

Dahl Collings (1909–1988) and Her Itinerary: Australia, England, and Back

Dahl Collings (1909–1988) actively contributed to the arts in Australia in the twentieth century through her engagement in a variety of fields and projects worldwide; surpassing cultural, geographical, social, artistic, and cultural borders. An active traveler, she often visited and worked in Europe, eventually working with Bauhaus Masters László Moholy-Nagy and György Kepes in London. At Simpson's Department store, the trio innovatively used window displays and retail virtual merchandising as a platform to evoke the Bauhaus spirit. Also an evocation of the Bauhaus was Collings' interest in the unity of all arts with her artistic range and interest in painting, commercial art, illustration, costume design, textile design, exhibition design, photography, and film. Through an analysis of various works, I aim to demonstrate Collings' cosmopolitan approach to art and her subsequent achievements that have unfortunately been marginalized or largely neglected.

Keywords: Australia, Dahl Collings, London, Simpson's Department Store, László Moholy-Nagy

Dahl Collings's cross-disciplinary devotion to artistic production situates her in the modernist realms of painting, commercial art, illustration, fashion, textile design, costume design, exhibition design, photography, and film. The aim of this paper is to trace Dahl Collings' overseas experience in London to demonstrate how she was transformed from active participant to active exponent of Modernism during the 1930s, an extremely challenging time to be both female and an advocate of a modernity that Australia viewed as a 'foreign disease'.¹ While existing scholarship surrounding Dahl Collings is due to the impressive work and effort of scholars such as Geoffrey Caban, Michael Bogle, and Anne Marie Van de Ven, my paper aims to assert Dahl Collings as a symbol of modernity by providing an analysis of her identity as a modern female artist, of her involvement in London with London serving as a crucial site of Modernity in itself, and of her contribution to Australia's Modernism as a result of her adoption of a Bauhaus aesthetic.

Dahl Collings, born as Dulcie Wilmott in Adelaide in 1909, began her art studies at East Sydney Technical College from around 1926–32 and took various painting courses at the J.S. Watkins Art School, earning a scholarship from the Society of Artists while focusing on portraiture.² At the time of her enrolment, East Sydney Technical College was modelled around the nineteenth century British concentration of tradition,³ and like the rest of Australia, faced modernism with much hesitance. After finishing her art education, at the age of eighteen Collings was granted her first job at Anthony Horderns, a big department store.⁴ Illustrative as an early example of her ambition, she had 'walked from store to store with her portfolio of drawings',⁵ until she impressed Hordens as well as other department stores like Farmers and David Jones, for which Collings completed freelance work. Shortly after, in 1933, she met and married fellow Australian Geoffrey Collings (1905–2000), also an advocate of modernism and with whom she would collaborate throughout her entire artistic career.

1 Helen Topliss, *Modernism and Feminism: Australian Women Artists, 1900–1940* (Roseville East: Craftsman House, 1996), 110.

2 Anne-Marie Van De Ven, "Dahl Collings b. 1909," Design and Art Australia Online, <https://www.daa.org.au/bio/dahl-collings/biography/> (accessed August 12, 2015).

3 Topliss, *Modernism and Feminism*, 29.

4 Geoffrey Caban, *A Fine Line: A History of Australian Commercial Art* (Sydney, NSW: Hale & Iremonger, 1983), 70.

5 Ibid.

Geoffrey Collings was not a well-known figure in the Australian art scene when he and Dahl met, and it has been only recently that there has been more revived interest in his work.⁶ Educated in Brisbane, before he met Dahl and while they both lived in Sydney, he worked odd jobs such as sweeping floors, running messages, delivering blocks, matrixes, and stereos.⁷ Nevertheless, Geoffrey Collings used the job experiences to get close to newspaper equipment and he was able to gain experience in linotype and production procedures while performing his menial tasks.⁸ Eventually, he was able to get hands-on experience, and finally acquire, the technical knowledge necessary to understand the process of printing plates. Together, these various professional experiences would later intrigue his London employers and serve as a ground for his employment.

London as a Site of Modernity

In 1935, Dahl and Geoffrey Collings would embark for London,⁹ a city which Australians considered as being full of opportunity. Described as the 'strongest magnet to all the peoples of the earth' London itself as a city, as a physical site of modernity and possibilities was, furthermore, perceived by Australians as 'as a metropolis representing the arts and urban opportunity,' that seemed to be lacking in Australia and as a 'central locus, the destination before, after, or in between any other travels.'¹⁰

The voyage to London alone is worthy of remark – it was an exemplary of the modern through the association with mobility, channels of transmission and transfer, and industrialisation of travel. A travel distance of over 10,000 miles, London was a significantly impressive trip amongst Australians. As stated by Angela Woollacott, 'reports of those in London regularly appeared in Australian newspapers and magazines, imbuing a London sojourn with celebrity status.'¹¹ This certainly can be seen in the newspaper articles that featured Dahl Collings and her husband that helped promote a stronger presence back at home in Australia.

Upon arrival in London, through determination and hardwork, Geoffrey Collings was able to get work as art director of the American advertising agency, Erwin Wasey & Co. Dahl Collings was able to do a variety of freelance jobs consisting of murals, fashion illustrations, and exhibitions for top fashion

magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*.¹² It allowed her to reach a significant female audience due to the popularity of these publications, as well as inspire Australian women back home with her fashion sense. Collings' interest in fashion was obvious with her designs as well as in her own personal taste in clothing that demonstrated her preference for sophisticated pieces reflective of her cosmopolitan lifestyle (Fig. 1). She often designed her own wardrobe.¹³

And it was perhaps this interest in fashion that resulted in Dahl Collings' involvement with Simpson Piccadilly, a circumstance that would later prove critical for her artistic development and contribution to the arts in Australia.



