

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women Podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Simeran Maxwell, Associate Curator of Australian Art at the National Gallery of Australia, to talk about Australian designers Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson, as well as the French modernist artist who inspired them, Sonia Delaunay. The three women's work is on display now at the NGA in an eponymous exhibition that will be on into 2026. So first, can you tell us about their partnership?

SM: Linda Jackson and Jenny Key are pivotal designers in Australian fashion history. They came together in Sydney, although Linda was originally from Melbourne and then spent a large period of time traveling extensively to Europe and parts of Africa. And then when she returned to Australia, she moved to Sydney and then the partnership between her and Jenny began. However, having said that, people tend to put them always together, Jenny and Linda, as if they were a design duo, whereas actually the designs were sold out of Jenny's shop in central Sydney called Flamingo Park. And Jenny's career really began with the iconic knitwear design. Linda's style is a little bit different, particularly in the early period. Linda had a background in dressmaking, whereas Jenny did not. When I recently visited Jenny, I was talking about, because I have her knitwear books, which have patterns in them, which are quite complex. And I said, I really want to make something like this. And we were looking at a pair of leg warmers and she said, "well, just do it." And I said, "oh, but my knitting is pretty basic." And she's like, "oh, I can't knit." I was like, "what? You can't knit?" And she's like, "no, that's what Jan used to do." So she was the design concept. And of course, there's this idea in Australia that you do everything, every part of it. But when you think about big international fashion brands, no one's expecting Alexander McQueen to knit his fabric or anything to create his designs back in the day. So why would you expect Jenny to do the same? I think there's just an assumption because she's a woman. She must be able to knit because knitwear was her thing. But she worked in partnership with a woman called Jan Ayres, who did the knitting for her, and she did the design concepts. And there's these really colourful designs that embraced Australia. And that's where the coalition between her and Linda began. They had these same shared ideas and these same shared passions. And they would also do these incredible catwalk presentations called the Flamingo Follies, which sound like a hoot and a half. And it really was a complete break from how you present your clothing to your potential future customers, who became very close friends in many cases with both Jenny and Linda. And so it was this sort of party atmosphere, it was performance, it was dancing. They were staged in these very unusual places: Chinese restaurants, the Bondi Pavilion, places that you might expect cutting-edge designers to use these days. But back in the '70s, that was not how you presented your fashion collections. So they were breaking all these boundaries really early on, and then just continued to do so in terms of what sort of influences they took on board. They were really at odds with what I would consider more mainstream fashion within Australia. And then they led how mainstream fashion changed in the late '70s and '80s and into the '90s.

AT: When I was looking at their stuff, all I could think about was this outdated idea that style is like Chanel's little black dress. Not to say that there's not a place and time for the little black dress, but theirs feels very bright and fun and bold, and it just feels like a pushback to that idea that to be chic you have to be subdued.

SM: Yeah, to minimize yourself. They were certainly not minimizing themselves or the women or men who bought their fashion. It was about doing the opposite. And in an ironic and hilarious turn of events, Karl Lagerfeld actually used Jenny's textile designs on the inside of a houndstooth, boxy, quintessential Chanel suit, which we are acquiring into the collection and will be part of upcoming displays. But it is hilarious how they rejected that idea that women need to be chic and minimal ruffles and details like that, and colours are muted and whatever. And then as things unfold those sort of muted fashion houses and subdued fashion houses end up taking on their ideas in turn. But yes, the things that they were attracted to, and you can see in both their designs, are definitely colour and shape. And the shapes are quite different between the two designers, and that stems in some ways with Linda's designs from her background in dressmaking. She loved a lettuce hem,

which I know certainly went out of style, but I think it's well and truly back. I'm noticing the "fashion girlies" on TikTok are all about the lettuce hem tops and what have you, so they will enjoy a little bit of vintage Linda. She had more shapes to her garments, whereas Jenny went for these quite boxy, rectangular jumpers and jumper dresses with large sleeves, if they had sleeves, and maybe even a big roll neck. So you were almost getting that pushback to what Dior did in the late '40s with the New Look, where you've got these waspy waists, and then people said, no, I don't want to be constricted, or what happened in the '20s and '30s with the flapper dresses, which were a pushback to corseted clothing of the turn of the century. Those flapper dresses actually really remind me of what Jenny's jumpers do for the figure. They give you a freedom, but it's a freedom while being very, very much on display and the center of attention.

