



WOMEN OF

INFLUENCE







## WOMEN OF INFLUENCE MARION HALL BEST, MARGARET JAYE AND MARGO LEWERS

From the 1930s through to the late 1960s, Rowe Street Sydney was one of the principal locales for viewing art and design. Running alongside the former Hotel Australia, Rowe Street attracted the fashionable and fascinated of Sydney, to explore the latest in art and design. Among the many fashion boutiques and coffee shops was a number of interior design galleries. Most notably were those run by Marion Hall Best, Margaret Jaye and Margo Lewers. These enterprising women introduced Sydneysiders to new ways of expressing themselves through the fabrics and furnishings of their habitats.

As well as importing the latest interior design ideas and products from Europe or the United States, Best, Jaye and Lewers championed the development of contemporary Sydney design by exhibiting the cream of post war Australian designer-artists.

At 12 Rowe Street, Margaret Jaye gave the noted Australian designer, Gordon Andrews, one of his first exhibitions while also providing one of the first points-of-sale for fabric designers such as Frances Burke and Nance McKenzie.

Marion Hall Best ran shops at 25 Rowe Street and 153 Queen Street, Woollahra. She promoted designers of the calibre of Grant Featherston, Clement Meadmore as well as Gordon Andrews, and showed the design work of artists such as Elaine Haxton.

Margo Lewers' Notanda Gallery at 17 Rowe Street featured the latest in her own and other's ceramic designs as well as the new work of designers and artists such as Adrian Feint.

The exhibition, *Women of Influence*, is a small tribute to the foresight, courage and conviction of Best, Jaye and Lewers who with their professional interest in promoting the latest in art and design, provided rare opportunities for the cross-fertilisation between art and design that contributed to the development of both on the Sydney art and design scene in the middle 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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Above: Elaine Haxton *England and India* Set of playing cards designed for P&O c.1948

Left: Frances Burke *Tiger Lily* c.1951 textured cotton

Cover images: TOP LEFT: Gordon Andrews *Rondo* chair c.1964 linen, metal, foam 115 x 58 x 61 cm LOWER LEFT: Margo Lewers (*untitled*) c.1952 mixed media on paper 56 x 38 cm TOP RIGHT: Jim Thompson, Hand printed silk fabric c.1968 LOWER RIGHT: Grant Featherston *Contour* chair *R152* c.1951 leather, wood 126 x 60 x 66 cm



## DOING WOMEN AND DESIGN HISTORY

This exhibition, *Women of Influence*, uses the idea of Rowe Street Sydney c1930-1950, a space now demolished, as a site of retail trading and imaginative design practice. In a provincial society such as inter-war Australia was then, with relatively few opportunities for design training and activity, shops and shopping held special significance. We should recall that when the Queen visited Australia in 1954, her reception was held in the David Jones' restaurant, as the most befitting interior in Sydney. From Toronto to Canberra, small independent traders and large department stores provided exciting and respectable spaces for women to encounter new products and ideas.<sup>1</sup> At the David Jones' Gallery in Sydney, for example, annual exhibitions were held of the latest Scandinavian furnishing textiles; even avant-garde Paul Poiret designs featuring Raoul Dufy textiles were retailed there in the early 1920s.<sup>2</sup> The focus on the department store as an innovative commercial structure and imaginary site in studies of Baron Haussmann's Paris within social and art history, and its place in women's, retailing and labour history has probably led to an underestimation of the significance of the smaller retailer. Rowe Street in Sydney drew together very different designers who shared a common agenda in transporting women away from the literal and metaphorical confines of Victorian taste, carrying us across the inter-war years and into the 1950s. It prompts us to imagine the number of goods, ideas and schemes from this period either discarded, undocumented, or languishing in photograph albums yet to be assessed.

This exhibition also highlights problems of historical method. At times research into Sydney design culture of just two generations ago feels like an archaeological dig. Interior architecture and the subsequent arrangement of homes is an ephemeral activity. Not subject to heritage protection even today, always at the vagaries of taste and fashion, and insufficiently documented until the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales placed a value on 20<sup>th</sup> century design, the historian interested in interiors is nearly always working from photographs, line drawings, advertisements and descriptions. It is a salutary aim to present surviving artefacts to balance the preponderance and effect of such illustrative material evidence. One of the drawbacks of relying on such material is that makers themselves may have laid ruses which could trick the customer then, and the historian today. In focussing on the challenge of assessing the output of Margaret Jaye, the first person to describe herself as an interior decorator in Sydney in 1925, this essay permits me to explain how one such misconception evaded me as a design historian for many years.

My essay sets a context for the idea of interior decoration in Sydney c1920-1950, and presents some of the historical problems in researching the practice of women interior decorator/designers Margaret Jaye, Molly Grey, Hera Roberts, Thea Proctor, Yolande Proctor, Marion Hall Best and Margo Lewers. This narrative is truncated, because apart from Marion Hall Best and Margo Lewers, whose oeuvre is documented in archives, and whose many family, friends and assistants recall their personality and practice, little is firmly documented about the work of the others. I will make some suggestions regarding the general picture at the time based mainly on printed evidence.

