

Useless Beauty

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Flowers and Australian Art

By

Ann Elias

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This book is dedicated to Rose Mair Poynter
and her grandmothers: Mair Elias
and Dawn Heather Poynter

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INTRODUCTION

In 1996 Elvis Costello sat in the Uffizi Gallery watching people looking at art and composed the lyrics for his next album: “All This Useless Beauty.” This enigmatic phrase “useless beauty”—almost self-sufficient in its own beauty—turns up not just in music but also in philosophy, science and visual art. As relevant to the eighteenth century as the twenty-first, it nevertheless means different things to different people. But in Western cultures, “useless beauty” is commonly applied, across disciplines, to the subject of flowers. More particularly it relates to questions about what a flower is, what the value of beauty is, why there are vivid colours and elaborate forms in nature, and whether there is any point in making art about flowers and beauty—questions threaded throughout the chapters of this book.

Maybe it was the crowd surrounding Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* (1482–1485), admiring the shower of pink flowers surrounding the pale goddess that got Elvis Costello thinking about whether beauty in art has any purpose outside itself. For centuries this question has been asked about art, but also about beauty in nature. Concerning the question about the purpose of beauty in nature, the examples are numerous, but one in particular is very Australian: it is the moment in 1933 when an Australian journalist, Sydney Elliot Napier, encountered the spectacular, kaleidoscopic “flowers of the sea”—corals and anemones—at the Great Barrier Reef and thought how pointless that their beauty exists for the most part unseen by human eyes, and in creatures whose lives are so short. Is beauty in nature for nothing? Is all this beauty useless?¹

In 1925 Lionel Lindsay, Australia’s leading art critic, used the phrase “useless beauty” in an article for the nation’s premier art journal, *Art in Australia*, about one of Australia’s major artists, Hans Heysen. In that article Lindsay described flowers as the “apotheosis of Useless Beauty.”² It is that moment and that context that defines the direction this book takes, which is to focus on these men, their circle of male and female colleagues, the way they represented flowers, the concept of useless beauty, and the very flower-centric and Eurocentric culture that flourished in Australia from 1880 to 1950. The peak years for flower-centricity in

Australian visual arts were between 1920 and 1940 and then interest dwindled. Or at least, flowers as a subject about nature, declined and were revived by the avant-garde, including Sidney Nolan, as something more psychological. But before this subject diminished in importance there is no question that art, gardening, interior decorating, design patterns, flower arranging, table-top photography of flower arrangements and garden design were all part of the wider culture of flowers experienced by men and women in the circle that was the art world.

Men are foregrounded in this study because they are the least well known of all the flower artists in Australian art history and this despite their great activity in floral representations. Many of Australia's most prominent historical artists, men who are famous for masculine subjects, also liked flowers. But little interest has been shown in looking beyond their conventionally masculine subjects at the more traditionally feminine subject of blossoms. The name "Tom Roberts," for example, fits easily with paintings titled *Mountain Muster* and *Bailed Up*. But is *Pelargoniums* (plate 1, c. 1920) a title that calls up his name? How different the viewing experience is when the subject is a herd of cattle ambling through a deep vista of eucalypt forest painted in browns, yellows and greens, the colours of the Australian bush, compared with a vase of pelargoniums in shallow, non-specific space all pink and white. The first gives us an animated pastoral with a hint of danger, while the other imparts a vision of life where all elements of risk have been eliminated and we are symbolically lured inwards by a space that envelops. This is the kind of floral still life that has, for centuries, defined feminine space.

Useless Beauty is the first book of broad chronology to discuss Australian art history through flowers and to put the well-known female artists Margaret Preston and Ellis Rowan in the wider context of the history of men who represented flowers and who worked across the "fine arts" practices of painting and photography. As such, it gives new shape to the debates and events of the past that influenced the course of progressive culture in Australia and the demise of Victorian and Edwardian traditions. It embraces the flower motif as others have embraced landscape. It argues that because pictures of roses and lilies are non-Australian, non-national and non-native, but rather cosmopolitan and global, that they have been thought useless to national art history.

