



# 'K' is for Conder

**CHARLES CONDER RETROSPECTIVE  
EDUCATION KIT**

ART  
GALLERY  
NSW

Art Gallery of New South Wales 14 June – 17 August 2003  
National Gallery of Victoria 5 September – 9 November 2003  
Art Gallery of South Australia 21 November 2003 – 26 January 2004

# CHARLES CONDER RETROSPECTIVE

## Contents

Education Kit Outline  
Introduction  
The Conder Enigma  
The Painter's Life: A Chronology  
Conder: A Travel Log  
Conder: A Cast of Characters  
Vocabulary  
Selected References

### Works in Profile

List of Works  
Colour Images  
Background Information  
K-6 Looking and Making  
7-12 Framing Questions

### Themes in Focus

List of Themes  
Colour Images  
Background Information  
K-6 Looking and Making  
Stage 6 Suggested Case Studies  
Afterthoughts: Some Personal Reflections



## Education kit outline

This education kit has been designed for use with the temporary exhibition *Charles Conder Retrospective*, 14 June to 17 August 2003. It highlights key works and themes and aims to provide a context for their use as a resource for K-6 and 7-12 audiences. It may be used in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition or as pre or post-visit resource material.

The K-6 and 7-12 material have been written with reference to the New South Wales Creative Arts Syllabus Years K-6 and the Visual Arts Syllabus Years 7-12. Specifically, the K-6 material focuses on Visual Arts and makes links to other key learning areas (KLAs); and the 7-12 material is structured around the Practice of Art History and Criticism, the Frames (Subjective, Structural, Cultural and Post-modern) and, through the suggested case studies, the Conceptual Framework.

Cover:  
William Rothenstein (1872-1945)  
*L'homme qui sort (The painter Charles Conder)* 1892  
oil on canvas 120.3 x 55.2 cm  
Toledo Museum of Art. Purchased with funds from the Libbey  
Endowment, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey 1952

# Charles Conder (1868–1909)

Amongst those who created the Heidelberg school in Australia, Roberts brought it intellectual rigour, McCubbin poetic nostalgia, and Streeton unbridled confidence.

Charles Conder gave it wings of imagination.

Curator Barry Pearce

The artists who camped and painted the landscape *en plein air* at Heidelberg gave each other affectionate nicknames. Streeton, young and slight of physique, was called 'Smike' after a character from Dickens, Roberts, being the eldest, British and most stubbornly determined of the group, was dubbed 'Bulldog', while Conder's name was abbreviated to 'K' or 'Kay', a play on the first letter of his surname, evoking the almost feminine grace of his elusively vague, poetic persona.

## Introduction

A core group of painters established the Heidelberg school of Impressionism in late 19th century Australia: Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton and Charles Conder. Conder is the only one of this key group for whom no fully encompassing retrospective exhibition has ever been organised. The reason is simple. He was only in Australia for six years (1884–1890) and unlike every other Australian expatriate artist of note, Conder never returned. His European work remained largely unseen by Australians, except in poor quality reproductions.

At last the long overdue retrospective is taking place, fittingly organised by the Art Gallery of New South Wales: the first public institution to purchase an example of the young artist's work, *Departure of the Orient – Circular Quay*, in 1888. From England, India, Australia, France to England again, Conder's restless spirit roamed. Despite the sensitive poetry he brought to his Australian landscapes, the dreamlike fantasy of his European silk paintings and the quality of his friendships with luminaries such as Toulouse-Lautrec, Beardsley and Wilde, Conder never found his ultimate identity in any particular country.

This retrospective includes more than a hundred of Conder's best works in oil, watercolour, drawings and prints. Opening with his most admired Sydney and Melbourne outdoor subjects, it also introduces Australian audiences to Conder's less well-known European works – shimmering *plein air* landscapes and dreamily ornamental watercolours on silk – some rare works not seen anywhere for decades.



