

Two tenants of Number 9 Collins Street: Tom Roberts and Kate Keziah Eeles

Juliette Peers

Abstract: Number 9 Collins Street Grosvenor Chambers was claimed to be the first building in Australia that was intentionally built for creative professionals. Until being 'façaded' in the 1980s, the tenants' list of the building was glamorous and romantic, with several generations of famous names in art and fashion and other creative industries making the building their base.

This paper focuses on the contrast in reputation and output between two late nineteenth-century tenants of Number 9 Collins Street: Tom Roberts the painter and Kate Eeles the couturier. Whilst *Shearing the rams* was being painted an ambitious Salon de Couture operated from a floor below. This is a strange and exciting modification of our understanding of the iconic nationalist artworks of the 1880s and 1890s. That we cannot place the artworks of Roberts and Eeles alongside one another and acknowledge their respective singularity as equally worthy of professional attention indicates the limiting effects arising from our peculiar cultural nationalism.

Robert's works have been meticulously documented in a catalogue raisonné and his life in a detailed biography, but currently only a few very high quality items have turned up in public collections with Eeles's label. Surviving examples of their work testify to their outstanding levels of talent in their respective fields, and like Roberts, Eeles was an innovator, who brought new ideas to Melbourne. She went on scoping/forecasting tours to London and Paris to ensure that her customers were indeed being presented with up-to-date styles from the fashion meccas.

Yet conversely the two artists may not be so disparate, for Eeles's finely crafted and current styles recall the schizophrenic nature of Roberts's practice with his urban-based portrait studies forming a significant section of his work during highpoint of his career from 1885–1900. Those of women reveal an intense interest in contemporary fashion. With his attention to the quality of his own clothes, Roberts may well have been in the late 1880s more alert than subsequent cultural professionals in Australia to the professional activities of his co-tenant.

The discussion of the relationship between art and craft could be assumed to be a twentieth and twenty-first century debate triggered by various theoreticisations and defences of 'craft' in Australia. Intense discussion around 'craft' at various periods in Australian has been most notably triggered by the 'Craft Movement' of the 1970s.¹ Another more recent phase of debate has arisen in the wake

¹ Craft Australia designated 2010 as the 40th anniversary of the 'Australian Studio Craft Movement', noting that '[a]lthough craft practice in this country precedes the 1970s, this date marks a flourish of activity due to new funding possibilities.' 'Celebrating craft and design landmarks' (Craft Australia Editorial) http://www.craftaustralia.org.au/library/editorial.php?id=celebrating-craft_and_design_landmarks [online] viewed July 2011.

of 'design' being identified as a means of integrating 'creativity' into modern political and economic agendas and a means for garnering creative activities some vestigial honour in an agora increasingly dominated by economic rationalism. However this paper will examine an older — and still virtually forgotten — Australian juxtaposition of fine art — respectable and accepted — to the less known and only partially acclaimed materially-based practices of craft and design. The relationship that is here outlined is the simple one of physical/geographical/urban proximity and it will be charted in an empirical and descriptive manner. Yet even with such direct conceptualisation and methodology the juxtaposition raises questions of a more theoretical, political and conceptual bent.

The relationship between art and craft is personified by two tenants of a particular Melbourne building in 1888 — Grosvenor Chambers in Collins Street — who contributed greatly to its reputation for artistic and social cachet amongst Melbournians during the land boom: the well-known artist Tom Roberts and the couturier Mrs Eeles, representing respectively fine arts and design. In the 1880s these two practitioners marked the beginning of the extended history of the proximity and interaction of art, craft and design within this one building. This history lasted until the middle of the twentieth century and evidence of this history up to the 1950s will be presented in this essay. The juxtaposition of Roberts and Eeles is not mere curious coincidence, but informs 80 years of art, craft and design activities in Melbourne. Given the fact that much historical and theoretical literature on visual culture in Australia has stressed the fine arts at the expense of design — the tenancies of this single building document the fact that these two fields of creativity were at least physically in closer proximity than the silos of historical memory would suggest.

The building itself reminds us that place has become an important driving issue in the discussion of living and present-day design. Writers such as Bradley Quinn (2003) have established links between design, especially fashion, and both the physical urban environment and the more intangible expression of an ethos of 'place' that resonate at an academic curatorial level and also in terms of popular cultural understandings of urban social life. Fashion in particular has been looked at in terms of its place of origin. A number of books on fashion and the site of its production have been published recently, including an anthology *Fashion's World Cities* and a range of studies covering cities such as London and Paris and the fashion of both nations such as Japan and regions such as South America. In writing a historical overview of the trope of 'Paris fashion', Agnès Rocamora presents a more critical view of this linkage between place and design, suggesting that it has been developed consciously by the extended network of the French fashion industry for 'legitimising' the rule of Paris as global fashion arbitrator. Her argument does suggest that this sense of place evoked in the concept of 'Paris fashion' has a relational aspect in that it references not only a tangible material reality but also simultaneously a less tangible constructed vision of place, 'the city as imagined', and the two concepts of the city interact and are productive in tandem. Indeed she argues that the suggestive effect of

