

Andrew Montana

Arabesques of Beauty: Cullis Hill, the 9 by 5 Impression Exhibition, decorative decor and painting

The little gallery has been beautifully decorated, free of charge, by Messrs. Cullis Hill and Co., who have thus practically shown their sympathy with Victorian artists. Drapings of soft liberty silk of many delicate colours, were drawn, knotted and looped among the sketches, while Japanese umbrellas, screens and handsome Bretby jardinieres completed a most harmonious arrangement of colour.¹

THE ARTISTIC AMBIENCE created by the coloured silks swathed and draped around the decorative oil sketches, picture stands and carved furniture in the *9 by 5 Impression Exhibition* held at Buxton's Art Gallery, Melbourne, in August 1889 has passed into legend. Indeed this exhibition has been written about so frequently as 'a celebrated event in Australian art history' that it may seem impossible to bring forward new facts and ideas about it.² Yet the decorating and furniture firm Cullis Hill & Co., owned by Morde Cullis William Hill (1848–1909), responsible for this exhibition's decor has been skimmed over by art historians, and consequently why his company was chosen has never been firmly identified. 'Mr Cullis Hill' has been trivialised undeservedly as a fashionable Melbourne interior decorator who 'trimmed Melbourne's property bonanza',³ or whose firm created an Aesthetic appendage to the exhibition with fashionable silks, which would appeal to Melbourne's urbane middle classes.⁴ There has been no other further analysis or insight as to why Cullis Hill's company was chosen.

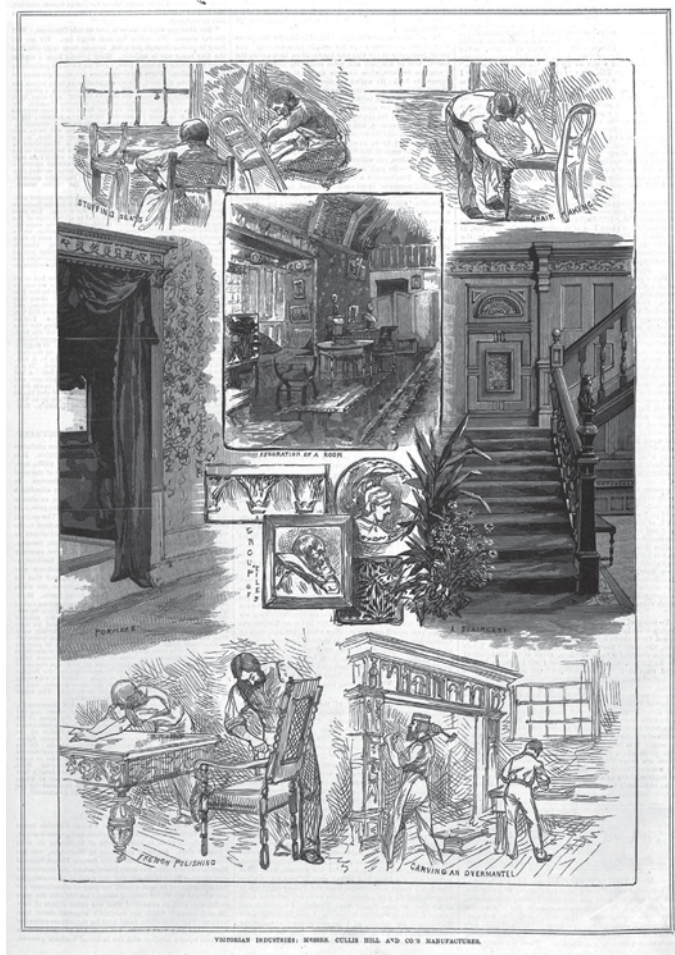
Contributing new context to this company's scene setting, this article brings to light significant reasons why Tom Roberts chose Cullis Hill to dress this famed exhibition. Further, it explores the lyrical and arabesque lines which the drapery in the 9 x 5 exhibition arguably anticipated in later decorative paintings and graphic arts of Charles Conder, and, in particular, Arthur Streeton's Art Nouveau tendencies well into the 1890s. Feminine in their then suggestive associations with the natural and organic worlds, the arabesque forms and undulating, spiralling lines seductively appealed to the senses and captured the contemporary fascination with the exotic, and emergent decorative Symbolism.⁵ Roberts knew of Cullis Hill for several years after the former's return from England and Europe in 1885, where he had seen Whistlerian Aesthetic Movement art and decoration, and no doubt visited the palace of Aestheticism, the Grosvenor Gallery in London. In Melbourne, Roberts recognised the importance of Cullis Hill's enterprise in fashioning and promoting 'art for art's sake' in the artists' studios and in domestic interiors of 'Marvellous Melbourne'. So in selecting Cullis Hill & Co., the key organising artists (Roberts, Conder and Streeton) participated directly in the concomitant relationship between art, decoration and patronage in the last two



Emma Minnie Boyd, *Corner of a Drawing-Room*, oil on canvas, 1887, 40.7 x 30.0cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
K. M. Christensen and A. E. Bond Bequest, 2006.
Image reproduced courtesy of the National Gallery of Victoria.

decades of the nineteenth century, when the crossover between decorative art, painting and the beautification of the domestic interior was strong throughout the modern, international Western world.⁶

It is well known that Roberts was a man of sartorial style⁷ and that he had an eye for fashionably attired ladies of Marvellous Melbourne (and Sydney) whom Cullis Hill cultivated as shoppers. Even if Roberts regarded flower painting as a less important art genre than figure and landscape studies in the competitive stakes for the recognition and sales of colonial artists' work at the Melbourne International Exhibitions of 1880 and 1888,⁸ he still painted decoratively colourful flower studies with bravura, broken brushwork and rich colour. Like his portraiture, these decorative paintings brought business. 'A man may be able to paint decently well and also know how to comport himself in good society', he later remarked, 'business, my dear boy, business.'⁹ Cullis Hill's



'Victorian Industries: Messrs Cullis Hill and Co's manufactory', from *Australasian Sketcher*, 18 November 1882. State Library of Victoria [A/S18/11/82/317]

patronage formed a part of this business. Transmitted through the flowing lines of the draped silks around the paintings, this decorative spirit was strong in the artists' painted colour sketches in the 9 x 5 exhibition – and continued in the emerging fashionable New Art currents of the 1890s.

