EDUCATION RESOURCE
REALMS OF VISION:
THE ART OF WILLIAM ROBINSON

SENIOR YEARS 10-12
Realms of Vision Education Resource and Activities provides valuable support for educators wishing to include William Robinson in their Visual Arts program. With a specific approach to addressing syllabus areas such as Appraising, Visual Literacy and the Social and Historical Contexts of William Robinson’s work, it includes easy to read notes that can be used directly in the classroom and sample activities for use before, during, and after a visit to the Gallery.

The Queensland Studies Authority outlines a series of Global Aims for a course of study developed for use in the Visual Arts. This Resource draws from these aims, and supports the Inquiry Learning Model. It specifically encourages students to:

> **Appraise** artworks, with confidence and individuality
> **Recognise** and **respect** the personal aesthetic of others
> **Affirm** and **value** the contributions of visual artists, engaging with Australian art
> **Examine perspectives** relating to social, spiritual, environmental and vocational contexts
> **Be appreciative** of multiple perspectives and philosophies on the meanings of artworks
> **Embrace** contemporary visual arts practices
> **Create** informed, active and sustained engagement with the visual arts.

The Gallery recognises that it is not always possible for students to visit the William Robinson Gallery. Our website features full colour images of artworks that appear in the Realms of Vision exhibition which are available for educators to use in the classroom. They can be found in the Exhibition > Current Exhibition section of the website, located at

www.ogh.qut.edu.au/wrgallery

A GUIDE TO THIS RESOURCE

The content of this Resource was developed from the Queensland Studies Authority syllabus for Senior Visual Art (ISBN: 978-1-920749-44-6) and the Queensland Studies Authority’s Year 10 guidelines for The Arts. This Resource was produced by the William Robinson Gallery, QUT Precincts.
Free guided tours of *Realms of Vision* can be booked during the week and in conjunction with tours of the QUT Art Museum and/or Old Government House. *Realms of Vision* is on display until **Sunday, 22 August 2010**.

There’s no need to book for a self-guided tour, but we appreciate a call in advance if your group numbers ten or more. A thematic map of the exhibition is featured in this resource and can assist in guiding your group visit.

The William Robinson Gallery is located on the first floor of Old Government House on Main Drive at QUT Gardens Point Campus. School tours can meet at the northern courtyard entrance as indicated on the map below.

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**VISITING THE WILLIAM ROBINSON GALLERY**

**OPENING HOURS**
Sunday to Friday 10am to 5pm
Closed Saturdays, Good Friday and Christmas Day
Free admission

**CONTACT DETAILS**
William Robinson Gallery
Queensland University of Technology
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REALMS OF VISION
MAJOR THEMES

> Early works and the artist
> Farmyards
> Landscape
> Portraits
William Robinson’s early works were strongly influenced by French artist Pierre Bonnard, who famously used bright colours to paint everyday interior scenes. After completing high school, Robinson went on to train as a primary school teacher, and was later awarded a scholarship to specialise in teaching art. Like most budding artists of the day, students learned by sketching the work of established artists, learning to mix paints and drawing figures by copying the artists they respected. For Robinson, Bonnard was one such artist.

Training as an artist back in the 1950s meant learning how to draw the human figure through practice. Students learned to draw ears, eyes and noses individually, and it wasn’t until later that they could graduate into a whole head or body. Practice made perfect and students often had to draw figures repeatedly until they were right.

Artists also had to learn to manipulate perspective. Having been taught by semi-modernist painters Melville Haysom and Arthur Evan Read, Robinson’s use of perspective is not always realistic. Their modernist style influenced his future landscape and farmyard works.

His early interiors were built from flat shapes of colour, bringing the background closer to the surface of the painting and creating very shallow pictorial space. They often feature flowers, hats and other still life elements, as well as patterned rugs, posing figures and unusual shadows.

