

Search and solitude

I went in search not only of beauty, and light, and colour ... which delight the eye and emotions of all artists – but of something deeper – something less easily expressed.

Florence Fuller,

1913

Australian women artists working in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century embraced a modernist shift toward the expression of inner psychological and emotional states. In city studios and rural artist colonies, they created meditative landscapes and intimate portraits that sought more than literal description.

The theme of *Search and solitude* introduces a dual impulse: an outward expansion of international networks and experiences, coinciding with an inward turn to explore hidden depths. Florence Fuller's artistic aim was to express 'hidden inner life'. In *Inseparables*, c.1900, she reveals the intellectual freedom of a young woman reading, the sitter's curved posture suggesting an interior journey rather than passive repose.

In London and Paris, Agnes Goodsir and Janet Cumbrae Stewart were widely praised for their interior portraits of women reading, reclining and lost in reverie. One French critic admired Goodsir's work for being painted 'with a taste at once strong and delicate, which some men might envy'. Sometimes depicting their romantic partners, these works are coded with Sapphic symbolism and signal a quietly subversive modernism.

Artist colonies such as Étapes in northern France presented further creative freedoms. These sites, offering immersion in nature and pre-industrial subjects, became unlikely modernist hubs, in which tradition and experimentation converged. Iso Rae sensitively depicted local women and children, while Eleanor Ritchie Harrison's *A winter morning on the coast of France*, 1888, captures what one contemporary critic described as the 'melancholy influences of the enveloping atmosphere'.

Florence Rodway

born Hobart 1881

died Hobart 1971

Night c.1907,

Sydney pastel

on paper

Gil and Shay Docking Drawing Fund 2024

Art Gallery of New South Wales

Florence Rodway's *Night* was made in Sydney, following four years of study at London's prestigious Royal Academy schools. After the rigour of the Academy, this dream-like drawing feels like a flexing of the young artist's imaginative abilities.

Night was made in response to a poem by Frank Morton, whose text invokes the power of darkness through the metaphor of the *femme fatale*. Rodway interprets this figure as a monumental being who drags bodies under her amorphous black cloak. Both poem and drawing centre on classic tropes of the late nineteenth-century Symbolist movement: the association between sleep and death, darkness and the unconscious, and the woman as a dangerous seductress. Rodway's drawings of cloaked female figures are rare examples of Symbolist art by an Australian woman artist. Although they were admired at the time, she soon established a reputation as an accomplished portraitist and won several high-profile commissions.

Janet Cumberae Stewart

born Melbourne 1883 died

Melbourne 1960

Nude 1925,

London? pastel

on paper

Private collection

Janet Cumberae Stewart

born Melbourne 1883

died Melbourne 1960

Reclining nude

c.1922–39, London?

pastel on cardboard on composition board

Purchased 1978

Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

In 1922, Cumberae Stewart moved abroad 'to work as well as play'. At her first London exhibition, Queen Mary purchased two works, remarking that 'English artists must look to their laurels if Australians were doing such fine work!' Soon after, she was hailed as 'Australia's most famous daughter'. The artist remained in Europe for seventeen years, travelling and exhibiting across France and Italy before returning to Australia in 1939 with her long-term partner, Argemone ffarrington 'Bill' Bellairs.

Made during her European sojourn, this work exemplifies Cumberae Stewart's distinctive command of pastel.

Traditionally associated with softness, femininity and genteel domesticity, the medium contrasts with the assertive mood of Cumberae Stewart's sitter. While grounded in the academic tradition of depicting the female nude, Cumberae Stewart subtly unsettles its conventions: the model's direct gaze, self-assured pose and unselfconscious nudity suggest not passivity, but a quiet sense of ease.

