



Into the Light

Recovering Australia's lost women artists 1870–1960

Into the Light Donor Circle Acquisitions 2022

Into the Light

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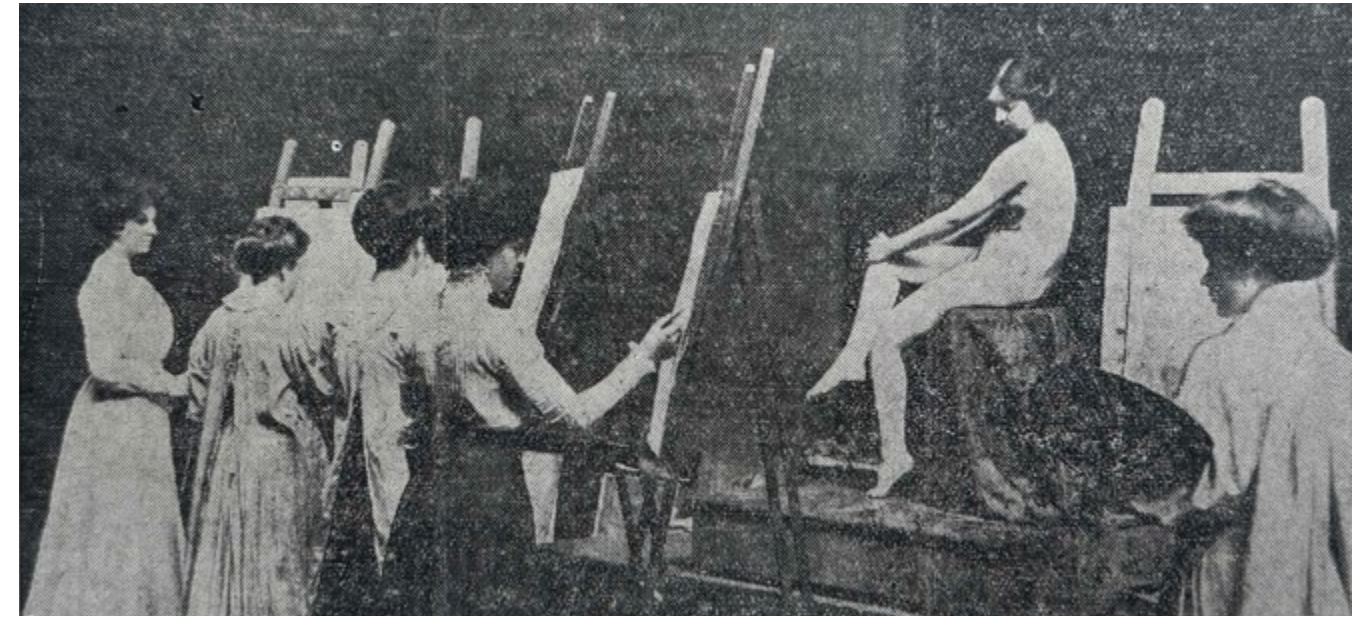
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Cover: Heliodore Hawthorne, *Some of Grace Crowley's Port Macquarie class* 1930, oil on canvas on board, 34 x 52 cm,
Into the Light Collection 2022, Sheila Foundation



Foreword



The Life Class - Artists at Work, *The Star: the Australian evening daily*, Saturday 9 April 1910, Sydney, N.S.W.
Printed and published by Ralph Asher for the Australian Newspaper Co., 1909-1910. State Library of New South Wales

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Into the Light: Recovering Australia's lost women artists 1870-1960 is Sheila's national research project to collect data about women artists working professionally in Australia whose work may have slipped from view. The data will be made available via an online portal, facilitating research, writing, exhibitions and publications that reconsider women's place in Australian art and allow their stories and their works to be seen and heard in our art museums and art histories.

The project's acquisition fund, supported by the Into the Light Donor Circle and other Sheila supporters, acquires artworks by artists uncovered by the program. In time it will become a major reference collection of artworks by generations of little-known women artists. With Dore Hawthorne's ITL 2022 painting *Some of Grace Crowley's class* 1930 included in the 2025 Anne Dangar retrospective at the NGA, we are already having an effect.

Artworks in the fourth year include impressionist-era paintings by Mildred Lovett (Tasmania), Daisy Rossi (WA) and Marian Barrett (Victoria), a Bernice Edwell miniature (NSW/Victoria), three paintings by tonalists Lesley Sinclair and Dorothy Whitehead (both Victoria), modernist works by sculptor Ola Cohn (Victoria) and painters Dore Hawthorne and Elsa Russell (both NSW) and a post-war painting by Polish émigré artist Lidia Grobicka (South Australia).

For ITL's fourth tranche, the cohort of writers ranged from undergraduate and graduate students Bridget Hoban, Hannah Newman and Robin Johnson to emerging gallery professionals Steph Markerink and Alexandra Guerman and feminist historian and senior librarian Barbara Lemon. Sheila's Senior Professional Partner (art history) Dr Juliette Peers has been heavily involved

as mentor, providing expert guidance and advice, as well as writing five essays and the introduction. For the second time a seminar for researcher/writers was staged ahead of the project and a debrief session at its conclusion. We believe the project offers these early career art historians, writers and curators an invaluable introduction to professional work in a mentored context that is unique in Australia outside the formal institutional parameters of a gallery or university. In so doing, it also places a range of new art historical voices before the public.

On behalf of Sheila I'd like to thank all those involved, with some special thank yous. Firstly, to Juliette Peers. Her research and advice is crucial to our acquisitions, while for the catalogue she shares her knowledge and experience with a new generation of writers. Secondly to Sheila's Senior Professional Partner (conservation) Anne Gaulton and framer David Butler. Their care for and commitment to these artworks is notably at odds with the treatment they received before they found their way to us. Third, to Sydney interns Annabelle Mentzines and Samantha Lawrence, who organised the seminars, researched copyright and supplementary images and helped research the fifth year's tranche. Finally to Sheila board members Kelly Gellatly and Angela Goddard, who work on the ITL sub-committee, making difficult decisions about how best to spend our donor funds.

And finally, to our wonderful donors. You're contributing to a project that will transform Australian art by presenting a more accurate and truthful picture of the role of women. We're proud to present this summary of the 2022 works and look forward to adding to it as the collection grows. To join the Into the Light Donor Circle, visit <https://sheila.org.au>.

John Cruthers

Introduction

The fourth Into the Light tranche offers an opportunity to further explore Australian women artists and artworks from 1870-1960. This tranche builds on previous Into the Light publications, but equally highlights the workings of fame, reputation and memory and their impact on how women artists are viewed. Whilst Into the Light is art historical in nature, issues about the particular gendered difficulties faced by women artists in building a consistent and coherent career profile that thread through many of this year's artists' biographies remain live and relevant for today's working artists.

This year's selection of artworks is particularly compelling as, perhaps more than previously, it presents a broader, more nuanced construct of women artists who have substantially fallen out of professional attention in Australia. Indeed whilst the concept of the "forgotten woman artist" is regarded by the *soi disant* culturally informed as unsophisticated, simultaneously this idea retains great appeal across the half century since International Women's Year in 1975. Reviving "lost artists" has launched many projects, including Into the Light, and even careers over the same timeframe. Sometimes as with Clarice Beckett, and others such as Kate O'Connor and Grace Cossington-Smith, this revival has become a cultural juggernaut of settler Australia, running with an unstoppable momentum that unlocks widespread popular and social implications about the creative potential of (white, middle-class) women. A further cluster of stories feature women whose creative life pivoted upon directly transgressing the strictures placed upon middle-class women in Australia, such as Joy Hester and Mirka Mora. These narratives have also gained immense popular currency, just as much as have the stories about women who have been erased from cultural memory.

Concurrently this present selection particularly indicates that not all women artists working across the late 19th century until the second wave feminist challenge to industry norms were invisible or depowered amongst their contemporaries. This year the ITL project includes two artists, Mildred Lovett and Ola Cohn, who, for substantial periods of their working lives, were considered to be at the summit of their profession, although their reputations have somewhat diminished over the last few decades. Here the forgetting is not so much the responsibility of their peers as of later artworkers.¹ Cohn has returned to the spotlight of modern public gallery practice in two recent curatorial projects *Brave New World* 2017 (NGV) and *Dangerously Modern* 2025-6 (AGSA/AGNSW).

In parallel Elsa Russell enjoyed a shorter, but no less intense period of extreme fame in the 1950s, when women artists were less visible in the public eye than in previous decades. Again Russell's brief moment of cultural prominence has made relatively little impact on later professional commentaries.² Postwar and into the mid-century Russell's frequently repeated themes of theatre, the dance and the circus were deeply embedded in popular, but equally high, culture both as antic and amusing subject matter, but equally as metaphors for serious issues of the purpose and meaning of human life. The currency and proliferation of such imagery enhanced the significant public discussion and positive reception of her art. Equally the

professional interest from both art and design industries in spontaneous, expressionist linework during the 1950s resonated with Russell's art.

In terms of public memory, Lady Marian Barrett's story is less recognised than any artist in this tranche, despite her substantial links to both the Heidelberg School/Impressionist/plein air movement as well as modernism across a five-decade career. She exhibited frequently, was favourably commented upon in the press, is held by three public collections and also benefited from a dynamic public and social profile that outstripped that of her now better-known artist colleagues such as Jane Sutherland and Clara Southern. She was a longstanding friend of both women. In terms of cultural profile a century ago, whilst Marian Barrett's artworks are currently virtually invisible in the Australian art market, she was a constant presence in cultural, academic and social life in Melbourne and widely esteemed. Unlike many women artists associated with the plein air group and Heidelberg era, she stood close to the centre of cultural and social power in Melbourne from the 1880s to the 1930s, vastly contrasting to her current obscurity.

Forgotten or overlooked artists exist on a very broad spectrum, and traditional connoisseurship-style judgements based on technical, design or executional merit have relatively little impact on an artist being undervalued and relegated to an outlying position. Lidia Groblicka's life narrative unquestionably represents the most tangible and extreme edge of "marginality" in this current grouping, and to date across all the biographies presented in ITL. Her story offers as a particularly intense emotional psychological perspective because of the large-scale global traumas of Nazi³ and Communist occupation in Poland, alongside the more intimate difficulties faced by the artist within her family. All she experienced was escalated by the process of moving between several countries. Groblicka also bore the brunt of local prejudices (if as a European she did not face melanin-based discrimination via skin tone) and the narrow boundaries of the culturally acceptable in mainstream Australian culture. In terms of the Into the Light project, Groblicka stands in for and ports into the project the many artists who have come to Australia from the mid 20th century onwards and whose substantial enrichment of their new country's culture has not been fitly acknowledged. It could be said that the presence of artists of different backgrounds and experiences is even less well represented in the public and popular eye, whilst the rate of immigration and the range of cultures coming to Australia rapidly grows. Yet with a professionally curated retrospective at a major state gallery during her lifetime, Groblicka is also placed within an elite cadre of esteemed contemporary artists, troubling conventional boundaries of the subaltern and the dominant. Groblicka always enjoyed attention in Adelaide, particularly as an esteemed printmaker with astute, ironic, often acidic observations. By any measure her story is vital to acknowledge outside of her home state of South Australia.

Heliodore (Dore) Hawthorne's contribution to disseminating knowledge about modernism in 1920s Sydney and her later energetic, non-mainstream, personalised imbrication with the norms of the increasingly codified postwar Australian art



"COMMUNAL EXPERIMENT", *Table Talk* (Melbourne, Vic.: 1885-1939) 5 August 1937, State Library of Victoria. Artist Lesley Sinclair in woollen sweater and long skirt can be seen treading mud bricks middle left, using the brick mould lower centre and with shovel upper centre

industry, as set out in the following essay devoted to her, provides sufficient justification for acknowledging less familiar artists. The magazine *Undergrowth* was both a useful medium for circulating progressive ideas and additionally could be considered as a creative project and early “artist’s book”. In that context Hawthorne’s handcrafted and laid-out journal again deserves far more attention than has been directed to it up to this time. Likewise her painting of Grace Crowley’s students seen in this collection is not only an important demonstration of early modernist ambition in Australia and the translation of principles learned in France from Lhote and Gleizes to local art circles, but also documents a number of women who like Hawthorne moved in Sydney modernist circles between the war. Hawthorne’s singular, substantially self-managed career also demonstrates omissions in mainstream preconceptions and templates of a successful artistic life.

Unlike many Australian modernists Hawthorne came from a working-class background, and throughout her career the need to be resourceful in the face of limited economic support and also negotiate difficult family circumstances made a major impact on her career options. Thus her story differs greatly to that of many of her contemporaries. With the strong interest in socially motivated creativity that particularly flourished in Sydney during World War II, Hawthorne was briefly praised for manifesting a potential model of a proletarian-driven art career with her series of works based on the Lithgow Small Arms factory. Dore Hawthorne indicates that obscure artists offer gifts and enhance their contemporaries’ professional lives as well as presenting a more diverse and inclusive meta-narrative of settler Australian art history. By researching such figures, the *Into the Light* project resonates with, and even pre-empts, recent calls to explore the substantial, but often unacknowledged in accepted mainstream narratives, contribution of non-heteronormative, non-neurotypical artists to the culture of their era⁴ or to focus on the differently abled and differently thinking creatives. This argument can be made for Lesley Sinclair and Lidia Groblicka as well. Again of course it is the choices made in forming institutionalised and mainstream narratives that limit what type of art and artists are discussed at a professional level. The successive *Into the Light* publications have broadened the range of historic women artists within published secondary sources.

Two works in the tranche are additional examples from artists already documented within the project. Bernice Edwell and Daisy Rossi, featured in previous publications, are this year represented by further typical works. They were each discussed in the press as making a significant impact amongst their peers and greatly contributing to the cultural life of their generation. Both new acquisitions focus on the core of each artist’s professional practice. In the case of Bernice Edwell, we have a fine portrait miniature with her characteristic light and singing colours and for Daisy Rossi, a flower-piece of West Australian native flora. The size and format links this work to a major commission that Rossi received from the Western Australian government for panels to decorate a formal room in its new showpiece London headquarters, sadly cancelled during the economic pressures of World War I. The award of such an important politically significant commission, with a strong nationalist dimension, to a woman artist is virtually without precedent in the Edwardian Australian art market. The only comparable examples of women artists whose work had a highly public traction would be the portraits of political leaders painted by Mary Stoddard and Josephine Muntz-Adams, both held

in state parliamentary collections today. Bertha Merfield also claimed to be working on murals for Australia House in London, again before 1914, again a commission that faltered.⁵ Rossi’s commission is another example of women artists’ achievements receiving little recent acknowledgement in mainstream narratives, yet now documented via *Into the Light*.

Another means of aligning this year’s collection with non-standard art histories is the focus on artists outside the Sydney-Melbourne axis, with Lovett of Tasmania, Groblicka of South Australia and Rossi of Western Australia. Women artists off the Sydney-Melbourne axis have consistently been less visible in the secondary market and found fewer either institutional or private buyers down the years. From the evidence of surviving works on the art market, as well as public gallery accession lists, in the period 1880-1960 male artists were clearly bought for significant public and private collections and traded on a more national scale. Especially from the 1920s to the 1940s the same stellar male artists were bought by the then more outlying public collections such as the Art Gallery of Western Australia and the Queensland Art Gallery as well as the securely-funded, standout institutions such as the National Gallery of Victoria, Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Art Gallery of South Australia. Conversely women often seemed, from the empirical sources of provenances, to attract a more regional and locally based patronage, often through more private links of friendship. However, acquisitions of women by public collections appear to be more frequent in c1890-1940 (even with the level of subsequent deaccessions of women’s work) than in c1960–1970. By about 1960 the buying and selling of art in Australia was scaling up with major dealers such as Australian Galleries and Rudy Komon building a national client base. Concurrently at this date many major dealers were reluctant to work closely with women artists,⁶ so the expanded and more secure market at this date generally did not impact so much on women’s careers and reputation.

One area that has been a focus across all years of activity for the *Into the Light* project has been documenting lesser known artists from the impressionist or plein air c1880-1930 era. In particular, *Into the Light* has moved substantially beyond the current reach of completed curatorial projects and public gallery publications in documenting the remarkably talented and active cohort of Sydney-based female plein air artists from the 1890s to the 1920s including Jessie Scarvell, the Cusack sisters, Alice Muskett, and Ethel Stephens, the de facto catalyst and leader of Sydney women artists in the early 1900s. Lesser known plein air women artists working in Melbourne have been another point of specialisation including Beatrice Colquhoun, Janie Wilkenson Whyte and the post-Heidelberg nationalist Jo Sweatman. In terms of the plein air movement this year we have major female artists working within this style, Mildred Lovett and Marian Barrett. Although often overlooked in later accounts, both of these women played a more dynamic role within plein air circles than mainstream historical accounts generally claim. Curiously, unlike the heroic and much-studied and curated males, both Barrett and Lovett also moved more adventurously with changing artistic trends when engaging with modernism, (as did Ethel Stephens in her on-trend relief prints).⁷

Lovett’s status amongst both male and female contemporaries, which was high even in the first decade of the 20th century, was further underpinned by early first-hand observation of British and French advanced art in the 1920s, during a period of leave

when she toured Europe and took classes, as well as frantically gathering publications, taking notes and visiting exhibitions. Throughout her working life Lovett attained a substantial professional profile and public responsibility in her role as a senior-level teacher. Conventional discussion of women artists during the 1990s and 2000s frequently claimed that women made little impact on the early 20th century art world, but Lovett’s career offers a different picture. The Sydney-Melbourne emphasis of much accessible art historical writing has left the Tasmanian-based Lovett, a favoured pupil of Julian Ashton, on the margins of public memory.

Lady Marian Barrett presents more complex trajectory than Lovett, who ironically shone within a template of “achievement” that is well understood in other contexts and for other (white, Australia) artists. Married to a controversial senior academic, who achieved much, even if he was thwarted in his ambition to enter federal politics (with an eye on the prime ministership), Barrett was never a hobbyist. She painted and exhibited throughout a busy life of public duties and causes. She held at least one solo exhibition and was acquired by public collections during her lifetime. Rather than hindering her art career, her public life fed into an ongoing engagement with both creative and civic life, offering her a breadth of experience and contacts greater than many female plein airists. Barrett mixed as an equal with major cultural and intellectual contemporaries, of both Australian and international renown, including a cosmopolitan, non-white intelligentsia within and beyond the British Empire. Additionally, she was a dedicated patron and supporter of visual artists in Melbourne, particularly as friend and mentor to a range of women artists from the families of early staff of the University of Melbourne, Mary Meyer, Ida Rentoul Outhwaite and Mary Cecil Allen.

Works by loyal, but less remembered, followers of Max Meldrum’s tonalism, Lesley Sinclair and Dorothy Whitehead, prompt questions, which deserve more detailed discussion beyond their biographies, around the positioning of women within this movement. As with Sydney plein airists, the *Into the Light* publications have opened up a discussion that has consolidated historical analysis around these overlooked women, which has to this point found little concurrent resonance amongst art professionals. The contribution of tonalist women to the cultural life of their contemporaries has, with the exception of Clarice Beckett, attracted a smaller amount of serious scholarship than that of modernist women, who have now been the centre of several decades of excellent curatorial and research activities. Partly this invisibility is due to patterns of scholarship around tonalism. In histories of Australian women’s art, Max Meldrum occurs frequently as a sort of antichrist or arch-villain aligned against creative women. One vein of criticism of Meldrum derives from the intense focus on Clarice Beckett, which includes scrutinising her relationship to her tonalist colleagues. Some of his male students were perplexed, even angered, by the respect Meldrum paid to Beckett, attention they thought should be paid to them.⁸ Art writers and historians often confuse the belittling, deeply sexist attitudes of some of Meldrum’s male students⁹ with the views of their teacher. Some of these male students implicitly believed themselves to hold special favour in the Master’s eyes and thus deserved greater attention. In turn they were affronted by Meldrum endorsing a female artist.

Another high-profile point of contention around Meldrum and gender is his much-quoted claim that women cannot paint. This statement arose as his response to Nora Heysen’s groundbreaking win of the Archibald Prize in 1938, the first to a woman in the history of the prize, although Meldrum was an arch-contrarian who somewhat enjoyed ideological contestations for their own sake,¹⁰ as well as publicly committing to strong atheistic, pacifist, anti-imperialist and free speech positions. Without endorsing his opinions, it is plausible that his railing against the award of Australia’s most prestigious art prize, at that date, to a woman was driven by formal concerns as well as a reductive vision of gendered roles. Heysen’s hard-edged, linear, European-style modernist classicism was a style he regarded as an anathema, vastly different to his own approach to painting. Meldrum’s concurrent publicly-stated praise for Beckett should also be factored against his highly public criticism of Heysen; he regarded Beckett as the best woman artist in history.¹¹

Despite the ambiguous status that female tonal painters held amongst their male peers, both Jorgensen and Meldrum employed women as studio assistants. Meldrum’s daughter Ida, a talented artist, worked for her father as an assistant, as did some of his early and more famous male students and later too Graham Inson, who became a key proselytiser for Meldrum’s teaching in New South Wales. Jorgensen employed Sue Vanderkelen, Helen Skipper and Lesley Sinclair as studio assistants. Jorgensen and Sinclair’s working partnership lasted for many decades, from the 1930s to the 1960s.



Lesley Sinclair in her studio at Montsalvat, later in life. Private collection

Sinclair and Whitehead emphasise how dedicated, often selflessly energetic women substantially maintained the supportive professional networks that bound Meldrum’s many associates together and provided a congenial reception and market for their work. Jo Sweatman and Alice Bale’s key contributions in the context of providing a managerial focus for the tonal painters and their allies via the Twenty Melbourne Painters group were discussed in ITL 2021. Sweatman’s and Bale’s dedicated loyalty to Meldrum, without ever directly following his style, may date back to their years at the National Gallery School in the mid to late 1890s, where Meldrum had already impressed “his fellow students” “[with] his views and particularly their application”.¹² Together with the important and highly disciplined and considered work of Polly Hurry and that of the less high-profile Elizabeth Colquhoun, acquired in previous years, (as too work by members of Meldrum’s circle already in the Cruthers Collection of Women’s Art such as Alice Bale, Alma Figuerola and Margery Withers), Sinclair and Whitehead are reminders of the substantial presence of women in the circles of tonal painters. Tonalist women made consistent, visible and prolific contributions to professional artmaking in Melbourne, especially from World War I through to the 1940s. If we are seeking to write an art history that takes appropriate cognisance of both women’s personal achievements and their place amongst their contemporaries, ignoring female tonal painters significantly distorts the public record and erases and limits our understanding of the potential impact that women artists historically made in their working lives and amongst their colleagues.

Yet whilst both women publicly claimed great loyalty to the pure, objective manner of painting as set out informally in Meldrum’s teaching and formally in his writings and disseminated by his students, followers and advocates even into the 21st century,¹³ when looking at their art, their beliefs as much as their output could offer a *griffe* to a present-day audience which will cause a more positive attitude to both artists. The non-painterly discursive aspects of social history and an expanded field of discourse and debate around Meldrum’s teaching potentially may capture more attention from both generalists and specialists alike, and from a younger audience.

Researching both women’s lives is shaped by shared historiographical phenomena. Firstly both women rapidly slipped out of journalistic coverage in the 1950s as the reputation of the tonalists were swept aside in favour of the Angry Penguins and the Antipodeans. Additionally, the (conservative, Liberal Party) Victorian state government’s endorsement of contemporary art practitioners, curators and art writers in the early 1960s under (Liberal Premier) Sir Henry Bolte further pushed both Sinclair and Whitehead (and many colleagues male and female) to the margins.¹⁴ Curators have shown little interest in their work in the years since. Thus Sinclair and Whitehead lived and worked for another three decades, substantially outside of mainstream art industry and public acclaim. Sinclair could not have cared less, whereas Whitehead was markedly angry about being sidelined.¹⁵ Secondly both women placed themselves intentionally at odds to the mainstream, postwar art market. Sinclair closely followed Jorgensen’s diktat that the Australian art market was irrelevant and without merit. No good would come from an artist putting work forward to an ignorant, money-centric public.¹⁶ Whitehead

shared her husband’s bitter scepticism of the Australian art market and of curating and art writing, in particular. In her own words she supported and assisted the compilation and writing of his text *The Literary Parasites of Art*, and endorsed his sentiments.¹⁷ She also took to heart Max Meldrum’s advice “don’t prate about your ‘personality’ ... Why do you assume that yours is of interest to other people?”¹⁸ to heart. Undoubtedly both women’s oppositional stance impacted their status and further compromised their public profiles, creating the exact opposite effect to what they had aimed for. Broadly both women would have been pleased to witness a public and institutional endorsement of tonal painting and a more secure place for the style – and its claims to art historical and objective “truth” – in larger narratives of art history which, apart from advocacy led by some Victorian regional galleries and the massive revival of Beckett’s work, did not happen until at least a decade after their deaths. However both women enjoyed an early period of greater fame than their current obscurity would suggest.

Reviewing the specific stories of this latest group of artists prompts consideration of the cumulative impact of the total four sets of acquisitions to date. What have these stories brought to a larger contextualised history of women’s art, prior to the massive upswing in activities and public recognition in the wake of second wave feminism from the early 1970s onwards? After four years we have uncovered and presented narratives about women artists who generally have little profile in public memory, yet who displayed substantial skill in constructing large scale works, even if relatively unknown such as Annie Potter. Many of the featured artists have made substantial contributions to the art professional experience of their various eras from the 1880s to c1970, through teaching, organising artists’ groups, (in some ways a precursor to the more modern professions of curating and arts management) and exhibiting work. In some cases this influence was exerted through innovative practices; in others they engaged with the central values and practices of the arts industry as staunch defenders of academic standards. Spectacularly in the case of Lady Marian Barrett: she played an active role in public life, whilst still working and exhibiting as an artist.

An artist’s reputation, especially amongst art professionals, either academic, curatorial or in the commercial sector, substantially governs her profile in public memory. The accepted ranking of an artist is often quite firmly fixed and can resist any form of reconfiguration, particularly if judgement is made by people regarded as industry leaders and shapers of the discipline. In a more positive move, there is evidence, from the nature of some recent and significant public gallery projects in the last 12 months, that accepted curatorial practice is now being associated with the promotion of a revisionist stance. A precedent has been established in the Sheila Foundation’s activities: from 2019 onwards the Into the Light project’s publications have repeatedly explained the logic and validity of working on less familiar Australian women artists, unpicking their life narratives, identifying and acquiring works, researching and collating the back story of each work and the artist who made it.

Dr Juliette Peers

Notes

1 Whereas previous ITL artists such as Jo Sweatman and Ethel Stephens also had substantial careers, they were simultaneously to some extent positioned as challengers to the mainstream either via association with Meldrum or on the grounds of gender as with Stephens who substantially worked to create resources for women artists that bypassed male dominated networks. Erica McGilchrist, whilst a highly radical artist and progressive left wing idealist, had a substantially fragile relationship to a mainstream whom she often surpassed in term of politics and consciously ignored industry reputations and expectations that she disagreed with.

2 Paula Furby has worked on documenting Russell and curating her into public gallery exhibitions over the last three decades.

3 Many of her father’s academic colleagues were executed by the Nazis.

4 See the recent publication Variations: *A More Diverse Picture of Contemporary Art*, ed Tristen Harwood, Grace McQuilten and Anthony White Caulfield, Victoria, Monash University Publishing 2023, which seeks to decentre the attention paid to the white and mainstream.

5 *Bulletin* 13 August 1914 p 20, Melbourne Chatter, Vol. 35 No. 1800 (13 Aug 1914).

6 Most clearly documented in the recollections of Erica McGilchrist.

7 Juliette Peers, *Ethel Stephens* in Into the Light: Donor Circle Acquisitions: 2021 – Sheila Foundation. <https://sheila.org.au/news/into-the-light-donor-circle-acquisitions-2021/>

8 Meldrum reprimanded the students who mocked her paintings and reminded them of her talent, which was greater than theirs. Such stories survived the decades in oral histories and lived memories. See for example Edith Ziegler, *The Worlds and Work of Clarice Beckett* North Melbourne: Arcadia 2022 p 75. Another factor that impacted on the position of women in the Meldrum circle was the circulation of Freudian ideas in the tonal painting circle as part of modern and rationalist approach to life. In practice these theories tended to broadly emphasise women’s roles and options as being tied in with a male- (and family-) focussed heterosexuality, including much discussion about motherhood as natural destiny for women. Sue Vanderkelen’s autobiographical novel *The Cruel Man*, North Carlton: Black Jack Press 2002 indicates the stresses that women faced in tonal painting circles especially around their experiences of free and “modern” love affairs with colleagues, or the advice provided to her that men naturally wandered and she should concentrate on her painting. The more bohemian lifestyle of Jorgensen’s circle was one of the triggers of his split from Meldrum. Gary Kinnane in *Colin Colahan: A portrait*, Melbourne University Press 1996 p 29 quotes a letter by Colahan in which he remembered Beckett as “fresh as a flower and young looking” rather than as a fellow artist.

9 Although not that of Archibald Colquhoun, who grew up surrounded by working women artists with his mother, his aunts and also Jane Price, who was his “nanny”, acting as “mother’s help” to his family.

10 Oscar Mendelssohn in his essay “The Art of Max Meldrum” in Clem Christensen ed. *The Gallery on Eastern Hill: The Victorian Artists Society Centenary* Melbourne: Victorian Artists Society 1970 pp 73-79, p 74 noted that Meldrum was “ever ready for an intellectual battle”. W.G. Cook interviewed by John Thompson for the ABC, and later published as John Thompson ed. *On Lips Of Living Men* Melbourne: Lansdown Press 1962 p 38 noted that “he did like to say shocking things ... not because he wanted to shock people but because he wanted to stimulate some fresh original thinking”.

11 *Bulletin* 5 April 1944 p 2 Vol. 65 No. 3347.

12 Anon, possibly Colin Colahan, *Australia* 1 October 1919 p 339 cited in John and Peter Perry *Australian Tonalism* Castlemaine: the Authors 2023 p 136.

13 The internet, including Youtube videos, suggests that tonal painting and Meldrum’s writings are still finding new advocates in the USA, and are being read and discovered in the present day, again especially in the US.

14 In Melbourne, at least, the Liberal Party, not the Whitlam federal government, aligned contemporary practice with the state as early as the 1960s, mostly on the grounds of a perceived effectiveness and efficiency in corporate governance rather than art practice. Juliette Peers, *More than just Gumtrees: a Personal, Social and Artistic History of the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors*, Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors in association with Dawn Revival Press, Melbourne, 1993 pp 126-132, Christopher Heathcote *A quiet revolution: the rise of Australian art 1946-1968*, Melbourne: Text Publishing 1996 pp 150-155.

15 From meetings in person with both artists.

16 Jenny Teichmann *Jorgensen of Montsalvat*, this edition Carlton: Black Jack books 2005, first published in 1976 pp 17-18.

17 In conversations with the present author in the early 1980s when seeking information around disputes centred on the tonalists during World War I. Whitehead was intentionally guarded in giving/sharing ideas and information to anyone who was not primarily a painter in the tonal manner and refused any more formal process of interview and information capture. Yet she opened up when setting out a process of compiling and producing *The Literary Parasites of Art* that was more collaborative and shared than circulates in curating and research at the present day. She also emphatically asserted the role of her husband and herself as live heirs to a transnational continuum of “great art” stretching back millennia, a tradition that had in her opinion substantially eluded Australian art writing since the 1960s. Whitehead’s intense suspicion of university trained curators extended to her demands for the gallery staff at the McClelland Gallery, all young professional women of polite and pleasant disposition with postgraduate study behind them (during the directors’ leave of absence) to be locked out of the gallery spaces during the judging and hanging of the AME Bale Travelling Scholarship and Art Prize, although she did accept them entering the space when making and fetching teas and coffees and handing round biscuits and other snacks and cakes. She was surprised by being offered hospitality and refreshment.

18 Max Meldrum “A Teacher to his Pupils” in Pandemonium vol 1 no 5 June 1934 p 11.

Mildred Lovett (1880-1955)

*A Summer's Afternoon depicts a serene image which reflects the aura of the late Edwardian era, both in subject matter and style. The painting features a young woman sitting on a wooden seat among sunlit trees in a lush, green garden. Beside her lies a cane basket and when focusing on her hands, the viewer can observe her crocheting a white lace-like textile design. Mildred Lovett's refined use of colour and tone to depict the afternoon light reflecting upon the trees and the woman's white, characteristically Edwardian dress, speaks to Lovett's historical position as an early-twentieth century Australian artist.... The expertise evident in *A Summer's Afternoon* captures only a fraction of Lovett's wide-spanning repertoire, which also included china painting, miniature painting and sculpting. Once described as "the most versatile artist in Australia", the skill and diversity of her practice, both as an artist and teacher, make her a noteworthy subject of Australian art history. Moreover, though *A Summer's Afternoon* contains a distinctly domestic subject matter, its themes move beyond this into the spheres of national identity and women as professional artmakers.*

This comment on *A Summer's Afternoon*, quoted from an unfinished essay on the work prepared by Claudia Rosenberg before she withdrew from the Into the Light 2022 project due to other professional commitments, accurately summarises this highly appealing and convincing work, and equally captures this painting's somewhat singular positioning. Firstly, as a material cultural object it is both known and unknown: the subject of a beautiful woman dressed in white, at rest in the dappled sunlight and shadow of a garden, occurs frequently in the work of Edwardian Australian artists, yet concurrently in being painted by a female hand this work is also beyond the norm. Like the work especially of Janet Cumberae-Stewart, but to some degree Josephine Muntz Adams and Hilda Rix Nicholas, and occasionally Ruth Sutherland and Dora Meeson, this work is immediately political, subverting the expected position of the feminine as the passive subject of masculine attention and – by implication – desire as expressed through the act of painting. Claudia's notes touch on further central aspects of Lovett's practice; she ranged freely, with notable success, across many media: oils, watercolours, miniature portraits, drawing, lithography, lino cutting, sculpture and china painting. Equally she was consistently acknowledged as an influential art teacher, counting many well-known artists amongst her students.

Thwarted or successful, overlooked or acclaimed amongst their contemporaries, Australian women artists have been subjects of serious research since the mid 1970s. Many artists – Hester, Preston, Cossington-Smith, Beckett, Olley, Proctor and Dangar – have been the subject of successive professional curatorial and academic research projects. Yet Mildred Lovett's high level of public recognition and official support during her lifetime and later relative neglect differs from familiar art historical narratives of marginalised and ignored women artists. Certainly Lovett was better known in the 1970s than in recent years. Curators and researchers rejecting nationalist and landscape-dominated Australian art histories in the 1970s recognised her merit and she was equally visible in the feminist explorations of art history of the same era. She featured in several iconic projects that redefined Australian curatorial expectations including Noel

Hutchison's and Ron Radford's 1974 exhibition of early Australian sculpture and the George Paton Gallery's legendary survey *Australian Women Artists* of 1975.¹ The nationally touring survey exhibition *Art Nouveau in Australia* of 1980 presented Lovett's painted china vases as defining examples of that global art movement's impact on Australia. Bonita Ely and Anna Havana Sande's *Profile of Australian Women Sculptors*, 1977, a photographic, textual and documentary installation, slide show and information resource – a then-unusual crossover between curating and contemporary art – produced on behalf of the Women's Art Register, included Lovett's work. Launched at the legendary Mildura Sculpture Triennials, the installation provocatively rejected the male default in cutting-edge artmaking in Australia of the 1970s.

Lovett was a firsthand witness to European modernism in London and Paris in the late 1920s and deserves a higher profile on that ground alone. Whilst *A Summer's Afternoon* recalls an older and slightly more conservative idiom than her later modernist works, Lovett's skill and the impact of her art are not in doubt. On its own terms *A Summer's Afternoon* is a plausible and confident impressionist observation of the effects of light. Furthermore, she was responding to the most radical artworks (within a European cultural context) widely seen in Australia to that date, brought in and exhibited by Ethel Carrick, Emanuel Phillips Fox and Rupert Bunny when visiting from Paris.



Emanuel Phillips Fox, *Loves me, loves me not* c1909, oil on canvas, 61 x 51 cm. The State Art Collection, The Art Gallery of Western Australia, Gift of Sir J. Winthrop Hackett, 1910



Mildred Lovett, *A Summer's Afternoon* c1910, oil on canvas on board, 45 x 35.5 cm, Into the Light Collection 2022, Sheila Foundation

Particularly the Foxes made a stellar impression on Australian art and social circles in 1908 and 1913,² for the revelation of colour and loose facture and as exotic, elegant visitors from France. This early work already sets a course for Lovett's interest in progressive technical formalism and future-facing aesthetics, and her focus on a French-inflected figuration.

