

Rupert Bunny

artist in Paris

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He is ... a brilliant and spirited artist who knows how to evoke the poetry of an evening ... and at the same time is able to express the radiant joy of a beautiful day, a delicate flesh blossoming in the light. The artist ... is, at one and the same time, a realist and a visionary, an observer of truth and a poet of the world of dreams.

Gustave Geffroy in *Exposition Rupert CW Bunny*, Galeries Georges Petit, Paris 1917

Nobody can have any idea ... unless they have lived in Paris and in Paris art circles of the intense vitality of art there. Out here [in Australia] ... art is not the living breathing thing that it is in Paris ... Here art is an entity; there an atmosphere ...

Bunny quoted in 'Art in Paris, Mr Bunny and the post-Impressionists: the future of art in Australia', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 Sept 1911, p 9

Rupert Bunny: artist in Paris

Rupert Bunny (1864–1947) was one of the most successful Australian painters of his generation. In an era when artists were increasingly drawn to Europe, no other Australian achieved the artistic accolades Bunny accumulated in Paris in the 1890s and early 1900s. He was, for example, the first Australian to gain honours at the prestigious exhibiting venue, the Paris Salon. By the end of his career 13 of his paintings had been acquired for French state collections. During his lifetime his art could be seen in galleries in London, Paris, Brussels, Edinburgh, St Petersburg and Philadelphia.

Eclectic yet unique, Bunny's oeuvre reflects his rich milieu and the rapidly changing styles of the belle époque. He had an extraordinary ability to assimilate diverse influences – from masters of the European tradition such as Rubens and Velázquez, to contemporaries like Gauguin and Bonnard – into an ever-evolving vision. Above all, Bunny was a splendid and adaptable colourist, from the subdued pastel hues of his early dream-like pastorals to the vibrant Fauve-inspired paintings of the 1920s.

The early years in Paris

Bunny left his native Melbourne in 1884, and after a brief period in London, settled in Europe's true artistic heart, Paris. Highly cosmopolitan Paris was a place of both tradition and modernity. Following the sensation of Impressionism, France remained a centre for avant-garde artists – the post-Impressionists and Symbolists in the late 19th century and the Fauvists in the early 20th.

In contrast to his fellow expatriates, Bunny moved smoothly into Parisian art circles. He spent nearly 50 years in Paris, spanning the belle époque, and frequented prominent 'salons', meeting figures such as Claude Debussy, Sarah Bernhardt and Auguste Rodin.

Bunny's unique aesthetic was the product of two seemingly opposed influences: his strictly traditional training in the Parisian atelier of admired history painter Jean-Paul Laurens and his absorption of more experimental

European trends. He quickly mastered ambitious figure compositions of mythological and biblical subjects favoured by Salon judges.

Bunny's first large-scale works were pastoral subjects, such as *Tritons* c1890, *Sea idyll* c1890 and *Pastoral* c1893. These were executed with the scale and precision of academic history painting, but also reflected the imaginative sensibilities he shared with French Symbolist painters such as Gustave Moreau. Inspired by the remote coastlines and silvery-pink light he encountered on trips to Brittany, these early paintings are infused with a dream-like atmosphere. Mythological figures are positioned at the meeting of land and sea, dreaming and waking, fantasy and reality. The flattened forms and mural-like compositions suggest the imaginative idylls of French symbolist artist Puvis de Chavannes and the poeticism of the British Aesthetic movement.

Around 1895, Bunny met his future wife Jeanne Morel, a fellow art student. She became the subject of many of his paintings, including *Dolce farniente* c1897, where she embodies his dreamy womanly ideal – a 'feminine Arcady' or place of sweet idleness. Here his debt to the British pre-Raphaelite painters is at its clearest, recalling the idealised, angelic women of John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Salon triumphs

At the turn of the century, a new mood pervaded Bunny's art, accompanied by his growing financial and critical success. While his paintings retained the idealism and grand decorative scale befitting the Salon, his subjects became increasingly modern, rather than mythological. The dream-like atmospheres of his earlier work crystallised into a new theme, as sleeping, relaxing or day-dreaming women dominated many of his compositions.

Preoccupied with colour and light, Bunny looked to the great colourists of the European tradition, from Veronese to Degas. *Summer time* c1907, acquired by the Art Gallery of NSW in 1928, his most ambitious Salon painting, encompasses an opulent range of chromatic and tonal

effects in an elaborate bathing tableau that also forms a sumptuous allegory of the five senses.