### 'Rembrandt versus Kalsomine'

In 1936 Lionel Lindsay penned the following description of the 'advisor on decoration':

If a new house is to be furnished in the most modern style, the manikin [sic] decorator whose aesthetic is sometimes bounded by the shop she serves, has no thought of accommodating the owner's present possessions ... her real purpose is salesmanship; so out go all the pictures – the Streetons, Lamberts, Heysens, Gruners – to the garret. Nothing must interfere with the colour scheme proposed.<sup>3</sup>

This passage highlights both the anxieties and the professional reservations which greeted the emergence of that new profession, interior decoration. Lindsay assumes the decorator will be female, the 'manikin' characterisation conferring both a faddish and modish status. Lindsay also alludes to the importance of colour in the redefinition of the inter-war Australian interior. Colour's sensual connotations and alleged links to femininity constructed both women and their practice of interior decoration as amateur and intuitive; their work was described as an extension of their natures. Modernism – here suggested by the focus on colour – was frequently elided with 'commercial art' and fashion. Lindsay's real concern – the demotion of mimetic painting and its replacement with work by 'decorative artists' such as Thea Proctor or Margaret Preston – forms the subtext of his diatribe.

Sydney artists including Adrian Feint, Roy de Maistre, Thea Proctor and Hera Roberts were closely involved with popularising the modern interior in inter-war Sydney. It has been well established in scholarship for twenty years that modernism in 1920s Australia was mediated through women's spaces and women's bodies, in decorative arts, fashion, advertising and department-store culture.<sup>4</sup> Interior decoration was intimately linked to all these sectors.

Previously the province of male traders and architects, interior decoration had been proposed as a suitable amateur occupation for the middle-class woman in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Women's involvement in the Arts and Crafts movement fuelled the growth of this connection, as women were encouraged to oversee and produce fittings for the 'artistic' interior. By the 1920s interior decoration was one of the few commercial occupations dominated by the idea and involvement of women. An image of the independent lady decorator fascinated society, recurring in magazines and novels. Some of these women, such as the American Elsie de Wolfe or the Paris-based Eileen Gray, moved in homosocial networks, providing one explanation for the contemporary fascination.

By the 1920s the shopper had been organised by marketing and commercial interests into a set of female stereotypes influenced by late-nineteenth century psychology. Modernism provided new challenges for this consumer who was now required to assess striking new colour combinations and textures. Female department store culture provided both respectable mixing and leisure space for women, and created new roles for 'design intermediaries' within these retail structures to provide advice and bolster sales.<sup>5</sup>

### The Interior Decorator and Evidence

There are few literary references which describe the new brand of Australian decorator in the inter-war period. George Johnston's *My Brother Jack* includes an evocative description of an amateur's decorating scheme in 'Beverley Grove' which incorporates elements of the brand of middle-class modernism popular in the 1930s-40s – 'severely modern pale-wood furniture', folk-weave fabrics, Van Gogh prints – but this was published much later, in 1964.<sup>6</sup> More useful to the study of the Australian decorator are women's periodicals including *Home* and *Australian Home Beautiful*, newspaper columns and the art journal *Art in Australia*. Oral history is useful for uncovering details regarding individual's practice which are not apparent in contemporary sources, but this approach is often weighted in favour of those individuals who left heirs or employed many assistants.

Few decorating manuals were published in Australia until the 1940s.<sup>7</sup> Margaret Lord's *A Decorator's World* (1969) provides an autobiography of an Australian decorator in the post-WW II period, and Marion Hall Best's autobiography exists in typescript.<sup>8</sup> Both are valuable documents not so much for the facts they reveal, which can generally be gleaned elsewhere, but more for revealing self-image and the novelty of this profession in Australia.



A problem regarding the nomenclature 'interior decorator' summarises the tension between art and trade which structured the profession. No entries appear for the category of 'interior decorator' in the professional listings of Sydney trade directories in the period 1920-1940, although individuals described themselves as such in the street listings. The nineteenth-century conjunction of decorating with manual trade is evident in Sand's directories for this period, with lists of 'Decorators' cross-referenced to 'Painters, decorators, etc.', and in turn to 'Oil and Colormen, Oil and Paint Manufacturers'. The more elevated categories of 'Art Decorators' and 'Art Furnishers' included firms established in the late-nineteenth century such as Althouse & Geiger and Lyon, Cottier & Co., which were also listed in the artisanal categories. Although the use of the adjectives 'art' and 'artistic' was linked to the aesthetic movement and not used to describe modern interiors in smart magazines such as *Vogue* or *Home* in the 1930s, it persisted in Australian trade names as late as 1937.<sup>9</sup>

*Wise's Post Office Directory* indicates the longevity of traditional trade associations in a different manner, in the employment of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century concept of the upholsterer. Their 1920 directory added the category of 'Furnishing Drapery Mnfrs.' [sic] to 'Furniture Brokrs [sic], Ware-housemen & Dealers', 'Furniture Importers' and 'Furniture Manufacturers'.<sup>10</sup> This indicated the continuing association of the supplier of textiles and drapery with the co-ordination of the decoration of the home. Sydney decorator Margaret Jaye is listed in this trade category from 1935.<sup>11</sup> The decorator Stuart Low is first listed in the category of Broker and Dealer in 1930.<sup>12</sup> The decorator Deric Deane (who also worked as an architect under the name Frederick Deane) appears for the first time in trade listings in 1933 at 35 Rowe Street, an address which like the 'Queen Street, Woollahra' of the post-WW II period, included a number of decorators including Margaret Jaye.<sup>13</sup> The term interior-designer is even less common, replacing the old 'decorator' only in the 1950s, when an image of educated professionalism, bolstered by education programmes and societies, was promoted.<sup>14</sup>



