

.... Continuing from PART 1 of Maude Prosser

In early December 1907 Prosser opened her private business venture, the “Sole depot in South Australia for Liberty and Co., Limited’s, London and Paris fabrics and wares”.²⁸ These words on a screen in front of the entrance to her studio display rooms opposite the YMCA Hall in Gawler Place at number 28 announced her enterprise. The Liberty Depot was one of the some 100 Adelaide shops that exhibited in their windows ‘principally goods of colonial production’ for a Chamber of Manufactures’ enterprise in 1908.²⁹ In that year Prosser advertised in the daily newspaper her ‘Window Display of Goods Executed on the Premises – Artistic Furnishings and Presents. Inspection Invited.’

Gerald Fischer, a former South Australian State Archivist, wrote that Gill bought presumably by importing, ‘special art needlework materials which he sold to students, claiming that local shops were unable or even unwilling to provide this service’.³⁰ Gill disposed of his stocks ‘in a rather equivocal manner in which the Superintendent of Art Needlework, Miss Maude Prosser, was closely involved. Miss Prosser resigned her teaching post to manage the shop. Gill ‘made his wife a sleeping partner in it.’³¹

Gill transferred needlework material valued at £800 that he held to his wife, the ‘dormant’ partner with Prosser in the Liberty Depot in order to realise on this property. The evidence to the ‘Gill Enquiry’ showed

clearly that the Depot has a monopoly for the sale in South Australia of certain materials which are indispensable in connection with the work of the School of Design, and therefore must necessarily be obtained from the Depot.³²

Work commissioned from the School and unfinished at the time, together with craft materials, were removed from the School and taken to the Liberty Depot ‘by dray and a cab’. Prosser said that although a number of people had applied for an art needlework class at the Liberty Depot, she did not intend teaching it; and she referred a number of applicants, nine

²⁸ ‘The Liberty Depot. A Pretty Display’, *Register*, 23 December 1907, p.11.

²⁹ ‘Manufacturers’ Day’, 9 September 1908, p.9.

³⁰ Gerald Fischer, ‘That the future might find its past: some notes on Harry Pelling Gill (1855-1916) art teacher, Curator of the Art Gallery of South Australia, artist’, typescript (September 1982). N. 186, p.51.

³¹ Gerald Fischer, ‘That the future might find its past: some notes on Harry Pelling Gill (1855-1916) art teacher, Curator of the Art Gallery of South Australia, artist’, typescript (September 1982), n. 186, p.7. H.P. Gill married Annie Waring Wright in 1886 at North Adelaide. She died at Neutral Bay, NSW, in

May 1936.

³² 'V.-Liberty Depot', *Register*, 10 December 1908, p.9.

by name she could remember, to the School of Design. Gill noted that of the five in the School's needlework class in 1907, four had been sent by the Depot.³³

It was suggested to Fischer that Gill made an arrangement in London in 1899 for the supply of materials.³⁴ Certainly, in 1889 Gill noted from London's *Magazine of Art* that a Liberty School of Embroidery exhibited table covers, fan screens, sofa and chair covers, and similar work, 'mostly based on Oriental designs.'³⁵ The germ of the idea of the Liberty Depot might have grown from this, one year after the establishment of the Art Needlework Society, and have matured when Gill's management was questioned.

In 1908 when the 'Gill Enquiry' was in its later stage, and it was feared Prosser's Liberty Depot would monopolise art needlework materials, Gill said the competitors of the Liberty Depot for the supply of most materials, were the city retailers Miller Anderson, James Marshall, Martin Brothers, and Martin of the Big Store (John Martin's), and there were 'little fancy shops in Adelaide' that sold silk thread not held for students by the School. Martin's Big Store, he said, had taught art needlework for some years without charging fees; students buy materials from the store and take a lesson. Gill understood that Liberty of London would supply the shop in Gawler Place but not Miller Anderson (and presumably not other stores). He assured his questioners that the School did not buy more than six per cent of its materials from Liberty of London. Mrs Gill withdrew from her partnership in the Liberty Depot in 1908.

