



TOM ROBERTS AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY CANBERRA

“PAINT WHAT YOU LOVE AND LOVE WHAT YOU PAINT”

Heather McKendry |

Tom Roberts is a name that conjures iconic Australian Art. This exhibition at the National Gallery is worth a visit, as it is twenty years since there was an exhibition of his works, and many of these are from private collections.

For me, the wonder of this retrospective is that Tom Roberts had such an enormous range of subjects and style. Most of us think of him as the painter of iconic Australian scenes – “The Shearing of the Rams”, “The Golden Fleece”, “A Break Away”, “Bailed Up” and, of course, “Opening of the First Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia by H.R.H. The Duke of Cornwall and York” (later King George V).



His early paintings were commissions - exquisite portraits of wealthy Australians. One eye catching work is titled “An Australian Native”, (1888) a title coined in New Zealand to describe Australian born Ada Crossley, a contralto singer. She is believed to be the model. The depiction is of a ‘type’ of Australian, a native born man or woman of Anglo-Celtic descent – healthy and vigorous and capable of producing strong children. It was painted at a time of strong national fervor, just before Federation. It depicts his superb ability to portray women.



I found his portraits of children equally delightful - such as “Miss Minna Simpson” with her cat – whom our gallery tour guide pointed out is not exactly enjoying being closely cuddled by a child.



Tom Roberts was born in England in 1856, and only came to Australia because his father, a teacher, died when he was 12 years old, and his mother and two siblings sailed out to live with relatives. Apparently he “remained English to his bootstraps”, however managed to capture the light of the Australian bush in his famous works.

He painted “Coming South” in 1885 as a result of his shipboard experience returning from a visit from England to Australia – on board he met J.F. Archibald of *The Bulletin* (and the Archibald Prize). At that time, Roberts started a new school of painting based on *plein air* practice – he and fellow artists Arthur Streeton, Charles Conder and Fred McCubbin benefited from what became known as The Heidelberg School, more recently called The Australian Impressionists.



One room of the gallery displays some of Roberts's unique panels which were part of a 9 x 5 (inches) Exhibition of Impressions he did with fellow artists from that group. The panels were all painted on cigar box lids and framed in flat wide lengths of kauri wood. These alone were well worth the visit to Canberra, and include landscapes, portraits and narrative scenes.

Thomas William Roberts – he painted light, and painted what he saw in Australia.