Lovett worked capably across several different scales, styles and media, from miniatures to sculpture. This diversity followed late 19th century British art practice, (and avant garde elements of European art and design) drawn from the Arts and Crafts movement and flattening out media hierarchies. Influential here too were the concept of the immersive, media-blending *gesamtkunstwerk*, and the idea that the artist's mind and hand were revealed in whatever format he or she chose. Lovett was not alone amongst Australian artists of c 1900 working in such a manner, but generally mid 20th century art historical and curatorial practice (in Western art at least) favoured a more disciplinary-based concentration on one medium. Thus Lovett and parallel figures such as Artur Loureiro and Charles Douglas Richardson have been only imperfectly assimilated into popular narratives.³ Lovett's case is further complicated by the relatively small proportion of work that has come to public notice.⁴ Even with access to family caches in the 1970s and 1980s, the amount of known works and the lists of works in catalogues and reviews do not match. Added to this, her regional origins have also substantially pushed her out of visibly popular constructs of Australian art.

Lovett's Tasmanian origins have greatly shaped her public profile. Not because of the general art market amnesia around regional art histories, but in the late 19th and early 20th century, Tasmania was a stronghold of the arts and crafts movement, expressing the then high reputation of avant garde British design. Advanced practice in Britain advocated an equality between media; painting took its place alongside sculpture, printmaking, metalwork, woodworks and ceramics, and, of course, china painting, an attitude Lovett clearly endorsed. Her acceptance of new ideas tracks a direct path from John Tranthim Fryer, who had trained at the South Kensington School London in the 1880s at the height of the British leadership of both design and sculpture in Europe.⁵ Fryer returned to Hobart in 1890, criticised the standard of art education at the Hobart Technical College, and was duly appointed to the staff. This British influence was reinforced by the later arrival at the Hobart Technical College of another young British trained sculptor and enthusiast for craft and design, Benjamin Sheppard. Lovett was clearly attuned to both Tranthim Fryer and Sheppard's influence and when Sheppard's health began to fail due to tuberculosis,⁶ she took on more responsibilities in teaching at the college.

Post-convict era art in Hobart was defined by a strong female leadership around Louisa Swan, who provided a precedent for Lovett's confident and ambitious self-placement in her early 20s. Equally Swan's presence established a favourable context in which public officials openly praised the abilities of both Mildred Lovett and Florence Rodway in 1900 as demonstrating the high standards of professional training at the Hobart Technical College.⁷ Singling out female artists as touchstones to local achievements in the arts is fairly unparalleled in Australia at that date. Successful expatriates such as John Longstaff and Hugh Ramsay exemplified the achievements of the National Gallery School as did George Lambert and Sydney Long in Sydney for Julian Ashton's teaching.



Photograph of Olive Pink and friends c 1905. P6-27-50 © University of Tasmania Collection. Sepia photograph of camp at Professor Lyndhurst Falkiner Giblin's Farm - Cobbler's End, Tasmania. Pictured are Olive Pink, Florence Rodway (with mop and basin), Mildred Lovett (with grid iron as harp) and Ursula Walker

Lovett was born into a middle-class Hobart family in 1880. Family memories place her as working as a photographic retoucher before she had formal art training.⁸ However her family was prosperous enough to send her to a leading girls' private school in Hobart run by Mrs Henry Barnard. Here art classes were provided by W H Charpentier (also a teacher at the Technical College),⁹ so Lovett may have already had some art training and shown interest in art before going out to work. Lovett's name appears in the rolls of the Technical College in 1895, although it was not known what classes she attended. Staff members included Tranthim Fryer and Ethel Nichols,¹⁰ a female artist who showed alongside Louisa Swan and Mabel Hookey and later Lovett herself. Press accounts of early Technical College meetings mention her as a woman who is ambitious and reaching beyond a bourgeois hobby and is far more complex than family recollections suggest. In 1900 Benjamin Sheppard publicised his "exceedingly successful" art classes with a lecture on art in Tasmania and an exhibition of students' work. "To those who have not, so far, seen the actual present work of some of these young students – particularly that of Miss Lovett and Miss Rodway – this opportunity is commended."¹¹

By 1902 Lovett had travelled to Sydney, to study with Julian Ashton. She bypassed the National Gallery School in Melbourne, then regarded as the most professional and comprehensive art school in the southern hemisphere, attracting students from across Australia and New Zealand. From the evidence of her drawings and her formalised art nouveau designs, she was engaged more with a linear and outline based approach rather than the softened tonal subtleties of National Gallery School drawing.¹² The high coloured, light-driven *A Summer's Afternoon* lies outside her frequent preference for graphics and works on paper, noted in previous discussions of Lovett.¹³ The Sydney-Hobart axis was a constant factor in her career.¹⁴ She moved between the two cities several times, and sent work from Hobart to art societies and galleries in Sydney when she needed a broader exposure. Her brief spell in Brisbane around World War I confirms this practice, as the Brisbane and Sydney art markets were closely connected in the early 1900s, more so than Sydney and Melbourne.

Ashton was strongly partisan for students whose work pleased him and became an enthusiastic champion of Lovett as soon as she entered his classes. His comments were reported back in Hobart. "Mr. Morton also mentioned that Mr. Julian Ashton, of Sydney, had informed him that Miss Lovett, another past student at the Hobart Technical School, was doing such good work that he was very proud of her as a student further pursuing her studies under him. (Applause)."¹⁵ In turn Ashton later in 1909 praised Lovett in a somewhat flowery and oblique overview of her china painting classes. He confirmed her status as a real artist not an amateur, a demarcation of many tendentious words and hurling of accusations in Edwardian Sydney and Melbourne.¹⁶ For Ashton, Lovett's commitment to being a self-supporting artist from the early 1900s onwards placed her amongst the right-thinking professionals. He also noted that her design work was better in quality than that which others had often supplied her with for the use of her pupils. Her painting on china "is superior to anything we have seen in the Commonwealth."¹⁷ His appointing her as his assistant in teaching is no surprise.

Lovett's areas of responsibility at the Technical College included sculpture and life drawing, as well as china painting. In 1904 Lovett applied for permission to run daytime art classes at the Technical College, which was granted.¹⁸ By 1905 she was also teaching sculpture and modelling and was judged a success with Dora Barclay, her sculpture pupil, being specifically praised.¹⁹ In Tasmania, South Australia and Victoria, technical schools offered professional employment to women as art teachers, as early as the 1890s.²⁰ Lovett also advertised private art classes, which included life drawing and plein air painting.²¹



Miss Mildred Lovett 1909, black and white photograph, Art and Architecture: The Journal of the Institute of Architects of New South Wales. Vol. 6 No. 6, National Library of Australia

Lovett returned to Sydney in 1909 and attained both high profile and unquestionably professional status as a member of Julian Ashton's circle. Ashton induced her to be his assistant against her fears that she was not good enough, "goading" her "to take the place he believed her pre-eminently fitted to occupy",²² – yet again a singular position for a woman artist. She replaced Sydney Long in the job, and when she married in 1913 was in turn replaced by Elioth Gruner and George Gibbons, an indication of Lovett's ranking. Gruner was also the manager of a cooperative art gallery masterminded by Ashton c 1912, of which Lovett – in his words "an exceptionally talented young woman"²³ – was also a supporter. Ashton presented the venture as both artist-run and nationalistic. "'Oh, yes,' replied Mr. Ashton, 'the artists here not only had to fight the apathy of the general public towards art, but they have had arrayed against them all the art dealers in the Commonwealth, because these men make a great deal more profit out of imported work, a large proportion of which is not equal in quality to that done by Australians. Naturally, they have a tendency to run down the work on which they do not make so much money, and to exalt that which brings them in a big profit'."

For a time Lovett was embedded in the highly nationalist, political and strategic machinations that characterised Julian Ashton's circle. The diminishment of Ashton's status as a nationalist plein airist from his foregrounding in Bernard Smith's histories from the 1940s and 60s has also marginalised Lovett. Her art in the 1900s to 1910s also reflected this positioning inside the highest level of professional art making in Sydney and stayed close to Sydney watercolour fashions, especially Hilder's colourist romanticism.²⁴ Characteristically she exhibited figurative drawings and works on paper as much as oils. As said, the appearance of *A Summer's Afternoon* in her oeuvre reflected the excitement caused by the visits of the Foxes and Bunny to Australia and has strong echoes of Fox's *Loves me, loves me not* in the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

In the 1910s and early 1920s, during her years teaching in Sydney and shortly after, Lovett frequently showed sculpture. In 1912 her work in this medium was widely praised. "No. 200, 'Child's Head,' by Mildred Lovett, is as fine a piece of modelling as we have seen in Australia, and the National Gallery Trustees did well to secure it."²⁵ Critics were equally enthusiastic about the purchase of her china painting by the Art Gallery of New South Wales:

It is a small thing. A group of dancing nymphs at the bottom, a few slender stretching roots carried to the top. But so exquisite in conception and colouring; one must see it to understand: and we can all see it, for the trustees of the National Gallery have secured it for the nation.

In 1913 Lovett married Sydney Paterson, a clerk, but remained the major breadwinner in the household, until Paterson's increasing blindness in the later 1930s led her to be more involved in his care and supervision. Shortly after their marriage the Patersons moved to Brisbane, where Lovett met Vida Lahey, who became a close friend. There were many parallels between the women in their personal and professional lives. Both were very active in their respective regional communities. As artists, teachers and advocates for modernism, they achieved a notably higher degree of executive prominence and rank²⁷ in their respective home cities than did many women artists in



Mildred Lovett, *Vase with pastoral design of dancing figures* by Sydney Long 1909. Art Gallery of New South Wales

Melbourne. Cultural life in Brisbane and Hobart was enhanced by their independent thinking and promotion of a gentle modernism amongst their colleagues. Their progressive tendencies were expressed via a discreetly formal and conceptual framing and emphasis on design, but masked somewhat by their relatively narrow and ritualised, if highly accessible, range of subjects. When Lahey showed signs of pushing herself towards a physical and mental breakdown after a stressful period in wartime Britain, Lovett invited her to Hobart where she stayed for several years in the early 1920s.²⁸ Later Lahey came down regularly to Hobart and stayed with Lovett to escape Queensland's summer heat.²⁹

Lovett's work was illustrated in *Art and Australia*, again documenting her closeness to the powerbrokers of the Sydney art scene. She showed widely including with the Society of Artists of New South Wales, a self-proclaimed elite and selective group, dominated until World War II by Julian Ashton and his associates. The society generally only admitted a small and highly choice female cohort to its committee, including Lovett. Other groups she showed with included the art societies of both Hobart and Launceston, arts and crafts exhibitions in Hobart, as well as some smaller group exhibitions in Sydney and Tasmania. She belonged to the Contemporary Group in Sydney, the first artist society in Australia to explicitly foreground contemporary art and originally centred around George Lambert. During the 1920s Lovett showed in London at the British Empire Exhibition 1924 and the Imperial Institute in 1929.

After World War I Lovett returned to the Technical College in Tasmania, becoming the senior art teacher in 1928. Her record as a teacher was outstanding. Across three decades in Hobart and Sydney, her pupils included significant women artists who

were regarded as pivotal figures of their generations, including Dora Barclay, Jean Bellette, Anne Dangar, Grace Cossington Smith, Grace Crowley, Dorothy Stoner and Edith Holmes. Students enjoyed her relaxed and tolerant approach as opposed to the formal manner of her immediate superior Lucien Dechaineux.³⁰ After being appointed to the senior teaching position she went to Europe to follow up on her interest in modernism and consolidate her knowledge in preparation for her increased responsibilities at the College.

Her interest in modernism was established before her trip overseas. Modernist influences were frequently traced in her works. "Her study of Miss Miller is remarkable for clean handling, and neat painting in the high key of the modern style in this class of work. The direct treatment and neutral background give life and interest..."³¹ Her now lost painting *The Jazz Jumper* c 1924 featured colours that were "distinctly bizarre and daring".³² In 1928 she exhibited modernist relief prints in the words of the *Mercury* critic "after the style of Margaret Preston" at the Art Society of Tasmania.³³ Examples of her relief prints illustrated in the 1989 catalogue suggest that she deployed Tasmanian wildflowers and handled the print medium with the same authority and flair that marked her grasp of decorative stylisation in china painting. Her longstanding expertise in design work informed her printmaking as it had previously done for her drawing and works on paper. Jean Campbell, in her encyclopaedic history of Australian watercolours, suggested that Lovett brought informed modernist knowledge to the Australian watercolour tradition, whereas the medium was usually an ancillary sideline to oils for other modernists.³⁴ Rather than



Mildred Lovett, *Florice* n.d. oil on canvas, 80 x 57 cm, private collection. Photograph courtesy of the Plimsoll Gallery, University of Tasmania, taken for the catalogue accompanying the exhibition Mildred Lovett, 1880-1955: A survey Plimsoll Gallery, University of Tasmania, 1989 (curated by Jonathan Holmes and Elizabeth Lada)

simply sharpening her outlines and simplifying her forms, Lovett took cues from Cezanne and later Cubist practice and let her coloured washes float separate from the outlines and therefore from mimetic representation.

Her trip overseas was in her own words "devoted more to the theoretical than the practical side of her work. [She] is keenly interested in the new art movement".³⁵ Taking leave of absence she studied intensively at the Grosvenor School of Modern Art, chosen as she said because it was renowned for its progressive curriculum. It is possible that her former pupils Grace Crowley and Anne Dangar recommended study at the Academie Lhote.³⁶ She corresponded with, and may have visited, Crowley in Paris, but Crowley was mostly painting in the south of France with Andre Gleizes when Lovett was in Paris. She made note of Mary Cockburn Mercer as the English-speaking Australian-born assistant at the Academie Lhote. Additionally she spent her free time visiting both public and commercial galleries in Britain and Europe, observing and taking brief notes on both historic and living artists, although for her family she mostly shared amusing social observations, not so much technical details. Her most detailed commentary and praise was for Marie Laurencin, admiring her modernity and feminine delicacy, declaring the work as pure as a "lark singing on a spring morning."³⁷ Laurencin was the most admired female associated with the Ecole de Paris and post Cubist modernism. Lovett carefully maximised her opportunities to observe and learn before she returned to what she feared was a narrower cultural context in Hobart.

The progressive nature of her teaching was widely recognised in the 1920s and 1930s: in the words of Thea Proctor for example –

The four artists, said Miss Proctor, were students of Miss Mildred Lovett, of Hobart, who was one of the few people in Australia who knew what drawing should be. It might be said that accuracy was the sole standard in draughtsmanship. Australia had suffered a great loss through the death of George Lambert, for he had raised both the standard of painting and the standard of draughtsmanship while he had lived in Australia.

Miss Lovett encouraged her students to think for themselves, and to experiment with colour and form, Miss Proctor added. The greatest weakness in Australian art had always been its lack of design. A picture must have a decorative quality and must make a definite pattern on a wall and an effect of colour.³⁸

Similar praise was given by Ashton, William Moore and also Margaret Preston, who rated Lovett's skill in drawing in a modernist style as above Lambert's.

After c 1940 Lovett had less time for art making as she was firstly caring for her husband and then less physically able herself. She moved back to Sydney and remained an enthusiastic gallery visitor, with an acerbic and critical view of the art of the 40s and 50s.

Referring to Mrs. Paterson's return, using the artist's married name, the "Sun" Sydney, describes her as "probably the most versatile woman artist in Australia," and adds:

"Oil[s], woodcuts, sculpture, and china painting all are provinces in which Mrs. Paterson is proficient. A brilliant pupil of Mr. Julian Ashton, she is one of the few women members of the Society of Artists and a regular exhibitor in its annual shows. The sculpture head of a girl was bought from her by the National Art Gallery."³⁹

In 1939 *Art and Australia* set out a convincing case for her status as a major player within the regional art history of Tasmania, yet equally at a national level in terms of the arrival and impact of modern art in Australia. Neither her reputation as a key woman artist, teacher, arts advocate and "influencer" (to use the current terminology), nor the uniquely high level of acceptance directed to her within the male-dominated inner circles of professional art making in Sydney at the time of the emergence of a strongly nationalist commercial and institutionalised art market in post-federation Australia, have made a lasting impact on public memory in Australia.

"Art in Tasmania owes a debt to Mildred Lovett, who is in charge of the drawing and painting classes. Herself a capable draughtswoman and skilled artist, whose work is easily comprehended by the layman, she is above the reproach of those who assert that contemporary art is merely a matter of bad taste and incompetent drawing ...".⁴⁰

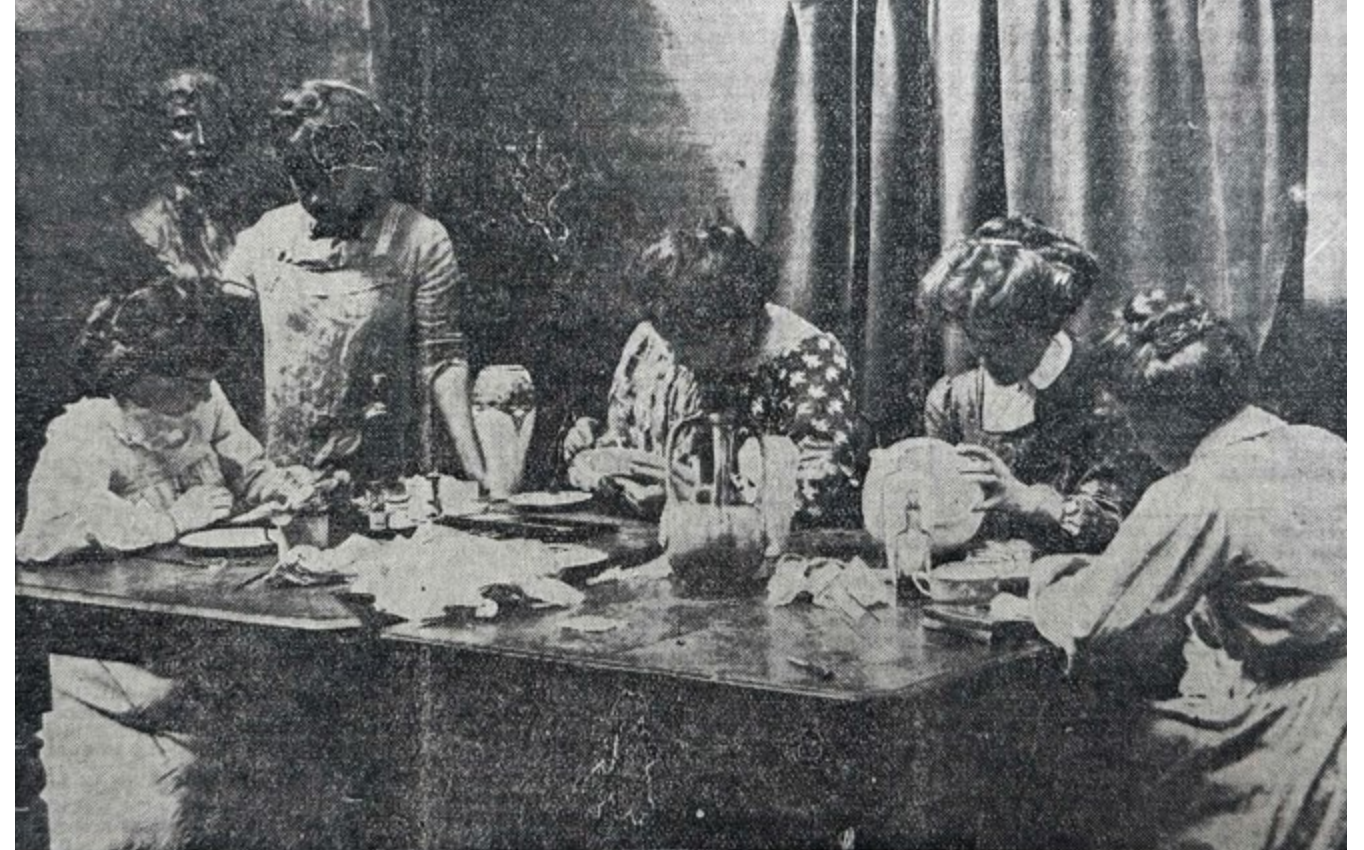
Juliette Peers



Mildred Lovett, *Nude (Study of Dorothy Stoner)* c 1928, pencil and wash on paper, 31.5 x 26.1 cm, private collection, photograph courtesy of the Plimsoll Gallery, University of Tasmania, taken for the catalogue accompanying the exhibition Mildred Lovett, 1880-1955: A survey Plimsoll Gallery, University of Tasmania, 1989 (curated by Jonathan Holmes and Elizabeth Lada)

Notes

- 1 The basis of Janine Burke's widely read and multiply republished 1980 monograph on the same subject.
- 2 See Juliette Peers "Friend, Mentor, Inspiration: Carrick's Impact on Australian Women" in Deborah Hart ed. Ethel Carrick. Canberra: National Gallery of Australia 2024 especially pp 229-231.
- 3 L.J. Harvey in Brisbane is an exception to this rule, working across multiple media and also having a large teaching practice at the Brisbane Central School but enjoying strong curatorial advocates in Ron Radford and Glenn R Cooke, and also being widely researched by pottery collectors and dealers.
- 4 The catalogue essay for her 1989 retrospective, Jonathan Holmes and Elizabeth Lada, *Mildred Lovett 1880-1955: A Survey*. Hobart: University of Tasmania 1989, p 5 suggests she was never a prolific artist, yet both the many exhibitions that she sent work to and the quality of her isolated works suggests that she had a stronger and more confident practice than the small number of currently known works implies.
- 5 Australians Charles Douglas Richardson and Bertram Mackennal were also in London and directly influenced by this flowering of experimental art and design, that certainly influenced non-historicist French design, Sezession movements in the German and Austrian empires, and design from Scandinavia, Italy to Eastern Europe, through engagement with figures such as William Morris, Walter Crane, Alfred Gilbert and (a little later) Charles Rennie Mackintosh. For a decade or so Britain outpaced France as the source of radical visual arts influences. Tom Roberts, also in London, certainly took up some of the ideas about the importance of artist as setting the pace in creative endeavour, but not so much the technical and stylistic influences, although his wife Lillie Williamson – more commercially successful than he was in Edwardian Britain – certainly engaged with avant garde arts and crafts practice and displayed art nouveau styling in her wood carving.
- 6 He died in South Africa in search of a warmer, more consistent climate than Tasmania to improve his health. Also note early press accounts stating that Lovett took over his class in the wake of his health issues. 25 Nov 1909 - PERSONAL - Trove (nla.gov.au) *Mercury* 25th November 1909 p 5 Personal.
- 7 01 Jun 1900 - THE MERCURY. - Trove (nla.gov.au) *Mercury* 1st June 1900 p 2 Art in Tasmania.
- 8 In Holmes and Lada p 3, some anxiety about the status of such work was expressed.
- 9 16 Jul 1887 - Advertising - Trove (nla.gov.au) *Mercury* 16 July 1887 p 3 Advertising.
- 10 Holmes and Lada exhibition p 22.
- 11 01 Jun 1900 - THE MERCURY. - Trove (nla.gov.au) *Mercury* 1st June 1900 p 2 Art in Tasmania.
- 12 Lionel Lindsay always criticised what he called the National Gallery of Victoria's "School of Smudge". This demarcation between drawing styles continued in Sydney through the influence of George Lambert when he returned to Australia.
- 13 Holmes and Lada p 5.
- 14 It was equally so for Lovett's friend and colleague pastellist Florence Rodway.
- 15 08 May 1902 - TECHNICAL SCHOOL. - Trove (nla.gov.au) *Mercury* 8th May 1902 p 3 Technical School Presentation to Miss Rodway.
- 16 In Melbourne, artists such as Meldrum, Bale and the extended McCubbin and Withers families were involved in such assertions. Julian Ashton in Sydney always asserted the primacy of his circle as the true professionals and this underpinned his claims that his associates and pupils were the major artists in Sydney.
- 17 Vol. 6 No. 6 (1 November - December 1909) (nla.gov.au) Julian Ashton "Miss Mildred Lovett: Some Notes on her China Painting" in *Art and Architecture: the journal of the Institute of Architects of New South Wales*. Vol. 6 No. 6 1909 p 190.
- 18 23 Nov 1904 - HOBART TECHNICAL SCHOOL - Trove (nla.gov.au) *Mercury* 23rd November 1904 p 5 Hobart Technical School.
- 19 26 May 1905 - GOVERNMENT TECHNICAL SCHOOL. - Trove (nla.gov.au) *Mercury* 26th May p 6 Government Technical School Exhibition and Distribution of Prizes. Barclay moved to Melbourne to study with Charles Douglas Richardson and then Europe, exhibiting at the salon before giving up art to marry John Eldershaw.
- 20 Elizabeth Armstrong in Adelaide is regarded as one of the first senior women teachers of art at a government funded school – Rachel Biven, *Some forgotten... some remembered: Women artists of South Australia*, Sydenham Gallery, Norwood, 1976.
- 21 03 Aug 1903 - Advertising - Trove (nla.gov.au) *Mercury* 3rd August 1903 p 6 Advertising.
- 22 *The Lone Hand* 1st May 1913 p xi.
- 23 26 Jan 1912 - AUSTRALIAN ART. - Trove (nla.gov.au) *Daily Post* 26th January 1912 p 7 Australian Art Cooperative Movement in Sydney.
- 24 Ashton seems to have visited Hobart and painted alongside Lovett, sharing the same subject. 1989 exhibition p 6.
- 25 "Society of Artists" *The salon: being the journal of the Institute of Architects of New South Wales*. Vol. 1 No. 31 November - December 1912 p 154.
- 26 04 Dec 1909 - THE SOCIETY OF ARTISTS. - Trove (nla.gov.au) *Clarence and Richmond Examiner* 4th December 1909 p 10 The Society of Artists.
- 27 For Lahey's profile in Brisbane see Juliette Peers "Vida Lahey" in Natasha Bullock, Kelli Cole, Deborah Hart, Elsbeth Pitt, *Know My Name* Canberra: National Gallery of Australia 2020 p 220.
- 28 Bettina MacAulay *Songs of Colour: the Art of Vida Lahey* Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery 1989 p 46.
- 29 26 Nov 1929 - SOCIAL GOSSIP - Trove (nla.gov.au) *Sun* 26th November 1929 p 23 Social Gossip.
- 30 Jonathan Holmes and Elizabeth Lada, *Lucien Dechaineux 1869-1957* Hobart: Centre for the Arts Gallery 1986 p 13 https://eprints.utas.edu.au/18371/1/Lucien_Dechaineux_1869-1957_Final.pdf .
- 31 14 Feb 1928 - ART SOCIETY EXHIBITION - Trove (nla.gov.au) *Mercury* 14th February 1928 p 3 Art Society Exhibition.
- 32 Holmes and Lada p 6.
- 33 04 Jul 1928 - THE ART SOCIETY - Trove (nla.gov.au), *Mercury* 4th July 1928 p 3. Other less remembered artists were noted as showing modernist prints too.
- 34 Jean Campbell Australian *Watercolour Painters: 1780 to the Present Day* Adelaide: Rigby 1983 p 158.
- 35 08 Feb 1930 - PERSONAL - Trove (nla.gov.au) *Mercury* 8th February 1930 p 10 Mildred Lovett Return from Overseas Tour.
- 36 Holmes and Lada p 8.
- 37 Important Women Artists *Mildred Lovett and her Students* Malvern: Important Women Artists Gallery 1976 p 5.
- 38 18 Feb 1937 - AUSTRALIAN ART. - Trove (nla.gov.au) *Sydney Morning Herald* 18th February 1937 p 4 Australian Art Poor Draughtsmanship.
- 39 08 Feb 1930 - PERSONAL - Trove (nla.gov.au) *Mercury* 8th February 1930 p 10 Mildred Lovett Return from Overseas Tour.
- 40 Eileen Crow "Art In Tasmania" *Art and Australia* 15 May 1939 p 26.



Mildred Lovett teaching China painting, *The Star: the Australian evening daily*, Saturday 9 April 1910, Sydney, N.S.W. Printed and published by Ralph Asher for the Australian Newspaper Co., 1909-1910, State Library of New South Wales

Daisy Rossi (1879-1974)

Supplementary essay

Qualup Bells is Into the Light's second acquisition of work by Daisy Rossi. Her landscape *Fairy Waters, Hawkhurst* 1911 features in the Into the Light acquisitions catalogue 2021.¹ That essay includes information on Rossi's life and work as a painter, designer and critic. Supplementary to the earlier essay, this piece explores Rossi's professional focus on depicting the flora of southwestern Australia, including *Qualup Bells*.

I dislike being called a flower painter, which, in the ordinary sense, conveys the idea of 'still life', conventional branches of flowers laid out on trays or tucked into china bowls or glass vases, the infinitely niggling and ladylike, conveying no adequate impression of the life of flowers.²

In 1909, Daisy Rossi, with funds from her work as a portrait painter in Perth, travelled to London to study.³ On a visit to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, she saw the Marianne North Gallery, home to over 800 paintings by a woman who challenged Victorian convention and travelled the world, often alone, making vibrant paintings of plants and natural scenes. Finding the Australian section of the Marianne North collection insufficient to convey the floral splendours of home, Rossi returned to Perth in 1910 with the ambition to work on depicting the plants of Australia's southwest.⁴



Marianne North Gallery, image courtesy of RBG, Kew

Daisy Rossi was in the right place for the pursuit of a passion for flora. Joseph Hooker, head of Kew Gardens, had written to Charles Darwin in 1855, "The Flora... of S.W. Australia will I believe turn out to be the most peculiar on the Globe."⁵ The English painter Marianne North was also astonished when she landed in Albany on the south coast of Western Australia in 1880. There, she shared accommodation with the Australian painter Ellis Rowan, who "at once introduced me to quantities of the most lovely flowers – flowers such as I had never seen or even dreamed of before... the abundance of different species in a small space was quite marvellous. In one place I sat down and without moving could pick twenty-five different flowers within reach of my hand.... The whole country was a natural flower garden."⁶

In placing the local flora at the centre of her practice, Daisy Rossi was evolving a settler tradition that was particularly significant in the southwest of the continent, given the region's remarkable biodiversity as home to one-third of all Australian plant species.⁷ An interest in botany, and various art and design practices such as china painting, watercolour, textiles, woodwork and metalwork, had come together in a way that underlined a sense of place for the newcomers to the land *through* the flora.

It was largely women artists who depicted the flowers; indeed, the very idea of the flower is long associated with femininity and was seen as an appropriate subject for women. Art historian Joan Kerr describes the place of such work in the art establishment of the day as "the despised female 'hobby' of flower painting – normally consigned to an artistic 'no-man's land' without scientific, economic or artistic value."⁸ Among the Perth "flower painters" who preceded Daisy Rossi was Margaret Forrest; one of the botanising women artists whose work demonstrated significant "scientific value". In the late 19th century, she collaborated with the Victorian Government Botanist Ferdinand Von Mueller, and 200 plant specimens collected in Western Australia by Forrest are held in the National Herbarium of Victoria.⁹

Dorothy Erickson asserts: "A few strong-willed individuals continued their careers after marriage, but it was considered humiliating for the husband if the wife's work was sold for more than pin money. Those works that were sold were often underpriced, undervalued...."¹⁰ Daisy Rossi's situation was different. As a single woman forging a living as an artist, art teacher and writer in Perth, she was already established in a long career by the time she married in 1918 at the age of 39. Her career also coincided with a time of social reform and agitation for the rights of women, with Australian women (only non-Aboriginal women) having been the first in the world to have the right to vote and stand for parliament. In 1910, Rossi's presence is noted among "a large attendance of women" to hear the activists Jessie Ackerman and Muriel Matters;¹¹ the latter being the Australian suffragist who, in 1908, tied herself to the grille of the Ladies' Gallery in the House of Commons in London, campaigning for British women to be enfranchised.¹² In that atmosphere of change, a woman being a professional artist such as Rossi, rather than a hobbyist, was becoming less of an outlandish notion.

In 1913, the book *Australasians who count in London and who counts in Western Australia* included this account of Rossi's drive:

...her intense wish to make art, and the influence of art, felt, forbade her to refuse any channel through which this might be done; and her whole-hearted interest in her work (has) had far-reaching results... gaining not only commendation from outsiders, but what is so much more difficult to obtain, much genuine admiration and applause from her fellow artists...¹³



Daisy Rossi, *Qualup Bells* c1914, oil on canvas, 50 x 80 cm
Into the Light Collection 2022, Sheila Foundation

A review of the annual exhibition of the W.A. Society of Arts in 1911 noted that, "By far the greatest exhibitor in the oils section is Miss Rossi, who has turned out several fine pieces of work... Miss Rossi's pictures are rapidly becoming very popular."¹⁴

Rossi's increasing reputation, and the importance of the flora as emblematic of the State, led to a commission from the W.A. Agent-General to create a series of wildflower paintings to be installed at Savoy House in London. In 1913, the Government of Western Australia was unimpressed by the London offices allocated to the State within the building where the agencies of all the states of the Commonwealth were to be accommodated. The premier, John Scaddan, found the proposal "absolutely unsuited to the requirements of a rapidly developing State such as Western Australia." W.A. struck out on its own to purchase the centrally located Savoy House, in order to better serve the interests of "a State which cannot afford to lag in the race for adequate prominence..."¹⁵

The reconstructed Savoy House was officially opened in January 1915, poised to bring the State's "great resources of gold and grain, of timber, wool, fruit and pearls under the eye of the world's metropolis."¹⁶ However, Daisy Rossi's wildflower panels were not among the resources on display. The only artwork mentioned in the fulsome account of the opening is a panoramic view of Perth and the Swan River by "Mr M. McKinlay, a young Western Australian artist."¹⁷ Miguel McKinlay, known in Perth as Michael, had moved to England in 1914.¹⁸

The outbreak of war had intervened between Rossi being awarded the commission and the opening of Savoy House. The details of the demise of the Rossi project are unclear. Perhaps the commissioning, transport and installation of the numerous suite of Rossi paintings became too expensive or too difficult in times of turmoil, and it may have been an easier solution to commission McKinlay, who was in London at that time. Whatever transpired, a prestigious showcase for Rossi's work was lost.

In 1915, the *West Australian* referred to the fate of the Savoy House commission, saying Rossi had recently been working less on portraiture, and that "her attention has been mainly devoted to...reproducing in oils the beautiful and unique flora of this State. But for the disorganising financial effect of the war...this new artistic departure would have resulted in the State's London Agency House presenting the distinctive feature of a chamber with mural decorations, in ordered series, of panels representative of the wild flowers of Western Australia. ...the work was already well advanced when through the above unfortunate cause the object named suffered indefinite postponement."¹⁹

In an exhibition of 54 works at her studio in Hay Street in Perth in December 1915, Rossi included works related to the commission; a show that was enthusiastically received as "of compelling interest to lovers of art."²⁰ The newspaper magnate and arts patron Sir Winthrop Hackett purchased *Eucalyptus Ficifolia* and *Hovea Trisperma* and gave them to the Western Australian Art Gallery.²¹

The works donated by Hackett are a useful demonstration of how Rossi's approaches to painting tree blossom and the flowers of smaller plants differed. The gumtree spray is lying on a surface, while the smaller, purple Hovea is painted where it



Daisy Rossi, *Red flowering gum (Eucalyptus ficifolia)* c1914, oil on canvas, 50.8 x 81.3 cm, Gift of Sir J. Winthrop Hackett, 1915, The State Art Collection, The Art Gallery of Western Australia

grows. Rossi explained, "I first started on my present method by painting a great armful of redgum that had been thrown down on my studio table in the sunlight, just as it was, without any arrangement at all. With the exception of such great branches of gums and wattle, I never pick flowers at all – to do so would be a profanation, and deprive them of their atmosphere, life and spirit. I have evolved a new way of painting wild flowers on their own ground...dead leaves, twigs, stones and all."²²

Despite that assertion, Rossi was sometimes required to take another approach to sourcing her floral subjects. This is confirmed by a 1917 description of a Rossi painting of "wild hibiscus", which notes that "the originals were sent down by Mrs Lillian Greaves."²³ Greaves, a writer known as the Wongan Poetess,²⁴ lived in Wongan Hills north-east of Perth, where native hibiscus (*Alyogyne sp.*) are among the local flora.²⁵

The painting acquired by Into the Light, *Qualup Bells*, may also have been achieved with this long-distance approach. The Qualup Bell (*Pimelea physodes*) is a shrub endemic to near-coastal regions over 400 kilometres south-east of Rossi's home in Perth.²⁶ Rossi's painting, with its indistinct, darkly worked background, does not show the plant's "own ground", and it is possible that Rossi painted picked specimens sent from the far south. The Savoy House commission, with its ambition to represent the flora of the State, may have led Rossi to break with her custom of painting plants in situ. Working from specimens sent from afar would have allowed her to depict such plants without making long and arduous journeys.



