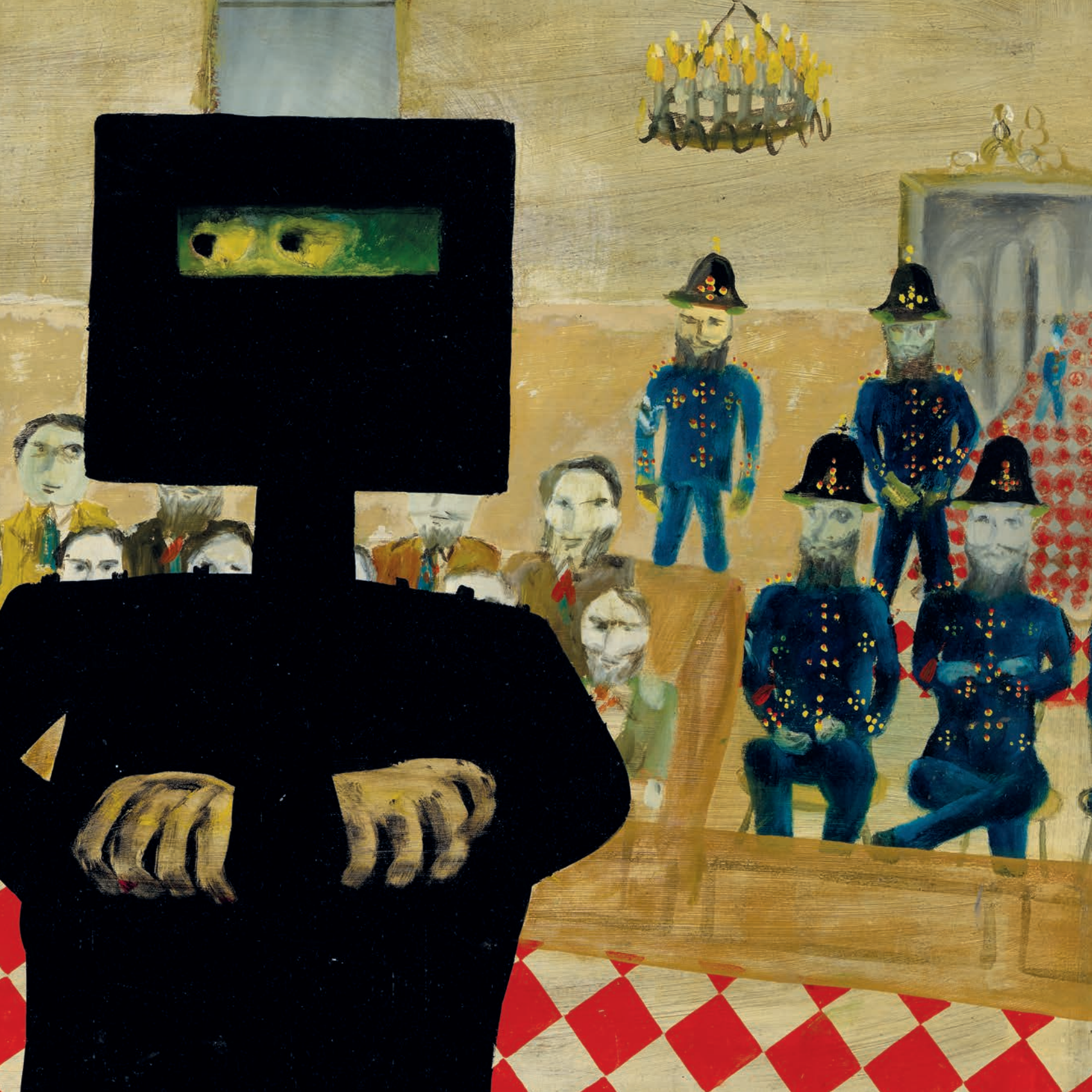
Sidney Nolan's **Ned Kelly series**



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NGA
National Gallery of Australia

Foreword

It is the National Gallery of Australia's aim to contribute significantly to the nation's cultural enrichment and for every Australian to experience their National Gallery of Australia, wherever they may be. Since its official launch in 1988, the National Gallery's travelling exhibitions program has seen almost 11 million people visit more than 130 travelling exhibitions at 1,595 venues in all states and territories and, occasionally, overseas. This represents well over 8,800 works of art that have reached Australians in their communities. These visitors have enjoyed the opportunity to connect with the national collection, with this connection being made more meaningful through the range of education and public programs that accompany these exhibitions. Through this program, we foster professional exchanges between galleries and museums and arts professionals on a wide range of museological matters.

