

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast, I'm your host, Allison Tyra. And today I'm joined by Dr. Rebecca Edwards, curator of Australian art at the National Gallery of Australia, to talk about Australian potter and painter Anne Dangar. An exhibition of Dangar's work curated by Dr. Edwards is on at the NGA through 27 April 2025. So first, could you give us an introduction to her life and career?

RE: Anne Dangar is really one of Australia's most important but under-acknowledged modern artists. In 1930, she moved permanently to Moly-Sabata, an artist colony in Sablons, a rural town in the south of France. And there she established a career as a potter working in the traditional potteries locally. But most interestingly, she decorated all of these pieces with Cubist designs, really bold, dynamic, bright Cubist designs, influenced by the Cubist artist Albert Gleizes, who was a really prominent exponent of Cubism at this time. And she's really interesting, because no other Australian artists really dedicated themselves to Cubism and modern art in that way. She's working among the avant-garde in France as their peer, exhibiting alongside them as their peer. And in this way, she was able to really form part of histories of Cubism in France, as well as histories of modernism in Australia, and had a really important influence on the development of modern art and abstraction here. So she had this really amazing career. But it's sort of hidden in the shadows. A lot of people have never heard her name before. But those that have are, I guess, completely obsessed with her because she makes such fantastic work and her life is so incredible.

AT: So how is she influencing Australia's art community if she's in France? Because I know that "Australian creative goes to Europe and builds a career there," it's a very common story that we even hear today. So how did that go the other direction as well, where she's also influencing things back home?

RE: Yeah, that's a really interesting question. What's important to kind of know about her is, she was always a real advocate for modern art. And she absolutely saw herself as a conduit for others. From her earliest years, she was a teacher in her small town in which she grew up, in Campsie. She was a teacher to young children. When she moved to Sydney, she taught with Julian Ashton at the Sydney Art School. And then when she moved to France and Moly-Sabata, she taught local schoolchildren as well. So teaching and sharing information was always a big part of what she did. But more specifically in terms of her influence in Australia. Throughout the 1930s, she sent her very best friend, but also for a period her lover, Grace Crowley. She sent her very regular correspondence throughout the 1930s, as well as lessons and exercises that she put together based on the theories of Albert Gleizes, the artists that established the community that she lived in. And Grace shared these with her like-minded friends, and her students as well. They would have regular catch-ups in Grace's studio, weekly catch-ups, and they'd read the letters out and they'd read the lessons and share these really interesting ideas. But what's really interesting is, alongside those lessons that talked about these ideas is that Dangar sent consignments of her own pottery decorated with Cubist designs to Crowley to share amongst all her friends, as well as her family. And she would hold small exhibitions of them, arguably the first exhibitions of Cubist art in Australia, we could say, very small, but no doubt the first, and would share them with all of Dangar's friends. So while they were learning these ideas, they also had these tangible examples of these ideas at play in objects that they used all the time.

So the artist Rah Fizelle, who was a friend of Dangar, he owned a series of mugs with these fantastic Cubist designs in which his monogram, RF, was embedded. He also owned a really fantastic jug that's now in our collection with these amazing Cubist decorations that encircle the entirety. So in handling it, it's something that you're always using. Really interestingly, a lot of the consignments arrived broken. And Dangar was really upset by this, but all of her friends in Australia glued those pieces together and then kept them. And this is a number of pieces in our collection that I suspect are part of those consignments that were smashed because you can see they're completely pieced together. But what's interesting about that is it meant her friends were really closely engaged with piecing them together and looking at what constituted the design and matching it up. And some of them even commented, many years later that in handling them in that way, they really began

to understand that the shapes were important. They weren't just decoration, there was something else going on there. So these lessons and these objects, when shared with her friends, they really encouraged them to experiment with Cubist ideas and with non-objective art, with abstraction. And for Crowley and Ralph Balson, another important Australian painter, these ideas became really important and really, I guess, encouraged them to push the limits of their own practice. And they became the first artists to really create purely abstract paintings in Australia. Ralph Balson had the first exhibition solely dedicated to abstract art in 1941 and Crowley exhibited geometric paintings the very next year. There was a major show of both of their work at the National Gallery of Victoria only a couple of months ago. And to so many people, their work was a complete revelation because like so many artists, they haven't received a huge amount of attention. They're, of course, beloved by people that know their work. But I think what's interesting is the next step is that these ideas really came to them and were really encouraged by Dangar and through her continued contact and correspondence with Crowley over many years. So it's a really interesting influence. And one you have to dig into the archive to discover. Once you see all the pieces, you're shocked that you didn't see it before.

