RA

Australia

An Introduction to the Exhibition for Teachers and Students

Australia

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Main Galleries
21 September – 8 December 2013

Exhibition organised with
the National Gallery of Australia

Supported by
Qantas Airways – The Spirit of Australia

Supported by
The Campaign for Wool

Cover: Cat. 197, Shaun Gladwell, *Approach to Mundi Mundi,* 2007 (detail)

RA Royal Academy of Arts

The RA is a unique organisation that remains true to its origins in 1768 as a place where art is made, exhibited and debated. Our aim is simple: to be a clear, strong voice for art and artists. The RA's Learning Department fulfils this objective by engaging people in the practice of art through hands-on creative experiences and exploring the art of the past and the present.

'If I was whisked away [...] I think I could put up with anything, except not seeing the Australian landscape. It would be a torture to have it cut off.'
Arthur Boyd, 1998, Janet Hawley, *Artists in Conversation*

Introduction

Inhabited by Aboriginal people for approximately 60,000 years, the landmass that came to be called Australia remained undiscovered by European explorers until the early 1600s. Yet the hypothesis of a continent in the southern hemisphere had long captured the European imagination. The Greek philosopher Aristotle, who believed in a balanced and symmetrical world, asserted in 350 BCE, 'There must be a region bearing the same relation to the southern pole as the place we live in bears to our pole.' Four hundred years later, the geographer Ptolemy bolstered Aristotle's theory by depicting *Terra Australis Incognita* ('unknown southern continent') in his eight-volume atlas *Geographica*, the source upon which Europe's exploration maps were based until the eighteenth century. But until the Dutch explorer Jan Carstensz visited the extreme northern coastline of Cape York Peninsula in 1623 and recorded his expedition in his journal, those living in the northern hemisphere had little primary evidence of the southern continent or its people.

Carstensz expressed disappointment with both the territory and the society he encountered. The Aboriginal people's lack of knowledge of and interest in the precious metals and spices that were highly prized in his own country, and that he had hoped to find on his travels, baffled him, as did the apparent absence of large trees or fresh water along the coast. He declared, 'In our judgment this is the most arid and barren region that could be found anywhere on the earth; the inhabitants, too, are the most wretched and poorest creatures that I have ever seen in my age or time.' In contrast, British explorer Captain James Cook recognised vibrancy in the Aboriginal people and their dynamic relationship with their land: '… they are far more happy than we Europeans […] the earth and the sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for life.' The earth also furnished the Aboriginal people with the materials and surfaces for their art, and had done so for 30,000–50,000 years. Indeed, when Cook dropped anchor in Botany Bay in 1770 and claimed Australia for Britain, he confronted mankind's oldest continuous culture, and disembarked at the most ancient land on earth. That land, and the diverse ways in which Aboriginal and settler artists have understood, experienced, responded to, and represented it throughout the centuries, underpins the exhibition 'Australia' at the Royal Academy of Arts.

Catriona McKenzie's observation [left] encapsulates the Aboriginal people's relationship to their land. The land contains their cultural knowledge, personal histories, and identity. Land lies at the heart of Aboriginal being, and at the core of their art. Paintings often refer to the 'Dreaming', the Aboriginal cosmology that invokes the ancestor spirits who they believe created the earth, humans, animals,

'In Aboriginal culture, you can know country, and country can know you.'
Catriona McKenzie, June 2013

and the land's geographical features as they moved across it, before transforming themselves into celestial and natural entities in sacred sites within the landscape itself. Through the Dreaming, storytelling, music, dance and art, Aboriginals transmit their societal laws, cultural heritage and values in a continuous process that collapses time into one reality. In fact, there is no word for 'time' in any of the Aboriginal language groups, and the concepts of 'land' and 'home' are one and the same. Past, present and future are intertwined for the Aboriginal people, as are their ancestral spirits, their own selves and the land that owns them.

Early Colonial 1800–80

Nine years after James Cook claimed the entire east coast of Australia on behalf of Britain's King George III in August 1770, his fellow voyager Sir Joseph Banks appeared before a British government committee set up to alleviate pressure on the country's gaols. Banks advised the group that Botany Bay in New South Wales could sustain a settlement of convicts, would hinder escape, and (erroneously) that its Aboriginal population was minimal and likely to abandon the area. The government accepted New South Wales as *terra nullius* ('land belonging to no one'), took up Banks's recommendation, and formulated a plan for the 'effectual disposing of convicts'. In 1787, prisoners were collected from gaols and floating prison hulks in Plymouth, Portsmouth and London for the journey to Australia. Among them were Australia's first non-Aboriginal artists.

