

Paul Wineman.



PORTRAITURE

... the attitude, the determination, were those of the first real artist I had ever encountered. He was my closest friend from that day. John Brack

Fred Williams was born in 1927 in Melbourne and grew up living in the city. He received his formal art education at the National Gallery School with William Dargie and in private classes with George Bell. In 1951, he set sail for London after obtaining a one-way fare from his family.

Williams spent four years in London, working for a picture framer, attending further art classes and visiting museums. He also had the opportunity to exhibit some of his work, including with the Australian Artists' Association in 1953. Williams suffered from asthma, and his poor health, lack of funds and desire to develop his own work led to his decision to return home to Australia in 1956.

Although best known for his landscape paintings, Williams remained committed to portraiture throughout his creative life. Since his student days in Melbourne and London, the human figure had been a consistent aspect of his art, in both life drawing and portraits of family and friends.

In *Self-portrait at easel* 1960–61, Williams presents himself as a professional artist, standing at an easel with brush poised, wearing a suit and green tie. He gazes out of the picture with a look of concentration on his face. The thin, diagonal strip of the easel's edge angles slightly to the right, balancing the artist's left-leaning posture. A green background with an underpainting of red is replicated in the red easel peg and in the figure, with red highlights appearing on the artist's cheeks, ear and jacket.

Portraiture was a focus for Williams's contemporary the Melbourne-based artist John Brack. Brack met Williams at art school in 1946 and they remained close friends. They painted portraits of one another (Williams's portrait of John Brack is on display in *Fred Williams: Infinite horizons*), which reveal the depth of their friendship and knowledge of each other's character traits. Both men shunned the limelight, were committed to their art and passionately interested in the history of art. Williams was renowned for his depictions of the landscape and Brack for the figure, which made for a fascinating juxtaposition in their joint exhibition at the Albert Hall in Canberra in 1967.

In John Brack's *Portrait of a man (Fred Williams)* 1958, Williams leans forward in a chair, a look of consternation on his face, his head crowned with a mop of curly hair. Brack's depiction of Williams is animated by the cropping of the figure in the lower right corner. It seems as though Williams is impatient and about to stand up and leave the space, anxious to get back to his own art-making.

QUOTE: John Brack's eulogy for Fred Williams, in Patrick McCaughey, *Fred Williams: 1927–1982*, 3rd rev edn, Murdoch Books, Sydney, 2008 (1980), pp347–9.



QUESTION

Study Fred Williams's portrait of John Brack in the exhibition. What insights into Brack's character does Williams communicate to the viewer?

RESEARCH

Study the figurative paintings in the exhibition. Consider how drawing and painting the figure throughout his career informed Fred Williams's landscape paintings.

ACTIVITY

Fred Williams used a mirror to help him paint his self-portrait. Williams was intent on depicting himself as a professional artist. Draw or paint yourself as an artist, show your brushes and other materials. Depict the surface you are painting on in the image, as Williams has done with his canvas.

(above) John Brack *Portrait of a man (Fred Williams)* 1958, oil on canvas, 112.7 x 90.8 cm, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, AM Ragless Bequest Fund, 1963

(reverse) *Self-portrait at easel* 1960–61, oil on composition board, 89.2 x 61.2 cm, National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, gift of Lyn Williams, 1998, donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program



THE TREE

I am going to paint the gum tree.

Fred Williams

When Fred Williams returned to Australia from England in 1956 and his friend and fellow Melbourne painter John Brack asked him what he was going to do, Williams replied that he was going to paint the gum tree. Brack advised against it, saying, 'Everybody's done that', and suggesting that nothing new could be added to the tradition of painting the gum tree. Williams tried anyway, and he soon succeeded in 'reinventing the gum tree'.

The iconic gum tree had long been a recurring theme in the work of many well-known and accomplished Australian artists, including Hans Heysen, Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton and Frederick McCubbin. The tree held symbolic meaning as it was frequently associated with a sense of place and with national identity.

By adopting this prolifically painted subject, Williams not only acknowledged its prior history but also indicated to his critics that he could introduce fresh ideas to the representation of the gum tree. He did this through much experimentation with composition, colour and form. Williams painted forests of trees, saplings, bent and fallen trees, tree stumps and close-ups of tree trunks. This variety of subject matter enabled him to find new ways to depict the tree by reducing its form to a more abstract vision.

Forest 1960–61 is an extreme close-up of a group of tree trunks. The vertical nature of the composition is offset by a stray black tree trunk that angles up to the left, revealing a sliver of red-brown. This triangular shape creates a tension between the overlapping forms and introduces a striking colour focal point. The creamy white, central tree trunk is a dominant element in the composition and, on closer inspection, a wide variety of purples, blues and greens are revealed.

