

Dedicated follower of passions

From *Mister Tambourine Man* to *Tiny Tim*, the Gallery's collection reveals much about the tenacious and obsessive Martin Sharp, writes the artist's biographer **Joyce Morgan**.

As a teenage Bob Dylan fan, I was riveted when I first saw Martin Sharp's *Mister Tambourine Man* reproduced in a magazine. I cut it out and pasted it onto the cover of my schoolbook.

It was tiny – just a few centimetres across. When I later saw the image reproduced much larger in London's *Observer* colour magazine, I squirrelled away the supplement and packed it in my bag when my family emigrated from Liverpool to Australia in 1968. I had no idea who had created the image – or that I was sailing toward his birthplace.

More than 30 years would pass before I met the artist behind the portrait that had compelled me. In 2003, Sharp sat at his studio table, amid coffee cups and chaos, as I interviewed him about his London days, when he created images that encapsulated the heady, psychedelic 'Summer of Love', half a century ago this year. It was a bitter winter day, but Martin seemed as impervious to the chill in his unheated studio in his Bellevue Hill home, Wirian, as he was to the unruly terrier scrabbling around our feet.

That first meeting began a decade-long series of conversations about his life and art that continued until his death in 2013, and became the genesis of my biography *Martin Sharp: His Life and Times*. During that time, I became familiar with many of his works in the Art Gallery of New South Wales and learned their backstories.

Sharp began working on *Mister Tambourine Man* in the Chelsea, London, studio he shared

with his friend, photographer Robert Whitaker – the Beatles' official photographer – before he moved nearby to the Pheasantry, where his flatmates included Eric Clapton.

Sharp created the Dylan image, one of the first of his works acquired by the Gallery, as a tribute to the musician. The hundreds of circles that formed Dylan's hair were influenced by Leonardo da Vinci's knot designs and the 19th-century Art Nouveau illustrator Aubrey Beardsley, who was undergoing a revival when Sharp arrived in London in 1966.

He worked on *Mister Tambourine Man* with his then girlfriend, Finnish model Eija Vehka-aho. I contacted Vehka-aho in Sweden, where she now lives, and asked her about her involvement. She drew the circles with a hand-held compass, often sitting on the studio floor. Virtually no two circles are alike. Unlike Sharp, Vehka-aho was precise, patient and fastidious. 'Martin was really messy; he was always dropping his ink bottles on drawings that he had already done... He knew that I was neat,' she told me.

Although best known for his psychedelic work, Sharp moved away from that during his four years in London. His art became less decorated and employed blocks of solid colour. By 1969, he produced a series of eight bold images he dubbed Smartiples – a set of which was acquired by the gallery in 2015.

The title played on Sharp's name and the packets of the brightly coloured lollies,

Smarties. Silkscreened on thin, transparent acrylic, the Smartiples may have been designed to be illuminated from behind. They are a series of visual puns that include a UFO (*Coming*), a breast (*Boo-Zoom*), a heart (*All yer need*) and a question mark (*Wot!*).

The vivid question mark was an important symbol to him. A version of it appeared in his work with London's *Oz* magazine, including on the cover of his celebrated all-graphic Magic Theatre issue in November 1968. An early sketch of the distinctive question mark appeared in a letter he wrote to Vehka-aho in July 1968.

