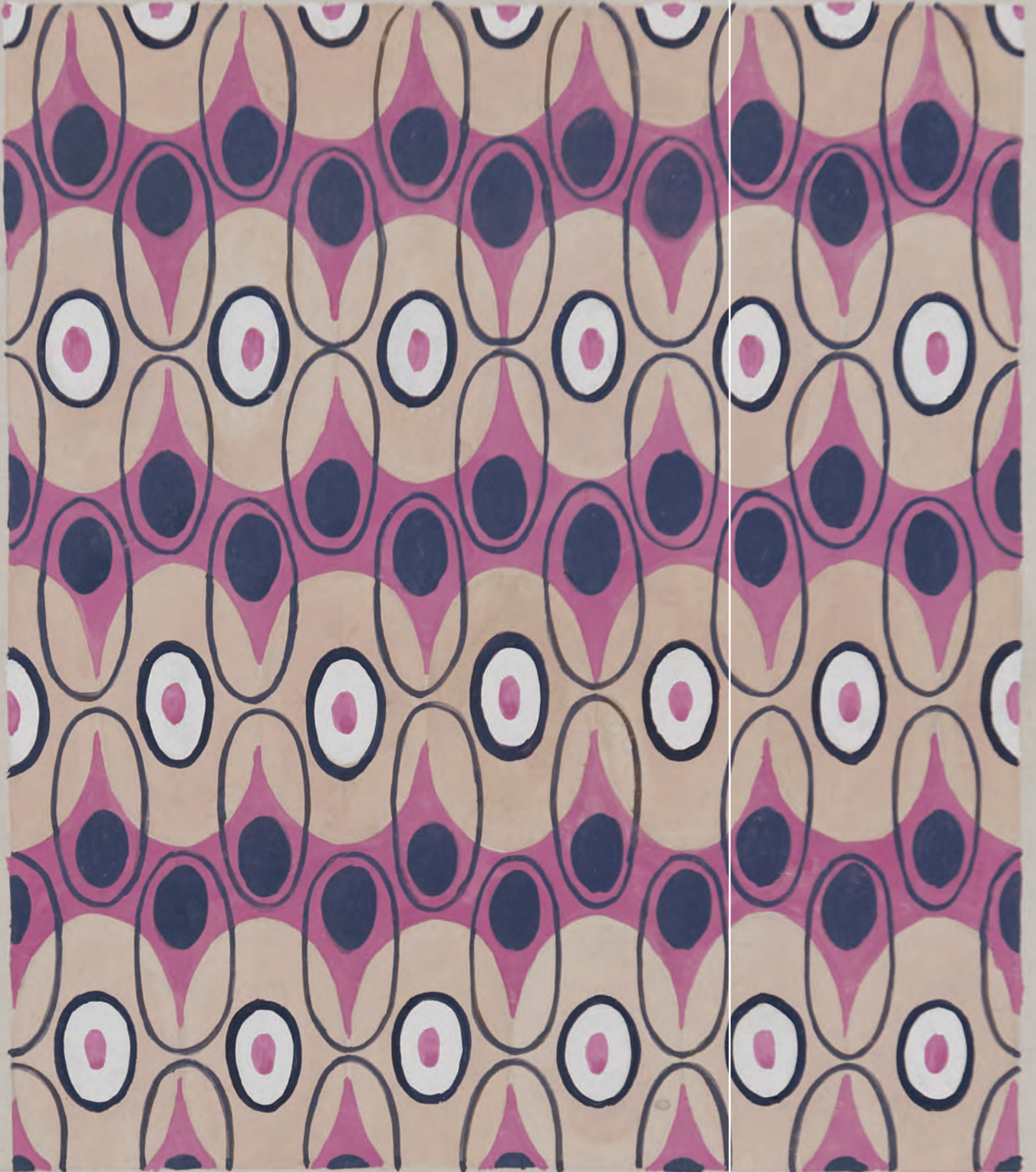


**RMIT
DESIGN
ARCHIVES
JOURNAL**

VOL 4 Nº 2 2014



SUITABLE for FOULARD.

ADDITIONS TO THE COLLECTION

Marion Fletcher

(1910–2012)

curator and costume historian

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*Mid-Century Modern:
Australian Furniture Design
at the National Gallery
of Victoria, 2014*

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Cover Image
Marion Fletcher,
design for textile
c 1950

Marion Fletcher, ON Coulson and eclarté are not particularly well known names in Australian design history but each contributed in significant ways to their fields of design practice in the second half of the twentieth century.

As Laura Jovic notes, Marion Fletcher was not only a designer and educator in the field of textile design (she taught at RMIT from 1950 to 1968) but as Assistant Curator of Decorative Arts (Textiles) she also laid the foundation for the National Gallery of Victoria's important collection of Australian and international fashion and textiles. Most significantly, in 1984 she published *Costume in Australia 1788–1901*, the first comprehensive and scholarly study of nineteenth-century Australian dress.

Catriona Quinn shows how Noel Coulson, an architecture graduate of the redoubtable GR King at The Gordon in Geelong, developed a successful practice among a prominent and wealthy client group in Melbourne, focusing primarily, though not exclusively, on domestic commissions. Coulson practised a mode of mid-century architecture that, while more ornamental than a modernist such as Robin Boyd might have allowed, nonetheless followed the modernist axiom of integrating the design of house, interior and garden into a coherent ensemble.

It was as professional weavers that Catherine Hardess and Edith 'Mollie' Grove created eclarté at the outbreak of WWII. For twenty years eclarté demonstrated a mode of modernist design practice that developed what had hitherto been a studio-based craft into a medium-scale industrial concern. Eclarté was Australia's earliest attempt to emulate the Swedish model of modernism promulgated by the Swedish Society of Craft and Industrial Design.

While Hardess and Grove could not match the Swedes' democratic goal of good design for everyone (eclarté fabrics were quite expensive) they suggest nonetheless that the impact of Scandinavian modernism, evident also in Fletcher's work, is probably an under-developed area of research in Australian modernist design studies.

Harriet Edquist, DIRECTOR

The Marion Fletcher Archive contains personal and professional correspondence, diaries, original artwork and needlework, notebooks, sketchbooks, research notes, lecture drafts and press clippings. It includes copies of Fletcher's publications as well as other books, pamphlets and journals. Date range 1939–2009.



Marion Fletcher (1910–2012): curator and costume historian

Laura Jovic



Marion Fletcher, pages from a folio showing designs for textiles, c 1950

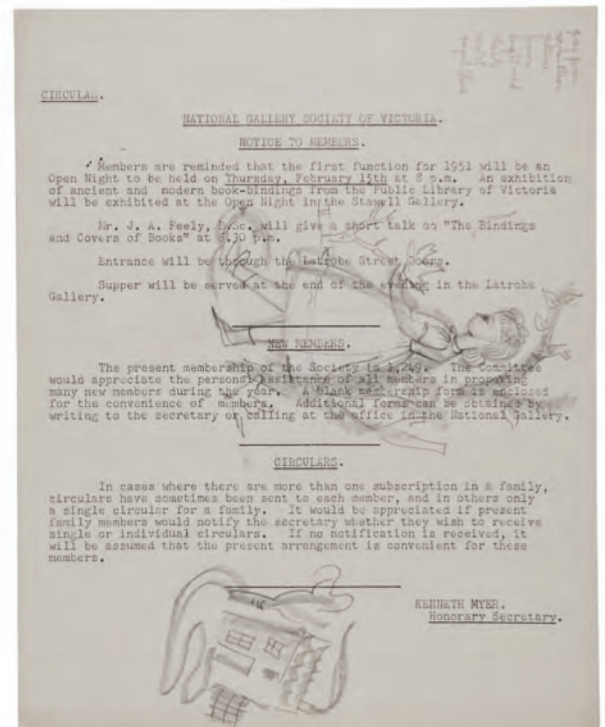
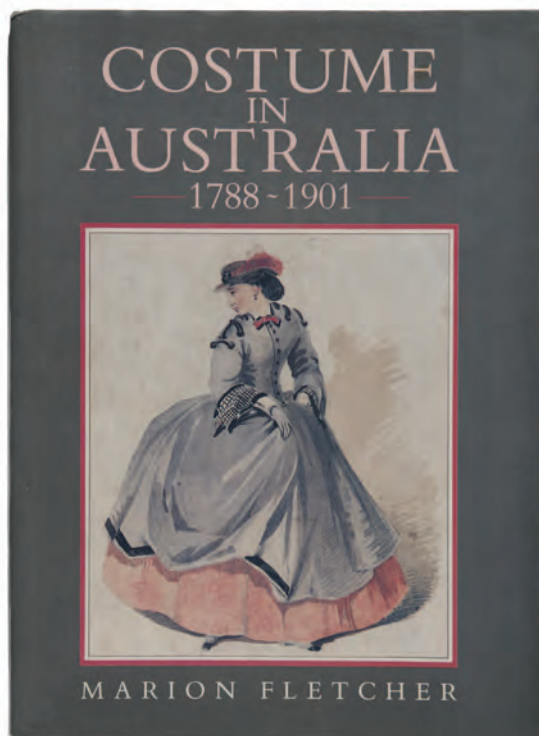
In 1984 Marion Fletcher published the first comprehensive text on nineteenth century Australian dress, titled *Costume in Australia 1788 – 1901*. Prior to this, the few books written on the subject had only sketchily followed a time-line of changing styles within the Australian context.¹

Fletcher's publication set a new standard. Through detailed research she articulated a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between dress and the aspirations of a colonial society. Fletcher was also the first researcher to examine surviving items of Australian dress and include them in the discussion. Thirty years on, it is timely to reflect on this book and where its body of research sits within the field of Australian dress studies. It is also opportune to acknowledge Fletcher's curatorial contribution to the development of the National Gallery of Victoria's (NGV) fashion and textiles collection.

In 2013, a year after Fletcher's death, her family donated her archive to the RMIT Design Archives. Spanning some sixty years, the archive traces her years as a student at the Edinburgh College of Art in the early 1930s to the latter years of her professional life. The archive provides an insight into decades of professional dedication to the field of fashion and textiles that encompassed the roles of designer, teacher, needleworker, curator and historian.

Comprising twenty-four boxes, the archive contains personal and professional correspondence, diaries, original artwork and needlework, notebooks, sketchbooks, press clippings and copious research notes and lecture drafts. It also includes notes and material collected while writing *Costume in Australia*. These resources provide insights into Fletcher's meticulous research processes and artistic grounding.

Born in Scotland in 1910, Fletcher was educated at Dalkeith High School from 1916 to 1925 and then at St George's School for Girls, Edinburgh, from 1925 to 1928. Following this, Fletcher attended the Edinburgh College of Art where she completed a Diploma in Design in 1932. Testimonials from the college attest to her being a talented and industrious student.²



This Page Above
Marion Fletcher,
*Costume in Australia
1788-1901*, Melbourne:
Oxford University
Press, 1984

**Top
Double Spread**
Marion Fletcher,
pages from a folio
showing designs for
textiles, c 1950

Bottom
Marion Fletcher,
sketches on a circular
from the National
Gallery Society of
Victoria, 1951



This Page Bottom
Marion Fletcher,
examples of various
stitches from an
Embroidery album,
c 1950

Top Right
Marion Fletcher,
embroidered cover
of Embroidery album,
c 1950

Her rounded design education included subjects taken in Antique Drawing, Perspective, Life Drawing, Historic Ornament, Hand Block Printing, Pottery, Jewellery, Leatherwork and Embroidery. Fletcher was awarded a £100 travelling scholarship from the College, which enabled her to view design practices in France, Germany, Denmark and Sweden.