This close-up contrasts with Williams's earlier *Tree loppers* 1955, which he painted in England. *Tree loppers* is significant in the artist's early years as its composition demonstrates an innovative approach to the subject. The low horizon line balanced by the vertical lines of the denuded trees brings them centrestage in an otherwise sparse composition.

QUOTE: Williams's friend Hal Hattam recalled the exchange, quoted in James Mollison, *A singular vision: the art of Fred Williams*, Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1989, p35.

(above) *Tree loppers* 1955, oil on composition board, 102 x 70.5 cm, private collection

(reverse) *Forest* 1960–61, oil on composition board, 89.5 x 77 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 2006

Fred Williams: Infinite horizons website nga.gov.au/Williams

 NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA



QUESTION

In the book accompanying this exhibition, author and curator Deborah Hart uses the phrase 'architecture of the tree'. What does she mean by this?

RESEARCH

Camille Corot's painting *The bent tree* c 1855–60 influenced many artists living in Melbourne. Analyse the painting to discover why this was so. View *The bent tree* on the National Gallery's *Turner to Monet* website.

RESEARCH

Compare and contrast depictions of the tree in Australian landscape painting by studying works of art by John Glover, ST Gill, Hans Heysen, Arthur Streeton, Russell Drysdale and Phillip Wolfhagen.

ACTIVITY

Find a place near you where you can see three trees together. First, draw the farthest tree lightly with a blunt pencil. Next, draw the middle tree a little darker and larger. Last, draw the nearest tree darker and larger still, making it bigger than your paper and including plenty of detail.



YOU YANGS AND UPWEY SERIES

In Australia there is no focal point. Obviously, it was too good a thing for me to pass up. If there's going to be no focal point in a landscape, then it had to build into paint. Fred Williams

Landscape painting has long been a dominant tradition in Australian art. Fred Williams's unique vision of the Australian landscape became increasingly recognised by art critics and the public during the 1960s. His reputation was not built on the depiction of grand locations but on an ability to create exciting works of art out of apparently unremarkable landscapes.

The *You Yangs* and *Upwey* series demonstrate how his fresh approach to depicting the local environment was evolving in the 1960s. During this period Williams also developed the habit of working in a series in which a number of works of art related to a particular location.

The *You Yangs* are a group of granite ridges rising above the Werribee Plain 22 kilometres north of Geelong. Williams first saw the *You Yangs* on his return from England, when the ship he was travelling on came around Bass Strait towards Melbourne. As a result of low rainfall, the vegetation on the *You Yangs* is grassland and low scattered woodland.

Williams's depictions of the area are influenced by the look of the landscape and by developments in abstract art. The *You Yangs* paintings were devoid of a focal point and horizon and featured small sensuous touches of the artist's brush to suggest the scrubby bush. His paintings of this period displayed a minimal aesthetic that paralleled the spaciousness of the Australian continent.

The honey-golden landscape in *You Yang pond* 1963 is enlivened with deep tones of brown and black with red highlights. The trees and rocks are reflected in a small pond, a feature in the landscape that Williams returned to in later years. As the painting has no horizon, the landscape envelops it and the sense of place is compressed. Due to paintings such as this, many Australians began to identify a particular landscape as being Fred Williams country.

Williams moved from Melbourne in 1963 to a modest bungalow in Upwey, where he became fascinated with the liveliness of the meeting point between earth and sky. The artist's house was perched on the side of a hill with a view up to the horizon, which became a central feature of the *Upwey* series and can be seen in Williams's *Hillside* 1963–64. This diagonal or curving hillside introduced a sense of instability into the work and established Williams's interest in geometry.

QUOTE: Fred Williams, interview with James Gleeson, 1978.



QUESTION

Rotate the image of *You Yang pond* 1963 so that you view it upside down and sideways. What elements in the painting tell you which way is up?

RESEARCH

Consider the following statement by Fred Williams:

I've painted some of the waterholes ... which could be the start of Creation. Water, then mud, then trees ... Nolan got them right. He got the Kelly country right too ... I see myself as a link between Nolan and Drysdale. Nolan the irrational, Drysdale the formal.

Study landscapes by Sidney Nolan and Russell Drysdale. Discuss Williams's comment about his relationship to these artists.

RESEARCH

One of the hallmarks of Claude Monet's painting was his preoccupation with variations of the same subject to produce a series of works. Study Monet's waterlily and haystack paintings to see how seasonal effects and time of day are communicated in paint.

ACTIVITY

Examine the paintings from the *Upwey* series. Draw 12 squares of the same size on a page in your visual diary. Then add a horizon line inside each square. Experiment with your placement of the line and consider how this affects the composition of the landscape.

