Grace Crowley's Contribution to Australian Modernism and Geometric Abstraction

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By

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—Dianne Ottley

INTRODUCTION

Grace Crowley was one of the leading innovators of geometric abstraction in Australia. When she returned to Australia in 1930, she had thoroughly mastered the complex mathematics and geometry of the golden section that had become one of the frameworks for modernism.

The golden section (also know as the golden ratio, the golden mean, the divine proportion) is a ratio or proportion defined by the number phi, where phi equals 1.61803. It can be derived with a number of geometric constructions, each of which divides the line segments at the unique point, where the ratio of the whole line to the large segment is the same as the ratio of the large segment to the small segment. This ratio has fascinated man through the centuries, being found throughout nature: in plants, flowers, shells, animals, astronomical bodies and the structure of man, and it is often described as, the proportion of beauty. It is believed to have been used by the Egyptians in the design of the pyramids, and was certainly used by the Greeks in the design of their buildings and artefacts. Renaissance artists used it, during which time it was termed, the divine proportion. Its construction and use by craftsmen was one of the secrets of the medieval guilds, until the methods of its construction were published in a book by Fra Pacioli in 1509. Thereafter, it was freely available to artists, along with other theoretical treatises, and its mystique was somewhat diminished. However, during the late nineteenth century, the golden section was rediscovered by artists seeking to create an art for their modern age, but underpinned with the classical grandeur of the old masters. Thus in Paris, the golden section was revived as a compositional, geometrical framework for modern and abstract art. André Lhote joined the people who became fascinated by this amazing proportion, studied and wrote about it for many years, prior to opening his art academy in Paris in 1922.

Crowley, Anne Dangar and Dorrit Black all studied under Lhote, recognized as the foremost teacher of modernism in Paris. Crowley not only taught the golden section to Rah Fizelle, Ralph Balson and students of the Crowley-Fizelle Art School, but used it to develop her own abstract art during the 1940s and 1950s.

Through her teaching at the most progressive modern art school in Sydney in the 1930s, Crowley taught the basic compositional techniques

as she had learnt them from Lhote. When the art school closed in 1937 she worked in partnership with fellow artist, Ralph Balson, as they developed their art into constructive, abstract paintings. Balson has been credited with being the most influential painter in the development of geometric abstraction in Australia for a younger generation of artists. This is largely due to Crowley's insistence that Balson was the major innovator who led her into abstraction. She consistently refused to take credit for her own role in their artistic partnership.

My research indicates that there were a number of factors that strongly influenced Crowley to support Balson and deny her own role. Her archives contain sensitive records of the breakup of her partnership with Rah Fizelle and the closure of the Crowley-Fizelle Art School. These, and other archival material, indicate that Fizelle's inability to master and teach the golden section, and Crowley's greater popularity as a teacher, were the real causes of the closure of the School. Crowley left notes in her archives that she still felt deeply distressed, even forty years after the events, and did not wish the circumstances of the closure known in her lifetime.

With the closure of the Art School and her close friend, Anne Dangar, living in France, her friendship with Balson offered her a way forward. Rather than risk losing another friend and artistic partner in a similar manner to the breakup of her partnership with Fizelle, Crowley chose to conceal her considerable mathematical and geometric ability while working with Balson. During the years following the closure of the School, the death of her father and the deteriorating health of her mother meant that, as the unmarried daughter, she needed to spend much time caring for her mother, until her death in 1947. This left her with little time for painting during that period. Crowley knew that Dangar had encountered strong opposition to the new compositional techniques involved in modernism, when she returned to Australia in 1929 to again teach at the Sydney Art School. She was also well aware of the popularity of the masculine landscape painting tradition representing the essence of Australian national identity. She said she felt a man had a better chance of gaining acceptance as an artist. By supporting Balson she was able to provide him with a place to work, in her studio, and had a friend with whom she could share her own passion for art, as she had with Dangar.

During her long friendship with Balson, she painted with him and gave him opportunities to develop his talents, which he could not have accessed without her. She taught him, by discreet practical demonstration, the principles of composition she had learnt from Lhote. During the period of the Crowley-Fizelle Art School, he had worked full-time as a house painter and only attended the weekend sketch club associated with the

School. From the late 1930s to the 1950s they discussed and planned their paintings together. When he retired from house painting in 1955, she continued to provide him with a quiet, secluded place in which to paint and experiment with new techniques. With her own artistic contacts in France, she gained him international recognition as an abstract painter and his own solo exhibition in a leading Paris art gallery. After his death in 1964, she continued to promote his art to curators and researchers, recording his life and art for posterity.

The artist with whom she studied modernism in Paris, Anne Dangar, also received her lifelong support and promotion. In the last decade of her life Crowley provided detailed information to curators and art historians on the lives of both her friends, Balson and Dangar, meticulously keeping accurate records of theirs and her own life devoted to art. In her later years she arranged to deposit these records in public institutions, thus becoming a contributor to Australian art history. As a result of this foresight the stories of both her friends have since become a record of Australian art history.

