

GRACE CROWLEY'S CONTRIBUTION TO
AUSTRALIAN MODERNISM AND GEOMETRIC
ABSTRACTION

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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.¹ 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

¹ 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*,² 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.'³ 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.

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

³ 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’.⁴ 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’⁵ 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)*.⁶ 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’.⁷

*A Study of Australian Art*⁸ 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.

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

⁵ Smith, *Australian Painting*, 210.

⁶ Ibid. 211.

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

⁸ 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.⁹

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’.¹⁰ 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 1964’¹¹. He acknowledged that her years in Paris

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

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

¹¹ 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.’¹²

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?’¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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*,¹⁵ 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.

¹² Thomas, *Grace Crowley*, np..

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

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

¹⁵ Burke, *Australian Women Artists*, 77-86.

Janine Burke's book on *Australian Women Artists 1840-1940*¹⁶ 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*.¹⁷ 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

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

¹⁷ 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*.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ Helen Topliss' *Modernism and Feminism: Australian Women Artists 1900-1940* (1996)²⁰ 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'²¹. 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

¹⁸ 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.

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

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

²¹ 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.²²

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.'²³

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'.²⁴ 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'.²⁵ 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'.²⁶ 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

²² 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.

²³ *Idem*.

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

²⁵ *Ibid.* 44.

²⁶ *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’²⁷ and the Archibald competition would continue for many years to be ‘a club of like-minded men in suits sharing a common view’²⁸ 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*²⁹ and such exhibitions have served to bring Crowley before a wider audience. Hylton felt that Crowley had ‘a major impact’³⁰ 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.³¹ 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 Radford³² 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

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

²⁸ *Idem.*

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

³⁰ *Ibid.* 51.

³¹ 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.

³² Director, National Gallery of Australia, 2007.

more important artist than was generally acknowledged'³³ 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’.³⁴ 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’.³⁵ 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

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

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

³⁵Radford, 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 20th 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'³⁶ 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.

³⁶ 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.

CHAPTER 1: DEVELOPMENT AS AN ARTIST

Grace Adela Williams Crowley was born on 28th May, 1890 at Cobbadah in north-western New South Wales. Her parents, grazier, Henry Crowley and his wife, Elizabeth, owned a large rural property known as Glen Riddle, near the small town of Barraba. She grew up surrounded by cattle, sheep, horses, cultivation, harvesting and shearing, along with three older brothers, Wilfred, Alan and Ken, and a younger sister, Florence. At the time of her birth her parents were pioneer folk who had to work hard to make a living from the land. However, by the time Julian Ashton first visited the property in 1906, the wool clip had realised an exceptionally good price for the day and the family had just built a new homestead to replace the original, rather more humble, dwelling. He described Henry Crowley as a very active and strongly built middle-aged man, and her mother as ‘a splendid example of the women of that time’ who accepted the inevitable changing fortunes of life with ‘a humorous chuckle and untiring patience’.¹

Crowley remembered her first drawings being done on ‘an old square brown tank at the back of the kitchen at Glen Riddle’. Her drawings were illustrations of stories she imagined ‘about people and what they did’ and although she did not write down the stories, she felt they were necessary for her and ‘had to be illustrated’². She later also described a similar process in first conceiving a picture in her mind before she could begin to paint or draw. As a child she found she greatly enjoyed illustrating her stories and these kept her much entertained through the years of growing up on a large, fairly remote property. She and her sister were educated at home until she was about 15 years of age.

In the last few years of her life she wrote an essay about her own development and life as an artist. In it she recalled that when she was about thirteen, her mother sent one of her pen and ink drawings, ‘of a little girl sitting near the fire nursing a black cat’, to the

¹ Julian Ashton, *Now Still Came Evening On*, Angus and Robertson Ltd, Sydney: London, 1941, 70.

² Grace Crowley, ‘Grace Crowley’s Student Years’, Janine Burke, *Australian Women Artists 1840-1940*, Greenhouse Publications Pty Ltd, Richmond, Victoria, 1980, reprinted 1988, 77.

magazine *New Idea* where it was published on the children's page and won a prize.³ *The New Idea* was a monthly magazine that described itself as being for 'Australasian women' with a dedicated section for children who could belong to The New Idea League. Children were encouraged to enter competitions for Prose, Verse, Drawings and Puzzles, with the monthly winners being listed in the 'Roll of Honour'. Grace Crowley, aged 14 years of Barraba, N.S.W., is listed as one of the prizewinners in the Senior Division for Drawing in the March issue of 1905. The drawings for the magazine were to be submitted 'in Indian Ink, very black writing ink or wash (not colour)' to be suitable for some of the drawings to be published. Crowley's drawing was not published, just her name.⁴ Her mother was greatly encouraged by this accolade and forwarded the drawing to *The Stock and Station Journal* for the opinion of a journalist writing under the column titled 'Gossip'. He in turn sought the professional opinion of the artist D.S. Souter, who declared that the young girl was artistically gifted and should seek art training.⁵

Crowley continued drawing mainly subjects at hand – people, cats, dogs horses, kookaburras and her father's sheep and cattle. Her father had a reputation for breeding very fine cattle. He encouraged his daughter to draw his prize bull, Prince Imperial, while instructing her on what to look for as the finer points of beef cattle. Immensely pleased with her drawings of the bull and also of Spot, the dog, he had them framed and hung in his office, where Crowley remembered them hanging for many years.⁶ This early intimate relationship with the land, along with her artistic gift, nurtured in Crowley the keen ability to observe and record the land and its inhabitants. This early talent no doubt helped when she undertook traditional drawing with Julian Ashton.

Her first real experience of life away from Glen Riddle did not come about until 1905-7 when she attended the Methodist Ladies College at Burwood. While a student in Sydney, her Uncle Archie, the Rev. Archibald Crowley, a Presbyterian minister, arranged for her

³ Idem.

⁴ Childrens' Page, 'The New Idea League' in *New Idea*, March, 1905, 859. Two other women artists who gained similar early recognition for drawing in The New Idea League's Roll of Honour were Ethel Spowers, September, 1904, 281, and again in October, 1904, 374.

⁵ Burke, *Australian Women Artists*, 77.

⁶ Idem.

to join him in weekly drawing classes at Julian Ashton's Sydney Art School. He would meet her at Central Station and take her to the classes, held in the Queen Victoria Market Building. Ashton's method of teaching was to instruct his students to draw 'the plaster cast of a skull exactly the right size and shape on a sheet of Michellat paper' using a piece of sharp-edged charcoal. Ashton believed that successful drawing began with mastering the contour first. Once a student was able to achieve an accurate outline exactly, then the details would fit within. Crowley found this disappointing as she had wanted to make a picture, so she only stayed a few months.

After finishing school in Sydney, Crowley returned home to Glen Riddle, where she did no more drawing. Her mother firmly believed that 'woman's place was in the home' so, in order to instruct and train her daughters in household duties, she had sacked the maid. Crowley had found her life fully occupied with what she always referred to, with some apparent distaste, as 'women's work'.⁷ Crowley's parents appear to have subscribed to the almost universally accepted Australian belief at the time, that marriage and the production of children was the highest aspiration for women. Marrying well was seen as the passport to lifelong happiness, and any woman unable to find a suitable husband, was regarded as having failed to fulfill her role as a woman. This was a time when governments were producing statistics to show that there was an alarming decline in the birth-rate among Australian women. The 1903 Royal Commission and the 1904 New South Wales Enquiry into declining birth-rates Australia-wide, eventually led to the 1912 introduction of the 1912 'Baby Bonus' and child endowment in the 1920s.⁸ At the same time, women were seeking greater independence, with about one-third of women working outside the home as early as 1890, and gaining the right to vote by 1902. Crowley's parents, as middle-class property owners and cattle breeders, would have recognised the importance of heredity and reproduction in consolidating their own life's work, and therefore the marriage of their children was of the highest priority, and possibly, their national duty.

⁷ Burke, *Australian Women Artists*, 78.

⁸ Beverley Kingston, *My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Maryann, Women and Work in Australia*, Thomas Nelson Australia Pty. Ltd., West Melbourne, 1975, 6-11.

Julian Ashton first visited Glen Riddle in 1906 when Crowley's father invited him to return at any time and stay as long as he wished. He returned in 1909 for the purpose of painting what he had, on his previous visit, noted as very typical outback scenery.

Ashton later wrote that he had observed the course of a river or creek could be identified by a faint rising mist that disappears immediately after the sun rises. He located a place about half a mile from the homestead, which he considered would make 'an admirable design for a picture' to be called 'Mist on the Creek'. This picture he sent to the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1911 where it was hung, and later purchased by the Melbourne National Gallery.⁹ Ashton's visit seemed to revive Crowley's interest in drawing and she later described how they would share a morning 'cuppa' before setting out to catch the early morning sunlight reflected in the water. She drew trees while Ashton painted, trying to capture the momentary effect of light so vital to an impressionist painter.¹⁰

A great niece recalled being told by her father, a doctor, that Crowley had been jilted by a beau and that her father felt it was something from which she never recovered.¹¹ Her niece, Eena Job, has confirmed that she was engaged to her first cousin, Gordon, in 1914, just prior to his enlistment in the army but that he was invalided out just before sailing overseas to take part in the First World War. Although he returned to his property between Narrabri and Barraba, the engagement was broken off.¹²

It was in 1915 that Crowley became a full-time student at the Sydney Art School without the approval of her parents. It seems her father never came to terms with Grace's decision to become an artist and made his feelings clear over the years. He expressed the opinion that Julian Ashton had 'ruined Grace's art'.¹³ It would not be unreasonable to suggest that he may have harboured great disappointment over her failure to marry. As Beverley Kingston pointed out – 'there was ignominy and a very strong smell of failure,

⁹ Ashton, *Evening On*, 73-74.

¹⁰ Burke, *Australian Women Artists*, 78.

¹¹ Pippa Kay, *Grace Crowley 1890-1985 (approx)*, Published on the internet as *Short Story Archive of Pippa Kalajzich*, Aylad's Writer's Group, 2-4.

¹² Elena Taylor, *Grace Crowley, Being Modern*, exh. cat., National Gallery of Australia, 2006, 9.

¹³ Burke, *Australian Women Artists*, 80.

whatever the status or class, attached to the unmarried woman'.¹⁴ This is a likely cause of the ongoing difficulties with her father to which she referred at various times. Living on a remote property, he would have had little access to urban culture, and probably could not understand either art or her lifestyle in the city. For Crowley herself, developing her talent for drawing and finding satisfaction in doing something well, would have built her own sense of worth – the opposite of what she experienced when with her parents at Glen Riddle. It is therefore not at all surprising that she developed a very warm relationship with Ashton, grateful for his encouragement and for his respect of her ability in choosing her to teach at his prestigious art school. Art became an absorbing interest for her, with the stimulation of other good artists around her, both male and female.

What had seemed to her a pointless exercise as a schoolgirl, that of trying to draw an accurate representation of a skull, she now approached with enthusiasm. Ashton's insistence that the contour or outline be drawn accurately first, became a challenge she was ready to tackle. Being older, she was able to appreciate the value of his training the eye to see size, form, pose and colour, which he maintained, could only be learnt by continuous daily study for a period of five or six years. His teaching methods were well established and reading his philosophy and methods of teaching art, it becomes clear that Crowley absorbed many of his ideas. He believed in a simple and practical approach of allowing the student to learn from their own experiments and mistakes and to develop their own techniques. His approach was to stress the individuality of each student, for he believed that individual expression was more important than anything else. He also stated that he believed that an artist was born with a natural gift but that he needed to apply himself diligently to developing his talent. This would explain why Crowley always insisted that Balson was a 'born abstract painter', even though she had the technical knowledge learnt from Lhote that was the basis of much abstract art.¹⁵ Crowley not only became an artist under Ashton's tutelage, but also absorbed his teaching methods which she herself then applied to her own teaching.

¹⁴ Kingston, *My Wife*, 118.

¹⁵ Ashton, *Evening On*, 108-110.

Ashton's commitment to *plein air* painting was an integral part of painting philosophy of truth to nature, in the early decades of the twentieth century. After the example of the Heidelberg painters, the Australian landscape was seen as the only rightful subject for any Australian artist, including Ashton. *Plein air* painting was regarded by many artists as resulting in true fidelity to nature and the Sydney Art School (SAS), organised regular outdoor sketching trips and an annual outdoor camping trip. It was on the summer class sketching trip of late 1914, conducted by Ashton, that Crowley first met Anne Dangar when they shared a room together and found they both came from the country. Dangar and Crowley joined the day class at the SAS full-time during 1915 but Dangar later switched to the evening class while she worked in the map section of Angus and Robertson in George Street, Sydney to support herself.¹⁶ Dorrit Black was also a student at the time, as were Roy de Mestre (later Maistre), John Passmore, Adrien Feint and writer, Dowell Reilly. Mildred Lovett was Ashton's Assistant Teacher until she married and moved to Tasmania. She was replaced by Elioth Gruner, described by Crowley as 'a retiring sensitive personality deeply in love with the great outdoors'. In 1918 Gruner joined the Army Medical Corps and Ashton, while making another visit to Glen Riddle, invited Crowley to join him as head teacher at the SAS.¹⁷

Julian Ashton had moved his Sydney Art School into the Queen Victoria Market Building soon after it opened in 1898. The rooms underneath the domes were flooded with natural light, preferred by artists. The skylights allowed the natural light to stream in, but it often meant that the students had to reverse the position of their easels as the light changed throughout the day.¹⁸ One end of the room was used for copying the casts – known as the antique room, while the other end was used for life drawing from a model. Lloyd Rees recalled visiting Ashton's 'wonderful studio' –

¹⁶ Crowley Archives, Box 1/10.

¹⁷ Bruce Adams, *Rustic Cubism: Anne Dangar and the Art Colony at Moly-Sabata*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London, 2004, 11-15.

¹⁸ Suzanne Stirling, Text by Helen Ivory, *QVB An Improbable Story*, Ipoh Ltd, 1998, 40.

The walls were all hessian covered, which gave a lovely dusky, warm interior, so akin to the tonal school of painting prevalent, that it made you feel as though you were in a Paris or London studio.¹⁹

Many years later one of her students at the SAS recalled the impression Crowley made upon her at the time. Her memories of Crowley were of a person who dressed stylishly – she remembered her wearing a fawn gaberdine coat, with a little chain across the front, pattering along the ‘antique’ room in dancing pump shoes, with her hair in a ‘marvellous bun all smoothly swathed’. The students had admired her drawings ‘done in one beautiful flowing line’, and they unconsciously followed her example ‘even to having the model’s hair hanging loose in decorative waves instead of on top of her head’.²⁰ Another artist, Nancy Hall, remembered Crowley as ‘diminutive’ and ‘always conscious of being Grace, nothing was allowed to interfere with her personality haphazardly’. She was affectionately called Smudge because of her fair hair. In contrast, Hall described Dangar as large, plain and sociable. Over their time at the SAS, they formed a close friendship, at first sharing lodgings with fellow students Dorrit Black and Belle Walker at Potts Point, and then Neutral Bay in ‘Craigielea’, a spacious old boarding house near the High Street Wharf.²¹

By 1920 Julian Ashton’s health began to decline and, with no telephones, Crowley never knew whether he would arrive in class. In 1920 Anne Dangar was offered the post of co-assistant teacher, which Crowley saw as being of great benefit to the School, the students and herself. By that time, Crowley and Dangar had formed a strong friendship and they were together renting a house in a quiet location overlooking South Head Cemetery at Rosa Gully, near Diamond Bay, not far from where Ashton lived at Bondi.²² The two women seemed to complement each other, with Crowley being a more conservative, genteel person, brought up to be conscious of her place in society, while Dangar was a

¹⁹ Lloyd Rees, *Peaks and Valleys, An Autobiography*, Collins Publishers Australia, Sydney, 1985, 1988, 113-4.

²⁰ Crowley Archives, Correspondence File 29/3, *Letter from Karna Livingstone dated 27th October, 1976*.

²¹ Adams, *Rustic Cubism*, 15.

²² *Ibid*, 11.

more passionate, and socially outgoing person, but without the financial support that Crowley had from her family.

The success Crowley achieved as an artist and teacher was due to the lengthy periods she spent away from her family. Her Uncle Archie, who lived in Sydney, was a person with a wide range of interests and an enquiring mind. On his visits to Glen Riddle, Crowley recalled him hammering out his inventions in the blacksmith's shop, collecting pieces of rock and discussing different geological formations and 'on lovely starry nights' he would look to the sky and 'discourse about the planets, the milky way and universes other than our own'.²³ He appears to have been one of the main encouragers of her artistic talents. She kept in touch with him even when she traveled overseas with Balson in the early 1960s, sending back special books he wanted, but could not buy in Sydney at the time.²⁴ Julian Ashton became her teacher and mentor who was able to facilitate the development of her intelligence and artistic talent. It was a mark of their mutual respect that she was able to maintain a good relationship with Ashton, even after her return from Paris when her artistic ideas had moved well into modernism, of which he was an outspoken critic. Ashton's respect for Crowley's abilities can be seen in the reference he wrote for her –

Miss Grace Crowley was for four years, from 1918-1923, the head teacher in the Sydney Art School, where her simple but lively methods of explaining difficult problems in drawing and painting were greatly appreciated by the large number of students in her care ... I should be glad to record here my respect and admiration for the undoubted gift she possesses of simplifying to the untrained mind of the beginner, the mysteries of form, tone and colour.²⁵

Dangar did not have the same depth of relationship with Ashton as Crowley, but he must have respected her as an artist and teacher to offer her the post of co-assistant teacher.

²³ Burke, *Australian Women Artists*, 77-78.

²⁴ Crowley Archives, 4/12. Note: Since I began my research, previously unsorted letters in Boxes 4 and 5 have been filed in chronological order and numbered in Correspondence files.

²⁵ *idem*.

Certainly Crowley enjoyed sharing the teaching with Dangar and through their shared interest in art and teaching, their friendship grew. As teachers at the leading Sydney art school of the time, they had earned a level of respect in the art community, not normally afforded easily to women painters at the time. Women were socially conditioned to accept discrimination against their art,²⁶ but both Crowley and Dangar enjoyed the support of Ashton, who had always taken an active role in the development of the Australian art scene. Crowley said she was never conscious of her work ‘being considered inferior to that of other students, male or female’.

Unexpected surprises sometimes happened ... de Mestre²⁷ or Duke as he was known by his fellow students, expressed admiration of a painting of a horse I’d done ... Gruner too, when a grey mare found her place on the walls of the Society of Artists one year, remarked on it most appreciatively and said, ‘I almost bought that thing’. These incidents were gratifying because any approach to painting was so different to their own.²⁸

Julian Ashton had earned the title ‘Father of Australian Art’.²⁹ He and his brother, George Rossi Ashton, had the two prize-winning pictures hung in the first public exhibition of the Art Society of New South Wales in 1883. He was elected a member of this Society in 1885, becoming President in 1887, and from then set himself ‘strenuously to the task of raising the standard of work’.³⁰ By 1892 the Society put him in charge of their art classes, gradually attracting what he termed ‘a promising body of students’.³¹

A new body of younger artists set up their own Society of Artists. For their first exhibition in 1895, Sir Henry Parkes performed the official opening in the Skating Rink in York Street. As Ashton’s sympathies lay with the younger men he chose to exhibit

²⁶ Caroline Ambrus, *Australian Women Artists, First Fleet to 1945: History, Hearsay and Her Say*, Irrepressible Press, Woden, A.C.T., 1992, 61.

²⁷ Roi de Mestre later changed his name to Roy de Maistre, so although Crowley knew him as de Mestre, for consistency I will refer to him as he is now better known as Roy de Maistre.

²⁸ Crowley Archives, 1/16.

²⁹ Ashton *Evening On*, 79-83.

³⁰ *Idem*.

³¹ *Idem*.

with them. This greatly offended the committee of the Art Society, who then dismissed him from his teaching position. Ashton seized the opportunity to open his own art school, originally in King Street, above the florist, Searls, in 1896. Parkes took a great interest in the arts and through the Education Department, gave a grant of five hundred pounds, which went initially to the Art Society. However, in 1902, the Minister for Education offered to raise the annual grant to eight hundred pounds if the two art societies joined under one name. The two societies joined, with the prefix 'Royal' added and thus was created The Royal Art Society. In time, as Ashton had predicted, members of the former Society of Artists wished to re-form and appointed Ashton as President, a position he held until 1921.³²

Over many years, Ashton trained and generously supported a great many leading Australian artists. As President of the Society of Artists he had worked consistently to raise the standards of exhibited art and to provide sales for his artists. During his time as President, he successfully persuaded Premier, Sir Henry Parkes, to provide a spacious gallery on the 5th floor of the Education Department in the then new Loftus Street Building. By 1921, when he resigned as President, exhibitions of the Society held in the Education Department's gallery were well attended by an increasing number of buyers, with sales amounting to almost four thousand pounds. He also successfully lobbied the National Gallery of New South Wales to allot a quarter of its annual grant to be spent on Australian work, rather than all on work from British academicians. It was Ashton who persuaded the Gallery to make the first purchase of work of the Heidelberg painters, Streeton's *Still Glides the Stream* in 1896. 'When Julian found talent in a student he was tireless in his efforts to help him'.³³ Crowley appears to have acted similarly in relation to Balson.

By the time Crowley was teaching at the SAS, the two art societies had developed their own alignments with certain artists. She described Society of Artists' Gallery as the only one available to students of the SAS, but run by a group of artists who were determined

³² Idem.

³³ Jean Campbell, *Early Sydney Moderns, John Young and the Macquarie Galleries 1916-1946*, Craftsman House, Roseville, N.S.W., 43-44.

to hang their own work. The only other main gallery to hang annual exhibitions was The Royal Art Society. In her words –

Julian Ashton students felt far too superior to send their work into
THAT.

And without a doubt, Dattilo Rubbo students felt the same way about the
Society of Artists.³⁴

Born and trained in Italy, Dattilo Rubbo fostered an interest in new painting trends from Europe, as reported in periodicals such as *Burlington Magazine*, which contained articles and reproductions of works by Cézanne and Van Gogh as early as 1910. From 1913 reproductions of modern art were published in the periodical *Colour* and included English artists Harold Gilman and Charles Ginner, under whom Norah Simpson studied at the Westminster School of Art, and French artists Matisse, Valadon, Monet, Vuillard, Modigliani and Gauguin. Australian artists Gruner, Blamire Young and Margaret Preston were also featured.³⁵ Norman Carter taught with Rubbo at the Royal Art Society and when E. Phillips Fox, under whom Carter had studied, exhibited his paintings in Sydney in 1913, Wakelin, de Maistre and Grace Cossington-Smith were introduced to contemporary trends in expression through colour. This was also the year that Norah Simpson, also a Rubbo pupil, returned from a trip to England and Europe where she had studied modern trends. To these developing artists colour became a liberating force and stimulus in their painting, with encouragement and strong backing from Rubbo. Wakelin's *Fruit Seller at Farm Cove* and Cossington-Smith's *The Sock Knitter* were both painted and accepted to be shown in the Royal Art Society's Show in August 1914, but Rubbo was accused of leading his students astray by both the Royal Society and the Society of Artists. The paintings were hung in a corner and subjected to ridicule by the vitriolic pen of Howard Ashton, who continued to condemn all modern art for many years to come,³⁶ as Crowley later experienced.

³⁴ Crowley Archives, 1/16.

³⁵ Heather Johnson, *Roy de Maistre The Australian Years 1894-1930*, Craftsman House, Roseville, NSW, 1988, 16.

³⁶ Leslie Walton, *The Art of Roland Wakelin*, Craftsman House, Seaforth, NSW, 1987, 13-16.

Crowley felt the Society of Artists discriminated against the younger artists, many of whom were women. However, as there were some, amongst the women students, who produced excellent work, eventually they were given their own exhibition. This was held at the Anthony Horderns Art Gallery in 1921, accompanied by much publicity. The fact that Margaret Preston was married to a Director of Anthony Horderns may have influenced this event. It was a selection of paintings and drawings by eleven talented women of the SAS, including both Crowley and Dangar. Entitled Exhibition by Eleven Australian Women, Crowley later commented that the men ‘facetiously reversed the title to The Australian Eleven’.³⁷

One of the projects of the Society of Artists which Ashton had helped to establish was the New South Wales Travelling Scholarship, first awarded to George Lambert in 1900. It then lapsed until its renewal in 1923, when Crowley resigned from teaching in order to prepare a portfolio for the award, possibly with encouragement from Ashton. Entrants were required to submit a ‘folio of drawings, a nude figure from life and a large scale composition’. The prize was a grant of two hundred and fifty pounds a year for two years of study in England or Europe. The prize sought to foster figure and portrait painting in New South Wales as, up until that time, most painters in that genre trained at the National Gallery School in Melbourne, while Sydney had produced mainly landscape painters.³⁸

As outback and pastoral scenes dominated the Australian art scene during this period, it was natural for Crowley to favour a subject with which she was very familiar. In order to compete for the Scholarship, she decided to return to Glen Riddle to realise a painting she had conceived and dreamed about doing for years. She lamented having to leave Sydney before seeing a demonstration George Lambert, the previous winner, gave at the SAS. She chose as her principal subject *The Milking Yard* – she envisaged a scene, familiar from her childhood, of a man milking while the cows stood around waiting their turn. Perhaps she had been inspired by Elioth Gruner’s painting, *Spring Frost*, a man with a herd of cows in the early morning, that had won the Wynne Prize for landscape in 1919.

³⁷ Idem.

³⁸ Campbell, *Early Sydney Moderns*, 43.

Certainly such subjects were very popular at the time. Crowley was at ease around cattle and horses – later writing ‘the cows seem to regard me as one of themselves’ and she was not fazed by them licking the paint off her palette. She became absorbed in drawing horses while they chewed her straw hat –

I loved the draught horses best, so ample and muscular ... something you could get hold of and play about with. I suppose Renoir felt like this with his women who were mostly very ample. (I am speaking in painters’ language, of course.)³⁹

Even many years later, she remembered it as a difficult time with her family and she may have felt this contributed to her loss of the award. Both she and Ashton were dismayed and disappointed when the Scholarship was awarded to Roy de Maistre, who had trained under rival teacher, Dattilo Rubbo. Lloyd Rees believed that de Maistre received valuable support from Lambert that helped him to secure the Scholarship.⁴⁰ By then Sydney Ure Smith had become the President of the Society, and Ashton wrote to him a strong letter of protest, resigning from the Society. Crowley had not the slightest idea that Ashton had taken this action until 53 years after the event. She had been approached in 1976 by a young woman researching a thesis, who showed her a copy of the letter Ashton wrote to Ure Smith. She recalled wondering at the time, whether the fact that Duke (de Maistre) had been driven to his studio every morning, while working on the scholarship paintings, by an influential person (whose name she could not remember), could have influenced the result. However, she was by then philosophical about the outcome –

Anyway, it was really miraculous that it all happened that way; it did, I suppose, Duke a lot of good, and if I HAD won the scholarship I would have enrolled at the Slade, London, which to my later thinking, would have been disastrous to my work, compared to what I gained by study with Lhote in his Académie, Paris, and with Albert Gleizes. And the

³⁹ Burke, *Australian Women Artists*, 80-81.

⁴⁰ Campbell, *Early Sydney Moderns*, 43.

great advantage of having Anne Dangar as a companion in 3 years of my 4 years of study in Paris.⁴¹

Crowley had been replaced at the SAS by Henry Gibbons so she could not return to teaching. With a friend who had also been a fellow student, Myra Cocks, she spent some time in Melbourne, where there was more emphasis on portrait and genre painting. In the early 1920s post-war prosperity had witnessed an increase in art student numbers and, through art magazines, reproductions and returning overseas students, knowledge of overseas art trends was becoming known in Sydney. At East Sydney Technical College, a former student of Julian Ashton, Herbert Gallop, formed The Students' Club, with Isabel Mackenzie as the Secretary.⁴² Julian Ashton gave the Club some support by criticizing student work at the monthly club meetings. Douglas Dundas suggested that the Club should organise lectures and other events to stimulate interest and discussion among members. It was decided to establish a Magazine of Youth and Ideals to circulate information and so, in December, 1924, the first copy of *Undergrowth* began with six hand-stencilled copies, then eight copies of the second edition and by the third edition, 150 were run off. Roland Wakelin, recently returned from a period overseas, designed a very modern cover, while Crowley designed a frontispiece with a delicate drawing suggesting a young artist with palette standing in a bush setting, to depict the idea of a young artist developing in the undergrowth. These designs were used until 1928, when the Club changed its name to the Five Arts Club, with the magazine adopting a more professional format designed by de Maistre and Adrien Feint. However, with the onset of the Depression, the magazine ceased production in 1929, but not before it had disseminated many new ideas about overseas art.⁴³

Florence Mofflin (later Florence Turner Blake) was one of the students who studied at the Slade School of Art in London. She wrote letters to her friends in Sydney about her experiences and travels and these were published in *Undergrowth*. Although she studied at the Slade from 1925 to 1929, she traveled to Paris during 1925 and wrote about it with

⁴¹ Crowley Archives, 1/10.

⁴² Campbell, *Early Sydney Moderns*, 43.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 44.

great enthusiasm of the bold compositions and colour schemes in the art she saw. What greatly impressed her was the freedom enjoyed by so many women busily engaged in the arts.⁴⁴

Crowley, Dangar and their friends were all influenced by the new sense of freedom available to women at that time. *The Home* magazine, published in Sydney in the 1920s and 1930s, promoted the images of a modern lifestyle to a city seeking to transform itself from a colonial port to a cultured international, modern city. Modeled on the American journals *Vanity Fair* and *House and Garden*, the magazine catered to the growing interest in American life and popular culture as portrayed in movies, magazines, radio programs and gramophone records. It featured the latest fashions, architecture, interior decorating, theatre and modern literature from overseas and its readers were encouraged to avail themselves of the post-war opportunities for women to have a career and undertake travel. Many of the covers designed by Thea Proctor portrayed the modern woman living a modern lifestyle: decorating an architect-designed home with artistic taste, playing tennis, driving, traveling and wearing loose-fitting, shorter clothes which allowed more freedom than the long, figure hugging styles of the pre-war era. Silk flesh-coloured stockings allowed women's legs to be shown in the shorter dress styles and the looser fitting clothing negated the need for tight-fitting corsetry and suited her freer, more active lifestyle. Her hair is worn in a simple, short bobbed style and she is presented by her image and pose as the carefree Jazz Age Flapper. Having access to modern transport, the career woman had the freedom to travel the world alone, in contrast to the need of the previous generation to be chaperoned.⁴⁵ Thea Proctor had lived and worked in England and was familiar with modern trends in art in England and Europe. From the early 1920s she and Margaret Preston were among the returned artists who encouraged Australian artists to take an interest in modernist techniques.

Roland Wakelin's introduction to modern art came soon after he joined the Royal Art Society in 1913 and began painting in Sydney. Returning from a Sunday painting

⁴⁴ Adams, *Rustic Cubism*, 16.

⁴⁵ Mary Mackay, 'Almost Dancing: Thea Proctor and the modern woman', *Wallflowers and Witches*, ed. Maryann Dever, Queensland University Press, 1994, 26-37.

excursion he saw a reproduction of Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* published in the *Sunday Sun* reporting the New York Armory Show. Through Dattilo Rubbo's teaching and encouragement he and fellow students were introduced to the simplified form and abstract components reducing the subject to a series of planes on a two dimensional surface, together with short, individual brushstrokes mixing colour on the flat surface to allow colour interaction creating heightened vibrancy and light, as used by Cézanne and the post-impressionist group of artists. In spite of critical opposition to modern art in Sydney, Wakelin continued to explore European trends for many years. He and Roy de Maistre learnt of *Cubists and Post-Impressionists* (1915) by Jerome Eddy and *Modern painting, its Tendency and Meaning* written by American, Willard Huntington Wright (1915), then available in Australia. They were able to see reproductions of works by Gleizes, Duchamp, Villon, Kandinsky, Picabia, Matisse and Picasso.⁴⁶ Wright included a long chapter on synchromism which his brother, Stanton Macdonald-Wright had developed in collaboration with Morgan Russell while working in Paris in 1913. Both American artists spent some years in Paris working with Matisse and Picabia respectively, and other artists working on abstraction and colour painting.⁴⁷ Wakelin and de Maistre worked on synchromist and abstract paintings for some time but they continued to receive a hostile reception from the critics when they exhibited their experimental paintings in 1919 .

