

1



2



3



Enterprising women studio artists:

The Misses Creeth

Eastern states collectors need to be reminded that Western Australia has an impressive artistic legacy and a vibrant present and future that is intimately linked to the rest of Australia. Historian and internationally renowned jeweller Dr Dorothy Erickson charts the careers of two sisters who made a living by producing works of art in Western Australia a century ago.

The Cinderella colony of Western Australia was a vibrant place in the first decade of the 20th century. The citizens commenced the new century confident of future achievement. The economy was booming. International communication was open. A constant movement of people between countries occasioned by the gold rushes promised artistic growth. Progress in art education was capped by international awards when J. W. R. Linton's students at Perth Technical School received a Diploma of Honour and the Grand Prix in the Franco-British Exhibition of 1908. Perth was on its way to becoming, as William Moore described it later, the third art centre in Australia.

Western Australia was remote enough, and to a certain extent exclusive enough, to develop along the lines that suited it. The west coast continued its traditional orientation as an outpost of Europe rather than a satellite of eastern Australia. The citizens concerned themselves with local issues and looked toward the international arena. Many of these people were newcomers to the colony who, in the normal course of events, would not have considered migrating to such an isolated outpost.

Some came for health reasons — attracted by a climate beneficial to tuberculosis sufferers. Others came for business opportunities, drawn to a colony that had escaped the depression of the 1890s. They found a capital city that had begun to bloom with new buildings and even amenities in advance of older centres.

Artistic activity was dominated by immigrants who had trained in Europe and retained strong ties via art magazines, which proliferated from the 1890s. British magazines: *The Studio*, *The Art Journal*, *The Connoisseur*,¹ *The Magazine of Art* and *The Artist*, were advertised in the Society of Arts' catalogues and available at E.S. Wigg and Son, in Perth.² These magazines supplied the needs of the diverse participants in the contemporary art movements, the collector, the professional artist, the semi-professional and the amateur.



Younger artists were particularly attracted to the Domestic Art Movement — a term which conveniently covered the modern Art Nouveau as well as the older Aesthetic cult of Japan and Queen Anne, by then inextricably confused with the historicism of William Morris's 'Arts and Crafts'. The young were building their homes. Before 1914, members of the West Australian Society of Arts consisted mainly of the upper echelons of society: the Government House circle, establishment families, English and Europeans with art and architectural training, professional people and some wealthy merchants.

Artwork had become a fashionable occupation for unmarried gentlewomen in the late 19th century and a number of Western Australian residents set up as artists with their own studios and art schools. The women's movement had encouraged women to expand beyond their traditional art forms of embroidery and painting and so the products of the studios were diverse, encompassing china painting, leatherwork, pottery, woodcarving, photography and pyrography.

If there was protest it was covert rather than overt — the women expressing feminist sentiments by being modern and artistic. May Gibbs poked fun at the conventional stereotypes in her cartoons. Others, such as Bessie Rischbieth and Mattie Furphy, beat metal. These feminists were gentlewomen but strong in their own way and in the vanguard of women's affairs from an early date. The

1-3
 May Creeth (1854–1947), Three paintings of Western Australian wildflowers, *Hovea*, *Verticordia* and *Hibbertia*. Panel size 28 x 11 cm. George collection, Perth

4
 Glasgow International Exhibition 1902. May Creeth's paintings are the panels at the top. The inscription is in French as they had previously been shown at the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1900

5a-b

May Creeth (1854–1947),
porcelain pin box c.1902-
1910 painted with
Anigozanthus manglesii
(kangaroo paw).
Thomson collection



5

6

May Creeth (1854–1947),
Tête-a-tête set painted
with *Leschenaultia biloba*
on German china blanks.
Significantly the 'Made
in Germany' has been
painted over on all but
the tray, placing the work
during WWI.
Rogers Collection, Perth



6

first professional women's club in Australia, the Karrakatta Club, formed in Perth in 1894 for 'mutual improvement and social intercourse', had the arts as one of its four major streams of endeavour.³ Margaret Forrest, one of the prime movers in the Society of Arts was also a foundation member of the Karrakatta Club.

