

panorama



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FROM THE PRESIDENT



Dear BAS members,

Glints of spring warmth have visited Melbourne in recent days and offer something of promise to days otherwise dominated by the bleak recent reports on the Covid-19 front and the frustrations of the lockdown.

At this time of the year, many of us look forward to the Twenty Melbourne Painters group exhibition at Caulfield Town Hall. It was due to open on August 13th and run through to the end of the month. Unfortunately, like many other similar events this year, the physical exhibition has had to be cancelled. It will however, be displayed online, beginning on Thursday August 13th and can be accessed via: twentymelbournepainterssociety.com.au

Jenny Pihan Gallery, which hosts the exhibition, has recently announced the opening of a new website and undoubtedly information about the Twenty Melbourne show will be available via this source.

Much uncertainty still hangs over our activities at the studio. It seems unlikely however, that we will be resuming any classes or groups this year. This of course is disappointing, but the health and well-being of all involved remains paramount.

In the interim, the Committee wishes that everyone stay well and that we are all able to find ways to keep our engagement with art alive.

LYNTON DAEHLI

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from **DEPICTION** to **DESIGN** in the still-lives of **MARGARET PRESTON**

The period from the late C19th into the early C20th, saw the emergence for the first time in Australia of a number of significant woman artists. Amongst these was Margaret Preston, who was born in Adelaide in 1875. It was also a time during which those who were able, travelled to Europe to further their artistic studies. Often in England, but also in France, where Paris was the unquestioned centre of emerging modernist trends. In 1904, Preston herself followed this tradition.



Nature Morte (oignons), was painted in 1905, whilst Preston was resident in Paris, attending art classes and immersing herself in the rich and lively artistic environment surrounding her. In the late 1890s, prior to leaving Australia, she had studied at the National Gallery School in Melbourne, where the Tonal Realist approach was firmly ascendant. As evidenced in this painting, Preston reached a high level of skill in this approach.

A polished competency in drawing and composition underlies this painting and its judicious restraint in subject matter, is a source of much strength. We have only a blue and white enamelled cooking pot and a cluster of brown onions, arranged on a simple table surface, positioned parallel to the picture plane. The wall surface behind, is slightly darker in tone than the table, but it's characteristically greenish hue, is allowed to wash over onto the browner hue of the table surface to provide a visual link.

The rich dark blue of the pot's exterior, sets up an bold complementary blue/orange colour drama against the shedding onion skins. Each of the objects depicted is assuredly understood by the artist and captured without hesitation. There is no nervous fidgeting in the paint application, but rather a decisive and joyful laying down of the brushstrokes needed to bring the objects to life.

The picture's composition is fresh and individual. Placing the largest single object, the lustrous heavy pot, high up in the format and to one side, avoids the risk of a stolid bottom heavy arrangement. The onions then tumble away in an essentially triangular drift toward the picture's lower left corner.

The picture offers delight, but although it displays skill in composition and technique, it's central concern is with **depiction** of its subject. The genre of still-life remained central to Preston's art practice throughout her career, but as she progressed beyond early works such as this, she became increasingly engaged by the design and decorative values within the pictures themselves. In a sense, it is as though she moved from being focused on the **life of the subject matter**, to a concern with the **life of the painting** itself. For artists working in a representational style, this is a decision which must often be made. At what point does our attention shift from a focus on the subject matter we are capturing and move to a consideration of the demands of the picture and getting this right.

During her initial stay in Europe, Preston had the opportunity to experience first hand, the emerging Modernist movements in art. She saw exhibitions of the work of Post-Impressionists: Cezanne and Gauguin and also the early work of Matisse and Fernand Leger among others. Although she remained committed to realism in her painting, she became engaged by what was referred to as "decorative art", emerging from Manet and Whistler and emphasising the aesthetic idea of picture design over subject matter.



This picture is entitled: Aboriginal Flowers and was painted in 1928. Preston travelled to remote Australia many times across her career and returned from one trip with this collection of blooms, made from feathers, as a tourist souvenir at a remote indigenous community. Her interest in aboriginal art and culture was long-lived and at times contentious. However, I will keep the focus here just on the picture.

We can see how far she has moved by this stage, from representing the subject, toward a highly designed and decorative treatment. It is unquestionably flowers in a vase beside a tilted bowl containing fruit, but exactly what the nature of the surface on which they sit is, or what we should make of the ambiguous backdrop, leaves us guessing. Her concern is with melding the painting itself, to form a satisfying decorative arrangement of its parts.

