

# Margaret Preston

## A material girl explained

### ROSE PEEL

#### Abstract

Margaret Preston (1875–1963), Australia’s most celebrated early modernist, created innovative woodblock prints from the 1920s which remain amongst the most popular of all Australian artists’ work. She was the first serious artist advocate of Aboriginal art, yet her appropriation of Aboriginal imagery to the cause of modernism contributed to the controversy, and the ongoing significance, of her work. Preston, notably in her experimental monotypes of 1946, her use of Masonite as a modern material for printmaking and her dynamic use of the stencil technique, produced exceptional decorative landscape prints towards the end of her long working life.

Preston consciously demonstrated the process of craft in her art, while the form and content extended the viewer’s imagination. The deliberate choice of materials and techniques produced a synergy to her works of art, encapsulating the practical and intellectual complexity of Margaret Preston.

#### Introduction

Madonna’s triumphant declaration of being “a material girl ... living in a material world” could parallel Margaret Preston’s own solid grounding in her time. Both women had an exuberant grasp of their material context, and with that an uncanny ability to change direction at whim. As a teaser line on her website, Madonna says: “No matter what you did, no matter who you are, no matter where you came from, you can always change ...”, or as Preston wrote in 1923 (quoting T S Eliot), “the character of an individual is not a fixed property” (Preston 1923: p20). Renowned as ‘the artist who changed her name’ after her marriage to William Preston in

1920, she continued to reinvent herself by experimenting with painting, printmaking and the applied arts. No doubt if the irrepressible Preston lived now she also would have a website, but she was from the age of print (and later radio) and within that made use of opportunities to present her ideas through exhibitions, articles, books, teaching demonstrations and public lectures, all of which reached different audiences, all of which promoted the name Margaret Preston.

### **Early influences**

In the 1920s Preston began to articulate her ideas on a future direction for Australian art. She offered the possibilities of modernist abstract designs inspired by indigenous cultures, which she predominantly promoted through the progressive *The Home* magazine and *Art in Australia*, with the support of publisher and entrepreneur Sydney Ure Smith. “Too much craft in art ruins the art in craft”, she wrote as one of her 92 general aphorisms on art and life published in 1929. This retains the idea of a certain distinction between art and craft while at the same time ensuring their connection.

During the 1890s Margaret Rose McPherson studied at the Adelaide School of Design, Painting and Technical Arts and at the prestigious National Gallery of Victoria Art School in Melbourne. There she attended the drawing school under Frederick McCubbin until qualifying for the painting school under Bernard Hall. Life drawing or copying plaster casts not only developed drafting skills but also instilled the craft of ‘building’ an artwork.

Hall provided students with a thorough knowledge of painting in the tradition of the Munich Academy. To create a design from life or still life they first sketched onto canvas in charcoal or pencil, then mixed halftones on the palette and began to paint, first with a warm undertone for the background, and then filling in the remainder, starting with the dark tones and working up to the lighter. Still life was formally incorporated into the syllabus in 1897, but already Preston had made a conscious decision to reject the competitive life-study studio, with Hall’s eroticised nudes, and concentrate on still life (or, as she phrased it, her “eggs, dead rabbits and onions”), working the aesthetic abstract relationships of objects within

an intimate space. Hall taught the technical skills necessary to produce a craftsman but believed that ‘truthfully’ representing nature required an artist who could convey with paint a ‘decorative unity’ or an individual vision.

Preston travelled to Europe with artist Bessie Davidson from 1904 to 1906, where she was confronted by the Munich Secessionists and challenged by contemporary artists showing in Paris, such as Paul Cezanne, Odilon Redon, Wassily Kandinsky and Robert Delaunay. It took some time for her to digest her experiences on her return to Adelaide. A few of Preston’s paintings from this time have the stamp of the colourman Lucien Lefebvre Foinet, of 19 Rue Va Vin and 2 Rue Brea, printed on the canvas. His address, which Preston included in French catalogues, has assisted in identifying and dating some works.

Preston later recalled in her autobiography (which she wrote in the third person):

... For two years she experimented in colour, searching always to get an aesthetic feeling in her work ... Her work from this time onwards is based on colour principles. She developed a scale of colour to suit herself ... (Preston 1927)

Realising that there was more to learn and explore, Preston returned to Paris in 1912 with artist and friend Gladys Reynell.