Sketches of her early needlework designs communicate an artistic sensibility that is indicative of the inter-War era of British design. Also in the archive is a small brown notebook where Fletcher recorded her impressions of Germany when she made a short trip to the country in the spring of 1933, shortly after Hitler came to power. She describes the Nazi fervour she witnessed at the 1st of May festivities in Hamburg and astutely commented that, 'it seems that disarmament is useless'.³

Between 1932 and 1933 Fletcher undertook teacher training at the Edinburgh Provincial Training College and specialised in Art. The following year she attended a weaving course in Stockholm. Her studies and practical experience led her back to the Edinburgh College of Art where she taught Design from 1935 to 1942. During WWII Fletcher worked as a draughtswoman with the Air Ministry in the area of camouflage and also in the Ministry of Works. She was released from her War work in 1946 and the following year she travelled to Australia to join family in Melbourne. Here she found employment with the innovative textile designer Vida Turner, and worked in her studio for three years from 1947 to 1951.

Fletcher had the opportunity to return to teaching when, in February 1950 she joined the School of Art



at the Melbourne Technical College (RMIT University). Her teaching included embroidery and fashion illustration and she also guided the fashion students in costume research.⁴ In 1960 RMIT introduced the Associate Diploma of Art (Decorative Needlework) and in 1961 Fletcher is listed in the RMIT Prospectus as Instructress Decorative Needlework. The Associate Diploma of Embroidery was made available in 1962 and Fletcher was employed as Lecturer, Embroidery, becoming Senior Lecturer in 1964, a position she held until she resigned in 1968.

While employed at RMIT Fletcher also pursued her work as a practitioner and historian, exhibiting needlework locally and overseas and continuously researching the history of costume and textiles. In 1953 Fletcher won the Grafton Award for textile design (worth 300 guineas) with her design titled 'Hieroglyphics' which featured small figures, trees and birds on a turquoise ground.⁵ Her 1954 exhibition at the Johnstone Gallery in Brisbane, of



ten embroidered pictures of her own design, drew high praise. The works were admired not only for their exceptional technical qualities, but also as being '...remarkable for their originality, fine composition, linear grace and a rare sense of colour'.⁶ In 1955 she took six months' leave and returned to Britain where she joined the Embroiderers' Guild in London and attended their five-day residential school in Sussex.⁷

Fletcher's historical expertise and practical knowledge drew her to the NGV where she served on the committee for its centenary activities in 1961. The Director, Eric Westbrook, recognised her abilities and in October 1962 the NGV Board of Trustees approved her appointment as Honorary Curator of Costume, a rare position at that time for an Australian public institution.⁸ It also flagged the

recognition that costume was a specialist field of knowledge requiring a dedicated curator. At the time in Australia, the active collecting of costume by public galleries and museums was in its infancy, with the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (now the Powerhouse Museum) in Sydney at the vanguard.

From 1962 to her retirement in 1972, Fletcher laid the foundations at the NGV for the development of a significant collection of international and Australian fashion and textiles. In 1966 she wrote the first booklet for the gallery on an aspect of the costume collection. Titled *Female Costume in the Nineteenth Century*, this modest publication illustrates selected British and Australian dresses and accessories in the NGV's collection.⁹ Fletcher's contextualisation of the outfits using contemporaneous Australian sources foreshadowed the approach she was later to take in *Costume in Australia*.

In February 1968 Fletcher resigned from her teaching post at RMIT to take up the position of Assistant Curator of Decorative Arts (Textiles) at the NGV (until 1981 the costume and textile collection sat within the department of Decorative Arts).¹⁰ In the lead up to the opening of the NGV's newly designed building on St Kilda Road in 1968, Fletcher advised on the development of a costume gallery. Her focus for the collection was historical dress, and in a 1968 article in *The Age* Fletcher noted that the majority of the costumes in the NGV's collection dated to the nineteenth century, and been gifted to the Gallery. She acknowledged that the collection needed enlarging and elaborated that, 'we're interested in costumes of high quality in design and workmanship, which are in good condition'.¹¹

With this in mind, Fletcher oversaw the purchase of key works from the eighteenth century, including the English *Wedding dress* (1791), made of cream taffeta with a dusty pink trimming; a man's *Interior robe* (1725-1760), commonly known as a banyan (a type of eighteenth century informal dress), made in France from a 'Bizarre' silk; an English *Open robe and petticoat* (1760-1780) of yellow checked silk woven with brocaded bunches of flowers; the exquisitely embroidered *Apron* (c1725) from England; and a gentleman's *Coat* of snuff-coloured silk damask (1740s). During Fletcher's time as Honorary Curator, the Felton Bequest acquired a major collection of lace and a collection of 5th to 7th century Coptic textiles for the Gallery, thereby strengthening its holdings of historic textiles.

Although Fletcher advised developing the costume collection in the area of English dress, she did not neglect the acquisition of Australian dress.¹² It was under Fletcher that a number of Australian items came into the NGV's collection, such as the donation in 1967 of a bronze coloured satin dress dating to

This Page

Marion Fletcher,
design for a textile,
c 1950

Opposite Page

Marion Fletcher,
design for a textile,
c 1950



This Page

Top
Marion Fletcher,
drawings of costumes
for *Costume in
Australia 1788–1901*,
pencil on tracing
paper

Middle

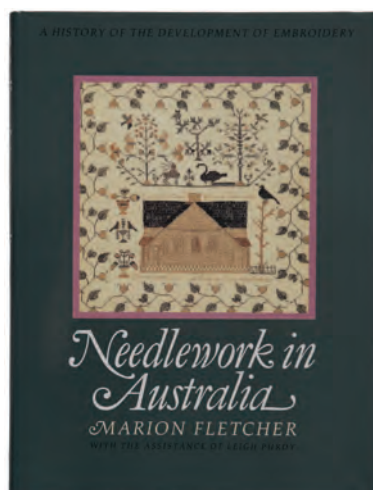
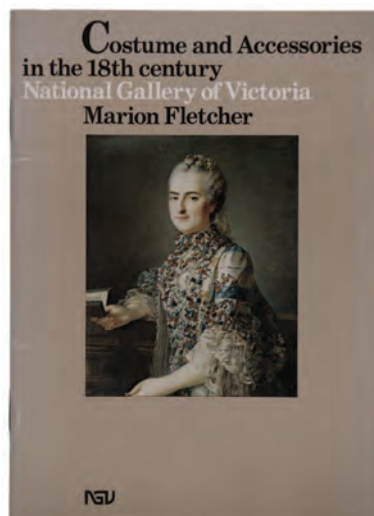
Marion Fletcher,
*Costume and
Accessories in the 18th
Century*, Melbourne:
National Gallery of
Victoria, 1977

Bottom

Marion Fletcher,
*Needlework in
Australia: a History of
the Development of
Embroidery*,
Melbourne: Oxford
University Press, 1984

Opposite Page

Marion Fletcher,
edited typescript
of opening pages
of Chapter 10,
*Costume in Australia
1788–1901*



1845-1850 with a Tasmanian provenance. The collecting of contemporary fashion at the NGV did not become a focus until much later, beginning with early acquisitions of works by local designers such as Linda Jackson and Katie Pye.

In 1970 Fletcher made a three-month study tour to Britain, Europe and America where she visited approximately fifty museums to report on the display and storage of costume and textile collections. The concluding remarks in her report emphasised the importance of being able to see actual examples of costume and textiles (reproductions in books being inadequate) and the fact that it is difficult in Australia to see comparative material.¹³ This reinforced her desire to establish a comprehensive costume collection in Australia.

Upon her retirement from the NGV in 1972 Fletcher became an Honorary Advisor and Life Member of the NGV. She endorsed the Gallery's 1974 acquisition of the Schofield collection, a major collection of historical dress that comprised some one thousand outfits, accessories, fashion journals and illustrations dating from 1760 to 1949. The purchase of the Schofield collection transformed the NGV's fashion holdings, making it a major collection of dress in Australia.

In retirement Fletcher was actively involved in founding of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop (now the Australian Tapestry Workshop) and in her late sixties and seventies she researched

183-10 2 13

16 lines

CHAPTER TEN
THE METAL IS ONLY ELECTRO
1880 - 1890

+

(Chapter Heading - Bonnet, Autumn Fashions, The Australasian Sketcher,
7 April 1886)

After generations in fear of bushrangers, the dramatic capture and hanging in Melbourne of Ned Kelly not only finally put an end to this menace, but also seemed to mark the end of an era, the end of pioneering days. Melbourne was entering the decade of its greatest prosperity and was about to surpass Sydney as the business centre of the entire colony. Handsome buildings were rising rapidly. Modern amenities such as telephones, lifts and increased public transport were adding to the comfort of life, and an avalanche of commercial development with the accompanying amassing of fortunes, made social life lively and entertainment lavish. Fashionable hostesses were vying with each other in putting on splendid occasions in their Toorak or city mansions. When the heat of summer became intolerable these leaders of society migrated to their properties at Mount Macedon or to the seaside at Queenscliff where the new fashionable sports of tennis or sea-bathing were indulged in.

The Melbourne Cup was an Australia-wide social event of the first magnitude. The other colonies had their race meetings but the 'Cup' was the apogee of them all. Since Archer won the first Cup in 1861 this fashion scene has been the subject of numerous illustrations; one of the most noted a painting by Carl Kahler of the Lawn at Flemington on Cup Day, in 1887 with named members of the Victorian Racing Club and visitors. As can be seen in this and the companion picture painted the year previously on Derby Day the ladies, who had been in a flutter of preparation for weeks, are attired in their smartest toilettes ^(bleus).

How gratifying it must have been that a visiting Frenchman who attended a Melbourne Cup in this decade should write full of praise for the dressing of the ladies on the racecourse:

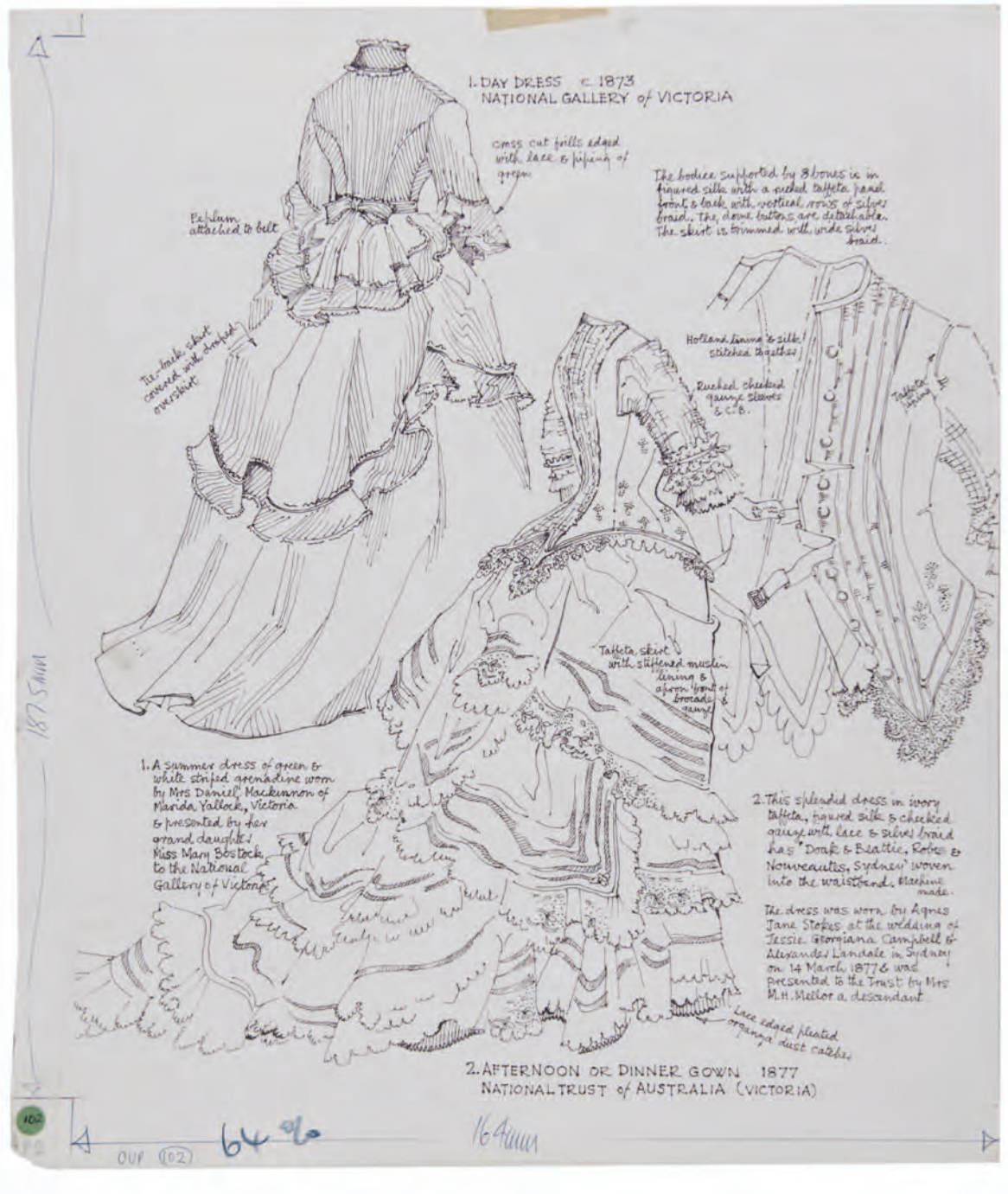
....le grand nombre de femmes jolie et gracieuses, ^{à m}élegamment vêtues de robes printanières blanches, roses, bleues et vertes, en mousseline de soie ou en satin, des plus cocuettes et des richement garnies. (1)

