

typically?australian

brisbane city gallery



typically ? australian

15 may - 28 june 1998

vice-chancellor

Visual art exhibitions, by their nature, are collaborative activities. Many and various individuals, organisations and institutions contribute to their making. Even more people are involved in viewing them.

The *Typically ? Australian* exhibition is a collaborative exhibition project developed by the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University and the Brisbane City Gallery, Brisbane City Council. Three years ago, Griffith University, through the Queensland College of Art, entered into a unique management agreement with the Brisbane City Council to jointly manage the Brisbane City Gallery.

Typically ? Australian is the latest exhibition to demonstrate the potential of this partnership. It brings together the resources and expertise of the Brisbane City Gallery together with the research skills and experience of guest curator, Humphrey McQueen. Together, this union has provided an exhibition of national significance where research and scholarship, applied in a cross disciplinary way, has contributed to an explorative analysis of the formation of nationhood. In considering the question 'What is Typically Australian?' this exhibition not only investigates how 'Australianness' has and continues to be constructed, but also demonstrates the vital role played by visual artists and designers in this formative process.

Griffith University wishes to acknowledge the financial support of the Australia Foundation for Culture and the Humanities, The Arts Office - Queensland Government, the Myer Foundation and the Brisbane City Council in making this exhibition possible.

L.R. Webb
Vice-Chancellor
Griffith University
20 April, 1998

provost/director

University education is often challenged by the potentially conflicting demands of evolving critiques of community values and the specific vocational parameters and training requirements of industry.

In no area of university work is this potential conflict more prominent than within the design education sector. This is because of the role design graduates play, and the importance given to sustainable employment through a buoyant economy which is a cornerstone of our political, social and educational systems. However, as we know, predictions about outcomes from this potentially all 'consuming' economy are dire.

The designer's task can be seen as solving graphic, spatial, object and systems problems and in so doing adding commercial and cultural value to these products. The educational challenge arises in achieving a satisfactory resolve to the question (which has many answers) of the relationship between individual commercial enterprise and broader, even global, environmental consequences and responsibilities.

Of course, designers and design educators are aware of this dilemma and as Buckminster Fuller so astutely pointed out in the late 1960's, it is within the grasp of designers to both add value to products and at the same time reduce their immediate and long term cost to the environment.

The *Typically ? Australian* exhibition and conference (May 16 and 17 1998, Ithaca Auditorium, Brisbane City Gallery) goes further than simply reinforcing this critical point of opportunity and responsibility. It attempts, through analysis of images and objects, to determine the role artists and designers play in the formation of underlying values which individuals, communities and nations adopt with subsequent ramifications for the economies and material worlds in which we live.

Professor Ian Howard
Provost and Director
Queensland College of Art, Griffith University
20 April, 1998

acknowledgements



Front cover and back detail image: Simon Mee *Blinky the Axe Hero* 1996 oil on canvas



wattle & rose

Florence Fitzgerald
Australia early 20th century
Through the golden tufted wattle
c.1918 Adelaide
oil on canvas, 114.2 x 164.9cm
Art Gallery of South Australia Adelaide
Wattle Day League 1918

Deborah Russell
Rose 1990
oil on linen, 76 x 66 cm
The Holmes a Court Collection, Heytesbury

typically ? australian

The question mark is central.

The exhibition *Typically ? Australian* investigates the complexities in how we have shaped ourselves as Australians during the century since Federation.

Questions about how we perceive ourselves are posed around eight instances for the typical:
wattles or roses,
sand or concrete,
koalas or dingoes,
blokes or bohemians.

By representing contrasts, these pairings deny attempts to restrict the typical to one notion.

The items chosen cover every domain of Australia — the **vegetable**, the **mineral**, other **animals** and the **human**. The neutrality of those categories is challenged by attitudes that the respective couplings can evoke:

*the native and the exotic,
the natural and the built,
the docile and the destructive,
the physical and the mental.*

That some people will resent associating the dingo with the destructive is another argument for why the typical is open to cross-examination.

