

An impressionistic landscape painting featuring a prominent, gnarled tree branch extending from the top center towards the right. The background is a mix of dark brown and blue tones, suggesting a sky or dense foliage. The foreground is dominated by warm, golden-brown and ochre colors, with visible brushstrokes creating a textured, sunlit ground. The overall style is characteristic of Australian Impressionism.

# She-Oak and Sunlight Australian Impressionism

2 April – 22 August

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**Iso Rae**  
*Young girl, Étapes* (c. 1892)  
oil on canvas  
105.5 x 59.5 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Purchased with funds donated by Krystyna Campbell-Pretty  
AM and Family, Professor Graham Peirson and Christine  
Peirson and the Norma Atwell Bequest, 2020





# SHE-OAK AND SUNLIGHT: AUSTRALIAN IMPRESSIONISM LEARNING RESOURCE

LEVELS 5–10

## OVERVIEW

This resource provides students with a comprehensive introduction to Australian Impressionism. It includes information about the movement's history and context, key artists, and the natural environment integral to their work, and guiding questions on selected works from the NGV exhibition *She-oak and Sunlight: Australian Impressionism*.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify and connect Australian Impressionism to a wider cultural, historical and social context, including the relationships between Impressionist artists and the significance of the places they worked
- Analyse and interpret themes, concepts and ideas in the work of Australian Impressionist artists and discuss how they are expressed in selected key artworks
- Identify and describe sources of inspiration and the important influence of the natural world in the Australian Impressionist movement
- Evaluate the relationship between Australian Impressionism and the stories, cultures and experiences of First Nations peoples.

### Tom Roberts

*Coming South 1886*

oil on canvas

63.5 x 52.2 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Gift of Colonel Aubrey H. L. Gibson (Rtd) in memory of John and Anne Gibson, settlers (1887), 1967





## LINKS TO THE VICTORIAN CURRICULUM

### VISUAL ARTS

- Analyse how ideas and viewpoints are expressed in artworks and how they are viewed by audiences (VCAVAR038)
- Identify and connect specific features of visual artworks from different cultures, historical and contemporary times, including artworks by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (VCAVAR039)

### HISTORY

- Levels 5 and 6: Significant contributions of individuals and groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and migrants, to changing Australian society (VCHHK096)
- Levels 9 and 10: Intended and unintended causes and effects of contact and extension of settlement of European power(s), including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (VCHHK134)

**Claude Monet**

*Rough weather at Étretat* (1883)

(Gros Temps à Étretat)

oil on canvas

65.0 x 81.0 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Felton Bequest, 1913

# 1. CONTEXT

## 1.1 WHAT IS IMPRESSIONISM?

During the nineteenth century, the term Impressionism referred to a type of art that was fresh and painterly (a loose style of painting where the brushstrokes are visible) with an informal sketch-like quality. It was applied to the work of some artists who painted en plein air (a French term for outdoors) and was widely used to describe the work of a growing number of artists from many parts of the world including England, the United States, Italy and Australia.

Today, however, Impressionism is often more narrowly associated with French Impressionism, a movement comprising French plein-air artists who worked in and around Paris in the 1860s and 1870s, including Claude Monet (1840 - 1926), Alfred Sisley (1839 - 1899) and Camille Pissarro (1830 - 1903). Their painting style incorporated bold, visible brushstrokes and a sense of spontaneity. French Impressionism is also commonly associated with bright chromatic colours and broken brushwork, making it quite distinct from the academic style that was more widely practised and understood in the early nineteenth century.

The Impressionist movement took shape in Australia when artists such as Frederick McCubbin (1855 - 1917), Tom Roberts (1856 - 1931), Arthur Streeton (1867 - 1943), Charles Conder (1868 - 1909), Jane Sutherland (1853 - 1928) and Clara Southern (1860 - 1940) started painting en plein air. Australian Impressionist artists were interested in French plein-air painters' work and techniques, but also in producing paintings that looked 'distinctly Australian'. These artists painted life in the city and the bush, and at coastal sites, all easily accessible on the newly developed suburban rail network.

Many Australian Impressionists were influenced by the European Impressionists, after having trained, worked and travelled in Europe for many years. Those who returned to Australia during the late nineteenth century brought with them their firsthand experiences of international art and the plein-air movement.



### WARM-UP QUESTIONS

- What do you already know about Impressionism? Does the name of this movement give you some insights into what sort of work you might see?
- What are the similarities between French Impressionism and Australian Impressionism? What are the differences?
- What insights about Australian life can we gain from looking at the works of Australian Impressionist artists? Why do you think they are an important part of Australian history? What might be missing from these representations of Australian life?

**Arthur Streeton**  
*Evening with bathers* 1888  
oil on canvas  
40.8 x 76.4 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Bequest of Sunday Reed, 1982



## 1.2 EN PLEIN AIR

En plein air is a French term meaning 'in the open air'. It is used to describe the practice of working outdoors, rather than in the studio.

Impressionist artists often painted en plein air to observe and record the light, colour and atmosphere of their subjects. This frequently involved painting very quickly, using a direct painting style, to create an impression of changing effects, such as sunlight or weather.

The practice of making oil sketches en plein air can be traced back as early as the seventeenth century to Claude Lorrain, a French painter. In Australia, earlier artists from the colonial period (1788–1850), such as John Glover and Eugene von Guérard, also made oil sketches of the landscape en plein air, but these sketches were made as preparatory work for paintings that were completed in the studio.

In Europe, it was not until the nineteenth century that oil sketches made en plein air became valued and exhibited as finished paintings in their own right. It was very popular in France to spend your leisure time in the countryside and, while doing so, many artists began to make small, rapidly executed paintings en plein air to record transient light and colour effects in the landscape.

