Blooms and Brushstrokes

A FLORAL HISTORY OF AUSTRALIAN ART

Penelope Curtin and Tansy Curtin

Introduction

THE FLOWERS

Late in 2017 we visited the National Gallery of Victoria to look at a Tom Roberts work that had appeared in the background in a television show we'd seen a few days previously; even from that brief glimpse we observed that the work contained flowers, which was most gratifying because we felt we needed a Roberts work in our book, his contribution to Australian art being so critical. When we saw *Mrs L.A. Abrahams* in the gallery, we really liked it, particularly and unexpectedly because it contained a multitude of flowers from which to choose. Afterwards we met a friend and explained what we'd been up to, and the following day we received from her an extract from the latest book by Robin Lane Fox, an outspoken English gardening writer, in which he discusses how gardening has enriched his life, and how it 'has deepened what I find in books and poems and in great paintings, *the identity of whose flowers is so seldom considered by their curators and historians*'.[i]

And that's what we've attempted to do – identify the flower or flowers in works of art, *but* in works that are representative of the art-historical trajectory of Australian art: in the words of our subtitle, 'a floral history of Australian art'. First and foremost, we wanted interesting, well-loved flowers, but we wanted these to be depicted in important works, those that would illuminate our floral history, notwithstanding that this might be a tricky proposition. And in some instances the confluence wasn't totally felicitous, a case in point being the Margaret Olley work, *Homage to Manet*, which is an interesting work on a number of dimensions *and* she's an important artist, but as for plumbago, the flower depicted, it's not a particularly likeable flower, but, then, Margaret Olley perhaps selected it to underscore a point she was making.

We also had to be balanced. Many wonderful flower works were executed in the first half of the last century: still lifes with flowers were at that time *de rigueur*; the still life as a subject was readily assembled; and the resultant works of art were accessible – financially and intellectually – to the average collector of art. And a huge array of beautiful flowers were depicted at this time by the likes of Nora Heysen, Vida Lahey, Adrian Feint and Margaret Preston. But we had to limit the number of works by these very prolific flower painters, since we wanted our coverage to be truly representative of the Australian canon. This means some much-loved old favourites weren't accorded feature-flower status, although many appear in the book by virtue of keeping company with the artwork's specified flower. And sometimes we couldn't find a work that depicted a flower that was an integral member of the flower 'canon': there was really nothing depicting violets, nor a suitable work showing galanthus (true snowdrops), a flower that appears to have replaced the tulip as the plant to collect.[ii]

Which begs the question of the relationship of the artist to the flowers they painted: what motivated the artist to select a particular flower or group of flowers to paint? The shape, colour, texture and form make some flowers particularly 'paintable' – the wheel-like form of the daisy or the zinnia, the angularity of japonica, the striking form of the 'angel's trumpet', and so on. Furthermore, historical or cultural traditions have determined that other flowers become the artist's favoured model: we had a huge number of rose paintings to choose from – we selected four to illustrate 'the history of Australian art', more than any other flower. Some flowers, like pansies, have an anthropomorphic quality, which endears them to all, including artists.

Right: Margaret Olley, *Summer flowers*, 1964

And let's not discount fashion. Like everything else, flowers – and the gardens they inhabit – change with fashion. Dahlias are a prime example: during the first half of the twentieth century everyone painted dahlias. What made dahlias so irresistible? Their sometimes complex form, their bright colours? At least half a dozen of the works included here contain dahlias. Writing about fashions in flowers, the American gardening writer Eleanor Perényi applied Nancy Mitford's system of U and non-U (upper class and non-upper class) to plants, noting that gladioli, scarlet salvias, red-hot pokers and orange marigolds are definitely non-U.[iii] Ironically, all of these are entirely suitable for the Australian climate, and many are welcome subjects for works because of the very characteristics that specifically deem them non-U: their bright colours and interesting forms. If we go back earlier – and perhaps this is less relevant to this book – fashions in gardens, and therefore flowers, were influenced by the introductions of new plants; for example, the flowers brought to Europe by the plant hunters. Introduced to France from China in the late nineteenth century, peonies provided inspiration for a number of Australian painters at that time.

And what about artist–gardeners? It is well known that Claude Monet and a number of the other French Impressionists loved gardens and gardening, with flowers becoming an intense and sustained focus of their works. In the Australian context, Lucy Culliton is a dedicated gardener, which surely must influence the way she paints the flowers in her garden. Hilda Rix Nicholas was also a keen gardener; she looked out of her studio window to her beautiful patch of azaleas. The works by these two artists in this book show their gardens, both, coincidentally, located on the Monaro, in southern New South Wales.