One line of investigation accepts the divisions within each of the eight categories. The wattle is our national floral emblem, but it has over 600 species such as the silvered Queensland and the golden Cootamundra. So which wattle is the most typical?

Even more puzzling is whether a blossom at the opposite end of the spectrum is a wattle? *Acacia purpureipetala* from Cape York demonstrates that it can. Hence, nature did not erect a white wattle policy. That a wattle can be purple points to the distinction between primary and secondary characteristics (what life scientists call the genotype against the phenotype). Our surprise and delight at a wattle being purple is a caution against relying on appearances when pondering what might be typical.

Similarly, when we associate Australia with sand, do we think first of deserts or beaches? If the answer is the deserts, do we mean that dead heart where explorers perished or the sands of North Africa at Beersheba and Tobruk where the First and Second AIFs fought?

When we identify Australia with the koala, what temperament of koala do we have in mind? On the first page of Norman Lindsay's *The Magic Pudding* we meet both the amiable Bunyip Bluegum and his grumpy Uncle Wattleberry. Which is typical? With koalas marketed as cute, what are tourists to make of Kenneth Cook's *The Killer Koala* (1986) or Neil Curtis's loutish *Bear Dinkum* (1980)?

What does the typical Australian bloke look like? Is his typicality represented by the teenager whom Van snapped playing volleyball on Manly beach or by Fiona Hall's staged shot of her eighty-year old father?

Competition between candidates for the typical is not confined to personal preferences. Public conflicts erupt, nowhere more strikingly

than in the loss of the beach at Tasmania's Lake Pedder beneath the waters of the Hydro-Electricity Commission's dam. Concrete conquered sand.

However, those same opposing examples of the typical can work together. Sand is used to make concrete. Sand also goes into the glass that lightens concrete buildings. Elsewhere, concrete slabs resist beach erosion.

Moreover, the complexities could have been established with other pairings. The waratah and the chrysanthemum could illustrate the native against the exotic in place of the wattle and the rose. These dualities indicate the inadequacy of treating Australianness as one-dimensional.

No sooner do we start to play with instances of the typically Australian than a host of alternatives spring to mind:

Anzac biscuits or iced vo-voes? pavlovas or lamingtons?
Billy tea or cafe latte? Fouxex or sweet sherry?
'Waltzing Matilda' or 'Advance Australia Fair'?
Namatjira or Kngwarreye? Kngwarreye or Nolan?
A Fortunate Life or *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*?
Dad Rudd or the drover's wife? Gallipoli or Kokoda?
Tennis or swimming? Rules or League?

Uluru or Fraser Island? the Opera House or the Harbour Bridge?

Those of us who favour one of those choices can appreciate why the alternative holds its place in a sample bag of Australian life. Hence, many will want to say that both the Melbourne Cup and the Sydney-to-Hobart are typically Australian.

The aim is not to set up a catalogue of icons for every child to memorise in some post-colonial Kim's game. The shallowness of such a pursuit was parodied by a critic of our late colonial verse:

Cattle duffers, bold bushrangers, diggers, drovers, bushrace-courses,
And on all the other pages horses, horses, horses, horses.¹

Nor can a typically Australian scene be illustrated, as one artist jested in 1888, by assembling:

first a gilt frame, then as much paint as will produce a blackfellow,
a kangaroo and an emu, arranged according to taste. If a digger
and a shearer can be thrown in, so much the better.²

That we can think of so many objects with which to illustrate the typical confirms the centrality of the question mark in *Typically ? Australian*. The exhibition interrogates both 'typical' and 'Australian'. The displays remind us of the multiple notions we always have had of ourselves, our land and our society. By locating current debates about the cohesion of Australia's peoples within broader experiences we can appreciate the layers long present through every aspect of our culture.

To adopt dichotomy as the organising principle for an investigation of typicality is to take up one of the ways in which we Australians have often thought about ourselves. 'Sydney or the bush', cried Henry Lawson, voicing one great divide.

