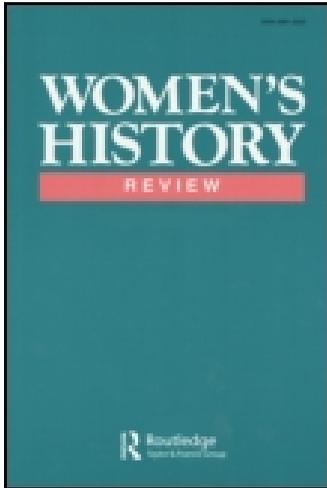


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The 'intrusion of women painters': Ethel Anderson, modern art and gendered modernities in interwar Sydney, Australia

Jane E. Hunt

In the interwar period in Sydney, Australia, male art gallery trustees, directors, and art schoolteachers objected to female advocacy and practice of artistic responsiveness to the modern. The dialogue between these two parties has often been interpreted in terms of a margin/centre dichotomy. Closer examination of the case of Ethel Anderson suggests that this model is inadequate. She demonstrated the transnationally apparent predilection of women to infusing civic cultures with the fleeting and everyday, thus inverting the spatial cues to cultural authority and presenting a gendered challenge to institutionalised, masculine notions of cultural authority.

James Stewart MacDonald, art critic and then director of the National Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW),¹ gave a lecture at the Pakie Club in April 1933.² The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported the highlights of the speech in which he remarked, 'that since the war there had been a tremendous *intrusion* of women painters. They had always painted badly; very slick as students, but as soon as

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they got away from instructors they fell off and eventually disappeared'.³ Implicit in this remark is a sense of spatial exclusiveness and hierarchy of importance in artistic practice. The women intruded into the domain of the art establishment and disappeared from it as they embraced non-institutional art practice. This was not a temporary lapse in manners on J. S. MacDonald's part. His private papers and published work are full of similar irritated attacks on the talents and tastes of women artists, particularly their apparent attraction to modern art. A year later, he warned that 'unless real painters speak up for themselves and right art the women and their near men abettors⁴ will ruin both. The feminists are in the majority and content if fashion, be it ever so trivial, be carried on the voices. Its lack of worth troubles them not at all'.⁵

Australian, British and American feminist art historians have demonstrated that women modernist artists such as Thea Proctor were far from passive victims of this misogynist belligerence.⁶ Nevertheless, even feminist art historiographers echo MacDonald and place women modernists on the margin of discourses on art, culture and modernity. They identify specific responses to the modern that were framed in terms of gender, and interpret the clash between masculinist and feminist modernities in terms of a dichotomy between margin and centre. Marsha Meskimmon, in her 1999 study of women modernists in interwar Germany, argues that while 'women were an integral part of the social, economic and cultural exchanges characterised as "modern"',⁷ the work of early histories of the modern forged a limited canonical version of modernism, in which women were rendered marginal.⁸ This apparent marginality is noted in other feminist attempts to find a place for women in the art historical canon; for Kathleen McCarthy and Caroline Oja, American women patrons and supporters of avant-garde art and music respectively⁹ 'tended to work from the sidelines, continually promoting the cause of neglected genres and groups'.¹⁰

Yet, not all historians affirm the masculine centre/feminine margin dichotomy or the associated argument for the gendered separation of aesthetics and cultural discourse in the early to mid twentieth century. It is commonly held that modernism constitutes the aesthetic response (whether positive or negative, dogmatic or ambiguous) to the emergence of modernity.¹¹ European modernism in the mid to late nineteenth century centred on male responses to a transformed metropolis that denied women a public civic presence.¹² Yet, scholars have also linked the 'entrance of women into the public space' with the modernising forces of urbanisation, migration, communication, and consumerism among others.¹³ The aesthetics endorsed or practised by modern women might be regarded as a powerful mobilisation of those forces in a critique of the 'successive antithetic roles' cast upon them by the masculinist modernities that denied women public agency in discourses on civic culture.¹⁴ In a recent study on the British example of Virginia Woolf, Maggie Humm points to the 'blurring of art and everyday experiences' as a strategy that worked to disrupt the high cultural practices enshrined in the masculinist cultural historical canon.¹⁵ Likewise, Janet Wolff, writing on the relationship between feminism and modernism, acknowledges that the 'new literary and visual forms and strategies invented and deployed to

capture and represent the changed situation of women in the modern world ... transform[ed] the spaces of masculinity'.¹⁶ Aesthetics self-consciously gendered as female thus came to embody a force of modernity that evoked defensive and negative modernisms. Further, the infusion of female modernities into modernist discourse threatened to disrupt or challenge established notions of cultural authority that were implicitly inscribed in masculinist terms.

This article seeks to present an Australian example of the way that female modernities could disrupt the masculinist cultural practices enshrined in the historical canon. Ethel Anderson engaged in crucial debates about modern art raging in the interwar art world in Sydney, Australia. Through examination of Anderson's cultural advocacy, it can be seen that female modernities, far from being culturally marginal, lay at the heart of a challenge to institutionalised cultural authority and underpinned emergent new thinking on civic cultural custodianship. While some aspects of her story may be specific to the Sydney context, Ethel Anderson's example affirms the transnational nature of the modernist cultural feminism identified by Humm, Wolff and others. Further, it offers a way of understanding what female modernities achieved by identifying, at least in this Australian case, a connection between these purportedly marginal practices and the liberalisation of notions of civic culture, authority and practice.

Before entering into specific discussion of Anderson's example, it is necessary to clarify that I am identifying a form of modernist feminism. The position may be viewed as a radical one as a result of its assertion of female perspectives on cultural practice that contradicted masculinist ones. However, it does not seek to connect female cultural activism, in this instance, to leftist radicalism. Early Australian art historiography focusing on the public battles in Melbourne, then Sydney, in the 1930s and 40s connects modernist art practice and leftist politics, and portrays them as diametrically opposed to a politically and culturally conservative camp. I have elsewhere shown that this interpretation of the emergence of artistic modernism in Australia, which underpins Australia's canonical modernism, applies narrow and misleading definitions of modernism and radicalism.¹⁷ Though never wealthy, Ethel Anderson moved in upper-middle-class, even upper-class circles, due to her husband's British army ranking and subsequent work for a series of New South Welsh state governors. Further, she was politically conservative, and more representative of the diverse and influential array of right-winged modernist intellectuals exemplified by Ezra Pound and the Italian Futurists than the leftist modernists highlighted in Australia's modernist canon. Anderson held memberships with organisations such as the Society of Women Writers and the Girl Guides, but was not an avowed feminist. Nevertheless, like many women in Australia, she appears as peripheral to the established story of modernism in part because she did not neatly fit into the radical nationalist teleology, and in part because the radical and potent force of female modernities remained unrecognised.

