‘WOMAN MAKING AN EXHIBITION OF HERSELF’: THE WOMEN’S WORK EXHIBITION, 1907

EMMA WILLOUGHBY

The First Australian Exhibition of Women’s Work was a celebration of all that feminists of the late nineteenth century had set out to achieve, and of the opportunities they believed had now been won. It was a moment in which to stamp women on the national memory, to stake a place as participants in the citizenship of the new state, and to affirm the progress and achievements that had been gained. They sought, as others had done, to justify their citizenship of the state by offering their labour as an example of their contribution to the Commonwealth of Australia. The Exhibition attempted to demonstrate that women could participate in the same nationalist dialogue that men did, with an emphasis on labour, duty, contribution and loyalty to the nation. Indeed the organisers and participants of the Exhibition co–opted the nationalist imagery and language of the newly imagined nation, to define a gendered national collective. Certainly the general consensus of the press and the organisers was that they had succeeded in proving women’s essential contribution to the Commonwealth. The Argus reported:

In years to come, when the passing events of to–day have been transferred to the pages of history, there will be one page upon which the eye of every Australian woman, and of every schoolgirl, too, will rest with pride. That page will contain the record of the Women’s Work Exhibition, the great declaration by Australian women, not of their independence, for that has been given them ungrudgingly in this free Commonwealth, but of their capacity for usefulness in the work of the world.¹

The Exhibition was held during October and November of 1907. It displayed sixteen thousand exhibits and at least 250,000 people attended. The Executive committee in their final report summarised the exhibits in the various sections of the Exhibition as being comprised of:

- 5,000 in the Fine and Applied Arts section,
- 7,000 in Needlework,
- 1,000 in Cookery, Horticulture, Medicine and Nursing etc., the British and Foreign making up the balance...
- In the trade section there were 103 exhibitors, representing most of the trades in which women and girls are employed in Australia. Some of the exhibits showed processes of manufacture in operation.²

The motivation for the Exhibition was educational as well as celebratory. It included a series of lectures and musical concerts, an example of a working creche, and teaching and catering exhibits. There were prizes for essays on various progressive topics, like ‘Best Essay on the Best Method of Supplying Pure Milk to the Poor of the City, especially in Summer’, trade exhibits from shops and companies run by women and displays of women’s inventions. Exhibits of work done by royal women were sent from various countries and there was a large number of foreign loan displays, including ethnological exhibits. It was a site at which a number of the prevalent political discourses of the day converged: feminism and nationalism, federation and protection, the birth rate decline and pro–natalism.

The Women’s Work Exhibition was a hybrid in form. The idea behind the Exhibition came from three main traditions, all closely linked to emerging nationalism: the international exhibitions, the women’s pavilions at international exhibitions, and the ‘All–Australian’ trade exhibitions.

The practice of including women’s pavilions in the international exhibitions of the nineteenth century was a physical manifestation of the Victorian ‘separate spheres’ doctrine. The women’s pavilions were mostly filled with domestic arts and crafts, and were separated from the

¹ Argus 24 October 1907, 7.
² Report of the Executive Committee to the General Committee, at a meeting held at Government House, Melbourne, 9 July 1908, MS Box 44, La Trobe Library Manuscripts, State Library of Victoria.
normative masculine produce on display. The dominance of domestic material was often contrary to the wishes of the organisers, whose feminist goals were to provide broader opportunities for women and to prove women’s economic worth in the same terms as nations flexed economic muscle in the main pavilions.

The first major exhibition of women’s work was held as part of the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876, where women lobbied for and set up the first separate women’s pavilion. Women’s exhibits were separated from the main displays of wealth, knowledge and industry and thus they sat outside of the national identities being developed and defined in the international exhibitions. This separation of women’s work, and the inclusion of a diversity of ‘produce’ across national borders ‘implicitly equated the work of all women on the basis of gender alone’. But, the model developed by the Australian Women’s Work Exhibition in fact usurped this traditionally marginalised role in the international exhibition, by staging a complete exhibition comprising solely ‘women’s work’.

