

## VIOLET TEAGUE: THE (WOMAN) ARTIST AS CRITIC

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Violet Teague made a substantial contribution to Australian experience of late Victorian and Edwardian visual culture.<sup>1</sup> She was trained in Brussels, London and Melbourne throughout the 1890s and came to widespread public attention after her portrait of Colonel Rede was awarded a *Mention Honorable* in the Paris Salon in 1898. As early as 1896 works painted during Teague's student years overseas had attracted favourable attention in Australia (*Sydney Mail* 13 October 1896). The 1898 Paris Salon prize was one of several foreign awards she received during her Melbourne-based career. In the early-twentieth century she painted a series of stylish bravura portraits of relatives and friends, mostly in an ambitious full-length format. Her list of sitters documents the cultural and intellectual circles in which Teague moved; it includes associates in the art world, academics and professional musicians. Her range of stylistic cross references, both modern and historic, create a blueprint for a quintessential turn-of-the-century artistic taste with an anglocentric perspective—the formal control and tonal harmony of Whistler, the bravura brushwork of Sergeant, the fascination with light upon rich shimmering fabrics from artists such as Gainsborough and van Dyck, and the grand manner of Reynolds.

Teague is more than a forgotten portraitist. In collaboration with her friend Gereldene Rede she was the first Australian to make Japanese-style coloured woodblock prints in *Nightfall in the TiTree* (1905, various collections including National Gallery of Australia) and produced a highly respected series of woodblock prints. She also produced *plein air* landscapes, animal paintings and seascapes. In 1932 at the age of sixty-one she undertook a tour of the interior of Australia, drawing and painting the desert landscape of far-north South Australia. A series of altar paintings dating from the turn of the century to the 1930s is her most unusual contribution to the art of her generation.

Clearly referencing late-nineteenth-century British taste, Teague's religious paintings are an antipodean response both to the Florentine *quattrocento* inspirations in the work of Thomas Cooper Gotch and to the work of decorative late Pre-Raphaelite-style painters including Kate Bunce and Robert Anning-Bell. These artists document the fascination of Victorian art with the early Renaissance, and the pervasive sentiments of Anglo-Catholicism at this time. Such theological and artistic influences were felt in Australia as well as in other countries where British culture was a dominant stylistic element. Teague's paintings can be set in this historic and artistic context by comparing

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<sup>1</sup> Teague's life has only been thoroughly discussed by scholars in the 1990s. See Peers and Hammond; Peers, *More than Just Gumtrees*; Kerr; Druce and Clark, eds. Unsourced biographical discussion throughout this essay is drawn from *Violet Teague* especially the biographical notes compiled by Druce, and articles by Butler, Callaway and Hoom.

them with a number of other Australian art and craft works of the period which draw upon similar influences (O'Callagan 14-15; Peers "Religious" 431-32, 437-39).

As Teague's work progressed during the twentieth century the technique she employed in her altar paintings became freer and increasingly lost the strong linear decorative quality drawn from Botticelli and Crivelli which had influenced late-nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholic painting; realist elements were skillfully blended into the more imaginative qualities, but the rich jewel-like colours remained faithful to the Victorian sources. Teague's most substantial altar painting—for the church of St James the Less, Mount Eliza (Victoria)—records the likenesses of many of her family and friends from the local district who for many years had provided the cast of the much-loved nativity plays and pageants enacted in the family garden at Mount Eliza. The picture could be read as a collective portrait of the ethos and values of that particular community, a visible cultural self-definition and a unique, transparent record of an Australian social and religious experience that has remained substantially beyond academic discussion. Only in the highly confected and artificial medium of "community arts" projects of more recent years have artworks sought to celebrate such a body of people and their multiple interrelationships.

Like many women of her generation Teague's life revealed both extraordinary reserves of energy and a strong social conscience. Following a lengthy trip in Central Australia she became appalled by the living conditions of the Aboriginal people on the Hermannsburg Mission and raised a thousand pounds during the depression by organising a fund-raising exhibition of works by most of Melbourne's prominent artists. The money from the fund enabled a permanent water supply to be cut through rugged countryside and piped directly into the mission. Throughout her career Teague frequently organised exhibitions, studio afternoons, gallery visits, and gave lectures for charitable purposes. She provides a textbook example of how such charitable and benevolent work had quasi-feminist dimensions. Charity and voluntary work in the early twentieth century provided a *de facto* extension of the range of acceptable activities for women of comfortable means, enabling them to deploy skills that would now be classed as of an entrepreneurial or executive nature. Indications of Teague's personal character from those who knew her and from information about her own actions and records suggest that her motives were free from the often hypocritical social anxieties about borders, status and contagion that were sometimes associated with Victorian notions of philanthropy. She was motivated by an unforced sense of social justice and responsibility that is nowadays frequently only ascribed to those imbued with left-wing or Marxist ideals.

