

# LOOKING CLOSELY AT *The Australian Way of Life*

## **The Rise of Nationalism**

In Australia in the 1870s British art was considered superior to that of its colonial counterpart. In the 1880s, however, an upsurge in Australian nationalism stimulated artists to highlight and celebrate Australian pioneering achievement. A growing awareness and debate about Australian identity emerged, eventually leading to Federation in 1901.

## **Artists of the Period**

German trained **Eugene von Guérard's (1811-1901)** style of landscape painting was highly detailed. It represented the magnificence of nature through a meticulous depiction of vegetation and geographic form. Von Guérard often used Indigenous people, animals and plants to identify a scene as Australian. By the 1860s he was considered to be one of the best landscape painters in Victoria.

## **Louis Buvelot (1814-1888)**

Von Guérard's analytical and almost scientific approach to landscape was thoroughly rejected by the artists of the Heidelberg School. They favoured the more impressionistic style typified by the work of Swiss artist Louis Buvelot.

A prominent figure in Melbourne from the 1860s to the 1880s, Buvelot's style was considered quite revolutionary at the time because of its freedom of expression and use of broad brush strokes. As a teacher he encouraged his students to capture the changing nature of the landscape by painting it at different times throughout the day.



Frederick McCubbin, *Down on his luck* (detail), 1889, oil on canvas

## **The Heidelberg School**

This was a movement, active in the late 1880s based in Heidelberg, an area on the outskirts of Melbourne. It was founded by a group of artists, including Frederick McCubbin, Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton. These painters were intent on presenting a direct response to the landscape and celebrating the Australian pioneering spirit in their art.

The '9 x 5 exhibition' of 1889 showcased the work of these artists. It comprised quick 'on the spot' impressions (painted on cigar box lids) of the area around Heidelberg and caused a public furore. These works seemed unfinished compared to the large, grand landscapes and narrative paintings popular at the time. Subsequently, the Heidelberg artists did paint large landscapes but in an impressionistic style and out of doors. Drammatically posed figures were, however, often added in the studio.

French artist **Bastien-Lepage (1848-1884)** was also admired by the Heidelberg artists. Typical of his work are scenes depicting heroic labourers posed in landscapes and painted directly from nature.

## **Frederick McCubbin (1855-1917)**

Born in Melbourne, McCubbin's iconic paintings of romanticised rural and pioneer life are as popular today as they were with audiences in the 1900s. Generally, he painted a softer and more lyrical view of the landscape than his contemporaries, often including women as major figures.

## **Mythology of Rural Life**

The mythology of the Australian way of life, one bound to the notion of the pioneer, prospector and pastoralist, found a heroic expression in the large landscapes of artists such as McCubbin, Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton.

McCubbin's painting *Down on his luck* is a typical example of the group's fascination with this romanticised idea of life in the Australian bush.

Ironically, the majority of the Heidelberg painters never ventured further than the outer suburbs of Melbourne. Whilst this enabled them to paint directly from nature (an important aspect of impressionism) the lush bushland surrounding their homes was not necessarily typical of out-back Australia. For example, it was from his home in Macedon that McCubbin painted *The Pioneer*, famously reproduced 100 years later as an advertisement for Kit-Kat biscuits. In order to be able to paint this work outdoors, the artist had to dig a trench in his garden, into which he lowered the huge canvas.

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Produced by the Art Gallery of Western Australia with the aim of making art more accessible for visitors

# LOOKING CLOSELY AT *Frederick McCubbin*

## Where is the viewer?

McCubbin uses a technique, popularised by the artist **Bastien-Lepage**, to create an illusion of depth. The combination of the detailed, close-up view of the central figure against an atmospheric landscape encourages the viewer's eye to move through the picture planes. First, the viewer's eye encounters the detailed foreground, then the middle ground containing the figure of the bushman. The eye then moves to the clearing and then onto the dense, tree filled background and the glimpse of sky in the far distance.

## Composition

The bushman has been placed asymmetrically in the painting. How does the figure relate to the bush that surrounds him? How do you think the bushman feels about where he is? Is he lost? Does he look overwhelmed by the bush?

