



Fred Williams was born in Melbourne in 1927 and is regarded as one of Australia's finest landscape painters and printmakers. Williams began studying at the National Gallery Art School in Melbourne in the 1940s and soon travelled to London in 1951 where he became familiar with European and contemporary art. Williams returned in 1957 with a renewed approach to painting with the Australian landscape as his primary subject matter.

Williams worked in a range of media including charcoal, pastel, acrylic, oil paint and gouache to depict the essence of the landscape. Moving away from traditional landscape painting, his surfaces were rich in texture

and included natural hues such as ocean blues, rusted ochres and pale olive greens. His landscape paintings continued to evolve over time and by the end of his life, he had created works that were dense with colour and texture as well as paintings with a distinctive minimalist or abstract style. Fascinated by the arid nature of the Australian landscape and its vastness, Williams captured his personal experience and challenged us to see the Australian landscape differently.

image: Fred Williams, Australia, 1927 – 1982, *Silver and grey*, 1969, Melbourne, oil on canvas, 137.2 × 152.3 cm; Gift of an anonymous donor 1992, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.
© Estate of Fred Williams

RESOURCES

BOOKS

Hart, D. *Fred Williams Infinite Horizons*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2011

WEBSITES

Adelaide Festival Centre – Sala Residency – Fred Williams Murray River

Murals

<http://bit.ly/2wRldAQ>

Art Collector – Fred Williams: A Life in Landscape

<http://bit.ly/2uRIBPj>

Fred Williams Infinite Horizons Secondary School Education Resource – NGA

<http://bit.ly/2i7tazH>

Sydney Morning Herald – Fred Williams: On New Territory

<http://bit.ly/2wRCxGX>

VIDEO

ABC News - Fred Williams

<http://bit.ly/2wRL50y>

KEY LITERACY WORDS

Abstract

Aerial perspective

En plein air

Horizon line

Landscape

Minimalism

Palette

EARLY YEARS

RESPONDING

What does this painting remind you of?

What sounds might you hear in the Australian bush?

Sometimes Fred Williams didn't use a paintbrush to create the marks on his canvas. How do you think he made them and using what equipment?

Look at other landscapes in the Gallery. What makes Williams' paintings different to other landscapes? Select a work of art that is similar to *Silver and grey*. Why is it similar?

MAKING

The small amount of marks that Williams has made on the canvas in *Silver and grey* means we can use our imagination to fill in the gaps. Using a photocopy of *Silver and grey*, add your own marks. What can you see in this painting?



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PRIMARY

RESPONDING

Consider how we can identify a landscape painting. As a class brainstorm the features of a landscape. Now look at *Silver and grey*. What landscape features does this painting have that classifies it a landscape?

Imagine showing Williams' paintings to people who have never visited Australia. What might they think about the Australian landscape given Williams' representations? Consider his use of colour, amount of paint and overall composition.

Silver and grey is a combination of the countryside near Lysterfield and the You Yangs in Victoria. Locate both of these places on Google Earth. How would you describe the terrain? What connections can you make to these places and Williams' painting?

Investigate other landscape paintings by Williams. In pairs list 5 common characteristics of his work. Share your responses with the class – did others identify other characteristics you hadn't considered?

Consistent with a tradition used in some Chinese paintings Williams would sometimes eliminate the horizon line in his paintings. It has been suggested that Williams may have been influenced by Asian art. Investigate examples of Chinese painting and calligraphy. Can you identify elements of this potential influence?

Compare Williams' *Flood bound cattle* to *Silver and grey*. How did Williams' style and palette change over time?

image: Fred Williams, Australia, 1927 – 1982, *Flood bound cattle*, 1975, Melbourne, oil on canvas, 256.0 x 62.0 cm; Gift of Lyn Williams AM 1995, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. © Estate of Fred Williams



MAKING

Sometimes Williams would seek inspiration from the landscape and then paint in his studio. Other times he would paint *en plein air* which is a French term that means to paint outside. Locate a natural surrounding nearby your school or home which you can paint *en plein air* the essence of this landscape. Experiment by simplifying the forms or try looking at the landscape through a viewfinder to distort what you see.