the phantom city is as real as the physical city (2009, pp. 185–87). In a series of texts, which have been much cited over the last decade, Richard Florida has proposed an even more dynamic and causal relationship between place and object. No longer merely the art historical and curatorial organising taxonomy of national ‘schools’, nor even the branding cachet of the place of origin, be it Paris Fashion or Scandinavian Design, Florida claims it is a demonstrable economic and geographical fact that design and creative industry professionals often tend to cluster in particular locations. They favour cities where there are a number of social conditions including a high existing proportion of people with creative qualifications, social tolerance of diversity and available technologies and resources, ‘the three t’s of economic growth: technology, talent and tolerance’ (2005, p. 6). Via Grosvenor Chambers and Mrs Eeles and Roberts, place can also be a point of sense making in discussing historic, pre-twentieth century Australian art and craft. Certainly the consolidation discussed by Florida as a new cultural and economic phenomenon in the early twenty-first century had already taken place by the second quarter of the twentieth century on an intimate scale in Melbourne within the upper eastern reaches of Collins Street, where artists, photographers, fashion retailers, smart hotels, clubs and cafes all gathered — the so-called ‘Paris end’ of Collins Street (Van Wyk, 2006, pp. 11–13). Moreover the activities, tenants and businesses of Grosvenor Chambers had already brokered the association of Collins Street east with activities associated with ‘style’, ‘art’ and ‘design’ in the 1880s.

Grosvenor Chambers and its tenants

The building is undoubtedly ‘star’ of the central conceit of comparison between two of its late 1880s tenants. Number 9 Collins Street, Grosvenor Chambers, is without exaggeration the building most closely and consistently associated with visual practice and the arts industries in Australia. Famed as the first purpose-built artists’ studios designed in Australia, it was opened to the public in April 1888. The top floor studios and their special effects of light, via siting of windows and painting of the colours on the walls, were designed in consultation with Roberts and other notable artists of the period.² The society journal *Table Talk* claimed in 1889 that Roberts’s studio was ‘one of the best in Melbourne’.³ ‘No. 9 Collins Street quickly became famed in art circles’ (Henty, 1937, p. 11).

Grosvenor Chambers was an amalgam of radical British culture and the romance of Parisian *vie de bohème*. In its name Grosvenor Chambers directly referenced the Grosvenor Gallery of London — representatives of all things artistic and radical at the time of the aesthetic movement in the 1880s (Newall, 1995). ‘[T]he gallery’s celebrity was equally a result of the controversy that surrounded the contemporary artists, ... influential figures in the British art world, who, nevertheless rarely exhibited at the Royal Academy’ (Inglis, 2008). The Grosvenor

² *Argus*, 26 April 1888, p. 8.

³ *Table Talk*, 26 April 1889, p. 5.

Gallery was the key display point for non-canonical British art, which often placed itself outside the Royal Academy system. This alternative centre offered by the Grosvenor Gallery contributed substantially to a brief flowering of avant-garde art and design of international repute, which exceeded accustomed mainstream norms and inspired the emergence of a European avant-garde movement in applied art. 'Such was the fame of the Grosvenor Gallery that audiences as far away as Melbourne were soon familiar with its activities, not only from serious exhibition reviews in British and local art journals, but also from its caricaturing in the popular press' (Inglis, 2008).

With its top-lighted studios on its top floor designed with art practice in mind, the cosmopolitan Melbourne resident could also dream of Parisian studio life.⁴ However, the Grosvenor Chambers artists in 1888 did not live in romantic poverty, but were 'nearly as comfortably disposed as a bank manager, with all [their] wants anticipated and supplied. An ante room nicely furnished for arriving visitors, a studio within, almost as rich in decoration and upholstery as a dentist's or photographer's room ...'.⁵

Downstairs in the semi basement, which was underground at Collins Street and above ground on Flinders Lane, was Australia's first purpose-built sculpture studio with extra high ceilings and large barnlike doors for moving full-sized sculptures in and out:

... the fall of the ground enables [the sculptor's] floor to be above the surface of the lane and yet allows him a clear height in the room of over 20ft, so that the most lofty groups may be modelled in the room without difficulty. The whole of the south end is occupied by a wide doorway and window, and the fanlight over the doors can be removed at will, giving an opening from the lane nearly 7ft wide by the whole height of the room. This is useful for the removal of large pieces of sculpture, such as that on which Mr Ball is at present engaged. The remainder of the basement consists of a spacious cellar, having access by stone stairs both to Collins Street and the lane. The cellar is lighted from Collins Street with Hayward's patent prismatic pavement and stallboard lights.⁶

The first tenant to rent this purpose-built sculptural studio was Percival Ball, and the space was later used in the interwar period by artist Septimus Power for his equestrian portraits (Henty, 1937, p. 11), the large doors and access to Flinders Lane serving horses as well as they served monumental sculptures.

Grosvenor Chambers was a favoured address for many generations of Melbourne artists. The tenants were a who's who of Melbourne art, both radical and conservative. It was built by Charles Paterson, a member of the Heidelberg School circle (Lane, 2010, p. 41). The first tenants included Roberts, the academic portrait painter James C. Waite, and a highly talented but short-lived

4 Fullerton (1988, pp. 26–27) notes the popularity of the fantasy of Parisian studio life in Melbourne during the 1890s. 'Like the contemporary opera *La bohème*, Trilby lent a certain glamour to the bohemian life led by artists.' Cf Taylor (2007, pp. 38–41) on the Australian fascination with the image of Parisian art life via Trilby.

5 *Argus*, 24 April 1888, p. 5.

