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| Grosvenor School of Art, London (1925-1940) |
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| The Grosvenor School of Art, also known as the Grosvenor School of Modern Art, was founded in 1925 by Scottish artist and printmaker Iain McNab. In 1940, it merged with the more traditional Heatherley’s Art School, which is still operating in London. The Grosvenor was famous across Britain and the British Empire in the interwar period for promoting modernist art and design. Its contribution to introducing and acclimatising continental modernism to an extended anglophile audience was substantial. Pupils came from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as other countries, and through them the experience of modernism was brought back to their homelands. Across the British Empire, the Grosvenor School made modernism acceptable and praiseworthy, representing the authority of what Australian artist Arthur Streeton called ‘the Centre of Empire’, combined with the glamorous social cachet that London symbolised for the social elites in the colonies. |
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These teachers established clusters of modernist acolytes, extending the Grosvenor School influence even further. Across the British Empire, the Grosvenor School made modernism acceptable and praiseworthy, representing the authority of what Australian artist Arthur Streeton called ‘the Centre of Empire,’ combined with the glamorous social cachet that London symbolised for the social elites in the colonies. News about the school found its way to the social, art, and literary pages of newspapers across the Empire, particularly noting the activities of children from prominent families at the school. Vision of the School The Grosvenor School’s accessible and lively vision of contemporary art and design also reinforced its influence. Students did not have to present with formal prerequisites or qualifications to enrol and could join at any time within a semester, meaning that overseas students did not have to wait until a new term started. They could also pick and choose whatever subjects appealed to them. Expatriates already established in London, such as the New-Zealand-born art dealer Rex Nan Kivell (1898-1977), recommended the school to newer arrivals and co-nationals. For some students, the fact that the school remained within the Anglosphere and did not demand adjustment to foreign languages and cultures may have been a point in its favour. Some artists did combine studies at the Grosvenor with studies in Europe: Russell Drysdale (1912-1981) studied at La Grande Chaumiere, and Helen Stewart (1900-1983) with André Lhote. Remarkably, the school was not a finishing school for dilettantes. It was well-furnished with everything from printmaking equipment to a commercial kitchen used to serve meals on-site. The staff members were outstanding personalities of their era, including Sybil Andrews who was hailed as a major figure of British and later Canadian modernism. The tutelage was also effective, promoting in its attendees a rigorous sense of linear clarity and an awareness of pattern and design. A reviewer in the *Sydney Morning Herald* attributed a new sense of strength in draughtsmanship and composition in the work of an artist who had returned from studies at the Grosvenor School. Claude Flight and His Students In public and curatorial memory the Grosvenor School is associated most frequently with the now highly sought-after oeuvre of coloured lino cuts that were produced by Claude Flight (1881-1955) and his students. These prints were greatly celebrated at the time of their making as a genuine innovation in art that was both democratic and modern. Although they were priced far above a working class income, they comprised a conscious attempt to make avant-garde art truly reflect ordinary proletarian life. In this, they resembled post-revolution Russian experiments with popular art forms. The artists also embraced stylistic and technical innovation. They did away with the monochrome key block, making areas of different colours carry and form the composition itself rather than just filling in established contours. The prints generally expressed a futurist dynamic, seeking to render speed and energy visible with compositional lines, visual distortions, and optical illusions. They celebrated aspects of modern life including streetscapes, public transport, organised sport and funfairs/amusement parks.  File: GrosvenorSchool\_FlightSpeed.jpg  1 Claude Flight, Speed, 1923, linoleum cut, 24.6 x 31.1 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art  While Flight was hailed as England’s true Futurist, his genial vision did not include the militaristic and politicised ideals of Italian Futurism. It is generally believed that Flight met Marinetti in 1912 when the latter visited London. For a brief period — less than a decade — the linocuts were wildly popular, finding buyers in commercial galleries. They were also exhibited in many public galleries (12,000 people viewed one touring exhibition in Britain alone), and were acquired as examples of contemporary art by major institutions. By the advent of the Second World War, the moment of collective and radical utopianism in the production and dissemination of art that the prints signified was over. Only in the 1970s did the prints begin to recapture curatorial favour. Significant survey exhibitions were organised by public galleries as early as the 1980s in Britain, Australia, and the United States. Other Mediums Beyond printmaking, the Grosvenor school supported modernist endeavours in a wide range of disciplines, hosting exhibitions of handmade book production, printing and bookbinding, modernist textiles for the home, and modernist accessories for dining and cooking, to offer a random selection. Art-theoretical subjects were also taught, with Frank Rutter lecturing on recent art history, including Picasso. As in a Parisian academy, the life class was a central focus of school life and routine. The school’s creative ethos was cosmopolitan, drawing upon the expected School of Paris influences but also Italian Futurism and, in the case of Claude Flight, the theories of the Viennese artist Franz Czizek (1865-1946). Pupils came from beyond the British Empire; the Swiss artist Lilli Tschudi (1911-2004) was the most high profile student. Exhibitions of student work were seen in places as scattered as New York, Shanghai, and Melbourne during the 1920s and 1930s. |
| Further reading:  (Coppel)  (O'Mahony)  (Parkin)  (Samuel and Penny) |