

SPIRITUALITY AND IMMORALITY IN EARLY SYDNEY MODERNISM

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Thomas Gibbons has written of the early twentieth century that, 'In the face of... supposed evolutionary deterioration, a utopian abstract art was intended to further humanity's proper (ie. spiritual) evolution into an exalted condition of universal brotherhood and cosmic consciousness'.¹ In this paper, I argue that while some modernist artists strove to depict a spiritual essence in their work, early modernist painting in Australia was largely seen, not as a cure for evolutionary deterioration, but as part of the problem; and that this view was closely allied with aspects of gender.

At the end of the nineteenth century and until the first world war artists were influenced by a plethora of transcendental philosophies. European artists such as Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian, Munch, Klee, Kupka and others were particularly influenced by theosophy.² Wassily Kandinsky based much of his very influential 1911 publication, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, on its teachings and wrote, for example, 'the relationships in art are not necessarily ones of outward form, but are founded on inner sympathy of meaning'.³

Early modern Australian art was similarly influenced by transcendental ideas. Artists here had first-hand knowledge of the ideas/philosophies affecting European artists. For example, C. W. Leadbeater, a leader in the theosophical movement in England, set up headquarters in Sydney in 1914 and stayed here for nearly twenty years. At that time Sydney had the largest Theosophical Society in the world. Many of the modernist artists in Sydney such as Roy de Maistre, Thea Proctor, Grace Cossington Smith, Frank and Margel Hinder, and Walter and Marion Burley Griffin had links to theosophy or its sister movement, anthroposophy.

There was also a very keen interest in spiritualism in this country. People, devastated by the unexpected death toll in World War I and unable to resolve that with the expectations they had when the young men left to fight, tried to make contact with loved ones. Arthur Conan Doyle toured Australia in the 1920s, lecturing on spiritualism. Artists, most notably Norman Lindsay, were practising spiritualists.

One of the most important jumping-off points for artists moving from the real to the abstract/spiritual was the association of art and music.

Kandinsky wrote: 'Musical sound acts directly on the soul and finds an echo there because, though to varying extents, music is innate in man'.⁴ The belief that music could speak directly to the soul inspired artists to ally painting to music with the idea that painting could then also speak directly to the viewer through its form and colour, without the intervention of recognisable subject matter.

This idea evolved in a unique form in Sydney. European artists relating colour and music such as Kandinsky, Kupka and musicians such as Scriabin, did so in a poetic way. Kandinsky, for example, wrote:

Blue is the typically heavenly colour. The ultimate feeling it creates is one of rest... In music a light blue is like a flute, a darker blue a cello; a still darker a thunderous double bass; and the darkest blue of all - an organ.⁵

Roy De Maistre, by contrast, devised exact and systematic charts which associated particular tones of colour with precise musical notes in order to produce harmonising colour systems by using colours that corresponded with harmonising musical notes. The harmonising colours were used to produce paintings such as Roland Wakelin's *Synchrony in Orange Major*, 1919, which showed simplified geometric forms and non-representational colour; and then fully abstract works, such as de Maistre's *Rhythmic Composition in Yellow Green Minor*, 1919, in which the flowing forms evoke theosophical imagery, but seem to speak of a life force in the vortical form. De Maistre wrote of colour at this time that it was the means of understanding 'the deepest underlying principles of nature, the source of deep and lasting happiness... the song of life... the spiritual speech of every living thing'.⁶

The havoc wreaked by the first world war provoked the belief that modern technology was out of control. Artists in the 1920s began to subject their work to even more rigour, frequently in a greater and greater effort to find the spiritual essence of life. This control is seen in the geometric and arithmetic forms of Margaret Preston, such as those in the cones and cylinders of the vase and banksia plant, the rectangular mirror and the horizontal lines at the bottom of the work, in *Banksia*, 1927. Preston also used the Fibonacci system of mathematics to model the proportions and ratios in her work.

Margaret Preston wrote herself, in her now well known aphorism (number 46), 'Why there are so many tables of still-life in modern paintings

is because they are really laboratory tables on which aesthetic problems can be isolated'. Paradoxically, it was this clinical/scientific approach that enabled artists to reach what they saw as the underlying meaning or spirituality of life/nature. As Stephen Rucker has noted: 'It is for the human spirit to see God in and through the phenomenal surface.'⁷

Frank Hinder used the means of sacred geometry from the American philosopher/mathematician Jay Hambridge's theory of Dynamic Symmetry to explore the transcendental. Hinder wrote of Dynamic Symmetry,

I knew that here at last was something that gave me a reason and meaning to what really lay behind the statements and precepts that had previously meant nothing... It was the relationship expressed which was important, and the relationship was expressed through design - the orderly expression of an idea.