However, one person who took a keen interest in Wakelin's art was John Young, and when Wakelin returned from three years overseas, Young offered him the inaugural exhibition at his newly established Macquarie Galleries in April 1925. Wakelin had further cultivated his interest in Cézanne and found support from fellow modernist, Margaret Preston, who wrote the introduction to his exhibition. In a simple and direct way she explained that in the modern vision, the aim was not to reproduce a likeness of the subject, but a spiritual and aesthetic response. She commended him as being young and modern with a fresh outlook and vision that should materially assist the forward

⁴⁶ Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1960*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1962, 175.

⁴⁷ Armel Fayol, 'Le petit dictionnaire des précurseurs de l'abstraction', *Dossier de L'Art*, No. 102, Décembre, 2003, 60-71.

movement of art in Australia.⁴⁸ The conservative critics responded with the usual caustic comments but Wakelin's message was well received by the many younger artists, whom he addressed at the June monthly lecture meeting organised by Rubbo in his rooms at 15 Bligh Street. Wakelin pointed out that in Europe Cézanne's influence was greater than that of any other artist. He pointed out that Cézanne stood for 'freedom in artistic expression...far more concerned with expressing emotional truths.'⁴⁹ The designs he had created were innovative and beautiful, 'bringing art into a new vision.'⁵⁰ Dangar was greatly impressed with Wakelin's art as inspired by Cézanne. She saw that impressionism lacked an underlying plan of construction that Cézanne's modern art had revealed to her. From 1924 she changed her teaching to include lessons from Cézanne and determined to save all she could to travel to France to learn more about modern art as developed by Cézanne.⁵¹

Over the next two years, Dangar and Crowley saved and planned for their trip, drawn to explore new ideas in Paris, which had been presented to them as a city vibrant and pulsating with artistic energy. Crowley had learned much from Ashton. She had become a skilled teacher and artist. With Dangar she sailed for Europe to begin another learning period in her life – one which was to take her a very long way and affect many people.

⁴⁸ Campbell, *Early Sydney Moderns*, 77.

⁴⁹ *Undergrowth*, July/August, 1925, np.

⁵⁰ *Idem*.

⁵¹ Adams, *Rustic Cubism*, 15.

CHAPTER 2: PARIS and ANDRÉ LHOTE

You will all want to know how my 'Art' is thriving. Well, it is difficult to say at this stage. I know I am in the process of 'change', so I hope that means I am growing, and to my surprise and gratitude and wild joy it doesn't hurt a bit. As a matter of fact, I must have got over most of the suffering that change must bring in Australia before I really had committed myself ...

I'd already started at Lhote's Modern School, and to my amazement his teaching was the only confirmation of the WANT I had been feeling so long without knowing exactly what the want was, and the THING I was afraid of doesn't exist. Instead of the suffering I expected, I have vanquished my 'ghost' at a blow, and have stepped with a heart singing for joy into a new and sunny field of labour and thought, that stretches ahead of me apparently without limit.¹

Before leaving Australia, Crowley had been troubled by her lack of ability to create a satisfactory composition, so when she began her studies with André Lhote, she was delighted to find his teaching was providing her with the very skill she had been seeking. Although Lhote was originally a cubist artist, he was principally known in France for his writing and teaching.² What Crowley learnt from Lhote did indeed equip her for new and sunny fields of labour and thought. I doubt that even Crowley herself did not realise when she wrote these words – 'apparently without limit' - just how far these new skills would take her art and how radically different her art would become.

As Crowley absorbed Lhote's teaching and made it the basis of her teaching at the Crowley-Fizelle Art School in Sydney in the 1930s, it is important to

¹ Grace Crowley, *Letters from Abroad*, Extracts from letters written by Grace Crowley to the students, *Undergrowth*, Oct-Nov, 1927, Sydney, Mitchell Library, Sydney, unpaginated.

² *André Lhote Rétrospective*, exh.cat., Musée de Valence, France, 15 June – 28 September, 2003, 119.

understand Lhote's artistic position and philosophy. In this Chapter, I examine the main artistic sources that shaped and influenced Lhote's development as an artist, writer and teacher. Lhote and Gleizes are often referred to together in Australian art writing and although they were initially both part of a group, known as the Puteaux Cubists around 1911-12, they developed in very different artistic directions. Bruce Adams has written extensively about Dangar as a disciple of Albert Gleizes, and her years working as a potter in his commune at Moly-Sabata. André Lhote was involved with the leading artists and writers in Paris and London, spending many years studying and writing on the forces that shaped modernism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He became one of the most influential teachers of modernist techniques and taught many successful artists. The influence of his teaching and writing can be seen in many leading artists of Europe, England, Ireland, South America, and the United States of America. In Australia his training was disseminated through both Dorrit Black and Crowley.

EXPERIENCE IN PARIS

After sailing from Australia on February 17th, 1926 on the *Ville de Strassbourg*,³ the friends travelled to Aix-en-Provence to visit Cézanne's studio and see for themselves the countryside he painted. Dangar had read of Cézanne's theories of pictorial construction in Australia and was convinced that the teaching she had received in Australia from her impressionist masters was lacking. By 1924 she had determined to save enough money to travel to Europe to study modern art of the school of Cézanne.⁴ Having been convinced by Wakelin that her own art lacked a constructive framework and that Cézanne's art could provide what she needed, the two friends headed directly for Cézanne's house at Aix-en-Provence in the south of France.

The visit to Cézanne's studio affirmed Dangar's desire to study his method of painting and composition. She wrote with great enthusiasm and detail to Nancy Hall of their visit and its impact and this was published under the charming title 'The House with the Blue Shutters' -

³ Crowley Archives, 1/10/1. Notebook with autobiographical notes c. 1975.

⁴ Crowley Archives, 5/3, Notes by Crowley on Anne Dangar.

Wild with delight, we set forth on a glorious afternoon. The great plane trees in the main avenue of the city were only just coming into leaf, and their silvery arms criss-crossed overhead, as they do in that wonderful composition of Cézanne's, with nude women in the foreground.

Turning into the narrow streets, a curious sensation of being only a momentary part of time came upon me. These streets would remain - these huge buildings of yellow stone had been, and would be, here for centuries, but we -? Yes, Aix made you feel personalities were of no account - the streets would be peopled centuries hence with men and women.⁵

Dangar was responding to her first real encounter with a country and a western culture with many centuries of history, so unlike the world in which she had lived up to that time. She described in detail his studio and the view, from a very large window, of the city with its yellow and pink roofed house and many church spires, and beyond, to the rich farmlands and the mountains.

In their rhythmic contours I saw Cézanne again, or perhaps I should say, Cézanne taught me to see his mountains. We looked and looked from that window ...

What a vast world, and so old! ...

How those structural compositions of his still-life would always bring back to my mind the massive buildings of his birth place ...

I will always look upon Cézanne as a realist - a painter who succeeded in painting the reality, of mankind, of time, of space, of life.⁶

Inspired by this visit, the friends travelled to Paris, arriving in late April, 1926, where they stayed initially at the Hotel rue des Écoles, a hotel popular with American and Australian visitors. They found lodging in a *Pension de Famille* in the Boulevard St. Michel overlooking the Luxembourg Gardens. The visit to Aix strengthened Anne's resolve to study in France, so they looked for a suitable

⁵ Anne Dangar, 'The House with the Blue Shutters', *Undergrowth*, July-August, 1926, np.

⁶ Idem.

apartment and studio. The vitality and spirit of creative freedom they found in Paris, convinced them they were in the right place.

Montparnasse had attracted an eclectic mix of painters, poets, writers, musicians, dealers and patrons since the early years of the twentieth century, and the cafes provided a meeting place for discussion and interaction. Almost all of the artists, writers and collectors who feature in the annals of modern painting, lived, worked or spent time in Montparnasse. Many Australian artists were attracted to the freedom and creative atmosphere of the area over the years – Rupert Bunny, Bessie Davidson, Rose McPherson, Agnes Goodsir, Marie Tuck and Hilda Rix Nicholas were only a few familiar names.⁷

In the early 1920s the devaluation of the franc made living in Paris an attractive economic proposition, particularly for the English, Americans and Australians. Popular cafes abounded on and around the Boulevard Montparnasse, near to the well-known ateliers attended by the many students – Le Dôme, La Rotonde, and La Coupole, the latter opened in 1927, were ones frequented by Crowley and Dangar. Many American women writers found Paris provided a creative stimulus not available in America at the time and that life in Paris between the wars was ‘economically, psychologically, and politically easier’.⁸ They were able to develop their own careers and live their lives free of any social restrictions placed on them at home. This was also the great appeal of Paris for Crowley and Dangar. Like many women who settled in the Left Bank artistic community at that time, they found acceptance of their choice to live together and work as artists. They found this a great release from the restrictions placed on them by the parochial and patriarchal attitudes in Australia.

The Paris of that time was a special place for women so it is little wonder that Crowley later wrote those had been the happiest years of her life. She was not alone in her sentiments, for in recent years a number of studies and memoirs have

⁷ Little, *A Studio in Montparnasse*, 54.

⁸ Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank, Paris 1900-1940*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1986, 13.

focused on the women of Montparnasse in that particular period. Merrill Cody, an American writer, wrote in his memoirs of living in Paris in the 1920s -

In those years in Montparnasse it was the women among us who shaped and directed and nourished the social and artistic and literary life of the young and vibrant Anglo-American colony. Without them, the colony would have neither the historical richness nor the cultural significance that has made it for years such an absorbing subject.

Resourceful, vital, resolute and blessed with immense talent, the women left their mark on all they encountered ...

Together they formed a ball of energy, a driving force of spirit and exhilaration.⁹

American academic, Shari Benstock, who undertook extensive research into lives of women writers living in Paris in that era wrote – ‘Rarely has a time and place so captured the imagination as the Paris of those years.’¹⁰

This was the Paris into which Crowley and Dangar arrived in 1926. Many American women writers and publishers, such as Peggy Guggenheim, Gertrude Stein, Sylvia Beach, Janet Flanner worked beside writers such as Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce and others. Man Ray and Kiki of Montparnasse, created lasting images through experimental photography; Berenice Abbot, an early assistant to Man Ray, followed in the footsteps of French photographer Eugene Atget, whose work documented the changes in Paris from the late nineteenth century until his death in 1927, building her reputation as a photographer. In a hotel not far from the Boulevard Mont St. Michel, André Breton and his group of friends met to discuss and institute their automatic writing, the beginning of the surrealists. Also close by was the Closerie de Lilas Café and Bar, a popular meeting place for writers and artists, where the group of artists had met to discuss their plans for the Section d’Or Exhibition of 1912.

⁹ Merrill Cody with Hugh Ford, *The Women of Montparnasse*, Cornwall Books, New York, 1984, 11.

¹⁰ Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank*, 4.

Crowley and Dangar enrolled for French lessons and began searching for a suitable atelier at which to study. There were many academies established in the Montparnasse area of Paris that had, in the late nineteenth century, supplemented and prepared students for the École des Beaux-Arts. Among the most renowned were Colarossi, Julian, la Grande Chaumière and Ranson. Many years later Crowley wrote -

One could work at Colarossi's with or sans (without) professeur: one glance at the work of the students there convinced us that any instruction was valueless, so we worked Atelier Libre.

We wandered gloomily amongst the paintings hung in Spring Salon ... most of them indifferent, many awful. I was looking for a portrait one could respect. At last, arrested by a portrait painted by Louis Roger - good (not mad about it) but decided to write to him (to) ask for lessons.

Beaux Art master ... no, we couldn't join les Beaux Arts...age limit 25 ... would give us private lessons provided we had a studio to work in.

We had already been looking for a studio. There were several being built in a little court in the rue Bardinnet (a tiny street off the rue d'Atesia). We secured one before it was finished - alas it could not be completed before Oct. ¹¹

At M. Roger's invitation they worked at his studio from late May for three weeks: two mornings per week with correction, and two mornings per week on their own, until he left on vacation. Although her original ambition had been to study at the Slade School in London, by the end of June Crowley 'could not bear to leave ... and began to seize on any excuse to study in Paris.'¹² Also about this time, a visit by Sydney Art School student, Myra Cocks, led to a busy time during which Crowley became concerned for Anne Dangar's health. The friends decided to holiday in Brittany and this helped for a time, but by late October Dangar needed a major operation. This was successfully completed in a hospital

¹¹ Crowley Archives, 1/10/1.

¹² Idem.

run by a catholic organisation and Anne then spent time convalescing at Chateau Rufisque, Aubagne.¹³

In October, just prior to Anne's operation, the friends moved into their new studio and began lessons with M. Louis Roger and also worked occasionally at Colarossi's. They continued in this manner for the early part of 1927 with their painting, while also exploring Paris and visiting many exhibitions and galleries. In a letter to Julian Ashton, Crowley commented -

Paris is full of rotten shows of pseudo-modern work, but my word, you come upon the real stuff now and then - modern, mind you, the sincerity and force of which makes you sit up and think. We saw a ripping modern exhibition of Dutch work once which was really a revelation.¹⁴

The Dutch modernists were known for their purity of design. Perhaps it was this exhibition that sowed the seeds of Crowley's later interest in Mondrian.

Crowley had been interested in working with M. Roger in order to achieve a finer 'finish' to her portraits and worked very hard, painting many portraits, in the months she spent with him. However, while working at Colarossi's she and Anne met an American ex-student of Lhote. Crowley 'was arrested by the fine quality of his work'¹⁵ and discovered he was an art teacher in America, who told her -

No-one thinks anything of a teacher in America who has not studied with Lhote. Join now - when the season opens, they'll be hanging from the ceiling by their eyebrows.¹⁶

Dangar, dissatisfied with Roger, promptly joined l'Académie Lhote in the Rue d'Odessa. Crowley continued for a short time with M. Roger until she felt she had achieved a finish to her portraits and evolved a better method of planning and carrying through her work 'at the swiftest and surest rate possible',¹⁷ before

¹³ Crowley Archives, 1/10/1

¹⁴ G. Crowley, Letter to Julian Ashton, Letters from Abroad, Learning in Paris, *Undergrowth*, May-June, 1927, np.

¹⁵ Crowley Archives, 1/10/1.

¹⁶ Idem..

¹⁷ Crowley, Letter to Ashton, *Undergrowth*, 1927, np

joining Lhote's Academy. Dangar admired Crowley's persistence and 'strength of will to drown herself and absorb another's methods and gets from a teacher all he has to give'.¹⁸

Writing to Julian Ashton, Crowley recorded her early impressions of Lhote and his teaching methods -

Lhote's school - very modern. ... An atmosphere of hard work and earnestness permeates the place, no-one is allowed even to w-h-i-s-p-e-r during working hours, and the master is earnest and inspiring ... The difference of method and outlook upon art is like a sudden swift plunge into the breakers on a rather fresh morning ... André Lhote ... is a young man, very virile and enthusiastic. He teaches entirely by correcting students' works, talking very swiftly while doing so, the whole class following him - his way of making a study compose is an enlightenment.¹⁹

With André Lhote, Anne Dangar found the teaching she had travelled so far to find -

l'art moderne de école de Cézanne (modern art of the school of Cézanne) for the basis of Lhote's teaching WAS CÉZANNE, which meant that from reproductions hung on the wall we were taught to examine the construction of masterpieces like Michel Angelo (Lhote had just returned from Italy where he had been specially granted a 'close-up' of the Sistine Chapel ceiling). The Dutch and Flemish masters as well as the great Italian school, the Spanish and the best of the French - I used to pin a reproduction of Ingres to my easel for at (the) time I simply adored this artist's magnificent line. Fine examples of the French School were not neglected - even the Impressionist, men like Seurat, Van Gogh, Renoir, Monet, Manet were treated with respect - with some understanding of the cubist movement. (Lhote himself had once been a cubist.) Lhote respected the work of the REAL IMPRESSIONISTS - but hated, as Cézanne did, the loose, soggy mess that Impressionism had fallen into. All this was quite logical for had

¹⁸ Adams, *Rustic Cubism*, 17.

¹⁹ Crowley, Letter to Ashton, *Undergrowth*, 1927, np.

not Cézanne expressed the desire to ‘make of impressionism something solid like the art of the museums’.²⁰

ANDRÉ LHOTE

André Lhote (1885-1962) became involved with a number of artists and writers on his first visit to Paris in 1906. Early friends were Jacques Rivere, Roualt Dufy and Jean Marchand. His work was much admired by Jean Cocteau, for whose *Escapes* he made a series of drawings. He exhibited with the first Cubists at the Salon des Indépendents in 1911 and, soon afterwards, became part of the group of artists and writers who were interested in the analogies between art, mathematics and music. Known as the Puteaux Cubists, they met each Sunday in the studio or garden of Jacques Villon in Puteaux, a suburb of Paris, and on Mondays at the Café La Closerie des Lilas. This group were influenced by the cubism of Picasso and Braque but were ideologically quite different. Lhote met and exchanged ideas with the scientifically and mathematically minded Villon and his brothers, Marcel Duchamp and Raymond Duchamp-Villon. The group included artists Metzinger, Leger, Picabia, Kupka, La Fresnaye, Gris and Albert Gleizes, and critics Guillaume Apollinaire, André Salmon and Walter Pach. They studied the concept of the Golden Section as described by Leonardo da Vinci in his *Trattoria della Pictura* that had been translated into French in 1910. In October, 1912 the works they had painted, on the compositional framework of the Golden Section and more abstracted than cubism, were shown in an exhibition *La Section d'Or* at the Galerie de La Boetie. Paris.²¹

During this period, art as an expression of French culture, was part of the political discourse. A wide ranging number of figures representing different political stances, anarchists, republicans and monarchists, supported their own version of ‘traditional’ French culture, resulting in different representations of classicism in pre-war Paris. Charles Maurras, royalist, and his literary colleagues Pierre Lassarre and Jean-Marc Bernard, maintained that the height of French

²⁰ Crowley Archives, 5/3.

²¹ Robert Stanley Johnson, *Cubism & La Section d'Or: Reflections on the development of the cubist epoch 1907-1922*, Klees/Gustorf Publishers, Chicago, 1991, 21-23.

culture came under the Sun King, Louis XIV, in the seventeenth century. His developed theory of French classicism recognised France's Greco-Latin heritage from the south, manifested in the art of Poussin and Cartesian rationalism. They criticised the Symbolists and their allegiance to the philosophy of Henri Bergson as antirational. Gleizes and Metzinger allied themselves with Bergson and the neo-Symbolists in a counter claim that the true tradition of French classicism was from the Gothic-Celtic north of France. At the time of the *Section d'Or* Exhibition, the Puteaux Cubists defined their classicism as aesthetically innovative based on the idea that the classical tradition was a succession of innovations over time, and not limited to one particular period. Gleizes published his manifesto *Cubisme et la tradition* in 1913, in which he condemned both Latinism and monarchism as foreign to France's true roots. As most of Europe had originally been Celtic, he believed the true Celtic roots came from Gothic art and Bardic poetry. Gleizes believed that the practitioners of Gothic art as seen in Gothic primitive artists and cathedrals, truly embodied the French nation's Celtic origins. He wanted French artists to develop and create an organic art rooted in Gothic art from their Celtic ancestors. The centrepiece of the *Section d'Or* Exhibition was his painting *Harvest Threshing* (1912) in which he depicts peasant life and community representing the ideals of spiritual harmony with nature. His artists' commune set up in 1927 at Moly-Sabata was an outworking of his perceived ideals where human labour is worked out in harmony with the organic rhythms of the seasons.²² It was these ideas that attracted Dangar to his commune, believing she could find spiritual and artistic fulfilment at the same time.

As part of the socialist ideals and championing of Gothic art, Gleizes, and also Fernand Léger, developed their art as public mural painting, seeing that as the natural evolution of the French Primitives and anonymous art of the cathedral builders. This they contrasted with the 'imitative' art of the High Renaissance that they blamed for the introduction of easel painting designed for 'individual, bourgeois collectors'.²³

²² Mark Antiff and Patricia Leighton, *Cubism and Culture*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2001, 111-129.

²³ *Ibid.* 127-129.

Although Lhote was part of this group at the time of the *Section d'Or* Exhibition, for him 'the geometry intervened' and set him on a course of study and analysis of different art theories. Lhote became one of a number of artists and writers fascinated by compositional geometry, spending years studying Renaissance art and eventually basing his teaching largely on Cézanne, who came from the Greco-Latin South of France. He studied the underlying geometry of art, tracing the history of the use of the golden section from the Renaissance through to the French artist, Claude Poussin, who had used the complex geometry in the composition of his paintings.

In her later life, Crowley was asked about the different teaching from Lhote and Gleizes. She was very clear about the differences in their teaching –

The basis of André Lhote's teaching was Cézanne ...

Yes, André Lhote at one time was a cubist, but not being able to resist the seduction of the world about him, renounced it. Albert Gleizes was a cubist and exceedingly critical of Cézanne. Gleizes was a mural painter insisting on the WALL to be painted and never left it.

Cézanne (and Lhote) made a compromise between the object SEEN visually and the wall.²⁴

According to French writer and critic, André Salmon, Seurat was 'the first to be concerned in the return to the great classic composition'. He believed that Seurat was the first artist in the late nineteenth century to construct and compose, describing him as 'the reconstructor'. Salmon believed that Seurat was a major influence on Matisse, and also in the development of cubism.²⁵

One of the books that greatly influenced Seurat was David Sutter's *La philosophie des Beaux-Arts appliqué a la peinture (Beaux-Arts philosophy applied to painting)* Paris, 1870, in which he stressed the importance of linear composition and aesthetic lines. He had used examples taken from the bas-reliefs and paintings of Antiquity and in it quoted Plutarch –

²⁴ Crowley Archives, 1, 5/3.

²⁵ André Salmon, 'Georges Seurat' (1920) in Broude, *Seurat in Perspective*, 60-61.

In the arts ‘nothing that is done well is done by chance, and I know no work of art that has succeeded except through the foresight and science of the artist. They all constantly use rules, lines, measures and numbers.’²⁶

Due to his temperament, Seurat was able to embrace the science of numbers enthusiastically. He formulated his own concept of harmony – the pleasing relationship of numbers to one another. He believed that everything in art was ultimately reducible to numbers and ratios – the greater or lesser amount of light that a volume will reflect, the relationship between two colours, the effect that lines have upon one another in relation to their length and direction. From 1889 he devoted himself to the intense study of linear contrasts, writing in 1890 ‘gaiety of line, lines above the horizontal: calm is the horizontal: sadness is the downward direction’. As a result of these meditations he produced, in 1890, the *Chahut* a work that demonstrated his belief in the prime importance of harmonic ratios – its underlying geometry is that of the golden ratio.²⁷ Salmon recorded that the first cubist studios were hung with works by Ingres and photographs of the *Chahut*, a painting containing the whole lesson for cubist artists.²⁸

As part of Lhote’s analysis of compositional geometry he undertook an extensive study of the art of Georges Seurat, eventually publishing a book on this artist in 1923. Lhote’s own study of the way in which Seurat applied the science of numbers, geometric relationships, contrasts of lines, verticals, horizontals and diagonals to create pictorial harmony, became part of his teaching. He taught that the root of every sensation of harmony is numbers, whether it be in the plastic arts (architecture, drawing, painting, sculpture) or in the musical arts (music, poetry). Harmony exists in the pleasing relationship of numbers to one another. This is the essential idea contained in the golden section, which is based on mathematical ratios. For lines, it is the relationship that lines have with each other, according to their respective lengths and directions. This became a major

²⁶ Charles Bouleau with preface by Jacques Villon, *The Painter’s Secret Geometry: A Study of Composition in Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1963, 210-213.

²⁷ Robert Rey, ‘The Renaissance of Classical Sensibility in French Painting at the end of the Nineteenth Century’ (1931) in Broude, *Seurat in Perspective*, 65-70.

²⁸ Salmon, ‘Seurat’ in Broude, *Seurat in Perspective*, 60-61.

theme in the teaching of both Lhote and Crowley, and an alphabet of lines and curves appear in Crowley's notes from Paris and in her teaching notes. Crowley told Mary Eagle that Lhote had displayed these symbols on the walls of his Atelier for his students. Similarly, Lhote taught scientifically about colour – it is the greater or lesser amount of light a volume will reflect, the reciprocal relationship between two colours, which are themselves simply the result of numerically measurable variations on the retina. Only those results from which well-balanced equations are derived can provide for the eye, heart and mind a sensation of complete, almost physical satisfaction: a sensation of harmony. All of this was a revelation to Crowley, who had been trained in the impressionist method of painting what she saw before her.²⁹

By the time Académie Lhote opened in 1922, Cézanne was seen as the most important source of modern classicism and Lhote's teaching was based on his ideas and Lhote's own studies of the great painters of Europe. He credited Cézanne with having created a new art based on the laws of composition used by the great artists of the past, particularly in the Renaissance. Cézanne himself used the golden section in composing his paintings. Lhote saw Cézanne as having 'organised the ancient laws of the primitives for composition scientifically in order to create paintings in the spirit of OUR times'.³⁰ Travelling to Holland to study Rembrandt - 'as one cannot in the Louvre',³¹ and Italy to study Michelangelo, Lhote found that these painters had indeed used the mathematical proportions of the golden section to underpin their famous paintings. He discovered for himself, and taught to his students, that the great art of the Renaissance was conceived to be part of an architectural structure and therefore needed a framework and a plan to achieve harmonious results. The great French-born painter, Poussin, had been identified as one of the last painters to understand and use the golden section and this was the reason that French painters, such as Cézanne, used Poussin as their model. Their desire to create a new form of classical painting was a matter of national pride. Lhote was in

²⁹ Eagle, *Australian Modern Painting*, 111.

³⁰ André Lhote, *Undergrowth*, November/December, 1927, np.

³¹ Lhote, *Undergrowth*, Nov/Dec, 1927.

agreement with Cézanne in his desire to create a landscape tradition for his time as Poussin had done in the past, and his teaching attracted students from all over Europe and further afield. Through the pages of *Undergrowth* his ideas were disseminated to art students in Sydney, adding to the voice of those already proclaiming modernist ideas.

Thea Proctor was advocating the very things Crowley was learning. In her talk to the Students' Club in 1926 she said –

The great failing in art instruction in Australia is its absence of instruction in design. It is not taught in any of the schools in Sydney or in Melbourne...

There is a great deal of prejudice against modern art in Australia. As soon as one uses the word 'design' in application to painting people who call the modern 'jazz' art become suspicious, not knowing that all the greatest works of art in the world are based on sound design... It is a quality which the works of the old masters have in common with the best modern art, the difference being that in the modern the treatment is tremendously simplified ...

Composition is something that is quite mathematical ... Every line you place in a certain shape must either conform to that shape or be in apposition to it. If you have a pronounced line going in one direction you must have another in the opposite direction to balance it.³²

STUDY IN PARIS

During the years 1927 and 1928 the friends studied together under Lhote. Amongst the papers left, are notes of a lecture they attended by Amédée Ozenfant. They shared the same studio, the same experiences and travelled together. From Julian Ashton they had learnt to observe 'accurately proportion, shape, colour, tone, from a visual-impressionist point of view'.³³ Under Lhote

³² Thea Proctor, 'Design: Thea Proctor's Talk to the Students' – (At the Students Club, 21st August), *Undergrowth*, September/October, 1926, np.

³³ Crowley Archives, Notes on Crowley Fizelle Art School.

they were introduced to the totally new idea to them, of the need for an artist to use a framework or skeleton structure on which to build a painting. An artist needed a plan of composition, in the way that an architect needed an organised design plan for any building.

Thus we were instructed in dynamic symmetry or if we did not possess a dynamic-shaped canvas - we could use another method (as Serusier and others did) for an accidental shape. All this was terrific for Anne and me.³⁴

Lhote not only taught them thoroughly about a compositional framework but also the importance of colour in the structuring of a painting. They were taught to paint in 'planes of colour' not just colour dotted indiscriminately 'like the impressionists', as Lhote saw it, but to create a composition of colour. If they were to paint a scene, say, of nude figure with curtains, couch, cushions, etc., he suggested they turn the canvas upside down (as Lhote discovered Ingres had done) and think of it as a design, painting in large areas of colour with complementary colours placed sparingly, to liven things up. Crowley later wrote - 'this is what he meant by saying - you must transpose your picture by using plastic methods.'³⁵ Crowley contrasted the different methods taught at the Sydney Art School, as painting things - seen visually, with the idea of constructing a canvas with 'a colour scheme deliberately chosen as insisted upon in l'Académie Lhote'.³⁶ At the Lhote Academy they were taught that the placing of colour and its complementaries was considered extremely important. Even many years later she still remembered the wonder of discovering the way such a colour scale made a huge difference to her painting -

Yes, I was to take my inspiration from the general colour, nude, curtains, couch...

And to work in a colour scale, I was to understand...say starting from yellow through the following harmonies of colour till it hit a cool contrast- blue or violet (or vice versa: say the general colour was green or blue, then march through the cool harmonies till you hit a hot contrast

³⁴ Crowley Archives, Box 5/3, 4.

³⁵ Idem.

³⁶ Idem.

- yellow, orange or red). Why, yes, it was all there before one ... and when I took the flesh colour into the background and brought the background of patterned curtains, yellow, orange, red, yellow-green and, ye gods, there was blue and some violet, into the nude, the whole thing looked more harmonious.³⁷

Published in 1839, Michel Eugène Chevreul's study *Principle of Harmony and Contrast of Colours and their Application to the Arts* resulted from his observations of the interaction of different coloured dyes as he supervised their use in the internationally renowned Gobelin Tapestry Works. His studies in optics and development of colour discs were absorbed and used by Eugène Delacroix in his search for greater luminosity of colour in his own paintings. Delacroix developed a technique of dividing colours using longer, thinner brushstrokes and this separation of tones enabled the eye to mix the colours optically.³⁸ His use of colour can be seen as a precedent for the way in which Cézanne used colour in modelling his designs. Seurat also made a thorough study of Delacroix's use of colour, which he shared with Signac. Both these artists made significant contributions in the development of new techniques and Signac's book *From Delacroix to Neo-impressionism* (1898) was widely read by the avant-garde of Paris.³⁹

Sonia Delaunay was an artist who used abstract patterns for dresses and scarves in the 1920s that Lhote described as 'a serene architecture and yet attractive with geometric forms arranged according to an easily perceived rhythm'.⁴⁰ Lhote wrote that Mme Delaunay had searched in painting to find really sharp colour contrasts that Lhote maintained were 'rediscovered in part by Delacroix and codified by the genial Seurat, theoretician of *simultaneous contrasts*' after being

³⁷ Idem.

³⁸ Diane Kelder, *The Great Book of French Impressionism*, Abbeville Press, New York, 1980, 1997, 21-25.

³⁹ Paul Signac, 'From Delacroix to Impressionism' (1898) in N. Broude, ed., *Seurat in Perspective*, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1978, 58-9.

