



# TOM ROBERTS

*A break away!*  
painted at Corowa, New South Wales,  
and Melbourne, 1891  
oil on canvas 137.3 x 167.8 cm  
Art Gallery of South Australia,  
Adelaide, Elder Bequest Fund, 1899

PRIMARY  
Education resource

**NGA**  
National Gallery of Australia

# For teachers

How to use this learning resource for primary students

## *Tom Roberts* is a major exhibition of works from the National Gallery of Australia's collection as well as private and public collections from around Australia.

This extraordinary exhibition brings together Roberts' most famous paintings loved by all Australians. Paintings such as *Shearing the rams* 1888–90 and *A break away!* 1891 are among the nation's best-known works of art.

This primary school resource for the *Tom Roberts* exhibition explores the themes of the 9 by 5 Impression exhibition, Australia and the landscape, Portraiture, Making a nation, and Working abroad.

The work in this exhibition has strong curriculum connection for **Years 3–6 of the Australian Curriculum**. This learning resource includes background information on each of the themes for teachers along with curriculum links across the learning areas **Visual Arts, Media Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, General capabilities** and **Cross-curriculum priorities** when relevant.

Each thematic page designed for students begins with a reproduction of Roberts' paintings followed by a brief overview, activities and questions.

## INTRODUCTION

'All Australian paintings are in some way a homage to Tom Roberts.' Arthur Boyd

Tom Roberts (1856–1931) is arguably one of Australia's best-known and most loved artists, standing high among his talented associates at a vital moment in local painting. His output was broad-ranging, and includes landscapes, figures in the landscape, industrial landscapes and cityscapes. He was also Australia's leading portrait painter of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition he made a small number of etchings and sculptures and in his later years he painted a few nudes and still lifes.

Roberts was born in Dorchester, Dorset, in the south of England and spent his first 12 years there. However he studied at the National Gallery School, Melbourne and spent almost half of his life in Australia. Australia was the key subject of his art, and indeed, he made a major contribution to the creative depiction of this land and of our understanding of it.

Working together with Frederick McCubbin, Arthur Streeton and Charles Conder from 1885 to 1897, Roberts was part of the legendary group of Australian artists: the Australian Impressionists. With one or another of them he painted outdoors at Box Hill, Mentone (Beamaris), Eaglemont (Heidelberg) and Little Sirius Cove, producing some of Australia's most loved works of art.

Roberts travelled widely around Australia, and particularly to sheep stations in rural New South Wales. There he produced some truly iconic works—*Shearing the rams*, *A break away!*, *The Golden Fleece* 1894 and *Bailed up* 1895—works that are now embedded in the Australian psyche, as he intended.

An original thinker, Roberts had a breadth of view. He was a born leader and mentor to younger painters, having an impact on his contemporaries, McCubbin, Streeton, Conder and Jessie Traill, and also on later Australian artists such as Elioth Gruner, Lloyd Rees, Arthur Boyd and Fred Williams.

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## FURTHER READINGS

The catalogue for this exhibition is recommended as an additional resource as it includes an introduction to the exhibition by Anne Gray as well as themed chapters and catalogue entries.

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## OTHER RESOURCES

- R Radford, *Tom Roberts*, Art Gallery of South Australia, 1996
- [Art Gallery of New South Wales website, Tom Roberts](#)
- [Australian National Maritime Museum website, immigration history](#)
- [Australian Curriculum](#)

## AUSTRALIA AND THE LANDSCAPE

'There was something in the artist that, seeing beauty, could communicate it to those with him—never looked hills so blue and dreaming distant; never trees on the nearer slope so finely traced; never clouds massed so bold and luminous as when his appreciation beside one seemed to see it into one's own eyes ...'

Australian artist Jessie Traill describing Roberts, 1935

When Roberts visited Melbourne for about a year at the end of 1919 he wrote that:

'It all came back to me when I sat there with the blue sweep of the [Dandenong] Ranges before me, and the sunshine warm and golden and the dear remembered beauty.'

The 1880s and 1890s were a time of change in Australian art and a period when artists began to talk about an Australian tradition. They sought to portray subjects that they believed would distinguish Australian life from that lived elsewhere. Roberts sought to create majestic images that recorded the hard work of European settlers in 'taming' the land.

Movement, or its absence, is also central to these works. The two shearing pictures are careful arrangements of figures in motion, in which he used the ideas of Eadweard Muybridge to convey movement, while *A break away!* is an action picture that dramatically conveys man and animals in motion, counterpointed against the verticals and diagonals of the landscape.

*Bailed up* and *In a corner on the Macintyre (The bushranger)* 1895 form a pair, with the bushranger 'bailing up' the coach in one work and being 'bailed up' himself in the other. Roberts depicted these scenes in a matter-of-fact manner, uninterested in creating a false sense of drama. They depict movement as stilled for a moment, a sense of breath held while under attack. In both works, Roberts also conveyed the glare and intense heat of summer in the Australian bush.

Roberts returned to Australia permanently in 1923, and purchased a property at South Sassafras (later renamed Kallista) in the Dandenong Ranges, Victoria. There, he painted intimate landscapes in a low-key palette; works with sustaining qualities.

As a commentator wrote in April 1932, in the catalogue foreword to Roberts' posthumous exhibition at the Melbourne Fine Art Gallery, his late paintings 'represent his love and poetic vision for all that is beautiful in Nature and his sympathy with the Australian landscape in its tenderest moods.'