(above) *Hillside* 1963–64, oil and tempera on composition board, 90.5 x 120.5 cm, private collection

(reverse) *You Yang pond* 1963, oil on composition board, 116.3 x 132.8 cm, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, gift of Godfrey Phillips International Pty Ltd, 1968



THE MINIMAL LANDSCAPE

Working out of doors I don't usually have any preconceptions of how I'm going to go about it ... [I] try and sit ... I sort of take the attitude that I'm like an antenna. I let it come to me ... I certainly don't try to impose anything on it. Fred Williams

Fred Williams made a significant contribution to the tradition of landscape painting in Australia. Even though he grew up in Melbourne and in some ways preferred to live in the city, he embraced the bush environment.

From early on in his career, he made regular trips out of the city to paint in the landscape. When he returned to the studio, he could distance himself from the experience of the landscape and focus on the process of painting. Williams was cautious about romanticising the landscape and enjoyed the variety offered by working the way he did.

In *Silver and grey* 1969, Williams experimented with the idea of a minimal landscape. The painting highlights his intuitiveness, developed after many years of sitting in the bush. Trees and other plant forms are painted with great variety and are scattered across the canvas. Fellow artist Leonard French described these marks as being like little toffees touched onto the canvas with a great sensuality.

Silver and grey is an abstract work painted in the studio from the artist's memory. The painting shimmers with light and features a restricted palette dominated by a large expanse of creamy white. Two expressive horizontal lines in the upper half of the canvas identify a change in topography. Williams was interested in depicting a microscopic view of elements in the landscape as well as a macroscopic view of the whole. He thought about what lay under the surface of the earth and how this internal layer connected everything above it.

Williams respected the Australian Impressionists Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts, Charles Conder and Frederick McCubbin, especially their interpretations of the landscape and treatment of light. In *Silver and grey*, Williams continues this tradition of capturing the atmosphere of light and heat in the bush; however, his minimal composition adds a sense of space and openness to his predecessors' depictions of the Australian landscape.

QUOTE: Fred Williams, interview with Alan Oldfield, 12 August 1981, in *Patterns of landscape: through the eyes of Fred Williams 1927–1982*, documentary film, Film Australia, Sydney, 1989.



QUESTION

Think about painters and what they paint (eg trees, portraits, bowls of fruit, flowers, the sea). Do you think that artists always like what they paint?

RESEARCH

Study the use of repeated subject matter by either Arthur Streeton or Tom Roberts, and discuss as a class how artists resolve problems by painting the same subject more than once.

ACTIVITY

Walk through the bush and concentrate on small details such as the colour of bark on a tree, the veins of a leaf or the moss on rocks. Make sketches of these features in your visual diary.

ACTIVITY

Discuss the quote by Fred Williams at the top of this card, especially the idea that he is like an antenna sitting in the landscape.

(above) Fred Williams, photographed for *The Age*, July 1980.
Photograph: Fiona McDougall

(reverse) *Silver and grey* 1969, oil on canvas,
137.2 x 152.3 cm, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, acquired 1992



WATER

... I have become very interested in the actual look of water ... Fred Williams

Throughout the 1960s, Fred Williams's reputation was built on paintings of the land and, most specifically, the dry environment. In the late 1960s, however, he became fascinated with the qualities of water—of seascapes, ponds, creeks, billabongs and waterfalls—and, by the mid to late 1970s, he had completed many paintings of coastal subjects.

During a holiday at Mt Martha in the late 1960s, between selling his home at Upwey and moving back to the Melbourne suburb of Hawthorn, Williams began using masking tape as a way of varying the size and formats of his gouaches. The tape had practical applications, helping to keep edges of the paper clean and proportions correct. This method also allowed him to develop paintings in bands or strips so that he could focus on sections of the landscape.

Gouache is a type of water-based paint that consists of pigments in a water-soluble binder (gum arabic) with preservative and plasticiser (glycerine). This medium produces paintings that are richly coloured with a velvety finish. Unlike watercolour, gouache does not rely on the whiteness of the background medium to achieve its effect.

Williams's strip gouaches of beaches and oceans were a revelation in conception, composition and colour. They allowed him to incorporate multiple images within a single work. They also enabled the artist to take an approach to colour and light influenced by the time of day and weather—Williams was staying at the coast for extended periods and was becoming more aware of weather patterns and changing skies.

During a visit to Erith Island in Bass Strait in 1974, Williams began to use a larger variety of colours. Gouaches such as *Beachscape, Erith Island I* 1974 have an expressive range of blues in the water set against luminous yellow sand. Small figurative details were also added, such as a bather sitting on a red towel underneath an umbrella. A further marker of human presence is included with the addition of footprints in the sand. In some of these gouaches, beach sand is glued to the surface of the heavy paper.

When Williams was honoured with a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1977, a substantial showing of the gouaches emphasised his strengths as a painter in this medium. The exhibition was the first solo show of an Australian artist at this world famous art gallery.