II

The creation of artistic effects for artists' studios, exemplified by Cullis Hill & Co's dressing of the 9 x 5 exhibition, was paramount in presenting art to the public; the atmospheric decor increased an artist's reputation and worked towards securing sales. Artists' studios received considerable publicity in reportage and print media, which created a persona

for the artist and advertised their works for the public.¹⁰ This interaction was current during this period when English, Continental and American art journals highlighted the synthesis of painting, architectural ornament and decorative art throughout their pages. Before the 9 x 5 exhibition, for example, Conder's studio in Melbourne was described as:

attractively fitted up with soft draperies of Madras muslins, liberty silks, and other lightly falling fabrics, while souvenirs of Sydney are scattered over the room—sketches by Phil May, F. B. Schell, Mahony, Julian Ashton, Mills [Minns?], Nerli and Madame Constance Roth. Scraps of seascape, river views, and a few of the artist's own pictures are dotted about the walls among fans and other odds and ends of curious little articles that artists love and which go far in making the studio the picturesque little spot it is.¹¹

Roberts's studio at Grosvenor Chambers was made equally atmospheric for the first 'studio day', open to visitors and held prior to the Victorian Artists' Society exhibition, some months before the 9 x 5 exhibition. *Table Talk* glowingly described Roberts's studio:

Mr Roberts studio – which is one of the best in Melbourne – was most picturesquely arranged, and the general hardness of so many frames was completely effaced by cunningly placed draperies in rich soft tones, broken here and there by bunches of dry reeds and grasses. Some kind friends had sent a profusion of lovely flowers for the adornment of the studio.¹²



Tom Roberts, *Glory of the Chrysanthemums*, oil on canvas on board, 1887, 20.3 x 39.4cm.
Image courtesy of Leonard Joel, Melbourne.



Arthur Streeton, *The Flight of Summer: a decoration*, c. 1890, oil on panel. Private collection. Image supplied courtesy of the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

The Grosvenor Chambers was the four-storey building designed in a Free-renaissance style by architects Oakden, Addison & Kemp right at the top of the eastern end of the city. Still standing at 9 Collins Street, it was built in 1888 to house a couture workroom and artists' studios, and to promote Australian arts, it was the enterprise of semi-retired decorator and businessman, Charles Stewart Paterson, who established Melbourne's leading art decorating firm, the Paterson Brothers, in the mid-1870s.¹³ Named after the Grosvenor Gallery, London's temple of Aestheticism established in the late 1870s, the Chambers also took its name from the Grosvenor Gallery established at the National Gallery of Victoria, in honour of the Grosvenor Gallery Intercolonial exhibition, which showed contemporary paintings by Edward Burne-Jones, George F. Watts, Evelyn de Morgan and Walter Crane plus a host of conventional paintings, especially brought out from the Grosvenor Gallery in London in 1887.¹⁴ In associating itself with its London namesake, Grosvenor Chambers, it was hoped, would be a centre for art and patronage in the colony. Indeed, the 9 x 5 exhibition was mooted for Roberts's Aesthetically decorated studio but the organisers decided to stage a larger event at the commercial Buxton's Art Gallery.¹⁵ Even a year earlier a correspondent for Perth noted that the anteroom of Roberts's studio, where works by Streeton, Fredrick McCubbin, George Walton and Roberts were exhibited, 'was gay with winter flowers and aesthetic screens and hangings'.¹⁶

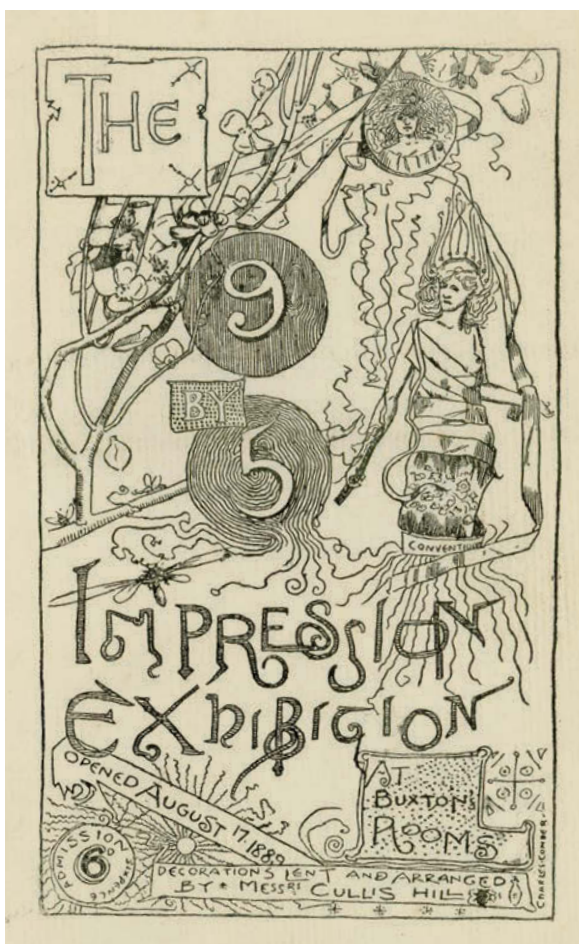
III

This decorative ambience was not new. Australian women of Aesthetic taste knew, as much as these artists, the appeal of decorative painting and Aesthetic interior effects including swathes of draped fabrics around fireplaces mantles, drawing-room easels and pictures. Throughout the late 1870 and the 1880s the women's pages of newspapers, magazines and journals were full of hints on how to decorate an artistic interior and artists' modified or seductively heightened these trends for their studio arrangements: 'The modern extreme taste in furnishing is to have the corner of the room cut off by curtains, screens, and little improvised tents', observed the *Australasian Sketcher* in 1887, and noted the profusion of Japanese chintzes, Madras muslin and Chinese silks used to line and drape the walls of fashionable, artistic rooms.¹⁷

