

MENZIES NOLAN EXHIBITION OCTOBER 2012

This selling exhibition of twenty-eight works by Sidney Nolan explores the key themes that occupied Nolan's art practice for four decades. Beginning with an early Kelly work from the midforties, the exhibition includes Central Australian landscape paintings spanning three decades, African and Antarctic works from the sixties, the magnificent 1964 *Ned Kelly and Mounted Trooper* and three important Burke and Wills paintings from the fifties, sixties and eighties. Later Kelly works, along with a collection of eighties spray paintings from the *Riverbend* and *Silk Road Series* add further depth to this fascinating array of works.

The most enduring of Nolan's themes, and the subject of the earliest work in the exhibition, is that of the story of Ned Kelly. *Kate Kelly Pursued by Constable Fitzpatrick* was most probably painted in 1945, the year Nolan first addressed the Ned Kelly theme. The fact that it remained in the artist's collection until his death in England in 1992 is perhaps testament to the immense personal significance Nolan gave to these very first Kelly paintings. In early works such as this Nolan started to build up the unique set of formal devices through which he encapsulated the complex symbolism of the Kelly myth. Very few of these ancillary Kelly works now remain in private hands; with its significant provenance and rarity, it is a painting of considerable historical importance.

Throughout his oeuvre, Nolan returned obsessively to the subject of Burke and Wills - the story, both terrible and tragic, of the ill-fated expedition of 1860-61. Centred on the contrasting figures of Robert O'Hara Burke and William Wills, it was a story that enabled Nolan to use local history and precisely address quintessential Australian themes. This exhibition includes three major Burke and Wills works, from the magnificent early painting *Burke Lay Dying*, 1950 through to *Landscape – Man and Camel* of 1966, and the large and impressive triptych, *Burial of Burke*, 1985.

Nolan's initial series of paintings produced between 1948 and 1951 on the Burke and Wills theme dealt largely with the historical records of the specific events of the expedition, using daguerreotypes and other visual records as the basis of many of the images. The first paintings are very much a combination of these records and the outcome of the artist's own personal epic journey through Central Australia's desert regions. The enduring impact of the journey compounded not only his realisation of the immensity of inland Australia but also of the degree of will and effort demanded of the fragile flesh and bone of these early explorers who penetrated its seemingly limitless and hostile landscape. This early exploration of the theme culminated in Nolan's powerful first series of works of which *Burke Lay Dying*, 1950, forms a vital part.

Another notable work on the Burke and Wills theme is *Landscape – Man and Camel*, painted in London in 1966. With its direct provenance from Sidney Nolan's principal London gallery this rare painting shows a barren and inhospitable background; in the foreground is the image of a fallen man, the doomed explorer Robert O'Hara Burke. Here again we experience Nolan's focus on one of his most enduring preoccupations: that is, man's relationship to the landscape

and the consequent human struggle to survive within the invariable framework of an indifferent Nature. A companion painting of the same date, *Camel and Figure*, exists in the collection of the Tate Gallery, London.

Such was his passion for the subject over the years that in 1984 Nolan was invited to join the film crew of the Hoyts Edgley production of *Burke and Wills*. On location he was inspired to produce his last series on the subject; a group of five large triptychs displaying a fresh, social commentary-based interpretation of the explorers' journey across Australia. *Burial of Burke*, 1985, formed a part of the group of five triptychs and presents a rare opportunity to own one privately.

We are delighted to have secured on loan for this exhibition *Ned Kelly and Mounted Trooper* of 1964, which forms a part of the third key group of Kelly paintings begun during an extended sojourn back in Australia. There is a deep sense of mystery that envelops *Kelly and Mounted Trooper*; and it has a powerful and compelling treatment of what is unquestionably the artist's most significant subject. The Kelly paintings of 1964 would seem to have brought the artist's long obsession with the archetypal Kelly story to a point of dramatic expression in terms of its enduring themes of struggle between the outlaw and authority.

Nolan's capacity to absorb the world around him and reconfigure it according to his own sensibility extended beyond the confines of his native Australia to the plains of Europe and Africa, Asia and Antarctica. His desire to travel was insatiable, all the while painting extraordinary series' of works inspired by these vast continents. Perhaps less well-known but no less important are the works Nolan produced during his travels to Africa when, in the European autumn of 1962, Sidney and Cynthia Nolan travelled there primarily to undertake a commission for Kenyan businessman Malin Sorsbie. Nolan, who was clearly greatly affected by this journey, returned to London and began work on an extensive series of paintings of African wildlife; thirty four paintings and eleven drawings were subsequently shown in the Marlborough Gallery's *African Journey* exhibition of 1963.

In these works Nolan revealed that not only had he a genuine passion for Africa, but he was also a subtle and gifted painter of animals. His elephants, apes, gazelles, antelopes, cheetahs, lions and zebras, among others, illustrate a distinct shift from the hard edged and assertive images that had dominated in the 1940s and 1950s, towards a sense of gentler, more painterly images in which the idea of unity of the subject and its environment predominates. *Untitled (African Elephant)* is exemplary in demonstrating Nolan's ability to evoke the feeling of a location, whilst portraying the perfect harmony of animal and habitat.

MENZIES

For further information on specific works in the exhibition please contact one of our Specialists.