During the First World War Teague devoted similar energy to fundraising for French and Belgian charities, especially civilian relief ("Gum Trees" 100).<sup>2</sup> Her initiatives included arranging on various occasions *tableaux vivants* of "great scenes"

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<sup>2</sup> Callaway's "Melbourne's Theatre of War" provides a detailed chronology of Teague's many wartime fundraising and charitable events.

from British history such as the Masque of Gloriana, with Melbourne artists in costume representing the court of Queen Elizabeth I, as well as Australian history including the arrival of Captain Cook. Teague's *tableaux* were so admired that she was asked to organise them on a number of occasions during the war to aid in patriotic fund-raising. She had done so as early as the 1890s when she organised Christmas *tableaux* with fellow students at her Belgian art school, the Academie de Blanc Garin (*Table Talk* 25 July 1901). Her verses written in honour of Burne Jones 1899 (unpublished, Violet Teague Archive) were intended to accompany a tableau of his paintings. She was still organising such events as late as 1931 to aid the Arts and Crafts Society. This event was recorded by stylish "glamour" photographs of the era (Callaway, "Clarke" 231-32) indicating to the growing importance of the "glamour" shot for both commercial and class/social applications. When Melburnians of the 1930s posed as Rossetti paintings two distinct protagonists of female beauty were combined: the pre-Raphaelite maiden and the social butterfly of the 1930s, so influenced by Hollywood.

Perhaps Teague's major example of such artworks was the extraordinary French Parade 14 July 1914 which she organised in conjunction with Madame Fracknell. The event portrayed 2000 years of French history and involved two-hundred or so participants—predominantly women because the men were fighting overseas. It provided some proto-feminist ironies when local women artists dressed as women from the revolutionary mob posed gleefully for a photograph in front of the Victorian Artists Society building—all for the cause of British Imperial policy. Coincidentally Teague had earlier suggested in her lecture on the history of women artists, "Women in Art," that a number of extraordinary women artists came to the fore in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries because men were more engaged in the complex political and military agitations that marked that era of European history: "Perhaps in those days as the men were all drawn off to martial pursuits the girls were left to till the fields of learning" (2).

Despite these achievements, it is no surprise to all who have followed the complex issues of the canon and artistic reputation in Australia that Teague has not found a more secure foothold in public and professional reputation. Only in the 1990s with the exhibition *Completing the Picture*,<sup>3</sup> nearly a century after she was praised as taking the honours in the annual Victorian Artists Society exhibition, did a thorough understanding of her talents develop. I have broached these issues of fame and reputation in a number of places, most notably in my 1998 Australasian Victorian Studies Conference paper "Unsuspecting and Innocent of Wrong: Reading the Mount Rennie Outrage as a Romance of Victorian Gender Relations" (published under the same name in the *Australasian Victorian Studies Journal* 3.2), and in another article which drew substantially from the framing parameters of that paper, "Leader of the Lady Artists: Contextualising Jane Sutherland's Reputation and Oeuvre." Both of these articles suggest that women artists' reputations were brokered by the needs and opinions

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<sup>3</sup> *Completing The Picture* toured in 1992-93; this was the first time in recent years that the public has been given the opportunity to view a selection of Teague's work.

of later generations of art academics and curators rather than the works produced by the artists themselves.

In keeping with the theme of the Victorians and journalism, this present article will examine another area where Teague's taste, energy and talent shone out: her art criticism and art theory writing. Compared with other important Australian women artists working in the 1890s and early 1900s, one of the most remarkable things about Teague's career is the cohesive archive of written sources which has survived. This collection includes a greater quantity of first-hand writings than for many of her female contemporaries. It is no exaggeration to suggest that Teague has a more complete documentary backing than most women artists of her generation in Australia. The archival sources, including first-hand writings both unpublished and published, certainly exceeds those surviving for any of her female contemporaries based in Melbourne.<sup>4</sup>

Teague's *oeuvre* of published and unpublished writing is an important Australian contemporary response to issues concerning the engagement of the Victorians with print media and gender. Although extending into the 1940s, Teague's written work was grounded in the Victorian era. Her fascination for anecdotes and allusive discursive imagery, drawing upon her personal feelings and reactions, makes reference to formulae employed frequently in Ruskin's writings on art where salient points are often delivered through metaphor and analogy, although Teague employs this technique with a little more delicacy than Ruskin. As authority for her views on art she categorises Browning's poems, including those on the lives of the artists, as theoretical writing about art rather than as creative writing. ("Mrs Allen" 5; "Thoughts on Art" 9). She explored her interest in Browning further by attending a series of lectures by her friend (and portrait subject) Professor Laurie at the University of Melbourne.

Teague's worship of the religious art of the early Renaissance—for example Fra Angelico and Botticelli, both of whom she specifically mentions in her writing—finds a direct reflection in her practice as a painter of altar pieces and again demonstrates the Victorian foundations of her view of art. In discussing the *quattrocento* she not only values the spiritual dimension of the art of that period but also praises the democratic spirit of cooperation which is demonstrated in practical terms by *quattrocento* artworks:

There was so great demand for altar pieces that schools, *botegas* they were called in Italy, arose, where armies of craftsmen worked at these things under the direction of great masters. Many of the students became great masters in their turn And passed the torch from hand to hand weaving a deathless halo for their country. ("Thoughts on Art" 9)

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<sup>4</sup> One of the few comparable archives so far located is that of Alice Brotherton who left a major manuscript collection of papers and writings from the 1880s. However, Brotherton was less of an artist than a *littérateur* who joined art societies and spoke on art matters.

These sentiments clearly reflect those of the contemporary arts and crafts movement in their validation of the co-operation between artists, the continuity between the fine arts and the skills of the craftsman, and the diffusion of art away from the singular “masterpiece” towards the many and varied objects of everyday life.

