

The South Australian School of Art at the Exhibition Building 1891–1963

Jenny Aland

On 15 June 1891, the School of Design, an antecedent institution of the South Australian School of Art, moved from its original location in the Institute Building on the east corner of Kintore Avenue and North Terrace to the Jubilee International Exhibition Building, where it would remain for the next seventy-two years.¹ This move was precipitated by increasing student enrolments which had stretched the limits of its accommodation, and because the nascent Art Gallery had already moved to the Exhibition Building from temporary accommodation in the Jervois Wing of the Public Library.² A Fine Arts Committee was set up in 1884 as a sub-committee of the Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery Board to oversee the work of both the School of Design and Art Gallery. Its members held that the cultural objectives of these institutions were closely aligned and should therefore be jointly administered.

The South Australian School of Art in context

The South Australian Society of Arts was founded in late 1856, its main objectives being to establish a school of design and a permanent art gallery. As one artist-educator later observed, the motivations for such a school:

*were intertwined with imperial aspiration, economic needs and colonial subservience—a presumption of the civilizing power of Western culture, of taste and beauty, and the practical need for technical education to further industry and trade.*³



Front face of Harry P Gill Medal

This medal is awarded annually to the student at the South Australian School of Art with the highest grade point average in the field of Design. The medal depicts Harry Pelling Gill in academic dress as an Associate Member of the Royal College of Art (ARCA) London, a position he claimed after 1899.

[Image scanned from actual medal, courtesy South Australian School of Art Archives, University of South Australia]

Five years later, on 2 September 1861, the School of Design opened in the newly constructed Institute Building. The school's first Master was artist, engraver and teacher Charles Hill, who had established his own Adelaide School of Art at his home in Pulteney Street, Adelaide, in 1855.

Twenty years later, in 1881, the Institute Board took over the administration of the School of Design, dividing it into a School of Painting and a School of Design, with German-trained artist Louis Tannert as Master of the latter. Because the Board members were not satisfied that Tannert's skills extended to the teaching of mechanical, geometric or architectural drawing, essential in their view particularly in relation to industry, they continued to search for a suitable candidate to meet these requirements. A year later, South Kensington-trained Harry Pelling Gill was appointed Master of the School of Design and Tannert was assigned the role of Master of the School of Painting.

At the Exhibition Building: 1890s

In 1891, the School of Design moved to rooms on the ground floor, first floor and basement of the Exhibition Building. The *Advertiser* reported in detail:

*The school entrance is by the eastern door of the exhibition facade. The ground floor space measures about 30 ft. by 85 ft.; the first floor consists of two rooms, one 35 ft. square, the other 30 ft. by 50 ft.; the basement space measures about 36 ft by 50 ft. In the upper rooms the ceiling lights have been coiled up, and the rooms are lit by seven windows with a south light. The rooms are divided into bays by light partitions and curtains; these extend 6 ft. into the room. Each bay is lit by a single window.*⁴

Three years earlier, on 15 February 1889, both Tannert and Gill were invited to suggest alterations to the Exhibition Building spaces being offered to the school. Gill observed that:

*Generally these rooms are in a very dirty condition through neglect and apparently wilful damage, all the windows and skylights should be made safe & workable, all leaks should be stopped & most of the battens removed from the walls & the rooms coloured.*⁵

When the school moved in 1891 the staff comprised Gill and Tannert, Artisan Master George Reynolds and Assistants Robert Craig and James Keane. A small number of staff was employed part-time to teach a range of subjects largely relating to manufacturing and industry. In 1891 there were 422 students enrolled in the School of Design, in stark contrast to the some 27 students in Tannert's School of Painting. As Gill's biographer, Gerald L Fischer, suggests, this disparity makes for 'an interesting comment perhaps on the practical as opposed to the aesthetic interest in art in Adelaide'.⁶ The School of Design's curriculum was largely oriented towards training artisans for industry and commerce as opposed to a 'fine' or 'beaux arts' approach. The teaching methods were based on the system used at the South Kensington School of Art where Gill had trained and which one commentator described as being 'rigid copyist drawing training—elaborately tiered into twenty-three stages and about as exciting as a London drain'.⁷

