

Sidney Nolan: the Gallipoli series



# Contents

About <i>Sidney Nolan: the Gallipoli series</i>	4
About the artist – Sidney Nolan (1917–1992)	9
Framing questions and further research	10
About the Australian War Memorial	10
Acknowledgements	11

## Acknowledgements

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Cover image: Sidney NOLAN, *Head of Gallipoli soldier saluting* (detail), 1977  
synthetic polymer paint on hardboard, 125 x 95 cm, ART91435



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# Sidney Nolan: the Gallipoli series

An Australian War Memorial Travelling Exhibition

## Education briefing notes

### About this Education Resource

This Education Resource is published to accompany the Australian War Memorial Travelling Exhibition

*Sidney Nolan: the Gallipoli series*

20 April – 1 June 2012

Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art

Bestec Gallery 2 and Gallery 3

These Education Briefing Notes are designed to support learning outcomes and teaching programs associated with viewing the exhibition *Sidney Nolan: the Gallipoli series* by:

- Providing information about the artist
- Exploring exhibition themes
- Challenging students to engage with the works and the exhibition's themes
- Identifying ways in which the exhibition can be used as a curriculum resource
- Providing strategies for exhibition viewing, as well as pre- and post-visit research

It may be used in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition or as a pre-visit or post-visit resource.

### Year level

This Resource is primarily designed to be used by secondary to senior secondary visual art teachers and students. Components can be adapted for use by upper primary and tertiary students.

## About Sidney Nolan: the Gallipoli series

Sir Sidney Nolan (1917–1992) was one of Australia's most complex, innovative, and prolific artists. He is best known for the iconic paintings from his *Ned Kelly*, *Burke and Wills*, *Mrs Fraser*, *Leda and the Swan*, and the *Desert and Drought* series. Of equal importance, but less well known, is his remarkable *Gallipoli* series.

In 1978 he presented the *Gallipoli* series to the Australian War Memorial. These 252 drawings and paintings, completed over a 20-year period, were donated in memory of his brother Raymond, a soldier who died in a tragic accident just before the end of the Second World War. Gallipoli was a theme to which Nolan constantly returned throughout his artistic career.

*Sidney Nolan: the Gallipoli series* showcases a selection of these works, which constitute both a personal and public lament, commemorating not just the death of Nolan's brother but a campaign that had cost so many Australian lives. Nolan also drew inspiration from the myths and legends of the Trojan Wars and how Australian history and identity are perceived.



Sidney NOLAN, *Gallipoli riders*, c 1961, textile dye on coated paper, 52.2 x 63.6 cm, ART91314

## About the exhibition

The exhibition includes ten paintings and seventy works on paper, which are arranged thematically within an interpretive framework. The exhibition begins by establishing the *Gallipoli* series within a broader context of Nolan's oeuvre, and is supported by biographical information. Rather than follow a strict chronological order, greater emphasis has been given to the five themes which the *Gallipoli* series can be divided into. These themes are:

### Origins

In 1955, inspired by his reading of Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths*, Nolan moved to the Greek island of Hydra to begin work on a series of paintings about the Trojan War. There he met George Johnston, who encouraged him to read Alan Moorehead's *New Yorker* article which discussed the geographical proximity of Gallipoli and Troy and the similarities between these two famous campaigns. Around this time he also briefly visited Gallipoli and the site of ancient Troy.



Sidney NOLAN, *Gallipoli landscape with recumbent Greek figure*, c 1956, gouache on coated paper, 25.4 x 30.4 cm, ART91226

### Battle

Nolan's reading of classical Greek literature, and Moorehead's article, led him to see the Australian soldiers of the First World War as 'reincarnations of the ancient Trojan heroes of mythical times'. His paintings and drawings of the Australian soldiers at Gallipoli recall the images of Greek heroes, who are shown fighting naked and without their armour on vases of the classical period. Inspired by these powerful, physical figures, Nolan depicts the modern soldier as someone caught up in a bloody and violent war.



Sidney NOLAN, *Gallipoli soldiers in action*, c 1961, textile dye on coated paper, 52.2 x 63.8 cm, ART91385

### The landscape

The paintings in Nolan's *Gallipoli* series depict landscapes that are a fusion of both the real and the imaginary. The landscape that Nolan would have seen when he visited Gallipoli was dominated by an impenetrable growth of thorny shrubs, similar to what visitors can see today. Then and now, the dry escarpments above ANZAC Cove are much as they were in 1915, and from Chunuk Bair, the undulating ridges and gullies unfold themselves. But Nolan's landscapes are also poetic evocations, a lament for a place where so many lives were lost.