Upon Williams' return from England he became fascinated with the Australian landscape. Draw different representations of the Australian landscape – the coast, the central desert, the bush and the suburbs.

Take a nature walk with your class. Take time to look closely at your surroundings and focus on the small details such as the colour of plants and trees or details in bark or leaves. Draw these observations in your sketchbook. Back in the classroom transform your drawings into an abstract painting.

The Australian landscape has a very distinctive palette. Look closely at the colours used by Williams and compare this palette with one other Australian landscape painting on display. How does Williams' palette differ to other artists? Which do you prefer and why? Which palette best represents the Australian landscape? Select an area of Williams' painting and recreate three of the colours accurately. Remember to document each attempt. How accurate was your mixing?

Landscape painting has a long tradition in art history. How does *Silver and grey* and *Flood bound cattle* challenge landscape painting conventions?



image: Fred Williams, Australia, 1927-1982, *Forest Pond*, 1974, Melbourne, oil on canvas, 182.0 x 151.0 cm; South Australian Government Grant 1975, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.

RESPONDING

Investigate the work of Howard Arkley and Fred Williams. Discuss how both of these artists presented a new approach to depicting the Australian landscape.

Silver and grey is an example of Williams' minimalist approach. How does *Silver and grey* compare to other minimalist works of art on display?

Inge King and Fred Williams were both fascinated by the Australian landscape, yet both responded in very different ways. Compare how each artist references the Australian landscape.

Writer and curator Timothy Morrell stated "*Silver and grey* is a national painting in the same way that large scale heroic works of Australian Impressionism such as *A break away!* 1891 by Tom Roberts are national paintings". As a class brainstorm what a 'national painting' looks like and how this may change over time. Do you agree with Morrell's statement? What would an iconic Australian image or national painting look like in 2017?

Williams often eliminated the horizon line from his paintings, sometimes giving the impression of an aerial depiction of the landscape. Investigate other artists such as John Olsen who depict the Australian landscape in this way. Why do you think artists omit formal elements of a landscape e.g foreground, middle ground, background and horizon line?

Silver and grey captures the unique spirit of the Australian landscape. Discuss how Williams and other artists such as Ian Fairweather and John Olsen explore a sense of place and their unique relationship with the land.

How does Williams' depictions of the Australian landscape differ to paintings by Dorrit Black, Stella Bowen, Russell Drysdale, Hans Heysen and Arthur Streeton?



MAKING

Williams would often use the wrong end of a paintbrush to flick paint on to the canvas to create his unique marks. Try techniques used by Williams as starting point and then invent 5 different ways to make marks on a surface.

Williams was at times unconventional in the way he painted, sometimes he would paint with his canvas on the ground, or looking up with the canvas attached to the ceiling. In order to focus on the abstract qualities of his painting he would sometimes turn his canvas upside down. Paint a landscape by either:

- Turning your canvas upside down
- Lay the canvas on the floor
- Attach it to the underside of a table and paint lying down

How do these altered perspective change your painting?

In the 1970s Fred Williams was commissioned by the Adelaide Festival Theatre to create the River Murray scenes which consisted of 13 panels. Williams had taken his friend John Baily on a cruise along the River Murray where the sketches for the painting were made. Create a class mural depicting your local environment using Williams' linear approach as inspiration.

In 2017 Betty Kuntiwa Pumani won the Wynne Prize for the best Australian landscape painting of Australian scenery. However Australian painter John Olsen questioned whether it was a landscape. Write a letter to John Olsen outlining why the judges of the Wynne prize made the right decision. Support your claims with reference to the evolution of landscape painting in Australia for both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists.

Dorrit Black, Australia, 1891 – 1951, *The Bridge*, 1930, Sydney, oil on canvas on board, 60.0 x 81.0 cm; Bequest of the artist 1951, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide