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Flower Men: The Australian Canon and Flower Painting 1910-1935

Abstract

Historical studies of Hans Heysen, George Lambert, Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton concentrate on paintings of landscape and people. Less well known are their paintings of flowers, which take the form of still-life painting or adjuncts to figure painting, such as portraits. While these artists are famous for the masculine way they approached masculine themes, and flower painting represents a stereotypically feminine subject, I argue that by making flowers their object of study, they intended to define and differentiate femininity from masculinity in an era of the 'New Woman'. Sex and gender are central to the subject of flower painting and are important for discussions about the work produced by all four men, although sex is often camouflaged behind the innocence of naturalistically painted flowers.



Fig.1. Tom Roberts, *Roses*, 1911, oil on canvas, 51 x 61 cm, Gift of Mr F.J.Wallis 1941, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Photograph: Jenni Carter.

Introduction: The Rough and the Pretty

In 1996, Humphrey McQueen remarked on the striking contrast in Tom Roberts' output between the feminine subject of flowers and the masculine subject of landscape:

Roses could not have been further removed in subject or mood from the sketches Roberts had been making in the Riverina of masculine work. We have approached the manner of man who could switch between the pretty and the rough.¹

This switch between 'the rough and the pretty' also applies to Hans Heysen, George Lambert, and Arthur Streeton. All four were friends and acquaintances from 1889 until the death of Lambert in 1930 and that of Roberts in 1931. In later years, their fellow artist Lionel Lindsay praised them collectively for developing a unique Australian tradition out of subjects that were nationally recognisable and distinctive to Australian life and landscape.² *Fire's On* (1891) by Streeton, *Shearing the Rams* (1888-90) by

¹ McQueen, 1996, pp. 256-57.

² Lindsay, 1942, preface.

Roberts, *Approaching Storm with Bush Fire Haze* (1913) by Heysen, and *Weighing the Fleece* (1921) by Lambert became known as classic depictions of the spirit of Australia, representing the strength and danger of masculine outdoor work. *Fire's On* took on significant national symbolism and was highly commended by *The Age* for its reflection of 'the contemporaneous life and activity of a new continent and a new race.'³ Even Heysen's uninhabited landscapes evoked an image of Australian masculinity because of the physical strength and courage that was associated with life in the bush.⁴

In the vast literature on these men, flower painting is a half-hidden subject. My aim, then, is to bring a fresh perspective to these four major figures in the Australian canon by addressing their involvement in a subject that was stereotyped in Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century as 'feminine art'. I explore the allure of flower painting in relation to prevailing tastes for naturalism and visual truth, and I discuss how the idea of the innocence of nature is used as a camouflage for the 'erotic suggestion' of flowers, a term once used to describe Streeton's flowers by his grandson Oliver.⁵ I show how flower painting was very much part of an Edwardian culture and how the garden, from which the flowers were often painted (a characteristic of Heysen's practice), symbolised family and prosperity. I also discuss how the conventional association of women and flowers is incorporated into both paintings of flowers and paintings of women. Tom Roberts, for example, was particularly drawn to the woman-flower analogy, and I argue that his figure paintings as well as his still-lives objectify femininity through floral motifs. George Lambert made serious studies of flowers, but he also parodied the woman-flower analogy by portraying himself, in his famous *Self-portrait with Gladioli* (1922), juxtaposed with a startling arrangement of flowers. The painting supports Claudette Sartillot's claim that flowers have 'no stable *topos*' but can subvert linearity, identity, and gender.⁶