The ladies must have preened themselves when this seal of ^{approval} ~~praise~~ from the very fountainhead of fashion was set upon their appearance. Local reporting, nevertheless, was not letting the side down for The Australian Sketcher, 20 November 1880 had this to say about the dressing of the ladies on the Lawn at the ~~Melbourne~~ Cup:

The general elegance and chaste splendour of the dresses was the subject of universal remark, and it is therefore but right to state that whilst a few of the costumes were imported direct from Paris, the majority of them were made in Melbourne.

^{Although} ~~While~~ illustration 2 is also an artist's impression, he gives us an accurate close-up picture of a fashionable young lady of the mid-eighties clad in her smartest attire ^{while} surveying the running of the ^{big race;} ~~Cup~~ her bonnet (for it ties under the chin), the pleated silk vest, the skirt drapery and her stance with her hand on her umbrella all proclaim the year. We hope that her dress was made in Melbourne! Madame Valiant, Mdlle E. Cadervall, etc.

And a family story reveals that a Melbourne modiste who shall be nameless offered her customers excellent and totally embracing advice when she said: 'Madame must always consider all of the whole of the tout ensemble!' How right she was, as the 'total look' to use a present-day term is imperative if a fashion is not to be made to look ridiculous or a failure.



and published her seminal texts. In 1977 she wrote the booklet *Costume and Accessories in the 18th Century* for the NGV collection, followed in 1984 and 1989 respectively with the books *Costume in Australia 1788-1901* and *Needlework in Australia: a History of the Development of Embroidery* (the latter with the assistance of Leigh Purdy).¹⁴

Drawing together contemporaneous references to letters, diaries, newspapers, magazines, paintings, photographs and surviving dress, *Costume in Australia* was the first scholarly review of the dress of colonial Australia. Australian fashion, and particularly colonial era fashion, was under-researched at the time and few collections of dress had been photographed or were the subject of academic writing. The dearth of material meant that Fletcher's

legacy lies in the fact that she located and identified works in museums around the country. Fletcher effectively built a knowledge base from which to compare and analyse provenanced examples of Australian dress, establishing a bedrock of research that had been crying out to be done.

In his 'Foreword' to *Costume in Australia*, the then Director of the NGV, Eric Westbrook, acknowledged Fletcher's strength as both an historian and a person who had handled and knew the objects she wrote about. Indeed, an important feature of this book is the inclusion of examples and detailed descriptions of surviving dress and accessories, twenty-seven of which are illustrated with line drawings executed by Fletcher. The process of drawing these objects demands an analytic mind – analysing and



Opposite Page
 Marion Fletcher,
 drawings for *Costume
 in Australia 1788–1901*,
 page 133 marked up
 for publication

This Page
 Marion Fletcher,
*Costume in Australia
 1788–1901*, page 77

deconstructing the objects so that the information in the illustrations can be distilled and clearly communicated. This was a scholar so familiar with her material that she could strip back the objects to their salient features. Fletcher's accompanying descriptions and use of contemporaneous terms indicate her expertise in identifying materials, styles and construction techniques.

Since the publication of *Costume in Australia*, very few books have dealt with colonial dress in Australia. Alexandra Joel's *Best Dressed: 200 Years of Fashion in Australia* was published in 1984, but covers a larger sweep from European settlement to the time of publication, and does not refer to or analyse surviving items of dress. In 1994, Margaret Maynard published her important work, *Fashioned from Penury: Dress as Cultural Practice in Colonial Australia*, which extended the analysis of colonial dress, addressing questions concerning class and society.

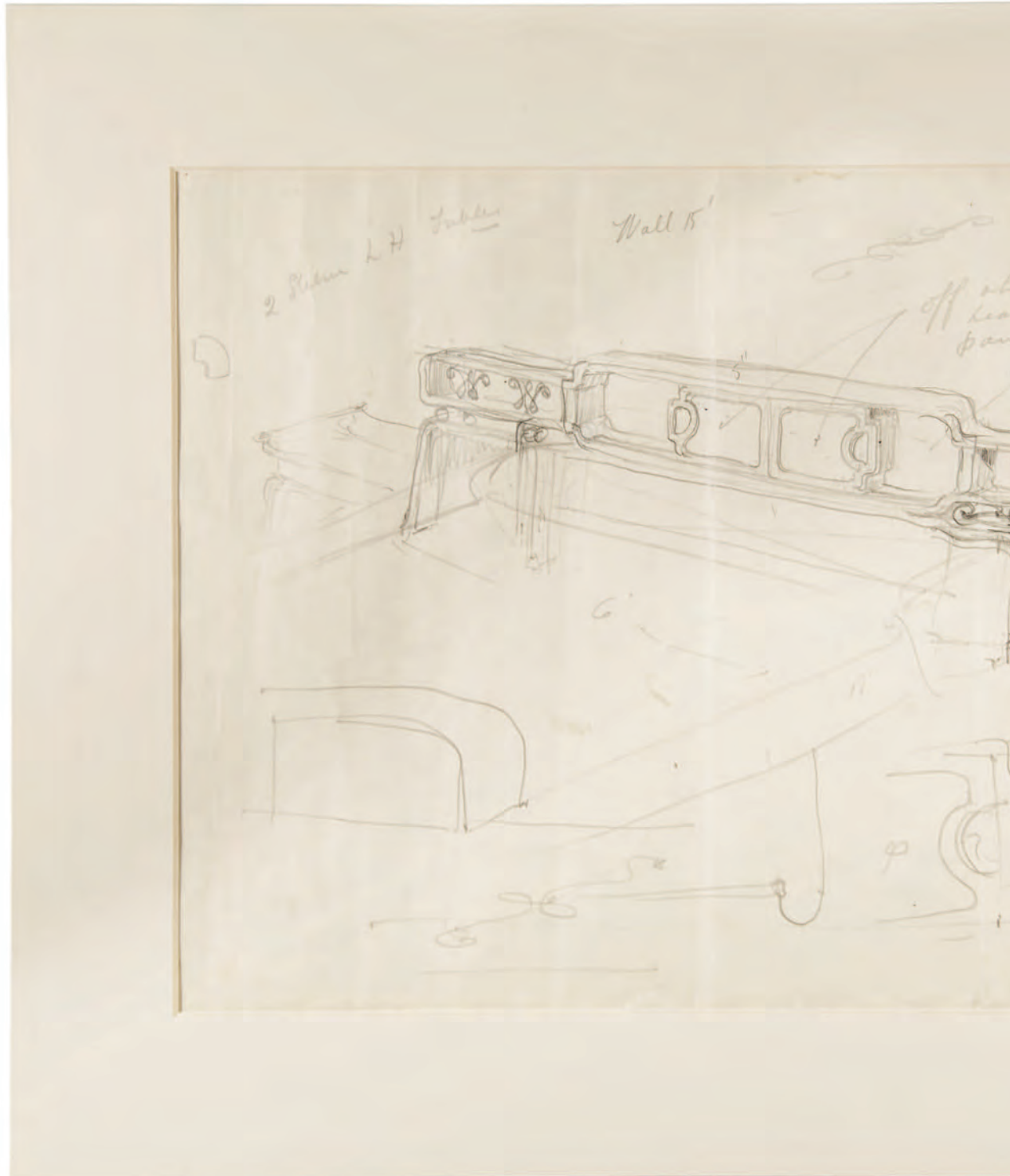
Articles and essays have since appeared in various journals and the *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion*, but Fletcher's work still stands as a groundbreaking text and remains as an important reference thirty years on from its publication.

Laura Jovic is undertaking a PhD at the University of Melbourne researching dress in colonial Australia. From 2007 to 2012 she was Assistant Curator, Australian Fashion and Textiles at the NGV and curated the exhibition *Australian Made: 100 years of fashion*.