QUOTE: Fred Williams, diary entry, 10 January 1968.



QUESTION

Fred Williams remarked to a friend that he was allowing some of his coastal scenes to become more 'Impressionist'. In relation to the painting *Beachscape, Erith Island I* 1974, what do you think Williams means by this term?

RESEARCH

Find examples of paintings or drawings by William Westall and Charles Lesueur, and consider how the work of these two artists might have interested and influenced Fred Williams.

ACTIVITY

When painting the coastal environment, Fred Williams commented that he was 'feeling the paint on'. Write a short poem about the experience of standing on the coast looking out to sea.

ACTIVITY

Experiment with using Fred Williams's strip format. Divide an A3 piece of paper into three sections using masking tape. Paint a coastal scene from a distance in your upper section, then zoom closer in the middle section and closer again in the bottom section.

(above) Fred Williams and Clifton Pugh painting on Erith Island, Bass Strait, 1973. Photograph: Ian Turner

(reverse) *Beachscape, Erith Island I* 1974, gouache and sand on paper, 55.6 x 77.6 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased from Gallery admission charges, 1983



THE PILBARA

There is no doubt that to paint sharpens the observation—and when you do [you] realise how much you miss. Fred Williams

Fred Williams travelled to Western Australia in May 1979 on the invitation of his friend Sir Roderick Carnegie, then chairman of the mining company CRA (now Rio Tinto). Sir Roderick thought Williams would be inspired by the vast spaces and haunting beauty of the Pilbara region.

During this visit and a subsequent trip in June, Williams was dropped off in the landscape to work for the day. By standing or sitting out in the desert environment, he had the opportunity to slowly absorb the experience. He could contemplate the age and history of the landscape—a landscape that was, despite its antiquity, new and stimulating to Williams.

The resulting Pilbara series includes around 100 outdoor and studio gouaches. The paintings highlight the unique geology of the region, including dramatic mountains and rivers, as well as the distinctive vegetation, such as the boab tree. Two years later, after the Pilbara experience had distilled in the artist's mind, he set to work making a series of paintings using the gouaches as his reference point.

His oil painting *Gorge landscape* 1981 was inspired by a dust storm that blew red sand over a dark rock face, partly obscuring it. The unusual shape of the rock is a striking motif in the composition. Williams captures the forces of nature as a weather event invigorates the landscape with a new energy.

In this painting, as with others in the Pilbara series, Williams explores colour. He paints the rich ochres of the earth and enlivens the desert environment with white trees and highlights of intense colour.

Williams's Pilbara paintings, like some of his early works, use geometric devices, including flat horizon lines and the diagonal lines of hillsides. In *Iron ore landscape* 1981, the edge of a hillside cuts into the mass of ochre ground, leaving the sky in the top-left corner of the painting. The landscape emits a bulky presence, engulfing the frame and asserting its dominance.

Many of Williams's paintings from the Pilbara series were exhibited widely throughout Australia and internationally. By the end of the twentieth century, the series had become Williams's best known group of works. CRA acquired a substantial number of these paintings, which were later given to the National Gallery of Victoria.

QUOTE: Fred Williams, diary entry, 30 January 1971.



QUESTION

Imagine you are left to paint in the remote Pilbara region for the day. What difficulties do you think you would face? What else might you observe in the desert?

RESEARCH

Use Google Earth to locate the Pilbara region. Research the geological history of the Pilbara and its relationship to Australia's mining industry. Consider what kinds of minerals are mined in the region and what they used to make.

RESEARCH

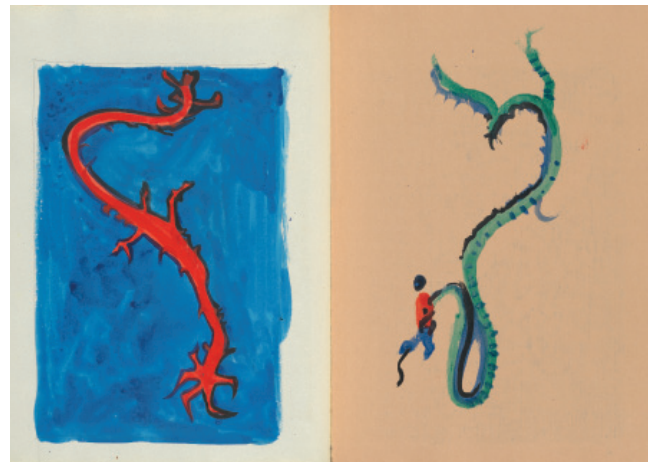
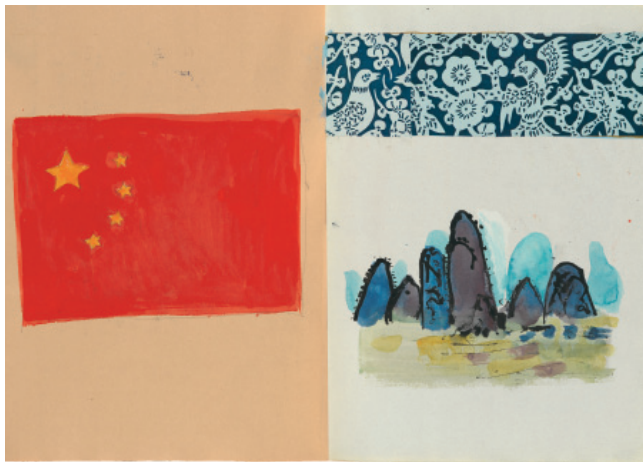
Research Aboriginal artists who have painted the Pilbara. Consider how their depictions of the landscape differ from Fred Williams's paintings.

