ANACHRONISM IN AUSTRALIAN ART: ITALIAN EARLY MODERN ART IN MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY AUSTRALIAN FIGURATIVE PAINTING

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of
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Abstract

The anachronistic presence of the art of Piero della Francesca and the Italian Early Moderns in the work of the mid-twentieth-century Australian figurative painters Justin O’Brien, Jean Bellette, Jeffrey Smart and Russell Drysdale provides a point of entry into the interpretation of their art. A significant amount of scholarship has focused on Australian mid-twentieth-century figurative painting as an artistic response to British and European Modernity. As a result that kind of Australian art is often regarded as a belated and inauthentic expression of an aspect of European Modernism. The reconceptualization of anachronism in art by Alexander Nagel, Christopher Wood and others offers a more positive approach that in a modified form can be applied to Australian art historical research. The application of theories of anachronism to the complex structures of quotation and appropriation in mid-twentieth century Australian figurative paintings reveals the ways these four Australian artists made use of Early Modern art and how it illuminates the character of their period. The anachronism in their work does not signify a retreat from the present, but rather a rupture in time that provides a critical distance from and, therefore, a new perspective upon their present moment. Representations of time are also mediated in complex ways by their regard for European modernist artists who also looked back to Early Modern art in different ways for different reasons. Examining how these four Australian artists engage with temporality therefore offers insights into how they understand their own time and provides new understanding both of the distant Italian and recent European art that captivated them.

In this thesis I identify allusions to Greek, Byzantine, Trecento and Quattrocento artworks in the paintings of the four selected artists. Particular attention is paid to the Quattrocento artist, Piero della Francesca, since he is quoted by them all. Directly or indirectly, anachronism revealed their personal ideologies, tensions and anxieties as well as the broader political context in which, and sometimes against which, these artists worked. Consequently, the study of anachronism in the work of these artists has significant implications for how their art is positioned within transnational history and culture.
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INTRODUCTION

Like any form of representation, art is inevitably engaged with what came before it.

Mieke Bal

Anachronism enables an interpretation of painting that takes into account the conscious and unconscious meanings attached to any quoted work. Italian Early Modern art appears anachronistically in mid-twentieth-century Australian figurative painting as a reworking of images mediated through British and European modernism. British and European modernism was informed by the revival of classicism in European art after the First World War. The continuing rediscovery of Piero della Francesca by British artists and writers in the 1920s was a part of the reconceptualization of the Italian Early Moderns by Australian artists. Consequently, the ways in which Australian artists received European and British modernism and the media through which it was disseminated in Australia is an important consideration of this thesis.

The appropriation of art from the Italian Early Modern era, in particular the Byzantine, Tre- and Quattrocento by four mid-twentieth-century Australian artists, Justin O’Brien, Jean Bellette, Jeffrey Smart and Russell Drysdale corresponds in some measure with the earlier revival of classicism in European modern art. While non-Indigenous Australian art is generally understood as being derived from a European aesthetic, their paintings have not yet been interpreted through the anachronisms that are

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1 Mieke Bal, Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1.
2 Bernard Smith, Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art since 1788 (Sydney: Ure Smith Pty Ltd, 1945), passim.
created by quotation and allusion to art from the recent and more distant European art historical past.

This study argues for the heterogeneous nature of the Australian response to modern art and does not seek to establish or analyse the development of a national narrative or an overarching artistic paradigm. Instead I have set out to explore how four individual artists used art from the past and to identify several significant shared assumptions. O’Brien, Bellette, Smart and Drysdale have been chosen as exemplars for the reimagining of anachronism in Australian art. These artists consciously and deliberately resisted the push towards Abstraction and Expressionism that dominated Australian art in the years after the Second World War. Rather than being reactionary, however, the innovative use of anachronism rescues their figurative paintings from sentimentality and nostalgia by applying their concern with the past to the present. Consequently, the study of anachronism in mid-twentieth-century Australian figurative art has significant implications for our understanding of how these artists defined themselves and their context.

This thesis identifies firstly, the temporal and spatial structures that anachronism creates and attends closely to the implications of those structures and, secondly, illuminates the relationship four Australian figurative artists had with the art of Piero della Francesca and the Italian Early Modern. While the influence of Piero della Francesca and the Italian Early Modern on Australian painting has been acknowledged by other art historians, it has not yet been interrogated through observed strategies of anachronism that disrupt time and space, past and present. The application of theories of time and space from other areas of art historical scholarship to the work of O’Brien, Jean Bellette, Jeffrey Smart and Russell Drysdale is a new and original way of thinking about their work.

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1 Barry Pearce, Lou Klepac, Richard Read and Margherita Zanoletti are examples of writers who have drawn analogies between mid-twentieth-century Australian figurative artists and Piero della Francesca. Their scholarship in this area and those of others are commented upon in detail in later chapters.
Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Theories of anachronism are combined with a more traditional art historical approach to interrogate the meanings attached to allusions to Piero and Early Modern European art in mid-twentieth century Australian figurative painting. Anachronism is a disruptive temporality found in art. Neither a past nor present tense, anachronism is an in-between time in art that interrupts the present moment. This understanding sits within the existing scholarship on anachronism and draws upon different aspects of anachronistic theory. Walter Benjamin speaks of ‘anachronistic shock’ in the temporal structure of Baudelaire’s poetry, finding correspondences with his time and the unstable temporality of nineteenth century modernity. Benjamin frames anachronism in art as the ability of the image to interrupt historical time from the point of the present moment. 4 Giorgio Agamben argues that rather than an interruption of historical time anachronism is both of the past and the present. According to Agamben, anachronism provides a necessary distance for the understanding of one’s own time. He too, however, recognizes anachronism as an entry point into the present rather than a sentimental or nostalgic remnant of the past. For Agamben, as with Benjamin, anachronism is a function of the alienation inherent in industrial modernity.5

The theories relating to temporality in art that this thesis draws upon are principally derived from Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood’s text, Anachronic Renaissance (2010) and Nagel’s Medieval Modern: Art out of Time (2012). 6 Nagel and Wood argue that linear time is a construct and imagine time instead as an interconnectedness of events and people. They see this as encapsulated in the work of art in its plural relationships to time. Nagel and Wood recognise performance and substitution as being two basic principles that operate simultaneously within an artwork.

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Performance points to the moment of an artwork’s production, while substitution points away from that moment towards an imagined series of moments when the artwork will be activated and reactivated, forward through quotation or backwards, to some other ancestral origin. They cite the temporal clashes in Carpaccio’s *The Vision of Saint Augustine*, 1502-3 as an example. Carpaccio’s painting depicts the fifth century Saint Augustine in his studio. Along with other anachronisms, a fifteenth century bronze statue of the resurrected Christ has been included in the image. Nagel and Wood argue that this statue functions as the ancient wooden icon to which it refers, it does not stand in for it, rather it is that work, in effect it is a surrogate for the original.

Nagel and Wood identify anachronism within this temporal framework as an interjection between the new Renaissance ideal of authorial originality and more ancient notions of substitution, but the phenomenon transcends particular chronological periods. This draws attention to the complex temporality inherent in any work of art. While anachronism in the form of quotation or allusion recalls the circumstances of an artwork’s production, its presence in the new work disengages the meaning of the original from the time and circumstances of its creation. They argue that Carpaccio’s quotation of a fifth century statue reimagined as a fifteenth century bronze, had the power to validate the new work because contemporary viewers concentrated on its subject, the statue being what they term, “the referential target”. They point out that this ‘retro-activates’ the original, thus imposing a value upon the antique original that may or may not have been there originally. At the same time, allusions to past artworks reworked in more recent works have the capacity to carry forward into the new work some of the meanings attached to the older works that in turn affect the meanings in both the new work and the original work. There is, therefore, a two-way process of exchange. Consequently, art has the capacity to constantly absorb new interpretations. The study of anachronism makes manifest these new meanings and examines the implications of the multivalency inherent any work of art.

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8 Ibid., 40-41.
9 Ibid., 42.
Nagel and Wood recognise the fact that some objects function *anachronically* in that they appear to escape notions of time and space in order to recur within different and later contexts producing an effect of incongruous modernity or simple timelessness.\(^{10}\) They also point to the contradictory capacity of an art object to both escape from and be bound by its time of production by identifying two basic principles that operate simultaneously in works of art: the performative (historical) and the substitutional (timeless). Thus they conclude that art has the capacity to be both simultaneously of its time and of a later or future time. According to Nagel and Wood’s definition of *anachronic*, art has the capacity to recall the past, to recreate the past retrospectively, as well as to anticipate the future.\(^{11}\) Although this model was primarily developed for the interpretation of Italian Renaissance art, with certain important modifications for a less spiritual place and time it provides a method for an historical re-interpretation of anachronism in Australian modernism; one that resists a linear conception of art history and recognises the temporal plurality and multivalency inherent in an artwork. This approach is a method of illuminating the multitude of affective interpretations that informed the response of Australian artists to Early Modern art objects.

**Structure**

This thesis is divided into individual monographs on four artists, Justin O’Brien, Jean Bellette, Jeffrey Smart and Russell Drysdale. The choice of artist was restricted by the decision to focus firstly on the second wave Australian modernists, meaning mid-rather than early-twentieth century painters. Secondly, they are all figurative artists whose paintings show an active engagement with past forms of reproduction. Thirdly, these artists were well acquainted with one another, both socially and professionally.

The format of this thesis allows the historical context of each artist and their influences to be discussed so as to establish the nature of their exposure to particular paintings from the past and to highlight the way past images of Early Modern Italian art in their

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 7-19.
\(^{11}\) Ibid., 18.
paintings were mediated and refracted through British and European Modernism. In addition, the monograph form enables the consideration of how each artist individually followed the European revival of Classicism and made it manifest in their paintings.

A range of primary and secondary sources is employed to establish the artist’s interest in and exposure to Piero della Francesca and other Early Modern European art. I have analysed the temporal and spatial tensions in individual paintings to show how these tensions derive from quotations and allusions to the Byzantine, Tre- and Quattrocento periods without abandoning a simultaneous allegiance to other twentieth century modernist paintings. In addition, therefore, I recognise the European paintings that appear to be central to the practices of the artists under discussion. Detailed visual analyses of the paintings of these four artists are undertaken to ascertain their sources and to explore how anachronism arises in them. Accordingly, the influences, contexts and the cultural and historical conditions within which these artists worked are a central consideration of each chapter.

The complex temporal structures that result from anachronism offer opportunities for exploring the rationale behind these artists’ artistic choices. However, before embarking upon a closer exploration of each artist I wish firstly to discuss the revival of interest in Piero and the Early Moderns in Europe, and, secondly, to establish the context for the Australian inheritance of this particular aesthetic.

The Revival of Interest in Piero and the Italian Primitives

Australian taste for Italian Early Modern art and Piero della Francesca, in particular, was refracted through certain trends in European and British modernism. A brief discussion on the British and European revival of interest in the art from this time follows in order to establish a context for the Australian refashioning of these tastes.

referenced older works, in particular the old masters. In the preface to the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition, *Art about Art*, the authors drew attention to the cumulative nature of art, and the fact that artists have historically always borrowed from prior works of art, a theme Leo Steinberg explores further in his introduction to the catalogue. Steinberg argues that there are instances where what an artist quotes or borrows bestows upon the original renewed relevance. In this way the old work is revitalized or retro-activated by the new work.\textsuperscript{12}

In 1990, a similar exhibition was held in London at the Tate Gallery. This exhibition, however, focussed on the revival of classicism in early twentieth century European art. The Italian and French response to the ‘Return to Order’ is well documented in the catalogue for the exhibition, *On Classic Ground*.\textsuperscript{13} The ‘return to order’ is exemplified in Picasso and Severini’s transition from Abstract Cubism to Classicism between 1914-1917. According to the authors of the catalogue, Elizabeth Cowling and Jennifer Mundy, it was during this time that European artists claimed the heritage of Classism to be their native tradition. If the classical past represented a return to order, stability and tradition, it is worth noting that Piero had already used it in that way during the Quattrocento. However, Cowling and Mundy also recognise that classicism was associated with academism and was therefore assumed to be reactionary and conservative.\textsuperscript{14} Furthermore, the association with fascist repression further complicated the ambiguity of classicism.\textsuperscript{15} Nevertheless, the authors argue that the avant-garde recognised the potential for innovation and invention in the structural relationships and mathematical proportions of classical art.\textsuperscript{16}

Cowling and Mundy illustrate how images from the Italian Primitives recur in modernist European Art through an exegesis on the works of individual artists in the *On Classic Ground* exhibition. They point out that in all the paintings from the


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 19.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 11.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 21.
exhibition, even when the pictorial setting is apparently contemporary, there is always an intentional anachronistic ambiguity so that the present is seen through the perspective of the past, so as to seem more resonantly idealised. Furthermore, they demonstrate how classical sources function as poetic metaphors to which the viewer must respond in order to understand the full meaning of the work. This thesis looks at the way Australian artists imitated European artists by reactivating the tenor of the Early Modern past to address conditions in the present. The Australian artists, like their earlier European counterparts, claimed Italian primitivism as their heritage, thus ignoring the ancient and legitimate Indigenous culture that already existed in Australia.

Luciano Cheles has set a precedent for examining the influence of Piero in twentieth-century art. His most recent publications include, "A Century-Old Passion: Piero Della Francesca in America," in Milton Glaser Nella Città Di Piero: Exhibition Catalogue (2007) and “The Italian Renaissance in American Gothic: Grant Wood and Piero della Francesca,” published in 2016. Cheles declares that Piero was, until relatively recently, largely forgotten and credits the British in the nineteenth century with being among the earliest appreciators of Piero. He also attributes Seurat and Cézanne with drawing the attention of the avant-garde to Piero because of their concern with the simplification and monumentality of form and an interest in ‘primitivism’. Cheles shows how American artists in the first decades of the twentieth century discovered Piero through their contact with European modernist circles. Cheles’ discussion of the influence of Piero in America allows for a similar study of the ways in which Australian artists encountered Piero. The next section, therefore, begins with a review of selected texts that discuss how the Early Moderns, and Piero in particular, came to be seen in Europe as proto-modernists.

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17 Ibid., 13.
18 Ibid., 28.
Francis Haskell in *Past & Present in Art & Taste* (1987) argues that all art is political, whether the artist is consciously aware of it or not.\(^{20}\) In *Rediscoveries in Art* (1976) he follows various revivals and changes in taste, arguing that in the nineteenth century the French and the British largely ignored Piero della Francesca.\(^{21}\) In 1987, Haskell expanded upon this saying that the taste that developed in Britain for the Quattrocento was not for Piero but for Fra Angelico, Fra Filippo and Brunelleschi. Furthermore, according to Haskell, Masaccio, not Piero, was the first fifteenth century master to be celebrated and apart from one or two others, like Raphael and Gentile Bellini, the Quattrocento was largely ignored in Britain during the nineteenth century.\(^{22}\) In 1994 Luciano Cheles challenged this ignorance of Piero in his essay, "Piero Della Francesca in Nineteenth-Century Britain," by pointing out that as early as 1840 Charles Lock Eastlake (1793-1865) had written appreciatively of Piero, referring to him as one of the most accomplished of painters. Cheles contends that Eastlake appreciated Piero’s individual style and expressive use of colour.\(^{23}\) Cheles, in agreement with Haskell, attributes the English revival of interest in Piero to the revival of interest in frescoes as a result of the newly rebuilt Palace of Westminster (1840-1870) in the Gothic Revival style.\(^{24}\) He argues that the German Nazarenes had stimulated Eastlake’s appreciation for the simplicity and spirituality of the Tre- and Quattrocento.\(^{25}\) According to Cheles, the small group of intellectuals who gathered around Eastlake, including Alexander William Crawford Lindsay (1812-80) and Austen Henry Layard (1817-94), all expressed their appreciation for the sincerity and purity of Trecento and Quattrocento art with Layard singling out Piero’s *The Resurrection* for particular mention.\(^{26}\)

Eastlake, in his capacity as Director of the London National Gallery, managed to secure Piero’s, *The Baptism*, for the Gallery in 1861. However, as Caroline Elam notes in her

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\(^{22}\) Haskell, *Past and Present in Art and Taste*, 99-100.


\(^{24}\) Ibid., 230.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 225.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 222-30.
article, *Roger Fry & the Re-Evaluation of Piero Della Francesca* (2004), with the exception of a select few, most people at the time found Piero’s work clumsy and tasteless, somewhat coarse and vulgar, redeemed only by its sublime perspective.\(^\text{27}\)

Elam provides valuable background to Roger Fry’s promotion of Piero in America.

Fry was an authority on the Old Masters, and the Italians in particular. His recognition of the architectonic qualities in the work of the post-impressionists as early as 1910 did much to establish Piero at the forefront of cultural taste. Roger Fry already had an appreciation for Piero when he visited Arezzo for the first time in 1897. Caroline Elam notes that 1897 was also the year that Bernard Berenson had written appreciatively of Piero’s impersonality, in his book *The Central Italian Painters of the Renaissance*.\(^\text{28}\) Fry met Berenson the following year in 1898 when they founded *The Burlington Magazine* together with others before an argument broke up their friendship. Elam makes reference to their relationship when she identifies in Fry’s 1901 lecture on Piero a tension between his view of Piero as a proto-formalist and resistance to Piero’s ‘impersonality.’ She notes that Fry would later come to value Piero’s ‘impersonality.’ The influence of Roger Fry’s *Vision and Design* (1920) and Clive Bell’s *Art* (1914) on Australian artists will be discussed in the forthcoming chapters.\(^\text{29}\)

In 1954 Berenson drew analogies between Piero and Cézanne: “the most satisfying creations are those which, like Piero’s and Cézanne’s, remain ineloquent, mute, with no urgent communication.”\(^\text{30}\) Sir Kenneth Clark in his monograph on Piero, first published in 1951, had already established a link between Piero and twentieth-century art by dedicating this book to Henry Moore. Clark reiterates the neglect of Piero, particularly by Ruskin who was, however, aware of Piero,\(^\text{31}\) and then accounts for Piero’s rediscovery through the renewed interest in classicism in the work of Cézanne.


\(^\text{28}\) Ibid., 22.


and Seurat. Clark recognised in the changed attitude towards Primitivism an appreciation of the universalising qualities of geometry, order and solidity by which a taste for Piero could be generated.\(^{32}\)

Larry Witham, in *Piero’s Light* (2014), traces the rediscovery of Piero in intricate detail. He locates Piero at a time when the revival of classical art and philosophy initiated significant changes in art, religion and science. Of relevance to this thesis is Witham’s description of the recognition of the universal quality of Piero in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and in particular his description of the new ways in which modernism interpreted Piero in the twentieth century.\(^{33}\) Witham observes that Piero’s impassivity and lack of emotion was a distinguishing virtue for Berenson, who contrasted it favourably with what Berenson considered to be an histrionic taste for expressionism. Witham expands upon Berenson’s response to Piero, noting that Berenson also appreciated Piero’s ‘science,’ and states that the architectonic feeling Piero achieved was his greatest accomplishment. Furthermore, Witham contends that Berenson used Piero as an antidote, not only for the over-expressiveness in art but also as a reaction to the popularity of cinema.\(^{34}\) This sets a precedent, which will be explored in this thesis, for understanding how the past can be used to validate or justify a position in and against the present.

Roberto Longhi, along with Fry, formed the basis for the twentieth century view of Piero as a forerunner of modernism in his text, *Piero della Francesca*, first published in Italian in 1927 and then in English in 1931.\(^{35}\) Longhi contends that modernism began in 1910 with Cézanne and Seurat and their ability to achieve a synthesis of form and colour that he associates with Piero. In 1927 Longhi wrote:

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\(^{34}\) Ibid., 206.

Piero’s figures and things possess...a gravity of stance, a sovereign indifference, and a ritual air that would put us strongly in mind of Egyptian or archaic Greek low reliefs, were it not for the way his shapes occupy the dimension of depth and the way they bathe themselves in light; for both these traits were unknown to ancient art. Or to leave the past for the far-off future, Piero might seem to have predicted and fully achieved the sense of Cézanne’s famous motto: “When colour is at its richest, form is at its fullest.”

Longhi recounts in *Piero della Francesca* (1927) how around 1880 Charles Blanc commissioned Charles Loyuex to copy Piero’s Arezzo frescoes for the chapel at the *École des Beaux-Arts*. He speculates how this might have influenced students who included Seurat and Gauguin. Sir Kenneth Clark later ratified this speculation in 1949 in *Landscape into Art* by attributing the similarities between Seurat and Piero to these copies, arguing that Seurat had never been to Italy. The relevance of this is that by 1927 there was general acceptance of the analogy between modern art and Piero, which was then restated in later Australian art.

Aldous Huxley’s *Along the Road*, first published in 1925, contains an essay entitled “The Best Picture.” Huxley may have been inspired by Layard because the picture referred to in the title is Piero’s *The Resurrection*, found in the small Tuscan town of Borgo San Sepolcro. The essay had no images of the painting and to add to the mystique of the painting, Huxley describes the difficulty in getting to San Sepulchro – a torturous seven hours by bus from Urbino. John Pope-Hennessy, in his book published in 1993, *The Piero Della Francesca Trail*, challenges this as in the 1930s it only took him three hours along the same route. However, the important point is, as Pope-Hennessy explains, in those days, knowledge and appreciation of Piero constituted membership of a very small and private cult. Later, knowledge and appreciation of Piero would also benefit and bestow intellectual and cultural capital upon those Australians seeking to participate in a particular British intellectual and

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36 Ibid., 162.
37 Ibid., 144.
40 Ibid., 177.
cultural milieu, a point whose importance for this thesis cannot be sufficiently emphasized.

Art transcends its temporal and cultural boundaries and allows those who appreciate it to do the same. Every work contains what Wolfgang Iser terms ‘the potential for innovation’ where it becomes part of a dynamic interaction between the time of its creation and the time of its reception in the future. This bears on Nagel and Wood’s conception of art as ‘a chain of substitutions’, wherein a work from the past can effectively legitimate a new work. However, the new work defines the nature of the chain as it makes its selection from what they term: “the debris of the past.” This is the point that T. S. Eliot made when he argued that every new work not only changes the canon but also is necessary to its production. Nagel and Wood acknowledge this two-way process wherein the past validates the present, but by the same token, the present reimagines the past. They argue for the necessity of the chain because, in order for something to be understood, it must follow certain conventions and comply with collective norms. However, the repetition of images and how they are received depends on how they resonate with that time. The past therefore has a double presence in art, first in the repetition of conventions, and second in what the images represent or signify. The avant-garde return to classicism during and after the First World War is an example of how certain past conventions can be used to legitimise new works that are responding to present conditions, as when Boccioni’s futurist work *Discrete Continuities of Space and Time* rejects the past only by remembering the great classic sculpture of the *Victory of Samothrace* in the Louvre.

The Australian paintings that are identified as having allusions to Piero and the broader past are understood to have evolved from the early-twentieth-century European

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46 John Golding, *Boccioni’s Unique Forms of Continuity in Space: [the 54th] Charlton Lecture delivered in the University of Newcastle upon Tyne on 10th February 1972* (Newcastle upon Tyne: University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1972).
return to classicism together with a rejection of the High Renaissance as a model for Australian Europeanism. These paintings are understood in terms of the way they reactivate art from the European past and make it present in Australia, and also how the use of ancient themes casts light on twentieth century Australia.

Art in Australia

There has been extensive scholarship on the history of Australian art, including monographs and exhibition catalogues on the Australian modernist artists that appear in this thesis. These texts will be referred to in the subsequent chapters. A close study of the work of these artists has revealed that some of their paintings contain quotations and allusions of works from the Byzantine, Trecento and Quattrocento, referred to in this thesis as the Early Moderns. Identifying the Italian Early Moderns in the work of these artists is relevant because it locates them within a particular artistic and intellectual group and demonstrates a sophisticated engagement with British modernism that belies the criticism of provincialism so often levelled at Australian artists of this time. Taking a cue from Luciano Cheles’s close analysis of the presence of Piero della Francesca in the work of American early-twentieth-century painter Grant Wood, I argue that, as with Wood’s paintings, the superficial meanings of paintings by Australian artists are deepened by an interpretation of the anachronism in their work.47

In 1985 Margaret Riddle, a lecturer in Fine Arts at the University of Melbourne, co-ordinated an exhibition curated by Honours students entitled Renaissance References in Australian Art.48 In the introduction to the catalogue Naomi Cass argues that the persistent presence of references to the Renaissance in Australian art and the a priori nature of modernism demonstrated a continued critical engagement with images of the past in both Europe and Australia. Furthermore, Cass noticed that diverse groups

48 Margaret Riddle, ed., Renaissance References in Australian Art (Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 1985).
of artists in Australia referenced the Renaissance, regardless of philosophy or politics. The particular mention made of the connection between artists like Jean Bellette and Justin O’Brien and the Early Moderns established a precedent for further examination.

In 1998, Richard Read explored the similarities and differences between Piero della Francesca’s *Madonna del Parto* and the figure of the woman in Russell Drysdale’s *The Gate Keeper’s Wife* in his article “Aboriginal Absence, Renaissance Presence and Anglo-Australian Relations in Russell Drysdale’s *The Gate Keeper’s Wife*”. Although Read’s purpose was to show how knowledge of art historical sources and contexts could change the interpretation of a work, he also opened up the question of the implications of allusions to Piero in Australian art. He suggests that a demonstrated taste for Piero was a pragmatic choice for artists wishing to garner the attention of British art critics and collectors, like Sir Kenneth Clark, who had visited Australia in 1949 looking for good contemporary art.

R.L. Pesman in “The Italian Renaissance in Australia” notes that for Australians in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries knowledge of the Renaissance was an indicator of wealth and taste. However, she qualifies this by noting that it was a taste for High Renaissance and Mannerist Italian art and artefacts rather than the Byzantine, Tre- and Quattrocento. Pesman suggests that Australians appropriated “ancient and hallowed images” from the Italian Renaissance and invested them with new meanings. Copies of Renaissance artefacts displayed in galleries and public places in Australia demonstrated the taste and culture of the new society and its elite. She argues that the culture that Britain brought to Australia in the nineteenth century was one based upon romantic representations of Italy as a place of creativity and originality, decadence and vice. The imagined freedoms and the possibility of visiting the cultural source attracted Australians to Italy, following the British, French and Germans in the

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51 Ibid., 124.
53 Ibid., 224.
tradition of the European Grand Tour. Pesman, however, does not account for the twentieth century preference for the Early Modern rather than late Renaissance art, particularly that of Piero della Francesca. This thesis develops a rationale for why these earlier centuries, neglected in most other histories of Australian art, appealed to artists in the mid-twentieth-century. I argue that the Australians were following a precedent established in Britain and Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and propose that Australian artists belatedly began to appreciate the art of the Early Moderns in the mid-twentieth-century as a modernist convention rather than in its own right. Furthermore, a rejection of later Renaissance precedents is presented as a resistance to the prevailing cultural conservatism in Australia.

The Australian response to European modernism was in no way homogenous; rather it echoed the complexity of the northern experience. In *The Myth of Isolation* (1962), Bernard Smith defined Australian modernism as a conscious series of acceptances and rejections as Australian artists entered into the modernist discourse in the early part of the twentieth century. He reiterated this in *Australian Painting*, published in the same year, by pointing to its cultural implications:

> The response to an old master... will differ in impact and diffusion from one country to another. What an artist or a nation borrows is as much a part of personal or national character as what it creates or rejects.

Smith argues that the archaic, referring to pre-Renaissance art, was used in Australia to challenge the authority of the academic and naturalistic tradition. Smith’s argument supports the claim that this thesis makes that Early Modern references are ideologically and politically significant.

Australian tensions were a response to challenges in representation, which had already taken place in Europe and Britain. The 1939 *Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art* that toured Australia provided a stage upon which this

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56 Ibid., 274.
challenge could be played out. In *Degenerates and Perverts*, Eileen Chanin and Steven Miller argue in support of Bernard Smith that this exhibition belies the myth of Australian isolation. Their discussion provides insights into the reception of modern art in Australia and exposes the tensions between traditional and contemporary groups. Their book is divided into four sections: the growth of awareness of modernity, the links between Australia and the wider world, the intellectual climate between the wars and the actual exhibition itself. What is stressed is the participation of Australian artists in an international art culture, through travel, literature and exposure to modern works. What emerges is a culture that not only saw itself as culturally subservient but insignificant on an international level.

Terry Smith, in the second volume of *Transformations in Australian Art* (2002) likened the 1939 *Herald Exhibition* to the 1910 Post-Impressionist exhibition in London and the 1913 Armory Show in New York in its impact upon local culture and art practice. Terry Smith addresses the problem of perceived cultural inferiority in his seminal paper, “The Provincialism Problem” originally published in 1974. He argues that because Australian artists were responding to European paintings in what he called a ‘second remove’, they adopted distorted characteristics of style. This was the result of not being a part of the cultural context that generated the innovative struggles in representation and also because works were only seen as reproductions. Thus he contends that artworks and art movements arrived in Australia without a context so that responses issued directly from the art itself rather the conditions that generated the art. This validates the necessity of a methodology that focuses on the agency of an artwork and its perception in Australia.

Terry Smith dismisses as reductive and misleading the argument that modernism in Australia was a diminished modernism. He points out that even at a second remove Australia still participated in the discourse of modernism – a discourse whose force

and relevance emerged out of a conception of modern art that was not derived solely from its locality: “The battles between the moderns and the traditionalists, the modernists and the conservatives... were all struggles at the level of modern art as an idea, as an institutional discourse.” Accordingly, a decontextualized idea of modern art was contested and challenged through Australian art institutions and art establishments in the battles between the modernists and the conservatives. Modern art was most famously attacked in a Sydney court during the 1944 William Dobell trial when the definition of portraiture, and indeed art itself, became the subject of a heated public debate. In addition, public protests followed the decision of the Victorian and New South Wales Gallery trustees not to display The Herald Exhibition; while on another front, the Contemporary Art Society was formed in retaliation to the conservative Australian Art Academy.

Catherine Speck and Georgina Downey in “Cosmopolitanism and Modernism: On Writing a New Australian Art History” (2008/9), argue for the cosmopolitan nature of the modernist discourse, seeing Australian modernism as participating in a web of cultural globalism, dispensing with the notion of its passive reception or the weakness of its local manifestation. Leslie Harding and Sue Cramer endorse this view in their discussion on the reception and dissemination of Cubism in Australia in Cubism and Australian Art (2009). They demonstrate how Cubism was first copied but then underwent a series of adaptations and translations within the local context; arguing that these responses were no less valid than those that took place in Europe.

These texts establish the validity of the Australian version of modern art but as the Mexican poet and diplomat, Octavio Paz noted in In Search of the Present, published in 1991, by the time the contemporary arrives in the colonies, it has lost its impetus and generative meaning. This results in a sense of belatedness which manifests as

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61 Ibid., 14.
anachronism. I therefore argue that anachronism can be considered as a defining feature of Australian modernism.

The anachronistic presence of past images in art paradoxically draws attention to the timelessness of art, which Adrian Stokes, a modernist critic in awe of Piero della Francesca, refers to as an ‘eternal present.’ The capacity of an Australian artist to summon the impression of the ‘eternal present,’ however, was complicated by colonialism and cultural marginalisation, which as Paz argues results in the perception of the present occurring only in Europe. For Australians, that present resided in London or Paris. According to Paz being on the periphery of a European culture results in anachronism and furthermore he concludes that modernism specifically excluded cultures on the periphery. However, the substitutonal or timeless principle in art allows art to transcend its spatial and temporal boundaries. This thesis therefore looks at anachronism in Australian painting as the Australian artist’s attempt to overcome cultural marginalisation and be a part of the ‘eternal present’ through art’s capacity for timelessness.

The history of Australian art is dominated by the writing of Bernard Smith. Place, Taste and Tradition, first published in 1945, located contemporary Australian art firmly within a European art historical discourse, identifying realism as a local inflection of European Modernism. The “Antipodean Manifesto” was written in 1959 and revisited by Smith in 1976 in The Antipodean Manifesto: Essays in Art and Art History. In the original and revised “Manifesto” Smith challenged the international avant-garde and set figurative and abstract painting in opposition in Australia. The “Manifesto” was written in 1959 in response to the growing popularity of abstract expressionism that Smith saw as a threat to figurative painting. Smith makes a point of emphasising that the rationale for the Manifesto was the defence of figuration rather than nationalism.

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66 Paz, "In Search of the Present," 36.
67 Bernard Smith, Place, Taste and Tradition: A study of Australian Art since 1788 (Sydney: Ure Smith Pty Ltd, 1945).
but he does note that it stated that artists should draw upon local Australian experience. 69 *Place, Taste and Tradition* together with *Australian Painting*, published in 1962 at a time when the influences of American art and culture had begun to displace British and European hegemony in Australia, are still important to the study of Australian art.

In *Place, Taste and Tradition* Bernard Smith credits contact with European art in the 1930s as one of the reasons for the revitalization of Australian art, in keeping with his view of Australian art as emanating from European art movements. He acknowledges an Australian curiosity about European modernism revealed in the reaction to overseas exhibitions, the formation of new art schools and art centres and an interest in experimentation shown by local art students. 70 He does not, however, recognise an alternative Australian modernity that utilised quotation and allusion to past images as an innovative form of representation.

Robert Hughes’ *The Art of Australia* 71 dismisses most of the artists chosen for this study. His reasons for doing so, namely their Eurocentric orientation, conforms with Kenneth Clark’s attitude that the value of Australian art lies in its freedom from the weight of the European past. 72 Hughes cites Australian isolation as a cause for provincialism and criticises the dependent relationship between Australian art and its European tradition without, as Bernard Smith notes in his review of *The Art of Australia*, acknowledging the presence of the local tradition that emerged out of that relationship. 73

Ian Burn in *The Necessity of Australian Art* (1988) accuses Bernard Smith of endorsing dependency on Europe as the most significant aspect of Australian art because his


70 Bernard Smith, *Place, Taste and Tradition*, 189-203.


broad stylistic generalisations in *Australian Painting* and *Place, Taste and Tradition* do not take local innovation into account. Burn conceives of this dependency as being over-determined by the dominant Western economic and social forces, by overseas ideas, styles and cultural values. Burn criticises Bernard Smith for treating Australian art as if it were a version of European art, rather than an independent response to a local modernity. In *Transformations of Australian Art*, Terry Smith argues that in fact, Australian modernism was not dependent upon developments in European modern art, but was rather a response to the displacements of suburbanization and industrialisation occurring within Australia. He cites John Brack’s *5pm Collins Street* painted in 1955 as an interpretation of Australian contemporary culture that echoes a global engagement with the discourse of modernity. Smith identifies expressions of contemporary Australian culture in other genres, such as David Reisman’s book, *The Lonely Crowd*, first published in 1956 and in the work of Australian photographers of street life such as Max Dupain and Robert Frank. Nevertheless, he also finds the influence of the quasi-realism of British modernist Stanley Spencer and the Italian Renaissance artist, Bellini, in Brack’s painting, which brings Australian art back into relation with European Early Modern and Modernist precedent. Smith does not examine the anachronistic implications of the juxtaposition of an early Renaissance image with Australian and British contemporary artists. Rather he tends to take for granted Brack’s quotation of a past image alongside a more recent image. However, it is this juxtaposition of past and present, the synchronic perception of art by Australian artists and writers, which makes alternative interpretations of their work possible and creates a space for this thesis.

Other studies of Australian art that have been useful to this thesis are Christopher Heathcote’s *A Quiet Revolution: The Rise of Australian Art 1946-1968* and *The..."
Innovators by Geoffrey Dutton. These texts provided valuable insight into the tensions between Sydney and Melbourne and the struggles between the conservatives and the avant-garde, between figuration and abstraction and the bitter infighting within Australia’s cultural institutions after the Second World War.

The association of Italian Early Modern art with both the conservative Royal Academy of Art in Britain and the more avant-garde British art movements that rejected the traditions of the Academy complicated the reception and use of art from this period in Britain. This complication was repeated in Australia in both Sydney and Melbourne in the battles between the artists from the Contemporary Art Society and those from the conservative Australian Art Academy using compositional strategies from the Italian past. As in London, the anachronistic presence of classicism in Australian art indicated an alliance with tradition and the Royal Academy of Art, but paradoxically it also indicated a radical rejection of British conservatism in favour of the School of Paris and the French avant-garde who were revisiting classicism in other ways. Consequently, I argue that anachronism in Australian art was not necessarily reactionary but was often an ambiguous hesitation between the conservative and the avant-garde, sometimes inclining in both directions at once.

Several current narratives of Australian art track the development of modernism and its Australian manifestation. These debates are generalised in nature and centre on modernism as a discourse and the legitimacy and efficacy of Australia’s participation as a peripheral modernity. I am proposing that instead of examining an overarching modernist discourse and the validity or otherwise of Australian modernism, precedents can be established for the application of theories of anachronism as an interpretive tool for Australian modernist art. Alexander Nagel and Christopher

Wood’s *Anachronic Renaissance* (2010), Nagel’s *Medieval Modern* (2012), Keith Moxey’s *Visual Time: The Image in History* (2013) and Mieke Bal’s *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (1999) have laid the groundwork for the investigation into how images from the past recur in contemporary art in ways that reinforce the dominant methodologies I have claimed from Nagel and Wood. I will apply a synthesis of their models to Australian art to examine how images from the remoter European past were mediated through a modernist sensibility and the ways in which anachronism complicates more literal interpretations of style and subject matter.

The significance of this line of inquiry is that it opens up new avenues of scholarship into mid-twentieth-century Australian figurative painting. Rather than seeing anachronism as a retreat into the past, this approach suggests that anachronism is a deliberate and conscious means of engaging with the present. Consequently, multivalent meaning in art is recognised through the anachronism that is created by quotations and allusions to past works of art. This approach differs from other studies of Australian art in that, inspired by Alexander Nagel’s way of thinking outside the dominant linear narratives of modern art, it proposes a new approach to understanding Australian figurative art through the complexity of time.

**Outline**

The chapters are organised as monographs on each artist with historical and contextual details incorporated into analyses of paintings. Such an approach gives full scope to the performative and historical aspect of Nagel and Wood’s polarity and is therefore crossed by synchronous comparison of common concerns shared between works by the individuals concerned. Chapter One examines the presence of Medieval and Early Modern art in the work of Justin O’Brien. It establishes the anachronistic presence of the Early Moderns as a rebellion against the authority and privileging of the High Renaissance in Australian art discourse. This chapter argues that O’Brien employed Early Modern visual strategies as a means of representing spirituality and trauma while eliding both his Australian identity and his homosexuality. This chapter
challenges the conception of O’Brien’s work as merely ‘decorative’, concerned with frivolity and luxury, and presents a view of the artist as a deeply conflicted individual seeking to escape through art. It introduces the argument that the use of the Early Modern was politically and ideologically significant by claiming that rather than being reactionary, O’Brien used the visual language of the past as a means of articulating his war trauma and concealing so in other ways to reveal his homosexuality, while resisting Australian provincialism and conservatism.

Chapter Two examines the narrative of the Australian neo-classical revival, based upon a sense of balance and a lack of overt emotion in the work of Jean Bellette. This chapter reveals that unlike O’Brien, Bellette used iconographic subjects as a pretext for exploring not inner, personal turmoil, but timeless and universal themes of human suffering and alienation.

The allusions to the Quattrocento, Ancient Greece and Rome, and to more recent modernist works that appear in Bellette’s paintings, continue to develop the argument that works from the past were perceived as synchronic with modernism, indicating an anachronistic relationship between the present and the past that privileged space and over time. Furthermore, it is argued that Bellette appropriated British and European modernism’s use of Piero della Francesca in order to locate herself as an Australian artist within the wider context of contemporary Western art; a political gesture that resisted identification with Australian nationalism through the universal themes attached to the human condition.

Bellette’s use of classical form in depictions of ancient mythology and folk tales is informed by her scholarly interest in Duccio, Masaccio and Piero della Francesca, an interest fostered by her husband, artist and Sydney Herald art critic, Paul Haefliger, who introduced her to the European Modernists. It is argued that Jean Bellette’s images of ancient Greek gods carry metaphoric meanings that address the present rather than the past and as with O’Brien’s use of Christian iconography, demonstrates her interest in universality.
Chapter Three introduces Smart’s sparsely populated cityscapes and argues that while they function symbolically in ways that address cultural alienation and other modernist concerns, they also evoke the intellectualism of the Quattrocento and apply it to the universal conditions of industrial modernity found in alienated non-places across the developed world. Unlike O’Brien, Smart expressed his homosexuality confidently. Smart’s use of Pieran geometry and light translates any place into a site for possible transcendence. It is argued that Smart, O’Brien and Bellette hide their Australian identity in the visual language of the Early Moderns, while Russell Drysdale reveals a conception of Australianness through the use of the same language.

Theories of anachronism are applied to Drysdale’s paintings in Chapter Four. Anachronism identifies an historical present in Drysdale’s paintings that, while similar to Bellette, is contingent upon a specific Australian distinctiveness. Drysdale’s use of the Italian Early Moderns and British modernism, together with a perceived European cultural inheritance, informed the way he contributed to the creation of an Australian mythology. I argue that identifying Pieran references in Drysdale’s work locates it within a hegemonic British cultural discourse. Drysdale’s responses to modernism are therefore discussed in terms of his relationship to Britain and the symbolism of his cultural constructions. His images of denuded landscapes in the Australian interior allowed Kenneth Clark to read the Australian landscape as a metaphor for post-war Europe, a chilling modernist image of humanity’s alienation from the natural environment as articulated in the poetry of T.S. Eliot. Clark’s promotion of Drysdale guaranteed a measure of success denied to many others. Clark’s reasons for doing so will be discussed in terms of his twin interests in the genre of landscape painting and the mystical symbolism of Piero della Francesca’s works.

Throughout these chapters on the individual artists, I will examine their reception of modernism. I will trace the multiplicity of their routes back to the art of Medieval and Early Renaissance Italy as a result of this exposure, bearing in mind that European modernism itself revisited this past despite its sharp breaks with remoter history in
other respects.\textsuperscript{82} Furthermore, I argue that knowledge and appreciation of Piero della Francesca and the Italian Early Moderns in mid-twentieth-century Australia were an indication of internationalism, of refined taste and intellectual status that opposed allegations of Australian parochialism, albeit within a Eurocentric framework. Quotations and allusions to Early Modern art rather than the later Renaissance in the paintings discussed in this thesis are therefore recognised as being politically and ideologically significant.

The theories of anachronism I apply to the work of the Australian artists chosen for this study show that they all avoided expressive and overtly socio-political statements by using the emotionally reticent language of the Early Moderns. Theirs was a different kind of resistance, one marked by withdrawal and repression, restraint and quiet; a considered and stylised approach that relied on deliberate self-consciousness, imagination rather than reality, and the symbolic use of form, line and colour. Their anachronism was not necessarily reactionary, although it does suggest a different kind of politics, one of disarming gentleness that will be explored in the forthcoming chapters.

\textsuperscript{82}The Italian Futurists for example, decried their rich cultural heritage yet it inevitably seeped back into the appearance of their works. An example discussed earlier is the debt that Boccioni’s \textit{Unique Forms of Continuity in Space} (1913) owed to the Second Century BC Greek \textit{Winged Victory of Samothrace}. 
Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explore the implications of the anachronistic quotations and allusions to pre-Renaissance visual language in the work of Justin O’Brien. I argue that Early Modern modes of representation reveal a complex relationship between anachronism, trauma and Australianness in his work. This relationship is explored through the temporal and spatial structures that are complicated by pre-Renaissance modalities existing synchronically alongside those of European modernism. There is further anachronism in the way O’Brien’s traumatic experiences as a wartime nurse in Greece and during his internment in a prisoner-of-war camp in Poland are made present by the emotionally reticent visual language of the Italian Early Moderns. Australianness and O’Brien’s closeted homosexuality are explored through the

tensions between the visible and the invisible that are contained in the anachronistic quotations and allusions to the past. This chapter challenges the conception of O’Brien’s work as merely decorative instances of ‘The Charm School’ as defined by critics and presents a view of the artist as a deeply conflicted individual in search of resolution who used the past in order to find a sense of peace in the present.

This chapter argues firstly that the anachronism in O’Brien’s figurative painting is a sign of resistance and rebellion. Mid-twentieth-century Australian culture was informed by a British version of European history, art and culture that emphasised the authority of the Italian High Renaissance. The existence of pre-Renaissance strategies in O’Brien’s mid-twentieth-century representational painting challenged the authority of the Renaissance and the academic tradition. These pre-Renaissance strategies function as substitutions for the Byzantine, Tre- and Quattrocento artworks from which they derive, which O’Brien received as contemporaneous with European modernism. The anachronism in O’Brien’s painting is therefore identified as symptomatic of personal resistances and rebellions that have to do with the Australian present, rather than a nostalgic retreat into an idealised past.

Secondly, this chapter argues that the trauma O’Brien experienced during the War was a critical turning point in the way he produced art. The paintings he completed during the war and after his return reveal emotional restraint and a focus on form. It is suggested that the lack of melodrama, what Bernard Berenson referred to as the ‘ineloquence’ of Piero della Francesca, operates in O’Brien’s work as an affective indication of trauma. Furthermore, the themes of life, death and resurrection, depicted anachronistically through allusions and quotations of an Early Modern style, are interpreted as indications of various kinds of withdrawal. O’Brien’s sustained

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2 ‘The Charm School’ is a pejorative label used to describe Sydney artists of the 1940s whose work was considered largely decorative. It is discussed in detail later in this chapter.


engagement with European Modernism, Significant Form and the Byzantine, the Trecento and the Quattrocento styles demonstrates a cathartic response to trauma, indicated by a suppression rather than an overt expression of emotional content that is, paradoxically, still expressive.

Thirdly, this chapter argues that O’Brien’s post-war thematic concerns with spatial and temporal tensions and religious motifs, in particular themes of the dormition, burial and assumption of the Virgin, consolidated his interest in the art of Early Moderns. The Blake Prize, established in Sydney in 1950 to encourage an interest in religious art, provided an avenue through which O’Brien could explore multivalency in the spiritual and religious imagery of the Early Moderns, within a contemporary context.

Finally, this chapter examines the subtle transformations that occurred in O’Brien’s use of past motifs when he relocated from Australia to Italy. O’Brien imagined himself an inheritor of European culture and experienced a nostalgic and displaced sense of coming home when travelling through Europe. It is argued that living in Rome resulted in a change from a deeply internal vision to one inspired by the external world around him. While O’Brien continued to explore his inner world through early Christian iconography, external contemporary references suggest a more resolved concatenation of past and present. Anachronism draws attention to O’Brien’s interpretations and reinventions of metaphor and meaning in Early Modern religious imagery. The anachronism in O’Brien’s twentieth century paintings allows for the reimagining of his work in terms of resistance and submission, silence and revelation.

Another important consideration of this chapter concerns O’Brien’s interest in modern art. Terry Smith argues that the distances between Australia and Europe meant that the cultural shifts and changes in Europe appeared arbitrary in Australia.⁵ O’Brien, as with many other Australian artists of the time, was not present when Europe underwent the social and political changes that manifested as modernism in art, but came to realise that changes had taken place in representation through the

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reproductions of contemporary paintings that were available to him. This temporal lag manifested in Australia in a sense of anachronism, belatedness, of being out of step with the social and political context that was driving these art movements. Thus, O’Brien’s quotations and allusions to the Early Moderns are themselves symptomatic of the anachronism felt by being in Australia, particularly as the Early Modern presence was well established in the European and British Modernist aesthetic before O’Brien made use of it. It is argued throughout this thesis that this delayed, second-hand response was an inherently anachronistic feature of the Australian context.

The significance of understanding O’Brien’s work through anachronism is that it reveals a multilayered and multivalent interpretation of European and British modernism. This challenges the dismissal of O’Brien as ‘Charm School,’ concerned only with luxury art, as well as the privileging of the High Renaissance in the discourse of twentieth century Australian art.

**Interpreting European Culture: A Tradition Inherited at a Second Remove.**

Justin O’Brien’s first exposure to art at the age of ten was in the form of lantern slides of Renaissance art and architecture shown in the darkened Adyar Hall under the Old Savoy Theatre in Bligh Street, Sydney. A sense of time is complicated by the way slides make the past present, even though, as Robert Nelson points out, the viewer is implicitly aware of the image being from the past. O’Brien’s aunt, Louise O’Brien, encouraged his interest in art by giving him art materials and taking him to lectures by eminent academics in European art history and architecture. Natalie Wilson attributes O’Brien’s fascination with Renaissance and Sienese Trecento art to these lectures. In 1995, O’Brien described to Lou Klepac the lectures he attended by the German émigré sculptor, Eleonore Lange: “She had a lantern… with slides, and I was looking at

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architecture, sculpture and paintings of the Renaissance... I was absolutely excited by it every time I went.”

