Imag(in)ing the Pacific: Modernist Women Artists

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In her autobiographical essay “Old Bloomsbury,” Virginia Woolf nee Stephen, recalls:

The Post-Impressionist movement had cast — not its shadow — but its bunch of variegated lights upon us. We [Virginia and her sister, Vanessa] bought poinsettias made of scarlet plush; we made dresses of the printed cotton that is specially loved by negroes; we dressed ourselves up as Gauguin pictures and careered round Crosby Hall. Mrs. Whitehead was scandalized. She said that Vanessa and I were practically naked.

It was all very risqué and, indeed quite shocking. Vanessa Stephen would marry Clive Bell, and make her name as an English modernist painter and designer; Virginia, would marry Leonard Woolf, and make her name at the vanguard of experimental English modernist literature. Virginia would be the more famous, or possibly, infamous, of the sisters, being the mover and shaker of the Bloomsbury Group — a nucleus of primarily male, primarily Oxbridge-educated intellectuals who began meeting regularly at the house of the sisters in Gordon Square, Bloomsbury, London, in the first decade of the 20th century. Here they discussed all things intellectual: nothing, recalled Virginia, absolutely nothing was banned as a subject of conversation — everything was ‘up for grabs.’

It was indeed a very freeing moment that marked the shift from Victorian to Modern relationships between the sexes, a corresponding freedom of sexual relationship, of intellectual and professional possibility for women, and a freeing up of the rigid constraints of Victorian morality that had understood literature and art to be the vehicles of a patriarchal Christian morality.

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1) I would like to thank the University of Tokyo, the Australian Government and the Australia Japan Foundation for their continued support of the Visiting Chair of Australian Studies at the Centre for Pacific and American Studies. It has been enormously rewarding for me and I think very important to cultural, educational and intellectual relationship between Australia and Japan. I would also like to thank Yasuo Endo, Kenryu Hashikawa and Toshiko Ellis for organising the symposium on ‘Imagining the Pacific, Imagining Australia’ held at Komaba on 27th July, 2012; and to thank the Director of CPAS during the period of my appointment, Jun Furuya, for his warmth and generosity.


3) “So there was now nothing that one could not say, nothing that one could not do, at 46 Gordon Square. It was, I think, a great advance in civilization,” writes Woolf. (Woolf, “Old Bloomsbury,” 174).
In her 1939 essay entitled “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” Virginia Woolf pins that moment of change to the year 1910 (and the month of December of that year). The essay is a riposte to Gordon Bennett’s accusation that the modern novel was not what it should be because modern novelists had lost (deliberately or carelessly) the skill of “character making.” Woolf, a major proponent and producer of the modern novel ‘on trial’ declared that Mr Bennett had muddled cause and effect: the novel portrayed character differently from of old because human character itself had changed “…in or about December 1910.”

This rather outlandish statement is followed by a qualification: “I am not saying,” she writes, “that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; and, since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910.” (70) Woolf goes on to assert that “All human relations have shifted — those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children,” and that “when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature.” (71) The year 1910 marks the end of the Edwardian period (with the death of the King in May) and the beginning of the Modern(ist) era with Roger Fry’s “Manet and the Post-Impressionists” exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in London during the last two months of the year. “There they stood upon chairs,” Woolf recalls, “the pictures that were to be shown at the Grafton Gallery — bold, bright, impudent almost, in contrast with the Watts portrait of a beautiful Victorian lady that hung on the wall behind them.”

The not-so-well-known English poet, Wilfred Blunt, recorded his impressions of this shocking exhibition in his diary:

[November 15] To the Grafton Gallery to look at what are called the “post-impressionist” pictures sent over from Paris. The exhibition is either an extremely bad joke or a swindle. I am inclined to think the latter, for there is no trace of humour in the thing. Still less is there a trace of sense of skill or taste good or bad or art or cleverness — nothing but the sort of gross imbecility which scrawls indecencies on the walls of a privy. The drawing is on the level of that of an untaught child of 7 or 8 years old, the sense of colour that of a tea-board painter, the method that of a schoolboy who wipes his fingers on a slate after spitting on them.

