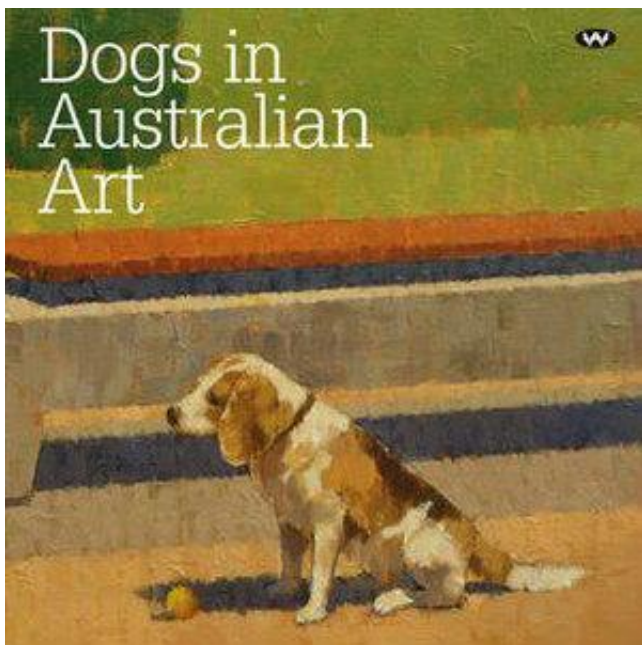


## Dogs in Australian Art

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ROZ BELLAMY

WAKEFIELD PRESS: Award-winning author Steven Miller's latest book is a unique history of Australian art seen through the lens of canine representation.



*Dogs in Australian Art* is one of those books that is a work of art in itself; a beautiful collection of art that you will want to leave on the coffee table, as it will surprise and delight anyone that picks it up. The author, Steven Miller, is head of the Research Library and Archive at the Art Gallery of NSW, and the depth of his knowledge and experience shows. He has written and co-authored many books about art, and his previous book, *Degenerates and Perverts: The 1939 Herald Exhibition*, won the NSW Premier's Australian History Award. In his latest book, Miller takes a unique approach to exploring Australian art. He explains that dogs are an extremely overlooked theme in the evolution of art, yet they are as valid a "lens" as any other, through which we can learn about art's debates, changes and rivalries.

The book is not just for the dog person in your life who obsesses over cute dog pictures on the internet. Art lovers, including those with no interest in dogs, will learn a great deal about the history of Australian art thanks to Miller's lucid and insightful text. He starts at colonisation, as the book's artworks focus on introduced and domestic species. However, he acknowledges that prior to colonisation, the dingo was an important part of Indigenous life and art and featured in rock paintings. He writes about the pioneer period, where artists were amateurs – mainly convicts, naval officers and

surveyors – and the changes that occurred as art began to develop as a field with the arrival of professionals. At this stage, dogs were tokens of civility and a reminder of the life left behind in England.

Miller continues with the establishment of the Heidelberg School art movement, named after the suburb where early dog breeders were based, while dog breeds were emerging and adapting to Australian life. Around the late 19th century, many Australian artists, including Rupert Bunny, moved to London and Paris where impressionism was changing art. The cities were both “dog crazy” and, for the Australian artists living and working there, “dog painting became a sign of European sophistication,” he writes.

Another chapter focuses on the changes in art during and between the world wars and the artistic movements that followed. Miller discusses the clash between the two types of dog painters after World War Two, the ‘Skinny Mongrel School of Melbourne’ and the ‘Contented Mutt School of Sydney’ dog painters. Even if you’re not interested in history, these are funny.

The historical introduction is followed by a table of contents categorising each work by breed. This is when things really heat up for dog lovers. There are small prints of dogs alongside each page of content and larger prints accompanying the essays. The artworks vary drastically in theme, mood and medium, and cover the 18th to the 21st century. For those with a limited interest in traditional oil or watercolour paintings, you may be glad to know that there are dogs depicted in wood carvings, embroideries, baked gingerbread cookies, digital prints, pastels, sculptures, woodcuts, ink drawings, etchings, acrylics, enamels, linocuts, collages, photographs, and, of course, the combination of live flowers, earth and steel in Jeff Koons’ giant *Puppy*, which sat outside Sydney’s MCA in 1995. Some use a combination of mediums, such as Basia Sokolowska’s collages which include her striking pet chow chow inserted into two Hong Kong postcards.

Artists choose their medium for specific aesthetic reasons, and there is no better example than Adrienne Doig’s embroidery, *Hamish and Max*. Miller explains that Doig “does not use thread simply as a substitute for the pencil. She delights in the subtleties of texture which needlework makes uniquely possible”. In Doig’s embroidery, the thick, woolly fur of the Bedlington Terrier is so realistic and distinctive, one almost wants to reach into the artwork and pat the dog.

In his final introductory essay entitled ‘Why not the dog?’, before the sections on each breed, Miller says,

*“There will be those who take issue with this revisionist history of Australian art, but I hope that they will admit at least this: something which artists have loved and lived with, have observed intently and celebrated in their work can be a useful lens through which to view a tradition.”*

It was not necessary for Miller to justify his reasons for writing this book. The artists and dogs speak for themselves.

Rating: 4 stars out of 5

*Dogs in Australian Art: A New History of Antipodean Creativity*

Steven Miller

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roz Bellamy is a Melbourne-based writer, reviewer and editor, with a passion for the arts and travel.