Preston wrote to artist Norman Carter from Brittany in 1913, stimulated by the work of Gauguin and Scottish colourist and art editor John Duncan Fergusson: “Decorative work—it is the only thing worth aiming for in this our century—it is really the keynote of everything. I am trying all I know to reduce my still-life to decorations and find it fearfully difficult.”<sup>1</sup>

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1 Preston to Norman Carter, Ile de Noirmoutier, 18 August 1913, State Library NSW, MSS 471/1/8-637c, pp187–194. In this letter she also writes “... I went to one only for Décor—the most beautiful thing there was by a man called Gauguin ... it had the dense purple earth the Tahaitian? [sic] women dull ochre ... There is a man called Ferguson [sic] I saw a [illeg] head of his ... Black hair The eyes were only blots of dark colour the nose had a black line down the side, red lips flat face one tone of dull yellow pink a shawl of cream ... —it was awfully fine, a stunning décor ...”

Gauguin and Fauve artist Matisse referred to their works as decorations, uniting the previously segregated disciplines of academic theory and decorative art. After seeing work by Cezanne and Fauve artists at the Salon d'Automne in 1905, and by Puvis de Chavannes, whose murals were "to her mind next to the Raphael's in the Vatican", Preston finally rejected the mimetic constraints of academic naturalism in preference for an art that is "something made by man to visualise ideas" (Preston 1938: p2).

Preston was also aware of the design exercises taught by Arthur Wesley Dow, an American teacher prominent within the Arts and Crafts movement, who published his influential text *Composition* in 1899. The book emphasised the principles of composition within squares, rectangles and circles by studying, among other things, Japanese textiles. The practical exercises suggested by Dow to achieve harmony using *notan* – dark and light – rather than modelled light and shade provided the underlying theory for many artists to reject "imitative drawing" (Dow 1913/1899: p3). Preston read the modernist periodical *Rhythm* (1911–13, founded and edited by John Middleton Murry, Katherine Mansfield and John Duncan Fergusson), where the artistic ideals of Fauves, Cubists and Post-impressionists, as well as Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints, were regularly discussed. The major shift in Preston's work from a tonal palette to interpreting the principles of modernism was underpinned with the idea of rhythm – line, form and colour. The use of flat, pure colour explored the colours and shapes of objects in shallow space. Murry wrote in *Rhythm* the modern artist "... may even draw thick black lines round their contours, to make them more emphatic ..." (Murry 1912: p327). Line defining form and black on white or with colour were structural devices Preston used in paintings and prints for the rest of her working life.

In Paris Preston visited the Musée Guimet, and probably the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, to look at Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints, and she probably also saw a major exhibition of Japanese prints and techniques at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in late 1913. Woodblock prints were a source of inspiration for many artists, with their use of flat, decorative colour, diagonal structure, linear definition of form and an expanded space which encouraged the viewer to use the 'mind's eye'. Preston's interest in Asian art continued throughout her life. She collected many books that were

not only art historical, but included the practical application of painting and printmaking techniques. Preston probably first experimented with woodblocks in 1914, and many of her paintings and later prints reinterpret the figurative design of an *ukiyo-e* print into everyday still life objects. Many of these translated designs are found as small sketches in the margins of her books, an invaluable resource for understanding Preston's methodology.

### Colour theories

Preston was a perceptive colourist who observed, absorbed and took up the challenge of a new palette from 1913. She wrote that she "developed a scale of colour to suit herself" but she may have derived it from the existing work of Percyval Tudor-Hart, a Canadian artist and colour theorist. He had developed a psychological colour theory in which he claimed that "pitch was equivalent to luminosity and timbre or 'tone' to hue but at the same time that the twelve notes of the chromatic scale were equivalent to those 'chromatic colours', in which C represented red and A blue-violet".<sup>2</sup> Combining ideas of colour and music were popular as theories and in musical performance in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Writing for *The Home* magazine in 1923, Preston herself equates music with science and suggests that a methodical system of colour to replace previous traditional systems requires "a scientific study of optics etc". Tudor-Hart worked in Paris at the time Preston was there in 1912–13 and attracted Commonwealth expatriates to his atelier. New Zealand artists Owen Merton and Maud Sherwood (who settled in Sydney in 1933) studied with him.<sup>3</sup> During 1912 Tudor-Hart gave at least two major lectures on his colour theory just before Preston and Reynell arrived in Paris, but may have given more.<sup>4</sup>

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2 John Gage (1999/1993) cites: "in 1920 the *Cambridge Magazine* published a musical analysis of a still-life by Duncan Grant according to Tudor-Hart's principles", p241.

