

# The Artist's Piano: Parisian Self-portraits by Hugh Ramsay (1877–1906)

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In 1918 the Fine Art Society held an exhibition of the Australian artist Hugh Ramsay's work in Melbourne, in which a number of self-portraits—including the *Portrait of the Artist Standing before Easel* (see Fig. 1)—were displayed amongst the selected works. In the catalogue essay, Edward Vidler wrote in relation to the range of work on view: 'it is scarcely thinkable, with the evidence of his actual work before us, that he would have been content, like many of even the recognised masters, to repeat himself continuously either in the subjects or treatment of his canvases.'<sup>1</sup> Ramsay's enduring interest in the subject of the studio piano and his various interactions with it as an artist—be it formally, as a visual motif, or symbolically—thus deserve our consideration. This article will explore the role of the piano in three paintings Ramsay made during his time in Paris (a fifteen-month period from January 1901 onwards) and which are now held in the National Gallery of Victoria: *Portrait of the Artist Standing before Easel*, 1901 / 1902; *Self-portrait (Smoking in Front of Piano)*, 1901 / 1902; and *(Interior of Artist's Studio)*, 1901.<sup>2</sup> As renowned Ramsay scholar Patricia Fullerton has noted, throughout his career,

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<sup>1</sup> Edward A. Vidler, 'Hugh Ramsay: An Appreciation,' *The Art of Hugh Ramsay* (Melbourne: Fine Art Society, 1918), 12.

<sup>2</sup> The titles are taken from the National Gallery of Victoria's online catalogue. They align with those given by Patricia Fullerton in *Hugh Ramsay: His Life and Work* (Hawthorn, Vic.: Hudson Publishing, 1988). Fullerton in turn builds upon the work done by Patricia Gourlay in her MA thesis, 'Hugh Ramsay: A Consideration of His Life and Work' (University of Melbourne, 1966). Fullerton notes (p. 188) that the brackets indicate descriptive rather than firm titles.

**Figure 1.** Hugh Ramsay, *Portrait of the Artist Standing before Easel*, 1901 / 1902; oil on canvas, 128.0 x 86.4 cm; Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria. Bequest of the executors on behalf of Miss E. D. Ramsay, 1943. [[www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/2867/](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/2867/)]



'Ramsay had often sketched and painted himself. However, the many self-portraits done in his Paris studio reflect a new level of critical self-analysis and introspection.'<sup>3</sup> Ramsay's interest in painting himself within his studio, and also in painting his studio itself—the site of his creative production—is both characteristic of the period and demonstrates an engagement with contemporary discourses about 'the status of the *modern* artist' and 'the studio as the mirror of the artist and his works.'<sup>4</sup> Art historian Rachel Esner explores this topic in depth, acknowledging the recent surge of scholarly interest in self-portraits, artists' studios and identity construction. Her 2011 article 'Presence in Absence: The Empty Studio as Self-portrait' argues that in the hands of many nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists, such images 'may be said to be visual manifestations of the ideology of artistic autonomy.'<sup>5</sup> In light of this, and considering Ramsay's musical interests and abilities in relation to place and artistic context, this article will analyse the ways in which Ramsay portrays music as an integral part of his studio practice and propose that the piano is used as a visual device to fashion a particular artistic identity, akin to the position adopted by James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) and others at this time.

<sup>3</sup> Fullerton, *Hugh Ramsay: His Life and Work*, 72.

<sup>4</sup> Rachel Esner, 'Presence in Absence: The Empty Studio as Self-portrait,' *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 56, no. 2 (2011): 241–62 at 242 and 245.

<sup>5</sup> Esner, 'Presence in Absence,' 261.

To situate this study within the broader field of portraiture studies, we can turn to Shearer West's book, *Portraiture*, for the Oxford History of Art series. West writes that:

Portraits are not just likenesses but works of art that engage with *ideas of identity* ... 'Identity' can encompass the character, personality, social standing, relationships, profession, age, and gender of the portrait subject. These qualities are not fixed but are *expressive of the expectations and circumstances of the time* when the portrait was made ... although portraits depict individuals, it is often the typical or conventional—rather than unique—qualities of the subject that are stressed by the artist.<sup>6</sup>

About the specific genre of self-portraiture, West writes:

