

MAUDE FANNY PROSSER—AN ‘ADELAIDE DECORATIVE ARTIST’.¹

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In response to the death of her mentor and colleague Harry Pelling Gill (1855-1916), director for Technical Art at the School of Design Painting, and Technical Art (later principal of the School of Arts and Crafts), Maude Prosser wrote as ‘one who owes all her training to Mr. H.P. Gill, and who is only one of many hundreds’, that his memory would ‘remain with us always and his influence for the good and the beautiful will be handed on through the ages to come.’²

Maude Prosser (1876-1950), the eldest of seven children, left her public school at fourteen years of age and, at sixteen, in 1892, entered Adelaide’s School of Design. She was able to afford only two art lessons a week until Gill entrusted her with paid work enlarging drawings—perhaps for enlarging sculptural drawings or for craftwork, particularly needlework designs. She eventually attended classes full-time, initially hoping to become an accomplished watercolour painter, but she realised her ‘limitations’.³ Prosser later completed the courses for her teaching certificates. She was the sole student successfully examined for the Art Class Teacher’s Certificate in 1897, for Subjects 3b and 5b, useful preparation for her future art needlework: one subject was a pencil outline of ‘ornament in low relief from the cast from the Madeleine⁴ or Louis XII pilasters, or any large ornamental scrolls; the other was a

¹ Maude Fanny Prosser’s mother was Betsey Gardner, her father Henry Edgar Prosser. Maude was born at Brinkworth, South Australia (Courtesy of Pauline Cockrill, from <ancestry.com>).

² ‘Views and Comments’, *Advertiser*, 10 June 1916, p.10. In March 1916, the Adelaide School of Art was re-named the South Australian School of Arts and Crafts.

³ ‘An Artist in her Studio. Artcraft and Utility’, *Mail*, 15 Jul 1922, p.18.

⁴ Probably the nineteenth-century neo-classical Church of the Madeleine, Paris, erected in memory of Napoleon Bonaparte’s Great Army.

shaded pencil or chalk drawing 'from a piece of ornament in high relief, or from casts of fruit.'⁵ Prosser was taught art needlework at the School mainly by Miss E.H. Meek.

In 1898 Prosser was appointed to the School of Design to teach art needlework, and became Superintendent of Art Needlework from 1901 until she resigned from the School in 1907. Prosser was one of the group of women that embroidered the nine feet high and six feet wide (233cm x 178cm) presentation portière of 1901, of 'excellent workmanship',⁶ and considered at the time 'the finest piece of art needlework ever executed in South Australia',⁷ presented to the Duchess of Cornwall and York during Australian Federation ceremonies in Adelaide. Perhaps this description was true of publicly displayed and known work, yet press hyperbole aside, much fine student and other work was done at the School of Design. It was seen at the annual School exhibitions that were reported in some descriptive detail in the press.

The School of Design had teaching branches at Port Adelaide and Gawler. The central School exhibited over 100 examples of work in autumn 1900 for the Century Exhibition in the Exhibition Building. This gave further opportunity for 'the beauty of fitness in use' to be added to the 'charm of a suitable decoration' of objects, whether needlework, wood carving, or metal work, no design of which was duplicated.⁸ The needlework was shown in a large glass case that extended over one wall, and also was hung, framed, around the walls. The frames held church work, darning, drawn thread work, Morris work, appliqué and crewel work. Tablecloths, photo-frames, blotters, a fire screen and needle-point lace were other work that won the newspaper reporter's eye and belief that the 'taste of the purchasing Adelaide public has been raised by [the School's] continuous output of original and artistic work'. Lena Unbehaun showed embossed leatherwork on the square seat of a turned blackwood 'Egyptian' stool, and Maude Prosser her leatherwork on a rectangular music seat.⁹

H.P. Gill encouraged students of the School to take the examinations of London's South Kensington School of Art for art teachers' and art masters' teaching certificates, but the School's Board of Governors had given notice in November 1894 that the examinations would be stopped. Maybe so, but Gill's strong voice is evident in 1903 when several reasons for the School discontinuing the examinations after 1903 were given: South Australia was the only colony that held them; holding the exams in June meant a time delay in the return of results that prevented students from planning their courses (work was sent to London at the end of the year and results were not known until nine months later, in September the following year); the School could not incorporate major curriculum changes made at London in time for teaching because of the time difference; and there were 'numerous errors' by the South Kensington authorities in forwarding exam papers.

