

## Invited Comment by Paul Atterbury On Tonal Realism. (Antiques Roadshow)



The concept of traditionalism in art is hard to define, as the ground is constantly shifting. To me, the key thing is that in western art the revolution can quickly become a part of the tradition. Indeed, it is often part of the process of revolution that it becomes the conventional and the acceptable. Classic examples of this from recent art history are Gainsborough landscapes and portraits, the watercolours of Cotman, Turner and Constable, the Impressionists and post-Impressionists, social realism, the cult of the primitive and, of course,

abstraction which, by the 1920s had become the part of the language of textile design and ceramic decoration. It applies also to institutions. The revolutionary fervour behind the setting up, in France, of the Salon des Refuses, in Britain, of the New English Art Club and in Australia of the Twenty Melbourne Painters Society, inevitably faded as it became traditional, without affecting the validity and enduring popularity of such institutions.

All of this applies to Australian art. It may seem an overstatement but my discovery, in 1986, that Australian art was distinct and definable, and very different, despite its European background, changed my life and I became addicted to the excitement offered by Australian art of all styles and eras. What was immediately apparent to someone brought up in conventional art history was that Australian artists always did their own thing and, in the process, changed quite radically the European styles, ideas and techniques upon which their art was built. They also had their own revolutions. One of particular interest to me is tonalism, mainly because a good friend in Melbourne has long collected and written about Clarice Beckett, giving me ample opportunity to look closely at and admire her work. This is not the place to discuss whether tonalism was particularly Australian or part of a wider global movement, but its enduring impact on many contemporary Australian artists is obvious, including some members of the Twenty Melbourne Painters Society. Today tonalism is now familiar, and therefore an established part of contemporary artistic language, but this need not lessen its impact and status as those revolutionary roots are still there. The art revolutionaries of today are naturally dismissive of the commonplace, the conventional and the popular, but their ideas will in turn become absorbed into the broad structure of

contemporary art. The fact that most people know Constable and Monet via table mats does not diminish the revolutionary power of the original.