

# Grace Crowley

## BEING MODERN

A National Gallery of Australia Travelling Exhibition

*Grace Crowley 1912*

## EDUCATION RESOURCE

This education resource has been written to assist with an appreciation of the travelling exhibition *Grace Crowley: being modern*. The education resource charts the stages of Crowley's emergence as a leading proponent of modern art in Australia; from her early exercises in draughtsmanship, through her bold study of cubism in France to her fascination with non-objective abstraction back in Australia. By Annette Tapp.

For teacher and student worksheets, further information and links visit the website: [nga.gov.au/Crowley](http://nga.gov.au/Crowley)



Cover image Painting 1951 oil on composition board  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 1969

# BIOGRAPHY

Grace Crowley was born in 1890 into a wealthy grazier family in north-west New South Wales. She was the eldest daughter and fourth of five children. This seems an unlikely start for a woman who was to become a pioneering modern artist in Australia. While she was considered a rebel by her family, Crowley was an exceptionally modest and exacting artist. It is her sixty or so surviving paintings that communicate the independence of spirit which was necessary to flout convention, both in terms of popular tastes in art and prescribed domestic roles for women in the last century.

Grace studied and later taught art at Julian Ashton's Sydney Art School. Desperately disappointed at not winning a travelling scholarship to London, Crowley was persuaded by fellow artist Anne Dangar to accompany her to France in 1926. Dangar's objective was to study and observe at first hand the work of Cézanne and other 'moderns'. Over a four-year period Crowley took every opportunity to stretch her understanding of contemporary art in Europe. In particular her study with André Lhote and later Albert Gleizes, both exponents of cubism, opened up a new world which Crowley took back with her to Australia.

Crowley's work had developed and changed during her time in Paris and on her return to Sydney she found much of the contemporary art there frustratingly conservative. Crowley launched an art school in Sydney with fellow modern Rah Fizelle. She also founded a sketch club in 1932 where a small group of artists, including Frank Hinder, met regularly and worked together. Crowley's close collaboration with Ralph Balson from 1938 onwards, (depicted painting in *Artist and his model* 1938) resulted in their leap to non-objective geometric abstraction in 1940. During the 1940s and 1950s Crowley painted a series of geometric abstracts that exemplify her highly developed and sophisticated understanding of colour and composition. From 1954 until Balson's death in 1964, Crowley chiefly devoted herself to supporting his career but she continued to push the boundaries of painting as one of her last works *Painting* 1960 illustrates.

Grace Crowley died in 1979; she was almost ninety. Her life had spanned two world wars and the ensuing re-evaluation and reconstruction of a modern world. In terms of a revolution that was the modern art movement in Australia, Grace Crowley had played a principal role.

# BEING AN ARTIST, DRAUGHTSMANSHIP



Grace Crowley's first drawings were made in chalk on the old square water tank behind the kitchen of the family homestead. In her eighties when Crowley was asked if she had wanted to be an artist from the beginning, she replied, 'Well I don't know whether you could put it that way. You do things because you can't help doing them.'

With the reluctant support of her family, Crowley became a full-time day student at Julian Ashton's Sydney Art School where hours of disciplined study of anatomy and drawing plaster casts honed her natural talent into a rigorous draughtsmanship.

Horses pulling plough 1920 illustrates both Crowley's technical skill and her love of watching and drawing the horses, cows and men working on the property. She longed to draw the shearers but her father would not allow her into the shed.

