Historical and Cultural Contexts, Techniques and Materials

- Born in late 19th century; practised art in early to mid-20th century
- Australian; female; educated in Adelaide, South Australia
- Was able to travel to Europe and live in Paris, a visual arts epicentre of early 20th century art

Born in Adelaide in 1879, Davidson was fortunate that as a woman in a male dominated art world she received privileges that enabled her to advance her cause to practise art. Her parents were middle class Scottish immigrants and she received a combination of public school and private education, which the family could afford. She also enjoyed a comfortable life in the semi-rural village of Prospect on the edge of Adelaide’s parklands.

Davidson may have gained the confidence to travel through the endeavours of the women’s suffrage movement which was led by South Australia in 1984. Suffrage was a movement for gender equality, allowing women to vote and encouraging women to pursue careers and travel independently.

At the turn of the 19th century, many Australian artists sought to study and live abroad, especially in Europe; men often settled in London whereas women tended to find Paris a more welcoming environment and a group of female Australian artists are renowned to have sought inspiration there. Women were able both to study in ateliers (studios) and exhibit their works in Paris. Most women returned to Australia after a few years but Bessie Davidson continued returning to Paris and made a contribution to the artistic environment by joining various associations for artists including the Femme Artists Moderne (Society of Modern Women Artists), becoming the group’s vice president from 1932-36.

Influences

Margaret Preston and German Secessionist art

Davidson studied with the renowned artist Margaret Preston (formerly known as Margaret Rose McPherson before her marriage) who was a huge influence on her artistically and as a supportive companion. Preston gained recognition as one of the most prominent female Modernist artists in Australia. Davidson was privileged enough to afford travel so the two of them left Adelaide for Europe together in 1904. They were encouraged to travel to Munich by Davidson’s father as he considered Parisian men to be immoral. Whilst in Munich, they viewed an exhibition by the German Secessionists and Preston took lessons at the Munich Government Art School for Women.

Secession is a term in art of the late 19th and early 20th century to refer to an art group that secedes from the official academic body of their respective country. In Europe, the first Secessionist body was formed in Munich and was then followed by the Vienna, Secession and the Berlin Secession. There were also Secession groups in France and Belgium. One of the best known artists from the Munich Secession is
Franz Stuck, who created Symbolist style artworks with dark and erotic themes such as The Sin (Die Sünde).

The influence of the aesthetics of the German Secessionist movement can be seen in Davidson’s early paintings The rag mender and French interior which mimic the German narrative style, low key tone and neutral colour palette seen in the work of artists such as Franz Stuck. Davidson’s subject matter, however was not quite as melancholy and erotic, preferring to depict genre scenes of working class people in humble interiors engaged in work.

Activity:

Look up The Sin (Die Sünde) by Franz Stuck. This is probably Stuck’s most famous painting. Compare this with Davidson’s The rag mender. How are the two paintings similar or different in aesthetics, subject matter or materials and techniques?

Then the two artists moved to Paris where Davidson excelled. They subsequently studied at the Académie de la Grande Chaumièrè in Montparnasse, where they were taught by artists Rene-Xavier Prinet and Lucien Simon, both of whom were to become important friends and mentors for Davidson.
Post-Impressionist artists Paul Gauguin and Paul Cezanne

Margaret Preston continued to be inspired by trailblazing Modernist artists such as Cezanne, Matisse, Kandinsky, Picasso and Paul Gauguin. She was particularly influenced by Gauguin, describing him as a ‘magnificent colourist’¹ and this influence was absorbed by Davidson. Similarly, the influence of Paul Cezanne is evident in Davidson’s distinctive style and can be seen in paintings such as Still life with fruits and a café and Lecture au jardin (Reading in the garden), both from the 1930s. In Lecture au jardin, Davidson demonstrates heavy and square shaped brushstrokes and a reduced analogous colour scheme to communicate the mood of coolness and contemplation within the uncomplex subject matter of the female figure reading. The influence of Gauguin’s saturated, vivid and flat colour can be seen in Davidson’s An Interior, 1920, and La robe jaune (The yellow dress) 1931. For Cezanne, Gauguin and Davidson, aesthetics and colour were more important than narrative.

