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**Art Appreciation lecture series 2022**

**Pomp and ceremony: The celebratory role in art**

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**Charles Conder and the Maison de l'art nouveau (1895)**

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**Angus Trumble**

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**Lecture summary**

Born in London in 1868, Charles Conder came to Australia aged 15½ in 1884. He had spent several years of his infancy and early childhood living in Bombay (Mumbai), where Conder père was a senior railway engineer. Conder might have remained and been educated in British India had his mother not died the usual memsahib death of fever or dysentery in 1873, whereupon, aged five, Conder was sent home to a boarding school at Eastbourne, hard by the South Downs on the coast of East Sussex. No doubt Conder's early childhood memories of India were faint and few. Nevertheless, they must have given him a clear sense of himself as a subject of global Britain at the height of imperium. Equally, however, those formative years of adolescence were deeply embedded in the beating heart of ancient England, but within easy reach of the cultural melting pot of the imperial capital. The move to Australia was his father's idea of distracting Conder from the vocation of artist, which seems to have taken hold when Conder was still at boarding school.

Having tried his hand as a clerk in the Lands Department and struggling for a while as an apprentice trigonometric surveyor under the supervision of one of his father's brothers, Conder spent roughly two years in Sydney as an apprentice lithographer and graphic artist on the *Illustrated Sydney News* and J. F. Archibald's *Bulletin*. A chance meeting in Sydney with Tom Roberts led Conder, from 1888 to 1890, to join the group of artists in Melbourne who have become known as the Australian Impressionists. When in April 1890, Conder sailed back to Europe, armed with a modest but useful legacy from a different uncle, he was still only 21½ years old. He never came back.

Deep immersion in the bohemian worlds of Paris and Montmartre followed, and enough success to sustain a budding practice as a very different kind of artist from the one who painted out of doors with Frederick McCubbin, Arthur Streeton and Tom Roberts at Eaglemont and Heidelberg, outside Melbourne. Yet it is for those brief sojourns in Sydney and Melbourne that Conder is still best remembered in Australia.

Before he moved to London in 1894, Conder became a much loved figure in the poetical, social and artistic circles of Paris, a friend of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and a devotee of the lush symbolist poet Paul Verlaine. Nevertheless, Conder was frequently dismissed there as an irredeemable *anglais* with a severe drinking problem and incurable syphilis (which he contracted in Sydney or Melbourne). The disease haunted and stalked him for the rest of his life; many of his later works were executed during long periods of convalescence when he was cared for mostly by devoted friends.

Meanwhile, from 1894 until he died in 1909, aged 40, in England Conder was thought suspiciously French, apparently adhering to the decadent Arthur Symons–Ernest Dowson–Leonard Smithers–Aubrey Beardsley "days of wine and roses" set, and much given to extended visits to Dieppe in Normandy, that bustling theatre of exchange between overlapping literary and artistic worlds of Paris and London. (Recognition of the superabundant cultural importance of Dieppe declined sharply as soon as she was almost completely pulverised by

allied bombs in August 1942.) Remembering Dieppe, Oscar Wilde described Conder's conversation as being "like a beautiful sea mist," an especially generous assessment in the circumstances, because at the time Conder was almost certainly drunk.

However, once he settled in England Conder achieved considerable success, much sustained by a small group loyal friends, above all the long-suffering William Rothenstein. Marriage to a wealthy Canadian widow, Stella Maris Belford, who was completely devoted to him, probably extended Conder's life by a good five years. Throughout, Conder had every reason to regard the works he drew and painted in colonial New South Wales and Victoria as, at best, juvenilia. Almost certainly, Conder would have greeted regular critical accusations of "slightness"—these still crop up from time to time—with wistful but kindly assent.

However, Conder's "big break" came in 1895 when he was invited to participate in an ambitious commercial venture in Paris, Siegfried Bing's "*Maison de l'art nouveau*." Bing was an extremely successful Franco-German art dealer and impresario who did much to propagate and deepen the accelerating taste for the arts of Japan, while at the same time promoting and lending his support to the group of artists known as the "*Nabis*": Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis, Paul Ranson, Édouard Vuillard, Félix Vallotton, Paul Sérusier and so on, all of whom looked to the Pauls—Gauguin and Cézanne—for guidance in following a new path away from the one, increasingly overcrowded, that was originally beaten by Manet, Monet, Renoir, Sisley, Pissarro and Bazille: French Impressionism. Bing's gallery was laid out as a sumptuous domestic interior the various rooms of which were allotted to different artists, but filled also with modern furniture and decorative objects that turned the whole into a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* under the simple but powerful rubric of *art nouveau*.

