

Primeval Wilderness as Consolation in Hans Heysen's Painting

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ABSTRACT

During the period of the 1920s and 1930s, representations of “authentic”, “wild” and “primeval” nature with a positive force and a sense of genuine beauty appeared in Australian painting, especially in the outback paintings of Hans Heysen (1877-1968). In his works, an admiration of the outback and the bush replaced the radical representations of the human battle against nature. This kind of representation demonstrates the attitude of certain Australian artists towards “wild” Australian nature (especially the outback and the bush) changed from perception of it as “alien” and “threatening”, to a growing sense of identification with it.

Keywords: Primeval, Wilderness, Consolation, Hans Heysen

INTRODUCTION

During the period of the 1920s and early 1930s, in Australian painting, there were representations of Australian nature as a positive force with “unique” Australian characteristics such as “the bush” and “the outback”, bringing a sense of vitality, regeneration and consolation to white Australians. In the colonial period, although there were also some representations of nature as a consoling or regenerating force, nature in these representations often appeared in “European” mode or with European references. In the nationalism of the 1880s and 1890s, a certain view of Australianness appeared in some works of the Heidelberg painters such as Tom Roberts (1856-1931) and Arthur Streeton (1867-1943), who captured the Australian landscape and light in its blues and yellows. But their works, which often included European references, mainly depicted the scenery of rural Victoria and not the true outback. What is more, in the second half of the 1890s there was an emerging tendency to represent the Australian landscape in dark and somber tones, or with domesticated images, even in some works of the Heidelberg painters (e.g., the later works of Frederick McCubbin (1855-1917) in which the emphasis shifted from bright light and colour towards subdued and low-keyed tones. As Ian Burn argues, this tendency appeared as a Europeanizing process. [1] The Australian landscape reappeared as an extension of the European landscape, rather than something uniquely Australian. In this “tamed” nature and “civilized” land, there were no hints of conflict between human beings and nature, but this harmony was achieved at the price of losing the sense of locality and the characteristics of Australianness.

REPRESENTATION OF PRIMEVAL LANDSCAPE IN HEYSEN'S PAINTING

As an exponent of true national expression, Hans Heysen had an affinity with the primeval Australian landscape. From 1926 to 1933 he made nine visits to the Flinders Ranges, where he was challenged and revitalized by the nature of the terrain. It was this scenery which formed

the main focus for his oil and watercolor paintings. In his painting *The Hill of the Creeping Shadow* (1929) (Fig.1), a sense of untamed beauty – vast, silent, ancient, austere and indomitable – is conveyed through the red and yellow tones (the colour of red earth), the dark top and the shadow of the hill, the lack of green grass or foliage, the dry creek and the cracked land, which has been reduced by drought to skeletal outcrops but still survives. There are no human figures in the painting, but if there had been, it is safe to say that the human figures would definitely have been dwarfed by the presence of the force of nature. The representation of vast spaces and silences to demonstrate nature's force since time immemorial is achieved by emphasizing the “bare bone” land forms, the erosion of the semi-arid land, and the weathering of ridges and cliffs. Heysen expressed his feeling for this land in 1932 in these words:

“It was in the Flinders Ranges that I was made curiously conscious of a very old land where the primitive forces of Nature were constantly evident. The barren hillsides, incised and torn by Nature's forces, hold a peculiar attraction. Their geological structure is seldom obscured by foliage, and in many parts where great masses of stone are piled layer on layer in regular formation, as if built up by some very ancient people, their appearance is given an architectural order... The far Northern interior of Australia with its stern reality of desert country holds a peculiar fascination for many who have come under its spell, and I must confess to having fallen a victim. I have seen it on calm days of crystalline purity when the eye could travel, as it were, to the end of the world, bringing with it that wonderful sense of infinity that a land of moist atmosphere could never give. There is an undeniable call about this interior which covers by far the greater portion of Australia, and offers, for the artist, a wide field as yet practically untouched”. [2]



Fig 1: Hans Heysen (1877-1968). *The Hill of the Creeping Shadow* (1929). Oil on canvas. 88.8 x 114.3 cm. The Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

