

ART ACROSS THE CURRICULUM | HISTORY

COLONY TO NATION: FIRST CONTACT

LEVELS 5–6

OVERVIEW

In this resource students will examine original artworks that explore Australia's contact history and frontier conflict. They will discuss the establishment of British Colonies in Australia and the concept of Terra Nullius and the effect this had on the traditional custodians of the land, considering these events from the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and first settlers. Through looking slowly at an artwork and drawing conclusions from visual evidence, students will develop their visual analysis skills and enhance their knowledge of the events that contributed to Australian colonies' development.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Discuss significant events in Australian history; in particular the arrival of the British, the effect of Terra Nullius on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and the consequences of frontier conflict.
- Explain the factors that shaped the Australian colonies and the effects this had on the daily life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and migrants.
- Analyse and interpret themes, concepts and ideas in Australian artworks from different times and cultures and discuss how these are expressed.
- Identify and connect specific aspects of artworks to a wider historical, cultural and social context.
- Create a written narrative reflecting on the experiences of different inhabitants of a colonial settlement, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

LINKS TO THE VICTORIAN HISTORY CURRICULUM

- Identify and describe patterns of continuity and change in daily life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, 'native born' and migrants in the Australian colonies (VCHHC085)
- Explain the causes of significant events that shaped the Australian colonies, contributed to Australian Federation and the effects of these on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and migrants (VCHHC086)
- The effects of a significant development or event on a colony (VCHHC090)

PRE-VISIT WARM UP



IN SCHOOL

1. INTRODUCTION TO FIRST CONTACT

In 1770, Lieutenant James Cook sailed to the east coast of Australia and named it New South Wales. He claimed possession of the region for the British Empire under the doctrine of Terra Nullius.¹ Terra Nullius is Latin for land belonging to no one. It was used to describe Australia, a land that was legally deemed to be unoccupied or uninhabited. He then sailed the whole coastline of Australia and declared to the British government that it would make a good place for a settlement.

A decade later, Britain had lost its colonies in America as a result of the American War of Independence (1775–1783). The British saw colonisation of Australia as an opportunity to expand their territory and trade in the South Pacific, and a solution to growing social and political problems such as unemployment, crime rates and incarceration. They founded a penal settlement in New South Wales and shipped their convicts to Australia.

European settlement began when the First Fleet sailed into Botany Bay in January 1788. Their arrival was watched by the Aboriginal owners of the land, the Gweagal and Kamaygal people. The 11 ships which made up the First Fleet carried more than 1300 Europeans, comprising officers, marines and 780 convicts. To the new arrivals, this new land and everything within it was unfamiliar and excited intense curiosity.²

- Imagine you're a young British arriving at Botany Bay in 1770. What might you see, think and feel? Create a list of descriptive words including adjectives and nouns.
- Imagine now that you are the child of a Gweagal elder watching Cook and his crew arrive. What might you see, think and feel at this moment? Create another list of words, including adjectives and nouns.
- Compare your two lists of words: one from the perspective of a new arrival, the other from a traditional custodian of the land. What similarities or differences can you find between your two lists?
- As a class reflect on your thoughts and ideas.

ACTIVITY

2. SEE, THINK, WONDER

The following thinking routines have been developed by Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education. They encourage curiosity through close looking, careful observation and the sharing of thoughtful interpretations and could be used with any artwork.

In *Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay, 1770*, 1902, Australian artist, E. Phillips Fox (1865–1915) has depicted the moment Cook arrived in New South Wales. Fox shows Cook ceremoniously coming ashore to claim the land for Britain. The colonisers are presented as powerful figures, the bearers of learning and civilisation in a land thought to have been empty of culture. In images such as these, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are often absent or relegated to the background.

Since Fox was born almost a century after Cook's arrival, he wasn't there at the time and has painted the scene using his imagination. He created the work in celebration of the Federation of Australia, when the six separated colonies united to form the Commonwealth of Australia on the 1st January 1901.



E. Phillips FOX
Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay, 1770 1902
oil on canvas
192.2 × 265.4 cm
National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne
Gilbee Bequest, 1902

2.1 SEE, THINK, *WORDS*

In pairs or small groups, create a list of words to describe the artwork. You may wish to extend the activity and use metaphors or similes to describe what you see.