Maude had been Superintendent of Needlework at the School of Design for some five years before she resigned. The press was always positive and encouraging in its treatment of her School exhibitions and work, no less so when her Liberty enterprise came to notice. Careful attention was recommended of her studio's art jewellery, silks, pewter ware, Ruskin and Lancastrian pottery (from Liberty, London—these both were experimental glazes for ceramic ware based on Chinese and Iraqi practices, a lustreware and flambé ware), and 'exquisite' examples of Prosser's skill as a carver and repoussé worker. As part of her new initiative, Prosser offered to send to England for any stock wanted by her customers; this was another side to her position as an agent for others', mainly local, productions. Prosser might have been singular at this time in South Australia in being a needle craftswoman as well as designer of furniture and knickknacks, and of a 'valuable carpet ... now being made in London in accordance with a design which [she] executed.' As a home decorator, she offered to take orders for her work.³⁶

Maude Prosser went to West Australia for two or three months in May 1911. On her return she intended to open rooms in the city for art needlework and designing. Possibly the Liberty Depot came to its end in that year, for in 1911 the Rundle Street department store James Marshall advertised for sale discounted 'Beautiful Embroidery Silks from the Liberty Depot' at its haberdashery counters. These, sold by the dozen at a little over half the Liberty Depot prices, were:

³³ Prosser's letters to Gill of 22 November 1907, 8 April and 6 June 1908, referred to at the 'Gill Enquiry', SRSA: GRG 19/75.

³⁴ Fischer, n. 186, p.7.

³⁵ 'Notes on Art Needlework—Magazine of Art', School of Design Art Club Magazine, no. 2, Aug 1889, p.52-53. This was in vol. 43, Sep 1885 issue of the *Magazine*.

³⁶ 'The Liberty Depot. A Pretty Display', *Register*, 23 December 1907, p.11.

Tapestry and Crewel Wools
 Twisted Floss Silk
 Cable Silk
 Morris' Thick Embroidery Silk
 Morris' Fine Silk
 Filonella
 Carpet Silk
 Filo Floss

Over April to June 1911 Marshall's advertised its sale of the stock of the 'Liberty Depot's Adelaide Agency'.³⁷ All the 'Art Needlework, both stamped and commenced' was to go at low rates to clear 'these lovely and artistic goods'.³⁸ It seems that Marshall's sold at least some of Prosser's own worked goods. Furniture was included in the offerings: richly carved corner cupboards, medicine chests, and cake and palm stands. The fancy goods on sale for 'lovers of art treasures' included copperware, art jewellery, furnishing materials, and art silks such as coloured flax threads and carpet silk for embroidery, and embroidery silks.

By new year 1912, what appear to be remnant stocks were for sale:

[James Pearsall & Co's] Cable Silk, the balance of stock from the Liberty Depot; Morris Thick Silk, Morris Fine Silk, Carpet Silk, Liberty sale price 2/3 dozen, our previous price 1/6 Now to Go at 1/ dozen. Coloured embroidery Threads, usual price 1/, now 6d dozen.³⁹



A two-tier box of Maude Prosser's skeins of Pearsall's Mallard Floss silk thread (Courtesy of Mary Rawlings)

³⁷ For example, advertisements in *Advertiser*, 27 April 1911, p.1 and *Register*, 1 May 1911, p.1.

³⁸ 'Waterproof trap rugs', *Adelaide Chronicle*, 20 May 1911, p.4.

³⁹ *Chronicle*, 6 January 1912, p.4.

In 1930, Charles Birks & Company acquired the agency for Liberty and opened a Liberty Room in its Adelaide department store.⁴⁰ Were the interest and stock acquired from Maude Prosser?

Prosser was asked by the 'Gill Enquiry' to outline her earnings. Two days after a somewhat curt and notational letter (below), where Prosser obviously was upset, she wrote again to state that her total earnings for the year 1906 were £117.5.10. The Art Needlework

Department earnings were £103.15.10, and the balance of £13.10.0 she earned 'through sale of sketches; and drawings in colour for [?Works]; & choosing colours & furniture for houses.'⁴¹ By 1907, when she resigned from the School, Prosser had already established her expertise in work she was to continue as an independent crafts business person.