Perhaps most significant of all for the sentiment of budding Australian nationhood were two reasons directly related to Australia's federation: 'If Australia is ever to become a country,'

⁵ 'South Kensington Art Examinations', *Register*, 2 Sep 1897, p.7. H.P. Gill encouraged students of the School to take the examinations of the South Kensington School of Art (Fischer, p.19).

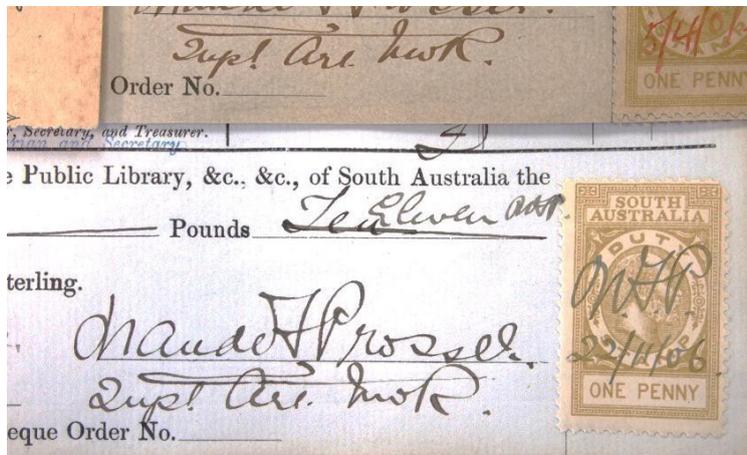
⁶ 'Studio-Talk', *Studio*, vol. 24, 1902, p.211.

⁷ *Register*, 11 Jul 1901, p.6.

⁸ 'School of Design Work', *Advertiser*, 28 March 1900, p.9.

⁹ 'The Century Exhibition', *Advertiser*, 28 March 1900, p.9.

Gill wrote, 'it must depend upon its own resources', and reject the 'absurdity' of 'not being able to certify' art teachers when it can certify its doctors and lawyers.¹⁰



Today, 'work of the needle is treated more as a graceful diversion or accomplishment, and there is little or no diligence in the pursuit of it as a great art.' (Maude Prosser, 'Art Needlework', School of Design Art Club Magazine, December 1903)

Art Needlework had been taught at the School of Design from 1886. Maude Prosser was appointed superintendent of Art Needlework in place of Miss E.H. Meek in February 1901. A year after her appointment, student needlework shown at their annual exhibition in 1903 was said to have markedly improved. In the 1903 students' exhibition, among many loaned items that modelled accomplishment and standards, a blotter for sale 'had the piping shrike beautifully worked in the centre in Morris silk.'¹¹ I.H. James was a cadet at the Adelaide School of Design when he saw H.P. Gill sketch the piping shrike for the South Australian coat of arms as Maude Prosser held its outstretched wings. He recalled Gill's casual comment, and well-founded fear, "In years to come they will be calling this a magpie." The piping shrike was suggested by the Governor-General, Lord Tennyson (a former Governor of South Australia), as the ensign emblem for the governor at sea, and H.P. Gill executed the design of the bird perching on a staff of eucalyptus, its wings symbolically extended upwards in front of the rising sun of the Commonwealth.¹² By 1903 the piping shrike appeared on numerous School of Design works.

The 1903 display in the Exhibition Building included drawing from the antique, life painting and drawing, wood carving, still life painting, and plaster carving. Most of the art needlework

¹⁰ 'School of Design Art Club Magazine', no. 1, 1903, pp.9-10.

¹¹ 'School of Design. Students' Exhibition', *Register*, 28 May 1903, p.6.

