

GRACE CROWLEY'S CONTRIBUTION TO  
AUSTRALIAN MODERNISM AND GEOMETRIC  
ABSTRACTION

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**APPENDIX 1 gratefully supplied from the Grace Crowley Archives, Art Gallery of New South Wales Research Library.**

## INTRODUCTION

Grace Crowley was one of the leading innovators of geometric abstraction in Australia. When she returned to Australia in 1930 she had thoroughly mastered the complex mathematics and geometry of the golden section and dynamic symmetry that had become one of the frameworks for modernism. Crowley, Anne Dangar and Dorrit Black all studied under the foremost teacher of modernism in Paris, André Lhote. Crowley not only taught the golden section and dynamic symmetry to Rah Fizelle, Ralph Balson and students of the Crowley-Fizelle Art School, but used it to develop her own abstract art during the 1940s and 1950s, well in advance of the arrival of colour-field painting to Australia in the 1960s.

Through her teaching at the most progressive modern art school in Sydney in the 1930s Crowley taught the basic compositional techniques as she had learnt them from Lhote. When the art school closed in 1937 she worked in partnership with fellow artist, Ralph Balson as they developed their art into constructive, abstract paintings. Balson has been credited with being the most influential painter in the development of geometric abstraction in Australia for a younger generation of artists. This is largely due to Crowley's insistence that Balson was the major innovator who led her into abstraction. She consistently refused to take credit for her own role in their artistic partnership.

My research indicates that there were a number of factors that strongly influenced Crowley to support Balson and deny her own role. Her archives contain sensitive records of the breakup of her partnership with Rah Fizelle and the closure of the Crowley-Fizelle Art School. These, and other archival material, indicate that Fizelle's inability to master and teach the golden section and dynamic symmetry, and Crowley's greater popularity as a teacher, was the real cause of the closure of the School. Crowley left notes in her Archives that she still felt deeply distressed, even forty years after the events, and did not wish the circumstances of the closure known in her lifetime.

With the closure of the Art School and her close friend Dangar living in France, her friendship with Balson offered a way forward. This thesis argues that Crowley chose to conceal her considerable mathematical and geometric ability, rather than risk losing another friend and artistic partner in a similar way to the breakup of the partnership with Fizelle. With the death of her father in this period, she needed to spend much time caring for her mother and that left her little time for painting. She later also said she felt that a man had a better chance of gaining acceptance as an artist, but it is equally true that, without Dangar, she had no-one to give her support or encourage her as an artist.

By supporting Balson she was able to provide him with a place to work in her studio and had a friend with whom she could share her own passion for art, as she had done with Dangar. During her long friendship with Balson, she painted with him and gave him opportunities to develop his talents, which he could not have accessed without her. She taught him, by discreet practical demonstration the principles she had learnt from Lhote about composition. He had only attended the sketch club associated with the Crowley-Fizelle Art School. Together they discussed and planned their paintings from the late 1930s and worked together on abstract paintings until the mid-1950s when, in his retirement from house-painting, she provided him with a quiet, secluded place in which to paint and experiment with new techniques. With her own artistic contacts in France, she gained him international recognition as an abstract painter and his own solo exhibition in a leading Paris art gallery. After his death in 1964, she continued to promote his art to curators and researchers, recording his life and art for posterity.

The artist with whom she studied modernism in Paris, Anne Dangar, also received her lifelong support and promotion. In the last decade of her life Crowley provided detailed information to curators and art historians on the lives of both her friends, Dangar and Balson, meticulously keeping accurate records of theirs and her own life devoted to art. In her latter years she arranged to deposit these records in public institutions, thus becoming a contributor to Australian art history. As a result of this foresight, the stories of both her friends, Balson and Dangar, have since become a record of Australian art history.

## TEACHING COMPOSITION

Over many years, Australian artists had been made aware of the importance of composition and systems such as the golden section and dynamic symmetry during their study in London and Paris. Although these techniques were known and discussed by Australian artists who had returned from overseas, particularly in the 1920s, they were not taught at any art school in Sydney until Dorrit Black and Crowley taught them at the Modern Art Centre in Sydney for a short period in the early 1930s. Then in 1932, with the opening of the Crowley- Fizelle Art School in George Street, Crowley taught the principles of the golden section and dynamic symmetry until its closure in 1937. Fizelle had not studied these systems while overseas but was aware of their value and use by master painters he had studied in Italy and Spain.

