

RUPERT BUNNY: ARTIST IN PARIS

1. INTRODUCTION

Fame is a fickle thing.

Rupert Bunny was the most successful expatriate Australian artist of his generation in Paris, achieving an enviable level of recognition and critical acclaim during the Impressionist period and beyond. Acclaim that eluded more famous contemporaries of his, including Arthur Streeton.

Yet he never became a household name in Australia. That's partly because he left here when he was 18 and spent 46 years in France, returning to Melbourne after the death of his wife, when he was 70. It's also because he painted very few Australian landscapes or other Australian themes, which were always popular with the Australian public.

Instead, he was a sumptuous colourist and decorative artist who produced the most ambitious Salon paintings of any Australian. In turn, Bunny prospered in Paris with many of his works acquired by the French state. Others were hung in galleries in London, Europe, Russia and America. No other Australian artist was exhibited so widely until the late 20th century.

Many expatriates stuck together but not Bunny. A genuine cosmopolitan who spoke fluent French and German, he was very much at home in "gay Paris", moving easily in Parisian social and artistic circles.

The vibrant artistic scene thrilled him. In an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1911, during his first trip home he said:

"Nobody can have any idea....unless they have lived in Paris and in Paris art circles, of the intense vitality of art there. Out here...art is not the living, breathing thing that it is in Paris.... Here art is an entity; there an atmosphere."

He was the first living Australian artist to have a retrospective at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1946 and it's nearly 20 years since the last important exhibition of Bunny's work. So it's time to rediscover an Australian artist who was a true exotic. I hope you enjoy the exhibition.

2. EARLY WORKS

Bunny arrived in Paris in 1886 to discover a swinging city, where the radically new rubbed shoulders with the traditional.

Like all expatriates, he wanted to scale the dizzy heights of success within the establishment art world. In Paris at that time, this meant recognition at the most prestigious exhibiting venue in Paris – the Salon.

As a result, Bunny was keenly attuned to the subjects and artistic styles dominating the mainstream.

At the turn of the century there was a yearning for a return to nature and a pre-modern spirituality, and artists - including Monet, Matisse and Gauguin - flocked to the remote, unspoilt coast of Brittany.

This appealed to Bunny's own poetic sensibility and his interest in mythology and classical themes and he joined the throng, visiting Brittany annually to sketch and paint.

During the late 1880s he produced a series of large-scale, delicately coloured sea idylls peopled with mythological and pagan creatures including mer-folk. These gave him his first real taste of success at the Salons. His painting *Tritons*, hanging here, got an honourable mention at the Paris Salon in 1890: the first time an Australian had achieved this distinction.

3. PASTORAL c1893

Pastoral is a fine example of the large-scale mythological works Bunny painted during his early years in France.

As you can see, idealised, contemporary youths share the canvas with fauns and nymphs, bringing a modern touch to a classical painting. By doing this, Bunny suggests that the Arcadia depicted is a state-of-mind rather than mere nostalgia for an imagined past.

The painting is an allegory about the transformative power of music. The youths and pagan beings are all transfixed by the strains of the pipes, lulled into a state of heightened consciousness.

The painting has the feel of a dream, with poppies symbolising sleep.

You can see how sensitive Bunny was to the way colour changed in different light and how he was able to evoke a subtle sense of atmosphere.

Note too the way the vermillion poppies are a burst of rich colour against the green. Time and again Bunny used red in this way. You'll find numerous examples of red flowers used as a colour accent throughout this exhibition.

4. BIBLICAL WORKS

Right from the start of his career, Bunny was recognised as a sophisticated colourist who used unconventional palettes and colour juxtapositions.

In the 1890s, he painted a series of biblical works, three of which are hung here. Their subject matter is very much the result of Bunny's desire to engage with the grand Salon tradition. But it is his use of colour that distinguishes them.

Ancilla Domini foreshadows the vibrant, colour-saturated works he would develop later and trumpets his perennial love of red. By contrast, *The descent from the Cross* and *Burial of St Catherine of Alexandria* both use another of Bunny's favourite palettes - bruised mauves, pinks, blue, green and fawn.

Bunny had spent time in England before arriving in France and these works are charged with a strong sense of poetry, mystery and emotion associated with the British Pre-Raphaelites. You can also see the influence of art nouveau – then very popular in France – though his use of flattened colour owes more to decorative French murals.

Both works were well received. *The descent from the Cross* was hung at the 1898 Royal Academy in London while *Burial of St Catherine* won a bronze medal at the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle.

