Nora Heysen
Light and Life
Education Resource
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This Education Resource is produced in association with the touring exhibition *Nora Heysen: Light and life*, curated by Jane Hylton and coordinated by Carrick Hill, Adelaide. The exhibition explores Nora Heysen’s world and work and highlights the strengths and diversity of her studio practice in a notable career spanning seven decades.

*Cover image: Self Portrait (detail), 1953, oil on canvas, 89.0 x 66.5 cm; Collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; South Australian Government Grant, 1994*

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1 ABOUT THIS EDUCATION RESOURCE

The Resource is designed to support learning outcomes and teaching programs associated with viewing the Nora Heysen: Light and life exhibition by:

• providing information about the artist and her practice
• exploring exhibition subjects and themes
• locating the artist’s work within art-historical contexts
• challenging students to engage with the works and the exhibition’s themes
• identifying ways in which the exhibition can be used as a curriculum resource.

It may be used in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition and as a pre-visit or post-visit resource.

Year Level
This Resource is designed to be used by primary, secondary – senior secondary visual art teachers and students.

Learning Areas
Visual Art: the exhibition offers insights into:
• the artistic development and contribution of a significant Australian woman artist
• studio-based styles and techniques
• art historical contexts of the modernist period

Society / Australian Studies
• the roles and contribution of women artists within Australian society
• Australians at war

English / Literacy
• Analysing works or reporting and debating findings related to viewing works will require students to make effective use of language and writing skills.
Self Portrait, 1953
oil on canvas, 89.0 x 66.5 cm; Collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; South Australian Government Grant, 1994

Nora Heysen is regarded as one of Australia’s premier portrait and still-life artists. Born in 1911, the fourth of Hans and Selma (Sallie) Heysen’s eight children, she grew up in the family home, The Cedars, at Hahndorf in the Adelaide Hills. From an early age Nora was determined to be an artist. Through study and application she achieved critical success and in her early twenties was able to realise a dream of living and studying in London.

By the time she returned to Australia in late 1937 her artistic horizons had been expanded by exposure to the diversity of traditional and modern European art. The artist moved to Sydney in 1938, perhaps to restore a sense of independence as an artist which she had enjoyed while overseas. This had the effect of extending Heysen’s reputation beyond South Australia and consolidating her credentials as a commissioned portrait painter. Winning the Archibald Prize in the same year (the first female artist to win this prestigious award) confirmed her growing reputation as one of Australia’s foremost woman artists.
Heysen was an official war artist (the nation’s first female war artist) and served as a captain in the Australian Women’s Army Service 1943–46.

From the late 1940s to the time of her death in 2003 her working base was Sydney and from 1954 her home, The Chalet, in Hunters Hill. Frequent travel with her husband Robert Black to Pacific destinations, including New Guinea and the Solomon Islands (1954–65), offered opportunities to extend her practice and to draw and paint local people, subjects which figured prominently in her output at this time.

The art of her senior years reflected in its flower studies, garden subjects, interiors and figure studies how special the intimate moments and subjects associated with her domestic world and studio practice were for the artist. Across this period she exhibited rarely but sufficiently for the Australian art community to appreciate the full flowering of her talents and imagination as an artist.

Awards and honours reflected this appreciation. In 1993 Heysen received the Australia Council’s Award for Achievement in the Arts. In 1998 she was awarded the Order of Australia (AM). In 2000 a major retrospective exhibition Nora Heysen was presented by the National Library of Australia, Canberra. In 2004 the Nora Heysen Foundation Inc was established in South Australia, based at the Heysen family home, The Cedars, Hahndorf, South Australia.

Insights
“Nora Heysen remains one of the most significant of the Australian female artists of the last century. She was a remarkable woman whose artistic achievements spanned a period of some 75 years, and who gained continued respect for her acknowledged passion and genuine dedication to her art. Nora Heysen was a beautiful colourist, formidable drawer, superb draughtsman and skilful exponent of oil on brush; an artist who placed herself in the history books by becoming the first woman to win the prestigious Archibald Prize and the first appointed female war artist in World War II.”

Allan Campbell
Curator, The Cedars, the Hans Heysen Estate
Chairman, the Nora Heysen Foundation Incorporated

“Ultimately the essence of Nora Heysen’s art reflects her continual pursuit of and love for light and life.”

Jane Hylton
Curator, Nora Heysen: Light and life
Meet the artist: Creative journey

Natural talent and work: Early years in Adelaide 1920s–1933

Nora, of all the Heysen children, demonstrated the most artistic interest and talent. Encouraged by her father she learnt to draw and paint. Aged fifteen she began formal art studies at the School of Fine Arts in North Adelaide. From the late 1920s to the early 1930s she continued to develop skills in drawing and painting across a variety of subjects, principally still life, portraiture (including self portraits) and landscape. Early work carries the imprint of the formal and conservative training she received primarily at the School of Fine Arts under Frederick Millward Gray. From Gray she learnt to analyse and illustrate objects in terms of essential volumes; cylinders, spheres and cubes. This system gave her the basis on which to explore the possibilities of form and composition.