A later but equally important body of Victorian art writing, the New Art Criticism, is also reflected in Teague’s critical writings and lectures. While not specifically mentioning the New Art Criticism in a quote or a source, she draws key concepts and values from the movement which clearly shadowed her own views. The New Art Criticism emerged during the 1890s with such British critics as R.A.M. Stephenson and D.S. MacColl<sup>5</sup>; it encouraged a new respect for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century art, leading to the awakening of interest in artists such as Velasquez, Gainsborough, Reynolds and Watteau. The New Art Criticism ranked the “Old Masters” above the Victorian mainstream. Historic art was seen to display more painterly values and both artistic and formal sincerity. Thus Teague’s ranking of the early Victorian Landseer below the work of the eighteenth-century animal painter George Morland indicates her indebtedness to this new body of critical theory. She considered Landseer’s animals “showy” and “superficial,” not “faithful portrait[s],” rather mere “*portraits de parade*” (“Latest Felton Bequest Purchases” 7). Her description of “Velasquez and later Goya” as the “marvellous impressionists of Spain” (“Thoughts on Art” 10) indicates that she was aware of the new critical writing emerging while she was overseas. To describe these artists as “impressionists” demonstrates the way in which the New Art Criticism read “Old Masters” as proto-avant-garde. Teague’s choice of words place her firmly in the same context.

A “budget” edition of Stephenson’s monograph on Velasquez entered the State Library of Victoria collection in 1901 (according to the date stamp) and would surely have been known to Teague. The fact that the two last chapters are titled “His Influence upon Recent Art” and “The Lesson of Impressionism” indicates how close Stephenson’s text lies to Teague’s description of the “marvellous impressionists of Spain.” Stephenson himself talks of Velasquez as “the great Spanish impressionist” (125). Indeed the tight monochrome format of the small black and white illustrations make Velasquez’s portraits look stylised and decorative in a late-nineteenth-century manner, remarkably like Whistler, Sergeant—or even Violet Teague. The interchangeability of courtly portraiture and radical impetus read into Velasquez by an Australian audience is demonstrated by Gordon Coutts, an associate of the avant-garde *plein air* group (the Heidelberg School), painting a portrait of Prince Albert for Melbourne’s Parliament House. Here pose, gesture and colouring were drawn from the Winterhalter portrait which the artist was commissioned to copy, but the handling defiantly evoked the painterly spirit of Manet and Velasquez, so alien to the refined surfaces of the Winterhalter original. There are no records to state whether Coutt’s choice was either a

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<sup>5</sup> Other critics associated with this movement include George Moore and Charles Wibley (Borland 67); it was also associated with the greater interest by the French avant-garde associated with the New English Art Club.

political or an artistic gesture of rebellion. In this antipodean interleaving of grand portraiture and radical art lies the contradiction whereby Teague herself supported a faction of art criticism that would strongly contribute to rendering her own art invisible to subsequent generations.

The revolutionary and modernist nature of Teague's cultural knowledge should not be under-estimated. The New Art Criticism marked the beginning of a central tendency of twentieth-century avant-garde stream of art writing where much *pre-Victorian* art was validated by modernism because of a shared ground of abstract and formal values with the current avant-garde. In her report on the National Gallery's Felton Bequest purchases for 1911 published in the *V.A.S.*<sup>6</sup> Teague was thoroughly in accord with the curatorial choices demonstrated by the Gallery's early purchases. The new acquisitions brought about by the recently expanded purchasing power of the National Gallery of Victoria thoroughly reflected the new weighting of art-historical and curatorial esteem towards old masters and eighteenth-century British art. This new critical standpoint rapidly devalued British Victorian art in both public gallery discourses and the art market. Sadly, the desire to own significant examples of admired artists outstripped critical probity in some early curatorial purchases of the National Gallery of Victoria which have now been found to be either inferior examples or outright copies. It must be added, however, that many later purchases of eighteenth-century British art through the Felton Bequest presented unquestionably genuine and still-admired works to the Melbourne public.

Teague herself registered disappointment that the pictures which arrived in Australia were not as good as those she had seen overseas painted by the same artists, even those of the same sitter. She suggested that the shortcomings in the Reynolds and the Hoppner demonstrated the damage that thoughtless art restorers could render to once fine artworks; her comments imply that she was troubled by these particular examples. Subsequently both works have been downgraded in their respective artists' *oeuvre*, thus demonstrating Teague's astuteness as critic and connoisseur:

Hoppner has given the vivacious brown eyes a rather calculating and hard expression, the drawing is faulty and the technique seems obvious and poor. . . . The shadow of the cheek and the painting of the neck and bosom and arms are not quite what we would expect from one of the Great Georgians, but it is hard for any but an expert to tell what indignities the painting may have suffered at the hands of cleaners and restorers. ("Latest Felton Bequest Purchases" 6-7)

Likewise in the same article she thought that the Reynolds may have faded in comparison to the "great Reynolds at home" she had seen on her travels (6).

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<sup>6</sup> The Victorian Artists' Society: their journal which ran intermittently between 1900-1918 was called "The V.A.S."

The concomitant enthusiasm which also developed in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries for the decorative arts of the eighteenth century and Regency periods made an impression in the content of Teague's own paintings. A number of them portray eighteenth-century and Regency-style furnishings and fittings, especially of the kind that became fashionable around the turn of the eighteenth century. Whereas her portrait of *Colonel Rede* (1898, Melbourne City Council) shows a recognisably Anglo-Japanese ambience with cane furniture, Whistlerian lacquered picture frames and an oriental screen, the interior in her *Welcome News* (1900) is distinctly neo-Regency in style, and *Dian Dreams* (1909, Art Gallery of New South Wales) portrays the same neo-Rococo armchair seen in *Welcome News*.

