



# MARGARET PRESTON ART AND LIFE

## EDUCATION KIT

ART  
GALLERY  
NSW

Art Gallery of New South Wales 29 July – 23 October 2005  
National Gallery of Victoria 12 November 2005 – 29 January 2006  
Queensland Art Gallery 18 February – 7 May 2006  
Art Gallery of South Australia 26 May – 13 August 2006



Margaret Preston in 1894, aged 19  
Photographer unknown, National Gallery of Australia, courtesy of the artist's family

## Margaret Preston (1875–1963)

If Margaret Preston had been a man I feel sure she would have enjoyed a public reputation equally as great as Dobell, Drysdale or Nolan in our time. But she was belligerently and seductively a woman, proud of it, and imperious in her demand that she be accepted as an artist.

AGNSW director Hal Missingham, 1963 <sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Margaret Preston was one of Australia's most celebrated modern artists. Her paintings and prints of the 1920s, 30s and 40s ushered in an era of new modernity, while her forceful opinions, expressed in a wide range of lectures, interviews and writings, established her as one of the most provocative public voices of the time. In a career which extended over five decades, she reinvigorated still-life painting, a marginalised genre in Australia, through a constant re-invention of its forms and an engagement with the central challenges of modernist expression.

Preston's work and her incessant experimentation reflect her constant drive to produce a modern national art based on the principles and motifs of Asian, modernist and Aboriginal art. As Australia's first serious artist-advocate of Aboriginal art, Preston's promotion and appropriation of its imagery has contributed to her ongoing significance and controversy. As well as her innovative artistic career, Preston actively promoted her ideas on Australian culture, cementing her place as an independent and influential woman of her time.

*Margaret Preston: art and life* is the first major retrospective exhibition of the artistic career and life of this important Australian, showcasing over 200 examples of her finest work, including painting, printmaking, ceramics, textiles, illustrative work, photographs and documents. The curator, Deborah Edwards, and co-curator, conservator Rose Peel, have spent five years locating works for this exhibition. The exhibition is presented as a set of experiences, organised chronologically through the decades of Margaret Preston's career.

**This indeed is a brain with unlimited invention, which has never once repeated itself ... we have a distinguished and original artist in Australia – an artist with abundant vitality ... the intellectual gift of invention and an emotional colour sense which amounts to genius.** Thea Proctor, artist, 1927 <sup>2</sup>



Margaret Preston at work in her studio, Adelaide c1909  
Photograph courtesy of the State Library of South Australia

## Margaret Preston: life

**1875** Margaret Rose McPherson born on 29 April in Port Adelaide, South Australia.

**1880s–90s** By the late 1880s Preston had embarked on a studentship which encompassed almost a decade of training in both the fine arts and crafts. During her time at the prestigious National Gallery School in Melbourne, where she trained in 1893 under Frederick McCubbin and again in 1896–97 under the school's director Bernard Hall, she made the important decision to focus on still-life painting, despite a larger school focus on landscape and figure painting.

**1900s–10s** Returning to Adelaide, Preston established a growing reputation as a tonal realist painter, committed to the traditional depictive function of art. After two years in Munich and Paris (1904–06), where she travelled and studied with her former pupil Bessie Davidson, she began to experiment more widely with colour. However it was during her next trip (1912–19), spent living in Paris and the United Kingdom with artist Gladys Reynell, that Preston's academic tonalism was dramatically superseded by a concern with decorative or abstract values which she gleaned from European post-impressionism and the work of Japanese printmakers of the *ukiyo-e* tradition.

Preston exhibited extensively in London and Paris. She also taught consistently, taking groups of students to the Irish coastal village of Bunmahon (then Bonmahon) in 1915 and the Cotswold village of Bibury in Gloucestershire in 1916 on summer painting excursions. In 1918 she also taught craft to shell-shocked soldiers at the Seale-Hayne Hospital in Devon. Preston returned to Australia in 1919 with Lieutenant William Preston, a company director; they married in Adelaide on 31 December 1919.