Endnotes

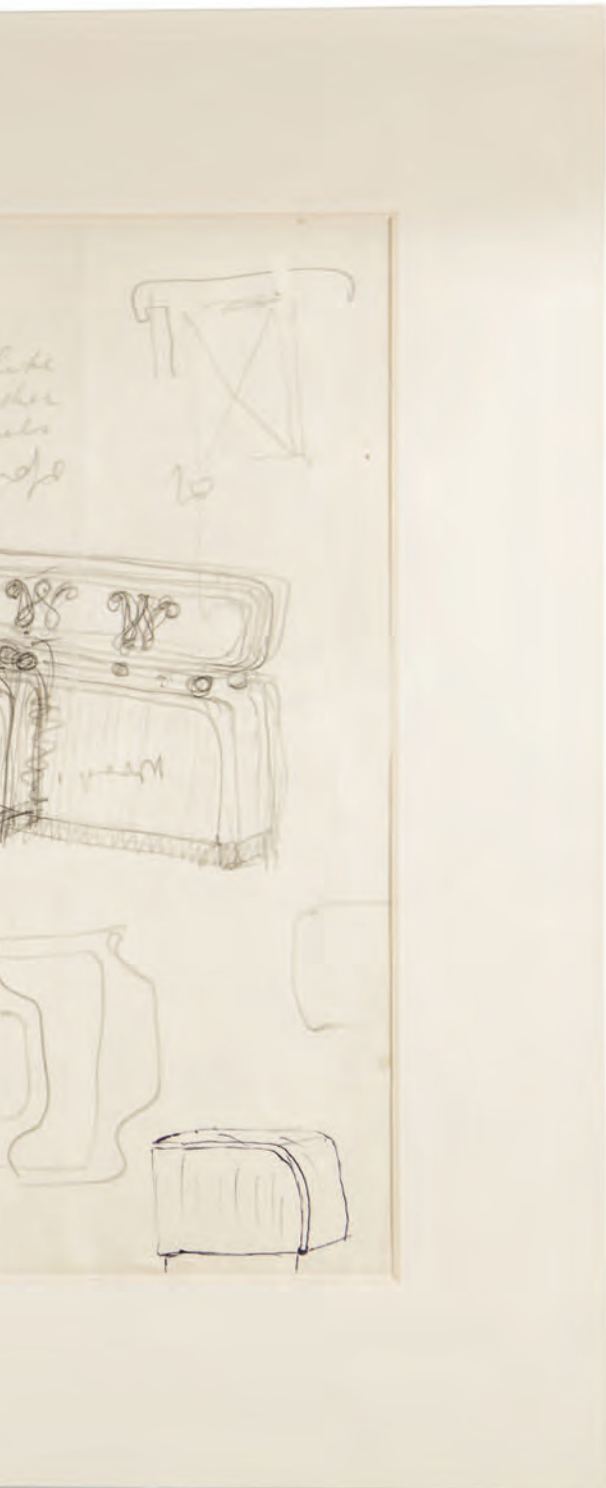
- 1 Cedric Flower, *Duck & Cabbage Tree: A Pictorial History of Clothes in Australia 1788–1914*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1968; Norma Martyn, *The Look: Australian Women in their Fashion*, Cassell Australia, Stanmore and North Melbourne, 1976; Elizabeth Scandrett, *Breeches & Bustles: An Illustrated History of Clothes Worn in Australia 1788–1914*, Pioneer Design Studio, Lilydale, 1978.
- 2 Biographical details along with information on studies undertaken and testimonials can be found in the Marion Fletcher Collection, RMIT Design Archives. Additional material on Fletcher's employment at RMIT has been kindly supplied by Sarah Brown at RMIT Archives.
- 3 Notebook, Marion Fletcher Collection, RMIT Design Archives.
- 4 'Historic Costumes in Her Care', *The Age*, 30 May 1963, 11.
- 5 'Motifs for your new prints', *Farmer and Settler*, 25 September 1953, 14.
- 6 Gertrude Langer, 'Embroidery as an art - not a craft', *Courier-Mail*, 1 December 1954, 2.
- 7 'Embroidery catching on again in U.K.', *The Herald*, 30 June 1955, 22.
- 8 Letter from Eric Westbrook to Marion Fletcher, 9 October 1962, confirming her appointment as Honorary Curator of Costume. Westbrook states that honorary curators are appointed in certain departments where '...professional staff with sufficient knowledge is not available'. At that time he stated that the NGV also had honorary curators in the department of Asian Art (Dr Cox), Greek and Roman Antiquities (Prof D Trendall), Glass (Mr Rex Ebbott) and Near Eastern Art (Mr W Culican). See also *The Age*, 30 May 1963, 11. Marion Fletcher Collection, RMIT Design Archives.
- 9 Marion Fletcher, *Female Costume in the Nineteenth Century*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1966.
- 10 Letter to Fletcher from NGV Secretary W McCall, 13 February 1968, confirming 6 March 1968 as Fletcher's commencement date as Assistant Curator of Decorative Arts (Textiles). The costume and textile collection at the NGV became a separate department in 1981 with Rowena Clark as its curator. It changed its name to Fashion and Textiles in 1995 when under the curatorship of Robyn Healy. With the development of NGV Australia at Federation Square, two departments were created in 2002, which independently oversaw International and Australian Fashion and Textiles. In 2014 the collection came together under the title of Fashion and Textiles. Marion Fletcher Collection, RMIT Design Archives.
- 11 *The Age*, 28 May 1968.
- 12 See Fletcher's handwritten letter in Marion Fletcher Collection, RMIT Design Archives, (not dated).
- 13 Marion Fletcher, 'Report to Trustees of my overseas study tour, 1970', Marion Fletcher Collection, RMIT Design Archives.
- 14 Marion Fletcher, *Costume and Accessories in the 18th Century*, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1977; Marion Fletcher, *Costume in Australia 1788–1901*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1984; Marion Fletcher with the assistance of Leigh Purdy, *Needlework in Australia: a History of the Development of Embroidery*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1984.

This gift comprises three pencil sketches by Noel Coulson of furniture for the entrance hall, living room and bedroom of the Mary Lipshut House in Toorak, c 1959.



Noel Coulson and the Lipshut House, Toorak, 1959

Catriona Quinn



O N Coulson (1905–1989) was one of the busiest and best-known architects in Melbourne in the middle decades of the twentieth century, catering to a wealthy and sophisticated clientele in Toorak and South Yarra, on a scale sufficient to break sales records with his suppliers.¹

Coulson's practice encompassed architecture, landscape, interior design, soft furnishing and hardware design, providing a singular aesthetic unique to each client. Prolific, industrious and independent, Coulson took on domestic commissions of enormous ambition and detail and yet his name is rarely mentioned in historical reviews of the design of the era.

The virtual disappearance of Coulson's name in the writing of the history of design of the 1950s and 1960s reflects academic and curatorial taste of the last twenty-five years; a preference for the innovative, the progressive and, above all, for design with its roots in International Style Modernism.² The range of work undertaken in interior design in the mid-century was more diverse than is popularly believed. Coulson's style might be perceived as too conservative, too luxurious, too elite to have attracted scholarly review. Yet aspects of his work were profoundly modern, chiefly his ability to put into practice the idea of a total design approach encompassing house, garden, furniture, soft furnishings and details, of which Frank Lloyd Wright and Walter Burley Griffin were familiar exponents.

Early Life and Training

Oswald Noel Coulson was born on 21 January 1905 in Geelong, Victoria, the third generation in Australia of a family with a considerable heritage in the architecture and design trades.³ His grandfather was Jonathan Coulson, a British born architect who had emigrated to Ballarat in 1854 and moved to Geelong to complete work on the Dennys Lascelles Wool Stores in 1872. Noel's father, Sydney Coulson, was a Geelong builder and cabinetmaker. Though Noel is not known to have worked in his father's business, there was a workshop in the family home built by Sydney in



**Preceding Page
Double Spread**

ON Coulson,
pencil sketch for
bedhead for Mary
Lipshut House,
Toorak, c 1959

**This Page
Above**

Dining room at 142 Powlett
Street East Melbourne, Beryl
Guertner, *Australian Book of
Furnishing and Decorating*
Sydney: Murray, c 1967

Photographer:
Not known

**Opposite Page
Top**

Lipshut House,
Toorak, 1959.
Entrance hall with
view through to
the rear garden
c 1996

Photographs:
Courtesy of the
Estate of Mary
Lipshut

Second from Top
Lipshut House,
Toorak, 1959.
Entrance hall and
staircase c 1996

**Second from
Bottom**
Lipshut House,
Toorak, 1959.
Entrance hall
showing the two
door low cabinet
and lamps in situ,
c 1996

Bottom
Lipshut House,
Toorak 1959,
living room,
c 1996



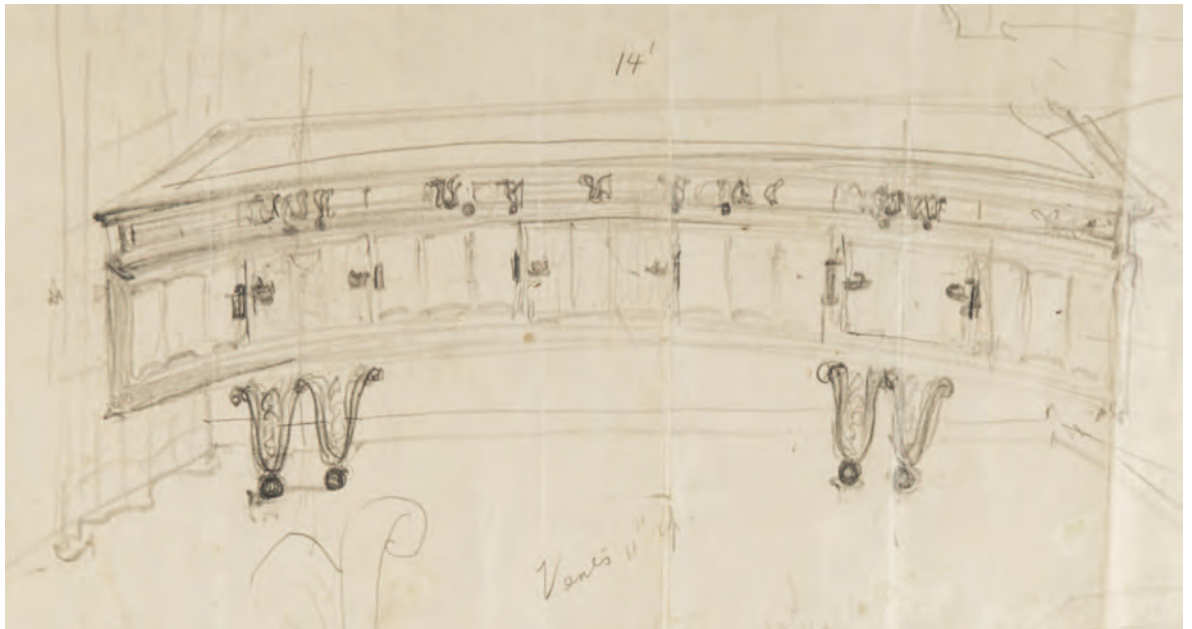
Park Street, Geelong, containing a plethora of old hand-made tools; perhaps Noel's skills were honed as a child around his father's cabinet-making workshop.

If nature provided Coulson with the inclination, his most important nurturer was undoubtedly G R King, his teacher and mentor at the Gordon Institute of Technology in Geelong, where Noel studied architecture in 1921.⁴ Singled out by Robin Boyd as one who 'indirectly fostered more good architecture than any other man in Australia'⁵

King's instruction in the classical and historical styles was to prove fundamental to Coulson's later work, underpinning an approach to design which interpreted traditional forms for modern interiors. It seems that King's training was thorough, demanding a versatility of skills from his pupils and culturally open,⁶ encouraging excursions to view particular buildings and styles. Articled to I G Anderson in 1923, Coulson completed his training in 1928 but was forced to leave the practice during the Depression, although he worked on at least two further commissions for Anderson in the 1930s.⁷ Gifted and versatile, Coulson was able to earn a living making linocuts, designing artwork, making and selling Christmas cards and, most significantly, exhibiting and selling his own hand woven fabrics. Given King's interest in textile manufacturing, Coulson probably learnt to weave at the Gordon Institute. His father built him a loom, a replica of an Elizabethan model and he produced placemats, curtain lengths and dressmaking fabrics. His biggest client was Lillian Wightman of Le Louvre.⁸

Coulson moved to Melbourne in the mid-1930s, following fellow Gordon Institute student Isabel Fiddes (1904-1998) who had taken up a position with Semco, the textile firm at Blackrock near Sandringham, where she became head designer. Isabel had also been trained under G R King and was later to become deeply involved with the family interior design business. The two married in 1935 and built a house to Coulson's design at 22 Godrington Street, Sandringham.

The War years saw Coulson in the service of the US Army, where he worked as a senior draughtsman for the Engineer's Office Division, South West Pacific Division. He designed everything from the famous 'two long legged, two short legged beds' for the soldiers camping at the Melbourne Cricket Ground⁹, to a special box to ship General Macarthur's dog home to the United States. Immediately after the War, Coulson went to work for a prominent Melbourne architect, Bernard Sutton, whose practice was kept busy by the post-war subdivision of larger Malvern and Toorak estates.



An Independent Practice – A Complete Design Service

By the early 1950s, Coulson had tired of his lengthy apprenticeships and wanted to strike out on his own as an architect. He was encouraged by one of Sutton's clients, his friend Phillip Rockman. On the strength of a large commission from Rockman for the interiors of his family home, 'Devon Lodge' at 10 Dudley Street, Brighton, around 1953, Coulson established his own firm.¹⁰ Brothers Phillip and Norman had established the fashion retail chain Rockmans in 1931 and were perhaps characteristic of many of Coulson's later clients: wealthy ragtrade families from the Jewish community, with an interest in and taste for high quality furnishings and sophisticated custom made furniture.

