

INTRODUCTION: EDUCATION RESOURCE

This education resource has been designed for teachers of students in middle and later years. It includes student-level questions and activities throughout that have been highlighted in maroon. It contains information on the work of John Brack with quotations, questions and commentaries to support class activities. Full-sized images are available to support pre- and post-visit learning. Teachers are encouraged to adapt the resource to the level and particular interests of their students, including younger students. This exhibition has particular relevance to Art, History, Literacy and Drama curricula.

Further information

The exhibition catalogue accompanying the John Brack exhibition will be available for purchase from the NGV Bookshop, online: www.ngv.vic.gov.au, and also at the Art Gallery of South Australia. This publication includes contributions by exhibition curator Kirsty Grant, also from Helen Brack, Sasha Grishin, Chris Mc Auliffe and Robert Lindsay, and an extended bibliography.

If I choose to paint the life I see around me, it is because I find people more interesting than things.

So it seems to me a worthwhile object to attempt to re-unite subject and design. This involves a certain conscious discipline, which may not be a bad thing at his time.

— John Brack, letter to Eric Westbrook, director, National Gallery of Victoria, 15 April 1956.



Latin American Grand Final 1969

oil on canvas

167.5 x 205.0 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased, 1981

© Helen Brack

JOHN BRACK EDUCATION GUIDE

Contents

John Brack's Biography	1
Historical Background: <i>Collins St, 5p.m.</i> Ideas for teachers of history	2
Artistic Debate Melbourne in the 1950s Debating topic: Abstraction and Figuration	5
Poetry and other Artists Art history: Compare Brack with Edouard Manet, Sidney Nolan and Fred Williams	7
Studio Practice Oil painting and etching techniques	10
Suburban Images Compare John Brack with Howard Arkley, Jenny Watson and others	12
People Ideas for literacy and art classes	14
Shop Windows Ideas for art classes – Shop window	16
Later Works The Unstill Life series Art: Compositional exercise	18
Responding to Brack: Curriculum Activities Exhibition analysis for senior students; Drama, Literacy and Art activities	21
Two Thematic Comparisons <i>The car</i> and a city comparison New media: Kate Beynon	23



JOHN BRACK'S BIOGRAPHY

John Brack was born in Melbourne on 10 May 1920. He attended evening classes at the National Gallery School from 1938 to 1940 and then served in the army from 1940 to 1946. Following his discharge, he returned to the Gallery School full-time until 1949, at the end of which he destroyed almost all of his student works. He worked as an assistant framer at the National Gallery of Victoria from 1949 to 1951, and then served as art master of Melbourne Grammar school until 1962. He was then appointed head of the National Gallery School, a position he held until 1968. John Brack died in Melbourne on 11 February, 1999.

His early work

In this early *Self portrait*, John Brack has drawn a dark-haired young man looking pensively outwards as he works, his hand to his mouth, implying a contemplation of an inner world and unspoken thoughts. Brack has used conté crayon on its side to delicately model the form of the head on textured French paper. The paper's watermark becomes part of the image. The overall darkness of the image adds to the feeling of melancholy thoughtfulness.

Using the above commentary on *Self-portrait* as a model, discuss how the formal, stylistic and technical elements contribute to the meanings and messages of the painting.

In this later picture, John Brack has captured an intimate moment of his morning ritual of shaving. What else does it tell us about the artist's personal experience?

Compare John Brack's two self-portraits. What do they reveal to you about the character of this artist? Consider the pose, position of the head or the feelings communicated through the artist's gaze.

Examine this photograph carefully. Look at the variety and number of brushes used by Brack. Notice how he kept his tubes of paint and how he arranged his paint on his glass palette. What does this say about the way he organised his work space?

Why might a painter choose to use an easel?

How is this photograph of the artist different from the self-portraits painted by Brack?

John Brack
Self-portrait c.1948
black pastel
32.3 x 24.1 cm
Estate of Dr Ursula Hoff, Melbourne
© Helen Brack

John Brack
Self-portrait 1955
oil on canvas
81.5 x 48.3 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased with the assistance of the National Gallery Women's Association
© Helen Brack



Photograph of John Brack in his studio with easel and paint completing nude on shag rug 1976–77, February 1977



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

COLLINS ST, 5P.M.

Collins St, 5p.m. 1955
oil on canvas
114.6 x 162.9 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, 1956
© National Gallery of Victoria

I used to stand in the doorway every night between 4.45 and 5.30 to watch the stream as it passed ...

As a matter of fact it used to strike me as most eerie, to be sketching within three feet of so many people, none of whom took the slightest notice. — 'John Brack on Brack', *CAE Art notes*, 1956.

John Brack's *Collins St, 5p.m.* is considered to be both an iconic painting of peak-hour Melbourne and a social commentary on daily life in the 1950s. The painting depicts people emotionally closed down by the grind of daily work. The office workers are unaware of each other, despite their close proximity, and are oblivious of the artist, who may be drawing them. It is also a painting about the loss of individuality and a lack of social cohesion among the masses. This idea may have wider political implications to do with class and power relationships.

John Brack painted with sincerity from his own direct observations and experience of working in a city-based insurance company as a young man. To develop this painting, he referred to photographs of buildings in Collins Street and used his friend John Stephens as a model for the man wearing glasses closest to the left hand-side of the work.

Compare this photograph with the characters in John Brack's paintings. Observe the similarities and differences.

