

# From Eggs to Electrolux

By MARGARET PRESTON



HE woman whose work illustrates this book is alive. As a small girl of twelve years of age she was very much so, especially the day her mother took her to the National Gallery of Sydney to see the pictures there.

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Her first impression was not of the beauty or wonder of the pictures, but now nice it must be to sit on a high stool with admiring people giving you "looks" as they went by, also she liked the smell of the place. She thinks now it must have been the kind of floor polish used on the linoleum.

This visit led her to decide to be an artist. Her mother being persuaded that she wasn't fit for anything else, asked advice from the school teacher, who recommended a needy friend. This friend gave tuition in an art that could be described as "painting without tears," the process was so simple. A piece of frosted glass was placed over a copy of water-lilies or swans, etc., and then pencilled through and afterwards coloured to copy.

One thing, however, the needy lady taught her, and that was to paint on china and bake the colours herself. There was a funny little gas oven in the backyard where the embryo artist experimented, so successfully, after a while, that at the mature age of thirteen she won a prize for china painting at a local show.

This was a great feat, and was duly acknowledged by all her friends, but it wasn't sitting on a stool at the Art Gallery, so she started making enquiries as

to the means of acquiring this honour. She found that the National Gallery authorities did not care for painting on frosted glass very much, that if she wanted to hang a work of hers on the 'walls and sit on a high stool it would be necessary to paint direct from Nature.

Then an inspiration came. As her mother knew no one who knew artists, why not go back to the Art Gallery and ask the man at the turnstile? He ought surely to know something, being with those pictures all day long. The idea was soon put into practice, and mother and daughter were presently interviewing the man of buttons. After some hesitation he wrote down the name of what he described as a "nice promising young feller" who might teach. This artist's work, he said, was there in the Gallery and they could go and see it.

At first sight it looked dreadful to them, but the artist-to-be explained to her mother that she had heard of the "Broad" school, so it must be that kind, but they took the addresses of two other artists whose work met all their requirements in detail and subject. These two artists declined teaching young buds to sprout, so her mother took her to the promising young feller *"who was very nice and helpful and promised that everything she did was to be from life"*.

Her first still life was begun in a studio in Angel Place. History has no memory of it, but a picture of a striped tablecloth with a studio pot hung for many years in the attic room of our young friend. After some months of careful teaching, the promising young man, who was really a very thoughtful person, suggested that it would be wiser if she were sent to Melbourne to learn, in a big school with other students, how to draw from the antique, to begin from the beginning.

As it made no difference to her family where they lived—her father being on the sea—they went to Melbourne. Some little time before this, the Victorian National Gallery had acquired a new master, and his fame was immense. It was to this great man she was sent. She began her drawing lessons at this school with one of the kindest, cleverest artists Australia has produced. He has gone now, but the memory of that, nice man always remains. He really didn't teach. The students would wait their turn for a lesson, but when he came it was generally only to hear that still more could be done. He gave nothing constructive. In spite of this, he was the best teacher she could have had, as it allowed her to feel that there was someone to help but not to influence.

Life did not go on in this peaceful way all the time, for at intervals the new master would unexpectedly appear. Austere, biting, and immaculate, he generally left bowed spirits in his wake, also intense admiration.

At various times in the year this new master demanded that victims of a certain standard in drawing should be laid on the altar of paint under his supervision. So, after a time spent in acquiring drawing prizes, the message came that our friend was ready for higher instruction.

The teaching was magnificent; after the gentle little man in the drawing school it came as a revelation. He was certainly the finest teacher she ever had; every student respected and feared him. Slender, well built, with stiff cropped head and sallow face, always faultlessly groomed even to enter the teaching studios, this man set an example to young Australia that those who came under his influence at the time have never forgotten. But wasn't he vitriolic! Nerves of iron and talent were necessary to stand his onslaughts, especially to one who could not appreciate his liking for hideous models. Fate intervened to help our little friend. It was necessary to draw numbers to get a place at the model, and as she always seemed to draw last, and therefore worst place, she was allowed, because of the crowded classes, to work quietly at still life in an adjoining studio. Here she would work day in and day out at her precious eggs, etc.

Often many days would she spend painting at a small high light, such perfection of detail being demanded. Her fortune sometimes deserted her, and back she would have to go to the human figure—drawing for so long that she never seemed to have time to begin in colour.