Alec Coles, *Qualup Bells* growing at Qualup, Fitzgerald River National Park WA 2025, courtesy Alec Coles

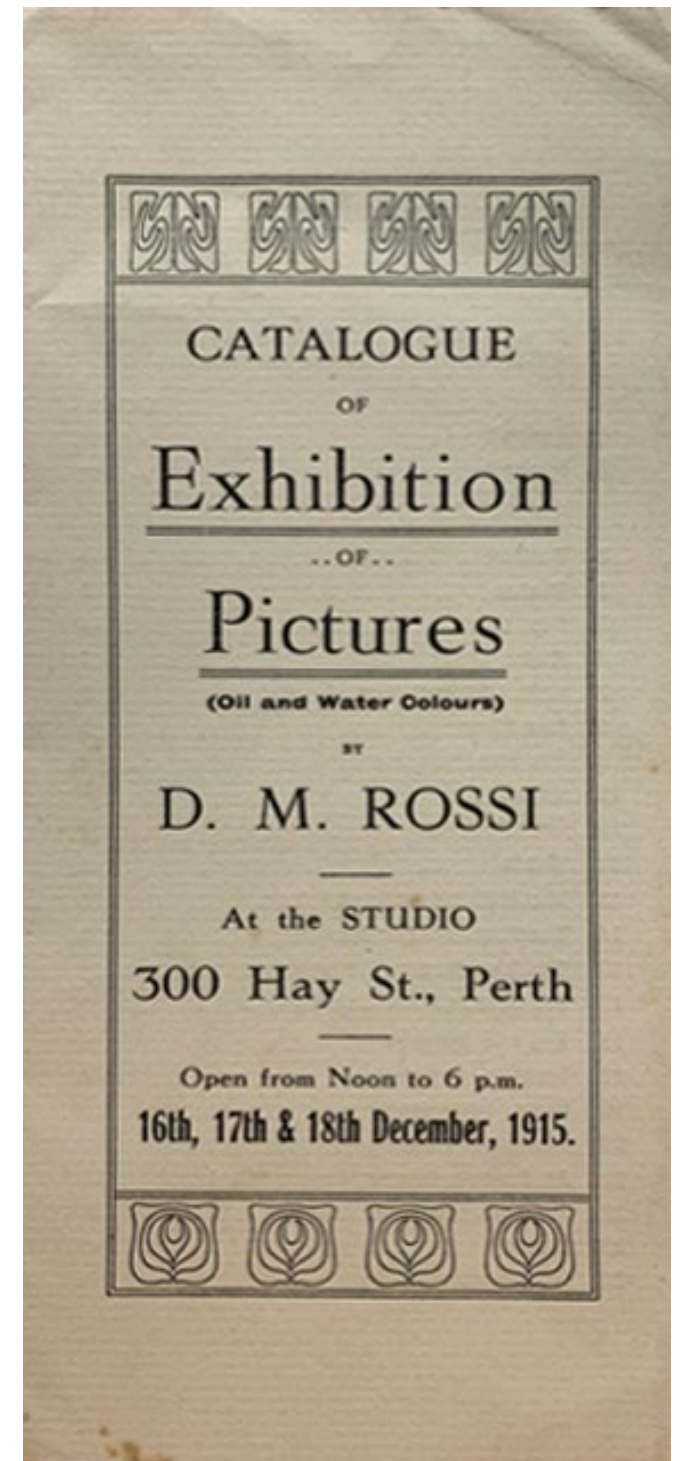
Qualup Bells, though undated, appears contemporaneous with the two works related to the Savoy commission (*Red Flowering Gum [Eucalyptus Ficifolia]* and *Hovea [Hovea Trisperma]*) that Hackett donated to the W.A. Art Gallery. Paintings that Rossi made much later, after many decades of career hiatus, are quite different – less closely observed, more loosely executed and set on paler backgrounds. This is apparent in late works such as *Banksia Littoralis*. A 1960 newspaper article shows Rossi at work on that picture, at the age of 81.²⁷

The catalogue for Rossi's 1915 exhibition, in which she included for sale works made for the Savoy House project, stated that eleven "unframed panels of West Australian flora" had already been purchased for a private collection.²⁸ The buyer was Kathleen Hardey,²⁹ and the paintings were installed at her house, Tranby Croft, in the Perth suburb of Mount Lawley. An effusive newspaper article describes the display in Hardey's home as "a complete revelation...if some vandal malignity obliterated our Western flowers they would live forever in those panels."³⁰ Hardey was a close friend and patron to Rossi, and her daughter Gretchen had childhood memories of accompanying her mother on frequent visits to the artist's studio in Hay Street: "I think she just went to the house so often and Daisy was painting, and if there was one she liked, she'd say 'I'll have that when it's finished'."³¹

Works Rossi made for the Savoy House project and sold to Hardey included one named in the exhibition catalogue as *Pimelia* (sic).³² There are many species of *Pimelea* in Western Australia. However, evidence suggests the painting was probably *Pimelea physodes*, or Qualup Bell. Rossi did make more than one painting of some of her floral subjects, but a listing of all known Rossi works includes only one *Qualup Bells*. It was among 25 Rossi wildflower paintings noted in 2000 as held in the collection of Gretchen Anketell, who had inherited them from her mother, Rossi's patron Kathleen Hardey.³³ It is, therefore, likely that the *Qualup Bells* now in the Into the Light collection was part of the artist's Savoy House project, originally intended for the West Australian Agent-General's offices in London.

Rossi continued to paint plants and landscape scenes into the 1920s. Her painting career then lapsed for decades, until she resumed her practice in the 1950s.³⁴ While Rossi's West Australian flora series never made it to London to promote the State at the heart of empire, the lost commission did serve to energise Rossi's painting of flora; the theme that most characterised her work for the rest of her life. As she said in 1923, "An artist's days of disappointment and sense of mere abject accomplishment are inevitable as night follows day; but it does not quench one's ardour – it is the necessary spur to fresh endeavour, and it is in the doing, not the result, that the artist finds his joy and reward."³⁵

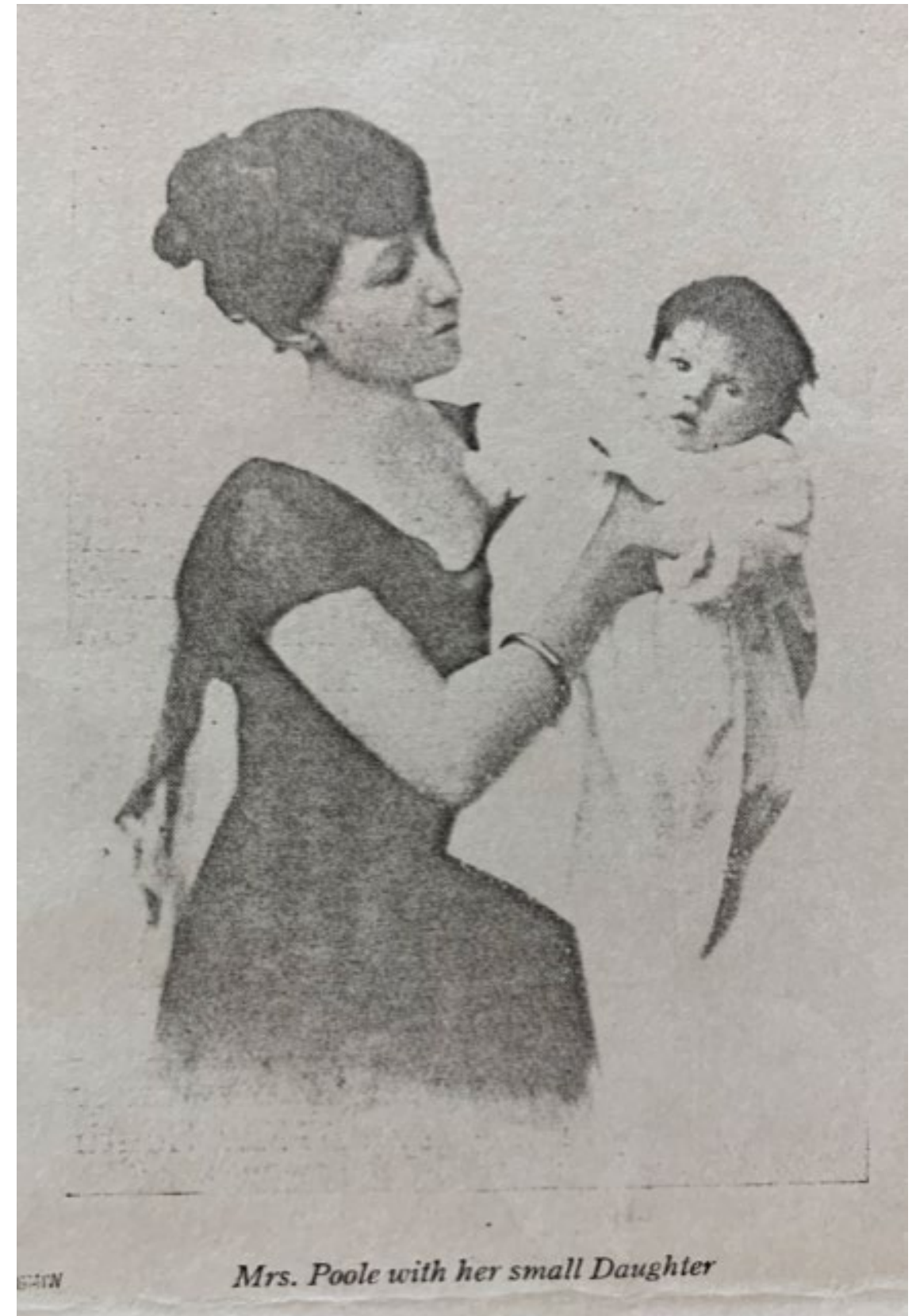
Robyn Johnston



Rossi exhibition catalogue, 1915. From the Art Gallery of Western Australia library collection

Notes

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- 3 Christobel Bennett, *Rossi: Artist and Citizen in Early Twentieth Century Perth*, Honours diss., Perth, University of Western Australia, 1998, p 15.
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- 23 'Art in Perth. Miss Rossi's Pictures', *Sunday Times*, 8 July 1917, p 6 <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/57984640>
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Daisy Rossi (Mrs Temple Poole, or Mrs Poole) with her daughter Iseult, c1920, *Woman's World*, October 1, 1923

Lady Marian Barrett (1861-1939)

Lesser-known women artists who made notable contributions to the impressionist movement in Australia have been acquired in various years of the Into the Light project. Sydney-based women artists have been a particular focus. Collectively their profiles tangibly diminished after their deaths and in the wake of the widespread deaccessioning of less-famous women artists from the Art Gallery of New South Wales, right up to the 1990s. Generally, Melbourne-based women artists have been better documented than their peers in other states, through various exhibitions across nearly a half century. This series was launched by the exhibition *Australian Women Artists: 1840-1940*, organised in 1974-5 by a curatorium convened by Kiffy Rubbo, which included Suzanne Davies, Grazia Gunn, Lesley Dumbrell and Janine Burke as a researcher,¹ in addition to exhibitions by male professionals such as Daniel Thomas and Ian North who had showed an interest in women artists. *Completing the Picture* 1992, an exhibition of Jane Sutherland's work in 1977 at the VCA (followed by the special focus on her work in *Australian Impressionism* in 2017) and a major retrospective of Emma Minnie Boyd in 2004 have also directed close attention on women artists from Melbourne with connections to plein air and impressionist practices.

Yet several Melbourne women artists with close associations to the impressionist movement have still eluded curatorial and academic attention even into the 21st century. Two such women, Theodosia Anderson and Beatrice Colquhoun, have been documented in previous ITL publications. Continuing this focus on extending the documentation of women in the plein air movement, a work by the most fascinating and dynamic, yet most obscure woman associated with the plein air circle has been acquired. Lady Marian Barrett's work rarely appears on the market, although she painted for half a century and was a highly prolific artist. Like Theo Anderson, Barrett painted in both a looser radical style, mostly in watercolour landscapes painted on holidays, and in a more formal academic style. Large caches of excellent works survived in her family's hands into the 1980s and beyond.



Marion Rennick, *Kangaroo in a Moonlit Australian Landscape* 1880, oil on canvas, 25.5 X 35.5 cm. Courtesy of the family

Contrary to received memory or many professional narratives, Barrett exhibited frequently across five decades with a number of groups and at major events in Victoria and in Sydney. She even organised a solo exhibition at her home in 1927 of oil still lifes and watercolour landscapes. From this exhibition Sir John Longstaff chose a work, a still life of a flowering cactus, to be donated to the Castlemaine Art Gallery,² which remains in the collection. Some of her works were donated to public bodies by herself or Sir James Barrett, including the Emily McPherson College (now RMIT) and to the network of rural hospitals in Victoria substantially established by her sister-in-law Dr Edith Barrett.³ Demanding critics who were often sceptical of women artists, such as Arthur Streeton and Lionel Lindsay, gave her positive reviews, again confirming Barrett's status as an artist. Despite her current obscurity, Barrett's artworks were consistently visible within Melbourne's professional artworld and she also was a major cultural agent within art, academic, educational, public welfare and charitable circles in Melbourne from the 1890s onwards as her husband became prominent in Melbourne's public life.



Marian Barrett, *Cactus* c1900 -1927, oil on canvas, 46 x 61 cm. Gift of the artist. Castlemaine Art Museum

According to her daughter Jeanette Robley, Marian Barrett jokingly used to claim that she was technically a cockney, as she had been born as Marian Rennick in 1861 within the sound of Bow Bells. Her father Charles Rennick was a prosperous businessman who had ambitions to be noticed in public life, standing for election in Victoria and lecturing on the Henry George land tax reforms. He also entertained progressive ideas as he offered a secondary education to his two daughters as early as the 1870s.⁴ Before she left London, Barrett studied at the Girls High School in Bayswater and also in Germany, and attained teacher qualifications in Germany,⁵ all this in her teens. The family came to Melbourne in 1879, when she was around 18 years old. On 2 June 1881, she married Frederick Joy Pirani, a mathematician, freethinker and philosopher. Despite his relatively young age, Pirani was something of celebrity within academic circles, an acting professor at the University of Melbourne, with a chair planned to be formalised later in 1881. Yet when he was thrown from a bolting horse in Fitzroy Street St



Marian Barrett, *Magnolias* c1920s, oil on board, 34 x 47 cm, Into the Light Collection 2022, Shelia Foundation

Kilda in July 1881, Barrett was widowed within a few weeks of her marriage, a sad tale that was widely mentioned in the press. Pirani was buried on unconsecrated ground after a secular service without any religious celebrant.

The accident to Mr. Pirani is a terrible one in every way. For he was a rising young man, he had a good future before him, he was a notable example of the good teaching of our University, and he was an excellent illustration of what our Victorian young men can do if only they try – He had been married but five weeks...⁶

Frederick Joy Pirani belonged to a Sephardic Jewish family which established a Melbourne branch of a large English tailoring company in the late 1850s, although when Pirani blazed a trail of educational successes through Melbourne Grammar and the University of Melbourne, he found widespread acceptance and admiration amongst Melbourne social elites. Little is known of how Barrett met her first husband, but the relationship indicates she was already moving amongst radical and progressive thinkers, following her father's interests. The Pirani family remained in contact with both the Rennicks and the Barretts into the 1920s and 1930s. They were listed in the press as guests at both social events and family milestones, weddings and funerals. Members of the Pirani family assisted Sir James Barrett's efforts to establish and maintain a permanent symphony orchestra in Melbourne. Her first husband was described as "an ardent student of music, and one of the most brilliant amateur pianists in Melbourne";⁷ music was an interest that she shared with both of her husbands.

Equally we do not know how Barrett met her second husband, Dr – later Sir – James Barrett. He spent several years during the 1880s in London and Europe, especially Germany and Austria,⁸ and was not in Melbourne when she was widowed. There was minimal press coverage of their wedding in 1888, nor does his short autobiography provide details about the marriage, rather it focuses on a series of thematic chapters overviewing his public campaigns from the 1880s to the 1940s, involving everything from health and educational reforms to greater provision of urban playgrounds to treatment of venereal diseases in the first AIF, to greater protection of native bushland and wildlife habitats to the establishment of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra to simplified English spelling, to reference only a few of his interests covered in his text. As he mentions "loved shades of other days", quoting Johann Wolfgang Goethe in the epilogue,⁹ one could presume he was thinking of now deceased family members, including Marian and their son Keith, killed in France in 1917. Both James and Marian Barrett were friends of the Sutherland family of Melbourne artists and intellectuals during the 1880s and they may have met in their circle. Certainly the couple was married at the Rennick home in South Yarra by the radical dissenting minister Charles Strong,¹⁰ who was also a member of the Sutherlands' circle. Later Marian Barrett was one of the few working artists in Melbourne who kept in touch with Jane Sutherland when she was forced into retirement and updated her on activities and gossip amongst the artists.

As a young, somewhat celebrity widow in Melbourne, the then Marian Pirani attended the National Gallery of Victoria School in the 1880s, contradicting the myth that the female students were young ladies of good family looking to acquire some polite accomplishments. She was a noted member of George



Marian Pirani, *Laura Moerlin (Mrs M P Fox)* (TC 1884) 1888, oil on canvas, The University of Melbourne Art Collection, © the artist's estate and The University of Melbourne

Folingsby's early cohort of students. During this period she painted a number of larger confident figure studies in oil. One of Barrett's few works in a public collection is her portrait of Laura Fox MA, in her academic robes from 1888. Laura Fox was a sister-in-law of Emanuel Phillips Fox and the second woman to graduate as a Master of Arts from the University. The Ian Potter Museum states that it is currently the earliest known painting of a female graduate of the University of Melbourne.¹¹ The work is unusually large in scale for known works by women artists from the 1880s, except perhaps publicly commissioned professional academic portraitists such as Mary Stoddard of Sydney. In its fairly careful and detailed representational style, close attention to tonal values, yet simultaneously some broadness and freedom in the observation of light, it holds its own with works of similar date by her better-known colleagues at the gallery school, May Vale, Josephine Muntz-Adams, John Longstaff, Alexander Colquhoun, Frederick McCubbin, Rupert Bunny, Phillips Fox and Emma Minnie Boyd, the latter being particularly skilled at assembling figurative works. Barrett painted other complex portraits in the 1880s and 1890s, but her later oils tend to be still lifes. Her practice in still life and flower paintings, which extended from academic to modernist, is the context in which this work should be understood. None of the modernist work she

showed from c1930 onwards has yet come to light.

Like many of Folingsby's students, she also attended plein air painting excursions and painting camps organised under the impetus of Tom Roberts, and which have attained legendary status, although the documentation of the many female attendees remains patchy and incomplete. As her daughter Bertha Canning noted, Barrett was the only person known to have painted at the artists' camps established by Tom Roberts in the 1880s and at the George Bell School in the 1930s. For that reason alone her story is noteworthy. Barrett was, in her daughter's recollection, considered very beautiful and painted many times by her artist colleagues, although only one early portrait has been identified, that by Fox in the Wesfarmers Collection, known as *The Orphan*. However Mary Eagle has rejected that ID¹² against the received tradition of both Barrett's family and the family of Sir James Barrett's second wife, Monica Heinze, in whose possession the artwork was passed down. This rejection of the ID may also reflect the strong focus of Eagle's art research upon the male stars of late 19th century and early 20th century Australian art. That the likeness is idealised, schematised and abstracted, and is not a direct resemblance is typical of Fox's (non-official) portraits of women including his wife. When painting a figure Fox often combined features of different sitters and worked up figures from different studies,¹³ so that outside of a commissioned portrait, the presence of a sitter in Fox's works is more an abstraction or a concept than a depiction. In terms of the historiography of late 19th century nationalist and plein air art, Barrett herself made one of the few contemporary public statements that linked women artists to



Emanuel Phillips Fox, 1865-1915, *The orphan* 1895, oil on canvas, 42.1 cm x 53.4 cm, courtesy of Wesfarmers Collection of Australian Art

1880s innovations in Melbourne painting. When opening a solo exhibition of Clara Southern in 1929, Barrett recalled how she was part of a group of friends, who now – with the exception of herself – had become household names in Australian painting.¹⁴

During the 1880s Barrett received good reviews at the newly-established student competitions at the National Gallery of Victoria School, at the reformist Australian Artists Association 1886-1888 centred upon radical and impressionist artists, as well as European trained artists, and at the Victorian Artists Society. "And among the lady exhibitors who have distinguished themselves both with the brush and the pencil, special mention must be made of Misses Edeson, Walter, Emerson, Chapman, Sutherland, and Mrs Pirani; and in a secondary degree, of Miss Rae, Miss Vale, and Miss Griffiths".¹⁵ Her "fine group of roses" at the inaugural exhibition of the Victorian Artists Society was claimed to be "a really magnificent piece of flower painting". The portrait of Laura Fox, now at the University of Melbourne, was classed with the "more noticeable" portraits shown at the Victorian Artists Society, along with those of M. de la Crouee, Florence Fuller and Hugh Paterson.¹⁶ She figures in Alexander Colquhoun's various recollections of the National Gallery School published many years later.

Among his confreres in these far-back days were John Longstaff, Fred McCubbin, Aby Altson, J. J. Gibbs, Izzet Watson, Tudor Tucker, David Davies, Mrs Pirani, Isobel Rae, Rupert Bunny, the writer, and others, painting figure and still life under the direction of G. F. Folingsby, and drawing at night from the living model—a consistently harmonious group, competing fraternally at the annual exhibitions till the award of the first travelling scholarship dispersed it to make room for a fresh lot of students entering upon life with new hopes and new aspirations.¹⁷

Under the new system these efforts gave place to the realism of still-life studies—fruit, pots and other inanimate objects, and "life", as represented by the indigent poor of both sexes. From these beginnings developed the more advanced picture composition and the annual school shows, which included the first travelling scholarship exhibition, held in 1887, with the result, as all the world knows, of the award to the star pupil, John Longstaff. The roll of pupils of that time, if called to-day, would show many vacant places. Fred McCubbin, T. St. G. Tucker, E. P. Fox, J. J. Gibbs, Llewellyn Jones, Izzet Watson, with possibly others, have passed on, and of those who have long made their habitat in distant parts of the world are David Davies and Aby Altson. In Melbourne to-day a few could still be found to toe the line, among them Sir John Longstaff, Mrs. Muntz-Adams, Mrs Gilfillan (Miss May Vale), Lady Barrett, then Mrs. Pirani, and the writer—all more or less still on the active list.¹⁸

Unlike some artists who stopped painting after they married, her new status and responsibilities did not suppress opportunities for a rich network of cultural connections. She continued to paint and exhibit, particularly at the Victorian Artists Society, but also at the art competitions organised in Ballarat by the Ballarat Ladies Art Guild, winning the still life prize in 1891¹⁹, the 1907 Women's Work Exhibition and Violet Teague's fundraising exhibitions during World War I. In 1903 the *Sydney Mail* stated

that “Mrs. James Barrett is one of the most charming artists in the Victorian [Artists’] Society”.²⁰ Her works were also included in the annual exhibitions of the Melbourne School of Art, managed by Fox and Tudor St George Tucker during the 1890s, so, despite having a young family, she was working in that studio.²¹ She particularly encouraged younger women in her circle of university contacts in their ambitions to become artists, which could include Mary Meyer née Nanson, Ida Rentoul Outhwaite, Mary Cecil Allen and Ethel Spowers, all daughters of senior academics and now far better known than Marian Barrett. Mary Meyer’s husband Dr Felix Meyer had been a professional colleague of Barrett’s since the 1880s. Meyer is a sparsely documented late 19th and early 20th century Australian woman artist, but she was a regular guest at functions hosted by the Barretts and a constant member of their circle. Both women were active and prolific painters and would have been supportive colleagues within their live practices, again a story that does not appear on the current mainstream art historical narratives.

Interestingly, Sir James Barrett’s arch-rival Dr John Springthorpe, similarly a distinguished medical practitioner, ambitious senior academic and patron of the arts, especially the plein air movement and Bertram Mackennal, held a romantic, Tennysonian, Ruskinian vision of women as the queen of the home and perfect, pure, wise mother, who stood apart from public and professional life whilst sweetening the sordid world of male competition and *Kapital*.²² Conversely James Barrett was surrounded by progressive, educated women with high profiles in public life. His sister Edith was an early female doctor who set up the bush nursing home movement, and shared her brother’s organisational energy, versatility and wide-ranging public interests.²³ His sister-in-law Edith Fox née Rennick was an early university graduate and qualified teacher who prepared students for university entrance. Marian herself similarly served on boards of public bodies including the Emily McPherson College from its inauguration (now part of RMIT with a distinguished record of art and design training) and the Free Kindergarten Movement. Springthorpe and Sir James Barrett represented vastly different ways of viewing women’s role in society and contributions to public life. During World War I Springthorpe and others tried to accuse Sir James Barrett of catastrophic incompetence in relation to the management of Australian military hospitals in Egypt, but James Barrett escaped censure when he transferred from the Australian to the British army medical service at the same rank and official enquiries exonerated him. His knighthood for his wartime service was also implicitly to be understood as compensation in effect for these damaging claims having been raised.²⁴

This elevation increased the cultural status of the couple and the range of activities that engaged them in Melbourne’s cultural circles. During the early 1920s both Barretts attended lectures by Max Meldrum and were present at social functions held in his honour, suggesting engagement with his high-profile philosophies. This connection also opened up friendships between Marian Barrett and early modernists such as Isabel Hunter Tweddle and Arnold Shore, who were well established in Meldrum’s circle. Tonalist and later modernist Mary Cecil Allen was already well-known to Barrett. The 1920s and 1930s marked a significant expansion of Barrett’s presence within Melbourne art circles. She exhibited more frequently, including a solo exhibition in 1927; with the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors; with the Warrandyte Art Exhibitions organised by Clara Southern in Penleigh Boyd’s

studio; with a group of modernist artists at the Athenaeum in 1935; at a survey of modern art in Australia at Geelong Grammar in 1935, including Rupert Bunny, Mary Cecil Allen, Ada May Plante, Maie Casey, Louise Thomas, Jessie Traill, George Bell and the Lindsays;²⁵ and with modernist art society Group Twelve and the important national survey of current living practitioners, *Women Artists of Australia* in Sydney in 1934.²⁶ Lionel Lindsay noted that her works “held together without any conscious effort”,²⁷ praise indeed given that he regarded women artists as somewhat fraudulent.

Barrett also opened exhibitions for several colleagues, including Clara Southern and Marguerite Mahood. This period also marked a high point in Sir James Barrett’s public standing when he was appointed Vice Chancellor and then Chancellor of the University of Melbourne. During his incumbency the University of Melbourne made its greatest inaugural commitment to the collection and curation of material culture that remains a central platform of the institution to this day, the opening of the Grainger Museum in 1938 and the acceptance and exhibition of the Ewing Collection of Australian art in 1936, the latter the first art museum opened on an Australian university campus. A fine still life by Barrett was included in the important collection of art that Percy Grainger donated to the University.

Lady Marian Barrett’s obituary after her fairly unexpected death in 1939 stated

Two of her greatest interests were her painting and her garden. As a girl she studied painting at the National Gallery and never ceased her art work all her life. She was always kind and encouraging to young artists, and many owed their success to her help.

Likewise for the *Who’s Who in the World of Women, vol 2, 1934*, Barrett listed painting and gardening as her interests.

This somewhat formal and academic, yet not unpleasing, still life directly embodies both of these longstanding interests. Equally the picture documents her enthusiasm for collecting oriental art, a passion shared with her husband. In 1935 Lionel Lindsay acknowledged the oriental aspect of some of her art: “a careful watercolour of clematis, almost Chinese in its precision.”³⁰



Marian Barrett, *Dainty Blossoms*, oil on canvas, 21 x 28.8 cm, Grainger Museum Collection, University of Melbourne

The vase was possibly from their collection. The couple often acquired items from friends and contacts residing in the region from India to Japan. Sir James Barrett promoted the professionalisation of western medical training, as well as the general idea of the role of the (western-style) university in increasing social capital and amenity across Asia, and to that end had many notable contacts amongst local regional elites, as well as the more expected collaborations with colonial officials and European administrators. Sir James and Lady Barrett entertained a diverse range of guests from many countries at their home Palmyra in Toorak, which was famed for its large gardens and the Australian wildlife that roamed freely on the property. Often these large and elegant events were intended to present notable people from diverse backgrounds, within the Southeast Asian region to (a sometimes racist and sceptical) Melbourne elite society.

Marian Barrett’s status in mainstream narratives is compromised by her marriage. Although a major academic, James Barrett is traditionally cast as a malign figure in histories of the University of Melbourne, embroiled in several longstanding feuds with Melbourne elites.³¹ He was a pragmatist who viewed the university as a practical, real-life institution, broadly accessible and with strong government funding, teaching modern languages and technical, vocational and practical education rather than a classics-based learning. Concurrently he accepted technologies and innovations, including film and radio, and championed the Australian Broadcasting Commission as a leader of cultural and intellectual life in Australia. Whilst he regarded the British Empire as a key force in global politics after he became increasingly disillusioned with Germany, which he once regarded as a more effective progressive country than Britain, he simultaneously advocated for a multicultural, multi-racial network of right-thinking, well-educated professionals, loyal to Britain and to whom Britain in turn would presumably show favour. For him, education and access to complex learning was the right of people of all classes and would create a more stable and just society.³² His interest in town planning, well-designed housing, urban open spaces for children’s playgrounds and national parks also indicated how he believed that, with appropriate resources and environment, the general population, broadly-defined, would be able to flourish and develop.

Sir James Barrett’s contradictory mix of a conservative, imperialist-based social model with strong advocacy for social mobility, community amenity, public access to community assets and a democratic state that served the interests of its citizens, does not fit the post Whitlam-era model of a settler Australian culture driven by cutting edge (white) radicals in many disciplines, nor the somewhat fixed and reductive models of imperialism and the rollout of state power, deployed as central in current postcolonial models. Certainly, Sir James’s ideas were received with hostility by contemporaries, whose grasp of class and cultural norms was more rigid and conservative than his. That hostility also informs understanding of the foundational conservative drivers that persist beneath the institutional structures of the settler Australian state. Such discussion may seem distanced from Marian Barrett’s artworks, but at the same time they document how issues around her husband have impacted her own position in public memory. Above all the broader context of the professional amnesia around her husband reiterates how far her story, beyond her actual surviving artworks, is different from that of many of her female plein air contemporaries. Barrett’s career and public life is important as it

demonstrates how matters within the visual arts community also touch upon broader social constructs and currents. Art is never an “add-on” or irrelevant to the larger picture of the governance of the state. Whilst it is well accepted that the highly creative women artists, Mary Alice Evatt and Lady Maie Casey, were



Emanuel Phillips Fox, *Portrait of Lady Barrett* 1912–13, oil on canvas, Geelong Gallery, HP Douglass Bequest Fund, 1962. Photographer: Andrew Curtis

close to the mid-20th century Australian state, and Casey’s daughter noted that her mother found Evatt altogether more congenial and likeable than the wives of her husband’s political colleagues such as Dame Pattie Menzies.³³ Marian Barrett brings the plein air circle and also pre-modernist women artists closer to the historic white Australian state.³⁴

Sir James Barrett’s multiple and influential globalised networks became those of his wife. Her obituaries noted that she hosted outstanding visitors from around the world at her home. She travelled overseas with Barrett to Europe, the United States, India, Asia and the Pacific. On these travels she met Australian expatriate artists, especially in London and Paris. Sir James Barrett’s wide range of cultural interests from establishing a permanent classical orchestra in Melbourne to organising the 1907 Exhibition of Women’s Work, also put Marian Barrett in a more proactive and central position than most female contemporaries. Again the richness of the world in which she worked and moved has hitherto not been acknowledged in art history. In 1909 Barrett and her husband, “the versatile doctor”, were “known as some of Melbourne’s most cultured residents”.³⁵ James and Marian Barrett enjoyed an extensive discourse with Melbourne artists. Via the Gallery School, Marian Barrett had close links to Phillips Fox, John Longstaff and to a lesser extent, due to his more irregular attendance, Arthur Streeton, since her days at the Gallery School in the 1880s. Whilst Sir James Barrett’s cousin,³⁶ Melbourne businessman A.O. Barrett, is remembered as a major 1920s patron of Streeton,³⁷ Streeton and Sir James Barrett were also closely linked via their views on town planning and ecological conservation during the 1920s and 1930s, as can be seen by multiple press accounts of them serving in the same groups and supporting each other’s opinions. Sir James Barrett opened one of Theo Anderson’s solo exhibitions. With Phillips Fox the linkages were strengthened when Barrett’s younger sister married one of Fox’s brothers.

The Barretts’ friendship with conductor and composer George William Louis Marshall-Hall further confirmed their position within a radical group of progressive freethinkers, who frequently existed somewhat in opposition to more conventional citizens. Marshall-Hall’s network of friends extended into the visual arts, as he was closely associated with Roberts and Streeton as well as McCubbin, Phillips Fox, Bernard Hall, Ernest Moffitt and Lionel and Norman Lindsay. The composer was a substantial, if unacknowledged, source for the Lindsays’ libertarian philosophies, and Marshall-Hall linked the Heidelberg artists into a broader free-thinking and non-conventional radicalism as well, rather than simply technical innovation in art practice.³⁸ In 1899 Marshall Hall wrote to Marian Barrett asking to borrow the score of a piano arrangement by Edward Elgar.³⁹ Percy Grainger, the iconic, freethinking musician of global reputation, was close to the Barretts and he was also honoured by large scale receptions at Palmyra, again hosted, decorated and managed by Barrett.

Marian Barrett’s status in public memory is further rendered ambiguous because of early Melbourne modernist Arnold Shore’s attraction to older, distinguished women. Shore’s friendship with Barrett became embroiled in Shore and George Bell’s bitter split. In the wake of Shore and Bell’s argument over their jointly run art school in Bourke Street, Bell’s supporters put out the story that Shore tended to fill the classes with socially prominent women of little talent, against Bell’s wishes. Many of Bell’s pupils assumed that Barrett was one of these undistinguished pretenders.⁴⁰ Bell’s supporters also regarded

Shore’s connections to notable Melburnians such as Lady Barrett, Lady Baldwin Spencer, Lady Maie Casey, Lady Joan and Sir Daryl Lindsay as social climbing. Recently Shore’s biographer dismissed Barrett using a quote from one of Shore’s several autobiographical manuscripts as “a dear old lady who used to bring in delicacies to share with the other students”, and suggested that Barrett saw him as a surrogate for her son Keith, who died on the Western Front.⁴¹ This judgement takes no cognisance of her five previous decades of close involvement with Melbourne’s art circles.

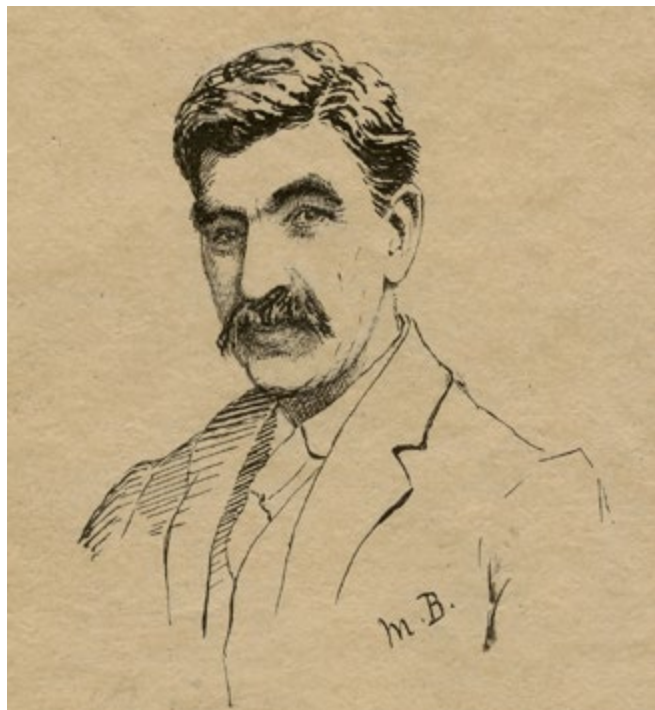
Against this belittling assessment could be placed a stirring obituary that indicated the vivid impact that Barrett made on her contemporaries.