**1920s** William and Margaret Preston moved to Sydney in 1920, where the artist embarked on a dramatic new phase of her career and moved to the forefront of Australian progressive art. With her decorative post-impressionist paintings and colour woodblock prints (which she revived as a modern artform in Australia), Preston became one of the country's most significant modern practitioners. After two decades of exploring the craft of her art, she now focused on its cultural application, developing a preoccupation with the idea of forging a modern, distinctly Australian art. She published a series of articles directing Australian artists and craftspeople to seek inspiration for a national art through the traditions of Pacific, Melanesian and Aboriginal art and in the late 1920s produced a number of major paintings inspired by Aboriginal art.



Preston woodblock printing, Berowra 1937  
Photograph by F J Haimarick, Fairfaxphoto

Preston's substantial profile as an exhibitor was amplified through the support of art entrepreneur Sydney Ure Smith, publisher of *Art in Australia*, the *Home* and later *Australia National Journal* where Preston's art and writings were featured. In December 1927, *Art in Australia* devoted a special edition to her work and in 1929, Ure Smith and Leon Gellert published *Margaret Preston recent paintings*, a deluxe portfolio highlighting key paintings and woodblock prints from Preston's successful solo exhibition in August 1929.

Preston's exceptional position within the Sydney art establishment was formalised by an invitation from the trustees of the Art Gallery of NSW (in December 1929) to paint a self-portrait for the collection 'with a view to perpetuating the names of Australian artists who have distinguished themselves in Art'. Preston was the first woman to be so commissioned.

**1930s** Margaret and William Preston spent much of the 1930s living in Berowra, some 40km north of Sydney. Here, in a radical

departure from her colour paintings and prints of 1920s, Preston's nationalism and her deepening commitment to the principles of Aboriginal art catalysed an emphatic return to depicting the unique forms of Australian wildflowers. Her move back to Sydney on the eve of the war in 1939 prompted a remarkable new body of paintings, when Preston, at 65 years of age and until this time an almost exclusive painter of still-lives and urban images, became a landscape painter.

**1940s** Preston's conversion to the forms and palette of Aboriginal art was shaped by her recognition of the central connection between Aboriginal art and country, reinforced by her growing awareness of the extent to which the Berowra-Hawkesbury region is inscribed with the markings, carvings and paintings of generations of Aboriginal possession. Preston also travelled extensively throughout Australia between 1939 and 1947 to study both accessible and remote sites of Aboriginal rock art. The 1940s proved one of her most active decades. She also experimented with a range of different printmaking techniques, including masonite cuts, colour stencils and a major series of highly successful monotypes (both landscape and still life) produced between 1946 and c1948.

**1950s** Preston's last major solo exhibition was in September 1953 at Macquarie Galleries in Sydney. As in previous decades, Margaret and William travelled extensively, with their last trip made to India in 1958. Preston gave her lecture 'Aboriginal paintings: Arnhem Land' at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in the same year. It was the last of an extraordinary number of lectures, talks and articles written and delivered by Preston throughout her career.

**1963** On 28 May Margaret Preston died in Mosman Private Hospital, Sydney.

Adapted from E Riddler, D Edwards & R Peel, 'Biographical notes' in *Margaret Preston*, AGNSW, Sydney 2005



Margaret Preston c1940s  
Photograph by Max Dupain, courtesy of Jill White

**All artists have enemies. Where they fail to inspire delight they instil terror. Margaret Preston is the natural enemy of the dull.** Sydney Ure Smith, artist, art entrepreneur and publisher of *Home* magazine and *Art in Australia*, 1927 <sup>3</sup>

## 92 aphorisms by Margaret Preston and others

aphorism: a terse saying embodying a general truth (The Macquarie dictionary).

The 1929 publication *Margaret Preston recent paintings* featured Margaret Preston's provocative artistic manifesto, '92 aphorisms by Margaret Preston and others', which described her artistic ideas and values, including many of her now-famous statements and claims.