These are not the works of art in any sense. They are merely works of impotent

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4) Quotation is from the version of the essay published in A Woman’s Essays: Selected Essays: Volume One by Virginia Woolf, ed. Rachel Bowlby (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 69-87. This quote from p. 70. [The original essay was published in the Nation and Athenaeum on 1st December, 1923, and later revised and published as a separate pamphlet by the Hogarth Press in 1924 — the version reprinted in Woman’s Essays.]

stupidity … a pornographic show.”

The general consensus according to The (London) New Age of December 1910, was that the works exhibited were “perverse and hideous. . . and displayed no element of skill, sensitivity or truth to nature, and ignored the established canons of beauty.” If Beauty is Truth and Truth Beauty, according to Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, then either this was a new kind of Beauty or a new Truth, for the classical aesthetic of the Grecian Urn had been replaced by Matisse’s “Vase with Nasturtiums and Dance” (I & II) and Picasso’s various “Vase[s] with Flowers”.

“It is difficult in 1939,” Woolf concedes,

when a great hospital is benefiting from a centenary exhibition of Cézanne’s works, and the gallery is daily crowded with devout and submissive worshippers, to realise what violent emotions those pictures excited less than thirty years ago. The pictures are the same; it is the public that has changed. But there can be no doubt about the fact. The public in 1910 was thrown into paroxysms of rage and laughter. They went from Cézanne to Gauguin and from Gauguin to Van Gogh, they went from Picasso to Signac, and from Derain to Friesz, and they were infuriated. The pictures were a joke, and a joke at their expense.

The catalogue for the exhibition listed 159 paintings, 52 drawings, 13 sculptures, and 9 items of faience pottery. There were 2 paintings by Picasso, including “Nude Girl with Basket of Flowers”; 22 works by Van Gogh; painting and sculpture by Matisse including “Reclining Woman” and “La femme aux yeux verts” (which apparently caused a great stir); and 36 paintings by Gauguin, including a painting that brought the most hostile response from reviewers and audience alike — “l’esprit de mort veille” (1892) now known as “Manao Tupapau, The Spirit of the Dead Keeps Watch”.

There are two aspects of this exhibition that are of interest to me. The first is the impact of the Pacific upon this radical art and its representation of a changed world or a changed world view from the perspective of Europe: Gauguin’s work, much of it based on his love affair with Tahiti, dominated the exhibition. We might debate the ‘authenticity’ and the ‘authority’ with which that vision was offered, but nevertheless it was a significant aspect of ‘the new’ (from the point of view of Europe).

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8) Woolf, Roger Fry, 153-54.
The second point is the degree to which women were subjects of that art, yet, as far as I am able to ascertain, no women artists were represented in this exhibition, that is, no work by women was displayed in an exhibition that purported to represent the work of this changed world of which Woolf speaks — a world in which she emphasizes (in her essay *A Room of One’s Own*, 1929) in particular a shift in relations between men and women.\(^9\) The exhibition might for example have shown a self-portrait of German artist, Paula Modersohn Becker.\(^10\)

In addition, again as far as I can ascertain (I make this qualification because no complete list of works shown appears to exist), no work by artists from the Pacific, either male or female, were shown. This might suggest that neither women nor the artists of the Pacific had made an impact on the world of European art, or the post-impressionist vanguard. Certainly they participated in, in fact could be said to have been instrumental in, the change that Woolf pins on the date December 1910; but that import is not recorded in artistic exhibitions like those put together by Roger Fry, or literary and artistic histories that tend to situate Australian modernism for example as belated; but perhaps also relations between men and women and their socially acceptable roles had not changed quite as significantly as Woolf might lead us to suppose. In addition it would also appear to be the case that relationship between the European/North American metropolitan centres and the colonial/Pacific periphery were demonstrated in the modernists’ use of ‘primitivism’ derived from Africa and the Pacific, or an orientalism derived from China and Japan; but derivative is the important word here. (Claude McKay for example, a Black Jamaican who was central to the creation of a Black modernism in the 1920s Harlem, supported himself while living for a brief period in Paris by modelling naked for aspiring student artists.)