Another point to make about our selection of flowers (we alluded to this when we mentioned the many appearances of the rose), is that a few of the selected flowers have more than one work to represent them, our rationale for their inclusion being that in some works the specific flower is indistinct, and we did want to present a recognisable image of the flower; hence, for example, poppies by W.B. Gould and by John Passmore. As noted earlier, a number of the works we have selected are still lifes, but not all, with some of our flowers appearing in landscapes, two extremes being John Glover's Tasmanian garden and Tracey Moffatt's mission at Cherbourg in northern Australia. A couple of the colonial works are botanical illustrations, which provide an interesting counterpoint to the flowers shown in the landscape or in the sitting room; some of our flowers appear on people, this individual most often being the reason for the work, rather than the flower. The role of a number of the flowers is to act as metaphors, interpreting, examining and explaining: Christian Thompson and Trevor Nickolls are two examples. So, while we have been unable to include all of the most familiar or most loved flowers, we have collected a charming and diverse 'bunch', executed by this country's most interesting and important artists, from colonial times to the present day.

For each of the flowers we have provided some sort of botanical-historical-cultural description, followed by an art-historical assessment of the work itself. Penelope Curtin compiled the former; Tansy Curtin the latter. As for the descriptions of the flowers, Penelope is neither a botanist nor a horticulturist, merely a plant- and flower-lover, who, along with Tansy, has cultivated gardens for many years, been an avid nursery-goer, and viewed many beautiful

Left: Nora Heysen, *Pom pom dahlias*, 1947

gardens, in Australia and overseas. In the limited space available for each flower, we've tried to provide information and facts perhaps less widely known – about both the flower, and the work and artist. Botanical and horticultural information is readily available and in her treatment of the individual flowers Penelope has paid these aspects limited attention, seeking out instead interesting and quirky facts about each, with the intention of amusing, entertaining and enlightening that ultimate of magnificent specimens – the reader.

THE WORKS

Australia's flora is beautiful and unique and has been critical to the lives of the nation's First Peoples as a significant food source, as well as for cultural and ceremonial purposes. This book does not seek to provide an exhaustive survey of the art of Australia over the 60,000 years of human habitation but to contextualise flowers – native and exotic – within Western artistic traditions. Since the country's colonisation in the late eighteenth century, flowers have played a significant role in the development of art in Australia: from the very earliest botanical illustrations attempting to make sense of the exotic flora, to the complex multi-layered works of contemporary art. At every turn, and through the development of artistic movements and styles, flowers as objects of beauty, implicit social indicators and symbols have continued to maintain their importance, although the species selected for representation by artists differ significantly due to changing fashions in art and cultivation.

The earliest depictions of flowers in Australian art primarily fall into two categories – the botanical or scientific illustration, and the floral still life, the latter principally informed by the seventeenth-century Dutch tradition. Botanical illustration plays a critical role in our understanding of plants and flowers; however, the purpose of this text is not to examine flowers through a natural history lens but rather from a social, cultural and, most importantly, artistic viewpoint. That said, botanical representations form one of the many threads that bind the flowers in this book. Artists such as John Lewin and Ferdinand Bauer developed their reputations as significant artists through their early interpretations of Australian flora, as they recorded these unusual flowers for the first time. However, Lewin and Bauer both developed their work beyond simple scientific illustration, demonstrating a keen artistic eye. In colonial Australia it was quite acceptable for women to be proficient in drawing and painting (particularly watercolours), this being one of the many accomplishments of a 'lady'. Eliza Strawbridge and Rosa Fiveash are two examples of important female artists in colonial Adelaide. The former's work was more decorative, while the latter established herself as an illustrator of great renown.

Still life painting in colonial Australian art developed from the Dutch tradition of the seventeenth century. In the Netherlands, baroque still life painting was often concerned with the notion of *vanitas*, that is, the vanity of earthly things.[iv] These works were replete with symbolism that represented life, death and rebirth and were often connected to religious sensibilities, especially Christianity.[v] This was also a time of significant world exploration, and wealthy citizens would fill their gardens with unusual plants gathered from exotic locations. These flowers were then transformed into opulent and complex floral still lifes.[vi] Still life painting thus became a symbol of significant wealth and status in Dutch society.

When Europeans began to colonise Australia, they brought the complex heritage of Western art to an ancient land, a land whose beauty and terror was well understood by its First Nations

people but which was seen as alien and exceptionally harsh by these new settlers. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, colonial art was merely a facsimile of the artistic context in Europe: the landscape, portrait and still life conventions were simply transplanted. Artists such as W.B. Gould, Henry Short and William Ford emulated the Dutch tradition without acknowledging the unique and exotic nature of the flora and landscape of the country in which they lived, so different from the extravagantly coloured tulips, roses, fuchsias and poppies these artists depicted. John Glover was one of the first artists to begin to depict the countryside from a uniquely Australian perspective, developing an understanding and appreciation of the form and colours of the bush, the olive greens and greys infinitely different from the deep forest greens and browns of deciduous trees of Europe.

