He studied at the Adelaide School of Art with Harry Pelling Gill in 1887-88. Then enrolled at Melbourne’s National Gallery Art School in 1897-99, working under Frederick McCubbin and Bernard Hall. Fellow students included talented painters, colourful personalities such as Violet Teague, Max Meldrum, George Bell, Hugh Ramsay and Alek Sass. But Macgeorge was desperately unhappy with the school’s philosophy, declaring in 1898: ‘… there is little room for anything like free expression’. However by 1899 his persistence was rewarded, when the judges of the Gallery School’s Travelling Scholarship, Walter Withers, John Longstaff and Arthur Loureiro, awarded him third place behind Meldrum and Ramsay.

His painting *Mother of Pearl* was purchased by the National Gallery in 1906. Macgeorge’s reputation as a post-Federation landscapist was established. In 1909 he met May Ina Hepburn, granddaughter of Victorian pioneer Capt. John Hepburn, at the Victorian Artists’ Society Ball. She was dressed as Cleopatra and Norman fell deeply in love, describing her as: ‘… a dazzling vision’. He purchased land on the Fairy Hills estate, close to Darebin Creek in Alphington, and they married. He commissioned an architect, Harold Desbrowe-Annear, to design a house naming it ‘Ballangeich’. Set amidst gardens, designed by Blamire Young, it became a meeting place for artists, writers, ballet dancers and intellectuals for the next 40 years. The Macgeorges’ guests included Rupert Bunny, Arthur Streeton, Lina Bryans, Eveline Syme, Edith Alsop, Daryl Lindsay and George Bell.

Throughout the First World War and the 1920s, Macgeorge’s path to modernism included working as an art instructor at Melbourne Teacher’s College and lecturing at the National Gallery of Victoria. In 1917 he was elected a Council member of the Victorian Artists’ Society and then President of the Australian Art Association in 1921. The topics of Macgeorge’s lectures reflect his modernist philosophy. With titles such as *The Influences in Modern Painting* (1925), *Self Expression in Painting* (1928) and *Modern Movements in Art* (1929), he sought to advance his views. In 1929 he joined William Frater, Adrian Lawlor and Arnold Shore petitioning the National Gallery to buy a Cézanne.

Travelling to England with May in 1930, he studied works in London’s National Gallery, the Royal Academy and the Tate Gallery and then to Paris, viewing the collections of the Louvre and Luxembourg Gallery. In Florence, he saw the Uffizi Gallery and the Pitti Palace. At Rome, Macgeorge visited the Vatican and the Gallery of Modern Art, later the Venice Biennale. He returned to Melbourne an even stauncher advocate of modernism and published his findings, ‘Modern art in Europe’, in *Art in Australia*. His lectures at the National Gallery continued to contain quite radical sentiments, considering prevailing tastes in Melbourne art circles, including *The Genesis of Modern Painting* (1933) and *Modern Revolutionary Art* (1936).

At the 1935 Loan Exhibition of Contemporary British Art, Macgeorge publicly confronted the detractors declaring: ‘I would like to be a modernist myself.’

Norman Macgeorge lived and painted through two of Australia’s major periods of art. He worked in the final days of the Heidelberg School and later became an out-spoken supporter of Australian modernism. This journey took him through idyllic times spent in the company of Arthur Streeton and Tom Roberts in 1895. It included an interlude painting at ‘Charterisville’, under Tudor St George Tucker and Emanuel Phillips Fox, in 1898. Until finally, Macgeorge became embroiled in the cauldron of modernist debate which erupted in Melbourne during the 1920s and 1930s.

‘Is there no room for the “modern” artist…’

Norman Macgeorge’s path to modernism included working as an art instructor at Melbourne Teacher’s College and lecturing at the National Gallery of Victoria. In 1917 he was elected a Council member of the Victorian Artists’ Society and then President of the Australian Art Association in 1921. The topics of Macgeorge’s lectures reflect his modernist philosophy. With titles such as *The Influences in Modern Painting* (1925), *Self Expression in Painting* (1928) and *Modern Movements in Art* (1929), he sought to advance his views. In 1929 he joined William Frater, Adrian Lawlor and Arnold Shore petitioning the National Gallery to buy a Cézanne.

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Norman Macgeorge, *Untitled (Sun bather)*, c.1947, Oil on composition board, 34.4 x 30.3 cm. The University of Melbourne Art Collection, Bequest of Norman Macgeorge 1970. 1970.0060
Sun bather c.1947 is a good example of Norman Macgeorge’s modernist approach. The image may also contain some interesting social commentary of the period. Macgeorge rarely used models when painting outdoors during the 1940s. But these figurative works c. 1940-1951, all tend to appear quite similar. Perhaps he relied upon old life sketches and notes. Interestingly enough, the artist has chosen to depict one of the women in the group naked on a public beach, a practice considered unacceptable at the time. Perhaps Macgeorge intended this image to make an anti-conservative type statement in line with his modernist leanings. This work also relates to several others from the Macgeorge Bequest, including Bathers c. 1947 and Bathers resting c. 1947-51.

Macgeorge continued to paint and involve himself in debate throughout the remainder of the 1930s and into the 1940s. He became a Council member of the Contemporary Art Society, formed by George Bell, in 1938. He never avoided controversy to promote modernism. In 1939 he wrote criticising J.S. MacDonald, Director of the National Gallery, for not purchasing any works from the Herald Exhibition of British and French Modern Art.

‘… Mr MacDonald objects to modern art …. he is merely standing in the way of progress … all creeds and schools of artistic thought should be presented in our national collection’. 10

During his later years, Norman Macgeorge wrote a great deal to promote the arts. In 1946 he published Borovansky Ballet in Australia and New Zealand. 11 This was followed in 1948 by The Arts in Australia, containing essays by leading arts commentators and works by Lina Bryans, Arnold Shore, Lyndon Dadswell, Maria Kuhn and others. 12 Macgeorge died in 1952, leaving instructions that his house and collection form a bequest to the University of Melbourne. In an obituary, Alan McCulloch described him as an artist of ‘… integrity and liberality …’ and a ‘…defender of modernism…’, concluding ‘… the cause of Australian art lost one of its most ardent champions…’. 13 To honour Norman Mcgeorge’s role in Australian modernism, and his contribution to Melbourne’s artistic and cultural life, the Ian Potter Museum of Art staged the exhibition Norman Macgeorge: Man of Art in 2001.

Selected works by Norman Macgeorge from the University of Melbourne Art Collection:
- Cottage Hahndorf, 1895, oil on canvas on composition board
- Woodland solitude, c. 1896, oil on plywood
- Untitled (Landscape with cattle, Yarra Valley), c. 1925, oil on board
- Gathering the crop, c. 1933, oil on wood
- Untitled (By the river), c. 1946, oil on canvas

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

Stephen Mead The Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2003

1 Macgeorge, Norman, ‘Modern art defended’ in Letters to the Editor, The Argus, 1 May 1937, p. 16.
5 Pigot, p. 13.
6 Macgeorge, ‘Modern art in Europe’, Art in Australia, October-November 1930.
7 Pigot, pp. 13-14.
9 Correspondence, Norman Macgeorge to Lina Bryans, 21 December 1950. Cited Pigot, p. 43.