



# BERTRAM MACKENNAL

THE FIFTH BALNAVES FOUNDATION SCULPTURE PROJECT

**EDUCATION KIT**

ART  
GALLERY  
NSW

ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES 17 AUGUST – 4 NOVEMBER 2007

NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA 30 NOVEMBER 2007 – 24 FEBRUARY 2008



Mackennal in his London studio c1898, courtesy of Pauline Kraay

**Mackennal was a classical realist with a strong decorative bent whose most pronounced characteristics were adaptability and versatility.**

'Obituary', *Times* 12.10.1931

## Introduction

Bertram Mackennal (1863–1931) was the most internationally successful Australian artist of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Born in Melbourne in 1863, the son of Scottish immigrant and architectural sculptor J S Mackennal, Mackennal studied at the National Gallery Schools in Melbourne (1878–82). Mackennal, one of the first generation of Antipodean-born artists to travel to Europe to study and exhibit, left Melbourne aged 19, in 1882. With the exception of a three-year period spent in Australia over 1888–91 and visits in 1901 and 1926, he remained an expatriate, living in Britain until his death in 1931.

Yet Mackennal maintained close links to Australia, and had become a cultural hero for Australians by the first decade of the 20th century. He completed a number of civic commissions, mentored Australian sculptors in London, and mounted a sell-out exhibition in Sydney in the 1920s which did a great deal to galvanise the market for domestic-scale sculpture in this country.

In Britain, Mackennal was the first Australian-born artist to exhibit at the Royal Academy, and indeed the first overseas artist to be elected a member of the academy; the first to have work purchased for the Tate Gallery; the first overseas Briton to design English coinage; and the first Australian artist to be knighted.

During the 1890s Mackennal became an exceptional avant-garde artist. He was immersed in a radical new sculptural movement subsequently known as the New Sculpture and was inspired by Symbolist, art nouveau and new classicist tendencies. Living in Paris in the mid 1880s and again in the early 1890s, Mackennal became a commanding sculptural synthesiser, tempering the radical innovations, expressive surfaces and sexualised subjects of Rodin with the style and sentiments governing more establishment conceptions. He was also strongly influenced by the progressive French interest in Florentine Renaissance traditions and its preoccupation with the eroticised body.

Based in London from the mid 1890s, Mackennal rose to sculptural prominence – creating the memorial tomb to King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra at Windsor, Britain's national memorial to Thomas Gainsborough in Sudbury, Suffolk, as well as other sculptural projects for Britain's royalty and social elites, including for Lord Curzon, the

vicerey of India, and the Duke of Norfolk. Mackennal is renowned for his national memorial to Edward VII at Waterloo as well as works in Westminster Abbey, York Minster, Winchester Cathedral, the Palace of Westminster and St Paul's Cathedral, among others. By 1910, under the patronage of George V, Mackennal had become one of the most successful civic sculptors of the era.

Mackennal was known as the creator of beautiful, empathetic portraits of many of the era's leading 'new women', including the actress Sarah Bernhardt and singer Nellie Melba. Similarly he established a reputation in both Paris and London as the creator of bold, sensual female nudes. His mythological and allegorical female figures, including *Circe* 1893, *Truth* 1894 and *Salomé* c1895 for example, are archetypal New Sculptural works and attest to Mackennal's strength as an artist who refined nature yet retained a direct sense of the life model.

Mackennal returned to Australia only three times, yet he maintained close ties with this country and completed a significant number of public works for Australian sites – including the Martin Place cenotaph, the figures of Archbishop Kelly and Cardinal Moran at St Mary's Cathedral, and the Shakespeare memorial in Sydney, along with the monument to Edward VII, located in Adelaide, the monumental statue of Queen Victoria in Ballarat, the King Edward VII and Springthorpe memorials in Melbourne, and various statues of civic dignitaries in Brisbane and Perth. Mackennal's Springthorpe memorial is without question the most spectacular example of art nouveau and Symbolist-inspired sculpture in Australia.

Mackennal's status as an Australian 'cultural hero' is undeniable. His work directly influenced the growth and directions of sculpture in this country. This exhibition is the first major retrospective of Mackennal's oeuvre. Over 56 domestically scaled sculptures and medallions have been sourced from national and international collections, including the Art Gallery of New South Wales' *The dancer*, the National Gallery of Victoria's *Circe*, the Tate Gallery's *The Earth and the elements* and life-size figure *Diana wounded*, and *Sappho* from the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

The exhibition is accompanied by a major monograph which includes a fully illustrated catalogue of his works on cd-rom.

