

On Not Owning a Grace Cossington Smith

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At Christie's auction at the end of 1998, there was a small Grace Cossington Smith interior for sale. Actually, there were two interiors and a landscape. But although the other interior – a passageway – caught my eye at first, the one that entranced me showed a corner of her bedroom, painted from an unexpected angle. Most of the bedroom interiors in public galleries look towards the French doors and the verandah, or back into the room and the wardrobe mirror. But this one was of a small dressing table in the corner. There's a similar, slightly large interior of that corner in the Bathurst Regional Gallery and a small one in Newcastle, but even so I was momentarily disoriented.

That month I had handed over a draft of *Stravinsky's Lunch* and there was something maddeningly appropriate after years of thinking about Grace Cossington Smith, looking at her paintings and learning to read her sketchbooks with the fluency of a diary, that I could still be thrown off balance. It was a disorientation that moved me, and made me laugh. She is the most elusive person I have ever written about. Elusive and tantalising; like the interiors, there's always the sense that she's just walked out of the room, and that if you could lean a bit further, and get the angle right, you'd glimpse her in the mirror that swings towards us.

It was not that she meant to tease – there was nothing of the flirt in her – or even that she wanted to cover her tracks. After all, she revealed herself with profound intimacy, so utterly did she show us the room where she slept, and dreamed, and dressed.

The catalogue estimate for the painting was \$12,000-\$16,000. The Christie's staff at the Sydney viewing said they thought it'd go for nearer \$12,000 than \$16,000. Jeremy and I stood in front of this little interior for a long time. As we walked out onto Oxford Street, back towards the car, I was already thinking the thought. Or not so much thinking the thought, as flooded with a desire, almost an imperative, to own the painting.

'What do you think,' I asked him. He's canny with money, so I was surprised when he said he thought I should buy it.

I'm not canny with money, and as a result never have any. But I had one of those lines of credit which people like me should be prohibited from, so writing

a cheque for \$12,000, or even \$16,000, was not an impossibility. Even so, I didn't expect quite such a wholehearted response. I suppose I expected to get talked out of it, and go home and have lunch and think about other things – like an afternoon sorting out the list of paintings, photos and sketches for the book. I was making an ambit claim of nearly fifty reproductions for Grace Cossington Smith alone, but I didn't know if I'd be able to use them all; reproduction costs are high, and nobody wants a book that's priced out of the market. So I had the even harder job of listing the paintings in order of priority, when really I wanted the lot.

The arguments in favour of being extravagant were sensible. Buying a Cossington Smith wasn't just a whim; it was an investment. She is very unlikely to go down, and who knows, she might even go up. I could always sell again, and even taking into consideration interest rates and the buyer's premium, I shouldn't lose much if I could hang on for a year or two. But even as we said the words, we both knew this wasn't the point. Buying a Cossington Smith isn't – at least for me it isn't, or wouldn't have been – a matter of investment, or even of sense. The central fact remained that I had fallen in love with the painting. Not only that, but it exemplified what I have come to understand about the interiors Grace Cossington Smith painted in the 1950s and 1960s as the culmination of a life given to the contemplation of form and shape and colour. What she does in them is render visible not only the world she knew, but 'things unseen', as she put it: 'the silent quality that is unconscious, and belongs to all things created'.

I didn't do any work that afternoon. Instead we went back and looked at the painting again. If anything, we liked it more. 'A little museum piece,' said another friend, who knows about these things. She saw it in Melbourne the next week, when it moved down there for the auction. 'Nearer twelve than sixteen,' Christie's had said. 'Underpriced,' my Melbourne friend said. So just to be sure I thought, okay, I'm determined to get this painting, I'll go up to \$17,000. With a fifteen per cent premium that meant a hefty cheque, but there's more than that in a line of credit, and after all it was an investment, I could always sell it again ... I had a week to rehearse the reasons.

The auction was in Melbourne the following Monday, which meant we had to bid by phone. I say 'we' because I'd never bid before, and Jeremy, who had, though not on the phone, was getting as excited as me, and said he'd do it.

The auction was to begin a 6.30. We were lot 4.

At 6.15 the phone went; it was a call for Jeremy. At 6.25 it went again, and this time it was Christie's checking we were there. The young woman who called was from the Sydney office, and I'd asked for her because I like her and thought that if I was going to spend all that money, at least I should know who was on the other end of the line. At 6.40 she rang again, and Jeremy could hear that they were on lot 2. Lot 1, an Olsen, had gone for the lower end of its estimate. So did lot 2, a Dickerson. Lot 3, a Justin O'Brien that I didn't like at all, was lower still. On this reckoning Grace would be mine by nightfall.

