







Casterton Community Museum



Walking Home c1931  
oil on board 49.2 x 59.5  
Private collection Melbourne



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Early charcoal drawing classes laid strong foundations into content, form and tone. Beckett's formal art training however did not really begin until she was 27 years old. Her father was more concerned with marrying-off his daughter to one of the well-heeled gentlemen of the district.

Finally Beckett was able to persuade her father to allow her to attend the National Gallery School of Victoria in Melbourne. He agreed only on condition that Clarice's older sister accompanied her. At the National Gallery Beckett she came under the tutelage of Frederick McCubbin, a leader of the country's impressionist school. She was also influenced by Max Meldrum, well known for his vocal and dogmatic attacks on Academic and Modernist theories. He credited her as his model student Beckett but only embraced some of his theories. She declared in 1924 that her task was *"to give a sincere and truthful representation of a portion of the beauty of nature and to show the charm of light and shade ... in correct tones so as to give as nearly as possible an exact illusion of beauty."*

In 1918 her father retired and settled in the Melbourne bayside suburb of Beaumaris. Beckett held her first solo exhibition in 1923 at the prestigious Athenaeum Gallery in Melbourne. Every year for the next decade she held exhibitions at this gallery. But critical support was not always forthcoming; a number of critics sharply attacked her work as "fogbound art", "obscured individuality, she being of a cult, which muffles everything in a pall of opaque density". Another wrote "a dull reiteration of nature". The more perceptive hailed her work as groundbreaking, describing her as "the most original painter in Australia".

Her own difficult family circumstances worsened. Her father was a deeply conservative man and did little to assist her career. The family was comfortably off but Clarice never had a studio and forced to paint on the kitchen table or leave the house in early evening or mornings, her easel being the side of a small homemade cart in which she kept her paints and brushes. When her mother fell ill in 1934, Clarice was made responsible for nursing her. Relations deteriorated with her father and Beckett lost touch with her artistic friends and began to lead a reclusive existence.

In 1935, whilst out painting a winter night storm she caught a chill, which quickly developed into double pneumonia. She died a few days later in a state of physical and emotional exhaustion. A year later a memorial exhibition of Beckett's paintings was held after which her paintings were put in storage in various locations. When they were rediscovered in 1970, more than 1,200 had been destroyed from being in an open-sided farm shed near Benalla for 30 years. Another 31 were destroyed in a house-fire.

Why was Beckett forgotten? Women artists such as Preston, Proctor, Cossington-Smith and others, were given wider acknowledgment than Beckett after their deaths. New trends were emerging in Australia in the mid- to late-1930s. Beckett's isolation, death and later neglect took place in a period of transition. Clarice Beckett was a courageous and deeply intelligent artist, whose techniques had never been seen before in Australia. Had she lived longer, Beckett would have made an even more substantive contribution. Amongst her papers was a cherished and well-worn copy of *Leaves of Grass*. The following lines were underlined:

*All truths wait in all things,*

*They neither hasten their own delivery nor resist it,*

*They do not need the obstetric forceps of the surgeon,*

*The insignificant is as big to me as any.*

*What is less or more than a touch?*

This beautifully sums up Beckett's art, her work and attitude to life.

(C) John Christian: July 1999 Exhibition: *Politically Incorrect: Clarice Beckett Retrospective at the Art Gallery of South Australia.*