Horses pulling plough 1920 oil on canvas on cedar panel  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 2001

Ena and the turkeys 1924 oil on canvas private collection

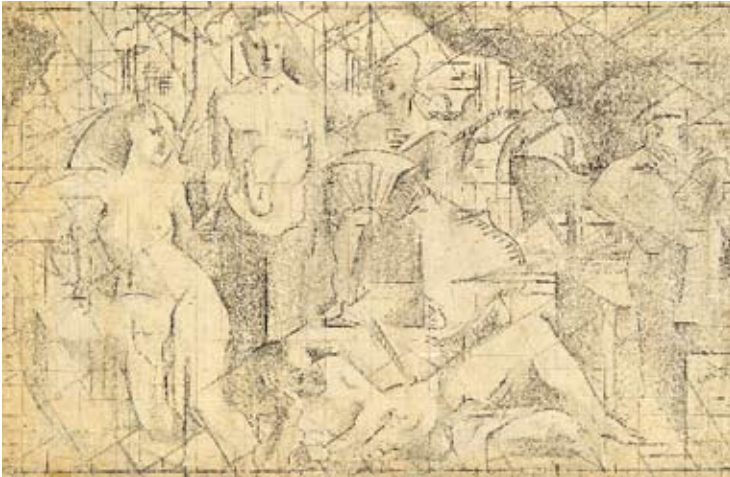
Mary and the baby 1925 oil on canvas private collection



While fairly sentimental and traditional in subject matter, Crowley's paintings at this time also suggest a more specific interest in composition and design. The strong geometric shapes of the large turkey in *Ena* and the turkeys 1924 and the umbrella in *Mary and the baby* 1925 are dominant elements in the paintings.

Crowley later acknowledged that up until her departure for France in 1926, her work was considered conventional and 'quite sane'.

# PARIS, BECOMING A CUBIST



Study for Sailors and models c. 1928 pencil on paper National Gallery of Australia, Canberra  
Gift of Grace Buckley in memory of Grace Crowley

Grace Crowley and her Australian artist friend Anne Dangar enrolled in one of the leading modern schools in Paris, Académie Lhote. André Lhote was one of the original cubists with a strong admiration for Cézanne. In a letter from Paris, Crowley described the suffering of being 'taken apart' by Lhote's criticism but also her relief: 'To my amazement his teaching was only the confirmation of the WANT I had been feeling for so long without knowing exactly what the want was. I feel rather dazed, but very happy, bewilderingly happy.'

Lhote placed emphasis on pictorial composition, the simplification of forms into basic geometry and the use of colour to integrate forms. In her student exercises Study for Sailors and models c. 1928 and Sailors and models c. 1928 Crowley constructed compositions according to the principles of the golden mean or section d'or. Both the paper and the canvas are the dimensions of a golden rectangle and all the compositional elements, the models and their surroundings relate to one another according to these proportions.



Mirmande 1928 and Girl with goats 1928 were painted during Lhote's outdoor summer school in the South of France. Crowley's new cubist approach was to consider the landscape as a solid piece of sculpture made up of geometric forms. The integration of a figure into the landscape was balanced by the underlying geometry of the composition and the limited palette of earth colours which blended all the elements together.

Shortly before Crowley was forced to return home to Australia she met the cubist artist and theorist Albert Gleizes. Gleizes's work was highly abstracted according to the specific theories of composition he had developed. Under Gleizes's instruction Crowley made a number of exercises: Cubist exercises using Gleizes's principles c. 1929 and Cubist composition, study for a religious mural c. 1929. Crowley experimented with the arrangement of superimposed and rotated geometric shapes within a rectangle. The effect was to create a rhythm and movement in space. Crowley found Gleizes's rational approach to pictorial principles compelling, and his influence was ultimately reflected in her own geometric abstract painting.

Mirmande 1928 oil on canvas Art Gallery of South Australia Bequest of Grace Crowley 1979

# SYDNEY, TOWARDS ABSTRACTION

On her return to Australia, Grace Crowley was required to help out on the family property. Combining family and domestic duties with her passion for modern art was a challenge. In *Horses by the pond* c. 1932 and, finally, *Shearing shed* c. 1932, Crowley assimilated her modern cubist theories with the Australian landscape, a landscape which was generally depicted by predominantly male artists in a conservative style.