Although, the works discussed in this article were painted at different stages of the artists' respective careers, they all fall within the period 1910 to 1935, when all four painters were particularly preoccupied with floral subjects. Streeton and Roberts began painting flowers much earlier than Heysen and Lambert. In 1889, at the '9 by 5 Impression Exhibition', Streeton exhibited *Honesty and Artichokes* (1889), a rapidly painted orientalist composition that the *Evening Standard* reviewed as 'a perfect bit of work, and one of the most attractive in the exhibition.'⁷ In the mid to late 1880s, Tom Roberts began to specialise in paintings of roses, and he was highly commended for the voluptuous *Madame Lombard and her Friends* (1888), a work described in *Table-Talk* as a highly original 'romance of roses of all colours.'⁸ Heysen's career as a flower painter was launched in 1908 when he exhibited *Zinnias*, a painting that William Baldwin Spencer described as 'just as good as Fantin-Latour.'⁹ George Lambert painted his 'first pure still life', *Pan is dead* in 1911.¹⁰

³ Cited in Clark and Whitelaw, 1985, p. 138.

⁴ Crotty, 2001, p. 21.

⁵ Smith and Streeton, 2001, pp. 19-20.

⁶ Sartillot, 1993, p. 17.

⁷ Cited in Smith, 1995, p. 42.

⁸ Cited in McQueen, 1996, p. 256.

⁹ W. Baldwin Spencer to Hans Heysen cited in Thiele, 1969, p. 116.

¹⁰ Gray, 1996, p. 63.

When Heysen, Lambert, Roberts and Streeton painted landscapes, they projected their gaze outward into public space. The symbolism of this is quite different to the act of painting still-life, which is distinguished for the way it evokes indoor private space, mental seclusion and introspection. Lionel Lindsay acknowledged this chain of associations when he described still-life painting as an involvement with the 'intimate things of daily life' and a 'quiet relationship of the painter with his subject-matter.'¹¹ The impact of the First World War had given each of these men good reason to become introspective, and the significance of war to their interest in flower painting is an important area for consideration.¹² However, my focus with this article is more specific. I concentrate on the cultural assumptions about flowers, femininity and sex as the proper context for understanding the flower painting of Heysen, Lambert, Roberts and Streeton. And I argue that in the era of the 'New Woman', with its clear threat to gender separations, flower painting was a way of clearly delineating the distinction between masculinity and femininity. Through flower-painting, the concept of a feminine world and sexual difference could be defined and objectified. In addition, the type of feminine world that flower paintings evoked was one reminiscent of the pre-war years, of nineteenth century values, and of a 'genteel' image of women and flowers as the embodiments of beauty, innocence, and the goodness of nature.

The Controversy of *L'Homme Fleur*

Heysen, Lambert, Roberts and Streeton shared attitudes toward aesthetics and the ethical role of the artist in society similar to those of Lionel Lindsay. Although their styles varied from academic realist to impressionist, they painted flowers naturalistically and with respect for the variety and innocence of nature's beauty. But in 1939, Lindsay was forced to confront a painting in which the representation of flowers was clearly meant to suggest the opposite of innocence. This was Salvador Dali's *L'Homme Fleur* (1932), also titled *Memory of the Woman-Child*, shown at the 'Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art' at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1939.¹³ Owing to its sexual content it was the most controversial painting in the exhibition.¹⁴ Lindsay described it, in an appendix to *Addled Art*, as an example of 'Freud's dirty mind.'¹⁵ The focal point of Dali's painting is a hybrid male and female bust erupting into scarlet rose blossoms that are simultaneously protrusions and orifices of flesh. It must have been obvious to all who looked at the painting that the roses were not a vision of purity, but were blossoming out of the erotic life of the unconscious. In 1900, Freud had written a theory of floral symbolism based on a patient's dream. He concluded that 'sexual flower symbolism, which indeed occurs very commonly in other connections, symbolizes the human organs of sex by blossoms, which are the sexual organs of plants.'¹⁶

¹¹ Lindsay, 1946, p. 52-53.

¹² For a discussion of flower-painting and war see Elias, 2007.

¹³ For information about the title, and for a reproduction of the painting, see Chanin and Miller, 2005, p. 38 and p. 212.

¹⁴ According to Lindsay, it was 'a constant centre of curiosity': Lindsay, 1942, p. 28.

¹⁵ Lindsay, 1942, p. 65.

¹⁶ Freud, 1976, p. 496.

