

# Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly series

Education resource for primary school students

## Sidney Nolan's *Ned Kelly series*

This resource includes:

- 1 overview card, which includes a Kelly helmet viewfinder
- 1 card with teachers notes and curriculum links
- 8 paintings from Sidney Nolan's *Ned Kelly series* each accompanied by activities for discussion, art-making and inquiry.

*'I find that a desire to paint the landscape involves a wish to hear more of the stories that take place within the landscape. Stories which may not only be heard in country towns and read in the journals of explorers but which persist in the memory'*

Sidney Nolan



Australian Government  
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**NGA**  
National Gallery of Australia

[nga.gov.au](http://nga.gov.au)

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**Sidney Nolan** *Stringybark Creek* 1947 National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, gift of Sunday Reed 1977

Sidney Nolan's **Ned Kelly series**

 cut out white area

## Introduction

Sidney Nolan's 1946–47 *Ned Kelly series* is one of the greatest sequences of Australian paintings of the twentieth century. Nolan's starkly simplified depiction of Kelly in his armour has become an iconic Australian image.

Nolan's paintings follow the main sequence of the Kelly story. Yet Nolan did not intend the series to be an 'authentic' depiction of these events. Rather, these episodes became the setting for the artist's meditations upon universal themes of injustice, love and betrayal.

The Kelly saga was also a way for Nolan to paint the Australian landscape in new ways, with the story giving meaning to the place. Above all, he considered that it was

***'a story arising out of the bush  
and ending in the bush'.***



## Teacher's notes

This resource is directly linked to the Australian Curriculum and is designed to develop successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active, informed citizens.

The *Ned Kelly series* lends itself to the study of:

- Visual Art
- Humanities and Social Sciences, particularly Civics and Citizenship and History

This resource has been designed for:

- Year 3–6 primary school students and teachers, however it may be adapted for use with other age groups.

Each card includes:

- THEMES: Key concepts for investigation in connection with the selected work of art.
- DISCUSS: Talking points to facilitate discussion and encourage observation, interpretation and imagination.
- MAKE: Creative art-making suggestions that explore key concepts.
- EXPLORE: Opportunities to connect Nolan with his influences and place the *Ned Kelly series* in the context of art history.

## Curriculum Links

### Year 3– 6 Visual Arts

[\(ACAVAM110\)](#), [\(ACAVAM111\)](#), [\(ACAVAR113\)](#)

[\(ACAVAM114\)](#), [\(ACAVAR117\)](#), [\(ACAVAM115\)](#)

### Year 3–6 Humanities and Social Sciences

[\(ACHASSI053\)](#), [\(ACHASSI074\)](#), [\(ACHASSI056\)](#), [\(ACHASSI077\)](#)

[\(ACHASSI058\)](#), [\(ACHASSI079\)](#), [\(ACHASSI059\)](#), [\(ACHASSI080\)](#)

[\(ACHASSI099\)](#), [\(ACHASSI127\)](#), [\(ACHASSI095\)](#), [\(ACHASSI123\)](#)

[\(ACHASSI097\)](#) [\(ACHASSI125\)](#)



## Research links

- The *Ned Kelly series* video, article and image gallery <https://nga.gov.au/nolan/>
- Teacher lesson plan: Sidney Nolan—*Ned Kelly series* <https://nga.gov.au/education/pdf/K-12-Resources/NGA-Resource-NolansNedKelly-YR5-6.pdf>
- Interactive lesson: Sidney Nolan and Ned Kelly <https://nga.gov.au/education/Resources/NedKelly/index.html>
- The face behind the mask: Sidney Nolan @ Heide Museum of Modern Art <https://vimeo.com/225314540>
- Ned Kelly, Sidney Nolan and the story of Australian art <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20130926-ned-kelly-man-in-the-iron-mask>
- Ned Kelly fact sheet <https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/search-discover/explore-collections-theme/australian-history/ned-kelly/ned-kelly-fact-sheet>

**Michael Lawrence** *Sidney Nolan with Kelly mask* 1987, Heide Museum of Modern Art Collection, gift of Susan Lawrence, published with the permission of Michael Lawrence

## Series activities

- Use this set of cards, and additional images from Nolan's *Ned Kelly series*, to create a 'storyboard' for your own movie about Ned. Change the sequence of the events to see how it might affect the outcome of Ned's story.
- Spend some time drawing outdoors, using the slot in this card as a viewfinder. Hold your viewfinder up and notice how the shape of your viewfinder crops what you can see. Use your viewfinder to select a section of the landscape to draw.

