



## Dobell, Sir William (1899-1970)

by Michelle Antoinette

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William Dobell is regarded by many as one of Australia's greatest portrait painters. After a modest beginning to his artistic career, Dobell achieved legendary status in Australian art history with his controversial receipt of the 1944 Archibald prize, Australia's premier award for portraiture.

While Dobell's oeuvre is replete with homosexual subtexts, the artist spent his life hiding his sexuality from what was then a very conservative Sydney society, wary of the potential harm to his career that an open display of homosexuality could cause.

Born in New South Wales on September 24, 1899, Dobell grew up in a large family in a working class suburb of Newcastle, two hours north of Sydney. As an adolescent he spent much of his time in pursuit of art, rather than young women. At the age of fourteen, he left Cooks Hill School, where art training was limited, to pursue a freehand drawing course at a local technical college. After taking up an apprenticeship with an architect in Newcastle, Dobell went to Sydney in 1924, where he worked as a draftsman and attended evening art classes at Julian Ashton's Sydney Art School.

Dobell's receipt of the Society of Artists Travelling Scholarship in 1929 allowed him to further his training at the Slade School of Art in London. Perhaps more importantly, from the perspective of his development as an artist, Dobell used London as a base from which he travelled to museums in Holland, Belgium, and Paris.

Dobell's painting *Boy at the Basin* (1932) is indicative of the influence of seventeenth-century Dutch painting on the young artist, especially the tight brushwork and sensitive use of light evinced in Vermeer's interiors. Many of Dobell's most important life studies of the male nude, including *Study*, *Boy on Beach* (1933), were also produced at this time, and suggest Dobell's delight in the physicality and sexuality of his male models.

On returning to Sydney in 1939 the still relatively unknown Dobell taught at East Sydney Technical College. With the outbreak of war, he took up a position with the Civil Construction Corps, becoming an unofficial war artist.

It was during this time that Dobell produced some of his most famous portraits. These include *The Cypriot* (1940), *The Strapper* (1941), and *The Billy Boy* (1943), the latter providing one of Dobell's most iconic references to homosexuality. The painting depicts the weighty torso of laborer Joseph Westcott, his flabby, pink flesh barely covered by a diaphanous, loose, white singlet.

In other paintings produced during the war, such as *Emergency Loading at Night, Perth* (1944), *Barrowman, Perth* (1944), and *Concrete Consolidation Workers, Sydney Graving Dock* (1944), Dobell also idealized the masculinity of fellow Construction Corps workers. His paintings glorify the men's physical prowess, casting them as sexualized, heroic workers.

Dobell's receipt of the 1944 Archibald Prize for his *Portrait of Joshua Smith* made him an Australian

household name. Even mainstream society, ordinarily uninterested in the politics of Australia's small artistic community, was intrigued by the often viciously personal debate initiated by the awarding of the prize to Dobell.

Trouble began when a cabal of conservative artists alleged that *Portrait of Joshua Smith* was a caricature, and therefore in breach of the stipulations of the Archibald Prize. The debate was finally settled, in Dobell's favor, by the courts. But the incident was pivotal in Australian art history, provoking a long overdue debate over questions of aesthetics.

The incident was also noteworthy because beneath a thin veneer of high-minded aesthetic discussion lurked a voyeuristic curiosity about the true nature of the relationship between Dobell and his sitter, Joshua Smith, a friend and fellow artist.

Traumatized by the intense public scrutiny of his personal life, in late 1944 Dobell retreated to the relative isolation of Wangi Wangi on the New South Wales central coast. He won the Archibald Prize two more times, in 1948 for his portrait of Margaret Olley and in 1959 for his portrait of Dr. E.G. MacMahon.

Recognition of Dobell's achievements came in 1964 when the Art Gallery of New South Wales presented a retrospective of his work. He was knighted in 1966, but died four years later on May 13, 1970. In accordance with the artist's wishes, much of his estate was used to establish The Sir William Dobell Foundation, an institution that continues to benefit and promote art in New South Wales.

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