After their arrival in 1788, and for the next 30 years, 90% of the Europeans living in Australia were convicts. The artists among them attempted to make sense of their new surroundings, and of the strong sunlight that seemed to flatten the landscape, by delineating the unfamiliar plants and animals they encountered. Their illustrations were mainly printed for sale in London, giving Britons their first glimpse of Australian wildlife, but not yet of the bush. Australia's new artists were intimidated by the country's untamed wilderness, and instead turned their attention to the colony of New South Wales, which reassuringly offered them signs of the burgeoning town of Sydney: a harbour, roads and houses. Similarly, Van Diemen's Land, a British island penal colony in Tasmania, began to attract European settlers, most notably the British artist John Glover (1767–1849).

Glover, a contemporary of J.M.W. Turner and John Constable, enjoyed a successful career in Britain as a watercolourist and teacher. He had gained a reputation as the 'English Claude', after the French landscape artist Claude Lorrain (*c.* 1604–1682), whom he deeply admired and who influenced him and Turner alike. Although Glover exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy in the hope of becoming a Royal Academician, his desire was never fulfilled. The son of a farmer, he returned to the land in 1831 when, at the age of 64, he followed his three sons to Van Diemen's Land to become a colonial farmer-painter, telling his biggest patron, Sir Thomas

'Our story is in the land [...] it is written in those sacred places [...] My children will look after those places. That's the law.'
Big Bill Neidjie, Kakadu elder, 1983

'There is a remarkable peculiarity in the trees in this Country; however numerous, they rarely prevent your tracing, through them, the whole distant Country.'
John Glover, 1835

Cat. 57
John Glover
A View of the Artist's House and Garden, in Mills Plains, Van Diemen's Land, 1835
Oil on canvas
76.4 x 114.4 cm
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. Morgan Thomas Bequest Fund, 1951

Phillipps, that he emigrated in the hope of discovering 'a beautiful new world, new landscapes, new trees, new flowers, new animals, birds, etc.'

Cat. 57 Within two years of his arrival, Glover completed his new house, studio and garden, which included seeds and plants that he had carefully transported from England. His painting, *A View of the Artist's House and Garden, in Mills Plains, Van Diemen's Land*, 1835, articulates his possession and taming of the island's uncultivated land, and his pride in so doing, by juxtaposing his flourishing English garden against a background of the Australian wilderness. The flatness of the plain, and the pyramid-shaped hill in the distance, throw the lush garden into sharp relief. Glover ensures that we admire his new home by directing our eye down the path that leads to its front door. He accurately details the property's every aspect: even from a distance, we can see that the farmhouse is built of stone, and that the studio, which has two skylight windows and a verandah that enabled the artist to paint outdoors, is constructed of wood.

A View of the Artist's House and Garden, in Mills Plains, Van Diemen's Land was among 68 paintings that Glover sent to London for an 1835 exhibition of his work. Van Diemen's Land often featured in the English press, and Glover exploited its appeal to potential buyers by highlighting the island's beauty and exoticism. The

artist himself embodied the successful emigrant, fulfilled by his new life in Australia and seemingly at home there. Indeed, when Sir Thomas Phillipps purchased a similar painting to add to his special gallery of Glover's work in his Cheltenham home (*View of Mills Plains, Van Diemen's Land*, cat. 56), he found that the artist had written on the back of the canvas, 'There is a trilling [sic] and graceful play in the landscape of this country which is more difficult to do justice to than the landscape of England.'

Assume that Glover's painting was your first introduction to the Australian landscape. How would you describe the land, based on his depiction?

What are the elements in the painting that express Glover's possession of the land?

Australian Impressionists 1890–1900

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Australia transformed rapidly from penal settlements into prosperous colonies after the discovery of gold in Victoria in 1851. At the peak of the rush, the country supplied a third of the world's gold, and saw the arrival of tens of thousands of Europeans and Americans hoping to strike it lucky. By the 1880s, Australia had experienced a boom in its fortunes, its population, and its cities, especially Sydney and Melbourne. The development of a telephone exchange and rail links further revolutionised urban living, and inspired artists to consider everyday life against a backdrop of the city. At the same time, a group of painters from Melbourne and Sydney, who were heavily influenced by the French *plein-air* artist Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848–1884), as well as Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796–1875), Jean-François Millet (1814–1875), and the British-American artist James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), joined forces to promote an Australian tradition of landscape painting.