Design was the foundation of art... Design was the element which linked all the forms of art and which was the basis of each. It made art an approximation of the grand design of the Universe.⁸

In his work *Dog Gymkhana*, 1939, studies made from nature are transformed into a unified framework by the mathematical proportions of Dynamic Symmetry. The overlapping forms suggest a psychological overlapping of people touching, talking, meeting; and the small shapes convey the liveliness of the dogs. But overriding this is the overall shape of the work, that of a raindrop, echoing the fact that the studies for the work were made in the rain. Similarly, the colours are prismatic colours - light shining through rain - though diluted. The many layers of light colour give the effect of translucent light. A very mundane scene - a dog gymkhana - is treated like and made into something transcendental, something in touch with the design of the universe, through geometric and rational methods.

Not all the early modernists, however, worked beyond the confines of traditional religion. Grace Cossington Smith achieved a tension between flux and control by way of her beliefs and her painting style. In *Beach at Thirroul*, 1931, the patterned brush strokes, the parallel lines of land and sea, and the reflected shapes in the land and sky suggest an interaction of the earth - the mundane and physical - with the sky - the spiritual - to a mystical whole. Cossington Smith wrote of her work,

My chief interest, I think, has always been colour, but not flat crude colour, it must be colour within colour, it has to shine; light must be in it, it is no good having dead, heavy colour... I wanted to express the forms in colour with the light... I use squares in the way I paint, not

from a conscious way, but it came to me naturally because I feel in that way that light can be put into the colour.⁹

Before World War I Sydney provided a sympathetic nurturing ground for experimental art, but with the post-war threat to national stability the situation was reversed.¹⁰ While articles published on modern overseas art before the war were largely informative, those published post war were editorialised and opinionated, with an emphasis on Australian superiority in adapting or resisting overseas trends. Sydney Ure Smith, for example, wrote concerning an exhibition of European modern work brought to Australia in 1923, 'Australia will find it difficult to take the extreme note seriously'.¹¹ Opening an exhibition of Roy de Maistre's work in 1926 Lady de Chair also perceived a difference between the form of modern art as it was practised in Australia and overseas. She praised de Maistre's work for not being 'the extraordinary stuff one sometimes sees in French and American magazines (for I should be sorry to think we might ever change our taste so much as to appreciate that), but the sturdy, intelligent style...'.¹²

The post-war reception of modern art was not only limited but also rife with contradictions and paradoxes; and colouring these was the issue of gender. In the late 1920s quite a lot of attention was given in the press and in magazines to the fact that women were becoming more like men. Commentary ranged from that of the Bishop of Durham who berated women's repudiation of wifely and motherly functions as the 'most marauding evil of our time',¹³ to the rather bemused appraisal of the fashion trend of cross dressing:

I was not a little puzzled by the number of clever faced young men whose clothes had a rather feminine cut and whose faces had a feminine cast... But... it began to dawn on me that they were not lady-like young men at all, but gentlemanly women.¹⁴

Other writers applauded, perhaps optimistically, women's increase in freedom:

the modern woman... can work physically and mentally more than heretofore... She has found new powers in herself and delights in wielding them. Her boyish bob, her clothes, her talk, her smokes and drinks are all gay pennants hung on the line to celebrate her freedom and newfound independence... She's not a pretty toy. She's a friend to man not dupe. She shares his life in public and private.¹⁵

Modernity entailed for women a new consciousness of their own ability, a new freedom to trespass into male territory and an independence before available only to men.

The new freedom being gained by women caused a backlash, however, and writers were prompted to emphasise woman's role as nurturer and sustainer of life: 'woman should not... lose sight of the greater work which she and she alone can do. Her supreme vocation in life is to be not only a capable woman but a mother'.¹⁶ Perhaps more insidious than the stated and implied fulfilment of women only through children, though, was the relegation of women to domestic chores in advertisements for modern appliances: insidious because the advertisements implied greater freedom in labour saving devices, while they promoted more and more items for women to spend more and more time using *inside* the home.

I have argued elsewhere that women artists in Sydney seemed much more able to come to terms with modernity than their male counterparts.¹⁷ Although women artists made more works relating to modern technology and the modern city than men artists, the greatest expression of modernism by women artists in Australia, and that most acceptable at the time, was in the domestic genre. Until recently women and the domestic have been excluded from the histories of overseas modernism. Janet Wolff has described the literature of modernity as the experience of men and states that equating the modern with the public has failed to describe women's experience of modernity.¹⁸ This has been less marked in Australian art history where the main manifestation of modernism in the 1920s has been seen to be in the domestic subject matter of women artists.

