

In these dreams of colour: a close examination of McCubbin's paintings in the national collection



Frederick McCubbin
Girl with bird at the King Street bakery 1886
oil on canvas
40.7 x 46 cm
National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra
Purchased 1969

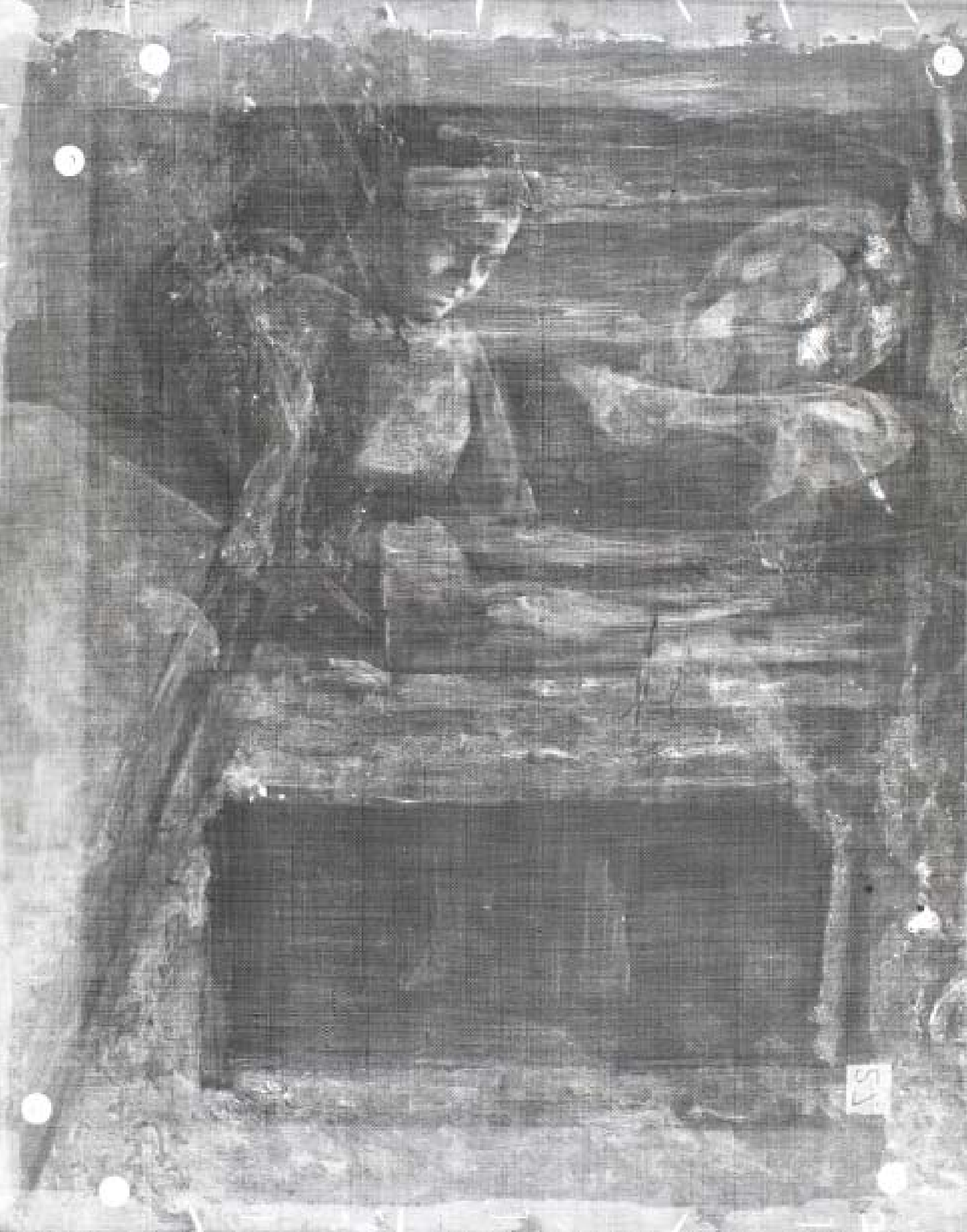
(fig 1) X-ray showing the portrait beneath the painting *Girl with bird at the King Street bakery* 1886.