Conder was allotted a small "boudoir in the eighteenth-century style," for which he painted one very large and eight rather skinny silk panels, all of them nearly two metres high, producing all nine in record time, a frenzy of hard work the like of which he had never known before and, as it turned out, he would never face again. They were installed within wall mouldings in the style of Louis XVI, and illuminated by electric lights with amber or orchid coloured shades; Conder liked his silks to look old, fragile and/or discoloured, even when they were not. The décor consisted of new furniture in the style of Louis XV. Conder's silks for Bing represented an astonishing amplification of what had hitherto consisted of delicate designs for fans, also in watercolour on silk. Unfortunately, they were mauled by the Paris critics, who resented the presence of non-French artists, but not by the British. Prior to 2013, the last time but one when Conder's silks were publicly exhibited was in 1899 at the Grafton Galleries in London, where they were deeply admired by D. S. MacColl. (They were shown again at the Carfax Gallery in 1910, soon after Conder's death.)

Through a number of quite improbable twists and turns, Conder's silks landed in the collection of the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut, incarcerated moreover in a huge collection of approximately 10,000 American decorative objects that were presented to Yale in 1932 by Mrs Mabel Brady Garvan, the wealthy widow of Francis P. Garvan, Yale College class of 1897, sometime President of the Chemical Foundation of New York. Badly neglected and damaged, they were correctly identified by me soon after 2003 and later restored by the department of Asian Art Conservation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. This lecture tells the story of their rediscovery.

The best biography of Charles Conder remains *Charles Conder: The Last Bohemian* by Ann Galbally (Melbourne University Press, 2003), however the best monograph is still *Charles Conder* by Ursula Hoff (Lansdowne Press, 1972, in their series "Australian Art Library"). It is

worth remembering that Ursula Hoff reclaimed Conder's fan designs—she never saw the Bing silks—at a time when, driven out by the aggressive postwar Modernism of Clement Greenberg, *art nouveau* was at the absolute nadir of institutional and academic taste. One would have been forgiven for thinking that it could not sink lower, except that numerous counterculture Bay Area pop music posters duly seized upon and claimed a special place for it. Perhaps this merely reinforced the lofty and almost ubiquitous prejudice. Dr Hoff knew better. Reflecting the tact of her generation, Dr Hoff did not mention Conder's syphilis in her monograph or in her 1969 article about Conder for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

The most recent and up-to-date treatment of what were once known as the painters of the Heidelberg School accompanied a huge exhibition of the same title, *Australian Impressionism* edited by Terence Lane (National Gallery of Victoria, 2007). *Edwardian Opulence: British Art at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* edited by Angus Trumble and Andrea Wolk Rager (Yale University Press and the Yale Center for British Art, 2013) pays Conder the compliment of assigning to him the only section of the book and exhibition that was devoted to a single artist, while, at the same time, providing ample context for the artist's career in England.

After 1894, Charles Conder became the focus of that intriguing Edwardian cult of paleness that flourished in the ensuing 20 years, along with a renewed taste for relics of the *ancien régime*. That taste for the rococo was thought to be very up-to-date, and to some extent both the paleness and the *ancien régime* furnished the superstructure of an entirely unfamiliar concept of Edwardian modernity, now almost completely forgotten. Conder's silks became famous for their subtlety, and for the curious, penumbral dramas that unravel in them: moody transactions beside trellises, in shady walks, behind boudoir screens. Most importantly, it was Conder's pale delicate poems in watercolour on the finest thin silk that led the poet W. B. Yeats to write, after witnessing the first performance in December 1896 of Alfred Jarry's antirealist satire *Ubu Roi* at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre (with sets designed by Pierre Bonnard and Paul Sérusier), his own remarkable and characteristically immodest assessment of Conder's work in the heart of Edwardian London, and has since become famous:

*After Stéphane Mallarmé, after Paul Verlaine, after Gustave Moreau, after our own verse, after all our subtle colour and nervous rhythm, after the faint mixed tints of Conder, what more is possible? After us the savage God.*