

# Australians must Develop Taste says Miss

AND HAS SOMETHING TO ADD ABOUT HATS, ARCHITECT  
RUSSIAN BALLET AND THE VENUS de MILO EPIDEMIC IN

By J. G. LISTER

"FOR example," she reminds you, "in this matter of clothes. To-day no woman need be a slave to fashion. Fashion embraces so much that is beautiful and individual, no longer merely insisting upon a certain skirt or sleeve. Certainly any woman can suit her self if she have brains and discrimination. Nothing is so pathetic as the evidence of a kind of 'run' on a fashion; it degenerates into a positive epidemic. When I reached Australia I was amazed to see in both Melbourne and Sydney, loops of attenuated ribbons dangling in horrible dejection from the brim of almost every hat, large and small, and worn impartially by young and—not so young.

"I remember a writer in *Femina* remarking upon the fact that there are two kinds of women—women with soul, and women who wear red hats! One might well apply such an expression with regard to the wearing of those wretched little ribbons.

"It is a fairly safe rule," continued Miss Proctor, "to dress a little to suit the city in which one lives. Generally speaking, one cannot wear the same clothes in Sydney as in London. This summer I saw in Sydney a girl whose appearance toned quite perfectly with her surroundings. The day was blue and gold and hot, and this girl looked a miracle of cool daintiness—a kind of sea-breeze incarnate. She wore, you see, a short frock of white muslin that looked as though mortal hands had never touched it, and a white, straight-brimmed hat whose tall, flat-topped crown was made entirely of ribbon bluish-green—the colours of the Sea. The effect brought an instant realisation of the iniquity of the ill-chosen and unsuitable garments worn by the majority. Of course, such frocking would not be in harmony with London pavements, and neither would it suit Melbourne, but for Sydney, with the sea lapping its very streets, it was, yes, it was, quite perfect.

"Talking about hats. Why do so many women wear their hats on the backs of their heads, when in every fashion-drawing from Paris, London and America the hat is put on level with the brows? It is not so much the hat, as the way one wears it, that matters. French and American women understand hats. Few English and fewer Australians do. Frenchwomen, of course, invest all clothes with significance; they make them their own.

"The hats worn here appear to be rather shapeless to one recently in Paris and London. There the crown dominates the hat; determines its style; affects definite and quite beautiful lines. Here, the brim seems to matter most. Possibly the need for shade has some-



MISS THEA PROCTOR

Photograph by Cazneau

is not really good. By all means have brims, but greater emphasis should be laid on the crown.

"Curiously, too, one is not really advised about hats here. I mean, every little French milliner knows

precisely what one must wear and how one must wear it. And you know she knows. It is instinct as well as training, of course, but unless one has a *flair* for hats, why be a milliner?



## PETER McNEIL

### Thea Proctor: Towards a stylish Australia

2013 | *Sydney Moderns: Art for a New World, Art Gallery of New South Wales*

This essay was included in the 324 pp. catalogue for a major Art Gallery of New South Wales exhibition, *Sydney Moderns: Art for a New World*, 2013. It assessed the contribution of the artist-designer Thea Proctor as a significant contributor to design, teaching and the wider visual culture of modernism in Australia from the 1890s to the 1950s. It has been well established in scholarship for twenty-five years that modernism in 1920s Australia was mediated through women's spaces and women's bodies, in decorative arts, fashion, advertising and department-store culture.

In previous research, McNeil pursued the claims of the early feminist histories of Australian visual culture such as Mary Eagle. His precise focus on the development of interior decoration and also product design as an avenue for creative women practitioners was published as *Designing Women in Art History* (1994).

McNeil's essay here is based on new primary research conducted in the archives of the National Gallery of Australia. It argues for Proctor's precise understanding of what suited Australian conditions and contemporary society. As well as writing for the catalogue, McNeil spent considerable time briefing the artist-designer Gitta Weise on the correct colour schemes for her recreation of the 'Burdekin House' room, the first exhibition of modern furniture in Australia (1929). This was because of his extensive archival research into the period.