Sidney NOLAN, *Gallipoli landscape with large drowned figure in water and steep cliffs*, c 1961, textile dye, wax on coated paper, 25.4 x 30.4 cm, ART91301

### The sea

A sense of the sea pervades the Dardanelles campaign, whose very goal was to seize control of the stretch of water that separated Gallipoli and Troy. The Australians who clambered ashore on 25 April 1915 at what came to be known as ANZAC Cove would sometimes return to swim in its waters. To escape the grime, the filth and the vermin of the trenches they were willing to brave the Turkish shrapnel that occasionally spattered the beach.



Sidney NOLAN, *Drowned soldier at ANZAC as Icarus*, 1958, textile dye, sgraffito, coloured crayon on coated paper, 25.4 x 30.4 cm, ART91309

### Australian identity

Nolan's Gallipoli portraits represent an attempt to define the Australian national character. They provide timeless images of the ANZACs: the young and the old, the innocent and the war-weary, the bushman and the city-dweller. Nolan described these later works and their evolution: 'The first paintings are a very youthful generation of soldiers. They then begin to absorb the fatigue, the weariness, the suffering, the mass experience of war. ... There is one in the later section of a young soldier. He is neither dead nor alive. He is kind of stopped by war...'



Sidney NOLAN, *Head of Gallipoli soldier*, 1977, synthetic polymer paint on hardboard, 122.2 x 91.4 cm, ART91445



- Nolan also explored in the works how Australian identity was influenced by the Gallipoli story, a subject that has been of increasing interest of late.
- The generous donation of the works of the *Gallipoli* series by Sidney Nolan began what would grow into a continuing commitment on the part of the Memorial to contemporary art as being a viable expression of commemoration and a valuable contributor to our understanding of the sacrifices Australians have made in times of war.

The Memorial is delighted to bring this exhibition to the Australian public as many of the works have not been exhibited for almost thirty years.

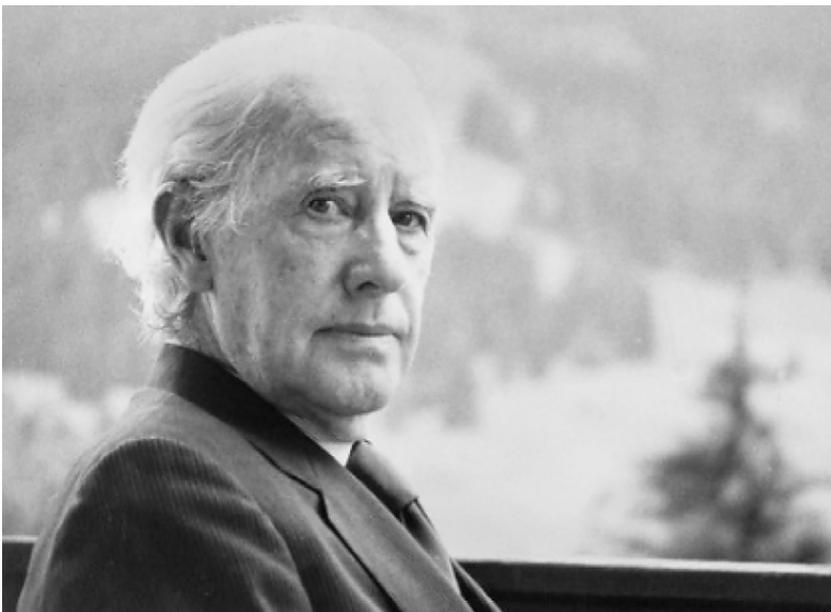
## About the artist – Sidney Nolan (1917–1992)

Nolan remains one of Australia's most acclaimed and internationally recognised artists. Many events and people helped shape his artistic journey, but none more than two independently wealthy art patrons, John and Sunday Reed. Sunday was particularly instrumental in encouraging Nolan to move away from abstract painting and collage towards a more figurative art.

During his Second World War military service in the western district of Victoria, Nolan found the job of loading and unloading stores and provisions to be mundane and repetitive. He applied to be an official war artist, but was turned down because his works were considered too modern. Dejected and bored, and unable to obtain a discharge, Nolan took off for Melbourne, and was duly declared 'illegally absent'. Up until the end of the war, he divided his time between his suburban studio and the Reeds' Heidelberg property.

In 1953, Nolan moved with his family to Britain. He travelled a great deal, and painted even more. An extended holiday on the island of Hydra brought him into contact with two famous Australians – the novelist George Johnston and the historian and writer Alan Moorehead – who inspired him to embark on his *Gallipoli* series. For his contributions to art, Nolan received a knighthood in 1981 and the Order of Merit in 1983; in 1988 he was made Companion of the Order of Australia.

Throughout his long, illustrious career, Nolan worked prolifically in a variety of media on themes drawn from Australian history, myths and legends. He revived elements and iconography from earlier works, but also maintained a spontaneous and vigorous style by continuing to explore new materials and painting techniques.



Informal portrait of artist Sidney Nolan aged 72. An Australian painter, draughtsman, printmaker and stage designer.