Fig. 1. Geoffrey Collings, Dahl Collings, ca. 1935–37. Courtesy of Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney, 2007/30/1-69/2/60 (00236773).

Simpson Department Store as a site of Modernity

Simpson Piccadilly, which opened its doors on April 29 1936,¹⁴ shortly after the Collings' arrival in London, was and is considered as one of architect Joseph Emberton's greatest works.¹⁵ Physically, the architectural structure and appearance of Simpson was and is exemplary of modernity with its achievement of simplicity, functionality, and spaciousness. And while its sheer size immediately received the attention it merited, it was also its interior and excruciatingly thought-out details that made an even more astonishing impact.

Simpson offered the most modern of the modern; fulfilling whatever a customer could want with added convenience and luxury. The grand department store functioned as a modern icon that offered visitors one of the best views of London, the opportunity to purchase theatre tickets and travel tickets, a sports shop, a golf range, a gift shop, a flower shop, an air conditioned cigar shop, a barber's shop complete with a shoe shine boy, both a formal restaurant and a snack bar, grand tailoring departments that covered 40,000 square feet, a dog shop, and a tape machine that provided

6 Isobel Crombie, "A Documentary Impulse: Australian Photographer Geoffrey Collings," *Art Bulletin of Victoria* 29 (1991), <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/a-documentary-impulse-australian-photographer-geoffrey-collings/> (accessed September 10, 2015).

7 Caban, *A Fine Line*, 70.

8 Ibid.

9 Van De Ven, "Dahl Collings b. 1909."

10 Angela Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), quotes on 4 and 9.

11 Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune*, 4.

12 Caban, *A Fine Line*, 71.

13 "Making her Way in London," *The Australian Woman's Mirror*, October 7, 1936, Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (or MAAS), Dahl and Geoffrey Collings Collection, 2007/30/1–14/1/2.

14 David Wainwright, *The British Tradition: Simpson—a World of Style* (London: Quiller Press, 1996), 25.

15 Rosemary Ind, *Emberton* (London: Scholar Press, 1983), 30.

the latest news and sports results.¹⁶ Everything that could possibly be desired, most definitely was possible of being fulfilled in just this one elegant building.

And while it was grandiose and glamorous, every physical detail was designed to suit the specific needs of practicality; the white horizontal Portland strips in the makeup of the front of the building, for example, were specifically structured angularly to prevent less dirt and debris from reaching the building reducing the building's maintenance; the windows were designed to allow for a vastness of light and space; and the neon lighting functioned to properly illuminate the building and increase its presence at night. The building's inner components operated based on the same principle of functionality. Light fittings were hung in a manner that eliminated shadows on items within the store; the innovative vacuum system assisted with accounting and financial matters; and the computerized check out systems were designed with the convenience of the workers and the customers in mind. Children would stand at the check-out flabbergasted by the 'beep' noises that would follow each merchandise scan.¹⁷ Moreover, the furnishings within the building were incredibly modern in themselves –from the ninety-foot chromium light fixture that was suspended down the entire main staircase of the store to the chromed metal chairs¹⁸– designs whose form and function can be seen as an influence of the Bauhaus aesthetic.

The actual merchandise that was being sold at Simpson, not surprisingly, was also representative of the most current fashion innovations that benefited the customer in terms of comfort, function, and overall appearance. The clothing pieces had an intricate modernity about them as they existed in an abundance of colours and fabrics during a period when men's wardrobes consisted of dull, dark clothing that oftentimes was not the most suitable or practical. Just as revolutionary was the electric shaver available –the first to be sold in Britain– and men's cotton underwear with the comfort of elastic that was a better alternative to the fussy and hot underwear made of wool that required linen tapes to be secured around the waist.¹⁹ Most certainly, as stated David Wainwright, Simpson 'was in truth a revolution; and as [...] distinguished guests and colleagues in the trade toured the new store, they were breath taken by the audacity of it. Perhaps the lower ground floor caused the most comment, for the sheer variety of items on offer, many of them never before seen in men's outfitters.'²⁰

The staff at Simpson was just as pivotal for its success and characterisation of modernity. Some of the most instrumental figures present were Bauhaus foundation instructor László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) and Hungarian artist György Kepes (1906–2001), also linked to the Bauhaus due to

his later involvement with the New Bauhaus in Chicago. Both had arrived in London with Bauhaus founder and prominent architectural figure Walter Gropius (1883–1969) seeking exile due to the turbulent political atmosphere surrounding Germany. Moholy-Nagy and Kepes were offered jobs at Simpson by Alexander Simpson himself, where they were responsible for display and product design.²¹ Moholy-Nagy completely oversaw every detail and component related to the store's visual appearance 'from window displays to the weaving of cloths for the restaurant'.²² Additionally, Hungarian-born Bauhaus artist Marcel Breuer (1902–1981) was also in contact with Alexander Simpson about producing furniture for the store, aspiring to one day complement Simpson with a Furniture Department²³ thanks in part to his connection with Moholy-Nagy who introduced him to Alexander Simpson.²⁴

It was at Simpson that Dahl Collings was hired by Moholy-Nagy himself after he became impressed with the versatility in her work in which she incorporated watercolour, fabrics, and other materials in an innovative manner he hadn't seen before in any of his students' work at the Bauhaus.²⁵ She became the only female member of the international team that Moholy-Nagy put together²⁶ and she even managed to later convince Moholy-Nagy to allow fellow Australian, Alistair Morrison, to join the team. This resulted in Morrison immediately becoming interested in the Bauhaus attitude towards design after working with Moholy-Nagy as well²⁷ and later applying those principles once back in Australia.