Charles Conder  
*Self portrait* 1902  
oil on millboard 47.5 x 35 cm  
Manchester Art Gallery. Presented by  
Charles Rutherston 1925

William Orpen (1878–1931)  
*Portrait of Charles Conder* 1900 pencil on  
paper 20.2 x 20.7 cm (sheet) Art Gallery of  
New South Wales. Presented by Howard  
Hinton 1931

## The Conder enigma

He was tall, very blond, with his hair ... which was heavy and soft ... parted in the middle; his soft blue eyes looked out somewhat absently ... equally soft and vague was his voice. There was about his conversation the same unfinished quality that characterised his painting and his writing, which gave to all three something infinitely rich and suggestive.

John Rothenstein, 1928

Conder's artistic persona was undeniably attractive. The number of portraits made of him during his lifetime testifies to this. But there was one thing his friends and contemporaries all agreed upon: his elusiveness. This quality also characterises Conder's work. He paints the fleeting moment, the unspoken word, the nuanced feeling, but just as we seem to have a grasp of who he is and what he is saying, he slips away.

Conder loved dressing-up, the idea of masks and disguises attracted him as subjects for art, and in life, suggested ways of shielding private sensitivities and personal identity. From the very beginning, in his Australian landscapes, Conder's modernity is apparent in the way he dissociates emotion from its Victorian context of narrative and uses it, via colour and form, as an agent of mood. When a title does suggest narrative it often takes the viewer a few seconds to locate the subject matter referred to, because Conder is always, it seems, at an oblique angle to his subject matter. This is most striking in *The hot sands, Mustapha, Algiers* 1891 where the sandy beach is only distantly glimpsed, a tiny strip beneath the sky at the top of the canvas.

Conder loved the beach for all its elemental qualities of sea, sky and sand, painting it from Coogee and Mentone to Dieppe and Newquay. He also enjoyed painting rivers and pastoral scenery on the Hawkesbury at Sydney, the Yarra at Heidelberg or the Seine at Chantemesle. However, the harmony and peace he felt in nature was, for him, also tinged with melancholy: 'Life is so beautiful that one thinks it must end soon...' he wrote to his friend the artist William Rothenstein in 1895.

On a nail in his room hung a frock coat, vest and trousers of a correct cut, a top hat, gloves and a stick, so that he might when he chose sally forth clad in garments that would insure his admission to the tea tables of the beautiful ladies that he then and always so deeply admired.

Perrin Joyce, 1925

# The painter's life: a chronology



Baron de Meyer (1868–1949)  
*Conder in his studio* c. 1904  
gelatin silver photograph, sepia  
toned 28 x 20.3 cm  
Collection Barry Humphries

Conder, for me, fulfilled all preconceived ideas of what a genius should look like. He was beautiful to look at, with a head like an antique marble, and a sleepy charm that somehow convinced one that here was someone unusual. 'The strange Bird' describes exactly the sort of sensation he first aroused.

A.S. Hartrick, 1939

... to Conder the world was an oyster, which he would open in his own fashion.

Julian Ashton, 1939

**1868** Charles Edward Conder born in Tottenham, England, 24 October.

**1870** His father appointed railway engineer in India, family moves to Bombay.

**1877** Conder returns to England after his mother's death and father's remarriage, commences boarding school at Eastbourne with his older brother, Samuel James.

**1884** His education complete, Conder's father sends him to Australia to stay with his uncle, William Jacomb Conder, and be apprenticed as a surveyor. Conder arrives in Sydney on the SS *Windsor*, 13 June 1884 and joins a Hawkesbury River surveying camp under Joseph Brooks.

**1887** After two years surveying various trig points, something his heart was never in, Conder throws in his apprenticeship to pursue a career in art, first taking employment with lithographers Gibbs, Shallard and Co. in Pitt Street, Sydney. Living at 71 William St. Woolloomooloo, he attends Saturday afternoon art classes under A J Daplyn, landscape painter. 3 December, exhibits for the first time, *Low tide, Hawkesbury River* (now in the National Gallery of Australia) with the Art Society of New South Wales. April 1887 – September 1888, Conder works as a freelance artist for *The Illustrated Sydney News*. This graphic work helps him develop an unparalleled eye for human incident.

