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 reinstituted 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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Associate Professor Catherine Speck, Dr. Susan Lemar and Research Librarian Margaret Hosking provided helpful advice and facilitated my research within the University of Adelaide.

Art Gallery of South Australia Librarian J in Whittington was generous with her time and help. Anne Mather helped locate archival material within the South Australian School of Art archives. Tony Kanellos provided access to some of Rosa Fiveash’s art held in the Adelaide Botanic Gardens and State Herbarium library, while Deryck Skinner very generously provided a copy of his unpublished writings on his cousin Rosa Fiveash to assist my own research on that artist. President of the Royal South Australian Society of Arts Beverley Bills provided useful access to many of the Society’s early records and catalogues, while Brian Baldwin, archivist of Prince Alfred’s College provided added information on James Ashton’s involvement with the same Society, his art and his teaching.

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 Oooke 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.

Mary Howie generously shared her memories of her father Laurence Howie with me and allowed me to handle her collection of his china painting. Lionel Peisley, Susan and Les Wright, Phil and Christine Sunman were of considerable assistance in locating pieces of
I acknowledge the assistance of Joan Drew and Judy Evans during my research on Ada Hough.

I particularly wish to acknowledge the friendship and consistent help of the committees and members of the South Australian China Painters Association and the Australasian Porcelain Art Teachers South Australian Region. They allowed me unlimited access to the library, records and extensive collection of china painting held in the Porcelain Art Centre, Buttery Reserve, Norwood.

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 their 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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