⁴⁰ André Lhote, Preface to 'Sonia Delaunay: Her Paintings, Her Objects, Her Simultaneous Textiles, Her Fashion Design' 1924 in Arthur A. Cohen, ed., *The New Art of Color: The Writings of Robert and Sonia Delaunay*, The Viking Press, New York, 1978, 177.

used by 'the ancients and forgotten for two centuries'.⁴¹ Crowley and Dangar would have been used to seeing these fashions while living in Paris and, from comments made later by friends and family members, Crowley's fashion sense was always considered to be very modern after she returned to Australia in 1930.⁴²

In a notebook kept by Crowley and dated 1927 and 1928 are notes written about Lhote's teaching and we do find similar things written in letters to *Undergrowth* at the same time.

Don't get too many directions in drawing a tree, search to vary the spaces. Search section d'or in all your dimensions - watch (the) ladder of (your) picture.

Divide your picture by light and shade. Not by trees, women, houses, etc. impressionism aimed to please - cubism aims to move rather than please. To wage war on scientific perspective as it was called was a daring thing after it had reigned nearly 500 years.

They could point to Oriental, Mexican, and African Art, but this might lead to copying Eastern mannerisms instead.

Cézanne built only by plastic means. He brought about volume not by an optical illusion but by the scientific use of colour.⁴³

By teaching his students to think about constructing their paintings in terms of shapes, directions, colours and tones, they could then compose any subject harmoniously and even move into abstract shapes and colours. He taught them to plan their work, to design their paintings. In her painting *Baigneuses* of 1928, we see Crowley using a simple colour plan and dividing the picture into shapes. However, although there is some emphasis on different shapes in her nude figures, they remain essentially figurative. For someone who has spent many years painting the figure, the transition into abstraction is a laborious process. Even after returning to Australia, her initial sketches were figurative and it is not

⁴¹ Idem.

⁴² Taylor, *Crowley*, 31.

⁴³ Crowley Archives, 1/4.

until the late 1930s that her paintings really show any extensive abstraction of the figure, in *Woman (Annunciation)* and *Portrait* both c.1939.

Crowley became totally absorbed in Lhote's teaching, finding inspiration in his study of the old masters. Even so, she still felt that perhaps she should spend some time at the Slade in London, as she had originally intended. However, when she confided this plan to fellow Lhote student, Mrs Matthew Smith, she was horrified – 'Don't go to the Slade ... I won a scholarship there – that's what's the matter with me!' ⁴⁴ At that time the English art schools had a reputation for producing students whose own painting was in the style of their teacher, whereas the French schools encouraged more independent development. ⁴⁵ Julian Ashton had trained at Académie Julian in Paris and his teaching philosophy was to bring out the best talent in his own students, something Crowley followed in her own teaching.

LHOTE'S BRITISH AND IRISH INFLUENCE

Lhote attracted many students from Britain and Ireland to his Parisian Academy having been introduced to the British public by Roger Fry through his Second Post Impressionist Exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in 1912. Fry and Lhote shared a common dissatisfaction with impressionist composition and an interest in the need for a compositional structure based on the old masters. In the years following that Exhibition, both were involved in writing, and Fry later credited Lhote's thesis with contributing to his fuller understanding of the artists who had helped shape the development of modernism. He eventually realised that what he was looking for could be found in the work of Cézanne – 'a modern vision with the constructive design of the older master'. ⁴⁶

With public recognition from Fry, and recommendations from other leading

⁴⁴ Burke, *Australian Women Artists*, 86.

⁴⁵ Eileen Chanin and Steven Miller, *Degenerates and Perverts: The 1939 Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art*, The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne University Press, 2005, 99.

⁴⁶ Roger Fry, 'Vision and Design 1920', in Eric Fernie, *Art History and its Methods*, Phaidon Press Ltd., London, 157-167.

painters and teachers, such as Walter Sickert and Bernard Meninsky, Lhote became a leading exponent of modernism in Britain. Irish artists figure prominently amongst Lhote's early pupils at his Paris Academy from 1922, many of whom were women and later referred to as 'Lhote's daughters'.⁴⁷ Many Irish artists felt the need to leave Ireland to study in London and Paris in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The most important of these returned exiles, Sir John Lavery and Sir William Orpen, achieved international recognition for their painting of Irish life and landscape. Anglo-Irish artist Jack Yeats became the most important Irish artist of the twentieth century for his expressionist paintings of specifically Irish subjects depicting a modern Ireland. He was considered a solitary genius who exhibited within Ireland and in English and American exhibitions, including the Armory show of 1913, and who won a silver medal for painting in the 1924 Olympic Games. However, in the 1930s the Dublin art world was dominated by conservative tradition and it was the women painters who brought the French influence of Lhote and Gleizes to Ireland.⁴⁸

Mainie Jellett studied at the Westminster School in London and was considered one of Sickert's star pupils. Evie Hone, related to other Irish artists of the same surname, also studied with Sickert and under Meninsky and both women studied with Lhote in the early 1920s. Both women were deeply devout Christians and they were drawn to the spiritual elements of Albert Gleizes' non-objective art, which he believed addressed 'the spirit whose particular property is movement, growth and life'.⁴⁹ From the early 1920s to the mid-1930s, Jellett and Hone visited France and regularly collaborated with Gleizes in their artistic development. Both women produced abstract, non-objective paintings through the 1920s and they were among the original group of forty-one painters and sculptors who formed the Paris-based Abstraction-Création, an international rallying point for artists pursuing non-objective art. Through the 1930s this group emphasised the theory and practice of abstraction in its diversity of forms

⁴⁷ Dickon Hall, 'André Lhote and Irish Art', James Beechey, *André Lhote and Friends*, exh.n.cat., Michael Parkin Gallery, London, June 26 – July 19, 1996, np, National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

⁴⁸ Bruce Arnold, *A Concise History of Irish Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1969, 159-166.

⁴⁹ Bruce Arnold, *Mainie Jellett and the Modern Movement in Ireland*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1991, 144.

and artists involved included Jean Arp, Sonia and Robert Delaunay, Alexander Calder, Moholy-Nagy, Naum Gabo, Antoine Pevsner, Mondrian, and the Australian John Power.⁵⁰ By the mid-1930s, Evie Hone developed a figurative style, in the manner of Rouault, and became one of the leading stained glass artists of the twentieth century, while Jellett played a leading role in the formation of the Irish Exhibition of Living Art in 1943, which very successfully brought together the work of conservative and modernist artists in Ireland.⁵¹

Jellett regarded Paris as the true heart of modernism in life and in art, and Lhote's studio as 'the most advanced public academy of the time.'⁵² May Guinness, Elizabeth Rivers, Barbara Warren and Bridget Ganly all found that Lhote's teaching provided them with a new approach to structure, pictorial space and treatment of form that allowed them to develop their own modernist style, just as Crowley did.⁵³ Jellett's sketchbooks from her period of study with Lhote revealed his teaching methods. It was firstly important to study and copy the works of famous old masters to learn the secrets of composition, balance and harmony that can be found in all great art. Geometric cubist treatment was then applied to the composition, defining the human body and the landscape in basic shapes, in the manner of Cézanne.⁵⁴ However, for Jellett and Hone, their period of collaboration with Gleizes was concurrent with their attendance at Lhote's Académie and their works show the strong Celtic and religious influence of Gleizes. They both produced most of their abstract works during the 1920s while working with him while he was producing non-objective works himself. Lhote never moved completely into abstraction. With their involvement with a wider group of abstract artists through *Abstract-Création*, during the 1930s, both Jellett and Hone moved away from their intense collaboration with Gleizes and developed their own independent styles and careers. By 1935 their twelve-year

⁵⁰ Ibid. 132.

⁵¹ Arnold, *Irish Art*, 174-177.

⁵² Beechey, *André Lhote and Friends*, np.

⁵³ All of these artists were leading figures in the Society of Dublin Painters and the Irish Exhibition of Living Art, and featured in an exhibition of *André Lhote and Friends* held at the Michael Parkin Gallery in London, June-July, 1996. This exhibition also featured some of Lhote's British pupils – Dorothy Hepworth and Marjorie Sherlock, also a former pupil of Sickert, and artists who had studied at Claude Flight's Grosvenor School – Alice Coates, Lil Tschudi and Dorrit Black.

⁵⁴ Beechey, *André Lhote and Friends*, exhn.cat.

period of learning with Gleizes effectively ended⁵⁵ and this loss of influence would explain Gleizes' strong desire to retain Dangar as his pupil and disciple over the years.

Lhote's preferred interest in landscape and the human body would have suited Crowley, as these were also her favoured subjects when she went to Paris. Crowley later followed Lhote's teaching methods in Sydney and, like many of his former pupils, was able to extend his basic teaching into the area of abstraction. 'Paintings and Drawings by Lhote and his Pupils' was an exhibition held at the Claridge Gallery, London in 1996 that acknowledged his significant role as the academician and interpreter of Cubism. He and some of his pupils were given an exhibition at the old Claridge Gallery in 1927 and after World War II, in 1946, he inaugurated the Anglo-French Art Centre at St. John's Wood, London but this was to be a short-lived project. However, in the early 1950s two of his most influential analytical books, *Treatise on Landscape Painting* and *Figure Painting* were translated into English and widely read by English-speaking artists and students.⁵⁶ Crowley owned a copy of each book and these form part of her Archives.

ABSTRACTED FORMS

It is clear from all the reports of Lhote's teaching methods that the abstract elements necessary to the composition of a painting was an intrinsic part of his instruction. Many of Crowley's paintings from the period of her attendance at the Lhote Academy display a strong element of abstraction. It was her continued correspondence with Dangar in the 1930s through which she was encouraged to move into complete abstraction, notwithstanding Crowley's later claim that it was Balson who led her into abstraction. Crowley herself described her art school partnership with Fizelle as being based on the constructive approach to painting, with both Lhote and Gleizes emphasising the abstract elements necessary for the composition of a painting.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Arnold, *Mainie Jellett*, 135-144.

⁵⁶ Beechey, *Lhote and Friends*, np.

⁵⁷ Crowley Archives, Notes on Crowley-Fizelle Art School.

A painting by Crowley dated 1928, *Three Women in a Landscape* (Art Gallery of South Australia), shows that she was by then moving into abstracted forms. This painting reflects Cézanne's ideas of creating a new classicism based on past tradition. The subject is the classical nude set against a background of the remaining Roman aqueducts in the Provençal area of southern France, to Cézanne, a highly visible reminder of his Greco-Roman heritage and, for him, a symbol of solidity and endurance.⁵⁸ Crowley has used this setting to create a modern vision of the classical nude – evolving from the nearest having recognisable features in the foreground, softened features of the second in the middle ground, to the third, featureless woman, painted with earthtones and fragmented into geometric shapes, with the background of the ancient aqueduct. This painting is evidence that she was already moving towards abstraction while still studying in Paris and it was Lhote's teaching that had facilitated this change in her painting.

MIRMANDE

Dorrit Black had left Australia in mid-1927 and travelled directly to London to undertake a three-month course of instruction on linocut under Claude Flight at the Grosvenor Art School. She had then joined Lhote's Académie from December 1927 with her friends, Crowley and Dangar, and in 1928 all three women joined Lhote's Summer School at the village of Mirmande near Drome. The nearest large town was Montelimar, 10 miles from Mirmande.

About 25 students, mostly Americans, 2 Turkish girls (daughters (of) Turkish Consul), 3 or 4 French, 3 Australian, 1 Italian (or was he French) count. We were billeted in the peasants' houses. Anne slept over the cows, I slept over the goats.

It was all extremely primitive. The American girl who slept UNDER some sheep's hides got herself moved (we got ourselves moved too).

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Cowling and Jennifer Mundy, *On Classic Ground: Picasso, Leger, de Chirico and the New Classicism 1910-1930*, Tate Gallery Publications, London, 1990, 68.

We all became extremely adept at keeping ourselves clean with the aid of a basin and a small jug of hot water. Once a week, hired a taxi and wallowed in a big bath at Montelimar.

Isabel Huntley joined us for a week towards the end of our stay. Anne and I first to come, last to leave.⁵⁹

Lhote was at that time writing his *Treatise on Landscape Painting* that has since become a classic. It was first published in France in 1939, with the English translation not until much later, in 1950.⁶⁰ Crowley's archives contain a copy of the book in the English translation. She later recalled -

It was supposed to be a secret, but I guess those two Turkish girls and the French one that he painted with much of the time, let the cat out of the bag. How I envied them the privilege of being able to work and talk freely with him - guess he hated our stuttering French.⁶¹

The Summer School at Mirmande was to be a transforming experience for Crowley in particular, having being taught by Ashton when he painted *en plein air*. This was Ashton's method and she had been a star pupil, then a teacher of his methods. Her first attempts at Mirmande brought Lhote's condemnation of her impressionist style, but it was not long before she was thinking of her painting in terms of organising the landscape in Cézannesque terms - the hill became a sphere, the trees became cylinders and the buildings were cubes. She followed Lhote's teaching on colour, working in earth colours where possible and gradations of colour, creating geometric shapes in different areas of colour. The result was her very striking painting, *Mirmande*, at the sight of which Lhote declared - 'Tolède' - apparently referring to El Greco's painting of Toledo.⁶² She also produced her *Girl with Goats* about this time, her close encounter with the goats at Mirmande would probably have brought back to her memories of growing up on a property in far off Australia.

⁵⁹ Crowley Archives, 1/10.

⁶⁰ Author found this still on sale at Musée d'Orsay Bookshop in March, 2005.

⁶¹ Crowley Archives, 5/3.

⁶² Burke, *Australian Women Artists*, 85.

In comparing the scene of *Mirmande* painted in 1928 by the three friends while at Lhote's Summer School, Black's painting very much reflects the teaching she received at the Westminster School, particularly from Claude Flight. Her painting is simplified into larger areas of colour and defined geometric shapes, and she develops volume with her assured handling of colour. In her landscape paintings of the 1940s, *The Plantation* and *The Coast Road*, this modelling with colour gave solidity, tactility and a sense of a third dimension, unique to her style. Dangar took a more distant perspective, placing the village as part of the surrounding hills, which are ordered into geometric shapes, with the foreground trees modelled by colour.

From *Mirmande*, Dangar and Crowley undertook their long-planned trip to Italy, proceeding first to Nice, then by train to Genoa. They visited Milan and Venice before going on to Florence, where they met up with another Ashton student, Isabel Huntley. Then on to Assisi and Rome before arriving at Naples, where Anne Dangar boarded a ship sailing for Australia. Crowley had planned to spend some time painting in Italy before returning to Paris. She had already arranged for painting supplies to be awaiting her in Ravello, a small hillside town situated on La Costa Bella (the beautiful coast) above Amalfi and near to Sorrento, and she stayed there all through November and part of December. When she returned to Paris she met up with another Ashton student, Florence Mofflin and they were both invited to spend Christmas with Edith and Norman Lloyd, also from the Sydney Art School, in Puteaux.⁶³

During 1928, before and after the Summer School at *Mirmande*, Dorrit Black travelled widely in Europe to Vienna, Switzerland, Italy and Germany. She returned to Paris to rejoin Lhote's Académie where she studied and travelled with Crowley throughout 1929, before returning to Sydney via London late that year.⁶⁴

⁶³ Crowley Archives, 1/10.

⁶⁴ Ian North, *Dorrit Black 1891-1951*, exh.n.cat., Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 1975, 13.

PARIS 1929

Writing in 1973, Crowley remembered that winter as a very harsh one with the lakes in the Bois de Boulogne being frozen over and she recalled that ‘the skaters had a marvellous time’.⁶⁵ For her, the highlight of that winter was being invited by Lhote to exhibit with him and other of his best students at a very important show, and being gratified to find herself hung beside Lhote.⁶⁶ Having entered her *Girl with Goats* in the first French Salon des Indépendents in February 1929, the review in the Parisian New York Herald gave her work high praise –

The exposition seemed to indicate a large following, in manner, of M. André Lhote. Amongst the Americans exhibiting, many of whom are women, there is a definite Lhote influence, and in one case, perhaps two, those of Mrs Genevieve Sargeant of San Francisco, and Grace Crowley, 'Girl with Goats', the pupils are at least as good as the master.⁶⁷

On the strength of this review, Crowley was offered an invitation to show at the Bernheim Jeune Gallery in Paris, an invitation she was unable to accept due to her impending return to Australia at the end of that year.⁶⁸ She later pointed out that a similar invitation issued to Roy de Maistre saw him leave Australia specifically to take up that opportunity. Unfortunately for Crowley, many opportunities were opening up for her when she had to leave Paris, summoned by her family. She had also been asked to take her work to New York where, one American student assured her, it would sell ‘like hot cakes’.⁶⁹ Crowley’s financial dependence and obligations to her family took precedence over her art, particularly as her family never had any appreciation of art nor of Grace’s talent.

⁶⁵ Crowley Archives, Correspondence 1941-1973, 104/1, Letter to Ian North dated 16 December 1973.

⁶⁶ Idem.

⁶⁷ Crowley Archives 5/1, ‘French Independents Give First Show of Paintings’, *The New York Herald*, Paris, 9 February 1929.

⁶⁸ Crowley Archives, Letter to North, 1973.

⁶⁹ Burke, *Australian Women Artists*, 86.

It was also in 1929 she painted the *Portrait of Lucie Beynis*, now in the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Having absorbed Lhote's teaching, she arranged the canvas in accordance with his mathematical laws of composition; then she broke it into parts treating each area with a different colour – one area green, one area red, arranging the colours, tones and lines in accordance with the laws for creating harmony, as she had learnt from Lhote. She considered it her best portrait.⁷⁰

With the Parisian winter of 1929 remembered as the Big Freeze, with the River Seine frozen - so that the ice had to be cut out in blocks to allow boats to pass - Crowley became ill with jaundice and Black arranged for her to be treated by the doctor who had attended Anne Dangar. While convalescing, she stayed with the Lloyd's in Puteaux. Norman Lloyd was an Australian painter of traditional landscapes who spent most of his life painting and teaching in England and Europe.⁷¹ At the same time, Douglas Dundas was occupying one of the nearby studio apartments when he was called to London, returning with a wife. During this period he undertook a two-week course of study on composition with Lhote in Paris, which made a lasting impression on him. He was always grateful to have had the opportunity to study there, for he found Lhote to have a vigorous teaching style, grounded in historical knowledge and associations with leading painters of the day. He felt the atelier had been a great stimulus to Crowley's art and that her *Portrait of Lucie Beynis* was an excellent example of her work in Paris.⁷²

In October 1929 she and Dorrit Black left Paris to travel to Amsterdam. In what she later described as 'a feast of Dutch and Flemish painters'⁷³, they also visited Ghent, Brussels, Bruges and The Hague. She much admired Vermeer but felt she was not sufficiently appreciative of abstract work at that time to really enjoy Mondrian. Later in her life she vividly recalled visiting l'Hospital St Jean in Bruges, solely devoted to Hans Memling, and in particular, a portrait of a young

⁷⁰ Grace Crowley, *Grace Crowley*, Archival art series, Smart Street Films, Melbourne, Australian Film Institute, 1975.

⁷¹ Jean Campbell, *Early Sydney Moderns: John Young and the Macquarie Galleries 1916-1946*, Craftsman House, Roseville, 1988, 45.

⁷² Dundas, *Quarterly*, 317.

girl veiled. 'To this day I remember it as flesh painting in its utmost perfection'.⁷⁴ She returned to admire Memling 'almost every day to offer him my worship' and would then 'scurry off' to the Musée Communal to compare it with Jan van Eyck's *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*.⁷⁵ She admired van Eyck's 'magnificent craftsmanship' but felt it lacked the 'tenderness of Memling'.⁷⁶ Years later she recalled hating the Rubens *Descent from the Cross* in Antwerp Cathedral, and hurrying past Dirk Bout's *Martyrdom of St. Hippolytes* in horror.

ALBERT GLEIZES

During 1929, letters from Dangar arrived imploring Crowley to find out all she could about Albert Gleizes. Anne had bought a book of his just before leaving Paris and read it on the long sea journey home. She had returned to Sydney enthusiastic to impart the knowledge she had learnt from Lhote, but was bitterly disappointed to find Ashton totally unconvinced - 'Anne and her darned old Cézanne!'⁷⁷ Ashton insisted she teach by his method at the Sydney Art School and, although she offered classes in her own studio at 12 Bridge Street, she became more unhappy and frustrated.⁷⁸

Gleizes and his wife were staying in Paris when Crowley wrote to him. He offered to give lessons to her and to Dorrit Black at his studio in Paris in mid-1929, just before he left for the south of France for the summer. Gleizes demonstrated his own geometric pictorial ideas from which Crowley produced a series of exercises executed in pencil and gouache on cardboard. These showed a series of abstract shapes with each one having different combinations of colour and surface texture. These are now part of the National Gallery of Australia Collection, having been gifted by Grace Buckley in memory of Crowley in 1980.⁷⁹ Crowley had already planned to spend August and September at a Summer School at the University in Perugia, so Gleizes suggested she return via

⁷³ Idem.

⁷⁴ Idem.

⁷⁵ Idem.

⁷⁶ Idem.

⁷⁷ Idem.

⁷⁸ Idem.

⁷⁹ Adams, *Rustic Cubism*, 25.

Serrières, stay at the Hotel Schaeffer, and work in his studio at Moly-Sabata until his return. He told her that his pupil, Robert Pouyaud would give advice about her work until he returned.⁸⁰ And so it was that she spent about a week working with Pouyaud from late September and several more weeks with Gleizes until late October when a letter arrived from Dangar. Crowley read the letter to Monsieur and Madame Gleizes telling of how profoundly moved Anne had been by his work and how much she wanted to be involved. Gleizes obviously felt that Dangar had connected to the spirit of his work for he replied - 'She is already here, distance doesn't count'.⁸¹ When Dangar received his telegram inviting her to Moly-Sabata, she felt it was an answer to prayer and set about planning her return to France.

Soon after this, Crowley received word of her Mother's illness and booked her own passage to leave France, sailing on the S.S. Chitral from Marseilles on 5th December, 1929 to Colombo, arriving a few days before Christmas. Her Mother and sister, Flo, arrived in Colombo on 31st December, 1929 and they holidayed together till January 18th when they sailed for Sydney, arriving on 6th February, 1930. Crowley was able to spend a few days in Sydney with Dangar before her friend left in the second week of February, 1930.⁸² It appears that Dangar left with Crowley her student notes from Lhote's Academy together with prints and drawings she had used while teaching in Sydney. These were kept and used by Crowley during her period of teaching and much later, when asked by various people to recall her memories.

Crowley's mother arrived back in Sydney in worse health, in spite of the expected beneficial effect of the sea voyages, and was admitted to a Sydney private hospital upon their arrival and Grace felt a sense of duty to help her sister with the care of their mother. This was a common expectation of daughters, particularly unmarried ones, in return for the family's financial support over the years.⁸³ She accompanied her mother to Glen Riddle but felt there was no

⁸⁰ Crowley Archives, 1/10.

⁸¹ Crowley Archives, 5/3

⁸² Crowley Archives, 1/10

⁸³ Beverley Kingston, *My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann, Women and Work in Australia*, Thomas Nelson Australia Pty. Ltd., West Melbourne, 1975, paperback edition, 1977, 118-122.

welcome there except from her mother. Her very conservative family were deeply shocked by the enormous changes in Crowley while in Paris.⁸⁴ Her art, clothing and interests were now very modern and different to her upbringing. She was bitterly disappointed to find 'the lovely French painting easel' used by Julian Ashton during his years of painting, then presented to her, was 'scattered in bits all over the horse paddock', and 'his sketching umbrella lost'.⁸⁵ Ashton must have had a great deal of respect for Crowley as an artist to have presented her with his prized art tools and, although unknown to her at that time, he had resigned from the Society of Artists over her loss of the New South Wales Travelling Art Scholarship in 1923. She had carefully stored Ashton's tools before her departure, so their total destruction appears to have been a deliberate act. Her family had no understanding of Crowley's interest in art and her father had expressed his sense of alienation from his daughter when she moved to Sydney to study under Ashton, who became her mentor and artistic father. In her tribute to Ashton on his retirement, she expressed her deep admiration of his personal qualities and, writing on behalf of his students, described the sense of privilege she felt to have been 'shaped ... by a master-hand ... which ... in the hearts of many ... left the impression of unforgettable lessons'.⁸⁶ Along with Crowley's sense of loss over Ashton's prized possessions, she felt great frustration at not being able to paint, after four years of having the freedom to develop her art in the artistically stimulating environment that existed in Paris at that time. Dangar empathised with Crowley's dilemma of having her father's financial support, and yet being unable to pursue her art, while having to fulfil her duty of care to her family.⁸⁷ Crowley remained at Glen Riddle caring for her mother, for some months but eventually felt the rest of her family were too difficult to live with and went to stay near Silkwood in Queensland, before returning to Sydney.

⁸⁴ Elena Taylor, *Grace Crowley – Being Modern*, exh.n.cat., Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 2006, 31.

⁸⁵ Crowley Archives, 1/10.

⁸⁶ Grace Crowley, 'Julian Ashton, The Teacher', *The Julian Ashton Book*, Published by 'Art in Australia', Sydney, 1920, np.

⁸⁷ Helen Topliss, ed., *Earth, Fire, Water, Air, Anne Dangar's letters to Grace Crowley, 1930-1951*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonard's, NSW, 2000, 40-41.

While at Glen Riddle in 1930 she painted a portrait of her cousin, Gwen Ridley, which she submitted for entry to the Archibald Prize competition in January 1931. In this portrait she treats the figure in a more direct portrait style, unlike in the way she painted the models in Paris, but the composition follows the methods she had learnt of opposing curves and angles. The background and the chair show dramatic colour and tonal contrasts, the curved back of the chair showing texture and lightness of colour against a deep background on the left, while on the right the chair is dark and without texture, contrasted against a lighter, more detailed background. If this was an attempt to make her style look less radical and modernist, it failed. To her surprise she found her painting style was considered quite extraordinary. She found the art world in Australia very dull and could not understand why it had remained unchanged during her absence.⁸⁸

In March 1930, Crowley's French and Italian paintings were included in an exhibition of modernist works at the Macquarie Galleries in Sydney. 'A Group of Seven' also showed the paintings of Dorrit Black, Roy de Maistre, Roland Wakelin, Enid Cambridge, Frank Weitzel and Grace Cossington-Smith. She then spent more time in the country, not returning to Sydney until late in 1931.

DORRIT BLACK IN SYDNEY

Black was enthusiastic about what she learned from Lhote and Gleizes and, like Crowley, found Sydney on her return, to be provincial and conservative. When she opened The Modern Art Centre in Sydney in early 1931 she aimed to teach and promote an understanding of the most modern art principles direct from Europe, through classes in drawing, painting, linocut, design and art appreciation. She had been inspired by the principles of modern design in Claude Flight's teaching, which was informed by his knowledge of the writings of both Lhote and Gleizes on the golden section and geometric composition.⁸⁹ Twelve exhibitions held there gave opportunities for modernist artists from different Australian cities to show their work and the Centre became a stimulus

⁸⁸ Crowley Archival Film, 1975.

⁸⁹ Sarah Thomas, 'A Wider Vision: Dorrit Black's Modern Art Centre' in *Art & Australia*, Vol.44, No.1, Spring 2006, 99.

for the discussion and promotion of modernism. Crowley taught life drawing at the Centre in 1931 and although they had both studied under Lhote and taken lessons from Gleizes, the two women began to move in different stylistic directions in Sydney. Black's style pushed the boundaries of geometric simplicity and appeared ultra-modern to a Sydney conditioned by the teaching and promotion of modern design through *The Home* magazine in the 1920s, and the availability of Claude Flight's first book of linocut designs from 1927. Black continued to teach and develop dynamic linocut designs very successfully during the 1930s while she maintained a correspondence with Claude Flight.

Black's Modern Art Centre conducted a Sketch Club and a gallery and it was there that Crowley held her first solo exhibition. As the gallery was not properly registered, it was not possible for any of the newspapers to send a critic to review the show. It is a measure of the esteem that was shared between Crowley and Julian Ashton that as a result of this oversight, he used his considerable influence and, with the gallery lawfully registered all other exhibitions received a newspaper critique.⁹⁰

Crowley's art had moved from Ashton's impressionist style to Lhote's European modern classicism and it seems that back in Sydney, with Black's strong, simple designs finding some favour with Sydney modernists, Crowley found herself out-of-place with Black's modernism. It was not long before they had a falling out and Crowley took the opportunity to begin her own school with Rah Fizelle, who was eager to explore her detailed knowledge of the golden section.

⁹⁰ Crowley Archives, 1/10.

CHAPTER 3: THE CROWLEY-FIZELLE ART SCHOOL 1932-1937

We were united in one belief, the constructive approach to painting and this insistence of the abstract element in building a design was the keynote of teaching with both Lhote and GleizesAlthough the model was used in the class the student was discouraged from making merely a faithful record of a nude or a portrait. The abstract elements in line, shape and colour were introduced in order to induce the student to construct a design with a given space.

Lhote analysed classical masters based on the golden section.¹

The Sketch Club at the Modern Art Centre brought together a number of former Sydney Art School students – Fizelle and Balson, Nancy Hall, E. Berndt, Ellen Gray and Murch Harvey. They also received visits from Eleanore Lange, Thea Proctor, Kenneth Wilkinson, Roland Wakelin and Myra Cocks. It was at the Centre that Crowley first met Michael Collins, who later married Rah Fizelle.²

Through working with Crowley at the Sketch Club, Fizelle became deeply interested in the theories she had learnt from Lhote. Douglas Dundas had travelled with Fizelle at times when they were both in Europe and Britain, and they had visited Dangar and Crowley in Paris, both spending brief periods at Académie Lhote. Dundas, in 1966, recalled that Fizelle had spent much time studying the works of the Italian Renaissance and become very interested in the geometric basis of these works. He felt it was ‘natural enough that he should find some answer to his curiosity in the work of Grace Crowley’,³ who spent four years studying with Lhote. With encouragement from members of the Sketch Club who were interested in modernism, Crowley and Fizelle made the decision to set up their own art school.

Locating premises at 215a George Street, the Crowley- Fizelle Art School was set up and operated there from 1932 to 1937. In spite of an arm severely injured in World

¹ Crowley Archives 1/10 – *Crowley-Fizelle School*.

² Ibid, 1/10. The name Michael is unusual for a woman but appears to be the name she used, as it is used in several places throughout the Archives. In one instance the name Edith appears in brackets beside the name Michael. Eric Riddler, Research Assistant at the AGNSW, suggested that she could have been using the name of her former husband, a common practice at that time.

War I, Fizelle made and painted things for the new studio ‘with the exquisite precision of a born craftsman’, as well as scouring auction rooms for easels, stools and other necessities. Crowley later acknowledged his great skill in planning to turn a spacious apartment facing George Street ‘into an ideal studio and class-room, with excellent lighting’. Balson made a gift of his labour by painting the new studio throughout, Crowley remembered. ‘I cannot remember a single student who had not been already trained at the Sydney Art School, the Tech. or Dattilo Rubbo’s’.⁴ What the Crowley-Fizelle Art School offered was something that had not been available at any other Sydney art school – a method of composition, as taught overseas.

Eileen Berndt and Ellen Grey (Rubbo) had suggested that Crowley and Fizelle should set up art classes and they were amongst the first students. Michael Collins, whom Crowley regarded as ‘probably the best designer in Smith and Julius’⁵ brought along quite a number of her colleagues to the School and Sketch Club. Other early students were Joan Tillam and Mrs Mary Alice Evatt, who had already spent time studying at the Bell School in Melbourne. Mary Alice and her husband, Dr. H.V. Evatt, then Minister for Foreign Affairs, became firm supporters of the modern movement both in Melbourne and in Sydney, spending much time at the Crowley-Fizelle School. Dr. Evatt was known affectionately at the School as ‘Judgie’ and Mary Alice (MAS as she was known to her friends and family) often took her children to the studio. Crowley later recalled that their son, Peter, worked at the School during his school holidays, causing some consternation when he let loose a small turtle in the classroom.⁶ Their daughter, Rosalind, also later recalled those years with great affection –

I spent a lot of time when young at the studio of Grace Crowley which was in George Street, up a long, steep flight of stairs. On entering the studio one was greeted by a wonderful smell of paint and turpentine – the area was bright, happy. My mother, Grace, Rah Fizelle and the occasional other artist (such as Joan Tillam) would be there. Amazingly, I was never bored. I just loved the whole ambience of Grace Crowley’s studio. I really think that my being able

³ Douglas Dundas, *Quarterly*, AGNSW, Vol. 8, No. 1, October, 1966, 319.

