

Ocean to Outback: Australian landscape painting 1850–1950

4 August 2007 – 3 May 2009

... it is continually exciting, these curious and strange rhythms which one discovers in a vast landscape, the juxtaposition of figures, of objects, all these things are exciting. Add to that again the peculiarity of the particular land in which we live here, and you get a quality of strangeness that you do not find, I think, anywhere else. Russell Drysdale, 1960¹

From the white heat of our beaches to the red heart of central Australia, Ocean to Outback: Australian landscape painting 1850–1950 conveys the great beauty and diversity of the Australian continent. Curated by the National Gallery's Director Ron Radford, this major travelling exhibition is a celebration of the Gallery's twenty-fifth anniversary. It features treasured Australian landscape paintings from the national collection and will travel to venues throughout each Australian state and territory until 2009.

Encompassing colonial through to modernist works, the exhibition spans the great century of Australian landscape art. From 1850 to 1950 landscape was the most painted and celebrated theme in Australian art. As well as images which convey the geographical extremes of the continent, Ocean to Outback includes works that reflect significant events that transformed the social fabric of Australia – droughts and bushfires, the gold rushes, the Depression, and times of war.

The exhibition begins with a dramatic shipwreck scene off Tasmania's east coast painted by convict artist Knut Bull (1811–1889). The wreck of the 'George the Third' 1850 depicts the aftermath of the shipwreck in 1835 of the convict transport ship. Following a four-month voyage from London and bound for Hobart, the 35-metre ship entered D'Entrecasteaux Channel on the evening of 12 April 1835. Less than 200 kilometres from its destination, the ship struck submerged rock and in the catastrophe that followed

127 of the 220 convicts on board died.² Survivors' accounts said the ship's crew fired their weapons at convicts who, in a state of panic, attempted to break from their confines as the vessel went down.

The painting is dominated by a huge sky, with the broken George the Third dwarfed by the expanse. Waves crash over the decks of the ship while a few figures in the foreground attempt to salvage cargo and supplies. This is a seascape that evokes trepidation and anxiety. The small figures contribute to the feeling of human vulnerability when challenged by the extremities of nature.

Australia's finest late colonial landscape artist from the period, Eugene von Guérard (1811–1901), painted images of Australia from the perspective of an observer, explorer and a resident. Von Guérard received numerous commissions for 'homestead portraits'. These commissions were generally paintings of properties owned by graziers who were keen to display the results of their hard labours on the land. Schnapper Point from 'Beleura' 1870 was painted for James Butchart who owned Beleura homestead, built in 1863. Schnapper Point is located near Mornington Peninsula on Melbourne's Port Phillip Bay (approximately forty kilometres from Melbourne). Von Guérard depicts the sweeping views from the property across the bay – an area that had become a popular holiday destination for Melbourne residents.

Knut Bull
The wreck of the
'George the Third' 1850
oil on canvas
84.5 x 123.0 cm
National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra Purchased with
funds from the Nerissa
Johnson Bequest 2001

Eugene von Guérard
Schnapper Point from
'Beleura' 1870 oil on canvas
66.1 x 104.2 cm
National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra From the James
Fairfax collection, gift of
Bridgestar Pty Ltd 1995





Thomas Baines
Gouty stem tree,
Adansonia Gregorii,
58 feet circumference, near
a creek south-east of Stokes
Range, Victoria River 1868
oil on canvas 45.2 x 66.5 cm
National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra Purchased 1973

Exploration of the Australian continent by Europeans was a risky and arduous pursuit. The professional explorer–artist Thomas Baines (1820–1875) was one of a group of eighteen people who formed the 1855 North Australian Expedition party. The purpose of this expedition was to determine the existence of natural resources for settlement in far north-west Australia. Under the command of Augustus Charles Gregory the expedition lasted from August 1855 to November 1856, with the group reaching the mouth of the Victoria River on the upper north-west coast of the Northern Territory on 15 September 1855.

Baines’s official role in the party was as artist and storekeeper – he made hundreds of sketches, recorded weather conditions and kept a detailed journal of daily life. Painted in London some thirteen years after the expedition, Gouty stem tree, Adansonia Gregorii, 58 feet circumference, near a creek south-east of Stokes Range, Victoria River 1868 depicts the party campsite and an enormous water-yielding baobab tree. The artist has painted himself in the lower right-hand side, sitting underneath a makeshift shelter sketching the tree.