The group's ostensible leader, Tom Roberts (1856–1931) studied at Melbourne's new National Gallery School (est. 1870) and was taught by one of Australia's most renowned mid-century landscape artists, Louis Buvelot (1814–1888). In 1881, Roberts departed Australia for four years of study at the Royal Academy Schools in London, where he came upon the 'Nocturnes' paintings by Whistler that were to inspire him throughout his career. In 1883, he undertook a walking tour of Spain, and chanced upon two art students, who talked to Roberts about the new ideas they had encountered in Paris, about the act of painting out-of-doors. Returning to Melbourne in 1885, and establishing a portrait-painting studio in the city centre, he nevertheless threw himself into painting outdoors. Together with his friends from the National Gallery School, Frederick McCubbin (1855–1917), Jane Sutherland (1853–1928), and Louis Abrahams (1852–1903), he set up a *plein-air* painting camp at Box Hill, a semi-rural area on the outskirts of Melbourne

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Cat. 93 overleaf
Tom Roberts
Allegro con Brio: Bourke Street West, *c.*1885–86, reworked 1890
Oil on canvas on composition board
51.2 x 76.7 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra and National Library of Australia, Canberra. Purchased 1918

that a new railway line had made accessible to city dwellers. Within a few years, having befriended a young painter named Arthur Streeton (1867–1943) – who later became the first Australian-born artist to show work at the Royal Academy – and the English-born artist Charles Conder (1868–1909), Roberts moved camp to Eaglemont, near Heidelberg on the outskirts of Melbourne.

The Australian Impressionists, also referred to as the Heidelberg School, gained critical notoriety in 1889 with their '9 by 5 Impression Exhibition' (so named for the 9 x 5 inch size of the works), held in Buxton's Rooms, Melbourne. For the artists, the word 'impression' denoted 'sketch', and indeed it was the sketch-like quality of the works that enraged many conservative critics, who deemed the work unsuitable for exhibition. For Roberts and his friends, 'impression' was a term associated with Whistler's 'Nocturnes', rather than with French Impressionism. Roberts's notion of Australian Impressionism stemmed from an experience at the Mentone seashore, where he observed the young artist Arthur Streeton painting. Roberts admired his work, commenting, 'I saw that his work was full of light and air.' The '9 by 5 Impression Exhibition' was a landmark event in Australian art. Many now praise works in the exhibition for their realistic and sensitive description of the Australian landscape.

Cat. 93 Perhaps surprisingly, the first work that Roberts painted after his return from London situates the artist and the viewer not in a rural or seaside setting, but in a first-floor window overlooking one of Melbourne's busiest streets. *Allegro con Brio: Bourke Street West*, *c.* 1885–86, additions 1890, vividly enacts the musical term, 'lively with fire', in its title. Roberts conveys the bustle of the street by populating it with 150 figures, mostly delineated with quick strokes of paint, and the sun's intense glare by omitting shadow virtually throughout the canvas. The white 'ICE' cart in the painting's centre reinforces the sensation of midday heat and offers, as it does, a remedy. Given his penchant for landscape painting, his abhorrence of Melbourne's architecture (having once described it as an 'expensive vulgarity'), and the public's preference at the time for bush scenes with a moral story, Roberts's choice of an urban subject without a clear narrative seems unusual. Yet the snapshot-like spectacle not only demonstrates his commitment to rendering faithfully the fleeting effect of a scene, but also his photographic sensibility (he began his career as a photographer). The painter accurately captures the street's line of cabs and stables that two years later were to be supplanted by cable trams, and at the left of the painting even includes the very bootblack who held the licence for Bourke Street in 1885: Charles Day. Roberts modified his scene five days before it went on exhibition in December 1890 by replacing a black cab in the lower left-hand corner with the figures of three women to brighten up that section of the canvas. As the painting failed to sell at the exhibition, he gave it to his friend, Frederick McCubbin.

The viewer's perspective is one floor up from the street. Why do you think Roberts employs a high viewpoint for this scene, and what is its effect?

Cat. 91 Roberts's portrayal of busy urban life in *Allegro con Brio* contrasts both thematically and compositionally with Frederick McCubbin's contemporaneous delineation of one of the period's most popular themes: getting lost in the bush. *Lost*, 1886, describes a predicament that occasionally befell the children of English settlers who had been slow to realise that the Australian landscape carried the threat of death to those unfamiliar with it. The real-life story of Clara Crosbie, who was found alive after three weeks in the Victorian bush in May 1885, may have inspired *Lost,* for McCubbin started the painting shortly afterwards. While the theme of pioneers building homes in the bush wasn't new, McCubbin was one of the first painters to illustrate the idea of children wandering away from these new homesteads.

McCubbin brings us right into the girl's plight. The vertical format of the canvas accentuates the tall trees that encircle and dominate her, holding her captive in the bush. Similarly, the painting's pervasive blue and green palette merges the girl with the land, as if it were swallowing her. The artist impels us to feel the lost child's distress by placing her in the centre of the landscape, giving us no clue as to the direction from which she came, or the way out of the bush to freedom. McCubbin hints at what may have originally lured her into the bush by placing mistletoe in her apron. Some have read the broken twig in the foreground as a sign that she will be rescued or has stumbled upon the right way out of the bush, but the artist leaves it to us to resolve the painting's narrative, and to wonder at her fate.