In many ways, it emulated the international exhibitions; it showed produce from many different nations, work both by the colonised and the colonisers. It included a huge variety of labour, from domestic skills to industrial and scientific, from artistic to practical, commercial to charitable, public and private. And like the international exhibitions it sought to define national identities, although in this case it represented a nation of women, rather than a literal nation state. International exhibitions manifested a newly popular idea that nations should have a distinctive culture, and this was also true of the Australian Women’s Work Exhibition. Indeed the Exhibition attempted to visualise a kind of ‘imagined community’ of women. The resonance of holding the Exhibition in the building where the 1880 and 1888 exhibitions had been held, as well as where the first federal parliament had been opened, and the first Australian flag had been flown, must have been obvious to the organisers. At the opening ceremony Alfred Deakin, then Prime Minister and the chairman of the Exhibition’s general committee, led Lady Northcote, chief organiser and wife of the Governor-General, to press a button signalling that a telegram declaring the exhibition open should be sent to Queen Alexandra, the Exhibition’s patron.

Many of the designs for certificates and posters for the Exhibition represent this convergence between feminism and nationalism, sometimes in a literal way, like Mrs Binney’s third prize winning entry to the poster competition; a map of Australia filled with women undertaking different occupations (fig. 1). Here the map is used in Benedict Anderson’s theorisation as the ‘logo–map’, a signifier of the imagined community. Helen Atkinson’s winning entry to the poster competition likewise depicts the states as women, with identical identities, although this is done in a more traditionally symbolic way (fig. 2). They also replicate the symbolic use of the classical female figure in nationalist representation for Federation, women’s suffrage and other political causes.

The Exhibition also participated in a new form of nationalist expression: the ‘All–Australian’ trade exhibition. These exhibitions, run by the Australian Natives Association, had a greater emphasis on labour and produce over education and scientific discovery. They promoted protectionist policies towards Australian products and white labour, thereby defining Australian

---

8 For a discussion of the use of the map in nationalist symbolsm see Willis ‘Decentring nation’ in Illusions of Identity, 13–30.
9 Anderson, ‘Census, Map, Museum’ in Imagined Communities, 175.
10 Margaret Anderson, ed., When Australia was a Woman: Images of a Nation (Perth: Western Australian Museum, 1998).
identity as fundamentally associated with work. Similarly, the Women’s Work Exhibition promoted women’s labour and produce, in an attempt to reinforce women’s position as citizens both within the new Australian nation and as a separate ‘nation’ or ‘community’ of women. For instance, the women emphasised these national identities by not dividing the courts by state, but rather organised the Exhibition into genre of work displayed. The Australian exhibits did not compete with the exhibits from overseas, which were shown as educational and informative. But the main motivation of the organisers was to bring the ‘women of the whole of Australia’ into ‘closer acquaintance and relationship’:

Enlarging our sympathies and instilling that feeling of ‘esprit de corps,’ so difficult to promote amongst the scattered population of a large continent.

When the question of representing political organisations in the Exhibition arose the Executive Committee responded that because the Exhibition was ‘national in character, and genuinely non–political’ no space would be allocated.

Scholars like Marilyn Lake and Kereen Reiger have pointed to the central emphasis motherhood is given in the construction of women’s citizenship and in Australian national identity. This is clearly a major part of the feminist nationalism represented in the Women’s Work Exhibition. However, I want to concentrate here on the parallel discourse surrounding women’s labour (paid and unpaid) which similarly attempted to firm up women’s roles in the construction of the Australian citizen.

The Exhibition partly engaged in, partly emerged from, an active discussion in the press around women’s participation in the paid workforce. It encouraged further public discussion about women’s opportunities in the labour market. The Exhibition was in this way an explicit political statement, taking the side of increasing and encouraging women’s participation in paid labour.

The diversity of exhibits in the Exhibition, combined with an emphasis on paid work and applied art, rather than fine arts and amateur work, contributed to the idea that the Exhibition could achieve a recognition of women particularly in terms of the nationalist preoccupation with work. The catalogue is clear on this point, particularly in relation to needlework and ‘arts’; they say they specifically wanted to encourage ‘plain and useful’ needlework rather than the ‘ornamental’ kinds, and thus the competitions were organised accordingly, omitting many of the ‘lighter and less useful’ classes.