Anderson's apparent marginality is also, in part, the result of gendered notions of cultural authority. Important to any analysis of Ethel Anderson's endeavours is, thus, an understanding of the way that ideas about cultural authority, place, modernity and gender intersected in interwar Australia, particularly in Sydney.

During the nineteenth century, a combination of John Ruskin's moral aestheticism and Matthew Arnold's notions of cultural authority evolved into an equation adopted and adapted in a multitude of ways across the western world. Materialistic, new, democratic states vested cultural authority in exclusive civic art institutions and their custodians in the hope that art might play a civilising influence or at least imply the civilised nature of the metropolis, region or nation in question.¹⁸ These were public institutions and of course their custodians were men.

In Australia in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, high cultural authorities reasoned that Australian landscapes offered the highest evidence of the nation's civilisation and progress.¹⁹ Individually and collectively, the Trustees of the (National) Art Gallery of New South Wales portrayed themselves as custodians of a wholesome national culture that demonstrated the nation's freedom from 'the revolutionary manias of a rotted world'.²⁰ At least initially, this patriotically symbolic genre appealed to a relatively affluent urban market which, in its own turn, applied an Arnoldian reliance on cultural authorities for a guide to the 'best' in art; the blue and gold landscapes proved a commercial success. Historians of regional cultural variance in Australia attach this professional validation through market success to Sydney in particular.²¹ By the early 1920s in Sydney, then, artistic taste was bound up with an earlier generation's pursuit of commercial success, as well as custodial anxiety about the modern. In an effort to gain entrance to the Arnoldian world of cultural authority, modernism's advocates reasoned that the new in art represented a pathway to beauty, truth and perfection, but that it could not be judged by former measures of the 'best' in art. The end was the same; the means were different. Neither side questioned the exclusiveness of civic cultural life, but as the opposing sides represented divergent responses to the modern and this lay at the heart of their disagreement, both may be classed as modernist.²² I would suggest that in interwar Sydney, diverse modernisms contributed to discourse on public culture, that canonical modernism only focuses on two masculinist modernisms that were locked in public confrontation, and that when we examine the work of women modernists and advocates of modernism, we see that more was at stake than simply what constituted the 'best' art, as canonical modernism's historians imply.

While Sydney appears in the historiography of Australian culture as a city lacking in confidence and vision, that is only if institutionalised art practice is taken as the sole guide to cultural discourse. In fact, at this time Sydney newspapers and art publications produced in Sydney were full of frantic discourse about local cultural needs and values. Writers of the period used words such as 'revision', 'cross-roads', and 'development' with reference to contemporary cultural movements, indicating that the one thing not happening on the intellectual front was stagnation. Repeated comments in the print media from the late 1920s, which increased in heat and insistence through the 1930s and 1940s, indicated dissatisfaction with officialdom's artistic taste even while the old men of Australian art, whom Bernard Smith likened to the priests of Leviticus, were attempting to lay down the law.²³ Custodial unwillingness to embrace art that directly reflected

on the changing world may have done more than alienate the modernist artists who hoped for institutional recognition. Communities of individual Australian citizens began to question the cultural authority of civic institutions and their guardians. The trustees and the institutions they represented appear in this discourse as uninformed, out of touch and materialistic.

It is in the context of extra-institutional critique of cultural authority that we may see the influence of female modernities. This case study seeks to show that the purportedly marginal female modernities were in fact representative of the broader challenge to Arnoldian notions of cultural authority and its Ruskinian civic symbols and underpinned the proposed alternatives. Ethel Anderson may have used mass-produced print media to advocate the modern in art, and decorative visual styles in murals painted by collections of young society women to pose this challenge from outside the domains inscribed as symbols of cultural authority. But the female modernities demonstrated by Ethel Anderson thus inverted the spatial cues to cultural authority and injected the everyday into public discourse, in turn highlighting the gendered basis on which cultural authority was founded. It is thus to Ethel Anderson's example that we now turn.

Born near Picton, New South Wales, Ethel Anderson née Mason (1883–1958) married Austin Thomas Anderson in 1904.²⁴ Mason met the Eton-educated, Royal Military College trained gunner, Austin Anderson, when he was posted to Brisbane in 1900. Mason had been promised to the future war hero Harry Chauvel and was unaware that Anderson was courting her until he proposed. Devastated at the news, Anderson departed for the Boer War, then service in India. When he heard that the engagement was broken, Anderson began to correspond with Mason, and eventually proposed again. They married in Bombay and settled in the northern part of India (now Pakistan). The young Mrs Anderson felt isolated and confined as the wife of a possessive British Major posted in India. Her interaction with other women in British army circles was very restricted, and she compensated by engaging in creative and intellectual pursuits—reading, writing poetry and learning to paint.²⁵ Some time after departing India for England on the outbreak of the First World War, Ethel Anderson became more serious about her artistic endeavours. She wrote to Charles Holmes, whom Austin knew from his schooldays at Eton, who was at that stage the director of the National Gallery in London, for some guidance. His replies were both encouraging and constructive, although the novice's attempts to implement the accompanying technical suggestions apparently ended in artistic disaster.²⁶ It appears that even at this stage Anderson approached her artistic endeavours more as an intellectual exercise than a creative pursuit in itself. Ethel Anderson preserved her sympathetic link to Britain's art establishment and used it years later to the advantage of Sydney modernists.