## Painting Techniques

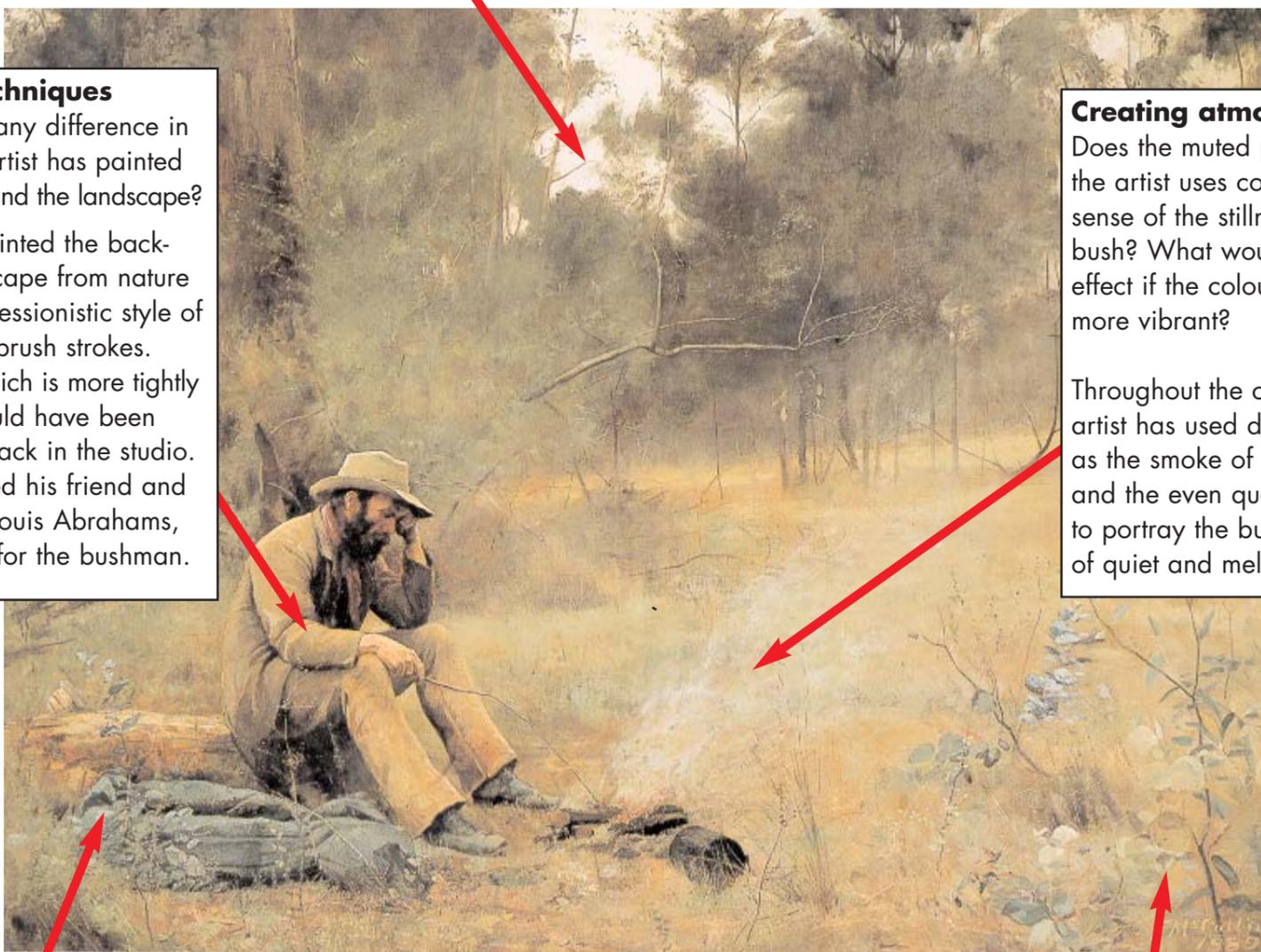
Can you see any difference in the way the artist has painted the bushman and the landscape?

McCubbin painted the background landscape from nature using an impressionistic style of broad, loose brush strokes. The figure, which is more tightly modeled, would have been added later back in the studio. In fact, he used his friend and fellow artist, Louis Abrahams, as the model for the bushman.

## Creating atmosphere

Does the muted palette which the artist uses contribute to a sense of the stillness of the bush? What would be the effect if the colours were more vibrant?

Throughout the canvas the artist has used devices, such as the smoke of the campfire and the even quality of light, to portray the bush as a place of quiet and melancholy.



Frederick McCubbin, *Down on his luck*, 1889, oil on canvas

## Who is the Bushman?

McCubbin has painted the bushman lost in thought and with an averted gaze. How does this affect your reaction to this painting? Can you imagine what he is thinking? Are there any clues in the things he is carrying that tell us who he is or what he does?

## Where is this painting set?

The work was actually painted in an artist's camp on the outskirts of Melbourne. It is now a densely populated suburb within the metropolitan region of the city. What changes do you think this landscape has undergone and experienced since the painting was made?

## The Eucalyptus Plant

Note the eucalyptus plant placed prominently in the foreground and painted in a detailed and tightly worked manner.

Does this tell you anything about the artist's attitude towards the Australian bush?