Detail, Mr. J.G. 1922, 'Australians must Develop Taste says Miss Thea Proctor', in *The Home*, June 1 1922, p. 37

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Thea Proctor: Towards a stylish Australia

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Thea Proctor:  
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Thea Proctor was born in October 1879, the same month as the opening of the Sydney International Exhibition, the first ambitiously planned, large-scale exposition held in the Australian colonies, and a turning point for the gradually diminishing commercial influence of Great Britain. It is remarkable that she became so very 'modern', being already middle-aged by the 1920s, yet her skilful use of aspects of the past helped her to create a new concept of taste for Sydney. Proctor's legacy is complex because much of it was ephemeral and also about influence. It lay as much in the impact of her stylish appearance, and her extensive writings and interviews on modern design, as it did in her art works, many of which were painted on the fragile and light-sensitive support of silk. For the cosmopolitan Proctor, 'design' referred not only to the applied and industrial arts but to a bold, modern approach to all of the arts. An advocate for women artists, she drew 1920s flappers for the covers of the style magazine *The Home*, but in her own appearance revived aspects of late-Victorian fashion. Through her devotion to art and design training, she inspired a generation of Sydney designers – particularly women, including the textile designer Dora Sweetapple and interior designer Marion Hall Best.

In addition to her art practice Proctor designed magazine covers, illustrations and advertising images (such as beautiful linocuts for the Australian lingerie manufacturer Berlei), undertook interior decoration and gave advice to modern women on flower arranging, food and fashion. From 1903 to 1921 she lived in London, apart from a return to Australia in 1912–14. On her return to Sydney in 1921 – at a time when the city was emerging as a centre for fashion – she was interviewed on a broad range of matters relating to style and 'taste'.<sup>1</sup> An advocate for better use of tones, she noted that the 'colours of the sea' worked for clothing worn in Sydney, but not in London.<sup>2</sup> She was also known for the decorative arrangements she made to accompany exhibitions of her art, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reporting

that 'for the opening ceremony this afternoon ... Miss Proctor is preparing a number of her well-known arrangements of fruit and flowers'.<sup>3</sup> In all of her activities Proctor contributed to Australia's nascent national design ethos.

Proctor was drawn to new media and art forms. In 1898, for example, she was one of only two artists to exhibit poster art at the NSW Society of Artists annual exhibition in Sydney.<sup>4</sup> Her approach to modern art and design was formed in the milieu of Edwardian London where she had been excited by performances of the Ballets Russes and artist Charles Conder's fancy-dress parties. Back in Sydney, Proctor had no substantial private income and had to work. Her commercial activity included the endorsement, with George Lambert and Sydney Ure Smith, of colour schemes for Ford cars, an act possibly influenced by the American interior designer Elsie de Wolfe's similar work with the new Willys-Knight Six automobiles in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Proctor designed a range of painted furniture for Grace Bros department store<sup>6</sup> and provided decorations for the David Jones beauty parlour.<sup>7</sup> It has also been claimed that Proctor decorated the quick-service eatery, the Soda Fountain, which opened in 1927 and is the subject of Grace Cossington Smith's iconic painting *The Lacquer Room* 1936.<sup>8</sup> In 1928 *The Home* advised that 'Miss Thea Proctor ... will in future make available to those who contemplate furnishing or re-decorating, her skill in planning schemes of interior decoration ... she will design entire schemes, advise on purchases and shop with clients'.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout her life Proctor was an advocate for a more beautiful Australian experience. In 1923, for example, in an interview with the *Daily Telegraph*, she referred to the new trend for colour in the home, noting that people were starting to fill their kitchen vases with brightly coloured flowers. According to Proctor, that 'bunch of zinnias is ... the thin edge of the wedge. There is no doubt that the taste for colour [in Australia] is improving'.<sup>10</sup> Proctor believed that every detail of daily life should be exposed to aesthetic training. In this she laid part of the ground for the postwar debate about national taste that was taken up by the architect Robin Boyd in his 1960 book *The Australian ugliness*.