Had there been no fixed order or hierarchy in the visual arts of Western countries, the story of Australian art (and of New Zealand, American and Canadian art for that matter) could have been written by placing flowers

front and centre. Instead, the histories of settler cultures celebrate historical subjects, people, and the spaces and places where people made their mark. Much of what is written about Hans Heysen, George Lambert, Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton, five key players in the slice of Australian art history addressed through this investigation, responds to their renditions of landscapes and people rather than their flowers—even ignores the fact that they painted flowers. Look at the pivotal histories of Australian art, including Bernard Smith's *Place, Taste and Tradition* (1945; revised 1979), and you will not find a fair or adequate representation of the degree to which artists who were painters, printmakers, and photographers, dedicated their attention to this subject. When the canon of art history was written, no-one cared much about artists who approached flowers in terms of verisimilitude; they were all but faded out from histories of art that favoured social realism. Images of blossoms may not seem to embody political content, but it is the political context in which they were produced that this book seeks to emphasise.

What use is the beauty of flowers to art, human existence, and great achievements? The truth is that the study of floral representations and symbolisms brings insight to the political dimensions of cultural life, including the human cost of colonisation and war. Representations of flowers perpetuated conventional stereotyping of femininity and masculinity but they also undermined it. With outdoor life making up such a significant part of the national psyche, and therefore informing historical, dramatic and landscape subjects, it was subversive indeed for Margaret Preston to aim to turn flowers and still life into a national art. That is why Preston—who is described by Deborah Edwards as reconceiving Australian native flowers³—is integrated into most sections of this book. But Preston wasn't alone in trying to blaze an alternative trail with flowers. Thea Proctor shored up her place in history by “mastering” the “feminine” subject of blossoms and making them her own. For the more emancipated woman, flowers became a symbol of strength. And this story is shared in New Zealand art history because Rata Lovell-Smith and Rita Angus followed a similar floral path in the 1930s. On the outside, however, when modern Australian women took up flowers as a serious subject it was seen as a sign of the “woman problem”: the fear of women destroying masculine standards by bringing amateurism and weak intellects to high art.

Vital to the shaping of *Useless Beauty* has been finding and selecting paintings, prints and photographs that relay dynamic stories and ideas about the attraction of artists to floral representations. Through images, I

show how these colourful parts of plants have influenced the national psyche (the “civilizing” influence of acclimatised flowers such as primroses), governed rituals (the blood red poppy), and defined identity (the elegant rose, the handsome waratah). In addition to a rich array of works from Australian art history is a selection of historical works by international artists that serve as comparisons for Australian counterparts, and a selection of contemporary works too. Contemporary works of art are included because it is clear that many questions about botanical form, about love, death and symbolism, still bear the same relevance today. Moreover, contemporary artists explore flowers to re-evaluate history and to address how “beauty” and “taste,” once relatively unquestioned as universally fixed and true concepts, are also mutable, unstable and are often classed, gendered and racialised ideas.

An orientation to contemporary literature on flowers and a sample of recent texts where references to the “useless beauty” of flowers appear will help define the scholarly context of this book. In 1990 Norman Bryson addressed the overlooked place of flower painting in Western art and asked, “what could be more useless than flowers, or flower paintings?”⁴ The question was rhetorical since tulips were worth more than gold in seventeenth century Amsterdam.⁵ In 2013 Michael Marder asked why the philosopher Immanuel Kant was so fixated on flowers when “flowers are completely useless and utterly superfluous.”⁶ Again a rhetorical question since Kant—the most cited source of the concept “useless beauty”—wrote about flowers as “free beauties of nature” and reasoned there is universal agreement that flowers are beautiful because they exist for themselves and not to fulfil any utilitarian purpose: we admire them in a disinterested way.⁷ From botanical literature is the example of Michael Pollan. He recalled how in childhood he worried that by growing flowers “all this useless beauty is impossible to justify on cost-benefit grounds” compared to utilitarian fruit and vegetables.⁸ At that stage of life he thought of flowers as luxuries and useless adornment whereas fruit was more important because it had a tangible purpose connected with economies and food. In adult life, however, Pollan started to think differently about flowers—he no longer saw them as the epitome of useless beauty, but as protector of the wellbeing of the earth’s ecology. Now Michael Pollan is in awe of “flowers whose form and color and scent, whose very genes carry reflections of people’s ideas and desires through time like great books.”⁹