AT: I find it interesting that the way you framed this, it feels very much like it's not just about aesthetic, but it's also pushing back against this idea that women, which is not to say fashion is not for men and fashion is for everyone in theory, but we understand that this is primarily targeted at women.

SM: Absolutely. The collection that we're buying is their entire archives, but they began the designs in the '70s. And we can't retrofit who they're designing for to fit a contemporary ideology of that. Now their designs are made for absolutely everyone. They want to see just people in clothing, but in the '70s, it's a bit of a cliché, but it was a different time. So these were definitely made for women.

AT: And this could be me putting my personal biases on it, but it feels very feminist to say, "we are not going to perpetuate this idea that women have to be small, women have to be quiet, women have to be bland, and they have to be constrained." And it feels like this is very much pushing back against that larger societal perspective, not just the fashion, but that idea that women need to be contained in that way.

SM: Absolutely. And anyone who's ever met, particularly Jenny, knows that this is a very large personality, you couldn't constrain this in a corset if you tried. And so I feel like her designs are very much an extension of her personality. Similarly, Linda, she is potentially a more reserved person. And I certainly don't mean that in a negative, but she doesn't feel that women should ever be constrained in a garment or an ideology. They love layering as well, which you find from the early periods of their designs and the mixing and the matching. So you'll see Jenny leg warmers with one of Linda's dresses, and then they'll have African hats over the top and one of their best friend's earrings. And it was very collaborative and inclusive environment that they were working in. And it was about, the rising tide lifts all boats. It wasn't competitive in potentially the way that you can see contemporary designers having to work. They were working in a different environment, and they were working slightly outside of the system that had been created, which is different from the system that is now, certainly, but by subverting that system, they created a community and a public who wanted their designs for themselves. So I would say that's incredibly feminist. You don't see what you want, you make it and they will come and you don't push others down in the process, whether they're queer male friends, their fellow women designers. Australian fashion has been a predominantly women-led environment. That's not to say that there aren't some men in it, but historically, there is more women than men, which I find refreshing because you look overseas and that's not the case. They created this environment that they wanted to live in. And I feel like that's such a powerful and brave thing to do.

By acquiring this extensive archive of the two designers and how the gallery intends to use this acquisition, now and then into the future will, I hope, retain this memory of the important place that they had in breaking some very firm traditions. And anyone who's tried to break a tradition knows how terrifying that can be and also how hard and how much pushback you will have, be it the patriarchy, the establishment or just even the wider public who, making changes, people don't necessarily embrace change just immediately. So I think that and also having both their archives directly from the artists and being able to capture the history of when these works were made and the experiences that these women had in these clothing items, because these are not,

sometimes you walk into fashion designers' archives and they are examples of clothing or garments or designs that have been worn once on a runway and never again, or an absolutely crisp, never-worn example of a collection. Whereas these works that we're collecting have had a life. There is a little red wine stain where it's been to a party or two. There is one particular ensemble that we are acquiring from Jenny but was actually made by Linda, designed by Linda and then the fabric was painted by one of their other close friends and collaborators, David Mcdermott, and then jewelry was made to go with the outfit by another one of their very close friends and collaborators, Peter Tully, and it's a cream crepe, multi-layered, multi-piece outfit. Jenny wore it and she definitely dribbled something on it. Because it was made in the '70s, it looks now a little bit like tea stain but she's like, "I think it was probably champagne, not quite sure." But these stories about, that these garments were made by many hands who worked collaboratively and it was made for Jenny to wear at one of the Flamingo Follies events and those stories that live inside garments that have been worn, I think, are so important because they sit very much side-by-side with other works in the collection and once something enters our collection, we're not having Kim Kardashian moments. These works are never worn by humans again but we do try and capture their lives and how they were designed for real bodies. As a curator of fashion, unless there is extenuating circumstances, I don't like to see garments without a mannequin or a tailor's dummy, something to give that sense of being inhabited because it's like having a painting and displaying it in an art gallery unstretched and just lying flaccid in a corner. People would be like, why would you do that? Well, why would you do that to a garment? Because that is not how they are created and it's not the purpose for which they're created, and I think working with Jenny and Linda on the acquisition has put a fire in me about the stories and, we're an art gallery and not a cultural institution in terms of social history but I think with their work, there's a very much an overlap and ensuring that we collect that social history that goes so importantly with these garments, that they can stand as works of art and then they can also speak to the environment in which they were made.