According to R.L. Pesman, tastes in Australia at the time tended towards Raphael, Michelangelo, Carlo Dolci and Guido Reni, following British preferences for the late Renaissance and Mannerism. Knowledge of the Renaissance, whether through personal experience or by way of reproduction, was, as Pesman notes, a badge of taste and culture in Australia. This preference was anachronistic in itself because, according to Caroline Elam, as early as 1920 the knowledge and appreciation of Piero della Francesca had replaced the late Renaissance as the epitome of intellectual status and taste in Britain. The general popularity of reproductions and lectures and the heightened response to the slides from the young O’Brien illustrates the distanced and rarefied way he received European culture. O’Brien’s early experiences of European art and culture were also anachronistic, the slides destabilised time and space, giving artefacts from another place and time a local, synchronic relevance.

O’Brien initially accepted the Renaissance as the primary source of culture in Australia. The centrality of European culture and the Renaissance was reinforced during his years of training under Edward Smith. In 1931, at the age of fourteen, O’Brien’s strictly observant Catholic parents allowed him to leave school to study full time under Smith, primarily because Smith, a very conservative history and portrait painter, was also a devout Catholic. Smith was a resolute opponent of Modern Art and believed, in an anachronistic impulse that appears to have been derived from the British Pre-Raphaelite movement and the German Nazarenes, that the future of art lay in the return to the Catholic values that had inspired the masterpieces of the thirteenth century. The art lectures O’Brien had attended as a boy and Edward Smith’s teaching

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9 Ibid. Although O’Brien recalls this lecture as being given by Eleanore Lange it could have been delivered by a number of other art professionals or academics. It must be noted that Lange was firmly committed to abstract art and promoted the social, spiritual and therapeutic function of art in her lectures, which suggests that it might not have been one of her lectures that O’Brien recalls. See Eileen Chanin and Steven Miller, Degenerates and Perverts: The 1939 Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2005), 83.
encouraged O’Brien’s Eurocentricity and informed the value and authority he placed on particular paintings from the past. Under Smith’s tutelage, O’Brien gained an appreciation for technique and received rigorous training in a traditional European academic style based on Renaissance techniques and principles that conformed with conservative Australian art discourse. O’Brien described his time with Edward Smith as “though the world of painting had died with Velasquez, Titian, Raphael and Bellini.”

O’Brien left Smith in 1938 to pursue a career as an artist and art teacher. That year he also joined the Fra Angelico Guild, which met weekly at Peter Dodd’s art school in Bathurst St, Sydney. The Guild was modelled on the ideas of a group of Catholic intellectuals and artists in France, headed by Father Couturier and Father Régamy who were committed to incorporating religious themes into contemporary art. They were also the inspiration for the establishment of the Blake Prize in 1950, which is discussed later in this chapter. It was through The Guild that O’Brien was exposed to the modernist art of Derain, Braque, Rouault and Matisse as synchronic with Early Modern art. Christine France describes O’Brien as being invigorated and excited by the lectures, debates, life classes and discussions on contemporary art at Dodd’s studio. Peter Dodd and the Fra Angelico Guild introduced O’Brien to contemporary art and a way of challenging the conservatism in Australian art institutions through the incorporation of Medieval and Early Modern religious art in their practice.

The following comparative analysis of O’Brien’s 1939 Self-Portrait with Jan van Eyck’s 1433 Portrait of a Man and Velázquez’s Portrait of Pope Innocent X c. 1650 illustrates the synchronic relationship O’Brien had to the art of the past, drawing on art from the early as well as later Renaissance as if they were contemporaneous. O’Brien’s 1939 portrait also provides a benchmark against which to compare his later wartime portraits.

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14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
O’Brien’s 1939 self-portrait is a realistic image of an earnest young man, painted, according to both Christine France and Natalie Wilson, in the style of Velázquez. Where they see the painting as a romantic work (France) and relate the brooding shadows and broad paint handling to Velázquez (Wilson), I propose this painting also alludes to the much earlier *Portrait of a Man* (1433) by Jan van Eyck.
Figure 3. Studio of Diego Velázquez, (detail) Portrait of Pope Innocent X, c. 1650
Oil on canvas, Galleria Doria Pamphilj, Rome.

The most obvious similarity to both Velázquez and Van Eyck resides in the red turban wrapped around O’Brien’s head whose significance is discussed later. O’Brien imitates the way the figures emerge from a dark background with the subtle play of light and shade creating a dramatic and arresting image. The close examination that the fine facial detail in the portraits requires from the viewer reinforces the sitter’s impression of introspection. The self-consciousness of the Van Eyck and O’Brien portraits differ from Velázquez’s in that these portraits are inward looking, although while the Pope in Velázquez’s portrait challenges the viewer with his authoritarian, outward gaze, O’Brien’s drops the worldly shrewdness that is evident in both of the earlier portraits.

These deviations from the early and late Renaissance portraits reflect the distance and differences between the European past and the Australian present. There is no evidence to suggest that O’Brien was aware of or interested in the historical events or developments that account for the changes in style and approach from Van Eyck to Velázquez. Instead O’Brien has engaged with the formal aspects of these paintings in a particularly naïve way, imitating the use of light, line and colour to indicate his knowledge of painting from the European past.

While there is no explicit Australian content in O’Brien’s portrait, the deviations can be seen as making Australianness visible by imagining Australia as an inheritor of the
European tradition and also through a clichéd demonstration of the disparity between the richness of European tradition and the paucity of Australian art and culture due to the relative vacancy of his represented face. O’Brien has deviated from traditional techniques by using broad, perhaps modernist, brushstrokes for his clothing that, while reminiscent of the painterly style of Velázquez, is in stark contrast to Van Eyck’s finely detailed brushwork, seen, for example, in the treatment of the fur collar. O’Brien has also translated the rich textures of the past into the rough simplicity of the present. Van Eyck’s turban, for example, is elaborate, high-fashion, fifteenth-century Flemish headgear, while the Pope’s cap appears to be plush red velvet, a sign of his status and authority. Conversely, O’Brien’s red headscarf is quite ordinary, in both size and texture. There is an element of dressing up and play-acting about its exoticism, characteristic of the Dutch tronie tradition. O’Brien does not seem to take into consideration the importance of the reference to the East and the authority, wealth and power of the Pope or the circumstances of each painting. Instead he appears to be focussing on the formal elements of line, colour and composition and thereby disrupting the original meaning and purpose of these portraits. His quotations unsettle the temporal and spatial stability of the older portraits by translating them into a twentieth century Australian context. Young and old, past and present, tradition and modernity are juxtaposed within the framework of the relationship between Australia and the European tradition. O’Brien’s Self Portrait thus reimagines Velázquez’s Portrait of Pope Innocent X and Van Eyck’s Portrait of a Man within an Australian context and destabilises their meaning through quotation.

Using Nagel and Wood’s model of substitution and performance reveals another interpretation of O’Brien’s 1939 self-portrait. Nagel revisited this model in Medieval Modern: Art Out of Time (2012) where he recognised the references to Medieval and Early Modern art in contemporary art. O’Brien’s modern paintings reveal what Nagel and Wood refer to as a “hidden sameness” in its quotations from the past. For Nagel and Wood, substitution implies no change of meaning. Although they were referring to

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religious objects and their various reincarnations, I suggest that the quotation of the
headscarf by O’Brien can also be read in terms of substitution if it is understood to
signify the same in all three portraits and thus remains a stable indication of the
authority invested in the subject. Consequently, the Renaissance paintings function,
not as relics of the past, but rather as contemporary resources and material objects
with their own agency. O’Brien’s translation of the headscarf in Van Eyck and
Velázquez’s portraits into a 1939 Australian context enables his identification as artist
and as a Catholic, with an authority that comes from the past. He collapses the
geographical and temporal distance between the paintings and their countries of
origin which brings Australia into the same cultural sphere as Europe, obliterating
differences and obscuring Australian specificity or national identity while also,
paradoxically, reinforcing it.

O’Brien’s self-portrait in the Renaissance style shows the privileging of Renaissance
painting in Australian art discourse. His works completed during and after the Second
World War oppose and rebel against the rational Renaissance values of idealism,
humanism, classicism and worldly power. I am about to propose that O’Brien’s
traumatic war experiences created the need for a different visual language, one that
offered a different perspective and worldview – a subjective rather than Renaissance-
inspired, empirical perspective. The lectures at the Fra Angelico Guild had introduced
O’Brien to European Modernism and the Early Modern compositional strategies in
their art. During the war O’Brien read texts by Roger Fry and Clive Bell that endorsed
the use of formal elements of Byzantine and Early Modern art in contemporary art.
The next section discusses O’Brien’s wartime portraits in terms of Fry and Bell’s
theories of significant form. Their books were available to O’Brien during his
internment in a prisoner of war camp and, it is argued, validated his use of Early
Modern compositional strategies as a means of navigating through the complexities of
his traumatic wartime experiences.

Replacing the Traditional with the Modern
In May 1940 O’Brien volunteered for the Australian Army Medical Corps. After five months of basic training, he was sent first to the Middle East and then to Greece. In Greece he was stationed at a hospital in Kokkinia, just outside Athens where he met fellow artists, Austen Deans and Jesse Martin.18 When Germany occupied Greece in 1941, O’Brien, Deans and Martin remained behind as a prisoners-of-war to look after those patients who were unable to be moved. After seven months they were sent to another camp, this time in Torún, Poland, where O’Brien remained until his release at the end of October 1943. In Torún, O’Brien was finally able to begin painting once again. The portraits he painted during this period reveal an emotional and expressive use of colour and line and a modernist interest in form. This section proposes that these changes came about because the traditional academic approach to painting based upon Renaissance notions of perfection and humanism could no longer provide O’Brien with an affective means of navigating the trauma and personal conflict generated by his war experiences. This period shows the beginning of O’Brien’s retreat into images of the mind rather than the eye. It is argued that Early Modern modes of representation, as understood through the lens of European Modernism, enabled this new stylistic direction.

Figure 4. Justin O’Brien, Self Portrait, 1941
Oil on cardboard (army medical supply box) 41.7 x 26 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

A comparison between O’Brien’s pre-war Self Portrait of 1939 and a 1941 self-portrait reveals a tension between the past and present through the evocation of form. O’Brien’s pre-war involvement with the Sydney branch of the Contemporary Art Society and his interest in Modern art fostered by Peter Dodd and the Fra Angelico Guild means that he would have been aware of, if not visited, the Herald Exhibition of Contemporary French and British Art shown in Sydney in 1939. Furthermore, the National Gallery of Victoria’s purchase of Van Gogh’s A Portrait of a Man (1886/87) from the Herald Exhibition had also received a great deal of national news coverage.19

This 1941 wartime self-portrait that reveals the influence of Van Gogh, suggests that O’Brien was familiar with Van Gogh and perhaps this particular portrait. While O’Brien’s colours may lack the brilliance of Van Gogh’s, there is a similarity in the use of tone and line and an emotive rendering of the cheekbone and hair that loosely alludes to Van Gogh’s Portrait of a Man. A comparison of O’Brien’s two self-portraits adds a further temporal complexity by drawing attention to the way O’Brien changed in both appearance and approach to painting as a result of his experiences during the intervening years, a before-and-after convention not unknown in war portraits.

19 News [Adelaide], 18 August 1939, 9; ‘The Daily Telegraph brings Melbourne Herald’s exhibition of French and British modern art to Sydney’, Australian National Journal, no. 3 (Summer 1939), 50; ‘Early portrait by Van Gogh in art exhibition’, Herald [Melbourne], 6 October 1939, 3; ‘Van Gogh in art show’, Sun News-Pictorial [Melbourne], 9 October 1939, 2. In 2007 the painting was found to have been misattributed to Van Gogh.
O’Brien’s 1939 *Self-Portrait* is self-reflective and calm, while his 1941 *Self-Portrait* demonstrates a new direction in subjective painterly expression. The warm deep tones and contrasts that indicated depth and volume in the earlier work have been replaced by a series of overlapping planes that reveal a newfound awareness of the picture plane as both a flat surface and a space to offer an illusion of reality. O’Brien’s use of overlapping planes of colour, rather than tone, to represent depth and form now alludes to both Van Gogh and Cézanne rather than Van Eyck or Velázquez, indicating a move away from the Renaissance towards modernism. Short rapid brush strokes and strong dark lines that announce, rather than hide, the presence of the artist reinforces this impression. The background has lightened into a muddy mass, reflected in the sallow tone of the sunken cheek. The outward gaze challenges the viewer with a directness that is absent in the earlier work. An elongated and gaunt face fills the pictorial space with scant attention paid to the inconsequentiality of fabric. The sensuous mouth and aquiline nose emphasise the leanness of the face. This wartime portrait reveals an assurance in line and more confidence in mark making. It still bears traces of Renaissance-inspired naturalness, but also demonstrates a modernist concern with form and colour relationships. Natalie Wilson notes that this self-portrait “attests to his academic training and his recent embrace of modernist modes of expression.”

By 1941, O’Brien was beginning to use colour and line to restate the relationship between the object and the two-dimensional picture plane, replacing his earlier use of Renaissance empiricism with a modernist interrogation of meaning through form.

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The heightened emotional register of *Man with the Beard* (1943) shows the enduring influence of Van Gogh. In addition, the sitter’s red cap draws this portrait into an analogous relationship with O’Brien’s 1939 self-portrait as well as, anachronistically, Van Eyck’s 1433 *Portrait of a Man* and Velázquez’s *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*. This time, however, the reference is ironic as the sitter is a prisoner-of-war, without agency or power. The difference draws attention to the sitter’s condition and is an important part of the conversation between works from the past and the present. The result is an overturning of chronology, a conflation of past and present wherein the certainty of the early Renaissance is countered by the uncertainty of O’Brien then, in 1939 and now, as a prisoner-of-war, in 1943.

The historic time of production does not dominate O’Brien’s interpretation of the older works. Instead, he understands them as historic and synchronic at the same time. They therefore participate in an exchange of meaning that is contingent upon the way they are received and their anachronistic presence in other later works. While the quotation of a red hat refers to paintings from the past, the discordant colour relationships in *Man with the Beard* reveal a modernist dislocation between subject and object in that colour values, rather than the sitter, now dominate the painting that
differs from the more psychological penetrating portrait of 1941. There is tension in
the way the red at the top is contrasted with the green at the bottom in that they
compete for attention. There is no surface or form upon which the viewer’s eye can
rest, so evoking a sense of restlessness and uncertainty.

Flat bands of colour are applied with a broad and rapid brushstroke, making apparent
the presence of the artist. There is still no attempt to recreate the texture of cloth; the
fabric is registered only through a contrasting use of colour. Expression lies in the
abstract colour and form relationship rather than in an accurate representation of the
object, demonstrating a move away from Renaissance mimesis towards a preference
for formal impact, indicating an interest in affective expression. The materiality of art
and the capacity of painting to carry and transform meaning are revealed in the
anachronistic allusions to and contrasts with the earlier paintings.

The next portrait, *A Spaniard*, also painted in 1943, completes O’Brien’s
transformation from the Renaissance into Modernity in its articulation of a strong
formalist aesthetic. The Byzantine qualities of this portrait suggest that O’Brien’s
interest in the Early Modern was now mediated through a formalist interpretation of
modernism that had itself revisited the past.

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 7. Justin O’Brien, A Spaniard, 1943
Oil on cardboard; 49.8 x 33.2 cm
Private Collection, Sydney*
Bold lines, an elongated neck and almond shaped eyes, that recalling Modigliani’s use of only the essential elements in a painting, are suggestive of a Byzantine style. The deep tonality of this work, which hints at Baroque chiaroscuro, creates a rhythm that defines the planes and emphasises the facial features. There is a modernist conflation of foreground and background, as both occupy the same plane within this harmony of dark and light. The tonal contrasts contribute to a rhythmically abstract composition, while the painting still retains a figural representation of the subject. The dramatic changes in portraiture show the incapacity of a Renaissance visual language to fully express the conditions of a prisoner-of-war camp, whereby the strong vertical planes and the reduced colour palette create a claustrophobic space within the confines of a compressed pictorial frame that alludes to the personal experience of confinement. The gaunt face, emphasised by the sharp angularity of lines and the too narrow, sloping shoulders, speaks of physical hardship and suffering. There is an evocation of despair that is incongruously offset by the sensuality of the mouth, hinting perhaps at the despair of other, more personal longings. This portrait challenges the certainty of faith that defines Byzantine mosaics.

These changes in style suggest that a particular formalist aesthetic, encountered during the war, resonated with O’Brien. The next section looks at the texts that introduced this aesthetic and how O’Brien incorporated it into his painting. It argues that a focus on form enabled O’Brien to distance himself from his circumstances and create a space between his life and his art.

**A British Aesthetic: Roger Fry and Clive Bell**

O’Brien did not strictly follow the Byzantine style as characterised by the better-known mosaics at Ravenna and Hagia Sophia. His knowledge of the Byzantine was most likely through modernist influences encountered in the texts he read during his internment in Poland. O’Brien’s identification with Byzantine imagery anchors his art in the distant past. However, O’Brien was following a precedent for using Early Modern modalities that had already been set by the European modernists. In 1987, Christine France, in
defence of O’Brien, likened the stylization in this painting to the School of Paris art of Matisse and Braque rather than the Byzantine, thereby locating O’Brien firmly within a European Modernist paradigm. Bernard Smith also made the point of distancing O’Brien’s work from the Byzantine saying instead that it draws its spirit from the delicacy of the Sienese Trecento softened with ‘a touch of folk whimsy’. The touch of folk humour Smith identifies in O’Brien’s paintings is also present in Russell Drysdale’s work and will be discussed in a later chapter. Smith provides an Australian interpretation of modernist conventions, one that tends to take life and art a little less seriously than its European or British counterparts. It can be argued in defence of Smith, however, that he was seeking to differentiate Australian and European art by identifying irreverence and irony as a defining feature of the Australian aesthetic. Yet, by focussing on humour, Smith misinterprets the anachronistic language of symbolic form as a flippant re-iteration of European modernism instead of an expression of trauma that resists literal representation. Harry Tatlock Miller also explicitly rejected the Byzantine in O’Brien’s painting, in favour of the Sienese Trecento. O’Brien’s expression of the Early Modern in A Spaniard, however, was not as result of direct experience of the mosaics at Ravenna or the Trecento art of Siena, rather it was mediated through the Modernist texts and influences he encountered during the war and reinforced by the Fra Angelico Guild in Sydney before the war. France is, therefore, correct when she identifies the source of O’Brien’s work as being not of the Byzantine, but rather of the Byzantine content in the twentieth century paintings of the School of Paris.

The International Red Cross supplied the prisoner-of-war camp in Poland with donated painting materials and books on contemporary art. Austen Deans wrote in his diary that they amassed a large art library, mentioning on the 20th August 1942 the receipt of “Books of Hodler and Brueghel from England” and in a diary entry on 7th August 1943 he described a book on Cézanne received from the Student Relief Fund (Oxford)

as ‘very fine’.  

According to Natalie Wilson, O’Brien cited having read books by both Roger Fry and Clive Bell but without mentioning the titles. Wilson suggests, based on availability at that time and the evidence in his paintings, that these books were more than likely to have been Roger Fry’s *Vision and Design, Cézanne and Henri Matisse*; Clive Bell’s *Art* first published in 1914, which looks closely at Byzantine, early Renaissance art and Cézanne; and Bell’s *Since Cézanne* of 1922. O’Brien’s shift in style during his internment can be understood through a new found enthusiasm for the aesthetics of Fry and Bell. Wilson speculates that O’Brien’s use of strong colours and, in particular, his painterly qualities indicates access to Roger Fry’s 1930s monograph on Matisse. Evidence that supports Wilson’s speculation is found in the way O’Brien articulates the eyes in *A Spaniard*. The strong outline and heavy-lidded almond-shape is quoted directly from Matisse’s *Self-portrait in a Striped Shirt* (1906).

Roger Fry explored the dual role of the artist in his essay on Matisse. “[The artist] has a double nature and a double allegiance. He longs on the one hand to realize his vision, on the other to be a maker; he longs to tell of his experience and also to create an object, an idol, a precious thing.” Fry also notes this dual nature in the painting itself: “It is a problem inherent in the dual nature of painting, where we are forced to

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24 Unpublished email correspondence between the author and Natalie Wilson, 31 August 2015 and the author and Paul Deans, 1 September 2015.
25 Unpublished email correspondence between the author and Natalie Wilson, 31 August 2015.
26 Unpublished email correspondence between the author and Natalie Wilson, 31 August 2015.
recognise, at one and the same moment, a diversely coloured surface and a three
dimensional world, analogous to that in which we live and move.” 29 Fry argues that the
Italian Byzantine began the reconciliation of this duality with their realization of the
“ideated space of the picture and the plastic perfection of the volumes it contains.” 30
O’Brien’s familiarity with Fry’s proposition is suggested in the deliberate and visible
mark-making by which he makes his presence as the artist felt, while he
simultaneously distances himself by his cool appraisal of his subject. Furthermore,
O’Brien’s A Spaniard reveals a self-conscious familiarity with Fry’s description of the
way painting functions as both a multi-coloured surface plane as well as an illusion of a
three-dimensional world. This is seen in the suggestion of a doorway on the right-hand
side of an otherwise flat picture plane. The differences between O’Brien’s earlier
portraits and the 1943 portraits painted in Poland suggest a re-enactment of ideas
found in the available texts and a more studied use of Byzantine structures.

Clive Bell made the connection between Byzantine mosaics and the Post-
Impressionists in a chapter in Art entitled “The Rise of Christian Art”: “Since the
Byzantine primitives set their mosaics at Ravenna no artist in Europe has created forms
of greater significance unless it be Cézanne.” 31 O’Brien’s adoption of Byzantine
elongation in A Spaniard, is more commonly found in Modigliani than Matisse.
Byzantine formalism is recognised in heavily stylised images that are indifferent to
accurate representation. They are usually outlined by strong dark lines, embellished
with rich colours, including gold, and shown in frontal depictions with a noticeable lack
of depth. A Modernist indifference to flawless representation allowed for the
rediscovery of Early Modern form, of spatial harmony and design that Fry argues had
begun with Cézanne and had been continued by Van Gogh and Gauguin. 32 O’Brien’s
work reveals some significant similarities to Van Gogh, Matisse and Cézanne in these
respects.

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
Elsewhere in *Art*, Bell argues for a similarity between art and religion claiming art, like religion, allows one to transcend the everyday:33

Art and Religion are ... two roads by which men escape from circumstance to ecstasy. Between aesthetic and religious rapture there is a family alliance. Art and Religion are means to similar states of mind. ...Art is a manifestation of the religious sense. ...It is an expression of ...emotion which is the vital force in every religion. ...We may say that both art and religion are manifestations of man’s...sense of ultimate reality.34

In a similar vein, Roger Fry argues for the superiority of the imaginative life, accessed through both art and religion, over the reality of the everyday. According to Fry, the imaginative life is ennobled and “distinguished by the greater clearness of its perception, and the greater purity and freedom of its emotion.”35

The young Catholic artist, imprisoned in a POW camp, adopted from the aesthetics of Fry and Bell the idea that art could be an important means of psychological survival as well as an affective means of expression. This is demonstrated by O’Brien’s evolution towards the Byzantine and his thematic use of religious imagery. Rather than this arising because of a return to the belief of his first art teacher, Edward Smith - namely, that the future of art lay in the Catholic values of the thirteenth century - I propose that O’Brien’s use of religious themes was a means of withdrawal, providing a necessary separation between his art and what was really going on in his life and mind. The religious aspect of Early Modern paintings had essentially been evacuated by modernism, giving rise to an aesthetic based on transcendence through form. Thus, the anachronistic juxtaposition of Byzantine and modernist form in O’Brien’s wartime portraits can be accounted for by his reading of Clive Bell and Roger Fry, rather than Edward Smith’s teaching.

33 Bell, *Art*, 59.
34 Ibid., 68-69.
Anachronism and the Attraction of the Byzantine

According to Robert Nelson, Byzantine art was attractive to the Post-Impressionists because it appeared to them to be both “old and modern at the same time.” He refers to the work of Matisse and Klimt to show how the Byzantine mosaics at Ravenna and Hagia Sophia were understood in accordance with the modernist aesthetic of the day. Nelson argues that Modernism’s return to past images was not a rupture but rather recognition of the modernity of those past forms. In this regard, Nelson is reaffirming Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood’s earlier argument that art has the ability to escape time and speak to a much later era.

In *Anachronic Renaissance*, Nagel and Wood argue for the materiality of particular art objects that appear able to escape both time and space, re-occurring within different and much later contexts as modern and relevant, or simply ‘timeless’. They draw attention to the contradictory capacity of particular art objects to both escape from and be bound by their historical positioning. According to Nagel and Wood, the performative/historical and the substitutional/timeless are two principles that are simultaneously present in works of art. Therefore, they describe art objects as anachronic: simultaneously of their time and with the capacity to be of a later or future time. A painting that alludes to a past work, as in O’Brien’s quotation from Matisse, which in turn refers to Byzantine mosaics, has according to Nagel and Wood, the capacity to recreate the meaning of the original work, as well as anticipate potential future meanings by destabilising any fixed or singular interpretation.

O’Brien’s quotations suggests that both the Matisse portrait and the Byzantine mosaics impact upon the meaning of his painting. This raises the level of importance of those works and anticipates new ways in which they can be used and interpreted. By alluding to the stylistic concerns and transcendent meaning of the Byzantine mosaics at Ravenna, Matisse recreated the original Byzantine image, reconfiguring it in

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modernist terms. The new work becomes a substitute for the original, which when reimagined in O’Brien’s portrait reactivates the Byzantine in the Australian present through its association with modernism. Therefore, by applying these theories of time and the materiality of the art object to O’Brien’s anachronistic use of Byzantine form, it can be concluded that O’Brien uses the Byzantine because the paintings of artists such as Matisse are understood as substitutes for the ancient works, carrying their meaning into the present. This method of substitution enables O’Brien to translate European culture into an Australian context. O’Brien’s painting can then be understood as participating in what Nagel and Wood refer to as the chain of substitutions which attaches contemporary meanings and metaphors retroactively onto the older works, on account of the new ways in which they are used. O’Brien, by adopting the Byzantine forms seen in Matisse’s painting, makes not only the Byzantine but also European modern art present in Australia because the modernity of the Byzantine is acknowledged through other more recent paintings rather than by direct first hand experience. O’Brien’s appropriation of a form used to express an unwavering faith in Christianity becomes a quest for certainty during an uncertain time. Furthermore, O’Brien follows Matisse’s rejection of Renaissance humanist values and perspective, challenging previous systems of order based on empiricism, rationality and logic. An interpretation is thus retroactively imposed upon both the Matisse portrait and the Byzantine mosaics from which it derives its form. Applying Robert Nelson’s argument on the paradoxical modernity of Byzantine art and Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood’s recognition of the capacity of some material objects from the Early Modern past to appear modern to O’Brien’s paintings reveal how references to the past are not necessarily about the past, but rather can be interpreted as an artist’s way of engaging with the present.

Christine France quotes O’Brien denying any exposure to Byzantine paintings and mosaics while in Greece firstly because he was a prisoner-of-war and therefore detained and secondly because all the churches and museums were locked during the war. She therefore concludes that: “O’Brien returned to Australia having never seen
any original Byzantine art at all.”\(^{38}\) The abstractions in O’Brien’s painting, if understood as relating to the Byzantine and Early Modern, are therefore recognised as being received through a modernist filter.

Modernism’s reconfiguration of the Byzantine as contemporary enables O’Brien’s abstraction of form to be read as an affective interpretation of his experience. Thus, if the anachronistic presence of the Byzantine seen in O’Brien’s wartime portraits is considered as an act of resistance to the authority of the Renaissance, then it can be seen as analogous with other personal and psychological resistances. It is, therefore, indicative of the way in which O’Brien made use of a stylistic strategy from the past in order to navigate the tensions and challenges of the present.

After the war ended, O’Brien continued to use Byzantine compositional strategies as a means of coping with post-war trauma by creating stillness in his paintings. This next section argues that the lack of melodrama in O’Brien’s post-war paintings paradoxically reveals the extent of his trauma. It is largely argued in relation to Greek Burial, completed after O’Brien’s return to Australia in January 1944.

**Post-war Thematic Concerns: Dealing with Trauma Through Stillness**

John McDonald, in his review of the 2011 O’Brien retrospective at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, identified in the formal qualities of colour and line evidence for O’Brien’s post-war religious crisis:

> By succumbing so wholeheartedly to the art of another age [O’Brien] does not present a living version of Jesus, Mary and the saints but a series of figures in fancy dress. His paintings are attractive but they are not convincing... O’Brien abandoned his faith but kept all the trappings, like the façade of a temple from which the contents had been removed. In these serene, often beautiful works one may see that he loved the style but could no longer believe in the substance.\(^{39}\)

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McDonald fails to recognise that the evacuation of religious meaning was in keeping with the modernist focus on form. Furthermore, McDonald is aware that upon the death of his mother in 1954, O’Brien finally renounced the Catholic Church and came to terms with his homosexuality.

At the end of 1954, after much soul-searching brought on by the death of his mother, O’Brien renounced his faith. In the years that followed he would also accept that he was homosexual, although he remained far from comfortable in his own skin.\(^\text{40}\)

This knowledge informs McDonald’s reading of O’Brien’s work. For McDonald, it is time and distance rather than modernism that has denuded the style of its authenticity. McDonald overlooks the possibility that the lack of dramatic content and manifest transcendence, that would otherwise convince him of authenticity, indicates a recessive emotion, a withdrawal into silence, which is no less spiritual. The evacuation of meaning that McDonald identifies is an indication of an alternative kind of engagement with the present. O’Brien addressed his religious and sexual crisis anachronistically through anachronistic substitution, oblique references to the past, and recessive emotion rather than direct confrontation.

\(^{40}\) Ibid.
Justin O’Brien’s response to trauma is indicated in his paintings by the repression of emotion, a withdrawal from reality, and his desire for peace. In an interview with James Gleeson in 1978 O’Brien explained his quest for peace: “the one thing I want in everything I ever do is peace. It’s the feeling of stopping for a second, and just coping with the whole thing.” This suggests that peace and stillness is something to be desired rather than something that is present. Stillness is found in the work of Piero della Francesca where images of battle and emotional intensity are depicted in a static composition of suspended time. O’Brien, like Piero, reveals emotion in a controlled way through stasis and the expression of emotion through form. The lack of overt emotionality, identified in Piero’s work by Bernard Berenson as ‘ineloquence’, operates in O’Brien’s paintings as both exposure and occlusion, a simultaneous revelation and withdrawal. Emotion and trauma is therefore made paradoxically present by its very absence.
O’Brien communicates trauma by withholding information and avoiding any dramatic depictions of violence. Lauren Berlant refers to the “underperformed emotion” in Scott Heim’s novel and Gregg Araki’s film, *Mysterious Skin*, to think about how a lack of melodrama and intensity can be used to indicate past traumatic events.41 She argues that the traumatic event from the past becomes an anachronistic feature of the work in that it throws out time by its presence. Time, she says, is ‘out of joint’, a phrase that Shakespeare has Hamlet use in Act 1, scene 5, to explain the voice of his father’s ghost. Giorgio Agamben uses a similar phrase to describe the sense of anachronism in the contemporary moment, referring to it as a “disconnection and out-of-jointness”.42 According to Berlant, the heightened sense of anachronism in contemporary aesthetics usually plays out in the uncanny banality of familiar soundtracks, spaces and fashion that point everywhere but to the present moment. However, in this book and the film, the present moment is not fleeting rather it is saturated with the traumatic events from past, but represented without melodrama, violence or suffering.43 According to Raymond Williams’ model that Berlant responds to, the trauma attached to the historical event is sensed rather than known or enacted.44 For Berlant, the lack of an emotional register presents an uncertainty and is an indication of withdrawal that undermines the normal power structures and social relations.

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What appears to be recessive action is only one kind of withdrawal: any gesture or way of being in relation can be at the same time embedded in a tangled field of action and event, and only some of these will be accessible immediately…. Any expressive act is as likely a defence against an encounter as it is an opening to being seen, known, and in relation, and often both aims operate at the same time.  

Applying Berlant’s argument to O’Brien’s painting allows the stillness, flatness and gestural effect in O’Brien’s Greek Burial (1947) to be understood as a way of eliding and attending to the intensity of the traumatic event that inspired the painting. Greek Burial is O’Brien’s response to witnessing the mass burial of famine victims in Kokkinia in 1941, during the German occupation of Greece. O’Brien’s Greek Burial is an anachronistic and historically ambiguous image in which styles and periods converge and exist synchronically in the depiction of trauma experienced in the past. O’Brien’s witnessing of the mass burial while still in Kokkinia manifests anachronistically six years later in a painting that informs his apperception of the Australian present. Byzantine elongation and compositional techniques together with a Quattrocento stillness complicate this response to unresolved past trauma.

O’Brien’s creative response to the traumatic event is an act of withdrawal. The anachronistically recessive emotional content of this painting paradoxically exposes even as it conceals the extent of the trauma. There is a double anachronism in Greek Burial similar to that Berlant recognised in Mysterious Skin.  

Firstly, anachronism exists in the depiction of a traumatic event witnessed during the war that is reactivated in 1947, and secondly, it manifests in the way O’Brien reignites the past by using Early Modern modes of emotional restraint and recessive expression. This traumatic event left an indelible mark on his psyche. “I tried to do a drawing of it... I sat down and I drew and I drew, and they [the drawings] were hopeless... they meant

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46 Ibid. See Berlant’s identification of the double anachronism of trauma in both the movie and book.
nothing.” An analysis of the painting reveals the influences and methods that finally enabled him to depict this devastating event.

The thin washes of paint used in *Greek Burial* that give an impression of being painted with immediacy and speed indicate the performance of painting. This contrasts with the overall stillness achieved through the almost architectural arrangement of form. There is no emotion written into the expression of the priest, however, emotion is invested in the gesture of his left hand and, I would suggest, in the implied pressure that etiolates all the forms thus locked into an architectonic stillness. The priest’s hand occupies the centre and the focal point of the painting. It is raised in a traditional gestural sign of the cross. The importance of that gesture, emphasised in its formal positioning is more than just a reference to the crucifixion. The gesture is a substitute for the cross; it carries the same iconographical meaning of sacrifice and redemption anachronistically into the work.

Fry’s formalist aesthetic dictated that the viewer responds to the form and volume of an image, to the way forms relate to one another, and to the surface and shape of the canvas, rather than to any literal or narrative representation. He does however admit that formal composition cannot be divorced from gestural representation.

The moment representation is introduced forms have an entirely new set of values. Thus a line which indicated the sudden bend of a head in a certain direction would have far more than its mere value as line in the composition because of the attraction which a marked gesture has for the eye. In almost all paintings this disturbance of the purely decorative values by reason of the representative effect takes place, and the problem becomes too complex for geometrical proof.48

Attention must be paid therefore, to the meaning introduced by the gestural effects of the lines, the curve of the wall which echoes the rounded tree shape that bends its trunk to nestle in its arc, and mirrors the walled city that appears to be held in the

48 Fry, *Vision and Design*, 32.
arms of the mountain. A strong vertical line runs from the rounded treetop, through the priest’s hand and stops just above the horizontal coffin, effectively dividing the picture plane into two sections. The delicate sprigs that are growing out of this tree counter the vision of death. The priest dominates the left-hand side, sharing the space with the other strong horizontal lines. The round circle of the tree is repeated in the blue body of water and the rounded curves of the hills in the distance. The trees that form a fringe on the hills are bare in comparison with those on the other side. This is a device used by Piero and seen in *The Resurrection* where the trees on the left-hand side behind Christ are mostly bare, in contrast with the leafiness of those on the right. The pink city connects the eye to the pink sloping side of the mountain on the left which is caught by the pink wall that meanders across the canvas. Every movement is contained by an opposing shape or colour, contributing to the stasis of the work.

The strong horizontal formed by the red priest draws attention to the two elongated bodies lying in coffins, the mourners, the figures in the background walking away from the scene and the red clouds overhead. Colour brings them all into the foreground. The apparent immediacy of the thin washes of colour that build up the picture surface is countered by the spatial stasis within the work.
The surface colour values negate the depiction of depth through tone in favour of a modernist interpretation of pre-Renaissance flatness. Early Modern compositional strategies are seen in the wavy pink wall that meanders across the centre of the picture plane and divides the image into two horizontal planes of foreground and background. O’Brien has elongated the figure of the Greek priest, emphasising its form in a hierarchical, rather than realistic, representation. The two mountains to the right balance this dominant form, dividing the canvas into three vertical and overlapping planes. O’Brien has eradicated a Renaissance illusion of depth in favour of an anachronistic pre-modern hierarchic composition and rhythmic patterning of colour, form and planes while still employing an underlying Quattrocento geometry that grounds the work in stillness. This image is both archaic and contemporary in its dual modernist and Byzantine emphasis on the flat picture plane and evocation of emotion through formal means.

There is a complex ambiguity in the spatiality and temporality of this work, as past and present, Australia and Greece, are synchronically aligned. Formal allusions to Cézanne are seen in the mountains around Kokkinia being depicted with a similar peak to the latter’s paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire. This quotation of Cézanne initiates a dialogue between twentieth-century Australian painting and nineteenth-century French Impressionism that locates O’Brien within a European art paradigm. The almost toy-like boat in the upper left hand side of the canvas indicates an incongruous and anachronistic image of leisure. The boat could be a reference to sailing activities on Elizabeth Bay in Sydney, where O’Brien had fond childhood memories. The boat and that particular body of water reappear in a later painting, The Virgin Enthroned, 1951, for which he credits Elizabeth Bay, Sydney, as the compositional inspiration. The boat and water contribute to the complex spatial and temporal structures of this painting. The blue that O’Brien uses to depict the body of water is in a much higher key than the other colours. This formal device of ordering through colour brings the otherwise subtle reference to Australia into the foreground. In Greek Burial, the tragedy of the mass burial O’Brien witnessed in Greece is made anachronistically present six years

later in Australia, through an oblique reference to sacrifice and redemption, informed by the heightened colour register of the blue lake.

Anachronistic themes of birth, death and resurrection painted in the emotionally reticent style of the Early Moderns dominated O’Brien’s post-war paintings. *Figures in a Room*, circa 1946, painted the year before *Greek Burial*, also holds tension in its depiction of revelation and occlusion, but its domestic setting suggests a more personal and subjective withdrawal. These withdrawals are explored in the next section through the two main motifs that are found in O’Brien’s post-war paintings. The first is his treatment of space while the second is his almost obsessive use of religious imagery, particularly images of birth, death and resurrection.

**Formal Expression Through Spatial and Temporal Tensions**

When he returned to Australia from the war, O’Brien embarked upon a series of interior domestic spaces inspired by the paintings of André Derain. In an interview in 1978, O’Brien told James Gleeson: “I was very influenced by Derain at that period…. I love what he did with still lifes and people in rooms and so on.”

The depiction of a domestic scene suggests an inner, private world. Figures trapped in a compressed domestic space can be read as an exploration of internal tensions associated with his return to civilian life. O’Brien’s *Figures in a Room*, with its Byzantine colour and compression of space, its sustained engagement with André Derain and Significant Form is understood through the complexity of its quotations as a subjective withdrawal into the imagination as a way of reintegrating into civilian life.

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50 O’Brien, "Interview with Justin O’Brien by James Gleeson," sound recording.
Paul Haefliger, art critic for the Sydney Morning Herald in 1945, recognised the influence of Derain in O’Brien’s treatment of space and form. He identifies Derain’s *Le Samedi* (below) painted between 1913 and 1914 as a source for another of O’Brien paintings from the same time.

Quite a group of painters have adopted a formula of arbitrary and elongated forms. But only with Justin O’Brien is there a justification for this choice of idiom which, in his work, is an indigenous part of a mood. His "Interior With Two Figures," reminiscent of Derain’s "Le Samedi," has a sense of loneliness and frustration well-emphasised by the long thin lines, the muted colours and tones so subtly varied.  

Haefliger uses O’Brien’s formal compositional arrangement and quotations from modernism and Byzantine art to justify an emotional reading of O’Brien’s work. The

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emotion in O’Brien’s paintings is, however, revealed in a recessive rather than expressive idiom. The work he mentions, O’Brien’s Interior with Two Figures, has unfortunately been lost but Figures in a Room contains enough allusions to Derain to support the assumption that O’Brien had worked on a series of paintings in the same vein. The three figures in O’Brien’s Figures in a Room explore the same compressed pictorial space of Derain’s Le Samedi with Renaissance-style open windows in both paintings offering partly obscured views of distant landscapes.

Figure 13. Andre Derain, Le Samedi (Saturday), c.1913-14
Oil on canvas; 181x228cm
Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts
Moscow, Russia.

Direct quotations add up to create strong links between O’Brien and Derain. O’Brien has reproduced Derain’s stylized sideboard and vase of flowers on the left, as well as the serving girl’s outward stare. There is a similar Byzantine elongation and use of geometric shapes to define form and facial features. The figures in both paintings are contained within the confines of the claustrophobic domestic space emphasised by the architectonic composition and Early Modern lack of depth. In both paintings the figures have their backs to the partially visible landscape in affirmation of the interiority of the subject matter. In addition the thin, vertical lines that O’Brien uses to depict the trees seen through the windows follow the forms of Derain’s trees. On the other hand, O’Brien has replaced Derain’s muted palette with an overabundance of colour, applying hues of reds and greens in layers of thin glaze.
The painterly techniques and lack of shadow O’Brien employed in Greek Burial are repeated to achieve a similar Early Modern flatness here. There is no hidden depth or illusion; instead the flatness of the picture plane announces a pre-Renaissance artifice in representation. Furthermore, the viewer’s eye does not travel easily into the pictorial space but is stopped from penetrating the depth of the image by strong vertical lines of light and dark. The result is the depiction of a private, imaginary space of occlusion rather than revelation. The tensions created by the strong horizontal and vertical lines suggest that domestic space is a contested site for O’Brien.

The lack of depth in Figures in a Room is emphasised by flattening out the floor with lines perpendicular to the sides of the picture frame, creating an ambiguous space wherein the figures are suspended, while the floor and carpet slip out of view beneath the picture frame. The tension this creates describes the depicted space as awkward and uncomfortable. Not only are Byzantine compositional techniques accentuated, but there is also a modernist challenge to a Renaissance illusion of perspectival space. By opposing Renaissance singular point of view perspectival representation, O’Brien may well be challenging traditional, social and political values that promote a heterosexual, middle-class, conservative existence. A withdrawal from directly confronting these values is achieved through the framing of that challenge in Byzantine symbolism. O’Brien withdraws through quotation and allusion to the European past, but withdrawal itself is paradoxically revealing as it raises questions about the reasons for his withdrawal, particularly in terms of his representation of domestic space.

Derain implies a relationship between the woman seated in the centre and the young girl standing next to her that suggests differences of class and status. The two figures are grouped together, separated from the isolated third seated figure by the pulled back curtain and suggestion of depth in the open doorway. The girl appears trapped between the seated woman in the centre and the large dresser on left. Their hands that encircle the empty dish unite them, while the strong lines of their arms create an opposing tension that is repeated in the tilt of the girl’s head. The girl turns slightly away, the angle of her head in line with the arm of the seated woman. The strong
lines and repeated shapes that contain her within the domestic space, confirm the impression that she is a servant. Her apron and demeanour further supports this while her gaze out of the canvas is one of dissatisfaction. The third figure sits alone, separated from the other two contained within her own world, her downward gaze reinforcing her isolation.

O’Brien repeated Derain’s outward, hailing gaze of the standing figure but departed from Derain by removing any interaction between her and the other two seated figures. O’Brien’s depiction of a domestic scene adapts Derain’s formal compositional strategies to depict the domestic setting as an uncomfortable space. Figures trapped in a compressed domestic space can be read as an exploration of internal tensions plausibly associated with his return to civilian life.

O’Brien’s hierarchical arrangement of feet on the highly patterned, Persian style carpet carries meaning in a formal way through the use of an Early Modern compositional strategy. Derain cut off his composition to increase the claustrophobic atmosphere, so the feet in his painting are not visible. In the O’Brien painting, on the other hand, the figures are full-length. The woman holding the tray is smaller than the two other seated figures, her feet slightly behind theirs. The discrepancy in height, although slight, infers a lesser status through the anachronistic compositional device borrowed from gothic paintings where size is an indicator of status. This subtly implies the status of servant rather than Derain’s overt statement. The effect of this deviation from Derain opens up the possibility for *Figures in a Room* to convey meaning in other symbolic ways.

O’Brien’s use of different skin tones, for example, possibly raises questions of social status and race relationships that were an issue in Australia but perhaps less so in Paris. While Derain used the same skin tone for all three women, O’Brien painted two in a darker tone: the visitor in the hat, and the standing figure holding the tray. By so doing, O’Brien translated Derain’s representation of European racial homogeneity into Australian diversity. This does not, however, translate easily, particularly considering the social and political segregation in place in Australia at the time.
A light outline on the left side of the visitor’s face suggests an ambiguous light source from the right and the possibility of a light-skinned face in shadow. The ambiguous light source used by Piero to denote spirituality reinforces in O’Brien’s painting a sense of artifice and awareness of the image as a product of imitation and imagination rather than observation. Other more formalist meanings can be attached to O’Brien’s use of different colour skin tones, one of which will be discussed later in relation to his use of green for the faces in a 1955 triptych, *The Virgin Enthroned*, his winning submission for the Blake Prize. In *Figures in a Room* the darker figures frame the lighter one, creating a formalist patterning of light and dark verticals that is repeated in the strong vertical lines of the windows and doors. This emphasises the middle figure as the focal point of the painting and also the equilateral triangular composition that is a departure from Derain. Mundane domesticity has replaced the Quattrocento spiritual significance of a triangular composition.

Natalie Wilson argues that the elongated forms, open windows and various objects of domesticity are for O’Brien, and the Modernists like Derain who influenced him, merely a means of arranging shape, pattern and colour. In keeping with Fry and Bell’s assertion that form contains affective meaning, I disagree with this. Instead of loud and expressive gestures, the anachronistic restraint in O’Brien’s work indicates another emotional withdrawal, this time from the domestic space. O’Brien transmits this meaning through the complex spatial and temporal structures created by quotation and allusion of both Derain and the Byzantine.

**Life After the War: Merioola and The Charm School**

In the years following the war, O’Brien settled back into civilian life, working as an art teacher at Cranbrook School and living at Merioola. O’Brien described these years as the happiest in his life. Merioola housed a diverse group of artists, Jeffrey Smart,

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Loudon Sainthill, Jocelyn Rickards and Donald Friend amongst others. Their bohemian lifestyle and Eurocentric preferences, which included an obsession with the Trecento and Quattrocento, led to them to being dismissed as “Charm School”.  

The Charm School was a pejorative label used by Robert Hughes to describe the group of artists who were loosely associated in Sydney during the 1940s. The Charm School, however, was never a school; the artists involved were too eclectic and their approach to art too different to be defined by one label, but they did reflect a new revitalization of Sydney art and society. Geoffrey Dutton describes the group as international and representing the avant-garde and pointed out that “unlike those who had gone before them in Australia, they know about Piero della Francesca and Poussin as well as Braque and Picasso.”