3 Information from Dr Roger Collins, New Zealand, who has written a biography of Owen Merton, presently unpublished.

4 There is a copy of *Cambridge Magazine*, January–March 1921 in the Margaret Preston archive, National Gallery of Australia, which includes 'The new theory of colour' referencing discussion on colour and sound in the 1918 issues. The

It is likely that Preston was aware of Tudor-Hart's 12-note chromatic scheme as it has similarities to the one she developed in a notebook prior to 1917 – with C as 'ruby red', A as violet and A flat as blue-violet.<sup>5</sup> The two chromatic scales at the front of the volume consist of 12 semitones, each starting on the note C. Preston then systematically compiled subsets of colours based on all the possible major and minor scales in small squares of oil paint.

The subsets correspond to traditional Western scales but Preston also developed 'Japanese schemes'. These are included as written annotations in the subsets. It is clear that Preston's references to Japanese schemes and their numbered books relate to the classified collection of textile designs *Shikiman Ruisan*, published by Teikoko Hakubutsan (Imperial Museum), Tokyo, 1892. Six of the ten volumes were bequeathed by William Preston to the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1963.<sup>6</sup> For instance, one annotation in Preston's sketch book on colour theory reads "Japanese Scheme (Book 1) related to C major", and one of the textile designs is annotated "[G] C major?". Together these can be used to interpret *Flowers* (1917) (Figure 1).

*Flowers* has two labels on the verso attached by Preece's Gallery, Adelaide, where Preston and Reynell exhibited on their return in 1919.<sup>7</sup> One label describes the painting as "showing the definite theory of colour

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1921 article is a response from Tudor-Hart to theories proposed by the chemist Wilhelm Ostwald, related to the standardisation of colour. Roger Collins quotes a letter from Merton to his mother where he says they are "preparing a big series of colour scales & putting them on canvas" in the last week of January 1912, leading up to "a big lecture on colour". (Collins 2004: personal communication)

5 The sketch book on colour theory is in the Margaret Preston archive, National Gallery of Australia.

6 It is assumed Preston acquired the Japanese volumes in London prior to painting *Flowers* in 1917.

7 The full text of the label is: "The paintings in this exhibition cover a period between the years 1912–1917, and have, without exception been exhibited in London or Paris. Exhibit no. 5 by Miss Macpherson is illustrative of definite theory of colour rhythm in composition or which she has latterly been working." The other label reads "... Exhibited at the New English Arts Club. 20 guineas."

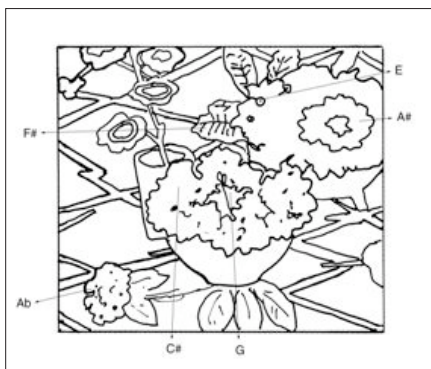


Figure 1. Diagram of *Flowers*, showing relationship of chromatic scheme with pigments.

rhythm". Microscopic cross-sections taken from the painting and the colour sketch book confirm the pigments match. For instance, Preston describes ruby red as C. The paint used as C in the higher octave of the C major subset and in the lower "Japanese Scheme Book III G major?" in her colour sketch book fluoresces as the pigment madder, whereas other 'ruby' reds appear to be alizarin. The "C# scarlet" which Preston refers to is vermilion in *Flowers'* geranium and the sharp chromatic scale. 'Scarlet' could be anything from iodine scarlet to a range of organic synthetics, possibly developed by the art supplier Winsor & Newton, who experimented and produced new pigments but sometimes retained generic names.<sup>8</sup> Preston's intuitive colour schemes provided a reference tool for her ideas of rhythm, harmony and balance, possibly designed to replace the rigorous rules of tonal painting she had rejected from 1912. She considered that subdued colour represented the Victorian era whereas "light and colour" characterised modern art (Preston 1923: p20).