The press at the time was awash in discussions relating to women’s paid work. In the same year as the Exhibition, New Idea published a series of articles on the various career options for women and Art and Architecture ran a series on ‘Our Australian Craftswomen’, by which

11 A number of women artists who exhibited at the Women’s Work Exhibition are listed as exhibiting in the Fourth Australian Exhibition, an ‘All–Australian’ exhibition organised by the Australian Natives Association in 1908. They include Margaret Baskerville, Norah Gurdon, Sara Levi, Ina Gregory, Janet Cumbrae–Stewart and Janie Whyte. See the Fourth Australian Exhibition of Australian Manufactures and Products Souvenir Catalogue (Melbourne: 1908).
13 First Australian Exhibition of Women’s Work, Minutes of the Executive Committee, 1906–1908, vols 1 and 2, MS Box 44, La Trobe Library Manuscripts, State Library of Victoria, vol. 1, 68.
15 Amanda Paul, ‘Making a Commonwealth Cake: Gender, Nation and Work at the First Australian Exhibition of Women’s Work, 1907’ (MA thesis, La Trobe University, 1995), and Cate Smith, ‘Exhibiting Women: The First Australian Exhibition of Women’s Work, 1907’ (Honours thesis, Australian National University, 1993). Both deal with the political implications of the Exhibition in terms of constructions of motherhood in the new nation.
they meant women earning money from their craft work. General press reports of the Exhibition saw widening opportunities for women’s work as related to a nationalist agenda. Table Talk reported:

Australian women, as co–workers with men in the arts and handicrafts which go to build up the Commonwealth, have made their curtsey to the general public, and invited attention to their own Exhibition.\(^{16}\)

The organisers clearly state their motivation of both illustrating opportunities, and affirming traditional women’s domestic work as important for the new nation. The catalogue reads:

One great hope often expressed is that the holding of this Exhibition will, while pointing to new paths leading through wider outlets to fresh fields of labour, also help to broaden and ennable the old beaten tracks and make them worthy of the high ideals which impel the human race to advance.\(^{17}\)

This use of an idealised notion of ‘work’, parallels other Australian nationalist discourse, the art of the Heidelberg School, Eight Hour Day processions and the writing of the Bulletin school. Political rhetoric too, links work to Australian national identity, as in this 1906 speech by Alfred Deakin, ‘Australia for the Australians’:

What is the best service patriotic Australians can offer to their country? Surely it is by making it so attractive, so good a place to live in, with such fair and just conditions, with such plentiful opportunities of earning an honest livelihood, with such protection against the machinations of monopolists and trusts, with such good chances for all men prepared to face the tilling of its soil, or the task of developing its enormous continent, that enlightened people everywhere will admire it. They will be tempted to say, ‘We wish we were Australians’.\(^{18}\)

Feminist scholars have long recognised the conflation of work and nationalism in the imagined nation of the late nineteenth century as predominantly masculine.\(^{19}\) The Women’s Work Exhibition makes it clear that women also used and internalised conventional constructions of nationalism and attempted to reposition themselves in relation to these constructions. For instance the Australian Landscape section was one of the most popular categories in the Fine Arts section, second only to flower painting (406 entries compared to 313).

The discourse around women’s work, of which the Exhibition was part, does reflect the actual situation of women in the paid workforce, where a significant change took place throughout the 1890s. Increasingly, more women moved into the workforce and from domestic service to the factory.\(^{20}\) By 1907 there was a huge amount of public debate on the subject. This debate made its way into the courts, too, when in the same year as the Women’s Work Exhibition, the Harvester judgement ordered that a ‘fair and reasonable’ basic wage for adult males be suitable to support a wife and children.\(^{21}\) This explicitly situated women as economically dependent on men, and their role as workers in the new nation as secondary, domestic and unpaid.

---

\(^{16}\) ‘Women’s Work’, Table Talk, 31 October 1907, 4.

\(^{17}\) ‘Introduction’, Women’s Work, Exhibition Catalogue, 32.


\(^{19}\) See particularly the anthology of articles Susan Magarey, Sue Rowley and Susan Sheridan, eds., Debutante Nation: Feminism Contests the 1890s (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993) and Kay Schaffer, Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).


In another realm too, the debate about women’s work flourished. I turn now to an examination of women’s art of the period, and the art sections of the Exhibition, which present us with an important way in which to examine how discourses of feminism, work and nationalism were constructed and related. By examining in more detail one section of the Exhibition we can see how the discourses in side the Exhibition functioned in the world outside. It is important to note, however, that very few of the works exhibited, out of the thousands, were collected by public institutions, and thus they have been largely lost to us — therefore, I do not want to claim that the few works I am going to show here, are by any means, representative of the whole arts section. By comparing extant works exhibited in the Exhibition, with works not exhibited, we can see clearly that women artists actively engaged with the discourse which linked women, labour and nationalism in this period. Indeed they were forced to by the gendered dichotomy of the amateur versus professional, a theme which I unfortunately do not have space for here, but which adds an extra layer to our understanding of these discourses in this period, and which should also be taken into account.