The term ‘charm school’ first appeared in print in a 1948 article in The Sydney Morning Herald written by Paul Haefliger: “The work of Jocelyn Rickards at the Macquarie Galleries certainly belongs to the charm-school.” Haefliger was describing Rickards’ art, which in his opinion whilst technically good lacked an elusive but essential quality. Christine France points out that the term appeared again in Elwyn Lynn’s 1957 Contemporary Art Society Broadsheet to refer, in a non-pejorative way, to art that was essentially non-expressionist. She argues that as a term it was in general use and an easy descriptive to use. Dutton agrees noting that Lynn used the term to define abstract expressionism by way of comparison. Dutton argues that Charm School only became a pejorative in order to promote abstraction and that it was not, as was commonly believed, invented by Robert Hughes who, incidentally, thought he had first heard it from Daniel Thomas. Hughes uses the term to denigrate Sydney art in the 1940s: “a decade of luxury art: the romantic poeticism of the forties, to give its official

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58 Dutton, The Innovators, 99.
name: or more succinctly, the Charm School.\textsuperscript{59} Geoffrey Dutton contends that the artists Hughes described as belonging to the Charm School were essentially not to his taste and as such Hughes misrepresented them and their contribution to Australian art.\textsuperscript{60} Dutton criticizes those who use the word ‘charming’ as a pejorative, arguing that the description prevents the artists involved from being fairly evaluated. He defends them by claiming that: “They were an avant-garde of a new kind, and their internationalism heightened the awareness of modern art in Sydney.”\textsuperscript{61} Dutton alludes to the invisibility of Australianness by pointing out their internationalism. I contend that their international focus expressed through the anachronistic visual language of Early Modern art was an ideological and political resistance to mid-twentieth-century constructions of Australian national identity based on Melbourne’s style of gritty social realism. Justin O’Brien’s deliberately stylized, anachronistic paintings elide notions of Australian identity and instead can be interpreted as an inner, subjective exploration of self. Dutton, however, says somewhat scathingly that: “O’Brien is ... inclined to put his figures to sleep.”\textsuperscript{62} I contend that O’Brien’s lack of melodrama, repressed emotion and use of sleep as a recurrent theme is a part of what makes his work compelling. The Dormition of the Virgin painted in 1947 reveals the complexity of his approach and in particular his metaphorical use of sleep and trance-like consciousness that is redolent of Early Modern spiritual states.

**The Catharsis of Religious Themes: Dormition, Burial and Assumption**

O’Brien continued to explore religious themes, throughout his life. Natalie Wilson describes O’Brien’s repetition of the Dormition, Burial and Assumption of the Virgin as an act of catharsis noting that they recur frequently during times when he was emotionally vulnerable.\textsuperscript{63} This contradicts her statement that subject matter was simply a vehicle through which he experimented with composition, technique and

\textsuperscript{60} Dutton, *The Innovators*, 110.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 107.
\textsuperscript{63} Barry Pearce, *Justin O’Brien*, 41.
O’Brien’s anachronistic style and choice of subject matter, understood as catharsis, indicates a present moment response to trauma and other personal concerns rather than a simple retreat into the past. O’Brien’s post war civilian life provides the context for understanding how the lack of melodrama in his paintings, expressed through a Quattrocento language of stasis, can be interpreted as withdrawal.

The Dormition of the Virgin was the first of O’Brien’s paintings on the theme of the death of the Virgin Mary. It was part of his first solo exhibition held in October 1947 at David Jones’ Art Gallery, under the directorship of his patron, the Sydney interior designer, Marion Hall Best. The exhibition was a critical and financial success, with The Art Gallery of New South Wales purchasing The Kiss of Judas.\(^{65}\) In his review of this exhibition for the Sun, Harry Tatlock Miller rejected the influence of the Byzantine in O’Brien’s painting, instead identifying the Sienese Trecento as the major influence on

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 40.
\(^{65}\) This was the second Australian state gallery to purchase a painting by Justin O’Brien. The National Gallery of Victoria had purchased a watercolour, Mending the Nets, from the group exhibition, Sydney Painters, held in Melbourne in March 1947.
his work. Tatlock Miller insightfully described the painting as “a moment of quiet reflection amid the chaos.” Stillness, whether of a Byzantine, Trecento or Quattrocento nature, draws attention to the way anachronism attends to the ‘chaos’ that Tatlock Miller identified in the present moment. Post war trauma contributed to O’Brien’s personal inner chaos. Anachronistic theories of substitution and synchronicity allow O’Brien’s use of Christian iconography together with the universal theme of sleep to be interpreted as deeply personal responses to the anxieties of his time.

Wilson notes that O’Brien used the Virgin Mary’s death or ‘falling asleep’ to continue to process his traumatic experience at Kokkinia. Falling asleep elides the trauma that was attached to seeing so much death by removing the horror and reframing death as benign and peaceful. The use of religious subjects and expressive rather than natural colours indicates an imaginative and intellectual engagement with subject matter. As O’Brien revealed, “a classical religious subject allows you to use your imagination freely. You’re not tied to using live models. You’ve a very free hand with colour.” O’Brien’s religious paintings are therefore understood as representing an inner world, a cathartic process of dealing with past trauma and more present concerns. While the imagination allows the exploration of the psychological, its subjectivity resists a fixed Australian nationalism by distorting temporal and spatial relationships.

Temporal and spatial distortions are both at play in The Dormition of the Virgin. The anachronistic quotation of Gothic arches with their impossibly slender columns punctuate the canvas and overflow the edges only to reappear in the next panel, creating continuity but paradoxically also emphasising the separation and spaces between the panels. The shape and form of the panels, along with the intensity of colour and ambiguous spatial tensions allude to what Dutton identifies as being both Byzantine and Sienese Trecento. The elongated figures are still Byzantine but the

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66 Barry Pearce, Justin O’Brien, 41.
67 Ibid., 41.
69 Dutton, The Innovators, 107.
Byzantine hierarchical organisation has now all but disappeared in favour of an unsettling Trecento sloping floor and windows that interrupt the pink walls of the interior in a suggestion of depth. It should be noted that *The Dormition of the Virgin* was painted before O’Brien had been to Siena. Christine France therefore, as noted earlier in regard to his prisoner-of-war portraits, attributes the stylization in this painting to the School of Paris as well, seeing the influence of Matisse and Braque in the vase of flowers on the flattened table and the patterned rug on the tiled floor. In its artifice, this painting is a retreat into the inner world of O’Brien’s imagination.

This image shows the Virgin calmly preparing for her death surrounded by saints, whose hands are raised in gentle gestures of blessings or prayer. O’Brien has depicted the Virgin’s death as a celebration, conspicuously concealing attention to the opposing reality he had experienced in Kokkinia. The anachronism in the painting reveals an experiment with time. The child in the left-hand panel symbolizes youth and the past. The flowers on the table suggest the domestic interior of the earthly realm. The spotted fabric of the child’s gown is anachronistically recreated in the clothing of the Virgin and the adult saint in the centre panel, showing the passage of time from childhood to adulthood and death. The angels on the right symbolize the future of the Virgin in heaven and her transition from mortal to divine. Death is therefore a gateway to a spiritual realm. O’Brien has represented a synchronic moment in which the past, present and future exist within the same space. The transformation of specific time into eternal time corresponds with O’Brien’s interest in universal rather than local themes.

The spatial ambiguity created by the floor, walls and ceiling define the interior space, punctuated by the partial vision of the landscape seen through recessed doorways. Bold colours and patterns in the fabrics and floor complete the depiction of the imagined space. Trecento stasis imbues the work with a sense of stillness and peace. The use of Catholic imagery helps O’Brien to negate the trauma he associated with death by reimagining it in terms of the peacefulness of a welcoming sleep. O’Brien’s

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A stylized painting shows a modernist use of colour and design that suggests similarities with Byzantine and Trecento art. His deeply human and contemporary response to trauma compresses the temporal and geographical distance between Australia and Europe through a timeless, universal concern with death.

At the time of painting *The Dormition of the Virgin*, O’Brian had only experienced European art and culture from a distance, through the available texts and reproductions and the limited collection held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. In 1948 he was able to take a sabbatical from teaching and spend a year working and studying in London and travelling through Europe. This allowed him to engage first hand with London’s National Gallery collection and to study in depth Piero’s compositional strategies and use of mathematical proportion in *The Baptism of Christ*. Marilyn Aronberg Lavin recounts how B.A.R Carter, in his ground-breaking study on the geometrical construction and symbolism of *The Baptism*, found that Piero had used an intricate mathematical framework based on one of Euclid’s propositions to identify Christ with the sun and thereby reinforce his divinity and Universal centrality.71 According to Larry Witham, Piero inherited this tradition from Plato who, like Euclid, viewed numbers as the essence of the world, both divine and fundamental to nature.72

Natalie Wilson reports that O’Brien was ‘captivated’ by Piero’s *Baptism of Christ* (1450) and *The Nativity* (1470-75).73 According to Wilson, O’Brien spent days in the London National Gallery studying the geometric structure of *The Baptism*. There is evidence of this in the painting he completed upon his return to Australia, *The Virgin Enthroned*, to be discussed the next section. His appreciation of Piero, along with other works by the Flemish artists Van Eyck, Hans Memling, Dirk Bouts and Gerard David, was based on factors that had little to do with their original meaning. O’Brien understood these works as timeless in their apparent modernity, perceiving them synchronically in the present, largely ignoring their historical and chronological origins. This supposition is

71 Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, ”Piero the Painter Blended Geometry with Religious Art,” *Smithsonian*, 23, no. 9 (1992), 4-5.
supported by a statement O’Brien made in a letter to Christine France in 1986: “All this intricate and finely painted detail was a wonderful discovery for me – it really worked and these painters had the genius to know how to bring it all together inside the canvas – a terrific feat.” There is no mention of religious significance or the historical circumstances that would bring to the fore their original purposes. Instead, there is only an appreciation of their formal elements, which suggests that O’Brien’s response is fashioned by contemporary modernist doctrine. This can be understood through Nagel and Wood’s theory of the transcendental continuities in religious art whereby the ancient gestures, be they structural or figurative, stand in for the absent original by being reactivated in the new work. Consequently, I argue that O’Brien’s The Virgin Enthroned makes Piero’s Baptism of Christ present in Australia by recreating its mathematically informed symbolism. In return O’Brien’s painting is given legitimacy and validation by the allusion to the past.

Synchronicity is emphasised in O’Brien’s description of Duccio’s Maestá, which he saw for the first time in Siena in 1948. “[The Maestá] doesn’t stink of the antique at all. It’s still alive in the most extraordinary way.” The description of the Maestá as alive evokes the timelessness of the work and the way O’Brien understands the work as contemporaneous with the present moment.

The preference for space over time, for the embodied experience of an artwork that has relevance in the contemporary moment, speaks of O’Brien’s synchronic rather than diachronic perception of art: “It was in Siena where I first really had a proper aesthetic experience, the first time I really felt design and colours.” This statement of O’Brien’s echoes the formalist aesthetic of Roger Fry in its response to form and structure. The perception of the artwork as synchronous, as a contemporary work informed by contemporary theories and discourses on art, shows a present day response to a work of art, rather than a reactionary privileging of the past. An analysis

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75 Nagel and Wood, Anachronic Renaissance, 11.
76 Statement by the artist from a tape-recorded interview between the artist and an unidentified journalist, Sydney, October 1976, quoted in France, Justin O’Brien: Image and Icon, 17.
77 Ibid.
of O’Brien’s paintings through anachronistic theories of interpretation offers a re-evaluation of the paintings Hughes dismissed as ‘Charm School.’

The Blake Prize and Substitution

O’Brien returned to Australia in 1950 and almost immediately began work on The Virgin Enthroned, his entry for the inaugural Blake Prize for Religious Art, to be held in Sydney in 1951. Allusions and quotations to Piero and Duccio are combined with references to Fra Angelico that recall his pre-war association with the Fra Angelico Guild in Sydney. The impetus for the establishment of the prize came from the same source that inspired the Guild – the French priests, Père Marie-Alain Couturier, Abbé Devémy and Pie Raymond Régamey. Michael Scott, a teacher and priest, and Richard Morley, a Jewish businessman who imported and sold fine art prints established the Blake Prize to encourage artists to produce culturally significant Australian paintings using familiar Christian religious stories and symbols. It was hoped that this would promote contemporary art of a high standard to fill the walls of the new churches that were appearing as part of suburban expansion following the Second World War.78 Bernard Smith, in the forward to Peter Fuller’s The Australian Scapegoat: Towards an Antipodean Aesthetic draws attention to the more generalized emptying out of spiritual values in Australian art practice of the 1950s.79 The revitalisation of religious art in Australia through the establishment of The Blake Prize was an attempt to rejuvenate and reassert Christianity. If considered alongside Australia’s race relations, post-war immigration and the white Australia policy of the mid-twentieth century, it can also be seen as a reassertion of European and British culture in reaction to the perceived threat from other migrant cultures and their religions.

The decision to name the prize after William Blake came about because of the diversity of Christian denominations in Australia at that time. According to the minutes of a meeting held on 18 October, 1950: “Blake is timeless and, though not professing

78 Rod Pattenden, “Seeing the Spiritual in Australian Art: The Blake Prize,” Art Monthly Australia, 246 (2011-12), 47.
allegiance to any particular denomination, was perhaps the most God-possessed painter of all time. Therefore it is the Blake Prize.\textsuperscript{80} The reference to timelessness and universality indicates Western hegemony in Australian thought and culture. Eternity is framed in Christian terms and O’Brien’s highly decorative painting fulfilled the Blake Prize criteria expressed through notions of universality and spiritualism:

The work should be both religious and beautiful. It must be religious in the sense that it has its inspiration in a mind that is not only capable of seeing the inner spiritual meaning of its subject but also the ability to convey that essentially universal reaction to others.\textsuperscript{81}

O’Brien had been raised within a strictly Catholic family and was particularly close to his mother. However, his closeted gayness was opposed to Catholic values. Her death in 1953 was the trigger that enabled him to finally renounce Catholicism completely. According to Natalie Wilson, O’Brien found solace in the teachings of Reverend Father Hans Küng and Uta Ranke-Heinemann, both of whom advocated a diversity of spiritual traditions that were more international in application and whose tolerance and pacifism attracted O’Brien.\textsuperscript{82} While their internationalism translated into an outward rather than provincial attitude, it was still based on Christian ideals. O’Brien rejected the limitations of Catholicism, provincialism and Australian nationalism in favour of something he perceived as timeless and universal, epitomized by the formal and Christian pre-Reformation elements of Quattrocento art. This ideological approach is found in The Virgin Enthroned, a painting that reveals anachronism through its reliance on the geometry of Piero, quotations from Fra Angelico and Duccio, and the modernist theories of Roger Fry and Clive Bell.

\textsuperscript{80} Rosemary Crumlin, The Blake Book: Art, Religion and Spirituality in Australia: Celebrating 60 years of the Blake Prize (Melbourne, Vic.: Palgrave Macmillan Australia, 2011), 15.
\textsuperscript{81} France, Justin O’Brien: Image and Icon, 18.
\textsuperscript{82} Barry Pearce, Justin O’Brien, 141.
The Virgin Enthroned is divided into three panels, a device commonly used in religious paintings and altarpieces and also in Frederick McCubbin’s 1904 nationalistic Australian historical narrative painting, The Pioneer. The choice of this format perhaps gives O’Brien’s painting a nationalistic as well as religious association. Furthermore, O’Brien employed the triptych’s potential for narrative, as seen in the McCubbin. O’Brien’s triptych can be read from left to right. The left hand panel illustrates the Fall in the Garden of Eden. In a 1962 letter to Father Michael Scott, O’Brien described the angel with her face covered, as: “flying away from the moment of the ‘fall’” and the Virgin as the New Eve.  

O’Brien’s re-activation of the Virgin as Eve speaks of the transcendental continuities conceived by Nagel and Wood in their theory of substitution. O’Brien’s Virgin is surrounded by eleven of the twelve apostles; O’Brien has excluded Judas but included the figure of Philomena, the patron saint of babies, infants and youth. Opposite the apostles stand significant saints, including St John the...

84 Nagel and Wood, Anachronic Renaissance, 29-34.
Baptist, St Jerome, St Augustine and St Francis. The small figure on the carpet is, according to O’Brien’s description, Bernadette. He does not, however, explain the reason for her inclusion. On the right-hand panel O’Brien aligns Mary with Jesus by depicting Him, in another transcendental continuity, as the New Adam, painting Him in red to symbolise his Passion.

O’Brien’s deliberate choice of iridescent green for the face and hands of the Virgin indicates his knowledge of the Early Moderns, and of Duccio in particular. In ancient altarpieces a green skin tone results when the underpainting is revealed because of the increased translucency of the pigments over time. O’Brien is drawing on a work that is definitively situated within a particular historical period and making that work a part of contemporary Australian art discourse by treasuring as artistically intentional something that is the result of accidental decay. This anachronism brings another temporal element into the painting but one that is, in O’Brien’s painting, contingent upon synchronicity rather than the passage of time as it is in Duccio’s work.

Figure 16. Fra Angelico, San Marco Madonna, 1438-1443
Tempera on wood, 220 cm × 227 cm (87 in × 89 in)
San Marco Museum, Florence, Italy.
Similarities to Fra Angelico’s *San Marco Madonna* can be seen in the way O’Brien has situated the Madonna within a landscape, has recreated the hierarchical arrangement of saints around the Virgin and also the patterned carpet that makes up the floor in the foreground and opens up the space between the viewer and the picture plane. O’Brien has also placed the Virgin upon an elongated throne but without Fra Angelico’s recessed arch. However, there is a similarity in the steps that lead up to the throne, separating the Madonna and Child from the saints that surround her.

The geometric structure of *The Virgin Enthroned* was inspired by O’Brien’s close scrutiny of Piero *The Baptism* in the London’s National Gallery. O’Brien related in an interview with Heather Rusden how the artist, Peter Dodd, who was very knowledgeable about dynamic symmetry, had joined him in London in 1948. According to O’Brien, Dodd taught him about the geometric laws that govern the use of dynamic symmetry by working on postcards of Piero’s *Baptism* with a compass. In the interview he explains that with the assistance of Peter Dodd he used this system to give his triptych, *The Virgin Enthroned* a Piero-like “beauty and greatness”. O’Brien, following the European Modernists who returned to classical systems of order after the turmoil caused by the First World War, was revisiting an Early Renaissance mathematical ordering of space in order to impose a system of order that implied stability, longevity and authority. By adopting this universalising mathematical construction O’Brien brings those qualities to Australia and to his work, thereby participating in a system of thinking about the world that reaches out beyond the confines of Australia. The use of Pierian compositional strategies draws O’Brien into a particular intellectual and artistic milieu but with interesting deviations as a result of his Australian context. At the same time, the use of Quattrocento geometrical innovation as a substitute for the original work, points to transcendent continuities across space and time.

86 Dynamic symmetry is based on the Golden Ratio, which will be discussed in a later chapter, and calls on ancient Greece. Dodd was probably familiar with Jay Hambidge’s acclaimed publications, *Dynamic Symmetry: The Greek Vase* (1920) and *The Elements of Dynamic Symmetry* (1926).
According to Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, Piero was remembered, in the years after his death, as a mathematician rather than an artist. He had written three theoretical treatises on arithmetic, solid geometry and the theory of perspective for use in painting.\textsuperscript{88} Wilson points out the stillness attained through the underlying geometry of O’Brien’s painting pays homage to Piero in its logical mathematical structure and the laws of dynamic symmetry where “each element within the three carefully proportioned panels [are] based on the mathematical relationships of the golden ratio."\textsuperscript{89} The significance of the golden ratio, also known as the golden mean or \textit{section d’or}, will be discussed later in relation to Jeffrey Smart.

O’Brien’s use of mathematical proportion is clearly visible in the preparatory drawing for \textit{The Virgin Enthroned}. The carefully mapped out composition reveals that O’Brien consciously chose the Virgin’s foot rather than the child on her lap to occupy the

\textsuperscript{88} Lavin, ”Piero the Painter Blended Geometry with Religious Art,” 123.
\textsuperscript{89} Pearce and Wilson, \textit{Justin O’Brien: The Sacred Music of Colour}, 63.
centre and focal point of the image. The importance of the hierarchical placement of feet seen earlier in *Figures in a Room* suggests a considered meaning. In *The Virgin Enthroned* the foot forms the point from which the painting is divided into two separate realms. The Virgin and Child are elevated and occupy the upper, and therefore heavenly, part of the painting, however her feet keep her attached to the earth, perhaps illustrating the dual nature of Christ and the Virgin birth, both spiritual and earthly. The saints occupy the lower two thirds of the centre panel, relegated to a different plane of existence. The dove in the right-hand panel is the only object that occupies the same space as the Virgin and Child, designating them and the space they occupy as sacred. The saints gather around the substituted New Eve in silent contemplation, forming the diagonals that draw the eye towards her, ensuring that she is the subject of the painting and echoing the Trecento compositional techniques of the *Maestà* and the *San Marco Madonna* that make the Madonna the central focus.

O’Brien relocates Catholic mysticism to Australia through the anachronistic associations with Piero. A stylized Australian Banksia shrub and a towering stone pine, a native of the Mediterranean, conflates two discrete geographical regions through their flora. This identifies Australian art as participating within an ancient culture that has at its origin the Hellenic civilisations. An interesting deviation is found in the anachronism of the small sailing boat that situates the religious event in contemporary Sydney. O’Brien was inspired by the beauty of Sydney harbour: “I was walking down Edgecliff Road, and I looked out... over, across the harbour. And I was very affected by the harbour in those days, and how beautiful it was... I suddenly saw the thing in my head, the picture came into my head.” In a later interview O’Brien further confirmed the setting as Australia, by pointing out: “Of course it doesn’t look anything like the harbor but the trees, the civilized bits in the background, they are Australia.”

O’Brien’s anachronistic quotations draws Australia into a present tense dialogue with the Italian Early Moderns through shared spiritual continuities. The substitution of images and strategies from the past enables O’Brien to reimagine Sydney as the New Jerusalem and the Virgin as the New Eve. The anachronistic allusions announce the

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90 “Justin O’Brien to Barbara Blackman.”
91 *France, Merioola and After*, 6.
presence of significant Trecento and Quattrocento paintings as part of O’Brien’s mid-twentieth-century Australian culture.

**Space, Imagination and Resolution**

O’Brien’s opportunities for self-expression were expanded as a result of his travels through Europe, although he returned to religious motifs throughout his life. Christopher Allen contends that the visual language of the past enabled O’Brien to transcend the personal and articulate something general and universal. However, the anachronistic principles of substitution and synchronicity indicate that the changed relationship between interior and exterior spaces in paintings completed after 1967 when O’Brien left Australia permanently to settle in Rome could be interpreted as a resolution of the tensions between his imaginative and his real life.

Bernard Smith has argued that Australian artists were part of the continuation of European civilisation. Christine France supports Smith’s assertion and, therefore, does not find it surprising that O’Brien should see the Greek, Roman and Byzantine cities as part of his heritage. In 1980, O’Brien reflected on the effects of being in Turkey in a letter to France which appears to suggest that rather than an Australian artist within a continuation of European civilisation, O’Brien identified as a European artist who happened to have been born in Australia:

> I spent three weeks travelling over the ruins of our heritage. Greek, Roman and Byzantine cities, not to speak of Hittite, Babylonian and Assyrian I don’t think that on any of the journeys I have made I have ever been so moved as by this experience. Even on the sites of Hittite cities where there was little left but a foundation plan and perhaps part of a wall, you felt like sitting quietly and being surrounded by this ambience. It was almost tangible and always sad to leave. The extraordinary feeling continued throughout the entire three-week journey. In some places like Termessos one felt like weeping, because of its

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ruined beauty and because what was left here was a part of you. In a strange way it was like going home.  

Termessos is for O’Brien in a very real sense home, part of a cultural history that he claims as his own and indicative of a widespread Eurocentric orientation. O’Brien struggled to translate this sense of belonging into an Australian context: “When I’m in Australia I really feel that I’m a bit like being on the moon… someone’s put me out on the wrong stop.” Barry Pearce, in *Love, Mysticism and Mythology* quoted O’Brien as saying that he avoids painting the landscape because of the loneliness it evokes in him arguing that O’Brien’s “was a more private crusade, involving a greater disconnection.” The disconnection that Pearce tacitly refers to was an emotional and sexual one, as well as a lack of identification with Australian stories and the landscape. Yet the landscape depicted in *The Virgin Enthroned* was also inspired by Sydney’s Elizabeth Bay, an area well known to O’Brien and one redolent with happy childhood memories. Hence, Australianess is made visible in *The Virgin Enthroned* as a part of subjective imagining, a ‘universal’ landscape of the mind, rather than actual observation. This subjective imagining allowed O’Brien to represent his world as calm and peaceful, without the tensions and anxieties of his real life.

Christopher Allen acknowledges the change in O’Brien’s art after he had left Australia for Italy in 1967. He suggests that the sexual freedom that came with being away from Australia finally afforded O’Brien license to look outside of himself, indicating that the sense of alienation he felt in Australia was lessened by being in Rome. Allen, however, adds that it was O’Brien’s renunciation of Catholicism in 1954, following the death of his mother that truly liberated him. O’Brien may have come to terms with his sexuality but, unlike Jeffrey Smart whose work is considered in a later chapter, he was never comfortable with it. O’Brien eventually found peace when his one-time lover

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95 “Justin O’Brien to Barbara Blackman.”
97 Allen, "Faith and Good Works", 12.
and model, Edigio Scardamaglio, married Daniela and had two daughters to whom O’Brien was godfather.\textsuperscript{98}

There is a changed use of anachronism in O’Brien’s Italian paintings. In Rome, O’Brien was able to incorporate the Italian landscape without feeling a sense of isolation and alienation. \textit{Sacred Concert} painted in Rome in 1974 has an ethereal quality and delicacy of line that suggests a level of contentment and reconciliation in the way disparate entities are unified within one overall composition. Changes in O’Brien’s treatment of external and internal space are offered as evidence to suggest that he found some sense of resolution by being in Rome. The overall stillness and softness of this painting indicates a resolution of the earlier tensions identified in the juxtaposition of strident chromatic range and stillness found in \textit{The Virgin Enthroned}. The complex temporal structures that are created by combining Quattrocento compositional strategies, Medieval and Trecento subject matter within a twentieth century image offer insight into O’Brien’s use of the past to navigate the present.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{sacred_concert}
\caption{Justin O’Brien, \textit{The Sacred Concert}, 1974. Triptych, oil on canvas, 133 × 145 cm. Private collection.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{98} Christine France, in conversation with the author in Sydney on 1 April 2013, indicated that Edigio was O’Brien’s only lover and that his marriage provided O’Brien with a family.
Sacred Concert, like the earlier Virgin Enthroned, is a triptych with the Madonna and Child occupying the centre panel. The musicians in the left hand panel have replaced the figures of Adam and Eve while John the Baptist, depicted here as a child and prefiguring the future baptism, still occupies the panel on the right hand side. The musicians play under a beautifully draped curtain that has been pulled back to reveal a realistically painted view of the Tiber. The sweetness and harmony of the music is suggested through the softness of colour. His earlier flat, elongated Byzantine forms have given way to rounder, more plastic, tonal figures that resemble Piero della Francesca’s. While the decorative floor and carpet remain, they are no longer flat but, in a Pieran-inspired mathematical illusion of depth, draw the eye into the landscape beyond. The compositional structure of Sacred Concert is rational and mathematical and lures the eye easily and without confrontation into a logical illusion of three-dimensional space. The Pieran-inspired spatial relationships that have replaced the Byzantine flatness exude peace and stillness.

The black and white chequered floor in the kitchen recalls the black and white marbled floor upon which the figure of Christ stands in Piero’s The Flagellation of Christ. As in Piero’s fresco the difference in floor pattern indicates a difference in physical and transcendent realms. In The Flagellation, the biblical event takes place in the recessed area on the left, indicted by the black and white floor tiles. O’Brien reverses this positioning of sacred and secular space. The tessellated and decorative floor establishes the space for the sacred and imagined performance that is foregrounded, while the black and white chequered floor of the kitchen in the background recreates
the secular space of the kitchen in his flat in Rome. The reversal of physical and transcendent space brings the spiritual significance of Piero’s *The Flagellation* into the present. The allusion to Piero also bestows upon O’Brien the intellectual status and taste that was associated with the appreciation of Piero in London in the 1920s. It resolves the tensions between Australian and European identification by making the distinction irrelevant and rendering it invisible.

The Roman landscape is accessible through the large open windows that invite the viewer to contemplate the tranquillity and beauty of the mirror-like river, the semi-circle arches of the bridge and the geometry and precision of the buildings in the background. The idealistic cityscape draws further analogies with Piero’s depictions of San Sepulchro as a New Jerusalem. In *The Legend of the True Cross* fresco cycle Piero imagines Jerusalem in the image of San Sepulchro, replete with Albertian-styled architecture. O’Brien recreates Rome as his New Jerusalem, and this along with the musicians, suggests that harmony and peace have been found there. The anachronistic contemporary figure in the kitchen is dressed in quieter, less transcendent, earth tones. The synthesis of temporal and spiritual dimensions reinforces the idea that O’Brien finally found peace in Rome.

Figure 20. *Piero della Francesca*, *Finding And Recognition Of The True Cross* (detail), 1452-66
Fresco, 356 x 747 cm
San Francesco, Arezzo

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The Virgin sits in the centre panel with Christ on her lap and two angels holding open the green curtain behind her, repeating the gesture of the pulled back curtain in the left-hand panel. An iridescent blue cloak covers and in part reveals the red gown beneath. O’Brien brings into sharp contrast the blue and red of the Madonna with the brown clothing of figure in the background on the right, who is almost absorbed by the brown kitchen wall. The earthy brown of the kitchen establishes an ontological relationship with the figure clad in brown, while the chromatic stridency and contrast of the Madonna’s red dress and blue cloak suggest an alternative, transcendent existence. O’Brien creates a pathway for the eye to traverse the canvas through the relationships of red and blue. The undertones of pinks and browns and the repeated colour of the walls that create a strong rhythm of vertical lines, bring the disparate elements of past and present together in one unified composition through the use of colour. This formal use of colour is unseen in his earlier paintings with their cacophony of colour, detail and line.

The peace and stillness that imbues this work, the gentle flow between panels and the softness of the palette harmoniously suggest a collapse in the distance between O’Brien’s art and his life. The anachronistic depiction of Christian iconography contemporaneously located within the same space as the mundane everyday activity occurring within his Roman kitchen suggests a resolution to the tensions between his imaginative and real life that existed in Australia. Anachronism therefore is the organising principle that underscores the presence or absence of the gulf between O’Brien’s art and his life.

Conclusion

O’Brien’s early quotations and references to Byzantine, Quattrocento and Trecento art appear in his paintings as substitutes for the originals, bringing European art into an Australian context while not overtly identifying any Australianness. Using anachronistic theories as an interpretative tool identifies the way his paintings translated the art of the Early Moderns and their symbolic meanings through British and European Modernism. The complex structures that are created by the allusions
and quotations of the past enabled a more nuanced and subtle interpretation of his paintings.

O’Brien, along with Jean Bellette who will be discussed in the following chapter, do not participate in the promotion of an Australian national identity or make their Australianness visible in the Australian tradition of landscape painting. Instead, they both address more generalised concerns about painting by using subject matter sourced through a shared European cultural past. When Bernard Smith, in his review of Humphrey McQueen’s *The Black Swan of Trespass*, chides McQueen for not addressing the tradition of painting inherited by Australian artists, he is referring to the ‘European tradition’. Smith contends that a painter develops within a tradition and responds to the problems that confront him [or her] in the visual language of that tradition. The tradition that shapes him [or her], Smith argues, becomes problematic if that tradition is derived from elsewhere and is concerned with things that are not relevant to the contemporary painter’s social context.¹⁰⁰ Smith also asserted that Expressionism was the only European art movement that had any relevance in Australia. He understood Expressionism as having emerged out of a Marxist struggle for social and political change; a struggle he felt had resonances in Australia.¹⁰¹ It can, therefore, be inferred that Smith would have found little relevance in O’Brien’s early Renaissance style portraits or later iconographical paintings, which contain political overtones of subjective resistance and opposition to a national Australian identity. The emotionally controlled visual language of the early Italians provided O’Brien with a subtle and oblique way of critiquing the strengthening of Australian identity evident in Australian expressionist painting.

O’Brien was not concerned with the historical evolution of form, nor the media through which it had evolved. He employed European art and artefacts synchronically, without a concern for their history, finding in the voices from the past contemporary relevance and meaning. His approach was deliberately anachronistic, validated by a

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 524.
particular strand of European Modernism and British Formalism and a belief in the freedom of imagination that was afforded by religious imagery. When he finally encountered the ancient religious artefacts that had inspired Modernism, O’Brien received them as contemporaneous, recognising not their age but rather their modernity.

The forthcoming chapters will show that, unlike Russell Drysdale, Justin O’Brien, Jean Bellette and Jeffrey Smart, fail to represent the Australian landscape as distinctively different from Britain or Europe. Interpreting their work through anachronism focuses on the diverse ways in which they appropriate European art and culture, in particular the art of Piero della Francesca. The anachronistic quotations and allusions achieve another kind of expression, a quiet and emotionally reticent evocation of Australian modernism.
JEAN BELLETTE: UNIVERSALISM AND CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY

Jean Bellette uses classical myth to introduce a human continuity, to emphasise emotions which do not belong to any one age and occasion but which reflect the fundamental conditions of man.

Ursula Hoff

Introduction

This chapter uses contemporary theories of anachronism to identify the complex temporal structures and anachronistic collapse of time in Jean Bellette’s work that enabled her to position herself, as a woman, within the wider context of Western culture. A reflexive approach examines the way the anachronism in her paintings contradicts Modernism’s iconoclastic narrative and rejection of the past. A reconsideration of Bellette’s figurative painting in terms of the interplay of synchronic and substitutional qualities in painting reveals her participation in an alternative Modernism informed by the revival of classicism in European art following the First World War.

This chapter proposes that Bellette, alongside the other artists in this study, was particularly influenced by a synchronic perception of classicism, British modernist theories and the work of Masaccio and Piero della Francesca. Rather than being

reactionary in the sense I showed Robert Hughes has argued in the previous chapter, I will demonstrate that the anachronism in her work follows a precedent set by Modernist European and British artists who used the past as a means of orienting themselves in the present. Allusions to Piero della Francesca link her to the other artists under discussion whose uses of the past are otherwise rather different. Bellette differs from the other artists in this study in that firstly, she is the only female artist and secondly, her early modern borrowings are grounded in the antique. Bellette used subjects from ancient mythology as a pretext for exploring timeless and universal themes. Each of the artists chosen for this thesis imposed meaning upon Piero and other art from the Early Modern past in accordance with their individual interests and needs. The diversity of their interpretations exposes a conversation between them and those of the European near and distant past that crosses time and space, collapsing boundaries and divisions. This investigation contributes to the existing scholarship on Jean Bellette from the point of view of anachronism.

Synchronic and diachronic are two temporal structures that govern the viewer’s perception of an artwork. An analysis of Bellette’s early paintings continues the argument introduced in the previous chapter that Australian mid-twentieth-century artists privileged the synchronic over the diachronic aspect of art. Synchronic recognizes, in a mutable contemporary moment, elements in temporally diverse artworks that make them appear contemporaneous. Diachronic is concerned with the recognition of the historical specificity of a painting and the way the painting evolves over time, beyond the artist’s completion of the work.

The allusions to the Quattrocento, to the Ancient Greek and Roman past and to the more recent Modernist works that appear in Bellette’s paintings suggest that she perceived these works from the past as synchronic with Modernism, indicating an anachronic relationship between the present and the past. European modernism appropriated specific quotations, for example the underlying structure or iconography from Medieval or Early Modern art works. These appear in Bellette’s work as substitutions that evoke what Nagel and Wood refer to as, “an originary authority
through participation in a sequence of similar tokens.”² They therefore act as the originals bestowing upon the new work agency and validation from the past.

A temporal approach considers how the allusions to works from the Quattrocento that appear in Bellette’s paintings were informed by her understanding of Neo-Classicism and her desire to have her work considered within the paradigm of European Modernism. I propose that Bellette appropriated British and European Modernism’s use of Piero della Francesca in order to locate herself as an Australian female artist within the wider context of contemporary Western art by focusing on themes that she considered to be universal to the human condition.

For the purposes of this argument, I discuss only paintings completed before Bellette left Australia in 1957. This is because the influences of Masaccio, Piero della Francesca and British formalism are most apparent in work completed during this time. The various phases of this essay will bear upon particular paintings which illustrate the themes of her work. The first painting under discussion is Study of a Young Man, completed in 1932 when she was a student at Julian Ashton’s art school in Sydney. This painting is offered as a baseline from which to explore the developments in her practice after four years in London and Europe. The next painting, For whom the bell tolls, is used to show the changes in Bellette’s practice after her return to Australia. Anachronism and the zones of contact that are created between past and present, and relevant art and literature are introduced through an analysis of this painting, which illustrates the Eurocentric nature of Bellette’s practice.

Bellette’s involvement in the 1939 Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art is explored to establish the conditions she encountered upon her return to Sydney. A discussion of her association with the exhibition is used to highlight the tensions between the conservative and the avant-garde, figuration and abstraction, and the traditional and the modern in Australia during this time.

Two Girls completed in 1948 reveals a synthesis of the Italian past, the modernist revival of classicism and the Australian present. This painting is discussed in terms of Bellette’s depictions of the life of the mind, anachronism, European neo-classicism, the return to figuration, and the influence of Picasso and Roger Fry.

Bellette’s awareness of pre-Second World War European art trends is apparent in the essays that she published in the Art in Australia magazine series between 1941 and 1942. Her knowledge and appreciation of Piero della Francesca is also seen in the allusions to his work in another 1948 painting, The Betrothal of Achilles. This section of the chapter proposes that Aldous Huxley’s essay on Piero’s Resurrection of Christ influenced Bellette. Allusions to Huxley in Bellette’s essay on Piero and references to Piero, ancient Etruscan friezes, mythology and Henry Moore in her painting, The Betrothal of Achilles, reveal the complex ways in which quotations and allusions to the past enabled her to orient herself as an Australian woman within the mostly masculine discourse of western art.

Bellette used the classical genres of portraiture, still-life and landscape to explore themes of timelessness and continuity. Her attempt to locate a sense of continuity in the Australian landscape is discussed in relation to a 1949 landscape painting, Ruins near Bathurst. The expressionist style of this painting, which she also employed in her later landscapes, redefines the lessons of Classicism and Piero.

The final painting under discussion is Bathers, completed in 1951. This painting contains a multifaceted and layered temporality. The fracturing of time seen in this painting is used to validate a political interpretation based on Bellette’s appropriation of the European tradition to suit an Australian agenda and context.

In addition to her paintings, the primary sources I have consulted include letters, interviews and the articles Bellette wrote for the 1941 and 1942 editions of Art in Australia magazine already mentioned. Secondary sources consulted include exhibition catalogues, newspaper reviews of past exhibitions, and interviews and references to Bellette’s work in texts on Australian painting.
Background

A brief look at the early life and art training of Jean Bellette establishes a context for the first painting under discussion. The analysis of this painting is followed by an account of the influence of Paul Haefliger and the time they spent together in London and Europe after their marriage. This is done to explore some of the reasons for her change of style in paintings completed after her return to Australia.

Bellette was born in Hobart, Tasmania in 1908. In 1927, she moved to Sydney with her parents and in 1928 enrolled at Julian Ashton’s Sydney Art School where she studied under Ashton, Henry Gibbons, Thea Proctor and Adelaide Perry. She was attracted to Ashton’s appreciation of the detachment provided by the modernist aesthetic. In an interview with Hazel de Berg in 1976, Bellette commented that “[Ashton] taught one… to keep a little bit apart from life and look, as Marcus Aurelius says, from a lonely watchtower at mankind.” That classical ‘air of detachment’ defined her approach to art. It augmented her interpretation of modernist distance and dislocation, emphasised by the anachronisms identified in her work.

The analysis of the early Study of a Young Man (c. 1932-33) that follows is offered as a benchmark from which to explore later developments in her practice. Study of a Young Man was painted while Bellette was a student at Julian Ashton’s art school in Sydney. It is a studio image of a young male model in a gentle classical contrapposto pose that adds interest to the overall composition. There is an unsettling tension between the intimacy of his hailing gaze and the elevated point of view of the artist that problematizes the distance between artist and subject, bringing Ashton’s approach to art into question and suggesting that detachment came later. However, the elevated point of view asserts the authority of the artist over the model and, by implication, over her medium.

Bellette situated her model within a deliberately constructed background of strong horizontal and diagonal lines. This reinforces the figure as the focal point of the painting. His left arm rests on a stool, with his leg and torso curving gently around his dangling hand. The bent arm, slightly angled torso and the one foot placed in front of the other are reminiscent of the posture of Classical Greek kourî statues.

Colour is used formally as a patterning device to enhance the composition, seen in the repeating bands of red and ochre. This directs the eye around the canvas, drawing attention to the central figure, and breaks the monotony of the otherwise sombre palette. In the background, the rectangular planes rendered in muted colours break up but also reaffirm the flatness of the picture surface. A strong academic awareness of light and its effects on colour and composition is apparent in the deep shadows of the background screen and the play of light across the table in the foreground. Bellette also uses light to contrast the delicacy of the model’s collarbone with his muscular shoulder. Strong tonal modelling of contours and the use of solid earthy tones are evident throughout the painting.

This image displays an academic education in art but lacks her later understanding of weight and volume. There is no indication of mass in the depiction of this figure; his feet, for example, seem to be only brushing the surface of the ground rather than
taking the full weight of his body. Even the supporting elbow appears to be resting weightlessly upon the stool. In 1933, this painting was exhibited in *The Sydney Art School Student Exhibition*. Singled out for praise in a review in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the critic commented on the confidence of the artist and that she showed ‘uncommon promise.”⁴ A later review in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1939 recalled that as a student Bellette’s work focused “primarily on line, with colour lightly and sparingly used.”⁵ This is evident in the muted palette and delicacy of line in *Study of a Young Man*.

There is nothing that speaks of the Medieval or Early Modern in this painting. Their anachronistic appearance in her work after she returned from London and Europe suggest that anachronism was a conscious and deliberate strategy inspired by her exposure to European and British modernism.

**Paul Haefliger, London and Europe**

Bellette met her future husband, Paul Haefliger, in 1935 while they were both studying at the Sydney Art School. Haefliger had arrived in Sydney from Switzerland with his mother and sisters in 1929. He had a profound influence on her understanding of art and, with his thorough knowledge of Western art, which included the Moderns, reinforced her European orientation.⁶ His outlook was decidedly global but with a bent towards the Orient as a result of time spent studying woodblock printing in Japan in 1932. Bellette and Haefliger married in May 1935 and left Australia for London the following year. In an interview with Hazel de Berg in 1976 Bellette recalled quarrelling with Haefliger on the journey to Europe because of his insistence on the genius of Matisse and Picasso. She thought they were ‘absolutely no good.’ By her own admission, she had much to learn.⁷

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⁷ Hazel de Berg, “Conversation with Jean Bellette”.
Bellette enrolled at the London Central School of Arts and Crafts in 1936 before moving that same year to the Westminster School of Art where she studied under Bernard Meninsky and Mark Gertler until 1938. Meninsky and Gertler were members of the London Group, which had been considerably influenced by Roger Fry and the Bloomsbury group during the 1920s. Gertler taught Bellette to use colour while Meninsky taught drawing as the essential structure of art expressed through volume, weight, movement and a strong use of line. Meninsky had a passion for the art of the past and introduced her to representations of fifth-century Greek art and reproductions of Renaissance artists including Masaccio and Piero della Francesca. A quotation from Piero is visible in a small watercolour by Meninsky entitled The Bathers, painted around 1938.

![Image](image-url)

**Figure 22. Bernard Meninsky, The Bathers (detail), 1938**

The figure on the left is captured in the process of pulling a garment over her head, a gesture that resembles that of the neophyte in the background of Piero’s *Baptism*. The substitution shows Meninsky’s appreciation of Piero and for the process of transformation, implied in undressing as concealment and revelation, as well as through bathing as ritual, both religious and secular. The title, of course, also refers directly to Cézanne’s series on bathers. Meninsky was a great admirer of Leonardo,

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Michelangelo, Cézanne, Picasso and most of all Masaccio. According to France, Meninsky, like other British modernists, deliberately selected the works of Giotto, Masaccio and Piero to emulate Fry and Bell’s contemporary theories of significant form and interest in geometry, as these critics had already hailed the old artists. Bellette was therefore alerted to the significance of form in Masaccio’s drawings and Piero’s frescos through Meninsky’s adoption of Fry and Bell’s theories.

In the interview with Hazel de Berg in 1976, Bellette explained that she understood form through Masaccio. “I had no conception about form, I had not learnt that, I had not been taught this, only later, now, was I introduced by accident to Masaccio.” The accident occurred in the print room of the British Museum where she saw eighteenth century reproductions of Masaccio’s frescoes for the first time. Her reception of Masaccio’s work was twofold. Firstly, she understood the reproductions as having modern value and meaning in a re-enactment of what she had been taught by Meninsky. Masaccio had been important, after all, for other modernist artists such as Henry Moore. Bellette therefore received the art from the past as synchronic with the present, seeing in it elements that were contemporaneous with the British and European modernists she was encountering. Secondly, the art of Masaccio had by that time developed its own aura within a British aesthetic, as indicated by Meninsky singling him out from amongst other Tre- and Quattrocento artists. A reference to Masaccio or Piero located Meninsky, and Bellette by association, within a particular British intellectual and elitist artistic milieu. It gave them both access to an art discourse that overturned notions of time and space through its focus on the timeless and universal elements of form.

Meninsky alerted Bellette to the essential qualities of line or shape that Fry identified as animating a painting and thereby triggering a complexity of emotional responses.

12 Hazel de Berg, “Conversation with Jean Bellette”.
Masaccio awakened in Bellette a modernist understanding of form that was, however, based upon images seen out of their original Italian context, in the British Museum’s print room.

Robert Hughes had criticized the Sydney artists of the 1940s for their bland and imitative nostalgia for a Europe that no longer existed. In a statement that seemed to be directed at Bellette because of his pointed use of Masaccio’s prints as his example, he accused them of: “[drawing] your studies after a colour print of Masaccio, without having been to the Brancacci Chapel and with the disturbing reflection that the Carmine might have been bombed last night.” The Brancacci Chapel that houses the Masaccio frescoes is located in the Carmine Church in Florence. Hughes is criticizing Australian artists, like Bellette, who identify with European art and culture by emphasizing the remoteness of Italy and impossibility of knowing the changing circumstances and pressures in Europe while living in Australia.

Bellette visited the Brancacci Chapel before her return to Australia. In 1938, she embarked on a twentieth-century version of the European Grand Tour, seeing for the first time, amongst other objects of interest, Masaccio’s frescoes in Florence and Piero della Francesco’s frescoes, including The Legend Of The True Cross in Arezzo. The tour also included several months in Paris where she attended life-drawing classes at the Académie Colarossi as well as at the nearby L’Académie de la Grande Chaumiére. These experiences, and the work of Piero della Francesca in particular, had a profound effect on her approach to her art practice and consolidated the direction she would take upon her return to Sydney late in 1939.

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Return to Sydney

According to Christine France, who curated the Jean Bellette Retrospective exhibition in 2004-2005, Piero was ‘the flavour of the day’ in mid-twentieth century Australia. She attributes this to the influence of Meninsky and Kenneth Clark saying it had to do with everyone’s attempt to capture pre-Renaissance stillness.\(^{16}\) The stillness of Piero reimagined anachronistically in Bellette’s paintings was a radical departure from the Australian Impressionists’ depiction of movement and light. Applying Nagel’s supposition, the art of Piero spoke to the mid-twentieth-century Australian present, but as Nagel argues in his comparison of Medieval icons and Duchamp’s ready-mades: “Different elements are being made to speak, and to speak differently, to different times and settings.”\(^{17}\) Bellette chose aspects of Piero as substitutes for the originals. In keeping with Justin O’Brien, she chose aspects that were not bound by any time or place and spoke of universalism and human connectivity. In addition, Bellette, like

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\(^{16}\) Christine France, Interview with the author (Sydney, NSW, 1 April, 2013).
O’Brien, identified as a European artist, born in Australia, rather than an Australian artist. Australian identity was rendered invisible by the substitution of Pieran elements into her work. However, while O’Brien analysed in depth the form and composition of Piero’s Baptism in the London National Gallery to repeat certain of its formal motifs in his The Virgin Enthroned, Bellette was drawn to what she saw as the essential humanism in Piero. In 1942, she wrote an article on Piero for Art in Australia stating:

It is a good thing that in every age we have among us men who rise up unafraid and above melancholy. Francesca was one of these. Surrounded by discontent, disturbances and quarrels, but endowed by a nature which wished to be universal, he created timelessness and impassivity. The problem of each man is, after all, to generalize sufficiently to reduce the desperate adventure of a lifetime to something equable, calm and capable of enduring.\(^{18}\)

Bellette’s For whom the bell tolls, painted in 1941 the year before she wrote the above paragraph, depicts one of the discontents, disturbance and quarrels taking place in the world at that time. Bellette re-enacts in this painting what she perceives to be Piero’s timelessness and impassivity to demonstrate the interconnectivity of humankind.

