

Danila Vassilieff
THE WOLF IN AUSTRALIAN ART



Danila Vassilieff *Soap Box Derby* 1939

This Education Resource has been produced to provide information and support for educational institutions. It is intended for this use only. The historical content of the documentary film makes it directly relevant to Australian history and politics students as well as to students of art and art history. It is the portrait of a period. The abundance of literary connections and parallels means that it is also eminently suitable for English students.

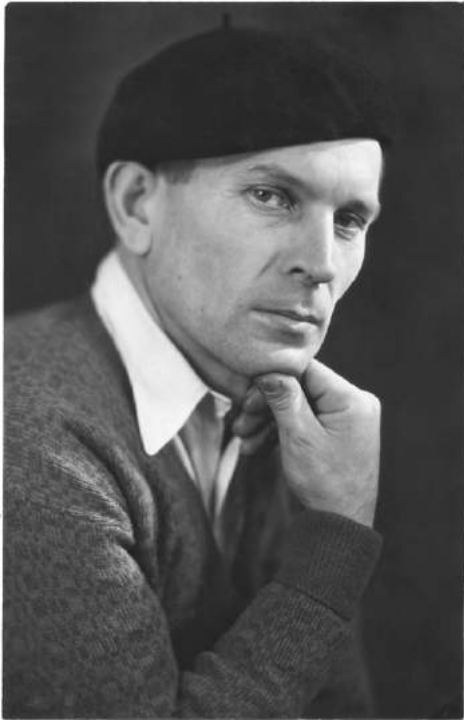
Introduction

Cossack Australian artist Danila Ivanovich Vassilieff (1897-1958), was a key figure in the development of figurative expressionism in Australian art. He gave expression to an aspect of Australian life rather than imitating a physical aspect of the country itself. His model of individual freedom liberated a generation of rebellious young Melbourne painters in the late 1930s and 1940s who became known collectively as the Angry Penguins —Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd, Albert Tucker, Joy Hester and John Perceval. Yet for many years after Vassilieff's death in 1958, writers, curators and collectors often overlooked his work, and his role as a 'father' figure remained under-acknowledged.

This compelling documentary offers an opportunity for a re-evaluation of the impact of this fascinating artist. It presents the finest of Vassilieff's achievements, spanning the period immediately preceding his arrival in Australia in 1935 through to the 1950s, when he also influenced Charles Blackman. Comprising key paintings from the mid-1930s to mid-1940s, a major representation of sculpture and a selection of works on paper, it demonstrates the calibre of Vassilieff's art to a new generation of viewers and students.

At the centre of this wide-ranging documentary stands the remarkable *Expulsion from Paradise* screen (1940, NGA collection). This four-panelled hinged and double-sided screen was a crucial trigger for Nolan's Ned Kelly series. The screen highlights Vassilieff's role in redirecting modern Australian art toward the expressive figurative tradition of Russian folk art, especially the story of *Petruchka*, (akin to a Russian Punch and Judy,) performed by the touring *Ballets Russes* company.

Biography



'Daniel' Vassilieff in Bristol at the age of 35

The story of how Vassilieff came to make his career in Australia reads like a script for an epic feature film. Set across several continents and featuring a changing cast of colourful characters, it is interwoven with grand themes: war, survival, adventure, love, betrayal, loss and above all, an innate drive to create. The tale begins in Kagalnitskaya, a village near Rostov-on-Don, South Russia, where Vassilieff was born in 1897 to a Cossack father and Ukrainian mother. He demonstrated enough potential as a young man for his parents to send him to a military academy in St Petersburg, where he trained as an engineer. He fought in World War 1 against the Germans before becoming caught up in the Russian revolution of 1917, captured by the Reds and imprisoned at Baku on the Caspian Sea. After a daring escape, he slowly made his way to China, living for a time with Tartar horsemen in Armenia, learning English in the employ of an Anglo-Persian oil company, and travelling by train through India and Burma.