According to Dahl Collings' personal reflections of her time at Simpson, for Moholy-Nagy, no detail was too small to overlook. 'Ok,' Moholy-Nagy would say, 'we're not just going to have the tablecloths yellow and order yellow tablecloths. We're going to think about it.'²⁸ Dahl Collings learned to apply this deep thinking and exploration of design possibilities within her own personal work, which according to Geoffrey Caban, involved the design of every item housed within Simpson, from the most mundane to the most intricate. She worked with 'furnishings, store graphics, fabrics, glassware, silverware, [and] even menus.'²⁹ According to Dahl Collings, because she had utilised

21 Sibyl Nagy, *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1969), 119.

22 Caban, *A Fine Line*, 72.

23 Alexander Simpson, *Letter from Alexander Simpson to Marcel Breuer, February 2, 1936*, 01825–001, 1936–02–03, Marcel Breuer Digital Archive, Syracuse University, <http://breuer.syr.edu/xtf/view?docId=mets/4889.mets.xml;query=alexander%20simpson;brand=breuer> (accessed September 12, 2015).

24 László Moholy-Nagy, *Letter from Moholy-Nagy to Alexander Simpson, February 3, 1936*, 00461–002, 1936–02–03, Marcel Breuer Digital Archive, Syracuse University, <http://breuer.syr.edu/xtf/view?docId=mets/2586.mets.xml;query=moholy-nagy%20simpson;brand=breuer> (accessed September 12, 2015).

25 Caban, *A Fine Line*, 71.

26 "Making her Way in London," MAAS, Dahl and Geoffrey Collings Collection, 2007/30/1-14/1/2.

27 Caban, *A Fine Line*, 73.

28 Caban, *A Fine Line*, 72.

29 Caban, *A Fine Line*, 70.

16 Wainwright, *The British Tradition*, 29–30.

17 Wainwright, *The British Tradition*, 29–33.

18 Wainwright, *The British Tradition*, 33.

19 Wainwright, *The British Tradition*, 28.

20 Wainwright, *The British Tradition*, 29.

watercolours to layer one colour over another, the overlapping of new colours led her to explore the visual intricacy of weaving. Consequently, she designed 'tablecloths to be woven for the restaurant,' as well as 'clothes for the clothing department that were accepted and manufactured, window displays and many other things such as labels for tobacco tins.'³⁰ Collings was also largely responsible for the interior design work that went into preparing Simpson for its grand opening.

Collings was completely mesmerized by the Simpson staff and mostly by Moholy-Nagy. She confessed that the work environment was 'absolutely stunning,' in that it allowed her to break free from the peripheral art education she had received in Australia. Further describing her experience at Simpson, she stated that 'the attitudes of Moholy and his team, their training, their knowledge, was so far away that it took [her] all day, every day, just to follow their thinking, let alone do the job [she] was expected to do. And yet they were easy to work with - they were wonderful teachers.' This intimate reflection reveals the constant challenge in working at Simpson, learning at Simpson, as well as producing at Simpson under the wing of one of the most established Bauhaus Masters. Moholy-Nagy, with his wealth of experience teaching a talented international audience of students at the Bauhaus wouldn't tell Dahl what to do, but rather, Dahl held the responsibility of telling him what could be done.³¹

It was the creative atmosphere at Simpson and the attention to every detail that proved instrumental in shaping Dahl Collings' relationship to colour. At the huge modern department store, for example, colour was used selectively and strategically. Colour was often used as contrast, with '...red on some floors, and as background to the sports clothes and equipment on the third floor, sky blue and emerald green.'³² Additionally, the spirit of experimentation was an intricate component of modernity that Dahl Collings was able to gain while there. She was able to witness Moholy-Nagy's enthusiastic and fervent interest in experimentation, such as his innovative display of clothing on heat-formed body shapes made out of transparent plastic he himself formed.³³ Simpson provided a nurturing environment in which Dahl Collings gained confidence in her own experimentation, largely as a result of Moholy-Nagy's full support and devotion to instructing her. She shares that as she commenced experimenting without limit, she felt like she was capable of doing anything.³⁴ This self-expressed freedom can be seen in Dahl's engagement with all fields of art and design.

One of the most important facets that Moholy-Nagy and his team dealt with was managing the modern window display (Figs. 2 and 3), which refuted and transformed the century-old custom



Fig. 2. Simpson display window. Published in 'Display Lessons from a New Store,' in *Commerical Art/ Art and Industry*, July 1, 1936, 24, <http://magazines.iaddb.org/issue/CAI/1936-07-01/edition/null/page/24> (accessed January 15, 2016).



Fig. 3. Display stand for lounge suits found. Published in 'Display Lessons from a New Store,' in *Commerical Art/ Art and Industry*, July 1, 1936, 25, <http://magazines.iaddb.org/issue/CAI/1936-07-01/edition/null/page/25> (accessed January 15, 2016).

of no-show windows and display cases for men's stores in Britain.³⁵ Moholy-Nagy jumped at the opportunity of using window displays as a means to address the larger whole of society rather than just the usual museum or gallery visitor. The intricacy and complexity of elements surrounding window displays such as the versatility of a window that so easily was modified throughout the day depending on the time of day (morning, afternoon, and night) and other possible factors such as weather attracted Moholy-Nagy who enjoyed the aesthetic challenges intrinsic in this new medium. For Moholy-Nagy, what was being displayed was of no importance to him; he was preoccupied with the visualisation that was created by factors such as colour and arrangement and the emotional effect it would have on onlookers.³⁶ Moreover, Moholy-Nagy's work with Simpson window displays demonstrate his passionate Bauhaus sensibilities that he introduced to the English general public by applying his vision of colour and originality to the frequently visited streets and shop window displays in London. As Krisztina Passuth asserts: 'The shop windows of Simpson's took over the role of the earlier avant-garde exhibitions and theatres. The shop-windows dressed by the artist come alive, they are no longer mere shop-windows, but a late evocation of the Bauhaus spirit. Asymmetric advertising is like a mild electric shock to the eye.'³⁷ Moholy-Nagy explained, adding the finishing touches of his work directly before the opening of the department store. For a short time, the shop-window became a Bauhaus platform and absorbed the artist's attention entirely and exclusively.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "Making her Way in London," MAAS, Dahl and Geoffrey Collings Collection, 2007/30/1–14/1/2.