The act of painting en plein air gained momentum in Melbourne after Tom Roberts returned from Europe in 1885 and set up an artists' camp for painting at Box Hill, outside the city. While it had gained popularity in Europe, in nineteenth-century Australia, plein-air painting was still often looked down upon by art critics.

### GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Research and discuss the development of the plein-air painting movement internationally and in Australia in the nineteenth century.
- How did the practice of working en plein air to produce a finished painting differ from more traditional approaches to painting the landscape?
- What practical challenges might working en plein air have presented to artists?



**Tom Roberts**

*'Evening, when the quiet east flushes faintly at the sun's last look'* (1887-1888)

oil on canvas

50.8 x 76.4 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

W. H. Short Bequest, 1944

## 1.3 MARVELLOUS MELBOURNE

Australian Impressionism emerged and flourished in Melbourne in the 1880s. Conversations surrounding the development of a sense of national identity for non-Indigenous Australians was beginning to gain momentum, and a demand for art and literature that told stories of life in this country was evolving. At the time, 'Australia' was still a geographical concept rather than a political reality, as the colonies weren't united as one nation until 1901. Melbourne was the wealthiest city in the world, with many elements that supported the development of Australian Impressionism:

- A booming economy
- A surge in the sense of national identity
- Increasing cultural sophistication
- A rise in leisure time and activities
- Artists connected to the latest international art and ideas through trade and travel.

Large numbers of immigrants had been moving to Melbourne since the start of the gold rush in 1851. However, in the decade between 1881 and 1891, the population of Melbourne almost doubled, rapidly growing from 268,000 to 473,000. For the first time, the Australian-born population outnumbered the immigrant population, leading to a surge in national feeling. The booming economy created a mood of optimism in the city; land speculators made large amounts of money and there was a massive increase in building activity.

Melbourne's economy was also boosted by trade. Ships arrived laden with an extensive range of goods, including fabrics designed by London company Liberty, fine porcelain and art journals. On the return trip they were weighed down with wool bales, sacks of wheat, beef and mutton (the export of which had been made possible by the development of mechanical refrigeration plants). Melbourne, the 'Queen City of the South' boasted the busiest port in the country. The energy and optimism of the city led to it being christened 'Marvellous Melbourne' by visiting English journalist George Sala.

### GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Look closely. What do you notice about the light in this painting?
- How has Roberts suggested the climate, the time of day and the season here?
- Do you recognise any of the buildings in this painting? How has this corner of Collins Street/Spring Street changed?
- How has Roberts captured the burgeoning atmosphere of Melbourne? Can you see any symbols that suggest progression and development?

#### Tom Roberts

*By the Treasury* (1889)

oil on wood panel

23.6 x 14.2 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased through the NGV Foundation

by The Hugh D. T. Williamson Foundation,

Founder Benefactor





# 1.4 IDENTITY

By 1891, Australia was a highly urbanised society, with two-thirds of the population living in cities. However, citizens increasingly located their origins in the bush; art, literature and popular culture often focused on images and stories of the bush and on rural and pioneer subjects. Australian agriculture became tied to a collective sense of national identity for non-Indigenous Australians. It was widely considered that non-Indigenous Australians' collective character was founded on not being afraid of hard work and enjoying the freedom of being in the open air.

However, these nationalist ideas and values – reflected in Australian Impressionist works – must be called into question. 'Narrative building' paintings such as Tom Roberts' *Shearing the rams*, 1890, depict mostly white men working the land with a focus on 'strong masculine labour'. In reality, many of Australia's agricultural workers were unpaid Aboriginal people (and the land had only been recently colonised). Aboriginal people were almost invisible in Australian art; excluding them from these paintings hid the dark and violent impact of colonialism on their lives and culture.

Women were also rarely represented, and when they did appear, it was usually in a secondary role that reinforced the idea that a woman's life revolved around home and family.

Read more about Tom Roberts's *Shearing the rams* on pp. 12-13 or in the NGV Art Journal 19 article '[Tom Roberts's Shearing the rams: the hidden tradition](#)'.

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Identify a range of factors that contributed to the growth of nationalism in the 1880s.
- Why do you think the bush and bush life are often viewed as distinctly Australian when most Australians live in cities?
- What ideas and values about Australian culture, history and identity do these paintings by Roberts and McCubbin communicate? How?
- Think about the time and context in which these paintings were made. Did these ideas and values represent the experiences of all Australians? Whose perspective is missing?
- What relevance do the ideas and values about Australia and Australian life, evident in the paintings, have for contemporary audiences?
- What role do artworks, including paintings, poetry and literature, play in defining national identity within a culture?
- Do you think national and cultural identity is something that can be defined?

### Tom Roberts

*A break away!* 1891  
oil on canvas 137.3 × 167.8 cm  
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide  
Elder Bequest Fund 1899  
Photo: AGSA  
Art Gallery of South Australia

### Frederick McCubbin

*Down on his luck* 1889  
oil on canvas  
145.0 × 183.3 × 14.0 cm (framed)  
State Art Collection, Art Gallery  
of Western Australia, Perth  
Purchased, 1896





## 1.5 THE 9 BY 5 IMPRESSION EXHIBITION

In 1889 the Australian Impressionists held an exhibition in Melbourne. They called it the *9 by 5 Impression Exhibition* because many of the 183 'impressions' measured 9 inches by 5 inches (the same size as a cigar-box lid). The exhibition featured plein-air oil paintings of landscapes, beach scenes, urban views and some figure subjects. Most of the works were painted on board, but others were on cigar-box lids collected from tobacconists, canvases and wax sculpted panels. One was in bronze. They were mostly presented in simple, standardised panel frames rather than more conventional gilt frames.

