



# REALITY IN FLAMES

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MODERN AUSTRALIAN ART  
& THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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INTERPRETIVE GUIDE



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in which Australian modern artists responded  
creatively to the war as they sought to comprehend  
its events and consequences.*

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## INTERPRETIVE GUIDE

This guide has been designed for secondary and senior secondary students and is intended to be used in conjunction with the exhibition *Reality in flames: modern Australian art and the Second World War*. The background information cited in this guide has been taken from the catalogue to this exhibition, written by Warwick Heywood, Bridie Macgillicuddy, Cherie Prosser, and Ryan Johnston.

This interpretive guide can be used as a pre- or post-activity, during your visit to the exhibition, or as a stand-alone study of modern Australian war art.

The activities in this guide link to the secondary history curriculum.

The guide also provides senior secondary students with the opportunity to research, reflect and create with respect to the social and historical context of art and its impact on society.

## INTRODUCTION

For Australia, as for many other nations, the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 started with the memory of the Great War still fresh and the effects of the Great Depression continuing.

*Reality in flames* explores the different ways in which Australian modern artists responded creatively to the war as they sought to comprehend its events and consequences. It examines the major social themes artists chose to explore, including new foreign and cultural encounters; advancements in warfare technology; changing gender roles; the home front; leisure and recreation; and, crucially, the tremendous hardship, destruction, and loss wrought by the conflict. The exhibition also highlights the artistic styles developed and adapted in response to these experiences, producing a powerful transformation in the practice of art in Australia.

# ART AND THE RECORDING AND INTERPRETING OF HISTORY

Artists have always played a crucial role in recording and interpreting the Australian experience of war. The works in this exhibition explore the dangers faced abroad and the challenges war brought to the home front and to Australian society.

## Themes

1. Identify some of the events or subject matters depicted in the exhibition. What broader themes were the artists interested in? Are there any themes you think have been left out? Why would you have included them?
2. Find two or more artists who have addressed the same subject matter or theme and discuss the similarities and differences in their approaches. For example, compare the works below:
  - a. What is the most obvious subject matter or theme?
  - b. What is the personal story of the artist and how have they made this work?
  - c. What is the artist conveying more generally about their view of the war?



Colin Colahan, **Ground staff (Flight Sergeant Oswald "Ossie" Ferguson)** 1942, oil on canvas, 60.9 x 50.7 cm. ART22312



Albert Tucker, **Psycho, Heidelberg Military Hospital**, 1942, carbon pencil, coloured wax crayons, brown pastel, gouache on paper, 25 x 17.9 cm. ART28305

## Perspective

The works of art in this exhibition provide insights into what was happening both on the battlefields and on the home front. Official war art scheme overseer Lieutenant Colonel John Treloar believed that contemporary school artists could not "provide as accurate or enduring a record of the war as others who adhere to academic methods".

3. Which works in the exhibition are from the "contemporary", modern school and which adhere to more "academic", traditional methods?
4. What did Treloar mean by an "accurate" record? Are any of the pieces in the exhibition more "objective" than others? Consider the works below:
  - a. According to your initial impressions, which work of art is most "accurate" or "objective", and why?
  - b. Research the historical event referenced in each work and when it was made. Was the artist involved in the event in any way? Does this change your opinion of the work?
  - c. Are the works of art in this exhibition records, interpretations, or both?



Frank Hinder, **Bomber crash**, 1949, egg tempera, oil glazes on gesso on hardboard, 59.5 x 49.1 cm. ART26924



Murray Griffin, **HMAS Perth fights to the last** c. 1942, oil on hardboard, 63.4 x 81.9 cm. ART24483

# ART AND THE RECORDING AND INTERPRETING OF HISTORY (CONTINUED)

## The official war art scheme

This exhibition includes the work of civilians, servicemen and servicewomen, and artists employed as part of the official war art scheme. Some of the scheme's artists travelled overseas with military forces while others covered a range of home-front themes. Commissioned artists wore uniforms, and were each assigned an honorary officer's rank, salary and benefits, and art materials. They gained access to key events and theatres of war, military personnel and practices, and technology. Not least, they were provided with the time and resources needed to interpret these subjects.