6 *Argus*, 26 April 1888, p. 8.

artist, George Walton. The latter's broad brushwork and tonal division in colour application and the confidence of his portrait work strongly resembles Roberts at the same period.⁷ Ball, who rented the basement, had the most credible professional reputation of all sculptors in Australia prior to the emergence of Bertram Mackennal as an internationally renowned sculptor during the 1890s. Ball had a solid career in Britain, was a regular exhibitor at the Royal Academy, and provided decorative sculptures for the North Façade of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Before coming to Australia for the sake of his health, his studio was based in Rome and he was in the friendship circle of American painter and sculptor Elihu Vedder (Soria, 1970, p. 90).

Jane Sutherland, Clara Southern and Jane Price, the major female plein-air artists, came to Number 9 when it opened and would often lend their studio to Roberts so he could entertain in a suite of rooms (Jane Price, quoted in Croll, 1935, p. 150). Arthur Streeton was also in residence in the early 1890s (Topliss, 1985, p. 33). Other tenants include E. Phillips Fox during the 1890s, John Longstaff for two periods, firstly in the 1890s and later in the 1920s, Janie Wilkinson Whyte in the early 1900s, Norah Wilkie in the 1910s, Louis McCubbin, son of Fred, in the 1930s, the major modernist sculptor Ola Cohn in the 1920s and 1930s, and tonal painters Polly Hurry and John Farmer in the 1930s. During the Second World War, thanks to Hurry, Number 9 Collins Street became the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors' volunteer headquarters. At this venue they made and sold handcrafts and art to raise money for the war effort, including knitting a herculean 2000 garments (Taylor, 2007, p. 25). The women also learned and practised first aid drills in case of wartime need, as documented by Sybil Craig's gouache in the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra. In the postwar period George and Mirka Mora rented space at Number 9 Collins Street which became not only their café, but also the centre for gatherings of their friends in the Melbourne art scene, such as John Percival and the Antipodean group. Émigré photographer Wolfgang Sievers also worked out of Grosvenor Chambers, after Lady Maie Casey had located space there for him (Taylor, 2007, p. 25).

Writing design history via Grosvenor Chambers and its tenants

Juxtaposing two tenants of Grosvenor Chambers, Roberts and Eeles, sets up a series of polar relationships: iconic versus unknown, fine art versus design and applied art, male versus female, nationalist versus cosmopolitan, oil painting versus fashion. These simple dialectics offer a broad-brush overview of the construction of the main assumptions of evaluating art. One half of these paradigms are familiar to visual cultural scholars, the other half is, in terms of mainstream historical narrative, more inaccessible and fragmentary. The historiography of decorative arts, design, craft and material culture is

⁷ As documented in Clark and Whitelaw (1986, p. 80), one of the few recent sources to depict the work of Walton.

fragmented and fraught in Australia, and certainly lags behind the professional attention paid to easel painting (McNeill, 2011). Material cultural studies in Australia also tend to be strongly dominated by dealers, collector-dealers and specialist curators (McNeill, 2011). This greater proportion of researchers not based in academia means that there is perhaps a lower level of publication in academic journals and a greater degree of policing of turf boundaries, because a publicly shared/known narrative of Australian design history is not circulated as widely through the undergraduate curriculum as is 2-D painting and fine arts history. Whereas this corralling and fragmentation of information was true of the fine arts in the mid twentieth century, art theory, digitisation of information and an increasing awareness of the opportunities and rights offered via publicly available information have allowed the painted image to escape from the secure stockade of institutional or capitalist ownership. With the decorative arts, design and craft, given the more patchy institutional holdings, access to primary sources in Australia — especially historic objects — themselves remains difficult.⁸ Due to the lack of a well-documented and visible canon, many professionals and academics do not realise the complexity of the high fashion industries that emerged in Australia during the 1870s, of which Mrs Eeles was clearly an early star.

Via Grosvenor Chambers tenancies further artistic relationships can be seen: Roberts with his artist neighbours Sutherland, Southern and Price. These artists are already marked — in the eyes of the modern investment art marketplace (Ellis, 2007) and still to a great extent in curatorial practice — by their not-good-enough-ness, their ‘weakness’, their derivativeness (Peers, 1999, 2005). Such assessments may be generalisations, but these problematic mainstream truisms can be interrogated and challenged through scholarship (e.g. McNeill, 2011; Ellis, 2007; Jordan, 2007; Peers, 1999, 2005; Kerr, 1996). Furthermore, the lack of status of these women artists can be allied with another even greater case study of neglect: that of Eeles. To the present day all four women are so poorly documented in the public record that even though they worked day to day in the same building, there is no current documentation that indicates what they thought of each other. Another tenant of Grosvenor Chambers, who arrived a little after the building’s grand opening, Madame Masseran, a corsetiere, styled herself ‘*artiste en corsets*’ in her press advertisements. What the artists painting in oils (both male and female) upstairs thought of the ground floor tenant’s appropriation of such a title is also unknown, although Masseran’s pride in her status is unmistakable.

