



Modernism and Feminism

Australian Women Artists 1900–1940

Helen Topliss

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CRAFTSMAN HOUSE

G+B ARTS INTERNATIONAL

For my daughters — Julia and Maggie

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Helen Topliss

Introduction

Women are capable of education, but they are not made for activities which demand a universal faculty such as the more advanced sciences, philosophy and certain forms of artistic production [...] The difference between men and women is like that between animals and plants. Men correspond to animals, while women correspond to plants because their development is more placid and the principle that underlies it is the rather vague unity of feeling. When women hold the helm of government, the state is at once in jeopardy, because women regulate their actions not by the demands of universality but by arbitrary inclinations and opinions. Women are educated — who knows how? — as it were by breathing in ideas, by living rather than acquiring knowledge. The status of manhood, on the other hand, is attained only by the stress of thought and much technical exertion.

Georg Hegel¹

In this study I discuss Modernism in Australia in relation to women artists against the advances achieved by female emancipation. At the beginning of the twentieth century women artists' new professional status was due jointly to education and to their new self-determination thanks to female suffrage. Education in art, as in the other professions, is essential for the development of the individual in society and for success in any chosen field. Classical philosophy, from which Hegel inherited his views on women, required women to be passive in the public sphere. According to this view of human nature, women are to men as plants are to animals; a lower and less intelligent form of life. As Hegel expressed somewhat grudgingly, women were perhaps capable of being educated to a certain extent, but not in the higher or the universal categories of philosophy and art. In using women's art training as a basis for the discussion of them as artists, I highlight the radical social changes that took place as a result of the women's emancipation movement at the end of the nineteenth century. This movement succeeded in discrediting the classical stereotype of women. Female emancipists challenged and overturned the assumptions of classical philosophy and aesthetics by asserting and proving that women were capable of higher achievement. Hegel's opinion of women, once dogma, was increasingly being questioned.

My starting point is the artistic and intellectual background of women artists at the beginning of the twentieth century, a background which is essential to an understanding of their subsequent careers. To simply state the basic facts and dates of where they studied and exhibited is not sufficient for an appreciation of their development and achievement. What is needed is a sustained analysis of women's artistic production within their specific historical context. The politics and the conditions of women artists have to be clearly mapped prior to any discussion of the particular character and qualities demonstrated in their work.

My interest in dealing with some of the issues will therefore require a careful plotting of

the historical context, since without this any discussion of women's art production could easily become an essentialist argument about the circumscribed qualities demonstrated by women as passive victims of history. On the contrary, women artists were fully conscious of their political context, and their artistic expression was made in the light of their knowledge as active agents in an historical process. Consequently, I will concentrate less on a stylistic analysis of their work and more on an analysis of their production in terms of recent feminist debate. Another important factor within the Australian context is that very little work has been done to establish a history for women artists of the period; there is no general historical text nor are there many published documents available on the artists. For this reason, I have had to resurrect texts and documents that have not been gathered together before. My own theoretical understanding of the major issues dealt with here has emerged slowly out of this necessarily empirical project and I am generally indebted to the writings of Anglo-American feminist art historians and theorists such as Griselda Pollock, Anthea Callen, Naomi Schor and Rozsika Parker.

Within this context I examine the following processes:

- The relation of female artists to a male-dominated field of endeavour.
- The development of a non-patriarchal discourse with regard to work produced by women which recognises the issue of gender difference in relation to work produced by women.
- An analysis of prevalent ideologies concerning art education and art production in which women's contributions can be situated.

The ideologies that have marginalised women in the historiography of art have been internalised by our institutions and by society, as expressed by Hegel in the above quotation. This study seeks to historicise the careers and work of women artists in Australia, a process that has to dismantle the male, linear analysis of art movements and to replace it with a mosaic form evolving or spiralling out of a central core. This core represents the complex issues of emancipation, of feminism and notions of femininity out of which the work of Australian women artists has developed. It is essential to look at women artists' education both at home and abroad, their general regional context, their subsequent careers, the work that they produced, as well as their artistic affiliations and the networks that they established with one another. My methodology requires a progression from the larger context to an analysis of their work in a series of specific case studies. I provide a great deal of documentary and primary evidence from newspapers and journals to elucidate the general context and to suggest the process these women artists experienced, a process which enabled them to 'suddenly' emerge as professional artists between the two wars. What I elucidate here are the mechanisms that went towards the creation of this new phenomenon of independent women artists.

