

Margaret Preston (1875-1963)

Precursor discourses domestic

According to Bean [in the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18* (1921)] The expected evolution [of British race and culture] had advanced more rapidly in Australia than in any other British dominion. Climate and an active outdoor life had already differentiated a new type in this embryonic great nation, 'the body wiry and the face clean, easily lined, thin-lipped'. The new types spoke with a distinctive accent and subscribed to the creed inherited from the gold miner and the bushman, 'of which the chief article was that a man should at all times, and at any cost stand by his mates'. Bean's Anzac [of the Australian expeditionary forces during the Great War] marked what Russell Ward, towards the end of the period here under survey [1915-1965], called 'the apotheosis of the nomad tribe': he was the embodiment of those traits that historical and literary imagination had perceived in the experience of convicts and settlers, gold-diggers and shearers. Even though Bean knew that, statistically, his digger was just as likely to come from the cities as the bush.

(Kiernan, 1988, 269-70)

The war consolidated a growing sense of nationhood, though still nationhood within the Empire; patriotism and imperial loyalty were comfortably compatible. Until well after World War II, probably most Australians, and they were overwhelmingly of British descent, saw themselves as W.K. Hancock described them to an English readership in 1930, as 'independent Australian Britons'.

(Kiernan, 1988, 270)

D.H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo* (1923) sees Sydney as a colonial imitation of London or New York, the bush as dismayingly empty and inhospitable. There seems to be no essential relationship between culture and nature; yet [his hero] Somers comes more to respond more positively to the easy-going egalitarianism of Australian society, even though he discovers in the returned diggers, secretly organized into a crypto-fascist militia, political forces similar to those that have driven him from Europe.

(Kiernan, 1988, 275)

In *Introducing Australia* (1942) [the US' journalist] Grattan had described it [the dominant tradition] as 'a compound of sound learning, rebelliousness, ordered faith in the common man, and even more faith in the Australian future. What better tradition could any nation want? Yet, sympathizer as Grattan was to what was still a minority literary culture – perhaps because it had more in common with the democratic American tradition than the English – he felt that 'utopian, republican, national democratic' values had been more alive in the previous century and were now being evoked nostalgically.

(Kiernan, 1988, 276).

Social and Historical Issues

*Social milieu

Preston rebelled against what she saw as the atrophy of Australian art in the dominant patriarchy of entrenched traditionalism, and masculine nationalism expressed through clichés of the bush ethos.

While Preston had championed Aboriginality in her work and her writings from the mid-1920s, her early interest in indigenous art was more anthropological, than one empathetic with its spiritual sensibilities. The works from the Berowra period reflect the growing

maturity of Preston's approach to Aboriginal art and culture, revealing a strong spiritual connection with the land and in addition echo her deep interest in Chinese art.

From Cashman at www.margaretpreston.info

Significance of prints as a technical mode

Preston's printmaking began in England where she experimented with etching. Woodblock printing enabled her to work with readily available materials, and draw from her study of Japanese art to create dynamic, colourful, vigorous and decorative images which were inexpensive to produce. Her prints gained wide spread appeal and were aimed at the domestic market. There are over 400 known prints, since she threw away any works that did not please her she must have done many more. Printmaking offered Preston immediacy, dramatic qualities, decorative possibilities and a discipline for her designer's mind, for the woodcut hinders facility and compels the worker to keep forms in his compositions severe: 'whenever I thought I was slipping in my art, I went into crafts – woodcuts, monotypes, stencils and etchings. I find it clears my brain'. Preston disregarded registration, reductionist colour etc, preferred to work with hand-colouring, and to experiment with new techniques, resulting in daring works of radical design, composition and unadulterated colour. Apart from experimentation, Preston employed woodblocks to solve representational and compositional problems. Sydney Ure Smith noted that it was through her prints that Preston achieved the primitive appeal in her work: 'Its conscious crudity makes it a succession of bald statements ... The affectation of the primitive is more evident here, than in any other branch of her art'.

(Cashman at www.margaretpreston.info abridged)

Appraisal by her peers

For the first time, the flora of our country – so long copied and imitated – was controlled and moulded to serve a high artistic purpose; a purpose which, allied with a technical equipment of the highest order, resulted in pictures of great and original beauty.

From this period I would date the intense Australianism which has been a feature of all Mrs. Preston's later work. If it is true that internationalism follows nationalism in Art, and the evidence of the greater schools of Art would seem to support the contention, then Margaret Preston is right in assuming that only a vigorous Australianism can an Art arise in this country that will eventually have meaning and value to the rest of the world.

Lloyd Rees in his review of the Margaret Preston Exhibition held at Art Gallery of New South Wales March 19th to April 16th, 1942. In *Society of Artists Book*, 1942, Sydney: Ure Smith, 1942, 74

Chronology of Margaret Preston (1875-1963)

From 1873-1919 surnamed McPherson, also written Macpherson.