A glance at Virginia Woolf’s relationship with the New Zealand-born writer, Katherine Mansfield, is exemplar of the complex nature of colonial Pacific/imperial metropole relations in the art world of the early 20th century. Woolf met Mansfield in 1916 and by 1917 they had established an intense relationship that would last until Mansfield’s death in 1923. Mansfield’s story, “Prelude”, set in New Zealand, was the second book to be published on the Woolfs’ Hogarth Press\(^11\) (a press that published many of the ‘names’ of the modern literature, psychology and philosophy of the early 20th century); and on Mansfield’s death from tuberculosis at the age of thirty-four, Woolf bemoaned the loss of a rival — she recognised Mansfield as her only real competition in the new art of literary modernism.\(^12\)

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11) The first publication of the press was two stories by Leonard and Virginia Woolf.
12) On hearing of her death in 1923, Woolf acknowledges the value of that literary friendship in her diary: “…one feels — what? — a shock of relief? — a rival the less? Then confusion at feeling so little — then, gradually, blankness & disappointment; then a depression that I could not rouse myself from all day. When I began to write, it seemed to me there was no point in writing. Katherine wont [sic] read
On seeing paintings by Van Gogh in Fry’s 1910 exhibition Mansfield had remarked that they “taught [her] something about writing, which was queer, a kind of freedom — or rather, a shaking free.”

Woolf would concede that Mansfield’s writing was the only writing of which she had been jealous. Yet Woolf referred to the colonial upstart and thoroughly modern Mansfield as a “civet cat that has taken to street walking.” Woolf would here appear to participate in something of the patriarchal Victorian Christian morality that was so outraged by the work of the post-impressionist painters that Woolf herself applauded. It would seem that this morality was also entangled with a colonial notion of what it was to be British and ‘civilized.’ Despite her sense of being ‘locked out’ of the education and professional possibilities available to the men of her class and generation, Virginia Woolf was nevertheless a privileged member of the elite upper-middle class British; and the monarch that guided her family model of behaviour and moral value (as described in her autobiographical memoir, A Sketch of the Past) was Queen Victoria — Queen of Great Britain, but also Empress of India and the Imperial sovereign of all her colonies — a number of which were situated in that vast Pacific, far, very far, from what the British imagined to be the centre of civilization.

The distance of Australia or New Zealand from Britain is 10,000 to 11,000 nautical miles and the sea-voyage was not only long, taking about 4 months, but still hazardous. Yet, eager to participate in the change that was taking place at this imagined centre of the world, colonial writers like Katherine Mansfield and colonial artists like New Zealander Frances Hodgkins (1869-1947) and Australian Stella Bowen (1893-1947), undertook the long voyage from the far flung ‘provinces’ of the Pacific to Europe — their hearts and minds turned towards the happening world of London and Paris. Stella Bowen left Australia for Europe in 1914, never to return home, and is best known in Australia for her work as a war artist (appointed in 1944). Yet she was also part of the artistic bohemian set in Paris of the 1920s, and of some renown for her tempestuous relationship with partner, Ford Maddox Ford. But the year she left Ford was also the year she held her first solo exhibition; the move away from the role of ‘supportive partner,’ “kick-started her into [what she describes as] ‘the