'Be prepared,' the woman from Christie's said, 'it happens fast.'

Lot 4. It was us. I'd brought another chair up to the phone but couldn't manage to sit. I felt like one of those cartoon figures with short sharp lines flying out of them. Jeremy, on the phone, was admirably cool, following the bidding that was going up a thousand at a time. He came in at \$14,000. \$14,000. \$15,000. \$16,000. He bid \$17,000 and stopped. \$18,000, \$19,000, \$20,000, it went, just like that, and about as fast. After \$20,000, the bids go up in leaps of \$2,000.

‘Do you want to bid twenty-two?’ the Christy’s woman asked Jeremy. Jeremy passed the question to me.

I stood there, mouth agape, hand up, and at that moment the hammer went down in Melbourne. Jeremy says he handed me the phone and I said no. I remember only the long drawn-out moment, and the phone in the air somewhere between our hands. Either way, we’d lost it. I talked to the woman from Christie’s. Private buyers, she said, they’d probably have gone up to \$24,000. It looked like they’d bought it because they loved it. ‘I suppose they were richer than me,’ I said, and she gave a little laugh that I took to mean they were.

‘There are fairy penguins on the harbour who are richer than you,’ my agent said – rather uncharitably, I thought – when I was telling her this story.

Lot 19 was the second Cossington Smith interior: the passageway. I can’t be sure, but I think it was the passage between the bedroom and the studio she had built onto the end of the house after her father died. At first I’d favoured this interior because of its yellow. *Yellow, the colour that advances*, Grace Cossington Smith had said. The sun is God, Turner is supposed to have said at the end of his life. I knew the journey Grace had made towards that yellow, and I knew its significance, but the passageway painting had the quality of trying something out, an experiment. In comparison the other interior – my interior – was calm and resolved. In any case the yellow passageway would have needed a much larger room than I could provide. Not because it was big – it wasn’t – but because you needed to stand well back from it. It went for \$18,000.

‘We underestimated her,’ the woman from Christie’s said afterwards.

‘Why do you think she’s going up?’ I asked.

She didn’t know, other than to say – which I knew – that she is the sort of artist people respond to from the heart. Which, perversely, makes her hard to price. Buyers will go over the odds to get her. And then they often hang on so long it’s a while before the painting is on the market again.

‘Are you very disappointed?’ Jeremy asked as we stamped round the park to recover.

‘Well, yes,’ I said, and then listed all the reasonable reasons for not being upset. Money, or lack of it; priorities; the cult of ownership that obsesses our world – and often not to the advantage of the people who can buy, let alone of those who can’t. More, more, more: the litany and lament of a dying century. I went to bed in a state of mind that Helen Garner calls ‘drearily noble’.

In the middle of the night, I woke bolt upright. It was as if everything I hadn’t allowed myself to feel the evening before had slipped in under cover of sleep. Fury against the rich headed the list. And anyone who has worked in art research will know that it’s not hard to get furious with rich owners of paintings. Some are eager and helpful. But others are resistant as if you’re really there to eye off the silver; with this tight sense of ownership there often goes a surprising ignorance about the work that’s owned, and sometimes even a lack of interest. On the whole it seems that the more welcoming owners are, the more knowledgeable they’re likely to be, and where there’s delight in the painting, it’s hard to begrudge them the pleasure. To be fair, most Cossington Smith owners fall into this latter category, for the same reason that her prices are going up: that ‘falling in love’ quality she induces in us.

Oddly, the fact that an artist is loved in this intimate, personal way can present another set of problems for researchers, because unless privately owned paintings have been through the auction houses, it can be hard to trace them, especially if they were bought before the artist became famous and her work catalogued. Cossington Smith paintings – especially the small ones – turn up in the estates of people who bought them for a song years ago and it's their children who are interested in the rocketing prices.

The next thing that kept me awake was more difficult. Fury with the rich fades. The life you live reasserts itself and you remember there are other forms of richness that have nothing to do with money or owning paintings. And these other forms of richness are what Grace Cossington Smith was painting – especially, but not only, in the interiors – and that, I suspect, is one of the reasons we respond to them. Because they are expressions of an inner peace, a self-knowledge, a *contentment* that was hard won, and real; a richness of spirit that no line of credit will buy.

