

## **Welcome**

May I first welcome you to the Art Gallery of New South Wales and to say thank you for joining me on this tour. What I want to do is to just walk through the building, walk through the galleries, which are over five floors, and just pick out some of the pictures which are my favourites and which I think and hope that you will love as well. These are some of the great pictures, the great works of art in this Gallery which I don't want you to miss.

**Agnolo Bronzino** *Cosimo I de' Medici in armour* c1545

We're now standing in the James Fairfax Gallery of pre-nineteenth century European art and here I've selected just two paintings to particularly look at. The first is on your right as you enter the gallery and it is Bronzino's portrait of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici in armour.

This splendid and imposing picture of a rather stern looking Cosimo was painted around 1540. It is a very striking and convincing portrait. We know we are looking at a real person – somebody who was indeed a powerful presence. But it is perhaps less that face of Cosimo that engages us because it seems so distracted; he does not seem to be the slightest bit interested in us, he's looking over our shoulder way beyond us. Clearly he has matters of the Florentine state on his mind.

Now it's not that face that I find so interesting, intimidating though it is. What I find particularly fascinating about this painting is that suit of armour. It has a magnificent sheen and I marvel at the way the artist has used those moments of white paint to such spectacular effect.

Look too at that soft and sensitive hand resting on the helmet. Bronzino was an artist who achieved beautiful textures and surfaces, whether it be the steel of the armour or the flesh of the hand.

Bronzino was a leading figure in that movement we now call mannerism, which was an initiative to try and bring a little warmth and humanity into the cool and objective reality of the high renaissance. Interestingly, like a lot of these semi-formal portraits, they were done in pairs and sometimes even more. And there is an almost exact replica of this subject by Bronzino in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence and in the year 2010 there is to be an exhibition in the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence, which will reunite our painting with the Uffizi version and others of the same subject. So that is something fascinating to look forward to.

We'll now move on into now what is really the eighteenth century gallery and as you approach this room, on the middle of the left wall, is a marvellous and wholly characteristic painting by Giovanni Antonio Canale, better known as Canaletto.

**Canaletto** *The Piazza San Marco, Venice* 1742–46

This is the Piazza San Marco in Venice. Canaletto was really the most distinctive visual recorder of his time and I think no other artist has celebrated the great city of Venice like Canaletto, and this is a classic.

The picture presents a view across the great St Mark's Square from the north side, with the Ducal Palace on the left, the church of San Giorgio Maggiore in the distance, the campanile in the centre and to the left of that we get just a glimpse of the San Severino Library. And then there's the long building that confronts us, which is now the Correr Museum. On the ground floor of that within that beautiful colonnade is the famous Florians coffee shop – a must for any visitor to Venice.

At the time this picture was painted in the 1740s, Canaletto was famous for his realistic views, his vedute of Venice, which were sold above all to British visitors and tourists. They were really very upmarket souvenirs.

Now what I love about this is not only that marvellous and fresh, bright and spacious blue sky – so typical of Canaletto – but also the observation of detail and particularly the people. It presents a wonderful panorama of the citizens of Venice. I think this is a very democratic picture because if you look closely at it you can see people that are grandly dressed, there are traders selling their wares, there are idlers and onlookers, musicians, children, buskers, grandees and dogs. There's all kinds of activity going on down there in the square. But everybody in a sense is treated as an equal.

Another thing I've always liked about Canaletto is that observation of detail. He observes so closely and gives us moments of detail that give his paintings that sense of authenticity; moments and quirks of reality that bring his subjects to life with a real sense of topicality.

For example, on the long building in front of us, now the Correr Museum, we can see a couple of blue and white striped canopies both of which seem to be flying in the breeze. It's just little moments like that that give Canaletto's work a wonderful sense of absolute veracity. We know that this is what Venice was actually like in the eighteenth century.

There are two other paintings by Canaletto illustrating much the same scene and from much the same viewpoint. One is in the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford in Connecticut and the second is in the Sir John Soane's Museum in London.

We'll now move around passing through the small corner room with sculptures into a large gallery in which are displayed some truly magnificent Victorian paintings of considerable grandeur.

Our first stop is on the left in the centre of the gallery and it is Ford Madox Brown's *Chaucer at the court of Edward III*.

**Ford Madox Brown** *Chaucer at the court of Edward III* 1847–51

This is a magnum opus. It is certainly one of the most celebrated paintings in the Gallery and it has an equally extraordinary history. It was painted over nearly five years from 1847 to 1851, by the great British Victorian and pre-Raphaelite painter, Ford Madox Brown.

The subject of the painting is Geoffrey Chaucer reading the legend of St Eustace to Edward III and his court at the Palace of Sheen on the occasion of his eldest son – the Black Prince's – forty fifth birthday and the whole thing is recalled very much in the style of a medieval pageant.

In his diary, Ford Madox Brown notes that he got various members of his family, his friends and even fellow artists to sit as subjects. For example, the great artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti is the dominant figure of Chaucer overlooking the whole scene. The artist's second wife Emma is the model for Joanna the Fair Maid of Kent, who appears just behind the white bearded figure of Edward III, up there on the right hand side. And then slumped in the chair beside is the then frail figure of the Black Prince, who was actually going to die later that year, for whom Brown engaged a professional model called Maitland.

Many others have been identified and I think the fact that the artist used his friends and colleagues as sitters gives the painting a wonderful sense of topicality. It's a painting full of interest, full of detail and full of interesting people and all to sumptuous effect. The painting was first shown in the 1851 Royal Academy exhibition and then the 1855 Paris International exhibition. Having failed to sell, perhaps on account of its size, the artist retrieved the picture in 1863 and it was sold to the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1876.

In November 1882 a very distressed Ford Madox Brown wrote a letter to, we believe, the then President of the Board of Trustees of the Gallery, the wonderfully named Mr Eccleston Dufour, expressing dismay under the happily mistaken misunderstanding that his painting had been destroyed when the Garden Palace building here in Sydney, its fine art annexe being the Gallery premises at the time, burnt to the ground in 1882.

He wrote: "I speak of my feelings under the impression that it is remembered in Australia that the picture took up the better part of five years of my life, from 25 to 30."

Well it's still here. Incidentally there is a much smaller, 1.2 by 1 metre version of the painting in the collection of the Tate Gallery in London.

**Sir Edward John Poynter** *The visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon* 1890

This is Cecil B. DeMille territory and I don't think Hollywood today could match this extraordinary vision. Of course the dominant figure is the Queen of Sheba walking up the stairs to the fabulously rich King Solomon. But she is not going to be intimidated by his renowned wealth. Here she steps confidently up the stairs as she shows off to King Solomon the various gifts that she has brought to him, just to demonstrate that she's not going to be overawed by his wealth.

Again in this painting of epic scale and detail, it is that concentration of detail and imagery that gives it such a fascinating interest. For example one of the things I particularly love about this picture is the sheen of that silk carpet leading up the stairs to King Solomon. Then there are the peacocks down in the right hand side, the fruits and the gifts, the monkeys on the left. It's all full of surprising detail.

Poynter has followed the accounts of this probably legendary visit of the Queen bringing gifts of frankincense and myrrh to Solomon. It's said that her intention was not about wealth or challenging Solomon's wealth, but to have a son. Certainly the artist has captured the spirit of the occasion and the place.

All this exoticism is very much in keeping with the fascination for the east and for antiquity that was such a feature of Victorian England as the empire expanded and encountered these exotic realms beyond the eastern Mediterranean. And Poynter has richly captured all that gregarious spirit in this extraordinary painting.

Technically there's another aspect to this painting which demonstrates Poynter's skill. It is the use of light. From those glimpses of the blue sky through the columns and most of all that gentle glare of light that pours down from the ceiling. We can just see some kind of canvas awning stretching across the ceiling, which filters the light down and across the scene.

You will of course notice too that frame. This is a piece of engineering and we always feel that if we ever take it off the wall there's every likelihood that the wall will fall down. But the frame, again was designed by Poynter. So he didn't just design and make the picture. He actually designed the whole thing as an enormous and wonderful presentation.

