

# SIDNEY NOLAN

## A P O E T I C V I S I O N

### TEACHERS' NOTES

#### INTRODUCTION

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Sidney Nolan (1917-92) is widely acknowledged as Australia's most inventive and influential artist of the twentieth century. A prolific painter, draughtsman and printmaker, Nolan produced some of the most iconic images in Australian art. His unique vision embraced Australian myths and legends as well as the landscape. Most well-known for his Ned Kelly series, Nolan also explored the tale of the ill-fated explorers Burke and Wills and brought to Australian art a new visual expression of this vast land.

Drawn chiefly from the collection of Melbourne scientist and art collector Dr Douglas Kagi and the QUT Art Collection, *Sidney Nolan: A Poetic Vision* highlights important works by the artist from the late 1940s to the early 1980s. The exhibition and catalogue have been made possible through the generous support of Dr Kagi.

#### AREAS OF INTEREST

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- Interpretations of landscape
- Poetry and painting
- Australian history
- Myths and Literature: Leda and the Swan, Oedipus, Shakespeare's Sonnets
- Australian outback/central Australia
- Burke and Wills
- Bushranger Ned Kelly

## CURRICULUM RELEVANCE

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Sidney Nolan is an important figure in the story of Australian art and history. This exhibition provides students of all year levels with the chance to develop a greater understanding and appreciation of the art of Australia. As the prime subject of Nolan's art, the Australian landscape is a topic that serves as an effective entry point to many areas and perspectives on the subject of Australia, past and present.

### YEARS P-4

#### The Arts: Visual Arts

**VA 3.1** Students design, make and modify images and objects applying elements and additional concepts to construct intended meanings.

**VA 3.2** Students make and display images and objects, understanding the functions of informal and formal display.

**VA 3.3** Students compare elements and additional concepts of images and objects from a variety of cultural and historical contexts.

### YEARS 5-10

#### The Arts: Visual Arts 1-10

**VA 4.2** Students make and display images and objects considering purposes and audiences.

**VA 4.3** Students analyse elements and additional concepts evident in images and objects from a variety of cultural and historical contexts.

**VA 5.1a** Students make images and objects to express personal responses to researched ideas.

**VA 5.3** Students research and evaluate images and objects of Australian artists / designers / craftspeople from a variety of historical and contemporary contexts.

#### Studies of Society and Environment 1-7

**TCC 2.1** Students explain different meanings about an event, artefact, story or symbol from different times.

**TCC 3.2** Students create sequences and timelines about specific Australian changes and continuities.

#### Australian Studies 8-10

**TCC 6.3** Students collaboratively identify the values underlying contributions by diverse individuals and groups in Australian or Asian environments.

### YEARS 11-12

#### Visual Arts 11-12

**Criterion 3: Appraising** – Students analyse, interpret, evaluate and synthesise information about visual language, expression and meanings in artworks, relevant to concepts, focuses, contexts and media. Students also practice visual art terminology, referencing, and language conventions.

## History 11–12

**Criterion 2:** Forming historical knowledge through critical inquiry – students analyse what is explicit and implicit in sources, including themes, values and interrelationships within and among sources.

## English 11–12

**Criterion 2:** Knowledge - Students gain knowledge and exercise their understanding of creative and poetic forms of writing and are able to view writing both in terms of the enjoyment texts give to people and the power texts have to influence, tell the stories of a culture and promote shared understandings.

**Criterion 3:** Knowledge and application of the constructedness of texts - students recognise that discourses available in the culture affect the representations in, and readings of, texts, and identify how readers, listeners and viewers are positioned by the choices that writers, speakers and shapers make about what to include in and exclude from the text.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST – SIDNEY NOLAN

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Nolan grew up in Melbourne and was a largely self-taught artist who was widely read. He enrolled intermittently in art classes but usually spent the class time in the public library devouring information about international artists, philosophers, poets and intellectuals. As a young adult he contemplated becoming a poet rather than an artist because of his love of literature and admiration for the poet rebel Arthur Rimbaud.

Nolan travelled extensively throughout his lifetime, spending extended periods of time in Europe, Africa, America and the Asia-Pacific region. Before moving to England in 1953 Nolan saw immense tracts of the Australian outback, his memories of which influenced his palette and subject matter and remained with the artist throughout his life.



Sidney Nolan "Bird over harbour, Sydney", 1948.