Teaching Composition

Over many years, Australian artists had been made aware of the importance of composition and systems such as the golden section during their study in London and Paris. Although these techniques were known and discussed by Australian artists who had returned from overseas, particularly in the 1920s, they were not taught at any art school in Sydney until Dorrit Black and Crowley taught them at the Modern Art Centre in Sydney for a short period in the early 1930s. With the opening of the Crowley-Fizelle Art School in George Street in 1932, Crowley taught the principles of the golden section until its closure in 1937. Fizelle had not studied these systems while overseas but was aware of their value and use by master painters he had studied in Italy and Spain.

When Frank and Margel Hinder joined the weekend Sketch Club of the Crowley-Fizelle Art School in 1934, Crowley found that Frank's art training in America was comparable with her Paris training. Frank brought with him an interest in the abstract qualities underlying most art, and knowledge of Dynamic Symmetry, a system of design principles developed by American writer, Jay Hambidge. However, Crowley recognized dynamic symmetry as an integral part of the golden section as she had learnt from Lhote. Frank Hinder, the son of a Sydney surgeon, had gone to America to study at the Art Institute of Chicago (1927-28). There he was taught that Seurat had developed a systematic theory of

colour, and that composition was to be interpreted in geometric form. He also learnt that modern artists were experimenting with abstract art in Paris, and about the golden section with its history from the Egyptians and Greeks. In 1929 he studied at the New York School of Fine and Applied Art under Howard Giles and Emil Bisttram, who were friends of Hambidge, and it was from them he learnt Hambidge's theory of dynamic symmetry.[1]

Hambidge had studied the use of the golden section by the Egyptians and Greeks in their art and architecture. He found that the recovery of the design principles required "special talent and training, considerable mathematical ability, much patience and sound aesthetic judgment". He concluded that geometrical analysis was "misleading and inexact" and found that by using arithmetical analysis, he could reduce the principles to working use for American artists and designers.[2] Until the arrival of the Hinders, Crowley taught the golden section from her own knowledge and the notes she and Dangar had taken from Lhote's teaching in France. Because Fizelle was having difficulty with the concepts of the golden section, she asked Frank Hinder to obtain from America, copies of the magazine published by Jay Hambidge on dynamic symmetry, entitled *The Diagonal* which explained how to apply this in design and composition. In the first issue of *The Diagonal*, Hambidge stated that dynamic symmetry "was identical with that used by Greek masters in almost all the art produced in the great classical period".[3]

With the closure of the Crowley-Fizelle Art School in 1937, Crowley's knowledge of these fundamental principles was contained in her teaching notes and books that remained in her possession until after her death in 1979. In the 1950s, when art historian Bernard Smith was writing his history of *Australian Painting 1788-1960*,[4] he consulted Frank Hinder about the George Street Group of modernists in the 1930s. Information about dynamic symmetry and Hambidge's books were made available to Smith and this was published, thus crediting Hambidge with the introduction of dynamic symmetry to Australia. By then Crowley had spent many years supporting Balson and by the mid-1950s had retired to the Southern Highlands with Balson, doing little painting. Her archives contain detailed descriptions and diagrams of the golden section, as well as extensive notes of colour and music theories as applied to art and, an alphabet of pictorial design as taught by Lhote.

Evidence of the influence of the teaching of the principles of the golden section by Dorrit Black and Crowley, can be seen in Australian artists. Black used it as part of her teachings at the Modern Art Centre until she had to close it and return to Adelaide. One major painter who

readily acknowledges his debt to the teaching of Lhote through Black, is Jeffrey Smart. He has frequently said that his art is about shapes and colours, and that his composition is based on the golden section as taught to him by Dorrit Black. "Black was one of the major influences on my painting … I am still influenced by her teaching … She came to Adelaide like a shot of adrenelin."[5] In the late 1940s Smart studied under Léger in Paris, one of the original group of artists who took part in the now famous Cubism and La Section D'Or Exhibition of 1912 with both Lhote and Gleizes.

Crowley's role in the introduction and teaching of this technique has never been acknowledged, despite the crucial part she played in the development of modernism and geometric abstraction. In this book I present material from her own archives to show how she contributed to the development of modernism and geometric abstraction in Australia. I have tried to directly quote some of the material from her archives that give an insight into her teaching, her attitudes and personality. In contrast to the many paintings she destroyed, she saved so many drawings, invitations, cards and many letters, often with her reply handwritten on the used envelope. As well as books, magazines, teaching notes and notebooks from her travels, she kept a file of all the newspaper cuttings relating to her and her friends – neatly corrected in red ink. All of these were a great help to her in her latter years as people approached her for information, and they have now become a great resource for art historians seeking to understand that period of art history.