What elements does Frederick McCubbin use to create a mood of anxiety?

Why do you think the bush was so frequently represented in Australian painting in the 1880s?

Federation 1900–20

After the boom years of the 1880s came the Depression of the 1890s. A combination of drought and financial hardship bankrupted the economy, and high unemployment affected the country overall. Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton and Charles Conder left Australia for London and Paris, hoping for critical and commercial success in Europe. But the nation's mood lifted when Australia became a Federation of states and territories on New Year's Day, 1901, amid early signs of economic recovery.

Cat. 91
Frederick McCubbin
Lost, 1886
Oil on canvas
115.8 x 73.9 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
Purchased through the Felton Bequest,
1940

As the century turned, Australia witnessed a growth in urbanisation and an increase in leisure time. By this point, much of the population lived in urban cities along the coast, and the beach came to symbolise egalitarianism and a healthy lifestyle, particularly after laws banning ocean swimming were repealed in 1906. However, a prohibition against mixed bathing remained.

Cat. 119 The English artist Ethel Carrick (1872–1952) arrived in Melbourne in 1913 with her husband, the Australian Impressionist E. Phillips Fox, before travelling to Sydney to see friends. While there, she painted scenes around Sydney Harbour and north Sydney, including this spirited seascape, *Manly Beach – Summer is Here*, 1913, employing vibrant colours and clusters of figures to express the vitality of a summer's day on the beach. An outspoken advocate of women's rights, Carrick was fascinated by the legal and social constraints placed upon beach attire and behaviour for men and women alike. While her depiction of the beach's golden sand and deep blue water undoubtedly entices the viewer, it is the cultural aspect of beach life that especially intrigued the artist. She manifests both the prohibition against mixed bathing and society's gender roles by depicting most of the women in *Manly Beach* fully clothed (with one daring exception at the lower right) and in charge of the children, while the men swim in the surf.

What does the painting *Manly Beach – Summer is Here* reveal about society in Sydney?

Imagine if Carrick had painted Manly Beach fifty years earlier. Who would be occupying the beach?

Early Modernism 1918–40

The conservatism that had held sway over art training during the height of Australian Impressionism prevailed until Rubbo's Art School opened in Sydney in 1897. Founded by Antonio Dattillo-Rubbo (1870–1955), the school attracted artists interested in Post-Impressionist painting and technique, including Australian-born Grace Cossington Smith (1892–1984), who enrolled in 1910. Rubbo delivered news to his students of artistic developments in Europe, covering the studio walls with reproductions of works by Cézanne, Sisley, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Seurat, thereby profoundly influencing the progress of modern art in Australia.

Cat. 131 As a child, Cossington Smith voiced her determination to be an artist, despite society's disapproval of the vocation for women. In 1912, she journeyed with her sister to England, returning to Rubbo's Art School in 1914, when she became enamoured with Post-Impressionism. By the end of the First World War, Sydney was developing faster than any other city in Australia, and on her return, Cossington Smith documented the city's changes in paintings and sketchbooks filled with notes about tone and colour. The city's changes accelerated from 1923 with the construction of the Art Deco-inspired Sydney Harbour Bridge and the razing of hundreds of homes in order to build new roads. The artist made numerous sketches and several paintings of the bridge's construction between 1928 and 1930 from Milson's Point on the north side of Sydney Harbour. *The Bridge in Building*, 1929, painted three years before the bridge opened, attests to the congruity between her modernity and that of her city.

Cossington Smith's low viewpoint causes the arches of the nascent bridge to surge above the viewer and Sydney itself, emphasising their industrial strength and the city's increasing dynamism. The angle from which she paints not only inspires a sense of awe in the viewer, but also reminds us of our diminutive status in an increasingly modern world, a point she reiterates through the almost imperceptible construction workers atop the foregrounded arch. Unlike the other paintings in the series, *The Bridge in Building* omits any detail of its context within Sydney. By focusing on the bridge as an abstract form, and applying intense colours to describe that form, the artist's approach recalls that of the French painters Robert and Sonia Delaunay (1885–1941; 1885–1979), both renowned in the 1910s and 1920s for their boldly-hued abstract portraits of another urban landmark, the Eiffel Tower (**fig.1**).

Cossington Smith offers us a man-made Sydney in process, where steel dominates the tiny patch of green landscape glimpsed behind the rear arch. Yet the

'My chief interest, I think, has always been colour, but not flat crude colour, it must be colour within colour, it has to shine; light must be in it.'
Grace Cossington Smith, 1965

painting is one of affirmation, not negation. The artist bathes the arcs in strong light and suggests a halo above them, imparting the bridge with a spiritual quality. Additionally, the intensity of her palette colourfully celebrates this much-needed symbol of hope during the Depression.