While her husband was at war, Ethel Anderson's creative interests received further intellectual fodder. Having moved into a house in the grounds of King's College, Cambridge, Ethel appears to have found friends, peace and inspiration; she encountered H. G. Wells while there, and developed connections with members of the Darwin and Keynes families when she joined the Cambridge

Drawing Society.²⁷ Gwen and Frances Darwin were both granddaughters of the famous Charles Darwin. Gwen had joined the Drawing Society in 1901, and attended the Slade School in 1908, where she studied under the mural painter, Henry Tonks. She married Jacques Raverat, and, over the ensuing years, became known as a 'distinguished wood engraver' and art critic. Frances Darwin also received art lessons and had links with the Drawing Society, but channelled her creative energies into poetry. By 1915, as Frances Cornford, wife of Trinity College scholar of literary classics, Francis Cornford, she had published two books of verse.²⁸ Another Drawing Society member was Edward Vulliamy, 'the East Anglican landscape painter' and 'Keeper of pictures' at the Fitzwilliam Museum.²⁹ Many of these new contacts had belonged to a circle which 'Virginia Woolf in April 1911 dubbed the "neo-pagans"', and others have since called the Bloomsbury Group. The Raverats' biographer (clearly an admirer) saw them as "'modern", free-living young people', rebelling against 'Victorian stuffiness'.³⁰

How much opportunity Anderson had to personally discuss modernism and art with her Cambridge acquaintances is unknown. It is likely, however, that Ethel Anderson's artistic tastes, ideas and passions were largely shaped during the Cambridge years. Echoes of their views concerning art or their own experiments with applications of art resound in her subsequent endeavours. Vulliamy, for example, 'was a true amateur, he believed that drawing and painting cannot be taught, and that it is all-important to remain free from the need to sell pictures.'³¹ Was it coincidence that at about the same time that Ethel Anderson and Grace Cossington Smith first met as neighbours in the Sydney suburb of Turramurra, the quiet Sydney modernist consciously decided to keep herself aloof from the artistic mainstream, and to pursue, without consideration of financial recompense, her artistic quest?³² Further, towards the end of the war, Jacques Raverat, like his close friend, the modernist Eric Gill, 'became more drawn to religious motifs'. Together, he and Gwen made 'studies' on the walls of Gwen's childhood home, before they painted a fresco at the Cornfords' home.³³ It seems hardly coincidental that shortly after the end of the war, when the Andersons moved from Cambridge to Worcestershire, Ethel initiated a number of mural-painting schemes that combined modernist techniques and religious themes.

When the Andersons were finally reunited in 1921, they took up residence at Low Hill House near the tiny village of White Ladies Aston, Worcestershire. There, Ethel put the artistic ideas accumulated through her Cambridge experience, and correspondence with Charles Holmes, into practice. She approached the Parochial Church Council in 1923, requesting permission to establish what the Andersons repeatedly called a 'faculty', with the aim of painting a mural on an interior wall of the village church.³⁴ In preparation, she asked Holmes to introduce her to Henry Tonks, a mural expert and one of Raverat's Slade tutors. Ethel designed the mural, but others assisted, including Alan Clutton-Brock, another Cambridge personality who later contributed articles to the same art journals as Raverat. A combination of universal and local themes was apparent in the resultant scene of five angels beside a stream, set against a backdrop of the Malvern Hills. It drew the

church council's appreciation and a mention in Arthur Mee's travel guide to Worcestershire.³⁵

Anderson subsequently organised her daughter Bethia and other local school-girls into what became known as the Young Worcestershire Arts and Crafts Society. The society's work included painting a mural in the main room of Low Hill House. Less self-conscious than the church mural, it connected an English building full of its own public and private historical interest with symbols of western cultural evolution and progress: it combined a bridge-less Sydney Harbour and a New York cityscape with a Boticellian Venus on an English beach. On a visit to Low Hill House in 1997, I discovered that sadly the mural no longer exists. However, another mural remains in the attic. Possibly symbolising paganism, a scantily clad woman bears a severed head (symbolising John the Baptist?) on a rough-hewn tray. She appears to have attracted a heavenly rescue mission, in the form of saints with gold-leaf halos and large blue feathered angel-wings. Flat bands of green, purple and blue, overlaid with decorative clusters of frangipanis and other tropical vegetation, reveal the impact of a visit to an exhibition of Gauguin's work in London, made by Ethel Anderson in 1924. It was perhaps the attic mural which Anderson photographed for Holmes, and concerning which he wrote, 'the strange tropical landscape and trees is in particular a wonderful success.'³⁶ When Austin Anderson's British Army responsibilities evaporated later that year, they departed for Australia. The Worcester episode offered Ethel Anderson the opportunity to consolidate her primary interest in some modern artistic innovations and mural design. She left, armed with the gifts of these experiences—an understanding of the intellectual basis and technical considerations underlying these artistic developments, and exposure to a milieu dominated by English women artists and writers who themselves have attracted contemporary theorising on the diverse nature of modernism in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century.³⁷

As previously mentioned, debate was escalating in Sydney by the mid to late 1920s regarding the city's civic cultural needs. Embedded in this conversation, particularly as it related to the AGNSW, was uncertainty about the supposed sources of cultural authority. Initially, however, Ethel Anderson's contributions to these debates might appear limited. Instead of plunging wholeheartedly into the social and cultural life of the city's elite, she busied herself with a group of moderately talented young women, mostly hailing from the upper north shore of Sydney. Drawing on her recent English experience, she founded an amateur group, called the Turramurra Wall Painters. Each Thursday, the members of the group converged on the Andersons' house for lunch, before proceeding to former stables in the garden at the rear of the house, where they experimented with Gauguinesque designs on its freshly whitewashed walls. The group's membership most likely leaned towards political conservatism. It included, among others, Nancy Campbell, the wife of the New Guardist Eric Campbell; Shirley Bavin, the daughter of the Nationalist state premier Thomas Bavin; and Elaine de Chair, daughter of the State Governor. Numerous others found themselves in the studio with a paintbrush thrust in their hands. The modestly talented twins,

Gwen and Jean Ramsay, and slightly older, serious artist and avowed modernist, Grace Cossington Smith, happened to be neighbours and also participated.³⁸