Henry Churchill Wingfield walking down Collins Street 1955.





Historical context – Postwar Melbourne

John Brack's *Collins St, 5p.m.* was painted at a time when there was still a lingering memory of the Depression and wartime austerity, yet there was more promise. It was a time of full employment, steady economic growth, home building soared and the suburbs around Melbourne spread. The population in the 1950s was primarily Anglo-Celtic in origin and Brack has painted them monochromatically, visually expressing this sameness. Today, Melbourne's population is more culturally diverse and the shopfronts are certainly more colourful.

Collins St, 5p.m. 1955
oil on canvas
114.6 x 162.9 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, 1956
© National Gallery of Victoria

Describe the clothing of the people in *Collins St, 5p.m.*

What do people wear in a city street today? How has fashion changed?

Immigration

One of the reasons for the lack of cultural diversity in the city population was the White Australia Policy which was in place from 1901 to 1973. This policy restricted non-white people on racial grounds; it was based on fears that there would be problems with their assimilation and the threat of cheap labour. Policies were in place to maintain a way of life based on the British heritage of Australia as a former colony. In the 1950s immigration transformed Australia; however, immigrants came mainly from continental Europe and Britain.

Consider the Government documents available online from the National Archives of Australia for the 1950s. Search *White Australia Policy*. What do these documents say about the attitudes of policy-makers, policies and the officials who administered them?

Melbourne

In 1955 Melbourne experienced a growth in optimism and civic pride in the lead-up to the 1956 Olympic Games. This, however, was not the subject of Brack's work. He painted a rather more sombre image depicting Collins St at 5p.m.

In 1955 Melbourne's first skyscraper, ICI House, was approved. Modern architecture like the Melbourne Olympic Pool and Olympic Park were constructed and a civic clean-up included the demolition of Victorian cast-iron verandas from Melbourne shopfronts. The first television licences were granted in time to broadcast the Olympics. Those without new television sets often watched the 'friendly games' in department-store windows. Ironically, John Brack clearly painted a more old-fashioned Victorian cityscape, not the new architecturally modernist Melbourne. John Brack's work stands apart from this utopianism, with a more humanistic and socially critical agenda.



Collins St, 5p.m. 1955
oil on canvas
114.6 x 162.9 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, 1956
© National Gallery of Victoria

Representations of the city

What else has changed in Australian cities since the 1950s? Use old newspapers, photographs and other primary sources to gather your evidence. Use a range of websites to search for Melbourne images from the 1950s. Visit websites such as Picture Australia at the National Library and Screen Australia. In particular, explore the State Library of Victoria and consider the images of Melbourne's Olympic buildings. Refer to www.slv.vic.gov.au/vicpamphlets/inter/594574.shtml

Australian identity

What does John Brack's work say about Australian identity?

Explore what you feel is an 'authentic' Australian image of the twenty-first century. Is it urban, suburban, outback or coastal? Is it possible to create a 'real' image of Australian identity? Why? Why not?

Visit your nearest city. Experience the streetscapes and compare painted and photographic representations of your city by artists over time.

If visiting Melbourne, follow the Golden Mile walking trail available from Melbourne visitors centre and observe the banks, old stock exchange, Block Arcade and other great Melbourne boom time buildings along Collins Street.

Compare John Brack's painting with the urban paintings of Charles Conder and Tom Roberts.



ARTISTIC DEBATE: ABSTRACTION AND FIGURATION IN MELBOURNE DURING THE 1950s AND 1960s

The chase evokes a sense of noise, energy and movement. The fun-loving nature of these girls has been captured. Notice one of the girls is running wearing only one adult shoe.

What do the angular shadows cast behind the girls contribute to the composition?

What sounds would these girls make?

In 1959 John Brack exhibited *The chase* in the Antipodean exhibition along with other paintings of children.

John Brack was part of the short-lived Antipodean movement that was formed by local artists and art historian Bernard Smith. They held only one exhibition and yet, significantly, the *Antipodean Manifesto* was published in the catalogue. John Brack regarded his participation in the movement as a mistake, and it is to be noted that it was only Bernard Smith who wrote the manifesto, not the artists.

At a time of growing interest in abstract art, the group aimed, among other things, 'to defend and to champion ... the place of the image in art' (*Antipodeans*, 4–15 August 1959, Victorian Artists Society, Melbourne).

What is a manifesto? Apart from artists, who usually writes a manifesto?

Look at Charles Blackman's *Lovers*. Why does there appear to be one figure? What does this say about love? What mood does this communicate?

Compare the work of the Australian abstract artists such as Roger Kemp, Leonard French, Yvonne Audette and Grahame and Inge King with that of John Brack and the other artists represented in the *Antipodean* exhibition. What does their work aim to do?

John Brack

The chase 1959
oil on composition board
100.2 x 121.8 cm
Grishin, o94
Private collection, Melbourne
© Helen Brack

Charles Blackman

born Australia 1928, worked in England
1961–66
Lovers 1960
oil on composition board
152.4 x 137.2 cm
The Joseph Brown Collection
Presented through the NGV Foundation by
Dr Joseph Brown, AO, OBE, Honorary Life
Benefactor, 2004
© Charles Blackman/Licensed by VISCOPY,
Australia



Leonard French
 born Australia 1928
Death and transfiguration 1958–59
 enamel paint on composition board
 122.5 x 91.7 cm
 The Joseph Brown Collection
 Presented through the NGV Foundation by
 Dr Joseph Brown, AO ,OBE, Honorary Life
 Benefactor, 2004
 © Leonard French/Licensed by VISCOPY,
 Australia

Consider what was happening overseas, particularly with American abstraction in the 1950s. Reflect on the work of Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko. Compare the imagery with that of Australian abstract artists.