*Flowers* is painted onto strawboard, a cheap, convenient cardboard support occasionally used by Preston during her time in Europe, in a conscious departure from the tradition of a primed canvas. The paint is directly applied to, and absorbed by the board, traces of which are visible between brushstrokes. For Preston this technique was also a reaction to her academic training, rejecting blended brush marks and tones. The

<sup>8</sup> Pigments identified and Winsor and Newton catalogues investigated by David Wise, Senior painting conservator, NGA, and Stewart Laidler, Senior painting conservator, AGNSW, November 2004.

unpainted fragments between the brushstrokes not only show the process of painting, but provide a flickering light source, evident in other Preston paintings from this decade. This evidence of the hand's movement supports Preston's ideas of "the craft in art".

In *Flowers* the brushstrokes of dense vermilion convey the paint's plasticity, again acknowledging the idea of craft in art. The flat, decorative surface gives to *Flowers* a 'surface unity' consistent with the notion of 'modern' painting discussed by Roger Fry, whose ideas stimulated Preston for many years.<sup>9</sup> Although strikingly similar to the Japanese textile design, *Flowers'* linear structural rhythm distorts the picture plane by tipping it forward, extending the viewer's imagination, bringing to it an individual vision.

### **Preston's techniques**

Over time Preston's preparatory drawing on the canvas became more rudimentary. Infra red spectroscopy shows when possible that she approached her work by roughly sketching a few charcoal or pencil lines. Invariably she then painted the motif, leaving the background until later. Preston wrote in 1931 "When we try to imprison that beauty we must make the type of picture fit a frame, so I design with the utmost care, the exact position of every tiny detail in leaf and flower, bowl and pot which will fit into that frame. It takes me ten times longer to get the design perfect in my mind as it does to do the work. You will find scraps of paper all over the house when I am designing a new woodcut and woe betide the person who touches one of the scraps. When I have the exact design in my mind, I set the model up, pots and flowers, leaves and background, and begin work ... " (Preston 1931: p5)

Preston preferred her paintings to remain unvarnished but occasionally glazed them, which the Fauves had also done in reaction to the salon

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9 Roger Fry (1868/1925, p216) wrote of Gauguin and Van Gogh: "The interest in the picture surface regarded as decoration increased with the still growing reaction from Impressionism ... taste for colour persisted, and was pressed further in the interests of surface unity."



tradition of varnished paintings.<sup>10</sup> To not varnish connected the work and the artist with modern techniques related to the flat finishes of Italian ‘primitives’, ideas consistent at the time with modernity.<sup>11</sup> The paintings in the joint 1942 exhibition with William Dobell appear from archival photographs to be glazed, but Preston may have changed her practice during the 1940s. In August 1945 Preston wrote to friend William Buckle “... it is the first time I’ve tried out a full varnish method. It took a year of drying out of the different stages. I’m going to try it out in my ‘Aboriginal’ work.” These paintings have not yet been identified, probably because many have been revarnished and others remain untraced.

Preston and Reynell were based in London during the First World War. Critic and artist Roger Fry had organised and named the first ‘Post-impressionist’ exhibition in 1910, which included Cezanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Picasso. His ideas on formalism and advocacy of the applied arts and crafts using abstract values influenced Preston. Fry established the Omega workshops in 1913, an applied-arts cooperative that employed artists with skilled artisans. He said “It is time ... that the spirit of fun was introduced into furniture and fabrics ...” (Woolf 1940: p194)

In 1915 Preston took summer students from London to Bunmahon, Ireland, where she taught oil and watercolour painting, drawing and monotype. During this time Preston painted several major works, for instance *Still Life* (1915, private collection), which was reproduced in the influential magazine *Colour* in June 1917, and *Still Life with Teapot and*