Kate O'Connor, May Gibbs, Marie Tuck and Florence Fuller are well known outside Western Australia but there were others too. Miniaturist Annie Andrews, art-teacher Miss M. A. Bailey and painter and interior designer Daisy Rossi had studios in St George's Terrace with craft-worker Kitty Armstrong nearby in Malcolm Street and Annie Dorrington, a designer of the Australian flag, in Bazaar Terrace. Marie Tuck was in Wellington Street. Flora Le Cornu was in Midland Junction and later (as Flora Landells) in Maylands. Cecil Ross, painter and teacher (later Mrs Eagleton), was in Claremont. Painter and embroiderer Loui Benham, wildflower painter Janie Craig and teacher and sketcher Henrietta Finnerty set up in Fremantle, though Benham later moved her studio to Perth. Augusta (Gussie) McKail had her school in Albany.

These were independent women who made a career of their art with many also teaching. As social pressure in Perth was still against married women having careers, only the really strong willed such as Gussie McKail, Janie Craig (Mrs Webster), Flora Landells and Daisy Rossi (Mrs Temple Poole) prevailed. By 1911, Western Australia had more professional women

and more servants per head of population than elsewhere in Australia. The availability of servants allowed a greater proportion of local women the time to pursue careers or engage in artistic activities.

Two career artists who deserve to be better known were May Creeth (Mary Elizabeth 1854–1947) and her sister Helen (Margaret Helena 1859–1941). They were the daughters of a Quaker, Margaret Grubb Beale from Mountmellick in County Laois, Ireland and her husband William James Creeth. Margaret was apparently skilled in china painting. William and Margaret emigrated to Victoria in 1853 where her parents were by this time established. May, Helen and their brother Richard were born in Victoria where the family became successful merchants and mining entrepreneurs. The women had Beale relations in Ireland, NSW, New Zealand, South Australia and Tasmania, places May was to depict in her paintings, as well as a Creeth cousin in Perth.

Both women trained in art at the South Kensington Schools (now Royal College of Art) in London. Many of the graduates of South Kensington became teachers of art, setting up in opposition to their former lecturers. May apparently won medals at the Art School as she advertised in the West Australian Society of Arts Catalogue of 1898, 'Miss Creeth Prize medalist and student of South Kensington – classes for drawing and painting St George's Studio, West Australian Chambers, St George's Terrace Perth,



7

7a

The front of a postcard showing the display in May Creeth's new studio in Colonial Mutual Chambers, St Georges Terrace, Perth 1906.

7b

The back of May Creeth's postcard to her student May Walker in Bunbury

8

May Creeth (1854–1947), Spider Orchid, Swan River Daisy, Geraldton Wax, Cowslip Orchid, Kangaroo Paw and *Hibbertia*, 1914, There is no brand on the porcelain but the Latin and common names are both written on the verso. Thomson collection, Perth

commissions for paintings executed.' She arrived in Western Australia mid-1898 or earlier, to join her brother who had arrived at the height of the gold rushes in 1896. May and Helen were apparently of independent means and resided in fashionable West Perth.

May opened a studio in St George's Chambers in 1898 but confusingly a month later advertised 'Hillcrest Ladies College, Emerald Hill Terrace. Classes will reassemble as usual Monday September 12. M. E. Creeth.' So perhaps she had arrived earlier and had taught there before.

May was soon exhibiting her work. She had a display at the WA Wildflowers Seventh Annual Exhibition held in the Perth Town Hall in August. An article in the *West Australian* August 24 1898, stated

Miss Creeth must indeed have been industrious as well as much travelled to produce so much and so varied work. ... There are scenes from Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania, New Zealand, Great Britain, France and Italy. Miss Creeth mentioned that she hoped soon to have



8

9
Helen Creeth (1859–1941),
Moonlight on Lake Monger, oil on
canvas. Rogers collection, Perth

10
Helen Creeth (1859–1941),
European hard-paste porcelain
vase painted overglaze with
Hardenbergia comptonia and
gilding, c. 1910, h 18 cm The
delicate purple Native Wisteria
trails over a creamy bulbous base,
in striking contrast to the gold and
black-rimmed neck. Collection:
State Art Collection Art Gallery
of Western Australia, Perth,
purchased 1985

11
Helen Creeth (1859–1941), plate
painted with the striking *Grevillea
wilsonii*. Thomson collection

some local views of the Swan, Guildford and
other surrounding beauty spots which she
much admires ... "

The article goes on to discuss ' A new branch
of art is the modelling and painting which
must be seen to be admired. ... there are also
figurines and animals which demand attention',
suggesting that perhaps she had some painted
'slip-cast wares' completed elsewhere on display.

