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# Seeing as believing – or is it?

**Dr Rob Haysom**

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This article explores aspects of the life and art of the Australian artist Arnold Shore, the subject of my recently published book *Arnold Shore – Pioneer Modernist*, Macmillan Art Publishing, 2009. The pantheon of Australian art history celebrates particular artists and their visual output. These designated artists become the celebrated and orthodox names, who are seen as defining specific cultural and historical moments. Arnold Shore is cursorily acknowledged in many Australian art history accounts, most often for his teaching at the modernist school he co-founded in 1932, The Bell – Shore School. Much about his art and life remains hidden with the National Gallery of Victoria owning thirteen of his works, none of which are on display. Whilst suggesting there are specific reasons for Shore's place in art history not being fully acknowledged, the article further investigates why some artists are consigned to a peripheral role, only for their significance and importance to be re-discovered at a later date after historical revisionism. Why is this so? Who are the tastemakers and gatekeepers that actively suppress artists stories and their contributions from receiving wider currency? What factors potentially conspire to obscure or push aside one group to the detriment of others? These questions are increasingly prescient in the twenty-first century as

globalisation and spectacle  
capitalism, compete with  
representative historical  
perspectives; issues raised in the  
latter part of the article.

# Seeing as believing – or is it?

**Dr Rob Haysom**

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In this article I discuss the artist  
Arnold Shore, including excerpts  
from my recent book *Arnold Shore*  
- *pioneer modernist*, the first  
published monograph on his life  
and work. Shore`s  
acknowledgement in historical  
overviews of Australian art is  
unfairly balanced towards his early  
forays into modernist painting, his  
teaching at the Bell – Shore School,  
and his extensive critical writing.  
Why his broader *oeuvre* is not more  
widely known raises a number of  
issues concerning how stories can  
become hidden and obscured.

I will firstly provide a brief  
overview of Shore`s activities and  
life. Secondly, I will cite several  
reflections by peers and critics  
about his painting. Thirdly, I  
suggest several reasons why  
Shore`s work is not more widely  
known. Finally, I will explore the  
issues that can impede an artists  
story, and how various sectors in  
the artworld can wittingly and  
unwittingly distort a historical  
perspective, particularly relevant in  
the twenty-first century.

In the book I state the following

about Shore :

Arnold Shore, along with his friend and painting contemporary, Jock Frater is recognized by art historians as a leader in advancing modernist art practice in Australia. In a sometimes hostile and unsympathetic climate exercised by the orthodoxy, they assiduously pursued their beliefs which became firmly rooted in post-impressionist concepts. They were pioneer modernists in Melbourne working in an insular and restrictive environment that sanctioned and reinforced works derivative of the Australian Impressionists. So restrictive was the Australian art scene that the earlier activities of the pioneer Sydney modernists, Roland Wakelin and Roy De Maistre were unknown in Melbourne. Before and during World War 1, Shore spent a disappointing stint studying drawing part-time at the National Gallery Art School under Fred McCubbin. Leaving the School before completing his studies, he was initially influenced by the doctrinaire painter, Max Meldrum, who offered an alternative teaching approach at his School. Under Meldrum`s tutelage, Shore gained in confidence and technical skill.

During the 1920s Shore, like many of his contemporaries, gained his knowledge of modern European art from secondary sources, such as books, magazines and postcards. This lack of exposure to original modernist works was made most palpable when a national tour of reproduction posters was undertaken in 1931.

By the late 1930s Shore, who had by then gained popular recognition

for his flower studies, turned his focus to the Australian bush, and in particular, the area around Mt. Macedon. It is in his bush landscapes that Shore demonstrated an intimacy and unique perception of the environment. These works not only added to Australia's landscape heritage but they also made a potent and significant contribution to Australian art.

Shore's exuberant and richly painted surfaces that he applied to his flower studies and landscapes masked inner demons and internal struggles. A less than happy childhood led to recurrent bouts of severe mental depression. Shore lived for his art, and his various jobs as art critic, gallery lecturer, or teacher gave him the security to engage in his passion, whilst also struggling with bouts of debilitating mental depression.

