

# Virtue and Sentiment: Madame Mouchette's Art and Teaching in Melbourne, 1881–1892

Andrew Montana

The influential French-born artist and teacher Madame Berthe Mouchette (1846–1928) was warm and dedicated and inspired her many female art students. This article focuses on Madame Mouchette's art teaching in Melbourne and highlights the impact of this woman who fostered artistic expression and community amongst her students. She achieved this through her art and teaching and by organising exhibitions of her students' work, as well as her own, during the period she lived in Melbourne. Whilst observing the middle-class protocol of not making exhibitions of themselves, through her efforts these young women achieved some visibility, bringing their artwork into the public sphere they helped to expand.

A subject of Mouchette's, Lucinda Elizabeth Gullet, the Australasian newspaper journalist known as 'Humming Bee',<sup>1</sup> placed 'women to the front' in one of her many articles considering women's role in modern society and their struggle to receive recognition. Perhaps motivated by the admittance of women to Melbourne University from 1880 and Bella Guérin's graduation with a Bachelor of Arts in 1883,<sup>2</sup> Gullet's beliefs encouraged

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<sup>1</sup> Humming Bee, 'Women to the front', *Australasian*, April 19, 1884, 7; Humming Bee, 'Women and Novels', *Australasian*, February 7, 1885, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Julia Margaret [Bella] Guérin was the first female graduate at the University of Melbourne.

women's ambitions and identified occupations where women might 'meet their masculine rivals on equal terms'.<sup>3</sup> Gullet proposed that women might become doctors, lawyers, ships' captains, theatre managers, preachers, lecturers, writers, musicians, artists and teachers, citing Mouchette and other women around Melbourne who taught art. Australian society was dominated by British taste, but value was placed on girls acquiring cultural refinements including studying a European language and art and music in day or boarding schools.

Cosmopolitan in outlook, Mouchette was well regarded for her French background and innate artistic talent. Melbourne society thought that being in her presence was like travelling within French culture, an experience from which young women would receive an education appropriate to their social position and aspirations. Mouchette's students were the young daughters of Australia's middle and upper-middle classes and her teaching schooled them in artistic accomplishments that were both ornamental and useful to their social interactions and personal development.

In early September 1881 Mouchette arrived in Melbourne from Paris with her husband Nicolas Émile Mouchette (1838–1884) and her younger sister Marie Lion (1855–1922), a French language teacher and artist with a diploma in language from the Paris Academy. According to anecdote,<sup>4</sup> they were inspired to come to Australia after hearing the Australian writer and later novelist Jessie Fraser, known as 'Tasma' (later Jessie Couvreur), give a favourable talk on Australia at the Geographical Society of France in Paris, to which Fraser was later appointed the first woman member.<sup>5</sup> There were other reasons for their interest in Australia—for example, the success of the French Court at the 1880–1881 Melbourne International Exhibition would have been known in Paris. Some 1,250 French exhibitors of utilitarian and luxury goods were represented at this exhibition, a huge advance on the 300 represented at the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition and the 700 represented at the 1876 Philadelphia International Exhibition in the US. The French government was supportive of its countrymen's commercial

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<sup>3</sup> Humming Bee, 'Women and Novels', *Australasian*, February 7, 1885, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Oscar Comettant, *In the Land of Kangaroos and Gold Mines (Au Pays des kangourous et des mines d'or)* trans. Judith Armstrong (Adelaide: Rigby, 1980), 158.

<sup>5</sup> 'A Distinguished Tasmanian', *Mercury* (Hobart), June 20, 1892, 2.

presence in Melbourne, and some Victorian industries looked to establish direct markets with France and thereby bypass the control of England on Australian exports, principally wool, destined for French manufacturers.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, representatives in the French Commission at this Melbourne International Exhibition stayed on and acted as agents for the luxury firms of Christoffle, Baccarat, Limoges, and Le Creuset.

Mouchette's arrival was much anticipated in Melbourne, where she soon exhibited and established an art class from the purpose-built studio at the rear of her residence, Nepean Terrace, Gipps Street, East Melbourne, where she lived with her husband and sister.<sup>7</sup> The press quickly promoted her artistic credentials, the copy no doubt provided by the enterprising Mouchette herself:

Madame Mouchette, who has arrived in this city with the intention of establishing herself as a teacher of drawing and painting in all their branches, has some specimens of her artistic skill on view in the room recently occupied by the Ladies' Work Association, adjoining Mr. Fletcher's art gallery, where she proposes to give lessons. Her speciality is portrait painting in oils and pastel, as also in miniature, but her studies from the life, from the antique, and from nature show that her talents are versatile, and that her accomplishments are various. A fruit piece from her in pencil is a charming production and her paintings on porcelain and upon fans prove that she is eminently well qualified to give instructions in these elegant and popular departments of the arts of design. The diplomas which Madame Mouchette holds from the Academy of Paris, from that of Bordeaux, and from the Prefecture of the Department of the Seine, denote the proficiency she has acquired by seven years of unremitting study in the Louvre, and those who propose to profit by her lessons will find her a highly agreeable lady, as well as a thoroughly competent teacher. Madame Mouchette is accompanied by her sister and pupil, Mdlle. Leon [sic], who excels in flower painting and in the artistic decoration of porcelain, and two examples of her work in ceramic plaques convey a highly favourable impression of her ability in this respect.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> 'France', *Argus Exhibition Supplement*, October 6, 1880, 12–13.

<sup>7</sup> *Argus*, January 30, 1882, 5.