**Mackennal accrued the measures of establishment value and arguably achieved the ultimate insider status with royal patronage. Yet his sense of being a dislocated Australian in Europe, and more acutely an expatriate largely unsupported by his country of birth, also lent a particular intensity to his drive to succeed.**

Deborah Edwards, senior curator, Australian art, *Bertram Mackennal*, AGNSW Sydney, p 16

## Biography

**1863** Edgar Bertram Mackennal was born on 12 June at 14 Napier Street, Fitzroy, Melbourne.

**1878** Enrolled in the school of design at the National Gallery of Victoria schools until 1882.

### LONDON

**1882** Sailed for England on the *Albatross*. Contacts forged in London and a network of Australian students.

**1883** Admitted as a sculpture student to the Royal Academy and produced his first-known work, a head of Charles Douglas Richardson.

**1885** Daughter Henrietta Agnes was born. In pressing financial circumstances, Mackennal produced tableware for sale before he was offered a position in the modelling and design department of Coalport in Shropshire.

**1887** *The five foolish virgins* and *Federation of the colonies of Australasia* were included in the 17th exhibition of the Victorian Academy of Arts in Melbourne.

**1888** Departed for Australia, with the prospect of greater financial security.

### AUSTRALIA

**1889–91** Established a studio at 307 Swanston Street. Assimilated into Melbourne's cultural milieu, making links that would become important contacts. Worked on the Parliament House panels and completed other private commissions including a portrait of actress Eugénie Le Grand, a bust *Young Australia, A mother's kiss* and a bust of Sarah Bernhardt.

### PARIS

**1891** By December Mackennal was established in a studio at 9 Rue des Fourniaux, with living quarters.

**1892** Exhibited for the first time at the Paris Salon, with *La tete d'une sainte* and *Baiser d'une mere (A mother's kiss)*.

**1893** The life-size plaster *Circe*, was exhibited at the Paris Salon and received an honorable mention in the catalogue.

### EDINBURGH

**1893** Financial hardship forced Mackennal to take a position in Edinburgh as assistant to Scottish sculptor William Birnie Rhind.

### LONDON

**1894** Moved to London, reputedly under the advice of Alfred Gilbert, who predicted a more stable financial position. Set up a studio at 87a Clifton Hill, St John's Wood.

**1897** Mackennal's profile and financial circumstances were significantly improved by an increasing number of public and private commissions, including his first major civic sculpture – a statue of Queen Victoria for Ballarat.

**1898** Nellie Melba commissioned a bust with the intention of presenting it to the state of Victoria – the first Mackennal sculpture to enter an Australian public collection.

### AUSTRALIA

**1901** In February, Mackennal, who had shipped out a small number of sculptures at his own expense, arranged an exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria.

### LONDON

**1902** *Salome, Truth, Morning and Chameuse* were included in the *First exhibition of statuettes by sculptors of today*, mounted by the Fine Art Society.

**1903** Mackennal exhibited *The truth seeker* at the RA and was commissioned to execute a statue of Queen Victoria.

**1904** Moved to a larger studio at 38 Marlborough Hill, St John's Wood, remaining his address until 1921.

**1905** Elected a member of the newly formed Society of British Sculptors.

**1907** Lord Curzon commissioned a major private tomb for himself and his first wife. After exhibition at the RA, *The Earth and the elements* was purchased by the Chantry Bequest for the Tate Gallery.



### DEVON

**1927** Returned to England, moved to 'Watcombe Hall', a house with two studios on five acres outside Torquay, Devon.

**1928** *Exhibition of bronzes by Sir Bertram Mackennal* at the Fine Art Society Gallery, Melbourne. Statue of Cardinal Moran was unveiled in Sydney.

**1929** The Martin Place cenotaph was unveiled by General Sir John Monash. Relief portrait of Queen Alexandra for the English church of St Alban in Copenhagen, was unveiled.

Mackennal exhibited for the last time at the RA.

**1931** Died suddenly on 10 October, aged 68, at Watcombe Hall.

Harold Cazneaux, *Bertram Mackennal* (in studio, East Sydney Technical College, 20 January 1927) Art Gallery of New South Wales Gift of the Cazneaux family 1975



## Circe 1893

bronze 240 x 79.4 x 93.4 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne The Felton Bequest 1910

... the Salon have awarded me 'Mention Honourable'... I could not receive more ... one must start with the mention even if your work is the best in the exhibition.