Arriving in Shanghai in 1923 he married the Cossack refugee, Anisia Nicolaevna with whom he migrated to Australia where they bought a sugar cane farm in Queensland. Later, while working on the railway extension in the Northern Territory, Vassilieff began to paint, using a child's painting kit. He also became an Australian citizen.

In 1929, after separating from his wife, Vassilieff journeyed to Rio de Janeiro to study with Dimitri Ismailovitch, a specialist in copies of Byzantine frescoes and mosaics. But Vassilieff rejected the traditional approach, seeking to paint 'living life ... people in action and movement' rather than inanimate objects. Leaving Brazil he worked his way through the West Indies, painting in a lively expressive manner, exhibiting at every opportunity.

His next stop was London where he was launched into the serious art world by Doris Ogilvie, a noted landscape architect and art collector. There he befriended Moscow-born Vladimir Polunin, a former scene painter for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, and Professor of Scene Painting at the Slade School of Fine Art.

Through Vladimir Polunin, with whom he stayed in London, he became familiar with the Ballets Russes, Russian decorative art and European modern art. He experimented with synthesising aspects of the Russian icon and folk traditions with simplified forms and vibrant colour. This conflation of traditions, which similarly informed the work of early Russian moderns such as Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov, underpinned Vassilieff's style henceforth.



Sergei Diaghilev, Vladimir Polunin and Pablo Picasso in London 1919

Despite a positive reception for his work in Europe sales were few, and with his homeland closed to him due to the increasingly repressive Stalinist regime, Vassilieff resolved to return to Australia. His first years back in the Antipodes marked the peak of his critical acclaim. During a period in Sydney he produced an early masterpiece: *Street in Surry Hills (Self Portrait in Cathedral Street)* 1937, in which he portrays himself wearing his trademark artist's beret and gazing confidently out at the viewer. He states his painter's credentials through references to the dramatic mannerist figures and compositional devices of old master El Greco, whose paintings he saw in Toledo, Spain. His application across the surface of opaque white highlights lends the image a shimmering effect.

Moving to Melbourne in mid-1937 at the height of the debate between the 'academics' and the 'moderns', Vassilieff was welcomed by the younger artists as a direct transmitter of the tenets of European modernism. He lived with his 'wife' Helen Macdonald in the inner, working class suburb of Fitzroy, and the neighbourhood's vibrant street life provided rich subject matter. Setting his easel up in the streets, he attracted the attention of the local children who feature in many compositions, such as *Soap Box Derby* (1938), *Children Playing in*

Collingwood School (1939) and *Street Scene with Graffiti* (1938), which also reflect the artist's earthy sense of humour.

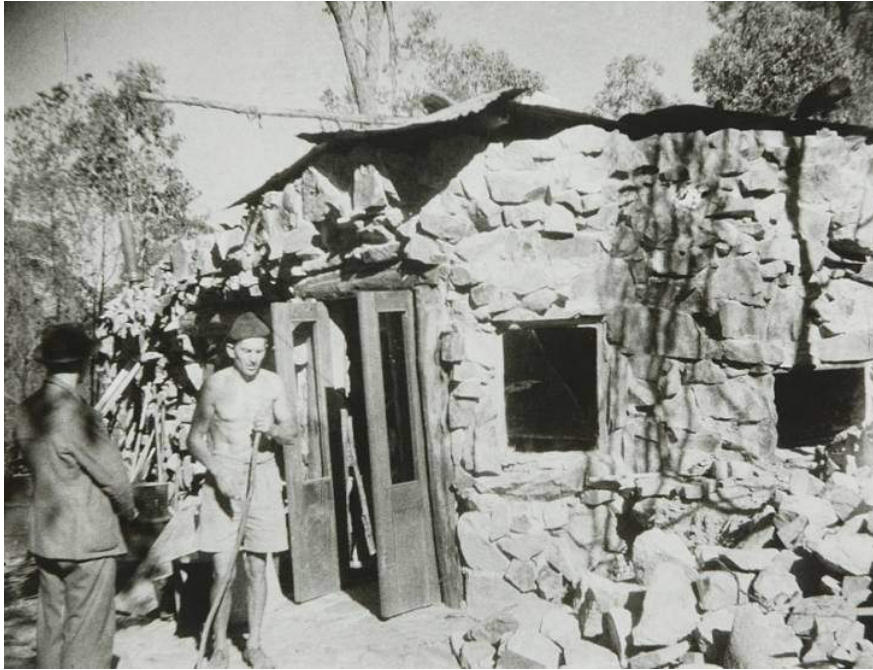
These works in many ways exemplify Vassilieff's credo that the message of an artwork is more important than its aesthetic. He eschewed laborious conventional techniques such as preparatory drawing and building layers of paint in favour of a spontaneous approach, freedom of expression and economy of means that emphasised emotional response. In some instances the rawness of the images keenly conveys the stark reality of the lives of those depicted, while in others the quickly applied, vibrant brushwork suggests the hectic energy of urban activity.