The contemporary literary allusion in the title of For whom the bell tolls demonstrates a wider outlook and influence on her work. The title refers not only to Ernest Hemingway’s novel of the same name that had been published in 1940 but also to the 1624 meditation on life and death by the metaphysical poet John Donne that Hemingway quotes.\(^{19}\) ‘For whom the bell tolls’, is a line from a passage that begins “No man is an island.” Donne makes the observation that we are all affected by the actions and fortunes of everyone else. The passage ends with:

> Each man’s death diminishes me,  
> For I am involved in mankind.  
> Therefore, send not to know

\(^{18}\) Jean Bellette, “Piero della Francesca,” Art in Australia, 4, no. 5 (1942), 36.  
\(^{19}\) Ernest Hemingway, For Whom the Bell Tolls (New York, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1940). John Donne (1572-1631), Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, Meditation XVII, 1624.
Donne’s meditation asserts the indivisibility of the human experience and was written to promote the universality of the Catholic Church. Donne uses the metaphor of a book which has many translations but in which all of humanity is contained. Hemingway quotes the passage at the beginning of the novel but widens its meaning by expanding upon Donne’s singular Catholic Church and God-given universality. He argues for a general sense of connectivity that he translates into resistance to fascism. The novel becomes the site for a synchronic zone of contact between Donne’s seventeenth century meditation of life and death and Hemingway’s twentieth century morality.

Hemingway’s novel is a fictionalized account of his experiences in the 1937 Spanish Civil War. By quoting Donne, he is alluding to a particular seventeenth century metaphysical understanding of the connectedness of the world in order to resolve opposing twentieth century modernist concerns of distance, isolation and dislocation. Bellette participates in this dialogue through her chosen title. Her painting compresses the temporal divisions between Piero and Fry, past and present, Donne and Hemingway, into one synchronic moment. The quotations in her painting form a link between mid-twentieth-century Australian and European politics and culture. The concept of universality in Piero, Donne and Hemingway migrates across temporal zones, genres and contexts into Bellette’s twentieth-century Australian painting.

Donne’s seventeenth century metaphysical poem is the vehicle that draws all the other references to the one synchronic moment by its emphasis on the connectedness of humanity. Thus, a deliberately employed anachronistic reference as a substitute for the original poem can create a bridge between the present and the past, and illuminate the past in as much as it comments on the present. Hemingway substitutes

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Donne’s meditation within an anti-fascist ideology that retroactively becomes part of the meaning of the poem, even though it could not have been part of the original meaning. As a result of Hemingway’s quotation, Donne’s phrase, “For whom the bell tolls,” becomes a recognizable token for morality and human obligation in a way that Donne, in his time, could not have anticipated. Bellette uses the phrase to negate any Australian difference between a European and Australian experience, further expanding Hemingway’s use of Donne’s meditation based on her interpretation of Piero’s universalism and timelessness. The authority of Piero, Donne or Hemingway does not depend on the materiality of their work; rather they participate in a synchronic sequence of meaning, in that the diachronically separate works reverberate with each other simultaneously, offering a serendipitous array of related but not identical meanings. This temporally complex approach positions Bellette within this sequence by making the notion of universal human connectivity relevant to an Australian context, as well. For whom the bell tolls, with its reference to Donne and Hemingway in its title protests against the modernist experience of dislocation, alienation and isolation by asserting the possibility of connectedness, timelessness and universality through shared concerns addressed across genres. Consequently, temporal and spatial distances between Bellette in Australia and European culture are dissolved through a synchronic medium of connectivity in the form of shared death tolled by the bell.

In the December 1941 edition of Art in Australia Bellette described Masaccio as one of “those heroic souls who stand apart from their age.”21 The image used to illustrate her article was Masaccio’s The Tribute Money. In this article Bellette identifies Masaccio as part of a continuum of important artists, a heritage that she traces diachronically from ancient Egypt, through Plato to Nicola Pisano (1220-1284) and Jacopo della Quercia (c.1374-1438). She then transfers onto Masaccio her own distanced, synchronic view of life by quoting Plato: “He who will discourse of man should look on the things of earth from some supra-mundane watch-tower,” and noting that Masaccio’s genius and

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21 Jean Bellette, "Masaccio,” Art in Australia, 4, no. 4 (1941), 30.
heroism lay in his “early detachment.” Bellette positions herself within that continuum of artists that reaches back into the distant past by having a quotation from Masaccio’s *The Tribute Money* substitute for the original in her *For whom the bell tolls*. In this way, Masaccio’s fresco, with its aura of authority, becomes an integral part of the overall meaning of Bellette’s work.

Following her description of Masaccio’s fresco, Bellette has recreated the “dark glances of the well-grouped figures,” “the eloquent hands and heavy limbs” and the figures that “appear, vanish and re-appear from sombre backgrounds, figures altogether serene, proud in despair or unbroken in their agony.” She too conveys emotion through the language of paint rather than subject matter. The quotations recreate and manifest the agency of the original albeit in a different context and key. Accordingly, the substitution of Masaccio enables an interpretation of Bellette’s paintings in terms of universalism and connectedness.

Different temporalities ranging from Masaccio to Hemingway, from biblical time to the Quattrocento, and from 1930s Spain to 1940s Australia, exist synchronically in Bellette’s work. Bellette’s depiction of a moment frozen in time, set against a stylized landscape of buildings, lake and receding hills, makes past concerns a feature of the present conveyed, as per her description of Masaccio, through the language of paint rather than subject matter. The composition is almost picturesque, with its defined foreground, middle-ground and background, except that there is no access to the landscape. No path or figure leads the eye easily into the imagined space; instead the way through is blocked by the solidity of the buildings and the linear arrangement of figures. The landscape functions as a theatrical backdrop, drawing attention to the drama of the encounter between soldiers and civilians taking place in the foreground.

The simplified architectural forms in Bellette’s painting unmistakably recall Masaccio’s use of architecture in *The Tribute Money* and *Expulsion from Eden*.

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22 Ibid., 38.
23 Ibid.
The arch on the left-hand side in the *Expulsion* represents the gate of heaven. Bellette imitates this arch in the building on the right-hand side of her painting. In all three paintings, the buildings function as a theatrical device that stages what is taking place in the foreground, while at the same time suggesting passages or doorways to other realities.

Bellette departs from the brilliance of Masaccio’s colour by using a much darker palette that announces the sombre atmosphere of the scene formally. Nevertheless, the redeeming flash of pink around the neck of the central figure draws a comparison with the pink Masaccio used for Christ’s robe. The allusion to Christ is repeated in the gesture of his left hand that crosses slightly in front of his body. However, his right hand hangs limply to his side, indicating a lack of redemption. There is no direction offered in that gesture, instead his fingers point to the ground, emphasizing the earthly rather than spiritual realm. The quotation of Christ’s gesture from Masaccio’s fresco sets a precedent for recognizing anachronistic gestural quotations in another of Bellette’s painting, *The Betrothal of Achilles*, which will be discussed later in this chapter.
Bellette also departs from Masaccio by not having a defined narrative. Masaccio’s *The Tribute Money* has defined temporality in its narrative in three parts contained within a single frame. It begins in the centre with the demand for money by the tax collector and then moves to the left, where the figure of St Peter is rendered in a much lighter tone to indicate distance. Finally on the right in the foreground, Peter is depicted in full colour once more, giving the tax collector the money. The non-linear narrative indicates a conception of time also apparent in the ordering of Piero’s *Legend of the True Cross*, Duccio’s *Maésta* and other fresco series of the era. In Masaccio’s composition, the three parts are unified and contribute to the overall coherence of the work. The mountains, trees and water in the background link the different elements adding to the balance and harmony of the composition. Bellette employs Masaccio’s compositional strategies anachronistically to address both spatial and temporal distance. Renaissance perspective is overturned in favour of Masaccio’s alternative ordering of forms seen in the relationship between the reclining figure on the right and the differences in the sizes of the figures that make up the group on the left.

Two civilian men being searched by soldiers occupy the centre of Bellette’s painting. The figures to the left and right of them appear either oblivious or unconcerned, detached from the events taking place. Christine France interprets this painting as displaying a sense of history with an emphasis on the ‘inner drama of the people’. However, each figure is engrossed with their own drama, disconnected from the others. The group on the left reinforces the general sense of isolation in Bellette’s painting. The figures in this group do not relate to one another in any way. One woman stares out of the canvas and functions as a hailing figure, calling the viewer to attend to the scene, while a much smaller figure looks away and a third appears to be walking away. The spaces between the three groups emphasize disunity rather than harmony. The nonchalance of the reclining figure on the right is jarring in the light of the actions of the soldiers. Bellette negates the passage of time by representing a

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single, imagined moment. This focuses attention on the emotional states of the figures and their lack of agency rather than on an implied narrative. The sense of history that France mentions manifests as anachronism as it connects the oppression and suffering of Christ with that of the more recent Spanish Civil War. Christ is reframed as a political, rather than religious figure, an equal victim of tyranny. The references to war gives gravity to Bellette’s present Australian moment and Australia’s participation in the fight against tyranny in the Second World War. Bellette’s image is a protest against the tyranny of indifference and an argument for the interconnectedness of humanity.

Bellette notes that there are underlying continuities in the history of art that contribute to the “endless logic that constitute a universe.”²⁶ She participates in Donne’s discourse on universality by giving her painting the same title and location as Hemingway’s novel. The repetition of Hemingway’s title strengthens the illusion of continuity, timelessness and universality and allows her to participate in this conversation across time, space and genre through substitution.

Bellette’s chosen title, along with the figures in uniform, justifies a comparison of this painting with Hemingway’s novel. Consequently, her painting is anachronistic if the location is identified as Spain during the 1936-1939 Civil War. However, understood as a general political protest against fascism, this painting indicates her empathy for those suffering in Europe that manifests in anxiety in Australia because of the connectedness of humanity. Her protest against injustice through her painting aligns her ideologically with concerns that are global as well as universal.

*The Sydney Morning Herald* critic at the time commented on the change in Bellette’s work upon her return from Europe stating that she now “concentrates intensely on realizing broad solidity and weight.”²⁷ This attention to solidity and weight contrasts with the lightness and delicacy of her earlier studio painting. As discussed, Bellette only understood form after Meninsky had introduced her to modern art and then to Masaccio and Piero. *For whom the bell tolls* contains multiple temporalities in its

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²⁶ Bellette, ”Masaccio,” 38.
²⁷ Unnamed art critic, ”Jean Bellette’s Pictures,” 1939, 6.
anachronistic quotations of Masaccio’s form and structure, together with a contemporary awareness of timelessness and universalism that is validated by the cultural authority of Masaccio.

*For whom the bell tolls* is anachronistic in its intersections of genres and eras that create temporal and cultural contact zones between Bellette and the European world, past and present, through figuration. In an unpublished interview with Richard Haese in Sydney in 1975, Haefliger recalled that Bellette “…loved the [early] Renaissance right from the beginning, she loved Masaccio, Giotto, della Francesca and somehow her whole work since then is centred on that early love.” Bellette remained a figurative painter, resisting the push towards abstraction and abstract expressionism. According to Jeffrey Smart, both he and Bellette came under considerable pressure to move away from figuration into abstract expressionism, particularly from the influential Haefliger. Smart quotes Bellette as saying: “Look, it has taken me a long time to find a way to paint and now I have found it I’m not budging – you can all go and try this or that, but I won’t.” The temporal complexity that Bellette creates through the anachronism in her painting allows her use of the past to be considered as a radical justification for figuration, radical in an artistic sense, rather than a politically reactionary and conservative attempt to uphold the traditions and styles of the past. However, this was a time when political opinion and artistic taste overlapped in complex ways.

**Internationalism and Controversy: The Herald Exhibition of Contemporary French and British Art and William Dobell**

The influence of art teachers in London and Paris, extensive travel overseas and the exposure to European modern art all account for the changes in Bellette’s practice, as seen in *For whom the bell tolls*. Australia, however, had also changed in the intervening years. An influx of migrants escaping the growing tensions in Europe

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30 Jeffrey Smart interview with Christine France, ibid.
contributed to a feeling of cosmopolitanism in Sydney. While the Sydney art world may not have been interested in the national and social politics of the Melbourne artists, they were very interested in the politics that surrounded art itself. Bellette brought back to Sydney a sense of internationalism and a commitment to promote contemporary art. European migrants and refugees arriving in Australia to escape the war included artists. They infused the local art scene with new ideas on painting and consolidated the practice of those locals, like Bellette and Haefliger, who were returning after having been abroad for many years. The way Bellette embraced and supported all forms of contemporary art in Sydney needs addressing to show how she oriented herself as a participant within the wider world of European contemporary art.

The presence of migrant artists was welcomed by some but met with resistance from others who, like Lionel Lindsay, a trustee of the National Gallery of New South Wales, believed that: “True art grows like a tree from its native soil, not from the sludge of decadent civilizations.” Bellette actively opposed Lindsay, accusing him in a letter published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of being ideologically allied with Germany in his opposition to the influx of European contemporary artists into Australia. Chanin and Miller confirm that Lindsay’s point of view was anti-modern and anti-Semitic. They point to Lindsay’s essay, *Addled Art*, where he describes Modern art as decadent and the creation of unscrupulous European Jewish art dealers. Bellette’s opposition to Lindsay confirms her belief in the value of an international modern art, her sensitivity to bias and her ideological commitment to the universal rather than the particular.

The reactionary attitude in Australia towards modern art in general was best exemplified by the response of the state gallery trustees in both Melbourne and Sydney to the *Herald Exhibition of Contemporary French and British Art* that came to Australia in 1939. Chanin and Miller chronicle the exhibition and its reception in *Degenerates and Perverts*, their title a quotation exemplifying the attitude of the

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31 Lionel Lindsay, “Letter to the Editor,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 October 1940, 7.
Australian art establishment of the time. *The Herald* exhibition was privately funded by Keith Murdoch and curated by Basil Burdette. Neither the Melbourne nor Sydney art galleries would present the exhibition; instead, it was displayed at the Melbourne Town Hall and the David Jones Gallery. Only in South Australia was it shown in the official state Gallery. The presence of original, contemporary European and British modernist works galvanized the local art world and gave the Australian general public a chance to see and purchase a significant collection of European Modern Art. It also served to locate Australian modernism within that context.\(^\text{34}\) The exhibition generated much heated political debate about the nature of contemporary art, a debate that had its apotheosis in the controversial 1943 court case over the legitimacy of William Dobell’s portrait of Joshua Smith winning the Archibald Prize.\(^\text{35}\) The *Herald* exhibition and the Dobell court case were the grounds upon which the battle between the conservatives and the modernists were fought. Bellette’s involvement with the *Herald Exhibition* and her support of Dobell shows her commitment to the promotion of modern art in Australia.

Bellette was closely involved with the *Herald Exhibition*, acting as a guide and giving lectures. The importance of the 1939 exhibition lay in the breadth of styles that constituted modern art and the debates that arose from it.\(^\text{36}\) When the war in Europe broke out two hundred and seventeen paintings by some of the best European contemporary artists of the time including Picasso, Braque, Cézanne, Matisse, Van Gogh, Gauguin and Derain remained in Australia housed in the basement of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. The gallery trustees refused to display them and despite the gallery not having any Impressionist or Post-Impressionist paintings in their collection, none were purchased. Chanin and Miller contend that essentially it came

\(^{34}\) Ibid., passim.  
\(^{35}\) Janet Hawley described this as the greatest art controversy in Australia’s history. The CAS declared the portrait an important work of art yet others considered it a grotesque caricature. The controversy dominated the newspapers and according to Scott Bevan: “For once, art was the talk of the nation.” Two other entrants lodged the lawsuit against Dobell and the gallery trustees alleging the painting did not comply with the Archibald guidelines. The court case was a *cause célèbre* and Dobell was required to publically defend his painting. Scott Bevan, “The William Dobell Portrait that Broke a Friendship and Divided a Nation,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 October 2014; and Janet Hawley, *Encounters with Australian Artists* (St. Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 1993), 75-92.  
\(^{36}\) For an in-depth discussion on the role of the 1939 Exhibition see Chanin and Miller, *Degenerates and Perverts*. 
down to the fact that the Sydney gallery trustees were resistant to modern art. Bellette participated in the protests against the storage of these paintings and as a result some went on display in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. The resistance to displaying them came not only from the reactionary trustees, many of whom were artists and preferred to see their own works hanging in the state galleries, but also from those who wanted to promote an Australian style of painting and therefore rejected any further European influence.

Responses to the 1939 exhibition and the Dobell trial exposed divisions within the Australian art world and revealed how contentious modern art was for those involved. The resistance to modern art by the trustees echoed other resistances and biases, including a gender bias. Ursula Hoff was particularly sensitive to discrimination. As a Jew she had fled from persecution in Germany and then upon arriving in Melbourne, was refused employment by J.S. McDonald, the director of the National Gallery of Victoria, for being a German Jew. Hoff’s sensitivity to discrimination is revealed in her defence of Jean Bellette, whose art she used to argue for the equivalence of women artists in an article written for Meanjin in 1952. Hoff takes Rene Huyghe to task for suggesting in his book on French contemporary painters, that the cubists invented women painters and that women were excluded from cubism’s theoretical and intellectual approach. Her support of Bellette indicates a shared sensitivity and awareness of the inequalities faced by women in the Australian art world. Bellette participated in the debates that the Herald Exhibition brought to the surface by promoting contemporary art in Australia both as an artist and as a woman.

Bellette and Haefliger demonstrated their commitment to the promotion of contemporary art in Sydney by attending the inaugural meeting of the Sydney branch of the Contemporary Art Society (CAS) held in 1939. The CAS was established in reaction to the 1937 formation of the Australian Academy of Art. The Academy was

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37 Ibid., 210.
38 Ibid., 209-13.
modelled on the conservative Royal Academy in London, and was thus rejected by Australian artists with contemporary affiliations. Bellette and Justin O’Brien exhibited in the first Sydney CAS exhibition in 1940 alongside other abstract works providing, according to the critic from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, “a fresh and youthful challenge to the conservative art world.”  

Christine Dixon, in her review of the Academy and the CAS, noted that the expected divisions obscured the reality, which was that many artists, Bellette included, exhibited with both groups. She does not deny the oppositions and dualities that were in place at the time stating that the tensions between them gave impetus to an “expressive vitality in Australian art.”

While the boundaries between the traditionalists and the modernists were quite fluid, their opposition motivated debate as what constituted Modern Art. As a result, Bellette’s Eurocentric focus and figurative style did not preclude her from participating in contemporary exhibitions as a modern artist.

Just as Bellette and her husband, Haefliger, criticized the conservatives, so a later critic criticized them on other grounds. Haefliger, also an artist, had been appointed art critic for the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1941, a position he held until 1957 when he and Bellette left Australia. In 1966 when the Australian art world had shifted its attention from Europe to America, Robert Hughes retrospectively accused Haefliger of being narrow, highly Eurocentric and championing the art of his friends. Hughes, along with Bernard Smith, criticized these Sydney artists for withdrawing and not engaging adequately with the war. They were also criticized for being Eurocentric and not promoting an Australian idiom. As we saw in the last chapter, Hughes exposed his bias against the Sydney artists of the 1940s by referring to them scathingly as Charm School and dismissing their art as “an antipodean echo of English neo-romanticism.” He did, however, give credit to Haefliger and Bellette for introducing Australian painters to the early Italian Renaissance. The early Italian Renaissance carried weight in Australia because of the widely accepted association of Piero and Cézanne, which will be

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44 Ibid., 171.
discussed in detail in the next chapter. Hughes criticized Bellette’s interpretation of classicism as stereotyped, static and passive, imbued with an unconvincing poeticism. He described the art of the Sydney Charm School as vacuous and somewhat silly and set against a revival of interest in European classicism that he believed had no relevance in Australia.\(^{45}\) Hughes rejected Bellette’s paintings, and those of the Charm School, because they promoted internationalism, rather than a national Australian art form, and because they were based upon an imported rather than a local mythology.

Geoffrey Dutton offers an alternative and more positive view of Sydney art in 1939: “The international came to Sydney and Sydney reached out beyond the gum-trees and the beach to the modern and the international.”\(^{46}\) Haefliger and Bellette were partly responsible. They had returned from Europe in 1939 with many good quality prints, which Peter Bellew reproduced in *Art in Australia*. In response to the decline in art publications from Europe during the war, *Art in Australia* announced in its March 1941 edition that it would have a more international outlook and encompass a broad range of art styles.\(^{47}\) It included woodcuts of Aboriginal burial posts reproduced by Haefliger, Japanese prints, reproductions and articles on local and European contemporary art thus exposing Australia to what Christine France described as “art that was international, primitive and monumental.”\(^{48}\) This challenges the illusion of the isolation of Australia’s art world, particularly during the war. As Bernard Smith observed: “An international outlook replaced a provincial one, while the pressures and urgencies of war brought a maturity and depth to art in Sydney.”\(^{49}\) Hughes disagrees with Smith, saying that the Sydney response to the war resulted in a decade of decorative, nostalgic art that looked anachronistically back to a Europe that no longer existed. The style of art produced during this period had, according to Hughes, a misleadingly international aspect that only worked because of Australia’s desire to be a part of ‘an international situation.’\(^{50}\)

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 169-96.
\(^{50}\) Hughes, *The Art of Australia*, 171.
What Hughes acknowledged he had missed seven years after the publication of that statement was the complex issue of the colonial relationship.\(^{51}\) When Sydney art is viewed within the context of that relationship, a more robust image of the situation emerges. Returning artists, like Bellette, and immigrant and refugee artists from all over Europe, transformed Australia from being a receiver of art from the outside into a transmitter of its own art. It is against this background that a new tradition of Australian landscape painting emerges that excluded artists like Bellette. It was a masculinist and robust image of a landscape defined by drought and emptiness best exemplified by Drysdale’s paintings, whose approach to the landscape will be discussed in a later chapter. O’Brien, Bellette and Jeffrey Smart do not represent the Australian landscape in those terms, for each adopted a less specific and more European, perhaps less masculinist approach.

Hughes is correct in accusing Bellette of looking outwards towards Europe rather than inward to Australia. However, he fails to realize the temporal complexity of the exchange. Amanda Beresford contends that Bellette’s style demonstrates a convincing dialogue with classicism and early twentieth century European modernism.\(^{52}\) Beresford recognizes a unity of form and content in Bellette’s figurative work that shows her commitment to the ongoing dialogue between the past and the present, to traditional and contemporary styles. Beresford and France agree that Bellette’s association with the Charm School and the negative connotations attached to that group has resulted in her contribution to Australian modernism being overlooked. Furthermore, France observes that Bellette’s identification as a neo-romantic rather than a neo-classicist ignores the positive role she played in changing the outlook in Australia from provincial to international.\(^{53}\) Against Hughes’s accusation that the members of The Charm School were nostalgic, wanting to preserve a 1930s European-style that they were unfamiliar with in a misguided effort to be international, Dutton notes that the group was in fact very familiar with Europe and European art. France also defends the group against

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 19.
Hughes’s accusation saying that all, except for the three youngest in the group, had either served during the war or had lived in Europe. 54 Hughes failed to recognise how Sydney art was addressing contemporary Australian rather than European conditions. The Charm School label effectively obscured the complexity of the anachronism in Bellette’s paintings through which she established a dialogue between Australia and Europe.

In spite of For whom the bell tolls winning the Sulman Prize in 1942, another Sydney Morning Herald art critic of the time: J.G. – not Haefliger who was unable to review the work of his wife due to the conflict of interest in doing so – criticized the painting for its lack of reality, suggesting that its value lay purely in its decorative appeal. This opinion conforms to Hughes’s deprecating view of the decorative appeal of The Charm School. As discussed, Charm School was a pejorative label used by Hughes to disparage the ‘romantic poeticism’ and ‘luxury’ of the art produced by Sydney artists during the 1940s. 55 Dutton’s defence of these artists was based on the fact that they brought an awareness of modern art to Sydney. 56 Dutton, however, finds Bellette’s neo-classical references fail by comparison with Picasso’s classical paintings, which he considers: “genuinely monumental or disturbingly human.” 57 The implication is that he sees Bellette’s work as essentially derivative, a poor imitation of a European style. Hughes described her figures as wooden, predictable and clichéd and accused the Sydney artists, and by implication Bellette, of equating art with elitism and making ‘good taste’ the criteria for judgment rather than intensity of experience. Dutton agrees with Hughes that good taste does not make for good art: “A trance of good taste snoozes in the work of Bellette.” 58 He does, however, state that their art was not trivial. I wish to argue that both Dutton and Hughes underestimate the complexity of her work and the understated tensions achieved through the employment of a Quattrocento ‘ineloquence’, to use Bernard Berenson term for Piero della Francesca’s art, and a medieval tension between what is visible and what is hidden, that makes her

55 Hughes, The Art of Australia, 170.
56 Dutton, The Innovators, 110.
57 Ibid., 107.
58 Ibid.
work compelling and relevant. As in Justin O’Brien’s work, it is in what is excluded, in what is not being overtly stated, that the interest lies.

**Classicism, Romanticism and Myth**

Robert Hughes and Bernard Smith’s conception of Sydney art will be explored in order to refute their identification of Bellette as a romantic rather than a classical artist. Their conception of Romanticism is interrogated to examine how Bellette resists the classification. I offer her painting, *Two Girls* (c.1945) as evidence for seeing her as an intellectual and classical artist rather than an imitative and neo-romantic one. The importance of this distinction reorients Bellette’s figurative art as intellectual, ideological and modern rather than reactionary, decorative and sentimental.

![Image of Two Girls](image)

*Figure 26. Jean Bellette, Two Girls c. 1945
Oil on Board 52.5 x 37.5cm
Wollongong Art Gallery, on loan from the Building Unions Superannuation Scheme Art Collection.*

Bernard Smith identifies two trends of figurative art emerging from Sydney in the 1940s; one he labels realistic expressionism and the other neo-romantic.59 Realistic expressionism in Sydney, according to both Smith and Hughes was not political, unlike

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the social realism of Melbourne. Smith loosely defines it as art that brought “an expressionistic idiom to the interpretation of life.” Both Smith and Hughes identify realistic expressionism in the work of Russell Drysdale and Sidney Nolan; however, both artists came to Sydney from Melbourne in 1940.

Hughes defines Romanticism as a reaction against the conservatism of the London Academy of Art and against provincialism and the prosaic. According to him, Romanticism incorporates all realities, internal and external, all histories, civilizations and mythologies. It is inclusive of all conditions and classes. He saw The Charm School version of Romantic as poetic, mysterious, glamorous and vague with an unnatural separation between classicism and romanticism, romanticism being emotional and classicism being intellectual.  

He rejected Bellette’s work as inauthentic and clichéd describing it as “…copied variations on a prototype [she] barely understands.” On the other hand, Smith recognized in the art of the neo-romantics with whom he associated Bellette the exploration of “historical styles; especially the Byzantine, the Trecento, the Quattrocento and Persian art, with a new freedom deriving from contemporary principles.”  

Neither description adequately recognizes the sophisticated anachronism behind the synthesis of those historical styles and what Smith referred to as ‘contemporary principles’ derived from British and European modernism. Apparent in Bellette’s work is an understanding of form that traverses time, an understanding informed by Medieval, Early Modern and Modern art.

Beresford argues that the Romanticism in Bellette’s work is consistent with the classical revival in modernist art that occurred in France, Spain and Italy. Both Smith and Hughes miss the classicism in Bellette’s incorporation of other styles and periods that positions her within this revival. Bellette’s use of classicism established temporal structures through which she interrogated the relationship between the European cultural past and the Australian present. This puts Bellette alongside those European

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60 Ibid.
61 Hughes, The Art of Australia, 176.
62 Ibid., 171.
63 Bernard Smith, Australian Painting, 230.
64 Beresford, “Classicism and Myth in Jean Bellette’s work,” 66.
artists, like Picasso, Derain and de Chirico, who responded to Jean Cocteau’s ‘call to
order’ and returned to the perceived stability that is represented by the past as a
means of navigating an uncertain present.

These European artists rejected the iconoclasm of modernists like the Italian Futurists
and deliberately looked back to the Classicism of the Italian past (as in fact did the
Futurists themselves on many occasions). Classicism represents authority, purity,
solidity, endurance and order with an ontology based on logical, repeatable and
universal patterns. Amanda Beresford, however, describes Bellette’s classicism as
“self-coded expressions”, and her paintings as: “closed, internally referential, their
meanings a private articulation of the artist’s inner life.” Untouched by the First
World War, Bellette responded to the illusions of timelessness and endurance of the
classical revival as a means of participating in a broader Western art discourse, as an
Australian, as a woman, and from a distance. Her description of Piero della Francesca’s
work for example as timeless, “equable, calm and capable of enduring,” indicates the
importance she placed on notions of continuity in order to establish a link between her
practice, modern Australian and European art practice and the radical new way the
European past had been used by those avant-garde European modernists of the early
twentieth century. Alexander Nagel paraphrases Walter Benjamin, describing time and
history as “multiple – shot through.” Anachronism locates Bellette’s work within that
temporal and spatial paradigm and allows a re-evaluation of her utilisation of the past
as progressive rather than reactionary.

Amanda Beresford asserts that the European artists revisited the classical past in order
to “revitalize modern art in a way that would have universal and lasting meaning.”

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65 The term describes the renewed interest in tradition that followed the First World War and is thought
to have been derived from Jean Cocteau’s, A Call to Order published in 1926. See Elizabeth Cowling and
and Australia, 43, no. 1 (2005), 10.
67 Bellette, “Piero della Francesca,” 36.
68 The Walter Benjamin quotation is: “Shot through with slivers of messianic time.” Nagel, Medieval
Modern, 23.
69 Beresford, "Classicism and Myth in Jean Bellette’s work," 66.
Beresford mentions two exhibitions that documented the revival of classicism in European modern art: *On Classic Ground* held at the Tate in London in 1990 and *Canto d’Amore: Classicism in Modern Art and Music, 1914-1935* at the Basel Kunstmuseum in 1996. However, she does not mention a similar exhibition held in Melbourne in 1985, *Renaissance References in Australian Art*. The curator, Margaret Riddle, chose Australian works that demonstrated that conversation across time that Nagel attributes to art. References to Classism, Masaccio and Piero della Francesca were noted in Bellette’s work. However, Riddle did not associate Bellette with the modernist revival of classicism that had occurred in Europe nor with the renewed interest in Piero della Francesca brought about by British formalism that redefines her work as avant-garde rather than reactionary. Bellette re-enacted the work of Picasso, Derain and de Chirico in her synthesis of classical and romantic principles. She took these modern European works out of their time and context and made them synchronic with mid-twentieth century Australia.

*Two Girls*, painted around 1945, reframes the dialogue between the European classical past and the modernist present of both Europe and Australia in female form. A comparison with Bellette’s earlier paintings reveals her attempt to represent an image of timelessness and continuity through the synchronic perception of art from the past. Despite the anachronism, the girls are engaged in a highly animated, relaxed, intimate and present-tense conversation that is perhaps as colourful as the hues that represent them, implying female intimacy and intelligence. The seated girl on the left is holding something in her right hand, the gesture echoing the way an artist may hold a brush.

The detail seen in Bellette’s previous work has given way to quick, broad brushstrokes, a strong painterly effect and tonality. An ornamental and abstract background has replaced the recognizable studio setting of her earlier student painting and the stylized landscape of *For whom the bell tolls*. The figure of the girl on the right is depicted in a similar pose to the young man in the studio but is now observed from a different angle and a much lower viewpoint, which emphasizes a modernist concern with weight and

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solidity of form. Gravity is conveyed through the use of thick paint that sweeps downward in overtly visible brushstrokes and dark contrasts of colour, anchoring the figures into the ground. Fine lines have been replaced by broad, gestural applications of paint reflecting a new self-conscious approach to mark making that announces the presence of the artist. The new lightness in her palette goes beyond representation, exposing a modernist interest in manipulating and experimenting with the effects of colour and light. The modernist aesthetic is emphasized by the use of formal elements and principles of painting, such as the rhythmic patterns of the sharp tonal whites that create an overall harmonious and balanced composition. The harmony of the composition is further enhanced by the use of an analogous colour scheme of warm yellows and soft reds. The red turns into pink to give form and shape to the seated girl on the left while yellow is used for definition in the standing figure on the right. Detail has been sacrificed in favour of an image that, through the manipulation of colour and line, the possible identification with the artist through the gesture, the intimacy of the relationship between the girls and the way the standing girl’s pose mimics that of the earlier model, suggests the expression of an inner consciousness. As Beresford notes, Bellette’s paintings are coded expressions that articulate private meaning.71

Ursula Hoff had, prior to Beresford’s observation, noted that Bellette was not concerned with depicting a likeness to nature but rather an idea or atmosphere remembered.72 This potentially has its origin in the emphasis on formalism as laid out in Fry’s “Essay in Aesthetics” in Vision and Design.73 According to Fry, art is the expression of the imaginative life and a means of communicating emotion. Art is not meant to represent life; rather it is the expression of emotion as an end in itself. Bellette’s belief that there was only safety “in the realm of the mind”74 suggests a familiarity with Fry’s imaginative life. Two Girls, therefore, must be understood as an affective signifier of the female ‘realm of the mind’.

73 Fry, Vision and Design, 21.
74 “Conversation with Jean Bellette.”
Bellette’s impressions of pillars and plinths allude to classical architecture and contrasts with the recognizable studio space in *Young Man*. As in *For whom the bell tolls*, the architectural structures do not inform a narrative; instead, all detail has been negated in favour of form and geometric construction, a device recognizable in Picasso’s neoclassical paintings. Her familiarity with Picasso is seen in the way the awkward cropping of *Two Girls* resembles the compression of figures in Picasso’s neoclassical painting, *Three Woman at the Spring* (1921). Both paintings celebrate the female form although Bellette’s reworking of Picasso’s image suggests that she is reclaiming that authority from Picasso.

![Figure 27. Pablo Picasso, Three Women at the Spring, 1921](image)

Further similarities with *Three Woman at the Spring* are found in Bellette’s use of tonal modelling, the way she handles the materiality of the paint, the solidity of her figures and in her composition. While Picasso’s Neoclassical figures have a stronger linearity and are more cylindrical in form, Bellette achieves a similar sense of stillness in the depiction of a frozen moment in time. Parallels with Picasso suggest that Bellette had, by this time, developed an appreciation for his work, no longer thinking of him as ‘absolutely no good.’ While not following Picasso’s logical and impersonal cubist approach, Bellette’s painting recalls the way Picasso framed the past in terms of
stability and endurance, in contrast with a present state of upheaval and uncertainty. Both artists evoke the past with classical references, but they remain in the present because of their modernist treatment of form and their address of contemporary concerns. The anachronism in Bellette’s painting suggests that by claiming the past and the agency of a Picasso painting as her own, she was asserting herself as a contemporary artist, in response to Australian conditions that actively discriminated against women.

Picasso began to entertain classical imagery in his paintings after meeting up with Jean Cocteau in 1916. His heavier figures seen in paintings of the 1920s reflected the need for classical certainty in the aftermath of the First World War. Cowling and Mundy maintain that it was during this time that Picasso claimed classicism as his heritage, in keeping with his interest in Primitive art, such as African carvings. They argue that these other traditions revitalized the classical tradition, providing a distinction between the uses of classicism by the European avant-garde as opposed to its use by the ‘academic arrière-garde.’ Thus, the synthesis of traditional and contemporary styles is what gave Modern European art its vitality. The anachronism in Picasso’s reprise of classical motifs opened the way for Bellette to utilize the classical past but she failed to incorporate other art forms that were on hand, like Australian Indigenous art, which, if it been recognized as having the same agency as other traditional styles, could have injected a similar vitality into her art. Instead, Bellette continued to face outward, away from Australia, toward Europe and its past.

Bellette’s articles on Maillol, Giotto, Masaccio and Piero della Francesca for Art in Australia, written between 1941 and 1942, promoted a sense of internationalism in Australia but at the same time, reinforced the importance of the European past. Two

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76 It is worth noting that Warwick Fairfax had rejected Bellette for the job of art critic at the Sydney Morning Herald, because he was not prepared to have a female critic. See France, “Jean Bellette: Early Life and Times,” 17.
77 Cowling and Mundy, On Classic Ground, 18.
78 Bellette was familiar with Australian Indigenous art. The evidence for this lies in the Indigenous designs Paul Haefliger had reproduced that appeared in the same issues of Art in Australia as Bellette’s articles on Masaccio and Piero della Francesca.
Girls is, therefore, the visual embodiment of this synthesis between the Italian past and European modernist expressions of classicism, and the quest to locate herself and the Australian present in that context. The next section examines the quotations and allusions to Piero in her painting, The Betrothal of Achilles in this light. Bellette’s article on Piero, mentioned earlier, exposed her emphasis on the expression of timelessness and the universality of the human condition. I argue that she used Piero to justify figuration as a contemporary rather than reactionary means of expression.

Bellette and Piero della Francesca

A generation of Australian artists had already anticipated Bellette’s use of Piero. Bernard Smith describes the seamless interaction between past and present in his description of May Marsden’s art classes that were held in Sydney between 1915 and 1941:

The best old master reproductions that could be found were artfully mingled ... with the clear line, radiant colour and bold design of early Sydney Modernism. Piero della Francesca and Bellini rubbed shoulders with Thea Proctor and Ethel Spowers; Cézanne and Vermeer nodded approvingly across the hallway to Grace Crowley and Rah Fizelle. ...[T]here was no break between modernism and the past.79

Smith recognizes the centrality of Piero to Australian Modern art, both to abstract and figurative artists, acknowledging the open-ended multivalency of Piero’s art that allows it to satisfy a wide range of needs. Rather than being artistically reactionary, Smith presents allusions to Piero as an integral part of Australian Modernity. However, he does not mention the implications of Piero’s influence on Australian art.

Bellette’s article on Piero, quoted earlier, indicates her familiarity with the sentiments expressed by British writer, Aldous Huxley in his essay, “The Best Picture” (1925).80

80 Aldous Huxley, Along the Road (London: Chatto & Windus, 1930), 177-89.
Her description of Piero as rising above “discontent, disturbances and quarrels” has its counterpart when Huxley writes that: “With the drama of life and religion he [Piero] is very little concerned.” Further similarities can be found in Huxley’s statement that what he most admires in Piero is his “intellectual power… his capacity for unaffectedly making the grand and noble gesture, by his pride in whatever is splendid in humanity” and that he appears inspired by what is most “admirable in man”. Huxley makes a point of distancing Piero from any spiritual significance arguing that the meaning of the work is contained in its formal aspects: the architecture, balance and harmony of the composition itself. Huxley stresses the intellectualism in Piero’s approach to painting. Bellette concurs when she writes of Piero’s “ability to convey in spatial harmonies the ideas of both heart and intellect” and that “he never sacrifices his superb architecture to the play of sentiment” — except that she added ‘heart’ to Huxley’s ‘intellect’.

Bellette reinforced Piero’s centrality to Australian art with justification provided by Huxley’s essay. She also made a direct link between Piero and Ancient Rome: “His is a powerful, cylindrical, Roman form,” she wrote. She validated this observation by explaining that in Piero’s youth both Donatello and Brunelleschi were unearthing the ancient Hellenic statues, thus emphasizing Piero’s connection to The Ancients. According to Bellette, it was the revival of that inheritance, ‘the renewals of hope’ that gave rise to the Renaissance. Accordingly, the anachronism in Piero’s use of classicism is repeated in Bellette’s use of anachronistic forms to speak to the present rather than the past. The anachronism in Bellette’s paintings reimagines Huxley’s descriptions of Piero’s stillness, timelessness and continuity within a twentieth century Australian context. Bellette links Australian modern art in the 1940s to Western modern art through a shared cultural inheritance. The implication is that classicism and the European past that invigorated modern European art could be used to invigorate Australian art as well. At the same time appreciation of Piero challenged the existing

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81 Ibid., 181.
82 Ibid., 186-87.
83 Bellette, “Piero della Francesca,” 29.
canon that accepted Botticelli but rejected Piero, as pointed out by Huxley. The challenge to the authority of the Renaissance echoes other subtle challenges to authority that can be read in the anachronism in Bellette’s paintings.

The complex temporal structures of The Betrothal of Achilles, painted in 1948, articulates the way Bellette used the past as a means of challenging the social and political conditions of the present. Although this painting refers to an ancient narrative, it combines the past and the present by focusing on only one moment in the narrative. The suggested protest in the face of impending tragedy seen in the mood of the painting implies a protest that has a contemporary relevance.

![Figure 28. Jean Bellette, Betrothal of Achilles 1948](image)

Oil on Cardboard 75.6 x 100.3cm
Art Gallery of Western Australia

*The Betrothal* refers to Greek mythology, but the moment in the narrative is elusive because of the absence of Achilles. The title however suggests that the figure in the forefront of the painting could be Polyxena, betrothed to Achilles and implicated in his death. Euripides’ tragic play, *Hecuba* tells the story of Polyxena. The connections between marriage and death were well established in the popular culture of ancient Greece. Achilles fell in love with Polyxena after he killed her brother Troilus. Her father, Priam, saw their marriage as a means of ending the Trojan War. Polyxena, 84

84 Huxley, *Along the Road*, 188-89.
apparently in love with Achilles, embraced her father’s plan. However, knowing about his vulnerable heel, she plotted with her other brother Paris to kill him.

Polyxena convinced Achilles to make a sacrifice at the temple of Apollo prior to their wedding. Paris, hidden from sight, shot a poisoned arrow into the heel of Achilles, with the help of Apollo. Some sources have him, in the throes of death, commanding the sacrifice of Polyxena to expiate his death; others have his ghost demanding her sacrifice. Either way, Polyxena has no choice and becomes a bride in death. However, as a result of her death the hostilities cease and the Greeks are able to return home. Polyxena can either be associated with deception and betrayal or be seen as a victim, defined by a lack agency and control over her fate. The title of The Betrothal of Achilles is a double effacement: firstly Polyxena, if indeed it is she who is depicted, is not named as the subject, and secondly, the title does not add any information but seems at odds with the depicted emotion. Thus, the image can be understood as a statement about the lack of female agency as well as female courage and sacrifice in the face of male domination.

The more subtle ways women were discriminated against in mid-twentieth-century Australia could account for Bellette’s anachronistic identification with Polyxena’s lack of agency. Bellette, who in all other respects was a strong and independent woman, was dominated by her husband, Paul Haefliger. France contends that Bellette’s subservience to him disadvantaged her as she always put him first, rather than forging ahead with her own work. On the other hand, France does not translate Bellette’s quest to find a universal humanism as feminist. In an unpublished letter to Amanda Beresford, John Olsen appears to agree that there is no feminism in Bellette’s work:

> These days it will be important for the feminists to know what was feminine in her work. That very question I asked Paul and he said, “None, that’s the

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87 Christine France, interview with the author (Sydney, NSW, 1 April, 2013).
strength of her work.” You may take this remark as you will but looking at her work there is more than a grain of truth in that.\textsuperscript{88}

These, however, are hardly neutral commentators, though Jeffery Smart also appears to negate any feminism in Bellette, describing her as being a “very busy woman” and identifying the role she played as wife and homemaker in accordance with social expectations of the time. He describes her as having to “do absolutely everything” because Haefliger was “not domestic” and just wanted to socialize.\textsuperscript{89} On the other hand Amanda Beresford appears to hint at resistance, suggesting that Bellette “constructed a social role for herself”, and that painting allowed her to escape that public performance of being Jean Bellette and retreat into an inner world, no less a performance, but a private one.\textsuperscript{90} Connie Tornatore-Loong contends that Bellette used mythology to universalize the human condition not the self, but qualifies it by adding that it was within an Australian context.\textsuperscript{91} These assumptions elide the possibility of overt feminist resistance. Nevertheless, the anachronism of the ancient myth disrupts the Australian present and inserts Bellette, as a woman and part of the universalizing doctrine, into that context.

Bellette’s need to assert herself is borne out by the fact that in the 1940s she was the only female member of the Sydney Group and as France reminds us female artists were often overlooked. While Bellette’s feminism, like O’Brien’s homosexuality, was not overt, the universal themes in her painting located a space for her within the existing cultural context. In an interview with Hazel de Berg in 1976, Bellette, sounding very much like Justin O’Brien whom she knew well, commented that safety could only be found “in the realm of the mind.”\textsuperscript{92} Consequently, she could resist certain social exclusions by asserting her agency as an artist. Anachronistic quotation and allusions

\textsuperscript{90} Beresford, “Looking Back,” 8.
\textsuperscript{92} “Conversation with Jean Bellette.”
gave both O’Brien and Bellette a subtle and controlled means of navigating the social conditions and gender relations prevalent in mid-twentieth-century Sydney.

Contemporary concerns are found in the association of Bellette with Picasso. Dutton, like Beresford, compares Bellette’s figures to Picasso, but Dutton criticizes her work saying it lacks Picasso’s monumentality and humanism. Dutton failed to recognize that the humanism expressed in Bellette’s painting was not an attempt to imitate what Picasso had achieved. Rather, I would argue, she was attempting to synthesize neoclassicism and the emotion of ‘the imaginative life’ as expressed in Fry’s Essay in Aesthetics through an anachronistic association of the present and the past.

Fry proposes that emotion can be conveyed through the interaction of the essential elements of painting: line, mass, space, light and shade, and colour. This is seen in the force of the diagonal line that tilts Polyxena’s body towards the right of the canvas and gains momentum by its repetition in the figure behind her on the left. The momentum is arrested by the verticality of two figures on the right. There is an unsettling tension between these opposing lines. The combination of arrested momentum with the possibility of an exchange outside the picture, suggested in her gesture, shows a frozen moment of arrested motion at a moment of crisis. Solidity and stasis are implied in the mass of the figures is created by tonal modelling. This gives off an air of weight and gravity that does, in fact, recall Picasso’s monumental figures. As I quoted earlier, for Fry gesture was an innate factor in formal arrangement, “a line which indicated the sudden bend of a head in a certain direction would have far more than its mere value as line in the composition because of the attraction which a marked gesture has for the eye.”

Bellette locates her figures in The Betrothal within a shallow depth of field, confined by the edges of the picture plane, suggestive of other more personal confinements. The flatness of the painting recalls the Etruscan frieze depicting the sacrifice of Polyxena

\[93\] Fry, Vision and Design, 16-38.
\[94\] Ibid., 33-34.
\[95\] Ibid., 32.
that Bellette saw in Orvieto ten years earlier. Beresford likens the shallow foreground to Masaccio and Piero,\textsuperscript{96} while Bernard Smith sees similarity with Henry Moore in the emotional tension of Bellette’s massive, classical forms.\textsuperscript{97} Beresford notes the anachronism in Bellette’s work when she describes her figures as sculptural, as being “carved from the same rock as their ancient settings” which she then states defines Bellette as a “modern painter attuned to contemporary European concerns.”\textsuperscript{98} Bellette achieves a sculptural effect through the thick impasto paint and the solidity of her figures. The synchronic use of strategies from the near and distant past validates her work through association and signals the way anachronism can be used as an effective interpretative tool.

The crushing of the figures within the depicted space is claustrophobic while the heavy chiaroscuro is dramatic. Light and dark are treated as abstract values, dividing the canvas into overlapping planes. The four figures occupy the foreground and are grouped tightly together, contained by the edges of the canvas. A sense of urgency is emphasized by Polyxena’s arm reaching across the canvas, further confining the figures. At the same time the illusionary space calls attention to its artifice through the lack of detail, the strong painterliness and the stylized treatment of the figures. The light catches the side of Polyxena’s face and shoulder, bringing her into the foreground and drawing attention to her outstretched arm. Her features, however, are shrouded in darkness which, following Pliny, enhances the expression of her emotions. Pliny praised the ancient Greek artist, Timanthes, for veiling Agamemnon’s face rather than trying to depict his extreme grief at the sacrifice of his daughter, Iphigenia.\textsuperscript{99} Thus, the viewer is free to imagine the full extent of Agamemnon or indeed Polyxena’s, grief. Consequently, history teaches us that hiding the face can be an indication of extreme emotion.

