



DEMOCRATIC ARTS

Lenore Coltheart reveals the contribution made by interior designer Ruth Lane-Poole to the national capital

What significance might a sideboard, a tea service, a hall table, a grandfather clock and two blanket boxes have to the story of Australian democracy? Domestic life and interior design don't really seem to have much to do with government, but as Canberra approaches the centenary of its foundation in 1913, we might consider how the design and creation of the capital reveal the aspirations for a new nation. Two new online features highlighting items in the collections of the National Library of Australia and the National Archives together provide a useful guide. Both relate to the work of Ruth Lane-Poole, the remarkable but now unrecognised

designer of the original interiors of the official Canberra residences for the prime minister and governor-general.

As shown in more than 100 working drawings she produced of her designs for the furniture, and her photographs of some of the completed work, her interior design style was as distinctive as the 'Federal Capital' architectural style identified with Canberra's early public buildings. These working records, in the collection of the National Library, are available online to tell their extraordinary story.

Ruth Lane-Poole was born in Limerick in 1885, one of the 11 children of Henrietta and Frederick Pollexfen, who separated when she was 15. She was then made a ward of her cousin, Lily Yeats, sister of celebrated Irish poet and playwright William Butler Yeats, painter Jack Yeats, and Elizabeth Yeats. The Yeatses then lived in London, where the two Yeats sisters had trained in the workshops of William Morris—Elizabeth as a printer at

Ruth Lane-Poole (1885–1974)
Prime Minister's Lodge, Interior
Staircase and Hall, Canberra, 1927
b&w photograph; 20.8 x 15.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3119722



above:
Ruth Lane-Poole with her first daughter, Charlotte 1913
Courtesy Phyllis Hamilton

below left:
Ruth Lane-Poole (1885–1974)
Design for an Arm Chair:
Sketch No. 58 1926
pen drawing on brown paper;
23.6 x 17.7 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3119841

below right:
Ruth Lane-Poole (1885–1974)
Chair with Fabric Upholstery,
Government House, Canberra,
1927
b&tw photograph;
18.7 x 13.9 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3119877

the Kelmscott Press, while Morris's daughter May had trained Lily as an embroiderer. Among the works which Lily Yeats produced with May Morris were hangings for the four-poster bed at William and Jane Morris's home, Kelmscott Manor. In 1902, the Yeats sisters became partners in the Dun Emer Press in Dublin and Ruth worked with them there until they set up their own Cuala Industries. Both these enterprises followed the principles of the William Morris workshops, and the design tradition known as the Arts and Crafts Movement, training young women in crafts such as bookbinding, weaving, embroidery and printing to enable them to earn a living. As well as teaching at Cuala, Ruth designed interiors for wealthier Dublin homes—until 1911, when she married Charles Lane-Poole. Her cousin, William Butler Yeats, took the role of her estranged father at the Dublin wedding.

On the Lane-Poole's arrival in Melbourne in 1925 (with their small daughters Charlotte, Mary and Phyllis), Charles settled into his new post as Commonwealth Forester while Ruth established a home for them in a flat in Punt Road, South Yarra. The flat had been designed by their architect neighbour, Harold Desbrowe Annear, a founding member of Victoria's Arts and Crafts Society. A follower of John Ruskin and William Morris, Annear taught at the Working Men's College and had published a manifesto for an Australian domestic architecture (titled *For Every Man His Home*). Ruth's credentials and connections made her a firm friend of Desbrowe Annear, and she was embraced by

the Arts and Crafts Society, making a widely acclaimed debut at the Society's exhibition in Melbourne Town Hall in September 1925 by creating an entire room of furniture and fittings crafted in Australian timbers and soft furnishings featuring Australian wool. In the same month, her first article on interior decoration appeared in *Australian Home Builder* (soon renamed *Australian Home Beautiful*).

Ruth Lane-Poole wrote regularly on interior design for magazines and newspapers in a heyday for Australian home building and decorating, partly driven by the hundreds of houses being built to create a brand new national capital at Canberra. Anticipated since 1901, the city was at last taking shape, though as a construction site it was viewed with some dismay by families being transferred there with the public service and parliament from Melbourne. The nation's first families were of course moving too. The former Yarralumla homestead of pastoralist Frederick Campbell was being extended to become the official residence for Governor-General Lord Stonehaven and Lady Stonehaven. Prime Minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce and Ethel Bruce would occupy a new and smaller building, The Lodge, reflecting the 'Ideal Home' style of the 1920s and designed by architects Oakley and Parkes. Construction of both residences was underway when Federal Capital Commission officials approached Ruth Lane-Poole on the matter of their interior design. In March 1926 she was appointed 'Furniture Specialist', responsible





for furnishing both residences, as well as the house for the governor-general's aide-de-camp in the grounds of Yarralumla. Her work at Government House was to include furnishing a suite of rooms specifically for the Duke and Duchess of York (later King George VI and Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother) during their brief Royal visit for the opening of Parliament House in Canberra on 9 May 1927.

While the design instructions were simple—the interior decoration of both houses, including designing the furniture—the reality was more complex. The Lodge was then barely more than foundations, and Ruth worked from the plans to develop the design brief she submitted in July 1926. She considered that the working areas and accommodation for domestic staff were inadequate, and with Ethel Bruce's backing managed to have the kitchen, scullery, cook's pantry and cold storage area increased in size. As well, she ensured the quarters for the housekeeper and maids were extended, ordering 'pretty floral chintz curtains, and bedspreads to match', as well as good quality floor coverings and pictures for the walls.

Tasks multiplied as work progressed, and Ruth Lane-Poole was responsible for everything from wall panelling to tableware, and even minutiae like light switches and bell-pulls. Cabinet specified Australian materials for the furnishings and fittings, and all goods were to be 'best British' manufacture, exemplifying the Government's Empire trade policy. Ruth was required to select and supervise the work of craftsmen

and suppliers and to consult both Ethel Bruce and Lady Stonehaven regularly. Without doubt her dealings with the federal bureaucracy (including ongoing criticism of expenditure from the Labor Opposition) provided the most frustration in this once-in-a-lifetime commission. To fulfil it, she had a very long shopping list. She placed large orders such as imported carpets through Myers in Melbourne, while other items (like two custom-designed dinner services with prime ministerial and vice-regal insignia) were ordered direct from London. Also ordered from England were silverware, glassware, and tea sets—with regret she was obliged to turn away from such fine items as Lalique glassware and a dessert set also of 'foreign' origin. Ruth's cousin Lily Yeats assisted as her unofficial London agent, selecting Morris and Company fabrics and wallpapers. Everything—the curtain materials, household linen, even porcelain soap dishes for the bathrooms—was of British manufacture, the only exceptions seeming to be some of the paintings (dutifully noted as 'foreign' on the delivery forms) and three items Ruth commissioned from Lily Yeats at Cuala Industries in Dublin. The latter, for Government House, were an embroidered fire screen and two embroidered silk bedspreads, specially made for the bedrooms occupied briefly by the Duke and Duchess of York in May 1927.

Although both Government House and The Lodge were (like the original Parliament House) intended as temporary, they remain the official residences 80 years later.

above left:
Ruth Lane-Poole (1885–1974)
Government House and Front
Gardens, View from Left Side,
Canberra, 1927
b&w photograph; 16.7 x 21.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3312585

above right:
Ruth Lane-Poole (1885–1974)
Silverware on Four Shelves,
Government House, Canberra,
1927
b&w photograph; 15.7 x 20.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3313880

Government House was intended for both constitutional and domestic functions, while The Lodge was ostensibly a private residence. In the new magazines of the 1920s, the *Australian Women's Weekly* and the *Australian Home Beautiful*, The Lodge was celebrated as a prime example of the 'Ideal Home' movement, but Ruth Lane-Poole recognised that it too would serve an official function, and in both of the buildings she attempted to define the blurred lines between the political and personal lives of the resident 'first couples'. Simplicity was the key: 'In order to obtain a simple, impressive and cultured effect and yet allow the room to accommodate as many people as possible, it is necessary to have little furniture, and continuous colouring.'

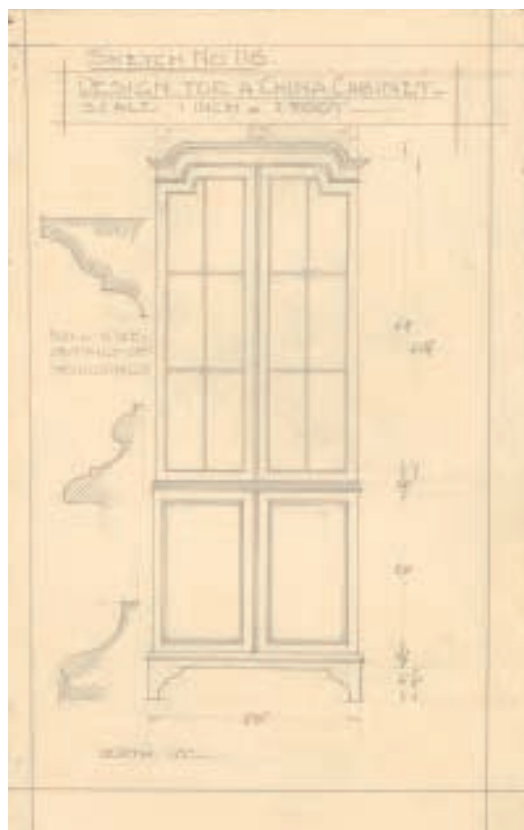
Employing more formal design elements in the colour schemes and furniture for official areas, and making a careful selection of pictures, she drew the civic sensibility of the architectural exteriors into her interiors. For public rooms, the dining rooms, reception areas and studies, her furniture designs reproduced classic and formal styles for chairs, cabinets, bookcases, side tables and mantelpieces. In an issue of the *Australian Home Beautiful* for 1927, she wrote about the 'fine range of beautiful woods', like the richly coloured Queensland maple, jarrah,

blackwood and Queensland walnut which she specified for her furniture designs. The study in each residence included armchairs covered in Australian bullock hide. The chairs in the governor-general's study were made of Tasmanian blackwood, with the desk inlaid with Queensland tulip wood. For these public rooms she also specified wall panelling extending from floor to cornice, to provide adequate dimensions for the pictures to be hung.

