**Nolan, Sidney (1917-1992)**

Sidney Nolan is a renowned Australian artist, especially for his iconic rendering of the bushranger and anti-hero Ned Kelly. Primarily known as a painter, he worked prolifically across a wide range of media, from drawing and printmaking to murals, stage design and collage, completing thousands of works. Born in Melbourne, Nolan studied at the National Gallery School from 1934-36, though he was more interested in connecting with other artists than the conservative teaching, and preferred reading in the library to sitting in class. Interested in abstraction and modern art, he sought to challenge the vision of Australia’s popular Heidelberg School of painting. He met patrons John and Sunday Reed in 1938 and began a decade-long friendship centered around their home Heide, and artists such as Albert Tucker, Joy Hester and John Perceval. This was a formative period of continual experimentation and intellectual exchange. Eventually he settled in Britain in 1953 and remained there for the rest of his life, where he continued to paint images of Australia with an expatriate vision. His survey show at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1957 was a major turning point in cementing his international reputation.

Nolan was drafted into the army in 1942 and stationed in Victoria’s rural Wimmera district. Here he found plenty of time to paint, sending bundles of work back to Melbourne, which Sunday Reed organized to exhibit with groups including the Contemporary Art Society, of which Nolan was a founding member. Trying out new materials, he liked Ripplon’s (an enamel house paint) luminosity under a lead-white undercoat, and the fact that it could be used thinly, like watercolour. It allowed him to create an intense light in his pictures. It was in this period that he turned to landscape as his primary subject, though not to render it realistically. He later commented that this wrestling with reality obsessed him as a young man, saying that eventually realised that ‘reality…could only be shown in completely symbolic terms.’

Throughout his life Nolan read widely, inspired by writings as diverse as classical Greek and modern literature, Australian history, poetry (especially Rimbaud) and philosophy. He also travelled constantly, including visiting and painting Africa, Antarctica, Gallipoli in Turkey, China and much of Australia.



Sidney Nolan, Kelly, 1946, enamel paint on composition board, 90.8 x 121.5 cm. Collection: National Gallery of Australia

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Nolan’s first Kelly was painted in 1945. At first rudimentary, by 1946 he had been refined to the powerful spectral figure that is virtually Kelly’s black armor alone. He painted Kelly until 1980 but the most famous group is the 1946-47 series. Kelly’s helmet draws on the history of abstract art’s black square (from sources such as Moholy-Nagy and Malevich) as well as thoroughly researched histories of the Kelly gang, but also reveals Kelly as an outsider and a sinister element in the landscape. Doubtless a reflection of his own complex life circumstances, he continued to create images of tragic-comic figures in the landscape, including his series of the shipwrecked colonial woman and betrayer, Mrs. Fraser, or the failed explorers Burke and Wills. Other important series include the drought and outback paintings, Leda and the Swan, Africa, Antarctica, Inferno and Illuminations. His famous Gallipoli series, showing Australian soldiers as tragic heroes, was inspired by classical Greek literature and the legends and heroes of the Trojan War, and responded to the failed Australian military campaign at Gallipoli in 1915.

**References and further reading:**

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