



FOREWORD

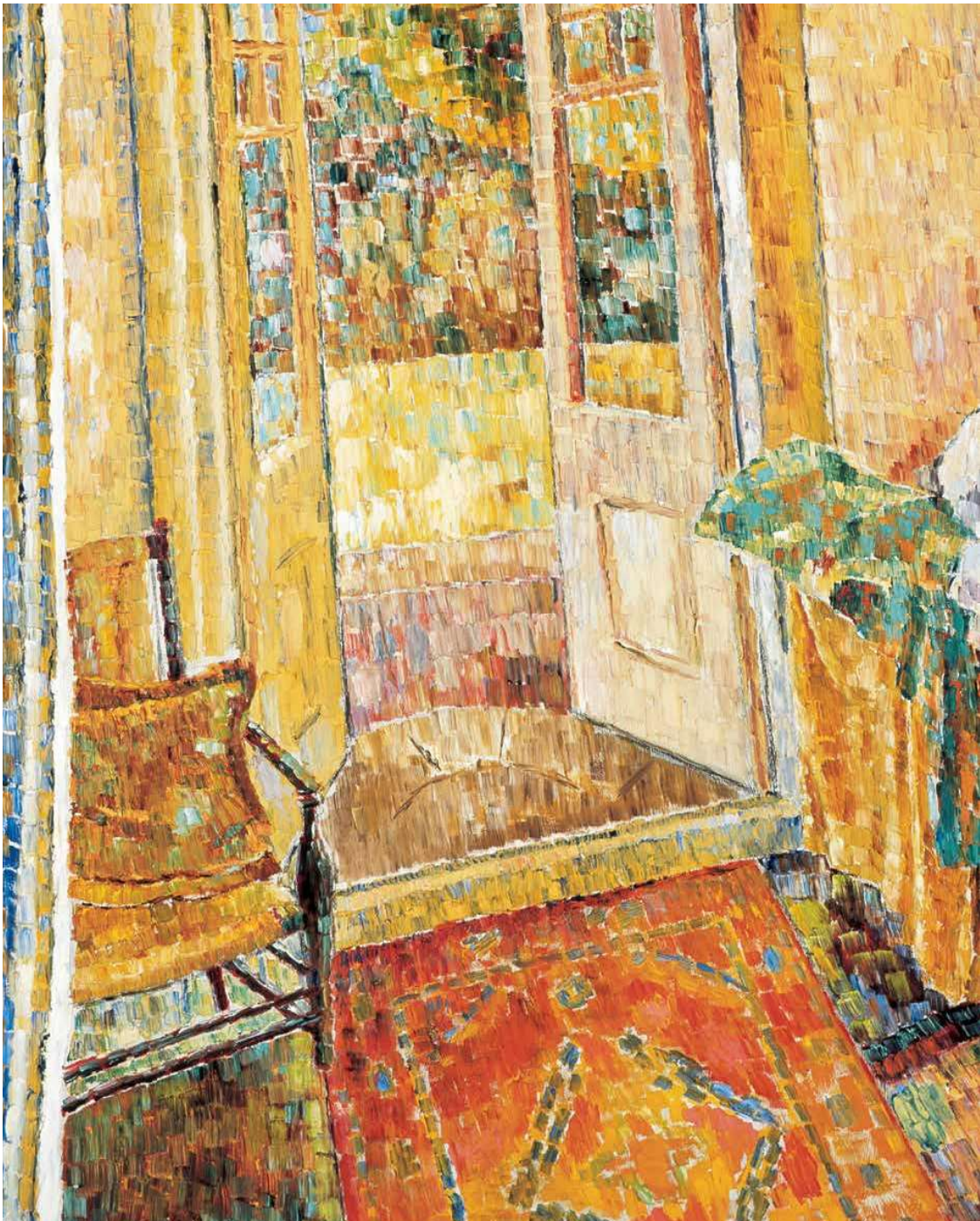
I close my eyes and imagine my ideal artworld space: it's sun-lit, spacious and airy. I walk amidst a scatter of tables and easy chairs, catching snatches of conversation on intrepid travel, must-see shows and other artworld gossip. I walk over to the well-stocked library to do some quiet reading, then chat about art and ideas over a drink and game of cards. It's a place where I can meet up with friends, take a life class or join fellow sketchers. It also offers space and resources for exhibitions and public lectures. Best of all, it's a brilliant place to host art parties and dance to the latest music...