From an early stage ... artists realized they could project particular ideas about themselves. This deliberate 'self-fashioning' has rarely been absent. Artists have used self-portraiture as a means to perpetuate a view of themselves ... the individual became like an actor performing before an audience ... Because artists were conscious about their own status and where this placed them in the social hierarchy, they could use the tool of self-portraiture to enact roles that declared their aspirations.<sup>7</sup>

When we consider West's comments in relation to Ramsay's self-portraits, the following questions arise: first, why is the piano important to his identity and aspirations, and second, is he conveying himself as an individual, or as a type? The type in question here is the 'musical artist', as represented by Whistler and others of the period. Perhaps his self-fashioning combines individual truths as well as aspiration. As West explains, 'portraits can be placed on a continuum between the specificity of likeness and the generality of type, showing specific and distinctive aspects of the sitter as well as the more generic qualities valued in the sitter's milieu.'<sup>8</sup> This is certainly relevant to Ramsay's representations of himself in his studio. We know that he was musically trained and active, but also that he admired artists such as Whistler for whom music provided a model for artistic practice.

Fullerton writes that in January 1901, when Ramsay arrived in Paris, the influence of Whistler on the young Scottish-Australian artist 'was more pronounced ... than that of any living artist.'<sup>9</sup> His admiration for Whistler—the older artist by then nearing the end of his life—stemmed from Ramsay's studies during the 1890s at the National Gallery School in Melbourne. Here, Velázquez was seen as the 'supreme master,'<sup>10</sup> thanks in part to the director Bernard Hall's studies in 1870s London, the heyday of the Velázquez revival.<sup>11</sup> However, Fullerton also observes that 'Ramsay's admiration for Velázquez led him as a student to emulate the works of Whistler.'<sup>12</sup> Whistler's influence is apparent in Ramsay's approach to portraiture, and Ramsay also explored Whistler's method of painting from memory (just as a musician, having studied the work in great depth, might perform without the score).<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, along with many artists at this time, Ramsay adopted what was perceived to be Whistler's use of a restricted

<sup>6</sup> Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 11 [emphasis added].

<sup>7</sup> West, *Portraiture*, 173.

<sup>8</sup> West, *Portraiture*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Fullerton, *Hugh Ramsay: His Life and Work*, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Fullerton, *Hugh Ramsay: His Life and Work*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Fullerton, *Hugh Ramsay: His Life and Work*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Fullerton, *Hugh Ramsay: His Life and Work*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Fullerton, *Hugh Ramsay: His Life and Work*, 33.

colour palette to focus on harmony and tonal variation. As Mary Eagle writes in her book *The Art of Rupert Bunny*:

At the turn of the century Whistlerian gloom was very evident at the big exhibitions. Noting the ‘swarms’ of dark pictures in 1902, a young Australian painter, Hugh Ramsay, expressed himself indignant at a general misunderstanding about tonal painting. ‘Isn’t it an idiotic idea that tone means darkness? If these imitators studied Whistler, they’d see that he isn’t black at all, but, though low in key, quite full & rich & fine & silvery in quality.’<sup>14</sup>

Ramsay’s interest in Whistler was not unusual for an Australian artist of this period. In 1889 when Ramsay was 12, Tom Roberts (1856–1931)—who was twenty years his senior—and a small group of colleagues including Arthur Streeton (1867–1943), Charles Conder (1868–1909) and Frederick McCubbin (1855–1917)—who would later teach Ramsay drawing at the National Gallery School—had mounted a deliberately avant-garde, and Whistlerian, exhibition in Melbourne entitled the *9 by 5 Impression Exhibition*. Roberts had no doubt seen Whistler’s work in London in the 1880s, and he brought back to Melbourne a number of Whistler’s ideas, including his innovations in exhibition design, the small scale and plain framing of the artworks, the influence of *Japonisme*, and imagery and titles that were not intended to convey a narrative but instead asked the viewer to appreciate the formal qualities of the work. Paintings by Roberts that display these characteristics include *Cream and Black* (1889), *Andante* (1889) and *Grey Day in Spring, Venice* (1884).<sup>15</sup> As many scholars have already explained, Roberts’s portraiture also shows the influence of Whistler. Against this background, Hugh Ramsay might be considered a second-generation Australian follower of Whistler—one not only influenced by Whistler himself but also by a transplanted culture of Whistlerism in Australia.