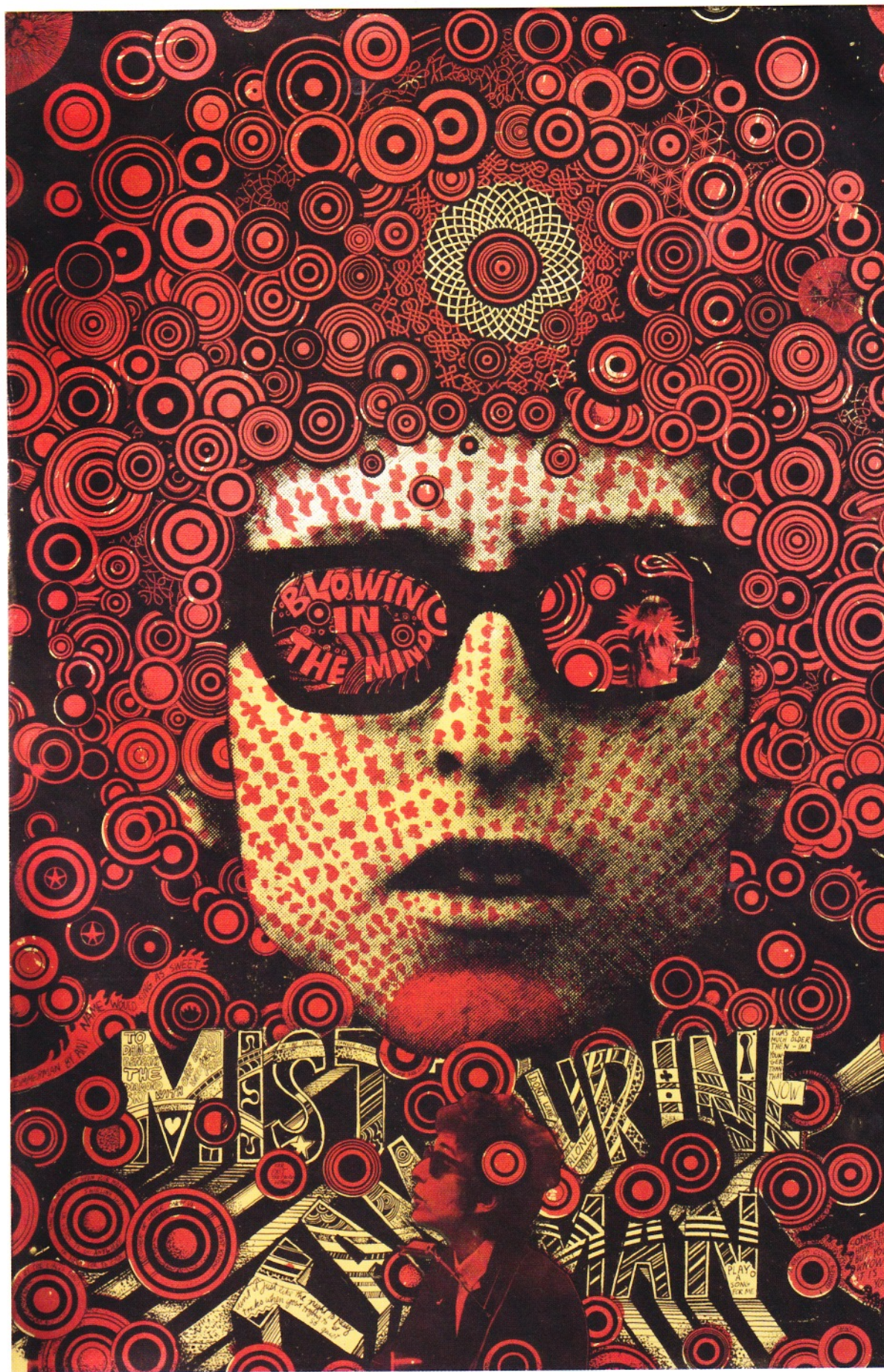
The letter was written during a period of turbulence and uncertainty for Sharp. Their romance was in crisis and Vehka-aho had left London for Stockholm. His stream-of-consciousness letter, full of disjointed ideas and unfinished sentences, reflects his tumult. He questioned his wayward heart, his emotional maturity and whether to leave London. A sketch of a question mark resting on the horizon underscored his confusion. He signed off not with his name but a heart casting a long shadow, an image he refined in his *All yer need* Smartiple.

Although most of the 35 works by Sharp in the Gallery's collection are on paper, they include a 1975 painting entitled *Miss Australia*, which depicts a young woman with a vivid blue body, a mane of wavy red hair and a necklace of hearts.