For much of the nineteenth century Australian artists followed the path established by their colonial predecessors, emulating the art of England and Europe with the creation of classic

Above: Berthe Mouchette, *The queen's bouquet,* 1891

Right: Henry Short,
Our Adopted Country. To the Memory of the Lamented Heroes of the Victorian Exploration, 1861

Above: Margaret Preston, *Monstera deliciosa*, 1934

baroque still lifes, flower studies and interiors, although Australian native plants began to feature alongside those from Europe. Florence Williams's striking tableau *A native bird with berries and native flora* shows a new appreciation of Australian flora. In the last decades of the nineteenth century a vast shift occurred in Australian art and an emphasis on creating a national style began to emerge. Two key events prompted the transformation of art in Australia – the establishment of the National Gallery School as an integral element of the National Gallery of Victoria[vii] under George Frederick Folingsby; and the influence of French Impressionism and, most specifically, its focus of painting *en plein air*, which was paramount to the impressionist model of practice. At the National Gallery School Folingsby taught narrative painting within a strong European framework, having been trained in Munich, but arguably the most important legacy of Folingsby's teaching was the establishment of the National Gallery School's Travelling Scholarship not long after he arrived in Australia, in 1879.[viii] This scholarship enabled a generation of Australian artists to study in the artistic centres of London and Paris and to experience the vibrant and dynamic lifestyle of these cosmopolitan cities, cities vastly different from nineteenth-century Melbourne.

For an artist to achieve recognition and success in Australia, travel and study in the artistic centres of Europe was considered essential, with the National Gallery's Travelling Scholarship providing this opportunity for many developing artists. During the latter part of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, a large number of artists left Australia, spending several years studying and travelling in Europe, predominantly in Paris and London. The majority of the male artists returned to Australia after several years of intensive European sojourning and study – Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton and Rupert Bunny among them – having enthusiastically absorbed the precepts of the new movements in art: impressionism, post-impressionism and, later, modernism. A large proportion of the artists who travelled to the art centres of Europe were women, surprising perhaps, given the male-dominated society of turn-of-the-century Australia, and some, such as Bessie Davidson and Agnes Goodsir, so wholeheartedly embraced the life and culture of Paris that they elected to remain there for the rest of their lives. These expatriate female artists turned to the female or domestic sphere for inspiration – portraits, interiors and still lifes were the principal subjects, with flowers playing a particularly important role in creating context and beauty in their compositions.

Impressionism came to Australian art in the guise of the Heidelberg painters, now more generally referred to as the Australian Impressionists. In the mid 1880s Roberts returned to Australia after extensive studies and travel in England and Europe and, with fellow National Gallery School student Frederick (Fred) McCubbin, he established an artists' camp at Box Hill (then pastoral land). Roberts and McCubbin were joined by Arthur Streeton and Charles Conder, and these artists began to paint in the impressionist style, *en plein air*. In 1888, the group found a large weatherboard house in Eaglemont and over the ensuing years this artists' camp attracted a diverse assembly of artists.[ix] The Australian Impressionists set out to capture the unique quality of Australian light – an endeavour in which no previous artists had been successful. These Australian 'impressions' are filled with bright white light, so unlike the more atmospheric quality of the light of London and Europe. While Charles Conder, Streeton, Roberts and McCubbin took inspiration from French Impressionism, they were able to set themselves apart through their distinctive treatment of light and their use of a bright colour

palette, in what became a move towards the concept of a national style in the years before Federation.

Impressionism held sway in Australian art for many decades before modernism and abstraction began to take hold from the 1920s. These Australian Impressionists are principally known for their landscape works painted *en plein air*, although they also painted portraits, interiors and still lifes. The still lifes, flower portraits and flower-adorned interiors executed by the Australian exponents of the French style demonstrate the same commitment to an impressionist style, with atmospheric backgrounds, sketchy application of paint and a considered approach to the play of light; McCubbin's *Roses* and Streeton's *Michaelmas daisies*, despite their significant difference in tone, demonstrate the key characteristics of impressionism in their focus on light and colour.

