

# Mattie Furphy – dainty but determined

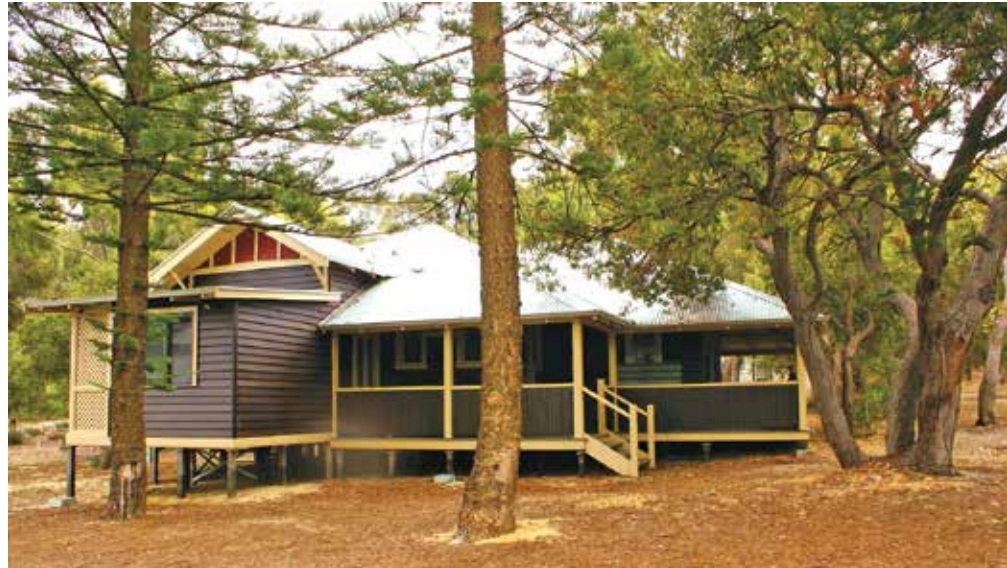
Dorothy Erickson documents the life and work of Mattie Furphy (1878–1948), a Victorian who moved to Perth in 1902 to become a prominent Western Australian artist and designer.

## DOROTHY ERICKSON

The Mattie Furphy Centre for Creative Imagining in Swanbourne WA was opened in October 2012 under the auspices of the Fellowship of Australian Writers (WA), who have rescued the house that Mattie had designed and Joseph and Sam Furphy had built. Restored after fundraising, it is now located in Allen Park a few hundred metres across an oval from its original location (**plate 1**). As part of a writer's centre it is intended "to promote awareness of the power of creative imagination and the central role it plays in all spheres of human activity."

But who you ask was Mattie Furphy? She was born Sarah Martha McCausland in 1878 in Victoria and married Sam Furphy, a son of writer Joseph Furphy (Tom Collins) of *Such is Life* fame, a member of the Furphy foundry family of Shepparton who made the water carts used in World War I –around which the soldiers used to spin tall yarns, giving rise to the term "furphy". More importantly, she was an artist and competent metalsmith in Western Australia in the first years of the 20th century.

The discovery of significant amounts of gold in Western Australia in the 1880s and the subsequent influx of both men and money, coincided with a world-wide resurgence of interest in design for the applied arts. The ideals of 19th-century British design reformers such as Henry Cole, John Ruskin and William Morris, and the French architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc had encouraged painters and architects to extend their activities to cover the design and practice of the decorative arts.



According to Stella Tillyard's thoughtful construct in *The Impact of Modernism 1900-1920: Early Modernism and the Arts and Crafts Movement in Edwardian England*, by 1890 the "dictates of fashion had by this time triumphed over the movement of ideas". The Arts and Crafts Movement had melted into the Aesthetic Movement before metamorphosing into early modernism in the 20th century. In England, 'Art' had become fashionable among the upper and upper middle classes, whose accoutrements reflected their 'Aesthetic' sensibilities.

In Perth, in the midst of a gold boom, facilities were expanding rapidly. Perth flaunted a new Stock Exchange, a new Art School, a new Museum and Art Gallery and many many new houses to cater for a population that multiplied four times in a few years. In the Perth art world, it became fashionable to design and make one's own door fittings and a certain amount of one-upmanship was in force. Fittings were made to denote superior aesthetic taste and modernity.