Crowley found an intellectual equal when Frank and Margel Hinder joined the Sketch Club at the Crowley-Fizelle Art School in 1934. Frank brought with him knowledge of dynamic symmetry and an interest in the abstract qualities underlying most art. The son of a Sydney surgeon, Hinder had gone to America to study at the Art Institute of Chicago (1927-28). There he was taught that Seurat had developed a systematic theory of colour, and that composition was to be interpreted by geometric form. He also learnt that modern artists were experimenting with abstract art in Paris and about the golden section with its history from the Greeks and Egyptians. In 1929 he studied at the New York School of Fine and Applied Art under Howard Giles and Emil Bistram, who were friends of American writer, Jay Hambidge, and it was from them he learnt Hambidge's theory of dynamic symmetry.<sup>1</sup> Frank returned with an American wife, Margel, who was a sculptor and also became part of the George Street Group of modernists. Until the arrival of the Hinders, Crowley taught the golden section from her own knowledge and the notes she and Dangar had taken from Lhote's teaching in France. Because Fizelle was having difficulty with the concepts of the golden section and dynamic symmetry, she asked Frank Hinder to obtain from America, copies of the magazine published by Jay

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<sup>1</sup> Renée Free, *Frank and Margel Hinder 1930-1980*, exh.n.cat., Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1980, 9-10.

Hambidge on dynamic symmetry, entitled *The Diagonal* which explained how to apply this in design and composition. Hambidge had also published a book on dynamic symmetry, from research in Paris and parts of Europe where there were many practitioners.

With the closure of the Crowley-Fizelle Art School in 1937, Crowley's knowledge of these fundamental principles was contained in her teaching notes and books that remained in her possession until after her death in 1979. In the 1950s when art historian, Bernard Smith, was writing his history of *Australian Painting 1788-1960*,<sup>2</sup> he consulted Frank Hinder about the George Street Group of Modernists in the 1930s. Information about dynamic symmetry and Hambidge's books were made available to Smith and this was published, thus crediting Hambidge with the introduction of dynamic symmetry to Australia. By then Crowley had spent many years supporting Balson and by the mid-1950s had retired to the Southern Highlands with Balson, doing little painting. Her Archives contain detailed descriptions and diagrams of the golden section, as well as extensive notes of colour and music theories as applied to art and an alphabet of pictorial design as taught by Lhote.

Evidence of the influence of the teaching of the principles of the golden section by Dorrit Black and Crowley, can be seen in Australian artists. Black used it as part of her teaching at the Modern Art Centre until she had to close it and return to Adelaide. One major painter who readily acknowledges his debt to the teaching of Lhote through Black, is Jeffrey Smart. He has frequently said that his art is about shapes and colours and that his composition is based on the golden section as taught to him by Dorrit Black. 'Black was one of the major influences on my painting ... I am still influenced by her teaching ... She came to Adelaide like a shot of adrenelin.'<sup>3</sup> In the late 1940s Smart studied under Léger in Paris, one of the original group of artists who took part in the now famous Cubism and La Section D'Or Exhibition of 1912, with both Lhote and Gleizes.

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1960*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1962.

<sup>3</sup> Barry Pearce, Essay, in Edmund Capon, *Jeffrey Smart Retrospective*, exh.cat., Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1999, 22-32.

Crowley's role in the introduction and teaching of this technique has never been acknowledged, despite the crucial part she played in the development of modernism and geometric abstraction, and this argument forms a major part of my thesis.

## ART HISTORY

A matter that concerned Crowley in the last decade of her life was the amount of misinformation she read about herself and her colleagues and their art. She spent much time talking and writing to curators, art historians and researchers, and often recorded her frustration when her information was misinterpreted or recorded wrongly. Ultimately she donated her letters and papers to public institutions where they have become a matter of record for research and continue to enrich knowledge of Australian art history. The curators and researchers who interviewed Crowley personally during her lifetime, have helped to shape her public image and that of her friends and colleagues who were part of the George Street Group. They have been recognised as playing an important role in the introduction of modernism in Sydney. However, Crowley was a self-effacing person who preferred to promote the art of others and made no claims for her own achievements. Without an objective study of her life and contribution to art, misunderstandings persist and my aim with this thesis is to try to set the record straight, as she herself tried to do.