³² Wainwright, *The British Tradition*, 28.

³³ Wainwright, *The British Tradition*.

³⁴ Caban, *A Fine Line*, 72.

³⁵ Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1969), 119–120.

³⁶ Moholy-Nagy, *Moholy-Nagy*, 120.

³⁷ Krisztina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 65.

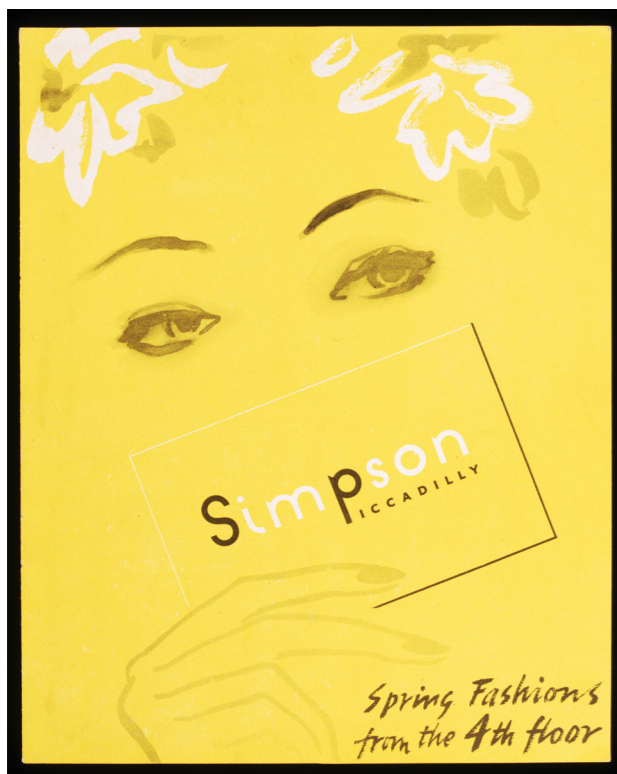


Fig. 4. Dahl Collings, Sydney/London/New York, 1930–60 Simpson Piccadilly, Spring Fashions catalogue cover designed by Dahl Collings. Courtesy of Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney. 92/191-19.

female eyes seem to produce an effect in which they follow the viewer, and the simplicity in the use of facial features make the subdued female presence even more intriguing. The advertisement served to address the collection of female clothing that was later added to Simpson's fourth floor, breaking the strictly-male merchandise and masculine atmosphere that Simpson had once proudly boasted.

Because Dahl Collings reflections on her experiences at Simpson are so positive, it might be easy to overlook the challenges she overcame in securing a job that was staffed by men and catered to men. *The Manchester Guardian* explains Simpson's aim was to

...create an atmosphere where men shall feel at home, where they may buy not only their own shirts and socks, but purchase silk stockings for their womenfolk and presents for the family in a setting which is congenial and heartily male. Only the future can tell whether the attempt

Furthermore, at Simpson, a spirit of collaboration existed amongst the designers who cooperated on a variety of tasks. This is reflective of the Bauhaus principle of collectivity in production. According to Dahl Collings,

...you learnt to work with other people—if you didn't have the time or the experience, someone else would carry on from your idea and thus, as a unit, we were able to do everything. And the whole store was done in this way, with us working together as a unit. It was my first experience of that.³⁸

Because of Collings' embracement of the teamwork environment that Simpson encompassed, however, it makes it difficult to find pieces that were accredited in Dahl Collings' name during her time at Simpson and later in her life once back in Australia. One work that has been attributed to Dahl Collings uses a bright yellow colour that is both pleasing to the eye with its happy tones of warmth (Fig. 4). The alluring fe-

will succeed, or whether women will invade this store in much the same way as they have monopolized all others.³⁹

More than just overcoming the obstacles and impediments of working in a male-environment, Dahl Collings was able to thrive in the male-driven public sphere whose sole focus was men's fashion and accessories during the first year that she worked there. Furthermore, Simpson and the men Dahl Collings worked with while at Simpson can be interpreted as her modern network that provided her and her husband with encouragement and support with the common goal of disseminating the modern. By working with Moholy-Nagy, Breuer, and Kepes, she was also introduced to Walter Gropius and maintained contact with the four individuals after leaving London and returning to her home back in Australia. In the decades that followed, they were sending and receiving personal items such as a wedding invitation to Kepes' daughter's ceremony and more professional items such as brochures and catalogues demonstrating the work the Bauhauslers completed once stateside at their respective institutions. Among the letters exchanged between the Collings and the Bauhauslers, László Moholy-Nagy, while at the School of Design in Chicago in 1943, warmly congratulated the Collings on an exhibition, sent warm regards to the two Collings children, updated the couple with his then current project, and ended the letter with, 'please keep in contact with us at it is always a pleasure to hear from ones [sic.] friends.'⁴⁰ Even long after Moholy-Nagy's death the couple remained in contact with Lucia. Furthermore, the Collings' exchanged postcards with Moholy-Nagy, Kepes, and Breuer (Fig. 5).