The *9 by 5 Impression Exhibition* reflected the artists' awareness of international art and artists, and a desire for their work to be seen in that broader context. Echoing the aims of the French Impressionists, the artists wanted to create 'first records' of fleeting effects in nature such as the weather, time of day or the season. They worked quickly and using broad strokes of colour and tone, giving the works a fresh sketch like quality.

The exhibition attracted enormous interest and its preview was well attended by the press, the literary community, socialites, collectors and the artists' friends. The paintings were affordable, with most priced at between one and three guineas. Despite the exhibition's popularity, some critics were shocked by the paintings and wrote outraged articles declaring that the works looked unfinished. The artists wrote a lengthy response to the papers, defending their aims and challenging academic European conventions.

Only about one-third of the paintings survive today. However, the vivid impressions that these paintings create of a moment in time, and the lively commentaries that surrounded them, ensure that the *9 by 5 Impression Exhibition* remains a celebrated event in Australian art history.

### GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What is the first thing you notice about these paintings and why?
- The *9 by 5 Impression Exhibition* received critical reviews in the newspapers. Write your own review expressing your feelings towards the works. Support your views with details and elements of the paintings as examples.
- The critics may have been outraged by the exhibition but it was incredibly popular. Who do you think the paintings appealed to and why?



**Tom Roberts**

*She-oak and sunlight* (1889)

oil on wood panel

30.4 x 30.1 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Jean Margaret Williams Bequest, K. M. Christensen

and A. E. Bond Bequest, Eleanor M. Borrow Bequest,

The Thomas Rubie Purcell and Olive Esma Purcell

Trust and Warren Clark Bequest, 2019



## 1.6 AUSTRALIAN NARRATIVES: A LONGER HISTORY

Australian Impressionism is sometimes referred to as 'Australia's first school of art'. However, it exists within a far longer history and was not, by any means, Australia's first art movement. Acknowledging Australia's shared history is central to the timeline of Australian Impressionism.

Australia's First Nations peoples are custodians of the oldest continuing culture on Earth, having thrived as owner-occupiers of the land for more than 70,000 years. Even while experiencing harrowing changes in their culture and community as European settlers colonised the land, First Nations peoples continued to make art enriched by their innate connection to and knowledge of Country. These visual representations of Country are an integral part of their culture and spiritual beliefs.

William Barak (born Beruk) (1824–1903) was born on Wurundjeri Country at Brushy Creek, near present-day Croydon, Melbourne. He was an Aboriginal artist, an important ngurungaeta (head man) for the Wurundjeri people and a cultural leader for Victoria's Indigenous community. He was an influential spokesman for Aboriginal land rights and the continuation of his culture. Barak worked to conserve his knowledge of the culture and ceremonies of the Wurundjeri people throughout his life.

In *Untitled (Ceremony)*, 1900, dancers, women, children, Elders and animals fill the entire drawing. There is no horizon line or borders in the work (or in that of many Indigenous artists of the time). This emphasises the strong connection between First Peoples and their land. Former NGV senior curator of Indigenous art, Judith Ryan, said 'there is no separation between land and sky or between the artists' identity and their Country. The artists are the land they paint.'<sup>1</sup> This composition is very different from the landscape paintings produced by Australian Impressionist artists, which are painted from their own visual perspective.

### GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Why is it problematic to call Australian Impressionism 'Australia's first school of art'?
- Barak used his painting to record important cultural knowledge for future generations. Look carefully at *Untitled (Ceremony)* and use the visual clues in the work to discuss what it communicates about Australian history and culture.
- How does hanging William Barak's work alongside Australian Impressionist work challenge existing perspectives on nineteenth and twentieth-century Australian culture?



**William Barak**  
*Untitled (Ceremony)* 1900  
earth pigments, watercolour and pencil on paper  
50.5 x 63.0 cm (image and sheet)  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
The Warren Clark Bequest, 2001



# 2. FRIENDS AND RIVALS

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Many of the Australian Impressionists, such as Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton, Charles Conder, Jane Sutherland, Clara Southern, Frederick McCubbin and Jane Price, were lifelong friends who met in their youth. These artists inspired and influenced each other. Sometimes there were disagreements, and on occasion they were rivals. Some of these artists, including Jane Sutherland, Louis Abrahams, Tom Roberts and Frederick McCubbin, met as students at the National Gallery School. Friendships between artists were also made during trips to Europe.

### WARM-UP QUESTIONS

- What do you already know about Impressionism? Does the name of this movement give you some insights into what sort of work you might see?
- What are the similarities between French Impressionism and Australian Impressionism? What are the differences?
- What insights about Australian life can we gain from looking at the works of Australian Impressionist artists? Why do you think they are an important part of Australian history? What might be missing from these representations of Australian life?



**Arthur Streeton**  
*Butterflies and blossoms* (1889); (1890) {dated}  
oil on canvas on composition board  
45.6 x 66.0 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Purchased with the assistance of a special grant  
from the Government of Victoria, 1979





## 2.2 TOM ROBERTS

Tom Roberts (1856–1931) was born in England and moved to Melbourne in 1869 when he was thirteen years old. He enrolled at the National Gallery School in 1874 at age eighteen, and returned to London to improve his skill as an artist, attending the Royal Academy School from 1881 to 1885. He travelled in Europe during his vacations and met other artists, who introduced him to new ideas. When Roberts returned to Australia in 1885, he shared his experiences of European Impressionism with his fellow artists, and ultimately had a profound influence on the development of Impressionism in Australia.

