Intrepid: Australian Women Artists in France in the Early Twentieth Century

Clem and Therese Gorman

Background

In early 2017 we approached Jane Watters, director of the S. H. Ervin Gallery in Sydney and a major supporter of women's art, with the idea for an exhibition of the work of the artists featured in *Intrépide,* our manuscript about Australian women artists in France in the early 20th century.

At that point, we had completed a first draft of the book and it had been accepted for publication by Monash University Press. With the support of the gallery board, Jane Watters readily agreed to the initiative. The exhibition, curated by Watters, was mounted superbly in January 2018, and was opened by Australian artist Wendy Sharpe who lives and works in Sydney and Paris. We both spoke at the exhibition's opening.

Introduction

It has been estimated that around three hundred Australian women artists visited France, mostly Paris, during the first half of the last century. Some stayed only a few weeks, time enough to visit galleries and absorb some of the atmosphere of the mythic Left Bank. Others stayed longer, exhibited in Paris, made their contribution and gained the respect of the French art world.

Capital of the Art World

Paris, as is well known, was the centre of the art world in the first half of the twentieth century. Not only painters, but many sculptors, musicians and playwrights made Paris their home. After World War Two, the migration of creative people to Paris became something of a stampede. Such a movement may rightly be called a pilgrimage—not so much in a religious sense, but a journey to a hallowed place in search of something that is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify. These Australian women artists went alone for the most part, paying large sums for their fares at a time when ocean travel was not all that safe, and with no support system when they arrived. Intrepid, indeed.

Why did so many go? Art in Australia during the first half of last century was much less developed than in Europe and was greatly beholden to English forms and movements. Paris was the acknowledged world capital of art with a special reputation for iconoclasm. To achieve one's best one really needed to be there, at least for a time. Moreover, many of the women, perhaps as many as half of our group, were lesbian and felt the need to escape the conservative patriarchy that ruled their native land. It is noteworthy that more women than men made this pilgrimage.

To what strange, exotic land were they headed? Lucilla d'Abrera, daughter and biographer of the Australian modernist artist Constance Stokes wrote: 'It was Montparnasse with its myriad cafés, cheap student apartments and often squalid artist communes that became the magnet for aspiring and mostly impoverished artists, musicians and intellectuals from everywhere. Naturally it would become the hub of left-wing views and activities because of the general permissiveness of its excitable, transient inhabitants' (2015).

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 seventeenth century, into the great Sorbonne, which in time became part of the huge Paris-Sorbonne University which now sprawls across the Left Bank from Montparnasse to the Gare d'Austerlitz. In the 1950s it was, like Sydney's Kings Cross at that time, an area where poor artists and students could afford to live.

Australian women's contribution to French art and society

We have been astonished and delighted to learn how significantly many of these women contributed to French art and society, as well as making a vital contribution to Australian art and society when they returned home. Many of them, including Bessie Davidson, Ethel Carrick, Stella Bowen and Moya Dyring, were shown in private galleries such as the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune. Almost all were hung in various Salons, some of them numerous times, proof of the respect they earned in the French art world. Not only did they contribute as artists, but some of them contributed significantly to France itself. Bessie Davidson was awarded the Légion d'honneur for her contributions to French society, and others, including Evelyn Chapman, Iso Rae, and Jessie Traill worked as nurses or aides in military hospitals during the First World War. Anne Dangar lived in an artist commune in the countryside, embedding herself into the local community, and Mary Cockburn Mercer enjoyed the company of some of France's most celebrated artists. Kathleen O'Connor was among those who stayed in France for most of their lives.

We wondered, as we walked through Paris, taking buses and the métro, how these Australian women got about, particularly as they would have had to carry their artworks across town to the Salons, which were mostly located on the Right Bank. The métro was in its infancy from the beginning of the century, but around the outbreak of WWI a network of electric trams covered the city. We imagined them, in their long dresses, transporting their artworks by public transport, or perhaps crossing one of the bridges over the Seine on foot.

Australian legacy and new French influence

Once in Paris they quickly found their place. Some, like Nicholas, Carrick and Traill, remained traditionalists, the illusionists they had been in Australia, increasing their skills and exhibiting their work in Paris. Others, like Grace Crowley, Dangar and Black, changed their entire artistic direction and embraced Modernism in its more iconoclastic forms, such as Fauvism or Cubism.

