

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast, I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Denise Mimmocchi, senior curator of Australian art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, to talk about modernist painter Grace Cossington Smith. So first, can you tell me about her impact in Australian art history?

DM: Grace Cossington Smith really delivered a beautiful, color-filled style of modern painting. She delivered this great new vision of color painting that was filled with light that really transformed the traditions of Australian art. So she started her career around the last years of the First World War. And so we're really looking at that period of the interwar decades and onwards in terms of her practice. What she really did during this time was that she, from those days as a student, she began to experiment with stylistic modes of European modernism, that she really embraced these changes to deliver a vision that was attuned to her local experiences. So even though she looked at the new, emerging traditions of Europe, she really grabbed that and made it something of her own to define the things that were in the world around her as she painted in Sydney. So through that, she delivered this really distinct vision of the new urban culture of Sydney as it was developing into a modern metropolis, as well as a very distinct and beautiful vision of the world of nature and the Australian bush around her. The other thing about Grace Cossington Smith is she really broke that traditional narrative of modern painters going to study in Europe and in Paris in particular at this time to earn their stripes, if you like, as a modern painter. She was very much firmly attached to her local world, for the source of her creativity and inspiration. So she is a truly remarkable artists that delivered so much in these ways.

AT: I'm curious, because you're talking about how she broke the pattern of you know, going to Europe and coming back, but my understanding is that she did live in Europe for a few years when she was younger. She took classes in Germany, was exposed to paintings by Watteau in Berlin. And so it does seem like she she did go there and brought it back.

DM: She traveled from 1912 to 1914, she traveled to England and spent a brief period in Germany as well, with her sister and initially her father. And she did study drawing in both England and Germany. But really, she was studying traditional forms of drawings. And it is surprising that during those years living close to London, she says that she wasn't exposed to any paintings of modern art. So yes, she was looking at traditional artists, such as the fabulous Watteau, but the type of art that she would become known for and by which she transformed - practices in Australia were very different to what she was studying in Europe, and that period very early on in her career, actually, in fact, before she started studying painting, she was only studying drawing over there was engaged with with types of art making that were very different to what she would come to be recognized back in Australia.

AT: Okay, so it sounds like there were probably some influences there, but it wasn't, you know, she went there, she developed her style and came back fully formed.

DM: No, it was actually, she does talk later on about how it was really only when she came back to Australia, and she was studying with an Italian-born painter, immigrant to Australia, called Antonio Dattilo Rubbo. She said it was really only through his classes in Sydney, ironically enough, that she became exposed to notions of modernism or modern art, and she began to look at the work of the modern masters such as Van Gogh that came to so inspire her work as a painter in Australia. So ironically enough, she was in London, had access to a whole range of all these art practices of modernism, but it was really only in Australia that she came to look at them, you know, through reproductions really. And through the encouragement of her teacher and fellow students back in Sydney,

AT: And I have to admit, as someone without an arts history degree, I'm not actually clear when you're talking about you know, she was studying the traditional and then she became this pioneering modernist artist, what are we talking about, like, what would you say defines, modernism compared to the more traditional styles,

DM: Well, modernism to really general generalize, because it is a very big umbrella word if you'd like for a lot of different artistic styles and movement. But if we're bringing it down to I guess its most basic definition, modernism is really looking at the way that artists transformed their work in order for it to express an experience of living in the modern world. So the most obvious example, perhaps, that I can use here is the way that Grace Cossington Smith and others from her time started to paint the world through this new vision of color. You know, they weren't looking at the world and trying to replicate it in their painting as we see it. But they were painting with a greater sense of this color, abstracted form, even though she did hold to certain forms of representation. You know, we look at her and we do recognize what it is she's painting, but it is again, not as we see it. She paints, you know, flattened form. She paints these compositions that have this great undercurrent of a sense of rhythm to them. So you look at it, she's not painting trees as we see trees. It's like this rhythmic manifestation of the world around her. And all this was really to give a sense of, again, not the world as we see it, but to extract from something that lies beneath it, the vital undercurrents of the world. This was very much, these new views of the world like Grace and others were painting them was very much impacted by the experience of First World War when that idea that the so-called sense of rationality, that sort of view of the world that had led humanity into this absolutely devastating trauma was no longer a way of seeing the world. So with those early decades of the 20th century, we do see painters trying to extract this greater sense of the spirit, the unseen things in the world, and try and express a sense of this in their painting as well. So one can fill seminars on the meaning of modernism, but I hope that sort of briefly gets a sense of the way that artists were changing their practices in order to align their expression with an experience of living in the modern world at that point in time as well.

AT: I mean, it sounds like it's someone trying to make sense of trauma, but on a grand scale.