2.2 SEE, THINK, *LINES*

1. Using a continuous line, draw the painting. Remember to keep your pencil on your sheet of paper the whole time, taking in every detail you see.
2. Share your drawing with the person next to you. Did it make you laugh?
3. Having now spent some more time looking carefully at the artwork, what do you think it might be about?
4. Justify your thoughts and ideas with a good explanation of what you see that makes you say that. Be sure to uncover all the secrets of the artwork!

2.3 SEE, THINK, *QUESTIONS*

If you could join Emmanuel Phillips Fox in a conversation, what would you ask him?

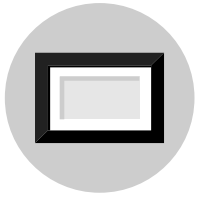
What answers might he give? Look for clues in the artwork to help imagine his response; examine the time, place and culture in which it was made to help you discover more.

2.4 SEE, THINK, *EXPAND*

- If the characters in Fox's painting were to come alive, what do you think might happen next in the narrative? Why do you think this?
- What events might have occurred following Cook's landing on Botany Bay? What might be the cause of some of these events? How might they have impacted the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples?
- In your answer consider the arrival of the British colonisers, the effect of Terra Nullius, and the consequences of this on the traditional custodians of the land.
- Given that Fox created this painting 132 years after the event, how accurate do you think his retelling might be? What may have influenced his depiction? Justify your thoughts.

ACTIVITY

3. WHAT'S IN A SHIELD?



IN THE GALLERY



IN SCHOOL

Unknown
Shield (c. 1800)
wood, cane, earth pigments
88.0 × 28.9 × 6.9 cm
National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne
Felton Bequest, 2011



Aboriginal people have occupied the Australian continent for more than 65,000 years. In pre-contact times, shields were used to protect warriors during intertribal battles. They were also used in ceremonial dance and traded as valuable cultural objects between clan groups. This shield is from around 1800. Like most shields, it was designed to tell the story of its maker. The painted and incised designs are signifiers of the identity and place of the artist. Its medium, shape and surface ornamentation are characteristic of shields collected from coastal areas in New South Wales.

The artists' names, language groups and precise locations were not recorded by European collectors so it is unlikely that we will ever know the name of the person who made this shield or their individual story – who they were, the name of their tribe, how they lived or died. However, through the survival of this special object, the legacy of this maker will be remembered.

The arrival of the First Fleet in 1788 marked the beginning of a period of sustained conflict between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people that continued for over a century. After which time, shields functioned more as the armature of war.³

A similar style shield to this one was collected near Port Jackson at the time of first contact in 1770. It's currently housed in the British Museum, but we now know that it was owned by a Gweagal warrior named Cooman. Cooman's ancestor, Rodney Kelly, is trying to have the shield returned to his people.⁴ Because of its similarity to the shield held at the British Museum, the design of the shield from the NGV Collection is symbolically linked with the trauma of British invasion.⁵

Find two different shields on display in the Gallery and complete the following activities. If you are in class, you could use the examples overleaf or search the NGV collection online using the term 'Aboriginal Shield'.

1. Draw the shapes and patterns of the two shields you have found.
2. Why might the shapes and patterns of the shields be different?
3. Choose one shield and answer the following:
 - When was it made?
 - What materials has the maker used?
 - What do you notice about the design of the shield?
Has it been painted or incised?
 - If the shield was created before 1788, how might the artist have sourced art making materials (e.g. paints and paintbrush) or created incisions?
 - What might the shield have been used for before and after 1788?
 - What impact might the arrival of the first fleet have had on the meaning and uses of the shield?
 - If you could give the maker a name, what would it be? Justify your choice with a good explanation.
4. Now give your maker a short story. Who were they? What might have happened to them? And, how did their shield end up in the NGV collection?

