

THE PLACE OF ART IN SOFT DIPLOMACY: THE JOURNEY OF A PAINTING FROM THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF TASMANIA ART COLLECTION TO THE UNITED STATES DURING WORLD WAR II

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(with three plates)

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A painting from the Royal Society of Tasmania Art Collection travelled to the United States of America in 1941 as part of an exhibition intended to showcase 150 years of Australian art. The exhibition, curated by Professor Theodore Sizer, featured 144 major artworks sourced from leading Australian art galleries, museums and private collections including the RST watercolour by FG Simpkinson de Wesselow of *Kangaroo Bay, Hobart*, 1846. Opening just two months before America entered World War II, the highly successful exhibition ran until 1945 visiting 26 venues in America, with selected works also touring to seven venues in Canada. It served not only to significantly improve awareness about Australian life but strategically encourage a closer US–Australia relationship for the Australian–American military alliance.

Key Words: colonial art, Royal Society of Tasmania, Simpkinson de Wesselow, Sydney Ure Smith, Australia, United States of America, World War II, Theodore Sizer.

A watercolour painting from the Royal Society of Tasmania (RST) Art Collection made its way to the United States of America in 1941, playing a part in an intriguing piece of mid-war soft diplomacy. The project was ambitious, with an Australian committee headed by Will Ashton OBE, aiming to select about 100 works of Australian art to tour America and Canada. The committee was advised by the highly-credentialled Professor Theodore Sizer, head of the Faculty of Art History at Yale, Director of the Yale University Art Gallery, member of the International Committee on Art History, and one of the most respected art advisers of the Carnegie Corporation at the time. Finance for the American exhibitions was provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York (*The Herald*, 6 February 1941, p. 7).

The planned exhibition aimed to showcase 150 years of Australian art to the American and Canadian public. Professor Sizer and the Australian committee of representatives from the leading art galleries in the country were tasked with giving a clear picture of Australia in its various aspects and at different periods in its development, as well as depicting the daily life of its citizens (*The Age*, 12 March 1941, p. 8). Sizer travelled to Australia, visiting each of the six state capitals and Canberra: ‘– all by air – covering a distance as great as from New York to San Francisco and back. It came as a shock to some that Australia was as large as the United States,’ it was noted in press coverage of his visit (*The Age*, 12 March 1941, p. 8).

The committee managed to complete its apparently herculean task, selecting artworks from the Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, Hobart, Brisbane and Warrnambool art galleries and museums, the Royal Society of Tasmania collection, the Mitchell Library and private collections (*The Sun*, 22 April 1941, p. 5). There were 144 artworks in the exhibition catalogue compiled by Sydney

Ure Smith (Smith 1941, pp. 29–49). Smith was an artist and publisher who held leadership roles in the art world including president of the Society of Artists, trustee of the National Art Gallery of NSW, member of the Advisory Committee for Applied Art, and many others (Underhill 2024). In Hobart, Sizer said an interchange of art between Australia and the United States would help to remove wrong ideas, ‘which in the case of Australia were gained to a considerable extent from Hollywood’ (*The Mercury*, 20 February 1941, p. 4).

The artwork selected from the Royal Society of Tasmania Art Collection was Francis Guillemard Simpkinson de Wesselow’s watercolour painting of *Kangaroo Bay, Hobart*, 1846, which became artwork number 26 in the exhibition catalogue (Smith 1941, p. 31; pl. 1). Smith observed that de Wesselow produced some of the best drawings and watercolours of Hobart, describing his work as excellent (Smith 1941, p. 20). Noted watercolourist Max Angus commented on this particular painting, in connection with de Wesselow’s frequent painting excursions with fellow artist John Skinner Prout:

On 17 October 1846 they sat together at Kangaroo Bay, near Hobart Town, to each produce a watercolour of the first rank, full of light and atmosphere, the deft brushwork, sure draughtsmanship and sparkling light in one being almost indistinguishable from those qualities in the other. (Angus 1984, p. 58)

This painting clearly has great appeal, as Professor Ross Large AO, Chair of the RST Art Committee, noted: ‘The Simpkinson de Wesselow selected for the 1941 exhibition is my favourite from the Royal Society of Tasmania collection of over 200 de Wesselow watercolours. It depicts the Kangaroo Bay shoreline, a few boats at the old jetty, two houses on the Bluff and a magnificent rendition of



Plate 1 – Francis Guillemard Simpkinson de Wesselow's watercolour painting of *Kangaroo Bay, Hobart*, 1846. (Royal Society of Tasmania Art Collection)

Mount Wellington in the background.' (R Large, pers. comm., 2024).