ACTIVITY

In your visual diary, sketch diagrams for landscape compositions as suggested in the activity on the card themed 'You Yangs and Upwey series', then experiment with colour to increase the drama of your compositions.

(above) *Iron ore landscape* 1981, oil on canvas, 152 x 182.4 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, presented through the NGV Foundation by Rio Tinto, Honorary Life Benefactor, 2001

(reverse) *Gorge landscape* 1981, oil on canvas, 152.1 x 182.4 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, presented through the NGV Foundation by Rio Tinto, Honorary Life Benefactor, 2001



THE CHINA SKETCHBOOK

It has been a fascinating journey & one you would never forget—probably the most exotic country on earth. Fred Williams

Fred Williams and his wife, Lyn, travelled to China in 1976. Before their departure, Williams was presented with a large sketchbook by Rudy Komon, his friend and art dealer. He used this book as a visual diary to record the diverse sights that inspired him during his travels.

The China sketchbook 1976, however, is not just a record of the trip. Williams selected images carefully so that the completed book is a very personal memento of a journey to a country he found intriguing.

The sketchbook includes images of things as varied as a Sung dynasty sculpture, a Maoist propaganda poster, an abstracted dragon motif and prawns he enjoyed for dinner. Williams also carefully considered the relationships between the double-page spreads to reinforce a sense of balance and composition.

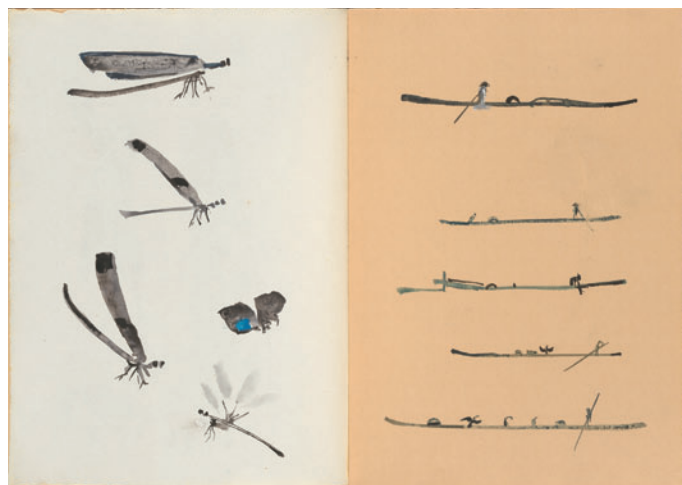
There is no text in the sketchbook and the coexistence of past and present in China is a feature. For many visitors, including Williams, the vision of modern life taking place adjacent to historical sites was fascinating.

Williams also noted that there were some parallels between China and Australia. In both countries, the landscape is a dominant feature and this vastness also radiates a meditative quality.

The China sketchbook refers back to paintings Williams made in the 1950s of performances of the Chinese Classical Theatre when he was working in London. Throughout his artistic career, Williams's work was often compared to Chinese landscape painting. He would have seen Chinese and Japanese art many times in exhibitions, collections and publications. He was also aware of the influences of both art forms on the Post-Impressionists.

In *The China sketchbook*, Williams included images that featured a reduction of form. It was through this process of removing inessentials in a composition that he confirmed a preference for simplicity in his art that he had already been investigating for a long time.

QUOTE: Fred Williams, diary entry, 18 June 1976.



QUESTION

Look through *The China sketchbook* on the National Gallery's website or in the exhibition. How do you think a written record of this journey would differ from Fred Williams's visual response?

RESEARCH

Who were the Post-Impressionists and which artists were most influenced by Japanese and Chinese art? Further information can be found at nga.gov.au/Exhibition/MasterpiecesFromParis.

RESEARCH

During his time in China, Fred Williams travelled by boat down the Li (or Likiang) River in Kweilin. The river and surrounding mountains are revered by artist, poets and scholars in China. Locate the region and discuss why it is so important in the cultural life of China.