Look at the work by Leonard French. How does he depict the religious ideas of death and also transfiguration – which means a type of metamorphosis, a sudden glorious change?

The great class debate

Art is, for the artist, his speech, and his way of communication. And the image, the recognisable shape, the meaningful symbol, is the basic unit of his language. Lines, shapes and colours though they may be beautiful and expressive are by no means images.

— *Antipodean Manifesto*

For the purpose of this debate, break into two groups:

A: artists producing figurative work, or

B: artists producing abstract work

Consider the previous statement from the *Antipodean Manifesto* and argue the value of either abstraction (non-recognisable) or figuration (the recognisable image). Present examples of both figurative and abstract art to best support each argument.

Make sure you define and use the terms 'abstract' and 'figurative' correctly as you discuss these ideas.

Suggested teacher reference: Christopher Heathcote, *A Quiet Revolution: The Rise of Australian Art 1946–1968*, Text 1995, pp. 105–23.

POETRY AND OTHER ARTISTS

I was born in Melbourne in 1920. I studied at the Box Hill High School. I left work at 16 and worked in an insurance company. Then at about the age of 17 I saw a couple of little reproductions of pictures of Van Gogh. That was a revelation to me – I had taken very little interest in the paintings in the museum.

– John Brack, interview with James Gleeson, 29 November 1978, NGA.

Collins St, 5p.m. 1955
oil on canvas
114.6 x 162.9 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, 1956
© National Gallery of Victoria

John Brack read extensively throughout his life and, in the 1930s, contemplated becoming a poet. He read writers such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Jean-Paul Sartre, W. H. Auden and Henry James, who influenced his thinking and approach to art and life. He possessed a deep knowledge of art history. Vermeer and Georges Seurat, in particular, influenced his method of compositional construction and use of tonal modelling.

Brack once said he recalled part of T. S. Eliot's epic poem *The Wasteland* when working on *Collins St, 5p.m.*

Unreal City

Under the brown fog of the winter dawn
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many
I had not thought death had undone so many.

T. S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*, 'The Burial of the Dead', 1922.

John Brack uses brown paint but is it like the 'brown fog' you may imagine in T. S. Eliot's poetry? How do you imagine the unreal city and does it differ to this Australian painting?





In Brack's ironic reworking of Manet's *Bar of the Folies-Bergère* he has followed the same dimensions as the nineteenth-century French work. It has a stark hardness and angularity compared to Manet's opulent and glittering work. Manet used curves and colours to create the sensual ambience of a Parisian nightspot. It is interesting to note that bars closed at 6pm in Melbourne at the time. Brack paints the drinkers after work urgently downing their beer during the 'the six o'clock swill'.

John Brack
The bar 1954
 oil on canvas
 96.4 x 140.0 cm
 Museum of Old and New Art (MONA),
 Hobart
 Purchased, 2006
 © Helen Brack

What shapes and colours are used by Brack in this work? What is the mood of this Australian bar?

Compare Brack's Melbourne 'six-o'clock swillers' with the patrons in Manet's Parisian bar. Compare Manet's barmaid with the Australian barmaid. Compare the body language such as the strong hands of the Australian barmaid with the more demure pose of the French barmaid.

Édouard Manet
 French 1832–1883
A bar at the Folies-Bergère 1882
 oil on canvas
 96.0 x 130.0 cm
 Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery, London
 Gift of Samuel Courtauld, 1934
 Photograph The Bridgeman Art Library,
 London

What story could both women tell about their lives?

How have both artists used the device of the mirror?

John Brack found urban and suburban themes more authentic than painting landscapes, claiming: 'It is also a mistake to go to Central Australia to paint an Australian Picture' (John Brack, letter to Eric Westbrook, director, NGV).

Sidney Nolan travelled to Central Australia in 1949, as did Russell Drysdale in the 1950s. Later, in 1979 and 1981, Fred Williams travelled to the Pilbara in Western Australia to paint the outback.

Research these artists and their artistic responses to outback Australia.

Contrast this to Brack's painting of the same period.

**John Brack***Portrait of Fred Williams* 1979–80

oil on canvas

142.0 x 163.0 cm

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Purchased, 1980

© Helen Brack

Photograph Christopher Snee

Fred Williams

Australian 1927–1982

Gorge landscape 1981

oil on canvas

152.1 x 182.4 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented through the NGV Foundation by

Rio Tinto, Honorary Life Benefactor, 2001

© Fred Williams Estate

Unlike Brack, Fred Williams's work belonged to the long and lyrical landscape tradition of Australian art. Despite their different perspectives, John Brack regarded Fred Williams as a fine painter, capable of extremely well-composed and subtly coloured paintings. They were good friends and Brack paints Williams, featuring the complex patterns of the Persian carpet. This contrasts the solidity and simple form of Fred Williams's body. Both painters shared a modernist aesthetic in painting and were masters in composition.

Fred Williams is an eclectic, to be sure ... which of us is not?