AT: All right, now just for anyone who's not aware of the context of the Kim Kardashian comment, basically **someone**, we're not calling anyone out, you can Google it, someone let her borrow an iconic Marilyn Monroe dress that did not fit her and so it came back quite noticeably damaged and so from a museum management collections perspective, don't do that.

SM: It caused a furor not just in the public world but also huge conversations were had after that event in the textile conservation world about preservation and the role of the textile curator in the ongoing maintenance of vintage garments. It was actually quite interesting to have those conversations, it is really unfortunate that what sparked it was something that, they're never going to be able to fix it. I work with textile conservators and they are miracle workers. but miracles only go so far. You can't bring things back from the dead.

AT: That's one of the things that, because as we talked about last time you were with us, one of the difficulties with textiles from a historical standpoint is that these were objects that were meant to be used. They were quilts that were on beds, tablecloths that were on tables, clothing obviously that was worn and so that's one of the reasons that it's so great that the NGA has recently acquired this massive collection directly from Jenny and Linda. So you referenced this, you've hinted at it, but could you tell us exactly what's going on there?

SM: Jenny and Linda, like all good artists and designers, they have held on to special works from their careers, from the '70s right through to their most contemporary works. And Jenny and Linda worked in the same space for only part of their career. When Flamingo Park closed, they went separate ways and they have separate interests and they worked on separate projects. So for instance Linda worked extensively in theatre with different theatre companies, both designers worked with a lot of First Nations artists and fabric designers, so those collections are really interesting to see the growth as ideas around appropriation change over the course of these two designers' lifetimes and then right up to some very contemporary designs they have done. So we

made contact with them and me and my curatorial colleague Rebecca Edwards went and did a week-long trip to visit both Jenny and Linda where they store their works and went through absolutely everything that they have and made incredibly hard decisions because especially when you're working so directly with the artists, this is their legacy and as people get older and of course we went through COVID, people's decisions change about how they see themselves and what they want for the future and where they want their works. So we had to make sometimes some tough calls but I think both Jenny and Linda are happy with the selection because we did work very closely with them to choose things that represent the entirety of their careers that then are preserved in the national collection. It's not like we didn't have any works by them already and we have already some important connections with some contemporary designers like Romance Was Born, who collaborate on their major runways with artists and designers particularly from the '80s but also contemporary artists. So we had both the Romance Was Born collections which they did with Jenny and Linda separately. So it really made sense bringing it to the gallery. As I said, it's been a long hard road, it's taken two and a bit years to get it over the line. It's a lot of work but part of it's going to be immediately on display and then other ideas can be teased out from the collections and they will be shown separately together with other artists, designers into the future and it's really exciting to be able to have that flexibility.

AT: Now I know that you have work from international artists in the collection obviously but I think it is very appropriate that two designers who were very much inspired by Australia's nature would be kept in the NGA collections. So I think it was Linda said, "we were standing in front of an incredible landscape the gum trees and the flowers and the clear bright colors and all the earthy colors and it was obvious that you would translate that into your artwork. In England and China, you had roses and chrysanthemums and in Australia we had waratahs." And they've also got cockatoos and koalas and wattle and gum trees and opals and these iconic landmarks. So it was very much Australia influenced their work and this has come up on previous conversations about the writer Miles Franklin, the singer Nellie Melba, where you just have certain women who are really bringing Australia into their work. It is very much part of who they are and what they're doing.