## Edouard Detaille *Vive L'Empereur* 1891

In the nineteenth century French gallery we will encounter what is probably the largest painting in the Gallery and it is another most unlikely picture to find here in Sydney.

Among a number of French Salon paintings is the massive *Vive L'Empereur* by Edouard Detaille in the centre room. Every time I look at this painting I think – what on earth is it doing here in Sydney? It is absolutely extraordinary. What possible interest could there have been in 1893 in Sydney when this painting was bought by the Gallery, in an epic French victory at the Battle of Friedland in 1807 when the French defeated the Russians? And it's all captured, immortalised and glorified in this epic painting.

At that time the trustees of the Gallery were given a small sum of money by the government to buy pictures and they sent most of it to a committee in London who went to the Royal Academy and to the Paris Salons. And they did instruct that committee on one occasion to say “please buy us something big and epic”. So what happened? We ended up with Detaille's *Vive L'Empereur*, which is indeed grand and epic and big.

It is not only the scale of the picture which is so captivating but I think we can't help but be fascinated and intrigued by the sheer energy and dynamic of the cavalry charge, of the sheer fury of that charging army.

One day recently when I was looking at the painting something struck me as slightly odd about it, because here's this thundering herd of cavalry men full of blood and thunder and guts, and yet there's a wonderful kind of serenity to the fresh green grass below, on which they're fighting their battle. Maybe this was a deliberate ploy of the artist: to contrast the hell of battle with the optimism of fresh, green grass and the grass of a battlefield littered with the debris of conflict – the butts of rifles, fractured swords and the forlorn helmets.

Detaille was born in Paris in 1847 and was almost bound to have a military career of some kind as he was surrounded by military figures in the family. And in 1868, the still young artist publicly showed his first military subject painting, entitled *The Drummer's Halt* – it was an imaginative scene from the French Revolution.

After serving in the Franco-Prussian war Detaille became something of a celebrity in France, producing all the drawings and plates for a book illustrating the huge variety of French military uniforms – some 390 images in all. By the 1890s he was back painting again and concentrating on pictures such as ours, which is dated to 1891: large and detailed epics of French military adventures, focusing particularly on various Napoleonic campaigns, and delighting in the mayhem of battle scenes and striking cavalry charges. He was a true scholar of French military history and there's no doubt that the details in *Vive L'Empereur* – the costume, the uniforms, the weapons – are accurately depicted.

In the adjoining gallery we will move on to a very different mood and a very different aesthetic; from the bombast of Detaille to the contemplation and reflection of the impressionists. Here we are dealing with movements and the very foundations of modern art, with impressionism and post-impressionism. There are two paintings here to particularly look at.

**Camille Pissarro** *Peasants' houses, Eragny* 1887

Camille Pissarro's *Peasant Houses at Eragny* was painted in 1887 and is a quintessential Impressionist painting.

This again is a painting that is so full of light, but it's no static light but a wonderful shimmering light and here in this picture is a lesson about how Impressionism evolved.

Impressionism with Monet, Renoir and Pissarro and Manet was about capturing the fleeting moment; that fleeting moment of the passage of light and air and breeze and wind, employing vivacious brushstrokes and fresh, bright colours.

Here Pissarro is doing something similar in achievement but with a slightly different means because instead of broad brushstrokes expressing that feeling of freshness and vitality, what he's done is use the point of the brush to create this extraordinary sort of kaleidoscope of momentary stabs, thereby giving a wonderful freshness and energy to the surface of the painting.

Every time I look at this painting I can sense the breeze in the air. I can feel the air and I can sense the light and it has that extraordinary capacity to be fresh every time you look at it.

Pissarro spoke of the qualities that he most admired in the art of painting as richness, suppleness, freedom, spontaneity and freshness of sensation. Well, this is the perfect demonstration of such aspirations. It is a wonderful painting and actually it's also something of a landmark in the history of this gallery because it was acquired in 1935 and was the very first Impressionist painting to enter the collections of the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

## **Paul Cézanne** *Bords de la Marne* c1888

Cézanne's dealer in Paris, Ambroise Vollard, included this painting in his first Cézanne exhibition held in 1895 and in 1905 Vollard sold the painting to Auguste Pellaraine who had made his fortune making margarine and spent his money collecting Cézannes.

By the 1930s he had well over a hundred paintings by the artist who is often called the father of modern painting. Of Cézanne, Picasso said, "he was my one and only master." And Matisse said "you see, he is a sort of god of painting." And in our own times the Australian Jeffrey Smart has said that in his youth he simply had to pay a visit to Cézanne's studio in Provence in order, as he put it "to see the place where modern art was born."

This is a classic and mature image of Cézanne. It is all about Cézanne looking at his subject and then reassembling it in his own imagination thereby giving his pictures that wonderful sense of evolution and process, something that is very characteristic of his work. Process, process, process. With every visit this painting will have something new to offer.

This was painted along the banks of the Marne so it's not from Provence, which is where he did so many of his pictures including those great images of Mont Sainte-Victoire. This was painted at a time that Cézanne went, as he said "underground." That is, he stopped sending paintings to impressionist exhibitions or the Salons and he virtually dropped out of the artistic scene. He was re-finding and reinventing himself. He was beginning to find that unique language of his. It represents a crucial period in his life.

As Matisse said "one shouldn't be astonished that Cézanne hesitated so long and so constantly. There are so many possibilities in him that more than any other artist he needed to put order into his brain." This is the consequence of that imaginative and intellectual order.

Firstly there is that horizontal layering of the composition. The sky, the buildings, the bank and the river in the foreground. We immediately recognise a strong sense of order and structure. In terms of composition, colour and texture this painting speaks fully of Cézanne.

There are endless moments of intrigue too; the subtle reflections in the water, the ghost-like hints of the boats and fishermen, the concentration of the buildings behind the village wall, the way that wall seems to curve around and out of sight. That tree, unexpectedly almost vertical and dead centre. And of course Cézanne's wonderfully fresh and always optimistic greens.

It is a painting that has all the certainty of Cézanne but is nonetheless an ever changing image. It is a painting that is endlessly shifting, changing and reasserting its balance.

There is something quietly convulsive about Cézanne's paintings as though we can sense the organic strength of nature forever active. Something is always happening in his paintings.

While Cézanne was indisputably an inheritor of impressionism, his great contribution it might be argued was to open the windows to the future. This is a painting that is the beginning of the story of modern art and when we say that Cézanne was one of the great influences in modern art, we can say that he was similarly a huge influence in the history of modern Australian art too. Artists from Cossington Smith to Nolan to Fred Williams to Jeffrey Smart would all recognise their debt to Paul Cézanne.

**Eugene von Guérard** *Sydney Heads* 1865

When we speak of Australian colonial painting we are speaking essentially of those artists who were born in Europe but came out to Australia and brought with them their own sensibilities, and this again is a fascinating story.

One of the pictures, which I think, tells the whole story particularly well is von Guérard's *Sydney Heads* painted in 1865.

The first thing of course – it's very much Sydney Harbour and it's wonderful to think that whilst there may have been a few more visible buildings it is still eminently recognisable as Sydney Harbour some 140 years later.

Von Guérard was born in Vienna in 1811. His father was an established painter of miniatures at the court of Francis I of Austria. Von Guérard then studied at the Dusseldorf Academy and his style and sensibility became established in the image of Claude Lorrain, Poussin and the German romantic painters. I think that legacy can still be seen here in *Sydney Heads*.

In 1852, aged 41, von Guérard left Europe to seek his fortune in the Victorian goldfields. That endeavour was not too successful but he made a living producing a number of small drawings of life in the goldfields. Anyway he soon abandoned the goldfields and decided that there really were opportunities for the artist in Australia and he was soon undertaking commissions for pastoralists and establishing himself as the foremost landscape artist in the country.

It seems that he paid just one visit to Sydney. He saw Sydney Harbour, did a few sketches and went back and painted this picture in his studio in Melbourne. But of course while he got the topography right I don't think he's captured quite the atmosphere of the place. And like so many of these artists, for example the English born John Glover who also hangs in this same gallery, they could not rid themselves completely of their European sensibilities about light and the clarity and coolness of colour.