Outside the art world, flowers have, without question, played a major part in world affairs. As the chapters of this book demonstrate, there is an

enormous literature on their significance to war, economics, religion, botany and psychoanalysis.¹⁰ One significant area of flower literature involves psychology, and in particular speculation on people's attraction to flowers. Pollan, again, believes the chemistry between flowers and humans is driven by human animality. He writes that flowers produce ever-proliferating cultural meanings because that "is precisely what natural selection has designed flowers to do"—that is, to attract other species, including humans, through colour, feel, and scent.¹¹ Elaine Scarry believes that it is because flowers are more easily imagined than other objects that they comfortably migrate to our minds and imagination.¹² She argues that a flower's pure saturated colour aids the rapidity of the internalisation of its image in the brain. In her view, poets and artists are drawn to flowers, and viewers too, for the thinness and transparency of petal tissue; Scarry likens them to thoughts themselves. She concludes that "it is clear: we were made for one another."¹³ A third example is Keith Critchlow, who writes about the mystery of flowers and argues that the reason we are drawn to them can be explained by their geometry which is a microcosm of the geometries of the universe and a symbol of "the mystery of life itself."¹⁴

The chapters of this book are organised in a loose chronology from the late nineteenth century through to approximately 1950, although there are frequent references to later examples of art. This is to enhance the clarity and cohesion of relations between artists, ideas and themes. Chapters alternate between stories about people (Max Dupain, Adrian Feint, Hans Heysen, Sidney Nolan, Ellis Rowan) and discussion of objects (feminine flowers, surreal flowers, Aboriginal flowers, colonial flowers, war flowers). There are three parts to the book. Part I provides a quick overview of transitions that took place in flower iconography in Australian art and the struggle for modernism in gaining cultural acceptance. It establishes key principles of aesthetic appreciation that dominated the colonial era such as the association of flowers and naturalism. Exploring the relevance of flowers to the male establishment of Australian art, and elaborating on the concept of useless beauty, is the purpose of Part II. Names that come up frequently in this section are Hans Heysen, George Lambert, Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton. Part III, however, emphasises modern thinking around the subject of flowers. As the years progress into the 1940s the influence of surrealism became more pronounced. Margaret Preston is also a big presence in Part III. It is at this point in the book that recent dialogues are introduced about Margaret Preston's appropriation of Aboriginal art for flower subjects. The final chapter concerns the late

moderns Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd and explores aesthetic ruptures brought to the subject of flowers by the avant-garde after the late 1940s.

The main themes of the book are beauty, war, taste, sex and myth. The question of beauty is all-pervasive. A sensibility for physical beauty and moral beauty, achieved through truth to nature, relates most obviously to the older artists in this study. Beauty meant something different in the work of the modernists because they investigated it in terms of formal resolve in patterns of colour and shapes. I discuss why flowers were welcomed within the rarefied art-culture of aesthetes, art galleries, and art criticism, while flowers associated with utilitarian science were “homeless.” This is where the story surrounding Ellis Rowan contributes an essential part to the overall history of flowers and representation in Australia. Her case involves the nebulous space between art and science. For this reason, her story represents a break in the narrative about flowers in Australian art. As does Aboriginal art. The idea of flowers symbolising “useless beauty,” and existing in and for themselves, makes no sense to Aboriginal art. In fact it has been difficult to integrate examples of historical barks and other objects produced within the time frame of this study. It was only when white Australians started looking at flowers through the Aboriginal gaze that they found different and new perspectives on methods of representation. Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s yam flowers painted at Utopia in Central Australia, or the flower motifs in Nym Bandak’s bark paintings from the Wadeye region of Northern Territory in the 1950s and 1960s, concern the whole plant consisting of seeds and fruit, not just the flowering tops.¹⁵

The impact of war on artists and its expression through floral representations is a constant theme. Ellis Rowan, for example, became a flower artist in New Zealand when her military husband was stationed there during the Taranaki Wars from 1845 to 1872. There is the case of the “Frau Karl” rose acclimatised in Australia by German settlers, painted by Hans Heysen, but symbol in wartime of enemy aliens. Flowers were also important subjects for the Australian war artists sent to the Western Front in World War I. Frank Hurley and George Lambert created many of Australia’s greatest examples of war art from floral emblems. In fact in wartime flowers found a natural home in Australian culture, particularly wildflowers. Their symbolisms were perfect for war. Red poppies, for example, can easily relate to the beautiful as well as the abject.