<sup>8</sup> 'Art Instruction in Melbourne', *Australasian Sketcher with Pen and Pencil*, September 24, 1881, 3.

From their residence, Lion taught French language and Mouchette taught drawing and painting from life in oils, and painting on porcelain, silk and ivory.<sup>9</sup> Lion was also an accomplished painter of miniatures and assisted her sister but it was Mouchette who navigated society with diplomacy and authority. Undoubtedly they both contributed significantly to the increasing interest young women had in the creative arts in the early 1880s, encouraging them to observe nature and build a composition from their life studies.

Accepted as an associate of the Victorian Academy of Arts in early 1882 with her sister, Mouchette exhibited three oil studies in the Academy's twelfth annual exhibition held in the small bluestone gallery building in Albert Street, East Melbourne, and opened by his Excellency and the Marchioness of Normanby in mid-March.<sup>10</sup> Mouchette's striking oil portrait of her husband received unanimous praise for its characterful likeness. The *Australasian Sketcher* journalist asserted it was the 'best portrait ever exhibited within the Academy's walls'.<sup>11</sup>

Her beautifully coloured fruit, flower and birds study nodded to the Dutch seventeenth-century still life genre in which the fruits are offset by a sombre background. According to one reviewer, it showed 'much judgement and skill in its execution'.<sup>12</sup> The competition seen between the parrot and the black plumaged bird perched to peck at the enticing grapes and peaches spilled from a basket, amidst a setting of roses, invited the viewers' curiosity and interest. Mouchette's painting *The Virgin*, venerating the spiritual power of Marian culture, was considered 'very French' by one reviewer, whose opinion undoubtedly reflected a Protestant bias, noting it was intended for a Melbourne chapel and 'would satisfy those who demand such things'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> 'Advertising', *Age*, January 21, 1882, 4.

<sup>10</sup> 'Ladies' Column: Twelfth Exhibition of The Victorian Academy of Arts', *Herald* (Melbourne) March 20, 1882, 3.

<sup>11</sup> 'Victorian Academy of Arts', *Australasian Sketcher*, April 8, 1882, 106; Mouchette's portrait was published in 'Sketches at the Victorian Academy', *Australasian Sketcher*, May 13, 1882, 12.

<sup>12</sup> 'Twelfth Exhibition of the Victorian Academy of Arts', *Herald*, March 20, 1882, 3.

<sup>13</sup> 'Victorian Academy of Arts', *Illustrated Australian News*, April 19, 1882, 55.



Berthe Mouchette, Still Life with Fruit, Flowers and Birds, oil on canvas, 1882, 72 cm x 95cm (sight), Private Collection, U.K. (Public Domain)

Lion exhibited delicate miniatures on ivory and some of Mouchette's students exhibited china painting with motifs studied from nature. Exhibits of pottery and china decorated by Doulton's 'lady' artists in the 1880–1881 Melbourne International Exhibition were purchased by the National Gallery of Victoria and displayed there, further reinforcing the practice as a valuable pursuit for young women in Victoria. Yet, tensions did arise in the Academy from male artists with professional reputations, including the National Gallery of Victoria's director and master of painting at the National Gallery Art School George Folingsby, Louis Buvelot and other ambitious male landscape artists, about exhibiting their paintings alongside the work of female art students and 'flower painters'.<sup>14</sup>

Mouchette was undaunted. She stressed in her teaching the importance of drawing from nature and life. Studying naked life models was not permitted

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<sup>14</sup> Led by Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton, artist members formed a breakaway society in 1886 called the Australian Artists' Association, but the two groups united in 1887 to establish the Victorian Artists' Society in time for the International Centennial Exhibition opening the next year.

for female students attending the National Gallery School in Melbourne during the 1880s and Mouchette adhered to this social propriety in her teaching. In 1882, the National Gallery School established a life drawing class for male students only, using the naked models posed by Folingsby.<sup>15</sup> Female students continued to work from the plaster casts. The 'Chloe scandal' surrounding the exhibition of Frenchman Jules-Joseph Lefebvre's oil painting of the naked female figure titled *Chloe* at the National Gallery of Victoria, especially on Sundays, epitomised the dominant bias towards showing the naked female form in art, however polished, from Melbourne's conservative circles at this time. The exclusion of women from drawing the naked model at the Gallery School was lifted to an extent during the 1890s, when women worked from the naked female form and exhibited studies showing the back of the naked female, or the torso of a male subject taken from life.<sup>16</sup>

Restricting young women's understanding of anatomy and the human form, this handicap was lessened through Mouchette's students studying the clothed and draped figure. Her students also wanted to learn drawing and painting from nature, instead of copying landscape paintings and figure studies displayed in art galleries, a method that Mouchette believed did not teach them drawing, composition and design skills. In late September 1882, Mouchette's painting classes were held in a new building on the corners of Swanston Street and Collins Street East. Some of her students continued to exhibit with the Victorian Artists' Society over the next year but Mouchette now preferred to hold her own exhibitions. In May 1883, she held an exhibition of student artwork in a spacious room at the rear of Batchelder's photographic *ateliers*, Melbourne.<sup>17</sup> It comprised drawings and paintings on canvas, china and terracotta and resulted from both Mouchette's and Lion's teaching. Introducing Mouchette's tapestry painting technique at this exhibition, 'Humming Bee' explained this technique, inspired by French Gobelins tapestries and called 'Point of Gobelins':

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<sup>15</sup> 'The Public Library', *Argus*, July 7, 1883, 10: reporting on the year's activities at the Gallery and the School.