While artists such as Thomas Baines recorded the far reaches of Australia, the major settlements of Sydney and

Melbourne continued to expand. Rail soon connected townships located close to the Blue Mountains and Dandenong Ranges to Sydney and Melbourne. Tom Roberts (1856–1931) and Arthur Streeton (1867–1943) used the rail to travel to the outskirts of Melbourne where they established artists’ camps on the fringe of suburbia, first at Box Hill and later at Eaglemont.

Tom Roberts first visited Box Hill to paint in 1882, accompanied by Frederick McCubbin (1855–1917) and Louis Abrahams (1852–1903). The artists set up camp on land owned by a local farmer, David Houston.³ In A Sunday afternoon c. 1886 Roberts depicts an intimate picnic. Framed by spindly gums and bathed in dappled light, a young couple relax in the bush, the woman reading to her companion from a newspaper. At the time, a belief in the health benefits of country air was becoming popular with city dwellers, who sought recreational activities in the bush or by the ocean. Roberts’s observant eye depicts small details in this scene such as the trail of smoke from the man’s pipe, the dark wine bottle on the crisp white cloth and the light falling softly on the leaves of the eucalypts.



Arthur Streeton's *The selector's hut (Whelan on the log)* 1890 is an image that conveys the 'pioneering spirit' which underpinned the Australian nationalist attitude of the late nineteenth century. Streeton depicted iconic elements of the land – the 'blue and gold' of sky and earth, golden grass and shimmering light, a slender silhouetted gum tree, and a bush pioneer. He shows a man at rest from the toil of clearing the land and making his home. The man depicted is Jack Whelan, the caretaker of the Eaglemont estate where Streeton had been given permission to set up 'camp' in an old house in the summer of 1888. Early the next year he was joined by Charles Conder (1868–1909) and Tom Roberts. The camp provided the perfect working environment – a reasonably isolated bush location close to the city of Melbourne.

Works by Australian Impressionists such as Roberts, Streeton and Conder showcase the national collection's great holdings from this period. Alongside these are scenes of modern, misty Melbourne as captured by Clarice Beckett (1887–1935). Beckett's lyrical and evocative landscapes remained largely unknown to Australian audiences during her lifetime. She was a dedicated artist who, despite dismissive reviews and few sales, continued to paint and exhibit regularly.



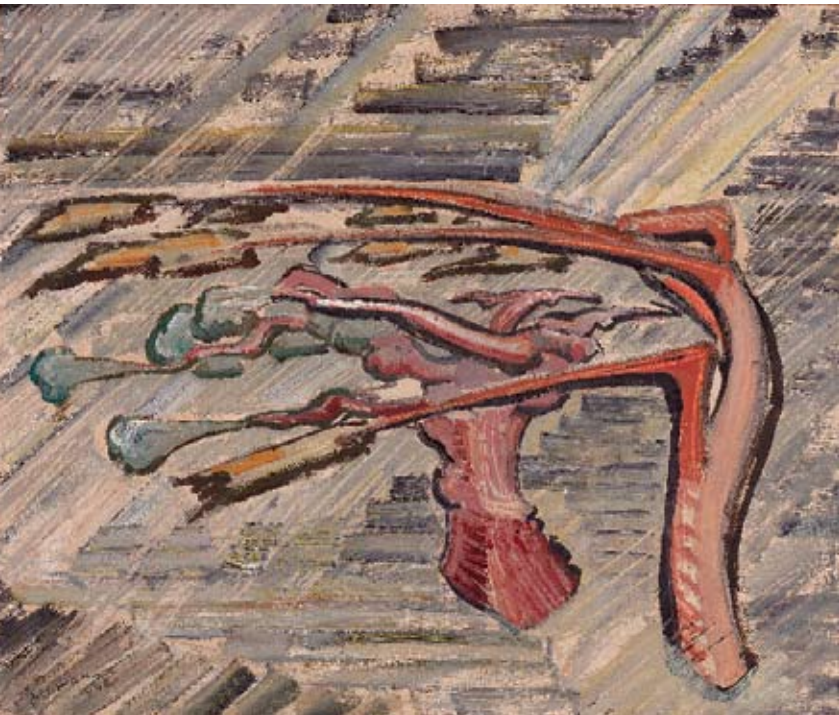
Tom Roberts
A Sunday afternoon c. 1886
oil on canvas 41.0 x 30.8 cm
National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra Purchased 1984

