



SIDNEY NOLAN

RETROSPECTIVE

EDUCATION KIT

ART
GALLERY
NSW

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NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA 22 FEBRUARY – 18 MAY 2008
QUEENSLAND ART GALLERY 6 JUNE – 28 SEPTEMBER 2008



Art was always to me a means of getting in contact with another world ... you could never see that other world and were never told about it, but art seemed to always be kind of touching it. Sidney Nolan 1

INTRODUCTION

Sidney Nolan (1917–1992) is one of Australia's most respected and internationally celebrated painters. During his career, he travelled and exhibited extensively throughout the world. He is best known for his various series, inspired by landscapes, myths or historical events. His output was prolific, ranging across various techniques and media. A constant experimenter with painting and drawing, he also produced stage designs and book illustrations.

THE RETROSPECTIVE

This exhibition is the first major retrospective since Sidney Nolan's death in 1992. Consisting of over 100 paintings, it includes some of his most important masterpieces.

The paintings are displayed in strict chronology, underlining the evolution of Nolan's vision from its genesis in Melbourne during the late 1930s to the United Kingdom half a century later. Each critical phase is represented, from the St Kilda and Wimmera themes, through the first Ned Kelly series, Central and Northern Australian landscapes and explorer subjects, African, Antarctic and European paintings, to Chinese and Australian-inspired abstractions.

Above: Sidney Nolan in his studio, Putney, London, mid 1960s
 photograph Axel Poignant © Roslyn Poignant, Axel Poignant Archive

Cover: Sidney Nolan, *Self portrait* 1943 (detail) ripolin enamel on hessian sacking on hardboard 61 x 52 cm Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, purchased with funds provided by the Art Gallery Society of New South Wales 1997
 © The Trustees of the Sidney Nolan Trust

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Melbourne in 1917, Sidney Nolan grew up in the suburb of St Kilda. Although he received some art training at Prahran Technical College and the National Gallery School, Melbourne, he was largely self-taught as an artist. Through repeated visits to the state library and Gino Nibbi's legendary bookstore, he discovered the art of Joan Miró, Paul Klee and Pablo Picasso and immersed himself in the writings of William Blake, Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, D H Lawrence and particularly Arthur Rimbaud.

He worked as a commercial artist before deciding to concentrate on painting. In 1938 he met Sunday and John Reed, who became not only his patrons for the next decade but also formed part of a close-knit, avant-garde group of artists and writers based at the Reed's house, Heide. Through the Reeds, Nolan met Danila Vassiliev, Albert Tucker, Joy Hester, John Perceval and Arthur Boyd.

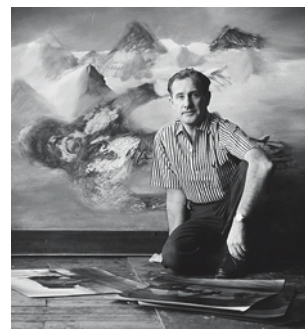
Nolan was a founding member of the Contemporary Art Society in 1938, where he exhibited annually from 1939 to 1947. The Melbourne *Herald's* *Exhibition of French and British contemporary art* in 1939 gave him the opportunity to experience first-hand the works of European modern masters.

Nolan's works from the late 1930s were Dada-inspired quasi-abstracts, intended to shock his contemporaries.

During the 1940s his work was profoundly influenced by Vassiliev and the French surrealist writers. In 1940 he designed the sets and costumes for the Ballets Russes production of *Icare* in Sydney, and held his first solo exhibition, which marked his departure from abstraction. In 1941 he became involved with the art and literary journal *Angry Penguins*, which would later publish the infamous Ern Malley poems.

... as Australia's premier iconographer of the continent ... Nolan flirted with descriptiveness without sacrificing the hallucinatory unreality that preserved his loyalty to Rimbaud ...

Barry Pearce, Head Curator, Australian Art, AGNSW and curator of *Sidney Nolan retrospective* 2



Drafted into the army in 1942, Nolan was stationed at Dimboola, western Victoria, where he began a series of works based on the Wimmera landscape and painted with fluid, fast-drying commercial enamel called Ripolin. After the war he produced a number of vibrant *faux-naïf* paintings based on his childhood memories of St Kilda. This was followed in 1946–47 by the famous Ned Kelly series – a theme he revisited several times.