## KEY THEMES

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### METHODS AND LANDSCAPE

Sidney Nolan had a fascinating approach to painting the landscape. Instead of painting “en plein air” where painters would set up their canvases out in the open landscape to paint, Nolan would take mental snapshots of the scenes he wished to paint—snapshots that his wife at the time called “quick blicks”. He would look at the landscape very quickly, and paint only his brief experience; he did not like to weigh himself down with studying the landscape too closely, nor did his “quick blicks” work as an all-encompassing photograph. He was much more interested by the way people look at the landscape, and his “quick blicks” meant that all of the **ephemeral** elements of the landscape were gone so he could capture the essence of a scene.

Much like the way he perceived the landscape, Nolan also painted the landscape with great speed. He sometimes painted with PVA, a type of paint that begins hardening as it is being painted. PVA allowed him to paint very quickly in sustained bursts of activity, and he once said “it was like cooking a soufflé...there was a point at which it bubbled and hardened and you couldn’t use it any more; it was like lava”. Nolan loved to work quickly—he said “three days” was the rule to paint a canvas—and he almost never made any preliminary sketches, save for a couple of handwritten notes meant to jog his memory of the places he had seen.

Like many other Australian artists of the twentieth century, Sidney Nolan’s landscapes drew inspiration from aerial perspective, stemming from the popularity in air-travel. He was able to see with his own eyes the light and colours of the landscape flowing and shifting as he flew over the desert. The desert landscapes of Central Australia were painted swiftly but precisely—Nolan understood the diversity and uniqueness of the Australian terrain, but knew “only a little of it can be painted”.

#### *Activity Prompts:*

- In the *Sidney Nolan: A Poetic Vision* exhibition, find Sidney Nolan’s “Central Australian Landscape”, 1981, and think about the way he used colour to construct the landscape. Why do you think he used so many colours and what effect does it create?
- Sidney Nolan played with ideas of perspective in many of his artworks, including using **multiple-point perspective** instead of a single vanishing point. Make a sketch of a landscape you’re familiar with, like your backyard or a park or even your school grounds, just from your memory. Try using multiple vanishing points to show things in your sketch you couldn’t otherwise show with single-point perspective.
- Do you think it makes a difference if you paint something quickly or slowly? Why? Think about some of the paintings you’ve made in class.

## **BURKE AND WILLS: AUSTRALIAN HISTORY, AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK**

As well as flying over the Australian outback, Sidney Nolan travelled extensively by road, rail, and sea. He travelled from New South Wales to Adelaide, through the “dead heart” of Australia up to Darwin, and down the coast of Western Australia to Perth before heading back to Sydney. He even travelled throughout Queensland, spending much time on Fraser Island, off Brisbane, and in the outback mining areas of the state.

Nolan felt a great connection to the explorers that preceded him, feeling that much was owed to them by Australian artists and poets. When flying over Central Australia, Nolan felt greatly moved by the plight of the doomed explorers Burke and Wills, who had attempted to travel from Melbourne up to the Gulf of Carpentaria and back again. Although successful in reaching the gulf, a series of misfortunes resulted in the pair passing away before reaching their home destination.

The doomed explorers in the harsh Australian landscape became a **legend** for Nolan; the figures appeared in many works, and bring to light the history of Australia alongside the landscape in which it occurred. They have a strong association between the Australian landscape and the people who made history with it. His Bourke and Wills images were an attempt to create a national myth, much like he did with his Ned Kelly paintings, and Nolan himself was very interested in learning about stories that specifically occurred in the landscape.

### *Activity Prompts:*

- Why would Sidney Nolan want to create a “national myth”? Does that mean it’s not true?
- Research the expedition of Burke and Wills, and trace their path through the country. Why do you think this trek was important to the history of Australia? What was their goal?
- Think of an event in history that you find interesting. If you involved it in an artwork, what might the implications be? What’s the difference between just retelling history and imagining history?

## BUSHRANGER NED KELLY

The figure of Ned Kelly in Sidney Nolan's art behaves as a symbol unequalled in Australian art. Just as Ned Kelly is a significant figure in Australian history, he is also a significant figure in Nolan's life. As a child, Nolan was shown "Kelly country" by his grandfather, who used to live off the land not far from the area in the Goulburn Valley. He regaled the young Nolan with stories of the Kelly gang's bank robberies and shootouts with police, and the idea of Ned Kelly became a personal emblem of the artist's own history. Nolan would one day return to Kelly country, as an adult, on an excursion to better understand the landscape that became so important to him.



