

Buda, not just an historic garden?

Historic Buda at Castlemaine provides an extraordinary template for examining the changing roles of women through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Gardening, decorative and fine arts entwined there to create an enduring family legacy that encompasses periods of considerable social change. Buda curator **Lauretta Zilles** links the Leviny family's garden with recent research about their social, artistic and cultural concerns.

The Leviny household at Buda was one that nurtured a love of art as well as gardening. Early artistic interests were encouraged and developed as the children grew to maturity. Five of the girls, Mary, Kate, Gertrude, Dorothy and Hilda never married, living out their lives in the Victorian goldfields town of Castlemaine. Most of the works they created still grace the house and garden of their home.

Their Hungarian father was a European trained gold and silversmith. Perhaps the girls inherited some of the sense of design evident in his jewellery designs of 1846–1852 or the elaborate silver objects made after emigration to Australia at the height of the Mount Alexander gold rushes. Leviny retired professionally around 1863 and managed a portfolio of real estate investments. He was a real presence around the home for his growing brood (two surviving boys and six girls). It is said he awakened in them an appreciation of gardening and apparently his children were allocated their own garden plots. He eventually took to painting (not very successfully) in oils. More importantly later on, the girls developed an awareness of their father's Hungarian background and particularly the colourful, naive designs of its folk art.

Their mother, Bertha Leviny (nee Hudson) was twenty years old when she married in 1864. He was forty six. She had immigrated to Tasmania with her parents in 1850. Recent research by Professor Marjorie Theobald (for a forthcoming Buda exhibition catalogue) has established something of her family background, illuminating Bertha as a sensitive woman who encouraged her children's creative pursuits. She was a good pianist and during her lifetime the

house was full of music. In the Buda Collection are some of Bertha's cherished books – two volumes of Kentish and Sussex pressed wildflowers belonging to her mother, and a juvenile sketchbook of her own.

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bushland for the collecting of wildflowers to be pressed or painted. There was involvement with the local Field Rambler's Club. There is a disputed claim that a "wild" garden at Buda was set aside for indigenous flora. What we can be certain of is that Australian wild flowers were an abiding love and a primary source for much of their design work exercises. They were also a major subject category of their subsequent art collecting activity -

purchases (mainly by Kate) or gifts, included flower studies by Mildred Lovett, Lucy Newell and most significantly Margaret Preston (including the best of her several studies of the Queensland Dendrobium, the painting, Australian Rock Lily 1933).

This glimpse of the girl's domestic background is complemented by their attendance at McCay's Castlemaine Grammar School and drawing classes which, along with the study of botany, physiology and languages, provided them with the educational accomplishments expected of gentlewomen of the time.

On a more formal basis in 1891, Mary, the eldest girl studied painting in Melbourne under a "Miss Sutherland", almost certainly Jane Sutherland, who with Clara Southern was one of the better known women artists of the Heidelberg School. The experience was brief. It has been suggested that the economic depression of the early 1890s forced Mary to return home to Castlemaine.



Bertha Leviny and family in the garden at Buda.

Subsequently, and much closer to home, she attended Arthur Woodward's Art School at the Bendigo School of Mines. Woodward was a distinguished teacher and a strong proponent of the English Arts and Crafts movement. His school had a reputation second only to the National Gallery of Victoria Art School. Mary, the eldest, bore the brunt of home duties with her mother and younger siblings and like the Jane Sutherland experiment it did not last long. Her younger sister Dorothy, the most prolific artist in the family, fared better and studied under Woodward (with her friend Alice Newell) long enough to qualify for a diploma.

Buda holds a large amount of Dorothy's work including designs in the Art and Crafts manner for wallpapers and wall friezes, some strange Art Nouveau brass work and later distinguished and distinctive enamels.

Gertrude attended classes at the Castlemaine Technical College. She specialized in Arts and Crafts style carved furniture and other objects.

Most importantly from 1904 to 1920 the household subscribed to the English publication, The Studio, the most influential art

magazine of the times and a source of inspiration for the Leviny girls. So was the magazine of the Arts and Crafts Society of Victoria which advocated the use of Australian flora in design.

Though living in Castlemaine they were well aware of the artistic milieu of their times and visited Melbourne exhibitions - those of the Victorian Artists' Society and the Victorian Arts and Crafts Society (at its 1910 exhibition they purchased watercolours by Blamire Young). Less tangible but with equal bearing on their careers were friendships with fellow artists like Alice Newell, Louise Riggall, Ridley Walker and A. M. E. Bale among others.

Although Dorothy was secretary of the Castlemaine branch of the influential Australian National Women's League, the girls were probably apolitical and hardly radical (though a copy of George Bernard Shaw's *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* was in their book shelves). It was a time of change in the accepted roles women could play in society. There was the question of suffrage and the vote, access to higher education (The University of Melbourne had only accepted female undergraduates in 1880) and entrance to the professions. Women wanted these, and to be taken seriously. In 1907, at the instigation of Lady Northcote, wife of the Governor of Victoria, a major art and craft exhibition was mounted in the Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne. It was called *The Australian Exhibition of Women's Work*, and was the first of its kind. As well as traditional and domestic areas the entry categories included many for fine and applied arts. Some of the girls' friends participated in the show and Kate, Dorothy and Hilda also entered embroideries, paintings and designs. Dorothy entered a competition design for the exhibition's poster won by another artist with strong links to the region, Helen Atkinson. The event was hailed as a

milestone in the recognition of women's role, not only in the art schools and art scene at home, but also in their dominance of the important Australian expatriate art communities in France and England. One outcome of the exhibition was the founding of the Victorian Society of Women Painters and Sculptors in 1909.

Two years before the exhibition Ernest Leviny died. From that time the girls began to modify the interior of the house. As with the garden, much of Buda's 19th century interior appearance was to change. Many of the Victorian furnishings and décor were replaced with Arts and Crafts movement items, more often than not of their own handiwork. The look of the house became simpler, more modern. Their most radical change in this regard was the "new" dining room which, with its blue and white china (identified by Patricia Begg as central European, not English) and dark panelled woodwork was pure William Morris. Some things did not change. The impression left on

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Peter Whaley (as a young plumber working for the family c1960) was that the Misses Leviny "...lived as if they were in the 1890s, right up until the 1950s". (Kerry Anderson interview A Trade Perspective on Buda, Buda Archives).

There is much more to the Buda story post 1907. There was the family's crucial involvement with the founding of the Castlemaine Art Gallery in 1913 and beyond: Kate's modest but distinguished collecting of Modernist Australian art and excellent skill as a photographer: the girl's interest in studio pottery and the textiles by Frances Burke: Dorothy's post 1940s champlévé enamel boxes decorated with Hungarian folk motifs and other Stan Ellis inspired work.

Finally Hilda, who was to outlive them all, gifted the contents of the house to the people of Victoria. Her creative family had lived there for 120 years. It was to be a memorial to their endeavours. In some ways it was a new beginning.

This short survey of the Leviny girls' achievements, background of growing recognition of women's role in the story of Australian art, outline of changing artistic tastes and the evolving character of the interior of their home (still largely intact) relates to work for a RETI (Rural Exhibition Touring Initiative) supported Buda exhibition of the same planned for later this year. This will happily coincide with and complement the other exhibition celebrating the centenary of *The Australian Exhibition of Women's Work* being mounted by another institution they helped found, the Castlemaine Art Gallery.

John James, a member of the Buda management committee, assisted with the preparation of this article and the Journal acknowledges his contribution.