5. ANCILLA DOMINI c1896

Bunny painted *Ancilla Domini* during a decade in which there was renewed fascination with religious mysteries.

The famous French actress Sarah Bernhardt actually recited the mystery of the Passion at Cirque d'Hiver. Whether Bunny saw that we don't know, but he certainly knew Bernhardt, who bought some of his work.

However, he would've been well aware that the subject of the Annunciation – that moment of supreme mystery when the angel Gabriel tells Mary she will conceive the son of God – would strike a chord with the predominantly Catholic French public.

Bunny uses colour symbolically in the painting. He structures it around the blazing, vermillion curtain: a rectangle of pure colour foreshadowing the passion of Christ. A shaft of light from under the door hints at the divine presence and highlights the increasing significance of light in Bunny's work.

On the floor next to Mary are roses, symbolising love and beauty. Roses are a recurring motif in Bunny's work. He chose a natural pink pigment called "madder" to paint them, which he used only for roses and nothing else.

6. THE PRE-RAPHAELITE INFLUENCE

In the late 1890s, Bunny painted a series of works influenced by the British Pre-Raphaelites. This almost exclusive focus was evidence of his abiding love affair with the female form. And many art historians over the years have marvelled at the way he engages so perceptively with women and the feminine mystique.

In 1902, at the age of 38, Bunny married Jeanne Morel, a French artist and model. She became his regular model and the central motif in his art. It's Jeanne that you see here in *Dolce farniente* and *A summer morning*, as it was in *Ancilla Domini*.

You'll notice that the symbolic rose appears frequently in these works. Around this time, Bunny also began to introduce others symbols including the white swan, which would also be permanently associated with women in his art. The swan has classical associations with poetry and music and is able to move between the spiritual and real worlds in both Eastern and Western mythology – so it was a sign of the higher realm of the gods.

7. DOLCE FARNIENTE c1897

In *Dolce farniente*, Bunny creates a timeless, poetic world with his depiction of an enigmatic group of angelic female figures on a dream-like seashore.

Dolce farniente means “sweet idleness” and Bunny has infused the painting with a feeling of gentle languor.

The soft palette of creamy pinks, blues, ambers and greens was increasingly characteristic of his work at that time. You can see how he has also used subdued light and uniform tones in order to heighten the sense of feminine mystique.

In the coming years Bunny would paint numerous similarly composed works featuring a group of women relaxing, dreaming, dressing or undressing by expanses of water.

Noted Parisian art critic Gustave Geffroy was very taken with *Dolce farniente*. Reviewing the Salon of 1897, Geffroy wrote:

“To discover the promises and creations of newcomers, it is necessary to research, to go to canvases attracted by a soft radiance, a quiet force, a secret charm....I like the poetry of *Dolce farniente* by Mr Bunny [of] women with graceful bodies, and beautiful and instinctive faces, who dream by the sea.”

Geffroy was a progressive scholar and a friend of Monet. He wrote major studies on artists such as Monet and Rubens and had his portrait painted by Cézanne so he knew his stuff

Geffroy championed Bunny’s work for the next three decades. In a 1917 review he said:

“He is a brilliant and spirited artist...at one and the same time, a realist and a visionary, an observer of truth and a poet of the world of dreams.”

8. SALON TRIUMPHS

In this room you will find some of Bunny's most ambitious paintings – notably *Summer time* and the spectacular *Endormies* – and others that bear testament to his highly social, cosmopolitan lifestyle.

Bunny was very much a man-about-town, actively participating in Paris's lively artistic, musical and literary milieu and café society. An Australian in Paris, you might say.

He knew many of the celebrated artists, writers, musicians and performers of the day including Sarah Bernhardt, Dame Nellie Melba, Isadora Duncan, Debussy, Rodin, Guy de Maupassant and Australian composer Percy Grainger, whose portrait hangs here along with one of Madame Melba.

He also painted Madame Sada-yakko, known as “the geisha who bewitched the West”. The lyrical painting *Madame Sada-yakko as Kesa*, hanging here, is considered by many to be the best work Bunny ever painted.

Hungarian writer Zsigmond Justh kept a diary of his time in Paris in 1888 in which Bunny – who became a good friend – makes regular appearances.

Justh tells of outings to the theatre, concerts and exhibitions, also lunches with other artists, social evenings at various cafés, dinner parties and musical soirees at Bunny's bohemian studio, with Bunny – who was a fine pianist – tickling the ivories while his flatmate, British art student Alastair Cary-Elwes, played violin.