Into the 1920s – A 'reputation for daintiness, exquisite finish, and harmonious colouring in needlework' ('Christmas Show', *Register*, 4 November 1924, p.12)

In September 1917, Maude Prosser exhibited at Stephens Place, opposite the Queen Adelaide Club.⁴² Afterwards she moved her collection of stencilling, worked cloths, imported wares, and leatherwork to number 5 Commercial Bank Chambers.⁴³ Probably in 1912 Prosser took her studio in King William Street, when a portière, curtains with a peacock design, and a screen that came with her, stayed and were admired for many years.

⁴⁰ 'Famous English Firm', *Advertiser*, 23 May 1930, p.16.

⁴¹ Maude F. Prosser, School of Design, Painting and Technical Art, letter to the Principal Librarian and Secretary, Public Library, 11 July 1907, SRSA: GRG 19/75. Gill supplied the Enquiry with Prosser's earnings for 1905-1906: £21.14.2 fees from class; £69.10.6 from payments for needlework; and £12.11.2 from commission on materials purchased, totalling £103.25.10 (SRSA: GRG 19/75).

⁴² 'Maude Prosser's Work', *Mail*, 15 September 1917, p.11.

⁴³ 'Miss Prosser's Art Exhibition', *Register*, 19 Sep 1917, p.8.



Stephen's Place, Adelaide from North Terrace. Between 1894 and 1900 (SLSA: B 130). The Queen Adelaide Club, established in 1909, is on the left. The building in the middle is G. & R. Wills' Clothing and Boot Factory where the firm began in 1856. The next but one, a three-story building, was the warehouse of the wholesale drapers Good, Toms & Company.

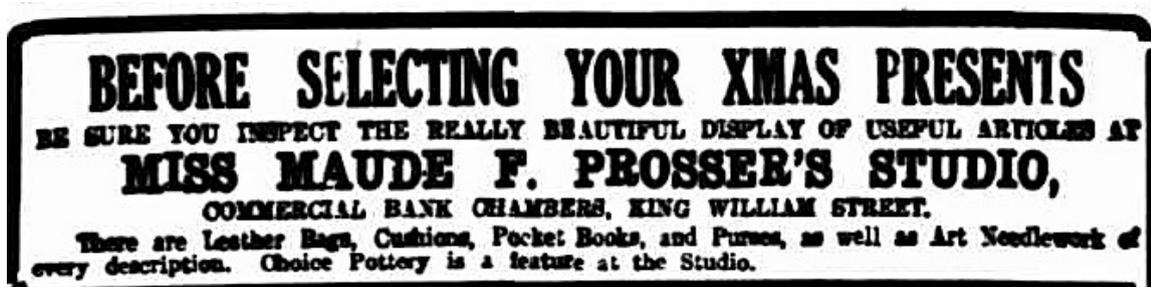
Prosser had successful marketing flair. For an exhibition of her work in Commercial Bank Chambers, she showed stencilling, poker and repoussé work, with a preference for Australian flora, and a new work, a bedspread of 'silver-grey' Liberty art fabric worked in pink and green colours.⁴⁴ Some time later, the press devoted considerable attention to her retailing at Haigh's Buildings of the 'fascinating shawl' newly in vogue. The Spanish shawl apparently was in demand. Black crêpe-de-chine with hand-made swaying fringes worked in the 'early Victorian style of silk and worsted': a design of 'half-wreaths, festooned round the centre of the shawl, done in small gay flowers, the end of each half-wreath ornamented with a single flower in jade green wool.' The shawl's other colours were jade, violet, pink, tan, and blue. Over the centre formed by the half-wreaths were scattered 'small tight old-fashioned posies' of the same vivid colours. Italian striped silk shawls and coloured silk unembroidered shawls were also for sale.⁴⁵



An array of Maude Prosser's leatherwork and an embroidered hanging
(Courtesy of Mary Rawlings)

In 1920 Maude Prosser exhibited 'Art Goods' in the window of Percival H. Prosser, manufacturing jeweller and watchmaker, in King William Street⁴⁶—mainly hand-tooled leather and 'Art Needlework'. In addition to colour staining, leather was decorated by perforation, embossing, and tooling with a hot point, and it is likely that Prosser used all these techniques. Percival Howard Prosser (born 1878), her younger brother, was a one-time student of woodcarving at the School of Design.