**An artist is something on two legs with a simple soul and a belief that he was made before God.** Aphorism 2

**Painting is a personal matter; it should be judged from the point of view of the artist.** Aphorism 11

**The work of a generation is not really understood before the coming of the generation which follows.** Aphorism 34

**An artist's evolution should always be in relation to himself and independent of outside forces.** Aphorism 61

**Art is the autobiography of each individual artist.** Aphorism 62

**To be lucid, to know of what one is capable is the first thing of importance for the artist.** Aphorism 68

## SELECTED REFERENCES

Elizabeth Butel, *Margaret Preston: the art of constant rearrangement*, Viking in association with AGNSW, Sydney 1985  
Deborah Edwards & Rose Peel, *Margaret Preston*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney 2005 (includes catalogue raisonné of Preston's paintings, monotypes and ceramics)  
Ian North, *The art of Margaret Preston*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide 1980  
Website: *Margaret Preston: art and life*, Art Gallery of New South Wales [www.margaretpreston.com.au](http://www.margaretpreston.com.au)

## WRITINGS BY MARGARET PRESTON

'Why I became a convert to Modern Art', *Home*, vol 4, no 2, June 1923, p 20. 'Art for crafts: Aboriginal art artfully applied', *Home*, vol 5, no 5, Dec 1924, pp 30–31. 'There and back in three months', *Home*, vol 7, no 10, Oct 1926, p ?. 'What is to be our national art?' *Undergrowth*, March–April 1927, p 2. 'From eggs to Electrolux', *Art in Australia*, 3rd series, no 22, Dec 1927, np

1. Hal Missingham, *Art in Australia*, vol 1, no 2, Aug 1963, pp 90–100  
2. The Proctor, 'An artist's appreciation of Margaret Preston', *Art in Australia*, Margaret Preston number, 3rd series, no 22, Dec 1927, np  
3. Sydney Ure Smith, Introduction, Preston number, *Art in Australia*, 1927



## Thea Proctor's tea party 1924

oil on canvas, 55.9 x 45.7 cm  
Art Gallery of New South Wales, purchased 1942

**Colour is an extravagance of the mind. Colour is the emblem of change.** Aphorism 56

### K-6 LOOKING & MAKING

**VISUAL ART** Set up a still life in the classroom. Choose local wildflowers and/or household objects. Using graphite, coloured pencils and paint draw three studies from three different viewpoints. Display the results.

**HSIE** Thea Proctor knew Margaret Preston, both living in Sydney at the same time. Who was Thea Proctor? Write about Proctor's life and work. Compare the personalities of these two artists. Outline how they are similar or different?

**SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY** Create a still life in the classroom, using dramatic light effects. Photograph it, then download or scan it into a computer. Experiment with different effects using Photoshop.

### 7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Imagine sitting down at the table. Describe the experience of the tea party. What can you hear and smell? What is happening and who is there? Is it a vibrant or glum affair?
- Suggest how colour, composition and framing give a sense of the ritual and activity of the occasion and invite the viewer into the image. Consider why Preston chose this particular colour palette? Propose new colours for this work. How does the mood and feeling change?
- Define the term *still life* and list its defining qualities. Justify whether you would identify *Thea Proctor's tea party* as a still-life painting, and why. Investigate the origins of still life. Explain why it is one of the most enduring genres in art history.
- Who or what is the subject of the artwork: the tea party or Thea Proctor? The tea set and other items in this work were real objects from Thea Proctor's studio, which Preston herself visited. Is there a sense of the artist's participation in and interaction with the subject of the work?
- Discuss how objects can convey a person's life and personality? Preston's still lifes can be reflective or symbolic of people she knew or even of her. How would you read Thea Proctor's personality, both as an artist and a social figure? Investigate why the tea party was an important part of her social life and work. In what way can a still life function as a portrait? Discuss.



## Implement blue 1927

oil on canvas, 42.5 x 43.5 cm  
Art Gallery of New South Wales, gift of the artist 1960

**Why there are so many tables of still life in modern paintings is because they are really laboratory tables on which aesthetic problems can be isolated.** Aphorism 46

### K-6 LOOKING & MAKING

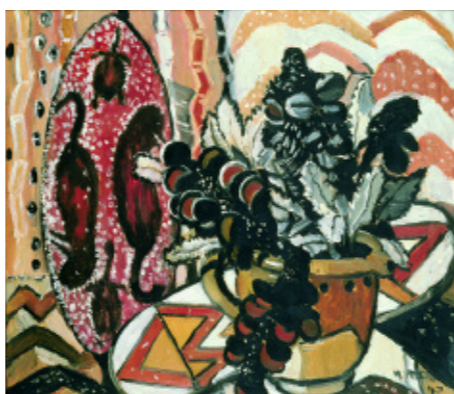
**VISUAL ART** Look closely at this artwork. Using coloured paper, map and cut out the geometric shapes. Create your own collage based on the artwork. Consider your colour arrangement and composition before gluing down.