In one colourful entry, Justh describes an artists' masked ball:

“Rupert Bunny is dressed as an angel; wearing a white, semi-transparent, Indian voile, floor-length shirt, a veil covering the crown of his head, held by a big bronze halo: and holding a six foot long trumpet in his hand. He looked splendid, prevailing over all the guests, being a head taller than the others.”

Bunny's sister Hilda also wrote about an extended visit she and her mother made to Paris in 1889 to visit Bunny. Like Justh she talked of concerts, opera and impressive musical soirees in Bunny's studio. Hilda also recalled a special party:

“We were invited to Madame Melba's birthday party. It was a marvellous gathering. Everyone who was anyone musically in Paris was there that night... At other times Dame Nellie invited us to lunch or sent us tickets to the opera.”

9. SUMMER TIME c1907

Summer time is Bunny's most ambitious Salon painting and his largest work, bringing to mind the allegorical murals of the day – something he had long wanted to create.

Here there are two allegories at play: summer as an ideal time and the five senses. Not surprisingly, it is the perfumed rose – Bunny's enduring symbol – that is used to evoke smell.

With its opulent but darker tones and intense orchestration of colour and light, the painting is full of complex patterns, textures and decorative detail.

Look at the play of shadow and light on the bodies and sumptuous gowns: how carefully observed and splendidly executed.

The women are depicted as modern followers of Venus, goddess of love and beauty. The way Bunny depicts them in various stages of undress gives the work a feel of time passing slowly and lazily.

The painting has the ambience of an Old Master and has been compared to the work of Venetian artist Tiepolo, known for his decorative frescoes. However, there is a theatrical bravado to the intricate staging of the composition that relates to the huge interest in theatre and spectacle in early 20th-century Paris.

10. APRÈS LE BAIN c1904

Après le bain was the first of 13 paintings by Bunny acquired by the French state: an unprecedented number for an Australian artist.

Exhibited in 1904, critics were fulsome in their praise. Pierre Baudin, art reviewer for *La Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, wrote:

“A large number of foreign artists exhibit. Some play an important role at the Salon... An important piece in the genre is Bunny’s painting, *Après le bain*. It is remarkable for its style: steeped in the art of Delacroix, and strongly reminiscent of Rubens’ composition....”

Describing *Après le bain*, another critic wrote:

“...their hair spills into the light; their dresses shine like diamonds...the sumptuous colours are softened: All is combined with a kind of Italian ease and an English distinction and the whole remains subtle and delicate.”

Endormies, which hangs beside *Après le bain*, is another seductive work. While drawing on the aesthetics of Pre-Raphaelites like Rossetti and Burne-Jones, it is nonetheless a decidedly modern work – and arguably one of Bunny’s most exceptional.

As you can see these two paintings share a gleaming, opalescent palette reminiscent of the late 1890s art nouveau as well as a rococo love of texture.

Both belong to a series which celebrated female beauty and mystery, and which frequently featured sleeping or dreaming women in modern Paris.

In *Endormies*, dreamy languor is so tangibly evoked you feel yourself being lulled into a soporific state – like the sleeping dog – just by gazing on it. One Australian critic suggested that the artist must “live in a land where it is always afternoon”.

11. BELLE ÉPOQUE & PARISIAN LEISURE

By 1909, Bunny had realised that his work was looking a bit conservative. Although still attached to the great traditions of the past he also wanted to be an artist of his time and was alert to the artistic currents around him. Modern women with parasols started to stroll onto his canvases.

The paintings in this room illustrate this transitional period when Bunny began to paint modern Parisian life – particularly urban leisure – during the endless summer of the beautiful era – the belle époque.

And so, for a while, he let go of his preoccupation with mythology and engaged with everyday subjects made popular by the Impressionists: mothers at play with their children in the Luxembourg gardens or relaxing with friends on the beach, women day-dreaming on a swing and resting at home.

Colour still remained paramount, and the paintings he produced around this time range from a soft, milky palette to darker, dramatic tones. At times, the colour is almost hyper-realistic. Fantasy and the unreal were never completely absent from Bunny's work but, for a brief time, reality was more in evidence in his work than it ever had been – or would be in the future.

12. THE AVANT-GARDE INFLUENCE

Essentially what you are seeing in this room is an academic painter trying to find his own way of engaging with post-Impressionism.

