WOMEN OF SUBSTANCE: THE ARRIVAL OF THE MODERN

In a conservative Australian art world dominated by men and their landscapes, it was female artists who ushered in a brave new world of early 20th-century modernism.

by **MARGARET BARCA**

By the early 20th century, a seismic shift in painting was sweeping away traditional realism in Europe with avant-garde artists seeking radical new ways of expression – art for a new world. The Post-Impressionism of Cézanne, the fragmented picture planes of Cubism, the wild colours of Fauvism, and the aesthetics of African and Oceanic art emerging in Picasso's work were shattering conventional notions of what could even be considered art.

In Australia, however, the 'Golden Summers' school of painting, which had given Australian painting ownership of the landscape, cast a long shadow. Landscape painting was still largely the dominant genre and was itself dominated by men. Arthur Streeton, Hans Heysen, Walter Withers, Frederick McCubbin and others continued to capture the light and the lay of the land but – with rare exceptions – these paintings were weighted by convention and seemingly oblivious to the changing world.

The Australian artistic diaspora was already well entrenched in the early 1900s, with a steady flow of established artists – George Lambert, Hugh Ramsay, Max Meldrum, E. Phillips Fox, John Longstaff, Tom Roberts – making their way to the UK and Europe, often for several years and sometimes forever.

They left behind a powerful group of artists, critics and gallery directors who were anti-modern, often vehemently so. Bernard Hall, director of the National Gallery of Victoria and head of the Art School from 1891, a position he held for more than four decades, was deeply conservative; Lionel Lindsay deplored the 'malady of modern art'; Howard Ashton was an aggressive opponent of modernism; JS MacDonald, a prolific art critic and director at the National Art Gallery of NSW and later the National Gallery of Victoria was, says historian Geoffrey Serle, "blindly hostile to nearly all 20th century painting and much before"[1].

Yet the tsunami of change could not be stopped. And whilst the old guard was male, the key figures challenging the status quo in art were often women. Well-travelled, articulate, innovative, and in defiance of the social norms, stereotypes and constraints of the day, these women led the way in painting and printmaking in the radical new styles.

The first truly Post-Impressionist work to be exhibited in Australia[2], the daringly modern *The Sock Knitter* (1915), was painted by Grace Cossington Smith (1892–1984). The flattened picture plane, colour blocking, broad brush strokes and stylised forms seem more typical of a Matisse or a Cézanne than a painting emerging from the suburban Sydney studio of a 23-year-old female artist.

Cossington Smith had studied drawing at Sydney's Julian Ashton Art School under Italian artist Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo, a progressive who introduced his students, through reproductions, to aspects of modernism.

After two years in Europe, she returned to Australia on the eve of World War I. She resumed classes, set up a studio at her ▶

Previous page:
Grace Crowley
Miss Gwen Ridley 1930
Glen Riddle, Barraba, NSW
Oil on canvas on board
72 x 53cm
Purchased 1995 with the assistance
of South Australian Government Grant
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

parents' house on Sydney's north shore and began painting in earnest.

It's uncertain how much of the modernist movement Cossington Smith had absorbed in Europe, but she had certainly encountered modernism through another of Dattilo-Rubbo's students, Norah Simpson (1895–1974). Simpson had visited London in 1912, studied at the eminent Westminster School and met members of the progressive Camden Town Group. In Paris she'd encountered original works by Matisse, Picasso, Van Gogh and Gauguin. She returned to Sydney with reproductions and first-hand knowledge about the latest art and artists in London and Paris. Dattilo-Rubbo and his students welcomed the information, but for Cossington Smith, the possibilities of this modernism proved inspirational.

Cossington Smith was wide-ranging in her subjects, tackling contemporary interiors and still life, as well as landscape and urban scenes. Her paean to the new Sydney Harbour Bridge, *The Bridge in Curve* (c1930), one of a series, is a deft modernist masterpiece. Brilliant colour, rhythmic patterns and radiating brush strokes convey the energy and dynamism of the construction. It is modernist in technique, style and spirit.