**HSIE** Look at the art deco period. Select an area to investigate: architecture, fashion, design, transport, advertising and technology. What does it tell you about the way people lived in this time?

**MUSIC** Listen to music from each decade of Margaret Preston's life. Who were the popular composers and performers? Which is your favourite? Listen to their music while painting – does it suggest different ways to paint?.

### 7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Describe this work – its subject matter, formal qualities, use of light and shadow. Identify how they unify the composition. Outline how it breaks from the decorative treatment of *Thea Proctor's tea party*?
- Analyse the title *Implement blue*. What is an implement? Speculate on what it could mean here. Does the title give insights into Preston's interest in the objects and reasons for painting them? What do you think she was trying to achieve?
- Within *Implement blue*, cups and glasses become beakers in a laboratory; the lemon, a specimen to be studied under the harsh examiners light. Investigate how the 'machine age' of the early 20th century influenced Preston's attitudes as an artist? Compare and contrast *Implement blue* with other Preston still-life compositions in this kit.
- Does Preston approach this composition in a scientific and analytical way? What similarities can be drawn between the laboratory and the kitchen? List evidence of this within the work. Consider why Preston has turned her back on nature and boldly embraced the 'man-made'.
- Define the terms modernism and modernity. Investigate the characteristics of each. Research the social and political events that were their catalysts. Outline how they each affected the art world and the individual's experience of Australia?
- Examine the role of women in Australian art of the early 20th century. Analyse why women became the champions of modernism between the two World Wars?



## Aboriginal still life 1940

oil on canvas, 43.6 x 48 cm  
Queensland Art Gallery, gift of the Godfrey Rivers Trust 1940

**Decoration without ornamentation. Enough or too much.** Aphorism 74

### K-6 LOOKING & MAKING

**VISUAL ART** Consider the title, colour palette and subject of this painting. Read about Margaret Preston's interest in Aboriginal culture. What was this relationship like? How does it show in the work?

Arrange flowers in a vase. Paint a still life using only the colours in *Aboriginal still life*. How does your painting change the way you feel about the flowers?

**ENGLISH** Margaret Preston said: 'Why there are so many tables of still life in modern paintings is because they are really laboratory tables on which aesthetic problems can be isolated'. What do you think she means? Discuss.

### 7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Examine *Aboriginal still life*. How has Preston's use of colour changed from earlier works? Identify the objects depicted in this painting, their cultural origins and uses. Would you associate the objects and colour palette with interior or exterior spaces? Discuss.
- How would you describe the painting technique – expressive and loose or controlled and tight? Consider how this blurs the objects and abstracts them into a design. Investigate why this technique would be of interest to Preston. Propose what her intention was.
- The 1940s was one of Preston's most artistically active decades, marked by experimentation and a pursuit of a unique Australian identity. Examine why a major world event like World War II would prompt such a pursuit.
- What are symbols? Are their meanings fixed or can they change? List the elements within *Aboriginal still life* that may be considered symbolic of Australia. Explain why. Debate how these may have been accepted or challenged as symbols of Australia in Preston's 1940s. Have attitudes and values toward this changed in 21st-century Australia?
- Consider how Preston's attempt at nationalistic images is received by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within contemporary Australian society? By representing Aboriginal objects without Aboriginal people, what subtle messages could be conveyed to the viewer. Is Preston copying or borrowing in *Aboriginal still life*? Can she be referred to as a postmodernist artist by today's definitions?



## Aboriginal landscape 1941

oil on canvas, 40 x 52 cm  
Art Gallery of South Australia, D & J T Mortlock Bequest Fund 1982

**Art, to fulfil its destiny, requires to be accepted by a nation or race and not by a few.** Aphorism 89

### K-6 LOOKING & MAKING

**VISUAL ART** Explore your local environment. Collect native leaves and make a dictionary of rubbings (frottage). Cut them out, hand-colour and compose on paper to form an abstract landscape.