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14 Woolf wrote in her diary (Thursday 11 October) that Mansfield “stinks like a — well civet cat that had taken to street walking. In truth, I’m a little shocked by her commonness at first sight; lines so hard & cheap. However, when this diminishes, she is so intelligent & inscrutable that she repays friendship.” (The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. I: 1915-1917, ed. Anne Olivier Bell [London: The Hogarth Press, 1977], 58.)
15 See discussion in Woolf, A Room of One’s Own.
effrontery of taking up painting as a profession." Some women returned home after only a brief sojourn in Europe (like New Zealander, Rita Angus and Australian, Grace Cossington Smith). Grace Cossington Smith (1892-1984) was one of the earliest artists in Australia to be influenced by the post-impressionist movement, and is acknowledged to have led the break-away movement in Australia from impressionism to the new modern art. Some artists were not given the opportunity to leave home at all like Australian, Clarice Beckett (1887-1935). Clarice Beckett was the classic “angel in the house,” so caught up in the time-consuming duties of caring for parents in declining health that she could only get outside to paint at dawn or dusk; and although acknowledged as significant by her teachers and peers, was virtually unknown by the public until the 1960s when over a thousand canvases were discovered rotting away in a barn. I will return to Beckett at the end of this essay. What follows is a brief discussion of the modernist art that was being produced by the colonial women of the Pacific in the early 20th century.

We might identify the changes that occurred during this period as encapsulated in Preston’s “Aboriginal Design with Sturts Desert Pea” (1943) and Cossington Smith’s “Wattle” (c1930s). Both are a radical departure from 19th century ideas of beauty of which Keats’ Grecian Urn is symbolic. Drusilla Modjeska’s book — Stravinsky’s Lunch (1999) — tells the story of the different choices made by Australian modernist artists Grace Cossington Smith and Stella Bowen; and Humphrey McQueen (a predecessor in this position of Visiting Professor of Australian Studies at the University of Tokyo) did much of the early work on Margaret Preston’s significant place in the Modernist movement in Australia (in his book, The Black Swan of Trespass [1979]); and there have been many subsequent studies of Australian women’s place in the Modernist movement. So I would like to do something a little different and that is to make connection across the Pacific, taking a brief meeting between New Zealander artist, Frances Hodgkins, and Canadian west coast artist, Emily Carr as my point of departure.

In September 1911, less than a year after that significant moment of change identified by Woolf, these two ‘colonial’ women of the Pacific — both intent upon furthering their careers as professional artists in this new world — met in Concarneau — a small fishing village in Brittany — a long way north of Dunedin, New Zealand and a long way east of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Of the obstacles to be met and overcome by the woman artist and of women entering the professions, Woolf also had something to say. In A Room of One’s

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17) Bowen is quoted here by Drusilla Modjeska in Stravinsky’s Lunch (Sydney: Picador, 1999), 14.
18) The Angel in the House is a popular and influential narrative poem written by Coventry Patmore, published in 1854 and reprinted in an expanded version in 1862.
19) Drusilla Modjeska, Stravinsky’s Lunch (Sydney: Picador, 1999).
20) Humphrey McQueen, Black Swan of Trespass: The Emergence of Modernist Painting in Australia to 1944 (Sydney: Alternative Publishing, 1979); McQueen also published on Preston in 1980, under the title, The Art of Margaret Preston (Adelaide: The Art Gallery Board of South Australia).
Own (an essay based on a talk she gave to the women of Girton and Newham Colleges of Cambridge) she asserted that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (or one might add, if she is to pursue a career in the arts). Woolf’s essay documents the material and social obstacles that would hinder a woman in the achievement of such. In “Professions for Women” (1931) however, she points to the psychological obstacles with which a woman must do battle even after she has gained the room and the money: “You have won rooms of your own in the house hitherto exclusively owned by men. You are able, though not without great labour and effort, to pay the rent. You are earning your five hundred pounds a year,” but “Even when the path is nominally open — when there is nothing to prevent a woman from being a doctor, a lawyer, a civil servant — there are many phantoms… looming in her way.” By far the most insidious and difficult of phantoms with which a woman must do battle is “the angel in the house.” The “angel in the house” is the model of middle-class Victorian womanhood — sympathetic, submissive, chaste, unworlly — the woman confined to the domestic sphere upon whose housewifely competence and succour the (British) family, the nation and the empire apparently depended. In a fit of rage, Woolf throws the inkpot at this phantom who threatens her freedom of expression at every turn, and claims to kill her, but the angel in the house has it would seem more lives than a cat — she just can’t be got rid of that easily (as can be seen in Woolf’s attitude toward Mansfield). (Clarice Beckett is exemplar of the angel in the house.)