AT: Now, correct me if I'm wrong here, but I feel like pottery is one of these media that we don't see as much of presented in museums. And I feel like there are class issues there because I know we've talked before on the podcast about how textiles are sort of diminished as "craft" rather than art. So anything that's actually useful isn't something that can be fine art. (RE: Yeah.) And I don't know if this is a medium that more women were maybe working in. If maybe there's some racism going on there, because I feel like a lot of the pottery you do see in museums are the "primitive" or ancient civilizations, like evidence of these times past from non-European cultures.

RE: Traditionally, there is sort of a hierarchy in the arts, you have painting at the top and craft at the bottom and pottery is firmly positioned in craft. But we have seen a really huge shift in this over the last few decades, the 1970s onwards, and textile certainly forms part of this, the divide between art and craft breaking down and ceramic artists starting to work or potters becoming ceramic artists, and starting to work in the field of sculpture and create things that aren't solely functional. And you see that with textiles as well, artists becoming textile artists and creating sculptural textiles and off loom textiles, and pushing the limits of what's traditionally acceptable for the medium and having people question then, is it art? Is it craft? And I think that's part of the reason why Dangar has remained in the shadow a little bit. As I said, the people that know her work and understand her legacy are great advocates for her work. And there's been a number of academics and curators that have done amazing work on her before. And Bruce Adams in particular, who wrote the first big monograph on her life and practice and excavated a huge amount. But I think because of this art/craft divide, her work has still always remained slightly at the side, she's a potter. She's also a woman and up until the last few years when museums and curators and historians have really actively tried to elevate the work of women artists, the National Gallery has certainly been trying to do that. Women have traditionally been left outside of the canon. But at the same time, she was also an expatriate. And I'm not sure if it's the same case for you in America, but certainly in Australia, the work of Australian artists produced outside of Australia, and perhaps not about Australia or of Australia, their work is often also not represented in the canon, which is pretty nationalistic. It's usually pretty masculine. It's usually pretty painting-heavy. And so in many ways, her work does not tick any of those boxes, and she's remained on the outer. But for me, as much as she is producing ceramics, and they're very functional. They're really just another support. She's enacting exactly the same Cubist principles that she would upon paper or painting. And in fact, she did produce works on paper, and you see those same ideas at play. But she became really interested in pottery, I think, because it was something that you held and something that you physically molded, that, for her, it became the perfect marriage of both of those ideas, both of modernity and everyday life and rustic peasant values. It all came together. But unluckily, up until, I guess, the last few decades, those ideas have set outside of a mainstream art history, and left her outside of the canon.

AT: This divide is so pronounced that I honestly couldn't even picture what does Cubism look like pottery as opposed to painting. So what is it about her work that makes you say, "Oh, yes, this is obviously a Dangar?" What makes them distinct, both individually as an artist, because every artist does have their own style. But also, what does that even look like?

RE: Yeah. Well, that's really hard. Like I said, she was working in the local potteries, French pottery, so she created very traditional rustic pottery. So it's always very thick, very chunky. It's quite funny, you talk to very fine potters and they're surprised at how rustic her work is. It's made for everyday use and to be broken and to just be replaced. It's very everyday wear. But, like I said, it's then decorated with these amazing Cubist motifs. And I guess that is the easiest way to pick. It's like this amazing mix of tradition and modernism. And nobody else had been doing that. But that said, she started to also bring in a whole range of fantastic imagery. She drew upon the regional and traditional motifs of the region. And she drew from Art Deco, because she lived and worked in Paris. She had knowledge of modern design outside of Cubism. So she brought all of those things together.