The 'old guard', including Lionel Lindsay, believed that 'proper' artists were slaves to nature and that flowers were gifts of the natural world that should be painted with attention to truth and with respect for beauty. In one article on Heysen's flower paintings, Lindsay described flowers as the 'apotheosis of Useless Beauty' because they blossom unseen and their beauty is not purposeful.¹⁷ Given this attitude, it is not surprising that as the 1920s progressed their flower paintings looked increasingly old-fashioned alongside works by Margaret Preston and other modernists. Heysen could not understand Preston's attitude to flowers, which was to de-nature them by flattening them into decorative patterns. In a letter to Lindsay, Heysen expressed deep reservation about her work, writing that 'all sense of subtleties is lacking – all that something which makes Nature's objects so fascinating & mysterious.'¹⁸



Fig.2. George Lambert, *Tulips and Wild Hyacinths*, c.1920, oil on canvas, 60.7 x 52 cm, Gift of Howard Hinton 1927, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Photograph: Brendan McGeachie.

¹⁷ Lindsay, 1925, unpaginated.

¹⁸ ASV Heysen, 1928, ms 9242/2036.

A Circle of Critics

Heysen's correspondence with Lindsay reveals a great deal of critical thinking on the subject of flower painting. Not only did he think Preston was taking the wrong approach to flowers, he also thought George Lambert's flowers needed greater 'movement'.¹⁹ Heysen painted flowers as if they had been freshly picked from the garden, imbuing them with an air of informality. This effect is particularly successful in *Roses* (1924).²⁰ By contrast, Lambert preferred to paint each flower as a separate entity, as if a series of portraits, and he favoured dark backgrounds that throw the blossoms into sharp relief and accentuate pattern over depth. There is also more narrative content in Lambert's still-lives: a decanter of wine and an overturned glass suggest rough behaviour and indulgence, both conventional signifiers of a masculine presence in an otherwise feminine, domestic world. *Tulips and Wild Hyacinths* (fig. 2) typifies Lambert's striking if somewhat stiff style. Despite his occasional criticism, Heysen could be supportive of Lambert's flowers. When the latter died, his friends mourned the loss of a great portrait painter. Heysen, though, chose to pay tribute to Lambert's flower paintings: 'so charming and distinguished in their arrangement, fine in form and lovely in colour.'²¹ Heysen did not want Lambert's death to pass without acknowledging that this artist was, amongst other things, a great flower painter. Lionel Lindsay went even further by claiming in 1942 that 'Lambert's "Tulips" and the "Cottage Bunch" (in the possession of Mr J. R. McGregor) are two of the finest flower pieces of our age. Classics, yet modern (in the original sense of the world) in their freshness.'²²

Floriculture and Home

Not only were Heysen and Lindsay knowledgeable about painting flowers, they were also knowledgeable about cultivating them. Streeton and Roberts were also enthusiastic gardeners, and the subject of growing flowers is a regular part of their correspondence. As typical Edwardians, they took great pleasure in nurturing beauty in their domestic lives and they lived in an era when men wore flowers in their lapels and women were named 'Rose', 'Violet' and 'Lily'. In the early twentieth century, the average home gardener was nearly always a 'man [who] dug his own garden, pruned his own roses, mowed his own lawn, and entered his own prize blooms in local gardening competitions.'²³

Geoffrey Smith claims that Streeton embarked on a long series of flower paintings only after marrying Nora, raising a family, settling down and becoming domestic.²⁴ Streeton often discussed gardening in letters to Tom Roberts and complained in 1930 of becoming exhausted by having too many roses to water, and too much lavender to harvest and dry for his wife's potpourri.²⁵ When Roberts and his wife Lillie moved to Golders Green in London, he himself wrote about the many hours of planting 'roses & daffodils & lavender & pear trees & wallflowers & sage & mint & apples & wisteria & thyme & lilac & as a guarantee of good faith the snow drops have begun the

¹⁹ ASV Heysen, 1920, ms 9242/1945.