<sup>16</sup> 'Students Exhibition at the National Gallery', *Age*, September 15, 1893, 7.

<sup>17</sup> 'Humming Bee', 'Amateur Exhibition', *Australasian*, May 19, 1883, 20.

The paintings in this latter style done by Madame Mouchette's pupils have been copied from old engravings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Miss Taylor selecting as her subject 'Venus Giving to Aeneas the Arms Forged by Vulcan'. A large hanging tapestry representing a hunting party, in large landscape, still incomplete, but indicating great promise, is by Mdlle [sic] Duret; a border surrounds the picture which, also copied from an old engraving, has a design of flowers, fruit and fish, and is called a *Tapestrie* [sic] *de haute-lice*...Great praise is due to Madame Mouchette for introducing this novel work to Melbourne.<sup>18</sup>

Her teaching was highly regarded and one 'Marjorie', commenting on the art scene in Melbourne for the Sydney press, ranked Mouchette's teaching with that of such men as 'Mr. Folingsby, Mr. Dowling and Monsieur Soureiro [sic]'. These artists, 'Marjorie' believed, were as competent as any in similar populations to Melbourne's in Europe and 'their untiring efforts must result in some rising young artists before many years have passed'.<sup>19</sup> Mouchette encouraged young women to select as their subject powerful women in myth, literature, religion, and history and transpose the then most respected academic genre of history painting into the imitation of tapestry through their painting on canvas. It was, in effect, a subtle subversion of the prejudicial belief that women were imitators and could not invent.<sup>20</sup> Some exhibition reports noted that Mouchette's teaching methods produced results far better in some of her students, 'than those which they followed in the absence of competent guidance and example'.<sup>21</sup> Mouchette also believed that working-class children should be taught drawing, using French methods she thought would assist Australian youth to gain employment as trade designers.

In a letter to the *Argus* newspaper editor in 1883, Mouchette advocated the importance of teaching drawing from the round to state school students in

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<sup>18</sup> 'Humming Bee': 'The Lady's Column: Tapestry and its Imitation', *Australasian*, May 26, 1883, 7: *Tapisserie de haute-lice* translates to 'high-warp tapestry' and the term is used today by contemporary weavers in France.

<sup>19</sup> 'Marjorie', 'Melbourne Gossip', *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, January 10, 1885, 78.

<sup>20</sup> Clarissa Campbell Orr, 'Introduction', *Women in the Victorian Art World*, ed. Clarissa Campbell Orr (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 12.

<sup>21</sup> 'The Victorian Academy of Arts', *Argus*, March 3, 1883, 3.

Victoria, and not drawing from the flat. Drawing from the flat was a method that the influential artist and art instructor William Dyce espoused in the mid-nineteenth century in England, and was a method of diagrammatic, one-dimensional drawing to render geometrically the outlines of forms and curves, often derived from plants, for ornamental patterns. Mouchette's teaching methods were grounded in her training in France where she claimed to have been a professor of industrial drawing in Parisian schools. In this system, children were placed before a model representing a simple geometric figure. By the model's side was a blackboard on which the teacher reproduced the geometric model, the children following this example in their own drawings. In the next stage of learning, the children worked independently and drew from more complex plaster models without the teacher's blackboard demonstration. Then the teacher explained the elementary rules of perspective and shading. The next year, the students worked from more complex plaster models and gained ability to 'draw easily ornaments, flowers, vases &c, all of which will develop [sic] in them a taste for the beauties of form and the harmony of lines'.<sup>22</sup> According to Mouchette, this basic training would enable a girl or a boy to have the skill to make a drawing for dressmaking, stonemasonry and upholstery trades. For trades in which design played a greater part, she explained that Paris had instituted free evening classes for more advanced drawing training. Mouchette emphasised that drawing from the round as she had explained it was a uniform system across Parisian schools meaning that a child could change schools and not be affected by different teaching. 'I believe', she expressed, 'that if the Parisian workman has made for himself a great reputation for skill and good taste, it is in great measure due to his practical art education'.

The French trained, English-born Australian plein-air artist Alfred James Daplyn, whom Mouchette knew through the Victorian Academy of Arts, applauded Mouchette's recommendations. A former art student of Jean-Léon Gérôme at the *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris and a student of Carolus-Duran and Corot also in France, Daplyn added in a follow up letter to the *Argus* that Parisian children would sit in a semicircle around the plaster cast object. Each student held a drawing board that rested on the knees as they drew the model. The teacher would then take their place and compare the

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<sup>22</sup> Berthe Mouchette, 'Industrial Art Teaching', *Argus*, June 21, 1883, 7.

drawing with the model. The adoption of this French system, he believed, would eliminate the expense of desks in Victorian government state school art classes and could accommodate many students.<sup>23</sup>

But not everyone agreed with the French teaching method. One Philip Howard wrote to the paper asking to ‘be permitted to say a word on behalf of the English system?’, meaning the South Kensington art and design training system in London. Widely adopted in government art and design schools across Australia, the South Kensington system advocated flat pattern design, the stylisation of nature for ornament and the belief that ornament must emerge from and be secondary to construction. Backhandedly, Howard acknowledged Mouchette’s belief that a general method be adopted in Victoria, but that if there were any doubts about the South Kensington system ‘let experts be appointed to inquire into and report on that of other countries’.<sup>24</sup> The Presbyterian Ladies College, where Mouchette did not teach art, made a point of advertising that its instruction followed that of the Kensington Art Schools in England.<sup>25</sup>