Much of what has been written about Crowley was written during her lifetime, when she preferred to support Balson's career, and what has been written since has largely been informed by this earlier writing. In Bernard Smith's *Place, Taste and Tradition*, first published in 1945, he credited Grace Crowley, Rah Fizelle, Frank Hinder, Eric Wilson and Eric Thake with the best work done in Australia in the areas of cubism, constructivism and abstract art. He praised Crowley's *Baigneuse* as the 'best painting by this group and certainly one of the finest paintings coming from the Modern Movement in Australia'. He described her 'distortion of natural form' as being used 'with fine sensibility to aid the plastic unity of the composition'. For him her surety of line, colour

and tone revealed it as ‘the best of the contributions that cubism has made to contemporary art in Australia’.<sup>4</sup> High praise indeed for Crowley at that time.

By the time Smith’s influential *Australian Painting 1788-1960* was published in 1962, Crowley was credited ‘with some understanding of cubism and post-cubist trends in painting’<sup>5</sup> learnt from Lhote and Gleizes between 1927 and 1931. Frank Hinder had been teaching Dynamic Symmetry at the East Sydney Technical College during the 1950s and was probably the source of Smith’s information on this period. Details of Hinder’s career and influences on his art were given and two books specifically mentioned – Jay Hambidge’s *Dynamic Symmetry, The Greek Vase (1920)* and Irma Richter’s *Rhythmic Forms in Art (1932)*.<sup>6</sup> Smith’s book has been the source of learning by generations of students of art history.

Although published in 1979 as *The Emergence of Modernist Painting in Australia to 1944*, Humphrey McQueen’s *Black Swan of Trespass* fails to even mention the Crowley-Fizelle Art School, although Eleanore Lange is mentioned as an influential teacher. She is credited with providing ‘a group of Sydney artists with reasons for breaking through surface Modernism’ and providing Balson with an environment in which he had ‘acquired his interest in Einstein’.<sup>7</sup>

*A Study of Australian Art*<sup>8</sup> included statements collected by Herbert Badham from both Crowley and Balson. They expressed their united belief in the importance of abstract design to be found in geometric structure and colour relationships. Crowley saw her painting as having evolved from the design elements of the old masters through to the modern master painters, Kandinsky and Mondrian. These elements can be seen in their paintings from the period.

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<sup>4</sup> Bernard Smith, *Place, Taste and Tradition: A study of Australian art since 1788*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1945, reprinted 1988, 1993, 199-201.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, *Australian Painting*, 210.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 211.

<sup>7</sup> Humphrey McQueen, *The Black Swan of Trespass, The emergence of modernism in Australian painting to 1944*, Alternative Publishing Cooperative Limited, Sydney, 1979, 104.

<sup>8</sup> Herbert Badham, *A Study of Australian Art*, Currawong Publishing, Sydney, 1949, 145-6.

In his book *The Innovators, the Sydney alternatives in the rise of modern art, literature and ideas*, Geoffrey Dutton does include quite a bit of information about the Crowley-Fizelle Art School and the individual painters who were prominent. Like McQueen, he identifies Margaret Preston as one of the leading modernist painters and describes the George Street Group as ‘admirable pioneers’ but says there was ‘not a genius among them, nor even a major talent’. He rightly described Crowley as ‘a selfless woman who gave most of her energies to teaching or encouraging other artists.’ However, his description of Jay Hambidge’s book *Dynamic Symmetry: The Greek Vase* as ‘one of the bibles of George Street’ is quite misleading. Crowley and Fizelle were already teaching Lhote’s principles of the golden section for several years before the Hinders joined the Group. He described both Crowley and Hinder as ‘literary-intellectual’, but their art as theory-obsessed, mechanical and rather colourless’. He does, however, link Hambidge and Lhote’s teachings as ‘united in their insistence on the use of geometry in proportioning space’ and he specifically mentions that in Hinder’s notes on dynamic symmetry he wrote about ‘the rectangle of the whirling squares based on the golden section’. He, like so many writers, says that Crowley and Dorrit Black both studied under Lhote and Gleizes and while that is true, their study under Gleizes was brief and their main teaching, particularly on the golden section, came from Lhote.<sup>9</sup>

