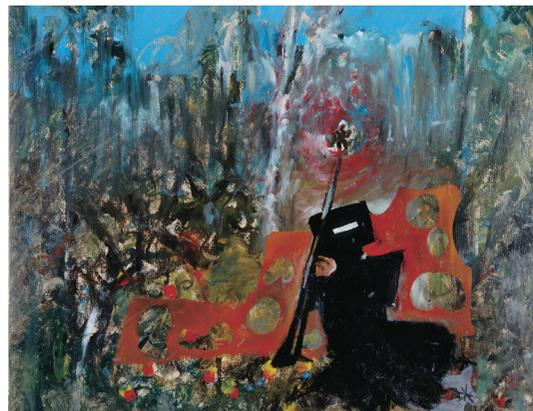
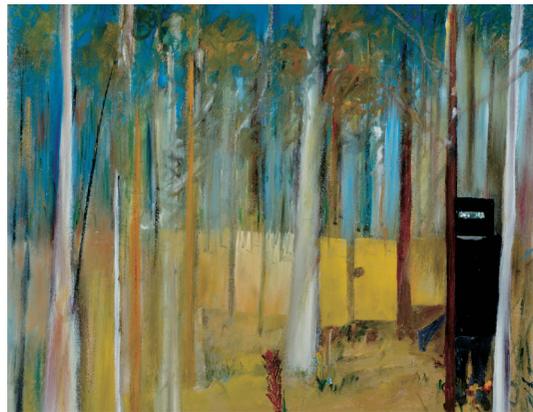
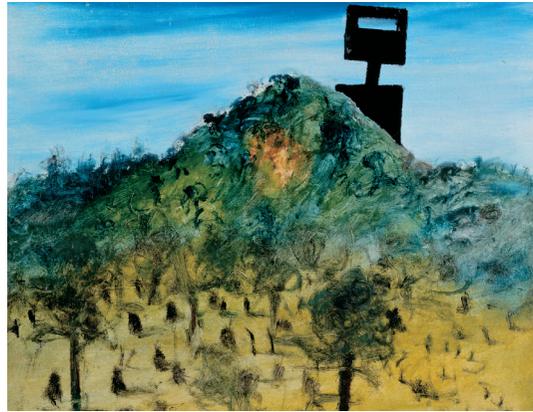
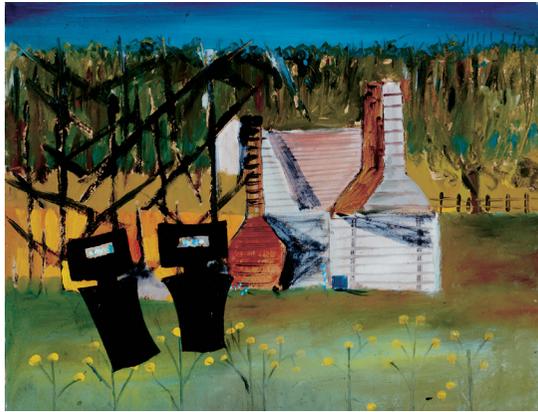


# NOLAN AND NED KELLY



## THE NED KELLY SERIES AT CMAG

Between March 1945 and July 1947, Sidney Nolan worked intensely to produce just over 50 paintings and additional works on paper that comprise what is now known as the first Ned Kelly series. Of these, 24 were gifted to the National Gallery of Australia by Sunday Reed in 1977 and the group of 15 works at CMAG represent the only other substantial holding from the series. They feature early smaller experimental works done on heavy strawboard in 1945 and reveal the first use of the iconic square mask with a slit for eyes. They evolved to the larger works painted on Masonite board at Heide from March 1946 which are distinguished by their bolder landscape forms. The final work is *Police Trooper* from April 1947. The exhibition at CMAG shows the works in date order. Dates were important to the artist. Nolan inscribed the date of completion on most of the works although some had been painted over what may have been several weeks or months:

Really the Kelly paintings are secretly about myself. You would be surprised if I told you. From 1945 to 1947 there were emotional and complicated events in my own life. It's an inner history of my own emotions but I am not going to tell you about them ...  
 – Sidney Nolan, 1985

Nolan's purpose in making the series was built upon multiple threads that had been evolving in his mind. Firstly, there was the sense that he wanted to find a contemporary way to express the Australian landscape and break with the dominant vision of the likes of Impressionist Arthur Streeton:

I wanted to do something that was the complete opposite of the sunset bush.  
 – Sidney Nolan, 1980

His time out in the Wimmera during his army service was the catalyst for seeing the landscape in a new way. But the bush alone was not enough:

I saw how (Kelly and the black square) would be exactly the sort of thing I needed to illuminate the Australian landscape and the other way around – how the Australian landscape would illuminate something to do with why a man like Kelly would arise.  
 – Sidney Nolan, 1980

I realised that Ned Kelly was the vehicle I needed – the tough life, the violence, goldmining, beating the drought ...  
 – Sidney Nolan, 1964

Top left: Sidney NOLAN, *Glenrowan*, 1945, Ripolin oil enamel, Dulux alkyd and Duco nitrocellulose on strawboard.  
 Top right: Sidney NOLAN, *Kelly*, 1946, Ripolin oil enamel, Dulux alkyd and Duco nitrocellulose on strawboard.  
 Middle left: Sidney NOLAN, *Kelly and Sergeant Kennedy*, 1945, Ripolin oil enamel, Dulux alkyd and Duco nitrocellulose on strawboard.  
 Middle right: Sidney NOLAN, *Kelly in bush*, 1945, Ripolin oil enamel, Dulux alkyd and Duco nitrocellulose on strawboard.  
 Bottom left: Sidney NOLAN, *Kelly and horse*, 1945, Ripolin oil enamel, Dulux alkyd and Duco nitrocellulose on strawboard.  
 Bottom right: Sidney NOLAN, *Stringybark Creek*, 1945, Ripolin oil enamel, Dulux alkyd and Duco nitrocellulose on strawboard.

When Nolan embarked on this series, the escapades of the Kelly Gang, Ned's capture, trial and hanging in 1880 were just within living memory rather than a story from a distant colonial past. Public myth making had started early with breathless coverage and visual renderings in the newspapers of the day. As technology evolved, the real events were recreated photographically in magic lantern presentations and in 1906 it was the subject of the world's first full length motion picture. Nolan was intrigued by how these stories came to be part of everyday parlance and folklore. He also had personal connections from his childhood. Some may have been expanded in his imagination, but that too is significant:

The actual armour that Kelly wore was one of the objects in the aquarium which as kids we were taken to see. So it is really one of my earliest memories – like the sea, or the smell of the eucalyptus tree. A thing which gets into your consciousness before you are aware that it's in.

– Sidney Nolan, 1964

... it happens to be true that my grandfather did chase the Kellys. So I heard all about it from him. He was a policeman and he was sent up to Beechworth to chase them. And as the saying is, "it was double pay and country girls" – and they didn't chase the Kellys too hard ... so it was said.

– Sidney Nolan, 1977

Nolan also had a personal connection to the feeling, like Kelly, of being on the run. Late in the war, he worked in virtual hiding from a small studio in Parkville under an assumed name after attempting to obtain a medical discharge. When that was refused, he went AWOL (absent without leave). His father viewed his actions with great disdain and these feelings were compounded by the shock news of his brother's drowning on war service. Nolan found resonance in Kelly's highly articulate statement expressed in the *Jerilderie Letter* against the injustices of the police and harsh government policies:

Kelly was not half rebel, half criminal, he was a rebel reformer. That is why he got into the language – he did something about the world.