We can also draw some points of similarity between Roberts and Eeles. Both were ambitious artistic professionals with a commitment to a showy performed

8 Due to fragility, and the need to limit exposure to handling and light, historic fashion items are particularly hard to access and study in Australia. Whilst British twentieth-century costume curating practices have been adopted in Australia, a key element — the accessibility of dress collections for informed outsiders (often, in the United Kingdom, genteel amateurs as well as academics and design students) — has not translated to Australian practice. Private collectors generally tend to seek out and recognise more recent Australian labels than those from the 1880s and 1890s, preferring a post-1950 vision of high fashion. Institutional interest and energy in research, publishing and collecting generally also favours this more recent period of fashion in Australia.

competency that was also dependent for validation upon an informed, admiring audience. Both consciously brought into question artistic competency and auteurship, as understood by their public, and showed how, in the nineteenth century, this performance of the assured, instinctive self-promoting creative artist circulated around the aspirational avant-garde, from fine arts to fashion. Both also speak of the sophistication of urban life in the hothouse of 1880s Melbourne, and how this urban life could nurture creative practices of skill and energetic ambition in both high art and design.

Robert's career has been investigated in great detail (Topliss, 1985; McQueen, 1996), but what is important is the role of Grosvenor Chambers — as much as the camps at Box Hill and Heidelberg — as a stage in which he could 'perform' Tom Roberts. His famous invitation card for the opening of Grosvenor Chambers (Topliss, 1985, p. 28) supposedly spoke of artlessness and rural simplicity: an Australian version of Rousseau in which an unbearded youth — certainly not the bearded Roberts in his expensive suits⁹ or the mustachio-ed Streeton — but an avatar in working-class, lax, unstyled clothes (notably a sloppy hat), painting a large canvas strung between two gum saplings. The subject is a vision of artistically inflected humility, genius yet demurral, but also a fantasy of artistic production, that overwrote the smart urban context in which Roberts finished and sold his paintings with an arcadian vision of a young lower-class male out in the bush. This image of proletarian youth and handsomeness did not, however, correspond with the clientele that he intended to attract to his studio: the card asks for guests to attend in 'evening dress'. It was a male evening only, a 'smoke night', even though the *Argus* pointed out when reviewing the event that all nights were smoke nights for men.¹⁰

It was into this same city studio that Roberts brought the bush in the form of gum blossom and gum leaves (Nancy Elmhurst Goode, quoted in Croll, 1935, p. 159). *Shearing the Rams* was painted here and first exhibited to the public.¹¹ Yet concurrently, this studio was also marked as a space of European ambition with a collection of artefacts including paintings from London and Spain, art muslin on the wall, a Venus torso on the mantelpiece, a Doulton bowl, a pipe organ — that sign of *ne plus ultra* of chic in Melbourne. Latest editions of overseas art journals were read and discussed in public *conversaciones* at Roberts's studio. Here Melbourne artists began the practice of *conversaciones* and open studios for the fashionable and well connected to visit. 'The number of people in Melbourne interested in art is large, if one may judge by the throng that climbed the four flights of stairs in the Grosvenor Chambers in Collins Street to reach

9 D.H. Souter recalled that 'he was the only one of us who dressed properly' — quoted in Croll (1935, p. 40).

10 *Argus*, 24 April 1888, p. 5. An abridged account of this event was also published in the *Australasian Sketcher*, 17 May 1888, p. 71; the smoke night was organised by C.S. Paterson and his male artist tenants to advertise the new building and the artists who worked there. From the article it would suggest that as well as viewing the studios on the top floor, the male guests went downstairs to a large empty room to hold a concert and a lively male-only dance. Possibly this space was Mrs Eeles's salon before the professional fit-out.

11 *Argus*, 24 June 1890, p. 6.

Mr Roberts's large and well-lighted studio.¹² The regional culture of nearby Asia was as equally celebrated as Europe's — Indonesian batik, sea-grass furniture and matting, oriental china, Japanese lanterns.¹³

Conversely what do we know of Mrs Eeles? She was a dressmaker whose label with a coat of arms and the magical address of 9 Collins Street may be found on a handful of garments in public collections in various states of preservation. The chief of her currently known garments is a superb, embroidered bodice, remarkable for its excellent state of preservation, in the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. What is notable in this example is the sensuous aspects of the sheen of the satin and the contrast of the delicate web of the chiffon trim — so often lost or rotted. The physical delicacy and translucency of net and tulle itself was, for the Victorians since the vision of Taglioni's *La Sylphide* in 1830, shorthand for the purity and fragility of the ideal woman, who was not embodied flesh but idealised spirit. The floral embroidery also reminds us of the link of woman to nature, woman to flower in Ruskinian symbolism. It is almost rococo revival, but just tempered by a botanical naturalism of the flower heads, and also a certain hint of art nouveau abstraction in the languid curves and interchanges. Like many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century dresses, its matching skirt has disappeared. Skirts often became separated from bodices to be remade and recut.

We can build up a picture of Mrs Eeles from certain newspaper advertisements. She started her business lower down in Collins Street early in the 1880s, as both advertisements and dress labels document. Around April 1888, she moved into the newly built Grosvenor Chambers, where her business took up the whole of the first floor.¹⁴

During the 1880s she travelled overseas to bring back sample gowns and novelties from Europe, Paris and London, as attested by classified advertisements.¹⁵ She is one of at least four women in Australia who by the late nineteenth century were making such forecasting trips. Sourcing first-hand information of new styles via buying trips was typical of the mid- and late-twentieth-century fashion industry, but such practices have a much longer history than usually assumed in Australia. Other Australian women making similar trips to Europe to obtain up-to-date and first-hand knowledge of fashion in the late nineteenth century were fellow Grosvenor Chamber tenant, Masseran, couturier Janet Walker of Brisbane, and paper-pattern queen and fashion magazine publisher Johanna Weigel of Melbourne (Peers, 2010, pp. 111–13).

