In The autobiography of Alice B Toklas, Gertrude Stein wrote: ‘If you do not solve your painting problem in painting human beings then you do not solve it at all’. On the west wall of this room, Hugh Ramsay confronts in his untitled early twentieth-century work some of the traditional challenges painters face in representing the figure: achieving a sense of the ‘living’ quality of flesh, skilled modelling of the body and harmonious colour arrangements. The pose of Ramsay’s youthful model is unconventional, serving to expose her skin from the nape of the neck to the base of the spine and emphasising her sensuousness and vulnerability.

A truthfulness to appearance is less important to Danila Vassilieff. In his Nude lady (c. 1945) displayed across the entrance-way, Vassilieff uses the figure as an archetype to test the possibilities of painting and representation. Primary forms are loosely sketched with gestural marks, while white highlights give fullness and density to the figure. Vassilieff’s treatment of the human subject and his treatment of the background are equivalent; his interest lies in the material character of the whole painting.

This exhibition of forty-four works held in the University of Melbourne Art Collection looks at representations of the figure, predominantly in Australian painting from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. One strategy when considering stylistically dissimilar works of art in a themed exhibition such as this is to catalogue relevant styles and periods. Another is to focus on each work separately, examining the material evidence of artists’ interests. Often, to look first to a work’s material characteristics, to the intensity or subtlety of treatment, surface finish, density of texture, and saturation of colour, is to better appreciate the special attributes of the individual work of art, and why they affect each of us differently.