5. Research the Second World War official war art scheme. How do you think the artists were chosen? Colin Colahan was instructed to create "some head studies of interesting character types", a request repeated to many official war artists. To what degree do you think the artists were directed in their subject matter?
6. Discuss some of the advantages and disadvantages of being an official war artist.
7. Discuss the differences and similarities between style, technique, and subject matter among the artists in the exhibition. Using the images below, compare works made outside of the scheme with those made by official artists.



Roger Kemp, **War conception**, c. 1941–42, enamel on cardboard, 85,2 x 112 cm, ART94230



Daphne Mayo, **Two jolly sailormen**, c. 1944, glazed ceramic, 27 x 22,2 x 10,5 cm, ART28406



Sybil Craig, **Girls working in the Container Production Room (Commonwealth explosives factory, Maribyrnong)**, 1945, oil on artist's board, 40,7 x 30,2 cm, ART23507



Lyndon Dadswell, **Bomb thrower**, 1942, cast, 1985, bronze, 70 x 54,2 x 26,2 cm, ART40928

## Creating history

The works of art in this exhibition are both historical records of and responses to the Second World War, and they have shaped our understanding of the conflict.

8. Using just the works below, discuss:
  - a. What did Australians do in the war?
  - b. What places were affected?
  - c. What was important to people during the war?
  - d. What do these works of art tell you about people's attitudes to the war?
  - e. What is the general impression of the war? Is it positive or negative?
  - f. Of the 50 artists in the exhibition, 11 are female. In what ways is this inequity a reflection of society at the time? Does it affect our perceptions of the war?
  - g. What similarities and differences can you notice between the style, technique, and subject matter used in work by female artists and that used by male artists?



Ivor Hele, **Grenade throwing, Bobdubi Ridge**, 1944, oil on canvas on cardboard, 48,3 x 58,5 cm, ART22556



Grace Taylor, **Land Army girls on cotton**, 1945, oil on hardboard, 40,8 x 55,8 cm, ART29759



Ivor Francis, **Energy of war**, 1940, oil on canvas on cardboard, 44,2 x 34,2 cm, ART28831

## ART AND ITS PERSONAL IMPACT

As the war progressed, most artists became immersed in the increasingly militarised world. They enlisted in the armed forces, worked with labour groups or in factories, or served as official artists observing and recording military activity.

1. Select an artist in the exhibition and research their background. Consider some of the following questions and discuss as a class or in small groups:
  - a. How was the artist involved in the war?
  - b. What might have motivated them to make war art?
  - c. What effect might the war have had on the artist?
  - d. What impact did the climate or conditions in which the artist worked during the war have on the materials and techniques employed?
  - e. What is the effect of this artist's work on you, the viewer?
  - f. What impact might their work have had on the community?
  - g. If you had the opportunity to interview one of the artists in the exhibition, what would you ask them about their wartime experience and their artistic response?

### Creating and expressing personal impact

2. Select a work of art from the exhibition and consider its effect on you. Examine the painting below and in small groups discuss:
  - a. Style, colour and mark making;
  - b. The themes and subject matter;
  - c. The personal story of the artist;
  - d. Your existing knowledge of the war and personal interests; and
  - e. The size, title, display and positioning of the painting in the exhibition.



Alan Moore, **SS guards burying dead, Belsen**, 1947, oil on canvas, 46.2 x 61.4 cm. ART27621

### People

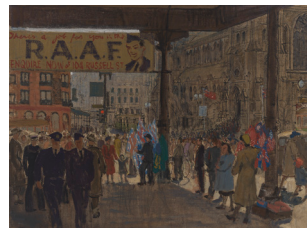
3. The artists represented in the exhibition depict people involved in or affected by the war. Examine the people portrayed in the paintings below and consider the following questions:
  - a. Research artists Eric Thake, Sali Herman and George Browning. How might the backgrounds and experiences of each artist have influenced the way in which his subjects are portrayed?
  - b. What do the different groups of people featured in the artworks tell you about the war?
  - c. The experiences of people during times of war can vary greatly. What experiences have been depicted in these paintings, and how have those involved been portrayed?



