

THE HEIDELBERG SCHOOL

by
Jennifer Eurell

The artists of the Heidelberg School produced some of Australia's most loved paintings. This essay looks at ideologies and practices that led up to their work, how they changed Australian painting and whether the Heidelberg School still has an influence on Australian artists.

The main artists involved with the Heidelberg School were Tom Roberts (1856-1931), Frederick McCubbin (1855-1917), Charles Conder (1868-1909) and Arthur Streeton (1867-1943) (Australian Dictionary of Biography 2010). The Heidelberg School was never a 'school', but a loose knit group of artists who painted in the Heidelberg area of Victoria around 1880s and 1890s. The men stayed in artists' camps, either camping or in cottages, at Box Hill, Eaglemont and Charterisville painting in *plein air* in weekends and over summer (Smith, B. 1991). Women artists of their acquaintance, notably Jane Sutherland, also visited the camps and painted in an impressionistic manner. They became known as the Australian Impressionists even though their work was not strictly the same as the French Impressionists who were more interested in colour theory and used a divided palette (Serle 1987).



*Charles Conder
Impressionists' camp 1889
oil on paper on cardboard
13.9 x 24.0 cm
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Source: <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au>*

This painting shows Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton in the old farmhouse at Eaglemont.

Although these artists worked in various genres, they became best known for their landscape paintings. Obviously, though, they were not the first painters to commit the Australian landscape to canvas, but the first to depict it with Australian vision.

Early artists in Australia were generally topographical or scientific illustrators, however even before settlement Sydney Parkinson recorded the repair of the beached *The Endeavour* in 1770 and created the first Australian landscape. The First Fleet arrived in 1787 and settled Sydney; then seven years later the first oil painting of an Australian scene was painted: Thomas Watling's *Sydney Cove*. (*Great Australian Paintings, 1991*). Watling was transported for forgery of bank notes, so it is not surprising that his paintings are meticulous recordings with outlined details of houses, stone fences and ships at anchor in the harbour. (Quartermain and Watkins, 1989).

In the early days of settlement the population thought of themselves as English with European culture in a strange land. It was obvious enough that the landscape was different to England and somewhat peculiar that this wasn't revealed by painters earlier than it was. It is understandable that there was no nationalism, or little history painting in the 18th and 19th centuries, because there just wasn't any European tradition to capture. In many ways Australia had to be invented, as well as absorbed.

Artists had trained in Europe so not only came with European techniques and ideals, but were catering to a market that expected a certain style of painting. Among the first to make an impact were John Glover (1767-1849), Conrad Martens (1801-1879), Eugene von Guérard (1811-1901), and Abram Louis Buvelot (1814-1888). All these men arrived as established artists. Glover was 62, Martens 34, von Guérard 41 and Buvelot about 50 when they stepped on Australian shores. (Australian Dictionary of Biography).

Glover tended to paint picturesque pictures of home and garden, but his *Australian landscape with cattle: the artist's property Patterdale* c. 1835 clearly shows one of the earliest oil paintings true to the Australian landscape in form and colour.

Australian landscape with cattle: the artist's property Patterdale, oil on canvas by John Glover, circa 1835, National Library of Australia



Martens had a Romantic style and von Guérard looked for the sublime, but when Buvelot arrived in Victoria in 1864 he also brought with him knowledge of the Barbizon painters and *plein air* painting from France, plus the idea of peasant labour as subject as captured by Millet and Courbet (Allen 1997). The time was basically right for someone to paint out in the landscape, and this is what the Heidelberg painters did. It was also fortunate that Streeton and McCubbin had been born in Australia, and Roberts and Conder arrived as youths. They didn't carry the baggage of Europe – they would look at the 'Bush' with fresh eyes.

Although weekend and summer painters, the artists had all trained at some time with the National Gallery School in Melbourne and both Tom Roberts and Fred McCubbin were taught by von Guérard (National Gallery of Victoria 2010). They also worked with commercial art – Streeton was a lithographer, Roberts worked in a photographic studio and as a portrait painter and Conder was a commercial artist with the illustrated press (Smith, B 1991). McCubbin was the odd man out – he was a baker, but eventually studied and taught at the National Gallery School. All were aware of the French Impressionists, and one has to be aware that the term 'impressionism' was used more loosely than it is now. There was also an influence of the work of the Naturalism of Jules Bastian-Lepage and Aestheticism of James Whistler, both painting in England (National Gallery of Victoria, 2010)

The Heidelberg painters set out to create an Australian school of painting. Their intent is clearly outlined by Roberts, Conder and Streeton in a letter to the editor of 'The Argus' in 1889 where they defend their work by saying that they do not need to take the safe path and work as others did before them as it 'could never help towards the development of what we believe will be a great school of painting in Australia' (Mackenzie n.d). They would not be recognised as such though until the 1920s. (Smith, B. 1991)

So exactly what was it that was different? Streeton did admire the work of Louis Buvelot so in 1889 he trudged out to the location of Buvelot's 1866 painting *Summer*

afternoon, Templestowe and painted *At Templestowe* (also known as *The road to Templestowe*).



