

# GRACE CROWLEY & RALPH BALSON

THE IAN POTTER CENTRE: NGV AUSTRALIA  
23 MAY – 22 SEPTEMBER 2024

NGV



# EXHIBITION FACT SHEET

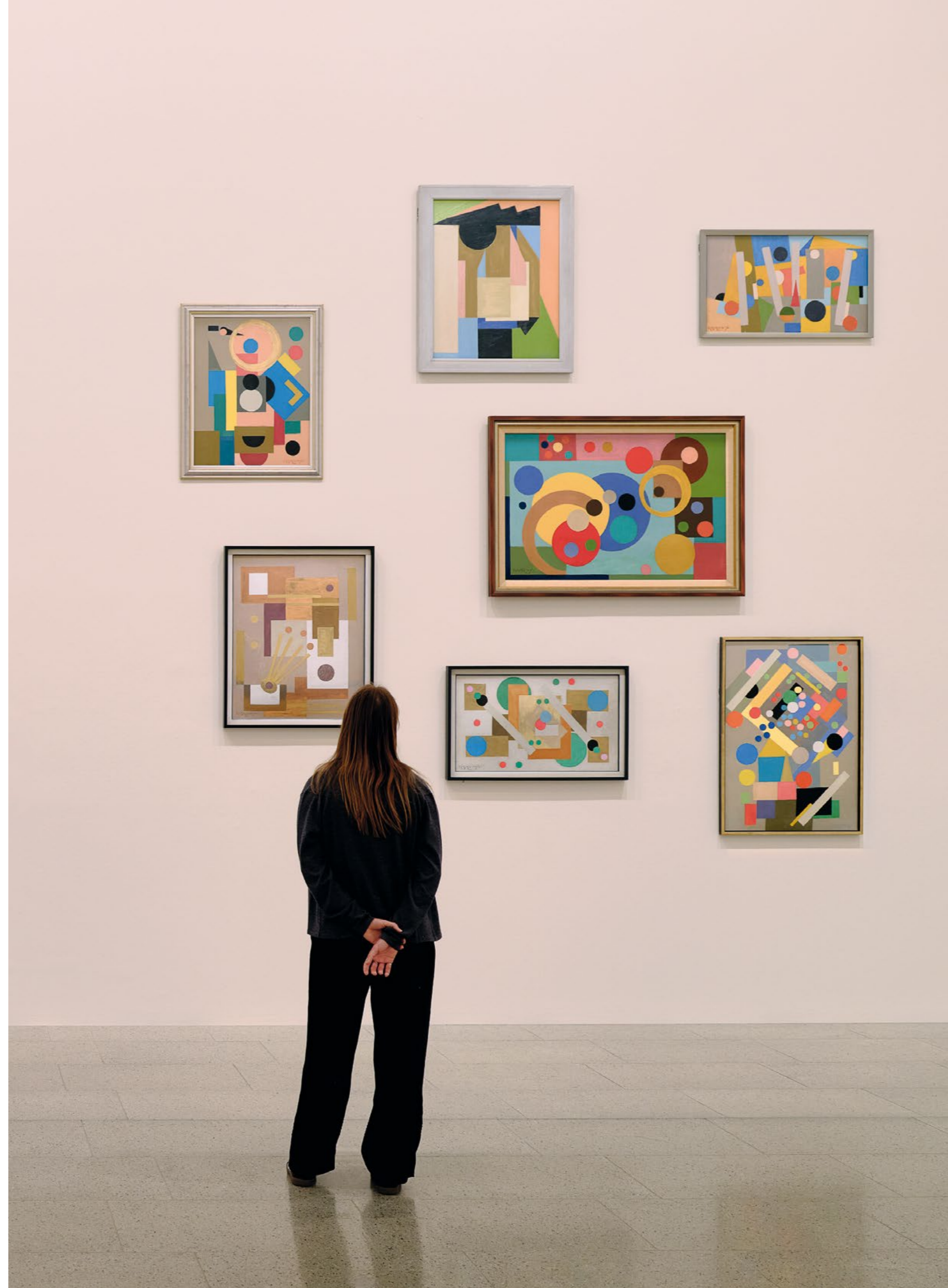
This fact sheet provides information specific to *Grace Crowley & Ralph Balson* to support the following Learning Outcomes of VCE Art Making and Exhibiting:

**Unit 2:** Understand, develop and resolve, Area of Study 1, Outcome 1

**Unit 3:** Collect, extend and connect, Area of Study 3, Outcome 3

**Unit 4:** Consolidate, present and conserve, Area of Study 3, Outcome 3

For a more detailed overview of exhibition preparation, presentation and conservation at the NGV refer to **Exhibiting Artworks at the NGV: VCE Art Making and Exhibiting | NGV** ▶





# ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Grace Crowley and Ralph Balson were pivotal figures in Australian abstract art, creating two deeply compelling bodies of work that helped shape the country's modern art movement. Crowley studied with celebrated Cubist artists André Lhote and Albert Gleizes in Paris between 1926 and 1929, and was greatly influenced by their teachings. Balson, a house painter, emigrated from Dorset in 1913 and first met Crowley at Sydney Art School where he enrolled in night classes under her tutorage. When Crowley returned to Australia, she established the Crowley-Fizelle School with fellow artist Rah Fizelle, where Balson also painted on weekends from 1934. Following the closure of the school in 1937, Crowley and Balson began working together exclusively, a collaborative partnership that lasted until Balson's death in 1964.

Together they pioneered pure abstraction in Australia. This exhibition celebrates their thirty year collaboration and charts their movement into pure abstraction throughout their respective careers.

## NUMBER AND TYPE OF WORKS

The exhibition features of eighty works by Crowley and Balson, some of which are sourced from the NGV Collection. The artworks encompass paintings and drawings on board, canvas and paper. Additionally, there is a collection of postcards Crowley gathered during her time in Europe, some sent by fellow Australian artist Anne Dangar. There are also reproductions of works by Paul Cézanne and Crowley's teacher André Lhote who were key influences in her early Cubist works. Many of these pieces have pinholes, showing that Crowley displayed them in various locations, perhaps as a form of inspiration.