Still life with cheese and bread, 1931
oil on canvas, 50.0 x 60.0 cm; Courtesy of Kensington Galleries, Adelaide; Photograph by Mick Bradley

An emerging individual: Life in London 1934–37

From the early 1930s and across the period spent in London (1934–37), it is possible to identify a noticeable shift in style and methodology. The earth colours palette which had served her so faithfully was replaced by a richer palette of bright luminous colours and brush handling became more gestural and textured. While in London Nora studied at the Central School. This study was supplemented by visits to galleries. While the subject matter of Heysen’s work continued to be primarily still life subjects, studio interiors, a few landscapes and portraits (including self portraits) her work reflected an increased awareness of the possibilities of colour to enliven the image and create mood. Change was also evident in an increasing complexity and sophistication of compositional arrangements within still lifes and interiors.
A wealth of experience: Sydney late 1930s–early 1940s

Nora returned to Australia, initially to Adelaide and The Cedars in later 1937 before moving to Sydney in 1938. Distinctive features of work made on her return were a more high-key palette (as opposed to an earlier reliance on darks and lights) and a looser painting style. This had the effect of establishing light and colour as central concerns of her practice. During this early 1940s period the artist continued to explore painterly expression through more gestural brushwork without abandoning sound draughtsmanship and compositional structure. At this time she completed a number of significant paintings related to the subject of motherhood.
At war 1943–46

In October 1943 Heysen took up an appointment as captain in the Australian Women’s Army Service. She was the first woman in Australia to be appointed as a war artist. During this time she produced over 170 works of art. This body of work consists of a range of subjects from formal portraits of female office bearers to more informal portraits and views of women engaged in a range of duties. Tropical conditions made oil painting very difficult and Heysen chose at times to work in chalk. Working in situ and speed required a change in technique; more direct and rapid brush work.

Pacific region work: 1954–64

Heysen married Robert Black in early 1953 and over the next decade accompanied him on research expeditions that took them both to Papua New Guinea, The Solomon and Trobriand Islands and the New Hebrides (now known as Vanuatu). On several Pacific region journeys the artist made numerous drawings and some oil paintings of local, indigenous people. Working mainly in chalks (a more manageable medium in the difficult climate and working conditions) Heysen honed her figurative drawing skills. Jane Hylton comments that, “The works she produced during these journeys are exceptional in Heysen’s oeuvre. Her knowledge of the human form translated readily into beautifully fresh portraits of the indigenous women and men.”
A home of her own: Sydney 1950s–2003

Following war service Heysen quickly re-established her artistic career. By 1951 she was very busy accepting commissions for both portraits and flower still lifes. In 1954 Nora and Robert purchased The Chalet at Hunters Hill, Sydney. Over the following decades Nora Heysen’s work became more introspective and reliant on subjects drawn from her domestic setting at The Chalet, including her garden and its flowers, local children, her cats and studio scenes. Heysen joined a local life-drawing group and over time produced a large and significant body of drawings of the nude model. As Heysen worked into her seventies her painting style became bolder and paint application dryer and more rapid.
Hans Heysen

The most significant formative influence on Nora Heysen’s practice was that of her father, the nationally acclaimed landscape artist, Hans Heysen. Hans had undergone his own initiation into the world of art when as a young man he studied and travelled in Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century (1899–1904). It was a time of radical change. The influence of Impressionism and a modified form of Impressionism spread in the final twenty years of the century. Many artists found ways to combine some of Impressionism’s innovative features, such as its freer brushwork, a preoccupation with light and atmosphere and an interest in modern-life subjects, with elements of a more conservative, academic kind. This complexity was apparent in Heysen’s work where a number of subjects and settings indicate a broad debt to humanist artists including Rembrandt and Millet. Heysen’s ‘capture’ of light, often within rural subject works, reflects his close study of the ‘atmospheric’ artists, particularly Claude Lorraine, J.M.W. Turner, John Constable and Jean-Baptiste Corot.

Heysen had encountered Modernist trends in the form of art by Paul Cézanne, Vincent Van Gogh and others. He admired aspects of their work but felt that Modernism in general placed undue emphasis on personal expression at the expense of form and structure. These priorities are clearly expressed in a letter he wrote to Nora while she was studying in London.

At your present stage of development, colour after all is not of such importance as form and structure — never relinquish your hold on your search for structure — it is indispensable to help you build your foundations: first form and structure then colour

Hans Heysen to Nora Heysen 22 March, 1930

Nora’s early training in drawing, composition and tonal realism and her ‘apprenticeship’ under the watchful and encouraging eye of her father in his studio ensured that this emphasis on structure emerged as a key organising principle for her work. Although the style of her mature work changed as she allowed colour a more central role it is still possible to identify a sense of ‘visual scaffolding’ created by the forms of individual objects and their relationships within a composition.