So if success in the professions for Virginia Woolf and for those privileged women of Cambridge would seem difficult, one might ask how much more difficult for a woman born in the colonies — for a woman like Katherine Mansfield. Not only gender, but distance from the great metropolitan centres of art, little money to spend on travel to the (perceived) centre (and to keep body and soul together once there), and the tarnish of belonging to the colonial classes — the weight of a felt or an imputed inferiority, made the obstacle course all the more challenging for women like Emily Carr and Frances Hodgkins.

But on the 28th of February 1911, from the Hôtel des Voyageurs, Concarneau, Brittany, France, Frances Hodgkins writes to her mother about her professional success:

I hear I have been very well hung & reviewed in Paris at the Water Colour Show — also I hear I am elected a member of the Women’s International Society now holding an Exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in London. This means another 2 guineas — How the money flies! . .”

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23 See “Professions for Women,” 285-86.
Emily Carr too was recognised in Paris, two of her paintings being hung in the 1911 Salon d’Automne along with those of the more radical cubists. Interestingly, it is money not status that is given priority in Hodgkins’ letter to her mother; and money too was always cause for anxiety in Carr’s life — both artists taught in order to continue painting: acceptance into the professional art world of the metropolitan centre was only the first step, for a professional artist from the colonies must support herself financially over the long haul. When Virginia Woolf considers whether receiving an annuity of £500 from her aunt or achieving women’s suffrage was more important, she decides that access to an independent income is more important to a woman’s achievement of independence and professional satisfaction than anything else.25)

The relationship between Hodgkins and Carr was brief — for a couple of months toward the end of 1911, Carr travelled to Concarneau to work at her painting as a pupil under the tutelage of Hodgkins. It is somewhat curious that Carr should travel to the old world centre to learn what she could of the new art in Europe, and yet seek out a teacher in a small village in France who was herself an (antipodean) colonial. “Hodgkins,” writes Susan Crean in her ficto-biography of Emily Carr, “came from Dunedin, New Zealand, a British colony at the opposite end of the Empire from Victoria, British Columbia, and, like Carr, was a single woman attempting to make a career in art. Two colonials at court, you might say, or two women on the loose from convention.” 26)

Although a quick glance at the online “Office de Tourisme” reveals Concarneau to have been a royal stronghold in the late 15th century with the marriage of Anne of Brittany to King Charles VIII of France, it would nevertheless hardly seem to constitute “court” for two colonial women desirous of furthering their artistic careers and making a name for themselves ‘in the world of art’ at the beginning of the 20th century. Paris rather … But, like St Ives in Cornwall, Concarneau in Brittany supported an artists’ colony that attracted many modern masters (and a few mistresses) and their acolytes; and like other colonies of its kind, most of which came into existence in the 19th century and began to decline after the First World War, Concarneau was a breeding ground for migratory birds of the impressionist feather. Villages like Concarneau provided artists with the material of the new romantic art: the residue of a ‘natural’ world, unsullied by rapidly industrialising modern European cities — a world that provided the romantic idyll of picturesque scenery complete with suitable models of peasant life (a new/old Adam and Eve in their (re)threatened fragile Eden).

It might seem that the colonial women had escaped from the new world colonies to a more recent form of old world colony; nevertheless it was here that Carr was to discover a new world of colour and rhythm in the work of Les Fauves (the wild beasts) and was influenced by Hodgkins’ “exuberant late impressionist technique,” her “rhythmic

25) See Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, 56. (“Of the two — the vote and the money — the money, I own, seemed infinitely the more important.”)

spontaneity,” and her “original colour harmonie.” Maria Tippet’s description of Hodgkins’ bold painting style of this period, is strikingly ‘unfeminine’ and reminiscent of language used to describe Carr’s later work: “[Hodgkins] would seize a large brush,” recalls a former student, “and, standing well away from a student’s easel, lash out with big decisive sweeps, working from the shoulder with her whole arm.”