Mouchette established a new studio in the Imperial Chambers at 77 Collins Street West and commenced her painting classes there in April 1884. Aware of the growing fashion for the artistic domestic interior and women’s role in its creation, Mouchette fashioned an exotic studio ambience in which to work and teach, full of hangings, statuary, plaster casts, plants, objects and Japanese decorative arts.<sup>26</sup> The *Argus* reporter admired Mouchette’s new studio, noting it was like visiting

the atelier of an artist of distinction in Paris, Rome, or Florence. Tapestries and hangings, screens and easels, plaster casts and ceramic ornaments, pictures and *bric-à-brac*, Japanese curios and French elegancies, have been so dexterously and daintily arranged that the ensemble is really charming. And much good work is being done by the pupils, while two portraits in process of execution by Madame Mouchette attest both her industry and her skill.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> A. J. Daplyn, ‘Industrial Art Teaching’, *Argus*, June 22, 1883, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Philip Howard, ‘Industrial Art Training’, *Argus*, June 25, 1883, 6.

<sup>25</sup> *Australasian*, June 7, 1884, 7.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Marjorie’, ‘Social Gossip from Melbourne’, *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, May 24, 1884, 970.

<sup>27</sup> ‘News of the Day’, *Argus*, April 30, 1884, 5.

During her visit to the studio 'Iris' from the *Leader* newspaper was struck by Mouchette's paintings in oils and watercolours, and on china, silk, satin, and ivory, one of the latter being exhibited at the Paris Salon by Mouchette before leaving Paris.<sup>28</sup> Also admiring the paintings on ceramic and satin by Lion, 'Iris' praised Mouchette's 'exquisite fan, painted on silk to imitate the ancient pictures, portraying fine ladies and their attendant *beaux*', and the portrait of Mouchette's husband previously exhibited at the Victorian Academy of Arts exhibition in March. Mouchette's drapery studies were assisted by a large model figure, the limbs of which became movable at the turn of a key. After the desired position was made the figure was locked and draped with fabric 'obviating', as the journalist noted, 'the necessity of numerous sittings, which would be otherwise required of the living model'.

The culmination of Mouchette's art teaching and practice was the large exhibition of her students' and her own and Lion's work held in July 1884, opened by Lady Loch and her husband the Governor of Victoria. A surviving copy of the catalogue listing the works is held in the State Library of Victoria and provides useful information on Mouchette's career. Mouchette had started teaching art at a Mrs Adderley's school in South Yarra, at Oberwyl Ladies College, St Kilda, and Ruyton Ladies College, Kew, as well as in her own studio. From October she also taught painting at the Ladies College, Grace Park, Hawthorn. The catalogue lists some students' artwork from Oberwyl and Ruyton, and the listed exhibits suggest a love of the beautiful that the students developed from observing nature, encouraged by Mouchette. It included life studies of the heads of elderly women and men, studies from the reproductions of Greek and Roman classical statuettes almost certainly a part of Mouchette's studio décor, and flower, bird and landscape paintings on canvas, silk, satin, ceramic and timber.

Clara Southern, who later painted poetic landscapes around her adopted home of Warrandyte, near Melbourne, exhibited four oil paintings taken from nature: the head of an old man, the head of an old woman, a still life, and a basket of pears. The French-born Charlotte Duret, who married the young French doctor Marcel Crivelli in 1887 in Melbourne, exhibited

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<sup>28</sup> 'Iris', 'Art Studios of Melbourne', *Leader*, June 7, 1884, 7.

four paintings in imitation of ancient tapestry, the technique for which Mouchette was best known, as mentioned above.<sup>29</sup> One of Duret's paintings was taken from an engraving of a landscape by Jean de Bruges, who also produced designs for tapestries; another was in the Louis XV style for a drawing from François Boucher and the remaining two were mantelpiece draperies. Charlotte Duret also exhibited paintings of flowers, and paintings of architectural ruins and animals on porcelain and faience, respectively, as well as a silk cradle coverlet painted with flowers. The talented Lucy Rigby who exhibited a painting of poppies and a portrait surrounded with wisteria also exhibited a painting in imitation of tapestry, taken from an old engraving and titled Alexander at the Tent of Darius (Catalogue 1884). Unfinished at the time of its exhibition, her completed painting was exhibited in the window of the fashionable furniture and decorating firm Cullis Hill & Co. in Elizabeth Street early the next year, an advertisement for Mouchette's teaching and influence and Rigby's talent.<sup>30</sup>

The press reviews of Mouchette's student exhibition were full of praise. Arts writers discouraged young female students from thinking that Poonah painting and crystoleum work were art and encouraged patience and perseverance to develop finer art skills.<sup>31</sup> Mouchette, who, as we have noted, did not teach flat, one-dimensional techniques, took her students on weekly outdoor sketching expeditions 'should the weather be suitable'.<sup>32</sup> The *Age* reviewer commended the truth to nature in many of the students' works and singled out Mouchette's portrait of Mrs (Lucinda) Gullet and

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<sup>29</sup> 'A Wedding in the French Style', *Australasian*, October 8, 1887, 7; For a biographical entry of Charlotte Crivelli and her French connections see <https://www.isfar.org.au/fadb/>.

<sup>30</sup> *Australasian*, February 21, 1885, 27; Rigby went on to open her own teaching studio in Melbourne as did some other of Mouchette's students.

