

MICHAEL REID

SYDNEY

BERLIN

BEYOND

Margret Preston: A Collection of Important Prints

From the time of her first exhibition in 1925 Margaret Preston established herself as the most important artist printmaker working in Australia. The exhibition received critical and popular acclaim. It was described in the press as ‘a riot of colour’ and sold exceptionally well. The most desirable works were those dealing with Australian flora; Preston hand-coloured them in gouache which enabled her to exploit the effects of vibrant, saturated colours. Her work quickly became iconic, being illustrated in journals like *Art in Australia* and *The Home* and being acquired by public galleries. The exhibition also marked the beginning of Preston’s commitment to the development of a national Australian art.

This important group of eight prints span the most productive years of Preston’s involvement with woodblock printmaking - ranging from her 1925 exhibition until 1939.

In *Native flowers* (1925), an arrangement of flannel flowers, Sturt desert peas and Christmas bells in a blue bowl, the flowers have a jewel-like quality, appearing vibrant against the solid black background. This was one of the best-known prints from the 1925 exhibition following its reproduction on the cover of *Art in Australia* in December of that year.

Throughout the twenties Preston continued to experiment with still lifes of native flowers, the compositions becoming bolder and more commanding. She also produced landscapes of the Sydney foreshore. When Preston settled in Sydney in 1920, she lived in the harbourside suburb of Mosman and went on to produce several prints which show her affection for this picturesque location. *Mosman Bridge* (1927), one such view, was selected by the artist to accompany her monograph *Margaret Preston: Recent paintings 1929*. All impressions of this print are slightly different. Preston was not interested in printing in colour, but hand coloured each print, the distribution of colour often varying, imparting each with its own vitality.

By the end of the decade Preston’s still life prints had become highly abstracted. *Gum blossoms* (1928) is one of the outstanding prints of this period, the artist carefully designing a floral arrangement with a pre-determined pictorial composition in mind. The subtly coloured round gum flowers and triangular leaves push out to the edges of the image, constrained by the rigid black lines that define the composition.

In the early 1930s Preston moved to live in Berowra, a rural area surrounded by dense native bush. She was aged in her early sixties and was recovering from surgery. Prints produced by Preston after this time are all rare. Whereas in the early 1920s her editions usually numbered 50 or 25, later editions are small, numbering only two or three, and in many cases impressions are unique. This is the case with *Old Banksia Tree* (1939), one of Preston’s most important prints from her Berowra years. The tree was located at the bottom of her property, gnarled by age but still productive; Preston obviously identified with it (there is a photograph of her standing next to it).

In this impression, the woodcut is not hand-coloured, but the artist has introduced background tone that emphasises the isolation and vulnerability of the tree. Produced on the cusp of the Second World War it marked the end to Preston’s Berowra phase of her career.

Roger Butler AM

Emeritus Curator, Australian Prints and Drawings

National Gallery of Australia



MARGARET PRESTON (1875-1963)

Gum Blossoms, 1928

woodcut, hand coloured

numbered 31st proof; titled and signed in pencil in lower margin

27.6 × 26.4 cm (10.9 × 10.4 in)

framed

EXHIBITED

Christmas Exhibition of Batik and Woodcuts, Grosvenor Galleries, Sydney, Dec 1928 (another example, as *Gum Blossoms*);
Exhibition by Leading Members of the Australian Society of Artists, Fine Arts Salon, Wellington (NZ), 4 Jul - 2 Aug 1930,
cat. 13 (another example);

Margaret Preston: The Art of Constant Rearrangement, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 27 Dec 1985 - 9 Feb 1986
(another example).

LITERATURE

Butler, R., *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 1987, cat. 124.

Among Preston's most iconic images, *Gum Blossoms* is a benchmark of her practice. Its bold design and strong native motif have made it perennially popular with collectors. The work's strong auction record — including a peak of A\$73,000 in 2024 — confirms its standing as one of the most desirable of all Preston woodcuts. While not rare, demand consistently outstrips supply.



The Bowl [Native Flowers], c.1935

woodcut, hand coloured

initialled "M.P." in block lower left; titled and signed in pencil in lower margin

18.8 × 25.2 cm (7.4 × 9.9 in)

framed

LITERATURE

Butler, R., *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 1987, cat. 193 (as Native flowers 1933–c.1935; hand-coloured woodcut);

National Gallery of Australia, *Australian Prints + Printmaking* database, record for *The Bowl* (inscriptions and collection details).

A scarce design that has not appeared at auction in at least 35 years, *The Bowl* reflects Preston's mid-career refinement of her floral motifs. The restrained design, balanced within a shallow still-life arrangement, is less commonly encountered than her more celebrated flower subjects, enhancing its collectability for those seeking breadth in a Preston collection.



Cinerarias, c.1927

woodcut, hand coloured

initialled "M.P." in block lower right; numbered 10th proof; titled and signed in pencil in lower margin

23.6 × 22.8 cm (9.3 × 9 in)

framed

LITERATURE

Butler, R., *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*. Canberra: Australian National Gallery/Oxford University Press, 1987, cat. 119, p. 131 (illus., another impression).

A highly decorative subject, *Cinerarias* is one of Preston's less frequently seen floral woodcuts. With only one recorded auction appearance in the past three decades, impressions are tightly held in both private and public collections. Its rarity is matched by its sophisticated use of layered colour, making it especially sought after by advanced Preston collectors.



The Banksia Tree [Old Banksia Tree], c.1939

woodcut

initialled "MP." in block lower left; titled and signed in pencil in lower margin

24.8 x 24.8 cm (9.8 x 9.8 in)

framed

LITERATURE

Butler, R., *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 1987, cat. 221 (as *The Banksia Tree / Old Banksia Tree*); National Gallery of Australia collection record (object entry for *The Banksia Tree*).