In December 1892, Louis Tannert resigned both as Master of the School of Painting and as Honorary Curator of the National (from 1967, Art) Gallery of South Australia, the latter being a position he had held since 1883. With Tannert's resignation and at Gill's suggestion, the Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery Board changed the name of the school to the School of Design, Painting and Technical Art to more accurately reflect its work.⁸ Gill became Director and succeeded Tannert as Honorary Curator. This was highly significant since it saw Gill travel overseas in 1897 and 1898 to purchase artworks of value and status for the gallery's collection, an opportunity enabled by the generous benefaction of Sir Thomas Elder.⁹ From 1889 to 1899, all works in the gallery's collection were on view to the public in rooms on the southern side of the upper floor of the Exhibition



School of Design students and HP Gill

Director of Technical Art, H P Gill with second year students training to be teachers in the Lecture Room, Exhibition Building, North Terrace, 1905.

[Photographer not known, Searcy Collection, SLISA PRG 280/1/3/19]

Building. These rooms were 'conveniently related to the School of Design below where, presumably, Gill had his office'.¹⁰

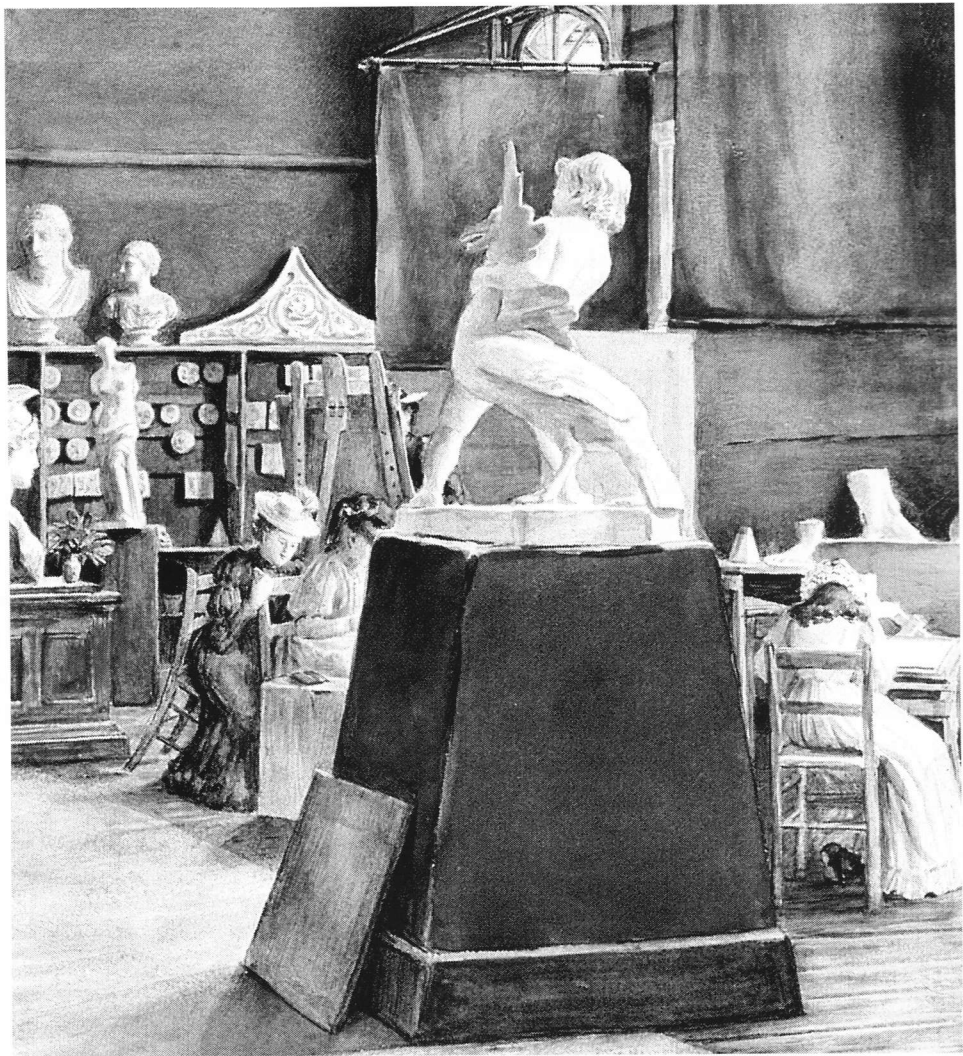
Throughout the 1890s, the School of Design, Painting and Technical Art widened its curriculum to provide instruction in craft: wood carving, leather work, repoussé in copper and silver, sgraffito, china painting and needlework. The annual student exhibitions became increasingly crowded with outstanding examples of their work. The school also continued to provide instruction in art for teachers and to assist in this work Gill published special course notes in the Education Department *Gazette* on what he called the 'new drawing'.¹¹ Increased enrolments and a more diversified curriculum saw further staff appointments. In 1893, former students, Laurence Howie and Charles Pavia were promoted to Assistant Masters while Elizabeth C Armstrong was appointed Painting Mistress, a position she held until her retirement in 1929. Such an appointment, of the first woman in any Australian art school, was not necessarily an attempt by Gill to create gender parity,