**1888** Conder becomes a member of Julian Ashton's evening sketch club and joins *plein air* painting expeditions to Randwick in February and Griffith's Farm, Richmond in September. He paints Sydney beaches with visiting Melbourne artist Tom Roberts at Coogee over Easter, and Italian artist Girolamo Nerli at Bronte in May.

13 June, Conder wins first prize for a sketch from nature at the Art Society's student competition. In September he exhibits ten works with the Art Society of New South Wales; the Art Gallery of New South Wales acquires his *Departure of the Orient – Circular Quay*. Prior to leaving Sydney, Conder is diagnosed with syphilis.

13 October, Conder sails for Melbourne to join Tom Roberts in his studio at Grosvenor Chambers, 91 Collins St. 16 November, Conder joins the Victorian Artists Society, exhibits four recent works including Sydney paintings such as *Coogee Bay* with a spectacular new beach study he made soon after arriving in Melbourne, *A Holiday at Mentone*.

**1889** Conder becomes part of the semi-permanent artists' camp at the old Mount Eagle Homestead at Heidelberg with Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton. They paint outdoors in all seasons between January 1889 and March 1890. Conder and Streeton become close, sharing a love of poetry and painting the landscape in a romantic, lyrical mode. Conder exhibits two works with the VAS in May and also paints at Riddles Creek, staying with his new patrons, Dr and Mrs (Kathleen) Caffyn.

17 August, Conder with Roberts, Streeton and McCubbin initiate a groundbreaking event in Australian art history: *The 9 by 5 Impression Exhibition*, at Buxton's Rooms, Swanston Street. Towards the end of this year his uncle Henry Conder visits from India and offers to support Conder for two years in Paris.

**1890** Living at his studio, Gordon Chambers Flinders Lane and at Eaglemont, Conder also

sketches at Sandringham, Rickett's Point. 29 March, exhibits six works with the VAS. 26 April, Conder sails for Europe on the *Austral*. He will never return to Australia. Visiting Naples, Rome, Paris and London, he settles in Paris in August. Joining the Academie Julian, he makes a lifelong friend, English painter William Rothenstein, and takes a studio in Montmartre.

**1891** Conder enrolls at Fernand Cormon's studio in Montmartre. Attracted by the bohemian atmosphere of nearby cafés and cabarets such as the Moulin Rouge, Le Rat Mort and Le Chat Noir he frequents them with Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Louis Anquetin. Admiring Monet's exhibition of haystack paintings, Conder goes to Normandy in the spring to paint in the valley of the Seine and the coastline at Dieppe and haystacks at Giverny. He falls ill in December and is invited to a friend's house to convalesce in Mustapha, Algiers, where he paints *The hot sands, Mustapha, Algiers*.

**1892** Returning to Paris, Conder exhibits in March in conjunction with William Rothenstein at Pere Thomas, picture dealer. He has two landscapes accepted by the Societe des Beaux Arts (the New Salon). Working *en plein air* at Chantemesle and Vetheuil, Conder returns to Paris and a new studio, in Montmartre, where Rothenstein paints his portrait *L'homme qui sort*, shown at the Salon the following year.

**1893** Conder has work accepted in both the spring and autumn shows of the New English Art Club. This time he also has four works accepted by the SNBA Paris, establishing a pattern of working and exhibiting on both sides of the Channel. Joining an artists and writers at a camp at Dieppe he befriends Aubrey Beardsley and publisher John Lane.

**1894** Conder continues to live a peripatetic bohemian studio life in Montmartre. In March–April he stays at 'La Grenouille', an inn at Giverny, and in May, exhibits six works with the SNBA. He spends autumn in London, exhibiting another two works at the NEAC.