[Listen to Jess Harper on Nellie Melba](#) or [read the transcript.](#)
[Listen to Dr. Rachel Franks on Miles Franklin](#) or [read the transcript.](#)

SM: When they really took off they established themselves as trying to break with, because as you said there are periods in history where these strong powerful artistic women will use Australian iconography as this touchstone within their practice or their visual image. But then you go through these massive dips where Australia is ashamed of itself and it's ashamed that it looks different from the rest of the world and that our animals are a little bit weird when you compare them to the rest of the world. And even the physical form of the island of Australia, that became a bit of a touchstone for them and these women were not afraid. They were like, "Australia has such great colors and it has this history." They were really concerned with stopping from pretending like First Nations and Indigenous culture wasn't a foundation stone in Australian culture more broadly. I think that they they wove those things together, so you have this visual imagery which is wattles, waratahs, native animals, Jenny Kee's Blinky Bill koala jumper which very famously and iconically Princess Diana wore. And then as their careers continued they'd never dispense with something that was a foundational idea like the opal for example, that is still an iconic representation for both designers. It has been abstracted in all sorts of ways, different color palettes have been pulled in and pushed out, but when you see all of those designs as Bec and I have done lined up next to each other, you can see how varied their approaches were to these ideas and that they never let go. The waratah is still such an important part of their iconography. Jenny's house is surrounded by waratahs and when she and Linda talk about their work whether it's now or then, they will always be referencing these things and Linda still goes to the Opal Festival. They don't let go of their ideas, they just add layers on top of them and when you look at their work, you see the complexity increase. Jenny for instance does a jumper in the '70s, these very simple rectangular designs and now she's still got that jumper in there she's just got additional layers. She's got a bodysuit, she's got a head scarf, she's got a wrap, she's got

several scarves obviously - just all of these additional elements. So I find that really inspiring as well, that you see the progression through their designs but you can always see where they started and what were those beginning inspirations and the inspiration was Australia and it still very much is and it's just their treatment has slightly shifted. But the color palettes, the animals are still there, the flora, fauna, all still there they just have more many more layers to them now.

AT: It's interesting because I know both of them had traveled internationally before they started their partnership and so I as someone who is clearly not Australian-born, I find that leaving your country is often the best way to get perspective on your country. So I'm wondering how much that might have reinforced the wanting to put those distinctive elements into their work.

SM: Yeah I agree. I think when you leave, you come back and you see Australia's big big sky. And they also traveled just even outside of Australia's big cities. Traveling is important to both designers. Linda did this extensive backpacker-y experience which was a very quintessential '70s with her then-girlfriend Fran Moore, who was a photographer, and her friend Peter Tully, who was a jewelry interdisciplinary artist and how those trips affected their experience. This group of four Jenny, Linda, Peter and David, sort of launched Australiana and made cultural cringe cool. They continued to travel internationally. David lived in New York, Peter traveled a lot, they went bush, they did all these sort of things, but they carried Australia with them. But then they took on board lessons learnt from international experiences, so ideas about visual connections - when they were traveling through Africa, you could tell where someone was from by the types of materials and jewelry and what have you that they wore and so when you think about Jenny and Linda's designs, you could see them in Iceland and know those ladies are from Australia. Like it's writ large on on their bodies and they carry that with them and they're proud of that, without that negative patriotism that can sometimes come with, there's an ideology that Australia's the best thing ever. And both artists have always been incredibly politically active, they have very firm thoughts on how Australia is and should be run in connection with particularly queer groups, people of color etc, etc. So they're certainly not saying Australia is just perfect the way it is but having said that, they do think that there is a relevance in grounding their ideas in in being Australian and there's nothing wrong with Vegemite. I mean it depends how thickly you apply it to toast but yeah.

AT: Okay we're gonna have to agree to disagree on that. I was genuinely worried that when I took my citizenship test they were gonna be like, "and now you have to eat Vegemite" and I wouldn't get my citizenship.

SM: Yeah, look, it's a divisive issue. It is a divisive issue, I totally appreciate that. But even the symbol of the Vegemite, whether you like it or not you see that and everybody links that to Australia. The wattle is such a, you don't see flowers like that elsewhere. Some of Jenny's early designs of tropical fish, they're so much based in the Barrier Reef, which is a visual icon of Australia, the color. They're so relevant, but then they juxtaposition with these deep brown and reds that you can see how they're drawn from central Australia and their time spent there. So their designs reflect not only the Australia that they were living in at the time and how that's changed, but when they would make a new experience how that's wrapped into their designs at that point.

AT: Now as we're talking about how Australian they are, there is actually a third person featured in this exhibition who is not Australian so can you tell us who that is and how she fits into this situation?