Daniel Thomas, while at the Art Gallery of New South Wales from 1958-78, befriended Crowley and was responsible for a number of major exhibitions which featured Crowley and her colleagues. The George Street Group of painters – Balson, Crowley, Fizelle and Hinder – were acknowledged in a 1966 Exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales as the ‘leaders of the second phase of the modern art movement in Australia’.<sup>10</sup> Ralph Balson, was seen as the most important abstract painter in an article written by Thomas in *Art in Australia* in March 1965. By the time Thomas curated *Project 4* Crowley’s Retrospective in 1975, he realised that it was she who had ensured ‘that his career was productive until his death in 1964’<sup>11</sup>. He acknowledged that her years in Paris

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<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Dutton, *The Innovators, the Sydney alternatives in the rise of modern art, literature and ideas*, Macmillan, South Melbourne & Crows Nest, 1986, 31-34.

<sup>10</sup> Renée Free, *Balson: Crowley: Fizelle: Hinder*, exh. cat., Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1966, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Thomas, *Project 4: Grace Crowley*, exh. cat., Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1975.

learning from Lhote had ‘made her a crucial influence on Australian Modernism through the 1930s.’<sup>12</sup>

One writer who clearly saw the importance of Crowley’s influence on Balson was Patrick McCaughey. In an article on artist Roger Kemp, published in *Art and Australia*, September 1970, McCaughey found Kemp’s development as a painter to have been uneven, lacking ‘the liberating effect of Cubist structures’ which he had intuitively worked towards and which in the 1960s became ‘the abiding formal strength of his work’. He goes on to say that there was ‘no parallel in Kemp’s career for the contact Balson had with cubist theories through Grace Crowley’. He saw Kemp’s art as posing a question ‘central to Western metaphysics ... how to express man as one function of a Divine Geometry?’<sup>13</sup> Balson also expressed similar ideas about his paintings. Balson’s biographer, Bruce Adams, writing on Balson’s art, also recognised that his approach to figuration in the late 1930s was disciplined and highly structured ‘informed by the analytical methods of cubist composition’. He saw works exhibited in the 1939 Exhibition I, such as *The Sisters (Family Group)*, *Madonna*, *Portrait of Grace Crowley*, and others, as showing the impact of cubism in their geometric organisation which provided formal armature for the composition.<sup>14</sup> Through her friendships with Daniel Thomas and Bruce Adams, Crowley made known the life and art of both Balson and Dangar.

In the 1970s a new group of feminist writers looked back to rediscover the many women artists who had been lost to Australian art history. Janine Burke curated a major exhibition in 1975 and compiled the accompanying catalogue for *Australian Women Artists – One Hundred Years: 1840-1940*,<sup>15</sup> for which Crowley wrote an autobiographical essay. This essay has become a valuable resource as it is full of personal recollections of her life and the influences that shaped her as a person and as an artist.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas, *Grace Crowley*, np..

<sup>13</sup> Patrick McCaughey, ‘Roger Kemp’, *Art and Australia*, Vol. 8, 1970-71, 14-15.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce Adams, *Ralph Balson A Retrospective*, exh.n.cat., Heide Park and Gallery, Melbourne, 1989, 21.

<sup>15</sup> Burke, *Australian Women Artists*, 77-86.

Janine Burke's book on *Australian Women Artists 1840-1940*<sup>16</sup> was an early publication to take a positive and empathetic view of women as artists in Australia. She saw Crowley as one of a group of women artists as 'radicals' of their day, among the most articulate, well-informed, influential, widely traveled and advanced of their time. Prevailing social conditions allowed some women to pursue a career in the arts and Crowley, like Cossington-Smith, was financially supported by her father's accumulated wealth. The difference between these two artists was that Cossington-Smith was always encouraged in her art by her family, while Crowley's family gave her no encouragement and were even hostile to her art. In addition to her father's support, her brother, Wilfred, gave her an annual stipend so she never had to worry about money. In return though, she was expected to be available to care for her parents during periods of illness and old age. This was a common expectation, particularly of unmarried daughters.