Arthur Streeton
*The selector's hut
(Whelan on the log)* 1890
oil on canvas 76.7 x 51.2 cm
National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra Purchased 1961

Beckett always painted outdoors, usually in the early morning or evening, around the bays and streets of her family home in the Melbourne beachside suburb of Beaumaris. She sought to convey the beauty of her local environment, be it through the afterglow of a bright sunset, the shimmering heat of a tarred road or headlights shining through misty rain. She excelled at depicting particular effects of nature, such as haze, rain, mist and smoke. *Beaumaris seascape* c. 1925 is a meditative image of a still sea, a tree-lined cliff and distant coastline. Beckett has paid close attention to the subtle effects of light and shade reflected in the water. The soft lilac and pink hues of the sea, coastline and sky dissolve into bands of colour. The subject is so tonally reduced it appears to be almost abstracted.

Work by another female artist of the period, Elise Blumann (1897–1990), depicts a ferocious storm scene on Perth's Swan River. Blumann painted the Swan and the native melaleuca trees of the region many times. Escaping the Nazi regime that devastated much of Europe, German-born Blumann came to Perth with her husband and two children in 1938. Educated at the Berlin Academy of Arts and the Royal Art School Berlin, Blumann was familiar





with the modern art of Europe. In Australia her modernist painting was unconventional, and she was regarded as a valued member of Perth's artistic community.

In *Storm on the Swan* 1946 Blumann uses broad sweeping gestures – strong horizontal and diagonal brushwork – to capture the power of a storm. Wind and rain beat against the limbs of the trees which appear to almost float in space. This dynamic and sensitive composition displays Blumann's modern approach to her art and her desire to capture the 'essential spirit' of nature.⁴ Areas of the painting's surface are blank, while others are scratched with the end of her brush to indicate sharp, fast rain. This is a vigorous, physical and quickly executed work, a powerful response to the speed in which a storm can approach and pass.

Modernist experiments of colour theory by Roland Wakelin (1887–1971) and Roy de Maistre (1894–1968) are included in the exhibition. In de Maistre's rarely exhibited *Forest landscape* c. 1920 he has adapted the subject of a felled tree to create a painting concerned with modernist principles of form, rhythm, symmetry and colour. Historically, the subject of the felled tree in the Australian bush has reflected artistic interests in rural industry, the natural grandeur of forests and, in some instances, an awareness of conservation issues related to loss and destruction. For de Maistre, tree trunks have been reduced to angular planes of colour and the composition is united



by vivid greens that portray the forest floor and foliage. De Maistre has explored a range of colour tones, using subtle shifts in greens, reds and browns throughout the painting.

Forest landscape belongs to a period when de Maistre was interested in the broken colour approach of Cézanne and the relationship between colour and music. He had studied violin and viola at the Sydney Conservatorium, and art at the Royal Art Society of New South Wales and Julian Ashton Art School. Working with musician Adrian Verbrugghen he developed a colour music scale where the spectrum of colours related to notes of the major and minor musical scales. The colour music theory was further underscored by de Maistre's interest in the psychological effects of colour and its relationship to the expression of emotional states. Quoting the English poet-performer and colour theorist Beatrice Irwin, de Maistre wrote that colour 'brings the conscious realisation of the deepest underlying principles of nature ... it constitutes the very song of life and is, as it were, the spiritual speech of every living thing'.⁵

A number of paintings in *Ocean to Outback* reveal how artists used the landscape as inspiration during difficult times of drought, depression or war. Works by Russell Drysdale (1912–1981) and Sidney Nolan (1917–1992) explore the drama and expressive possibilities inherent in the land. In 1944 Drysdale was commissioned by the *Sydney Morning Herald* to accompany journalist Keith Newman to western New South Wales to document

Elise Blumann
Storm on the Swan 1946
oil on paper mounted on
cardboard on composition
board 57.0 x 67.0 cm
National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra Purchased 1978

Roy de Maistre
Forest landscape c. 1920
oil on cardboard
35.4 x 40.6 cm
National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra Purchased 1971

(opposite)
Clarice Beckett
Beaumaris seascape c. 1925
oil on cardboard
50.0 x 49.0 cm
National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra Purchased 1971



Russell Drysdale
 Emus in a landscape
 1950 oil on canvas
 101.6 x 127.0 cm
 National Gallery of Australia,
 Canberra Purchased 1970

the effects of the drought. This experience significantly changed the way he viewed the Australian landscape. The photographs and sketches he made on the trip informed much of his work in the following years.