Proctor promoted her modern ideas about art through 'Miss Thea Proctor's Art Classes', a series of advanced lessons in figure drawing, design, portraiture and composition that she taught at Julian Ashton's Sydney Art School and at her studio at 219 George Street, Sydney. In 1929 four students from her 'special design class' won first prize for a screen they showed at the NSW Society of Artists exhibition.<sup>11</sup> Her ideas also surfaced in the work of a younger generation of Sydney

printmakers, including Gladys Gibbons, Ysobel Irvine, Amie Kingston, Ailsa Lee Brown, Adria Feint and Vera Blackburn. Proctor, who never married, publicly supported women artists; at the opening of Ailsa Allan (Lee Brown) and Gladys Gibbons's exhibition at Sydney's Macquarie Galleries in 1937, for example, she said: 'A woman who has the care of a home or family needs special courage and determination to practise an art which gives her self expression'. The unpublished memoir of interior designer Marion Hall Best provides further details about Proctor's approach to teaching, including the importance for her of the 'intricate workings of Roi de Maistre's [sic] colour theory based on a major or minor chord in music, but ... always in three dimensions'.<sup>12</sup> In the 1930s Hall Best returned to Proctor for:

lectures on stage design and particularly in relation to the ballet, which [gave me] a lasting awareness of the importance of the design of the groupings of the dancers and the unfolding of the pattern in movement through space, and a second moving pattern of the related colour-harmony of the costumes to the décor, and of course all one with the music.<sup>13</sup>

Dora Sweetapple also indicated that Proctor was still teaching an 'advanced design class' in the 1950s.<sup>14</sup>

Proctor herself was often described as though she were a work of art – a 'gorgeous picture in navy blues and petunia purples'.<sup>15</sup> However, her penchant for style and imposing appearance meant that she was the subject of gentle caricature in magazines like the *Bulletin* which reported that:

The modern flapper, with her lack of drapery is no use to Thea Proctor. Having fully decided that the days of crinolines, flowing veils and haberdashery which the wind can catch and swirl are the best from the decorative point of view, she makes full use of them in her painting on silk for fans or mere decoration.<sup>16</sup>

This taste for Victorianism was pronounced in British and French avant-garde circles in the 19 and 30s – in the work of the photographer Cecil Beaton and fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli for example – and is an indication of the complexity of being modern in Sydney at the time. A spotlight on Proctor therefore confirms the recent view of the scholar Rita Felski that it requires an expanded sense of modernity that is not simply about high modernism to permit a more complex understanding of modern visual culture to emerge.<sup>17</sup>



Thea Proctor  
The rose c1928  
hand-coloured woodcut  
ACNSW



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## Australians must Develop Taste says Miss Thea Proctor

By I. G. LISTER

"The hats worn here appear to be rather shapeless to one recently in Paris and London. There the crown dominates the hat, determines its style; affects definite and quite beautiful lines. Here, the brim seems to matter most. Possible the need for shade has something to do with it, but the effect



Photograph by CAPMANN



Miss Thelma Proctor sketches



"If Australians realised that they have much to learn in such matters, there would be more hope for the development of better taste. With the exception of architecture and music, little progress would appear to have been made since I was last here. Australians are certainly more insular than the English. And then they have no standards of comparison. They see nothing and hear very little."

left to right

A Thea Proctor impression of new winter evening modes by David Jones department store, *The Home*, March 1923

MPT NSW

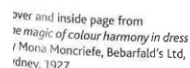
Cover design by Thea Proctor,  
*The Home*, March 1923

HHT NSW



over and inside page from  
the magic of colour harmony in dress  
/ Mona Moncrieffe, Bebarfald's Ltd,  
Sydney, 1927

urtesy Peter McNeil



100 | SYDNEY MODERNS

Modern life, modern city | 10

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# Thea Proctor: Towards a stylish Australia