Art History

A matter that concerned Crowley in the last decade of her life was the amount of misinformation she read about herself and her colleagues and their art. She spent much time talking and writing to curators, art historians and researchers, and often recorded her frustration when her information was misinterpreted or recorded wrongly. Ultimately she donated her letters and papers to public institutions, where they have become a matter of public record for research and continue to enrich knowledge of Australian art history. The curators and art historians, who interviewed Crowley personally during her lifetime, have helped to shape her public image and that of her friends and colleagues who were part of the George Street Group. However, Crowley was a self-effacing person who preferred to promote the art of others and made no claims for her own achievements. Without an objective study of her life and contribution to art,

misunderstandings persist, and my aim is to try to set the record straight, as she herself tried to do.

Much of what has been written about Crowley was written during her lifetime, when she preferred to support Balson's career, and what has been written since has largely been informed by this earlier writing. In Bernard Smith's *Place, Taste and Tradition*, first published in 1945, he credited Grace Crowley, Rah Fizelle, Frank Hinder, Eric Wilson and Eric Thake with the best work done in Australia in the areas of cubism, constructivism and abstract art. He praised Crowley's *Baigneuse* as the "best painting by this group and certainly one of the finest paintings coming from the modern movement in Australia." He described her "distortion of natural form" as being used "with fine sensibility to aid the plastic unity of the composition". For him her surety of line, colour and tone revealed it as "the best of the contributions that cubism has made to contemporary art in Australia"[6] High praise indeed for Crowley at that time.

By the time Smith's influential *Australian Painting 1788-1960* was published in 1962, Crowley was credited "with some understanding of cubism and post-cubist trends in painting"[7] learnt from Lhote and Gleizes between 1927 and 1930. Frank Hinder had been teaching Dynamic Symmetry at the East Sydney Technical College during the 1950s and was probably the source of Smith's information on this period. Details of Hinder's career and influences on his art were given and two books specifically mentioned – Jay Hambidge's *Dynamic Symmetry, The Greek Vase* (1920) and Irma Richter's *Rhythmic Forms in Art* (1920)[8] Smith's book has been the source of learning by generations of students of art history. The evidence of Crowley's contribution to the teaching of dynamic symmetry remained in her teaching notes. After her death in 1979 these notes became part of her Archives at the Art Gallery of New South Wales Research Library.

Although published in 1979 with the subtitle *The Emergence of Modernist Painting in Australia to 1944*, Humphrey McQueen's *Black Swan of Trespass* fails to even mention the Crowley-Fizelle Art School, although Eleanore Lange is mentioned as an influential teacher. She is credited with providing "a group of Sydney artists with reasons for breaking through surface Modernism" and providing Balson with an environment in which he had "acquired his interest in Einstein".[9]

A Study of Australian Art[10] included statements collected by Herbert Badham from both Crowley and Balson. They expressed their united belief in the importance of abstract design to be found in geometric structure and colour relationships. Crowley saw her painting as having evolved from the design elements of the old masters through to the

modern master painters, Kandinsky and Mondrian. These elements can be seen in their paintings from the period.

In his book *The Innovators, the Sydney alternatives in the rise of modern art, literature and ideas*, Geoffrey Dutton included quite a bit of information about the Crowley-Fizelle Art School and the individual painters who were prominent. Like McQueen, he identifies Margaret Preston as one of the leading modernist painters and describes the George Street Group as "admirable pioneers" but says there was "not a genius among them, nor even a major talent". In the light of more recent research and re-evaluation of the George Street Group of artists, many now would not agree with his judgement. He rightly described Crowley as "a selfless woman who gave most of her energies to teaching or encouraging other artists". However, his description of Jay Hambidge's book *Dynamic Symmetry: The Greek Vase* as "one of the bibles of George Street" is inaccurate. Crowley and Fizelle were already teaching Lhote's principles of the golden section for several years before the Hinders joined the Group. He described both Crowley and Hinder as "literary-intellectual", but their art as "theory-obsessed, mechanical and rather colourless". He does, however, link Hambidge and Lhote's teachings as "united in their insistence on the use of geometry in proportioning space" and he specifically mentions that in Hinder's notes on dynamic symmetry he wrote about the "rectangle of the whirling squares based on the golden section". He, like so many writers, says that Crowley and Dorrit Black both studied under Lhote and Gleizes and while that is true, their study under Gleizes was brief and their main teaching, particularly on the golden section, came from Lhote.[11]

Daniel Thomas, while at the Art Gallery of New South Wales from 1958-78, befriended Crowley and was responsible for a number of major exhibitions which featured Crowley and her colleagues. The George Street Group of painters, Balson, Crowley, Fizelle and Hinder, were acknowledged in a 1966 Exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales as the "leaders of the second phase of the modern art movement in Australia".[12] After Balson's death in August, 1964, Thomas paid tribute to his art and his unique place in Australian art history, as the first Australian artist to produce a solo-artist exhibition of non-objective paintings in July 1941 in Sydney.[13] However, by the time Thomas curated *Project 4* Crowley's Retrospective in 1975, he acknowledged that it was she who had ensured "that his career was productive until his death" and that her years in Paris "had made her a crucial influence on Australian Modernism through the 1930s."[14]