1. The Mattie Furphy Centre for Creative Imagining in its new location in Allen Park in Swanbourne, 2012

2. Sam and Mattie Furphy on their wedding day about 1900



### 3.

James W. R. Linton with students in the “drawing from the cast” class at Perth Technical School c 1904

### 4-5.

The drawing room in Sam and Mattie Furphy’s House, Allen Park, Swanbourne. Mattie made the carved detail of the decorative brackets under the plate rail in the drawing room

Bernard Woodward, the curator of the new Museum and Art Gallery, wrote “The work of beautifying our homes must necessarily be slow as it is not a question of money but one of taste.”<sup>1</sup> A few examples of these homes survive and fortuitously Mattie Furphy’s is one. Those of artists James W. R. Linton, Francesco Vanzetti, Herbert Gibbs and Flora Landells did not.

Sam and Mattie came to Western Australia in 1902, soon after their marriage (**plate 2**), to set up a Furphy foundry and in 1905 were joined by his parents. Strong-willed Mattie did not get on with her mother-in-law and spent most of her

time at the Perth Technical Art School (now Central Institute of Technology) where she enrolled in freehand, cast, and model drawing and undertook classes in repoussé. For a tiny, corsetted Edwardian belle the latter was some considerable physical feat.

According to Joseph Furphy, she was at art school five days a week — from 10 am to 10 pm. She studied from 1905 to 1910 and was an outstanding student, winning scholarships which paid for her fees. She and Flora Le Cornu (Landells) were mentioned in the annual reports as energetic and persevering students who stimulated the others. Joseph wrote that later when Mattie attended the school for only one day a week, she spent another out in the bush or along the beach with other advanced students, painting from nature.

The Art Gallery, Museum and Technical Art School in Western Australia were modelled on those of London’s South Kensington complex.<sup>2</sup> James W. R. Linton, newly arrived from England, had set up the applied arts within the Technical School under a committee which believed that:

*Art teaching and art training have long been recognised by all progressive nations as an essential factor in a modern education. Necessity making these no longer*





the monopoly of the rich but the privilege of the poorest is well understood and no small part of the hopes of elevating our people rests on bringing art influences into the midst of the homes of the humblest.<sup>3</sup>

Many local gentlewomen, instead of receiving their art training privately as was customary, began attending the Technical Art School and were joined by others for whom art had previously not been an option (plate 3).

In the first decade of the 20th century, the favoured style in Western Australian metalwork (and the furniture and surroundings to which it was attached) was a version of late Art Nouveau.<sup>4</sup> This modern style, which had become popular right around Australia by Federation, was international but with distinct regional variations. The chameleon style had a number of names: Stile Liberty, Stile Inglese, Studio Stil, Moderne Style, Jugendstil, Belgische Stil, and Wiener Sezession. To these should be added the styles known in Australia as “Federation”. The local version had much in common with the 20th-century manifestations — the Darmstadt Jugendstil, Viennese Secession and the Glasgow style which was influenced by Art Workers’ Guild member and architect Charles Frances Annesley Voysey (1857–1941), whose own style was influenced by Japan. Voysey was the most widely-imitated of English designers

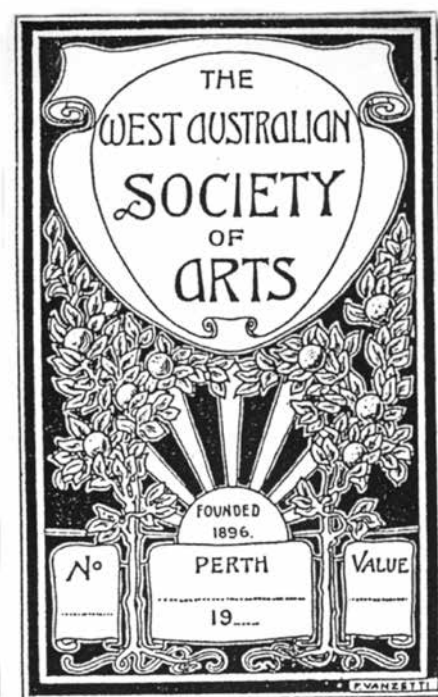
outside the country. He was regarded as the “fountainhead” of Art Nouveau.<sup>5</sup>