It is not surprising that the *Age* critic reviewing the 9 x 5 exhibition gave a precise description of the impact Cullis Hill & Co.'s decorative arrangement had on the painted panels in this exhibition:

a choice assemblage of rapid sketches in oil, colour being the quality most sought after, the original millboards being neatly framed, deftly set off by the hangings and other accessories in the Kalizoic fashion.¹⁸

This Kalizoic fashion of draping interiors with fabrics was well established in Melbourne at this time. The Kalizoic store, managed by Messrs Pearce and Co., supplied Liberty silks from London for draping, furnishings, and for women's fashion. A successful enterprise, it moved from the Melbourne suburb of Windsor to a more prominent city



Offprint on paper of Charles Conder's front cover design for exhibition catalogue, *The 9 by 5 Impression Exhibition*, 1889. State Library of Victoria [H93.347]

location in Collins Street in 1887.¹⁹ Cullis Hill also stocked a large range of Liberty fabric and Indian muslins, and the term 'Kalizoic' became generic for the draping of soft coloured silk fabrics, and for some like-minded individuals the name also symbolised the spirit of the modern 'New Woman'. Conder appears to allude to this representation through his female allegory of Art unravelling swathed sashes of 'convention', and the fluttering of fabrics and swirling lines on the front cover that he designed for the dainty 9 x 5 exhibition catalogue. The catalogue's back cover, also by Conder, is an advertisement for the Melbourne engravers, printers, designers and show card manufacturers Fergusson and Mitchell who printed the exhibition's catalogue; it is similarly ornamented with flowing lines. Indeed, this concept of female freedom represented by swathes of Liberty



Circular advertising for Cullis Hill & Co. [ephemera] c. 1882.
State Library of Victoria [H10488/4]

silks as the suffragette movement gained political momentum took the form of a satirical eponymous allegory in verse written several years later:

Soon the woman you ventured to scoff at
Shall show you the strength of her will,
We swear it, by Robertson Moffatt !
We'll prove it, by Cullis and Hill !
In Liberty—fabrics—we'll clothe us,
On freedom—of conduct—we'll dote :—
You'll adopt, sirs, though you may loathe us,
The cause of "One woman, one vote".²⁰



Music Room at Cullis Hill's residence, Tudor Lodge, Hawthorn, c. 1890. State Library of Victoria.

So the columnist for the *Daily Telegraph* painted a rich picture of Cullis Hill & Co.'s decor for the 9 x 5 exhibition to harmonise with the colours in the decorative, impressionistic sketches, and took the draped fabric as the cue to evoke the exhibition's mood:

To lovers of the beautiful – and beauty is after all, as Browning says, 'about the best thing God invents,' – the arrangements of the exhibition must strongly appeal. Scarves and draperies of soft clinging silk, of the reds that Millais has made popular, and the greens, beloved of the aesthetic, hangs from picture-frames and over stands and carved cabinets. The great blue and green vases that stand in various parts of the gallery were filled on the opening day with japonica and roses, violets and jonquils, and the air was sweet with the perfume of daphne.²¹

One of *Table Talk*'s reports leading up to the opening of this exhibition mentioned the artists' gilding and bronzing the neat wooden panel frames 'preparatory to the entrance of [Cullis Hill & Co.'s] handsome furniture'.²² Other frames were stained black or left plain to exploit the grain of the timber and other frames' inner chamfered edges were painted gold. A large ebony and gold easel presumably from Cullis Hill occupied

the centre of the room, and was also swathed with fabrics during the 9 x 5 exhibition. Conder painted trailing blossoms and foliage on some of the frames for his impressions, and an amateur, perhaps a sweetheart or an admirer of Streeton's painted the frame for his impression, *The Lover's Walk*.²³ Other frames were similarly embellished. They complimented the decorative oil sketches and were the antithesis of the expensive ornate gilt, carved and moulded French Rococo and Italian Renaissance revival frames crafted by specialist Melbourne frame makers associated with the Academy and the Salon.²⁴