Since there is a great deal of material available on Margaret Preston, particularly in the catalogues of Butler, 2005, [including a detailed biographical essay] and Edwards, 2005, I have chosen here to abstract and re-arrange certain reliable secondary materials mostly abridged from www.margaretpreston.info; en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Preston; adb.anu.edu.au/biography/preston-margaret-rose-81,

- 1875 April 29, Margaret Rose McPherson born in Port Adelaide to David McPherson, a Scottish marine engineer, and Prudence McPherson. Called 'Rose' until mid-1930s.
- 1877 sister Ethelwynne born.
- 1885 family moved to Sydney, McPherson attended Fort Street Girls School for two years.
- 1887 china painting, and private art classes with William Lister Lister.
- 1887 wrote of experience of visiting the Art Gallery of New South Wales with her mother:
She remembers quite well her excitement on going through the turnstile to be let at large in a big, quiet, nice smelling place with a lot of pictures hanging on the walls and here and there students sitting on high stools copying at easels. Her first impression was not of the beauty or wonder of the pictures, but how nice it must be to sit on a high stool with people giving you 'looks' as they went by ... this visit led her to decide to be an artist.
- 1888-94 studied at National Gallery of Victoria Art School under Frederick McCubbin, a painter in 'German' academic manner.
- 1895-96 father's critical illness forced Macpherson to return to Adelaide to be with her family.
- 1896 McPherson n studies at the National Gallery of Victoria Art School with Bernard Hall, where her tuition included drawing from the nude model, a practice which Preston initially disliked, preferring still life.
- 1897 won Still life Scholarship
- 1898 Studied at the Adelaide School of Design, under H.P. Gill and Hans Heysen, where remembered as 'a lively redhead who figured prominently at the school...she was either an advanced student or an instructor of some sort'.
- 1899 St Peter's College, Adelaide and Presbyterian Ladies' College, Adelaide, McPherson established her own teaching studio in the city's AMP building, among her students were notable artists Bessie Davidson, Gladys Reynell and later, Stella Bowen [1918-27 partner of Ford Madox Ford, author of *Drawn from Life*, 1941, and a significant 1940s' war artist] who referred to her as 'a red-headed little firebrand of a woman, who was not only an excellent painter, but a most inspiring teacher'.
- 1903 her mother Prudence died.
- 1903-07 McPherson travelled with student Bessie Davidson to Europe studying in Munich and Paris, and travelling in Italy, Spain and Holland, briefly studied in Munich at the *Kunstlerinnen Verein*, but did not relate well to the teaching and current trends in German art: 'half of German art is mad and vicious, and a good deal is dull. I am glad to say that my work stands with the best of them'.
- 1904 November, in Paris, impact of works Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse, Picasso, Kandinsky, Delaunay, Derain, Vlaminck and Rouault. [See also comments of 1913 in Butler, 2005, 10; Preston ed. Butel, 39-44, 'The Moderns to this year 1938', from *Art in Australia*, 3rd series, no.72, 1938]
- 1905 April, *Nature mort (oignons)*, exhibited at Beaux-Arts Salon
- 1906 April, *Le chiffonier*, exhibited at Beaux-Arts Salon.
- 1906 December 15, returned to Adelaide.
- 1912-14 second visit to Paris with student Gladys Reynell.
- 1912 ? introduction to Japanese art and design at the Musée Guimet on recommendation of either Rupert Bunny [Australian painter] or George Oberteuffer [American painter], shown in delight in asymmetry; pattern as the dominant element of design; close-up observations of natural patterns; celebration of particular flora; daring engagement with deliberate primitivism.