— John Brack on Fred Williams etchings, 1968, Rudy Komon Gallery.

John Brack depicts Fred Williams with his working diary on the table beside him. His diaries contain quick and sketchy thumbnails of his work, documenting his daily life, details of his journeys into the landscape and his working process.

Why do artists use visual diaries?

Observe Fred Williams's *Gorge landscape*, 1981, and compare and contrast the work with that of John Brack.





John Brack
The fish shop 1955
oil on composition board
60.0 x 71.6 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art, Bulleen
Gift of the Trustees of the Museum of
Modern Art and Design of Australia to
the National Gallery of Victoria 1981.
Transferred to Heide Museum of Modern Art
by the Council of Trustees of the National
Gallery of Victoria, 2005
© Helen Brack

STUDIO PRACTICE

Oil painting techniques

So since it is a matter of ideas, I find that I always paint from drawings, drawings of the idea, and I paint very slowly, since the picture must in the end be not a flash of inspiration but a large addition sum of little ideas. — John Brack, interview with Hazel de Berg, 1962, National Library of Australia.

John Brack started his painting process with preliminary drawing. He then set up his easel with a blank canvas or primed hardboard next to the drawing. Brack blocked in the structure onto his canvas using oil paint and liner marks. He rubbed off any paint that he did not feel was in the right place and constantly modified his work as he went along. Brack worked slowly, considering the formal elements and the subject matter. He intelligently refined and distilled each work both technically and conceptually. He often built up his ideas by working in series, which gave his work momentum.

His oil paint was mixed with a homemade, sun-thickened linseed oil to help the paint flow. This gives a rich painterly quality to the surface. John Brack was able to create meticulously blended, smooth surfaces with precise edges and regular lines. He used a range of brush sizes including a fairly fine brush for line work. Brack methodically created intricate patterns and simulated textures such as the marble pieces in the terrazzo bench in *The fish shop*. This surface was juxtaposed with the modelled texture of the trophy-like head of the fish, where brushmarks were smooth and concealed. In his later works he laboriously used the finest sable brushes to develop the details he had drawn up using compasses and rulers.

Cardboard stencils were also used in Brack's later works to create repeated motifs such as pencils. In many of these works he uses up to fifteen layers of overpainting to build up the surface of his pictures.

Brack's aim for these works was for them to be 'a large addition sum of little ideas'. What do you think he means by this? Do you think he was successful in achieving this aim?



John Brack
The conference 1956
 watercolour, pen and ink
 43.1 x 62.1 cm
 Private collection, Melbourne
 © Helen Brack

John Brack
Jockey and trainer 1956
 etching and plate tone, ed.6/25
 16.8 x 22.6 cm (plate); 26.8 x 32.8 cm (sheet)
 National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
 Gift of the artist, 1964
 © Helen Brack



Printmaking – Etching

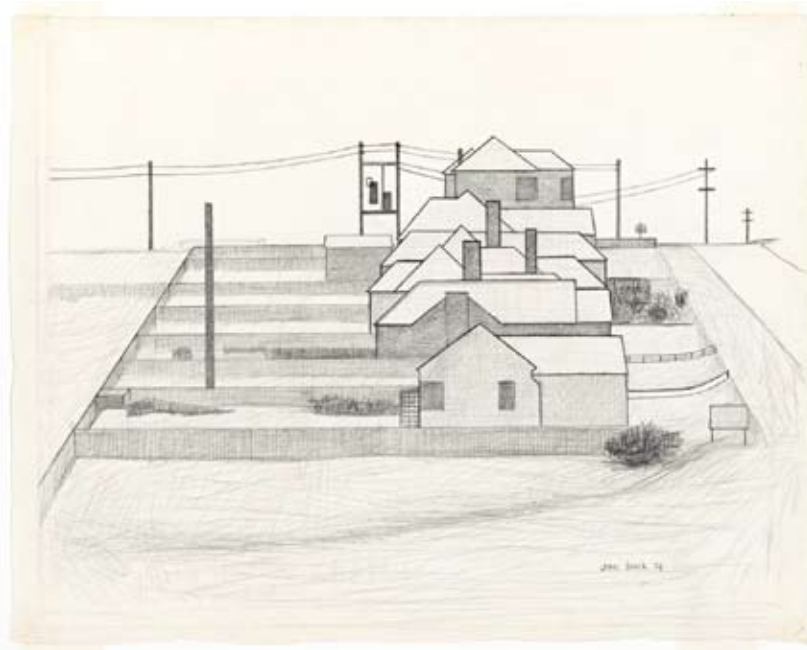
In 1956 John Brack visited Flemington racecourse every Saturday afternoon over a six-month period to find subject matter for his racecourse series. Here Brack produced drawings in pen and ink and watercolour such as *The conference*, 1956, recalling the subject matter of Toulouse-Lautrec and Edgar Degas. Brack found the jockeys to be some of the most interesting people at the racetrack with character in their faces and colourful racing silks.

Brack produced etchings that related to his pen and ink and watercolour works. He studied etching at Swinburne Technical College with the idea of making his work more affordable.