Helen Macdonald at the piano – Vassilieff reclining behind.

On the occasion of his first Melbourne exhibition at Riddell's Gallery Vassilieff met John and Sunday Reed, who became his friends, staunch supporters and collectors of his work. Other early supporters were the progressive educators Clive and Janet Nield, who in 1939, during World War II, opened Koornong Experimental School in Warrandyte, then in Melbourne's outer reaches. The Nields employed Vassilieff as the foundation art teacher and Helen, his wife, to teach music. With the prospect of a settled life at last, Vassilieff built their house across the

creek from the school. He quarried the hillside for stone and constructed the dwelling with his own hands. Stonygrad, as it became known, was a focal point for the young artists associated with the Reeds and Heide, where they absorbed Vassilieff's liberated art along with his fusion of creative ideas and belief that there were no rules.



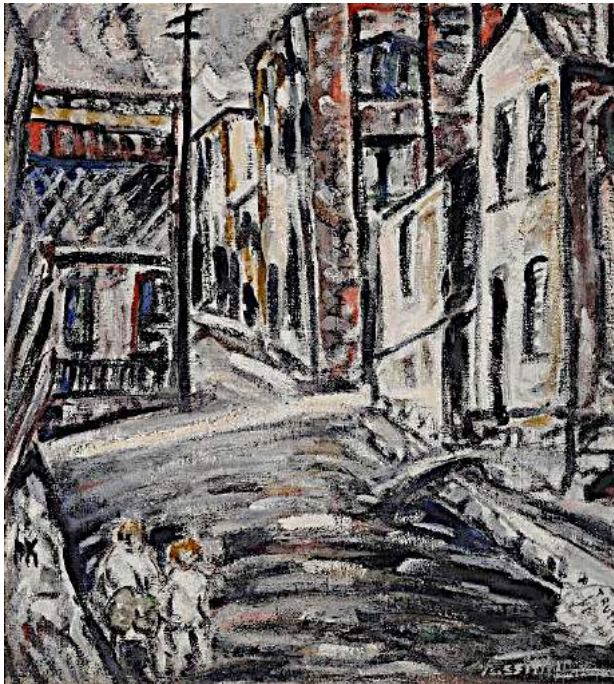
'Stonygrad' in Warrandyte, the house Vassilieff built by himself from local materials, c.1941. Photograph Albert Tucker

In 1944 Vassilieff's marriage to Helen broke down and her departure left him devastated. Koornong closed in 1946 and he decided to sell Stonygrad and use the proceeds to leave Australia and follow friends to South Africa. By a twist of fate he fell in love with the woman who purchased his house, Elizabeth Sutton Hamill, and with her money and encouragement he transferred his energies to sculpture. Inspired by his familiarity with Russian folk carving and also the work of European modern masters, such as Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, known to him from London, he began to carve in local Lilydale marble. He quarried the limestone himself, basing his selection on colour, texture and structure, and used his expertise with hand and power tools to create some of the most remarkable pieces in the history of Australia sculpture.