DM: Yeah, absolutely. And certainly in terms of, experiences of a lot of countries in Europe and Australia and obviously others, New Zealand too, working through this impact of what had just happened and that left populations devastated and and so many people at personal level, devastated, with that sense of loss, and physical and psychological trauma as well.

At the same time, we're also looking at and particularly in Sydney, this new world of modernity, in the early years of the 20th century. So, Sydney at the time when Grace Cossington Smith started painting, Sydney as a city was being transformed into a modern metropolis. We had colonial low rise buildings being knocked down at a really accelerated rate and being replaced by high rise buildings, the scale of things had gone up. We first get you know, things like department stores, which altered the patterns of consumerism, we get mass events we have cinema, we have jazz music, we have subways that take transport system underground, and of course in Sydney, the building of the Sydney Harbour Bridge really epitomized all those ambitions of turning Sydney into this new metropolis from the city that it was. So artists in Sydney, including Grace, were really looking, perhaps not consciously, but they were aligning their painting to tap into this new sense of the dynamics of the modern world. And the changing dynamics of their city. So we look at her color-filled paintings, the sense of this world that's in motion in them, and you can see how they're connected. Not only in the subjects, but in the way that they're painting and the way the world is expressed, to this sense of the pulsating new world of modern Sydney as well.

AT: And of course, anytime we have a lot of change, there are conservatives who are pushing back against that and I find it interesting that she was a foundation member of and exhibited with the anti-modernist Australian Academy of Art. So I'm curious, someone who was clearly interested in innovation, so why would she be affiliated with such a conservative organization, do you think?

DM: Well, it's sort of useful to remember that the Australian Academy of Art developed on the eve of the Second World War almost. We'd entered by this stage, a very different type of, of modernism, a very different style, when we're looking at the young, emerging painters of art of that period. It is, by that stage Cossington

Smith's work was pretty well established as well. And it was, the idea of what contemporary art was by that stage was something very different to the sort of color, metaphysical kind of painting that Cossington Smith and her other colleagues had done, that earlier wave of modernist art had been practicing. By this stage, we're looking at artists, just to give a handful examples, like Sidney Nolan, Joy Hester, Albert Tucker, Arthur Boyd, artists who'd been influenced by new ideas of surrealism, about the psychological dimensions of the self, and so they're expressing their sense of the world in a very different way than Cossington Smith had. But also to get back to this question of, how come she still wasn't that sort of radical voice in Australian politics and Australian art. I'm gonna paraphrase her badly, but the feminist art historian Catriona Moore once said something about our interwar, the popular image of the radical bohemian doesn't match Australia's earlier interwar innovators. When we think of the radical artistic bohemian, we think of the Parisian, the radical artists from the streets of Montmartre, for example, in Paris, but who had radical left-wing progressive views as well as artistic views. Not all our artistic innovators sort of fitted into that mold and certainly, you know, Grace Cossington Smith, she was certainly a very, had a very radical vision in her art, but she was also very firmly based in a middle-class, family existence, in her home up in the upper North Shore, in Turramurra. So that's not to say that she didn't have expansive worldviews or anything, but it's perhaps not aligned to that idea of the Bohemian artist also being politically radical in their views as well.

AT: So her 1915 painting *The Sock Knitter*, which was of her sister knitting socks for the war effort, I believe is often considered the first post impressionist painting in Australia. But when we're looking at the timeline, that was more than 20 years before the Academy was formed. So if she perhaps was a bit more radical in say, the 1910s, maybe by the 1930s, she wasn't seen as quite so... wasn't as new.

DM: Yeah, yeah. This brings me back to the point that that type of cutting edge, modern art in in the late 1930s, was very different and moved on from what that type of art, the innovations of modern art had been around the time that Cossington Smith started painting. They're very two different periods of modernism in Australia. And there's nothing to say that one is more valid than the other. They were just in response, of course, to the times, which those artists were painting.

AT: And I think we've touched on this a bit but she was very much a Sydney artist, like pretty much all of well, not all, but most of her work is Sydney scenes and places and people and, documenting events like the Prince of Wales visited in 1920. So, would you say that she captured the zeitgeist of Sydney in that time?