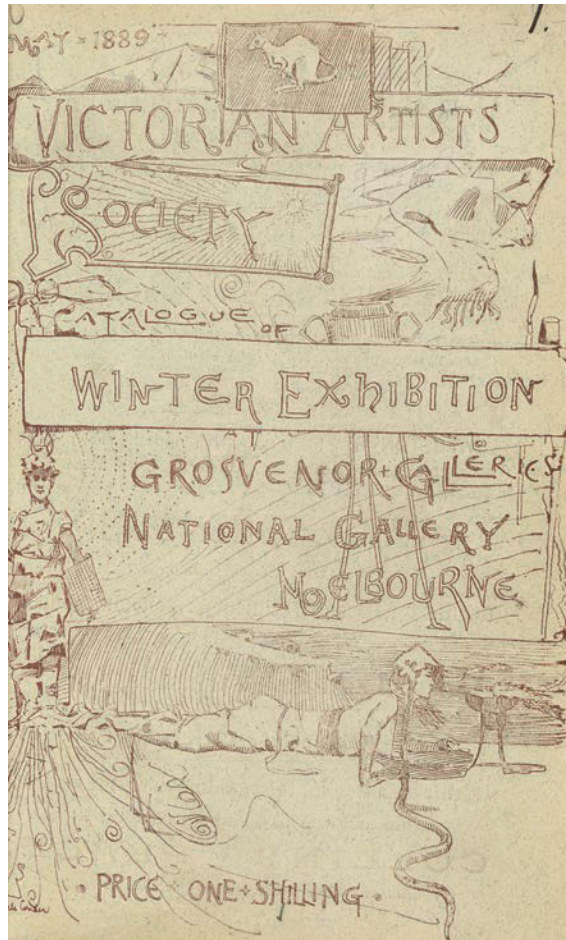
It is unknown if the Anglo-Japanese screen later fitted up with some of the 9 x 5s purchased by Japonist Dr Douglas Stewart from the exhibition was made to order by Cullis Hill.²⁵ It seems likely. Cullis Hill & Co.'s rival firm Rocke & Co., for which Morde Cullis Hill had been a managing partner until after the 1880 International Exhibition, had made the large four-leaf screen to frame Mrs Irvine-Robertson's painted scenes of England, Melbourne and Australian flora displayed in her studio.²⁶ But Cullis Hill was not only a fashionable Melbourne decorator, importer, and manufacturer of art furniture, but a *patron* of Victorian artists including Roberts. As much as providing the decorations for the 9 x 5 exhibition, Cullis Hill's patronage of Australian art included the respective purchase of a painting by John Mather and Tom Roberts several years before this famed exhibition. The connection, then, that the *Table Talk* journalist made when she noted that Buxton's Art Gallery was being fitted up 'in a very artistic manner by that true sympathiser of Australian art, Mr Cullis Hill',²⁷ has never been identified.

'Original Melbourne is fast disappearing', wrote a correspondent some years before the exhibition, 'and in its place is rising a city of beautiful buildings worthy of the colony':

Cullis Hill and Co. have extended their new establishment . . . They have plenty of room to display all that art furniture, the beauty of which they so largely advertise. As many ladies were gathered around the large windows last week as around any of the drapers' shops where the window dressing is almost perfection.²⁸

Indeed, Cullis Hill's new establishment in 1884 rose to six stories in height, with a French polished cedar shop front frame boasting a huge glass window for 'stock-exhibition purposes'. The second floor was devoted to furniture and furnishing for the drawing room, and it 'unconsciously suggest[ed] the simile of a palace of art, so harmonious its arrangement, so pleasing the contrast of colours'.²⁹ In late 1887 Cullis Hill's establishment was numbered amongst the places to visit during Melbourne Cup week. Interestingly, descriptions of several of the showroom's displays not only anticipate the draped decor of the 9 x 5 exhibition but indicate the crossover between the set dressing of Cullis Hill's emporium, artists' studios and the Aesthetic domestic interior:

The arrangement of this department is perfect, the effect of so many lovely baskets of flowers, Japanese jars, half-moon fans, for hall decorations, *screens and pictures draped with curtains, in design and material so beautiful* you pause to think you are really in a city of the South, and compare it favourably with what you have seen in the huge cities of the old world.³⁰



Victorian Artists' Society Winter Exhibition catalogue, cover design by Charles Conder, May 1889.

(One wonders if Roberts, Streeton and Conder exhibited works surrounded by drapery at Cullis Hill's emporium before the 9 x 5 exhibition). This seductive power of association continued in the report's descriptions of the carpet department and again evoked the decor and ambience of artists' studios:

Those [carpets] displayed can be utilised at the will of the purchaser, even as wall decorations. Tanjore rugs or mats, Oriental rugs, wool mats, mats made from the skin of the native bear, opossum etc. Linoleums in all varieties and widths, Japanese and Mosaic designs. A choice collection of Indian matting.

The third storey presented a drawing room 'so beautiful and artistic in the arrangement of the furniture and the wall decorations'. The display, which included 'Japanese balloons of hand painted silk', 'Cloisonne vases', 'Doulton ware', 'lovely

occasional tables', and 'their still lovelier afternoon tea service',³¹ approximates the decor in Roberts's now well-known portrait *Mrs L. A. Abrahams*, which he painted in his Grosvenor Chambers studio in 1888.

Morde Cullis Hill acquired one of Tom Roberts's decorative paintings when he purchased from the Australian Artists' Association exhibition held at Buxton's Art Gallery in October 1887: Roberts's *Glory of the Chrysanthemums*. This painting 'with its natural arrangement, its judiciously chosen background, and nice feeling for colour', showed, according to the *Argus* reviewer, 'agreeable proof of the artist's versatility'.³² He also purchased John Mather's painting *On the Upper Yarra* in early May 1888 from the Victorian Artists' Society exhibition. This exhibition included panel paintings, 'well adapted for decorative purposes', of flowers and fruit.³³ Mather was a contributing artist on the *Picturesque Atlas of Australasia*, and regularly exhibited with the Art Society of New South Wales throughout the late 1880s. His *Evening on the Yarra* was illustrated in part 14 of the *Atlas*, and this part followed the issue in which the exterior of Cullis Hill's premises in Elizabeth Street and the company name were visible in a bustling metropolitan Melbourne scene. It was not a regular occurrence that company names were visible in the *Atlas*' graphic illustrations of buildings in town and city streets, which suggests both Cullis Hill's 'product placement' and his relationship to the artists working on the *Atlas* under the art direction of the entrepreneurial Philadelphian landscapist Frederic B. Schell.³⁴ The asymmetric Japonist decorative elements surrounding and framing some of the illustrations throughout the *Atlas* are strikingly appealing, and the cover of each *Atlas* number features a small, stylised Japanese *mon*, or emblem of the chrysanthemum, the Japanese Imperial flower. It is not surprising, then, that the auditorium view of the Princess Theatre in Melbourne in part 42 clearly shows a performance of the popular Gilbert & Sullivan operetta *The Mikado*, again suggesting the fashion for things Japanese, which was incorporated into artists' studio interiors, domestic interiors, the 9 x 5 exhibition, the decorative settings in Cullis Hill's emporia, and not least in the art and ornament of this period.³⁵