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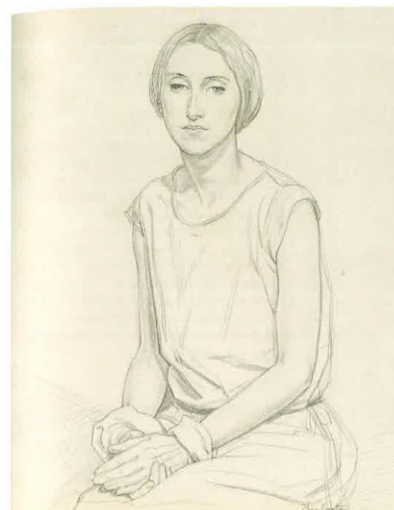
clockwise from left

**Thea Proctor**  
Two women c1926  
(design for cover of *The Home*,  
July 1926)  
watercolour  
AGNSW

Hera Roberts' design on biscuit tin,  
c1933  
Courtesy Peter McNeil

Cover design by Hera Roberts,  
*The Home*, February 1933  
HHT NSW

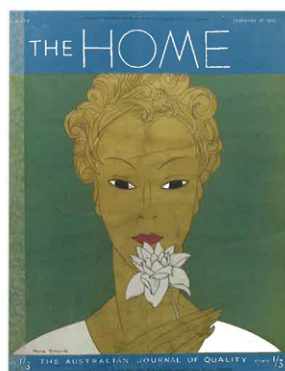
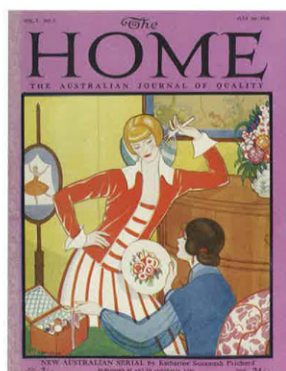
Cover design by Thea Proctor,  
*The Home*, July 1926  
HHT NSW