Another writer who befriended Crowley was Mary Eagle when researching her book *Australian Modern Painting Between the Wars 1914-1939*.<sup>17</sup> She clearly spent some time getting to know Crowley to understand her contribution and captured and distilled the essence of Crowley's personality and artistic career. Crowley felt no conflict between her early training with Ashton and what she learnt with Lhote in Paris, and remained on good terms with Ashton when she returned to Sydney, in spite of his avowed opposition to modernism. She was grateful to Ashton for the sound artistic training and encouragement she received from him, but found that Lhote's teaching provided her with what she needed to compose a picture - a framework for composition.

Both of these books highlighted the important, but previously unrecognised, role women artists played, particularly in the introduction of modernism to Australia. The attention drawn to this fact has stimulated a great deal of research, writing and curating of exhibitions focusing on the women so far lost to Australian art history. A major survey undertaken by Joan Kerr to retrieve women artists, resulted in a survey exhibition and

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<sup>16</sup> Janine Burke, *Australian Women Artists 1840-1940*, Greenhouse Publications, Collingwood, Victoria, 1980, reprinted 1981.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Eagle, *Australian Modern Painting Between the Wars 1914-1939*, Bay Books, Sydney & London, 1989.

publication of *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book: 500 works by 500 women artists from colonial times to 1955*.<sup>18</sup> Crowley and Dangar were both identified and included with short biographies. Crowley also appeared in Caroline Ambrus' *Australian Women Artists – First Fleet to 1945: History, Hearsay and Her Say* (1992) included in a group of women artists, Margaret Preston, Grace Cossington Smith, Clarice Beckett and Dorrit Black, who challenged mainstream aesthetics.<sup>19</sup> Helen Topliss' *Modernism and Feminism: Australian Women Artists 1900-1940* (1996)<sup>20</sup> explains why women artists used modernism as a way of establishing their own feminist context as artists, having been marginalised by traditional academic practice that was male-dominated.

Topliss recognised that Crowley was a capable artist but simply noted that Crowley, like Dangar, preferred to promote the talents of their male colleagues as did other women of that period. Topliss saw Rah Fizelle as the leading talent in the Crowley-Fizelle Art School, made no mention of Crowley's knowledge of the golden section and dynamic symmetry, but said that Fizelle's knowledge and teaching came from Jay Hambidge's book on *Dynamic Symmetry* and Irma Richter's book *Rhythmic Form in Art* brought to the School in 1934 by Frank Hinder.

*Strange Women: Essays in Art and Gender* (1994) took a strong feminist stance on the representation of women in art. The focus was 'to develop an understanding of the way in which patriarchy marginalises women's art in a country which has a proud tradition of misogyny'<sup>21</sup>. A number of the essays addressed this marginalisation within the context of modernism and looked at the ways in which the women artists of the time had found their own individual methods to subvert the patriarchy and find a space for their own art. Margaret Preston, Thea Proctor and Crowley were all seen as women artists who had presented themselves as intelligent, independent and, above all, modern. This was certainly the way in which Crowley presented herself, personally in clothing, interests

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<sup>18</sup> Joan Kerr, Ed., *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book: 500 works by 500 women artists from colonial times to 1955*, Craftsman House, Roseville East, 1995.

<sup>19</sup> Caroline Ambrus, *Australian Women Artists: First Fleet to 1945: History, Hearsay and Her Say*, Irrepressable Press, Woden, A.C.T., 1992.

<sup>20</sup> Helen Topliss, *Modernism and Feminism: Australian Women Artists 1900-1940*, Craftsman House, East Roseville, 1996, 66-79.