– Letter to John Reed, 22 August 1947

As conflict ended in August 1945 there also came a new urgency to find fresh expression:

...there was also a sense to everybody – we had been through the war – there was a feeling that the world was going to begin again.

– Sidney Nolan, 1980

Part of that expression was also referencing abstract art, in particular, the work of the Russian Constructivist painter Kazimir Malevich:

I was conscious of the fact that the black square was haunting Modern Art since the first war, since Malevich, and it was tilted on one side and used by various people, by Max Ernst, by other people, but basically the black square was around in Modern Art and all I did was to put a pair of eyes into this black square to see if I could animate a formal shape.

– Sidney Nolan, 1980

But there were also more ambiguous personal reasons for the mask:

The fact that there's supposed to be a man underneath the mask, and he's supposed to be Ned Kelly and he's supposed to be a hero or a non-hero, or a criminal, in one sense is secondary to my general pursuit of some formal things which are inside my soul.

– Sidney Nolan, 1980

## MAKING THE PAINTINGS

Sidney Nolan's time working as a commercial artist in a factory had given him the confidence and experience to use painting materials that were not conventionally used by artists who were then principally trained in watercolour or oils:

Perhaps because I was in the factory and had to do large stands, I used spray guns – I was technically quite accomplished because I'd had the time in the factory. So unwittingly, I trained as a painter by working in the factory at a young age. The technical aspects of the Kelly paintings appear naive but are done on proper principles and actually quite complicated bits of work.

– Sidney Nolan, 1980

I like the immediate feeling of Ripolin (and the aroma!). When you can see every brush stroke if you like. Some people want all surfaces to be crumbly like Stilton cheese.

– Sidney Nolan, 1985

In a letter written to Sunday Reed from Dimboola he outlined specifically the basic primary colours that he wanted her to buy and send to him:

Dulux is probably the most durable lacquer or enamel on the market so really it's the best angle to concentrate on. Their three best colours, strongest, brightest, are lemon yellow, cobalt blue and the red I've forgotten but you can tell it easily enough on the colour card. Those three colours and black and white and thinner give a pretty complete range.

– Letter to Sunday Reed, late 1942

The primary type of enamel used in this series was Ripolin, which was invented in the Netherlands as the first commercially available enamel paint in 1897 and was keenly used by iconic artists and architects of the modern period:

Picasso had said that Ripolin was healthy paint – and when he said that I believed him and I ordered as much as I could – Ripolin was a high quality enamel paint that was used on yachts and Rolls Royces. Picasso combined it with oils ... But I used it straight and I used it like watercolour ... I like to dip the brush in the tin.

– Sidney Nolan, 1980

Ripolin is thin and highly viscous and to avoid unwanted dripping, Nolan needed to work with the painting surface laid flat. As the series progressed, he became more confident in overpainting, at times only letting a fragment of the base colour remain exposed. His youthful enjoyment of speed as a cyclist and swimmer seemed to correspond to the quick way that he could apply the paint, but he was often frustrated at the care required to allow it to dry.

The 16-year-old poet Barrie Reid came down from Brisbane to visit the Reeds in August 1947 and vividly described the sight of seeing the *Ned Kelly* series in process:

That first morning when I walked in, the hall was full of paintings. The dining room was a studio with tins of ripolin, bottles of oil, a scrubbed long table and on the walls many charcoal drawings of bearded heads. I saw real painting, free and authentic for the first time. I had arrived just as the Kellys were nearing completion; the large hardboard panels, the cardboard studies, the many drawings and watercolours captured and controlled my eyes.

– Barrie Reid, 1967



Sidney NOLAN, *Kelly*, 1946, Ripolin oil enamel, Dulux alkyd and Duco nitrocellulose on strawboard.

Sidney NOLAN, *Return to Glenrowan*, 1946, Ripolin oil enamel, Dulux alkyd and Duco nitrocellulose on strawboard.