**1895** February–March, he is in Paris, April–June, he is in Chelsea, London during the second trial and conviction of his friend Oscar Wilde. July–November, again visits Dieppe and sends one work, *L'Oiseau bleu*, to the NEAC. 26 December, Conder shows a 'boudoir', commissioned for Samuel Bing's radical exhibition of 'new art' in *La Maison de l'Art Nouveau*, Paris.

**1896** Conder exhibits oils and works on silk at Samuel Bing's second Paris exhibition of Art Nouveau, but once again the response proves disappointing. Trips to Dieppe and Dornoch, Scotland, result in landscapes, two shown at the NEAC.

**1897** January–April, Conder is in Paris. With the poet Ernest Dowson in Dieppe, Conder visits Oscar Wilde, who has been released from Reading Gaol. Streeton relocates to London where he meets Conder again.

**1898** Beardsley dies in March at Menton. April, two Australian landscapes by Conder are included in a travelling exhibition showcasing Australian Art at the Grafton Galleries, London.

**1899** May, Conder holds a one-man show at the Carfax Gallery, Ryder St, St James in London. This is his first major showing of small-scale,

(continued next page)

## The painter's life: a chronology (continued)

delicate watercolours on silk; they have instant critical and commercial appeal and Conder's name is made.

**1900** Oscar Wilde dies. Conder is influenced by new friendships with English modernist painters Augustus John and William Orpen.

**1901** Shortly after his May exhibition at Carfax Gallery, Conder meets Stella Maris Bedford, a Canadian widow. Charles and Stella marry in Paris, 5 December, at the British Embassy.

**1902** Conder's marriage proves happy and the couple settle in Chelsea. He continues to spend summers painting in Normandy and is invited to show in Brussels. In December he breaks with Carfax Gallery.

**1903** Charles and Stella spend early months in Venice. November, Conder is invited to exhibit in Pittsburgh USA with the Carnegie Institute.

**1904** The Conders move into their most famous home, an eighteenth century house at 91 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea. October–November, Conder completes a commission to decorate a room in Edmund and Mary Davis's Holland Park house. Davis throws a fancy dress party to celebrate.

**1905** February, Charles and Stella give their own memorable masquerade party, acclaimed by all who attended. The social round saps Conder's

inspiration and his spirit falters.

**1906** Conder is included in an exhibition of Modern Art at Agnews in Bond Street but his studies of modern life fail to impress the English critics. April, Conder mounts a large exhibition of oils, watercolours and prints at Galeries Durand-Ruel in Paris. His old friend Emile Blanche writes the catalogue introduction, but the show is not a success. May, Conder sends work to the NEAC where Arthur Symons sees him and notes he was 'vague and dejected, obviously very ill'. June, Conder suffers a stroke. He and Stella spend three months at Newquay in Cornwall where his spirits are revived and he manages some fresh studies of the beach. His illness recurs in Brighton. Conder becomes irrational. He is removed to a sanatorium, never able to work again.

**1907** Stella brings him back to London where he is nursed privately. Work is sent to the Leicester Galleries, London and a modern art exhibition at Liverpool.

**1908** Stella takes him to specialists. Conder's condition is pronounced incurable. In June he enters Holloway Sanatorium, Surrey.

**1909** 9 February, Conder dies of 'general paralysis of the insane' at Virginia Water, Surrey.

## Conder: travel log

One constant in Conder's life was his movement and travel within and across countries.

Locales Conder visited or lived at included:

### Australia

Sydney:  
Bronte Beach  
Circular Quay  
Coogee Beach  
Hawkesbury River  
Richmond  
Windsor

### Melbourne:

Box Hill  
Heidelberg  
Eaglemont  
Mentone, Mornington Peninsula  
Port Phillip Bay

### Queenscliff

Ricketts Point  
The Yarra River

### Algiers

Mustapha

### England

Brighton  
Chelsea, London  
Newquay, Cornwall  
Tottenham  
Surrey  
Swanage, Dorset

### France

Ambleteuse, Normandy  
Dieppe  
Montmartre, Paris  
Seine River, Chantemesle

### India

Bombay

### Italy

Venice

### Spain

Algeciras  
Seville

## Conder: cast of characters

A great many people throughout his life influenced Conder. Many were friends, many artists. Many he knew personally and some he did not. All however affected him in one way or another.

