

LOOKING CLOSELY AT

Robert Juniper



Robert Juniper, National Bank Mural, 1954-55, oil and pencil on hard board detail

Narrative Frieze

The arrangement of figures against a long narrow picture frame is stylistically reminiscent of an Egyptian frieze.

Interestingly it was an approach the artist re-used throughout the 1950s. The viewer may wish to compare the stylistic similarities in works such as *Drying Sails*, 1954, which is on display in the Centenary Galleries.

The Commission

Juniper was commissioned by the architect John Oldham. The commission was unusual in that the mural had been included at the planning stage of the building, although the location and scale of the work had changed from the initial concept designs which had envisaged a full wall mural.

Sense of Design

Oldham selected Juniper because of his strong sense of design and the figurative nature of his work. He was also confident that the artist could handle the scale of the commission. There was no formal contract for the work, only a single

National Bank Mural, 1954-55

In 1954 a meeting with the architect John Oldham, whose family firm had designed the Prudential Building being newly erected on St Georges Terrace, resulted in the artist being commissioned to paint a mural for the National Bank chambers within the building.

This was the largest work the artist had undertaken and depicted the history of commerce and trade from Phoenician times

document, which has since been lost, determining a set fee of three hundred pounds. (Although Juniper's recollection is that the figure was one hundred and fifty pounds).

The Location

The Prudential Building was significant in that it was the first postwar commercial building in Perth. Conservative in style, it was typical of Australian

commercial buildings of the late 1920s and 1930s. The ground floor (the National Bank Chambers) were, however, quite revolutionary in concept. The area combined for the first time both banking offices and public spaces. The mural's audience would therefore be both the bank employees as well as their customers.

A Solid Base to Work On

The excellent condition of the painting largely attests to the quality of its original construction. It is made up of eight large and two small masonite panels prepared with casein, gesso mixed with glue, and titanium oxide. It was then washed down with turpentine and ochre ready for the initial drawing.

In Context

The viewer should be aware that the panels were designed to form a long frieze, which was installed high up along the ceiling cornice, encircling the main trading hall. Seen at a distance it would obviously give a different visual impression from that of the current display.

The viewer may notice where conservation work has been undertaken to restore portions removed to accommodate air-conditioning vents, installed as part of the bank's renovation.

Much of the information contained in this sheet is derived from Christine Sharkey, *Robert Juniper's National Bank Mural of 1954* in "Essays on Art and Architecture in Western Australia", Centre for Fine Arts, Perth, 1988, pp. 47-59. Please refer to this publication for a more detailed analysis of the work.

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NATIONAL BANK MURAL

The imagery depicts the History of Commerce and Trade travelling broadly in time from early Roman and Phoenician trade through to contemporary Australian mineral exploration.

Panels:

- 1 A Roman Legionary Accompanied by an Auxiliary
- 2 The Carthaginians at Sea
- 3 The Chinese Traders
- 4 The Phoenicians
- 5 The Christian Era
- 6 Rail Building and the Cattle Industry
- 7 Hydro-electricity, Shearing, Shipping and Export
- 8 Oil and Mineral Exploration and Production
- 9 Housing and Construction
- 10 Art and Architecture

Robert Juniper, *National Bank Mural*, 1954-55, details



The artist uses the basic design principle of repetition to move the viewer's eye across the work and to create synergy between the different figurative elements. For example, the horse on the right mirrors the one on the left, with the dog at its feet also echoing its shape in miniature form. Look for other examples of this device in the work.



Two figures and a donkey are central in the frieze, symbolising Mary and Joseph and the coming of the Christian era. They divide the past elements, with those depicting contemporary Australian life.

Sources

Although the majority of images are from the artist's imagination he did tentatively reference a book on the Bayeux Tapestry (a historical tapestry sewn by the women of Bayeux, France) and simple pictograms of historical costumes found in Webster's *New Twentieth Century Dictionary*.



Heroic Figuration

The group of men working on the railway are watched by a woman and child. This is the third and final representation of women in the work.

Women are excluded from the representations of trade and commerce (although the three Phoenician women could be selling their fruit). Imagery of the female figure is largely maternal in sharp contrast to the majority of the more contemporary male figures who are involved in some form of heroic manual labour.

Does this reflect the myth of the hard yakka, stereotypical Australian pioneer? Does the male conquer and make use of the land, whilst women are excluded?

The artist has used strong linear motifs throughout the work. In this panel the strong verticals of the shearer's arms are mirrored by the markings of the wharf, which in turn is picked up in the chimneys and poppet heads in the following panel.

As you look at the work can you identify where the artist has changed from a horizontal to vertical patterning?