Journeys in northern Queensland and Central Australia in 1947–49 gave rise to numerous other series, including historical works based on the story of the shipwrecked Mrs Eliza Fraser and landscapes of Australia's red 'dead heart' observed from the air. In 1948 Nolan married his second wife, John Reed's sister Cynthia (having become divorced from his first wife, Elizabeth Paterson in 1942), and the following year the Kelly paintings were exhibited in Paris.

In 1949 the Art Gallery of New South Wales purchased *Pretty Polly Mine* and *Carron Plains*, the first Nolan works in a public collection, and in 1952 the *Courier-Mail* commissioned Nolan to make visual records of the devastating drought in Queensland and the Northern Territory.

Nolan travelled to Europe for the first time in the early 1950s. In 1953 he moved to England, basing himself in London – from where he visited Greece, Antarctica, Africa and China – and returning regularly to Australia. In 1958 he was awarded a Harkness Fellowship, living and studying in the USA for two years.

In the following decade Nolan continued to pursue antipodean themes including the explorers Burke and Wills and the Anzac Gallipoli campaign. Later, he developed themes drawn from his travels and re-work previous subjects through memory.

Nolan's wife Cynthia died in 1976, and he married Mary Perceval (née Boyd) in 1978. He was knighted in 1981 and elected to the Royal Academy in 1991.

Nolan died in London in 1992.

The first major Nolan retrospective in Australia was presented by the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1967 and in 1987 the National Gallery of Victoria mounted a major touring retrospective to celebrate the artist's 70th birthday. Nolan is represented in public and private collections throughout Australia and overseas, including the Tate Gallery, London, and MOMA, New York.

GLOSSARY

abstract a style of art that has no source in external reality or that depicts real forms in a simplified way by emphasising line, colour or geometry. Also known as non-representational or non-figurative art. An *abstraction* is a work of art in this style.

Dada an early 20th-century art movement that started in Europe and deliberately challenged traditional aesthetic standards and cultural values.

modernism a philosophy that rejects the past as a model for art, proposing new forms of art suited to the present. Often used to describe a series of cultural movements that emerged in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

faux-naïf a French term literally meaning 'falsely naive', it is used to describe an artistic style that pretends to be childlike and unsophisticated.

surrealist belonging to an art movement that seeks to express the workings of the subconscious mind and is characterised by fantastic imagery and unexpected juxtapositions.

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photographs above, from left:

Christmas at Heide, c1946 (l to r: Sidney Nolan, Sunday Reed, John Sinclair and John Reed) photograph Albert Tucker, Heide Museum of Modern Art
Courtesy Barbara Tucker

Sidney Nolan in his studio, Gatehouse Street, Parkville, 1945 photograph Albert Tucker, Heide Museum of Modern Art
Courtesy Barbara Tucker

Sidney Nolan with *Gorilla*, London, 1963 photograph Axel Poignant
© Roslyn Poignant, Axel Poignant Archive

This printed education kit is also available online:
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/ed/kits/nolan



Luna Park 1941

enamel on canvas, 67 x 84 cm
 Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Purchased with funds provided by the Nelson Meers Foundation 2003 © The Trustees of the Sidney Nolan Trust

Memory is I am sure one of the main factors in my particular way of looking at things ... it seems to sharpen the image in a way that cannot be achieved by other or more direct means. Sidney Nolan ³

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

VISUAL ART: Choose a place that is important to you. Draw this place from memory. Simplify your drawing by selecting the main lines or shapes and emphasising the key features. What colour scheme will you use to communicate a mood or feeling about the place you have drawn?

MATHS: Design and make a 3-D structure based on *Luna Park* using recycled materials, tubes and tape. Roll marbles through your structure and time their journey. Is it the same every time?

ENGLISH: Find images of Luna Park in both Melbourne and Sydney. Discuss in class what it is like to visit an amusement park. Write a poem recounting an experience of visiting an amusement park. Use descriptive words to communicate the energy and mood of the park. Illustrate your poem. Hold a poetry reading in class.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY: Investigate the invention of the roller-coaster. Research the general public's response to early roller-coasters. How have fun rides changed over the past century? Explore advancements in technology that have led to these changes. Present your findings in class and discuss current attitudes to fun rides.

