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

At the turn of the twentieth century, Australia and France were both undergoing profound periods of transformation. Australia was grappling with its colonial past and struggling to establish a national identity, while France was in the midst of *La Belle Époque* – a complex period marked by both optimism and hidden tensions. Despite these differing contexts, Australian artist Thea Proctor (1879–1966) and French artist Élisabeth Sonrel (1874–1953) both demonstrated a deep sensibility to nature in their artworks, thereby reflecting key elements of Art Nouveau – a movement that emerged in Europe in the 1890s and was defined by organic forms, intricate patterns, and the integration of art into everyday life.

Both Proctor and Sonrel sought to break from the historicism that dominated much of the art world in the late nineteenth century. Sonrel employed traditional academic techniques in innovative ways to create mystical, Renaissance-inspired artworks filled with allegory and poetry, while Proctor produced vibrant, modernist artworks inspired by Japanese printmaking, Post-Impressionism, Cubism and Fauvism. A key similarity between their works is the frequent use of botanical motifs. Proctor often includes vases of flowers, floral patterned furniture, and floral clothing in her compositions, while Sonrel paints flowers and vines around the edges of her artworks, and adorns her subjects with flower crowns and bouquets. 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 attributes ascribed to nature, including fertility, strength and vitality. The female figures in Proctor and Sonrel's artworks typically have elongated limbs, exaggerated curves, flowing hair, and delicate facial features. They exude femininity, elegance and grace, thereby capturing the idealised beauty characteristic of both nature and Art Nouveau.

Though separated by continents and cultures, Proctor and Sonrel both sought to create new forms of art that reflected the broader cultural shifts occurring in their respective countries. While their techniques differed considerably, they both demonstrated a profound sensibility to nature and captured core elements of Art Nouveau. Ultimately, their artworks illustrate not only their individual responses to the cultural and artistic currents of their time, but also the enduring power of nature as a unifying force in art.