But what's really interesting is she was looking very particularly at the Cubist philosophies that Gleizes developed. And he was really interested in, it's quite complicated, but fundamentally, he broke it down into movements of translation and rotation. And for him, the idea of translation was movement up, down, left and right, your flattened planes moving up and down, left and right, which he saw as really continuing the work of Cubists of earlier in the 20th century, trying to reduce space and the distinction between object and background to bring them together on the same plane, flattening space, flattening perspective. That he saw as being represented in the movement of translation. But he was also really interested in representing time, the idea of time, which is something far more abstract. And he saw that represented in the movement of rotation, which when you think about it, does make quite a lot of sense, the idea of seasons passing cyclically, and of day turning into night turning into day again. It's repeated moments and movements that represent time moving forward, represented in a circle. So those are the two kind of movements that he brought together. And his Cubism, to put it very simply, broke down figurative form, sometimes non-figurative, completely abstract forms into different shapes, and, and they enacted those movements.

And so for Dangar starting to work in pottery, suddenly those movements made even more sense. I don't know if you've ever created wheel-thrown pottery yourself. As you can imagine, the circular forms of plates, of bowls, of tureens are perfectly suited to these shapes that are following these circular movements. They in fact encourage you to view them in the round and be part of those circular movements themselves to become part of this idea of representing time. And at the same time, the idea of creating the pottery, the sitting at a wheel with a centred ball of clay and this clay spinning and slowly becoming a vessel or various other form, also echoed this sort of rotational movement that Gleizes spoke about. So for her, pottery suddenly became very symbolic of his Cubist ideas. So I think that's how you recognise her work, because there's something more going on. You look at it, it's not just something that's decorative, it has this really powerful energy coming forth, that is the combination of all of those parts. It's the combination of this Cubist imagery, it's a combination of something that you would use every day, but also her physically bringing those ideas together in the object.

AT: Now, as you mentioned earlier, and I'm going to quote the exhibition description here, "she is one of Australia's most important yet under-acknowledged modern artists." So as we've discussed, she was very influential, even in the sense that she was doing remote learning many decades before Zoom made it cool. (RE: Such a pioneer.) (laughter) So for someone who was so influential, how has her legacy been lost?

RE: Yeah, no, it's really interesting story. At the time of her death, she was little known in Australia. And I guess the impact that she had had on those artists was little known as well, because even, and Crowley and Balson in particular, their work wasn't hugely popular. The Australian art world remained pretty conservative into the '40s and '50s. And so they actually had quite a tough time in really elevating their work and did work in a

bubble. So her encouragement from afar was really fantastic, but they still didn't break through here. And so it really wasn't until the late 1970s when Balson had long since died and Crowley was in her 80s. And curators and art historians revisiting the 1920s and '30s and '40s and wanting to recuperate those histories of modernism, and particularly those networks of people and the art they're producing, because they could see in retrospect, the work being produced was actually really interesting and really radical. They started interviewing her about her colleagues and about her painting partners and Balson in particular. And it slowly emerges, people interviewed her, that she actually was a really interesting figure as well. And so she has her first survey show at the age of 80-something, which is kind of crazy.

But eventually through conversations, this shadowy other figure also started to emerge, which is Dangar. And they're questioning, "well, when did you go to France? You said you were in France with somebody." And she and Dangar had travelled to France together in the late 1920s and they'd studied modern art in Paris under André Lhote and they'd returned and she'd somehow kept in touch with movements in France. And they slowly began to piece together that it was always from this friend that remained in France that was sending this information. Then it emerges that Crowley has actually a stack of letters that she'd sent her for 21 years. And all of those letters today are now in the State Library of New South Wales and totally accessible and you can read them. I've read them all. It's great reading, but slowly all of this material starts to emerge and Dangar herself also starts to emerge and people realise, "oh, actually she was doing really interesting work." And this is the late 1970s that this is happening. And so at this time that Bruce Adams, who did write the major monograph on her work, he was interviewing her and drawing together information that was through their discussions around Balson that he discovered Dangar and decided to undertake more research on Dangar. Daniel Thomas, who is a really significant figure in art history in Australia, a founding curator both here and at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, he then worked with Crowley to place all of her works in collections after she died and also worked with her to place the works by Dangar that she owned in collections in the years before leading up to her death and after.

