

## SIDE BY SIDE

Japanese Visions: Work from The  
Collection of Bendigo Art Gallery

Bendigo Art Gallery

Victoria

1 December 2012–27 January 2013

Drawing from Bendigo Art Gallery's collection, curator Alva Maguire brings together the print works of Japanese and Australian artists, tracing the influences of nineteenth-century Japonisme on Modernism, as well as the development of a striking Australian printmaking aesthetic. The collection of twenty-five *Ukiyo-e* (pictures of the floating world) woodblock prints, bequeathed to the gallery several decades ago, includes early nineteenth- to mid-twentieth-century artists such as Ando Hiroshige, Utagawa Kunimasa and Konobu Hasegawa.

These works are juxtaposed with prints by Australian artists including Lionel Lindsay, Margaret Preston, Thea Proctor, Eveline Syme, Ethel Spowers, Dorrit Black and Murray Griffin, showing strong links between content, techniques, materials and composition.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Japan reopened trade with the west, flooding Europe with Japanese arts. A decade later, the 1862 London World Exposition exhibited Japanese woodblock prints, further promoting its widespread influence on western art. As students, many of the Australian artists in this exhibition travelled and studied in Europe where they were heavily exposed to the Japonisme embraced by painters such as Vuillard, Van Gogh, Monet, Whistler and Conder.

In the Japanese woodblock prints, the focus on aspects of the natural world: seasons, natural wonders, animals, or on the figurative: ritual, fable, everyday occupations, is reflected in the content of the Australian work. In Griffin's representation of the ducks in *The Wild Duck*, the background is reduced to horizontal lines and muted autumnal colours. This simplicity of line against the detail on the duck itself achieves a sense of space and ultimately stillness, of capturing the wild quietly.

Proctor's work, often associated with the work of Conder, here in *Women with Fans* celebrates the courtesan or the beautiful women depicted in Japanese prints. Lowered eyes and lowered fans both hide and reveal, a tension characteristic in depictions of Japanese courtship rituals. Again the monochromatic print and tightly cropped figures owe much to a Japanese aesthetic. Proctor, however, presents these figures in a distinctly Australian context — on a chaise longue with Sydney Harbour in the background.

The scope of art in this exhibition also reveals something of the changes that were taking place in printmaking. Japanese woodblock printing methods, introduced to Britain in the late 1800s, had established a zealous following that promoted and guarded the extreme technical demands. In the early 1900s, their position was threatened by the introduction of the linocut, until then considered a child's art education tool. Claude Flight, a pioneer of linocut techniques, was teaching at The Grosvenor School of Modern Art in London, where his students included the Australian artists Eveline Syme, Ethel Spowers and Dorrit Black. Through his new medium, Flight, influenced by the futurists and the depiction of the speed of the machine age, introduced these artists to geometrically reduced forms and bold-blocked colour. □



Top: Ando Hiroshige, *A Spring Moonlight Scene at Shinyasgijima in Yedo (Tokyo)*, c.1840s, colour woodcut, Bendigo Art Gallery Collection.

Above: Ethel Spowers, *The Green Bridge*, 1926, colour linocut, Bendigo Art Gallery Collection.