These carvings, that progress from block-like images to bump and hollow figures, then to divided and double-sided more complex figures, often with overhanging body parts, have a satirical or playful edge. The apex of his achievement in the discipline is represented by *Stenka Razin* (1953), a portrayal of the seventeenth-century Cossack bandit who, not unlike Ned Kelly in Australia, led a peasant rebellion and was executed, but not before famously tossing his princess into the Volga River. Vassilieff's portrait of Razin embodies the contradictory aspects—leader and libertine—of his character.

In 1954, Vassilieff separated from Elizabeth and spent his last years teaching at high schools in Mildura, Swan Hill and Eltham, and fishing on the Murray River. The disparate and restless imagery of his late work reflects the fragmentation of his semi-itinerant lifestyle and his witty, sometimes scathing, observations of provincial society. He never returned to Russia. In March 1958, on a visit to Heide, he died of heart failure in John Reed's arms.

Paintings



Danila Vassilieff
Truth Woolloomooloo 1936
oil on canvas on board
56 x 50cm
Private collection,
Melbourne

In this painting the *Truth* newspaper lies in the gutter as an obvious clue to the meaning of the title. Vassilieff always insisted that the message was more important than the aesthetic. His external eye observed the dark side of Sydney's ramshackle city streets, responding with urgent gashes and turbulent brushmarks that connect to the steamy content of the newspaper. Vassilieff would set up his easel on the pavement, no doubt attracting the curiosity of the children and dogs whose presence here adds to the convincing impression of real life on the streets. The exact location has been identified as the intersection of Little Riley and Reservoir Streets, Woolloomooloo.

TASKS: Give a short explanation of the following terms in relation to *Truth Woolloomooloo*: art elements, historical context, aesthetic qualities, subject matter and style. Discuss how the creative process contributes to the meaning of the painting.



Danila Vassilieff
Street in Surry Hills (Self-Portrait in Cathedral Street) 1937
 oil on hessian on composition board
 118 x 88cm
 Newcastle Art Gallery
 Purchased 1982

Vassilieff marked his arrival in Sydney with this major self-portrait in a dome-like artist beret, as a kind of manifesto. The location of the image (in Cathedral Street, Woolloomooloo), reflects his view of art as a means of spiritual regeneration. Vassilieff had assimilated the Russian expressionist aesthetic, whereby the artist strives to transcend the everyday through the intensity of his own expression. The figure grouping, which includes a mother and child on the artist's right and a turning youth on his left, invokes the intersection between the eternal and the real. The figures are borrowed from El Greco (whose frescoes he had admired in Spain in 1934), the old master who blended the Byzantine icon tradition with immediate execution.

TASKS: Make a quick storyboard of five postcard-size images of a significant event in your life, one that includes real people in action. Select the most interesting image to develop into a larger painting on good watercolour paper. Think about the colour palette and choose colours that best represent the mood of the event. Work quickly and don't overwork.



Danila Vassilieff
Valerie and Betty 1937
 oil on plywood
 45 x 53.6cm
 Heide Museum of Modern
 Art, Melbourne
 Purchased from John and
 Sunday Reed 1980

Vassilieff had a natural affinity with children. The animated outlines and awkward figures of these girls link them to their surroundings, as do the earthy tones used for their clothing. Hands tucked behind their backs, shoes cropped by the bottom edge and their long legs growing out of short skirts, they present themselves up close to the artist, eager to be painted. Through his economy of means—exposing the white ground below the rapid-fire brushstrokes—Vassilieff evokes the insecurity and deprivation of inner-Melbourne's working class.

TASKS: Discuss the aesthetic qualities of *Valerie and Betty*.
 How do visual art elements such as line, brush marks, colour, quickness and texture interplay with materials and techniques to communicate meaning?



Danila Vassilieff *Street Scene with Graffiti* 1938.
oil on plywood 45.5 x 61.1cm Private collection Melbourne.

Vassilieff enjoyed the spontaneity of graffiti in the streets and laneways of Fitzroy, regarding it as part of the everyday life of the locale. Here the crude humour of the scrawled text and imagery is accentuated by its actual physical location. Vassilieff's expressionist aesthetic reflected the deliberately crude humanism of Russian artists such as Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova.