## FOCUS WORK: KELLY AND HORSE 1946



Sidney NOLAN, *Kelly and horse*, 1946, Ripolin oil enamel, Dulux alkyd and Duco nitrocellulose on Masonite.

In March 1946 Nolan moved from painting the *Ned Kelly* series on the smaller sized boards made of compressed paper to larger boards made of hard Masonite. He had already been working on that scale for the *St Kilda* series, so it is likely that the smaller series can be regarded as more experimental and with the resolved clarity of the abstracted Kelly mask, Nolan felt confident to progress to the larger sized panels.

In the painting *Kelly and horse* the outline of a small Kelly head is visible beneath the large one and Nolan has written two dates in pencil at the bottom of this work – March 1946 and September 1946. This may indicate his process of coming back and reworking the composition as he moved to create larger bolder forms.

Nolan created several works depicting Ned Kelly on his horse, all of them different. In the Foundation Collection, there are two paintings created a year apart that share the same title. In the [earlier painting, created in 1945](#), Kelly appears behind a shroud of saplings, and notably his back is to the viewer. There is a sense of comic absurdity as we see the bushranger, weighed down by his home-made armour, struggling to gain a foothold to mount his horse which patiently stands by.

In the [1946 version of this work](#), Kelly is significantly more confident. He is shown astride his horse with his gun poised as he fearlessly stares at the viewer. In contrast to the earlier work, here Kelly and the horse have been thrust into the central foreground. Stylistically both the forms and rendering of the landscape are bolder and more hard-edged compared to the earlier work. The land around Glenrowan Hill with its burnt-out stumps and scrubby trees is hard, barely cleared country. Here Kelly and his horse are at one, alert and watchful within the bush landscape they survey.

## FOCUS WORK: POLICEMAN IN WOMBAT HOLE 1946



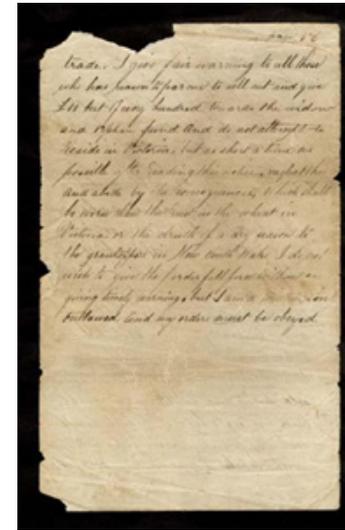
Left: Sidney NOLAN, *Policeman in wombat hole*, 1946, Ripolin oil enamel, Dulux alkyd and Duco nitrocellulose on Masonite.  
Right: Page 56 of the *Jerilderie Letter*, courtesy State Library of Victoria.

During the shootout at [Stringybark Creek](#), Constable Thomas McIntyre managed to escape. He evaded the Kelly gang by hiding in a wombat hole. The terrified note describing the incident he recorded in his police notebook is inscribed on the back of the painting and in the painting itself:

..... Ned Kelly and others stuck us up today when we were  
disarmed. Lonigan and Scanlan shot. I am hiding in  
a wombat hole till dark. The Lord have mercy on me.  
Scanlan tried to get his gun out.

Nolan paints a comically surreal scene set in a field of flowers with a lizard who has come to investigate the hapless trooper, a faintly bemused wombat who can't get into his home and a magpie calmly perched on the end of the rifle. With these animal characters, Nolan appears to be referencing Ned Kelly's eloquent [Jerilderie Letter](#) of 1879:

..... Is my mother not to be pitied also who has no alternative  
only to put up with the brutal and cowardly conduct of a  
parcel of big ugly fat-necked wombat headed big-bellied



..... magpie-legged narrow-hipped splaw-footed sons of  
Irish Bailiffs or English landlords which is better known  
as Officers of Justice.

When he visited Lanyon in 1987, Sidney Nolan commented that he added the yellow after the painting was completed as a reference to the Wimmera and to Arthur Streeton's golden landscape paintings.