Interestingly, Bunny sat on the jury that decided to hang Matisse's radical paintings *Dance* and *Music* at the 1910 Salon d'Automne, having become the first Australian to be elected as a member of the prestigious Salon five years earlier.

Matisse's two large panels with their primitive female figures dancing and playing musical instruments shocked many – and Bunny himself wasn't impressed. Asked about post-Impressionism in an interview for *The Southern Spectre* while in Australia in 1911, he described Matisse's paintings with their pink and red female forms and said:

“You can imagine the colouring but it would be impossible to give an idea of the atrocious drawing of the figures...The head and leader of the movement since Gauguin's death is Matisse, whose work of course is better than I have described, especially as regards drawing but only a narrow line divides the sheep from the goats of that movement.”

However, Bunny's engagement with such avant-garde work clearly had an influence on his own.

Throughout the 1910s, he continued to experiment with colour. *Shrimp fishers at Saint-Georges* was quite a departure with its two flattened panels of blue and brown creating a shallow background plane, against which the figures in the painting are pushed to the fore in theatrical fashion.

Bunny's work was becoming increasingly decorative. His use of the Japanese screen as a backdrop in *Sunbath* is a prime example. He also embarked on a final series of mythological works – and this time his palette was verging on iridescent.

13. BALLETS RUSSES & THE NEW MYTHOLOGIES

In 1909, Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev formed the Ballets Russes in Paris and started bringing innovative young choreographers and composers together with designers and visual artists including Matisse, Miro, Bakst and Picasso.

The radically new works that emerged made waves around the world and had a profound affect on the development of modern dance and ballet as well as on Parisian culture generally. Bunny, who went regularly to the theatre, was as fascinated as anyone else.

The company caused an immediate sensation with its first program of three works. One of them – called *Le Pavillion d'Armide* – featured a rococo set by Alexander Benois in strikingly unusual harmonies of pale green, mauve, pink and turquoise. This palette would subsequently feature in Bunny's late mythological paintings.

Other famous works to premiere at the Ballets Russes included Nijinsky's *Afternoon of a faun* and *The rite of spring* with its rhythmic, dissonant score by the young Stravinsky, both hugely controversial productions when they opened.

The Ballets Russes inspired in Bunny a renewed interest in classical mythology, exoticism, Orientalism, primitivism and theatricality. In 1913, he embarked on a body of work known as his *danse chromatique* series in which the canvases pulsate with a dynamic sense of rhythm and intense colour harmonies similar to that used by the Fauves, led by Matisse.

Bunny was now at his full power as a colourist. Finally liberated from the studio model, he abandoned any pretence at naturalism and became distinctively and utterly his own artist.

14. THE RAPE OF PERSEPHONE c1913

Rhythm is central to Bunny's *danse chromatique* series and is epitomised in the exceptional *The rape of Persephone*.

If you look at the flow of energy in the work you'll see that Bunny has used sequences of spiralling curves, which propel the elements outwards like a centrifugal force, giving the painting a dynamic sense of rhythm.

The painting depicts Hades silhouetted against a sheet of flaming red in the act of kidnapping a swooning Persephone. Tongues of flame, writhing serpents, heavy skies and wreathes of bluish smoke intensify the fetid atmosphere.

Along with rhythm, colour is the most striking feature of Bunny's late series of mythological paintings with hot pinks, reds and mauves predominating here.

Writing about the painting in his book *The art of Australia*, Robert Hughes said: "He thought the Fauves bunglers, but the savage reds, lilacs, and greens of *Persephone* are as saturated with expressive vigour as any Matisse."

15. COURTISANNES A LA CAMPAGNE c1920

The superb *Courtisannes à la campagne*, painted around 1920, shows the obvious influence of the Ballets Russes and Fauve art movement on Bunny's work.

By now, Bunny's colours were rich and saturated. The new fad for Orientalism was influencing fashion and interior design as well as art and you can see that Bunny has featured Oriental carpets in this painting while the landscape itself looks like decorative fabric.

The model standing at the centre of this spectacular Oriental tableau is, once again, his wife Jeanne Morel, heavily and exotically costumed. The two figures dancing behind her bring a primitive rhythm and energy to the work.

Having focused almost exclusively on women for a decade or more, Bunny began painting the male figure again. In *Hercules in the garden of Hesperides*, you'll see a heroically muscular figure. A similar brown-skinned male appears in several of Bunny's paintings at the time, including *Oedipus and the Sphinx*.