## Quotations

On each card are two quotations. The first (in grey) is an historical quotation chosen by Sidney Nolan from a range of sources, including newspapers of the day, *The inner history of the Kelly gang* by JJ Kenneally (Melbourne, J Roy Stevens, 1945), and the Royal Commission's 1881 report on the Victorian police force and the conduct of the hunt for the Kelly gang. The second quotation is from Sidney Nolan himself, from a conversation with Australian artist Elwyn Lynn in 1984.



## Landscape

The 'Kelly Country' is that portion of north-eastern Victoria which extends from Mansfield in the south to Yarrowonga in the north, and from Euroa in the south-east to Talangatta in the north-west.

'I put a fire or a setting sun on the horizon ... I wanted a clear ambiguity because this was a tranquil scene for the subsequent violence. It's along the Goulburn River. That muddy, opaque quality of the dam is very Australian; muddy under the serene, clear blue sky.'

**Sidney Nolan** *Landscape* 1947, enamel paint on composition board, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, gift of Sunday Reed, 1977

## THEMES

Light, space, place, landscape

## DISCUSS

SEE: What part of the painting do you see as the focal point of the composition?

THINK: Why do you think Sidney Nolan placed this landscape at the beginning of his *Ned Kelly series* of paintings?

WONDER: How do you imagine you might feel, if you were in this landscape riding on a horse with Ned?

## MAKE

Place Ned into Nolan's Kelly country *Landscape* 1947 using a black paper cut-out. Move your cut-out to different positions on Nolan's painting to explore new compositions. In what ways do changes in the composition affect the mood or narrative of the work of art? Try making smaller and larger cut-outs of Ned and experiment with where they might fit within the composition.

## EXPLORE

Examine Arthur Streeton's painting [\*Golden Summer, Eaglemont 1889\*](#), discuss the similarities and differences in comparison to Nolan's *Landscape* 1947.



## Ned Kelly

We rob their banks  
We thin their ranks  
And ask no thanks  
For what we do.

'This is Kelly the defiant. I put Kelly on top of the horse in a particularly orderly manner. I wanted an air of perfect authority. It looks simple but I wanted the maximum feeling of space, so the cloud appears through the aperture in the mask.'

**Sidney Nolan** *Ned Kelly* 1946, enamel paint on composition board, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, gift of Sunday Reed, 1977

## THEMES

Iconic imagery, myths and legends, Australian identity

## DISCUSS

SEE: Can you see any strange things about the way Nolan portrayed Ned in this portrait?

THINK: Do you think this is a portrait of Ned or an idea of Ned, and why?

WONDER: Why do you imagine Nolan made the sky visible through Ned Kelly's helmet? What might the clouds tell us about where Ned Kelly is headed?

## MAKE

Make a collage based on your idea of Ned Kelly as an iconic character. Use only bright, bold colours and simple shapes, which you might cut out of paper, card or recycled materials.

## EXPLORE

Examine the work of early Abstract artists, such as [Pablo Picasso's \*Still-life with mask, 4 March 1937\*](#) and [Kasimir Malevich](#), particularly his painting *Black Square* 1915. Discuss what influence European modern artists may have had on the development of Nolan's abstracted and symbolic representation of Ned Kelly.



## Quilting the armour

Mrs Skillion, who was Margaret Kelly, sat out in the evenings sewing the soft blue quilting into the headpiece of the armour.

'The armour casts a heavy, baneful shadow. Kelly's sister is quilting the helmet to protect a precious head and it's done with tenderness and love, while a peaceful world goes about its life.'

**Sidney Nolan** *Quilting the armour* 1947, enamel paint on composition board, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, gift of Sunday Reed, 1977

## THEMES

Love, fidelity, gender roles.

## DISCUSS

SEE: Can you see and describe the visual elements that Nolan has used to balance the composition of his painting *Quilting the armour* 1947?