TASKS: Is there anything specifically Australian about this work?

How would you define this kind of neighbourhood?

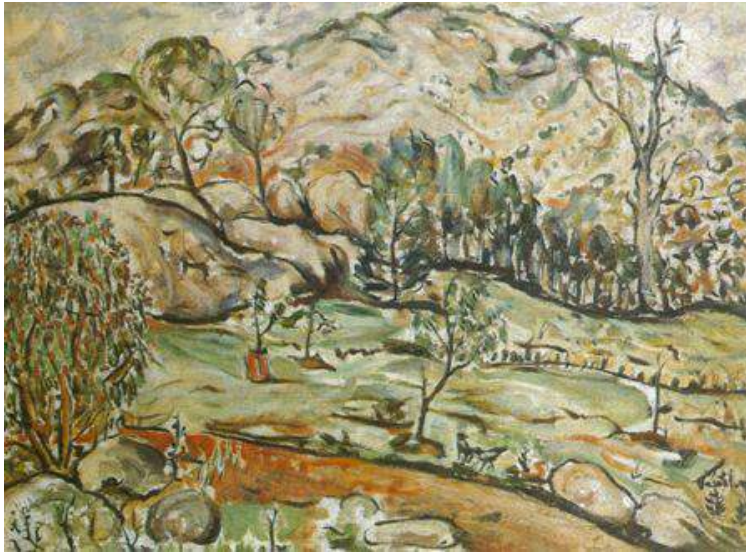
What is the black striped shape in the foreground?

What kind of mood is conveyed by the graffiti? Would they have been drawn by political radicals or by larrikins? How can you tell?

Can you identify the small buildings backing on to the lane (The activities of the boy and the dog will give you a clue).

Do you notice anything peculiar about the chimney tops in the upper right? In the light of Vassilieff's background, how would you account for these shapes?

What is the artist's attitude towards the subject matter. Does he enjoy it or is he critical?



Danila Vassilieff *You Yang Mountains* 1938
oil on canvas 49x 54.5cm. Estate Dame Elisabeth Murdoch

The ancient contours of the You Yang Mountains reminded Vassilieff of the landscapes of French master Cézanne. Here the pyramidal form rises, as in Cézanne's celebrated depictions of Mont Sainte-Victoire, above the sparsely wooded foothills and organic shapes of the rocky outcrops. Yet the quick brushstrokes and energetic swirls lend a fleeting and fugitive quality to the scene, and the inclusion of local incidents and the occasional animal or bird, accentuates the temporary rather than the timeless. The You Yangs landscapes were exhibited in Geelong when the artist was staying with teachers Clive and Janet Nield at Geelong Grammar School in 1938.

TASKS: What do Cezanne's paintings of Mont Sainte Victoire have in common with Vassilieff's paintings of the You Yang Mountains? Beyond landscapes, what other themes do they share? Evaluate how art elements have been used to create a particular aesthetic quality to communicate ideas.



Danila Vassiliev *Peter Macdonald* 1938 oil and pencil on canvas 56.6 x 50cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Gift of Helen Klausner 1985

The sitter for this portrait was the brother of Helen Macdonald, the artist's 'de facto' wife. Peter introduced his musician sister to Vassiliev when the two men were working together as engineers on the Woronora Dam, south of Sydney in 1936. Peter later lent Helen the money to buy the land at Warrandyte on which Vassiliev would build their stone house. In this tenderly rendered image, Peter is seen as a centre of life, nurture and stability.

TASKS: Consider the angle or position we are viewing the subject of this artwork from? How has the artist decided to present the figure? Look at the objects around the figure. What do these clues in the painting tell us about the subject?