Ironically the values that emerged from this late nineteenth-century shift in sensibility would prove particularly destructive in an Australian context to a fair assessment of Teague's merits. The change in outlook brought about by the New Art Criticism provides one source for the intense antipathy to Victorian art that in some ways has lingered longer in the twentieth century in Australia than in other Anglo-American cultures. Art historians have noted that throughout most of the twentieth century the collecting policy of the National Gallery of Victoria was dominated by eighteenth-century pre-Victorian British art (Galbally 140) and British and European decorative arts of the same period. The New Art Criticism played a considerable part in establishing this cultural ethos, as too did the closely associated and strongly anti-Victorian New English Art Club. Early-twentieth-century British art authorities to whom the Australians looked for guidance when making public purchases of expensive artworks were increasingly under the sway of such sentiments and in some cases were members or close associates of the New English Art Club.

Much of Teague's writing found publication, sometimes in the daily press, but mostly in specialist quality media (to the degree that it existed in Australia at that time). Her interest in such writing was grounded in the late Victorian era. In 1901 *Table Talk* stated that she was the Australian correspondent for *International Art Notes*, an art magazine written by women.<sup>7</sup> The *Table Talk* interview could be informally appended to her *oeuvre* of art theory as it—like all of Teague's art writing—demonstrates her erudition in both visual and literary matters. Like her firsthand writing, the interview stands beyond Teague as a litmus test of the kinds of knowledge of art and culture circulating in, and available to, the Australian white settler society of the time.

Teague's writings not only provide supporting documentation for her life and *oeuvre*, they also reveal aspects of the cultural and art historical knowledge of Melbourne from the 1890s to the 1940s. The cultural discourse presented by Teague's writings has been overlooked when forming stereotypes of Australian cultural options of the 1890s and 1900s. As Teague frequently wrote for publication, or was at least writing for an audience via lectures and talks, her ideas had a public life as professional discourse; her essays were generally not private musings, and can therefore be regarded

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<sup>7</sup> Listings of Victorian periodicals suggest that this magazine ran from 1900-1901. I have not seen any editions.

as the touchstone to shared values with her audience and readers. Teague's writing performed a diverse range of functions, from straight visual arts criticism, exemplified by an essay "A Medieval Masterpiece" in the *YMCA News*, and by her reports on the Felton Bequest purchases at the National Gallery of Victoria, to her celebration of the character and achievements of the Australian artist E Phillips Fox after his death. Some speeches were delivered at exhibition openings, others were intended to inspire younger art students. Her papers include a corpus of verse some of which found publication, again especially through the art circles in which she moved; for instance, the Victorian Artists' Society July 1904 Winter Exhibition catalogue included Teague's poem "A Cloud Fantasy."

At the same time Teague's writings are also an important resource for the study of her own work as they support the stylistic evidence in her pictures which may be read via a traditional connoisseurship or empirical art historical manner. From her own words we learn more about Teague's choices and taste. Thus we are not surprised that she discussed religious art with enthusiasm or praised the grace of Botticelli's hands (*Table Talk* 25 July 1901). The work of Sergeant, whose handling she obviously admires, is mentioned in her writing as too is the work of Gainsborough ("Latest Felton Bequest Purchases" 6-7). Indeed her 1911 description of the British eighteenth-century portraitists as "the Great Georgians" ("Latest Felton Bequest Purchases" 6) mirrors not only the high critical reputation accorded these artists in the Edwardian era by writers of the New Art Criticism movement but also the strong influence they had over her own work.

Likewise her writing on printmaking also reflects her practical interest in that medium. An essay published in 1914 during the First World War discussed techniques of woodblock print-making illustrated with an original example by Teague herself. Here Teague made the delightfully paradoxical statement that a Japanese invasion of Australia would be "much desired" because exquisite quality papers and inks for printmaking would be available ("Wood Engraving" 6). Considering the high level of anxiety that Australian masculinist public culture expressed over the rise of Japan from the 1890s onwards, these sentiments stood as a delicate sedition against the interests of the Australian Commonwealth. Perhaps, following what we know of Teague's character, the irony and whimsy of the idea of a "much desired" Japanese invasion rather than the politics of the situation would have appealed to her. Fun and jokes found a place in her writing. Unpublished manuscripts in the family archive include a parody of a social column where the high society celebrities at the glittering ball were rabbits, complete with watercolour illustrations that uncannily resemble similar letters to young friends that Beatrix Potter in England would later develop into well-known publications.<sup>8</sup>

Teague spoke and wrote at length on the function of art, frequently placing cultural achievement within a pantheistic concept of the Divine inspired by Theosophy.

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<sup>8</sup> I am not suggesting any direct link, but perhaps one could argue that Potter ultimately made public and familiar a personal and private female genre of writing for the amusement of children and family.



An essay that deserves attention as a substantial example of early Australian art theory was published by the Theosophist magazine *Advance Australia*. Teague presented a closely related talk to students at her old school, Presbyterian Ladies' College, for which a variant and extended manuscript survives. The extended essay with its quotations from Browning demonstrates how values drawn from the mid-Victorian era and the pre-Raphaelite circle could survive into the twentieth century, mediated by the diverse spiritual influences of Theosophy. Theosophy also introduced many westerners to elements of Hindu and Buddhist thought, yet such was the pluralistic synthesis of Theosophy that whilst Teague ratified her fascination with Victorian aesthetic values through the Theosophical Society's validation of the spiritual in everyday, she could at the same time approach contemplation of the extreme French avant-garde by suggesting that the 1920s fascination for primitivism and direct self expression among artists could reflect the shared Hindu-Theosophic principal of the eternal cycle of rebirth and decay.