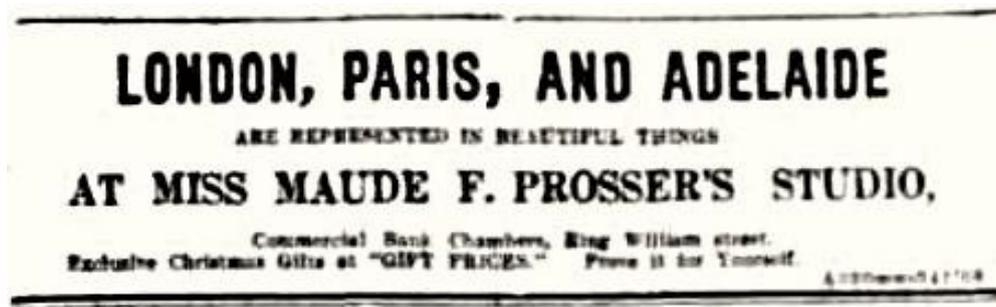
Maude Prosser took loud and clear advertisements:



Register, 4 Dec 1920, p.2

⁴⁶ Percival Howard Prosser, Maude's brother, was born in December 1878 at Wellington, SA. He and Vera Adelaide Pank were married on 18 Oct 1906, Adelaide.

A more daring approach was Prosser's equating of Adelaide with European centres.



'Public Notices', *Register*, 12 December 1923, p.2.

With Mrs T. Freebairn and Miss H.M. Berndt, Prosser was a judge of the large section of 'Fancy and Plain Needlework, Lace etc.' at Adelaide's 1920 Peace Exhibition that included embroidered initials and monograms, ribbon work, crochet, drawn-thread articles, Venetian embroidery, Hardanger, smock work, Morris bag, art needlework, and portière or tablecloth categories.

When she returned to part-time teaching at the School of Design, Maude Prosser taught art needlework to teacher trainees and art students. At the second term 1922 annual exhibition at the Exhibition Building, a glass case showed 'captivating specimens' of work done under her supervision: a supper cloth in Richelieu work treated in four folds with waratah, gum, flannel flowers, and wattle decoration; an appliqué runner, wool-work curtains, a water-lily cushion, and the 'latest fancy adornments for lingerie and street wear'—what were these?⁴⁷

Prosser's work attracted lavish critical acclaim. The description in 1921 of part of her exhibited work, 'Delicacy of thought permeated a lovely handkerchief and glove set, which featured a gum design on Morris silk embodying the palest of coloured shades. This same Morris silk ... specially imported by Miss Prosser ... strikes a distinctive note in many forms',⁴⁸ was possibly outshone by the following year's effusive assessment, surely of great benefit to a commercial artisan craftswoman:

MISS PROSSER'S EXHIBITION. DISTINCTIVE GIFT DISPLAY

(From *Register*, 2 December 1922, p.12)

'Christmas-tide—when we turn our thoughts to friendly deeds,' is creeping very near. Each season Miss Maude Prosser makes a special display of her now famous art and craft work. Her centrally situated studio at Commercial Chambers, King William street, is now aglow with wonderfully toned colourings employed in the compilation of distinctive work in every form of material, from wood and leather to silk and muslin. Miss Prosser is a decorative artist of unusual attainments, for her original designs cover a wide range of vision. She has

⁴⁷ 'School of Arts and Crafts', *Register*, 25 May 1922, p.9.