Impressionism

The first Impressionist exhibition was held in Paris in 1874. By the late 1880s it had become less a specific art movement associated with a small group of radical artists (including Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, Mary Cassatt and others) and more a generic style with many variations. But characteristic elements such as painting en plein air, divided or ‘broken’ brush work, use of pure and complementary colours, and emphasis on light remained in common. Australian artists (unless they travelled overseas) in the first half of the twentieth century (including Nora Heysen) had little or no contact with original Impressionist (or Modernist) works. Heysen was inspired by a major exhibition of Monet’s work seen in London in 1936. This had a great influence on her style particularly in the use of brighter colour and the treatment of light.

Post-Impressionism

This term was derived from the title of an exhibition held in London in 1910. The participating artists, including Cézanne, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Georges Seurat and Van Gogh, represented a phase of artistic experiment which replaced Impressionism (thus the title). While Post-Impressionism was a very broad term to describe a diversity of styles and approaches, there were similarities in the work of artists associated in some way with the Post-Impressionist style. The imagery tended to a flattening of pictorial space and simplification of form. Colour was arbitrary and determined by imaginative or expressive imperatives rather than truth to original sources. The appeal of this approach for a number of younger British artists (and for Nora Heysen) was that it retained a strong link with the world of appearances – unlike forms of Cubism, Surrealism and abstraction.

Nora Heysen’s exposure to a wide range of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art was extensive. The artist recalled being particularly drawn to the work of Auguste Renoir, Monet, Pierre Bonnard, Alfred Sisley, Cézanne, and Van Gogh. This experience inspired Heysen to express a sense of ‘light and air’ in her work.

The Pissarro connection

In 1935 Heysen was invited to meet the artist Orovida Pissarro, the daughter of Lucien Pissarro whose work both Nora and Hans Heysen admired. Orovida confronted Nora with observations that her painting was “muddy and fifty years behind the time” and “too low in tone” and suggested a new range of colours to use including cadmiums, ultramarine, cobalt and crimson. In response Nora deliberately brightened her palette and noted with satisfaction that it created more “vibration and brilliance than before”. This introduction of more high-key notes into her work marks a significant shift in London-period work. The consequences can be seen in work subsequently made over the remainder of her life, expressed in confident handling of rich and brightly coloured compositions.
MEET THE ARTIST: IN CONTEXT

The turn of the century – a time of change

The late nineteenth century marked the end of the pioneering era in Australia. Some Australian Impressionists, Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton and Fred McCubbin in particular, commemorated this era in a number of paintings which became national icons (including Arthur Streeton, Fire’s on, 1891, Tom Roberts, Shearing the rams, 1890 and A break away!, 1891, Fred McCubbin, The Pioneer, 1904). In the early twentieth century, pastoral landscapes were valued as expressions of national identity. Hans Heysen was celebrated as the inheritor and foremost exponent of this tradition.

Expatriate and European travel experience: late nineteenth century

By the early twentieth century the strategy of leaving Australia to study and travel in England and Europe became a priority for some Australian artists. The movement of artists and art students to Europe (mainly to London and Paris) began in the 1880s and continued into the 1930s. The first wave (1880–1900) included Tom Roberts and John Russell who left in 1881, Bertram Mackennal 1883, Rupert Bunny 1884, Charles Conder 1890, Arthur Streeton 1898, Hugh Ramsay, Max Meldrum and George Lambert 1899.

Modernism

After World War I (1914–18), the young nation of Australia underwent great economic and social change. This change was reflected in art of the period. A new generation of artists looked for subjects and styles which better expressed (than pastoral landscape painting) the idea of Australian as a modern, urbanised nation. This generation was attracted to styles and ideas associated with European Modernism. Modernism is a general term which applied to a wide range of art styles and philosophies associated with early twentieth century art. Art styles associated with it include; Cubism, Surrealism, Abstraction, Constructivism, Futurism and Vorticism. While elements of Post-Impressionist style filtered back to Australia through the travel and study experiences of a few artists, familiarity with a wider range of modern styles was restricted to reproductions in art publications. Encountering modern art meant overseas travel. World travel became more accessible during the late nineteenth to early twentieth century and a number of younger Australian artists, particularly women artists, seized the opportunity to broaden their horizons.

Australian women artists and Modernism

From the 1920s opportunities opened for women to take more independent and less conventional roles in society. World War 1 had a major impact on life in Australia. Families lost menfolk and many soldiers were severely wounded. As a result, in the period following the war many women took more responsibility within the home. A period of economic prosperity before the Great Depression (1929–1931) gave people and some women in particular, a greater degree of social freedom. For some women this translated as opportunities to follow an artistic career in Australia or overseas.