Let's first look at the strong underlying geometry in the composition. The flowers form a partial sphere, which sits atop the neutral cylinder of the vase. The fruit bowl is a simplified disc form, with the curves of its profile echoed in the ridged markings in the table surface. The identity of the backdrop is hard to determine, but it appears recessed in the central panel. This is then flanked first by lighter vertical bands followed by dark bands at the picture's edges.

The colour palette is restrained, with most of the picture's surface given over to tonal variations of a warm grey. These come to an extreme of black and white in the hemisphere of flowers, which also introduces us to the presence of vermillion. This colour however, appears nowhere else in the picture. The final hue of deep yellow, is strictly confined to the tilted disc of the fruit bowl.

Although this is still clearly a representational painting, it has much in common with the European modernist abstract work of the early C20th, Preston would have seen whilst studying there. We could look for example to the work of Georges Braque, the Cubist colleague of Picasso, or their Spanish contemporary, Juan Gris.



Implement Blue of 1927, is perhaps the best known of Preston's still-lives from this period.

Again, it is a triumph of design and the decorative over mere depiction of its subject. The painting owes much to the style of Art Deco, an abbreviation for the Arts Décoratifs movement, which emerged just prior to WW1 in Paris and subsequently became pervasive in architecture, art and design worldwide, giving us such splendours as New York's Chrysler Building amongst much else.

To return to Preston's painting, considered geometry plays an important role. The suggestion is that the table on which the objects sit, is pressed into a corner. However, definition is minimal. The horizontal surface, without the objects and shadows, would be just a flat white plane. The backdrop, is also simple. Black with white bands. Two at first, then three once they turn the corner toward the right hand edge. The table surface tilts precariously downward, in fact at a steeper angle than the glasses and cups which sit upon it and the elliptical shadows cast by the latter, are by no means akin to those that would occur naturally. Their function here is decorative.

The colour palette is again restrained. The main drama is built into the extreme of the black/white contrast. If we look more closely however, a presence of blue is allowed to creep into the shadows cast by the jug and the white cup and saucer in front of it. Apart from a range of greys, the only other colours present in any consequential way, are the yellows associated with the cut lemon submerged in liquid, in the glass to the left. There is a playful schematised rendering of the reflections and refractions of light, dancing on the surfaces of jug and glasses. These however, answer more to the demands of the painting than to the objects with which they are connected.



Banksia 1927, is one of many paintings, which celebrate Preston's sustained love of native Australian flora. As in *Implement Blue*, this painting makes important use of an assertive black/white drama in its layout. It most likely represents a table of some sort before a window, but these objects are secondary to their role in providing a set of engaging shapes and tone/colours on which to place the bunch of banksia (blossoms) of the title.

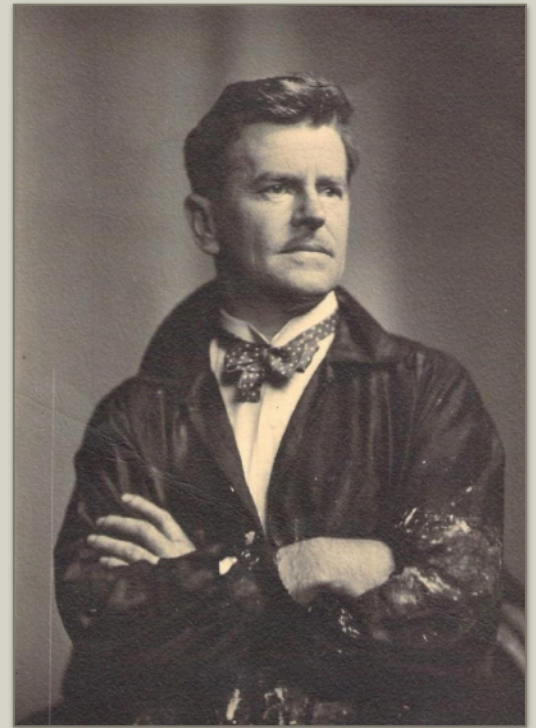
If we look closely at the table, it's surface appears to be made up of segments resting at different inclinations. For me, this is primarily about a whimsical playing with geometry, whilst allowing for the introduction of some mid-tone greys, to transition between the extremes of black and white in the schematic layout. There is also an important diagonal accent in the picture's structure, primarily in the rightward leaning placement of the banksia flowers, but then further picked up in the two unexplained triangular forms on the picture's right hand edge. The light grey left-hand segment of the table, also helps to affirm this diagonal rhythm.