Modernism's introduction to Australia followed a similar path to its immediate predecessor, French Impressionism: it was the art teachers and returned expatriates who brought the first wave of modernism to Australia. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries two key art schools helped to shape the course of art in Australia – Julian Ashton's Sydney Art School and, as noted above, the National Gallery School, first under G.F. Folingsby and subsequently led by several other key artists, Bernard Hall and Frederick McCubbin among them. As the century progressed, independent art schools and individual teachers emerged as pivotal in Australia's artistic development. Artist–teachers such as Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo, Max Meldrum, Arnold Shore, George Bell and Dorrit Black were crucial in supporting modernism in its myriad forms: tonalism, abstraction, expressionism and so on. The expression and progression of these various movements and styles is exemplified – and illuminated – by flower pieces: the atmospheric tonalism of Max Meldrum's *Iris in the mirror*, the painterly expressionism of Grace Cossington Smith's *Foxgloves growing* and the pared-back and abstracted forms of Margaret Preston's *Aboriginal flowers* and Dorrit Black's *The pot plant*. The tradition of still life painting was integral to modernism in Australia, lending itself to an interrogation of the key signifiers of the modernist aesthetic: colour, form and composition. Jean Bellette, David Strachan and John Passmore each utilised the still life genre to create dramatic modernist works. Simultaneously, a new group of modernist painters emerged – the Antipodeans – developing in response to the overuse of abstraction and promoting the importance of figurative art. Arthur Boyd, John Brack and Charles Blackman were key members of this group.

As modernism gave way to post-modernism, Australian art grew at an exponential pace and moved forward into the contemporary era. The hitherto relatively linear trajectory of the nation's art became fractured and fragmented, expanding to include a great variety of media, not merely the traditional media of painting, drawing, sculpture and printmaking, but unreservedly embracing photography, moving image, installation and ephemeral art. Art in Australia began to follow global trends, and artists used their chosen medium to elicit emotional responses, to raise awareness of personal and global issues, and to discuss the human condition. Flowers maintained their place in this multiplicity of narratives, with stories ranging from childhood memory to reflect on fractured Indigenous lives, as in Brenda L. Croft's *I remember roses*, contemplation of one's own mortality with Polixeni Papapetrou's *Blinded*, and recognition and

Right: Joseph Lycett, Australia, *Waratah (Telopea speciosissima), c.* 1820

celebration of Australia's First Peoples, as in Christian Thompson's *Purified by fire*. Contemporary artists continue to reinvent the most traditional form of flower painting – the still life. Margaret Olley, Michael Zavros, Don Rankin and Robyn Stacey have each interpreted this classic genre in unique ways. And artists such as John Wolseley reaffirm the role of botany and scientific investigation in the representation and interpretation of plants and flowers.

Flowers occupy a noble place in the history of art the world over. With their myriad forms, colours and symbolic meanings, they have inspired countless generations of artists to reflect upon and map their beauty, diversity and originality. By means of individual flowers – those depicted in still lifes, floral portraits, decorative interiors and botanical illustrations and executed by a long line of Australian artists – this book takes the reader on a journey through

Above: Eric Thake, *Blue bells, blue river, Upper Murray,* 1932

the history of Australian art, from the late eighteenth century, when the traditions of Western art canon were transplanted into newly colonised Australia, through the rapidly developing artistic styles of the early twentieth century, to the contemporary period, a period characterised by countless narratives and styles, and encompassing a host of objectives – aesthetic, social, political. Significantly, these works of art also shine a light on the role and importance of plants and flowers in everyday life and elucidate changing floral fashions, as well as highlighting flowers in their various forms – cut flowers, pot plants and gardens.

Penelope Curtin and Tansy Curtin

Above: Ethel Carrick, *Flower stall*, undated

Christmas bells

MARGARET PRESTON, 1875–1963, *Self portrait*, 1930 (right)

THE FLOWER

There are four species in the genus *Blandfordia*, all of which are endemic to eastern Australia. The pot of Christmas bells on Margaret Preston's windowsill is likely to be *Blandfordia nobilis*, since this species grows in the sandstone country of New South Wales and in coastal heathlands. Christmas bells, named after the shape of their flowers and the timing of their flowering, are immensely popular as cut flowers, resulting in their being overpicked in the wild – in much the same way as the beautiful native orchids in the Adelaide Hills – to the extent that they are now extinct in some areas. Blandfordia is a protected native plant and a licence is required to grow (and export) it commercially. It was first grown domestically as a glasshouse plant in England from 1803.[51]

Blandfordia nobilis grows as a tufted perennial with strappy green leaves and erect leafless flower stalks, with the actual flowerheads supporting between three and twenty flowers of bicoloured bells of striking tones of orange, through scarlet to blood-red, tipped with saffron yellow, or paler tints of these, including salmon pinks. As cut flowers they have an extremely long vase life, nor do the flower colours fade over time, adding to their popularity.

To my mind, Christmas bells, along with waratahs and Illawarra flame trees (*Brachychiton acerfolius*), are synonymous with Sydney.

THE WORK

A book about Australian art would not be complete without a significant focus on Margaret Preston, undoubtedly one of the finest artists of the twentieth century, and one whose work is represented in innumerable collections across Australia. Born Rose McPherson, Preston, who was both dedicated and prolific, was one (if not the leader) of a group of highly talented female modernists to emerge from Adelaide in the latter years of the nineteenth century. She was close friends with Bessie Davidson and Gladys Reynell, both of whom went on to become very accomplished artists. Preston, like others in her cohort, believed international travel crucial to developing an artistic style: she travelled to Europe and Britain, absorbing culture in the great artistic centres of the world.