For example, although Margaret Preston also made works of modern city streets and constructions such as the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the bulk of her work was feminine flower painting and domestic still lifes. Her experience with modernity was, like that of most women in the home, through modern appliances and gadgets. Roger Butler quotes one critic of Preston, 'The lady seems to specialise in representations of the things housewives would rather not see when they go to picture galleries - pudding basins, jam jars, sections of cheese, and other not very inspiring articles'.¹⁹

In 1929 Preston commented concerning a self portrait, 'I am a flower painter - and I am not a flower'.²⁰ She seems to have been repudiating the use of women as subjects only, to be emphasising the woman as artist/producer. Her use of the domestic as subject matter could thus be read as an overt attempt to elevate women's activities to the status of art. Ironically, her work was acceptable, indeed extremely popular, because it

depicted feminine subject matter, which then, rather than being seen as elevating women's production, could be viewed safely as a confirmation of women's place.

A further indication of the complexity of modernity and its expression in culture is shown in the text and subtext which built up around the concepts of beauty and ugliness and their relationship to modernity and modernism. Bernard Hall, for example, queried whether anything could extenuate the 'indescribable ugliness of the electrification of the rail and tramways' or be so 'incongruous as and depressing as a hydraulic lift'.²¹ He viewed modern technology, not as the promise of the future but as the penultimate phase of an 'old and declining civilisation'.²²

This view was also held by Norman Lindsay and others who saw the modern as weak and neurasthenic, as exhausted as modern post-war Europe; and modernity as 'associated with a nervous, devitalised population'.²³ David Walker points out that even more than this 'to be called robust and virile, suggested something more than good health; it indicated that a stand had been taken against modernity'.²⁴ Counterpoint and contrary to this ran the association of modernity with strength and vigour: for example, the instigation of exercise programmes in modern factories and shops,²⁵ and the beauty seen in mass sport, 'the stadium has carried the day against the art museum, and physical reality has taken the place of beautiful illusion'.²⁶

Different again to the association of both modernity and anti-modernity with the strong and healthy body was the invocation of both a renaissance and a classical revival as progressive alternatives to modernity and the use of ideas of health and beauty in both. Norman Lindsay was of the opinion that, 'it is the moderns who are old and senile and ugly. The ancients only have the secrets of eternal youth'.²⁷ Deborah Edwards has recorded the similar view of Lionel Lindsay, that 'primitive Australia and classical culture provided an alternative to modern urban reality': 'The human body was now promoted as one of the chief metaphors for the dawn of an Antipodean Golden Age'.²⁸

The use of the idealised, healthy Australian body in the achievement of a neo-classical state was not simple and straight forward, or pure and sexless. As George Mosse has stated, manliness not only safeguarded against the general perils of modernity but was necessary to protect against modernity's blurring of the distinction between normality and abnormality.²⁹ The influential ideas of the German physician and sexologist, Iwan Bloch, circulated his opinion of the link between modern cities and illicit

sexuality.³⁰ Given that sexual excess and uncontrollability is considered the feminine other of male rationality and control, the subtext of the negative view of modernity as decay, neurasthenia and unmanliness was an association of these aspects with the female/feminine. The views of Norman Lindsay and others were clear that 'vitality was essentially a male endowment' and that 'the artist in Australia was characteristically a young male of superior energies'. But, as David Walker points out, Vance Palmer 'feared the creation of a tearful, neurasthenic, emotionally enfeebled community' and suspected that 'male energies were becoming exhausted in a weepy and womanised world'.³¹

Co-existing with the ideas of the Lindsays and others, of classicism as an alternative to modernity and modernism, were undercurrents of modernism itself as classical. John D. Moore, for instance, wrote in comparing modern art to modern life, 'First of all we have to realise that painting is unlike the aeroplane or the motor car. It is not a new thing; it has centuries of tradition and example behind it'.³² Similarly, Sydney Ure Smith wrote in comparing modernism and traditional art, 'Both camps have qualities worth preserving, but without the basis of sound draughtsmanship and a knowledge of design an artist's work can be of little value, whatever his outlook'.³³

Others, however, saw modern art as a dramatic change from the art of the past. Bernard Hall described modernity as having 'a mania for making things different rather than making them better' and modern taste as having the vice of 'restlessness in the desire to be strikingly original';³⁴ and the Sydney artist Miriam Moxham complained concerning modernism, 'while I slumbered, the tide rose and swept away all the old landmarks. I... watch the flood tide filled with nameless horrors... distorted and hideous, they utter strange and tuneless cries'.³⁵

In 1920s Australia, in spite of the sincerity and intensity of the modernist artists, modernity, as Mary Eagle has pointed out, was seen as a trivial, stylish thing, a thing for women not for serious men artists.³⁶ It could be argued, however, that the belittling and ridiculing of modernity and modernist art, was based in the fear of change, particularly that of the role of women.

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