From this paragraph it is clear that this artist's view of wild nature is diametrically opposed to that of the colonial painters and writers. Heysen was fascinated by its “crystalline purity”, especially a sense of timelessness, eternity, profound silence without signs of human beings, and otherworldliness. To him it had an undeniable call, and the practically untouched landscape gave him a “wonderful sense of infinity”. Heysen's *The Three Sisters of Aroona* (1927) (Fig.2) also painted a landscape in which nature is primitive and unalterable, and can be read as “frozen”

in deep time. Heysen wrote to his friend Sydney Ure Smith: “everything looks so old that it belongs to quite a different world... Fine big simple forms against clear transparent skies – and a sense of spaciousness everywhere”. [3] But although he was struck by the simplicity of the forms with their fierce colours, clear edges and the flat light against clear transparent skies, what impressed him first and foremost was the unknown antiquity of the landscape which brought a wonderful sense of infinity to him. As Heysen’s friend, the artist Lionel Arthur Lindsay (1874-1961) observed, there was little in the science of composition that Heysen did not know, but in the face of the nakedness of the Earth, instead of deliberate composition, Heysen used a more direct approach, preferring spontaneous recreation after the way of nature herself. [4]



Fig 2: Hans Heysen (1877-1968). *The Three Sisters of Aroona* (1927). Oil on canvas. 76.0 x 90.0 cm. Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.

Heysen constructed a vision of the pristine and primeval in order to show that nature has the power to renew the human mind and to console the miserable human heart. This myth of “nature as refuge” has its origin in the misfortunes which befell his family during and after the First World War. Before he saw the Flinders ranges, during the War, Heysen’s father was assaulted in an Adelaide Street as a “damned German” and his wife’s brother-in-law was interned in the “German Concentration Camp” at Liverpool, New South Wales. Heysen himself suffered the insult of having his national loyalty and personal integrity questioned because of his German ancestry, an experience he found deeply hurtful. The Trustees of the National Art Gallery of N.S.W. refused to include Heysen’s works in a Loan Exhibition of Australian Art until he “definitely and satisfactorily” declared whether his “allegiance and sympathies are with the British Nation”. He wrote to Gruner in April, 1918: “I disliked the approach of the Gallery Board on the question of nationality”. In 1915 the Australian Art Association, of which Hans was a member, officially drew his attention to the “many rumours of your lack of sympathy with the British cause” and asked him to make his position clear. During the ensuing 5 years rumours about the potential treachery of Hahndorf, his native town, including spy rings, and the transmission of messages to the enemy, were prevailing. [5] Subsequently his wife suffered a nervous breakdown in 1922 and their third daughter died from meningitis in 1925. All these misfortunes affected him to such a degree that in a letter to Lionel Lindsay he wrote: “Even Dame Nature could arouse no response, it seemed as if we were living in another world with no sun to give warmth or life...” [6] But in 1926 when he first visited the Flinders Ranges, he was immediately excited by the landscape. This different “Dame Nature”, so characteristically

Australian, this state of "wilderness", aroused his passionate response and gave him condolence. In his letter to Lionel, he said that even time could not heal his pains. But what time could not do, Nature could: "Let us hope it will be Nature's compensation". [7] The dry mountains helped ease his negative feelings, and made him once again feel exhilarated by the natural world. [8]

Heysen saw the power of Australia's "wild" and "unspoiled" nature as a force of consolation for the human soul. The feeling of consolation was aroused by the grandeur of nature (manifested in the outback, mountains, rivers and sea. In times of profound sadness and distress, it provides a refuge for those who want to turn away from the cruelties and stupidities of the world. When the human world seems to be on the brink of destruction, or in times of profound change, it is only the tranquility of nature which can ease the human mind. Compared with the infinity of nature, and the solace of the unchangeable and the all-pervasive, human misery pales into insignificance. Heysen openly admitted his need for nature's immense silences to comfort his soul. He yearned for the distant and unpeopled solitude – not only of the Flinders but, beyond it, of Central Australia itself. This is in a sharp contrast to the colonial attitude toward the "wilderness". Heysen felt such a deep affinity with these wild solitary ranges, such an understanding of their primordial, rearing outlines and subtleties of colour. To Heysen they had a purity that breathed the spirit of the earth and enthralled his senses.[9]

One outcome of his affinity with wilderness, was that Heysen expanded the subject matter of Australian painting to include the remote inland and the sunburnt outback (regarded as uniquely Australian) and used this as a way of representing the power of the natural world. Heysen thought that the arid reds, blues and ochres of land wracked by drought and desolation were preferable to the greens of a fertile and plentiful countryside, and refused to accept a verdant Flinders: "To me it becomes more and more interesting on each successive visit under summer conditions. Although there was nothing but wind, dust, and sand on every day, the landscape was never devoid of some paintable matter".[10] Even when painting plants, he chose to depict nature in its harshest form. In his *Three Gums in the Flinders Ranges* (1930s) (Fig.3), the gums are depicted as huddling for survival in creek beds, twisted and gnarled by their attempts to survive drought and flood. But their massive roots still claw deep into the bedrock, evidence of the survival of living things in even the most adverse conditions. The visual impact is given force by the sparseness of trees in the background plains and ranges.