Although during his lifetime much of Roberts's income was earned as a portraitist, today he is best known for his large-scale, narrative paintings such as *Big picture*, 1903, which Roberts was commissioned to paint for the opening of the first federal parliament of Australia. He returned to England to complete the work in 1901. *Big picture* is on permanent display at Parliament House in Canberra.<sup>2</sup>

### Ramon Casas

*Tom Roberts* 1883

oil on canvas on wood panel

32.7 x 24.5 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Marie Therese mcveigh Bequest, 2005



## SHEARING THE RAMS

*Shearing the rams* is based on Roberts's visit to a sheep station in southern New South Wales. It was important for Roberts to accurately paint every detail in his bigger paintings by close observation, which was seemingly at odds with the abstracted impressions that were being celebrated by Impressionist artists at the time. For *Shearing the rams*, he made many sketches and even set up his canvas in the woolshed. The final artwork, finished off in his Melbourne studio, is a painstaking record of the sheep farmers' way of life.

There were immediate calls for the painting to enter a public gallery, with an article in the Sydney press stating, '[I]f our national gallery trustees were in the least patriotic, they would purchase it'.<sup>3</sup> Some art critics argued that the work didn't fit the conventional definition of 'high art'. Nevertheless, the wool industry was Australia's greatest export industry and it was a theme that many Australian people could identify with, making *Shearing the rams* a painting well-loved and recognised by many Australians.

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

Look closely at Roberts's *Shearing the rams*:

- How would you describe the mood or atmosphere? What do you notice about the colours? How does this contribute to the ambience of the scene?
- What would you hear if you were inside this painting? What would you smell?
- What clues can you find in the painting that suggest the climate?
- Look carefully at different parts of the painting. What are the values and narratives it presents? Are these values still relevant in Australian society today?
- The sheep farmer's life was a theme that many Australians could identify with in the 1890s, as the wool industry was Australia's most important industry at the time. Can you think of a theme that modern-day Australians might identify with?



**Tom Roberts**  
*Shearing the rams* 1890  
oil on canvas on composition board  
122.4 x 183.3 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Felton Bequest, 1932





## 2.3 ARTHUR STREETON

Arthur Streeton (1867–1943) was born at Mount Duneed, Victoria. He was enrolled in night classes for sketching at the National Gallery School, but never received formal instruction on painting and was largely self-taught. Roberts invited young Streeton to join the artists' camp at Box Hill and, with the influence of his artist friends, Streeton's art blossomed into an early maturity.

Even though Streeton was almost wholly self-taught, his paintings showed new vision and brought him fame and success as a young artist. His *Golden Summer, Eaglemont*, 1889, painted as a twenty-year-old, was taken to Paris in 1892, and won Australia's first honourable mention and a gold medal at the prestigious Paris Salon exhibition.

**Tom Roberts**

*Smikey Streeton age 24* 1891

oil on canvas

45.7 x 35.7 cm

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Purchased 1945

Photo: Jenni Carter, AGNSW

Photo: AGNSW



## 'THE PURPLE NOON'S TRANSPARENT MIGHT'

'*The purple noon's transparent might*', 1896, takes its title from a poem about the natural world called 'Stanzas written in dejection, near Naples' by Percy Bysshe Shelley. Streeton was inspired to create the work by the view of the Blue Mountains from the Hawkesbury River. He painted it in two days 'during a shade temperature of 108 degrees', in a state of 'artistic intoxication with thoughts of Shelley in my mind'.<sup>4</sup> This painting is an important early example of Streeton's blue and gold Australian landscape, a colour combination which later became the signature palette for Australian landscape paintings.

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

Look closely at Streeton's '*The purple noon's transparent might*':

- What season do you think is depicted? Find some visual clues from the painting, such as the colour of the sky and the riverbed, to support your idea.
- Describe the colour scheme used by Streeton for the sky and the river without using the word 'blue'.
- Find a copy of 'Stanzas written in dejection, near Naples' by Percy Bysshe Shelley<sup>5</sup> online and compare it to Streeton's work. What qualities do they share?
- If you had to give the work a new name, what would you call it?

Watch a video with NGV Head of Conservation, Michael Varcoe-Cocks, discussing Arthur Streeton's work, '*The purple noon's transparent might*'.



**Arthur Streeton**  
'*The purple noon's transparent might*' 1896  
oil on canvas  
123.0 x 123.0 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Purchased, 1896





**(left)**  
**William Rothenstein**  
*Charles Conder* (c. 1891-1892)  
 oil on canvas  
 64.9 x 32.0 cm  
 National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
 Purchased, 1966

**(above)**  
**Charles Conder**  
*Coogee Bay* 1888  
 oil on cardboard  
 26.8 x 40.7 cm  
 National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
 Purchased with the assistance of a  
 special grant from the Government of  
 Victoria, 1979

## 2.4 CHARLES CONDER

Charles Conder (1868–1909) was born in London in 1868. He spent his childhood in India before returning to England in 1873 after his mother's death. Conder began his art career in Sydney in the 1880s. His early art tuition included night classes at the Art Society of New South Wales school, where he was taught by A. J. Daplyn, who was actively involved in the plein-air painting movement in Melbourne and Sydney.

In Sydney in 1888, Conder met Tom Roberts, and the pair began painting together at Coogee Beach. The following year, he joined Roberts and Streeton at their artists' camp in Heidelberg. Conder's paintings of the house would later appear in the *9 by 5 Impression Exhibition*. His style had a decorative lightness and colourfulness, which inspired and influenced his Australian Impressionist friends.

Conder's time with the group came to an end after seven years in Australia. He left for Europe in 1890, moving between France and England. He achieved fame in Europe; his works are widely featured in European collections.

### GUIDING QUESTIONS

Look closely at Conder's *Coogee Bay*, 1888:

- Describe the landscape. How has Conder used colour and light to convey the season and climate?
- What are the figures doing? What might they suggest about people's approach to the land and environment at the time?
- Conder painted *Coogee Bay* emphasising the decorative qualities of form and colour, while Roberts's *Holiday sketch at Coogee*, 1888, reflects his focus on the landscape's natural effects. Compare the two works. What similarities and differences can you find?