With the death of Lady Barrett, wife of the Chancellor of the University of Melbourne (Sir James Barrett) and of Sister Jessie MacBeth, two lives which had a most stimulating influence on their generation and on the generations following their own came to an end.

LADY BARRETT was a clear, fearless thinker. She believed in life as an adventure, and her interest in her charities, in gardening, and in the art of painting remained with her always, as stimulating to herself as they were helpful in her relations with others.

A fellow-student of Sir John Longstaff and the late Fred. McCubbin under Folingsby at the National Gallery before her marriage, Lady Barrett exhibited with the modern art groups to within a few months of her death.⁴²

Juliette Peers



Marian Barrett, *Untitled (Portrait of Professor George W.L. Marshall-Hall)* undated, ink on paper, size sheet 22.2 x 21.5 cm, Grainger Museum Collection, University of Melbourne

Notes

- For details of the organisation of this important event and its backstory see Juliette Peers ‘Visit of the Tiger Lady A Woman’s Art Revolution in 1970s Melbourne’ in Anne Ryan ed. *Lesley Dumbrell: Thrum*, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales 2024 pp 36-38.
- Sun* 9 August 1927 p 26, 09 Aug 1927 - AT PALMYRA - Trove.
- As far as can be known these artworks have since disappeared. The present author tried to locate the work from the Emily McPherson [i.e. RMIT] collection two decades ago.
- Barrett’s sister Edith Rennick matriculated in 1884 in Melbourne, *Argus* 14 January 1884 p 4, 14 Jan 1884 - THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE. MATRICULATION EXAMINATION.— OCTOBER TERM 1883. - Trove. She firstly worked from her father’s home as a private teacher preparing student for matriculation and by 1889 she had graduated with a BA hons from the University of Melbourne and was working as a teacher, *Argus* 25 April 1889 p 3, 25 Apr 1889 - Advertising - Trove. She later married Joel Fox, brother of the painter E.P. Fox.
- Conversations with Jeannette Robley.
- Sydney Morning Herald* 5 August 1881 p 7, 05 Aug 1881 - OUR MELBOURNE LETTER. - Trove.
- South Australian Register* 8 August 1881 p 4, 08 Aug 1881 - THE RIGHT OF ASYLUM. - Trove.
- Stephen Murray Smith *Sir James William Barrett (1862–1945)* Biography - Sir James William Barrett - Australian Dictionary of Biography.
- James Barrett *Eighty Eventful Years* Melbourne: James Stephens 1945 p 133.
- Herald* 14 November 1888 p 6, 14 Nov 1888 - Family Notices - Trove.
- https://art-museum.unimelb.edu.au/collection/mrs-m-p-fox-ma-1888/.
- Mary Eagle *The Oil Paintings of E. Phillips Fox in the National Gallery of Australia* Canberra: National Gallery of Australia 1997 pp 66-68.
- See Len Fox’s account of Phillips Fox’ working methods in Len Fox *E Phillips Fox and his Family* Potts Point: Len Fox pp 66-68, 1985 edition p 68: “he often changed the person slightly to fit in with the painting”.
- Argus* 29 May 1929 p 16, 29 May 1929 - ART EXHIBITION. - Trove.
- Australasian* 10 November 1883 p 10, 10 Nov 1883 - FINE ARTS. - Trove.
- Argus* 30 April 1888 p 30, Apr 1888 - EXHIBITION OF THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY OF ARTISTS. - Trove.
- Alexander Colquhoun ‘Australian Artists of the Past E.P. Fox’ *Age* 22 October 1932 p 5, 22 Oct 1932 - AUSTRALIAN ARTISTS OF THE PAST - Trove.
- Alexander Colquhoun ‘Australian Artists of the Past George Folingsby’ *Age* 20 August 1932 p 4, 20 Aug 1932 - AUSTRALIAN ARTISTS OF THE PAST - Trove.
- Ballarat Star* 4 December 1891 p 4, 04 Dec 1891 - AMATEUR ART EXHIBITION. - Trove.
- Sydney Mail and NSW Advertiser* 6 May 1903 p 109, 06 May 1903 - Melbourne Gossip. - Trove.
- Table Talk* 29 December 1893 p 8, 29 Dec 1893 - The Newspaper Press Of New South Wales. - Trove.
- Juliette Peers ‘The Genius of Mr Bertram Mackennal: the Springthorpe Memorial 1897-1901’ in Deborah Edwards ed *Bertram Mackennal*: Art Gallery of New South Wales Sydney 2007 pp 180-185 esp p 180 and note p 210. Springthorpe’s life and imagination was filled with Ruskinian, Arthurian and Victorian medieval symbolism around woman as queen and angelic being, wife, mother and homemaker, the complement to the active and intellectual life of man. His surviving children were named for Arthurian heroes and heroines, and the names of his homes Camelot and Joyous Garde also are derived from the Arthurian cycles. The material can be seen in his elaborate scrapbook diaries in the State Library of Victoria, themselves a remarkable art object and a documentation of global facing cultural awareness in Federation Australia which focussed continually, via images of romantic narrative paintings, on the representation of woman as a beautiful object, rather than as a creative and thinking agent in her own right.
- Lyndsay Gardiner *Edith Helen Barrett (1872–1939)* Biography - Edith Helen Barrett - Australian Dictionary of Biography.
- Murray-Smith *Sir James William Barrett*.
- Argus* 8 November 1935 p 8, 08 Nov 1935 - CONTEMPORARY ART - Trove.
- Sun* (Sydney) 14 July 1934 p 8, 14 Jul 1934 - ALL STATES - Trove.
- Herald* 24 June 1935 p 11, 24 Jun 1935 - Modernist Work At Athenaeum Gallery - Trove.
- Herald* 2 June 1939 p 13, 02 Jun 1939 - The Late Lady Barrett - Trove.
- Biography - Lady Marian Barrett - People Australia whos_who_world_023.pdf.
- Herald* 24 Jun 1935 p11 - Modernist Work At Athenaeum Gallery - Trove.
- Academic and social elites in Melbourne pursued intense feuds against Sir James Barrett, some of which were of purely personal origins. The intensely negative opinion around Sir James Barrett has also kept his wife’s achievements out of professional and institutional memory. A close contact of the extended Barrett family, the controversial bookmaker, businessman and entrepreneur John Wren, faced a similar network of rumour and gossip. The vendettas are synergous, if we accept James Griffin’s arguments in *John Wren: A Life Reconsidered* Carlton North, Scribe 2004 pp 393-396 that the impetus to malign Wren was driven by elite interests rather than radical political activism. Via his second marriage to Monica Heinze, sister of Sir Bernard Heinze, James Barrett married into Wren’s circle. Sir James Barrett’s brother Dr Edgar Barrett was a well-documented assistant of Wren in his racing, trotting and boxing interests. The families connected for two generations over the different fora of professional sport and classical music. Wrens and Barretts, including Marian, were present at social events in the George Bell circle, the Lyceum Club, Bernard Heinze’s ABC concerts, the University of Melbourne and the more musically inclined Wren daughters were on the guestlist at Palmyra. Dr John Springthorpe found both Barrett and Wren obnoxious and at different times he schemed unsuccessfully to destroy their careers. Sir James Barrett’s enemies thwarted his desire to enter politics with a view to being state premier or the prime minister. Murray-Smith *Sir James William Barrett*.
- Barrett *Eighty Eventful Years* pp 83-4.
- Conversations with Jane McGowan.
- Marian Barrett also aligns with the relationship between the later Heidelberg circle and the Fisher Labor government, mediated through the “Scottish” links between Fisher, John Ford and Hugh Paterson and Frederick McCubbin. These linkages led to the establishment of Commonwealth Art Advisory Board, precursor to the Australia Council, which gave government art commissions to Fox, McCubbin, Meldrum and other notable male artists of the era. Barrett knew Fox and McCubbin via their years at the Gallery School.
- Brisbane Telegraph* 27 November 1909 p 10, 27 Nov 1909 - Gossip for Women. - Trove.
- A.O. Barrett was a “chief mourner” at Sir James Barrett’s funeral and his status as cousin was widely mentioned in the press *Herald* 7 April 1945 p 3, 07 Apr 1945 - UNIVERSITY PAYS TRIBUTE TO SIR JAMES BARRETT - Trove.
- Cf Arthur Streeton ed Ann Galbally and Anne Grey *Letters from Smike*. Balmain, NSW Ligature Pty Limited 2021 digital edition n.p. note 587.
- Juliette Peers “Ancient and Modern: some recently-catalogued: G. W. L. Marshall-Hall material” *La Trobe Journal* Autumn 1987 no 39
- George William Louis Marshall-Hall, Letter to Marian Barrett 8 January 1898. Described as the “variations”, presumably the piano transcription was of the then very new Enigma Variations, only a few years old. Suzanne Robertson *Passions of a Mighty Heart: Selected Letters of G.W.L. Marshall-Hall* University of Melbourne: Lyrebird Press 2015 p 74.
- Sunday Baillieu Reed was briefly one of these socially prominent students at the early Bell-Shore School. Similarly later in the 20th century Barrett’s friend Mary Meyer complained that some of Bell’s later female supporters wrongly defined Meyer as an amateur artist and overlooked her early 20th century professional study in France and at the Westminster School in London and belittlingly dismissed her pedigree amongst other artist members of the Lyceum Club. Juliette Peers ‘Place aux Dames: Women Artists and Historical Memory’ in Joan Kerr and Jo Holder eds. *Past Present: The National Women’s Art Anthology*, Sydney: Craftsman House 1999 pp 30-31. As discussed in the essay on Dorothy Whitehead, Lady Joan Lindsay suffered from an ambiguous status as falling between a professional and amateur status as a creative woman in mid 20th century Melbourne, prompted by expectations around acceptable female roles in Melbourne elites.
- Rob Haysom *Arnold Shore: Pioneer Modernist* Melbourne: Macmillan 2009, especially chapter 6 pp 72-73. Shore had a number of engagements with mental health professionals in Australia in an era when Freudian theories were gaining a toehold in advanced Australian cultural circles. Much of his autobiographical writing strongly reflects a Freudian centring of his sexual experience and maturation. Whilst women were important to Shore and shaped his experience, and oral history suggests that many students found Shore congenial as a teacher, he tended to regard women (in so far as his discusses them in his writings and drawing from these sources) as helpmeets and service figures, who supported his personal and professional wellbeing, not as professional colleagues in their own right.
- Australasian* 10 June 1939 p 19, 10 Jun 1939 - TWO COURAGEOUS LIVES ENDED - Trove.

Bernice Edwell (1880-1962)

Supplementary essay

Bernice Edwell was introduced in the Into the Light Acquisition Fund catalogue 2021, through a crisp yet graceful pencil sketch of the artist Sybil Craig when a young woman. In this tranche Edwell is again featured, but on this occasion in the scale and format of work that brought her the greatest fame amongst her contemporaries: the portrait miniature. It should be emphasised that, despite the small physical format, Edwell's contemporaries considered her portraits to be as admirable as larger oils by other celebrated professionals. Her selection for the inaugural Archibald Prize, 1921, with miniatures of senior Australian army personnel and the first warden of Trinity College at the University of Melbourne, demonstrates the range of notable people who sat for her and the esteem in which her contemporaries held her.

Generally, Edwell's female sitters tend to be more anonymous domestic based figures who are less publicly acclaimed than her male subjects, although some female sitters, especially those who were artists such as Ida Rentoul Outhwaite (now in the National Gallery of Australia) and Florence Rodway (Art Gallery of New South Wales as *The Peacock Feather*)¹ are distinguished and celebrated. In turn Outhwaite included Edwell's work in her collection of notable Australian art alongside Streeton, Heysen, Herbert, Septimus Power, Norman Lindsay and Bess Norris Tait.²

This current work presents a more intimate subject of an unknown sitter, a blonde woman wearing a jacket which may be a Japanese kimono or a copy of such made by a local Australia firm or a home dressmaker.³ From just before World War I to just after, kimonos were central features of Australian women's wardrobes. That it was easier during the war to trade with Japan than with Europe, and Japan was allied to the British Empire in World War I, also fuelled this popularity. Although generally overlooked now in public memory, from the earliest days of white settlement, the relative closeness of Asian and southeast Asian ports to Australia and the shorter travel time offered a potentially wider range of quality and design of consumer goods from the region to Australian buyers, especially ceramics and textiles, if not certain food stuffs. The straight and relatively low neckline also suggests a date from c1915 into the early 1920s, from when Edwell had firmly established her base in Melbourne rather than her hometown Sydney.

Like her close friends Alice Bale and Jo Sweatman, Edwell's works were always accomplished and well handled. Yet often their consistent but anonymous level of accomplishment offers few *griffes* for a materialist or formalist analysis. Her use of colour was frequently striking and Edwell's ability to select and organise colour added both variety and sophistication to a format where the small scale offered few obvious opportunities for displaying pictorial or design interest. The delicate colour harmonies of Whistler, especially variations of the same closely related tones, clearly influenced Edwell's choice of hues in some portraits. This influence was shared with expatriate American women artists working as miniaturists in Paris the early 1900s.⁴ This current work is not as abstract as some, but light and tone create a very real presence of a sitter, who alas remains unknown.⁵ The luminosity and atmospheric freshness



Bernice Edwell, *Miss Ida Rentoul Outhwaite* 1917, painting on watercolour over underdrawing in pencil, National Gallery of Australia, gift of Vanessa Martin and Stella Palmer 2015

emphasised by impressionism's rejection of academic preset templates and methodologies also tangibly informs Edwell's technique. Equally the light and singing colours, clear blues and pinks are more usually associated with Bunny and his small group of pupils, whose palettes were lighter and fresher than most other Australian artists of the first three decades of the 20th century. Bunny and Edwell moved in the circle of the Craig family, which commissioned work from both artists. Sybil Craig's mother collected *objets de vertu* and early Victorian "hard image" photography, daguerreotypes and ambrotypes, which were closely twinned with miniatures.

Edwell's skill with colour harmonies and experimental stress upon arbitrary and imaginative choice when arranging colour adds plausibility to her claims to artistic credibility, although it renders her links to the Meldrum group, as with most elements of her life, enigmatic.⁶ This combination of new style with old format was substantially forged by foreign women artists working in Paris c1900, when Edwell was in the city, and provides in the absence of any more precise documentation a plausible hypothesis around the source of her interest in miniature painting. This new style was based on a fusion of modern



Bernice Edwell, *Portrait miniature* c1920, watercolour on ivory, 7cm, Into the Light Collection 2022, Sheila Foundation

impressionism with the increasing curatorial and artistic authority and centrality of 18th century and Beaux Arts design in the US following the Chicago 1893 exhibition and the Federal Revival.⁷ The Francophone cultural leanings of Edwardian Britain also were influential in bringing 18th century taste to an Australian elite with strong identification with Britain. Again Edwell is placed at the centre of Australian cultural preoccupations of the first three decades of the 20th century.

Although less free and sketchy than the work of Bess Norriss Tait, the fluidity and confidence of the handling, the lack of sharp outlines and neo-18th century stippling⁸ and the realistic not stylised presentation of the subject indicates how some Australian miniaturists, although now ignored by many curators, were famed for a progressive and modern approach to the genre, which consciously rejected sweetness and gentility.⁹ Edwell herself emphasised that good miniature work should be approached on just the same terms as any other art task, save for the scale.¹⁰



'An Australian Miniaturist', by I. M. Brodie, *The Australian Woman's Mirror*, February 17, 1925

The frame on this new acquisition is noteworthy as highly informative about Edwell's early career and associations. An eloquent comparison could be made with the frame on the Gladys Laycock portrait of John Young Caird (ITL 2021). Laycock's work was complemented by a gold frame clearly signed by the Sydney jewellers Hardy Brothers. This frame in itself is an important document of 20th century Sydney gold and silver-smithing. The connection between miniature art and eminent jewellers was longstanding because miniatures were often set into jewellery, lockets, brooches, even decorative

boxes in precious metals as sentimental keepsakes. Images of monarchs in watercolour or enamels were used by European royalty as gifts and presentations, exchanged both at a familial and a diplomatic level and as gifts to honour loyal courtiers, from the 17th century onwards. By 1900 a second trend had emerged where miniatures featured in radical and reformist traditions of hand working metal as a rejection of industrial manufacturing. Miniatures were displayed in hand-forged metal frames and also in bespoke hand-carved wooden frames, that reflected ideas on artist-designed framing popularised by the Pre-Raphaelites and James McNeill Whistler, and which influenced the Heidelberg group. Catalogues and reviews indicate that miniatures were shown regularly with both the Melbourne and Sydney arts and crafts societies, for their own sake and as examples of contemporary jewellery, metal work, ecclesiastical work and *objets de vertu*.

The hand beaten irregular surface on the frame on Edwell's miniature indicates that the frame-maker was associated with a craft guild rather than a prestigious city jeweller. The clearly visible imprint of the maker's hands and tools expressed the eloquence and truth to process and materials that distinguished arts and crafts work from the smooth polish and showy glitter of high society jewellers. Thus this work reminds the viewer of Edwell's direct participation in craft circles, especially in Sydney in the first decade of the 20th century, although she remained in contact with craft groups after she moved to Melbourne. She also served on the committee of the Sydney Society of Arts and Crafts, and her craftwork was acquired by the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Accounts of the Society of Arts and Crafts in Sydney document her as working in partnership with a major Sydney metalworker, Mildred Creed, although the date of the costume suggests a time after Edwell's move away from Sydney. So any attribution remains hypothetical, but Edwell certainly remained in contact with the Sydney group into the 1920s. This link between miniature painting and well-made individualised arts and crafts framing was very typical of the Miniature Revival.

As well as offering a more extensive insight into Edwell's practice, this second Edwell acquisition offers a chance to update Edwell's into the Light narrative in light of fresh research. As previously noted her personal life is a somewhat obscure and conjectural narrative. The lack of clear detail or first-hand opinion in records around Edwell's life is a phenomenon that goes beyond the usual stereotype of the "forgotten woman artist" or sexist biases in the documentation of women's art history. With the acquisition of this work, in her more characteristic scale and medium, we can understand more about the practice that brokered her prominent status as an artist amongst her contemporaries. Equally this new acquisition coincides with new scholarship and research that brings both Edwell and her work into a closer focus.

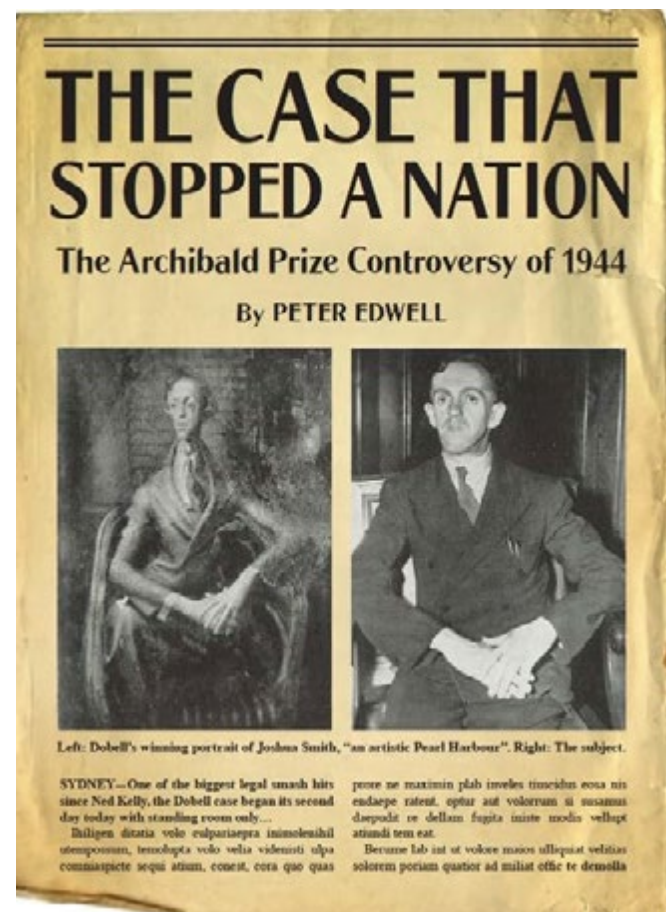
The hypothesis raised with the first acquisition that Edwell's somewhat bland and circumspect public reputation should be read in relation to the controversy and drama that attached itself consistently in public media to her half sister Mary Edwell-Burke from c1930 onward,¹¹ can be further affirmed. If as Peter Edwell, both as academic and family member, plausibly suggests that Edwell-Burke's life should be read through the lens of an unconventional family structure and familial trauma,¹² then so too should Bernice Edwell's very differently inflected public reputation. Joan Kerr suggested that the Edwell family used

legal threats to prevent Mary Edwell-Burke from changing her name or using the Edwell name in public during their lifetime. Family information suggests that Bernice Edwell's brother Horace successfully managed to remove evidence of his father's "misdemeanours...from the family record",¹³ due to his conservative outlook. Bernice Edwell's successful wrangling of a high reputation as an artist unfolded against this same context of family secrets and hidden stories. Her strong Catholic faith would have demanded the censoring and management of the strong emotions that her half-sister so frequently unleashed in public, particularly in the misogynist social agora of settler Australia. Religion may also have provided an effective coping mechanism for the stresses of such public control. It is plausible that these decades of hiding or enduring personal stresses may have led to the gradual but unmistakable withering of both Edwell and Edwell-Burke's later careers.

Edwell was born in England in 1880 and came to Sydney with her parents, where by c1891 her father Henry Edwell had entered into a long-term relationship with another woman, Rose Burke. As he was wealthy and worked for the Sydney brewers Tooheys, becoming manager of their operations in Brisbane by 1908, he was able to support two households, as did a number of more "eminent Victorians" such as Charles Dickens and William Powell Frith, the latter notably supporting three family households in some style at different addresses in London. Although Henry Edwell remained legally married to Edwell's mother, evidence suggests he actually lived in closer proximity to his second family in both Sydney and Brisbane. Apart from financial support, Bernice and her mother had been effectively abandoned after Henry Edwell aligned himself to Rose Burke. Mother and daughter had been a family "unit" for years earlier with connections to Adelaide and Hobart as well as Melbourne where they finally settled.¹⁴ The pair moved away from Sydney permanently when Rose Burke and her daughter Mary Edwell-Burke settled in Sydney, from Brisbane, after their time in Paris. After Henry Edwell's death, both Edwell and Edwell-Burke lived with their respective mothers in two different cities.

Remarkably in an era when many families refused permission for women to enrol in art school, Henry Edwell sponsored professional training for both his daughters,¹⁵ starting with the best local teachers, the Royal Art Society in Sydney for Edwell and Godfrey Rivers in Brisbane for Edwell-Burke. Then he subsidised advanced study for some years in Paris for each daughter. Alice Bale's publicly strong support in Melbourne for Edwell-Burke, and fundraising for her legal costs in the Archibald case, is believed to have been partly a front for Edwell's concern for her half-sister that family politics prevented her directly actioning in public.¹⁶ Edwell did not make any public statement and this recently published family belief points to a poignantly distant but also supportive link between the sisters who shared a similar talent and choice of career. However, not only were Bale and Edwell friends but the case aligned with Bale's ongoing fight against "modern" art.

Both Edwell and Edwell-Burke are often regarded as outliers, if for different reasons, Edwell-Burke most obviously for her outspoken and litigious eccentricity.¹⁷ Professional and historical interest in the high profiled court case around Dobell's 1944 Archibald Prize win has substantially cast Edwell-Burke in a negative light on the wrong side of history. Edwell vanished from public memory as her specialist discipline has been so neglected in public art histories. Both women enjoyed significant public



Peter Edwell, *The Case that Stopped the Nation: The Archibald Prize Controversy of 1944*. Mary Edwell-Burke was one of two artists who took William Dobell to court over the awarding of the 1944 Archibald Prize to his portrait, Mr Joshua Smith

reputations for portrait work, which had overlapped in the 1920s, with both artists having been bought for public collections, yet their fame diminished during the 1940s. Previously Edwell had a strong presence in Edwardian Sydney after her return from Paris, especially as a craftist and as a foundation committee member of the Society of Women Painters. Edwell-Burke's artwork was renowned for its bright tropical colour schemes and subjects, its often-complex allegories and its popular cultural references to commercial art. Edwell's aesthetic appears at first to be more reserved and contained in comparison, but also offers a more conceptual, more considered engagement with colour in particular and handling of light. For her colleagues in Meldrum's circle and the Twenty Melbourne Painters, Edwell's more sober focus on technique and excellence possibly was admirable in that it avoided the accessible popular culture and fashion references that marked her half-sister's aesthetic. This professional focus and commitment led to her acceptance within the highest echelons of Australian academic art, where female practitioners were not always welcome between the wars, and her impressive achievements need to be returned to public awareness.

Juliette Peers

Notes

1 Clearly identified as Rodway in *The Australian woman's mirror* Vol. 1 No. 13 17 February 1925 p 41. This identification of the sitter often is not attached to the *Peacock Feather*.

2 "The Godmother of the Elves and Fairies" *Table Talk* 22 December 1921 p 6.

3 "Kimono" *Geraldton Express* 17 August 1914 p 4. This syndicated article with illustration appeared in local Australian newspapers across several states in c1914-1915 discussing the purchasing and making of kimonos and their care in an Australian domestic and suburban context.

4 Carrie Reborá Barratt and Lori Zabar *American Portrait Miniatures in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* New York Metropolitan Museum of Art Yale University Press 2010 pp 24-5.

5 It is possible with her light blonde hair, pale complexion, blue eyes and direct glance the sitter is Jean Parker Sutherland, who at a later date was a member of the circle of Sybil Craig and her mother. Currently this identification of the sitter is purely speculative

6 Benjamin Thomas, "Purveyor of Taste: W. R. Sedon and Melbourne's Sedon Galleries". *La Trobe Library Journal* No 86 December 2010 p 103, and endnote. She was a founding member of the Twenty Melbourne Painters Society, centred around Meldrum and his vision of a highly specialist cadre of artists working close to his teachings.

7 Reborá Barratt and Zabar 2010 pp 24-25, 240.

8 Gladys Laycock [ITL 2021] used a more traditional style of brushwork in her portrait of Colin Young Caird.

9 Joanna Gimore "Small Worlds" in *Portrait* 38 1 December 2010, National Portrait Gallery, Canberra. <https://portrait.gov.au/magazines/38/small-worlds>. Norriss Tait was one of a number of artists who chose to pursue the medium professionally and who seem to have welcomed the challenges it presented. Predominant and most highly regarded among these were a number of women, including Norriss Tait's compatriots Bernice Edwell, Bessie Gibson and Justine Song King – artists akin to Norriss Tait in their practice as well as in their less lofty positions in the records of Australian art.

10 *The Australian Woman's Mirror* Vol. 1 No. 13, 17 February 1925 p 41.

11 Juliette Peers "Bernice Edwell (1880-1952)" in Into the Light Acquisition Fund catalogue 2021 p 34. <https://sheila.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Into-the-Light-acquisitions-2020-WEB.pdf>. cf Stephanie Cusick Markerink "Tempe Manning (1897-1960)", Into the Light Acquisition Fund catalogue 2021 pp 62-63.

12 Peter Edwell *The case that Stopped Australia* Ultimo Halstead Press 2021, pp 74-75, 172-173.

13 Edwell pp 172-3.

14 Although Peter Edwell p 74 suggests that the pair had moved to Melbourne by 1912, they appear to have been in Adelaide at least in passing around 1914, and Bernice Edwell had ongoing links to Tasmania, receiving the first training there and making her last public exhibitions in that state.

15 Edwell p 74

16 Edwell p 146

17 Other issues included her widely reported court case to receive payment for a portrait of actress Nellie Stewart from the sitter in 1930, *Argus* 15 November 1930 p 23, her portrait of Senator Dorothy Tangney being rejected by the Commonwealth government Art Advisory Board in 1945. Markerink ITL 2021 pp 62-63. Much discussion around the Dobell case has centred upon Edwell-Blake's reputation for eccentricity.

Lesley Sinclair (1904-1999)

Lesley Sinclair was a prolific artist who did not care for market success or status. Nor, outside of her working life as an artist, did she care much for the social conventions and expectations held by the more conservative members of her class background. Her practical independence, conscious avoidance of the mainstream art market, intense focus on art practice and consistent de-centring of herself and her ego in favour of the collective ethos of the circle of artists, intellectuals and freethinkers clustered around the charismatic Justus Jorgensen makes her a distinctive figure in comparison to many contemporaries. Sinclair's lifestyle and personality, as much as her artworks, present a somewhat unfamiliar option for interwar and mid-century Australian women artists. If the most current, emerging art writing and curating practices advocate for discussing Australian art via more diverse paradigms,¹ then Sinclair's career offers elements of a historical backstory in outlying, non-standard modalities of artmaking, somewhat situated outside "neurotypical" templates. If art professionals seek to highlight non-standard narratives and careers, Sinclair deserves further consideration within large scale art historical narratives, where she has been previously fairly invisible.

Sinclair worked as an artist for seven decades, albeit substantially outside academic and curatorial circles. She was originally employed by the *Argus* as a commercial artist in the mid 1920s and then by the 1930s became a much-liked friend, noted artist and teacher amongst Melbourne's tonal painters, studio assistant to Justus Jorgensen and a willing, tireless worker in the physical building of the Montsalvat art colony. From the 1960s to the 1990s, she was the public face of Montsalvat, working in the ticket booth at the entrance at the weekends (occasionally she paid young relatives to give her a break, whilst she went off to paint or took students out for plein air painting). Sinclair's devotion to her practice and a creative life offered a different role model than that offered by many other mid-20th century Australian women and became a major inspiration for a great niece, Ann Stephen, to embark on a distinguished career as a curator and academic.

She had been part of Montsalvat since its inception in 1934 and lived at Montsalvat for the last 30 years of her life teaching and painting. She was also a popular figure at the Montsalvat entry gate welcoming visitors with her warm smile.²

Decades after her death she is still respected amongst Melbourne tonal and traditional artists as an art teacher and founding member of the Montsalvat community. Her story resonates more with popular and local understandings of art and creativity, rather than the large and heroic scale of both conservative interwar nationalist art and the Heide and Antipodean movements that formed basic historical and curatorial narratives. This marginal status also resonates with the discrete validations of vernacular engagement of art in settler Australia found in the writings of Ian Burn and Bettina MacAulay.³ Her regional importance in the cultural life of outer northern Melbourne is affirmed by the acquisition of works for both the Darebin and Nillumbik municipal collections.

Sinclair regarded her longitudinal radical family pedigree as a foundation of her non-conventional view of the world. Her mother's grandfather, Thomas Burbury, was a Luddite, part of a movement that attacked factories and destroyed weaving looms in Britain to defend the rights of skilled artisans against industrial mass production. Apprehended due to a factory fire in Coventry in 1831, Burbury's death sentence was commuted to transportation to Van Diemen's Land in 1832. Ironically transportation as a convict allowed him to prosper far beyond his class and expectations had he remained in Britain, once he gained his ticket of leave.⁴ His children all married well and both of Sinclair's parents were considered to belong to the Tasmanian gentry. Sinclair was equally proud of her father's atheist and Darwinist beliefs,⁵ although when young she feared his non-conventional views made her a marked woman when walking amongst the pious residents of Camberwell.⁶ Yet Lesley Sinclair's placid, genial character, as well as her apathy towards accepted templates of ambition and success, has contributed to later generations of art professionals reading her – in terms of mainstream constructs of history – as a passive, perhaps secondary, figure when a hardcore, activist mindset is regarded as a key prerequisite for public status. Yet rather than being a weakness, her positive outlook made her immune to the bitter schisms and rivalries that sometimes marked the lives of her contemporaries. Sebastian Jorgensen paid tribute to this aspect of her character: "One of Lesley's great attributes was to make friends with people of all ages".⁷

Existing accounts, which have not been challenged or questioned, complicate any understanding and appreciation of Sinclair. Particularly Betty Roland's chronicle of life at Montsalvat, *The Eye of the Beholder*,⁸ passes over Lesley in favour of colleagues with more scandalous life narratives. Roland's book has substantially influenced subsequent discussion of Jorgensen's circle and its complex dynamic, thus keeping Sinclair out of the public eye. Like-wise Lena Skipper's notebooks, written in the late 1920s and early 1930s, which were a major source for Roland, do not mention Sinclair, even though she belonged to the circle whose personal lives formed the central theme of the notebooks. Art writers' tendency to discuss Clarice Beckett's life and aesthetic as both isolated and singular, centring the hostility shown to her art by critics and emphasising obstacles and setbacks⁹ likewise sidelines Lesley Sinclair. Accepted narratives about Beckett play down the well-documented positive aspects of her career, including frequent favourable reviews, her solid public reputation, the respect tendered by her colleagues and her longstanding friendship with Sinclair. Even Edith Zeigler's encyclopaedic, fine scaled, somewhat revisionist biography about Beckett,¹⁰ based upon the frequent press coverage of Beckett's art and social activities, does not mention Sinclair, although Beckett's professional circle and many friends and colleagues are discussed in detail to more precisely situate Beckett.

I have argued previously that Beckett's work, and its loss and reappraisal,¹¹ is often deployed as a touchstone to the loss of potential talent and opportunities of two generations of middle class and lower middle class white Australian women, relegated to the family sphere.¹² Sinclair's mantra of self-supported simple



Lesley Sinclair, *Old Diamond Creek Farmhouse* c1920s, oil on board, 34 x 44 cm, Into the Light Collection 2022, Sheila Foundation
© Estate of the artist Lesley Sinclair. Reproduced with permission

living and her constant production of artworks suggests that she, either intentionally or unconsciously, paid no heed to social directives that curbed and dismissed female ambition. At the same time a similarity in backgrounds and family situations also possibly provided a congenial point of mutual experience. A longstanding friend and colleague of Sinclair described both women as “true ladies”.¹³ Both women grew up with stern, formal fathers, both were from genteel backgrounds, (although with elements of rising social mobility in their family trees) and both consciously evaded a conventional life in favour of concentration on a professional career as an artist. The intense investment in fantasies of Beckett, including even a novel, wandering the foreshore on solo painting trips, should be stretched occasionally to include a more prosaic and grounded companion on these forays. This image becomes itself something of a trope: Sancho to Don Quixote or Sam to Frodo.



Lesley Sinclair, *Boatshed* (date and details unknown), Victorian Artists Society. © Estate of the artist Lesley Sinclair. Reproduced with permission

Sinclair was born in Dookie/Maroopna in 1904, where her father was a lecturer at the Victorian government agricultural college. Later he was promoted to principal at another government college at Longerenong, outside Horsham. Here she spent her childhood in a home decorated with William Morris wallpaper, despite being situated in the dry and harsh Wimmera country. Her childhood was happy and “carefree”, despite her father being in her words “very stern...very Scottish in his attitudes to bringing up children”, whilst her mother, whose health was often fragile, “was easy going” and, contrary to childrearing norms for the era, did not try and curb her daughter’s unusual whims. When Sinclair as a child expressed a desire to eat her meals outdoors on top of a haystack, dinner was brought out for her.¹⁴ The family’s move to Melbourne away from Longerenong, when her father was appointed to the staff of the *Argus* newspaper, upset Sinclair. She was sent to a prestigious, academically excellent girls’ school, Fintona, in Melbourne where she became unhappy and rebellious.¹⁵ Flora Pell, a noted Melbourne educationalist, nutritionist, celebrity cookbook writer and first wave feminist,¹⁶ suggested to Sinclair’s parents that they remove her from the ladies’ college and enrol her in art classes for girls at Swinburne Technical College, which proved a far more congenial setting. Her father, realising that the typical life of young, well brought up women in 1920s Melbourne – parties, dances and finding a husband – would not suit his daughter, organised a job for her as a commercial artist and photo

retoucher at the *Argus*. Sinclair described her job as mostly painting over “cleavages” before photos were rendered into half tone blocks.¹⁷ The work was highly pressured with short deadlines and large volumes of assignments, but she believed that it was good training.¹⁸ Although when talking later to art historians Sinclair emphasised her alienation from the social activities of her older sisters and others around her, newspapers record her as attending dances for the press association, the mayor of Camberwell and with National Gallery students. Newspapers show her as active in suburban tennis during the 1920s, playing for Trinity Presbyterian church in Camberwell as well as being a spectator at elite tournaments at Kooyong.¹⁹

Working at the *Argus* brought her into contact with notable Melbourne artists employed by the newspaper, Leslie Wilkie (later director of the Art Gallery of South Australia), Harry B Harrison and Richard McCann. The latter two were associates of Meldrum and through them in the mid and later 1920s Sinclair made contact with Meldrum’s wide circle of art students and supporters from many backgrounds in Melbourne. McCann and Harrison recommended taking lessons from Meldrum, but he returned to France in 1926 for an extended residence and was absent from Melbourne. As an alternative option Sinclair enrolled in the National Gallery School in 1927, which she found unsatisfactory. Academic and political theorist William McMahon Bell, a Meldrum supporter, suggested she try classes with A.D. Colquhoun, a choice also advocated by Clarice Beckett.²⁰ Colquhoun was newly returned from Europe and had established art classes in 1926 with a tonalist outlook. Although she always stated firmly that Jorgensen was a far superior teacher, Sinclair may have spent some time in the Colquhoun studio, as in 1976 she stated to Jenny Teichmann that she commenced lessons with Jorgensen in 1932,²¹ suggesting she had a longer period between the Gallery School and starting with Jorgensen than often assumed. She certainly stayed in Colquhoun’s classes long enough to meet and befriend Myra Morris, another Colquhoun pupil, who was also a noted poet, short story writer and novelist in Melbourne between the wars.²² Morris became a mutual friend of both Sinclair and Beckett. Although Morris’s high reputation has faded, thus no attention has been paid to the links between the three creative women in Melbourne, she was as well known in Melbourne, or even more so, than either Beckett or Sinclair in c1930.