12 *West Australian*, 16 May 1888, p. 3.

13 Taylor (2007, pp. 17–19) reproduces a number of images of Roberts's studio both paintings and photographs.

14 *Argus*, 26 April 1888, p. 8.

15 *Argus*, 3 September 1887, p. 8.

Fashion in Grosvenor Chambers and Mrs Eeles

As with fine artists, Grosvenor Chambers consistently attracted fashion-based tenants over half a century, even though by the 1930s Louis McCubbin was occupying part of Mrs Eeles's former first-floor premises.¹⁶ The corsetiere Masseran was also a tenant.¹⁷ She too was positioned at the summit of Melbourne's fashion businesses and boasted an exclusive clientele. Although, as with Mrs Eeles, she is now obscure in historical memory, details of her career can be garnered from an advertisement in which she claims to have worked for a London corsetiere, Madame Olivier Rolland, who supplied the Princess of Wales. She described herself in 1896 as an '*artiste en corsets*'.¹⁸ This claim validates the conjunction of couturier Mrs Eeles with Roberts by suggesting that elite members of the Australian fashion industry in the late nineteenth century did see themselves as 'artists', and thus high end fashion as an 'art'. Like Roberts, Masseran could boast Vice Regal patronage. The connection of Grosvenor Chambers with fashion continued beyond the era of Roberts and the plein-air group. In 1922 a dressmaker on the ground-floor showrooms of Grosvenor Chambers was robbed of over £1000 worth of stock,¹⁹ a considerable sum at that date, suggesting an elite business. Mavis Ripper, who was renowned as one of Australia's most gifted couturiers in the years leading up to the Second World War, had a studio there in the 1930s (Peers, 2010, p. 112).

Mirka Mora brought the building's two genealogies of art and fashion (and thus craft/design/applied art) together in the 1950s. At that date she was living in Grosvenor Chambers and working as a dressmaker with clients referred from a sales assistant in Georges department store (Beier, 1980, p. 13). Mora's dressmaking work followed the favourite Australian practice, endemic it was said in the 1930s to all classes (Peers, 2010, p. 101), of passing off locally made garments as French couture (cf Jents, 1993, pp. 52, 55). By her own admission, Mora was not trained as a dressmaker and often worked by trial and error, even sending her husband to dressmaking classes to find out about technical details undercover. She was born in Paris, however, and that gave her credibility enough for Australian customers. Sunday Reed employed Mora first as a dressmaker (Beier, 1980, pp. 13–14) rather than spotting her talent for art. John Reed met Mirka and Georges Mora when picking up a dress that had been made for Sunday (Taylor, 2007, p. 25). Thus it was that fashion connections and fashion business led to a new and important chapter in the Reeds' ongoing patronage of Melbourne artists and also launched both Mirka and Georges Mora as important fixtures on the contemporary art scene in Melbourne. The Mora family continues to be influential in Melbourne art six decades later. The confluence of histories of fashion design and art which centre on Grosvenor Chambers as late as the 1950s suggests that 'high' art (intellectual, cerebral)

16 See 'Exhibition of oil paintings by Louis McCubbin: held at the studio, 1st floor, Grosvenor Chambers, 9 Collins Street, Melbourne: open daily from the 28th April to 13th May, 1933, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.'

17 *Argus*, 20 November 1902, p. 2.

18 *West Australian*, 16 December 1896, p. 3.

19 *Argus*, 20 March 1922, p. 6.

and craft (of the hand) and design (of the market/client) have had, at least at basic level, a longer proximity in Australia than is usually credited by accepted narratives.

When thinking of the different positioning of Mrs Eeles and Roberts in professional historical imaginations we should note that in booming prosperous Melbourne of the 1880s, Eeles's studio was not seen as irrelevant but as a matter for civic congratulation. The book *Victoria and its Metropolis* of 1888 praised her 'handsome showrooms, a dark room for the exhibition of silks and the display of gaslight effects, also a large factory capable of accommodating upwards of forty employees and filled with appliances as necessary for such an establishment in conformity with municipal legislation' (Alexander Sutherland, quoted in Lane, 2007, p. 147). Fashion was here seen to represent neither folly nor the trivial concerns of female minds, but civic pride, mercantile initiative and the steadfast beneficence of capitalism in boom-time Melbourne, through the conformity of Mrs Eeles's workroom to 'municipal legislation'. The validation of Mrs Eeles's enterprise again highlights the notion of nineteenth-century Melbourne as a 'world city' in its era, with its complex and now largely forgotten nineteenth-century 'fashion culture' (Peers, 2010, pp. 103–04).

Humphrey MacQueen suggests that Mrs Eeles's 40 or more female staff could have provided Roberts with 'suitable subjects for an artist's eye or his compliments' (McQueen, 1996, p. 43). The difference between the brief treatment of Mrs Eeles's undertaking as a site of romantic diversion and the encyclopedic detail of his tracking of Roberts's many professional activities is obvious. McQueen does not make any comment about the size of the undertaking (owned by a woman) or about the client base in Melbourne and colonial Australia that could support an elite dressmaking studio with upwards of 40 employees. Conversely, representing a different generation of historians and a new modality of history writing that no longer seems to be obliged to erase middle- and upper-class cultural presences in Australia, Alex Taylor takes Mrs Eeles's atelier more seriously and discusses her famed *salon de lumière* — where dress fabrics could be tested under totally artificial lighting to gain an understanding of how they performed during an evening social event. He sees Mrs Eeles's business and its resources as proof that 'performing the artist' had always in Melbourne an aspect of commercial acumen and commercial promotion (2007, p. 16). For Taylor, Mrs Eeles's sales and promotion facilities represent an essential but often intentionally overlooked aspect of the 'fine arts'.

