

The Modern Art Movement in Australia

By [ROLAND WAKELIN](#)

IT was about the year 1913 that the first glimmerings of what is now called "modern art" came to us in Sydney—I remember seeing in a Sunday paper a cubist "*Nude Descending a Staircase.*" It was puzzling, but I wanted to know more about these pictures. The names of Cezanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh were then unknown here. We art students knew a little of the French Impressionists, Manet, Monet, Degas and Rodin, but more of the English Impressionism of Whistler.

It was about this time that Miss Nora Simpson returned from England and told us something of the new outlook. Colour was the thing it seemed—vibrating colour, and there were new ideas in composition—unorthodox. Miss Simpson and Miss Cossington Smith were at Rubbo's "Atelier," I was at the Royal Art Society and de Mestre hovered between the two. The spirit of adventure was abroad. Here were new fields to explore—a means to express something much more vital than what we saw in the paintings around us. We commenced to heighten our colour, working in stippling touches and to make severe cubistic drawings. The elders of the Royal Art Society became perturbed. A special meeting of the Council was called to stop the rot, but Datillo Rubbo bravely defended us and finally won the day.

The Society, however, accepted some of our work at the Annual Exhibitions in 1916-18. In 1919 de Mestre and I worked together on his scheme for harmonising colour in accordance with the musical system of harmonising sound. We held a joint exhibition at Gayfield Shaw's Gallery, which called forth the critics' rage in the words, "Elaborate and pretentious bosh."

Miss Cossington Smith about this time produced a series of cartoons on topical subjects in vivid colour, using an extremely simplified symbolism.

The next few years were mingled with uncertainty. We were repeatedly told that we were "on the wrong track" and really wondered if we were, and I think, unconsciously drifted in some degree back towards the academic.

In 1923 de Mestre and I were together in Paris and London and the sight of original works by the Masters we respected stirred again our old enthusiasm. We decided that on our return to Australia we would pursue our former course without compromise.

As there now seems to be more general interest awakening in our work, it may be well to set forth briefly the ideal behind it.

Modern painting aims at the setting down of essentials in the clearest and most direct manner possible. This sounds simple till we inquire, "What is essential to the painter in his work?"

It is generally accepted that in a painting we cannot give all that nature offers. Paint is a limited medium and if one particular truth is stressed, then other truths must be sacrificed.

Let us examine a "*Still Life*" by Cezanne. We observe that the table is "skew-wiff," the jug out of plumb, the apples rough and unfinished. Now imagine these things rectified. We will "rule up" the table, make the jug straight, smooth and polish the apples to delight the heart of a greengrocer. What is the result? We have gained much in "truth of appearance" but we have also completely destroyed the rhythmic flow of line—that *concentric* feeling in the design, the feeling of "radiation from centres" which is a basic truth of Life itself. In smoothing the apples the colour has lost all that *vitality* which separate juxtaposed touches give. We have sacrificed Life in the design to gain a more complete realisation of outward appearance—which is the more important, the body or the raiment? To the painter the first essential

is that his subject (his expression in paint) shall live on his canvas, and he gives his subject Life—movement, not by copying something in movement, but by giving movement to his lines—vitality to his colour. He believes it is at least better to have a crude living thing than a well-dressed corpse.

So the painter, in his desire to give his work qualities of Life, looks on his subject (either in fact or imagination) and instinctively seeks in it the particular accent of line, tone or colour which will give that vital rhythmic unity which he feels to be inherent in Life. Thus the so-called distortions in modern painting are not deliberately contrived, but are due to the painter's actually seeing his subject that way, though he sees it, of course, more in his mind's eye than by actual physical eyesight.

It stands to reason, therefore, that one who looks at a "modern" picture expecting to find there the representation of some scene, face or object that he would enjoy looking at in reality, will be disappointed.

This may be termed enjoyment at second hand, but a painting must be enjoyed for its own sake—for its own independent Life—significance—beauty.

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Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, 1912



Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with Apples*, 1890-94



Roland Wakelin, *Still Life*