

OLGA TSARA

Edna Walling's pictures

Edna Walling, one of Australia's best-known garden designers, lived from 1895 to 1973. Born in England, she moved to Australia in 1914 and graduated from the School of Horticulture, Burnley College, Melbourne, in December 1917. She was a household name from the 1920s to the 1940s, mainly due to her regular articles on gardening that appeared in the magazine *The Australian Home Beautiful* (1926–46). She was also known by reputation among her wealthy Melburnian clients, who included Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, Dame Nellie Melba and Sir Frank Packer. As a pictorial collections librarian at State Library Victoria and the curator of the photographic content of the Edna Walling Website, I was privileged to catalogue the Library's Edna Walling Collection, which comprises over 4900 of Walling's photographs and 300 of her garden plans. This article features a small selection of the collection's holdings to illustrate a discussion of her aesthetic roots: the drivers and influences which led to her picture-making.

Landscape architecture

Heavily influenced by the Arts and Crafts Movement, Walling developed a style of garden design based on her knowledge of architectural principles of form, proportion and perspective. Evident in her designs is the incorporation

The Barn, the kitchen looks out into the bush, gelatin silver photograph, c. 1936–69, H2018.160/77. All images reproduced to accompany this article are by Edna Walling.





Self portrait, flexible-base negative, 1952, H96.150/278

of thought and meaning in detail, the painterly handling of colour and form through planting, and the laying out of the garden as a sequence of intimate, highly personal spaces.¹

She collaborated with fashionable architects like Marcus Martin, achieving a unity between house and garden in which the garden one saw from inside the house was part of the intended living experience rather than an afterthought – a key guiding philosophy of the Arts and Crafts

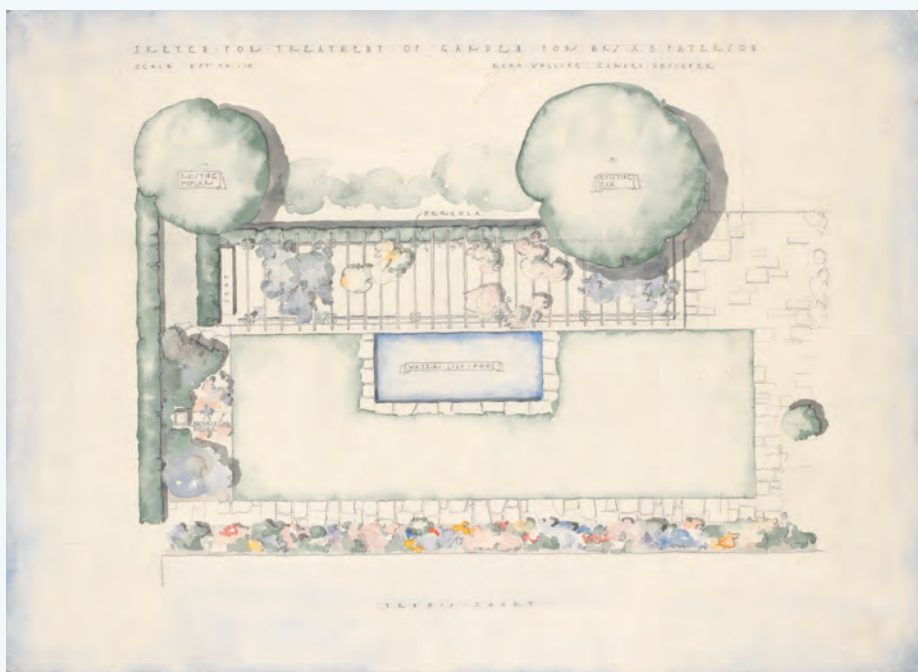
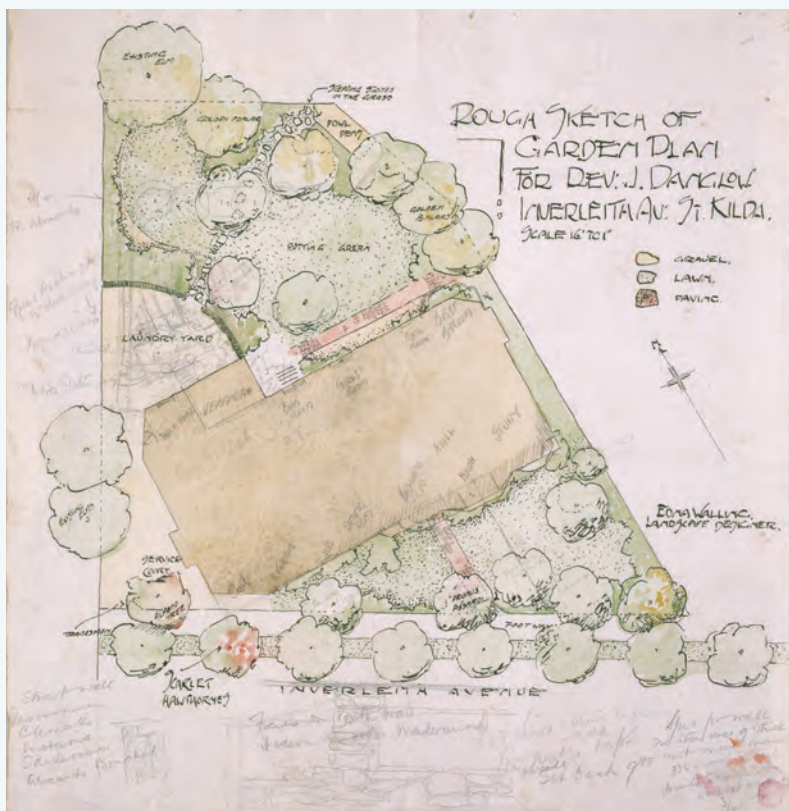
tradition. As architectural historian and academic Harriet Edquist argued, Walling's work was part of a continuum in this tradition and was based on the work of her Australian predecessors Walter Butler (1864–1949) and Harold Desbrowe Annear (1865–1933).²

