

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra. And today I'm joined by Dr. Deborah Hart, head curator of Australian art at the National gallery of Australia to talk about post-impressionist painter Ethel Carrick. An exhibition of Carrick's work is on display at the NGA through 27 April 2025. So first, could you tell us a bit about her life and her work?

DH: I think of Ethel Carrick as a very transnational artist. She was born in the UK on the outskirts of London. She traveled to France with her Australian husband in 1905, and they came to Australia many times and she exhibited in London, in France and in Australia. So she had this very rich context and that's apart from her travels, which were quite extraordinary. So she was a very adventurous artist from an early stage. She was born in Uxbridge. She was one of nine children, used to be thought it was 10, but we got the records. I was lucky enough to go through a lot of original material. And so nevertheless, it was a big family and her father managed a kind of emporium, a bit like David Jones here. And it's interesting to me because you can see even in Ethel Carrick's quite abstracted works, her interest in fashion and in dress codes of the day that I think actually started from this early time. Another really interesting thing was her fascination with music. She studied at the Guildhall School of Music before going to the Slade School of Fine Arts. So it was for me, the interest in that was that later she found analogies between music and painting. And that correspondence is something that I reflected on quite a lot in pulling together this exhibition.

So as I mentioned, her training was really at the Slade. This was very important because in the late 19th century, women were not allowed to enter some of the larger art schools like the Royal Academy Art School. And a lot of women had been lobbying against this, obviously. And there was a woman, L. Herford, Laura, who put in just her initial and she got in and it made a furphy of why women shouldn't be allowed in. But that's just a little bit of context. So Slade had left in the terms of his bequest that women should be allowed to enter the Slade on equal terms, which was pretty exciting. And when you look at photographs of the artists or the art students at the Slade, there are so many women. And I think it's wonderful. But what's also a bit sad is that so many of them haven't been remembered. So many of them had large struggles to overcome, to be able to continue with their work. So nevertheless, Ethel Carrick had a wonderful time at the Slade. I was lucky enough to visit the Slade archives and I went through the record books and I could see her signing in and she was often the first to sign in. You could see the little signatures that these wonderful old books that they have in the library there. And she was often there on a Saturday when other students had decided they needed a weekend. And while she was at the Slade, it was a pretty traditional kind of background where you'd learn drawing from plaster casts and from the figure. There also was a particular class where they were looking at clothing. One of her teachers was Henry Tonks. And there were some really incredible drawings that I looked at that he did. Unfortunately, the Slade didn't have her work. But just to see that kind of background, in a lot of things that gave her a really good grounding and she did very well and won several awards.

And during this time, she also goes to the summer schools in Cornwall at St Ives. And this was quite liberating. It was one of the first times that she was actually setting up out of doors with other art students. And one of the people she meets there is her future husband, Emanuel Phillips Fox, who is an Australian artist. He had been there before. He was a bit older than her. And they were on a sketching trip together and they really clicked. But it took a few years before they actually got married. They marry in 1905 in Ealing. And it's real who's who of Australian art. There's Tom Roberts and George Lambert and Violet Teague, who became a very good friend of Ethel Carrick. And they go to France and Emanuel and Ethel set up their home in Montparnasse, which, of course, in 1905, it was such an exciting time. It's the Belle Époque. And there were really a lot of opportunities for women to exhibit. And that was super exciting. And it's interesting in relation to the relationship between Ethel and Emanuel that he is a more traditional impressionist artist. So he painted in a more lyrical sense, particularly in these early years. He was painting nudes. He was also painting portraits. Whereas what she was doing was, she found herself in Paris. She would go out into the Luxembourg Gardens. It was still pretty radical for a woman to go out and set up her easel and little boards out of doors, basically using the public domain as a studio. And what we see evolving and what comes through in the first room of the exhibition are all these just

wonderful, bold, even by today's standards, quite bold, free post-impressionist works. Post-impressionism was a very new thing at that point. In fact, the term was only really coined in 1906. But she was looking at other artists working in France at the time, people like Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard, but also women who, I'm also working on projects to recover some of the women that I discovered and people like Martha Stettler and Alice Dannenberg, who actually were co-directors of the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, one of the great art schools in Paris that still runs today.