With characteristic eclecticism, Bunny's portraits from this time drew from a variety of sources – from the delicate tonalism of Whistler in *Mme Sada Yacco 'Kesa'* c1900 to the grand British portrait tradition of Reynolds and Gainsborough invoked in *Madame Melba* 1902.

Bunny's reputation as a decorative painter on the grand scale fuelled his international sales. Most significantly, in 1904, *Après le bain* became the first work by an Australian to be purchased by the French state, housed in the Musée du Luxembourg, France's contemporary art gallery (now in the Musée d'Orsay).

Parisian leisure

In the years leading up to 1910, modern Parisian life became the predominant subject of Bunny's paintings. *In the Luxembourg Gardens* and *Bridge (Luxembourg)*, both c1909, are based on sketching sessions he took in the gardens, probably with fellow Australian artists. Whereas his compatriots favoured Impressionist fragmentation and swift execution, Bunny remained faithful to tonal modelling and careful studio production.

Women dreaming, relaxing or waiting remained central to his art – as seen in *The siesta* c1906–07, *Sunday afternoon* c1908 and *The swing* c1915–17 – yet unlike earlier idyllic imaginings, these works offer apparently realistic slices of modern urban leisure. Paintings like *Le bel après-midi (Royan)* c1908 depict holiday makers at newly-popular resort beaches, reflecting the rise of mass tourism in France.

Modern colour and dance

Around the same time, the painters known as the Fauves (wild beasts), led by Matisse, were causing a sensation in Paris, with their vibrant, clashing colours and highly stylised forms. Despite Bunny's shock as a juror of the 1910 Salon d'Automne in confronting Matisse's *Dance* and *Music*, Fauvism would have a strong impact on his art.

Bunny grappled with becoming a modern artist. *Mme Sada Yacco 'Le Shogun'* c1907, *Shrimp fishers at Saint Georges* c1910 and *The sun bath* c1913 mark his transition into stronger colours and flattened forms. This early intensification of colour and decoration polarised critics.

In his last major series – which he described as the '*danse chromatique*' – Bunny liberated his art from naturalism and embraced modern colour and rhythmic composition. The exotic colour and rhythm of the sensational dance

troupe, the Ballets Russes (which debuted in Paris in 1909) are invoked in paintings such as *Salomé* c1919.

These later works found enthusiastic admirers in both Paris and Australia, one artist describing them as 'a glorious riot of colour from the finest imaginative artist Australia has produced'.¹

Landscapes

The landscapes Bunny painted throughout his career reflect his evolving styles and the varied scenery that inspired him. His cottage at Les Landes, near the river Loire, was a base for sketching trips into the French countryside. Whilst painting *en plein air* was a well-established practice, Bunny remained true to his academic training, only sketching outdoors and then working up the final composition in the studio.

The landscapes range in mood from the Whistlerian twilight of his early Etaples paintings to the luminous scenes of Provence painted in the 1920s under the influence of Pierre Bonnard, to the subdued realism of the works he painted after his permanent return to Australia.

Final years

Bunny's late works reflect his immediate response to the revival of classical traditions which dominated the interwar decades in Europe. The monumental figures in *Housewives* c1932 and *Slave women* c1926 point to the impact of Picasso's classicist nudes of the 1920s.

After an absence of almost 50 years, and following the death of his wife Jeanne in 1932, Bunny returned to live permanently in Melbourne in 1933. Despite his age, he was assimilated into the local contemporary art scene, exhibiting both solo and with progressive artists groups.

Bunny was given a major retrospective in Melbourne in 1946, a year before his death, confirming his reputation as one of Australia's most significant artists. Nonetheless, he remains an exotic in Australian art. An expatriate, regarded as not quite French and not entirely Australian, he was never interested in a national agenda. Rather, Bunny's artistic achievements reflect the success of his own individual vision.