There were, however, some common elements to be found in their work, whatever their artistic mode. An extensive, and often ground-breaking use of colour was certainly an element shared by almost all of them. Another common element, according to Butel (1985) was design: this was especially true of the Cubists but can also be found in the work of those who worked in the Impressionist or post-Impressionist idioms, such as Dora Meeson.

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

The period covered in our book, from roughly 1900 to 1950, breaks down into three main sections: the so-called ‘Belle Époque’ from around the turn of the century to the beginning of World War 1; the 1920s, known as the ‘Jazz Age’, and lastly the period of the 1930s and World War II. Some, like Bessie Davidson, sought to remain in the country, and were loyal to France throughout the first half of the century, but most belong to one or other of these three periods.

During this time, women found new freedoms and responsibilities, they challenged patriarchy, made their way in the working world as professionals and shouldered the responsibilities of helping France through its trials. Not all of the women lived and worked in France during the earlier part of the half century. Margaret Olley, for instance, did not arrive until the late 1940s, while Iso Rae returned to Australia after the Great War. Nevertheless Paris continued to be a mecca for artists until the rise of the New York scene in the 1950s.

Most of these women studied extensively before leaving Australia’s shores. The school through which more passed than any other was the National Gallery of Victoria Art School in Melbourne, which was under the direction of Bernard Hall and Frederick McCubbin for much of the period covered in our book. Traditional and British though it was, its standards were high, and its graduates arrived in France with solid foundational training.

In Sydney, Julian Ashton trained several, as did Dattilo Rubbo. In Brisbane, the Brisbane Central Technical College, under Godfrey Rivers, taught a number of the women including Margaret Olley. In Adelaide, Margaret Preston, Bessie Davidson and Gladys Reynell set up their own school, teaching Stella Bowen among others.

Where did these women come from, and how did they raise the funds to travel halfway round the world? Most, though not all, came from wealthy or middle-class families. So, for some, the family provided the funds, and in a few instances, the chaperones as well. 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 Tuck’s case by working for florists both in Adelaide and Perth for eight years.

Some, when they arrived in Paris, worked as cleaners in other artists' studios. Many of them were appalled by the low standards of the accommodation they could afford—usually up numerous flights of stairs, and often with no sanitation or running water (Crowley). Those from small rural towns, such as Anne Dangar, might have fared better than their city cousins in these conditions.

Once settled, the women, without exception, enrolled at art schools. 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. André Lhote's school taught his version of Cubism, from an academic position. The Académie de la Grande Chaumière was extremely popular with foreigners and also highly regarded. Paris was moving with the times, as exemplified by the school of René-Xavier Prinet, established exclusively for women. During this period too, some of the schools began allowing women artists to attend life drawing classes. All of these schools were located on the Left Bank, mostly near the Boulevard du Montparnasse.

The women also found numerous Salons with well-advertised exhibitions judged by juries of eminent figures. These Salons gave many of the women an entrée into the Parisian art world, enabling them to compete on their merits in what was an acutely competitive industry.

We are all familiar with gossip and shop-talk, but American researcher Jane Jacobs, in *The Economy of Cities* (1970), describes what she calls 'spillover', referring to the cross-fertilization of ideas and inspiration among members of a group—what we might today think of as networking. It is easy to transport this theory to the lives of the women, who might have gained ideas or insights through conversations in cafés or, like Kathleen O'Connor at Le Dôme Café, simply by listening to chatter at nearby tables. The area around the intersection of Boulevard Raspail and Boulevard du Montparnasse was the village square of the international artistic colony in Paris during these years, and it is there, Jacobs asserts, that the pollination which enriched the culture of the West largely took place.

The Australian women were, overwhelmingly, serious artists who worked long hours in a highly competitive *milieu.* They went to Paris for themselves, both as artists and as human beings. They seem to have matured quickly in their new surroundings, and they used their freedom, contrasting markedly with the subjugation of women at that time in their home country, to learn, to grow and to mature. For some, it was enough to be there: Paris had a magical attraction which perhaps cannot be explained in logical terms. They were in a city called Paris, but even more so, they were in a Paris of the mind.