Looking at Sydney Harbour today we would feel and we would see, we would glimpse a kind of inevitable warmth in the sky. There is very little of that warmth in this painting of Sydney Harbour by von Guérard. It's actually a very European colour, not an Australian colour, and of course the reason for this is at that time all these pictures were made not out in the landscape but in the studio, and the eyes and the response to the subject had been filtered in that rather objective way by looking at the scene and then taking it back in the mind and painting it in the studio. And particularly in this case because the picture was actually painted in Melbourne.

**WC Piguénit** *The flood in the Darling* 1890 1895

Also displayed in this gallery is another major Australian colonial picture. A picture of grand scale is William Piguénit's *The Flood in the Darling*. Here again we encounter that big sky. Australia is known for its big skies.

Piguénit was born in Hobart, Tasmania in 1836 and worked in the Tasmanian Lands and Survey department, no doubt developing his drawing skills. He was essentially a self-taught artist. He left there in 1873 to devote himself to life as an artist, moving to the mainland in 1875 and on to Sydney in 1880. But he simply did not stay in Sydney. He travelled. He saw. He felt.

This painting, *The Flood in the Darling* is no mere vision. It is an experience, for he did indeed witness the flood and I think that sense of being there is powerfully illustrated. He has captured the sheer breadth of water and sky with a cinemascope efficiency and effect.

Here the artist has lowered the horizon line. In fact the glistening reflections of the water virtually merge with that silvery sky. The effect is one of infinity. But what I particularly like about this is that contrast between the fleeting breeze-swept clouds and the tranquillity of the silvery floodwaters. Somehow it's daunting but it's beautiful. And I think in the way it captures how many of the early European settlers in Australia must have felt about this vast continent. There is scale. There is depth. There's a kind of endlessness that's hinted at in this extraordinary and I think very beautiful painting.

And speaking of daunting vistas, just to your right on the adjacent wall is another majestic landscape by Piguénit – *Kosciusko*, painted in 1903. Here again we see a work of scale by an artist both entranced and awed by the grandeur of nature.

Piguénit was a conventional artist but few have captured that epic quality of the Australian landscape like him. We will now go into the big gallery in the centre, which is actually the largest gallery in the whole building and it is a great celebration of that moment of national identity in Australian painting.

This was brought about by the simple fact of artists doing what the impressionists and others were doing back in Europe; of not painting in the studio but painting “en plein air” as they say, outside in the landscape, thereby seeing and feeling the sense of place and then transmitting that sense of the experience onto the canvas.

The achievement of the French impressionists was in conveying the fleeting moment, the passage of light and air into a visual experience; and in the wake of their achievement so Australian art achieved its unique and independent identity.

## **Rupert Bunny** *A summer morning* c1908

On your left there are two large and imposing paintings by Rupert Bunny. I particularly want to look at *A summer morning*.

Rupert Bunny, like Phillips Fox, spent much time in Paris. He was born in Melbourne in 1864 but spent much of his creative and artistic life in Europe and Paris in particular.

Like many of his colleague artists here in Australia, Bunny was keen to learn about developments in Europe and most of all about the new visions of the impressionist movement.

Painted in 1903, *A summer morning* is again very much a French painting and it was indeed painted in Paris. Overall it has a richly languid aura to it. Perhaps it's an after-lunch scene with Rupert Bunny's wife sitting there playing with the cats on her lap. A quick glance from another well dressed lady: she holds a basin into which the maid, always in her place, that is – in the shadows, pours the milk, presumably for those cats.

It's a painting about pleasure and indulgence, enhanced of course with Bunny's delight in colours and texture. I like particularly the glancing shadows of the trees and foliage on the blue shutters; a hint of that impressionist quest of capturing the fleeting light.

Like Phillips Fox, Bunny was a conventional painter. One who had seen and enjoyed the visual delights of the impressionists and post-impressionists, and who saw in those works the opportunities for his own style. But he also had his finger on the social and stylistic pulse and he conveyed that world of genteel hedonism with great conviction and certainly with great delight.

Bunny was an artist who enjoyed his life, as he did his painting. I suppose he could be charged with simply being a European artist but the very fact that he was born here – and eventually did return permanently in the early 1930s – places him and his art firmly within the annals of Australian art. And Rupert Bunny certainly made a flamboyant and colourful contribution to that history.

## **Arthur Streeton** *Fire's on* 1891

Here is a painting indelibly etched into not just the history of Australian art but into the Australian psyche.

Here we have an icon of Australian art. Whenever I look at this painting, which is often, I'm always struck by the sheer intensity of that blue sky. It literally shimmers with heat. Then I sense the feeling of dust and heat in the air. Such conditions and qualities could only have been captured by an artist working in the impressionist way of actually sitting in situ out there in the landscape and thereby feeling what he or she was actually seeing.

There is also a moment of real history in this painting. In 1891 when the railway of the Blue Mountains west of Sydney was being built, workmen were tunnelling through the solid sandstone and there was an incident and an explosion and somebody was injured. Streeton was there at that moment and he captured the very moment when the poor injured workman was being brought out of the tunnel. Such topicality brings a certain frisson and drama to the whole experience.

At the time of the incident it was of course the accident itself that was the story. Not Streeton's painting at all. But of course in the fullness of time the incident itself is of really no significance – it's the painting and it's that wonderful sense of being there. That sense of the relentless heat, the dust, the crackle in the landscape and that sizzling sky which I think we can all feel whilst looking at this picture.

Interestingly Streeton wrote to his fellow artist, Frederick McCubbin, in October 1891 about his experience, describing his being there and watching the whole drama play out before him. He wrote – “right below me the men work. Some with shovels, others drilling for a blast. The ganger cries ‘fire's on’. All the men drop their tools and scatter and I nimbly skip off my perch and hide behind a big, safe rock. I'll soon begin a big canvas of this. I think it looks stunning.”

Well he was right. What Streeton may not have known at the time of course was that out of that incendiary moment he would create one of the most famous paintings in the history of Australian art.

**Grace Cossington Smith** *The curve of the bridge* 1928–29

We must now move on to the twentieth century and into our modern Australian galleries. Our first stop here is a modernist painting describing one of the wonders of the modern world – the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

This is Grace Cossington Smith's *The curve of the bridge* painted in 1928–29 as the mighty structure was nearing completion. Here is a marriage of the advancements of art on the one hand and of science and technology on the other.

The building of Sydney Harbour Bridge was an absolutely epic event. When you look at the bridge today, this huge structure, and think that it was built in the late 1920s and early 1930s, one can I think imagine the awe with which the citizens of Sydney watched this great edifice grow and tower above the city. It must have been a staggering sight at the time and of course it was a sight that intrigued the artists, particularly the modernist artists and Grace Cossington Smith was very much a part of that movement. And she, like many artists, spent quite a lot of time watching this vast structure emerge and reach over Sydney Harbour.

During the course of the construction and her many visits to the site, Cossington Smith made a number of studies in watercolours and they were eventually transposed into paintings of which this is one.

Our first impression is the enormity of the structure. Like the artist we too are awed by that great curving, complex of iron girders sitting on those solid but almost pristine white pylons. And in the distance, just to ensure that we appreciate that she has scale of the bridge, is a liner steaming out into the harbour. We know roughly the size of that ship and so we are doubly impressed then by the size of the bridge but this is still a painting. It is not an accurate depiction. Fairly true to be sure but nonetheless it is really a product of the artist's imagination. Thus it is that after digesting the actual imagery we are simply overtaken by the colour, the almost agitated brushwork and the visual dynamics.

This is all carefully orchestrated by the artist to ensure we appreciate the urgency, the power, the excitement of the modern world.

The sky is equally unusual. It is really done not with brushstrokes at all but by a series of diagonal stabs of the brush in varying colours. It's like a kaleidoscope. So again the impression is one of energy and she has used exactly the same kind of technique of staccato brushstrokes in energising the surface at the bottom of the picture on which the bridge is being built.