Mentioning commerce via Mrs Eeles's innovative showroom again throws up the anxiously policed demarcation between 'fine art' and object-related practices. The latter are never exempt from the shadow of capitalism and the commodity and thus not seen to be as worthy of commendation as 'art'. One could turn to the remarkable denunciation of fashion — specifically — in relation to the *virtu* of 'fine art' by German-American Benjamin Buchloh and his colleague Yves Alain Bois. 'What had irreconcilably divided avant-garde practice and fashion production had been the radical aesthetic, social, and political character of the former' (1997). Both particularly fear fashion's 'vapid menace' and 'empty

promise' (1997) in relation to the acknowledged value of 'art' or the 'avant garde'. Yet valuing art for its intellectual and revolutionary potentials is also about erasing the presence of the object in art. The object can problematise painting with its association not only of the sordid exchange of money and the low-brow commodity, but also for its grounding in artisanship and physical skill, as much as the world of ideas. Roberts's famous pronouncement,

A man may be able to paint decently well and also know how to comport himself in good society. Besides you don't as a rule sell your stuff to people who rent cottages at seventeen and six. (Souter, quoted in Croll, 1935, p. 40)

reveals him to be as concerned with the image and income stream of his clients as any more commercially orientated organisation such as Mrs Eeles's *maison*. His love of fashionable, quality male dress suggests that this concern for image and status extended to personal presentation.

In one way the relationship between 'art' and material practices such as design and craft is very clear following on from the cues given by the weighting of professional historical activities in Australia: Robert's fame has only increased and consolidated down the generations, whereas Mrs Eeles's reputation has diminished greatly. Conversely, in the late nineteenth century Mrs Eeles's name was widely known and had currency independent of the presence of her labelled products. Dressmakers in both rural Victoria and interstate advertised that they were 'late of Mrs Eeles' as proof of their superior status. In the 1890s Mrs Eeles was a 'brand'.

Miss Henderson who has been for a number of years with Mrs Eeles, of Collins Street, Melbourne, which should be a sufficient guarantee that any work entrusted to her will be completed in a thoroughly artistic manner.²⁰

... Miss Ashworth, premier dressmaker. It is almost unnecessary to draw attention to her skill as a fitter and designer, her long experience with Mrs Eeles of Collins-Street Melbourne, in addition to the satisfaction she has given here is a guarantee that patrons will be more than satisfied.²¹

Note that Miss Henderson claimed that her pedigree from Mrs Eeles ensured her work would be 'completed in a thoroughly *artistic manner*' [my italics]. She certainly thought her former employer was an artist, and equally claimed that status for herself working in Camperdown. Again, as so often when researching early Australia fashion practices and also early creative women in Australia, the primary sources provide a different and somewhat more positive perspective than the judgements of much twentieth-century professional scholarship.

Mrs Eeles constantly advertised for staff in Melbourne over a 20-year period from the 1880s to the first decade of the twentieth century, particularly for specialists in skirts or bodices. This subdivision of tasks suggests that her atelier was run along French lines where multiple employees worked simultaneously on

²⁰ *Camperdown Chronicle*, 10 September 1889, p. 10

²¹ *Mercury* (Hobart), 18 June 1895, p. 2

different parts of a dress to ensure that it was finished in relatively quick time. The constant advertisements may mean that there was a turnover of unsatisfactory staff. Conversely, staff may have found Mrs Eeles's establishment uncongenial, although some ex-employees boasted of her training, which suggested that they had positive memories of their workplace. A further possibility is that temporary staff were constantly being hired as turnover demanded. Without further documentation it is difficult to second guess, but there was certainly a pool of professionally trained staff with couture quality skills in turn-of-the-century Melbourne that Eeles sought to communicate with.

Mrs Eeles as innovator

Her *Salon de Lumière* gives us the clearest picture of Mrs Eeles's cultural ambition as a follower of the innovator of the modern 'fashion system', designer Charles Frederick Worth.

At the House, clients could preview evening attire in rooms illuminated by various forms of light — natural light, candlelight, gas lamps, and later, electric bulbs. While the House maintained the usual fitting and modelling rooms, it also offered rooms for fabric selection that were distinguished by colour. An understanding of the play of colours and textures was one of the enduring achievements of the House, and was successfully passed from generation to generation. Charles Worth's sense of colour was particularly noteworthy — he preferred nuanced hues to bold primary colours. (Coleman, 2010)

Worth also subdivided skirt and dress production to enable quicker production and also to maximise diversity given that he had a large client base, many of whom moved in the same circles. The parts of his garments were to a degree modular in design (Coleman, 2010). Mrs Eeles's advertisements seeking specialists in different components of a dress suggest that she followed a similar approach. Whether Mrs Eeles derived her knowledge from London houses that emulated Worth or whether she actually knew and visited Worth is not known, but the Worth structure and intention is clearly visible. Mrs Eeles could have bought dresses as models from Worth from which to make licensed copies in Melbourne, as did American companies. As noted above she hosted showings of dresses and samples from Paris in her atelier, but she does not name the original designers.