Again she wins a drawing prize, but the next year was a happy one, for the still life scholarship was hers. It would seem that a liking for the colour and form of inanimate objects was born in her. Then comes a domestic upset, and she finds it necessary to go with her family to Adelaide, there to teach for a year or so and then return to Melbourne for fresh instruction. This stay at the Melbourne Gallery was only a short one, as it was imperative that she should return to Adelaide to continue with her teaching. Her art work was really begun at this time. It shows a movement of thought which is continuous throughout. As a young girl, not yet in her twenties, she made up her mind to teach for her living and paint her pictures as she would, to choose her own subjects and do

them in her own way, leaving all thought of selling out of her mind. From Monday morning until Saturday she taught.

Fortunately, her pupils were pleasant, so that her nerves were not racked when she started on her own work at the week-ends. Against all opposition of friends and relatives she painted eggs, dead rabbits, onions—just everything she liked. It was no use for her to explain to people that the standardised beauty for art of landscapes, sunsets and ladies did not interest her; that as she felt no pleasure in them, how could she possibly say anything in pencil or paint that would interest anybody else? So she simply didn't try.

Every week-end found her painting away at her eggs or rabbits; her ideal at this time was to paint them with such fidelity to nature that they could almost be used in the kitchen. As soon as she saw her hopes likely to be realised, her mind worried her. If she really painted as well as that, surely she would be the very best painter of still life in the world. The doing of it was so easy. It was this fact that raised a doubt in her mind about her possible fame; so being orphaned, she started to put by pence until they became pounds, to take a trip abroad to see really where she stood and also to get some- "finishing" lessons.



Margaret Preston, *Eggs - Still Life*,  
from her oil painting

A specimen of her work at this time is "*Eggs*" (Plate 14), now belonging to the Royal Art Society. It was bought from the annual Art Society's Exhibition for £5, a price considered outrageously high for such common objects.

The pence had now become sufficient pounds to take the wonderful trip abroad. She starts off with a friend intending to live in Munich for some two years. Paris was not chosen, as the French reputation did not come up to the desired standard of her friend's parent, so they went Germanywards.

Her art tour began in Venice, but as nothing impresses the ignorant, Titian and his fellow artists roused little enthusiasm in her mind—in fact, her feeling was one of sympathy with an irate American lady whom she heard saying in a loud voice to her husband as she strode through a Belgian Gallery: " Rubens; if I see any more of that man's paint I'll go mad."

It took Munich and the Seccionists to awaken her. In the beginning she hated the big Government Art School for Women; having her lessons translated to her drove her frantic. She simply couldn't understand. There in that horrid country no one seemed to understand Australian, German, or appreciate Australian art. They were all hopeless. It was even worse for her when she found herself understanding in German what apparently sane artists and students were saying about a certain picture at a Seccionist Exhibition—a picture that had a large pink dragon, with a lady victim clad in yellow, being rescued by a gentleman in black clothes, not armour —clothes! They were actually admiring it. It made her feel sick. She much preferred the good old art show then on at the same time, where lemons were fruit and dragons standardized lizards.

In fact, the only art she really admired in Munich was Dürer's painting of two apostles, one having a whole landscape painted on the pupil of his eye. This to her was Art. Things were so bad that a decision had to be made; she couldn't stay in a country going mad; so in spite of the possible upset to her friend's morals, she would go to Paris. It was a freezing morning when she left Munich. Snow lay thick everywhere. It was a regular Napoleon's march from Moscow, both having Paris for their objective. Once settled in Paris she started to feel the air, by visiting the exhibitions then open. Alas! for all her hopes. The Autumn Salon was just closing, but she found this show exceeded the outrageousness of the Seccionists. Under these distressing conditions there was only one thing to be done—to get a teacher who was a moderate and yet intelligent, to explain and teach what these people thought they were doing. The first thing that wise man did was to realise that our little Australian was

really worried and wanted to learn. So he sent her to study Japanese art at the Guimet Musee, to let her learn slowly that there is more than one vision in art.

That a picture could have more than eye realism. That there was such a thing as aesthetic feeling. That a picture that is meant to fill a certain space should decorate that space. That the time of Giotto had passed when he painted to teach. Nowadays, books and education were being given away. That each century should have some of the characteristics of itself in its art. All this and so much more that our poor little artist was obliged to become a very humble student indeed. She found she had been hopping about on one rung only of the ladder of art.