Bertram Mackennal to James Smith, 30.5.1893, Edinburgh, James Smith papers, Mitchell Library, Sydney MSS21214

### K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

**VISUAL ART:** Look at the facial expressions of each *Circe* sculpture. Are their expressions the same? **Imagine** if *Circe* could speak. What would she say? Which sculpture do you think is more powerful? Why? Would you respond differently if

*Circe* was a painting? **Discuss** in class. **Look** at *Circe*'s headdress. **Design** and make your own headdress.

**ENGLISH:** **Research** the myth of *Circe*. **Write** a modern version to suit the sculpture. **Discuss** reasons why artists have referred to classical

myths for inspiration or motivation.

**Find** other mythological characters depicted in paintings and sculptures in the collections of the AGNSW and the NGV.

**SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY:** What is bronze? **Research** the process of casting a bronze sculpture. **Investigate** whether casting methods have changed over the centuries.

**MATHS:** **Calculate** the ratio of the statuette to the life-size *Circe*. **Research** the contemporary costs involved in casting the statuette. **Create** a formula to estimate the cost of casting the life-size *Circe*.

### 7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Compare the statuette and life-size *Circe*. Why would Mackennal create a statuette of *Circe*? Assess the impact of the two sculptures. Discuss how scale can influence a viewer's response to a sculpture. Analyse the meaning of the following description of *Circe* from 1893: 'the vanity of it all, her invitation and her contempt, are very finely expressed ... It is Sin.'<sup>1</sup> Do you think a contemporary audience would view *Circe* differently? Discuss your responses in class.

*Circe* was sculpted specifically to create an impact at the 1893 Salon in Jardin de Champs Elysées. Explore the reasons why *Circe* was made and exhibited in plaster. Investigate the audience's response to *Circe* though critical remarks. Assess why it was important for Mackennal to be acknowledged in this exhibition. Research the history of the salon and the role it played in the development of an artist's career during the late 19th century.

Explore the late 19th-century interest in the femme fatale through the writing of Charles Baudelaire, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Théophile Gautier and Gustave Flaubert. Investigate the strategic reasons for Mackennal selecting the mythological character of Circe, the sorceress from Homer's *Odyssey* who entrapped Odysseus's men by turning them into swine. Explore the issues affecting gender roles with the onset of modernity.

## Melba 1899

marble 198.5 x 61.3 x 61.5 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Gift of Madame Melba 1900

I owe it all to Melba. She introduced me to all the big people and I held up their walls for years.

Bertram Mackennal, in H Bolitho, *Marie Tempest*, Cobden-Sanderson, London, 1936, p 96

### K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

**VISUAL ART:** What is a bust? **Choose** a well-known performer. **Select** images of this person and draw their face, focusing on recognisable features. **Decide** on the public image you want to communicate about this person through their facial expression and accessories. **Model** the head and shoulders in clay. Then carve the bust into a block of soap using simple carving tools. **Compare** the different sculptural techniques. **Discuss** the advantages and disadvantages of each technique.

**MUSIC:** **Define** the terms *soprano* and *prima donna*. **Listen** to recordings of Dame Nellie Melba. **Describe** her voice and compare it to the voices of popular singers of today. **Document** the places where she performed. **Find** critical reviews of her performances. **Imagine** being present at one of her performances and write your own review.

**HSIE:** **Research** the life and achievements of Dame Nellie Melba. **Explore** the significance of her stage name. **Find** images of her and compare them to Mackennal's bust. How did this bust enter the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria? **Explore** reasons why past generations of artists often left Australia to excel in their field. Do you think artists feel this way today? **Discuss**.

### 7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Sculpture is closely linked to patronage. Investigate the importance of attracting supportive patrons through the various stages of Mackennal's career. Investigate reasons why Dame Nellie Melba commissioned this bust. Research other performers, such as Sarah Bernhardt, who commissioned busts by Mackennal. *Melba* was the first sculpture by Mackennal to enter an Australian institution. Discuss the significance of this acquisition.

Find examples of classical Roman busts and compare these to *Melba*. Discuss how Mackennal has suggested Melba's professional success. Observe the tapered square-based plinth and the art nouveau symbolism. Research the symbolism of the mythical Greek muse Terpsichore.