NOTES

1. George Bell, 'Jewel-like art of Rupert Bunny', *Sun News Pictorial*, Melbourne, 23 Sept 1936, p 33

www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/bunny

- online education kit
- children's trail
- audio tour and transcript

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cover: *Dolce farniente* c1897 (detail) Private collection, Melbourne. Courtesy of John Playfoot Fine Art
left: Rupert Bunny c1894 Rupert Bunny family photograph album Private collection



Sea idyll c1890

oil on canvas, 100.5 x 161.5 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Gift of Alfred Felton 1892

Between myth and reality

The work of Mr Bunny, with its complete originality, its ... charming sentiment which suddenly lifts one into an enchanted world, will delight the eye and mind of everyone oppressed by the dull realism and bald truth which predominate

ER, 'Australian artists in Paris', *Age*, Melbourne, 19 May 1894

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING QUESTIONS

VISUAL ARTS: **Imagine** you are walking through *Sea idyll*. **Describe** the seascape, the figures and the colours. What time of day is it? How has Bunny created a dream-like mood? Why do you think he has shown the back of a merman and not the face?

Compare *Sea idyll* and *Tritons* c1890. **Discuss** why Bunny uses myths and legends as subjects for his paintings. What do you think water may symbolise in his artworks? **Research** a water-based myth or legend. **Illustrate** your chosen story. **Consider** the colours you will use to communicate a mood.

MATHS: **Observe** the crashing waves. **Find out** how mathematics is used to predict wave patterns and size. **Consider** how this information is used by scientists to protect vulnerable coastlines.

PDHPE: **Talk** about the effects of the sun on human skin. **Devise** an advertising campaign, with a slogan, around this painting to encourage people to use sun block.

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Critically analyse this painting. What is your initial response to the work? Consider the atmosphere the artist is trying to portray. How does Bunny suggest both the real and the imagined in this composition? Think about the relationship between the figures and the landscape. How do they complement each other and in turn enhance the meaning of the work?

The French Symbolist painters sought to create an art that conveyed emotions through suggestion, something felt rather than known. With this in mind, and using *Sea idyll* as your focus work, suggest how Bunny shared these sensibilities. Include further research on this approach to art in your case study.

Consider the quote above. What is the significance of taking people into an enchanted world? Consider both the audience of the time and the audience today. How might their interpretation of the painting differ?



Angels descending c1897

oil on canvas, 157.5 x 98.4 cm
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. Morgan Thomas Bequest Fund 1904

Bunny's women and the pre-Raphaelite influence

He began as a tonalist, flirted with something very close to pre-Raphaelite painting, and found success as a painter of elegant pictures of women in a semi-academic manner ...

John McDonald, 'Visual art. A life of discord and harmony', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 July 2007, p 16

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING QUESTIONS

VISUAL ARTS: **Count** how many angels you can see. **Describe** the expression on their faces. Do you think the same model posed for each angel? **Explain** your reasons. **Observe** the curved lines in the painting. How has Bunny directed our eyes to look at the work from top to bottom? **Make** several sketches of a person from different angles. **Use** these as a basis for a painting.

Compare *Angels descending* and *Dolce farniente* c1897. Find the following elements used in Bunny's paintings: roses, idealised figures and intense reds. **Discuss** what these might symbolise. **Paint** your own picture including these symbols.

HSIE: **Research** the significance of angels in different cultures. **Examine** the symbolism of angels in Bunny's paintings. **Find** stories about angels appearing to people. **Compare** examples of paintings by pre-Raphaelite artists with Bunny's.

ENGLISH: **Compile** a list of descriptive words for *Angels descending*. **Write** a poem, using these words, based on the idea of a place between the real and imagined.

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

With an increased focus on feminine subjects in the late 1800s, Bunny developed a body of work that can be called the 'feminine Arcady'. Discuss this imagery with consideration to the paintings he developed at this time.

How does the artist create a feeling of 'sweet idleness' and a realm between the real and the spiritual world in this painting? Specifically discuss the use of colour and placement of the female forms. How has Bunny used spiritual symbolism from the past in a modern context?

Research the pre-Raphaelite style. Discuss how this painting depicts its ideology and yet reflects Bunny's unique portrayal of feminine beauty.



Après le bain c1904

oil on canvas, 192 x 170 cm
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

The belle époque

It is an exhibition of Australian painter Rupert Bunny whose art the Parisian public has been applauding for a long time. But never before has this magnificent artist manifested himself in masterpieces so outstanding in terms of colour, drawing, composition, significance and imagination.