So there was this very invigorating environment and she was showing in the more radical salon, the Salon d'Automne. And so what happens is Emanuel showing in the more traditional salon. And I think there was probably a bit of sparring in terms of things they liked or didn't like. He wrote in a letter to Hans Heissen that "post-impressionism seems to be taking over, god help us." And of course, there's his wife doing post-impressionist works. But she had a strong will of her own. I think it's something she became known for. And I really admired her for that. It was so great to see that she became a full member of the Salon d'Automne. And then she also gets elected to the jury. And this is quite remarkable. There aren't many women who are elected to the jury. And there's actually a point where she's judging her husband's work, Emanuel's work, as to whether it could get in. And so, it did. But it was interesting, sort of interesting points. So, she was definitely at that period, more adventurous, more modern, more avant garde.

And they come out to Australia in 1908. This is her first visit. And there are some very annoying write-ups with, "Emanuel is showing off his little wife in Australia." And I was like, grr. But having said that, she very much held her own. She did. She did admire him and his work and she she did promote his work, but she also stuck to doing her own thing. And one of the very interesting things, I think, about how we retell the stories of Australian art and art internationally is to go back to the time rather than necessarily looking at the legacy. Because I think what happens is you find that there was some recognition at the time and people were really interested in works that were so different from anything they'd ever seen. And she has this exhibition in 1908 in Melbourne. And all the stories, the mainstream stories have talked about post-impressionism coming at least sort of three years later. And here was Ethel, well written-up in the press. People were saying they were quite extraordinary works. And she goes and paints post-impressionist work. She goes to Sydney to the Botanic Gardens and does what I think are probably among the first truly post-impressionist works painted in Australia. And they're really bold and dynamic. When we say post-impressionist, it's a bit of a slippery term, but it's really that move from impressionism to post-impressionism where light and shadow is still really important, but it's more expressive. And it's really also about how colour makes you feel. And she was really interested, as I mentioned, about the musical resonances of color. She comes back again in 1913, and it's very interesting. She'd been developing her confidence. And she said, "when I started painting, I took what my husband said at face value. I now am really thinking for myself" and had that developing confidence, which you can see coming through in the exhibition.

In 1911, Ethel Carrick goes on one of her visits to North Africa, and she paints an extraordinary work called *Laveuses Algériennes - Algerian Women Washing in a Stream*. And it's just remarkable for the luminosity, the expressiveness of the paint handling. What I found so interesting is that although other people had painted similar scenes, it's as if the women who are doing their daily chores are so at ease with her. She's sitting at the edge. She'd often say that in certain places it was very difficult to paint because people would stand in front of her or block her view. They want to see what she was doing. And at other times people were a bit self-conscious. But because she was such a natural painting out of doors, this work just gives the sense of the freedom of the women set in a natural environment. And I think the thing that's so striking is the level of abstraction that she brings to actually looking at the scene. And when you look at it, you're kind of thinking, "wow, this is before really Kandinsky's work is known." And it has that sense of energy and moving between figuration and abstraction. And it's really a work to look out for in the exhibition.

AT: So do you think part of that is the female gaze as opposed to the male gaze (DH: Yes.) and the fact that these women were more comfortable with a woman? And that fundamentally changes the painting and the

context and the meaning, like beyond just the work itself?

DH: Yes, I think that Ethel Carrick as a woman was not imposing herself. I feel like this is a common thread with different marketplaces where she would very much be on the sidelines, not pushing herself forward. I think people felt at ease with her. In that particular scene, it's like the whole world is just suffused with this particular energy that she brings to that work. And it's like when you hit a moment in your life and you might be in a particular place and everything just feels so well aligned. It has that feeling. But in relation to her as a woman painting other women, that definitely was a thing, because in Spain she really struggled painting crowds because of the interest in what she was doing. And then she does two paintings in courtyards. And you really get the feeling that the women are quite comfortable with her just sitting in the corner of the courtyard as she paints their daily lives. She loved to capture the world in flux and just, she said, "I love crowds. Crowds are to me like a needle is to a magnet." She also saw them as musical chords, and saw them in terms of particular groups. And so, when she's in these Spanish courtyards, there's one where there's actually a chair that looks like it's being held for her when she finishes painting. And that lovely sense of friendship and circles of women coming together is something that's very characteristic of her way of working.

AT: Now, one of the things that I find intriguing about this exhibition in particular is that you note, and I'm going to quote here, "her art has often been considered in the light of her husband, Australian artist Emanuel Phillips Fox. However, they were married for only 10 years due to his untimely passing, and she continued to create art for several decades." So can you tell us a bit more about how that lens has impacted the ways her story has been told and how you're shifting the narrative framing?