Francis Guillemard Simpkinson (1819–1906) was a naval lieutenant appointed in 1844 to the magnetic observatory in Hobart Town, where he was stationed for four years before returning to England. He was an accomplished artist who painted prolifically during his time in Tasmania, with some of his watercolours displayed at the first public exhibition of paintings in Australia held on 6 January 1845 at the Legislative Council chambers. He added 'de Wesselow' to his name later in life due to an inheritance in 1869 from the de Wesselow branch of the family (Hodgman 1967). In 1900 he gifted his large collection of fine colonial watercolours to the Royal Society of Tasmania, through the intervention of RST Vice-President Bishop HH Montgomery when the RST was focussed on gathering pictures, maps and documents important to Tasmanian cultural identity prior to Federation.

The paintings were packed in a zinc-lined case in England and sent by sea to Hobart Town, arriving unscathed and intact on the other side of the world. Max Angus notes: 'The generosity of this gift and the circumstances surrounding the making of it are among the most singular and interesting in the history of Australian colonial art' (Angus 1984, p. 16). At the monthly meeting of the RST in October 1900, the letter of donation from Simpkinson de Wesselow was read in full, and a vote of thanks moved to the donor of '...this

priceless gift of works of art' was carried with acclamation (Royal Society of Tasmania 1900, p. x).

Two artworks selected from the separate Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery Collection (TMAG) were: John Glover's *My Harvest Home*, artwork 24 in the exhibition catalogue, and Thomas Griffiths Wainewright's *Portrait of Mrs. Wilson*, artwork 25 (Smith 1941, pp. 30–31; pl. 2).

The timing of the exhibition seems extraordinary: it opened in the United States on 2 October 1941 (National Gallery of Art 1941a), two months before the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour that precipitated America entering World War II. The exhibition toured until 1945, travelling to 26 venues in the USA with a selection of the art also going to seven venues in Canada (Jordan 2013, p. 25; pl. 3). What occasioned this large and expensive undertaking in the middle of a world war? Was it prompted by a sudden desire of the American people to better acquaint themselves with Australian art? Or a thirst for inspirational 'cultural exchange in the midst of chaos', as Sizer opined? (*The Age*, 12 March 1941, p. 8).

The answer appears to be far more pragmatic. In an interview, Sizer commented directly on the world war in progress: 'Over in the States,' he said, 'we're realising that we have no friends any more except Great Britain — and it's high time we got together. British and Americans, we're all in this together, and we'll have to get out of it together'. (*The Herald*, 6 February 1941, p. 7). The

