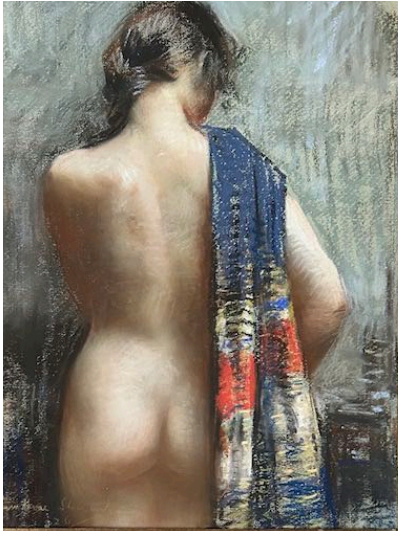


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A CLOSER LOOK AT...

Pastels by Janet Cumbrae Stewart and Florence Rodway



Janet Cumbrae Stewart *The Old Shawl* 1926
pastel on paper 35 x 27 cm



Florence Rodway *Portrait of a Woman* 1935
pastel on paper 50 x 40 cm

Pastel is a medium of ground pigments mixed with binder, often presented in a stick form, allowing for vibrant colour and are produced in a large range of colours. The technique dates back to the Renaissance and flourished in the 18th century, particularly for portraiture, through artists such as Rosalba Carriera and Jean-Baptiste Chardin, and again in the 19th century, favoured by Edgar Degas. Pastel can be manipulated in a variety of ways, using broad strokes or more defined lines or in a more painterly way, blending colours together or mixed with water and applied with a brush. The pigment sits on the paper and accordingly, special textured paper is usually preferred. The powdery nature of pastel means such works are inherently fragile. A fixative can be used, although this will alter the brightness and flatten the pigment, so some artists prefer not to use this option.

Two Australian artists who were acclaimed for their pastel technique are Janet Cumbrae Stewart and Florence Rodway. We are pleased to currently have eye-catching works by each of these artists, allowing us to take a closer look at their mastery of pastel.

Both artists were recognised and acclaimed in their time for their pastel works. However, both have suffered from the common fate of many female artists who have become overlooked and 'rediscovered' from the 1970s continuing to today. Further, the general fragility of pastel works means they may not have survived or cannot be regularly displayed or easily lent. Much of Rodway's work was portraiture, which may have been commissioned and retained by family members so that her work is not common on the market.

Indeed, an article in 1939 (*Many Women Painters of Talent Have Made Mark in Australia*) lamented the loss of both Janet Cumbrae Stewart and Florence Rodway from the art scene.

“On the subject of women painters in Australia, it is queer where some of them get to. **Florence Rodway. one of the finest pastellists we have ever had**, suddenly arranged to get married in 1916, and has never been heard of from that day to this.

Janet Cumbrae-Stewart, after a **triumphal sojourn in England**, where she numbered among her patrons Queen Mary, King George and a great number of nobility, besides the principal English and Continental galleries, returned to Australia two years ago, took a cottage in the country with a young girl from Chelsea, and since then has never been seen or heard of. **This is a great pity, for the absence of offerings from these two very distinguished women painters in a great loss to Australian art. Let us hope that one day they will burst on us with a fanfare of trumpets and an astonishing display, for their work was very beautiful and sane.**” *News* (Adelaide) Thurs 10 Aug 1939 p.16

So let the trumpets blare as we take a closer look at works by these talented artists.



Florence Rodway won a scholarship to attend the Royal Academy School in London (1902-1906 and where she was influenced by John Singer Sargent) after early studies in Tasmania. She returned to Sydney where she regularly exhibited at the Society of Artists and was a foundation member of the Society of Women Painters in 1910, the same year the Art Gallery of New South Wales purchased two of her works. She studied at the Julian Ashton School under Sydney Long and also worked producing black and white illustrations for journals including the *Lone Hand*. Rodway became known for her portrait work, usually focussing on a single figure. She continued to establish a significant reputation, particularly in her favoured medium of pastel and was sought after for portrait commissions from both institutions and private clients, including Dame Nellie Melba; J. F. Archibald (her portrait being a finalist in the inaugural Archibald prize); Julian Ashton and Henry Lawson.

After her marriage in 1920 her output decreased somewhat although her work was included in Society of Artists Exhibition of Australian Art in London (1923) and the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley (1924) and Australian Artists' Work at the Imperial Institute in London (1928), an indication of her standing at the time. In 1932, Rodway moved to Hobart with her husband and daughter, establishing a studio and continuing her artistic pursuits, with exhibitions in 1941 and in 1948 with Edith Holmes and again in 1953.