Created after Sharp returned to Australia from London, the work began as a sketch by ➤

Martin Sharp
Mister Tambourine Man
1967

Screenprint, printed in
black and red ink from
multiple stencils, on gold
foil laminated paper, 75.4
x 49.8 cm. Art Gallery
of New South Wales.
Thea Proctor Memorial
Fund 1970 © Estate of
Martin Sharp. Licensed by
Viscopy, Sydney.





Left:

Martin Sharp
Tiny Tim, eternal
troubadour
1982

Four-colour screenprint
on white wove paper,
101.8 x 75.8 cm. Art
Gallery of New South
Wales. Accessioned
2006 © Estate of Martin
Sharp. Licensed by
Viscopy, Sydney.

Right:

Martin Sharp
Miss Australia
1975

Synthetic polymer paint
on hardboard, 181.7 x
147.3 cm. Art Gallery
of New South Wales.
Purchased 1977 © Estate
of Martin Sharp. Licensed
by Viscopy, Sydney.

a long-time friend, artist Cressida Campbell. She told me how as a teenager she stood before a large blank canvas Sharp had prepared. He suggested she draw on it. She was hesitant to do so, but eventually picked up a pencil and drew a face.

The work resembles Campbell, yet it also bears an uncanny likeness to Sharp's favourite childhood nanny. Sharp was two years old when 17-year-old Roma Leonard became his nanny, and the pair formed a close bond. 'Nursie Roma', as Martin called her, was a great beauty with thick wavy hair who, during the years she cared for Sharp, entered the Miss Australia contest.

Sharp was a prolific letter writer. In 1978 he wrote to Jackie Menzies, then the Gallery's curator of Asian art, a lengthy letter about the Japanese Ukiyo-e artist Hokusai. Sharp had long admired the artist and spoke often of Hokusai to friends. (Indeed, Sharp's friend singer Marianne Faithfull told me he introduced her to the Japanese master.)

The 17-page letter provides insight into Hokusai's impact on Sharp, as well as on the complex relationship between an artist and his

muse. He recalled finding a Japanese print in a Paris shop in 1972 that he was convinced was an unknown work by Hokusai.

The image depicted an *ama*, or female abalone diver, who held aloft an abalone shell. Her foot touched a submerged rock from which she had chiselled the shell. Martin saw the image as an oriental counterpart to Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*.

He thought the rock resembled an old sea creature and symbolised the artist. The female diver was his muse. She had extracted from the old sea creature his art and unrequited love, in the form of the abalone. The diver 'like an angel, or a muse, comes from the higher realm of air, the artist dwells in the lower water world, more pressured, more turgid, darker', he wrote.

He told Menzies how he was devastated when the print was later lost. He subsequently painted a large tribute to it, entitled *Abalone*, which he loaned to the Gallery's *Notes from the river caves* exhibition in 2008. The letter also reveals his tenacity and obsession, outlining elaborate efforts to establish the print's authenticity.

Sharp was unwavering in his obsessions

and convictions, not least about the eccentric American singer Tiny Tim. Sharp spent years – and a large slab of his inheritance – making a film about the singer, recording his music and bringing him to Australia.

A poster in the Gallery's collection evokes one of Sharp's most quixotic episodes involving the performer. In 1982 Sharp hired the Sydney Opera House for a concert by the singer. The poster depicts the Opera House shells morphing into Tiny Tim's face. Ahead of the concert, Sharp placed an advertisement in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. It read: 'Martin Sharp presents against all reasonable advice, once only, the one and only Tiny Tim, Eternal Troubadour.'

But Sharp never did accept 'reasonable advice'. He followed his own passions and obsessions. He was as undaunted by the views of others and the dictates of the art world as he was to the winter chill on the day we first spoke.

Joyce Morgan will give a talk on Martin Sharp on 27 April, followed by a signing of her new book, *Martin Sharp: His Life and Times* (Allen & Unwin, \$34.99). See *At the Gallery* for details.