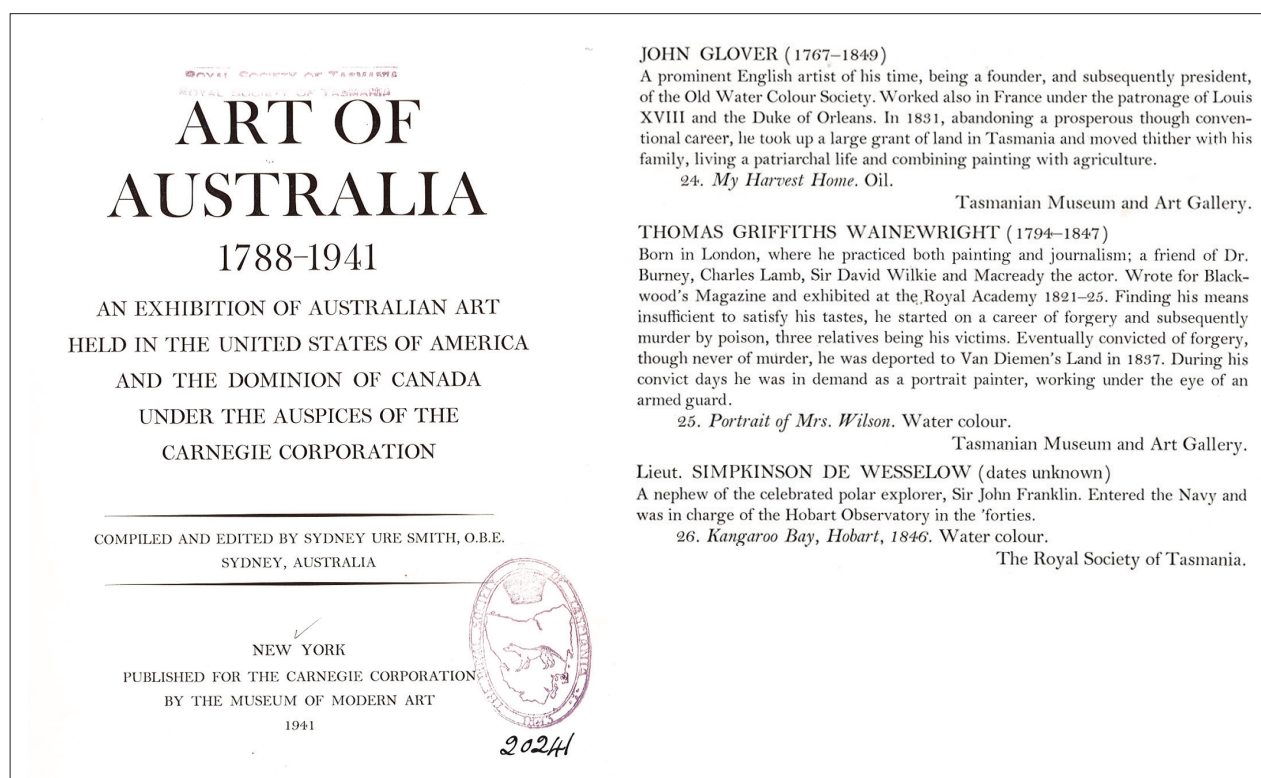


Plate 2 – Excerpt from the Art of Australia catalogue showing entries selected from the TMAG Art Collection and RST Art Collection.

exhibition was supported by the Australian Government 'as part of their soft power initiatives to encourage a closer US-Australia relationship' (Geissler 2019, p. 9). It generated goodwill for the Australian-American military alliance, and simultaneously gave exposure to Australian art in countries where it was formerly little known (Jordan 2013, p. 25). Indeed, an article by Theodore Sizer titled 'The Unknown Art of Australia' was published in October 1941 (*Sun News-Pictorial* 1941, p. 2).

The exhibition also had a large impact in Australia at the time. Sizer's opinions were much sought after in Australia and widely reported by the press (Jordan 2013, p. 26). In the Australian art world, the exhibition 'acted as a lightning rod for a conflict between modernists and anti-modernists that had been escalating since 1938' (Jordan 2013, p. 26).

It appears that Sizer endeavoured to avoid entanglement in the agitations and factions of the Australian art scene, concentrating on the key aims of the project. 'The aim is to make it historical,' he said. 'We want to know about Australian art, not Australian artists.' (*The Herald*, 6 February 1941, p. 7).

The National Gallery of Art (NGA) in Washington, where the exhibition opened, gave this overview: 'The exhibition presented a cycle, starting with the work of the aborigines, continuing with the dominating styles of 19th-century British art, and ending with the influence of aborigine work as a basis for a new outlook for the national art of Australia.' The NGA noted that the Washington exhibition also contained works from the collection of Ethel Marian (Maie) Casey, wife of the Australian Minister in Washington, RG Casey, and

that 61 of the catalogued works toured to Canada (National Gallery of Art 1941b).

Australian diplomatic presence in the United States was very new. The world war with attendant threats in the Pacific led the Australian Government to the decision to establish a diplomatic legation in Washington, and Prime Minister Robert Menzies appointed RG Casey, a senior Cabinet colleague with previous diplomatic experience, to set this up (Lowe *et al.* 2016, p. 9). Minister and Mrs Casey were regarded as key players in the art project, and it is thought they were directed by the Australian Government to ensure both Australian and US needs were met (Ryan 2021). Mrs Casey, later Lady Casey, was an interesting character in her own right. She was herself an artist who attended the Westminster School of Art, London, continuing her studies in art on her return to Australia. She was a patron of the arts as well as a collector (National Portrait Gallery 2024), and she also found time to paint in the various countries in which she lived. Lady Casey was made a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts in 1979 and was appointed AC in 1982 (Langmore 2007).

The exhibition was notable for introducing Aboriginal art to America. Reviews were overwhelmingly positive, with the Aboriginal bark paintings often singled out for comment. For Theodore Sizer, the bark paintings were the highlight of the show because of their modernist appeal (Geissler 2019, p. 10). Significantly, several American art museums, including New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, purchased works from the exhibition (Jordan 2013, p. 25).

