George Lambert was born in St Petersburg, Russia, in 1873 to Anglo-American parents. When Lambert’s father – an American engineer – died just prior to his birth, his English mother moved her family to live with her father, also an engineer working in Russia. Within two years the entire family had relocated to Germany, then six years later to England. It was at school in England that George Lambert showed the first signs of his drawing ability. In 1887, aged fourteen, George Lambert arrived in Australia with his family, and joined relatives in New South Wales. Soon Lambert was sent to work and after initially languishing in clerical positions in Sydney, he spent the following few years as a jackeroo at ‘Eurobla’, his great-uncle’s property in central New South Wales. It was here that George Lambert developed a lasting connection with the Australian landscape, emanating from his fascination for the wide Australian plains, the eucalyptus filled bush and the vast open skies. This experience on the land afforded Lambert enduring imagery and artistic inspiration. Early works that invoked such impressions included A bush idyll 1896 and the straining wagon horses silhouetted against an imposing Australian sky in Across the black soil plains 1899.1 This latter work was awarded the Wynne Prize for landscape in 1899. The following year Lambert travelled to England and France as the recipient of the inaugural NSW Society of Artists Travelling Scholarship.2

Portraiture was fashionable in Edwardian London, and to ensure a regular income George Lambert concentrated on commissioned portraits and on applying his drawing skills to figurative illustrations.3 Contrary to the current trend however, the old masters provided more of a direct and sustaining influence on Lambert’s technique than the emerging European avant-garde. In 1917, George Lambert was appointed an official Australian war artist in Palestine and later Turkey, and, in addition to sketching the military leaders and light horsemen, he turned to landscape.4 Lambert’s role as war artist required him to record the physical environment, however, it was also his affinity for the forms and tones of the terrain that reinforced his connection with the land. By 1921, the allure of the Australian bush was proving too strong for George Lambert to stay away any longer and he returned to ‘my country from which I have so long been exiled’.5 Shortly afterwards, an invitation from Sir Granville Ryrie to visit Michelago, near Canberra, provided Lambert with an opportunity to take in the countryside and to attend the Tirranna Picnic Races. Lambert became a regular visitor to the Ryrie property and it was a combination of both his background and personal experiences there that provided the essence for one of his last paintings, (The Tirranna Picnic Race Meeting) 1929. His return to Australia, after more than twenty years abroad, saw George Lambert producing images that would be ‘for all times a record of bush life by one who really knows’.6

the life of a cosmopolitan artist

George Washington Thomas Lambert led an international life. He was born in Russia and spent his formative years in Germany, England and Australia. Lambert’s artistic career began in Australia where he developed his draughtsmanship; was furthered in Europe where he identified with the older art traditions; and culminated in his return to Australia twenty years later, where Lambert ultimately produced work derived from a variety of sources to make his own statement.

George Lambert was born in St Petersbourg, Russia, in 1873 to Anglo-American parents. When Lambert’s father – an American engineer – died just prior to his birth, his English mother moved her family to live with her father, also an engineer working in Russia. Within two years the entire family had relocated to Germany, then six years later to England. It was at school in England that George Lambert showed the first signs of his drawing ability. In 1887, aged fourteen, George Lambert arrived in Australia with his family, and joined relatives in New South Wales. Soon Lambert was sent to work and after initially languishing in clerical positions in Sydney, he spent the following few years as a jackeroo at ‘Eurobla’, his great-uncle’s property in central New South Wales. It was here that George Lambert developed a lasting connection with the Australian landscape, emanating from his fascination for the wide Australian plains, the eucalyptus filled bush and the vast open skies. This experience on the land afforded Lambert enduring imagery and artistic inspiration. Early works that invoked such impressions included A bush idyll 1896 and the straining wagon horses silhouetted against an imposing Australian sky in Across the black soil plains 1899.1 This latter work was awarded the Wynne Prize for landscape in 1899. The following year Lambert travelled to England and France as the recipient of the inaugural NSW Society of Artists Travelling Scholarship.2