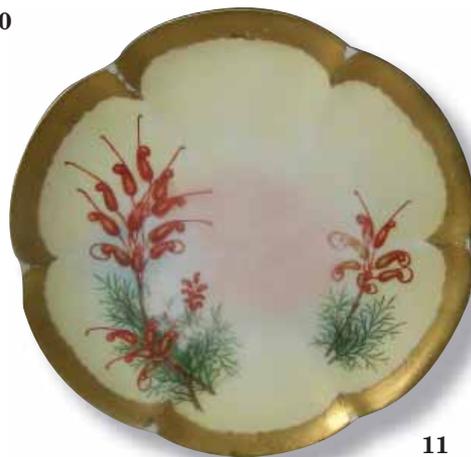
A reviewer of the 1898 exhibition held by the
WA Society of Arts remarked that

'Violets' by Miss M. E. Creeth was a
most natural looking group of violets, just
plucked, seemingly, and thrown carelessly
on to the panel they adorned. 'Wildflowers'
by the same author, was also very beautiful.

May was one of a number of award winners
at the Coolgardie Industrial Exhibition of
1899. She exhibited with other artists such
as Valentine Delawarr, in an exhibition at
Bickfords Furniture Warehouse where the
upper floors were set out as rooms and the
pictures were hung on the walls. The following
year she held an Art Union at Bickfords. By
February 1899, advertisements in *The West
Australian* read 'Drawing and Painting. Miss
Creeth's classes meet daily at the studio. WA
Chambers, St George's Terrace. Outdoor
classes for Sketching. Terms at Wigg & Sons.
Commissions for Painting executed.'

A member of the local press visited her studio
and recorded

I was ... very much struck with the
beautifully painted panels of the wild
flowers of the colony. Each flower is painted
on a separate panel, and thus its beauties of
flower and foliage are seen to a much better
advantage than if a number of different sorts
are grouped together. ... over a hundred
different specimens which Miss Creeth
has collected, and of which she has made
paintings so true to nature that it is very
easy to imagine that the flower itself is flung
carelessly on the canvas. Miss Creeth
gives lessons in painting, not only of flowers
but of landscapes, of which she has several
cleverly executed ones in her studio ... She
is in her studio every day and all day, except
Monday mornings and Saturday afternoons.





12a



12b

Author Peter Cowan tells us she

Painted a collection said to number some six hundred varieties of native flowers. She was assisted in naming them by the Government botanist Dr Morrison. ... the native flowers even got onto ceramics, when Miss Creeth imported what was said to be the first studio kiln. The china was popular and distributed widely. Perth did have considerable activity and enthusiasm in the arts in those years, perhaps more widespread than could be found later.

Miss Creeth had met Dr Morrison at the Royal Society, where she was later a councillor.

In 1900 fourteen of May's wildflower paintings (plates 1 – 3), together with thirty from Lady Forrest and seventy from Dircksey Cowan, Annie Dorrington, May Gibbs, Etta Finnerty, Gertrude Ford, Mrs E. Hardy, Mrs W. C. Thomas and Mr J. S. Anderson, were shown in the Western Australian pavilion at the Paris Exposition Universelle, and later sent to the Glasgow International Exhibition of 1902 (plate 4). Wildflowers, of which there are over 14,000 endemic to Western Australia, have always been identified as a particularly Western Australian subject. A long tradition of painting them has endured. This is not merely a legacy of the 19th century interest in botany but an assertion of local identity.

May visited Helen in Sydney in 1900 and apparently imported a kiln for firing painting on china, which arrived about 1902. She commenced decorating china with images of the native flowers that fascinated her. One of the earliest pieces known is a lovely little pin box decorated with Western Australia's state emblem the kangaroo paw *Anigozanthus manglesii* (plate 5). She was also



13

12 a-b

Two kangaroo paw brooches. That on the left in the silver surround is by Helen. The one on the right in the gold bezel is by May. George and Rogers collections

13

May Creeth (1854–1947), brooches featuring spider orchids, *boronia*, *Leschenaultia biloba* and a kookaburra – an introduced species – and a novelty in WA. Rogers and George collections



14

attracted to the bright blue *Leschenaultia biloba* and painted it often (plate 6).

May exhibited in the Adelaide Chamber of Manufactures Exhibition in 1905. The *Adelaide Advertiser* reported that 'Miss Mary E. Creeth shows some instructive studies in wild flowers, mostly Western Australian, which are executed with considerable skill.'⁴ By 1906 May had moved her studio down St George's Terrace to the Colonial Mutual Chambers, advertising that she taught oils, watercolours, china painting, pyrography and photography (plate 7). May apparently ran a china painting supplies outlet here as well. She sent out postcards to her friends and students to alert them to the change of address. She also fired the work of the students and others to at least 1930.