Other couplings express the ways in which settler Australians have dealt with being antipodean. Book titles juxtapose aspects of our connections with Europe: *The Lion and the Kangaroo*, *Snow on the Saltbush* and *The Stockyard and the Croquet Lawn*. Our soldiers fought



sand & concrete

Olegas Truchanas
Lake Paddor from the Frankland Range 1971
photograph courtesy of Truchanas Family

Lake Gordon and visitor reception centre
photograph courtesy of The Hydro-Electric Commission Tasmania

at Gallipoli under the initials AIF, which stood for Australian Imperial Force. The linking of Australian with Imperial exemplified the ambivalence in the settler status of Austral-Britons, to recall a phrase from the 1920s. That English/Australian connection was part of the tug between metropolitan and peripheral in the shaping of our identity.

Tensions between the overseas and the local are significant for how we have fashioned emblems to bridge the distance between here and abroad. For example, we bred local varieties of roses and we crossed Scottish collies with dingoes to improve the kelpie.

To feel more at home in Australia, early settlers sought native equivalents for the familiar from their mother country. Hence, they named a desert flower after the rose in the hope that it might smell as sweet. Identification of the rose with England glided over how that flower was itself a hybrid. The Chinese origins of the rose appear on the crockery that Mei Quong Tart (1850–1903) used in his Sydney restaurants.

Governments used the wattle to acclimatise the British Royals, well before Whitlam legislated for a Queen of Australia. The first Commonwealth stamps in 1913 wreathed King George V with wattle sprigs. The Commonwealth gave a pair of silver salvers with a 'mimosa motif' to Princess Elizabeth for her wedding in 1948. During the 1954 Royal Tour, the government presented the Queen with a wattle-spray brooch of blue-white and golden diamonds.³ (Drawings for that jewellery, along with an imitation, are in the Design section.)

Queen Elizabeth II became most familiar to us in a frock designed by Hartnell and described as mimosa yellow, with a wattle pattern and acacia leaves. Tens of thousands of admirers kept the issue of the *Women's Weekly* for 17 February with its cover photograph of that dress. Copies of William Dargie's painting of the Queen in that frock hung in schools and post offices, while the original is in Parliament House, Canberra. A stamp to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the tour featured that portrait. To raise funds, the Monarchist League in Sydney is selling signed prints of Dargie's picture.

Notwithstanding these efforts, the associations of English royalty with the rose were too strong to be overgrown by acacias. In preparation for their attendance at official welcomes, school children read a poem which ended:

But the roses sang for England as they touched Australian sky —
The song they will sing for England as a Queen rides by.⁴

The British Colour Council had nominated Clarence Rose as one of the three official colours for the Tour, giving a lead to designers of clothes and jewels.

Thus, no single or fixed factor can establish an essence of Australianness. Inventiveness allows our traditions to flourish. The forces that unify our experiences rely on the interaction of minds with hands, on design as concept and technique.

what is typical?

The typically Australian need not be the statistically average. Rather, the typical approximates to an ideal type, overlapping with the archetype or stereotype. For instance, the typical Australian remains masculine although half our population is female. The typical Australian woman also exists but she is not yet the typical Australian.

Fame does not guarantee typicalness. When Dame Nellie Melba died in February 1931, the Melbourne *Argus* asked: 'Is it too much to say that she was the greatest Australian?' Despite the recognition that Melba achieved here and abroad, she has never been considered typical, whether because her standing came from the arts or because of her gender.

Russel Ward laid out the heritage behind identifying Australian with male in his influential *The Australian Legend* (1958). He acknowledged that he had drawn his sketch of the typical Australian from 'the bushmen of the last century, not, primarily, Australians in general or even country people in general, so much as the outback employees, the semi-nomadic ... of the pastoral industry'.