⁴ Crowley Archives, 1/10.

⁵ Smith and Julius was a commercial art studio involved in publishing and advertising.

⁶ Crowley Archives, 1/10.

to be with such interesting artists during my early years has helped me to love and understand art.⁷

Mary and Doc Evatt became life-long friends of Crowley and many years later Mary Alice paid tribute to both Fizelle and Crowley's keen ability as teachers –

These two people imbued their classes with enthusiasm and skill and their feeling for colour, above all colour. They influenced a whole generation of painters in Sydney with their aims of balanced dynamic symmetry and harmonious arrangements of colour.

Fizelle and Crowley had both been trained by Julian Ashton and Crowley always felt that his training in the art of teaching was of the highest standard. Looking back she wrote –

He did teach a student to SEE accurately – proportion, shape, colour, tone, from a visual-impressionist point of view, and apart from that, he was a tremendous personality, warm, approachable, sympathetic to the problems of youth; even when ill-health deprived us of much of his presence, on those rare occasions when he did walk into the class-room, it was as though a warm electric current passed through the place.⁸

Fizelle went to England in 1927, studying initially at the Regent Street Polytechnic in London, then attending the Westminster Art School under Bernard Meninsky, Walter Bayes and Frank Medworth, who later became Head of the Art School at East Sydney. He then spent three years roaming around Spain, Majorca, France and Italy visiting churches, museums and palaces studying the art and architecture of these countries. He painted many watercolours during this period and exhibited at the Royal Academy in London and the Salon in Paris before returning to Australia, where he exhibited his watercolours in both Sydney and Melbourne. He once told Hinder that 'he never really understood Cubism',⁹ but after studying paintings of the

⁷ Rosalind Carrodus, 'Memoir' in Melissa Boyde, *A fresh point of view: the life and work of Mary Alice Evatt, 1898-1973*, exh.n.cat. Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, Bathurst, 30 March-12 May 2002, 12.

⁸ Crowley Archives, 1, 5/3.

⁹ Frank Hinder, *Rah Fizelle*, *Art in Australia*, September, 1965, 129.

Renaissance he was keen to understand their structural basis. Composition was not taught at the Sydney Art School. Douglas Dundas said that the emphasis was on drawing and tonal painting.

Speaking many years later, Crowley said she felt that her own artistic education was an accumulation of experience from all of her teachers, contact with fellow students and individual artists, from her own experiments and reading, rejecting what she felt was unnecessary and accepting what she considered vitally essential to her own art. Of her development as a teacher and painter she said – ‘I know that in my teaching I drew from all three of these great teachers (Ashton, Lhote and Gleizes), leaning much more strongly on the influence of Lhote.’¹⁰ Crowley had been well trained by Lhote and was highly regarded by him. When Mary Alice Evatt spent some time at the Académie Lhote in 1938, Lhote spoke of her with admiration, describing her as ‘si gentile’.¹¹

As Lhote had done, Crowley taught by referring to and analysing the work of the great classical masters, based on the golden section. Crowley taught from hers and Dangar’s notes taken while studying with Lhote, and reproductions of great paintings, which she always kept. She thoroughly understood and could apply the principle of dynamic symmetry and this knowledge was of great interest to Fizelle. This was the basis of Crowley’s teaching from the opening of the School in 1932, before the Hinders returned from America with similar knowledge received through the writings of American, Jay Hambidge. Frank and Margel Hinder joined the group at the Sketch Club in 1934. When describing the teaching of the Crowley-Fizelle Art School for Daniel Thomas in 1975 she explained:

Symmetry is usually confused with our use of the term ‘symmetry’.
Symmetry, broadly speaking, is the relationship or proportion of parts to the whole. Dynamic is the geometry of growth (logarithmic spiral) while static is expressed in crystalline form and the regular forms of

¹⁰ Crowley Archives, Copy of ‘Queries and Answers’ between Renée Free and Grace Crowley for Exhibition of *Balson, Crowley, Fizelle and Hinder*, 1966.

¹¹ Evatt, *Crowley-Fizelle Art School*, 314.

geometry. Whether the work is static or dynamic is based on the 'golden section' the rectangle of the 'whirling square'.¹²

The diagrams and notes of these teachings were recorded in notebooks, graph books and sheaves of notepaper retained by Crowley until her death. In the graph book, Crowley has prepared notes and diagrams of The Mean Proportion and the Divine Proportion, terms never used by Hambidge. These terms, Mean Proportion and Divine Proportion, were used in the Renaissance and Hambidge did not make the connection with Renaissance artists.

USE OF THE GOLDEN SECTION DURING THE RENAISSANCE

Piero della Francesca had two passions – painting and mathematics – in particular geometry – and he combined them. He applied these two obsessions to the problems of perspective and the expression of volume, in his painting, and to this added his gifts for light and colour. Della Francesca, all through his life, was a mathematician and studied and wrote on perspective and volume. His pupil, Franciscan friar, Luca Pacioli, was a great admirer of Euclidian geometry and wrote a number of texts on the subject. Pacioli's intention in writing his treatise, expressed on the first page of *The Divine Proportion*, as he named it, was to reveal to artists the 'secret' of harmonic forms¹³ and was the first printed book of applied geometry written in Italian and published in Venice in 1509.¹⁴ This work aimed to show how to apply Euclidian geometry for use in painting, sculpture, architecture, music and other areas. He had already acknowledged della Francesca as his teacher in his 1494 publication *Summa de arithmetica, geometria, proportioni and proportionalita*. He believed his book would provide a practical mathematical basis for artists and managed to secure the services of Leonardo da Vinci as illustrator.

The geometry and mathematics expounded in both della Francesca's *Five Regular Solids*, and *Proportion* are based on the thirteenth and final book of the Greek writer, Euclid's *Elements* (ca. 300 BC). This book details two great areas of mathematical

¹² Crowley Archives, 1/10.

¹³ Livio, *Golden Ratio*, 133.

knowledge: the ratios which Euclid termed ‘division in extreme and mean ratio’; and, the geometry of the five regular solids.¹⁵ These five regular solids (or polyhedra) had been investigated thoroughly by the Greek mathematician, Theaetetus (ca. 417 BC – 369 BC), to whom their original construction is attributed. They were described by Plato in his *Timaeus* as having the following properties –

They are the only existing solids in which all the faces (of a given solid) are identical and equilateral, and each of the solids can be circumscribed by a sphere (with all its vertices lying on the sphere). The Platonic solids are the tetrahedron (with four triangular faces); the cube (with six square faces); the octahedron (with eight triangular faces); the dodecahedron (with twelve pentagonal faces), and the icosahedron (with twenty triangular faces).¹⁶

The platonic solids are intimately connected to the golden ratio, along with five-fold symmetry, the pentagon and pentagram. The pentagon was considered of great importance in art of the Middle Ages, as it was bound up with the golden proportion and was considered to be the expression of perfect beauty. One of the secrets of the medieval guilds, passed on for centuries through an oral tradition, was the construction of a pentagon, inscribed within a circle, made by the means of compasses. With the revival of interest in the golden proportion in Paris in the early twentieth century, Gino Severini was one of the artists who published his own treatise on the subject *Du Cubisme au Classicisme: Esthétique du compas et du nombre* (From Cubism to Classicism: The Aesthetic of Compass and of Number)¹⁷

Many painters through the centuries had followed a number of different geometric compositional structures, and these became a renewed source of interest in the late nineteenth century and the underlying structure of modern art in the early twentieth century. The use of the golden section had fallen out of favour among artists over time until the early nineteenth century, when German theorists rediscovered the

¹⁴ Samuel J. Edgerton, Jr., *The Heritage of Giotto's Geometry: art and science on the eve of the scientific revolution*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1991, 166-7.

¹⁵ Richard Padovan, *Proportion: Science, Philosophy, Architecture*, Spon Press, London and New York, 1999, reprinted 2001, 137.

¹⁶ Livio, *Golden Ratio*, 67-68.

¹⁷ Gino Severini, *Du Cubisme au Classicisme: Esthétique du compas et du nombre*, J. Povolozky, Paris, 1921, Copy in Fisher Library, University of Sydney, Sydney.

concept as part of their research into Egyptian monuments. The German neo-classical schools of Overbeck and Cornelius had a much stronger interest in abstraction than that of David and were fascinated by the incommensurable numbers of the golden ratio. When the French artist, Paul Serusier visited a friend, the Dutch painter Jan Verkade, who was a novice at the Benedictine Monastery at Beuron, in Southern Germany in 1897, he discovered that the artistic creed used there involved the ratios of the golden section. The painter-monks at the monastery were following the theories of Father Didier Lenz, who believed that many of the great works of antiquity, such as Noah's Ark and the Egyptian pyramids, were all based on simple geometric shapes – the circle, triangle and hexagon. Serusier was captivated by these theories of 'sacred measures' and shared them enthusiastically with his circle of artistic friends in Paris – Paul Gauguin, Emile Bernard, Maurice Denis and Claude Debussy. Debussy later used golden ratios in his music compositions.¹⁸ By 1908 Serusier was one of the principal teachers at the Académie Ranson where he taught the golden section, and later published details of his art theory in his *L'ABC de la peinture (The ABC of Painting)* in 1921.¹⁹ One of his pupils, Roger de la Fresnaye, became part of the Puteaux Cubist Group who exhibited at the *Salon de la Section D'Or*. Another writer with 'a thorough and direct knowledge of the German philosophical writings', Matila Ghyka, also published two books on the subject in 1927 and 1931²⁰ and these have been widely read over many years.

FRANK HINDER AND JAY HAMBIDGE

When Frank Hinder joined the Sketch Club, Crowley recognised that he had acquired knowledge similar to Lhote's teaching on the golden section from his teachers in New York, Emil Bistram and Howard Giles, whose teaching was based on dynamic symmetry introduced to America through the writings of Jay Hambidge.

Jay Hambidge was an American (1867-1924) who spent much of his life searching for the technical bases of design. Convinced that design was not purely instinctive, he believed he found his answer in dynamic symmetry that he researched in Europe after

¹⁸ Livio, *Golden Ratio*, 168-169.

¹⁹ Bouleau, *Secret Geometry*, 244-246.

²⁰ Idem, Matila Ghyka, *Esthétique des proportions dans la nature et dans les art (Aesthetics in nature and in art)*, Paris, Gallimard), 1927, *Le Nombre d'or, Rites and rythmes pythagoriciens*, (The Golden Number, Pythagorean rites and rhythms), Paris, Gallimard, 1931.

the War. He returned to America to begin publishing these ideas as his own discovery. In the first edition of his magazine *The Diagonal* in 1919 he stated –

The basic principles underlying the greatest art so far produced in the world may be found in the proportions of the human figure and in the growing plant. These principles have been reduced to working use and are being employed by a large number of leading American artists and designers and teachers of design and manual art ... the discoverer of these principles, Mr Jay Hambidge, is now lecturing in Europe and gathering from the museums there, fresh material for the artists and students of America.

The principles of design to be found in the architecture of man and plant have been given the name dynamic symmetry. This symmetry is identical with that used by the Greek masters in almost all of the art produced during the great classical period.²¹

Here Hambidge is describing the principles of the golden section, describing it as identical with the compositional methods of the Greek masters

We may compare this description with what Hambidge wrote in his book, first published in 1926, he claimed to have discovered ‘the essential idea connected with the form rhythms observable in plant architecture’ observation of which ‘led to the discovery of dynamic symmetry.’ He explained –

Many years ago, the writer became convinced that the spiral curve found in plant growth ... and that of the curve of the shell, were identical, and must be the equi-angular or logarithmic spiral curve of mathematics ... Being convinced that the spiral was indeed the mathematical curve mentioned, the writer saw that, because of a certain property which it possessed, this spiral could be reduced from a curve form to one composed of straight lines and thereby be used by the artist to solve certain problems of composition and connect design closely with nature.²²

²¹ Jay Hambidge, *The Diagonal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, November, 1919, Yale University Press, 1919, 1.

²² Jay Hambidge, *The Elements of Dynamic Symmetry*, Dover Publications Inc., New York, 1926, 5.

The golden section as employed by Renaissance artists and architects was based on a number series identified by thirteenth century mathematician, Leonardo Fibonacci, as 1.1.2.3.5.8.13. In this series each number is the sum of the two preceding it. The system was turned into each number and arranged in a spiral. On any side of the resulting triangle, the whole length, and all of its smaller divisions will be the same proportion to each other.²³ It is clear from these descriptions that Hambidge's discovery, which he termed dynamic symmetry, was in fact the same as the golden section.

Hambidge attributes his discovery of dynamic symmetry to his observations of the law of leaf distribution, as described by Botanist, Professor A.H. Church in his book *On the Relation of Phyllotaxis to Mechanical Laws* (1904), the curve of the shell described by Rev. H. Moseley in *On the Geometrical Forms of Turbinated and Discoid Shell* (1838), and the treatment of the spiral by D'Arcy W. Thompson in *Growth and Form* (1917). Professor Church studied the curved leaf growth of plants and the distribution of the seed in the head of sunflowers.²⁴ It was discovered that the leaves growing on a plant do so in a spiral distribution that allows for each leaf to have access to the sun. This arrangement is also similar in the petal distribution of roses but on a tighter scale. The florets on the heads of sunflowers form clockwise and counter clockwise spiral patterns. The same pattern can be found in the spiral curve of the nautilus shell. The dancing Hindu god, Shiva, is shown holding a nautilus in one of his hands, representing one of the instruments of creation of life and form. Researchers have discovered that these growth patterns in plants and in nature were based on ratios that are golden ratios.²⁵

Margaret Preston owned a copy of T.A. Cook's *Spirals in Nature and Art* (London, 1903) in which she made notes about the Fibonacci sequence, the growth fractions of plants and the Phi-Spiral. Cook claimed that his ideas came from studies made by Leonardo da Vinci of the laws governing ripples, whirlpools and currents. Eagle noted that Preston had returned to this book in the 1930s when Leonardo's principles

²³ Ron Bowen, *Drawing Masterclass*, The Slade School of Fine Art, London, 1992, 149.

²⁴ Hambidge, *Dynamic Symmetry*, 3-5.

²⁵ Livio, *Golden Ratio*, 8,109-115.

were being discussed.²⁶ This could have been during the period of operation of the Crowley-Fizelle Art School or at the time of Exhibition I in 1939, after the closure of the School.

As Hambidge based his writings on the study of Greek and Egyptian art, without seeing the connection to the Renaissance artists, it could be an indication that his own research may have concentrated on the German based writings. However, it should also be noted that there was a great interest in the golden ratios as they applied to the geometric shape of the pyramids. This modern interest in pyramidology had been stimulated by the publication in 1859 of John Taylor's study of *The Great Pyramid: Why was it Built and Who Built It?* These subjects may have been more attractive to an American scholar than the more nationalistic interest shown by French in the legacy of artists of the stature of Poussin, who was known to have used the golden ratio.

With Fizelle's keen interest in the golden section, Crowley asked Frank Hinder to obtain copies of Hambidge's publication on dynamic symmetry to help with the teaching at the School.

It was through Hinder we obtained from New York some valuable books on the theory. Whilst a student in Paris I had been accustomed to listen to André Lhote discourse on the subject, but it was reassuring to have literature like Hambidge's 'Greek Vase' and copies of the monthly magazine, 'The Diagonal' actually in one's hand.

Fizelle became deeply interested in the theory and lectured on it in the school.²⁷

Crowley well understood the derivation of Hambidge's knowledge and these publications affirmed the worth of Crowley's teachings from Lhote. The advantage of Hambidge's publications to the group was that they were in English. Copies of the 'The Diagonal' form part of her Archives, as do lectures she gave on the golden section and use made of the diagonal by Renaissance painters. However, once these

²⁶ Eagle, *Australian Modern Painting*, 84.

²⁷ Crowley Archives, 1/10.

books arrived, it also meant that Fizelle was no longer reliant on Crowley for the knowledge he sought.

The Hinders brought a different focus, more on application of these principles to modern design. They had a great deal of compatible knowledge and this both strengthened Crowley's knowledge and brought another dimension to the group at the Crowley-Fizelle Art School and Sketch Club. Frank Hinder's training in America had many similarities to Crowley's experience in France. His teachers understood the work of the 'ancients' – Piero della Francesca, Durer, Blake, Holbein – and their link with the modern artists – Braque, Seurat, Delaunay, Villon, Gris, et al. He, like Crowley, had learned of the abstract elements in art created by structural line and use of colour. Hinder also kept contact with friends and his teacher in America and the group of artists at 215a George Street were kept abreast of developments in France, through Dangar, and the USA from Hinder's former teacher, Emil Bistram.

Crowley and the Hinders shared a belief in the importance of design in art. In the book she used for teaching at the Art School, Crowley likened the importance of design in art to composition of music, an idea from Renaissance times that was revived in the late nineteenth century. Renaissance artists were fascinated by the theory of proportions to be found not only in numbers and measurements, but also in sounds, weights, time and position. Leonardo, and also Albrecht Durer, studied and developed systems to bring the human body, geometry, architectural order, indeed all beauty, together into a single play of relationships. Their belief was that proportions in architecture, sculpture and painting 'were like harmony in music and gave intense delight'.²⁸ The theories they developed for artistic workmanship were meant to achieve harmony. Crowley learnt of these principles while in Paris and taught them in her classes. A copied quote from a book by Pearson on *How to see Modern Pictures* is amongst her teaching notes -

Henry E. Krehbiel in his 'How to Listen to Music' says –

²⁸ Irma A. Richter, Ed., *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, First published 1952, Issued as World's Classic paperback 1982, 145.

A tone becomes music material only by association with other tones. Similarly, a line becomes art material only in association with other lines.

Musical tones are related to each other in respect of time and pitch. Art lines (or forms or colours) are related to each other in relation of space, movement, tonality, etc.

So far as music is merely agreeably co-ordinated sounds, it may be reduced to mathematics and its practice to handicraft. But recognition of DESIGN is a condition precedent to the awakening of aesthetic emotion.

There is clearly an analogy. The modern movement has re-discovered the importance of design – the importance of the relations of lines, forms, colours and spaces to each other and to the picture as a whole. Indeed it has discovered that this quality of design is one of the most essential qualities which determines a work of art – that without it the making of pictures may be reduced to imitation and to handicraft.

It is the recognition of design in a broadened meaning of the word that may be said to be one of the basic principles of the modern movement.

Design, however, has been a basic quality in pictorial expression through countless centuries of human life...

The Modern Movement provides the opportunity to restore the balance, to vibrate to a forgotten chord, to see the thing which IS art and has been art for 20 thousand years!

It should be then, a worthwhile aim to arrive at some comprehension of this strange important quality called design, by excavating it, so to speak, from the accumulated mass of extraneous ideas under which it has become buried.²⁹

²⁹ Crowley Archives, 1/7.

From the time of Pythagoras, the Greeks considered music to be based on mathematics – musicians studied the mathematical basis of tones. During the 12th century musicians moved away from composing music to mathematical formulae. Later musicians, including J.S. Bach (1685-1750) realised that mathematical elements existed in music and used them in his composition. With the rediscovery of the golden ratio in the 19th Century it was natural that some musicians, including Bela Bartok (1881-1945) and Claude Debussy (1862-1918), displayed a marked interest in using the golden ratio in their compositions.³⁰ Discovering that mathematics was a common factor in the composition of music and art was a powerful creative stimulus at the time. It led to experimentation by musicians and artists alike and the publications of quite a number of books on the subject. Albert Gleizes based much of his research and teaching on Celtic designs, especially the spiral which he saw as denoting time's perpetual rhythms. Crowley's abstract paintings of the 1940s and 1950s show a strong sense of rhythm.

The Hinders also brought to Sydney a copy of Irma Richter's *Rhythmic Forms in Art: An Investigation of the Principles of Composition of the Works of the Great Masters* stated –

Once more the star of Raphael stands in the zenith. The modern school has written rhythm on its banner. Its interest is centered in discovering the relation of shapes to one another and on welding them into a harmonious structure.³¹

She, like Hambidge, made extensive reference to the use of the golden section and also observed that Cézanne had been 'fascinated by the classical tradition that Nicholas Poussin had acquired in Rome' through his study of the great Renaissance masters. Corot also followed the principal qualities of the interlinking of different planes in the landscape tradition of Poussin and Claude Lorrain, who followed the rules of *paysage compose*, originally developed in Italy. Both artists used an underlying geometric structure in planning their paintings.³² Lhote followed Cézanne's example of using a composed landscape based on an underlying geometric

³⁰ Livio, *Golden Ratio*, 183-190.

³¹ Richter, *Rhythmic Form in Art*, v.

³² Bouleau, *Secret Geometry*, 124-131

structure, interpreted in a modern classical manner and he wrote of this in his book *Treatise on Landscape Painting*.

Crowley was able to use the clear explanations and pictures from Richter's book within the Art School to illustrate her own knowledge gained from Lhote.³³ These ideas had been shown in Sydney, in experimental paintings in colour music and new colour theories by Roy de Maistre and Roland Wakelin in their exhibition at the Gayfield Shaw Gallery in 1919. Although these ideas were criticised by the conservative artists and critics at the time, throughout the 1920s there were increasing numbers of art students who travelled to Europe to acquire first-hand knowledge of modern trends. As artists returned with first-hand knowledge of modernism, they stimulated more interest through exhibitions, lectures and articles in various publications.

The Students Club had been formed in 1923 to stimulate discussion of modern developments, and in 1925 the Contemporary Group was formed, mainly through the efforts of Thea Proctor, with the support of George Lambert, who 'made a significant contribution towards creating an environment'³⁴ for the acceptance of modernist ideas. Both these artists had gained considerable success in London and their prestige gave status to the exhibitions of the Contemporary Group over the following years. This group became the first real voice and outlet for modern and experimental developments in Australian art. The first exhibition *A Group of Modern Painters* was held in the Grosvenor Gallery in 1926 but subsequent exhibitions of The Contemporary Group were held in the Macquarie Galleries. Eventually as more artists joined, exhibitions were held in the larger space of the Blaxland Galleries in the Farmer's building, under the Macquarie Galleries management team of John Young and Basil Burdett.³⁵

Margaret Preston had returned to Australia in 1919 inspired by modern art as reflecting the conditions of modern living. She disseminated her ideas through

³³ Crowley Archives, Transcribed copies are stored amongst Crowley's teaching notes.

³⁴ Anne Gray, *Art and Artiface: George Lambert 1873-1930*, Craftsman House, Roseville East, Sydney, 1996, 119.

³⁵ Campbell, *Early Sydney Moderns*, 49.

lectures at the Students' Club, the Art Gallery and the University and wrote numerous articles for *Art in Australia* and *The Home* magazines. Both Preston and Thea Proctor became strong exponents of the art of woodblock printing and the simplified modern style associated with *The Home* magazine. Proctor had spent a number of years living in London and returned with definite ideas on modern art. To students she quoted Clive Bell – 'Art is not imitation of form, but invention of form'.³⁶ She believed that composition and design were of vital importance in art and both of these women artists were outstanding advocates of modern art in Australia.

Always a strong supporter of modern art, Mary Alice Evatt later attested to the strength of the teaching at the Crowley-Fizelle Art School when she wrote -

All who longed for design as the bones of their work, those who looked for pure colour as their birthright, those who found significant line more important than light and shade, turned to the group for help. Never in vain, for it proved that they set the modern movement in art on its way, bringing colour and imagination and design into an unsettled period of accomplishment³⁷

Mary Alice, due to her position as the wife of leading politician H.V. Evatt, became something of a spokesperson for the modern movement in Australia. By 1935, with a large number of women interested in the modern movement, the *Australian Women's Weekly* encouraged interest in the new styles of art being shown, Mary Alice's paintings attracted attention and were publicised in the *Weekly*. It was Mary Alice who eventually became the first woman Trustee of the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1943, and she was the only female member right up until her retirement in 1970. The struggle had been a long one, for it was as early as 1919 that it was reported in the magazine *Table Talk* that women were 'making a spirited stand'³⁸ for representation as a trustee of the National Art Gallery.

³⁶ Proctor, *Undergrowth*, Sept/Oct, 1926.

³⁷ Mary Alice Evatt, *The Crowley-Fizelle Art School*, Art Gallery of NSW Quarterly, Vol. 8, No. 1, October, 1966, 314-5.

³⁸ Pam James, ' "No thank you, but do you have any painted fan decorations?" Modernist women artists and the gatekeepers of culture' in Maryanne Dever, Ed., *Wallflowers and Witches: Women and Culture in Australia 1910-1945*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1994, 66.

Trustees of the National Gallery changed very infrequently between 1918 and 1939 as these were lifetime appointments requiring State Government approval. When a trustee died, his replacement was sought from people belonging to a similar social and economic elite, recognised as having an approved connoisseurship of art to maintain a certain high standard of art. The obituary of long-standing trustee, Sir James Fairfax gives a succinct idea of the trustees' standards and taste –

Gradually by study and observation in European galleries he acquired a highly cultivated taste in painting and became recognised as a connoisseur whose judgement was always sound and reliable. The weaknesses of certain developments of the extreme of the modern school 'post-impressionism', 'cubism' and the like, were abhorrent to him as largely founded upon a deficiency of drawing.³⁹

It was not only the trustees of the Gallery who opposed any form of modern art, but heads of long-established art societies and schools, notably Julian Ashton. J.S. McDonald, as *Herald* art critic and later Director of the NSW National Gallery from 1928, had immense political power and influence in the art world. He, like many other influential people, not only defended artists of his own era, but seemed to hold a 'curious obsession with modernism as a simile for putrefaction'.⁴⁰

James McDonald had trained as an artist under Bernard Hall and Fred McCubbin at the Melbourne National Gallery School from 1892 to 1897, a period when the painters of the Heidelberg School were establishing a reputation for representing an Australian image. He followed painters such as Streeton, Roberts and Lambert overseas, studying in London at the Westminster School and in Paris at Colarossi's, then travelling and painting in France and England. He was a man of considerable technical and theoretical knowledge, but totally devoted to the artists of his own period, such as Streeton, Lindsay, Heysen, Lambert and David Davies. He enjoyed considerable success as an artist and lecturer until his overseas service during the First World War, from which he returned with serious injuries. Attempts to revive his

³⁹ Ibid, 65.

⁴⁰ John F. Williams, *The Quarantined Culture, Australian Reactions to Modernism 1913-1939*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, 31.

artistic career met with little success and he was in financial difficulty until he was appointed as the art critic of the Melbourne *Herald* in 1923.

McDonald's opinions seemed to be shared by his friend, the Victorian politician, R.G. Menzies, who saw nothing but 'absurdity' in modern art and who actively campaigned to set certain standards in art. He was instrumental in setting up an Australian Academy of Art 'to raise the standards of public taste by directing attention to good work'. In 1937 he wrote –

I think that in art beauty is the condition of immortality – a conclusion strengthened by an examination of the works of the great European Masters ...⁴¹

Had he taken the time to study the basis of modern art as taught at the Crowley-Fizelle Art School and discussed at the Sketch Club, he might have understood that the basis of the teaching was the great European Masters, and more.

The setting up of the Academy in 1937 caused deep division among artists. In Sydney agreement could not be reached as to the nature of the Academy, but in Melbourne it was seen as wholly negative and a barrier to any progress. George Bell attacked the Academy as seeking a total dictatorship over patronage of the arts. He was one of a number of strong-minded, progressive men who founded The Contemporary Art Society (CAS) in Melbourne, with John Reed as its first President. The members of the CAS found the highly conservative attitudes of the members of the Academy as abhorrent as the Academy members found modernism.

One of the powerful advocates of the move to modernism was Sir Keith Murdoch, proprietor of the *Herald*. His commissioning of his art critic, Basil Burdett, to curate an Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art, represented a challenge to conservative taste and a triumph for the radical modernists. The Exhibition was shown in the National Art Gallery of South Australia in August/September, 1939. With J.S. McDonald, then Director of the Victorian Art Gallery, a sworn opponent of modernism, the Exhibition was shown in the Melbourne Town Hall in

⁴¹ Williams, *Quarantined Culture*, 33-34.

October/November, before moving to Sydney where it was shown at the David Jones Art Gallery from November to December 1939.

Also in 1939 was the first exhibition of The Contemporary Art Society, opened by Dr. H.V. Evatt, then Judge of the High Court, who held progressive views on art. With the combination of these two exhibitions and the enthusiasm shown by the many artists familiar with these works from their travels, The Contemporary Art Society successfully opened branches in both Adelaide and Sydney. Grace Crowley later recalled that Peter Bellew, a founding member of CAS, came to Sydney to recruit members. Both Hinder and Fizelle joined the CAS, Fizelle becoming its first Sydney President. However, Crowley and Balson declined to join, preferring to follow their own experimental path.

Her reason for not joining the CAS probably lay in the breakdown of relations with Fizelle over the closure of the Art School. She told Daniel Thomas that she felt that the Art School was probably not making enough money. It seems Fizelle needed a reliable income and returned to the Education Department. Shortly thereafter, he married fellow artist, Michael Collins. However, recently published letters Dangar wrote to Crowley, shed a little more light on the passage of their relationship through the life of the Art School.

A letter written on 1 December 1932 expresses Dangar's delight that Crowley has now resumed painting and 'found your real self again in your work'.⁴² She comments on Crowley's portrait of Ellen Gray, painted in 1933 and entered in the 1934 Archibald Prize, and her friendship and plans with Fizelle to open their own Art School. By March, 1933 she was thrilled for Crowley, congratulating her on opening her own studio from which the modern movement in Australia could grow. She likened it to Ashton's triumph in establishing the Sydney Art School in the face of disapproval from the old Art Society. Crowley wanted Dangar to join her in teaching at her new art school, possibly even offering to pay her passage back to Australia, as she sent details of Orient line shipping. But Dangar felt she was out of touch with teaching advanced students and wrote on 24 July 1933 – 'It's simply

⁴² Topliss, *Earth, Air, Fire, Water*, 97.

sweet of you and Fizelle to offer me your studio which everyone tells me is so charming and tasteful.’ But she says quite definitely ‘At present I know I must stay here.’ She felt committed to Gleizes and his philosophy, seeing him as ‘a very great prophet’.⁴³ Crowley continued to hope Dangar would return to Sydney to become part of the modernist group, and even though Dangar indicated interest in that idea from time to time, she never made the decision to return.

Through the letters to Dangar we can see that by Easter of 1936, it seems that Crowley’s relationship with Fizelle had begun to show signs of strain –

But you were so loyal to Fizelle always. I thought I had completely misjudged him in thinking him superficial. Dorrit (said) when she was here ‘Fizelle is too superficial for Smudge⁴⁴, he is after her and that flatters her but she can’t rest satisfied with such a scatterbrain companion. All the same he has a nice, kind nature and I hope you will be happier by the time this reaches you dear. Don’t let go of your school, you are needed there darling. Rodriguez told me over and over again how much you are esteemed, how wonderfully you explain things ...’⁴⁵

By November 1937 Dangar is concerned that she has not heard from Crowley – ‘we fear you and Fizelle have parted’. Then in a letter dated 24 April 1938 she writes ‘I’m thankful you have freed yourself from Fizelle’s tyranny’. A further letter dated 16 November 1938 is more specific –

I’m terribly, terribly sorry you have (had) such a horrible time with Fizelle and I do hope he gets moved by the Education Department to a distant town where he can pose as a great artist. Sydney is too big for a jealous nature like that. But really dear you must never stop through any more of these scenes you describe – he is mad at the time – and actually there is something of truth in what he says. His jealousy (is) caused by his admiration of you and your work and so he says it is your fault. Just leave him every time he glares or shows

⁴³ Topliss, *Earth, Air, Fire, Water*, 110.