Arsène Alexandre, 'Le Salon d'Automne', *Le Figaro*, 17 Dec 1905

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING QUESTIONS

VISUAL ARTS: **List** the things you can see in the painting.

Observe how Bunny has paid close attention to the fabrics, lace and beads. **Set up** a still life with different textured fabrics and objects that suggest luxury. **Examine** how the light falls.

Paint a picture showing the texture of the fabrics and objects.

Consider how the figures are arranged. Why are the women in a semi-circle? **Arrange** a group of people in a tableau. **Ask** them to pose as if getting ready for an event. **Sketch** the figures, paying attention to their body language, clothing and props. **Use** the sketch as the basis for a painting focusing on the figures.

DRAMA: **Describe** what each woman is doing. **Imagine** what they are getting ready for. **Invent** a conversation between them. **Perform** a role play based on this painting in class.

HSIE: **Identify** what the women are wearing. Do you think these clothes would allow you to move freely? **Find** images of Parisian fashion of the belle époque. **Consider** why fashions change over time. **Compare** the clothes in Bunny's painting to those worn today.

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

The women in this painting reflect the period known as *la belle époque* (the beautiful era) in Paris. Respond to this image and discuss how you think Bunny defined the term 'beautiful'. Consider the subject matter, use of colour and composition.

Find works by 20th-century artists depicting women. How do they differ from Bunny's interpretation? Define the term beautiful in today's world? Create an image of a 'beautiful woman' individually and then as a class group. Do your images differ? Discuss if there can ever be one ideal image.

Research the history of the Paris Salons and their influence on the art world. What was the significance of being chosen for the Old or New Salon in Paris? How did it impact on an artist's career?



Salomé c1919

oil on canvas, 81 x 65 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Purchased 1968

Fauve colour and the return to mythology

Despite his stylistic conservatism, the painter kept a finger on the pulse of taste. He responded to post-impressionism and fauvism, albeit belatedly, in a series of brilliantly coloured compositions on classical themes in the 1920s

Bruce James, 'Rupert Bunny', *Art Gallery of New South Wales Handbook*, AGNSW, Sydney 1999

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING QUESTIONS

VISUAL ARTS: **List** the colours you can see in the painting.

Compare these to the more subtle colours of Bunny's early work. Which works do you prefer? **Point** to the various decorative patterns you can see. **Role-play** how Bunny applied the paint in daubs, feathery strokes and broad strokes.

Research the story of Salomé. How has Bunny created a composition suggesting movement and colour? What is the mood of this painting? How has Bunny used colour to suggest this mood? **Use** vibrant colours to create a work about dance and music.

MUSIC: **Observe** the musicians creating the beat for the dancer. **Compose**, play and record a piece of music to accompany Salomé using percussion instruments. **Perform** the piece from an audience.

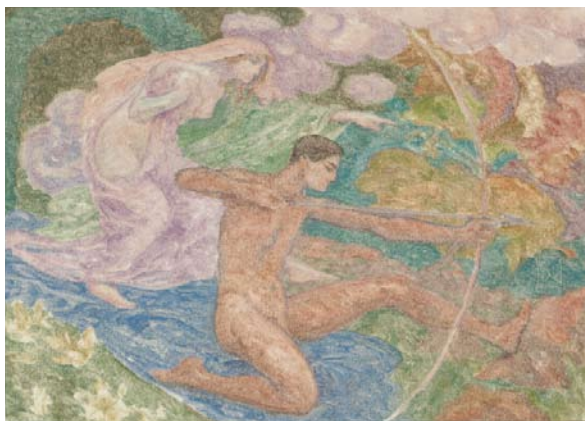
DANCE: **Discover** why the Ballets Russes had such an impact on the arts in Paris. **Compare** images of the costumes and set designs for the Ballets Russes with Bunny's danse chromatique series. **Choreograph** a dance inspired by these images. **Perform** it in class.

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

In his last major series – which he described as the 'danse chromatique' – Bunny liberated his art from naturalism and embraced modern colour and rhythmic composition. The Fauve aesthetic made a great impact on his work at this time. Research the art and artists of the Fauve period. Suggest why Bunny was drawn to their ideals. Use examples from his body of work as evidence for your point of view.

This painting embodies a sense of energetic, rhythmic movement. Discuss how the artist has achieved this effect. Find examples of music that suggest the type of rhythms the figures are playing, listening to and dancing to. Create your own series of works based on the music you have collected.