Helen is recorded as teaching in Sydney in 1893, which she continued to do until about 1910 when she joined her sister in Perth and in 1914 had a studio at 104 St George's Terrace. Her real name was Margaret Helena but she was known as Helen. Helen was a painter, china painter, teacher and photographer. They lived in various places near the city, Bagot Road, Subiaco and in West Perth in what is now Parliament Place. Both sisters were accomplished china painters. A beautiful vase by Helen Creeth is in the collection of the Art Gallery of Western Australia (plate 10). This has delicate purple Native Wisteria – *Hardenbergia comptonia* trailing over a creamy bulbous base in striking contrast to the gold and black-rimmed neck.

The Misses Creeth also painted wildflowers on porcelain plaques that were then set in gold to be worn as brooches. The metal surrounds were usually made by the commercial firms of Levinson & Sons, J C Taylor or Caris Bros.

May was a councillor of the Royal Society of W.A. in 1920-22 and gave one of the speeches at the tribute to the first woman in parliament in Australia, Edith Cowan, when she lost her seat in 1924. Which arena of Cowan's endeavour intersected with hers is not known. They may have both been involved in saving part of Kings Park from the proposal to build a hospital as a memorial for war veterans, however as they lived near the park a few hundred metres from each other there could have been a social interaction. May rarely exhibited with the West Australian Society of Arts however she exhibited china painting as well as oil paintings of wildflowers in 1926.



15



16



17

14
May Creeth (1854–1947), teapot, jug, sugar bowl and creamer c 1910. Recently acquired by the National Gallery of Australia together with a set of six cups, plates and saucers painted by Helen to match

15
Helen Creeth (1859–1941), sweetmeat dish. Thomson collection

16-17
Vases by Helen and May Creeth c.1910. Thomson collection

Her students included Debra Brockman (later Lady Hackett), Dr Buller Murphy, a young lady married to a much older influential citizen who was the owner of the *West Australian* newspaper etc and patron of the WA Society of Arts, Marion Holmes wife of the Manager of the Western Australian Bank, Flora Le Cornu (Mrs Landells), Eugene M. Menz who came to Western Australia after her marriage and Rose Carey (Mrs Walker) a prominent solicitor's wife of Bunbury. Marion Holmes may have learnt her pyrography skills here too. Of these only Flora was a professional artist.

By 1935, the Misses Creeth were semi-retired in Outram Street, West Perth and the studio and artists' supply shop was taken over by china painter Helen Walker from Sydney to become the Haidi Studio. Helen and May moved to Churchill Avenue, Subiaco where they owned other property. Helen died on 8 April 1941, while May died in Subiaco on 22 September 1947.

They have been virtually forgotten as neither of the sisters nor their brother married, so there has been no one to promote their legacy. The beautiful vase in the Art Gallery of Western Australia collection inspired me to find what little I could of their story. There is much more to tell which will no doubt be uncovered when 20th century copies of the *West Australian* are available to search on line.

Collections

Helen is represented in AGWA, WA Museum, NGA; May in the Holmes à Court Collection, NGA, WA Museum, reputedly Battye Library.

References

- *Adelaide Advertiser* 22 March 1905, p. 5.
- Peter Cowan, *A Unique Position*. Perth, UWA Press 1978, pp. 98-9.
- *Sydney Morning Herald* 3 March 1905 p.8.
- West Australian Society of Arts Catalogues 1898, 1906.
- *West Australian* 23 & 24 August, 6 Oct, 6, 7 & 24 Dec 1898; 14 Jan, 8 Feb, 22 April, 14, 15, 16, 18 Dec 1899.
- *Western Mail* Christmas Number 1899, p. 87-88, article by E. J. Bickford illustrated by Miss Creeth et al.
- RWAHS Photographic Collection L6 7185.

Notes

- 1 J. W. R. Linton's brother-in-law, Granville Fell, was the editor.
- 2 Advertisements in the West Australian Society of Arts' catalogues.
- 3 Margaret Forrest was in charge of arts, Lady Gwennyfred James of health. *Karrakatta Club Incorporated: History 1894-1954*, Imperial Printing Co., Perth, 1955, pp. 6, 10.
- 4 *Adelaide Advertiser* 22 March 1905, p. 5.



18



19



20

18 19

May Walker, jug featuring *stylidium*s (trigger plants), and caladenia purple enamel orchids on English Tuscan china c.1912. Rogers collection

20

Flora Landells (1888-1981), bowl painted with Glasgow roses c.1913. Family collection

21

Eugene Menz, blue wren brooch. Private collection



21