It might come as no surprise from Dahl Collings' reflections on her experiences while at Simpson that she credits meeting and interacting with Moholy-Nagy as the greatest influence on her career.⁴¹ The similar modernist-point-of-view from which both Collings and Moholy-Nagy departed meant that design was indivisible. For Moholy-Nagy, 'the problem posed by Simpson's window display

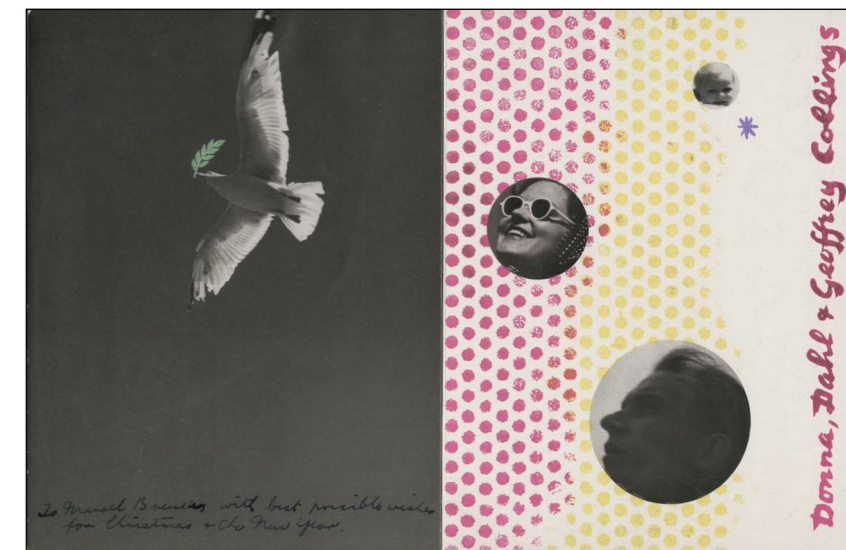


Fig. 5. Christmas card from Dahl and Geoffrey Collings to Marcel Breuer, 1938, in Marcel Breuer Papers, Special Collections Research Center. Courtesy of Syracuse University Libraries. 37854-002.

³⁹ Wainwright, *The British Tradition*, 32.

⁴⁰ László Moholy-Nagy, *Letter from Moholy-Nagy to the Collings, May 11, 1943*, MAAS, Dahl and Geoffrey Collings Collection, 2007/30/1–24/35.

⁴¹ Caban, *A Fine Line*, 71.



Fig. 6. Dahl Collings, Fashion illustration. published in Richard Haughton James "Dahl and Geoffrey Collings," *Commercial Art/ Art and Industry*, August 1, 1938, 39. International Advertising & Design DataBase, <http://magazines.iadbb.org/issue/CAI/1938-08-01/edition/null/page/9> (accessed September 5, 2015).

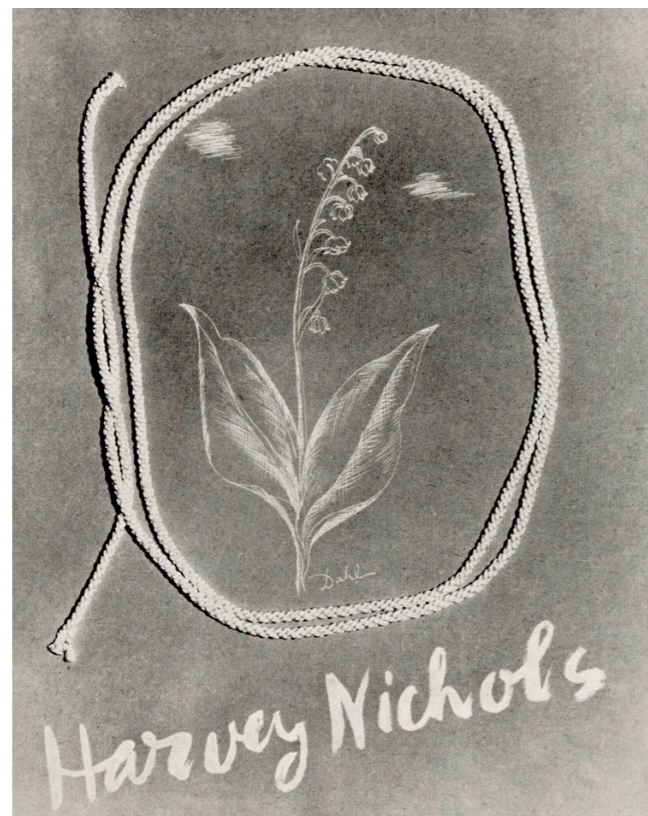


Fig. 7. Dahl Collings, Design for a catalogue for the department store Harvey Nichols. Published in *Arts et Metiers Graphiques fr*, November 15, 1938, 13. International Advertising & Design DataBase, <http://magazines.iadbb.org/issue/AMG/1938-11-15/edition/null/page/81> (accessed September 5, 2015).

was basically no different from a setting for *Madame Butterfly*.⁴² Likewise for Dahl Collings, whose lack of interest in narrow specialization led to her seeing 'no difference between planning a poster, an electric iron, and exhibition stand or the scenario for a documentary film'.⁴³ In other words, both Collings and Moholy-Nagy had the sensibility to join all arts and crafts for the common goal of creating something visually striking, a core principle clearly expressed in the Bauhaus manifesto.

⁴² Moholy-Nagy, Moholy-Nagy, 125.

⁴³ Richard Haughton James, in "Exhibition of Modern Industrial Art and Documentary Photos at the David Jones Gallery," (1939), 3, Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS), Dahl and Geoffrey Collings Collection 92/191-22-7.