In November 1927, the product of this series of lunches featured in an article printed in the glossy society magazine, *Home*.³⁹ Launched in 1920 by the Sydney-based publisher, artist and patron, Sydney Ure Smith, *Home* turned female members of Sydney's upper middle class into the smart set, by linking them to 'modern' lifestyles, fashion and tastes as communicated and adapted from trends abroad. *Home* thus helped to fuel dismissive perceptions of female modernities, and their linkages with decorative and commercial cultures.⁴⁰ It might initially be assumed that the article about Anderson's wall painters was aimed largely at this smart set, and not at masculinist cultural authorities. Anderson certainly appears to have taken the initiative in arranging for the mural to feature in such a publication and substantially influenced its tone. The article echoed the sort of part altruistic, part educational motives that Anderson appeared to attach to her mural-painting projects. Mural painting offered a constructive use of leisure time for the younger set, and was a service that they could offer to any 'good cause'. It could stimulate both an interest in art itself through a hands-on approach, and an appreciation or at least an awareness of the 'pleasantly refreshing' spatial freedom of the 'style of Gauguin', which Anderson carefully explained suited mural painting better than the restrictive perspective of realism. Admittedly, this freedom led to an almost 'bizarre' and certainly haphazard collection of images on the stable walls at Ball Green, united chiefly by the obvious unreality of their subjects and settings. As will be seen, the emphasis on spatial freedom seems to have symbolic civic and cultural implications as well as literal visual applications.

Anderson harboured the wish to repeat her Worcestershire church decoration schemes and indeed, the stable-painting project led to a number of more public ones. Gwen and Jean Ramsay designed an effective representation of a very modern subject, the Harbour Bridge under construction, for Turramurra Grammar School, earning themselves third prize in an unspecified competition for 'mural decorations'.⁴¹ An invitation to decorate the Children's Chapel at St James' Anglican Church, Sydney, followed this success. In September 1929 Ethel Anderson and her daughter Bethia, as well as a select group of artists, set to work on the chapel walls. Participation in the project was restricted to ensure the standard of the end product. In addition to the Ramsay twins, the group included two other artists who are usually referred to together with Grace Cossington Smith as being among Australia's earliest modernist experimenters, Roi de Mestre and Roland Wakelin. Despite their involvement, the Children's Chapel mural was less stylistically and technically innovative than the earlier private experiments. Though still reflective of the new in art, style and content, the mural also displayed a hint of nostalgia. It illustrated an old English carol against a Sydney Harbour backdrop and included the arches of the half-finished bridge. Drawing on a centuries-old religious artistic tradition that Anderson had first utilised in her Worcestershire experiments, gold leaf was used for both the angelic halos and for a series of arches that provided structure and framing

for each of the harbour scenes. Gauguinesque traits are less prominent in the resultant panels than they were in the stable mural, with a neatness of style and tastefulness of arrangement that reveals the influence of fashionable, decorative modernist styles, by then quite popular in local magazines such as *Home*.⁴²

Across the world from the late nineteenth century, many women with artistic interests, like Anderson, experimented with simplified and stylised techniques suited to mass cultural media and either incurred open rejection by cultural authorities, or were quickly dismissed as unrelated to the story of the progress of art. Thea Proctor's cover illustrations for *Home* epitomise the convergence of art, fashion and commerce in the medium as well as its vitriolic rejection by influential and outspoken male artists and commentators. Norman Lindsay, known for his obsession with the portrayal of nudes, objectification of the female body, nostalgia and intense anti-modernism, reasoned that Proctor should not be included in the 1923 exhibition of Australian art sent to London, as she was, 'OK for *Home* covers but not for art'.⁴³ To many of Australia's art historians, the arts of 'graphic design, photography and interior decoration' featured in *Home* were viewed as being 'like dress, . . . sites of modernity freed of the aesthetic constraints on the fine arts'.⁴⁴ The women of Meskimmon's Weimar *frauenkultur* also 'wrote books and articles, edited journals, produced art, mass media imagery and fashion'; their work appears to have suffered a similar fate in Germany's canonical modernism.⁴⁵ A like propensity to utilise this medium was demonstrated by the American women patrons of the musical avant-garde, who developed 'an intricate network of publishers, promoters, performers, [and] editors' to publicise the work of modernist composers.⁴⁶ As with mural painting, the linking of female modernities with commerce, the mass-produced and the transitory, in print media directed by and to women, meant that they were openly rejected by institutions that were representative of masculinist nineteenth-century cultural traditions and their custodians.

Yet in each case, there is much more to the cultural activism of women utilising and defining the function of print media. Proctor's work was the product of a more diverse oeuvre demonstrating engagement with the same artistic—philosophical, technical and practical—problems that faced many artists of the period. In fact, the nostalgia apparent in her reinvention of the eighteenth-century decorative fan, and the echoes of nineteenth-century Australian painter Charles Condon in her fan scenes and watercolour paintings, might appear to mirror the anti-modernism of conservative art authorities. Pamela Nunn, however, firmly argues that in her artistic nostalgia, and her commercial expressions of 'taste', Proctor publicly and politically enacted a self-created version of modern femininity.⁴⁷ Likewise, the print-oriented *frauenkultur* of Weimar Germany and the American women music patrons who founded or actively utilised small print publications to advocate the cause of modernist composers shaped the small print media with which they became associated and used them as tools for establishing their own authority. Far from rendering their activities as marginal to discourse on art and modernity, the anti-establishment nature of their chosen media demonstrates the inadequacy of the responses of cultural authorities to modernity. A gulf was opening up

between the ideals and practices reified by art gallery custodians and the cultural expression of the reality of modernity. It is no wonder that the narrow visions of the chief art establishment protagonists of the period, as well as canonical modernism's historians, had trouble identifying the seriousness of the modernism demonstrated by Ethel Anderson and her troop of painters. The murals influenced by this discourse were never intended for exhibition in art galleries. Here was art, painted straight onto the walls of homes, stables, schools and hidden-away chapels. It echoed decorative visual styles that were popular in magazines of the time and thus a discourse about art and modernity that openly embraced modern commercialism. The female modernism that attributed to the print medium a function in cultural discourse neither suited nor sought the affirmation of established exclusive and civic symbols of cultural authority. And it deeply disturbed them.