One writer who clearly saw the importance of Crowley's influence on Balson was Patrick McCaughey. In an article on artist Roger Kemp published in *Art and Australia* in September 1970, McCaughey found Kemp's development as a painter to have been uneven, lacking "the liberating effect of Cubist structures" which he had intuitively worked towards and which in the 1960s became "the abiding formal strength of his work." He goes on to say that there was "no parallel in Kemp's career for the contact Balson had with cubist theories through Grace Crowley". He saw Kemp's art as posing a question "central to Western metaphysics … how to express man as one function of a Divine Geometry?"[15] Balson also expressed similar ideas about his paintings. Balson's biographer, Bruce Adams, writing on Balson's art, also recognised that his approach to figuration in the late 1930s was disciplined and highly structured, "informed by the analytical methods of cubist composition". He saw works exhibited in the 1939 Exhibition I, such as *The Sisters (Family Group), Madonna, Portrait of Grace Crowley*, and others, as showing the impact of cubism in their geometric organization which provided formal armature for the composition.[16] Through her friendships with Daniel Thomas and Bruce Adams, Crowley made known the life and art of both Balson and Dangar.

In the 1970s a new group of feminist writers looked back to rediscover the many women artists who had been lost to Australian art history. Janine Burke curated a major exhibition in 1975 and compiled the accompanying catalogue for *Australian Women Artists – One Hundred Years: 1840-1940*[17], for which Crowley wrote an autobiographical essay. This essay has become a valuable resource as it is full of personal recollections of her life and the influences that shaped her as a person and as an artist. Burke's book was an early publication to take a positive and empathetic view of women as artists in Australia. She saw Crowley as one of a group of women artists as radicals of their day, among the most articulate, well-informed, influential, widely travelled and advanced of their time. Prevailing social conditions allowed some women to pursue a career in the arts and Crowley, like Cossington-Smith, was supported by her father's accumulated wealth. The difference between these two artists was that Cossington-Smith was always encouraged in her art by her family, while Crowley's family did not understand her interest in art. In return though, she was expected to be available to care for her parents during periods of illness and old age. This was a common expectation, particularly of unmarried daughters.

Another writer who befriended Crowley was Mary Eagle when researching her book *Australian Modern Painting Between the Wars 1914-*

1939[18]. She clearly spent some time getting to know Crowley to understand her contribution; she captured and distilled the essence of Crowley's personality and artistic career. Crowley felt no conflict between her early training with Ashton and what she learnt with Lhote in Paris. She remained on good terms with Ashton when she returned to Sydney, in spite of his avowed opposition to modernism. She was grateful to Ashton for the sound artistic training and encouragement she received from him, but found that Lhote's teaching provided her with what she needed to compose a picture - a framework for composition.

Both Burke's and Eagle's books highlighted the important, but previously unrecognised role women artists played, particularly in the introduction of modernism to Australia. The attention drawn to this fact has stimulated a great deal of research, writing and curating of exhibitions focusing on the women so far lost to Australian art history. A major survey undertaken by Joan Kerr to retrieve women artists resulted in a survey exhibition and publication of *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book: 500 works by 500 women artists from colonial times to 1955*[19]. Crowley and Dangar were both identified and included with short biographies. Crowley also appeared in Caroline Ambrus' *Australian Women Artists – First Fleet to 1945: History, Hearsay and Her Say*[20] included in a group of women artists, Margaret Preston, Grace Cossington Smith, Clarice Beckett and Dorrit Black, who challenged mainstream aesthetics.

Helen Topliss' *Modernism and Feminism: Australian Women Artists 1900-1940* explains why women artists used modernism as a way of establishing their own feminist context as artists, having been marginalised by traditional academic practice that was male dominated. Topliss recognised that Crowley was a capable artist but simply noted that Crowley, like Dangar, preferred to promote the talents of their male colleagues as did other women of that period. Topliss saw Rah Fizelle as the leading talent in the Crowley-Fizelle Art School, made no mention of Crowley's knowledge of the golden section and dynamic symmetry, but said that Fizelle's knowledge and teaching came from Jay Hambidge's book on *Dynamic Symmetry* and Irma Richter's book *Rhythmic Form in Art* brought to the School in 1934 by Frank Hinder.[21]

Letters written by Anne Dangar to Crowley from 1930 until Dangar's death in 1951, were donated to the State Library of New South Wales by Crowley, along with lessons from Albert Gleizes to the students at the Crowley-Fizelle Art School in the 1930s. Interestingly, Crowley had asked Dangar's friend, Lucy Deveyle, to destroy her letters to Dangar after their mutual friend's death. Helen Topliss undertook the task of deciphering

Dangar's handwriting and published those letters, linked with some biographical details of Dangar's life, in *Earth, Fire, Water, Air: Anne Dangar's letters to Grace Crowley, 1930-1951*.[22] These letters form one of the sources of information about the friendship between Dangar and Crowley that was used by Peter Brooke, when researching and writing the life and work of Albert Gleizes, published in *Albert Gleizes: For and Against the Twentieth Century*. So through this book both Dangar and Crowley are placed within the context of the development of modernism and abstraction in Europe.