Furthermore, Tom Roberts and his colleague Arthur Streeton were both keen musicians and enjoyed playing the American cabinet organ Roberts kept in his studio.<sup>16</sup> Much to the dismay of Sophie Osmond—the writer for *Table Talk*—the organ even made an appearance at the *9 by 5 Impression Exhibition*, with Roberts ‘eliciting the most dismal sounds from the instrument.’<sup>17</sup> Dismal or not, these artists were enacting the role of the ‘musical artist’ and—to return to West’s theories of portraiture mentioned earlier—were setting up, or performing, certain ‘ideas of identity’ about what it meant to be an artist at this time.

Another Australian artist relevant to our discussion is, of course, Rupert Bunny, who was depicted playing the piano by his friend Alastair Cary-Elwes (1866–1946) around 1887 (about one year after he arrived in Paris via England).<sup>18</sup> In the painting *Rupert Bunny* (now held in the National Gallery of Victoria) the sitter, aged approximately 21, appears serious and

<sup>14</sup> Hugh Ramsay letter to L. Bernard Hall, from London, 19 June 1902, L. Bernard Hall Papers, 2 BH 434, Australian National Gallery Research Library, Canberra; quoted in Mary Eagle, *The Art of Rupert Bunny* (Canberra: Australian National Gallery, 1991), 51.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas William Roberts, *Cream and Black*, 1889; oil on cedar panel, 26.6 x 16.9 cm; private collection. Roberts, *Andante*, 1889, oil on wood panel, 26.0 x 13.1 cm; Adelaide, Art Gallery of South Australia. Roberts, *Grey Day in Spring, Venice*, 1884; oil on wood panel, 11.3 x 20.2 cm; Canberra, National Gallery of Australia. I discuss these paintings, the influence of Whistler on Roberts, and Whistler’s interest in music in my article ‘Music and Cross-cultural Exchange in the Art of Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton and James McNeill Whistler,’ *Music in Art: International Journal for Music Iconography* 38, no. 1–2 (2013): 89–99.

<sup>16</sup> Terence Lane, *Australian Impressionism* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2007), 148.

<sup>17</sup> *Table Talk*, 16 Aug. 1889, 1, quoted in Lane, *Australian Impressionism*, 161.

<sup>18</sup> Alastair Cary-Elwes, *Rupert Bunny*, c. 1887; oil on canvas, 65.1 x 81.3 cm; Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.

earnest: neatly attired, he leans slightly inwards to carefully study the score. As in Ramsay's self-portraits, the piano here is an integral part of the studio space, and the sheet music piled on top melds with the displayed paintings in a happy clutter of artistic endeavour. While it is difficult to identify exactly what Bunny is playing, we know his musical interests and background were considerable. His mother Marie Wulsten (1828–1902) was passionate about music and was a friend of the renowned pianist and composer Clara Schumann (1819–1896).<sup>19</sup> In Melbourne, the city's 'cultivated elite' visited the family home, and Bunny later listed the names of twelve pianists he had met, including four who visited Melbourne: Arabella Goddard (in 1873 to 1874), Henri Kowalski (from 1880 until 1882), Max Vogrich (between 1881 and 1886) and Charles Hallé (in 1890). The other pianists, aside from Clara Schumann, were Artur Rubenstein (who toured Australia in 1937), Vladimir de Pachman, Hans von Bülow, Anna Esipova, Sophie Menter, Agnes Zimmermann and Count Géza Zichy.<sup>20</sup> When Bunny's mother and sister visited him in Europe for a period of eighteen months from 1889, he was reacquainted with Clara Schumann.<sup>21</sup>

Taught by his mother, Bunny was an accomplished pianist and also 'composed music on and off through most of his life.'<sup>22</sup> Eagle has explained that not only did his sketchbooks 'contain occasional bars of music' but also that in 1943 he wrote to Daryl Lindsay about composing music for three ballets, with a fourth on its way, and that he 'extended the musical idea to the way he painted.'<sup>23</sup> Of his series of twenty-one night balcony scenes entitled 'Days and Nights in August,' painted between 1907 and 1910, Eagle notes that:

there were critics who admired the formal qualities of these paintings, specifying, for instance, Bunny's use of pattern, his interest in light, his "rhythmic" organisation, the "cadences" of tone and the small touches of light and bright colour. The repetition of subject, model and format ... were found to be a vehicle for nuance by the formalists.<sup>24</sup>

These comments suggest that the critics understood that Bunny's paintings were *musical*, in the sense that they were to be appreciated for their formal qualities, over and above any sense of narrative. The musical titles Bunny gave the paintings—such as *The Distant Song* and *Nocturne*—informed the viewer of his intentions.<sup>25</sup> However, the overall theme of women listening to music was real—Bunny wrote of one painting, 'I called it "The Sonata" the idea being three women listening to music from the balcony of a room, which it really was, as a danish [*sic*] woman & a very fine pianist a friend of ours was playing the "moonlight sonata" [by Beethoven].'<sup>26</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Mary Eagle, *The Art of Rupert Bunny in the Australian National Gallery* (Canberra: Australian National Gallery, 1991), 2.