Sinclair’s complete devotion to Jorgensen’s teaching precepts, along with his broader views on life and culture, became central to her life from the early 1930s until her death in 1999. This loyalty shaped both her unfolding career and how she framed and made sense of her life and work when looking backwards. Thus she did not chafe at the slow progress and repetitive tasks that characterised Jorgensen’s classes, noting that Meldrum said that students should paint in monotone for two years. Nor did she find Jorgensen’s setting out rules for his students’ off-duty lives, especially to avoid popular and banal side interests such as shopping at Myer and Coles, irksome.²⁴ For Sinclair, Jorgensen’s strict demands of absolute obedience not only proved his level of genius, but provided a new stable framework for her life. Her mother’s sudden death impacted greatly and Sinclair found it hard to live at home with her strict father. Meeting Jorgensen and becoming one of his devotees became a turning point when she was distressed.²⁵ She unapologetically endorsed Jorgensen and overlooked the less generous aspects of his personality.²⁶



Lesley Sinclair, *Rowe Street, North Fitzroy* c1940s, oil on board, 34 x 44 cm, Into the Light Collection 2022, Sheila Foundation © Estate of the artist Lesley Sinclair. Reproduced with permission

[F]ollowing Meldrum, with us, was a religion and a very good religion indeed! You really believed that painting was defined in one way only, without compromise....²⁷

[Jorgensen] was a wonderful teacher. I needed a good teacher as I was a bit mixed up about art.

...Well he dominated us in a sensible way. I think all great teachers necessarily dominate²⁸

She left home, rented rooms in the city, easily found during the depression, and on Jorgensen's advice took a job as an office cleaner. The logic ran that being a cleaner was a position that would bring in money but not create too many pressures on her mind. Cleaning would leave her with daylight hours substantially free for painting.

These days it is more fashionable to do these sort of jobs, but it was very below par...and a lot of people thought I was a bit queer...look at the way I would have ruined my hands, wouldn't I...but you ruin them by painting anyway. You always have paint under your finger nails, if I did not have dust and office dirt. It was a very exciting time, because I was so mad on wanting to paint a landscape, the fact that I could be independent and just go out on a nice day.²⁹

She later laughed about some of the incongruous situations that she encountered in this work, perhaps the only commercial contract cleaner in Australia who was aunt to an Australian governor general and cousin to a state governor.

Working around the city in the early morning, when the streets were empty, offered inspiration for urban scenes, a vein of imagery that Beckett had introduced to the Meldrum circle and which Colin Colahan and Sinclair particularly took up in turn. Sinclair enjoyed watching the light and atmospheric conditions,³⁰ although she seems to have preferred crisp, clear sunlight that bathed her subjects and flattened out details, rather than the twilight and misty effects sought by Beckett. Sinclair was particularly engaged by the elaborate shapes and profiles of the many 19th century buildings surviving in 1930s to 50s Melbourne and the varied colours in which they were painted. In her early works she was also alert to the grids and patterns created by streets, building profiles and urban infrastructure, although she presented them with a more implicit, less overtly stated, manner, when compared with Beckett. Whilst Sinclair rarely dated works, the profiles of cars, the relative lack of traffic or redeveloped buildings allows many of her street scenes to be dated into the 1930s and 1940s, as in her Rowe Street view.³¹ Beyond the central city she moved into the inner suburbs, somewhat before Tucker in the later 1930s and Vassilief in the 1940s or the Antipodeans in the 1950s. By the 1960s and 1970s ink and watercolour scenes of Carlton, East Melbourne and Parkville had become a Melbourne cliché, decades after Sinclair had explored the then substantially unfashionable inner suburbs. From the picturesque faded elegance of inner Melbourne, she extended her search for subjects down to Footscray and Williamstown. A scene of warehouses on the Maribyrnong River from the 1950s, now in the State Library of Victoria, is one of her few works in public collections. Jorgensen's caveat on exhibiting and his mistrust of the Australian art market and the general public's level of taste³² ensured that there is little press

documentation of Sinclair's early work as an artist.³³ When she appears in the press later in the 1930s, she is either brickmaking at Montsalvat in 1937 or a fully-fledged professional painter in the streets of Carlton in 1938.³⁴



Lesley Sinclair, *Street in Fitzroy* (date and details unknown), private collection. © Estate of the artist Lesley Sinclair. Reproduced with permission

Jorgensen soon put Sinclair into positions of responsibility. She deputised regularly as a teacher in Jorgensen's Queen Street studio from the 1930s until the 1950s. She also frequently worked as Jorgensen's studio assistant, a role shared with both Helen Skipper and Sue Vanderkelen in the 1930s. In her novel of her experiences amongst the tonalists, Vanderkelen describes the work of the studio assistant: "...she was to put down the first block in of paint, the first brief crude impression of tone, colour and form. Thus filling the canvas and enabling the master to complete his picture more rapidly".³⁵ Meldrum similarly firstly employed some of his early male pupils as assistants and, later in the 1930s, his daughter Ida acted as his studio assistant and prepared canvases. At Montsalvat Sinclair made bricks in tandem with Sonia Skipper, and later worked on lead-lighting for windows, at Jorgensen's behest.³⁶ Women and men worked jointly on building construction at Montsalvat, much to the shock and amusement of Melbourne society in the 1930s.³⁷ The complex of handcrafted romantic Europhile buildings could also be regarded as part of Sinclair's creative legacy and a remarkable collaboration of a number of (mostly) women artists. Sinclair was also responsible for buying food at the Victoria Market, hauling it out to Eltham by train and then cooking for the students and followers staying at Montsalvat on the weekends. The ethos was egalitarian and non-capitalist. Students and followers were provided with free food and accommodation, even some art lessons thrown in, in exchange for physical labour on the ever-growing building site.

During the week, after working at Jorgensen's studio or in her studio-residence in the Saint James building, Sinclair joined other Meldrum associates at the Mitre Tavern. When the pub closed at 6pm they travelled onto restaurants such as the Latin Cafe, Chinese restaurants, or a private supper in Jorgensen's Queen Street studio, where they could legally drink and socialise



Lesley Sinclair painting at Montsalvat, photograph, photographer unknown

at a more leisurely pace into the evening. Other opportunities to combine work and friendship were the artists' camps organised at San Remo and Inverloch by pupils and associates of Meldrum, Jorgensen and Colquhoun. Sinclair stayed and painted at these camps as she recalled, although she is not always listed in later published accounts. She remained fond of the area and frequently returned to paint at San Remo and Westernport Bay and took pupils on painting excursions to Westernport Bay throughout her life.

As the rural scene acquired by Into the Light shows Richardson's Chicory Kiln near Ventnor, Phillip Island, built in the 1870s,³⁸ it may have been painted during one of the San Remo camps.³⁹ This work presents an intriguing enigma. The subject of a warm red brick building, in front of a bank of dark trees and bordered by a fence appears in a more abstracted image by Clarice Beckett. There are clear differences in the buildings depicted by both artists. Beckett's structure seems to have a verandah and she has avoided the highly intrusive form of the chicory kiln's rear square elevated faceted roof.⁴⁰ Conversely the placement of the fence and the bank of trees, and the topographic profile of the landscape are very close in both works, as are the blocked hues and tonalities of the landscape, even given that Beckett appears to have painted at an earlier point of the day. If Beckett has radically edited the roofline, either for design purposes to depict a more suave built form or perhaps to concentrate on the front of the structure as a first impression,

she still broadly indicates the fenestration of the side wall, and a warm patch of red brown to the right could be the outbuilding that Sinclair carefully depicts. The level of abstraction of built forms in this work matches the few other works by Beckett that can be compared with documentary records of a specific site.

If the comparison can be accepted as two pictures of the same subject, Sinclair maintains the passive neutral eye, recording the tonal variations without narrative or emotional effect that was the ultimate goal of tonal painting teachings, whereas Beckett more consciously leverages design potential and an abstract dynamic (which of course has made her a curatorial favourite since the 1970s) from the scene before her. Sinclair maintains the clarity and authority of the eye and the direct impression that was central to the tonal painting methodology. This approach was analogous to her tendency to be open and receptive in her dealings with the world rather than an architect and organiser. A further element suggesting that Beckett and Sinclair were possibly working from the same subject is that the small series of views of rural vernacular buildings and cottages, often in red brick, by Beckett are routinely associated with the San Remo district. If one doubts that anything could link the much-celebrated Beckett's art with that of the more obscure Sinclair, then a painting of a boatshed and foreshore jetty from a private collection of tonal painting sold out of the Victorian Artists Society⁴¹ reveals how closely Sinclair engaged with Beckett's work. Flowerpieces generally are a point of closer overlap between the two friends. The use of black in both of Sinclair's Into the Light works reflects Jorgensen's greater usage of that pigment in both painting and teaching than Meldrum, who tended to use colour in dark tones rather than defaulting to black. In both works the softness of touch, the floating qualities and the sparse delicacy of laying in her subject are typical of Sinclair's best work.

Despite the myth that she did not exhibit until her retrospective in 1985, Sinclair frequently appears in the Melbourne press of the 1950s, exhibiting with the Victorian Artists Society, the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors, in the Dunlop Art Prize and at other events, all indications of a professional status at that date. Critics often regarded her with great favour. In 1950 Matcham Skipper declared that she was a woman artist of distinction and more of an artist than Sidney Nolan.⁴² And in 1957 he wrote that she "shows the other ladies how in a soft but firm Spring landscape painted at the exhibition gardens".⁴³ In 1953 the *Age* judged her to be "preeminent" amongst the tonalists showing with the MSWPS.⁴⁴ Major critics of the day, Arnold Shore, Alan McCullough and Alan Warren, classed her amongst the superior, important artists in group exhibitions, although by the end of the decade, the elaborate and detailed reviews that had been the norm for Australian art criticism in the previous century were becoming briefer, more tightly focused on a smaller range of artists and accorded far less column space. At this date women artists became less discussed than they had been for the past half-century. Sinclair's profile was definitely higher than the norm for women artists in Melbourne in the 1950s.

Also during the 1950s Sinclair branched out with lessons in lithography at RMIT and studies with Mary Macqueen,⁴⁵ who emphasised graphic line and drawing – although there is also some crossover as both Sinclair and Macqueen frequently chose inner Melbourne suburbs as a favoured subject in the 1940s and 1950s. In the next decade Sinclair was frequently selected for

the Eltham Art Show and other municipal art competitions. Her nephew recalled that in 1973 she won a flight to Singapore as first prize in the Glen Waverley Art Competition but never took up the offer.⁴⁶ Sinclair preferred, like Alice Bale and Clarice Beckett, to remain in Victoria and, again like them, to focus on perfecting fine-scaled observation of the near at hand. When the St James Building was demolished in the early 1960s to build AMP House, Sinclair was given a 19th century cottage on the Montsalvat site in return for assisting at the gate on open days and teaching tonal painting. She continued this work until close to her death, remaining vital, capable and independent despite her age. Later in her life, Sinclair began regularly visiting the Western District of Victoria to hold classes and workshops there. Again her classes were very popular and many pupils re-enrolled multiple times because they enjoyed her teaching. A longstanding friend, Dr Elizabeth Arthur, operated a gallery in Hamilton and facilitated this expansion of Sinclair's activities. Dr Arthur compiled a full-length unpublished biography of Sinclair, based substantially on Sinclair's own memories and comments. Sinclair's strong, single-minded, concentration on essential tangible pleasures in life, as well as her dedication to her practice, became a unique inspiration to people around her.

Colleague Sonia Skipper provided a vivid and generous overview of Sinclair's merits.

Lesley Sinclair who came to the Queen Street Studio at its start was a very fine and dedicated pupil. Lesley had titian hair, a cheerful personality, and a delightfully dry sense of humour.... Over the years she produced numerous impressions of the streets and parks around Melbourne and these would be of historical interest today, with so many changes that have come about in Melbourne since.⁴⁷



Artist unknown, *Portrait of Lesley Sinclair*, private collection

Juliette Peers

Notes

- 1 *Variations: A More Diverse Picture of Contemporary Art*, ed Tristen Harwood, Grace McQuilten and Anthony White Caulfield, Victoria, Monash University Publishing 2023.
- 2 Unpublished essay written by Andrew Sinclair, *Lesley Sinclair, artist and teacher Monday, 1 January 2023*, courtesy of Andrew and Kirsty Sinclair. A shorter version is available online as documentation of a 2022 exhibition of Sinclair's works from the Montsalvat collection, EXHIBITION: Lesley Sinclair – Landscape and Still Life from the Montsalvat Collection – Montsalvat.
- 3 Ian Burn, *Popular Melbourne landscape painting between the wars*, Bendigo Art Gallery, 1982. Ian Burn, *National life & landscapes: Australian painting, 1900-1940*, Sydney, Bay Books, 1990. Desmond MacAulay and Bettina MacAulay, *What's lost, what's won: conviction and contradiction in the art of Frederick McCubbin: with works by ten contemporaries*, Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery, 1999.
- 4 Elizabeth Arthur Ms p 8.
- 5 Although biographical accounts suggest that Mr Sinclair and his household remained church goers, possibly because of social expectations of the era. The Heidelberg School associate composer G W L Marshall-Hall caused a scandal by watering his front garden on Sunday mornings whilst still wearing his pyjamas to pointedly offend passersby on their way to church services of various denominations.
- 6 Conversations with Elizabeth Arthur.
- 7 Quoted by Andrew Sinclair in *Lesley Sinclair, artist and teacher Monday, 1 January 2023*.
- 8 Betty Roland, *The Eye of the Beholder* Sydney: Hale & Iremonger 1984.
- 9 Juliette Peers, "I am Woman, Hear me Weep," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2000, pp 213-222.
- 10 Edith M. Ziegler, *The worlds and work of Clarice Beckett*. North Melbourne, VIC: Arcadia 2022.
- 11 It should not be forgotten that the Jorgensen family and other Montsalvat associates had preserved a smaller cache of works by Beckett, indoors and in better storage conditions after her death until the 1970s. These too were dispersed to the market through Rosalind Hollinrake.
- 12 Exhibition Review: Clarice Beckett: The Present Moment – Sheila Foundation. <https://sheila.org.au/blog/exhibition-review-clarice-beckett-the-present-moment/>.
- 13 Conversations with Elizabeth Arthur.
- 14 Elizabeth Arthur, Unpublished biography of Lesley Sinclair Ms pp 8, 16.
- 15 Arthur Ms pp 15, 16.
- 16 Alison Wishart, 'The Turbulent History of Our Cookery Book', *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, issue no. 9, 2010.
- 17 Conversations with Lesley Sinclair.
- 18 Elizabeth Arthur Ms p 17.
- 19 e.g. *Sun* 30th September 1922 p 18, 30 Sep 1922 - WOMEN AT TENNIS - Trove. *Australasian* 5 February 1927 p 53, 05 Feb 1927 - TENNIS AT KOOYONG. - Trove.
- 20 Elizabeth Arthur Ms p 20.
- 21 Jenny Teichmann, *Jorgensen of Montsalvat*, this edition Carlton: Black Jack books 2005, first published in 1976 p 16.
- 22 Myra Morris - Wikipedia. D.J.Jordan, "Myra Morris", Australian Dictionary of Biography 1986.
- 23 Elizabeth Arthur Ms p 20.

- 24 Juliette Peers, *More than just Gumtrees: a Personal, Social and Artistic History of the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors*, Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors in association with Dawn Revival Press, Melbourne, 1993 p 78.
- 25 Elizabeth Arthur Ms p 23.
- 26 Most accounts and recollections place her in a platonic master disciple relationship to Jorgensen, although her pupil Aileen Weinberg suggested in conversation that there was a degree of romantic attraction between the pair and that at one stage, when young, Sinclair was so distressed at Jorgensen's libertarian attitudes and his wandering eye, which frequently landed on other women, that she suffered from hair loss, alopecia areata, and had to wear a wig in public. It should be noted that Weinberg's recollections are not mirrored in other accounts. In more recent years whilst stress is regarded as a trigger for alopecia, medically the disease is classed as an autoimmune disease that can occur independent from any emotional status. Like many autoimmune diseases it affects women more than men.
- 27 Elizabeth Arthur Ms p 31.
- 28 Conversations with Lesley Sinclair, quoted in Peers, *More than just Gumtrees* p 78.
- 29 Conversations with Lesley Sinclair in Peers, *More than just Gumtrees* pp 180-181.
- 30 Conversations with Lesley Sinclair in Peers, *More than just Gumtrees* pp 180-181.
- 31 She later dated one Melbourne street scene via an inscription verso as 1930 when preparing works for her Victorian Artists Society retrospective in 1985.
- 32 Teichmann pp 17-18.
- 33 Nor are there detailed press reviews of the work of many other Jorgensen pupils male and female in the 1930s, suggesting they too also obeyed his instruction to avoid the local art market.
- 34 *Table Talk*, 05 Aug 1937 - COMMUNAL EXPERIMENT - Trove. *The Sun* 21 Mar 1938 - STUDYING ART IN COMFORT - Trove.
- 35 Sue Vanderkelen, *The Cruel Man* p 115.
- 36 Sonia Skipper, *My story: tales from a pioneer of Montsalvat*. Carlton North, Vic: Black Jack Press 2005.
- 37 *Table Talk*, 05 Aug 1937 - COMMUNAL EXPERIMENT - Trove, cf Teichmann p 17.
- 38 Inaccurately titled as *Diamond Creek Farmhouse* when submitted to auction.
- 39 Whilst the bridge linking Phillip Island to San Remo was not constructed until the end of the 1930s, at least two regular boat services linked Phillip Island with the Westernport mainland by the late 1920s, including a chain-driven car ferry that crossed the 600 metres or so of sea between San Remo and Newhaven. Getting to Phillip Island from San Remo was not an issue even for artists who did not drive such as Sinclair and Beckett.
- 40 These square towered kilns were a key to the island's economy as an essential part of the chicory industry and have been reiterated by bespoke architecture for both private and public commissions on the island since the advent of post modernism.
- 41 <https://web.archive.org/web/20240522104916/https://vasgallery.org.au/Boatshed-34940>.
- 42 *Bulletin* Vol. 71 No. 3659 (29 Mar 1950) (nla.gov.au).
- 43 *Bulletin* Vol. 78 No. 4054 (23 Oct 1957) p 25.
- 44 *Age* 18 May 1954 - ART NOTES - Trove.
- 45 Conversations with Lesley Sinclair.
- 46 Andrew Sinclair in *Lesley Sinclair, artist and teacher Monday, 1 January 2023*.
- 47 Skipper p 45.



Clarice Beckett, *Grey Day* c1920, oil on board, 22 x 29 cm, private collection

Heliodore Hawthorne (1895-1977)

Dore felt the ugliness of materialism and pollution as keenly as she felt everything that was fine and beautiful and much of her painting and writing was a great cry of protest.¹

Nancy Hall, 1978

Fiercely independent, frugal and committed to living on her own terms, Dore Hawthorne played a significant role in Sydney's early-modernist scene. A contemporary of Grace Crowley, Dorrit Black, Ruth Ainsworth and Anne Dangar, Hawthorne began her artistic journey like many others at the Julian Ashton Art School in Sydney. Through bushwalking groups, art school committees and the documentation of their creative and political ideas in the pages of the bi-monthly magazine *Undergrowth*, Hawthorne became a central figure in this community of artists.

Despite her contribution to this significant time in Australia's cultural history, Hawthorne's story is mostly unacknowledged. This essay offers an insight into Hawthorne's eccentric life, with a particular focus on her earlier years and the influence she had on the community leading Sydney's early modernist movement.

Born Heliodore Hawthorne on 31 August 1895, Dore was the ninth child of ten to James Gavin Hawthorne and Gertrude Hawthorne.² Unlike her contemporaries, Hawthorne's family came from a lower socio-economic background. The family grew up in a small house in Camperdown, NSW. As one of the youngest children, Hawthorne felt less responsibility to provide for the family and was encouraged to pursue creative endeavours. Following her schooling, Hawthorne gained a job designing patterns in an embroidery factory earning 4 pounds a week.³

When her brothers returned from World War I her family home "was rendered hell" due to outbursts of drunken aggression from her eldest brother.⁴ Seeking an escape, Hawthorne brought her ailing father and two nephews to the bushlands of Dee Why in Sydney's Northern Beaches. Her younger brother Cecil had received a block of land in the area for his military service, which he had deeded to Dore.⁵

With determined resourcefulness and 8 pounds in savings, Hawthorne persuaded a bank manager to give her – a single woman in her early twenties – a loan that enabled the start of 'Capri', a self-built fibro cottage and studio.⁶ Despite its challenging beginning (and no-doubt precariously built structure), Capri offered Hawthorne the first taste of financial independence – something extraordinarily rare for a woman so young.

At this time Dee Why was still undeveloped and covered in dense bushland, so it would have been a challenging lifestyle change for the Hawthornes. Despite its isolation from the inner-city lifestyle, Dee Why during the 1920s and 1930s was a curious hub for creatives. Several artists resided in the area, including Marion Ferrer (Mrs Jagger) who established the Dee

Why Art Colony (DWAC) along with other landscapists, Roland Wakelin, J. Muir Auld, Cecil Hart, Norman Lloyd, Mick Paul and James Jackson.⁷

It's unknown whether Hawthorne was connected with the DWAC directly. However, Hawthorne frequently brought friends and fellow artists to Dee Why with her (as seen in the photograph below), so it seems likely that artistic circles would have overlapped during these adventures to the Northern Beaches.



Dore Hawthorne (centre) and friends at Dee Why Beach, Art Gallery of New South Wales Archives, Grace Crowley Archives

The 1920s brought excitement, innovation and creative possibility to the Sydney arts scene as modernism gained increasing momentum in Europe. At the core of Australia's modernist art community was the Sydney Art School (renamed in honour of its founder in 1942 as Julian Ashton Art School). It was here that Hawthorne embarked upon her artistic journey.⁸

Hawthorne began night classes in 1921 while working day shifts at the embroidery factory to support herself financially.⁹ The Sydney Art School promoted itself to anyone engaged in visual work, from illustrators to architects and even embroidery factory workers. The School advertised itself as being able to "train the eye to accurately observe form and colour and the hand to record this observation beautifully".¹⁰

As a passionate and proactive student, Hawthorne became an early member of the Arts Students' Club, which formed in 1923 as "a forum for discussion of new art trends".¹¹ She formed several of her own committees and groups, including a bushwalking group with fellow art students including Dorrit Black, Nancy Hall and Roland Wakelin. Fellow student and close friend Nancy Hall (1900-2001) recalls her first impressions of Hawthorne:¹²

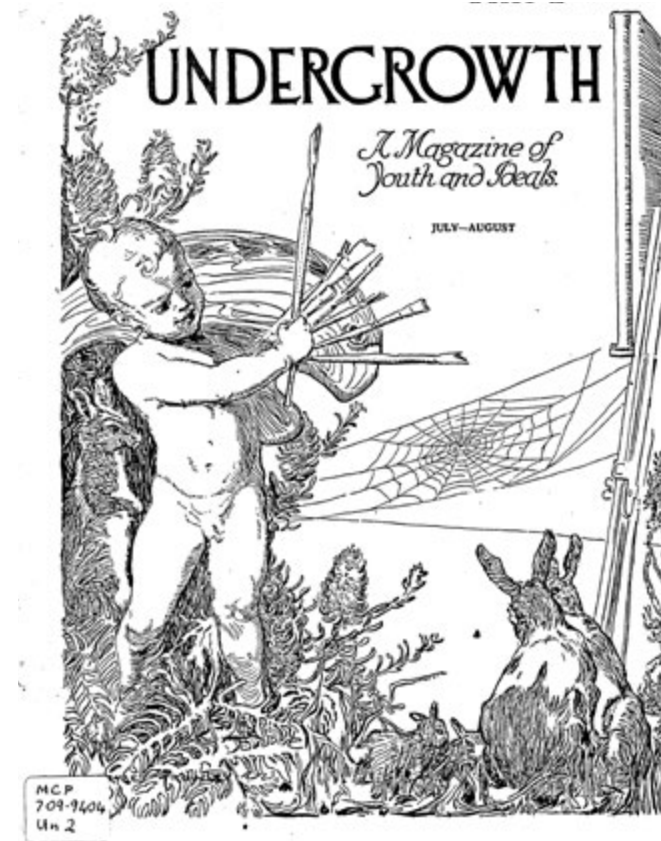
This Heliodore (gift of the sun)...a gentle creature with luminous brown eyes, was quickly promoted from antique to life class to my envy, who was stuck in this lower state for many months. My friendship with her began one Saturday when I went with her to Dee Why. The trip was the result of a sudden request that I go



Heliodore Hawthorne, *Some of Grace Crowley's Port Macquarie class 1930*, oil on canvas on board, 34 x 52 cm, Into the Light Collection 2022, Sheila Foundation. © Estate of Dora Hawthorne. Used with permission

with her, whom I hardly knew at all, but whose quiet urgency of manner made it hard to refuse. Without telling me what the object of the excursion was, she led me through the bush... [to] a half-built fibro cottage telling me she was building it for her old father and nephews and asking me for moral support. It was a depth of feeling and a confidence I hardly knew how to handle!¹³

Hall and Hawthorne became close friends, sharing personal, professional and political ideas and interests. On a bush walk in 1923 the pair – along with four other art students from Julian Ashton – came up with the idea to start a magazine, and thus *Undergrowth: A Magazine of Youth and Ideals* was born.



Grace Crowley, *Undergrowth: A Magazine of Youth and Ideals* 1925, courtesy of State Library Victoria

With an ambition to express their ideas, publish their artworks and share them widely, *Undergrowth* grew from humble beginnings into "the voice of modernism in Sydney".¹⁴ Contributions came in the form of articles, poems, stories and artworks, including cover illustrations from prominent artists including Grace Crowley, Margaret Preston, Roland Wakelin and Ruth Ainsworth. The name *Undergrowth* was chosen to represent the students as "the bracken and tangle of the art world in which George Lambert and others towered as trees".¹⁵ In the editor's note of *Undergrowth*, March–April 1929, Hawthorne speaks to the motivations behind the magazine:

Undergrowth sprang from the sheer joy of growing as do the green things from which it takes its name. Like them, it may flourish and eventually make a definite

pattern against the sky, but we are in no hurry to train it into an avenue of respectable shrubs, labelled and pruned.¹⁶

Despite its being the only publication representing the aims and thoughts of young writers and artists in Sydney at the time, Hall and Hawthorne were always out of pocket over its production.¹⁷ The first edition consisted of six copies, hand-printed with a typewriter at Hawthorne's studio in Dee Why. From 1927, circulation had increased to the point that they were producing 150-200 copies for each edition with a cyclostyle, a device that uses a pen with a small-toothed wheel to prick holes in a sheet of waxed paper.¹⁸ This is then used as a stencil.¹⁹ Some artworks were drawn directly onto the wax paper so the illustrations could be printed along with the reading matter when the stencils were cut.

The production was highly laboured and at times tiresome, but not without success. Readers claimed that the "hand-made" aesthetic enhanced its value, noting that "in a world effete with commercial perfection, little inaccuracies of the hand retain the charm all home-made things have".²⁰ For Hall and Hawthorne, the priority was always to publish content that was honest, daring and innovative, not to generate a profit.²¹



Heliodore Hawthorne, Nancy Hall, *Undergrowth: a magazine of youth and ideals*, November-December 1927 from the Art Gallery of New South Wales Institutional Archive 1927, staple-bound magazine of 16 printed pages, linocuts 28 x 22.3 x 0.3 cm; National Art Archive, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by Jean Campbell 2001. National Art Archive. © Estate of Dore Hawthorne © Estate of Nancy Hall Image © Art Gallery of New South Wales

Hawthorne's writing and artworks feature in every edition. Her striking and comedic style lends itself well to the magazine format. As seen in the accompanying image, Hawthorne depicts a female art teacher standing behind her male student hunched over an easel for the cover artwork of the November–December 1927 edition. Just as she heralded the voices of women within the pages of *Undergrowth*, in this cover Hawthorne shows us the confidence, ability and leadership of women artists and their influence on their male counterparts.

Acting as a time capsule of the Sydney art world in the 1920s, *Undergrowth* offers us a precious and intimate insight into the radical thoughts and inner workings of Sydney's young modernist artists, writers and thinkers. Although *Undergrowth* did publish work by men, it provided a unique and unprecedented opportunity for women to publish their ideas and artworks. Art historian Heather Johnson speaks of its unique offering:

Female editorship was unique in a Sydney publication at the time, and it is perhaps telling that many women artists ...found their only public recognition in *Undergrowth*. When it ceased publications after the July/August 1929 issue, most disappeared, leaving almost no trace in the art world.²²

Beyond the pages of the magazine, Hawthorne captured this fierce, talented and determined community of women artists in her drawings and paintings. Acquired by the Sheila Foundation, Hawthorne's oil on canvas, *Some of Grace Crowley's Port Macquarie class* 1930, 1930 depicts a still life class with five women whom Hawthorne has named on the verso of the painting: L to R, Judy Creswick, Mrs Creswick, Lucy Andreas, Grace Crowley (in black), and Mrs Gibson.

The women in this painting – particularly Lucy Andreas and the Creswicks – were connected to Sydney's modernist circles. Judy Creswick, daughter of Mrs Alice Creswick, was active in avant-garde theatre in the 1930s and also pursued painting, while both she and her mother spent extended periods in England and Europe during the interwar years. Mrs Alice Creswick was associated with Grace Cossington Smith and Dorrit Black as well as Grace Crowley, exhibiting alongside them in a 1929 exhibition at Anthony Hordern's Fine Art Galleries, as well as with the Australian Art Society in 1927. Lucy Andreas, sister-in-law of artist and art patron Mary Alice Evatt (1898-1973) and a student of Julian Ashton, likewise moved within these cultural networks, her presence frequently noted in Sydney's social pages. Limited material about Mrs Gibson is available.

The controlled composition and strong linework show Hawthorne's experimentation with cubist techniques with clear influence from her friends and fellow artists, Grace Crowley, Anne Dangar and Dorrit Black, who studied cubism together in Paris.²³ Particularly influenced by the teachings of French painter and critic André Lhote, they were taught geometric systems of dynamic symmetry, pictorial harmony and the golden ratio.²⁴ Lhote had a disciplined and unemotive approach to composition and subject,²⁵ asking his pupils to "Learn to work by the geometry, the numbers...work with your intellect more and let your eyes have a holiday".²⁶

Throughout their time abroad the three artists kept in contact with Hawthorne, often sharing notes from their classes to be

published in *Undergrowth*. In the March–April 1928 edition, Dangar and Crowley transcribed one of Lhote's lectures on cubism. It quotes:

The servitude of an artist who blindly follows the accidents on the exterior of objects always results in paintings devoid of meaning and excessively sentimental. Henceforth, we shall have an art which shall spring from technique before all other preoccupations...See nothing in the nude, but the straight lines, the angles and curves, the tones cold and warm, the large, small and medium-sized dimensions, etc.²⁷

Upon their return to Sydney, Crowley, Dangar and Black continued to share their newfound learnings in Australia.²⁸ In 1929, Dangar resumed teaching for Ashton but quickly became frustrated with his reluctance to embrace modernism. By winter 1929, Dangar launched independent classes to teach cubism, effectively establishing the first modern art school in Australia. Within the first six months, she had 23 students including Hawthorne. Dangar also continued to publish essays and manifestos in *Undergrowth* throughout the following years.²⁹

Crowley also remained connected to Hawthorne. The class depicted in *Some of Grace Crowley's Port Macquarie class* was the first that Crowley led following her return from Europe.³⁰ Hawthorne's prior learnings of cubism from Dangar and further teaching from Crowley is evident in this work. The composition employs the golden ratio with a line following the arc of Crowley's arm into the table with a focal point landing on Mrs Gibson's hands. The centre still life piece – likely a floral arrangement – is made up of overlapping geometric shapes in a limited palette. Each object and subject is aligned to its surroundings with sharp angles that suggest the use of Lhote's mathematical framework.³¹ There is some inconsistency in Hawthorne's approach to the figures perhaps showing her hesitancy in undertaking such an ambitious work. Always a willing experimenter, Hawthorne shows in this painting a brave approach to trialling new styles of modernism.

Some of Grace Crowley's Port Macquarie class tells a story of collaboration, travel, friendship and skill-sharing within Sydney's community of women artists. It is a rare representation of women's agency and significance – including Crowley, Dangar and Black – in bringing cubist ideas and teachings into Australia.

In the mid-1930s, Hawthorne's time at art school came to an end. She was invited by Ruth Ainsworth to take up a teaching role at Frensham, a private girls boarding school in Mittagong.³² Hawthorne leased her house in Dee Why and lived on campus. Renowned interior designer Marion Hall Best was a student of Hawthorne's during her short stint at Frensham. In an interview with historian Bronwyn Hanna, Best recalls her memories of Hawthorne's classroom:

We had an art mistress, Dore Hawthorne, who was meant to give us lectures on the history of architecture. Now she was an "odd bod", I've never heard of her since but she was eccentric enough to have been Picasso. The idea of standing up and lecturing on the history of architecture was just too much for her so she did several posters on the subject instead and they were brilliant.³³

Despite her impact on the students and Frensham's notable history of supporting the work of women artists and designers, life as an art mistress was stifling for the free-spirited Hawthorne.³⁴ She left Frensham in 1937 and due to issues returning to her home in Dee Why, she was left homeless. Ever the pragmatist, Hawthorne returned to a favourite bush walking area in the Burratorang Valley and built a self-described 'shack' near a spring as her new residence.³⁵

With World War II breaking out in 1939, women were called upon to fill the jobs left behind by men needed for active service. In 1942, Hawthorne joined the home front efforts by working as a "final viewer" at the Small Arms Factory in Lithgow. Her work involved the application of precision gauges to Bren gun components before they were sent to assembly.³⁶ Rostered on the gruelling night shifts which started at 11pm, Hawthorne required a nearby dwelling. With her usual frugality and resourcefulness, Hawthorne began a new self-build on the grounds of an old boys school. She describes this particular project in a letter to Grace Crowley:

I got a Morris car chase (sic, chassis) – 7x6 or nearly – and had it turned into a dwelling, standing on billy-cart wheels so that it became a "vehicle" and so dodged building restrictions... [Here] in my packing case home, I slept and cooked and shivered as well. There wasn't much room inside, but outside were lovely 17 acres surrounding.³⁷

Hawthorne lived in this self-built home for almost 10 years and it was here that she created her most notable series of paintings, *Factory Folk*, following her retrenchment from the Small Arms Factory in 1945.³⁸ Based on sketches she had created during her breaks at the factory, *Factory Folk* provides a record of daily life as a factory worker during wartime. Hawthorne signed this series under the pseudonym 'Brendorah', a combination of her first name with the name of the guns she had worked with so closely.