Danila Vassiliev

The Expulsion from Paradise 1940

tempera on cotton four panels screen

167 x 321.4cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased 1984

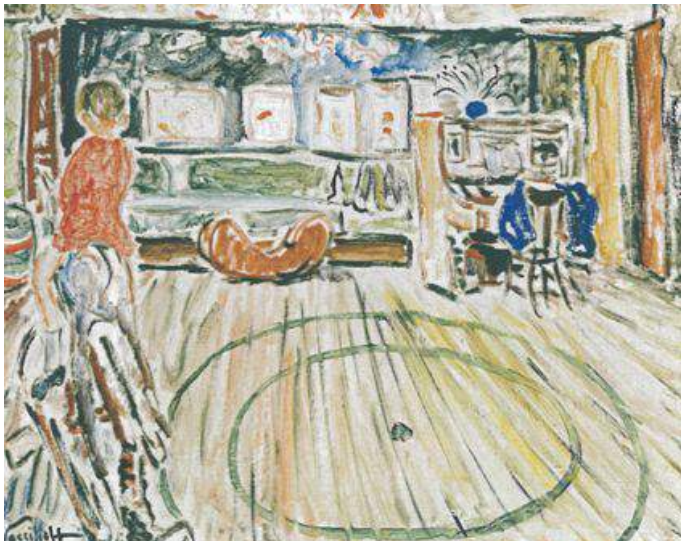
This decorative screen was commissioned by Warrandyte art collector Connie Smith. Vassiliev painted it when the Russian Ballet was in Melbourne in 1940, and its imagery conflates the biblical story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden with the folk story of *Petrushka*, a puppet clown that comes to life. The expelling archangel with the flaming torch in the third panel is modelled on the figure of the Blackamoor, wearing Turkish slippers, in the set design for the Moor's room in the Ballets Russes production of *Petrushka*. The stage-costumed figure of God the Father, enthroned in the right panel, doubles as the charlatan Showman, whose magic controls the puppet.

Vassiliev's crude and mildly irreverent approach to religious themes had a profound impact on younger artists who admired him. It liberated the fertile imaginations of, for example, Arthur Boyd and John Perceval, who went on to draw and paint their own idiosyncratic versions of biblical subjects.

For Sidney Nolan, Vassiliev's work was particularly important. In late 1946 Nolan stayed at Stonygrad for several weeks and had access to

further, decorative ballet scenes on the back of the *Expulsion* screen that Vassilieff had added later, upside down. It has only been in recent years that the compelling link between these compositions and Nolan's famous Kelly series has become evident.

TASKS: How does one artist influence another? Look carefully at paintings of *The Expulsion* (1947-48) made by Arthur Boyd and John Perceval and at Sidney Nolan's *Constable Fitzpatrick and Kate Kelly* 1946. Describe the links between them. Refer to the elements: colour line, texture and space as well as the principles of vision, simplicity, proportion, rhythm and contrast.



Danila Vassilieff
Schoolroom at Koornong
1942
oil on plywood panel
Private collection,
Melbourne

In 1939 Vassilieff was invited to be the foundation art teacher at the experimental Koornong School at Warrandyte. His personal example suited the School's emphasis on education through experience. In this painting of the art room which he also built, the imagery suggests the imaginative process as well as the different means of creation.

TASKS: Identify these creative images and some of the elements in this art room, such as the use of colour, line, design and shape that appear to suggest the creative process.



Danila Vassilieff
Interior with Figures 1942
Oil on canvas
45.6 x 39.5cm
Private collection,
Melbourne

The real setting of this interior composition is the large drawing room of George Bell's house in Toorak, Melbourne. George Bell was Melbourne's outstanding teacher of modern art, who saw Vassilieff as a 'natural'. In this group portrait of Bell's wife, daughter and future grandchild with his own wife, Helen (in the centre), Vassilieff unites Bell's respect for formal values with significant figures from contemporary life. In contrast to the traditional conversation piece however, these figures are arranged in a conversation of colours, contours and patterns, in the manner rather, of Matisse.

TASKS: Look at how the elements in this painting are arranged. Now think about the way the light travels around this composition. Draw the movement of your eyes on a small piece of paper, the same size.

Compare your line drawing with your classmates. Is it the same or different? Consider how and why the artist has directed our gaze to certain elements within the painting.