The importance of the theme of taste to the topic of flowers and Australian art is constant. For example, taste is vital for considering the

impact of editor and publisher Sydney Ure Smith on standards of art. Taste is reflected in the range of images reproduced in *Art in Australia* journal, many of which were flowers. The question of taste, and specifically the privilege given to European taste, explains why Australian critics, collectors, and art-lovers believed the greatest flower painter was the French artist Henri Fantin-Latour. But I also take the subject of flowers and taste out of the traditional fine arts by looking at it in the context of modernist design, especially the art of flower arrangement. Not only was flower arrangement integral to modernism, but orientalism was vital to flower arrangement. Thea Proctor and Margaret Preston wrote about both. So did Helen Blaxland, Australia's most prominent flower arranger in the mid-twentieth century who published three books on the subject between 1947 and 1949. As a later chapter explains, Blaxland's books employed Australia's leading photographers, including Olive Cotton and Max Dupain. Their assignment for Blaxland was to photograph flower arrangements by some of Australia's most wealthy and influential citizens.

For the most part, the historical figures who dominate these pages kept a lid on the sexual potential of flowers. Lionel Lindsay, for example, was offended by the way Salvador Dalí explored sex and death through the motif of roses in *L'Homme Fleur* (1932), a painting shown in the *Herald* Exhibition in Melbourne in 1939. It is a veiled eroticism that appears in floral works by Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton. And while Adrian Feint's flower extravaganzas are profuse in blossom, Craig Judd notes they are tightly controlled as if the artist "sublimated or sacrificed the libido to the "good manners" that were then deemed essential to great art."¹⁶ But Max Dupain's close-up photographs of the centres of flowers, and suggestive montages of human and flower bodies, exude sexuality.

Completing the main themes of this book is a section on mythologising and the avant-garde moderns who transformed flowers into abstract ideas, including the existential loneliness of life Australia. After 1940 flowers were given a more brutal visual vocabulary and in the hands of Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd invoked new issues: wildflowers as symbols of struggle, alienation and exile; flowers in vases as symbols of a colonised country; metamorphosis of man to flower as symbolic of a life turned inward. Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd were less interested in beauty than visions of flowers that probed the myths and legends of a dry, burnt country.

After many years puzzling over the place of flowers in Australian art, and the entwining of beauty, war, taste, sex and myth in the subject of

flowers, the result is *Useless Beauty*. The sheer volume of production of flower imagery in painting, printmaking and photography, by men as well as women, makes this study long overdue. It opens new windows on Australian art history and as a collection of works of art never before been seen together it represents a unique exhibition. In part it relays a social history of Australia told through representations of flowers created during a period of cultural modernisation extending from the late nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth. This book is also about the impossibility of depicting flowers as pure form. The phrase “useless beauty” suggests an apolitical subject. It implies that flowers stand for nothing more serious than themselves. Yet as the following chapters show, they are easily politicised. And always, it is difficult to disentangle people’s private reasons for representing flowers from the social impact of public events.

First, a quick orientation to some specific artists, and to ideas and practices originating in the nineteenth century that continued to influence the production and reception of art in the first decades of twentieth century Australia.

PART I:
BACKGROUND

CHAPTER ONE

FLOWERS AND THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Australia's colonial history is often described in floral metaphors. For instance, to Imants Tillers, a leading contemporary artist, the nation's non-indigenous people are "a cutting from some foreign soil."¹ It's an apt way of characterising a population cut from British stock, transplanted to the Antipodes in the eighteenth century, then augmented, changed, and challenged throughout the nineteenth century by migrations of European, British, Asian and other nationals. By speaking of colonial migration and settlement in terms of grafting, hybridising and acclimatising, the floral metaphors can be further extended.