James W. R. Linton placed an emphasis on drawing and design in the course. In this he was following the methods of his own training and the tenets of Walter Crane whose article “The Language of Line of Design” published in *The Magazine of Art* c 1899 and in his books, defined “the art of design” as “the adaptation of forms to spaces, objects, and materials” and who was emphatic that:

Line, whatever its value to the painter, is to the designer the very nerve and fibre of life, since the whole value of his work depends upon the constructive use and quality of his line, both for its strength and beauty.<sup>6</sup>

Mattie obviously applied these dictums when designing the details of her house, which was built in stages on wildflower-clad sand dunes on the corner of what is now Clement and Marmion Streets, Swanbourne between 1908 and 1920. She designed and made delightful beaten-copper panels and fingerplates for the doors, candle sconces, overmantels and wooden shelf brackets ornamented with quandongs to complement the quandong finger plates in the drawing room (plates 4–5).

Everything was coordinated. The entrance hall featured repoussé kangaroo paw flowers



ACCEPTED DESIGN FOR THE SOCIETY'S BOOKPLATE.

6. Stained glass windows probably by Barnett Bros. to designs by Mattie in Mattie Furphy's house, Allen Park, Swanbourne
7. The Franco-British Exhibition Diploma of Honour awarded to Mattie Furphy, Katherine Armstrong, Ernestina Levinson and Flora le Cornu
8. Francesco Vanzetti's bookplate for the WA Society of Arts



### 9–11.

Mattie Furphy's repoussé copper, Quandong and Kangaroo Paw motif door panels now installed at Tom Collins House but originally made for her own house. The carpentry was by Joseph Furphy. Collection Fellowship of Australian Writers (Western Australian Branch), Tom Collins House, Swanbourne



with the same motif in the stained glass windows (**plate 6**), while the dining room was ornamented with grape motifs. An enamelled repoussé hall mirror featured a banksia. These were all designed under the influence of James W. R. Linton, the art master at the Technical School, who wanted the students to design and make new modern work and not copy old styles.

When the student work was exhibited at the Chamber of Manufactures' exhibition in Perth in 1906 the applied arts, including repoussé, were singled out for praise. Being one of the outstanding students, Mattie also showed in the school's exhibit at the Women's Work Exhibition in Perth in 1907 with Flora Landells, Ernestina Levinson and Catherine Armstrong. The school's exhibit consisted of drawings, paintings, art needlework, dressmaking, and woodcarving. As Mattie had won the prize for drawing from the cast in 1905, it is probable that her exhibit included drawings.

This exhibit went to the 1907 national exhibition in Melbourne as a non-competitive entry and was reduced and forwarded to the Franco-British Exhibition of 1908, where it won the Grand Prix and a Diploma of Honour (**plate 7**).<sup>7</sup> Few of Mattie's paintings have been traced but her metalwork is preserved in Tom Collins' House and the adjacent Mattie Furphy House in Allen Park Historic Village. Her forté appears to have been repoussé.

In one set of repoussé copper door panels, the quandong is treated rather after the manner of the fruiting pomegranate trees in Francesco Vanzetti's bookplate design also used for the Society of Arts' exhibition catalogue of 1904 (**plate 8**). This fruiting tree was a local development of an international motif. Furphy's quandongs are the most successful of her three designs for door panels (**plates 9–11**). The dictates of Walter Crane, via the medium of Linton, are used to adapt the form to fit the chosen rectilinear shape. The chasing and repoussé are crisp and the background smoothly treated to recede.

Furphy did not follow the dictate to be modern in the largest piece of metalwork (**plate 12**). The overmantel featuring wyverns appears to have come straight out of Owen Jones's 1850s *Grammar of Ornament* which was in the school library. The overmantel is however a tour-de-force masterfully executed. The design, used a motif favoured by members of the Aesthetic Movement, and is somewhat recidivous. Joseph Furphy was not very impressed. Describing its making he wrote:

... for the last couple of weeks she has been spending an hour or so every day at her Art work. Not painting, sad to say, but embossing copper panels and plaquets for her overmantel. One panel of that work – about a yard square – took her nearly a year to belt into shape, and the shape was a couple of hideous wyverns glaring at each other. Which is supposed to be highest Art.<sup>8</sup>

Furphy made a large copper-framed wall mirror which features a domed repoussé and pierced banksia motif set over a background of turquoise enamel. This rather large and plain piece is relieved by small turquoise enamelled rondels at each corner. According to Jean Lang, the Furphys had a small enamelling kiln set up at their foundry in Fremantle and these were probably enamelled there.<sup>9</sup> The foundry may also have had a wax furnace for burning out moulds for sculpture, as the foundry cast special equipment Linton needed, such as raising-stakes. The Furphys and Lintons became friends.