<sup>20</sup> Eagle, *Art of Rupert Bunny*, 2–3, and 235, note 16.

<sup>21</sup> Eagle, *Art of Rupert Bunny*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Eagle, *Art of Rupert Bunny*, 3, 154.

<sup>23</sup> Eagle, *Art of Rupert Bunny*, 74, 154. See also Desmond MacAuley and Bettina MacAulay, *Singing in the Heart: Music and the Art of Rupert Bunny* (Rockhampton: Rockhampton Art Gallery, 2007), 99–101, and 103–104.

<sup>24</sup> Eagle, *Art of Rupert Bunny*, 60, 72.

<sup>25</sup> *The Distant Song* [*Le chant lointain* or *The Distant Song 2*], c. 1908; oil on canvas, 220.2 x 180.5 cm; Canberra, National Gallery of Australia. *Nocturne* [*The Distant Song 1*], c. 1908; oil on canvas, 220.8 x 180.5 cm; Canberra, National Gallery of Australia. For a discussion of these titles and their meaning see MacAuley and MacAulay, *Singing in the Heart*, 61–5.

<sup>26</sup> Rupert Bunny to Kingsley Sutton, 14 Oct. 1945, Rupert Bunny File, Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, quoted in MacAuley and MacAulay, *Singing in the Heart*, 65.



Like Ramsay, Bunny had also painted Melba's portrait in 1901 to 1902,<sup>27</sup> as well as other Australian musicians in London at this time—notably the pianist-composer Percy Grainger (1882–1961) and the singer Ada Crossley (1871–1929).<sup>28</sup> This context of Australian musical artists, along with the influence of Whistler, provides the artistic backdrop for Ramsay's self-portraits with piano.

As other scholars have noted, Whistler's influence is readily apparent in many of Ramsay's paintings. For instance, the misty, nocturnal street scene *Lamplight* (1897) that Ramsay painted from memory, suggests the knowledge of Whistler's *Nocturnes*;<sup>29</sup> and his numerous portraits of women and girls in white dresses would seem to draw inspiration from Whistler's three *Symphonies in White*. In particular, the study of white-on-white, the inclusion of an animal skin rug and the two-figure composition of *The Sisters* (1904) has similarities with Whistler's *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* (1862) and *Symphony in White, No. 3* (1865–1867).<sup>30</sup>

The double portrait *Lady in Blue* (1902) has also been linked with Whistler's work, with Fullerton acknowledging the de-personalisation of the subjects through the title (in this case the sitters were Ramsay's Paris studio mate James MacDonald (1878–1952) and his American fiancée, the art student Maud Keller).<sup>31</sup> As Fullerton notes, Whistler's own portrait titles often included non-specific and, it should be added, musical, terms such as symphony, harmony, and arrangement, which often preceded the name of the sitter. In this way, Whistler—with his art-for-art's-sake aestheticism—directed the viewer's attention foremost to the formal qualities of the painting, such as the delicate colour harmony in *Harmony in Pink and Grey: Portrait of Lady Meux* (1881–1882).<sup>32</sup> At other times he omitted the musical term and the identity of the sitter altogether, in works such as *Rose et or: La Tulipe* (1893) and *Mother of Pearl and Silver: The Andalusian* (1888–1900) which capture his sister-in-law Ethel Birnie Philips from behind.<sup>33</sup> In these works, the identity of the sitter is secondary to the beauty of Whistler's subtle colour palette and the rendering of the dresses' fabrics and forms. Ramsay's use of the title *Lady in Blue* would seem to have been chosen with similar intentions—the violin resting on the small table and slightly truncated by the right frame, draws our attention to the 'musical' (that is, aesthetic) qualities of the painting. Through a dramatic handling of light and shade, Ramsay

<sup>27</sup> Ramsay, *Portrait Sketch of Nellie Melba*, 1902; oil on canvas, 59.0 x 50.0 cm; private collection. Ramsay, *Sketch of Nellie Melba*, 1902; oil on board, 35.0 x 27.0 cm; private collection. Colour plates of Ramsay's sketches of Melba are included in Patricia Fullerton, *Hugh Ramsay: 1877–1906* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1992), 62–3. Rupert Bunny, *Madame Melba*, 1901–1902; oil on canvas, 245.5 x 153.0 cm; Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.