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<sup>10</sup> It appears from AGNSW installation photographs of the 1942 Preston/William Dobell exhibition that many paintings were glazed. Personal communication with Paula Dredge, paintings conservator, AGNSW. In a letter to Ian Mudie 20 June 1934 [1943] Preston writes, “I have just sent the picture framer a note about the frame – I have asked him to make a plain unstained wood frame – about 3 in wide. I also told him to put glass on it ...” Mortlock Library, State Library of SA, MS PRG 27/1/N-R. The Conservation Department AGNSW has catalogued the Parker Gallery Archive of frame mouldings – which includes Preston’s favoured #506 for bronze or white paint.

<sup>11</sup> The Impressionists were opposed to ‘academic artifice’. For further information see Anthea Callen, *The unvarnished truth: mattness, ‘primitivism’ and modernity in French painting, c. 1870–1907*.

*Daisies* (1915, AGNSW). She widely exhibited and was successfully reviewed. Preston and Reynell studied pottery at the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts in 1916 where they also may have learnt various printmaking techniques. They built a kiln in Cornwall in late 1917–18 with the idea of establishing a studio pottery. Preston, like her friend Gladys Reynell, was a competent potter and published a ‘résumé of the craft’ in 1930. Reynell was to become an important studio potter on her return to Adelaide, and Preston included many of Reynell’s pots in her paintings; for instance, *The Pottery of Gladys Reynell, S.A.* (1922, private collection) and *Banksia* (1927, NGA). By August 1918 the two artists were teaching rehabilitative pottery, basket weaving, batik, woodblock printing, stencil cutting and monotype to ‘shell-shocked’ soldiers at Seale-Hayne Neurological Military Hospital in Devon, crafts that would stimulate Preston’s future work.

Preston’s connection with drawing and intaglio printmaking is combined in the soft-ground etching *Mill Pond, Bibury* (c. 1916, AGNSW) where she drew with a pencil through a material, possibly silk, onto the plate. The resulting effect was a flattened pencil drawing which she described on the print as “pencil etching”. The element of immediacy was integral to Preston’s way of making art, but it was possibly the distance between the hand and the ultimate creation of the line through the acid bite in etching that turned her away from this particular technique. Preston’s prints and paintings demonstrate a consistent linear sensibility and she later described her woodblock prints as “line wood drawings”.

In the 1920s Preston’s highly coloured woodblock prints of flowers and the urban environment were introduced to the domestic market as reasonably priced original artworks suitable for the modern home. The craft was described by Preston in the first of two published articles, ‘Coloured woodprints’ (1926) and ‘Wood-blocking as a craft’ (1930b). Preston had a deep appreciation for the broad cultural context of Japanese craftspeople – the artist, block carver and printer – and emphasised that her approach to the craft was “to make a beginning from a western point of view” with “no desire to copy” the “exquisite” work of Japanese masters. Energetically attacking the woodblock, she wrote in 1926: “the cutting is primitive” but could lead to a new “method of wood-cutting ... quite different from the Eastern” (Preston 1926: p64 & p113). Preston preferred Turkish boxwood

but later opted for Australian craft-sourced Huon pine, which from 1925 she cut across the grain as it offered less resistance (Figure 2).

In her 1930 article Preston emphatically stated that the colours “should not be put on subtly. It is better to use them in simple crude masses to match the key blocks”, which she hand coloured in gouache, adjusting the colour and shape within the dominant line of the black key block, so each is unique. It appears she occasionally used a stencil for this purpose, presumably when producing an edition.

### **Developing a modern national art**

Preston’s interest in Aboriginal art was ignited on her move to Sydney in 1920. Initially she studied collections in the Australian Museum and then travelled extensively, visiting many local and remote Aboriginal sites. At first Preston focused on the cultural application of her work with the idea of developing a modern, distinctly Australian art drawn from a combination



Figure 2. Woodblock for *Wheel flower* c.1929. Huon pine.  
44×44.5 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales.

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of the culturally differentiated principles, motifs and techniques of Asian, Western and Aboriginal art, free from “contaminating sources”, meaning British traditions and American influences.

