





NOLAN'S AUSTRALIA

THIS COULD BE THE EPICENTRE
OF THE GALLERY'S 20TH CENTURY
AUSTRALIAN COLLECTION

Sidney Nolan
Central Australia 1950
Oil and synthetic polymer
paint on hardboard
122 x 152.5cm

The latest painting by Sidney Nolan to come into the Gallery's collection has sparked a rare degree of excitement amongst curators and staff. Barry Pearce, head curator of Australian art, gives it the same iconic status as Tom Roberts' *Bailed up* and declares it to be one of the ten best Australian paintings in the Gallery.

It is *Central Australia* 1950, a large work that captures the character and expanse of the continent's vast internal spaces. There is not a human, animal or bird to be seen. Yet there is no sense of it being a lifeless centre. Rather, it's the opposite.

As Gallery director Edmund Capon describes it: "Sidney Nolan's great achievement was to instil into the Australian landscape the drama of the human presence and experience. This majestic, almost visionary painting may have no human presence but it is redolent with the spirit of place and the drama of human imagination and emotion."

This painting was first exhibited as one of a series at Sydney's David Jones Gallery in the month it was painted, March 1950. Anthropologist Charles Mountford opened the show with a comment and a prediction: "It is a superb and overwhelming experience, and it may not be too fanciful to imagine that future art historians will date the birth of a predominantly Australian idiom from this exhibition."

Barry Pearce writes about the "powerful impact on the Australian public's perception of their own country" that this series by Nolan produced. Considering that, he continues, "it is surprising that one of its best paintings was not immediately purchased by the Gallery. Instead, the Trustees agreed to buy a small, minor example two years later for the Travelling Art Exhibition scheme. This work was also called *Central Australia*."



Sidney Nolan
Robbed 1947
 Synthetic polymer
 paint on hardboard
 91.5 x 122.9cm

The Gallery's major project to upgrade its Nolan collection has been an area thoroughly addressed in the past few years with the help of the Nelson Meers Foundation. The family foundation became involved in the quest to improve the holding, which was stronger in numbers than in the quality of works that displayed his diversity and range as an artist. The Nelson Meers Foundation pledged to fund the purchase of five major works defined as iconic benchmarks in Nolan's career.

Central Australia 1950 completes that promise, and it is the pinnacle of the five purchases. Pearce says of it: "The painting is without doubt, both in its large scale and breadth of definition, a magnum opus of the series, matched only by the piece owned by Tate Britain, *Inland Australia*, painted five days later. This work almost has a dioramic relationship with *Central Australia*: their scales are identical and horizon lines match almost perfectly.

"Nolan himself was unequivocal about its importance, writing to Professor Edward Ford, who purchased it from the David Jones Gallery: 'I am so glad you have the painting. In many ways it was, I think, the most complete statement I was able to make on *Central Australia*'.

"The acquisition of *Central Australia* not only contributes profoundly to the realisation of an emphatic core of masterpieces in the Nolan collection, but also defines perhaps the epicentre of the entire 20th century Australian painting collection."

Central Australia builds on four Nolan paintings bought by the Gallery since 2001 with funds provided by the Nelson Meers Foundation. They are *Italian crucifix* 1955, *Drought skeleton* 1953, *Luna Park* 1941 and *Robbed* 1947. The five works will be hung

together in a special presentation, which is expected to be unveiled to the public in December.

Nolan's Ned Kelly series, painted in 1946-47, were represented by 27 paintings to illustrate the narrative. But he actually painted more. Those that were eventually excluded for the sake of a tight telling of the tale included two important works, *The camp* 1946, which was bought by the AGNSW in 1978, and *Robbed*.

"*Robbed* was painted during the second half of the series when Nolan started to introduce a softer, melancholic quality to the landscape, with figures and events on the verge of being swallowed up by something larger than themselves," writes Pearce. "This wonderful work, with glowing yellow sky above two naked men walking along a track towards the mysterious blue sanctuary of distant ranges, is the most intriguing Kelly image of its period.