but rather more a strategic manoeuvre. He observed:

*It has been found desirable in England ... at schools where the students are females, to have a mistress. The whole of the present students in the School of Painting are, I think, doing Elementary Work and are females.*¹²

Also in 1893, botanical illustrator and former student at the school, Rosa Fiveash, was appointed part-time to teach classes in china painting.

The first of many Federal Art Exhibitions held at the South Australian Society of Arts Gallery at the Institute Building from 1898 attracted entries from all over Australia. From these exhibitions Gill purchased a number of significant works by Australian artists that are today considered key works in the collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia, particularly Tom Roberts' *A Breakaway!*, 1891. Others



Alice Hambidge, 'The Antique Room at the School of Design', 1892

This work was exhibited at the Federal Art Exhibition in 1893.

[Watercolour, 40x36cm. Private collection. Image courtesy of Judy Dutton, publisher of Gemmel, Nancy, The Hambidge Sisters, 2001]

Display of woodcarving by students at the South Australian School of Arts and Crafts, 1911

[South Australian School of Art, University of South Australia Library]

by the Hambidge sisters, Alice, Helen and Millicent (Millie), who were students at the school during the 1890s, were bought from the Federal exhibitions that were held annually until 1923.

Federation and World War One

Following Federation the School of Design enrolments continued to grow—by 1909, there were 1750 full and part-time students.¹³ In that year, as a result of what is generally now known as ‘The Gill Enquiry’ into ‘the sale on commission of work by students—and perhaps others’¹⁴ the school’s administration was transferred to the Education Department and it was renamed the Adelaide School of Art with Gill as Principal.

The early 1910s were somewhat de-stabilised by the looming possibility of world war, a situation exacerbated further by the enlistment of male staff in the Australian armed services. At Gill’s resignation in 1915, the Education Department appointed twenty-six year old sculptor, John Christie Wright,

despite knowing that he had already enlisted. Before departing for service, Wright spent two months reorganising the school in directions which, to a large degree, ran counter to those set by his pre-decessor. He also renamed the school the South Australian School of Arts and Crafts (SASAC). Sadly, Wright was killed on 2 May 1917. As Caroline Adams explains in her cameo in this book, during 1919 the Exhibition Building was used as a hospital for influenza patients. The SASAC’s classes were held in various rooms at the Adelaide Teachers’ College, Twin Street, and the old Glenelg Railway Station in King William Street.¹⁵ Charles Pavia was appointed Acting Principal until the return of Laurence Howie from war service.

The 1920s and 1930s

By the time Laurence Howie returned to take up the position of Principal of SASAC in 1920, the school had become increasingly focused on developing students’ arts and crafts skills in woodcarving, photo-



Students at South Australian School of Arts and Crafts, 1945.

The bookcase at the rear is the Elizabeth Armstrong Memorial Library Bookcase. One of the lecturers at the school, Joseph H Choate designed the bookcase and students and staff designed and carved the seven wooden panels which can just be seen at its top. These panels were known as the ‘Seven Lamps of Architecture’ which acknowledge the work of John Ruskin, British art critic, art patron, draughtsman and watercolourist.

[History SA South Australian Government Photographic Collection GN08951]

graphic retouching, ticket writing, china painting and art needlework.

In the mid 1920s, the Director of Technical Education, Charles Fenner, established a secondary school for girls aged twelve onwards, which could be described as a forerunner to the technical education high schools common in later decades. This school, later named the Girls Central Arts School (GCAS),¹⁶ was co-located with SASAC in various sections of the Exhibition Building. Many of the staff taught in both schools. By the mid-1920s, there were eighteen staff, including eleven women. Several of the latter were highly respected practising artists as well as teachers: Elizabeth Armstrong, Marie Tuck, Mary Packer Harris, Jessamine Buxton and Ethel Barringer.