Summer Afternoon, Templestowe 1866
Abram Louis Buvelot
Oil on canvas 76.6 x 118.9 cm
Source: Art Gallery of South Australia



At Templestowe, 1889
Arthur Streeton
Oil on canvas 25.4 x 40.7 cm
Source: National Gallery of Victoria.

Visually the differences are obvious. Buvelot's work is more traditional with an emphasis on sky and a more romantic view of the landscape. The landscape is graceful with long shadows across the foreground. It is a painting that draws the viewer in, where Streeton's has a high horizon and reflects glaring sunlight and the starkness of drought conditions back to the viewer. Buvelot's brushwork is considered and fine but Streeton's is loose and quickly executed with flat brush or palette knife. The gold of the dry pasture is treated as one block of colour with the road cutting through it. The view has been simplified as have the brush strokes. Buvelot's view is gentle and soft, but Streeton's is harsh reality.

The Heidelberg artists came to the public notice when they launched their 9 by 5 Impression exhibition in August 1889 at Buxton's Rooms in Melbourne. It was the first time a group of artists devised a theme and mounted an exhibition in Australia. Tom Roberts had plenty of flair and had probably seen the James Whistler exhibition in London, so decorated the rooms with borrowed paraphernalia arranged in an 'Aesthetic' manner and had 'anti-academic' pine frames made for the paintings. (Clarke 1985)

The paintings were mainly oils on 9 x 5 inch cigar box lids, procured from Louis Abraham's family business, and were not necessarily well received by the critics. One woman journalist wrote that there was a 'broad effect of tone and colour without the eye being attracted by details', but art critic James Smith of the Argus saw it differently as a 'pain to the eye' due to sketchiness and incompleteness (Clarke 1985, p. 114).

Smith's critique was tacked up for all to see, so the public came to see what the fuss was about, and most of the small paintings of local scenes sold within two weeks. There were seven artists involved in the exhibition of 175 paintings and 6 sculptures. Conder designed the catalogue which stated their philosophy: 'When you draw, form is the most important thing; but in painting the first thing to look for is the general impression of colour' (Clarke 1985, p. 113).

Bernard Smith (1991) summed up their work by recording that they had created a distinctly Australian style of painting, depicted effects of light and colour, allowed for the luminosity of pale summer shadows and atmospheric effects, and analysed the form of eucalypts and *melaleuca*'s.

However, the Heidelberg School painters were not solely landscape painters. They painted urban as well as rural landscapes, their friends, society portraits, beach scenes and each other. The 1880s and 1890s were also the years leading up to Federation. *The Bulletin*, Henry Lawson and A.B. Paterson were all touting the Australian identity, so it was not surprising that the work of the Heidelberg School contained a nationalistic content – ports, railways stations and rural men at work. (Great Australian Paintings, 2001). McCubbin ignored urban depression years, but sums up the feeling of the era in *Down on his luck*, 1889 with a man who has seen better days pensive in front of his small fire in the bush. Conder would return to Europe after seven years in Australia, and both Roberst and Streeton travelled overseas, however, McCubbin stayed in Melbourne and wrote '...the Australian Artist can best fulfil his highest destiny by remaining in his own country and studying that which lies about him...' (Australian Government Culture Portal, 2010)



Tom Roberts
Shearing the Rams, 1888
Source: www.ngv.vic.gov.au

Some of Tom Robert's work was retrospective. His *Bailed up* 1894 records an 1860s event of bushrangers holding up a stagecoach, and *Shearing the Rams* 1888 shows no signs of the upcoming 1891 shearers strike or the mechanical shears that were the cause of it. Roberts used sketches, photography, models as well as his academic training in these paintings (Smith, T. 2002). McCubbins' huge painting *The Pioneer's* 1904 captures the anxieties of the Colonial settlers in trying to set up a home in the bush, as well as acknowledging the growth of the cities.