Coulson always credited the success of his career as an independent architect and interior designer to Phillip Rockman. This commission enabled him to lease 21 Little Collins Street which he refurbished as the office for his practice as architect, interior and garden designer, until 1961. The Nicholas family of Aspro fame may also have played a role in establishing Coulson's early career. Coulson is known to have done some work at Burnham Beeches, the Nicholas mansion in the Dandenong Ranges, probably refurbishment after its wartime use as a hospital and later decorated homes for the family in Melbourne and Mount Macedon. Though Coulson was still working for Sutton at this time, the Nicholas family clearly supported him in his new business, as, like other clients, family members went on to commission interiors for multiple houses.

Staff at the new enterprise was limited. Trainees were given opportunities but none lived up to Coulson's standards, ingrained in him by King.

He found the post-war generation unschooled in the classical styles and felt they lacked knowledge and versatility. None was to last. Isabel, with her Gordon Institute design skills and experience, became integral to the new business and draughted many of the thousands of designs Coulson produced. Furnishings and gardens were Noel's strength, but Isabel worked every day at Little Collins Street draughting plans and details for clients. Barbara Coulson also worked part time in the business, as a general assistant to her father, before establishing her own offshoot, Gordonart, an accessories business to supply Coulson's clients with the required glassware, lamps and cutlery. The only other staff member was the formidable Miss Starr, his secretary, who arranged all orders and did all the administration work.

In 1961, prompted by the sale of 21 Little Collins Street and the Coulson's wish to live and work in the same premises, the house at Sandringham was sold and the family moved to 142 Powlett Street, East Melbourne. Coulson radically transformed an 1867 terrace with concrete blocks on the outside and inside using floorboards recycled from nearby Cliveden Mansion, demolished for the Hilton Hotel. Built over four floors, Coulson's antique French furniture was the centrepiece of the 1961 interior scheme. A second scheme later in the 1960s saw a more minimal approach, though with intense colour and Chinoiserie touches. In the front hallway, papered in blue silk, Barbara Cole painted Chinese poetic landscape scenes in black ink, covering the full height of the wall. Cole had previously painted special commissions for Coulson, such as the trailing wisteria vine over Aviva Korman's dressing table at her Queen's Road flat in the mid-1950s.

figure in the Australian fashion industry, especially in the early import of European labels and the later development of a market for vintage couture.

Coulson was given a comprehensive brief for the house's interior and garden, and he designed all floorcoverings, wall coverings, fabric, lighting, [and] furniture and landscape. The wall coverings included a mix of silk wallpaper, timber panelling and painted surfaces, with feature walls used to provide a subtle change of texture. The furniture was custom made by S Andrewartha,¹³ a multi-generational institution in Melbourne furniture making, at their workshop in Richmond.¹⁴ Andrewartha made furniture to order, whether simple or elaborate, for most of Melbourne's interior designers and decorating firms. All the fabrics for upholstery, cushions, curtains and bedspreads were likely to have come from the Sydney firm Artistry, as Coulson made frequent trips to Sydney to select and order fabric and carpets in large quantities for his Melbourne clients. It is possible the carpets at the Lipshut House also came from Artistry, but Coulson also ordered carpets to his own design from the Melbourne firm of Fink.¹⁵ According to Mary's son, Peter Lipshut, 'everything worked, everything belonged, everything was functional, there was never any need for any alteration because everything in the house was as it should be and worked well'.¹⁶

In August 1964 *Australian House and Garden* featured the Toorak house of Aviva and Leon Korman. The couple already had a long history with Coulson, who had decorated their flat in Queen's Road, Melbourne, and worked for Aviva's father Michael Sanders. *House and Garden's* article referred to 'noted architect Mr Coulson, who was in the pleasant position of being able to relate each piece of furniture to its room setting and determine its size, shape and function accordingly' and observed

turquoise accented by different shades of gold, chartreuse, muted pink and grey, with touches of black and Chinese red...off white buttoned upholstery with drapes a deep grey flecked with blue...cigar brown upholstery and a side chair in deep Ming-blue, green-grey drapes and walls, sculptured turquoise carpet and paler turquoise ceiling.¹⁷

The variety of timbers used in this house impressed *House and Garden*, including teak coffee table and cabinetry with sculpted teak handles, natural maple built-in TV and radiogram unit, black bean coffee table and blackwood bedroom furniture. The predominant timbers however were 'bleached and natural maple'.¹⁸



The practice Coulson established provided a complete domestic design service, covering houses, interiors, furnishings and gardens. Coulson was incredibly productive, running three or four house design projects at once and taking responsibility for every part of the design work himself, producing copious detailed drawings for every element. Each piece of bespoke furniture warranted a drawing, one of which survives today, with annotations, for the custom made bedhead for the main bedroom of the Lipshut House in Toorak.¹¹ At the time of his retirement, there were hundreds of drawings still in existence, more than sixty of them relating to the Victor Smorgon House. He also personally designed and commissioned carpets to be made, with intricate cut pile 'carved patterns.' Bespoke designs were made for the construction of the curtains, headings, blinds and soft furnishings, each unique to the requirements of the house, again with detailed drawings. His role extended to the design of cast iron gates, doors and hardware.¹² This ambitious programme of total control over design, with only Isabel and Miss Starr to assist, meant that commissions, such as the Lipshut House, sometimes took several years to completion, but always with the same cohesion resulting from a single design vision.

In the late 1950s Mary Lipshut engaged Noel Coulson to furnish the family house in Toorak. Its interiors remained intact until 1996, when Mary moved and the house was sold. The Lipshut House had been designed by Edward Billson and Partners in 1958, architects who had previously designed Philip Lipshut's Elastic Webbing premises in Collingwood and the family home in St Kilda, for Mary Lipshut's father, Morris Plotkin. Mary Lipshut, whose archive is to be donated to the RMIT Design Archives, was a key

Opposite Page

ON Coulson, pencil sketch of living room sideboard for Mary Lipshut House, Toorak c 1959

This Page

O N Coulson, armchair for Mary Lipshut House, Toorak, c 1959.

Photograph courtesy of Shapiro Auctioneers, Sydney and Melbourne

The vibrant colour of the Korman interiors contrasts with the more restrained, muted palette of the Lipshut House, which ranged from pale greys to light olive greens and pale gold, though the use of bleached timbers and carved and gilded furniture is consistent throughout Coulson's work. Always sensitive to the implementation of colour, which he personally custom mixed for each job, Coulson wrote in 1959 'Colour is of paramount importance as is simplicity of small schemes and variation and development in larger ones'.¹⁹ As the 1960s wore on, Coulson's taste for colour became more adventurous, with stronger shades such as peacock blues and lime greens. Commercially, Artistry usually sold more conservative fabrics in Melbourne than in Sydney. Coulson was seen as an exception, pushing further than others for colour and richness in furnishings no doubt inspired by his Jewish clientele who were less conservative than others in Melbourne.²⁰ In his own house in Powlett Street, he used celadon greens, with Chinese touches in the lounge room and peacock blue with yellow in the den.

Though Coulson's style was not radical, it was nevertheless inventive and sprang from a personal combination of influences and inspirations in his early career. Robin Boyd remarked of G R King's students, 'it became the accepted thing for the young men, upon qualifying, to travel extensively. With few exceptions they returned deeply impressed with contemporary Continental work'.²¹ Coulson was one of the exceptional few; he never left Australia. Instead, it was King's training that became the bedrock of his practice and style: proficiency in executing classical proportions and an understanding of its variants – Georgian, Regency, Greek, and American Colonial. It is clear however that Coulson was not merely parroting classical style by making traditional reproductions for clients. Modern rather than Modernist, he was producing furniture with its roots in earlier classicism, but still clearly recognisable as being of the twentieth century. Coulson, as an avid theatre-goer, was exposed to the set designs and costumes of Colonel de Basil's Ballets Russes, whose tours in the 1930s were influential in the careers of other Australian designers.²² French and English Art Deco also clearly interested him: his first employers Anderson and Sutton continue to be known chiefly for their Art Deco influenced Modernist buildings of the 1930s.²³ Coulson was always philosophically closest to North Americans, 'a Frank Lloyd Wright man from go to whoa'. Le Corbusier held no appeal. He was an admirer of Walter Burley Griffin and, though he was commissioned more than once to complete interiors of houses designed by Griffin's first Australian pupil, E F Billson, the two were not close, the connection being philosophical rather than stylistic.

Coulson's philosophy and influences had much in common with English-born American interior and furniture designer, T H Robsjohn-Gibbings whose clients included Doris Duke, Elizabeth Arden and Conrad Hilton.²⁴ Both had a preference for Frank Lloyd Wright over the Bauhaus and a clientele with a taste for luxury and the means to support it. They had in common a genuine interest in and knowledge of classical design, the shapes and motifs recurring in footstools, chairs and desks: papyrus leaves, acanthus leaves and lion paws. A description of Robsjohn-Gibbings' work as stemming from 'an inspired and highly original source of great design. His classical Greek furniture had a rather 1930s post-deco glibness that ancient Greece surely lacked; however, it was unquestionably dapper and beautiful in its own right',²⁵ could as easily be applied to Coulson's.

While there is no evidence that Robsjohn-Gibbings influenced Coulson directly, his evangelical approach to his modern American design crusade meant that his two books on the subject published in 1944 and 1954 were enormously popular and available in Australia.²⁶ They were amusing parodies concealing a grim message and Coulson may have shared Robsjohn-Gibbings' fear of an approaching 'golden age of plastics' as well as his opinion of Frank Lloyd Wright as the 'Michelangelo' to the International Style's 'Frankenstein's Folly'.²⁷

The two designers certainly had at least one documented connection as their work was illustrated in Clive Carney's *International Interiors and Design* (1959).²⁸ The book followed months of travel by Carney in Europe and America and was intended to bring the 'collection of outstanding achievements by leading architects, interior designers and decorators of the world' to the attention of the Australian public.²⁹ The flyleaf lists the diverse array of designers in Carney's pantheon, among them Alvar Aalto, Marcel Breuer, Hugh Casson, Dorothy Draper, Ignazio Gardella, Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, Mies van de Rohe, Oliver Messel, Richard Neutra, Gio Ponti, Robsjohn-Gibbings and Joern Utzon. Carney, who was in a close business relationship with Coulson, devotes three pages to the latter's furniture of the mid 1950s, some of the earliest of his independent career, showing a classical modern style fully formed. For example the Korman's Queen's Road flat includes a remarkable dining setting with simplified Greek key patterns repeated in the chairs, candlesticks and side furniture. It is worth noting the range of designers Carney considered representative of international design at this time, locating Coulson within a broader story of mid-century interiors than recent scholarship would allow.



This Page
 ON Coulson,
 combination
 telephone table
 and chair, Mary
 Lipshut House,
 Toorak, c 1959

Photograph
 courtesy of
 Shapiro
 Auctioneers,
 Sydney and
 Melbourne

Suppliers

Many Melbourne businesses enjoyed the benefits of Coulson's growing commissions. Georges of Collins Street supplied luxury imported textiles for curtains and other soft furnishings, made up by staff in their workroom, under the supervision of Mrs Dell, who was known for her high standards. Furniture was also custom made by Andrewartha or Fred Alison of the firm Fredericks and, for jobs requiring specialty carving in the more traditional style, Mei and Picchi. A firm called Edwards supplied marble for both interior fit outs and furniture components. C R Gaslake Pty Ltd made the wrought iron work for the staircases that featured in several home magazines. Fink Brothers in Caulfield supplied carpets. Specialist painted finishes were done by leading Melbourne painters and paperhangers Lucas and Gilovich, or sometimes the Opat firm. Furnishing trims were supplied by Nott's Novelties, an old connection as Bernard Sutton's wife Marjorie's family ran the business at 234 Flinders Lane.