MORE SHIELDS FROM THE NGV COLLECTION



Unknown
Shield (c. 1900)
earth pigments on wood, pipeclay
64.7 × 32.5 × 6.9 cm
National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne
Felton Bequest, 2011



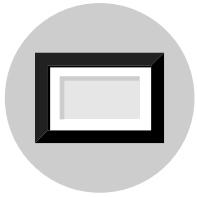
Unknown
Broad shield (19th century)
wood, cane
87.1 × 17.0 × 6.0 cm
National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne
Purchased with the assistance
of a special grant from the
Government of Victoria, 2008



Unknown
Broad shield (19th century)
wood, earth pigments
92.5 × 24.5 × 5.5 cm
National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne
Purchased, National Cultural
Heritage Fund, 2009

ACTIVITY

4. SEE, THINK, CHALLENGE



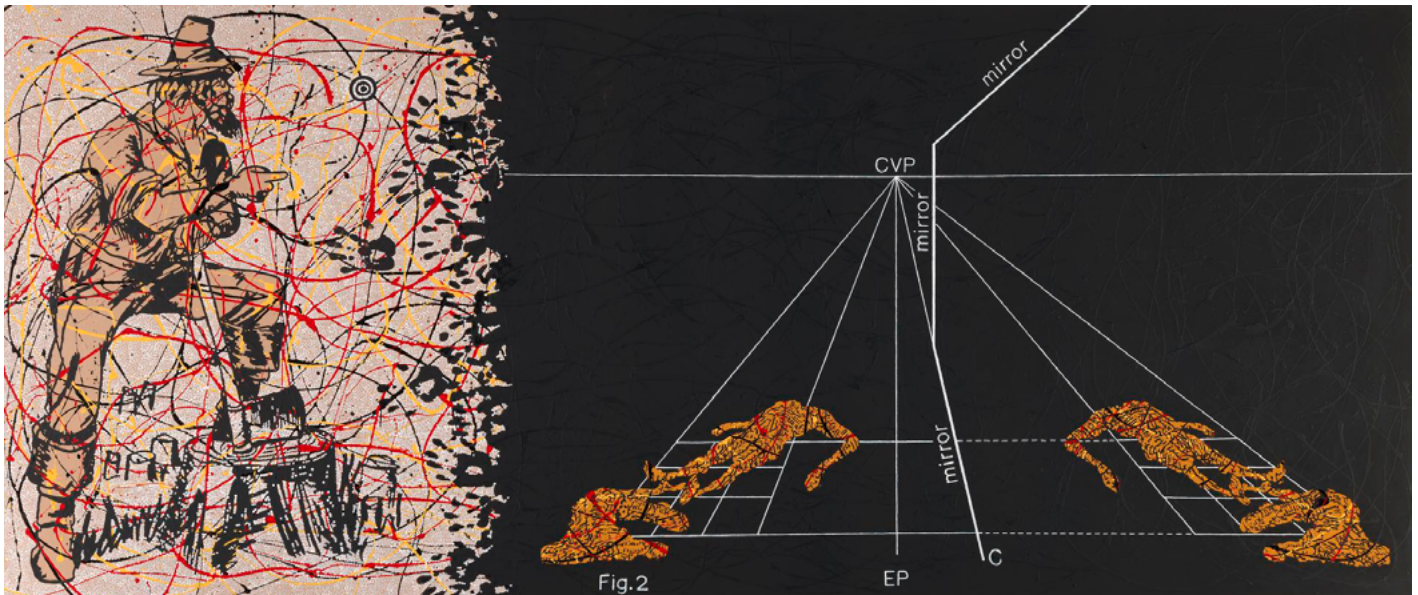
IN THE GALLERY



IN SCHOOL

Gordon Bennett (1955–2014) was an Australian artist of Aboriginal and Anglo-Celtic descent. Growing up in the 1960s, Bennett's Aboriginal heritage was repressed. Society perpetuated the belief in Australia as *Terra Nullius* and celebrated British colonisation of Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples weren't recognised traditional custodians of the land. Bennett's understanding of the nation's history was partly shaped by images commonly found in history books like Fox's painting *Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay 1770*.^{6 7}

In his painting *Terra Nullius (Teaching Aid) As Far As The Eye Can See*, 1993, Bennett questions the role that white, Western culture and ideas have played in constructing our history and identity as a country. Splashes and drips of red, yellow and black paint reflect the colours of the Aboriginal flag. Two thirds of the canvas is covered with a dense black mass of handprints. The land has been cleared for infrastructure; figures lie on the ground trapped in a grid like structure while an axe wielding man points in their direction. Dots acknowledge the iconic Aboriginal white dot painting of the Western Desert.