²⁰ The painting is reproduced in Elias, 1994, p. 69.

²¹ Thiele, 1969, p. 306.

²² Lindsay, 1942, p. 49.

²³ Holmes, Martin, and Mirmohamadi, 2008, p. 89.

²⁴ Smith and Streeton, 2001, p. 7.

²⁵ Croll, 1946, p. 122.

programme.²⁶ As for Heysen, his daughter Nora spoke about how he grew ‘an abundance of the flowers that he loved to paint, especially dahlias, zinnias, delphiniums and fuchsias and revelled in the vibrance of petunias, phlox and cyclamen, and the subtleties of scabious.’²⁷

Roses (1924) is one of Heysen’s many paintings of this species. The flowers have the heavy, full appearance of blossoms picked late from the garden. They have been arranged in a vase and placed in a shallow space suggestive of a hallway and there is an overwhelming feeling of being privy to Heysen’s real world rather than an imaginary place invented in the studio. The convincing sense of the autobiographical and the intimate explains why one visitor to Heysen’s home in 1929 was prompted to note ‘a vase of flowers, just as he had so often painted it, on the polished table.’²⁸ Despite its charming informality and seductive intimacy, and the knowledge that Heysen did paint flowers from his own garden, the painting conforms to the conventions of still-life, most noticeably in the motif of a fallen flower. There is also an ever-present suggestion that this interior feminine space was a curiosity for him, that he has focused upon it precisely because it was mysterious and exotic. A similar observation has been made by art historian Norman Bryson in relation to the still-lives of eighteenth-century French painter Jean-Baptiste Chardin:

When the male artist paints the interior world of the household, he encounters an obstacle which is without equivalent in the other genres, and which must be negotiated. The asymmetry of the sexes with regard to domestic life constantly works to place the male painter of still-life in a position of exteriority to his subject. Inevitably, still-life’s particular mode of vision bears the trace of this exclusion.²⁹

As with Chardin’s work, the flower paintings of Heysen objectify the interior, female space, setting it at a distance and reflecting the different social roles of the sexes in Edwardian society.

A Feminine Practice

Between 1910 and 1935, then, flower-painting was a serious interest of men such as Heysen, Lambert, Roberts and Streeton, as it had been for Henri Fantin-Latour, Claude Monet, and Vincent Van Gogh in late nineteenth-century Europe. In Victorian and Edwardian England, on the other hand, the genre was dominated by women, as it was regarded as a ‘socially appropriate’ subject for them. Botanical art and floral still-lives became very attractive to amateur women because the study of nature was considered morally enriching and because women were thought naturally suited to the gentle subject of flowers.³⁰ In 1906, Melbourne’s *The Daily Telegraph* described flower painting as ‘a branch of painting in which women excel.’³¹ Ten years later, the *Argus* attributed the success of flower paintings by members of the *Women’s Art Club* in

²⁶ McQueen, 1996, p. 538.

²⁷ Mattingley, 2007, p. 8.

²⁸ Thiele, 1969, p. 218.

²⁹ Bryson, 1990, p. 169.

³⁰ For a history of women and flower-painting in Europe see Greer, 1979, pp. 227-50.

³¹ Epacris, 1906, unpaginated.

Melbourne to their 'intimate knowledge of the subject.'³² By the early twentieth century, then, flower-painting in Australia was directly connected with amateurism, women, and femininity.

The question, however, remains as to whether painting flowers put manhood at risk. Did Heysen, Lambert, Roberts and Streeton experience any masculine anxieties from their choice to take up this practice? There is some evidence of defensiveness. Lionel Lindsay, for example, twice emphasised the 'masculinity' of Heysen's flower paintings in order to differentiate him from the French flower painter Henri Fantin-Latour. In 1923, Lindsay concluded that Heysen's work displayed 'a more masculine quality.'³³ In 1925, he distinguished Heysen on the basis that Fantin-Latour's work was 'almost feminine.'³⁴ Caroline Ambrus has argued that male artists in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Australia were traditionally expected to repress feminine qualities; Lindsay's defence of Heysen is an example of such an attitude.³⁵ Nonetheless, masculine anxiety over the supposed femininity of flower painting was probably alleviated for Heysen, Lambert, Roberts and Streeton because they were already famous for outdoor work and masculine subjects. In addition, flowers were objects for their gaze, and by painting them they were putting femininity at a distance as well as fixing the distinctions between male and female identities.