Janet Cumbrae Stewart

born Melbourne 1883

died Melbourne 1960

The Chinese coat

1919, Melbourne pastel

on paper

Elder Bequest Fund 1919 Art

Gallery of South Australia

Josephine Müntz-Adams

born Barfold, Victoria 1862 died

Melbourne 1949

A gypsy belle

c.1896, Melbourne oil

on canvas

Purchased 1945, frame conserved with a donation

from Gwen and Brian Hassett under the Adopt an

Artwork program, 2013

Art Gallery of Ballarat

Dora Ohlfsen

born Ballarat, Victoria 1869

died Rome 1948

Woman with bear skin 1920, Rome bronze

Gift of Michael Cain and Ian Adrian 2019

Art Gallery of New South Wales

Dora Ohlfsen left Australia in 1886. She was among the first Australian women artists to establish a career in Europe and did so within the male-dominated sphere of sculpture. Ohlfsen once told a reporter that she spent her life proving 'it was possible for a woman to succeed in life without the help of men'.

After time in St Petersburg, where she mixed with Tsarist elites, Ohlfsen settled in Rome in 1902 with her Russian partner Elena von Kügelgen. Studying at the city's French Academy, she reconceptualised her celebrated work with medallions into statuettes. In *Woman with bear skin*, Ohlfsen models the figure in the classical *contrapposto* pose, yet imbues the form with an individualised sense of intimacy. The bear skin at the figure's feet adds a sensual flourish and suggests a contemporary 'live' setting.

Florence Fuller

born South Africa 1867

died Sydney 1946

Inseparables

c.1900, London or Paris

oil on canvas

Elder Bequest Fund 1900 Art

Gallery of South Australia

Eva Benson

born Gawler, South Australia 1875

died Sydney 1949

Psyche

c.1919, London

bronze

Purchased 1924

Art Gallery of New South Wales

First exhibited at the Royal Academy in London in 1920, Eva Benson's *Psyche* reflects the influence of the 'New Sculpture' tradition, with its refined naturalism and emotionally resonant treatment of a mythological nude. The work draws on the Greek myth of Psyche, a mortal woman whose beauty rivalled that of the goddess Venus. Cupid, the son of Venus, fell in love with Psyche after piercing himself with his own arrow; here shown lying at her feet. It was commended as 'a work excellent alike in its poetic implication and refined sculptural grace', prompting the Walker Art Gallery to request its inclusion at the 1920 Liverpool Academy. *Psyche* was later shown at Sydney's Society of Artists in 1922, from which it was selected for competition in that year's Wynne Prize.

Eva Benson initially trained and worked as a teacher in Adelaide until moving to Perth in 1906. There she studied art with James Linton at Perth Technical School and travelled to London in 1912, taking classes at the Polytechnic Institute under sculptor James Stevenson. She exhibited at the Royal Academy, Society of Women Artists, Royal Glasgow Institute and Royal West of England Academy from 1915 until her return to Australia in 1920, aged forty-five. Benson undertook major sculpture commissions for architectural projects around Sydney until she ceased working around 1930.

Florence Rodway

born Hobart 1881 died

Hobart 1971

Study in black and white

c.1906, London or Sydney

charcoal on paper

Purchased 1906 Art Gallery of

New South Wales

Florence Rodway

born Hobart 1881 died

Hobart 1971

Head study c.1906,

London or Sydney

charcoal on paper

Purchased 1906

Art Gallery of New South Wales

Josephine Müntz-Adams

born Barfold, Victoria 1862

died Melbourne 1949

Care

c.1893, Paris

oil on canvas on composition board

Purchased 1898

Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

In 1890, after early studies at Melbourne's National Gallery School, Josephine Müntz-Adams sailed for Europe, where she continued her education for six years. She was among the first generation of Australian women artists to make their way to Paris.