## KEY ARTISTS

Grace Crowley and Ralph Balson

## KEY TEAM MEMBERS

### CURATOR

Beckett Rozentals

### EXHIBITION DESIGN

Jenny Kan

### CONSERVATION

Raye Collins

Ruth Shervington

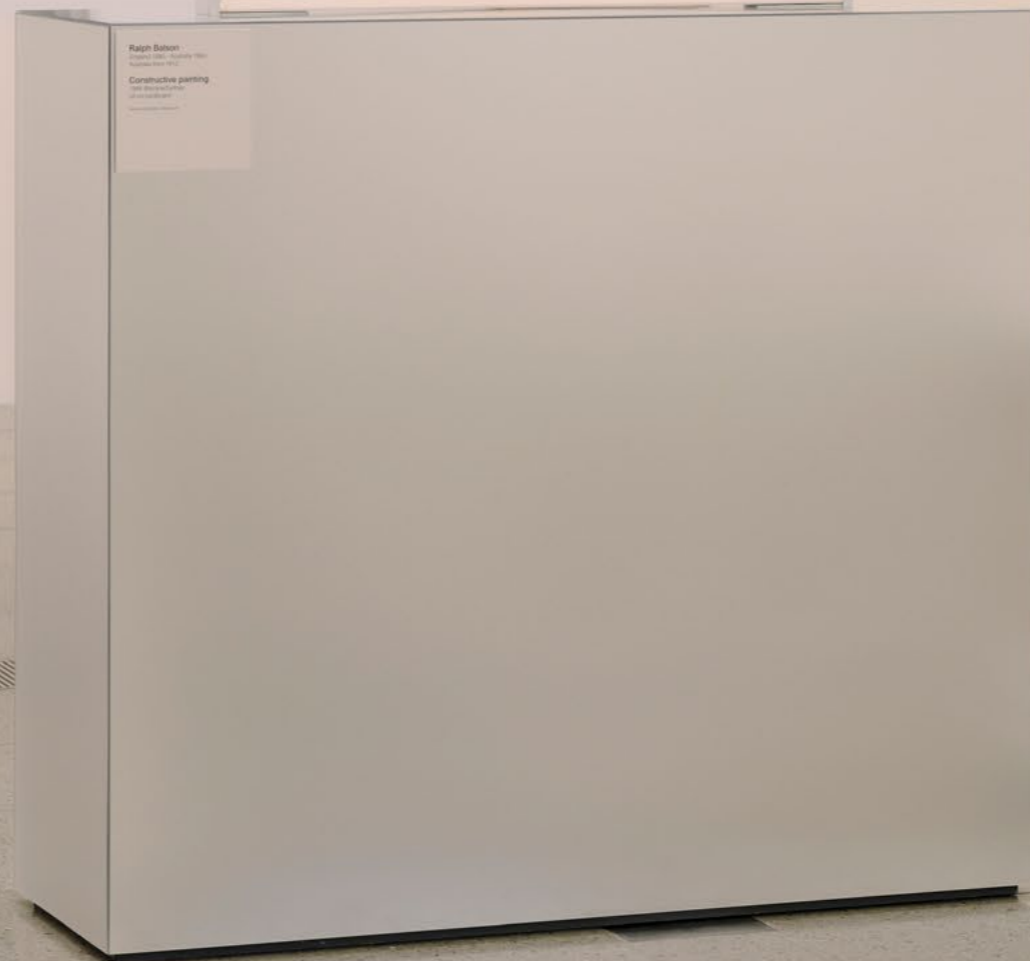
Camielle Fitzmaurice

## CURATORIAL RATIONALE

*Grace Crowley & Ralph Balson* is the first exhibition – unite and focus exclusively on these two artists and their thirty-year collaboration. The exhibition is organised chronologically and divided into eight sections that detail key moments in the artists' careers.



Grace Crowley  
Constructive painting  
1950  
Oil on canvas



# EXHIBITION DESIGN

*Grace Crowley & Ralph Balson* is displayed at The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia. Situated on Level 3, the exhibition was designed to subtly reflect the colour and tonal qualities of key works by Crowley and Balson. To celebrate Ralph Balson's (*Constructive painting*) which was surprisingly discovered whilst preparing works for the exhibition, the exhibition design team adopted pastel and metallic tones, as well as shades of brown and pink to evoke the pigments in the painting. Soft tones were used to evoke the colours and layering techniques used by both artists – particularly warm and peach-toned colours. The base wall colour is Polished Opal (Dulux) and Raw Cotton Half (Dulux), Casper Grey (Dulux) and Christobel Quarter (Dulux) are also used throughout the exhibition.

The exhibition's plinths have been treated using satin silver acrylic mirror, which softly reflects surrounding colours to create an immersive environment. These plinths contain artworks, postcards and even the paint pigments the artists favoured, still in their original tubes. Lines on the floor show touch distances, eliminating the need for traditional kick-plinths (often used to prevent people from getting too close to the work).

Similar to the exhibition's wall colour palette, the title wall text's typography uses brown and metallic colours reminiscent of shades seen in many of the works. The font selected for the title wall and quotes is Swiss Bold Condensed and indented text along the title wall suggests a conversation between the two artists. Most works are displayed in a single line (sometimes referred to as a linear hang) at eye height, which creates a clear visual path for visitors to follow. The exhibition also features two salon hangs, which refers to paintings displayed in a dense, loosely aligned format. These more tight-knit displays celebrate the moments when Crowley and Balson's works leapt into pure abstraction.