In providing this portrait, Ward recognised tensions within the characteristics that had contributed to the typical:

According to the myth the 'typical Australian' is ... a great improviser, ever willing 'to have a go' at anything, but willing too to be content with a task done in a way that is 'near enough'. Though capable of great exertion in an emergency, he normally feels no impulse to work hard without good cause ... Though he is 'the world's best confidence man', he is usually taciturn rather than talkative ...

Despite its 'often absurdly romanticized and exaggerated' aspects, Ward was right to accept that the typical 'often modifies current events by colouring men's ideas of how they ought "typically" to behave'.¹

In Ward's definition, the typical Aussie is still likely to be a bush dweller, from the fictional Mick Dundee to the real-life Sara Henderson, although ninety-five per cent of Australians live in towns, with two-thirds in cities of a million and more. That the bushman or country woman is not our reality does not erase his or her typicalness. Gaps between the typical and the average are among the contraries informing *Typically? Australian*.

In some cases, however, the typical and the average coincide. For instance, the typical Australian is native-born of Anglo-Celtic derivation as the majority of our population has been for some 120 years.

Recognition of the gulf between how we are and how we typify ourselves came with the installation of the legend of the 1890s. Lawson and Paterson, both city-dwellers, sparred over the attractions of life up the country. By mid-century, James McAuley satirised those who, 'though they praise the inner spaces,/ When asked to go themselves, they'd rather not'. Around 1980, the radical folk-rock band Red Gum took the piss out of suburbanites for whom 'the outback is a lark', slipping their new Range Rovers into 'four-wheel drive/ At the gates of National Park'.

Ward could argue that this self-mockery perpetuated one trait in the typical Australian as a sceptical 'hard case'. That aspect returned

¹ *Bookfellow*, 31 May 1899, p. 21.

² Julian Ashton, *Daily Telegraph* (Syd.), 23 January 1888, p. 3.

³ *Commonwealth Jeweller and Watchmaker*, 10 December 1947, pp. 71, and 10 March 1954, p. 178.

⁴ *Victorian School Paper*, Grades VII & VIII, February 1954, p. 3.



koalas & dingoes

W. H. Perry (designer)
Koala design for 1938 4d stamp
 ink and watercolour on paper
 National Philatelic Collection, Australia Post

Marg Towt (designer)
Dingo design for 1980 20c stamp
 watercolour on paper, typographic overlay
 National Philatelic Collection, Australia Post

in *Crocodile Dundee* where the outback was framed by the cities of Sydney and New York. The film opens with shots of the American journalist phoning New York from her hotel suite overlooking Sydney's central business district. When she later asks an Aborigine for the time he produces a watch. So, primitivism was undercut by humour. Those jokes perhaps say more to us than to overseas audiences whom tourist promoters still teach to see the outback as dominant.²

That simplification was blatant in the opening paragraph of a New York review of *1988*, the recent novel by Brisbane author Andrew McGahan:

Australia is a nice place to live, and probably the worst place in the world to write the harrowing antinovel that exposes your generation as a phalanx of debauched zombies. Where's the nihilism? Where's the gritty banality? Living in Australia, you have no steady Caledonian drizzle to drive you to drugs, no skyrocketing divorce rate to make you veer your mother's Lexus off a cliff; merely kaleidoscopic scenery and a sheltering raft of laid-back, optimistic adults, beery inclined to support you in your every move. How do you even start to invent a fractured, empty soul for your generation while there are kangaroos and duckbilled platypy boinging past your window?³

In praising McGahan for achieving the seemingly impossible, the critic offered a less caricatured view of Australia. Nonetheless, his opening run of clichés was as predictable as a platypus bouncing past one's window is entrancing.

If Australians have long known better than to mistake the typical for the average, what is to be gained from focusing attention on the typical? The typicals do exist. That they have to be imagined does not render them imaginary. The typical is never a disembodied essence but appears in shifting practices, beliefs and imagery.