Cossington Smith may have led a quiet life in Sydney but her output was prodigious. Although her work was considered radical, especially in the 1920s and '30s (*The Bridge in Curve* was rejected by the Society of Artists for the 1930 exhibition), she became Sydney's pre-eminent painter between the wars. Her work became increasingly colour- and light-drenched, and her luminous works continued to evolve. For decades, Cossington Smith captured both public and private moments with a rare gift for colour and unique vision of her world.

Another artist who moved increasingly towards abstraction was Grace Crowley (1890–1979), who had been an exemplary student and then teacher at the Ashton Art School painting traditional landscapes and sentimental rural scenes. That was all about to change.

In 1926, she travelled to Europe with artist Anne Dangar, who was on a pilgrimage in search of Cézanne. They lived and studied with some of the foremost modernist teachers in Paris, met leading contemporary artists and theorists, visited Cézanne's studio in Aix-en-Provence, and travelled extensively. Crowley returned to Australia in 1930, well versed in dynamic symmetry and Cubist theory and proceeded to paint some of the most radical works of the time.

Crowley's *Portrait of Gwen Ridley* (1930) was one of the earliest cubist paintings done in Australia and an Archibald Prize entry. It reflects the effect of her French studies with its emphasis on geometry, flattened planes and the rhythmic repetition of curves with a wonderfully monumental figure, in many ways reminiscent of Picasso's Gertrude Stein portrait (1905–06).

In 1932, she established a studio in George Street, Sydney with artist Rah Fizelle, which became a hub for some of the more avant-garde of the modernists. After closing the Crowley–Fizelle school in 1937, Crowley and painter Ralph Balson focused increasingly on abstraction. ►

Left:
Margaret Rose Preston
Australia; England; France
(1875–1963)
Implement blue 1927
Oil on canvas on hardboard
42.5 x 43cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales
Gift of the artist 1960
Photo AGNSW
© Margaret Rose Preston Estate/
Licensed by Viscopy 2015

Above:
Clarice Beckett
Wet Evening c.1927
Oil on cardboard
25.7 x 30.4cm
Maud Rowe Bequest, 1937
Image courtesy Castlemaine Art
Gallery and Historical Museum,
Castlemaine, Victoria

BECKETT'S WORK DEMONSTRATES A RESTRAINED SENSIBILITY, WHICH COULD WELL BE VIEWED AS A FORERUNNER TO MINIMALISM

In 1941, Balson had the first exhibition of entirely abstract paintings in Australia. Crowley showed her first abstract the following year. She continued to explore geometrical abstraction though she was not acknowledged for her work until the 1950s when a public gallery exhibited her works for the first time.

Sydney Harbour Bridge: reaching for the future

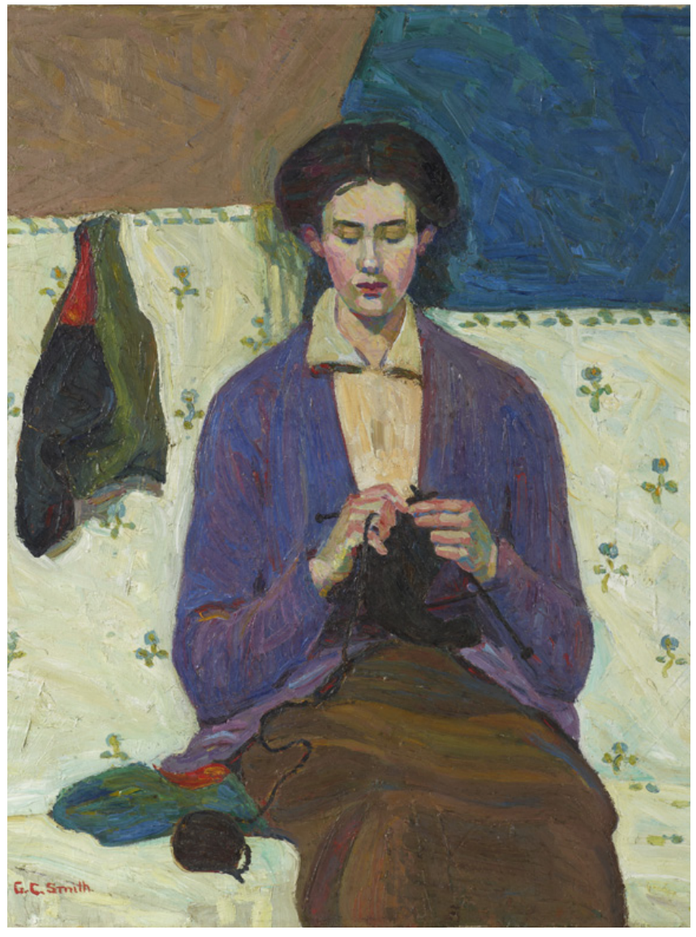
In Sydney in the 1920s, nothing symbolised progress and the city's headlong leap into modernity as powerfully as the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. As it inched its way across the water, transforming the city's landscape, the bridge's structural magnitude and vast forms inspired some of Sydney's key modernist artworks.