Like Auguste Rodin, Mackennal preferred modelling in clay, however he wrote 'marble has above all things dignity and it flatters form'.<sup>2</sup> Explain with reference to *Melba*. Mackennal found the final stage of carving marble 'dreary' and 'not very artistic, [as] the material takes too long to shape and one wearies'.<sup>3</sup> Despite his irritation with handling stone, why did Mackennal make a replica marble bust?



## The dancer 1904

bronze 168 x 71 x 69 cm  
Art Gallery of New South Wales  
Purchased 1910

**A highly poetic temperament and a profound knowledge of anatomy, an independence of thought and keenness of observation, great emotional sensitiveness and the most delicate sureness of touch, are all visible in the work of this young sculptor.**

Argus, Melbourne, 19.2.1901

### K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

**VISUAL ART:** Describe the expression on *The dancer's* face and the grace and elegance of her gestures. How does Mackennal create the illusion of movement? **Observe** a person dancing and draw several quick sketches. **Select** a sketch to create as a sculpture. **Note** the positions of the arms and legs and consider how to balance your sculpture. **Use** wire to create the structure, secure it to a wooden base and model the figure in clay over the wire frame.

**PDHPE:** Research dance styles in vogue at the turn of the 20th century. **Search** for samples of music of the period. **Observe** *The dancer's* frozen pose. What would be her next step? **Choreograph** a group dance inspired by the period using some of the samples of music you found. **Perform** your dance.

**SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY:** Document a figure in motion using a digital camera. **Identify** the various muscles in use and discuss. **Stand** in the various poses and feel the tension of the muscles identified. **Investigate** Mackennal's knowledge of anatomy by observing *The dancer*. **Explore** how artists trained during the 19th century and how they explored anatomy.

### 7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Examine how 'New Sculpture' sought to modernise the theory and practice of sculpture in Britain through the work of Alfred Gilbert, Hamo Thornycroft and Bertram Mackennal. How was New Sculpture a reaction to neo-classical sculpture? Discuss how *The dancer* is an example of New Sculpture. *The dancer* demonstrates New Sculpture's focus on the encounter between sculpture and the viewer. Would the impact of *The dancer* be altered if the figure was clothed? Discuss.

Reflect on this observation by Mackennal: 'the love of form is more highly developed in the French ... they are more appreciative of sculpture than the English'.<sup>4</sup> Compare the French and British approach to sculpture during the latter half of the 19th century.

Research the practice of Auguste Rodin exploring his high realism and physicality. Evaluate Rodin's impact on Mackennal. Discuss how Mackennal assimilated the advancements of Rodin such as an emphasis on texture and the emotional state of a subject.

Compare and contrast the representations of the female nude in sculpture and painting at the turn of the 20th century. Explore the various stereotypes such as goddess, heroine and powerless victim. Investigate the social, political and economic issues that were affecting women during this period in Western Europe. Assess Mackennal's representation of the dancer as a symbol of the modern woman. Discuss in class.



## The Earth and the elements

1907

marble 63.5 x 31.8 x 31.8 cm  
TATE Presented by the Trustees of the Chantrey  
Bequest 1907. Photo © TATE, London 2007

**It takes a lot to upset my belief in myself, the more I see of work in my particular craft here in London I see no reason to change my idea that there is plenty of room for me ... I have already made enemies ... which is a good sign. They hate a new man here, they don't like being stirred up out of the good old British calm.**

Mackennal to Theodore Fink, 1894, Theodore Fink papers, University of Melbourne archives MSS97/96

### K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

**VISUAL ART:** Walk around *The Earth and the elements*. Discuss how this sculpture is different to other works in the exhibition. **Observe** the various surfaces. **Imagine** what it would feel like to touch them. **Sketch** the work from different angles and attempt to portray the various surface qualities.

**HSIE:** What is the Royal Academy? Where is it and why was it established? What impact did it have on an artist's career in the 19th and early 20th centuries? Is the Royal Academy still important? **Research** artists who have been successful due to their link with the Royal Academy.

**SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY:** Explore the qualities of marble. Where is it found? Is it expensive? Does it break easily? What elements affect it over time? **Prepare** a PowerPoint presentation to show the process from raw marble to finished sculpture.

