

BRAVE, TALENTED AND OVER THERE

Australian Women Artists in France 1900-1950

by Clem and Therese Gorman

AN ESTIMATED THREE HUNDRED Australian women artists visited France, mostly Paris, during the first half of last century. Some stayed for only a few weeks, time enough to visit galleries and absorb some of the atmosphere of the mythic Left Bank of that time. Others stayed longer, exhibited in Paris, and studied and grew both as people and as artists.

It is these latter women with whom we engaged when writing our book *Intrépide*, which will be published later this year. We have chosen to honour twenty-eight women who contributed to the French art scene and also gave back to Australian art. We have followed their hopes and dreams, their transformations, their struggles and disappointments, their triumphs.

Paris at that time was the centre of world art. Much of the innovation which has transformed Western art and culture had by that time fully emerged and made its initial impact.

The Left Bank was, and indeed still is, a student area. Even in medieval times most of the monasteries and teaching centres were located there, and this morphed from the 17th century into the great Sorbonne university. In the first part of the 20th century the area was poor and by no means all of the huge Haussmann buildings – a feature of

the massive urban renewal program of the time - had been erected on that side of the Seine.

The area known as the Latin Quarter, which of course embraces most of the streets associated with the arts, had in the minds of some of the artists, for instance Grace Crowley, the character of a mythic land which enticed them. Crowley noted in her diary that for weeks after her arrival she searched high and low for the Latin Quarter; only to discover that she was (near the Boulevard St. Michel) in the middle of it!

We felt a thrill as we walked pavements that had been trod by such as Gertrude Stein, Modigliani, the French poet Apollinaire and Picasso, as well as by our dauntless women.

Many of them, including Bessie Davidson, Ethel Carrick, Stella Bowen and Moya Dyring, would have their work shown in private galleries including the Bernheim-Jeune. Almost all of our artists were hung in the various *Salons*, some of them numerous times. *Salon* was originally the title given to the official art exhibitions organised by the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in the 18th century but later became the generic French term for any large mixed art exhibition and these were numerous. The *Salon des Indépendents* was established in 1884 by Georges

Seurat and Paul Signac and its annual exhibitions continued until the beginning of World War I. The *Salon d'Automne* was founded in 1903, an alternative venue for innovative artists, and continues to the present.

Exhibition in the *Salons* was proof of the respect in which an artist was held by the French art world. Despite the presence of huge numbers of Americans, British, Germans, Canadians, Russians and so forth on the Left Bank, it is open to argument that no other nationality was exhibited more frequently and in more prestigious venues - at the very least in proportion to their numbers.

We wondered how the Australian women got about, particularly as the *Salons* were mostly located on the Right Bank. The Métro was in its infancy from 1900 to 1914 but a network of electric trams covered the entire city by the

start of World War I. We can imagine our artists in the *Belle Époque*, in long flowing dresses, carrying artworks onto and off public transport, or perhaps tramping over the bridges of the Seine. *La Belle Époque* was the period of about two decades between France's devastating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and before World War I, a time of creativity, flourishing arts and elegant dress as well as angst and decadence. The population of Paris exploded in this era of progress and prosperity.

Before leaving Australia's shores these women were already in a sense a cohort, although their acquaintance with each other was generally limited to those from their home city. They were often characterised as Bohemians, or non-conformist. Not for these women would there be marriage to a 'suitable' gentleman followed by family life and then perhaps only a single visit to Paris to shop. Almost half of our

group could be identified as lesbian or bisexual for whom escape from the confines of home to the liberating air of Paris would have been an important motivation for their travel.

Once in Paris they quickly found their place. Some, like Hilda Rix Nicholas, Stella Bowen or printmaker Jessie Traill, remained traditionalists, the illusionists they had been in Australia, using Paris to increase their skills and exhibit their work in the world's cockpit. Others, like Grace Crowley, Anne Dangar (painter and potter) or Dorrit Black, changed their entire artistic direction and embraced Modernism in its more iconoclastic forms.

There were, however, some common elements to be found in their work. Colour was certainly a passion shared by almost all of them. Another common element was design: this was especially true of the Cubists, but can also be found in the work of some Impressionists or post-Impressionists such as Dora Meeson (married to artist George Coates).

We were intrigued to discover that a number of the women disliked being referred to as 'women' artists, preferring simply to be regarded as artists. We thought carefully about this before deciding that, since it was as women that they have often been sidelined or under-estimated, the use of the word 'women' would be unavoidable in this project.



Sewart, Janet Cumbræe: 'Studio Fairy', 1930, black pastel

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The period covered by our book, from roughly 1900 to roughly 1950, breaks down into three main sections: the so-called *Belle Époque* up to the beginning of World War I; the 1920s, which was known as the Jazz Age, and the period of the 1930s and World War II, a time of austerity, struggle and loss.

