

2025 Dobell Exhibition Grant

This year's round of the Dobell Exhibition Grant program was assessed on Friday, 25 October 2024 by a three-member panel comprising: Michelle Belgiorno-Nettis, Chair, Sir William Dobell Art Foundation; Courtney Novak, Deputy Director, Maitland Regional Gallery; and Brett Adlington, CEO, M&G NSW.

The panel assessed 12 applications from public and regional galleries across NSW, offering \$40,000 to support one exhibition project. Very strong exhibition proposals were received for a wide range of exhibition projects.

After robust discussion, the panel unanimously awarded the \$40,000 grant to **Bondi Pavilion Gallery** for their proposed exhibition *Souter's Bondi*.

The panel commended *Souter's Bondi* for its well-developed curatorial rationale, detailed project plan and supporting material, strong links with the local community and history, comprehensive public programming and high potential for engagement with new audiences. The panel acknowledged the relevance and benefits of aligning the exhibition with the international celebrations of the 100th Anniversary of Art Deco as well as the National Trust Heritage Festival.



Image: *Bathers and Lifesavers on Bondi Beach*, David Henry Souter, 1934. Cropped. Object number 00055529 Australian National Maritime Museum Collection funded by Australian National Maritime Museum Foundation.

Overall, the panel was impressed by the quality of all applications commenting that it was a very competitive round. Assessors encouraged applicants to ensure that budgets are correct and include a well-balanced spread of DEG funding. Where relevant, local First Nations communities should be consulted in developing exhibition projects.

High scoring applications demonstrated detailed planning, realistic budgets, original and compelling curatorial concepts, collaboration with local communities, partnerships with relevant organisations, innovative and extensive public programming and high-quality support material.

2025 Dobell Exhibition Grant Recipient

Bondi Pavilion Gallery - *Souter's Bondi* - \$40,000

Souter's Bondi considers iconic mural works by David Henry Souter, historically displayed in the clubhouse of the Bondi Surf Bathers Life Saving Club (BSBSLC) and utilises them to create a contemporary conversation about the Beach; beyond local identity, as a symbol, an icon, a place of leisure and significance to our national identity. Souter served as the BSBSLC President from 1920-1921 and created these works between 1920 and 1934. The exhibition will return these beloved local artefacts to Bondi Beach, offering audiences a glimpse of Bondi's history whilst creating an opportunity for contemporary interpretation. The exhibition will celebrate Souter as a prominent local figure in Bondi's history: a surf lifesaver, illustrator, Art Deco stylist and key figure in the Australian Classical Revival.

The exhibition combines historical appreciation, contemporary artistic interpretation and community engagement to increase understanding of Bondi's heritage across multiple subject areas. Souter's work articulated Bondi's identity during pivotal moments in the rapid increase in popularity of beach-going in the early 20th century, defined the 'Aussie surf lifesaver' through posters and illustrations, and contributed to the legend of the Anzac Soldier.

Contemporary art commissions inspired by Souter's murals will be developed by four artists including Gerwyn Davis, Maz Dixon, Billy Bain, and Lillian O'Neil. Together with loaned works by various other artists, the exhibition will explore social changes and themes of leisure, gender, local identity, and mythology. By examining Souter's work through diverse artistic lenses, its content and context is extended and deepened. Featured artists will respond to the original murals in the form of prints, ceramics, photography, collage and painting. This work will be accompanied by poster and print reproductions and a small collection of objects loaned from the Waverley Local Studies Collection and the BSBSLC.

Commissioned artists will be encouraged to illuminate hidden histories and narratives overlooked in Souter's work, challenging audiences to see the mural's subjects from new perspectives. To enrich the experience, the exhibition will include annotated interpretations of Souter's Murals, decoding their iconography for viewers. These printed annotations will highlight elements of Art Deco and Art Nouveau styles, as well as significant figures, objects, and landmarks, enabling visitors to unpack the allegorical symbolism within the works.

The exhibition will coincide with the international festival celebrating the 100th Anniversary of Art Deco and Waverley Council's associated Art Deco programming, as well as the National Trust's Heritage Festival. Planned public programming includes: Art Deco walking tours, BSBSLC History Committee talks, curator tours, additional 1920s digital content in the adjacent interactive Bondi Story Room, and a weekend of courtyard activations with period dance and live music. A folded booklet aimed at young audiences will be available to visitors, offering interactive games and prompts to encourage exploration of the murals and deeper engagement with both Souter's murals and contemporary works in the space. This project is supported by the Australian National Maritime Museum.

For more information about the Dobell Exhibition Grant program please contact: **Susan Wachter, Exhibitions, Funding & Programs Manager**, susanw@mgnsw.org.au or **Vanessa James, Funding & Programs Manager**, vanessaj@mgnsw.org.au

The Dobell Exhibition Grant program is supported by the Sir William Dobell Art Foundation and managed by Museums & Galleries of NSW.