Care was Müntz-Adams's major student work at the Académie Colarossi and is painted in the tradition of French Realism. A softly lit image of a plain-clothed woman, who stares pensively with an open letter in one hand, *Care* is a portrait of quiet resilience and compassion. Müntz-Adams's portraits were praised for their 'rugged honesty and sincerity', and considered remarkable for their 'firm, free, modelling and broad effect'. *Care* was exhibited in the Salon de la Société des Artistes Français in 1893, where it was given a prestigious position at eye height 'on the line'. In 1898 it was the first painting by an Australian artist purchased by the Queensland Art Gallery.

Florence Fuller

born South Africa 1867

died Sydney 1946

A French peasant

1894-99, France

oil on canvas

Purchased 1972

National Gallery of Victoria

Florence Fuller

born South Africa 1867

died Sydney 1946

Mother and child

c.1898, London oil on

canvas

James and Diana Ramsay Fund 2021

Art Gallery of South Australia

Violet Teague

born Melbourne 1872

died Melbourne 1951

The boy with the palette

1911, Melbourne

oil on canvas

Gift of U.S. Teague 1976

National Gallery of Australia

In this large portrait, Violet Teague portrays twelve-year-old Theo Scharf, recognising his talent as an artist and his confidence in his future. He often painted alongside Teague in Melbourne and at the time he was considered to be a child prodigy.

The work is also an aesthetic statement: a melody in black, brown and gold, it illustrates Teague's first-hand familiarity with numerous international portraitists and represents a fusion of inspirations. Its tonalism and form, expressed in the sinuous figure of the boy placed against a luminous field of restrained golden colour, echoes the aesthetics of James McNeill Whistler, while it appears to use Édouard Manet's *Le fifre*, 1866, as its prototype.

Displaying a virtuosic handling of paint and a sensory feeling for surface texture, the portrait reveals Teague in full command of her medium. The path of the boy's shadow along the floor, up the skirting board and against the wall, anchoring the subject within the shallow space, is a statement of technical prowess in spatial control. Its underlying asymmetrical abstract design gives the work an additional feeling of three-dimensionality and looks to the compositional devices employed by Japanese colour prints, which were much admired at this time.

Awarded a silver medal at the 1920 Société des Artistes Français (Old Salon) in Paris, *The boy with the palette* is Teague's crowning achievement. Its certificate was assigned to 'Monsieur' Violet Teague, a sharp pointer to the additional gendered prejudices these women experienced.

Cristina Asquith Baker

born London 1868 died

Melbourne 1960

Not titled (Dead trees) c.1914,

London colour lithograph on paper

Purchased 1983

National Gallery of Australia

Quiet and reflective in ambience, *Dead trees* and *The star* were first exhibited in London in 1914. Although each colour lithographic print is based on an Australian oil painting, their settings have been generalised, demonstrating the move away from the representation of particular geographic locales towards to universal concepts of impermanence and unearthly realities.

Cristina Asquith Baker undertook two periods of international travel (c.1902–05 and 1912–14). She attended art classes at Académie Julian in Paris (1903), and her time away included a painting trip to the artists' colony of Étaples (1904). She is among the first Australian artists to produce colour lithographs in London, in 1914, and it is likely she studied this medium with the influential London teacher Ernest Jackson, co-founder of the Senefelder Club, whose European members included Henri Matisse.

Cristina Asquith Baker

born London 1868 died

Melbourne 1960

The star 1914, London

colour lithograph on paper

Purchased 1987

National Gallery of Australia

Iso Rae

born Melbourne 1860 died

Brighton, England 1940

Woman in garden 1898,

Étaples, Pas-de-Calais, France oil on

wood panel

Purchased 1977

National Gallery of Australia

Eleanor Ritchie Harrison

born Streatham, Victoria 1854 died California,
United States of America 1895

A winter morning on the coast

of France 1888, Étapes,
Pas-de-Calais, France oil on canvas

Donated through the Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program by James M. Hardigg in
memory of the artist and Birge Harrison 2025
Art Gallery of New South Wales

Eleanor Ritchie Harrison studied in London and Paris in the late 1870s and 1880s and travelled extensively in Europe and the Americas. *A winter morning on the coast of France* was painted in 1888 at the artists' colony of Étapes. Ritchie Harrison moved there with her husband, the American artist Birge Harrison, in 1887, staying for eighteen months. This small fishing village attracted a large contingent of Australians and Americans at a time when many artists were relocating from overcrowded cities to seek a greater connection with nature.