Sydney Harbour Bridge was erected during a time of economic hardship, yet was adopted as a positive symbol by Sydney residents. Can you think of a recent building project locally or nationally that has had the same effect?

Cossington Smith uses strong purples and oranges in *The Bridge in Building*. Would you respond differently to the scene if she had used the grey tones of actual steel and granite? How so?

Fig. 1
Robert Delaunay
La Tour Eiffel, 1926
169 x 86 cm
Oil on canvas

Cat. 131
Grace Cossington Smith
The Bridge in Building,
1929
Oil on pulpboard
75 x 53 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Gift of Ellen Waugh 2005
© Estate of Grace Cossington Smith
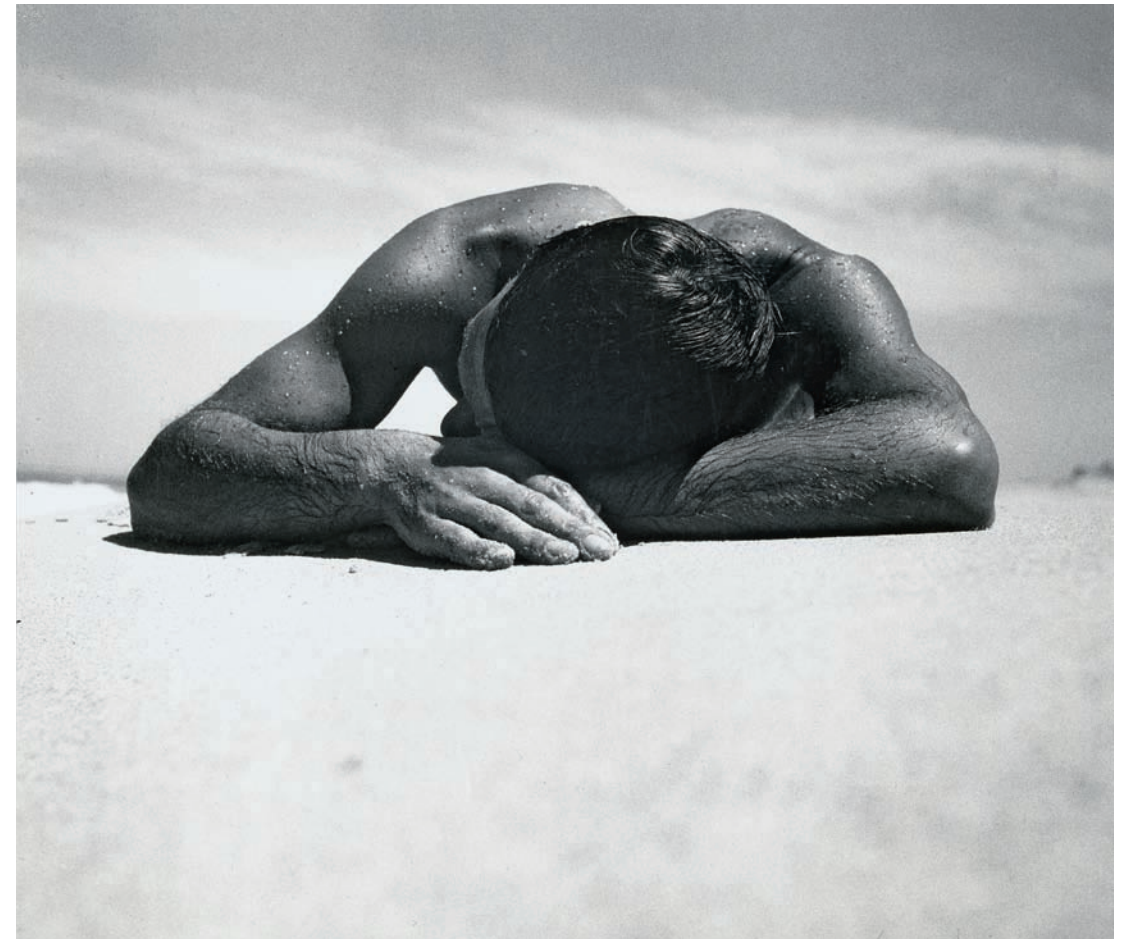
Cat. 138
Max Dupain
Sunbaker, 1937,
printed 1975
Gelatin silver photograph
38.6 x 43.4 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Purchased 1976

'I doubt if the Ancient Greeks produced better examples of physical beauty and grace.'
Sydney teacher and sculptor Rayner Hoff, 1931

Cat. 138 Artists offered Australians an alternative emblem of affirmation, modernity and classical form in the 1930s: the human body. Max Dupain (1911–1992), an architectural, art and commercial photographer with a highly successful practice, experimented with Surrealism, but became renowned for photographs that placed idealised bodies in a natural beach setting. His most famous work, *Sunbaker,* 1937, fuses body, land, sun, sea and vitality into an image of complete harmony. Shooting his subject from sand level, Dupain accentuates the curves and angles of the man's shoulders and arms, monumentalising him. With his tanned skin against the bleached sand, the man almost appears to be a geological feature of the beachscape, rather than human, creating a perfect union of body and land.