⁴⁸ 'A Beautiful Display', *Register*, 18 November 1921, p.8.

devoted her talents to the evolution of novel creations, using as the motifs various subjects from Australia's floral and animal kingdoms. But, beyond this there are also designs that represent Oriental and mythological themes. For instance, the latest dragons and griffins are delightful bits of work that lend themselves admirably to centre pieces on cushions, cosies, handbags, portieres, screens, and every other useful sphere chosen by this practical craft worker. To visit the studio is to enter an appealing spot, for an extensive array of original work would seem to make the path of the gift chooser an easy one.

The leather goods ... include hand-coloured designs. A striking series of cushions includes a circular one devoted to twin dragons produced with unerring artistry in tonal shades of reseda [mignonette]-green and purplish-blue, with touches of heliotrope and pink on a biscuit ground that is outlined in black. A kangaroo hunt on a similar ground is visualized in greens and browns, with a flap in tan edging. Pale-pink Sturt pea on a cream ground, contrasted with green leaves, adorns another cushion that has a pink flat edging. A conventional design, wrought with handsome effect, is that in rich blues and pillar-box red, which distinguishes other leather work. Blotters are of manifold size and form, and these useful gifts depicts our gum blossom in various arrangements, and many of our native birds are similarly treated. A griffin blotter that is unusual is pink-backed and has been thought out in shades of blue, grey, and heliotrope, set off with a brown outline. Little diaries are a novelty, and enshrine pretty grouping of native flora and fauna. Calendars depict a series of magpies, teddy bears, kangaroos, and laughing jacks.

There are telephone book covers daintily worked, and book markers, black cat calendars ... and similar 'thoughts for Christmas' abound. Book rests will appeal to readers, for these unusual holders for newspaper or book have been created in cretonne and leather, and are invaluable. A leather cosy, of Indian workmanship, has perpetuated a vicious dragon, and the green-and-ochre shades are a lovely bit of colour ensemble.

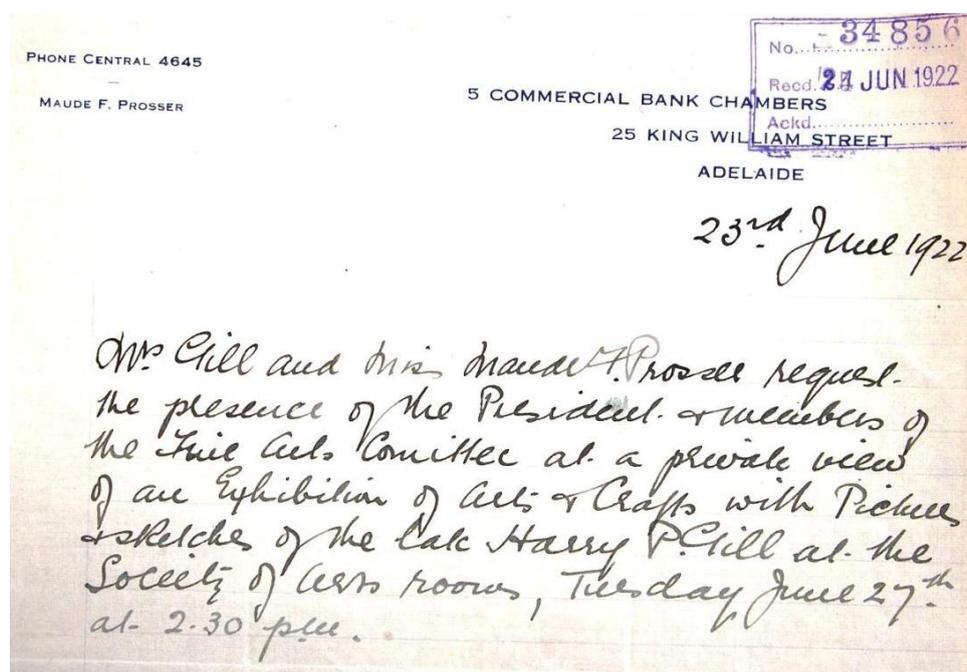
Coming to another section one can revel in black satin and floral silk handbags. Miss Prosser's exquisite stitchery and her Liberty silk linings are well known. This year she has excelled herself. One black satin bag was effective through its very simplicity, for a medallion scintillated ripples of colour in wine, pink, green, grey, and royal blue tints. A stiff top was worked in harmonizing design, and the lining was by no means a minor feature, in fact, it suggested that the bag could occasionally be turned inside out and used with striking effect.

