



Sidney Nolan

SIR SIDNEY NOLAN 1917-1992

Sir Sidney Nolan who died at his London flat on 28 November 1992 and was duly buried at St Martin's-in-the-Fields, Trafalgar Square, was born in Carlton, Melbourne, in 1917, the son of a tram driver. Between these two worlds Nolan lived an extraordinary life as a successful and wealthy artist.

Leaving school at 14 he underwent sporadic training at the National Gallery of Victoria's art school and read widely upstairs in the domed Reading Room of the Public Library. These twin impulses, painting and literature, led to his most inventive surrealist-inspired work exhibited in Melbourne before and during the Second World War. Contact with John and Sunday Reed increased his self-conscious use of literature as a source for his art and the development of 'mythmaking' in his painting in the ensuing Kelly series, the Mrs Fraser series, the Gallipoli paintings and a re-working of Leda and the Swan.

His response to the visual world was quixotic—momentous in the Central Australian landscapes of 1950, poetic in the 'Riverbend' series of the mid 1960s, and strained in the African, Antarctic and Chinese series. Nolan left for London at the end of 1950 and, like so many of the creative spirits of his generation, was overwhelmed by the experience of Europe and never really lived in Australia again. Success came in the 1950s and he was henceforth able to live as he pleased. This included a great deal of travelling which in itself became the source of much of his art. An interest in the theatre led to a number of successful commissions for sets and costumes in both London and Australia. He also created book jackets for authors C.P. Snow and Patrick White.

Nolan's art relied upon a 'faux naive' appeal underscored by his dextrous use of ripolin paint to further poeticise his imagery. His strongest works after the early surrealist excursions and the first Kelly series were his Australian landscapes, in which he can be said to have uncovered a poetry and suggestion hitherto dormant to Western eyes.

He was extremely prolific and, as time went on, generous in his gifts, the National Gallery of Victoria in particular benefiting in the mid 1980s by the gift of the impressive 'Wimmera' landscapes

Painted during his otherwise unhappy years in the army based at Dimboola.

Although in his early years he was closely associated with the poets, critics and artists of the 'Heide' circle as well as the Boyd family and John Perceval, after leaving Australia Nolan tended to work alone. He became a Knight Bachelor in 1981, was awarded the Order of Merit in 1983 and was made an Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1985. He was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Academy in 1989. Nolan married three times and is survived by his wife Mary, Arthur Boyd's sister.

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