Strange Women: Essays in Art and Gender took a strong feminist stance on the representation of women in art. The focus was "to develop an understanding of the way in which patriarchy marginalises women's art in a country which has a proud tradition of misogyny"[23]. A number of essays addressed this marginalisation within the context of modernism, and looked at the ways in which the women artists of the time had found their own individual methods to subvert the patriarchy, and find space for their own art. Margaret Preston, Thea Proctor and Crowley were all seen as women artists who had presented themselves as intelligent, independent and, above all, modern. This was certainly the way in which Crowley presented herself personally, in clothing, interests and attitudes. Jeanette Hoorn, with the opening words of her essay "Women Make Modernism: Contesting Masculine Art Criticism", throws down the gauntlet in a challenge to the then existing art history:

> The emergence of modernism in Australia is a narrative in which the roles of male artists are privileged in spite of the fact that the most experimental and interesting early modernist paintings were by women. It was the art of women that brought modernism to Australia in the first decades of this century.[24]

Referring to Grace Crowley, Dorrit Black and Anne Dangar, she makes the point that, following their studies in Paris in the late 1920s, they were the first "to embark on a version of cubist painting in works such as their Mirmande landscapes".[25]

Pamela Niehoff, in her essay "The New Woman and the Politics of Identity", states that in her professional relationship with Fizelle "Crowley was clearly the dominant partner"[26]. It was from her that Fizelle absorbed many of the precepts of Lhote's teaching. This is evident in her papers and this material more fully explains Lhote's teaching and writing. Niehoff describes Crowley, unusually for most writers, as a "tough-minded woman and a confirmed modernist"[27]. She categorises her as a Thinking Woman and describes the subjects of two of her Archibald Prize entry portraits,

Gwen Ridley (1930) and *Portrait in Grey: Miss M. Roberts* (1933) as "portraits of strong-minded women".[28] Niehoff nominated Crowley's *Portrait of Lucie Beynis* (1929) as representative of the liberated and intellectual women of the time: reading matter at hand indicating intellectual pursuits, while the modern short haircut, business-like clothing and pre-occupied gaze represents a woman involved in her own pursuits and independent. This also reflects the intellectual atmosphere and freedom of women in Paris during those years between the two world wars, the period when Crowley lived there. Crowley dared to challenge the staunchly traditional portraits by entering her two portraits, the Ridley in 1930 and the Roberts in 1933, in the Archibald Prize. It was well understood that the Trustees "had an inbuilt aversion to anything that smacked of the intuitive or modern"[29] and the Archibald competition would continue for many years to be "a club of like-minded men in suits sharing a common view"[30]. Women were simply not accepted as artists. The prevailing social attitudes against both women and modernism in the 1930s were strongly against the chances of any success as a woman artist for Crowley, and I believe she made intelligent choices in the light of the reality of her circumstances, and the strong social prejudice against women artists at the time.

Since these survey exhibitions of women's art have brought so many women artists to public attention, there have followed a number of subsequent exhibitions, both in groups and of individual women artists. Crowley's work was part of a highly successful exhibition curated by Jane Hylton from the Art Gallery of South Australia *Modern Australian Women – Paintings and Prints 1925-1945*, and such exhibitions have served to bring Crowley before a wider audience. Hylton felt that Crowley had a "major impact"[31] on the work of Rah Fizelle and Ralph Balson. A number of individual studies have been made of the lives of women artists – Bessie Davidson, Grace Cossington Smith, Alison Rehfisch, Jean Bellette, Mary Alice Evatt and Anne Dangar[32]. However, very little has been known about Crowley until Elena Taylor's retrospective exhibition.

In December 2006 the National Gallery of Australia opened the exhibition *Grace Crowley – Being Modern* accompanied by a catalogue, with many details of her life from interviews with family and friends, and a substantial number of her paintings published in colour for the first time. Ron Radford, Director of the Australian National Gallery, had seen her retrospective exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1975 and been much impressed by her work. He was convinced that "she was a much more important artist than was generally acknowledged"[33] and, as Director of the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery in 1978, contacted Crowley with

a view to preparing an exhibition to celebrate her ninetieth year, which would have been in 1980. Her death in 1979 curtailed these plans but the *Being Modern* Exhibition which toured various Australian Galleries until November 2008, brought together many previously unseen works by Crowley, retrieved works covered with primer on the verso of other paintings, and cleaned many works to their original colour. When interviewed at the time of her 1975 Retrospective Exhibition she said: "you want to be known by your best works, not by something miserable. Everybody does bad work, even the best of us"[34]. In introducing the National Gallery of Australia Exhibition, Radford indicated that he felt that Crowley had not received the recognition due to her as a pioneer of abstraction and her quite significant role in introducing modernism to Australia.

Working mainly from her own archival material and related manuscripts, I look at Crowley's central role as an innovator of abstraction in Australia, and why she chose to promote Balson's art instead of her own. I also look at her contribution which involved her teaching, her support of her fellow artists and her role as an art historian. I believe these choices were made because of the prevailing social conditions, and are therefore not as readily accessible as art works, but nevertheless, deserve recognition.

