Historical regard: how tertiary art and design education were valued in the early twentieth century.

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BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS:

Elise is a PhD candidate and graphic designer with a long connection to Federation University Australia (FedUni) and its antecedent institutions. Elise graduated from the university in 1992 and returned as a sessional lecturer before establishing a graphic design studio with her husband in 1998. The university is a key client. Elise's thesis explores the influences and impact of one of these institutions, the Ballarat Technical Art School, with particular reference to design and applied art education during the early twentieth century.

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ABSTRACT:

of individuals.

Financial calamities during the last two centuries lent impetus to arguments for increased technical training that would facilitate industrial competitiveness and growth. Yet economic struggles were not the only incentives for the teaching of art and design, which also included

social, cultural, political and philosophical motivations.

As global connections were forged, and transnational exchange was rendered ordinary, many countries utilised visual culture, and therefore art education, to highlight commercial differences and reinforce national identities. Building the visual vocabulary of Australians became particularly pertinent as international styles began to enter the country. It was also commonly believed the taste of whole social groups could be cultivated through the training

The acts of designing and making were considered a nexus for mind, eyes and hands. The knowledge and skills developed were deemed portable, useful in life beyond art, and occasionally on par with numeracy and literacy. For the individual, there is an innate value to designing and creating in and of itself.

This paper will explore how art and design education were valued historically through the incentives for technical and applied art training during the early twentieth century. The Ballarat Technical Art School will serve as a mooring from which to explore shared concepts of non-economic value in art and design education.

KEYWORDS:

Design | Education | History | Australia | Value

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As the last leaves of nineteenth century calendars fell away, Australian authorities aimed to facilitate industrial competitiveness and growth by improving technical training and applying art to industry. Technical art schools thus embodied the three pillars of art, science and trade and occasionally bristled with the tension this created. To serve industry, the traditional conventions of disciplined, scaffolded art instruction were maintained. Meanwhile, art students and staff sought to embrace new thinking about individual expression, creativity and spontaneity. This duality created a taut paradox (Stankiewicz 2009).

Technical art institutions traversed the terrain between art and science. Scientific outcomes, by their nature, were quantifiable. The legitimacy of art's value could appear less stable by equal measure. Thus, many stakeholders sought to justify the currency of their field.

It is important to acknowledge the porous boundaries between fine art, applied art, craft and design — more than a century of debate has failed to establish anything like firm distinctions. However, it can be argued that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century these areas overlapped heavily. In fact, many individuals undertook work across several fields, owing largely to 'having a stomach to fill and a back to cover' (Dickinson, S 1890 in Smith [ed.] 1975, 247). As such, technical art institutions at this time served multiple purposes: to train artists, to train artisans, and to train art teachers.

Art sympathisers claimed that visual art culture was essential to the exploitation of industrial resources for economic benefit. However, financial advantage was not the only incentive for the teaching of art and design. Understood to improve visual literacy and manual dexterity, art training was considered the substructure of many trades and crafts. Of the 18 crafts and trades examined by the Victorian Department of Public Instruction in 1904, 10 directly applied art to industry, with art an important element of another five (Victoria. Education Department [VED] 1905, p. 67). Engagement in art practice was believed to foster moral fortitude, reinforce national identity, enable social change, and furnish participants with discerning taste. Thus drawing, and to a lesser extent modelling, were valued across all stages of education.

TEACHING ART TEACHERS

Art education in Victoria was valued from kindergarten through to tertiary training, and art educator training was tailored according to teacher level and school type. Drawing was a critical explanatory skill for generalist teachers, and therefore a foundation subject of teaching certificates. With limited access to diverse visual resources, teachers acted as pictorial repositories, capable of illustrating images and demonstrating concepts as necessary.

In addition to drawing, handcraft was promoted by Victoria's Inspector of Manual Training. Sloyd, an anglicised Swedish term for manual arts, became synonymous with woodwork in Australia, but the intellectual, moral and practical principles it embodied were applicable to any material. Its popularity within junior schools increased demand for qualified teachers of 'elementary crafts'. In response, a three-year, practise-led Manual Arts course was introduced in 1909. Students undertook a crammed curriculum that included design, decoration, painting, stencilling, modelling, wood and metal work, dressmaking and millinery, in addition to 'Theory of Teaching', causing at least one student to lament 'we will know a little of everything and nothing in particular' (*The SMB* 1921, p.23). Despite its rigorous nature the course remained popular, and its graduates influenced generations of children throughout Victoria. (*Technical Education in Victoria* 1934, p. 21).