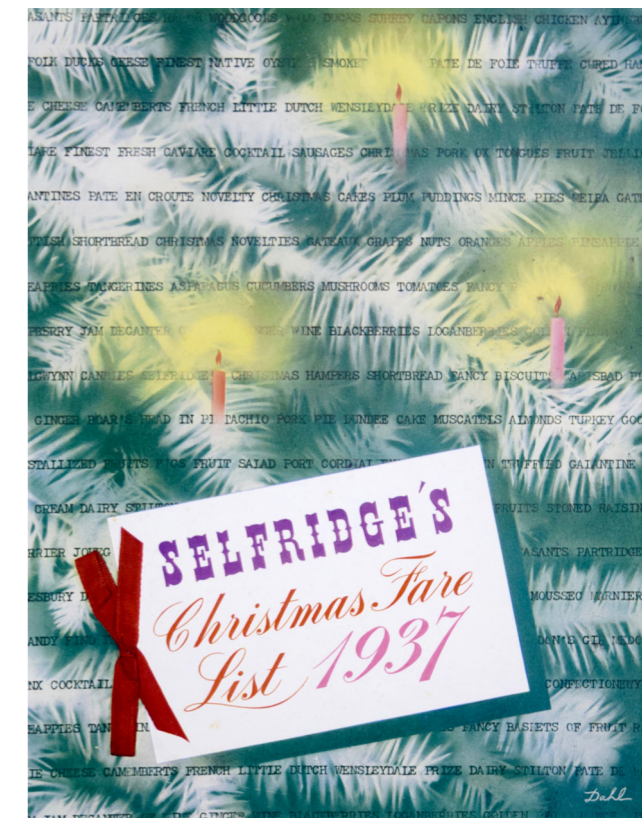


Fig. 8. Dahl Collings, Advertisement, artwork: Selfridge's Christmas Fare list 1937. Courtesy of Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney. 92/191-2/9.

Dahl Collings - Modernist Artist

Utilizing the skills learned at Simpson, Dahl Collings went on to produce catalogue work for several British brands (Fig. 6) and for British department stores, Harvey Nichols (Fig. 7) and Selfridge (Fig. 8). Collings' work for these department stores is exemplary of the simplistic yet effective advertising skills Collings mastered while at Simpson with delicate and sweeping lines that characterize her work. The work for department store, Harvey Nichols consists of natural elements such as a rope strand, minimalistic clouds, and centrally-positioned plant individually provide lively touches while at the same time, working together to form a discrete face; the strand acting as the enclosing head, the clouds as eyes, and the plant as nose and lips. The dual nature of all of these forms further strengthen Dahl's whimsical touch to the work. Similarly, Collings' work for Selfridge's Christmas Fare List, whose bold green background shows illuminated Christmas tree branches, appears as a direct influence of Moholy-Nagy's experimentation with photograms, a technique that Collings would later exhibit in Australia as 'photographs without a camera'.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Dahl and Geoffrey Collings "Modern Industrial Art and Documentary Photos," 1939, exhibition catalogue, MAAS, Dahl and Geoffrey Collings Collection 92/191-22-7.