⁴⁴ Dangar’s nickname for Grace Crowley.

⁴⁵ Topliss, *Earth, Air, Fire, Water*, 146.

signs of going off ... do forget him completely ... I feel I am bad not to be more your fellow painter, not to help you to be working in readiness to join our group and help us.⁴⁶

This makes clear that the fallout with Fizelle was a very personal one with Crowley and would explain her reluctance to join The Contemporary Art Society with Fizelle as President. Crowley never spoke publicly of her falling out with Fizelle – they simply went their different ways. Crowley later admitted that she had always been ‘very vague about our financial status ... but I guess at best we did no more than cover expenses’.⁴⁷ This would, no doubt, have made it difficult for Fizelle who needed to make a living, but this may just have been a convenient way to explain the breakdown of the partnership. After the demise of the Art School, Fizelle kept the premises as the Fizelle Studio. His wife continued to occupy the place after his death in 1964 until it was vacated in 1969.

Forty years after these events Crowley did reluctantly speak of the events surrounding the closure of the School, but at the time, in confidence. They are, however, now part of her Archives and explain the depth of her understanding of the teaching she had from Lhote, which she shared with Hinder, and they both tried to impart to Fizelle.

According to Crowley, Fizelle was very anxious to understand the precepts which formed the basis of Lhote’s teaching. Many of the artists who had studied overseas and returned to Australia had learnt about the role of mathematics and design in composition. Preston, Proctor, Wakelin and Lambert had all encouraged interest in modernist art to students in the 1920s, including Crowley and Dangar. So when Crowley demonstrated her thorough knowledge of the geometry of the golden section, a small group of students of the Sydney Art School were particularly keen to learn more, so Crowley agreed to form the art school with Fizelle. He put much energy into creating a fine studio, was generally liked and loved company. Crowley described him as having had great success in teaching children but ‘an utter failure in teaching adults’.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Topliss, *Earth, Air, Fire, Water*, 165.

⁴⁷ Crowley Archives, Notes on Crowley Fizelle Art School.

⁴⁸ Crowley Archives, Correspondence.

I would squirm in misery listening to him making a fool of himself of what I had tried to impart. He had caught hold of some of the superficial aspects of the theories borrowed from me, but he did not seem to have the power to grasp the essentials.⁴⁹

Crowley had explained to Fizelle, Lhote's talks on dynamic symmetry but was glad when Hinder joined the Sketch Group in 1934 because 'Hinder had practised the theory with great diligence'. It was through Hinder that they obtained copies of *The Diagonal* and other similar books, to give Fizelle 'an opportunity to lecture on the various roots'.⁵⁰ Crowley then tried to support Fizelle by sitting in on his lectures, but felt that Fizelle never had the perception to apply the theory to his own work.

There were an increasing number of incidents when students sought Crowley's instruction and criticism of their work, rather than Fizelle's. Although Crowley tried to remain loyal to Fizelle, she felt that such incidents 'were galling to a man of Fizelle's temperament',⁵¹ and contributed to a growing hostility between them. She also felt another contributing factor could have been Dr Evatt's great esteem of her work 'to an almost embarrassing degree'.⁵² As time went on, Crowley and Balson worked more and more together, and this too, would have added to Fizelle's discomfort. Eventually, Fizelle's distress manifested in some emotional scenes that greatly upset Crowley, even recalling them forty years later, she described them as 'heart-burning'. She felt that such outbursts were mental disturbances caused by Fizelle having been shell-shocked and in constant pain from his war injuries. She expressed bewilderment at his behaviour and found it intolerable.⁵³ However, it explains the underlying causes for the closure of the Crowley-Fizelle Art School and the reasons for some of Crowley's subsequent decisions.

The strong opposition to modern art at the time was given as the reason for the closure of the Art School in 1937. Hinder later wrote that the word Contemporary was seen

⁴⁹ Idem

⁵⁰ Idem

⁵¹ Idem

⁵² Idem

⁵³ Idem

at the time as a term of abuse, and Fizelle was aware that, although the students were not numerous, the School's influence 'was evil enough to stimulate orthodox opposition'.⁵⁴ Although Crowley and Balson refused to join the CAS, Hinder continued to paint with them on weekends at 227 George Street for a time. Eleanore Lange had been part of the Sketch Club of the Art School and it was she who suggested the small group work towards an exhibition to show the public what the aims were of the modern movement in art.

When interviewed in 1975, Crowley recalled the 'lively goings on at 215 George Street'.⁵⁵ She said Fizelle always loved people around him and 'excelled in the role of host'. She had enjoyed meeting many interesting people whose friendship she had retained and 'deeply valued' over all the years since the School. She recalled the excitement felt about establishing the CAS in Sydney by Dr. Evatt, Peter Bellew, Hinder and Fizelle. She praised both Hinder and Fizelle for being 'very public-spirited',⁵⁶ in all the work they put into the Society in spite of having full-time jobs. She remembered that, after rejoining the Education Department, Fizelle had done 'some valuable work',⁵⁷ establishing a children's art library at the Balgowlah School. She said there were several factors which determined her decision not to join the society: the first was her need to 'work things out quietly and alone'.

First to SEE ... then to DREAM ... and then on the morrow to
PAINT
Who said that? Why yes ... Millet, the man who painted the
Angelus!⁵⁸

The other factor was her decision to help Balson by providing him with a place to paint in his spare time. It seems he could not work at home, although he never explained to her the reason. She assumed it was lack of space and made her attic

⁵⁴ Frank Hinder, *Rah Fizelle*, *Art in Australia*, September, 1965, 129-130.

⁵⁵ Crowley Archives.

⁵⁶ *Idem*

⁵⁷ *Idem*

⁵⁸ *Idem*

studio available to him when he was not working at his job. Her explanation for not joining the CAS was that she and Balson would not have time; they had already determined their paths – ‘so since by that time we knew quite definitely which way WE wanted to go we decided to stay PUT and let the many divergent ideas fight it out together.’⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Idem

CHAPTER 4: EXHIBITION I

In this Chapter, I look at Exhibition I that was planned to show the public the style of modern art studied by the group of artists who worked together at the Crowley-Fizelle Sketch Club during the 1930s. It was presented with a written document explaining the philosophy of their art. The media debate which surrounded this Exhibition included quite scathing criticisms and personal attacks on both Crowley and Hinder. With Crowley's self-effacing personality, such comments could have been one factor in influencing her ultimate decision to support Balson's career rather than pursue her own. Being financially dependent on her family, she realised that her duty to them to provide support as they aged and became infirm, would require her to sacrifice her own artistic career. She had already had to give up opportunities in Paris just as her paintings were gaining recognition there in 1929. With the uncertainty of the impending war, the financial effects of the Depression a living reality, her father's recent death and her mother's ongoing infirmity, the emotional turmoil of the closure of her Art School, Crowley's apparent compromise can be seen to make reasonable sense. Support of Balson meant she could retain an artistic colleague and friend with whom she could share her artistic aspirations while retaining the financial support she needed.

In officially opening Exhibition I at the new David Jones Gallery in 1939, Mr Justice Evatt was quoted in the newspaper, saying –

This Exhibition provides an illustration of that aspect of the modern movement which tends to reject mere photographic representation. It emphasises that the product should be an object of beauty in itself, embodying design and organisation. The faculty of appreciation has to be educated and developed ... Australia's geographical isolation made it necessary to give special encouragement to artists who could contribute

to our intellectual life. It is unfortunate that they are at times subjected to irrational and ill-informed criticism.¹

Exhibition I took place in David Jones Gallery from 17 August to 2 September 1939. It was the culmination of several years of planning by the group of artists interested in modernist art, both painting and sculpture. The Exhibition included paintings by Crowley, Fizelle, Balson, Hinder and Frank Medworth, along with sculptures by Eleanore Lange, Margel Hinder and Gerald Lewers. Crowley's archives contain a single sheet of paper headed *Minutes of Meeting 1*, dated 27 June 1937, recording the aims of the group –

The science of design in relation to the pictorial plane, either expressed through colour or through geometrical areas, and where receding planes are introduced, they are expressed in relationship to the pictorial plane. In sculpture the same problem is expressed in relationship of shapes to the entire volume.²

Eleanore Lange had been urging the group to present an exhibition as a manifesto of their style of art, to create interest and debate amongst progressive artists and art lovers. Lange had arrived in Sydney from her native Germany in 1930 where she had trained as a sculptor. From Hans Cornelius she learnt the 'science of art', a combination of aesthetics and optics and it was his 1908 publication *Elementargewerbeschule der bildenden Kunst* (*The Elementary Laws of Art*) which became the basis of her art teaching.³ Her involvement in the organisation of the art curriculum at an experimental government school gave her early insight into the nazification of this school and brought about her decision to leave Germany. Her main project in the early 1930s was the presentation, mainly to children, of the great people and events in history, including biblical history, through the medium of a marionette theatre. She did not want children to confuse great people with the actors who represented them, seeing marionettes as abstract. This

¹ *Daily Telegraph*, Friday 18th August, 1939, front page under heading 'Artists' distorted view'.

² Crowley Archives, 5/1.

unusual approach brought her into contact with an wide variety of Sydney personalities, including the then Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, J.S. McDonald. By the mid-1930s, she transferred her teaching to giving lectures to a variety of groups that included the Art Gallery, the Grosvenor Gallery, University of Sydney, the Celtic Society and the Civil Rights Defence League.

In her role as artist and lecturer with the George Street Group of modernist artists from 1936, she conducted three courses, each a series of ten lectures, to explain modern scientific art research. Taught at the Crowley-Fizelle Art School, her first course was on *Nature and Art*; the second on *Laws of Composition* included teaching on dynamic symmetry as taught at the school, and the third, *The Social Function of Art*, explored the theme of the influence of thought on composition throughout the history of art, from paleolithic to modern times. As a lecturer she gained press attention for her views on art. Her lectures became an important part of the Sydney art scene of the 1930s and the press sought her opinion on the modern art in the International Art Exhibition shown at the Art Gallery of New South Wales from July to September, 1936. In an article for *Art in Australia* published in August 1936 she wrote—

Modern art sets out to arrange the picture so that the object of the outer world is the starting point for aesthetic, philosophical or scientific knowledge revealed through the eye and for the eye.⁴

According to Crowley when talking many years later, it was Lange and Frank Hinder who suggested the idea for Exhibition 1. Lange became the author of the manifesto, the Foreword to Exhibition I, which she had seen as providing the layman with a guide to ‘the central problem of modern art’.⁵ As Crowley explained, what they were trying to make understood was the direction art had taken since the early part of the century with

³ Geoffrey Batchen, ‘Looking through the prism: The sculpture of Eleonore Lange’, in Maryanne Dever, Ed., *Wallflowers and Witches: Women and Culture in Australia 1910-1945*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1994, 49.

⁴ Batchen, Eleonore Lange, 52.

⁵ Ken Scarlett, *Australian Sculptors*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1980, 356-7. Crowley’s Archives also contain a copy of Lange’s Foreword to Exhibition 1.

‘men like Gleizes, Metzinger, Picasso, Braque, Villon, Delaunay and others’.⁶ For her, even after 35 years, she was impressed with the ‘penetration and clarity’ of Lange’s explanation.⁷ Lange explained –

Since Impressionism, the interest of painting moved to the colour-phenomena, and first created atmospheric perspective. The French artist, Henri Matisse was the first to offer a new system of order, e.g. composition, in replacing the vanishing point by the pictorial plane. Each colour in a neo-classic picture is determined in its area, tone, value hue, by its power to interpret third and often fourth and more dimensions, in their direction to the pictorial plane, e.g. as stated above, the actual two-dimensional surface of the canvas, coinciding with the two-dimensional plane of human vision.

In painting the modern artist has eliminated or subordinated all statements of natural appearance of objects, according to his structural design ...

So painting today is abandoning the representation of objects in order to establish a new realm of visual existence. This leads step by step to ‘abstract art’.⁸

The exhibition was the culmination of some years of a number of artists working closely together, with much exchange and working through theories and ideas learnt overseas.

In September 1937 Hinder held an exhibition of his American and recent Sydney work at the Grosvenor Gallery. Reviewers were faced with a great variety of work they found difficult to understand. This came at a time when there were press debates over the conservative nature of the art shown by the Australian Academy of Arts. One correspondent to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, J.T., wrote that, after viewing exhibitions by the leading art societies, that he saw ‘nothing but a gloomy future for Australian art’. He criticised the Gallery for making too many purchases of mediocre work with no eye to the value of choosing works which contributed to the State’s cultural development. In

⁶ Idem.

⁷ Crowley Archives, Notes on Crowley Fizelle Art School.

⁸ Scarlett, *Australian Sculptors*, 356-57.

reply, Hinder wrote a letter outlining plans by the group to mount an exhibition to present ‘certain problems which have arisen from the researches of scientists and philosophers, and await the co-operation of the artist to be given visual form’.⁹

The Exhibition certainly engendered a great deal of debate, with highly derisive attacks from Howard Ashton, the art critic for the *Sun* newspaper at the time. Possibly because he was Julian Ashton’s son, he remained loyal to his father’s teaching that aimed at training the eye ‘to accurately observe form and colour and the hand to record this observation beautifully’.¹⁰ Unlike many of his contemporaries who were open to new ideas, Howard Ashton displayed an unbending attitude against any new styles or theories in art. He was convinced that his father’s way of teaching by observation, was sound and he, like his father, was not open to new theories in art, seeing art applied according to theory as ‘a futile effort’. ‘If the confused ‘foreword’ which ushered in this show means anything it means that the painter’s aim is to reproduce the vision of a one-eyed man with no mental processes.’ He concluded his critique with a warning to art students to avoid getting involved in theories of art and urged them ‘to follow Hunt’s advice: Draw firm and be jolly.’¹¹

In her letter of reply Grace Crowley assured Ashton that she had enthusiastically read Hunt’s pamphlet at a stage when her artistic development was on a par with ‘what Mr. Ashton’s is now’, but could ‘truthfully say its perusal contributed nothing vital towards my education save to retard it’. She went on to advise Ashton to study the construction of Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* and assured him that such study would put him ‘on the high road to discovering the secret which gives this famous portrait its eternal quality.’¹² She

⁹ Frank Hinder Archives, AGNSW Exhibition 1 File

¹⁰ Crowley Archives, 5/1

¹¹ Idem. Ashton’s review published in the ‘*Daily Sun*’, 17 August 1939. Charles Henry Hunt was an English-born artist who arrived in Sydney 1879; cartoonist and lithographer with various magazines; dissatisfaction with the Academy due to lack of artists on its Council, along with George and Arthur Collingridge, W.C. Piquenit, and Lucien Henry, he was among the first members of The Royal Art Society of New South Wales, founded in 1880. From: William Moore, *The Story of Australian Art*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney & Melbourne, First published 1934, reprinted facsimile 1980, Vol. 1, 162-164, Vol. 2, 111.

¹² Crowley in her reply letter, describes Mr Hunt as ‘this obscure, though no doubt very sincere, gentleman’ who had written a pamphlet – *Hunt’s Talks on Art*.

was, of course, referring to the composition being based on the Golden Section as the ‘secret’ of its aesthetic excellence, which she assured Ashton could then be seen in Hinder’s painting entitled *Ghymkana*¹³ When interviewed in 1975 she speculated on what Howard Ashton would have thought of ‘Andre Lhote’s demonstration to his students of the constructive elements in building up’ either da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* or Michelangelo’s ceiling in the Sistine Chapel.¹⁴ Crowley had lectured on Leonardo at the school pointing out the basis of his design elements. Like Lhote, she used famous works of art to show the use of the golden section by the great masters and some of these remain in her archives and with her drawings held in the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Looking back over the years, she regarded Ashton’s ‘nasty’ comments as ‘simply delicious’, realising that by 1975 both artists and laymen would readily understand what they were presenting as new ideas in 1939.¹⁵

Ashton’s reply was lengthy, scathing and defensive. Although he remembered Crowley as a ‘clever student’, he said, she flattered herself on her artistic development and saw her comparison of Hinder’s art with that of Leonardo as a ‘sad commentary’. He attacked modern ‘researches’ into many areas, including ‘two-dimensional and poached-egg art’.¹⁶ He wrote –

Spengler regards all these freak movements in art as the neurosis of a civilization tired, incapable of mental effort and concise thought, and slipping back into the mysticism and obscurantism of the jungle.¹⁷

He maintained that Leonardo had drawn by observation and developed skill, which was the method taught by his father, and the only method he really knew. He regarded abstract art and expressionism as ‘fooling and deception.’ He saw art based on geometric design as obscure to

¹³ Crowley Archives, Newspaper clippings.

¹⁴ Idem

¹⁵ Idem

¹⁶ Crowley Archives. Newspaper clippings.

¹⁷ Oswald Spengler wrote his *Decline of the West*, published 1918-22, in which he argued that European culture was on an irreversible decline, cited in Bernard Smith, *Modernism’s History*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1998, 111. Ashton’s letter appeared under ‘Other Points of View – Letters to *The Sun*’ shortly during the period of the Exhibition.

the average human intelligence and it could therefore have no permanence or significance.¹⁸ In this, he echoed a sentiment expressed by Robert Menzies, two years prior to the exhibition, when he claimed that great art spoke ‘a language any intelligent person can understand. The people who call themselves modernists talk a different language’.¹⁹

In his letter Hinder expressed his amazement that, as a critic and trained artist, Ashton should ‘be confused and upset by a clear and concise explanation of facts known to every artist who studies the theory as well as the practice of his art’.²⁰ Referring to Ashton’s advice to students to stay away from theory, he said such a course –

would completely cut the student off from the great traditions of the past – all based on certain theories held by the masters. Possibly (or obviously) he has never read the works of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Durer, Delacroix, Blake, Henri, Roger Fry or Wilenski,²¹ to name but a few. These students will undoubtedly read these works and profit by them.²²

Howard Ashton’s response appeared directly under the printed letter –

As the critic who advised students to paint what they see, and not to worry about theory, and as a painter who has perhaps read a little more, and a little more intelligently than Mr. Hinder, and would not make the gaffe of putting Michelangelo and Mr. Wilenski in the same boat as authorities, I still maintain that the foreword to the poached-egg show at David Jones is sheer jargon. I am not in the least confused.²³

Frank Hinder’s reply to Ashton was never published as he thoroughly put Ashton in his place. He accused Ashton of having no qualifications as a critic ‘save abuse and cheap

¹⁸ Smith, *Modernism’s History*, 111.

¹⁹ *Argus* newspaper, 23rd April, 1937 cited in Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, Allen Lane, Ringwood, 1981, 41.

²⁰ Crowley Archives. Newspaper clippings. Also, Frank Hinder Archives. Exhibition 1 file.

²¹ Reginald Wilenski, a British art theorist and writer.

²² Haese, *Rebels*, 41.

²³ *Idem*

sarcasm'. In his own sarcastic comment he suggested that Ashton would probably have advised Leonardo to draw firm and be jolly.²⁴

Other correspondents to the newspapers were also critical of Ashton's lack of knowledge as a critic. The *Sun* newspaper, on 18 August, published a short letter from F.C. Courcier under the heading *Irony is Ignorance* –

Even if the exhibition contains not one serious artist (which is practically an impossibility), your writer still remains a fool. As Gaudier-Breska said, 'Only the very ignorant try to refute by means of ridicule and irony.' Gaudier-Breska was 23 when he said this – perhaps your writer is younger and doesn't know very much.²⁵

Another correspondent, named Linton, also sent a letter to the *Sun* that was not published. In it he described Ashton's 'shrill abuse' of the Exhibition as illustrative of an 'ostrich-like hiding of the critical head in the sands of mediocrity' and a 'stubborn refusal to see any merit' in any painting style other than that learnt by the critic. He found Ashton's criticism to be 'as pointless as it is childish'. He reminded him that egg tempura had been used for centuries, dating well back beyond the Greeks and used extensively by many famous artists, including Giotto and Botticelli. He found the exhibition to be like 'a draught of fresh air into the stuffy provincialism of the Sydney art world'.²⁶

There were some more balanced critiques of the Exhibition. One critic found Rah Fizelle's nudes appealing with their sense of modelling and simplicity; in Crowley's works the tapestry-like patterning was extended and involved colour juxtapositions. He commented on Hinder's 'belated echoes of the cubist movement' but criticised his works for lack of emotional content. He did, however, comment on 'the intellectual brilliance of a concisely solved mathematical problem'²⁷ meaning it in a derogatory way at the

²⁴ Hinder Archives. Exhibition 1 file.

²⁵ Idem

²⁶ Idem

²⁷ Hinder Archives: Eight 'Moderns' – Highly Cerebral Art, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 August 1939.

time, but pictures constructed on the principles of the golden section are based on precise mathematics.

Writing under the assumed name of 'Open Mind', one correspondent felt that many critics were missing the whole point of the Exhibition. The artists had clearly stated that their art was a new visual experience and had gone to the trouble to write a detailed Foreword explaining their art. He made the point that were the art similar to that accepted as art at the time, there would be no need for explanation and it was reasonable that the public should give 'these artists a fair go and try to understand what' they meant. For him, the value of art did not lie in being obvious – 'If we can't use our imaginations and see further than our noses (with one eye or two) then the fault must be ours'.²⁸

Strong support of the Exhibition came from Mr Justice Evatt at the Official Opening and these comments were reported in at least two newspapers. He said that the Exhibition illustrated the fact that the modern movement no longer saw any point in mere photographic reproduction. The emphasis was now on the product itself as an object of beauty, 'embodying design and organisation'. Evatt was well aware that the modern movement had swept the world and that Australia was lacking any examples of modern art in its galleries. He drew attention to the fact that 'works by Matisse and Modigliani sometimes realise 200 times as much as do the works of artists such as Orpen'.²⁹

The *Sun-Guardian* on 20 August 1939, on the Women's Social front page, published a picture of Julian Ashton and Grace Crowley together chatting apparently amicably. The accompanying text read –

Art is very much the topic of the tea cups with controversial arguments about the exhibition of paintings and sculptures at David Jones' Gallery, the majority of young artists declaring the show stimulating, and Julian

²⁸ Idem

²⁹ Crowley, 5/1, Defence of Modern Art: Mr. Justice Evatt's Views, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 August 1939.

Ashton, who taught in Sydney for 50 years laughing himself silly about them. ‘The joke is’ said this veteran ‘I taught about six of them’.³⁰

This public ridicule of her painting on the front social page of a leading newspaper would have been galling to Crowley, already struggling with lack of confidence, in an environment largely hostile to modernism. She would certainly have found it easier to remain in the background and play a supportive role to Balson.

Originally the concept was that Exhibition 1 was to be the first in a number of exhibitions to show the ideas on which these artists had been working. However, the Second World War curtailed any further exhibitions.

ABSTRACT ART

Hinder, like Crowley, remained in touch with artistic events overseas and in 1938 Hinder had received from his former teacher, Emil Bistram, a copy of the catalogue of a 1937 exhibition at the Guggenheim Gallery of ‘Non-Objective Art’ with an important catalogue essay on Kadinsky’s art by Hilla Rebay. Eager to share this with his fellow artists, he invited Crowley and Balson to dinner to view the catalogue but found Balson to be ‘most scathing, saying he did not see anything in it’.³¹ Hinder later confirmed that ‘Ralph was not impressed and, after a cursory glance, dismissed it’.³² He found Grace to be more interested, especially in the work of Gleize and Lhote. Hinder remembered loaning the catalogue to Crowley and Balson and jokingly reminding them not to ‘pinch the colour plates’ to which Balson took great offence. Having worked as a housepainter all his life, Balson frequently found himself watched with suspicion by his clients. According to Hinder, in the following weeks, Balson rarely spoke to him when they worked together at Crowley’s studio and she finally asked Hinder to work elsewhere. The reason given was that Balson had taken Hinder’s remark as an insinuation that he was a thief, but Hinder’s own comment was: ‘The real reason, of course?’³³ These incidents indicate that Balson lacked confidence with Hinder on a social, as well as an

³⁰ Women’s Social, Section 3, *Sun-Guardian*, 20 August 1939.

³¹ Free, *Frank and Margel Hinder*, 11.

³² Frank Hinder Archives, *George Street. Crowley, Fizelle, Balson*. 1990. My thanks to A.D.S. Donaldson for directing me to this information.

artistic experience level. A further reason for Crowley to downplay her own ability and lead by example, in order to retain Balson's companionship as a fellow artist.

Hinder's recollections also throw some light on the relationships and tensions within the George Street Group. He commented that Balson 'couldn't stand' Fizelle and did not like his work, while Fizelle had scant regard for Balson. Hinder realised that Balson 'must have felt the "social" difference' between himself and the rest of the Group and 'rarely said anything'.³⁴ At the time of Exhibition I Balson appeared to be quite hostile to some of Hinder's works, objecting to his painting *Subway People*, but that his objection was overruled by the others in the Group.³⁵ It was Hinder who had the only abstract painting in Exhibition I.

This is significant in light of the fact that it was Balson who held the first completely abstract one-man exhibition in 1941. Balson clearly underwent a complete conversion to abstraction between 1939 and 1941. In the Foreword to the catalogue for Exhibition 1, Eleanore Lange wrote – 'In painting, the modern artist has eliminated or subordinated all statements of natural appearance of objects, according to his structural design ... This leads step by step to abstract art.'³⁶

Frank Hinder certainly remembered the arrival of the 1937 Guggenheim Catalogue as an important event for him as it stimulated quite a number of new works through 1938 and 1939 with Bauhaus titles – *Tribute to Kandinsky*, *Gravity* and *Spiral*. In the 1940s Hinder recorded his feeling for shape and form as he developed it through his paintings –

Constructivist was partly spontaneous (stimulated by Kandinsky) but mostly 'intuitive geometric' (can't think of any other way of expressing it). Intuitive in the sense that the job is somewhat like a jig-saw puzzle but with the infinite correct solutions, and by changing, adding and subtracting one becomes aware that one has gone as far as one can go –

³³ Idem

³⁴ Idem

³⁵ Idem

³⁶ Scarlett, *Australian Sculptors*, 356-7.

the job either works or it doesn't. Hence the analogy with music – composition, counterpoint, etc.³⁷

The essay in the 1937 Guggenheim Catalogue would have easily struck a chord with Crowley who had been introduced to the idea of non-objective art while living in Paris and through her contact with Albert Gleizes in 1929. It also underlines the shared intellectual knowledge between Crowley and Frank Hinder. Throughout the 1930s she was kept in touch with ideas from Europe in letters written by Dangar from Moly-Sabata. During the period of the Art School, Crowley had little time to experiment with non-objective art but with the closure of the School in 1937, she was then free to extend her art further towards abstraction.

It seems that the Guggenheim catalogue 'sparked something'³⁸ in Crowley for there is a marked change of style and use of colour in 1938. From the time of her return to Australia in early 1930 her paintings of the early thirties follow closely the style she developed under Lhote. She did many sketches of rural life while at Glen Riddle and worked on them applying the principles of the golden section she learnt from Lhote. She retained the sketches, exercises and a few small paintings she had completed following Gleizes' instructions while staying at Sablons, France in 1929. These exercises taught her about the translatory and circular movement of planes. These ideas had been used by many of the artists in and around Paris, following the example of Cézanne who used the underlying geometrical structure to embody movement and rhythm. Kandinsky and Matisse followed Cézanne's examples in developing their own, unique styles of abstract art. Compositional geometry was used by many artists including, Derain, Rouault, La Fresnaye, Delaunay, Léger, Villon and Mondrian. It was a marker of the modern movement. Some artists concentrated on line and form while others directed their efforts to colour, as did Matisse and Delaunay. It seems that, having absorbed these modern styles while in Paris and been kept in touch with continued developments in art in France though Dangar's letters, Crowley's relative isolation as an artist in Sydney had allowed the modernist culture to mature within her. In a 1932 letter Dangar had reported to her a

³⁷ Free, *Frank and Margel Hinder*, 11.

³⁸ Hinder Archives, *George St.*

magazine article by Lhote in which he wrote - 'One may draw inspiration from the past but the real artist of each epoch is he who has the courage to search within himself and go forth alone upon an unknown path as Cézanne did.'³⁹ The catalogue essay *The Beauty of Non-Objectivity* described the way that geometry and colour could release the rhythm, joy, harmony and sense of beauty that was possible through non-objective art. It seems that the catalogue acted as a catalyst for the ideas she had absorbed over the past decade and she resolved to move forward to experiment with abstract art.

MOVES INTO ABSTRACTION

During 1938 Crowley produced quite a number of paintings in which she used much brighter colours and arranged her composition geometrically a forerunner of her move to total abstraction. A section of her entry for the 1938 Commonwealth Sesquicentenary Prize, History of Australia Section, *The Gold Rush 1851-54*, is arranged in diagonal, geometric blocks with earthtones contrasted with patches of high-key colour and although the horses and figures are largely representational, the work is a distinctly modern composition.

When she had visited Albert Gleizes in Paris in 1929, to illustrate his admiration of a beautifully drawn line, he had shown her a drawing of a bull by Courbet. While staying at Glen Riddle on her return to Australia, she was reminded of this incident when she saw her father's prize bull, *Prince Imperial*, lying on the grass. The resultant sketch she did is given a modern treatment, making the bull a bright red.⁴⁰ It is unsigned but she has written on the bottom right hand corner: *PI with apologies (he was a roan) for colour.*⁴¹

During all of her artistic life Crowley drew and painted landscape, animals and people so the 1938 painting *Still Life* is unusual. It is reminiscent of early Braque and Picasso still

³⁹ Topliss, *Earth, Fire*, Letter dated 26 January 1932, 69.

⁴⁰ Elena Taylor, Didactic panel accompanying Exhibition *Grace Crowley – Being Modern*, Australian National Gallery, 23 December 2006 – 6 May 2007.

⁴¹ Taylor, *Grace Crowley*, 61.

life paintings and seems to me clearly an experiment into abstraction. Elena Taylor's well chosen quote from Crowley confirms this.

The cubists were the pioneers of the modern movement of today. Our movement which is searching back into the constructive methods used by the master of the past ...

That search back reveals the enthralling possibility of the abstract elements of design used for its own sake, sacrificing the objective element of external visual form for its interpretation.⁴²

Crowley's superb draftsmanship is evident in her many pencil drawings. Even in her paintings under Lhote in Paris and in the early 1930s, she could not bring herself to abstract or distort the figure. Until 1938, when there is a tremendous change and she begins to integrate the figure into the design and uses a much higher-keyed palette than ever before.

The Artist and his Model (1938) shows a much looser style of brushwork with an element of translatory movement and rhythm, but still a relatively low-key colour. However, there is an explosion of colour into a very high key with *Woman (Annunciation)* 1939 and *Portrait* (1939) with the semi-abstracted figure very much part of the overall composition design. The painting shouts with joy and the rhythm of life, not from the use of translatory movement, but simply with the assured use of colour. All of these paintings were shown in Exhibition 1 and created controversial debate in the newspapers at the time.

The two painters in Exhibition 1 who had a thorough knowledge of structural design that would lead step by step to abstract art, were Frank Hinder and Crowley. If we look at the paintings hung by Crowley and Balson, there is a similarity of style in that both entered semi-abstract paintings where the figures were built on geometric shapes and the colour built up in planes using complementary colours, as taught by Lhote. In the paintings – *Holiday, 1936* and *Girl in Pink, 1937*, and *Madonna 1939* the figures remain basically

⁴² Crowley, Didactic panel, Exhn, *Grace Crowley*, c.1936.

intact with the background moving into abstraction. It is interesting to note that of the paintings done by Balson in 1939, his *Painting of Grace Crowley* is treated differently to others. Her figure shows very little abstraction and her face reflects a serene quality; the simple colour scheme is unified throughout the picture, showing that she is at one with her surroundings, an integral part of the style of the painting. This is in stark contrast with *The Sisters (Family Group)* 1939 who are part of an overall design, as are *Semi-Abstraction: Woman in Green* 1939 and *Figure Design* 1938 – the latter two with strongly angular designs which appear awkward and static.