*Lecture au jardin* (Reading in the garden) 1930s
Oil on plywood
94 x 114 cm
Max and Nola Tegel Collection, New South Wales

**Style, Aesthetic Qualities, Art Elements and Art Principles**

- **Style:** Post-Impressionism with distinctive use of colour and texture
- **Aesthetic qualities:** Peacefulness, contemplation
• Elements: colour – analogous, monochromatic, neutral; tone: high key, low key, gradation; shape: geometric, square; texture: rough, raised;
• Principles: asymmetrical balance created by visual weight of subject matter; focal points created by leading lines and tonal contrast; repetition of pattern; unity of colour, shape and texture

Throughout her career, Davidson’s styles developed from the German narrative or genre styles to Impressionism through to a more distinctive Post-Impressionist style.

Post Impressionism developed as a reaction to Impressionism with artists developing their own individual painting styles and with a greater focus on shape and aesthetics. Australian artists took up Post-Impressionism a little later than the European artists due to the time it took to travel, gain inspiration and then adapt the movement to their own style and subject matter. Davidson’s Lecture au jardin (Reading in the garden) is a perfect example of Post-Impressionism in its use of reduced, analogous colour palette, square brushstrokes and heavy impasto style painting.

Davidson’s early paintings such as The rag mender were characterised as having low key (dark) tone, warm colour palette and strong contrast of tone through her realistic depiction of figures in interiors. This assisted to create a sombre and at times melancholy aesthetic. This changed with her development of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist influences through to a more vibrant colour palette, often analogous, squared or elongated brush strokes and high key tone, as seen in paintings such as Lecture au jardin (Reading in the garden) and Purple flowers.

Davidson often used the principle of asymmetrical balance using diagonal leading lines to lead the viewer to the focal point which was often a subject of the painting in a lighter tone or warmer colour. This can be seen in many of her paintings including La robe jaune (The yellow dress) 1931 and Interieur (possibly a work titled Jour de soleil) 1925
La robe jaune (The yellow dress) 1931
oil on canvas
38 x 46 cm
Private collection, Sydney
Image courtesy S.H. Ervin Gallery.
Photo: Michael Bradfield, Roller Photography
Interieur (possibly a work titled Jour de soleil) 1925
oil on board
91.5 x 73 cm
Alexandra Club, Melbourne
Purple flowers 1930s
oil on card
42 x 58 cm
Collection of Rob and Jenny Ferguson
Image courtesy Bonhams
Materials and Techniques

- Oil painting on canvas and board
- Broken colour – painting two colours next to each other which merge into a new colour when viewed from a distance
- Fat over lean (building oil painting up in layers thinned with turpentine with the layers becoming progressively thicker
- Impasto (thickly applied paint
- Use of palette knife in later works
- Use of exposed board in later works

As Bessie Davidson worked in the early to mid-20th century oil painting was the main art form practised by Australian and European artists and she was heavily inspired by the Impressionist and Modernist oil painters of the time. Her early paintings such as *The rag mender* 1906 followed an academic style of oil painting on canvas starting with a stretched canvas, priming and building up layers of thinned oil paints in a ‘fat over lean’ style. As she progressed her technique, her style become more bold and distinctive with paint being applied in thick and squared brush strokes with a palette knife. In the 1930s, she started to develop a bolder use of paint which included sometimes leaving parts of the board unpainted, such as in *Interieur* (possibly a work titled *Jour de soleil*) 1925.

Travelling frequently, to countries such as Morocco, Davidson often painted en plein air (meaning outside in the open), often taking a small paints box. Sally Smart describes this as "very feminine, like a little cosmetics case".

Footnotes:


1 Harford, Sonia, Parisian legacy of a family pioneer, Sydney Morning Herald, 2013