**Beckett, Clarice Marjoribanks (1887–1935)**

Clarice Beckett ranks as a major Australian woman artist, with the curatorial rehabilitation of her work since the early 1970s remaining central to popular feminist history. Beckett’s abstracting impressionism, subtle colour harmonies and ordered placement of compositional elements is similarly ranked as quintessential to Australian modernism. In the early 1970s her proto-minimalist approach was likened to Rothko in its refined blurring of hues and her para-futurist vision of an industrialised city broke with the expected agrarian memes of 1920s Australian painting. As Beckett never left Victoria, her vision was highly autonomous and self-reliant. Locally available books and art tuition provided her with theoretical and technical cross-references. Her creativity was bounded by, and yet transcended, domestic routine and a relatively sedentary life, to poetically transform her local surroundings. Beckett’s redemption as a self-driven cultural maverick trapped within a restrictive middle class family in trope-ic discussions of her life offered guidance and self-identification for women artists within the context of “women’s liberation” and 1970s second wave feminism. These mythologies have stimulated substantial curatorial and scholarly interest, but have underestimated the degree of profile and respect accorded Beckett in her lifetime.

Beckett’s controlling family circle was highly sensitive about social status and outward convention and Clarice as unmarried daughter bore the brunt of household duties. Her father discouraged visitors and deemed a studio unnecessary for his daughter. Hence she painted *en plein air* and completed small scale, easily transportable works. Clarice’s mother however did ensure that she received the most comprehensive liberal humanities education available to women in c1900s Australia. Intensive reading of visionary poets like Walt Whitman and WB Yeats fostered in Beckett the sense of a creative artist’s responsibilities and the Theosophical movement offered access to alternative belief and non-Western cultures.



Clarice Beckett, *Passing Trams*, c. 1931, oil on board, 62.8 x 58.7 cm, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.

Beckett’s sketches drew favourable attention from artists Walter Withers and Ola Cohn who persuaded her parents that she should have professional art training. Travelling to Melbourne Beckett enrolled at the National Gallery School, Melbourne between 1914-1916. Here teacher Frederick McCubbin’s silvery landscape tonalities were inspirational, although she reinterpreted them with a rigorous formalism. Seeking an alternative to traditional beaux arts education, Beckett turned to Max Meldrum, whose positivist system combined Edwardian enthusiasm for a Velazquez and Manet derived tonalism with the analytical discipline of the sciences, particularly optics and visual perception. She studied with Meldrum for a year, but continued throughout her career to request his opinion on completed work. He regarded her as an outstanding pupil and an exceptional woman artist.

The annual exhibitions of Meldrum’s students and friends were Beckett’s first substantial public showings. Highly prolific, she held annual solo exhibitions from 1923-1933. Critical reception was mixed; her suppression of detail drew criticism and her work was judged as vague and unfinished. Painting in imperfect weather conditions with muted visibility fascinated Becket, but was seen outlandish and irregular by critics. However documents and oral histories reveals she received a greater degree of respect from colleagues in professional and literary circles than is often assumed.

With greater knowledge of overseas modernism circulating in 1930s Melbourne, her palette became arbitrarily brighter and she increasingly emphasised surface patterning above accurate rendering of planes and tones, suggesting a move away from empiricism. However the increasing ill-health of her mother curtailed her time and household chores sapped her energy. She was unable to recover from a bout of pneumonia caught whilst painting in a storm.

**References and Further Reading**

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(A lavishly illustrated overview of the generation of female modernists operating in Australia between the wars, which places Beckett in context of her peers and documents the richness of the early modernist experience in Australia)

Lock-Weir, T. *Misty moderns: Australian tonalists 1915-1950*, Adelaide, South Australia: Art Gallery of South Australia.

(The first modern curatorial examination of Max Meldrum and his students with a central focus on the work of Clarice Beckett)

McGuire, P. (2010) ‘'The silver thread': Clarice Beckett and her brother’, *Victorian Historical Journal*, Vol. 83, No. 2: 276-285.

(An article featuring recent research into primary sources which provide greater detail of the Beckett family and their household)