

ARTWORKERS UNION SLIDETALK 1984

SLIDE ONE: Artworkers's Union Petty Cartoon

SLIDE TWO: Victorian National Gallery School 1895

Organised activity in the visual arts developed in the Australian colonies as early as the 1840's, in the form of Mechanics' Institutes Schools of Art, and Societies and Academies of Art.

On the whole, these bodies were philanthropic in nature, geared towards the moral 'betterment' and 'civilizing' of rough colonials.

For instance, the Victorian Society of Fine Arts (est. 1856) was formed for the express purpose of "educating the taste of the people by familiarizing them with the sight of paintings and statuary". With this in mind, this august body (whose professional members included Eugene van Guerard and Charles Summers) was instrumental in pressing for the establishment of the National Gallery in Victoria in the 1860s's.

The slide you see is a photo of the Gallery students, from the turn of the century. This photo was reprinted in a local paper in the twenties, with accompanying caption explaining that this group contained the "origins of many present day celebrities". When we read through the accompanying list of 'Celebrities', we find that none of them are woman. Yet we can't help noticing that then, as now, the vast majority of these art students are women. What happened to all these woman art students on graduation? What's more, this problem is still with us today.

Perhaps the earliest example of a specifically women's arts organisation was the Ballarat Ladies' Art Association, set up in 1890 for the express purpose of assisting the advancement of women artists and students. Perhaps more is known of the 1907 Australian Exhibition of Women's Work, held in the Exhibition Buildings in Melbourne. This exhibition contained over 16,000 exhibits, from fine needlework to horticulture.

As we have already noted, most of the early societies were intent on cultural improvement'. Therefore it's not surprising to find that on the whole they were under the executive control of eminent (and no doubt well meaning) lay members. This imbalance often caused much tension between professional and lay members, and combined with a more general dissatisfaction on the part of younger artists with the old guard, in matters of taste, standards and political viewpoints. The problem of control over the Societies forced artist members of two major groups (the Victorian Academy of Art and the Art Society of N.S.W.) to split from their parent bodies. In Victoria, the younger professionals left to form the Australian Artists' Association in 1895. In a number of years, however, they rejoined with members of the Academy to form the Victorian Artists' Society. In Sydney, the breakaway group formed the Society of Artists. Both groups were clearly responding to the recognition of professional interests needing protection.

SLIDE THREE: Percy Lindsay, 'Smoke Night, Victorian Artists' Society, 1906

The Victorian Society of Artists ran a well-known art school and annual exhibition. It also had a rather legendary reputation for its bohemian functions. For instance, in 1895 when the fledgling Society took over the Melbourne Exhibition Buildings and Gardens for an 'Artists' Carnival' patrons were entertained with a mix of jousting and rapier duels, gymnastic feats, dancing, 'tableaux vivants', foot-races and "...a program of Inexhaustible Excitement and Indescribable Interest every afternoon and evening, all for one shilling."

The Percy Lindsay illustration you see here shows a more regular Society entertainment the Smoke Night. Taken from a 1906 function, it picks out the individual personalities' in attendance: Walter Withers, John Mother, Frederick McCubbin, J. Ford Patterson, Charles Nuttall, William Moore, Alexander Colquhoun and Percy Lindsay. The Victorian Artists, Society didn't always restrict itself to all-male affairs, however, as indicated in the next two slides.

SLIDE FOUR: Victorian Artists' Society: Artists' Mask and Domino Night, 1908

SLIDE FIVE: Victorian Artists' Society. Sets at the 'Artists' Ball' (nd)

SLIDE SIX: Selection Committee, N S W Society of Artists, 1907

This photo shows a more lighthearted moment in the deliberations of the 1907 Selection Committee of the N.S.W. Society of Artists, first formed in Sydney in 1895 after a disagreement between artists and lay members of the Art Society of N.S.W., when no artist was elected to the Selection Committee of the Annual Exhibition. Artists wanted to have more control over the exhibition of their work. The Society of Artists' Annual Exhibition of members' work, selected by a committee of artists, became one of the most significant regular events of the art world.

As previously indicated, the Victorian Artists' Society shares this history. Although both organisations never identified themselves as industrial organisations, the Victorian Artists' Society and the N.S.W. Society of Artists set standards as professional artists' associations in Australia, with no small political influence, and a strong tradition spanning many decades. These societies sought to protect their members' interests in a number of ways. For example, the Victorian Artists' Society put pressure on the Minister for Customs in 1911 to impose a ten pound duty on imported paintings etc, to protect the market for locally produced work. Ironically perhaps, some ten years later we see the N.S.W. Society of Artists calling for the lifting of this import duty, as many artists were by now travelling abroad, only to find themselves liable for duty when they returned to Australia with their work, or sent work to Australia for sale on the local market.