Varying combinations of experience distinguish Australians from other peoples, even from New Zealanders. In 1770, when Captain Cook encountered both Kooris and Maori, the social systems of Aborigines were more different from those of the Polynesians than those of settler Australians would ever become from the *pakeha*. Nonetheless, we are aware of more differences across the Tasman than the pronunciation of vowels. New Zealand colonists used a Maori word for themselves whereas few settler Australians have ever known the words that Aborigines apply to us. While the *pakeha* beguiled themselves with a faith in their multi-racial harmony, settler Australians were content to smooth the pillow under the head of a dying race.

As travellers we sense that although the stereotype of efficient German or excitable Italian is qualified by each German or Italian we meet, the behaviours that caricature those two ways of living remain recognisable. Similarly, traits that distinguish Australians become more obvious when we are overseas. Swimming pools in Germany are health centres while those in Japan are for splashing about in rather than for doing laps.

A recent survey of the perceptions that Australians hold of themselves reported that about three-quarters of us accept the

existence of a distinctive Australian culture.⁴ The distinctive is not the same as the typical but supplies materials from which the typical is selected. Differences exist between age groups about which aspects best express that culture. All agree on the importance of novels and films, sport, and the bush. Preferences are divided most keenly over the significance of ethnic diversity and the beach in defining Australianness. Also the generations disagree about which music, films, television programs and authors represent their culture. Broad appreciation is registered for *Blue Heelers* but few 18–24 year olds watch *GP*.

That the typical is neither singular nor fixed is apparent from analyses of contents, by time periods and by location.

Just as there is a typical Australian so can there be a typical for each sub-group. Hence, the typical Australian can be narrowed to the typical Australian bohemian which spirals through other qualifiers:

by gender, to typical female Australian bohemian,
 then by art form, to typical female Australian bohemian poet;
 and finally by time, to typical female Australian bohemian poet between the wars.

Do we allow the average to equal the typical for minorities as one more way of diminishing their importance, taking the ordinary as their ideal type? That was so for the promoters of White Australia. For them, the typical Chinaman was a gambler or a market gardener, not the exceptional Sydney merchant active as a Freemason.

The typical also changes across time. Perceptions of the koala, for instance, have kept shifting. Around 1800, natural historians related it to the South American sloth, but in the 1960s the koala became the mascot for Qantas jetting across the Pacific. During the 1920s, a million koalas were slaughtered to make felt from their fur, whereas today the koala is a fund raiser for the Wilderness Society.

The typicalness of an item is also affected by its placement. A rose will smell as sweet whether it is growing in a suburban garden or as a grave marker in a cemetery, but its significance shifts. Equally, roses depicted in a woodblock by Thea Proctor in a public gallery have a different effect on us than roses on a box of chocolates promoted for St Valentine's Day. The neon rose that signals the highway turn-off into the city of Elizabeth (SA) flashes a different message from that on the posters advertising the Rose Festival in nearby Adelaide which identifies itself as 'the Rose capital of Australia'.

The typical is easier to accept from outside a society than when you are a member of it and aware of the exceptions and the shadings. Every society is more diverse when experienced from the inside.

¹ Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1960, p. 1–2.

² Tom O'Regan, 'Fair Dinkum Fillums': The Crocodile Dundee Phenomenon', Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka (eds), *The Imaginary Industry: Australian Film in the late '80s*, AFTRS, North Ryde, 1988, pp. 155–57.

³ Bruno Maddox, editor of *Spy* magazine, in the *New York Times Book Review*, 23 February 1997, p. 11.

⁴ Michael Emmison, 'Transformations of taste: Americanisation, generational change and Australian cultural consumption', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, November 1997, 33(3), p. 339.

design

Images that contribute to our notions of the typically Australian did not fall from the sky. As the products of human activities, they involve elements of design. The look of an icon was not preordained but resulted from judgements, both social and practical.

In his oil painting 'The shop' (1908), George Lambert mocked the artificiality of studio portraiture. The title abbreviates workshop but also hints that trade and commerce will affect our vision even of majesty. Lambert presented a paid model dressed up as the king. Simulation is emphasised by setting this upright and regally garbed impostor beside a floppy and naked dummy made of fabric.