Danila Vassilieff Peter and the Wolf illustration 1948. Series A. "How the Wolf strained to catch him" watercolour and gouache 27.8cm x 42.8cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

TASKS: People remark on the energy of Vassilieff's works on paper. How is that achieved do you think?

How does the artist capture the frantic movement of the wolf?

How well does this illustration tell the story of the wolf's capture?

What kind of colours does the artist use? How does he distribute them?

Sculptures

In the late 1940s Vassilieff transferred his energies to sculpture, perhaps as a release for the energy previously spent on building Stonygrad. He visited the Thomas Mitchell quarry in Lilydale to obtain blocks of limestone, basing his selection on colour, the pictorial potential of the form, and durability. His expertise with tools enabled him to carve directly into the limestone without preliminary drawings and he soon progressed to power tools, which were faster and allowed him to respond to the grain of the material.

Over a decade Vassilieff produced approximately thirty major sculptures. Various whimsical, assertive and satirical, these expressive carvings are reminiscent of the lively characters and types of folk art. But their tactility is unique—a product of their domestic scale; their relationship to the hand; and their smoothly polished surfaces that reveal the depth and intricacy of the mottled limestone, a marine deposit. An important influence was the raw vitality and simplified forms of the work of French sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891-1915), which Vassilieff had come to know during his years in London.



Danila
Vassilieff
Boy 1950 Lilydale
marble, cream,
grey
47.5 x 34 x
23.4cm
Heide Museum of
Modern Art,
Melbourne
Bequest of John
and Sunday Reed

The distortions and simplified forms of Vassilieff's sculptures have an affinity with examples of children's art chosen by psychologists to represent 'haptic' tendencies, where the most emotionally significant part of the subject is physically exaggerated. This work also exemplifies the rich textural and tonal possibilities inherent in the Lilydale limestone, which the artist polished to reveal the intricate configurations of the mottle and create a sense of movement throughout the figure.

Drawing on the folk art traditions of his homeland, his structural comprehension as a trained engineer, and his knowledge of modern art antecedents, Vassilieff created sculpture that defies the conventional categorisation. These pieces reference high and low art sources while reflecting Vassilieff's unique vision of the world around him.

TASKS: What is the subject matter explored here?

How has Vassilieff used materials and techniques to support
a) the expression and b) the communication of his subject?

Comment on the significance of the real material Vassilieff used for his sculptures.

How do his sculptures extend his practice as a painter?



Danila Vassiliev
Mechanical Man 1953
Carved and waxed Lilydale
marble
48 20 x 24.5cm
National Gallery of
Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1973

The compressed energy and precision of *Mechanical Man* reflects the interlocking of mechanical and organic forms, suggesting that Vassiliev has translated a folk object into the language of modern European art. His stone carvings have affinities with the work of the Vorticists, Henri Gaudier-Brzseka and Jacob Epstein, and also with the Russian sculptor Ossip Zadkine. The brilliant finish, essential to revealing the pattern of the marble, increases the aesthetic appeal of the work.

TASKS: Does this subject remind you of any useful object? Does it suggest movement? If so what kind of movement, animal, vegetable, mineral or mechanical? How has Vassiliev used materials and techniques to make us think and reflect his view on life?

Imagine a world inhabited by these “mechanical men” and how would you create a “mechanical woman” to act as his partner? Think about how Vassiliev has created the tension between the head and the lower body.



Danila Vassiliev *Stenka Razin* 1953 carved and waxed Lilydale limestone 57 x 40 x 13.5cm
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
Purchased 1973

TASKS: Record a list of words that come to mind as you view this work, for example: crude, natural, gestural, complex, defiant, triumphant, fierce, fleeting, holey, radiant, jagged, sinewy, positive and negative.

How have the techniques of sculpture been applied by Vassiliev to create these sensations and aesthetic qualities?