He worked on copper plates using acid to bite lines into the metal. The lines, that look like engraving on the surface of the metal, are filled with tacky oil-based ink that is worked into the plate. The surface of the smooth copper plate is then wiped clean so only the etched lines held the ink. Damp soft paper is pressed into the plate, pulling the ink up out of the lines using an etching press to create pressure. The resulting effect looks rather like a drawing, but the paper is left embossed by both the plate's shape and the etched lines that are raised. The advantage of this process is that many impressions can be made from the one plate. In *Jockey and trainer*, a subtle grey background has been established as Brack deliberately left 'plate tone' by leaving a film of printing ink on the copper plate surface while printing. He made the decision not to wipe back his plate entirely before printing.

Look at both the drawing and etching and compare the compositions. Consider the visual impact of them both. How would you tell the two different techniques apart?

What is more valuable, an original print or an original drawing? Discuss.



SUBURBAN IMAGES

In the 1950s John Brack, Robert Dickerson and Charles Blackman worked extensively with suburban themes. John Brack's *The new house* depicts a rather modern yet conservative middle-class couple in their new home. The outer suburbs of Melbourne were sprawling with new homes due to the postwar baby boom and immigration. The dream of home ownership was linked to notions of national identity. The suburbs were seen as the antithesis of the outback with its legends and heroes painted by nineteenth-century painters.

The new house includes interestingly coded details such as an ubiquitous reproduction of Van Gogh's *Langlois Bridge*, 1888, and a housewife dressed in an apron.

John Brack
New suburb 1954
 pencil
 39.2 x 50.2 cm
 National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
 Purchased, 1983
 © Helen Brack

John Brack
The new house 1953
 oil on canvas on board
 127.0 x 55.8 cm
 Private collection, Brisbane
 © Helen Brack

What does the inclusion of the Van Gogh painting tell us about this couple?

What does this painting say about gender roles in the 1950s?

Do you think John Brack treats his subjects, the married couple, sympathetically?

The suburbs also inspired poets. In November 1962 John Brack's suburban drawings were published alongside the poetry of Chris Wallace-Crabbe entitled *Eight Metropolitan Poems* in *Australian Letters*, a journal of writing and criticism.

Suburb

Streets where I pause, boughs I have walked beneath,
 Pass your implicit comment as you will;
 I crave no path, demand no twisted wreath
 But your configuration shapes me still.
 —Chris Wallace-Crabbe, *Eight Metropolitan Poems*.

Consider how the layout of the sprawling suburbs has shaped Australian culture and identity. How do artists and poets create the 'mood' of the suburb?

List some Australian films and TV programs that have been set in the suburbs? What image of Australian society do they portray? Is this accurate? What are the commonalities between these programs and real life? Why do you think these films and programs are so popular?

**John Brack**

The unmade road 1954
oil on canvas
73.6 x 50.7 cm
Private collection, Melbourne
© Helen Brack

Jenny Watson

born Australian 1951
House painting: Box Hill North (small version) 1976
oil on canvas
91.4 x 106.6 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Michell Endowment, 1977
© Courtesy of the artist

Jenny Watson

born Australian 1951
House painting: Box Hill North (large version) 1976
oil on canvas
177.8 x 213.6 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Michell Endowment, 1977
© Courtesy of the artist

Chris McAuliffe describes John Brack's suburban paintings as having a 'weird melancholy'. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain.

Compare the work of John Brack with later artists who have responded to the Australian suburbs: Margaret Dodd, Jenny Watson, Robert Rooney, Alex Danko, William Delafield-Cook and Howard Arkley.





PEOPLE

There is a diversity and intrigue to the many portrayals of people found in Brack's work. His subjects included fellow artists, his friends and family who sat for their portraits in his studio, as well as people he observed in the wider community.

John Brack based these paintings on photographs of actual dance performances held at the ballroom-dancing championships at Festival Hall. His series includes elegant dancers as they move around the dance floor. They are painted in monochromatic pink and strong red; others in the series are in equally vivid colours such as strong yellows and blues. Brack has delighted in creating a showbiz ambience with all the details superbly captured, including women with beehive hairdos, shiny with lacquered hairspray, fixed stage smiles and elegant pointed toes. Pattern is used in the repeated round motif of the ballroom dancers' dresses, flared out over stiffened petticoats. Some of John Brack's dancers are almost grotesque parodies and others, like these Latin American dancers, express a plainly joyful mood. Brack was fascinated by people who turned a pastime, like dancing, into a job.

John Brack had four daughters. This drypoint is an image of his first-born daughter crouched on the floor. *The first daughter* is drawn from above, an intimate and fatherly viewpoint. This framing of the composition helps express a feeling of paternal tenderness and heightens the sense of her smallness.

How does Brack use positive and negative shape in this image?

John Brack

First daughter 1954
drypoint, ed. 1/15
24.8 x 17.4 cm (plate); 32.5 x 26.2 cm (sheet)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, 1954 (3144-4)
© Helen Brack

John Brack

Latin American Grand Final 1969
oil on canvas
167.5 x 205.0 cm
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased, 1981 (81.11)
© Helen Brack



John Brack
Two typists 1955
 oil on canvas
 51.0 x 61.5 cm
 National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
 The Joseph Brown Collection
 Presented through the NGV Foundation by
 Dr Joseph Brown, AO, OBE, Honorary Life
 Benefactor, 2004
 © Helen Brack

Ideas for literacy and art classes

Although the faces refer to actual people, an effort was made to make them represent generalised types in addition. Even office workers may have dreams ...

— John Brack, CAE Discussion Group Notes: 'Brack on Brack'.

Discuss the meaning of John Brack's comment.

