

An artist with ‘an acute sense of the poetic in nature’: the landscape painter Victor Zelman (1877-1958), by Volkhard Wehner

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Every district boasts some outstanding present or former residents. We in Boroondara are privileged to have had a distinguished family associated with our area: the remarkable Zelman family.

In this article, following some general observations about the Zelmans, I will endeavour to throw some light on the life and activities of one member of this family, Victor Zelman, a man endowed with great talent in two different fields: in music, especially the violin, and in painting. While in later life Victor became closely connected with the Daylesford and Hepburn district, I propose to examine what connection his work as a painter also links him with the area in which he spent much of his childhood and early middle-age, namely the area now comprised by the City of Boroondara.

Alberto Zelman, Victor's father, had immigrated to Australia from Trieste in 1871. At that time Trieste was part of the Habsburg Empire, a vast multinational conglomerate of German, Italian, Hungarian, Jewish, various Slavic and Turkish peoples. The empire's thriving musical tradition was not only confined to its German-speaking regions like Vienna and Salzburg but it also existed elsewhere, including in northern Italy and the regions along the Adriatic coast. There is considerable uncertainty about Alberto's ethnic origins, which might have been Italian or possibly Jewish. In an interview in the journal *Tabletalk* Alberto, the senior Alberto's eldest son, may have deliberately blurred the family's origins by claiming that an ancestor, a Florentine nobleman and poet who was involved in revolutionary activities in Italy, was being pursued by the police, fled to Trieste, and changed his name.¹

The senior Alberto (1832-1907) had trained as a musician and had worked as a conductor, composer and music teacher in various parts of the Habsburg Empire. His work later took him to India, and subsequently to Australia. Following his arrival in Sydney in 1871 he went on a tour of Australia and New Zealand as conductor of an Italian opera company before eventually settling in Melbourne in 1872 where in late 1873 he married a local musician, Eliza Hodgkinson. By 1874, when his first son Alberto junior was born, he lived in North Melbourne, but in the following years he changed his residence almost annually: in 1877, by the time his second son Victor was born, he was at 13 Carlton Street, Carlton, and he remained in Carlton until 1881: at 29 Drummond Street (1878), at 4 Drummond Street (1879), at Faraday Street (1880), and at 308 Lygon Street (1881), before moving to Rose Street, Richmond, for the following three years. After he eventually came to Hawthorn in 1885 (Evansdale Road), it took another move to Majores Street (1887) before he finally settled for good in Albert Street in 1888. Almost from the time of his arrival he became popular as a piano teacher, composer, and conductor, especially of the numerous opera seasons of Lyster's Italian opera company. Following the death of Julius Siede, in 1889 he briefly acted as the conductor of the famous choral society, the Melbourne Liedertafel. His four sons were born between 1874 and 1880. Two of them are of particular interest in this narrative, namely his eldest son Alberto (1874-1927) and his second, Victor.

All four Zelman sons received their musical education from their father. The younger Alberto, highly gifted, became a violinist. In due course he embarked on a stellar career as a violinist, conductor, and founder of the Albert Street Conservatorium Orchestra, the predecessor of the Melbourne Philharmonic Orchestra. Alberto, and later also Victor and the two younger brothers, attended Kings College in Nicholson Street, Fitzroy. After their parents' move to Hawthorn the boys possibly stayed on as boarders but later, especially following the re-location of Kings College to North Terrace in Clifton Hill in 1893, the younger ones transferred to various Hawthorn state schools. Quite early in his life Victor had

chosen the violin and viola as his specialty, and after leaving school, he performed with several small chamber orchestras. All early newspaper references to him relate to his musical performances, principally as violinist.

We have little documentation about most of Victor's early life and general education. It may come as a surprise that this already accomplished young musician in 1897 enrolled at the National Gallery School to study drawing and painting. Records show that he attended the school until 1901, possibly part-time. It has been suggested that a photograph of the entire art class including its teachers, taken sometime in the late 1890s and reproduced in an article in the *Argus* on 5 April 1941, includes the face of a youthful Victor Zelman among the sixty or more faces shown. However, that could not be proven, despite being able to consult an annotated copy of that photograph held by the University of Melbourne Archives. Teachers and future prominent artists that can be identified include Fred McCubbin, George Bell, Max Meldrum, Victor Cobb, Margaret Preston and others.² Frederick McCubbin, one of the leading impressionists, and the successful all-round artist John Mather, were among Victor's teachers. Mather may have taught him the art of etching. Art historian Margaret Dillon, who has researched Victor's life in considerable detail, observes that Victor's work clearly shows McCubbin's influence.

