

# CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN DRAWING 20 YEARS OF THE DOBELL PRIZE FOR DRAWING

## Education Resource

This education resource has been developed by the Art Gallery of New South Wales and is also [available online](#)

*An Art Gallery of New South Wales exhibition toured by Museums & Galleries NSW*



## DRAWING ACTIVITIES

- Draw with black pencil on white paper then with white pencil on black paper. How does the effect differ?
- Shade a piece of white paper using a thick piece of charcoal then use an eraser to draw into the tone to reveal white lines and shapes.
- Experiment with unconventional materials such as shoe polish and mud on flattened cardboard boxes.
- Use water on a paved surface to create ephemeral drawings. Document your drawings before they disappear. How do the documented forms differ from the originals?
- How did drawing with an eraser, shoe polish, mud and water compare to drawing with a pencil? What do you need to consider differently as an artist? How did handling these materials make you feel? Did you prefer one material to another?
- Create a line drawing with a pencil, a tonal drawing with charcoal and a loose ink drawing with a brush - all depicting the same subject. Compare your finished drawings. What were some of the positive and negatives of each approach? Is there one you prefer, and why?
- Draw without taking your drawing utensil off the page. What was challenging about this exercise?
- Draw something from observation without looking down at your drawing. Are you pleased with the result? What did you learn?
- Create a series of abstract pencil drawings using colours that reflect the way you feel. Overlay the works with paint then scratch back to expose some of the drawing beneath. Add another layer of drawing on the top.
- Select a subject then draw it twice: once from close observation and once from a photograph. Compare the drawings and discuss the differences between each approach.
- Select a well-known story to illustrate. Consider the materials you will use and how the types of marks and strokes will add to the effect.
- Go on a journey to the beach or in a bush or urban environment and collect items of interest. Bring this collection of found objects to class and create an arrangement to draw. Experiment using a lamp to intensify shadow and manipulate highlights in your still-life arrangement.
- Create a drawing based on the interior of your art room, classroom or home. Place yourself in the composition in a creative way.

- Use a view finder to plan a composition. Consider various angles and make a few quick thumbnail sketches. Develop the composition you are most satisfied with.
- Working in pairs, ask one person to select an existing drawing and describe it aloud while the other person draws what is described to them. Compare the new drawing to the original artwork. Swap roles and repeat the process. Discuss your experiences and the results.
- Of all the drawings you've created, selected the one you think is the most successful. Give it a title and write an artist's statement about this work. Hold a class exhibition and ask the audience to respond to the works.

## LOOKING AND RESPONDING TO DRAWINGS

- Why do artists draw? Debate the importance of drawing and why it is such an enduring artform.
- Imagine how the drawings were made. Do you think they were created quickly or over a long period? Write a list of the steps that may have been involved. Imagine you are the artist and write to a friend telling them about your artwork and how you approached making it.
- Record all the types of marks you can see in the drawings. Describe the textures and surfaces and suggest what materials could have been used to make them.
- Consider the use of colour, or lack of it, in the drawings. How does it affect the mood of the work and your response to it? How would the mood and your response differ if the colours were changed?
- Discuss the impact that size has on a drawing and on the viewer. How does your physical distance from an artwork when viewing it affect your appreciation of it?
- What does a title reveal about an artwork? Do you think each title suits its particular drawing? Consider alternative titles.
- What do you think lies beyond the edge of a drawing? Choose an artwork and create an image to extend the composition.
- Select an artist and appropriate their style to create a drawing of your own. Look closely at their materials and techniques. What did you find most challenging about adopting another artist's style?
- List different categories of subject matter eg portrait, landscape, abstract, narrative, still life. What type do you prefer? Explain your choice to the class or a friend.
- Choose one drawing and use its subject for a drawing in your own style. How does your work differ from the artist's?
- Discuss the way an artist has visualised a story or idea. Write a piece of creative writing inspired by one drawing. Compare your piece to the drawing, noting the similarities and differences.
- How responsive are artists to the world around them? Look at a drawing and consider if the artist responded to the natural world or built environment or if they retreated to the inner world of their imagination.
- Choose an artist and research their body of work. What other mediums do they work in? Can you identify their artistic style? Does drawing play an important role in their art practice?