One of Preston's late woodcuts, rarely seen outside institutional holdings. No copy has surfaced at auction in 35 years, while the National Gallery of Australia holds a distinctive blue-tinted version, adding weight to its scholarly significance. Its rarity, combined with the enduring appeal of the banksia motif, makes it one of the most desirable of Preston's late-period prints.



Mosman Bridge, c.1927
woodcut, hand coloured
signed in pencil in lower margin
25.2 x 18.8 cm (9.9 x 7.4 in)
framed

EXHIBITED

Margaret Preston in Mosman, Mosman Art Gallery, Sydney, 7 Sep - 13 Oct 2002 (another impression, illus. in cat.);
Margaret Preston, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 29 Jul - 23 Oct 2005 and touring (another impression);
Sydney Moderns: Art for a New World, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 6 Jul - 7 Oct 2013 (another impression).

LITERATURE

Draffin, N., *Australian Woodcuts and Linocuts of the 1920s and 1930s*. Melbourne: Sun Books, 1976, p. 35;
Deutscher, C., & Butler, R., *A Survey of Australian Relief Prints 1900-1950*. Melbourne: Deutscher Galleries, 1978, cat. 28, p. 21;
Butler, R., *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 1987, cat. 113, p. 127;
Edwards, D., Peel, R., & Mimmocchi, D., *Margaret Preston*. Sydney: AGNSW, 2005, pp. 82, 286;
Edwards, D., & Mimmocchi, D. (eds.), *Sydney Moderns: Art for a New World*. Sydney: AGNSW, 2013, pp. 162, 315.

This work captures Preston's modernist eye applied to the harbour suburb where she lived in the 1920s. Examples are held in major institutions and have featured prominently in landmark exhibitions, underscoring the importance of this print in her oeuvre. Auction appearances are relatively infrequent, with demand supported by the subject's resonance for Sydney



Native Flowers, 1925

woodcut, hand coloured

initialled "MP." in block lower left; numbered 20th proof; titled and signed in pencil in lower margin

12.7 x 12.7 cm (5 x 5 in)

framed

EXHIBITIONS

Exhibition of woodcuts by Margaret Preston, Dunster Galleries, Adelaide, September 1926, cat. no. 10 (another impression).

LITERATURE

Butler, Roger. *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*. Canberra: Australian National Gallery/Oxford University Press, 1987, cat. 89.

A composition of striking balance and colour, *Native Flowers* exemplifies Preston's early maturity in the woodcut medium. Its auction history underlines its rarity; only two appearances since 1987. Collectors value its compact scale and finely judged hand-colouring, which typify Preston's efforts to elevate Australian native flora into modern design.



Nambucca, c.1928

woodcut, hand coloured

numbered 4th proof; titled and signed in pencil in lower margin

10.2 x 10 cm (4 x 3.9 in)

framed

LITERATURE

Art Gallery of New South Wales collection record (medium, size and proof status for another impression).

An exceptionally rare and intimate composition, with only one recorded auction appearance in the past 30 years. Number 3 of the edition is held in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, affirming its institutional recognition. Its small scale and delicacy distinguish it from Preston's larger floral woodcuts, appealing to connoisseurs of her more elusive works.



Australian Flowers, 1927

woodcut, hand coloured

initialled "MP." in block lower left; from an edition of 32; titled and signed in pencil in lower margin

10.9 × 11 cm (4.3 × 4.3 in)

framed

EXHIBITIONS

A Survey of Australian Relief Prints 1900-1950, Deutscher Galleries, Melbourne, 13 Apr - 5 May 1978, cat. 29 (another impression).

LITERATURE

Art in Australia, "Margaret Preston Number," No. 22, December 1927 (deluxe edition with the woodcut tipped-in);

Butler, R., *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 1987, cat. 120, p. 131; Butler, R., 2005, p. 141, cat. 120 (illus., another impression).

Published in *Art in Australia* in 1927, this woodcut reached a wider audience than most of Preston's relief prints. Despite an edition of 32, detached impressions rarely appear at auction — only around seven in the past 20 years. Its publication history adds to its desirability, representing Preston at her most conscious of printmaking as a vehicle for national identity.

\$250,000 for the collection

Selected Collections that hold works by Margaret Preston

Art Gallery of New South Wales (Sydney)

Art Gallery of South Australia (Adelaide)

Art Gallery of Western Australia (Perth)

Geelong Gallery (Geelong)

Holmes à Court Collection (private, WA)

Joseph Brown Collection (private, gifted to NGV, Melbourne)

National Gallery of Australia (Canberra)

National Gallery of Victoria (Melbourne)

Newcastle Art Gallery (Newcastle)

New England Regional Art Museum — Howard Hinton Collection (Armidale)

Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (Brisbane)

University of Western Australia — Cruthers Collection of Women's Art (Perth)

Provenance

Collection formed from the early 1990s; all woodcuts acquired from Josef Lebovic, Sydney.

Private collection, Sydney.

MICHAEL REID

SYDNEY

BERLIN

BEYOND

109 Shepherd Street
Chippendale NSW 2008
+61 (02) 8353 3500
tobymeagher@michaelreid.com.au

Monday - Friday 11am - 5pm
Saturday 11am - 3pm

Michael Reid Sydney + Berlin acknowledge the Gadigal people as the traditional owners of the land on which our Eora / Sydney gallery stands. We pay our respects to Indigenous Elders past, present & emerging.