Australian artist Helen Ogilvie (1902–1993) is perhaps best known for her early linocuts and woodcuts, and her later oil paintings, which primarily depict rural colonial buildings, representative of a 20th-century inter-war Australian vernacular. Her works are valuable examples of a modernist Australian vision, reflecting experimentation with contemporary styles and modes of art of the early century, but in a rather Australian fashion. They display the significant influence of the modernism of George Bell, whom Ogilvie encountered briefly in 1925 at the National Gallery School in Melbourne, where he was the drawing master for a short time, and share similarities with the work of other printmaking artists, including Eveline Syme. The linocuts and oil paintings by Ogilvie that are now in the University of Melbourne Art Collection provide evidence of such styles, influences and methods.

Ogilvie grew up in country New South Wales, before moving to Melbourne and attending the National Gallery School between 1922 and 1925. Before moving to the city, she would go out sketching in the local area with mother, Henrietta, a competent watercolourist. At the National Gallery School Ogilvie reportedly had difficulty relating to the ‘dark academism which was being taught’ and, moreover, found the rigid technique ‘difficult and boring’ and at odds with the ‘liberal education I had enjoyed in the country’. Moreover, the school at the time was still—like much of the Australian art world—a male-dominated and rather patriarchal place.

The trajectory of Ogilvie’s career altered when, in around 1928, she purchased a book on linocutting by English artist and teacher Claude Flight, which was illustrated by the author and his friends with prints that were considered ‘daringly modern’ by Australia at that time. Probably fuelled by this discovery, Ogilvie produced many linocuts and wood engravings from the 1930s onwards, before switching to oil landscapes in her later years. Her diverse career spanned not only printmaking and painting, but also from 1949 to 1955 the role of director of the Stanley Coe Gallery in Melbourne (later the Peter Bray Gallery), where she organised exhibitions of the work of emerging artists such as Sidney Nolan, Helen Maudsley, John Brack, Ian Fairweather, Arthur Boyd and Margo Lewers.

In this discussion I touch on two main facets of Ogilvie’s career—printmaking and oil painting—and use works in the University of Melbourne Art Collection to demonstrate that Ogilvie’s work can not only tell us something of Australian women artists’ careers in the 20th century, but can also be used to explore social and cultural themes of the era, including shifts in Australian identity that were influenced by the value given to certain places, a value that over the century was increasingly given to the city over the colonial rural life and architecture that Ogilvie frequently depicted.

Prints and text: Russell Grimwade’s Flinders Lane
Many of Ogilvie’s prints serve a decorative or illustrative purpose, such as the frontispieces or tailpieces of books. They are evidence of a 20th-century rapprochement between those forms of art intended to stand alone, such as easel painting, and those that also serve other ends, such as book illustration. They also reflect the interdisciplinary nature of the art and cultural industries of the time. Although printmaking in Australia almost came to a standstill as a result of World War I and the Great Depression, it did continue. Moreover, women artists of the era who were trying to forge a career faced many obstacles, and this was true for Ogilvie, despite her strong connections in the art.
world, including the Boyds and the Grimwades. A diverse practice was often necessary to make ends meet; even ephemeral items such as Christmas cards could be a useful source of income. Friend and patron Russell Grimwade commissioned Ogilvie to illustrate his book *Flinders Lane: Recollections of Alfred Felton* (1947). She also illustrated *Stolne & surreptitious verses* (1952) by John Medley, vice-chancellor of the University of Melbourne from 1938 to 1951, and a friend of Grimwade’s.

Although Ogilvie’s prints for *Flinders Lane* depict subjects from an earlier period (the 19th century, as described in Grimwade’s text), they are modernist in style, reflecting the use of line and shape by artists such as Dorrit Black, Thea Proctor and Ethel Spowers. The heading illustration to Chapter 2, for example, depicts a group of four people sitting around a table listening to a phonograph (below). Through her use of shading and dramatic lines, Ogilvie has created a stage-like illusion, in which the figures are set against a brightly lit background. Through her stylistic and compositional choices, Ogilvie emphasises the importance of the technological equipment, though it is not of Ogilvie’s own era. The prominence afforded to technology—for example the depiction of the electrical wiring—suggests the influence of the 20th century’s valuing of technology and the transmission of information. As Grimwade’s text was published not long after World War II, technological advances of that era may well have influenced the way that earlier, even obsolete, technologies were viewed and represented.

Similarly, the heading illustration to Chapter 7 (above) depicts a roaring steam train at Spencer Street Station, which accompanies text recalling a journey to Bendigo on the Thursday before Easter, 1899. This print evokes technological advancement, for example, in the technique used to depict the steam, capturing a substance in a state of constant flux and effectively representing it in a two-dimensional medium.