Some double-sided artworks are also displayed on plinths in the middle of the space. This creates a floating effect and enables the audience to engage with both paintings.



A salon hang (left) and linear hang (right) in *Grace Crowley & Ralph Balson* at the Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia, 23 May – 22 September 2024. Photo: Tom Ross



An early floorplan prepared by Exhibition Design. Please note: some artworks are displayed differently in the exhibition.

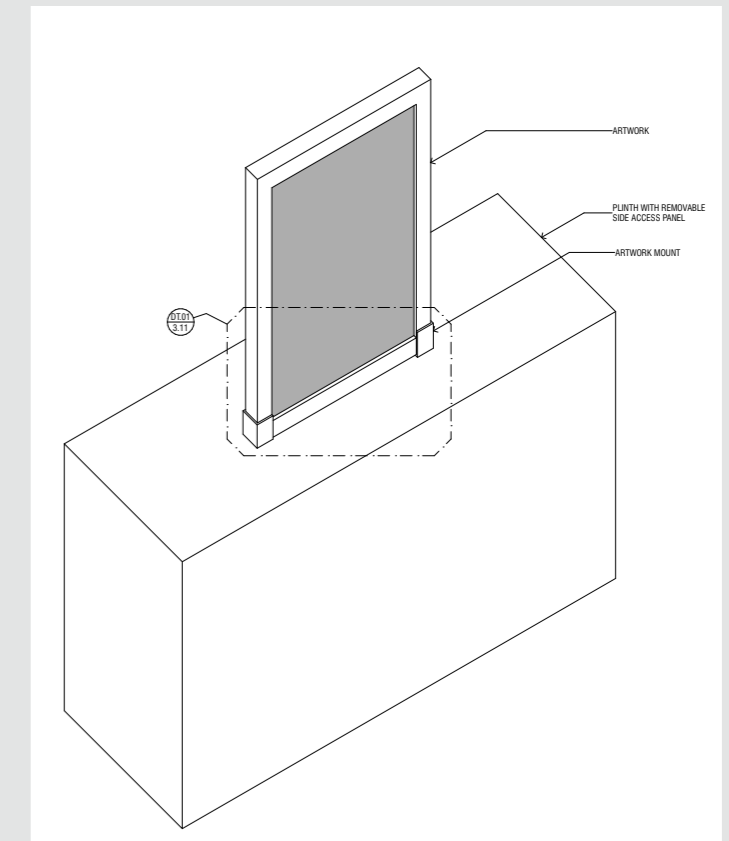


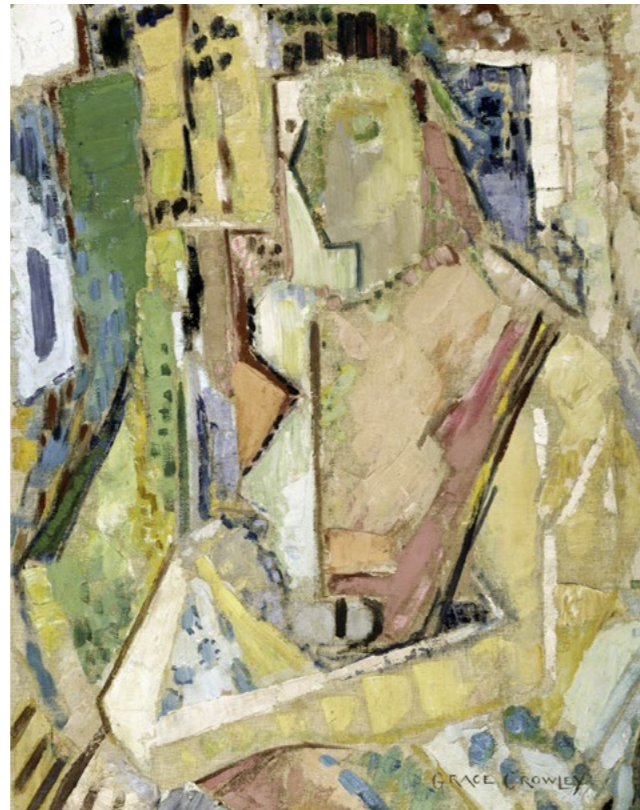
Image of double-sided plinth prepared by Exhibition Design