The Sydney firm of Artistry played a key role in the development of Coulson's style. In turn, Coulson's large-scale orders played a role in contributing to the growth of Artistry's business nationally. Artistry was founded in 1933 by Clive and Edna Carney; their daughter June later joined

the business. Artistry expanded to set up a Melbourne branch in Toorak Road, South Yarra, in 1963. It was an interior design studio as well as a major importer and supplier of fabrics and carpets and Coulson became one of their biggest customers. Artistry benefited from Coulson's large decorating projects for clients such as Victor and Loti Smorgon. All the fabrics and soft furnishings ordered were those of the best quality and made to last. Coulson favoured American and Italian woven and self-quilted fabrics. Miss Starr did all the ordering of bolts of fabrics in large quantity; such was the scale of his business and clients. If the Melbourne showroom didn't have what Coulson required, stock was obtained directly from Sydney.³⁰

Clients and Patrons

According to Barbara (Coulson) Dillon, who accompanied him to many site visits and meetings with clients in her role as his assistant, her father believed that the client's needs and preferences were the most important thing in preparing the scheme. He listened closely to their views and requirements and took the time to learn about them: for example, whether they were left or right handed had an impact on kitchen design and layout. Suppliers saw Coulson as a powerful figure and persuasive with clients. Once the consultation and design was prepared, it was no longer a

collaborative process, but one where Coulson was in full control. Clients would continue to consult him on every detail over many years if they needed to update a fabric or even a door handle.³¹

For some clients, this level of respect was life long, so deep was the professional connection and so greatly they appreciated his work. Melbourne's Jewish community were important patrons and word of mouth and admiration for their friends' homes led to more commissions. John Gandel, Lionel and Arnold Gross and David Mandie all commissioned work. Multiple properties and generations were not unusual amongst this clientele. Michael Sanders became a client as a result of seeing the Rockman House; Sanders' daughter Aviva and her husband Leon Korman also commissioned Coulson. Probably the largest commissions Coulson ever attempted were those for the Smorgon family, including a penthouse for Eric Smorgon and houses for Victor and Loti Smorgon and Sam Smorgon.

Coulson's clientele however was neither limited to this tight circle, nor to the city alone; commissions for country properties took him to Mount Martha, Mount Macedon, the Western District, Scoresby and back to Geelong. Beyond Victoria, Coulson was loyal to close friends in Sydney, undertaking design and garden commissions for Sir Percy and Lady Joske in Strathfield. Considerable time was spent in Tasmania on interior refurbishments of older houses for the Nettlefolds in Sandy Bay and the Grants at High Peak, outside Hobart.

One of his smallest houses, commissioned in Launceston in 1964 by Kevin and Kathleen Sullivan, could also be considered one of his most complete and enduring. In preparing for their 'empty nest' new house, the Sullivans consulted with Coulson on the block of land before purchasing, to ensure the right house with the best orientation was possible. Coulson was involved from the start and designed the house, garden and interiors, with many customised fittings, to accommodate the older couple and their existing furniture. Light fittings, lamps and door handles and other details were arranged by Miss Starr, under Coulson's direction. The kitchen was tailored to the older clients, with higher than usual bench tops for comfortable use. Orientation to the north-facing garden, essential in Tasmania, through large sliding doors, was Coulson's local response to the principles of Frank Lloyd Wright. In 2010, the next generation of Sullivans also successfully downsized to the same house, finding Coulson's carefully considered design functional fifty years later.³² Around 1970, Noel Coulson and Isabel moved within East Melbourne to 77 Graves Street and then finally to Balnarring on the Mornington Peninsula where Coulson kept

up a part time practice eventually retiring around 1972; he died on 21 January 1989.

As this survey reveals, Coulson's practice sits outside the story of Australian twentieth century Modernism, yet its originality and individuality, its stylistic links to influential twentieth-century designers and teachers and the extent of his commissions amongst some of Melbourne's most prominent families means Coulson's work is worthy of further examination and collection.

Two auctions of furniture from the Lipshut House held at Shapiro Auctioneers in Sydney in 2009 and 2014 drew renewed attention to Coulson's work and career. Both sales showed the unpredictability in the market for lesser-known designers, as well as the high level of interest in designs new to the secondary market. In a reversal of the pattern of the 1980s, when museum collecting, research and exhibitions drove the auction market for twentieth-century furniture, today it is auctioneers like Andrew Shapiro and his private collector clientele who are anticipating museums in rediscovering and bringing to public attention neglected and little researched designers.

Catriona Quinn, who works as a research consultant to Shapiro Auctioneers in Sydney, was a curator with the Historic Houses Trust of NSW for more than ten years and developed collections and exhibitions in the area of 20th century houses and interiors.

Endnotes

- 1 James Fisher, interview with the author, 14 July 2014.
- 2 The most recent of the two landmark museum surveys, *Mid Century Modern, Australian Furniture Design*, National Gallery of Victoria, 2014, emphasises those same designers who, in Judith O'Callaghan's words, 'carried the weight of modernist ideology' – as did *The Australian Dream, Design of the Fifties, Powerhouse Museum*, in 1993 – Featherston, Meadmore, McLay, Andrews, Burke, Seidler and Hall Best. The Historic Houses Trust exhibition I curated in 1993, *Sydney Style, Marion Hall Best and the Modern Interior*, drew attention to her more adventurous designs over a lesser known but undeniably conservative aspect of her work.
- 3 Information on early life, training, family background, working methods, client relationships and suppliers from author interviews with Barbara Dillon (nee Coulson) July, August and September 2014. Barbara was Coulson's only child, born in Melbourne in 1941.
- 4 K. Sillcock, 'King, George Raymond (1872–1950)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/king-george-raymond-6958/text12085>, published in hardcopy 1983, accessed online 4 November 2014.
- 5 Robin Boyd, *Victorian Modern*, 1947, facsimile edition, Melbourne: Robin Boyd Foundation, 2011, 12.
- 6 King found a receptive pupil in Coulson, a cultural polymath who later wrote ballet and musical scores and was a regular at all types of musical theatre, opera and dance and collected French and English antiques.
- 7 Built Heritage Pty Ltd, 'O.N. Coulson,' *Dictionary of Unsung Architects* | www.builtheritage.com.au
- 8 Lillian Wightman (1902-1992), the shop was in Howie Place in Melbourne until 1934 when it moved to Collins Street.
- 9 Alf Bachelder, *Melbourne's Marines*, undated manuscript, MCG Library.

The legendary First Regiment of the First Division, US Marine Corp (which had served at Guadalcanal) was stationed at the MCG in 1943 and beds were specially made to fit the concrete rises in the stands. 2000 men were accommodated this way.
- 10 www.builtheritage.com dates Coulson's first commission from a tender document for a new house in Brunswick in 1941. At this time he was still working for Anderson; his subsequent years with the US Army and post-war employment with Bernard Sutton meant professional independence came later.
- 11 Peter Lipshut, interview with the author 11 July 2014, with notes from Allan Lipshut and Rae Rothfield.
- 12 James Fisher, interview with the author, 14 July 2014.
- 13 State Library of Victoria picture archive H2008.26/5
- 14 Brian Andrewartha, interview with the author, 14 July 2014.
- 15 James Fisher, interview with the author, 14 July 2014. Fisher was employed by Artistry in Melbourne in the 1960s.
- 16 Peter Lipshut, interview with the author, 11 July 2014.
- 17 'Coordination is the Keynote of this Melbourne Home', *Australian House and Garden*, August 1964, 41.
- 18 'Coordination is the Keynote of this Melbourne Home', 41.
- 19 Clive Carney, *International Interiors and Design*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1950, 61
- 20 James Fisher, interview with the author, 14 July 2014
- 21 Boyd, *Victorian Modern*, 12.
- 22 One of Australia's most influential interior designers of the mid-twentieth century, Marion Best wrote in her unpublished autobiography, 'I had been fired by the stage designs by Oliver Messel for Francesca da Rimini. . .it started there'. Marion Best Collection, Sydney Living Museums, Caroline Simpson Library and Research Collection, Sydney, New South Wales.
- 23 11 Grosvenor Court, Malvern, 1937, is listed in Nigel Lewis and Richard Aitken, *City of Malvern Heritage Study*, 1992; I F Anderson is recognised in several state heritage studies; his Lonsdale House, Melbourne, 1934 rebuild became a cause for the Art Deco Society.
- 24 Daniella Ohad, 'T H Robsjohn-Gibbings: Crafting a Modern Home for Postwar America,' *Journal of Interior Design*, 34:1.
- 25 John Loring, 'T H Robsjohn-Gibbing, Interpreting Classical Forms for the Twentieth Century,' *Architectural Digest Design File*, http://www.architecturaldigest.com/architecture/archive/robsjohn_article_012000, accessed 17 August 2014.
- 26 T H Robsjohn-Gibbings, *Goodbye Mr Chippendale*, New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1944 and T H Robsjohn-Gibbings, *Homes of the Brave*, New York: Knopf, 1954.
- 27 Robsjohn-Gibbings, *Goodbye Mr Chippendale*, 97.
- 28 As well as running a design studio, Clive Carney published one of the earliest professional texts on interior design in Australia, *Furnishing. Art and Practice*, London, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1950. He followed this up with two important books on international design, Clive Carney, *International Interiors and Design, Sydney*: Angus & Robertson, 1959, and Clive Carney, *Impact of Design*, Sydney: Lawson Press, 1959
- 29 Carney, *International Interiors and Design*, flyleaf.
- 30 James Fisher, interview with the author, 14 July 2014.
- 31 James Fisher, interview with the author, 14 July 2014.
- 32 Kevin Sullivan, interview with the author, 14 October 2014.

This length of woven linen fabric from the late 1950s was given to Marian and Douglas Kitto, parents of Elizabeth Hill, by their friends Catherine Hardess and Mollie Grove.



eclairé and the transformation of studio weaving in Victoria

Harriet Edquist

The emergence of studio weaving in late nineteenth-century Britain was, as Tanya Harrod notes, a combination of upper-middle class philanthropy aimed at corralling some of the more vulnerable in society into useful work, and alternative studio-based industries established by those in retreat from the metropolis.