Ritchie Harrison depicts, as a reviewer in 1890 described, the 'melancholy influences of the enveloping atmosphere' of the coastline near Étapes in winter, with local women moving through the landscape. It is one of the paintings the Harrisons brought with them to Melbourne in 1889, where the influential critic Sidney Dickinson wrote that it embodied 'the elements which make French landscape art so influential and important'. The couple stayed in Australia and exhibited both European and Australian subjects to considerable interest until 1891, when they departed for California. In 1895 Eleanor gave birth to a son, who died soon after, and she died the following week.

Newly conserved with the support of the Howarth Foundation, *A winter morning on the coast of France* is on display in a public art gallery for the first time since 1890.

Florence Fuller

born South Africa 1867

died Sydney 1946

Woman in a garden in France 1895,

France oil on canvas

Purchased through the Sir Claude Hotchin Art
Foundation, the Art Gallery of Western Australia
Foundation and the Great Australian Paintings
Appeal 1996

Art Gallery of Western Australia

Maud Sherwood

born Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand 1880

died Katoomba, New South Wales 1956

On the way to market

1913, Brittany, France

watercolour on paper

Cruthers Collection of Women's Art

The University of Western Australia

In 1925 Maud Sherwood explained to local audiences that 'the new conception of art strives more and more for emotion, rather than reality'. In 1911, after studies in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand, Sherwood set off for Europe, taking classes first at Colarossi's atelier in Paris and then with Canadian artist Tudor Hart, who led sketching tours in the European countryside. Sherwood also accompanied her compatriot Frances Hodgkins in plein-air painting expeditions to the fishing villages of Brittany.

Hodgkins's embrace of modern techniques and expressive freedom was an inspiration to many, including Sherwood. The way the clouds billow up from the horizon in this airy watercolour reflects a technique Hodgkins developed during her own studies with the Symbolist painter Pierre Amédée Marcel Béronneau in 1908. Shortly after making *On the way to market*, 1913, Sherwood moved to Sydney, where she became an active member of local art societies and renowned for her watercolours.

Artist colonies

From the late 1800s, artists began to retreat from Europe's capital cities. They congregated in towns and villages such as St Ives in Cornwall or Concarneau in Brittany, creating informal artist colonies. Driven in part by a movement termed 'naturalism', which sought to portray the timeless qualities of provincial life, this shift to the country marked a rejection of an increasingly industrialised metropolis. In villages across Europe, Australian artists established studios, joined artist groups and participated in local exhibitions. Maintaining their connections to the wider art world, they sent works for exhibition to the capitals of Paris and London, as well as back home to Sydney, Melbourne or Adelaide.

The artist colony at Étapes, on France's northern coast, hosted at least thirty Australian artists at various times until the 1930s. In 1897 a Sydney newspaper reported that 'quite a little cluster of Australian artists had established themselves' there. The colony offered an intimate environment for artistic exchange and camaraderie, still within an international and bohemian milieu. For women, the communal atmosphere was particularly liberating, and the rustic lifestyle was more affordable than in Paris. In 1895 it was reported in a Melbourne newspaper that 'in almost every case it costs a woman much more to live in Paris than a man. At some of the most desirable ateliers the fees are almost double those of the men.'

Jessie Traill born
Melbourne 1881 died
Melbourne 1967

Mother and child 1909,
Melbourne etching on
paper

Bequest of Judge H.J.H. Henchman 1995
Art Gallery of New South Wales

Jessie Traill

born Melbourne 1881

died Melbourne 1967

Ti-tree frieze

1910, Melbourne

etching on paper

Purchased 1920

Art Gallery of New South Wales

Jessie Traill was one of the most prominent Australian artists to take up etching in the early twentieth century. She became renowned for her depictions of the Australian bush in all its poetic moods, as well as for images of engineering and construction in celebration of modernity.