So it was then through this very slow process of historians and curators slowly rediscovering her and then trying to place this material in libraries and galleries where people could start to access it and start to make sense of it that over the next 40 years her work and her legacy has started to really be uncovered. The first exhibition of her work in Australia was in 2001 and that was a small show but really important in terms of presenting her work for the first time. And the Art Gallery of New South Wales then had held a small show just a couple of years ago with works that they had acquired from France. And this has been a really slow process for collections to accumulate substantial holdings of her work and for material to be made available. The National Gallery acquired her archive back in 2012 and this has got 700 letters and sketchbooks and drawings, all sorts of amazing things. And so it's been this gradual accumulated process that the time is finally right for a big show to happen because all this amazing foundational groundwork has been done and all these collections have been established but it has taken a really long time.

AT: So did she ever come home because we know that she was doing this in like the 1930s and you mentioned the 1970s and it sounds like she had passed away by then. (RE: Yeah, yeah,) Did she ever come back?

RE: No, she didn't. So she first went to France in 1926 and she was there for two and a half years, returned and spent 1929 in Sydney and was just completely miserable because she found it so conservative and commercial and she missed the freedom and liberation of Paris and she missed being so close to modern art. And eventually she did move back to France in 1930, so not that long after really, and she was invited by Gleizes to move to his artist colony and arrived there in 1930. And aside from a six-month trip to Fez in Morocco, she remained there for the next 21 years and she didn't leave, she didn't return to Australia and then she died there in 1951. She did make regular plans to return to Australia but she never ever followed any of them through. There was always sort of one more opportunity, one major exhibition in Paris or some activity or exhibition she was organising with her young students or a trip to Morocco and then of course the Second

World War breaks out and that really grounded her further. And then by the time she was in her late years, she sort of realised it was almost too late to return and I think she always knew that she would never have really coped. She had lived a life of such freedom and such proximity to modern art at its centre that to return to Sydney would have felt such a wrench. I think she would have been a complete fish out of water.

AT: So that raises an interesting question of, we know that she has been overlooked historically in Australia, was she well-known in France?

RE: Yeah she was pretty well known in France, certainly you go particularly to the museums surrounding the region in which she was living and her work is on display. I was at the Musée de Beaux Arts in Lyon a couple of years ago and her works are in their permanent collections. So she forms a part of histories of French pottery because of course she is a potter and she's working in a region that is quite well known for a very particular type of pottery, using particular clays and particular methods and she's firmly part of that lineage and that history. But because she formed part of Albert Gleizes's artistic circle and she was really the driving force of Moly-Sabata she's definitely part of that history as well. So while she's not obviously again a household name she is certainly part of histories in France, and her work represented in major collections, both the collection of Lyon for example but the Musée des Arts Moderne in Paris, her work in the Pompidou. It's really significant collections of modern art and so certainly at her death, the difference in the way she was represented and known was very, very stark. There's a really interesting story in the years after she died, Crowley wrote to Mary Webb, who was another Australian artist living in Paris who became her on-the-ground correspondent after Dangar's death, and asked her to find an example of Dangar's work that she could then present to an Australian institution so that her work could finally be represented. And eventually after many letters because of course this is the time of letters, there's no email and there's no text, they eventually tracked down quite a large presentation platter, so something that would be mounted on the wall and offered it to the Art Gallery of New South Wales as a gift and they rejected it. Whereas today, institutions are clambering over each other to try and acquire her work so there's a real stark difference I suppose in the way that she was being remembered in France and Australia at that time.

AT: Now we do need to go back because I like how you just casually mentioned that Crowley was also her lover (RE: Yeah, yeah.) and then we just kept going. I love that you've talked about how important Crowley was to preserving and promoting her legacy. And I know that there's a stereotype about lesbians staying friends with their partners after they break up but even by that standard this seems to be going above and beyond. (laughter) So can you tell us a bit more about that relationship and if there's any other aspects of her personal life that you'd like to share?