# RESPONDING

## 1. BEHIND THE MASK

Nolan explained that he felt drawn to the story of Ned Kelly and that he had a personal connection to this historical figure. List some of the reasons for this connection. Use quotes to support your claims.

## 2. WHOSE COUNTRY?

Aboriginal custodians have cared for the land, animals, plants and waterways in Australia for over 65,000 years. Since the 1880s, north-eastern Victoria has been referred to as 'Kelly Country' because this is where Ned Kelly and his gang rode their horses and hid in the Australian bush from the authorities. [Take a tour](#) through 'Kelly Country' in North-eastern Victoria and list both the **colonial place names** and the **Indigenous place names** along the tour. Now look at the [AIATSIS map of Indigenous Australia](#). List the places that are special to you and your family and note the Indigenous place names.

## 3. JERILDERIE LETTER – FOCUS WORK: POLICEMAN IN WOMBAT HOLE 1946

On page 56 of the *Jerilderie Letter*, Ned Kelly attempts to justify his actions and on page 43, calls the authorities **a parcel of big ugly fat-necked wombat headed big-bellied magpie-legged narrow-hipped splaw-footed sons of Irish Bailiffs**. Nolan references this derogatory slur in the *Policeman in Wombat hole* painting with the inclusion of a wombat, a lizard and a magpie. The *Jerilderie Letter* offers an historical insight into Australian identity and is one of only two original Kelly documents known to have survived. In it, Kelly outlines the justifications for his actions and the injustices he and his family suffered at the hands of corrupt authorities. This manifesto is regarded by some as an early call for an Australian republic. Do you agree? Why? List reasons to support your answer.

## 4. AUDIO DESCRIPTION – FOCUS WORK: KELLY AND HORSE 1946

An Audio Description is a form of narration used to provide information surrounding key visual elements in an image for the benefit of the blind and visually impaired. It enables greater access to artworks and is a style of writing that features the following:

- It is factual and comprehensive, describing what you see in detail.
- It is objective and avoids interpretations, allowing the user to form their own impression.
- It highlights the key elements of the work, allowing the user to build an image in their own mind. Key elements to consider include; shape, line, colour, texture, size, mood, subject, materials, techniques, style.
- It is methodical and builds up an image, starting with a general overview, followed by the background details, and finishing with the foreground details. The main focus of the work should be the last piece of information provided to the user as this is most likely to leave a lasting impression. Information about the image is revealed in the following order:
  - Overview of the image
  - Background detail
  - Foreground detail
- Read a transcript of the Audio Description of *Kelly and horse*, 1946 below:

This is a painting by Sidney Nolan of Ned Kelly, a bushranger in north-eastern Victoria who was eventually executed in 1880. The full title of the work is *Kelly and horse*. It is a large work, 92.1 cm high and 122.4 cm wide, painted on Masonite board with Ripolin oil enamel, a type of house paint.

Ned Kelly in his armour, sitting on his chestnut red horse, dominates the image. The figures are so large in comparison to the landscape in the background they look almost superimposed. The upper part of the painting's background is a brilliant ultramarine blue sky under flat and featureless white stratus clouds. The lower half of the background is a landscape of thickly wooded rolling hills in deep forest green with a larger triangular shaped hill just behind Kelly, transitioning to lighter greens and ochre yellows indicating the lower slopes and a partially cleared plain. Nolan has taken a modernist approach with the landscape. The hills and trees are recognisable but stylised, painted with free, fast swirling brushstrokes. The larger trees in the foreground are interspersed with gnarled blackened stumps, really just daubs of black paint.

The chestnut red horse is centred in the extreme foreground, only the head and chest are visible and the animal has a boxy, geometric quality. The ears are triangles and the eyes are circles, cut out so you can see the landscape behind the horse through these holes, the positioning of the trees within the sockets gives the impression the horse is looking up and to the left. There is a thin bridle looping along the side of the horse's neck but there is no saddle.