The female challenge to the physical symbolism of public art institutions is apparent in another practice employed by Anderson in her efforts to promote her 'modernist' subjects: 'At Homes'. As with her other strategies to promote modernist artistic practice, the use of cultural performance within gendered domestic spaces to engage in public discourse had contemporary currency across the western world and has since attracted feminist scrutiny. American advocate of 'ultra-modern' music composers, Blanche Walton, 'presid[ed] over a kind of salon', showcasing young modernists in private musicales. As Oja observes, 'she exploited the traditional female domain of the home to help the struggling avant-garde'.⁴⁸ In her work on three European women known as modernist interior designers, Bridget Elliot asks whether, by staging interiors redolent with personal identifiers of female identity as public showcases of their work, they may have symbolically destabilised 'the much idealized separations of female/male, home/work and interior/exterior'.⁴⁹

In Ethel Anderson's case, she used the upper-middle-class practice of holding 'At Homes' to curry public support for Roland Wakelin, who continued to struggle for institutional recognition of his work as an artist. In September 1930, Anderson thus intervened in public discourse on art and culture, by transforming her home into a venue for the exhibition of his work. Her daughter Bethia later recalled the physical process that effected this inversion of domestic space:

In order to provide space to show his lovely pictures, the furniture from our drawing room and dining room, from my bedroom, a spare room and the hall, had to be stacked on the verandahs, where my bed was wedged between a bookcase and the sofa ... The house was kept open for a fortnight; Gwen and Jean and I, with Gracie and Enid Cambridge, had charge of one room each, where we lectured at set times, on modern art—the knowledge, for us three younger ones hastily drummed into us by Mother—while my parents took it in turns to welcome everyone by our front door.⁵⁰

'Everyone' included 'busloads of school children', art gallery trustees, press representatives, friends and neighbours. The network of helpers consisted chiefly of upper North Shore female artists, hailing from respectable families. They represented a modestly intellectual milieu that seemed to flourish in the area.

Although the event reportedly attracted over a thousand people during the two weeks as well as numerous press reports, few sales resulted. Wakelin nevertheless felt that the At Home 'had its effect'.⁵¹ At the opening of a Contemporary Group exhibition several weeks later, the artist John Moore paid tribute to the rare opportunity that Ethel Anderson's generosity had offered to Wakelin, to 'see all ones work hung together'.⁵² Ethel Anderson held a second 'At Home' in November 1931 featuring Wakelin, Grace Cossington Smith and Gwen and Jean Ramsay. In 1934, Ethel arranged another Wakelin exhibition at the Macquarie Galleries. This continued exposure seemed eventually to have an effect on establishment and public opinion and Wakelin subsequently thought of the years 1933 to 1937 as the golden years of his career.⁵³

Like the murals, articles in *Home*, and associations that might be drawn between Ethel Anderson's modernism and commercialism, the 'At Homes' were not immediately perceived as serious interjections into contemporary discourse on civic art and culture. How do we know, then, that Ethel Anderson's work was not, as James MacDonald and others implied, a frivolous, superficial and fleeting fancy? It is in her written work in support of the modern in art that we find evidence that her efforts were directly aimed at contemporary discourse on 'art' and cultural authority, rather than commercial art. Like MacDonald and despite her use of what might be classed as middlebrow cultural practice, Anderson drew distinctions between cultural practices. She participated in discourse that strove to separate high and low cultures within the context of time and place. She implemented contemporary distinctions that would later be used to identify what history knows as high culture and popular culture. She addressed the fears and ideals held by establishment figures, drawing on an eclectic, exhaustive knowledge of European artistic and literary tradition, in an attempt to convince contemporary proponents of anti-modernism that there was room for the 'modern' in 'art'.⁵⁴

Anderson's strategies are particularly evident in her advocacy of the work of Roland Wakelin. Speaking to conservative cultural anxieties in a review of his first solo exhibition, Anderson implied that democracy, modernity and progress could be safeguarded through, among other things, representation of the universal in art. Change in artistic technique provided a valuable record of that progress: art was 'the only diary civilisation has ever kept'. But art in democratic society needed to avoid personal idiosyncrasy or localism. Hence, English romanticism in art and literature was limited in its vision. Wakelin, she asserted, had detached his work from this creative tradition. Through his focus on form and colour he sought to create a 'beauty which has its own absolute value'. His work transcended space and time. It was, 'in essence, universal'.⁵⁵ Universality and the representation of eternal values was in fact a common theme, locally and internationally, and across creative genres. A moderate artist of the time, Leslie Rees, speaking about the collective rejection of 'modernism' by local art establishment figures such as Lionel Lindsay and Julian Ashton, explained that they genuinely believed that it threatened the 'canons of beauty' to which they had devoted their lives.⁵⁶ MacDonald spoke about 'big emotions and motives', and 'man's search for truth', while

Lionel Lindsay looked to the ‘transcendent beauty’ of nature.⁵⁷ Further, Anderson endeavoured to show Wakelin in the context of evolving western tradition. Commenting on a 1930 exhibition of Wakelin’s work, she explained what his focus on form and colour was meant to achieve—a sense of rhythm and balance. This might, she acknowledged, result in the distortion of perceived reality in his work, but Wakelin was not alone in this—there were precedents in the work of Renoir, Giotto and Leonardo da Vinci, in which reality had been manipulated for effect. In making this point, she cited her British National Gallery contact, Charles Holmes, thus offering doubters in need of the word of a male cultural custodian some reassurance.⁵⁸ Strategically, she had evoked a sense of connection to European artistic tradition and herself sketched a teleological modernist art historical canon.

By publishing in mainstream newspapers, Anderson entered directly into the previously mentioned discourse on modernism, art and cultural authority. An instructive example of this extra-institutional discourse and the ways in which it challenged custodial authority is apparent in the debate surrounding the Exhibition of Contemporary British Art opened in Sydney in mid-April 1933. Arranged by Alleyne Zander, another woman who intellectually and spatially engaged with and challenged establishment ideas on art, the exhibition provided opportunity for ‘diehards’ and modernists to debate which artistic genres and practices were conducive to the progress of civil society. Art gallery trustees in both Victoria and New South Wales were criticised for ignoring the exhibition, and purchasing only a few token etchings. In Sydney, John D. Moore, the Macquarie Galleries director, asserted that the exhibition represented the ‘best contemporary art in England’ which the ‘great galleries of Europe’ deemed worthy of purchasing. Most importantly, he argued that the trustees had ‘failed as leaders of artistic thought, to help make our art galleries representative of the vital art of our time.’⁵⁹ Many echoed this sentiment. The diehards retorted that contemporary art simply represented ‘the ferment of youth’ and poor technical skills; ‘Why are the hands so big and badly drawn?’, long-established teacher Julian Ashton asked.⁶⁰ Experience and sound technique became a riff in the diehards’ defence. A little more creatively, one critic used another anti-modernist trope that ‘sympathy for the modern’ was the product of mental illness and perversion.⁶¹