## 2.5 JANE SUTHERLAND

Jane Sutherland (1853–1928) was born in New York to Scottish parents and emigrated to Sydney in 1864 and later Melbourne in 1870. Jane Sutherland was a leading artist in Melbourne during the late nineteenth century, studying at the National Gallery School alongside McCubbin and Roberts.

Sutherland was able to live as an unmarried, working woman with the support and encouragement from her family to pursue a career as an artist. Other than working as a professional artist, teaching was also an important aspect of Sutherland's career. She shared a studio with Clara Southern at Grosvenor Chambers on Collins Street, where the pair painted and taught art. She sought out her own subject matter without attempting to follow the example of others.

Sutherland took plein-air sketching trips to Alphington, Templestowe and Box Hill with some of her contemporaries, Roberts, Streeton and Conder. However, as a woman she was unable to stay with the men at the campsites overnight, and instead made day journeys.

Sutherland suffered from a stroke around 1904, during the peak of her career. Her brother, William, helped with her movement after the stroke. However, after William's death in 1911 it became too difficult for her to continue painting and exhibiting.

### George Sutherland

*Jane Sutherland in Sutherland family album c.1880*

pencil sketch

State Library of Victoria, Melbourne



## FIELD NATURALISTS

Sutherland was a member of the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria, an organisation that explores natural history through excursions into the bush and which inspires school children's interest in nature. *Field naturalists*, c. 1896, shows her love for the Australian bush; the artist uses different shades of green, yellow, pink and purple to depict the different plants and trees. On the left, three young field naturalists are standing in water barefoot, possibly inspecting something that they have just discovered.

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Describe the scene in Jane Sutherland's painting *Field naturalists*. Come up with a story about what is happening in the painting using the visual clues to support your ideas.
- Sutherland's paintings were often priced at a fraction of the value of those of her male peers. During an 1894 exhibition, Sutherland's work, *To the Dandenong*, 1888, had an asking price of eighteen guineas, while David Davies sold his piece, *Moonrise*, 1894, for seventy-five pounds. What might be some possible reasons for this price difference?
- Research the history of gender pay gap. How was Sutherland's experience similar to or different from the experience of women in the art industry today?



**Jane Sutherland**  
*Field naturalists* (c. 1896)  
oil on canvas  
80.9 x 121.3 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Gift of Mrs E. H. Shackell, 1962





**Clara Southern**  
*An old bee farm* (c. 1900)  
oil on canvas  
69.1 x 112.4 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Felton Bequest, 1942

## 2.6 CLARA SOUTHERN

Clara Southern (1861–1940) was born at Kyneton, Victoria. Southern studied at the National Gallery School from 1883 to 1887. The Grosvenor Chambers studio she shared with Jane Sutherland was considered an important centre for the Australian Impressionism movement; Tom Roberts and Jane Price also had studios in the building later.

After her marriage to John Flynn in 1905, Southern moved to Warrandyte, Victoria, and established an artists' community there. Southern loved the area surrounding Warrandyte, frequently interpreting the bush in soft tonal colours. In her pastoral landscapes, women go about their tasks, merging into their environment with the colours of their clothes often reflecting that of the sky and the land.

