

still life

living images

The wood engravings of Lionel Lindsay

Heather Lowe

*Assistant Curator of
Prints (1993)**

The years from around 1910 to the mid 1930's were marked in Australian art by the swift rise of printmaking as a highly popular art-form. A great number of Australian artists adopted printmaking, in particular etching, as one of their principal forms of expression, such that the period became known as the "etching-boom". Lionel Lindsay first achieved his reputation as a leader in printmaking in Australia through his etched work, in which he established a personal style and assured technique around 1908. The rapid growth in popularity of printmaking had its precedent in France and England, in the Painter-Etcher movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Australian artists hungrily searched for information and examples of printmaking techniques and styles, and a sharing of knowledge amongst artists from Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, and Perth was one of the major characteristics of this period. Australian artists shared not only knowledge of techniques, but also their tools and home-made printing presses. Artists such as Lionel Lindsay, Sydney Ure Smith, Victor Cobb, and John Shirlow studied the printmaking techniques of the modern international etchers such as Charles Meryon and Whistler, and the old master wood engravers such as



The Jester, 1923. Wood engraving, no. 100/100

Durer, from the few prints held in national art collections, books such as P.G. Hammerton's *Etching and Etchers*, and reproductions in international magazines, primarily *The Studio*.

Wood engraving had experienced an international revival after the first world war, as artists re-adopted the ancient medium as the perfect expression of individual creativity and careful craftsmanship. Wood engraving was a considerably more arduous and painstaking technique than either etching or woodcutting, and the artist's pride in the craftsmanship of his or her work was a central element to the import and aesthetic beauty of the finished print. Wood engraving had a more limited following than etching, but the few practitioners in Australia achieved an international reputation for their skill and freshness of style. Lionel's friend Ernest Moffit first introduced him to the elements of woodcutting in the late 1890's, but it was not until the 1920's that Lindsay returned seriously to the medium of printing on wood through wood engraving. Lindsay quickly developed a great surety of style in the medium, and his adoption of wood engraving initiated a change of subject matter. Previously attracted to landscapes and anecdotal views of aged architecture in his etchings, his vision in the wood engravings became concentrated on the fascinating beauty of detail in intimate views of still-life and the discovery of character and form in bird and animal studies. He published his first volume of wood engravings in 1922, entitled *A Book of Woodcuts*; this collection received a very favourable response from both Australian and English critics. Dedicated to the medium from this time, Lindsay continued working at a tremendous rate. He published a more sophisticated volume, *Twenty One Woodcuts*, two years later. Both these books of engravings were entirely type-set and printed by Lindsay and his family.

Lindsay's engraving style was greatly influenced by the English artist Thomas Bewick (1753-1828), one of the first wood engravers to use the end grain of the box-wood, and to engrave with a series of lines of varying width rather than cross hatching, in a technique known as the "white line method". This was the central element of "classic" wood engraving, in which the very nature of



Fruit Piece, 1925. Wood engraving, no. 25/100

the wood and the engraving process was central to the image. Lindsay noted of the style of Thomas Bewick:

"In these little cuts every line has meaning, there is no 'hit or miss', but a considered, delightful employment of white line full of expression and beauty. The forms have variety of treatment, yet are knitted together by largeness of style—the direction of the line and its suggestiveness seem to me inimitable."¹

Bewick's technique, developed in the late 18th century, can be contrasted with the method of reproductive engraving which became common in the 19th century as a commercial adjunct to book illustration. In this technique the wood surface was gouged away to create lines in relief, which delineated the forms with the effect of strokes of a pen when printed. It was both the style and the commercialism with which reproductive engraving was associated which were strongly rejected by the artist-crafts-people of the 20th century wood engraving movements, in favour of the purer and more "honest" forms of earlier engraving by artists such as Thomas Bewick. Lionel Lindsay was quite explicit about the importance he himself gave to both form and line, and the necessity to respect the medium itself:

"My interest in wood-engraving lies entirely in liberating qualities contained by no other medium and striving for free expression by line. For this reason I

never make a complete design on the block... From a careful pencil study I place my principal object; carefully drawing a precise outline. I blacken the intervening space and start by establishing my largest lights; finding direction, modelling and strength of line on the block. I prove as I go, building up my design bit by bit. I gamble with the ultimate result, but my chief care is to establish a true graver cut, keep its drawing quality and to preserve the intervening black. I keep thus to a classic ideal."²

Lindsay learnt the complicated techniques of wood engraving from W. J. Linton's *Wood Engraving. A Manual of Instruction*, a small volume which he came across in a second hand bookshop. This book provided Lindsay with much needed advice on selecting the most appropriate wood surface, how to wield the engraving tools, and printing processes. Unlike woodcutting, in which the surface of wood parallel to the grain is employed, wood engraving is made upon the end grain of only the very hardest of timbers, usually box-wood. As the hard wood tends to quickly blunt the metal tools, the gravers used must be of quality. Lindsay was fortunate to possess high quality gravers, one set purchased from John Mather, and another from the English engraver Martin Stainforth.

The period of Lionel's interest in wood engraving coincided with the very happy and stable years of his marriage at

his home near Wahroonga, near Sydney. *Morning Tea* depicts Lionel and his wife Jean relaxing on the verandah at Wahroonga. Lindsay found an infinite variety of subject matter from around his home to create his still-life arrangements and studies of birds and animals; many of the fruits and vegetables were products of his own garden. Exotic birds had fascinated Lindsay since his childhood, when a neighbour in Creswick had kept a feathered menagerie in cages in his back yard. In both his still-life, and animal and bird studies, the fascination of the subject in all its detail and character became an integral and aesthetic part of the care and minute attention which were central to the engraving process. "I try to get the character of the bird in a typical attitude—but in reality it is motive for design. I have none of the naturalist interest that actuated Bewick" 3 Lindsay commented. Although he probably first gained the inspiration to engrave animals and birds from Bewick, he noted "...I cannot remember when I was not fascinated by their beauty and flight; birds, animals and flowers; so much more beautiful than humans..." 4 Lindsay's wood engravings were international in subject and style. They achieved critical acclaim in London not for any peculiarly Australian character, as was the most prominent art of the period by artists such as Arthur Streeton or Tom Roberts, but rather for their evident skill and beauty which compared so favourably with Lindsay's European contemporaries.

Lindsay's wood engraved prints were probably the first examples of the artist's work to attract the attention of Harold Wright, influential print collector and dealer at the venerable firm of Colnaghi in London. Harold Wright became Lindsay's principal patron, constructively criticising his wood engravings and etchings and encouraging Lindsay to exhibit his work in London. Wright and Lindsay maintained a life-long correspondence, and Lindsay sent a print from almost every plate and wood engraving he produced to add to Wright's personal collection. Many of the prints from the collection bear personal inscriptions and dedications to Harold Wright from Lindsay, revealing the creative processes of the print's production, and the intimacy and aesthetic compatibility of the two friends. Wright's collection was

bequeathed to the University of Melbourne Library by his widow, the late Lily Isobel Wright, in 1964. Without exception they demonstrate the painstaking technique and great acuity of vision which Lindsay combined to create beautiful and fascinating images of the natural world.

**Note: Heather was employed for the 12 months from February 1993—February 1994 as Assistant Curator of Prints, an internship generously funded by the Miegunyah Trust. She was subsequently awarded the Harold Wright Scholarship, under which she is currently studying in the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum in London. In early 1994 she curated an exhibition of Lionel Lindsay prints from the Library's collection, "Still Life—Living Images", at Arts Victoria.*

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NOTES

- 1 Lionel Lindsay, quoted by J.S.Macdonald in "The Woodcuts of Lionel Lindsay", *The Print Collector's Quarterly*, April 1923, p 169.
 2 Lionel Lindsay, quoted by J.S.Macdonald in "The woodcuts of Lionel Lindsay", P 180.
 3 Lionel Lindsay, quoted by J.S.Macdonald in "The Wood cuts of Lionel Lindsay". p 171.
 4 Lionel Lindsay, quoted by J.S.Macdonald in "The Woodcuts of Lionel Lindsay". P 169.