Neither Thea Proctor nor Ethel Anderson directly critiqued the masculinism inherent in cultural authority in this instance, but rather both asserted their right to comment authoritatively on the trustees’ attitudes towards contemporary art. They thus entered into the discourse on modernism in art, diluting its masculinity. ‘I am a teacher of drawing’, Proctor asserted when she began her defence of the badly drawn hands; she judged them more by the contemporary standards of rhythm, balance and imagination, rather than the ‘diehards’ principle of technical precision and realism. Her overall point, however, was that there was a place for such art in the art galleries and that the trustees and cultural leaders had failed in their duty to ‘advance art’ by not recognising this.⁶² Ethel Anderson joined the fray late and only once and her contribution did not by any means end the debate. Drawing on her links with the British art establishment, as well as her

exhaustive knowledge of western artistic tradition, she clearly demonstrated her right to comment authoritatively on the connections between 'contemporary art' and that tradition.⁶³

It was the *Sydney Morning Herald's* own (anonymous) commentator who pointed to the wider issue of the role of a detached elitist cultural authority in the 'present day'. The lengthy article echoes Anderson's line about the connections between the best of contemporary art and the masters of the past; that is, the arguments for institutional recognition of some contemporary artistic innovation. It concluded with the wish, however, that 'the trustees set out to bring artistic endeavour into closer relationship with the general life of the people':

If the trustees of the National Gallery [the AGNSW], and other such responsible bodies, wish to perform a useful function, let them come out of their present academic retirement. Let them take the public into their confidence. Let them make known generally what the modern movements in art really stand for: and thus create a demand for the work our excellent Sydney artists are doing. Let them use their influence with architects so that new buildings may have mural decorations by local painters. . . . Let them start a campaign in favour of householders hanging original paintings, etchings, or woodcuts on their walls, instead of mediocre reproductions. Let them improve the standard of interior decoration in the average house.

If they did these things, or even a few of these things, they would be earning the respect of all cultured people. These are the important matters to be attended to in Sydney. . . . After all, the general progress of art in this State is the principle thing.⁶⁴

The author may have been Ethel Anderson—her connections, influence, determination and capacity all suggest that this is likely. Whether this was Anderson or not, there are clear signs of the influence of female modernities on the author's hopes. The author asserted the importance of the application of art in everyday environments, of the presence of original art as opposed to commercial products in domestic interiors, of the anti-institutional practice of mural painting. He or she connected this intrusion of 'art' into 'general life' with the progress of the state; he or she did so just three weeks after MacDonald had lamented the 'intrusion' of women into the exclusive 'world of painters'.⁶⁵ The paper's 'Commissioner' had argued persuasively for a gendered inversion of custodial practice. MacDonald was wrong in one respect; the feminists had not attacked the notion of 'right art', they had publicly and successfully disrupted notions of cultural authority and practice.

Certainly, within Australian institutions symbolising cultural authority leftist practitioners and advocates of artistic modernism contested the anti-modernist stance of outspoken, culturally and politically conservative custodians, just as modernism's historical canon proposes. It is evident, however, that vigorous discourse on what constituted art capable of speaking for and to a leading capital metropolis, and even to the nation, was a feature of the cultural world outside those civic institutions. The discourse thus brought into question the appropriateness of exclusive nineteenth-century institutions that acted more like museums than adjudicators on art that best reflected contemporary realities. Present

within the discourse on civic culture and the role and nature of cultural custodianship were gendered modernisms, that is, practices that were reactive to the modern and framed as masculine and feminine. By bringing art out of symbolic civic institutions and into upper-middle-class suburban spaces, Ethel Anderson might appear to have risked trivialising the work of the very artists she sought to aid, particularly given the anti-materialist modernism embodied in notions of cultural authority. But that is only if the discourse on art and culture is viewed as limited to the custodial institutions such as civic galleries and associated art schools, in which Arnoldian notions of culture were enshrined in the nineteenth century with the aims of demonstrating the level of civilisation attained in the Antipodean colonies. Rather than affirming the purported marginality of modernist women artists and modernism's advocates, Ethel Anderson's example demonstrates that female modernisms contested the masculinist basis of existent notions of cultural authority and practice, by asserting the relevance at that time of the mass-produced, the everyday, and the suburban. In this instance, a culture of leisured female modernity led the charge, but this was one among many to present such a challenge. Examination of these strategies alerts us to an emerging perception that the cultural solution to modern ills did not lie in obviously symbolic institutions. These strategies were fundamental to the proposed alternative: art was still art, exclusive and burdened with a civil function, but it needed to be more accessible and reflective of the present; art was for the everyday, art was for every man, child and woman.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

- [1] Reflecting the perceived role of art galleries as civic institutions and the contemporary interest in Australia's possible nationhood at the time that it was built, the Art Gallery of New South Wales was originally named the National Art Gallery of New South Wales, a title which it still held at the time of MacDonald's speech.
- [2] 'Pakies' was founded by Pakie Macdougall, the former wife of little theatre manager, Duncan Macdougall, and attracted a bohemian crowd. Among noted or regular patrons were women such as Dulcie Deamer and Marion Mahony Griffin. It is interesting that MacDonald chose to launch his attack on modern women painters in an alternative club attracting women who blurred the boundaries of performance, space and theatrical practice. See Connie Stephens, untitled draft, n.d. 1930–31ⁿ, in Robertson, Constance, Mrs William Kinneard, Papers, ML MSS 1105, box 2, item 2 'Committees, Societies etc, 1921–62', pp. 39–71.
- [3] See 'Modern Art. Mr J.S. MacDonald's Criticism', in *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)* (1 May 1933), p. 10, emphasis added.
- [4] Yes, he was homophobic.

