

GROSVENOR SCHOOL LINOCUTS

Distinguished Professor Peter McNeil

Colour enters tremendously into decoration now...The moderns are not afraid of their taste. Thea Proctor on her return from London, *The Home*, 1922

Printmaking offers particular challenges and opportunities to artists. It often demands technical and manual skill, can be messy and hard work. When 'modern etching' arrived in 1860s Paris, it was seen by poet Charles Baudelaire as intimating personality. One of the next big print revolutions was the rise of the linocut, printed on oriental laid tissue paper in the 1920s-30s: easier, bolder, more democratic. The centre of this global trend was the Grosvenor School of Modern Art, London and its leader was Claude Flight, who taught from 1926 to 1930.

An eccentric who lived in a cave in Summer, Flight was loved by his students. Eveline Syme wrote fondly of Flight: 'sometimes it is hard to remember that he is teaching so complete is the camaraderie between him and his students'.¹ Flight did not invent the technique of using linoleum blocks, which had been used in wallpaper, commercial art and German Expressionism. But Flight was a charismatic teacher and great self-promoter who sent exhibitions of the School's work as far as Melbourne and Shanghai. Students drew from live models and were encouraged to seek inspiration in everyday life. His followers included the English Cyril E Power (whose son was a bus driver), Sybil Andrews, Swiss born Lill Tschudi and a substantial contingent of Antipodean Australians, all of whom feature in this remarkable collection.

Flight encouraged the students to depict the dynamism of modern life: travelling by jolting bus, taking a Wembley Exhibition fun fair ride, riding the tube escalator, putting up posters, observing industrial and farm work, but also the natural world, particularly birds. The backdrop to the styles deployed was Italian Futurism, often known in Britain as Vorticism, which privileged bright colours, jagged lines and a cubistic sense of dynamic movement in space. It owed much to the preceding Bloomsbury circle. Roger Fry's Omega Workshop produced and sold designs for clothing and furnishing textiles influenced by Cubist and Futurist art, as well as Primitivism and the colour schemes and athletic eroticism of the *Ballets Russes*. Flight ran a similar modern interior design store in 1927.

The bright colour combinations used here were not simply about the modernity of neon and advertising. 'Chromotherapy' was considered essential to a healthy, modern life and the Australian press described new 'health rooms' which featured painted furniture and bold modern art.ⁱⁱ

The linocut format was also more democratic and could be retailed at cheaper price points: it suited the new approach to interior decorating for flats in which one bold art work would complement simple furniture, built-in cabinetry and electric fires. The lino format had wide influence: back in Australia, English-born Michael O'Connell and Margo Lewers made lino-printed linen textiles from 1929 before the advent of screen-printing.ⁱⁱⁱ

A great many Australian women travelled to live and study art abroad from the 1890s. Gertrude Stein once said that 'self-exile was modern art'. The best places to study were in London and Paris. Many women artists came from Adelaide. South Australia was the only colony that had no convict labour (its arrivals were 'free settlers', many being German) and was the first Australian state to grant women the vote. The much loved Margaret Preston inherited an estate at an early age, enabling her to open an art school there. Painter Grace Crowley and potter Anne Dangar were closely connected with and sometimes lived with another Adelaide linocut artist, Dorrit Black (1891-1951). Melbourne women Ethel Louise Spowers (1890-1947) and English-born Eveline Winifred Syme (1888-1961), who were about the same age (both being comfortable from their fathers' respective newspaper money), travelled together to study linocut with Flight. Spowers' *Resting Models* (sometimes called *Spowers and Syme*) [1933-34] represents that rare thing for Australia, a possible libidinal scene, in which one woman looks at the other, unobserved and at ease. Even if this were simply an opportunity for Spowers to study and paint the nude (her sister noted that she had a model coming in to draw), the work is remarkable, and it was exhibited only once in her lifetime. Spowers was also Flight's agent in Melbourne. Described as 'tall, slender and graceful', sadly she burned much of her work before her death as well as her papers. Syme used proceeds of her art to help establish a Women's College at the University of Melbourne. It was said she had a 'crisp, quick voice' and a 'rather abrupt manner'.¹

Free-thinking, emancipated, rendering motion, creating rhythmic decorations, this assembly of linocuts by various masters of The

¹ Stephen Coppel, 'Syme, Eveline Winifred (1888–1961)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/syme-eveline-winifred-11814>

Grosvenor School is an opportunity to acquire a representative suite - or individual gem, such as the rare *Love on Ice* - that are as lively and dynamic as the day they were printed.

ⁱ Stephen Coppel, *Linocuts of the Machine Age*, Scolar Press/National Gallery of Australia, 1995, 66.

ⁱⁱ 'Health Rooms', *Herself* [Australia], 1:4 [incorrectly printed as 3], 17 September 1928, 6

ⁱⁱⁱ Tracey Sernack-Chee Quee, *Claudio Alcorso and Post-War Textile Culture in Australia*, PhD, UTS, 2020.