Fig.3. George Lambert, *Self-Portrait with Gladioli*, 1922, oil on canvas, 128 x 102.8 cm, National Portrait Gallery, Canberra. Gift of John Schaeffer AO, 2003.

Man of Flowers

That images of flowers could serve as part of a male artist's visual identity is demonstrated in George Lambert's *Self-Portrait with Gladioli* (fig. 3). This was painted in 1922, the year that Lambert became an Associate of the Royal Academy in London and returned to live in Australia from a long period in Britain, where he had built a considerable reputation. He returned to Australia claiming that Australians were

³² The *Argus*, 5 December 1916, p. 8.

³³ ASC Lindsay 1923a, ms 5073/1/1374.

³⁴ Lindsay, 1925, unpaginated.

³⁵ Ambrus, 1992, pp. 29-31.

'terrified' of him.³⁶ The painting treads a fine line between self-satisfaction and self-mockery. However, the gladioli that decorate the lower half of Lambert's body and which make an incongruous addition to the painting, confuse the conventional distinctions between male and female signifiers, and suggest that the portrait was also planned as an object of social criticism.

In 1986, Andrew Motion described the gladioli in Lambert's self-portrait as a sign of a 'potent creator'.³⁷ But in 1923 they were a source of anxiety to Lionel Lindsay, who wrote to Hans Heysen that the flowers 'attract the eye too insistently by their colour.'³⁸ Their absurdity made an impression on poet Beckett Lindsay who, following Lambert's death in 1930, remembered the artist for 'loving the most brilliant and amusing flowers.'³⁹ Lambert's pose, however, is so provocative that it suggests that the painting is intended as some form of social criticism or even mockery. Men were not meant to share a symbolic relationship with flowers, nor command the direct comparison with flowers that Lambert invites with his gladioli. His portrait is too flamboyant in pose, and too comfortable in its indoor world of velvets and flowers, to represent Australian ideals of manliness. On show is a man who is metropolitan, and who therefore lived his life in a place where distinctions between masculine and feminine behaviours were more fluid than they were in the bush.

By the later nineteenth century the association of men with flowers had developed connotations of homosexuality, making Lambert's gladioli even more provocative.⁴⁰ They are also more suggestive of sexual ambiguity than other flowers, such as roses, because their general shape is phallic, while each blossom is vulval. This ambiguity is also true of lilies and was the subject of a number of closely studied paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe in the 1920s, such as *Two Calla Lilies on Pink* (1928). O'Keeffe paid equal attention to both the recess of the flower and the stamen, and it has been noted that the 'paintings are simultaneously phallic and womblike.'⁴¹ Lambert's self-portrait, then, with its ambiguously gendered flowers may be considered as a deliberately provocative statement about his own sexuality.

Woman-Flower

Lambert's portrait, though, stands as something of an anomaly in Australian art, since floral imagery was more typically associated with the female body. The roses painted by Henri Fantin-Latour, for example, reminded Jacques-Émile Blanche not only of 'a button' but also of 'a woman's breast'.⁴² Moreover, George Lambert and Tom Roberts commonly used flowers as props in portraits of women to underscore the attributes of her sex and her identity as a woman. In Lambert's *Hera* (1924), for example, the sitter's brightly coloured and flamboyant clothes match the gladioli that sit beside her and double for her femininity, grace and exuberance. Roberts' *The Mirror* (fig. 4) confirms Humphrey McQueen's description of the artist's approach to painting women as both

³⁶ Underhill, 1991, p. 104.