Although outwardly conservative in appearance and demeanour, his art was rich and vibrant. In contrast, the conservative art establishment of the day made transgressors fearful and insecure and later acknowledgement by more enlightened critics was not always enough. A valued and endearing friendship between Shore and Frater helped sustain each other as they explored alternative approaches to depicting their world. Ironically, that friendship was later conveniently used by vested interests to denigrate and attempt to lessen the significance of their contribution to Australian art. Wedged between the collective power of the Australian Impressionists and the Angry Penguins, Shore's approach was isolated and more individualistic. His place in history has been much

neglected, despite his significant impact on Australian art which includes winning many prestigious awards and prizes for his painting, being well represented in all major Australian public galleries and many regional galleries and his activities as a teacher, writer and champion of others. In later years inner conflict, critical neglect and external criticism proved insurmountable (Haysom,2009,15).

In researching material for the book, a number of Shore`s peers and former gallery directors and critics spoke strongly about his work. The artist, Noel Counihan observed in the *Guardian* in 1946:

`His work, leaning closer to our contemporary life, was a positive factor influencing the artistic outlook of many artists, including the writer, then a student of 17 or so. I remember well the excitement I experienced looking at the fresh, vigorous paintings of Shore, rich in colour, striking in form, and reflecting some of the mood of the times. They helped to open up a new world of art to me.`

The artist, writer and critic, Adrian Lawlor wrote in *The Herald* in 1946 that Shore`s work:

*`...abounds in that sense of style and quality which was always inherent in his work.`*

The painter and critic Arthur V. Cook in *Meanjin* (9:1 1950), noted:

*`Under the spell of Van Gogh, Shore`s palette was released, colour was used impulsively and audaciously, imparting to the canvas an effect which suggests the boundless abundance and fertility of nature. He learned to work intuitively, with the result that outward appearance was*

*subjugated to the more pressing vision of the mind. The ardent rapidity of his brush has in his best work been sufficient for the task.*

Eric Westbrook, a former director of the National Gallery of Victoria wrote in a - *Personal letter to Shore* in 1957: *I have developed a very high regard for your abilities and for your sincere love of the arts...and we (the NGV), must do everything to help you regain your rightful place as one of the country's leading painters.*

The prominent artist and critic John Brack stated of Shore's later landscape paintings in a review in *The Age* in 1957: *...it has always been the mark of the heavyweight to countermand the rules, and we can be grateful that there is one with enough skill and courage left to do it.*

The flamboyant Patrick McCaughey, critic, former academic and director of the National Gallery of Victoria wrote in a 1977 exhibition catalogue titled, *The Later work of Arnold Shore*:

*... he played an important part in establishing more enlightened attitudes to contemporary art...his role as pioneer modernist, as teacher and critic has unfairly outweighed his reputation as a painter...these later works come with the shock of a new discovery, revealing a different, more complete and more moving artist than hitherto.*

Similarly, a former esteemed senior curator of Australian art at the National Gallery of Victoria, Brian Finemore wrote in his book *Freedom from Prejudice* (1977):

`Shore`s real importance lies in his paintings. At his best his works have a spontaneity and vitality which emphasises the living quality of those things he most liked to paint: flowers, gardens, and the growing vigour of the enveloping bush.`

Given these endorsements why is Shore`s work not more widely acknowledged?

## **SYDNEY INNOVATORS WERE FIRST**

As previously stated, Melbourne`s innovators lagged behind Sydney`s modernists. Whilst Shore and Frater`s contribution have often been noted in writings on Australian art, they have not been extensively contextualized. Australia in the 1920s was insular, both internally and externally, as a tyranny of distance from the centers of activity in Europe and America, let alone Australia`s capital cities, proved problematic. The deeds of innovators and those of more radical persuasion in Sydney were essentially invisible to artists in Melbourne, and vice versa. Innovation in art was not sought from within, but rather from overseas, but even then it was not extensive or fully appreciated. In addition, there were petty suspicions and rivalries evident between Sydney and Melbourne, leading to a bunker mentality.