SLIDE SEVEN: Australian Writers and Artists' Union.

The Australian Writers and Artists' Union was formed in Sydney in 1909, and later set up branches in other states. Part of a general growing industrial consciousness among

Cultural workers, its aims were to advance and protect the interests of its members: in its own words, to protect "pioneers of cultures" from "semi-starvation".

In 1911 a group of artists and writers made a public appeal through newspapers and petitions to the then Federal Labor Government for legislation to cover copyright and to protect the local cultural industry from overseas imports.

The Writers and Artists' Union petition read in part:

"it is not our desire in any way to prohibit or handicap the introduction into this country...of true works of art, but we demand at least an opportunity for the exercise of our talents, and such an improvement in our industrial conditions as will enable us to conform to decent Australian standards of living."

If the government would encourage the development of a 'truly Australian' publication industry, they claimed, then less writers and artists would have to leave Australia for jobs elsewhere.

This petition, signed by eminent Australian writers and artists such as Henry Lawson, the Ashtons, Victor Daly, Sydney Long, Blamire Young, the Lindsays and so on is interesting in its conflation of industrial issues and nationalism in the claiming of credentials as 'true' interpreters of Australia. The irony of this position, as writers have pointed out, is that the pastoral industry, which played a very important role in the national ('bush') image developed by this 'Oz bohemian' generation was always staunchly opposed to protectionism.

SLIDE EIGHT: Red Cross Banners, 1918

During the First World War artists were involved in most aspects of the war effort (although many took an anti-conscription stance). Here we see eminent members of the Victorian Artists' Society painting banners for display on Red Cross Day, 1918. (From left; Norman MacGeorge, W.Seed, Leslie Wilkie and W.B.McInnes).

Another society of artists that took an active part in war work was the then flourishing Society of Women Painters, representing women artists from N.S.W., Victoria and Tasmania. Under the inspiring motto, "Unsullied Faith, of soul sincere, of justice pure the sister fair", this noble body offered its members a wide range of services and activities, from its inception in 1913 to the thirties. (At this point it might be interesting to note that in 1913 another society, the Women's Handicrafts Association was formed, though very little is known about this organisation). With an art school in the Queen Victoria building in Sydney, the Society of Women Painters offered their members painting and anatomy classes, a sketch club, visiting lecturers, 'criticism mornings' and monthly radio broadcasts of the Society's activities. The Society's members also signed a petition calling for the dismissal of J.S.MacDonald, Director of the National Gallery of Victoria when he claimed there had never been a good woman artist.

Associated with the National Council of Women in 1934, the Society of Women Painters attempted to promote the exhibition and sale of its members' work, although it remained on the whole a somewhat 'Society' society.

SLIDE NINE: Australian Arts Club Catalogue, 1919

One of the other more interesting societies in this early period was the Australian Arts Club, which emerged in the immediate post-war years in Sydney, and spread quickly to include members from Melbourne and Adelaide. Here you can see the cover of their 1919 exhibition catalogue. It was first known as the Sydney Sketch Club, when, in 1914 artists would meet weekly to draw from the model and "discuss art matters". This club rapidly expanded, with increasing membership, new studios and annual exhibitions. The Club's purpose was as a "common meeting ground for artists to air their views, and for general discussion and study..". Drawing in members from other societies, it soon claimed to be the "most representative of art bodies in Australia today."

The selection of artists exhibiting in the Club's annual exhibition was less representative, however, gathering from views portrait silhouettes of exhibiting members shown here from the 1919 catalogue. The silhouette portraits are by May Moore and Judith Fletcher.

SLIDE TEN: "Some of the members of the Australian Arts Club" (from its 1919 exhibition catalogue)

No women seem to be 'represented' in this informal grouping of 'artists exchanging viewpoints.'.

As we've seen so far, there has been no organisation that encompassed or represented the interests of all art workers. In the main, the Societies remained as elite 'bohemian clubs', as bunkers of lay conservatism, or catered to more specialised needs (such as the Society of Women Painters, the Yarra Sculpture Society (1898), the Society of Arts and Crafts of N.S.W. (1906) or the Camera Circles and Clubs that emerged in Sydney and Melbourne during the First World War.

However through the interwar period these Societies repeatedly called for more government subsidisation in the arts, for travelling scholarships, and funding for the establishment of regional galleries etc. To this end, they pressed for the establishment of a federal Ministry to cover and serve the varied needs and interests of cultural workers.

Source: Artworkers Union Archives