# CONSERVATION

*Grace Crowley & Ralph Balson* includes a range of mediums which involve four conservation departments: Paintings; Frames and Furniture; Paper and Photography; and Exhibitions. The conservators' role is to preserve all works and ensure loaned works are returned in the same condition that they arrived in. Most works have been loaned from private collections and other galleries. As part of the conditions of a loan, works may have specific requirements to control light exposure, temperature/humidity or mandatory touch distances. It is the conservator's job to monitor these conditions and ensure they communicate relevant loan conditions to the curatorial and exhibition design teams. Throughout the exhibition, the teams will monitor, clean and maintain the works. This might include altering or adapting how visitors are directed to interact with each piece.

## SELECTED WORKS

GRACE CROWLEY, *PORTRAIT* 1939 &  
RALPH BALSON, (*CONSTRUCTIVE PAINTING*) 1941

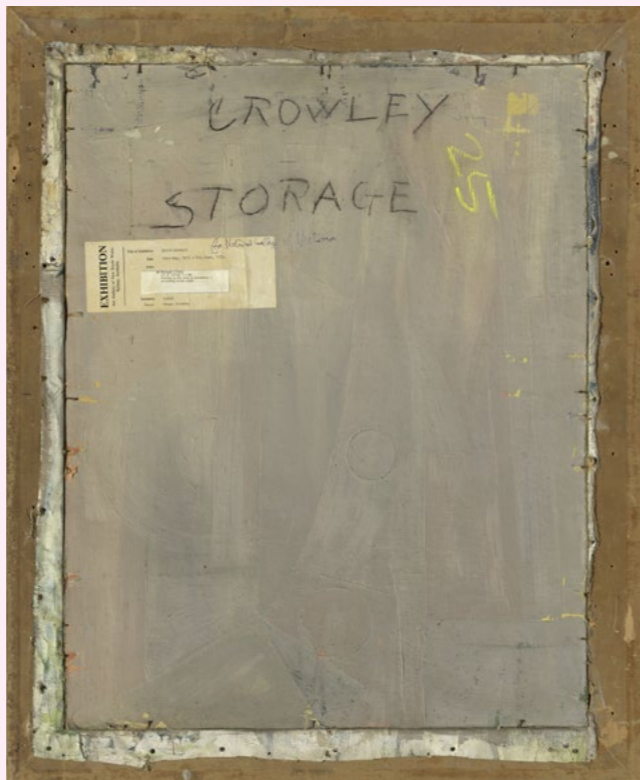


## ABOUT

Grace Crowley's semi-abstract *Portrait*, 1939, represents a major step towards pure abstraction, as it rejects traditional methods of depicting realistic form and space. Crowley discards techniques like perspective and tonal gradation, opting to imply depth and three-dimensional form with colour and shape. Leaving parts of the canvas unpainted, she simplifies the figure with patches of pure, unmodulated colours applied with a confident brushstroke and palette knife, creating a flat and artificial space.

On their initial examination of *Portrait*, the Gallery's conservation team identified that the backing board (a stiff board that sits behind a framed artwork to offer support and prevent damage) was very old and in need of updating. The word 'storage' was written on the back and upon removing the board from the frame, they soon realised that there was a fully intact Ralph Balson painting on the inward-facing side of the board.

Balson's (*Constructive painting*), 1941, is typical of his paintings from the early 1940s. The work incorporates distinct flattened and geometric motifs found in other works from his 1941 solo exhibition at Anthony Hordern's Fine Art Gallery in Sydney. As Crowley's painting was completed in 1939, this suggests that she left *Portrait* in an unframed state for a few years before it was fitted into its current frame.