Worth not only set up commercial systems, he also established the primacy of the designer above the client in arbitrating stylistic authority and credibility. Thus the designer was not a servant of his or her clients, but exerted a control over the options of taste and choice within the transaction. The client deferred to the professional knowledge of the designer. He is important not only for fashion, but for establishing the current high regard directed towards design and designer goods — there could be no Phillippe Stark, Mark Newsom or the various 'Design Festivals' in Australian capital cities or celebrations of Australian locations such

as Melbourne as a 'Design city' without Worth. His self promotion further speaks of the conversation between art and other practices. Even his photographs indicate how far he had adapted mid-nineteenth-century positioning of the self-contained romantic genius artist into his fashion design business. 'Late-nineteenth-century publicity images of Charles Frederick Worth depict a man who saw himself as an artist, wearing a bow at the neck or a beret. Many of the images of his son Jean-Philippe also show someone intent on conveying an impression of creativity' (Coleman, 2010). "'My mission is to invent: creativity is the secret of my success," he boasted.' (Tungate, 2009, p. 13). Given Roberts's extreme consciousness of the authority of the artist amongst his audience and peers, and given that Roberts is now acknowledged as the driving force behind the professionalism among late-nineteenth-century Australian art circles, Mrs Eeles's apparent positioning of herself as a designer in the manner of Worth suggests a point of contact between the first and second floors of Number 9 Collins Street far more significant than any romantic liaison. Roberts and Eeles appear to have shared a consciousness of radical innovation and strategic self-making. Although far less is known about her, there is evidence that Eeles presented herself as a 'professional', as did Roberts.

The link between the aesthetic and self-positioning of Worth and Mrs Eeles can be upheld. Her possible interest in Worth is corroborated by empirical evidence as she follows his interest in abstract figured jacquard silks. These non-representational and dramatic patterns are generally unconventional in terms of the international corpus of late-nineteenth-century dress,²² and are usually assigned to Worth. They are quite different from the more demure floral, small scale and historical patterns that are the norms amongst most high end fashion designers of the late nineteenth century. A yellow evening cape with Mrs Eeles's label in outstandingly sound condition in the National Trust of Victoria collection shows this type of abstract patterning. Another gown in ivory brocade with an abstract lozenge pattern (possibly from the 1890s, but substantially altered at the time of the Second World War, and also held in the Trust collections), displays the large scale of repeat that is a Worth trademark. Fragments of a striking chartreuse-coloured evening dress, now in fragile condition, suggest the aesthetic power and frisson that evening dresses of eye-catching design could have at the elaborate social events of late-nineteenth-century Melbourne.

Mrs Eeles died a wealthy woman, who had made enough money from her couture house to retire as a 'lady'. Her success was confirmed by the fact that when she died in 1939, she was a resident of the elite Clivedon Mansions in East Melbourne, surrounded by expensive, if conventional, furnishings, including a painting by J.H. Scheltema,²³ a more low brow taste in landscape painting than

22 Coleman (2010) discusses Worth's penchant for large patterns.

23 *Argus*, 25 May 1939, p. 19. Fragments of oral history collected by the National Trust of Victoria suggest that Mrs Eeles trained in Britain — she came out to assist a sister already working as a dressmaker in Melbourne and then branched out with a more successful brand on her own. She paid her girls more than the minimum wages. She had a fashionable clientele including Nellie Melba, with whom she would have stand up rows but who would come back to Mrs Eeles. Her daughter was sent to a private school and was always more beautifully dressed than her peers.

the Heidelberg School, but certainly an admired painter in turn of the century Melbourne. She left a substantial estate in monetary terms too.²⁴ Despite his popularity and high profile in boom-time Melbourne, in later years Roberts never consolidated his finances to such a degree as did Mrs Eeles.

Tom Roberts and fashion

The parallel nature of Eeles's and Roberts's practices as confident self promoters in tune with their elite customers can be further substantiated. Mrs Eeles's world of fashion was equally home territory for Roberts to a degree that is barely acknowledged even today. Roberts was unquestionably a *fashionisto*. Fashion was part of his charisma as much as his painting and 'leadership' skills, and perhaps his love of fashion was synonymous with the qualities for which he is remembered in professional memory.

He was the only one of us who dressed properly ... he was our sole society bohemian ... Chief amongst his sartorial possessions were a crush hat and dress cape lined with red satin. (D.H. Souter, quoted in Croll, 1935, p. 40)²⁵

Charles Conder's *Holiday at Mentone* (1888, Art Gallery of South Australia) demonstrates that chic up-to-date urban male wear was part of the image of the Heidelberg school as much as proletarian or bush dress.²⁶

Robert was not only a consumer of fashion; in marrying Lillie Williamson, Roberts married into 'rag trade' money. His bride had grown up in a family that was kept in comfortable prosperity by the profits of the Craig Williamson drapery business on the corner of Elizabeth Street and Flinders Street in Melbourne. The massive department store Craig Williamson[s] operated from 1873 to 1937. From the 1890s onwards the business occupied a substantial Wilhelmine baroque building, rebuilt after a major fire in 1897 (the year after Roberts married Lillie Williamson) that destroyed many other buildings and businesses abutting the department store.²⁷ During the early 1900s when, in London, Roberts's art career collapsed, the Williamson estate and inheritance (drawn from the department store profits) supported the Roberts household (McQueen, 1996, p. 508).