The first wave of overseas travel occurred in the years leading to the First World War. This group included; Bessie Davidson, Hilda Rix Nicholas, Stella Bowen, Margaret Preston, Thea Proctor, Gladys Rejnell, Jessie Traill, Kathleen O’Connor, Agnes Goodwin and Grace Cossington Smith.

The images produced by Australia’s women artists from the 1920s to the later 1930s expressed a creative and positive response to the challenges of becoming a twentieth century, modern nation. These artists explored new ideas about what art could be and portray. They brought new movements such as Cubism back from Europe. They explored and extended painting and printmaking in ways that challenged other artists and Australian audiences.

The women who dominated the two decades from the 1920s to the 1940s challenged the conservative mood of art and society during this period. Included in this generation of women artists venturing outside of Australia were; Jean Appleton, Dorrit Black, Grace Crowley, Anne Dangar, Lisette Kolhagen, Kathleen Sauerbier, Ethel Spowers and Eveline Syme. A feature of the work of this group of artists was the willingness to seek out and use urban and industrial subjects (such as cities, trains and bridges) and treating them in a stylistic manner which emphasised, technological change, speed and modernity.

Nora Heysen’s modernity

Nora Heysen, until she travelled overseas, was isolated from the revolutionary changes taking place in the art world in the first part of the twentieth century. Her art training was conservative as was the art scene in Adelaide at this time. Her father Hans had made a conscious decision to turn his back on much of the Modernist experimentation he observed while overseas thirty years earlier. Nora was cautious but curious about aspects of modern art. Her eventual adoption of a broadly Post-Impressionist approach which used colour and a measure of expressive painterly style – a measure of how far she felt she could embrace the spirit of Modernism without abandoning principles of sound draughtsmanship and compositional structure.
Explore: Still life

Still life with cheese and bread, 1931
oil on canvas, 50.0 x 60.0 cm; Courtesy of Kensington Galleries, Adelaide; Photograph by Mick Bradley

Consider

This early example shows the artist applying her emerging skills in tonal realism. This means that shades of colours (lighter to darker) basically define solid forms. This is clearly evident in the loaf of bread and the eggs.

The single source of light (from viewer’s right to left) has made it easy for the artist to organise the highlights and shadows. Within this working arrangement Heysen has also had to deal with reflected light. Look at the lower surfaces of the two eggs lower right to see how the light from the tablecloth is ‘bouncing up’ onto the eggs.

A challenge for realist artists is to create convincing simulations of surfaces and textures across a wide range of objects. Consider how successful Nora has been in rendering the surface qualities of the bread, eggs and bottle. Look also at the way the artist has worked to ‘capture’ the translucency of liquid in the glass and the crinkled quality of the paper wrapped around the block of cheese.

Consider also how in this very tonal image how the red units on the bottle (cork and seal) are used to ‘lift’ the mood of this image and act as points of focus.

The composition is based on a traditional formula of the triangle. The top of the bottle acts as the apex and the front edge of the tablecloth the base. Notice how the knife is angled to lead the eye inwards and up towards the bottle.
This picture can be looked at in two different ways. Half close your eyes and the apples might suddenly begin to look solid. Open them and they might begin to float or dissolve. This effect is commonly found in many of Nora Heysen’s later works. It is an indication of how determined she was to fuse elements of light and life within her work.

The treatment of light is much different to early tonal realist work (as seen in *Still life with cheese and bread*) where a single source of light created a predictable range of highlights and shadows. In *Apples* the light seems to be everywhere almost to the point of shining from within solid forms. This is largely due to the dominance of yellow within the total composition and the loose, open brushwork which has left sections of the white underpainting visible.

The composition is less formal than in early work. The back rungs of the chair positioned on the right create an asymmetry which has been counterbalanced by the two red apples closest to the viewer. The close focus on the subject (which has resulted in the tight cropping of the chair) and the slight degree of tilting towards the viewer are legacies of the artist’s grasp of Modernist principles of composition and viewer engagement.
**EXPLORE: FLOWERS**

*Summer flowers*, 1933
oil on canvas, 76.1 x 61.2 cm; Collection of the Carrick Hill Trust, Adelaide; The Hayward Bequest; Photograph by Mick Bradley

**Consider**

This painting is an excellent example of the high level of skill Nora Heysen had achieved, by the early 1930s, in rendering complex arrangements of flowers. The flowers depicted had been freshly cut and the artist needed to work quickly to capture a sense of freshness and beauty before the blooms faded and wilted.

Compare this work to an earlier flower-subject painting in the exhibition such as *Scabious* painted in 1930. There are a number of differences in approach. In *Still life* there is far less reliance on transitions from light to dark within individual blooms to create illusions of form.