This is a celebration of the modern world and Cossington Smith has used, quite properly, the language of the modern art world to demonstrate her obvious enthusiasm for this brave new world.

## **Sidney Nolan** *Central Australia* 1950

If we follow the history of Australian art in the twentieth century there was an enormous amount of activity in the pre World War II years but I think the years immediately after World War II were in a sense even more dramatic and even more defining in the history of modern Australian art. And I'm equally sure that one of the people who contributed hugely to that new dimension, those new horizons and new opportunities was the painter Sid Nolan.

I used to know Sid Nolan well. He was a man of instinctive mischief and relentless curiosity. He was always fascinating, interesting, quite often slightly irritating people because, you know, Sid always knew everything. But he also had that wonderful instinct just to put something in your mind. To sow a seed in your mind that you never knew was quite there.

He was immensely curious about everything and in the history of Australian art I think he opened new doors and new horizons. I've always said that for me Sid Nolan used the Australian landscape not as an end in itself but as a theatre for the human drama.

One of my favourite paintings is *Central Australia* and you might think that's odd when I say that because I think of Nolan's great contribution was not only seeing Australia but also using it as a theatre for the human drama – because this is painting in which there's not a single soul to be seen.

But it does two things – firstly its scale. Its emotional scale, like its physical scale is vast. We can see infinity in this painting. We're standing back, we are elevated above the landscape and we are looking into that eternal infinity.

But the other thing about it is, and this is where the human presence or the presence of the human spirit does come in, because I can feel somehow there's poetry in this painting, which is exactly what Sid would have wished. That we look at this painting and feel not only the poetry of the landscape and the vastness and the sky. That we can somehow create our own words, our own poem if you like, our own ode to suit his image of the Australian landscape and the Australian outback.

There might be no definable person in this painting but it is a picture that is full of the human spirit.

## **Jeffrey Smart** *Matisse at Ashford* 2004

Jeffrey Smart has lived in Italy near the city of Orezza for well over 50 years but he is still an Australian painter and he still, in spite of his modern urban language, feels that instinct for the Australian experience.

His great passions, his great concerns, are for the satisfaction of composition. His hero is probably Piero della Francesca, the artist who over 500 years ago brought an extraordinary clarity, beauty and eternal tranquillity to the art of Renaissance Italy.

Here Smart is achieving much the same but with the emblems, symbols, bric-a-brac and paraphernalia of the modern industrial world. Jeffrey Smart makes us see beauty in the most ordinary, prosaic and unlikely of things. Like for example the platforms of a railway station.

Smart likes to tell how his paintings come to him and this is a perfect example. He works from that glimpse of opportunity. With this painting the inspiration came from a momentary stop on the Eurostar train from Paris to London. Out of the Channel Tunnel it came and made a brief stop at Ashford station in Kent where Jeffrey glanced out of the window and saw the platforms and the advertising posters for a Matisse exhibition at the Royal Academy. He glimpsed a moment of serendipitous geometry.

He made a quick sketch in a notebook and this wonderful painting began its journey to realisation. But there was still a long way to go: endless studies; friends posing so he could get the waiting figures right; ideas about platforms and of course like Fred Williams, raiding his own visual vocabulary and putting into the picture some of his standard features. For example the large block of apartments in the background – there are no such buildings to be seen from Ashford station. This is the artist making a picture and above all an immensely satisfying composition.

**Brett Whiteley** *Woman in bath* 1963

In the history of recent Australian art one name that cannot be overlooked is that of the mercurial Brett Whiteley. Brett Whiteley died before his time and he was perhaps one of the most intriguing, vivacious characters I've ever met in the Australian art scene.

Everything he touched and particularly in his visual arts, he managed to instil with an extraordinary sensuality and vitality. Whiteley managed to give even his landscapes a sensuality bordering on the erotic. And his visions of women were natural and indelible subjects for his imagination and none more so than in his picture *Woman in bath*. Firstly, the woman was his then wife and muse, Wendy. And there she is with attenuated limbs, rather like a landscape folded up in the bath, being showered upon in a very suggestive way.

The other wonderful thing about this painting, which I love so much, is that background which is a deep, deep indigo colour. It is so rich, so sensuous and so mellifluous that you feel you could almost lick it. It's a colour with the depth of infinity. To create a spacious, dark surface like that and give it such life and sensuality is I think an extraordinary achievement. But it is all very much in the manner of Brett Whiteley's style and aspiration.

How to characterise the Whiteley style? It is flashy, instinctive, quick witted and in a way slightly scatological in its catchall way. Whiteley declared himself in every work he created and in this painting the sensuous Whiteley with the erotic touch is richly, richly revealed.

He had a quicksilver mind and a quicksilver presence. Whiteley was erratic but like most instinctively creative spirits he was capable of moments of complete and fulfilling potency. This for example is a painting redolent with spontaneity but it's certainly not lacking in substance and profundity.

I often think of Brett Whiteley as an artist driven by distractions. His mind was forever flying off on some miraculous tangent. There was little in life that he did not want to engage with or savour. In Whiteley's hands everything is animate and animated.

**John Olsen** *Five bells* 1963

The next painting I want to show you is a large painting by John Olsen, entitled *Five bells*.

John Olsen is like his paintings – the very embodiment of *joie de vivre*. He's a larger than life character. He's a wonderful painter, a poet, a raconteur and actually a great cook as well.

There's a natural sense of celebration in all Olsen's paintings and certainly that is the impression of *Five bells*. I don't think any artist has recorded in such a visual, energetic and distinctive way the peculiarities, the textures and the diverse life of the Australian landscape.

All his paintings are full of trailing, meandering, staccato lines like the traces of animals or insects, or perhaps the spontaneous and often unfinished thoughts of man. And motifs, echoes of nature, echoes of the human imagination.

Olsen is the true raconteur of the Australian experience. I often think that looking at an Olsen painting can be rather like lifting up the carpet of nature and landscape and seeing what's going on underneath it.

This of course is not a landscape. It's actually a harbour-scape and it was created in memory of a poem by Kenneth Slessor called *Five bells* which was actually about some poor bloke who happened to fall off the Manly ferry and drown. It's an odd theme to choose and when you look at this painting it's not really at all about a poor man falling off a ferry. It's about the celebration of harbour life and it's about the rippling agitated life that happens just under the surface of the water.

But there are two lines from this poem that I do think echo with this painting. They are:

Deep and dissolving verticals of light  
ferry the folds of moonshine down.

Now if you're in the water in the sunshine you can see the sun shining through the surface of the water and shimmering down into the depths and in doing so shafts of drifting rays of light enliven all those mysterious and mostly unseen bits of life under the water.

Olsen reveals to us the manifold forces and activities of the natural world. That's what this picture's about – it's about a celebration of the maelstrom of life that goes on under the harbour waters. That's what John Olsen's about too. He celebrates life and nature in every picture he makes.

**Fred Williams** *My garden* 1965–67

There's absolutely no doubt that one of the most distinctive and distinguished Australian artists of the modern era is Fred Williams.

After World War II there was a spirit of independence in the Australian artistic imagination. Maybe that imagination felt it had earned its independence from a then war ravaged Europe and that spirit is beautifully expressed in the work of Fred Williams, because when you look at a Williams painting you will recognise that it could not possibly have come out of any other culture or country than Australia. It has a certain dryness, a certain crackle to it.

We know it's a landscape, it has the instinct of a landscape and yet it is abstract in its denial of a specific reality. What Fred Williams did was distil the landscape into a vocabulary of motifs, which he happily used just like an alphabet to create not words but images, and I think that was a huge contribution. Not only to the sensibility and our response to the environment and the landscape – to the landscape in which we sit – but also to the development of an independent national identity in Australian painting.

The picture that I've chosen out of so many is called *My garden*. Among Williams' considerable body of work, this is a particularly distinctive picture largely because of the rich, resonant red. It's a colour which he used to great effect in a series of works he was commissioned to paint in the Pilbara region of Western Australia, a region riddled with iron ore hence that colour. Of course no landscape is quite that red or indeed this red, but that's artistic license for you.