What is the significance of the black feet above the typists head?

What might these typists say?

What may these typists aspire to? Use *The two typists* to inspire a creative-writing response.

Student Label Project

At the National Gallery of Victoria, the Student Labels Project has encouraged students to create interpretative labels for some works of art on display in the Joseph Brown Collection at NGV Australia. Here is a response which is displayed next to John Brack's *Two typists*.

In this painting you see two tea-stained mellow women. They are not to be messed with, very business-like and serious. The one on the left has a cheeky face like a volcano which is about to explode with laughter. The lady on the right has tightened, 'superglued' lips and raised eyebrows.

Ella King and Maddy Catanese

Year 6

Lauriston Girls' School

Read the student label. Write your own label for any of the other works in this resource. Use the images from this resource to create a 'gallery' of John Brack's work for your classroom noticeboard or use them in a PowerPoint presentation. Place your interpretative label under the image and read it out to your class. If students select the same work, compare the variety of interpretations.



SHOP WINDOWS

In *The block* John Brack was inspired by the room interiors and underlying rectangular structure of space of the Dutch seventeenth-century master, Johannes Vermeer. Rather than a traditional aesthetic room interior filled with still-life objects such as marbled-tiled floors, lustrous drapery, bottles, musical instruments and apples, Brack selects what he calls 'inartistic' subject matter drawn from the everyday. The imagery is laden with implicit meaning. The butcher's shop interior is cold; objects are steely hard and sharp hooks hang from a metal rail. The ominous door to the cool room creates a 'chilling edge', as does the empty butcher's block with worn grooves created by the constant action of surgically sharp knives dissecting animals for meat. Vermeer often uses a picture within a picture; unlike his work, the emptiness of Brack's space is haunting and alludes to the horrors of the Holocaust of the Second World War.

Compare Johannes Vermeer's *A lady standing at a virginal* from the National Gallery, London, with Brack's *The block*. Describe the painted surfaces in each work. Comment on the composition. Is there a focal point? Locate all the rectangles within both works. Compare the underlying geometric structure of both.

The main problem is to find a satisfactory balance between what is to be omitted and what is to be included. There must be no detail in the painting which does not make a direct and essential contribution to the idea.

— John Brack, CAE Discussion Group Notes: 'Brack on Brack'.

What do you think Brack may have deliberately omitted from *The block*? Why?

John Brack

The block 1954

oil on canvas

59.0 x 71.5 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented through The Art Foundation of

Victoria by Dr Joseph Brown, AO, OBE,

Honorary Life Benefactor, 1999

© Helen Brack

Johannes Vermeer

Dutch 1632–1675

A lady standing at a virginal 1670–72

oil on canvas

51.7 x 45.2 cm

National Gallery, London

Purchased, 1892

**John Brack***Inside and outside (The shop window)* 1972

oil on canvas

164.0 x 130.5 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased, 1973

© Helen Brack

Brack has composed this image using ambiguous pictorial space to fuse what is inside and what is outside the shop. He uses shadows and odd reflections of a looming figure in silhouette; a simple flat area, in contrast to the visually busy lower part of the composition filled with goods from a shop that sells hotel and restaurant catering equipment. There is an intriguing aspect to this work in that the figure is a self-portrait which is repeated, distorted and elongated in the surface of the objects.

How does John Brack consider the pattern-making aspects of the design?

How does he create the solid geometry of repeated saucepan sets and steel ice-cream servers?

What three-dimensional objects and spaces contrast with John Brack's flat figure?

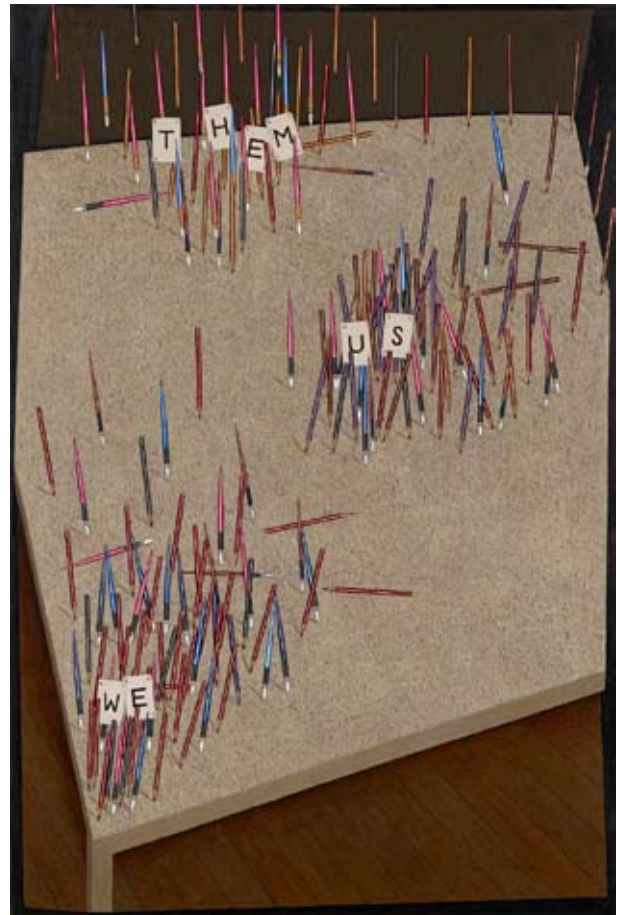
Locate the shop-keeper in the top left-hand corner of the work. What does this figure bring to the picture that would otherwise be missed?