Preston returned to Australia and established herself as a flower painter of great renown. Perhaps unusually for artists of this period, Preston used flowers as a vehicle for exploring different styles, techniques and ideas. This self-portrait is an extremely important work in Preston's oeuvre: it was a commission from the trustees of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and thus firmly established Preston as a key artist in the canon of Australian art.

The artist has presented herself in much the same way as she presented her flower portraits – straightforward and replete with symbolism. Preston has included the accoutrements of her working life: paintbrushes, palette and, of course, flowers.[52] The choice of the motif of an Australian native flower in this instance must be considered a deliberate decision, an absolute declaration of her 'Australianness'. Moreover, this self-portrait depicts a new type of Australian artist – an empowered and contemplative modern woman.[53]

Daffodil

VIVA JILLIAN GIBB, 1945–2017, *Still life with daffodils*, 1995 (right)

ARTHUR BOYD, 1920–1999, *Sleeping bride*, 1957–58 (page 57)

THE FLOWER

'Daffodils that come before the swallow dares, and take the winds of March with beauty'.[68]

So says Perdita in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* of one of the earliest harbingers of spring. We all know at least the first half of the Greek myth of Narcissus, after which the genus is named, but I had forgotten the conclusion: after his death on the reedy bank of the pool, a flower, which bears his name today, emerged. Mrs Grieve, whose 'modern' herbal appeared in 1931, refutes this, claiming instead that the name 'narcissus' comes from the Greek word *narko* – to numb – due to the narcotic properties possessed by the plant; Socrates called the plant 'Chaplet of the infernal gods' because of these effects.[69] The origin of the word 'daffodil' itself is said to be from the 'asphodel', a flower mentioned by the ancient Greeks and which the daffodil is said to resemble.[70]

Some gardening writers suggest that 'daffadowndilly', 'narcissus' and 'jonquil' are common names for daffodils. However, as a non-expert, I've always considered the 'daffodil' to be the species with large trumpet-shaped flowers, as in 'King Alfred', and perhaps Wordsworth's 'host of golden daffodils'; I've always called the bulbs that produce white clusters of flowers, 'paperwhites'; while the cheery yellow and orange early-flowering narcissus, also with clusters of several flowers and with a strong scent, are 'jonquil'.[71] The genus includes about fifty species originating in southern Europe, particularly the Iberian Peninsula, and north Africa, with historical accounts suggesting that narcissi have been cultivated from the earliest times, becoming increasingly popular in Europe around the sixteenth century.

While it is impossible to identify the daffodil in the Boyd, I could make an educated guess about that in Gibb's work. It looks to me like a double pheasant's eye daffodil – *N. poeticus* – also called 'poet's daffodil'. Among the first daffodils to be cultivated, it was brought, so the story goes, to England by Sir Geoffrey de Fynderne from the Middle East on his return from the Crusades. The so-called 'Findern flower' – *Narcissus poeticus* 'Flore Pleno' – has become an emblem of the village of Findern in South Derbyshire, the home of Sir Geoffrey.[72] Along with *N. jonquilla*, *N. odoratus* and *N. tazetta*, the pheasant's eye daffodil provides an oil used in perfumery, including in Guerlain's famous Samsara. While all narcissi are poisonous when eaten, the bulbs of *N. poeticus* are more dangerous than others and have a scent so powerful that headache and vomiting can occur if a large bunch of the blooms are kept in a closed room,[73] giving credibility to the notion that some perfumes can cause allergic reactions in some people.

Foxglove

GRACE COSSINGTON SMITH, 1892–1984, *Foxgloves growing*, 1929 (right)

THE FLOWER

Digitalis purpurea is the species of foxglove most commonly growing in gardens, the genus name referencing the flower's resemblance to a finger or glove. The English name for foxglove appears to be a distortion of 'folk's glove', the 'folk' being the fairies, while the spots on the blossoms were said to be where the wee people had placed their fingers.[119] In some parts of England the plant is known as 'fox fingers', foxes reputedly wearing the flowers to keep the dew off their paws. The Northern Europeans see the shape of the flowers as resembling a bell, calling them fox bells: when foxes wore the flowers, the sound of the bell would frighten the hunters pursuing the foxes for their tails.[120]