Cullis Hill knew that Australian artists needed practical encouragement. This is reflected in his villa residence, Tudor Lodge, in Harcourt street, Auburn (Hawthorn). Modelled by the architect of his multi-storied retail establishment, John Beswicke, in a Victorian Tudor revival style and built originally for Beswicke's father in 1873,³⁶ it included a tiled vestibule transformed into a picture gallery, a drawing room, dining room, breakfast room and adjoining conservatory. The large 'noble Gothic music room' with a large organ recess, fitted with a chamber organ from George Fincham of Richmond, Melbourne, featured a ceiling and dado panelled in polished pine, with a large fireplace from Doulton & Co., and three large chandeliers of Venetian glass. A stained glass oriel window at one end of this room looked out to the Gothic castellated low walled terrace in keeping with the picturesque castellated parapets of the residence and its gated entrance wall in Harcourt Street. Fitted out with statuary, paintings, armour, tapestries, Japanese vases and embroidered screens, an Aesthetic Chippendale revival cabinet, furniture by



Arthur Streeton, *Tambourine*, oil on tambourine, 1891, 25.7 diam. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. The Joseph Brown Collection. Presented through the NGV Foundation by Dr Joseph Brown AO OBE, Honorary Life Benefactor, 2004. Image reproduced courtesy of the National Gallery of Victoria.

Gillow of London and Smee of Finsbury, a fine collection of *objet d'art* and art furniture from Cullis Hill's manufactory besides much else, Tudor Lodge exemplified the artistic culture of a leading sophisticated Melbourne decorator, businessman and art patron of the 1880s.³⁷ The stained glass oriel window in the Gothic music room was undoubtedly the work of stained glass artist William Montgomery, who advertised his business and commissions in the 9 x 5 exhibition catalogue. The full page advertisement included stained glass designs for the respective Harcourt Street residences of Cullis Hill and John Beswicke, which Montgomery had created after his arrival in Australia in 1887.

'But we are affecting a love for Art and "Culture" if we have it not', rallied the *Age* art critic in 1887, in praise of the Australian Artists' Association from which Cullis Hill purchased Roberts's painting and with the hope that the National Gallery of Victoria would patronise the works of young Australian artists as well as exhibit or buy works from Britain and Europe:

Toorak mansions must now be decorated in a costly manner; the humblest of suburban villas possesses a 'dado', and the artistic tastes of the masses of the people are catered for at the National Gallery, where there are some very good paintings indeed, if there are also some very bad ones. These paintings have mostly been bought in England from recognised European artists.³⁸

Cullis Hill knew John Mather years before he bought his painting. As Rocke & Co.'s former managing partner, Cullis Hill saw Mather's hand painted 'figures of Classic Grace . . . birds, butterflies and foliage'³⁹ on the art furniture exhibited to much acclaim at the

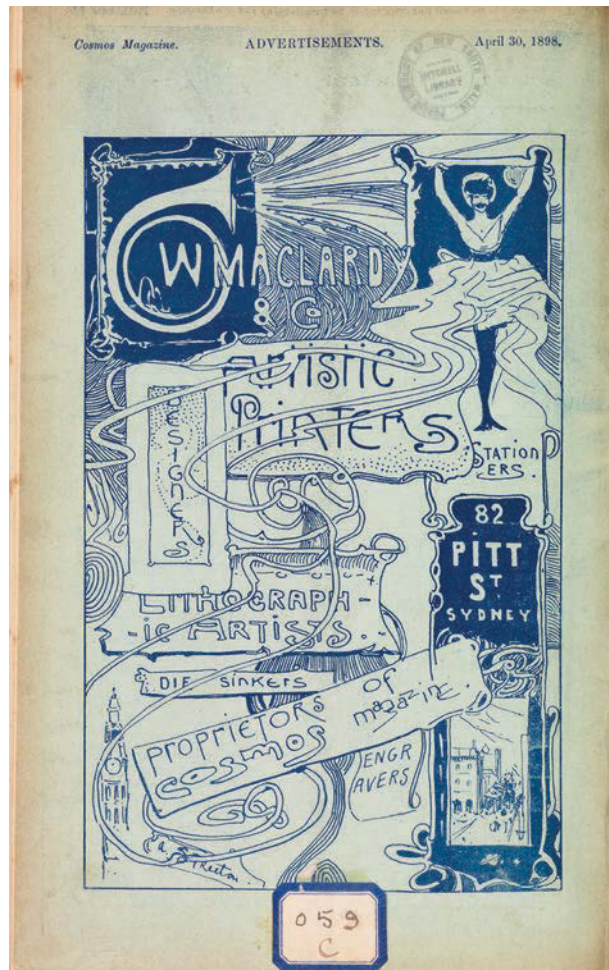
1880 Melbourne International Exhibition, and Mather's Aesthetic mural paintings for the Exhibition building in the Carlton Gardens. Cullis Hill established his own furniture manufactory and decorating business south of Princes Bridge in 1881. Advertising as an independent artistic decorator based in Collins Street, Mather probably also worked for Cullis Hill because the latter used Australian and Continental artists to paint furniture, dadoes, friezes and ceilings, and advertised for tenders to decorate homes using its 'thorough staff of artists'.⁴⁰ One report praising the Cullis Hill & Co. manufactory in 1882, for example, commented on a drawing room suite that was being made to order comprising 'a beautifully finished Chippendale china cabinet, with numerous panels either of painted birds, butterflies, and flowers, on gold, or bevelled glass, hidden away amongst little bracketed corners. Cornices, in wood were made to match'.⁴¹