Material relating to the decoration of the home was written by a number of Australians who were not professional 'decorators', including artists, architects, columnists and tastemakers. Nineteenth-century aestheticism and the Arts and Crafts movement in Australia generated considerable periodical literature relating to the home, most of which appears to have been addressed to women. 'Artistic' ideas were translated into more permanent form in Mrs. F. B. Aronson's *XXth Century Cooking and Home Decoration* (Sydney, 1900). Addressed to the middle class woman, the text is concerned mainly with recipes and household hints, but includes an illustrated thirty page section 'Decoration within the Home', classified by room-type. She demanded the informality of 'art-colour-blending and its attendant charms and details', and illustrated numerous contorted but asymmetrical draperies.

Mrs Aronson's model of decorating as an extension of housewifery, an occupation that was taken up strategically in the post-suffrage period as the home science or home economics movement, was not supplanted until the 1920s, when the concept of the modern 'interior decorator' was first promoted in Australia. Its development coincides with the rise of the expert in all fields of domestic life – mothercraft, cookery, nutrition and sex.<sup>15</sup> Within this context the decorator can be seen as but another expert equipped with superior taste and knowledge, whose previously amateur status was placed on a more professional footing in accord with the rationalisation of women's work in the early twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> 'Let us deliver ourselves into the hands of the expert' proclaimed *Home*, reviewing the state of interior decoration in 1928.<sup>17</sup>

## 'Attractive Opportunities': Interior Decoration as a Career for Women

Unlike architecture, a profession with recognised standards and organisations, interior-decorating in Australia was ill-defined and not well recognised. Opportunities for training in Australia as an interior decorator were extremely limited in the inter-war period.<sup>18</sup> The centrality of artists to the development of the profession is indicated by the fact that the Arts and Crafts societies and Thea Proctor's design classes appear to be the only source of training available to those interested in 'design'. Details of how Thea Proctor conducted her 'design' classes are scanty, but judging from contemporary comments 'design' meant a bold 'modern' approach in which form and colour were primary.<sup>19</sup> An interior-decorator such as Marion Hall Best came to interior decoration via other forms of the decorative arts; embroidery classes with June Scott Stevenson (1926), then Proctor's design classes.<sup>20</sup> Margaret Lord also entered the field after an art education; her autobiography describes her studies at Swinburne and teaching art in secondary school before attending the Arnold School in London.<sup>21</sup> The obsession with 'art training' was not new. A cornerstone of the Arts and Crafts movement, it continued to be mobilised as a way of indicating one's distance from uneducated taste. In *Home* magazine, artists were not only assumed to be the tasteful individuals who could best raise standards, they were described as synonymous with the decorator:

Our aesthetic senses are just as much in need of diagnosis as our internal organs. "I have handed over the whole furnishing scheme to a qualified designer" should be as frequent an acknowledgement as "I have placed myself in the hands of the very best doctor". There ARE artists in this country capable of undertaking the interior decoration of your house in a manner comparable with the work which is being done in other countries.<sup>22</sup>

The post-war concept of the 'design' school did not exist in Australia; there were technical colleges for carpenters and joiners, but no training in design *per se*. Artists and tastemakers argued for the establishment of such a course, claiming improved standards of taste in both art and manufactures would be the result. The *Burdekin House Exhibition* (1929) was organised as a *de facto* design museum, albeit a temporary one. The theme of improving Australian art and design formed the leitmotif of Ure Smith's *Art in Australia* and *Home* magazine, and accounts for the considerable attention accorded modern continental interiors in these publications.

An early Australian description of the profession of interior decorator occurs in the *Adelaide Woman's Record* in 1922. Concerning women and the architectural profession, the article was written in consultation with Edith Napier Birks, Secretary of the School of Fine Arts.<sup>23</sup> The editorial noted:

Miss Birks believes that there is also a place for the woman decorator and furnisher able to give expert advice on colours and types and convenience... There is no doubt that if enough of us realised our ignorance and were in a position to pay for skilled opinion on our ideas, a good firm of women could be very useful. Such a firm would watch for and disseminate ideas on furnishing the maidless house.<sup>24</sup>

The article analysed the exclusion of women from the architectural profession; 'this seems a career especially suited to women, and yet very few – only one in Australia so far as we know – have taken it up'.<sup>25</sup> The profession was seen as a suitable and lucrative role for the middle class woman, one which ensured respectability and maintained a reassuring link to the home. The author argued that, as 'Woman is more completely a house dweller than man', she should be ideally suited to the design of dwellings, 'schools, hospitals, children's homes, and such institutions'. The

explanation for the exclusion of women given by architects, that, 'Women would probably be good at design and decorative detail, but... not interested in the practical side, in the constructive work', was dismissed as 'very weak'. Women's admission to law and medicine were cited as instances disproving this theory.