Some, like Bessie Davidson, sought to remain in France, and were loyal to France throughout the first half of the century. A year after her arrival in France, she was exhibiting at the *Salon de la Société des Artistes Français* and the year after that at the *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts*. In 1922 she would become the first Australian woman elected a member of the *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts*. She was appointed to the French *Légion d'Honneur* in 1931 in part for co-founding of the *Salon des Tuileries*.

Most of the women studied extensively before leaving Australia's shores. The school through which many of them passed was the National Gallery of Victoria School in Melbourne, which was under Bernard Hall and Frederick McCubbin for much of the period covered. It was traditional and British, although its standards were high. In Sydney, Julian Ashton trained several of them, as did Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo. In Brisbane the Brisbane Central Technical College, under Godfrey Rivers, taught some including Margaret Olley. In Adelaide Margaret Preston, Bessie Davidson and Gladys Reynell (artist and potter) set up their own school, teaching among others, Stella Bowen. (Margaret Preston and Gladys Reynell studied ceramics at the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts in London in 1916 and Reynell would run her own potteries on her return to Australia.)

Where did these women come from, and how did they raise the funds to travel half way round the world? The evidence revealed to us indicates that most, although not quite all, came from wealthy or middleclass families. So, for some, the family provided the funds, and in a few instances, they also provided the chaperones. Others, notably Marie Tuck of Adelaide (a city which contributed many more women than its tiny size would have suggested) worked to raise the funds for travel, in her case as a florist for eight years. Some, like her, when they arrived in Paris worked as cleaners in other artists' studios. Some complained about the poor standard of the only rooms they could afford – usually up numerous flights of stairs, and often with no sanitation or running water.

Once settled, the women, without exception, enrolled at art schools, all of them in the Latin Quarter. Some of these were the best in the world, some were iconoclastic, some traditional.

The *Académie Julian* was traditional, highly regarded, and attracted those women who wished to make a decent living at their art and was a major alternative training centre to the official *École des Beaux Arts*. *L'Académie Andre Lhote* taught his version of Cubism, from a very academic position.

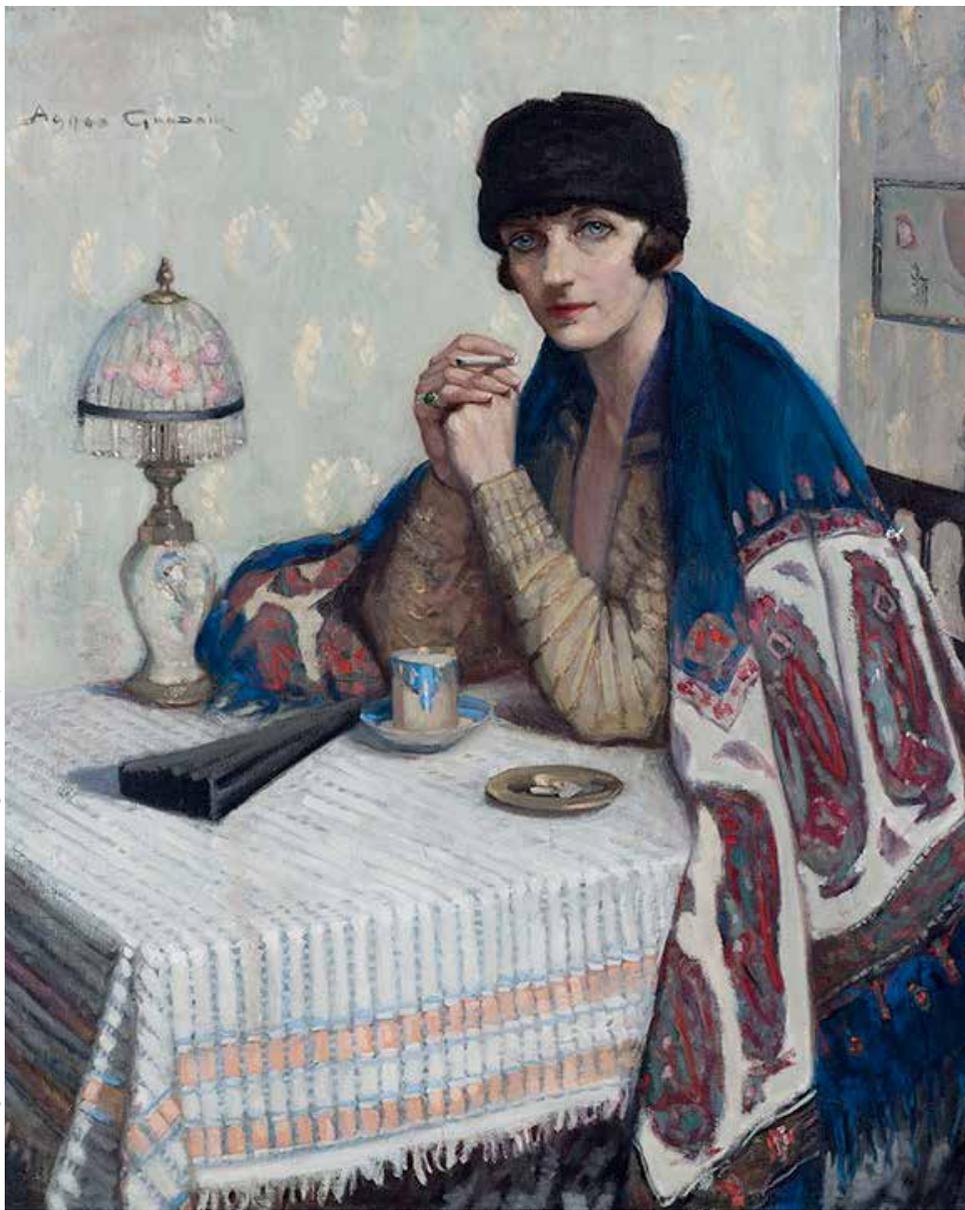
The *Académie de la Grande Chaumiere* was extremely popular with foreigners and also highly regarded. Founded in 1904 in the *rue de la Grande Chaumiere*, it was acquired by the Charpentier family in 1957 and still operates today.