Teague's attitude stands in direct contrast to the writings of Lionel Lindsay, another Australian artist who likewise emerged as professional in 1890s Melbourne and was very near her contemporary in age. In his *Addled Art* Lindsay saw in modernism only the repulsive demonstration that inferior social groups—including Jews (ix, 8-14); homosexuals (19) and "Fin de Siecle Decadents" (26); Women (17, 23, 52); and Sexual Perverts (28, 64-65)—promoted modern art since they were unable to sustain serious artistic effort. For Lindsay, unlike Teague, modern art had no place in a philosophical or spiritual overview of life and art, it only indicated the bankruptcy of twentieth-century culture "the age of speed, sensationalism, jazz and the insensate adoration of money . . . the product of Stunt" (1). In this context Teague's intellectual flexibility and plurality should neither be taken for granted nor undervalued.

Teague's belief in an intense and serious purpose for art extended to an imperial vision of British civilisation guided by a holy mission on behalf of humanity and civilisation drawn from propaganda around the Allied role within the First World War. Talking of a portrait she had painted Teague clearly invoked this sense of spiritual transcendence through the Imperial British mission: "I could do him no greater honour than to paint him at the foot of the Cross, which has been his battle standard—as it has been England's in this war. What other country has three crosses for her flag? Sacrifice is the meaning of it, and 'whosoever shall lose his life for My sake, the same shall save it'" (*Victory Peace Honour* n. pag). It is also clear that she personally believed artistic egos were subsumed in great works of art, either within the collective spirit of the age as in the *quattrocento*, or in serving the Theosophical synthesis of all religions as embodying a trans-historical "manifestation of the human spirit" dedicated to the "Eternal Consciousness" ("*Advance Australia*" 185) When viewed from this context the Allied cause was by no means sordid or self serving, or even a defence of imperial and commercial interests, but supremely "artistic" as it involved that collective serving of the community and noble ideals that Teague regarded as an indication of true culture.

Her most fascinating piece is a manuscript for a lecture (which may have been partly published around 1907)<sup>9</sup> on the history of European women artists from the Renaissance to the turn of the twentieth century: "Women in Art." Although a general history, it reveals a specific favourite: she seems particularly intrigued by Vigée LeBrun, the eighteenth-century portraitist who forms the centrepiece of her lecture. Teague may have written and spoken about Vigée LeBrun at length because she was more thoroughly documented than many other women artists, but it is also fair to suggest that Teague was possibly drawn to Vigée LeBrun by a number of parallels to her own career and ambition. These points of overlap are fairly straightforward but telling factors which are especially emphasised in Teague's own account when she highlights issues in Vigée LeBrun's life that reflect her own experience and interests.

First, both women specialised in portraiture. Each limpidly emphasised the grace and charm of their female sitters in a social tradition where physical beauty was almost a public duty of the rich, talented and well-connected woman. The culture that Vigée LeBrun worked in is far closer to the art and cultural values in Teague's society than Teague's is to our own society today. Second, both Vigée LeBrun and Teague were admired in the public domain for the professional quality of their art and both undertook feats of prodigious energy and application far beyond the stereotype of a genteel hobbyist. Of course Teague's stage was the proportionally smaller one of early twentieth-century Melbourne's academic and artistic circles whereas Vigée LeBrun travelled to a number of European courts and counted royalty amongst her patrons, but the pattern remains parallel. The public dimension of their careers links both artists to discourses in their respective societies about ideal gender identity and roles. Like Vigée LeBrun in her era, Teague's unceasing energy and initiative in her Australian context across seven decades of her life suggests a sense of a serious and professional attitude to art-making.

Third—and we can see how important this issue is to Teague by the careful attention she pays to it in her text—Vigée LeBrun was highly cultured. Teague devotes much space to describing an entertainment that Vigée LeBrun gave in Paris in the 1780s. The guests were dressed in Grecian-style clothes, classical poetry was recited, the decor and even the food—so far as possible—was to be based upon classical precedent and ancient Greek written and visual sources. As already discussed Teague was fascinated by theatre, dressing up and pageantry and the love of costume and performance shaped her working life. In her 1911 discussion of the Reynolds purchased by the National Gallery of Victoria, she similarly devotes attention to an imagined female social presence at the highest level of enlightenment cultural debate when she describes Offy Palmer's life as Sir Joshua Reynolds's favourite niece. Portrayed as not merely a handmaiden serving cups of tea, the imagined young girl is the invitational figure who (as much as the male genius) unlocks a utopia of high cultural achievement: "She has listened to much brilliant talk, has poured out many cups of tea for Dr

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<sup>9</sup> The clipping found among her papers appears to be a source used by Teague from the *Times Literary Supplement* dated 1907 rather than a report on her lectures—but it is not certain.

Johnson, who has maybe complimented her on this very portrait as she presided over her uncle's wonderful tea parties where there were often more guests than plates. She makes us, too, feel part of the number" ("Latest Felton Bequest Purchases" 6).

Teague's lecture further demonstrates her own interests by frequently highlighting major portraitists including Sofonisba Anguissola (whom Teague introduced as the "chief glory" of the Cremona School), Rosalba Carriera and Catherine Read. The last two both commanded considerable reputations in the eighteenth century for their portrait painting. Teague admitted that until she made a special study of the subject of women artists she only gave credit to three women—Marie Vigée LeBrun, Angelica Kauffmann and Rosa Bonheur—as having made a significant contribution to art history. The most contemporary artists whom Teague discusses are impressionists such as the American Cecilia Beaux who was certainly at the height of her reputation if we date the lecture at around 1907. From a slightly earlier period, but still extremely significant names of the nineteenth century avant-garde are those of Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot. Teague described the latter as an artist who "excels." Cassatt and Morisot, like Vigée LeBrun, were among the few women who enjoyed what approached a serious reputation as "master artists" in the twentieth century before the feminist art historical movements of the 1970s.