- Preston learnt that there is more than one vision in art. ‘That a picture could have more than eye realism. That there was such a thing as aesthetic feeling. That a picture that is meant to fill a certain space should decorate that space.’ [both cited from Cashman, www.margaretpreston.info/life-work.
[On exposure to Japanese art as being from her second visit to Paris see Butler, 2005, 9, and 37, n.69]
- 1913 April, exhibited at Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts.
- 1913 October, re-located to the UK.
- 1913 December, exhibited at new English Art Club.
- 1914 May, exhibited at Royal Academy, later at Pittsburgh International Art Exhibition, Annual Exhibition of Modern Art, Liverpool.
- 1915 Whilst at Bonmahon, County Waterford, Ireland, McPherson’s copy of Arthur Morrison’s *Exhibition of Japanese Prints*, London: The Fine Arts Society, 1910, marked ‘Margaret from Gladys March 1915’. That of Edward F Strange *Japanese Illustration, a history of the arts of wood-cutting and colour printing in Japan*, 1904 marked ‘with love from Gladys her birthday April 30th, 1915’. [Sydney: AGNSW library. McPherson’s copy of Ernest F. Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, London: William Heinemann, 1912, was missing in a 1970’s search by Mary Eagle. At AGNSW library McPherson’s copy of *L’estampe Japonaise*, 2 v., Paris, Éditions Albert Morance, is from 1923]. [On McPherson’s Japanese excursions see Peel in Edwards, 2005, 256-257 and n.18, p.297]
- 1916 studied pottery at Camberwell and also the principals of Modernist design at Roger Fry’s Omega workshops.
- 1916 McPherson met future husband in Vauxhall Bridge Road, London whilst carrying out canteen work.
- 1918 September, began teaching pottery and basket-weaving with Reynell to shell shocked soldiers at the Seale-Hayne Neurological Military Hospital in Devonshire.
- 1919 January, Reynell returned to Adelaide because of dying father.
- 1919 August 2, Preston and future husband arrive in Sydney on same ship.
- 1919 September 15, joint exhibition of McPherson and Reynell in Adelaide without their presence.
- 1919 December 31, in Adelaide aged 44, but giving her age as 36, married William George Preston, six years her junior, a former artillery officer who served at battle of Amiens, a successful businessman who later supported her work and international travel, and whose quiet personality matched Margaret Preston’s often fiery one. McPherson takes Preston’s surname in signing her own works.
- 1919 lived in Mosman, the district and surrounding area was the subject included in many works: *Red Cross Fete*, 1920, *Heads I & II*, 1925, *Harbour Foreshore*, 1925, *Circular Quay*, 1925, *Edwards Beach Balmoral*, 1929, *Rocks and Waves*, 1929, 1932 (both from Wyargine Point, near Edwards Beach), *The Bridge from the North Shore*, 1932.
- 1920 Royal Art Society Spring exhibition; Art Gallery of New South Wales purchased *Summer*, 1915.
- 1920s adoption of modernist positions in her work derived from Cubism. Among her celebrated dicta: ‘Decoration without ornamentation. Enough or too much’; ‘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’. Léger’s curvilinear and cylindrical forms echoed in *Implement Blue*, 1927, which also, according to Ann Stephen [1980] shares ‘the same currency of construction as the commercial photography of the period, favouring oblique angles of perception and dramatic lighting effects, which stress the formal or abstract qualities of the subject.’ *West Australian Gum Blossom*, 1927, employs a restricted palette in the manner of Japanese prints.

- 1923 onwards, major involvement of Preston with the publisher, Sydney Ure Smith, also the President of the Society of Artists, and the influential editor and publisher of *Art in Australia*, *The Home* and *Australia National Journal*. Preston contributed fourteen articles to *Art in Australia*, thirteen articles to *The Home*, nine to the *Australia National Journal* and four articles to the *Society of Artists Yearbook*.
- 1930 Art Gallery of New South Wales commissioned her self-portrait, the first female Australia artist so honoured.
- 1932-9 lived at Berowra in the bush in Northern Sydney. Developed a conscious wish to find an Australian national style based in part on Aboriginal art seen in her works *The Brown Pot*, 1940, *Manly Pines*, 1953, and on Australian flora banksia, waratah, gum blossom, and wheelflower whose irregularity and asymmetry facilitated her modernist approach
- 1940 lived again in at various homes and a hotel in Mosman until Margaret Preston's death in 1963.
- 1942 painting *Japanese Submarine Exhibition* ironises wartime paranoia and anti-Japanese sentiment through painted sign on submarine DO NOT ASK QUESTIONS.
- 1943 began to experiment with rough side of Masonite as printing surface.
- 1947 aged 72, made 16,000-kilometre journey by utility from Sydney to Northern Territory.
- 1950s Preston continued to paint and make monotypes throughout her later years, her works revealing her ongoing interest in Aboriginal art. Her last series of prints reflect a religious theme, possibly motivated by the Blake Prize, instituted in 1951.
- 1963 May 28, died in a Mosman private hospital.
- 1967 husband Bill died.

Foreign and domestic travels

- 1923 June, South Seas [following Gauguin]
- 1924 December to 1925 January, Bali, Bangkok, Hong Kong.
- 1926 early, China, Japan, Bali, Hong Kong.
- 1927 North Queensland.
- 1934 June, Yunnan, Beijing, Great Wall, Japan, Korea.
July, studied woodblock printing in Japan.
- 1937 June, New York, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatamala, Mexico, Los Angeles, San Francisco.
- 1938 London
- 1939 early, Hungary and Poland.
- 1944 international art is interesting but it is better that we do our own thinking. [‘Personal statements: Margaret Preston’, 1944, cited by Butler, 34, n.227, 39]
- 1947 15,000 kilometer journey to Northern Territory.
- 1950 Morocco, Tangier Spain, Corsica, Italy
- 1951 Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Holland.
- 1953-54 Near East: Petra in Jordan, Jerusalem, Damascus, Persia, Turkey, Greece, Egypt.
- 1953 [travel] tends to make the work of pictorial artists similar in all countries of the world...And the non-conformer to popular trends is not in a very happy position – he finds he is a misfit.
Preston in *Sydney Morning Herald* 20 September 1953, p.27 cited in Butler, 2005. 34, n.226 39.
- 1956 Ceylon.
- 1957 Madagascar, Rhodesia, Kenya.
- 1958 India, Nepal, Kashmir.
- [based on Butler, 2005, biographical essay]
She never painted when she was on tours; she seemed to want to get away entirely from art altogether, and when she came back to it she was all the more prepared to go ahead, probably on some new phase entirely.
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