What is interesting about this similarity of artistic exuberance and expansiveness is what it might say about the freshness of vision (from a European perspective) that was offered by the colonials who came in search of learning and surely influenced the old imperial centre as much as Africa had influenced Picasso, or Tahiti had influenced Gauguin. Although it is rarely acknowledged, I have no doubt that this different “angle of vision” (to use another of Woolf’s phrases), had enormous impact on the modernist art movement in Europe, in the same way that Mansfield’s writing had (an acknowledged) impact on Woolf’s. Frances Hodgkins however, because she stayed on in Europe has had more visible impact on that world and has made a more international name for herself. Emily Carr is little known outside Canada.

Although Carr and Hodgkins made a similar decision to choose the professional career of an artist over that of marriage and motherhood (a decision unavailable to Clarice Beckett); their differences are best represented by Hodgkins’ decision to choose a life of exile from home — making her career in Britain, which was in fact a choice to belong to the old art world of Europe; and by Carr’s decision to choose to return home — to Canada — but thereby also to choose a life of exile — the exile represented by the isolation of the professional artist on the Pacific coast of Western Canada. Yet, even these choices are curiously similar in the sense that desired belonging also involves a kind of exile in both cases.

In November 1911 Frances Hodgkins writes to her mother:

I am [not] coming out to NZ in an humble spirit willing to accept any old post they care to offer me. . . You see I have gained a considerable position in Paris as a teacher along advanced & modern lines which very probably will not be either understood or appreciated in NZ where conventional & academic methods are popular. . . you surely don’t expect & want me to settle into a Maiden Aunt do you & throw up career & ambition & lose the precious ground I have gained — you are

28 Paraphrased by Tippett, Emily Carr, 95.
29 “. . . almost every writer who has practised his art successfully had been taught it. He has been taught it by about eleven years of education — at private schools, public schools and universities. He sits upon a tower raised above the rest of us; a tower built first on his parents’ station, then on his parents’ gold. It is a tower of the utmost importance; it decides his angle of vision; it affects his power of communication.” from a paper read to the Brighton Workers’ Educational Association in 1940; quoted in Michelle Barrett’s introduction to A Room Of One’s Own, xiv.
much too dear & unselfish for that I am sure.\(^{30}\)

Here, Hodgkins has thrown the paint pot at the angel in the house, with Frances refusing the role of Maiden Aunt and refusing to come back home to live, even for the sake of her mother. Rather she chooses a career, and most significantly, refers to her artistic profession as “my work” and further, proclaims her right to work “like any man of business.” Although Hodgkins returned briefly to Pacific shores (exhibiting in both Australia and New Zealand to good reviews), she spent the rest of her life in France and Britain where she successfully carved a niche for herself “permanently & definitely” (as she desired)\(^{31}\) in the modern Art world.

Faced with a similar prospect, and from a similar middle-class colonial background, Emily Carr made a different decision. Carr too was determined to carve a niche for herself in the art world of her day; and she too had persuaded her unimpressed family to allow her to travel — to San Francisco, London and France — in pursuit of skills and experience unavailable to her in the backwoods of a provincial colonial town on the west coast of Canada. But Carr recognised the value of originality that lay at her doorstep. Like many of the modern artists, Carr was fascinated by the so-called ‘primitive’ art of the Native peoples of North America, in particular the peoples of the north-west coast; and although the project on which she brought her artist talent to bear was initially anthropological and curatorial in its desire to make a record that would preserve the designs of carved house and funeral posts (totem poles) for posterity, her appreciation of Native design and her search for a spiritual connection to ‘the land,’ revolutionised her perception of the world around her: she called it “fresh seeing.”\(^{32}\) But confidence in this “seeing” did not come without the necessary testing of herself in the world that ‘counted.’ “I was tremendously awed,” she recalls in her autobiography (Growing Pains), “when a real French artist with an English artist-wife came to Victoria.” The visitors were unimpressed with Canadian scenery:

\[\ldots\] they banged down the lids of their paintboxes, packed up, went back to the