Paris was moving with the times, as exemplified by the school of Rene-Xavier Prinet, established exclusively for women. During this period, too, some of the schools began allowing women artists to attend life classes. Prinet taught first at his open studio in Montparnasse and then at the *École Nationale des Beaux-Arts*.

The *Salons*, with their annual exhibitions advertised competitively and judged by a jury of eminent figures, gave many of the women an entrée into the Parisian art world, enabling them to compete on merit in what was a very competitive industry. This competitiveness is why the women worked so hard. That the women also competed among themselves is confirmed by Anne Dangar's letters in *Earth, Fire, Water, Air*, edited by Helen Topliss, where Dangar mentions competitiveness between Crowley, Black and herself. Sebastian Smee, in his *The Art of Rivalry*, states that "rivalry is at the heart of some of the most famous and fruitful relationships in the history of art" and asserts that these rivalries were characterized by "friendship, admiration, envy and ambition".

There were also, of course, many commercial art galleries where the Australian women exhibited. Many group exhibitions, a pathway toward recognition, were mounted by artists' clubs and societies. The art dealers and gallery owners played an important role in bringing the work of little-known foreign artists to the attention of the French art-buying public.

American researcher Jane Jacobs, in her book *The Economy of Cities*, advances a theory which she calls 'spillover', by which she means the cross-fertilization of ideas and inspirations among members of many groups engaged in a common activity: today it might be called networking. Jacobs cites Picasso, an artist possessed of moderate talents, who advanced his career using ideas 'appropriated' from others such as the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, or his painter colleague Georges Braque. Many of the Impressionists painted together, inspiring one another.



Agnes Goodsir kept the chaos of everyday life out of her work. She largely eschewed Modernism except for a brief fling with the fashionable 'Japonaise' style. *Girl with Cigarette* is arguably her most famous work, depicting a young woman alone in a café, smoking, and eyeing the artist with a cool and confident gaze.

It is easy to translate this theory into the lives of the women who might gain ideas or insights during conversations at cafes or, like Kathleen O'Connor at *Le Dôme Café*, an intellectual gathering place in Montparnasse also known as the Anglo-American cafe, simply by listening to chatter at nearby tables. The cafes around the intersection of the Boulevard Raspail and the Boulevard Montparnasse have been described as the village square of the international artistic colony in Paris during these years. In addition, of course, the women were able to use the bathroom facilities which were often not available in their studios.

We have been asked whether we discovered a 'female sensibility' which somehow distinguished these women from their male counterparts of the same period. We have to offer the irritating response: yes and no.

Many of the women showed an inclination toward interiors, or toward the use of decorative motifs. Yet also, many of the women painted landscapes, turbulent waters and machinery. It is arguable that when women did paint en plein air their work might be decried as inferior simply because it was not considered appropriate

for women to approach such subjects. Certainly we noticed no difference in technique or power when the women tackled subjects which were generally, at that time, considered more suitable for male painters.

Because the women arrived in Paris when the major movements of the time had already been established, their choice was either to join, or remain aloof from, the great movements such as Impressionism, Fauvism, Post-Impressionism or Cubism. The option of inventing a new style or movement was generally not available to them, though some did blend styles, or push the boundaries.

