

# in detail

Hugh Ramsay Untitled (Study of a boy)



**Hugh Ramsay** born Scotland 1877, died Australia 1906  
*Untitled (Study of a boy)* [n.d.]  
 Oil on canvas, 79.5 x 63.0 cm (sight)  
 The University of Melbourne Art Collection  
 Gift of Mr William McDougall  
 1997.0142

## ‘Hugh Ramsay was that very rare phenomenon – a born painter.’<sup>1</sup>

Hugh Ramsay’s brief, yet remarkable, life left him acknowledged as one of Australia’s most gifted painters. He exhibited successfully in Paris at the age of twenty-five and was promoted in London society by Nellie Melba. The artist’s potentially brilliant career was cut short when Ramsay died from tuberculosis aged twenty-eight.

Born in Glasgow in 1877, Ramsay arrived in Australia when his family emigrated in 1878. Between 1894 and 1899 he attended Victoria’s National Gallery School, studying drawing under Frederick McCubbin and painting with Bernard Hall. Under Hall, Ramsay followed the tonal tradition of Velasquez and his 19th century followers, notably Whistler. In 1897 he forewent two terms at the Gallery School and rented a studio at 312 Flinders Street, while attending landscape classes at Emanuel Phillips Fox and Tudor St. George Tucker’s Melbourne Art School, ‘Charterisville’, in Heidelberg. It would appear that *Untitled (Study of a Boy)* was painted c.1897-1900. A similar work, *Nude Study – Seated Boy Leaning on Box* (1897), appears in a photograph of Hugh Ramsay in his studio c.1900.<sup>2</sup>

Ramsay won student prizes and finished second in the Gallery School’s coveted Travelling Scholarship in 1896 and 1899. Undaunted at missing the Scholarship, he sailed for England in November 1900. On board ship, ironically, he met the winner of the NSW Travelling Scholarship, George Lambert and his wife, who befriended him. After visiting London and Scotland, he travelled to Paris in January 1901 to experience the rich cultural life of the city. Ramsay accepted an offer from a fellow Australian artist, James MacDonald, to share a studio in Montpanasse, near the Latin Quarter. He enrolled at the nearby Académie Colarossi, relishing the freedom his new school encouraged. Of greatest impact, however, were his frequent visits to study the Old Masters

in the Louvre, responding to Ribera, Van Dyck, Correggio, Titian, Veronese, Tintoretto, Rembrandt, Raphael, Michelangelo and his hero, Velasquez.

Soon after his arrival, one of Ramsay’s portraits was accepted at the Société des Artistes Francais (Old Salon). In March 1902, four of his works were accepted by the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts (New Salon) and hung ‘on the line’ (eye level), an honour usually reserved for members. Writing to his sister, Ramsay was overwhelmed at his debut: ‘Of course it seems ridiculous to see a list of names in which the first one is Ramsay and Whistler and Sargent following.’<sup>3</sup> Soon afterwards he met Nellie Melba, the diva of European society. She was very impressed by the young artist. Inviting him to London, where she introduced him to major figures in Edwardian society and commissioned a full-length portrait.

Ramsay was diagnosed with tuberculosis in June 1902 and never finished Melba’s picture. She loaned him sixty pounds for his immediate return to Australia. Two harsh winters in Paris, working long hours, and stinting on food to buy materials is said to have contributed to his illness. Later, MacDonald recalled Ramsay’s frugal existence: ‘His ardour burnt him up. In Paris he would begin painting an hour before breakfast and continue late into the night by oil lamp.’<sup>4</sup> In September 1902, Ramsay held his only career solo show at Melba’s home in Toorak. Afterwards, she commissioned him to paint her father, David Mitchell, and niece, Nellie Patterson.

Hugh Ramsay  
*Untitled (Study of a boy)*  
(detail) [n.d.]



