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| Cossington Smith, Grace (1892–1984) |
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| Grace Cossington Smith was one of Australia’s foremost female modernist artists. Having developed an enthusiasm for modern theories of colour and design at the Dattilo Rubbo art school in Sydney, in 1915 she exhibited *The Sock Knitter,* a seated portrait of her sister Madge knitting socks for the war effort. The portrait’s tight composition and flat blocks of decorative colour, influenced by the modern British style, have led to claims that it may be Australia’s first Post-Impressionist painting.  Cossington Smith went further than most in exploring the technical challenges and pictorial effects of colour and rhythmic compositional structure. She lived an unmarried, childless and economically comfortable life devoted to art. Living in relative suburban seclusion, Cossington Smith nonetheless held regular and successful solo exhibitions and was loosely involved with Ethel Anderson's Turramurra Wall Painters. Her broad subject matter includes city scenes as well as portraits of friends and family, religious scenes, landscapes, still lifes and flower paintings. The artist later focused loving attention on the formal and spiritual dimensions of light, as expressed in the mirrored interior spaces of her beloved home, Cossington.   While she always attended to the formal qualities of her art, Cossington Smith’s works often contain details of human interest and social commentary. Her modern viewpoint drew strength from a number of sources, including war propaganda and commercial illustration. The artist’s prodigious drawing skills were honed through an illustrative observation of current events, evident from her early wartime propaganda cartoons. As a child of the Kodak ‘happy moments’ generation, Cossington Smith’s paintings offer snapshot-style observations of city life. *Reinforcements: Troops Marching* (1917), for example, presents a tightly framed view that zooms in on the acute details and the emotive, human angles of the scene.  As a political conservative and devout Anglican, Cossington Smith responded rapturously to the span of the new Sydney Harbour Bridge, which she depicted as a sublime spiritual and technological masterwork. *The Bridge in-Curve* (1930) looks up from below to the arches of the bridge approaching from each side of the harbour, as if in communion, forming the architecture of the Trinity and haloed by a radiant rainbow of light. Cossington Smith’s landscapes also attend to formal, decorative qualities, enabling her to investigate the underlying rhythms of nature itself. Her experimental approach to colour and form freed her from the conventions of naturalistic landscape painting that still dominated Australian interwar art. *Sea Wave* (1931)abstracts the coastal shoreline through rhythmic colour composition as a means to transcend the material, everyday world and seek connection with the Divine.  File: Smith\_the\_bridge\_in-curve.jpg  Figure 1: Grace Cossington Smith, *The Bridge in-Curve* (1930). Tempera on cardboard, 83.6 x 111.8 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. |
| Further reading:  (Eagle)  (Hart)  (Modjeska)  (Topliss) |