A devotee of the handmade, the personal and the unique, in 1921 Walling designed and built 'Sonning', her home in Bickleigh Vale, in the outer eastern Melbourne suburb of Mooroolbark. After acquiring more of the surrounding land in 1922, she realised her dream of creating a village with a cloistered ambiance and charm unthreatened by encroaching suburbia. Her biographer Peter Watts described this achievement as 'an extraordinary experiment in urban development'.³ Walling was a true aesthete, and at Bickleigh Vale music, performance, literature and art were welcome and enjoyed. She hosted concerts and ballet at 'Sonning' and cultivated friendships with many creative, artistic and unconventional people. As will be discussed below, one of these people was William Blamire Young (1862–1935), an important artist, critic, writer and watercolourist who lived in Mooroolbark from 1923.

Art

Walling created garden plans in ink and watercolour as presentation copies for her clients. Of the 300 or so garden plans held by the Library, about 30 are embellished with watercolour. Her early watercolour plans were dominated by black outlines, with the colour used to fill in the shapes. These appear more like static cartoons in comparison with her later plans, in which watercolour itself defined the form. This complex technique shows her mastery of the medium.

Walling's watercolour work is reminiscent of the painting style of William Blamire Young. His work was exhibited in the National Gallery of Victoria, and he gave lectures on watercolour painting, sometimes at Melbourne's Lyceum Club.⁴ It is possible that Walling attended one of these lectures, for she had a number of friends who were Lyceum members. In her book *The unusual life of Edna Walling*, Sarah Hardy, actor, playwright and historian, stated that Walling knew Young. Hardy found a reference to this among the notes Peter Watts made when interviewing Walling's secretary Blanch Marshall. She also noted that a poem by Young's daughter, Ida, accompanied a photograph of the garden at 'Sonning' in *The Australian Home Beautiful's* issue for September 1933.⁵ So their connection may have spanned at least ten years. This is an interesting connection: I would argue that with Young's influence, Walling's skill as a watercolourist developed sophistication over the years.



Top Rough sketch of garden plan for Rev. J. Danglow. Inverleith Av., St. Kilda, pen, ink, watercolour and pencil on paper, 32.0 × 30.2 cm, c. 1922, H97.270/37 **Bottom** Sketch for treatment of garden for Mrs A.B. Paterson, ink and watercolour on paper, 58.6 × 39.5 cm, 1935, H2001.240/2



Such a bathing pool as this provides room ..., gelatin silver photograph, c. 1920 – c. 1949, H87.73/7

Photography

Walling left a huge body of photographic work. Of the Library's 4900 images, about 1000 are gelatin silver prints, and the rest are flexible-base negatives. Approximately 600 are portraits of people and candid photographs of animals, and about 1800 contain views of various gardens that Walling designed; the cottages at Bickleigh Vale in Melbourne; and scenery from trips to the Grampians, Mount Kembla, Kosciuszko, Wilsons Promontory and various country towns. Finally, about 2500 are of horticultural subjects and are arranged in alphabetical sequence by plant name.