Against all medical advice, Ramsay continued to paint. Over a couple of short years, often quite ill, he produced some of his finest works including *An Equestrian Portrait*, which received critical acclaim when exhibited at the 1903 Victorian Artists' Society (VAS) Annual Exhibition. Followed by what is considered his masterwork *The Sisters*, featuring his siblings, Madge, Nell and Jessie, shown at the 1904 VAS Annual Exhibition. As his Paris colleague, MacDonald, wrote almost 40 years later: '... in 1904 ... only the great Sargent excelled him.'<sup>5</sup>

Hugh Ramsay died at his family home, 'Clydebank', in Melbourne on 5 March 1906. Two significant exhibitions of his work were staged following his death – *The Art of Hugh Ramsay*, at the Fine Art Society, Melbourne, in 1918, and the *Hugh Ramsay Loan Exhibition*, at the National Gallery of Victoria, in 1943. But almost another 50 years elapsed, before Ramsay's work under-went a major re-appraisal. The National Gallery of Victoria's 1992 retrospective, *Hugh Ramsay 1877-1906*, allowed the public and scholars alike to see what George Bell once described as: 'the quality of his genius.'<sup>6</sup>

#### **Ramsay's *Untitled (Study of a boy)*: a technical viewpoint**

At a glance, the imagery in this painting is confusing. The face of the boy is incomplete, black brushwork over the surface, and an additional ear protruding from the face. However, the tools of conservation research enable us to reinterpret the image to gain a better understanding of

Ramsay's intent. The University of Melbourne Conservation Service has used Infrared Reflectography (IRR) to penetrate the paint layer and reveal information below. This may reveal underpaint, underdrawing, previous retouching and changes in composition. It can offer insight into previously undetected artistic practice and technique. The IRR image here uncovers another figure, possibly male. Clearly, Ramsay has removed the upper surface of paint to show the ear of the figure below. This highlights Ramsay's discontent with the image of the boy and a possible desire to return to the painting below.

This, however, does not explain the black brushwork or the incomplete nature of the painting. Possibly the black paint was applied by Ramsay, as he attempted to rework the composition and resolve the image. Likewise, the continuous layer of original varnish over the in-completed image and Ramsay's signature at the bottom indicate a commitment to the painting. Eventually, he intended to return to the painting and rework it. Overall, *Untitled (Study of a boy)*, demonstrates Ramsay's technique of reinterpretation and reworking of an image. It illustrates how Ramsay constructed paintings over a long period of time. This work is an invaluable research tool for extending our knowledge about Ramsay's paintings and technique as he struggled to resolve an image.

#### **How does Infrared Reflectography work?**

IRR examines artworks in their electromagnetic spectrum greater than 700 nanometers. Certain painting materials absorb, or reflect, IRR depending on their composition. Generally an oil polymer paint film will reflect IRR light and will remain transparent, however carbon based materials will absorb IRR light and illuminate. Consequently, we see any carbon-based drawings under the paint surface.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Selected works by Hugh Ramsay from the University of Melbourne Art Collection:**

- *Untitled (Seated girl)*, c. 1894-1906, oil on canvas on board
- *Michael Willis Fergusson*, 1898, oil on canvas on board
- *Untitled (Self-Portrait)*, 1901, oil on paper on board
- *James S. MacDonald*, 1901, oil on canvas

Additional information available at [www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au)

Stephen Mead The Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2003

- 1 Bell, George, 'Hugh Ramsay: an appreciation', *Hugh Ramsay Loan Exhibition*, National Gallery of Victoria, 1943.
- 2 Fullerton, Patricia, *Hugh Ramsay: His Life and Work*, Hudson, Hawthorn, Vic., 1988, pp. 40 & 195.
- 3 Correspondence, Hugh Ramsay to Madge Ramsay, 25 April 1902. Cited Fullerton, p. 89.
- 4 MacDonald, JS, 'A great Australian artist: triumph and tragedy of Hugh Ramsay', *The Age*, 13 March 1943, p. 7.
- 5 MacDonald, *ibid.*
- 6 Bell, *ibid.*
- 7 Research by Nicole Tse, Projects Conservator and Researcher, Ian Potter Conservation Centre, University of Melbourne, May 2003.