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# Australian Painting



QUEENSLAND  
ART GALLERY

## EARLY COLONIAL ART

All too frequently we are overwhelmed by the charm of our Early Colonial Art and forgetful of the use to which it was put in providing information and records. Consequently the earliest pictures of aborigines, kangaroos, colonial settlements or country vistas, let people in the homelands know what Australia was like and recorded familiar scenes for the satisfaction of settlers in after years.

However, they saw the Australian landscape as Europeans - the aborigines looked to them like Red Indians or Polynesians, the trees like English species or similar to them. It was not until later that our artists began to paint things as we in turn have come to see and understand them.

The earliest artists who sailed with navigators, scientists and the first administrators were more concerned with their brief to record bird, animal and plant life - and occasionally to make studies of the indigenous black man.

Augustus Earle sailed with Charles Darwin on the *Beagle* in 1831, William Westall and Matthew Flinders on the *Investigator* and like his father John William Lewin was a natural history draughtsman.

Until settlements grew there was little else to paint as the artists were not concerned with human beings in action and certainly not with convicts or lowly orders. Paintings distinct from scientific recording merely repeated the taste of the privileged European patrons - the gentle watercolours of elegant houses in their landscaped settings, still lifes - flowers, fruit and game and portrait sketches.

Genre paintings (the depiction of subjects of everyday life) were all but ignored or passed over as unimportant. It was not until later that a few artists directed their talents toward ordinary people. S.T. Gill arrived in Adelaide in 1839 and later painted the busy gold rush scenes of Ballarat and Bendigo.

Robert Dowling gained lesser prominence by recording the early life around Battery Point, Hobart. It is regrettable that there were no earlier genre painters or that they were not encouraged. And so we have lost forever a contemporary appreciation of our early times - the swaggering soldier, the unlucky convicts, the proud settlers, the sailors, traders and whalers that make the settlements of Sydney and Hobart Town brighter by their presence

Even after Gill we are still not fully sympathetic to the need to record contemporary life - Frederick McCubbin to a great degree reminds us in his romanticized paintings that the life of the pioneer settler was indeed difficult.

It is well to take pleasure in these old works though many of them are hardly masterpieces by European standards. But they have a vitality and beauty and do depict Australia as it appeared to a small integrated community of pioneers.

Briefly our early artists fall roughly into three groups:

- (1) the convicts like Thomas Watling, Joseph Lycett, Thomas Wainwright, William Gould, John Eyre and George Peacock;
- (2) The cultivated amateurs who included in their gentlemanly prerequisites an ability to paint and sketch - William Light, Captain James Wallis, Philip King, William Westall;
- (3) the professionals who paved the way for the birth of the Australian School of painting - John Glover, Conrad Martens, Louis Buvelot; Eugene von Guerard, J. Skinner Prout, Nicholas Chevalier.

## ART OF THE MIDDLE PERIOD

Often this period has been mistakenly called Australian Impressionism, mainly due to the fact that in 1885 Tom Roberts returned from France, the home of Impressionism, applauding its merits. It was obvious that Roberts had witnessed an exciting and vibrant art movement based on the Barbizon School of *plein air* painting. The term *plein air* impressionism could be more apt for the Australian counterpart for like the French they developed the habit of completing their work out-of-doors while they had the scene before them. Prior to that they had made sketches on the spot and produced the finished drawings in their studios.

The Roberts way of painting proved popular and was quickly taken up by Fred McCubbin and Louis Abrahams who formed the first artists' camp at Box Hill, Victoria. The taste for living in and painting the bush grew and the Heidelberg School was established with Conder, Streeton and Withers joining forces. For the first time in art the real beauty of the Australian landscape was recognised by the public - the old European greens and softer lights had given way to the newly discovered blues, golds and ochres under a harsh Australian light.

Other artists followed Roberts to Europe, John Peter Russell, Rupert Bunny, and E. Phillips Fox, and became expatriates. Streeton however returned only to witness the decline of the Heidelberg School.

The more academic traditions of the Royal Academy gained popularity among a certain group of artists - the brilliant John Longstaff and the flamboyant George Lambert both displayed outstanding manual dexterity through the use of broad, square brush strokes. Likewise the watercolourists Blamire Young and J.J. Hilder employed a confident and rapid technique of fluid washes.

There seemed to be several simple directions in Australian art of the Middle period. Those who followed Streeton's later style included Gruner, Heysen, Buckmaster and later still Campbell. Portraits and nude studies continuing the example of Lambert, McInnes, Hall and Wheeler; pictures of horses in which the leading exponent was Septimus Power; and paintings of boats, harbours and tourist resorts, from Streeton's Sydney Harbour scenes to early Lionel Lindsay oils and Will Ashton, were among other directions explored.