To find a space for women's artistic production, the prevalent cultural ideologies have to be understood so that a place can be created for women artists that does justice to their production. This space is different to that allocated to them by male critics. It has been recognised that women in all cultures inhabit a different space to that of men; it is generally a smaller and more private space.² Analogously, in the field of art history, the space given to women is equally slight, even when criticism acknowledges women's art, it is often lacking in an understanding of female social history. Furthermore, women who distinguish themselves in any field are generally treated as token males, thus becoming alienated from their own history. Female issues have to be understood within the historical context of Australian women's social

condition where they were doubly marginalised, first of all as women and secondly as provincial female artists.

Part of my strategy is to trace the careers of a number of Australian women artists in the period of 1900–1940 to assess the effect of European art on their work and, consequently, to attempt to evaluate their influence on the Australian art of the period. The major features of this period were the arrival of Modernism, its gradual assimilation into the culture and the reappraisal of the arts and crafts, a field in which women held centre stage. Modernism has been problematised by recent writings and the use made of this term in the writing on art in Australia has disregarded the multiple origins of the work produced by women artists; their production has been simplified and their interpretations of Modernism treated as a fixed category. In this study Modernism is considered from the women artists' point of view at the time, and it will become evident that each of these artists had a personal and idiosyncratic response to the European phenomenon.

Women artists' involvement with art education and art therapy during World War I reveals that they also saw art as a social instrument. The new societies that were formed to encourage the arts and crafts were founded and led by women such as Eirene Mort and Ethel Stephens, both of whom were active in art politics in Sydney at the beginning of the twentieth century, when women artists were working with a number of stylistic categories in response to changing attitudes to the crafts at this time.³ The important issues, such as the professionalising of women artists, crossed stylistic and media boundaries.

The press during this period fully acknowledged the role of women artists as promoters of Modernism and of the Arts and Crafts movement in general. However, Modernism took many forms in Europe and its corresponding offshoots in Australia were also varied.⁴ At times, its Australian derivative was genuinely interpretative and there was an attempt to create a distinctly Australian version, as in the case of Margaret Preston. But, in other instances, no attempt was made to identify the individual form of Modernism with a characteristic Australian character, as in the work of Grace Crowley and Dorrit Black.⁵ Thea Proctor is an interesting figure for feminist analysis since she consciously advocated a strong self-image that was stylistically related to her mannered and decorative art. Proctor was of the opinion that art was universal and therefore she did not consider the arguments in favour of a nationalist content or idiom for Australian art. In Proctor's case, there was also a disjunction between the expression of a modernist aesthetic and her own practice which was essentially a *fin-de-siècle* style. Nevertheless, she was an important advocate of Modernism in Sydney during the period under question. Proctor's case does demonstrate the importance of an artist's training for their subsequent artistic development. Significantly, she was to lament her conservative influences, in particular the decorative work of Charles Conder which attracted her on her arrival in London at the beginning of the century. She realised later, that had she been introduced to Cézanne at that formative stage of her career, her artistic development would have been radically different.⁶

Modernism was not the only force acting on artists in this period. In the field of craft, the major influence was an Arts and Crafts style derived from British designers and theorists. It is hardly surprising to discover that the Arts and Crafts movement provided the major direction for the Society of Arts and Crafts in Sydney, a body that was given shape by Eirene Mort and Ethel Stephens. On the other hand, the Society of Arts and Crafts in Melbourne had a much more modernist orientation, amply displayed in the journal of that society, the *Recorder*. Ethel

Spowers and Eveline Syme had a particularly high profile in the society and published their findings and experiences of Modernism regularly in the *Recorder*. Spowers and Syme and some of their colleagues found a version of Modernism in the work of Claude Flight, at the Grosvenor School of Modern Art in London. A few of them also continued their studies with André Lhote in Paris. The circles of influence for foreign art students were generally restricted to a few well-known schools and masters, since the period of their studies overseas was generally of short duration and foreign students only had access to certain well-publicised schools. Just as in the nineteenth century, the Académie Julian was the most popular art school for foreign students, so similarly, in the early twentieth century, the Académie Lhote was the most frequented school for American, British and Australian students.

