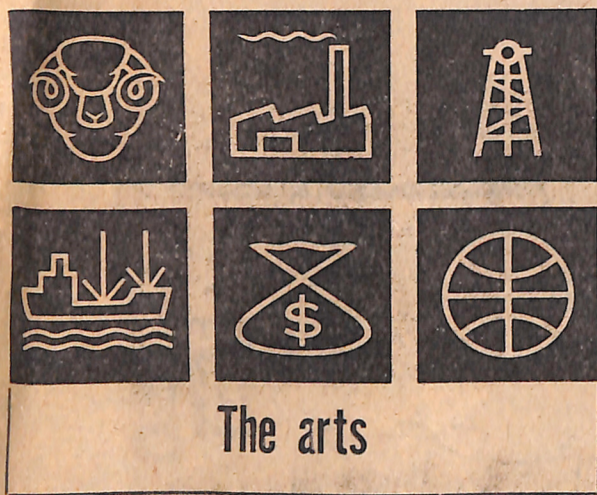
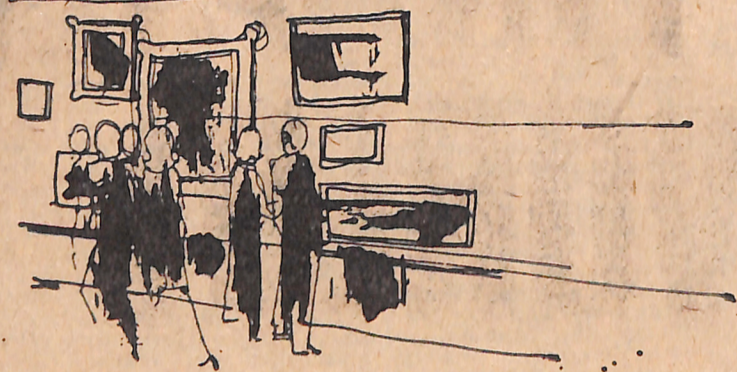


THE WAY AHEAD



The arts



Australia has reached a stage of affluence at which she is pleased to find a few dollars spare to use on art after all the plumbing is done

by **ROBIN BOYD,**
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ONLY seven or eight years ago you could count the number of artists who lived only by their art in Australia on the fingers of one hand. There were scores more — maybe hundreds — who would have liked very much to make a living by the sale of their paintings, but could not find enough public support.

These unsuccessful ones did not go hungry. They painted at night and in week ends, while by day they did signwriting or house-painting for good money to buy the necessities of life, like cheese and flacons of claret.

Today if you try to repeat the little arithmetic exercise you run out of fingers before you leave the top rank of well-known name painters who live by art alone. Thousands of dollars are offered annually in art prizes. Prices for pictures have doubled and redoubled. Red spots swim before the eyes at nearly every art show.

Artists (painters, I should say) are enjoying a boom in Australia almost the equivalent of the industrial miracle in West Germany or the scientific revolution in Russia. Young Australian artists now drive cars, wear suits, and often distinguish themselves from the pedestrian herd by having short hair.

Is it, then, safe to assume that art and culture in Australia have risen alongside industry and commerce to a secure new state of affluence and popular appreciation? And if this is so, have the artists changed, or has Australia?

Well, the artists have not changed. They are still the same people in the main, a little older and joined by new, younger ones with broadly the same approach to life: that is, a not entirely material approach. They have the creative spirit, which many societies in the past, and some

richer ones today, revere and honor.

They are trying to say something about themselves, their environment or their society, which has not been said before and which in some small way may increase the illumination of our world.

The artists have not changed, but Australia has. However, let us not be so optimistic as to suppose that it has increased its appreciation of artistic endeavor over the past decade in proportion to the increase in the value of a Dobell portrait.

What has happened is that a goodly number of well-to-do Australians have realised, as their American cousins did some years earlier, that paintings are the almost unavoidable next possession for a three-car, two-television, one-pool family. And paintings are good for at least three things.

If you have a conscience about your duty to culture, then paintings are the most painless way to absorb art — the taste almost disappears when taken with sherry. Secondly, most paintings are at least as good as most shares as an investment risk; and thirdly they still have much more residual status value than shares, even if you back a loser.

I hope there is someone still optimistic enough to resent my cynicism. I want it not to be true. I would like to believe that the big art boom represents a wide new awakening of appreciation and cultural maturity in Australia.

Yet while one can go for a time wishfully believing such a thing, once a year or so some shattering event proves that we are still at heart a nation of cultural bushmen, inviting and deserving the most devastating dismissals by visiting ill-wishers.