<sup>31</sup> Poonah or Theorem painting was a method of painting flowers, leaves, birds and insects and involved tracing over a design, cutting out sections of paper and laying on paint colours one by one. See E. Harrison, *The Young Ladies Journal; Complete guide to the work-table* (London: E. Harrison, 1884), 89–96; Crystoleum painting became popular in the early 1880s across England, North America and Australia and was a method of applying colour to albumen print photographs under glass.

<sup>32</sup> E. A. C., 'Art Notes', *Once A Month* 11, February 15, 1885, 137; E. A. C., 'Art Notes', *Once A Month* 11, April 5, 1885, 313.

Catherine Duret's portrait exhibited in the principal studio room, as being 'most spirited' and with an 'excellent likeness'.<sup>33</sup>



Berthe Mouchette, Portrait of Lucinda Elizabeth Gullett, 1884, oil on canvas, 151.5 x. 96.0 cm (sight), State Library of Victoria Collection, Melbourne, gift of John Drury (Public Domain)

This painting of Gullett is now in the State Library of Victoria and is the rare surviving example of a Mouchette portrait in a public collection. Gullett appears gracious, unaffected, and knowing. She is simply but artfully posed in three-quarter view, and the background shows Mouchette's skill at tapestry effects. As the *Australasian* journalist 'Humming Bee', Gullett had entrée into Melbourne society, with a sharp eye for social relationships and fashions. The painting, then, is Mouchette's homage to another female arts professional within her circle and marks a solidarity.

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<sup>33</sup> 'News of the Day', *Age*, July 26, 1884, 9.

The predominately tonal green, brown, and cream palette of the oil painting is enlivened by the flush of scarlet red poppies pinned at the centre of Gullet's fichu and towards the back of her wavy dark hair. The *Argus* reviewer (probably James Smith) correlated the growing fashion for imitation damask painted on interior walls by art decorators with the practice of tapestry painting by Mouchette and her students. This erudite reviewer observed that one of Duret's imitations of tapestry was after a drawing by Boucher, 'who was for some time attached to the manufactory at Beauvais, before becoming court painter to Louis Quinze'.<sup>34</sup> Although the works in the exhibition were not for sale, the reviewer concluded that the female pursuit of 'elegant arts' could also become a means for employment, should that necessity arise.

In October, Mouchette's oil paintings *Virgin and Child* and a head of St. Jerome were exhibited at the large Loan Exhibition at the Ballarat Picture Gallery, commemorating the Gallery's foundation that year.<sup>35</sup> It was during this exhibition period that her ailing husband, who had been appointed as the acting consul at the French Consulate in Melbourne in 1883, died from an acute haemorrhage of the lungs after a long illness. He was interred in the Catholic section of the Melbourne cemetery.<sup>36</sup> Dr Duret, the father of Mouchette's young student Charlotte Duret, had attended him.

Mouchette grieved and persevered. The following year the most interesting section of the Victorian Jubilee Exhibition, held in 1884–1885 at the Exhibition Building, Carlton, to celebrate the settlement of Melbourne, was deemed to be the Picture Gallery, which included Mouchette's *Portrait of a Young Lady*. According to the *Once A Month* journalist, the painting was 'a credit to her'.<sup>37</sup> Without children of her own, Mouchette continued to hold impressive exhibitions of her work and her students. All were well received and often opened by Lady Loch, who also distributed the prizes. Reviews naming the young artists and describing their work, from nature, from the round and from life, were laudatory. Again, the décor of her exhibitions attracted journalists' attention. 'Iris' reported that Mouchette draped many

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<sup>34</sup> 'An Art Exhibition', *Argus*, July 26, 1884, 10.

<sup>35</sup> 'The Ballarat Picture Gallery', *Ballarat Star*, October 11, 1884, 4.

<sup>36</sup> John Drury, 'Nicolas Émile Mouchette, 1838–1884: Acting Consul de France', *Explorations* 20, (July 1996): 13–15.

<sup>37</sup> E. A. C., 'Art Notes', *Once A Month* 11, January 15, 1885, 6.

of the pictures standing on easels with Roman scarves and lengths of plush 'in the richest and most aesthetic colours', and the studio windows 'were wreathed with trailing ivy'.<sup>38</sup>

By September 1885, Mouchette had purchased Oberwyl (in Burnett Street, St Kilda, where she had taught) from the Swiss-born Madame Elise Pfund who had conducted an exclusive private girls' school there since 1867. As 'Marmion' noted for the *Sydney Mail*, Mouchette would conduct the school in conjunction with Lion, and on the same principles as its former owner.<sup>39</sup> Mouchette employed a large number of teachers who taught English, religion, music, singing, German, Italian, dancing and gymnastics, dressmaking and cookery. She taught drawing and painting and Lion taught modelling, but Lion also taught French language, literature and conversation. French was the language spoken out of class hours, and Mouchette conducted her art classes in the large studio attached to Oberwyl. Deferring to the dominance of the Anglican and Protestant religions in Victoria, Mouchette advised that a Church of England clergyman would lecture in the school to aid the girl's moral and religious education.<sup>40</sup> Throughout the following years Mouchette advertised her school and curriculum in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane, Hobart and Launceston, with the result that many Victorian and intercolonial boarders studied at Oberwyl.

