



Government  
of South Australia

**Opening of *The Edwardians: Secrets & Desires***

**Art Gallery of South Australia, North Terrace**

**Thursday, 8 July 2004**

**Premier Mike Rann**

**Minister for Economic Development**

**Minister for Social Inclusion**

**Minister for the Arts**

**Minister for Volunteers**

Acknowledgements:

- Minister for Tourism, Jane Lomax-Smith
- Former Minister for the Arts, Di Laidlaw
- Honorary French Consul, Anne Levy
- Chairman, Art Gallery of SA, Michael Abbott, and Board members
- Gallery Director, Ron Radford
- Curator of *The Edwardians: Secrets & Desires*, Anna Gray
- Distinguished guests
- Ladies and gentlemen

The short reign of Edward VII...from 1901 to 1910...was a time for England...as one of its best songs proclaimed...of hope and glory.

A new century had dawned on an empire that embraced the world.

A new King had been crowned.

One who revelled nightly in the theatres, bohemian salons and gambling dens of London.

He was a hearty, carousing, Falstaffian man who loved art and horses and boat-racing and beautiful women...especially actresses.

His was a vividly contrasting style...and lifestyle...to that of his mother.

Queen Victoria had been a melancholy recluse in widow's black.

And her name had become synonymous with pinched manners, corseted morals and nervous middle-class respectability.

Under Edward, the leash was finally off.

Victorian sensibilities were becoming unbuttoned...in what has been called a triumph of counterculture.

The rich partied.

And the new rich paid handsomely to have their portraits painted.

But the “upstairs”, of course, also had a “downstairs”.

This “Indian summer” of Empire...with all its seeming splendour and excess...was to be both short-lived and illusory.

It was soon smashed and ground into the blood and mud of Gallipoli, Ypres, Passchendaele and the Somme.

There was a loss of not only hope and glory, but also innocence...and more importantly millions of young lives.

And...eventually and inevitably...there was the loss of Empire itself.

An Empire thought to have been as invincible as the era’s new ship had been thought unsinkable.

But for a brief time, such darkness was not foreseen.

The Edwardian era was a period of extraordinary cultural achievement.

The playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote *Man and Superman* and *Major Barbara*...espousing revolution and attacking religious hypocrisy.

HG Wells...inventing science fiction...gave us *War of the Worlds*.

Rudyard Kipling...pioneering a humanistic sympathy for dispossessed peoples...wrote *Kim*.

Closer to home, Miles Franklin...a dauntless feminist...produced *My Brilliant Career*.

Sigmund Freud...probing our innermost thoughts...wrote *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*.

Anton Chekhov...revolutionising theatre... completed his last great works of cultured exile: *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*.

Enrico Caruso, Nellie Melba and Peter Dawson put their great performances on gramophone records.

Emmeline Pankhurst founded the Women’s Social and Political Union.

And Edward Elgar wrote the symphonic anthem of the era, *Pomp and Circumstance*.

The Edwardian period was a time of experiment and courage.

People delighted in the new...a genre-challenging artistic and social revolution that, in many ways, prefigured the 1960s.

It was suddenly okay...in these early days of Bloomsbury...to be provocative, to be modern, to be cheeky and to challenge preconceptions.

It was also a time when a number of Australian artists...Rupert Bunny, Ethel Carrick, Hugh Ramsay, E Phillips Fox, George Lambert, Bessie Davidson and Tom Roberts...rubbed shoulders with artists from England and Scotland, New Zealand and France, Ireland and America.

Many of these expatriates...including the Americans James McNeil Whistler and John Singer Sargent...feature in this exhibition, and their influence through other artists is traced.

Whistler is one of my favourites.

On one hand, he was a dandy and egomaniac who invented much of his own personal history.

But on the other hand...and most importantly...he was a bridge between East and West, as well as between old and new.

Inspired by the art of Japan...and particularly the Edo period...he fused the Japanese aesthetic into European art.

Famous for his tonal subtlety, his scenes of London fogs over the Thames showed that...like Monet...he believed the veil reveals more than it hides.

His soft colours bleed into one another...a clear link to impressionism and even further on to Mark Rothko.

Whistler influenced writers like Proust, sculptors like Rodin, and the English painters and brothers, William and Albert Rothenstein.

And he touched the wonderful Australian painters John Peter Russell, Hugh Ramsay and Rupert Bunny...who are also featured in this exhibition.

Just a glimpse of Bunny's *Madam Sadayakko*...the famous geisha...reveals the power of Whistler's influence.

John Singer Sargent had a similar impact.

He was prolific...producing more than 800 portraits.

His chronicling of high society was made more dazzling by his extraordinary use of light and shade.

Rodin described him as the "Van Dyke of our times".

And Robert Hughes said "Sargent was the unrivalled recorder of male power and female beauty in a day that, like ours, paid obsessive court to both".

His influence can be seen in the works of Vanessa Bell and Australians Hilda Rix Nicholas, Hugh Ramsay and George Lambert.

We're seeing here in this exhibition...for the first time...Australian and New Zealand expatriates alongside their European and North American contemporaries.

For the "colonists"...coming as they did from what was seen as a poor-relations, country-cousin kind of background...Europe at the time must have been a shock.

The certainties they expected to find were all falling away.

And the traditions of approved official art...like that of Sir Joshua Reynolds and the Royal Academy...were going out the window.

“Everyday life” as artistic subject matter suddenly appeared on the scene.

Instead of the posed, portentous, majestic legend...the visual equivalent of spin...art was showing us ordinary life.

Delicate, unremarkable moments in time...as if caught by a flashlight camera, on a rainy street, or a balcony, or a picnic ground, or a grey beach.

No longer posed, official portraiture...although we will still see some...but people as they actually were.

George Lambert's self-portrait *Chesham Street* is a grand example of this.

We see the artist being examined by a doctor.

His naked torso takes centre stage.

It's a disturbing, intimate, impactful work...even now.

Imagine how it must have been at the time.

Of course, one of the greatest examples of Edwardian art is not downstairs in this exhibition.

It's outside on North Terrace.

It's Bertram MacKenna's sculpture of Edward VII...one of the largest, most monumental exclamation points of the Edwardian era anywhere on earth.

Not unveiled until 1920 by the then Prince of Wales...later to be the King who abdicated...the statue was greeted, I'm told, by thousands of people who packed North Terrace for the doubly Royal and tremendously smug occasion.

The King is depicted in the coronation robes he wore both at Westminster Abbey and in India before bowing princes and maharajas, and prancing tigers on leashes.

Beside him are three female figures.

They represent Peace, Justice and...to complete the blissful trinity...South Australia.

“South Australia's” arms are outstretched and the fruits of the State are at her feet.

Though a good few historians think the female figures actually represent...and lovingly duplicate...three of the King's favourite mistresses!

But it's this exhibition...here inside...that we celebrate tonight.

It's a magnificent compendium of the expatriate achievement of uppity colonials in a time of European dominance in the arts.

A celebration of how well we did in competition with our British, French and American role models and rivals.

Congratulations and thanks for the inquisitive diligence of all concerned.

Once again, the Art Gallery has generously and delectably provided an abundant and stimulating banquet of excellence and experiment.

It's a great pleasure to declare *The Edwardians: Secrets & Desires* officially open.

Thank you.