**Thea Proctor**  
Girl with gloves c1928  
pencil  
AGNSW



**Thea Proctor**  
Portrait of Ailsa Lee Brown 1927  
black pencil  
NGA

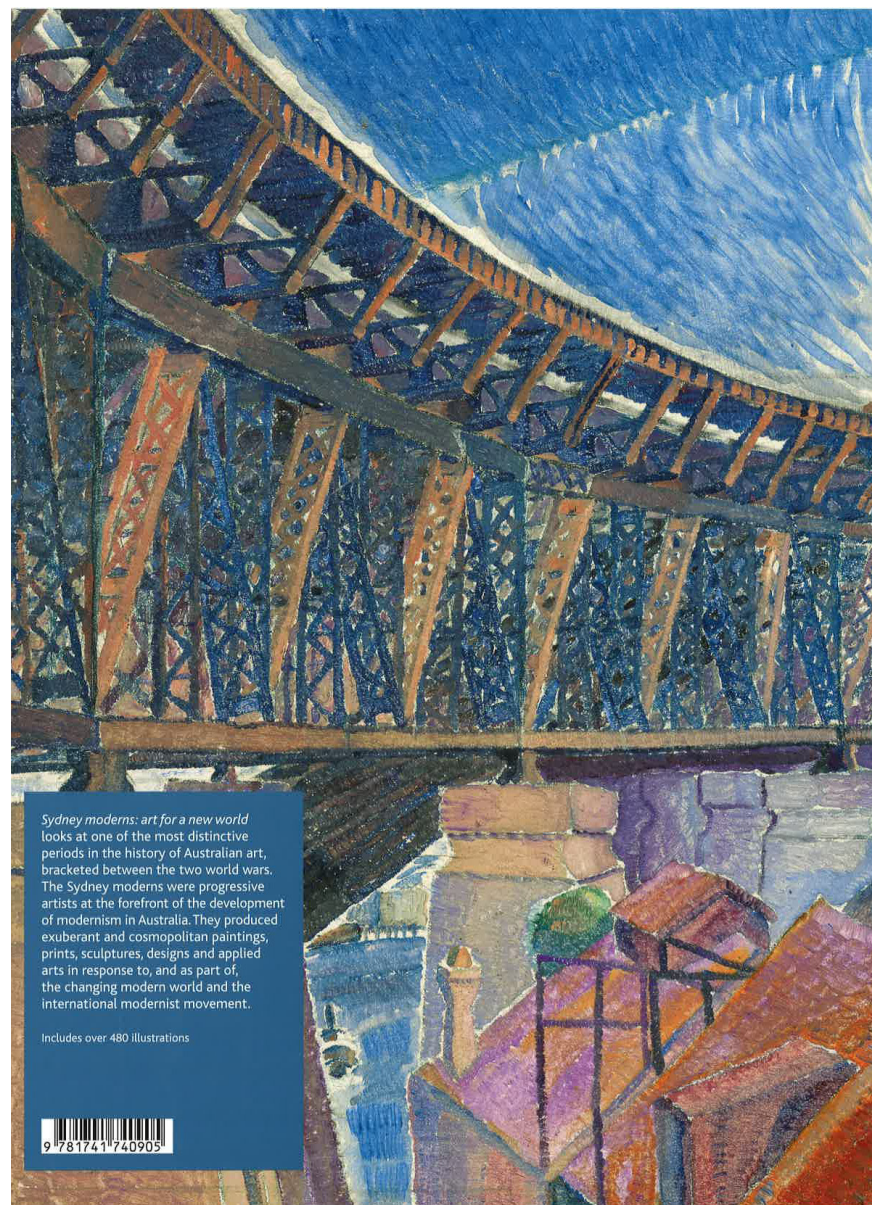
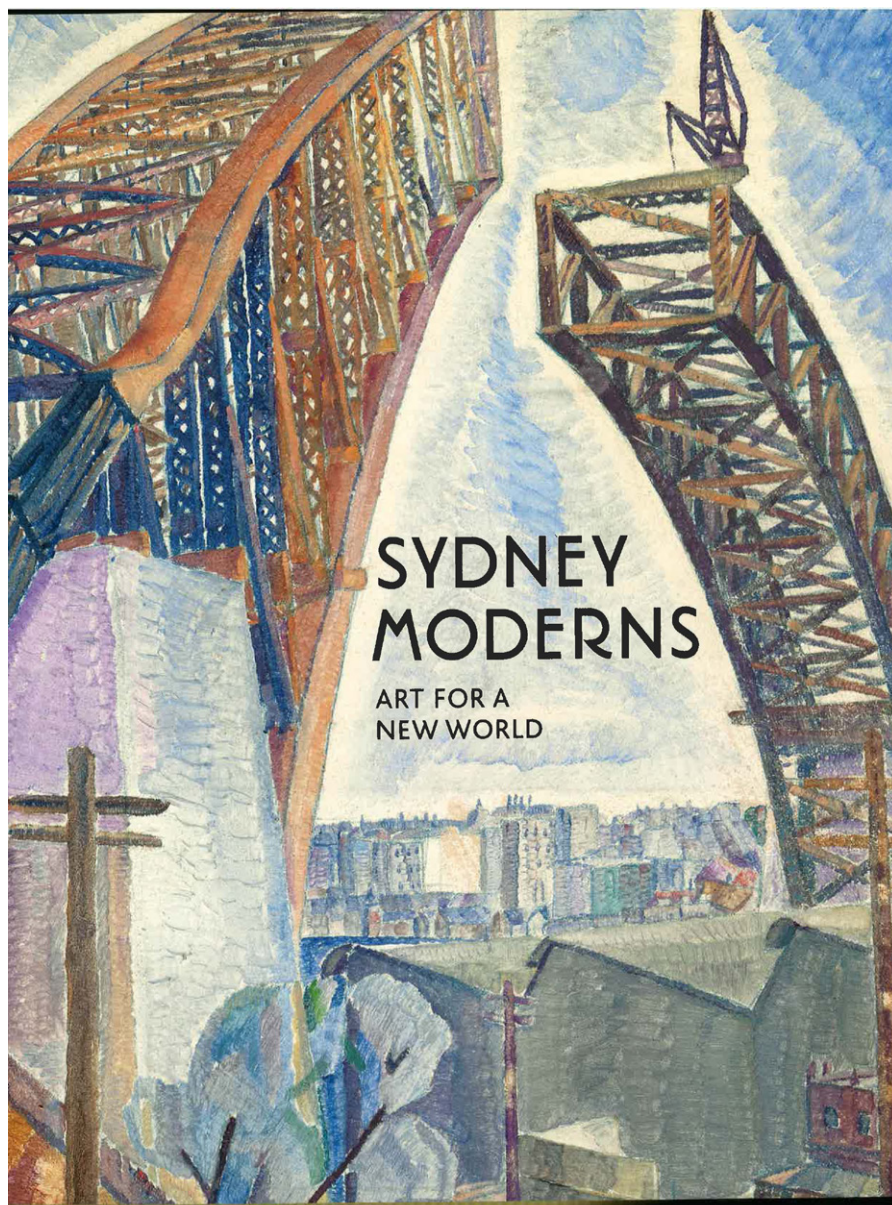