The first time Mouchette's work was seen outside of Melbourne was at the School of Art Exhibition in Launceston held throughout December 1885. This included her full-length portrait of an unnamed Melbourne woman painted against a tapestry background and a *médaille en plâtre* sculpture by Lion. The exhibition was organised by the French-born artist and teacher at the School, Monsieur Maurice, who encouraged 'the eminent French artistes Madame Mouchette and Mademoiselle Lion' from Melbourne to exhibit.<sup>41</sup> He may have known them from France. Mouchette also exhibited two watercolour portraits of the daughters of the Launceston lawyer and politician, art collector and lender to the exhibition, George Thomas Collins,

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<sup>38</sup> 'Exhibition of Painting', *Leader*, July 4, 1885, 7.

<sup>39</sup> 'Marmion', 'Melbourne Gossip', *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, October 3, 1885, 716.

<sup>40</sup> 'Ladies' School, Oberwyl', *Argus*, October 24, 1885, 18.

<sup>41</sup> 'School of Art Exhibition', *Launceston Examiner*, November 11, 1885, 2.

a genre that increased Mouchette's reputation—and enrolments. One Friday evening's entertainment at the School of Art Exhibition concluded with Maurice's vocal rendering of *La Marseillaise*.<sup>42</sup>

On the international stage, another coup for Mouchette was the inclusion of her students' artworks in the large Colonial and Indian Exhibition held in South Kensington, which opened in London in May 1886 within especially erected, temporary buildings located near the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) and the National History Museum. A preliminary viewing of some of the Victorian exhibits was held in the upstairs art gallery in the Exhibition Building, Melbourne, in December 1885. Governor and Lady Loch, politicians, members of the Commission and guests viewed artworks destined for London, including oil and watercolour paintings by John Mather, John Ford Patterson, Tom Roberts, Louis Buvelot, Eugène von Guérard, and Madame Mouchette and her students.<sup>43</sup> Reviewing the exhibition in London, the correspondent was proud that the women artists represented in the Victorian Court by oil paintings numbered seventeen. 'This is indeed a state of things to be proud of,' eulogised the writer, 'a fact which tells that the "advance" of Australia is not a patriotic aspiration and a well-chosen motto only'.<sup>44</sup>

The *Official Catalogue* for this exhibition indicates that Mouchette showed a portrait of her husband, presumably the same portrait she exhibited at the Victorian Academy of Arts exhibition in 1882.<sup>45</sup> She also exhibited painted fans, and a special section along the outside of the reception hall used by the Victorian Commission in the exhibition was allocated for her and her students' exhibits. These included a large tapestry painting with 'a classical subject', oil and watercolour paintings, and pressed flower, feather, and fern arrangements.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> 'School of Art Exhibition', *Launceston Examiner*, December 4, 1885, 3.

<sup>43</sup> 'The Victorian Exhibits for the Indian and Colonial Exhibition', *Herald* (Melbourne), December 3, 1885, 3: The ordering of the words in the name of this exhibition varies between reports.

<sup>44</sup> Correspondent, 'The Colonial and Indian Exhibition', *Argus*, June 21, 1886, 7.

<sup>45</sup> *Official Catalogue: Colonial and Indian Exhibition*, 179 (London: W. Clowes, 1886). There is no entry for a painting of Oberwyl by Mouchette in this catalogue.

<sup>46</sup> Dr J. E. Taylor, 'Educational Exhibits at the Colonial Exhibition', *Argus*, August 14, 1886, 4.

A frequent guest at fashionable Melbourne weddings and at Government House functions and garden parties, Mouchette also instructed Lady Loch in art. Whilst in office (until 1889), Lady Loch continued to open Mouchette's annual exhibitions and present awards to her students. In appreciation, twenty-nine of Mouchette's students, including Duret and Southern, created a large, figured tapestry painting titled *La Charité*, the design taken from the seventeenth-century French artist Sébastien Bourdon, illustrating a verse from a chapter of Isaiah in the Old Testament.<sup>47</sup> For the Loch's fancy dress ball held in honour of Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1887, Mouchette costumed herself as the influential French revolutionary and Girondist, Madame Roland. Lion went as an Algerian lady.<sup>48</sup>

In the winter of 1889, Mouchette left Melbourne with her sister for Noumea aboard the French steamer the S. S. Yarra to visit the Governor of New Caledonia. Before leaving port she invited friends to an afternoon tea held in the saloon of the ship.<sup>49</sup> Whether she arrived by July 14 to celebrate the national fête of the French Republic is unclear, but it seems likely. Mouchette and Lion had travelled to and from Sydney throughout the 1880s, but this was Mouchette's first trip to New Caledonia. Within the month the press announced that Mouchette had been awarded the *Palmes Académiques* by the President of the French Republic. This prestigious award was made in recognition of Mouchette's artistic abilities and her service to education in France and Victoria. It may have been Lucinda Gullett who wrote in the *Australasian* that Mouchette's distinction was 'all the more honourable and gratifying, inasmuch as it is rarely bestowed upon women'.<sup>50</sup>

Mouchette had organised a singing class at Oberwyl under the instruction of Mrs Emery Gould as well as elocution and performance classes taught by then well-known Nellie Veitch, who stage-managed *tableaux-vivants* at the many Oberwyl entertainments. The peripatetic French dance, calisthenic and deportment teachers, Messieurs Paul Bibron and De Bernard from Paris, also taught lessons at Oberwyl.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> 'Gossip', *Australasian*, April 24, 1886, 7.

<sup>48</sup> 'Description of Dresses', *Melbourne Punch*, June 23, 1887, 4.

<sup>49</sup> 'Social', *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), July 13, 1889, 9.