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\(^{31}\) In October 1910 (that fateful year when human character changed), Frances wrote to her mother: “It has been a week of excitement for me — each post has brought me in some good news from Paris about my pictures — flattering press notices — kind letters — requests for lessons etc & I am feeling a little happier than usual . . . Aren’t you willing I should stay & follow it up? Don’t you want me to find myself permanently & definitely in an established niche in the Art world. I wish you were as terribly ambitious for me as I am for myself.” (Frances Hodgkins to Rachel Hodgkins, Grand Hotel des Voyageurs, Concarneau [c15th October, 1910], Letter No. 199, Gill, Letters of Frances Hodgkins, 256.)

\(^{32}\) “Fresh Seeing” is the title of the address Carr gave on 4th March, 1930 to the Victoria Women’s Canadian Club in association with her first solo show in Victoria, Vancouver Island. The address was published posthumously under the title Fresh Seeing: Two Addresses by Emily Carr (Toronto/Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1972). Here she explains that “Creative art is ‘fresh seeing’.” (10)
Old World. . . They said also that the only places you could learn to paint in were London or Paris. I was disappointed at hearing that, but immediately began to save. I slung an old pair of shoes across the studio rafters. When pupils paid me I shoved the money away in my shoes.

‘I am going abroad to study!’ I told my astonished family.  

Of course, it wasn’t a decision made as flippantly as that, nor was her family merely astonished. They were thoroughly disapproving; in fact they did not ever understand Carr’s obsession with painting or the kind of painting she produced. On her return from France she laments not only the humiliation she felt when the public and the press jeered at her work, but also the complete lack of family support: “My sisters disliked my new work intensely. One was noisy in her condemnation, one sulkily silent, one indifferent to every kind of Art . . . One sister painted china. Beyond mention of that, Art was taboo in the family. My kind was considered a family disgrace.”  

And although Carr always felt hurt by their lack of regard, she also felt guilty that she was not the sister they expected her to be. Her idiosyncracy was both her badge of courage and her mark of mortification. But Carr, like Hodgkins, insisted that art was work for which she was prepared not only to do battle with the angel in the house: she refused marriage and the prospect of motherhood, but more, went so far as to refuse the support of a group of like-minded painters to which she felt some sense of belonging.

After study in Europe, her journey to the ‘the big smoke’ in eastern Canada, brings her work to the attention of the Canadian art world and to those artists who are working in the modern manner. She records her first impression of The [Canadian] Group of Seven in her journal (published after her death under the title *Hundreds and Thousands*):

> These men are very interesting and big and inspiring, so different from the foolish little artists filled with conceit that one usually meets. They have arrested the art world. They are not afraid of adverse criticisms. They are big and courageous. I know they are building an art worthy of our great country, and I want to have my share, to put in a little spoke for the West, one woman holding up my end.

Ultimately, Emily Carr not only chose the profession of art over the profession of marriage, she also chose to walk a solitary path — “one woman holding up [her] end”; and she chose the Pacific. In 1934 Carr recorded a conversation and her thoughts subsequent to a visit by the art collector, Harold Mortimer Lamb: “It’s a shame to think of you stuck out here in this

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corner of the world unnoticed and unknown,” says he. “It’s exactly where I want to be,” says I. And it is, too. This is my country. What I want to express is here and I love it. Amen!”