Of the latter, an influential early example was the Surrey-based Haslemere Weaving Industry established in 1894 by Maude King, her husband Joseph, Maud's sister Ethel and her husband Godfrey Blount. Employing local women in a somewhat repressive, semi-feudal atmosphere it produced 'plain and coloured linens, plain and striped cotton and some figured weaving designed by [Godfrey] Blount'.¹ The Blounts also founded the Peasant Arts Society which specialised in applique embroidery, hand-knotted rugs, ironwork, plaster work, linocuts and the like, sold at an outlet in London.² Ethel Mairet, the most significant figure in British studio weaving in the first three decades of the twentieth century, presided over a smaller establishment. From studios near Stratford-upon-Avon during WW1 and at Ditchling in Sussex from 1918 she devoted her time to research into pre-industrial weaving techniques and vegetable dyes and yarns, publishing two books on the subject in 1915 and 1916. Importantly, her weaving 'rejected pattern design and the careful drafting of designs on point paper in favour of plain weaving'.³ The 'spectacular neo-primitivism'⁴ of these developments aligns them to the research by early Modernist artists into non-European and pre-industrial cultures. However, Mairet did later see a future for handloom weavers in industry, as was the case in Scandinavia, which had fostered its craft cultures since the mid nineteenth-century. This advocacy of early craft practices in a modern world was the subject of an article in the Melbourne journal *Southern Sphere* published in 1910:

There are those who incline to think that hand-weaving represents a backward step in these progressive days, but quite the reverse is the case. The best machinery is no more capable of doing the work of a hand-loom than a hand-loom is capable of doing the work of the best

machinery. All materials for embroidery, and a large proportion of the materials used for curtains, tablecloths and bedspreads, are at their best when hand-woven.⁵

Studio weaving had entered the Arts and Crafts studios of Australia in the early twentieth century, counterpoised against a background of a successful textile industry developed in the colonial period. In Victoria, Geelong was the centre of the country's most famed wool production region and a number of mills were established along the Barwon River producing high quality tweeds, blankets, rugs and worsteds.⁶ The home-based or small weaving studio offered something else however, and as in England, in Australia it was controlled by women.⁷

One of the first published accounts of a studio weaver appears in an issue of Sydney-based journal *Art and Architecture* in 1908.⁸ Suzanne Gether 'the mother of weaving in Australia'⁹ was born in Denmark and learnt woodcarving in Switzerland before migrating to Dunedin, New Zealand, in 1890 where she practised her craft. Towards the end of the decade she was invited to Sydney where she established herself as a woodcarver in a studio in King Street. At some point she became involved in textiles and in 1907 exhibited at the Arts and Crafts Society of New South Wales 'various fabrics, from fine light portieres to a handsome Smyrna rug.' This indicates that she had developed a range of textile skills although her greatest impact was on handloom weaving where her concerns with design, flat pattern and non-western art forms presage the aesthetic concerns of Modernism.¹⁰ Like dozens of Australian craft workers, Gether had the opportunity to show her work to a national audience at the First Australian Exhibition of Women's Work 1907 held at the Exhibition Buildings in Melbourne from 23 October to 30 November. Inspired and initiated by Lady Northcote, wife of the Governor-General, the exhibition brought together exhibitors from Australia with those from Britain, Europe, North and South America, India and Africa in a vast display of fine art and craft. It catalysed women's craft and design and cut across boundaries of class

Opposite Page
eclairé, length
of woven linen,
late 1950s



and professional status that by 1907 had stalled the British system. In addition textiles provided an entrée into the world of modernist design where women could contribute significantly and in some cases lead.

Partly in response to the Women's Work Exhibition, the Arts and Crafts Society of Victoria was established in 1908, one of the aims of which was to raise standards of craft to a professional level. At their first exhibition Gether exhibited hand-woven materials and gave demonstrations of handloom weaving, which were considered a highlight of the exhibition. Thereafter, weaving was one of a number of crafts taught at the Arts and Crafts clubroom at 357 Collins Street and over the years Arts and Crafts exhibitions contained increasing numbers of woven products of a high standard of technique and design. In 1910 one weaver exhibited hand-woven rugs that attempted to marry a modern technique with an Australian aesthetic using wools that were not only spun locally but dyed locally 'in the necessary "faded" tones' that reflected the Australian landscape: 'In soft tones of greys and pinks, greys and purples, and greys and blues, the hand-woven rug is almost at its best. . .'¹¹ Thirty years later, eclarté would attempt something very similar. Melbourne craft

worker Eva Butchart, inspired by Gether's example, sailed off to England with her sister in 1912 to study handloom weaving at Haslemere Weaving Industry. She may also have been prompted by an article that appeared in *Southern Sphere* in February 1912 written by a Special Correspondent in London that described Haslemere and the Peasant Arts Society. It was illustrated with photos of the Weaving House at Haslemere, a table loom in Norway and specimens of woodwork. Butchart returned to Melbourne shortly before the war 'bringing equipment with her; she included work from Haslemere at the annual Arts and Crafts exhibition and established herself as a teacher of handloom weaving: 'Although of a very retiring disposition, she was influential and well-loved as a teacher, as well as capable of improvisation, turning bicycle wheels into spinning wheels when equipment was lacking'.¹² In 1913 she was appointed a member of the Arts and Crafts selection committee to maintain standards of craftsmanship. At the same time Henrietta McGowan and Margaret Cuthbertson included handloom weaving in their guide to careers for women noting that looms could be bought through the Arts and Crafts Society.¹³ During the War, Butchart gave regular demonstrations of wool spinning while in 1915



Opposite Page
Suzanne Gether,
'The Bee Design'
woven fabric,
Southern Sphere
1 September 1910,
35. State Library
of Victoria

This Page
Top
Hand loom in
bed-sitting room
in Norway,
Southern Sphere,
1 February 1912, 7.
State Library of
Victoria

Bottom
Haslemere
Weaving House,
Southern Sphere,
1 February 1912, 7.
State Library of
Victoria



Nancy Austin, Elinor Purvis and Miss A Gordon of Toorak formed a Wool-Spinners' Guild although what became of this is not recorded.¹⁴

Whether or not it was the activity prompted by these women, by 1916 weaving had entered the curriculum of the School of Applied Art at the Melbourne Working Men's College (WMC; RMIT University). In the prospectus of that year it advertises 'Weaving. The hand loom. Plain, tapestry, and simple pattern-weaving'.¹⁵ A year later William Morrison was appointed Instructor in Textiles thus beginning a long association with RMIT that lasted until 1945. He taught all the day and night classes in weaving and textile design and the 1918 WMC prospectus contained a detailed description of the weaving course which covered a range of technical matters suggesting a close knowledge of regional British, European and American practices.¹⁶ In 1917 A W Sinclair was conducting classes in handloom weaving in a facility in Carlton for returned servicemen and in July, over 900 metres of tweed woven by the soldiers was auctioned at the Melbourne Stock Exchange after first being displayed in a prominent Collins Street store.¹⁷ Sinclair may also have conducted classes from 1915 for returned servicemen at the Gordon Technical College, Geelong under the auspices of its Principal G R

King.¹⁸ It may have been at the Gordon, as Catriona Quinn suggests in her article in this issue of the *Journal*, that architect O N Coulson, a pupil of King, learnt the craft. During the Depression he supported himself by producing, among other articles, hand-woven fabrics on a loom built by his father. As well as small items like placemats he wove curtain lengths and dressmaking fabrics for clients including Lillian Wightman of Le Louvre in Melbourne.

While the Arts and Crafts Society in Melbourne showed woven textiles by Butchart and others, there is no evidence they worked at any larger commercial scale and it may well be that Coulson was the first studio weaver, apart from the returned servicemen, in Victoria to do so.

Interwar period

Studio weaving continued to develop within the Arts and Crafts Society, Butchart convening the weaving section of its annual exhibitions that regularly showed work from local women together with examples from Europe, Asia and elsewhere. Butchart also gave a talk on weaving in a series of short talks about art and craft presented on radio 3DB in 1929 and at about the same time published a booklet, with E C Veitch, on table loom weaving and Australian vegetable dyes.¹⁹



**This Page
Top**

eclarté installation at Venetian Court, Hotel Australia, March 1940. Photograph relating to the eclarté business 1940–62

Photograph: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented by the Grove family, 1995

1995.311.1-25

Bottom

eclarté display of textiles c 1940. Photograph relating to the eclarté business 1940–62

Photograph: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented by the Grove family, 1995

1995.311.1-25



In 1929 Nora Gurdon, who had trained at the National Gallery, showed hand-woven rugs as wall hangings at the annual October exhibition. Earlier that year she had been in England and had taken weaving lessons from Jean Orage at her studio in Chelsea. Orage, who had supervised the tapestry workshop at Morris and Company during the War, produced abstract designs for rugs, as well as chair covers and draperies. Gurdon was knowledgeable and pursued textiles around England, visiting Ethel Mairret, 'who was having a vegetable dying week' at her craft community at Ditchling, Sussex, as well as the weaving town of Kersey in Suffolk where she painted its medieval architecture. Margaret Alston, who was overseas at the same time as Gurdon, was deeply impressed by the quality of weaving in England, mentioning Mairret as one of the leading practitioners.²⁰

In 1929 and 1930 another Society member Mrs Charles Courtney travelled around Britain on a textile reconnaissance, which she subsequently wrote up for the *Recorder*.²¹ Demonstrations of spinning and weaving continued to feature in the annual exhibitions and in 1934 artist Helen Ogilvie demonstrated rug-making.

The next name to emerge in this fragmentary history is Rachel Grieve who, with her brother David and sister Edith, returned to Melbourne in 1937 after almost two decades absence in North America, primarily in Detroit, Michigan. Grieve's interest in weaving had been awakened when she saw an exhibition of Scandinavian weaving at the Chicago World's Fair in 1933. She studied weaving with Nellie Sargent Johnson at Wayne University, Detroit, and back in Melbourne pursued a career as a practitioner and teacher. She helped to establish the War Widows' Craft Guild in 1945 and she taught weaving to men of the Royal Australian Air Force in hospital at Ascot Vale. Her brother David designed and constructed her looms while Edith designed the textiles, which were noted for their 'precision and finesse'. Grieve was also a public advocate for weaving, speaking at lectures, on radio and in the media.²²

Catherine Hardess and Mollie Grove c 1940

Into this well-developed if narrowly focussed context came the two women who formed *eclarté*, the most successful of the mid-century studio-weaving enterprises.²³ Catherine Hardess (sometimes Hardress) and Edith 'Mollie' Grove came from similar middle class professional backgrounds and were active in the Arts and Crafts scene. Hardess was born in 1889 at Flemington, Melbourne, daughter of schoolteacher George Henry Hardess and his wife Ann Emma.²⁴ She was educated at Ballarat and completed a

teaching diploma at Prahran Technical Art School and in 1919 went on to teach fine art at the Girls Junior Technical School at Swinburne Technical College in Hawthorn. Travelling to London in 1923 she spent two years studying at the Slade School of Fine Art before returning to Swinburne to teach in 1926. By the late 1920s she had developed a public profile as an advocate for the crafts. In November 1929 we find her lecturing at Myers for 'Irish Linen Week', her lectures dealing 'with the linen industry, the application of colour to table decoration, and correct table service, and were attended by large and appreciative audiences'.²⁵

Hardess was doing well at Swinburne, and in 1930 was 'transferred to the Senior Art Department, where it is felt that her ability as an instructress in art subjects will be given greater scope'.²⁶ Always an outgoing woman, she combined her practical teaching with illustrated lectures on the history of art, possibly one of the first art teachers to provide such lessons in Victoria and she also delivered a lecture on colour harmony on radio 3DB in 1930.²⁷ As a sideline she produced exclusive children's wear under the name of 'Betty Brett', staged one of the first children's fashion parades and opened a small shop in the city.²⁸

However in 1935 Hardess became unwell, closed her business and was granted leave of absence for a year from Swinburne to recuperate. She left for England in the company of a friend, presumably Mollie Grove. The two had met at Swinburne when Grove was a student in Applied Art, which suggests some time around 1930 when Hardess was transferred to the Senior College.²⁹

Grove was born in 1909 and educated at Methodist Ladies College in Melbourne where her father, the Reverend John Grove, was Principal from 1929 to 1939. In 1933 it was reported that Grove, together with Lorna Stirling, were conducting musical and drawing classes at the school's Elsternwick campus and that an Arts and Crafts class had been established, probably by Mollie.³⁰ In London, Grove enrolled at the celebrated Central School of Arts and Crafts established in 1896 'solely for the training of art and craft workers, and the fundamental aim and method of the education is production'.³¹ According to Grove, it was only after a year of general study at the Central School that by chance she was introduced to weaving:

In a little country cottage where I was staying whilst on a holiday, there was an old handloom which I was invited to use. Almost dramatically my knowledge of texture and colour and a musical background clicked together with the rhythm of the shuttle.³²



ECLARTÉ CONTINUED

This Page

Prime Minister Menzies opening the eclarté studio in Dandenong 1951, watched by Catherine Hardess and Mollie Grove. Photograph relating to the eclarté business 1940–62

Photograph: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented by the Grove family, 1995

1995.311.1-25

This chance encounter precipitated a move to Kensington Weavers where Grove enrolled in a three-month course run by Dorothy Wilkinson, who had been trained in drawloom weaving by the celebrated weaver Luther Hooper.³³

The work was meticulous and required great discipline, but was excellent training. After I gained my diploma with the Kensington Weavers I was apprenticed to a skilled continental weaver and also worked with an analytical chemist who was experimenting with textile dyes.³⁴

Later Grove was to report that she learnt the art of making natural dyes from Frau Jorgensen, a German refugee, but there is no record of the identity of the analytical chemist.³⁵ Hardess meanwhile, who had made slow progress in her recovery, pursued studies in theatre design, working with well-known designer Osborne Robinson at the Northampton Repertory Theatre. Later, she received a design position in a repertory theatre in Kent where the women established a studio.³⁶ Initially her attention was entirely taken up by theatre design and the possibilities of developing children's theatre in Australia based on Russian models,³⁷ but as Grove's interest in weaving grew Hardess began to be absorbed into her work. Together they decided there was a future in studio weaving in Australia, combining Grove's excellent technical skills and Hardess's design acumen.