The NGA is proud to launch the national tour of Sidney Nolan's 1946–47 paintings on the theme of nineteenth-century bushranger Ned Kelly. The series was first painted while Nolan was living with Sunday and John Reed at their homestead Heide in Bulleen, Victoria. In 1977, Sunday Reed donated twenty-five of the twenty-seven paintings to the NGA. Earlier in 1972, the NGA had acquired one work from the series, *Death of Sergeant Kennedy at Stringybark Creek* 1946.

These iconic works hold a prominent place in the story of Australian art. Bushrangers have been a constant source of inspiration in Australian art, from William Strutt's *Bushrangers* 1887 and Tom Roberts's *Bailed up* 1895 through to the work contemporary artists such as Dale Frank and Adam Cullen, who have painted numerous iterations of Ned Kelly. Likewise, authors such as Peter Carey, who wrote the Booker Prize-winning novel *The true history of the Kelly Gang* (2000), have looked to bushranging history as source material for contemporary historical fiction. In painting these works, Sidney Nolan drew on critical primary source documents, and many authors and historians have drawn their inspiration from both the paintings and the writings.

As a group, and as individual paintings, they still hold enormous relevance today, providing a master class on Australian art history and on the development of figuration, landscape painting and abstraction in Australian art. By being able to view this important group of paintings about history, landscape and mythology firsthand, new generations of emerging Australian artists, authors and historians will be provided with a fresh way of interpreting Australian artistic expression.

It is our role to provide all Australians with equal opportunity to access this remarkable body of work. While its status as one of the greatest sequences of Australian painting of the twentieth century has been emphasised through international displays at New York and Dublin, rarely has the Kelly series left Canberra, precluding large audiences from the furthest states from viewing one of the most dynamic series of paintings in Australian art history. This exhibition will allow a new audience to become acquainted with the important legacy of Sidney Nolan.

Nick Mitzevich
Director

Introduction

In 2018, the National Gallery of Australia is embarking on an extensive travelling exhibition of Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly series to make these works accessible to audiences across the nation. It is fitting that the tour should commence some seventy years after they were first publicly exhibited, in April 1948, in the little-known Velasquez Gallery in Melbourne. This was the first public outing of this particular group of works, including one that was acquired from Clive Evatt and had been shown individually, and twenty-five gifted to the National Gallery in 1977 by Sunday Reed, that has become known as one of the greatest series in the history of Australian art.

Nolan's Ned Kelly series is a distillation of a complex, layered story set in the Victorian landscape and centred around a nineteenth-century bushranger and his gang who were on the run from the police. Landscape is a key element in the paintings—as Nolan said, 'it began in the landscape and ended in the landscape'. The series also depends upon a loosely threaded but vital dramatic human narrative that has its catalyst with *Constable Fitzpatrick and Kate Kelly* 1946 in the domestic arena of the Kelly family home where a fracas occurs, and ends with *The trial* 1947, in a Melbourne courtroom where Ned Kelly is sentenced to death. The marriage of a feeling for the environment and human drama imbues these paintings with meaning and poetic resonance. While the legendary aspect is informed by social history, some of the paintings are embellished by Nolan's lively imagination.

Nolan painted the majority of these works in glossy enamel-like paint on the dining-room table at Heide, the home of John and Sunday Reed in the Melbourne suburb of Bulleen. The Reeds had a great library, including up-to-date art journals from Europe which provided great inspiration for

Nolan. He was deeply interested in European modernism and also in local history. As an artist profoundly intrigued by myths and legends, he sought to find abiding stories of his own place with which he was able to connect. In the 1940s, he found just what he was looking for in the Kelly story. Nolan sought to inform himself; reading the report on the Royal Commission on the Police Force in Victoria, issued in 1881, as well as JJ Kenneally's *The Inner History of the Kelly Gang and their Pursuers*, 1929. He also travelled to what would become known as 'Kelly country' with the writer Max Harris.

Personal and familial ties enter the story. Remarkably his grandfather, William Nolan, had been involved in the hunt for the Kelly gang in the Victorian countryside. There was also some sense of personal identification for the young adventurous artist Sidney Nolan with Kelly as a 'rebel reformer' and an outsider on the run. Before the Second World War ended, he was something of an outlaw himself, in hiding from the police having absconded from the drudgery of guarding supplies as part of his military service the previous year. While in the army he had soaked up the scintillating colour and light of the blue and gold landscapes of the Wimmera which informed some of the Kelly paintings. However, close observation also reveals that the landscape across the series is actually remarkably varied.