\textsuperscript{96} Beresford, “Looking Back,” 10.
\textsuperscript{97} Smith, \textit{Australian Painting}, 274.
\textsuperscript{98} Beresford, “Classicism and Myth in Jean Bellette’s work,” 68.
We should recall that in 1954 Bernard Berenson described two ways of conveying emotion in painting. The first and most over-emphatic and barbaric way according to Berenson is through the ‘articulate action of the entire body including the head’ in other words, Expressionism. The second, in contrast, is seen only in the features of face, eyes or mouth, as depicted by Piero. Berenson favoured the second method. He argues that figures in art should exist in and of themselves, ineloquent, conveying their essential character through their existence rather than any overt emotionalism or expressionism. This is the intellectualism and classicism he responds to in Piero, putting forward a case for a less expressive but more intellectual use of form to convey emotion. Following Berenson’s ideal method of depicting emotion Bellette reveals emotional tension in *The Betrothal of Achilles* through the use of form. She translates Piero’s ‘ineloquence,’ (to use Berenson’s term) into a sense of gravity, nobility and timelessness. The anachronism of an ancient narrative juxtaposed with a modernist concern with form, creates a temporally complex and multivalent image.

Bellette chose Piero’s depiction of the Queen of Sheba recognizing the true cross to illustrate her article on him, indicating a familiarity with the *Legend of the True cross* fresco cycle. The figure of Polyxena bears a significant similarity with two of Piero’s figures from this fresco. The first is on the far left of the group that surrounds the dead body of Adam in *The Death of Adam*, the first fresco in the narrative cycle. Polyxena has a similar profile with a slightly open mouth and a similar layer of cloth across her shoulders. They both have their outstretched right arms cross the picture plane in front of the other figures. There is a similar shadow across the front of the

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face that effectively veils any emotion. Bellette has also repeated the modulations of marble-like skin and hair and features that appear to be carved from stone rather than live flesh. Bellette claims the agency and authority associated with Piero by substituting through quotation the image of Adam transformed into female form. The gesture of Polyxena is also seen in the Queen of Sheba fresco that illustrated her article on Piero, published in *Art in Australia*. The gesture is used by one of the ladies-in-waiting where it functions as the focal point of the image. Her arm lies on and gives weight to a diagonal line that runs from heaven to the log before which the queen kneels, emphasizing the moment of divine knowledge when the Queen of Sheba recognizes the log to be the True Cross.

![Figure 30. Piero della Francesca, The Queen of Sheba (Detail)](image)

*The Legend of the True Cross Fresco Cycle, c.1460*
San Francesco, Arezzo, Italy

While the tenor of the images is quite different, Bellette’s recreation of this gesture gives weight and significance to her painting through an anachronistic association. Bellette ignored the fresco’s spiritual immanence and focussed only on the transmission of emotion through gesture. The exclusion of the recipient of Polyxena’s gesture and gaze creates anxiety in the viewer by withholding information. Malcolm Bull suggests that what is hidden from view feeds into our neurotic paranoia that what is withheld may be a fundamental truth.\(^{101}\) Therein lies the fascination with the unseen and the invisible, the things we are excluded from as a result of gender, race or status are intimated in this painting. Bellette claims agency over her subject through the gesture that acts as a substitute for the authority of Piero, while suggesting that there

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are other hidden meanings attached to this work, inferring a feminist protest against a lack of agency expressed through anachronistic substitution and Pieran ineloquence.

The departures from Piero are as interesting as the similarities. Unlike Piero’s employment of a wide tonal range, Bellette’s palette is a gradation between monochrome and colour, with a modernist reliance on strong linearity. In another departure from Piero, the figures behind Polyxena are not specifically gendered and no one is looking out of the picture plane implicating the viewer in a narrative., the gradation of colour from white marble to pigmented skin shows painted stone coming alive or perhaps flesh losing life, as it becomes a memory. In short, Bellette’s painting is approximated to a bass-relief rather than an exercise in the illusion of depth through mathematically devised theories of perspective. Furthermore, the temporality in Bellette’s image does not come not from the linking of a series of frozen moments, but rather by the suggestion that the figure on the left is a carved, stone bust, indicating some important, long dead personage. The use of statues to indicate another time was effectively employed by de Chirico and will be discussed in the next chapter on Jeffery Smart. In Bellette’s painting, the suggestion of a marble bust and the association of Greek mythology with quattrocento frescos and ancient Hellenic friezes create a complex temporality that universalizes the emotional content of Bellette’s work.

In spite of the departures from Piero, Bellette explores what is universal and enduring in humanity through an anachronistic engagement with the essential humanism she perceives encapsulated in the work of Piero. However she simultaneously employs the modalities of form and colour that locate her work within the discourse of European modernity, a discourse that identifies Piero with that which has endured and continues to be relevant. By substituting a Pieran gesture into her work, Bellette claimed the authority and agency that is associated with knowledge and appreciation of Piero.

Bellette has treated the formal elements of painting in a modernist manner, exhibiting the influence of Berenson and Fry. While not being overtly expressive she used the figures in her work to convey emotions that could arise in any time or place. Her
figurative interpretations of classical mythology are used to explore tragedy, betrayal and sacrifice, a legitimate response to the Ancient Greek narrative suggested in her title. Her twentieth century painting makes this response relevant to Australia in 1948, as well as to Piero during the wars and upheavals in Quattrocento Italy. Her painting seeks to demonstrate that emotions are universal and a fundamental part of the human condition. To this end the narrative is only implied and meaning is conveyed through tone, colour, paint, texture and composition. Bellette applied a Modernist formalism to suggest the substituted presence of Piero and thereby reduce the disturbances of her time into something calm and enduring.

**Mythology and its Implication in the Work of Jean Bellette**

Barbara Hall recalls Bernard Smith’s comment that Bellette was interested in places ‘where every root and rock presents some threatening archaic presence, where the mood is heroic and melancholic, a land where the gods are dead and man is dying.’\(^{102}\) Smith provides a precedent for examining the quotations and references from the mythological past in Bellette’s painting.

In keeping with the legions of modernist artists influenced by theosophical ideas and practices, Bellette was exposed to Anthroposophy and the multivalent psychical potentiality of mythology through her husband, Paul Haefliger. Haefliger’s mother and grandmother were both Anthroposophists and his grandmother was a personal friend of Rudolf Steiner, the founder of the movement. Anthroposophy believes in an objective and intellectually comprehensible spiritual world that can be accessed through perceptive imagination, inspiration and intuition.\(^{103}\) Anthroposophy promoted the use of mythology as a psychologically valuable tool to explore human consciousness. In a lecture on the Prometheus saga delivered in October 1904, Steiner


stated, “myths are the expression of esoteric truths.” In this lecture he delved into the layers of meaning that reveal the essence of human nature, seeking within the myth possible reasons for its creation. Consequently, the anachronistic presence of Ancient Greek mythology in Bellette’s mid-twentieth-century Australian painting indicates layers of interpretation that exist beneath the literary, surface level.

In a congruent way, Bellette was also influenced by Surrealism’s use of mythology. André Breton, the founder of Surrealism, had written an article for *Art in Australia*, in 1941. It appeared in the same edition as Bellette’s article on Masaccio. In this essay he identifies the synchronic temporality that existed during the war and informed artists of the time:

> Suddenly all of those past events, which we had been accustomed to consider purely from a speculative or theoretical standpoint – as wars, religious conflicts, crises in government, and the rise and fall of culture – all that which up to the present had been for us a beautiful but dim and misty revelation of the heroic past, has now become for us a living actuality, a poignant presence incorporated in our very being.

According to Breton the only way forward out of the morass of war was through the freedom offered by both art and the imagination. Bellette’s retreat into her imagination and the past was not therefore in these terms a reactionary response to modernism or a retreat from confronting the war but, inspired by what she saw in Piero, a way of rising above the disturbances of the day to produce something enduring and universal through the freedom offered by her imagination. As Breton noted, “[one] can still dream of those marvellous fragments of Heraclitus... Of the work of Aristotle.” Unlike Piero or Masaccio for whom the elucidation of religious content was a foundational objective, Bellette’s use of mythology functioned as a pretext for the exploration of modern emotion and sensation that transcended historically grounded narrative.

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105 André Breton, “Originality and Liberty,” *Art in Australia*, 4, no. 4 (1941), 11.
I have tried to paint groups of figures in landscape, using mythology as a pretext; my main preoccupation was to try and order space and colours in a certain way so that they would suggest to me some atmosphere I recognized...  

Mythology, whether classical or biblical, operates as a mode of signification. In *The Betrothal of Achilles* Bellette combined visually and temporally multivalent images from the ancient past with a modernist interest in space and form to convey something that has meaning for the contemporary world. This was achieved through substitution of those images from the past that she perceived as having authority, such as Piero’s, in order to imbue her own images with that authority and power and also by perceiving all images, whether past or present, as synchronic.

In *Contemporary Art and Classical Myth* Isabelle Loring Wallace and Jennie Hirsh argue that the way a work of art departs from the myth it illustrates reveals its interpretation. They contend that: “Myths are stories whose real subjects lie elsewhere, somehow unbound by the minor narrative through which deeper meanings are inevitably conveyed.” Accordingly, the use of mythology demands that the viewer constructs the meaning and treats the myth as allegory. Bellette stated that she uses mythology as a pretext, a means of suggesting an atmosphere she recognises through the ordering of space and colour. The ancient story is an anachronism in the context of her modernist interest in the affective use of space and colour. The temporal juxtaposition legitimates the examination of the suggested narrative for other possibly more personal meanings and interpretations that lie beneath the surface. These meanings are revealed in other paintings, including her unsuccessful attempts at representing the Australian landscape.

Bellette had begun teaching in 1945 and in 1948, the year *Betrothal* was painted, she opened her own studio in Sydney. Her students included John Olsen, Margaret Olley and David Strachan and as a teacher she was held in high regard. On Friday nights she

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flew from Sydney into Bathurst to teach a group there. This inspired a series of landscape paintings that depicted, in the relatively new history of European settlement in Australia, what Bernard Smith saw as her interest in an “archaic presence.”

**The Landscape: timelessness and continuity**

Bellette’s Australian landscapes indicate a departure from her usual depictions of mythological figures within an undifferentiated landscape. In a defence of Bellette’s painting, Ursula Hoff placed Bellette’s classical figures and Nolan and Drysdale’s outback scenes within the same conceptual frame. According to her both define the fundamental conditions of man in terms of continuity: Nolan and Drysdale locate it in nature and the setting of life, while Bellette finds continuity in emotions.

In her [Bellette’s] pre-occupation with old stories the emphasis seems to rest on the concept of ‘old’; and the quest of an historical dimension of the continuous, eternal and infinite is not confined to ‘painters of the museums’. In Australia this quest takes the form of out-back scenery in Drysdale’s and Nolan’s work. Their paintings reflect continuity in nature, in the setting of life. Jean Bellette uses classical myth to introduce a human continuity, to emphasise emotions which do not belong to any one age and occasion but which reflect the fundamental conditions of man.108

Hoff seeks to equalize the art of Bellette and the male artists by asserting the validity of her practice. A 1949 landscape, *Ruins near Bathurst*, shows Bellette’s attempt to find an historical dimension in the landscape and at the same time produce an image of something that does not belong to any one age or occasion but is timeless and enduring. The depicted ruins preclude an indigenous history and represent a European experience of a strange and barren land in a way that is, in today’s terms, reactionary because of its Eurocentric denial of Indigenous history.

Bellette departs from neo-classicism and the intellectualism of Piero in this painting. The lack of a human presence is uncharacteristic and emphasizes the loneliness and isolation of the place. Mood is generated through form and colour instead. She has used a looser, vaguely expressionist style that is not evident in either her mythological paintings or in the still lifes and portraits from around the same time. It can, therefore, be read as an attempt to engage with a sense of place, something not evident in any of her other paintings. There are traces of Poussin in the strong diagonals and the vertical planes that draw the viewer into the composition, creating the illusion of space and distance that negates the flat picture plane. The rhythmic pattern of light and dark on the squat abandoned building with its asymmetrical fenestration and series of overlapping planes shows the possible influence of Cézanne. The moody expressionism of the painting has some classical symmetry in it, but the sea of muddy colours is the gestural and expressionist antithesis of Pieran intellectualism. The spectrum of dark, brooding colours has nothing to do with the light and clemency of Italian skies. A ghostly blasted tree stands to the right of the propped up ruin, adding to the sense of desolation. The exaggerated, dramatic contour lines are a further departure from a Pieran world of stillness, symmetry and proportion. For such an intellectual painter, and particularly one familiar with Piero’s work, this must be read as a deliberate departure, a formal device for contrasting what she saw as the vast emptiness and
alienation of the Australian landscape with its relatively new European history against
the ancient history of both Europe and Indigenous Australia. Through this painting,
Bellette attempts to find a sense of timelessness and continuity in the Australian
landscape. Her unquestioning effacement of the existing and ancient history of the
indigenous people reveals the extent to which her European vision ignored any prior
Indigenous claim to the land.

Bellette purchased a cottage at Hill End, close to Bathurst, in 1954. The abandoned
mines and pillaged landscape around Bathurst had as France states ‘a special intensity
for Bellette.’\(^{109}\) France frames Bellette’s response to the land in European terms.
According to her, Bellette was attracted to “the monumental, crystalline forms
reminiscent of Henry Moore” and “the history and sheer isolation of the place”.\(^{110}\) The
history that France refers to is interpreted anachronistically through a lens fashioned
by early twentieth century British formalism.

**A Complex Temporality**

The loosely expressionist style of *Ruins near Bathurst* and her later landscapes of
Majorca indicate a departure from Pieran intellectualism. However, the paintings she
made during the 1950s before leaving Australia permanently show her continued
commitment to the order and harmony of modern classicism. This work reveals the
influence of both Cézanne and Picasso while still paying homage to the Quattrocento
past.

\(^{110}\) Ibid.
Beresford identified anachronism in Bellette’s *Bathers* from 1951 in the debt it owes to Picasso and some of his sources. She identifies Perugino’s *Apollo and Marsyas* from 1495 in the figure of the man standing with the pole, which she argues was also quoted by Picasso in *Pipes of Pan* painted in 1923.

Temporal and spatial distance from the original paintings accounts for the differences between Picasso and Perugino, and Bellette and Picasso. Bellette recreates the solidity of Picasso’s figures and repeats the poses of the two figures seen in Perugino, but she adds four more female figures to her composition. The inclusion of a beach lifesaver’s flag and the contemporary bathing suits worn by Bellette’s extra figures lend an anachronistic ambiguity to the painting that in certain respects anticipates Jeffrey Smart’s 1969 painting, *Morning Practice, Baia*. The contemporary references

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111 Beresford, “Classicism and Myth in Jean Bellette’s work,” 68.
are a new temporal layer superimposed upon the original sources. The repeated gaze between the standing figure and the seated musician that locks out the others emphasizes this multifaceted temporality through the suggestion of a shared, separate reality. The impassivity and monumentality of the figures once again recall Piero, particularly the form, volume and impassivity of the two standing figures on the right-hand side. The full-length figures serve as a foil to the other more casual figures whose curiously truncated legs have an odd and destabilizing effect. They function as commentators on the scene, occupying a separate ontological realm, in the same way as the angels in Piero’s *Baptism* or the three mysterious contemporary figures in *The Flagellation* do. However, they tower over the low horizon line, their heads projecting into the blue sky, occupying the same plane as the only male figure. There is a hint of protest, a quiet resistance to male presence as the women on the right are not subordinated to the standing male, unlike the group on the left. It is an argument for equality expressed in an anachronistic and Quattrocento formal language of design and composition. The quotations of the past translate the originals into a new Australian context. The complex temporal layering and translation of a European idiom by an Australian artist argue for the continuation and endurance of European values in Australia but also propose a subtle criticism of modernism’s masculinist discourse.

**Conclusion**

Beresford points out that Bellette’s early work was completed when Western culture was facing imminent destruction, and Australia had suffered an attack from Japan. In the light of this, Beresford sees Bellette’s art as “her homage to Europe and its tradition.” The distance between Europe and Australia meant that Bellette, as Hughes rightly noted, would have had no direct knowledge of the ways in which the war was changing Europe. However, her quotations of particular artworks allowed them to act as substitutes for the originals within an Australian context. In this way, she preserved a version of European culture, expanded to include a non-gendered

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112 Ibid., 69.
ideology. As with Picasso and the other artists who followed Jean Cocteau’s ‘call to order’ Bellette also looked to the past for solidity and stability at a time when what she valued appeared to be under threat.

Bellette and Haefliger left Australia once again in 1957, eventually settling in Majorca late in 1958. Her exile was not a deliberate one, as she never intended to leave Australia permanently. The end of the war brought an end to Australia’s period of isolation and ushered in a new prosperity and internationalism, as seen in the 1956 Olympic Games that were held in Melbourne. Christine Dixon and Terry Smith point out that by the end of the 1950s a significantly large number of artists had once again left Australia, not as students as in the past but, like Bellette, as established artists. This, they argue, emphasized the perception of Australia as a peripheral art centre, the war years being just an interruption rather than a significant change in outlook. Bellette’s return to Europe despite her commitment to and participation in the Sydney art world seems to bear out this perception.

It has been argued in this chapter that art images from the past recur in Bellette’s paintings. The resulting anachronism indicates her synchronic reception of art images and also how quotation or allusion substitutes for the original artwork and carries that associated meaning into her work. Bellette participated in the classical revival that occurred in European art after the First World War, which contradicted the iconoclasm of Modernity and announced an alternative Modernism. The emphasis on form in her painting challenges the perception of her as a decorative, neo-Romantic artist and identifies her as politically and ideologically engaged, taking over the neo-classicism of European artists, such as Picasso, to assert herself as a woman and an artist. The complex temporality in her early work juxtaposes anachronistic allusions to the Quattrocento art of Masaccio and Piero and the twentieth century work of Picasso and Moore, translated into an Australian context.

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References to Piero della Francesca in Bellette’s art and in particular her writing, puts her in the same cerebral, social and intellectual milieu as the other artists in this thesis. The kind of withdrawals they exhibit may well be escapist in an elitist sense since they were all from middle-class and prosperous backgrounds, however, their work does highlight by way of contrast what seemed authoritarian, racist, homophobic and banal in contemporary Australia. Bellette differs from the others in that, as a woman, her paintings demonstrate sensitivity to exclusion based not on class conflict or sexual preferences, but rather on gender politics. She participated in contemporary art by locating continuity within the emotions that she saw as being an integral part of the human condition, irrespective of gender, time and place.

This chapter proposed that substitution and synchronic perception of art images seen in Bellette’s use of form was an attempt to express something universal about the human condition and thereby bridge the cultural distance between Europe and Australia as well as the gender divide in place in Australia. The non-narrative visual language Bellette employed was, in its paradoxical anachronism, inherently Modern and European. Bellette deliberately positioned her practice within the continuum of representation and mark-making that stretched back to Ancient Greece and forwards to the Moderns perceiving it synchronically and thus with contemporary relevance.

Bellette’s approach to the art of the past was synchronic, in that she treated the art of Masaccio and Piero as coeval with British and European modernist art. This synchronic perception encouraged her to recognize in the art from the ancient past factors that made them appear modern and universal. I have argued that it was her interpretation of British Modernism that enabled this perception. Bellette looked outward from Australia toward Europe and located herself, as a female artist, within the wider context of contemporary Western art.

Understanding the present through a lens provided by the past offered Bellette a distanced view of the present, a detachment she also recognised in Masaccio. I have argued that Bellette used this distanced view to collapse time and to resist cultural exclusion by articulating something she perceived to be universal about the human
condition. Amanda Beresford claimed that Bellette was unique in establishing a dialogue between contemporary Australian art and the early twentieth century reappearance of European classicism. This thesis argues that Bellette, in fact, shared this dialogue with other figurative artists in mid-twentieth century Australia, who for various reasons explored in each chapter, used the classical revival in Europe as a means of resolving issues relating to their participation in contemporary art discourse.

Bellette died in Majorca in 1991. The Retrospective held in 2004-2005 has revitalized interest in her work and introduced her to a new audience. It is fortuitous that this occurs at a time when an interest in the way the art from the past inserts itself into the present has overturned linear taxonomies and understandings of art history. The anachronistic theories of substitution and synchronicity allows for a re-evaluation of Bellette’s work in terms of what the quotations from the past reveal about the present.

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Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to interrogate the anachronistic presence of Piero della Francesca in Jeffrey Smart’s figurative paintings. This chapter applies the same theories of anachronism but argues for their relevance in the distinctly different circumstance that Smart left Australia in 1963 and remained in Italy until his death in 2013. Anachronism, therefore, is a compelling motif even in the work of Australian artists living abroad as much as those at home, but there are different pressures on its meaning.

An art historical methodology is used to contextualise and analyse Smart’s paintings in terms of a dialogue between the present, European modernity and Piero. I will argue that anachronism opens up a new critical pathway for evaluating Smart’s subject matter. The significance of this approach is that, as with Bellette, it reframes the anachronism in his painting, not as a reactionary rejection of Modernism’s iconoclastic
narrative but as evidence for a considered and sophisticated engagement with Modernism’s re-visioning of past forms.

Jeffrey Smart, like Bellette and O’Brien, used quotations and allusions from the near and distant past synchronically. His synchronic rather than diachronic perception of an artwork favoured the time and place of its reception, rather than the time of the artworks production or its historical presence. Consequently, references to art from the ancient past and Piero, and European and British Modernism exist contemporaneously in his work, exposing the multifaceted relationship with the past that Smart shares with the other artists in this study. I will once again argue that specific artworks functioned as substitutes for the originals and in this way also served to reduce the distances between Australia and Europe, past and present, but this time from the direction of an artist located in Europe.

Traditional art historical analysis is used to situate Smart within the context of his time, to identify the contemporary theories that influenced him and the ways in which the compositional strategies in his paintings derive from the Quattrocento. This analysis begins with a justification for establishing a connection between Piero and Jeffrey Smart through stillness and design and is followed by a brief overview of Smart’s background to create a larger context for his work. There then follows an analysis of the temporal structures in later paintings, completed between 1962 and 2002. Hence a kind of anachronism is embedded in the thesis itself, as Smart’s paintings are being considered as mid-twentieth-century, even though they fall into the second half of the century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. My justification for this apparent anomaly is that Smart consolidated his style in the early 1960s and did not undergo any major stylistic changes until he returned to the looser and more textured style of his youth, a few years before his death in 2013. Really, then, the formative period that produced his most characteristically enduring style is mid-century.

In addition to Smart’s paintings, the primary sources referred to in this chapter include letters, personal interviews, and his memoir, Not Quite Straight, first published in 1996. Exhibition catalogues and newspaper reviews of his exhibitions, interviews with
those who knew him and citations of his work in texts on Australian painting make up secondary sources for this chapter.

Completed while he was still in his native town of Adelaide, *Water Towers* (1944) is the first work to be discussed because it is an example of Smart’s early work that demonstrates an awareness of European modernism and an early interest in form. Then *The Cahill Expressway*, completed in Sydney in 1962, is discussed in terms of Smart’s conscious and deliberate quotations of the non-objective factors in Piero’s work that establish cultural and temporal contact zones between the past and the present, Europe and Australia. The work of the early-twentieth century Italian artist, Giorgio de Chirico, and that of the fifteenth century artist, Piero della Francesca, are shown to possess a synchronous existence in this painting. The way de Chirico also employed anachronistic Pieran motifs in his work adds further complexity to the temporal structures in Smart’s. *Cahill Expressway*, therefore, establishes links to western art through both historical and modern quotations. This painting is considered by Christopher Allen to be the first painting that fully articulates Smart’s ‘world’.¹ Smart’s world consists of transitional, anonymous spaces that are part of the post-industrial world. This painting will, therefore, be discussed in terms of Marc Auge’s concept of the *non-places* of supermodernity.²

The next painting under discussion, *Approach to a City III* (1968-69), investigates how Smart used Pieran geometry, perspective and light to reveal the beauty in these anonymous non-places that are otherwise devoid of meaning. It is argued that the impersonal and ambivalent images of outsiders within a recognizable post-industrial, urban landscape speak of a shared human experience defined paradoxically by alienation and disconnection, made manifest through the anachronism in this painting.

Themes of timelessness and continuity are explored through the anachronism in the painting, *Morning Practice, Baia* (1969). This painting recalls Piero’s *The Resurrection* in

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its structure, perspective and colour palette. The painting is offered as Smart’s reflection on the complexity of time and space using a combination of Pieran and modernist tropes and is discussed in terms of the temporal and spatial theories that influenced Smart.

Smart rejected the expressionism that was popular in Melbourne as well as the abstraction that was dominant in Sydney. *Art Gallery in Shopping Arcade* (1980) articulates through anachronistic juxtaposition the tension between figurative and abstract art, tradition and modernity, and Australian and European art. Smart explores these oppositions by positioning a traditional and recognizable Australian landscape within a complex Mondrian grid. This section argues that Smart used figuration to interrogate the specificity of a national Australian art style within a ubiquitous and, therefore, more international urban environment. The complex temporal and thematic structures in this painting raise questions about the commodification of Australian art and identity and its position within a modern western culture.

The chapter concludes by identifying the particular anachronistic allusions to Piero’s *Flagellation* in Smart’s 2002 painting, *Taxi Stand, Brisbane Art Gallery*. I argue that Smart deliberately used anachronism to destabilize the relationship between the past, present, and future. The temporal ambiguity in this painting is established by the re-enactment of the different ontological realms or pictorial worlds that exist simultaneously in Piero’s *The Flagellation*. *Taxi Stand* explores the themes of occlusion, interpellation and modernist alienation that define Smart’s work. An analysis of this painting is an opportunity to examine the meaning that Smart imposed upon Piero. Anachronism, therefore, provides a critical entry point for a discussion of the many complex spatial-temporal structures in Jeffrey Smart’s paintings.

**Smart and Piero della Francesca**

An exploration of the pathways that connect Jeffrey Smart to Piero della Francesca will be undertaken before embarking upon a brief overview of Smart’s background and the role of anachronism in his paintings. Barry Pearce has repeatedly made reference to
the connection between Smart and the art of the past, in particular, that of Piero.³ One of the aims of this chapter is to identify the ways in which Smart emulated and quoted Piero and another is to propose a rationale for doing so. The purpose of this is to demonstrate that Smart’s use of Piero’s Quattrocento representation of the world was, in its anachronism, paradoxically modern and that Smart was following a precedent set by the European modernists. The temporal and spatial distances between Australia and Europe, Piero and Smart, and Smart’s encounter with Modern art accounts for the differences between Smart’s visual articulation of time and space and that of his sources. An identification of the Quattrocento allusions in Smart’s painting shows that he was following those late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century European artists who read modernist features into Piero’s work.

Marilyn Aronberg Lavin argues that the abstract elements in Piero’s paintings that were understood as modern must have formed part of the work’s original meaning in the Quattrocento even though there was, of course, no abstract art at that time:

Historically speaking, there was no abstract art in the fifteenth-century, and no painting without both a subject and a purpose. The factors that allow the twentieth-century viewer to read The Flagellation as ‘non-objective’ must, in its own time, have formed part of its meaning.⁴

The abstraction that Lavin refers to is found in Piero’s use of geometry and light that conveys a coherent, spiritual yet rational world. Piero’s precise compositional and deep perspectival rendering of The Flagellation of Christ, for instance, imbues the work with a spiritual meaning that arises directly from the Euclidian mathematical propositions that he employed, while the double light source locates the scene within an ambiguous space, outside of time and space.⁵ These non-objective factors, with their Quattrocento promise of a universal and timeless humanism, allowed the work to

be understood in abstract terms by the twentieth century viewer, yet are also the chief difference from his sources in Giorgio de Chirico, whose forms and spaces tend to be quirky and skewed.

Figure 35. Piero della Francesca, The Flagellation of Christ, c.1455–1460
Oil and tempera on panel 58.4 cm x 81.5 cm
Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino

Piero’s manipulation of single point perspective in The Flagellation appears as a universal principle not bounded by specific time frames. Its use implies that if something was true at the time of Christ, it remains true in the 1400s and thereby at any future date, though any attention to histories of perspective would undermine this assumption.⁶ Piero’s painting is based on Quattrocento humanist principles but for the twentieth century viewer, it was imbued with a scientific immanence that outshone its religious content. Aldous Huxley, for example, argued that all Piero’s paintings were about something other than the depicted event; for Huxley they were about a continuing humanitarian ideal.⁷ This meaning was imposed upon Piero by artists in Europe because of the perception that his work, and that of the Early Moderns in general, was simpler, purer and more sincere that the art of the High Renaissance and Mannerism that had dominated Western taste and culture since the works of John Ruskin in the nineteenth century. Smart’s response to Piero was due to the recognition of the timeless purity and simplicity that could rescue an outsider artist of his kind from provincialism.

⁷ Aldous Huxley, Along the Road (London: Chatto & Windus, 1930), 181.
Smart was introduced to Piero through the literature on art that was available in Australia. In 1941 Smart bought a copy of Thomas Craven’s *A Treasury of Art Masterpieces*, published in 1939. This book contained reproductions of Piero’s *Battle of Constantine* and *The Queen of Sheba* frescoes from the *Arezzo Cycle*. In his memoir, *Not Quite Straight*, Smart recounted the importance of this text:

> Perhaps if I had to name a single publication which influenced me, it would be that book. Piero della Francesca’s frescoes from Arezzo were reproduced. It was the first time I saw them in good colour and the appeal was instant – it was like falling in love.\(^8\)

Barry Pearce points out, however, that by 1941 Smart was already an avid reader of books and magazines on Modern Art. Smart’s response to Piero must therefore be seen within the context of his knowledge of modern art trends in Europe and Britain. Books that Pearce identified as influential were Peter Thoene’s, *Modern German Art*, published in 1938 with an introduction by Herbert Read, and the poetry of T.S. Eliot.\(^9\) Smart read Eliot while still living in Adelaide and Pearce contends that it was Eliot who provided Smart with the idea of the city as a worthwhile subject.\(^10\) Pearce also makes mention of Edward Sackville West’s *Graham Sutherland* and Geoffrey Grigson’s *Henry Moore*, both part of the *Penguin Modern Painters* series, edited by Sir Kenneth Clark. However, these were published in 1944, after Smart had bought Craven’s text and therefore, while influential, could not have influenced his response to the Piero reproductions.

There is an underlying narrative of Pieran influence that pervades these texts. Herbert Read admired the work of Piero;\(^11\) Kenneth Clark wrote a monograph on Piero in 1955, which he dedicated to Henry Moore; and T.S. Eliot is generally understood to have been referring to Piero and his *Baptism of Christ* when he refers to ‘A painter of the Umbrian school’ in his 1920 poem, *Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service*:

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\(^9\) Pearce, *Jeffrey Smart*, 239.  
\(^10\) Ibid., 35.  
A painter of the Umbrian school
Designed upon a gesso ground
The nimbus of the Baptized God.
The wilderness is cracked and browned

But through the water pale and thin
Still shine the unoffending feet
And there above the painter set
The Father and the Paraclete.12

The meaning that Smart attached to Piero was therefore informed and reinforced by his readings on Modern Art and a literary interpretation of formalism that pervaded British modernism. This implies a level of knowledge and cultural sophistication that belies the myth of artistic isolation, even for the small provincial city that Adelaide was in Smart’s youth.

Smart had a copy of The Flagellation pinned to the wall of his studio in Italy. It can thus be safely assumed that The Flagellation was of central importance to him. Simon Pierse, however, rejects the connection between Smart and Piero, insisting that Smart was “too much in love with the Italian sunshine to unlock the mystery of Piero’s cool vision.”13 He nevertheless concludes by acknowledging Smart’s claim that light creates beauty in the everyday. While Smart may be blinded to Piero’s cool vision, his use of light as an anachronistic device for revelation and continuity is a direct quotation from Piero, seen in The Flagellation of Christ where discrepant light sources are used to demarcate the different ontological realms that depict the past and the present, the biblical and the secular.

The three figures that stand together in the foreground on the right-hand side of the canvas are bathed in a light that emanates directly from the gaze of Christ. This connects the past event with the contemporary discussion that appears to be taking place. On the other hand, Christ is connected to the golden statuette atop the plinth

by a light that appears to come from the right, as seen in the left-hand shadow that similarly describes the slight contrapposto of their torsos. A further complication comes from the upward light that emanates from Christ, illuminating the coffered ceiling directly above and casting deep shadows across the other recesses. Marilyn Aronberg Lavin argues that regardless of the identities of the three figures in the foreground, the two distinct sources of light sets the scene outside of time and place, the suffering of Christ being a bridge between the secular and the divine worlds. The light sources suggest both overlap and disjunction between heaven and earth.

The identification of the three figures that occupy the right hand side of Piero’s Flagellation continues to challenge and mystify art historians. Larry Witham, for example, argues that at least two are contemporaneous with Piero. Gombrich, on the other hand, in a much earlier argument against Kenneth Clark’s identification of them as being politically symbolic, proposes a biblical referent, suggesting they are connected to the repentance of Judas and therefore contemporaries of Christ’s. David Carrier provides a useful overview of some of the many approaches and interpretations of this work, while demonstrating how interpretations are subject to change as art historians seek to find novel approaches to overdetermined images, arguing that this is often at the expense of notions of truth.

According to Lavin, Roberto Longhi together with B.A.R Carter, a professor of perspective at the Royal Academy in London, examined the geometrical underpinnings of Piero’s paintings to show the indivisibility of Piero’s science and art. The buried Pieran geometry, particularly evocative in The Flagellation, is pervasive in Smart’s paintings. Of specific importance is Smart’s use of the Golden Mean. According to Larry Witham, Piero understood through Plato and Euclid that numbers were the essence of

14 Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, "Piero the Painter Blended Geometry with Religious Art." Smithsonian 23, no. 9 (December 1992), 127
18 Lavin, “Piero the Painter,” 127.
the world and had explored this mathematical ratio in his *Abacus Treatise*, using it to resolve the problem of proportion.\(^{19}\) I argue in the sections that follow that Smart’s paintings reactivate the universal and enduring value associated with Piero, a perception informed by Smart’s interpretation of European modernism. By quoting Piero’s use of light and geometry the associated meaning of Piero becomes an integral part of the meaning of Smart’s work. Piero’s conception of a timeless, unified world provides an entry point for a critique of Smart’s paintings. The following overview of Smart’s background and art education contextualizes his attraction to the universalism and timelessness in Piero.

**Background**

Smart was born in Adelaide, South Australia, in 1921. His memoir, *Not Quite Straight*, begins with his family trip to Europe at the age of 4, which was described as ‘The Trip Home’.\(^{20}\) The privileging of ‘elsewhere’ over Australia defined Smart’s art practice and shaped his attitude towards European art and culture. Smart’s first love was architecture, but family financial misfortune directed him to art teaching, where he could immediately earn a living.\(^{21}\) The architectural elements that are evident in his work bear witness to this early love. From 1939 to 1941 Smart worked as a junior teacher in Adelaide, while studying art under Marie Tuck. Tuck taught him how to organize his palette in accordance with the traditional method practiced by the European masters. A visit to Dorrit Black’s studio during this time left a lasting impression. Black’s instruction was based on what she had learnt from the Cubist painter, Albert Gleizes. According to Ian North, Gleizes had taught her how to build a composition using the Golden Mean.\(^{22}\) The Golden Mean, also referred to as the Golden Section or Golden Ratio, is thought to create a sense of balance, harmony and beauty in design and is expressed mathematically by the number *phi*. The principles of dynamic symmetry that Peter Dodd explained to Justin O’Brien derive from this ratio.


\(^{21}\) The background to Jeffrey Smart has been drawn from his memoir and also from Barry Pearce’s monograph on Smart.

\(^{22}\) Ian North, *The Art of Dorrit Black* (South Melbourne, Vic.: Macmillan;[Adelaide]: Art Gallery of South Australia, 1979), 87.
According to Larry Witham, Plato had identified the ratio as being part of the creation of the world and that it was thought to be both divine and fundamental to nature. Witham notes that while Piero did not analyse the ratio he did demonstrate awareness of it by using it for his calculations in his *Abacus Treatise*. Its significance for Smart lay in its capacity as a universalizing tool for analysis. In a letter to North, Smart described how Black taught him to apply this principle to the analysis of any painting from the past or the present, traditional or contemporary.

She began with the geometric method for establishing the Golden Mean... This was a positive eye opener and she linked it with compositions by Poussin, Tintoretto, Veronese, da Vinci and so on. And it all related so clearly to Braque, Léger and above all to Cézanne.

The negation of chronological distance through the use of an anachronistic artistic modality, such as the Golden Mean, connects these artists, past and present, and reconfigures them, and by extrapolation Smart himself, as contemporary and universal. Using the Golden Mean as a formal device for analysis and composition changes the meaning of a painting, shifting interpretation away from narrative to a focus on proportionality and form. The irony of applying this ancient method to twentieth century representational concerns was not lost on Smart and will be discussed later in this chapter in relation to his painting, *Morning Practice, Baia*, completed in 1969.

Barry Pearce identifies what he terms an ‘escape mentality’ in Smart’s early work in the lack of any national or regional specificity. Quotations of de Chirico and the manipulation of Renaissance perspective indicate a familiarity with European modernism and an identification with the ‘elsewhere’ that is Europe rather than Australia. The implication is that even while living in the seeming isolation of Adelaide, Smart was identifying himself not as an Australian, but as an international artist. Unfortunately, neither Barry Pearce nor Smart nor any other of Smart’s biographers make mention of the *Herald Exhibition of Contemporary French and British Art* that

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opened in Adelaide on 21 August 1939. Adelaide was the only state gallery to host the exhibition. As discussed in an earlier chapter, the Melbourne and Sydney state gallery trustees had intended to hold the works in storage for the duration of the war. As a result of public pressure, forty works were eventually returned to Adelaide and remained on display at the state gallery from November 1940 through to July 1941. These included paintings by Van Gogh, Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso.  

Smart was in Adelaide during this time and considering the publicity the exhibition attracted and his interest in contemporary art it can be assumed that he visited the exhibition. *Water Towers* (1944), painted while still living in Adelaide, demonstrates an awareness of European modernism and an early interest in form.

![Figure 36. Jeffrey Smart. Water Towers, 1944, Adelaide, oil on canvas 61.7 x 63.5 cm Elder Bequest Fund 1944 Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide 0.1274](image)

There are elements in *Water Towers* that indicate the direction Smart would take in his later paintings. An oddity of this painting is the lack of people, something that is also apparent in *The Wasteland II* (1945). Smart’s paintings are usually about the relationship of the individual to the environment and he relies on figures to provide a sense of scale. The absence of a human presence is, therefore, a notable feature of his early work. While *The Wasteland II* speaks of abandonment and alienation, drawing obvious parallels to T.S. Eliot’s poem to which the title refers, *Water Towers* shows life and activity through industrialization rather than a human presence. There is an eerie absence of any activity other than mechanical. Smoke and steam emanate from the old steam engine and the factory chimney. There is a suggestion of transformation, of change from the water collected in the towers to the steam that drives the mechanisms of industry. As a result, the life in this painting comes in the form of machinery.

There is a Quattrocento awareness of different ontological states depicted in *Water Towers* that is seen in Piero’s representations of transitional states. In *The Legend of the True Cross*, for example, the piece of wood that is to become the cross goes through various transformations and recognitions, yet it retains constant mystical efficacy across diachronic history. In Smart’s painting, these transitions and transformations are expressed through the solidity of the actual water towers and
buildings, the liquidity of the water presumably collected in the towers, its conversion to steam and finally its manifestation as the smoke that obscures the sky, merging into a purplish grey muddy mass of clouds. Fluctuating states of being are articulated through the processes of industrialization rather than the spiritual transformation of the human soul or psyche. Although some of Smart’s work may seem to be influenced by Surrealism, he avoided Surrealist attempts to manifest the unconscious. Nevertheless, he remained interested in the metaphysical, often expressed anachronistically, as in this painting’s reference to steam power at a time of air travel.

Christopher Wood discusses how Piero took as his starting point, not the story of the cross itself, but other paintings from the distant and more recent past and combined all of them synchronically, as if they had the same value. He thus also recognizes the substitutions in Piero’s Legend of the True Cross fresco, describing Piero’s image as temporally unstable, with citations drawn from ancient Greece, Rome, the Byzantine mosaics at Ravenna and the Trecento. Piero’s citations are, Wood argues, conscious and deliberate, allowing the historical past to function as a type of an historical present. Similarly, the substitutions in Smart’s painting function to locate him within the continuum of picture-making and art history while at the same time addressing concerns that have to do with the present rather than the past.

The reference to de Chirico through the explicit citation of a steam engine suggests that the isolated city of Adelaide is a participant in a wider Western modernity, albeit at a temporal and geographical distance from its European centres. De Chirico had rejected the Italian Futurists iconoclastic manifesto and frenzied, blurred style of painting by consciously alluding to the past through the juxtaposition of Greek and Roman statues and Pieran architectonic design. The juxtaposition of the past with the present resonated with Smart. He too sought timelessness and continuity by combining the present and the past, but whereas de Chirico looked to the past as a means of regaining stability within a world of shifting boundaries, Smart’s synchronic

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perception of art from the past, resonated with his interest in the mutability and instability of time informed by his reading of J.W. Dunne’s *An Experiment with Time* (1927) and an interest in theosophy. Smart was impressed by Dunne’s theory of the prescient nature of dreams and in particular his explanation of déjà vu, as being both in and out of time. This interest justifies an interpretation of his work through the application of theories of anachronism.

According to Pearce, Smart’s limited chromatic range shows the influence of his teacher, Ivor Hele, but I contend that it alludes rather to de Chirico’s limited use of colour. The glaring scarlet of one of the towers, a keynote of the painting, is perhaps equivalent of de Chirico’s incongruously lurid green sky. The solid browns and reds imitate de Chirico’s palette, as does the use of a contrasting white that highlights the steam coming from the dark steam engine. Smart’s quotation of de Chirico’s cylindrical structure in *The Enigma of the day II* (1914) draws another analogy between the two artists.

![Figure 38. Giorgio de Chirico, The Enigma of the day II, 1914](image)

Smart translates de Chirico’s background cylindrical structure into two large water towers that become the subject of his painting. They dominate the foreground, inhuman in size, dwarfing the factory buildings in the background and drawing attention to the differences in scale. The rungs of the ladder on the right-hand tower are incongruously large and would be impossible to climb. The overall composition, however, is unified by the formal elements of the painting: the colour scheme, the

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28 Smart, *Not Quite Straight*, 49.
29 Pearce, *Jeffrey Smart*, 38.
diagonal lines formed by the roofs on the left and right of the towers and the chimney pots that echo their shape.

*Water Towers* shows some of the clarity of line and tone that would develop later into Smart’s trademark flatness and use of solid colour. This painting still bears the brushstrokes and painterliness that identifies his early work, without his later trademark manipulation of light. It shows his interest in the world around him, not the landscape of gum trees and hills, but the modern industrial world that exists on the outskirts of suburbia. There is nothing that speaks of a specifically Australian landscape. By avoiding any indication of national identity and alluding to European modernity, Smart replaces regionality with internationalism. He might be depicting winter, but it could be a northern European rather than Australian one. There is, however, a necessary element in the painting that speaks of an Australian experience of modernity. Adelaide as a city was doubly isolated: a small town away from the centres of Sydney and Melbourne, themselves cities isolated from the art centres of the Western world. In his autobiography, Smart recounts how he felt stultified in Adelaide and speaks of the urgency of getting to London and Paris to see not only the contemporary paintings but also the old masters.30

In 1948, Smart embarked on a journey that would take him to New York, Philadelphia and London, where he visited leading contemporary art galleries. From London, he travelled to Italy with Justin O’Brien and then to Paris where he studied briefly under Fernand Léger. He returned to Sydney in 1951 and lived at Merioola, along with O’Brien, thus becoming associated with The Charm School. In Sydney he befriended Jean Bellette and renewed his friendship with Russell Drysdale. As with Bellette and O’Brien, Smart’s association with the so-called Charm School was to his detriment. Bernard Smith, for example, mistakenly described Smart’s work as neo-romantic, linking it to Bellette’s and O’Brien’s:

> O’Brien’s work, especially that based on secular subject matter, reveals the continuing influence of [Jean] Bellette. In such paintings slender, effeminate nudes rendered in graceful arabesques inhabit a wonderland of magic colour.

30 Smart, *Not Quite Straight*, 134.
Jeff Smart (b. 1921), a South Australian who later settled in Sydney, had also painted a good deal in this mode.\textsuperscript{31}

Smith manages to be misogynistic and homophobic at the same time. He minimizes the classicism in Smart’s painting and by describing his work as neo-romantic he misses the formalism through which Smart achieved the meaning that rescues his work from nostalgia. “Yet for all its classical balance Jeffrey Smart’s art presents a romantic and partial view of the modern city.”\textsuperscript{32} Smith interpreted Smart’s paintings as a pessimistic condemnation instead of the celebration of modernity that Smart claims it is. Smart, on the other hand, insisted that he found the world of cars, roads, factories and airports beautiful and his paintings reflect the world as he saw it. “I like living in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century – to me the world has never been more beautiful. I am trying to paint the real world I live in, as beautifully as I can, with my own eye.”\textsuperscript{33}

According to Pearce, Smart was inspired by the ‘vacuum sealed illusionism’ of the nineteenth century artists that he admired in the Art Gallery of South Australia’s collection, particularly Frank Brangwyn’s \textit{The Bridge of Avignon} of 1913-14, and H.J. Johnston’s \textit{Evening Shadows, backwater of the Murray}, painted in 1880.\textsuperscript{34}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\textsuperscript{31} Bernard Smith, \textit{Australian Painting 1788-1960} (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962), 293.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 416.
\textsuperscript{33} Pearce, \textit{Jeffrey Smart}, 8.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 47.
\end{footnotesize}
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Pearce claims that Smart took from them the idea of painting the world they saw around them, *en plein air*. However, Smart was not interested in painting what would have been for him an artificial engagement with the Australian landscape. The poetry of T.S. Eliot validated Smart’s twentieth century vision of his world. In his memoir, Smart credits Eliot’s *Preludes* as being the source for his first images of urban life, seen in paintings of the 1940s like *Water Towers* and *The Wasteland II*. Smart states that it was not long after reading Eliot that he painted his first vacant lot. Eliot’s poetry provided Smart with an urban language that unified the European and Australian experience of modernity:

> On my first acquaintance with Eliot’s poems they provided me with images of urban life which were valid. I had painted my last flower piece, the gum trees and the billabongs and blue hills had been thrown out with the daffodils.\(^{35}\)

The urban imagery that Eliot’s poetry conveyed with its modernist themes of the anonymity of the city, of alienation and isolation, are fully realized in Smart’s 1962 painting, *Cahill Expressway*. *Cahill Expressway* demonstrates Smart’s interpretation of

\(^{35}\) Smart, *Not Quite Straight*, 70.
a contemporary, urban landscape; it is a twentieth century synthesis of elements from Piero, the nineteenth century artists whom he admired for painting what they saw around them, and Eliot’s poetry which enabled him to see his urban environment as an equally valid subject.

**Historical and Modern Anachronisms**

The aim of this section is to examine the anachronistic quotations in *Cahill Expressway*, both historical and modern, to reveal the ways in which Smart situates himself and his work within the context of Western art and culture. Simon Pierse observes that Smart’s paintings depict the emptiness of Marc Augé’s transitional ‘non-places’.

This painting will therefore be discussed in terms of Augé’s concept of non-places, the theme of elsewhere, the presence/absence of the figure, theatricality as in the real and unreal, and the different ontological realms. The importance of light and its function as a quotation from the Quattrocento in this painting is also discussed.

![Figure 41. Jeffrey Smart, Cahill Expressway, 1962 oil on plywood 81.9 × 111.3 cm](image)

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According to Pearce, Smart regarded his Adelaide paintings as mere precursors or what Pearce refers to as his ‘warm-up’ phase.\textsuperscript{37} Paintings done after Smart left Adelaide express his internationalism more successfully. Christopher Allen is therefore in agreement with Pearce when he states that \textit{Cahill Expressway}, painted when Smart was living in Sydney, was the first painting that fully expressed Smart’s world.\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Cahill Expressway} represents a ubiquitous, anonymous, non-place that is a familiar sight in most modern cities. The highway and its underpass in \textit{Cahill Expressway}, despite the specificity of the title, constitute one of the transitional non-places familiar in the post-industrial world. Marc Augé defines a place as ‘\textit{relational, historical and concerned with identity}.’ Conversely, an area, which cannot be so described, he defines as a non-place.\textsuperscript{39} Smart was drawn to the anonymous spaces in the post-industrial landscape: the intermediary zones like highways, airports and industrial backyards. These zones do not define a particular national identity nor do they facilitate interpersonal contact. Instead, through their lack of specificity, they serve as equalisers, negating cultural and national differences.