Until 1904, Victor's name is mentioned in various newspaper notices solely connected with musical events in which he participated. We can, however, assume that he also devoted a good deal of time to his painting. Dillon surmises that very likely he exhibited some of his early paintings in various group exhibitions.

In May 1898 newspapers report that Victor had suffered a serious cycling accident though he appears to have recovered fairly quickly. Reports of his activities in the ensuing few years are scarce, though a newspaper report in 1899, indexed in the *Trove* database, indicates that he and his brother Alberto, with two other musicians, had formed the Zelman Quartett, and it is very likely that they regularly performed in public.

In January 1908 a newspaper reports that jointly with Alberto, Victor had been appointed executor of his father's will, the elder Alberto having died only a few days earlier at his home in East Hawthorn, which at the time was usually referred to as Auburn.

Victor's younger brother Ernest in 1903 had married Blanche Borsa, the daughter of an enterprising Swiss-Italian immigrant family at Hepburn Springs, and as the result of Victor's frequent visits to Hepburn he became quite attached to Blanche's sister Clara. They eventually married in 1907 and set up home at 'Mirabella,' 62 Wattle Valley Road, Canterbury, though frequently visiting Blanche and Ernest and even building a small holiday cottage for themselves at Hepburn Springs where Victor established a studio around 1910. Until 1931, when they permanently moved to Hepburn, Canterbury remained their principal home, though Victor was often away painting and sketching in various parts of Victoria.

For most of his Canterbury years, according to records held at Xavier College, Kew, Victor occupied the post of Music Master at that college, in charge of teaching the piano (not the violin!). Very likely this was a part-time position, while performing as a musician and painting were his main activities. From 1919 onwards he regularly exhibited with the Victorian Artists' Society, and later with the Fine Arts Society. 'His colourful, picturesque landscapes [became] popular during the 1920s,' notes McCulloch in his *Encyclopedia of Australian Art* (p.1052). He held his first solo exhibition in Melbourne in 1923, another in 1925, while also showing his work in Sydney (1925) and even at the British Empire Exhibition in England (1924-5). In a spreadsheet Dr Dillon documents 212 oil paintings, 11 watercolour works and 17 etchings. With the exception of the etchings, many of which are dated from the 1930s, the majority of the oils appear to have been painted in the 1920s. One single canvas bears an earlier date (1916). This leads to an assumption that Victor's entire

early work—which doubtlessly existed and must have been substantial—was either donated to friends or family, sold outside conventional trade channels, or has been lost.

In 1908 *The Xaverian* school magazine, published by Xavier College, for the first time mentioned ‘Signor Zelman’ as one of the school’s ‘lay masters—Music’ (p.48). In subsequent years the magazine also makes reference to the ‘Mr Victor Zelman Prize,’ which was awarded almost annually to students of the piano. Victor’s connection with Xavier College eventually ended in 1931. The editorial of the magazine in that year notes that ‘the historic figure, Mr Victor Zelman, who had been Music Master for so many years, left us.’ The magazine then followed this up with a brief article headed ‘Mr Victor Zelman’ which was accompanied by Victor’s photograph. It runs thus:

Mr. Victor Zelman left us this year after 29 years on the College staff as Music Master. We had indeed grown accustomed to seeing him come in every morning at 8.30, and had come to admire the patience it required to listen to our faltering efforts on the piano. But his patience was rewarded and some splendid musicians passed through his hands. Mr Zelman has now retired to the seclusion of Hepburn Springs, where he has built himself a home and where he continues a life-long interest in painting. We have seen many of his works on exhibition in Melbourne, and he is now represented in the National Gallery by a landscape painting ‘The Promise of Spring.’ We wish him many years of happiness in his work.