### The Arts – Visual Arts: Year 3 and 4

- Explore ideas and artworks from different cultures and times, including artwork by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, to use as inspiration for their own representations ([ACAVAM110](#))
- Use materials, techniques and processes to explore visual conventions when making artworks ([ACAVAM111](#))
- Present artworks and describe how they have used visual conventions to represent their ideas ([ACAVAM112](#))
- Identify intended purposes and meanings of artworks using visual arts terminology to compare artworks, starting with visual artworks in Australia including visual artworks of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples ([ACAVAR113](#))

### The Arts – Visual Arts: Year 5 and 6

- Explore ideas and practices used by artists, including practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, to represent different views, beliefs and opinions ([ACAVAM114](#))
- Develop and apply techniques and processes when making their artworks ([ACAVAM115](#))
- Explain how visual arts conventions communicate meaning by comparing artworks from different social, cultural and historical contexts, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artworks ([ACAVAR117](#))

### General capabilities

- Critical and creative thinking
- Personal and social capabilities
- Literacy

## PORTRAITURE

'... the subtlety of it & the way the pigments have been floated & flickered on I grasp all that the painter meant, no brush work no cleverness.'  
Roberts on Velásquez's approach to paint in his portraits, 14 November 1909

In 1877, while studying in Melbourne, Roberts started working for Stewart's Photographic Studios. At these studios Roberts was responsible for arranging lighting and posing sitters for portraits, as well as painting some backdrops. This experience had an impact on his own portraiture and he adopted the idea of using native plants as a part of the backdrop for his own sitter in *An Australian native* 1888.

Roberts was Australia's leading portrait painter of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For many years, portraiture was a principal source of income, and it was 40 per cent of his oeuvre.

Roberts' portraits include a wide range of subjects, some 'official' and some of friends: pastoralists, businessmen, politicians, fellow artists, musicians, actors, fashionable ladies, children, and Aboriginal people. As is the case with many portraitists, the commissions are often more impersonal and those of friends show more flair and greater empathy. Many of his portraits of women and girls also demonstrate a sensitivity to the subject.

### The Arts – Visual Arts: Year 3 and 4

- Explore ideas and artworks from different cultures and times, including artwork by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, to use as inspiration for their own representations ([ACAVAM110](#))
- Use materials, techniques and processes to explore visual conventions when making artworks ([ACAVAM111](#))

### The Arts – Visual Arts: Year 5 and 6

- Develop and apply techniques and processes when making their artworks ([ACAVAM115](#))
- Plan the display of artworks to enhance their meaning for an audience ([ACAVAM116](#))
- Explain how visual arts conventions communicate meaning by comparing artworks from different social, cultural and historical contexts, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artworks ([ACAVAR117](#))

- Explore ideas and practices used by artists, including practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, to represent different views, beliefs and opinions ([ACAVAM114](#))

### The Art – Media Arts: Year 5 and 6

- Explore representations, characterisations and points of view of people in their community, including themselves, using settings, ideas, story principles and genre conventions in images, sounds and text ([ACAMAM062](#))

### Humanities and Social Sciences: Year 4

- Pose questions to investigate people, events, places and issues ([ACHASSI073](#))
- Locate and collect information and data from different sources, including observations ([ACHASSI074](#))
- Draw simple conclusions based on analysis of information and data ([ACHASSI079](#))

### General capabilities

- Critical and creative thinking
- Personal and social capabilities

## 9 BY 5 IMPRESSION EXHIBITION

The *9 by 5 Impression exhibition* in 1889 established Roberts' and his friends' reputations as innovators and created their identity as a group—of Australian Impressionists— or impressions-ists.

Before the exhibition opened the *Table Talk* art critic Sophie Osmond remarked:

'Now ... the public will have the opportunity of judging for itself what Impressionism really is ... The three principals of the movement are Mr Tom Roberts, Mr Charles Conder and Mr Arthur Streeton ... generally considered to be the leaders of Impressionism here, while Fred McCubbin may possibly be added as a fourth ...'

In the small catalogue produced by the artists they explained their interests and aims:

'An effect is only momentary; so an impressionist tries to find his place. Two half-hours are never alike, and he who tries to paint the sunset on two successive evenings, must be more or less working from memory. So in these works, it has been the object of the artists to render faithfully, and thus obtain the first records of effects widely differing, and often of very fleeting character.'

The *9 by 5 Impression exhibition* opened on 17 August 1889 at Buxton's Art Gallery in Swanston Street, Melbourne. Roberts, Charles Conder and Arthur Streeton contributed the majority of paintings and CD Richardson, sculpture.

The opening created a stir in Melbourne. The rooms were decorated in an aesthetic style, with draperies of soft Liberty silk, Japanese umbrellas, blue and green vases filled with japonica and roses, violets and jonquils, and the air was sweet with the perfume of daphne. The artists wanted to convey momentary impressions of colour and light, fleeting atmospheric effects and the transient moods of nature.

Following English artist James Whistler's example, most of the works were shown in simple wooden standardised frames. The exhibition's title referred to the size of the wooden panels they painted on, which were nine by five inches (23 x 12.5 cm). Many were painted on cigar-box lids provided by Roberts' friend Louis Abrahams, whose family imported cigars.

### The Arts – Visual Arts: Year 5 and 6

- Explain how visual arts conventions communicate meaning by comparing artworks from different social, cultural and historical contexts, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artworks ([ACAVAR117](#))
- Plan the display of artworks to enhance their meaning for an audience ([ACAVAM116](#))

### General capabilities

- Critical and creative thinking
- Personal and social capabilities
- Literacy

## MAKING A NATION

### The 'Big Picture' (1901–03)

'You know how proud I am to have put my little bit to Australian history.' Roberts to Alfred Deakin, 1903

On 29 May 1901—three weeks after the first sitting of the Federal Parliament of Australia—Roberts accepted a commission to paint this historic moment. Roberts was moved by the momentous event, and found the shaft of sunlight that came down from the central dome of the exhibition building and spread across the assembled crowd to the royal couple on the dais, to be emblematic. From that experience he made a lively oil sketch in which he captured this fleeting effect of light.

