

Tansy Curtin review of Clem Gorman and Therese Gorman, *Intrépide: Australian Women Artists in Early Twentieth-Century France*

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After their having been for so long sidelined and forgotten, there is now without doubt a major global push to reclaim the artistic stories and legacies of female artists. In recent years, many galleries and museums around the world have turned their attention to programs and exhibitions presenting works on, or by, women. In 2020 the National Gallery of Australia launched a two-year project titled *Know My Name: Australian Women Artists 1900 to Now*, which seeks to bring the names of Australia's female artists to the fore—living artists, as well as those who have been lost to history. While it is undoubtedly *de rigueur* to examine the work of female artists, that is not to say that political box-ticking explains the heightened interest in this cohort; rather, there is a general awakening to the inequities of the arts world (and wider world more generally) and the layers of privilege within it, particularly in relation to gender and race. Concomitantly with this reawakening comes the realisation that the work of these (women) artists should be exalted and elevated to a new status and that there is a palpable need to widen the scope of the Western tradition or canon of art to ensure these artists receive the acknowledgement due to them. It is into this new world, post the #MeToo movement, that Clem and Therese Gorman's *Intrépide* has been launched. Arguably, the world in 2020 is a very different place from that of 2015, when the authors commenced their investigations, which of course does not negate the impact of their scholarship, but perhaps makes readers, both academic and lay readers, more critically aware of the subject matter constituting this publication.

As a curator and art historian, I, like Clem and Therese Gorman, have long been fascinated by expatriatism in the Australian art community from the late nineteenth century. I keep returning to the stories of the female expatriates, to understand and unpack their lives and legacies, and to gauge their courage and tenacity in the pursuit of their artistic aspirations. And, while texts have certainly been written about this period in Australian art history and the significant women who inhabited it, further scholarship and ongoing engagement with the topic are crucial. As the renowned feminist scholar, Janine Burke, notes: 'the price of re-discovery, or so it seems, is eternal vigilance; if the flame is not attended it will go out and the

reputation of that artist will again sink into obscurity'.¹ It is simply not enough to rediscover these artists, but to assure their rightful position in the history of Australian art, their lives and works—like that of their male colleagues—must be the subject of ongoing research and reassessment, and since it is not possible for us to go back in time to (re)contextualise their work in their lifetimes, we must do so within a contemporary framework, undeniably the approach of this publication.

In the late nineteenth century, Australian art was generally viewed as conservative and parochial, and for aspiring young artists their ultimate objective was to escape Australian provincialism and 'backwardness' and venture to the artistic capitals of London and Paris. To have their work displayed in the august art institutions of these two cities—the Royal Academy of Arts and the Paris Salons—was the marker of success and proof that they had 'made it' at a national and international level.

An extended sojourn to Europe was viewed as a rite of passage for Australian artists and, as the authors note, the key Australian art schools at the time played an important role in encouraging students to travel. George Frederick Folingsby, Director of the National Gallery of Victoria and its associated National Gallery School (1882–91), established an important travelling scholarship in 1887 to support his students, and today we are familiar with many of the names of the recipients of this important prize, including John Longstaff and George Coates. *Intrépide* reminds us that George Coates and Dora Meeson jointly received the 1896 travelling scholarship, but that Meeson gave up the opportunity in favour of Coates, who would later become her husband (pp. 28–29). Notably, female enrolment in the National Gallery School and other primary art schools was substantial from the late nineteenth century, with the travelling scholarship awarded solely to women between 1908 and 1935. Nonetheless, the volume of female artists by comparison with their male counterparts was not necessarily reflected in contemporaneous exhibition programming and the acquisition strategies of the state galleries, a situation which to this day in Australia remains skewed to male artists. Elvis Richardson's 'The Countess Report' notes the major discrepancy between graduation statistics and numbers being exhibited in state galleries—in 2014 almost three-quarters of visual arts graduates were female and yet they constituted only 34 per cent of state gallery exhibitions.²

A love of Paris has seemingly led the authors on this journey of discovery of Australia's forgotten women artists, proving that, more than a century later, the city retains its allure. In our collective psyche, Paris continues to be the great romantic city of Europe; we too are enamoured of its cultural vibrancy and enticed by the grand boulevards and beaux-arts buildings. The legendary bohemian lifestyle of many of

1 Janine Burke, 'Art and Amnesia: The Gallery School and the Fate of Women Artists', *ART150: Celebrating 150 Years of Art*, accessed 7 August 2020, art150.unimelb.edu.au/articles/women-and-art (site discontinued).