- Can an erased line be as powerful as a drawn shape? Look closely at a drawing and consider how partially-erased marks might complement articulated shapes to create texture and form. How is the artist's process over time documented in the work?
- Almost all drawing involves constructing artificial spaces on a two-dimensional plane. Choose three drawings and identify different approaches to space and perspective. How do the artists organise elements in a work and how do these approaches affect the viewer's response?
- If contemporary artists employ paint, collage and sculptural techniques to make a drawing, how do we distinguish drawing from other artistic mediums? Can a work of art simultaneously be a drawing as well as a painting or sculpture? What are the historical precedents for this blending of genres?
- Research the history of drawing as a studio practice. What role did drawing play as an observational technique in anatomical studies and in preparing a painting? How and when did the practice emerge as an independent art form?

## THE DOBELL PRIZE FOR DRAWING

The annual Dobell Prize aimed to encourage excellence in drawing and draughtsmanship among Australian artists.

Held annually from 1993 to 2012, it was initiated by the Art Gallery of NSW and the trustees of the Sir William Dobell Art Foundation (established from the estate of Australian artist William Dobell).

Each year the foundation's trustees invited a guest - often an artist - to judge this open competition, and finalists were displayed in an exhibition at the Gallery. The winning work automatically became part of the Gallery's collection, and over the years a small selection of finalist works were also acquired. Together these form the Dobell Australian Drawing Collection.

What constitutes a drawing was deliberately not outlined in the conditions of entry. This flexible approach ensured a great variety of drawings were submitted, ranging from those made using materials traditionally associated with drawing (pencil, pen and ink, charcoal etc) to those that are part of contemporary practice (including pastel, watercolour and collage).

The Dobell Drawing Prize 2012 marked the final year of this competition. After 20 years, the Art Gallery of NSW and the Sir William Dobell Art Foundation confirmed a refreshed approach to the exhibition of contemporary Australian drawing at the Gallery with a new initiative - the Dobell Australian Drawing Biennial - to be launched in 2014.

### *Questions and activities*

- Research the artist and benefactor William Dobell and create a timeline of important events in his life and career. Imagine interviewing Dobell for a talk show. Role-play the interview in class, preparing questions and answers for the host and the artist.
- Dobell drew quick sketches from life, often from several angles to capture the subject. View [drawings by Dobell in the Gallery collection](#). Describe the types of lines he used and imagine the speed at which he sketched. Create a series of drawings inspired by his work.
- According to James Gleeson, artist and Sir William Dobell Art Foundation director, even Dobell's paintings 'were usually "drawn" in oils, for he preferred to use the brush like a pencil, building up the forms from an accumulation of lines'. View [paintings by Dobell in the Gallery collection](#). Do you agree with Gleeson's comment? Paint a portrait of a friend using a similar approach to Dobell's.

## **WHO WAS WILLIAM DOBELL?**

Born in Newcastle in 1899, William Dobell came to art late. A poor student, he left school as soon as he could and was apprenticed to a local architect to train as a draftsman because he had revealed some talent for drawing as a youth. Dobell moved to Sydney in 1924, where he worked for a time as a draftsman at the Redfern workshops of Wunderlich, manufacturers of architectural metalwork and terracotta. His flair for drawing resulted in a move to the firm's advertising department and evening classes at Julian Ashton's Sydney Art School, where he began serious studies in drawing and painting. It was only then, as he approached the age of 30, that Dobell realised his true vocation.

Awarded the Society of Artists Travelling Scholarship in 1929, Dobell left for London and stayed for ten years. While there he studied briefly at the Slade School, but spent most of his time consolidating his formal training by drawing as much as he could and painting, often painstakingly, small-scale oils. He exhibited little, preferring to quietly develop his skills and powers of observation, making genre, landscape, portrait and character studies and supplementing his income with commercial art and odd jobs. He associated with other artists, mostly Australians, who supported each other materially, as well as artistically, in hard economic times. However, he gained most from his concentrated observation of the work of the old masters in London and various European museums.

