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I am an aspiring art curator with a diverse background in law and psychology. I am currently serving as Museum Manager at the Museum of Play and Art, while pursuing a Master of Art Curatorship. My main area of interest is Australian art, particularly contemporary First Nations art.

Transcending Boundaries: Proctor and Sonrel's Shared Sensibility to Nature

At the turn of the twentieth century, Australia and France could not have been more different. While Australia was grappling with its colonial past and struggling to establish a national identity, France was in the midst of La Belle Époque – a period of optimism, prosperity, and innovation.¹ Despite these geographical and cultural differences, the artistic output of Thea Proctor in Australia and Élisabeth Sonrel in France bore remarkable similarities. Both Proctor and Sonrel demonstrate a deep sensibility to nature in their artworks, thereby reflecting key elements of Art Nouveau.

At first glance, Proctor and Sonrel appear to have little in common: Sonrel created mystical and Renaissance-inspired paintings using traditional techniques, while Proctor produced vibrant, modernist artworks influenced by Japanese printmaking, post-impressionism, cubism and fauvism. Despite these stylistic differences, both artists rely heavily on botanical motifs. Proctor frequently includes vases of flowers, floral-patterned furniture, and floral clothing in her compositions (see fig.1). Meanwhile, Sonrel paints flowers and vines around the edges of her artworks, and depicts her subjects holding bouquets and wearing flower crowns (see fig.2). Both artists also utilise sinuous, curved lines, creating a sense of dynamism and fluidity that reflects the organic shapes and rhythms found in nature. These botanical motifs and flowing lines not only evoke the inherent beauty of the natural world, but also serve as hallmarks of Art Nouveau.

Proctor and Sonrel further demonstrate their sensibility to nature by depicting beautiful women as central figures in their artworks. Women have long been associated with various aspects of nature, including fertility, strength and vitality.² The female figures in Proctor and Sonrel's artworks typically have elongated limbs, exaggerated curves,

¹ Cameron Gordon, "Chapter 10: La Belle Époque", in *Many Possible Worlds: An Interdisciplinary History of the World Economy Since 1800* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023): 261.

² Aloka Patel, "Representation of Women and Nature in English Literary Texts", *Contemporary Literary Review India* 8, No. 1 (February 2021): 1+, <https://literaryjournal.in/index.php/clri/article/view/540/867>.

flowing hair, and delicate facial features. They exude femininity, elegance and grace, thereby capturing the idealised beauty characteristic of both nature and Art Nouveau.³

In conclusion, despite their contrasting styles, Proctor and Sonrel shared a profound connection with nature, which they demonstrated through their masterful use of botanical motifs, undulating lines, and depictions of women. While the Art Nouveau movement is traditionally associated with France, Proctor's artworks suggest that the style also had a significant impact on Australia. As art writer D.J. Finley explains, "Art is an organic thing. It breeds and spreads, and it is as catching as a plague."⁴ Overall, these two inspiring artists remind us that art and nature are universal languages capable of transcending geographical and cultural boundaries.

Word count (excluding footnotes): 402

³ "Exhibition: Women in Art Nouveau", Europeana (website operated by the European Union's Connecting Europe Facility), accessed April 28, 2024, [https://www.europeana.eu/en/exhibitions/art-nouveau-a-universal-style/women-in-art-nouveau#:~:text=During%20the%20same%20period,%20\(predominantly,jewellery,%20paintings%20and%20printed%20works.](https://www.europeana.eu/en/exhibitions/art-nouveau-a-universal-style/women-in-art-nouveau#:~:text=During%20the%20same%20period,%20(predominantly,jewellery,%20paintings%20and%20printed%20works.)

⁴ D. J. Finley, "Art in Australia: Looking Both Ways", *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 105, no. 5006 (June 1957): 615, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41368598>.



Fig. 1. Thea Proctor, *Two women*, c. 1926.



Fig. 2. Elisabeth Sonrel, *Fleurs de Serre*, *Fleur des Champs*, *Fleurs de Montagne*, *Fleurs des Eaux* (collectively called *Les Fleurs*), c. 1903.

References

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Images

- Fig. 1. Proctor, Thea. *Two women*. c. 1926. Pencil and watercolour on ivory wove paper on board, 30.6 x 28.8 cm. Art Gallery of NSW.
<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/221.1975/>.
- Fig. 2. Sonrel, Élisabeth. *Fleurs de serre, Fleur des champs, Fleurs de montagne, and Fleurs des eaux*. c. 1903. Lithographs in colour, 58 x 27 cm each. MutualArt.
<https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Fleurs-de-serre--Fleur-des-champs--Fleur/AE4C1D818AC3F2111FF333C00E2B480C>.