<sup>50</sup> 'Gossip', *Australasian*, August 17, 1889, 12.

<sup>51</sup> 'Advertising', *Geelong Advertiser*, April 27, 1889, 3.

Mouchette was also supportive of a new organisation formed by Lady Loch and led by Lady Clarke, well known for her philanthropy towards building university accommodation for young women, to advance plain needlework and cutting for girls and women. Based on a Swedish method of instruction and with a London branch, the Plain Sewing movement in Melbourne aimed to teach cutting and sewing without the aid of a sewing machine, ensuring that plain needlework skills were kept.<sup>52</sup> With Miss Tegetmier employed from London to lead the movement in Melbourne, classes were held at Lady Clarke's mansion Cliveden, at Mrs Matthew Davies' mansion Bracknell, at Government House, at Lady Wrixon's mansion Raheen, at the Working Man's College for state school teachers, and at private girls' schools including Oberwyl, where Mouchette lent a room both for her students and women living in St Kilda.<sup>53</sup> It is little wonder that the French writer and representative and juror for France at the 1888–1889 Melbourne International Exhibition, Oscar Comettant, praised Mouchette and her school in his book on Melbourne and parts of Victoria titled *Au Pays des kangourous et des mines d'or*, published in France in 1890. This book gave a first-hand account of Mouchette and Oberwyl and the *Australasian* reviewer of Oberwyl quoted Comettant's praise: 'I do not believe ... that there is anywhere in Europe an establishment for young ladies organised upon a better plan or directed with a more sagacious authority, whether as regards instruction or administration, than the pensionnat controlled by Mme Mouchette at St Kilda'.<sup>54</sup> Comettant was proud that Mouchette promoted French culture, and then went on to describe a musical and dramatic fête which he had attended at her school.

The minute books of the Alliance Française de Victoria (1890–1953) are in the State Library of Victoria, and historian John Drury explains that Mouchette held an inaugural meeting at Oberwyl, at which she read a letter authorising her to establish membership to the Alliance Française.<sup>55</sup> This letter to the General Consul of France in Melbourne,

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<sup>52</sup> 'Advancement of Needlework', *Table Talk*, October 5, 1888, 12.

<sup>53</sup> 'The Plain Sewing Movement', *Australasian*, April 6, 1889, 37; Melbourne Punch, October 18, 1888, 25.

<sup>54</sup> 'Literature: In a French Looking Glass', *Australasian*, April 26, 1890, 45.

<sup>55</sup> John Drury, 'Berthe Mouchette', *French Lives in Australia*, ed. Eric Berti and Ivan Barko, (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2015), 129–145.

Monsieur Léon Dejardin, was received in Australia on July 6, celebrated as the official date the Alliance was founded in Melbourne.<sup>56</sup> Members of the executive committee were women, and Lady Clarke served as the Honorary President. Mouchette was the delegate representing Alliance Française in Melbourne and Lion proposed the formation of French lessons, which would be taught at Oberwyl. With her contacts within the French community and francophiles around Melbourne, Mouchette established a large membership.<sup>57</sup>

The first meeting of the Alliance Française was held in late July by Lady Clare at Cliveden. It was an elite, social occasion, and the attendees, many from Melbourne's professional and upper middle-classes, participated in the promulgation of a polite, cultural accomplishment in colonial society, the acquisition of the French language. Decorated with French tricolour draperies and with holly, violets and marguerites placed in bunches to represent the tricolour, the drawing room was filled with members and friends, including the diplomatic corps, social and political figures, and artists Tom Roberts, Marion Ellis Rowan, Signor Catani, Mouchette and Lion. Undoubtedly, Mouchette's award from France and her ongoing reputation as an artist and an art teacher at Oberwyl assisted in establishing her leading role with the Alliance Française in Melbourne. Women of the organising committee wore the badge comprising a French tricolour, bordered by pale blue cloth, to designate the Victorian branch. Vocal and instrumental selections, all by French composers, were rendered and the learned art critic James Smith, whose daughter's wedding Mouchette had attended a year earlier, spoke in French about the beauties of the language and the civilising benefits of learning it.<sup>58</sup>

Mouchette's artwork continued to be bought by collectors and she attended art exhibitions around Melbourne. She was a member of the party held to celebrate the opening of artist Senhor Artur Loureiro's new studio at his residence Cabana in Kew. Many other artists including Arthur Streeton, Frederick McCubbin and Charles Conder attended.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> 'L'Alliance Française de Melbourne: Une Dame plus que centenaire', *Le Courier Australien*, June 1, 2002, 28.

<sup>57</sup> 'Popularising the French Language', *Australasian*, August 2, 1890, 38.

<sup>58</sup> *Table Talk*, August 1, 1890, 3.

<sup>59</sup> 'Senhor Loureiro's New Studio', *Table Talk*, April 3, 1890, 8.