The National Gallery of Australia has 16 paintings by Frederick McCubbin in its collection, seven of which are from his earlier period. The earliest works in the collection, painted while he was at the National Gallery School in Melbourne in 1886, are *Sunset glow*, *Girl with bird at the King Street bakery* and *At the falling of the year*. Although he didn't study abroad like so many of his contemporaries at the time, McCubbin was driven by a naturalist impulse derived from painters such as Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848–1884), Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret (1852–1929) and George Clausen (1852–1944).

With his only visit to Europe in 1906, McCubbin's naturalism was replaced with the painterly concerns of the Impressionists and his particular appreciation for the late works of JMW Turner (1775–1851). The muted light and tone of his early works were replaced in his later paintings

with skeins of pure colour woven across the surface of the canvas. Works, such as *Violet and gold* 1911 and *Afterglow* 1912, are masterpieces of this mature style, painted by an artist confident in his abilities.

The paintings of his last decade are the subject of the Gallery's forthcoming exhibition *McCubbin: Last Impressions 1907–17*. In preparation for the exhibition, the Gallery began an active program of conservation on the McCubbin paintings held in the national collection. Although McCubbin's subjects and themes remained similar throughout his career, a close examination of his works reveals the marked changes in the painterly techniques by which he sought to portray familiar views from around his home—firstly in suburban Melbourne, then at Mount Macedon and finally in South Yarra.



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(fig 2) An X-ray of *Afterglow* 1912 shows a portrait painting beneath the landscape.

Frederick McCubbin
Afterglow 1912
 oil on canvas
 91.5 x 117 cm
 National Gallery of Australia,
 Canberra
 Purchased 1970

What this conservation program uncovered, beneath the many layers of paint and discoloured varnish, are fresh insights into these much loved works, as well as the changes in the many small but important decisions an artist makes during the creation of a painting—decisions about supports, techniques, palette and surface coatings.

Throughout his career, McCubbin typically painted on commercially prepared canvases supplied by artists' colourmen in Melbourne, such as EW Cole in Collins Street and W & G Dean of Equitable Place. McCubbin probably originally bought his canvases ready stretched, as several paintings such as *Sunset glow* 1886 and *Girl with clasped hands* c 1900 remain on their original stretchers. *At the falling of the year* 1899, from his early period, and his later work *Self-portrait* c 1908 are both painted on standard size, pre-stretched Winsor & Newton canvases, which would have been imported from England by one of his Melbourne suppliers.

Some of McCubbin's early works, such as *Winter landscape* c 1897 and *Triumphal Arch at Princes Bridge, Melbourne* 1901, are on solid supports rather than canvas. The former is painted on commercially prepared academy board and the latter is on a whitewood panel—both of which were commonly used by artists and were available from artist suppliers. They were particularly useful for *plein air* painting as they were inexpensive and portable. *Triumphal Arch at Princes Bridge, Melbourne* is painted in a typical manner for this type of study, with the paint applied directly to the board and the natural tone of the wood providing a mid-tone in the composition of the foreground.

Most earlier works, however, are painted on a medium-fine plain woven linen canvas, which once the priming is applied has only a modest weave pattern. This would have suited the painting technique he employed at the time which depended on washes and scumbles of colour as well as fine detailed brushwork.

The later paintings, on the other hand, are more variable. While most of them are still on commercially prepared canvases, there is a greater range of weights and weaves. *Violet and gold* 1911, for example, is painted on a heavy-weight linen canvas, while *Floodwaters* 1913 has a strong twill weave. In both cases, the assertive canvas weave is exploited as part of the work, giving further depth to the energetic paint layer. Whether this was a deliberate choice by the artist or a happy accident is open to interpretation, as it is more likely that this variation in the choice of painting support is purely pragmatic and driven by financial constraints.