Sunbaker has often been used to symbolise 'the spirit of true Australia'. What makes this image such an appropriate symbol?

Wartime and Post War 1940–50

Cat. 155 There are few cultural legends as frequently portrayed in modern Australia as that of the bushranger Ned Kelly (1854–1880). Australia's first feature film told *The Story of the Kelly Gang*, 1906, and for over a century now the Kelly character has appeared in countless films, novels, plays, ballets, songs and paintings.

Sidney Nolan (1917–1992) painted a series of works about the Ned Kelly story, which chronicles key events in the history of the Kelly gang in scenes that resemble film stills, thus lending them a cinematic quality when viewed as a whole. He opens the story with the visit of Constable Fitzpatrick to the Kelly homestead at Eleven Mile Creek in April 1878, where the legend of Ned Kelly as folk hero ostensibly begins. Fitzpatrick had come to arrest Ned and his brother Dan for horse stealing. At some point, he allegedly grabbed Ned and Dan's sister Kate, provoking a fight during which Ned shot the constable in the wrist. Warrants were issued for the brothers' arrest, but they escaped into the hills, joined by two local men. A police search party covered the area around the town of Mansfield, but the Kelly gang, who knew the countryside well, found the party first, ambushing and killing three policemen at Stringybark Creek. One escaped, however, to Mansfield and reported the killings, after which the Kellys were outlaws. Although notable rewards were offered for the gang's capture, they brazenly robbed banks and took hostages in northeast Victoria and New South Wales in December 1878 and February 1879 respectively. Sixteen months later, their freedom ended at a siege in Glenrowan after Ned instigated a scheme to lure police to the area by killing a police spy. He had planned to derail the train with police reinforcements on board, and take hostage any survivors, but a townsperson forewarned the police of the gang's whereabouts before the train arrived in Glenrowan. When Ned emerged from his hotel hideout to confront police, he was wearing a handmade suit of armour that weighed 41 kilos but covered only his head and torso (**fig. 2**). The police shot at his exposed legs and arrested him. His brother and the two other gang members died inside the hotel, and Kelly was taken to Melbourne, where he received a hurried trial. He was hanged in November 1880.

By the time Nolan painted his 1946 *Ned Kelly*, the bushranger's presence still resonated in Mansfield, the town in Victoria where the gang shot three policemen. In fact, it was the endurance of Kelly's presence in the Victoria landscape, coupled with Nolan's response to his feelings about violence after three years in the Army, that propelled him to explore, through paint, Ned Kelly the man, as opposed to the myth.

As a child, Nolan spent his school holidays in Glenrowan, the scene of the Kelly gang's final shoot-out, and heard the story of Ned Kelly from his grandfather, who was one of the policemen who went after the bushranger. As an adult, the artist read everything he could about the Kelly family, including the Royal Commander's Report of 1881 (published after Ned was hanged), newspaper accounts, and books. Additionally, he visited all the key areas in the Ned Kelly story. Above all, the

Fig. 2
Suit of armour worn by Ned Kelly, 1880
Steel and leather

Image © State Library of Victoria

'I find that a desire to paint the landscape involves a wish to hear more of the stories that take place within the landscape. Stories which may not only be heard in country towns and read in the journals of explorers, but which persist in the memory, to find expression in such household sayings as "game as Ned Kelly".'
Sidney Nolan, letter to Sunday Reed, 18 May 1943

Fig. 3
Ned Kelly Sequence
Sydney 2000 Summer Olympic Games, Opening Ceremony

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'Really, the Kelly paintings are secretly about myself […] It's the inner history of my emotions, but I am not going to tell you about them.'
Sidney Nolan, as told to Elwyn Lynn, 1984

outlaw's link to the land intrigued Nolan, who declared that Kelly's was 'a story arising out of the bush and ending in the bush.'