- [5] J. S. Macdonald, *The Bulletin*, 24 January 1934, cited in Caroline Ambrus (1992) *Australian Women Artists: First Fleet to 1945: history, hearsay and her say* (Woden, ACT: Irrepressible Press), p.140.
- [6] Including Helen Topliss (1996) *Modernism and Feminism: Australian women artists 1900–1940* (Sydney: Craftsmen House); Mary Mackay (1994) *Almost Dancing: Thea Proctor and the modern woman*, in Maryanne Dever (Ed.) *Wallflowers and Witches: women and culture in Australia 1910–1945* (St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press).
- [7] Marsha Meskimmon (1999) *We Weren't Modern Enough: women artists and the limits of German modernism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), p. 3.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- [9] Women music patrons, for example, supported the work of modernist composers. See Carol J. Oja (1997) *Women Patrons and Activists for Modernist Music: New York in the 1920s*, *Modernism/Modernity*, 4(1), pp. 129–155.
- [10] Kathleen D. McCarthy (1991) *Women's Culture: American philanthropy and art, 1830–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. xiv.
- [11] Peter Beilharz (2006) *Two New Britannias: modernism and modernity across the Antipodes*, *Antipodean Modern: Australian Cultural History*, 25, p. 145.
- [12] Janet Wolff (1990) *Feminine Sentences: essays on women and culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press), p. 56; Jane Hunt (2004) 'Victors' and 'Victims': men, women, modernism and art, *Write/Up, Journal of Australian Studies*, 80, p. 74.
- [13] Robert Dixon & Veronica Kelly (2008) *Australian Vernacular Modernities: people, sites and practices*, in Robert Dixon & Veronica Kelly (Eds) *Impact of the Modern: vernacular modernities in Australia 1870s–1960s* (Sydney: Sydney University Press), p. xv.
- [14] Hunt, "Victors" and "Victims", p. 75.
- [15] Maggie Humm (2002) *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures: Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, photography and cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), pp. 12, 13.
- [16] Wolff, *Feminine Sentences*, pp. 60, 61.
- [17] Hunt, "Victors" and "Victims", pp. 65–75.
- [18] In much the same way as Helen Meller's men did in late-nineteenth-century Bristol. See H. E. Meller (1976) *Leisure and the Changing City* (London: Routledge & Kegan). See also, Richard White (1981) *Inventing Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin), pp. 90–91; and Lisanne Gibson (2001) *The Uses of Art: constructing Australian identities* (St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press), chs 2 and 3.
- [19] Ian Burns (1991) *National Life and Landscapes: Australian painting 1900–1940* (Sydney: Bay Books).
- [20] Lionel Lindsay (1923) *Australian Art*, in *The Exhibition of Australian Art in London, 1923* (Sydney: Art in Australia), n.p.; also see Pam James (1994) 'No thank you, but do you have any painted fan decorations?': modernist women artists and the gatekeepers of culture, in Dever, *Wallflowers and Witches*, pp. 64–65.
- [21] See John Docker (1974) *Australian Cultural Elites: intellectual traditions in Sydney and Melbourne* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson); Vincent Buckley (1986) *Unequal Twins: a discontinuous analysis*, in Jim Davidson (Ed.) *The Sydney-Melbourne Book* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin); and Bernard Smith (1986) *Two Art Systems*, in Davidson (Ed.), *The Sydney-Melbourne Book*.
- [22] Bernard Begonzi (1986) *The Myth of Modernism and Twentieth Century Literature* (New York: St Martin's Press), p. xi; and Peter Wagner (1999) *The Resistance that Modernity Constantly Provokes: Europe, America and social theory*, *Thesis Eleven*, 58, p. 42.
- [23] Bernard Smith with Terry Smith (1991) *Australian Painting 1788–1990*, 3rd ed. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press), p. 195. See, for example, J. F. Bruce (1922)

- The Younger Generation, in *Art in Australia* (AA), New Series, 1(2), pp. 45, 46; Sydney Ure Smith (1928) Editorial, AA, 26, n.p.; Sydney Ure Smith (1929) Editorial, AA, 29, n.p.; and Gavin Long (1932) Layman's Complaint, AA, 15/1/32, pp. 20–22.
- [24] Martha Rutledge (1993) Anderson, Ethel Campbell Louise, in *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (ADB), 13 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press), pp. 46–47.
- [25] Bethia Foott (1992) *Ethel and the Governors' General: a biography of Ethel Anderson (1883–1958) and Brigadier-General A.T. Anderson (1868–1949)* (Sydney: Rainforest Publishing), pp. 45–69.
- [26] Charles Holmes to Ethel Anderson (ELA), March 26 1915, and April 1 1915, Anderson Family, Ethel Louise Anderson Papers, ML MSS 5294 (ELAP), Box 6, Folder 1, 'Letters 1907–29'.
- [27] Foott, *Ethel and the Governor's General*, pp. 95, 96; and notation on correspondence, Agatha Shore to ELA, 1924, ELAP, Box 6, Folder 1.
- [28] Helen Fowler (1996) Frances Cornford, 1886–1960, in E. Shils & C. Blacker (Eds) *Cambridge Women: twelve portraits* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 139.
- [29] Anne C. Clay (1914) A Picture of the Cambridge Drawing Society (Cambridge: small society booklet, no publication details), p. 4; Cambridge Drawing Society, *Catalogue of the Forty-Fourth Exhibition of Pictures of the Cambridge Drawing Society*, 21 February–1 March 1914.
- [30] David Steel (1989) Introduction, in L. M. Newman & D.A. Steel (1989) *Gwen and Jacques Raverat: paintings and wood-engravings. Exhibition and Catalogue* (University of Lancaster Library), p. 16; and Reynold Stone (1978) *The Wood-Engravings of Gwen Raverat* (London: Heinemann), p. 11.
- [31] Clay, 'Cambridge Drawing Society', p. 4.
- [32] Jane E. Hunt (2002) *Cultivating the Arts: Sydney women culturists 1900–1950* (Ph.D. thesis, Macquarie University), pp. 235–236.
- [33] Steel, *Gwen and Jacques Raverat*, p. 19.
- [34] Foott, *Ethel and the Governor's General*, p. 110; Minutes, Parochial Church Council (PCC) Meeting, 26 Feb. 1923, 'Minute Book, Vestry, Parish and PCC meetings, 1842–1949', Hereford and Worcester Records Office, Ref. 850 White Ladies Aston BA4779/2, p. 85.
- [35] Foott, *Ethel and the Governor's General*, p. 111; PCC, 'Annual Parochial Church meeting, 1924', 30 April 1924, PCC Minutes, p. 96; and Arthur Mee (Ed.) (1938) *The King's England* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, no copyright, printed 1938). Sadly, winter storms have since badly damaged the church wall and destroyed the mural.
- [36] C. Holmes to Ethel Anderson, 17 December 1924, in ELAP, Box 6, Folder 1.
- [37] For example, Humm, *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures*.
- [38] Foott, *Ethel and the Governor's General*, pp. 132–133.
- [39] Gwen Spencer, 'The Mural Painters of Turramurra Showing How the Younger Set, Decoratively Speaking, Have gone to the Wall', in *Home*, 1 November 1927, pp. 22–23.
- [40] Nancy Underhill (1991) *Making Australian Art 1916–49: Sydney Ure Smith patron and publisher* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press), pp. 194–196; Angela Woollacott (2001) *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian women, colonialism and modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 209.
- [41] 'Amateur Mural Painters', cutting in *Woman's Realm*, section of an uncited Sydney paper, in ELA Papers, Box 15.
- [42] 'The Children's Chapel, St James' Church, King Street, Sydney', typescript flier in ELAP, Box 16; and 'a revival in ecclesiastical art', in *Home*, 1 February 1930, pp. 28–29; *St James' 1824–1999* (published by the Churchwardens of St James' Church, Sydney to mark the 175th anniversary of the consecration of the church, 1999), pp. 42–43; Heather Johnson (1995) Ethel Anderson [re the mural], in Joan