Danila Vassilieff *Murray*
Faces 1954 watercolour
 and gouache on paper
 30.3 x 40.4cm
 Heide Museum of
 Modern Art, Melbourne

The directness of Vassilieff's art entered a more anguished phase in his later years. Having lost the home he had built with his own hands, and suffering from poor health, he taught art at high schools in Mildura and Swan Hill. He wrote that the school inspectors were not convinced of his effectiveness as a teacher: "My report was not a happy one . . . I don't know how long I will be kept if I cannot control one or two forms of devils."

TASKS: Relationships between the artist and their subject.

Look at the objects around the figures. Do they provide the viewer with clues about the subject?

What about the facial features? How do they portray the devilish mood of the schoolchildren?



Danila Vassilieff *Mildura Wedding* 1954
oil on composition board 91 x 122 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne
Purchased from John and Sunday Reed 1980

An ambitious allegory of the eternal battle between the sexes, *Mildura Wedding* was intended to make a splash at the annual exhibition of the revived Contemporary Art Society. In the foreground, the artificial culture of Mildura is almost jammed against the picture plane. The figures of the bride and groom have mismatched features and resemble a pair of poker machines, with lever-like arms and rows of buttons or openings that reveal their respective choices: women and gambling for him; parties and a future child for her. In the lower left, the line of red buttons suggests trouble ahead; while on the right, the picture-book setting of the Murray River is identified by the presence of the local paddle-steamer, *Avoca*.

The tiny image that flanks the central figure—of a male dropping a female figure into the river under a night sky—is a key to memory and legend. It connects the piratical figure of a Mildura husband to Vassilieff's sculpture *Stenka Razin* (1953), of the Cossack bandit who famously

tossed his princess into the Volga River. In this feisty allegory, Vassiliev goes beyond his immediate exile to link myth and reality, painting and sculpture, the Volga that he misses and the Murray he loves.

TASKS: What is the title of this artwork? Does this assist you to understand or know what the painting is about? Might you interpret the painting differently if it was called something else? For example 'Untitled'.

Would you describe the subject matter as unusual, surprising, awkward, controversial, absurd?

What is the overall mood of the painting? Does the work lend itself to comparison with another work by a famous painter?

Describe some of the leisure activities portrayed in this painting of Mildura. Do you understand the symbolism in this painting? How have the elements and principles of art been applied in this painting? Describe how the artist has done so.



Danila Vassilieff *Reflection in the Darling* 1958. gouache on newsprint, 29.9 x 40.3 cms, Mildura Arts Centre collection

The riverbank watercolours were painted in the last months of Vassilieff's life when he was living in a fellow teacher's shack at Buronga. He put down the simple events of the day: a white cockatoo returning to the nest; an eagle attacking a cockatoo; a cod evading a shag; but each event is so felt and understood that it seems to imply a more general truth about the rhythms of life , of creatures and their environment.

TASKS: Take a long look at this watercolour . What emotional work does the work evoke in you? What thoughts, ideas and feelings come to mind when you view this work?

How do the materials and the techniques in this work reinforce any themes raised?

Further reading about Danila Vassilieff



Felicity St John Moore, *Vassilieff and his Art*, Macmillan Art Publishing, Melbourne, 2012.

Haese, Richard, *Rebels and Precursors: the revolutionary years of Australian art*, Allen Lane, Melbourne, 1981.

Moore, Felicity St John, *Vassilieff and his art*, Oxford University Press, London, 1982.

Moore, Felicity St John, *Vassilieff: A retrospective exhibition of paintings, sculptures and watercolours*, Heide Park & Art Gallery, 1985.

Moore, Felicity St John, *Angry Penguins and Realist painting in Melbourne in the 1940s* – exhibition catalogue for Australian tour 1989 -90.

Reid, Barrett and Nancy Underhill (eds), *Letters of John Reed: Defining Australian Cultural Life 1920–1981*, Viking, Melbourne, 2001.

Acknowledgements: This education resource has been developed by Felicity St John Moore and Richard Moore in close association with Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne. 2015 to accompany the DVD production of THE WOLF IN AUSTRALIAN ART - THE LIFE AND ART OF DANILA VASSILIEFF (1897 -1958)