The women would undoubtedly have come home with an aura of Europe about them. They would have been wearing at least some French clothes, they would have been full of their French and European experiences; their art would have blossomed and in some cases changed radically, and they would have had an air about them of knowledge and authority, of having been, as it were, 'blooded' in European art. They had become truly and fully professional artists. They were across the latest world trends and, above all, they knew who they were both as artists and as people. This last may be one reason why

Mary Cockburn Mercer:
'Ballet', Probably 1939
though undated, oil
on canvas, National
Gallery of Australia. It
shows a scene from the
'Commedia del'arte'.



a number of them went into teaching on their return: Marie Tuck, for instance, in Adelaide, and Betty Quelhurst in Brisbane. Dorrit Black created a gallery. Gladys Reynell established a pottery, and most of them exhibited. The works of all of these women are now held in major Australian galleries and some sell for six figures.

Agnes Goodsir, whose work graces the cover of our book, saw the Left Bank and its people perhaps more clearly than any of the women. With funds in the bank she enjoyed the carefree spirit of Parisian life. Her sitters included famous actress Ellen Terry, philosopher Bertrand Russell and Benito Mussolini. She enjoyed herself: 'It's such fun, if you want a café there, the Rotonde and The Dome where Trotsky and Lenin met and planned the future of Russia, students of all sorts foregathered, all nationalities, Arabs, Czechs, Greeks, Romanians, Italians, and every -ian one could figure.'

Renting a studio was considered more expensive for women due to the perceived need for greater security, but this was not a problem for her. The Nabis were a symbolist, cult-like group of French artists, creators of a subjective art deeply rooted in the soul of the artist and, like the Nabis group, Goodsir kept the chaos of everyday life out of her work. She largely eschewed Modernism except for a brief fling with the fashionable 'Japonaise' style. *Girl With Cigarette* is arguably her most famous work, depicting a young woman alone in a café, smoking, and eyeing the artist with a cool and confident gaze.

She was hung in various *Salons* twelve times, as well as in private galleries, more than many French artists. In 1927 she returned to Australia for a solo exhibition at the Fine Art Gallery in Melbourne and Macquarie Gallery in Sydney. Our research discovered much more about this pioneering artist.

Kathleen O'Connor was born in New Zealand, the daughter of a celebrated engineer. From 1891 she was taught privately in Perth. She did not have access to the major art schools of the Eastern States, training instead at the Perth Technical College. She went on, however, to develop her own unique brand of Impressionism while in her beloved Paris, and her inventiveness in this regard should not be underestimated.

She had her personal contradictions – a very private woman who, we discovered, kept her secrets, loved name dropping and café life, and who sought the company of major artists such as Bonnard, Modigliani, and Vuillard. She studied at the *Académie Vassilieff* from 1908 to 1914.

She stated in her interview with Hazel de Berg: '... I always loved drawing ... everyone I met taught me something. I got an impression of something ... form was always important to me ... growing as an artist is the same as growing as a person'. She loved café life but



Intrépide

AUSTRALIAN WOMEN ARTISTS IN
EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY FRANCE

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had no need, she said, to talk to anyone. She had a small coterie of friends with whom she painted *en plein air* in the Luxembourg Gardens. Robert Hughes referenced 'the exuberant action of the line, and the froth of light breaking up the forms ... a gift for organizing images as surface ...'. She exhibited at least sixteen times in the *Salons* as well as some private gallery shows. She returned home only when funds finally ran out, and had an influence on younger artists in Perth, starting with a retrospective at the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

The Modernist art which Dorrit Black found in Paris excited her, and she carried that excitement into her work and back home to Australia. Born in Adelaide, later a student of Julian Ashton in Sydney, she learnt in Paris both the power of curved and sweeping lines across a canvas and the complex theory of Cubism from her mentors André Lhote and Albert Gleizes, the self-proclaimed founder of Cubism.

Her work, *Sailors and Girls*, demonstrates Lhote's theories. She achieves the flattened look which he taught, and emphasizes form, line and colour, and a sense of circular movement around the picture plane. Then she began to grow beyond the limits of geometric Cubism, achieving a flowing sense of movement with warm curves.

As the book outlines, her adventures in France influenced modern art in Australia.

Anne Dangar seems, at first glance, to be a living contradiction – committed to Modernism even before going to Paris in 1921, but also becoming a passionate Agrarian Catholic Socialist.

She never enjoyed Paris and moved first to the summer home of André Lhote at Taormina near Miramande. These were not happy times for her, but at his artist commune at Moly-Sabata on the Rhône she finally found her feet. She wrote many letters home, mostly to her lover Grace Crowley, full of theory, tips, technical information and chatter about her life. These letters, later edited by Helen Toppliss, had a significant influence on Australian art when shared by Crowley and Black with the Antipodean art world.

These intrepid women, throwing caution to the winds, travelled around the world to learn from, and contribute to, art. They inspired many other women to do the same and they did this with dash and a sense of style that only France could teach them.

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