Teague's discussion resembles the approach of 1970s models of feminist art history. She praises trailblazers and those who broadened the options for women. Her lecture was intended to educate and proselytise in that she indicated which artists had works accessible to her audience in the Melbourne National Gallery. Like Teague's own *oeuvre* the lecture is pluralistic, open, and accepting of all options rather than directed and politicised to emphasise a cohesive point of view. Teague—consistent with her own persona as modest, retiring and sincerely Christian—did not see Vigée LeBrun as the painting bimbo whom Germaine Greer, as much as she claimed to defend her, would later faintly mock as "the pretty girl" (268). For Teague, Vigée LeBrun was a rigorously self-critical and painstaking artist. Her essay—perhaps open and naive but undoubtedly vivid, partisan and enthusiastic—ends with a "three cheers for Madame LeBrun."

Teague's lecture on women artists allows one to examine historical phases in women's art history. Again it should be remembered that this young woman living in Melbourne in the early 1900s reflected contemporary of the cosmopolitan intellectual life of the northern hemisphere. A case could be made to suggest that Teague's practice and outlook was more in step with overseas development than with that of the Nationalist-Heidelberg artists, although Teague could produce credible artworks such as her 1897 group of Chimside portraits which totally embrace nationalist preoccupations as well. In particular her lecture on women artists permits consideration of the international shape of contemporary published discussion at the time when she researched, wrote and presented her lecture. Around the turn of the century the burgeoning discipline of art history and its concomitant literature increasingly began to examine female artists as well as males. Walter Shaw Sparrow's substantial *Women Artists of the World* and Louisa Ragg's *Women Artists of Bologna* were among a number of titles in various languages dealing seriously with women artists published at

that time and into the early twentieth century. Both volumes were held by the State Library of Victoria during Teague's lifetime.

Teague's papers and articles are also an antipodean reflection of the still substantially under-researched contribution that many British women made to the literature of art theory, art history and art appreciation during the nineteenth century. Her essays could also be seen against the background of growing opportunities for women art-writers in the late-nineteenth-century British press. During the 1890s for example Lady Colin Campbell made her name as an art critic and even as an editor of journals devoted to the arts during the 1890s. She was famed for being one of the first journalists to be able to break into male territory (Fleming 243). In Teague's papers is a clipping from the *Times Literary Supplement* (1907) reviewing Mrs Ragg's *Women Artists of Bologna* which notes how many British women had recently made a name for themselves as art historians.

A focus on Teague may also allow us to recall some other early Australian women writers on art. Although hard to track down because their writings were frequently anonymous, particularly if they were published as columns of gallery-based reviews or even in the "social notes" where art matters were also discussed mostly through corroborating accounts by third parties, a number of Australian women who wrote on art can be identified. However, like their painting sisters, information about them has become so hard to retrieve by now that recovering them as subjects for cohesive academic discussion is difficult. Two examples are sisters Edith Hybers and Marie Therese Loureiro who from the late 1880s were art critics on the *Age*. Loureiro wrote on various topics related to the more expected Victorian female journalistic fields of dress and household matters under the pseudonym "Marmite." She was still active in the early 1900s following a career that spanned nearly two decades. Mary Therese and Teague moved in the same circles. Teague painted her daughter, and as a pupil at Melbourne's Presbyterian Ladies' College in the 1880s had been taught by her husband, Artur Loureiro. Florence Blair, Edith de Castilla and Conor O'Brien were, like Huybers and Loureiro, important groundbreaking champions of the *plein air* Heidelberg artists in the print media.

The role these women writers, artists and supporters played in popularising the Heidelberg artists and giving them a cachet of fashionable chic is one which present-day academics and curators largely ignore. As I have suggested elsewhere<sup>10</sup> the suppression and belittling of the varied contribution of female contemporaries to the Heidelberg group not only permits the Heidelberg group to be read as a conservative testament to the "genius" of the male creative artist, it also facilitates the pervasive interpretation of the group as expressing a left-wing, democratic ethos of work and masculinity. In this context Teague's *oeuvre* becomes intensely political—in particular her most spectacular, high-profile and characteristic expression: the portraits of women.

Even without invoking the many editorial excisions which have taken place to permit a left-of-centre identity to become essentialised and naturalised as fundamentally

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<sup>10</sup> "Leader of the Lady Artists: Contextualising Jane Sutherland's Reputation and Oeuvre."

“Australian,” one can contrast the grace and ease with which Teague, an upper-middle-class, intensely religious, unmarried woman, outperformed Tom Roberts—now defined by historical practice as both central and heroic—in the field of portraiture.<sup>11</sup> Roberts struggled with portraiture as economic necessity. He resented the fact that his free-will and individualism as an artist/male genius was yoked like a bullock to the humiliating servicing of his betters. Class issues were inflected with gender identities because toadying to the upper classes was regarded as an essentially emasculating activity. Roberts and his male peers tried to disavow their necessary dependency upon the patron even to the extent of singing mocking songs about middle-class taste (Croll 44, 47-48). Teague (and other female contemporaries such as Alice Chapman, Josephine Muntz Adams and Constance Jenkins) undertook the same task with no complaint. However, they have not been canonised by later generations as icons of nationalist self-identification. In this context one can again see how the centre of normalcy, democracy and nationhood in Australian culture is still claimed as masculine with little effective contestation from academics, historians and curators.