The choice of Roberts flowed from his reputation as a portrait painter. The commissioners (a consortium of private benefactors named the Australian Art Association Pty Ltd) had high expectations of him: they asked for 'correct representations' of the Duke and Duchess of York, the Governor-General, the state governors, members of the Federal Parliament and 'other distinguished guests to the number of not less than 250'.

With the completion of such a large and significant commission, it is surprising that Roberts was never offered a knighthood. When a friend questioned him about this, however, he replied, 'Oh it doesn't matter about me, look what a splendid position has been given to my work'.

#### Making the 'Big Picture' (1901–03)

'Friends pity me but they needn't. I know what a chance there is to produce something & am going for it for all it's worth. ... a document? – yes? & something more. The Royalty & its suite of Governors of states and – the members, democracy – with the people – that's the Empire and this all meets under one roof. And that's what I'm painting.' Roberts to SW Pring, Roberts pen pal and president of the Artists Society of New South Wales, c 1903

Roberts made individual portraits—some in pencil and some in oil—of all the main figures that he included in the painting. He made a visit to Sydney to produce sketches of the prime minister and the Duke and Duchess.

Keeping in mind that the figures he was drawing or painting individually were to form part of a group, he made careful notes of the weight, height and age of the sitters, their country of origin, and particulars such as hat size. He noted down his impression of their character, often with much humour. As a result, the painting provides an extraordinary panorama of Australian politicians and society.

Working in a room in the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne, Roberts extrapolated his small oil composition to a large canvas, by the traditional means of squaring up. He then placed his many portraits into the outline, attempting to remain faithful to the sitter, but also trying to place them in relation to the whole. He had to rely on photographs of the event to be sure where everyone was standing.

Most of the delegates at the ceremony wore black in observance of a period of mourning after the recent death of Queen Victoria. To balance this Roberts gave some emphasis to the choir, who were dressed in white. In all, the picture included 269 separate portraits. The wet, incomplete canvas was shipped to London in March 1903, where Roberts continued to work on it in the South African Room of the Imperial Institute. He finished it on 16 November 1903.

#### Humanities and Social Sciences: Year 5 and 6

- Develop appropriate questions to guide an inquiry about people, events, developments, places, systems and challenges ([ACHASSI094](#)) ([ACHASSI122](#))
- Locate and collect relevant information and data from primary and secondary sources ([ACHASSI095](#)) ([ACHASSI123](#))
- Examine primary and secondary sources to determine their origin and purpose ([ACHASSI098](#))
- Examine different viewpoints on actions, events, issues and phenomena in the past and present ([ACHASSI099](#)) ([ACHASSI127](#))
- Evaluate evidence to draw conclusions ([ACHASSI101](#))
- Work in groups to generate responses to issues and challenges ([ACHASSI102](#))
- Reflect on learning to propose personal and/or collective action in response to an issue or challenge, and predict the probable effects ([ACHASSI104](#))

#### The Arts – Visual Arts: Year 5 and 6

- Develop and apply techniques and processes when making their artworks ([ACAVAM115](#))
- Explain how visual arts conventions communicate meaning by comparing artworks from different social, cultural and historical contexts, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artworks ([ACAVAR117](#))

#### General capabilities

- Critical and creative thinking
- Personal and social capabilities
- Literacy
- Intercultural Understanding

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## WORKING ABROAD

After studying at the National Gallery School, Melbourne, Roberts travelled to London in 1881 with the express intent of studying at the Royal Academy Schools. He established friendships with a number of fellow students, including the sculptor, Harry Bates, whom he depicted in *The sculptor's studio* 1884–85.

During the 1883 summer vacation, Roberts toured France and Spain with the artist John Russell and friends. In Granada, towards the end of this trip, Roberts met two young Spanish art students, Ramón Casas and Laureà Barreau, who encouraged him to paint a 'direct sketch' outdoors in front of the subject.

While overseas, Roberts also visited Paris, and travelled to Venice where he looked at and was inspired by the works of Velásquez and Manet.

After returning to London in 1903, and following the completion of the 'Big Picture' on 16 November 1903, its display at the Royal Academy in London in 1904, and its presentation to the King, Roberts became uncertain of the direction he should now take with his art. He suffered from eye trouble and entered a 'black period' for several years.

Roberts did not stop painting during his 'black period', but slowly worked his way through it. He was fortunate in that he continued to receive commissions, such as that for a portrait of the Marquis of Linlithgow, the first Governor-General of Australia, from the Art Gallery of South Australia in 1904, and later, the second Governor-General, the Rt Hon Hallam Tennyson for the Commonwealth of Australia.

The visit of his 'old chum' McCubbin in 1907 helped Roberts recover his spirits. Together they had viewed the then recently discovered late work by JMW Turner in the Tate Gallery. McCubbin was overwhelmed by these paintings, realising that most of those on show had been painted at the end of Turner's life, 'when he had realized the quality of light'. His admiration for Turner's adventurous use of colour and the way he was able to convey light influenced Roberts.

In the summer of 1913 Roberts made the first of his visits to Lake Como, Italy, where he stayed with his portrait subject, Ruby Hartl and her new husband. Inevitably, he was attracted to the picturesque scenery of the area, as well as to the company of his friends and the luxury of their home. Moreover, this visit resulted in Roberts' one and only London exhibition, at the Walker's Gallery in 1914.