The colours are brighter and the placement of colours (the reds and blues for example) is strategic in terms of inviting the eye to track across the image to explore like and unlike colour relationships.

The composition makes a strong visual statement. Notice how the blooms are pushed out to the edges of the image. This has the effect of breaking up the background or ‘negative’ space behind the subject into areas of interest.

The brushwork (seen best in the original) is decisive and bold.
Consider

This still life is characteristic of later work by the artist in which painterly expression dominates. The artist has worked directly and with speed in defining the principal features and objects within the composition. This is a ‘drawing style’ of painting. Most items such as the vase of flowers, the apples in the basket and the plate have been depicted by multiple sweeps and dashes of a relatively thin brush. The broader areas, particularly the table top, window and wall have also been ‘built up’ with sweeping brush marks.

The colour relationships of yellow and pink dominate the composition. The bunch of flowers relies on passages of white and the radiating extensions of green to establish its presence in the middle of such a high energy composition.

To maintain freshness the artist has left some areas of underpainting exposed. On the left of the flowers it is possible to see where the artist has scraped back through the pigment to the canvas.

As with most of Nora Heysen’s work, no matter how energised or expressive in style, it is possible to see how control was maintained by weighing tonal values. To appreciate this peer at the image through half-closed eyes and try to see the image in terms of light and dark (and shades between). You may notice how the dark passages in the bunch of flowers, the foreground basket of apples and to a lesser extent, the rectangular unit far right tend to ‘anchor’ the image and prevent it from dissolving into a mass of shapes, lines and colours.
Explore: Self portraits

Self-portrait, 1932
oil on canvas, 76.2 x 61.2 cm; Collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney;
Gift of Howard Hinton 1932; Photograph by Jenni Carter

Consider

Nora Heysen painted a number of self portraits, often at critical points in her professional and private life. As such they are revealing expressions of self scrutiny.

This 1932 self portrait was painted when the artist was barely in her twenties. It was painted in her father’s studio, before she has her own studio space. The work bench in the background, with its collection of painting materials and boards, emphasizes the idea of an artist at work. The pose that Nora strikes is one used conventionally by traditional artists to project and define their professional identity. The palette is one given to the artist by the acclaimed singer Dame Nellie Melba.

There is a framed picture behind her head. It is a reproduction of a painting by the Dutch seventeenth century artist Jan Vermeer, an artist both Nora and Hans Heysen admired. The controlled tonal realism of this work and low-key range of colours, particularly the dark brown of the artist’s clothing and the white of the collar, echo the style, tonal values and even the period costuming to be found within Vermeer’s painting.

Technically, Heysen built her painting on her strong drawing skills This is particularly evident in the face where the dramatic modelling of volumes bears a strong similarity to portrait drawings made by the artist around this time.

The composition relies heavily on the extreme contrast of the dark silhouette of the torso and the rectangular framed pictures on the wall and the light areas of the wall and stacked painting boards.

The purple-blue of the fabric on the back of the chair and the red pigment on the palette have been given the task of enlivening or lifting the mood of the image.
This is a revealing self-portrait, made in London, at a crisis point in Nora Heysen’s life. It was the last painting the artist made before returning to Australia. London was a hard, cold and lonely place. Recent negative critical opinion of her work had crushed her spirits. Having created this work, the artist abandoned it. Perhaps the mood it conveys was too difficult to confront.

The subject is the artist in her small studio-flat. It’s a cramped space. The artist is in fact sitting partly on her palette with a line of washing running just behind her head and a cooking stove immediately to one side.

Compare the pose of the figure to that in the 1932 self-portrait (illustrated this Resource). In the earlier work Nora has the upright manner and self-assured look of someone purposeful and in control. In the 1937 self portrait the body is slumped, the face expressionless except for the eyes which look away from the viewer. The overall impression is that of weariness. Perhaps the washing has a symbolic role to play by suggesting that the artist herself has emotionally been ‘hung out to dry’. Think about the ‘down and out’ reference in the title.

The low-key mood conveyed by the figure is in contrast to the up-beat style of painting. This work is an excellent example of the range of Modernist influences Nora Heysen absorbed while in London. The direct influence may well be the Post-Impressionist styles of representation promoted through the artist’s contact with Lucien and Orovida Pissarro. By this time Nora had looked with initial curiosity then enthusiasm at a wide range of modern-era artists including Renoir, Monet, Sisley, Cezanne, Bonnard and Van Gogh.

Evidence of Modernist influences can be seen in the use of ‘broken brush work’ (individual, square headed brush marks laid side by side to build areas), complementary colour to create shadows (as seen in the cool colour highlights on the face and the brighter, pastel-hued colour range).
Consider

As an official war artist Nora Heysen created over 170 works of art. 152 of these works were ultimately acquired by the Australian War Memorial under the Official War Art Scheme. This body of work presents a range of subjects. It included formal portraits of female office bearers as well as less formal views of women engaged in a wide range of work. Collectively they constitute a unique record of Australian women’s contribution to the war effort.