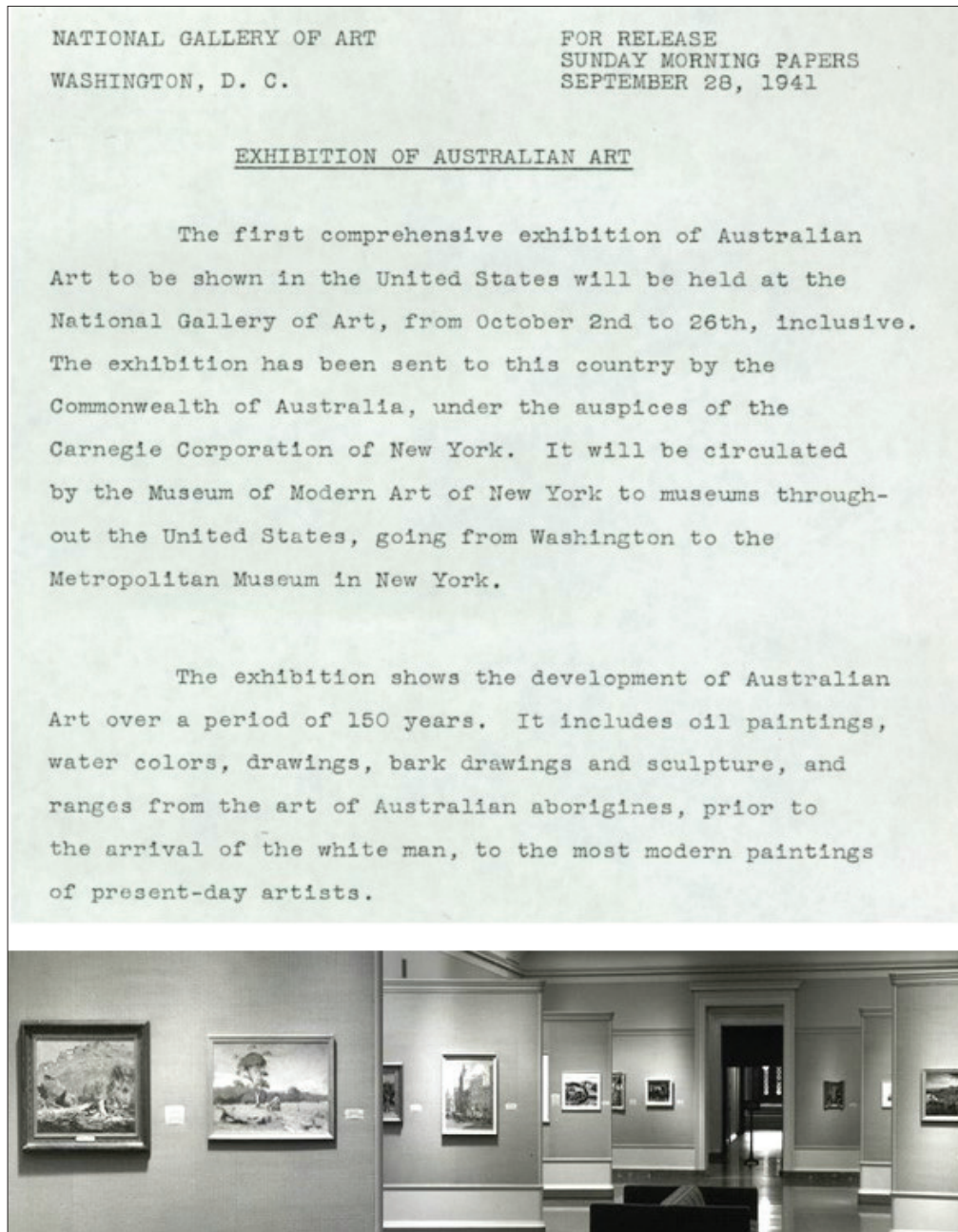


Plate 3 – Excerpt from the National Gallery of Art (1941a) press release and view of the artworks hanging in the exhibition. (source https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/1941/art_australia.html)

The inclusion of a work from the Royal Society of Tasmania Art Collection in this Australia-wide selection of art speaks strongly to the standing of the Collection in the Australian art world in 1941, as well as the quality and interest of the chosen work by Simpkinson de Wesselow, of *Kangaroo Bay, Hobart*, painted in 1846. A copy of the exhibition catalogue is held in the Royal Society of Tasmania Library Collection housed in the Morris Miller Library, University of Tasmania, and makes very interesting reading.

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