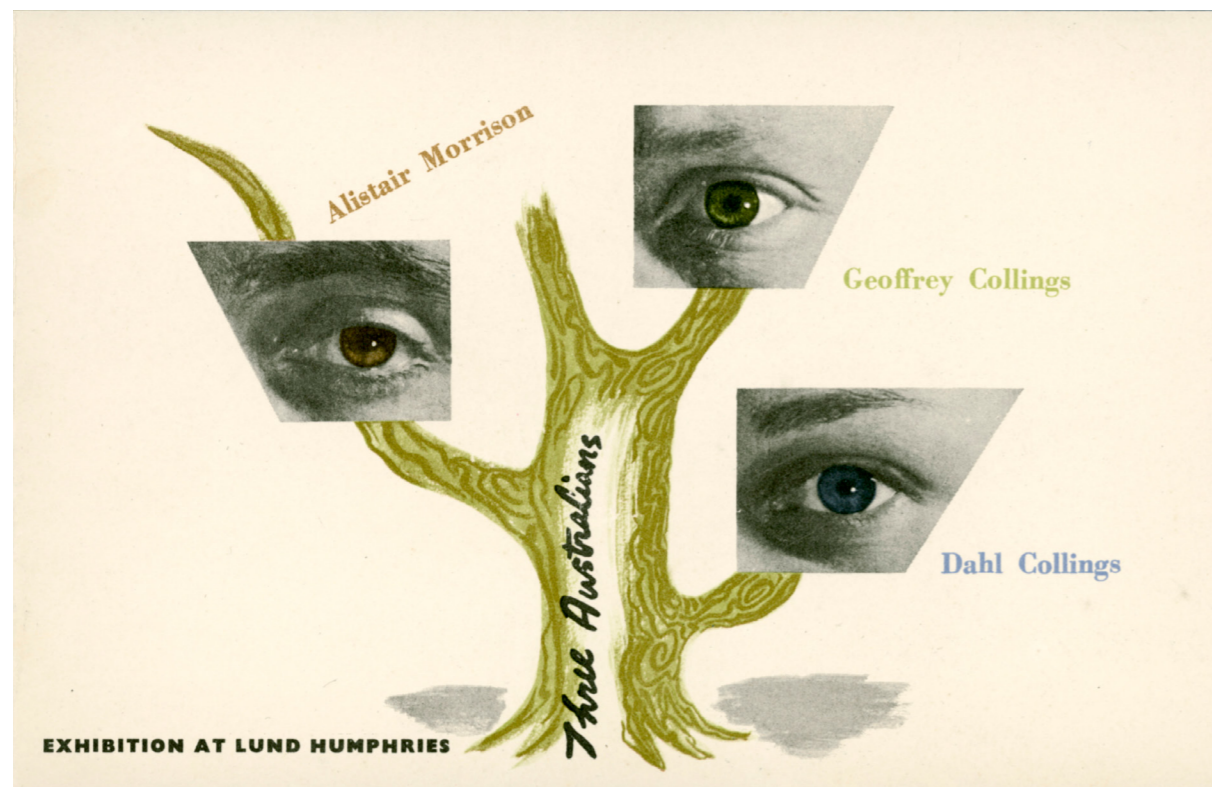


Fig. 9. Dahl and Geoffrey Collings and Alistair Morrison, Invitation, to exhibition "Three Australians", commercial art and photography, at Lund Humphries Gallery, London, 1938.

Courtesy of Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney. 92/191/22-1.

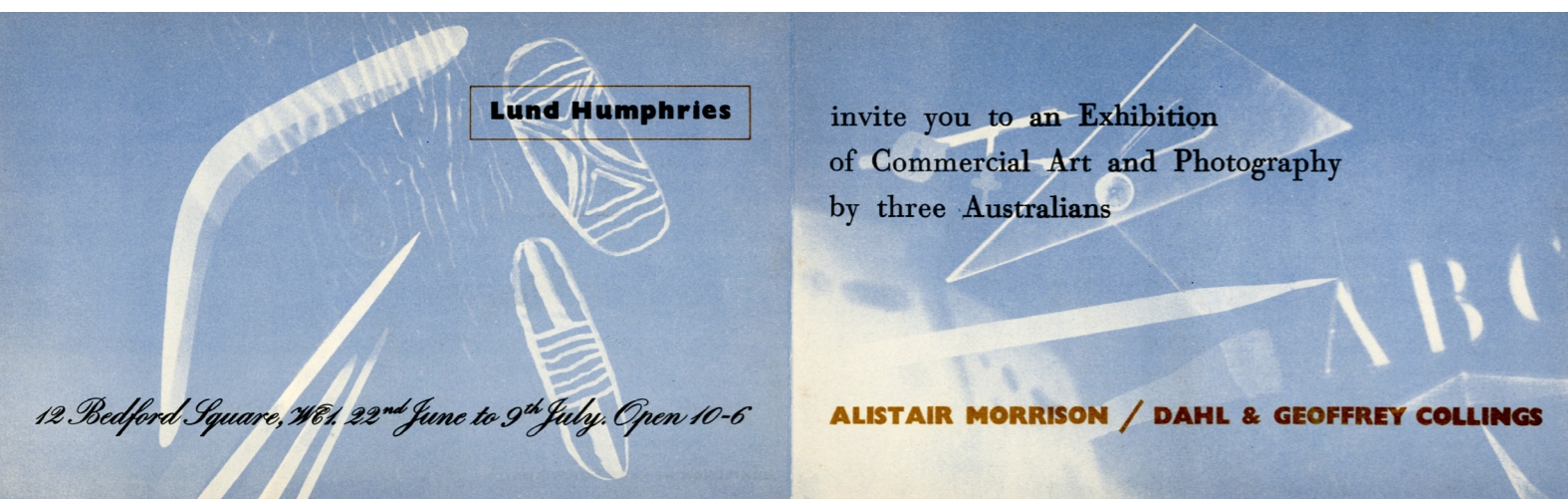


Fig. 10. Dahl and Geoffrey Collings and Alistair Morrison, Invitation, to exhibition "Three Australians", commercial art and photography, at Lund Humphries Gallery, London, 1938.

Courtesy of Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney. 92/191/22-1.

Before leaving London, Dahl Collings, Geoffrey Collings, and Alistair Morrison held the "Three Australians" exhibition consisting of commercial art and photography at the Lund Humphries gallery in London (Figs. 9 and 10). One variation for the invitation for the Lund Humphries Gallery (Fig. 10), demonstrates yet again the Collings' experimentation with photograms – a photographic technique Moholy-Nagy is extensively known for – while the other variant (Fig. 9) perhaps served as inspiration for Kepes' *Advance Guard of Advertising Artists* which he would produce a couple of years later in 1942.

On the brochure of the exhibition, established English poster artist, E. McKnight Kauffer, famous for his London Underground posters, wrote on the brochure for the exhibition:

We must get rid of the idea from our minds that Australia only stands for Sheep Farming, the Life of the Open Air, and Sports- especially cricket. Slowly and surely there are influences at work introducing other aspects of what might be called a more intellectual life. These Three Australian Artists are symptomatic of this gradual change: their approach to designing and photography is the same as in this country but it has the added attraction of simple directness, which seems to come from their affinity with the open air life of their own country. Their work is so interesting I am glad it is to be shown to the English public. I believe it is the first occasion upon which an exhibition of this kind has been devoted entirely to Australians.⁴⁵

Thus, Dahl Collings, along with her husband and Alistair Morrison, were able to leave London while at the same time leaving a part of themselves, their legacy, back in London. As promoters of not just modern art, but of a refined Australian aesthetic and elevation of artistic standards, the trio was not just able to benefit from Britain, but most significantly, add to it.

Dahl Collings can be viewed as a powerful icon of modernity and as a 'woman of the world'⁴⁶ through her cosmopolitan nature and travels to countries such as Tahiti, Spain, and America. As seen in an intimate capture by Geoffrey Collings (Fig. 1), Dahl stands assertively looking forward with a camera, a mechanical symbol of modernity, as if it were a natural extension of her physical human body. This photograph demonstrates a woman who is strong, fashionable, ambitious, and passionate - the very definition of who Dahl Collings is.