This painting has a special significance for us because it is Williams' response to one of our Australian icons – Tom Roberts' *Bailed up*.

Williams saw himself very much as the inheritor of that great tradition established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Roberts, Streeton, McCubbin and others, who achieved a national identity for Australian art in their unique exploration of the Australian bush.

Here we have a more modern but nonetheless convincing and beautiful interpretation of that sentiment – our feeling, our sense of being in the Australian landscape.

## **Introduction to the Upper Asian gallery**

Having looked at some of the Gallery's Australian art, we should now move along and do something entirely different. Basically we're following the layout and geography of the building and we'll walk across our central court into that wonderful new gallery that looks like a great big lantern and that is our Upper Asian gallery. As we move into the Asian galleries, the whole ambiance and atmosphere changes. We should be slowing down now, we should be moving into a world of contemplation. We have two levels of the Asian gallery. The Upper one which is normally devoted to general pan-Asian themes, like the Faiths of Asia and the lower one which is devoted East Asia which is China, Korea and Japan.

*Amitabha Buddha* late 8<sup>th</sup> – mid 9<sup>th</sup> century

The first image we encounter is a large seated figure of the Buddha.

This monumental stone image of Amitabha Buddha, the Buddha of the west, sits with his hands held in the meditation gesture, known in Sanskrit as the Dhyana mudra. A mudra is simply a position of the hands with symbolic meaning. And his feet are in the vajrasana position with both soles upwards. And of course in the tradition of these figures the Buddha is wearing the thin diaphanous robes of a monk.

The Buddha is clearly deeply immersed in meditation. The Buddha emanates the serenity, the wisdom and the spirituality expected of this central icon of the Buddhist faith.

It's likely that originally this Buddha was part of a specific grouping. For example, Amitabha was the Buddha of the west and the Buddha of the present. So together with Shakyamuni the historical Buddha, Maitreya, the Buddha of the future, he was one third of that powerful triumvirate of the Buddhas of the past, present and future.

There are some particular characteristics and features about Buddhist sculpture whether from south east Asia or India, China or Japan. Above all it's the language of the robes and how they fit around the body and here we can see this fundamental feature. There is that extraordinary simplicity of the one line of the dhoti reaching down over the left shoulder, under the right breast of the Buddha and folding around the figure so as to reveal the figure with absolute clarity. It is almost sensual – if it wasn't for the sheer bulk and certainty of that image.

There is I think a strong sense of spiritual certainty about images of the Buddha, after all they were intended to instil calm, serenity and confidence into the devotees and this imposing figure does just that.

And the other feature, which again is very characteristic of the whole tradition throughout Asia, is how the folds of the draperies became another particular and distinctive part of the artistic vocabulary. And if you look just below the folded feet there are those small but very explicit pleats. Such exquisite details contrast with the overall simplicity and gentle grandeur of this image.

Stylistically this Buddha is close to those at Borobudur – that astonishing 8<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> century complex near Jogjakarta in central Java – one of the greatest monuments to Buddhist faith in the world. It is designed in the form of a mandala and with its literally dozens of images of seated Buddhas just like this one. This too is carved from a very similar volcanic stone.

So I suspect that this great and serene Buddha probably came from the vicinity of Borobudur in central Java and certainly it is of 8<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> century date.

## *Standing crowned Buddha* 12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> century

Now we come to an outstanding image of the *Standing crowned Buddha* from Thailand and dating from around the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, cast in bronze.

It is in a style that is reminiscent of the Khmer style of Cambodia, which of course is renowned, at the magnificent temples of Angkor Wat.

Among the highly distinctive characteristics of this style are the way in which the torso is handled in that very smooth, rather silky and figure hugging way, so too are the facial features, particularly the full lips, the long ears, strongly defined eyebrows and the not so large but firmly modelled nose.

These are all characteristic features of the Khmer style, whether in the Vietnamese or, as here, in the Thai tradition.

The idea of a crowned Buddha reflects that important relationship between state and religion, between the secular and the sacred. At that time Buddhism in China, south east Asia and elsewhere, was widespread and growing and often sponsored by the imperial and ruling dynasties. And in order to reinforce that association images of the Buddha, like this, would often be enhanced with symbols of the imperial status, hence the crown. It was a way of reaffirming that association between the state and religion.

The Buddha stands with both feet firmly planted on the ground. There is nothing uncertain about this Buddha's presence. Both hands are held upright in the gesture of reassurance – the Vitaka mudra. This is indeed an image of reassurance in every respect.

You will see implanted onto those hands a small symbol. That is one of the Buddha's 32 lakshanas – distinctive marks that are symbols of the Buddha's powers. This one is the wheel of the law.

It is thought that this image was probably made in the early 1100s in the region of Lokburi, to the north of Bangkok, which at that time was part of the extended Khmer empire.

It is also worth just noting the quality of the craftsmanship and the sophistication of the technique of bronze casting that make such an exquisite image possible.

**Yoon Kwang-cho** *Punch'ông ware jar* c1990

Korea has historically and culturally been overshadowed by her neighbours China and Japan but I think it's important to appreciate that whilst Korean art and culture may indeed have origins in China, their assimilation and adaptation in Korea has led to the emergence of a most independent, distinctive and ingenious culture.

Furthermore Korea has been the conduit for many artistic and cultural ideas and traditions to travel from the mainland to Japan. Buddhism is just one example.

This modern Punch'ông ware vase is a very good example of the arts of Korea as independent on the one hand and part of the great and varied tradition of East Asian art on the other.

Punch'ông ware dates back to the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century. It is essentially a stoneware covered with a creamy slip into which designs are incised. Punch'ông actually means 'powder green' – a reference to the faintly green tone of the transparent glaze that is applied over the slip and the incised decoration.

There is an inherent sense of rustic honesty in these ceramics and that quality above all appealed greatly to the sophisticated but simple aesthetic of the Japanese tea masters. Thus it is that we find Japanese tea ceremony ceramics that echo the aesthetic of Korean ceramics, Punch'ông ware included. Indeed Korean potters are renowned in Japan for their tea wares.

But this is a modern interpretation. It's an odd and eccentric shape – a triangular pot. It is very individual. It is enshrined in tradition but is fully contemporary.

It was made only in 1990 by the potter Yoon Kwang-cho. He has created this unexpected shape. Not at all the kind of form we would expect to be made of ceramic.

He literally constructs his pots in the traditional coiling manner, with strips of clay and then beats and scratches the surface to give them that aura of antiquity and use.

Here he has then incised on three sides of the jar, a text from a Buddhist sutra on the concept of nothingness or Sunyata. It is an echo of the void within that triangular pot.

## *Nô theatre costume c1800*

In Japanese art and culture the Nô theatre is renowned. It is an extraordinary and unique experience – the oldest form of theatre in Japan and in many ways the embodiment of the Japanese aesthetic.

It is slow, staccato, arcane, inscrutable and profoundly esoteric. But like so much in the Japanese aesthetic it is also formal and surprisingly contrasting.

The Nô theatre is distinguished by long, slow periods of austerity punctuated by moments of action and the stage is similarly austere. But it too is punctuated with moments of visual richness, which include the sumptuous costumes of which this is a splendid example.

Although dating from around 1800, it is contemporary in feeling with those energetic whirlpool motifs alternating in the checker pattern with stylised dragon motifs. It is that characteristic mixture of the traditional and the modern.

The sheer luxury of the costume is enshrined in the silk, gilt and gold brocade. This particular type of robe is known as an 'atsuita', that is, an outer garment and it's a robe worn principally by male actors in the Nô theatre playing male parts.

**Kanô Einô** *Pine, bamboo and plum blossom* 1600

In Kanô Einô's *Pine, bamboo and plum blossom* pair of screens the contradictory qualities of restraint and flamboyance, which are so characteristic of the Japanese aesthetic, are I think beautifully expressed. The gold ground, the rich colours, the graphic flourish are all bound into the rigour of the design and the overall effect I think is simply brilliant and irrefutably Japanese.