Starting off again she tries to add another quality to her realism—that of decoration. Hunting the galleries of Spain, Holland and Italy, etc., she has learnt to appreciate the mighty qualities in the works in these countries. But it all costs so much money and she finds that her pounds have become pence, so it was necessary to return to Adelaide to teach and earn. Her work at this period shows a definite move from sheer realism—the "Onions" in the National Gallery, Adelaide, and "Roses" owned by the Broken Hill Gallery were painted at this time.

On her return to Adelaide, she started teaching and working at her picture-making, trying to find her feet for her new movement—the addition of design in colour to realism. But now how difficult are friends and relatives, and so inconsistent. Only a few years ago they were grumbling because she would paint such horrid subjects as dead rabbits and fresh eggs. Now they were complaining because she is painting large gay flowers against gay backgrounds. *"Oh, why will you do it," they say, "when you had begun to sell and were getting on so nicely with those dark mysterious backgrounds and quiet material?"*

As she had no desire to sell unwanted work, she was quite free to pursue her own destiny. Back in Adelaide once more, how she craved for just one glimpse of that pink dragon. She felt that her knowledge was so small, but she knew that no one could help her but herself, so there was nothing to do but to plod on, work out on canvas that which bothered her mind. For two years she experimented in colour, searching always to get an aesthetic feeling in her

work, and all the time penny-piling to be able to make a dash back to Paris to see if she had moved a little.

The collection for the trip this time went quicker, as being older and more experienced she received more students, so that by the end of two years she was able to return to Paris and refresh herself. Her work from this time onwards is based on colour principles. She developed a scale of colour to suit herself, and with the combination of realism produced such work as "Anemones" (Plate I).

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Margaret Preston, *Roses*

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Margaret Preston, *Anemones*

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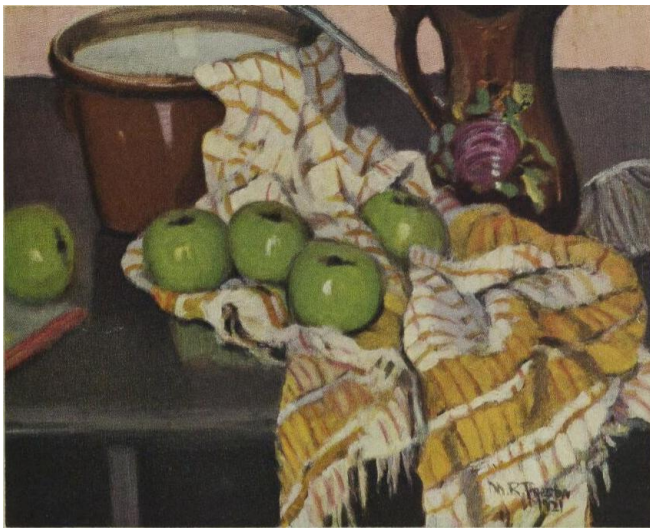
This let her definitely know the move had been made. Solitary realism lay at the back with her adolescence. From now on she allowed herself full license in colour—only letting her subjects appear as realistic as her aesthetic feeling allowed.

Exhibiting and teaching, she found her days full, when crash, down came the war. She decided to try and help mend soldiers, as she had no capabilities to heal, and so went to a pottery school and learnt simple rules of that trade. She had as teacher one who did throwing of shapes on the wheel for Doulton's, so her good fortune in teachers still stood to her.

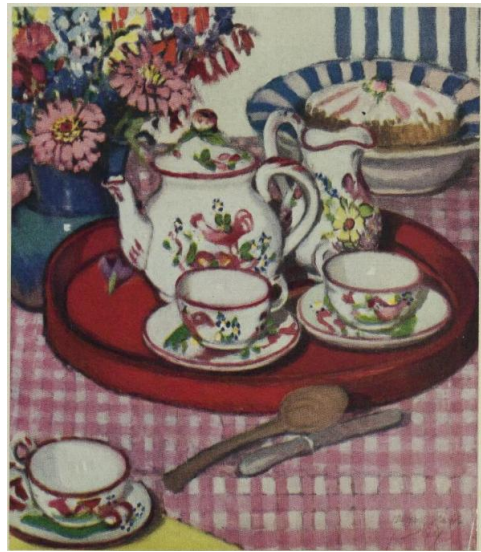
After a time she was able to teach shell-shocked men, simple pottery. Down on the Devon Moors she worked with them until the armistice came and she was free to come home. There are two nice pots in the London War Museum made under her tuition by shell-shocked soldiers.

