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## LAURAINÉ · DIGGINS · FINE · ART



**BESSIE ELLEN DAVIDSON 1879 - 1965**

*Lecture au Jardin (Reading in the Garden)*

oil on plywood panel

94 x 114 cm

signed lower right: Bessie Davidson

***Provenance:***

private collection, Normandy, France

Maîtres Patrice Biget et Frédéric Nowakowski, d'Alençon, France, 31 May 2014, as

*Lecture au Jardin*

corporate collection, Melbourne

Bowls of flowers, quiet interiors, or women reading, Bessie Davidson excelled in painting still life. There are no heroics or grand narratives. For her the subject was the formal elements of paintings, composition, form, colour and texture, thoroughly French in feeling and mood. Even her models were drawn from the familiar, her sister and niece, or close friends. The sitter in *Madame Le Roy Assise de dos dans un Intérieur* of c.1920 (National Gallery of Australia, Canberra), is her friend Marguerite Le Roy. The Montparnasse apartment interior in which she reads is the artist's. Paris became Davidson's home, her light filled paintings becoming progressively freer and more semi-abstract in the later years of the twenties and onwards.

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The verve and spontaneity with which the French Impressionists recorded the visual pleasures of the everyday and its transient moments brought a reaction with a greater sense of form and compositional structure, as found in the work of Paul Cézanne and his fellow Post Impressionists. The combination in *Reading in the Garden* is quite fascinating. The vivacity of Davidson's brushwork is so suited to capturing a moment of leisure; but form and setting are well constructed out of the paint's fabric. Penelope Little, in her excellent book on Davidson, observed, 'It is interesting to speculate with what awareness Bessie slipped into the post-impressionistic, "Cézannesque" style that characterised her most confident and productive years'.<sup>1</sup> The presence of Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard, two other French artists she admired, can also be felt in her otherwise immensely independent art. In *Reading in the Garden*, a work of her later years, perhaps the thirties, the handling of paint is masterly. Tightly controlled and built up, the faceted colours delight in subtle combinations and harmonies. The diagonals are powerful. Add in the striking emphasis on the picture plane and you have a painting with all the fascinating richness of a Persian rug - and more. The illusion of a tunnelled view through the trees to the landscape beyond engenders an absorbing interplay between depth and surface flatness, leading the eye on further discoveries of aesthetic delight. Its self-assurance commands attention.

Subjects of women reading, a book or letter in hand, run through Davidson's oeuvre. Notable examples are in private collections include *Le Livre Vert (The Green Book)* of 1912; *Jeune Femme Lisant (Young Woman Reading)* c.1915; and *Jeune Femme Lisant une Lettre (Young Woman Reading a Letter)*.<sup>2</sup> *La Robe Jaune*, 1931, also held privately, offers the related subject of a woman seated in another light-filled garden, but much freer in handling and dominated by the colour of the dress. In Paris, Davidson is represented in the collections of the Musée d'Art Moderne, Musée d'Orsay and the Musée du Petit Palais, and in such prestigious Australian collections as the National Gallery of Australia and the Art Gallery of South Australia. While Australian collectors have been slow to respond to her talents, this painting is yet another example of why her star will continue to rise.

David Thomas, 2016

1. Little, Penelope, *A Studio in Montparnasse: Bessie Davidson: An Australian Artist in Paris*, Craftsman House, Melbourne, 2003, p.87

2. Little, (2003), plates 10, 21 and 25 respectively