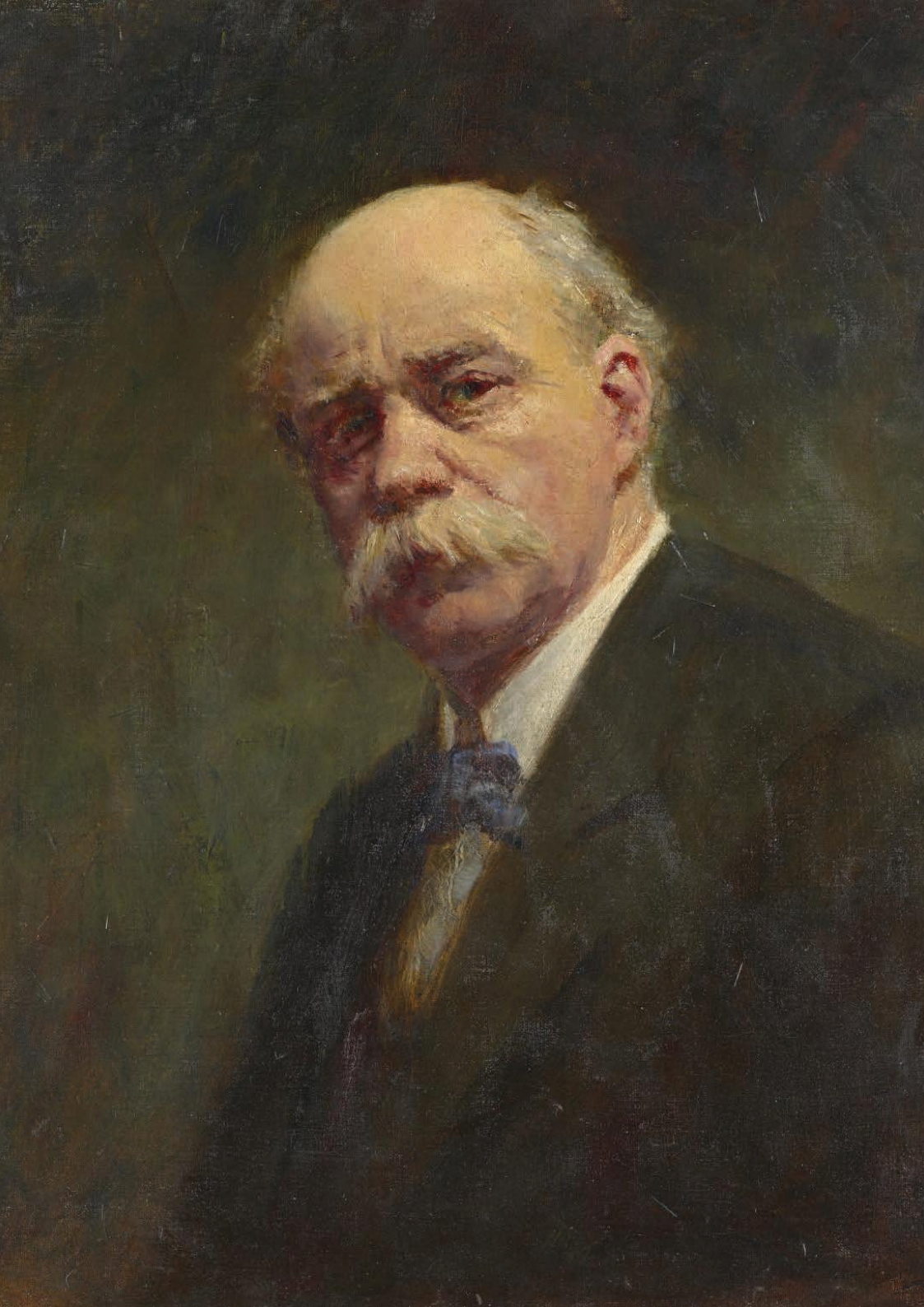
### ***AN OLD BEE FARM***

*An old bee farm*, c. 1900, was painted in Warrandyte. The soft colours used depict mist during twilight, with a rising winter moon in the background. The bee farm could symbolise the threat of industrialisation to the modern world, and sentimentality for the past and rural ways of life. While the work was generally appreciated, critics argued that Southern's technique in painting the figure was poor. This may have been influenced by her lack of experience in this area, as female artists weren't permitted to attend life classes until the following decade.

### **GUIDING QUESTIONS**

- What do you think *An old bee farm* is about?
- What do you think the figure is doing in this painting? What might Southern have been trying to tell the viewers with this figure?
- Looking at the outfit the figure in *An old bee farm* is wearing. What would it have been like painting en plein air in summer in the fashion of the era?





## 2.7 FREDERICK MCCUBBIN

Frederick McCubbin (1855–1917) was born and raised in Melbourne. McCubbin studied at the National Gallery School under a number of well-known artists, including Eugene von Guérard and George Folingsby. One of his fellow students was Tom Roberts. When Roberts returned from overseas in 1885, he and McCubbin led plein-air painting trips to Box Hill, Mentone and the Heidelberg area.

In 1888, McCubbin became instructor and master of the School of Design at the National Gallery, teaching several students who also became prominent Australian artists, including Charles Conder and Arthur Streeton. He later served as president of both the Victorian Artists' Society and the Australian Artists' Association.

Unlike many of his friends, McCubbin remained mostly in Melbourne throughout his life. During his only trip to Europe, in 1907, McCubbin gained exposure to works by European Impressionists, which inspired a shift in his later art towards freer, more abstracted brushwork and lighter colours.

**Frederick McCubbin**

*Self portrait* (c. 1913)

oil on canvas on composition board

61.0 x 51.0 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Felton Bequest, 1941



## THE PIONEER

McCubbin painted many large landscapes that aimed to capture life in Australia. *The pioneer*, c. 1904, reflects non-Indigenous Australian society's perspectives on national identity around the time of Federation. Painted en plein air in the bush at Mount Macedon, the work can be read as a story of European settlement in Australia. Each panel shows a scene in time: settlers making a life in the bush, clearing, building and raising a family, and the development of the city seen in the background of the work's third panel.

The three large-scale panels are called a triptych format, usually found in traditional religious art. By producing this work as a triptych, McCubbin elevated the status of the pioneer settlers within Australian art history.

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

Look closely at McCubbin's *The pioneer*:

- What is happening? What do you think McCubbin is trying to tell the viewer with this work?
- How can you tell that this painting is based in Australia, rather than Europe? Consider subject matter, figures and colour palette.
- The pioneer celebrated some of the ideas and values surrounding Australia and Australian life during the time of Federation. Identify some of the ideas and values presented in the painting. Are these ideas and values still relevant today?
- The pioneer was painted to celebrate Federation by telling a story of Australia. Describe the story represented by the three panels. Whose story is represented and whose story is missing from this narrative?



**Frederick McCubbin**  
*The pioneer* 1904  
oil on canvas  
225.0 x 295.7 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Felton Bequest, 1906





## 2.8 JANE PRICE

Jane Price (1860–1948) was born in England and studied at the South Kensington Art School, now known as the Royal College of Art, in London, before arriving in Sydney in 1880, and moving to Melbourne in 1882. Price painted en plein air and made regular painting day trips to the artists' camp at Eaglemont. She painted continually throughout her life. To support her practice Price worked as a governess, and was employed for a time to look after the children of Annie and Frederick McCubbin, who encouraged her artistic endeavours. Without a supportive family behind her, her time for making art was limited by the need to make a living in other ways, including painting studies of Australian wildflowers, which were reproduced as postcards. Price was a founding member of the Society of Women Painters in Sydney.

### ***CHILDREN PLAYING IN A LANDSCAPE***

Price used a high-keyed palette to produce the effect of luminosity within *Children playing in a landscape*, 1890. Depicted is a clear horizon line separating the sky and the land, with two children seen playing next to the water. This painting is a strong example of Price's painting technique of using short, wistful brushstrokes to produce the effect of a sunny day in the country.

### **GUIDING QUESTIONS**

- In Price's paintings, what do you notice about the horizon line? How does its placement influence the feel of the artworks?
- Price used bright colours such as pink and white in *Children playing in a landscape*. What do the colours make you think about when looking at the painting?
- What do you think the two figures might have been doing? Imagine what they might have been talking about and write an imagined dialogue between them.