Hawthorne found her artistic groove in *Factory Folk*, depicting a stylistic combination of her quick, sketchy illustrations from *Undergrowth* with the modernist techniques present in *Some of Grace Crowley's Port Macquarie Class 1930*. Hawthorne's *Factory Folk* not only offers an insight into factory life but also shows the social pressures placed on the women workers as well as their resilience to this major social change. With a sense of humour and sincerity that is unique to the series, Hawthorne captured wartime stories that were mostly left untold.

The first exhibition of this series was shown in November 1945 at the Littleton Hostel in Lithgow. It was opened by the art critic, Bernard Smith, who had encouraged Hawthorne to develop this series when he saw her sketches on a visit to Lithgow with the exhibition *150 years of Australian art* travelling from the Art Gallery of NSW. During this opening, Smith noted that "although

official records of factory work during the war had been made, this exhibition is perhaps the only unofficial one of its kind to come out of the war... Besides being extraordinarily interesting, the exhibition is of a very high standard".³⁹ The significance of Smith's opening remarks lies not only in his position at AGNSW, but also as a Marxist and then-member of the Australian Communist Party. It is likely he recognised a kindred political spirit in Hawthorne.

The importance of this series also did not go unnoticed by the media, with several glowing reviews in the local *Lithgow Mercury*:

Visiting the exhibition... you feel you have entered through a secret door and seen life at the factory when production was at its peak. This impression is assisted by the accompanying catalogues in which pungent comments describe each painting... Interpreting daily incidents, in humorous but kindly vein the pictures are remarkable for their effect of continuity.⁴⁰

With *Factory Folk* complete Hawthorne moved on to her next ambitious project, establishing an art gallery in Lithgow. Hawthorne was so determined that in 1948 she made the generous offer of bequeathing all of her effects to the Council if it would build a public gallery on the site of a disused swimming pool in what later became Queen Elizabeth Park.⁴¹ To prove her seriousness, Hawthorne drafted a will to be enacted if the Council agreed to her proposal.⁴² Unfortunately, the Councillors couldn't agree on the proposal – one would support the idea if it included a bandstand; another wanted the pool restored instead; another was happy to support it as long as no trees were cut down; and others were happy to support it whatsoever. However, the support she had gained was lost when the mayor failed to be re-elected.⁴³

In 1951, Hawthorne returned to her home in Dee Why taking her "packing case home" with her. There she lived with the financial freedom of a steady pension until her health collapsed in 1968. Hawthorne then moved to a convalescent home in Manly until her death on 23 July 1977.⁴⁴

Hawthorne was a trailblazer in all aspects of her life. She approached her artworks, writing and politics with remarkable resourcefulness, unwavering determination and fierce passion. Across the pages of *Undergrowth* and beyond, she provided platforms and opportunities for recognition, collaboration and networking within a community of women artists including Grace Crowley, Dorrit Black, Anne Dangar, Ruth Ainsworth and many others. Despite Hawthorne's crucial role within this community being largely unknown today, her contribution to the development of modernism in Sydney is indisputable.

Steph Markerink

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- 37 Hawthorne, Dore. Letter to Grace Crowley, 17 April 1965. Courtesy Archives of Art Gallery of New South Wales.
- 38 "Artist Captures S.A.F Features in Oils." *Lithgow Mercury*, 1945, p.4.
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Dore Hawthorne *Morning after night shift* 1945, oil on hardboard, 35.6 x 43.4cm, Australian War Memorial. © Estate of Dora Hawthorne. Used with permission

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Elsa Russell (1909-1997)

One of the many outstanding women artists yet to receive adequate representation...her exceptional feeling for whimsy and spontaneity, her concern for people and nature... Whatever the medium, the paint or other material was energetically applied.¹

Elsa Russell Obituary, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1997

Energy, whimsy and spontaneity – no other words could more perfectly capture the life of Elsa Russell and her vibrant art. Known simply as 'Elsie' amongst her acquaintances, she was a gifted painter from Sydney who pushed the boundaries both in her art practice and social life.² As a professional female artist in the 20th century, she bravely navigated the many societal and financial constraints that often impeded women from pursuing non-traditional careers. The two pieces under discussion here – a flower study and a World War II pilot – encapsulate this determination to challenge gender stereotypes. Russell's story is one of dedication and creativity, offering a rare glimpse into the experiences of women grappling with the art scene in this era.

Born in 1909 to F.A.A. Russell, a King's Council barrister, Elsa Russell grew up in a relatively affluent upper middle-class family with her three sisters, Patience, Sybil and Audrey.³ Her artistic endeavours can be partially attributed to the values instilled by this family. She lived in an exceptionally creative household. Her mother, Lillian nee Salter (1873-1956), was an artist herself who had studied alongside the famous painter Mary Stoddard (c1852-1901).⁴ Her father also pursued painting as a recreational activity.⁵ It is no surprise that each of the sisters developed a love for artistic pursuits, but it was Elsa and her sister Audrey (1907-1986) in particular who ventured into the world of professional painting.

In the initial stages of their artistic endeavours, both Audrey and Elsa Russell demonstrated a preference for watercolours, although Elsa eventually diversified into oil and gouache. This early inclination can be attributed to their mother's proclivity for the medium, which mirrored the artistic style and methodology of Mary Stoddard.⁶ Audrey even received praise in a letter to Elsa for the "distinguished way she laid on her watercolours and her ever-fresh approach...."⁷ Their proficiency in the medium was demonstrated when the sisters participated in the Watercolour Institute's Annual Exhibition, with Audrey in 1936 and Elsa in 1986-87.⁸ Both sisters appeared to encourage one another in their professional endeavours and were regularly featured in the same exhibitions, such as 309 Library in George Street and the Barefoot Gallery at Avalon.⁹ Their strong sisterly bond and shared experiences undoubtedly played a pivotal role in Elsa's career, reflecting the common reliance of female artists of that era on the camaraderie of other women to support their pursuits.

For a time, both sisters also studied together. Elsa Russell's formative education unfolded at Abbotsleigh School.¹⁰ To pursue her artistic career, she later enrolled to study drawing at the East Sydney Technical College in 1927.¹¹ Unfortunately, due to financial and personal challenges, she could not continue her

studies there. Nevertheless, she persevered on her own and, in 1930, created *Still life with snowdrops*, a painting that was acquired for Into the Light in 2023.¹²

The painting *Still life with snowdrops* is a remarkable display of bold and brilliant artistry. The snowdrops rest in an ochre mug placed on a table loosely covered with yellow cloth and with a blue piece of fabric draped behind it. The objects are strikingly captured through dry, hard-edged brushwork. The suggestive shapes, bold use of colour and emotive movement reflect the burgeoning modernist movement in Australia in the 1930s. During this period, artists shifted from a highly naturalist depiction of the world to one that played with different colours and greater abstraction. The impact of this influence is evident in Russell's fragmented brushstrokes and juxtaposed colours, which exhibit minimal blending. The painting shares a similar style with Grace Cossington Smith's modernist work *The sock knitter* 1915. Both pieces feature a bold use of colour and harsh brushwork, captivating the viewer with their tactile quality. Russell was aware of Cossington Smith and may have been influenced by her style. It's interesting to note, too, that Cossington Smith's work comments on the passive role of women in war, a theme that would later influence Russell's own artistic practice.¹³ Presented as the first work in her retrospective exhibition at Woolloomooloo Gallery in 1989, *Still life with snowdrops* is highly significant as the perceived "catalyst" for Russell's professional career.¹⁴ In this exhibition, the painting appeared alongside a series of still lifes from the 1930s that all feature the distinctive post-impressionist style she developed early in her art practice.



Dad, Brucie and Elsa Russell Outdoors Sketching at Castle Hill, *Dattilo-Rubbo Pictorial Material*, 1870-1955, Mitchell Library, State Library NSW. © Louise Havekes. Used with permission

Between 1932 and 1934, she received further education under Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo at his art school. Russell fondly reminisced about the atmosphere of his studio, recalling it as "always charged with electricity, which of course was due to the



Elsa Russell, *Still life with snowdrops* 1930, oil on cardboard, 54.7 x 37 cm, Into the Light Collection 2022, Sheila Foundation. © Louise Havekes. Used with permission

vital sparkle of his wit...personality and highly explosive temperament somewhat peppery, yet always charming...."¹⁵ This period of study likely contributed to the refinement of her modernist and post-impressionist style, as Dattilo-Rubbo is widely acknowledged for his profound influence on the modernist movement in Australia, with his school serving as the point of origin for numerous post-impressionist artists.¹⁶ Several of Russell's artworks reflect his influence, including *Cooma*, showcased in the 1935 exhibition of The Society of Artists, and *Old Wollstonecraft looking towards Greenwich* in 1934.¹⁷ Both landscapes showcase the same vibrant use of colour and fluid form that characterised the work of other post-impressionist students from Dattilo-Rubbo's school during this period.

The Dattilo-Rubbo art school nurtured many aspiring female artists at the time. Russell herself recalls studying alongside Janna Bruce (Bruce) (1909-2000), Betty Morgan (c1900s), Alison Rehfish (1900-1975), Mary Webb (Webby) (1917-1958), Frances Ellis (1900-1971), Margaret Coen (Gunner) (1909-1993), Dora Jarret (1895-1983), Irene Meagher (Titianella) (c1900s) and her sister Audrey among others.¹⁸ Comparing Russell's work with that of her peers reveals the influence of Dattilo-Rubbo's instruction as well as Russell's own unique style. For instance, a comparison between Janna Bruce's *Castle Hill landscape* 1929 with Russell's *Tree lined street* reveals numerous similarities in the shape, colour, tone and brushwork of each landscape.¹⁹ This complementary practice appears to have been a product of their shared learning experience and close relationship, supported by a photograph capturing both Russell and Bruce painting *en plein air* with Dattilo-Rubbo at Castle Hill. The given image underscores the emergence of Russell's artistic practice within a larger framework of adept female post-impressionists, whose mutual connections exerted influence on each other's artistic endeavours.

After leaving Dattilo-Rubbo's school, Elsa Russell made her artistic debut in 1934 at a shared exhibition in the 309 Library.²⁰ Reviewers noted her landscape works were "painted with a simplicity and a directness that are very charming...."²¹ Later in 1937, she entered the Wynne Prize with two landscapes alongside Grace Cossington Smith.²² However, with the arrival of World War II, Russell shifted her career focus and attempted to utilise her growing renown and artistic talents to support the war effort. In 1940, she orchestrated a special exhibition in her Wollstonecraft residence to raise funds for the Red Cross.²³ Not content to sit on the sidelines, she subsequently joined the National Emergency Services (NES), where she obtained several qualifications, including a certificate of First Aid and two years of ambulance driving.²⁴ These skills facilitated her acceptance into the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF) in 1942, where she served as a "driver of motor transport" (DMT).²⁵ She held this position until 1943 with the 5 Service Flying Training School (5-SFTS) at Uranquinty before being posted to H.Q. at Laverton until her discharge on 15 October 1945.²⁶

Despite the demands for discipline and the often-challenging circumstances within her unit, Russell consistently carved out time for her artistic pursuits. Her passion was noticed by several colleagues, one of whom noted that she "is a landscape and portrait painter of considerable talent...she has a delightful sense of humour and puts on excellent items at the Unit concerts...."²⁷ Although not designated as an official war artist, Russell often sketched and drew her fellow unit workers and

officers. Being directly involved in the war effort, her drawings possess a distinctive quality, as she depicted them with the insight and perspective of someone intimately familiar with the challenges and duties her subjects encountered.²⁸

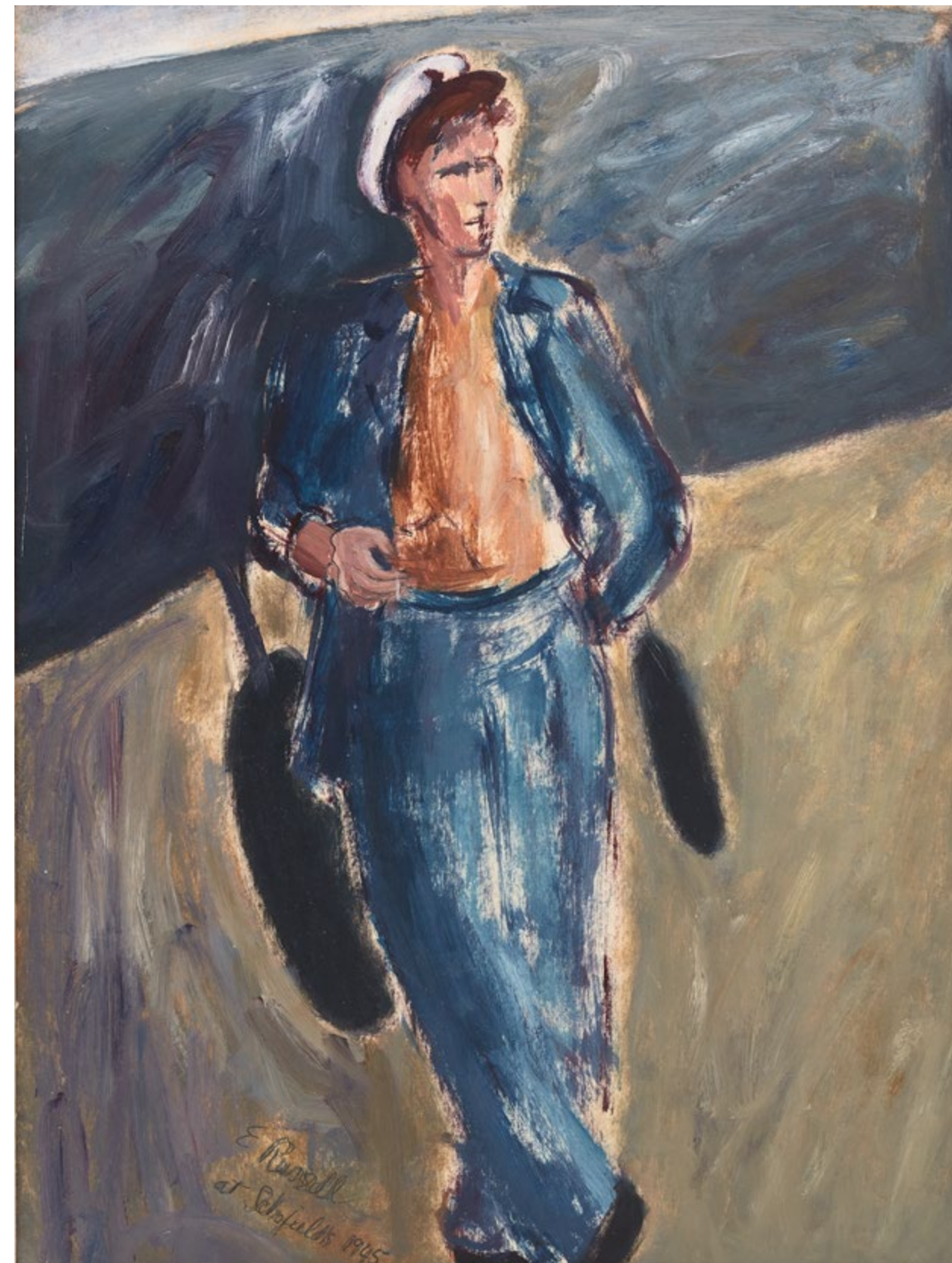


Elsa Mary Lillian Russell, 5 SFTS DMT 93166 1942, National Archives of Australia. © Louise Havekes. Used with permission

Around 16 of Russell's wartime sketches are housed in the Australian War Memorial. They capture fleeting moments with rapid brushstrokes that convey a sense of urgency and motion. Indeed, many of the works are produced on odd bits of paper and are rarely described aside from a brief title, hinting at their immediacy. Created using various mediums such as pen, ink, watercolour and pencil, her sketches appear to serve as a reflective exercise, offering a critical and sometimes humorous exploration of everyday activities.



Leading Aircraftswoman Elsa Russell, WAAAF, Refuelling an Aircraft. Courtesy Australian War Memorial, 00915.001. © Louise Havekes. Used with permission



Elsa Russell, *At Schofields* 1945, oil on cardboard, 78 x 53 cm, Into the Light Collection 2022, Sheila Foundation. © Louise Havekes. Used with permission

Russell's extensive collection of wartime sketches primarily focused on the female members of her unit. In World War II, many servicewomen provided crucial auxiliary forces and filled support roles in the war effort. Her sisters Sybil and Audrey were also actively involved, with Audrey assuming the role of an officer, as outlined in an article titled "From Art to Airforce".²⁹ Through her artistic contributions, Russell illuminates this under-represented aspect of the wartime experience – the female gaze. One specific sketch, titled *WAAAFs getting into Airforce jeans for the first time*, vividly and playfully portrays the new lifestyle and attire adopted by women during the war. The scene is imbued with humour, as evident in the posture of the figures who seem perplexed by the overalls and their ill-fitting nature, with the two women at the back wearing garments that are either too long or too short. This sketch uniquely commemorates the often-overlooked reliance on women's labour during wartime and the evolving gender roles it inspired within society.

Russell herself appears to have embodied this new "blurring" of masculine and feminine, with many individuals referring to her as "Lady Elsa" whilst she operated the "masculine" heavy-mechanical vehicles.³⁰ Content in her capabilities, Russell outlined in a five-verse text entitled *Grease-Sprog's Progress* that she was one of the few who adeptly navigated traditionally masculine fields with feminine grace.³¹ She had a unique ability to capture fleeting moments in time and was often able to convey the mood of a scene through the expressive movement of her strokes and occasional colouring. These attributes would subsequently come to define her oeuvre, particularly in her documentation of the Circus and Ballet during the 1950s. Although her style predates the graphic design and high art trends of the 1950s, the influence of this new movement is evident in the elongated representation of certain figures.



Elsa Russell, *WAAAFs getting into Airforce jeans for the first time* 1944, pen and ink, watercolour, pencil on paper, 31.5 x 38.2 cm, AWM ART29016. © Louise Havekes. Used with permission

During her time in the WAAAF, Russell's artistic endeavours extended beyond these sketches to include the painting *At Schofields*, completed in 1945 and acquired by the Into the Light Collection. Executed in oil on cardboard, the artwork portrays an anonymous man standing on the Schofields airstrip with aeroplane wheels behind him. His suave and saucy self-

confidence is conveyed through his relaxed posture, reminiscent of contemporary fashion photography standards at the time and the bold use of colour. The immediacy of the brushstrokes conveys a sense of urgency within this piece. Several constraints, including time and the availability of cost-effective materials, may explain this work's hasty nature. The background consists of blocked strips of faded colour, and the visible lines applied within these blocks create a sense of movement and texture. The utilisation of dry, thick brushstrokes was prevalent among artists contemporaneous to Russell, serving to underscore the visceral ambience of the painting.

Russell does not adorn this serviceman with any status or details of his uniform. Instead, he is a plain figure, perhaps depicted in civilian clothes. This representation closely resembles Russell's other sketches in how it deviates from official war artists by portraying service men and women as ordinary rather than heroic figures. It provides insight into her perceived role within the wartime service, suggesting that she does not view herself as inferior to men. Unfortunately, this same anonymity means the model for this painting remains a mystery. The Schofields airstrip was loaned to the Air Arm of the Royal Navy in 1944 as a Mobile Naval Air Base called HMS Nabthorpe.³² During this time, it was predominately used by the British Pacific Fleet, including various Seafire, Firefly, Hellcat and Corsair Squadrons.³³ This would indicate that the unknown figure within Russell's painting may be a British naval officer, a claim supported by his military cap, which features a red patch similar to those worn by the British Navy and congruent with images from the Schofields airbase of British units.³⁴

Interestingly, Russell's military records appear to show that she was never stationed at Schofields. Most of her movements were between No. 1 Personnel Depot, Laverton, Uranquinty, No. 5 Operational Unit, Ultimo and Bradfield Park.³⁵ Nonetheless, she may have visited briefly or, as Furby and Sheridan note, the inspiration for this work may have stemmed entirely from a photograph.³⁶ Her sketches from this time provide a noteworthy juxtaposition to the more official, national depictions produced by commissioned war artists. Not only does her art capture the oft-overlooked lives of ordinary citizens and auxiliary workers, but it also affirms the capability of women to undertake roles in the public sector.³⁷

After the war, Russell took advantage of the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Training Scheme to return to East Sydney Technical College from 1946 to 1947.³⁸ During this time, she studied life drawing under the tutelage of Godfrey Miller. It is likely that this training solidified her passion for human subjects, which had been developing through her wartime sketches. From this point on, her artworks began to shift from a focus on still life and landscape to include more images of people and activities, such as circus and ballet performers. In 1951, Russell showcased her work alongside Dora Jarret and Piers Bourke in the Sydney Empire Theatre Foyer.³⁹ Later, she incorporated some of the same works in her debut solo-exhibition in the David Jones Gallery in 1952.⁴⁰ These two exhibitions featured ballet dancers inspired by Russell's experiences as a freelance artist with the Borovansky Ballet. The showcases, while appreciated by performers and theatregoers, were not entirely well-received by the art community. One critic noted that "she depends on draughtsmanship and since her accomplishments there leave all to be desired, beauty falls flat..."⁴¹ Such occasional criticism would follow Russell for most of her career and largely reflects

the negative comments on technique and lack of true creativity that were directed at female artists at the time.

Despite these challenges, Russell channelled her wartime experience and persevered, carving out a distinct space of her own within the art world through dedication and camaraderie. Her name frequents the social and art newspaper columns of the early 1950s, demonstrating her successful efforts to establish herself as an artist.⁴² Between 1947 and 1962, she consistently exhibited with the Contemporary Art Society and was actively involved in its debates, critique sessions and lectures.⁴³ The cultivation of these artistic relationships extended into her personal life, where she adeptly established a community of creative individuals around her. At one point, she lived in shared accommodation with the talented practitioners John Olsen and Piers Bourke in North Sydney.⁴⁴ Later when she moved to Seaforth with her sister Audrey, she transformed the space into a hub for artistic friends and travellers. Indeed, Russell's niece Louise Havekes notes that even when both sisters were older, they remained active producers of art and "maintained a circle of artistic friends, spent weekends in the countryside painting, and enjoyed afternoon drinks..."⁴⁵

Throughout her lifetime, Russell's abiding concern for others remains prominent in these instances of community building and her art itself. Whether dedicating her time to serving the nation or supporting the artists around her, including her sister, she was a cherished member of the Sydney artistic community. Her art captures those members of society who were often overlooked, such as women and, later, also Indigenous advocates, such as Faith Bandler, whose portrait is now housed at the State Library of NSW.⁴⁶ Russell found beauty in ordinary, everyday moments, the periods or people often disregarded and forgotten. It is this artistic approach that makes her so significant. Not only does she provide insight into her own life as a female artist in the 20th century, but she also offers a window into the lives and experiences of others, reminding the viewer to cherish human connections and friendships.

Bridget Hoban and Hannah Newman



Elsa Russell, *Faith Bandler* 1957, oil on masonite, 60.7 x 51 cm, donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by Faith Bandler, 1998, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. © Louise Havekes. Used with permission

Notes

- ¹ "Obituary Elsa Russell", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1997, p 120.
- ² See the crossed-out "Elsa" on this form which has been replaced with "Elsie." Note: She may have preferred this name because her aunt on her mum's side was called Elsie. National Archive of Australia, "Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force Recruitment Form" (Canberra: 4954494, 1948-1939); Samantha Littley, "Elsa Mary Lillian Russell: Biography," *Design and Art Australia Online*, 2011, <https://www.daa0.org.au/bio/elsa-mary-lillian-russell/biography/>;
- ³ Paula Furby and Susan Sheridan, "An Artist in the WAAAF: Elsa Russell's War," *Hecate* 28, no. 2 (2002): p 156.
- ⁴ Samantha Littley, "Elsa Mary Lillian Russell: Biography," *Design and Art Australia Online*, 2011, <https://www.daa0.org.au/bio/elsa-mary-lillian-russell/biography/>.
- ⁵ "Mother and Her Two Daughters All Artists," *Daily Mirror*, 2nd Oct 1952, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/276430917?searchTerm=Elsa%20Russell%20artist>, p 26.
- ⁶ See the works listed amongst her mother's personal collection in the personal artist's collection box at the AGNSW, which are predominately watercolour works.
- ⁷ *Personal Letter from Phyl Arnott to Elsa Russell, in the artist's collection of Elsa Russell*, 1987, Art Gallery of NSW Archives.
- ⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*. "Art Exhibitions: Watercolour Institute." April 8, 1936. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article17325963>, p 11; Littley, Samantha. "Elsa Mary Lillian Russell: Biography." *Design and Art Australia Online*, 2011. <https://www.daa0.org.au/bio/elsa-mary-lillian-russell/biography/>.
- ⁹ *Daily Telegraph*. "Topical Events." November 13, 1934. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article246996841>, p. 13; Littley, Samantha. "Elsa Mary Lillian Russell: Biography." *Design and Art Australia Online*, 2011. <https://www.daa0.org.au/bio/elsa-mary-lillian-russell/biography/>.
- ¹⁰ Littley, Samantha. "Elsa Mary Lillian Russell: Biography." *Design and Art Australia Online*, 2011. <https://www.daa0.org.au/bio/elsa-mary-lillian-russell/biography/>.
- ¹¹ Paula Furby, *In Context: Australian Women Modernists, Nancy Borlase, Jacqueline Hick, Erica McGilchrist, Mirka Mora, Barbara Robertson, Elsa Russell* (Adelaide: Flinders University, 2001), p 29.
- ¹² Woolloomooloo Gallery, *Retrospective Exhibition: Elsa Russell* (Woolloomooloo Gallery, 1989), p 2, cat. No. 1.
- ¹³ Scates, Bruce. "The Unknown Sock Knitter: Voluntary Work, Emotional Labour, Bereavement and the Great War." *Labour History* 81 (2001): p 29
- ¹⁴ Woolloomooloo Gallery. "Retrospective Exhibition Elsa Russell," 1989. Research Library AGNSW.
- ¹⁵ Jean Campbell, "Introduction to the Retrospective Exhibition on Dattilo-Rubbo," *Northern Beaches Council*, 1981, <https://www.northernbeaches.nsw.gov.au/things-to-do/arts-and-culture/manly-art-gallery-museum/collection/antonio-dattilo-rubbo/life-and-times>.
- ¹⁶ Campbell, Jean. "Introduction to the Retrospective Exhibition on Dattilo-Rubbo." *Northern Beaches Council*, 1981. <https://www.northernbeaches.nsw.gov.au/things-to-do/arts-and-culture/manly-art-gallery-museum/collection/antonio-dattilo-rubbo/life-and-times>.
- ¹⁷ Christies. "ELSA MARY RUSSELL (1909-1997) Cooma." 2004. <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-4332272>; Australian and New Zealand Art Sales Digest. "Russell, Elsa Mary, Old Wollstonecraft Towards Greenwich." Accessed October 13, 2024. <https://www.aasd.com.au/artist/3691-elsa-mary-russell/works-in-past-sales/?page=2>.
- ¹⁸ Letter from Elsa Russell to The Manly Museum and Gallery on Dattilo Rubbo, *Manly Museum and Gallery Archives*, p 2.
- ¹⁹ Invaluable. "Janna Bruce (Born 1909) Castle Hill Landscape (circa 1929) Oil on Board," 2011. <https://www.invaluable.com/artist/bruce-janna-x5shaf9sab/sold-at-auction-prices/>.
- ²⁰ "Current Artbursts," *The Bulletin*, November 28, 1934, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-611243740>, p 45; "Topical Events," *The Daily Telegraph*, November 13, 1934, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article246996841>, p 13.
- ²¹ "Current Artbursts," *The Bulletin*, November 28, 1934, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-611243740>, p 45.
- ²² Art Gallery NSW. "Wynne Prize 1937." Accessed October 13, 2024. <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/prizes/wynne/1937/>.
- ²³ *Art in Australia*. Third. Sydney: Sydney Morning Herald Publication, 1940, p. 74; Anna Christine Williams, *Heritage of the Empire Air Armada*. PhD Thesis (Sydney: The University of Sydney, 2022), p 63.
- ²⁴ *Record Office R.A.A.F. RUSSELL, Elsa Mary Lillian Service Number – 93166*. National Archives of Australia, A9301, 4954494.
- ²⁵ *Record Office R.A.A.F. RUSSELL, Elsa Mary Lillian Service Number – 93166*. National Archives of Australia, A9301, 4954494.
- ²⁶ Samantha Littley, "Elsa Mary Lillian Russell: Biography," *Design and Art Australia Online*, 2011, <https://www.daa0.org.au/bio/elsa-mary-lillian-russell/biography/>; *Record Office R.A.A.F. RUSSELL, Elsa Mary Lillian Service Number – 93166*. National Archives of Australia, A9301, 4954494; National Archive of Australia, "Number 5 Service Flying Training School Uranquinty-Personnel Occurrence Report 1/1943-50/1943-Part E: Airwomen," January 26, 1943, A10605, 856/1.
- ²⁷ *Confidential Report: Airmen or Airwomen Applicants for Commissions*. National Archives of Australia, A9301, 4954494.
- ²⁸ Anna Christine Williams, *Heritage of the Empire Air Armada. PhD Thesis* (Sydney: The University of Sydney, 2022), p 244.
- ²⁹ *Daily Mirror*. "From Art to Airforce." March 8, 1945. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article272483842>, p. 6.
- ³⁰ Furby, Paula, and Susan Sheridan. "An Artist in the WAAAF: Elsa Russell's War." *Hecate* 28, no. 2 (2002): 164.
- ³¹ Paula Furby and Susan Sheridan, "An Artist in the WAAAF: Elsa Russell's War," *Hecate* 28, no. 2 (2002): 160
- ³² GML Heritage. "Former Schofields Aerodrome: Interpretation Strategy. Amended Final Report." Sydney, Canberra: GML Heritage, 2020, p 9.
- ³³ Fleet Air Arm Bases. "R.N.A.S Schofields H.M.S Nabthorpe/H.M.S Nabstock." *Royal Navy Research Archive*. Accessed October 14, 2024. <https://www.royalnavyresearcharchive.org.uk/FAA-Bases/Schofields.htm>.
- ³⁴ See Squadron 706 and 724, among others. Fleet Air Arm Bases. "R.N.A.S Schofields H.M.S Nabthorpe/H.M.S Nabstock." *Royal Navy Research Archive*. Accessed October 14, 2024. <https://www.royalnavyresearcharchive.org.uk/FAA-Bases/Schofields.htm>.
- ³⁵ National Archive of Australia. "Record Office R.A.A.F: RUSSELL ELSA MARY LILLIAN: Service Number - 93166." Canberra: 4954494, 1948 1939, pp 15-16.
- ³⁶ Furby, Paula, and Susan Sheridan. "An Artist in the WAAAF: Elsa Russell's War." *Hecate* 28, no. 2 (2002): p 166.
- ³⁷ Speck, Catherine. *Beyond the Battlefield: Women Artists of the Two World Wars*. London: Reaktion Books, 2014, p 118.
- ³⁸ Furby Paula. *In Context: Australian Women Modernists, Nancy Borlase, Jacqueline Hick, Erica McGilchrist, Mirka Mora, Barbara Robertson, Elsa Russell*. Adelaide: Flinders University, 2001, p 29.
- ³⁹ "The Ballet on Canvas," *The Age*, November 6, 1951, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article205667908>, p. 2; "Ballet Art Show," *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 28, 1951, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18224144>, p 11.
- ⁴⁰ "Actress Opened One-Man Art Show in Record Time," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 2, 1952, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18284406>, p 5.
- ⁴¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*. "Three Art Shows in Sydney." October 1, 1952. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18284236>, p 4.
- ⁴² "The Ballet on Canvas," *Age*, November 6, 1951, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article205667908>, p 2; "Ballet Art Show," *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 28, 1951, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18224144>, p 11; "Art Review," *Herald*, November 6, 1951, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article247848390>, p 7; "Three Artists Gave Party Before Show," *Daily Telegraph*, July 26, 1951, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article248598493>, p 17; "Art Notes," *Age*, November 6, 1951, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article205667934>, p 7; "Sketches of Ballet at Theatre Exhibition," *Daily Telegraph*, June 28, 1951, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article248670445>, p 17; "Saddle Forsaken for Ballet Art," *Daily Telegraph*, June 24, 1951, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article248677712>, p 10; "Backstage Ballet Artist's First Time Out Front," *Sun*, July 1, 1952, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article229780842>, p 17; "Small Talk," *Sunday Herald*, September 28, 1952, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18512197>, p 16; "At Sydney Galleries," *Le Courier Australien*, October 3, 1952, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article166979456>, p 5; "Actress Opened One-Man Art Show in Record Time," *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 2, 1952, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18284406>, p. 5; "Three Art Shows in Sydney," *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 1, 1952, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18284236>, p. 4; "Current Art Shows," *Daily Telegraph*, October 1, 1952, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article248657325>, p 10; "Exhibition Poses Problem for Critic," *Sun*, October 2, 1952, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article230997274>, p 30; "Crowd Saw Kmit's Paintings," *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 2, 1953, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18379168>, p 12; "Immature Paintings by Women," *Sun*, April 28, 1953, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article229734226>, p 18; "Paris to Sydney," *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 29, 1954, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18423002>, p 4; "Rush for Show She Won't See," *Australian Women's Weekly*, July 9, 1958, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article51941028>, p 31.
- ⁴³ See her letter to the Society in 1948 and the framed oil painting "Pittwater" she exhibited in 1947 with the Society. State Library NSW. "Contemporary Art Society of Australia (N.S.W.) - Correspondence, 1943-1968: MLMSS 2440/1-6. 9ALqrj4Y. 131239," 1968 1943; Furby Paula. *In Context: Australian Women Modernists, Nancy Borlase, Jacqueline Hick, Erica McGilchrist, Mirka Mora, Barbara Robertson, Elsa Russell*. Adelaide: Flinders University, 2001, p 29.
- ⁴⁴ Furby Paula. *In Context: Australian Women Modernists, Nancy Borlase, Jacqueline Hick, Erica McGilchrist, Mirka Mora, Barbara Robertson, Elsa Russell*. Adelaide: Flinders University, 2001, p 29.
- ⁴⁵ Furby Paula. *In Context: Australian Women Modernists, Nancy Borlase, Jacqueline Hick, Erica McGilchrist, Mirka Mora, Barbara Robertson, Elsa Russell*. Adelaide: Flinders University, 2001, p 14.
- ⁴⁶ State Library NSW. "Faith Bandler Collection Item ML 1175," c 1957. <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/faith-bandler>.

Ola Cohn (1892-1964)

A piece of stone which seems to have no life
A heavy hammer and some tools as well
Then give me space and light and air to breathe
With no tormenting company round about
That I may try and carve into that stone
Expression of the vital force of life¹

Carved into a wooden plaque at her East Melbourne studio home, these same words appeared in 1940s typescript on page one of Ola Cohn's meandering, mesmerising autobiographical manuscript. The sentiment, the very notion of a "vital force of life" in sculpture, had come directly from the teachings of Henry Moore at London's Royal College of Art (RCA), and governed Cohn's artistic practice for the duration of her career.

Ola Cohn was "a big flour bag of a woman, healthy as bread, strong as a millstone", in the affectionate words of writer and friend Barbara Blackman. She is fondly remembered for carving the *Fairies Tree* in Melbourne's Fitzroy Gardens as a gift to children during the depression of the 1930s – a tremendous feat of strength, skill and imagination – but she is less well recognised for her work as a highly accomplished modernist sculptor.

Cohn worked tenaciously to establish a career in a physically demanding field of art, carving freehand into stone and wood. She cared nothing for social mores concerning fashion or feminine appearance, choosing to dress comfortably in capes and smocks. She made her home from a converted livery stable-cum-motor garage. She believed in the goodness of people and in the fundamental public good of art and art practice, running life drawing classes for American soldiers during World War II (protecting the modesty of each volunteer model with a tea towel) just as happily as she ran pottery classes for kindergarten teachers in training. Her studio was generally open to curious passers-by. "Everything of Ola's was, like her generous size, larger than life-size," recalls Blackman, who also posed as an artists' model. "The dais was higher, the combustion stove chunkier, the chairs wider, the cats huge."²

Cohn received her initial training in Bendigo, where she was born in 1892. Her mother Sarah Helen Snowball came from an Anglican establishment family with a strong presence in Melbourne political and social life. Her father Julius was born to Danish Jewish parents and co-owned the Cohn Bros. cider and cordial company in Bendigo, established by his father Moritz and Uncle Jacob. Carola, always called Ola, was the fourth of their six children and was home-schooled until she was twelve. She was shy, and happiest when surrounded by pets – cats, birds, mice, even silkworms – but as a young woman she felt the first stirrings of ambition and recognised that marriage would be an impediment to her success as an artist. "Many are content to live, to marry, to die and be forgotten," she wrote in her diary, "but that is not my idea... I want to leave both name and memory behind."