Bunny's depiction of Hercules was very likely inspired by Nijinsky's unforgettable performance in *Afternoon of a faun*: an audaciously sexual work with violent energetic choreography in which Nijinsky played a faun who flirts with and chases several maidens.

16. BUNNY, THE MAN & HIS SELF PORTRAITS

Bunny's artistic and social standing in Paris is well documented. But the man himself remains more of an enigma.

In his diary of 1888, Hungarian writer Zsigmond Justh described the 24-year old Bunny as:

“six feet tall, curly blond hair, pointy blond beard and moustache (in the French manner)...”

Still not much to go by. What we can glean from various letters, recollections, newspaper articles and self portraits is:

He was a heavy smoker who favoured Gauloises: unfiltered French cigarettes with a strong, distinctive smell.

He was an avid card player, of Bridge in particular. And an accomplished piano player – even captivating Melba.

He was very regular in his work habits – painting from immediately after breakfast - where he consumed countless cups of tea with cigarettes - until lunch: always a leisurely affair.

Some describe him as happily married, others as unhappily married but all agree he was socially gregarious. Even Bunny himself spoke in various interviews of his love of the Paris social scene.

“Another aspect of Parisian life which appeals strongly to me is the life of the Boulevards... The stroll along the Bois, the café and trees, the aperitif, the meeting with one's friends....”

The three self portraits here painted between 1920 – when he was 56 – and 1933 – when he was 70 – don't show the artist as a young man but we do see a progression from debonair gent to aging aesthete.

However, it's the recollection of him by Australian art dealer Lucy Swanton in 1968 that seems to pull the fragments together.

“civilised, courtly, sensitive, delightfully cynical, with the cynicisms accompanied by a faint shrug of the thin shoulders and a gleam of amusement in his brown eyes – eyes as bright and quick as a bird's.”

17. LANDSCAPES

Bunny painted landscapes all his life. This group of glowing delicately coloured scenes of Provence, painted mainly during the 1920s, clearly shows the influence of Pierre Bonnard.

Plein air painting had its hey-day in France during the 1920s. Around this time, Bunny bought an old farmhouse in the tiny village of Les Landes near the Loire Valley with a huge barn, which he converted into a studio.

From there, he made numerous trips into the French countryside where he painted on-the-spot sketches with the utmost care but only worked them up into larger landscapes when he was back in his tiny Paris studio.

According to Australian artist Daryl Lindsay, these sketches meant a great deal to him:

“During his lifetime Bunny could not be induced – unless under the bond of great friendship – to part with any of them. They were, so to speak, his lifeblood and many times I have watched him go through them – lingering over this or that with loving affection.”

Though Bunny’s landscapes show signs of human habitation, they are like timeless dreamscapes and it is this quality that connects them to the rest of his work.

Reviewing an exhibition of his landscapes in 1944, the *Sydney Morning Herald* art critic wrote:

“His work belongs to the springtime of painting... The general restraint and economy of the pictorial elements are admirable. Viewed objectively there is nothing of particular interest.... But the delicacy of the diffused tones and the air of lyrical poetry which takes hold even of the meanest shape transforms this unexciting scene in to one of sheer delight. Bunny seems to discover painting afresh.”

18. HOUSEWIVES c1932

The rather amusingly titled *Housewives* is a clear indication of the influence of Picasso on Bunny's work at this time.

As with the painting *Slave women*, *Housewives* represents a return to the female form and the domestic world that Bunny explored, but here there is a very different solidity, mass and gravitas to the figures, which bear an obvious relationship to Picasso's classic nudes painted between the two world wars.

The subtle harmonies of *Housewives* and its muted finish suggest that Bunny's longstanding interest in mural painting continues unabated.

The painting exudes a much slower, stiller rhythm than Bunny's late mythological paintings inspired by the Ballets Russes. This imbues the work with a sense of timeless tranquillity as the women go about their chores just as others before them have done over countless centuries.

19. LATE WORKS

In 1933, Bunny returned to live in Melbourne. He continued to paint until his mid 70s. He died at age 82.

Right to the end of his career Bunny remained open to new artistic influences.

He had always been ambitious when it came to making art and that quality never left him.

Well into old age he was still experimenting with colour and taking calculated risks.

His combinations of browns, creams and mauves in later works such as *Slave women*, hanging in this last room, are in many ways similar to the colour palette and bruised hues he used in *Burial of St Catherine of Alexandria* 30 years earlier – but here the colours are more saturated.

Ultimately Bunny's significance lies in his exceptional skill as a decorative artist and a dazzling master colourist.