Many will know where I'm going here, for this is precisely what our great-great-grandmothers set up over a hundred years ago at the Sydney club-rooms of the Society of Women Painters. I mention this 'herstorical' reverie in response to a common query we hear today: whether independent actions, exhibitions and publications just isolate and 'ghetto-ise' women's work? Art history shows otherwise, and this volume illustrates a century of female creativity that needs to be asserted. Back in 1910, the feminist platform of the Society of Women Painters was fairly clear: to build on the impetus of women's suffrage, to expand education, to provide relative freedom of travel (unchaperoned) and participation in new workplaces, including the professional artist's studio.

Stepping out from the deep, conservative shade cast by the Heidelberg School, this younger generation wove, printed, painted and potted new forms to express the modern, emancipated lives they wished to lead. 'Wished to...': art is a wonderful laboratory for living. The title of this book signals how these women artists and craftswomen, teachers, art writers and influencers actively shaped our modern culture. Their biographies and images indicate that this was no small feat. Why so? These women could not claim a direct relation to Australia's national story as their birthright. They had no mythic, heroic individuals to serve as pictorial models, such as the stereotypes of the bush pioneer or larrikin enshrined on canvas by the Heidelberg painters. Nor did they enjoy an equivalent Romantic legacy of 'female bohemia'. However, the images and

lives detailed in this book charted a different course to the prevailing Edwardian roles of daughter, wife and mother. A few of the artists showcased here were adolescents when women first gained the right to vote. Many then saw the old world collapse and, as mature professionals, were imagining a new national narrative in the aftermath of war. They depicted new subjects, new stories and new spaces. The masculine bohemians of the 1890s, for example, had held that the city was corrupt and unhealthy, but modern women of the twentieth century who were not identified with the bush mythology wholeheartedly embraced city life, commerce, industry and leisure as spaces of freedom and movement. For these artists, 'Farmers' meant the swish Sydney emporium (like Horderns and David Jones) where women could shop unchaperoned in safety and comfort. Neither bohemian nor bushman, this generation created a new creative subjectivity from scratch: 'the modern woman artist'. She may have been privileged and white rather than anarchic and avant-garde, but she far more effectively helped to liberate future generations of Australian women artists.

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INTRODUCTION

*'It was an odd road to be walking, this of painting.
Out and out one went, farther and farther,
until at last one seemed to be on a narrow plank,
perfectly alone, over the sea.'*

The title for this book is taken from the above passage in Virginia Woolf's classic 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse* where the artist Lily Briscoe reflects on her sense of isolation as an artist. This occurs at a time of self-doubt regarding her artistic ability, a state of mind which isn't helped by the assertion of a male character in the novel that 'Women can't write, women can't paint'. Those familiar with Woolf's writing will know that Lily eventually overcomes self-doubt and produces a work with which she is well-satisfied.

Self-doubt, professional isolation and being subject to disparagement appear to be the lot of many creative people and even those of genius are not immune. While this relates to both genders and to all time periods, it is likely that women artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were obliged to walk a more difficult artistic road than most. Before this time, the making of art was the preserve of males, with women being limited to the roles of muses, models or artists' assistants. In Australia, as elsewhere, this situation changed utterly over just a few decades of the twentieth century, such that women artists came to be recognised for their talent without necessarily being hindered by their gender. This transformation was not a chance occurrence but came about through the collective vision, energy and determination of a cadre of women who challenged the status quo and changed the artistic landscape. In telling something of their life stories, this book aims to convey a sense of the world in which these women lived and of their contribution to an artistic upheaval that was more revolutionary than evolutionary.

From Ellis Rowan, who was born in 1848, through to Lina Bryans, who died in 2000, the lives of the 156 women described in this book cover more than 150 years. Over this time span, two world wars were fought, communism came and went as a political ideology, economic depressions were endured, the internal combustion engine was invented, electric and nuclear energy were harnessed and telecommunications came to dominate all of our lives. Over the same time period, the population of Australia went from some 350,000 (close to the population of Canberra today) to over 19 million, New South Wales and Victoria separated, Victoria saw its gold rush and Brisbane its great fire, Australian Rules Football was codified, Ned Kelly was hanged, Qantas was founded, the Sydney Harbour Bridge was built, the Tasmanian tiger became extinct, both Melbourne and Sydney hosted the Olympic Games and Aboriginal people became full Australian citizens and had their land rights recognised. Women demanded and obtained the right to vote, Nellie Melba reigned supreme over the opera stage, Edith Cowan was elected to parliament, Queen Elizabeth opened the Sydney Opera House, safe and effective contraception became available, the ban on married women working in the public service was lifted and paid maternity leave was introduced. The development of the literary, performing and visual arts paralleled these profound changes in Australian society.