Olive Cotton's 1937 photograph of Max Dupain taking a fashion shot on Cronulla beach reminds us that the sunbaker in his 'On the beach' (1941) could become iconic only because it too had been posed.

Designers contribute to the installation of the typical because they strive for a characteristic to capture our attention. This tendency to simplify is intended to make their product stand out against the tumble of commodities and messages — from video clips to furnishing fabrics — to which we are exposed.

Hence each object in *Typically ? Australian* needs to be remembered against a blizzard of other emblems that compete for our attention and loyalty. Outside the confines of this exhibition we would not see many of these items isolated from hundreds of others in shop windows or magazines, on screens or billboards.

Images and objects are altered when selected for a museum. Placed out of their workaday habitats, a dingo T-shirt or a packet of sugar illustrated with a dingo acquires a status remote from its use as a commodity. Here, they call for longer looking.

Still less do we encounter objects arranged in ways that question their meaning. On the contrary, in life they will be presented in order to convince us of a point of view, or to make us buy one brand label over its rivals.

Interpretations of the rose are made various by design, whether horticultural or commercial. Roses are no longer redesigned by fanciers but are the products of industrialisation, reliant on pesticides and growth chemicals to return profits for a multi-billion dollar flower trade.¹

A Design segment of *Typically ? Australian* traces how images are constructed, principally through the issuing of postage stamps.²

Stamps convey messages. They are not just the receipts we now most often get on parcels. Some topics are favoured and others are out of bounds. The Country Women's Association got a stamp in 1962 but the 1956 centenary of the eight-hour day did not.³

The explorer has been a standard figure in school books, glorifying British discovery and hence ownership of this continent. Hence, the release of a comedy, *Wills and Burke* (1985) starring Garry McDonald, left film critics uncomfortable.⁴ For generations, imperial conquest, enriched by the gold rushes, equalled the history of Australia in the nineteenth century. The saga began with the crossing of the Blue Mountains and followed Oxley, Sturt, Mitchell, Kennedy, Leichhardt, Burke and Wills, as heroic or tragic figures. The explorer was male and white, reinforcing the dominant version of the typical Australian.

Not surprisingly then, the third commemorative stamp issued by the Commonwealth of Australia was for the centenary of Charles Sturt's expedition along the Murray River in 1830.

Since the British Navy had been the basis for imperial power, six maritime explorers were honoured in 1963–64. Five were English and the sixth was the Dutchman Abel Tasman. A series was devoted to James Cook in 1970. Britannia ruled the waves. In 1971, a stamp did show the vessels of the anonymous Asians who had traded for centuries along our northern shores. None of the Spanish, Portuguese or French captains who traversed the coastline was honoured until 1991 when Vancouver appeared for exploring the Albany area of Western Australia.

With the theme of exploration established as respectable, the stamp advisory committee had to decide which members of an expedition were to be pictured. No Aboriginal guides have been shown although their knowledge was essential.

After the proposed idea and its imagery are found to be politically safe, a designer is commissioned to create the art work.

Typically ? Australian traces these procedures around the development of one from a 1976 series of six stamps of explorers. On display are various states in the process of production of that stamp.

One subject was Ernest Giles (1835–97) who had ventured west of the overland telegraph line in the 1870s. Giles had called himself 'forgotten' and his celebration a hundred years after his journeys relied on the place of the explorer in the official definition of typically Australian more than on the worth of his discoveries.

The choice of the other five would have paid attention to the need to represent the States, as happens when prime ministers select their ministries. Did Queensland get John Oxley to keep Bjelke-Petersen happy?