This portrait of a nurse working in a make-shift blood bank in Papua New Guinea is typical of a number of work site interiors made in various theatres of war. In creating such an image Heysen needed to call upon her drawing and rendering skills, particularly in dealing with interior lighting. The artist’s experience in painting interiors is particularly evident in the bold massing of lights and darks to achieve dramatic effect and add interest to what another observer might see as a commonplace scene.

The painting style of this work is direct. Consider how, for example, the artist has created the impression of numerous bottles on the work bench using decisive brush marks and highlights.
Consider

The person in this painting is the pathologist Captain Robert Black, a specialist in tropical diseases. Heysen met him during the war. They corresponded, maintained contact and later married in 1953.

Jane Hylton has observed of such images that they were almost like “incidental images such as one might catch while walking down the wards corridor a busy hospital. These interiors reflect the concentrated intensity that surrounded the entire war effort – we dare not disturb Sister Minnie Goldstein as she works in the blood bank in Alexishafen in Papua New Guinea, nor interrupt Robert Black as he focuses on titrating sera”.

In this picture the artist has maintained a middle-distance focus to ensure that the viewer gets a real sense of the laboratory environment in which the doctor is working. Her portrait and figure skills are evident not only in the concentration expressed on the face but the delicacy of hand gestures in holding a delicate item of laboratory equipment.
Consider

Early in her career Nora made a conscious decision to excel in portraiture. One reason for this was the fact that her father, Hans, had, as she once put, ‘taken out copyright on the gum tree’ and by implication tree-studded landscapes. In portraiture Nora felt she could work in her own space without inevitable comparisons with her father.

The artist made a number of sketches and paintings of the person represented in the painting. She was a local Hahndorf woman named Ronda. Nora’s mother Sallie had arranged for Ronda to model for Nora. The artist found inspiration in the subject’s strong features and healthy appearance. Heysen gave the figure in her finished portrait the Biblical name of ‘Ruth’.

Three painted versions of ‘Ruth’ give a good idea of Nora’s interest at the time in fifteenth century Florentine Renaissance painting. There are, for example, strong visual similarities between this work and Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*.

The sparse, hilly character of the background landscape is intended to match the tough, robust appearance of the woman.

Technically the work is painted in two sections. The figure is defined in careful tonal realism with smooth transitions between highlights and shadows. The background landscape on the other hand has been built up by free-spirited glazing over cool grey underpainting.
Consider

The art of Nora Heysen’s senior years reflected in its flower studies, garden subjects, interiors and figure studies how special the intimate moments and subjects associated with her domestic world and studio practice at Hunters Hill were for the artist. This portrait of a local boy nursing a cat captures a simple moment in time.

A feature of this work is the open, confident brush work which matches the subject in its informality. The image has been built up from a light ochre background wash, some brush-drawn lines to define the chair and the figure, then some wet-in-wet build up of areas (particularly the hands and the cat) to pull the primary features together.
“To look. To see. To really see. That is the ultimate result. If you do it well enough and contribute something of the imagination and real knowledge to anything you do it must have an effect on the viewer. It opens your eyes. You just don’t look. You see. You feel.”
Nora Heysen, speaking in film production, Of art and men: Nora Heysen, Schlusser, Eugene, Seven S Productions, Sydney, 2007

As an artist working in the studio tradition Nora Heysen thought and acted visually. Her training taught her to think of a picture as essentially a composition. This meant that no matter what the subject might be (a face, figure or vase of flowers for example) it had to work as a visual statement. So painting for Nora Heysen was always more than copying or creating a likeness. It had to capture the visual character of the subject and it had to capture the viewer’s imagination. By favouring a certain visual style Nora Heysen provides clues to her intentions as an artist. Recognising these clues creates an opportunity to share the artist’s feelings about the beauty and uniqueness of, in her words, “life and life”.

To make this happen Heysen thought and acted as if she was playing a game. In this game there were a number of key players such as light, colour and composition.

Time to look at one of Nora’s paintings to see how it’s been put together and how it works.

General description: What does this picture look like? What is it about? What does it show?
This painting shows a woman sitting at a table in a room. She is reading (a book?) while having a cup of tea (or coffee?).

Is there any more information? The woman is wearing a dressing gown and has slippers on her feet. Alongside the cup and saucer on the table is a cut loaf of bread on a bread board, on a tray, a tea pot, a bottle of milk, a cut pumpkin on a saucer and a vase with flowers in it.
This type of description is like an audit or checklist of what’s in the picture. It provides a platform on which additional information can be added as follows:

**Light:** Where is the light coming from? Is it natural or artificial? How has the artist dealt with reflected light?

**Colour:** What kind of colours has the artist used? Do some kinds of colours dominate? Does it look as if the artist has given some thought to where different areas of colour are placed? To answer this question focus on all the ‘blues’ in the picture. Notice how they are varied shades of blue and that they are ‘scattered’ within the composition. Do you think the artist intended to do this? If so, why?