Ebonised overmantels, corner cabinets, wall brackets and mirrors, many of these items decorated with painted panels poured into Australia from England during the 1880s and early 1890s, or were made to order by the Melbourne firms Cullis Hill & Co., Roche & Co. and the Wallach Bros (also based in Sydney). In 1884 a reporter on Cullis Hill's new showroom highlighted the range of cabinets:

... of all shapes and dimensions in rosewood, walnut, ebony and gold. Some are to be seen with light twisted pillars and carved doors, whilst others show glass panels and numerous drawers. A very pretty one has sprays of blossoms and fruit painted upon panels of gold colour, but the carved ebony are [sic] amongst those that attract the most attention.⁴²

IV

The union of decorative art and decorative painting was a part of the zeitgeist of modern Melbourne. Arthur Streeton's feeling for decorative art was grounded from the mid-1880s, when he worked for Melbourne's premier artistic printers and lithographers Troedel & Co. as a lithographic artist.⁴³ A year before Streeton joined Troedel & Co., this firm produced Wallach Bros' new 200- page illustrated catalogue, using the latest artistic printing to attract the consumer's eye. With a frontispiece that exploited Aesthetic motifs, the catalogue included a lot of art furniture, amongst more conventional lines, featuring painted panels of blossoms, birds and flowers.⁴⁴ Emma Minnie Boyd's delightful oil study *Corner of a Drawing-room*, exhibited at the same exhibition as *Glory of the Chrysanthemums* in 1887 shows a corner cabinet that may have come from Wallach's emporium, which was fitted out with 'Indian and Japanese rooms',⁴⁵ or more likely from Cullis Hill's burgeoning emporium. Surrounded by artistic trappings including Japanese fans, papyrus grasses, little framed pictures and *objet d'art*, the hand painted ebonised cabinet has a vase of lilies placed on the floor in front of it to emblemize her Aesthetic taste, further enhanced by Boyd's atmospheric use of cast light and shadow. It is no wonder that she brought some of the 9 x 5 impressions through her parents and, with her husband Arthur, practically assisted Streeton's delivery of his large oil *Golden Summers* to France for exhibition, after Charles Conder's initial suggestion to transport it when he looked towards leaving Australia in early 1890.⁴⁶



Advertisement with art work by Arthur Streeton for W. MacLardy & Co., Sydney. Back cover, *Cosmos: an illustrated Australian magazine*, 30 April 1898.

Cullis Hill & Co. created art decorations and manufactured art furniture for public and private interiors, not only in the 'Anglo-Japanese' style, but also in the Old English, the Queen Anne and the Renaissance revival styles. In 1886 for instance, the manufactory crafted a large carved sideboard designed in the Renaissance style for the Melbourne Club's dining room, probably designed by the Melbourne architects Terry & Oakden (later Oakden, Addison & Kemp).⁴⁷ Such commissions were not unusual throughout the 1880s: Cullis Hill & Co. made the throne furniture designed by Terry & Oakden for the installation of Sir William J. Clarke, Bart, as the Grand Master of the Freemasons in Victoria, and probably much of the fitments for extensions to the Melbourne Club.⁴⁸ By 1890, the firm retailed prestigious, massive Renaissance revival carved furniture by

Smee of Finsbury alongside quaint bamboo furniture inset with Minton tiles, and a Moorish cabinet 'reminiscent of the Alhambra' [Palace], decorated in blue, red and gold and bearing an Arabic inscription, which according to *Table Talk* was 'a thing of beauty to linger over'.⁴⁹ And throughout the decade Cullis Hill's firm manufactured finely carved furniture, Morocco leather mahogany suites, or lighter, ebonised art furniture for Melbourne villas and mansions. It decorated banquets and private receptions with artistic paraphernalia and provided furnishings for Melbourne's theatre decor.⁵⁰

Installing carved furniture, a large black and gold easel, swathes and arabesques of art silk draperies, and art pottery in the 9 x 5 exhibition, then, was as much an advertisement for Cullis Hill's business as it was for the artists' decorative paintings. The acquisition of Roberts's *Glory of the Chrysanthemums* must have clinched Roberts and Cullis Hill's relationship; it combined decorative art and patronage. Indeed, the chrysanthemum flower was revered during the 1880s and into the 1890s and with Japanese, horticultural, and aesthetic associations this herbaceous bloom was as popular in vases as it was as a motif for decorative painting throughout the Western world.⁵¹ Streeton also painted several studies of the flower, his first in 1888, which he showed in the Victorian Artists' Society spring exhibition: 'Of flower pieces there are numerous examples and almost uniformly good', praised the *Argus* critic of that exhibition:

Mrs Ellis Rowan's basket of fruit blossoms and Mr Tom Roberts's fine group of roses are exceptionally so . . . Mr Arthur Streeton's chrysanthemums . . . [and] some yellow and crimson chrysanthemums, by Miss Jane Sutherland . . . [all] serve to heighten the general attractiveness of the exhibition.⁵²