## The Arts – Visual Arts: Year 3 and 4

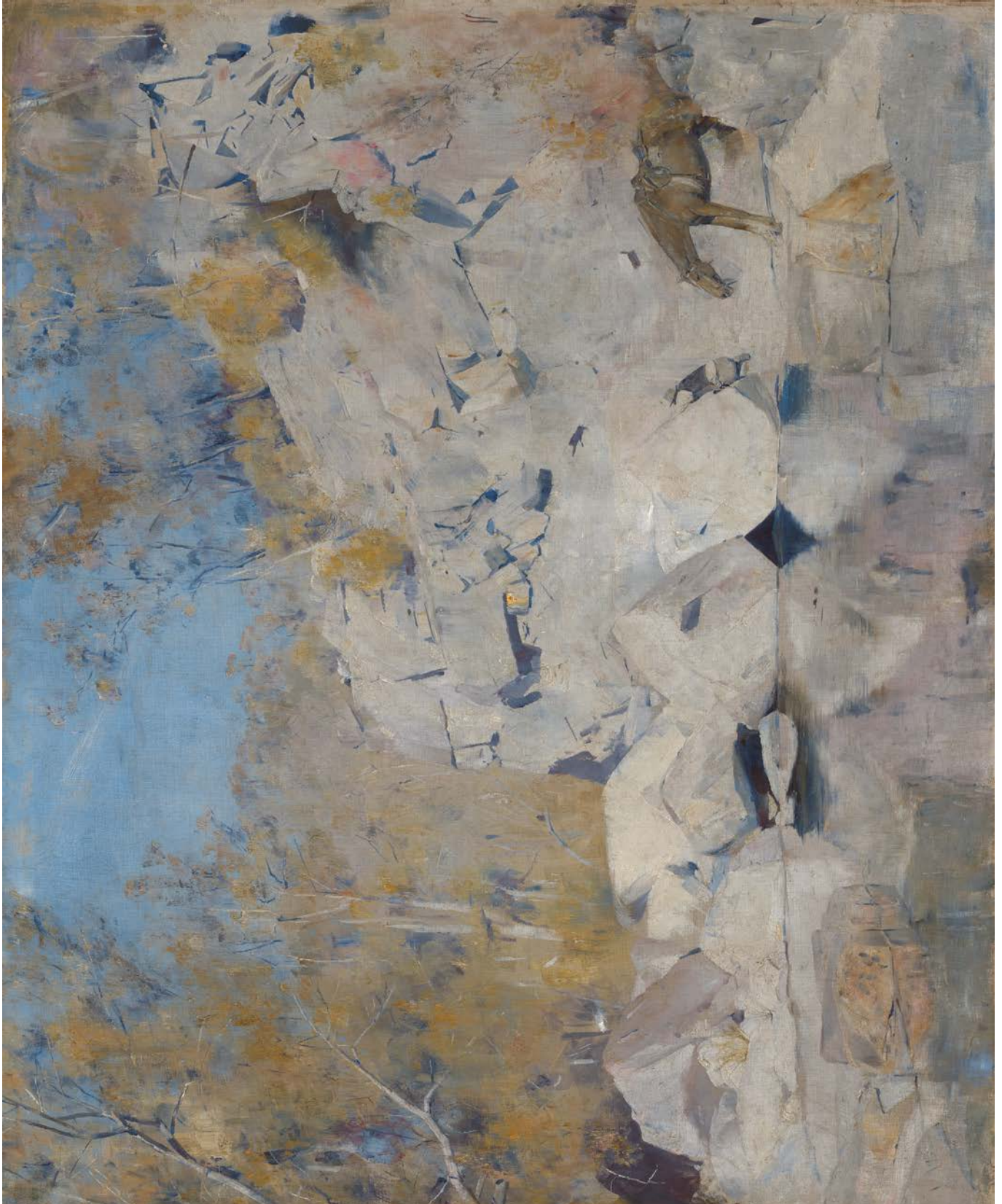
- Explore ideas and artworks from different cultures and times, including artwork by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, to use as inspiration for their own representations ([ACAVAM110](#))
- Use materials, techniques and processes to explore visual conventions when making artworks ([ACAVAM111](#))

## General capabilities

- Critical and creative thinking



*In a corner on the Macintyre*  
painted at Newstead, North  
Elsmore, New South Wales,  
1895  
oil on canvas 71.1 x 86.4 cm  
National Gallery of  
Australia, Canberra,  
purchased 1971



# Australia and the landscape

*In a corner on the Macintyre (The bushranger), 1895*

**In his early rural works, Roberts painted subjects that were typically Australian, and captured the Australian bush in a new way.**

By the late 1880s Roberts wanted to go further and create large-scale heroic images of life on the land, with the figure playing a dominant role. He sought to paint works showing the unique character of the country, and depict 'strong masculine labour'. He also celebrated Australia's pastoral industry, on which the country was economically reliant.

*Shearing the rams* 1888–90 was the first of these large-scale national narratives; *A break away!* followed in 1891. Roberts created his second shearing picture, *The Golden Fleece* in 1894, followed by *Bailed up* 1895 and *Mountain muster* 1897. To this group of large national narratives should be added the smaller bushranging subject *In a corner on the Macintyre (The bushranger)* 1895.

These decades were a time of change in Australian art and a period when artists began to talk about an Australian tradition. They sought to portray subjects that they believed would distinguish Australian life from that lived elsewhere, 'a life different from any other country in the world'—the life of the bush. They aimed to establish the validity of nationalist subjects, and to treat them with seriousness and on the scale of history paintings. Indeed, in the 1880s there was a self-conscious desire to create a national school and to develop a local market for Australian art.