Early training was undertaken at the Bendigo School of Mines, and Cohn's first exhibition was held at her family home in 1918.

After the death of her father in 1920, she moved to Melbourne, enrolled at the Swinburne Technical College and attempted to make a living from her craft. She received mentorship from Web Gilbert and worked very briefly as assistant to British sculptor Paul Montford, though she found him arrogant and exploitative. In 1926, at the age of 33, Cohn travelled to London where she was accepted into the RCA based on an audition piece assessed by Ernest Cole and Henry Moore. She was accompanied by her younger sister Franziska, a landscape architect.

Cohn spent five formative years at the RCA. The training back home in anatomical, Greek-influenced sculpture, meticulously copied from life, seemed constrained and misguided as she watched Henry Moore tackle a lump of stone: "With a few chalk marks here and there to suggest what he intends to carve, he whacks straight away at it, first knocking off its corners, and keeping his conception well in the centre of the block." It was Moore who impressed upon her that any sculpture "abstract or otherwise... must contain that living force that makes the creation vibrate with life."

Introduced to the work of Rodin, Maillol and Epstein, Cohn's approach to her art was radicalised. At the British Museum she encountered a carving from Easter Island and recalled in her memoir "its power and feeling of brooding silence held in the image of the stone". She produced some of her most celebrated works at this time, including *Head of a Virgin* 1926, the Portland stone carving of *Mother Earth* 1926 and *Comedy* 1927 shown below. *Comedy* she described as "an abstract noun – sexless",



Ola Cohn with *Comedy* 1927, later purchased by Queensland University. Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library Victoria, MS 8506, Box 1028/2



Ola Cohn, *Head with hands* c1931-4, stone, 41 x 13 cm, Into the Light Collection 2022, Sheila Foundation

and *Head of a Virgin* also “contains both sexes, making it sexless - therefore a virgin. It closes its eyes, and lives within itself, ever growing in intellectual thought and giving forth a feeling of peace.”

Overseas, Cohn’s work was exhibited by the Royal Society of Artists, the Society of Women Artists, the Women’s International Art Club, Australia House and the Paris Salon. Back home the response was less laudatory. Cohn took up residence in a dilapidated studio at 9 Collins Street directly underneath Louis McCubbin’s studio, below street level. Here she held an exhibition of her London works in March 1931. It polarised the critics. The *Bulletin* journalist denounced her modernist style and questioned snidely “whether it is worthwhile chiselling and sawing these Madonnas suffering from elephantiasis out of such intractable material as wood, stone and marble”.³ Correspondents from the *Herald* and the *Leader* had a more positive response and Cohn’s talent was recognised by fellow artists, cementing her place in the contemporary art world. Walter Jago wrote in *Home Beautiful* magazine that she was “neither of the old school nor the new... imaginative, real and true to her art”.⁴

It was almost certainly in this period, within three years of her return to Melbourne from London, that Cohn carved the piece acquired by the Sheila Foundation in 2022, now known as *Head with hands*.

The first known record of its acquisition was by the gallerist Joseph Brown in 1974, ten years after Cohn’s death. Brown estimated 1935 as the date of creation and this looks to be a close guess. The piece was not included in the 1931 exhibition of London work but is very evidently influenced by Cohn’s training at the RCA: the androgynous features with closed eyes



Formal photograph of *Head with hands* taken in Ola Cohn’s Collins St studio, presumably upon completion, early 1930s. Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library Victoria

and serene expression, that “brooding silence”; the elongated nose and large mouth; the strong centredness of the design and almost architectural properties. The material has been identified as sandstone, which places the piece in Australia – this was not a material that Cohn records using in Britain.⁵

Most tellingly, the sculpture was formally photographed on a pedestal in Cohn’s Collins Street studio, which she occupied from 1931 to 1934. It appears in the background of several other photographs taken there, and images from the same studio show members of the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors (MSWPS) modelling heads along very similar lines under Cohn’s tuition.



Ola Cohn works in her Collins St studio, early 1930s. *Head with hands* can be seen at the far right of the image next to Comedy. Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library Victoria



Members of MSWPS work under tuition from Ola Cohn at her Collins St studio, c 1932-34. Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library Victoria

A slide image of this specific work can be found in the family archive, taken by Ola Cohn’s brother Leo, and hand annotated with the title *Cast*. The work has also been likened to her piece *Haunted*, exhibited in 1936. While eyes are wide open in *Haunted* and there is nothing brooding about the expression, the motif of a long-fingered hand is there, balanced beneath the head.



A visitor to Cohn’s exhibition inspects her sculpture, *Haunted* 1936. “A composition I had conceived of a spook or lost soul, terrified of its own peculiar being”. Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library Victoria

Cohn would go on to take up some very significant commissions in Australia in the 1930s including two six-foot sandstone figures for the Hobart Hospital, *Science* and *Humanity* 1938; a series of nineteen panels for the MLC building in Sydney, depicting Australian industries 1939; and the awe-inspiring *Pioneer Woman* for the Pioneer Women’s Memorial Garden in Adelaide 1940. This last had to be carved outside given the sheer weight of the limestone. By then, Cohn was living in her famed Gipps Street studio: “Ola’s Home”, or posthumously, the Ola Cohn Centre. The converted stable and coach house was a much-loved venue for drawing and sculpting classes as well as fundraising garden parties and meetings of artists’ societies including the Plastic Group, the Victorian Sculptors’ Society, the Sculptors’ Society of Australia, Melbourne Contemporary Artists and the MSWPS, of which Cohn was president for sixteen years.

Despite their artistic brilliance, Cohn’s most significant public artworks continued to draw very mixed (and assertive) public opinion. The artistic movements and individuals that had so inspired her overseas, it seemed, had not yet made their mark at home. Of *Pioneer Woman*, she wrote: “Some thought my statue’s hands and feet too large, and not lady like and dainty. I had carved them so they would suggest the strength and power of a symbolic woman, one who could handle all situations and tread all soils with equanimity.”

This ongoing critique must have taken a toll: “having spent my life studying sculpture,” Cohn wrote, “it always seems to me ludicrous to be upset by the opinions of those who have not.”

Notes

- 1 This and all otherwise unattributed quotes from Ola Cohn come from her unpublished autobiographical manuscript, *Me in the Making*, held in the Papers of Ola Cohn, Australian Manuscripts Collection, MS 8506, Box 1023, State Library Victoria. The manuscript was re-edited by Barbara Lemon and published as *A Way with the Fairies*, R.W. Strugnell, Melbourne 2014.
- 2 Barbara Blackman, *Glass After Glass: Autobiographical Reflections*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1997.
- 3 *Bulletin*, March 1931, clipping contained within the papers of Ola Cohn (State Library Victoria).
- 4 Walter Jago, ‘Ola Cohn at work: her contribution to Australian architecture’, *Home Beautiful*, September 1939.
- 5 Interview with Charles Nodrum and Kate Nodrum, Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne, March 2023.
- 6 Juliette Peers, interviewed by Barbara Lemon for ‘The Word in the Stone: Sculptor Ola Cohn’, *Hindsight*, ABC Radio National, September 2008.

Perhaps exhausted by it, or simply by the years of toil – and emotionally spent after the deaths of her mother and sister in quick succession – Cohn returned in the 1940s and 50s to an establishment arm of sculpture. Her work was still recognisably Ola Cohn, but with a focus on religion that was somewhat at odds with her lifelong interest in spiritualism and fantasy, including a genuine belief in fairies. “I am just a woman working out her own salvation, in a very personal way,” she wrote. “I produce my progeny in my work. My awareness of, and my love for humanity, is shown there.” She continued to take commissions and to be recognised by awards including the Crouch Prize in 1952.

At the age of 61, after a longstanding friendship, Cohn married Herbert Green, a former government printer and himself the son of a sculptor. They were married for just four years before he passed away. Ola Cohn died in December 1964 at the age of 72, one month before she was awarded an MBE for her work in the service of art. She bequeathed her Gipps Street home to the Centre for Adult Education, on condition that the MSWPS be allowed to use it one day per week. Her ashes were buried there at the feet of *Mother Earth*, alongside the graves of a succession of pet birds and cats.

Ten years later, *Head with hands* was purchased from Joseph Brown’s *Autumn Exhibition 1974* for \$600 by an art collecting couple in Melbourne and remained in the possession of this family for nearly fifty years. At the time, Brown’s gallery was located at 5 Collins Street, just two doors down from the studio in which the piece was made and photographed, and one of his employees was Charles Nodrum. It would be Charles who sold the piece to the Sheila Foundation through his own gallery in 2022.

Ola Cohn once remarked that “fame which lives through artists’ lives only to die with their passing may have been as disastrous to them as neglect”. The Sheila Foundation has made a timely purchase of a quintessentially Cohn sculpture that revives her story and that clearly, tangibly demonstrates her contribution to contemporary sculpture and Australian art. Historian Juliette Peers explains:

We can never take away from her that positioning, that she was the first person to really present the sort of sculpture that showed... different values, these non-Greek values in sculpture, this return to carving, this interest in earlier forms of art or non-Western forms of sculptural expression. And that’s something that the whole of contemporary sculpture today is still indebted to, [that] first very courageous step she made.⁶

Barbara Lemon

Dorothy Whitehead (1900-1995)

Dorothy Whitehead is relatively unfamiliar in formal academic and curatorial narratives of Australian art history. Yet she earned a substantial public profile as an unmistakably committed professional woman artist in Melbourne, dating from the relatively halcyon days of the 1920s and 30s when the tonalists and Meldrum's associates enjoyed a fairly central position in local art politics, until the era of relatively low profile for women artists of any style by the 1950s. With the expulsion of representational art from official patronage in the 1960s, Whitehead was pushed further to the margins. This highly ordered, yet simultaneously somewhat flamboyant and performative still life has a more complex backstory than mere appearances at first glance may suggest.

Moreover, the story, and also the person behind this painting act as a touchstone to the problematics of writing women into the public record. Even though on-paper documentation is fairly sparse, Whitehead's later career substantially falls into living memory and with that her story becomes partially a litmus test for broader attitudes towards appropriate models of female behaviour and emotional temper in public life. Personal memories of Whitehead are strongly divided between positive and critical, reflecting the tendency to make negative judgements around women who are seen as too assertive and feisty in the public arena. Traditionally they are seen as divisive figures, mocked and often universally disliked, denounced as "dragon ladies". Yet the Meldrum circle was noted, especially during World War I, for its strong and outspoken men such as Colin Colahan and Justus Jorgensen, who were highly partisan and vocal in their defence of what they saw as Meldrum's interests and the superiority of his teachings. Dorothy Whitehead was no less committed in that tradition, although has borne a greater weight of criticism in living memory than her male associates. The artist herself may not have been happy with such discussion around her work. Like a number of artists associated with Meldrum, she believed that discussion of the personality of the artist was not an essential factor of appreciating an artwork.

Whitehead was born into a large family with strong pastoral interests in the western district that extended into both agricultural and commercial interests in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. The extended Whitehead family descended from two brothers who migrated to Sydney in the 1830s. By the end of the decade the brothers had relocated overland with a large amount of stock to Victoria, settling in the Warrnambool area. Both brothers in turn had large families.¹ The *Bulletin* noted that she had relatives throughout the Western District.² These rural-based interests extended to such activities as horse breeding, racing, polo and dressage throughout the early to mid-20th century and the name Whitehead was often in the social pages reflecting the formal social and recreational public lives of prosperous property owners. Whitehead's younger cousin and namesake, Dorothy Eleanor Whitehead, enjoyed a major public profile. She was an officer in the Australian Women's Army Service during World War 2 and a distinguished, well-known headmistress at Ascham (NSW) and Firkbank (Victoria) private girls' schools.³

Despite her secure background, the only detailed, first-hand discussion currently available of the artist Dorothy Whitehead's more personal background suggests that her childhood could be considered in current terms "traumatic", overshadowed by the early loss of a mother of whom she had no memories. Whitehead and her brother and sister were brought up in Port Fairy by their grandmother, Emma Whitehead, the niece of an Anglican archbishop. The grandmother was "very strict and prim" in Whitehead's words, extremely attuned to social status, although living apart from her husband. Whilst her grandmother was starchy and upright, Whitehead's father was well-known as a successful racehorse owner and breeder, and apparently perhaps an archetypal "colourful racing identity". When growing up Whitehead was never told anything about her mother other than she was "beneath" the rest of the Whiteheads socially and of a "different" religion. Dorothy's mother, Anne Archbold, is documented as having come from an Irish Catholic family settled in Peshurst. Dorothy and her sister Adeline "were not allowed to play with other children from Port Fairy excepting with Madge Holden, as her aunt was Lady Peacock".⁴ When they were sent to boarding school in Warrnambool, the sisters received an invitation to a birthday party from a shopkeeper's daughter which their grandmother made them refuse as "you only mix with doctors, clergy, bank clerks and the squattocracy."⁵ This story resembles Hilda Mangan's recollection that a very young Clarice Beckett's friendship in Casterton with a child who had Indigenous connections was not approved of by her parents.⁶ Beckett as the daughter of a bank manager also was brought up within the very formal social hierarchies of the Western District in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Whitehead's childhood may appear to have shaped the formality of her dealings with non-familials, and her careful avoidance of sharing introspective and personal matters.⁷ Conversely this strict and conventional upbringing made Dorothy's decision to be self-supporting throughout her life, via her art and creative skills, somewhat revolutionary against the frequent pattern of women of her generation and class to keep apart from public and commercial life.⁸

Her ability as an artist was spotted when she was a teenager; she claimed that a teacher entered a painting by Whitehead into a competition which won first prize.⁹ Another account states that she won a scholarship for a full art and design course in the Victorian State Technical education system in 1917 and as there were no facilities for advanced training in Warrnambool, she transferred to the Ballarat School of Mines.¹⁰ Here she studied with John Rowell and Harold Herbert. The latter remembered Whitehead but damned her with faint praise some years later in 1936.

This is her first show, and the exhibits, all oils, are figure, flower, and landscape subjects. Tonal values and dark backgrounds are the most important considerations. It was my privilege to teach her as a student. Her work displays not much originality, but it is thoroughly sound and sincere. The flower pieces are good. They are pleasantly composed and very attractive as colour harmonies.¹¹



Dorothy Whitehead, *Camellias* c1960s, oil on board, 55 x 44 cm, 62 x 56 cm (frame), Into the Light Collection 2022, Sheila Foundation. © Patricia A. Phillips. 2026. Reproduced with permission



Ballarat School of Mines Students' Magazine Editorial Committee, 1921, Dorothy Whitehead positioned in the back row, fourth from the left. Ballarat School of Mines Magazine, 1921. Victorian Collections

Two years later in 1938 Herbert again claimed her for the Ballarat School and assessed her more positively.

Miss Whitehead is an able painter who began to practise her art some years ago. Most of her early training in drawing and design was in Ballarat at the Technical Art School. She was a student luckily endowed with ability and a capacity for hard and conscientious study. Then she became the art teacher, and now, the artist.¹²

Amalie Colquhoun, then Amalie Feild, became a friend when Whitehead was at the Technical College and they remained associated for decades. Colquhoun was a little ahead of Whitehead career wise, having become a staff member and sent to East Sydney Technical College for subsidised tuition in order to be trained to establish new curricula and studios when she returned to Ballarat. Whitehead was employed as a decorator in a stylish and superior furniture retailer, a position which was regarded as reflecting well on the Technical College's art school.¹³ Much of her teaching would remain in the popular and commercial arena. During 1924 both women joined the ranks of Ballarat based artists commuting down by train to Melbourne for lessons, often weekly with Meldrum. Whitehead studied with him between 1924 and 1926.¹⁴ Although she was not exhibiting work at this date, a long slow period of study often seen as a fundamental grounding for Meldrum students, she was visible within the social circles of Meldrum, his students and supporters as attested by press accounts.

By the later 1920s she had moved from Ballarat to Melbourne and by the 1930s lived in a modern studio flat in the legendary number 9 Collins Street, where Constance Stokes also had resided until the birth of her children. Max Meldrum and Polly Hurry also had periods working in the same building, the latter in what had been Tom Roberts' studio. In Melbourne Whitehead worked as an art teacher at Methodist Ladies College and Fintona.¹⁵ She also spent 10 years teaching art at the Prahran Technical College, possibly commencing in the later 1920s and retiring in 1940.¹⁶ She appears to have made little impact on the records. As the history of the Prahran Technical College states, Whitehead and administrative staff member Elsie Reid had "both made great contributions to the school", yet were barely

mentioned in official records.¹⁷ The Prahran Technical College taught both creative and industrial subjects at secondary and tertiary levels and was regarded as one of the best public educational organisations south of the Yarra. By the 1960s its reputation as one of Melbourne's most significant and radical art schools was cemented, setting key trends in the local art scene over the next three decades, until its 1991 merger with the Victorian College of the Arts.¹⁸

In c 1932 Sidney Nolan was amongst Whitehead's students, but she considered him lazy and untalented, something of a favoured and much repeated anecdote in her later years.¹⁹ This viewpoint of Nolan was shared openly within both tonalist and classical modernist circles in Melbourne.²⁰ Ironically given Nolan's tendency to myth-make and embellish stories, he strategically altered his recollections of Prahran Tech when being interviewed by at least two potential biographers, Bernard Smith and Brian Adams, to suggest that it was Sir William Dargie, not a woman, who was his (implicitly barely

Here is Dorothy Whitehead, an exhibition of whose pictures opened at the Athenæum yesterday afternoon (8th).



Miss Whitehead comes from Warrnambool, and has many relatives in the Western District. She studied painting with Archie Colquhoun, and has a studio-flat at No. 9 Collins-street, an address which claims the distinction of being the only building in Melbourne erected for the purpose of artists' studios. Broothorn photograph.

News article featuring a review of Dorothy Whitehead's exhibition at the Athenæum Gallery on 8 September 1936

respected) teacher at Prahran. This substitution made an especially impactful statement when shared with Bernard Smith during the years of Menzies' prime ministership, a radically inflected titbit which could act as bait for the historian to attempt a biography that never eventuated.²¹

When Meldrum moved to France for an extended period after 1926, Whitehead studied with A.D. Colquhoun and later Amalie Colquhoun, after Amalie Feild married Colquhoun. Thus Dorothy Whitehead belonged to a notable set of graduates from the Colquhouns' art school in the 1930s, which included her future husband Harley Griffiths, Rollo Thomson, Rona Blogg, Heyward Veal and (Sir) William Dargie. All these young artists attracted attention in the press as soon as they began to exhibit. Whitehead proved to be a prolific exhibitor, holding several solo exhibitions from the mid 1930s to the 1950s. She also exhibited with the short-lived Australian Academy of the Arts in the later 1930s. Not only did the Academy reflect her artistic philosophy; she had longstanding personal connections to several of its key players. Whilst in recent times characterised as a battle between radical and conservative forces as an indication of the self-evident *virtu* of mainstream artists and art narratives, Christine Dixon and Dynah Dysart back in 1986 noted the ambiguities inherent around concepts of a battle between the Academy and the Contemporary Art Society, especially the number of modernists including Wakelin, Preston, Proctor, Cossington Smith and Adelaide Perry who actually exhibited with the Academy.²² Conversely Meldrum withdrew his support, following his dislike of cant and bureaucracy.²³ Whitehead was also amongst the notable Australian artists who donated artworks to raise money for victims of the 1939 Victorian bushfires.²⁴ Another major independent exhibition in which her work was seen was the Red Cross Fundraising exhibition at Ferntree Gully which included historical and contemporary work, and founded the Ferntree Gully (now City of Knox) art collection in 1944.

In 1940 Whitehead married Harley Griffiths, a fellow Colquhoun student. Griffiths was himself the son of an artist, Harley Griffiths senior, who had been aligned with Meldrum since they were students at the National Gallery School in the 1890s. By the early 1930s the younger Harley Griffiths was regarded as something of a *Wunderkind* in traditional painting circles and a future star artist in Australia.²⁵ Later, as with Whitehead, his reputation faded considerably. In the 1940s he was widely acquired by state and regional galleries in several states as an artist of merit and won major art prizes. From 1939 he was employed by the National Gallery of Victoria as an art conservator. Throughout their marriage little was shared in public about the couple's personal lives, although Griffiths painted a series of striking Vermeer and Velasquez inspired interiors which featured his wife as a working artist in their shared studio, an unusual collection of imagery for the 1940s. This celebration of Dorothy as a working artist contrasts with the tensions around practice and public visibility that existed between some working artistic couples of the 1940s as diverse as Albert Tucker and Joy Hester and Sir Daryl and Lady Lindsay.

The Geelong Art Gallery acknowledges the appeal and charisma of one of these portraits of Whitehead: "[t]his work highlights the often solitary and intimate act of painting, with Griffiths acting as a rare observer of an artist poised to make her first mark upon a fresh canvas".²⁶ Equally these impressive paintings offer a fascinating testimony to the couple's shared aesthetic



Harley C Griffiths, *The Studio* 1946, oil on plywood, Geelong Gallery © Patricia A. Phillips. 2026. Reproduced with permission

philosophy. Contrary to stereotypes of the cultural cringe or the tyranny of distance, the couple believed themselves to be sincere and diligent students of a grand European tradition that stretched back to the 15th century.²⁷ There were no disjunctions or barriers of culture or class between Griffiths and Whitehead and the European artists whom they studied and admired. This direct communication with cultures both physically and chronologically far removed from their surroundings, whilst it may be now unfashionable, yet concurrently is a valid minority position that added a further level of richness to the creative mindscapes of interwar and mid-century Australia and deserves to be acknowledged at the very least.

Not only did Griffiths and Whitehead share a studio, but from the evidence of their paintings they also shared a collection of still life props because the same flamboyant and elaborate vases appear in each of their works. Whitehead was never solely a homemaker and worked after her marriage. However as her husband was securely employed by the National Gallery of Victoria, she was not providing financial support to her husband, rather it was a partnership of two artistic professionals. She taught at the Box Hill Girls' Technical College, where she covered a similar range of duties as at Prahran, and again the same socially accessible mix of industrial and creative curricula. As with Prahran, the Box Hill Girls' Technical College has expanded to form a major tertiary institution which also had an art school. Box Hill had an excellent reputation and offered professional education to women, when many people believed that women's main role was as a housewife. Conversely another woman in Whitehead's personal and professional circle, Lady Joan Lindsay (a National Gallery School student from an even

more elite family background than Whitehead) suspended her painting career for several decades in order to support her husband, despite receiving favourable reviews and also despite deeply longing for a creative rather than a domestic life or serving as hostess to an eminent, highly politically active, man.²⁸

Griffiths and Whitehead resided in a historic former farmhouse in Bayswater, of a symmetrical and neo-classical design. Their home was filled with a large collection of paintings, antiques, curios and oriental art, and several paintings especially by Griffiths show the house, its contents and the garden. A particularly lively and informal landscape by Whitehead of blossom trees and foraging hens may be a scene from her garden.²⁹ Whitehead sometimes included examples from her collection of Japanese woodcuts in her still life paintings.³⁰ A visitor to a later home recalled “there is evidence of talented people with the private collection of their paintings hung on the studio walls”.³¹ The Griffiths’ life parameters expanded greatly when, on the advice of Sir Kenneth Clark, who was visiting Australia in 1949 at the invitation of Sir Daryl Lindsay, Harley Griffiths was sent overseas with funding from the Nuffield Foundation to study up to date methods of painting conservation in Britain and Europe to augment his work as the conservator at the National Gallery of Victoria.³² At the same time the gallery invested in equipment to establish the first conservation laboratory at a public institution in Australia.³³ Whitehead travelled with Griffiths in 1950, 1955 and 1968 when he was on study tours,³⁴ offering her a wider experience than many of her female contemporaries, especially at a time when women artists’ position in cultural life was less certain than it had been in previous decades. Whitehead and Griffiths painted extensively on their travels as can be seen from surviving works.



Dorothy Whitehead, *Chooks under the blossom trees*, oil painting, 27 x 37 cm, E. J. Ainger Pty Ltd. © Patricia A. Phillips. 2026. Reproduced with permission

Equally her connections to the NGV via her husband enriched her professional network. Sir Daryl Lindsay, Sir William Dargie and Harley Griffiths were closely linked by friendship and coalesced an emergent curatorial and public gallery industry, including with Dargie and Lindsay, the emerging Australia Council and the National Gallery of Australia.³⁵ Whitehead was linked to the powerful and dynamic circle established by Lindsay round the NGV.³⁶ Lindsay’s proactive networking placed the

NGV also at the forefront of the nascent curatorial and public gallery industry in Australia in the 1940s. Sir William Dargie, friend and colleague, and perhaps something of a “frenemy”, remained a part of their lives again bringing the Griffiths close to the centre of cultural power in Menzies’ Australia. He wrote the preface for Griffiths’ *crie de coeur*, *The Literary Parasites of Art*. Whitehead and Dargie worked together into the 1980s and 1990s on managing the exhibitions, prizes and scholarships funded by the estate of Alice Bale, linking with public galleries that hosted these events. Dargie also had a more diverse, cosmopolitan and powerful range of contacts in both Australia and overseas, and, despite his conservative reputation, behind the scenes remained somewhat sophisticated and ironic, with a Wildean/Whistlerian streak that enabled him to step back and see the ridiculousness of situations that were for Whitehead (and, from the evidence of *The Literary Parasites of Art*, presumably Griffiths) matters of extreme concern.³⁷

Whitehead’s later artistic life increasingly centred on the Twenty Melbourne Painters, a group associated with Meldrum and his circle, including many women artists such as Bale, Sweatman, Beckett and Hurry. She first exhibited with TMP in 1956, became a member in 1963 and served as secretary from 1971 to 1978.³⁸ Whitehead was particularly concerned about ensuring succession plans for the group, and thus too Meldrum’s ideals. To that end she sought out younger people to assist with its management, often asking emerging artists to become involved: some resisted and some accepted the invitation.³⁹ Another project that dominated her life during the 1970s was her support for her husband’s anthology compilation of artists’ writings denouncing art critics; in the 1980s and 1990s she still stood by its assertions.⁴⁰ She was also concerned about the influence of those she saw as marketplace-centred artists such as Tim Storrier and Charles Billich, and the many pedantic illustrative watercolourists, with a strong relationship to mid-century commercial graphics, appearing within more traditional painting circles. Both phenomena she believed were commodifying and cheapening art.⁴¹ As well as a practical guide for creating a representational artwork Meldrum’s philosophies embraced a degree of existential altruism around the act of painting, whilst rejecting any input of expressionist emotional content. Painting was not an indulgence but a responsibility, and Whitehead tapped into that level of ethical asceticism.⁴² She saw herself and her husband as directly linked to a Eurocentric tradition as defined by Meldrum of realist, clear-thinking art dating back to the Renaissance and she was proud of that lineage, which had strongly shaped her life.

Perhaps Whitehead’s commitment to the role of the artist is paradoxically more engaging than her actual artworks to a later generation, despite her insistence that the material and technical aspects of art mattered above all else, or her strong advocacy for her husband as a genius leader amongst her contemporaries.⁴³ The outstanding Australian modernist art critic, art advocate and queer intellectual of the 1930s to early 1940s, Basil Burdett, neatly encapsulated the incipient tensions of Dorothy Whitehead’s paintings. Whilst he clearly intended to critique her work, in which he saw many shortcomings, equally he seemed captivated by its uncanny, unexpected strengths, despite his antipathy. Burdett’s observations are still remarkably cogent and underline the singular nature of Whitehead’s aesthetic (more specifically her flower pieces) and how it is situated in an unusual and outlying position in the usually predictable narratives of Australian art history.

Read in light of Burdett’s comments, the seemingly conventional flowerpiece *Camellias* at the centre of discussion strays further from the expected values of public art histories than a cursory first impression may imply.

Her flowers mostly have a harsh, staring brilliance, which realises little of their fragile delicacy.

Miss Whitehead’s work gives me the impression that the world has no special significance for her as a painter and that she has nothing very particular to say about it in paint. So, like a great many painters in similar cases, she resorts to a formula. The formula, in her case, derives mainly from the tonal precepts of Mr Max Meldrum, but there are also strong traces in it of National Gallery school influences.⁴⁴

This artificiality and flamboyant luxuriousness in Whitehead’s still lifes are tangible and yet enigmatic and incongruous in relation to the known and accepted facts of her life story, her opaque, somewhat prosaic and disciplined personality and above all her feisty defence of the Meldrum tonal school. Yet tonalism was a style to which, as Burdett noticed, as can anyone well versed in Meldrum’s life and theory, Whitehead sometimes hardly adheres to in her image making. Burdett saw in her the NGV school style, (actually ported from the well-resourced academic training at Ballarat School of Mines) as well as tonalism. Given that she trained in technical and commercial art well, there are hints of fashionable design, particularly interior decorating, and illustration and advertising from the 1930s to the 1950s. She eschews the dramatic lighting and deep shadows of Meldrumism for an even fluorescent bath of white light.



Dorothy Whitehead, *Daisies in Vase*, oil on canvas on board, 36 x 31cm, Gibson Gallery. © Patricia A. Phillips. 2026. Reproduced with permission

Meldrumism posited itself as – drawing from the life stories of artists as diverse as Whistler and Rembrandt – existing in opposition to the mainstream and the superficially social and capitalist. Hence the Meldrumites claimed amongst their contemporaries to be essentially avant garde and the true modernists in bypassing sentimentality and narrative in art, or equally refusing to dwell on angst and psychological ruminations. Yet there is little of the austerity and contemplation seen in the art of Meldrum, various Colquhouns,⁴⁵ John Farmer, Harley Griffiths junior or Percy Leason, the sagacious observations of and borrowings from Japanese and other Asian art seen in Meldrum’s associates, or even the urban modernism of Beckett, Sinclair and Colahan. Beckett’s poetic spiritualised abstractions and seeking for underlying cosmic harmonies and structure are the antithesis to some of Whitehead’s still lifes, although their decorative formalism carries not unpleasant echoes of the work of Adrian Feint and Thea Proctor, both of whom have a stronger critical profile than Whitehead herself.

Modern curatorial revivals of Meldrumism from Mary Eagle and Rosalind Hollinrake onwards prioritise the strongly abstract-leaning work of the school. This abstraction can include the dramatic, urban scenes of Beckett (themes shared by others including Colahan and Sinclair), Meldrum’s pared down studies of groups of trees, often painted at Eltham, and the austere and direct studio still lifes, characterised by very stark lighting effects and contrasts between tones. However, other artists in Meldrum’s circle, less celebrated today, presented a more finely textured approach to observations of both form and gradations of tone, whilst adhering to Meldrum’s eschewal of outline and/or the infilling of cloisonnist spaces. This more careful and meticulous application of Meldrum’s teaching also offered a more accessible presence of the subject and detail. Artists working in such a manner include Peter Newberry, Augustus Cornehlis, John Rowe and Whitehead’s husband Harley Griffiths junior. Whitehead’s work belongs more to this stream of tonalism.

Her lighting and overall colour scheme is, in *Camellias* and other still lifes, often clear and even, offering opportunities for presenting her subjects unambiguously and without any disjunctive juxtapositions of light and shade. Here the overall colour palette has a chilly elegance, bathed in a luxe silvery chrome brilliance. The lightness and pale tonalities suggest modernity but the dominant neo-classical element of the white urn also suggests a strong presence of historicism. This combination gives an unmistakable impression of the lavishness, glamour and sense of drama that characterises the so-called Hollywood Regency style, a favoured decorative style for interior design emerging in California in the 1920s and 1930s and popularised globally by the cinema. Elements persisted in Australian interiors into the Menzies era, until overturned by mod, pop and psychedelic trends in the very late 1960s. Whitehead’s particular floral arrangement stands in for the myriads of similar fulsome and lush arrangements seen in all manner of public and private interiors from cinemas to funeral homes to legal offices and hotel foyers in the years of Menzies, sometimes in the more practical, long lasting new medium of plastic, cheaper to buy but more readily catching the dust. The mobile swirling but subtly shaded pattern of the wallpaper behind the flowers references the interest in patterned textiles and wallpapers that also characterised Hollywood Regency interior design. No other tonal artist encapsulates Hollywood Regency so effectively and the artwork is delightfully and intriguingly

anomalous to both Whitehead’s colleagues and her own stated philosophy.

Although relatively few works from a five-decade career of exhibitions have passed through the market, this worldly, performative elegance with a glacial, slightly alien, inflection, which creates as Burdett noted a degree of charismatic *griffe*, is seen in other surviving flower pieces suggesting that Whitehead’s vision was distinctive amongst her contemporaries. Her landscapes are perhaps less unique as art objects but often those painted at Taggerty, Alexandra, Eildon and the lower reaches of the “high country”, a favoured painting ground for Whitehead,⁴⁶ also display elements of the formal post-Heidelberg nationalist landscape. This influence is especially tangible when she includes distant mountain ranges as a formal, sublime backdrop to the genial fertile agricultural land in the foreground. The influence of Harold Herbert and John Rowell from her years in Ballarat also shaped her landscape work. Yet Rowell in his own words had also learned much from Meldrum⁴⁷ and was linked to many of his colleagues, so the circle of influence remains tight. As Ian Burn noted, the role of women working within the interwar and 1940s/50s nationalist landscape canon is less known than either the male artists or

the dissonant visions of non-nationalist painting from Beckett to the modernists. Whilst ironically Whitehead remained sceptical of commentaries on art, which for her remained a visual and technical matter, and resisted biographical and personal narratives, she and her art deserve a larger, more appreciative place in public memory. A broad, firmly situated and inclusive history of women’s art in Australia is enhanced by stories of less directly obvious contributions to both the aesthetic experience as well as the managerial and executive structure of the arts industry, such as made by Whitehead. An Australian art history without Dorothy Whitehead is diminished and impoverished.

Juliette Peers

Note that much of Dorothy Whitehead’s life and context is not covered in detailed, on-paper records, but exists ephemerally in live memory, including that of the present author. I am grateful to several people who shared personal memories of Whitehead. The essay is itself a primary source and record around the substantially elusive and undocumented life and work of the artist and its subjective nature should be acknowledged.

Notes

1 Diana and Wendy Whitehead *The Whitehead family on Spring Creek / compiled by cousins Diana and Wendy Whitehead*. Warrnambool, Vic. : D. & W. Whitehead] 1986. Ian Cameron. *They came of bold and roving stock : the story of six families who migrated to Australia and their progeny : Hutton family in 1823, Whitehead family in 1837, Gilder family in 1885, Meek family in 1889, Prentice family in 1891, Cameron family in 1913* Moorooka, Qld. : Boolarong Press with Mr Ian Cameron 1996, Marjorie M Simpson, *Related / compiled and written by Marjorie M. Simpson*. [Meerlieu, Vic.] : P.M.A.M. Simpson 1980.

2 *Bulletin* 9 September 1935 p 42 Vol. 57 No. 2952 (9 Sep 1936).

3 Biography - Dorothy Eleanor Whitehead - Australian Dictionary of Biography.

4 Whitehead family on Spring Creek p 102.

5 Whitehead family on Spring Creek p 102.

6 Edith M. Ziegler *The worlds and work of Clarice Beckett*. North Melbourne, VIC : Arcadia 2022 p 27.

7 Cf discussion of Dorothy Eleanor Whitehead.

8 Brenda Niall’s recent biography of Joan Lindsay (Melbourne Text Publishing 2025) offers some penetrating observations of the fate of creative women within middle and upper middle-class marriages in mid 20th century Australia. “In revealing middle-class marriage as a hostile environment for creative practice for mid-century Australian women, Niall’s biography by implication stresses how exceptional the women who did manage to find and defend a place to write and to create were.” Catriona Menzies-Pike “Joan Lindsay by Brenda Niall review – a poignant biography of the Picnic at Hanging Rock author” Joan Lindsay by Brenda Niall review – a poignant biography of the Picnic at Hanging Rock author | Books | The Guardian. If Niall indicates how class expectations undercut Lindsay’s own understanding of her talents and wish to deploy them, then this was a conflict that Whitehead never appears to have experienced or accepted as valid and thus another sign of her relevance to larger cultural narratives.