Although the leaves, flowers and seeds of this plant are all poisonous to humans and some animals, and can be fatal if ingested, digitalis has been used since early times to treat heart disease, and Mrs Grieve reassuringly informs us that when digitalis fails to have the required effect on the heart, lily of the valley may be substituted. Digitalis, it is claimed, is also beneficial in the treatment of inflammatory diseases, internal haemorrhage and epilepsy.[121] A chemical compound extracted from the leaves has been used in modern times to treat congestive heart failure (although synthetic equivalents have now been developed). These chemicals can increase the strength of heart muscle contractions, change heart rate, and increase heart blood output. Interestingly, it takes a poison to treat a poison: in cases of aconite poisoning (monk's hood), give digitalis via syringe![122]

In the not too distant past the foxglove was a short-lived plant but recently perennial hybrids have appeared on the market, and in delightful colours – pink apricots (my favourite), soft rose, peach and the traditional strawberry pink – and with intensified spotting. So striking and elegant are they in herbaceous borders that it is hard to accept that in the language of flowers the foxglove represents insincerity!

THE WORK

Today Grace Cossington Smith is considered one of the great female Australian Modernists, but her early work, in the 1920s and 1930s, is characterised by a more post-impressionist style: the thick application of paint and the use of bold pure colours, *Foxgloves growing* being an excellent example. Cossington Smith's composition is also interesting in these early works, in that the subject matter completely fills, and sometimes overflows, the picture plane, a technique often utilised by other Australian Post-Impressionist artists, for example, Bessie Davidson. Of note in this small painting is Cossington Smith's masterful use of colour and tone, with the work making use of a select palette of colours: harmonious warm colours – pink, lavender, maroon, peach and lemon-yellow – are juxtaposed against stronger cool colours – olive green, blue and grey. The layering of these colours across the foreground, mid-ground and background accentuates the modernist flatness of the picture plane.

G. Cossington Smith

The child of British immigrants, Cossington Smith studied with Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo, an early proponent of modernism, but her dedication to the style far outstripped that of her teacher, who eventually returned to more traditional forms. During her career Cossington Smith visited England on two occasions, but she remained committed to Australia: ‘I would rather live in Australia because it interests me from my art point of view. The country itself, I think Australia is absolutely wonderful, the country, the animals, the flowers, everything . . . [the light] is more intense and brilliant’,[123] a view shared by other Australian Impressionists at the turn of the century.

Over the course of her career Cossington Smith’s style moved from post-impressionism to a purely modernist aesthetic: gone is the painterly impasto technique, to be replaced by a sketchy, almost mosaic-like, application of paint. This latter period saw Cossington Smith established as one of the greatest colourists in Australian art.[124] Like so many female artists of the mid-century, Cossington Smith concerned herself with what was perceived as the female sphere – flowers, gardens, interiors and the occasional portrait – yet her aesthetic and her painterly modernist style elevates these everyday subjects to extraordinary and luminous paintings, where colour and form are celebrated. The subject matter and execution of the female modernists distinguishes them from their male counterparts: while the men were often concerned with presenting grand narratives and issues of great social import, the women were more interested in presenting their daily lives and reinforcing the importance of the quotidian in art.

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU, 1960–2018, *Blinded*, 2016 (page 81)

THE FLOWER

In Australia fritillaries fall into the category of rare plants, especially the large and flamboyant crown imperials, depicted here by Polixeni Papapetrou, which until recently I hadn't seen available in this country. The more subtle, smaller species, such as the snake's head fritillary, which grows in meadows in southeastern England (*F. meleagris*), and *F. acmopetala* and *F. uva vulpis* from Turkey are available from specialist nurseries, and I've seen them in gardens in the Adelaide Hills; they undoubtedly grow in equivalent climatic areas in other parts of Australia. The majority of these smaller species normally carry a variety of unusual markings and colourings, and the genus name *Fritillaria* is believed to refer to the chequered pattern of *F. meleagris*, in that it resembled the box in which dice were carried.[125]

Margery Fish in her book on cottage gardens writes that in early twentieth-century England crown imperials (*F. imperialis*) were grown in many gardens, but 'today' (she was writing in 1960) interest in them has dwindled and they are found only occasionally in cottage gardens. Fish writes charmingly that the flowers have great individuality and that she likes 'to lift up those handsome heads to look into their faces . . .'[126] The crown imperial derived this common name both from its resemblance to a crown and because it was first grown in the Imperial Gardens in Vienna. Central European legend has it that this fritillary grew in the Garden of Gethsemane and was white. During Christ's agony in the garden, all of the flowers bowed their heads in sympathy, save for the crown imperial. As Christ was led away, He glanced at the upright flower, which then was overcome with shame, from that day hanging its now-blushing head.[127] Fritillaries were a popular inclusion in Dutch still lifes, a tradition continued by Vincent van Gogh in *Imperial fritillaries in a copper vase*, 1887, held in the Musée d'Orsay.