Traill's printmaking practice flourished after her study in Europe, at first at the London School of Art under etcher Frank Brangwyn, and later at the Royal Academy and Colarossi's atelier in Paris. Traill's time in Paris exposed her to the work of contemporary French artists like the Nabis, who emphasised the decorative as the primary function of art, as well as to Art Nouveau, with its graceful, organic lines. She also witnessed the influence of Japanese aesthetics on French art. This was to have particular impact on her landscapes, such as this etching, an ambitious and densely wrought image of one of her favourite subjects, the ti-trees of her childhood alongside Port Phillip Bay.

Jessie Traill

born Melbourne 1881

died Melbourne 1967

L'homme qui boit (The
drinking man)

1908, Paris or London (printed 1914, Melbourne)

etching on paper on paperboard

Purchased 1980

Art Gallery of New South Wales

Early printmaking

From the mid-nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, Britain boasted one of the most robust environments for printmaking in the world. Expatriate Australian artists were active participants in this flourishing scene. In London, C.L. Allport and Cristina Asquith Baker were among the first Australian artists to produce colour lithographs, while Jessie Traill created etchings influenced by her European training. Drawn to the medium's creative possibilities and professional promise, these artists embraced printmaking not only as a form of expression but also as a means of recognition and income.

During this period, the popular reproductive steel engravings once common in Victorian homes were superseded by artist-made prints, with the emergence of the 'painter-etcher' – artists who produced original etchings as a creative art form – representing a major shift. Many printmakers specialised in a single technique, such as etching, wood engraving or lithography.

The Australian artists who were working within this vibrant discipline helped to shape the medium's direction. Allport taught printmaking for nearly twenty years in London, while Traill returned home to apply her skill to Australian subjects and settings.

C.L. Allport

born Hobart 1860

died Hobart 1949

The paddlers

1908, London

colour lithograph on paper

Gift of the Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts
State Library and Archives of Tasmania

The seamless spatial effects evident in *The paddlers*, 1908, exemplify the artist's technical mastery of the new print medium of colour lithography. This leisurely scene of children at play in the shallows was inspired by the artist's observations at the beach at Le Havre, a major port in France's Normandy region. The work's focus on reflected light and shadow and the subtle optical shifts between the sand, sea and sky show Allport working at the height of her creative powers. The enchanting, dreamlike atmosphere is reminiscent of the lithographic prints of the French avant-garde Nabis artist Jean-Édouard Vuillard.

Born into a creative family in Hobart, Allport pursued her artistic ambitions in Europe between 1888–22 and 1927–31. Her grandmother, Mary Morton Allport, often referred to as Australia's first professional colonial woman artist, provided her early training. C.L. Allport is particularly important for being the first Australian-born artist to explore colour lithography. The artist supported herself through the sale of her art and teaching; she taught for nearly twenty years at the London School of Photo Engraving and Lithography. By 1932, then in her seventies, Allport had returned to Hobart permanently, where she subsequently set up a studio and printing press and continued exhibiting her work.

Agnes Goodsir born
Portland, Victoria 1864 died
Paris 1939

Girl on couch (A letter from
the front) c.1915, London oil on
canvas

Gift of public subscription 1927
Bendigo Art Gallery

Agnes Goodsir born
Portland, Victoria 1864 died
Paris 1939

The letter
1926, Paris
oil on canvas

Bequest of the artist 1947
National Gallery of Victoria

Agnes Goodsir born
Portland, Victoria 1864 died
Paris 1939

Woman reading
c.1915, London oil on
canvas

Presented through the NGV Foundation by
John and Suzanne Playfoot, Governor, 2001
National Gallery of Victoria