³⁷ Motion, 1986, p. 89.

³⁸ ASC Lindsay 1923b, ms 5073/1/1317.

³⁹ Lindsay, 1930, unpaginated.

⁴⁰ Looby, 1995, p. 121.

⁴¹ Fillin-Yeh, 1995, p. 39.

⁴² Blanche quoted in Druick and Hoog, 1983, p. 266.

‘amorous as well as artistic.’⁴³ The conjunction of woman and flower is here clearly sexualised. A naked woman glances dreamily into a mirror that is framed by a branch of hollyhocks, the round concave cups of which look both breast-like and vulval. The hollyhock is a famously showy plant and traditionally signifies fertility and fruitfulness. The flowers in *The Mirror* are pale rather than red but they are nevertheless a metaphor of desire, not only that of the woman, but also that of the viewer and that of the artist. Jane R. Price recalled a conversation where Tom Roberts said to her:

I often see a beautiful young girl, just the type I want for some subject I hold in mind, but (here he laughed to himself) whatever would an Australian mother think if I asked her if she would allow her daughter to sit for me in the nude?⁴⁴

The girl in Roberts’s mind is young, which suggests that she is innocent, but she is also willing to sit nude, which suggests that she is knowing. She is the equivalent of Salvador Dali’s *femme-enfant*, a woman-child who is both pure and not so pure, and who is therefore the source of erotic fantasies.⁴⁵ *The Mirror* allowed Roberts to paint his own passions and desires, but cloak them in the innocent subjects of youth and blossoms.



Fig.4. Tom Roberts, *The Mirror*, c.1915, oil on canvas, 88 x 70 cm, Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery, Launceston.

Camouflage

The act of camouflaging desire behind representations of flowers is part of the history of botany as well the history of arts. In his study of floral imagery in American art, Christopher Looby has detailed the way in which flowers were a subject onto which ‘fantasies of gender, sexuality, and race (not to mention class) could be projected.’⁴⁶ The lily, for example, is a traditional symbol of chastity and purity, and is integral to the symbolism of the Virgin Mary. It has the potential, though, to invite erotic associations due to the openness of the flower and its dramatic display of the sex organs of the plant.

⁴³ McQueen, 1996, p. 359.

⁴⁴ Topliss, 1985, p. 191.

⁴⁵ Lusty, 2007, p. 26.

⁴⁶ Looby, 1995, p. 125.



Fig.5. Arthur Streeton, *Lilium Auratum*, 1933, oil on canvas, 134 x 85 cm, Gift of Mr Frank Rickwood in memory of Justin Robert Rainey 1995, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Photograph: Brendan McGeachie.

Arthur Streeton's *Lilium Auratum* (fig. 5) is unusually large for a flower painting. The length of the stalk is almost human in scale and the artist has ensured that the fully opened blossoms are at eye level with the viewer. We are forced to look into them rather than at them, so that while their traditional symbolism suggests notions of virtue and goodness, their physicality is suggestive of sex and sexuality. Annette Stott has written insightfully about 'floral-female' figure paintings in American art.⁴⁷ She has argued that flowers embodied a masculine ideal of youthful femininity in possession of 'cultivated beauty, silence, moral purity, graceful but limited movement, decorative function, and a discreet suggestion of fertility.'⁴⁸ Likewise, in Streeton's *Lilium Auratum*, a discreet suggestion of fertility occupies the same conceptual space as a more conspicuous display of whiteness and purity.

Flowers, then, can suggest youthful femininity when they are buds and when they are white. In others states they signify different types of female subjects. Aging women, for example, have historically been regarded as analogous to the 'fully-blown' rose. Such an analogy was possibly in Tom Roberts' mind when he painted *Madame Lombard and her Friends* (1888). The 'Madame Lombard' rose was highly popular in the late nineteenth century. By giving his painting this title, Roberts has not only identified the

⁴⁷ Stott, 1992.