Reverse view of **Grace Crowley's** *Portrait* 1939, labelled 'Storage'



(top left)  
**Grace Crowley**  
*Portrait* 1939  
oil on canvas on cardboard  
71.6 x 56.2 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Bequest of the artist, 1981  
A3-1981  
© The Estate of Grace Crowley

(above)  
**Ralph Balson**  
(*Constructive painting*) 1941  
oil on cardboard  
71.4 x 56.2 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Bequest of Grace Crowley, 1981  
2021.222  
© The Ralph Balson Estate

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS



*Portrait* is painted on unstretched canvas that was delicately tacked onto the frame. Once conservators removed the Balson painting, they needed to make a new backing board to safeguard the painting. They constructed a board made from Dilite, with Dacron padding, further ensuring the work's stability during transport and display. While working on both paintings, the conservation team were able to identify that Crowley and Balson shared a palette to paint these two works.

Balson's (*Constructive painting*) was created on cardboard. The artwork was found to be in good condition and had minimal varnish applied. Before any restoration work began, the conservation team conducted a technical examination of the artwork's condition to identify the potential risks that restoring it could pose, to analyse the cost/ benefit for restoration. This process involved spot-testing and pigment examination to understand the composition of the materials used.

Conservation and restoration of modern paintings (which are characterised by unbroken fields of colour) present unique challenges, particularly in preserving the painterly quality of the artwork. Examining this work under a microscope revealed that rather than using tape, Balson painted each colour region freehand using a square brush, following lines that he had drawn in pencil. His original pencil marks can be seen peeking out in the margins between colours. The preservation of these pencil marks is critical to work's restoration efforts; an example of the delicate and nuanced approach conservators must take.

The first step in treating the artwork was removing the old, discoloured varnish. Conservators used organic solvents with a swab, carefully cleaning the painting under the microscope. Once treatment was complete, the conservators applied a new synthetic varnish called MS3 (developed in collaboration with CSIRO). Traditional damar varnish (a natural resin-based varnish that was popular in the past) tends to yellow and become more insoluble over time. MS3 is preferred for its conservation-grade quality, as it offers a more stable chemistry and can be easily dissolved and replaced. Losses

and damages to the paint layer were filled and inpainted using MS3 mixed with dry pigments to minimise visual distractions and ensure that the work remains as faithful as possible to the artist's original vision.

As the details regarding the artist's intended framing for (*Constructive painting*) are unknown, conservators tried to envision a frame Balson's past exhibitions and works that are known to be in their original frames. Crowley's *Portrait* is displayed alongside Balson's (*Constructive painting*) to reinforce their connection. The wall displaying these artworks has been painted with two overlapping pink rectangles (Dulux Christobel Quarter) representing the artists' shared use of colour and intertwined nature of their practice. To the left of these paintings sits a waist-high plinth displaying examples of the pigments that formed the basis of Crowley and Balson's shared palette. Due to the toxic nature of this material, the tubes have been encased in a Perspex display case, which has been moved to the corner to ensure it is not accidentally knocked or moved.

(above)  
Conservator of Paintings Raye Collins  
with **Grace Crowley's** *Portrait* 1939 and  
**Ralph Balson's** (*Constructive painting*) 1941.  
Photo: Narelle Wilson / NGV

(opposite, top left)  
**Grace Crowley**  
*not titled (Cubist exercise using  
Gleizes's principles)* 1929  
painting in gouache, over drawing in pencil  
15 h x 12.5 w cm (sheet)  
The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra  
Gift of Grace Buckley in memory  
of Grace Crowley, 1980  
© The Estate of Grace Crowley