Another painting of chrysanthemums by Streeton followed in 1891. Lauded by *Table Talk*, it was described as a 'glorious mass of white, yellow and red, broadly painted and harmonious in the last degree'.⁵³ Cullis Hill was drawn to Roberts's *Glory of the Chrysanthemums* in 1887 and his acquisition anticipated the decoration of the 9 x 5 exhibition, and undoubtedly the ebonised table and aesthetic paraphernalia, which filled Roberts's Grosvenor Chambers studio before this exhibition. Framed within an Anglo-Japanese style rectilinear format, the glowing, painterly study exploited the flower's potential as a fashionable subject and Roberts used vigorous brushwork and deep, rich colour to achieve his glowing autumnal effect. Indeed, Cullis Hill lent this painting to Roberts for exhibition in the Victorian Artists Gallery at the 1888 Centennial Melbourne International Exhibition.⁵⁴ By 1891 the Aesthetic effect of Roberts's studio was praised by a visiting Sydney journalist with a description that evokes the decorative display of merchandise in Cullis Hill's emporium:

The walls are draped from frieze to floor with china blue muslin, through whose folds thread a conventional pattern in white. The delicate tint of blue is apparent throughout the whole colouring of the apartment. It shows in the carpet, divan, and Oriental rugs, scattered here and there. Leopard skins, large Japanese vases filled with feathery grasses, an open harpsichord in a dimly lit recess, and an antique-looking music book resting on its stand, give a quaint, remote look to this quiet retreat.⁵⁵

Arthur Streeton's little oil painting *Tambourine*, painted on a tambourine in 1891, depicts Roberts's studio at the Grosvenor Chambers where he worked after revisiting Melbourne from Sydney when Roberts was away painting. A novelty, the small circular format shows the draperies, an 'Oriental' lantern, Japanese embroidered hangings, stacked paintings, an easel, and artistic paraphernalia in this artist's studio. One of the paintings depicted is Streeton's *Chrysanthemums*. Deftly registered in a sketchy impressionist method, the painting's tones and vivid colour accents across the tambourine's surface appealed to buyers in search of a decoration. Indeed, one article promoting Cullis Hill & Co.'s new merchandise highlighted the wall decorations 'in the way of small mirrors . . . gilt lyres, harps, tambourines, palettes, etc.,' and, as if describing some of the effects in Roberts's studio, the new hollow bamboo sticks in which to place masses of pampas and other grasses, and a pair of Japanese vases, 'covered with the correct impossible landscapes in the true grey-blue which is one of the hallmarks of Japanese art'.⁵⁶ Streeton expressed his delight in having the run of Roberts' studio in a letter to him in May 1891 and included a pen sketch of the studio's interior in which Streeton is seen discussing his *Chrysanthemums* with two admiring ladies.⁵⁷

V

Streeton's realised from his early sales that his decorative style of painting was popular. His Aesthetic painting *Butterflies and Blossoms* painted at Eaglemont, then an outer suburb on the fringe of Melbourne, sold to Charles Stewart Paterson in 1890, suggested Conder's influence to capture the transience of youth and beauty. Roberts painted Paterson's portrait in 1888 and it was exhibited in the Centennial International Exhibition in the Victorian Artists' Gallery with some of his other paintings, including *Glory of the Chrysanthemums*.⁵⁸ *Table Talk* called *Butterflies and Blossoms* a 'harmony in blue and gold', and the *Age* thought that it would be hard 'to conceive a more tender and delicate scheme of colour'.⁵⁹ Streeton learned the appeal of decorative painting during this period. His *Decorative Harmony in Grey* (1888) is another example,⁶⁰ as is his exercise in Aesthetic Symbolism, the oil on panel *The Flight of Summer: A Decoration* of around 1890. The viewer's eye sweeps upwards from the curling smoke of Streeton's talisman cigarette and through the arabesque trails of his berry fruit laden branches to join the diaphanous, trailing veils of his elusive female sprite who allegorises summer's flight with up stretched arms. Equally as subtle is the arabesque form of the river that lyrically bends its way through the centre of Streeton's well known poetic landscape *Still Glides the Stream and Shall for ever Glide*, painted in 1890.

The onset of the depression in Melbourne deterred art patronage and contributed to the demise of Cullis Hill & Co., one of many businesses that collapsed in the early 1890s. In 1891, less than five months after Cullis Hill attempted, unsuccessfully, to sell Tudor Lodge for both family and financial reasons, he sold his antiques, modern art furniture, musical instruments, statuary and tapestries at the residence. But not one painting, watercolour, sketch or drawing from the art works that had lined his private

picture gallery was listed for sale.⁶¹ The *Table Talk* journalist wrote that ‘the vestibule with its beautifully tiled floor is used as a small picture gallery’, but only mentioned that ‘the rare and beautiful collection’ of furniture, decorative arts, tapestry and statuary was up for auction.⁶² *Glory of the Chrysanthemums* must have changed hands earlier, or later, and may have been sold in the large auction of landscapes, beachscapes, flower and streetscape oil paintings by ‘Tom Roberts, F. McCubbin and A. Streeton’, which according to the sale notice in December 1890 resulted from ‘tours through New South Wales’ and amongst other works included ‘[a] clever picture of Bourke-street . . . Scenes at Coogee, N.S.W., Study of Roses &c.’⁶³ A painting called *Chrysanthemums* by Roberts, lent by a Melbourne collector David Cook, who also lent Roberts’s *A Summer Morning Tiff*, was listed in the catalogue for the *Victorian Artists’ Society’s Exhibition of Australian Art: past and present*, held at the National Gallery of Victoria in August 1893,⁶⁴ leading the formative Roberts’s scholar Helen Topliss to believe that this was *Glory of the Chrysanthemums*.⁶⁵ Streeton moved between Sydney and Melbourne over the next few years, finally settling in Sydney. He wanted to develop his art’s decorative power: ‘I fancy large canvases all glowing & moving in the happy light’, he wrote to Roberts optimistically from Melbourne in early 1891, ‘& others bright, decorative & chalky & expressive of the hot, trying winds & the slow, intense Summer’.⁶⁶