Having decided to include Ernest Giles, Australia Post commissioned the painter Brian Dunlop to submit designs. Next, a reference group adjusted the art work, whether for visual or ideological reasons. Some changes are necessary to fit a stamp in with the look of others in the series. Others are made to suit the inks and paper to be used. Two of Dunlop's preliminary sketches were not adopted. The version agreed to had to be amended after the standard letter rate increased to 18 cents. The image was then broken down into colour blocks for printing, in this case into four separations of reddish brown, brown ochre, cobalt and black. Eventually, the Giles stamp was sent out with its first-day covers, postcards, posters and other publicity materials, which had been through comparable processes of selection and amendment.

Brian Dunlop was but one of the fine artists commissioned to design stamps. Those assignments continued a practice established for the first Commonwealth issue in 1913, which had been designed by the watercolourist Blamire Young (1862–1935).

Like artists, images move back and forth between the realms designated as fine art to those labelled popular, folk, mass or commercial. Each time, the materials have to be redesigned to fit into a different medium. The reproduction of the work of art is never mechanical but needs inventiveness at each remaking. A museum will print postcards of its paintings, for example Charles Meere's *Australian Beach Pattern* (1940) in the Art Gallery of New South Wales. That image is also sold as the decoration for a coffee mug, and used as a promotional poster on railway station billboards to attract visitors. Jewellery is marketed from the passage in the Meere painting of the girl playing with a ball. Institutions license the use of an oil painting on a postage stamp, as with Sid Nolan's *Musgrave Ranges* (1949).

The Jack Thompson centrefold in *Cleo* and the Holeproof advertisement echo a Renaissance tradition that was revived in nineteenth-century French painting of the female nude in Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863). (Were they examples of cross-undressing?)

The demotic will also be taken up by gallery artists. Ginger Meggs began as a cartoon character in 1921, and featured on a screenprint by the Pop Art maker Martin Sharp in 1979.

Just as the typical is a social creation, so are the objects and images that express views of Australianness the outcome of debate and design, of censorship and creativity. To follow how they are constructed is to encounter why a question mark is central in any discussion of the typically Australian.

1. Niala Maharaj and Gaston Dorren, *The Game of the Rose: The Third World in the Global Flower Trade*, International Books, Utrecht, 1995.

2. see Peter McNeil, 'Rarely Looking In: The Writing of Australian Design History, c. 1900–1990', *Journal of Australian Studies*, March 1995, 44, p. 48–63.

3. Humphrey McQueen, *The Australian Stamp: Image, Design and Ideology*, Arena, Spring 1988, p. 78–96.

4. Tim Bonyhady, *Burke and Wills: From Melbourne to Myth*, David Eli Press, Sydney, 1991, pp. 308–11.



blokes & bohemians

Sybil Craig born Great Britain 1901, arrived Australia 1902, died 1989
Victorian Constable c 1930
oil on canvas board, 54.4 x 46.5 cm
Gift of the Estate of Sybil Craig
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Geoffrey Mainwaring
Female Impersonator (Private Victor Fox) c 1945
oil on cardboard, 50.4 x 34.8 cm
Australian War Memorial (24388)

an atypical exhibition

Typically ? Australian is a museum show. The materials on display were chosen for several reasons. Artistic excellence was only one. A composition as accomplished as Elise Blumann's *Surf* (1939) is included for its subject. The same criterion applied to Margaret Johnson's *Portrait of John Curtin* (1947) which is surely one of the more posthumous portraits in captivity. Its presence is a reminder that design is not always stylish.

This exhibition would have been easier to organise if it had been set in the mould of 'The Koala in the Australian Imagination'. That kind of approach has served its purpose by bringing attention to the richness of local materials devoted to particular flora¹ or fauna,² professions or products. Like retrospectives for individual artists, the single subject is losing its effectiveness as a curatorial principle. Of course, themes remain to be explored — the bushfire being one. Issue-based shows, on *The Body* or *Orientalism*, attempt to match the curiosity of the public for ideas. *Typically ? Australian* has taken the next step by being problem-based, presenting viewers with paradoxes and argument at every turn.

The selection principles conform to the concept of variety constructing a unity.