Crowley's semi-abstract paintings were similar in style but more cohesive, because she had mastered this style in France over ten years earlier. There were five of her 1938 and 1939 paintings in Exhibition 1 – *Semi-Abstraction, Woman (or Annunciation), The Artist and his Model, Harvest, and Squatter's Daughter*. Of these, only two were hung in the 1966 reprise exhibition. *Woman (or Annunciation)* was painted for Exhibition 1 and purchased by Mr Justice and Mrs Evatt and given the title *Annunciation* by them. The style of this painting is noticeably similar to those done by Balson at the time, but Crowley's composition and placement of colour are more assured and show her confidently moving from the more structured style of her paintings done in France, to a freer style. Of her *Artist and His Model* she was later to describe it as 'a rather whimsical colour sketch' of Balson painting a model on her roof garden in George Street. She said that she had made an exaggeration of what she had been taught by Lhote of not isolating the figure, but 'bringing the colours of the background into the figure, and the colours of the figures into the background'.⁴³ This same method is used by Balson in his paintings, so I would argue that Balson learnt this technique from Crowley, as she led him into abstraction.

Mary Alice Evatt, writing in 1966 on the Crowley-Fizelle school, noted that the teaching of both Fizelle and Crowley had moved gradually towards more abstract concepts of composition, to more ordered and imaginative abstract works. She described Crowley as

⁴³ Crowley Archives, Notes on recollections by Crowley for 1966 AGNSW Exhibition: Balson, Crowley, Fizelle, Hinder.

‘so slight and delicate in appearance’, growing ‘stronger and stronger in her works’.⁴⁴ We know that Crowley was a skilled and clever student who patiently worked to develop and extend her art over the years. Evatt herself produced a painting entitled *Woman in Green with Grace Crowley painting in the background 1930’s*.⁴⁵ The Crowley painting is a completely abstract composition, similar in style to those produced by both Crowley and Balson through the 1940s and early 1950s.

After the closure of the Art School, Eleanore Lange continued to lecture at the site of the School, 215a George Street, which had become Fizelle’s Studio and remained so until after his death in 1964. Frank Hinder recorded that the Sketch Club continued meeting at Fizelle’s studio on Saturdays for most of 1938 but by late that year, Fizelle decided he did not want the Group to continue painting there. Crowley then invited Balson and Hinder to paint at her studio at 227 George Street. During that period, Hinder observed Crowley and Balson arranging different coloured paper and books as they planned a composition and painted together. He felt that it was Crowley’s abstract compositions of that time were ‘more asymmetrical, freer’ than either his own or Balson’s. Margel Hinder also felt that Crowley’s work was superior to Balson’s.⁴⁶ The idea of arranging coloured paper in planning a work would have been a visual way of teaching the geometric principles and possibilities to Balson.

It is clear that up until 1938 at least, Crowley was clearly the more advanced artist moving towards abstraction, and that Balson was expressing hostility to modern trends, possibly because he lacked a confident understanding of it at that stage. A note in Crowley’s archives, commenting on the lectures given by Eleanore Lange during the period of the art school, further reveals Balson’s lack of interest in modernist trends in the late thirties – ‘there was nothing with which I personally was not already familiar.

⁴⁴ Mary Alice Evatt, *AGNSW Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 1, October 1966, 314.

⁴⁵ Boyde, *Mary Alice Evatt*, 5. No exact date is given for this painting but it is likely to have been during the period of the Crowley-Fizelle Art School.

⁴⁶ Topliss, *Modernism and Feminism*, 79.

Balson, I am certain, had never attended any one of them.’⁴⁷

Even though Balson died in 1964, Crowley did not give up her studio in George Street until 1971 to make way for redevelopment in the Rocks Area. However, from the time she purchased High Hill at Mittagong she did very little painting. Indeed one might ask, why would a woman who had made painting her life, rather than succumb to a domestic woman’s role for which she had a self-professed loathing, purchase a house in the Southern Highlands in later life? The house itself much larger than the apartments in which she lived for years, is near the crest of Mt Gibraltar, surrounded by five acres of lawns, grounds and gardens, with high hedges for privacy. There she converted a double garage into a studio, so that Balson could paint full-time when he retired from his job as a house-painter. It was here she finally gave up her own painting to look after the house and substantial gardens surrounding it, to devote herself to continuing to support Balson’s painting, from then a full-time career.

Crowley had noticed the great toll the Depression had taken on Balson as he struggled to support his family. She said in an interview for the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1975 that Balson had told her that during the Depression years ‘he would sit in the Domain in absolute despair’.⁴⁸ She was very conscious of her own financial security and had readily helped her friend, Anne Dangar, through her struggles. With Dangar determined to stay in France, and uncertainty about the future brought about by World War II, it would seem that her compassionate nature, and her own need for the companionship of a fellow artist, found a new friendship with Balson. As was her nature, she proved a loyal and giving friend to Balson, with time, material help and her own knowledge. She was, however, diplomatic in sharing her knowledge and always gave credit to Balson for his ‘natural ability’. This was also her style of teaching as learnt from Ashton, who always aimed to bring out a student’s own ability and talent. However, anyone looking at the mathematical concepts and amount of acquired knowledge involved in understanding all

⁴⁷ Crowley Archives, 4/11

⁴⁸ Lenore Nicklin, ‘Grace Crowley Looks Back on a Lifetime of Art’, *The Sydney Morning Herald, Weekend Magazine and Book Review*, Saturday 10 May 1975, 11.

that she had learnt from Lhote, can readily see that this could hardly be acquired by a natural instinct. Frank Hinder said –

Explaining the practical side of dynamic symmetry is not easy, the mathematics are there for all who are interested to read, but to me the visual aspect is the important one. It is difficult to demonstrate its possibilities by means of the written word or diagrams in a book. It is the actual doing that reveals the logic and possibilities of the theory.⁴⁹

Crowley's ability, experience and gradual development towards abstraction throughout the 1930s were established, as was her compassionate and generous nature to her friend, Anne Dangar.

I believe that she made a conscious choice to support Balson, and with good reason. In a 1975 film interview she said 'I've always felt it was harder being a woman.' She felt that women had to do the uninteresting household jobs, and we know that she deliberately chose to be a painter rather than be tied down to a domestic role. She went on to say that she felt it was harder being a woman artist because women's art was much less acceptable than a man's. Women's art was inclined to be treated as craft and at that time there were very few sales anyway, due to the Depression. She admitted that she had 'actually thought of putting on my paintings a man's name, hoping they would sell better.'⁵⁰ She also said that, as a woman, she had 'been more or less conditioned to being considered inferior as a person by men'. As a woman at the Sydney Art School she said it had been 'difficult to get work accepted by the Society of Artists'.⁵¹ Although she was not conscious of her work being considered inferior at the SAS, she remembered her surprise at unexpected admiration from male students such as de Maistre and Gruner.

It is my opinion that her self-effacing view of her ability as an artist was heavily influenced by the society in which she lived, where women were expected to play a supporting role to men. Thea Proctor sought support from George Lambert, who was

⁴⁹ Free, *Frank and Margel Hinder*, 6.

⁵⁰ Grace Crowley, *Grace Crowley*, Archival art series, Smart St. Films, Melbourne, Australian Film Institute, 1975.

⁵¹ Crowley Archives, Personal notes.

well respected as an artist, and Margaret Preston had the support of a wealthy and influential husband. Crowley carried the psychological burden of a lifetime of conditioning by her parents that she was an oddity, even failure, for not marrying, and they considered her art an aberration. She was financially dependent on them and in return for this, as the unmarried daughter, was expected to look after them in their declining years. Unlike Grace Cossington Smith, who not only had her father's financial support but was also relieved of family household responsibilities. Crowley's father died in 1938 and her mother's health continued to deteriorate, so Crowley faced uncertainty as to how long she would need to care for her mother. With her contact with Dangar threatened, and soon cut off by the war, and the Art School closed, her partnership with Balson had now replaced the importance of her friendship with Dangar. From this time, Crowley and Balson worked together, just as Crowley and Dangar had in Paris. Hinder later commented that when he finally persuaded Crowley and Balson to hang some paintings in a Contemporary Art Society Exhibition, that they had only agreed 'provided they were hung together'.⁵² Crowley and Balson needed each other for support to pursue their shared passion of painting. With the demands of her family and the pressure of societal expectations for women to play a supporting role to men, Crowley took the best option open to her.

There have been a number of people over the years who have recognised Crowley's crucial role. Jean Campbell in writing on *Early Sydney Moderns* said of her that she believed that 'her role as innovator is still not fully recognised'.⁵³ Hazel de Berg also mentions similar sentiments to Crowley when interviewing her in 1966. She suggested that Crowley and Balson had 'built on each other' and Crowley agreed. De Berg then pointed out to her that Kim Bonython had written a book in which he saw her 'as the first abstract painter in Australia'. Crowley's reply was 'God only knows. I never thought about such a thing! To which de Berg responded 'You don't think about what you do,

⁵² Hinder, Hinder Archives, *George Street*

⁵³ Jean Campbell, *Early Sydney Moderns*, Craftsman House, Roseville, NSW, 1988, 119.

you do it.’⁵⁴ Here, I believe de Berg had challenged Crowley and although she expressed surprise, she did not deny what de Berg had suggested.

In a small catalogue of an exhibition of *Abstract Art in Sydney 1930-1960* held at Sotheby’s Gallery, Sydney, in 1998, showing the work of Balson, Fizelle and Hinder, Crowley was recognised as the linchpin of the George Street Group of modernist painters.⁵⁵ As the Curator of *Grace Crowley – Being Modern*, Elena Taylor describes her as ‘the hub around which the group revolved’.⁵⁶

When Daniel Thomas curated a retrospective of Crowley’s art, he opened his brief catalogue essay by saying she had given much energy to Balson, whom she considered to be ‘Australia’s finest abstract painter.’ It was she who insured ‘that his career was productive until his death in 1964.’ He went on to acknowledge that her years in Paris learning from Lhote had ‘made her a crucial influence on Australian Modernism through the 1930s.’⁵⁷

Balson’s biographer, Bruce Adams, acknowledged that, although much of Balson’s knowledge of modernism came from his own reading, that many of his ideas developed as a result of his friendships with artists who had worked overseas.

It is notable that the thirty years of painting featured in this exhibition are also the years of his companionship with Grace Crowley. A studious, highly trained artist, Crowley gave the untravelled Balson contact with other artists and with modernist ideas originating in France.

⁵⁴ Hazel de Berg, *Grace Crowley Talking about Ralph Balson*, National Library of Australia, Oral History Collection, Tape173, Cut 1, Second Side, February 1966, 4.

⁵⁵ Justin Miller, Introduction to *Balson – Fizelle – Hinder: an exhibition of abstract art in Sydney 1930-1960*, Sotheby’s Gallery, Sydney, 1998, curated by Nicholas Chambers, Sotheby’s Inaugural Internee from Department of Museum Studies, University of Sydney.

⁵⁶ Taylor, *Grace Crowley*, 33.

⁵⁷ Daniel Thomas, *Project No. 4: Grace Crowley Exhibition Catalogue*, 10th May – 8th June, 1975, AGNSW, Sydney, np.

Through Crowley, Balson became familiar with quite specific theories of plastic art derived from the teachings of the two cubist-oriented painters, André Lhote and Albert Gleizes.⁵⁸

In spite of her successes as an artist, Crowley lacked confidence in her own ability. I believe a psychologist would say that she had little self-esteem. This would explain her habit of destroying much of her art as being below standard. She felt she only wanted to be known by her best work. In my opinion, she used what she had – her financial security and her knowledge wholeheartedly in the support of both Dangar and Balson over many years. She lived vicariously through them, her own belief in the one thing that brought her great satisfaction – her skills as an artist.

⁵⁸Adams, *Ralph Balson*, 10.

CHAPTER 5: PARTNERSHIP IN ABSTRACTION

This chapter traces Crowley's interest in abstraction from her time in Paris, her lessons with Gleizes, her growing interest and early development through the 1930s, to its realisation in collaboration with Balson, and to her mature works of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Crowley brought her knowledge of abstraction from Paris, the primary source of the modernist aesthetic, directly to Sydney. But it took thirty years for the aesthetic of geometric abstraction to reach Australia via America, and for her art to find appreciation, but only after she had destroyed many works and all but ceased painting.

Throughout the 1930s Crowley was being presented with the idea of non-objective art through letters from Dangar. With the Art School closed and a new artistic partnership with Balson, the way ahead was clear to Crowley. The ideas she had been absorbing and fermenting, now came to maturity and she embraced the opportunity to find expression in a new and challenging way. Albert Gleizes had introduced the idea of non-objective art to her in 1929 and through the 1930s she was kept in touch with ideas from France, she also purchased and read books on the subject as they became available. Her partnership with Balson gave her the confidence and encouragement to move to complete abstraction. This could be one reason she credited Balson with leading her into abstraction, although clearly she had the intellectual knowledge, technical skills and ability far in advance of Balson at the end of the 1930s, and was in a position to teach and lead him.

Crowley received letters from Dangar regularly from the time of her return to France in 1930 and from Dangar's letters learnt of the Paris-based Abstraction-Création group of artists pursuing non-figurative art. Gleizes was a member of the *Abstraction et Création Société* for the promotion of non-figurative art and was one of a number of artists who had been working in this area throughout the 1920s. Auguste Herbin, French abstract painter, and Georges Vantongerloo, Belgian sculptor, painter and writer, formed the Society early in 1931 and by 1935 membership numbered over four hundred,¹ including

¹ Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James, Eds., *The New Art – The New Life, The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, G.K. Hall and Co., Boston, 1986, 281.

Mondrian, Michel Seuphor, Naum Gabo, Antoine Pevsner, Mainie Jellett and Evie Hone. The Society held exhibitions of members' work in their gallery and published an annual magazine called *Abstraction and Création*, a copy of which Dangar sent to Crowley in 1933. In 1934 Gleizes insisted that Dangar become a member and suggested that Crowley also join the group. However, members had to submit three non-objective works to be judged and Dangar queried then whether Crowley had painted any such works.² So the ideas were being presented to Crowley during the period of her art school and she was reading from books on the subject from overseas that became available to her.

The Belgian essayist and poet, Michel Seuphor had formed the Cercle et Carré (Circle and Square) Group early in 1930 with Torrès-Garcia. The Group had around eighty members, with Mondrian 'clearly the spiritual centre of the group'.³ When Seuphor fell ill at the end of the year, the Group had disbanded and by the time he returned to Paris, the Abstraction-Création Society had absorbed most of Circle and Square members, with Mondrian, according to Seuphor, 'the central figure: his very presence gave the group authority'.⁴ Seuphor met Gleizes through the Abstraction-Création Society and subsequently stayed at Moly-Sabata, spending lengthy periods working with Dangar on the upkeep of the commune, during which time they discussed the different artistic directions of both Gleizes and Mondrian. Dangar had a myopic belief in Gleizes, particularly in the spiritual value of his work, and could not see any such value in Mondrian's art.⁵ Dangar mentioned Seuphor visiting Moly-Sabata a number of times in letters to Crowley⁶ and this would be how Seuphor became aware of the Sydney group of abstract artists in the mid-1930s. Seuphor followed Mondrian's evolution as an artist through his time in England and after he fled to New York in 1940. After the Second World War Seuphor continued his interests in artists pursuing abstraction, writing on the life and work of Piet Mondrian, Jean Arp and Sophie Tauber-Arp, a number of books on abstract art in Europe, and in 1958 published his *Dictionary of Abstract Painting*

² Topliss, *Earth, Fire*, 106, 118.

³ Michel Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian Life and Work*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1956, 164.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Adams, *Rustic Cubism*, 55-56.

⁶ Topliss, *Earth, Air, Fire, Water*, 89-90.

Preceded by a History of Abstract Painting in which entries appear for Crowley, Balson, Hinder and Mary Webb. Seuphor's inclusion of Crowley, Balson and Hinder recognised them as products of the Abstraction-Création movement in Europe.

Abstraction-Création was an international group of artists with a broad spectrum of political ideas, linked by a common philosophy of aesthetic ideals and a vision that their art should express a universal and united view of humanity. This was to counter the ideas of arbitrary chance and the new nationalism that were also current at the time.⁷ The group produced a yearbook annually, to which Mondrian contributed statements in 1932, 1933 and 1934. The copy in Crowley's Archives is *Abstraction-Creation, No. 2, 1933* and the statement made by Mondrian in that edition was in reply to a question about what he wished to express in his work – 'What every artist seeks: to express harmony through the equivalence of relationships of lines, colours and planes. But only in the clearest and strongest way.'⁸ These ideas were planted in Crowley's mind during the period of her Art School but were only able fully to come to fruition some years later when she had the time to explore and develop them.

According to notes made by Crowley, there were plans for the artists of Exhibition I to follow-up with a second exhibition in 1940, but the outbreak of war prevented this. Prior to this, Dangar had sent some correspondence lessons on Gleizes' theories to a number of people interested in moving towards abstraction. However, the war prevented further mail between Australia, except on an erratic basis. After the death of Crowley's father in 1938, her mother had stayed at Glen Riddle with her sister, Flo, and Flo's husband but by 1941 her mother, now bed-ridden, was moved to a nursing home – first at Warrawee and then Drummoyne. Crowley spent much time with her, leaving her with little time for painting.

Unlike Dangar, Crowley and Balson were not limited to following one artist. They were able to draw upon different sources of ideas, various publications and Crowley's personal

⁷ Hans L.C. Jaffé, 'Geometrical Abstraction' in *Abstract Art since 1945*, Fwd. Jean Leymarie, A.D.A.C. Brussels 1970, English translation, Thames and Hudson, London, 1971, 179.

⁸ Holtzman and James, *New Art – New Life*, 282.

experiences of abstract art while living in Paris. Crowley and Dangar had been able to study first-hand, different styles of abstraction while in Paris, and Crowley retained a number of the books which she and Dangar had purchased while in Paris together. The 1933 edition of Herbert Read's book *Art Now* Crowley gave to Balson as a gift, probably in 1935 as that is the date on the same page as the inscription 'To Mr Balson, Compliments from Grace Crowley, 14.2.35'.⁹ Crowley owned a 1936 copy of Alfred Barr's *Cubism and Abstract Art*¹⁰ so her interest prior to the closure of the Art School is clear.

As confirmed by Hinder, Crowley and Balson worked together on composition of their paintings from at least 1938. During the preparation of the exhibition *Grace Crowley – Being Modern*, a hitherto unknown Crowley abstract was discovered overpainted on the back of a 1947 Crowley *Abstract Painting*.¹¹ Curator Elena Taylor compared it with pencil sketches and has dated the unfinished work at 1941 and given it the title *Composition Study*.¹² The style and paint colours used are the same as a number of paintings by Balson also dated 1941: *Painting, Painting No. 17, Constructive Painting*.¹³ Bruce Adams observed that the style of these paintings and the other eighteen paintings done by Balson for his 1941 Exhibition 'suggested a variety of sources in European abstraction'.¹⁴ The Read book *Art Now* contained black and white reproductions of abstract paintings by a wide variety of artists including Léger, Metzinger, Picasso, Nicholson, Arp, Tauber-Arp, Delaunay, Villon, Gleizes, Wyndham-Lewis, Roy de Maistre, Henry Moore, Giacometti, Klee, Kandinsky, Burra, Nash, Herbin and others. With their knowledge and interest in the Abstraction-Création Society, the books and reproductions, Crowley and Balson could see the various styles used by different artists. With Crowley's thorough knowledge of the underpinning geometric structure and their

⁹ Herbert Read, *Art Now*, Faber & Faber, London, 1933, Grace Crowley Bequest inscribed on front lining page 'To Mr. Balson, Compliments from Grace Crowley' 14.2.35.

¹⁰ Alfred Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1936, Crowley Bequest inscribed on lining page 'GAC'.

¹¹ Kim Brunoro, Conservator, 'Discovering a Grace Crowley Painting' in *Artonview*, No. 48, Summer, 2007, National Gallery of Australia, 28-29.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Adams, *Ralph Balson*, 20, 23, and Taylor, *Grace Crowley*, 42.

¹⁴ Adams, *Balson*, 24.

combined knowledge of paint and colours, Crowley and Balson developed their own unique style. This early style used simple geometric shapes – the circle, square, rectangle and triangle in proportioned relationships and, while there is a predominant use of primary colours – red, blue, yellow with black and white, tertiary colours are also present, adding interest and creating their own palette of colours. These works were conceived in the between-the-wars spirit of the need for architectural order, as inspired by the modern machine and the metropolis. Their influence derived from the modern European masters. For Mondrian one thing alone mattered – ‘to create through rigid mathematics a superior beauty, the work of the spirit, rejoicing the intellect of the spectator through the eye’.¹⁵ Kandinsky, Klee and Miro all used a geometric or architectural frame to underpin their compositions.¹⁶

Balson held the first exhibition of completely abstract paintings at the Anthony Hordern Gallery from 29 July to 9 August 1941. This exhibition of 21 untitled constructive paintings went virtually unnoticed at the time, receiving a non-committal review in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Bulletin* referring to his circles, triangles, squares being suitable as ‘designs for patchwork quilts’.¹⁷ There was very little appreciation of modern art in Sydney at that time and Crowley later referred to herself and Balson as the two most ignored artists of that time.¹⁸ Macquarie Galleries promoted many contemporary artists and they were included in a group exhibition there in 1944 with Frank Hinder and Gerald Ryan. Crowley exhibited six works entitled *Linear rhythms 1-6* but none of these works appear to have survived.¹⁹

Although Crowley spent much time looking after her mother and had little time for her own painting, she was very much involved with Balson’s paintings, even signing his works ‘her elegant script being considered superior to Balson’s for this purpose’.²⁰ The Hinders and Mary Alice Evatt were well aware that their paintings were planned together

¹⁵ Bouleau, *Secret Geometry*, 251.

¹⁶ Ibid 230-242.

¹⁷ Nicholas Chambers, *Ralph Balson: Painting in Art and Australia*, Vol.40 No. 2 Summer 2002, 250.

¹⁸ Crowley Archives, Personal notes.

¹⁹ Taylor, *Crowley*, 41.

²⁰ Ibid 43.

over many years. By planning each composition with coloured paper and string, Crowley was teaching Balson the principles and possibilities of the use of the golden section by visual means. She had found Fizelle unable to grasp the concepts, causing her much pain in the breakup of their partnership and, as Hinder had observed, it was in the planning that the concepts and possibilities became clear. Evatt attested to the importance of the planning stage and that the painting was done easily as a result. Crowley's overpainted *Composition Study* was not the only incidence of her covering an early abstract with grey priming, as another work was found to have received the same treatment.²¹ Her decision to support Balson's career and yet stay very much involved, seems to have been a sound decision for her lifestyle of that period.

However, after her mother's death in 1947, she was freed to give herself fully to painting again, and the works she produced from 1947 through to the mid-1950s are her most lyrical orchestrations of harmonious rhythms through form and colour. These paintings appear to be the outworking of ideas that had matured within her over many years and were now able to be fully explored and developed. The Guggenheim Catalogue that Hinder loaned her in 1938 contained an essay on *The Beauty of Non-Objectivity* which explained Kandinsky's principles for non-objective art, and through the 1940s these principles can be seen in much of the work produced by both Hinder and Crowley.

Painting, like music, has nothing to do with reproduction of nature, nor interpretation of intellectual meanings. Whoever is able to feel the beauty of colours and forms has understood non-objective painting.²²

It was an understanding of these principles that allowed Crowley to express herself more freely through her painting. In *Abstract Drawing 1947* the black line sweeps diagonally upwards in a gesture of release, then curves around to return in a wide sweeping motion, as if setting the tone of the painting; then white lines appear to juxtapose the broad gesture as details, like added themes or melodies. This is non-objective art for the sheer pleasure of expression. Crowley's art became the expression of the life of her spirit as

²¹ Brunero, *Artonview*, 29.

²² Frances Frascina and Charles Harrison, Eds., Hilla Rebay, 'The Beauty of Non-Objectivity' in *Modern Art and Modernism, A Critical Anthology*, The Open University, Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd., London, 1982, reprinted 1988, 145.

encouraged by Kandinsky, who had identified the strong relationship between music and art.

Crowley joined The Contemporary Art Society (CAS) in 1947 and she and Balson were included in a number of group exhibitions in the following years, though with little favourable interest. She participated in a group exhibition at David Jones Gallery in 1948 entitled *Abstract paintings drawings sculpture constructions*. At that time the David Jones Gallery was managed by modernist designer, Marion Hall-Best. In 1949 Crowley and Balson had works in the Eleventh Annual Exhibition of the CAS and *Abstract Drawing 1949* could well have been one. This work is similar in technique to her 1947 *Abstract drawing*, using white and grey gouache on black paper. The limited palette is echoed in the sharply angular shapes that were applied through stencil and have a softly speckled finish. This strikingly dramatic geometric drawing would have been completely out of step with the styles popular at the time and gave rise to caustic criticism that hers and Balson's art was 'less interesting than the streak of bare wall above' their paintings 'which ... has the touch of life about it, the fingerprints of generations of art-lovers'.²³

Macquarie Galleries held exhibitions, in 1951 *Abstract Compositions* and their 1954 Exhibition, *Abstractions* in which paintings by Crowley and Balson were hung. In spite of Crowley's and Balson's paintings being hung in exhibitions at intervals over the years, even local art gallery experts failed to appreciate their work. It was not until many years later, in 1975, that Lucy Swanton of the Macquarie Galleries wrote to Crowley after visiting her Project 4 Exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales – 'Now I will just say that on two visits I found this record of your life completely absorbing and rewarding. I felt ashamed of not having sufficiently appreciated the depth and quality of your painting in earlier days.'²⁴ As the paintings done by Crowley and Balson were well ahead of any understanding of the aesthetic of geometric abstraction in Australia, it is not at all surprising even local experts had little appreciation.

²³ Taylor, *Crowley Exhn.*, didactic panel, quote from *Bulletin*, 1949.

²⁴ Crowley Archives, Correspondence, *Letter from Lucy Swanton, Elizabeth Bay dated 5th September, 1975*.

Mary Alice Evatt, while travelling abroad with her husband in 1947, arranged to send to Crowley, books and catalogues on modern art. Amongst the literature received by Crowley were copies of Moholy-Nagy's *Vision in Motion* and *The New Vision and Abstract of an Artist* and Mondrian's *Plastic and Pure Plastic Art*. The latter was written by Mondrian in 1936 for *Circle: An International Survey of Constructive Art* (1937) jointly edited in England by Ben Nicholson, Naum Gabo and Leslie Martin. Interest in abstract art was widespread in England through the groups Axis and Circle from the early 1930s and artists actively involved included Ben Nicholson, Naum Gabo (in England from 1935), Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and Herbert Read. Mondrian was seen as a major figure and wrote the article because, as he saw it, there was 'so much confusion in the modern movement'²⁵ he wanted to clarify the content. Publication of these articles in English made them accessible to a wide audience in England and the United States. Mondrian was a key figure in the dissemination of abstract art, first to England in the 1930s and then to America in the 1940s, where he joined other major modernists, including Moholy-Nagy and Gropius, who influenced the development of American abstraction.

MATURE ABSTRACTS

The period from 1947 through to her purchase of High Hill in 1954 is the period in which Crowley produced a group of highly original, resolved mature abstract paintings, well in advance of their recognition as geometric abstraction in the 1960s. These paintings embody the spirit of modern geometrical architecture with the idea of music and movement. Mondrian had expressed these ideas in his *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-3) and *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1943-4) having been rejuvenated and inspired by his move to New York in 1940. Crowley could well relate this to her similar experience with the excitement and stimulation of Paris and jazz in the 1920s. Her paintings of this period are alive with colour and rhythm and the spirit of a new order.

²⁵Holtzman & Martin S. James, *The New Art – The New Life*, 288-9.

Two paintings of 1947, simply titled *Abstract Painting*, show evidence of their planning with 'pieces of coloured paper and even slivers of string on paper'.²⁶ Both of these paintings resonate with colour harmonies and beautiful proportions: and what could be more beautiful than the divine proportion, as the golden section was sometimes known. By the time she created these paintings Crowley had worked with geometric theories and language of line and colour for almost twenty years. Guided by her knowledge and instinct she created compositions that were perfectly balanced geometric shapes, but with the personal painterly evidence of brushwork and the imperfect lines made by human hands, in the spirit of the Bauhaus. Both paintings move to much freer and less defined angular shapes than hers and Balson's abstract paintings of the early 1940s. In these paintings her years of study and painting synthesize into these masterful non-objective creations that are both painterly and geometric at the same time, intuitive and grammatical, asymmetric and yet enigmatically balanced. *Abstract Painting* from the National Gallery of Australia Collection, moves to free the predominantly rectangular shapes by less defined edges; the colour harmonies are high-key, their tonal hues: reds, blues, yellows appear in their tonal variations; the string shapes create movement on the surface. In *Abstract Painting* (1947) from a private collection, there is a more muted colour harmony: pink against maroon, yellow against ochre, soft green against a brighter green; and the shapes are less, larger and more open in composition: angles opposed to angles and curves to curves, string shapes become a more integral part of the overall design. Through years of study of the geometry of proportions, these paintings reveal Crowley as an artist well-versed in the language of form, tone, colour and lines, now able to improvise and explore the rhythm and beauty of non-objective art.

What is quite remarkable in most of the paintings by both Crowley and Balson from this period onward, is the technique of being able to use an opaque oil paint to achieve the effect of transparency of colour through colour. This transparency is achieved through an intimate knowledge of how an overlay of one transparent form affects that of the colour and tone underneath. This quality gave their paintings a complex layering of tones and hues. Their knowledge of the use of colour is further shown in the way they used

²⁶ Evatt, *AGNSW Quarterly*, 315.

brighter colour with softer edges, and smaller areas of brighter colour nested within a muted field of the same hue. With this, they were able to achieve a luminous effect in their paintings. They studied books on the scientific use of colour together to extend their own knowledge and experience.²⁷ They understood the principle that the ‘intensity of colour is approximately inversely proportional to the area taken up within the whole picture’.²⁸ Balson had worked all his life with paint and Crowley had undertaken extensive study of the subject as an artist, so their shared knowledge resulted in both of them having a similar mastery of the use of paint and colour.

In *Abstract Painting* c. 1950 (Ballarat Fine Art Gallery) Crowley uses mainly rectangular shapes on a vertical axis, with a marked use of small areas of intense colour in contrast to softer hues, achieving a balance of colour and form. This painting has a simplicity of colour and form reminiscent of Mondrian’s *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, in which nearly all his horizontals and verticals are in the golden ratio.²⁹ In contrast *Abstract Painting* 1950 (private collection) is a strongly angular composition, with use of stand alone rectangles. The use of the (string) line is also angular and used as a pathway through the painting, the intensity of colour standing out clearly against the irregular quadrilaterals and polygons. She has used small areas of intense colour against much softer hues, to punctuate the composition. In *Abstract Painting* 1950 (Cruthers Collection) she uses high-key colour, the central square dominates the composition set on the diagonal, with a large rectangle counterbalanced on the right and underpinned on the left with a low-key polygon. The small dark shapes which float on top, are motifs that perform the role of melodies in music. The closeness with which Crowley and Balson worked during this period is underlined by the fact that this painting was ‘excised from the verso of a Balson painting’³⁰

²⁷ Crowley’s Archives contain books on colour: Maitland Graves, *The Art of Colour and Design*, McGraw Hill, 1941; Ralph M. Evans, *Introduction to Colour*, John Wiley, London & New York, 1948; Egbert Jacobsen, *Basic Colour: an interpretation of the Ostwald colour system*, Theobald, Chicago, Ill., 1948.