These words capture the mood of his art and also suggest Conder’s quasi-Symbolist decorative painting *Hot Wind* painted in early 1889; ribbons unfurl and a snake slithers its way towards the female spirit allegorising the drought as she blows from a small cauldron the ‘hot wind’ which floats off in a diaphanous haze of harmonious crimson and smoky lilac hues. Conder’s tiny watercolour *Mirage* of the same year is similarly evocative, with billowing and spiralling ‘clouds’ emanating from the youthful allegorical sprite. Spiralling trails and abstracted concentric circles erupting into rhythmic patterns permeated Conder’s art since his illustrations for the *Illustrated Sydney News* in January 1888. Art historian Mary Eagle noted that they appear to take their cue from the grotesque imagery of Japanese Manga and the ties and knots of the kimonos worn by Japanese beauties in Ukiyo-e woodblocks.⁶⁷ But the arabesque aesthetic is evident and flowing energy animates not only his 9 x 5 exhibition catalogue cover, but also his cover design for the Victorian Artists’ Society Winter Exhibition held at the Grosvenor Gallery at the National Gallery of Victoria in May 1889. Depicting his *Hot Wind* imagery, art and nature merge in this cover that predicts both his cover art for the 9 x 5 exhibition catalogue and also the spiralling lines and motifs that surge in the composition of Conder’s catalogue cover design for the Victorian Artists’ Society Exhibition, held in March 1890, a month before he left Australia.⁶⁸

It is well known that Conder’s work was a influence on Streeton’s.⁶⁹ Streeton’s *Spirit of the Drought* painted around 1896 features an allegorical sprite encircled by a *bois de rose*, diaphanous, a crimson licked veil placed against his chalky tonal palette. And his *Oblivion* inspired by Alfred Tennyson’s poem *The Lotus Eaters* and painted in 1895 depicts a woman stretched out on a slab and placed against the high horizon line

of a hazy Australian coastline. Shown at the inaugural Society of Artists' Exhibition in 1895 in Sydney (Tom Roberts was this Society's chairman), the painting's enveloping figure edges close to the picture plane, and billowing drapery cascades over her form, recalling Albert Moore's paintings of women Aesthetically robed after the Antique style. But it is also reminiscent of Frederick Lord Leighton's female allegory of summer titled *Flaming June* painted and exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1895; *Oblivion* suggests that Streeton may have known Leighton's painting inspired by Michelangelo of a draped figure recumbent in an arabesque pose, or the paintings of Moore.

Like Roberts's, Streeton's decorative and commercial sense was strong. His decorative design advertising W. H. MacLardy, a firm of Sydney printers and publishers, published in this Society of Artists' first exhibition catalogue, and in subsequent years MacLardy's *Cosmo Magazine* was full of gaiety.⁷⁰ His concentrated and then spiralling lines, mainly emanate from the billowing skirts of his *fin de siècle* 'New Woman' dancer, who moves to the airwaves of the large blaring trombone. Exploiting modern typographic fonts, the sketchy compositional elements comprise an overlay of text, scrolls and advertising business plaques. The composition for his MacLardy advertisement owes some debt to Conder's front and back cover designs for the 9 x 5 exhibition catalogue, in particular its back. The overlapping sign cards, the swirling lines and the layout of the design elements, linked by streaming and looped ribbons are echoed in Streeton's New Art advertisement. Streeton's cover art for the Exhibition by the Society of Artists catalogue also uses billowing and flowing forms and lines; the bodies of two allegorical women with long hair have evaporated into spiralling cloud-like forms of drapery, which seem to fuse into smoke that curves and floats back into a pitcher resting at the base of his design. The typography, arabesque lines and swirling energies of the overall composition express the New Art tendency of the 1890s.

These swirls, coils and trailing arabesques are hallmarks of Streeton's graphic style, and are seen in modified form on the cover of his *Sydney Sunshine Exhibition* catalogue accompanying his exhibition held in Melbourne in late 1896. This graphic cover exploited the alliteration of 'S' to create scrolling and arabesque lines. A sun breaks over the central field and radial lines end in simple curlicues; his linear, graphic abbreviation is immediate and lines erupt and unite into a simple design of asymmetric concentric circles.

Streeton found the going tough after he arrived in London from Australia in 1897 at the height of the *fin de siècle*. But as for Conder and Roberts, the crossover between decoration and painting, which these artists had exploited in their studio decor and art throughout the late 1880s, permeated much of Streeton's art for over a decade. The draping and arabesque swathes around the decorative paintings in the 9 x 5 exhibition, and the decoration of Roberts's studio at Grosvenor Chamber were transposed from Cullis Hill's emporium, prompted by Morde Cullis Hill's earlier patronage of Roberts's oil study *Glory of the Chrysanthemums*. And both the commercial and the aesthetic value of decoration resonated with Streeton. Ambitious, but with little money and few

contacts, he expected his work to be taken up by major London galleries. After securing a studio, he worked up decorative sketches and paintings to send off to them. He wrote to Walter Barnett, his stylish photographer friend from Melbourne who travelled with him on the same ship to London: 'Well, come & pick a sketch before I send em into some exhibition'. Barnett sent him some green oak frames to try out, and Streeton responded inspirationally, '[I]f I become known in London it will be by a series of decorations within these frames . . . I may cause a demand & have an Exhibition entirely of decorations'.⁷¹



Streeton's Sydney Sunshine Exhibition, 88 Elizabeth St, next Falks, 1896.