9 Whitehead family p 102.

10 12 Feb 1918 - SENIOR TECHNICAL SCHOLARSHIPS. - Trove *Warrnambool Standard* 12 February 1918 p 3.

11 *Argus* 8 September 1936 p 6.

12 *Argus* 27 September 1938 p 7.

13 *Ballarat Star* 28 October 1922 p 2, 28 Oct 1922 - SCHOOL OF MINES - Trove.

14 John and Peter Perry *Max Meldrum & associates: their art, lives and influences* Castlemaine, Vic.: Castlemaine Art Gallery and Historical Museum 1996 p140.

15 Perry and Perry p 122.

16 Judith Buckrich *Design for living: a history of 'Pahran Tech'* Windsor, Vic. : Pahran Mechanics' Institute Press 2007 p 43.

17 Buckrich p 52.

18 Buckrich pp 149-151.

19 Including to John and Peter Perry and the present author.

20 Note that Nancy Underhill in her biography of Nolan, *Sidney Nolan: a life* Sydney, NSW NewSouth Publishing 2015, pp 39-44 misreads Melbourne art politics. Bill Harding was not a conservative, but a protégé and friend of the early modernists William Frater and Arnold Shore. These modernist pioneers saw Nolan as a con person as equally did less experimental artists.

21 Underhill pp 32-33.

22 Christine Dixon & Dinah Dysart *Presenting Australian art 1938-1948: counter claims* Sydney, National Trust of Australia (N.S.W.) 1986.

23 Cf Perry and Perry p 37 Meldrum felt that good artists would be swamped by bad in the Academy.

24 *Argus* 13 February 1919 p 2 13 Feb 1939 - ART UNION DRAWN - Trove.

25 Arthur Streeton “An Unusual Picture” *Argus* 25th July 1932 p 3 25 Jul 1932 - AN UNUSUAL PICTURE. - Trove.

26 1947 | Geelong Gallery.

27 Across a series of informal conversations with the writer in the 1980s, sometimes within a workplace situation, Whitehead refused to discuss either personal or practice-related matters, although she did open up about her feelings of close engagement with European traditions of mimetic art dating back to the proto and early Renaissance. She emphasised that this kinship was a joint vision shared with her husband. The production of the anthology *The Literary Parasites of Art* was an extension of that engagement. Her art historical narrative very much followed the artistic genealogy set out by Meldrum, but through several periods

of European travel before the jumbo-jet era of mass travel Whitehead and Griffiths obtained a more immersive knowledge beyond the books, photographs and slide images which were the basic channels of communication for both conservative and radical artists in Australia throughout the first three quarters of the 20th century.

28 This is the central argument of Niall 2025.

29 Sold at E. J. Ainger Pty Ltd, Special Sale, Day 2 (Art lots only), Melbourne, 07/04/2019, lot no. 433, another view of the trees and chickens in summer confirms that this was a view that Whitehead painted on various occasions, see Vickers & Hoad Bowral, Australia April 01, 2023 lot 23. Joan Lindsay and Dorothy Whitehead both found the activities of their domestic chicken flocks entertaining.

30 John Perry notes on Dorothy Whitehead May 2024.

31 Whitehead family on Spring Creek p 102.

32 History of Conservation at the NGV | NGV.

33 31 Mar 1952 - SCIENCE INVADES THE GALLERY - Trove, 09 Nov 1951 - Meet a Melbourne artist with a million pound baby - Trove.

34 Perry and Perry p 122.

35 Daryl Lindsay also spotted the talent of a young James Mollison. Although he had a reputation as a conservative, Dargie supported several important purchases for the NGA before it was formally established including the work of Clarice Beckett and insisted upon the Commonwealth collection acquiring regional works from New Guinea, the Pacific and Asia, as well as white Eurocentric art. The connections of Whitehead’s extended family to various aspects of equine culture and sports could have possibly resonated with Lindsay who also had many pastoral connections and always showed great interest in horses and often painted them.

36 Niall p 117 quoting Lindsay’s recollection in her unpublished autobiography of her friendship with “the man who cleans and restores the important paintings for the all-important Felton Bequest”. Joan Lindsay’s direct interaction with Dorothy Whitehead is not documented as yet although can be presumed. The two women moved in the same circles, came from the same wealthy, private school background, enjoyed fossicking for antiques, rolling out stylish interiors and setting out a formally curated home. Both women believed passionately in the distinctions between good and bad, right and wrong and worthy and unworthy art and that the creative person should be able to mark out these boundaries. Like Dargie, Joan Lindsay also engaged with the ironies that the contrast between the worthy and unworthy offered more than Whitehead and Griffiths. Whitehead’s still lives engage with the type of décor that Joan Lindsay enjoyed (as too actress Vivien Leigh who also was had links into Daryl Lindsay’s circle. And even Sunday Read - as documented in surviving fittings of her home at Heide) in the Hollywood Regency style.

37 Based upon personal impressions of interactions with both Whitehead and Dargie.

38 Perry and Perry p 122.

39 Some did not take up her invitation, but others did.

40 Conversations with Dorothy Whitehead.

41 Conversations with Dorothy Whitehead.

42 Based upon discussions with Whitehead and others in Meldrum/s circle. Another source that is informative in this context is Jenny McFarlane’s *A Visionary Space: Theosophy and an Alternative Modernism in Australia 1890-1934*, PhD Thesis, Australian National University, Canberra, 2006, pp 101-110 especially discussion of Meldrum’s atheistic para-cosmology and concern about probing the nature of “reality” and “vision” created a synergy between Meldrum’s rigorously analytical vision and the spiritually inflected landscape/nature vision of theosophy. Thus too Clarice Beckett’s spiritualism can be understood in that context, and also Meldrum was noted as a rationalist and a free-thinker who supported free speech and anti Nazi movements

43 In talking about her life for a family history she also emphasised the importance of Harley Griffith’s career.

44 *Herald* 7 September 1936 p 8.

45 But not Beatrice who remained an impressionist moving into a spiritualist abstraction.

46 John Perry notes on Dorothy Whitehead May 2024.

47 18 Apr 1923 - LEARNING TO SEE - Trove.

Lidia Grobicka (1933-2012)

In my opinion, my work has been judged too positively by the critics. On the one hand, it made me very happy, but at the same time it made me tense and nervous.¹

1972 marked the year Lidia Grobicka became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts South Australia (RSASA), Adelaide. Becoming a Fellow was a tremendous feat for any artist in what was a small conservative Anglophile city with little interest in modern art, but especially for a post-war Polish immigrant with socialist sensibilities.² This honour also coincided with the year Grobicka created *Winter*, an oil on canvas painting, a meticulously executed and rare offering, depicting a winter streetscape in Nowy Sacz, Southern Poland. Created between visits from Australia to the artist's native Nowy Sacz, the painting depicts an austere "khrushchevka", a low cost three storey apartment building developed in the Soviet Union during the early 1960s. Despite its cold Soviet aesthetic, the dwelling occupied a soft spot in Grobicka's heart. As well as providing a sense of permanence for the family, the apartment became a much-needed haven for Lidia's frequent visits and lengthy stays. In her memoirs Grobicka described the two-bedroom apartment as a luxurious family home, only because the apartment had an inside bathroom and hot running water. It must be noted that there is no concrete evidence to suggest the structures depicted in the painting are the exact place the family moved to, after years of housing insecurity and roaming between rentals and relatives. However, inferences can be made; the painting is a symbolic representation of the long-awaited family home.

A prolific printmaker, Grobicka favoured a controlled monochromatic palette which complemented the boldness of her designs. She tirelessly produced and editioned countless woodblock prints that feature in institutional and public gallery collections in Australia, the UK and Poland. However, in the early 1970s the artist embarked on a new direction, producing a collection of oil paintings with a seeming lack of depth and characteristic of naïve art. These works were distinguished by a bright and colourful palette and often an iridescent blue pigment which, over the years, became her trademark.³ Grobicka has been classified as a naïve artist, not only because of her use of clearcut and strong colours but also her use of approaches such as simplicity, whimsy and fantasy, "imbuing her subjects with great sensitivity and pathos, so they remain in the mind of the viewer as a profound and haunting experience".⁴ Even her working methods when creating art seemed child-like, as she always crouched on the floor on all fours when carving or painting.⁵

Despite enjoying relative commercial success, painting was not Grobicka's favourite medium. According to her son Roman Grobicki, his mother often complained about the lengthy process required to produce just one work. The artist's reluctance does not come as a surprise, especially when taking the time to examine the work closely. In the details one can recognise the same meticulous precision required for a

woodcut relief print. This characteristic fastidiousness limited her production to only four oil paintings a year, making them rare and sought after.⁷

The provenance of *Winter* is not complete, although when it surfaced at an Elder Fine Art auction in Adelaide decades after it was painted, it was clear the painting had been lovingly kept in pristine condition. However, behind the glistening, crisp snow and iridescent blue sky, a string of veiled complexities can be deciphered, unlocking a deeper analysis of the artist's life experiences. As well as depicting a particular timeframe in the artist's life, *Winter* also encapsulates the skillset she acquired at the Krakow Academy of Fine Art, which almost exactly coincided with the "greatest flowering of social realism" in Poland.⁸



Lidia Grobicka in her studio, working on the block for *Bugs tree* 1988, gelatin-silver photograph, 9.9 x 15 cm, private collection, photographer unknown, courtesy of the artist's family.

Grobicka was born in 1933 in Żółkiew, which belonged to Poland, then Russia and now Ukraine. The family moved several times before permanently settling in Nowy Sacz. Her early childhood years were spent at Krzemieniec where her father, a professor of natural history, held a post at Liceum Krzemieniec. The artist often attributed her love and curiosity for nature, which strongly featured in her work, to the time she spent on the back of her father's motorcycle, accompanying him on expeditions to the nearby forests and lower reaches of the Carpathian Mountains. The long days of the summer months would be spent in search of new species for his herbariums and insect collections. In her memoirs, unfinished due to the onset of dementia, Grobicka recalled that it was on one of these trips she had an emotional response to a landscape, which struck her as unsettling and chilling. Despite a clear cloudless day, she recalled seeing an unusual juxtaposition of a dark and ominous sky against the backdrop of light, almost levitating sand dunes.⁹ This memory consistently influenced her work and was expressed through the iridescent blue tone depicted in her paintings time and time again. Prior to fleeing Krzemieniec she would often accompany her father at the College Museum at



Lidia Grobicka, *Winter* 1972, oil on canvas, 49 x 60 cm, Into the Light Collection 2022, Sheila Foundation. © Roman Grobicki. Used with permission

Liceum Krzemieniec, where he was a curator of natural history exhibits. As a "museum child" she was free to roam and explore the museum's nooks unhindered and interact with the collections.¹⁰ The folk costumes, old furniture and paintings were of particular attraction to young Lila and became a consistent feature in her earlier woodblocks.¹¹

When viewing the painting, one feels a suspenseful, eerie stillness symbolic of the looming danger Groblicka experienced as a child. Firstly, the arrival of the Bolsheviks just before World War II, bringing night-time deportations which kept everyone in a state of constant fear, and later the war itself. Two years after fleeing Krzemieniec, the family learned of the thirty teachers from Krzemieniec High School and members of the local intelligentsia who were arrested and executed by the Germans on what has become known as the Hill of Crosses. Most of these people were her father Oktawian's former colleagues and friends.

Towards the end of the war the town became embroiled in the succession of battles between Soviet and German forces. In 1944 the situation became unbearable and the family fled to her mother's hometown, Nowy Sącz, with the help of a sympathetic German soldier.¹² There Lidia remained until her admission to Krakow Academy of Fine Art (established 1818) in 1951. Following her graduation with a Masters in Fine Arts in 1957, Lidia moved to London in 1958 and later Australia in 1965. Despite major changes in her life and moving across the globe, Groblicka continued to be drawn back to Nowy Sącz, which remained a constant source of inspiration throughout her career.



Lidia Groblicka's student passport, private collection, © Roman Groblicki. Used with permission

During the six years at the Academy, among more traditional visual mediums such as painting and sculpture, Groblicka experimented with graphics and poster design, often used in the creation of large-scale communist propaganda posters and banners. The technical classes were coupled with compulsory theoretical subjects such as Marxism and Leninism, dialectical materialism and economics to name a few.¹³ The preferred style being taught at the Academy was "proletariat", which depicted factory workers and farmers, working to achieve a common goal of the Communist Party. To gain admission, she was required to showcase not only

prohress in drawing and painting, but also to demonstrate her socio-political awareness by aligning the subject matter of her work with the socialist teachings of the time.¹⁴ She gained some technical skills from her art tutor Ewa Harsdorf, who taught her three days a week prior to entry exams, although she lacked the specialised skills needed to depict bricklayers or tractors accurately. Groblicka recalls that instead of a socialist reconstruction, she drew a sad fairy tale about a lost dog.¹⁵ The response of depicting half serious fairy tales, which were often laden with symbolism, hidden messages, dry humour and satire, became analogous with her artmaking throughout her life.

While she became quite proficient with lithography and metal work while at the Academy, Groblicka arrived at her preferred medium of woodblock printing in her third year of study, under the direction of Ludwick Gardowski, an honorary and decorated graphic artist who encouraged her to develop her own style and maintain her individuality.¹⁶ However, her interest of wood carving began much earlier and can be traced back to her early childhood, when she was given blunt scalpels by her father, who helped young Lila carve patterns on pencil cases and wooden boxes.¹⁷ Animals often featured in Groblicka's work and served as escapism and a link to the lighter and more innocent years of her childhood. In *Winter* for example, the dark bird perched on the chimney on one of the taller buildings to the right could be a grey lark. Although often referred to as a symbol of hope and a new beginning, in this painting, as in some of Groblicka's other works, it is a waiting sentinel.¹⁸ A folk song about a grey lark abandoning the fields and flying to a distant country beyond the seas is something Lidia remembered singing as a child.¹⁹ It seems almost foretelling of Groblicka's future and the pattern of her regular migration across the Pacific.

Woodcut relief printing remained Groblicka's medium of choice, despite nearly a decade of painting. She would paint while waiting for pear woodblocks, maximising the output of works that needed to be sold. Even though she was "looked after" by her husband Tadeusz (Tadek) Groblicki, she worked, first in London for a short period as a jeweller's assistant, prior to the birth of her son. In the early stages of her art career in



Lidia Groblicka, *Potato diggers II* 1953, Kraków, Poland, woodcut on paper, 9.4 x 14.2 cm (image), 15 x 21 cm (sheet); Gift of the artist 1990, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, © Roman Groblicki. Used with permission

Australia, she worked casually as a carer for the elderly, until interest in her work started to pick up and she was able to secure more regular commissions. Financial independence was important to her, as it allowed her to support her family in Poland and pay for her extended trips back home, taking only her son with her.²⁰ The inscription on the back of the painting *Winter*, "must sell", confirms her motivation to reunite with her parents and siblings.

Upon graduation from the Academy she travelled to London out of curiosity and stayed out of spite for her new in-laws. Groblicka was far too independent and outspoken for the conservative nature of her religious family-to-be, which arranged her visit to London in the hope of marrying off their son. They didn't understand her adventurous spirit or her zest for life and condemned her desire to create art. They found her lazy, undomesticated and, upon viewing her portfolio of work full of nudes, downright immoral, and overall a bad Catholic. In her memoir, Groblicka describes in detail the enjoyment she felt exploring London's museums and parks, as a way to escape the dark and dingy family home, where the domestic work never seemed to end. The toxic family dynamics eventually served as a catalyst for the couple's move to Australia.²¹



Lidia Groblicka, *Self Portrait*, 1963, linocut on paper, 29.7 x 25.8 cm. South Australian Government Grant, 1990, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, © Roman Groblicki. Used with permission

Prior to settling in South Australia, the Groblickis briefly lived in Sydney, only to purchase a property in haste on the outskirts of Adelaide from a developer's catalogue with the earnings they made on the London property's sale. Groblicka preferred to be closer to nature and away from the developing, industrial Sydney. Her hermit existence, on the outskirts of Adelaide in South Australia from 1966, was a choice and very much a reflection of Groblicka's personality, or what Roman Groblicki described as a symptom of her undiagnosed Asperger's syndrome.²² It is not uncommon to read about an artist described as lonely and isolated, however she was an outsider

by her own design.²³ According to Adam Dutkiewicz, who extensively researched and published on South Australian émigré artists, is an Honorary Historian for the RSASA and who closely followed Lidia's career, Lidia often declined invitations to Polish community events. However, Lidia participated in some exhibitions organised by Australian-Polish Arts Society of South Australia when she became a member in 1980, one held at the RSASA gallery and another in 1981 at Dom Korenika.²⁴ Adam's father Wladyslaw Dutkiewicz, a highly regarded artist in the Adelaide art world, introduced Lidia to RSASA.²⁵ Wladyslaw was known for holding monthly soirees at his home that were attended by hundreds of people, often from the art industry, yet Lidia did not find herself drawn to these events.²⁶ In her mind she never left her motherland, and never wished to assimilate. She held on to her Polish identity, never breaking ties with her beloved country, which made it difficult for her to make new friendships.²⁷ The few contacts outside home were from various art and print associations, mainly RSASA, and her one life-long gallerist Rachel Biven, who owned Off the Beaten Track Gallery, later Sydenham Gallery. Biven, who curated many of Groblicka's exhibitions, found a way to bond with the opinionated and unapologetically outspoken Groblicka, who was often quick to criticise her contemporaries, yet rejected praise and attention, believing herself to be unworthy of the bestowed honour. They remained good friends and stayed in touch even after the gallery closed and Biven moved interstate to live with her daughter, after the passing of her husband.²⁸

Over the years Groblicka's exhibitions attracted a large spectrum of reviews. One of the more sterling receptions of a solo exhibition was at Australian Galleries Melbourne in 1976, by one of Australia's most esteemed art critics, Allan McCulloch, writing for the *Herald*. A successful exhibition that saw a substantial selection of the paintings sold was described by McCulloch as a "vision of a true blend of perception and ingeniousness." High praise indeed from the writer of *The Golden Age of Australian Painting: Impressionism and the Heidelberg School* (1969) and *McCulloch's Encyclopedia of Australian Art* (1968).²⁹ *Winter*, however, at the time titled *Winter Landscape*, was not among the works sold and was sent back to the artist. There is some ambiguity in relation to the painting's final destination, however there are reasons to believe that an RSASA member purchased the painting shortly after it was shown at Australian Galleries.³⁰

In stark contrast, Groblicka's exhibition at Macquarie Galleries Canberra a year later received a less than complimentary review. Sasha Grishin, recently appointed the senior art critic at the *Canberra Times*, launched into the review with an arbitrary intensity that would unnerve any seasoned artist: "a striking example of an unsuccessful attempt to imitate a style that does not come naturally to the artist."³¹ However, it is worth pointing out that Grishin continued to follow the artist's career over the years, and nearly two decades later his review of her exhibition at the Australian Girls Own Gallery (AGOG) in 1991 revealed admiration for both the works and artist's life-time achievements.³² He pointed out that despite major changes in her life Groblicka's style did not change – yet it is undeniable that Groblicka's work underwent a succession of stylistic changes. Between 1957 and 1965 the rhythmic imagery of her woodblocks began to disappear. Earlier works made in a social realist style, where the organic lines and folk subjects have been created from the cache of visual memories and sketches, were replaced by simpler, starker motifs.³² Perhaps it was the

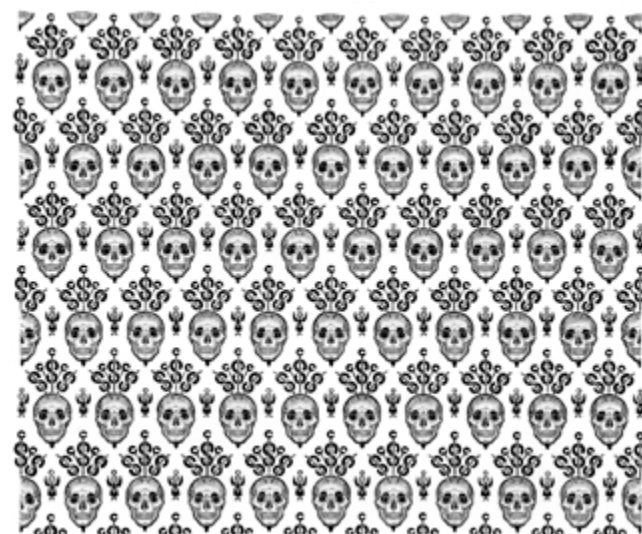
life changing experiences of migration, marriage and motherhood, where society's hypocritical expectations replaced the sweetness of childhood memories,³⁴ or simply the influence of pop art and the exuberance of her new environment that drove the new expression of childlike imagery with strange allusions to sadness and death.³⁵

The liberating move to London in the 1960s and exposure to the pop art prints of artists like Peter Blake and David Hockney had a profoundly overwhelming effect on the young artist, which is not unique to Groblicka.³⁶ Another South Australian printmaker, Barbara Hanrahan, who found herself in London in the mid-sixties, experienced similar stylistic changes in her work. It is interesting to see that both artists, although undoubtedly influenced by pop art, strayed from the pop art formula in favour of portraying more complex feelings between characters in their work.³⁷ Despite these complexities and their emotional range, both artists were criticised for being too decorative in form, Hanrahan for her overuse of loops and swirls³⁸ and Groblicka for favouring ornament and pattern, which overshadowed conceptual qualities.³⁹ Yet despite a myriad of similarities one difference is clear: unlike Groblicka, Hanrahan enjoyed much more the social aspects of the art industry. Hanrahan was a member of many art societies and groups such as the Contemporary Art Society, Women's Art Movement in Sydney and Women's Art Register in Melbourne. Perhaps for these reasons she had greater commercial success and institutional recognition in her lifetime compared to her more reserved fellow printmaker.

Groblicka worked tirelessly throughout her life, creating a prolific oeuvre of prints and drawings, a large selection of which was bequeathed posthumously by her husband to the National Gallery of Australia. This honour and achievement must be attributed in part to Roger Butler, senior curator of prints and drawings at the NGA, who was always committed to ensuring a large spectrum of diverse artists was included in the Australian Art collection. Since 1981 when Butler was appointed to the department of Australian Art, over 3,000 Australian prints, posters and illustrated books have been added to the collection.⁴⁰ An intensely passionate advocate and supporter of émigré artists, Butler believed that Australian art practice has been profoundly affected and transformed by the different traditions and values émigré artists brought with them. In his book *The Europeans: Émigré artists in Australia 1930-1960*, which was produced in conjunction with the National Gallery of Australia's exhibition of the same name, Butler discusses the pressures of assimilation the artists feel, however, he chose to focus on those that infused their cultural heritage into their Australian lives.⁴¹ Although Groblicka was not included in this exhibition and publication, as she arrived in Australia in 1965, one can appreciate why Butler had no reservations in acquiring her work, as it continues to speak strongly, espousing its feelings and ideas to those who come across it.⁴²

Lidia Groblicka: Black + White, held at the Art Gallery of South Australia in 2011, was her last exhibition before her passing in 2012 and a notable arc point in the artist's life. The retrospective exhibition, co-curated by Julie Robinson and Elspeth Pitt, focused on Groblicka's engagement with printmaking over some sixty years. The works transported viewers from the early socialist folklore through to the disillusionment with and inevitability of corporate greed.⁴³ The naïve, satirical works were replaced by a geometry of skulls

and dollar signs in later prints. The stylistic change reflected in her work by an air of disillusionment can be attributed to the early onset of dementia, which hindered her independence and restricted travel.⁴⁴



Lidia Groblicka, *Plantation in spring* 2001, woodcut on paper, 35.8 x 43.1 cm, gift of Tadeusz and Roman Groblicki in memory of their wife and mother Lidia Groblicka, 2012, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, © Roman Groblicki. Used with permission

This exhibition was a mark not only of Groblicka's raw talent, as the majority of the later prints were produced in isolation, but also her tenacious work ethic. Not every artist sees their life's work celebrated in a solo exhibition at a venue like the Art Gallery of South Australia, a nationally prestigious and influential gallery. Public galleries in Australia are selective in which living artists they choose to give a retrospective. This honour more often than not is bestowed on a non-living artist who is well established in art circles, preferably male and of Anglo-Saxon origin. Yet there she was, a living, elderly, immigrant woman who did not make friends easily and had only her work to speak for her. This was the zenith of her achievement and a tangible mark of her significance nationally and in her hometown as an artist.⁴⁵

Alexandra Guerman

Notes

- 1 Lidia Groblicka, *The Beginning of the world*, Autobiography, p. 311.
- 2 Adam Dutkiewicz, *Lidia Groblicka, suburban iconographer: a printmaker's view of life from Poland to Australia*, Norwood, S. Australia: Moon Arrow Press, 1st ed. 2010.
- 3 Email correspondence with Bev Bills director of RSASA and 27 March, 2023. "The blue is very much Lidia's blue, she used in her paintings".
- 4 Shirley Cameron Wilson, *From Shadow into the Light. South Australian Women Artists since Colonisation*, Adelaide, Delmont Pty. Ltd., 1988.
- 5 *ibid.*
- 6 In conversation with Roman and Lee-Ann Groblicki, January 2023.
- 7 Adam Dutkiewicz 2010
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 Art Gallery South Australia, Elspeth Pitt, Acting Associate Curator, Prints, Drawings & Photographs, 2013.
- 13 *ibid.*
- 14 *ibid.*
- 15 *ibid.*
- 16 Adam Dutkiewicz, 2010.
- 17 Lidia Groblicka, *The Beginning of the world*, Autobiography.
- 18 Sonia Barron, 'A Pole's Journey in Drawings, A survey of drawings and recent prints', *Canberra Times*, 1994.
- 19 Lidia Groblicka, *The Beginning of the world*, Autobiography.
- 20 In conversation with Roman Groblicki.
- 21 Lidia Groblicka, *The Beginning of the world*, Autobiography.
- 22 *ibid.*
- 23 Dianne Clare Longley, 'The Development of a Print Culture in South Australia Post WWII to 2008, institutions, politics and personalities', A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Australian National University, 2017.
- 24 Czesława Jakubowska, *History of Australian-Polish Arts Society of South Australia*, Australian-Polish Art Society of South Australia, Adelaide, South Australia, 2008.
- 25 *ibid.*
- 26 *ibid.*
- 27 Adam Dutkiewicz, 2010.
- 28 Lidia Groblicka, *The Beginning of the world*, Autobiography.
- 29 Rodney James, *McCulloch, Alan McLeod (1907-1992)*, Australian Dictionary of Biography, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mcculloch-alan-mcleod-16351>.
- 30 Telephone conversation with Bev Bills, director of RSASA, and email correspondence with Justin Elder, Elder Fine Art, 9 May 2023.
- 31 Sasha Grishin, 'LIFE STYLE TV – ARTS - ENTERTAINMENT ART Enamels celebrating colours and forms', *The Canberra Times*, Wed 30 Mar 1977.
- 32 Sasha Grishin, 'Starkness in Groblicka's work,' *The Canberra Times*, 1991.
- 33 Dianne Clare Longley, 2017.
- 34 Melinda Rackham, 'Barbara Hanrahan: an Australian feminist artist you need to know', *The Conversation* 2021.
- 35 Elspeth Pitt, Acting Associate Curator, Prints, Drawings & Photographs, 2013.
- 36 *ibid.*
- 37 Alison Carroll, *Barbara Hanrahan, Printmaker*, Wakefield Press, 1986.
- 38 Melinda Rackham, 2021.
- 39 Elspeth Pitt, 2013.
- 40 Roger Butler, *The Europeans: Émigré artists in Australia 1930-1960*, National Gallery of Australia, 1997.
- 41 *ibid.*
- 42 *ibid.*
- 43 Julie Robinson and Elspeth Pitt, *Lidia Groblicka: Black + White*, Art Gallery of South Australia Adelaide, 2011.
- 44 *ibid.*
- 45 Conversations with Juliette Peers.



Ola meets the gaze of her seven-foot limestone *Pioneer Woman* 1940. "The *Pioneer Woman* started to emerge from the stone, with an expression of calmness and dignity. I looked at her and felt as Galatea must have felt when he saw a living form coming to life under his touch". Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library Victoria

SHEILA FOUNDATION Into the Light Acquisition Fund 2022

PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES

David Butler

My introduction to framing began with commercial picture framing upon arrival in Australia in 1976. I began working for the AGNSW in 1987, initially as an assistant conservator under the guidance of Malgorzata Sawicki. This gradually became a mixture of conservation work and replicating new frames derived from photographs in the AG's archives. I moved to the Blue Mountains in 1991 and had a home studio built on our property. In 1995, I began job sharing with Bassia Dabrowa, after which I devoted my time entirely to fabricating new frames from my home studio. Working part time for the AGNSW enabled me to work for other clients, mainly public institutions. Public collections for which I've made frames include the National Gallery of Victoria, National Gallery of Australia, NSW National Trust, Historic Houses Trust, State Library of NSW. I have a particular interest in the replication of 19th century frames but also have considerable experience in framing works of 20th century and contemporary artists.

Framer

John Cruthers

John Cruthers is an art adviser, collector and gallerist. Working from 1974, he and his mother Sheila Cruthers assembled the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art. It was gifted to the University of Western Australia in 2007 and is Australia's largest stand-alone collection of women's art. In 1985 he began working professionally with Australian private collectors, including Rupert Murdoch and TV producers Reg and Joy Grundy. His enthusiasm for southeast Asian art was kindled in 2013 and he has travelled widely in the region learning about its art and artists. In 2019 he opened 16albermarle Project Space to share his passion for southeast Asian art with Australian audiences. His work on Sheila's Into the Light Acquisition Fund allows him to continue the collecting he began with his mother almost 50 years ago, and to support and mentor young researchers and art historians.

Publication editor

Anne Gaulton

For Anne Gaulton, in her role as conservator, working with artists, curators and art historians has become an essential and most loved part of her practice. The Into the Light project offers such a wonderful opportunity (even though the artists are long gone) to discover something of their lives, artistic intentions and the arts and social fabric of the day. In a similar role, but with living contemporary Australian artists, Anne regularly works alongside artists to assist with conservation aspects of art making, long term maintenance and installation. She sees increasingly that the conservation profession itself also has a social context, despite its valid technical and material concerns, both in terms of what is valuable enough to be conserved and who does the conserving. The art object can no longer be treated as a singular thing but must be understood in terms of its complex historical and contemporaneous relations.

Paintings conservator

Alexandra Guerman

Alexandra Guerman is a Sydney-based researcher and curator, with a Bachelor of Creative Arts and New Media (2001) from UOW and Master of Curating and Cultural Leadership (2022) UNSW. Her career progression into curatorship has been heavily influenced by 15 years of experience working in the graphic and interior design industries in Australia, UK and UAE. Alexandra's unique approach to art research has seen her awarded with a university prize for academic achievement on the recommendation of the Head of School, and in 2021 a placement on the Dean's list for academic excellence. Recently a part of Sydney Contemporary Art Fair 2022 and currently writing for VASA Project, an online centre for media studies, her interests include Eastern European artist from interwar and post-war periods. Motivated to bring greater recognition to female immigrant artists from Eastern Europe, Alexandra has written about Lidia Grobicka, a Polish artist from South Australia.

Researcher/writer

Bridget Hoban

Bridget Hoban graduated from the Australian National University with a Bachelor of International Relations and a Bachelor of Art History and Curatorship in 2026. Currently based in Prague, Bridget's interests span disciplines to explore uses, transformations, and re-presentations of visual culture to shape social structures and histories. Bridget wrote an essay on the framing of Gladys Laycock's miniature portrait on ivory as part of the 2021 Into the Light Project. She has presented and panelled at the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand conference in 2023. Bridget has a keen interest in women artists in Australia and the transformation of art historical lenses to fully understand and appreciate these artists and their work.

Researcher/writer

Robyn Johnston

Robyn Johnston is a writer, curator, and producer of creative projects. She brings to her work a keen sense of audience, developed over a long career as an arts broadcaster and producer for ABC Radio National. Working as a freelance curator of multi-disciplinary exhibition and event projects enriches her practice as a researcher and storyteller. The drive is to create experiences, whether on the page or in the space, that not only offer insight and real information, but have the power to move people. In 2025, at the University of Western Australia, Robyn completed a Bachelor of Arts in History of Art, Italian, and Curatorial Studies. She has a lifelong engagement with the visual arts, and an abiding connection with the landscapes and artists of Western Australia.

Researcher/writer

Barbara Lemon

Researcher/writer

Dr Barbara Lemon is Director, Curatorial and Collection Research for the National Library of Australia. Barbara has held senior roles in the national libraries of Australia, New Zealand and the UK, and her work as a professional historian has been published in a wide range of journals, online exhibitions and radio documentaries. Her doctoral thesis on the history of Australian women philanthropists was awarded in 2008 (University of Melbourne). In 2014, Barbara's edited version of sculptor Ola Cohn's autobiography was published with the support of State Library Victoria.

Stephanie Cusick Markerink

Researcher/writer

Steph Markerink is a Sydney-based writer and researcher, currently working in marketing and communications for the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCA). Prior to joining the MCA, Steph worked in curatorial and communications teams in several Australian arts organisations including Arts Project Australia, the Sheila Foundation and Brunswick St Gallery. Steph received her Master of Arts and Cultural Management from The University of Melbourne in 2022, and her Bachelor of Arts Majoring in Art History and English Literature in 2020. In her research projects, Steph works to overturn gender bias in the arts by sharing and celebrating the contribution of Australian women and non-binary artists, both historical and contemporary. This is most evident in her research project, WAWA (Wonderful Aussie Women Artists), an online community where free resources on Australian women artists are shared in an accessible and engaging format.

Hannah Newman

Researcher/writer

Hannah Newman is currently a museum educator and outreach programs officer. She has worked across four cultural institutions in Sydney, Australia and has a master's degree in Museum and Heritage Studies from the University of Sydney. She is committed to the democratisation of history, including diverse perspectives in both the storytelling process and the audiences they reach. She believes that history should be for everyone, and no story too small to tell. Her work encompasses artist biographies, such as AWARE – Julie Hagen-Schwarz, and public lectures, including one on the migration of Alexander Roberston during the 19th century.

Dr Juliette Peers

Art historian/mentor

Juliette Peers is a creative thinker, historian, curator and cultural producer. Her interests span classical art and design history, popular culture, feminism and cultural politics. They favour unstable, outlying, queer and feminist narratives, engage with images and mythologies of the feminine and traverse film, literature, dance, celebrities, fandoms, royalty, statues, public monuments, fashion and dolls. She taught design history at RMIT University from 1994-2019 and has worked as a curator on projects with public galleries in Australia and Europe, Britain and North America, as well as employment at the National Gallery of Victoria and the McClelland Gallery. As well as an ongoing collaboration with the Sheila Foundation, she serves on the editorial advisory board of *Artlink* magazine and is an associate curator at the Gippsland Art Gallery. Recent publications include essays for *Lesley Dumbrell: Thrum*, AGNSW 2024, *Ethel Carrick*, NGA 2024-2025, *Turner and Australia*, Gippsland Art Gallery 2025 and *Keeping things together: 50 years of the Women's Art Register*, Women's Art Register/Melbourne University Press 2025.

Artworks purchased and restored with the support of our donors 2022

Mildred Lovett, *A summer's afternoon* c1910, oil on canvas on board, 45 x 35.5 cm

Daisy Rossi, *Qualup Bells* c1914, oil on canvas, 50 x 80 cm

Marian Barrett, *Magnolias* c1920s, oil on board, 34 x 47 cm

Bernice Edwell, *Portrait miniature* c1920, oil on canvas, 38 x 46 cm

Heliodore Hawthorne, *Some of Grace Crowley's Port Macquarie class* 1930, oil on canvas on board, 34 x 52 cm

Ola Cohn, *Head with hands* c1935, stone, 41 x 13 x 13 cm

Elsa Russell, *Still life with snow drops* c1930, oil on compressed card, 54.5 x 37 cm

Elsa Russell, *At Schofields* 1945, oil on cardboard, 78 x 53 cm

Lesley Sincalir, *Old Diamond Creek farmhouse* c1920s, oil on board, 34 x 44 cm

Lesley Sinclair, *Rowe Street, North Fitzroy* c1950s, oil on board, 34 x 44 cm

Dorothy Whitehad, *Still life with flowers* c1960s, oil on board, 55 x 45 cm

Lidia Groblicka, *Winter* 1972, oil on canvas, 49 x 60 cm

Into the Light Donor Circle members and Sheila Foundation donors 2022

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