The Kelly paintings were not created in the order in which they were initially exhibited. Instead, words extracted by Nolan from nineteenth-century records helped him to bring some sense of order to the first public exhibition of these works at the Velasquez Gallery. Looking across the grouping as they were shown in 1948 (and are largely shown to this day), there is a fascinating trajectory. Even though some of the paintings are less crucial than others in determining the sequence, Nolan was very clear that he wanted the group to start with *Landscape* 1947—a muddy environment, all moody and low-key tonalities—to set the scene. In an interview with Elwyn Lynn in 1983, he gave his personal interpretations, providing telling insights into his thinking, albeit with the benefit of distance and hindsight. 'I wanted a clear ambiguity because this was the tranquil scene for the subsequent violence.' Not all the paintings are equally crucial to the narrative. Some are indicative of small incidents in the records that caught Nolan's robust imagination. These quiet non-events are interspersed with the dramatic occurrences.

There are gentle works of pure fabrication, like *Quilting the armour* 1947 of Ned's sister Margaret 'quilting the armour to protect a precious head done with tenderness and love, while a peaceful world goes about its life'. It is the one work that gives a feeling for small rural communities involved in subsistence farming at the time. Then there are those key works that convey a sense of the violent drama that unfolded, like *Death of Constable Scanlon* and *Burning at Glenrowan,* both painted in 1946. It is precisely this alteration in the pacing—from quiet to dramatic, from quirky, seemingly irrelevant incidents to totally life-changing episodes—that give the series its dramatic, filmic qualities.

Fact and fiction intermingle. Certainly in real life, Ned Kelly only wore his bulky armour near the end of the drama, but for Nolan it becomes a vital, symbolic device from beginning to end. The helmet is like a frame within the frame. The visor within the helmet is another viewfinder—a slot to be seen through, or filled with emotive colour and eyes askance. The stark pared back, black square of the helmet was a stroke of brilliance. It did not appear without precedent but came out of earlier works, including the simplified head in

Boy and the moon 1939–40. It also finds resonances with Kasimir Malevich's famous *Black square* 1915, although Nolan remarked that the squares he saw in the work of László Moholy-Nagy were actually more relevant at the time. There were also other sources, but in the end it was the way that Nolan made this image his own, in this context, that endures. As he said in an interview with Elwyn Lynn in 1983: 'This is Kelly the defiant. I put Kelly on top of his 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'.

This Ned Kelly image captured the public imagination in ways that few others in the history of Australian art have done. For many it has subsumed the image of the real armour and stands perennially for Kelly himself. In his visual account of the Kelly saga, Nolan recognised the complexity of the events that had no easy answers. He brought to the visual re-telling a broad emotional undertow—of violence, fear and flight; courage, desperation and brazen folly; love and anguish. The Kelly series has been exhibited numerous times internationally, including at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin. This current tour around Australia will undoubtedly inspire many visitors to engage afresh with the potency of this still remarkable group of paintings, and to debate and contemplate the resurrection of a story that will never die.

Deborah Hart
Head of Australian Art

'I put a fire or a setting sun on the horizon... I wanted a clear ambiguity because this was the 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'

Landscape 1947

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

Ned Kelly 1946

'It is typical of Australia that to keep warm the policemen
set fire to a whole, standing hollow tree, which would
have been a blazing beacon to any Kellys or their friends.
It looks spectacular, Wagnerian'

The burning tree 1947

'That is what the fireplace looked like and the objects on the mantleshelf were really there. The action looks a little comic but it began the real trouble. Kelly is very observant and watchful'

Constable Fitzpatrick and Kate Kelly 1946

'I am amused that the police had hammocks in the bush.
It seems to indicate something of a comic opera'

Morning camp 1947

'I think this and *The watchtower* are good paintings of sleepy, hazy and dusty country towns in the heat. This is where they brought the dead policemen and I was intrigued by violence in peaceful settings'

Township 1947

'All the Kellys may have dressed like this at times to deceive people for fun. The picture is as posed as the rider. The story is that Steve Hart, dressed as a girl, won the race at Greta Races, riding side-saddle.'

Steve Hart dressed as a girl 1947

'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.'

Quilting the armour 1947

'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 increases the unreality of violent events. Kelly seems to be present only as a force of destiny'

Death of Constable Scanlon 1946

Stringybark Creek 1947

'Matters are not separated here. They are forced right against the eye, terror and evil so close that no one is seen as a whole; everyone is cut off in both senses of the word. Kelly is cool and natural.... No compassion; the natural thing to do.'

Death of Sergeant Kennedy at Stringybark Creek 1946

'This is really about myself. I used to climb the watertower at Horesham in Victoria and look at the sleepy town and think, dream and imagine.'

The watch tower 1947

'People used peacocks as 'watch birds': they could see people two miles off. I was amused by the oddity of peacocks in Australia and their being put to such a use. The pale-faced policeman does not know how close observers may be; remember that policemen had been killed.'

The alarm 1947

'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.'

The chase 1946

'Many of the policemen did not want to encounter the Kellys. Kelly was a wrathful myth in his own day and the frightened policeman got out of the way in the corner of the painting and gave Kelly centre stage.'