## RESPONDING and RESEARCH

- Describe the colours that Tom Roberts has used in *In a corner on the Macintyre* 1895. How has the paint been applied to the canvas? Do you think it has been done carefully and slowly? Or roughly and quickly? What equipment do you think Tom Roberts has used to apply the paint? Zoom in very closely and enlarge a section. What does it look like from this perspective?

- Research 2-3 of the following artists who have all painted the Australian outback:

- |                    |                    |
|--------------------|--------------------|
| - Albert Namatjira | - Jessie Traill    |
| - Russell Drysdale | - Arthur Streeton  |
| - Percy Lindsay    | - Arthur Boyd      |
| - Fred Williams    | - Harry Garlick    |
| - John Wolseley    | - Margaret Preston |

Can you find similarities between the work of any of these artists? What are the main differences? Choose one of the artists above whose work you like. Why do you like their work? How does it make you feel? How would you feel if you were in the landscape s/he has painted?

## MAKING and DOING

- Write a Haiku poem in response to the painting *In a corner on the Macintyre*. Perform the poem in front of the class. Create a book with everyone's poem in it so that everyone in the class can have a copy.
- As a class recreate two copies of *In a corner on the Macintyre* with two different colour schemes to see how this effects the overall look and feel of the work of art:
  - Divide into two groups and decide on a colour scheme for each group.
  - Divide two colour copies of the painting into 12 equal areas, each with a number on the back.
  - Each student completes their section of the painting in the agreed colour scheme.
  - Place the 12 paintings back in order and display both sets of 12 images side by side.
  - Compare and contrast the two groups.
- Paint your own landscape by using square pieces of cardboard instead of a paintbrush. Share your work with others and discuss if you enjoyed the process or if you found it difficult.



*Miss Minna Simpson*  
painted in Melbourne, 1886  
oil on canvas 59.5 x 49.5 cm  
National Gallery of Australia,  
Canberra, purchased with funds  
donated by the National Gallery of  
Australia Council and Foundation in  
honour of Ron Radford AM, Director  
of the National Gallery of Australia  
(2004–14), 2014. 100 Works for  
100 Years

# Portraiture

## *Miss Minna Simpson, 1886*

### Miss Minna Simpson was the five-year-old niece of the artist's future wife, Lillie Williamson.

In this portrait, Minna looks directly at the viewer, holding firmly onto her white kitten, which appears as if it would very much like to escape her clutches.

This was one of the first major portraits that Roberts' painted after he returned from his studies and travels in England and Europe. While abroad he had studied many different artists including Eduard Manet, James Whistler and Diego Velázquez, who all used a similar colour palette to the one that Roberts has used here.

### RESPONDING and RESEARCH

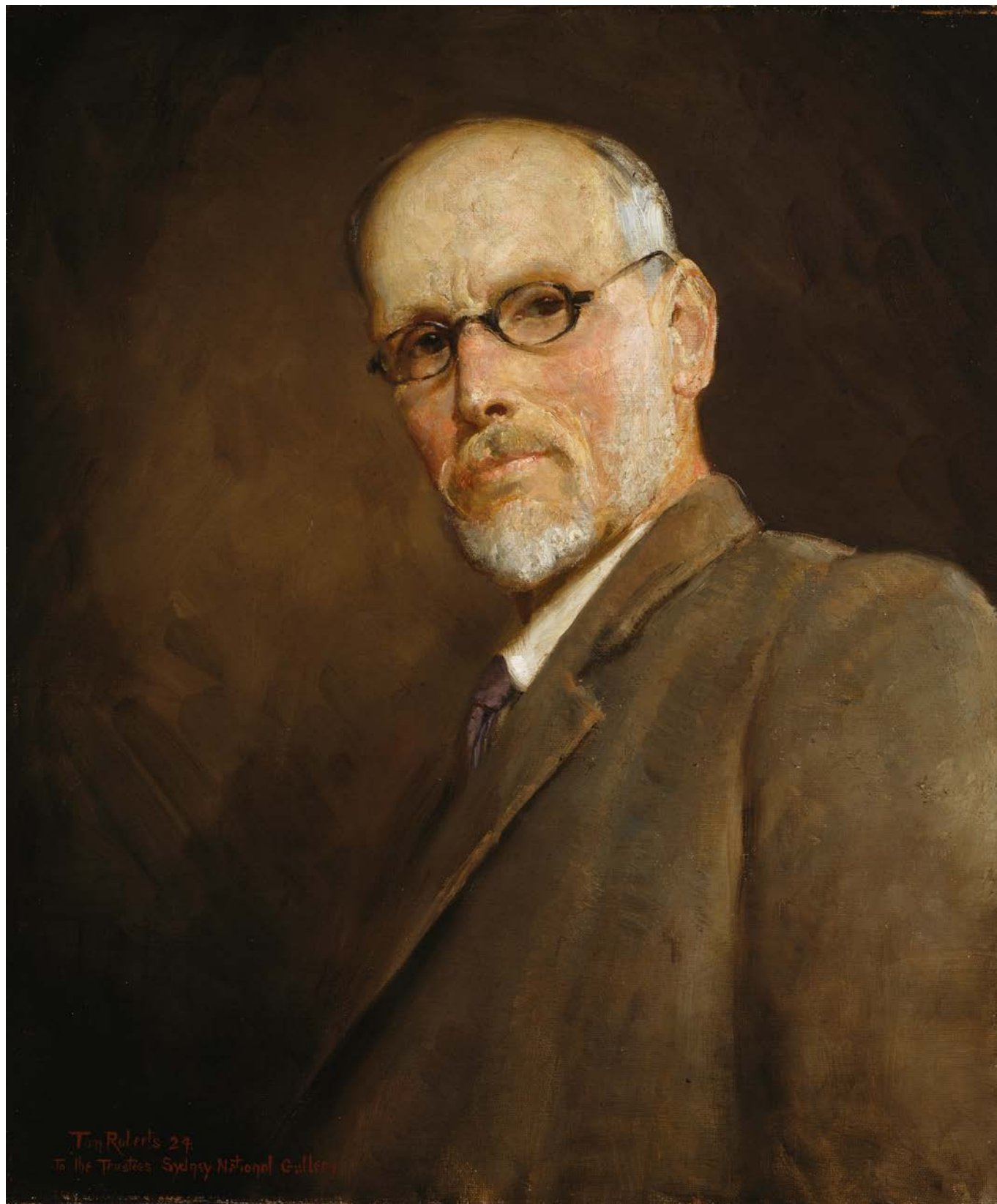
- Describe the clothing that Miss Minna is wearing. Would they be comfortable? Can you imagine spending your weekends wearing this? What do her clothes tell us about the year in which the painting was created?
- What do our clothes tell us about ourselves? Is what we wear important? Is having a uniform important, either in a school or in a profession? Do we judge people by what they wear? What conclusions can you make about Miss Minna Simpson?
- Look at the following features and describe their texture:
  - Minna's bonnet and apron, paying particular attention to the lace detail
  - the kitten's fur
  - the dish of milk on the table.
- Look also at the toys on the table. Tom Roberts made these toys to keep Miss Minna entertained while he painted her portrait, which could often take quite a long time (especially for a small child!). What do you think they are? With no TV, iPads or computers, what did children do in the house to occupy their time? Could you go a week without any screen time at all?!