Returning again to Australia, she took on domestic duties, finding time to continue with her art. Still painting in colour with a set principle in her mind,

she produced "*Apples*" (Plate 4), "*Thea Proctor's Tea Party*" (Plate 7A), and "*Hibiscus*" (Plate 9).



Margaret Preston, *Apples*



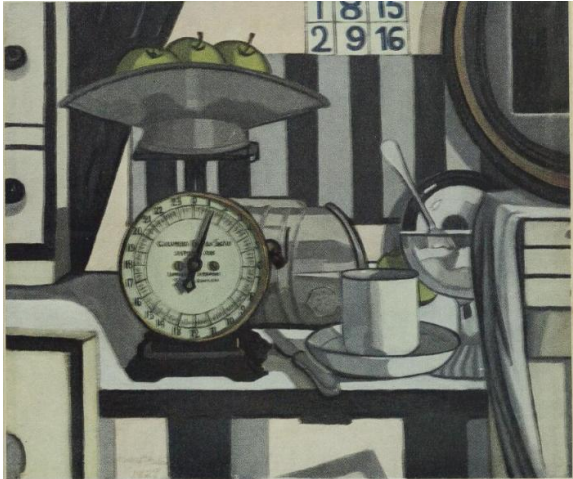
Margaret Preston, *Thea Proctor's Tea Party*



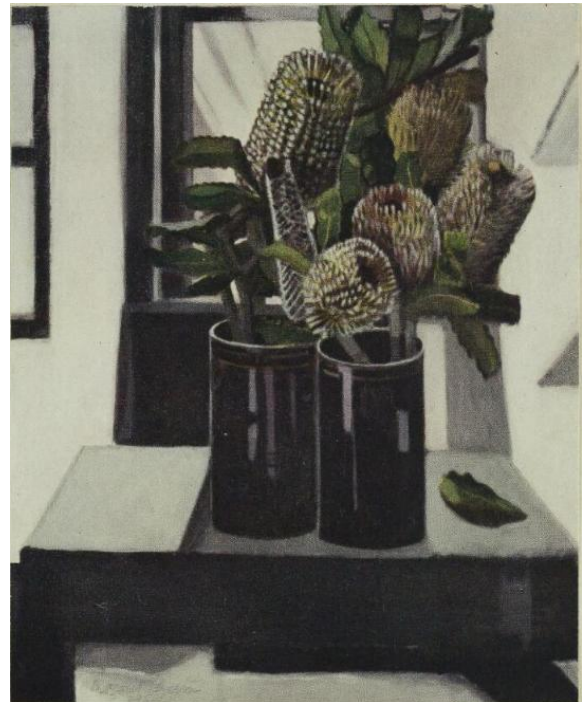
Margaret Preston, *Hibiscus*, 1925

Yet again the old restless feeling is bothering her. She feels that her art does not suit the times, that her mentality has changed and that her work is not following her mind. She feels that this is a mechanical age—a scientific one—highly civilised and unaesthetic. She knows that the time has come to express her surroundings in her work. All around her in the simple domestic life is machinery—patent ice-chests that need no ice, machinery does it; irons heated by invisible heat; washing-up machines; electric sweepers, and so on. They all surround her and influence her mind and, as her mind is expressed in

her work, she has produced "*Still Life*", 1927 (Plate 12), and "*Banksias*" (Plate 13).



Margaret Preston, *Still Life*, 1927



Margaret Preston, *Banksias*, 1927

Yet again come her friends and Critics. Queer people. Only a short time since they were complaining that her colour knocked everything out, and now that she is trying to produce form in its simplest manner; making all other qualities subservient to this, they regret her throwing away of her beautiful colour."

Fortunately she is free to paint what she pleases and how she thinks. She does not imagine she has advanced in her art—only moved. The ladder of art lies flat, not vertical. This only she claims for the works in this book. They are the mind of a woman who is still alive.

**Art in Australia**

A Quarterly Magazine

Margaret Preston Number

Third Series

Number Twenty Two

December 1927