Introduction

The Ian Potter Museum of Art houses the University of Melbourne Art Collection. The collection is rich and varied and has major holdings of Australian art in all media from the early nineteenth century to the present, as well as holdings of European art, International indigenous art and classics and archaeology. Numbering 20,000 works, these rich and diverse holdings form the largest university art collection in Australia.

Collection overview

The earliest Australian work in the collection is a rare set of prints published by Absalom West, showing views of Sydney and environs. Printed in Sydney in 1812, they are first pictorial views produced in Australia, and form the foundation of the fine group of nineteenth-century Australian prints, drawings, watercolours and oil paintings that include works depicting Western Australia, New South Wales, Tasmania, South Australia, as well as Victoria. The nineteenth-century collection includes fine paintings by major artists—Louis Buvelot, Conrad Martens, Nicholas Chevalier, Samuel Prout, Frederick McCubbin—and one of Australia’s most famous bushranger paintings, William Strutt’s Bushrangers, Victoria, Australia 1852 (1887).

Key early twentieth-century works include Rubert Bunny’s The first step (c. 1908–11), E. Phillip Fox’s Lamplight (c. 1911) and Bernard Hall’s extraordinary Despair (c. 1916). There are also holdings of paintings by Hans Heysen, Frederick McCubbin, Hugh Ramsay, Arthur Streeton and Walter Withers. Mid century works are represented by Weaver Hawkins, Ian Fairweather, John Perceval, Margaret Preston and Sidney Nolan.

Australian artists from the second half of the twentieth century are well represented, with significant works by leading artists such as Arthur Boyd, Ralph Balson, John Brack and Fred Williams. As for the 1980s onwards, the collection includes works by Peter Booth, Robert Jacks, Inge King, Robert Klippel, Jenny Watson, Brent Harris, Vivienne Shark LeWitt and others. Australian art from the 1990s is mostly shown at the Potter though the Vizard Foundation Collection of Art of the 1990s. This collection of 124 works, which has been on long-term loan to the Potter since 1994, includes artists such as Brook Andrew, Howard Arkley, Gordon Bennett, Juan Davila, Destiny Deacon, Robert Hunter, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Tracey Moffatt, Patricia Piccinini, Sally Smart, and Ricky Swallow.

While the principal focus of the collection is Australian art since the early nineteenth century, non-Australian works include the large, early seventeenth-century Peasant wedding dance (c. 1610) by Pieter Brueghel III, a luminous Turner watercolour, Oberwesel (1840), a fine drawing by Henry Moore, a large group of over two thousand twentieth-century posters from Europe, United States and Asia, and nearly two thousand antiquities.

Australian Indigenous art features with an important early group of Groote Eylandt bark paintings from the 1940s, which form part of the large ethnographic Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture. The most spectacular bark paintings in the University’s collection—some of the finest in Australia—commissioned and collected in Arnhem Land from 1935 to the early 1940s by Donald Thomson, currently reside in Museum Victoria, on long-term loan from the University since 1970. More recent works by Indigenous artists in the collection include paintings by Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Butcher Cherel, and Rusty Peters, and photographs by Destiny Deacon.
The University Art Collection has developed through donations, purchases and commissions. The first acquisition dates from 1881 and is, appropriately, a commissioned portrait of the University’s first Chancellor, Sir Redmond Barry. Portraits of senior academics feature in the collection and the tradition of commissioning portraits continues to the present day. The growth of the collection during the twentieth by a range of generous donors—Dr Samuel Arthur Ewing (1938), Mrs E. Phillips Fox (1939), Samuel Courtauld (1946), the Rupert Bunny Estate (1948), Dr Leonhard Adam (1960), Norman Lindsay (1969), Macgeorge Bequest (1970)—led to the formation of a University Art Gallery in 1972.

During its first years the University Art Gallery was housed in the John Medley Building (designed by Roy Grounds) and in 1975 moved to the Old Physics building, which had been renovated by Daryl Jackson. The Ian Potter Gallery and Art Conservation Centre was created in 1989 and housed in the former Physics Annexe, refurbished under direction of architect Greg Burgess. In 1998 the present day Ian Potter Museum of Art, prominently sited on Swanston Street and designed by Nonda Katsilidis, was opened. It is named in honour of Sir Ian Potter in recognition of the great support The Ian Potter Foundation has given over many years.