THINK: Why do you think Nolan has placed Margaret Kelly sewing out in the farmyard? Why do you think Margaret Kelly is quilting a lining for Ned Kelly's helmet?

WONDER: What do you imagine life would have been like for a woman living on a farm such as this?

## MAKE

Construct a protective outfit or costume to wear using found objects and recycled materials. Don't forget to decorate the inside of your costume—the inside is just as important as the outside.

## EXPLORE

Examine other works of art depicting women engaged in domestic labour, such as [Grace Cossington Smith's \*The sock knitter\* 1915](#) (Art Gallery of New South Wales) and [Arthur Boyd's \*Woman sweeping\* 1947–1949](#). Discuss the similarities and differences in the style of each artist, and compare the emotion of the women depicted in the works of art.



## ***Death of Constable Scanlon***

He was in the act of firing again when Ned Kelly fired, and Scanlon fell from his horse and died almost immediately.

'In a sudden, violent accident time seems to stand still. I have exaggerated; the bridle must have been long, but that and the levitated horse and constable increase the unreality of violent events. Kelly seems to be present only as a force of destiny.'

**Sidney Nolan** *Death of Constable Scanlon* 1946, enamel paint on composition board, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, gift of Sunday Reed, 1977

## **THEMES**

Artistic influences, styles and mavericks

## **DISCUSS**

SEE: Can you see and describe the visual narrative in Nolan's painting *Death of Constable Scanlon* 1946?

THINK: Do you think that Ned Kelly is part of this action or an observer of the events portrayed in the painting? What do you see that makes you think that?

WONDER: Do you wonder why Nolan has painted Constable Scanlon 'flying' through the air? Discuss your ideas with a friend.

## **MAKE**

Create a painting that tells a story. Choose another famous Australian to feature in your visual narrative. Depict your famous Australian at an important moment in their story; and paint them boldly like Nolan did with Ned.

## **EXPLORE**

Examine the work of Surrealist artists in the NGA's collection, such as [Hannah Höch's \*Imaginary bridge\* 1926](#), [Rene Magritte's \*The lovers\* 1928](#) and James Gleeson's [Spain 1951](#). Discuss the similarities and differences between these works of art and Nolan's painting *Death of Constable Scanlon*. You might consider how the artists depict space and which elements appear real versus those that are imagined.



## ***The chase***

I am sure the police would not ride them down in a day; they would have to hunt them down, but not ride them—the outlaws were well mounted.

'Kelly had been black but I put the stripes as though he may have played Australian Rules, you might think, but the same stripes occur as wallpaper in the burning Glenrowan Hotel. Events casting their shadows before them? The policeman goes the opposite way... wisely.'

**Sidney Nolan** *The chase* 1946, enamel paint on composition board, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, gift of Sunday Reed, 1977

## **THEMES**

Mateship, teamwork, foreshadowing

## **DISCUSS**

**SEE:** Can you see and describe the visual elements that Nolan used to create the suggestion of movement in this painting?

**THINK:** How do you think the idea of a team or a gang is displayed in this painting?

**WONDER:** Can you imagine why Sidney Nolan only placed the armour on the horse and nobody in it? Discuss with your class.

## **MAKE**

In coloured pencil draw your ideal team or gang wearing your imagined uniform. Consider your choice of colours and pattern, choosing a design that will make them easily recognisable to one another.

## **EXPLORE**

French painter [Henri Rousseau](#) was a noted influence on Nolan's work. Examine Rousseau's artworks, particularly his use of animals in the landscape. Discuss the visual elements that you think Nolan borrowed from Rousseau.



## ***The defence of Aaron Sherritt***

Mrs Sherritt: 'They (the police) were in that position when Dan Kelly was in the room. I was put under the bed. Constable Dowling pulled me down ... and then Armstrong caught hold of me, and the two of them shoved me under.'

'A satirical title and a rather scornful portrayal, but the police thought the whole gang was outside and they had heard Sherritt shot. The quilt is real. A friend who was in the army with me gave it to me. It was made by people in a Heidelberg hospital.'

**Sidney Nolan** *The defence of Aaron Sherritt* 1946, enamel paint on composition board, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, gift of Sunday Reed, 1977

### **THEMES**

Pattern, light, composition, technique, perspective

### **DISCUSS**

SEE: Can you see and describe in your own words how Nolan has created the perspective of this room?