In the early part of the nineteenth century, settlers viewed the landscape of Australia, including all flora and fauna, as "wild and uncivilised, almost indistinguishable from the Indigenous inhabitants."² However, there are many stories about relations with whites being mediated in the nineteenth century through gifts and exchanges of wildflowers initiated by Aborigines. European wildflower tourists who travelled to Western Australia to see the explosion of plant colour that transforms the landscape between June and September disembarked from passenger ships in King George's Sound and were sold or gifted flowers by Aborigines.³ In the 1890s, at La Perouse, where Joseph Banks had "discovered" Australia's botanical riches in 1770, women and children who lived in this Aboriginal settlement on the outskirts of Sydney gathered and sold wildflowers to white visitors from the city.⁴ Among them were banksias, the strangely beautiful antipodean flower named after Joseph Banks.

To Europeans and settlers, wildflowers were curiosities and symbols of the otherness of Australian nature while the introduction of flora and fauna from Britain maintained an "emotional bond between Australian colonies and the mother country."⁵ English cottage flowers were put on a pedestal while native Australian flowers were put in a subordinate category. And the same was true for imported works of art compared with local production. Importing art to Australia from Britain, France and other European countries was a further effort to maintain ties with the Old World and educate colonials about the standards of taste and beauty.

By 1900, Australians were accustomed to hearing that both local artists and national art collections were inferior to those in Europe. For example, in 1898 a London critic concluded, “there is no Australian art,” but rather a culture in which Australian artists copied poor examples of British and European work.⁶ Australians were anxious about their distance from Paris and London and as late as 1917 an editorial in *Art in Australia* by publisher and editor Sydney Ure Smith (1887–1949) argued that “our remoteness from the rest of the world makes it difficult to know what is worthwhile in Art movements elsewhere.”⁷

Australian public art galleries began buying for their collections in the second half of the nineteenth century. Budgets were tight, but the guiding principle was to acquire only one or two examples by each artist in order to build a comprehensive representation of contemporary British and, to a lesser extent, continental European art. The Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, for example, was established in the 1870s and, like other Australian museums, employed London representatives to build its collection. They purchased the majority of works from the Royal Academy and some from the Paris Salon.⁸ Their early acquisitions included large scale historical and genre scenes by John Everett Millais, Edward Poynter, Ford Madox Brown, and Frank Brangwyn.⁹ Between 1890 and 1900, acquisitions also included works by Frederic Leighton, John William Waterhouse, and George Frank Watts. In 1893 it was claimed that New South Wales had the “finest art collection in the Southern Hemisphere.”¹⁰

Exhibitions of local art also flourished and examples were acquired. In 1889 the Art Gallery of New South Wales added to its collection a painting by Mary Stoddard titled *From Earth and Ocean* (plate 2, 1889). Stoddard was born in Edinburgh and migrated to the colonies after she married. She settled in Sydney but eventually returned to live in London.¹¹ Her painting *From Earth and Ocean* is representative of the academicism and dark tonal painting favoured in that era. The roses that spill over a nautilus shell epitomise Englishness and the shell expresses the spirit of an age of travel, of new taxonomies of flora and fauna, and the colonisation of exotic lands. The painting has a studied informality, yet it compelled the Victorian era viewer to consider whether their own life had the same poise, beauty, control and refinement as this arrangement. As the title of Stoddard’s painting suggests, the roses, plumbago and nautilus shell have been gathered far and wide and from land and sea. In sum, the painting evokes the spectacle of Empire by its opulence and by the implication of conquest in its title. Stoddard has paid attention to mimetic accuracy. Her

drawing is clear and the droplet of water on the rose is pure and true like crystal. The Art Gallery of New South Wales acquired the work in the same year it was painted to demonstrate to citizens of the colony the standards of good art. As a model of good form, of noble subject, and admirable naturalism this type of flower painting remained popular even when it was challenged by modernism and a growing interest in native flowers.