<sup>21</sup> Jeanette Hoorn, Ed., *Strange Women: Essays in Art and Gender*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 1994, 6.

and attitudes. Jeanette Hoorn, with the opening words of her essay 'Women Make Modernism: Contesting Masculinist Art Criticism', throws down the gauntlet in a challenge to the then existing art history -

The emergence of modernism in Australia is a narrative in which the roles of male artists are privileged in spite of the fact that the most experimental and interesting early modernist paintings were by women. It was the art of women that brought modernism to Australia in the first decades of this century.<sup>22</sup>

Referring to Grace Crowley, Dorrit Black and Anne Dangar she makes the point that, following their studies in Paris in the late 1920s, they were the first 'to embark on a version of cubist painting in works such as their *Mirmande* landscapes.'<sup>23</sup>

Pamela Niehoff, in her essay, 'The New Woman and the Politics of Identity', states that in their professional relationship with Fizelle 'Crowley was clearly the dominant partner'.<sup>24</sup> It was from her that Fizelle absorbed many of the precepts of Lhote's teaching. This is one of my main arguments and I present material that more fully explains Lhote's teaching and writing. Niehoff describes Crowley, unusually for most writers, as 'a tough-minded woman and a confirmed modernist'.<sup>25</sup> She categorises her as a Thinking Woman and describes the subjects of two of her Archibald Prize entry portraits, *Gwen Ridley* (1930) and *Portrait in Grey: Miss M. Roberts* (1933) as 'portraits of strong-minded women'.<sup>26</sup> Niehoff described Crowley's *Portrait of Lucie Beynis* (1929) as representative of the liberated and intellectual women of the time: reading matter at hand indicating intellectual pursuits, while the modern, short, haircut, business – like clothing and pre-occupied gaze represents a woman involved in her own pursuits and independent. This also reflects the intellectual atmosphere and freedom of women in Paris during those years between the two world wars, the period when Crowley lived there. Crowley dared to challenge the staunchly traditionalist portraits by entering her

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<sup>22</sup> Jeanette Hoorn, 'Women Make Modernism: Contesting Masculinist Art Criticism' in Jeanette Hoorn, Ed., *Strange Women: Essays in Art and Gender*, Melbourne University Press, 1994, 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>24</sup> Pamela Niehoff 'The New Woman and the Politics of Identity' in Hoorn, *Strange Women*, 45.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 44.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 43

two portraits, the Ridley in 1930 and the Roberts in 1933, in the Archibald Prize. It was well understood that the trustees ‘had an inbuilt aversion to anything that smacked of the intuitive or modern’<sup>27</sup> and the Archibald competition would continue for many years to be ‘a club of like-minded men in suits sharing a common view’<sup>28</sup> and women were simply not accepted as artists. The prevailing social attitudes against both women and modernism in the 1930s were strongly against the chances of any success as a woman artist for Crowley and I believe she made intelligent choices in light of the reality of her circumstances and the strong social prejudice against women artists at the time.

Since these surveys of women’s art have brought so many women to public attention, there have followed a number of exhibitions, both in groups and of individual women artists. Crowley’s work was, of course, part of a highly successful exhibition curated by Jane Hylton from the Art Gallery of South Australia *Modern Australian Women-Paintings and Prints 1925-1945*<sup>29</sup> and such exhibitions have served to bring Crowley before a wider audience. Hylton felt that Crowley had ‘a major impact’<sup>30</sup> on the work of Rah Fizelle and Ralph Balson. A number of individual studies have been made of the lives of women artists – Bessie Davidson, Grace Cossington Smith, Alison Rehfisch, Jean Bellette, Mary Alice Evatt and Anne Danger.<sup>31</sup> In December 2006 the National Gallery of Australia opened the exhibition *Grace Crowley – being modern*, accompanied by a catalogue with many details of her life from interviews with family and friends, and a substantial number of her paintings published in colour for the first time. Ron Radford<sup>32</sup> had seen her retrospective exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1975 and been much impressed by her work. He was convinced that ‘she was a much

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Ross, *Let’s Face It: The History of the Archibald Prize*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1999, revised 2001, 23.

<sup>28</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>29</sup> Jane Hylton, *Modern Australian Women, Paintings and Prints 1925-1945*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2000.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 51.

<sup>31</sup> Penelope Little, *A studio in Montparnasse: Bessie Davidson: an Australian artist in Paris*, Craftsman House, Melbourne, Vic., 2003; Daniel Thomas, *Grace Cossington Smith*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1973; Rachel Power, *Alison Rehfisch: a life for art*, Beagle Press, Sydney, 2002; Christine France, *Jean Bellette*, exh.n.cat. National Trust of Australia, Sydney, 2004; *A fresh point of view: the life and work of Mary Alice Evatt, 1898-1973*, exh.n.cat., Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, Bathurst, NSW, 2002; Bruce Adams, *Rustic Cubism: Anne Dangar and the Art Colony at Moly-Sabata*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 2004.