The subject matter at once evokes the beauties of nature and indeed of the perceived virtues of nature. This is a theme omnipresent in the arts of Japan.

The symbolism expressed in these screens is profound. The cypress as a gnarled and impressively resilient tree was a symbol favoured by the samurai class. The bamboo, taking the traditional Chinese interpretation, as the tree that bends in the wind but never breaks symbolises integrity and nobility. And the plum blossom represents both purity and the transience of beauty. These are traditionally referred to as the three friends of the cold season. The colourful pheasant is a Chinese emblem of beauty and good fortune.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century was the golden age of Japanese screen painting when the maturity of the brilliant Momoyama period, that's from 1568 to 1615, was reinvigorated by the nouveau riche tastes of an emergent and wealthy samurai elite. And Kanô Einô was the leading figure of the third generation of the famed Kyoto Kano school of painting, which was at this time, the 17<sup>th</sup> century, noted for its flamboyance. But it had its origins in the traditional Chinese brush and ink style of painting.

In Japan that rather more reserved and intellectual manner was transformed with striking colours and dramatic compositions, into an aesthetic that is so distinctively Japanese. And at this time the movement was strongly stimulated and influenced by the tastes of those emergent samurai and mercantile classes.

*A pair of tomb guardian figures late 6<sup>th</sup> – early 7<sup>th</sup> century*

In the history of early Chinese art and specifically the art of the Han, that's from 206 BC to 220 AD, and the Tang dynasties, that's 618 to 906 AD, the pottery tomb figure tradition is an outstanding feature.

Basically these objects were made to represent earthly life within the tombs of the deceased royalty and aristocracy. As such pottery tombs figures from guardians, military figures, soldiers, courtiers, court ladies, entertainers, horse, animals, even buildings, provide us with an evocative glimpse into the real world of ancient China.

These two guardian figures hardly represent people from real life, although they are lifelike but they are to some extent conjured images of fearsome guardians that were placed in the corner of tombs in order to dispel evil spirits and protect the deceased.

Whilst the faces and expressions may be demonic, the military style of armour, the details and even the triumphant poses as they trample on those poor innocent looking animals, one a goat and the other a bovine, are all quite realistic. And of course realism was an essential quality in the tomb figure tradition if these objects were to fulfil their role as emblems of life on earth.

In recent decades many hundreds of Han and Tang dynasty tombs have been excavated revealing literally thousands of these tangible moments of ancient China but few have such detail and presence as these two.

They are made from a low-fired pottery or earthenware and these were then covered with a white slip that served as a base for painted detail and often some gilding too. All of which enhanced their appearance and their reality. Others were covered with coloured glazes but all together they are marvellous evocations of life in China over 1200 years ago.

## **Jingdezhen ware** *Dish with bouquet design* 1403–24

In the history of Chinese art perhaps the defining feature is the great tradition of ceramics and porcelain above all. And in the tradition of porcelain I think we always identify blue and white porcelain with China.

The Gallery has a wonderful collection of Imperial blue and white porcelains of the Ming (that's from 1368 to 1644) and the Ching (that's 1644 to 1911) dynasties.

Among the most splendid examples is a blue and white porcelain dish of the Yongle period – that's from 1403 to 1424 at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The Yongle period was one of glorious cultural and artistic achievement for China. The emperor, the Emperor Yongle, was an inspired patron of the arts and in removing the capital of the empire from Nanching to Beijing he also built the Forbidden City in the new capital.

Now this is an imperial dish. It's quality clear evidence that it would have been made for the imperial courts. Porcelain is made from kaolin and the principle centre of manufacture in China and indeed the location of the imperial kilns is in Jiangxi province at a place called Jingdezhen about 450 kilometres south west of Shanghai. Jingdezhen remains to this day the centre of porcelain production in China and believe me it is as busy as ever.

The process is straightforward. The object is formed and shaped then it's put out in the sun to dry. Then the artist comes along and paints directly onto that so called biscuit surface. It is then covered with a clear glaze and then fired at a high level, over 1000 degrees centigrade and the Chinese developed this technique to absolute perfection.

Among the many secrets is the controlling of the glaze and of the firing so that the design, painted in cobalt blue in this case, does not diffuse in the process.

The technique of painting an underglaze blue may not have originated in China; it was actually invented in Persia and came to the Middle Kingdom probably in around the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> centuries along the ancient Silk Roads. But the Chinese most certainly perfected the technique to the very highest level.

One of the outstanding characteristics of Chinese imperial blue and white porcelain is the harmony of form and decoration. In this example the way that the central panel – a bouquet of lotus and water plantain – sits perfectly within that circular space and then around the rim, the cavetto, is a continuous lotus scroll. A similar lotus scroll decorates the outer rim of the dish.

All these elements of design seem to embrace the form of the vessel with a natural rhythm.

**Anselm Kiefer** *Von den Verlorenen gerührt, die der Glaube nicht trug, erwachen die Tommeln im Fluss*  
2004

Anselm Kiefer is without doubt one of the greatest artists of our time. A man with, I have to say, a big conscience, a commensurate sense of grandeur and indefatigable imagination.

Hence, as we see here, his works so often achieve grandeur of both presence and scale. The Gallery has a number of works by Kiefer but this without doubt is the most remarkable.

It has a title that is far too long, far too complicated and far too dramatic to announce but when you see this work, contradictory forces seem to be at work. There is scale and bombast. There is weight. There is gravitas and there lurks within it we suspect, a meaning of great profundity.

And yet when you see a concrete stairway suspended like that above one of Kiefer's characteristically scarred and textured landscapes, we know it's vulnerable. We know it's precarious, and I think these are those opposites of certainty and uncertainty. These are the qualities that are foremost messages in this extraordinary work of art.

What is it all about? Our quest for consolation and our quest for immortality perhaps? A revelation of our vulnerabilities shrouded or shored up perhaps in the bigness and the bombast of this construct. It is probably quite easy and quite logical to read this broken stairway as a connection between the world we know and the world beyond. And that quest for comfort and substance beyond our sentient world, which we now inhabit. That's the essence of this piece and the title, long though it is, is actually taken from a poem, an Austrian poem by Ingeborg Bachmann and titled *Die brücken (The bridge)*. And which roughly translates as:

The drums in the river come alive  
beaten by the lost ones  
who are not supported by faith.

It's about treading on bridges; trying to bridge that gap between the spiritual world and the material world, between the sentient world and the world hereafter.

For all its apparent surety the balancing act here is precarious. It's like life itself, riddled with uncertainties, rich in layers of experience but still complicated, anxious and full of unanswered questions.

Typical of Kiefer to raise our curiosity, arouse our senses and our imagination, to rouse us from our slumber and then leave it to us.

## **Pablo Picasso** *Nude in a rocking chair* 1956

For so long late Picasso paintings were deemed to be weak, careless and of no great significance in the oeuvre of this absolute titan of twentieth century western art. I have always begged to differ. I have always seen power, energy and incurable vision in Picasso and no less so than in his later works, such as this painting *Nude in a rocking chair* which dates from 1956.

Neither the passage of time nor the onset of older age it seemed to me had dimmed his vitality, ambition and resolve. When he painted this picture Picasso was 75.

As ever the focus of his attention is the female persona. Where indeed would Picasso have been without the female of the species? As ever the figure here is irredeemably physical – its presence a powerful dynamic and positively defined. And at the same time it is an emotional and psychological target.

Picasso of course had this extraordinary love-hate relationship with women. They're his subjects, they're his inspiration and they're his life. And here we have this strange woman with no face and yet that head is strangely alert.

The head, neck and breasts are outlined with simple and almost naïve black lines but there is urgency in those apparently spontaneous gestures. Then below that hacksaw mouth hints at a voracious aggression. This is Picasso having his usual full on engagement with women and life.

His output was enormous and somehow you get that sense of activity, that relentless activity, and that sense of spontaneity in this painting. The bright and contrasting colours are similarly striking, so too the small blue palm in the upper left. These are all slightly reminiscent of Matisse because at this time Picasso was living at La Californie behind Cannes in the French Riviera. His friend of probably fifty years of more, Matisse had lived at Nice nearby and had died in 1954, just a couple of years before this picture.