This kind of representation is in sharp contrast to that of the colonial painters (e.g., John Glover (1767-1849)) who transplanted European green to the Australian landscape. In appearance this image of a parched inland, a drought-stricken and bare-boned land (which was more and more popularly accepted as a symbol of Australia during the 1930s), is comparable to the images of drought and harsh terrain in Tom Roberts's nationalistic paintings of the 1890s (e.g., *The Break Away!*). However, the purpose and significance of Heysen's awakening of the national consciousness to the harshness of the Australian landscape was totally different. During that period in Australia, drought and the Depression had resulted in general poverty and desolation, but despite this Heysen thought that the spirit of the people remained unbroken. Unlike Roberts and Lawson, Heysen in his paintings does not show the spirit of the people through depictions of their struggle with the harshness of their environment. The absence or sparseness of trees and the drought-stricken appearance of the landscape convey the impression of nature as an unassailable power with a strength beyond challenge by human beings. Nature must be seen as a source of essential truth and a force that demands "contemplation and thought".[11] Although

most living things were dead and plant life withered, and the country had been literally reduced to sand, the people who lived amongst it all were actually optimistic: "It is hardly believable that after 5 years of this drought their hearts would still beat sound. Perhaps the land they live on is all they possess, and to leave it means 'chaos.'" [12]



Fig 3: Hans Heysen (1877-1968). *Three Gums in the Flinders Ranges* (1930s). Watercolour. 30.5 x 40.5 cm. Private collection.

This "contemplation" also brought about a spiritual identification with the dry and parched land, which in this period was represented more beautifully than ever. Heysen could feel his heart beating with the pure excitement induced by the changing colours of the landscape ranging from the deepest purple to the palest yellow through every shade of red and orange. He wrote to Lionel: "The Far North holds me fast... my mind dwells there – undoubtedly there is a peculiar fascination about the place... I must confess only a very hardened sinner could not have been touched by the desolation – it seemed impossible that anything could ever spring up again in that parched land".[13]

His paintings and letters convey the message that "authentic" Australian nature – the gum trees and the primordial land – were now appreciated as a kind of unique beauty infused with a spirit of its own. Some critics think that Heysen's works were also influenced by European conventions. For example, Colin Thiele argues that his attitude towards rural landscapes was influenced by Jean Millet and other Barbizon painters, and his interest in light, shade and colour was influenced by the techniques of J.M.W. Turner. John Neylon also argues that his rural subjects reflect his close study of the "atmospheric" artists, particularly Claude Lorrain, J.M.W. Turner, John Constable and Jean-Baptiste Corot. [14] But although his paintings do show an allegiance to European conventions in aspects of technique and choice of rural subjects, he was depicting unique Australian subjects, such as the gum trees, the Adelaide surrounds, and the Flinders Ranges. Although Neylon argues that in the 1920s Heysen's works were influenced by the reductionist style of modernism and had a kind of hardness and "sharp-edge" aesthetic, those works were not "imagined" landscapes.[15] His impressions of the Old World were fading under the summer light of the Australian bush. Thiele argues more reasonably that Europe seems to be foreign to Heysen's blood, an overlay to the real soul of his experience. His European tour (1899-1903), while assisting his painting in many ways, did not influence his

choice of subject matter, and as he stood again on Australian soil, his true allegiance reclaimed him.[16] The great European artists and the European artistic movement of the time helped to open Heysen's eyes to the appreciation of Australian light and colour. They enabled him to achieve a greater sense of regional identity, which can be seen in the major subject matter of his works: the Flinders Ranges-related landscapes from 1926-1933. Heysen confessed that the quality of Australian sunlight and the lure of the great gums enthralled him.[17] Sunshine and light above all were for him the essence of Australian landscape, life and atmosphere: "It always appears to me Australia has something individual in its light that colours local substances with just something that another country has not got, and it is this something out of which an Australian school has got to come ... Streeton often got this something, but he didn't explore beyond its very surface... I wish he had stayed here and probed deeper into the mysteries of our forms – and light".[18] Lionel Lindsay's comments are fair and convincing: "Heysen had felt the majesty and mystery of the earth in this wonderful series of mountain landscapes [the Flinders Ranges] ... They are his discovery and, I believe, the most important contribution to Australian landscape made in the 1920s".[19]