THE CULTIVATION OF TASTE

Trained art teachers were just one of the outputs of technical art schools, the predominant remit being to instruct artists and artisans. However, the system also served another purpose in the eyes of art educationalists — to educate the public (Victoria, Board of Inquiry into the Working Men's College [BIWMC] 1911, p. 130).

During the nineteenth century, cultural champions emerged to establish public art institutions throughout the Australian colonies. These advocates of pictorial art believed access to fine art galleries would impart a refining influence over people, including the rough and ready stragglers of the gold rush (Powell 1887). The wobbling confidence of many Australians at the time meant visiting international exhibitions were prized for what local art students might learn, thus raising the standard of art work (*Education Gazette* [EdGaz] 1910, p32). The tendency of Australians to look outward does not imply that local design wasn't valued.

However, efforts to train local artisans seemed wasted if the Australian public were unable to appreciate their work. The motivation instead was to change consumer taste, by improving Australian design, in order that consumers would prefer local products. Here, and elsewhere in the world, the applied artist was tasked with elevating culture while undertaking training to better recognise and accommodate movements in public taste.¹

An appreciation of good design could be imbued in students who had no intention of seeking employment. Even the much maligned lady amateurs, with a well-trained eye, would create demand for good art through discerning purchases and, 'as future mothers' influence successive generations (VED 1915, p.91).

VISUAL LITERACY, MANUAL DEXTERITY AND MATERIAL AWARENESS

The acts of designing and making were considered a nexus for mind, eyes and hands. Even at primary school level, manual training was considered critical to intellectual development. Craft established 'a new path of communication between brain and hand,' promoting different ways of thinking which would, in turn, improve mathematical ability, spatial awareness, and oral and written expression (EdGaz 1907, pp. 42–43).

Art was considered the 'language of many industries' (BIWMC 1911, p.129). However, the coded syntax of visual forms can be read in a multitude of dialects. A sculptor does not necessarily understand the pictorial vernacular of the typographer, cartographer or publication designer (Boughton 1986). Thus, in order to maximise employability, technical art students undertook wide-ranging studies, working freehand in some subjects and with mathematical instruments in others.

Drawing and modeling were the cornerstones of technical art programs. Students worked from historical examples, nature, life and from memory. General Design examination candidates responded to one of several design questions, each with a specific commercial or domestic context. Subject options in the 1915 examination included a concert program, an enamel clasp, a cottage sideboard, a stencilled frieze, stained glass panel, wrought iron gate or a silk fan. Pencil, chalk, charcoal, and pen and ink were all acceptable drawing mediums,

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See for examples: Britain (Cunliffe-Charlesworth, 1991, 2); USA (Hopkins, JR, Hekking, WM & Weinberg, L 1917, 31); and Chile (Espinoza, 2009, 76).

as were oils, watercolour and gouache. (Victoria. Education Department Examination [Exam] 1915, p. 110).

Modelled Design examinations offered equally varied options. Modeling was considered an excellent method of bimanual training and the basis of many art trades. Clay was cheap and accessible and served as a proxy material for other media including wood, leather, stone, metal and plaster. To the frustration of the State's Inspector of Art, modeling was not offered at the National Gallery Art School for many years. It therefore differentiated technical and fine art training in Victoria.

Art and craft practice became increasingly important in the early twentieth century. Concerns were raised as early as 1884 that Britain's pervasive National Course of Instruction (emanating from South Kensington, London) was not suited to the applied and decorative arts. It was criticised for its two-dimensional focus, lack of practical work, and inexperienced graduates (Macdonald 2005). Disapproval of design without application was also being voiced across the Atlantic (Caffin 1899). It became increasingly evident that working within the limitations of each material, in addition to the constraints of the design brief, challenged designers to innovate (Duncan 1900, p.264; Christie 1910, p.68). Victoria's Inspector of Technical Schools claimed teachers with hands-on, material experience were invaluable (VED 1915, p. 91).

At the Ballarat Technical Art School, staff and students worked collaboratively on private and government commissions, enmeshing the creation, development and application of knowledge. In contemporary terms, it was a dynamic community of practice (Wenger, Trayner, and de Laat 2011). Importantly, art knowledge and craft skills were transferable; useful in life beyond art. Art education was emphatically championed as 'an essential part of the education of students of science and trade work,' (BIWMC 1911, p.16).