The broken fence 1907 for example, is painted on a cotton canvas that the artist obviously sourced and prepared himself. The blue stripe visible on the back, and to some extent through the paint layer, suggests that this material was originally meant for a domestic purpose such as, perhaps, window awnings. The same material has also

been found on a work in the National Gallery of Victoria's collection, suggesting that the artist had a small supply that he used for painting.

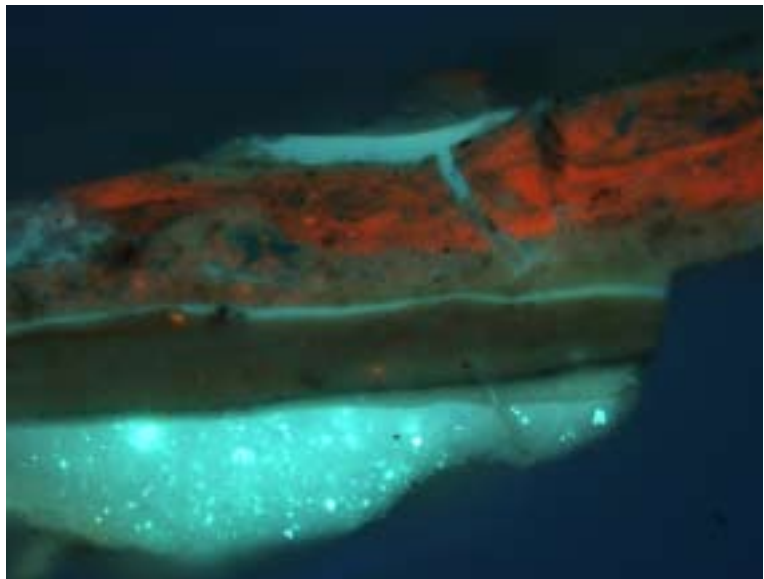
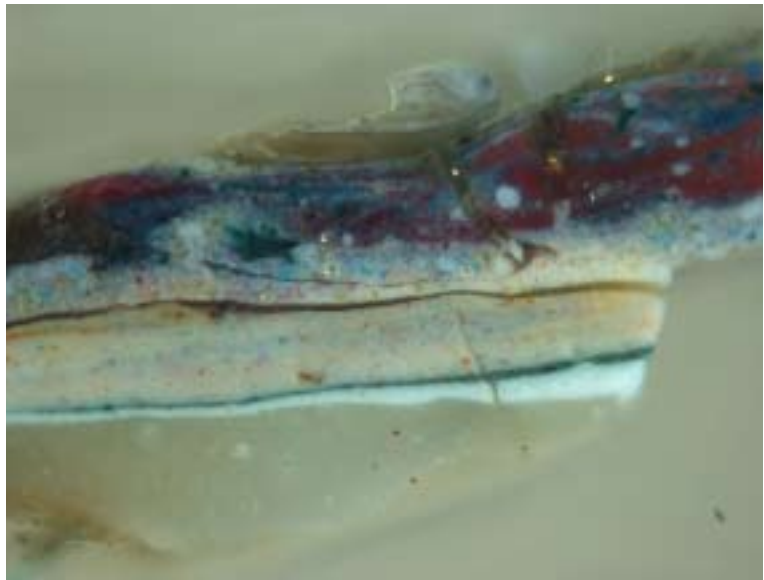
Throughout his career, McCubbin also appears to have maintained the practice of reusing canvases. *Girl with bird at the King Street bakery*, for example, was originally used to paint a portrait (possibly an early self-portrait) as a palette is visible in the upper right of the X-ray (fig 1). *Afterglow*, painted some 25 years later, has a painting of a female figure underneath the surface (fig 2). X-rays of other paintings have also revealed similar portraits beneath them. *Mount Macedon landscape with children playing* 1911 was probably first used for a portrait or figure painting before it was cut down and the present image painted. The folds of the old tacking margins and nail holes can be seen beneath the paint, along both sides of the image. Several paintings, including *Child in the bush* 1913, have also been cut down from existing canvases and re-stretched onto old stretchers before work began on the final image.