²⁸ I am indebted to artist Wayne Roberts, for his knowledge and observations in this area.

²⁹ Bouleau, *Secret Geometry*, 250.

³⁰ Taylor, *Crowley*, 61.

In another *Abstract Painting* 1950 (Ballarat Fine Art Gallery) there is a predominance of blue, with a transparent diagonal blue elongated rectangle reaching from the lower right to a 'window' of light blue in the top left corner. A base of low-key polygons is 'entered' through a bright red rectangular 'window' to follow an introspective pathway to a dark circle in the lower left corner, passing through an irregular white circle adjacent to the window of light blue. This painting seems to explore the theme of universal harmony.

PAINTING 1950

In my opinion, Crowley reaches her zenith in this style in *Painting* 1950 (National Gallery of Victoria). This painting seems to be a culmination of her search over a decade for an expression of universal harmony through the beauty of non-objective art. The influence of both Kandinsky and Mondrian can be seen, brought together in her own unique style. From Kandinsky she uses basic forms with beauty of shape: the circle, rectangle and triangle, with an 'intuitive sense of cosmic order'³¹ and from Mondrian she uses the geometry and mathematics of the golden section, to create proportions of superior beauty in the strongest and clearest way,³² as encouraged by Mondrian. The very large irregular polygons that form the ground of the painting are intentionally placed and proportioned in accordance with Crowley's geometric rationale. Four circles provide intense, high-key colour in varying ways: the solid, small yellow on the left, the two-tone blue on the right, below which is a red open circular shape, offset higher on the left with a single red stripe, while the largest circle has gradations of green. The green and blue at the height of their intensity have dramatic luminosity. The dominant central shape is the outline in yellow of a triangle. Kandinsky had written of the triangle representing the life of the spirit. He described an artistic genius, like Beethoven, as standing alone near the apex of the triangle – misunderstood and abused. Over time, the triangle moves and those who were in the lower segments reach the point at the apex and finally understanding the once solitary genius.³³ Could the triangle here be a reference to the

³¹ Frascina and Harrison, *Modern Art and Modernism* 146-147.

³² Holtzmann and James, *New Art – New Life*, 281.

³³ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Translated with an introduction by M.T.H. Sadler, Dover Publications Inc., New York, 1977. 6-7.

way Crowley felt isolated and misunderstood as an artist? Balson certainly echoed these feelings in a statement in 1963 when he ‘spoke of the profound isolation of man in an unbounded universe’.³⁴

A detailed mathematical and geometric analysis of this painting undertaken by artist/musician/mathematician, Wayne Roberts has revealed ‘It is clearly evident that Phi (the golden ratio) and whole number proportions are fundamental to this painting.’ All of the geometric shapes are very specifically placed in relation to the underpinning geometry. There are multiple golden ratios within the painting, together with the whole number proportions two and three. Roberts wrote -

(This), together with her geometry notes, proves Crowley was a master of the discipline of geometry as it applies to artistic composition. In my view her geometric and compositional prowess in art has been underestimated and perhaps unprecedented to this very day.³⁵

The full analysis of this painting is very detailed and complex and is attached with diagrams (see Appendix 2). At present, there does not appear to be any other painting by either Crowley or Balson that appears to be so simple in its composition and yet has such a complex, hidden geometry. Although further specialised analysis may yield interesting results.

We know from Crowley’s archives that Lhote taught analysis of famous paintings based on the golden section but that he did not move into abstract art. Compositional analysis of a painting by Piero della Francesca, which Crowley may have studied with Lhote, shows similar use of elemental numbers in its composition (see Appendix 3).

The *Baptism of Christ* (National Gallery, London) is constructed upon the number three. Its breadth is divided into three, with axes falling upon the right edge of the tree and the left side of St. John (which stretches upwards

³⁴ Adams, *Balson*, 34.

³⁵ Wayne Roberts is an artist/musician/mathematician/author who resides in Canberra and undertook this analysis in collaboration with me. His calculations are based on the catalogue reproduction of Grace Crowley’s *Painting* 1950, Taylor, *Crowley* catalogue, 51, and checked with the actual painting.

along the vertical). Its height is divided also into three, or more exactly, into two if we merely consider the rectangular part, which has a ratio $2/3$. The semicircle on top of it, forming its third part, is in reality a complete circle which we can follow along the left arm of St. John and the upper curve of the loin cloth of the Christ. The dove, perfectly horizontal, shows us the exact position of the top of the rectangle and the centre of the circle.³⁶

We can also look at paintings by Mondrian to see his use of the golden ratio with his paintings were based on verticals, horizontals and diagonals. Analysis of some of his paintings are also attached for comparison (see Appendix 3).

What Crowley has created in *Painting* 1950 is complex and would appear to be unique to her. She has followed the examples of master painters and geometers to create her own masterpiece of geometric abstract art, in isolation and apparently unrecognised in Australian art.

Knowing that Crowley and Balson worked so closely over a long period, some of the statements made by Balson reflect their shared ideas –

I am a painter, I believe in painting, and the wonderful tradition of painting. Time has not erased the work of the old painters but has enhanced and enriched it. We do not paint like them because through the discoveries and the search for truth of the scientists, our way of living and thinking is different.³⁷

These sentiments certainly reflect much of what Crowley learnt from Paris, of the old painters and new scientific methods, and subsequently, through her correspondence with Dangar, of the developments in abstraction taking place in Europe.

³⁶ Bouleau, *Secret Geometry*, 95.

³⁷ Adams, *Balson*, 34.

During the 1940s and early 1950s when Crowley and Balson were painting in their constructive style, what they were doing was unique in Australia. Most Australian artists were painting in the romantic style of the School of Paris or in an expressionist manner. When Herbert Badham included Crowley and Balson in his *A Study of Australian Art*, both artists expressed a commitment to similar ideals in their painting, that of abstract design. Crowley believed that ‘depictive shape and form are barriers in the way of the full enjoyment of colour, dimension, shape, line, tension and rhythm’. Her aim was ‘to show the essential character of design, a definable thread’ that ran through ‘the masters from the beginning of painting’.³⁸ Here we can clearly see Crowley expressing Lhote’s teaching of the golden section, passed through the painting masters of Europe, but also used by the modern masters of Europe, including Kandinsky, Villon, and particularly Mondrian. Balson said he believed that ‘the source of true design’ was to be found ‘in cosmic laws’ and that his painting style was ‘a new expression of reality apposite to modern conditions through constructed relationships of colour and shape’.³⁹ Balson explained their combined belief in the universality of true design to be found in geometric structure and colour relationships and he acknowledged that ‘his greatest single influence’ was Mondrian.⁴⁰ It was much later, in the 1960s, with the coming of geometric abstraction to Australia, that what Crowley and Balson were painting in the 1940s, began to find some appreciation.

Writing in 1966 Douglas Dundas said that over the years ‘Grace Crowley discarded figurative elements in her painting and developed a form of geometric abstraction which Ralph Balson was also practising.’ He described Crowley’s and Balson’s constructivist paintings of the 1940s and early 1950s as ‘unique in Australia’. They dealt with ‘areas and space in terms of beautifully applied colour’ and created examples of ‘the purest and richest classical abstraction seen here’. He pointed out that there was ‘little appreciation of these fine works’ and even other artists failed to see their merit. He confessed to having battled with the Society of Artists to convince them to hang Crowley’s and Balson’s works, but eventually his efforts were rewarded. During his absence abroad in

³⁸ Badham, *Australian Art*, 145-6.

³⁹ Idem.

⁴⁰ Adams, *Balson*, 24-27.

1952, Lloyd Rees and Wallace Thornton solicited a number of paintings from Crowley and Balson to hang in the Society of Artists' Annual Exhibition.⁴¹

FIFTIES PAINTINGS

In *Composition – movement* 1951 (National Gallery of Australia) Crowley experiments with a different type of abstract, one more after the style of the late collages of Matisse, using bright colours and simple shapes with soft edges. This work was stencilled and hand painted in gouache on bright green paper. The greater number of shapes are in a soft beige, allowing the bright yellow, orange and black irregular shapes to stand out against them. There is a counterpoint between the restriction of colour and irregularity of form in this calligraphic-like work. This work seems to explore the use of space within a self-contained area: the shapes all float freely and largely independently of each other, with all paths remaining within the picture space.

Abstract Painting 1952 (National Gallery of Australia) uses a dark, square, diagonal base to carry the shiny, tessellated shapes. The brushwork has a confident, painterly feel to it, and the colour harmonies allow the whole composition to reflect the wonderful, luminosity in this painting. Another *Abstract Painting* 1952 (National Gallery of Victoria) produces similar colour harmonies in a geometrical pattern of polygons. There is a melodic orchestration of colours within the plane.

A musical quality is evident in *Abstract Painting* 1953 (Art Gallery of South Australia), similar to Roy de Maistre's *Rhythmic Composition in Yellow-Green Minor* 1919 (Art Gallery of New South Wales). Three semi-transparent, mainly dark green bands rise gently uphill from left to right, providing a perfect counterpoint to the rectangle underneath, the whole a high-key orchestration. In sombre contrast is *Abstract Painting* 1953 (Art Gallery of Western Australia) which is strongly low-key, with much black and complex patterns. This follows the pattern of her painting in these mature years where

⁴¹ Douglas Dundas, 'The Second Contemporary Australian Movement', *Quarterly*, Vol.8, No.1, Art Gallery of New South Wales, October, 1966, 316-20.

she often explores similar themes in contrasting high and low-key harmonies and juxtaposes free-flowing and contained forms.

CONCLUSION

Crowley's interest in complete abstraction dated from her contact with Gleizes in 1929. Throughout the 1930s, her correspondence kept her informed of the latest developments in non-objective art in Europe, in particular through the Abstraction-Création Society. She also pursued her interest through books on modern art that became available in Australia and shared some of these ideas with Balson. Faced with the closure of her Art School, she took the opportunity to pursue her artistic partnership with Balson, providing him with access to her studio for painting. From Frank Hinder's account, Balson showed great reservation and little interest in non-objective art in 1938. Balson's *Figure Design* 1938 and *Semi-Abstraction: Woman in Green* 1939 lack the elegance and skill seen in Crowley's paintings she brought from Paris: *Girl with Goats* 1928, *Portrait of Lucie Beynis* 1929, and the *Cubist exercises* she completed with Gleizes 1929. So it is clear that when they began their painting partnership in 1938, Crowley was far in advance of Balson in technical skill, knowledge and experience as an artist moving towards abstraction and that it was she who led him into abstraction. During the late 1930s and through the 1940s their artist friends observed the way she taught Balson visually, the principles of composition she had learnt in Europe. She destroyed or overpainted many of her own abstract works of the 1940s, as proved by recent scientific investigation. It appears to have been a deliberate choice on Crowley's part to train and credit Balson as the innovator in their partnership, but the evidence proves beyond doubt, that it was Crowley who was the real innovator of non-objective art in Australia during the 1940s. The evidence of her prowess as a skilled mathematician and geometer is revealed in the analysis of her *Painting* 1950.

CHAPTER 6: MATURE YEARS - INFLUENCE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

TEACHING AND INFLUENCE

In 1949 Crowley spent a brief period teaching a course in abstract art at East Sydney Technical College. She was invited to teach the course to replace Eric Wilson, following his death. Balson's biographer wrote – 'She resigned after a brief period, and Douglas Dundas transferred the position to Balson'.¹ This seems to me to indicate a strong possibility that Crowley recommended Balson for the position. Balson taught the two-hour class every Friday for ten years, until 1959. It was also during this same period that Frank Hinder taught Dynamic Symmetry, also at East Sydney Tech, although he had never taught it at the Crowley-Fizelle Art School. Handbooks of the period list Hinder teaching Pictorial and Abstract Composition from 1950-58, initially at the East Sydney Technical College and then from 1954 at the National Art School, as it became then. Other teachers during that period were Douglas Dundas, Herbert Badham, Lyndon Dadswell and Peter Laverty.² It is impossible to know whether Crowley resigned the position in order to encourage Balson, but that would have been consistent with her nature and known actions. Although he had no previous teaching experience, as she did, it would have afforded him the opportunity to interact with students, build his confidence and help his image as an artist, as well as bringing him some extra income and independence. Douglas Dundas made a point of commenting on Balson's teaching –

My recollections would not be complete if I neglected to make reference to Ralph Balson's effectiveness as a part-time teacher at the National Art School. Eric Wilson and Frank Medworth had each in turn taken a class in abstract painting. They were followed by Balson, who brought a new and stricter concept of abstraction which found some devoted adherents. He obviously enjoyed teaching, and the time involved did not encroach too much on his own work.'³

¹ Adams, *Balson*, 50.

² Yearly Handbooks of East Sydney Technical College and National Art School, 1950-60.

³ Dundas, *Quarterly*, AGNSW, 319.

Tony Tuckson, Guy Warren, Ron Lambert and Cameron Sparks were some of his students who developed their art along abstract lines.⁴ Crowley would probably have said that Balson's effectiveness as a teacher was a natural talent, but I consider that a more plausible explanation is that she passed on to him her own teaching methods. She had, after all, been trained and employed by Julian Ashton, to bring out a student's own talents.

Although Tony Tuckson's art developed a more abstract expressionist style, he considered Crowley and Balson to be his 'most influential' teachers, attributing to their teaching his 'heightened sensitivity to space as well as a special interest in colour'.⁵ These were qualities that Crowley learnt from Lhote and further developed through study with Balson as they painted together. Daniel Thomas recorded that Crowley and Balson found Tuckson their most 'sincere' student 'and were fond of him'.⁶

ANNE DANGAR

After the war, Dangar received many commissions to decorate buildings in the area around Moly-Sabata. With some financial help from Crowley, she was finally enabled to build her own pottery kiln, eighteen years after her arrival at the commune. The war had strengthened her bond with France and its people and she feared another hostile reception to her art if she returned to Australia.⁷ But the deprivations of the war and years of hardship took their toll on Dangar's health.

During the last year of Dangar's life, Crowley showed her ongoing concern for her friend's health with frequent gifts of foods to help her recover from a 'nervous collapse'.⁸ In her last letter to Crowley, dated 7 July 1951, Dangar wrote that she had been overwhelmed by Crowley's gift, she had used the money to improve her living conditions and that made it possible for her to

⁴ Adams, *Ralph Balson*, 50.

⁵ Daniel Thomas, *Tony Tuckson 1921-1973*, exh.n.cat., Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1976, 9, cited in Terence Maloon, *Painting Forever: Tony Tuckson, Tuckson and Tradition*, National Gallery of Australia website, 2006, 2.

⁶ *Idem*.

⁷ Topliss, *Earth, Air*, 252.

⁸ *Ibid*, 319.

get some rest, which was what she most needed.⁹ This must have provided some comfort to Crowley when she learnt of Dangar's sudden death in September 1951.

Even after Dangar's death, Crowley exchanged letters with Mary Webb, an Australian artist living in Paris.¹⁰ Crowley proposed purchasing pieces of Dangar's pottery and presenting them to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, but the then Director, Hal Missingham, declined her offer. A few years later, Webb wrote and told Crowley that Dangar's pottery was on permanent display at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, in a room devoted to the masters of the modern movement – Gleizes, Villon, etc. She told Crowley that it was extremely well displayed,¹¹ and this must have pleased Crowley, knowing how hard Dangar had worked, and after all the years of supporting her friend. It was not until she visited Paris again in 1960-61 with Balson, that Crowley was able to see the pottery for herself.

In the same letter from Webb, dated 18 February 1955, Webb reported to Crowley that she had made the acquaintance of Michel Seuphor and his wife and told him of hers and Balson's abstract paintings. Seuphor of course, knew of Crowley through his association with Dangar at Moly-Sabata in the 1930s and indicated his interest in writing an article on both Crowley's and Balson's work. Webb wrote to request photos, documentation and biographical details on them both and asked Crowley to send all this information direct to Seuphor. Crowley complied with this request and Webb wrote on 17 March 1955 telling her this was to be published in *Aujourd'hui* (Today) (formerly *Arte Aujourd'hui*) (*Art Today*).¹² On 21 April 1955 Webb wrote requesting biographies for Crowley and Balson for Seuphor's planned *Dictionary of Abstract Painting*¹³ in which entries appear for Crowley, Balson, Hinder and Webb. Had it not been for Crowley's contacts, it is unlikely that Balson and Hinder would have been known to anyone in Paris. It was on the strength of his entry in the Dictionary, that a Paris Gallery offered Balson an exhibition in 1960 during their trip together.

⁹ Ibid, 326.

¹⁰ Crowley Archives, Correspondence.

¹¹ Idem.

¹² Crowley Archives Correspondence

¹³ Michel Seuphor, *Dictionary of Abstract Painting*, Methuen, London, 1958.

ROBERT KLIPPEL

In 1952 Balson shared an exhibition at the Macquarie Galleries with Robert Klippel. About two years earlier, Balson and Crowley had made the acquaintance of Klippel, who had recently returned from living in London and Paris. At the time there was still very little appreciation of abstract art in Australia. In his review of the Balson/Klippel Exhibition, James Gleeson said he felt that there was no content in abstract art – ‘We cannot relate it to ordinary life’.¹⁴ Klippel had not enjoyed his time in London, but he spent a productive eighteen months in Paris. He had lived in an atelier, Boulevard Arago in Montparnasse, so he and Crowley could share their memories of Paris and of the stimulating times they had spent discussing art in cafes like The Dôme. He had felt very happy and ‘truly at home in Paris and I wished to spend my life working there’¹⁵. However, with his income terminated he had to return to Australia and found it very difficult working in an unsympathetic environment. With Crowley and Balson he could share both his experiences of Paris and his interest in abstract art. Looking back on those years, he later wrote to Crowley –

I will always treasure the times I spent with you both at 227 George Street and Balson’s magnificent gesture to share his Exhibition at Macquarie Galleries in 1952. I am extremely grateful for your friendship (both you and Balson) during those (extremely) hard years. I felt so alone and you both gave me the confidence to push more deeply into my work – and that serious art was truly significant.¹⁶

Crowley and Balson had been working in isolation for many years so readily understood Klippel’s predicament. No doubt the friendship was beneficial to all three artists for their mutual support.

¹⁴ James Gleeson, *The Sun*, Sydney, 21 May 1952.

¹⁵ Crowley Archives, Correspondence, Letter from Robert Klippel dated 29.10.1975.

¹⁶ *Idem*.

HIGH HILL

1953 was a landmark year for Crowley. In September, her brother Ken died and this led to the sale of the family property, Glen Riddle. With proceeds from this sale, Crowley chose to purchase a property named High Hill on Oxley Drive, Mittagong. This was a spacious house surrounded by large grounds, set high up on the north side of Mt. Gibraltar and well back above the road, providing a very private and quiet area in which to live and work. The well-planned garden had all year round colour and sectioned areas were connected with sandstone pathways. The weatherboard house with tiled roof overlooked the terraced gardens and lawns that reached down the hill, and was not visible from the road. It was here that Crowley converted a double garage into an additional studio for Balson. She claimed that the large garden needing her constant attention, finished her painting career. The fact that Balson turned 65 years of age and became eligible for the pension in August 1955, is almost certainly the reason for the purchase of the property. Balson retired from house-painting and was finally able to work full-time on his painting. His wife had died so he sold the house at Maroubra and moved to High Hill. Crowley seems to have been content to provide Balson with the opportunity to spend his retirement doing what he had wanted to do for so long, and later wrote -

All he needed for creative work was space and solitude, supplemented by books, mostly on art, science, poetry, the best in contemporary novels, his mind always avant-garde ...

For the pent-up energy and frustration which had dogged him all his past life seemed literally to pour out from him.¹⁷

She seems to have found some contentment with her friendship and partnership with Balson. The frustration he felt as an artist was something she shared, having had to leave Paris when opportunities were opening up for her, and they had both had to meet family obligations for many years.

During the 1950s a couple living together but not legally married, would have been considered inappropriate. Accordingly, Crowley and Balson were discreet about their living arrangements,

¹⁷ Crowley Archives, Notes on Balson.

the house no doubt chosen for its quiet location with maximum privacy. Local residents apparently believed that Balson resided in the converted garage where he painted, and they marveled at his fortitude in the cold winters.¹⁸ Crowley's great-niece commented: 'There was much in her life she kept private'.¹⁹ And in spite of her warm relationship with her Uncle Archie, it seems her relationship with Balson was something that Crowley kept to herself. When writing to her uncle from London in April 1960, she does not mention Balson by name –

I met another Australian artist who is just as mad – or even madder – than I am – and we have been getting around together, my companion having had a little previous experience of the intricacies of London streets.²⁰

Balson had left Australia several weeks before Crowley to spend some time visiting his relatives in America and England, prior to meeting Crowley in London.

EXHIBITIONS

By the early 1950s, paintings by Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale and Albert Tucker being shown overseas in Paris and London, drew attention to uniquely Australian experiences and attitudes. This created an interest in Australian contemporary art overseas and also within Australia. An exhibition organised by the Arts Council of Great Britain in London in June 1953 as part of the celebrations surrounding the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, featured Australian contemporary artists. Balson had been one of the painters included in this exhibition, along with Drysdale, Nolan, Tucker, Jean Bellette, Lloyd Rees, Justin O'Brien, Donald Friend, Godfrey Miller and Frank Hinder. Bellette, married to Paul Haefliger, art critic for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, was part of the more fashionable neo-romantic painters circle of the time. Haefliger was unconvinced about abstract art describing it as 'lacking in vitality'. At best he saw it as a 'splendid means to master composition'²¹ for young painters, when reviewing an exhibition of the Contemporary Art Society in March 1955.

¹⁸ A telephone conversation with a Bowral resident, Carmen Wright, in March 2005, seeking information for a publication on artists who have resided on Mt. Gibraltar, Mittagong, revealed that a local resident and former neighbour of Crowley's believed that Balson had lived in the converted garage.

¹⁹ Pippa Kay, *Grace Crowley*, Short Story Archive, Aylad Writers' Group, www.publications.com/aylad/shortstory. 3.

²⁰ Crowley Archives, Correspondence file.

²¹ Smith, *Australian Painting*, 310.

However, by 1955 the post-war generation of young painters were given new impetus through the leadership of painter, Elwyn Lynn. Elected to the CAS executive and appointed editor of its *Broadsheet*, Lynn printed useful news of events overseas and stimulated discussion and questioning of accepted assumptions. He subscribed to a number of art journals from England and America which kept him up-to-date with trends in those countries. Also in Sydney, Carl Plate sold English and European art books in his Notanda Gallery in Rowe Street.

One of the most influential exhibitions in the post-war era was *French Painting Today* which toured all Australian capital cities between January and September, 1953. This afforded artists an opportunity to view original works by Braque, Chagall, Matisse, Dufy, Ernst, Utrillo, Derain, Vlaminck and Picasso, as well as Manessier, Soulages, Vieira da Silva and Hans Hartung who seemed to leave a lasting impression on the work of some young artists. Between 1956 and 1959 a number of exhibitions were held in Australia of British, German, Italian and Japanese contemporary art.

Until the mid-1950s knowledge of abstract art came mainly from England and Europe but in the *CAS Broadsheet* of March 1955 introduced discussion of American abstract expressionism, action painters, along with tachism. The American contribution to contemporary art was further made known through lectures by visiting experts – Dr. Grace McCann Morley (1956), Professor Dorothy Cogswell (1957) and Australian modernist, Mary Cecil Allen (1960), who had left Australia for America to extend her own interest in modern art. John Passmore, then teaching the techniques of Cézanne to his students, exerted much influence on the acceptance of abstract painting in this period.

In 1956, James Gleeson was appointed to curate and accompany the Pacific Loan Exhibition of Australian Contemporary Art on board the P. and O. Liner *Orcades*, leaving Sydney on 5th October for Auckland, Honolulu, Vancouver and San Francisco, returning to Sydney on 12th November. Crowley was asked to contribute paintings but directed him to Balson's art, resulting in two of Balson's non-objective paintings being selected for the exhibition. Both Gleeson and

Haefliger were enthusiastic about this exhibition. Haefliger wrote – ‘Australian art has sprung to life in this most important of all exhibitions’.²² Gleeson, who travelled with the show, described it ‘as a honey of a show’ and said that the paintings which created the most interest in America were ‘those committed to the extreme forms of abstraction or abstract expressionism’.²³ Haefliger asserted that the importance of this exhibition could not be overestimated and, with these endorsements, abstract expressionism became part of the Australian art scene.²⁴

With Balson retired and painting full-time, he experimented with new techniques while Crowley ceased her own painting to commit herself fully to supporting and promoting Balson’s art. He had his paintings hung in exhibitions at the David Jones Gallery in 1957, The Matson Lines Exhibition of Australian Art in 1959, and Blaxland Gallery in 1960. As a result of this latter exhibition, he was offered a solo exhibition at a Brisbane Gallery but had to decline, as he and Crowley were about to leave for an extended trip overseas.

ENGLAND AND FRANCE

Leaving Sydney on 13 March 1960, Balson flew to New York to visit his brother, Leslie; then on to Dorset to visit relatives. Crowley was farewelled by her brother, Wilfred, and Uncle Archie from Mascot on 3 April to fly direct to London, but with many stops for refuelling – Darwin, Singapore, Bangkok, Bahrain, Calcutta, Cairo and Rome. A postcard sent to her Uncle Archie about that time, thanks him for seeing her off and she tells him –

Those lengthy stops at various airports where we were given refreshments and could walk around, prevented passengers from becoming over-weary from too long sitting. I’ve never in all my life had such travel comfort, or been attended with such sweet consideration.²⁵

Having spent much of her later life caring for her parents and Balson, Crowley obviously appreciated receiving some caring attention herself.

²² Paul Haefliger, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 October 1956. Crowley Archives, Newspaper clippings.

²³ James Gleeson, *The Sun*, (Sydney), 1 December 1956. Crowley Archives. Newspaper clippings.

²⁴ Bernard Smith, 295-315.

²⁵ Crowley Archives, Correspondence.

Balson met Crowley in London and together they spent time visiting galleries and looking at the work of abstractionist and texture painters – Tapiés, Burri, Riopelle. They were also able to see work of American modern painters – Reinhardt and Elsworth Kelly. On 20 May, visited the Gallery Creuze in Paris, where Balson had been invited to have an exhibition of his abstract work. They travelled to Exeter, Devon and installed themselves in the small, historical town of Crediton (seven miles from Exeter) to paint, Balson preparing for his exhibition in Paris. In June they made a pilgrimage to London to see a Picasso Exhibition, then returned to Devon. By the time they left on Sunday 2 October, Balson had prepared twenty-seven paintings and had them framed. Crowley had painted there happily but when they were leaving she only took five sketches and three paintings, which she had framed. She later admitted to not knowing what to do with them all and, being a harsh critic of her own work, recalled putting a hammer to all but the three she took to Paris. There Raymond Creuze, Director of two galleries – Salle Balzac and Salle Messines – ‘saw them and liked them very much, and asked me to leave them with him to exhibit in group shows, and it is through this incident that I met a sculptor named Szabo who is Director of l’Academie de Feu in the Rue Delhambre in Paris.’²⁶ It is evident from this incident that her own highly critical opinion of her art was not shared by others. Creuze was no doubt an astute connoisseur of art and it seems Crowley had lost none of her talent since 1929, when hung beside Lhote.

Her recollections are full of nostalgia for the time she and Dangar spent in Paris. The notes she left, record her visit to Szabo’s Academy where she wandered around the area recalling time spent with friends. The old Dôme Café – famous rendezvous des artistes – right alongside the Rue Delhambre, where she and Anne sometimes had coffee.

The Rotonde en face, hadn’t moved its position in 28 years and further on I could see La Coupole, which was a new café-restaurant just opened when I left Paris for Australia. Then strolled along the Rue Delhambre and stopped dead in my tracks before ‘La Corbeille’ the tiny restaurant where Anne and I and other students from Lhote’s school used to have our evening meal. I studied the menu which is always pinned outside cheap restaurants and my mouth began to water

²⁶ Ibid. Box 4.

for sure enough, there was my delicious chateaubriand which I ordered unfailingly every evening. Unbelievably, a few doors away the Chinese restaurant where many of Lhote's students dined, but Anne and I only sometimes, because the meals were more costly.²⁷

With this flood of memories, she visited Szabo's very dilapidated Academy whereupon he invited her to stay at his Chateau about fifty miles outside of Paris. The next day she and Balson climbed into his dusty car and drove north through flat country filled with the russet colouring of autumn, to the tiny village of Ravenal. The Chateau, on first sight looked old, but once inside they found it to be well-heated, clean, bright and modernised. They were warmly greeted by Szabo's French-Canadian wife and two charming young daughters. This provided them with more opportunity to paint in preparation for Balson's Exhibition at Creuze's Salle Messines Gallery, which opened on 30th November, 1960.

What a sense of achievement and satisfaction this occasion must have been for Crowley. Having missed her own opportunity for a Parisian exhibition in 1929, spent many years developing and extending her own studies in abstraction along with Balson, and then nurtured and supported Balson's art for many years, this must have felt like a crowning achievement for so many years of neglect from the Australian art world.

Crowley and Balson then returned to Sydney on about 12th March, 1961 to their retirement lifestyle of painting in their quiet retreat on Mt. Gibraltar between Mittagong and Bowral. Balson continued to experiment with different abstract painting styles. He had just prepared a painting to enter in the Transfield Prize, when he was taken ill and admitted to hospital. He died on 27 August 1964. They had been preparing to leave on another trip overseas, this time to America, but Crowley did not go on that occasion. Crowley stayed at High Hill until late in 1966 and in 1967 purchased a home unit at Manly.

²⁷ Idem. A postcard dated 12th January, 1977 to Crowley from Mary Eagle reported to her that there was no sign of Lhote's Academy in Rue d'Odessa, nor of the restaurant 'La Corbeille'.

Her great niece described the Manly unit as ‘too ordinary’ for her great aunt Grace – it was new but not modern. The unit was on the fourth floor of a red-brick, high-rise block of units on a Manly peninsula with a magnificent view over Manly Cove and down Sydney Harbour. It was far enough away from the town centre to be relatively quiet but only a short, pleasant walk to the ferry and shops. There were blank walls and she told her family – ‘I want to put up all my paintings. I want to be surrounded by the things I love to see, but the light’s not good enough and I need good lights to see them properly’. So her family helped her to install track lighting on the ceilings of all her rooms and hung her paintings, her own and those of her friends, Balson, Hinder and Fizelle, on the walls.

Curator Elena Taylor found pictures of Crowley’s unit taken in 1979 and she was most impressed with Crowley’s elegance and artistic sensibility. When mounting Crowley’s first retrospective exhibition in 2007, she featured a whole wall sized version of the photo at the entrance to the Exhibition as a statement of Crowley’s modernity.²⁸

RECOGNITION AT LAST

In 1966 the Art Gallery of New South Wales prepared an exhibition to honour the forerunners of the contemporary abstract art movement in Sydney – Balson: Crowley: Fizelle: Hinder. After Balson’s death in 1964, Crowley had suggested to Daniel Thomas that the Gallery hold an exhibition of Balson’s work, but it was decided to include Fizelle, Hinder and Crowley herself. This was the first major exhibition to bring Crowley’s work to a wider public audience. Mary Alice Evatt, by then a Trustee of the Art Gallery, on Wednesday 5 October 1966, officially opened the Exhibition to show what these artists as a group and as individuals had contributed to the modern movement of art in Australia. The Exhibition showed the common ideals that were the basis of their creative art during the 1930s.

²⁸ Taylor, *Crowley*, 6. Comments by Taylor on Curator’s tour 3 March 2007.