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND COMMERCIAL DIFFERENCE

During the late nineteenth century the application of national styles served a 'vigorous restatement of national identities' in many Western countries (Julier 2005, p. 25). The illusion of a single national identity aside, it is unsurprising that Australians also sought to adorn the fresh face of their newly Federated country. Some artists felt local flora and fauna offered motifs for a national art, an attitude reflected in exams that asked candidates to illustrate

sprays of indigenous plants. Increasingly however, such parochial imagery was a source of Antipodean shame for modern artists who considered themselves global citizens.

To cross the divide between isolationism and globalisation, a few artists chose to appropriate and adapt Indigenous art. While ancient, the distinct forms and vitality of Aboriginal art resonated with adherents of the Australian modern movement. Problematically, the aesthetic of Indigenous art was taken out of its original context, adopted without awareness of its symbology and applied to commercial conditions. It was an illegitimate solution for non-Indigenous Australian artists.

Despite these efforts, identification of an Australian style remained elusive. Today, it can be argued that Australian, British and global forces meshed to produce a unique hybrid (Dickenson, J 2014), an organic amalgam to cure the nation's colonial hangover and assert an independent identity.

During this period organisations such as the Australian Natives' Association (ANA), comprised of Australian-born children of colonizers and settlers, who identified themselves as 'native', expressed the view that art could highlight the value of local materials, and were highly active in promoting Australian-made products. Britain and Canada were similarly motivated to support home-grown artistic wares by equalling the quality of design found elsewhere (Chalmers 2005, p.216).

World War I exacerbated Commonwealth fears of Germany's technical superiority, further motivating governments to improve local design and manufacturing. It also highlighted the value of art in promoting a national unity and boosting morale. Drawings and illustrations were utilised by Australian publishers to poke fun at the nation's enemies while reinforcing a sense of unity and pride (Moore 1934). This type of publication was not limited to large-scale enterprises such as the *Bulletin* or the *Aussie*. Some individual digger units and troop carriers conscripted on-board artists and writers to produce their own magazines.

CULTURAL ENRICHMENT AND AESTHETIC APPRECIATION

The role of the industrial artist, according to one observer, was 'to adapt his forms to the conditions of manufacture, to grasp the necessities of local trade, and at the same time design with a knowledge of the principles and history of his craft,' (Dods 1917). The historic catalogue of world designs was considered to be 'of no small value to the historian' demonstrating, as they did, commonalities, differences and possible migratory trajectories

(Christie 1910, p.81). A critical understanding of historic styles continued to be important to designers throughout the twentieth century, expanding the range of their visual vocabulary (Schenk 1991, p.170).

Embedded into South Kensington-style curricula were subjects such as Historic Ornament, in which centuries of pattern and decorative styles were to be committed to memory. In light of this, schools with a substantial reference library held an advantage. In 1905, only six technical art schools had what was considered a standard book of reference on historic ornamental styles, and limited plaster replicas meant it was impossible to deliver the subject consistently across institutions. Books enabled study of key periods globally, however the majority of casts accessed by schools were from European Renaissance sources (VED 1905, p.67). Australian guardians of British culture held staunchly to historical content in art education (Topliss 1996, p.29), however, exposure to quality Australian art was increasingly valued as a tool for cultural enrichment, and art school collections began to acquire examples to 'teach students about Australian cultural heritage and to encourage appreciation of art' (Collet 2009).

In addition to historic ornamentation, technical art students were obliged to commit human and plant forms to memory, and recall, reference and replicate them under exam conditions. Human Anatomy entailed memorising the skeletal and muscular systems and their effects on the external human shape, both static and in motion. Drawing Plant Forms required a mental archive of Australian and imported botanical imagery, including the natural growth of the plant, stem, leaf, flower and fruit. These elements were to be accurately illustrated then translated into stylised, design outcomes.

MORAL IMPROVEMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The Victorian-era ethos of Mechanics' Institutes continued to colour technical training after they had themselves largely faded. Their mandate to deliver moral improvement alongside knowledge is echoed in the benefits ascribed to art and craft training, including the 'habits of cleanliness, self-reliance, perseverance' and a love of honest work (EdGaz 1907, p.43). In art, as in literature, aesthetic appreciation could be considered an antidote to the demoralizing aspects of life (EdGaz 1910, p.25).