Dorrit Black's *The Bridge* (1930), matched modernist technique to an emerging modernist icon. Black (1891–1951) exhibited the work, considered Australia's first cubist landscape, at her debut solo show at Sydney's Macquarie Galleries after returning from Europe in 1929. Finely balanced geometric forms, sharp edges, bold curves and harmonious, if unexpected, colours convey the rhythm of the monolith and the harbour landscape.

Black had studied art in Adelaide before arriving in Sydney in 1915 to study and teach at the Julian Ashton Art School. In 1927, she studied printmaking at London's Grosvenor School of Modern Art. She went on to exhibit her linocuts at a significant exhibition in London and then studied with Cubists André Lhote and Albert Gleizes in France.

In 1930, Black opened The Modern Art Centre as an alternative to the traditional academies in Sydney. Students were few but, importantly, the space also provided an exhibition venue for significant modernists including Grace Crowley, Grace Cossington Smith, Roland Wakelin and Ralph Balson. Black had six solo shows in Sydney but closed The Centre in 1933, eventually returning to Adelaide to care for her mother. However, she continued to paint and later resumed teaching, with one of her best-known students, Jeffrey Smart, acknowledging the important influence she had on his painting. A major retrospective in Adelaide in 2014 has helped confirm Dorrit Black's contribution to modernism.

Instrumental in moving modernist art and its aesthetics beyond the limited coterie of Sydney's art world was ▸



Above:
Grace Cossington Smith
The Sock Knitter 1915
Oil on canvas
61.8 x 51.2 x 1.7cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales
Purchased 1960, Art Gallery of NSW
Photo AGNSW
© Estate of Grace Cossington Smith

Below:
Constance Stokes
Still Life (c1950)
Oil on hardboard
36.2 x 52.2cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased 1951
©Courtesy of the artist's estate

Margaret Preston (1875–1963), perhaps the most important advocate in Australia for modern art between the wars. By 1919, Preston had already encountered modernism in Europe from the avant-garde German secessionists to the Fauves and Paul Gauguin. She had studied and exhibited in London and Paris and travelled widely. She was prolific and innovative, and her work evolved into a modernist manner that was original, powerful, ambitious and bold.

Preston believed it was essential that Australia develop a nationalist art, reflective of local culture, and she was famously forthright on the matter, contributing numerous articles to *Art in Australia* and *Home Journal*. Much of her own work was inspired by native flora and Indigenous art. An inveterate traveller, in the 1940s she visited the Kimberley and Arnhem Land to further understand Indigenous culture.

Moving from painting to prints, especially woodcuts, transformed her work, proving ideal for the powerful imagery and bold simplifications that increasingly defined her art. Whilst she often depicted still life, her works were far from the conservative, well-mannered art which that might imply. As Sidney Ure Smith commented, the prints expressed "vitality and rebellion". Nothing could be further from a delicate, whimsical still life than Preston's oil painting *Implement Blue* (1927), where cups and saucers are reduced to almost architectural forms and the restricted palette makes for a powerful, highly graphic work.