Mary Stoddard's *From Earth and Ocean* expresses her attachment to Britain. Homesick residents also communicated their ties with the northern hemisphere through floriculture and horticulture, including flower shows and gardening. These activities were vital for the social acclimatisation of settlers in Australia. Gardening was an occupation with symbolic importance in a country in the process of "taming" the landscape. David Goodman explains that gardens were seen as a "civilising and a quietening force."¹² Goodman also writes about the pleasure that British settlers obtained from the successful cultivation of northern hemisphere vegetables and fruits in Australian soil, and how the sight of plants from "home" was sometimes emotionally overwhelming. Flowers, in particular, were reminders of the past and generated feelings of loss and regret for that past. What they evoked was nostalgia and longing. They could transport homesick migrants back in time and space to their place of origin.

One colonial artist, John Dicksee, turned this into the subject of a lithograph. Titled *The First Primrose* (1856), it depicts a room crowded with people eager to see the first blossom of an English primrose picked from a newly cultivated garden in Australia. Katie Holmes, Susan K. Martin and Kylie Mirmohamadi argue that this print has an important place in Australian cultural history for the way it illustrates the social significance and symbolism of gardens and flowers in the lives of early European settlers.¹³ The first bloom of the primrose was proof that life could continue as before, even under different skies, if gardens were tended and the landscape shaped by the flora of Britain and Europe.

But some imported flower species and ornamental plants became invasive weeds—the convolvulus, for example. It has attractive flowers but it can smother the life out of other plants, including natives. Introduced to Australia by colonists, it became a noxious weed. Yet in the context of Europe it represented refinement in visual taste. Convolvulus inspired many of the most popular transfer designs for English plate-ware, Spode. This plate-ware was in turn imported to Australia. In effect, convolvulus

represents a double colonisation: one by the convolvulus flower itself and another by the flower's representation in plate-ware. Danie Mellor, who is a contemporary artist with Aboriginal heritage, has turned this history into the poetic space of a work titled *Picaninny Paradise* (plate 3, 2010). The convolvulus flowers in this work are copied from stylised convolvulus patterns that were printed in tones of grey-blue on the borders of Spode's nineteenth century chinaware. The same designs can be found in floral pattern books produced two hundred years ago and widely used in nineteenth century England. China manufacturers, naturalists, artists and theorists all utilised the botanical illustrations in these folios, including John Ruskin and Charles Darwin.¹⁴ For Mellor, then, it is not the natural flowers but the floral designs belonging to nineteenth century popular culture that represent colonisation.

From a tangle of stylised convolvulus flowers he projects a skull and cross-bones. The history involving depictions of human skulls interwoven with flowers is a long one. People have often seen skulls in the heads of flowers, and if not skulls, then faces. As in *memento mori*, where representations of material objects encourage reflection on the subject of death, Mellor's image imparts a general message about the vulnerability of life and the transience of earthly pleasures. If this flower is *Convolvulus major*, then, according to the nineteenth century language of flowers, it symbolises "dead hope." Mellor shows that Western culture received in Australia was a confusion of orientalism, naturalism and classicism derived from high art as well as popular culture. In this life and death struggle between colonising flower and a living, colourful Indigenous world lies the struggle of Aboriginal people and the reality of dispossession.

The importance of floriculture and of floral aesthetics to upper middle class life in Australia in the nineteenth century is exemplified by the story of Robert Barr Smith (1824–1915) and his wife Joanna (1835–1919). The Barr Smiths, who had emigrated from Scotland to Adelaide, surrounded themselves with familiar European plants and flowers, some of which they brought with them. In addition, they were avid collectors of flower paintings and floral patterns for home designs. The Barr Smiths collected home decorations produced by William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement and were among Morris & Company's most valued international clients.¹⁵ Floral motifs abounded in the rich array of chintzes and fabrics, carpets and embroideries, wallpaper, glassware and furniture that they selected. Daffodils decorated their curtains, while roses, tulips, fuchsias and marigolds adorned their armchairs. Among their valuable art

collection were five paintings by Henri Fantin-Latour (1836–1904). Four of these were “flowerpieces” and all were acquired in London. The extent of their European collection was not widely known in Australia, but the art critic and artist Lionel Lindsay (1874–1961) and the artist Hans Heysen (1877–1968) were friendly with the Barr Smith’s and both were privy to knowledge about their collection and had seen the Fantin-Latour paintings.¹⁶ In the Barr Smith’s home, with its William Morris wallpapers and upholstery and Fantin-Latour flower paintings on the wall, an atmosphere of European elegance was created in the far reaches of Australia.