Count how many figures of John Brack are reflected in the shiny objects.

Art-making activity

Find a shopfront close to where you live that you feel has a mood or atmosphere you'd like to capture. Take a photograph or create a video clip of this place. Describe the shop in words. Produce a small sketch of this shop. You may also produce a small soundscape as well.

Display your responses together and ask your class to describe to you the mood you have tried to capture. Did anyone coincidentally select the same place? Discuss these differing interpretations. Did your work convey to others what you intended, if not, does it matter?



LATER WORKS

The Unstill Life series

John and Helen Brack travelled to Europe in 1972. Two years later Brack used the postcards he collected on this trip as subject matter for paintings, especially those cards depicting objects produced by ancient cultures. Brack also incorporated the influence of the Belgian surrealist René Magritte. During this late period of his career, Brack produced a new series of paintings focusing on the history of past civilisations, conflict and violence. In these complex works he shows control of space and creates tense and confronting visual conundrums that represent military forces or human interaction. His compositions are intricately balanced and accurately painted using compasses, rulers and stencils to construct images of painstaking precision.

Consider why the artist uses pencils. What might they symbolise?

Brack endeavoured to multiply the levels of meaning in these later pictures. He creates intentional ambiguity using metaphor and irony. Brack noticed:

In the museums at the time ... all of the thousands of visitors ... were much more interested in the postcards at the front counter than in looking at the real thing. What was characteristic of those postcards was that they had been altered to make them pretty. That struck me as an amusing irony. It was not until a couple of years after that I felt I could make use of the postcards ... both to make a picture in which the colours that had been added to them acted against each other, and as a sort of tribute to ancient art.

Interview, James Gleeson, 29 November 1978.

John Brack
Watching the flowers 1990–91
oil on canvas
137.5 x 107.0 cm
Private collection, Melbourne
© Helen Brack

John Brack
We, Us, Them 1983
oil on canvas
183.4 x 122.4 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Mr Philip Russell, Fellow, 1983
© Helen Brack



John Brack
Souvenirs 1976
 oil on canvas
 130.0 x 97.0 cm
 Private collection, Melbourne
 © Helen Brack

Why might some people prefer reproductions, internet images and virtual galleries to the experience of 'real' works of art?

Locate an image of the *Bust of Queen Nefertiti*, New Kingdom, c.1340 BC, from the Egyptian Museum, Berlin. Notice how John Brack has incorporated this antiquity in his painting *Souvenirs*.

In this work, why do you think Brack may have placed all the 'heavy' and 'important' antiquities on the top of the knives and forks and only one postcard image at the bottom?

Is this composition balanced as an overall design? Could this arrangement of objects really balance like this in reality?

The allegorical reading of many of these pictures is simply enough. We are taken over by Them, and pushed out; but then Them becomes Us, as we realise we are all the same; and this cycle of aggression, colonisation and assimilation is perpetual.

— Ted Gott, *A Question of Balance*, Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2000.

Consider the quotation by Ted Gott; do you agree that the work suggests that the takeover cycle is perpetual? Give evidence for your point of view.

What are the visual tensions in the work?

What is most eye-catching about this painting? Compare the monochromatic background with the focal point.

What is the most visually effective aspect of this work?



Art: Compositional exercises – balance

Adjust the joints of a wooden mannikin to create a range of poses. Once you have selected a pose, use a single light in a darkened room to create a consistent light source. Draw the mannikin using line and tone to create form. Photocopy this drawing several times and create a composition by cropping, linking and overlapping these photocopied motifs to balance your composition. Alternatively, you may wish to create cardboard cutout stencils to repeat this motif or scan your drawing and manipulate it using a digital manipulation program like Photoshop to create a visually dynamic composition.

Cansu Yildiz from Mt Hira College sets up her still life inspired by John Brack

Inspired by John Brack, you may wish to extend your composition by adding playing cards, scissors, cutlery, museum postcards or pencils to create a balanced design. Find objects you feel have special meaning and add these to make the imagery more personal.

Consider the symbolism of each of these objects. What connotations or associations come to mind?

Imagine how you could balance or topple the objects as you manipulate them. Think about how this tension between order and disorder could inspire a work of art.

Students are encouraged to make their own statement, rather than merely copying John Brack's technique.



RESPONDING TO JOHN BRACK: CURRICULUM ACTIVITIES

Exhibition analysis task for senior students

VCE Studio Art

Observe the exhibition space and record your observations about the lighting, hanging height, wall colour, graphic elements and layout of the exhibition.

NGV exhibition design scale models for *John Brack* 2009.

How has the curator arranged the works of art in the exhibition space? What does their placement in the exhibition say to you, the visitor, about John Brack's pictures?

Notice the use of the audio guide in the gallery. How does this influence the visitor experience? (You are able to download the audioguide from the gateway to this educational website)

How has the exhibition been promoted to the community, both at the National Gallery of Victoria and outside the Gallery to encourage visitors to attend?

Collect any articles that appear in the newspapers regarding the John Brack exhibition. Read the reviews from different critics and consider if the review is favourable or otherwise. Do you agree or disagree with the critic's review? Discuss and debate the reviews with your class.