Members of the lily family, crown imperials are endemic to mountainous regions in Turkey, western Iran and eastwards to Kashmir, and unlike their less spectacular cousins they can grow to a metre high. Their orange-red flowers (although yellow, red and apricot have now been developed) in spring have a musky scent, which reputedly deters mice and other small animals.[128]

The quartered roses on the young woman's head could be moss, damask, Portland, Bourbon, or even David Austin roses, but the only quartered rose I know with a green eye is 'Madame Hardy', a white damask rose. The girl's headpiece also includes red hybrid tea roses, pink rhododendron flowers, delphiniums and perhaps a peony.[129]

Golden chalice vine

JOHN BRACK, 1920–1999, *Solandra*, 1955 (right)

THE FLOWER

'Golden cup' and 'trumpet flower' are other common names for *Solandra maxima*, a large woody vine endemic to Mexico and Central America. In my Brisbane childhood I knew it as golden chalice vine and was told that it was a hallucinogenic, although I had no idea how its hallucinogenic properties were harnessed. Another species, *Solandra grandiflora* is still used as a hallucinogenic by the Huichol people of Mexico, while a tea produced from its roots, branches and fruits is used in this culture as an inebriant.

I also remember it as a rapacious climber, completely covering a shed near our house and sprawling into the nearby overhanging trees. With large – up to twenty-five centimetres long – golden cup-shaped flowers, often veined in purple, and glossy dark-green leaves, the solandra vine is a dramatic addition to a lush tropical garden, especially at night when the flowers are richly fragrant.

Solandra takes its botanical name from the eighteenth-century Swedish botanist Daniel Solander, invited by Joseph Banks to join the scientific staff on the 1770 voyage of the *Endeavour* to the east coast of Australia. Solander had been a student at the University of Uppsala, where the professor of botany was the celebrated Carle von Linné (Linnaeus). Solander later edited Linnaeus's *Elementa Botanica* and became a dedicated supporter of the Linnaean system of classification.[154]

In common with tomatoes and potatoes, *Solandra* belongs to the Solanaceae or nightshade family, and like some other species in this family is considered to be toxic.

THE WORK

The name John Brack is synonymous with the rise of bold Australian painting in the middle of the twentieth century. A member of the influential group of artists the Antipodeans, he developed a distinct approach, one that ultimately came to epitomise a Melbourne style: his painting *Collins Street 5pm*, 1955, is one of the most lauded paintings of the twentieth century in Australia. *Solandra* is in keeping with Brack's oeuvre and shows the hallmarks of his style – the flattened picture plane, the use of muted colours and an unwavering focus on formal qualities.

Brack began drawing and painting as a child but he never considered these works as part of his oeuvre and refused to acknowledge these immature experiments; he also executed many sketches while serving in the army and again he did not include these in his oeuvre.[155] Having served during the Second World War, Brack began his rehabilitation by studying at the National Gallery School under the likes of George Bell. Brack was very much concerned with narrative and national identity and sought to create grand meaningful works in the vein of Tom Roberts's *The big picture*.[156] Helen Brack indicates that Brack was aware of creating double meanings in works and was much influenced by Picasso's statement: 'You don't have to depict a man with a gun, a tomato plant will do'.[157] While it is entirely possible to read Brack's painting as simply a beautiful still life of an intriguing flower, it is unlikely that Brack intended so simple a read, and the heritage of the plant and its connections to the colonisation of Australia were very likely important in Brack's selection of this unusual flower.

John Brack 53

Plumbago

MARGARET OLLEY, 1923–2011, *Homage to Manet*, 1987 (right)

THE FLOWER

I have a new-found respect for plumbago, a plant I've never really been keen on: I have memories of its growing untidily in hedges in every second suburban garden in Brisbane. However, it can't be all bad because it appears in Mrs Grieve's *Herbal*. Also known as leadwort, its root, when chewed, is said to be beneficial for toothache.[273] The genus name is derived from *plumbum*, meaning lead, since many species in the genus have lead-coloured flowers. Incredibly, some species are said to be antidotes to lead poisoning! [274]

Plumbago (*P. auriculata*) is widely distributed throughout the tropics and subtropics; hence its happiness in Brisbane, but it does require heavy pruning to keep it both neat and to improve its flowering. When clipped into a dense hedge, its mass of phlox-like baby-blue flowers transforms a concrete footpath to a gentle powdery-blue perambulation. A fact sheet from Gardening Australia cautions that plumbago has a tendency to become a weed;[275] contrast this with Christopher Lloyd's notes on the July clean-out of his greenhouse: 'it is now sufficiently clement for the potted plumbago to be relocated to the herbaceous border'![276]

What fruit flanks the plumbago – a bowl of large cherries or small plums? We originally considered pomegranates because they have a pomegranate sheen about them, but they're very small.