<sup>28</sup> Bunny, *Ada Crossley*, c. 1903; oil on canvas, 202.7 x 130.7 cm; Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria. Bunny, *Percy Grainger*, c. 1902; oil on canvas, 99.2 x 83.6 cm; University of Melbourne, Grainger Museum.

<sup>29</sup> Ramsay, *Lamplight*, 1897; oil on canvas, 59.0 x 65.0 cm; private collection. A colour plate of this painting is included in Fullerton, *Hugh Ramsay: 1877–1906*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Ramsay, *The Sisters*, 1904; oil on canvas, 125.7 x 144.8 cm; Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales. James McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl*, 1862; oil on canvas, 213 x 108 cm; Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art. Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 3*, 1865–1867; oil on canvas, 52 x 76.5 cm; University of Birmingham, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts.

<sup>31</sup> Fullerton, *Hugh Ramsay: 1877–1906*, 61.

<sup>32</sup> Whistler, *Harmony in Pink and Grey: Portrait of Lady Meux*, 1881–1882; oil on canvas, 193.7 x 93 cm; New York, The Frick Collection.

<sup>33</sup> Whistler, *Rose et or: La Tulipe*, 1893; oil on canvas, 190.5 x 89 cm; University of Glasgow, Hunterian Art Gallery. Whistler, *Mother of Pearl and Silver: The Andalusian*, 1888–1900; oil on canvas, 191.5 x 89.8 cm; Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art.

creates a spotlight on the female figure seen in profile—the exaggerated effect suggesting the stage lighting of a musical or theatrical performance. While the somewhat mysterious relationship between the figures provides dramatic tension, Ramsay's primary concern would seem to be in capturing the shifting tonal variations of her dress.

The beauty and seriousness of purpose that characterises this musical image is somewhat at odds with the idea of music as light entertainment that is evident in a photograph of Ramsay playing the piano in his Montparnasse studio. In this image we see him performing in a theatrically exaggerated, nonsensical fashion, presumably accompanied by the raucous singing of James MacDonald and the American painter Frederick Frieseke (1874–1939).<sup>34</sup> Yet, in a letter of 1901 he wrote of working on a piano duet version of Mendelssohn's *Overture to Fingal's Cave* with McDonald: 'It's great but fairly difficile [*sic*] and we have to practice a bit.'<sup>35</sup> Recalling Ramsay's musicianship decades later, MacDonald—who was not only Ramsay's studio mate in Paris but had also been a fellow student at Melbourne's National Gallery School—wrote, 'Organ playing educated his natural sense of rhythm and made him keenly sensible to balance. His playing was rather hard and lean, but correct and time true, metronomic indeed until later in his short life.'<sup>36</sup> Raised in an authoritarian family, Ramsay's early musical education had shaped by the religious interests of his father; at the age of seventeen he became 'the organist and choirmaster at the local Congregational church in Ascot Vale.'<sup>37</sup> In Paris, according to Amy Lambert, 'Ramsay reduced his food rations to hire a piano and fed his soul on the hyacinths of Bach fugues.'<sup>38</sup> Its volume and expressive capabilities must have seemed luxurious after the tiny spinet that had been tucked away in the corner of Ramsay's Melbourne studio.<sup>39</sup>

Of course, the piano was quite a common item in nineteenth-century studios in Paris and London, just as it was in middle-class homes: it provided a focal point for convivial gatherings, and a means for light entertainment and serious music alike. The domestic piano, and its portrayal in visual art, has been the subject of rich and significant interpretations by the American scholar Richard Leppert.<sup>40</sup> In the studio setting the piano could be used simply to entertain models or visitors, or—for those with more discerning musical interests—to communicate the latest musical ideas. Whistler, for instance, was happy to accommodate the little-known pianist Horace Jee as an occasional secretary and rather unreliable entertainer.<sup>41</sup> It is presumably Jee that Whistler's biographers, the Pennells, refer to when they describe a man who 'came to dine one evening and, asking to stay over night, remained three years'!<sup>42</sup> Whistler explained to them:

<sup>34</sup> The photo is included in Fullerton, *Hugh Ramsay: 1877–1906*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Ramsay to Madge Ramsay, 12 Dec. 1901, quoted in Fullerton, *Hugh Ramsay: His Life and Work*, 60.