In all of the works in the national art collection, McCubbin seems to have been happy with simple white commercial priming and was content, at least initially, to paint directly onto it.

In 1886, McCubbin was a drawing master at the National Gallery School, and his approach to painting reflects the influence of the school's director George F Folingsby. The paint layer in works from this period is built up of thin washes of colour reinforced by more opaque applications of paint. Compared to his later works his use of impasto is minimal.

Although McCubbin worked more freely in his *plein air* sketches and paintings, his 1886 *Sunset glow* is perhaps representative of his preferred studio working method at the time—and of Folingsby's influence. As a first stage, he blocked in the main composition in dark brown paint, covering the whole surface. This approach of establishing the shadows first with bituminous paints and working from dark to light was old-fashioned by the standards of the day, referring to academic practice from the first half of the nineteenth century. Highlights and details have then been applied in thicker paint while allowing the initial layer to remain unaltered for much of the shadow areas. As a result, light in the paintings is muted and modified by the dark under-layers and, due to the oil paint becoming more transparent in the intervening 120 years, the painting has gradually become darker and warmer in overall tone. A comparable method has been used in both *Girl with clasped hands* and *An autumn pastoral* 1899.

McCubbin continued to use a variation of this method, even in his later paintings; although, the washes tended to refer more to the colours in the final composition. It can be seen in the first layers of the cross-section from his later work of 1911, *Mount Macedon landscape with children playing*, where a thin wash of green has been applied directly over



the ground (fig 3 & 4). His use of thick impasto in the later works also meant that he could establish solid highlights independently of his darker initial layers. Even so, due to the extended time he seems to have worked on some paintings, there are anomalies; for example, the sky in *Afterglow* has thick green paint layers directly beneath much of it.

Analysis of McCubbin's working methods is complex and not helped by the fact that many of the later works have earlier compositions underlying them. *The broken fence*, for instance, is dated 1907, but we know that McCubbin began painting this work much earlier. The dark brown–black paint visible across the surface in the gaps of the later pure paint layers suggest that it may be painted over a Folingsby-type composition.

McCubbin does not appear to have been particularly fussy when reusing a canvas. The cross-sections from *Mount Macedon landscape with children playing* show

(fig3) Cross-section of *Mount Macedon landscape with children playing* 1911, magnified by 400x, showing two different paintings on one canvas: lower layers are the pale brown paint layers of original image; top layers form final image and show the swirling wet in wet paint application.

(fig4) As fig 3 viewed in ultraviolet light, which shows a fluorescent zinc white ground, bright varnish layer through the middle of the cross-section (over the original image) and swirling pink fluorescent Rose Madder pigment in the top layers.



that the first composition was probably wholly finished, as the paint layers are intact and there is an uninterrupted varnish layer present. In artist's manuals at the time, it was normally recommended that reused canvases be scraped or sanded back to provide tooth or a new priming is applied; McCubbin seems to commonly do neither. The undamaged initial layers show that he simply painted straight on top of them, without any preparation. As a result, it is common to find areas of anomalous colour in the later paintings, as paint strokes from earlier compositions break through the later paint. Similarly, there are textures throughout the surfaces from brushstrokes in previous states or compositions. Occasionally, McCubbin incorporated parts of an earlier painting into a later image; for example, parts of the dark paint in the centre of *Girl with bird at the King Street bakery* were originally part of the underlying portrait.