Dahl's pivotal engagement with the public sphere through her various active artistic roles in the 1930s, as well as the additional roles of both a mother and a wife during a time when a woman's traditional association with the fine arts kept her within the private sphere,⁴⁷ certainly demands recognition. Dahl Collings went against and denounced the mutually exclusive option of either having a marriage or a career. She had a marriage, two children, career aspirations, as well as a balanced partnership with her husband Geoffrey Collings. According to British modernist

45 Caban, *A Fine Line*, 73.

46 Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune*, 23.

47 Brian Head, *Intellectual Movements and Australian Society* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988), 146.

Richard Haughton James, with whom the Collings worked, Dahl and Geoffrey exemplify a model partnership of collaboration and support. The following is an excerpt by Haughton James:

As much as can be learned from the rough and tumble of technical training in art schools and studios, engraving plants and advertising agencies, big retail stores and display firms, they have between them. As much as can be learned by study, travel, and wide circle of contacts, they have too. They have made illustrations, posters and folders, designed window displays and made photographs without number for concerns whose name is legion. They have worked under the competitive stimulus of some of the best designers in Europe, and have ploughed lonely furrows in the hard, resisting clay of business depression. They have worked with the founders of the documentary film movement in London and made films themselves in Spain and Tahiti; they have had their work published as examples by 'Photographic' and 'Arts et Métiers Graphiques' in Paris, had their own public exhibition early this year in London, shown in Rotterdam in 1937, been written-up and reviewed in many publications... As plain producers of 'useful art' these people are the designers of our world.⁴⁸

Thus while Dahl and Geoffrey's marriage was a rare one, it certainly was a modern one in which marriage and artistic collaboration meant equal support for each other's artistic and intellectual endeavours so much so that they often co-signed works together, making it often impossible to accredit just one of them with a specific work. Geoffrey Collings and Dahl Collings were partners in both of the possible definitions a partnership can represent; one tied to professional teamwork, and simultaneously, one tied to the marital relationship.

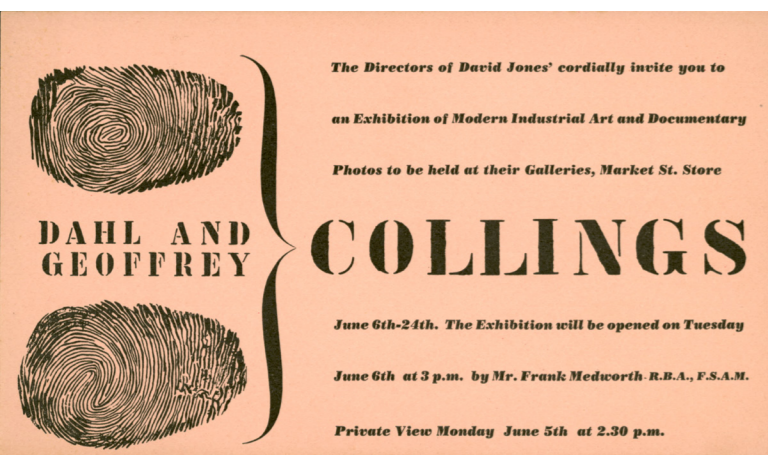


Fig. 11. Dahl and Geoffrey Collings, Invitation, to exhibition of industrial art and documentary photos, at the David Jones Gallery, 1939. Courtesy of Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney. 92/191-22/4.

It was not a direct flight back to Australia as the Collings made a few stops in Tahiti and Spain to pursue further artistic endeavours. Nonetheless, upon their return back to Sydney in 1939, along with British artist Richard Haughton James who had also worked in London and had succeeded Geoffrey Collings as art director of Erwin Wasey, the trio turned their attention to creating something that would complement their shared interest in industrial design by evoking the Bauhaus spirit of collaboration. The Design Centre was born in an attempt to introduce better industrial design standards in Australia. While at the Design Centre, the trio completed 'design models for

industry and provided art direction, graphics and exhibition work' while at the same time, collaborating with other Australian artists.⁴⁹ The two would go on to produce exhibitions for the 1939 Australia World Fair in New York and producing the Exhibition of Modern industrial Art and Documentary Photography at the David Jones' Gallery (Fig. 12), 'considered as one of the first of its kind in Sydney',⁵⁰ just within a few short years since their time in London. With decades of artistic ventures ensuing well until the 1960's, Dahl and Geoffrey continued developing and applying a modern eye that they adopted from the Bauhaus masters in London.

In conclusion, Dahl Collings was an artist who did not allow circumstances during her time to keep her from engaging in the arts from the late 1920s onwards. She had to pursue her career through Australia's hesitance against modernism, the world wars and the many ensuing conflicts, as well as through the Depression. This posed the greatest challenge for her as a woman artist because of the resistance to women assuming positions that were intended to be filled by male counterparts⁵¹ and the general belief that women should instead take on the role of 'home-maker' as a solution to the aftermath of the Depression. In every way modern, Dahl Collings rose above these challenges and throughout her life continued to exemplify the Modernity she had brought back to Australian soil in her suitcase contributing to Australian cultural and artistic production.



Fig. 12. Dahl Collings, gouache on paper. Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, / New York, USA, 1950-53. Courtesy of Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney. 92/191-16/5.

49 Caban, *A Fine Line*, 77.

50 Bogle, *Design in Australia*, 113.

51 Topliss, *Modernism and Feminism*, 38.

48 *Modern Industrial Art and Documentary Photos*, 1939, exhibition catalogue, MAAS, Dahl and Geoffrey Collings Collection 92/191-22-7.

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