

**CHANGING FORTUNES:THE HISTORY OF CHINA PAINTING IN SOUTH  
AUSTRALIA**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses a gap in research regarding South Australian china painting. Although china painting has been practised in Australia for the last 120 years and is held in major Australian collections, it has been little researched and then in a minor role associated with ceramics and studio potters, or as women's art/craft. The china painters too, have been little researched.

My research identifies the three 'highs' of the changing fortunes of china painting, and how the practice survived in between. I argue that it was first taught in the city's School of Design, Painting and Technical Art in 1894 as a skill for possible industrial employment, due to the initiative of School Principal, Harry Pelling Gill. However china painting classes were discontinued by 1897 due to an economic depression and the fact that the anticipated industry did not eventuate.

In 1906 china painting classes were reinstated in the (re-named) Adelaide School of Art and teacher Laurence Howie was pivotal in that revival. China painting classes ceased during the First World War while Howie served overseas in the Australian Forces, but resumed in 1923 after his return and appointment as Principal of the (renamed) School of Arts and Crafts. The resulting change in the fortunes of china painting was the outcome of the School's appropriate training in art and design, and I argue this enabled emerging professional female artists to confidently exhibit china painting alongside their fine art. I will devote a chapter to the important role of the South Australian Society of Arts in facilitating this important public exposure of china painting.

The Second World War marked a decline in popularity of china painting. Chapter 5 traces its survival till it burst into popularity again in 1965. Further chapters describe china painting's following meteoric rise in fortune and the role played by the South Australian teachers of the art/craft, few of whom had received formal art training. I argue that china painting became a conservative social craft, but nonetheless a serious hobby, pursued by married, middle-class women who strongly believed their work was art, not craft. I will point out how they were visited and influenced by entrepreneurial American teachers, politically active in the art/craft debate in the United States of America.

Chapter 8 will chart the steps taken by Australian teachers in the 1980s to break from the American influence and regain an Australian identity in teachers' organisations and iconography. I will describe the debates that ensued following experimental work exhibited by avant-garde Australian teachers to resolve the art/craft debate regarding china painting in Australia, and the difficulties of maintaining china painting momentum as the majority of practitioners became elderly women.

This thesis identifies education of the practitioners as a key factor throughout South Australian china painting history as a way of better understanding the place of china painting within the decorative arts. China painting is currently in decline; nevertheless, as I will point out in my conclusion, there are several future pathways it could take. Only within recent decades have curators and writers shown an increased interest in women's decorative arts, including china painting. It is timely to undertake research before existing documentation of china painting is lost.

## **CANDIDATE'S DECLARATION**

**Thesis Title: CHANGING FORTUNES: THE HISTORY OF CHINA PAINTING IN  
SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

**Candidate's name: Avis Carol Smith**

I declare that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge or belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

**Signed**

**Date** *15 December 2008*

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I appreciate the correspondence and assistance by the following curators and staff who facilitated my access to view china painting held in many gallery collections. Christopher Menz and Robert Reason of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Glenn Cooke of the Queensland Art Gallery, Dr. Grace Cochrane of the Powerhouse Museum Sydney, Deborah Edwards of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Robert Bell at the Art Gallery of Western Australia and later at the National Gallery of Australia. Narelle Symes at the Shepparton Regional Gallery, and staff at the Castlemaine Regional Gallery also kindly allowed me access to china painting in their collections. Librarians Anne Mather at the University of South Australia and Graham Powell at the National Library, Canberra were particularly patient and helpful.

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Finally I express my gratitude to the many women who consented to be interviewed in their homes. They freely answered many questions and brought their treasures out of china cabinets and cupboards for me to handle. Moreover I was always offered afternoon tea or morning coffee - usually in exquisite hand-painted cups and saucers reserved for special occasions. It was a privilege to be admitted into their social rituals.

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It is not customary for china painters to attribute a title to their china painting, but in accordance with the conventions of Art Historical captions, the following titles have been attributed by the author and are in all captions wherever they appear in the thesis chapters. Numerous images in the list of figures are reproduced in the thesis, but do not appear on the digital version.

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