Other theories have been raised to explain the way certain urban centres serve as sites for the inspiration and stimulation for artists. James Panero (2010) develops a theory of 'ideas in the air', floating around a crowded environment where artists gather. So many of the intellectual and artistic movements which drove the twentieth century either started in Paris or were promoted and developed there. Surrealism, French existentialism, Dadaism, feminism, absurdism, anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism, socialism, Jungianism, postmodernism, all found a nurturing home, and in some cases an incubator, in Paris. In Paris the women could rub shoulders in cafés or in social salons with Trotsky and Lenin, André Breton, Hemingway, Rilke, Oscar Wilde, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry Miller, Ionesco, and many others.

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

Those who sold well—such as Chapman, Nicholas, Carrick and Davidson—tended to be those whose work was less influenced by the new movements in art, which for many people were the basis for the dominance of the Parisian art scene. Despite being the locus of the avant-garde, Paris was also a conservative city which, like many cities then and now, had a radical quarter. Those artists who experimented a little with the new developments—Constance Stokes comes to mind—tended to incorporate modest elements of, say, post-Impressionism, or Fauvism, into their fundamentally illusionistic work.

While many of the women were influenced by French art and artists, or indeed, those who were 'more French than the French' like the American Whistler, many of them were inspired and influenced by their chosen environment. For this reason, Carrick and Bowen for example, spent time in North Africa, and others spent time in the French countryside. Many found stimulus in the faces of old French peasants seen at marketplaces.

In our opinion, these women found themselves, not only in the accidental sense of discovering a new set of surroundings, but also in the more potent, and more intentional sense of finding who they were as artists and as people, as a result of deliberately relocating themselves.

Homeward bound

The women would undoubtedly have come home with an aura of Europe about them. They would have been wearing at least some French clothes, in styles that would take years to arrive in Australia; 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 having been, as it were, ‘blooded’ in the European art scene. They had become truly and fully professional artists; their skills honed, their knowledge greatly deepened, their experience enriched, their confidence strengthened. They were across the latest world trends and, above all, they knew who they were both as artists and as people. This may be one reason a number of them went into teaching upon their return—Tuck, for instance, in Adelaide, and Quelhurst in Brisbane. Black started a gallery. Reynell established a pottery. And most of the returning artists exhibited, displaying what they had learnt in Europe. Works by all of these women are now held in major Australian galleries.

A pilgrimage such as this, to one global destination, is unlikely ever to happen again. Today huge flocks of tourists criss-cross the globe, and many cities are significant centres of art in their own right; Mexico City, today, has a vibrant and original art scene, as does New York, not to mention Shanghai, Tokyo, Sydney, Los Angeles.

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The following six short biographies were chosen from the twenty-eight Australian artists whose lives and work are the subjects of our book *Intrépide*. The selection provides a representative cross section and includes some of the well-known as well as the lesser-known among them.

Agnes Goodsir 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 but remained a little aloof from the other women, and from her sitters, who included famous actress Ellen Terry, philosopher

Bertrand Russell and Benito Mussolini. Gérard-Austin (2014), writes that Goodsir clearly enjoyed herself: ‘It’s such fun, if you want a café there, the Rotonde and The Dome … where Trotsky and Lenin, Red to the last corpuscle, 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’.[1]

Renting a studio was considered more expensive for women due to the perceived need for greater security, but this was not a problem for Agnes Goodsir. Like the Nabis group, she kept the chaos of everyday life out of her work, and she largely eschewed Modernism, except for a short fling with the fashionable *Japonisme*, but she did follow a trend away from *en plein air* to interior painting.

Girl with Cigarette is arguably her most famous work, depicting a young woman alone in a café, smoking, eyeing the artist with a cool and confident gaze. Goodsir was adept at depicting moments of quiet solitude, pauses in the hectic rush of life, as in *Type of the Latin Quarter,* using muted colours typical of the period. Her palette was fairly dark, probably due to French influences, and Whistler was also an influence on her figurative style. She contributed considerably to French art and exhibited in various Salons twelve times, as well as in private galleries—more than many French artists. She concentrated on becoming a fully professional artist, which meant illusionism and portraiture. She learnt as much from the French as she could, mainly at Colarossi’s (the Académie Colarossi), the Académie Julian, and the Académie Delécluse, but she followed her own star, avoiding both theory and iconoclasm.

