

ICONIC 19th CENTURY AUSTRALIAN ARTWORK TO BE RESTORED

Frederick McCubbin's *The North wind*



The National Gallery of Victoria and Bank of America Merrill Lynch today launched restoration work on Australian Impressionist artist Frederick McCubbin's *The North wind*, 1891.

Tony Ellwood, Director, NGV, said: "We're delighted to be able to restore a major work by Frederick McCubbin, one of Australia's most beloved Impressionist artists, thanks to generous support from Bank of America Merrill Lynch.

"This significant work, acquired by the NGV in 1941 through the Felton Bequest, has an intriguing story to tell. Previous restorations compromised McCubbin's original work and it will now be restored as closely as possible to its original state. The information acquired during this project will offer a lasting contribution to the field of technical art history and the care of McCubbin's work.

"I look forward to seeing this important work return to display upon the project's completion," said Mr Ellwood.

Kevin Skelton, CEO and country executive for Bank of America Merrill Lynch in Australia, commented: "The Art Conservation Project is a global initiative by Bank of America Merrill Lynch and involves the restoration of art works in 25 countries.

"This year, we have partnered with the National Gallery of Victoria and are delighted to see the restoration of an iconic piece such as McCubbin's *The North wind*. As the year progresses, we hope to uncover the most intricate details of how McCubbin created his masterpiece and look forward to sharing this information with art enthusiasts across Australia."

Frederick McCubbin was born in Melbourne in 1855 and developed a fondness for drawing at an early age. He studied at the National Gallery's School of Painting from 1877 with Tom Roberts, winning a number of student prizes. In 1885 McCubbin and Roberts led *plein-air* painting expeditions to Box Hill, Mentone and later, Heidelberg – rural areas close to Melbourne – giving birth to a distinctive school of Australian landscape painting, sometimes known as the 'Heidelberg School'. *The North wind* is an iconic work from this period and reflects McCubbin's widely-revered imagery of everyday people at work and rest, capturing the spirit of the Australian bush.

Prior to entering the NGV's collection in 1941 *The North wind* was subjected to significant restorations that altered the presentation of the artist's original work. These included a failed attempt to clean its surface,

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followed by considerable over-painting of McCubbin's original composition. There is also evidence to suggest that the format of the picture has been modified and the original frame removed.

The conservation project will incorporate historical scholarship and technical analysis, including infrared and UV light photographs and x-rays, to identify the extent and nature of the materials to be removed from the original surface. This will involve a survey of other works by McCubbin from the same period to look for patterns of pigment use. Due to the similarity of the over-paint's chemical makeup to McCubbin's original work, and the duration of time since its application, it is already understood that the treatment required will be complex and intricate, making this a difficult and time-intensive restoration.

Following the removal of additional material, reconstruction of the aged surface will take place to present a sympathetic and respectful rendering of McCubbin's original composition. A replica frame will be constructed for the conserved painting, the style of which will be drawn from an original period example known to have been chosen by the artist. The full restoration project is expected to be completed by the end of 2014.

Since 2010, Bank of America Merrill Lynch's Art Conservation Project has provided grants to museums and cultural institutions for 57 projects in 25 countries. *The North wind* is the second piece of Australian art to be restored by the bank, following the conservation of William Charles Piquenit's *The Flood In the Darling* with the Art Gallery of NSW in 2012.

Michael Varcoe-Cocks, Head of Conservation, NGV, will be authoring a blog and documenting the restoration progress through detailed descriptions and images. Follow the restoration online at ngv.vic.gov.au.

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Project Sponsor: Bank of America Merrill Lynch

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Image caption:

Frederick McCubbin

Australian 1855–1917

The North wind 1891

oil on canvas on plywood

91.9 x 152.3 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Felton Bequest, 1941