Inspired by indigenous arts, not only Australian but those from Papua New Guinea, Norfolk Island, Japan, Java and Fiji, Preston published a series of articles during the 1920s instructing the Australian craftsperson through example and a set of aesthetic principles on how a modern national art could be founded. Extracted from textiles, carvings and shields, Preston suggested to her predominantly female readers abstract designs for baskets, mats, cushion covers and bed covers, all of which could transform the domestic environment, repositioning the craft in art to the industrialised product. She advocated simple colour, natural pigments of red, yellow ochre and black and the geometric shapes suggested by the triangular eucalypt leaf and its circular-shaped flower as the keynote of national designs. The contemporary view that Aboriginal people were on the brink of extinction reinforced the idea that their art could be preserved for its decorative value.

Preston’s position as an appropriator of Aboriginal art without acknowledging its cultural significance has been well discussed but her admiration and promotion of the art was unflagging. By the 1940s, when Preston became a landscape painter, her growing understanding of Aboriginal art as synonymous with authentic experience drew upon the most important aspect of Aboriginal culture – the connection to country. With a restricted palette describing symbolic landscape in a modernist decorative manner, Preston subverted the traditional notion of pastoral panoramas.

### **Printmaking techniques**

Preston preferred Japanese papers for woodblock, ‘masonite prints’ and monotypes. She often used *kōzo* as it could withstand the pressure of the cut edges of the wood when rubbed by the baren or roller. In 1926 Preston advised that “it is necessary to have a very good, or hand-made paper, as it does not shrink as much as ordinary paper”.<sup>12</sup> Some papers were collected in

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<sup>12</sup> Preston writes to Will Ashton: “... One or two things – One Your [& my] woodcut of ‘Sturts [sic] Desert Pea’ I havent [sic] any more of the original print

her travels where “she happened upon some marvellous stuff ... and filled her trunks with it, wrapping up her hats and frocks in bumpy brown paper parcels”.<sup>13</sup> Bill Preston was a director of Dalton Brothers Ltd and later of Anthony Hordern’s department store, which imported goods from Japan, including paper wrappings which were undoubtedly ‘recycled’. Preston suggested Messrs Haddon, London, as a source for materials (Preston 1926: p113). She was also in constant contact with framer and art supplier Parker Galleries, Sydney, who imported papers, but these have not been specifically identified in the account books in the Parker Galleries archive, AGNSW.

The shortage of building materials during and after the war promoted the use of fibreboard, and with typical curiosity Preston explored its possibilities, saying “Masonite hasn’t the hardness nor the fixness [sic] of wood and so I feel I can portray in it more of the Australian atmospheric feeling than in wood. It has a looser quality.” (Butler 2005: p64)<sup>14</sup> Preston experimented with the new material by reversing the idea of the black line in relief to a gouged line. She explored the full effect of “masonite cuts” by first cutting away the line on the rough side of the board. The raised flat areas of the block were hand coloured before printing, a method similar to the monotype technique. The elegant *Waratah etc.* (1943) (Figure 3), with its sparse, flat colour suggests a hardy, dry plant symbolic of Australia.

Preston experimented with the monotype technique with remarkable energy in the 1940s, while living in the Hotel Mosman. She had taught it in Ireland in 1915, where New Zealand artist Edith Collier wrote in a letter to her parents: “I have just started doing monotype it is very interesting you do it on copper paint it on—you have to be very quick as the whole thing has to be done in half an hour or it is spoilt ... You can only get one

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paper – had only the one piece – I have other hand made paper the same colour – will this do? One or two of my Patrons have asked for exactly same ...” 18 July 1943, AGNSW library.

13 Review of a demonstration, Sergius, *Undergrowth*, July–August 1928.

14 Butler quotes Margaret Preston from ‘Australian Artists Speak’, a radio interview programme (1947?), a typescript of which is held by the NGA Archives.

drawing” (Drayton 1999: pp38–39)

The monotype is a synthesis of drawing and printing, transferring the pigment from one surface to another with an element of uncertainty. The brush retains its spontaneity but once the paint is pressed, the image is reversed and flattens, changing the flow of the brush line. Generally this gives a decorative effect which is more apparent with a press, but when rubbed by hand a different textural quality can be achieved.