Sidney Nolan "Glenrowan", 1970-71.

Ned Kelly was a notorious bushranger; he was arrested several times in his youth for assault, and was later caught as a part of a cattle-rustling operation. Eventually Kelly and his gang attempted bolder crimes: robbing banks and taking hostages. After an acquaintance of the gang was exposed as a police informant and killed, the Kelly gang took around seventy hostages at the Glenrowan Inn, knowing that a train loaded with police was approaching. The gang donned their famous armour in preparation for the attack, but were overwhelmed by the police after a plan to derail their train failed. All of the members of the Kelly gang were killed in the incident except for Ned Kelly himself, and he was tried and hanged on November 11, 1880.

Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly paintings incorporate both the landscape and the people within it, each as important as the other. Nolan admitted there was a personal layer of meaning in the Kelly works, but he refused to reveal its details. He once said "you would be surprised if I told you... [the paintings are] an inner history of my own emotions but I am not going to tell you about them".

### *Activity Prompts:*

- Even though a painting has a public meaning, artworks such as Sidney Nolan's can also have hidden private meanings. Another prominent example would be Indigenous Australian art, which is often made for both public and private audiences with very different levels of interpretation. Think about the public and private layers that might exist in the art you make in class. Why might having multiple meanings in one artwork be important or interesting?
- Use your school's library to learn more about Ned Kelly and his gang. Does this change the way you view Nolan's work?
- Ned Kelly is infamous for his armour suit, but he actually only wore it for his final stand at the Glenrowan Inn. Think about myths and legends, and why we so strongly associate Kelly with his armour today. What does it mean if somebody, like Ned Kelly, is a folk hero?
- Is Ned Kelly still important to Australia today?

## MYTHS AND LITERATURE: LEDA AND THE SWAN, AND SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

Sidney Nolan also travelled extensively outside of Australia, including England, Greece, the United States, Ethiopia, and even Antarctica. In his "Leda and the Swan" images, Nolan drew inspiration from ancient Greek mythology, in particular the myth that the Greek god Zeus transformed into a swan and coupled with the Queen of the Spartans, producing an egg that hatched into Helen of Troy. Ultimately, Helen of Troy became the catalyst for the Trojan War. Although a powerful image in itself, Nolan was more interested in the poetry that had been written about Leda, and in particular a poem by a little-known Australian named Alwyn Lee, whose poem ends with:

...Until black Jupiter with snake-like head,  
Has taken lubra Leda to her bed,  
And everything, including tears are shed.

It was after reading this poem that Nolan said that the myth came alive and he started to paint. But the poem was not his only inspiration; the experiences he had during his travels had a significant influence, such as watching swans in London and the lights shining off the Thames River.

Nolan was also inspired by Shakespeare's Sonnets, and produced a series of works in response to composer Benjamin Britten's music, a man similarly inspired by Shakespeare. Like much of Nolan's other work, these artworks are loaded with private meanings that he holds close to his heart, and may be amongst the most enigmatic of his works.

### *Activity Prompts:*

- Sidney Nolan was actually attacked by swans when he was twelve years old! This may be one reason for his interest in the Leda and the Swan myth. Do events from the past influence the way you look at things? How might you use past events to influence the art you produce? They might already influence your work without you realising.
- Nolan was inspired by Shakespeare's Sonnets and stories of Greek mythology. Have you read any stories that might inspire you? Maybe there are other creative things that inspire you:
  - Television shows?
  - Video games?
  - Advertisements?
  - \_\_\_\_\_?
- Nolan's visit to London influenced the way he made his "Leda and the Swan" series. Think about sources of inspiration for the places you've been. Even if you've never been overseas or outside of your town, you might be inspired by a friend's house or a grocery store!

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Curated by Stephen Rainbird and  
Simone Jones

QUT Art Museum, Brisbane  
5 June – 17 August 2008

Rockhampton Art Gallery  
25 August – 31 October 2008

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The QUT Art Museum is now taking bookings for gallery visits and guided tours of *Sidney Nolan: A Poetic Vision* and other exhibitions. Tours can be tailored to suit your students, and can focus on other topics such as working in the art industry. To book a free guided tour or gallery visit (without a tour) please e-mail [artmuseum@qut.com](mailto:artmuseum@qut.com) or phone **07 3138 5370** in advance.

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