

A study in rhythm and design: Edith Alsop (1871–1958)

Drawing extensively from the University of Melbourne’s rich collections, A study in rhythm and design introduces the work of a relatively unknown but adventurous artist, Edith Alsop.

Through book illustrations, mural panels, finished drawings, sketches and prints, the exhibition reflects aspects of Alsop’s artistic development: from her early commitment to the principles of the Arts and Crafts movement, to influential studies in Europe and England, and her enthusiasm for modern art. Linking each of the works is a strong sense of rhythmic movement and Alsop’s exceptional design skills.

Born in Melbourne in the late-nineteenth century, Alsop's career parallels that of many of her better-known female contemporaries—such as Eveline Syme, Ethel Spowers, Dorrit Black and Ida Rentoul Outhwaite—whose contributions to Australian art have been recognised in recent years.

Following studies at the National Gallery School in the early 1900s, Alsop exhibited at the First Australian Exhibition of Women’s Work in 1907. She exhibited at the Victorian Artists’ Society, Yarra Sculptors’ Society and the Arts and Crafts Society of Victoria. Her early reputation was built largely on the success of illustrative work for children’s publications.

After an extended period in Europe and England, Alsop returned to Melbourne in the early 1930s and immersed herself in contemporary art activities. She enrolled in classes at the school of George Bell and Arnold Shore, exhibited as a founding member of the Contemporary Art Group and at the inaugural exhibition of the Contemporary Art Society. She continued exhibiting throughout her lifetime: her last recorded exhibition being with the Independent Group of Artists in 1957.

The Edith Alsop Study Collection was gifted to the university in 1983 by Dr Yvonne Aitken (1911–2004). Consisting of over 250 works on paper, the collection is the largest public holding of the artist’s creative output and forms the basis for the exhibition.
The Edith Alsop Study Collection: an artist abroad and at home

A large number of works in the Edith Alsop Study Collection—and the majority of exhibited works—date from the artist’s influential study tour of Europe and England from 1928 to 1931, and the years immediately after her return to Melbourne.

Aged in her late-fifties, Alsop travelled abroad in the company of her sisters Ruth and Florence, with the primary intention of studying art. She joined the painting classes of André Lhote in Paris, studied at the British School in Rome, and learnt wood engraving at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London. Alsop’s selection of schools was considered: the Académie Lhote was a popular destination for Australian artists interested in the principles of cubism, while the Central School of Arts and Crafts was at the forefront of England’s wood engraving revival of the early twentieth century.

After three and a half years abroad, Alsop returned to Melbourne in early 1931 with a renewed appreciation for both modern art and the technical possibilities of the wood engraving medium.

In April 1931 she held her first solo exhibition at Everyman’s Library, Collins Street, Melbourne. Alsop’s ‘travel pictures’, described as ‘impressions of life and locality in picturesque corners of France and Italy’ and executed in watercolour, chalk and pencil, displayed ‘sure craftsmanship, a sense of color and a gift for composition …’ (The Age, 21 April 1931, p. 5).

These qualities are also evident in many of Alsop’s works of the 1930s and ’40s.
Printmaking features prominently throughout Edith Alsop’s career: she is known to have produced etchings, wood engravings and linocuts.

While examples of etched works are absent from the university collection, references to this aspect of her practice locate her amongst some of Melbourne’s earliest practitioners. In 1916 Alsop exhibited an etching at the Victorian Artists’ Society, and in 1922, she curated an exhibition at the Arts and Crafts Society of Victoria, where she displayed her own works alongside those of Jessie Traill, Victor Cobb and Herbert Rose.

Alsop’s study of wood engraving at London’s Central School of Arts and Crafts in the late 1920s could be considered a natural extension of her early interest in book illustration. The origins of this process are closely linked with the illustration of books—a connection reinforced by the location of wood engraving classes within the School of Book Production at the Central School.

It is likely that Alsop was introduced to the process of linocut by Eveline Syme and Ethel Spowers, who both studied with Claude Flight at London’s Grosvenor School in the late 1920s. In Melbourne, Syme and Spowers promoted the teachings of Flight through exhibitions, articles and practical demonstrations at the Arts and Crafts Society of Victoria.

The linocuts of Flight and his contemporaries are characterised by their bold colour, dynamic rhythms and modern subject matter. While few examples of Alsop’s colour linocuts are known—perhaps suggesting that she applied aspects of Flight’s teachings to the black & white format in which she generally worked as a wood engraver—her choice of subject is very much in keeping with those depicted by artists of the Grosvenor School, such as the human figure at work and at leisure, and the rhythms of nature.
Edith Alsop: early illustrative work

The strong sense of design evident in many of Edith Alsop’s later works of the 1930s and ‘40s has its origins in her early career as an illustrator of children’s books.

Alsop’s talent for design was noted at an early stage: she was awarded first prize for ‘Best original design for a frieze’ and second prize for ‘Best design for a bookplate’ at the 1907 First Australian Exhibition of Women’s Work.

In 1910, along with Ida Rentoul Outhwaite, Janet Cumbrae-Stewart and Jessie Traill, Alsop completed a series of large-scale panels for display in the children’s wards of the Homeopathic Hospital. Alsop’s eight panels—three of which are displayed in the exhibition—were based on well known nursery rhymes and completed in a flat two dimensional style influenced by the work of English book illustrator Walter Crane, a key figure in the Arts and Crafts movement.

1910 also saw the publication of Some Children’s songs, with full-page colour illustrations and black & white vignettes by Edith that accompanied the music and lyrics of Marion Alsop and Dorothy Frances McCrae.

And, only a few years later, two children’s books with black & white illustrations by Alsop were published: The Cobweb Ladder and Tales of the Fairies. Images from The Cobweb Ladder were exhibited at the 1917 annual exhibition of the Victorian Artists’ Society.

Although it is thought that Tales of the fairies was Alsop’s last foray into children’s illustration, publications remained an important aspect of the artist’s working life. In the early 1930s she was co-editor of The Recorder, the journal of the Arts and Crafts Society of Victoria, and she contributed images to Manuscripts: a Miscellany of Art and Letters and the Centenary Gift Book.