Dr Dillon observes that ‘very little information exists in the public domain about Victor Zelman. There appears to be no collection of letters, sketchbooks, notebooks or other memorabilia in any major library or archives. This is unusual as he was likely to use sketchbooks to capture...images which could later form the inspiration for the etchings he did in his studio.’ This lack of information also explains why it is difficult to determine where many of his canvases were painted, though we know that, like many other artists, he moved all over Victoria in search of ‘picturesque’ vantage points. For most of his doings we are limited to snippets appearing in newspapers, many of them quite trivial. In 1911, for example, Clara Zelman was involved in an incident where, for no apparent reason, vitriol was thrown at her, fortunately only damaging her clothes. In 1913 reference is made to one of Victor’s paintings being in the collection of a Mr Harpur Bell, who was considering lending some of his pictures to the Castlemaine gallery. What appears to be a final reference to his work as a musician is an article in the satirical journal *Punch* in 1918 that mentions a performance of the *Victor Zelman Band* at the Flemington races. All later mentions of Victor relate to his painting and to art exhibitions in which he participated.

Victor’s output was considerable. It consisted largely of oil paintings of various sizes while etchings and water colours form only a small part of his work. He adopted a style that fitted somewhere in between impressionism—a style that had dominated Australian art since the Heidelberg art movement of the late 19th century—and realism, a style some writers refer to as *traditionalism*. By concentrating on landscapes he chose a subject that was popular among the art-buying Melbourne public prior to the ‘new

wave' of modernism that swept the art world from the early 1930s onwards. All this ensured that Victor's work was much admired, with the result that his earnings from art sales were considerable. Dillon estimates that in 1925 alone he might have grossed £435, in today's terms almost \$38,000. His 1923 and 1925 one-man exhibitions in the City were very successful, and the critics generally approved, even applauded his work. The Melbourne *Herald* art critic Archibald Colquhoun observed Victor's 'acute sense of the poetic in nature.' In 1925 J.S. MacDonald described his exhibition as 'a very good showing,' noting the artist's 'tenderness' and 'love of nature.' Throughout the 1920s we find similar verdicts and only few serious criticisms, though after 1925 Victor's work was mostly presented in group exhibitions rather than solo shows.

In due course his work, though largely bought by private collectors, also found its way into a number of public galleries including the NGV, the Geelong, Castlemaine, Benalla and Bathurst galleries, and eventually also the Australian National Gallery.

To attempt to single out from his large *oeuvre* the paintings, etchings and watercolours relating to the region where they were painted—in our case a location in or near Boroondara—poses a major problem because with the exception of paintings done around Hepburn, where he permanently settled in 1931, Victor usually gave them generic names like 'Settler's cottage,' 'Cattles grazing in treed landscape,' 'Sheep in paddock,' 'Landscape,' 'The haycart,' 'Nocturne,' or similar. This makes it impossible to determine the location. As noted before, Dillon lists a total of 212 paintings, 11 watercolour paintings and 17 etchings by this artist which have been recorded. There may be many more. *Artnet*, the *Australian and New Zealand Art Sales Digest* (which lists 146 of his works), various digitized listings by galleries, as well as *Wikipedia* list, and in some cases reproduce, individual works on the Web. From among these only four bear titles that can be safely associated with Boroondara and areas nearby. No doubt there could be more, though without documentation—as noted by Dillon—this is an impossible task. This writer's attempt in seeking help from local residents, published in the *Burwood Bulletin*, yielded not a single response.

Among the four paintings is an untitled work of a small church, originally built in 1857 and located close to the borders of Camberwell, Canterbury and Surrey Hills. It was known as St Brigid's Roman Catholic church (c. 1900). The three others are 'Spring day, Burwood' (undated and sold at auction in 2015); 'Ashburton' (c.1925); and 'View of Canterbury' (undated, listed in *Australian and New Zealand Art Sales Digest*).