⁴⁸ Stott, 1992, p. 76.

species but also suggested that this gathering of flowers is a gathering of aging women, since the flowers he has painted are beautiful but are very much in the last stages of their life.⁴⁹

Distinct Genders

Annette Stott contends that paintings of the floral-female were an assertion of Victorian concepts of femininity at a time when the stability of the old order of gender distinctions was crumbling with the emancipation of women.⁵⁰ Julie Anne Springer has similarly interpreted floral femininity as a 'plea for a more feminized culture' in an era of the 'New Woman'.⁵¹ Heysen and Streeton painted the majority of their floral still-lives in the 1920s when women's independence in the visual arts reflected their new identity in Australian society. Heysen's view of femininity was traditional and he spoke disparagingly about larrikin girls in Adelaide and unladylike female bike-riders in Paris.⁵² Although he did not produce portraits of women as flowers, he did associate women with floral imagery. In a number of flower paintings intended as gifts to his wife Sallie he included the inscription 'to my wife'. Consciously or not, this placed her in a socially conservative role of woman as decorative and passive. It also located her in the realm of fertile nature since, as Stott points out, 'the blossom, which precedes the fruit or seed pod of a plant, was a natural symbol of the potential of a woman to be fruitful and bear children.'⁵³

Humphrey McQueen argues that the 'New Woman' 'complicated the attempts to delineate manliness' by sharing masculine signifiers such as wearing trousers.⁵⁴ Athleticism and receding hemlines also signalled a woman who was willing to forgo her femininity in the name of freedom, comfort and health. Traditional women were often the subject of Arthur Streeton's letters and a source of admiration and longing, but the modern woman repelled him:

Times change and standards are lowered all along the line – I'm not an ardent Feminist – 'The female of the species is more deadly than the male'. Perhaps you've observed it !! I think that women with the athletic sports & their abbreviated dress lose all their charm. – all newspapers use pictures of women's legs in hoping to sell their goods, etc – chase me – I hate it.⁵⁵

Floral Fantasies

Streeton liked women to dress modestly. Fuller skirts meant their charms were hidden and encased, like a flower with its petals. In fact, the flower/woman analogy was important to Streeton's approach to the world and his social attitudes to women. It can be found in a letter written in 1890 to Tom Roberts. With sexual suggestiveness, even sexual aggression, Streeton described 'sarsaparilla twisting her purple strength round everything; she is most amorous and sheds her colour like blue tears if you pluck her

⁴⁹ For a reproduction of this painting see Topliss, 1985, plate 52.

⁵⁰ Stott, 1992, pp. 72-73.

⁵¹ Springer, 1985-86, p. 7.

⁵² Thiele, 1969, p. 53.

⁵³ Stott, 1992, p. 66.

⁵⁴ McQueen, 1996, p. 402.

⁵⁵ Cited in Galbally and Gray, 1989, p. 211.

roughly.’⁵⁶ Much later, when writing about the cultivation of roses for the *Argus* newspaper, Streeton again wrote suggestively about the behaviours, appearances, and shapes of flowers:

The exquisite beauty of a La France bud slowly unfolding its precious garments as you look at it; the firm filmy whiteness of a British Queen bud, its curving petals indicated by refined greys ... The rose is difficult to paint. It simply will not yield its subtlety to flashy strokes of the brush.⁵⁷

The exquisite opening rose bud doubles as a fantasy of an exquisite woman whose clothing is peeled back in front of the artist’s gaze. Just as a young woman can be viewed as an interior being full of hidden secrets, so also can the flower be viewed as a metaphor for a young woman full of secrets but essentially passive. Streeton’s analogy of petals and skirts can be compared to Jean Genet’s literary imagery in *Miracle of the Rose* (first published in 1951), where four men are described pushing back the petals of a rose and falling into the ‘deep gaze’ of its heart.⁵⁸ The difference is that Genet’s imagery is homoerotic while Streeton’s is heteroerotic.