THINK: This is the only painting in the series that doesn't include the landscape in some way. Why do you think Nolan might exclude it here?

WONDER: Why do you imagine Nolan might include a quilt from his own life in a painting about Ned Kelly's life?

### **MAKE**

Write an imagined conversation that you think might have taken place between the characters in this painting while they were hiding under the bed from the Kelly Gang.

### **EXPLORE**

Examine the work of other artists who have painted bedroom scenes like [Grace Cossington-Smith's \*Interior in yellow\*](#) and [Van Gogh's \*Bedroom at Arles \(Le Chambre de van Gogh à Arles\)\*](#) (Musée D'Orsay, Paris). Analyse and compare each artist's approach to space, light and three-dimensional form.



## ***Glenrowan***

'Such is life'

'This is subtitled, as it were, 'Such is life!' Muster up your spirits and go out as well as you can. The police thought they were an army so I gave them, satirically, a regimental goat. The Aboriginal trackers are there with tribal markings. Irish police and non-Irish police, Aborigines from a remote culture and outlaws all meeting on this fateful stage, like the final act of an opera, all lined up. No wonder the sky went crimson. Mrs Reardon is still there, the baby with a different shawl. She changed it as she ran along; a good mother.

**Sidney Nolan** *Glenrowan* 1946, enamel paint on composition board, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, gift of Sunday Reed, 1977

## **THEMES**

Violence, loss and pain

## **DISCUSS**

**SEE:** Can you see and describe the visual relationship between the colour around Ned's eyes and the colour of the sky in this painting? What emotion does the colour around Ned's eyes suggest?

**THINK:** Why do you think Nolan has painted Ned so much larger than everybody else in the picture?

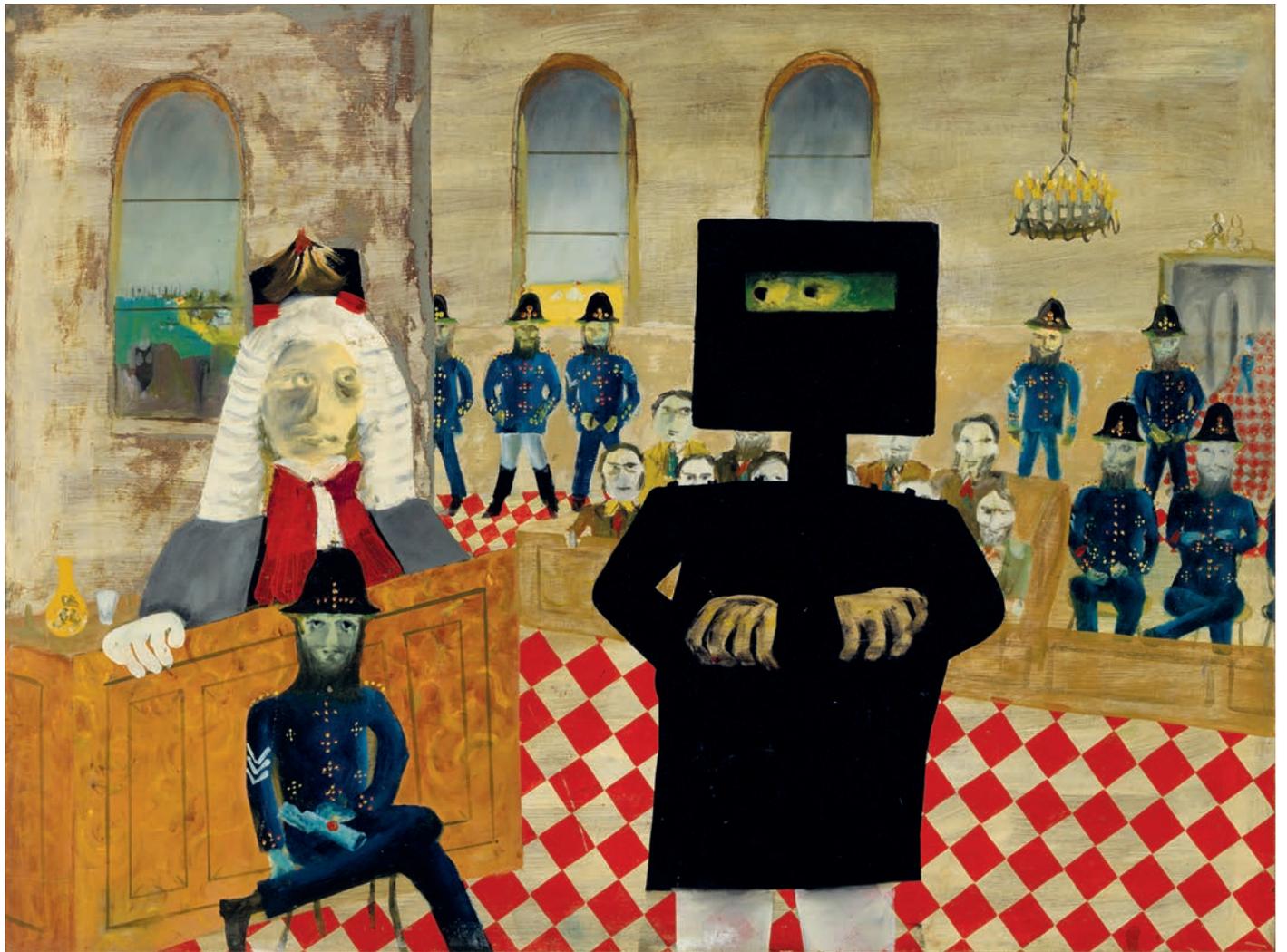
**WONDER:** Do you wonder why Nolan has included a goat in this chaotic scene? Discuss your ideas with a friend.