**Patterns:** Patterns are often used by artists to build visual energy. Items in a picture may have decorative patterns as part of their surfaces (such as the rug on the floor in this picture). Or the artist will sometimes repeat marks, lines, shapes, colours or brush marks to create patterning. See if you can find examples of both in this picture.

**Composition:** How is everything arranged or placed within the picture? Does it look as if the artist has given some thought about where different things are placed? Do you think for example that the artist meant to line up the bowl on the mantelpiece with the painting above and the table legs below?

**Lines and shapes:** Artists like Nora Heysen understood the power of lines and shapes to create interest and to control the way a picture is viewed. The table and chair legs for example have important work to do in subdividing the lower part of the picture into interesting smaller sections. To find the important shapes try peering at the picture through your eyelashes. When you do so you might notice that much of the lower part of the picture ‘comes together’ to make a large shape against the upper part which is mainly the light coloured wall. But when you do this you might also notice that many of the items on the table such as the bottle of milk and the loaf of bread ‘come together’ to make some interesting light-toned shapes in the middle of the picture.

**Space and spatial depth:** The artist has used shading to create the illusion that such things as the loaf of bread, the cup and the pumpkin are solid or three dimensional. Can you find other examples of shading used to create illusions of reality? The artist has also used a visual system called perspective to increase the spatial depth of the picture. Find out what this term means and see if you can find examples of this system at work in this picture.

**Mood:** Nora Heysen created interpretations not copies of reality. In expressing her feelings about her subjects she intentionally or otherwise created moods which speak directly to the viewer. The way the artist chooses to interpret her subjects usually decides the overall mood of the work. It remains a personal thing. You may get a sense of a particular mood the artist never intended.

**Style:** Art works are often classified according to style. To say that Nora Heysen’s art is in a realist or Post-Impressionist or Modernist style is only useful to a degree. It doesn’t say what makes her art special or distinctive. However when analysing or discussing individual works it is very useful to think about the style as being the sum of all the various features and visual elements working together. Thus we can talk about early paintings and drawings as being in a tonal realist style. Late works, on the other hand, may be described as expressive. With Nora Heysen it is perhaps best to talk in terms of her work having its own or distinctive style.

**Medium:** The way the paint is applied in a painting (usually but not exclusively with a brush) reveals much about the artist’s intentions. A lively or ‘worked’ painting surface or areas composed of multiple and visible brush (or other medium) marks will usually build the visual energy of the picture. It may also help to build or define the mood of a work. Reproductions will not always convey this information so when you see the original London breakfast check it out.

**Technique:** This a broad term that covers the different methods the artist uses when working with an art medium such as oil paint or pastel. It may include the support, (stretched canvas or board), ground (base on which the pigment is placed), preliminary drawing on the ground, underpainting, washing or staining, indirect painting methods such as working from thin to thick layers of pigment or applying glazes over pre-prepared surfaces, direct painting methods such as wet-in-wet manipulation of pigment or working back such as wiping, scraping or inscribing.
FOR TEACHERS/STUDENTS: 
LEARNING CONNECTIONS

The following activities can be adapted/adopted for visit/post-visit use:

Visual Arts

Studio/Arts practice
• Having viewed the exhibition check it out one more time to see if there’s an idea or technique (in a work) that you could try when you get back to school or your studio.
• Nora Heysen always considered the way her pictures worked as compositions. Try producing some images which deliberately use or manipulate compositional elements.
• Heysen often used colour relationships as a means of organising and adding interest to her images. Try producing some images which deliberately explore relationships between colours.
• Try completing a still life painting of freshly cut or gathered flowers (or a plant) which captures the freshness of the subject before the blooms fade and wilt.
• Try producing a work which makes deliberate use of Post-Impressionist ideas and techniques
• In later life Nora Heysen found inspiration and subjects in life around her at Hunters Hill. See if you can make a work of art based on subjects drawn from your own personal surroundings.
• In her work as a war artist, Nora Heysen essentially focused on individuals making their contribution. Consider using this as a starting point for some of your own work using local events or issues as a starting point.

Personal response/analysis of works
• Select one work that appeals in some way and tell someone else your reasons for your selection.
• Write a review of the exhibition which explores the links or relationships between the works. You might find the ‘Explore’ themes in this Resource a useful starting point for this.
• The artist has said that her art was essentially about ‘light and life’. How successful do you think she was in achieving this?
• Write or present a formal analysis of a selected work using aspects listed in ‘Keys for looking’ in this Resource as a reference.
• Compare a small selection of Heysen’s work to demonstrate how the artist’s ideas and style changed over time.