<sup>32</sup> Director, National Gallery of Australia, 2007.

more important artist than was generally acknowledged'<sup>33</sup> and, as Director of the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery in 1978, contacted Crowley with a view to preparing an exhibition to celebrate her ninetieth year, which would have been in 1980. Her death in 1979 curtailed those plans but the current exhibition, planned to tour various Australian galleries until November 2008, has brought together many previously unseen works by Crowley, retrieved works covered with primer on the verso of other paintings, and cleaned many works to their original colour. When interviewed at the time of her 1975 Retrospective Exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, she said – ‘You want to be known by your best work, not by something miserable. Everybody does bad work, even the best of us’.<sup>34</sup> Radford has written that ‘Crowley’s great achievement as a pioneer’ of abstraction ‘has not received due recognition’ and that she had ‘a central role in the introduction of modernism in this country’.<sup>35</sup> This thesis looks at Crowley’s central role as an innovator of abstraction in Australia and why she chose to promote Balson’s art instead of her own. The thesis also looks at Crowley’s contribution that involved her teaching, her support of her fellow artists and her work as an art historian. These choices were made because of prevailing social conditions and are therefore not as readily accessible as art works.

Chapter 1 examines Crowley’s early natural talent that was encouraged by her parents while she was young, but later opposed by them as it interfered with what they saw as her duty to undertake a woman’s role as wife and mother. This they considered to be part of her duty to the country, and they never accepted her choice to become an artist. Under the guidance of Julian Ashton, she developed great skill as both an artist and a teacher, absorbing many of his teaching philosophies. His great belief in bringing out the best in each of his students was to be the skill she used so effectively with Balson, later in life. While teaching with Ashton her meeting with Dangar led to a lifelong friendship that took them both to Paris and exploration into the very crucible of modernism. Crowley’s

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<sup>33</sup>Ron Radford, ‘Director’s foreword’ in Elena Taylor, *Grace Crowley – Being Modern*, Exhn.cat., National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2006, 5.

<sup>34</sup>Susan Foster, *At 85, Manet’s a hard act to follow*, The Sydney Morning Herald, Thurs 10 July 1975, 7.

<sup>35</sup>Radford, in Taylor, *Grace Crowley*, 5.

loss of the Travelling Art Scholarship to Roy de Maistre in 1923, became a catalyst for her in seeking a new way of composing her art. This was to change her art irrevocably and to lead her eventually, in a very different direction.

Chapter 2 deals with Crowley's and Dangar's journey to Paris via Aix-en-Provence – the home of Cézanne. Their encounter with Cézanne confirmed Dangar's desire to study modern art in the manner of Cézanne and therefore to study in Paris rather than go to London and the Slade School of Art, as Crowley had originally intended. Their discovery of André Lhote, one of the leading artists, writer and teachers of art – whose teaching was based on Cézanne's theories, changed their art forever. Crowley found in his teaching the very thing she felt her painting needed – a structure and a means of composing pictures. He taught her how to compose pictures according to the methods of the old masters – based on the geometry of the golden section and dynamic symmetry. He also taught how to use colour scientifically and to build a picture by plastic means, rather than by shading and use of perspective as she had been taught by Ashton. With these methods her art was to eventually develop much further than she could have envisaged – into abstraction.