Preston's first major exhibition of prints in Sydney in 1925 was with Thea Proctor (1879–1966), another significant spokesperson for modern art. Although Proctor spent 13 years in London from 1903, she did not adopt any of the more radical styles, remaining relatively conservative in her own art. After returning to Australia she became a well-known teacher, illustrator, printmaker and an influential tastemaker. Proctor was a member of the Society of Artists' Selection Committee, and in 1926 she established the Contemporary Art Group with George Lambert. She encouraged experimental and avant-garde artists, and was in a position to give them credibility.

CONSTANCE STOKES

Constance Stokes (1906-1991) has not hitherto enjoyed the same level of recognition as her modernist contemporaries. However, recent research by curator Jane Clark, author Ann Summers and daughter Lucilla Wyborn D'Abrera is reviving interest in her works, which are now sought after by galleries and private collectors throughout Australia and in Europe. Stokes trained at the National Gallery School of Victoria, and in 1931 won the Travelling Scholarship to the Royal Academy in London. Although best known for her figurative paintings and drawings, she showed early talent for still life, as demonstrated in *Green Gum Nuts* (1933), which hints at the influence of Cubism. Offered at auction in 2012, the accompanying catalogue noted: "Stokes was an outstanding still life painter, as seen in *Green Gum Nuts*. Ranking with the best that [Margaret] Preston then had to offer, its modernism and individuality has an appealing vitality and freshness of vision."
The NGV acquired Stokes' *Still Life* in 1951, expressing high regard for this work in its quarterly bulletin: "For centuries, artists have been conscientiously transferring pound after pound of apples and pears to canvas. *Still Life* ... consists of a more or less traditional arrangement of apples and pears and a rather commonplace earthenware jar. From these homely ingredients, the artist has evolved a strong design of rich and jewel-like colour, whose swelling rhythms create an extraordinary illusion of air and space."

Clarice Beckett: the Melbourne perspective

In Melbourne, conservatism in the art world had a stronger hold until the late 1930s. The painter Clarice Beckett (1887–1935), however, was creating her own niche. Beckett's father was against her artistic ambitions, expecting her instead to act as housekeeper and carer for her ageing parents. It was not until she was 27 that Beckett was able to attend the Gallery School where she studied with the conservative tonalist, Max Meldrum. Clarice proved a gifted artist and determined to establish a career despite her family circumstances. She held solo exhibitions annually at Melbourne's Athenaeum Gallery from 1923 to 1933 and exhibited in group shows.

Whilst influenced by Meldrum's tonal painting, Beckett's work demonstrates a restrained sensibility, which could well be viewed as a forerunner to minimalism and conceptualism.

Beckett worked mainly en plein air at those times when she could escape her oppressive family environment. Painting in the early morning and at dusk, her urban and suburban settings weave mundane telegraph poles, a car or lonely figures into her lyrical, almost wistful, scenes. *Wet Evening* (c1927) catches the glistening light on a wet, bitumen road, a single car venturing – escaping? – towards the atmospheric, leaden horizon.

Tragically, Beckett was caught in a storm when out painting. She developed pneumonia and died a few days later, aged just 48. Though they were not discovered for many years, she left behind a vast number of paintings that confirm her significance as an artist and which serve as a reminder of the multiple ways in which the new art from the Old World was eventually expressed in Australia. ●

MARGARET BARCA

FURTHER READING

Burke, Janine. *Australian Women Artists 1840–1940* (Greenhouse Publications, Melbourne, 1980). Not in print, but well worth searching out at a library.

McCaughey, Patrick. *Strange Country: Why Australian Painting Matters* (The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2014).

Wyborn d'Abrera, Lucilla. *Constance Strokes: Art & Life* (Hill House Publishers, Melbourne & London, 2015).

Footnotes:

1 adb.anu.au/biography/macdonald-james-stuart-jimmy7338
2 Thomas, Daniel, *'Grace Cossington Smith,'* Art and Australia, Sydney, March 1967, p. 301