Art history / Art in context
• Still life is a significant genre or tradition within art of the European tradition. As a student of this tradition Nora Heysen adopted many of its conventions and techniques. See if you can identify some of them.
• Heysen was an Australian war artist. Have there been others? Have there been other Australian women war artists? The Australian War Memorial site www.awm.gov.au will be a useful starting point.
• This Resource includes the names of a number of women artists who made a significant contribution to Australia’s acceptance of modern art in the first half of the twentieth century (see ‘Meet the artist: In context’ in this Resource). Consider researching one of these artists to find out more about the kind of art they produced.
• The artist had a shock when told by Orovida Pissarro that her work was fifty years out of date. Why do you think Orovida said this?
Society
• Australian society of the first half of the twentieth century found most forms of modern art to be incomprehensible, confronting and even ‘dangerous’. Why was this so?
• Nora Heysen, as a daughter and female artist, was conscious of always ‘working in her father’s shadow’. Do you think these kinds of things remain an issue or challenge for young women aspiring to develop their own careers today?

Literacy/English
Analysing works or reporting and debating findings related to viewing works will require students to make effective use of language and writing skills. Analysing and responding will also allow students to learn more about art as a powerful form of communication.

Listening and speaking
• Select one of the suggested themes in this Resource (e.g. Still life, Australians at war) and give a short presentation which analyses some works within this thematic context.
• Can art really capture or express ‘art and life’? Or is it just in the mind of the artist or the viewer? Organise a debate about the idea of beauty. Set this debate within the context of a question (e.g. should we really believe what artists say?).
• Some people commissioned Heysen to paint flower still lifes on the basis that they wanted to own something beautiful to look at. Why do some people believe flowers to be beautiful? Where does this idea come from? Why should flowers get singled out for special treatment? Is all nature equally beautiful? Consider organising a debate around these questions.

Writing
• Write a wall label text for one or more works in the exhibition using your personal response as a starting point.
• Write a short piece which imagines the thoughts and feelings occurring within the artist’s mind as she worked on a painting.
For Teachers/Students: Get started (in the exhibition)

The following tasks are designed to support/initiate structured viewing and engagement for students in the exhibition. They can be undertaken in any order and are suitable for individual and small group work. Implicit in some tasks is the idea that students or groups will report findings and discuss works with others. Scribing is not necessary to undertake these activities but some of these tasks could involve scribing to support on-going post-visit work.

First and last impressions
• What did you think about when you first came into the exhibition and looked around?
• Was there any work in particular you wanted to look at or return to and look at again? Why do you think this happened?
• Is there a work in this exhibition that you think you will never forget or find hard to forget?
• Before leaving check out the exhibition one more time to see if there's an idea or technique in a work that you could try when you get back to school

Think about
• When you find yourself wanting to look at some works in particular do think it is because the image or subject is interesting or is it because of the artist’s technique or way of interpreting the subject
• If disaster strikes you could save one work from this exhibition, which one would you save and why?

Easy?
• Which work was the easiest and which work was the hardest to make – and why?

Analysis and response (individual work/s)
Choose any work that attracts your attention and apply any or all of the following questions
• Are the visual qualities of this work appealing in any way?
• Can you see any kind of connection between this kind of art and others you know about?
• What do you think this work is about or might be saying?
• Write a caption (extended wall label) for a selected work based on your own personal response, feelings or interpretation.
• Has this given you an idea for something you could make as part of your art studies?
• Select one work that appeals in some way and tell someone else your reasons for your selection.

Analysis and response (the exhibition)
• Write a review of the exhibition which explores the links or relationships between the works.
• Choose one of the themes suggested in the ‘Explore’ section of this Education Resource and review the exhibition from this perspective.
• Are there other themes (not identified in this Resource) which could apply to this selection of work.
• Write a press release for this exhibition.
• Compare two or more works which appear to be exploring similar ideas in different ways.
Research and further resources

Research for this Education Resource is drawn primarily from the following publication produced in association with the *Nora Heysen: Light and life* exhibition at Carrick Hill, Adelaide 2008–09.


Other recommended texts


Gray, Anna, *Send me more paint!*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1989

Hylton, Jane, *South Australian women artists: Paintings from the 1890s to 1940*, Art Gallery Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1994


Recommended websites


Search under ‘Nora Heysen’. This site contains an extensive Nora Heysen profile (and linked education materials) and resources related to other Australian war artists.

[www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au)  Australian War Memorial, Canberra


Search under ‘Education’ for education resources linked to the exhibitions *Hans Heysen* and *Modern Australian women: paintings and prints, 1925 – 1945*.


Look for the ‘Self Portrait’ on-line education resource.