PETER McNEIL

Thea Proctor: Towards a  
stylish Australia

Catalogue front and back cover





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Thea Proctor: Towards a stylish Australia

From the director

The Art Gallery of New South Wales is pleased to present *Sydney moderns: art for a new world*, an exhibition and publication focusing on the progressive art movements that shaped Sydney's interwar modernist culture. The exuberant and cosmopolitan paintings, prints, sculptures and decorative arts produced during these decades represent one of the most vital periods in Australian art history. Responding to the accelerating modernity of their harbour-side metropolis and closely attuned to developments in international modernist movements, Sydney's modern artists were intent on creating new realms of visual experience in Australia that encapsulated the dynamics of their new age.

The *Sydney moderns* exhibition brings together varied facets of the artistic innovations of Sydney's interwar decades. In doing so, it highlights the complex phenomena that is early Australian modernism, exploring its relationship to internationalism and nationalism, as well as its journey towards abstraction. This accompanying publication follows the themes of the exhibition while also

amplifying the moments, events and collaborations as well as individual artworks that distinguished Sydney modernist culture. A major collaborative exercise between the Art Gallery of New South Wales and a number of key scholars in the field, this publication provides an expanded view of an era of central importance to all that has come since in Australian art.

From the late 1960s, initially under the curatorial direction of Daniel Thomas, the Art Gallery of New South Wales has built what is now an outstanding collection of Sydney modernist artworks. *Sydney moderns* has provided an exciting opportunity to showcase these holdings alongside exceptional works from numerous public and private collections across Australia. I extend my sincere thanks to all lenders to this exhibition, without whose generous support the show would not have been possible. I thank, in particular, the National Gallery of Australia and its director Ron Radford, as well as the National Gallery of Victoria and the Art Gallery of South Australia, and their respective directors Tony Ellwood

and Nick Mitzewich, for their many significant loans.

I also acknowledge the substantial support of the Art Gallery Society of NSW, the Gallery's member organisation, which has sponsored *Sydney moderns* in celebration of its 60-year anniversary. Throughout its existence, the Art Gallery Society has contributed towards major acquisitions for the Gallery's collection, and within this tradition of generous support they have played an essential role in realising the ambitions of the *Sydney moderns* project.

I finally wish to thank the Art Gallery of New South Wales staff who brought this exhibition and publication to fruition, particularly senior curator of Australian art Deborah Edwards whose inspired vision initiated this project, and curator of Australian art Denise Mimmocchi who joined Deborah in co-curating the exhibition.

DANIEL THOMAS

## Foreword

When I arrived in Sydney to work at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, in 1958, Australia lacked any sense of its own art history. Bernard Smith's standard account, *Australian painting 1788–1960*, was still four years in the future and his groundbreaking *Place, taste and tradition: a study of Australian art since 1788* had received little notice in 1945, in its drab wartime issue. The only art history 'texts' readily available were the collections of the six state art museums which had accumulated little besides that from local salon exhibitions.