Like his landscapes and farmyards, Robinson’s interiors express a deeper personal understanding of the subject matter and often depicted his own home or the homes of close friends and family members.
Preferring a quieter domestic life after the construction of the South-East Freeway, the Robinsons moved from inner south-east Brisbane to a farm in semi-rural Birkdale. They kept goats, chooks and cows, and gave many of them names—the cows Josephine and Rosie appear in many of the artist’s paintings. Being close to the animals, Robinson has been able to reveal their personalities as if they’re real characters and depict their behaviour as they play on the farm. Robinson also paints portraits of his cows as if they are posing for family portraits, complete with oval frames.

Sometimes the artist includes himself and his wife Shirley in his farmyard compositions. They never appear like farmers in charge of their animals, rather they’re intermingled with the animals, playing on the farm as if they’re equal. Aside from some farmyard equipment, Robinson’s farmyard paintings have flat backgrounds with no horizons—you might think the animals are floating in the air! This lets us focus on the animals and it means Robinson can fill his paintings with more animals than you’d expect. He takes care with his composition to show us plenty of animals so that the action spreads across the whole canvas. If he tried to paint an horizon in, it might look too overcrowded. Many artists will sacrifice realistic representation of objects or a place in order to express their ideas better.

Often only parts of the animals are visible, which makes it seem like Robinson’s paintings are just smaller snapshots of all the activity on his farm. By the time the Robinsons sold their farm, they had 40 chooks, six cows and about 70 goats!

> Animals exhibiting human characteristics
> Composition
> Humour
> Animals as family members
> Urban vs. rural life
In 1984, Robinson moved with his family to a farm at Beechmont in the Gold Coast hinterland. He remained there for the next ten years producing dramatic landscape paintings. Framed by steep cliffs and subtropical rainforest, the Robinsons’ property and its surrounds was a great source of inspiration to the artist.

Robinson would take long walks in the rainforest, observing the way light moves throughout the day and often he paints a whole day in a single painting. Sometimes the morning sky would be painted in one corner, with the darker evening or night sky painted in another. He is very interested in capturing time in his paintings.

Sometimes in the wet subtropical rainforest, Robinson would come across a puddle or stream that reflects the sky in an interesting way and paint that too.

The canopy of the rainforest is so high that when you look up to the sky it looks like trees are sprouting in every direction. The first thing many people notice about Robinson’s paintings is that the trees are growing in twisting directions and that it is hard to tell where the horizon is. A distorted horizon with curling trees and complex reflections makes it very hard to gain a normal perspective of the environment—you can’t tell where you are when looking at these landscapes.

Like a lot of Australian landscape painters such as Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale and Fred Williams, William Robinson is interested in multiple-point perspective, which means that there is no single vanishing point in his paintings. In this way he can represent more about the environment, expressing his knowledge and appreciation of the rainforest, while also emphasising the vastness of the Australian landscape. By not representing the landscape realistically, Robinson is able to show more about the passage of time and the magnitude of the rainforest, moreso than if he painted a “normal” landscape painting. He wants us to see and know the landscape like he does.

**REALMS OF VISION**

**LANDSCAPE**

> Multiple-point perspective
> Representation of time
> Vastness of Australian landscape
> Knowing and experiencing the landscape
> Presenting new views of the landscape
William Robinson has entered the prestigious Archibald Prize seven times with his self-portraits. Despite its importance, the Archibald Prize is often surrounded in controversy—which is why Robinson likes to poke fun at it. He sometimes thinks that the paintings entered into the Archibald are silly and once said that his 1987 entry, Equestrian self-portrait, was “silly enough” to win the Archibald Prize. He was right: Equestrian self-portrait won that year, and Robinson won a second time in 1995 with Self-portrait with stunned mullet.

In Equestrian self-portrait, Robinson was inspired by the story of Charles IV on horseback, a painting by Francisco de Goya that satirised the eighteenth-century Spanish king. Charles IV was a fat and foolish king who wanted a portrait painted of him riding a horse, even though he wasn’t known for horse riding. Normally equestrian portraits are painted of respected leaders or military figures, usually in a strong and powerful pose, but Goya painted Charles IV sitting still on a fat old horse, and didn’t make him look very impressive. The King didn’t realise that Goya’s painting was mocking him, but he liked it anyway.