Kelly carries a gun on his back and the butt of the rifle is the ochre yellow of the grassy plain with swirling circular shapes reminiscent of the trees in the landscape. Kelly is clad in armour, reducing his form to a series of geometric black shapes.

He balances on the horse with no arms or legs. The torso is a wedge shape, narrower at the base and widening at the shoulders. His neck is a cylinder and his head is a square. The figure's size is so large in contrast to the background Kelly's square helmeted head almost reaches the top of the painting. There is a cut out rectangle in Kelly's square helmet within which two black circular eyes float against the background of the sky. Sunlight glows yellow on the left side Kelly's neck, helmet and allows the black circles of the eyes to have a gleam suggesting he, like the horse, is looking to the left rather than directly at the viewer.

There are 24 works in CMAG's Foundation Collection and 15 of these works comprise the *Ned Kelly* series. As a class, collaborate to write an Audio Description for the remaining 14 paintings in the *Ned Kelly* series. Students may work individually or in pairs.

# MAKING

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## STOP MOTION ANIMATION

View the paintings in CMAG's Nolan Collection [online](#). Each one of Nolan's *Ned Kelly* paintings tells a story. They are like the chapters that make up the bigger story of Ned Kelly and his gang. Look at the paintings and, as a class, discuss the story that is being told in each.

Nolan's paintings have been described by art historian T.G. Rosenthal as having 'a distinct similarity to the set of images that constitute a storyboard for a film sequence.' Nolan's biographer, Brian Adams also stated that 'Nolan's painted narrative was rather like a series of still frames from a silent screen dramatisation of events ... he called them one off snapshots of each episode ...' In other words, Nolan's paintings look like a series of stills taken from a comic strip or a storyboard for a movie.

## Watch the stop motion animation created at CMAG called [Kelly...Back in the Can](#)

Synopsis: Ned and his friends go sightseeing in Canberra for the Centenary. The holiday is interrupted by a menagerie of characters straight out of a Nolan painting, including a policeman, a swooping magpie, a giant man-eating wombat, a lizard with superpowers and a very grumpy camel. In the shemozzle and kerfuffle of the chase, they fall into a wombat hole! Here they all become good friends and have a party, with cake, candles and fireworks to celebrate Canberra's 100th birthday.

## How was it made?

CMAG's stop motion animation was inspired by Sidney Nolan's paintings and brought those paintings to life on a larger than life-size theatrical scale. One thousand photographs were taken over six workshops from above looking down. The camera was mounted on a bar on the ceiling and the lens was pointing down to the floor. There is a connection between the way Nolan made these paintings and the way they were animated. When Sidney Nolan made the paintings in the Nolan Collection at CMAG, he did not use an easel. Instead, he put the board flat on the dining room table to paint so the paint would not drip. To reference this idea, and to capture the flatness of Nolan's paintings, the backdrops, props and characters for this animation was laid flat too and were then photographed from above.

Create a simple stop motion animation using an app that may be downloaded for free onto a personal or school device such as a phone or tablet. Use the method of shooting the stills from above looking down onto backdrops and characters. These are essentially the flat 2D shapes of a collage that are not glued down so that they may be animated. Will you draw, paint or cut them out of magazines? What will you animate? Listed here are some suggestions for inspiration:

- An episode from your own life.
- An episode from the Kelly story depicted in one of Nolan's paintings.
- An episode from the Kelly story described in Ned Kelly's *Jerilderie Letter*.

# RELATED LINKS

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[Ned Kelly fact sheet](#)

[Sidney Nolan exhibition, Dublin 1973 – Ned Kelly series](#)

[Transcript of Jerilderie Letter](#)

[Ned Kelly's last stand](#)

[Stop.Motion.Nolan at CMAG](#)

[NGA Ned Kelly series by Sidney Nolan](#)

[AGWA Ned Kelly series](#)