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Nolan painted vivid memories of his childhood experiences in St Kilda. Respond to the mood, light, scale and environment portrayed. What particular memories is Nolan communicating in *Luna Park*? Compare your childhood memories with the memories depicted in this artwork.

With John and Sunday Reed, Nolan became a founding member of the Contemporary Art Society in 1938. Investigate the aims of this society and the circle of artists who congregated around the Reed's home at Heide. In what ways did the Reeds foster the development of contemporary Australian art? Research the establishment of the Heide Museum of Modern Art.

Discuss the significance of the 1939 *Herald Exhibition of French and British contemporary art* for the development and practice of modern art in Australia. Research the artists included in the exhibition and their impact on Nolan's art practice. In particular, discuss the link between Nolan's *Luna Park* 1941 and the artworks of Klee and Miró.

Death of Constable Scanlon 1946

Ripolin enamel on hardboard, 90.4 x 121.2 cm
 National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, gift of Sunday Reed 1977

Abstract black squares ... [had] been floating around in modern art for some time ... All I did was put a neck on the square ... Sidney Nolan ⁴

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

VISUAL ART: Imagine you are witness to this event. Describe the frozen scene. How has Nolan suggested a moment in time? Sketch the composition of the painting, identifying the relationships between shapes and lines in the foreground, middle ground and background. How has Nolan used these elements to create a feeling of drama and space in the Australian landscape? Imagine this scene is part of a film storyboard. Make a sketch of the frame before and the frame after to tell more of the story.

HSIE: This painting depicts two historical figures, Ned Kelly and Constable Michael Scanlon. Who was Ned Kelly? Why was he considered to be an outlaw? What was the role of Scanlon in Kelly's story? Investigate the living conditions for Kelly and his family. Find out more about bushrangers and research other paintings, poems and films about them.

DRAMA: List the emotions reflected by the characters in this painting. Write a monologue for Kelly at this moment and articulate his thoughts and feelings. Perform your monologues in class. Select music to accompany your performance to complement the mood of the painting.

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

'... In the international culture of modern art ... the black square was always being played around with ... this was to do with Malevich and others,' Sidney Nolan. ⁵ What is the significance of Nolan's choice of the black square for his image of Ned Kelly? Research Kazimir Malevich's *Black square* 1915 and discuss the philosophy behind it and its impact on modern art.

Nolan was an avid reader of poetry and philosophy, which provided inspiration for his art. His favourite poet, Rimbaud, wrote, 'il faut être absolument moderne' ['one must be absolutely modern'].⁶ Analyse the composition of *Death of Constable Scanlon*. Is there evidence to suggest other Rimbaud influences in this artwork?

Nolan's experience with the materials and methods of modern art began with his work as a commercial artist. He probably started to use Ripolin in 1943 after reading about it in Gertrude Stein's *The autobiography of Alice B Toklas*. What are the special qualities of Ripolin that Nolan valued so highly? Experiment with materials in class that have similar effects as this painting medium.

Investigate the connection between Nolan and the *Angry Penguins* journal. What were the magazine's objectives? Research the Autumn 1944 edition featuring the fake poet Ern Malley. Discuss the impact of Ern Malley on Australian artistic circles of the time.



Temptation of St Anthony 1952

enamel and oil on hardboard, 121.8 x 91.3 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, purchased through The NGV Foundation with the assistance of an anonymous donor, Barbara Tucker, Founder Benefactor and the proceeds of The Impressionists Gala Dinner at NGV International 2004
© The Trustees of the Sidney Nolan Trust

Sidney Nolan's entomological *Temptation of St Anthony* has a delirious, dream-like quality, inspired, one imagines, by the devilish ebullitions of Hieronymus Bosch.

Alan McCulloch, Melbourne *Herald* art critic ⁷

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

VISUAL ART: Identify the figures and describe their facial expressions. **How** has Nolan created drama in this scene? **What** elements show he has set the events in Australia? **Why** do you think he did this?