Perhaps Picasso was reminiscing, not only about his engagement with women of course – that's paramount and absolutely mainstream – but in the setting of this scene perhaps he was thinking about his friend Matisse with those colours, those blocks of colour and the blue palm tree. Maybe that's just a gentle reference to his erstwhile friend and colleague Henri Matisse.

In the archives of the Picasso estate there are many photographs and two of them relate directly to this painting. One is of Picasso sitting in the bentwood chair, which is clearly the chair in this painting, and the other is of Picasso in his studio with a pile of pictures, prominent among them is this very painting. So at least we know it's absolutely genuine.

**Ernst Ludwig Kirchner** *Three bathers* 1913

In 1905 a group of energetic, forthright artists in Berlin got together in order to add a new kind of fervour, a new energy into German art and they found much of their inspiration in primitive art, and engaging with the real world, and indeed with the delights of the natural world.

This was the foundation of German expressionism. It's a style that's characterised by a kind of dramatic, urgent and staccato brushwork and by strong, often discordant colours. It's almost as though Kirchner here has used his brush not to stroke the paint but to cut the paint. It has a rather brutal physical quality to it.

There were two broad themes to the German expressionist movement. One was the urban in Berlin and it gave wonderful colour and exoticism to images of a vibrant if slightly fanatical city. The other was – the artists used to go to one of the Baltic islands, and it was there in such encounters with nature and the natural world that inspired this painting by Kirchner.

When you look at this picture we can see the qualities and the characteristics of German expressionism. There is that robust feel to it. The figures seem to be carved rather than painted and there is a hint of the primitive style in the statuesque figures and their almost coarse features.

What these artists were seeking was seen as a fresh, honest and open horizon and they sought inspiration in the perceived simplicity of primitive art – but having said that there is a lingering feeling of anxiety here. Like all German expressionist works this image is redolent with the tension, almost fear, that embroiled the nation in the years immediately before World War I.

Beneath the bravura, the hint of the exotic, the joy of nature there lurks in these figures, these bathers about to be engulfed by those green waves, an undercurrent of anxiety.

**Alberto Giacometti** *Woman of Venice VII* 1956

An artist of great distinction and extraordinary individuality is Alberto Giacometti and the Art Gallery of New South Wales is the proud and sole owner in Australia of a Giacometti sculpture.

This is one, the seventh, of his series of *Women of Venice*. The group was made originally as a commission for the French government for the Venice Biennale. Interesting that, because Giacometti wasn't actually French, he was Swiss but he lived in Paris and he was therefore adopted by the French and represented France in the Venice Biennale.

His visual language is absolutely distinctive and immediately recognisable. It is distinguished by these gaunt, elongated, thin, manipulated images. Every figure of Giacometti's feels like a lonely, isolated figure. Their austere presence, their brooding silence, seems to cast an anxious shadow and yet they are absolutely redolent with human sympathy. And somehow we feel an instinctive sympathy for that image and the condition that it appears to explore, for they are imbued with a profound humanity. Giacometti's sculptures are his journeys for a truth, forever sought but never fully attained.

It has always intrigued me how much Giacometti actually looked like his sculptures. He was the most extraordinary sort of gaunt looking figure and there was an air of absolute austerity about him.

He would often say that every work of art of his was a failure and in a sense I know what he means because every work of art that he made was a journey and the journey was always inevitably going to be incomplete, unfinished. He actually said once, "satisfaction is the artist's enemy" and I think when you look at a figure like this one of the things that has always struck me was – how did he know when to stop?

He worked in plaster, sometimes in clay, endlessly fashioning these tangible souls of his until he felt he could do no more and yet always in the knowledge that each figure was inevitably an unfinished journey.

In the history of twentieth century western art and sculpture in particular Giacometti demands our attention and our respect, for not only has he created a totally individual artistic language but I also happen to think that he has created a visual experience that touches the very soul of our human condition and that is perhaps why, in spite of his sculptures' unreality and their disturbing sense of alienation, they are nonetheless approachable, oddly comforting and disarmingly friendly.

**Bill Henson** From the series *Paris Opera Project* 1990–91

Bill Henson may employ the technique of photography to produce his powerful, compelling, seductive but often disturbing images, but he is no mere recorder of facts.

Bill Henson is a creator of images; images that are laden with beauty and vulnerability, with threat and affirmation. Henson can instil the familiar with profundity and an intense morality. A morality that is too easy, I suspect, to misread.

There's always a sonorous and slightly foreboding quality hovering in those images; a sense of expectation, not so much of something that has happened, even though every one of his images has 'a past', but of something about to happen. Such an attitude adds a certain frisson of excitement to his work.

In his handling of light, shadow and texture Henson's works are paintings in all but technique. I always think of the drama of Caravaggio when looking at a Henson photograph. There is grandeur and opulence, silence and introspection, theatre and gritty reality, but above all there is forever a hint of subversion and vulnerability.

In 1990 Henson was commissioned by the Paris Opera to create a body of work. The result was not images of the opera but images, richly conjured and quite mesmerising in their suggestiveness, of spectators.

This is one of those images. There is in that concentrated and urbane face a hint of revelation, of inner reflection but then there is whatever is inferred by the emerging image of the young boy from that mysterious background. In the end it is an image of intrigue and quiet drama and especially of that feeling that something is about to happen.

Like all Henson's work, this image too resonates with a truth, even though we cannot quite put our finger on that truth. The story is never fully told and we are inevitably left in mystery and suspense. As Henson himself has said, "the object in my work is not necessarily the subject" and yet every image of his is as emotionally charged as it is seductively beautiful.

**Freddie Timms** *Jack Yard* 2000

Contemporary Aboriginal art is full of surprises and full of a new and colourful but genuinely associated vitality. By associated I mean its connection with history and place.

Here in Freddie Timms' work *Jack Yard* we are presented with a most unlikely or at least, unexpected combination of contrasting colours: a soft contemporary pink and a rich resonant black. How could such colours have come from the parched brown outback of inland Australia?

The overall effect is so contemporary and so urban and yet there is that undeniable sense of place and link to a long established tradition.

Those meandering dotted lines; they are the tracks across the landscape of the east Kimberley region of north-western Australia. The broad areas of black echo that featureless territory, punctuated by those tracks, and the occasional rocky outcrop is perhaps suggested by the gentle pink and subtle yellowish ivory colour patches.

This may seem at first sight to be an abstract painting but it is not. It is very much the echo of a place and above all a feeling *for* that place and of being *in* that place.

In this case the place is Jack Yard on the Bow River station south of Kununurra.

The painting, for all its contemporary flavour, still echoes the experience and isolation of that place. It is a convincing exemplar of a long tradition translated into a modern living idiom.

## **Lin Onus** *Fruit bats* 1991

No doubt about it Lin Onus' *Fruit bats* is one of the most intriguing, enticing, amusing and always fascinating works in the Gallery collection, and always one of huge public interest and public attraction.

Here we have a unique marriage of a bland, red-tiled and endless suburbia with indigenous Aboriginal art and it is a surprisingly happy and enjoyable one; and certainly one with humour.

Firstly the centrepiece to it all is the Hills Hoist – the device of the suburban backyard on which the clothes were hung to dry. But here this is hung not with clothes out to dry but models of fruit bats, all painted of course with traditional Aboriginal designs. And on the ground – all the little petals. They're not petals at all. They're little droppings from the bats above but deftly decorated with homely flower-like motifs. But one might also see them as the debris, the droppings, of the human presence and Lin Onus has painted them all in these wonderfully bright, friendly colours.

It is a work of creative humour but equally an incisive comment or observation about the meeting of the western material world and all its clutter and the deeply inscribed and indelible traditions of Indigenous Australia.

Lin Onus was uniquely positioned to make such observations about the meeting of the old and the new, the indigenous and the imported. He was unjustly expelled from school at the age of fourteen and yet later attended university. He had a Scottish mother who was a member of the Communist Party and an Aboriginal father. So there was in his genes a spirit of rebellion.