Faced with thousands of negatives, often with multiple exposures of the same subject, we cannot know which images Walling thought of as her best work. It is at the time of developing images that the photographer makes decisions about exposure, balance of light and dark, and cropping. Walling did not print all of her negatives, and the prints that she did make reveal her aesthetic aims in terms of her own work. By carefully looking at the



They say our country rides on the sheep's back, gelatin silver photograph, c. 1930 – c. 1960, H98.120/272

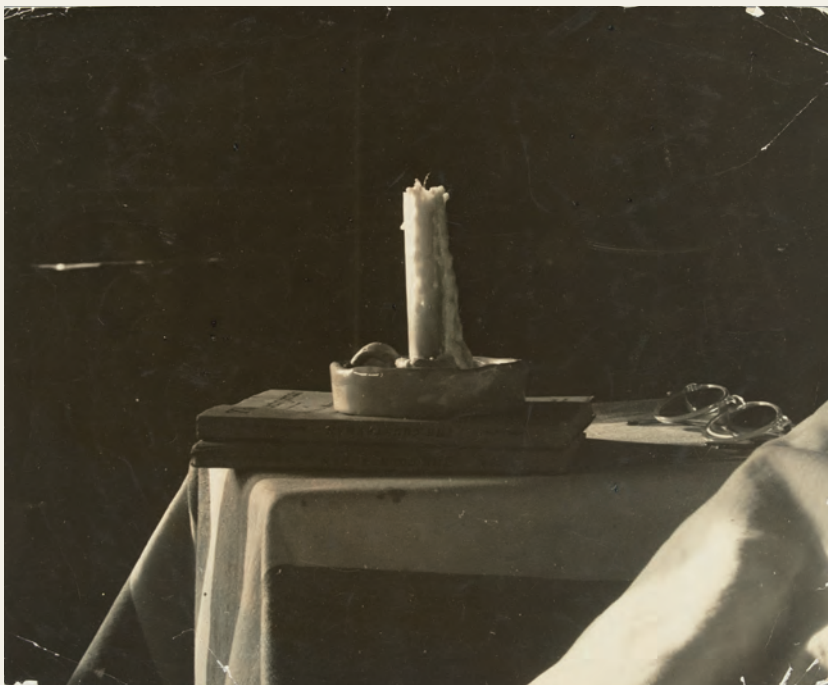
photograph albums with collations of photographs curated by Walling herself, and the photographs she developed in her own darkroom, we can formulate some generalisations about her style.

What becomes apparent is that Walling, always working with black-and-white film, drew on two distinct styles of photography. Her photographs of her travels, landscapes and horticultural subjects are documentary in style. They are focused and crisp and capture moments of reality. Her artistic photographs, however, ally most with pictorialism. Pictorial photography



Top Sea-box *Alyxia buxifolia*, gelatin silver photograph, c. 1940 – c. 1960, H98.120/492

Bottom The blue gums right down to the sea at Lorne, Victoria, gelatin silver photograph, c. 1930 – c. 1960, H99.120/33



Top A present of this blue pottery candlestick was greeted with much delight, gelatin silver photograph, c. 1947, H99.120/60 **Bottom** Portrait of Richard Gray, flexible-base negative, c. 1940 – c. 1960, H2001.180/194



Left *Elderly woman with cat and dog*, gelatin silver photograph, c. 1940 – c. 1950, H98.120/22 **Right** *Conoble siding*, flexible-base negative, c. 1930 – c. 1960, H96.150/288

emerged in the late 19th century when a growing number of photographers were using photography as an expressive tool. Wanting to see photography elevated to the realm of art, they sought to convey emotion and mood by creating photographs with a softer focus, often silhouetting the foreground of a landscape, or backlighting their portrait subjects, and thus sometimes obscuring their features, and were less concerned with documentary accuracy.

The small selection of images reproduced in this article is intended to lend weight to the author's observations and opinions about Edna Walling's pictures. Faced with very large archives of photographers' work, collection managers are charged with keeping and accounting for every image, but they choose only some for individual description and digitisation; it's a process we refer to as 'selective digitising'. At present, all of Walling's garden plans and about 200 of her photographs at the Library are digitised; most were originally digitised for the Edna Walling Website, produced in 2002. They have been heavily drawn on in the last 20 years, but in due course many more photographs from the archive will be digitised, making available fresh material for historians and Walling enthusiasts to explore.