Sali Herman, **Liberated Indians, Rabaul 1945**, oil on canvas on plywood, 45.5 x 61 cm. ART22840



Eric Thake, **Self portrait in a broken shaving mirror 1945, Noemfoor Island, Indonesia**, gouache on paper, 36 x 30 cm. ART96765



George Browning, **VE Day, Melbourne 1945**, oil on canvas on hardboard, 64.5 x 80.3 cm. ART24072

## ART: ITS TECHNIQUES AND USES

### Impact on the artist's work

The Second World War affected the artists' lives and the art they created during and after the war. Sidney Nolan's wartime experience introduced him to the rural landscape which later dominated his career as an artist, while Roger Kemp was driven by a sense of despair, and after the war continued to create images of a dark and broken world.

4. Research one of the artists in the exhibition to discover the ways in which their art practice was influenced by the war. Look at their work before, during, and after the war to get a sense of changes in subject matter, style, and technique.

### Respond and create

5. Think about the ways in which conflict may have affected your own life or that of your family, whether recently or in the past. Is there a history of military service in your family? Did someone in your family escape war by immigrating to Australia? Create an artwork in response to either family history or personal experience, or to conflict more generally.
6. Along with a classmate or your whole class, make your own quick sketch of something which has happened during the day. Discuss and compare the works, focusing on themes and perspective. For example:
  - a. What themes have people chosen as important?
  - b. Where people have depicted similar themes, how are their drawings similar or different, and why?

The visual forms used by artists in the Second World War helped interpret the experience of combat, the powerfully destructive machinery of war, and the social upheaval produced by global conflict. Australian artists drew from the tradition of international modern art to look closely at all the war's facets and beyond its official narratives.

### Modern art and modernism

1. This exhibition features "modern Australian art from the Second World War". Investigate the meaning of "modern art" and the associated global artistic practices during the mid-twentieth century.
2. Identify some of the different styles and techniques used in the exhibition. Examine some of the works below and discuss:
  - a. How are colour, mark-making, and composition used?
  - b. Has the artist been inspired by others in this exhibition or internationally?
  - c. Which other aspects of modernism may have influenced the artist?
  - d. How does the style used relate to the subject matter or the story told?



Dore Hawthorne, **Gauges and components**, 1945, oil on hardboard, 20,4 x 25,3 cm, ART94129



Sali Herman, **Kana Suai, Bougainville**, 1945, oil on canvas on plywood, 45,4 x 40,2 cm, ART22849

## ART: ITS TECHNIQUES AND USES (CONTINUED)

### Symbols

Symbolism often provides artists with a way of communicating ideas and making sense of issues that concern them.

3. Select a work of art from the exhibition which uses symbolism and discuss it with a classmate or in small groups.
4. Examine the works below and consider the following:
  - a. What do the skulls in Slawik's work symbolise?
  - b. What do you think the "V" in Tucker's work means?
  - c. What other symbols have been used in either work?
  - d. Do these symbols occur in other works by either artist?
  - e. Have the meanings of these symbols changed over time?
  - f. Do symbols mean the same thing to people from different social or cultural backgrounds?



Bernard Slawik, **Loading the cars to Belzec**, c. 1943, pencil on paper, 14,6 x 26,1 cm, ART90349



Albert Tucker, **Clown**, 1943, oil on paper on cardboard, 25,6 x 20,3 cm, ART96038

### Artist groups

The war years were a vibrant and tumultuous period for art and culture in Australia. Many artists joined groups or societies to harness and refine their artistic approaches. The artists in this exhibition belonged to such groups as: the Contemporary Art Society (CAS), whose adherents were interested in modernism and, later, social realism; the Adelaide Contemporary Art Society; and the Studio of Realist Art (SORA). Meanwhile, the "Angry Penguins" embraced a more critical view of oppressive social norms.