Back in Sydney, Crowley concentrated on figurative painting and teaching. She advised her students to 'dissociate [yourselves] from the sentimental interest of individual figures and think of the great geometrical plan'. This conviction was borne out by her own work; if Crowley's 1930 portrait of her cousin, *Portrait of Gwen Ridley* 1930, was a monumental arrangement of the figure into geometric shapes, by 1939 Crowley had all but sacrificed the figure to colour as a dominant element in *Woman (Annunciation)* c. 1939.

Crowley's path to abstraction can be mapped through her consistent attention to cubist principles of composition, the influence of Gleizes's theories, her increasing absorption with colour and her interest in exploring the effect of limiting the picture plane to two-dimensionality.





Woman (Annunciation) c. 1939 oil on canvas on composition board  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 1972

Abstract painting 1947 oil on cardboard National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 1959

Finally Crowley's close collaboration with Ralph Balson and their mutual exchange of ideas and support for one another led to a resolution of the search Crowley had committed herself to for so long – an art based on neutral geometric elements of form and colour.

Crowley's work between Abstract painting 1947 and her last geometric abstract works in 1953 was highly evolved, sophisticated and elegant. In Painting 1950 and Painting 1951 transparent and two-dimensional forms are studiously arranged and superimposed to create a space where forms appear to be floating or rotating on a central axis.

In Abstract painting 1952 a complex energy is created in the build-up of competing coloured forms and in Abstract painting 1953 there is a playful tension between the tilt of the elusive and transparent rectangle and the opposing diagonal green strips which dissect the picture plane.

Being a modern meant that Crowley remained interested in fresh movements in modern art; her own experiment with poured paint in Painting 1960 was entirely characteristic of an artist who was both modest and daring.

# IN THE GALLERY

Looking at Crowley's earliest works discuss the ways you think life on the land and in the city changed over the nearly ninety years of her life.

Look closely at Crowley's early works and her drawings and paintings in France. Discuss the differences you can see in the images Mary and the baby 1925 and Girl with goats 1928. How has cubism influenced Crowley's approach to painting figures?

Across the exhibition we can see the great distance Crowley travelled towards making colour itself a dominant subject of her work. Choose two paintings that illustrate the changes in Crowley's use of colour over time. Discuss her choice of colours and why you think they changed.

Spend some time looking at one of Crowley's abstract geometric paintings. Do you have the sense that shapes appear to recede, advance and float? How do colours create a sense of depth or space so that one shape appears to overlap another?

Look at Painting 1951 (the painting with the large pink circle in the top right-hand corner). Does this picture appear balanced? What elements do you think determine balance in paintings? What shapes are important to the balance or lack of balance in this work? How does colour affect this?

# RESEARCH AND ACTIVITIES

Research the golden mean (golden section, or section d'or). Look at the work of western artists through the ages and find examples of their use of the golden mean. Then plan your own drawing using the golden mean to construct your composition.

In the western art tradition abstraction began to emerge in the early 20th century. Find examples of early 20th-century works of art from different European cities that show a variety of approaches to abstraction in painting.

There were several Australian women artists who were very influential in the development of abstract painting in Australia. Research two of the following artists: Dorrit Black, Grace Cossington Smith, Margaret Preston, Anne Dangar. What are the differences and similarities between their work and Grace Crowley's? Why do you think their work has been influential?

Can you find more examples of Australian artists since the 1950s who use abstraction in their paintings?

Explore the possibilities of abstract geometric painting yourself. Start by arranging and overlapping coloured shapes in tissue paper, cellophane and string across a blank rectangle. Play with colour, form and balance and see how complex the composition can become.

# Grace Crowley

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Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide SA, 27 July – 28 October 2007

Hawkesbury Regional Art Gallery, Windsor NSW, 21 December 2007 – 3 February 2008

Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, Mornington Vic., 19 March – 18 May 2008

Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth WA, 14 June – 21 September 2008

Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart Tas., 2 October – 23 November 2008

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