This appreciation of "typical", "authentic" Australian nature stands in contrast with the dominant attitude of the colonial period. It regards "wild" or "unspoiled" nature itself as perfect, embodying eternal truth and vitality. It has the power to make people forget the "self", to bring them a sense of home. Heysen was also overwhelmed by nature's infinite perfection, and felt an almost pantheistic reverence for Nature, as can be seen in such comments as: "It is no wonder that often the object of art is forgotten when one is so constantly brought in close contact with the absolute perfection of Nature's details – it is all perfect in its finish, and therefore hopeless for an artist to imitate".[20] "The more one lives with Nature and the 'inner truths' come gradually home to one". "Nature after all is so pure and lively, so perfectly finished". "My aim is simple and my present attitude is to practically accept Nature as she is".[21] This "perfectly finished", pure nature with its "inner truth" does not need to be transformed by human hands. Its finest nuances of form and colour have the power to give human beings spiritual sustenance in times of tragedy and sorrow: "I must confess, the Sun – its light and its warmth – is my religion".[22]

IDEOLOGICAL AND AESTHETIC CHANGE: TOWARDS A "UNIQUE" AUSTRALIAN NATURE

Heysen's ideas and his representation of the myth of "nature as refuge" represent the changing attitudes to nature of some Australians. During this period, in the context of nationalism and national identification with the land, more and more Australians began to have a sense of belonging to this land. Commentators on Australian painting were excessively sensitive to derogatory comments about the Australian landscape. They believed that it was too often judged according to the standards of European (especially British) landscape, and was therefore considered ugly and bereft of literary associations.[23] Among artists, there was wide agreement as to what was distinctive about the Australian landscape. There was a widely shared vision of its beauty, its significance and its unique spirit. The view of Australian scenery as monotonous, sombre and relatively colourless, typical of former periods and one which was also held by some visitors and newcomers to Australia during this period, was severely criticized by many nationalists and Australian-born artists. They argued that "the subtlety of colour led to an appreciation of the beauty of the Australian landscape which lasted longer than the more dramatic but quickly exhausted beauty of other landscapes".[24] Critics encouraged the view that the achievement of artists lay "in revealing to Australians the landscape of their

country and providing them with formulas and conventions by which they might perceive it in terms of beauty, where once they had seen it with the eyes of indifference, of apathy, even of distaste".[25] The "primeval" simplicity of forms thought of as unattractive to European eyes began to be appreciated for their own sake. The Australian light and colour were regarded as unique and the landscape itself was considered by some to be the most harmonious in tone and colour in the world because "the clarity and intensity of the light led to a precision of tone – indeed, a tonal perfection – which made for refined harmonies of colour".[26] Even Max Meldrum (1875-1955), a painter and art theorist who ran the Meldrum School of painting between 1916 and 1926, hardly a strong nationalist, pronounced that, in contrast to the "richer and more obvious colours" of the European landscape, the colour scheme of the Australian landscape was "more evasive, delicate and evanescent", and time was required for the eye to become "accustomed to the prevailing harmony of colours, form and tone".[27]

The changed attitude toward the gum tree is also evident. Although the Heidelberg artists had painted the gums in various ways, nobody in Australia had studied the gum as Heysen had, or analyzed its character to such a degree. He referred to the play of light and shadow along its great bole, the tatters of loose bark hanging in the wind, the mottled sunlight on leaves and limbs, and the twisted trunks and limbs surviving in the drought. Heysen showed his love for the gum tree when he said "there is something immensely exhilarating when tall white gums tower into the blue heavens – the subtle quality of the edges where they meet the sky – how mysterious".[28] The beauty of gum trees provided spiritual revelation for him: "Never have I seen them so magnificent nor clothed in such beauty of subtle colour and tones – with ever shifting lights and shadows weaving alternating patterns. They are a never-ending source of pleasure and stimulus." [29] And he emphasized the gum trees' "sheltering" or "mothering" force: "He is on the crest of a rise – placed against a clear space of sky, and seems capable of mothering all the cows and birds in the district".[30] It was Heysen who made the Australian gum tree a special and central subject first for his own art and eventually for Australian art at large. His contribution to Australian art is profound and enduring. A whole nation came to see the gum tree as he saw it.[31] From Heysen's depiction of the Flinders landscape and gum trees, we can perceive a new understanding of what constituted the "typical" Australian environment – its colour, light and flora.