The depicted expressway is located in Sydney, near the Art Gallery of New South Wales, a stretch of road that forms a link between Sydney’s northern and eastern suburbs. It was the first freeway constructed in Australia and is, therefore, a sign of Sydney’s urbanization and modernity.\textsuperscript{40} The freeway was begun in 1955, and while the overpass was opened in 1958, the underpass that Smart depicts was only completed in 1962. That the actual Cahill Expressway was considered an eyesore and an aesthetic blunder may have contributed to Smart’s attempts to redeem it aesthetically.\textsuperscript{41} Smart would have read about the controversy over the building of the expressway in

\textsuperscript{37} Pearce, \textit{The Master of Stillness}, 10.
\textsuperscript{38} Allen, \textit{Jeffrey Smart: Unpublished Paintings}, 23.
\textsuperscript{39} Augé, \textit{Non-places}, 77.
\textsuperscript{40} At the opening of the overhead section of the expressway the Premier, Joseph ‘Joe’ Cahill, described it as ‘a striking symbol of Sydney’s growth and maturity’ \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 25 March 1958.
newspaper reports of the time. In an interview in 1995, Smart pointed out that the light at a particular time of day had the ability to transform a space and make it appear beautiful. Smart drew his inspiration for this from Piero’s use of light, which has a double function, to illuminate and to transform. Light is a vitally important structural consideration in the precursor’s work. In the Flagellation and the Resurrection, for example, Piero has used two light sources to reveal two different ontological realms: the human realm and that of Christ who is illuminated by a heavenly light so that the two realms intersect where he stands. As discussed earlier, the secondary light source for example, in the direction of Christ’s gaze in The Flagellation, creates contrary shadows from the rest of the picture in the coffered ceiling of the loggia. Thus, Piero uses light, an insubstantial and abstract element, to reveal a different reality and this contributes to the way meaning is inferred. The light in Cahill Expressway also illuminates and transforms and is an important underlying structural principle. It draws attention to the form of the expressway and transforms it into a compelling image. Smart uses the light in his painting to overturn a lack of aesthetic appeal and represent the road as a celebration of something beautiful: a non-place of supermodernity.

Light and deep shadow form rhythmic patterns across the canvas, against which certain forms are realized. The darkness of the underpass highlights the otherwise unobtrusive one-armed figure standing at the curve of the pavement. Smart’s transition from the image of the steam train to the road cuts the link with de Chirico but reopens a link with Italy on a more contemporary front. This resembles Bellette’s opening beyond Australia through the use of ancient Greek mythology but in a different key; in Smart’s painting the road embodies the metaphor of connectivity through different regions of similar non-places.

The fading and diminishing streetlights, whose arched, outstretched arms echo the curve of the road and underpass, are the only indication of the road’s possible direction. The road dominates the painting; its arc curves away from the viewer,

42 “Smart’s Labyrinth,” The Creative Spirits, Artfilms (Australia: ABC TV, 1995).
leading to somewhere unseen, an elsewhere, that is heralded by the statue and its gaze. The gesture towards the unseen recalls Bellette’s *Betrothal of Achilles* discussed earlier and suggests a shared concern with what is hidden. As an inanimate and partially occluded kind of *Rückenfigur*, the turned back of the overhead statue invites the viewer to contemplate the possibility of a past or future that is somewhere else, unseen.\(^\text{43}\) This vision is denied to the man below for the underpass obscures the statue. The raised horizon prevents both the figure and the viewer from seeing beyond the arc of the highway. An echo of Piero’s distinct light sources is found in these discrepant gazes. There is the suggestion of a road ahead that could lead to some form of wholeness, but that possibility is revealed only to the viewer in the form of the triumphant statue with three visible arms, one of which is outstretched, and the two-armed street lights that fade into the distance. The theme of incompleteness is carried over into the truncated arm of the living figure (a subliminal classical reminder) and the interchange between what is living and inert in his positioning beneath the statue.

The sculpture in the painting represents Bertram McKennal’s sculpture, *Shakespeare Memorial* that in reality does not have an outstretched arm. This sculpture embodies the way British culture manifested in Australia. The sculpture denotes a celebration of British literature but while the bronze figures were cast in England, its marble pediment was cut and polished in Italy. Its only relevance to Australia is that it stands for the importation of a culture from elsewhere, which Smart self-consciously acknowledges through the pointed gesture of its outstretched arm. The single-armed lampposts that surround the statue and the one-armed man in the foreground, the only figure in the painting, emphasize the limitations in the here and now. The statue and the street lights draw attention to the deficiency of the man, who, nevertheless, challenges the viewer with his direct gaze. His pivotal rotundity, meanwhile, rhymes with the circulating roadway.

\(^\text{43}\) A *rückenfigur* is a figure in painting depicted from behind, usually positioned in the foreground. The viewer is encouraged to identify with the figure and its contemplation of the view. The *rückenfigur* is a recurring motif that is most effectively seen in the paintings of the German Romantic artist, Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) and is extensively discussed in Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (London: Reaktion, 1990).
Smart acknowledged that the viewer’s gaze is inevitably attracted to a figure but denied the figure’s capacity to carry meaning saying: “The fat man in the dark suit, in various guises is in many of my paintings, because a strong vertical black rectangle with a bald head is a lovely shape.” However, this particular fat man, painted with only one arm, suggests another level of meaning that is located beyond the surface. The man, although small, dominates the image, his hailing gaze engaging the viewer, rhyming with the hailing figures in Piero’s work. In so far as they discernibly recall Piero’s, these hailing figures anachronistically implicate the viewer in biblical narratives that have no bearing on the modern urban world. By doing so they thereby overturn ontological differences between the imagined and actual space, heaven and earth, past and present, the represented image and life, reality and theatre, here and elsewhere.

The figure, the statue and the viewer can be interpreted as occupying different temporalities. The statue is an anachronistic motif frequently used by de Chirico to indicate the past in the form of a person of note, long deceased, as in his Italian piazza series of which, *The Enigma of a Day (1914)* is an early example. In *Cahill Expressway*, however, the statue is seen from below rather than above. It hovers over the figure of the man, which comes to represent more of the past and less of the present the older the painting gets. The viewer represents all possible future viewers, as only the viewer can see the potential for wholeness in the future as indicated by the two-armed statue. These anachronistic and ontological differences contribute to the complexity of the temporal structure of the painting.

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The ominous dark shadow cast by the overpass and the pavement that catches the light reinforces the strong theatrical element of this painting. In addition, Smart has positioned the man as if upon a stage, a performer in a strange and alienating world. The upward curve of the road frames the figure like a proscenium arch or a drawback curtain. The theatricality of the painting draws attention to its artifice suggesting an obscured reality that exists behind the façade, in the shadows. This raises questions about what lies beneath the surface stillness of Smart’s painting.

Anachronism, both historical and modern, situates Smart within the tradition of Western art and culture. The influence of the American realist, Edward Hopper, is revealed in the ambiguity, clarity and light of Smart’s painting. In 1948, Smart had visited major American art museums including the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, both of which have Hopper paintings in their collections. David Anfam identifies in Hopper’s paintings an implicit emphasis on elsewhere and in a reiteration of T.S. Eliot the assumption that the present place and time are hard to bear. Hopper’s emphasis on elsewhere is translated in Smart’s *Cahill Expressway* into a different reality where perhaps his alternative sexuality, illegal in Australia in 1962, would be more acceptable.

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Smart found in Hopper contemporary validation for his realist, figurative style that addresses the anonymous places of the urban environment. Their paintings share a sense of theatricality, of elsewhere and of displacement. They differ in that Hopper’s elsewhere is not a place but a metaphysical state of being, it is a palpable longing that is played out in ubiquitous and definable American locations, whereas for Smart elsewhere is a physical location, described as a non-place, through which he establishes connectivity, albeit as an outsider.

Smart left Australia permanently for Rome in 1963, fulfilling the promise implied in *Cahill Expressway*. The next painting under discussion, *Approach to a City* III (1968-69), extends the metaphor of the road and investigates how Smart consolidated the link between Australia and Italy through his continued depiction of transitional places. *Approach to a City* III painted in Italy shows that Smart continued to use Pieran geometry, perspective and light paradoxically to reveal the beauty in non-places that are otherwise devoid of meaning and beauty. The narrative of the outsider, seen in *Cahill Expressway*, is fully articulated in this later painting. The impersonal and ambivalent images of outsiders within a recognizable post-industrial, anonymous urban landscape paradoxically describe a shared human experience defined by alienation and disconnection.

**Pieran Geometry, Perspective and Light**

*Approach to a City* III is another depiction of a transitional space that, like *Cahill Expressway*, conveys emptiness and anxiety. This time, however, there are no markers to identify the place. Renaissance perspective, used by Piero to depict a coherent and unified, humanist world, is an anachronism in a painting that depicts alienation and disconnection. This use of perspective indicates a modernist employment of the past, as seen in de Chirico and brings a temporal complexity to the painting. A focus on the anachronism in this painting adds another layer of meaning that suggests that the impersonal and ambivalent image of outsiders in a recognizable post-industrial, urban landscape is a shared human experience.
Paradoxically, feelings of alienation can be shared. Germaine Greer recognized this when she rejected the alienation in Smart’s paintings arguing conversely that what he depicts is familiar and contemporary:

The world which Jeffrey Smart had created out of familiar elements belongs to us. We can understand its extremely complex language. It is not a world meant to be savoured by strollers or applauded by passengers in hansom cabs; it is constructed on our own speed and scale. We read its arcane symbols effortlessly and just as swiftly translate them into sensation.\footnote{Peter Quartermaine, \textit{Jeffrey Smart} (South Yarra, Vic Gryphon Books, 1983), xx; Pearce, \textit{Jeffrey Smart}, 178.}

Greer identified the esoteric in Smart’s work but rather than finding it alienating, she understood and interpreted its symbols as familiar modern signs. However, Greer missed the way Smart used Renaissance perspective, not to implicate the viewer in a narrative, but rather to isolate and position the viewer outside of the narrative. Consequently, using anachronism as an entry point for an interpretation of Smart’s
painting reveals a modernist detachment from narrative through the manipulation of the relationship between the viewer and the image.

*Approach to the City*, however, does represent a familiar, modern image. A road arches over a hill, flanked on the right by three anonymous apartment buildings, painted in different colours but otherwise identical. While in Rome, Smart lived in an area dominated by brutalist Mussolini-inspired architecture. The rectangular shapes of the apartment buildings in the painting repeat that of the truck disappearing over the top of the hill. Smart’s manipulation of Renaissance single-point perspective positions the viewer precariously in the middle of the freeway, on the thin median strip, whose merging black and white stripes emphasise the distance to the summit. This positioning creates a tension in the painting preventing the viewer from feeling secure in their vantage point. This anxiety is accentuated by the apparent fragility of the couple walking along the right-hand side of the road. A man assists what appears to be an elderly woman, while the steep slope that looms ominously up ahead, suggests further difficulty for both of them. The slow, almost organic curve of the upward road, and the bridge that is meant so much more for traffic than people emphasises their effort, vulnerability and alienation. The suitcase would suggest they are moving and that she, in particular, has got a long way to walk before gaining even the antiseptic shelter of those anonymous human containers on the right.

This painting withholds meaning although, as Greer suggested, the signs Smart uses are familiar. The road is a recognisable form, as are the buildings, the truck and the people, but the narrative, unlike a Quattrocento fresco, does not hold together. It is a mystery narrative that asks to be deciphered but resists any definitive conclusions. The presence of the couple on the side of a freeway makes no sense, nor does the surrounding emptiness and the lack of detail. The painting is an approach to a city, a transitional space between one place and another; it lacks definition and identification. So while the signs are recognisable, their meaning is not. Aesthetic meaning is paradoxically related to utilitarian function. The rectangle of the speeding truck is utterly ephemeral, but in rhyming with the tenement buildings it is essential for locking the composition into a static and eternal framework. Likewise its speed
qualifies what may be the excessively slow progress of the walkers, which are yet faster than the road and the apartment blocks. There is a sidereal combination of temporalities, in which antiquity is paradoxically equated with the elderly figure.

Like many other modern artists, Smart evades the question of meaning in his work, insisting that his paintings have none and claiming that his geometric compositions should be read in terms of balance and scale. The identification of the anachronistic substitutions and other temporal anomalies offers an opportunity for interpretation. The composition, detail and spatial arrangement suggest a correlation with Andrew Wyeth’s painting, *Christina’s World* (1948). Smart had, in all probability, seen this painting, along with works by Edward Hopper, in New York in 1948.\(^47\) Bernard Smith noticed correspondences between Wyeth and Smart although he observed that Smart did not have Wyeth’s sentiment and domesticity.\(^48\) There is indeed a resemblance in the spatial arrangements, the high horizon line and the almost obsessive attention to detail. The clarity of line, treatment of light and stillness in Wyeth’s painting suggests the possibility that, as Luciano Cheles has argued for Grant Wood, Piero della Francesca could also have influenced Wyeth. Smart’s work, like Wyeth’s, has an element of stillness and a simplicity of design, but he departs from Wyeth in that his work is distinctly urban rather than rural. Even *The Listeners*, produced by Smart in 1965, with its direct quotation of Wyeth’s obsessively detailed grassy hill from *Christina’s World*, has urban rather than rural overtones. There is a noted similarity between Smart and Wyeth in that their paintings were seen as alternatives to abstraction, Wyeth’s in the late 1940s in America, and Smart’s in the 1950s in Australia.


\(^{48}\) Smith, *Australian Painting*, 415.
Smart’s insistence that figures only provide a sense of scale is challenged by the unresolved tension and ambiguity in his painting. The tension in the twisted pose of Christine makes Wyeth’s painting equally ambiguous. Both artists use an empty grey sky as a formal device for balancing out the composition and offering a background to the colour, but at the same time, it hints at something sinister and ominous. While Wyeth acknowledged that his paintings contained abstract and emotional meaning, Smart preferred his paintings to be understood as formal exercises based on Pieran geometry.

The subject matter is only the hinge that opens the door, the hook on which hangs my coat. My only concern is putting the right shapes in the right colours in the right places. It is always the geometry.  

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49 Michael Kimmelman, “Andrew Wyeth”.
50 “Jeffrey Smart,” interview by Sandra McGrath, Art International, XXI, no. 1 Jan-Feb (1977), 17.
Smart’s figurative style is anachronistic within this abstract context. The anachronism alienates the viewer looking for a narrative usually implied in figurative art. This does not mean that there are no narrative elements; they are just left deliberately unresolved and mysterious. The anachronism in Smart’s figurative paintings implies new metaphors and meanings rather than a simple narrative.

Barry Pearce recognises Smart’s resistance to meaning, asserting that his paintings only contain the illusion of a narrative. He interprets Smart’s paintings as having no other meaning bar that of the light that reveals the beauty in the moment being depicted. “For ultimately, there is no secret meaning to any of the things that appear in his paintings: the man in orange overalls; the green truck; the yellow factory. These are all transient illusion,” writes Pearce. He continues by observing that light, contrary to belief, is not transient but is still and timeless. “A steady stream from the sun provides the most potent metaphor for eternity, and only painting can pay it the supreme homage.”51 Pearce, therefore, finds meaning in Smart’s work through metaphor, but his resistance to a possible narrative misses the enticement to dream and speculate about those private or inaccessible worlds to which they infer.

Light as an indication of timelessness is emphasised in the next painting, Morning Practice, Baia, painted in 1969. This painting best describes the notion of timelessness through the depiction of static light that Pearce recognizes as fundamental to Smart’s work.52 The structural and organizational concerns of this painting are examined in order to demonstrate how it enters into a dialogue with the past, in particular with Piero’s Resurrection. Morning Practice, Baia recalls Piero’s The Resurrection in its early Renaissance structure, perspective and in its colour palette. Smart explores temporal fluidity by combining both Pieran and modernist elements to present through the artist’s vision a sense of timelessness and endurance.

**Timelessness and Endurance**

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51 Barry Pearce, Jeffrey Smart (Roseville, NSW: The Beagle Press, 2005), 21.
52 Pearce, The Master of Stillness, 7.
Figure 46. Jeffrey Smart, *Morning Practice, Baia*, 1969
oil on canvas 58 x 82 cm.
Private Collection.

The anachronism in *Morning Practice, Baia* exposes Smart’s interest in art’s capacity to convey meaning that is timeless and enduring. According to Barry Pearce, Italy provided Smart with a heritage that spoke of the immutable qualities of representation that affirmed Smart’s figurative approach:

...centuries contract... into the accumulative memory of its inhabitants so that past and present meet seamlessly, reinforcing the artist’s vision of a fixed centre from which time has been eliminated. It is the perfect place to remind him that in an advanced industrial age the fundamental values of an artist observing the world, and the ideal methods of painting it, remain immutable.53

Smart uses anachronism to open up artistic dialogues about concerns fundamental to the creation of art in the past that remain important in the present. Piero’s work lent itself to anachronistic appropriation because he himself appropriated the classical proportion and mathematical precision of the Ancient Romans. Thus the art of the past and its readiness to be appropriated enabled Smart to identify, and claim as his own, a figurative European inheritance.

53 Pearce, Jeffrey Smart, 12.
The first noticeable anachronistic device that Smart employs in this painting is the manipulation of the pictorial space to interpellate the viewer. The theory of ideological interpellation was developed during the 1970s by Louis Althusser to show how a state or regime can exert control over a subject if the subject believes her position within a particular social structure is natural rather than instantiated by institutions. In accordance with art history practice, I use this phrase more loosely to describe the means by which a painting positions the viewer. An example of this is the way the previous painting situates the viewer in the middle of the road. The way the viewer is ideologically interpellated in Baia, however, is particularly relevant as a theatrical and distancing stratagem. The interpellation of the viewer is an anachronistic device that is apparent in medieval altarpieces, for example, where the Madonna, the Christ child and the angels sit within a frame, the barrier effectively excluding the viewer from the holy realm and identifying the viewer as human and belonging to an earthly realm, but nevertheless inciting communion between human and divine creatures across this divide. This spatial tension has temporal correlatives. The humanist shift that manifested in the Renaissance is evident in Piero’s manipulation of this tradition. The fifteenth century contemporary viewer was invited to identify with the events depicted in the pictorial space by the representation of a realistic and familiar landscape and the breaching of the barrier between the divine and the secular. In The Resurrection, for example, Piero depicted an event from the distant biblical past but located it in the fifteenth century present through the use of immediately contemporary Albertian architecture for its setting, conflating dimensions of time and space. Nagel and Wood contend that the practice of mingling historical and contemporary references was common in Quattrocento paintings and that the temporal dissonance it created generated new layers of meanings that were contingent upon the viewer. This mingling of past and present is seen in The Resurrection. The image is pregnant with religious resonance but its location within the secular and contemporary landscape of Arezzo translates the spiritual and religious

into the present, thus making it relevant to the contemporary viewer who recognises herself in that hallowed space. The fanciful and inauthentic fifteenth-century uniform of the soldiers is an approximation to Roman military costume that repairs the division between Roman past and Quattrocento present, thereby addressing the present rather than historical viewer. This in turn suggests the continued significance of the narrative for future viewers. Thus time folds back onto itself and the temporal divisions of present, past and future become redundant. By depicting an event from the past and locating it in the Quattrocento present, Piero imbues the present with religious immanence. In The Resurrection he manipulates the medieval organization of the distinct realms of heaven and earth. The figure of Christ is depicted emerging from his tomb with the sleeping soldiers in the foreground. The wall of the tomb effectively signifies a separation between the earthly and the divine, however the raised foot of Christ resting on the top of the tomb reunites them. Christ is leaving the earthly for the divine and yet impinging on the spectator at the same time.

In Morning Practice, Baia, Smart is integrating both Piero and Picasso references within a contemporary scene, collapsing temporal divisions through a shared theatricality and awareness of the artist as an outsider. He dramatizes the anticlimax of spirituality declining into an entertaining trick, but also restores it through apparently accidental colour chords that belong to art. Smart positions the curious and surprising acrobat so that, comparable to Christ in The Resurrection, he too is separated from the viewer, but in this case by steps in the foreground rather than a wall. The raised platform and staircase gives the appearance of a medieval altar, an impermeable ontological separation between the realm of the viewer and that of the figure depicted within the pictorial space. One of the hidden anomalies of this relationship in the painting is that an acrobat usually performs before an audience, theatrically, but here he is the subject of voyeuristic surveillance, hence the oddity of the viewer seeing him obliquely, head first. This figure implies a radically opposite nature of consciousness compared to the figure in Cahill Expressway. Where he was a meditative looker, wholly aware of the interpellated viewer, the acrobat is inwardly focussed on physical dexterity and effort that prevents contemplative awareness of the outside world.
Alongside the historical substitutions are anachronistic references to more contemporary art. When Dorrit Black first exposed Smart to the principles of dynamic symmetry in composition and the Section d’Or or Golden Mean she emphasized composition and painting as a studio construction, an interpretation rather than an objective representation of something seen. This informed Smart’s practice and therefore the way a painting is constructed is an indication of Smart’s intentions. The shapes created by blocks of colour and the intervention of shadow and diagonal lines operate as abstract forms within the tight construction of the composition. Dividing the composition according to the golden ratio, puts the shadow of the cube that bleeds into the grey sky and breaks up the solidity of the wall at the heart of the composition. This interrupted outline or passage, was a technique that, according to Lesley Harding, Andre Llohte believed embodied the genius of Cubism because it recognizes the way the eye makes sense of the whole in spite of its partial elision. The implication is that this painting is a conversation between cubism, abstraction and realism that takes place across time.

The interrupted shadow on the wall serves as a link between the paintings overlapping planes, breaking up the monotony of colour and adding to the tension between the planes formed by the rectangular wall, the diagonal railing and the solid grey mass of the sky. The tension in the work is heightened by the enclosing surfaces of neutral colour that form the walls and draw the viewer’s eye back to the cube at the focal point of the canvas. Structurally, the dark greyish-brown sky in Morning Practice, Baia divides the picture plane into a foreground and background, which enhances the motif of the stage. The entrances left and right and the looming cement block painted in neutral colour further emphasize this. The backdrop to the shallow stage bounded by stairs, suggests an occluded space to which the viewer has no access. The visible wedge of nondescript sea and sand and its partial occlusion is an unexpected merging

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56 Pearce, Jeffrey Smart, 40.
of the finite and the infinite, a slab of something that goes on forever, an indication of
timelessness.

The figure at the centre of the painting, and therefore occupying centre stage, is a young man on his back wearing an old-fashioned bathing suit balancing a cube on his raised feet. The deliberate and overt anachronism of the bathing suit alerts the viewer to the less overt discourse of temporal interrelationships. The painting alludes to Picasso’s interest in circus performers, in particular to his 1905 painting, *Acrobat on a Ball*, a painting Smart was familiar with.\(^{58}\) Picasso’s performing players were of course outsiders, and hence stood as metaphors for the artist’s outsider position. Picasso’s acrobats represent a kind of jongleur. The alienation and melancholy of *Acrobat on a Ball* that was a part of Picasso’s Blue Period, was replaced with a more playful approach as seen in a later Picasso painting, *Bathers* of 1918, where a girl in a striped bathing suit very similar to the one in Smart’s painting, playfully parodies the contortions of the young acrobat.

![Figure 47. Pablo Picasso, Acrobat on Ball, 1905 (left); and Figure 48. The Bathers, 1918 (right)](image)

The prosaic seaside background of *Morning Practice, Baia* locates the setting anywhere in the world but the title implies a connection to another time. Anachronism suggests possible interpretations and meanings, either conscious or unconscious. The setting of Baia proposes the option of looking beyond the substitution of Picasso and

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\(^{58}\) According to Barry Pearce, while in Ostia Smart had seen a man lying on his back balancing a ball on his feet and created a sketch combining this image with Picasso’s painting. Pearce, *The Master of Stillness*, 7.
Piero for meaning. Baia was a holiday destination of surpassing natural beauty for the ancient Romans during a time of luxury, excess and sexual transgression. In *Bay of Baiae, with Apollo and the Sybil* (1923) Turner used Baia as the location for the myth that tells of the Sybil’s request to Apollo for eternal youth, connecting the myth irrevocably to the place. The story of the inexorable passing of time and the futile quest for stasis is poignantly re-imagined by Turner through the change in architecture set within the eternal beauty of the landscape. Smart also offers his painting as a meditation on the passage of time, although paradoxically, nothing natural defines the location of the built up non-place.

![Image of Turner's painting](image)

*Figure 49. Joseph Mallord William Turner, The Bay of Baiae, with Apollo and the Sybil, 1823*

Oil on canvas
145.4 x 237.5 cm
Tate, Turner Bequest 1856

Also embedded in the metaphor of Baia is the mythology of Europe as a haven for the alternative lifestyles and freedoms that the British Grand Tourist of the 18th and nineteenth century sought to experience. This informs Smart’s twentieth century rejection of Australia whose conservatism would not allow his alternative life choices.

The possibility of greater sexual and social freedom offered by Italy is evident in Smart’s choice of Baia as the setting for this painting. In spite of his insistence on his paintings having only formal meaning, *Baia* can be read as a celebration of living within a more accepting and less conservative culture than Australia. Anachronism, figuration and allusions to classicism, open up avenues for interpretation that go beyond a strictly formal analysis.
Smart replaces Piero’s religious immanence for something much more prosaic, but his manipulation of the tradition of using a frame within the framed painting opens up a dialogue with the past about the relationship between the viewer and the subject. Rather than religious immanence to suggest endurance and timelessness, Smart creates timelessness through the vision of the artist. Thus what is emphasized in the anachronistic allusions to separate ontological realms is that it is the artist’s vision and representation of a world, past or present, that is timeless and immutable.

Smart’s depiction of a man balancing a cube rather than a ball, as one would expect, alerts the viewer to the cube’s representational function overtly suggesting that the artist is playing with the contemporary concerns of Cubism while at the same time recognizing the transitional Blue and Rose phases of Picasso’s figurative paintings prior to Cubism. Smart’s depiction of the Neo-Platonic geometry of the cube, sphere and cone that interested Cézanne in such classical art as Poussin’s, reveals another continuity between the Renaissance and modernist art, though it also harks back beyond the subversive asymmetries of Cubism. Continuity is explored by Smart in Art Gallery in Shopping Arcade (1985), a painting that articulates the debate between figurative art, considered anachronistic in much mid-twentieth-century Australia, and more contemporary abstract art, epitomized by allusions to Mondrian.

The Debate between Abstraction and Figuration

Art Gallery in Shopping Arcade has Smart articulating the debate between abstraction and figuration as a visual image. There is a conscious and deliberate reference to the Australian landscape tradition and Modern art. A Hans Heysen-style landscape is situated within a Mondrian-like interior, that speaks of the architecture of the 1950s rather than 1980s. In this painting Smart establishes a dialogue between the Australian past and European modernism, and by exposing the tensions between the two he alludes to his position as an Australian artist informed by both. The sign on the door that reads, Mondrian & Co. and describes their activity as an importer and exporter is a wry reinforcer of this exchange and unusually overt in its metaphorical meaningfulness.
Placing the nineteenth century landscape within a twentieth century modernist grid and locating both those within a contemporary and ubiquitous symbol of twentieth century materialism is anachronistic and opens up a dialogue between past and present, Australia and Europe, figuration and abstraction. The architectonic elements relocate painting itself from its traditional place in European cathedrals and palaces into an anonymous mid-twentieth-century shopping mall. This empties out the spiritual meaning of art and redefines it as a commodity of exchange, replacing spiritual value with commercial value. The changed role of painting is made manifest by the anachronism; even Mondrian has been reduced to a realistic portrayal of modern commercial premises and a method of commercial exchange.
Smart resisted the push away from figuration towards abstraction, finding in the past a validation for figuration. He also reverses the poles of high and low culture in this painting: that which is special and that which is ordinary. The title of the painting is genuinely ironic in that sense. The cheap commercial architecture of this arcade is usually the antithesis of an art gallery. This does not just deflate high art, however, it also elevates ordinary commercial architecture, painted to be garish but becoming bold and elevated by analogy with Mondrian. The overriding principle is one of interchange, summed up by the idea of commercial exchange.

Smart draws upon Piero’s geometric rules of composition to suggest a perfectly harmonious, stable and coherent relationship between forms through which he re-imagines a paradoxically dystopic, urban or suburban landscape as beautiful. The repetition of blocks of colour, the tensions between the angles and the treatment of space all suggest that these elements of painting are used in their abstract form. Smart had seen the 1st Century BC mosaic, *The Street Musicians* by Dioskourides of Samos that had been recovered in Pompeii. This ancient work provided him with a language that while anachronistic, addressed contemporary painting concerns in a formal way:

> It was the composition of the mosaic, the grouping of the figures, the vertical, the horizontal, that gridding about the door...abstract but realistic with no relation to nineteenth-century painting or any painting that I knew. 59

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59 “Smart’s Labyrinth,” quoted in Pearce, *Jeffrey Smart*, 91.
Smart is not rejecting nineteenth century painting, on the contrary, the presence of the Heysen-styled painting in *Art Gallery*, demonstrates an acknowledgement of its place in Australian art history. However, Smart relocates it as a rural anachronism within an abstract grid, the strangeness of its new location indicating its lack of authority over the identity of the contemporary Australian environment. At the same time Smart is reconciling triadic artistic opposites, classicism, realism and abstraction with Australian anti-modernism (Heysen) and European modernism (Mondrian). Smart’s recognition of the abstract elements in the mosaic is a twentieth century response that would not have been possible without the reception of European modernism in Australia, as discussed in previous chapters. The synchronic conventions that *Art Gallery* employs overturn linear time through the anachronistic juxtaposition of the nineteenth and twentieth century and a first century mosaic.

Alexander Nagel in *Medieval Modern* could have been referring to this painting when he observed that an artist’s use of modalities from another era destabilizes the relations between the past and the present by invoking “random temporal and spatial distributions rather than linear chronologies.” Anachronism opens up an entry point for an analysis of Smart’s work in terms of substitution and the synchronic reception of art from the past. Australian artists had a complex relationship with the art of the European past, participating in a series of selections and rejections that were dictated

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by cultural norms. Whereas European artists were reminded of the historicity of the artworks by their presence in their environment, in Australia the artwork is made present through quotation. Smart’s quotations from the past in *Art Gallery* substitute for the original artworks; in a sense they are those originals, relocated into an Australian context. This destabilization recognizes how the power and meaning that is associated with iconic artworks is contingent upon their reception and context.

The next painting under discussion continues to examine how substitution and synchronicity operate in Smart’s painting. Smart’s anachronistic use of the temporal ambiguity and spatial conventions found in Piero’s *The Flagellation of Christ* demonstrates how images from the past can be used to overcome temporal and cultural boundaries so as to critically engage with contemporary Australian art.

**Transcending Boundaries: The Double Presence of Piero**

Art has the capacity to transcend its temporal and cultural boundaries. Every work is part of a dynamic interaction between the time of its creation and its reception in the future. Nagel and Wood, in their study of the way religious icons reoccur in Renaissance works, refer to this as “a chain of substitutions,” wherein the presence of the ancient icon legitimates the new work. Translated into a secular context this is seen in the way the Mondrian legitimates Smart’s *Art Gallery*. Nagel and Wood point out that the new work defines the nature of the chain in that the artist makes conscious choices from “the debris of the past” and argue that in order for the chain to make sense the new work must follow certain conventions and comply with some collective norms. However, these repetitions depend on how the past work resonates with the present. The past therefore has a double presence in art, first in the repetition of conventions, and second in what it represents or signifies.

*Taxi stand: Brisbane Art Gallery* painted in 2002 is discussed in terms of the double presence of Piero’s *The Flagellation of Christ* seen firstly, through the repetition of its

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62 Ibid., 15.
conventions, and secondly, through what those conventions signify in Smart’s specifically Australian painting. Sasha Grishin points out the similarities in artistic strategies between Taxi Stand and Piero’s Flagellation citing the same underlying geometrical structure and metaphysical interest in light, the same ambiguity, impersonality and enigma. A copy of Piero’s painting hung in Smart’s studio throughout his adult life, indicating its significance. Smart’s anachronistic quotation of certain conventions from The Flagellation can therefore be understood as deliberately evocative of Piero.

The specific conventions repeated by Smart in Taxi Stand include Piero’s use of spatial recession and temporal ambiguity. Grishin sees a correlation between The Flagellation and Taxi Stand in the way the internal architectural framework of both paintings

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Sasha Grishin, Jeffrey Smart: Paintings and Studies 2002-2003 (Collingwood, Vic; Paddington, New South Wales: Australian Galleries, 2003), 8-10.
creates a contrast between the recession in the background and the foreground space.\textsuperscript{64} The internal compositional framing of \textit{Taxi Stand} reveals a passage between ontological frames in the form of the outside seen from within the Brisbane Art Gallery. One presumably enters an art gallery to see this work, but once before it looks out through the exit to the art gallery onto the everyday, which is yet brought within the ambit of art by its framing as well as the gallery space in which it is observed. Furthermore, whereas Piero’s biblical scene is situated within modern Albertian architecture, Smart realizes Renaissance proportion in the modern non-place of the Brisbane Art Gallery’s exit. There is also a cage like resemblance between the Brisbane Art Gallery walkway and the loggia in which Christ stands, though solids have been substituted for the void outside the loggia. In \textit{Taxi Stand} the loggia is realized as a void with just a ganglion of traffic directions that are meaningless from the viewer’s position on the steps. Piero depicts the religious event within the recess, designating it as a mystical and religiously significant space. Smart, however, replaces the meaningful event with an image of secular non-meaning and insignificance, except insofar as the traffic signs are repurposed as directions towards the world outside the picture, replicating the \textit{mis-en-abyme} of a painting inside a gallery of the world outside the gallery.

While Smart imitates Piero’s architectural space of foreground and recessed background, instead of the three enigmatic Quattrocento figures in the foreground, Smart positions the unknown and temporally unstable viewer there. The viewer is implicated in both Piero and Smart’s paintings in that the images logically extend into the space between picture plane and viewer, although in \textit{The Flagellation} this is more direct as the three contemporary figures invite the viewer to identify with them. The non-specific space that is occupied by the three enigmatic and much debated fifteenth-century figures creates a complex temporality within \textit{The Flagellation}, separating the pictorial space into different ontological realms of past and present, spiritual and secular, reinforced by the separate light sources discussed earlier. In \textit{Taxi Stand}, Smart emphasizes the liminality of the outsider by drawing attention to the

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 10.
viewer’s external position by way of comparison with The Flagellation. This reiterates a modernist sense of alienation and dislocation.

The convention of temporal ambiguity establishes another anachronistic link between Piero and Smart. The different moments in time, overtly apparent in The Flagellation, are conveyed in Taxi Stand through anachronistic association. The Flagellation represents a religious event but the Albertian architecture and the figures in contemporary dress subvert the biblical timeframe. In Taxi Stand the anachronism is secular rather than religious: the figures in 1950s clothing stand outside a contemporary building within an image painted in 2002. The substitution of The Flagellation in Taxi Stand through Smart’s use of Piero’s underlying logical structure and anachronism constructs an art historical past and applies it to an Australian setting. This temporal layering gives the gallery an anachronistic historical presence well before its official completion in 1982. Philip Guston, quoted by Marilyn Aronberg Levin, describes the recess of The Flagellation as “a disturbance... placed in the rear as if in memory.” Smart similarly subverts a linear conception of history through the anachronism in his painting but Smart evokes a memory from the 1950s for a building that only came into existence thirty years later, while he was living in Italy. The image reconstructs an impossible history, one that has bearing on the present. The anachronism in Taxi Stand draws attention to the present context, while at the same time making that moment problematic by subverting it.

Taxi Stand can be understood as articulating what Octavio Paz describes as an outsider’s relationship to the present as well as the sense of being out of time that Giorgio Agamben defines as anachronism. Paz argues that the distance felt by the colonized from the European centre complicates the perception of the present resulting in a fracturing of time. This creates a plurality of spaces wherein the present becomes evacuated of all meaning, as the present is always located somewhere in

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Europe.\textsuperscript{67} Paz therefore argues for the existence of multiple modernisms, rather than a singular, unified one.\textsuperscript{68} Similarly, Terry Smith recognises a diversity of modernisms and their ability to make a multiple attack on the present.\textsuperscript{69} Smart’s figurative paintings can then be interpreted as evidence of an alternative modernism. Smart utilised images from the European canon to subvert the unequal relationship between the centre and the periphery, and thereby claim his work as contemporary, relevant and international.

Agamben, on the other hand, defines anachronism as a necessary hallmark of the contemporary because it provides a disconnection whereby one can perceive and grasp one’s own time rather than being a symptom of regression into an idealized past, away from the problems of the present.\textsuperscript{70} For Agamben art from the past can be a corrosive on the present by providing a measurement of distance between the new and the old. The anachronism in The Flagellation, for example, makes those in the present responsible for the events of the past, while the past event, at the same time, draws attention to the conditions of the present. By the same token, Smart reminds the viewer who is positioned in the mutable present moment that she will be accountable for the way the past is perceived in the future.

The temporal ambiguity in Taxi Stand alerts the viewer to the mutability of time and its representation by Piero in The Flagellation. T.S. Eliot highlighted the interrelationship between past and present by arguing in Tradition and the Individual Talent (1919) that a new work reorganizes the canon that preceded it.\textsuperscript{71} Accordingly, the more recent painting impacts upon the meaning of the older one by drawing attention to its secular meaning and significance to a twentieth century Australian artist. Smart confirms the centrality of The Flagellation to Australian art practice by his quotation of Piero. Consequently, he displaces the Australian emphasis on the later Renaissance and

\textsuperscript{67} Paz, "In Search of the Present," 34-35.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 36.
\textsuperscript{69} Terry Smith, Contemporary Art: World Currents (London: Laurence King Publishers, 2011).
\textsuperscript{70} Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary?," 40-41.
thereby rearranges the local art canon to make it congruent with an overseas one, even though he is no longer living in Australia.

*The Flagellation* embodies a complex temporality and its presence in Smart’s painting can be understood as his attempt to conflate past and present through painting’s capacity to transcend temporal and cultural boundaries. *The Flagellation* therefore carries meaning that goes beyond the original reason for its production by Piero. The performative aspects of the work, its chronology and reason for existence, are not taken into account by Smart. Instead, the authority that is part of *The Flagellation*’s meaning is transferred through substitution onto *Taxi Stand*. The application of Piero’s structural logic creates a link between Smart’s painting and the appreciation of Piero. This gives *Taxi Stand* an historical referent and cultural connection that is European irrespective of actual location. Brisbane is constructed as being as much a part of European culture as Smart’s Italian home, though anyone who knows this view from the gallery would feel a counter-interpretation of its ubiquitous modernist architectural style. The significance of *The Flagellation* no longer lies in its Quattrocento religious immanence but in other more secular twentieth-century concerns. Smart acknowledges the hegemonic European canon through the quotations of Piero’s spatial and temporal ambiguities but then subverts the canon by inserting a specific reference to Australia. His knowledge of Eliot indicates that he was likely to have been aware of how the canon could be subverted and rearranged by contemporary interventions.

The revival of interest in Piero’s painting in Europe and Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century and its subsequent popularity in Australia suggests that *The Flagellation* complied with some of the collective norms found in Western art discourse. Smart reimagined an urban landscape in terms of Pieran ideals of order, harmony and balance implying that his Australian experience could also be framed in such terms. Thus Piero, and in particular *The Flagellation*, operates as a vehicle for Smart to situate himself within the wider context of Western culture.
Smart’s imitation of Piero’s temporal conventions and ordering of space indicates the significance of The Flagellation and suggests that for him it functioned, not as a relic from the past, but rather as a contemporary resource. The Flagellation, as stated, has a double presence in Taxi Stand, first in the repetition of its conventions, and second in what it represents or signifies as a substitution.

**Conclusion**

An examination of the complexity of the revivals that exist coevally within the paintings discussed in this chapter expose a multifaceted response to significant paintings from the past. Smart validated his alternative and paradoxically anachronistic modernism by his quotations and allusions to significant European and American paintings.

An analysis of an early Smart painting, *Water Towers (1944)* revealed anachronistic references to de Chirico. His representation of Australia as a modern, post-industrial economy draws on de Chirico’s vision of a dystopic, alienated society where the link between humanity and nature has been severed. *The Cahill Expressway* painted in 1962, shortly before Smart relocated permanently to Italy, responds to de Chirico’s imagery through the use of symbolism and anachronistic references to the past. This painting contains elements of theatricality and design that establish links across time and hints at an embedded narrative through the repetition of symbolic form, in spite of Smart’s insistence that his paintings do not contain any narrative. The influence of the American realists, Edward Hopper and Andrew Wyeth are acknowledged in Smart’s realistic style, where the ambiguous use of light and spatial arrangements suggest internationalism rather than provincialism. The depiction of a transitional, anonymous space that could be anywhere in the post-industrial world is used by Smart to establish comparability between Australia and the rest of the modern world, though we see he does return from Italy to Australian settings. He used Pieran harmony of form, colour and light to reveal the beauty of these spaces. This defamiliarized ubiquitous urban landscapes and transformed them into compelling images of modernity.
Approach to the City III investigated Smart’s use of Pieran geometry, perspective and light that instead of indicating a unified harmony between the individual and the environment, articulates an outsider narrative of dislocation. Smart explored the modernist paradox that is found in the shared experience of alienation and disconnection through the anachronistic use of Pieran geometry and design. The formal elements of line, shape and colour are emphasized through the design of the painting. They disrupt any narrative and therefore meaning that the viewer tries to impose. This painting also reveals Smart’s use of light as a metaphor of eternity.

Themes of timelessness and continuity were explored through the anachronisms in Morning Practice, Baia. Smart employed anachronistic elements in this painting to open up a dialogue about concerns of representation that are fundamental to the creation of art, regardless of time. Anachronistic associations with Ancient Rome, Piero, Turner, Cubism and Picasso concatenate into a meditation on time and space and its representation in contemporary art. The Golden Mean, a compositional device used by Piero, acts as a unifying metaphor, suggesting that what holds true in the past, remains true for the present.

Art Gallery in Shopping Arcade was chosen because it articulates the debate between figuration and abstraction through its complex temporal structures. At the time of this painting abstraction was prevalent in Australian art. Smart participated in this debate by using anachronistic references to demonstrate his knowledge of the abstract values of art. Art Gallery also addresses the changing role of painting, from a carrier of religious meaning to a carrier of commercial value, a comment perhaps on the vacuousness of the Australian art market and the overweening authority of the Australian Impressionist tradition over national identity. The distinction between rural and urban notions of identity and the separation of the individual from nature that is intimated in this work will be further explored in the next chapter on Russell Drysdale.

The final painting chosen for this chapter demonstrated the centrality of Piero’s The Flagellation of Christ to Smart’s practice. The complex temporal structures of Taxi
Stand, Brisbane Art Gallery are created by the double presence of the past: firstly in the anachronistic treatment of time and space and secondly in the significance of The Flagellation in Australian art discourse. The ways in which The Flagellation informs this painting and Smart’s conscious quotations of it is interpreted as an outsider’s relationship with the present. The influence of T.S Eliot and J.W. Dunne’s theories of time emphasize the importance of a temporal approach to the understanding of Smart’s work.

Smart’s paintings are self-conscious representations of temporality created through quotations and allusions to the art of the past. In contrast with O’Brien and Bellette’s use of anachronism as a means of distancing themselves from Australia, Smart’s work is not defined by his location. Consequently, Smart avoided confining notions of national identity by remaining fully engaged with international complexities of representation.
4 RUSSELL DRYSDALE: THE CREATION OF AN AUSTRALIAN MYTHOLOGY

The present interested Drysdale in so far as it represented what had been.

Lou Klepac

Introduction

This thesis now turns to the recognition of the anachronistic nuances in the work of Russell Drysdale. The aim of this chapter is to discuss how the revival of the Italian Early Moderns in British Modernism together with a perceived European cultural inheritance informed the way Drysdale contributed to the creation of an Australian mythology. While the other artists discussed in the preceding chapters looked away from Australia towards Europe, Drysdale located the epicentre of Australian mythology in the bush. Identifying the subtle ways that Drysdale employed anachronistic strategies in his approach to painting expands the interpretation of his paintings to include new meanings. This approach suggests that Drysdale’s paintings resist a simple, nationalistic interpretation but contain aesthetic meaning articulated through the emotionally reticent language of design derived from the Early Moderns.

This chapter argues firstly that, in keeping with the other artists I have discussed, quotations and allusions to the Early Moderns are embedded in Drysdale’s focus on design over expression. Secondly, it looks at the ways in which Drysdale departed from

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the other artists under discussion in his intellectualized and self-conscious representations of the Australian outback and its inhabitants. In an attempt to minimize the differences between Australia and Europe, O’Brien used Christian iconography and other European imagery, Bellette drew upon ancient archetypes from Greek mythology, and Smart concentrated on images that were ubiquitous in the industrialized world. Drysdale, however, created uniquely Australian archetypes and located them in equally unique settings, drawing attention to the differences rather than the similarities between Australia and Europe. And finally, this chapter argues that Drysdale’s use of the same Early Modern visual language reveals a sophisticated use of temporal and spatial structures that allow for a non-literal interpretation of his work. The relationship Drysdale had with George Bell, and the influences of Roger Fry, Clive Bell and Kenneth Clark are important considerations of this chapter.

Paintings have been chosen that best illustrate the arguments offered about his work. The paintings are ordered thematically rather than chronologically and cover the period from 1938 through to 1965. The importance of this analysis is that, as Luciano Cheles pointed out in reference to Grant Wood, the presence of the Italian Early Moderns shows that regionalism does not necessarily equate with provincialism. Wood was part of a group of regional artists who came to prominence in America in the 1930s through their figurative paintings of rural, humble scenes. His conservatism put him at odds with the urban and politically left wing Social Realists. Similarly, Drysdale’s outback scenes of everyday people in remote settings can also be seen as regional and conservative. However, the sophisticated quotation and allusions of the Early Modern in both their paintings belie the accusation of an inward looking simplistic provincialism. An interpretation based on theories of anachronism offers an alternative approach to Drysdale’s representations of Australia.

In the mid-1940s Drysdale’s stick-like figures became solid, rounder and more static. Critics recognized for the first time the overt use of Quattrocento strategies. The first

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painting to elicit a Quattrocento comparison was *Joe*, painted in 1950. The analogies drawn between Piero and Drysdale due to the Pieran-like monumentality and generic look of his figures are used to show how the association with Piero draws Drysdale into a dialogue with contemporary western art criticism. Richard Read’s anachronistic association of *The Gatekeeper’s Wife* with Piero’s *Madonna del Parto* informs this analysis.

Drysdale’s painting, *The Rabbiter and his Family* (1938) discloses anachronistic references to the Byzantine, early Renaissance and early twentieth-century Modernism. This analysis will unearth the meanings of its the temporal complexity. The next painting under discussion, *Man Feeding his Dogs* is used to show how Drysdale interpreted Fry’s language of design in his treatment of time and space in response to the Australian landscape. The influences of Seurat, Kisling and de Chirico locate Drysdale’s work within the chain of substitutions that leads back to Piero and the Italian Early Moderns through European Modernism.

Drysdale learnt from Bell to approach painting as an intellectual pursuit, with reason and intention, founded upon close study of Piero, taking precedence over intuition and emotion. This is seen in the spatial and temporal manipulations of *The Councillor’s House*, painted in 1949 and purchased by Kenneth Clark. The discussion of this painting centres on Drysdale’s anachronistic combination of classicism and British Modernist conventions that gives the landscape a pre-colonial European historical past. It is argued that Drysdale’s image was contingent upon the influences of British modernism and British patronage rather than a representation of an intrinsic and pre-existing characteristic of the Australian landscape and that these alternative meanings are conveyed through the anachronistic use of Quattrocento and classical strategies.

*Sunday Evening* painted in 1941 shows how Drysdale used the landscape as a backdrop for the creation of an Australian mythology and to reflect universal human values. The sophisticated anachronism in this painting that displaces time and space shows how Drysdale used the landscape to convey abstract meaning.
Drysdale deliberately reduced any chance of individuality and specificity in his portrayals of outback characters. In this he recalled George Bell’s lessons on the importance of knowing the essence of an object and understanding its form. Drysdale’s generic ‘big woman’, seen in The Gatekeeper’s Wife, first appeared in the 1940s, her repetition tentatively suggesting an uncanny narrative as Drysdale shows her aging across the three paintings with the landscape changing around her. In The Drover’s Wife (1945) Drysdale depicted her as a bewildered young woman newly arrived in the outback and a year later, in 1946, she reappeared as an older woman in Woman in a Landscape. In 1965, Drysdale reinvented her once more, as The Gatekeeper’s Wife, older again and this time with a child.