#### **Jane R. Price**

*Children playing in a landscape* (c. 1888)

oil on canvas

30.5 x 62.5 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Gift of Andrée Fay Harkness through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2020





## 2.9 INA GREGORY

Alice 'Ina' Gregory (1874–1964) was born in East Melbourne. She studied at the National Gallery School for five years in the 1880s, and later attended classes run by artists E. Phillips Fox and Tudor St George Tucker at Charterisville in Ivanhoe. Gregory specialised in landscapes and garden views, which she exhibited at the Victorian Artists' Society. Gregory lived with her sister, Ada, at the back of their family home in St Kilda, in relative isolation.

The sisters aspired to 'a life intellectual and emotional'.<sup>6</sup> From 1938 to 1948 Gregory and Jane Price lived together, and the two artists absorbed themselves in a holistic, spiritual approach to nature and art, which was reflected on their canvases with themes of poetic inspiration. Gregory was a founding member of the Melbourne branch of the Theosophical Society.

**E. Phillips Fox**

*Ina Gregory* c. 1895

conte crayon on paper

41.7 × 30.7 cm

National Portrait Gallery, Canberra

Purchased, 2012

National Portrait Gallery



## CHARTERISVILLE

Gregory's *Charterisville*, 1890s, depicts the garden at Charterisville. It includes part of a building on the right and a small section of fence behind the flowers; bright colours of red, pink and yellow represent different types of flower in the garden. The painting's low-keyed palette is typical of works produced at Charterisville, with many of the school's artists using muted tones that captured the fleeting effects of twilight and the changing nature of modern Australian life.

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Gregory painted the flowers in *Charterisville* with dots and short lines in bright colours. Looks at this painting from a distance, then look at the details up close. What do you notice about the flowers?
- Looking at the colours used to depict the garden in *Charterisville*, which season do you think this painting is depicting?
- Can you imagine what you may smell and hear if you were inside this painting?



### Ina Gregory

*Charterisville* (1890s)

oil on canvas

23.5 x 22 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Gift of Krystyna Campbell-Pretty AM and Family  
through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts  
Program, 2020

© The Estate of Ina Gregory Georgina

# 3. ARTISTS' CAMPS

## 3.1 INTRODUCTION

*She-Oak and Sunlight: Australian Impressionism* highlights many of the significant sites where the Australian Impressionists worked en plein air. Some of the sites were known as 'camps' because the artists pitched their tents in the bush so that they could paint over a few days. These were in areas such as Box Hill, Heidelberg and Mentone, outside Melbourne.

Tom Roberts' *The artists' camp*, 1886, shows fellow artists Frederick McCubbin, who is drinking his billy tea, and Louis Abrahams, who is grilling chops over a fire of gum twigs. Roberts set up his easel nearby to capture his impression of the scene 'on the spot'.

### WARM-UP QUESTIONS

- What do you think some of the advantages might have been in setting up these camps and staying overnight?
- What changes in the environment do you think the artists would have been able to observe overnight? Consider changes to the light, colour and atmosphere.



**Tom Roberts**  
*The artists' camp* (1886)  
oil on canvas  
46.0 x 60.9 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Felton Bequest, 1943





## 3.2 BOX HILL

Although most people lived in the cities, it was the bush and bush life that was seen as uniquely Australian at the turn of the twentieth century. This idea exerted a powerful influence on Australia's emerging sense of national identity and was reflected in the work of many poets, writers and artists of the period, including the Australian Impressionists.

In 1882, a railway line opened and areas outside of Melbourne, such as Box Hill, became easily accessible to city-based artists. The natural bushland on a farmer's property at Box Hill was the site of the artists' first plein-air camp. During 1885 and 1886, this was the favoured painting site for McCubbin, Roberts and Louis Abrahams. Jane Sutherland visited them at Box Hill on weekends, painting works such as *Obstruction, Box Hill*, 1887.

McCubbin's direct experience of the bush at Box Hill is evident in his painting, *Lost*, 1886. Notice the bark peeling from the trunk of the eucalypt in the foreground, the dry grass, twiggy saplings and the work's blue-grey palette. McCubbin often liked to tell a story in his paintings. McCubbin was inspired by actual cases of children becoming lost in the Australian bush; the theme of the lost child was popular in literature and the news at the time.

**Frederick McCubbin**

*Lost* 1886

oil on canvas

115.8 x 73.9 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Felton Bequest, 1940





## GUIDED QUESTIONS

### ***LOST* – FREDERICK MCCUBBIN**

- What story do you think McCubbin is telling in this painting?
- What do you notice about the palette he has chosen to paint the bush and the figure?
- How would you describe this environment?
- What do you think McCubbin was trying to communicate about the Australian bush?

### ***OBSTRUCTION, BOX HILL* – JANE SUTHERLAND**

- How is the narrative here different from the one in McCubbin's *Lost*?
- What do you think this figure might be contemplating?
- What do you notice about the bush here? How is it different from the environment depicted in *Lost*?
- How does Sutherland use composition to comment on the changes occurring in the Australian bush?

**Jane Sutherland**  
*Obstruction* 1887  
oil on canvas  
Art Gallery of Ballarat, Victoria.  
L.J. Wilson Bequest Fund 1976





**Charles Conder**

*A holiday at Mentone* 1888

oil on canvas

46.2 x 60.8 cm

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

South Australian Government grant with the assistance

of Bond Corporation Holdings Limited through the

Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation, to mark the

Gallery's Centenary, 1981

## 3.3 MENTONE

The health-giving properties of sea air and of sea bathing prompted excursions to the bayside settlements. The artists travelled there by steamboat or train. In the summer of 1886–87 Roberts, McCubbin and Abrahams rented a cottage in Mentone, a beachside suburb about twenty kilometres from Melbourne. The newly developed suburb could be reached by railway and was described by developers as the 'Riviera of the South'.