**HSIE** Investigate Aboriginal rights during Margaret Preston's life and times. What were the issues which Indigenous Australians faced and fought? Compare these with the issues faced today. Has anything changed?

### 7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Examine the treatment of forms in this landscape. Would you call it 'realistic' or does it veer toward abstraction? Propose why Preston chose to interpret in this way? List the qualities familiar and unfamiliar to your experience of landscape. Does the composition invite the viewer in to explore the environment or exclude them? Can this landscape be anywhere other than Australia? Discuss.
- Compare Margaret Preston's *Aboriginal landscape* with Albert Namatjira's landscape paintings. Investigate how each represents the realistic and symbolic nature of the land from their cultural perspectives. Compare Preston's and Namatjira's artistic careers and their reception by Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences. Why were their experiences so different? Propose how both artists were challenging social roles and painting traditions in Australia.
- Develop an exhibition with the My Virtual Gallery program on the AGNSW website ([www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/mvg](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/mvg)) entitled *Shifting visions: Australian landscape*. Choose artworks from the collection and write text panels that reflect a new way of seeing the landscape of Australia. Consider a range of cultural and gender perspectives. Discuss the rationale and overall position presented through your combination of artworks.



## Wheel flower c1929

woodcut, hand-coloured, 44.1 x 44.6 cm image  
Art Gallery of New South Wales, purchased 1929

## Billabong, NSW 1946

colour monotype, 30.8 x 40.6 cm image  
National Gallery of Victoria, purchased 1948

**Too much craft in art ruins the art in the craft.** Aphorism 49

### K-6 LOOKING & MAKING

**VISUAL ART** Make your own print based on a native flower. Investigate Japanese woodcuts and the process involved – in particular look at the *ukiyo-e* (floating world) period. Place paper onto a painted surface or inked plate. Draw a landscape with a pencil on the back of the paper and lift it off. Compare and discuss the process and marks made with your print.

**ENGLISH** Write a poem about each artwork using words that describe the feeling of and experience of each.

**HSIE** What is a billabong? What is the origin of this word? Investigate river systems and how a billabong is made. Identify the flower in *Wheel flower*. Is it native to Australia or introduced? Investigate the unique qualities of Australian native flowers. List the common bonds between the subject of both artworks.



### 7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Examine *Wheel flower* and *Billabong, NSW*. When was each made? Refer to Preston's biography and consider the events that may have influenced each work. Are there aspects to them reminiscent of her previous artworks and interests? Create a mind map for each artwork that links them together.
- Wheel flower* and *Billabong, NSW* are the result of different printmaking techniques. Identify these and outline their processes. Consider the use of colour and mark making – one expressive and painterly, the other controlled and graphic. Ascribe a quality to each and explain why. How does each technique enhance the subject and contribute to the overall reading of the subject?
- Discuss the opportunities printmaking gave Preston to expand her profile and success as an artist. Research Preston's relationship with commercial art through printmaking. How did this contribute to the way women saw the world around them and themselves in this era?
- Compare the subject matter of both *Wheel flower* and *Billabong, NSW*. What is the effect of capturing nature in the landscape as opposed to nature in a still-life? Discuss this notion in relation to a European modernist artist's and an Indigenous Australian artist's approach to artmaking.

To complement this printed education kit, a more extensive version is available online including: full-colour images, artist biography, historical timeline, curatorial and permanent collection connections, key quotes, glossary, theme source sheets, **Visual Art Focus Section** and **History Focus Section** with K-6 Looking & Making and Cross Curriculum Links, 7-12 Framing and Inquiry Questions, and activities for **gifted & talented students** and **students with disabilities**.

## MARGARET PRESTON

# ONLINE K-12

[www.margaretpreston.com.au](http://www.margaretpreston.com.au)

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Cover: *Self portrait* 1930 oil on canvas, 61.3 x 51.1 cm  
Art Gallery of New South Wales, gift of the artist at the request of the trustees 1930 © Art Gallery of New South Wales

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