Nolan's painting of Ned Kelly strips both the landscape and the figure back to their most simplified form. The brightly lit arid land seems to stretch across and ahead of Kelly forever, as does the deep blue sky. Against the vivid gold and blue, whose depth and glossiness Nolan achieved through the use of Ripolin enamel paint, Kelly appears in the infamous metal armour he had fashioned out of stolen ploughshares bolted together. But Nolan doesn't recreate the armour as it actually looked. Instead, he appropriates Russian artist Kazimir Malevich's (1879–1935) idea of the black square, which revolutionised early twentieth-century art in 1913 as the supreme and purest geometric form, and transforms it into Kelly's helmet. Speaking to Elwyn Lynn on 6 September 1984, Nolan explained, 'This is Kelly the defiant. I put Kelly on top of the horse in a particularly orderly manner. I wanted an air of perfect authority. It looks simple, but I wanted the maximum feeling of space, so the cloud appears through the aperture in the mask.' The simplicity of the form, together with the complex associations it invokes, renders *Ned Kelly* one of Australia's most potent images, and one of its most iconic: when Sydney hosted the 2000 Olympic Games, a reproduction of Nolan's *Ned Kelly* loomed large on a huge screen over an arena filled with performers reenacting the artist's vision of the black-square helmeted outlaw (**fig. 3**). Significantly, it was not the historical figure of Ned Kelly that Australia presented to the world that night as a folk hero, but Sidney Nolan's visual reinvention of the man.

Why do you think Sidney Nolan's representation of Ned Kelly is more identified with the outlaw than photographs of the man himself?

Why do you think the legend of Ned Kelly has remained so popular within Australian culture?

Describe the cinematic qualities of *Ned Kelly*.

Cat. 197 Shaun Gladwell updates Ned Kelly's ride into the landscape with *Approach to Mundi Mundi*, 2007, the work from his MADDESTMAXIMUS series that opens the exhibition 'Australia' at the Royal Academy. A black-helmeted motorbike rider, the artist himself, clad in black leather, moves slowly through the vast landscape, out of focus at first, as if Australia's land cannot be grasped immediately. Gradually, the rider extends his arms in a Christ-like pose that also recalls the classical proportions of Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, projecting an image of perfect balance advancing through the landscape. The desert road he travels along is the location used in the Australian dystopian action film *Mad Max 2*, but Gladwell refutes its post-apocalyptic vision of the outback through his gesture of embrace. But the gesture itself begs interpretation. Is the figure embracing the land, surrendering to it, or asserting his possession of it? Is he confronting it, mastering it, or marking it by drawing a line through the landscape with his bike or body as the brush? Like Nolan with *Ned Kelly,* Gladwell employs simple yet culturally significant

'I always quote Paul Klee: "Drawing is like taking a line for a walk".
Shaun Gladwell, 2011

imagery to probe the multilayered relationship between a man and the land he rides into.

The paradoxical stillness of the moving image, in which time stretches into one extended moment, recalls the Aboriginal idea of past, present and future as one. Additionally, Gladwell's evocations of marking, possessing and confronting unfamiliar territory synthesises the Aboriginal and colonial responses to the land that distinguish the history of Australian art.

How do you read the rider's gesture? Why does he outstretch his arms?

Indigenous Painting

Although hundreds of sites across modern-day Australia bear evidence of the millennia-old Aboriginal painting tradition, it wasn't until the twentieth century that Aboriginal painting and sculpture gained public and scholarly recognition as works of art. The explorers who first encountered early rock engravings mistakenly attempted to read them as accurate depictions of plants and animals, while later generations regarded them as ethnographic artefacts. In fact, Aboriginal paintings and engravings transfer ancestral and cultural knowledge through a range of visual languages that encompass conventional, geometric and abstracted designs – normally referring to aspects of Aboriginal cosmology – as well as figurative images of ancestors and spirits in human form, flora and fauna, and the physical features of the landscape. These vary from region to region and group to group. Each group possesses special designs and symbols that distinguish them from other clans, and restricts their subject matter to the iconography over which they have hereditary rights. Today, those designs continue to be painted onto the human body, sacred objects and onto ceremonial grounds, as well as onto portable materials such as bark or canvas. Four colours prevail: red, from red ochre or haematite; yellow, from yellow ochre; black, from charcoal or manganese oxide; and white, from kaolin, clay or gypsum. Painting in natural pigments on flattened sheets of eucalyptus bark is the archetypal art form in Arnhem Land (one of the largest Aboriginal Reserves in Australia and perhaps best known for its isolation, the art of its people, and the strong continuing traditions of its Indigenous inhabitants). Until the 1970s, this was regarded as the only traditional form of Aboriginal painting; however many contemporary artists have elaborated on and innovated traditional structures.

