Juliette Peers

**Crowley, Grace Adela Williams (1890–1979)**

Grace Crowley belonged to the remarkable and influential generation of Sydney modernist women artists in the 1920s and 1930s. Whilst her surviving oeuvre is relatively small, her direct contact with the French avant-garde of the 1920s and her ongoing contact with French artists until the 1960s together with her consistent record in disseminating modernist principals stands out as particularly distinctive within mid-20th century Australian art. She became the leading teacher of cubist principals in Sydney, firstly alongside another Australian student of André Lhote, Dorrit Black, in 1932 and then in a shared venture with Rah Fizelle 1932-1937. Additionally she ran a modernist sketch club, which gathered together a small likeminded coterie. Her first fully abstract painting was exhibited in 1942. Throughout the later 1940s and early 1950s she painted a significant series of brightly coloured abstracts, based upon elaborate compositional preparation with arrangements of string and coloured paper shapes. By the late 1930s she neglected her own work to facilitate that of Ralph Balson, whom she regarded as a key modernist genius. Professional peers when later talking to academics and curators affirmed the strength of Crowley’s influence on Balson and her individual autonomy as an artist. According to Ron Radford, in her lifetime artists, whom she had taught including Balson and Fizelle, received far more public recognition than she did.

Her family like many Australian landholders replicated the sporting and practical outlook of county life in England. They had little time for creative activities and expected Crowley to marry well. Yet her family provided Crowley with a financial security that, as Jane Hylton has noted, offered the social and economic means to sidestep both Sydney art politics and marketplace pressures. Crowley enrolled fulltime in Sydney’s celebrated Julian Ashton art school in 1915, and her abilities meant that by 1918 she was assistant teacher. As Ashton grew older, responsibility for directing his atelier devolved onto Crowley. She remained an impressionist until 1926 when she journeyed to France. Here she sought avant-garde artists who accepted pupils including André Lhote, Albert Gleizes and Amédée Ozenfant. In particular geometric systems for organising compositions detached her work from mimesis and unlocked her ability to communicate modernist principals to others. Her mother’s illness recalled her to Australia in 1930, where she was in the words of Daniel Thomas “the most experienced modernist painter in Australia.”



Grace Crowley, *Sailors and Models*, c. 1928, oil on canvas, National Gallery Australia, Canberra.

Correspondence with expatriate Anne Dangar until 1951 facilitated contact with Gleizes and other French artists. Later, Crowley stayed current with French and European art via correspondence with Mary Webb: a Sydney artist working in Paris in the 1950s. Hence Crowley and Balson were listed in the *Dictionary of abstract painting*, published in 1957 by Michel Seuphor in Paris. Crowley and Balson made an extended tour of the United States, Europe and Britain, meeting artists and looking at contemporary art in public and commercial galleries, an unusual step for Australians before the advent of relatively cheap mass air travel in the 1970s. After Balson’s death in 1964, Crowley sought to organise a retrospective at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, but curators expanded this project into an examination of prominent 1930s Sydney modernists including Crowley herself which opened in 1966. The feminist art movement enriched the last decade of her life and consolidated her reputation. She formed productive professional bonds with art historians and curators including Daniel Thomas and Janine Burke. In 1976 Crowley was made a member of the Order of Australia.

**References and Further Reading**

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National Gallery of Australia. (c2006) ‘Grace Crowley’, *Being Modern* website, Canberra: National Gallery of Canberra <http://nga.gov.au/Crowley/index.cfm>.

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(Biography written by a curator who was a close colleague of the artist and contributed greatly to her return to public recognition)