The Mercury reported on her exhibition (29 August 1941) that the works comprised portraits of Hobart persons, including children. "They exert a strong attraction because of their vitality, which comes of a sure technique blended with sensitiveness. They are finely drawn, and tonal delicacy is combined with bold colour treatment."

In Rodway's *Portrait*, we are intrigued by the modern woman meeting the viewer's gaze, in the manner of Preston's *Flapper* (1925, collection of the National Gallery of Australia) and Hilda Rix Nicholas' *Une Australienne* (1926, collection of the National Gallery of Australia).

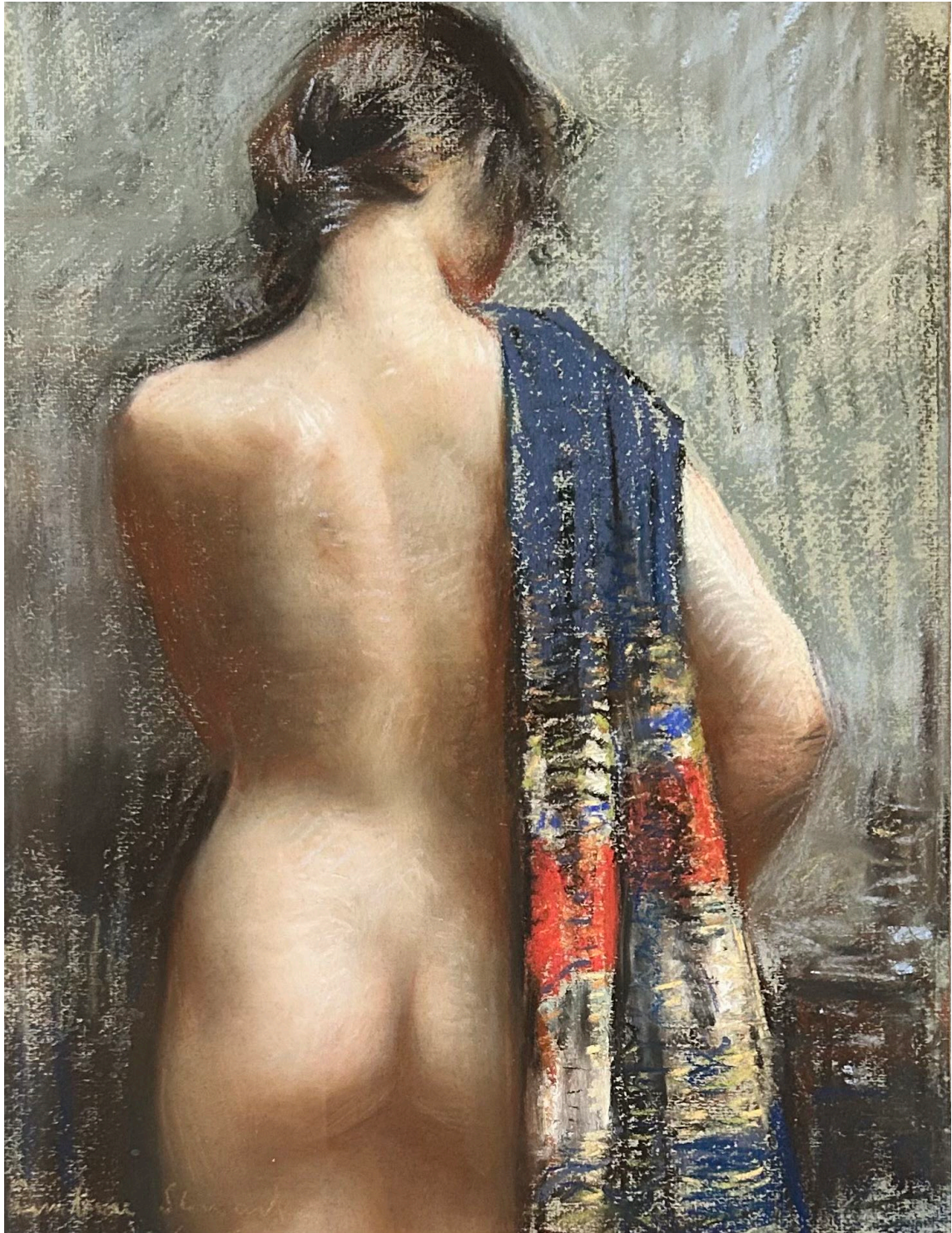
Rodway has presented her sitter front on and with a great degree of directness with a focus on the face, the background seeming to support and highlight the figure and at the same time, simply melt away. Her outfit transports us to another era. Rodway uses bold, broken, parallel, vigorous linear strokes and strong colour focus. There is a sense of dynamism and we feel the presence of the sitter. Her ability to capture the essence of her sitter saw Rodway as a highly sought after portraitist and she was a finalist in the Archibald Prize in 1921, 1923 and 1942. An article in 1935 singled her out as a possible future prize winner, calling out for women artists to be recognised. It took until Nora Heysen's win in 1938 for the first woman to win the Archibald.

