

# FRED WILLIAMS

## INFINITE HORIZONS

### ARTIST TIMELINE

An extract from the NGA publication *Fred Williams: Infinite Horizons*

- 1927** Born, Richmond, Melbourne, Victoria.
- 1943** Attended National Gallery School, Melbourne (1943–47).
- 1946** Attended George Bell Art School Melbourne (1946–50).
- 1951** First exhibition *Ian Armstrong, Fred Williams, Harry Rosengrave*, Stanley Coe Gallery, Melbourne.
- 1952–56** Lived in London, worked as a framer. Attended evening life art classes at Chelsea School of Art.
- 1957** Returned to Australia. Landscape became the dominant theme in his work. Worked part-time as a picture framer. First solo exhibition, *Exhibition by Fred Williams of paintings in gouaches and oils*, Australian Galleries, Melbourne.
- 1961** Married Lyn Watson. Moved to South Yarra, Melbourne, maintaining his studio in Exhibition Street.
- 1962** Moved to Melbourne suburb of Hawthorn. Included in *Australian painting: Colonial, Impressionism, Modern*, Tate, London.
- 1963** Began painting full-time. Moved to Upwey in the Dandenong Ranges outside Melbourne. Won Helena Rubinstein Travelling Art Scholarship and travelled to Europe (1964).
- 1964** Won Transfield, Muswellbrook and Robin Hood Art Prizes. Represented Australia in the International Exhibition of printmaking in Ljubljana.
- 1965** Works included *Young Australian painters* touring exhibition to Tokyo and Kyoto, Japan.
- 1969** Moved to Hawthorn, Melbourne. Solo exhibition at Ballarat Fine Art Gallery.
- 1970** First major exhibition in public art gallery, *Heroic landscape: Streeton - Williams* at National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
- 1975** Appointed trustee, Council of the National Gallery of Art, Canberra (1975–82).
- 1976** Made Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE).
- 1977** Solo exhibition at Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 1980** Awarded Doctorate of Law, LL.D (Honoris Causa) by Monash University. Solo exhibition at Australian Embassy, Paris. Solo exhibition at Fischer Fine Art, London. Solo exhibition at National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. *Fred Williams* by Patrick McCaughey published by Bay Books, Sydney.
- 1982** Died April, Melbourne. Survived by his wife Lyn and three daughters, Isobel, Louisa and Kate.

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### EXHIBITION THEMES

Extracts from NGA online resource

### PORTRAITURE

Although best known for his landscape paintings, Williams remained committed to portraiture throughout his creative life. Since his student days in Melbourne and London, the human figure had been a consistent aspect of his art, in both life drawing and portraits of family and friends.

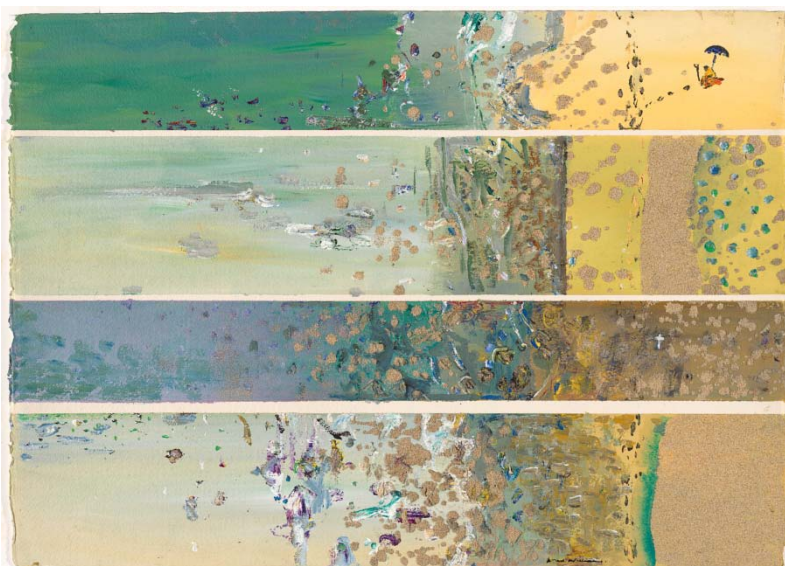
In *Self-portrait at easel* 1960–61 (pictured), Williams presents himself as a professional artist, standing at an easel with brush poised, wearing a suit and green tie. He gazes out of the picture with a look of concentration on his face. The thin, diagonal strip of the easel's edge angles slightly to the right, balancing the artist's left-leaning posture.



### MINIMAL LANDSCAPE

***'Working out of doors I don't usually have any preconceptions of how I'm going to go about it ... [I] try and sit... I sort of take the attitude that I'm like an antenna. I let it come to me ... I certainly don't try to impose anything on it.'***

Fred Williams



Fred Williams made a significant contribution to the tradition of landscape painting in Australia. Even though he grew up in Melbourne and in some ways preferred to live in the city, he embraced the bush environment.

From early on in his career, he made regular trips out of the city to paint in the landscape. When he returned to the studio, he could distance himself from the experience of the landscape and focus on the process of painting.