<sup>36</sup> J.S. MacDonald, 'A Great Australian Artist: Triumph and Tragedy of Hugh Ramsay,' *Age*, 13 Mar. 1943, quoted in Fullerton, *Hugh Ramsay: His Life and Work*, 138, note 17.

<sup>37</sup> Fullerton, *Hugh Ramsay: His Life and Work*, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Fullerton, *Hugh Ramsay: 1877–1906*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> A photo of his Melbourne studio is included in Fullerton, *Hugh Ramsay: His Life and Work*, 40.

<sup>40</sup> See for instance, Richard Leppert, 'Sexual Identity, Death, and the Family Piano,' *19th-Century Music*, 16, no. 2 (1992): 105–28; and Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>41</sup> 'Horace Jee, 1840/1850–??,' published in the online edition of *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler, 1855–1903*, ed. Margaret F. MacDonald, Patricia de Montfort and Nigel Thorp, University of Glasgow (hereafter G UW), accessed 15 Dec. 2017, <http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence>.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Robins Pennell and Joseph Pennell, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler* (London: William Heinemann; Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1908), vol. 1, 182.

he was a genius, a musician, the first of the 'AEsthetes,' [sic] before the silly name was invented. He hadn't anything to do—he didn't do anything for me—but decorate the dinner-table, arrange the flowers, and then play the piano, and talk, and make himself amiable ... At moments my mother objected to such a loafer about the house. And I would say to her—'well—but—my dear mummy, who else is there to whom we could say, play, and he would play; and, stop playing, and he would stop playing right away!'<sup>43</sup>

In a letter of 1875, Whistler wrote of one studio model: 'I fear she must have found that day in the Studio rather a dull one—for Horace who might have relieved the monotony of work with his piano did not turn up until the next day!'<sup>44</sup>

A deeper level of musical engagement is conveyed through Frédéric Bazille's 1870 painting of the studio he shared with Renoir, which shows a small piano placed in the corner of a spacious studio filled with lively discussion.<sup>45</sup> As the Musée d'Orsay's website explains, the painting conveys the close association between Bazille, Manet, Monet and Renoir, by depicting specific people and artworks refused by the Salon.<sup>46</sup> At the piano sits Bazille's friend Edmond Maître, a supporter of Wagner whose music and theories Bazille, Manet, Renoir and many other artists of the time greatly admired.<sup>47</sup>

Of course, by Ramsay's time in Paris the gramophone (or phonograph) was beginning to assert itself, and recorded music would eventually surpass live performance in the home and studio. We know that Whistler for instance owned a gramophone in Paris, for in 1899 he wrote from Paris to his publisher William Heinemann in London asking if Heinemann would purchase for him 'the registering part.' Giving him the name and address of the company he wrote:

Don't you think you might go there and get it for me?—I suppose it attaches to the machine I have—But in any case, if it be altogether a separate instrument, I want it! —You see if I had it, I could put it in the Academie, and everything would be recorded—and by and bye [sic] you could bring out the "Whistler Cours" in a wonderful book! —and what an amazing thing that would be! —Don't [sic] say anything about it—but do see about it—I shall try in Paris too—but I may not find it.<sup>48</sup>

It is against this backdrop that we will now focus upon Ramsay's interest in his studio piano.

In the life-size *Self-portrait (Smoking in Front of Piano)* shown in Figure 2, Ramsay's upright posture lends order to the working clutter of the studio setting, which is emphasised by the tight cropping of the scene. The close perspective lends intimacy to the composition, placing the viewer in the studio. Lit from the right, the daylight illuminates Ramsay's face and the sheet music open on the piano's music stand. A half-spent candle symbolises the hours he has spent playing. He conveys himself in a moment of repose positioned between 'music' and

<sup>43</sup> Pennell and Pennell, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler*, vol. 1, 182. The Pennells do not provide an exact date for this quote, but include it in Chapter 15, 'The Open Door. The Year Eighteen Hundred and Seventy-Four and After.'