The designs for the Exhibition prize certificates, first and second, depict the wide variety of ideas women themselves had about the idea of work. Ruby Lindsay’s first–class diploma certificate design shows classically dressed women climbing stairs (representing progress perhaps) to receive their awards (fig. 3). They hold objects representing music, fine and applied arts: a palette, vase, sculpture and lyre. They represent accomplishments rather than ‘labour’. The second–class diploma certificate by Eirene Mort is more broad in its categorisation of women’s work. A classically dressed woman represents a range of arts, including music, painting, decoration and writing. Two more women represent motherhood, horticulture, domestic work (represented by needlework), and manual or farm labour.22

In general, within the fine art of this period, representations of women being idle or engaging in leisure pursuits abound in the international and Australian Impressionist genre.23 In these representations the universalised ‘woman’ represents the leisured Other to the employed ‘man’. This was true of both the work of male and female artists of this period. Jane Sutherlnd’s Daydream, a piece exhibited at the Women’s Work Exhibition, is typical of the trope of the woman at leisure (fig. 4). But it should also be recognised that some women artists, many of whom exhibited at the Women’s Work Exhibition, used women’s labour as an important theme in their work at this time.

Although it is true that women artists often depicted motherhood, leisure time and children in their painting, it is also the case that a simultaneous theme of women’s labour was a popular choice for the 1880s and 90s generation of women artists, and for the younger modernists. Clara Southern’s An Old Bee Farm, which was exhibited in the Exhibition of Women’s Work, is an example of this type of plein air representation of women’s labour (fig. 5). Paintings like Clara Southern’s A Cabbage Garden and A Country Washhouse and Jane Sutherland’s The Mushroom Gatherers depict idealised rural female labour in the Australian landscape (figs. 6, 7 and 8).24 In A Cabbage Garden and An Old Bee Farm, the dilapidated homestead is in the background, still limiting women to the boundary of the home in which they carry out their labour. Rather than the masculine taming of the land depicted in works by male painters of this generation, the women in these paintings are domesticating the bush. Their work is generally limited to the homestead and to a domesticated space. Yet it is still valorised by women artists as being quintessentially Australian — part of the Australian landscape. The work is generally

22 Eirene Mort’s Second Class prize certificate is reproduced in Women’s Work (microfiche).
24 Jane Sutherland exhibited twelve paintings in the Women’s Work Exhibition, all in the non–competitive, fine arts division. Although neither of the paintings illustrated here are listed in the catalogue, there is a painting named The Harvest Field which, judging from the title, may have dealt with similar subject matter. The only Sutherland painting exhibited in the Women’s Work Exhibition I have been able to track down is Daydream (fig. 4). Clara Southern exhibited seven paintings in the non–competitive, fine arts section, including An Old Bee Farm (fig. 5), the only one of which I have found illustrated.
performed in an Australian bush scene, although often a cultivated space close to the homestead: a garden, orchard or field.

The trope of women's work continued to have a prominent place in women's art in the years after the Exhibition. Other women artists sought to universalise women's work as historic, traditional and worthy. Hilda Rix Nicholas's painting Work of 1909 (fig. 9) seeks to naturalise women's work, making it at once 'heavy' labour, but at the same time idealising it. The message seems to be that women's work is at once traditional and dignified. The title, simply 'Work', suggests an assumption of universality of women's experience of work common to male representations, which claimed 'that by making art the perfect expression of one time and one place, it becomes art for all time and of all places'. That the type of work claimed as universal is at once domestic and nostalgic is significant. Vida Lahey's 1912 oil painting Monday Morning is likewise a romanticisation of women's domestic labour on a grand scale (fig. 10). Lahey wanted to dignify women's work, in the same way as masculine labour had been dignified by nationalist male artists. At the same time, Lahey chooses to represent traditional women's domestic work over the newer working opportunities that were available for women. And she also upholds a contemporary view that maintained that domestic service was better and healthier for women workers than factory work.

