

Grace Cossington Smith, Justice Meagher and the Bar Association art collection

By Gary Gregg*

We agreed – indeed, no sane friend of ours would bother to argue – that Art was the most important thing in life, the constant to which one could be unfailingly devoted and which would never cease to reward; more crucially, it was the stuff whose effect on those who were exposed to it was ameliorative. It made people not just fitter for friendship and more civilised (we saw the circularity of that), but better – kinder, wiser, nicer, more peaceful, more active, more sensitive. If it didn't, what good was it? ... *Ex hypothesi* (as we would have said, or indeed *ex vero*), the moment someone perceives a work of art he is in some way improved.

Julian Barnes – *Metroland*

I am happy to be able to report that there is more to the Bar Association's art collection than an infamous air brushed painting of some gel, apparently communicating with herself in a way not encouraged by polite society, at least in public.

If Richard Ackland's mockumentary screened on the ABC is taken as gospel, *that painting* has come to be regarded as an affront by the more politically correct of our brethren (there must be some?) and seemingly by most, but perhaps not all, of our female members.

Fortunately, there exists within the collection a work far more deserving of attention. A work of modest means and purpose, yet a work which fulfils the ideals of art.



This work, *from David Jones' window* is a drawing by Grace Cossington Smith which the Bar Association is fortunate to have in its collection. It appears to have been rendered in wax crayon and perhaps coloured pencil. Yet, the modesty of its means has an endearing quality which immediately engages the viewer. On examination, you see that it is intimate in scale and purpose. I suspect that it is successful because it has the attributes of the best works of art, it was created for the artist (from a need to create) rather than for an audience.

Probably unknown to most of us, this work has existed within the collection since the 1970's. This is such a good picture that I say without hesitation that one so called politically incorrect work, would have been far better expended on celebrating this lovely little drawing by Cossington Smith.

Grace Cossington Smith, who was born on 22 April 1892, has, in the view of Daniel Thomas, always been recognised as one of the three pioneers, with Wakelin and de Maistre, of Post-Impressionism in Sydney. Thomas was the author of the first article to be published on the artist which incidentally did not appear until March 1967 (*Art in Australia*, Vol. 4, No. 4). He also expressed the view that if Miss

Cossington Smith's work has been less well known than it deserves, it is partly her own choice. It seems that she preferred to stay within the gentle circle of her home – her father, her sister and a few painter friends.

Thanks to recent publications, including *Stravinsky's Lunch* by Drusilla Modjeska, her story and her work are becoming better known by the general public. She is perhaps best known for her late interiors of her house at Turramurra which demonstrate her frequently praised skills as a colourist.

Cossington Smith studied with Anthony Dattilo-Rubbo at his school, 'the Atelier', in Rowe Street, Sydney for a period of about six years between 1910 and 1918. Perhaps influenced by Rubbo, some of her early work had political and social themes (eg., *Strike* 1917), yet from her earliest work until the late interiors, Cossington Smith frequently found inspiration in the landscape. The suburban streets and neighbouring bush at Turramurra have featured in the majority of those landscapes.

As to the work itself, *from David Jones' window*, although signed in pencil by the artist, is undated. Yet evidence suggests that it was done some time in the 1930s. Daniel Thomas, *op.cit.*, refers to 'a rather personal group of hatched linear drawings in coloured chalks and pencils' from around 1930. I believe this work is of that group. In addition, the back of the frame carries a sticker from the Macquarie Galleries (which did exhibit her work) describing this work as circa 1936.

This is a work which re-pays with the currency of pleasure, the investment of observation.

A good work of art does not give itself up too easily. It does not reveal all of its qualities on a fleeting acquaintance. One needs to linger a while, invest time and interest and the rewards will be forthcoming.

Some of those rewards in the case of this drawing include the following:

- Pleasure at the contrast between the

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* Gary Gregg is a full-time barrister and a part-time painter. In 1998, at the suggestion of Justice Meagher, and on the condition that Meagher, JA selected the work, Gregg donated a work on paper to the Bar Association. That work now hangs in the common room. Gregg's eighth solo exhibition will comprise drawings and works on paper and will be held August/September 2002 at BBA Gallery, Sydney.

historical landscape of the 1930s depicted in the drawing and the landscape of today. For example, observe the ships with funnels and masts and the now demolished buildings to the south and south west of the Barracks. This is similar to the pleasure one derives from looking at an old photograph of say Circular Quay and Dawes Point, but the pleasure is more than curiosity and is heightened because someone did not just point a camera but rendered and interpreted the landscape.