<sup>44</sup> Whistler to Frances Leyland, [18/25 Sept. 1875], Pennell-Whistler Collection [hereafter PWC] 2/16/1, Washington DC, Library of Congress, GUV 08053, accessed 11 Dec. 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Frédéric Bazille, *Bazille's Studio*, 1870; oil on canvas, 98 x 128.5 cm; Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

<sup>46</sup> 'Frédéric Bazille: *Bazille's Studio*,' Musée d'Orsay, accessed 6 Dec. 2017, [http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire/commentaire\\_id/latelier-de-bazille-11400.html?no\\_cache=1](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire/commentaire_id/latelier-de-bazille-11400.html?no_cache=1)

<sup>47</sup> Kermit Swiler Champa, 'Concert Music: The Master Model for Radical Painting in France, 1830–1890,' *Imago Musicae* 16–17 (1999): 211.

<sup>48</sup> Whistler to William Heinemann, [Jan/Apr. 1899], PWC, GUV 08801, accessed 12 Dec. 2017.



**Figure 2.** Hugh Ramsay, *Self-portrait (Smoking in front of Piano)*, 1901 / 1902; oil on canvas, 169.5 x 111.2 cm; Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria. Felton Bequest, 1906. [[www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/2866/](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/2866/)]



'painting' (symbolised by the equipment on the low table in front of him), suggesting two possible interpretations: either that the two artforms are equally important to him (note the considerable space taken up by the piano, the close stacking of the canvases against the wall, and the way in which he positions himself in front of the piano); or that he is about to choose between them. There is a strong sense of clarity and order in this image—the frames above the piano provide geometric shapes that are articulated by the light hitting their edges, and the structure of the piano, including its keys, is well defined. Indeed, Fullerton comments upon 'the strident white line of the piano keyboard and the square white block of the music sheet, which acts as a pictorial foil.'<sup>49</sup> Ramsay presents himself as well groomed and prosperous; his hair is neatly combed to the side, his jacket looks new and warm, and he wears a scarf around his neck at a jaunty angle. Such a positive representation of himself concurs with Esner's argument that the prevalence at this time of depictions of artists in their studios reflects an awareness of 'the need to exhibit and sell not only one's works, but also oneself, while simultaneously

<sup>49</sup> Fullerton, *Hugh Ramsay: His Life and Work*, 75.

maintaining the guise of the autonomous and self-expressive individual (genius).<sup>50</sup> Connected with this was the trope—perpetuated in literature of the period and by the artists themselves—that the sight of the studio offered insight into the artist's mind and work.<sup>51</sup>

*Portrait of the Artist Standing before Easel* (see Fig. 1) is, in contrast, an image of action—Ramsay occupies a performative space framed by his two arts (the piano and the easel). Light shining on his left shoulder and back, and on his arm holding the brush, highlights Ramsay, the performer. The large size of this painting commands the viewer's attention and indicates the importance Ramsay placed upon the work. It also enables the artist to create an impressive sense of depth, giving an awareness of the studio space in which he stands. The viewer is positioned further back—separated from the artist's workspace—and could perhaps be the subject that he paints: when seen in the gallery, the image comes into focus from a distance, and perhaps most successfully from the left side, as if we are standing diagonally from the artist.

Reminiscent of Whistler, who famously used long-handled brushes, Ramsay appears to turn to the viewer between brushstrokes—he is poised to paint, with one leg in front of the other and his shirt sleeves rolled up, and the brushes or palette in his right-hand are blurred by movement. Similarly the piano is a scene of action—the chair is turned at an angle as if someone (perhaps the artist) has just moved away from the instrument, and extra items piled on top of the piano suggest a casual playing though of music. The viewer's attention is drawn to the piano through formal devices: a diagonal line connects the base of the easel with Ramsay's feet and the piano's edge, which is truncated by the right frame; the three elements (painting, Ramsay and piano) are similarly connected by their eye-catching white highlights. By hiding the picture on the easel from the viewer, this obscuring of the painting's subject matter also draws our attention to the piano—where the keyboard and sheet music (the 'active' parts) are fully visible.