Since the Archibald Prize shows paintings of important figures in Australian culture, William Robinson is trying to make fun of the seriousness of it all by painting himself as an uncomfortable farmer astride a horse. And just as Charles IV liked his mocking portrait, so Robinson won the Archibald Prize.

Robinson’s self-portraits are very personal to him, and they express emotions that he feels he can’t express any other way. Even though his self-portraits are famous, he doesn’t take them as seriously as he does his landscapes, which is why he is bold with them. He never sells them because he wants his wife Shirley to keep them, and he has even produced lithographic prints of these paintings to make sure that his grandchildren and great-grandchildren will see them too.

REALMS OF VISION
PORTRAITS

> Self-portraiture
> Satire
> Conventions of historical portraiture
> Expressing complex or private emotions through art
> Artist as profession
> The Archibald Prize
**ACTIVITIES: BEFORE & DURING YOUR VISIT**

1.1 > Research the work of French artist Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) and identify the key \textit{concepts, focuses, and formal} attributes of his work including \textit{technique} and \textit{media}.

1.2 > William Robinson acknowledges being \textit{influenced} by the work of Bonnard. Drawing on your \textit{research}, \textit{analyse} one of Robinsons artworks located in the ‘Early Works’ section of the exhibition and \textit{compare} similarities and \textit{differences} to the work of Bonnard.

1.3 > In the context of your own art making, \textit{identify} one artist you believe has \textit{influenced} your work. \textit{Discuss} and \textit{compare} attributes of their work and your own in relation to \textit{concepts, focuses, context, and medium}. Draw on comparative examples to further illustrate links.

2.1 > The environment in which William Robinson lives plays a vital role in his art making. It is \textit{reflected} in his landscapes, interiors and farmyard works. Is the environment you live in \textit{reflected} in your artwork? If so, why do you think this is important?

2.2 > Although predominantly a painter, William Robinson has created many works other media including drawing, printmaking and sculpture. What are the merits of exploring different media?

3.5 > Examine one of William Robinson’s landscapes. Does it look like a traditional landscape? \textit{Identify} what is the same/different.

3.1 > Throughout art history, artists have shown interest in representing ‘time’. \textit{Research} the different ways artists have attempted to \textit{demonstrate} the passage of time.

\textit{TIP}: You could begin by researching \textit{memento mori} or \textit{vanitas} painting. It may also be useful to think about mediums that literally deal with time, such as video.

3.2 > How might \textit{multiple-point perspective} and the \textit{representation of time} in Robinson’s work help us understand the landscape better?

3.3 > William Robinson paints his landscapes in the studio, not ‘\textit{en plein air}’\textsuperscript{1}. \textit{Considering} the historical context of ‘\textit{plein air}’ painting, \textit{reflect on why} you think he works in the studio.

3.4 > Many of Robinsons landscapes are large in \textit{scale}. Why do you think this is the case?

3.6 > William Robinson wants us to see the Australian landscape in a personal way. Why might this be important?

4.1 > Printmaking allows the creation of multiple copies of the same image. What \textit{advantages} and/or \textit{disadvantages} does this have over ‘one off’ methods such as painting or drawing?

\textsuperscript{1} \textit{en plein air} is a French expression meaning ‘in the open air’ and is commonly used to describe the act of painting outdoors.
ACTIVITIES:
AFTER YOUR VISIT

1 > Think back to the sketchbooks on display in the William Robinson Gallery. Why might it be important to show sketchbooks and early drawings in an art gallery, as opposed to only paintings on the walls?

2 > Even though William Robinson’s paintings are vibrant and full of colour, they’re often only made by mixing a small number of pigments on his palette. Why do you think it might be interesting to display the artist’s palette in a gallery space? What did you observe about his palette?