As war approached they travelled around Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, well-known centres of traditional textile production, and Russia, a leader in children's theatre. They particularly admired Swedish and Finnish home crafts, earlier versions of which had been

introduced to the Melbourne Arts and Crafts community two decades before by Gether and Butchart. Perhaps what attracted Australian designers to Scandinavian Modernism, were not only the high quality of its products but also a shared democratic temper and Scandinavia would provide a model for Australian textile production for decades to come.³⁸

Hardess and Grove returned to Melbourne in 1939 with handlooms and a small amount of capital, enough to establish a studio at 40 Queens Street.³⁹ Sourcing yarn from spinning mills in Victoria and New South Wales, they produced in six months enough fabric for hangings and dress-material, to hold their first exhibition. Supplemented by work completed in England, the exhibition, at the Venetian Court at Hotel Australia in March 1940, was opened somewhat surprisingly perhaps by Prime Minister Robert Menzies who was no doubt persuaded to the task by the prominent Nicholas family and their colleague Reverend Grove all of whom shared a Methodist background. The exhibition, which was well received, was arranged and designed by Hardess in seven courts showing tweed weaves for furnishing and wall hangings and fabrics of varying weights and weaves for fashion of all kinds. They also displayed their tapestry hanging *Spring* set against its inspiration, Finnish weaver Margareta Ahlstedt Willand's tapestry *The Flower Garden*, that they had admired in the Finnish Pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition and later bought from the artist in Finland.⁴⁰ First Hardess and Grove registered their business as eclarté Pty Ltd, the name being derived from the French *clarté* ('light', 'clarity') prefixed by a lower case 'e' ('excellence'). They planned to produce textiles with a distinctly Australian aesthetic, reflecting the colours and textures of the landscape, much as weavers had done in the 1910 Arts and Crafts exhibition with their 'faded' colours. But apparently eclarté's 'Banksia Brown' and 'Eucalyptus Blue' tweeds were overlooked by clients who preferred imported fabric and for a while they were compelled to copy these in order to survive.⁴¹

Unswerving in their dedication to a form of hand weaving that complemented rather than dominated the natural qualities of wool, they eventually found their market and by 1941 eclarté was sufficiently well-established to be included in the photographs that illustrated the ABC's *Design in Everyday Things*, which had originated as a series of radio talks aimed to improve design awareness in the public.⁴² Their work was bought by some of the large emporia such as Henry Bucks, Buckley & Nunn, Myers, Georges and David Jones (Sydney) and they displayed their work for the Australian



Wool Board at the Royal Agricultural Show in 1940. Soon they moved to larger premises in Fulton's Lane off Little Collins Street where they employed ten staff. During the War their products were restricted by Government protocols to tweeds of commercial lengths at fixed prices but they traded successfully nonetheless.

In 1940 they also took up teaching appointments at Methodist Ladies College in the newly built Art School which was completed in 1939 and funded by Alfred and George Nicholas. When the women approached the School about teaching positions in November 1939 George Nicholas, who was Chair of the Finance Committee, decided personally to fund their salaries.⁴³ This arrangement lasted until 1941 when for unknown reasons they left the school.⁴⁴

Dandenong

In 1951 eclarté moved their studio to a 3.4 hectare site on the former Novar Estate on the Princes Highway near Dandenong, then a semi-rural but developing industrial region to the east of Melbourne. They repurposed four existing army hospital huts although quite how they financed this venture is not known but there may have been family or possibly government backing: once again their enterprise was opened by Prime Minister Menzies. The factory incorporated advanced thinking about working conditions and practices for the employees working twelve looms: As Hardess explained:

We feel we have made a success of a social experiment in human behaviour and friendliness. People can work and be happy at the same time. There is still room in this modern age for the joy and satisfaction of craftsmanship and creative work in happy surroundings. And it can be made to pay. We have proved it. It could be extended to other parts of Australia. I hope it will be.⁴⁵



Four years later when journalist Joan Leyser visited the Dandenong factory she noted:

'Relaxing' colours are a feature of the factory. Every room has been designed as a trap for light and air. A gravelled piazza, with brightly coloured chairs and tables, invites employees to take meals out of doors. Only men are employed on weaving the fabrics. Highly skilled women staff the mending department... Now the 23 people they employ are a team working not as factory hands, but as artists.⁴⁶

It had a wool store, a room where repair and mending work was done and a room which housed the looms, most of which were built to eclarté's specifications. At their busiest, eclarté had a workforce of about 30 people. Once again the landscape inspired their colours, a yellow gold taken from a particular wattle and a black and gold combination from the *Kennedia nigricans* while the beach at McCrae not far away yielded a 'heavenly amethyst'.⁴⁷ The bold move paid off and through the 1950s they produced 'tweeds for men and women, rugs and furnishings, hangings and upholstery'.⁴⁸ Their textiles, particularly their woollen rugs, were popular with the Australian government as official gifts to various overseas dignitaries and Royal visitors. They began to expand into furnishing fabrics and became a favourite with some of Melbourne's avant-garde architects and designers and their work appeared in a series of new and innovative buildings and exhibitions. In 1953 they provided fabric for the twill curtains, upholstery fabrics and bedspreads for University House at the ANU, Canberra, designed by Professor Brian Lewis of Melbourne University.⁴⁹ Lewis commissioned Fred Ward to design all the furniture for which eclarté provided the fabric. Bernard Joyce chose their fabric for two

This Page Left

Catherine Hardess supervising the weaving room, Dandenong, 1950s. Photograph relating to the eclarté business 1940-62

Photograph: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented by the Grove family, 1995
1995.311.1-25

Right

Head Office, Reserve Bank of Australia, Sydney, showing eclarté curtains and floor rug. Photograph relating to the eclarté business 1940-62

Photograph: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented by the Grove family, 1995
1995.311.1-25



This Page

Top
Conference room,
Australian
Academy of
Science, Canberra,
showing seating
by Derek Wrigley
upholstered in
eclarté fabric.

Photograph:
Ben Wrigley

Bottom

Opening page of
Joan Leyser's
article on eclarté,
*The Australian
Home Beautiful*,
February 1955



chairs in the 'contemporary room' he designed with David Brunton for the Ideal Home Exhibition in 1955 and their pale green/blue upholstery fabric was used on Derek Wrigley's two-seater units in the conference room of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd's Australian Academy of Science building (1958) in Canberra.⁵⁰ It is still fresh after half a century's use. They also supplied fabric for curtains and furniture at Ormond College (Grounds, Romberg & Boyd) and St Hilda's College (Ellison Harvie) at the University of Melbourne, although as the latter was completed in 1964 this might have been a post-Heathcote commission. Robin Boyd was probably responsible for their contract to supply curtains and divan covers in the suites at John Batman Motor Inn (Romberg & Boyd). For the Colonial Mutual Life Assurance Society building they developed a novel woollen 'hessian-weave' for the curtains on the executive floor, 'a new conception in window fabric weave. Not only did it have the heat and sound insulating and fire-resistant properties of wool, plus wool's superior texture and drape, but its open weave allowed in light while restricting heat from the sun'.⁵¹

Heathcote

In 1957 Hardess and Grove made the decision to scale down their operations and they sold the Dandenong site. They went overseas to investigate the state of the industry elsewhere and when they returned in 1958 set up again at an old flour mill in Heathcote, a rural town in central Victoria. The Heathcote community welcomed the newcomers as they offered employment, albeit on a small scale, to its dwindling population. In 1962 they received one of their most important commissions through H C 'Nugget' Coombs, Governor of the Reserve Bank, who was impressed with eclarté's work with Fred Ward in Canberra. Coombs saw to it that they were commissioned to provide upholstery fabric, curtains and a floor rug for the Board Room in the Sydney head office. On the successful completion of the project the Commonwealth Board of Works, who was handling the contract, indicated that eclarté would provide the fabric for the Reserve Bank's Melbourne office. Hardess and Grove went ahead and ordered the fleece in anticipation and cancelled all other private work, but their looms lay idle as they waited for an order that never arrived. The Board of Works had sourced fabric from a Melbourne wholesaler. With no stock of work to tide them over eclarté were forced to close their operations.⁵² By this time Hardess was 73 and had suffered a major injury to her hand at the Heathcote factory and the setback with the Reserve Bank was probably too much.

They sold their Heathcote operations and moved to the mud brick house in Lower Plenty designed by Alistair Knox for Frank English in 1947, making fairly extensive alterations to it and the garden.⁵³ Grove obtained a job as a proofreader and editor for a Melbourne printer where she remained for fifteen years. Catherine Hardess died in 1970 and Grove moved to an apartment in Balwyn, taking with her three looms and examples of eclarté's work with which she furnished the interiors. She died in 1996.⁵⁴

The demise of eclarté seems to have been the result of difficult circumstances combined with a certain naivete in terms of business practices; as Grove herself admitted, eclarté never had to tender for a job, but relied on contacts and networks of clients initially established through her well-connected family. The women saw themselves as 'artists, not traders'.⁵⁵ As Joan Leyser noted in her 1955 review of the Dandenong studio:

Neither is a business woman in the tough sense of the word, and they shrink from the less attractive sides of commerce. It is therefore a small miracle that they have been able to preserve and develop their industry, in the face of what seemed, at times, insuperable odds.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, eclarté's contribution to Australian textile design and production was profound, which was to find a means to work in a way that the highly regarded Swedish textile industry, for example, had perfected by the middle decades of the century. The Swedes had, by aligning the best of their craft traditions to industry achieved their ideal of Modernism - mass production in the spirit of craftsmanship 'with very little compromise'.⁵⁷ As Hardess herself noted in 1940, 'the great Swedish craft movement urged that every county revive the old native art of its people. . . So those old native arts revived and contributed an inexhaustible source of inspiration to modern designers'.⁵⁸ This combination of traditional craft, contemporary design and modern industrial practice was what eclarté had aimed for and had, for a short time at least, achieved.

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Installation view of the exhibition *Mid-Century Modern: Australian Furniture Design* at the National Gallery of Victoria, 2014.

The blueprints of Fred Ward's Home Beautiful 'Blueprint' chairs, lent by RMIT Design Archives, can be seen on the wall to the right above an example of a 'Blueprint' chair.

John Whittenbury
 Christmas poster for
 Post Master General, 1960s.
 The John Whittenbury archive,
 RMIT Design Archives.



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