DH: Sure. So Emanuel Phillips Fox died quite suddenly in 1915. It was a really difficult time for Ethel Carrick. They were close. I mean, people can have differences and, it was a terrible blow to her. And she really went into a period of grief where she did little work. I mean, it was also the time coinciding with the First World War. But, she also plays a part in this narrative because she feels really keen to promote his work above her own. And so, that's not an untypical thing or atypical. It's something that happens a lot. And it took her till about 1919. She hits her stride again after the war. She starts to paint some really amazing works, like one of the great works of her career, *The Market*, 1919. And you really see her at the height of her powers and works like that or like *Manly Beach* and other really key works. They were recognized. But as time went on, she was advocating for his work. Her work wasn't necessarily, by the time we get to the '20s and '30s, it wasn't anymore the avant garde, the newest thing in town. So by that point, she was still painting a lot of the same themes. She was painting marketplaces and beach scenes and parks and gardens. But they really have a strength and a presence of their own. And they really make a very strong contribution to the story of this country in terms of its art and to France. But I think what did happen quite a bit is they often showed together. And that's happened into recent times and not taking away from the fact that many of those shows were very good. But it became a point of compare and contrast rather than actually being able to see her in her own right. And so, there's even this point where in 1925, she has this exhibition with him in Adelaide. And at the end of it, she writes this little catalogue introduction. And at the end, she says, "well, there wasn't really enough room for many of my works. But one day you might have the chance to see more and I'll be happy to come and show you," something along those lines.

And so, I really thought of that during this exhibition because looking at her in her own right is very important. His work was often on a larger scale. It had a different feel, the works that are closest to when they were painting together on their travels. But really, it wasn't until 1979 that she had her first retrospective. And that was really due to the work of a lot of women in the '70s doing a similar project to what we're still doing now, which is retrieving the stories of women artists. And so she has this exhibition in '79 at the Geelong Gallery, curated by Margaret Rich. And I think it was the first time that people had really had a chance to see her work in terms of from the beginning to later works. It was not a huge show as the one we're doing is, but

nevertheless, it was important because it was a recognition of her as an artist in her own right. She would often put his work first and put herself down. And some people then just go along and agree with it, whereas actually not paying attention to her own work in her own right. And this is, it's interesting. It's raised a bit of a question, in terms of the name of the show, because it's Ethel Carrick rather than Ethel Carrick Fox. And there have been some people who've felt that it should be Ethel Carrick Fox. And it's true that she did sign a number of her works Carrick Fox. But what's interesting is right from 1908, all her solo shows, bar perhaps a couple, and she did have a lot of solo shows, were all Ethel Carrick, which was pretty radical in 1908. The newspaper reports say "Mrs Fox, who exhibits as Miss Ethel Carrick." And so she was asserting her independence. I think she could see that her art was distinctive. And of course, as you said in your question, she continued to paint and make prints for a long time after his death.

And her work goes on different trajectories. When she's in her 60s, she's traveling in India and she's very intrepid. She didn't have much money by the stage. Initially she had some money from her family. But in her later years, she was struggling and she was often staying in boarding houses or theosophical establishments. She goes to India because she is interested in theosophy. By the time she's in her 60s, she's a vegetarian. She's very interested in commonalities across humanity rather than divisions. And when she goes to India, she often travels by bus and gets a place by the driver. She goes to a convention at Adyar, otherwise known as Chennai or Madras. And but then she also treks into the Himalayas. And I was so excited to find some really beautiful little guashes that she did while she was traveling. And she lives on a houseboat for a while in Kashmir. And we have a beautiful painting in the show of her painting on the Jhelum River. And you see that strength of her practice continuing. So there is that frustration that conflating the two artists. It's nothing particularly against Fox. But it's like, can we just see her achievement for what she did in her own right? And I think it's just so exciting to be able to see these groupings and how she how she worked across particular themes and and continued, all the way through. In her market scenes, for example, the ones at the beginning that are post-impressionist have a very different feel to the market scenes that she did in the '20s in Nice. And she finds this fabulous flower market, which is, of course, also where people like Matisse had a studio. But she does her own very distinctive thing. You get her ability to bring in the architecture, the incredible color. It is one of the things I hope people will take away from the show, is that she's a wonderful colorist. And it was really exciting to find a couple of works that she did of the same French markets in 1951. She'd been living in Australia. She goes back to France. She's very peripatetic. And she goes back and she's living in the hills above Nice in Grasse. And she goes down and paints these really fresh flower market scenes that really don't look like the work of a 79-year-old. And it was just fantastic to be able to find some of the letters where she talks about, wanting to continue to travel as long as she possibly can, and going through Italy at 79, and just saying how she wishes that young students could have these opportunities.