### RESEARCH

- Research the changes in clothing between 1850 and 1950 in Australia. Compare your findings with what children in other countries wore at the same time. How did fashion change for children, women and men? Was the clothing appropriate for our climate?
- Research and find out three different types of toys that were popular for boys or girls around 1880.

### MAKING and DOING

- Choose an animal that you would like to make. Work collaboratively in small groups to create a scene for your animals, or a diorama. Make a display in a public area of the school for others to enjoy.
- Make a timetable of your week without screen time! How do you fill your time each day? Did you find it easy or difficult? Share with your class and hear their experiences. Challenge your teacher to do the same.



*Self portrait*  
painted at Kallista, Victoria,  
1924  
oil on canvas 61.2 x 51 cm  
Art Gallery of New South  
Wales, gift of the artist at the  
request of the Trustees, 1924

# Portraiture

## *Self portrait, 1924*

### Tom Roberts painted this self portrait when he was 68 years old.

He has carefully analysed his facial features and created a portrait that is restrained and formal. Roberts' brown suit blends into the dark background and only the white collar lightens the outfit. Roberts depicted himself almost full face, with just a slight turn of his head. He has a steady, observant gaze behind his glasses, a rather self-confident, determined expression, and a somewhat mysterious, but personable smile. The simplicity of the portrait along with its understated and naturalistic approach conveys Roberts' confidence in himself, feeling no need to embellish his presence.

The self portrait is often the artist's most personal form of expression, a means of self-evaluation and self-promotion. Successive self portraits over a long career can chart an artist's artistic development, showing how their concerns changed over time. Although Roberts was Australia's leading portrait painter at the turn of the century, unlike other major Australian portrait painters of this time such as George W Lambert and Hugh Ramsay, he painted very few self portraits. This suggests that Roberts was less keen to learn how to paint portraits by using himself as a model, or to explore himself in his art.

### RESPONDING and RESEARCH

- What is a self portrait? What should it express? Should it have a realistic likeness to the artist? Why? Throughout history, artists have always created self portraits. Why do you think this is? Look at the self portrait of Tom Roberts. What are the first five words that come into your head when you look at the painting? What kind of person do you think he is? Is he stern, kind, friendly or intimidating?
- Discuss the main colours you can see in the painting. Do you like these colours? If you were painting yourself what colours would you choose and why?

- The artist is looking down at us, the viewer. Does he look as if he is taller than us? Does that make him more powerful?
- Look at a range of self portraits that are in the NGA collection. Here are a few that vary in approach and medium:
  - Hugh Ramsay, c 1902
  - Ambrose Patterson, c 1902
  - Grace Cossington Smith, 1916
  - Albert Tucker, 1941
  - Montien Boonma, 1982
  - Arthur Boyd, 1985
  - Julie Dowling, 2002

From this collection of self portraits, which ones do you like and why? What do they tell us about the artist? How are they similar? How are they different?

### MAKING and DOING

- Working in pairs using a camera or a phone, take a series of self portraits (or 'selfies!'). Experiment with a front, three-quarter and side profile and study yourself from each viewpoint to establish if they reveal anything different about you.
- Include one object that tells us about you. It might be a musical instrument, sporting equipment, a bunch of paintbrushes, a book, a phone etc. Create a series of self portraits and use digital manipulation to change and enhance certain aspects of them such as the colour and size.
- Print them out and display them.