She returned to Australia several times, in 1905 and again in 1907 when six of her paintings were included in the first ‘Australian Exhibition of Women’s Work’ at the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne. In 1927 Nellie Melba was present when Goodsir gave an interview in her Paris studio. She returned in 1927 for a solo exhibition at the Fine Art Gallery in Melbourne and Macquarie Galleries in Sydney.

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[1] This quote is from an interview in *The Home* magazine (1927) which was included in Helene Barbara Weinberg (c1994) *American Impressionism & Realism: The Painting of Modern Life*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Kathleen O’Connor hailed from Western Australia and did not have access to the major art schools of the eastern states, training only at the Perth Technical College. She went on, however, to develop her own unique brand of Impressionism while in her beloved Paris.

She had her personal contradictions: she was a very private woman who loved name-dropping and café life; a very private woman who sought the company of major artists such as Bonnard, Modigliani and Vuillard.

Like some others, her picture of an artistic life in Paris was developed from magazine articles and photographs in newspapers and she saw Paris as a place where she could realise her potential. She studied at the Académie Vassilieff from 1908 to 1914, the first to admit that she had arrived in Paris deficient in technical skills.

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’ (Berg, 1965). She loved café life but had no need, she said, to talk to anyone, instead absorbing by a sort of social osmosis the ideas that were floating all around her on the pavement at Le Dôme Café. She seems to have had a small *côterie* of friends with whom she painted *en plein air* in the Luxembourg Gardens.

In the 1930s, while retaining a high palette, she abandoned the comparative precision of her earlier work, developing what critic Robert Hughes called ‘the exuberant action of the line, and the froth of light breaking up the forms (…) a gift for organizing images as surface’ (1970).

O’Connor exhibited at least sixteen times in Salons as well as in some private gallery shows. She returned home only when funds finally ran out. She exerted an influence upon younger artists in Perth, starting with a retrospective at the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

Dorrit Black changed the way she saw art, and changed the way many Australians saw art, as a result of what she learnt in France. Having ventured to Paris for an education in art, she was captivated early on by Cubism.

Born in Adelaide, later a student of Julian Ashton in Sydney, Black learnt in Paris both the power of curved and sweeping lines across a canvas, and the complex theory of Cubism revolving, for her mentors André Lhote and Albert Gleizes, around the golden mean (*Section d’Or*).

She was well funded for the periods she spent in France, first from 1911 and later in the 1920s, and when she began to sell her work, she became largely independent. In her journal, *An Account of Travels and Work, 1927–29,* Black describes 'crossing over' from London to Paris to catch up with the latest developments in world art (North 1979). Her studies with Lhote changed her entire perspective.

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. She spent time near the village of Miramande, which she painted as a wedge shape on the side of a hill. With this and other contemporary works she began to grow beyond the limits of geometric Cubism, achieving a flowing sense of movement with warm curves.

Dorrit Black (23 December 1891–13 September 1951)
Australian painter and printmaker. Source: Wikipedia Commons.

Dorrit Black believed in constant change and experimentation, and this personal power was what she brought back to Sydney, where she taught and established a modern art gallery, and exhibited, influencing many younger artists, and doing perhaps more than any other artist to establish Modernism in Australia.

Hilda Rix 1922–1923. Wikipedia Commons.

Moya Dyring, 1937. Public domain.

Hilda Rix Nicholas was a traditionalist who nevertheless embedded some Modernist techniques into her work, which were extremely valuable to Australian art when she returned.

She overcame some severe personal difficulties but maintained a very successful professional practice, both in France and when she returned to Australia, though her work did change along the way. In Paris she was influenced by *Japonisme* and Impressionism, but continued her exploration of line, form and structure that she had begun in Australia, her work often reflecting current Parisian fashion.

Hilda Rix Nicholas was born in 1884 in rural Victoria and studied at the National Gallery School in Melbourne. Moving to Paris with her mother and sister soon after, they shared a rather down-market *pension* on the Left Bank, and work was her god. She had mixed feelings about the French, loving their gaiety but retaining a certain Anglo-Celtic suspicion of it. Careful with money, she avoided much of the café life that many of the other Australian women so loved.