Chapter 3 deals with the Crowley-Fizelle Art School that operated in George Street, Sydney from 1932-1937. It was the most avant-garde modern art school in Australia for its time. Crowley based her teaching on what she had learnt from Lhote and taught the golden section as the compositional framework for modern art. Because of her own experience she knew the need for teaching a method of composition in Sydney. When the Hinders brought the same principles to the Sketch Club of the School, it was really only Crowley and Hinder who fully understood the geometry and mathematical skills involved in its use. American writer, Jay Hambidge presented his version of dynamic symmetry as a new tool for designers. He presented its history as having originated from the Greeks but failed to appreciate the important role of the master painters of the Renaissance. Because Crowley's understanding came from Lhote, she understood its European legacy from old masters of the stature of Piero della Francesca, Leonardo da

Vinci and the Poussin, who was an inspiration for the French classical modernism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Throughout the 1930s Crowley corresponded with her friend Anne Dangar living at Moly-Sabata in rural France, through which she was kept in touch with the development of abstract art in Europe. During this period her art was moving inexorably towards abstraction. In spite of input from both Crowley and Hinder, Fizelle had difficulty in teaching the golden section or dynamic symmetry and his increasing frustration was a major factor in the eventual breakup of the School. These details were kept confidential by Crowley during her life and have only become available as a matter of public record as part of her Archives.

With the closure of the Art School, Dangar determined to stay at Moly-Sabata, her parents increasingly needing her attention, Crowley had limited options at that point. Her decision to support Balson's art offered her a replacement for Dangar, in having the friendship of a fellow artist, while allowing her to devote the necessary time to her ageing parents and still maintain an active involvement with her own art.

The artists who were part of the George Street Modernist Group planned a series of Exhibitions to inform artists and those interested, in the new form of art in which they had been experimenting. Exhibition I, their first and only exhibition, took place in 1939 and created heated public debate, mainly in the press, both for and against modern art. In Chapter 4, I look at the response from the public and art critics and evaluate its effect on Crowley and her decisions taken at that time in regard to her future direction. The onset of the Second World War precluded any further exhibitions by the Group.

Crowley clearly worked closely with Balson in the development of their abstract art throughout the 1940s and 1950s, during which time she provided him with unwavering support, as examined in Chapter 5. She spent a great deal of time caring for her elderly mother to fulfill her obligations as to her family, until her mother's death in 1947. Then from 1947 she painted her most mature and finely orchestrated abstract paintings.

Recent analysis of *Painting* (1950) has revealed Crowley as a master mathematician and geometer, having produced at least one work with geometric skills on a level with paintings by Piero della Francesca and Mondrian. I believe this painting proves that she was certainly the leader in the artistic partnership with Balson, yet she staunchly maintained her support of Balson to the end. In his retirement she provided him with a secluded haven in the Southern Highlands where he could pursue his painting full-time, perhaps content that she had left proof of her skills waiting to be found in the hidden geometry of the 1950 abstract painting. In 1960-61 they travelled overseas, painting together in England and France prior to Balson being given an opportunity of a solo exhibition at a Paris gallery.

After Balson's death in 1964, Crowley moved to Manly and from there made herself available to art curators and researchers interested in the art of herself and her colleagues. Chapter 6 traces Crowley's continued support of Balson and Dangar through contact with curators and researchers. By her meticulous record keeping and the donation of her papers to public institutions, she made a significant contribution to our understanding of the art of that period in which she lived and worked. Her own art and that of her friends finally gained recognition as innovators of geometric abstraction in Australia.

In Chapter 7 I look at the way in which the abstract constructive art practiced by Balson and Crowley in the 1940s and 1950s found a new appreciation with the introduction to Australia of colour-field painting in the 1960s. Patrick McCaughey described Balson as 'the *maître d'école* of the second-generation Sydney modernists'<sup>36</sup> in 1969. Then in the 1980s and 1990s, with a growing international appreciation of Aboriginal abstract art, a new generation of artists and curators sought to recover the early history of abstract art by Crowley, Balson and Hinder. With Balson seen as the major instigator of geometric abstraction, I felt that the time was now overdue to recover Crowley's innovative role in the introduction of modernist compositional techniques in Australia.

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<sup>36</sup> Patrick McCaughey, *Australian Abstract Art*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1969, 6.

Grace Crowley was a clever, intelligent, independent woman who could be described as an intellectual artist who was ahead of her time. Her skill as an outstanding mathematician, geometer and artist has gone undiscovered until recently. Through her pioneering teaching of the golden section, her development of geometric abstract art together with Balson and her consistent support of both Balson and Dangar, we can now assess the legacy she left to Australian art. The contribution Crowley made still has relevance within the contemporary art scene in Australia, and needs to be more widely recognised and appreciated.