He then worked as a mechanic and a spray painter in car workshops in Melbourne, all the while teaching himself to become an artist. That spirit of independence and self-reliance is beautifully expressed in this amusing but telling work.

## **Ginger Riley Munduwalawala** *Limmen Bight River Country* 1992

Now here's one of my favourite contemporary Aboriginal painters – Ginger Riley.

I always associate Ginger Riley's lively, colourful and I think slightly humorous paintings with the Nagnak, that's the white and quirky sea eagle that seems to pop up in all his pictures often looking, as here, like an unexpected sentinel. The Gallery owns two other paintings by Riley and these also have that white bird standing there in the midst of things. It is the guardian to Riley's mother country; a country inhabited with totemic beings in the form of snakes, birds and ancestral beings.

Riley has said of his favourite bird, "you know in my mind I always paint Nagnak."

Limmen Bight river country is in south-eastern Arnhem Land and is territory over which Ginger Riley once held a certain sway in his role as caretaker. He was one of the foremost artists of the Ngukurr, ('place of stones'), Aboriginal community on the Roper River.

Riley only took up painting late in life when he was over fifty years old in 1987 but he immediately made an impact with the breadth of the embrace of his compositions, which show the landscape as a whole rather than as a series of motifs or symbols, and above all with his completely unexpected and strong contrasting colours.

"Lots of colour" Riley used to say, "I play it up the colour, too much."

Painting in any form in any culture is essentially an art of the imagination and none more so than in Aboriginal art traditions. It is the art of revealing what the mind sees and the heart feels.

So it is with Ginger Riley for of course the landscape of south east Arnhem Land does not look quite like this nor does it have that kaleidoscope of colours. But it does in Ginger's imagination.

**Rusty Peters** *Waterbrain* 2002

Like so many painters from the east Kimberley region of north-western Australia, Rusty Peters spent his youth working as a stockman on various cattle stations. That total familiarity with country is an absolute pre-requisite for the understanding and appreciation of country, place and tradition. All are central components of his art and this is an extraordinary work of art and I'm sure the largest work of Aboriginal art in the Gallery collections.

Like most of his colleagues, Rusty too took up painting late in life. In 1989 when he was over fifty years old he moved to Kununurra to work as an assistant at the Warringarri Aboriginal Arts community. But even then he was not really a painter, for he only began painting in earnest in 1998.

This is certainly his most ambitious work and here he is exploring the cycles of life and learning. Reading from left to right he presents a chronology of process from birth and growth and learning, from conception to adulthood.

It's interesting to note that learning was always for Rusty Peters a major concern. Even before he went to Kununurra he helped to establish and run a community school to ensure instruction in the lore and culture of the Gija people, that's his own people, and to make sure it was firmly inscribed into the curriculum. So here too, Rusty Peters is seeking to teach and to thereby value traditions.

At the lower left are water weeds among which according to Gija belief, the spirits of unborn children reside before entering the mothers' wombs to become spirits of human beings.

Then the imagery describes birth and infancy, with the child crawling and then walking and then running, then on to learning and the instruction of the brain. The large pale grey circular motif in the middle symbolises the adult brain. The ultimate in grey matter, it might be said.

Then the right panels deal with education, the education that transforms the child into a member of adult society. And finally there are images of the artefacts, which the elders of the community use to instruct.

It is a momentous work with a grand vision; not only a vision of visual satisfaction but one, more importantly, of belief and traditions.

**Giulio Paolini** *L'altra figura* 1984

What an elegant if enigmatic work this is. It is in many ways the epitome of the Italian aesthetic. A marriage of the classical and the contemporary and all expressed with that perfect poise of Italian design.

Paolini was a leading member of the movement known as Arte Povera, literally 'poor art', that was a loose collaboration of principally Italian artists who in the 1970s and '80s sought to disturb the equanimity of the world of fine art; to challenge that refinement and aloofness through the use of found objects and base materials.

Whilst this particular work does not necessarily seem to quite fit such a description it is conceptually at least very much in accord with the aspirations of the Arte Povera movement and since it is made simply of plaster it might be said that it is not inscribed with the kind of immortality that is sought in the condition of fine art.

So here we have two columns on which are placed two classical heads looking at each other but slightly downcast and I have to say, rather coy in demeanour. There is too a hint of vanity about these two heads and between them lie the fragments of a shattered third head and no – it is deliberate, not an accident.

Is this the fragility of nature or beauty or vanity? Or is it just the Arte Povera movement shattering our pious regard for the past?

## **James Angus** *Bugatti Type 35* 2006

Now we all know those beautiful Bugatti racing cars of the 1920s, resplendent in their French racing blue, were fast as well as glamorous but this one is positively windswept.

James Angus explores the opportunity of sculpture to extreme and novel ends, using usually, as his starting point a real, functional and recognisable form. What the artist has done here is force the car through a thirty degree shift thus distorting its presence and perhaps, like Christo (the great ‘wrapper’) but in a different way, make us see things, familiar and pragmatic things, anew.

He gives his objects, his sculptures a reality too in their meticulous fabrication and indeed in the geometry and accuracy of his structures.

The shape of this car is perfect in every way; so too its proportions and detail. Such qualities of meticulous attention are then turned on their head by the complete improbability of a car assuming such a strange and unlikely attitude.

James Angus plays with our assumptions and perceptions in this way and he achieves a special credibility through his attention to detail, his empathy with materials, his accuracy and such immaculately engineered machines, such as this.

This is a beautiful object and the artist’s reconfiguration has quite rightly, since it *is* a racing car, merely enhanced the image and perception of cultivated speed.

**Cy Twombly** *Three studies from the Temeraire* 1998–99

If we accept the notion that one of the basic instincts of the human species is to make marks then I believe we can appreciate the subtlety and veracity of Cy Twombly's magical works.

Twombly does defy instant categorisation because he is an artist absolutely of his own making driven by his own beliefs, instincts and sensibilities, and fulfilled by those marks so full of intuition and sensibility.

I think the path to an appreciation of Twombly's work lies in the sense of experience that they evoke. They convey sensation and they convey a rich sense of history.

The story of these particular works, *Three studies from the Temeraire* is fascinating and reveals much about the artist's instincts, interests and momentums.

In 1998 Twombly was working on three related but at the time independent canvasses on three adjacent walls of his studio where he lives in the ancient Mediterranean port city of Gaeta between Rome and Naples, where Twombly could continue his eternal dialogue with the sea and with the echoes of classical antiquity.

The theme was these ancient vessels and all the senses of myth and history they inferred. There was originally neither particular thought of Turner, an artist who he had always especially admired, nor of the three panels as a single work. But gradually they coalesced into a single epic event and were shown in the National Gallery in London in an exhibition *Encounters – New Art From Old* in the year 2000. And they were shown alongside Turner's famed *The fighting Temeraire tugged to her last berth to be broken up* which was painted in 1883.

The theme of this exhibition was great artists of our time converse with the greatest artists of all time, and of course Twombly's pictures assumed their role as contemporary evocations of Turner's *Fighting Temeraire*.

Looking at the three canvasses together as a single panorama there is a potent sense of passage as the ships drift, float and sail into the warm, sensuous but slightly ominous embrace of infinity.

There is a strong sense of procession, with the flagship bringing up the rear. Or maybe they are all images of the same ship passing into history. This dissolving fleet is a poignant echo of Turner's *Temeraire* as she is towed by a tugboat to her last resting place in the cooling glows of a fast descending sunset.

Both Twombly's and Turner's paintings are dominated by sky and water, indistinguishable in Twombly, but both elements in which things can float.

There is too a wonderful correspondence between the emotive reflections in Turner's *Temeraire* and the dripping lines that flow from Twombly's apparently doomed ships.

## **Thank you for visiting**

Thank you very much for coming. I hope you've enjoyed your visit. And there are three things that I want people to leave the Gallery with: firstly that slight sense of elevation and a sense of having had an experience, secondly, a memory and a bit of knowledge that you might not have had before, and thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, I would like you to leave with the wish to return. Thank you very much.