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# Virginia Spate FAHA

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1937–2022

When it was time to launch Virginia Spate's great book *The Colour of Time: Claude Monet* (1992), it was the former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam who spoke, at the recently-opened Museum of Contemporary Art at Circular Quay. The MCA was the product of a decade of her tireless advocacy, just as the book crowned twelve years of research. Scholar and teacher, public figure, environmentalist and art lover, Virginia Spate represented the pinnacle of late 20<sup>th</sup> century academe.

In 1978 she had been appointed just the fourth female professor in the University of Sydney's history. As Power Professor of Fine Arts, she succeeded the Australian scholar and critic Bernard Smith, who had founded the teaching department and Power Collection of Contemporary Art with the munificent bequest of a million pounds left to the University by the painter Dr. John Wardell Power. As head of the Power programme for 25 years, Spate doubled the size of the department and in the 1980s moved it in new directions through strategic appointments, establishing Film studies, Design studies, and French theory and criticism as an intellectual base. In the 90s she supported the study and teaching of Indigenous art and Asian art. She was an enabler of gifted young academics, be they British, Australian, South Asian or American, and was loved and admired by two generations of the art professionals she helped to form. Her mesmerizing lectures on French art, Australian art and other topics enriched countless student lives.

Virginia was born in Reading, England, and was raised in an academic milieu, albeit in difficult circumstances. Her father Oskar Hermann Christian Spate was a brilliant young Cambridge historical geographer who was active in late colonial Burma and India. His wife Daphne, a teacher, began raising Virginia in Rangoon, moving to Melbourne for safety when WW2 broke out while Oskar, injured in an air raid, was sent to New Delhi. Late in the war the family was reunited in England and Virginia's brothers Andrew and Alastair

born. The Spate family emigrated to Australia in 1951 when her father was appointed foundation chair in Geography at the new Australian National University (where Oskar was based for the rest of his life). Virginia initially studied at Preshil during the war (the famous Melbourne progressive school, where her mother Daphne taught) and then Canberra High School next to the ANU campus – Canberra High was a poor second to the King Alfred School in London.

Spate's love of visual art flourished when she entered Australia's only art history programme, established by the Londoner Joseph Burke as Herald Professor at the University of Melbourne in 1946. Starting her BA in 1956, Virginia's view of art was deepened by two Jewish art historians who had fled the Nazis: 'Dunera Boy' Franz Philipp from Vienna, and Dr. Ursula Hoff from Hamburg. Spate began historical research on the Heidelberg School artist Tom Roberts under Bernard Smith. She graduated with Honours in History and Fine Arts in August 1961, and a year later with a Master of Arts awarded for a 300-page thesis on Tom Roberts. At the same time, she showed her commitment to contemporary art with her first publication, a short book on the young Sydney abstractionist John Olsen (in a series of Australian Art Monographs edited by Smith).

Spate proved to be an outstanding scholar in that each of her research theses became foundational texts in their fields. Her master's thesis on Tom Roberts was famously incommunicado at the Baillieu Library while she prepared the eventual book. A decade in coming, her *Tom Roberts* (Lansdowne Press, Melbourne, 1972 rev. 1978) set a new standard for eloquence before the visual object. Although Bernard Smith was the model for historical erudition, he did not share Spate's rare capacity to bring a painting alive when analysing it. *Tom Roberts* was the most accomplished art history monograph yet devoted to an Australian artist.

The Australian phase of Spate's research career ended with her passage to Cambridge University in the mid 1960s, where she taught and studied, taking a second MA. In 1967 she enrolled for a PhD at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, in a small but distinguished Art History department led by the British scholar of the Italian Renaissance, Charles Mitchell (a friend of Bernard Smith). Spate began work on the art of the French avant-garde prior to WWI, which took her to Paris. There she completed her doctoral dissertation *Orphism, pure painting, simultaneity: the development of non-figurative painting in Paris 1908-1914*, in 1970.