Knowing this made my midnight crisis that much harder, for the despicable thought went through my head that I should have pushed on, pushed up my opponents - \$22,000, \$24,000, \$26,000, \$28,000 – and got the painting. After all, I was writing about her, the book was in manuscript and there was still time to fit in another paragraph, give it the trumpet sound, reproduce it, make it famous, and snap up the increase in value.

There was a small Clarice Beckett at the auction, a fishing boat rocking in an evening light. I'd once been tempted by one of her bathing boxes in a gallery in Melbourne, but had baulked at what now seems the low price of \$4000. It didn't take much to know that her prices would go up again once the big exhibition opened and began its tour round the country. As I lay awake in the dark, temptation was a punishing demon.

Having spent years contemplating the fate of a generation of Australian artists who were in their prime between the wars, of course I knew that paintings gain value from the ways they are written about and reproduced, as well as from the ways they are exhibited – that is how they enter the culture. But until then I hadn't put this thought together with the prospect of personal gain. If I was wanting to increase Grace Cossington Smith's value, it wasn't in terms of her worth on the art market, but in terms of what her life and paintings meant, and still mean. The story I had to tell was of the immense value of a person working according to her own lights for sixty years, battling through long periods in which she felt herself eclipsed, or at least badly understood, first by conservative critics – 'deliberate frightfulness' was the verdict in 1918 – and later by the strident visibility of the young masculine modernists who shot into view after the Second World War, when Grace was in mid-life, and mid-career. Where once she had been chided for her radicalism, she became overlooked as old fashioned and domestic. It was a shift of sensibility and art practice that scuttled most of the other women of her generation.

Clarice Beckett was already dead. Living with a timid mother and an unsympathetic father, she had no studio at home. She'd caught a chill out painting one day in 1935 and it turned into pneumonia. Hers is a story of a talent that managed to express itself despite a life marked by frustration and grief. Grace Cossington Smith's story is one of quiet endurance, and of remaining true to a way of living and a way of seeing that was not always understood at the time, and never had much monetary value. That it is so highly valued now is ironic; she had no idea of the prices she'd so soon command.

Within three years of her death in 1984, a single painting would sell for more than the entire value of her estate (which was proved at \$129,850 in 1985). One of her last interiors, *Studio Door*, luminous in yellow, sold at auction for \$140,000 in 1987. Another interior went for \$160,000. When I discovered the disparity between the estate and these auction prices, and saw that some of the finest large paintings not in public galleries changed hands several times in as many years, I felt rage tinged with contempt.

I remembered all this that night after the auction, and the self-righteous position I came to was that not only did I not want to join the ranks of those riding on her back, but given my interest and all that I knew, it was unethical to try; at that moment it seemed as if the very act of buying would be to try. But the sorrow of not getting that painting stayed with me so strongly that I knew the dreary nobility of this position was disingenuous. I still wanted to own that painting; I wanted to live with it, and I would have sold a lot before I'd have sold it. Not because of its dollar value, or even because it's a beautiful painting, but because it would have been a talisman, a daily reminder of all I have come to understand from Grace, and yet can so easily drop back from.

As it is, I live with many painting I love, all of them acquired for small sums of money, slowly over the years. Until now the only artist from Grace Cossington Smith's generation that I've been able to afford, and therefore thought to buy is Sybil Craig, and then only her pastels. The rest are paintings by people I know; some were given to me, others collected over more than a decade from exhibitions and visits to their studios. I value them greatly. I like living alongside images made by people painting in the same environment in which I write. I like the interconnection of work and friendship and the art that comes from it. I like the traces of struggle and change and development.

And that's how it was with Grace Cossington Smith. There were always a few who understood her, and from early on there were serious buyers; not many, but enough. Enough to give her confidence, enough to let her feel the shape of the understanding of others press back on her. Many of the great paintings that we know her by – *The Sock Knitter* from way back in 1915, her famous images of the Harbour Bridge from the late 1920s and early 1930s, right through to the late interiors – were returned from exhibitions and languished in her studio until they were bought by the state galleries as the last of her six productive decades was coming to a close. But there were always smaller ones of the walls of the friends she lived and worked alongside. On her walls she had paintings by her contemporary Roland Wakelin and her dear friend Enid Cambridge.

She also had prints of paintings by Van Gogh and Gauguin. You can see their influence in her work; you can see them in some of the interiors, hanging on the walls; you can see what she learned from them. But she didn't have to own the originals. Why not? Because she understood them; because they lived inside her; because they became a part of her and the ways she saw the world. And because, like me, she didn't have the money.