This is no place to discuss the merits and faults on either side of what I believe to be the most complex artistic riddle of the century, the Sydney Opera House. Some action was popularly required of the new Government of New South Wales. Yet at it had had any real sympathy with the vision it could have found a compromise that would have preserved the vision.

Instead the N.S.W. Government chose to solve the Opera House problem in the classic way of phillistines. It adopted the final solution to the problem of an arrogant artist: total elimination. Numerous Australians would like to adopt this solution at all times, for visions mean nothing to them.

Australia has reached a stage of affluence at which she is pleased to find a few dollars spare to use on art after all the plumbing is done. This is certainly an improvement but it still leaves us rather a way behind any pocket of civilisation which accepts the arts as being of about equal status to plumbing.

For instance, the architectural mode of successful Australia at this moment is to build something regimentally practical, anonymous, and defiantly unimaginative, but yet tipped with art, as a vanilla jés cream is with chocolate sauce.

Thus buildings of the utmost ennui are given a sculptured metal grille over the entrance door done by some dedicated and underpaid man from Eltham, or a mural from Warrandyte. Murals have become the symbol of this transitional period, poised as we are between the bush and self-contained civilisation.

Buildings done for Qantas and other Australian companies to American designs still have marals by real Australian artists. I hereby make prophesy that the final compromise which will be devised to finish the Sydney Opera House will include a mural done by an expatriate Australian artist.

Imported ideas decorated with Australiana: that is the stage we have reached in our cultural development, and the argument in justification of it is that we must keep up standards, that we would do Australia no good service by accepting lower standards just to give Australia's artistic people openings in their various fields.

That is the justification for almost all the secondhand artistic life of Australia today, for the death of the film industry, for the starvation of music and theatre, for all the obstacles erected in the way of all creative television, for the neurotic urge to call an international competition or to call in an "overseas expert" whenever something important has to be done.

A good imported idea or a dull local one — the secondhand or the second-rate: that is how a great number of Australians see the alternatives. Naturally enough they choose the former.

The proposition, however, is false. There is first-rate work of many kinds being done here despite the apparent apathy of the public to it. For every frustrated artist in any field who leaves Australia for the northern hemisphere in search of a less hedonistic and more sympathetic country, another fine artist seems to be born here to take his place.

Brilliant musicians, television writers, painters — we breed them by the dozen. We encourage them up to about school-leaving age. Then they discover that Australia has no real jobs for them. It is still a young, vigorous land of opportunity, but still all this is largely on the physical level. It is not yet a land where ideas are rewarded.

As a nation, we still feel safer with tried, tested, overseas ideas. (Usage of the word "overseas" as a superlative adjective is an Australian contribution to the English language.) We still consider we are doing well to imitate successfully. We have not learned to cultivate the man of creative promise.

Australia is not mean to many of her citizens. She rewards the slowest, dullest and laziest fairly. She permits enterprise, hard work and gambling to make some rich. Yet there is still a deep reluctance to pay for the tender qualities of talent, imagination and creative invention — to pay for research, planning, design, thinking or original ideas.

It is not fair or correct any more to call Australia a conservative nation. The country is not really run by old men any more (or is it just that they look younger as one gets older?) Anyway, there is now something more serious than conservatism.

The main obstacle to Australia's great, continuing promise over the recent years of one-sided physical progress seems to have been the lack of a sense of direction.

This has applied in all walks of life to varying degrees, and has been most apparent in the look of Australia — in the field of visual design — in most of our rather safe and dull buildings, our impoverished and entirely non-visual town planning, our couldn't-care-less attitude to the Australian landscape and to our monuments of the past. In all this we have conspicuously lacked a will to understand and be ourselves.

Yet Australia continues to change every day. A tiny indication of a possible revival of a sense of direction may be found in our change of heart towards the old gum tree.

Two or three years ago it was considered a noxious weed in the suburbs. Today no median strip in a divided highway, no municipal planting pocket, no shopping-centre landscape zone, is complete without a variety of sturdy eucalypts.

At least we have reached this plateau: the save-the-gumtree, the mural, or the chocolate sauce, stage in our artistic growth, and we should be thankful for small mercies.

There is hope so long as we don't pretend to ourselves that we are contributing to world art because some people like Sidney Nolan and Robert Helpmann are recognised as the top of their classes overseas and yet still can bear to come home occasionally.

There is hope that in this transitional stage we will later develop more self-reliance and a more sensitive appreciation of creative expression bound more closely to the Australian life, so that we may be, eventually, neither second-rate nor anything but ourselves.