Drysdale’s ‘big woman’ and his other monumental characters do not fit easily into the landscape. These massive figures dominate the pictorial space, looming over the lowered horizon line. In contrast with the figures that inhabit paintings of the British picturesque landscape tradition, Drysdale’s white Australians take up too much of the available picture space. This is not always seen in his paintings of Indigenous Australians. This chapter argues that Drysdale’s paintings of Indigenous Australians appear now to be largely unsatisfactory. In Group of Aborigines (1953) and Young Girl at the Rockpool (1963) I argue that the figures in these paintings are either represented as disassociated from the land on the one hand, as seen in the former painting, or on the other hand, belonging too much to the land, as in the latter painting. These paintings are discussed in terms of the anachronism that links a white Australian’s mid-twentieth century depictions of Indigenous Australians to the deep time of the geological past, but at the same time excludes them from the present.

Anachronism, whether identified through quotation and allusion or by unsettling temporal and spatial juxtapositions, allows for a nuanced interpretation of Drysdale’s paintings. My analysis begins by exploring Drysdale’s reception of the aesthetic concerns of Roger Fry. It looks first at the way his teacher and mentor, George Bell, interpreted Fry and the British aesthetic in order to establish a context for Drysdale’s understanding of Modernism and explain his readiness to embrace Early Modern art.
Receiving British Aesthetics: George Bell’s Interpretation of Modernism

According to R.L. Pesman, the Byzantine, Trecento and Quattrocento dominated mid-twentieth-century Australian art, together with what she describes as a “continuing gaze on Piero della Francesca.” All of art history is available synchronically for artists, writers and critics to appropriate and utilize. Therefore, when art from a specific time period is referred to in any way, it carries with it particular meaning in part cast back from the changing needs of the present. This meaning is an integral part of the analysis of Drysdale’s paintings. As works of art are subject to changing interpretations over time and can mean different things under different conditions of reception, the conditions under which Drysdale worked, the mediated ways he encountered the art from these particular periods and the ways in which they are invoked in the discussions about his work are an important consideration.

The anachronistic referencing of the Italian Primitives in Modernist painting mediated between the conservative and the avant-garde, as we saw in the case of Jeffrey Smart’s Art Gallery in a Shopping Mall in the previous chapter. This ambiguity is present in the return to conventions of the past in Europe following the First World War. These frames of meanings that were already in place in European and British thinking informed Drysdale’s understanding of the Early Modern Italians. Their presence in Drysdale’s work can be accounted for because of his teacher and mentor George Bell’s interpretation of the English aesthetics of Roger Fry and Clive Bell.

Fry’s modernist doctrine of Significant Form draws meaning from the formal aspects of a work rather than from an overt narrative or figurative representation. As discussed previously Clive Bell and Fry identified in certain works of art a similarity in the relationship of form and use of line and colour that generated an affective, aesthetic response in the viewer. They argued for the ahistoricity of significant form, finding it in the works of Piero della Francesca, Poussin as well as in the post-impressionist work of Cézanne.

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As an Australian, Drysdale did not directly experience the conditions that gave rise to Modernism in France. George Bell, however, was in Paris from 1904 to 1906 and saw how the artists from the École de Paris were rejecting Impressionism’s breakdown of solid forms and emphasis on light and tonality. From Paris he went to London and was there for Roger Fry’s 1912 Post-Impressionist exhibition. Even though Bell lived in London until 1920, by his own admission, his conservatism prevented him from embracing or understanding the changes that were taking place in representation. It was only when he had returned to Australia and gained an emotional and physical distance from the tensions in Europe that he was able to assimilate and process what was occurring in European art. Bell returned to Melbourne and in 1932 he opened, along with Arnold Shore, the Bell-Shore School of Art, which Drysdale attended from 1935 to 1938.

In response to the First World War, artists like Picasso, Matisse and Modigliani, returned to the solidity and perceived endurance of classical design and structure they identified in the art of the Italian Tre-and Quattrocento. This was, as discussed previously, ambiguous because during that time both the conservatives and the avant-garde claimed the past as a justification for the present. Drysdale’s introduction to the abstract values of Tre- and Quattrocento art that British Formalism and Post-Impressionism alluded to was through George Bell’s distanced and mediated understanding of Modernism. Consequently, Fry’s identification of Piero as a proto-modernist has important implications for the ways in which Drysdale understood modern art.

Roger Fry, Piero della Francesca and British Modernism

The change and chaos in Europe that ensued in the aftermath of the First World War rendered the perceived systems of rationality and order found in the art of the early Renaissance attractive. The revival of classicism during the interwar period was a

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means of returning to perceived structures of stability in an attempt to define the present. However, evidence shows that a revival of interest in the art of the Italian Tre- and Quattrocento had already taken place in Britain towards the end of the nineteenth-century, prior to the outbreak of the First World War. In September 1894 Roger Fry wrote a letter to his father, Sir Edward Fry, stating, “The more I study the old masters, the more terrible does the chaos of contemporary art seem to me.” At least at this early stage of his life, this indicates a rejection by Fry of the ephemeral dissolution seen in the Impressionist style of painting in favour of something more structured, rational and classically based.

Caroline Elam proposes that Fry wanted to formulate an unemotional, objective and scientific approach to art criticism based on the qualities of design he valued in the art of the Trecento and Quattrocento Italians. An early interest in the Neo-Classical revivals of disegno is seen in Fry’s 1905 republication of Sir Joshua Reynolds’s Discourses. Elam argues that it was because Fry was looking for these qualities in contemporary art that he was able to recognize them in Cézanne and Seurat, rather than the art of Cézanne or Seurat awakening his renewed interest in the earlier art. She bases this supposition firstly on the fact that in 1897 when Fry visited Italy for the first time, he already held Piero in high regard. Secondly, Fry only recognized the constructive qualities in Cézanne’s work years after the publication of his book on Giovanni Bellini in 1899. Therefore, as Elam argues, Fry’s taste for the early Italians was not the result of contemporary trends but rather of his scrutiny of a range of contemporary art for an equivalent to the art of the earlier era. This is in direct opposition to the artists in this study whose recognition of the modernity of Piero came about because it had already been established in European and British modern

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art. As a consequence, it was British thought that informed their perception of the value of Piero and the Italian Early Moderns and this is reflected in their art.

Fry’s use of the past to validate a present art form is seen in his analogy between early Italian design and Cézanne’s Post-Impressionist paintings. The language Fry used in his discussion of post-impressionism included terms such as “recover” and “neglect,” denoting an art form rediscovered from a forgotten past era:

I gradually recognized that what I had hoped for as a possible event of some future century had already occurred, that art had begun to recover once more the language of design and to explore its so long neglected possibilities.  

The anachronism in Fry’s statement initiates a complex dialogue between the past and the present. The anachronistic language of design becomes ahistorical through its lack of temporal and spatial anchoring, making it relevant and contemporary for a mid-twentieth-century Australian artist. What was a past convention of representation became refigured as modern when Fry recognized it in contemporary art. The importance of design to Drysdale is shown in a letter he wrote to George Bell in 1948:

In the first place a design if it is a good design will arouse emotion which because it is based on abstract qualities is an aesthetic emotion, and in the second place if emotions are to be aroused by the content of expressiveness of the subject all very well but they do come second – and if put first at the expense of design they don’t account for much. 

Drysdale therefore rejects a sentimental and nostalgic expression of emotion in favour of an aesthetic emotional response generated through abstract and non-objective factors, such as colour, form, line and the treatment of space.

Fry saw as analogous the treatment of space in early Renaissance frescoes and the modernist concern with the limitations of the flat picture plane and the relation of
forms. His discussion of Piero’s murals and the problems associated with the flat picture plane expresses his interest in the transmission of meaning through form:

All the great masters of mural painting know that the wall must be left in the end a flat wall, but Piero insists that this flatness shall be due to no arbitrary convention of hard arresting contours. On the contrary, both contours and modelling here stimulate the imagination to realize the solid relief of the figures and their logically possible relation to one another in space. But, by the bare frankness with which each form is stated, and by the subtlety of the tone contrasts, he allows the senses to remain at rest concerning the flatness of the wall, while the imagination can if it chooses build up the ideated space.¹¹

Fry’s acknowledgement of the illusion of space must have resonated with Drysdale who was trying to find a way to convey the vastness of the Australian continent within that same flat, picture plane. However unlike Fry, who looked at the Post-Impressionists through eyes trained by the Tre- and Quattrocento, Drysdale’s association with the Italian Primitives and their treatment of space begins with his teacher and mentor George Bell and his interpretation of Fry.

**George Bell: A Champion of Modern Art**

George Bell introduced Drysdale to Modern art, albeit through reproductions. Bell was at the forefront of modern art in Australia in the 1920s and 1930s.¹² While nothing remains of his writing during the years he spent in Paris and London, his approach to art survives in the paintings and accounts of his pupils. In Paris from 1904 to 1906, George Bell had studied the Old Masters and although he had been exposed to modern art, he remained conservative in his approach, trapped, according to June Helmer, by his “colonial education, which did not prepare him either socially or

¹² The general information on George Bell’s life and influence have been drawn from the following sources: Mary Eagle and Jan Minchin, The George Bell School: Students, Friends, Influences (Melbourne and Sydney: Deutscher Art Publications; Resolution Press, 1981); Christopher Heathcote, A Quiet Revolution: The Rise of Australian Art 1946-1968 (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1995); and Helmer, George Bell.
intellectually for the French avant-garde.” According to Bell’s students of the 1940s he expressed regret at not having taken full advantage of the opportunities that were on offer in Paris during that time. However, as Helmer notes, it was in Paris that Bell first rejected the rigid academic mode of painting as imitation in favour of a more intellectually formal approach. Christopher Heathcote quotes Bell as having once said, in a statement very close to Fry: “Design is the real subject.” In a 1945 radio interview with Bernard Smith, Bell’s interest in form is apparent:

In Paris I found that I had to get down to the real idea of knowing the form and put it down in paint – from knowledge as well as from observation. I mean, if you only look at the form you can do no more than copy it, but if you know the form you can make it function as part of a design – one is imitation and the other is creation.

Evidence for George Bell’s knowledge of Fry and Clive Bell is found in this distinction between imitation and creation because he rejected the academic style of painting based on a Renaissance imitation of nature for a more abstract understanding of how form conveys meaning. Helmer speculates that Bell’s visits to see Piero della Francesca’s frescoes in Italy in 1912 and again in 1914 could have been influenced by Fry because Piero was at that time still relatively under-appreciated. Nevertheless Bell was aware of Fry’s proposition that the classical tradition was being continued through Post-impressionism although, according to Helmer, it would take another twenty years before he fully embraced that idea. By the time Drysdale enrolled at Bell’s art school in Melbourne, Bell had embraced the idea that particular art objects from the European past could be perceived as modern and relevant in the twentieth-century. Drysdale’s paintings will therefore be approached with the understanding that he was aware of the analogous relationship between the classical past, the Quattrocento and modernity.

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13 George Bell, 31.
14 Heathcote, A Quiet Revolution, 15.
15 Helmer, George Bell, 33.
16 Ibid., 40.
17 Ibid., 38.
When Bell returned to Melbourne in 1920 he brought back to Australia an emphasis on the importance of composition, design, colour and harmony over expression of emotion and representation of narrative. In ultra-conservative Melbourne Bell was considered a champion of modern art. His practice and interest in form and the emotionally reticent Quattrocento art set him at odds with both the conservative art establishment and the highly emotive and politically and socially motivated art that was gaining a preference with painters in Melbourne. Consequently, he was straddling an ambiguous line situated somewhere between his own political and artistic conservatism that set him at odds with other contemporary artists and his challenge to the establishment. In spite of this, or perhaps as Heathcote suggests, because of Bell’s inherent conservatism, Drysdale prospered under his tutelage, his work gaining recognition locally by winning major art prizes, and abroad through his participation in international exhibitions.

Heathcote criticizes Bell’s school for catering too exclusively to middle-class values and tastes, suggesting that Drysdale’s success was the result of his work being unthreatening and therefore accessible to Melbourne’s bourgeoisie. He draws attention to the fact that most of Bell’s students came from middle-class, well-educated backgrounds and because they did not challenge the social mores of stultifying Melbourne their art remained accessible to the buying public. Certainly Drysdale, who maintained a relationship with Bell until Bell’s death in 1966, came from a prosperous, well-educated family. He was one of Bell’s most successful students absorbing Bell’s intellectualized doctrine and becoming what Mary Eagle refers to as a “factual rather than abstract thinker” in keeping with the general image of the Australian male of his generation.

Drysdale’s art is a synthesis of Fry and George Bell demonstrating reason and intention over intuition and emotionalism. In a reaction to and rejection of Australian Impressionism, Bell taught Drysdale that painting was a conscious, intellectual

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18 Ibid., 40.
19 Eagle and Minchin, The George Bell School, 20 and 44.
20 Ibid., 89.
engagement, a product of the mind that takes place in a studio rather than an en plein air attempt to imitate or represent nature. Bell would encourage Drysdale to look at an object and then draw it from memory, remembering the essence that gave the object its form. In explaining this approach, Drysdale used the example of a jug whose essence lies in the way all jugs conform to a certain shape that allows a jug to hold something. Other ways Bell encouraged Drysdale to supplement observation by intellectual imagination included instructing him to draw from a model as if he was facing the opposite side.\(^2\) This encouraged Drysdale’s conceptual understanding of form and intellectual construction of images and gives credence to the argument that the anachronism evident in his paintings was a strategic and deliberate approach to representation.

**Anachronism, Piero and Drysdale**

Distance from the conditions that caused the revivals of the past in modernist art accounts for differences in the way Drysdale appropriated the past in his art. European artists produced paintings in response to the prevailing social and political conditions. Conditions in Australia at that time meant that some artists saw their remoteness to European art and civilization problematic and sought out European culture finding it in lectures, books and reproductions of well-known paintings rather than direct experience. Drysdale, in a similar fashion to O’Brien, Bellette and Smart, was therefore responding to particular paintings. This meant that their attention was focussed on the perceived agency of the object rather than the circumstances that generated the conditions under which those objects were produced. This supports a synchronic rather than diachronic perception of art objects from the near and distant past.

Drysdale was encouraged by Bell’s interpretation of both Modernism and Roger Fry’s Formalism to see in Post-Impressionist art the way past strategies could be put to use in the present. However, as previously acknowledged, French and British modernism was a product of conditions in France and Britain, not Australia. This analysis therefore

\(^2\) Ibid., 90-91.
examines the ways in which Drysdale anachronistically translated the strategies he saw in the paintings from the Byzantine, Tre- and Quattrocento, which had already been hailed as modern, into an Australian context.

The underlying classicism in Drysdale’s work imbues it with an eerie anachronistic detachment. Agamben, as discussed, understands anachronism as a form of detachment, arguing that it is necessary if one is to perceive one’s own time. Drysdale’s detachment differentiates his work from the expressionism that was gaining favour in Melbourne and brings to mind the ‘ineloquence’ that Bernard Berenson saw in the underlying classical forms of Piero della Francesca’s work. It has been argued that the characters in Drysdale’s paintings share Piero’s ineloquence, the same dignified reticence and simple existential being, but with the addition of a certain rustic humour. In 1960, for example, James Gleeson drew Drysdale into an analogy with Piero in his review of Joe: “[Drysdale’s] study of Joe, the storekeeper, drugged with silence and staring into space, has all the monumentality of a Quattrocento fresco.” However, the somewhat comical, overweight Joe, with a trace of five o’clock shadow darkening his chin, bears none of the spiritual grace, purpose and significance of Piero’s or indeed any other figures from the Quattrocento. The value of the comparison therefore lies in the shock of the association.

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Lou Klepac, in 1996 and Richard Read, in 1998, also invoke the Quattrocento in their discussions of Drysdale’s work. Klepac frames Drysdale’s work in opposition to Piero while Read finds Piero’s *Madonna del Parto* displaced into a Drysdale painting with something of the same vernacular caricature evident in *Joe*. Klepac imagines a seamless fit between Piero and his world, comparing the timelessness of the spiritual immanence in Piero to the alienation and death he sees in Drysdale:

Drysdale’s world is basically pessimistic, unlike the joyous mysticism of the painter Piero della Francesca, whose world is timeless. Drysdale’s world is one where man is made to suffer because time passes, and death obliterates both him and his works. Piero’s clear infinity and eternity are religious in the sense that light unites man with the rest of the universe and makes him part of it. In Drysdale’s paintings of the 1940s, people are prisoners of their own anxieties. Dispossessed, they wander in an environment which is alien to them. Though they have adapted to it physically, it is not their natural home.²⁶

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By evoking Piero, Klepac recognizes the cogency of comparing the Italian art of the fourteenth and fifteenth-century with contemporary Australian art. In so doing he establishes Drysdale as a participant in an ambiguous relationship with the past and utilizes the Quattrocento as a benchmark in Australian art discourse. Klepac’s description brings Drysdale into an oppositional relationship with Piero and this context informs his interpretation of Drysdale’s painting. Klepac notes the unifying effects of light in Piero’s work and draws attention to the sense of place and belonging that is denied to the Australians of European origin. A comparison with Piero doubles the anachronism in Drysdale’s work, firstly by focusing on the perceived strangeness of the Australian landscape and drawing attention to the passing of time, and secondly by providing a Quattrocento European filter through which to interpret his work.

Richard Read, on the other hand, draws attention to the similarities and differences between Drysdale’s *The Gatekeeper’s Wife* (1965) and Piero’s *Madonna del Parto* (1457) as a means of fleshing out other more nuanced interpretations than those previously suggested.²⁷ Read opens up the possibility of equivalence between Australian and British art through analogy with Piero’s Madonna. In his essay, “Aboriginal Absence, European Presence,” Read uses art historical analysis to propose that Drysdale’s sketch of an Aboriginal woman was an abandoned precedent for the wife, noting how Drysdale replaces her expression of intense anger with Pierian reticence in the form of Piero’s *Madonna del Parto*. Thus, Read proposes that anachronistic references to classical Renaissance art in Drysdale’s painting reflected personal concerns that have little or nothing to do with Australian national identity.²⁸

The stance and the form of Drysdale’s woman is certainly similar to Piero’s Madonna, the half-open gate repeats the opening of the curtain, the child hanging on the gate is analogous to Piero’s angels holding the curtain open and the pompons on the end of her slippers migrate from the extravagant flowers embroidered on the tent.²⁹ Read argues that Drysdale’s anachronistic use of quotations from past European art meant

²⁸ Ibid., 118.
²⁹ Ibid., 118-20.
that his work was familiar to western viewers, because Drysdale was essentially painting for an English audience.  

Read uses his knowledge of art history to expand upon existing interpretations of Drysdale’s Gatekeeper’s Wife by suggesting that the tensions in this work exposed through the similarities and departures from Piero’s Madonna hint at an unresolved tensions in his relationship with his recently deceased wife.

Figure 56. Russell Drysdale, The Gatekeepers Wife, 1957
Oil on canvas 101.6 x 127cm
Signed lower right
Art Gallery of Western Australia

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30 Ibid., 121.
Read argues that when an artist borrows from another painting, what is omitted is equally as important as what is included. If the mother and child in Drysdale painting is recognised as a substitute for the transcendental and spiritual Madonna and Child of ancient religious paintings then, as Read points out, the distance between them becomes significant and can be read as reflecting the tensions and anxieties of Drysdale’s personal relationships.

In a further substitution, the cross-like telegraph pole in the background, with its unsettling and impossible perspective, occupies both foreground and background. This anachronistic substitution of a crucifix as a means of contemporary communication that cannot be fixed in either real time or space creates a further link to the transcendental and spiritual art of the past. In the past, the image of the crucifix and the Madonna and child conveyed specific meaning, similarly understood through anachronistic substitution, the telegraph pole and the wife and child convey meaning in the present. Read proposes that while local knowledge perhaps excludes a contemporary viewer, the telegraph pole, by being literally and metaphorically over the woman’s head, transmits a “superior knowledge of art both from and to the rest of the world.”

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31 Ibid., 130-31.
32 Ibid., 133.
confirms Read’s proposition that this painting is an attempt to reconcile, within a symbol of Australian national identity, both European and Australian cultural knowledge. Although, as Read later points out, Drysdale has not painted any actual telegraph wires, suggesting a breakdown of communication.  

The comparison of Piero and Drysdale discovers certain meanings and signification in Drysdale’s art practice. Not only does it locate the painting within a Western art discourse, it also confirms an anachronistic relationship between Australian and European art. As Read states the “aura” that is associated with Piero’s Madonna “sheds dignity” upon Drysdale’s woman. Thus, the anachronistic substitution of a past image confers meaning upon the newer work. But this also works in the reverse, in what Charles Martindale refers to as “a two-way process of understanding, backwards and forwards, which illuminates antiquity as much as modernity.” Read bestows the dignity of Piero’s Madonna upon Drysdale’s woman making dignity an important feature of the older work, but in the comparison he also allows for bathos at the expense of the Australian figure in her corpulence and tawdry domestic dress and his characteristically warped architecture. Both Klepac and Read use anachronistic quotations and allusions to Piero in order to make sense of Drysdale’s work, suggesting fruitful lines of enquiry for my own study of Drysdale’s anachronism in terms of substitution.

**A Non-Regional Approach to Art**

Russell Drysdale was of a sufficiently wealthy and cosmopolitan Anglo-Australian background to be able to move just as freely between England and Australia as he was between the cities and country towns within Australia; he was equally at home in Sydney as he was in the outback or London. His work will, therefore, be discussed in terms of a non-regional approach to the representation of place and space, for it

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33 Ibid., 143-44.
34 Ibid., 120.
enabled him to generate a more synoptic mythology of Australia than was available to more regionally based artists.

Drysdale’s connections to England and British traditions were particularly strong. This gave him a certain privileged understanding and acuity about Britain and Australia that enabled him to garner the essence of both cultures by frequently moving between them during his upbringing. Although born in Bognor Regis, England on 7th February 1912, Drysdale lived mainly in Australia, unlike the other artists under discussion in this thesis. However, perhaps because of his connections to both Britain and Australia, he never felt an emotional allegiance to any particular nation. Yet, in 1951 he explained his rejection of Britain in a letter to George Bell saying: “I am not part of this country [Britain] any more – I couldn’t live here and will be glad to get home and work again.”

Drysdale did not set out to be an artist. In 1932, while recovering in a Melbourne hospital from an eye operation, Drysdale met Dr. Julian Smith, a surgeon as well as an artist and photographer. Dr. Smith saw some of the drawings Drysdale was doing to amuse himself. Impressed, he showed them to Darryl Lindsay, who although not yet the curator of the National Gallery of Victoria was well connected in the Melbourne art world. Lindsay introduced Drysdale to George Bell, who had recently opened up the Shore-Bell School of Art in Melbourne.

In November 1932, Drysdale left Australia on a trip to Europe inspired by George Bell’s discussions of Modern Art. Drysdale wanted to discover for himself the work of the Modern painters. The effect of seeing the works in the galleries rather than in reproductions had a profound effect on him and he later spoke of the importance of seeing the actual work rather than relying on reproductions:

> Modern paintings which seemed to me quiet when I had seen them as reproductions shown to me by Bell, came as a short of shock when I saw these

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things in galleries; quite suddenly they had a meaning which they never had in books. 

Drysdale was able to approach the seminal works intellectually and objectively, prepared by George Bell’s teaching. Accordingly, like other artists who travelled to Europe to see old masters and more contemporary artworks, the spatial gets privileged over the temporal in a synchronic perception of the art on display. This means that the art works contextualize each other in a different way from reading about them chronologically in an art history book. Thus for Drysdale and the others in this thesis, Piero was perceived synchronically with modernism, unlike Fry who recognized the design and form that he valued in the art of the past in the modernist works of Cézanne and Seurat, or George Bell, who could only come to understand Modernism after a separation of both time and distance from his original and limited experience of it. As a consequence, a particularly synchronic experience of engaging with a broad range of art within a short space of time was part of the Australian reception of modern art, as opposed to an awareness of the diachronic evolution of art and the conditions that informed and shaped European and British modern art practice.

Drysdale attempted to incorporate into an intellectualized representation of Australian space elements of what he had seen in contemporary European and British paintings. He worked slowly and consequently built a relatively small oeuvre. Lou Klepac notes that Drysdale viewed art as, “a complicated and difficult process.” However Klepac goes on to say that Drysdale approached his studies with an intellectual vigour. This is not to say that being intellectual makes a painting free of emotion, rather, because the emotion is expressed through design, it is an aesthetic emotion made fuller by being controlled. Drysdale has in common with O’Brien, Smart and Bellette, the way his paintings resist sentimentality and address a seemingly universal humanity that resonates with Piero’s equally intellectual approach. Nevertheless, he differs from

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them in that he sought an Australian identity for his simplified forms and rhythmic compositions.

Drysdale returned to Australia in 1934 with a new visual lexicon and sensitivity to the changes taking place in Australian art. Unlike the earlier Australian impressionist tradition of painting en plein air, Drysdale preferred to paint in his studio and to rely on his memory and photographs. His formative years on his family’s large rural property had established a connection to the land that would remain an essential part of his consciousness. This would shape his representations of the landscape, giving rise to Donald Friend’s rather biting comment that a Drysdale representation of the South Pole would look like the central Australian desert. This discriminates Drysdale from Smart for whom the whole of the developed world, Australian or Italian, looked like an industrial non-place. Friend’s observation supports the supposition that Drysdale used the landscape as a means of navigating through the problems of pictorial representation, in much the same way as Bellette used mythology or O’Brien used Christian iconography, with the differences arising out of their personal needs. This thesis argues that underlying Drysdale’s approach to the landscape was a conception of modern representation based upon Pieran and other Early Modern elements of design. Therefore, the complex temporal structures in his work point to an intellectual and conceptual exploration of representation, rather than an attempt at realism. His paintings of the Australian outback and its people, based upon sketches and photographs taken during his travels across Australia, were more attempts to resolve problems of representation than realistic portrayals of the landscape:

I’m busy working out a theme in a landscape at present which is giving me a lot of fun – inter-relating large forms so that the rhythms flow through them and gain emphasis from staccato movements here and there, such as the almost cubic shapes of the roof-tops of a town in the middle distance – it’s good fun and I find I have a bit more courage about it than I had before and tend more and more to use colour not locally but as an arbitrary symbol to emphasise the relationships of the forms and areas and provide an illumination which belongs entirely to the picture.

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39 Don Bennetts, Donald Friend: The Prodigal Australian (Eight Mile Plains, Qld: Marcom Projects distributor, 2007), DVD.
Drysdale rejected the pastoral visions of the Heidelberg school and their Romantic notions of the natural sublime and beautiful in favour of anachronistic Quattrocento strategies of design inspired by Roger Fry’s writings. This, it is argued, was an intellectual rather than emotional approach, a way of seeing governed by an awareness of pictures as constructions of the mind rather than of the eye.

Drysdale’s recognition and acknowledgement of painting as an accumulation of ideas into images represents a particular and unique vision that has the symbolic use of colour, design and perspective of the Byzantine and Tre- and Quattrocento art at its source. This idea will be explored in terms of the anachronistic allusions to the art from the past and the symbolism in The Rabbiter and His Family, a painting completed in 1938 while Drysdale was still studying under George Bell.

The Anachronistic Presence of the Italian Primitives in Drysdale’s Early Work.

Figure 58. Russell Drysdale, The Rabbiter and his Family, 1938
Oil on canvas 61.5 x 76.7 cm
Signed and dated lower left
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
The Rabbiter was once a familiar character in the Australian outback; the poorest of farmers, he was sustained not by his produce but rather by the number of rabbits he could capture. Drysdale’s treatment of him, however, raises his status and imbues the man and his family with the same kind of dignity, meaning and importance as the subjects of an Early Modern Italian altarpiece. This practice also recalls the Modernist French artists, like Rouault, whose paintings elevated the everyday characters at work and leisure in and around Paris. However, Drysdale, as Van Gogh did with his images of peasant farmers, elects to represent the rural working class rather than the urban bourgeoisie. In this semi-satirical deviation from the expected subject matter, I shall argue that Drysdale adopts a particularly Australian egalitarianism towards art and society.

The space in which Drysdale reimagines this familiar character imbues the Rabbiter and the landscape with relevance and meaning. *The Rabbiter* draws attention to itself by its arbitrariness and ambiguity. There is nothing to suggest, other than the title, the man’s profession. The carefully tilled fields, well-maintained buildings and rainwater tank connote excellent farming skills, so why not call him a farmer? Perhaps then, the title is purposefully ambiguous and refers to the character of the man and his growing family? If that is the case, then it is not without a certain wry and base humour, which is reinforced by other elements of the painting, like the woman’s pompom slippers. The title however, does draw the viewer into a close examination of the landscape in search of clues and places the family in the context of local knowledge.

While the object of the painting may be the rabbiter and his family, meaning is conveyed through the overall design and colour. Firstly the traditional pyramidal arrangement of figures draws on the hierarchical composition of early Italian altarpieces, a strategy generic to the art from that period. The hierarchical arrangement of figures in which the most important figure forms the apex of the triangle can be seen in Duccio’s *The Maesta* as well as in Piero’s *The Resurrection*, for example. In both these works the triangular composition emphasizes the centrality and importance of the central figure, be it the Mother holding the child or the risen Christ. However, there is a certain amount of irreverence in Drysdale’s use of this
compositional device. Drysdale shows more interest in the harmony of colour and form and the play of light than any religious significance. He also deviates from any formal distortion through irony and satire in a manner that was uniquely Australian. From this point of view, modernist distortion takes on an element of parody, which, surprisingly, does not contradict a balance with sacred forms and transcendental colours that lift the scene into an exalted, anti-naturalistic sphere.

![Figure 59. Duccio, Maestó, 1308-1311](image)
Tempera and Gold, 213 x 396 cm
Museo dell'Opera Metropolitana del Duomo, Siena

In *The Rabbiter*, Drysdale positioned the houses on the edges of the canvas and tilted the land to create a theatrical backdrop that emphasizes the flatness of the picture plane and confirms the artificiality of the setting. The two buildings frame the composition like the wings of a stage and provide a barrier between foreground and background. The figures that occupy the shallow foreground reinforce the theatricality of the overall image, conveying the impression of constructed imagining, rather than realistic depiction. The family is on display for the viewer, a fictional reconstruction within a narrative of a rural utopia imagined by Drysdale in a partly anachronistic Early Modern visual language, though as we shall see it is strangely intermixed with
modernist stylistic qualities. This anachronistic combination opens up the possibility of other interpretations based on the temporal structures within the painting.

The hierarchical composition elevates a lowly rural character, usually associated with poverty, to a position of veneration reserved for more illustrious subject matter. Understood as a metaphor for Australian art, Drysdale appears to be asserting Australian equivalence and viability through the use of pre-Renaissance compositional strategies. This need for assertion signifies the anxiety of the Australian artist in the face of European and British hegemony.

The figure of the Rabbiter is the focal point of the painting, due to both his relative size and because he occupies the apex of the triangular composition. As already noted, this gives him the same status as Piero’s risen Christ or Duccio’s Madonna and bestows a certain ironic and anachronistic spirituality upon the family. The way the other figures reduce in size on either side of him is also anachronistic in that it alludes to the diminishing sizes of the saints typically found on either side of the Madonna and child. Thus, size and composition becomes an anachronistic indicator of relative importance within the painting.

Size also expresses time, as each child born at a different time brings an element of temporality to the image. This draws the family into a temporal relationship with the rhythm of the land as well. However, time is expressed in human rather than natural terms, the children indicating the couple’s fecundity and fertility, in the hope that the tilled field in the background follows suit. Unlike the picturesque landscape tradition where time is expressed through the depictions of ruins or ancient natural formations, Drysdale depicts time through the relative ages of the people who populate the landscape. This reveals a white Australian’s anxiety over how to represent time in a land that has no picturesque ruins or ancient stones and whose ancient history is supposedly invisible, albeit within the eternal cycles of nature, human life and religious recollection and contrast.
The dog scratching itself on the right is another momentary indicator of time in an otherwise static Byzantine array. The two dogs that flank the family group mirror each other in colour and breed and punctuate the bottom corners of the compositional triangle. They contain the family within this holy shape in the same way that trees are used to frame the composition within a Claudian derived picturesque landscape. The dogs are directly linked to the figure of the father through the diagonals that flow down from the top and the horizontal that forms the base of the equilateral triangle. The triangular relationship shows the father’s dominion over the two animals and by extension, over other animals, including rabbits, and indeed his family.

The Byzantine source for this painting is reinforced by the rhythm of feet that imitates the positioning of the feet of Constantine and Theodora seen in the mosaics at Ravenna. In both images, the central and most important figure is not only the tallest but, like Theodora who stands in front of her companions, the Rabbiter’s feet are in front of the others, reinforcing his status. Drysdale has enlarged and elongated their feet, giving them more surface area of contact. The way they are planted to the ground is a conscious deviation from the floating feet in the mosaics, and so gives rise to the speculation that this painting is not about transcendence but rather about firm occupation of the land.

Figure 61. Empress Theodora and Attendants, c. 547
Church of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy
Drysdale’s use of a Byzantine array legitimizes the social structures of a partially idealized mid-twentieth-century family. The male figures dominate the composition, the pose of the son on the right-hand side mirrors his father’s, their opposed legs bent at the knee create a protective frame around the eldest daughter. Repeated forms, created by using stencils that are sometimes reversed, are both Byzantine and Renaissance. The son stands with his arms authoritatively crossed suggesting confidence and independence while the diagonals formed by the father’s arms create a triangle that contains both daughters. There is a chauvinistic implication in keeping with the then dominant patriarchal doctrine in Australia that identifies the father as the protector of his daughters while the son at his side functions almost as his equal. Yet the mother, though positioned slightly behind, is not a passive or subordinate figure. The slippers that attach her to the home, while humorous, do not extend her dominion over the domestic space into the outdoors but rather serve as reminders that the outdoors is not her natural place. This is reinforced by the way she and her baby are turned slightly away from her husband, towards the house, while at the same time holding the viewer’s gaze with equal force. She is excluded from the male triangle but connected to her eldest daughter by the diagonal that travels from the daughter’s raised arm behind the father’s back. The Rabbiter’s hat disrupts the skyline whereas the trees frame the hatless woman. This is a further indication of their attachments to the public and private spheres of landscape and house brought together in this scene. The congregation of family, trees and hills naturalizes the family in the bosom of this half-cultivated (the ploughed field) half-natural (the meadow and grassland) scene. The direct outward stare of the figures and their stance convey confidence, arrogance and a feeling of defensive resilience.

The hillside that slopes gently up and into the background frames the family group by reinforcing the triangular composition but also demonstrates a Quattrocento concern with the illusion of space and distance, not unlike the background of Piero’s *Resurrection*. Drysdale has employed an anachronistic Quattrocento compositional strategy in his depiction of the background trees and rolling hills. The horizontal band formed by the trees that connects the two side hills are also seen in Piero’s *Queen of Sheba* fresco in Arezzo. Drysdale’s hills withdraw into a Quattrocento calm in the
rhythmic regularity of their corrugations that are picked up in the arch of some of the feet in the foreground.

Figure 62. Piero della Francesca, Queen of Sheba (detail), 1452-66
The Legend of the True Cross, Fresco,
Basilica of San Francesco, Arezzo.

Drysdale has used colour to reinforce the distinction between male and female. The brown and blues in the clothing of the son and father creates a pattern that links them and in the process sets them apart from the other female figures. The white shirt of the son that could perhaps link him to the indeterminate gender of the baby compositionally balances out the flat blocks of colour. The violent colour contrast between hills and sky draws the viewer’s attention to the abstract value of the colours. The absence of deep afternoon shadows suggests the dawn in the sudden and startling band of yellow in the background sky. Nevertheless, there is a transcendental immanence in the lowered horizon line that has to do with the static time of sunrise as part of an eternal cycle. Dawn denotes newness and rebirth, a metaphor for a new land, a new beginning and hope in a new country. The repetition of yellow in the scattering of spring flowers and the yellow hair of the baby reinforces the motif of birth and rebirth. The suggestion of dawn and use of yellow generates an overall feeling of hope, prosperity and confidence in the future, though in a tough sense, since the Rabbiter is a merchant of death for rabbits. Drysdale imagines Australia as an Arcadia, locating nobility and heroism in the experience of the common and the everyday. Thus, a French modernist approach to landscape painting has replaced the hot, sun-bleached landscapes of the Heidelberg School, signalling a rejection of the nationalist fervour that accompanied them. It is the expressive and symbolic use of colour and design that generates meaning rather than a nationalistic narrative,
although in Drysdale it is often what people do, their profession, rather than the look of the land that defines identity.

Drysdale’s appropriation of Early Modern forms was distilled through his exposure to European modernism. Drawing on the European tradition of painting, Drysdale uses rich and vibrant colours that echo French Post-Impressionist artists like Kisling, Derain or Van Gogh. The anachronistic Byzantine flatness and colour saturation also connects him to Matisse, while the tilled fields with their dots of new growth and curvilinear plough lines recall early Miró or Kisling landscapes. By following a contemporary European trend in painting, Drysdale is situating himself within an international rather than a parochial art world, accessed through an anachronistic connection to a more remote European art historical past. *The Rabbiter and his Family* is an image of Australia but the influences of European Modernism, particularly the School of Paris, are apparent. These elements suggest that Drysdale was perhaps tempering Australian nationalism in painting with an ahistorical, non-regional Western internationalism so as not to alienate possible British audiences.

**A Natural Manifestation of European Surrealism.**

As discussed in the previous chapters, artists in Sydney during the 1940s had embraced the art from the past, in particular, the Byzantine, Trecento and Quattrocento art.\(^\text{41}\) Drysdale’s move to Sydney in 1940 offered him a way out of the conflict and factional fighting of Melbourne’s socio-political art world and consolidated his interest in these eras. Once in Sydney Drysdale found a way of painting that corresponded with what the avant-garde was doing overseas. Bernard Smith, in wanting to find an Australian school of painting, denies Drysdale’s association with the School of Paris and instead formed an analogy between Drysdale and American artists such as Thomas Hart Benton, who he states in the 1930s “rejected the formal adventures of the School of Paris and returned home to paint the American scene.”\(^\text{42}\) Smith’s objection is not to the European influence, but rather to the growing popularity of abstraction in both


\(^{42}\) Ibid., 244.
Australia and America that those artists like Benton, and as we saw in the previous chapter, Wyeth and Hopper, were also resisting. Smith saw in Drysdale’s figuration and use of classical European sources the possibility of an iconic Australian way of painting:

In place of massive Roman arcades he [Drysdale] substitutes the cast-iron verandas of boomtime Australia. Thus the fantastic element, not being forced, gains power as a threat dimly felt beneath the surface of the commonplace. Here we are confronted with one of the basic qualities of Drysdale’s imagination. He seeks continually for what we might call a realistic correlative; in other words forms in real life which correspond to those more abstracted evocative forms given currency by avant-garde painters abroad.43

Smith’s ‘realistic correlatives’ bear a close, if subversive, resemblance to T.S Eliot’s ‘objective correlatives’, thus exposing Smith’s cultural source, though his use of the term also suggests some distortion or displacement from reality. These correlatives are not only found in the landscape or in cast-iron verandas but in Drysdale’s depictions of the people who inhabit the landscape. However, Smith’s interpretation of Drysdale’s images as representative of a ‘local scene’ obscures how the complex temporality indicated by the anachronistic presence of the European art historical past frames the local in international terms.

The massive elongation of limbs, for example, in Drysdale’s *Man Feeding His Dogs* painted in Sydney in 1941 recall the distortions of de Chirico and L. S. Lowry, but has another source that reaches further into the past to Byzantine art. The elongation of and emphasis on line, the flatness of the picture plane and the use of strong, contrasting and high-keyed colour are all elements of Byzantine art. This adds a temporal complexity that complicates literal interpretations by pointing to possible alternative and abstract formal meanings. The slender, blighted trees that echo the stick-like, angular forms of both dogs and man, for example, draw attention to the barrenness of the land and the lack of nourishment and shelter nature provides in this seemingly hostile and uncanny environment. As previously argued, Drysdale has

43 Ibid., 249-50.
overturned the Australian Impressionists’ romantic representations of the Australian bush that located continuity and endurance in nature and humankind. The slender, bare trees suggest that while the land itself may endure, man and nature are fragile and transitory, bringing in a dimension of time to this reading of the landscape. This meaning is not specific to land clearance in Australia, but also bears on the destruction that was occurring in Europe at the time as a result of World War II. Drysdale is using the specificity of an Australian image as a pretext to say something in general terms about the fragility of human existence in both Europe and Australia. He transcends mere Australian identity, although this meaning is largely to be understood and consumed in Australia.

*Man Feeding His Dogs* is considered by some to be the first painting of Drysdale’s that evokes his sense of the isolation and sparseness of what is now considered to be a typical Drysdale representation of the Australian landscape. Drysdale shared with Jeffrey Smart an intellectual approach to painting, but unlike Smart’s depictions of non-places and the transitional spaces that are found in the post-industrial western world, Drysdale depicts stereotypes of people located in purposefully imagined barren landscapes that were understood as being uniquely Australian. Both Drysdale and Smart discarded naturalism, but unlike Smart, the anachronism in Drysdale’s paintings attests not to the similarity of Australia to the rest of the modern, industrial world but rather to its often rurally based strangeness and difference. Both artists adopted a Quattrocento restraint of emotion, a controlled emotionalism that leaves the viewer with a sense of unease, but while Smart’s world can be understood in contemporary terms, Drysdale’s is a barren space that defies logic and resists understanding. In its alienation and nightmarish irrationality, Drysdale imagines Australia as a semi-naturalistic manifestation of European Surrealism.
Figure 63. Russell Drysdale, *Man Feeding His Dogs*, 1941
Vaucluse, Sydney
oil on canvas 51.2 x 61.4 cm
inscribed in brown paint l.r. Russell Drysdale
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
Gift of C.F. Viner-Hall, 1961

*Man Feeding His Dogs* depicts Australia as a strange, uncanny wasteland that resists logical understanding, but it also suggests an historical past. This painting uses the Australian landscape to convey the irrational and bizarre, in contrast with English or European traditional representations of idyllic and familiar concepts of landscape and the representation of time. In keeping with the tenets of Surrealism, the weird and dreamlike quality of the painting conveys a sense of uneasiness, anxiety and discomfort. The basic subject matter is the routine muted generosity of feeding a trusted animal in the midst of a barren scene. An elongated, stick figure of a man strides across the bare landscape, weighed down by a bag of food for his dogs. A chair hangs in a tree; a wagon wheel leans against another, strange evidence of a bizarre or dreamlike domesticity that exists elsewhere. Their presence suggests the impossibility of getting rid of anything in such an isolated place. This leads to a strange but perhaps rurally characteristic build up of discarded, sculptural objects that indicate a time in the past when they were once of use.
The straining of the dog at the end of the chain adds to the ambivalence of the scene: is it eager to be fed or aggressive at being chained? An affectionate longing for company is another ambiguous possibility, but the man seems to have no emotional energy to respond as he trudges towards the dogs, shoulders hunched, his arms hanging limply by his side, one weighed down by the bag he carries and by the regularity of a routine activity. Neither the task nor the image can be understood in conventional terms nor does it bear any relation to prior depictions of rural industry.

Isolation, distance and space are the themes of this painting, made problematic by the anachronism that suggests the presence of an historical past.

Drysdale’s painting conveys the mind-numbing boredom of repetitive and mundane tasks in a strange and alienating environment. Steven Crowell identifies boredom as one of the themes usually associated with existentialism, along with dread, alienation, the absurd, freedom, commitment and nothingness. Existentialism emerged after World War II, flourished in Europe in the 1940s and 1950s, and thereafter found its way to Australia as evidenced by the presence of many of those themes in this painting. Crowell identifies Martin Heidegger as one of the major existentialist philosophers. Heidegger recognized the inextricable relationship between boredom and time, noting how boredom lengthens time into something to be endured. However, he was also vaunting boredom as a universalizing state of consciousness around this time. According to Heidegger, the endurance of boredom leads to attunement, a subjective state fundamental to our understanding of being. Drysdale, therefore, brings time and universalism together in this existential image of the extreme boredom associated with mundane repetitive tasks contained within a surreal and alien landscape. Drysdale’s painting is therefore more akin to Bellette’s depictions of a state of mind rather than any particular place or time. The veracity of Drysdale’s representations of the Australian landscape is thus contested in favour of the

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exploration of an emotion through Modernist formalism that has its source in Early Modern art.

Drysdale conforms to Modern painting by conveying boredom through formal devices, such as the monotonous repetition of vertical lines created by the bare, almost dead trees. He has carefully composed and precisely worked out the composition of this painting. The triangle is once more used as the organizing principle underlying the structure but now a bare, thin tree occupies its apex. The spiritual transcendence suggested by the significance of the triangle is devoid of redemption. The lowered horizon line highlights the emptiness of the landscape and accentuates the vastness of the space. The foreground makes up the base of the triangular composition and is occupied by the man and his dogs. Life occurs only on the single earthbound level, there is no higher ontological realm to offer salvation, suggesting no reprieve from boredom and no spiritual transcendence.

Incongruously leaning against the tree on the far right is another stick figure who acts as a formal device to balance the composition and amplify its sense of scale. He creates a mysterious waiting narrative that only adds to the impression of overall boredom. He complements the trudging of the other figure in a continuous present tense state of waiting. There is also the oppositional temporality between the discarded objects that signify the past and an interminable present of the waiting figure. Opposing tensions are also found in the bounding of the hounds on the left and opposing stasis of the one on the right. The anachronism in these temporal relationships identifies meanings within this work that lie beneath literal interpretation. The boredom depicted in this painting suggests that Drysdale was intentionally using the Australian landscape as a vehicle to explore complex existential themes fundamental to a contemporary understanding of human nature that reached beyond Australia.

Critics and collectors in Australia and London ratified the perceived veracity of Drysdale’s imaginative vision. They understood his paintings as truthful representations because they framed the Australian landscape in ways that resonated
with the post-war existential debate. In Australia, Paul Haefliger remarked that Drysdale was able to ‘imprint his vision on the populace so that it regards its environment through his eyes’. Haefliger acknowledges that while Drysdale’s paintings are compelling they remain a personal vision. Kenneth Clark, in London, identified Drysdale, along with Sidney Nolan, as being among the “first artists to give the flavour of that strange continent.” This suggests that for Clark, Drysdale’s images corresponded with what he imagined Australia to be, in spite of him being unfamiliar with the Australian outback. Drysdale therefore, perhaps unwittingly, depicted the landscape with distinctive qualities that assisted in defining its national identity. Yet, Drysdale was not trying to create a singularly Australian sensibility, but rather a way of participating in a western art discourse as an Australian. In 1959, he made this clear in an address:

Because of our youth and continental detachment it is more likely that we may be able to say something of our own in our own tongue as a contribution to the international language of art.... We can employ ideas that grow from within us, not necessarily those of other people....

Drysdale acknowledged in this 1959 address that although Australia’s cultural heritage was European the physical distance from Europe allowed Australian painters to develop a language of their own, transitioning from a receiver to a transmitter of culture. However, he was quick to clarify that this did not mean the production of a national art because he considered art to be an international language. In this belief, though not in his painting, he resembled Jean Bellette. Drysdale used the landscape to differentiate Australia from Europe. He rejected the modern urban environment, even though he, like the majority of Australians, lived in a coastal city, in favour of the

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50 Ibid.
51 The 2013 *Australia* exhibition in London curated by Kathleen Soriano was testament to the fact that Australian identity is still characterized through images of the landscape.
mythology of an exotically remote landscape. Smart and Drysdale were etching the rural and urban sides of the same Australian coin. Drysdale’s economic and social standing and his middle-class respectability perhaps gave him the authority to create an Australian mythology, whereas Smart’s homosexuality and outsider status forced a more controlled, less revealing, approach to painting. Their friendship and knowledge of each other’s work is revealed by Smart’s account of how both Drysdale and Bellette had urged him to ‘loosen up’ his brushwork and how his refusal to do so had resulted in fierce arguments, that nevertheless did not affect their friendship. Drysdale and Smart both imposed certain frames of meaning upon Australian nationhood and national identity, but Drysdale’s was adopted and reinforced by Kenneth Clark in the 1940s signifying the importance of British cultural authority at the time.