The imperatives driving artistic innovation in Europe were vastly different to life experienced in Australia. Further there was limited access to innovative works in public collections due to conservative collection approaches, which in some instances, perceived

modernist art as a Jewish plot to flood the market with inferior art. High quality posters and reproductions were few and far between. The stranglehold of conservative forces actively reinforced the 19th Century values of egalitarianism, mateship, and a cloying idealized and romanticized approach to the Australian bush. These values assumed currency and mythic proportions through the links made with World War 1 and the Gallipoli campaign, which were firmly established and reinforced by the Anzac legend.

Melbourne`s younger artists, disenchanted with the conservative teaching at the National Gallery Art School, were attracted to the depictive art underpinned by scientific theory, music and literature as espoused by its fanatical zealot, the Scotsman, Max Meldrum. Worldly and self assured, Meldrum articulated a rigid, five tonal painting theory that drew upon Corot and the Old Masters. Shore was drawn to Meldrum`s techniques and wide artistic knowledge. A student at the National Gallery Art School from 1912, Shore like a number of other younger artists was seduced by Meldrum`s theoretical posturing and the strong mimetic paintings he produced. Shore left the Gallery School in 1917 and joined Meldrum`s School. Shore was young and impressionable due to a restricted upbringing; Meldrum seemed like a breath of fresh air.

Shore studied under Meldrum for five years culminating in teaching his approach to other students. However, Frater`s cynicism and Shore`s expanded world view led to a questioning of Meldrum`s

methods. The approach had limitations. The limited tonal range failed to account for high light tinting. Shore's study of past art, reinforced by his love of classical music, revealed a depth of form and feeling absent in Meldrum's approach. Meldrum's zeal and persuasiveness effectively drew younger artists to his approach which, as a consequence, meant that they avoided further explorations, which may have led them to discovering the post-impressionists earlier.

In 1923 Shore and Frater struck out on their own investigations reading, studying and absorbing as much about other artists that they could. From 1924 on both artists began to experiment after exposure to reproductions of Cezanne and Van Gogh in Sir William Orpen's *Outline of Art* magazine.

If modernism was predicated on aesthetic innovation and change, then the earliest practitioners are those given most prominence. However, a more inclusive context that takes into account socio-historical circumstances would recognize the activities operating in Sydney and Melbourne as significant, rather than overly focus on Sydney and its early innovators.

Various theoretical perspectives fall short of accounting for historical amnesia. Institutional theorists Dickie (1997, 2000) and Danto (1981, 1997) have written extensively about what makes an object a work of art. The role of the art gallery (the institution) provides a consecratory role through institutional fiat. Simplistically, if its in a gallery and is designated as art, then it is. Duchamp's

celebrated *readymade* urinal is often cited as a prime example of this position.

More usefully, a sociology of culture perspective (Alexander, 2003; Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1993; Crane, 1987; Woolf, 1981) acknowledges the influences and roles of the art world and its functionaries – artists, curators, writers, academics, collectors, critics, gallery directors, publishers, and so on. These various functionaries can be gatekeepers who actively influence and promote particular sectors, movements or artists, either by commission or omission.

At this point I have suggested two reasons for Shore's marginalisation. Firstly, Melbourne's innovators lagged behind Sydney's modernists and hence have been overshadowed in the pantheon of Australian art history. Secondly, art institutions selectively present their collections.

## **SELECTIVE TRADITION**

The cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1961: 69) observed that a lived culture within a particular time and place, and the recorded culture, a legacy left by art works and everyday material, are subject to a selective tradition. Such a tradition promotes, acknowledges and ignores aspects of the lived and recorded culture of a defined period. It is not only a selection but an interpretation. Shore's legacy to Australian art has often fallen prey to a selective tradition that has failed to fully appreciate his contribution.