ACTIVITY

Make a record in your visual diary of a very short journey such as your walk from the school entrance to the classroom or your trip home from school. Draw some small details that you notice on the way, such as a particular door handle, a set of steps or a winding path. Also, depict some larger objects on your trip, such as your bike, a fence, your friend or the car in which you are travelling.

(above and reverse) *The China sketchbook* 1976, gouache on paper, sheet 34.8 x 25.4 cm (irreg), book closed 36.5 x 26.5 x 3.7 cm, private collection



ART HISTORY

... it is his greedy art history that makes him our best observer of landscape.

Daniel Thomas

In 1964, on his second trip to Europe, Fred Williams visited many major museums, often making small drawings of the layout of the displays from one period of art history to the next. After visiting the Louvre in Paris, he recorded in his diary, 'So much more prepared for seeing this time', alluding to how his expanded knowledge of art history and experience as an artist more richly informed his viewing experience.

During his travels, Williams collected a large number of museum postcards of works of art that he admired. These postcards would become a great resource in future years for inspiration and problem solving. He admired many artists—including Paolo Uccello, Raphael, Diego Velázquez, Jean-Antoine Watteau, Gustave Courbet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian—but Honoré Daumier and Paul Cézanne remained his favourites since his days as a student.

Williams's first exhibition in a public art museum was held in 1970 at the National Gallery of Victoria. *Heroic landscape: Streeton-Williams* brought him together with an artist from an earlier generation whom he admired, even though each had his own distinct vision of the Australian landscape.

Williams's interest in Australian art history stimulated his decision to depict waterfall sites that had been painted by nineteenth-century artists. Eugene von Guérard's *Waterfall, Strath Creek* 1862, in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, inspired Williams's series of waterfall paintings. He had been interested in waterfalls since the early 1960s and now developed his ideas further.

One of the paintings in the series is *Waterfall polyptych* 1979 of which the third canvas of four is reproduced on this card. For this work, Williams painted two canvases in the morning and two in the afternoon. All were painted on one day and, as the light changed and he shifted vantage points, he became aware of how the shapes moved into one another. Williams put the paintings aside for six months and then reworked them in the studio even turning them upside down to ensure that the abstract qualities of the image were working.

QUOTE: Daniel Thomas, 'Official rebels', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 April 1975.



QUESTION

What are the similarities and differences between Paul Cézanne's *Rocks near the caves above the Château Noir* c 1904 (see the Gallery's *Masterpieces from Paris* website) and Fred Williams's *The Nattai River* 1958 (on the back of the card themed 'Colour' or at the Gallery's *Fred Williams* website)?

RESEARCH

Use the book and website that accompany this exhibition to look up one of the artists that Fred Williams admired. Find examples of their works that you think would have interested Williams. Consider the composition, use of paint, brush marks and colour.

ACTIVITY

Eugene von Guérard's *Waterfall, Strath Creek* 1862 inspired Fred Williams's series of waterfall paintings. Study von Guérard's work at artgallery.nsw.gov.au/work/OA3.1967 and Williams's *Waterfall polyptych* 1979. Paint your own interpretation of a waterfall.

(above) Eugene von Guérard *Waterfall, Strath Creek* 1862, oil on canvas, 83.2 x 65.7 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, purchased 1967

(reverse) *Waterfall polyptych* 1979 (detail/canvas 3), oil on four canvases, 153 x 488 cm (overall), Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, purchased with assistance from the HG Slater Foundation, 1980



COLOUR

I have a fierce desire to paint colour.

Fred Williams

A feature of Fred Williams's work in the 1970s was his use of luminous colour. He began to add vivid blues, greens and mauves in response to his renewed interest in water as a subject.

Williams had always been interested in colour theory and owned a copy of *The laws of contrast of colour and their application to the arts*. First published in 1855, the book was a key source for many of the French Post-Impressionists that Williams admired, including Georges Seurat. Williams was also inspired by the exhibition *Two decades of American painting* at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1967.

Williams was a great observer of nature as a result of his regular painting trips out into the landscape. He admired the approach of the Australian artist Max Meldrum, who believed that the tonal colour of the Australian bush was the most beautiful in the world. Williams understood this aspect of the landscape in Australia and, during his career, his use of colour became more expressive.

In 1977, Williams was invited by the mining company Comalco Ltd to visit their operations in Weipa on the Cape York Peninsula. Williams relished the opportunity to visit the far north and, during his stay, he flew low over the land and coastline in a light plane. The experience inspired him to paint a number of gouaches of the Weipa region back in his studio, which he felt were among his best works.

Williams was also fascinated with geology and the layering of the landscape that occurs over millennia. The strip format of the *Weipa* paintings paralleled the geological phenomena in which each layer of sediment exhibits unique features of a particular period.