Drama, Literacy and Visual Art activities Upper Primary and Early Secondary

Collins St, 5p.m. – Your street at 2pm

Explore *Collins St, 5p.m.* from a historical, social and artistic perspective. Through research and sharing of information, examine life in the 1950s and reflect on Brack's depiction of society at this time.

Select a busy precinct in your local area and investigate the built and natural environments contained within this area such as streets, shops, public buildings, parks and gardens and sporting grounds. Brainstorm the range of activities that make up daily life in this area such as shopping, watching and playing sport, visiting the doctor or dentist and so forth. Identify the people in this environment who engage in various activities at different or particular times of the day. Use a range of ways to capture and record this information including the use of digital cameras, mobile phones, electronic whiteboards and personal observations and sketching.

As a class, create a large-scale mural or series of streetscapes depicting this environment and the people who interact in this place at a particular time of the day, just as Brack has done with *Collins St, 5p.m.* Use a range of materials such as cardboard, tyvec or foamcore panels as support structures with painting, collage and mixed media to create the street scene and/or cityscape.

Write a dialogue based on your research which can then be performed in front of the mural or streetscape you have made. Improvise and invite spontaneous interaction by others in these dialogues.

Compare *Collins St, 5p.m.* with the artwork the class has created and consider how the characters interact.



John Brack
Study for Collins St 1955
oil on composition board
38.1 x 88.9 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, 1956 (3303-4)
© National Gallery of Victoria

John Brack
The lamp post 1955
pen and ink
37.5 x 23.0 cm
Private collection, Melbourne
© Helen Brack



TWO THEMATIC COMPARISONS

The car

I can recall the circumstances of this painting quite clearly. Walking in a suburban street one day the car passed me, and as it did so, the occupants looked out. This seemed to compose itself as a picture instantly, which I have found to be rare. Even then I had great difficulty in fitting the car into a rectangle in such a way that the faces would be at the right distance from the spectator i.e. close up.

— John Brack, CAE Discussion Group Art Notes.

The car itself is an unusual artistic framing device, the landscape is distant and the faces are dislocated from the ancient land. John Brack found suburban people going for their Sunday drive more interesting than the landscape they passed by; in contrast, the countryside appears dull and desolate.

How does John Brack show what is most important to him in this painting?

Brack has said of this work that he painted the background as 'remote and ancient'. How has he conveyed this idea visually?



Compare Brack's car with the work of Margaret Dodd, Eamon O'Toole, Tim Jones and Jon Campbell; artists who all critique the culture of the car. Is there anything humorous about their ideas?

How would you describe John Brack's painting in terms of his distinctive style in comparison with other artists?

John Brack

The car 1955

oil on canvas

41.0 x 102.2 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, 1956

© National Gallery of Victoria

Margaret Dodd

born Australian 1941

Grassed Holden 1972

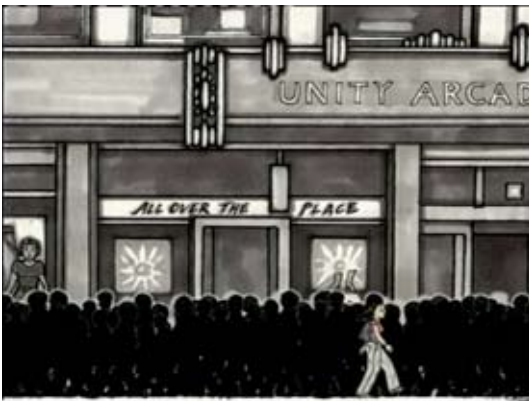
earthenware

19.9 x 43.8 x 21.2 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, 1974

© Courtesy of the artist



The city

View the still from the animation by Kate Beynon *Li Ji: Warrior girl*. Compare this with John Brack's *Collins St, 5p.m.*

Kate Beynon's new media work features a female protagonist moving through Melbourne in the early twenty-first century. In her past life she was an ancient Chinese heroine.

It is now over fifty years since John Brack painted *Collins St, 5p.m.* Beynon's work is loosely influenced by Brack, but it also reflects how much has changed culturally in Melbourne during this time.

Speculate what Australian cities will be like in another fifty years.

Compare Kate Beynon's view of twenty-first-century Melbourne with John Brack's view of Melbourne in the 1950s. What social messages are conveyed by each artist?

What cultures are represented in Kate Beynon's twenty-first-century Melbourne and what cultures are seen in John Brack's *Collins St, 5p.m.*? Explain why this may be the case.

Compare and contrast the emotions and feelings conveyed in both Kate Beynon's *Li Ji: Warrior girl* and John Brack's *Collins St, 5p.m.*

Why do you think there were so few women in Brack's painting? Describe how women's role in Australian society has changed with reference to John Brack's *Collins St, 5p.m.* and Kate Beynon's *Li Ji: Warrior girl*. You will need to research what was happening in the Australian workforce in the 1950s in terms of gender, pay rates and the type of work women usually did as evidence for your answer.

John Brack

Collins St, 5p.m. 1955
oil on canvas

114.6 x 162.9 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, 1956

© National Gallery of Victoria

Kate Beynon

born Hong Kong 1970,
arrived in Australia 1974

Li Ji: Warrior girl 2000

Still from colour video transferred to digital

betacam, sound

14 min 35 sec

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased through the NGV Foundation

with the assistance of the Joan Clemenger

Endowment, Governor, 2001

© Courtesy of the artist