



Mosman Art Society Inc.

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Newsletter 166

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**A BRIEF
HISTORY
OF THE
THE 9X5
IMPRESSION
EXHIBITION
1889**



Tom Roberts, Mentone 1888

“Probably the most famous exhibition in Australian art history”

AGNSW

In 1889 young radicals Tom Roberts, Charles Conder and Arthur Streeton decided it was time to introduce Australian audiences to Impressionism. With the possible addition of their mate, Fred McCubbin, they considered themselves the leaders of the revolutionary new art movement from Europe.

Although not quite the first in Australia to paint en plein air with sketchy brushwork and vivid colours, they were certainly the most determinedly controversial. Roberts initially planned to hold the exhibition in his studio at the Grosvenor Chambers in Melbourne, but the venue was later changed to Buxton's Rooms in Swanston Street, opposite Melbourne Town Hall.

When it opened on 17 August, 1889, it included 183 works, with the majority by Roberts (62), Conder (46), and Streeton (40). McCubbin contributed five and the rest were by their colleague Douglas Richardson and two young art students, Roger Falls and Fred Daly.

Most of the paintings were 9 inches by 5 inches or approximately 23cm x 13cm. Many of these were painted on cigar box lids supplied through fellow Heidelberg artist Louis Abrahams, whose family owned a cigar business.

Other paintings were on board, a number on canvas and there were some sculptured panels in wax and one in bronze.

Portraits and interiors were included, but the majority appeared to depict landscape and were characterised by a free painterly style, fresh colours and informal composition. Normally such works would be considered preliminary sketches and unsuitable for public exhibition.

The influence of London-based American artist James McNeill Whistler and Aestheticism (the pursuit of beauty and taste as the chief principles of art and life) was particularly important. Roberts had seen Whistler's carefully stage-managed exhibition of small atmospheric sketches shown as finished works, Notes – Harmonies – Nocturnes, while he was in London

in 1884, and this inspired the careful planning, marketing and presentation of the 9x5 Impression Exhibition.

Following Whistler's example, the Australian artists used simple standardised frames, most from wide flat panels of redwood rather than more conventional gilt frames. The gallery was decorated in an Aesthetic style, with drapings of Liberty silk, Japanese umbrellas and jardinières. Charles Conder designed an elegant catalogue on handmade paper and afternoon tea was served daily 'in dainty little cups about the size of thimbles', according to one viewer. Each Wednesday afternoon there was a musical concert.

Large numbers of press, literati, socialites, collectors and the artists' friends flocked to the exhibition preview. Pictures were affordably priced between one and three guineas and over £50 of sales was made in just a few hours.

The exhibition generated great interest and good reviews from some critics, in-



Charles Conder, Herrick's blossoms (c.1889)

cluding The Age. "Persons interested in art should not fail to visit it," said the Evening Standard. But James Smith of The Argus, who was Melbourne's leading art critic and a trustee of the National Gallery of Victoria, was outraged. "The modern impressionist asks you to see pictures in splashes of colours, in slap-dash brushwork, and in sleight-of-hand methods of execution..." he wrote. "Some... suggest that a paintpot has been accidentally upset over a panel of nine inches by five..."

This was a truly ground-breaking exhibition, the first in Australian art history to be organised by a group of artists with a unified vision, aiming to present a bold new approach to painting.

Only about one third of the paintings survive today. A number of them – works by Roberts, Conder and Streeton – are on display in the 19th century Australian art collection at the Art Gallery of NSW.

By Anne Woodham

Members News

OUR AUGUST DEMONSTRATION

Tuesday 14th August

Demonstration – Pigment Lab

The Demonstration will encompass paints, mediums and papers from Pigment Lab and showcase many more brands and products available globally which aren't available at most art supply stores in Australia. As a purveyor of fine art, design and illustration supplies the company offers quality products at affordable prices and expert advice.

Doors open 7.00 for refreshments

Demonstration from 7.30-9.00pm

\$10 entry Melody room

Mosman Art Gallery

AT THE RECENT KU-RING-GAI 53RD ANNUAL ART AWARDS EXHIBITION

Kasey Sealy was awarded First Prize in Watercolour for

"Frosty Sparkle Forbes"

Inta Charteris was awarded Highly Commended for her pastel

"Maui Magic"

MAS 9X5 EXHIBITION INFORMATION 1ST TO THE 16TH OF SEPTEMBER



Jan Hook's George's Heights

SUBMISSIONS need to be in by **MONDAY 20TH AUGUST**

Conditions and submission forms are on MAS Website, to download and send to the treasurer P.O Box 343 Spit Junction Mosman 2088
You may submit online

RECEIVING DAY TUESDAY 28TH AUGUST 9am – 5pm

HANGING DAY WEDNESDAY 29TH AUGUST 9am – 5pm

OPENING NIGHT SATURDAY 1ST SEPTEMBER 5.00-8.00pm

BBQ sizzle wine, supplied by Society.

Please bring a plate of savoury or sweets to share.

SUNDAY 16TH SEPTEMBER COLLECT UNSOLD WORKS 10am – 5pm