The gum tree was also regarded as a symbol of majesty, strength, and vitality. A photo caption in Sydney Mail Annual, October 1930, stated that, "The hoary old gum tree, tattered and twisted by wind and heat, is one of the most picturesque veterans of the bush, and symbolical of the Australian spirit of indomitable endurance that has been our history".[32]. In Heysen's *Three Gums in the Flinders Ranges* (Fig.3), the artist deliberately exaggerated the scale of the tree to create a heroic and mysterious atmosphere. The giant trunk formation of the gum tree was emphasized in order to symbolize the life force, endurance, resilience and grandeur, and were endowed with such "human" qualities as majesty, dignity, nobility and heroism. Heysen personified the gum tree: "He is full of vigour and holds his head erect, surveying the whole countryside".[33] Although imbuing trees with human qualities can be interpreted as "humanizing" the trees or as a way of "denaturing" nature, Burn is not convincing when he argues that it was by these means that the artists showed the gum tree as tamed and controlled. Rather, the Australian artists used the gum tree to express their own national sentiments. In this period, assertions about the uniqueness of the landscape were often closely linked with the idea of national potential and cultural individuality.[34]

Besides Heysen, many other painters and writers saw the gum tree in a positive light. Roberts said that one of the first things that struck him about Australian art after the First World War was the rapid growth which had taken place in the popularity of gums.[35] The gum tree in the past was seen by many Australians as dull and ugly because its form was thought of as inelegant and without rhythm, its trunk too white, and its foliage too thin and hard, and not as green as European trees. But the tree was now regarded as representing the uniqueness and beauty of the Australian landscape. J. S. MacDonald (1878-1952), a well-known Australian art critic of this period, commented that the gum tree was all and solely Australian. Latitude and altitude could not keep it out of any Australian landscape, and it had more shapes than any tree growing on the earth. Indifferently it grew out of sand, rocks, loam, clay, gravel, swamps or the snow, and each case it took to itself a different form: bark, trunk, limbs, leaves and their texture and density all varying.[36] Margaret Preston, one of the best known artists of this period, began her campaign to develop and promote a national art and considered "the gum leaf shape of a sharp triangle" to be one of the basic Australian forms, influenced by Aboriginal art.[37] As Rothwell argues, Australian writers (and artists) began to understand the flora around them as an alternative creation, and a rival in grandeur and variety to the trees and plant life of other continents. Their enthusiasm was strengthened by influences from the Aboriginal world in which the roles of plants and trees were clearly delineated as sources of food and medicine, and as emblems from a pre-existing world known as the "dreamtime".[38]

Relevant to the idea of the gum tree is that of the bush. The new ideas of the bush as a living entity with a refreshing force and a sense of beauty, symbolizing rebirth and vitality of growth, are now more explicitly expressed. This new image of the bush is clearly represented in some modernist paintings. During this period, Australia was coming to terms with modernity and modernism. Although some conservative theorists had anti-modernist attitudes, some modernists like Grace Cossington Smith, Margaret Preston, Roland Wakelin, Roy de Maistre, and G. W. Lambert who had reputations as important painters, did make an effort to introduce modernism into their works. Starting from the experimentation with the methods of Cezanne, van Gogh and Gauguin, modernism gradually influenced the work of younger painters and grew in numbers and influence.[39] Burn argues that in terms of cultural identity and national myths, modernist trends such as Cezannism, English post-impressionism and French decorative cubism had little influence on the expression of a national spirit.[40] But in fact the modernists made a considerable contribution to diversity in the painting of Australia landscape and flora, and they brought a fresh perspective to the representation of Australian national and cultural identity.

CONCLUSION

During the period of the 1920s and early 1930s, Australian culture was coming to terms with modernity. In this transition from the tradition to the modern, in the context of the national sentiments, the Australian representation of nature was characterized by aesthetic and ideological diversity, in which nature was represented as indomitable and as providing a consoling and refreshing force to human spirit. This is clearly demonstrated in Hans Heysen's painting. In Australia it was a new idea, one that contrasted with the old myth of nature as "threatening enemy". With this new representation, the appearance of nature began to possess the characteristics of an "authentic" or "typical" Australian natural environment. This kind of nature began to be endowed with positive associations, which broke away from the old aesthetic of "wilderness" as "alien other" and "imagined" landscape in European style.

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