Museum acquisitions then did not receive intensive prior research. At the Art Gallery of New South Wales I was the first curatorial appointment, a young university graduate encouraged by director Hal Missingham and deputy director Tony Tuckson to research and recommend acquisitions that filled Australian art historical gaps. My first collecting campaigns brought paintings by internationally significant colonial painters to notice, and those of the Sydney moderns. I also distributed works to the other state collections.

Sydney's modernists were represented in the Gallery's collection inadequately, except for Margaret Preston whose assertive temperament and decorative-design style enabled her acceptance in a Sydney art world dominated by the middle-of-the-road Sydney Ure Smith – the country's only specialist art publisher, an advertising entrepreneur and a Gallery trustee. Ure Smith intimidated Grace Cossington Smith, who felt he regarded her as a lady amateur; her first painting to enter the collection, a rhythmic still-life crackling with her electrified touch, came late, in 1940, and as a 'gift of 20 admirers'. In around 1958 major galleries presented occasional exhibitions of major 'pioneer moderns', all still living, and relayed anecdotes of de Maistre's and Wakelin's 1919 colour-music paintings – 'pictures you could whistle!' – none of which were in any museum collection.

Bernard Smith, then preparing *Australian painting*, visited Cossington Smith where *The sock knitter* 1915, Australia's first post-impressionist painting, was still in her studio: we should buy it, he said, and we promptly did, in 1960. Australia's first abstract painting, Roy de Maistre's *Rhythmic composition in yellow green minor* 1919, arrived the same year. Both were canonised in Smith's book as key works of our art history, as was Preston's *Implement blue* 1927, a gift from the artist in 1960.

When Preston died, in 1963, I presented a memorial display and published my opinion that she was the best Australian artist between the wars. Ralph Balson's death in 1964 generated the 1966 exhibition *Balson, Crowley,*

*Fizelle, Hinder*, about that abstraction-tending Sydney circle, and many acquisitions.

Seeing American art on a subsequent study tour of the United States provided an epiphany. The moment in 1919 that produced de Maistre's and Wakelin's 'synchrony' landscapes and abstractions might be as good as the American synchronism that had triggered the Australian work. American southwest desert art and Nicholas Roerich's Himalayan mysticism had influenced Frank Hinder during his study in the United States. Grace Crowley later used his *Dance of the Koshares, New Mexico* 1933 in a lecture to demonstrate how '[there is only] difference on the surface between an Egyptian sculpture ... a Cimabue ... a Vermeer ... a 1916 Cubist ... a Frank Hinder'.<sup>1</sup>

On my own return from America in 1966 I had changed my mind about Preston. Cossington Smith now seemed the finest of all Australian artists between the wars. So I added much work by Hinder and Cossington Smith to the collection. In 1973 my Cossington Smith retrospective travelled throughout Australia. Many complimented me on promoting women artists, but I hoped only to identify highest-quality art, especially if neglected on account of an artist's reserved temperament, as with Cossington Smith, Crowley and Balson, or if apart from dominant modes, as were de Maistre's, Hinder's and Cossington Smith's esoteric or Christian spiritualities.

My American tour coincided with the heyday of pop art and thus tempered my disapproval of Ure Smith's commercialism. The graphic-design covers for his smart lifestyle magazine *The Home* were as fine as any published in twenties Manhattan, and so were the celebrity photographs by Harold Cazneaux.

This book by Deborah Edwards and Denise Mimmocchi and other essayists is a wonderful enrichment of Australia's knowledge, evaluation and interpretation of an important stage in its art. We were less worried about national identity, and more confident that pleasure is a serious matter and the intimate life as important as public affairs. Cossington Smith and Hinder tackled vital questions of spirituality, sex and death in imagery of fire; the novelist Patrick White took notice.

The greatest works of art embody both anxiety and bliss. So do some by the Sydney moderns. Later 20th-century artists Sidney Nolan and Fred Williams are at present the only historical Australians to occasionally find a place in surveys of world art. Now let's suggest that future compilations might consider including Harold Cazneaux, Ralph Balson, Grace Crowley, Roy de Maistre, Frank Hinder or Grace Cossington Smith.

Foreword

Michael Brand  
Director, Art Gallery of New South Wales