"Richer in impasto compared to the thinner enamel of its siblings, *Robbed* displays Nolan at the subtlest heat of his imagination. Until a more specific reference to the Kelly saga is uncovered, the undressed figures might be loosely interpreted as humiliated police, edging in fear for their lives towards the cover of sunset. Alternatively it might relate to the time when Kelly, as an adolescent, assisted in the robbery of two men, or, when accused of drunkenness at 22, he had his trousers ripped off during his fierce resistance to arrest.

"If either is the case, *Robbed* may have been intended for the very beginning of the series, signifying a sort of comic-tragic presage before events took a more violent turn. Its palette is close to *Landscape* 1947, which Nolan eventually preferred as the first image, the sky warmed prophetically by the flames of a bushfire rather than sunset.



Top left: **Sidney Nolan**
Drought skeleton 1953
 Oil and synthetic polymer paint on hardboard
 90.5 x 121cm

Left: **Sidney Nolan**
Italian Crucifix 1955
 Synthetic polymer paint on hardboard
 93 x 123cm

Above: **Sidney Nolan**
Luna Park 1941
 Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
 67 x 84cm

All works purchased with funds provided by the Nelson Meers Foundation
 AGNSW Collection © Estate of Sidney Nolan

“But there is a third reading. Could the naked figures be sleepwalkers of a pantheistic dream of liberty, of absorption into a larger scheme of things, into nature itself? Even at its most harsh, the Australian landscape has beckoned its settlers with the possibility of Arcadia, and many have died still yearning for it. In this sense, *Robbed* is a counterpoint to the sinuous pink bathers in Tom Roberts’ *The sunny south*, painted 60 years earlier: an escapist fantasy to match the Heidelberg vision, but tinged with the anxiety of a modern sensibility.”

In the July 2003 issue of *Look*, Pearce wrote about the first three paintings to be bought for this collection within the collection. He recalled that Nolan had just returned from Europe when he was commissioned by the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* to capture the impact in Queensland and the Northern Territory of the catastrophic failure of monsoonal rains over two years. The series that resulted included *Drought skeleton* 1953. “His stark images with hot landscape penetrating through the bones and skin of carcasses were quite a shock to the public, which had become accustomed to a more witty, facetious vision. No doubt the effect of a visit to Pompeii, where he saw the petrified bodies of humans and dogs, engendered that sense of gravitas which Nolan himself described as ‘life haunting the bones’.

“Shortly after his drought series, Nolan’s restlessness took him back to Italy, where he travelled extensively. But it was not Renaissance painting which inspired him; rather the religiousness that permeated its landscape and culture. In 1955 he symbolised the idea of that culture shattered by war in the bombed Eremitami church of Padua by painting two versions of the *Italian crucifix*.” The Gallery has the Mediterranean coastline version, “at once an image

of brutality, haunting architecture, limpid sea, and the masked persona which hints at the second coming of the Kelly series.”

Commenting on *Luna Park* 1941, Pearce looked more deeply into the work’s sources than Nolan’s childhood memories of the Big Dipper in Melbourne’s St Kilda. In the two years before he painted this picture, Nolan had completed the William Blake-inspired painting *The tent*, and designed stage sets for Serge Lifar’s controversial ballet *Icare*, in which a tent structure represents the prison from which Icarus attempts to flee.

“The cloudless sky and iron grid of the Big Dipper were a perfect extension of this visual idea, and a counterpart to the flat, dark-lined abstractions which interested Nolan in the work of Picasso, Léger and Klee, allowing him to develop a modernist language out of his private associations rather than merely replicate the outward forms of the European avant-garde.”

The impact on the Gallery’s Australian collection of these five paintings will be thrilling and energising. Everyone at the Gallery – and, in turn, everyone who visits the Gallery – will be grateful to the Meers family for the chance, as Pearce puts it, to further engage at close hand with the inspiration and enigma of one of our country’s greatest artists.

JILL SYKES