Whilst the artist is firmly absorbed in the study of and presentation of her subject: the flowers. She clearly wants to share her love of them with us. There is also no question that she wants to make an engaging picture and the *life of the picture* and its decorative value, is ultimately of greater importance than the subject it depicts.

Margaret Preston's paintings are represented in most of the major Australian collections. A comprehensive retrospective exhibition was held at the NGV Federation Square in 2005 and the excellent catalogue by Deborah Edwards is still available. However, if you are interested, there will be no difficulty in sourcing illustrations of her work. She is a superb and sophisticated colourist and a preeminent Australian artist of the C20th.

LYNTON DAEHLI

W B McInnes



My grandfather William Beckwith McInnes was born in Melbourne in 1889. He was generally called “Bill” and referred to as “WB” by family. He died aged 50, so his grandchildren got to know him only through his paintings and family stories.

WB was born with a heart condition which these days would be identified and corrected in a baby easily, but caused him difficulties throughout his life. According to a family story he was invited to enrol in the National Gallery School at age 14, on the recommendation of his doctor who was impressed by the drawings and sketched portraits young Bill had been doing while in hospital.

He graduated from the Gallery school in 1909, after winning a succession of awards as a student. However, he didn't win the highly coveted prize of the Travelling Scholarship with his final exhibition painting “The Empty Cradle”. It shows a man and woman looking downward to the cradle. Presumably grieving parents, the left hand of the mother is without a ring. This is understood to be the reason for the unfavourable judgement of this work.

He took himself off to Europe and Britain in 1912 using funds from a highly praised exhibition with fellow graduate F R Crozier at The Athanaeum Gallery in 1911. He visited galleries and built a body of landscape work that was exhibited at the Athanaeum in 1914. On that trip he stopped in Morocco where he sketched and painted vibrant market and street scenes. He travelled through England up to Scotland to Iona, the island his grandparents had emigrated from. He was able to extend his time painting landscapes in England and Scotland by spending a year or so based in St Ives north of London where he taught at the local school.

He was interviewed later about this early period, and says he once had “one of those fits of despair that comes at some time, I suppose, to any artist. I simply could not manage the colours of the Scottish landscape to my satisfaction, and at one stage, in utter disgust, I pitched everything - canvas, easels, paints and all - into the river and vowed I wouldn't touch painting again.”

Fortunately he did continue to paint, and the Athanaeum exhibition was a sellout, with at least two paintings purchased by Nellie Melba. During the years of the First World War, WB continued to concentrate on landscapes. He would travel and camp with other painters, and describes one expedition: “One of my most frequent companions on my jaunts was Crozier. He and I once departed on a sea trip in a small craft with a tiny cabin. We had a terribly rough trip once we got outside the bay; our clothes were drenched and the seas washed into the cabin. We got round Wilson's Promontory, narrowly escaping seasickness, and put in at Lakes Entrance, moving on up the river to Bairnsdale. We wanted to get into the bush to sketch, and we hired a man to drive us and our belongings somewhere well out into the country. He did it all right. We drove all day, and at night he dumped us in a bare field by a fence, and departed. We awoke next morning and found we were in the middle of an absolutely flat, absolutely treeless plain - not a thing to be seen from one horizon to the other. We had no idea where we were, but waited patiently most of that day til a cart passed. We hailed it, and got back to Bairnsdale and took the train to Beaconsfield. We tramped from there to Cockatoo Creek, and sent our things ahead by rail. Ahead, did I say? The railways took three weeks to deliver the goods, and when they arrived a splendid Christmas pudding, baked for us by an aunt of Crozier's, had whiskers on it a foot long. We were at Cockatoo Creek for the best part of nine months, sketching and idling.”

WB began teaching at the National Gallery School in Melbourne in 1916, aged 27 and continued there until his death in 1939. Initially he acted as locum tenens for Frederick McCubbin, master of the school of drawing during McCubbin's six months' leave of absence. He was then temporarily appointed to the position in 1918 after McCubbin's death, and in 1920 he was permanently appointed. In 1934 when [Bernard Hall](#) left for England as adviser for the [Felton](#) bequest, McInnes was appointed acting-director of the National Gallery of Victoria, and on Hall's death, was appointed head of the painting school.