In *Weipa IV* 1977, the landscape becomes an explosion of colour. Dark ochres are juxtaposed with bright oranges, mustard yellows and soft pinks. There is a sense of movement between each of the sections and a balanced relationship between the components of the work. It is, however, Williams's mastery of colour that is the strength of the *Weipa* series.

QUOTE: Fred Williams, quoted in James Mollison, *A singular vision: the art of Fred Williams*, Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1989, p 158.



QUESTION

Compare Fred Williams's use of colour in paintings from the 1950s and 1960s, such as *The Nattai River* 1958, to works from the 1970s and 1980s. How does Williams's approach to colour change from one decade to the next?

RESEARCH

Consider the following statement by Fred Williams:

I couldn't ignore the Colour Field movement and continue to paint. I had to make a response to the most significant art movement of that time in Australia, and that was the New York Colour Field Movement.

Study the New York Colour Field Movement and research some of the artists involved with the movement.

ACTIVITY

Divide a piece of A3 paper into three equal parts. Paint a landscape in each. Use only primary colours in the upper section, secondary colours in the middle section and tertiary colours in the bottom section. Use a little black and white to add details such as trees and rocks in the landscape.

(above) *The Nattai River* 1958, oil on composition board, 88.5 x 92.1 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, purchased 1958

(reverse) *Weipa IV* 1977, gouache on paper, 57.4 x 75.1 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased from Gallery admission charges, 1983



ENVIRONMENT

It's the kind of country you have to be born into or be just plain 'hardy' but [it is] tremendously attractive to look at. The fascinating patches of snow form themselves into inventive shapes ... The day has everything weather wise. There is rain, sleet & snow, lowering blue clouds & brilliant sunshine.

Fred Williams

Fred Williams was intrigued by the diversity of the Australian environment, including the unforgiving aspects of nature. He captured the drama and harshness of the landscape in paintings of bushfires, floods, erosion and snowstorms. Williams also regretted man's impact on the environment, from his early landscapes painted in the Mittagong area to paintings from the late 1970s in which pollution and environmental degradation are evident.

Williams experienced the drama of bushfires on more than one occasion in his lifetime. During the fiercely hot summer of 1968, bushfires left an indelible impact on the artist after his property at Upwey in the Dandenong Ranges was threatened. Williams stayed to guard the house and studio while his wife and children fled to safer ground.

On a trip with his family to Kosciusko National Park in New South Wales in 1975, Williams had the opportunity to paint the contrasting snowy landscape. He was a keen weather watcher and often recorded fluctuations in weather in his diaries. At Kosciusko, he became interested in the cloud formations and snow patterns. He responded more directly to the experience of being in the landscape rather than painting the effects of weather on the landscape.

In *Snow storm, Kosciusko 1976–77*, the height of the steep terrain is emphasised by the portrait format of the painting. Williams captures the drama of the ever-changing mountain environment. The winter season is suggested by the high horizon line with swirling clouds and organic snow shapes creeping over the edge. In this dramatic windswept scene, Williams added small, red mountain flowers dotted across the landscape and an icy blue area of cloud meeting the edge of the mountain.

QUOTE: Fred Williams, diary entry, 11 January 1975.



QUESTION

What compositional and artistic devices does Fred Williams use in *Snow storm, Kosciusko 1976–77* to help the viewer experience the sensation of being in the landscape?

QUESTION

How does Fred Williams emphasise the recuperative aspects of the landscape following a fire in the gouache *Burnt ferns 1968*?

RESEARCH

Fred Williams was inspired by Arthur Streeton's painting *'Fire's on'* 1891 in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Study this painting on the National Gallery's *Turner to Monet* website and discuss the elements of the painting that would have been interesting to Williams.

ACTIVITY

Paint two versions of the one scene in different weather conditions. Focus on capturing the atmosphere of each scene as a result of the impact of the weather. Record the weather in intimate detail in your visual diary.

(above) *Burnt ferns 1968*, gouache on paper, 57.2 x 76.8 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of the HJ Heinz II Charitable and Family Trust, Governor, and the Utah Foundation, Fellow, 1980

(reverse) *Snow storm, Kosciusko 1976–77*, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 183 cm, private collection



GEOMETRY

Today's painting pleases me because of a more resolved spatial feeling.

Fred Williams

In his painting *The studio* 1977, Fred Williams's invites us into the intimate surroundings of his creative environment. It is as though he has just left the room allowing the viewer to witness the atmosphere of this space in which his art-making takes place.

Spatters of paint on the floor, paint on the easel and a painting on the wall activate the room as a site of art-making. Although this painting of a place the artist knew well appears to have been conceived with ease, its formal qualities reveal a lifelong interest in geometry.