She trained with Auguste Delécluse at the Académie Delécluse, and with American Impressionist Richard Miller, where she learnt to use a brightly coloured palette. Later she studied at La Grande Chaumière under Théophile Steinlen, and later still at the Académie Colarossi with Claudio Castelucho. In 1910 the family moved to Étaples, the art colony in the north of France, where contact with international artists influenced her forceful imagery.

Nicholas worked in Morocco in 1912, and on her return to Paris one of her works was purchased by the French government. She worked often in the Luxembourg Gardens and loved strong colours and exotica, fancy dress and masquerade.

She was hailed in France as a brilliant newcomer, but personal disaster struck when her new husband, Major George Nicholas, died on the Somme battlefield. She fell into depression but fought back, exhibiting, and growing as an artist. Her work was hung numerous times in various Salons and she became an associate of the *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts*.

Returning to Australia Nicholas eventually married a grazier, and began painting scenes of rural Australian life, slowly falling out of fashion though still selling work. Her painting, *Defiance,* of a young rural woman, hands on hip and head thrown back, is regarded as one of her finest.

By 1930 she had summarily rejected Modernism. A highly talented and dedicated artist, she impressed the French art world and created a bridge for Australians between traditionalism and Modernism.

Moya Dyring trained at the National Gallery School in Melbourne, a flamboyant but hard-working student; she exhibited in Melbourne before travelling to Paris after the Second World War, where she lived on the Île Saint-Louis in an apartment called 'Chez Moya' which was home to many Australian artists in the city.

Influenced by Modernism, she returned to Australia on a number of occasions to teach and exhibit, spending nonetheless the major part of her time in France. In 1961, she curated the Australian section of the Paris Biennale. One of the Art Gallery of New South Wales studios at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris was named after her.

Ethel Carrick was, according to widespread belief, a team player and, if so, her husband, Emmanuel Phillips Fox, was the captain and star player during their shared lifetime, though subsequently critics consider that her work far outshone his.

In 1905 the couple moved to Paris and married there. Her work, colourful and evocative, deviated from its initial similarity to his. Her crowd scenes, especially those painted in North Africa, are stunning and today fetch over a quarter of a million dollars. She engaged with Modernism, though not with its wildest shores, and spent a lot of her abundant energy helping other women artists.

Born and initially trained in the UK before moving to Australia, Carrick studied in Paris for a time at the Académie Julian. The couple were not poor and rented a comfortable apartment in the Boulevard Arago on the Left Bank. She loved to paint *en plein air* and painted often in the Luxembourg Gardens. She embraced Orientalist influences and post-Impressionism, manifested in loose brushstrokes and strong colours, possibly also influenced by the Fauves.

In her work, the use of light was perhaps her greatest achievement, emphasising the play of light across surfaces. She brushed figures on quickly, suggesting rather than clearly outlining form, and avoided creating the illusion of depth, in line with Modernist tendencies of the time. She sometimes adopted the technique of 'broken colour', an Impressionist technique where closely related or complementary colours are mixed or juxtaposed closely with one another so as to create a sensation of light, often called ‘painting the light’.

Ethel Carrick exhibited in the Salons, particularly the Salon d’Automne, and her work found favour in official circles. Apart from landscapes she enjoyed painting portraits. In these she was able to capture character and emotion and forged great visual intimacy with her sitters.

Carrick maintained contact with the Australian art scene, and her work, her *engagement,* and her ability to grow as an artist influenced a number of younger Australian women artists.

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The story of Australian women artists, at home or abroad, has only recently begun to be told. These intrepid women, throwing caution to the winds, travelled around the world to learn from and contribute to the art of Paris, the world’s foremost artistic centre. They inspired many other women to do the same and proved, if proof were needed, that women can contribute at least as much to France, or to Australia, as can men. They did this with a dash, and a sense of style, that only the French could teach them.

Terrigal, New South Wales

Eds: For further details of Australian women artists in France and their participation in Paris exhibitions, see *Australasian Artists at the French Salons*, listed in the French-Australian Bibliographical Notes on page 108 of this edition of *The French Australian Review*.

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