First, that precept meant no separate sections are given to three of the conventional proofs of our diversity, that is, ethnics, Aborigines or women. Instead, examples by and about each are included within the four pairings. Thus, Peter Lyssiotis's lithograph, 'Migrants love concrete', challenges the folklore that the prime contributions of Mediterraneans to post-war Australia have been Nescafe and Pizza Hut.

Two further decisions kept the exhibits away from a pair of accepted practices. That all the bodies are of blokes will shift attention from the female nude that has dominated the past 200 years. That all the images of blokes are by women, whether ladies or sheilas, tacks around the fashion for the homoerotic. Images of men by men appear in other sections such as bohemians, with Harold Cazneaux's photographic portrait of the art teacher Julian Ashton.

Second, *Typically ? Australian* avoids any identification of Australia with nature to the exclusion of culture, with scenery instead of buildings, with endangered species rather than creative spirits. The most misleading treatment of the typical is to sink Australia into its landscape. *Typically ? Australian* shows nature recreated through culture by attending to the concrete buildings, hybrid roses and bohemians.

Selection necessitates omissions. Although the cinema and television have been so formative in the twentieth century, those media are not on display for technical and cost reasons. That absence is all the more reason to notice their impact. Since the silent era, most films and television dramas shown here have been from the USA. The result is that, as a magazine editor put it in 1958, '[t]he daydreams we get from celluloid are not Australian day-dreams'. By contrast, he observed:

Anybody who has sat among a mass audience in a British or American cinema, while a locally made film takes some story as the excuse for an observant romp over familiar streets and

landmarks and for an imaginative statement of their national characteristics, knows the blend of stimulation and assurance that comes from it. It plants one's feet on the ground. The workaday world is integrated with the world of one's imagination.³

Hollywood defined us by what we were not.⁴ Sometimes Australian audiences sighed with relief that we were not as violent as those Yanks. At other times we squirmed with embarrassment that we were not as energetic.

Books are on display in *Typically ? Australian* for their dust jackets and illustrations. Yet the written word is the arena for debates over Australianness. In an exhibition of images and objects, we therefore need to remember the contribution of print to redefining the typical through phrases such as 'The Lucky Country'; or a snatch of verse such as Mary Gilmore's 'Shame on the mouth/ that would deny/ The knotted hands/ That set us high'; or a line from a play as when, in *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, Emma says that she is 'Gettin' a sea breeze off the gutter'.

Against the absence of screens and texts, *Typically ? Australian* deepens and broadens the Australian memory bank. That we find it easier to list instances of the typical from today rather than from earlier this century should not privilege the most recent.

Retrieving images that have been sidelined leads to a consideration of why they fell out of favour. Changes in technologies played their part. Hence, Australians raised with colour television often find black-and-white movies invisible. Despite the effort put into teaching students how to read images, silent movies seem tedious. The outcome is that a classic of the Australian cinema such as *Kid Stakes* (1927) has a half-life only as a Festival happening boosted by a live orchestra.

Explanations of how items from the past regain attention, other than in a museum, differ according to how far back we go. Nostalgia as a marketing tactic repositions items from several generations past while a Holeproof advertisement from the 1970s can seem too recent to interest an historian, yet too remote for a cultural theorist.⁵

Each generation or ethnic grouping can look beyond their patches to treatments of the typically Australian that are as inclusive as our exhibits are expansive.

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- 1 See Margaret Betteridge, 'The Use of Australian Flora in Decorative Arts', *Australasian Antique Collector*, 1979, 19th Edition, pp. 44–50.
- 2 Terence Lane, 'The Kangaroo in the Decorative Arts', *Australasian Antique Collector*, January–June 1981, 21st Edition, pp. 79–84.
- 3 *Nation*, 22 November 1958, p. 14.
- 4 Diane Collins, *Hollywood Down Under: Australians at the Movies 1896 to the Present Day*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1987.
- 5 David Buchbinder, *Performance anxieties: Re-producing masculinity*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1998, pp. 24–25 & 166–67 discusses only Holeproof's 1990s marketing campaign.



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