**Going home**  
 painted in Melbourne, c 1889  
 oil on cedar cigar-box lid 23.4 x 13.6 cm  
 National Gallery of Australia,  
 Canberra, purchased 1976

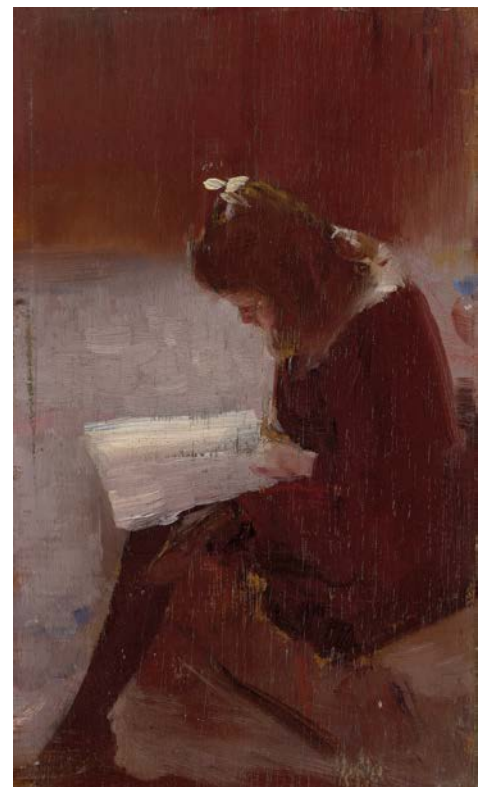


**Saplings**  
 painted in Melbourne, c 1889  
 oil on cedar cigar-box lid 14.5 x 34.5 cm  
 Art Gallery of South Australia,  
 Adelaide, Morgan Thomas Bequest  
 Fund, 1927

**Gray day in spring, Venice**  
 painted in Venice, 1884  
 oil on wood panel 11.3 x 20.2 cm  
 National Gallery of Australia,  
 Canberra, purchased 1973

**Mentone**  
 painted in Melbourne, 1888  
 oil on cedar panel 11.4 x 19 cm  
 National Gallery of Victoria,  
 Melbourne, purchased 1955

**Harper's Weekly**  
 painted in Melbourne, c 1889  
 oil on cedar panel 23.8 x 14.2 cm  
 National Gallery of Victoria,  
 Melbourne, purchased 1958



## 9 by 5 Impression exhibition

### In 1889 Tom Roberts and a group of artists opened the *9 by 5 Impression exhibition* in Melbourne.

The exhibition featured 182 works, many of which had been painted on cedar cigar-box lids that measured nine by five inches (or approximately 23 x 13 cm). The artists were interested in capturing fleeting moments and many of the paintings were done quickly and *en plein air* (or 'in open air'). Although the response to the exhibition at the time was mixed, it is now recognised as an important event in Australia's art history.

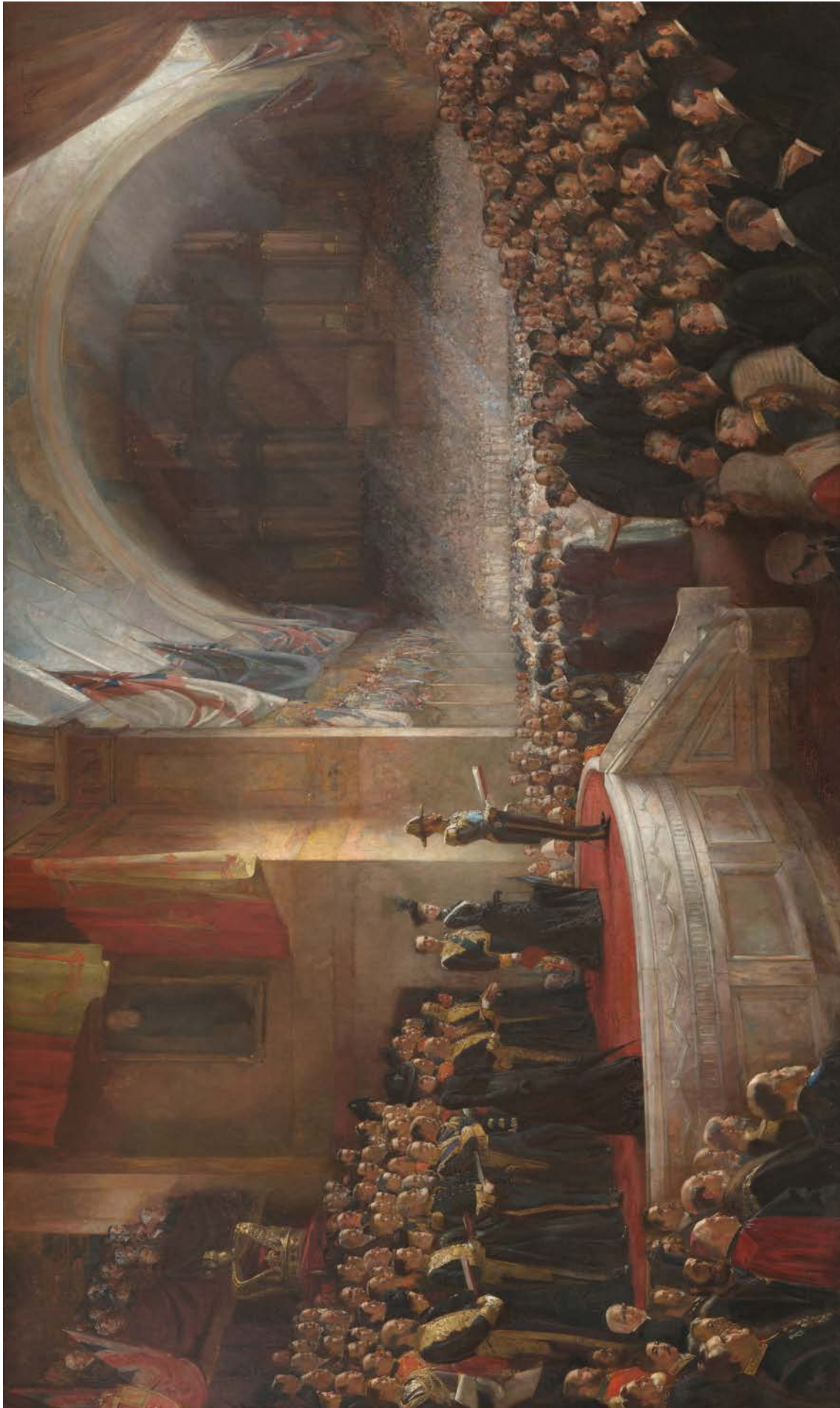
#### MAKING and DOING

- A modern day object that is a similar size to the 9 by 5 cigar-box lids is a tablet device! Design a series of device covers in the style of Australian Impressionism. Using a drawing app on your device such as Sketchbook Pro or Draw, create a series of five digitally drawn images that record important aspects of your life. Make sure there are ones that represent important people, important places and important objects in your life. Share with your class.