1916 was also the year of his first notable portrait commission. Members of the Art Advisory Board gave him a commission to paint Sir Ronald Munro-Ferguson, who was then Governor-General but stipulated he should submit a trial sketch. The story goes that Sir Ronald kept him waiting in a room where there were a number of portraits by Henry Raeburn. The young McInnes spent the time studying them, then the GG gave him an hour and a half. The sketch was submitted dripping wet and the astonishment of the members was so great at the excellence of the study that it was unanimously accepted as the finished work.

Winning the Wynne Prize for landscape in 1918, WB felt he was on his way to being a landscape artist - the genre he loved - but his multiple success with the Archibald changed this trajectory.

The Archibald Prize was the first major prize for portraiture in Australian art initiated in 1921 after the receipt of a bequest from J.F. Archibald, editor of *The Bulletin* who died in 1919. My grandfather was awarded the inaugural Archibald and the following three as well. He went on to win the award a total of seven times.

He travelled to Europe again in 1925 and found he was in great demand as a portrait painter. A major accolade was the commission from the Federal government to depict the opening of the first parliament in Canberra in 1927 by the Duke of York. In 1928 he exhibited with the [Royal Academy](#), and in 1933 he travelled to England again (this time with wife and children) to paint the Duke of York (later [King George VI](#)). This was a commission arranged by the Castlemaine Gallery.

The following story describing an early studio incident against the background of WB's position a pre-eminent portraitist is from an article in the *Adelaide News* in May 1937:

"Mr. McInnes has had many distinguished sitters, including the King and Queen. It is hard to get him to speak of his experiences with Royalty, but that he thoroughly enjoyed them is evident from his keen Imperialism and the result of his portrayal of Their Majesties. Many years ago he built himself a studio of earth blocks, and it looked very fine. There was a light high up in the wall that threw a shaft of gold on to a dais on which the sitter was placed, giving a real Raeburn touch to the subject. Being rubicund of visage at the time, I was asked to sit as a Raeburn type, but after the first day had to relinquish the honour to make way for Capt. Colin Duncan, then military attache to the Governor-General. Between whiles the rain fell heavily and undermined the soft foundations, and when the gallant hussar was looking his finest and the artist most enthusiastic down came the whole show with a crash, luckily without injury to either occupant.

Mr. McInnes laughed heartily when reminded of it the other day, and said how sporting Capt. Duncan was about it. The portrait when completed was an outstanding exhibit at the Australian Art Association's successful show in 1922."



"Mother and Son" a portrait of my grandmother and my uncle Malcolm at home, entered in the Archibald in 1922. WB won the prize that year with his (still missing) portrait of Professor Harrison Moore.

As a family, we always wondered why there hadn't been much written about WB. A few years ago my sister-in-law and I approached Melbourne author Margot Tasca who is now working on the final draft of her biography covering his life and work. Margot has already published a biography of Percy Leason, a contemporary of his. She wants to draw attention to the artists who worked "between the wars" and were swept aside with the movement to Modernism in Australia. She says "his portrait painting was prolific but just how prolific it actually was, can only be guessed at. We mainly only know about the works in public collections and a few in private but I think there are probably many, many more. He entered about 75 works into the Archibald, and then I have titles for possibly about another 75. Although 150 portraits is quite a number - particularly over about 20 years, I suspect the number of portraits he did, could be double that." Margot's biography is to be published next year, when the Art Gallery of New South Wales will hold their "Archies 100" retrospective exhibition. The AGNSW are currently tracking down the locations of winning portraits and finalists. This prompted the recent articles in The Australian newspaper (June 17) where the discovery of the location of WB's 1936 Archibald-winning portrait of Julian Ashton is featured.

You can see images of Archibald prize portraits, including WB's "Portrait of a Lady" from 1924 of my grandmother, Violet, who was herself a highly regarded artist if you go to The Art Gallery of New South Wales <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/prizes/archibald/>