(opposite, top right)  
**Grace Crowley**  
*not titled (Cubist exercise using  
Gleizes's principles)* 1929  
painting in gouache, over drawing in pencil  
14.8 h x 12.5 w cm (sheet)  
The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra  
Gift of Grace Buckley in memory  
of Grace Crowley, 1980  
© The Estate of Grace Crowley

(opposite, below)  
**Grace Crowley**  
*not titled (Cubist exercises using  
Gleizes's principles)* 1929  
painting in brush, gouache, over drawing  
in pencil  
a. 18.5 h x 17 w cm (sheet)  
b. 18 h x 17.6 w cm (sheet)  
The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra  
Gift of Grace Buckley in memory  
of Grace Crowley, 1980  
© The Estate of Grace Crowley

## GRACE CROWLEY'S 1929 CUBIST EXERCISES USING GLEIZES'S PRINCIPLES





Installation view of *Grace Crowley & Ralph Balson* at The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia, 23 May – 22 September 2024. Photo: Tom Ross

## ABOUT

In 1929, fellow Australian artist Anne Dangar (who was studying in Paris) wrote to Crowley about Albert Gleizes' Cubist paintings. Impressed by her friend's recommendation, Crowley reached out to Gleizes and arranged classes for herself and another Australian artist, Dorrit Black. While Crowley only had a handful of sessions with Gleizes, his teaching had an ongoing impact and influenced her move into non-representational art.

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS

All four of these untitled artworks are paintings in gouache over drawing in black pencil, on loan from the National Gallery of Australia (NGA). When borrowing works from other galleries, both parties commit to a loan agreement, which details the conditions of the loan. The loaning gallery's registrar reviews these agreements to understand their requirements, which may include specifics about environmental conditions or acclimatisation periods.

A conservator conducts a condition report for each work before it leaves the gallery and upon its arrival at the borrowing institution. These reports are typically delivered as a hard copy, alongside the artwork, though they can also be sent digitally. The condition report tells us what physical state the work is in at a given point in time. This is important for insurance purposes and it helps conservators monitor the work over the course of the exhibition and watch for any changes.

The transportation of loaned works varies based on the proximity of the institutions. For nearby locations, artworks are often transported via specialised art trucks equipped with climate control, cushioning, air ride suspension and hydraulic lift gates. Generally, a courier is sent, although this is decided at the lender's discretion.

Artworks are delivered in crates, with works on paper and paintings usually arriving framed. However, special requests can be made for works to be delivered unframed.

For *Grace Crowley & Ralph Balson*, the curator requested that the pink and green Cubist exercises be mounted in a style mirroring the layout of the red and orange *Not titled (Cubist exercise using Gleizes's principles)*, 1929, which are on the same piece of paper. In this instance, these artworks were delivered directly to our conservation department, where custom mounts and standard frames were created in-house under the supervision of a paper conservator.

To protect these delicate paper works during their transit from the NGA in Canberra, the artworks were flat-packed between two pieces of archival blue board and interleaved with glassine. They were then placed inside a blue board box which was fitted into a standard wooden shipping crate.

*Not titled (Cubist exercise using Gleizes's principles)* are displayed alongside paintings and other works on paper under the theme 'European Sojourn'. Light levels are restricted to 50 lux due to the sensitivity of the colourants. Considering the wall colours and framing of neighbouring works, the curator and exhibition design team chose a simple timber blackwood frame with a square profile. These works are photo-cornered in and overmatted. This means they have no adhesive or tapes attached, which enables minimal intervention for loaned works. A double floating-mount was also used with acrylic glazing to protect the works.



## IN THE GALLERY



## FURTHER RESOURCES

- This resource is designed to support VCE Art Making and Exhibiting **Exhibiting Artworks at the NGV: VCE Art Making and Exhibiting | NGV.**
- **VCE Art Exhibiting and Making Study Design** and **VCAA support materials for implementation 2023** National Gallery of Victoria, **Explore Conservation**

EXHIBITION MAJOR PARTNER



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