5. Select several artists in the exhibition and identify which schools of artistic thought they followed. Discuss the similarities and differences in techniques and subject matter between or within the groups, and why these existed. For example, compare the different schools of the two artists below.



Noel Counihan, **A soldier on leave**, c. 1943-44, oil on composition board, 55,6 x 45,4 cm, ART93998



Dorrit Black, **The wool quilt makers (Red Cross Wool Fleece Quilts Relief Committee)**, c. 1940-41, watercolour, pastel and pencil on paper, ART92574

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## ART: ITS TECHNIQUES AND USES (CONTINUED)

### Using art

The Angry Penguins, “social realists”, and Adelaide Contemporary Art Society adherents had very different views on the roles of art during the war.

6. What role do you think art should play during wartime? What are some of the effects art can have on the artist, the audience, and the wider community? What roles could your own art practice play, and what impact might it have on others? Consider the following:
  - a. What artists, styles or techniques influence your work?
  - b. What other influences might you have (i.e. friends or family, books, music etc.)?
  - c. Do you prefer one style or technique, or do you incorporate a range of these in your work?
  - d. In what ways has your work evolved over the past two years?
7. Select a style or technique employed by an artist in the exhibition that is different to your own, and create your own artwork in that style.

### Technology

8. Consider some of the connections between contemporary war artists and the art and technology used by artists during the Second World War.
  - a. What are some technological innovations artists have access to today that were not available during the Second World War?
  - b. Are different artistic mediums such as painting, sculpture, photography, or digital art more authentic, capable of telling the truth, or able to express emotion than others? For example, if Russell Drysdale’s **Soldiers and children in Greece** (c. 1943) were a video, would we have a different insight into the people portrayed or the wartime experience more generally?



Russell Drysdale, **Soldiers and children in Greece**, c. 1943, pen and black ink heightened with white on paper, 21.7 x 20.2 cm (irreg), ART28309.002



Shaun Gladwell. Two unidentified soldiers rest in Chinook A15-202, “Dark and Stormy”, at the Rotary Wing Group maintenance hangar, 2009, P09777.014

### Research

The Australian War Memorial continues to employ official war artists. Typically, these artists are embedded within Australian military forces in conflicts or peacekeeping missions to enable a personal and informed representation of that conflict.

9. Research the ways in which contemporary Australian artists respond to and represent war. Discuss the techniques and technologies employed and the subjects depicted.
10. Using contemporary technologies unavailable to artists in the Second World War, create a work of art in response to this exhibition.



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## SUGGESTED READING LIST

Deborah Edwards and Denise Mimmocchi (eds), *Sydney moderns: art for a new world*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2013.

Charles Merewether, *Art and social commitment: an end to the city of dreams, 1931–1948*, AGNSW exhibition catalogue, New South Wales, 1984.

Richard Haese, *Rebels and precursors: the revolutionary years of Australian art*, Penguin Books Australia, Melbourne, 1981.

Betty Churcher, *The art of war*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2004.

Catherine Speck's *Painting ghosts: Australian women artists in wartime*, Craftsman House, Melbourne, 2004.

Michael McKernan, *All in!: Australia during the Second World War*, Thomas Nelson Australia, Melbourne, 1983.

Anne Gray, *Send me more paint!: Australian art during the Second World War*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1988.

Joan Beaumont (ed.), *Australia's war 1939–1945*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1996.

## USEFUL LINKS

Australian War Memorial:  
**[awm.gov.au](http://awm.gov.au)**

National Gallery of Australia collection search:  
**[artsearch.nga.gov.au](http://artsearch.nga.gov.au)**

Australian Dictionary of Biography:  
**[adb.anu.edu.au](http://adb.anu.edu.au)**

Design & Art Australia Online:  
**[daao.org.au/about](http://daao.org.au/about)**