Art education attracted the *noblesse oblige* of successful, public-minded individuals, who helped found art galleries and schools around the country, further demonstrating the perceived moral and social value of art. President of the Working Men's College Melbourne asserted the commercial value of technical training was secondary to 'good honest work rendered, because of its own self and its value in building up character'. He claimed 'the people perish' where there is no artistic vision (*Star*, 24 July 1915, SMB Newspaper Cuttings [SMBNCa] 1915, p.66). In this holistic view, art education served industry, individuals and society collectively.

To repatriate servicemen returning from the First World War (many whose educations had been interrupted by enlisting), governments established retraining opportunities. Additional space and equipment was granted to schools, however the Repatriation Department was unprepared for the severity of the physical and emotional disabilities that limited tradetraining options for many men. Art classes provided accessible rehabilitation and the opportunity for apply skills to industry. Participants of the Art Metal course at Ballarat, for example, established a successful business (*Courier*, 10 February 1921, SMBNCb, p.6).

The repatriation training experience delivered two positive social lessons, that older students could learn new skills, and that people with disabilities were able to work productively (Clark 1929, p34). In addition, evening classes offered education to people disadvantaged by the necessity of work during the day (Knott 2014). Purists however, who believed technical art schools served only industry, were known to scoff at the hobbyists and amateurs who sometimes attended these classes.

Just as art and craft practices were believed to boost established moral values, they also provided the opportunity for Modern artists to eschew tradition for new experiences (Carter 2008). The arts offered a relatively socially acceptable way for young women to escape convention. Some schools actively encouraged women to enrol, marketing many streams as 'good avenues for successful employment', either within a business or freelance (*The Ballarat School of Mines and Industries: Prospectus B*, 1915, 11). For a time, acceptable job roles for women expanded, and trained men could set their own terms. The Great Depression of the 1930s, however, stripped men of their power to negotiate and ultimately their jobs. Society railed against women who worked when so many men were unemployed.

Freshly minted career girls were subverted to their former roles 'of home-maker and child-bearer,' (Burke 1980, p.73).

Art education was employed as an instructional tool across disciplines, and in particular, nature studies. Australian educationalists suggested art encouraged awareness of environmental issues. Drawing Australian indigenous plants might save native trees from ruthless and indiscriminate ringbarking (EdGaz 1909, p. 314). Working with materials such as wood was hoped to reduce the 'reckless cutting down of our forests' by raising awareness of materials, geography and the impacts of forest clearing on landscape and climate. (EdGaz 1903, p. 43).

INDIVIDUALS AND OBJECTS

Humans rely on culture to 'direct our behaviour and organise our experience' (Crotty 1998). Organisational perspectives (cultural, educational and governmental) so far dominate this historic valuation of art education and its advantages for society. Individuals undertaking art training might value the experience differently. Undertaking tertiary education was one way in which a person could accumulate cultural capital and distinguish themselves from other people. The degree of training, the particular discipline, the institution in which they studied, all had currency. Some people sought art training to add to their accomplishments, for personal gratification or improvement. Others, not obliged to work, undertook art studies purely for the joy of exploration, experimentation and creation; but this leads us into realms where formal education holds little sway and the cult of the artist-as-genius begins.

The art objects produced by students learning their craft embody value also. Burgeoning museum collections indicate that material culture had long been appreciated, however artefacts are usually compared (consciously or subconsciously) 'to a standard corpus of canonical works' (Moxey 1994, p.39). The value of highlighted works is reinforced via the cyclical re-consumption of a suite of styles and artists, served up from the platters of educational institutions, galleries, dealers and collectors. Student artwork, however, moves our attention away from the carefully curated and published successes of hero-artists and designers. Instead it allows examination of sketched, unfinished and mocked-up work, providing fresh insights into the praxis of teaching and learning art.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored how art and design education were valued historically through incentives for delivering technical and applied art training during the early twentieth century.

In addition to a vocation, individuals sought pleasure and prestige from art training. For organisational stakeholders, art education was a national investment that could influence the allegiances and cultural tastes of whole social groups. Art training established valuable interconnections between eyes, brain and body and skills acquired were deemed portable, affording value to society beyond the primary act of making art objects.

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