Conder's *A Holiday at Mentone*, 1888, is an Impressionist celebration of Australian light and leisure. In the work, Conder expresses his delight in the intense blue sea and sky, the brilliant white sand, and people relaxing in the fresh sea air. He presents fashionable Melburnians promenading during a day trip to the Mentone seaside. Bathing took place behind the walls or enclosures, such as the baths visible to the right in the painting.

### GUIDED QUESTIONS

#### *A HOLIDAY AT MENTONE* – CHARLES CONDER

- Describe the environment. How has Conder used colour and light to convey season and climate?
- What sort of activities are the people engaged in?
- How might these activities convey a particular mood and atmosphere?
- What do you notice about the composition?



## 3.4 HEIDELBERG

Since 1891 the Australian Impressionist artists have commonly been known as the 'Heidelberg School', a name coined by the American art critic Sidney Dickinson. In reality, the painters did not belong to a 'school', nor did they share exactly the same goals. However, they did share close friendships and they painted together at sites such as Eaglemont and Box Hill.

The term the 'Heidelberg School' reflects only a brief moment in the careers of only some of the artists. Streeton, Conder and Roberts spent two summers in a farmhouse in Eaglemont painting the surrounding landscape. McCubbin visited but never painted in the area and others, such as Sutherland and Price, only made day trips to the camp.

It was in Eaglemont that Streeton painted some quintessential evocations of the dry summer landscape. The artists' working methods, painting in the open air, working quickly to capture the impression before the light and colours of the landscape changed, is evident in Streeton's *Near Heidelberg*, 1890.

### GUIDED QUESTIONS

#### ***NEAR HEIDELBERG* – ARTHUR STREETON**

- Describe the atmosphere that Streeton has captured in this painting.
- What do you notice about the details in the foreground?
- How might these dandelions and tiny eucalypts indicate the season?
- How has Streeton evoked temperature, light and the time of day through the palette and use of shadow?

**Arthur Streeton**  
*Near Heidelberg* 1890  
oil on canvas  
53.7 x 43.3 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Felton Bequest, 1943





## 3.5 SYDNEY AND NEW SOUTH WALES

Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton spent significant periods in Sydney living at Curlew Camp, an artists' camp. During this time, Sydney city life, the harbour and coastal surrounds became important subjects in their work.

In the 1890s, Melbourne experienced an economic depression. Roberts and Streeton joined the increasing numbers of Melburnians who headed to Sydney in search of new opportunities. Prices for wool and wheat fell dramatically and many people lost their money when the banks collapsed. The campaign for the right of women to vote gained momentum in the 1890s and was finally successful in New South Wales in 1902.

Sydney, which had been settled at the time of British arrival in 1788, didn't experience the building boom of the 1870s and 80s, and had quite a different character from Melbourne (which wasn't founded until 1835). The artists responded to the beauty of the city's natural setting on the harbour. They were captivated by Sydney's beaches, the coves on the harbour, the blue of the water and the activity of a busy maritime city. Sydney's climate provided perfect conditions for outdoor recreation, particularly around the harbour, with activities such as boating, picnicking, fishing and sea bathing. Like Melbourne, an extensive rail network had already been established, complemented by the ferries that plied the harbour.

### GUIDED QUESTIONS

#### **CIRCULAR QUAY – ARTHUR STREETON**

- What do you notice about the way that Streeton has used colour in this painting?
- What kind of impression does this city make?
- How does Streeton capture the sense of movement and activity on the harbour?
- Compare this work to the colours used by Tom Roberts to depict Melbourne in *By the Treasury*. How does the use of colour create two distinct cities?

#### **Arthur Streeton**

*Circular Quay* 1893

oil on wood panel

13.9 x 63.5 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased with the assistance of a special grant from the Government of Victoria, 1979

## NOTES

- 1 Sophie Gerhard with Hannah Presley, 'Australian Impressionism: a longer history', in Anne Gray and Angela Hesson (eds), *She-Oak and Sunlight: Australian Impressionism*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2021, p. 132.
- 2 Tom Roberts's Big Picture is officially titled *The opening of the first parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia by His Royal Highness the Duke of Cornwall and York, 9 May 1901*. Parliament of Australia, 'Tom Roberts' "Big Picture", Parliament of Australia, [https://www.aph.gov.au/Visit\\_Parliament/Art/Top\\_5\\_Treasures/Tom\\_Roberts\\_Big\\_Picture](https://www.aph.gov.au/Visit_Parliament/Art/Top_5_Treasures/Tom_Roberts_Big_Picture), accessed 8 Feb. 2021.
- 3 Viva [Edith Castilla], 'Melbourne gossip', *The Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, 19 July 1890, p. 145, see <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/163645496>, accessed 8 Feb. 2021.
- 4 National Gallery of Victoria, 'The purple noon's transparent might', NGV, Victorian Government, <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/3060/>, accessed 4 Feb. 2021.
- 5 Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Stanzas written in dejection, near Naples', *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45140/stanzas-written-in-dejection-near-naples>, accessed 5 Feb. 2021.
- 6 National Portrait Gallery, 'Ina Gregory, c. 1895', *National Portrait Gallery*, Australian Government, <https://www.portrait.gov.au/portraits/2012.24/ina-gregory/>, accessed 18 March 2021.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

- Anne Gray and Angela Hesson (eds), *She-Oak and Sunlight: Australian Impressionism*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2021.
- *NGV Magazine*, no. 27, Mar–Apr 2021, <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/ngvmagazine/issue-27-mar-apr-2021/>

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