Chapter 1 examines Crowley's early natural talent that was encouraged by her parents while she was young, but later opposed by them as it interfered with what they saw as her duty to undertake a woman's role as wife and mother. This they considered to be part of her duty to the country, and they never accepted her choice to become an artist. Under the guidance of Julian Ashton, she developed great skill as both an artist and a teacher, absorbing many of his philosophies. His great belief in bringing out the best in each of his students was to be the skill she used so effectively with Balson later in life. While teaching with Ashton, her meeting with Dangar led to a lifelong friendship that took them both to Paris and exploration into the very crucible of modernism. Crowley's loss of the Travelling Art Scholarship to Roy de Maistre in 1923, became a catalyst for her, in seeking a new way of composing her art. This was to change her art irrevocably and lead her eventually in a very different direction.

Chapter 2 follows Crowley's and Dangar's journey to Paris via Aix-en-Provence, the home of Cézanne. Their encounter with Cézanne confirmed Dangar's desire to study modern art in the manner of Cézanne, and

therefore to study in Paris, rather than go to London and the Slade School of Art, as Crowley had originally intended. Their discovery of André Lhote, one of the leading artists, writers and teachers of art, whose teaching was based on Cézanne's theories, changed their art forever. Crowley found in his teaching the very thing she felt her painting needed, a structure and a means of composing pictures. He taught her how to compose pictures according to the methods of the old masters, based on the geometry of the golden section. He also taught how to use colour scientifically and to build a picture by plastic means, rather than by shading and use of perspective as she had been taught by Ashton. With these methods, her art was to eventually develop much further than she could have envisaged – into abstraction.

Chapter 3 examines the Crowley-Fizelle Art School that operated in George Street, Sydney from 1932-1937. It was the most avant-garde modern art school in Australia for its time. Crowley based her teaching on what she had learnt from Lhote and taught the golden section as the compositional framework for modern art. Because of her own experience she knew the need for teaching a method of composition in Sydney. When the Hinders brought the same principles, in dynamic symmetry, to the Sketch Club of the School, it was really only Crowley and Hinder who fully understood the geometry and mathematical skills involved in its use. Hambidge, presented his version of dynamic symmetry as a new tool for designers. He presented its history as having originated from the Greeks, which he studied in depth. He did study Leonardo da Vinci's writings on the Vitruvian Interpretation of the Greek Canon relating to the proportions of the human body, but failed to fully appreciate the important roles of the master painters of the Renaissance, and their use of the golden section in art. Because Crowley's understanding came from Lhote, she understood its European legacy from the old masters of the stature of Piero della Francesca, Leonardo da Vinci and Poussin, who was an inspiration for the French classical modernism of the twentieth century.

Throughout the 1930s Crowley corresponded with her friend Anne Dangar, living at Moly-Sabata in rural France, through which she was kept in touch with the continuing development of abstract art in Europe. During this period, her art was moving inexorably towards abstraction. In spite of input from both Crowley and Hinder, Fizelle had difficulty in teaching the golden section or dynamic symmetry and his increasing frustration was a major factor in the eventual breakup of the School. These details were kept confidential by Crowley during her life and only became available after her death, as part of her archives.

With the closure of the School, her friend Anne Dangar determined to stay at Moly-Sabata, her parents increasingly needing her attention, Crowley had limited options at that point. Her decision to support Balson's art offered her a replacement for Dangar in having the friendship of a fellow artist, while allowing her to devote the necessary time to her ageing parents and still maintain an active involvement with her own art.

Chapter 4 looks at the George Street Modernist Group and their plans for a series of exhibitions to inform artists and those interested in the new form of art, with which they had been experimenting. Exhibition 1, their first and only exhibition, took place in 1939 and created heated public debate, mainly in the press, both for and against modern art. I look at the response from the public and art critics and evaluate its effect on Crowley and her decisions taken at that time in regard to her future direction. The onset of the Second World War precluded any further exhibition by the Group.

Chapter 5 examines the artistic partnership between Crowley and Balson as they developed their abstract art throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Crowley needed to spend a great deal of time caring for her elderly mother to fulfil her obligations to her family, until her mother's death in 1947. Then from 1947 she painted her most mature and finely orchestrated, abstract paintings.

Recent analysis of *Painting* (1950) has revealed Crowley as a master mathematician and geometer, having produced at least one work with geometric skills on a level with paintings by Piero della Francesca and Mondrian. I believe this painting proves that she was certainly the leader in the artistic partnership with Balson, yet she provided him with unwavering support, even long after his death. In his retirement, she provided him with a secluded haven in the Southern Highlands, where he could pursue his painting full-time, perhaps content that she had left proof of her skills waiting to be found in the hidden geometry of the 1950 abstract painting. In 1960-61 they travelled overseas, painting together in England and France prior to Balson being given an opportunity of a solo exhibition at a Paris gallery.