Included in the imposing array of black satin goods was a bag with tortoiseshell top, which was embossed with a conventional rose tree wrought in blues, greens, and terracottas. The lining was exquisitely toned to reproduce the effect. A cushion cover, worked in applique, on a rose-pink ground, featured a cream satin water lily, with grey satin leaves, and was worked up in pinks and greens. A mole-coloured bag with a wooden top, was made of buffed calf, and, with its silk lining, was a handsome example of original craftsmanship.

Turning to the glass cases, further joys could be experienced, for organdi[e] aprons in all colours, some plain and some stencilled, offered wide selection. White muslin aprons, devoted to a single medallion of coloured embroidery, were most attractive, and boxes of lingerie further indicated the skill and scope of Miss Prosser's work. In a miscellaneous section vases, candlesticks, and other articles offered further choice in wood and china. The exhibition is open daily.

Prosser and Gill exhibition 1922

In a week-long (originally scheduled for four days) retrospective exhibition in winter 1922 of many of Harry Gill's paintings, Maude Prosser as joint exhibitor showed her 'unexcelled' hand-embroidered peacocks on frames and on a silk poplin portière; a richly-decorated appliqué cloth in blues, a pink Morris silk cushion with 'gum hand-stitchery', and other crafts including bags, purses, and cushions.⁴⁹ Prosser's work included a suede cushion cover worked with a dragon motif; another with a magpie surrounded by Sturt peas; 'handsome' portières stencilled or worked with Prosser's designs, and 'exquisite' restrained embroidered lingerie and linen-work. Some of her silk and beaded bags had ivory or tortoiseshell clasps. Not only did she exhibit suede table mats, lamp and candle shades, but a carved wooden book rest.⁵⁰



The inclusion of Prosser's work in the exhibition is implied, not stated, in the wording of her invitation to members of the Fine Art Committee.

Another reviewer treated Prosser's work before discussing the 244 mainly watercolour paintings by Gill shown with her work at the Society of Arts in 1922. Prosser, praised as a designer and colorist, showed suede covers decorated with kangaroo and magpie and Sturt pea designs, wood carving and leather work, and a 'handsome' silk poplin portière with a peacock design, an Australian coat of arms with a 'minimum of stitchery', a pink Morris silk cushion with 'gum [?eucalyptus] hand-stitchery', and needlework and embroidery of lingerie and linen ware having 'beauty in distinction and restraint'. She showed two framed silk-worked pictures of peacocks, silk and beaded bags with 'rare and curious clasps', some in carved ivory and tortoise-shell (probably imported), and new 'blanket work' for scarves and bags.⁵¹

⁴⁹ 'Display of Art', *Register*, 28 Jun 1922, p.6.

⁵⁰ 'Australian Art. Combined Exhibition', *Advertiser*, 28 June 1922, p.8.

⁵¹ 'Australian Art. Combined Exhibition', *Advertiser*, 28 Jun 1922, p.8; 'Display of Art', *Register*, 28 June 1922, p.6.



School of Arts and Crafts staff, 1926 (From the archives of Allan Sierp, Principal of the SA School of Art, 1961-1963, now in the Friends SASA Archives collection. Courtesy of Jenny Aland).

Back row, from left: Miss Marie Tuck (1872-1947, life teacher, part time, who joined the School in 1914), John C. Goodchild (1898-1980, etching, part time), Mr Middleton (geometry, part time), Charles J. Pavia (geometry etc., senior master), Miss N. Leicester (clerk), Mr ?Jenner (geometry, part time), Miss Gladys K. Good (1890-1979, china painting, weaving, full time, retired 1960), Robert Craig (modelling, wood carving, full time), Edwin Newsham (born 1891, arrived Adelaide 1923; from 1947 deputy Principal, Adelaide School of Arts and Crafts, lettering, full time), Mrs Wallascheck (formerly Margaret Elizabeth Kelly, born 1890, taught at the School for nearly fifty years, antique drawing, dress design, full time).

