The events of ‘Black Thursday’, 6 February 1851, in which bushfires engulfed much of the Colony of Victoria, made a significant and lasting impression on William Strutt. Decades after the day of ‘destruction, devastation, and ruin’, the artist’s vivid account featured in his autobiographical notes of his colonial experiences between 1850 and 1862.3 In 1864—thirteen years after ‘Black Thursday’ and soon after Strutt had returned to England—he visually recorded the events, completing one of his most significant paintings: Black Thursday, February 6th. 1851.4 (Sketch for ‘Black Thursday, February 6th 1851’) is one of several studies for this historic work.

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On the day of ‘Black Thursday’ Strutt was working at the offices of the Ham Brothers, publishers of the Illustrated Australian Magazine. He had arrived in Melbourne from England only seven months previously and soon gained work as an illustrator—although his ambition had been to work as a history painter in keeping with the Academic training he had received in Paris between 1838 and 1844. Events in the young colony provided a wealth of subject matter for a history painter, none more dramatic than the bushfires of ‘Black Thursday’. Soon after the fires, Strutt visited the affected areas and recorded the scenes of devastation through a series of sketches. “A[n] artist’s eye and pencil”, wrote Strutt in his journal, ‘should be collecting matter everywhere …’5

The sketch or study was an important aspect of Strutt’s working process throughout his career dating back to his early training at the ateliers of Michel-Martin Droëlling and Joseph-Nicolas Jouy and his studies at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts under Paul Delaroche and Horace Vernet.6 Drawing instruction was emphasised in the curriculum of the ateliers: students completed figure drawing from engravings, then casts and finally from the live model. Drawing exercises extended to the making of copies of works in the collection of the Louvre. A strong mastery of the Academic drawing style was required before advancement to classes in painting and composition. The sketch was highly regarded in the ateliers since it represented the primary thought of the artist.7 At Droëlling’s atelier (at which Strutt studied from 1838–43) he advised: ‘Do sketches, train yourself in composition: whatever ideas you’ve got, put them on paper in a single day at one stroke, and even though it’s on a small scale, you can put into it anything you like in the way of harmony, elegance, costumes, poetry and so forth …’8 In addition to its compositional role, the sketch was also an important tool in Strutt securing commissions for large historical paintings.9 It was a lack of patronage in Melbourne, however, that ultimately led him to return to England in 1862.

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Recalling his departure from Melbourne, Strutt wrote: ‘as we were steaming down the bay for the Heads bush fires were sending up their volumes of smoke from the Gippsland ranges, reminding me of old times.’ It is not surprising then that with this final view of the colony once again ablaze, Strutt commenced Black Thursday, February 6th. 1851 soon after his arrival in England. Strutt worked on this major painting for approximately three years, referencing contemporary press clippings and annotated sketches that he had completed in Australia, and undertaking additional compositional studies. His journal records a period of five years during which he gathered ‘studies of every kind’ for the finished painting.

One of these studies, (Sketch for ‘Black Thursday, February 6th 1851’) relates to the imagery in the left-hand section of the finished work in which horses stampede towards the viewer, away from the threatening fire. The pen and ink drawing is presented in a similar elongated format to the painting: the central activity occurring in a frieze-like band across the width of the sheet. Strutt captures the urgency and fear of the fleeing horses as they are herded away from danger by a lone horseman in the left background.

A second sketch in the University of Melbourne Art Collection, The sick woman in the dray (Study for Black Thursday), correlates with the painting’s central area of activity. The small sheet (14.5 x 22.2 cm) includes several figure studies as well as what appear to be exercises for specific details, such as the folds of a sleeve and pillow and the knot of the sick woman’s bonnet. Although rapidly executed, Strutt successfully conveys the exhaustion and panic of his subjects in these pencil sketches.

No doubt aware of the significance of the subject matter to Australian audiences, Strutt was inspired to paint Black Thursday, February 6th. 1851 by the thought that it would ‘be hung in an Australian National Gallery.’ Despite two thwarted attempts to secure the work for the Melbourne National Gallery in the mid-1860s and 1870, it was almost twenty years after Strutt completed the painting before it was seen by Australian audiences.

The painting was exhibited in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney with an accompanying publication in which contemporary press reports of the bushfires and reviews of the work’s first exhibition in 1864 were reproduced. Alongside this coverage, an 1883 letter to the editor of the SA Advertiser from a long-standing friend of the artist was reprinted in which he wrote: ‘The studies alone are a monument of genius and industry, and I shall use all my influence with the artist to persuade him to frame and send over some of his pencil studies. Amongst them are some of the finest I have ever seen, and worthy of a pupil of such men as the great P. De la Roche [sic], Horace Vernet, Dr[ö]lling, Ingres, &c.’ Fortunately, several sketches for this historic painting have made their way into the collections of major Australian institutions providing the opportunity to study the working processes and early influences of this significant colonial artist.

Related works by William Strutt from the University of Melbourne Art Collection:
- The sick woman in the dray (Study for Black Thursday), c. 1862, pencil
- Race for life, Black Thursday, c. 1863, oil on canvas
- Drölling’s atelier, Paris, c. 1839–43, pencil
- Discobolus, c. 1839–43, pencil
- Self-portrait with companion, Atelier Jouy, Paris, c. 1840s, oil on canvas (on loan from the Vizard Foundation)

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

Lisa Sullivan The Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2003

2 Mackaness, p. 20.
4 William Strutt, Black Thursday, February 6th. 1851, 1864, oil on canvas, 106.5 x 343.0 cm, La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria, accession number: H28049.
5 Mackaness, p. 12.
6 Curnow, pp. 4–8.
8 Borne, p. 54.
11 Mackaness, part 2, p. 33.
13 Curnow, pp. 49–9.
15 Correspondence, George Charles Haite to the editor of the SA Advertiser, 27 July 1883, reproduced in Grand Fine Art Exhibition …, n.p.