My choice of women artists has been guided, first of all, by the consideration of overseas influences; I have therefore selected artists who trained overseas. Secondly, I have chosen women who worked in a variety of media, in order to establish the close links between art and craft during this period. The crafts were after all, crucial in disseminating modernist values, as the Arts Décoratifs exhibition in Paris in 1925 demonstrated. Women had always been traditionally involved in the decorative arts, and for this reason, their work was prominent in the period in question. Sonia Delaunay's exhibit at the 1925 exhibition included her own fabric designs worn by glamorous models and exhibited with her Orphist paintings. Significantly, a photograph of this display was reproduced in *Home* magazine in Sydney in the same year.⁷

What I would like to demonstrate, first of all, is the artistic network created by women artists in Australia from the beginning of the twentieth century up to World War II and, secondly, to establish a pattern of common interest and influences. Up to now, whenever women artists of this period have obtained critical notice, as in the case of Margaret Preston, their work has been taken out of its intellectual and artistic context. I believe that the contribution made by these women is distinct and that their achievement can only be understood in the light of the enhanced consciousness achieved by women artists at the beginning of the century as a result of the women's emancipation movement. This movement was as active in Australia and New Zealand as it was on the continent and in North America and women here were, in fact more successful than their counterparts further afield, in that they obtained the vote first. In this respect, the Adelaide context is a particularly interesting one. South Australia was the first state to achieve female suffrage in 1894; British women in comparison only achieved this in 1918. Significantly, we can establish an especially strong emancipist context for women in the arts in Adelaide and note that it is from South Australia that some of the strongest modernists, such as Margaret Preston, have originated.

The issues in question here are those which the deconstruction movement has highlighted; they involve the suspension and disruption of the accepted cultural hierarchies. In art history, deconstruction has enabled a new approach towards accepted ideas and beliefs, which has overturned accepted traditions. Most of all, it has questioned definitions about movements in art and procedures in historical enquiry where the dominant ideology had prevailed. Critical enquiry has been levelled at public institutions and other social determinants rather than only at the artistic product. As a consequence, feminist history has flourished under this rupture of traditional thinking.

It is important to note that, in art historiography, each text has its own critical agenda whereby certain movements and certain artists are given privileged status. For instance, in William Moore's history, it is the Heidelberg School and above all, Arthur Streeton, that

define the author's sense of a quintessential Australian art.⁸ In Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting*, it is a notion of Modernism defined by a distinctly socially responsive art that eschewed the excesses of European Modernism.⁹ The emphasis in Smith's interpretation falls on the art of the 1940s in Melbourne, thus privileging the work produced by figurative and expressionist male artists who tended to come from Melbourne. When women artists are discussed, if at all, they are set aside as an atypical phenomenon, as in chapter VI of Smith's *Australian Painting*. In this context, Foucault's social analysis is crucial for understanding the operation of power systems within any social structure.¹⁰

The post-World War I period saw the proliferation of journals on art, the dissemination of reproductions, and the speeding up of travel which meant that, more than ever, artists in Australia were taking note of European developments. The eagerness with which women artists undertook travel overseas to further their studies and to witness the art and the landscapes related to it, such as Cézanne's Aix-en-Provence, testifies to their newfound independence. Without the independence achieved by the emancipation movement in the late nineteenth century, women could not have travelled abroad on their own. The major concessions won by the female emancipists in Australia and abroad led to a reconsideration of women's status (this is dealt with in chapter 3). This important achievement was crucial to women artists because, until then, their art was considered as a suitable accomplishment and pastime only. By the beginning of the twentieth century, women were beginning to be classified as professional artists.