At the risk of promoting a stereotype, the individual women included in this book had much in common. Many were from privileged backgrounds – from households where education was valued

and where artistic and other talents were likely to be identified and nurtured. Fewer than might be expected ever married and fewer still had children. In twentieth-century Australia, some 95% of women married at some period in their lives and over 90% had children. By comparison, just over half (51%) of the artists included in this book ever married and fewer than one third (31%) had children. It is likely that some shunned domesticity so that they could better devote themselves to their art. An alternative explanation might be that, finding themselves without a spouse or children, they were better able to develop their artistic careers. Some of the women included in the book were clearly gay and it is probable that some were drawn to an artistic milieu that was more accepting of gay people than Australian society in general, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Irrespective of their social backgrounds, marital status and sexual orientation, these women opted for their own 'odd road' on which to walk. Some were self-taught while others pursued a formal art education through the limited channels then available. Those fortunate enough to live in Melbourne or Sydney had access to the National Gallery of Victoria Art Schools and to the art classes at the Victorian Artists Society on the one hand and to the Julian Ashton Sydney Art School and Sydney Technical College (later National Art School) on the other. Those from smaller cities, towns and rural areas had fewer training opportunities; for many single young women of their era, moving to Melbourne or Sydney to study was not an option, at least not until they had matured in years. Wherever they studied at that time, art students were mostly exposed to a conservative 'academic' teaching that was suspicious of anything new and discouraged experimentation. Aspiring women artists often also encountered other barriers to their artistic development – for example, being denied access to life classes or being excluded from art-related excursions in the absence of a chaperone.

A remarkable number of women artists seemed dissatisfied with what Australia had to offer in terms of exposure to art and art teaching, such that 98 (63%) of

the 156 artists featured in this book travelled to Europe at some period in their lives to broaden their artistic horizons. Travel to Europe was no small undertaking at that time, often taking over three months on a sailing ship. This explains why, once arrived in Europe, visiting Australians tended to stay for years rather than months. The mecca for Australian artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was either Paris or London, with Paris being more popular with women artists and London being more attractive to their male counterparts. In Paris, women were able to access a number of private Académies (e.g. Delécluse, Colarossi, de la Grande Chaumière, Julian) and rub shoulders with the outstanding artists of that era. London also had its attractions, with visiting Australian artists gravitating to such places as the Royal Academy, the Slade School of Fine Art and the Grosvenor School of Modern Art.

While a small fraction of Australian women artists chose to remain overseas for much of their lives (e.g. Mary Cecil Allen, Anne Dangar, Bessie Davidson, Agnes Goodsir, Mary Cockburn Mercer), the great majority returned to Australia, bringing back with them not only fresh perspectives on art but on much else that enriches the human condition – e.g. literature, music, fashion, architecture, politics and philosophy. The individual and collective experiences of returned émigrés served to stimulate local debate on societal values and on national identity at a time when Australia was emerging from its colonial chrysalis and taking its place among the nations of the earth. Many Australian artists who travelled overseas were also first-class ambassadors for their homeland, giving at least as much as they received and leaving an enduring mark on their host countries.

As a consequence of their overseas experiences, a large proportion of returning women artists became part of the modernist movement and, with the help of like-minded male artists, pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable back in Australia. For many, the espousal of new art forms came at a personal cost, as their work was often derided by the art establishment and found little favour with the viewing and buying

public. Yet, these women persevered. Through the groups and societies that they formed and joined, they supported one another, opening their studios to aspiring artists, giving lectures, writing in newspapers and magazines, broadcasting on radio and later on television, such that, over time, they helped to bring about a greater acceptance of new approaches to art. In this, they were supported by some forward-looking private galleries, which in turn were often owned or run by women. The art establishment proved to be less receptive. For example, Mary Alice Evatt was the first woman to be appointed to the Board of Trustees at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, in 1943, and remained the only female member for the following 27 years.

In order to combat professional isolation, women artists formed or joined existing groups and societies, some of which were gender-specific. For example, the Students' Art Club (later the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors) was founded in 1902 and Sydney followed suit with the establishment of the New South Wales Society of Women Painters in 1910. Women were heavily involved in the establishment of broader groupings; for example, thirteen women, including AME Bale, Elsie Barlow, Bernice Edwell, Bertha Merfield, Clara Southern, Ruth Sutherland, Jo Sweatman and Isobel Tweddle, were among the founding members of the highly influential Twenty Melbourne Painters Society, which formed in 1918 and is still in existence. Outside of Melbourne and Sydney, women artists lacked the same level of collegial support; many ploughed on regardless, while others eventually moved from Adelaide, Perth, Brisbane and elsewhere to more supportive environments. Hobart proved to be an exception to this trend and, for a period in the early twentieth century, a small group that included Edith Holmes, Mabel Hookey, Mildred Lovett, Florence Rodway, Dorothy Stoner and Violet Vimpany maintained a strong artistic nucleus there.