Jane Sutherland, *The Mushroom Gatherers*, (c. 1895)
Oil on canvas 41.6 x 99.3 cm
National Gallery of Victoria
Source: <http://img1.liveinternet.ru/images>

In some ways the work of women impressionists was more akin to the French Impressionist paintings than the men's, with dabs of colour and very indistinct outlines. They painted women going about their work in rural settings like Jane Sutherland's *The Mushroom Gatherers*, c,1895 and Clara Southern's *An Old Bee*

Farm, 1900, precursors to Grace Cossington Smith's urban and modernist *The Sock Knitter* of 1915 in subject matter.



Golden summer, Eaglemont 1889
oil on canvas 81.3 h x 152.6 w
Arthur Streeton
Source: Picture Australia
National Library of Australia

In 1985 the *Golden Summers* exhibition was held at the National Gallery of Victoria and presented 150 works of 38 Australian artists of the 1880s and 90s, including paintings by Jane Sutherland, Clara Southern and Ina Gregory. (Clarke 1992) In the catalogue foreword myths around the Heidelberg School are acknowledged, but it is also said that ‘after nearly a hundred years, their impressions of the Australian landscape – city and bush – still stir our sense of locality and identity.’ (Clarke 1985)

To assess whether the painters of the Heidelberg School have an influence on the artists of today, one would need to trace directions that were established by these artists. Perhaps the strongest trends are those of the landscape painting of Streeton, the nationalism of Tom Roberts, and the melancholy work of Frederick McCubbin. One would also not want to ignore the path opened by the women artists of the Heidelberg School which gave recognition to Australian women painters. There are also other paths such as the one that builds on the Heidelberg School painters' love of landscape in Hans Heysens (1877-1968) magnificent gum trees; that then leads to Rex Battarbee and then to Albert Namatjira's (1902-1959) ghost gums of Central Australia (Smith, B. 1991).

There is a link with landscape painters who painted in the Dandenong Ranges but at different times. Buvelot and von Guérard painted there in the early 19th century, so did Streeton and Roberts in the latter part, whereas Fred Williams (1927-82) and Jeffrey Makin (b. 1943) knowingly continued the tradition in the 20th century. The first two

painted grand vistas, the second two captured the light and narrowed their field of vision, where the latter two abstracted, flattened and looked for the essence of the landscape. Makin noted the parallels with American Edward Hopper and Streeton in voicing the need to shake off the mantle of European painting and establish regional art.

Another geographical connection was when John and Sunday Reed, well aware of the Heidelberg artists' camp, established their property, Heide, in the area. Their patronage would support artists who would continue along the line of heroes and nationalism, in Sidney Nolan's (1917-1992) Ned Kelly series in 1947; and the landscape tradition with Arthur Boyd's (1920-1999) Wimmera landscapes and John Perceval's (1923-2000) impasto *Two gums, homage to Buvelot* in 1960.

Similarly, Russel Drysdale (1912-1981) and Clifton Pugh (1924-1990) would take landscape painting into the outback and also present a less glowing account of the bush than the Heidelberg painters (Australian Government Culture Portal 2010).

Fred Williams
Upwey Landscape
Source: *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 15, 2006



Perhaps the artist who extended the Heidelberg tradition was Fred Williams. Arthur Streeton, in particular, had used paint in a very broad manner – a mere flick of the brush created the sheep in his 9 x 5 inch *Impression for 'Golden Summer'*. Williams would take this further – a blob and a streak of paint would be enough to represent a tree. Or as John Carrol says 'trees read as calligraphy'. Carrol also notes that there was no centre of interest in Williams's paintings – he captured the monotony of the Australian bush (Carrol 1992). But he had also moved on to what Allen (1997 p. 166) describes as 'metaphoric rather than mimetic'.



The River Murray, 2010
Colley Whisson
Source: David Sumner Gallery, Adelaide

It would appear that the Australian Impressionists started trails in many directions, and there are still artists calling themselves Australian Impressionists. Colley Whisson (b. 1966) is one who continues the style, as do many others painters, both amateur and professional (Whisson 2010).

However, from a postmodern point of view, there is a current stream of parody, sarcasm and appropriation. Tom Roberts has taken the brunt of this. As far back as 1969 Martin Sharp glued a reproduction of Sidney Nolan's *Kelly at Glenrowan* (1955) into Tom Robert's *In a corner of the MacIntyre* in what Kerr (1996) describes as a 'larrikin act'. In 1979 Pam Debenham etched an altered version of Robert's *Shearing the Rams* as *Strong feminine labour* (1979), and also made a tiny print of Roberts' painting as a matchbox cover. The former relating to feminism and the latter to commercialism of icons (Kerr 1996). Dianne Jones substituted indigenous shearers for the three main characters in her inkjet on canvas print *Shearing the rams, 2001*, and an altered *Shearing the Rams* was also used in advertising for Home Timber and Hardware and Aussie Bums underwear (National Gallery of Victoria 2010).