Gordon BENNETT

Terra Nullius (Teaching Aid) As

Far As The Eye Can See 1993

synthetic polymer paint on
canvas

176.0 × 414.0 cm

National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne

Gift of Nellie Castan in memory
of Ron Castan through the
Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program, 2018
2018.1042

© The Estate of Gordon Bennett

Look closely at Bennett's painting and answer the following questions.

- What materials has he used?
- How has Bennett applied the paint to the canvas? Move your arm as though you're painting the picture yourself.
- What colours has Bennett used? What might these colours represent?
- Create a list of things you see. What other signs and symbols can you find? What might their meaning be?
- Can you see the handprints, splatters of paint and dots? What might Bennett want us to think about when looking at these sections of the painting? Why do you think he combined different techniques to create this painting?
- Look at the title of the artwork. What clue does this provide in helping us understand the work?
- What story do you imagine Bennett's painting might tell?
- Consider Bennett's childhood and education. He was taught Australian history using European imagery and narratives from the perspective of Terra Nullius and his identity was suppressed. How might this have informed his art making? What effect do you imagine this had on his sense of identity?
- What ideas does Bennett explore in this painting?

Compare Bennett and Fox's painting. What connections can you make between the two? What similarities and differences can you find? What are the key reasons for the similarities and differences?

PROJECT



IN SCHOOL

5. CREATE A WRITTEN NARRATIVE

Using your finely tuned analysis skills and knowledge of Australia's contact history and frontier conflict, choose one of the artworks we have looked at so far to create an imaginative narrative set in Australia during the late eighteenth century.

Some suggested character narratives specific to each artwork are listed below, however there are no limits to your imagination!

- E. Phillips Fox: Imagine you are one of the British soldiers in Fox's painting. Or perhaps one of the indigenous men pictured in the background.
- Gordon Bennett: Are you the bearded man in Bennett's painting? Or perhaps one of the figures caught in the grid?
- Shield: Are you the owner of the shield? Or, have you found it abandoned, or worse taken it from its owner? What's your story?

In all these narratives consider your past, present and your hopes for the future. How have events during this time altered your life? What has changed and what has remained the same? Are you excited or wary of these new people? What might your new experiences entail?

- For the more adventurous student you might like to imagine you are a grand old gum tree, silently observing the changing landscape. What is happening around you? What changes are taking place? If you could speak to the human population, what would you say?

Remember to make good use of your knowledge and skills, use some of the rich descriptive language you developed in earlier activities but above all have fun writing your story!

NOTES

1. National Gallery of Victoria, 'Colony: Frontier Wars Artwork Labels', NGV, Victorian Government, <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/exhibition/colony-frontier-wars/>, accessed 20 July 2020, p. 195
2. See Cathy Leahy & Judith Ryan (eds), *Colony Australia 1770–1861 / Frontier Wars*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2018, p.5.
3. *ibid.* p.60.
4. Bridget Brennan, 'The battle at the British Museum for a 'stolen' shield that could tell the story of Captain Cook's landing', 2019, *ABC News*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-05-11/british-museum-battle-for-stolen-indigenous-gweagal-shield/11085534>, accessed 30 July 2020.
5. Cathy Leahy & Judith Ryan (eds), *Colony Australia 1770–1861 / Frontier Wars*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2018, p. 60
6. National Gallery of Victoria, 'Colony: Frontier Wars Artwork Labels', NGV, Victorian Government, <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/exhibition/colony-frontier-wars/>, accessed 20 July 2020, p.38
7. For more on Gordon Bennett see NGV Education resource *Gordon Bennett* https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/school_resource/gordon-bennett/ and Gordon Bennett, 'The manifest toe' in Ian McLean & Gordon Bennett, *The Art of Gordon Bennett*, Craftsman House, 1996

FURTHER RESOURCES

National Gallery of Victoria, 'Colony: Frontier Wars | Curator's Perspective', 2018, NGV, Victorian Government, YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HmaTN7tY1yI>, accessed 20 July 2020.

National Gallery of Victoria, 'Colony to Nation', 2020, NGV, Victorian Government, https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/school_resource/colony-to-nation

The British Museum, 'Shield', *The British Museum*, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Oc1978-Q-839, accessed 20 July 2020.

Project Zero, 'See, Think, Wonder: A Thinking Routine from Project Zero', 2019, *Project Zero*, Harvard Graduate School of Education, http://www.pz.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/See%20Think%20Wonder_2.pdf, accessed 20 July 2020.

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