Hence art world functionaries can

make artists and their works visible or invisible. Ironically Shore was both praised by radical and conservative artists, critics, curators and gallery directors yet today his work has been largely hidden. More concerning, however, is that the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) owns thirteen of his works, none of which are on display. The Art Gallery of New South Wales on the other hand has Shore`s paintings on display.

## **INSTITUTIONAL COMPROMISE**

### **COLLECTOR AS ARBITER**

A significant part of the NGV's display of Australian art is taken up by the Joseph Brown collection. Whilst the collection has some good works, a requirement for the collection being given to the NGV was that it remain intact in the designated location. This raises the issue of the role of the collector in being the sole arbiter of taste, and the unofficial chronicler of the NGV's history of Australian art. Early exponents of modernist practice in Australia, the Sydney based, Roland Wakelin and Grace Crossington Smith are represented in the Joseph Brown collection which is appropriate, but is only part of the story. The NGV is Melbourne`s premier art institution. The absence of the display of early Melbourne modernists, not only distorts the historical perspective, but also denies and hides the telling of the Melbourne story. Further, the Melbourne story is another thread that sheds light on the politics and parochialism of Australian art in the early part of the 20th century. In short, the NGV has a vanity based collection of Australian art,

based on a collector's works and which is named in his honor. It precludes a more complete understanding of our cultural heritage, and opens up the charge that the NGV is not a representative public collection, even though heavily reliant on public funds.

## **COLLECTOR AS STIPULATOR**

The lack of additional space to the Joseph Brown collection space means that alternative readings, critiques, reassessments and reappraisals are unable to be accommodated. Given that the NGV has thirteen Shore's, as well as works by other Melbourne modernists, this means that a collector's works determine the historical perspective. In effect, the NGV has signed over the focus of their holdings to a collector's conditional ultimatum. Thus, independent selection or curatorial input is denied. More insidiously, the promotion and consecration of certain artists over others enhances their cultural cache, and hence monetary value. Indeed, Joseph Brown's marketing approach as an art dealer in the 1960s, was to carry stock holdings of artists' works in order to drive up the prices due to scarcity and limited availability (Van den Bosch, 2005:49).

## **SPATIAL CONSTRAINTS**

Increasingly the NGV is hamstrung by space and structural decisions. In July 1997 the Liberal Government under the leadership of Jeff Kennett, and the NGV director Timothy Potts, announced the establishment of a dedicated gallery for Australian art at Federation Square. The decision

was met with some derision in the art world with concern that Australian art was separated from its international counterparts, thus eliminating a broader cultural reading (Van den Bosch, 2005:144-6). Nevertheless, given the separation that now exists, an internal dialogue between different readings of Australian art would prove valuable. Alas, it is increasingly left to the Regional Galleries to facilitate and foster alternative histories and readings on Australian art and artists.

### **CURATORIAL PREJUDICE**

Interestingly the recent major touring exhibition on Australian tonalism, *Misty Moderns*, which looked at Max Meldrum and various artists, including Shore, began at the Art Gallery of South Australia and ended at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) in Canberra. The Victorian showing was not at the NGV, but rather, the McClelland Gallery in Langwarrin, an outer suburb of Melbourne. Why not the NGV? One can speculate. As one of the shows curators observed there is still residual hostility shown towards Max Meldrum and those associated with his teaching. Did the NGV reject the exhibition? Was the lack of space for showing the works problematic? However, a more charitable perspective relates to the associations forged between the appointment of the director of the NGA, Ron Radford, who previously worked at the Art Gallery of South Australia, and which would have made it easier to secure the NGA as a touring space .

### **OUT OF STEP WITH THE**

## TIMES

Another reason that Shore's work has been hidden is that his steadfast approach to landscape from the late 1930s went against the fashions of the day, wherein artists embraced surrealism and expressionism that addressed the human condition, a strong theme emerging from the horrors of the second world war. Thus, Shore appeared as an artist out of step with his times. His association with the more conservative Australian Academy of Art and the Victorian Artists' Society added to his marginalisation.