24 *Argus*, 29 April 1939, p. 13

25 A page of drawings by Alfred Martin Ebsworth from the *Australasian Sketcher*, 17 May 1888, depicting the opening party of Grosvenor Chambers has a prominent figure of an artist with a crush hat under his arm; it may be a portrait of Roberts. <http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/miscpics/gid/slv-pic-aab22611/1/mp010094> [online] [viewed March 2012]

26 Anecdotaly, Margaret Streeton suggested to the author in the 1980s that Arthur Streeton is the young man lying down on the sands and Roberts is the figure in the grey suit on the pier.

27 *Argus*, 22 November 1897, pp. 6–10. There appears to have been an extended Williamson family involved with the drapery trade in both Launceston and Melbourne. A Mr Williamson moved to Melbourne from Launceston in 1848. His Melbourne store later became Hicks Atkinsons (for anecdotal information about the Williamson family see *Argus*, 2 April 1949, p. 4). Lillie Williamson's father Caleb Williamson was in Launceston running a drapery during the 1860s and 1870s (cf McQueen, 1996, p. 54). Lillie was born in Collingwood and historical records document that a Caleb Williamson was a draper in Collingwood in the late 1850s (see the account of a forgery case in 1859 in which he was the victim of a bad cheque, *Argus*, 21 November 1859, p. 6).

One notes that Roberts and also E. Phillips Fox were both close-focused students of contemporary fashion, which they painted with great flair and observation. Was it any accident that both had their studio above a highly successful couture studio of its day? Fox's paintings are particularly informative about the avant-garde, empire-style fashions worn by women in 1890s Melbourne (e.g. *My cousin* 1893–94, National Gallery of Victoria, and 'Marie Torrence', c. 1895, private collection), as well as a faddish dressing of little girls from families within art and design circles in regency-style fashions in the manner of Kate Greenaway (e.g. *Adelaide, daughter of Professor Tucker*, 1895, Art Gallery of New South Wales). The role of fashion in Roberts's vision is hardly considered by historians. Yet he was an outstanding observer of contemporary urban fashion in the period, its forms, surfaces and colours. Fashion featured prominently in his art during the successful years in Australia when he enjoyed great social and professional prominence amongst his peers. The close nexus between promoting art professionalism and making art chic by means of its social and architectural setting — as seen in his instigation of studio *conversazioni* in his modish studio — is also matched by the prominence of fashion in his best portraits from the 1880s and 1890s. Despite his antipodean location, Roberts could be seen as Baudelaire's painter of modern life par excellence (Baudelaire, 1863). The schizoid persona split between the great horse-and-bowyang operas so beloved of his mid-century, left-wing champions and his urban-based portraiture practice is already present in his own invitation card for Grosvenor Chambers, which used a working-class figure to invite guests to a formal reception. Grosvenor Chambers as site of urban creativity and also of urban fashion production linked Roberts to the cultural life of the city and to elite society activities and style in the city.

Later assessments of the plein-air group are impoverished by our inability to place their artworks alongside the extraordinary but currently elusive couture culture of the Melbourne in which they were painted. The complexity of the links between the star tenants of the first and second floors of Grosvenor Chambers suggests that accepted professional constructs — which focus upon the fine arts at the expense of the materially based craft and design practices which concurrently flourished alongside the now highly celebrated art practices — distort our understanding of the parameters of creative options in the late nineteenth century. Whilst in recent years material based practices are being rapidly repositioned to be parallel with the fine arts, examining the careers of Roberts and Eeles suggests that Australian high or fine art has always been embedded within a more strongly object- and material-based marketplace and audience than suggested by the twentieth century focus on fine arts in historians' and curators' publications. Moreover, this early world of making and design in 1880s Melbourne functions in a way that is congruent to more recent textual and theoretical explications of design. Thus Grosvenor Chambers could be regarded in modern terms as a 'hub' or an 'incubator'. Deploying more recent paradigms for sense making in visual culture and its histories offers a more productive and informative point of interchange between Roberts and Eeles than the twentieth century, fine-arts-centric constructs. Despite the difference

in the reputations of Roberts and Eeles their worlds are more closely intertwined than would be at first suspected, not only via their presence in Grosvenor Chambers but also in their visual presence within the cultural ambition of 1880s Melbourne. Roberts, via the Craig Williamson department store, was far more dependent on the garment trade for his economic wellbeing than posterity may realise. Thus, in examining the points of interchange between Roberts and Eeles, we touch upon a greater longevity of interaction between craft, design and 'art' in Australia than is usually acknowledged.

Juliette Peers is a historian of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century visual culture and material history, engaged with a wide range of both high and popular art forms, including the pre-histories, back stories and precursors of new media, technologies and art forms, as well as the social histories of new technologies. She is widely published as an academic, an art and cultural historian and a freelance curator on many aspects of Australian art history, particularly the Heidelberg school and Australian women artists, as well as the Pre-Raphaelites, the history of fashion and textiles, and aspects of popular visual culture, including dolls. The role of gender, mythologies and symbolism in shaping and brokering knowledge systems and the often unacknowledged life of the past within present and incipient practices and technologies is a particular fascination. Juliette is also editorial consultant for the journal *Artlink*. She is a lecturer in SIAL (Spatial Information Architectural Laboratory) and postgraduate and research co-ordinator in Textile Design, RMIT.

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