In general McCubbin's palette throughout his career was relatively limited, and traditional. The late works, for all their range of colour—especially the shades of greens, blues and purples—are based on only a small number of individual paints. As well as carbon black and lead white, McCubbin used Prussian blue and cobalt blue, Rose madder and vermilion for his reds, lead chrome yellow and, occasionally, a lemon yellow. These were supplemented by a selection of yellow and red ochres with darker umbers. The only modern colour he appears to have regularly used was the bright green pigment viridian.

The distinct characteristic that increasingly marks the later works is the sheer physicality of the paint. McCubbin's earlier works, including landscapes such as *At the falling of the year*, are obviously constructed using traditional techniques, whereas the later works evolve from a complex surface. Typically, he paints wet in wet, using a whole range of brushes and, at times, possibly also his fingers.



McCubbin used a palette knife as often as he used brushes, layering on the paint in slabs, using it to roughly mix colour and to cut into and drag surfaces. The contrast can be demonstrated by his handling of grass and foliage: in his earlier works, the delicate flicks of a fine brush (so reminiscent of Bastien-Lepage) are later replaced by staccato stabs of the side of the palette knife.

In the course of completing a canvas, McCubbin would often rework and revise areas. This may mean overpainting; however, he also regularly scraped and abraded sections to reveal underlying colours, the ground or even earlier compositions (fig 5). The textural effects created by this process were then incorporated into the composition. While some of the rubbing back was done during the initial painting *Afterglow* and *Violet and gold*, show that the abrasion was also carried out after the paint had dried, indicating that he revisited the paintings in the studio. McCubbin also scratched into his wet paint with both the tip of the palette knife and the end of a brush handle to create sgraffito effects (fig 6).



As a final stage, McCubbin would often modify the colour or tone of certain passages by applying very thin, transparent washes of colour. Although not glazes in the strict technical sense—that is, they are not composed of transparent pigment in varnish (he seems to have used oil instead)—they do function in a similar way. The sky in *The broken fence*, for instance, is dulled with a blue–grey oil glaze, and the bright green in the middle-ground of *Floodwaters* has been slightly darkened with a thin warm brown (fig 7). Shadow areas in foliage also commonly have a similar treatment to increase their depth or modify their tone. These, as well as any lighter scumbles, would again have been added once the main body of the painting had dried sufficiently so that mixing did not occur.

Whether McCubbin intended his later works to be varnished or not is debatable. Given his attention to the tones in his work and the dominant aesthetic at the time, which was for unvarnished paintings (at least among the artists who interested McCubbin), it is likely that his paintings were originally unvarnished. We also know that many of the varnished or waxed surfaces of his works are later restoration varnishes.

On the other hand, we also have evidence of varnish layers within cross-sections, which we know must be McCubbin's work. What may account for these seemingly contradictory findings is that McCubbin may have made a

distinction between his portraits and landscapes, preferring that the latter remain unvarnished. It is unfortunately difficult to be sure of this as the situation is made more confusing by the fact that many of the paintings have had heavy restoration.

In many cases, previous restorations of the Gallery's McCubbin works (before they were acquired for the national collection) have altered the works substantially. Areas of deliberate abrasion and scraping back have been repainted to hide what was thought to be damage. Drying cracks, an inevitable result of McCubbin's use of heavy impasto, have frequently been over-painted, as have old damages such as tears and holes. The variable gloss—again, a result of his technique—has also been balanced with a saturating coat of varnish.

The conservation preparations for the exhibition will no doubt provide further insights into the complexities of McCubbin's painting methods and how they evolved. Even so one thing that never changed was McCubbin's passion for painting and his dreams of colour.

David Wise
Senior Paintings Conservator

Frederick McCubbin
Floodwaters 1913
oil on canvas
92.5 x 182 cm
National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra
Purchased 1973

(opposite)
(fig 5) Detail of obscured sun of *Floodwaters* showing use of abraded paint to create highlights.

(fig 6) Sgraffito used to create trees in *Floodwaters*.

(fig 7) Brown tone wash of *Floodwaters*.