Chapter 6 traces Crowley's continued support of Balson, even after his death in 1964. She later moved to Manly, and from there made herself available to art curators and researchers interested in the art of herself and her colleagues, including Anne Dangar. By her meticulous record keeping and the donation of her papers to public institutions, she made a significant

contribution to our understanding of the art of that period in which she lived and worked. Her own art and that of her friends finally gained recognition as innovators of geometric abstraction in Australia.

Chapter 7 analyses the way in which the abstract constructive art practised by Balson and Crowley in the 1940s and 1950s found a new appreciation with the introduction to Australia of colour-field painting in the 1960s. Patrick McCaughey described Balson as "the *maître d'école* of the second-generation Sydney modernists"[35] in 1969. Then in the 1980s and 1990s, with a growing international appreciation of Aboriginal abstract art, a new generation of artists and curators sought to recover the early history of abstract art by Crowley, Balson and Hinder. With Balson seen as the major instigator of geometric abstraction, the time has now come to recover Crowley's innovative role in the introduction of modernist compositional techniques in Australia.

Grace Crowley was a clever, intelligent, independent woman who could be described as an intellectual artist who was ahead of her time. Her skill as an outstanding mathematician, geometer and artist has gone undiscovered until recently. Through her pioneering teaching of the golden section, her development of geometric abstract art, together with Balson, and her consistent support of Balson and Dangar, we can now assess the legacy she left to Australian art. The contribution Crowley made still has relevance within the contemporary art scene in Australia and should be more widely recognised and appreciated.

CHAPTER ONE

DEVELOPMENT AS AN ARTIST

Grace Adela Williams Crowley was born on 28th May, 1890 at Cobbadah near the small town of Barraba in the Nandewar Ranges in north-western New South Wales. Her parents, grazier Henry Crowley and his wife, Elizabeth (nee Bridger) had married in 1878, when Henry had built a slab house, known as The Forest, where all five Crowley children were born. Grace was the fourth child and eldest daughter, having three older brothers, Wilfred, Alan and Ken, and a younger sister, Florence. In the 1890s the country was badly affected by a rural depression and her parents worked hard to make a living from the land.[1]

Henry Crowley was in partnership with his brother, William, running the Cobbadah Estate set up by their father John, for a number of years until 1899 when the partnership was dissolved. Henry then purchased a property south of Barraba known as Glen Riddle[2] and by 1906, when Julian Ashton first visited the property, the wool clip had realised an exceptionally good price for the day. This had enabled the family to build a new homestead to replace the original, rather humble dwelling. Ashton described Henry Crowley as a very active and strongly built middle-aged man, and Grace's mother as "a splendid example of the women of that time" who accepted the inevitable changing fortunes of life with "a humorous chuckle and untiring patience".[3]

Crowley remembered her first drawings being done on "an old square brown tank at the back of the kitchen at Glen Riddle". Her drawings were illustrations of stories she imagined "about people and what they did" and although she did not write down the stories, she felt they were necessary for her and "had to be illustrated".[4] She later also described a similar process in first conceiving a picture in her mind before she could begin to paint or draw. As a child she found she greatly enjoyed illustrating her stories, and these kept her much entertained through the years of growing up on a large, fairly remote property. She and her sister were educated at home until she was about 15 years of age.

In the last few years of her life she wrote an essay about her own development and life as an artist. In it she recalled that, when she was

about thirteen, her mother sent one of her pen and ink drawings "of a little girl sitting near the fire nursing a black cat" to the magazine *New Idea*, where it was published on the children's page and won a prize.[5] The *New Idea* was a monthly magazine that described itself as being for "Australian women" with a dedicated section for children, who could belong to The New Idea League. Children were encouraged to enter competitions for Prose, Verse, Drawings and Puzzles with the monthly winners being listed in the "Roll of Honour". Grace Crowley, aged 14 years, of Barraba, N.S.W. is listed as one of the prize-winners in the Senior Division for Drawing in the March Issue of 1905. The drawings for the magazine were to be submitted "in Indian ink, very black writing ink or wash (not colour)" to be suitable for some of the drawings to be published. Crowley's drawing was not published, just her name.[6] Her mother was greatly encouraged by this accolade and forwarded the drawing to *The Stock and Station Journal* for the opinion of a journalist writing for the column titled 'Gossip". He in turn sought the professional opinion of the artist D.H. Souter, who declared that the young girl was artistically gifted and should seek art training.[7]

Crowley continued drawing mainly subjects at hand – people, cats, dogs, horses, kookaburras, and her father's sheep and cattle. Her father had a reputation for breeding very fine cattle. He encouraged his daughter to draw his prize bull, Prince Imperial, while instructing her on what to look for as the finer points of beef cattle. Immensely pleased with her drawings of the bull and also of Spot, the dog, he had them framed and hung in his office, where Crowley remembered them hanging for many years.[8] This early intimate relationship with the land, along with her artistic gift, nurtured in Crowley the keen ability to observe and record the land and its inhabitants. It was a talent that no doubt helped when she undertook traditional drawing with Julian Ashton.