Anachronism in Drysdale’s Landscapes

Kenneth Clark, a protégé of Bernard Berenson, was undoubtedly one of the most influential figures in twentieth-century British Art and by association, one of the most influential figures in twentieth-century Australian art. John Ruskin’s influence on Clark is noticeable in Clark’s first book, The Gothic Revival, written in 1928 while he was still a student at Oxford. His appointment as director of London’s National Gallery in 1933 made him the youngest person, at the age of thirty, to hold that position. Clark’s other publications included books on Leonardo da Vinci and Piero della Francesca. In 1963 Graham Sutherland painted a portrait of Clark in profile, making a direct link between Clark and Piero’s portrait of Federico da Montefeltro, reflecting Clark’s interest in Piero and drawing an analogy between Clark and the ideal Renaissance man.

Kenneth Clark visited Drysdale in January 1949 and bought *The Councillor’s House*, even before Drysdale had time to make the final touches. Klepac notes that it is one of the few paintings Drysdale dated and proposes that it was done at Clark’s request.\(^{54}\) In a review of Sir Kenneth Clark’s *Landscape Into Art*, Hoff states that Clark identifies attitudes towards the landscape as indicators of meaning that recur through time. She notes that he refers to allusions and quotations as ‘similarities of spirit’ rather than historical influences. She illustrates this by drawing attention to the way Clark conflates time by seeing anachronistic similarities between the effects of war in the sixteenth century German Reformation art of Grunewald and Altdorfer and post-World War One twentieth-century German expressionism.\(^{55}\)

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*Landscape into Art*, which Clark was in the process of compiling on his journey to Australia in 1949, is arranged thematically rather than chronologically. His themes include symbols, fantasy, the ideal and the return to order.56 Hoff draws attention to the universalizing characteristics of these categories that are independent of time identifying them as “typical modes of thought and feelings which achieve their fullest expression at some favourable historical moment, but recur in individual temperaments throughout the history of art.”57 This suggests that Clark’s is a present tense and synchronic rather than historical or diachronic dialogue with the art from the past, one that denies temporal and spatial distance from its origins in European cultural history. I will argue that Drysdale’s quotations and allusions to Modernism and Classicism and his use of an underlying Pieran structure bear an anachronistic ‘similarity of spirit’ that engages in a synchronic conversation across time with other art works.

While he was in Australia, Clark embraced what he perceived to be a democratic and unsophisticated culture, as opposed to British intellectualism and elitism:

> They are the only truly democratic and non-hypocritical people of the world.... There are relatively few rich people and, thank God, even fewer smart people. What is known as ‘sophistication’ does not suit the Australian character at all, and the only unpleasant experiences I had in Sydney were a couple of dinners with socialites.58

As noted, Clark had identified Drysdale, along with Sidney Nolan, as being among the “first artists to give the flavour of that strange continent.”59 In this Clark is rejecting the hopeful, pastoral vision that the Australian impressionists had created for one of barren emptiness and difference to Britain. Drysdale and Nolan’s landscape satisfied Clark’s agenda, and he actively supported them, while O’Brien, Bellette and Smart,

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57 Hoff, "Landscape into Art," 314.
59 Clark, MacInnes and Robertson, *Sidney Nolan*, 8.
with their non-specific places and more European themes, seem to have reflected nothing back to him.

Simon Pierse, in “Sir Kenneth Clark: Deus Ex Machina of Australian Art” (2009) provides a context for understanding why Drysdale’s The Councillor’s House, would have appealed to Clark. Pierse argues that Clark was concerned that British art was moving away from the landscape tradition. In ‘The Future of Painting,’ published in The Listener in 1935, Clark expressed his concerns that the growing popularity of abstraction, with its potential exhaustion of form and lack of pictorial symbolism, was leading painting to a dead end. According to Martin Hammer, Clark wanted to use the landscape tradition to revive public interest in Turner, Constable, Samuel Palmer and Ruskin’s Romanticism, as an alternative to the formalist aesthetic of Roger Fry and Clive Bell. Drysdale’s painting can be understood as a Romantic articulation of the decline of western civilization. Clark saw Drysdale’s images of a vast, dry, desolate and fractured landscape as a reinvigoration of the figurative language of painting that was being overshadowed by abstraction. Clark, however, was serving British rather than Australian needs.

Clark understood that representations of the Australian landscape had relevance beyond local national concerns. Peter Fuller points out that during the 1940s, Clark actively endorsed contemporary British landscape artists like Paul Nash and Graham Sutherland. Fuller argues, however, that the gentle English landscape could no longer function, in Romantic terms, as an appropriate metaphor for the twentieth century, whereas the harsh, empty Australian landscape could. Drysdale’s The Councillor’s

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61 Martin Hammer notes that for Clark the autumn of 1935 was a time of foreboding with the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and the passing of the Nuremberg Laws in Germany, which denied rights of citizenship to Jews and imposed severe restrictions on their personal freedom. Thus it can be argued that Clark’s view of German influence on modern art and his revival of British Romanticism was a reaction to the neo-classicism promoted by the fascists. However, as Hammer rightly points out, both Hitler and Stalin were also condemning Modern Art. Martin Hammer, “Kenneth Clark and the Death of Painting,” Tate Papers, 20 (Autumn 2013), accessed 12/01/2015, http://auth.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/kenneth-clark-and-death-painting.
62 Ibid.
63 Peter Fuller, Peter Fuller’s Modern Painters: Reflections on British Art (London: Methuen, 1993), 176.
House functions as a metaphor for the aftermath of the war in its tragic portrayal of a deserted city, a once prosperous and industrious civilization now lost and abandoned.

Drysdale’s responses to the Australian landscape were always ambivalent. He was familiar with the interior of Australia having crossed from east to west by road, and on various occasions had made several shorter excursions, filling notebooks with sketches and taking photographs of people and places encountered along the way. Coming from a wealthy, landowning family he had benefitted from farming the land. However, his painting, The Councillor’s House shows that he was also keenly aware of the devastation that mining and farming had wrought. As a result his landscapes often represent time in ways that are dream-like, sometimes nightmarish, informed by a visual language associated with surrealism. An alternative approach through anachronism exposes other anxieties inscribed upon the landscape.

64 Christopher Heathcote, Russell Drysdale: Defining the Modern Australian Landscape (Kent Town, South Australia: Wakefield Press in association with Tarrawarra Museum of Art, 2013), 16-17.
The Councillor’s House recalls Jeffrey Smart’s approach to painting in its manipulation of detail and in its objective and intellectual rather than emotional engagement with subject matter, though Smart would never have produced such a violently disjunctive composition without reconciling its opposites in some way. In contrast to Smart’s tightly controlled brushwork, Drysdale’s looser forms bring an almost organic fluidity to this painting, particularly noticeable in the foreground. Drysdale, as with Smart, was responding to both contemporary and historical images in that British modernism and classicism are both at play in The Councillor’s House. Drysdale may have also employed a Pieran mathematical compositional structure and manipulation of light and space as a formal strategy, but his landscape denies any possible transcendence as both house and mine stand in timeless abandonment and unholy juxtaposition.

The deeply etched, expressive lines of the foregrounded mine are in opposition to the strangely classical presentation of the house that all but disappears into the landscape. The classical association of the house creates a link between the once prosperous mining community and the height of European art and culture, fading into the past and disappearing from view. The modernist distortions that convey the strangeness and unfamiliarity of the landscape are juxtaposed against the classical configuration of the house, whose angular roof breaks but also mimics the gentle rise of the background hills. The subterranean excavation of the mine represents a Barbara Hepworth womb or a Henry Moore tube tunnel. They are imposed beneath the symmetrically classical arrangement above ground. The grotesque style of the British modernist, Graham Sutherland, can be seen in the strong tonality and arabesques of the rock formations that contrast so distinctly with the precise architectural lines and soft tones of the house itself and shatter the otherwise monochromatic composition with its deeply gouged linearity. Drysdale deviates from Sutherland with this monochromatic palette, in deference to the hot Australian sun that bleeds the colour from the landscape and reduces everything to the colour of bleached bone. The juxtaposition of the classical past with contemporary modernism within an Australian context generates a temporal and spatial tension in the work.
Time has passed in this painting: the once occupied and productive house and mine are both now a relic from another time, for both the original and what destroyed it now belong in grotesquely permanent juxtaposition to the past that once had agency but is now only a vessel onto which meaning is projected. There is further temporal dissonance in the melancholy fence that once protected or contained something of value but now functions only as a compositional device. The fence links the house to the entrance of a smaller mine in the mid-ground, whose shape echoes the larger more compelling entrance in the foreground.

The anachronism in this painting opens up an analogy between the use of the land and the history of painting. *The Councillor’s House* offers a deliberation on the history of representation, from the classical through to the modern – a resource to be mined for the purpose of the artist in the same way that the settler mines the land. Drysdale wrote about the importance of having a base in reality when developing an idea in a painting:
I still remain convinced that to create something you must take your substance from reality, and by so doing you give it a quality of unreality and because of that produce what is a reality of its own.... The metamorphosis of an idea. A painting which is, though taken from life, a painting, and if it is art then becomes something real in itself.  

Drysdale’s photograph of the house and its surroundings draws attention to his selective use of detail in order to represent a space that conforms to a particular idea. A comparison with the photograph shows how Drysdale has isolated the house and ignored the detail of the landscape around it, which contains much more foliage. He has painted the house as if the land was absorbing it, while at the same time exposing the destructive legacy of mining, potentially undermining the stability of the house from beneath. The house is perfectly classical but the unconscious bowels of the earth that disappear beneath it, registers a peculiarity and oddness in opposition to a Pieran classically unified and rational sense of place and belonging. Drysdale offers the viewer an entrance into the depths of the unknown, even of the unconscious, but the conflagration of sudden colour and the orange glow that emanates from within suggests danger rather than enlightenment. While both the mine and the house appear to be deserted and abandoned, while not actual ruins, they are reimagined as relics of surreally conflicting land use, imposing a sense of history and time upon the landscape that displaces any existing pre-colonization history, though the mysterious title also divorces the image from European history in Australia. Nothing in the painting explains why the house might once have belonged to a councillor, except as the ghostly reminder of socially conflicted labour – white collar work and the gruelling manual work of mining.

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Donald Friend and Jean Bellette and her husband Paul Haefliger had bought houses at Hill End in the Bathurst region outside of Sydney in the 1940s, turning it into a small artists colony, frequently visited by artists from Sydney, including O’Brien, Smart and Drysdale. Hill End was once a vibrant city, second only to Sydney in size. It reached its peak in 1872 during the Australian Gold Rush but by the end of century it was almost a ghost town. The atmosphere of the Hill End landscape inspired Drysdale. In 1948 he wrote the following to Friend:

Hill End with cultivated and intelligent detachment achieves its real and significant beauty to an artist – its sense of history, its charm of form and dignity, its life of contrast that its roots in the past give it in this day and age.66

Clark saw in Drysdale’s painting what he considered to be a necessary prerequisite for contemporary landscape painting: a background for legend and a reflection of human values. The mid-twentieth century Australian landscape, therefore, allows for the projection of fantasy, reducing it to a site upon which a multitude of meanings can be

imposed. The identification of anachronism in Drysdale’s landscape paintings provides an interpretive tool for unearthing one such layer of meaning. The next painting under discussion, *Sunday Evening*, painted in 1941 conforms to Clark’s understanding of how the landscape genre functions. Drysdale’s sophisticated use of anachronistic strategies in this image reveal his use of the landscape as a backdrop to mythologize the isolation of Australia, while human values are reflected in its family social dynamics.

**Mythologizing Australia**

In *Sunday Evening* Drysdale mythologizes the isolation of Australia by making it analogous with the imagined isolation of a rural family. The site of the painting cannot be identified; there are no specific landmarks to ground it in reality. As Klepac points out with respect to *The Councillor’s House*, the historical or typographical Hill End is not represented, rather it is Drysdale’s own version.67 The landscape in *Sunday Evening* is in keeping with Drysdale’s use of the landscape to convey an idea of something – an ideated image that emerges from intellectual engagement with an idea rather than through the observation of an object or place. The way this mythologized space operates is once again exposed through the depiction of time.

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67 Ibid., 168-69.
Time is once again made apparent in the depiction of the different stages of life, and referred to most obviously in the title of the painting. Sunday evening is associated with a kind of ennui or accidie, an end of the weekend melancholy, more relevant to city than rural life. This suggests that the painting although depicting a rural scene has more to do with urban concerns, the landscape functioning as site upon which those concerns can be played out. Family and isolation are two themes of this painting that when interpreted through its anachronism suggests another layer of meaning. As Richard Read argued in relation to Stokes’s Pisanello, art reveals how our perceptions of the outside world reflect the structures of our minds. As in The Rabbiter, Drysdale depicts a family group but departs from The Rabbiter, in that it is no longer an obviously cheerful or optimistic image. A lack of coherence also

As in The Rabbiter, Drysdale depicts a family group but departs from The Rabbiter, in that it is no longer an obviously cheerful or optimistic image. A lack of coherence also

probematizes the family. Where The Rabbiter was a cohesive group with internal divisions, Sunday Evening shows a family overtly divided. A slender rather precarious tree divides the canvas into two distinct areas, the public sphere of masculinity on the right and the private sphere of feminine domesticity on the left. Time is indicated in the way the boy has detached himself from the mother by moving into the masculine and more public realm occupied by the father. The universal human condition of growing up and detachment from the mother is further suggested by the juxtaposition of the outside and domestic realms with the bicycle, a means of leaving, placed beside the washing line, but in this world there may be nowhere to go.

Drysdale's elongated figures have not yet given way to his rounded and monumental Quattrocento forms but there is evidence of increased volume, seen particularly in the still mainly angular form of the mother. Her bizarre pom-pom slippers break the bleakness of the mood through their faint suggestion of satire. She holds her baby on her lap in a parody of a fourteenth-century Madonna; legs akimbo, she sits not on a throne but on an old crate. She is framed by the parallel angle of her daughter’s extended leg, opposite to but rhyming with her mother’s, and standing her ground. In conjunction with the leaning tree, the daughter’s leg encloses the mother and child within a protective but unholy triangle. The mother’s lowered eyes look passively down at the baby on her lap, while the daughter, standing directly behind her, stares out of the picture plane engaging with the viewer in an anachronistic reference to the hailing figures in Early Modern frescoes. If daughter implicates the viewer as a hailing figure, she does not offer any indication of salvation; instead she contributes to a sense of unease, tension and anxiety intimated by the need for the formal arrangement of an assertive and protective triangle. The triangular structure is ambivalently used. On the one hand, it is protective but on the other, it constrains and encloses. Nor does the daughter invite the viewer into the scene, but instead her extended leg and foot could tentatively suggest the hope for escape – a sudden springing up - or on the other hand, a defiant standing her ground.

Time is differentiated and condensed by the serial ages of the baby, the young girl and the mother. The three are trapped in a never-ending cycle of birth and death. They are
contained in the barren, stony landscape where both humans and nature appear to be overwhelmed by the effort of being. The date of this painting shows its completion during the height of the Second World War, and perhaps that helps to account for its underlying sense of menace and despair.

The light, often understood in Quattrocento or Trecento art to be a symbol of birth and redemption, is ambiguous and unsettling. Drysdale uses a theatrical and wholly unnatural light source to reinforce the separation between the male sphere on the right hand side of the picture and the female sphere on the left. The left-hand side of the father and son, the dunny in the distance and the slender tree against which a bicycle rests are all illuminated by a light source from the left. The left side of the painting has its light source coming from the right. This abstract use of light might be a direct quotation from Piero who, as stated previously, uses distinct light sources to separate regions of heaven and earth. Drysdale employs alternative light sources, not for a Tre- or Quattrocento purpose of depicting transcendence and the divine, but in a contemporary way reminiscent of de Chirico, to reinforce the strangeness of the scene and alienate and unsettle the viewer.

Drysdale also uses colour to reinforce the division between the two groups. It adds an internal and formal rhythm to the work. The repetition of white in the apron and swaddling cloth connects the mother and child. Earthy tones of deep reds and greens further unite the female group and anchor them to the domestic realm, enclosed by the water tank and the fragile branches of the tree. The separated male figures, however, are projected over the low horizon line and into the sky, the light blue effectively isolating them not only from the domestic realm but also from each other.

The clouds that form like breaking waves overhead have an oppressive linearity that rather than being dark and heavy with rain are as ineffective and languid as the figures themselves. They add to the theatricality and unreality of the scene by giving the father’s head something to push against and further enclosing the foreground space.
Once more, as in *Man Feeding his Dogs*, a strange, dream-like domesticity exists, located not inside but outside, in the landscape. The designation of public and private, male and female spaces recalls Piero’s distinct ontological realms in the *Resurrection* where the risen Christ is differentiated from the sleeping soldiers by a different light source and different point of view, but these realms are certainly not heaven and earth. There is also the suggestion that there is no other realm to escape to, as both regions are contained within the measureless outback. The space is desolate and barren although the few leaves on the tree, like those that would appear on the tree in the second half of *Waiting for Godot*, first performed in 1953, do suggest a false or fragile hope.

Displacing an anachronistic nineteenth-century landscape tradition symptomatic of John Glover’s writhing boughs and other nineteenth-century Australian artists enables Drysdale to project a twentieth-century imagined experience of isolation onto the Australian landscape. Signs of domesticated human life – the washing line and the distant dunny – occupy the centre of the canvas and push the humans to the sides, a space usually reserved for natural formations, trees or other geological structures, that function as framing devices in traditional picturesque landscapes. In so doing Drysdale participated in visualizing a mythology that understood Australia as isolated and strange through the rejection of familiar Claudean or Poussinesque pictorial norms. The structure of the painting with its separation of male and female realms, its circular and ambiguous temporality and its triangular constriction suggests a personal interpretation of family relationships.

The increased bodily volume that was only suggested by material form in this painting found its apotheosis in Drysdale’s generic series of ‘big women’, where he used size to express the endurance and continuity of humankind; another myth located in the Australian landscape, and one that coincided with the end of the Second World War.
Endurance and Continuity

Figure 72. **Russell Drysdale**, *The Drover's Wife*, 1945
Vaucluse, Sydney
oil on canvas 51.3 x 61.3 cm
inscribed in brown paint l.r.Russell Drysdale
National Gallery of Canberra
As World War II was drawing to a close Drysdale moved away from elongated limbs and fragile human forms to monumental, voluminous figures that appear to be anchored firmly to the ground. The Drover’s Wife (1945), Woman in a Landscape (1948/9) and The Gatekeeper’s Wife (1965) are images of non-individual stereotypes imbued with abstract meaning. The Trecento and Quattrocento practice of using generalised features is a possible source. Piero’s Madonna del Parto, for example, is not a highly defined individual, but rather a representative of a type, in her case a peasant type, quite different from his other sacred women. Drysdale does something similar by painting an archetype rather than a portrait. Drysdale acknowledged this in a letter to George Bell in 1948: “If the subject is a woman then it shouldn’t be Edna or May or what have you, but a sort of archetype.”

69 Russell Drysdale, Letters to George Bell, letter 9, 15/10/48, n.p.
with a large formless shape dressed in an equally plain dress of a general shabbiness. The archetype recurs as Drysdale’s *Woman in a Landscape*, slightly older and shabbier, and later as the *Gatekeeper’s Wife*, this time with a child. Each appellation further reinforces the woman’s lack of individuality and the generic nature of the characterization. It is a stereotype that, like Piero’s Madonna, carries a particular meaning, but unlike the Madonna, it is not an indication of spirituality or transcendence. There is particular nobility in Drysdale’s women because they bear the numbing loneliness, anonymity and isolation of their world upon their forms. Their monumental size speaks to their endurance and their continuity, thus meaning is conveyed through form and volume.

Berenson had argued that Piero’s figures exist in and of themselves and are thus not justified by the need for a narrative. Fry had also stressed suppression of narrative. Drysdale takes his cue from Berenson and Fry in that his figures also simply exist, although they allow us to imagine a kind of narrative for them. Often, as discussed in relation to his earlier paintings, narrative is reduced to the level of cyclical narrative, for example the gatekeeper’s wife is opening the gate, again, and again; the man feeding his dogs is doing so for the umpteenth time. Thus, Drysdale’s figures are imprisoned by cyclical time, which according to Klepac gives his paintings a profound melancholy.  

Kenneth Clark celebrated architecture as a signifier of civilisation. In the place of monumental structures, Drysdale’s big women display those qualities of civilisation in their physicality and presence. While they have a stillness, clarity and volume that suggests the influence of Piero, they depart from Piero in that they are ill at ease in their surroundings. Drysdale’s women stand out, planted there, occupying space like a large cathedral occupies a square, dwarfing everything around them. They are solid within that harsh and hostile landscape, intimating that they will always be there while the trees, usually associated with continuity and age, are by contrast spindly, denuded and ephemeral. Here nature is fragile and unreliable; it is as if Drysdale is now

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suggesting that it is the human presence that will endure, even if it also perpetuates anxiety.

Ursula Hoff compared Bellette’s depictions of ancient mythology to Drysdale and Sidney Nolan’s depictions of the outback in terms of temporality stating that they share a quest for “an historical dimension of the continuous, eternal and infinite.” However, she argued that Drydale located continuity in nature and the setting of life, rather than in a human presence:

[Drydale’s] paintings reflect continuity in nature, in the setting of life. Jean Bellette uses classical myth to introduce a human continuity, to emphasise emotions which do not belong to any one age and occasion but which reflect the fundamental conditions of man.72

In opposition to Hoff, for whom Drydale’s depictions of nature reflect continuity, I have argued that nature appears fragile and impermanent in contrast to the massive forms of his figures. The new solidity in Drydale’s Woman in the Landscape, or The Drover’s Wife, reflects determination and survival. Their monumentality speaks of the European past enduring, but reimagined in a different setting. Using the familiar, historically validated, and anachronistic language of figuration, Drydale’s paintings reinforce the strangeness of the landscape but at the same time the ability of humans to adapt and survive. Hence Read’s argument that the swaggeringly relaxed posture of the Gatekeeper’s wife specifically repudiates the ‘cultural cringe’73 as defined by Arthur Phillips in 1950.74

Imagining Deep Time in an Unfamiliar Landscape

R.L. Pesman argues that the landscape in Australia did not provide the same sense of belonging, timelessness and continuity that it did in Italy:

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Time and time again, reference is made to the ages-old bond of sympathy between humanity and nature which is found in Italy but deemed to be lacking in Australia, to the interrelatedness and interdependence of past and present, to a past in Italy that continually informs the present, to a landscape in which human occupants seem to belong.\footnote{Pesman, “The Italian Renaissance,” 236.}

If Europeans belong only to the Australian present, the Aboriginal Australians, on the other hand, are connected to the Australian past through the landscape. \textit{Young Girl at the Rockpool} (1963) reveals a generalized mythology that associates Aboriginality with the deep time of the land, while the European attachment is only to the present time. Hence the sense of homelessness I attributed to Drysdale’s white Australian figures alluded to earlier. The Indigenous Australian is therefore excluded from Drysdale’s mythology of the present, and this severs the only local manifestation of Pesman’s “interrelatedness and interdependence of past and present” that is truly Australian. It is therefore necessary for Drysdale to impose one through quotation and allusion to the European past.
Young girl at the Rock Pool was painted in 1963 when Drysdale was in the midst of mourning the deaths of his wife and son. Read alludes to Drysdale’s use of art as a means of working through the tensions and anxieties in his life in his psychological analysis of how an angry Aboriginal woman in the preliminary sketch for The Gatekeeper’s Wife stands in for a complex repressive displacement of his alcoholicely abusive white wife.76 Geoffrey Dutton wrote of this period of Drysdale’s life:

The works that emerged [1963-64] were sweated in blood, through a period of acute psychological depression it almost seemed as if the artist in the man had gone bush and there was no way of finding him. The wounds in Drysdale’s life have always led him to draw his creative bow more strongly than ever before.77

If, as Dutton suggests, Drysdale had ‘gone bush’ in response to deep psychological wounding, the earthy red and yellow ochres that appear to absorb and engulf the figure could indicate his emotional state. A solitary, naked female figure sits motionless on a rock, seemingly a natural part of the landscape. The rocks in the background envelop her; their planes and surfaces find equivalence in the planes and surfaces of her flesh and limbs. In effect, Drysdale is returning her to the land, in a re-enactment of burial. Compare this, however, to Drysdale’s treatment of white Australians who tend to stand out from the landscape, often towering above a low horizon line, emphasizing a separation from the land. By treating the woman’s flesh and the background rock in the same way, Drysdale connects the woman to the deep time of the landscape through its geographical features. There is, of course, from a current perspective, something deeply racist about this image as she sits deprived of agency and rendered as a passive object for white appraisal, although her expression is potentially hostile.

The woman appears slumped in resignation, emphasized by her rounded belly, which is offset by the curve of her back. The opposing curves are repeated in the rocks on the left consolidating the temporal connection to the land. Her too long arm and too large hand abstract their literal meaning. Her arm is tree-like, while her fingers grip the rock and spread out like roots, transforming her into a natural being, emphasizing her oneness with the land. Her feet dangle over the rocky outcrop, disappearing into a barely seen pool in which there is no reflection to indicate conscious or deep thought. This, along with her lack of clothing that reinforces her connection to the land, serves to dehumanize her. She looks beyond the viewer, emphasizing distance and exclusion.

The title of ‘young girl’ not only designates time but also problematizes it for he has painted someone who appears to be much older than a young girl. Furthermore, it robs her of any agency that comes with adulthood and serves to differentiate her from the other ‘big women’ and perhaps also from his recently deceased wife. This image of a woman connected to the deep time of a landscape overrides the finality of death, mortality and the passage of time.
Klepac considers Drysdale’s depictions of Indigenous people to be sympathetic, however, I, in agreement with Read, contend that they exist in his paintings in the same way that his other figures do, as stereotyped, non-individual, generic characters, painted without overt expressions of emotion. They are revealed as either too much part of the land, like rock formations or trees as in this painting of the young ‘girl’, or dissociated from the land in an unnatural separation as seen in Group of Aborigines painted ten years earlier in 1953. This group differs from his generic white women and family groups in that they do not possess any dominion over the land, they are not planted there, cathedral-like, but are instead displaced in the landscape. Both paintings represent Drysdale’s unresolved attitudes and anxieties about indigeneity, despite his fervent expressions of respect for the Aboriginal community.

Figure 75. Russell Drysdale, Group of Aborigines, 1953
oil on canvas 50.8 x 61.0 cm stretcher; 64.5 x 74.3 x 7.7 cm frame
Not dated.
Art Gallery of New South Wales

In *Group of Aborigines* Drysdale pictured the group in a barren landscape with no evidence to suggest any kind of domesticity or a working relationship with the land. Unlike *Young Girl at a Rockpool*, they tower over the horizon line, with the result of seeming to occupy a vast space in which they don’t belong, when clearly, in another sense, they do. They are gathered, unnaturally, in a tight formation in the foreground of the canvas, bunched together leaving spaces either side when they could have spread out. The adults loom over the single child, in a very different composition to Drysdale’s other families, like the *Rabbiter or Sunday Evening*, breaking the natural cycle of birth and death seen in the other family groupings. Here, there are simply too many adults and too few children to make up a traditional family or to suggest a natural temporality, as he has with his other families, based on perpetual cycles of birth and death. There is something wrong about the grouping that remains unspoken but conceivably hints at or unwittingly betrays Australia’s policy of the forcible removal of children from Indigenous families or the coercion of employees.

No light strikes their features and so their faces are in deep shadow and ill-defined, emphasizing a lack of expression and individuality. Significantly, the light is focused on the background with its strange flatness and the indeterminate boundary between land and sky. This accentuates the volume and mass of the dark figures in the foreground. The treatment of light and the overall composition highlights the flatness of the picture plane and reinforces the impression of dislocation. There is no humour or satire in this image. The lack of shoes, even those ridiculous pompom slippers worn by the rabbiter’s wife, suggests Drysdale’s acknowledgement of an interstitial people trapped in the space between two cultures, their bare feet rooted in the land while their western clothes and hats strip them of that connection. Read points out that another purpose of their bare feet is to suggest poverty and to further defamiliarise their Western clothing, rendering it incomplete by not extending to the ground.\(^{80}\)

The group are inaccessible to the artist and therefore to the viewer, despite the excessive sense of their display. In *Group of Aborigines*, the indigenous people are as

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\(^{80}\) Ibid., 175.
displaced as Drysdale’s Europeans, while *Young Girl* shows the woman as a part of the land. One of the perhaps impressively unaccountable aspects of this painting is the way that the representation of a group manages to convey collective isolation. The shift in emphasis can be the result of the recognition of loss. It is as if, as Read partly suggests, the loss of his wife and son finds expression and sympathy in the Indigenous loss of the land. But, as mooted above, he also suggests something more troubling and violent than that, a displacement of personal grief into othered aliens. Drysdale’s acknowledgement and attempt to engage with Australia’s Aboriginal people is absent from the universalism and internationalism of the other artists in this study. Yet, this engagement is problematized through the temporality he attaches to them that either locks them into the past or cuts them off from the present.

**Conclusion**

Anachronistic references to Early Modern art in Drysdale’s painting mediated his images of Australian cultural identity. The familiar, historically validated, European language of figuration reinforced the strangeness of the Australian landscape but at the same time the ability of humans to adapt and survive. Recognising the figures in Drysdale’s paintings as substitutions for earlier models from the Byzantine and Tre-and Quattrocento identifies a transcultural dialogue between Australia and Europe.

Despite his prosperous Anglo-Australian origins, Drysdale adopted a particularly Australian egalitarianism towards art and society. He resisted the British hegemony associated with the taste for the High Renaissance in Australia by employing visual strategies from an earlier era and thereby establishing an equivalent status for Australian art. He asserted Australian identity through anachronism, making time a feature of the vast and undifferentiated nature of the Australian outback in his paintings. It can be languid and repetitive time, as in the opening and closing of gates and the daily ritual of feeding dogs, or circular time, depicted by the cycles of birth, life, and death in his family portraits. Drysdale depicted Australian space in terms of the boredom associated with traversing long, undifferentiated distances. In addition

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81 Ibid., 176.
to spatial complexities, Drysdale represented historical time by representing the accumulation of discarded items and abandoned buildings, displacing ancient Aboriginal history with a relatively recent white Australian history. Drysdale’s rural scenes therefore have more to do with urban concerns, with the landscape functioning as a site upon which those concerns can be played out, since his figures amongst the rural detritus are most often exiles from the city.

Drysdale’s paintings attest to a rurally based strangeness and difference, a barren space that defies logic and resists understanding. In their alienation and nightmarish irrationality, Drysdale’s paintings imagine Australia as a semi-naturalistic manifestation of European Surrealism, where a strange dream-like domesticity is located outdoors in the landscape. The veracity of Drysdale’s images remained uncontested because of the need to assert an Australian point of difference from the rest of the modern world, yet Drysdale’s paintings depict a state of mind rather than any particular place or time.

The emotionally reticent but stereotyped immigrant characters that populate Drysdale’s landscapes have largely European values and traditions and corresponded with, and indeed determined, the way his contemporaries imagined the outback. Drysdale avoided accurate depictions, creating composites and manipulating imagery to suit the overall design of his image. In this way he created an objective and emotionally distant representation of a mythologized landscape and the people that populate it that allowed the viewer to remain cerebrally detached, yet eerily moved.

These reflections warrant a larger point. Drysdale’s paintings are an urban imagining of the outback for urban consumption. His surreal images homogenized Australia even though he represented only an aspect of it, facilitated by his love for the bush but compromised by his life in the more populated cities of Melbourne and Sydney. They are studio constructions intended to identify Drysdale as an international artist participating in a western art discourse by using formal elements of design to articulate a national identity that is both arrestingly new and time-weathered in the double sense of Early Modernist precedent and local endurance of harsh and isolated conditions.
An association with Piero identifies Drysdale, along with the other artists in this study, with a specifically British intellectual and cultural group who interpreted Piero’s work as having timeless and universal qualities. The complex temporal structures and Quattrocento stillness and restraint of emotion inherent in Drysdale’s paintings show a level of sophistication that belies Australian isolation and parochialism. Correspondingly, Drysdale’s knowledge and implementation of contemporary visual art locates his quintessentially Australian representations within the wider context of modern Western art and thought.
CONCLUSION

Anachronism in mid-twentieth-century Australian figurative art has significant implications for how we position the artists I have discussed within the history and culture of their time. This thesis has argued several main points. Firstly, certain Australian figurative artists in the mid-twentieth century were, by employing anachronistic strategies, following a lead established by the European modernists in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Secondly, anachronism is not a neutral choice but one that is ideologically and politically charged. Thirdly, Australian artists perceived European art and artefacts synchronically with the present and invested them with agency and meaning that had very little to do with the time or the conditions under which the artworks were originally produced. And lastly the individual rationales behind these artists’ employment of anachronism in painting suggest that the Australian articulation of modernism was a complex and heterogeneous one.

The overall argument of this thesis is that anachronism, as a defining feature of a certain kind of mid-twentieth-century Australian figurative painting, created complex temporal structures that revealed an Australian version of modernism informed by the revival of classicism and the concomitant rediscovery of Piero della Francesca and other Early Modern artists in Europe after the First World War.

This thesis makes the claim that anachronism is a feature of the mid-twentieth-century figurative painting of O’Brien, Bellette, Smart and Drysdale by showing how multiple pathways lead back from their paintings to the art of the Early Moderns through
European modernism. These claims recognise an artwork’s capacity for substitutional synchronism on the one hand, and the performative approach to art on the other. I have sought to demonstrate that the multivalency inherent in Early Modern art made them relevant to Australian art in ways that enabled an active engagement with the present rather than mere escapist withdrawal into the past. The significance of this demonstration is that it establishes an important, alternative art historical approach to the artists concerned that makes a richer, less reductive and dismissive understanding of their work available to contemporary viewers.

My argument has been based on Nagel and Wood’s theory that an object has both performative and substitutive elements that activate its capacity to disrupt notions of time, and an understanding that the viewer has a synchronic and diachronic relationship to an object that governs its temporality. For example, for twentieth century Australian artists, Piero’s Flagellation no longer functions performatively as an historical document referring to events in the past, nor as a transmitter of divine immanence intended at its time of creation, but as a substituted object of form and structure that contributes to the agency of the work. Religious mystery is secularised, yet remains no less mysterious.

An Australian appreciation of the Italian Early Moderns is presented as a rebellion against the established Australian preference for the High Renaissance and Mannerism that echoed other more personal as well as public rebellions. Anachronism therefore reveals something about how these artists positioned themselves within their historical context. For example, the anachronistic presence of the Early Modern in Justin O’Brien’s work was a means of withdrawal and resistance needed to navigate through trauma and other personal and emotional issues. By stripping back the brilliantly coloured surface meanings of his paintings, a deeply personal, spiritual vision is revealed through a medieval use of colour and early Renaissance compositional strategies. Anachronism in both style and subject matter replaced personal trauma with peace and stillness and public Australianness with a transculturated aura of universality.
The outbreak of the Second World War in Europe forced Jean Bellette to return to Australia, bringing with her an understanding of European modernism. Her anachronistic use of ancient mythology, which she used as a pretext to explore universal themes and human emotions, extends the arguments of withdrawal and resistance to include the idea that universalism expressed through a European cultural heritage was firstly gendered, with the pressures on a woman being different from those on a man, gay or not, and secondly, excluded a local Australian heritage. In contrast to O’Brien, Bellette, who of course as a woman could not have personally participated in battle at that time, was yet politically engaged, particularly in terms of resistance to Fascism in Germany and in the Spanish Civil War. We saw that this was possibly a consequence of her integration into wider social and intellectual circles through her husband and her contemporary aesthetic allegiances. While O’Brien had to hide his sexuality or could only expose it indirectly, Bellette had to resist her marginalisation, by alluding to the prominent role accorded to women, like Polyxena, in antique art and literature. By quoting Piero or Masaccio, Bellette was able to challenge that kind of Australian art discourse which had up till then been largely dominated by High Renaissance taste. I have argued that Bellette needed endorsement from the past in order to assert herself as a female artist in the present, and chose an Early Modern visual language to resist a tradition from which she felt excluded.

Jeffrey Smart had a much more direct visual relationship to Piero della Francesca than O’Brien, Bellette or Drysdale. Smart’s ambiguous paintings of ubiquitous images of the post-industrial world are often explicitly rendered with the same unifying light and perspective used by Piero della Francesca. I endeavoured to show how under the influence of modernism, Smart emptied out the original religious meaning of Piero’s use of light and universalizing mathematical composition from his paintings. Instead, the stillness, silence and Quattrocento unity between nature and humanity that infuses O’Brien’s and Bellette’s work articulates a modernist sense of alienation and disquiet in Smart’s. His quotations and allusions to both Piero and de Chirico operate as substitutions for the originals, reframing them within an Australian context even though Smart, like O’Brien, left Australia for Italy. By contrast to O’Brien’s slight
reminders of Sydney’s Elizabeth Bay in hybridized landscapes, Smart wholeheartedly extended the urbanism he had first encountered in Adelaide to its Italian counterparts. Smart maintained his Australian identity in Italy, bridging the very real distances and differences between Europe and Australia, the European past and the Australian present. Though the themes of timelessness and continuity in Smart’s anachronisms bear significant resemblances with those of Bellette and O’Brien, they diverge sharply in their suggestion of an international rather than a universal human discourse. In other words, he was more interested in evoking uncanny cultural analogies between contemporary Australia, America and Europe within a Pieran aesthetic than exploring the conditions that supposedly affect humanity in general. In this respect his realistic style and ambiguous use of light reflected a shift towards contemporary urbanism that both Australia and Italy were undergoing. Smart’s transitional non-places drew Australia into a comparable relationship with the rest of the modern world through his re-imagining of Pieran Quattrocento symbolism in international rather than purely Australian terms. Compared to O’Brien and Bellette, Smart embraced the phenomenon of industrial modernity rather than merely the stylistic attributes of European modernism.

In contrast with Smart’s urban internationalism, Drysdale shifted from the city to the outback, translating Pieran idealism and spirituality into an empty and surreal landscape and using humour in his depictions of Australian life to characterise a broad Australian identity. Seeming to transcend the regional identities of the major cities, which often localized the appeal of other Australian artists, Drysdale’s outback paintings were synecdochic: their representation of the centre was a part that stood for the whole. Meanwhile the temporal clash of classicism and modernity seen in The Councillors House looks forward to Whiteley’s deconstruction of the analogous relationship between modernism and the Early Modern in Fidgeting with Infinity, which I will shortly adduce as different in kind in its use of Pieran sources. Drysdale’s painting depends on anomaly; in this respect it partakes of a general tendency that distinguishes him from Smart in style as well as in its rural subject matter. Drysdale employs Early Modern references to generate a quasi-comic discrepancy, in the grubby obesity of Joe for example, in which the association with Piero actually shocks the
viewer by contrast within the analogy. Drysdale is emphasising the discrepancy, particularly for British eyes, so as to prepare them for what Clark would call ‘the strange flavour’ of Australia. Early Modern art is the frame for perceiving Australian difference, albeit difference that shrewdly perpetuates, even as it deviates from, the fashionably uncanny existentialism of Smart’s industrial internationalism.

The four artists discussed in this thesis took different pathways to Piero and along the way revealed both the flexibility of meaning inherent in his work and the multitude of ways it can be interpreted and utilised. Their quotations and allusions to Piero and the Early Moderns create complex temporal structures that bring new understanding to what it means for Australians to quote from Piero in particular and the Early Moderns in general. By applying contemporary theories of anachronism that include those of Agamben and Paz, I have argued that anachronistic appropriations of Early Modern art were an innovative and contemporary means of representation that in large measure resisted the pervasive conservatism of Australia itself and its academic art tradition. Rather than constituting a false and sentimental nostalgia for the past, I hope to have demonstrated that the anachronism in their work provided a critical distance from which they could engage with contemporary concerns. As anachronism also indicates the displacement of time within a work, my application of theories of anachronism revealed these artists’ tensions and anxieties about their present.

Although I have explained how the mediated, second-hand introduction of Early Modern paintings to these artists in slides, illustrated books and journals often served to abstract those works from the aura of their physical settings and cultural contexts, I have also shown how this sense of decontextualization generated suspense and longing that prompted visits to the originals in situ at significant junctures in these artists’ careers. Thus one of the questions asked in this study was the effect of travel on Australian art. All of the artists I have discussed demonstrated an urgency to travel, with London, Italy and France being popular destinations, thus evoking comparisons to the eighteenth and nineteenth century European Grand Tour. The embodied experience of a work of art had a lasting impact on their paintings. Justin O’Brien spent days in the London National Gallery making endless copies of Piero’s The
Baptism of Christ. He paid close attention to the compositional structure of the painting, the balance of light and dark and the use of light as a unifying device, deriving a sense of meaning for all of those strategies that he successfully incorporated into his painting, The Virgin Enthroned, upon his return to Australia. Jeffrey Smart relates in his memoirs how he managed to find a ladder to see the face of Christ in The Resurrection up close when he visited San Sepulchro, noticing the double light source and dual point of view. Jean Bellette commented that until she had seen Masaccio she had not understood form at all and travelled to Italy to see Piero, writing for Art in Australia about both artists in the heightened language of the newly converted.

Drysdale travelled to Italy so that he could see for himself the Piero frescoes in Arezzo that so enthralled his mentor, George Bell. The urgency these artists displayed in their desire to see particular paintings, like Piero’s, and the way they responded to them when they did, shows their deep appreciation of the transnational agency of art. It also underscores the temporal and spatial complexities of seeing older art as synchronic with other more contemporary paintings, and often alongside many others in a museum, when they have previously only been seen out of context and in reproduction.

My conclusions, however, do not mean that anachronism was in any way a unified and consistent strategy employed throughout modern art in Australia. The late twentieth-century rejection of Eurocentric art in Australia was largely the result of influence shifting from a European, and particularly British, tradition of emulating the art of the past,¹ to an American derived enthusiasm for postmodern pastiche, driven by an awareness of consumerism and technology. This underscores the fact that anachronism was not a ubiquitous practice throughout Australian twentieth century art and explains why I have not tried to present anachronism as an overarching nationalistic feature of the idiom. Moreover, using theories of anachronism as an interpretative tool is of course only one of many possible approaches to understanding mid-twentieth-century Australian art.

¹ Svetlana Alpers, The Vexations of Art (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), passim.
It is incumbent on me in concluding to explain principles of exclusion and chronological limits of the thesis when there are other, and some later, Australian painters who have directly responded to Piero and who I have not discussed in this thesis. Despite the interest we might take in their response, there are good reasons why they do not fall within its scope. Sidney Nolan and Brett Whiteley both produced paintings that rework specific Piero paintings. Nolan’s *The Annunciation* bears an uncanny resemblance to Piero’s *The Nativity* and Whiteley’s *Fidgeting with Infinity* is an acknowledged reimagining of Piero’s *The Baptism of Christ*. One aspect of a more inclusive line of enquiry could have been the perceived power and influence that these particular Piero della Francesca paintings, that hang in London’s National Gallery, have had and continue to have on the Australian imagination.

Figure 76. **Sidney Nolan**, *The Annunciation*, 1951
Ripolin, 90.5 x 121cm.
Private Collection

Figure 77. **Piero della Francesca**, *The Nativity*, 1470-5
Oil on poplar
124.4 x 122.6 cm
National Gallery, London
While Nolan’s allusions to Piero are arguably rare and uncertain, they are unquestionable in his *The Annunciation*. But Nolan’s use of Piero’s *Nativity* in that painting amounts to a stylistic disjunction rather than a mere discrepancy as in Drysdale’s work, for it is painted in a style whose jagged and expressionistic nervousness is the antithesis of Piero’s serenity. We have seen discrepancies between past and present, again, opened up in Smart’s *Taxi Stand*, for example, but they are not taken anywhere near the extremism of this point of disjunction. Nevertheless, Nolan is still working within a largely British tradition of reverence for Piero. Whiteley, on the other hand, rather than reverential comparison, is making parodic disjunctions. He deconstructs the British tradition by creating a confrontation between American materialism and Italian spiritualism at a time when Australian culture as a whole was
beginning to identify less with British and European tradition than with superheated American innovation on many fronts. The inclusion of contemporary multi-media elements stuck on to the canvas, photography and overtly sexual references, challenge both the integrity and the decorum of the medium of painting itself. Modernity and anachronism are not in harmony with one another as in the other paintings discussed in this thesis. As Richard Read points out, “Whiteley’s stylistic and multi-media elements deconstruct each other to remain in unresolved and anomalous solution.”

The bastion of early Renaissance stasis has been transformed into a trendy American road movie as the dotted white line of a highway snakes up the right hand side of the triptych. Margherita Zanoletti argues that Whiteley’s pastiche of Piero is primarily about Whiteley rather than about appropriation. She explains that the reactivation of The Baptist was part of Whiteley’s general self-representation that relied on the appropriation and translation of works from the past but also from the extra pictorial insets of contemporary artists such as Jasper Johns. It is for these reasons that Whiteley’s wide-ranging sources and influences, still more than those of Sidney Nolan, put him outside of the confines of this thesis. As Robert Hughes rightly observed: “Every painting of Whiteley’s is a roll in the hay with the muse of art history,” with the emphasis very much on sexual rolling rather than the tacitly reverential emulation that the four artists in this study convey through their borrowing. While Fidgeting with Infinity offers an interesting comparative study for future research, its basic affiliation with American culture, pop art, pornography, the horrors of the contemporary Vietnam war and its overall style of subversive, heterogeneous pastiche sets it within a later paradigm that distinguishes it from the tenor of the art discussed in this thesis.

Another exclusion from this thesis, worthy of pursuing in future research, is that, well before the Brett Whiteley era, I believe that there were some significant overlaps between the American and Australian understanding of Piero as they had a similar exposure to European and British modernism. A comparative study would provide

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interesting insights into the shared assumptions and differences between mid-
twentieth-century figurative artists in both countries, and perhaps reveal actual
exchanges between American and Australian artists with these shared interests.
Another possible avenue for future research that has sometimes lurked in this thesis is
the Pieran references in Australian women’s art. While Jean Bellette is the only female
artist to fit the parameters of this thesis, there are other women who used Pieran
strategies in their work. Dorrit Black, for example, taught Jeffrey Smart Quattrocento
compositional strategies and the universalising nature of the Golden Ratio, which he
put to good use in his painting. Another modernist artist of interest is Nora Heysen,
whose calm and composed self-portraits resemble women in Piero’s frescoes. There
are also significant contemporary women artists who continue to utilize Early Modern
and Renaissance art.

There may be even more reason to explore parallels with New Zealand artists. The
predominantly British influence over another former colony may again have persuaded
artists to also see Italian art through British eyes. Kushana Bush is a contemporary New
Zealand artist who blends the historical with the contemporary, responding very richly
to Piero’s battle scenes from The Legend of the True Cross while Séraphine Pick,
another New Zealander, pastiches a Quattrocento portrait by adding earphones,
thereby engineering synaesthetic anachronism with contemporary sound technology.\(^5\)

\(^5\) I am grateful to Richard Read for bringing these artists to my attention.
As these artists were responding to British art, another area for further investigation would be a comparative study of the anachronistic presence of Early Modern art in British figurative painting, particularly those from the early part of the twentieth century. Bernard Meninsky has already been mentioned with regard to his influence on Jean Bellette, but another British artist of interest would be Winifred Knights (1899-1947), whose work shows a considerable Quattrocento influence.
I hope that contemporary cultural theorists, writers and visual artists will find something of value in this application of an anachronistic approach to Australian art. Theories of anachronism challenge the conception of linear time. They recognise art’s capacity for a conversation across history, indicated by the complex temporality of any work of art. Furthermore, it is hoped that this research will be of interest to scholars in the field because even the most iconic and overfamiliar of paintings can be defamiliarized by discriminating its spatial and temporal tensions and thereby revealing new layers of meaning. New interpretations of well-known works discussed in this thesis, which have often previously been considered largely decorative and apolitical, now reveal tensions and anxieties concerned with personal issues of trauma, sexuality and alienation and more generalised concerns about representation, nationalism and provincialism. Bridges are created between the personal and the public through the discussion of the artist’s use of anachronism. I have argued for example that the iconically Australian national identity Drysdale projected in his paintings are also spaces in which he works out more personal concerns to do with family, loss and self-definition, while Bellette asserted herself at a time of endemic inequality for women by using ancient Hellenistic mythology as a pretext to explore universal themes associated with the human condition.

Anachronism therefore opens up the possibility of meaning beyond such overtly depicted public concerns as religion or nationalism, and suggests more personal and private concerns, such as sexual identity, that could not, at that time, be publically exposed. Taking meaningful pleasure in the recognition and interpretation of anachronism is therefore a useful means of stripping back surface meaning and identifying complex metaphors in mid-twentieth-century Australian figurative painting.


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