In addition to this engagement with the debate through representation, the discussion about the value and meaning of women's work was transposed onto the supposed division between amateur and professional. The binary opposition amateur/professional is related to the similar tropes of the domestic/public, the reproductive/productive, and the non-economic/economic, but is used most frequently in the sphere of art work. In art criticism and history, the dichotomy of amateur versus professional is central to the construction of gender difference. Which is not to argue that this construction is only ever applied in relation to gender, but rather, that in the nineteenth century professionalisation became central to the emerging identity of the 'artist'. The tradition of seeing women's art as amateurish in comparison to men's was pervasive at the time of the Women's Work Exhibition. The reality of women's art practice was much more complicated than this simple opposition would perhaps suggest. Women participated in the fight against the supposed 'amateurism', but they also set up their own clubs to challenge this construction. In addition, women's art work was regarded as amateurish by most male critics whether they were working professionally or not, and often the boundaries of what it meant to be a professional were blurred.

In the Women's Work Exhibition, despite the organisers' emphasis on professionalism, and the large numbers of women earning a living from their art, the criticism was still made that the art sections were full of amateurish work.

The implication of much of the press criticism was clear: women's art was essentially amateur, whether they were making money from it or not. Indeed, the Exhibition itself is a direct response to this criticism. The organisers believed that a display of women's work would refute this idea, and encourage women to become professional, not only in the sense of earning money for one's labour, but in the educational benefits the Exhibition would provide for the quality of women's work, paid or unpaid. At the same time the Exhibition uses the concepts of amateurism and professionalism in a variety of ways. Its broad inclusivity of types of work, from practical homemaking to childcare to teaching, presents a continuum of work, rather than a clear dichotomy between the professional woman worker and the amateur.

In the Arts sections a largely conventional structure was maintained. The programme is mostly organised around traditional categories of art: 'applied' as opposed to 'fine' arts; 'landscape' as opposed to 'flower painting'. An exception to this structure is the Design section,

26 Vida Lahey exhibited four works in the Women's Work Exhibition, two Australian landscapes and two still life paintings. None have been recovered. Bettina MacAulay, Songs of Colour: The Art of Vida Lahey (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1989).
which is included under Fine Arts. Nevertheless, the artists themselves often challenge this
traditional structure, by competing in several different categories, across applied and fine arts
disciplines, and charging prices not necessarily consistent with their professional or amateur
status. Many of the more established artists did not exhibit in the competitive categories, but did
exhibit in the non–competitive or loan sections. The reality, too, was that artists could sometimes
make a better living from flower painting than from other (masculinised) forms of art.

The Women’s Work Exhibition offers an important opportunity for us to understand
women’s response to Australian nationalism around the time of Federation. I have chosen here
to focus on the simultaneous and parallel discourses that associated labour with nationalism, but
there are many other ways in which women engaged with the nationalist project. Women’s
responses to nationalism, like men’s, were diverse. But women’s art should also be understood in
the context of wider discussions about women’s work, amateurism and professionalism, and
creating a nationalist identity outside of motherhood. Although motherhood was the
predominant construction of feminine Australian national identity, some women chose to
respond to nationalism on those same terms with which men had excluded them, proving that
their labour could be valued just as much in cultural representation as the bushman’s. Whether
this was politically successful or not remains a point of uncertainty. The Exhibition became a
largely forgotten event in Australian history and art history. Why this was the case could easily fill
the columns of another paper, however, I would suggest that the Exhibition can teach us a lot
about the failures, and the successes, of recovery feminism. By attempting to prove that women
can be valuable to the nation state as workers, the organisers of the Women’s Work Exhibition
did not ultimately challenge this patriarchal construction.

Museum of Victoria
Fig. 1: Mrs E. Binney, Third Prize poster competition entry. Reproduce from *The Australasian*, 22 June 1907.

Fig. 2: Helen Atkinson, Winning entry to the Women's Work Exhibition poster competition, 1907.
Fig. 3: Ruby Lindsay, Women’s Work Exhibition, First Class prize certificate, 1907

Fig. 4: Jane Sutherland, *Daydream*, c. 1895, oil on Canvas, 50.8x72.6cm
Fig. 5: Clara Southern, *An Old Bee Farm*, c. 1900, oil on Canvas, 66x117cm

Fig. 6: Clara Southern, *A Cabbage Garden*, c. 1899, oil on Canvas, 51.1x76.4cm

Fig. 7: Jane Sutherland, *The Mushroom Gatherers*, c. 1895, oil on Canvas, 41.3x99cm
Fig. 8: Clara Southern, *A Country Washhouse*, c. 1895, oil on Canvas, 39.4x59.8cm

Fig. 9: Hilda Rix Nichols, *Work*, 1909, oil on Canvas, 162x130cm
Fig. 10: Vida Lahey, *Monday Morning*, 1912, oil on Canvas, 153x122.7cm