Cat. 30 The leading artist in the Kimberley's Warmun community in Western Australia, Rover Thomas (1926–98), applied earth pigments combined with organic gum to his painting *Cyclone Tracy* (1991), which invokes the cyclone that devastated the city of Darwin on Christmas Eve, 1974. The painting relates to a ceremony and song cycle called the Kurirr Kurirr, revealed to Thomas through a

series of visitations in the aftermath of the cyclone from the spirit of his deceased aunt. The woman was in a car accident on a road flooded by the cyclonic rain. While being airlifted to hospital she died over the site of a whirlpool in the Western Kimberley. The site carries particular significance, for the Aboriginal people consider the whirlpool to be the physical manifestation of, and home to, an ancestral Rainbow Serpent, which gives the Kimberley land its constant life force. Her spirit made the journey across the Kimberley, visiting sites of ancestral and historical significance, to her home in the east where it witnessed the destruction of Darwin by another Rainbow Serpent, in the guise of Cyclone Tracy. (Rainbow Serpents are responsible for creating rain, thunderstorms, monsoons and cyclones.) The woman's spirit gave Rover Thomas the songs, choreography and painted imagery that he needed as part of the Kurirr Kurirr ceremony. This ceremony reveals that the cyclone is a manifestation of the Rainbow Serpent warning Aboriginal people to reinvigorate their culture, which at the time was under threat from the European presence. However, outside the context of the Kurirr Kurirr ceremony, in which the painted designs are articulated in terms of songs and choreography, Thomas has created a more complex composition. The painting features a black form that commands the canvas and seems to expand, as if it were increasing its potency as it bears

down on Darwin. The ochre bands radiating outwards are the small winds and dust storms that feed into the cyclone.

In 1975, Rover Thomas moved to Warmun, today a centre for contemporary east Kimberley Aboriginal art. It is also an historical site of community displacement where, in the nineteenth century, European pastoralists and gold-miners forced the Aboriginal population off their own land. The settlers' livestock polluted the Indigenous people's freshwater sources and dispersed their sources of food. Approximately half the Aboriginal people of the east Kimberley lost their lives through poisoning, malnutrition, or massacre, a theme that Rover Thomas explored in several of his works. In 1926 and 1935, the government set up settlement camps, against which the Indigenous families rebelled but were nonetheless forced to occupy until the last camp was sold in 1955. Rover Thomas worked as a fencer and a stockman, and many of his kin worked on pastoral properties, which enabled them to maintain a connection to their ancestral land.

From what viewpoint does Rover Thomas show you Cyclone Tracy?

What mood does the artist create in his painting *Cyclone Tracy*? How does he achieve it?

Contemporary

Cat. 194 Contemporary artist and activist Fiona Foley creates works of art that expose the personal and political ramifications of historical acts against the Aboriginal people. A Badtjala woman from Thoorgine (Fraser Island), Foley often explores how colonial settlement devastated the Badtjala. In *Bliss*, her 2006 video, she critiques the 1897 Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, which had 32 sections, eleven dealing specifically with controlling the supply of opium to Aboriginals. The act comprehensively governed the lives of Aboriginal people. For the first time, Indigenous inhabitants faced restrictions on who they could marry and where they could live. They and their houses could be searched if they were suspected of opium possession. Devastatingly, they could also be removed against their will to geographically remote enclaves.

Foley invites us into a Tasmanian field, where the opium poppy is grown. Gorgeous pink flowers sway in the wind, their movement and rustling sound akin to the drug's hypnotic effect. Like Dorothy's poisoned poppies in *The Wizard of Oz*, the field stretches as far as the eye can see, beckoning us into it. Its beauty seduces us, but throughout the video Foley reminds us of the field's sinister undertones by interspersing short quotes from Rosalind Kidd's 1997 book, *The Way We Civilise*. The text reveals the consequences of the Act's legacy for the Badtjala people over the following century, and particularly how employers caused the Aboriginal people to become addicted to opium so they could be exploited as indentured labour. She

'For me, what I like to do
is work with this
material and put it out in
the public arena and say,
"Look at this. How are
you engaging with this
aspect of our history?"'
Fiona Foley, 2011

thus captivates us with alluring imagery, but compels us to look beneath its surface. For Foley, art informs and instructs. 'I see my role really as an educator,' she explains. 'Every time I insert into the public realm a work that involves an historical context or underpinning, it really is about educating Queenslanders about their own history.'

If the video did not have text, would you have understood the relationship between the poppy field and the history Foley invokes? Why or why not?

Consider Foley's use of video, and the difference between exploring her subject matter through the moving image and a still image.

Conclusion

As the works discussed in this guide demonstrate, the history of Australian art negotiates multiple histories, including those of Aboriginal language groups, colonial settlers, the Australia-born, and the country itself. It comprises, simultaneously, the world's oldest and youngest artistic traditions ('The question of whether Australia is old or young jangles in the Australian imagination,' wrote Thomas Keneally in 2009), and grapples with artists and communities whose notions of time, spirituality, and land ownership vary greatly: Does man own land, as the settlers presumed, or does land own you, as Aboriginal people believe? What these histories share, however, is the recurrent and profound need by artists to articulate their responses or relationships to land, whether urban, rural, or beachside. The Royal Academy 'Australia' exhibition opens up these histories for debate by showing how artists have used the landscape tradition to probe how they and their countrymen understand Australia, their communities, and themselves.

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