Preston breaks with the tradition. Many of her monotypes are printed from the smooth or rough side of Masonite, which adds a textured



Figure 3. *Waratah etc.*, 1943. Colour masonite cut.  
50.2×41.6 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales.

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impression to the paint, a little like canvas. Its patterned imprint depended on the pressure and movement of the hand and through the baren or roller the grid-like texture can be often seen. When the board is thickly painted the suction between paper and 'plate' forms small peaks of paint, which remain as evidence of the process. Drawn and printed within an hour or two, the technique would have satisfied Preston's passion for immediate expression.

Preston experimented briefly with silk screen prints and explains the process in detail (Preston 1946–47). She includes the materials needed, the construction of the screen and squeegee and the preparation of the inks. The two basic techniques of stencils and stop-out lacquer (used for freer drawing of a design) are also described, but for Preston the screen print process itself was too removed from the physical interaction she preferred when creating an artwork. Moving from the laborious screen printing technique but taking the stencil was a logical step and one that gave her a new printmaking technique.

The arts and crafts movement in Britain and the United States in the 19th century revived the craft of stencil, which had been used in China and Japan for centuries to decorate interior spaces and furnishings. French artists at the turn of the century developed the *pochoir* (cut stencil) technique adapted from the intricate Japanese *katagami* paper patterns used for printing decorative textiles. Preston, empathic with the ideals of the handmade object, had a long experience with the technique, yet possibly when seeing Aboriginal hand stencils at rock art sites in northern and central Australia she was inspired to reassess the process.

Invariably the stencils are placed onto a thin black cardboard, which provides the black outlines where the stencil blocked the paint. The stencils were cut from paper, traditionally a thick manila paper coated with shellac, or an oiled paper, which would be necessary if an edition was considered. It appears the thick opaque gouache was vigorously stabbed with a short bristle brush through the cut stencil, providing complex overpainted circular areas of colour in complete contrast to the smoother application of gouache in multiple-stencil *pochoir* prints, for instance, like those associated with Art Nouveau and Art Deco.

Preston's stencil prints defined by black lines suggest connection with

Aboriginal paintings and the charcoal stick. They depicted subjects drawn from rock art, New South Wales taphoglyphs (carved burial trees), biblical subjects and strong decorative images of landscape. *Shoalhaven Gorge N.S.W.* (1953, NGA) makes use of a restricted 'Aboriginalised' palette, with a vertical flattened landscape also making reference to a Chinese scroll painting, whereas the intense colours of *A Mile out of Alice Springs* (1949, AGNSW) (Figure 4) seem to vibrate. Twenty-seven of the prints were exhibited in 1953 at Macquarie Galleries, and Preston included a cut paper stencil to demonstrate the technique. The exhibition was opened by historian Bernard Smith who later wrote: "... If one considers her work both in terms of its inherent aesthetic achievement and its contribution to an independent Australian tradition, I doubt whether there was anyone at that time to equal her." (Smith 1989: p302)



Figure 4. *A Mile out of Alice Springs*, 1949. Colour stencil. 23.4 × 29.8 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales.

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## Conclusion

Margaret Preston was a material girl in all senses – in her understanding of the market forces in which she was operating, in her application and courage in adopting different techniques and aesthetics, and in her deserved and substantial reputation as the quintessential Australian artist.

*Hiroshige's Last Poem*  
The eastern city I leave,  
And – without a brush  
To paint new pictures,  
I take the long road  
That leads to the distant view.  
(Huish 1912)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This book was in Preston's collection.

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### **Author biography**

*Rose Peel* has been a member of AICCM since 1973 and has organised, given and attended many workshops, courses, conferences and talks from that time, including convening the Third National Symposium for Paper, Books and Photographic Materials held in Sydney 2004. She joined the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1985 having worked at the National Library of Australia, National Australian Archives and as an independent conservator for several years. Rose majored in art history and theory at Sydney University before gaining a Bachelor of Arts degree. She produced *Zhuangbiao*, an educational DVD on scroll mounting, with conservator Sun Yu at the AGNSW in 2004, and in 2005 co-curated the major travelling exhibition *Margaret Preston: Art and Life*. At the time of the symposium she was Senior Paper Conservator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

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