Nolan studied the works of European masters including Giotto, Bosch and El Greco. **Find** examples of works by these artists that depict the lives of saints. **Research** the stories illustrated. **Choose** your favourite story and paint your own version, setting it in the Australian landscape.

HSIE: **What** is a saint? **What** role have saints played in various societies? **Research** the life of St Anthony. **Find** images by other artists depicting the life of St Anthony. **Compare** them to Nolan's version. Which one do you think is the most successful, and **why**?

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY: **Locate** Central Australia on a map. **Source** colour images from the region and compare them to Nolan's paintings. **Investigate** the area's geography and climatic conditions. **Identify** and discuss the adaptation of several species of flora and fauna. **Present** your research in the class.

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Returning to Australia in 1951, Nolan was inspired to paint *Temptation of St Anthony* for the Blake Prize which was established in that year. **What** is the Blake Prize? **How** did it inspire Nolan's art practice at the time? **Why** was he interested in submitting an artwork for this competition?

St Anthony was a hermit saint who endured physical, mental and spiritual torment yet remained steadfast. Many artists over time have been inspired to paint aspects of his struggles. **Compare** Nolan's iconography with that of other artists who have painted this subject, including Bosch, Paul Cézanne and Salvador Dalí.

Imagine this artwork is part of an Australian production of a play about St Anthony and you are a critic writing about the set, costumes, choreography and soundtrack. **In** your critique, explain the ways in which Nolan has dramatised the narrative in an Australian context. **How** is Nolan using humour to bring this legend of an Egyptian Christian saint to life for an Australian audience?



Burke 1962

enamel and oil on hardboard, 122 x 122 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, gift of Godfrey Phillips International Pty Ltd, 1968 © The Trustees of the Sidney Nolan Trust

I doubt I will ever forget my emotions when first flying over Central Australia and realising how much we painters and poets owe to our predecessors the explorers, with their frail bodies and superb willpower.

Sidney Nolan ⁸

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

VISUAL ART: Nolan explored the interior of Australia from the air and by travelling through the landscape. **How** has he communicated the vastness and heat of the landscape in this artwork?

Nolan often worked from memory. **Collect** images of Central Australia. **Look** closely at them, noting the tones and landforms. **Put** away your source images and paint a series of landscape paintings from memory.

PDHPE: **Look** at Nolan's Burke and Antarctic series. **Investigate** the effect of extreme climatic conditions on the human body. **Make** a list of food, clothing and resources you might take with you on a journey into remote inland Australia or Antarctica. **Discuss** the emotional and mental strain involved in such a journey.

HSIE: **Research** the expedition of Robert Burke and William Wills. **What** were their objectives? **Discuss** the personal characteristics necessary for such an expedition. **Compare** the resources and technology available to Burke and Wills in 1860 with those available today. **What** do you think the outcome of their expedition might have been if they had had access to today's technology?

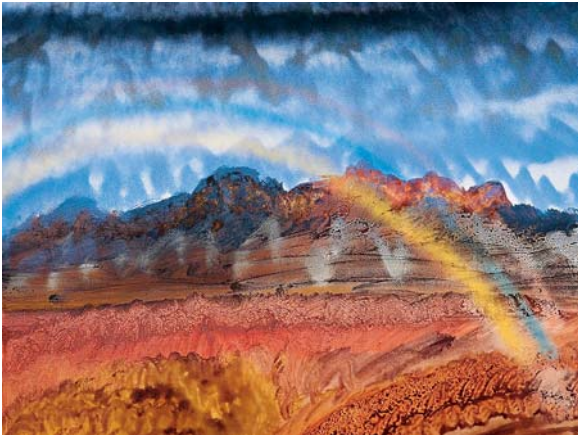
7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

What event from Australian history is being told in *Burke*? **Examine** the details of the artwork's iconography. **Does** it suggest that Burke is at the end of his journey? **Discuss** how Nolan has engaged his audience in the tragedy. **What** is your response?

Imagine you are asked to describe the journey of an early Australian explorer to someone who has never been to Australia. **Research** historical records and create a sequence of drawings through which you tell the story. **What** aspects of the human drama and landscape will you emphasise to bring this now-legendary saga to life?

How is Nolan expressing the different ways the man and the camel experience the landscape? **In** what ways do their gestures activate an emotional response in the viewer?