Furthermore, unlike those of Roberts, the merits of Teague’s paintings were acknowledged outside Australia in international competition. One could argue that portraiture was by the turn of the century a *déclassé* genre widely accessible to women only when myths of the bohemian/romantic creative ego had already diverted male artists to the more prestigious arena of the “avant-garde.” Another argument is that women substantially entered portrait painting when it was rendered obsolete by the invention of photography. Yet these arguments can be countered by the phenomenon that some of the most internationally celebrated and publicly acclaimed artists around 1900 to 1910 were portraitists, including John Singer Sargent and Phillip de Laszlo, as well as Margaret Parlarchy. The latter was the 1890s version of Rosa Bonheur, Lady Elizabeth Butler or Vigée LeBrun: the heroic, exceptional woman artist, the preaching dog. Acknowledging the depth or even the presence of Teague’s portraits in Australian culture—giving her voice by according her writing the status of a professional historical discourse—shifts the power balance away from the masculinist trans-class rituals of culture and power which still in subtle and lateral ways (even as they are frequently disavowed in the academy on the grounds of their misogyny and racism) dominate the manner in which culture is packaged and remembered in Australia. Victorianism itself—with its associations of female rule (excessive, oppressive and maternal) and British culture (alien to Australian nationalist self imaging)—also sounds a similar dissonance to certain high-profiled mainstream Australian values. Thus both chronologically and metaphorically Teague is undoubtedly a “Victorian” subject.

Teague’s feminine, formal and nostalgic world of beautiful dresses and paintings in the grand manner had a feminist overtone in its *fin-de-siècle* context, as evidenced through her lecture on women artists. An account of the women’s art display at the 1900 women’s conference in Paris published by the *Sydney Town and Country Journal* (27

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Neville identified this contrast between the two artists. (“Violet Teague’s Portraits,” Druce and Clark 51) but I wish to push the political implication further than he does.

October 1900) noted how *tableaux vivants* on the life of Marie Antoinette were part of the official program of a conference that highlighted the achievements of advanced women. Robert Tracey has noted that in her alternative mythic incarnation as heterosexual innocent the French Queen, as a noble and ideal beauty in trying circumstances, had long fascinated the British Victorians in the guise of a symbol of the vulnerability and helplessness of the quintessential woman. In this light, Elisabeth Gruner suggests, first-wave feminist discourses were able to present Marie Antoinette with all her feminine qualities as a woman of positive values who disseminated an image of supremely feminist grace and dignity in the public arena. Major French women artists involved in the opening ceremonies of the Paris conference included the extremely important Virginie Demont-Breton and Sarah Bernhardt (famed as a sculptress as well as an actress). Such linkages between beauty, social prestige and opening opportunities for women have been forgotten in the short history of second-wave feminism. A related theme is Austrian academic Lisa Fischer's argument that certain female royal figures, most notably Kaiserin Elisabeth of Austria, Queen Elisabeth of Rumania (a.k.a. Carmen Sylva) and the French Empress Eugénie, gave cachet and credibility to nineteenth-century feminist endeavours and issues.<sup>12</sup> Teague's assured and elegant female sitters were in their own way local versions of these iconic and enigmatic women (certainly Elisabeth of Austria and Eugénie were well known and loved as fantasy-desire figures a century ago in Australia) who demonstrated the possibilities of exercising a female power and presence in the modern world.

A context and validation for the writings of Violet Teague could be established within the history of ideas in Australia, but should they be regarded as an interesting, nostalgic byway, or as a record of the insufficiently documented arena of early Australian women artists? Or has Teague's potential relevance and impact been devalued by intellectual/academic practice? The directness of Teague's writings lends them more than documentary interest. They reveal a personal warmth and frequently an enthusiastic response to their subject that keeps them alive for a later generation, whereas early-twentieth-century Australian theoretical writing on art and/or literature or other humanities subjects may frequently seem alien, florid and over-formal—yet at the same time unsophisticated—to many later professional readers. Teague's unmasked, unforced communication suggests that she was confident her audience shared her cultural vocabulary and that her views would meet an informed reception.

Teague's writings indicate the existence of another intellectual and cultural experience of Australian life that has been devalued by a number of central intellectual traditions down the generations, from radical nationalism, through socialist realism to post-colonialism. The latter discourse in Australian practice seems to have a curious

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<sup>12</sup> Fischer does, however, overlook the fact that other high profile European royal women disseminated more off-balance female personae around the early 1900s, representing such perennial twentieth-century female stereotypes as the classic cuckolded wife (ever forgiving and gracious), the religious hysteric, the "bloody" feminist-dominatrix, and the white trash social climber-bimbo with a taste for bad men/bad sex.

knack for leaving the reputations of dead white mainstream males intact whilst assigning responsibility for the rightly deplored excesses of colonialism to women.