SM: Her name is Sonia Delaunay and she is definitely not Australian. She was born in what is now the Ukraine and then she moved to Paris and married another artist called Robert Delaunay. And her graphic style that was developed with him and a number of other artists called Orphism looks and shape and form and color and what I love about Sonia's career and practice and what both Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson also loved about Sonia's practice is the expansive nature of what she did. There were a couple of these really incredibly talented

modern women artists who eclipsed their husband's career and those around them and they didn't get completely buried in the history books but they're top-tier and they should have had more extensive treatment. Sonia's one of them and she turned her hand to multiple things, so the gallery owns a wonderful painting which we have on display a lot of the time. We also have this incredible collection of design prints, so she made these prints and drawings to test out designs which sometimes went into production as textile designs and what have you. She designed clothing, she made pottery, she made jewelry, she bedazzled a Citroën car back in the '20s, and by bedazzled I mean she painted it and I only have only seen black and white images of her standing in front of it but I would love to see it - obviously there wasn't color photography back in those days, but I would love to see what it what it looked like in the flesh and and whether it still exists. And she worked with Citroën on it, it wasn't like she took a car and just upcycled it. She was this fabulous moment and her designs are incredibly diverse and yet you see a Sonia Delaunay, whether it's a print, a painting, a clothing design and you know it's her.

She also worked for the Ballet Russes. So the National Gallery owns one of the largest collections of Ballet Russes costumes in the world, which everyone's like "oh, Canberra? Weird." But our first director had a very unique approach about how he was going to build a collection of modern art in the mid- to late 20th century, when you can't just go around buying Old Masters. You can't start building that collection from the '70s, so he was looking at unique and innovative ways that he could acquire works by artists and so many incredible modern artists worked for the Ballet Russes. Having said that, their original team of theater designs were also incredible and in turn shaped visual art, so that's a whole other story. But it's very interesting the way that Sonia and to a much lesser extent her husband Robert as well as some other really pivotal figures like Natalia Goncharova, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse etc. all worked for this company. And so we have a group of costumes which she designed for the ballet *Cleopatra* after the original designs which were made by Léon Bakst, one of the original theater designers to work with the Ballet Russes. So his initial designs were in part destroyed by fire and so Diaghilev, who owned the Ballet Russes, was like, "right, well we'll get Sonia to do some designs." And they're fantastic. Orange is not my color, I should say, but these are this juxtaposition between orange and deep blue with pops of gold lamé. They are really a sensation.

And juxtaposing these designs by Sonia with what Jenny and Linda were doing in the very start of their career, both designers were looking at international art, and we've talked about how they're drawing inspiration from Australia but they're not living in the back of beyond. They're these crazy artistic women who were traveling the world and they were looking at what art history really was, and how some of those ideas could be applied to contemporary fashion design. And that in itself was not something that certainly hadn't been done in Australia but it was even a crazy concept. Now, all contemporary artists are collabing with big fashion houses but back in those days it didn't happen so much. It didn't happen at all. So drawing that connection, which I think is something that people don't know. They'll know Jenny's wattle dress or one of Linda's multi-layered lettuce designs. They'll know them, but they don't necessarily know that story that some of those early modern artists played such a pivotal role in the designs.

AT: Well that begs the question of, when people come to this exhibition, what do you hope that they'll walk away from it with?

SM: I want people to take a fresh look at both Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson's early designs. This is the the start of their career, before they got firmly embedded in Australiana, so that the colors that you see in these designs are quite different. They're brighter and they don't have that Australian lens put on them yet. And then if you look at Sonia's designs, and so we have textile panels, we have as I said the Ballet Russes, we have these incredible print series, and how they were pulling out these color palettes so directly from her designs. It's a foundational moment that I don't think people are aware of. I always want to uplift a modern woman, so I think getting Sonia's work out that isn't her painting, because no shade to painters but when you can see the depth of an artist's practice and that they worked in so many different media with such ease, I think that people

appreciate that they don't necessarily know that before. So I think comparing these three women's practices together really work, it'll showcase our collection which is so strong in the three artists. And it will just show how the younger designers pulled from this older artist but not in a cookie cutter way. But when you see the works in front of each other, you're like oh I totally get that and I just want them to celebrate three really powerful women in the arts.

AT: *Know My Name: Kee, Jackson and Delaunay* will be on display into 2026 at the National Gallery of Australia, with the second part of the exhibition that Simeran mentioned opening in November 2025. Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember well-behaved women rarely make history.