THE WORK

Over her extraordinary career, Margaret Olley, one of this country's most loved and readily recognisable artists, had more than ninety solo exhibitions, was awarded an Order of Australia and had a gallery named in her honour. Portraits of Olley have also won the Archibald Prize twice – first William Dobell's portrait in 1949, and then one by Ben Quilty in 2011. Despite her extensive travels around the world, Olley preferred to focus on subjects with which she was intimately familiar, primarily being known as a painter of still lifes and domestic interiors. In her later years Olley became the doyenne of the Sydney art scene, with her sumptuous and exotic studio and her lavish parties becoming almost as famous as the artist herself. After her death, parts of her studio were recreated at Tweed River Art Gallery, the Tweed River area being where Olley spent many of her childhood years. [277]

Homage to Manet contains two different versions of Edouard Manet's painting *The balcony* (*Le balcon*, Musee D'Orsay): the complete work and another focusing on the primary female figure. Today Manet is recognised as one of the greatest of the French Impressionists, but when *The balcony* was first exhibited it was derided and reviled, some critics even suggesting that the scene was too risqué and the shutters ought to be closed.[278] In true Manet style, the artist had disregarded the established conventions of nineteenth-century art, depicting the ancillary items (such as the flowers and architectural elements) in more detail than the central figures.[279] By directly referencing Manet's work, Olley is paying homage – as the title indicates – to an artist she admired and respected. But, perhaps more importantly, since Olley would undoubtedly

have been aware of the chequered history of *The balcony*, she set out to similarly challenge artistic conventions: by focusing on her own humble plumbago, she elevates it to a subject worthy of artistic representation. It is relevant to note that Olley painted a second homage to Manet – *Homage to Olympia* – highlighting another of Manet's important contributions to the history of art.

Poinsettia

ANTONIO DATTILO-RUBBO, 1870–1955, *Mlle Alice*, 1937 (right)

THE FLOWER

I'm always dismayed when I see poinsettias being sold as an 'annual' in England around Christmas-time. The same in the United States, where small and more compact cultivars have been bred purely for the purpose of Christmas colour in a pot and later discarded. We in Australia are used to seeing the large scarlet-flowering poinsettias growing cheerfully in the garden, particularly in the tropics and subtropics. The name 'poinsettia' comes from Joel Poinsett,[280] the first United States envoy to Mexico, who introduced the plant to the US from Mexico in 1825. National poinsettia day is celebrated in the US on 12 December, the day Mr Poinsett died.

This flower's botanical background surprised me, in that it is a member of the genus *Euphorbia* (spurge): I know euphorbias as the very hardy drought-tolerant perennials grown in gardens in drier parts of Australia, such as South Australia and parts of Victoria. Perhaps I should not be surprised, since poinsettia (*E. pulcherrima*) exudes a milky substance when cut – like most garden euphorbias and similar to the rubber tree, the latter belonging to the same family but a different genus. Legend has it that during the Second World War there were hopes that the sap of the poinsettia could be used as a substitute for rubber, given the rubber shortages at this time.

The poinsettia's spectacular flowers, which remain long after the leaves have fallen from this deciduous shrub, aren't flowers at all but large bracts, and it is these that surround the real flowers, the tiny yellow 'dots'. Cultivated by the Aztecs and Mayans well before the arrival of Europeans, poinsettia was used for a range of aesthetic, practical and medicinal purposes, including the bark and red bracts for a reddish-purple dye.[281]

THE WORK

Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo was undoubtedly one of the most significant Sydney art teachers in the first half on the twentieth century. He and Julian Ashton can be credited with creating an entire generation of highly successful artists. Dattilo-Rubbo was born in Naples, Italy, and it was here that he received his artistic training before emigrating to Australia in 1897. Upon arriving in Sydney, Dattilo-Rubbo quickly established himself as a highly desired teacher, and under his tutelage a strong cohort of students inspired by international modernism emerged, Grace Cossington Smith, Roy de Maistre and Roland Wakelin among them.[282] Although an extremely accomplished artist, Dattilo-Rubbo did not receive the recognition in his later years that he felt he deserved. (Perhaps because he was such a successful teacher, his students eventually outshone him.) In 1947 Dattilo-Rubbo was commissioned to paint Prime Minister John Curtin's official (posthumous) portrait for Parliament House in Canberra.[283]

In the first decades of the twentieth century Dattilo-Rubbo was a strong proponent of modernism, but from the 1930s he returned to a more academic style of painting, subsequently disparaging the modernist aesthetic.[284] Nonetheless, *Mlle Alice* gives the impression of a truly modern woman: the sitter has the finger-wave hairstyle so popular in the 1930s and is smoking a cigarette in true Parisian style, seemingly unconcerned with her audience. The overall composition of the painting is adroitly united with the use of the carmine-red paint for the poinsettia, the umbrella handle and Mademoiselle Alice's red lips and fingernails.