A Portuguese by birth, Loureiro studied under Alexandre Cabanel in Paris and exhibited at the Paris Salon before he arrived in Melbourne in 1884. His Melbourne studio included a collection of models, purportedly sent to the 1888–1889 Centennial International Exhibition in Melbourne by the École des Beaux Arts, which he had purchased, and included examples of Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Renaissance-revival statuary, for use in his teaching and painting.<sup>60</sup> Fluent in French and Italian, Loureiro married Tasma's younger sister Marie Therese née Huybers in Paris, who became the art critic for *The Age* newspaper.<sup>61</sup>

Mouchette's Alliance Française classes continued at Oberwyl with the assistance of Lion and Lady Clarke, and in May 1891 Mouchette met the visiting Governor of New Caledonia at Government House in Melbourne.<sup>62</sup> In the Spring of 1891, Mouchette and Lion held another art exhibition at Oberwyl. Mainly comprising oil flower studies, it included Mouchette's painting *The Vision of St Agnes*, purportedly after Titian, a tapestry painting of the Virgin after Pompeo Batoni, and a sunset landscape of Portsea on the Mornington Peninsula, Victoria. Nature, history, religious sentiment, and beauty were celebrated by the sisters through this exhibition. Lion exhibited fine flower paintings, a decorative figure panel representing Spring, and a delicate miniature. Some students also exhibited their works, but it is unknown if many of them sold.<sup>63</sup>

Now in the National Gallery of Victoria, Mouchette's most important work was her painting *The Queen's Bouquet*, the subject taken from Victor Hugo's tragic drama of courtly love, betrayal and revenge, *Ruy Blas*.<sup>64</sup> Making the unpeopled painting aesthetically pleasing with its harmoniously coloured profuse floral blooms, she heightened the spatial and ambiguous narrative tension by painting red bloodstains of the wall. The gilded frame crafted in Melbourne by the prominent frame-making firm Isaac Whitehead (Jnr) is original and bears the plaque and inscription:

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<sup>60</sup> 'Around the Artists' Studios', *Illustrated Sydney News*, August 1, 1891, 7.

<sup>61</sup> 'Women in the Arts', *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 10, 1907, 5.

<sup>62</sup> 'Social Notes', *Australasian*, May 9, 1891, 8.

<sup>63</sup> 'Fine Arts', *Leader* (Melbourne), September 26, 1891, 8.

<sup>64</sup> Berthe Mouchette, *The Queen's Bouquet*, oil on canvas, 1891, 122.1 x 152.9 cm (with frame), National Gallery of Victoria Collection, Melbourne (Public Domain) 'Art and Artists: Exhibition of Painting', *Table Talk*, September 25, 1891, 16.



Berthe Mouchette, *The Queen's Bouquet*, oil on canvas, 1891, 122.1 x 152.9 cm (with frame),  
National Gallery of Victoria Collection, Melbourne (Public Domain)

Oh ! cette main sanglante empreinte sur le mur  
pour m'apporter les fleurs qu'on me refuse  
C'est aux pointes de fer qu'il s'est blessé sans doute.  
Un morceau de dentelle y pendait !

Ruy Blas Acte 2nd  
VICTOR HUGO

Painted by  
BERTHE MOUCHETTE  
1891<sup>65</sup>

Mouchette advertised Oberwyl's second quarter would commence in late April 1892, but it was a difficult winter for her. With falling enrolments due to the growing impact of the depression, Mouchette's debts mounted.

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<sup>65</sup> [www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/55986/](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/55986/) ; 'Oh! That bloody hand imprinted on the wall!/ to bring me flowers that I am refused here/ It was probably with iron points that he injured himself/A piece of lace hung from it!'

She was no longer able to operate the school and she had probably over-extended herself financially at Oberwyl, especially with her many generous and hospitable entertainments. Moreover, the cost of dressing for vice-regal receptions, parties, exhibitions, and theatre events was high. By July, Mouchette had sold Oberwyl. In need of money, she auctioned her furniture, decorative arts, and her New Caledonian weapons. A large grand piano by Pleyel et Cie, purchased from the Centennial Exhibition in Melbourne, which once held pride of place in the drawing room, and six other fine pianos were included.<sup>66</sup> This sale also comprised the school's furniture, bedroom furniture, studio easels, models and equipment, the stage and the theatre sets. Her world at Oberwyl ended. Almost a week later Mouchette and Lion held a sale of their oil paintings, watercolours, frescoes, friezes, panels, and painted plaques, at Fraser's Art Gallery, Queen Street, Melbourne. A large and attractive portrait of Louis XV attributed to the French court painter Charles-André Van Loo was also auctioned, adding further cachet to Mouchette's sale.<sup>67</sup> Mouchette had creditors, and a first dividend payment was made to them through her estate solicitors in late August.<sup>68</sup>

By September, she and Lion had settled in South Australia. She later became deeply involved in the Theosophical Society, painting the portrait of the theosophist and humanitarian activist Annie Besant, whom she hosted with a reception in Adelaide in 1908.<sup>69</sup> Yet, through her teaching and her art exhibitions in Adelaide and the Adelaide Hills, Mouchette continued to forward the cause of women and their cultural influence and acted as an ambassador of French culture, language, and art well into the early years of the twentieth century.

*Australian National University, Canberra*

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<sup>66</sup> 'Advertising', *Argus*, July 15, 1892, 2; 'Advertising', *Argus*, July 19, 1892, 2.

<sup>67</sup> 'Advertising', *Argus*, July 23, 1892, 2; 'Sale of Pictures', *Age*, July 25, 1892, 3.

<sup>68</sup> 'Law Notice', *Age*, August 19, 1892, 8.

<sup>69</sup> *Critic* (Adelaide), June 17, 1908, 18; *Advertiser* (Adelaide), September 24, 1908, 6. Mouchette's painting of this portrait was assisted also with the use of a three-quarter cabinet photograph. Signed and dated, it remains in the Theosophical Society's rooms in Adelaide, South Australia. I am grateful to Gaynor Fraser, Lodge President, for his assistance with research about this painting.

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