Students at both the GCAS and SASAC in this period went on to become practising artists of note. Some of them returned to teach at one or both of the schools. Notable among them were Ivor Hele, Jacqueline Hick, Ruth Tuck, Jeffrey Smart and Dora Chapman. The 1930s also saw the production of *The Forerunner* magazine (1930–1938). Edited by Mary Packer Harris, each issue featured writing, photographs and artworks by staff, students and local artists which to large degree reflected the standard of visual arts and crafts then valued by both schools.¹⁷

The 1940s: impact of World War Two

The early 1940s saw the school turned out of the Exhibition Building to make way for the Royal Australian Air Force. As Harris recalled:

*we had to leave our School of Art in the old creeper-covered Exhibition Building and go into rat-infested quarters in various Adelaide buildings ... the old ivy-covered arches and portico were knocked down to make ungracious wood and iron ablation blocks at the back.*¹⁸

Former Head of the GCAS, Gladys Good, remembered the school's first move to

*Twin Street and the basement classrooms ... And then our second move to the G & R Wills Building on North Terrace, with the metal workers from the Engineering School banging away all day. But after the war ended and we regained our dear old Exhibition Building ... the GCAS had the western wing ... the larger rooms and the lovely grounds all to ourselves.*¹⁹

Both comments reflect the affection that these and many other staff and students had for their home in the Exhibition Building.

In the 1930s and 1940s Modernism in art became of particular concern, with several South Australian artists, mostly women, travelling overseas to gain a more intimate understanding of the movement. With the exception of teachers Tuck, Harris and Dorrit Black however, such modernist ideals were barely reflected in the teaching and work of students at both schools. In fact, in the 1940s, both heads of the schools, John Goodchild (SASAC) and Good (GCAS), publicly ridiculed modernist art practice.²⁰

Contrary to the views propagated by the majority of staff at SASAC who continued to focus on the teaching of arts and crafts, a number of young South Australian artists were already adopting modernist styles, particularly those of Surrealism, Cubism and abstraction. On 2 June 1942, a group of them, increasingly disheartened by the anti-modernist views of members of the Royal South Australian Society of Arts (RSASA)²¹ formed the South Australian branch of the Contemporary Art Society, and convened their first exhibition at the RSASA Gallery shortly thereafter. A significant proportion of artists participating in this exhibition were teachers in South Australian government schools, including Black, Harris, Hick and Tuck.²² The modernist nature of the work in the exhibition not only raised the ire of many Adelaideans but also drew damning and critical comment in the newspapers.²³



Printmaking class with Udo Sellbach, Lecturer, Exhibition Building, July 1963

[Photographer Allan Sierp. Photograph by courtesy family of Allan Sierp. South Australian School of Art Archives, University of South Australia]

Post war years: 1950s and into the 1960s

The 1950s saw an increasing number of critical comments about the standard of teaching and student work at SASAC appear in the *Advertiser* and *News* despite the staff's continued focus on the production of high quality arts and crafts works. The frequent short-term appointments of principals—six between 1941 and 1963—certainly did not allow the administration to develop or consolidate any plans for the school's future. However, 1957 saw the introduction, for the first time in its history, of three-year (later four-year) diploma courses in Fine Art, Art Teaching and Advertising Art. The advantage of these courses was that they provided end-on diplomas as opposed to a program of single subjects for which certificates had been awarded since the Gill years. The first Diplomas in Art Teaching were gained in 1958 and awarded in May 1959 mostly to individuals who were

already teaching at the school. At the end of 1958, significantly, the name of the school was changed to the South Australian School of Art (SASA).²⁴

In late 1956, alteration of the Exhibition Building was planned so that it more appropriately suited the purposes of SASAC. These plans were later abandoned in favour of constructing a new purpose-built campus on a government-owned town acre at 48–60 Stanley Street, North Adelaide.²⁵ Over the next seven years, plans were drawn and construction undertaken such that by mid-1963, the new premises were ready for occupation. In June 1963, just prior to the school's move to Stanley Street, Principal Allan Sierp went from classroom to classroom to photograph the school at work, so providing an invaluable record of the SASA in the last month of its seventy-two year occupancy of the Exhibition Building.²⁶ The photographs also reveal the derelict status of the building and the makeshift nature of the classrooms. As one former student recalled:

It was an incredible old Victorian building which had enormous ceilings about two stories high. It had partitions to divide off the classrooms. The building was covered with ivy, the ceilings were starting to crack in the front. Bits of plaster fell down and birds flew through windows and nestled in the rafters. There was an old overgrown garden in the same style as the building. It was overrun with wild cats and rats but was terrific for drawing and painting. It was just in the right spot for an Art School, five minutes from the Gallery, Museum, Botanic Gardens, Zoo and the Torrens, around the hub of the city.²⁷

Long-time staff member of the SASA, Geoff Wilson, also recalled his brief time at the Exhibition Building with fondness:

Stanley Street really was a glorified secondary school. It had a few things, but it really didn't work as an art school. The old school, everybody looked back on that with a lot of love. Because it was casual, it was falling down, but it felt like a school.²⁸

On 11 July 1963, the SASA began its relocation to its new premises and on 15 November 1963 the Governor of South Australia Sir Edric Bastyan officially opened its new building.

Endnotes

- 1 'School of Design', *Advertiser*, 29 June 1891, p6.
- 2 Fischer, GL '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', typewritten manuscript with hand-written notes (62p), Art Gallery of South Australia Library, 1982, p11.
- 3 North, Ian, 'Dates, Questions and the View from Mars: SASA 150th Anniversary Address', delivered at the SASA Gallery, 11 October, 2006, np.
- 4 'School of Design', 1891, p6.
- 5 Public Library, Museum & Art Gallery, Correspondence, memo-randa and rough plans connected with the provision of accommodation for the School of Design at the Exhibition Building, 1889, GRG 19/280, State Records of South Australia (SRSA).
- 6 Fischer, 'That the future might find its past', p18.
- 7 North, 'Dates', np.
- 8 Minutes of the Fine Arts Committee, 10 March 1893, Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery, GRG 19/361, SRSA.
- 9 *The Story of the Elder Bequest: Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide*, (Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 2000).
- 10 Fischer, 'That the future might find its past', p25.
- 11 Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery Annual Board report (Gill), 1906-07, Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery, GRG19/370, SRSA.
- 12 Aland, Jenny, 'Art and design education in South Australian schools, from the early 1880s to the 1920s: the influence of South Kensington and Harry Pelling Gill', (MEd Thesis, University of Canberra, 1992), p191.
- 13 South Australian Parliamentary Papers (SAPP), Report of Minister of Education 1910 No. 44.
- 14 Aland, 'Art and design education in South Australian schools', p249.
- 15 'History of the School', South Australian School of Art Prospectus, 1961, pp12-13.
- 16 SAPP 1929 No. 44, p10; SAPP 1933 No. 44, p11.
- 17 *The Forerunner* (1930-1938) available online at the University of South Australia Library.
- 18 Harris, Mary P, 'Sanctuary: The Girls Central Art School in wartime', in E Jolly (ed.), *A broader vision: Voices of Vocational Education in Twentieth Century South Australia* (Adelaide: Michael Deves Publishing, 2001), p135.
- 19 Good, G, 'There was only one school like it in the world', in Jolly, A *broader vision*, p141.
- 20 Weston, Neville, 'The professional training of artists in Australia, 1861-1963, with special reference to the South Australian model' (PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, 1991), p366.
- 21 The 'Royal' prefix was assigned to the South Australian Society of Arts in December 1935.
- 22 Hylton, Jane and Art Gallery of South Australia Board, *Adelaide Angries: South Australian painting of the 1940s* (Adelaide: Art Gallery Board of South Australia, 1989), p20.
- 23 'New "Limit" Set By Moderns, Contemporary Art Show', *Advertiser*, 9 July, 1942, p6; 'Letter to Editor: 'Contemporary Art'', *Advertiser*, 22 July, 1942, p8.
- 24 SAPP 1959 No. 44, p.21.
- 25 O'Sullivan, Kevin, 'Dinosaur or Delight? Late modern architectural heritage and the 1963 South Australian School of Art Building', *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, 34, 2006, pp50-65.
- 26 Photographs held by the author.
- 27 Callan, Brian, in Dean Bruton, *The Contemporary Art Society of South Australia 1942-86: Recollections* (Parkside: The Society, 1986), p2.
- 28 Wilson, Geoff, 'Geoff on the Couch', transcript of conversation with Winnie Pelz, Friends of South Australian School of Art event, University of South Australia, Adelaide, 24 March 2009.