2 For statistical analysis and further information see Elvis Richardson, 'The Countess Report', February 2016, www.thecountessreport.com.au/.

the artists draws us in and we cannot help but be intrigued by their connections to the exotic and unusual—albeit, at times, seedier—aspects of Parisian life. Through their own love of the French capital, the authors invite us to consider just what brought these Australian women across the vast oceans to a foreign country to paint and draw. Although many commentators may be tempted to highlight only the positive experiences of these artists, *Intrépide* presents a more authentic picture of the reality of life for these women: they undoubtedly revelled in the excitement and glamour of life in Paris, but their living and studio arrangements were often rudimentary and substandard. In dispelling the prevailing myth of an artistic life in romantic bohemian Paris being one of comfort and pleasure, Clem and Therese Gorman remind us that a career as an artist demanded commitment and determination, with Agnes Goodsir, one of the artists included in this book, herself noting: ‘in Paris ... art is something more than a polite hobby ... it is an absorbing life work’.³

The 28 artists selected for the book are an interesting and eclectic bunch; some, such as Margaret Preston, Ethel Carrick, Dorrit Black and Grace Crowley, are familiar names, while others are less well known, Madge Freeman, Marie Tuck and Anne Alison Greene, among them. The authors are unapologetic about the subjective nature of their selection: many of the artists they ‘happened’ across during their research and while discussing the topic of their book with friends and colleagues. But these choices are in themselves intriguing, revealing what it is about these intrepid women we still find fascinating.

The authors do not claim to be art historians; rather, they are biographers (with a background in theatre) of artists, but presenting, in addition to an engaging narrative of each artist’s journey, informative snippets of an art-historical nature designed to confirm and promote the artistic legacy of these women. By way of comparison, an art historian researching this period might adopt a different approach and select an altogether different cohort of artists, perhaps those who were engaging with the avant-garde artistic movements of early twentieth-century Paris. In *Intrépide*, each artist’s story is presented as a brief biographical vignette, one that offers a first glimpse into the lives of these women, with complementary information about their artistic endeavours. Given the wide-ranging nature of this publication, the vignettes are by no means exhaustive, which leads me to note that this is not a book to satisfy an art historian or scholarly researcher, nor is it intended as such, since much of the information presented is not new research but rather the collecting of multiple sources into a single volume in order to whet the appetite of the reader not familiar with the story of female expatriatism.

³ Agnes Goodsir, ‘Australian Artist in Paris’, *Advertiser*, 15 February 1927, 19, accessed 11 August 2020, trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/73655449.

Each artist has been allocated a short and catchy chapter heading; for example, ‘Dora Meeson: Progressive Feminist, Traditional Artist’ and ‘Stella Bowen: The Symbiosis of Art and Life’, a device that distils their lives into witty—and, arguably, illuminating—one-liners. While this clever approach undeniably makes engaging reading for an everyday public, these headings have a tendency to oversimplify the complex and layered lives of these incredible women. That these women were indeed ‘intrépide’ is undeniable: they uncompromisingly sought out opportunities to further their artistic careers through international travel. However, the sum effect of 28 stories compressed into a single volume is a diminution of the importance of each of these lives. Summarising the narratives into four or five pages means that some of the depth and nuance is lost, with the stories tending to become a collection of basic biographical facts. For their part, illustrations have the capacity to add depth and substance, and perhaps here more images would have served this purpose. Surprisingly, some of the works selected were far from typical of individual artists’ oeuvres, Gladys Reynell’s *Pensiveness*, which features on the cover, offering a good case in point. Heavily informed by the female impressionists, it is undoubtedly a fine painting, but it is certainly not illustrative of the work for which Reynell is celebrated today: now she is highly regarded for her unique studio pottery. Similarly, the works selected to represent Kathleen (Kate) O’Connor and Ethel Carrick are by no means characteristic examples of the skill of these highly talented artists. One thing is clear, however, when considered as a group an important connection between the artists becomes obvious; namely, their choice of subject matter. Their works are intimate and personal explorations of subjects close to the artists’ interests and lives. In the history of Australian art, representations of this country’s unique and majestic landscape are privileged above all other subject matter and are associated with the ideals of nation-building and identity. Sadly, the intimate and personal nature of the subject matter of these works by women mean that they automatically receive less critical attention.

With its engaging style and inherently interesting content, *Intrépide* is an enjoyable read and offers a gentle introduction to the lives and works of 28 courageous and talented women artists of the early twentieth century. Providing a well-researched foundation for those unfamiliar with the story of Australian expatriatism, the book will almost certainly encourage the reader to venture further and discover for themselves more about this important group of women, and their work. Each of the artists who appear in this book made unique contributions to art and society in Australia and France. Some, like Bessie Davidson, fully integrated themselves in Parisian life and culture, while others returned to Australia, bringing back with them a wealth of artistic and cultural knowledge and experience. These individual tales remind us of the need for rigorous ongoing scholarly study of these artists, specifically, that each of them—and their sisters not included in the selection—is deserving of their own publication and, indeed, exhibition.

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