¹² 'Another New Flag', *Advertiser*, 14 Mar 1903, p.6; Vox, 'Out Among the People', *Advertiser*, 13 July 1950, p.4. It is contended that a student of James Ashton's Norwood Art School and of the Adelaide School of Design, Frances Jane Illert, used the seal of the King of Prussia's *Consulat* in Adelaide as the basis for her design in the 1890s of the South Australian emblem, and that H.P. Gill eventually submitted it as his own design (see 'The Origin of the South Australian "Piping Shrike" (Magpie) Emblem', SLSA: PRG 1399/180.

examples were loaned—they came also from interstate. So great was the School's success in selling its work that it had to be borrowed for exhibition. Loaned works were an educational device to show standards and achievements as aspirational instructional models for students. For example, an address cover decorated with Sturt pea design was returned for the exhibition from Sydney by Lady Tennyson, who earlier had received it as a presentation gift, and there were sixteen other lenders.¹³

The needlework was considered of 'a very high character' and was displayed in a lower room of the building: the entrance hall to the exhibition was decorated with palms, 'art muslin, drapery, and pictures'; and several 'extremely graceful and one or two rather stiff designs for needlework fashionable fancies'.¹⁴ Ecclesiastical embroidery by the Guilds of St Peter and St Paul; and in the room below the art needlework was 'tasteful in design [and] executed in a highly superior manner.'

Through its exhibitions of the applied and industrial arts it was the objective of the South Australian Chamber of Manufactures not only to recognise home achievements but to stimulate their further developments. So too was this the School's objective. The context of the Chamber's ambitious exhibitions e.g. the 1910 Exhibition of Manufactures, Arts, and Industries, Adelaide, 24 March to 4 May held in the grand Jubilee Exhibition Building, North Terrace.

In September 1910, Maude Prosser, wrote to Richard T. Baker (1854-1941), Curator of the Technological Museum at Sydney:

I enclose a photograph of a small exhibit I have just sent to the Melbourne Arts & Crafts Exhibition to be opened on the 4th. Oct., just a sample lot of goods.¹⁵

She entered this work, probably for instructive display and not sale, in the large Arts and Crafts Society's exhibition held at the mansion, Cliveden, East Melbourne, in October 1910. Was she being overly modest, demure, in front of a museum official or was this her generally unassertive or unpretentious opinion about her skills and craft production? Perhaps not the last, for Prosser had a flair for marketing as an independent business woman who surely pursued certain feminist principles, not the least a refusal of self-effacement.

¹³ 'School of Design. Students' Exhibition', *Register*, 28 May 1903, p.6.

¹⁴ 'School of Design', *Register*, 18 Nov 1891, p.6.

¹⁵ AGSA: File 'Prosser, Maude', AC2/4468.



Maude Prosser sent this photograph of a 'small exhibit' of her work to R.T. Baker, Sydney (AGSA: 'Prosser, Maude', file AC2/4468. 'M.F. Prosser. Sept 1910. With compliments' on back, relates to her letter to Baker of 29.9.1910). The small embroidered, sometimes painted, parlour bellows, with brass or gilded nozzles, were a component of the 'artistic fireplace' and enjoyed a popularity from the 1880s, employed not so much to enliven coals but to blow the dust from objects in boudoirs and drawing rooms.¹⁶ (Courtesy of Mary Rawlings, art teacher and great-niece of Maude Prosser)

¹⁶ M.B.W. and M.G.H., 'Art Needlework', *Art Amateur*, vol. 8. No. 2, January 1883, p.49.

Baker strongly advocated that the waratah (*Telopea speciosissima*) be sanctioned as Australia's floral emblem.¹⁷ He gave two public lectures at Adelaide titled 'Australian Flora in Applied Art', and 'Our Natural Heritage, the Gum Tree'.

Baker probably bought from Prosser her copper repoussé trinket boxes, her tooled leather book covers, and other work in 1914 after his visit to Adelaide. One cover was of rust-coloured suede leather stamped with a group of three of the waratah motif he so loved, its edges whip-stitched in black thong, and with plaited loops set at either end to form double loop handles.¹⁸



Maude Prosser. Copper repoussé vase worked with eucalyptus foliage and fruit motifs. c. 1910. The detail shows the carefully folded and riveted base corners. Powerhouse Museum: Reg. no. A1146

¹⁷ 'Waratah Versus Wattle. A New South Wales View', *Advertiser*, 29 Sep 1910, p.10.