In fact, there was widespread interest in Fantin-Latour in Australia in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth century. One reason is that his dahlias, zinnias, peonies, poppies, hollyhocks and asters made European immigrants feel connected with the northern hemisphere. And just as European migrants often preferred cultivated European flowers and fruits over the plants they found in Australia, so too they felt that Fantin-Latour’s art was superior to that of Australian-based artists. Critics referred to his paintings as “treasures” and they felt certain that the examples they acquired for public art collections in Australia were “good ones, and characteristic of the painter.”¹⁷ As later chapters show, the approach that Fantin-Latour took to flowers had considerable impact on artists who later became part of the Australian canon, and whose careers began in the nineteenth century, especially Arthur Streeton (1867–1943) and George Lambert (1873–1930).

Between 1890 and 1935, five of Henri Fantin-Latour’s flower-paintings were acquired for public collections in Sydney, Adelaide and Melbourne.¹⁸ Sydney Ure Smith wrote in *Art in Australia* about one painting, titled *Flowers and Fruit*, purchased by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, that the public had flocked to the gallery to make their “pilgrimage to the little masterpiece.”¹⁹ Australians were pleased with the idea that they owned a significant number of Fantin-Latour’s still lifes. Writing in 1924 Lionel Lindsay claimed:

We are certainly fortunate in possessing so many. Adelaide Gallery houses *White Poppies* and the matchless *Zinnias*. T. Barr Smith, Esq., of Adelaide, owns two, Melbourne Gallery the same number, and at last Sydney Gallery has its “Fantin.”²⁰

Fantin-Latour’s work was seen as the epitome of good taste. And because Australians deferred to British and European tastes well into the

twentieth century, the fact that Fantin-Latour was very popular in England was in itself persuasive. As far as Lionel Lindsay was concerned, the French artist could do no wrong. In an article where he described flowers in nature as exemplars of “useless beauty”—because they are free and self-sufficient, existing for no purpose—he also said about the formal qualities of Fantin-Latour’s paintings that his “clairvoyance was extraordinary, almost feminine, his taste as rare as the Chinese and Japanese in this genre.”²¹

In Fantin-Latour’s formal arrangements Lionel Lindsay found the wisdom of the East. He also found a virtuous pursuit of beauty and a humble pursuit of truth. *Poppies* (plate 4, 1891) was acquired in 1906 by the National Gallery of South Australia from a private collection.²² Like the Gallery in Sydney, the Adelaide Gallery concentrated on collecting contemporary art from Britain and Europe. The Gallery’s curator between 1892 and 1909 was Harry P. Gill, whose tastes have been described as “quite distinctive and more refined than that of his inter-colonial colleagues, less bourgeois Victorian realist, more purely Aesthetic.”²³ *Poppies* exhibits a strong connection with the Aesthetic Movement. The painting looks simple, as if it took no effort to paint, yet is a masterpiece of balance and harmony in colour and form. Its focus on a single motif against a plain background enhances the illusion of simplicity. Michel Hoog has described this period of the French artist’s work as austere, but to Australians in the early twentieth century the clarity and orientalism of *Poppies* was a sign of ultra-sophistication.²⁴ In Australia, a country that prided itself on egalitarianism, Fantin-Latour’s flower paintings were admired for what Lionel Lindsay called “aristocratic spirit.”²⁵ To Australian eyes these were flower paintings that embodied an idealisation of European culture filtered through the East: a mixture of bourgeois elegance and refinement.

The popularity of Fantin-Latour in England, and Australia’s early dependence on British taste, go a long way to explain the artist’s popularity in Australia. Given the emotive power of flowers it is easy to imagine how his paintings of popular English garden varieties could evoke nostalgia for home. It is also easy to imagine how they threw into sharp relief the difference between northern hemisphere flowers and the robust, dark and primitive-looking native flowers, especially banksias, that grew naturally in Australia.

Colonial emphasis on flowers and acclimatisation, nineteenth century tastes in flower types such as roses, and pre-modern, late Victorian