



Photographer unknown, 'Daniel' Vassiliev in Bristol at the age of 35; image courtesy Felicity St John Moore

# Screening Vassilieff

## *The Wolf in Australian Art*

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Danila Ivanovich Vassilieff has remained a shadowy figure to those who rely on public spaces to experience the best work of an artist. His works, many held in regional and state galleries, have remained all but hidden from the public eye. That was part of my inspiration for deciding to embark on the making of a new documentary film – *The Wolf in Australian Art* – dedicated to shedding light on a remarkable man and the significant contribution he made to Australian art.

Every art-historian mother should have a family of collaborators. It so happens that I have a few – eldest son Richard Moore was available as a director; youngest son Timothy Moore designed the 2013–14 exhibition ‘Journey to Mildura’ where several sequences were filmed; and my daughter Lisa Moore injected the film with the power and drama of her piano playing.

As artist Robin Wallace-Crabbe says in his opening of the Mildura exhibition, Vassilieff kept changing styles. He was a shape changer; often in a single year he changed styles, defying description and categorisation. No follower of fashion was he, rather an intuitive being, painting directly out of his incredible life. A life of great adventure that began on the banks of the Don River in Russia and ended on the Murray in Mildura.

As the film shows, Vassilieff was key to shaping the figurative nature of Australian art. He was the senior artist in the ‘Angry Penguins’ exhibition that marked the Australian Bicentenary overseas and then toured six regional galleries in Australia. Vassilieff was represented by some influential personal allegories

that issued from his emotional crisis in 1944. But his single most influential creation, the exuberant *Expulsion from Paradise* (1940), a four-part double-sided screen from the National Gallery of Australia (NGA), was not suitable for selection. Yet as the artist was wont to declare: ‘If my pictures are good enough, they will survive.’

That *The Expulsion from Paradise* survived is miraculous indeed. My hunt for it was sparked by Albert Tucker who urged me to locate it when I began my research in the mid-1970s; his photos of the screen from Vassilieff’s house in Warrandyte were among the only visual proof that the screen existed. Its physical location remained a mystery for many years and was largely thwarted by his estranged (and now deceased) widow Elizabeth Vassilieff-Wolf. Her telephone call to its Warrandyte collector John Bayard persuaded him to bar my access. In his letter to the Director of the Australian National Gallery (ANG, as it was then called) more than a year later, Bayard wrote:

Felicity could not have known they were extant, as at Betty’s request, I would neither speak to or allow Felicity to see or examine my Vassilieff paintings and sculptures.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the efforts of Elizabeth, the screen was finally rescued and acquired by the ANG, cheating the bushfire (by three days) that destroyed the entire Bayard collection, including nine Vassilieff sculptures.









Danila Vassiliev, *The Expulsion from Paradise*, c. 1941, tempera on canvas, 167 x 321.4cm overall (approx.);  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1984



The choir's contribution to the film underscores the essential character of Danila's paintings: the rich colour, sure tonality, disciplined rhythms and unerring touch. It also provides a wonderful filmic illustration for Nettie Palmer's comment that Vassilieff painted 'Fitzroy like Holy Russia'.

As the film shows, the screen was not only a carrier of Russian modern art, but a key to understanding Sidney Nolan. The replica that stood at the centre of the Mildura exhibition (the original being too fragile to lend) was the linchpin. For its Petrouchka scenes on the back nailed the connection between the blackamoor-archangel in the ballet – through the philandering modern art identity Adrian Lawlor – to the infamous Irish–Australian bushranger Ned Kelly. The Petrouchka scenes were the inspiration for Nolan's conversion of the Russian folktale into its equivalent Australian legend; they spur the four Kelly series interiors, and they unleash hidden references to his own emotional double life. As Nolan told me on the night of his Lanyon gallery gift event in March 1980: The trigger of his art was Vassilieff but it was up to me to find it.

With all this history, that the *Expulsion from Paradise* screen has not been on display at the NGA for over 30 years would seem astonishing. The good news is that it will be displayed in the next changeover of Australian art in the company of screens by the Sydney moderns and a clutch of other Vassilieff works.

'We need more atmosphere Mum; I've found a Russian choir': I always knew that Danila had sung in a choir in Fitzroy in the 1930s, but on the urging of Richard we arranged to film a Russian a cappella choir at Brunswick's Russian Orthodox church. In one of those moments when you realise the creative spirit might just be with you, the choir master excitedly told us that he had discovered Vassilieff's name on the register as a choir member at that very church. As they sung an arrangement of the 'Lord's Prayer', I half closed my eyes and imagined Danila's bass notes soaring up to the minaret, taking him back to Mother Russia. The choir's contribution to the film underscores the essential character of Danila's paintings: the rich colour, sure tonality, disciplined rhythms and unerring touch. It also provides a wonderful filmic illustration for Nettie Palmer's comment that Vassilieff painted 'Fitzroy like Holy Russia'.

It's been just over 40 years since I was struck sideways by one of Vassilieff's sculptures – James Mollison rightly argues in the film that his sculptures are some of Australia's greatest cultural exports and assets – and set me on a winding path to the production of this film. None of the research really prepared me for the only moving footage of Danila in existence. It's only three seconds long and was shot on 16-millimetre film by members of Melbourne's socialist Realist Film Unit in the 1940s. It shows him at one of the happiest periods of his life when he was the art teacher (and principal builder) at Koornong Experimental School at Warrandyte. Beret slightly askew, he leans over a young student in his art room, in keeping with one of his dictums: 'I want to live a life of creativity not destruction.'

Every time I slot the film in my DVD player (oh, just another peek), it's a joy to witness the creativity that our family has been able to exert on the story of the deeply flawed and slightly tragic figure. Vassilieff died in 1958, one week after landing his nemesis – a gigantic 23-kilo Murray cod, en route to returning with his sculptures to apply for a job as the director of the Mildura Arts Centre's Regional Gallery. How his directorship would have been received by the Mildura community, who he satirised in some of the most poignant works in the film, we'll never know – but that's the subject of a feature film.

1. Letter from John Bayard to James Mollison, 10 May 1983.

Based on the book *Vassilieff and His Art* (2012) by Felicity St John Moore, and directed by Richard Moore, *The Wolf in Australian Art* (2015) is distributed by Ronin Films and is screening in the coming months at Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, on 4 March; the Art Gallery of Ballarat on 25 March; and at Geelong Gallery on 7 April.



Danila Vassiliev, *Fitzroy Children*, 1937, oil on canvas, 56 x 51.5cm; collection of Lina Bryans, Melbourne; image courtesy Deutscher and Hackett