Several Sydney women's periodicals in the late 1920s provide illuminating commentaries on the subject of the 'New Woman' and the role of interior decorator. The cheap monthlies *Herself*. *Her present, past and future* (1928-1931) and *Helen's Weekly* (1927-1928) exhibited considerable ambivalence regarding the post-WWI women and paid work.<sup>26</sup> The first editorial of *Helen's Weekly* proclaimed, ' "Helen" is an out and out Feminist. She is stage managed, written and - I almost said printed - by women'. The issue of the female consumer and her new 'power' fuelled many of its first numbers:

in the shops the tastes of *Herself* are much more considered than HIS [sic] ...The machine age and modern industry have ousted woman from the producing function and she now concentrates upon that of the consumer ... Woman has lost the creative side of work from immemorial time recognised as hers, and has received in exchange a subject position of drudgery and routine.<sup>27</sup>

A later issue advocated communal kitchens, bulk buying and the British Letchworth communal system, indicating that the ideal of the self-contained suburban home was not universally lauded in women's magazines of the period.<sup>28</sup>

*Helen's Weekly* included articles on domestic architecture, dress, make-up and interior decoration. It forms a useful contrast to the expensive *Home* magazine which covered similar terrain for the upper-middle class woman. *Helen's Weekly* opposed the cosmopolitan airs of magazines such as *Home*; ' "Helen": intends to be practical... she will not rouse your cupidity concerning a certain make of rug only to inform you that it cannot be obtained in Australia'.<sup>29</sup> In its short life considerable space was devoted to the rationalisation of domestic work, the principles of Taylorism. Typical was an article entitled 'Build your own Kitchenettes. Conserving Time and Energy by Forethought', in which the author claimed she had 'suffered long and bitterly at the hands of the man architect of kitchens'.<sup>30</sup> A model similar to the Frankfurt kitchen (c1925) is illustrated, with swivel adjustable stool at 'the centre of domestic operations' .

Both *Herself* and *Helen's Weekly* published articles which chronicle attitudes towards decorating in Australia. The obsession with colour and the pseudo-scientific nature of the discussion is indicated in titles such as 'Color as a Curative Agent'<sup>31</sup> and 'Great Healing Power of Chromopathy', which explored the possibility of 'colour cures'.<sup>32</sup> The latter described the activities of Yolande Proctor, 'an earnest student of Design, Interior Decoration and especially Health Rooms, having studied Commercial Art and Colour in relation to environment and health'.<sup>33</sup> Proctor was described as championing colourful painted furniture. The latter was associated with modernity in this period, a commercial range having been designed by Thea Proctor in 1927.<sup>34</sup> Stylistically, however, such furniture was not necessarily tied to modernism, Yolande Proctor giving suggestions for both modern and antique room decoration.<sup>35</sup> 'Health rooms', *Herself* claimed, 'are designed according to the temperament of their inhabitants', and the journal indicated letters of enquiry could be addressed to Proctor care of the Argosy Gallery in Hunter Street, a store which retailed small works of art and ornaments, where Margo Lewers showed hand-blocked fabric in 1935.<sup>36</sup>

The definition of 'decorator' needs to be broadly interpreted. In 1928 *Home* advised that, 'Miss Thea Proctor... will in future make available to those who contemplate furnishing or re-decorating, her

skill in planning schemes of interior decoration... she will design entire schemes, advise on purchases and shop with clients'.<sup>37</sup> Like Yolande, Thea Proctor retailed her taste and her colour-sense, removing completely the taint of trade. Thea Proctor's family circle included other women working in this field. Hera Roberts, the illustrator and designer, was her student and cousin, and another cousin, Mrs C. Dibbs (*née* Mary Proctor) conducted a country 'Shopping Club' to 'undertake any kind of buying - from furnishing a house to buying a piece of cherry ribbon'. Of the latter *Herself* noted, 'Her ideas on interior decoration should be very helpful - she is a cousin to the well-known Thea Proctor, and she shares her artistic tastes'.<sup>38</sup> In the same year *Home* indicated the cachet of such work, when it was noted amidst the expatriate social notes:

Miss Betty Dangar has been bitten with the prevailing craze for interior decoration, which is having such a vogue in the Old World. She writes: "I am busy with furniture design and cabinet making and various things. I go to a school of arts and crafts."<sup>39</sup>

Other women were more closely connected with business, retailing antique and modern furniture (both 'period' and modernist), soft-furnishings and fabrics, such as Merle du Bourlay and Margaret Jaye. By 1928 an accelerating number of traders listed their decorating services in the pages of *Home*.<sup>40</sup>

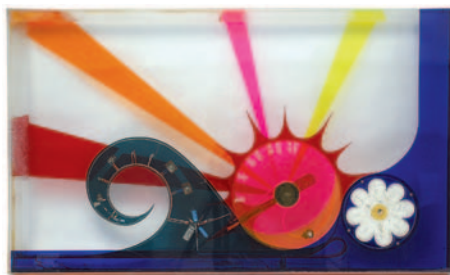
In 1930 *Herself* published two articles by F. Kay Ross entitled 'Fortune Favours Expert Woman. Interior Decoration as a Career for Girls'.<sup>41</sup> Ross' nationality is uncertain; no mention

of her occurs in other contexts, but it is claimed here she 'spent many years in America in the study of her profession' (i.e. decoration).<sup>42</sup> The articles formed part of a series examining careers for the New Woman, such as secretarial work. Apart from the valuable insights into attitudes to the profession of decorator, they provide a rare contemporary summary of this practice in Sydney, as interesting for whom they exclude as for whom they consider. Ross stated that the only

decorators in Sydney were Margaret Jaye, an American male, architects and the department store advisors. She described the field as dominated by men, perhaps because they controlled the furniture departments of stores.<sup>43</sup> Ross described the anomaly of a profession which should be dominated by women - 'Since furnishing the home is essentially the province of women' - but which was apparently little known and exploited. The requirements are described as simple; 'the student bent upon this career must have an innate artistic sense... All other things can be added'.<sup>44</sup> She concluded, 'What career for girls offers more attractive opportunities', an editorial note indicating, 'There are no schools for teaching Interior Decoration in Sydney, but a class is in process of formation'.<sup>45</sup> Again, not mentioning Thea Proctor's design class suggests her emphasis was trading rather than amateur activity.