Vicki McInnes



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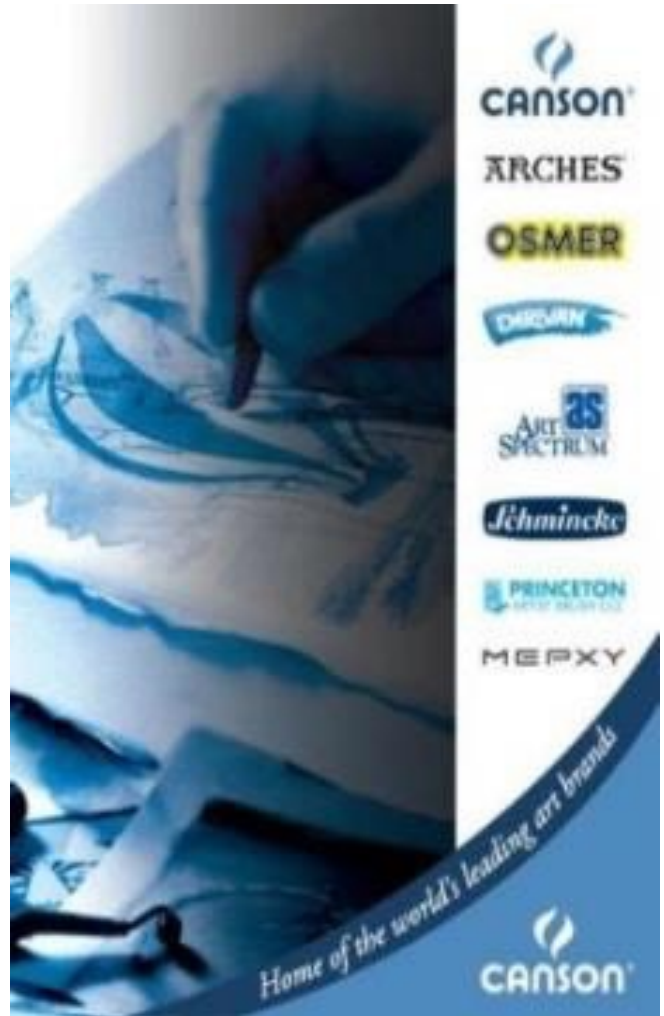
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Street Art

Art or vandalism?

Graffiti, posters, murals, tags, pavement drawings and even sculptures — all these are street art, the art of urban spaces. From the cave paintings of our ancestors, through the wall announcements of Ancient Greece and Rome, and to our days — inscriptions and drawings on the walls of cities and villages accompany human civilization. For many of us, graffiti in the subway, underpasses, and railway overpasses seems barbaric and hooligan. But are they indeed? According to supporters of street art, art hidden in galleries, museums and private collections is inaccessible to most people. That is why street artists advocate the democratization of art and its universal accessibility outside the legislative system scope, as well as generally accepted concepts of private property.



The ephemerality and fragility of street art projects is one of the central ideas of this art form. At any moment, a one-of-a-kind "exhibit" can disappear without a trace, it can be painted over both by janitors ordered by the authorities, and other artists. The main tool of a street art painter is a spray can and an accurate idea of what he/she wants to draw, because you often need to do this very quickly. In many countries, considerable fines are imposed for damage to city property, so artists try to hide their activity in a construction work, filming or other inconspicuous "movement".



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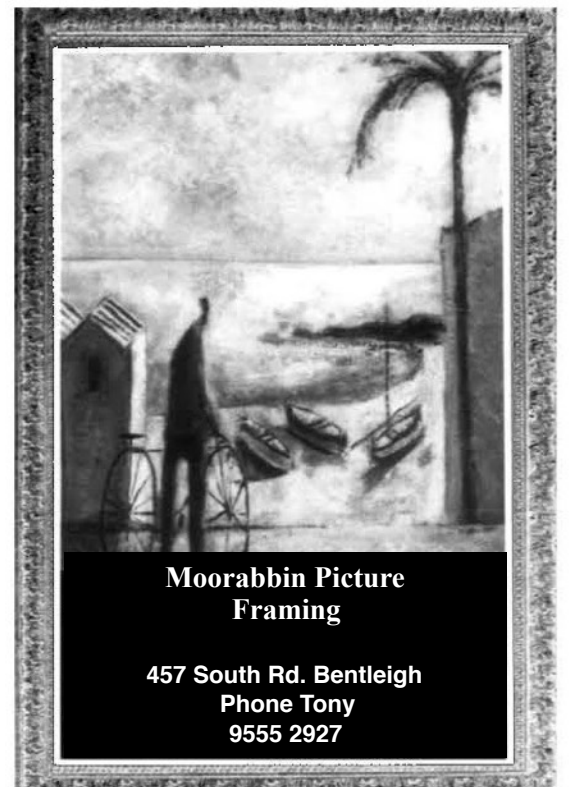
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