In *Emus in a landscape* 1950 Drysdale explores the strange and surreal qualities of the Australian outback. The native birds move quietly through the landscape, passing a precariously arranged structure of wood and corrugated iron. This sculptured mass of refuse represents the remains of a previous settlement. It could be an abandoned dwelling or a wrecked ship on a dried inland sea. Drysdale creates a sliding space between reality and imagination, fact and myth, and captures the vast space and timelessness of the outback.

Between 1947 and 1950 Sidney Nolan spent months travelling through remote areas of Australia. Using money he had made from a successful exhibition of Queensland outback paintings held at the David Jones Gallery in Sydney in March 1949, Nolan, accompanied by his wife Cynthia and stepdaughter Jinx, travelled through Central Australia,

the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia. This trip, from June to September 1949, inspired a body of work and a series of paintings that depict inland Australia from an aerial perspective.

Inland Australia 1950 is an extraordinary aerial image of the 'heart' of the continent, possibly of the Durack Range. With the composition board lying flat on a table Nolan has pushed the paint around the surface of the work. In some areas the paint has been wiped back, exposing the white undercoat of the composition board. The undulating shapes and intense colour of the red earth evoke an 'otherworldly' sensation – a feeling of the land's inherent grandeur, timelessness and mystery. Nolan described the work as 'a composite impression of the country from the air'. Painted in his Sydney studio, he used photographs taken from the aeroplane as a visual aid. *Inland Australia* is an example of Nolan's technique of fusing elements from existing locations with a landscape remembered from experience.

Ocean to Outback: Australian landscape painting 1850–1950 includes images of the furthest points of



distance and geography across Australia. Created by some of our greatest landscape artists, these paintings reveal the compelling beauty, extreme conditions and qualities of the Australian environment that have made landscape painting a vital force in Australian culture. ■

Beatrice Galton
Associate Curator, Australian Painting and Sculpture

The exhibition catalogue is available from the National Gallery of Australia Shop on 02 6240 6420

Further information at nga.gov.au/OceantoOutback

notes

- 1 Russell Drysdale, interview by Hazel de Berg, 1960, Canberra: National Library of Australia, [deB 27].
- 2 Michael Roe, *An Imperial disaster: the wreck of George the Third*, Hobart: Blubber Head Press, 2006, p. 12.
- 3 Leigh Astbury, 'Memory and desire: Box Hill 1855–88', in Terence Lane (ed.), *Australian impressionism*, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2007, p. 51.
- 4 John Scott & Richard Woldendorp, *Landscapes of Western Australia*, Claremont, Western Australia: Aeolian Press, 1986, p. 17.
- 5 Roy de Maistre, extract from lecture on 'Colour in relation to painting', in *Colour in art*, exhibition catalogue, The Art Salon, Penzance Chambers, Sydney, 1919.

Tamworth Regional Gallery, Tamworth NSW,
4 August – 22 September 2007

Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart
Tas., 5 October – 25 November 2007

Riddoch Art Gallery, Mt Gambier SA,
8 December 2007 – 20 January 2008

Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Ballarat Vic.,
2 February – 30 March 2008

Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, Perth WA,
13 April – 1 June 2008

Cairns Regional Gallery, Cairns QLD,
21 June – 27 July 2008

Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs NT,
9 August – 19 October 2008

Newcastle Region Art Gallery, Newcastle NSW,
8 November 2008 – 18 January 2009

Canberra Museum and Gallery, Canberra ACT,
31 January – 3 May 2009

Sidney Nolan
Inland Australia 1950
oil and enamel paint on
composition board
91.5 x 121.0 cm
National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra Purchased 1961