Ruth emphasised the importance of the entrance hall of The Lodge in doubling as an impressive, yet welcoming, space. She used Tasmanian mountain ash panelling for the walls, Australian oak for a hall table, chairs, a grandfather clock and rug chest, and dressed the timber floor with three Persian rugs. Critical of the provision of both a billiard room and a study for the prime minister without a room for the prime ministerial wife to receive her own visitors and attend to her correspondence, she enlisted Ethel Bruce's support to overcome the architects' resistance and turned a proposed breakfast room into 'a sunny, well-proportioned' sitting room. This was finished with deep ivory painted woodwork, mauve and white striped wallpaper and hand-printed English linen curtains in soft yellow and mauve. To avoid ruining the sitting room's proportions,

below left:
Ruth Lane-Poole (1885–1974)
Design for a China Cabinet:
Sketch No. 116 1926
pencil drawing on paper;
27.5 x 16.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3353887

below right:
Ruth Lane-Poole (1885–1974)
China Display Cabinet,
Government House, Canberra,
1927
b&w photograph;
18.6 x 13.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3313459



she ordered a specially-built baby grand from the Melbourne piano-maker Beales.

Her interior design for the private rooms of both residences addressed the needs of those who would live there, creating pleasant spaces with lighter colours and furnishings, such as in Lady Stonehaven's bedroom. For the bedrooms of Ariel and Ava, the younger Stonehaven daughters, she had Lily Yeats source Morris and Company wallpapers and cretonnes. Ruth wrote in the *Australian Home Beautiful* of ways to create a bedroom that would be an unfussy, elegant and welcoming 'haven of rest'. This sensibility to both the public roles and private lives of the occupants drew on the William Morris principle of merging utility and beauty. She gave equal emphasis to this principle in the servants' quarters of both residences, clashing with the supervising architect Henry Rolland and other officials. She also insisted that the interior walls of The Lodge be rendered with set plaster so that they could be tinted, painted or papered and not merely kalsomined. After her first visit to Canberra in autumn 1926, she had The Lodge's internal doors panelled rather than glazed, and the fireplaces changed from English style coal-burning grates to Australian open hearths for wood fuel.

In addition to The Lodge and Government House, Ruth Lane-Poole designed the interiors of Westridge House, the official residence of the head of the Forestry School, in Banks Street, Yarralumla, where the Lane-Pooles lived until 1945. Ruth's friend Harold Desbrowe Annear was the architect. This was one of his last commissions (he died in 1933), and Ruth worked closely with him on the layout, and innovations such as the first Australian 'flush windows', which slid vertically into the walls. In summer, flyscreens were automatically raised as the windows opened. She drew her own kitchen plan, as well as designing the interior decoration and fittings. Melbourne landscape designer Edna Walling was responsible for the design of the gardens.

Today, despite subsequent changes, both Government House and The Lodge retain some of Ruth Lane-Poole's elements: their high ceilings, generous windows and the proportions of the rooms reflect the civic design aesthetic developed by their original decorator, as well as by their architects. Though sadly all of the original furniture



has been lost from The Lodge, on the annual open day at Government House a few original items can still be glimpsed—a sideboard, a tea service, a hall table, a grandfather clock, and two blanket boxes.

These remnants are significant to our understanding of the democratic aspirations embedded in the design of the nation's capital. Ruth Lane-Poole's furnishing style was not modernist but conservative, and her furniture designs reproduced those of established designers, but her experience and training in the William Morris tradition meant that in her interior design she was drawing on the same source of inspiration as Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin. Like them, she wove values of beauty, artisanship and equality into elements of Canberra's design. Her interiors for the official residences of Australia's prime minister and governor-general match the Griffins' democratic and civic vision, and warrant her a place in our national history.

Recognition of Ruth Lane-Poole's role in the historic enterprise of building Australia's national capital might at last be emerging. The digitised collection of her working drawings and photographs now accessible on the National Library's website is one step forward, and the website of the National Archives of Australia (featuring both Ruth and Charles Lane-Poole) is another.

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Ruth Lane-Poole (1885–1974)
Prime Minister's Lodge, Canberra,
1927
b&tw photograph; 16.3 x 21.4 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3313353

To view the work of Ruth Lane-Poole in the National Library, go to www.nla.gov.au/pict/ and search for 'Ruth Lane-Poole'.

The National Archives of Australia website, featuring the legacy of both Ruth and Charles Lane-Poole, is at www.uncommonlives.naa.gov.au