Ross' position was revealed in *Herself's* October editorial, which also endorsed the adoption of decoration as a career for women. The 'class in process of formation' was to be taught by Ross herself; her lecture on 'decoration in America as practised by women' was announced, and the claim reiterated that 'Special courses will be arranged as a career for girls'.<sup>46</sup> Ross' lecture was described as stressing the importance of colour and space, but did not advocate a particular design process.<sup>47</sup>

An article similar to Ross' was published in the *Australian Woman's Mirror* the same year.<sup>48</sup> It described the activity of women including Ruth Lane Poole, who supervised much of the furnishing of the Governor-General's residence at Yarralumla and Mrs Guy Smith, who worked at an 'exclusive furnishing firm' in Melbourne.<sup>49</sup> Interior decoration is described as a genial occupation, the





following description reading like a chronicle of social life:

Mrs. Smith declares her work to be most congenial, meeting pleasant people, spending her time amid beautiful furnishings and furniture and seeing her color-schemes [sic] take form and effect; and as the art of home decoration is so essentially feminine it is surprising more Australian women have not adopted the role of advisory decorator.<sup>50</sup>

### 'In Future all Modern': Margaret Jaye

The first trader to be listed as an 'interior decorator' in Sydney was Margaret Jaye, who opened a store in Darlinghurst Road in 1925.<sup>51</sup> In Wise's directory she is described as 'art decorator', a term replaced by 'decorator' in subsequent years.<sup>52</sup> Sand's describes her between 1926 and 1931 as an 'antique dealer', although several contemporary advertisements indicate she carried mainly reproduction-antique furnishings.<sup>53</sup> Although her business is recalled by many as a gift shop, Jaye stocked furniture, ornaments, hand-blocked linens, Italian brocades, chintzes and Lyons-made Rodier fabrics.<sup>54</sup> In Sand's 1932-33 listing she appears as an 'interior decorator' for the first time.<sup>55</sup>

According to a contemporary whom I interviewed in 1992 Jaye did not employ assistants in the 1920s, relying instead on her 'female companion'. Her non-art profile also hinders research. Unlike Marion Hall Best, Molly Grey and Thea Proctor, Jaye's interiors were not featured in *Home* magazine nor *Art in Australia*. Although Australian decorators were rarely committed to one schema for the home (Cynthia Reed in Melbourne, stockist of Fred Ward modernist furniture and Michael O'Connell fabrics is an exception), most of them were involved sporadically with promoting certain modern decorative ideas. Jaye was described in typically divided terms as 'able to offer the people of N.S.W. a unique service, viz. the furnishings of the Home throughout no matter how small or how large, or in what colour or period'<sup>56</sup>. The critique of the architects, that there was no consistency of programme or concept, is fairly justified.

Once I based a part of an argument about Jaye around a photograph of a room supposedly furnished by her. I wrote that the room 'Jaye furnished c1930 was thoroughly modernist, including modern hangings, geometric upholstery and a built-in sofa-bookcase surmounted with globular light fittings'.<sup>57</sup> Luckily for me, I also noted that 'Its details are similar to contemporary American schemes'. Imagine my wry amusement when years later in a friend's New York apartment I picked up a catalogue on inter-war textiles.<sup>58</sup> There I saw 'Jaye's' room, designed, in fact by Paul T. Frankl, the significant American designer whose ideas provided the driving force of nearly all the modern room sets at Burdekin House. Interestingly, the Frankl image in question used Paul Rodier Lyons-made textiles, a cotton weave which permitted light to pass through, precisely those textiles that Jaye had advertised she imported. Either Jaye or the editors at *Herself* happily lifted an image from Frankl's *New Dimensions* (New York 1928, plates 37, 107) and wrote a caption that claimed here was 'A section of a pretty sun parlour in one of Sydney's leading homes furnished by Miss Margaret Jaye'.

That Jaye was not entirely a model of modern business ethics has been suggested in both surviving letters and by two interviewees (1992). In 1932, for example, Jaye sold a shipment of Anne Dangar's modernist abstract-patterned pottery, made by the Australian artist in rural France. The cream and green ceramics included tea-sets, bowls and jugs, which according to Dangar, Jaye complained were 'too thick for Australian taste'.<sup>59</sup> As Jaye was charging the equivalent of fifteen francs and sending Dangar one franc per item, Dangar was moved to complain to artist-friend Grace Crowley; 'I guess it's her prices are too thick for people with taste'. Jaye was characterised by another who remembered her as 'a real old take', a tough business-woman who was not interested in the meticulous detail decorators such as Marion

Hall Best later expended on her commissions, not above buying napery in Coles and reselling it at a considerably higher price. As Dangar wrote to Crowley regarding the sale of her pottery: 'you can arrange it all at once or bit by bit in your studio to sell, but at honest prices – not Miss Jayes'.<sup>60</sup> Sydney was a very small world, and clearly hierarchies were not only drawn between the *milieu* of the decorator and the mass taste of the furnishing store, but within the ranks of the interior decorator.