Naturally not all artists conformed to these categories. Hugh Ramsay followed the style of Velasquez, and the lyricists were Blamire Young, J.J. Hilder, Penleigh Boyd and Sydney Long. Max Meldrum's tonal representations departed from main streams and seemed to turn back the clock by restating the truths established by the Barbizon School of France.

## TOWARDS MODERN ART

The link with France through our expatriates may not be so very important at this stage but by the early twenties a group of Sydney artists was making bold adventures into the anti-academic realms of modern Art.

Roy de Maistre, Roland Wakelin and Grace Cossington Smith led a movement based on Cezanne's cubism. There Sydney artists achieved an individuality which only today is being fully appreciated. However, it was the art teacher Datillo Rubbo who saw their potential and encouraged them to battle on in their endeavours to gain acceptance. Before long with Adelaide Perry and Margaret Preston they established themselves as the Contemporary Group.

By the early 30's large reproductions of pictures by Cezanne, Gauguin, van Gogh and Matisse had begun to appear in Australia and the influence of artists returning from Europe had broadened the field of understanding.

The strong influence of Cezanne was seen in William Frater's three 1931 Archibald Prize entries. He with other Melbourne artists, Arnold Shore, A.M. Plante and Isabel Tweddle formed the nucleus of the Twenty Melbourne Painters and encouraged George Bell to establish a modern art school in Melbourne (1932).

The Contemporary Art Society was formed in Melbourne in the early years of the war with branches in Sydney and Adelaide. Crowds flocked to its early exhibitions and *contemporary art* especially among the young, became something of a vogue.

At the outbreak of the Second World War the return to Australia of Dobell, Drysdale, Eric Wilson, Grace Cossington Smith and Donald Friend provided a much needed stimulus to modern art. They were joined by a band of emigres, Desiderius Orban, Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack (ex Bauhaus) and Danila Vassilieff who with earlier arrivals Sali Herman and Josl Bergner infused a more mature continental spirit into our art world.

The post war period saw the rise of two of Australia's most notable artists Sir William Dobell and Sir Russell Drysdale - the former for his superb telling portraits and the latter for his romanticized and theatrically composed studies of outback Australian life. As a consequence a new vision of Australians and Australia was opened up to artists and their audiences.

As many Australians are very realistic and down to earth they are generally not drawn to abstract or non-representational painting - that is a painting which relies for its appeal purely on the significance of its disposition of colours and shapes, and not on its reference to anything in the world of reality.

If we look back at Eric Wilson's *Stove* painting we see how he uses a real object as basis for the-composition, but the picture relies upon its interesting and powerful design of shapes, colour and texture. Constance Stokes and Justin O'Brien likewise used colour and shape resourcefully in their stylized figure composition.

The art of the fifties was dominated by a group of artists from Melbourne - Arthur Boyd, Albert Tucker, John Olsen, Sidney Nolan, John Brack, John Perceval and Leonard French. Their contribution today is unmistakable for we realize now in the light of a fuller awareness how exciting and adventurous these years were. Boyd's *Bride* and *Leda* series, Nolan's *Kelly*, *Burke and Wills*, and *Mrs. Fraser* works surely must be regarded as artistic and historic milestones.

## ART IN THE 70's

The notable exhibition in 1968 *The Field* forcibly defined Hard-edge colour abstraction as the main style of the late sixties. Col Jordan, John Firth Smith, Sydney Ball, Michael Johnson were among those artists who clearly defined shapes with strong colour contrasts and forceful direction. The Pop art movement tended to peter out towards the end of the sixties leaving Richard Larter and Ken Rienhard to carry on the movement assisted to a lesser degree by Keith Looby and Peter Polditch.

The world wide movement in the 70's towards New Realism was heightened in Australia by Robert Boynes's return to this country. Boynes's concern for the dehumanization of our plastic society was not echoed in William Delafield Cook or Alan Oldfield's plain reality. Jeffrey Smart shows us that his strange form of Surrealism of the 1940's is still relevant today as we acknowledge that the New Realists are simply revival surrealists.

Although Lyrical Abstraction and Minimal Art survive in various quarters the general tendency in art in the 70's is towards sculpture rather than painting. Conceptual art, assemblages and sculpture have been the pre-occupation of many artists and the success of the Mildura Sculpture Exhibitions of 1970 and 1973 is due mainly to artists like Ti Parks, Tony Coleing and Ross Grounds who made both social and ecological statements in their work.

This does not conclude that painting is dead or lacks interest or vitality or that the successful expressionists or semi-figurative artists have conceded to the more publicized avant-garde mainstreams. Artists like Fullbrook, Brack, Boyd, and Williams continue to pursue their own particular causes unencumbered by new wave ideas or philosophies. Perhaps in the end their work needs no justification.

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These books are available for consultation at the State Library of Queensland, William Street, Brisbane and through the Brisbane City Council's Municipal Library Service.