¹⁸ Prosser's copper boxes and vase, leather book covers, and bags are illustrated on the Powerhouse Museum web site: <<http://www.powerhousemuseum.com>>.

Deft fingers and an education in form and colour



Adelaide School of Design staff in 1905. Left to right: John Harrison, Gladys Booth, Beulah Symes Leicester, Robert M. Craig, Margaret Kelly, Elizabeth C. Armstrong, Charles J. Pavia, Maude Prosser. H.P. Gill is seated centre in profile.¹⁹

In 1903, Maude Prosser published a summary of her aesthetic principles in the *School of Design Art Club Magazine*. Needlework is the 'art of clothing forms', she wrote, and 'must be studied independently of any connection with painting, architecture or sculpture.' Embroidery requires industry and patience, is therefore 'woman's art'; and it can and should 'express the individuality of the worker'. Prosser noted that appliqué and 'art-linen', worked round with button-hole stitch, are the most simple forms of art needlework. As with all work, design, possibly more so than evenness of stitch, is essential for success. She noted as being integral to art needlework, counterpoint appliqué, crewel stitch, from the 'finest work in the finest silks, to the boldest in the coarse wools', and darning, 'particular attention being paid to the outline and the stems in all work'. Prosser cautioned those who would ignore

¹⁹ From Neville Weston, *The professional training of artists in Australia, 1861-1963*, with special reference to the South Australian model, PhD thesis, Department of Education, University of Adelaide, 1991, p.529 (source unknown).

prudence and 'educated powers, thoughtfulness and study', that they thereby ignored the essential basis on which to achieve superior art needlework.²⁰

'In the needlework cupboard'

The 'fancy articles' under Prosser's charge in the School exhibition of autumn 1906 attracted favourable comment, especially the three portières with chrysanthemum and rose decoration considered to be of excellent workmanship. The display included two 'ornamental piano covers', a serge cloth worked in carpet silks with a thistle motif (possibly a tablecloth), many cushions, worked fabric frames, stoles, and blotters. The needlework students were listed: Mesdames Hole, R. Smith, A. Adamson, Astley, and Magarey, and Misses E.E. Daw, [G.] Jude, M. McDiarmid, Law Smith, M. Adamson, A. Cudmore, A. and B. Morphett, O. Key, L.H. Goode, L. Anthony, and Agnes Killick, who became an instructor in needlework at the School in the early 1900s.²¹

At the following year's exhibition, Maude Prosser's 'needlework and miscellaneous fancy work department' contained repoussé vases, frames, boxes, and brass and copper matchbox covers as well as needlework produced by some sixteen students. The exhibitors in 1907 included Misses E. Jude, C. Fisher, A. Cudmore, L. and A. Poulton, Daw, M. Adamson, J. Melrose, C. Melrose, E. Lawrence, L.H. Goode, Morphett, and Mesdames P.H. Prosser (Maude's sister-in-law), G. Ayers, Girdlestone, and J. Counsell.²²

To raise 'the general standard of taste' by exhibition and example.

Australian aversion to the 'lifeless regularity' of 'machine-made art ... sold by the yard, by the pound, or at so much a gross',²³ kept alive the sentiments of William Morris and other English arts and crafts practitioners, so influential in applied and industrial crafts design that responded to the worst of bad design and indifferent manufacture resulting from the industrial revolution. The second annual exhibition in 1910 of the Arts and Crafts Society showed the development of 'an Australian ideal in decorative work of all sorts',²⁴ and revealed that from development and training of the obviously 'enormous talent' will come wonders.

This general exhibition, held at the mansion, Cliveden, East Melbourne ran over its initial two weeks from 5 October because public interest was so eager. Demonstrations were held of book binding, coloured glass cutting and setting, and cane basket work.