## **MAKE**

Use drawing or painting materials to make a work of art that expresses your ideas about war and chaos in our world today. Incorporate abstract elements, such as lines and shapes, to represent your ideas, and choose colours that express how you feel when you think about war and chaos.

## **EXPLORE**

Examine other works of art that depict scenes of chaos or war, such as [Hilda Rix Nicholas \*These gave the world away\* 1917](#), [Francisco de Goya's \*The 3rd of May 1808 in Madrid\* 1814](#) (Museo Nacional del Prado) and [Pablo Picasso's \*Guernica\* 1937](#) (Museo Nacional Centro De Arte Reina Sofia). Discuss the similarities and differences in comparison to Nolan's painting *Glenrowan* 1946.



## ***The trial***

Judge Barry then passed sentence of death, and concluded with the usual formula: 'May the Lord have mercy on your soul.' Ned Kelly: 'Yes, I will meet you there!'

'The tiled floor in red and white was in a house I was in once. The courthouse was in South Melbourne and through the left-hand window you can see sailing ships of the time. The candelabra is true to life. The judge wears the black cloth of death and below is a sergeant with a rolled, sealed document that spells doom for Kelly. Of course, it could not have then been ready. Kelly told Judge Barry that he would soon see him in the next world, which is not a very polite thing to say to a man who's just sentenced you to death. Strangely enough, Mr Justice Barry, a great man, who did many good deeds, went home to bed and died a fortnight later, from, it is said, a septic carbuncle.'

**Sidney Nolan** *The trial* 1947, enamel paint on composition board, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, gift of Sunday Reed, 1977

## **THEMES**

Justice, ethics, law and order

## **DISCUSS**

**SEE:** Can you see and describe how Nolan has used proportion of people and objects to influence what you look at?

**THINK:** How do you think Kelly is feeling in this painting? What do you think his body language and the colour of his eyes reveal?

**WONDER:** Do you wonder why Nolan has portrayed Ned Kelly still wearing his armour, even though he is in the courtroom surrounded by police?

## **MAKE**

Make a short digital film with your classmates, re-enacting the trial of Ned Kelly using Nolan's painting as visual inspiration and historical documents as source material for your script. Consider making some simple props, costumes and sets to include in your film.

## **EXPLORE**

Examine the work of other artists who manipulated perspective, such as [Alexandra Exter's \*The music lesson c. 1925\*](#), David Hockney's [Views of hotel well III 1984–85](#), and [Maurits Escher's \*Tetrahedral Planetoid 1954\*](#). Discuss the differences and similarities in comparison to Nolan's painting [The trial 1947](#). Discuss why artists might choose to experiment with the representation of perspective in their work.