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George Lambert Untitled (The Tirranna Picnic Race Meeting)
The Tirranna Picnic Race Club was established in 1855 in rural New South Wales near the wool-producing centre of Goulburn. The club was conceived by men from local pastoral families ‘who as schoolboys held the first meeting to race their ponies’, while the annual race meeting became an important social fixture drawing visitors from far and wide.7 George Lambert’s painting of the event, *(The Tirranna Picnic Race Meeting)*, contains three recurring elements of the artist’s work – the Australian countryside, the human figure and the horse. Most significant however, is the portrayal of wealthy Australian society at leisure against a backdrop of the Australian landscape. A common practice of George Lambert’s work was the non-specific depiction of particular places and well-known people.8 Members of prominent Australian families are evident in several of Lambert’s paintings including *Weighing the fleece* 1921 in which Mr and Mrs Leigh Sadlier Falkiner appear in a woolshed on their property. Wanganella near Deniliquin, NSW; and The squatter’s daughter 1923–24, which features Gwendoline Ryrie surveying the undulating pastures of the Ryrie family property ‘Michelago’.9 As with these two works, George Lambert applied the practice of anonymity to his Tirranna subjects. Amidst the mingling race crowd he has included Mr Walter N Gunn, a former honorary secretary of the club, and Mr Campbell Gibson, owner of the Tirranna property on which the races were held.10

In 1929 when Russell Grimwade heard that this painting was for sale, he turned in excitement to his close friend Daryl Lindsay, the director of the National Gallery of Victoria, for counsel. Lindsay, who was familiar with the work, urged Grimwade to buy it, claiming ‘it is a first-rate piece of Australiana’, his only hesitation being the matter of some minor unfinished detail – an issue that nonetheless was to plague Grimwade thereafter.11 Although George Lambert gave an undertaking to complete the painting, overcommitted with commissions and suffering from ill-health he died before this could be accomplished. The transaction for the acquisition of the painting was eventually completed after Lambert’s death but Russell Grimwade was to note: ‘My lasting regret is that both for my short benefit and for posterity the picture has not been finished, and strangely enough ever since Lambert put it into my house last November I have had the foreboding that such would be the way it would finish’.12

Nevertheless, completed or not, George Lambert rightly envisaged an auspicious future for the painting. With the delivery of *(The Tirranna Picnic Race Meeting)* to Russell Grimwade, Lambert expressed the hope that it would be ‘placed in a good and splendid place in your charming house’.13 At ‘Miegunyah’, the Grimwade home in Toorak, *(The Tirranna Picnic Race Meeting)* was placed on the north wall of the dining room where it remained until 1973 when the Grimwade Collection was transferred to the University of Melbourne under the terms of the Grimwade Bequest.14

**Related works by George Lambert from the University of Melbourne Art Collection:**

- Untitled (Clerk of the course – a study for The Tirranna Picnic Race Meeting), c. 1929, oil on cedar panel
- Untitled (Landscape with a man and a horse), c. 1923, oil on board
- Miss Stanhope Forbes, c. 1924, pencil on buff paperboard
- Untitled (Head of a young woman), c. 1924, pencil on buff paperboard
- Study for bedouin, c. 1918, oil on wood panel

**Additional information available at www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au**

Elizabeth McRae The Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2002

1 Lambert was an accomplished horseman, and horses and equestrian matters featured in many of his paintings.
2 The scholarship was awarded on the basis of George Lambert’s paintings: *Youth and the river 1900* (present whereabouts unknown); *The heart of the bush 1900* (Joseph Brown Collection, Melbourne); and *Portrait of my mother 1900* (present whereabouts unknown). Gray, Anne, George Lambert 1873–1930 Catalogue Raisonné: Paintings and Sculpture, Drawings in Public Collections, Perth, 1996, pp. 7–8
3 While abroad Lambert exhibited widely and formed a life-long association with the Royal Academy, an institution renowned for the quality of its portrait displays. In 1921, he was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy. Gray, Anne, Art and Artifice: George Lambert 1873–1930, Sydney, 1996, p. 85.
4 Gray, Sydney, p. 100.
5 Gray, Sydney, p. 106.
6 Gray, Sydney, p. 156.
7 Shaw, CM, Notes on Tirranna, Goulburn, 1 July 1931, University of Melbourne Archives, Sir Russell and Lady Mab Grimwade Collection, series 4/3 (UMA).
8 Lambert adopted the French practice where disclosure of the sitter’s identity had been abandoned, as reference to individuals was thought to distract from aesthetic interest in the works. Gray, Sydney, p. 85.
9 Gray, Sydney, p. 108.
10 Shaw.
11 Notes by Daryl Lindsay, undated (UMA).
12 Correspondence, Russell Grimwade to Sydney Ure Smith, 18 June 1930 (UMA).
13 Correspondence, George Lambert to Russell Grimwade, undated (c. 1929) (UMA).
14 Interview with Sir Andrew Grimwade, great-nephew of Russell Grimwade, 10 July 2002. The Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest comprised collections of works of art, Australiana, furniture, historical documents and memorabilia as well as the Grimwade property ‘Miegunyah’. The Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne Victoria 3010 Australia Telephone +61 3 8344 5148 frontdesk@art-museum.unimelb.edu.au www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au

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