## Framing questions and further research

- Why do you think Nolan decided to donate his *Gallipoli* series to the Australian War Memorial's art collection?
- Identify themes in the *Sidney Nolan: the Gallipoli series* exhibition. Can you describe how these themes are evident in the works selected for this exhibition?
- Nolan's reading of Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths* led him to see the Australian soldiers of the First World War as 'reincarnations of the ancient Trojan heroes of mythical times'. Refer to the work *Gallipoli figures in Battle* and discuss how his paintings and drawings drew inspiration from the myths and legends of the Trojan Wars.
- Research the Gallipoli Campaign at ANZAC Cove and the Trojan War and discuss the similarities between these two famous military campaigns.
- ANZAC Day is a national day of remembrance in Australia and New Zealand and is often considered the birth of national consciousness for both of these countries. What does ANZAC stand for and why is this day special to Australians?
- The paintings in Nolan's *Gallipoli* series depict landscapes that are a fusion of both the observed and the imagined past. Can artworks which reference the past have anything to say about the present and future?
- How would you describe the mood in Nolan's Gallipoli landscapes depicting water? Can you identify the strategies the artist has used to create this mood?
- Just as Nolan's Gallipoli portraits represent an attempt to define the Australian national character, consider how you could explore Australian identity in your own work.

## About the Australian War Memorial

- The Australian War Memorial uniquely combines a national shrine to the fallen (the heart of which is the Tomb of the Unknown Australian Soldier), a world class museum and a research centre.
- Located in the nation's capital, Canberra, the Australian War Memorial tells the story of Australia's experience in world wars, regional conflicts and international peacekeeping. It commemorates the sacrifice of the 102,000 Australian men and women who died serving their country and all those who have served in the defence of Australia's national interests.
- The Australian War Memorial is an outstanding educational resource and has special appeal to young Australians and educators. Australian history comes to life with personal connections to family stories. The stories the Memorial tells are very much those of Australia in the 20th century.
- The Australian War Memorial is one of Australia's great institutions and is currently Australia's most visited museum. The Memorial was recognised as Australia's best major tourist attraction and was presented with the national award in 2000, 2001 and 2002/03. It was also inducted into the Tourism Awards Hall of Fame.
- In 2007–2008 the Australian War Memorial attracted over six million visitors (over five million via the website and over one million to the Memorial itself).
- The main Memorial building houses an extensive collection of exhibits depicting the Australian experience of war. Stories from all conflicts are told in a variety of ways: traditional displays (e.g. relics and large technology items are presented alongside their story); interpretive displays (e.g. specific battles are recreated through the use of dioramas and experiences are portrayed in the artworks presented); or through the use of cutting-edge 'object theatre' or multimedia displays (e.g. 'Sydney under attack', a sound and light show, tells the story of the three midget submarines that attempted to raid Sydney Harbour in 1942)
- In recent years it has undergone a complete redevelopment with over 60 percent of its galleries revitalised. A large new exhibition space, ANZAC Hall, was added in 2001. ANZAC Hall provides a stunning exhibition of large technology items, such as the Japanese midget submarine that entered Sydney Harbour in 1942 and 'G for George', the Australian War Memorial's Second World War Lancaster bomber. Striking by night, focusing around 'G for George', is the Memorial's largest and most popular exhibit and is the centrepiece of a major exhibition in ANZAC Hall. An impressive sound and light show realistically depicts a night operation over Berlin in December 1943.

- During 2007 the Memorial opened the 'Conflicts 1945 to Today' galleries in its latest redevelopment. 'Conflicts 1945 to Today' presents the powerful stories of Australian involvement in conflicts over the last six decades. Key features of this gallery redevelopment include the bridge taken from HMAS *Brisbane*, which is linked to the Memorial building by a walkway, as well as the inclusion of a number of multimedia presentations (e.g. 'The Dustoff', 'A Letter Home').
- In 2008 the Memorial opened *Over the front: the Great War in the air*. This exhibition tells the story of military flight and aerial combat during the First World War. An additional five aircraft from the Memorial's collection are brought to life with an exciting multimedia presentation directed and produced by award-winning filmmaker Peter Jackson.

## Acknowledgements

It is important to acknowledge both the Australian Government's Commemoration Program; and the Visions of Australia program for their support of the exhibition.

### Australian Government's Commemorative program

The Australian War Memorial's Travelling Exhibitions program is funded by the Australian Government's Commemorative program. Additional information is available from the Department of Veterans' Affairs offices, and on the DVA website at [www.dva.gov.au](http://www.dva.gov.au)

### Visions of Australia program

*Sidney Nolan: the Gallipoli series* is supported by Visions of Australia, an Australian Government program supporting touring exhibitions by providing funding assistance for the development and touring of Australian cultural material across Australia.