This made Spate only the second Australian after Bernard Smith to achieve a doctorate in Art History (a degree not yet offered in Australia). She was a writer of books more than articles, and it took a decade to convert the PhD into a major volume, published at Oxford's Clarendon Press in 1979. In the meantime, Spate curated two adventurous exhibitions at Cambridge's Kettle's Yard: *Time and Space died Yesterday. Simultaneity. Paris. World, 1910. 1914.* (1976) and the related *L'Esprit nouveau: art, architecture, music, sport, film, theatre, dance, modern life* (1978). Her 400-page book *Orphism* was with the

publishers by the time Spate – institutionally quite junior but already of immense reputation – was appointed to the Power Chair.

Spate arrived in Sydney as an expert in a key period of Australian art, and French and international high modernism. At just 42 years of age, she inherited a department known for the fractious brilliance of its leading figures, in a Faculty of Arts where the Department of Philosophy had split in two in 1973 on ideological lines, neo-Marxist and traditionalist. She herself was a quietly intense, almost austere figure, left-leaning and increasingly devoted to environmental issues. Discreet about her personal life and living alone, at the end of her career Virginia revealed a significant relationship with the Italian-born designer and creative artist Germano Facetti, who had revolutionized Penguin Books covers in the London of the 1960s and 70s. Their correspondence stretched over several decades.

Spate's environmental activism took two forms: the first was to help defend the pristine Franklin River, which the Tasmanian Hydro-Electric Commission was proposing to dam. After the failed campaign to save Lake Pedder, the effort to save the Franklin became national front-page news and led to the founding of the Greens Party. As a public figure, Spate went to Tasmania, took to the inflatables on the Franklin, and was one of hundreds arrested by police in early 1983. She spent a few days in Risdon Prison near Hobart. The second cause was a long-running, community-based campaign to protect the architectural and social values of the Pyrmont peninsula in central Sydney. Spate had bought a terrace house in Pyrmont's Mount Street in 1981, renovated it, and lived there until 2013. She was a highly-valued member of Pyrmont residents' action groups, and was named Minister for the Arts, Culture, Education and Media in the 'Republic of Pyrmont', which seceded from NSW for a day on 23 August 1992!

Spate's research consolidated around French art. She worked with a distinguished French team to co-curate for the Art Gallery of NSW the exhibition *French Art: The Revolutionary Decades, 1760-1830* (1980). Based on loans negotiated with the Louvre and other French national museums, the exhibition set a new standard for scholarly gallery displays in Australia. Spate provided a long but vivid introductory essay for an Australian public unfamiliar with this era of French art, and with Robyn Cooper compiled an extensive education package. She was elected to the Australian Academy of the Humanities the next year.

Already in her Tom Roberts book Spate had given evidence of a special kind of art-historical writing. It depended upon extensive cultural and historical knowledge (she was a trained historian), and a singular gift for engaging with and illuminating works of art. As her long-time Sydney colleague Terry Smith has written: "*Virginia had the best 'eye' of any art historian I have known. To stand next to her looking at a picture—to talk through its genesis, to decipher its intentionality—was an unmatched delight. Purposeful*

*searching of this kind is at the core of our profession, and few could do it with such subtlety, precision, and care”.*

This gift is transferred in the writing of her *Colour of Time* in particular. Although her younger colleagues of the 1980s were exponents of Marxist theory and postmodern philosophy, her own methodology can be described as a more classic art history. She combined great scholarly rigour – respect for the detail – with a unique skill in mixing historical and biographical data in a fluid and powerful prose appreciation of the art object. This is partly why her work has stood the test of time – chapters of her *Colour of Time* and her *Monet and Japan* are still taught today, while her self-annotated 1961 thesis on Tom Roberts remains a treasure-trove for those preparing the Roberts catalogue raisonné.