Louis Anquetin  
Louis Abrahams  
Julian Ashton  
Aubrey Beardsley  
William Jacomb Conder  
A J Daplyn  
Stella Maris Belford  
Augustus John

G V F Mann  
Dr Stephen & Kathleen  
Mannington Caffyn  
Frederick McCubbin  
Claude Monet  
Girolamo Nerli  
William Orpen  
Tom Roberts

William Rothenstein  
Walter Sickert  
Arthur Streeton  
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec  
Jean-Antoine Watteau  
James McNeill Whistler  
Walter Withers  
Oscar Wilde

# Vocabulary

Key terms and phrases associated with the life and work of Conder:

Academy	Illustrator	Salon
Art Nouveau	Impressionism	seascape
avant-garde	Japonisme	screen
bohemian	Landscape	silk
cabaret	lyrical	surveyor
en plein air	palette	Symbolism
expatriate	patron	The 9 by 5 Impressions
fan	poetic	Exhibition
fin de siècle	portrait	watercolour
Heidelberg School	Rococo	

## Selected references

Ann Galbally and Barry Pearce, *Charles Conder Retrospective*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2003

Jane Clark and Bridget Whitelaw, *Golden Summer: Heidelberg and Beyond*, International Cultural Corporation of Australia, Melbourne, 1985

Mary Eagle, *The Oil paintings of Charles Conder in the National Gallery of Australia*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1997

Ann Galbally, *Charles Conder: the last bohemian*, The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2002

Frank Gibson, *Charles Conder: His Life and Works*, The Bodley Head, London, 1914

Ursula Hoff, *Charles Conder*, Lansdowne Press, Melbourne, 1972

John Rothenstein, *The Life and Death of Charles Conder*, Dent, London, 1938

Geoffrey Smith, *Arthur Streeton 1867–1943*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1995

Daniel Thomas (ed), *Tom Roberts*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 1996

### K–6

Robin Norling (ed), *A Young Person's Guide to Art in Australia*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1985

Margaret Plant, *Painting Australia: A Child's Guide to Australian Paintings*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1995

Donald Williams, *Looking at Australia: Talking about Art and Culture*, McGraw-Hill, Sydney, 1997

### Online

Artcyclopedia: Charles Conder

[www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/conder\\_charles.html](http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/conder_charles.html)

In the Artist's Footsteps: Charles Conder / Tom Roberts / Heidelberg School

[www.artistsfootsteps.com](http://www.artistsfootsteps.com)

### Australian lenders to the exhibition

Art Gallery of New South Wales [www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au)

Art Gallery of South Australia [www.artgallery.sa.gov.au](http://www.artgallery.sa.gov.au)

Art Gallery of Western Australia [www.artgallery.wa.gov.au](http://www.artgallery.wa.gov.au)

National Gallery of Australia [www.nga.gov.au](http://www.nga.gov.au)

National Gallery of Victoria [www.ngv.vic.gov.au](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au)

Queensland Art Gallery [www.qag.qld.gov.au](http://www.qag.qld.gov.au)

State Library of New South Wales [www.slsw.gov.au](http://www.slsw.gov.au)

State Library of Queensland [www.slq.qld.gov.au/scd/arts/jameshardie.htm](http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/scd/arts/jameshardie.htm)

*Further information and full references for quotes used in this kit are available in the Art Gallery of New South Wales Research Library and Archive.*

Principal sponsor: The President's Council of the Art Gallery of New South Wales

Media sponsor: The Australian

Produced by the Public Programmes Department

© Art Gallery of New South Wales 2003

[pp@ag.nsw.gov.au](mailto:pp@ag.nsw.gov.au)

[www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au)