How do the horizon, the sky and Nolan's application of materials add to the emotional impact?



Rainbow over Pilbara 1982

enamel spray on canvas, 121 x 152 cm
Private collection. © The Trustees of the Sidney Nolan Trust

What I am doing now is a curious thing. Over the last five years or so I've been doing these huge abstracts. I started out as an abstract artist ... They relate to the ones I was doing in 1937–8 ... So I'm sort of treading water, refining my formal language ...

Sidney Nolan ⁹

K–6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

VISUAL ART: Nolan was influenced by the tradition of Chinese ink painting. Find examples of Chinese landscapes. Compare these to *Rainbow over Pilbara*. Discuss the similarities and differences.

Experiment with ink, watercolour and spray-paint, drawing inspiration from your memories of a particular landscape. Compare the qualities of the various media. Why do you think Nolan returned to using spray-paint later in his career?

Compare *Rainbow over Pilbara* with *Burke*. Analyse the similarities and differences. Discuss how Nolan communicates different feelings, thoughts or ideas.

MUSIC: This artwork depicts the calm after the storm. Select an instrument and compose a musical score with three movements: the brewing of the storm, the storm itself and the calm afterwards. Perform and record your compositions.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY: Research the formation of a rainbow. Why do rainbows appear? Investigate the spectrum of light. Experiment with diffusing white light through a glass prism. Devise simple experiments to test out how colour can influence an individual's mood. Record your findings in a table.

7–12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

'Painting is only worthwhile if you don't know the outcome. When you start a painting you must never know what the end product is going to be.' Sidney Nolan.¹⁰ Research Nolan's experimentation with media and technique in the development of *Rainbow over Pilbara* and collect examples. Suggest other artists who have experimented in similar ways.

Discuss the elements in *Rainbow over Pilbara* that indicate Nolan has been influenced by his travels. In what way has he revisited his earlier approaches to painting practice?

Nolan painted in his studio from memory, notes and sketches. In this artwork, what has he remembered about the Australian landscape? Create a monoprint based on a remembered landscape of your own. When it dries consider another layer to deepen the meaning of your work. Develop a body of work inspired by these initial experiments.

His style was an intelligent mixture of faux-naïf, Cézanne, van Gogh, chaotic scale, objects devoid of gravity, and the exaggerated shadows of surrealism, pulled together by the replicated magic of a child's view of the world; all superbly enhanced by the luminosity of Ripolin enamel paint which he began to use at the beginning of 1943.

Barry Pearce, Head Curator, Australian Art, AGNSW and curator of *Sidney Nolan retrospective* ¹¹

Sidney Nolan is the best known, the most familiar, name in the history of modern Australian art; indeed his name is synonymous with Australia. And yet he remains something of an enigma.

Edmund Capon, Director, Art Gallery of New South Wales ¹²

NOTES

- Unless otherwise stated, all quotes are from the exhibition catalogue: Barry Pearce et al, *Sidney Nolan retrospective*, AGNSW, Sydney 2007
- 1 Interview with Sally Begbie for 7.30 Report, ABC-TV Australia 1992
 - 2 Pearce, p 36
 - 3 Quoted in Jaynie Anderson, 'The early work of Sidney Nolan 1939–49', *Meanjin*, vol xxvi, no 110, Sept 1967
 - 4 Interview with Elwyn Lynn, 1984, in *Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly* Lynn & Semler 1989 p 9 Lynn & Semler 1985, p 10
 - 5 Interview with Lois Hunter, 29 Sept 1980, Oral History Section, National Library of Australia, Canberra
 - 6 From *Adieu in Une saison en enfer* (A season in hell), 1873 in Wallace Fowlie (trans), *Rimbaud: complete works, selected letters*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1988, pp 302–03
 - 7 *Herald*, Melbourne, 10 June 1952, p 8
 - 8 28 April 1967, Cynthia Nolan papers, National Library of Australia
 - 9 Interview with Mary Sara, *Yorkshire Post*, 23 July 1992
 - 10 Noël Barber, *Conversations with painters*, Collins, London 1964, p 98
 - 11 Pearce, p 28
 - 12 Pearce, p 11

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