In the small oil painting known as (*Interior of Artist's Studio*), shown in Figure 3, Ramsay omits himself as subject and adopts a lighter, warmer palette to depict the studio as an inviting sanctuary for music and art. Art historian Jaynie Anderson has suggested that this image might be considered in relation to other nineteenth-century paintings that capture and portray the ambience of artists' studios: 'Sometimes these portraits were drawings of the milieu without the man, his possessions being his still life, such as the romantic representations of his studio in moonlight by Carl Gustav Carus in 1826 (Karlsruhe), or Adolph Menzel's *Bedroom of the Artist* [1847] (Berlin) or most famous of all Van Gogh's *Chair* [1888] (London).'<sup>52</sup> In this regard, the research of Esner is directly relevant to contextualising and interpreting Ramsay's (*Interior of Artist's Studio*). Esner argues that in images of the studio devoid of actual people, the artist's presence is not only implied but is 'visually embodied' through commonly depicted objects such as the artist's chair and tools.<sup>53</sup> She writes that in 'nearly every instance, the chair appears to have been pushed back, as if the artist has just got up.' Indeed, in (*Interior of Artist's Studio*)

<sup>50</sup> Esner, 'Presence in Absence,' 242–3.

<sup>51</sup> Esner, 'Presence in Absence,' 245–7.

<sup>52</sup> Jaynie Anderson, email to author, 8 Nov. 2017; and Donat de Chapeaurouge, 'Das Milieu als Porträt,' *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 22 (1960): 137–58. I am very grateful to Professor Anderson for sharing her insights with me in person and through email.

<sup>53</sup> Esner, 'Presence in Absence,' 261.

Figure 3: Hugh Ramsay, (*Interior of artist's studio*), 1901; oil on canvas, 41.0 x 32.8 cm; Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria. Presented through the NGV Foundation by the Estate of Mr John Wicking, Honorary Life Benefactor, 2003. [[www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/73888/](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/73888/)]



the chair is at a more pronounced angle than in *Portrait of the Artist Standing before Easel*. Emphasised by the light from the left, a pile of books or sheet music on a second chair also invites consideration.

It is interesting that Ramsay has omitted his brushes and instead draws the viewer's eye once more to the piano, which is placed in the centre of the image, to the right of the canvas (where we might have expected to see his tools). Again, Ramsay uses the device of the diagonal line between the easel and the chair legs to direct our attention to the instrument. Like the artist's brushes, the piano is a tool for self-expression: as an object that invites both touch and listening, it can signify the artist's hands as well as his ears. In this painting, the artist's embodied eye (and indeed his body itself) is signified by the specific viewpoint he has chosen to paint—that taken from his position in front of the easel.

Unlike in *Portrait of the Artist Standing before Easel*, the canvas here is in full view—yet, it is almost blank, merely a study in tonal variation. Formally it contributes a bold mass to the composition, which might be considered a study in shapes, line and tones. But the overlapping of canvas and the piano is interesting: is the amalgamation of—or interrelationship between—painting and music the subject of this small painting? Certainly, it would seem to be a deliberate

juxtaposition and a considered artistic statement: Ramsay's display of the front of the canvas to the viewer is quite unique within this specific genre. Esner has observed that in all 'the empty studio images [she has studied] the easel is either empty or turned away, whilst the canvas, too, demonstratively presents either its side or back to the viewer.'<sup>54</sup> Instead of withholding himself and his subject matter from the viewer, Ramsay makes clear his artistic stance.

As Fullerton recounts, music was an interest Ramsay pursued throughout his short life. She writes that:

Even before going to school Ramsay displayed particular gifts for music and painting ... Ramsay taught himself to read and write music and could play the organ, flute, piano and violin before he left school. It has been said he could have been equally successful as a musician had he chosen that as his vocation. He chose art.<sup>55</sup>

To return then to West's comment that artists 'could use the tool of self-portraiture to enact roles that declared their aspirations',<sup>56</sup> these images of Ramsay and his studio space convey the almost equal importance he placed on art and music, and his positioning of himself as a 'musical artist'—both in the sense of his own musical interests and capabilities, but also in sympathy with the many artists of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries who practised Walter Pater's dictum, 'all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.'<sup>57</sup>

#### About the author

Arabella Tenniswood-Harvey is a pianist and art historian. Her research focuses on music in visual culture, and the topics of her publications in this field include the art of James McNeill Whistler, ANZAC imagery, and late nineteenth-century Australian art. She is currently Senior Lecturer and Coordinator of Classical Performance at the Conservatorium of Music, University of Tasmania, and has released a number of CDs on Move Records.

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<sup>54</sup> Esner, 'Presence in Absence,' 259.

<sup>55</sup> Fullerton, *Hugh Ramsay: His Life and Work*, 6.

<sup>56</sup> West, *Portraiture*, 173.

<sup>57</sup> Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, 1893, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 106.