At a critical time, some national and international exhibitions served to showcase the work of women artists and to nurture their early careers. A seminal event was the First Australian Exhibition of Women's Work, which was held at the Melbourne Exhibition

Building in October and November 1907 and which had 5,000 exhibits in the Fine & Applied Arts section alone. Attracting some 250,000 visitors, the exhibition proved that there was an audience for women's arts and crafts and that art could provide women with a livelihood. Some years earlier, the 1898 Exhibition of Australian Art at London's Grafton Gallery had 38 women among the 111 featured artists. However, this early experience was not sustained, such that the 1923 Exhibition of Australian Art at London's Burlington House had just 13 women (AME Bale, Elsie Barlow, Norah Gurdon, Ida Outhwaite, Margaret Preston, Thea Procter, Florence Rodway, Maude Sherwood, Janet Cumberbrae Stewart, Jo Sweatman, Jessie Traill, Dora Wilson), producing 20 of the 212 works on show.

It is clear that the two world wars served as catalysts for the emergence of women as professional artists. The recruitment of men, including male artists, to fight overseas created a vacuum that was filled by women. Although they were discouraged from working in war-affected areas and often obstructed in becoming war artists, some women persevered and proved themselves more than capable in this challenging milieu. Prominent among these were Stella Bowen, Evelyn Chapman, Sybil Craig, Dora Meeson, Hilda Rix Nicholas and Iso Rae. Others participated in different battles and wars, not least of which was the suffrage movement and other movements that fostered the emancipation of women. Just about all of the women included in this book could be regarded as feminists, although some were clearly more ardent in this regard than others.

The individual and collective activism of the women described saw many of them rising to positions of importance within the art world and then using their influence to shape the direction of twentieth-century art. Many were active in art-related clubs and societies, organised exhibitions, wrote articles and lectured on art and otherwise promoted the visual arts, sometimes at the expense of their own careers. Some became influential outside of the art world and used their status to promote the visual arts at a societal level. Outstanding examples include Mary Cecil Allen,

Ethel Anderson, Maie Casey, Sunday Reed and Treania Smith. Women such as Dorrit Black, Grace Crowley, Adelaide Perry and Thea Proctor were among the most highly regarded art teachers of their generation. Pioneering Indigenous Australian women artists such as Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Queenie McKenzie not only broke new ground but shaped the direction of Indigenous art for a myriad of followers.

Some readers might be interested in the selection criteria for inclusion in this book. Quite simply, we had to begin and end somewhere and opted to include only those artists who had lived and died at some stage in the twentieth century. This led to the omission of some people who were clearly of the twentieth century (e.g. Nora Heysen, Jacqueline Hick, Margaret Olley) but who survived into the early years of the twenty-first century. An inability to source or use biographical information led to the exclusion of others (e.g. Mary Webb, Janie Wilkinson Whyte), who we would otherwise have wished to include. The decision to write a note rather than a full profile on a given artist was also largely determined by the availability of biographical information rather than on any notion on our part of their perceived importance as artists. Doubtless, many readers will be as disappointed as we are at the paucity of Indigenous Australian artists, with just four people (Cordula Ebatarinja, Kurwingie Kerry Giles, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Queenie McKenzie) included. It is clear that Indigenous Australian artists came to prominence later than their non-Indigenous counterparts and that some future book on twenty-first-century Australian artists will be far better balanced in this regard.

It is now almost a century since Virginia Woolf wrote *To the Lighthouse*. Were she alive today, one wonders what she would make of the roads being walked by women artists of the modern era, particularly with regard to issues of self-doubt, professional isolation and gender discrimination. Woolf might still hold the view that many people who devote their lives to the mercurial and uncertain world of the literary, performing and visual arts continue to walk 'odd roads'. She would likely agree that the arts continue to be a fertile ground for self-doubt and self-

criticism, stimuli which often serve to drive some people to the highest levels of artistic achievement. However, while artistic creativity can still be a lonely pursuit, Woolf would probably surmise that, in the modern era, professional isolation is increasingly a matter of choice rather than of obligation. Doubtless, Woolf would be disappointed and disheartened by the incontrovertible evidence that gender discrimination still permeates the arts in Australia, as elsewhere. Though the people included in this book had an undoubted and profound impact on the shape of twentieth-century Australian art, work remains to be done in the twenty-first century to bring women's art to centre-stage, where it rightly belongs.

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**Paul Finucane & Catherine Stuart
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