There are two doorways, one dark and the other allowing light in the adjacent room to penetrate into the studio. The easel is placed off-centre partially covering the painting of regenerating ferns on the wall. The broken vertical line and diagonal marks in the fern painting create a sense of liveliness in the otherwise stable and carefully constructed composition of the studio.

Williams has created relationships between geometric shapes, from the small rectangular canvas facing the wall to the square windowpanes in the next room. The rectangular doorways, the shape of the large canvas on the wall and a large expanse of rectangular space in the foreground all create a balanced whole. Two stools are placed in the foreground of the composition.

Williams had investigated geometry, unity and balance for many years. In earlier paintings, he experimented with complex geometry and the relationships between diagonal, horizontal and vertical lines. In *Circle landscape* 1965–66, Williams responded to the view of a hill that he saw one evening on his way from Ferntree Gully to Upwey. It is as though we are looking through a window into the landscape. The painting was inspired by the rose windows the artist had seen in the grand cathedrals of England and Europe.

QUOTE: Fred Williams, diary entry, 26 April 1976.



QUESTION

Study *Circle landscape* 1965–66 on this card and *Oval landscape* 1965–66 on the Gallery's *Fred Williams* website. What do they share in common and how do they compare with *The studio* 1977?

RESEARCH

Oval landscape 1965–66 was inspired by paintings executed by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, who incorporated figures and still-lives into oval shapes in a number of their Cubist paintings. Research Cubism and these images in your library or on the internet.

ACTIVITY

In the book accompanying this exhibition, Sebastian Smee comments that Fred Williams's landscapes 'always seem built around a premise of stillness'. Discuss this comment as a class in relation to *The studio* 1977.

(above) *Circle landscape* 1965–66, oil on canvas, 152.4 x 134.6 cm, private collection

(reverse) *The studio* 1977, oil on canvas, 122.3 x 122.2 cm, private collection



PROCESS

Once there were 'outside' and 'inside' paintings—now there is no difference.

Fred Williams

Fred Williams was dedicated in his approach to art-making and maintained a disciplined daily routine from the late 1960s. Each day began with writing entries in his diary. These entries reveal much about his creative process and working methods. They also maintain a commentary on the progress of particular works of art, provide many personal insights and include photographs of family and friends.

In the 1960s, Williams regularly painted in the landscape in gouache on paper, observing and gathering ideas for future work. He was a skilled painter in gouache, using the medium in the field because of its faster drying properties. By the 1970s, Williams's habitual pattern consisted one day of painting in the bush, often in oils, and the rest of the week working in the studio.

Williams's diaries confirm that he often worked on multiple paintings from different series at the same time. This approach resulted in an overlapping between the series, enabling him to maintain a level of inventiveness across varied subject matter.

He believed drawing was a sound basis for becoming an artist. Gouache and oil sketches were frequently turned into paintings shortly after they were completed. His diary drawings include diagrams of intended compositions and representations of exhibition hangs, including the plan for his joint exhibition with John Brack at the Albert Hall Canberra, which is on the cover of the education resource.

The diaries also give details about the different working methods Williams used. He worked on his canvases in a variety of ways, sometimes placing them flat on the ground and painting them from above or turning the canvas upside down as a way of focusing on the abstract qualities of the painting itself. He used rags, socks and jumpers to wipe back the surface of his paintings.

In the 1970s, Williams began to paint in the landscape with oil paints and canvas. In *Forest pond* 1974, the close-up of the pond's reflective surface continues his interest in water as a subject. The saplings in the background are softened by a riot of colourful vegetation, providing a sensation of lushness to this scene. Williams's years of painting in the landscape paid off in this period as he captured something extra in his oil paintings: the experience of place, of being there.

QUOTE: Fred Williams, diary entry, 30 April 1976.

(above) Sherbrooke Pond, Victoria, 1962. Photograph: Fred Williams

(reverse) *Forest pond* 1974, oil on canvas, 182 x 151 cm, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, South Australian Government Grant, 1975



QUESTION

Why do you think it was such a progression for Fred Williams to be able to paint in oils on location in the landscape?

QUESTION

Fred Williams more often than not used photography to help him remember locations in the landscape. Painters sometimes also use photography to compose a subject before completing a painting in the studio. How else might a painter use photography?

RESEARCH

A feature of Fred Williams's paintings of the 1970s is the appearance of a dominant line in the composition. In the exhibition or on the National Gallery's website, observe Williams's paintings from this decade of fires, dry creek beds and dry riverbeds. Discuss the links between the three bodies of work.

ACTIVITY

Choose a location in your local landscape that has meaning for you. Over a number of lessons, sketch the scene and record details of the environment in your visual diary. Use watercolour or gouache to paint the scene and finally paint a version of the landscape in oils.