Three years on, in 1906, students' fancy articles displayed in the 'needlework cupboard' of the School of Design included three portières decorated with roses and chrysanthemums; two ornamental piano covers; a cream serge cloth worked in carpet silks with a thistle motif.

²⁰ [Maude Prosser], 'Art Needlework', *School of Design Art Club Magazine*, December 1903, pp.19-24.

²¹ 'School of Design. Students' Exhibition', *Advertiser*, 31 May 1906, p.8.

²² 'School of Design. Exhibition of Work', *Advertiser*, 30 May 1907, p.9.

²³ 'Arts and Crafts. The Hand and its Cunning', *Argus* [Melbourne], 8 Oct 1910, p.20.

²⁴ Vesta, 'Women to Women. Arts and Crafts Exhibition', *Argus*, 2 Oct 1910, p.15.

Plus cushions, stoles, and other things that should be 'inspected by all lovers of high-class needlework. Eighteen students exhibited work.'²⁵

In 1913, in a large glass case in the eastern room of the School, were examples of art needlework supervised by Maude Prosser: a handsome appliqued portière, a bedspread by Mrs Burston, tablecloths, photo frames, sachets, cushions, table centres, a piece of leatherwork let into a wooden glove box, and 'an exquisite cosy with a peacock design, worked by Miss Edith Dow.' Maud Fletcher's big curtains with a vine pattern, and other workers' cosies, cushions and curtains were also displayed.²⁶



Maude Prosser. Early 1900s (Courtesy of Mary Rawlings)

Presumably Prosser was back at the School teaching part-time in 1913, although her 'numerous novelties' of poker work, stencilling, and art needlework were displayed in Spring that year at her rooms at Commercial Bank Chambers. Maude Prosser must have made special mention to her columnist of a probably 'unique' order: a bed spread worked in pink

²⁵ 'School of Design. Students' Exhibition', *Advertiser*, 31 May 1906, p.8.

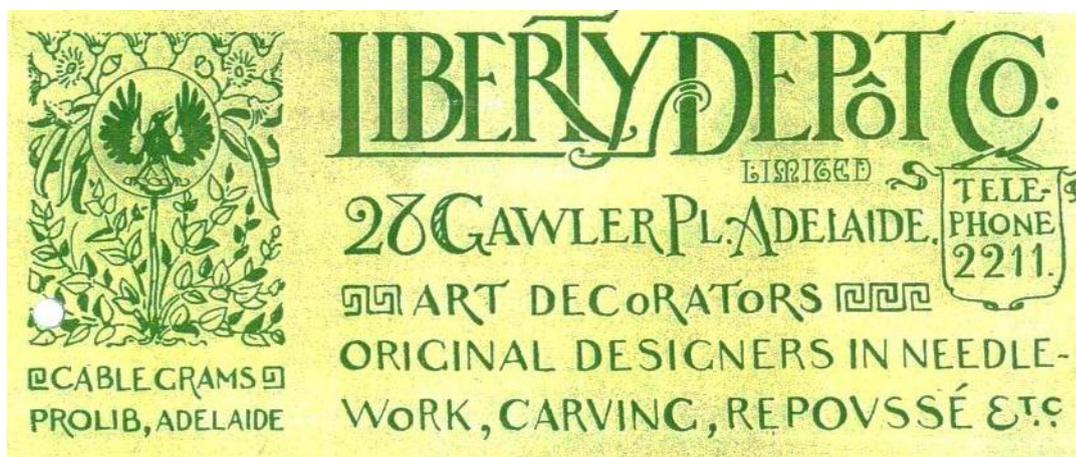
²⁶ 'School of Art. The Annual Exhibition. A Fine Show', *Advertiser*, 23 May 1913, p.12.

and green on a silver-grey Liberty art fabric.²⁷ Certainly she was teaching the first and second grades of art needlework at the School in 1921-1922 and at times onwards.



Maude Prosser's The Pyro brand kit for poker work (Courtesy of Mary Rawlings)

THE LIBERTY DEPOT COMPANY



²⁷ 'Social Notes', *Mail*, 30 August 1913, p.6.

..... The history continues in PART 2 of Maude Prosser