The West Coast was a kind of antipodes to the eastern commercial and governmental hub of Canada — divided from the rest of the country by the Rockies, and Victoria itself was even further removed — situated on an island in the Pacific Ocean. But at the age of sixty-one, Carr realised that if she was to amount to anything, she must carve out a niche for herself in the place and of the place that she knew and loved so well. On first seeing A. Y. Jackson’s paintings of north western Canada (the Skeena River) and “the Indians,” she is aware of something missing in her own work, but also aware that she has the opportunity to paint something that will distinguish her work from the crowd:

I felt a little beaten at my own game. His Indian pictures have something mine lack — rhythm, poetry. Mine are so downright. But perhaps his haven’t quite the love in them of the people and the country that mine have. How could they? He is not a Westerner and I took no liberties. I worked for history and cold fact. Next time I paint Indians I’m going off on a tangent tear. There is something bigger than fact: the underlying spirit, all it stands for, the mood, the vastness, the wildness, the Western breath of go-to-the-devil-if-you-don’t-like-it, the eternal big spaceness of it. Oh the West! I’m of it and I love it.

But what distinguished Carr as much or more than her painting of west coast forest and First Nations art were her huge sea and sky scapes. Carr might as well have said, “Oh the Pacific! I’m of it and I love it”; and it was the Pacific that connected her with the antipodes and the woman artist who gave her the confidence to paint in a manner that was thoroughly modern.

What this tells us is that Emily Carr recognized the value of what another artist from the colonial Pacific, albeit southern rather than northern, could offer in terms of assisting her toward the expression of a newness of vision — a “fresh seeing”— that was the motivating force of her artistic struggle. There is little recognition of the impact these women of the colonial Pacific had upon the ‘old world’ of art and its realisation of a new truth and the recognition of a new beauty. We can see the difficulty Woolf has with an inherent ‘colonial’ class snobbery that gets in the way of her admiration for Mansfield’s “fresh seeing.” Although Mansfield acknowledged the impact of Van Gogh’s art upon her writing — “a shaking free” — I think this liberation was only possible because she was receptive to it. Eyes might be open, but they don’t necessarily see if the mind is not open too; and I think that Pacific eyes are used to looking differently — they look into the distance. Distance might have been a tyranny of sorts for these women, but it was also a liberation that

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38) The reference here is to Geoffrey Blainey’s work on The Tyranny of Distance, published in 1966.
allowed them to venture into new territory. They necessarily saw ‘the world’ with new
eyes because it was as though, once they gathered their courage, they expressed a view of
the world seen through a great bay window (or better, a large open verandah) — so much
space and light — and a horizon that kept receding into that distance. A frightening prospect
perhaps, but also one of limitless possibility that was difficult to conceive of, let alone act
upon, at the heart of the metropole (which of course was why the brave avant-garde like
Virginia Woolf had to send her first artist heroine off to South America,39) why Gauguin
had to travel to Tahiti and why D. H. Lawrence had to travel to Mexico and Australia40) —
although the less said about that the better). So let me draw this essay to a conclusion with
three images of a female Pacific: Grace Cossington Smith’s “The Bridge in-curve” (c1930),
Carr’s “Strait of Juan de Fuca” (c1936) & Clarice Beckett’s “The Road to the Sea” (c1932).
The Sydney Harbour Bridge is not a full curve — but unfinished — allowing space
and light to shine through its open arch; Carr’s Pacific meets the sky in a vast expanse of
radiating energised light; and Clarice Beckett’s painting, “The Road to the Sea,” will not
allow the eye to rest on the foreground figures — the blue of the woman’s dress pulls the
viewer toward the blue of the Pacific ocean — and the eye moves restlessly back and forth
— out to the horizon and back, out to the horizon and back, like the voyaging of Beckett’s
colonial modernist sisters. Clarice Beckett might not have been afforded the opportunity to
voyage out in person, but she nevertheless made that artistic voyage. If the Pacific played a
significant part in the imaginary of the ‘old world’ artists of this period, it also acted upon the
imagination of those who lived by its rhythms at the far-flung edges of the British empire,
engendering an art of “fresh seeing.”

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40) The novels based on Lawrence’s time in Australia are Kangaroo (1923) and The Boy in the Bush
(1924) and in Mexico, The Plumed Serpent (1926).
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