One of Mattie Furphy's most successful works was a striking pair of candle sconces in brass and copper (plate 13). Smoothly domed hemispheres of brass are juxtaposed against repoussé copper back plates. These circular plates have five swirling leaf and berry motifs, chased and repoussé in low relief. The copper sections are given a satisfying deep red patina which contrasts with the polished yellow of the brass reflectors. The candles are held by fabricated brass fittings attached by rivets to the base of the circular copper plate. Fortunately these attractive pieces are preserved in Tom Collins House, the headquarters of the Fellowship of Writers in Swanbourne, with her other work but are now in need of conservation work which the Fellowship are endeavouring to get funding to undertake.

Most of the metalwork and doors were transferred to what is now Tom Collins House in 1939 when Sam and Mattie moved to live there and remained in the house when Sam Furphy later gave it to the Fellowship of Australian Writers. They are fine examples of the work made in the first decade of the 20th century and remain a memorial to Mattie who died on 25 July 1948.

Both of Mattie's homes have been heritage listed by the Heritage Council of Western Australia and reside in Allen Park. Tom Collins House had to be moved to make way for a freeway and became the first house in Western Australia to retain heritage listing after being moved. Mattie's own home fell

prey to developers when the last of the family moved out and was saved by a concerted effort of concerned people and moved across the park near to Tom Collins House in what has almost become a heritage village. Both properties are used and maintained by the Fellowship of Writers (Western Australian Branch) for fellowship meetings and to house writers in residence. They hope Mattie's work will inspire other creative endeavours.

**Dr Dorothy Erickson** has written several books fundamental to understanding the development of design and decorative arts in Western Australia from the first British settlement in 1829 to today. She is a frequent contributor to *Australiana*, and her latest book, *Inspired by Light & Land. Designers and Makers in Western Australia*, is reviewed in this issue.

#### NOTES

- 1 Bernard Woodward, *Guide to the Arts, and Arts and Crafts: with a catalogue of the Sculptures, Paintings and Black and White Collections* published in 1904 by the committee of the Western Australian Museum and Art Gallery, p 56.
- 2 This now comprises the Natural History Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Royal College of Art, Imperial College etc.
- 3 *Annual Report* 1904-5, np.
- 4 *The Studio* 26 (1903) featured the work of Austrian and Scottish makers exhibited at the First International Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art held in Turin, Italy, in 1902. This work is generally described as Art Nouveau.
- 5 Hugh Osborne ed., *Oxford Companion to the Decorative Arts*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975, p 812. Although he stressed tradition, Voysey had a dislike of historical revivals and pioneered simplicity in interior decoration.
- 6 Walter Crane's influential style is often classed under the general Art Nouveau banner and a major analysis of his work by Georges Lemman was published in 1891 in *L'Art Nouveau*. About 1895 he and Lewis Day, both contributors to the old style, denounced the term, trying to project an air of robust probity to dissociate themselves from the "degenerates" and Oscar Wilde, whose trial in 1895 coincided with the publication of Max Nordau's *Degeneration*.
- 7 *Annual Report and Prospectus* 1909, p 22.
- 8 Quoted in Lang, Jean. *At the Toss of a Coin*, Perth: Tom Collins Press, p 30.
- 9 *Ibid*, p 46.



#### 12.

Mattie Furphy's fireplace surround now in Tom Collins House, Swanbourne. The repoussé metalwork was originally completed and installed in Mattie Furphy's house

#### 13.

Candle sconce, polished brass and repoussé copper, c.1906, 32 cm wide by Mattie Furphy. Collection Fellowship of Australian Writers (Western Australian Branch), Tom Collins House, Swanbourne