Research the biblical story of Salomé and John the Baptist and propose why the artist chose to depict this scene. How does this reflect Bunny's approach to art-making?



La chasse c1921

colour monotype, 24.2 x 34.2 cm (image), 32.2 x 43.2 cm (sheet)
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Purchased 1976

Bunny monotypes

It is his strikingly flat, decorative works ... that stand out now, due to their exaggerated stylisation. Like Preston (who he instructed in the art of monotypes) Bunny conceived of a heroic style of decoration, rid of all 'picturesque' leanings.

John McDonald, 'Style with distinction: Rupert Bunny's mythologies', *National Times*, 11–17 July 1986, p 37

K–6 LOOKING AND MAKING QUESTIONS

VISUAL ARTS: **Examine** the body language of these figures. Are they fearful or filled with spirit? **Visualise** what the couple is hunting. **Invent** a story to accompany this monotype, detailing what happens next. **Illustrate** this using watercolours and oil pastels. **Compare** *La chasse* to other monotypes in the exhibition and discuss the choice of colours, dramatic action and movement depicted in these scenes.

Research the process of creating a monotype. **Discuss** how the process is similar and different to painting. **Think** about why Bunny experimented with printmaking. **Experiment** in creating your own monotypes. **Exhibit** these in class and invite others to view them.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY: **Investigate** how a bow and arrow is used and the skills involved in archery. Has the design for a bow and arrow changed over the centuries? **Propose** why it is not commonly used in warfare in the modern era.

ENGLISH: After creating your own monotype, write a sequence of instructional steps explaining the process. **Swap** these in class and review each other's instructions. Were they clear and comprehensive?

7–12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

American painters in Paris in the 1890s would hold monotype 'parties', which is where Bunny first encountered the medium. Hold a monotype 'party' in class and learn about this technique from each other. Consider the importance of gathering in a social context and how this can enhance a greater understanding of who you are as an artist.

Research Bunny's monotypes and compare his early attempts to his later works in the 1920s. Consider both subject matter and the use of colour in his compositions. Explain why Bunny decided to create artworks in this medium and how these prints differ from his paintings.

Consider why artists experiment with different mediums. Research an artist who has produced work in a number of mediums and discuss how this has enhanced or hindered their body of work. Compare your research with others in the classroom.



Le Lavandou c1940

oil on canvas, 49.7 x 65.9 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased 1947

Landscapes in France and Australia

It was his [Rupert's] custom to work from the small sketches ... establishing the pattern, colour and tone of the landscape as he saw and felt it. He would often keep a dozen canvases going at the same time ... always referring closely to the small Bristol board sketch he had painted in the open air, before making any change in the painting ...

Jean Campbell, Jean Campbell archives, AGNSW, MS1998.6

K–6 LOOKING AND MAKING QUESTIONS

VISUAL ARTS: **Examine** the sky and the shadows in this painting. What time of day and what season do you think it is? How can you tell? **Imagine** the sounds you might hear walking through this landscape. **List** the colours you can see. **Describe** the texture of the painting and think about how Bunny has applied the daubs of paint.

Find other paintings of landscapes in the exhibition. **List** three aspects they share and three that are different. How is *Le Lavandou* different to the Australian landscapes painted by Bunny? **Imagine** these landscapes using all your senses (sight, sound, touch, smell and taste). **Describe** your sensory response to each work.

HSIE: Bunny painted this landscape of Provence from memory when he was in Melbourne in about 1940. **Locate** the region of Provence in the south of France. **Research** its environment and customs. Is this painting an accurate interpretation of the region? **Discuss** if memories are a good source of information.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY: Lavender is grown widely in this area of France. **Research** the medicinal qualities of lavender and the ways people have used it over the centuries.

7–12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Bunny painted landscapes throughout his career. They reflected his changing styles and practices and the varied scenery that inspired him in France and Australia. Compare Bunny's landscapes from these regions and discuss how they differ.

Consider other artists working in France at the turn of the 19th century. How does Bunny's body of work differ from and show similarities with his contemporaries? Research the significance of landscape painting at this time.

Bunny tended to only sketch outdoors and work the final canvas in the studio. Observing your immediate environment, develop a series of landscape paintings based on Bunny's approach to landscape painting as well as his palette and compositions.