Untitled painting of St Brigid's church by Victor Zelman, reproduced courtesy Surrey Hills Neighbourhood Centre Heritage Collection

A somewhat enigmatic note on the back of the picture by a later owner, who donated it to the Surrey Hills Neighbourhood Centre Heritage Collection, makes the puzzling comment that the artist had donated it to Henry and Annie Leigh 'in return for hospitality.' The Leighs at various times had homes at Camberwell, Canterbury and Surrey Hills. Their one-time

The picture depicting the little church of St Brigid's bears all the hallmarks of a very early painting. It is simple and shows an early, somewhat undeveloped style, yet it is charming and evocative, and what's more, it represents a rare pictorial record of the area around 1900—a characteristic rarely found in this artist's work. Its small format (17.4 x 31.8)—not very common in Victor's later, recorded, work, appears to corroborate the early

Canterbury home, in Balwyn Road, was only a few hundred metres from Victor's home in Wattle Valley Road, Canterbury, and it is not unreasonable to assume that they and Victor were acquainted, or possibly even friends. However, the reference to 'hospitality' is difficult to explain. Sue Barnett of the Surrey Hills Historical Society, the present owner of the painting, has established that Annie Leigh's family, the Becketts, had close connections with Surrey Hills. Sands and McDougall's *Directory* shows that between 1908 and 1930 Annie Leigh's residence (but not that of her husband Henry), is given as Montrose Street, Surrey Hills, which is fairly close to where the church stood. However, no plausible explanation can be provided concerning the 'hospitality' comment by the previous owner of the painting, Alan Holt.

The second picture, 'Spring day, Burwood' (shown below), was painted in Victor's usual 'traditionalist' style. What it has in common with other impressionist works is that it shares the impressionists' predilection for representing 'everyday' subjects and scenes. It



possibly dates from the early 1920s. Its whereabouts are unknown, and the auction house putting it up for sale has ceased to exist.

Almost nothing is known about the other two paintings. The work entitled 'Ashburton' is listed in the Fine Art Society of Melbourne's catalogue *Exhibition of Oil Paintings by Victor Zelman* in April 1925 with a 10 guineas price tag. No other information is given and its present owner is unknown. Dillon includes the fourth work, 'View of Canterbury,' in a spreadsheet headed *Victor Zelman. Complete list of paintings*

(2020), but she is unable to provide any additional information. As in the case of the other two, this painting's whereabouts are also unknown.

To summarize, Victor Zelman was a gifted popular and prolific 'regional' artist, and without doubt, despite the small number of paintings that can be specifically associated with the area around Boroondara, he can be claimed as one of our local painters who, after all, had lived and worked well over forty years in this district.

Notes

¹ 'Alberto Zelman; a distinguished musician.' In *Tabletalk*, 16 September, 1926, p.8

² 'When Australian art was in its sturdy youth,' by Jo Sweatman. In *Argus*, 5 April, 1941, p.4; annotated newspaper article catalogued as 'Students at the National Gallery of Victoria Art School in Melbourne' [ca.] 1895, National Gallery School Collection, University of Melbourne Archives, 2007.0060.00019. See also *Wikipedia*, 'Victor Zelman', Note 3

The author is deeply indebted to Dr Margaret (Meg) Dillon for providing access to her extensive writings on Victor Zelman and the Zelman family as well as for her helpful replies to a number of emails. Catherine Hall of Xavier College provided most useful details from historical issues of *The Xaverian* school magazine including a photograph of Victor Zelman as well as granting permission to use these in this article. Sue Barnett of Surrey Hills Historical Society kindly gave permission to use the picture of St. Brigid's church as well as her own research into the history of this painting. Jane Beattie of University of Melbourne Archives provided useful advice as well as an annotated picture of the students and staff of the National Gallery Art School for this writer to examine. The enthusiastic help of the editor of *The Burwood Bulletin*, Raine Biancalt, was much appreciated. Very useful information was gleaned in *The New McCulloch's Encyclopedia of Australian Art* (article on Victor Zelman), the National Library of Australia's *Trove Newspapers* database (various newspapers), Sands and McDougall's *Directory of Victoria*, the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (various entries), as well as several other published and digitized publications. Max Zelman and Richard and Graham Sellars-Jones kindly shared with me some interesting personal views on Victor Zelman's life and work.

NB Despite efforts by the author, ownership of the painting 'Spring Day, Burwood' could not be established and therefore cannot be acknowledged.

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