The encounter 1946

'This is a story within the Kelly story; a double informer? Actually, the police were hidden in the caves. Sherritt had been a member of the gang and was now marrying into a family friendly with the Kellys. They were an Irish bunch and Sherritt had gone too far: 'It's a shame, but we will shoot him.'

The marriage of Aaron Skerritt 1946

'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.'

The defence of Aaron Skerritt 1946

'This is right out of the commission report. It gives a slightly more sympathetic view of the police. There is a feeling of innocence and the horse is right out of early hunting prints.'

The evening (1947)

'This is just a story. If I were making a film I could have the policeman and the members of the gang in disguise but this is as impossible as the horse in *The evening*. It's a fantasy.'

Bush picnic 1946

'The police did not question the old man as they knew he would misdirect them, but thought the wife could be bluffed, but she was shrewd and well trained and like a good wife would misdirect them. My uncle Jack used to wash himself with a bar of laundry soap in the dam; Velvet soap in fact.'

The questioning 1947

'I was proud that I'd got the horses going up the hill
all right. It was difficult for me. One of the pack
horses had fallen, so I decided to put it upside down
and give levitation another aspect. It is a dreadful descent
and the horse will fall forever. I am nearing
the climax of the tragedy.'

The slip 1947

'She thought she was trapped. There was a sort of truce, but she was fired at. Her actual shawl was exhibited at the commission. I put the silly, self-assured policeman in the corner. All is in chaos... I was interested in the reflection of the burning hotel on the trees.'

Mrs Reardon at Glenrowan 1946

'These were once joined together and I had Mrs Reardon and her baby still fleeing for their lives. It was once six feet by four, but late one night, Jack Bellew, a journalist, said, 'Look Sid, that painting is too bloody big, cut it in two.' I told him to leave it alone, but to prove it was not too big, I would cut it in two. You see I come from a long line of Irishmen. So I cut it and looked at them separated and together, and they looked better together. Unfortunately I parted them forever'

Burning at Glenrowan 1946

Siege at Glenrowan 1946

'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.'

Glenrowan 1946

'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.'

The trial 1947

Checklist of works
Attributed dates are in brackets. The paintings and checklist are reproduced in the narrative order used in the Valasquez Gallery exhibition at Tyres furniture store, Melbourne, 6–16 April 1948.

All works are from the National Gallery of Austrlia collection and are are a gift of Sunday Reed, 1977 unless otherwise stated.

Sidney Nolan
born Australia 1917
died England 1992

Landscape 1947
enamel on composition board
121.4 x 90.7 cm

Ned Kelly 1946
enamel on composition board
90.8 x 121.5 cm

The burning tree 1947
enamel on composition board
90.7 x 121.2 cm

Constable Fitzpatrick and Kate Kelly 1946
enamel on composition board
90.7 x 121.2 cm

Morning camp 1947
enamel on composition board
90.7 x 121.1 cm

Township 1947
enamel on composition board
90.7 x 121.5 cm

Steve Hart dressed as a girl 1947
enamel on composition board
90.6 x 121.1 cm

Quilting the armour 1947
enamel on composition board
90.4 x 121.2 cm

Death of Constable Scanlon 1946
enamel on composition board
90.4 x 121.2 cm

Stringybark Creek 1947
enamel on composition board
90.7 x 121.5 cm

Death of Sergeant Kennedy at Stringybark Creek 1946
enamel on composition board
91 x 121.7 cm
Purchased 1972

The watch tower 1947
enamel on composition board
90.6 x 121.4 cm

The alarm (1947)
enamel on composition board
90.5 x 121.3 cm

The chase 1946
enamel on composition board
90.7 x 121.1 cm

The encounter 1946
enamel on composition board
90.4 x 121.2 cm

The marriage of Aaron Shellitt 1947
enamel on composition board
90.7 x 121.1 cm

The defence of Aaron Shellitt 1946
enamel on composition board
121 x 90.7 cm

The evening (1947)
enamel on composition board
90.5 x 120.1 cm

Bush picnic 1946
enamel on composition board
90.4 x 121.2 cm

The questioning 1947
enamel on composition board
90.7 x 121.1 cm

The slip 1947
enamel on composition board
90.7 x 121.1 cm

Mrs Reardon at Glenrowen 1946
enamel on composition board
90.8 x 121.5 cm

Burning at Glenrowen 1946
enamel on composition board
121.5 x 90.7 cm

Siege at Glenrowen 1946
enamel on composition board
121.2 x 90.3 cm

Glenrowen 1946
enamel on composition board
90.9 x 121.2 cm

The trial 1947
enamel on composition board
90.7 x 121.2 cm

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