Themes of modernity, of machines and technology, are also evident in the tailpiece to Chapter 3, which depicts a man firing a gun. Though the corresponding event in the text is vastly different, set on a rural property, it nevertheless evokes imagery of machinery and weaponry, common in the works of the Futurists and other early- to mid-20th-century artists who were living through those turbulent decades. Created immediately after World War II, Ogilvie’s images have a distinct simplicity and stability, yet are also dynamic. They can be seen as part of the new ‘living modernism’ that developed after 1945. As Cody Hartley commented in regard to a recent exhibition of works by Georgia O’Keeffe and Margaret Preston, modernism was ‘a global
phenomenon representing a set of reactions and artistic strategies that emerged around the world as a means of making sense of the conditions of modern life. Even if less overtly than some artists, Ogilvie’s works show a keen awareness of trends of modern life, such as dynamism and the role of technology, weaponry and machinery. Thus her art is part of the international dialogue of modernism.

During the war, Ogilvie was a member of the Red Cross rehabilitation service, working at the 115th Australian General Hospital (Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital), helping injured servicemen with handcraft activities. Like many of her era, Ogilvie appears to have possessed a keen awareness of the times in which she was living and, whether intentionally or not, expressed this in her art. In a 1962 article she commented that ‘the war years enforced on me a long pause for thought and consideration on the work I had done’. Although she was satisfied with that work, she believed that, because it was all in the print medium, it was ‘limited’. Thus Ogilvie evokes the rural lifestyle as one of freedom, uncluttered by the people and machines of the city. The decline of Australian rural idealism in the 20th century and the parallel physical decay of traditional colonial dwellings are themes that recur in Ogilvie’s paintings.

Ogilvie’s Stone house, Portland (opposite) depicts a forgotten colonial building, isolated in the landscape. It is a simple stone cottage, with a tin roof with a chimney at each end, and a central cream timber door flanked by small sash windows. In the lower-left foreground is a single wooden post, from which some barbed wire hangs slackly: a dilapidated reminder of the fence that once stood there and thus of the working history of such properties. The cottage is surrounded by dry, yellowed grass, trees lining the horizon and a harsh blue sky with clouds. While the work has some similarities to 19th-century Australian rural scenes, Ogilvie’s roughly textured and less blended brushstrokes, together with her treatment of the subject matter, sway the work towards a contemplative realism, the subject matter a remnant of the past that it symbolises: the opposite of the romantic idealism of colonial-era works.
Moreover, Ogilvie’s paintings demonstrate how highly she valued the buildings themselves, and serve as an archival record of the Australia of these left-behind structures. As a newspaper article from 1970 put it, Ogilvie simply wished ‘to record those things most people don’t give a second glance’. Lyndall Crisp stated in 1979: ‘To Helen Ogilvie a run-down galvanised tin shack in the back of beyond is not an eyesore but a thing of beauty to be recorded and preserved as part of Australian history’. Thus, the buildings are presented as nostalgic reminders of Australia’s past, as well as speaking of the changes that have since occurred, which have led to their more neglected appearance by the time Ogilvie is depicting them.
The documentary nature of the paintings is suggested by Ogilvie’s method of working. She explained: ‘[I] usually draw the building when I see it and photograph it in the morning and at night to record the different shadows … then it might be 18 months before I get round to painting it’. This reveals the works to be carefully documented records of specific subjects, not merely transient perceptions or impressions, although Ogilvie was careful to capture the typically Australian atmosphere of her subject matter by using oil paint on a white background, which she said provided a transparency that resembled bright light. This realist and documentary nature of her works can also be seen in *Galvanized iron shed with gig* (see above), which depicts a rusted corrugated iron shed, with a water tank on the left and an old buggy—a long-abandoned technology by this time—visible under its shelter.

In 1963 Ogilvie exhibited 34 works at the Leicester Galleries, in Mayfair, London. The subject matter was probably unfamiliar to a British audience in the 1960s, and whether Ogilvie managed to convey her nuanced take on the contemporary status of these dwellings is hard to say. A short biography in the exhibition catalogue states that the works ‘record some of the architecture of the country and suburbs peculiar to Australia, which belong to the early period of the present century … [and] are fast disappearing’. While perhaps merely a turn of phrase, the description of the buildings as ‘peculiar to Australia’ possibly suggests that the works were received as documentary records of unfamiliar colonial architecture and culture, with London viewers perhaps missing their subtle representation of a changing society and of a landscape shifting away from what these dwellings represent. Back in Australia, Daniel Thomas in Sydney’s *Sunday Telegraph* commented in 1968: ‘When they are gone they will presumably seem as peculiarly Australian to us as they already are to foreigners … for although Miss Ogilvie has scarcely exhibited here, her London exhibitions are often noted with respect in the English magazines’. In the 1960s and 1970s Ogilvie widely exhibited her series on Australian...
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