Williams was cautious about romanticising the landscape and enjoyed the variety

offered by working the way he did. Williams respected the Australian Impressionists Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts, Charles Conder and Frederick McCubbin, especially their interpretations of the landscape and treatment of light. Williams's minimal composition adds a sense of space and openness to his predecessors' depictions of the Australian landscape.

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### EXHIBITION THEMES CONT...

#### PILBARA

Fred Williams visited the Pilbara iron ore region of Western Australia twice in 1979 on the invitation of his friend Sir Roderick Carnegie, then chairman of the mining company CRA (now Rio Tinto). Sir Roderick thought Williams would be inspired by the vast spaces and haunting beauty of the Pilbara region.

During this visit and a subsequent trip in June, Williams was dropped off in the landscape to work for the day. By standing or sitting out in the desert environment, he had the opportunity to slowly absorb the experience. He could contemplate the age and history of the landscape—a landscape that was, despite its antiquity, new and stimulating to Williams.



Williams's Pilbara paintings, like some of his early works, use geometric devices, including flat horizon lines and the diagonal lines of hillsides. In *Iron ore landscape* 1981, the edge of a hillside cuts into the mass of ochre ground, leaving the sky in the top-left corner of the painting. The landscape emits a bulky presence, engulfing the frame and asserting its dominance.

Many of Williams's paintings from the Pilbara series were exhibited widely throughout Australia and internationally. By the end of the twentieth century, the series had become Williams's best known group of works. CRA acquired a substantial number of these paintings, which were later given to the National Gallery of Victoria.

In 2001 the NGV announced that Rio Tinto had generously donated one of Australia's finest art collections, The Pilbara Series, to the Gallery. This series is the only complete collection of landscape paintings by the late Melbourne born artist Fred Williams, and comprises 13 oil paintings and 18 gouaches. At that time it was the largest single donation of world acclaimed art by a company in Australia. The Pilbara Series was given to the NGV under the Federal Government's Cultural Gifts Program.

#### THE CHINA SKETCHBOOK

Fred Williams and his wife, Lyn, travelled to China in 1976. Before their departure, Williams was presented with a large sketchbook by Rudy Komon, his friend and art dealer. He used this book as a visual diary to record the diverse sights that inspired him during his travels.

The sketchbook includes images of things as varied as a Sung dynasty sculpture, a Maoist propaganda poster, an abstracted dragon motif and prawns he enjoyed for dinner. Williams also carefully considered the relationships between the double-page spreads to reinforce a sense of balance and composition.

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### EXHIBITION THEMES CONT...

#### COLOUR

***'I have a fierce desire to paint colour.'***

Fred Williams

A feature of Fred Williams's work in the 1970s was his use of luminous colour. He began to add vivid blues, greens and mauves in response to his renewed interest in water as a subject.

Williams had always been interested in colour theory and owned a copy of *The laws of contrast of colour and their application to the arts*. First published in 1855, the book was a key source for many of the French Post-Impressionists that Williams admired, including Georges Seurat. Williams was also inspired by the exhibition *Two decades of American painting* at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1967.

Williams was a great observer of nature as a result of his regular painting trips out into the landscape. He admired the approach of the Australian artist Max Meldrum, who believed that the tonal colour of the Australian bush was the most beautiful in the world. Williams understood this aspect of the landscape in Australia and, during his career, his use of colour became more expressive.



#### Captions:

##### **Fred Williams**

Australia 1927–82, lived in England 1951–56

*Self portrait at easel* 1960–61

oil on composition board

89.2 x 61.2 cm

National Portrait Gallery, Canberra

Gift of Lyn Williams 1998

Donated through the

Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program

© Estate of Fred Williams

##### **Fred Williams**

Australia 1927–82, lived in England 1951–56

*Beachscape, Erith Island I* 1974

gouache and sand on paper

55.6 x 77.6 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased from Gallery admission charges, 1983

© Estate of Fred Williams

##### **Fred Williams**

Australia 1927–82, lived in England 1951–56

*Iron ore landscape* 1981

oil on canvas

152.0 x 182.4 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented through the NGV Foundation by  
Rio Tinto Limited, Honorary Life Benefactor,  
2001

© Estate of Fred Williams

##### **Fred Williams**

Australia 1927–82, lived in England 1951–56

*Sturt's Desert Pea* 1974

gouache, synthetic polymer paint

55.6 x 77.2 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased from Gallery admission charges,  
1983

© Estate of Fred Williams

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### EXHIBITION PROGRAMS

A full range of programs including lectures, workshops, performances and talks have been created to complement this exhibition. For current information on programs please visit [ngv.vic.gov.au](http://ngv.vic.gov.au).

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**A National Gallery of Australia Exhibition**

**NGA curator: Dr Deborah Hart, Senior Curator Australian Painting & Sculpture Post-1920.**

**Principal Sponsor:**

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### Media contact

Sue Coffey

Head of Media and Public Affairs

[sue.coffey@ngv.vic.gov.au](mailto:sue.coffey@ngv.vic.gov.au)

03 8620 2346 | 0417 558 511

Jemma Altmeier

Senior Coordinator, Media and Public Affairs

[jemma.altmeier@ngv.vic.gov.au](mailto:jemma.altmeier@ngv.vic.gov.au)

03 8620 2345 | 0417 575 088