This discovery strengthens my sense that Paul Frankl is the significant figure who connects disparate Australian modern furniture and interior design practice. The influence of his ideas can also be seen in the work of Margo Lewers, in her design for a shelving unit in the late 1930s, possibly in her Rowe Street Notanda Galleries (from 1936-1939).<sup>61</sup> Frankl's work was cosmopolitan and evoked an abstract notion of the skyscraper city. Unlike the more elaborate and artisanal French work, it could also be replicated in painted or lacquered wood. It was not overly challenging in its use of materials (no chromium), did not suggest the factory, office or hospital, and also evoked the glamour of Hollywood cinema.

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Tastemakers including Sydney Ure Smith and Leon Gellert had used the decorative arts as a bargaining chip in the promotion of a modern aesthetic for Australian painting. If a woman wore a modern French fabric, then she should look at a modern picture, they argued. This polemic relegated both women and design to a tenuous position. They gained their significance only in terms of what they might do for the cause of high art, for the ocular adjustments they might bring to the average person in the street.

'The aesthetic experience provided by surroundings and articles of accomplished design is the best preparation for the higher enjoyments in the realm of disinterested art', wrote Ure Smith.<sup>62</sup>

In the mid-1930s Australian modernism was realigned with a masculine and technological paradigm. A younger generation of architects sympathetic to the International Style and aligned to engineering rejected popularised versions of *art deco* and promoted a model of rationalist modernity. The working of elevators, sliding pocket doors and air-conditioning plants were illustrated in almost fetishistic detail, like art-works themselves. Fewer women were involved with this movement and the rise of the professional industrial designer displaced women from their previously untrained role as interior decorators and furniture designers. The lady 'Decorator' became the disparaged term – famously described by Frank Lloyd Wright as 'interior desecrators' which was expunged from the language of post-World War II modern architecture and design. *Women of Influence* raises an important issue: with so little material culture remaining from this period, and so little documentation, how do we distinguish the trimming of a lamp-shade from thoughtful explorations of space, colour and materials? Until more research is conducted, a searching assessment of the cultural production of a whole generation of Sydney female – and indeed male – 'designer-artists' or 'artist-designers' remains a matter of speculation.

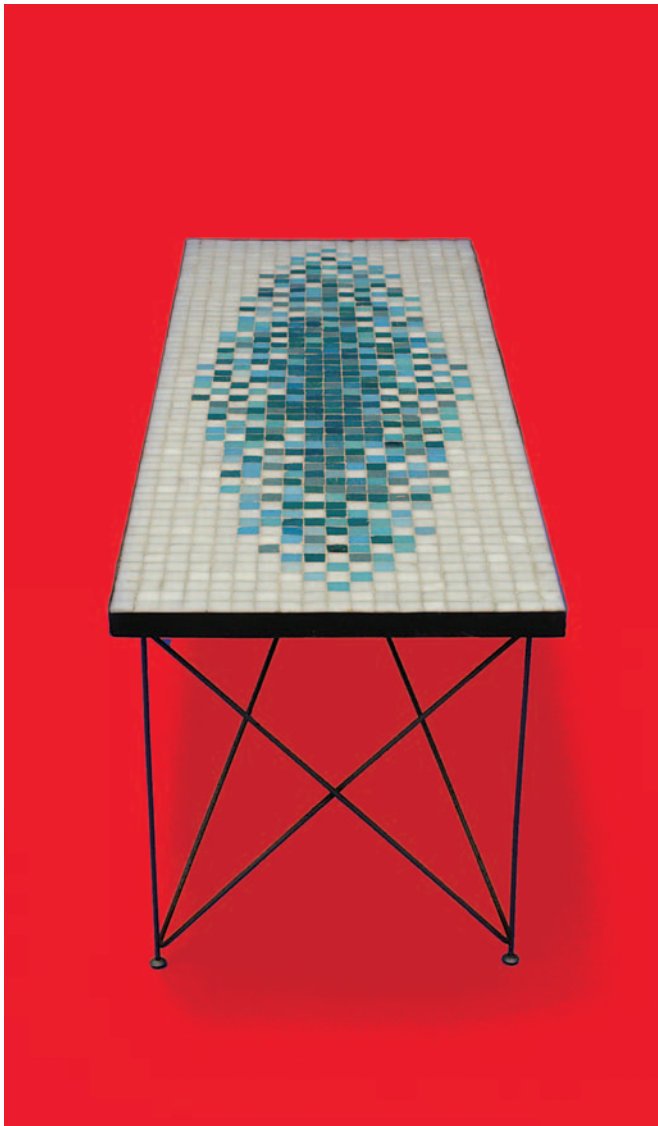
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*This essay is dedicated to the memory of Michaela Richards, my post-graduate colleague and friend at the Australian National University*

IMAGES Left to right: Clement Meadmore *Cord* dining chair 1952/3 steel, synthetic cord, wood; Maija Isola *Lokki* for Marimekko, Finland c.1961 cotton fabric; Jack Meyer *Sunrise IV* Sound sculpture 1972 Perspex battery operated wall radio 72.5 x 122.5 x 5 cm, © Jack Meyer, Licenced by VISCOPY Australia 2005; Clement Meadmore *Table lamp* c.1953 painted steel 31 x 11 x 11 cm.