### 7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Research the depiction of the elements earth, water, fire and air in classical Greek and Roman art and literature. Examine the reasons why *The Earth and the elements* has been described as being conceived in 'a flash of Rodinesque inspiration'.<sup>5</sup>

Explore the motivation behind the creation of this work for the Royal Academy, London. What role did the academy play in Mackennal's career? Reflect on the quote (above) by Mackennal. Examine the difficulties expatriate artists faced when establishing themselves in Europe.

Compare innovations in painting and sculpture at the turn of the 20th century. How did modernity impact upon them? Did sculptors and painters respond in a similar manner? Compare the work of Mackennal to that of avant-garde artists.



## Unveiling of the Memorial to King Edward VII 1911–21

Waterloo Place, London, 20 July 1921, courtesy of Pauline Kraay

**In reverting to a militaristic model ... an image of controlled energy, restraint and authoritativeness, the artist foregrounded those attributes central to the rhetoric of the Edwardian and Georgian reigns.**

Deborah Edwards, senior curator, Australian art, *Bertram Mackennal*, AGNSW Sydney 2007 p 67

### K–6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

**VISUAL ART:** Describe the pose of the horse and rider. Estimate the size of the monument. Imagine viewing this at Waterloo Place and describe the angle you would view the monument. Compare the *Memorial to King Edward VII* to other equestrian sculptures in Sydney or Melbourne. Find out what symbols are associated with equestrian sculpture. Illustrate in cartoon format the stages of creating this monument. Research the structure of a horse. Using a cane or wire structure create your own equestrian model. Cover and build up the layers with tissue paper and glue.

**HSIE:** Who was Edward VII? List his achievements. Mackennal produced seven memorials to Edward VII. What is a memorial? Why were they made? Research and sketch public monuments in your local area, both historic and contemporary. Consider why they were created and debate the cultural messages being communicated. Survey the location of the monuments and assess if they have been placed in a desirable location or not. Design your own monument for a local public figure.

**ENGLISH:** Search the internet for images of Waterloo Place, London. Discuss why this location was selected for the monument. Write a newspaper article about the unveiling in 1921. Imagine the formal ceremony, describe the public's reaction on the day and include an interview with the artist.

### 7–12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Survey the history of the equestrian monument in Western art history. Discuss the continuation of the equestrian tradition into the modern era. Investigate the visual symbols of power and authority and their intended impact on the viewer. Research the collections of the AGNSW and NGV for artworks exploring the theme of the equestrian.

What impact did royal patronage have on Mackennal's career and social status? What did it mean for Mackennal to be the first Australian artist to be knighted?

Why was this period referred to as a *golden age of patronage*? Explore the cultural reasons why British royalty and the Empire's establishment were so keen to invest in public monuments. Mackennal's imaging of royalty is described as *prolific*. Find images of Mackennal's other royal commissions. Discuss the cultural messages communicated through these works. Explore whether a contemporary audience would interpret these monuments differently.

Investigate the construction of Mackennal as a 'cultural hero' by the Australian art establishment. Explore the complex reasons why Mackennal's long envisioned major sculpture for Australia did not eventuate.



**I don't think sculpture will ever be appreciated in the same way as painting. Sculpture appeals to a cultivated few and is a pure cult whereas painting always appeals ... because of colour since colour, like music, is understood by all ...**

Bertram Mackennal, 'Australia's only sculptor' *The Sketch*, London, Australasian edition, 29.4.1896, p 25

**Notes** (unless otherwise stated, all quotes are from the exhibition monograph)

1. p 101
2. p 178
3. p 178
4. p 26
5. p 68

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#### Acknowledgments

Education kit coordinator: Danielle Gullotta, coordinator k–6 programs  
Activities and questions: Danielle Gullotta  
Questions edited by Victoria Collings, coordinator k–6 and family programs,  
Tristan Sharp, senior coordinator, education programs  
Introductory text adapted from catalogue text by Deborah Edwards, senior curator,  
Australian art and additional text by Connie Tornatore-Loong, assistant curator,  
Australian art  
Photography AGNSW: Jenni Carter  
Design: Mark Boxshall  
Editor: Jennifer Blunden  
The Fifth Balnaves Foundation Sculpture Project  
Supported by The President's Council  
Cover image: Bertram Mackennal, *Circe* 1893 (detail) bronze statuette  
(cast c1902–04) Art Gallery of New South Wales Purchased 1970  
Produced by the Public Programs department  
© Art Gallery of New South Wales 2007  
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