Fig.6. Arthur Streeton, *Roses*, c.1929, oil on canvas, 61 x 51 cm, Gift of Mr F.J. Wallis 1941, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Photograph: Jenni Carter.

The flesh of petals has a long history of evocative and erotic appeal for artists. When writing about Martin Johnson Heade, the nineteenth-century American flower painter, Christopher Looby compared his flowers to nudes. Heade’s paintings of magnolias presented on velvet backgrounds are described as ‘odalisques on a couch’.⁵⁹ Streeton’s painting *Roses* (fig. 6) also uses the effect of petal against velvet to heighten the sensuousness of flesh. The erotic conjunction of fabrics and flowers in Streeton’s paintings certainly caught the attention of others. One reviewer commended his flower paintings, and noted that ‘backgrounds of silks and velvets are other features of these studies to excite admiration.’⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Croll, 1946, p. 16.

⁵⁷ Streeton cited in Smith and Streeton, p. 20.

⁵⁸ Genet, 1971, p. 274.

⁵⁹ Looby, 1995, p. 126.

⁶⁰ Cited in Smith, 1995, p. 176.

Conclusion

Jack Goody has written an extended treatise on the culture of flowers. Central to his work is the claim that 'sexuality lies at the core of the flower's existence and played a prominent part when it was taken up in human life'.⁶¹ This is exemplified through Freud's notion that the floral imagery in the dreams of his patient was evidence of the 'struggle between libido and its repression.'⁶² Freud's theories on desire and its repression informed the visual arts: the red roses in Dali's *L'Homme Fleur*, for example, heighten rather than conceal the subject of sex. As a result, Lionel Lindsay claimed the painting was vulgar and posed a threat to the moral welfare of the 'hundreds of innocent girls' who had viewed its 'sex and scatological implications.'⁶³ This was somewhat hypocritical of Lindsay given that his youth was spent 'largely devoted to physical pleasures.'⁶⁴ But the circumstances surrounding *L'Homme Fleur* in Australia prove that for men of Lindsay's generation including Heysen, Lambert, Roberts and Streeton, flowers, like women, were in their proper place if they belonged to the realm of innocent beauty and the goodness of nature.

Goody has also highlighted the comparative dearth of publications in the West on the cultural significance of flowers outside the fields of botany and gardening.⁶⁵ Norman Bryson has reached similar conclusions in his work on still-life paintings of flowers, which he places in the category of the 'overlooked'.⁶⁶ My aim with this article has been to draw attention to an under-studied aspect of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Australian art. While Hans Heysen, George Lambert, Arthur Streeton and Tom Roberts were responsible for the development of a national school of landscape painting befitting an image of Australia as a virile frontier, they also made a significant contribution to flower painting, an un-heroic subject with traditionally feminine rather than masculine associations. The role of such paintings in Australian art is a subject that will require and that deserves further research.⁶⁷ My intention here has been to show that the main narratives of the life and work of Heysen, Lambert, Streeton and Roberts will remain incomplete until we fully engage with the ambiguities and complexities of their flower paintings.

Dr Ann Elias was awarded her PhD from the University of Auckland in 1991. She is currently Senior Lecturer at the Sydney College of the Arts, the University of Sydney, where she teaches Theoretical Inquiry. Her research focuses on still-life and flower painting, as well as on camouflage as a conceptual entity and a physical phenomenon. She has published widely, and is currently preparing a book on still-life painting. Ann

⁶¹ Goody, 1993, pp. 3-4.

⁶² Freud, 1976, p. 496.

⁶³ Lindsay, 1942, p. 30.

⁶⁴ Mendelsohn, 1988, p. 69.

⁶⁵ Goody, 1993, p. xii.

⁶⁶ Bryson, 1990.

⁶⁷ An area for future study would be the place of flowers in the individual emotional lives of Heysen, Lambert, Roberts and Streeton. Why, for example, did Streeton become fixated on flowers after 1920 and produce over one hundred and fifty flower-paintings? See Smith, 1995, p.176.

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