Her first real experience of life away from Glen Riddle did not come about until 1905-7 when she attended the Methodist Ladies College at Burwood. While a student in Sydney, her Uncle Archie, the Rev. Archibald Crowley, a Presbyterian Minister, arranged for her to join him in weekly drawing classes at Julian Ashton's Sydney Art School. He would meet her at Central Station and take her to the classes, held in the Queen Victoria Market Building. Ashton's method of teaching was to instruct his students to draw "the plaster cast of a skull exactly the right size and shape on a sheet of Michellat paper"[9], using a piece of sharp-edged charcoal. Ashton believed that successful drawing began with mastering the contour first. Once the student was able to achieve an accurate outline exactly, then the details would fit within. Crowley found

this disappointing as she had wanted to make a picture, so she only stayed a few months.

After finishing school in Sydney, Crowley returned home to Glen Riddle where she did no more drawing. Her mother firmly believed that a "woman's place was in the home" so, in order to instruct and train her daughters in household duties, she had sacked the maid. Crowley had then found her life fully occupied with what she always referred to, with some apparent distaste, as "women's work".[10] Crowley's parents appear to have subscribed to the almost universally accepted Australian belief at the time that marriage and the production of children was the highest aspiration for women. Marrying well was seen as the passport to lifelong happiness, and any woman unable to find a suitable husband was regarded as having failed to fulfil her role as a woman. This was a time when governments were producing statistics to show that there was an alarming decline in the birth-rate among Australian women. The 1903 Royal Commission and the 1904 New South Wales Enquiry into declining birth-rates Australia-wide, eventually led to the 1912 introduction of the "Baby Bonus" and child endowment in the 1920s.[11] At the same time women were seeking greater independence, with about one-third of women working outside the home as early as 1890, and gaining the right to vote by 1902. Crowley's parents as middle-class property owners and cattle breeders would have recognised the importance of heredity and reproduction in consolidating their own life's work, and therefore the marriage of their children was of the highest priority, and possibly, their national duty.

At the time of Ashton's first visit to Glen Riddle, Crowley's father invited him to return at any time and stay as long as he wished. He returned in 1909 for the purpose of painting what he had noticed as very typical outback scenery on his previous visit. Ashton later wrote that he had observed the course of a river or creek could be identified by a faint rising mist that disappears immediately after the sun rises. He located a place about half a mile from the homestead which he considered would make "an admirable design for a picture" to be called "Mist on the Creek". This picture he sent to the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1911 where it was hung, and later purchased by the Melbourne National Gallery.[12] Ashton's visit seemed to revive Crowley's interest in drawing and she later described how they would share a morning "cuppa" before setting out to catch the early morning sunlight reflected in the water. She drew trees while Ashton painted, trying to capture the momentary effect of light so vital to an impressionist painter.[13]

Around 1914 Crowley was engaged to her first cousin Gordon, just prior to his enlistment in the army, but her niece, Eena Job recalled that he

was invalided out just before sailing overseas to take part in the First World War and although he returned to his property between Narrabri and Barraba, the engagement was broken off.[14]

It was in 1915 that Crowley became a full-time student at the Sydney Art School, without the approval of her parents. It seems her father never came to terms with Grace's decision to become an artist and made his feelings clear over the years. He expressed the opinion that Julian Ashton had "ruined Grace's art".[15] It would not be unreasonable to suggest that he may have harboured great disappointment over her failure to marry. As Beverley Kingston pointed out "there was ignominy and a very strong smell of failure, whatever the status or class, attached to the unmarried woman".[16] This is a likely cause of the ongoing difficulties with her father, to which she referred at various times. Living on a remote property he would have had little access to urban culture, and probably could not understand either art or her lifestyle in the city. For Crowley herself, developing her talent for drawing and finding satisfaction in doing something well, would have built her own sense of worth; the opposite of what she experienced when living with her parents at Glen Riddle. It is therefore not at all surprising that she developed a very warm relationship with Ashton, was grateful for his encouragement, and for his respect of her ability, in choosing her to teach at his prestigious art school. Art became an absorbing interest for her, with the stimulation of other good artists around her, both male and female.

What seemed to her a pointless exercise as a schoolgirl, that of trying to draw an accurate representation of a skull, she now approached with alacrity. Ashton's insistence that the contour or outline be drawn accurately first, became a challenge she was ready to tackle. Being older, she was able to appreciate the value of his training the eye to see size, form, pose and colour, which he maintained could only be learnt by continuous daily study for a period of five or six years. His teaching methods were well established and, reading his philosophy and methods of teaching art, it becomes clear that Crowley absorbed many of his ideas. He believed in a simple, practical approach of allowing the students to learn from their own experiments and mistakes and to develop their own techniques. His approach was to stress the individuality of each student, for he believed that individual expression was more important than anything else. He also stated that he believed that an artist was born with a natural gift, but that he needed to apply himself diligently to developing his talent. This would explain why Crowley always insisted that Balson was a "born abstract painter"[17], even though she had the technical knowledge, learnt from Lhote, that was the basis of much abstract art.