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AFTERSHOCKS

Nolan and the Holocaust



2 May – 29 June
Alter Family Special Exhibitions Gallery



Sidney Nolan is one of Australia's most significant artists, renowned for his evocative depictions of the Australian landscape and his iconic Ned Kelly series.

Cover: Untitled [Victim Head], 1961. Sidney Nolan.

Sydney Jewish Museum
Collection / © The Sidney Nolan
Trust/ DACS.

Above: Australian artist Sidney
Nolan, taken by Albert Tucker.
National Library of Victoria

Sir Sidney Nolan

OM AC CBE RA Hon. RE

1917-1992

Born in Carlton, and raised in St Kilda, Victoria, Nolan came from a working-class background. In the early 1930s he worked as a sign painter and graphic designer while studying drawing at the National Gallery School of Design. During this time he became deeply involved in Melbourne's avant-garde scene and formed a close friendship with art patrons Sunday and John Reed.

Nolan was heavily influenced by modernist literature, poetry, and art, becoming a founding member of the Contemporary Art Society. In 1946, while living with the Reeds at Heide, he began his first Ned Kelly series, which would become one of his most celebrated works.

In 1947 Nolan left Melbourne for Queensland and never returned. As his reputation grew he moved to Europe, where he created another Ned Kelly series between 1954 and 1956. In 1955 he began a series of paintings inspired by the Trojan War and the Gallipoli campaign, capturing the devastation of war. From the 1960s onward, he continued to paint and exhibit both internationally and in Australia.

Today, Melbourne remains central to Nolan's artistic legacy, with his early years and creative evolution deeply embedded in the city's cultural landscape.

Visitors are advised that
images within the exhibition
may be distressing.

Nolan and the Holocaust

Sidney Nolan's haunting depictions of the Holocaust reveal a deeply personal and largely unseen chapter of his artistic journey, one shaped by his immersion in poetry and philosophical observations on humanity. Nolan became aware of the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany during World War Two and was profoundly affected by what he learned. In 1961, he became mesmerised by the televised trial of high-ranking Nazi official Adolf Eichmann, held in Jerusalem, Israel.

It was during 1961-1962 that Nolan created his Holocaust works. Though largely kept from public view, Nolan created a series of untitled, raw, emotive drawings that reflect his intense contemplation of history's darkest chapter. Nolan's layered imagery and stark symbolism reveal an artist grappling with memory, trauma, and the depths of the human condition.

In 1962 Sidney Nolan visited Auschwitz with friend and journalist Al Alvarez. The journey left an indelible mark on his artistic and personal world, sparking a haunting and deeply personal exploration of human suffering, loss, and resilience. Nolan was unable to come to terms with the industrial scale of murder, and with what Hannah Arendt termed "the banality of evil." Nolan had intended to illustrate Alvarez's article for 'The Observer' but did not complete this project and struggled to depict the Holocaust in his career.

The Eichmann Trial

Adolf Eichmann was a high-ranking Nazi officer responsible for organising and overseeing the mass deportation of Jews to concentration and death camps during the Holocaust. He played a key role in implementing the 'Final Solution,' helping to facilitate the systematic murder of millions of Jews across Europe. Eichmann was captured in Argentina and brought to Israel to stand trial in 1961. He was charged with crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity and war crimes. The trial drew global attention to the Holocaust, as the proceedings were televised, bringing details of the Holocaust and testimonies from survivors into homes across the globe. Eichmann was found guilty on all charges. He was executed by hanging in 1962, the only person to ever be sentenced to capital punishment in Israel.



Adolf Eichmann during
his trial in Jerusalem,
Israel Government
Press Office.

Ravensbrück

Ravensbrück concentration camp, established in 1938, was located 90 km from Berlin. It became the largest women's concentration camp in the German Reich. In its earlier years, Ravensbrück's prisoners were primarily composed of non-Jewish political opponents of the Nazi regime. In Ravensbrück prisoners were subject to unmitigated torture and cruelty. They were forced to labour in gruelling conditions, including the building of an autobahn. In 1943 a crematorium was added, and in 1945, a gas chamber was built nearby. By 1944 Ravensbrück contained many sub-camps and held over 70,000 women. Guards at Ravensbrück were exclusively female, and after early 1942 Ravensbrück served as the central training camp for all female SS guards.

Ravensbrück was liberated by the Soviet Army in 1945. Approximately 123,000 women from more than 40 nationalities were prisoners at Ravensbrück. In addition to those murdered in the gas chamber, anywhere up to 50,000 died at the camp, and tens of thousands were sent east to death camps.

[Ravensbrück] was a cold, austere camp, clean and cold. The prevailing feeling was cold and the coldness was not only from the atmosphere, from the weather, the coldness was from people. There was not a shred of friendliness, of help, of support.

Kitia Altman OAM, Holocaust Survivor

Auschwitz

Located in Nazi-occupied Poland, Auschwitz was the largest and most infamous Nazi concentration and death camp complex. Established in 1940 it became a central site of the Nazi campaign to eradicate Europe's Jewish population. Auschwitz consisted of three main camps: Auschwitz I, Birkenau (Auschwitz II), Buna Monowitz (Auschwitz III). Prisoners faced inhumane conditions, starvation, medical experiments, and mass executions. Many were sent directly to gas chambers upon arrival. Approximately 1.3 million people were murdered in Auschwitz, of which 1.1 million people were Jewish men, women, and children.

[Auschwitz was] absolute bedlam and panic.

There were screaming, there were dogs, there were people who were hit, "raus, out quickly"...you know, there was absolute pandemonium and people were just completely confused and scared, and they didn't know what was going on.

Wolf Deane, Holocaust Survivor



Female Prisoners on the way to the Barracks, Auschwitz Album, Yad Vashem Collection.

Continue your experience through our public programs: hear from a Holocaust survivor, join an expert talk or take part in our Holocaust education course. For more information scan the QR code.



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This exhibition follows the Museum's 2022 exhibition 'Shaken to His Core: The Untold Story of Nolan's Auschwitz', produced in collaboration with 'Nolan's Africa' author, Andrew Turley. With the acquisition of some 65 artworks from Nolan's Holocaust series, the Sydney Jewish Museum is proud to present this exhibition featuring new insights and research into our Sidney Nolan Holocaust collection.

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