Clement Meadmore Coffee table c.1953 manufactured by Michael Hirst, glass tiles, copper, steel 37 x 39.5 x 120 cm

#### ENDNOTES

Note: The author is grateful for the support of the Faculty Research Grant Project 2001. Regarding oral history: four interviews were conducted by the author with contemporaries who knew or recalled Margaret Jaye, one who helped out as a teenager. I have chosen to keep my interviewees' confidence at this time.

<sup>1</sup> There is a very large bibliography on the idea of the department store and its role in consumer's imaginative experience. The Australian case is assessed in Gail Reekie, *Temptations. Sex, Selling and the Department Store*. Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1993. For an exemplary case-study regarding interior design see Virginia Wright, *Modern Furniture in Canada 1920 to 1970*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Peter McNeil, 'Poiret in Sydney: Fabrics and Photography', *The Art Deco Society Newsletter (Sydney)*, vol. VII, no 1, 1996, pp.8-9.

<sup>3</sup> Lionel Lindsay, 'Rembrandt v. Kalsomine', *Art in Australia*, May 1936, p.56.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Avenel Mitchell, *Thea Proctor (1879-1966): Aspects of élitism 1921 to 1940*, B.A. Hons. Thesis, University of Sydney, 1980; Mary Eagle, *Australian Modern Painting Between the Wars 1914-1939*, Sydney, Bay Books, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> The notion of design intermediary I borrow from Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers. Design and Innovation from Wedgwood to Corning*, John Hopkins University Press, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> George Johnston, *My Brother Jack*, London, Collins, 1964, pp.251-2.

<sup>7</sup> Miss McDougall, *Interior Decoration for Australians. A discussion course of eleven chapters*, Australian Army Education Service, n.d., (c.1940s); *Interior Decoration for Salespeople*, Sydney, The Retail Traders' Training Institute of NSW Ltd, n.d. (c.1940s). Another result of war-time education programmes was Margaret Lord, *Interior Decoration. A Guide to Furnishing the Australian Home*, Sydney, Ure Smith, 1944.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Lord, *A Decorator's World. Living with Art and International Design*, Sydney, Ure Smith, 1969. Marion Hall Best, *Autobiography* [typescript], Marion Hall Best Archive, NGA Research Library.

<sup>9</sup> *Wise's New South Wales Post Office Directory*, 1935, p.113.

<sup>10</sup> *Wise's, op. cit.*, 1920, p.2037.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 1935, 'Furnishing Drapery Mfrs. & Imprtrs.', p.113.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 1930, p. 2863. Low's business was at 363 New South Head Road (1930); 435 New South Head Road, Double Bay (1931, p.1043); 107 Elizabeth Street (from 1932, p.1046).

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, 1933, p.1019. I thank Catriona Quinn for pointing out the twin roles of Deane.

<sup>14</sup> In Australia the professionalisation of the activity is marked by the establishment in 1951 of the Society of Interior Designers.

<sup>15</sup> Kerreen M. Reiger, *The disenchantment of the home. Modernizing the Australian family 1880-1940*, Melbourne, OUP, 1985; Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home. Domestic Architecture and Cultural Conflict in Chicago 1873-1913*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

<sup>16</sup> Mary J. Quinn, whose *Planning and Furnishing the Home. Practical and Economical Suggestions for the Homemaker* (New York, Harper & Bros.) was published in 1914, is described in the frontpiece as 'Instructor in Design. School of Household Science & Art, Pratt Institute'.

<sup>17</sup> 'Interior decoration in Australia', *Home*, 1 June 1928, p.23.

<sup>18</sup> *Art in Australia* noted: 'The time has come, it would seem, for the establishment of an Australian school of design...' March 1930 (unpaginated).

<sup>19</sup> 'she has endeavoured to instill the principles of balance, of the rhythmic play of line and the satisfying juxtaposition of masses' (H.H. Fotheringham, 'The Importance of Design and its Relation to the Student', *Art in Australia*, September 1927, pp.46-8).

<sup>20</sup> In 1940 she furthered her education by enrolling in a New York correspondence course, *Arts & Decoration. Practical Home Study in Interior Decoration*.

<sup>21</sup> Lord, 1969, *op. cit.*, pp.9,105.

<sup>22</sup> *Home*, 1 June 1928, p.76.

<sup>23</sup> Editor's notes, *Woman's Record* (Adelaide), vol.III, no.3, 6 September 1922, p.3.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, pp.3-4.

<sup>25</sup> 'Careers for Women. No.13 - Domestic Architecture', in *ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>26</sup> This was also the case with the short-lived *Ours. A Paper for Australian Homes*.

<sup>27</sup> *Herself*, vol. 1, no. 1, 15 June 1928, p.4.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Moss, 'Domestic Foundations of the New Age', *Herself*, vol.1, no.5, 1 November 1928, p.11.

<sup>29</sup> *Helen's Weekly*, vol.1, no.1, 8 September 1927, p.43.

<sup>30</sup> 'Build your own kitchenettes', *Helen's Weekly*, vol.1, no.6, 13 October 1927, p.13.

<sup>31</sup> "Chromo", 'Color [sic] as a Curative Agent', *Helen's Weekly*, vol.1, no.7, 17 November 1927, pp.13, 54.