Several donors have helped build the collection over the years and the following provides an introduction to some of the key aspects of the University Art Collection:

**The Ewing Collection**, donated in 1938, was one of the earliest to be given to the University of Melbourne. Dr Samuel Ewing, a leading Melbourne medical professional and former student of the University, collected leading Australian artists of his time, including Rupert Bunny, Louis Buvelot, Nicholas Chevalier, E. Phillips Fox, Bernard Hall, Hans Heysen, Frederick McCubbin, David Davies, Max Meldrum, John Ford Paterson, Arthur Streeton, Walter Withers and Blamire Young. The collection was originally displayed in a specially dedicated Ewing Gallery and at its entrance Dr Ewing’s mission for his collection was inscribed:

> That our youth may be inspired with the beauty as well as a deeper love of their country by the works of our artists.

**The Rupert Bunny Collection** was gifted to the University from the artist’s estate following his death in 1948. The collection consists of fifteen drawing books, sixteen sketchbooks, and many oil and watercolour sketches that researchers continue to study for insight to the artist’s techniques and materials. The sketchbooks also contain preparatory sketches for many of the artist’s key works.

**The Sir Russell and Mab Grimwade ‘Miegunyah’ Collection** is one of the most significant collections in the University Art Collection. The collection came to the University 1973. Sir Russell Grimwade had a close association with the University, as student, council member and Deputy Chancellor. The collection forms a fascinating insight to Grimwade and his collecting practices and interests. Colonial to modern Australian art, furniture and decorative arts form the core of the collection and their research, preservation and display continues to be support through of the Miegunyah Bequest. The most famous work in Grimwade’s collection and in the Potter is William Strutt’s painting Bushrangers, Victoria, Australia, 1852 (1877), based on a true event on 16 October 1852.
The dramatically installed stained-glass window by Napier Waller in the Potter foyer was a gift from John E. Leckie and is known as *The Leckie window*. It was originally installed in the University's Wilson Hall in 1935. In 1952 Wilson Hall was destroyed by fire but the window was saved and eventually reinstalled in the Ian Potter Museum of Art when it opened in 1998. Another work that was installed as part of the Potter building is Christine O'Loughlin’s *Cultural rubble* (1993) on the façade. The work replicates classical objects and sculptures from the Louvre collection.

The teaching collections donated to the University, such as the Classics and Archaeology Collection and the Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture, form some of the most interesting collections of the University Art Collection. Dr Leonhard Adam, lecturer in the Department of History at the University of Melbourne collected works from 1942 to 1957 to aid his teaching at the University. The collection includes ethnographic objects from Australia, New Zealand, Asia, America, Papua New Guinea and Africa.

In 2001 the University's Classics and Archaeology Collection was transferred to the Potter for preservation and display in the Classics Gallery wing which opened in the same year. The collection continues to be one of the most actively accessed collections for tutorials held at the Potter every semester.

Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack was a founding member of the Weimar Bauhaus in Germany. He came to Australia in 1940 and the collection was donated by his widow Olive Hirschfeld in 1971 and 1980. It contains many of his colour theory studies, along with drawings, prints and paintings, the majority of which date to the artist's time in Australia.

The Gerard Herbst Poster Collection was donated by former RMIT Head of Industrial Design, Gerard Herbst, and consists of Herbst’s private collection of over 2000 posters representing international design from the 1950s to 1990s. Herbst was influenced by the aesthetics of the Weimar Republic and the teachings of Walter Gropius. Many of the posters represent these influences and most were created in eastern European countries, notably Poland. Herbst's collection was specifically collected as a teaching aid for his students so they would be inspired by the excellence in design. Herbst donated the collection to the University in 1996 and it has formed the basis for one of the Potters most successful ongoing volunteer programs for university students to gain valuable experience in collections management.

The diversity of the University Art Collection allows for constant interpretation. It forms a great resource for the University and its academic programs as well as for the general public through regular changing displays and exhibitions.