On his return, Dobell was received almost immediately as an artist of considerable substance. Hailed by many as the greatest Australian portraitist ever, official acclaim and popular fame attended much of his career. In large part, this stemmed from the widespread controversy generated by the Archibald Prize of 1943 - which Dobell was awarded for a portrait of Joshua Smith - and the infamous court case that followed it.

While he was known for landscapes and genre paintings, it was his major portraits, including those of Margaret Olley (1948), Dame Mary Gilmore (1957) and Helena Rubinstein (1963), that cemented his reputation. He was knighted in 1966, and died in 1970.

## **SIR WILLIAM DOBELL FOUNDATION**

The Sir William Dobell Art Foundation was established upon the death of William Dobell in 1970 for 'the benefit and promotion of art in New South Wales', according to the terms of his will. It was a deliberately broad brief and decisions regarding projects the foundation would fund were left at the discretion of the trustees. Tony Clune, Dobell's sole executor, appointed Charles Lloyd Jones and Franco Belgiorno-Nettis as trustees, while Dobell's biographer, the artist James Gleeson, was appointed art director and Thelma Clune, archivist.

The foundation was established from the proceeds of the disposal of Dobell's estate, which included an auction of works from his studio. Dobell's work had become increasingly popular with collectors, and the sale was held three years after his death,

at the (then) new Sydney Opera House, ensuring the greatest possible attention. It was also the first auction conducted by Sotheby's in Australia.

In his will, Dobell suggested a broad range of possible activities for the foundation, including the establishment of an art prize or prizes, but his intention was to allow the trustees of the foundation to use their own judgment in allotting funds to various projects for the encouragement of Australian art and artists. Over the years the foundation has sponsored many diverse projects. The Dobell Prize for Drawing at the Art Gallery of NSW was largely the initiative of one of the foundation directors, James Gleeson. Established in 1993, it pays due recognition to the importance of drawing in William Dobell's art, as well as encouraging excellence in draughtsmanship by artists working now.

## **DOBELL AND DRAWING**

Support for a drawing prize by the Sir William Dobell Foundation is particularly apt because of the importance William Dobell placed on drawing. Drawing was the foundation for all his art - it was his way of forming and developing ideas, and how he came to realise his intentions in paint.

The artist and Dobell Foundation director James Gleeson noted: 'He was essentially a draughtsman. Even his paintings were usually "drawn" in oils, for he preferred to use the brush like a pencil, building up the forms from an accumulation of lines. It was a method he used in his early London works and it remained a basic characteristic of his painting style, reaching its fullest development in the "white drawing" works of his late years.'

Dobell's early inclinations and training had led naturally to drawing. The Sydney Art School (later renamed the Julian Ashton Art School), where Dobell received his first instruction, was renowned for its focus on drawing from life. Distinguished alumni, particularly George Lambert and its founder Julian Ashton, had left their mark on the school in their focus on drawing. The school's approach echoed that practised in many schools in Europe and England, emphasising the linear rendering of form. An understanding of anatomy was expected, though not formally taught - drawing from observation was of foremost importance.

London's Slade School also had a reputation for excellence in drawing, and a similar regime for teaching it. Henry Tonks, who taught Dobell there in 1939, was one of the school's most celebrated teachers of drawing, and instilled a disciplined approach that incorporated drawing from casts of antique sculpture and from life and the study of anatomy, so that students acquired sufficient skill from which to develop their individual vision as painters or sculptors. Dobell continued to focus on drawing for the remainder of his life, stating from time to time that it was essential to his work.

For Dobell, quickly executed sketches were his means of capturing observations of a subject on paper, as an aide-mémoire. He mostly drew his subjects from life, often from several angles. Observation and memory were combined in drawing before he was able to elaborate upon his initial impressions in paint. Drawing was a way of



solving visual problems and understanding his subject, grasping it before he developed it into a final composition.

The majority of his extant drawings seem slight at first sight. They are often on scrappy pieces of paper, occasionally using poor materials and in some cases creased and worn, indicative perhaps of the urgency of their creation and the frequency of their use as references. Further study, however, reveals them as critical to the conception and development of Dobell's subjects. Drawing was for him a private activity - very few of his drawings were intended as finished works in their own right - rather they were his way of understanding his subjects and realising his ideas pictorially.