Whilst much of the detail of Shore's activities have remained hidden, the truly under-recognised contribution he has made through his art was his perceptual and innovative *alla prima* response to the Australian landscape. From the late 1930s he principally focused on painting landscapes after winning awards for his portraits and still life compositions. His distinctiveness was to place the viewer in the landscape so as to experience the rhythms and patterns of nature as a living organism. Shore provided a bridge between the Australian Impressionists and the Angry Penguins; his vertical bush compositions preceded those of Fred Williams. He engaged the senses with his deft and exuberant use of color and texture.

In Shore's best work, the urgent jabs, marks and drawing into the surface, add an immediacy and energy that brought his subjects to life; the heat haze, the buzzing, whirring sounds of insects, the play of light on the leaves and blades of

grass. The use of atmospheric perspective to achieve depth, and the subtle tints and tones, or conversely his intense color palette, transformed and breathed life into the mundane and ordinary subject, resonating in his best landscapes. These were not paintings that celebrated sentimentality. Nor in many paintings did they incorporate elements pertaining to human intervention. Rather they are riotous celebrations of nature, in light, color and surface.

Hopefully the book *Arnold Shore – Pioneer Modernist* will go some way to restoring interest and reassessment of a largely hidden and forgotten artist, whose larger place in Australian art history has yet to be more fully appreciated. Unfortunately it is most often the academy, and not the prime art institutions, that are leading the charge for unearthing hidden or neglected historical figures.

## **BUT WHAT OF THE FUTURE –ART/FASHION/GLOBAL MARKETS**

As Van den Bosch (2005) and Robert Hughes (1992) has repeatedly pointed out, the shift from art as autonomous under the period broadly defined as modernism, to the absorption with commerce and fashion in a post-modern era that facilitated interactions between high art and popular culture, the market and economics, has located art and its activities as complicit with commodified practices. For example, the franchise - branding gallery concept, exemplified in the Guggenheim, the Tate, and the Louvre, cultural tourism, the Art Fairs, the dealer – collector -

entrepreneur Charles Saatchi and the YBrits global promotion, proliferating Biennales (Stallabrass,2004;2006;Werner, 2005) and the artist as unabashed self-promoter and circus ring-master, a la` Koons, Kostabi and Hirst . As Twitchell observed since the 1960s, `as our culture started moving from a gatekeeper to a ticket-taker culture, from a custodial culture to an entertainment culture, the museum was forced to compete for what became the modern patron, the shopping tourist (Twitchell, 2004: 225-6). Such shifts are enmeshed in market economics, globalised politics and spectacle capitalism. Increasingly what we see is often subject to cultural economic imperatives, or at the behest of financial power brokers. Art is in danger of becoming a plaything in the service of gimmickry; the regional story subsumed by global homogeneity, spectacle or curatorial convenience and abnegation.

As Smith(2009), Hughes(1992) and Van den Bosch(2005) observe, the shift in the late 20th century from the dominance of the primary market (the commercial gallery), to the convergence with the secondary market (the auction house), in a global context, has led to massively inflated prices and an emphasis on contemporary practice. The Tate Modern opened in London in 2000 and has been enormously successful in attracting crowds to its shows, but is in danger of being damned by its success and the expectations of its audiences. The challenge faced by major public galleries is to maintain their relevance in the face of mass entertainment options. Their once

clearly defined role of maintaining representative collections is now stretched to embrace pluralistic contemporary innovation; time will determine as to whether the Emperor is wearing any clothes, and that innovation for its own sake is not the only rationale.

Importantly, artists like Shore need to be re-examined, and the broader cultural context of their practices as representing modes of activity at a given cultural moment not be lost to a convenience of forgetting, curatorial abandonment, or glib dismissal. The selective tradition needs to be a more inclusive and considered one. If not, our cultural history and memory are in danger of becoming massively distorted and hidden from future generations.

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