Post-colonialism makes the female the focus of an intense rejection of the middle class and whiteness, thereby ironically reinstating through its unrelenting focus upon these identities as both lacking and aberrant some of the key obsessive gender and purity fetishes of colonialism. Likewise there is a strong unspoken neo-conservative investment and an authentically Victorian avant-garde masculinist heritage in mainstream Australia's obsession with targeting and denouncing supposedly "bourgeois" and feminine values (Peers, "Unsuspicious" 7-10, 14-15, 18-19). In such a context Teague's art can become too easy a target. Yet if she is rejected for being a wealthy woman who painted other wealthy women in elegant dresses, one ignores the central problems that her art and work poses. Examining Teague's art and writing on its own terms, accepting her as mainstream and serious, if not "professional" in her informed commitment to art, exposes the subjective and manipulated nature of many of the basic assumptions and myths that have sustained key meta-narratives of Australian cultural identity since World War 2. In this context it is clearly easier to overlook Teague than to acknowledge the fault lines along which run the collusive relationships between the canon, the mainstream, and the supposedly radical and cultural power broking in Australia.

Teague could—and did—represent attitudes now identified as conservative: charity, "good works" and social responsibility through benevolence. Simultaneously she articulated points of view that move closer to much current Australian thought in an acknowledgment of Aboriginal sovereignty and original ownership leading to a concomitant duty of respect to this seniority: "When it is remembered that all the land and all the water were the aborigines' inheritance, this will seem a small act of restitution" (Letter to the *Argus* 19 January 1934). The sense of the newness and particularly the *temporality* and *ephemerality* of the white Australian presence in comparison to the Aboriginal is striking in Teague's reference to these issues: "We white people have only been a little while in Australia, not much over a hundred and fifty years" ("Mrs Allen Has Asked" 1). This concept is popularly seen as a recent innovation and relates to rapidly mutating visions of the essentialist nature of nationalist paradigms of identity.<sup>13</sup> Teague also contrasts the ephemeral quality of the white presence with contemporary (1920s and 1930s) impoverishment of the Aboriginal long-term guardians of the land. Moreover she links the issue of restitution to the dispossession of the original owners and identifies compensation as a duty that the whites must pay for usurping the original custodians. While there may also be colonial and imperialist issues in Teague's assumption of the "lady's" mission of civilisation, a

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<sup>13</sup> Gelder and Jacobs provide a useful index/blue print to these changes. Their text is not without its own problems, notably the elite devoicing of the *mittelstand* and lower hedonistic "white trash" elements of settler society and the book's limpid upholding of the post-1945 intellectual as the spiritual guide and leader of nationalist Australia.

charge from which Theosophy itself is not exempt,<sup>14</sup> Teague's arguments demonstrate that the sense of justice which is now seen as the product of a left liberal intellectual elite has a longer and more diverse history than frequently generally suspected in Australia.

Teague's stance should be subtly differentiated from the classic "smoothing the pillows of a dying race" attitude. Her writings make it clear that for her death and growth were not a Darwinian metaphor of struggle and annihilation but a Karmic cycle of change which affected every living thing. We were all in effect "dying races" and potentially "coming races." Death and decay were not to be read as subject, inferior states rather as natural and expected. If we turn to both the creative writing (*Clouded Dream*) and theoretical writing ("Karma as a Cure For Trouble") of her close friends the artists and theosophists Ada and Ina Gregory we can see something of the rigid and austere philosophic discipline that Theosophy provided for such late-nineteenth-century Australian women artists in the contemplation of issues of death and regeneration. Remarkably, in the context of her era, Teague indicated that the abject predicament of the Aboriginal people was not due, as colonial and eugenicist discourses broadly asserted, to innately inferior intellectual and biological qualities but to the fact that they had been cheated of their inheritance. An even more modern cross-reference is Teague's direct allusion to the Aboriginal people surviving "100 years of our occupation" in her letter to the *Argus*. Here, particularly, she pre-empts a vocabulary associated with late-twentieth-century reinterpretations of Australian history in the light of post-colonial theories.

These issues again demonstrate how by depriving Teague of a voice by ignoring her written texts, or by consciously devaluing the intellectual merit of the traditions that guided her, creates a more heroic vision of present-day Australian intellectual life. By simplifying perceptions of the cultural explorations made by Australians in the past, present-day academics create an empty stage upon which the mind and insight, and

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<sup>14</sup> The mirror world of a spiritual imperialism around the turn of the century can be best seen in the 1912 split of the Theosophical society when the German-Austrian (and some other European) members left to follow Dr Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophical Society. The issues causing the split were explicitly Nationalist-Imperialist as there was volatile discussion about the possible role for central European mystical traditions in the Society, traditions which were regarded with suspicion by the mostly Anglophile hierarchy. Conversely Europeans resented the intense stress upon Hindu belief which was seen as expressing the British Empire's cultural-political world domination. Central Europeans also wished to distance themselves from Archbishop Leadbeater's desire to replicate neo-Anglican and Anglo-Catholic vestments, rituals and ranks within the Theosophic society—again seen as imposing strongly English conventions upon a supposedly international group. Ironically, when one considers the present-day organisational and institutional health of the Anthroposophical Society versus the dwindling Theosophical Society, it seems that in the realm of mysticism the Central Powers won the victory that eluded them on the battlefield in 1918. That the second great Theosophic split came between rival mother goddess-figureheads of British (Annie Besant) and the American (Katharine Tingley) origins, also demonstrates the influence of national rivalries. Tingley's self appointed title "the Purple Mother" referenced imperial symbolism and maternity—surely an American appropriation of Queen Victoria. Likewise there was a nationalist inflection in Tingley's interest in Native American and Mesoamerican mysticism.



above all the leadership and salvationist abilities of the Enlightenment (male) thinker in the guise of the post 1945 academic, shines out more clearly. Even considering Violet Teague's case on the simple historicist grounds that I have set out above, I think today we could well follow her lead and conclude with "Three Cheers for Violet Teague."

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