<sup>32</sup> 'Great Healing Power of Chromopathy', *Herself*, vol.1, no.4 (incorrectly printed as no. 3), 17 September 1928, p.5.

<sup>33</sup> 'Health Rooms', *Herself*, vol.1, no.4 (incorrectly printed as no.3), 17 September 1928, p. 6. Proctor appears to have owned or managed the Argosy Gallery, Hunter Street, later 223 Macquarie Street, which sold Persian rugs, old china, antiques, etchings [advertisement, *Home*, 1 May 1929, p.18]. Thea Waddell states that Yolande was not a cousin of Thea Proctor (communication with the author, 1992).

<sup>34</sup> *Home*, 1 April 1927, p.50.

<sup>35</sup> 'Health Rooms', *Herself*, vol.1 no.6, 6 March 1929, p.13.

<sup>36</sup> 'Health Rooms', *Herself, op. cit.*, p.6.

<sup>37</sup> 'Personal and Social', *Home*, 2 July 1928, p.4.

<sup>38</sup> 'New Shopping Club', *Herself*, vol.1, no.12, 5 December 1929, p.10. See also her advertisement, *Herself*, vol.II, no.1, 30 January 1930, p.11.

<sup>39</sup> *Home*, 2 April 1928, p.96.

<sup>40</sup> 'The Treasure Chest, 19 Darlinghurst Road, Art Dealers and Interior Decorators' (*Home*, 1 December 1928, p.14); 'Cecil N. Weir, who will be pleased to call at your home and advise you for your colour scheme, 333 George Street' (*Home*, 2 April 1929, p.3); 'Florence Duvelle, Consulting Interior Decorator, Potts Point' (*Home*, 1 October 1929, p.3); 'Jean Little, Melbourne - chintzes, cretonnes, & furnishing silks from London & Paris. Interior decoration, and assistance' [*Home*, 1 November 1929, p.7]; 'Monica Piddington, Nursery Designer and Decorator, Pitt Street, Sydney' [*Home*, 2 January 1930, p.9].

<sup>41</sup> *Herself*, vol.2, no.3, 5 July 1930, pp.13, 30.

<sup>42</sup> 'Interior Decoration', *Herself*, vol.2, no.7, 5 November 1930, p.3.

<sup>43</sup> Margaret Lord noted in her 1969 autobiography that Joyce Brown was the first woman to break into this male preserve at Anthony Hordern's in the 1940s (Lord, 1969, *op.cit.*, p.102).

<sup>44</sup> Ross, *op.cit.*, p.13

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, p.30

<sup>46</sup> Editorial, *Herself*, vol.2, no.6, 4 October 1930, p.1

<sup>47</sup> 'Interior Decoration', *Herself*, vol. 2, no. 7, 5 November 1930, p.3.

<sup>48</sup> I. M. Brodie, 'Interior Decoration. Advisory Work as a Career for Women', *Australian Woman's Mirror*, vol. 6, no. 49, 28 October 1930, p.12.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> In both Sand's and Wise's directories Jaye's business is listed firstly in 1925. Sand's Directory lists her as 'decorator, 89 Darlinghurst Road'. Wise's directory lists her at 69 Darlinghurst Road, which is more likely the correct business address, as Mrs E. Crawley's furniture shop had been at this address the previous year. Inaccuracies do appear in these guides, as Jaye is called 'Joyce, Margaret' in one listing.

<sup>52</sup> *Wise's, op. cit.*, 1925, p.28.

<sup>53</sup> Sand's, *op. cit.*, 1926, p.1428, and subsequent issues.

<sup>54</sup> Margaret Lord recalled her business as a 'pretty shop' attracting 'much attention' (Lord, 1969, *op. cit.*, p.99).

<sup>55</sup> Sand's, *op. cit.*, 1932-33, p.1542.

<sup>56</sup> *Herself*, vol. 2, no. 3, 5 July 1930, p.12.

<sup>57</sup> Peter McNeil, *Designing Women*, MA Research Thesis, Australian National University, 1993.

<sup>58</sup> Thieme, Otto Charles, *Avant Garde by the Yard. Cutting Edge Textile Design 1880-1930*, Cincinnati Art Museum, 1996.

<sup>59</sup> Ian Dungavell, 'Moly-Sabata Dangar. The Pottery of Anne Dangar', *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, no. 11, 1993, p.17.

<sup>60</sup> Dungavell, *op. cit.*

<sup>61</sup> Bell, p.12. Lewers' later exercises in 1950s garden design, a type of modern *chinoiserie*, also connect her work to the earlier ideas of W Hardy Wilson, whose interest in both Georgian simplicity and Asian models permitted his clients to break with Victorian and Edwardian *horror vacui*. There is also *chinoiserie* in Marion Hall Best's colour schemes, use of South-East Asian vegetation and notions of tenting.

<sup>62</sup> Editorial, *Art in Australia*, March 1930, unpaginated.





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Above Images: (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) Marion Hall Best Shopping bag, swing tags and business cards; Marea Gazzard From the 'Boulder' series 1966 handcoiled earthenware 50 x 47 cm; Gordon Andrews Wrapping papers for David Jones Ltd c.1949; Wolf Bauer (Germany) *Collage* for Knoll Textiles, New York 1969 silk, cotton velvet.

**Women of Influence**

Marion Hall Best, Margaret Jaye and Margo Lewers  
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Curators: Bryan Fitzgerald and Allan Walpole

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