#### RESPONDING and RESEARCH

- Look at the collection of paintings. What are they paintings of? Describe the different scenes and subject matters.
- The artists in the *9 by 5* exhibition are classified as 'Australian Impressionists' or 'impressions-ists'—what do you think this term means? Look up the term online and see what results you get. Compare the artists grouped as 'Australian Impressionists' with artists painting in Europe who are known as 'French Impressionists'. Can you see the similarities between these two art movements? What are they?
- Research the work of James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) who was an influence to many of the artists featured in the *9 by 5* exhibition. How are his works similar? How are they different?





*Opening of the first parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia by H.R.H. The Duke of Cornwall and York (later H.M. King George V), May 9, 1901*  
 painted Melbourne 1901-2, finished in London, 1903  
 oil on canvas 304.5 x 509.2 cm

Royal Collection Trust, presented by the Commonwealth in 1904, on permanent loan to Parliament House, Canberra  
 Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2015

# Making a nation

*Opening of the first parliament, 1901*

## At the turn of the twentieth century, Tom Roberts won the portrait commission of a lifetime—to capture the first Commonwealth Parliament of Australia, convened in Melbourne in May 1901.

The artist was required to represent accurately the 250 people in attendance, providing a grand and realistic pictorial record of the most momentous occasion in Australia's history. Nicknamed the 'Big Picture' the finished painting measures over five metres long and included 269 portraits! At the time Roberts was very happy to accept the commission, but in the end it took him over two years to complete. At its completion he was proud of his achievement, but exhausted.

With no allocated seat at the opening, Roberts had to climb up some railings to view the 12,000 guests looking 'like a landscape stretching away.' From that impression he made an oil sketch—which you can also see on display in the *Tom Roberts* exhibition.

### RESPONDING and RESEARCH

- What is your first impression of this painting? Can you imagine painting such a large and detailed work of art?
- Discuss as a class what you think is happening in the painting. How would you describe the mood? Is it a formal or informal event? Explain your answer by referring to the subject matter, technique and colour.
- Who do you think are some of the people present? Who is missing in this painting? Does this painting look as if it represents all of Australia? Why are there no Indigenous people in this painting? Follow up this discussion with some research about the events that led up to this event—known as 'Federation'.
- Many people (over 40 per cent) voted against Federation in 1901. Who do you think voted against this? What advantages would there be to keeping each state or colony independent? What are the benefits of Federation for the colonies?
- Can you see the crown in the painting? It is a large, oversized object. What does it represent? Research and trace the connection that has always existed between Great Britain and the European settlement in Australia. How do you see the future of Australia with regards to its connection with Great Britain? Should Australia become a republic? What is a republic? What are your thoughts?
- Research how Parliament in Australia operates today and how the voting system has changed since 1901.
- Have a look at the [Australian Parliament House](#) website and find out who are the various ministers. Which minister would you like to work with and why? What change would you try and create and why?

### MAKING and DOING

- The painting is a very crowded and busy scene. Do you think the artist has successfully portrayed this? Have a look at John Brack's *Five o'clock on Collins Street* and also LS Lowry's *Going to work* and discuss how each artist represents a crowd of people differently. Create your own work of art with a crowd of people—this may be from a music concert or a sporting event. How detailed will you make the people? It could be from your imagination, from a memory or a photograph. Try to capture how it might feel to be among so many people.
- As a class, debate the burning issues that you think we need to address as a nation. What would you ask the Australian Government to consider or change? Present your ideas in a carefully written letter. Find out who your local government representative is, consider what actions you could take and send them your letter.



*Fog, Thames embankment*  
 painted in London, 1884  
 oil on paperboard 13.1 x 21.7 cm  
 Art Gallery of New South Wales,  
 Sydney, purchased with funds  
 provided by the Gleeson O'Keefe  
 Foundation, 2008



*Trafalgar Square*  
 painted in London, c 1884  
 oil on cardboard 14 x 28 cm  
 Art Gallery of South Australia,  
 Adelaide, South Australian  
 Government Grant, 1988

# Working abroad

*Fog, Thames embankment, 1884*

**While studying in London from 1881–84, Roberts was inspired by the many works of art he saw on display in public collections and special exhibitions.**

One of the artists whose work he encountered in London was James McNeill Whistler. The influence of Whistler's atmospheric panel paintings and his simplified brush technique can be seen in *Fog, Thames embankment 1884* and *Trafalgar Square c 1884*.

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## RESPONDING and RESEARCH

- Consider the composition of both of these works of art. Can you identify foreground, middle ground and background? How do these artistic conventions create a sense of space and distance? What are the differences between each ground in terms of colour and tone?
- Tom Roberts has created these paintings using mainly silhouettes of each area. What is a silhouette? Can we still express ourselves using silhouettes only?
- Research a city skyline. It may be somewhere you have been or somewhere you would like to go. What do the buildings look like? Are there any famous landmarks and what are they?

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## MAKING and DOING

- Print out some examples of skylines and cities. Trace around these onto shades of colours. Create a collage by cutting out a foreground, middle ground and background to show distance with your lightest colour being at the back. Collage them together to create your city picture. Draw in detail to populate your artwork with people, trees, cars or boats.