Front row, from left: Miss Jessamine V. Buxton (1894-1966, still-life painting, antique drawing, full time, retired 1954), Miss Crawford (general drawing, full time), Miss Beulah Leicester (general drawing, oil and watercolour painting, leatherwork, and china painting, full time), Laurence Hotham Howie (1876-1963) (Principal 1920-1941, outdoor painting), Miss Elizabeth Armstrong (still-life painting, part time), Mrs Balk (photo-retouching, part time), Miss Mary P. Harris (1891-1978) (general drawing, history of art, linoleum relief printing, full time, joined in 1922), Miss Maude F. Prosser (1876-1950) (Art Needlework, part time).



Miss Maude Prosser's bewildering array of specialities

At the time when the city limits contained virtually the sole commercial and business hub of the metropolitan area, light industries, butchering, and other essential businesses operated cheek-by-jowl. Home-crafts such as Prosser offered were available from various

outlets, but the quality of her work and imports was perhaps not matched elsewhere. In the early 1920s Prosser imported voiles from Paris, and her lingerie, night gowns, and camisoles were modelled on Parisian lines. In 1923 the press praised an embroidered dressing jacket of a soft heliotrope crêpe de chine, the design worked entirely with a spoke stitch, and tea cloths and mats in Richelieu stitchery.⁵²

Maude Prosser's studios in Adelaide

The decade of the 1920s saw a local land development and house-building boom, and a related shortage of tradesmen. It was the time when the bungalow and late arts and crafts interior design went hand-in-glove.

By July 1922, if not earlier, Prosser was a visiting teacher at the School of Arts and Crafts, and had two assistants in her private work. Possibly the young and aspiring soprano, Aileen Newlyn, was one. She was in charge of Prosser's studio in Commercial Bank Chambers⁵³ while Prosser was interstate in 1924, or returning from Colombo in February 1924. Prosser's art needlework, on calendars, photo frames, a Liberty satin tablecloth appliqued in a dog-rose design, China silk nighties, each with its individual embroidered design, and needle books, took its place alongside other varieties of her handwork.⁵⁴

In 1922, Prosser said she had refused tempting commercial offers from firms in Melbourne and Sydney: she did not want to give up her life in Adelaide and, significantly, her 'freedom.' This suggests a degree of business success in Adelaide, but also a feminist determination. "You know, I always get what I want--eventually, and I think it is because I never go beyond my limitations and I know what I want."⁵⁵ This confession tells us something, but not a lot about Maude Prosser.

In 1923 she had taken premises at Gresham corner, King William Street, for a two-week long Christmas sale. There was a dearth of dedicated exhibition spaces for art and craft in Adelaide city. The department stores John Martin, and Miller Anderson, made space available. One more consistent was a book store, F.W. Preece, in whose window Prosser's roll of honour for the Muloowurtie Rifle Club was exhibited in 1917.⁵⁶ Preece's, booksellers and librarians, and Gallery of Australian Art, had rooms in Haigh's Building, fronting King William Street, before moving across to the corner of Gilbert Street and King William Road.

In December 1923, Prosser travelled to Colombo, staying at the Grand Oriental Hotel, and returned to Adelaide in February 1924. The 'novelties and charming things for gifts' she displayed in 1924 most likely were swelled by her Ceylonese buying, but she began to import Majolica ware from Italy in that year. Among the wealth of her offerings were glass

..... The history continues in PART 3 of Maude Prosser

⁵² 'The Craft of Beauty', *Register*, 29 Aug 1923, p.10.

⁵³ Possibly on the corner of Gilbert Place and Currie Street, behind the former Bank of Australasia.

⁵⁴ 'Artistic Christmas Gifts', *Mail*, 13 Nov 1920, p.12.

⁵⁵ Felise, 'An Artist in her Studio. Artcraft [*sic*] and Utility', *Mail*, 15 Jul 1922, p.18.

⁵⁶ 'A Roll of Honour', *Mail*, 27 Oct 1917, p.12.