- Kerr (Ed.) *Heritage, The National Women's Art Book* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press), p. 229. Afterwards, during the 1930s Anderson received further invitations from other churches in Australasia. These she carried out by herself, on occasion assisted by Jean Ramsay. A photograph of *Ascending Man* painted for Gundy near Muswellbrook in 1936 reveals a much less dynamic and adventurous approach to mural design and greater emphasis on the power of symbolism. See 'Turramurra Wall Painters at Work', source cited as *Herald*, n.d.; and 'St Matthew's, Gundy. "Ascending Man"', source cited but illegible [*The Scout* . . ?], 11 January 1938, both cuttings in ELAP, box 15, package 2, 'Cuttings re Anderson activities 1909–40s'; and Austin Anderson diary, 1935, entries for 25 Jan, 20 Feb, in ELAP, box 25 re trip-tych painted for 'Rabaul church', which otherwise not named, by Bethia and Ethel.
- [43] Norman Lindsay cited in Underhill, *Making Australian Art 1916–1949*, p. 80. See also Kosmas Tsokhas (1996) *Modernity, Sexuality and National Identity*: Norman Lindsay's aesthetics, *Australian Historical Studies*, 27, p. 107; and Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune*, p. 197.
- [44] Underhill, *Making Australian Art*, p. 200.
- [45] Meskimmon, *We Weren't Modern Enough*, p. 3.
- [46] Oja, *Women Patrons and Activists*, p. 130.
- [47] Pamela Nunn (2002) *Owning Femininity: Thea Proctor and the Australian avant-garde*, in Bridget Elliott & Janice Helland (Eds) (2002) *Women Artists and the Decorative Arts 1880–1935: the gender of ornament* (Aldershot: Ashgate), pp. 75, 79.
- [48] Oja, *Women Patrons and Activists*, p. 137.
- [49] Bridget Elliott (2002) *Housing the Work: women artists, modernism and the maison d'artiste: Eileen Gray, Romaine Brooks and Gluck*, in Elliott & Helland (Eds), *Women Artists and the Decorative Arts*, p. 181.
- [50] Foott, *Ethel and the Governor's General*, p. 150.
- [51] Roland Wakelin, Interview, Hazel de Berg collection [sound recording c.1961, 1962], National Library of Australia, ORAL TRC 1/23.
- [52] 'Social Gossip. A Danger to Our Art. Warning against Its Commercialism', *Daily Pictorial* (13 November 1930), p. 19.
- [53] Leslie Walton (1987) *The Art of Roland Wakelin*, (Sydney: Craftsmen House), p. 130; Roland Wakelin, de Berg interview. Douglas Dundas (1967) Roland Wakelin. The Painter, *Art and Australia*, 4(4), p. 282; Barry Pearce (1990) Wakelin, Roland Shakespeare (1887–1971), *ADB*, 12 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press), pp. 350–351.
- [54] Aside from commentaries on the work of particular artists, Anderson broached more general subjects such as art criticism, modern artists in France, and the philosophy of art. 'Critics, and Emile-Othon Friesz', *The Bulletin*, 18 March 1926, p. 3; 'Paul Gauguin', *Home*, 5(12), December 1924, p. 38; 'Tea-Cup Talks. Art and Nature', *Sydney Morning Herald* (24 September 1927), p. 11; and 'Subject in Art', *Art in Australia*, 29, September 1929, n.p.
- [55] Ethel Anderson, *SMH* (8 September 1928), p. 13.
- [56] Leslie Rees (1984) *The Small Treasures of a Lifetime: some early memories of Australian art* (Sydney: Collins), pp. 93, 94.
- [57] J. S. MacDonald, annotation on cutting from *New York Times*, Notebook, Box 1, MacDonald Papers, p. 27; Notes, MacDonald Papers; Sydney Ure Smith, 'Heysen and Lindsay', in ML MSS 31, p. 231; and Lionel Lindsay, 'The Exhibition of One Hundred and Fifty Years of Australian Art', in *AA*, 70, 1 March 1938, p. 26.
- [58] Ethel Anderson, 'Mr Roland Wakelin's Art', in *B.P. Magazine*, 1 December 1930, p. 51.
- [59] John D. Moore, Letter to Editor, *SMH* (21 April 1933), p. 4.
- [60] Julian Ashton, Letter to editor, *SMH* (21 April 1933), p. 4.
- [61] Eric L. Apperly, Letter to editor, *SMH* (26 April 1933), p. 6.
- [62] Thea Proctor, Letter to editor, *SMH* (24 April 1933), p. 6.

- [63] Ethel Anderson, Letter to the Editor, *SMH* (3 May 1933), p. 8.
- [64] 'Our own Commissioner', 'Contemporary Art. Craftsmen and Poseurs. Some Local needs', *SMH* (22 May 1933), p. 13.
- [65] Macdonald, *SMH* (1 May 1933), p. 10.