Imants Tillers (b. 1950) lived at Little Sirius Cove, Sydney from 1981-1988 where Roberts, Streeton and others had also camped, but only later would he appropriate their work and turn Robert's small *Impression*, 1889 into three large replicas exhibited as *Four impressions* (Kerr 1996).

Frederick McCubbin's *The pioneer* was used as a Tim Tam advertisement and also targeted by Anne Zahalka (b. 1957) whose parody *The immigrants* (1982) is a

photomontage of McCubbin's work with colonial pioneers replaced by Greek migrants.

The Heidelberg painters are far from forgotten. Basically, they were in the right place at the right time. They had the ability, training and freedom to take advantage of what was happening in European art as well as what had preceded them in Australia. They looked at the Australian landscape with clarity; painted in many genres; took Nationalism in their stride and added to the awareness of Australian identity.

Bibliography:

Allen, Christopher, 1997. *Art in Australia: from Colonization to Postmodernism*. London, Thames and Hudson

Australian Dictionary of Biography 2010, Online edition, Canberra, Australian National University on <http://adbonline.anu.edu.au> (accessed 5.10.10)

Australian Government Culture Portal, 2010. *Australian painters*. <http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/painters/> (accessed 19.9.10)

Bonython, Kim 1980. *Modern Australian painting, 1975/1980*. Australia. Rigby

Carrol, John (ed.) 1992. *Intruders in the bush*. 2nd Edition. Australia. Oxford University Press.

Clark, Jane and Whitelaw, Bridget. 1986. *Golden Summers: Heidelberg and beyond*. International Cultural Corporation of Australia.

Clark, Jane 1992. Women artists and the Heidelberg Era in *Art and Australia*, Vol 30 No. 2, 1992 pp184-6

Galbally, Ann E. 2006. Streeton, Sir Arthur Ernest (1869-1943), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Online edition, Australian National University on <http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/A120137b.htm?hilite=streeton> (accessed 5.10.10)

Great Australian Paintings, 1991. Sydney. Ure Smith Press

Heathcote, Christopher, 2002. *Australia Felix: the art of Jeffrey Makin*. Melbourne, Macmillan Art Publishing.

- Hoff, Ursula, 2006. Conder, Charles Edward (1868-1909) *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Online edition, Australian National University on <http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/A030418b.htm?hilite=conder> (accessed 5.10.10)
- Horton, Mervyn. 1975. *Australian painters in the 1970s*. Sydney. Ure Smith.
- Hughes, Robert 1970. *The art of Australia*. Norwich, England. Penguin Books Ltd.
- Kerr, John 1996. Colonial Quotations in *Art in Australia*, Vol. 33 No. 3 Autumn 1996.
- Mackenzie, Andrew (n.d.). *Following the artists' footsteps*. www.artistsfootsteps.com (accessed 5.10.10)
- National Gallery of Victoria 2010. *Australian Impressionism*. <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/australianimpressionism/education/index.html> (accessed on 5.10.10)
- Quartermain, P and Watkins, J. 1989. *A pictorial history of Australian painting*. London, Bison Group.
- Serle, Geoffrey, 1987. *The creative spirit in Australia: A cultural history*. Australia, William Heinemann.
- Smith, Bernard, 1988. Art in its social setting in Burgmann, V & Lee, J (eds.). *Constructing a culture: A peoples history of Australia since 1788* (pp. 224-240), Ringwood, Victoria, Penguin.
- Smith, Bernard, 1991. *Australian Painting 1788-1990*, Australia, Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Terry, 2002. *Transformations in Australian Art: The Nineteenth Century – Landscape, Colony and Nation*. Sydney, Craftsman House.
- Thomas, David, 2006. McCubbin, Frederick (Fred) (1855-1917), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Online edition, Australian National University on <http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/A100232b.htm?hilite=McCubbin> (accessed 5.10.10)
- Topliss, Helen, 2006. Roberts, Thomas William (Tom) (1856-1931), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Online edition, Australian National University. <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A110419b.htm> (accessed 8.9.10)
- Whisson, Colley 2010. Colley Whisson's website on <http://www.colleywhisson.com/> (accessed 18.10.10)