RE: I think if Dangar hadn't moved permanently to France, they probably would have stayed together. But this is also a time when it was really hard for a woman, particularly a lesbian woman, but for a woman regardless to live an independent life. Most women were expected to maybe work for a couple of years in something polite like teaching and then marry and have kids and leave that behind. And so many of Dangar's cohort did absolutely that. So I think for her, the move to France has many facets as to why it was something that was so easy for her to do. I think the relationship with Crowley, they probably both knew it would be something they would never really be able to present openly if they were living in Sydney. I think Paris would have been such an amazing experience for the two of them, the liberation that women experienced there. And during the 1920s it was really the center of kind of open lesbian activity. There was a whole heap of women living there quite openly, or at least safely. They could veil their sexuality or at least sort of present their relationships publicly as friendship but everybody knew what was going on and it was fairly acceptable. Whereas I think it was probably quite a different situation in Sydney. The Oscar Wilde trial is still fresh in everybody's mind people are writing about lesbianism like it's a mental health issue or there's something wrong with people. So it's not a safe

environment by any means. So I think the two of them, it was always a relationship then, you would never be able to truly be fulfilled in the way that, or lived I suppose in the way that they would like it to be lived. And so I think for that for that reason it was sustained so long as friendship ultimately in the end. I think they never knew that they wouldn't see each other again. I think Crowley thought she was going to come over and stay with Anne there, and always thought maybe she would come back. They make a joke about moving to Canberra and setting up a pottery, that would be great. But I don't think they ever thought that that would they would ever not see each other again but of course that's what happened. And Crowley had other relationships, we assume she had a relationship with Rah Fizelle. We assume she probably had a relationship with Ralph Balson. But the two of them also remain very, very, very close. They were united both through this intense love that they had for each other, but also their practice as well, for both of them in many ways in a push to their personal relationships aside to advance their artistic practice and to dedicate themselves to that. Neither of them married, neither of them had children, which very much would have been a way for them to have safe, easy lives. But instead they really ardently pursued their artistic practice and everything that went along with that. So I think it's a really complicated time and context but also both being a woman but also being a lesbian woman, so complicated. There's so much tied up in what you're able to do and what you're allowed to do and what's acceptable to do, that... I can't even imagine. I think it's so fraught.

AT: So what do you hope that visitors who come to the exhibition will take away from the experience?

RE: Fundamentally I want them to come away like knowing who she is and knowing her work is fantastic and that they should have known it. But at the same time, I've spent a really long time working on this project, like five years and so I actually feel deep affection for her. And I visited Moly-Sabata where she lived and I feel deep affection for Moly-Sabata and it is a magical place and I hope that in terms of an experience that people walk in and they feel that there is actually, there has been a lot of love that's gone into this whole project. But also there's a lot of love coming back to her from that community as well. Moly-Sabata is still there. It's an artist residency program today, contemporary artists, like 30 artists come and stay every single year. Some of them use her kiln and her workshop. They know who she is, the streets are named after her. Older people in the town still remember her. They were her students as children. So it feels so alive there and I hope that people feel her presence in the show as well. It has been such a long project that I I do feel very close to her and it's something that at this point, it's very close to my heart. As curators we always sort of fall in love with our subject but this has been a really incredible experience. So yeah, I hope people get a sense of that when they walk through the show.

AT: Now when you mentioned that they're going to be introduced many of them for the first time to someone that they "should have known" (RE, laughing: Yeah it's a bit mean, isn't it?). Well, but I don't take that as "oh you should have known this" as though it's your fault. I think what you're getting at is more, you hope people are questioning, "wait, why don't I know about this person?" (RE: Yeah.) and sort of re-evaluating art and art history through that lens.

RE: Yeah absolutely. It's so interesting what gets written in and what doesn't get written in, particularly when you look back at art history. And as an art historian, I know I will be guilty of those same errors in decades' time. People look back at the period that I'm working and wonder why I didn't include this and that. But I guess that's for me what's also so exciting, is being able to go back and redress these absences and flesh out new networks and relationships that perhaps weren't visible at the time. That's one of the most exciting parts of being a curator and an art historian. But it also feeds in to a bigger project that the Gallery is obviously promoting with its Know My Name campaign. But galleries I think globally at this point are also pushing, everybody is really interested in elevating the voices of women because they have almost quite actively been kept outside of art history because art history is generally written by men or at least it's men that are at the top

making the decision. So yeah, it feels great to be one of the many women working below trying to push these women up to the top. So it's certainly not a case of, people should have known but there were barriers in place so that they didn't and I'm really excited that we're removing those barriers and there is lots to read on her, not just by me but by others. And so it's a great opportunity to open those floodgates and have more people engage with her work.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.