"Florence Rodway, for instance, who won a bronze medal for the outstanding portrait study in the Paris Salon some years ago, painted the finest portrait of the late Sir Harry Rawson in his Admiral's kit, which Sydney possesses. It hangs in the main entrance hall of Government House. ... The future should surely hold a winner if feminine studios when the Archibald prize is handed out." Sydney Budget of Women's News Archibald Prize Sidelights, *The Telegraph* (Brisbane) Thus 24 Jan 1935 p. 16

Janet Cumbrae Stewart's early teachers included John Mather, and Bernard Hall and Fred McCubbin at the National Gallery School and she regularly exhibited with the Victorian Artists' Society 1909 -19 and was elected to council in 1914. She continued her career in London and exhibited at Beaux Arts Gallery, London 1924 -31 and was included in the Paris Salon and the Royal Academy. She returned to Australia in 1939, remaining due to the war. Cumbrae Stewart was celebrated in her lifetime with exhibitions, awards (receiving an honourable mention at the Old Salon, Paris in 1923) and commissions. Further recognition of her work was promoted by the Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery exhibition in 2003, *The Perfect Touch*.

Cumbræ Stewart's work comprised portraits, landscapes, and still lifes, particularly flower studies however she is most well known for depicting the female nude in pastel. These works were not driven by a narrative focus, rather the sensuous and gracefulness of the figure with a focus on colour and texture.

Cumbræ Stewart's artwork is today viewed through a lens acknowledging her lesbian sexual preferences, providing another layer of intimacy to her celebration of the female form.



In *The Old Shawl* we see a device favoured by Cumbræ Stewart, with a shawl draped over the model's shoulder, providing a contrast between the richly coloured material and the soft flesh tones, offset by the model's dark hair. With her head turned to the right, allowing for a tension in the pose where the left shoulder, right elbow and the gentle profile are highlighted.

This work appears to be a study for a pastel dated 1927, which sold through Sothebys in 2007, *Nude with Shawl*, showing the same material over the model's right shoulder.



Nude With Shawl 1927 pastel on paper 53.5 x 43 cm

In each of these artworks, the delicacy of the pastel medium is matched with a vigour in the strokes on the paper and pastel lends itself to capturing both luminous skin tones contrasted against bold blue and red in the Cumbræ Stewart and velvety black in the Rodway. The sketchy nature of the background in each accentuates the figure.

It is a privilege to be able to exhibit these artworks side by side to appreciate the mastery of each of these artists in their favoured pastel and to resound the fanfare for the names Florence Rodway and Janet Cumbræ Stewart.

Both these artworks will be showing at the *Australian Art and Antique Dealers Association Art Fair* at The Great Hall, Sydney University, 31 August – 3 September 2023.



FLORENCE ALINE RODWAY 1881 – 1971

Represented in the following selected collections:

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane
Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart
National Library of Australia, Canberra
State Library of Victoria, Melbourne
Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney
WL Crowther Library, State Library of Tasmania, Hobart
Parliament House, Canberra
Australian War Memorial, Canberra

JANET CUMBRAE STEWART 1883 - 1960

Represented in the following selected collections:

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
Northern Territory Museum and Art Gallery, Darwin
National Library of Australia, Canberra
Bendigo Art Gallery, Bendigo
Hamilton Art Gallery, Hamilton
Cruthers Collection of Women's Art at the University of Western Australia

For further details about both these artists:

Design and Art Australian Online

Australian Dictionary of Biography

Ambrus, Caroline, *Australian Women Artists: First Fleet to 1945: History, Hearsay and Her Say*, Irrepressible Press, Woden, 1992

Burke, Janine, *Australian Women Artists 1840 – 1940*, Greenhouse Publications, Collingwood, 1980

Kerr, Joan (ed.), *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book*, G&B Arts International in association with Craftsman House, Australia, 1995

Finucane, Paul & Stuart, Catherine, *Odd Roads to be Walking: 156 Women Who Shaped Australian Art*, Red Barn Publishing, Ireland, 2019

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