- This work, inscribed *from David Jones' window* beneath the signature of the artist, was drawn possibly from the vantage point of the long defunct but apparently to be refurbished David Jones Café on the seventh floor of the women's store. It looks down on the landscape across the old Supreme Court building on the corner of Elizabeth Street and St James Road, past Queens Square to the Hyde Park Barracks and across the Domain to the harbour.

Shifting the vantage point seems to have been a not infrequent device employed by this artist. See also works in the Art Gallery of New South Wales collection:

- Things on an iron tray* on the floor circa 1928, which, as the title implies, depicts a still life seen from above;
- Circular Quay from Milsons Point 1928* (coloured pencil, crayon) which may well have been a study for
- The Curve of the Bridge 1928-29* (oil on cardboard), both of which observe the principal subject from below.

Although it is unfair in some ways to compare this drawing to her late interiors, it is possible to see in this work why Grace Cossington Smith enjoys a deserved reputation as a colourist. As Geoffrey Dutton wrote in *The Innovators* (1986) for

her, colour, and colour within colour, was the messenger of form. She is one of the supreme colourists among Australian painters. In her late 70s she set down her thoughts on the subject:

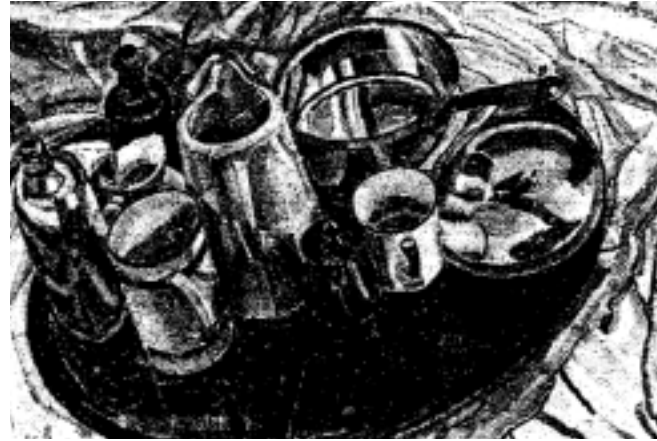
- 'All form – landscape, interiors, still life, flowers, animals, people has an inarticulate grace and beauty; painting to me is expressing this form in colour, colour vibrant with light – but containing this other, silent quality which is unconscious, and belongs to all things created.' (GCS quoted in Mervyn Horton, *Present day art in Australia*, Sydney, 1969, p.203)

- 'I have always wanted, and my aim has always been to express FORM in COLOUR – colour within colour, vibrant with light.' (GCS 1967 letter – Art Gallery of New South Wales)

For this work, and for certain others in the collection (apparently including the gel referred to above) we owe a vote of thanks to the Hon Justice Meagher. Some members of the Association may not be aware that Justice Meagher, who held the office of president between 1980-1981, took a keen interest in the Association's collection in his time at the Bar. Legend has it that from time to time Justice Meagher would inveigle and/or strong-arm fellow members to part with funds to enable works to be purchased for the collection. This Cossington Smith work has inscribed in pencil on the back 'sold Meagher and Reynolds \$750'. Justice Meagher told me that the work was purchased in 1974 and donated to the Association in memory of Anthony Vincent, a former member of 8 Selborne Chambers who died in 1973.

Justice Meagher is of the opinion that this drawing is one of the two best drawings Cossington Smith ever did. The other, which is unsigned and undated, is part of his private collection. Also a landscape, this drawing of Black Mountain in Canberra, employs a fauvist approach to colour and is strikingly beautiful.

The Association's records pertaining to the collection are unfortunately incomplete. However, such records as do exist suggest that Justice Meagher also



Things on an iron tray, 1928

had a hand in the acquisition of a number of the better paintings in the collection. Mention of just two of these will suffice. The Keith Looby painting *Newly Refined Again* (the judge with the yo-yo) was acquired in 1971 thanks to the then Meagher QC and T O L Reynolds.

Similarly, the painting of Sir Ninian



Gary Gregg, Justice Meagher and the 'other' Cossington Smith painting.

and Lady Stephen by Euan Macleod was acquired in 1982 thanks to the then T. O'L Reynolds, R J Hunter QC, Meagher, QC and Nicholas.

Perhaps the Art Gallery of New South Wales across the Domain is too far to walk for terribly busy barristers wishing to see works of Grace Cossington Smith (although the current exhibition of the sketch books of Lloyd Rees at AGNSW is a delight which should not be missed). However, *from David Jones' window* and the Association's collection is nearer to hand and will amply repay a visit. Those wishing to view Grace Cossington Smith's drawing are invited to contact Mr Chris Winslow, the Association's Public Affairs Officer for assistance.