DM: Absolutely. I think she, like I say, the city of Sydney at this time was an era of great transformation and I think her work does tap into not just the physical changes of the city, but that, again, the sort of undercurrents of the new experiences of the city, of actually being in the city, she encapsulates I think so well in her works. There are those early works from what was still her student years, like you say that the prince, and these were the years when she was commuting, you know, several times a week from her home in Turramurra, into the city. By the end of the 1920s, she sort of retreats a bit and paints from her studio, which is in the gardens of her family home. But even though she does have that sense of distance from the city and urban culture, she does around this time, in the late 1920s, come to paint one of her greatest series of works and I would say also one of the greatest series of works in in Australian early modernism, which is her paintings of the Sydney Harbour Bridge under construction. They are just really defining words of this era of modern art in Australia. And again, she's not just painting the progress of the bridge's construction, but she's trying to get a sense of the spirit of it. This sort of, she paints these radiating incredible visions, color visions of this bridge coming into construction like it's almost like this magnificent, overwhelming organic force. It's about the spirit of things as much as it is, the celebration of the engineering feat that it was. If you compare that, she painted a lot of the streets around her home, but if you compare what she's painting, if you look at a photograph of this street, and then you look at her vision of it, you actually see how incredibly, you know radically transformative her vision as a painter was because she translates it through color, she translates it, the long streets around her home, which in those

days were not obviously as heavily populated as they are now though, one sees that they are sort of still what we might say a semi rural, but she just paints these wonderful sweeps of paintings, sweeps of color. And again, I just keep coming back to it, but that sense of energy that she detected in the modern natural world around her. One detail that she does paint and incorporates in her compositions was the telegraph poles, the electricity poles in her suburbs, which were, of course there, and they were a sort of marker of her modern world, but one senses to that she's painting them in a more symbolic sense. You know, she was really attuned to this idea of the energies, the unseen energies in the world around us. And so with this inclusion of the telegraph poles and not just an actual, something that was actually in the landscape, but they also stood for a sense of that undercurrent of modern energy in the places around her as well. To see the photos of her world in Turramurra, to see her paintings side by side, I think you truly get a sense of this remarkable vision of the artist and how amazing for, to look out onto the streets and see the beautiful color, dynamic compositions that she encapsulated in her paintings.

AT: Most of her work is the world around her, but she also painted images of Allied troops in France during World War Two, Allied leaders dining at the Yalta Conference, church scenes that reference World War Two, and I believe she also did a few drawings of World War One scenes. So this was obviously unusual for her and I'm wondering, is it just part of that larger theme that we were talking about earlier of people trying to make sense of what's happening in their world, even if they're not directly experiencing it?

DM: Yeah, I mean, I think they're sort of deviations from her norm in terms of painting because she was primarily an artist, I guess, focused on her private world and her most immediate world. But of course, that's not to say that she lived in a vacuum. And of course, the impact of world events, certainly the impact of two world wars was keenly felt as well. So she, even though like I say that private world remained primary, we do also see her engaging, of course with the more public realms of world affairs. But also you know, like, for example, I said, she painted these incredible paintings of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, that were her personal vision of them, but they were still very much a work about a subject rather, that was a public, in the public domain. So I think the same can be said for these works from both, that emerge from the First and Second World War. You know, when the First World War she draws that remarkable work that's in the Art Gallery of New South Wales called Refugees, which was based on film footage that she saw, photographs that came from Europe, so not something that she witnessed firsthand, but it tells us and like those works that you mentioned from the Second World War, it shows an artist who was of course attuned to the wider world around her and to world events as well and these creep into her repertoire of subjects as a painter.

AT: So a lot of the women that I talk about on the podcast are not very well known today for various reasons, but I feel like I've seen Grace Cossington Smith's name all over the place, as someone who does enjoy a good art gallery. And obviously, I've been to the Art Gallery of New South Wales many times, highly recommend. But it seems like her work is quite well known today. So do you feel like she's fairly recognized or perhaps not as much as she should be?

DM: Well, I mean, I hope so. I hope that she is today recognized as one of the pioneers of that early phase of modern painting. But actually as an artist who produced exceptional works throughout her long career, which went, her last great body of work was in the 1950s and she was still delivering something absolutely breathtaking and new and innovative at that time as well. So I just don't want to situate her in those early interwar decades. She continues to be a significant painter, even though she lived till quite a ripe old age of 94. It was really, and even though she had been exhibiting fairly consistently throughout her life in solo shows and group shows, and was hopefully well recognized in Sydney, it was probably, really only until there was a retrospective exhibition of her work at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in the 1970s that her name did become more well recognized and of course, it's also the work of many important feminist curators and art historians who've really retrieved her from the realms of obscurity, and continue to promote her work, as well as

so many other of her female colleagues, artistic colleagues during the 20th century, and to remind people of just what an exceptional painter Grace Cossington Smith was. To be this artist who continually transformed the way she painted, but continued to contribute to the great transformations of art in Australia during the 20th century. Of course, that always comes with her exposure in galleries and I think she is fairly well represented in the state national galleries and regional galleries these days. So I hope that she is up there and that people do recognize the name as one of our leading 20th century painters.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well behaved women rarely make history.

<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/artists/cossington-smith-grace/>