

Sidney Nolan: Across Continents

8th September – 8th October 2010



Burke and Wills Expedition 1962

Agnew's opens its new premises at 35 Albemarle Street on September 8th with an exhibition dedicated to the work of Sir Sidney Nolan (1917-1992), the internationally acclaimed Australian artist who was hailed by the art historian, Kenneth Clark, as one of the leading artists of the twentieth century.

Born in Melbourne of Irish stock, Nolan was largely self-taught as an artist, having worked as a tram conductor, dish washer and display designer in a hat factory before turning to painting as a career. Aged 21, he attracted the notice of the arts patrons John and Sunday Reed, whose house, near the Melbourne suburb of Heidelberg, was frequented by a group of young artists who have become known as 'The Angry Penguins' after a contemporary journal of that title. Nolan married in 1938 and later entered a ménage-a-trois with the Reeds. Having been conscripted into the army in 1942, he deserted a year later and had to live under an assumed name. In 1946 he began a series of paintings of the infamous outlaw and bush Ranger, Ned Kelly. The impact of the paintings, now considered icons of modern art was to turn Nolan into *the* 'enfant terrible' of Australian art, setting him on a path to international recognition.

Agnew's have championed Sidney Nolan since the 1980s and he exhibited a selection of his Chinese paintings with the gallery in 1982. Agnew's represented the artist's estate following his death in 1992 and staged a major retrospective of his work entitled *Nolan's Nolans: A Reputation Reassessed* in 1997.

The forthcoming exhibition will follow in the tradition of *Nolan's Nolans* by containing works that span the entirety of the artist's career from the very early *Prison Camp* (c. 1939) to late works such as *Chinese Mountain Landscape with Boat* (c. 1982). It will feature paintings from some of Nolan's best-known series including *Burke and Wills* – the ill-fated explorers, *Leda and the Swan* and *Paradise Garden*. *Sidney Nolan: Across Continents* is intended to provide a rich overview of the artist's oeuvre, drawing attention to the fact that Nolan travelled extensively and resided in a number of different countries throughout his lifetime. The exhibition will include examples of works by Nolan depicting Asian, European, American and Antarctic subjects in addition to the better-known Australasian subjects. By doing so, it seeks to reposition Nolan not only as a leading Australian artist but as a leading global artist. The inclusion of a number of Nolan's designs for the stage will further testify to the diversity of his work.

Long-standing support for Nolan provides evidence of Agnew's strong links with Australia. The gallery has sold important paintings to major institutions in Australia including the National Gallery in Canberra, the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Gallery of Victoria and has helped assemble some of the continent's most important private collections, including that of James Fairfax.

Following the initial success of his *Ned Kelly* pictures in the late 1940s, Nolan's artistic reputation accelerated quickly. His work was exhibited at leading galleries across the world including the National Gallery of Victoria, the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Tate Britain and his pictures were acquired by premiere institutions including The Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Arts Council of Great Britain and The Royal Collection. Nolan's artistic success was recognized when he was awarded an O.B.E. in 1963. This was followed by a knighthood in 1981 and an Order of Merit in 1983. He was elected A.R.A. in 1987 and R.A. in 1991.

Artist's Notes:

Born in Melbourne, Nolan grew up in the coastal suburb of St Kilda. He enrolled at the National Gallery of Victoria's School of Art but preferred to follow a course of self-education. In 1938 he attracted the notice of John and Sunday Reed, whose house Heide became the centre of activity for a group of avant-garde artists including Albert Tucker, Joy Hester, John Perceval and Arthur Boyd. Nolan entered into a ménage-a-trois with the Reeds, which ultimately destroyed his relationship with his first wife Elizabeth Paterson, whom he had married in 1938. Nolan staged his first solo exhibition in Melbourne in 1940 and was conscripted into the army in 1942. He continued to paint whilst training with the army in Dimboola and ultimately deserted in 1943, living in hiding under the assumed name of Robin Murray. Between 1946 and 1947, Nolan produced his first *Ned Kelly* series, which was arguably the defining moment of his career. Nolan ended his tumultuous relationship with Sunday Reed in 1947 and consequently moved away from Heide.

In 1948 he married John Reed's sister, Cynthia and together they moved to England in 1953, after Kenneth Clark advised Nolan to travel to Europe in order to develop and hone his artistic skills. The Nolans visited a number of European countries in the 1950s, spending considerable amounts of time in Italy and Greece. They also lived for a period between 1958 and 1959 in America. Nolan loved visiting new places and travelled extensively throughout his lifetime, journeying to China on several occasions and even visiting Antarctica in 1964. He was also passionate about the performing arts and particularly opera. He befriended the composer Benjamin Britten and was commissioned to create set and costume designs for productions at some of the world's most prestigious venues including the Sydney Opera House and the Royal Opera House, collaborating successfully with the Australian director Elijah Moshinsky on three projects. In 1976 Cynthia died and in 1978 Nolan married his third wife Mary Perceval. The artist died in 1992.

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