AT: So one interesting parallel to a previous episode about Grace Cossington Smith and other Australian artists is that although it wasn't what Smith or in this case Carrick are best known for, the fact of World War I obviously had an impact on everyone who was doing art or really doing anything at this time. So even though, as you've described, so many of these beautiful scenes and everything were not connected to World War I, but I understand that she did some work documenting that as well.

DH: Yes. So in terms of World War I, she went from Australia after Emanuel had died back to the UK. And it was a really difficult time. Her sister, Jessie Platts, had two sons who she saw, for the last time because they were both killed as a result of the war. And at the end of the war, she paints a few works that are really atypical. One is *Place de la Concorde*. It's a very large painting. The colours are very muted. In fact, you feel like it's these lost souls in this vast Place de la Concorde. And it had been quite a traumatic time, but she had really dedicated herself to the war effort, to helping refugees. She helped Belgian children in the hospital in Paris and was very keen in doing her bit. And then in the Second World War, she was meant to be going from India back to

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Paris. But of course, it was too dangerous with the Nazis going into France and what was happening there. And de Gaulle, of course, goes to London and she does a lot of work in relation to freeing France. Free the French was a big thing for her. And during that time, she documents the work of women workers, volunteers who very often don't get recognised. And I think she really wanted to pay homage to the works they were doing. So we have some works that I think people will be not very familiar with. There's one, for example, of women making utensils out of papier-mâché because there was a scarcity of utensils in hospitals, for example. And women would come together and do this amazing work and she's able to really convey the sense of her appreciation of women together.

And she really depended a lot on her woman friends. She was part of the Melbourne Society of Painters and Sculptors. And they all banded together to really try and show their commitment to really helping people who were struggling as a result of what was happening in Europe. And there's another one where people are like making things in an op shop. And the final one is actually very close to the National Gallery of Australia or used to be, which was the Canberra Services Club. And she does this wonderful painting of women wearing these white uniforms. It's so luminous and it has so much warmth in it. When you look at photographs at the time, it does look very different. But part of what she does is about how she feels. That's important to her work across a whole different range of styles. But in the Services Club, it was basically to bring some solace to people who had been experiencing trauma. And what's interesting about this is that her own apartment was raided in Paris by the Nazis, towards the end of the Second World War. And I think there was this fear for her of going back, to a place that she loved so much. And she stayed in Australia for the longest time during the war from 1939 to 1950. So it's just an interesting story within the wider story of Ethel Carrick's artistic development.

AT: Now, this 1979 exhibition in Geelong, was that her first Australian retrospective or her first retrospective anywhere?

DH: That was her first retrospective anywhere.

AT: So she hasn't gotten the love she deserves in Europe either?

DH: No, it's very difficult. When I was doing research, I was lucky enough to go and do some research in the UK and Paris. But I did find that very few people knew her in Paris, where she had really spent most of her adult life apart from Australia. People hadn't heard of her. A couple of people, it was vaguely familiar. So she had a solo show in 1928 where one work was acquired by the French state. It was a hugely exciting event for her. But it was very difficult to get solo shows and certainly retrospectives. Most of her work went through the salons, the Salon d'Automne or the bigger group exhibitions, the exhibitions with women artists. But many of them became forgotten over time. And so, this retrospective after Geelong, so we're talking about several decades later, is really an opportunity to look at her work in depth. We have around 140 works in the show from 65 lenders. And I'm so grateful to the lenders because really without that private collector base and without some of the institutions, the regional and state galleries and the university collections, we wouldn't have been able to assemble this big exhibition that I always feel is like works coming together. It's like finding their friends that were painted at the same time so that you can see the great works, but you can see the context around them and you can see how the work unfolds. And I really hope that people will take the opportunity to come and see them before they all disappear back into their various homes around the country. And it's very special to be able to see them together and really think about what she achieved as a colorist and as a painter of great distinction and somebody we ought to remember.

AT: The exhibition of Ethel Carrick's work is on through 27 April 2025 at the National Gallery of Australia, and you can also purchase the publication that accompanies the exhibition and shares new research about the artist's life and work online at any time through the NGA website.