In his report on the NGV’s activities for that year, director Bernard Hall wrote: ‘The Travelling Scholarship was brilliantly won, for the first time, by a lady, Miss Constance L. Jenkins, with an exceptionally good picture, which, in my opinion, was second to none of any entered for this competition since it was founded.’2

The NGV Travelling Scholarship was first awarded in 1887, ten years after the establishment of Melbourne’s NGV Art School.3 Awarded triennially, the scholarship provided funds for the winner to undertake three years of study in Europe to complete their professional training.4 In the late-nineteenth century, studies at the academies of London and Paris and the acceptance of works at their exhibition venues, were highly respected achievements and considered the means by which an Australian artist attained professional status.

The first seven winners of the Travelling Scholarship were male students: John Longstaff (1887), Aby Altson (1890), James Quinn (1893), George Coates (1896), Max Meldrum (1899), Meyer Altson (1902) and Isaac Cohen (1905).5 The win by Jenkins brought the male domination of the scholarship to an end and heralded a string of female recipients that continued until 1932.6

While numerous factors may have contributed to this development, the success of female NGV Art School students from 1908 correlates with the general movement of women into the professions and their changing status in society. In many ways, Jenkins’ early career is representative of the course of contemporary female artists as they strove to move beyond the ranks of the dilettante towards the status of professional artist.

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In May 1912 Constance Jenkins held her first solo exhibition at Melbourne’s Athenaeum Hall. Among the ninety-six exhibited works were paintings that represented significant achievements in the young artist’s career including works completed during an extended study visit to Europe such as My lady pincushion (daylight), paintings accepted for exhibition at London’s Royal Academy and the Old Salon in Paris, a prize winning portrait from the 1907 First Australian Exhibition of Women’s Work and the first and second place works for which she became the first female artist to win the National Gallery of Victoria’s (NGV) Travelling Scholarship in 1908.

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By 1912 Jenkins was a well-known artist and was invited to participate in several important exhibitions. In May 1912 she held her first solo exhibition at Melbourne’s Athenaeum Hall. Among the ninety-six exhibited works were paintings that represented significant achievements in the young artist’s career including works completed during an extended study visit to Europe such as My lady pincushion (daylight), paintings accepted for exhibition at London’s Royal Academy and the Old Salon in Paris, a prize winning portrait from the 1907 First Australian Exhibition of Women’s Work and the first and second place works for which she became the first female artist to win the National Gallery of Victoria’s (NGV) Travelling Scholarship in 1908.

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Jenkins achieved success as a student in Paris: her Portrait of E Spencer Macky, Esq. was accepted for exhibition at the Salon de la Société des Artistes Français (Old Salon) in 1910. And after relocating to London in 1911, she exhibited a painting titled The mirror at the Royal Academy.11

Further details of Jenkins’ scholarship years can be gathered from her letter to the editor of the journal of the Victorian Artists’ Society (VAS), published soon after her return to Melbourne in 1912.12 In addition to Paris and London, Jenkins travelled to Italy, the Austrian Tyrol, Munich, Belgium and Holland and many of these locations featured in the titles of works in her 1912 Athenaeum Hall exhibition.

Also exhibited in 1912, was an intimate still-life painting My lady pincushion (daylight) in which Jenkins depicts a lady’s dressing table complete with pincushion, mirrors and jewellery. The large mirror which dominates the right half of the painting reflects the pincushion, the room’s door and beyond. Jenkins successfully depicts a variety of finishes within the painting: the reflective surface of the mirror, the sheen of the beads, glass jewellery box and silver hand mirror, and the brilliant daylight that floods through a sheer curtain. Completed in thick, textural brushstrokes and a lightened palette, this work reflects Jenkins’ exploration of techniques beyond her academic training, during her time abroad. As she wrote in her letter to the VAS: ‘It has been a great three years for me, and a great eye opener … in Paris I found myself in a place where one could see and feel so very many different ways of looking …’13

Jenkins’ 1912 exhibition was well attended by the public and many works were purchased.14 Among the buyers was Dr Samuel Arthur Ewing, a Melbourne physician who had begun collecting works of art only four years earlier in 1908. Ewing was an enthusiastic arts patron and supporter of cultural activities in Melbourne. He purchased works from some of the city’s key exhibition venues including the Guild Hall, Fine Art Society’s Gallery and the VAS as well as directly from artists, many of whom he befriended through his membership of the Melbourne Savage Club.15

My lady pincushion (daylight) was one of three works purchased by Dr Ewing from Jenkins’ solo exhibition and represents one of his earliest acquisitions.16 With his keen interest in the local art scene, it is likely that Ewing had followed Jenkins’ early success as the recipient of the NGV Travelling Scholarship, particularly since her win coincided with the year in which he began collecting.

Within months of her successful exhibition Jenkins departed Melbourne to marry Spencer Macky, a fellow student from the NGV Art School. The couple settled in San Francisco where they were both actively involved in the city’s cultural activities for over four decades. During this time Jenkins’ achievements were as impressive as they had been in the early years of her career in Melbourne and Paris: she continued her practice and exhibited widely, was a founding member of the San Francisco Society of Women Artists and taught at the San Francisco Institute of Fine Arts. One of her most significant achievements as a teacher was the introduction of still-life classes, an initiative that was ‘regarded as revolutionary at the time’ and one which suggests that the still-life genre remained an important one for Jenkins well beyond her student and scholarship years.17

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Lisa Sullivan The Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2004

2 Hall, Bernard, [Report to the chairman, National Gallery Committee], 18 March 1909.
5 VCA Gallery, n.p.
6 VCA Gallery, n.p. C Winifred Honey (1911), Ethel Bishop (1914), Marion Jones (1917), Adelaide Perry (1920), Jean Sutherland (1923), Nancy Guest (1926), Constance Parkin (1929) and Eileen Robertson (1932).
7 VCA Gallery, n.p.
9 For reproductions of these works see Kerr, Joan (ed.), Heritage. The National Women’s Art Book, Australia, 1995, p. 18 and Somerset, p. 114.
10 Somerset, pp. 114–5.
11 Athenaeum Hall, Constance Jenkins, ex. cat., Melbourne, 14 to 25 May 1912.
12 Victorian Artists’ Society (VAS), The VAS, no. 9, 1 March 1912, pp. 1–2.
13 VAS, p. 1.
14 VAS, The VAS, no. 12, 1 June 1912, p. 4.
15 Over the course of thirty years, Ewing amassed a significant collection of Australian art, the greater part of which he donated to the University of Melbourne Student Union in 1938.
16 Prior to the purchase of the Jenkins work, Ewing had acquired works by notable artists including Hans Heysen, Penleigh Boyd, Walter Withers and Rupert Bunny.