Wallace Thornton's review of the Exhibition in the *Sydney Morning Herald* recognised the four artists as having been the avant-garde pacesetters of the thirties, introducing to Australia a new approach to art. He acknowledged that up until then, Australian artists were involved in 'conventional academism or impressionism'. The art of these pioneers had a freshness compared with the 'stuffy, ponderous art' of the thirties, with its 'clarification of forms and use of restrained, subtle colour harmonies'. He found Balson and Crowley to be the most impressive as painters describing Crowley's 'ordered shapes and colours ... most impressive realisations of her abstracted concept.' He described Balson as the 'most painterly' of the four artists with a 'characteristic architectural order that remained his own'. This abstracted architectural order was the keynote of the modernist movement – the underlying geometry from the golden section and dynamic symmetry. In his final paragraph he foresaw eventual recognition of their contribution, some thirty years later –

If these four artists had few followers and were denied influence by the advent of abstract expressionism in this country, they were courageous innovators and today, with the coming of the hard-edged style, their contributions to painting here has a new significance.²⁹

Crowley and Hinder had contributed much information for the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition and this has been used by subsequent generations of researchers. It was noted that 'Balson had learnt about modern art from books and was immediately drawn to those artists with first-hand knowledge.'³⁰ Balson's biographer, Bruce Adams, acknowledged Crowley as a 'studious, highly trained artist' who taught him 'quite specific theories of plastic art' and through their thirty years of friendship 'fostered Balson's sense of involvement in the history and transformation of late cubism and abstraction in Europe'.³¹ This exhibition took place at a time when a new generation of artists in Australia were producing paintings with an emphasis on colour relationships – Dick Watkins, Tony McGillick, Michael Johnson and Gunter Christmann among them.

²⁹ Wallace Thornton, 'Look back at yesterday's innovators', *Sydney Morning Herald*, Wednesday 5 October 1966. Crowley Archives, Newspaper clippings.

³⁰ Free, *Balson, Crowley*, 6.

³¹ Adams, *Balson*, 10.

As a result of the Second World War, many innovative artists from Europe moved to America and also Australia, where they influenced a generation of artists through their teaching, painting, architecture and design principles – Moholy-Nagy had been part of the Abstraction-Création Group in Paris (1932-6) and established the Institute of Design in Chicago, based on Bauhaus principles, from 1938-46. Also disseminating Bauhaus principles were Walter Gropius at Harvard, Joseph Albers at Yale, while Mies van der Rohe, Herbert Bayer and Marcel Breuer applied the principles developed at the Bauhaus into architecture and design. Mondrian, whose importance rests on his development of ‘pure’ abstraction, also extended his influence by moving to America. He was, of course, a major influence on Balson, who was later discovered by Australian geometric painters.

When the large exhibition – *Two Decades of American Painting* toured to Australian galleries in 1967, Australians were finally able to see some of the art from America. This showed the works of American abstract painters – Albers, Rothko, Reinhardt and Stella – to many a new experience, except for people like Crowley and Klippel, who had witnessed the early development of modern abstract art in Paris three decades before. Albers and Arshile Gorky had originally been part of the European Abstraction-Création Society, many artists in the exhibition had studied in Paris, coming into contact with cubist, surrealist and modernist influences – Adolph Gottlieb, Willem de Kooning, Hans Hoffman, Elsworth Kelly, Joan Mitchell, Robert Motherwell, Robert Rauschenberg, Mark Tobey and Bradley Walker Tomlin, while the younger artists were influenced by these painters. In his catalogue essay Irving Sandler said that there were two main attitudes among the diversity of contemporary art – one that emerged from an ardent romantic outlook in the 1940s and 50s and gave rise to abstract expressionism; and the second that developed as a reaction to it, by a more classically minded, younger generation of artists who valued a more impersonal and impassive artistic expression. He described Stella’s paintings as ‘monuments to a new classicism’, and recent optical paintings and geometric compositions as ‘new experiments with visual sensations that follow those of Seurat, Albers and Vasarely and other scientifically minded artists’. Lucy Lippard attributed the rejection of abstract expressionism to ‘the prevalent non-romantic concept of simultaneous detachment ... and a general orientalisation of our electric age’. She had observed that the new interpretation

of ‘cool’ applied to the new ‘teenage culture’ as well as current art. ‘Cool’ was first popularly applied to the new craze of jazz.³² Jazz was popular in Paris in the 1920s when Crowley lived there. All of this must have brought a wave of nostalgia for Crowley - jazz and the new classicism of modern art. It had taken over thirty years for these ideas to permeate, via America, to Australia and be ‘discovered’.

Gallery A held a second Memorial Exhibition for Ralph Balson in 1968 devoted to his constructive paintings, done between 1941 and 1956 – the period when he and Crowley painted together. Reviewing the Exhibition, James Gleeson described the works as ‘remarkable’ and Balson as an ‘artist ahead of his time’. He said that at the time, these paintings appeared to be out of step and reliant on exhausted ideas. With hindsight, he believed that they were ‘the springboard for much of the hard-edged abstraction and op-art’ of the time. He saw these constructive paintings as stripped down to a few essentials, tempered with restraint and discipline, but ‘a discipline aimed at freedom’. For Gleeson these paintings were filled with ‘a gorgeousness of colour that made the canvasses sing’ - ‘The eye floats, glides or skips from colour to colour and from area to area as though engaged in a delightful game, but the rules are laid down quite definitely by the artist. He remains in control of the eye’s choreography.’³³ It is little wonder that Crowley kept and must have treasured such high praise, written about Balson’s paintings, but which equally applied to her own during that period.

CROWLEY RETROSPECTIVE 1975

On 10 May 1975 (International Women’s Year) just a few days before her eighty-fifth birthday, the Art Gallery of New South Wales opened the first retrospective exhibition to feature Crowley. It was fitting that her Project 4 Exhibition followed the Exhibition *Modern Masters: Manet to Matisse*, the artists who had originally inspired modernism and Crowley’s art. Twenty years after the event, Joanna Mendelssohn remembered ushering Crowley into the Exhibition –

³² Irving Sandler, Lucy Lippard, in *Two Decades of American Painting*, exh.n.cat., National Gallery of Victoria 6 June – 9 July, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 26 July – 20 August 1967, np.

³³ James Gleeson, *Artist ahead of his time*, Art by James Gleeson, *The Sun*, Wednesday 17 July 1968. Crowley Archives, Newspaper clippings.

She wished to see just one painting, Henri Matisse's *Large Interior in Red* ...
 And this pioneer of modern art just stood and stared. The effect of great art
 reverberates through time, and twenty years later this painting still haunts me.³⁴

Crowley felt rather overwhelmed to find her own Exhibition hung in the same space as the modern masters, and apprehensive about its reception, but she need not have worried.

Daniel Thomas curated the exhibition, interviewing Crowley and gathering from her, many pencil sketches and drawings that had 'been tossed around for 40 years,'³⁵ and had them framed, along with twenty-five paintings. Thomas arranged for Crowley to attend the Gallery on Friday 9 May at about 4 pm. To her great surprise, she found her paintings and drawings hung in a very prominent position in the Gallery, with many people attending who said 'nice things about my work' and she 'began to believe they meant what they said'.³⁶

The Hinders and Klippel glowed about the exhibition. Daniel brought up the whole of the staff and introduced them and I sat like Queen Victoria, not amused, but somewhat dazed – but oh so grateful to those people who had conspired to be so sweet to me.

And so the dreaded exhibition which had, in anticipation, churned up so many butterflies in Gracie's tummy ended up in something like a fairy tale.³⁷

Crowley's work was again on display later that year in an exhibition opened at the Art Gallery of New South Wales on 10 October 1975 - *Australian Women Artists – One Hundred Years: 1840-1940*. Curator Janine Burke asked Crowley to write a one thousand word essay about her life as an artist, which was published intact and became an invaluable resource to art historians and students. Her friend and fellow artist, Margel Hinder, also contributed information about her development as a modernist sculptor. It had taken over thirty-five years for these trendsetting artists to gain public recognition of their contribution to Australian art.³⁸ As she wrote to a friend

³⁴ Joanna Mendelssohn, 'Mind of a Master', *The Bulletin*, 25 April 1995, 81. Crowley Archives, newspaper clippings.

³⁵ Crowley Archives, Personal recollections.

³⁶ *Idem*.

³⁷ *Ibid*. Draft of a letter written to Bruce Adams dated 25 May 1975.

³⁸ *Ibid*. Carolyn Osterhaus, 'Into the world of women's art', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 October 1975.

The Australian Public queued up to see the Art Gallery of New South Wales Exhibition of *Modern Masters – Manet to Matisse* loaned to us from MOMA. 1930 to 1975 is a long stretch, but it just goes to show how public opinion alters – if you wait long enough.³⁹

In the Australia Day Honours List of 26 January 1976, Crowley was made a Member of the Order of Australia for services to Art. She received many letters of congratulations, which although long overdue, were much appreciated by her and have become part of her archival resources.⁴⁰

THE MODERN WOMAN

According to her great niece, Crowley maintained her interest in modernity all through her life and this encompassed art, music, and clothes. She was remarkably fit, for many years regularly walking up and down the six flights of stairs to her attic studio in George Street. Her niece remembered her as a vegetarian who grew exotic herbs in pots on her rooftop garden. When the family visited her, great aunt Grace made fresh carrot juice in her juice extractor and served the family vegetarian pates and mousses, along with fresh salads.⁴¹

When they visited her at High Hill at Mittagong, there was not a normal chair or table in the whole house, just bright cushions in basic colours, window seats with padded cushions and coffee tables with colourful hand-painted tiles on top. She remembered the ceiling painted by Balson in grey overlapping squares, with a smaller framed version hung on the wall, along with other modern paintings. One Christmas, she listened to, and liked, the music of the Beatles and the Moody Blues, saying it reminded her of when jazz was new. In the 1920s, modern clothing had marked young women as independent and self-assured. Crowley maintained this attitude through her life, favouring smart, well-cut clothing and accessories, the latest in kitchen

³⁹ Ibid. Correspondence.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 'Full list of recipients of Order of Australia', *Sydney Morning Herald*, Monday 26 January 1976, 13.

⁴¹ Crowley appears to have become vegetarian later in life. She had grown up on a beef cattle property and referred to having eaten chateaubriand, a specially prepared beef fillet, while living in Paris in the late 1920s.

appliances, as well as modern taste in clothing and accessories, the latest in kitchen appliances, as well as modern taste in furnishing and decoration in her homes. Her nephew described her taste in clothing as 'Bohemian' - she wore shifts with large, bold patterns, flat soled shoes or hand-painted clogs, and beads made from heavy, textured, and exotic stones.⁴²

From the time she quit her studio in the Rocks area, to make way for redevelopment in the 1970s, her fruiterer from George Street caught the ferry across to Manly once a week to deliver her fruit to his oldest and best customer. On one of these regular visits, he raised the alarm when she failed to answer the door. She had died some days earlier – with a bowl of shiny fruit on her table and her beloved paintings on her walls.⁴³ She died on 21 April 1979, just a few weeks short of her 89th birthday.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Crowley's correspondence files show that in her later years she was approached by many different people seeking information and wanting to buy her art. She was able to arrange that all of her important paintings eventually became part of major gallery collections, along with her drawings that she had retained over so many years. In February 1977 all of the letters from Anne Dangar, which she had kept and treasured for years, she donated to the Mitchell Library. In her letter to Librarian, Mrs. Suzanne Mourot she said that –

University students and others come to me for information re art history of the past and I have found them an indispensable reference. This has brought me in touch with interesting young people – and though I feel grateful for this, that task is becoming too heavy/exacting. Regretfully I say I must give it up ... it makes me too tired.⁴⁴

However, even up until the last few months of her life, Crowley was concerned about setting the record straight about the artistic history of herself and her friends. In reply to a letter requesting information early in 1979 she wrote -

⁴² Kay, *Grace Crowley*, website.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 3-4.

⁴⁴ *Idem*

You refer to the literature you have consulted; this makes me feel very uneasy. For the past six months, I have contemplated making a list of the hotch-potch of misinformation contained in ‘ the literature’ I have read concerning that period of art history concerning myself and my contemporaries in the 30s and 40s and making corrections as I know them.⁴⁵

Her Archives are full of notes, letters and papers that are frequently corrected in red pen, in Crowley’s elegant handwriting, making them a treasure trove of information for art historians. Her generosity in sharing her artistic experience with researchers and curators in her later years, and the donation of her papers, have made a great contribution to the knowledge of this period of art history. In a letter written to her, a friend said ‘You’ve made an art of bringing out the best talent in others’.⁴⁶

PUBLICATIONS

As part of the reclamation of the role of women artists in Australia that took place in the last two decades of the twentieth century, Helen Topliss researched Anne Dangar’s story, edited and published these letters in *Earth, Air, Fire, Water*. The telling of Dangar’s story can certainly be attributed to Crowley’s efforts of retaining and documenting her friend’s life.

One of the university students she befriended was Bruce Adams. Their friendship lasted many years as she shared with him the story of Ralph Balson’s life and art, and also told him about Anne Dangar’s life. In 1989, ten years after Crowley’s death, Adams curated a Retrospective of Ralph Balson’s life and art and wrote the accompanying catalogue. Were it not for Crowley’s meticulous record-keeping and her unwavering commitment to these two artists, much less would be known of their lives. She made their life and art available to future generations of art historians.

⁴⁵ Crowley Archives, AGNSW, Correspondence file, 92/3, draft reply to a letter from Peter Pinson dated 30 January 1979 requesting information.

⁴⁶ Crowley Archives. Letter from Dorothy Adams dated 31 May 1975.

Crowley had lived through a period in the 1920s when women experienced a greater freedom of choice in their lives, than previous generations. She was able to pursue a career as an artist and teacher and travel to Paris with her friend, unchaperoned. In Paris they discovered themselves in an artistic Garden-of-Eden, surrounded by a wealth of cultural life and personal freedom they could never have experienced in Australia, and the opportunity to learn first-hand the latest in art techniques and movements. Having returned to Australia out of a sense of duty to her family, her knowledge and teaching skills were used to introduce the latest techniques of modernism to Sydney for a few years, until the Second World War brought a dramatic change in the status of women. It was many years later, in the 1970s during another period of feminist awareness, that her work, and that of other marginalised women artists, could be appreciated by a younger generation of emancipated women.⁴⁷

During this period of reassessment, Crowley's role was included as part of an overview of contribution by women. She was one of many women artists who had pursued their art with very little recognition. She was recognised by some of the writing as a clever, intelligent, independent woman who was described as an intellectual artist ahead of her time. At the time of those writings she was in her eighties, having spent over thirty years of her life giving more support to Balson and Dangar than to her own art. She was a modest person who had received very little encouragement for her own art over many years. The belated interest and attention to her art was something she found a little surprising but she was grateful for it. However, she could not be objective about her own role, although she gave many valuable insights. During the 1980s and 1990s Ralph Balson's art has received a reassessment from a new generation of artists, with Balson, Crowley and Hinder now regarded as pioneers of geometric abstraction in Australia. As Crowley herself noted, writings about them are often inaccurate and, as I studied her Archives, I came to the conclusion that her role in the development and introduction of abstraction to Australia has been greatly misunderstood and underestimated, mainly through her own promotion of Balson, and denial of her own role.

⁴⁷ Jeanette Hoorn, Ed., *Strange Women: Essays in Art and Gender*, Melbourne University Press, 1994, 1-6. This set of essays examined the way in which the role played by women artists had been repressed and misrepresented by a patriarchal, misogynist society. In these essays, women set out to reclaim the role women played in Australian art history, a role denied them in the past.

CHAPTER 7: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

The French poet, Gustave Flaubert, in 1852 dreamed of an art that would obey its own laws of harmony and relationship and said that art would become something ‘which will hold the balance between algebra and music’.¹ He envisaged an art that had left behind painting from observation and would be created by using laws of harmony and relationships. This art was realised in abstract painting based on laws of geometry. From the second half of the nineteenth century and for most of the twentieth century, artists explored these ideas. Grace Crowley was one of them.

Geometric abstraction in Europe evolved over a long period of time, through many different artists. Cézanne created his paintings based upon a plan, a system of objective mathematics: he used the golden section. Seurat’s aesthetic and technique are constructed on a theory of harmony, a musical language that defines the mood of the painting. He also used the golden section. From the Section d’Or Group of painters in Paris around 1910 came painters who built their art on the relationship of numbers and ratios, (Lhote, Villon) and other painters who concentrated on colour and its harmony, passage and movement (Delaunay, Kupka).² Kandinsky, commenting on Cézanne’s *Bathers*, a composition in a triangle, believed that Cézanne’s use of the old (Renaissance) principle of geometric form gave it a new soul.³ In his work the triangle represented the life of the spirit.⁴ Kandinsky’s abstract paintings were based on geometrical frameworks, as were those of Mondrian and the De Stijl Group, who created a pictorial language to make universal harmony visible and to clearly show the laws governing man and nature. Mondrian believed that harmony of relations came through – relations of position: the right angle and parallels; relations of proportion: simple division and the golden ratio; and relations of colour: discreet and sonorous harmonies of unshaded tones.

¹ Jaffé, *Geometrical Abstraction*, 163.

² Ibid. 163-173.

³ Bouleau, *Secret Geometry*, 230.

⁴ Kandinsky, *Spiritual in Art*, 6.

Crowley lived in Paris at a time when all these ideas were maturing and becoming visible and Dangar's letters kept her informed of key developments in abstraction. Crowley returned from Paris with a thorough understanding of the use of the golden section and the scientific knowledge of the use of colour, she possessed the fundamental laws that, over time, equipped her to eventually create her own geometric abstract paintings. When she did have the necessary time to quietly work through those laws, she produced paintings that embodied a visual art that held the balance between mathematics and music and were tied to the strict laws of number and relationship (or ratio), as Flaubert had predicted. What is quite remarkable is that she did so in virtual isolation from the major artistic centres of the world, using the laws she had learnt, and developing her ideas on abstraction through letters from France, books and discussions with fellow-artist, Balson, who had not had the benefit of the thorough training that Crowley received.

Painting 1950 appears to be a solitary masterpiece that she developed on her own, as there appear to be no other paintings by Crowley or Balson that are at the same time appear simple and yet quite complex in its hidden geometry. It proves that Crowley had the skills of a master mathematician and geometer. Perhaps that is what her enigmatic comment meant when she said she would let someone else judge her art, when asked by Daniel Thomas in 1975.⁵ I believe she made the triangle central in this painting because to those who understood its meaning as Kandinsky had written about it, her skills were not comprehensible to those around her at the time. Her art came directly from Europe, the crucible of modernism and was only appreciated in Paris by those who understood its origin. But she knew that as more artists came to understand the language of geometric abstraction, her message and skills would be discovered and understood.

Europe had been the birthplace of modern art and abstraction but with political change and war, the principal exponents and teachers were driven out. It came to Australia, after thirty years, mainly from America and England where the major innovators had been able to develop and disseminate their ideas. Not until the mid-1950s did Australia begin to embrace modernism and abstraction, followed by a form of geometric abstraction with

⁵ Crowley Archives, Notes of interview with Crowley by Daniel Thomas in 1975.

hard-edge painting in the 1960s. Joseph Albers, formerly a teacher at the Bauhaus, one of the most important centres for the development of geometric abstraction, was one of the principal links in the move from geometric abstraction to hard-edge painting.

It was during the 1960s that the Art Gallery of New South Wales acquired a number of early modernist paintings for its collection. Amongst its acquisitions for 1965 were Ralph Balson's *Abstraction* (1951) and Grace Crowley's *Portrait of Lucie Beynis* (1929). This portrait had been painted in Paris while she was studying with André Lhote and was one of the canvasses she brought back to Australia and these 'would have been perhaps the best modern pictures to be seen in Australia'. It was reported in the Gallery's *Quarterly* journal that these paintings were acquired because 'certain movements' had been 'neglected when they were current'... for example, the cubism and geometric abstraction of Crowley, Balson and Fizelle'.⁶ Tony Tuckson's presence in the Gallery as Deputy Director, where he worked on the Aboriginal Collection from the mid-1950s and through the 1960s, coincided with the interest in abstraction. He had been taught abstraction by Balson and worked as a weekend painter, as Balson had done for so many years. The 1966 Exhibition of works by Balson, Crowley, Fizelle and Hinder, curated by Daniel Thomas, presented them as pioneers of modernism and brought their art to the attention of another generation of artists.

Interest in Balson's art increased in the late sixties with Gallery A in Sydney, then managed by James Mollison, holding Balson Memorial Exhibitions in 1967, 1968 and 1969. Patrick McCaughey, who in 1966 took Bernard Smith's position as art critic of *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne, later wrote that 'the period from 1966-1970 was a time of change and re-alignment in Australian art and the Australian art world'. He observed that there were a group of older artists – in Melbourne, Roger Kemp, Fred Williams and Donald Laycock, and in Sydney, Ralph Balson, Robert Klippel and John Passmore – who enjoyed 'the active admiration of the new generation' of artists.⁷ It was McCaughey who in 1970 articulated the contribution Crowley had made to Balson's art, pointing out that

⁶ *Acquisitions for 1965* in Art Gallery of New South Wales *Quarterly*, April, 1966, 278-287.

⁷ Patrick McCaughey, *Field Days* in Sue Cramer, *The Field Now*, Exhn.cat., Heide Park and Art Gallery, Bulleen, 1984, 23-26.

Roger Kemp's development as an artist had lacked the discipline and analytical structure that Balson had learnt from Crowley.⁸

The first temporary exhibition to be held in the National Gallery of Victoria's new building in 1968, *The Field*, brought together forty Australian artists working in various strands of abstraction. In the catalogue McCaughey wrote –

Australian art has not been rich in good abstractionists. The Ralph Balsons, Roger Kemps and Robert Klippels have been few and their work never given the prominence it deserves. It would be absurd to make exaggerated claims for the painters of *The Field*. But never before has Australian art boasted so many talented abstractionists.

Breakthroughs, revolutions, pending triumphs – these are journalists' slogans and they don't apply to the present. Australian art may be making yet another of its hopeful starts in search of a modernist tradition.⁹

Elwyn Lynn and Royston Harpur both contributed essays and the exhibition was also shown at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Many of the artists involved came from Sydney galleries – Kim Bonython Gallery, the Central Street Gallery, Gallery A and Watters Gallery. Royston Harpur and Tony McGillick were totally committed to showing geometric abstraction in Australia and promoted it aggressively during the time of the Central Street Gallery from 1967 to 1970. They played an active role in *The Field* and subsequently in the Pinotheca Gallery in Melbourne that evolved from the artists of Central Street.

John Nixon first exhibited works at Pinotheca in 1973 and claimed his early paintings were in response to works by Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman. As well as being a painter, Nixon has also acted as 'a curator, small-press publisher and historiographer of certain branches of abstract and conceptual art'. In 1980 he curated an 'important focus/survey of the mid-twentieth century' art of *Ralph Balson: 10 Constructive*

⁸ McCaughey, *Kemp*, Art and Australia, Vo.8, 1970-71, 14-15.

⁹ Patrick McCaughey, *Experience and the New Abstraction*, in N.R. Sneddon, *The Field*, exhn.cat., National Gallery of Victoria, 1968, 88-90.

Paintings 1940-1950, held at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, ‘anticipating the artist’s recuperation by art historians and the art auction houses’.¹⁰ Paul McGillick, in 1981, wrote an article on *The Importance of Ralph Balson* claiming he was ‘one of the best painters this country has produced ... also one of the most interesting ... (and) an Australian original’.¹¹

This interest in the pioneering abstractionists by a younger group of artists working in similar areas was given added impetus by the rise to prominence of Aboriginal art during the 1980s and 1990s. The widespread international acceptance of Aboriginal art as being uniquely Australian has led to many Australian artists searching for ways to connect their own art to local tradition. This was the rationale for the Exhibition *Geometric Painting in Australia 1941-1997* showing the works of fifty Australian artists in the area of geometric abstraction –

The desire to survey the history of geometric abstraction in Australia was initially motivated by the fact that non-representational painting was little appreciated here and that the achievement of our pioneering abstract painters had not been accorded due recognition. The concern that there ought to be a greater public awareness of the history of non-representational painting in Australia was given emphasis by the recent widespread national and international acceptance of ‘aboriginal abstraction’.¹²

Balson’s exhibition of non-objective art in 1941 was taken as the historical starting point, with works by Crowley and Hinder also included to acknowledge their contribution. Although reference was made to the early colour/music experiments of Roy de Maistre, Balson’s ‘important achievement’ of his 1941 exhibition ‘and his disciplined

¹⁰ Max Delaney, ‘Energy and Sunlight: John Nixon’s Shining History of Abstract Painting’ in *John Nixon EPW 2004*, exhn.cat. Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 29 May-24 July 2004, Southbank, Vic, 4.

¹¹ Paul McGillick, ‘The Importance of Ralph Balson’ in *Aspect: Art and Literature*, No. 22 October 1981, 5-6

¹² David Pectorius, *Geometric Painting in Australia 1941-1997*, University Art Museum, The University of Queensland, 1997, 11.

commitment to abstraction thereafter until his death in 1964' was seen as the most 'appropriate starting point' -

The engagement by contemporary artists with the ground breaking work of earlier generations suggests that practitioners today are not only aware of their inheritance, but regard themselves as very much part of a local tradition of geometric abstraction. For example, the additive paintings of Angela Brennan and Melinda Harper are both clearly indebted to those of Balson and Crowley yet they also retain a contemporary relevance.¹³

This exhibition included paintings by Robert Rooney, Ron Robertson Swan, Ian Burn, Robert Jacks, Tony Tuckson, Dick Watkins and others. A number of sub-genres also utilise geometric abstraction that can be traced back to the work developed by Balson. Geometric abstraction has been used by painters such as Howard Arkley in wall painting, Gail Hastings and Robert MacPherson in sculptural situations, Rose Nolan in large scale banner painting and by Robert Owen in architectural and sculptural applications, as well as his paintings.

In a survey exhibition of Robert Owen's work, among influences on his art, he acknowledged 'constructivist geometries ...(and) ... the mathematics of geometry and physics and the language of light, colour and space'.¹⁴ All these areas were explored by Crowley, Balson and Hinder. In his architectural sculpture installed on the wall of the Commonwealth Law Courts in Melbourne (1998) Owen has used cubes, hypercubes and dodecahedrons. These geometric shapes are related to the pentagon which is part of the golden section. Some of Owen's paintings of primary coloured monochromes can be referenced to 'early 20th Century Utopian modernism and the primary colours and abstract forms of movements such as the De Stijl'.¹⁵ Owen has created sculpture and architecture very much in the original spirit of De Stijl with their vision of art and architecture as an expression of universal harmony and part of the modern metropolis.

¹³ Pestorius, *Geometric Painting*, 33.

¹⁴ Zara Stanhope, 'Sculpture in the Nth Dimension: The Activation of Public Space by Robert Owen', in Wayne Tunnicliffe, *Robert Owen: Different Lights Cast Different Shadows*, exh.n.cat., The Art Gallery of New South Wales, 16 October – 28 November 2004, 13.

¹⁵ Wayne Tunnicliffe, 'Different Lights Cast Different Shadows', in *Robert Owen*, exh.n.cat., 8.

Crowley's abstract paintings were created in the same spirit and she expressed that in the way she lived and decorated both High Hill and her Manly unit.

Similar reference was made in a 2005 exhibition of work by Rick Amor, describing him as a typical Romantic, 'but he is also considered an intellectual artist in the manner of Jeffrey Smart. Every composition is carefully measured, with frequent references to the classical device of the golden section',¹⁶ expressing the harmony and beauty of proportion.

Jeffrey Smart has always described his art as 'geometry'. While at art school in Adelaide he visited Dorrit Black's studio. She gave the students her notes on dynamic symmetry which she had learnt from Lhote in Paris. He has said that he was greatly influenced by her.

She began with the geometric method for establishing the golden mean ... This was the positive eye opener and she linked it with compositions by Poussin, Tintoretto, Veronese, da Vinci and so on. And it related so clearly to Braque, Léger and above all to Cézanne.¹⁷

Smart greatly admires Cézanne and his favourite painting is Piero della Francesca's *The Flagellation*, now seen 'as the most perfect demonstration of complex yet harmonious composition'. Smart believes that every composition by Cézanne 'is an original', seeing his use of subject matter 'as merely the building blocks of composition'. For Smart, as for Cézanne, subject matter 'is only the hinge that opens the door'. His real interest in creating his art is to put 'the right shapes and the right colours in the right places'.¹⁸ So while his subject matter may be related to what he sees, its composition is abstract, based on the golden mean.

It is significant that Smart acknowledges his debt to Black's knowledge of dynamic symmetry and the golden mean learnt from Lhote and Gleizes, as the 'positive eye

¹⁶ John McDonald, 'Holey Rituals', Visual Art, Spectrum, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11-12 June 2005, 29.

¹⁷ Capon, *Jeffrey Smart*, 43.

¹⁸ Capon, *Smart*, 14.

opener' to his ongoing compositional practice. Crowley made that great discovery for herself when she joined Lhote's Academy in Paris in 1927. All three women who studied under Lhote, Crowley, Dangar and Black, tried to share this knowledge with artists in Australia on their return but were met with either opposition or indifference. Each woman in her own way continued to utilise and share what they had learnt, even though they were greatly limited by their circumstances.

George Bell had an interest in 'dynamic symmetry or the golden cut' as a theory of composition. He had books on the subject in his library and introduced the theory to Eric Thake and Clive Stephen. 'Its aesthetically pleasing principle of proportions was in keeping with Bell's intellectual and classical approach to art and his interest in mathematics'.¹⁹ Many of the artists who had trained in England and France knew of the importance of mathematical ratios and their use by the old masters, but none of them used it to move into complete abstraction as Crowley and Balson did.

CONCLUSION

The golden section has been a matter of great interest and fascination through the centuries, right up to the present day. Crowley used it to extend her own art beyond the figurative and semi-figurative. She continued to develop her art further into complete abstraction, with dynamic rhythm and harmonious colour. Working with Balson, together they explored the way other artists in Europe and England had created a new language of abstraction and they produced their own abstractions here, at the same time as the innovators from Europe were disseminating their ideas in America. But here in Australia, they were ignored and misunderstood. There was no history, no visionaries and no nurturing of creative talent here at the time. They worked in isolation in Australia but were intimately connected to the spirit of painters throughout history, with whom they shared the pleasure of creating visual beauty as an expression of their own time.

¹⁹ June Helmer, *George Bell: The Art of Influence*, Greenhouse Publications, Richmond, Vic., 1985, 11.

Now that Ralph Balson has been recognised as one of the leading innovators of geometric abstraction by a younger generation of artists keen to find a local tradition, I believe it is now time to recognise Crowley's vital contribution. Daniel Thomas, when working on Crowley's retrospective exhibition in 1975, realised that Crowley had been the person who had made possible Balson's development and continued growth as an artist.

I have argued that it would now be more appropriate to set the record straight and give to Crowley, rather than to American writer Jay Hambidge, the credit for introducing to Australian artists, the compositional methods on which modernism is based – the golden section and dynamic symmetry. Her invaluable contribution in teaching these techniques at the Crowley-Fizelle Art School, and particularly to Fizelle and Balson, and others, should see her acknowledged as one of the leading teachers of modernism in this country. I believe her teaching was indeed a crucial contribution to the George Street Group of artists – the innovators of geometric abstraction in Australia. She was a generous friend and supporter of Australian art and artists, and by her meticulous keeping of records and donating them to public institutions, she has left invaluable resources to Australian art history. My research indicates that she left at least one major compositional masterpiece in *Painting* (1950) as a statement of her great ability as a geometer and artist. It was particularly through her art that she developed the modernist aesthetic of geometric abstraction in Australia. These are her special contributions to Australian art.

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