If Spate herself was not a practitioner of the “new art history”, she did a great deal to encourage its propagation in the Power department. She appointed American film theorist Alan Cholodenko in 1979, followed by the fashion theorist Michael Carter and design theorist Tony Fry (both from the pioneering Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham). From the 1980s she, Cholodenko, Terry Smith and later Julian Pefanis converted Power Publications from an occasional series to the engine-room of Australian post-modern studies. Power specialized in the translation and interpretation of French philosophical authors, from Jean Baudrillard and Roland Barthes to Antonin Artaud and Jean-Francois Lyotard.

Spate was a feminist who led by example; she appointed and supported such female colleagues as Joan Kerr, Julie Ewington, Jos Hackforth-Jones, Catriona Moore, Laleen Jayamanne and Louise Marshall – as well as the feminist artists and writers around the Tin Sheds Workshop. She was a regular and formidable contributor to debates in the Faculty of Arts at Sydney University, and had the ear of successive Deans and Vice-Chancellors. Spate’s persuasive gifts and wry sense of humour served her well on the University Senate and the council of the Australian National Gallery in Canberra.

In the outreach aspect of the Power chair, Spate was especially effective. She beefed up public education by making the occasional Power Lectures into a regular programme. On the retirement of Elwyn Lynn in 1983 she appointed two influential curators to the Power Collection (at the time Australia’s best-funded collection of contemporary art). Bernice Murphy and Leon Paroissien, a husband-and-wife team, under Spate’s direction broadened the Power remit to begin collecting Australian and not just international contemporary art. They were among the first to begin acquiring Indigenous art for a major collection, largely through community commissions managed by Djon Mundine at Ramingining. Realising the importance of Aboriginal art, Spate co-funded the series *Talking About Aboriginal Art* (VCR recordings, 1991).

From the early 1980s Spate worked with the Sydney University hierarchy and the Wran Government of NSW to find a suitable home for the Power Collection. It was Spate who brokered the deal by which the State Government allocated the old Maritime Services

Board building at Circular Quay to the University at a peppercorn rent, to be converted into a major new art gallery after the MSB vacated in 1987. Power Bequest funds were used for the renovation (a controversial move that in the end proved a drain on Power resources). The new Museum of Contemporary Art, opened in 1989, was later to become “one of the most successful of its kind anywhere” (T. Smith).

Spate’s years of research into the life of Claude Monet resulted in her magnum opus *The Colour of Time: Claude Monet* (Thames & Hudson, London, 1992). The book began life in 1978 as a commission for a modest 40,000 words from Thames & Hudson’s Nikos Stangos. Although her weighty administrative load and her teaching left scant time to write, Spate’s account of the artist ballooned to 350 closely-printed pages. The book is one of the best monographs written on an artist of any period, was awarded the prestigious Mitchell Prize (of which Spate is the only Australian recipient), and remained in print for many years. As David Bromfield wrote, “The passages which discuss the late waterlilies, especially the great oval decorations installed in the Orangerie on Monet’s death, are breathtaking . . . *The Colour of Time* is a great book, not because of its enviably immaculate scholarship, but because it offers a passionately convincing account of the creation of Monet’s art” (Art & Australia, 1992).

After retiring in 2004 Virginia purchased a pied-à-terre in Paris, near the Centre Pompidou, where she spent long periods until declining health brought her back to Pymont. While in France she worked on two ambitious projects that unfortunately remained incomplete at the time of her death. They had begun life as the lectures presented as Slade Professor of Fine Art at Cambridge in 1998-99. The first was on the image of landscape in French painting; the second, about which she was most passionate, was on Paul Cézanne’s great series of Bathers.

Among many honours, Professor Spate was awarded a Centenary Medal in 2001 for service to Australian society and the humanities in the study of art history. She was honoured with a *Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres* in 2003, and a Companion of the Order of Australia (AC) in 2018 for “eminent service to higher education, particularly to art history and theory and to the advanced study of the contemporary arts, as an academic, author and curator, and as a role model for young art historians”. In her last years Professor Spate gifted her library to the Schaeffer (formerly Power) Library at the University of Sydney, while the Papers of Virginia Spate comprise 25 catalogued archive boxes at the National Library of Australia.

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