The Life, Art and Religious Iconography of David Wright

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By

Peter A. French

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For Robyn,
with heartfelt gratitude

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FOREWORD

This volume presents the life and work of Australian contemporary glass artist David Wright (b. 1948), and, in particular, his contribution to Australian religious iconography in the period 1970-2010. In that period Wright produced hundreds of high quality art glass windows for Australian public, private and sacred spaces, including significant national churches, school and hospital chapels, and synagogues, yet little scholarly research on the artist and his place in Australian art history exists. Through the production of the first *catalogue raisonné* ever produced on the artist and with a close examination of his opus, this publication argues that Wright has made an identifiable and unique contribution to the field of Australian religious iconography in the period 1970 – 2010.

PREFACE

I am deeply indebted to Mr. David Wright for the time he has dedicated to assisting me during the course of this research. A large number of interviews over the course of eight years and unrestricted access to collections of both private and public material concerning his artwork provided rich resources to underpin this book. Access to Wright's private notebooks was critical to understanding his observational and painterly skill that translates into vivid and original glass. Collections of private correspondence, plans, drawings, cartoons, financial and purchasing records were made available to me, providing detailed information about artworks that would simply not have otherwise been available. Personal information regarding the artist's family background, early works and influences was generously provided by members of David Wright's family who have been ever so gracious with their time and patience over the course of this project, especially The Revd. Sue McPhee, Flinders, and Mr. Ed Wright, Melbourne. Mrs. Margie Barton, Bairnsdale, Mr. Michael Wright QC, Melbourne, and Ms Prue Wright, Melbourne, have also assisted with this research.

The construction of the first *catalogue raisonné* of Wright's work is critical to understanding and analysing his contribution to art history in Australia. The construction of the *catalogue* relied upon access to both public and private collections of Wright's art, which in turn required access to a large number of individuals and institutions. Owners of Wright's works have been especially gracious in assisting with this research, providing copious details concerning each of the works in their homes and collections, as well as on numerous occasions allowing the photography of such pieces for the preparation of the *catalogue raisonné.* The following individuals have been of considerable assistance in this regard: The Revd. Ken Box, Launceston, Tasmania; Dr. Adrian and Mrs. Renee Dabscheck, North Caulfield; Mr. Peter and Mrs. Sherene Guy, Toorak; Ms. Suchada Hongsananda, St. Kilda; Dr. Steven Klein, Brighton; Mr. Bernie and Mrs. Margie Korman, Elsternwick; Mr. Peter Martin, East Hawthorn; Mr. Robert McKay, South Yarra; Ms June Newton, Toorak; Mr. Andrew and Mrs. Birgit North, Beaumaris; Mr. Gary and Mrs. Mary O'Connor, North Balwyn; Ms. Lotte Porges, North Caulfield; Ms M. Salom, St. Kilda; Ms Glenys Sigley, Camberwell South; Mr. Robert and

Mrs. Jean Sillar, Dudley, NSW; The Rt. Revd. Andrew R. St. John, New York, New York, USA; Mr. Richard and Mrs. Susan Thompson, Mossiface, NSW; and, Mr. D. Young, Glen Iris.

An equally significant number of institutions have been helpful with providing access and further information about the commissioning of various artworks by Wright. The hospitals in which Wright's work is installed have been gracious with their time and especially in providing access and resources pertaining to the artworks. Ms. Angela Edwards, of St. John of God Hospital, Berwick; Ms. Jacqui Meiers, of Cabrini Health Group and the Staff of Cabrini Hospital, Malvern, the Residential Care Unit, Ashwood, and the Acute Palliative Care Unit, Prahran; and the Staff of the Intensive Care Unit, Knox Private Hospital, Wantirna, have all been particularly helpful.

Multiple works by Wright contained within schools have required repeated access to buildings and archives and for Ms. Liesel Bladin, Methodist Ladies College, Kew; Mr. Andrew Boyd, Mr. Stuart Brook, and Ms. Julie Girdwood, Grimwade House, Melbourne Grammar School, Caulfield; The Revd. Walter McEntee and Ms. Annette Welkamp, Melbourne Girls Grammar School, South Yarra; Mr. Stephen Norris, Launceston Grammar School, Tasmania; and, The Development Office, Camberwell Grammar School, Canterbury, I am grateful.

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Curators of a variety of national, state and private collections have been generous with their time and the collections in their care, especially

Ms. Lara Merrington, Ms. Emma Epstein and Ms. Sarah Wall, The Samstag Collection, The University of South Australia, Adelaide; Mr. Nick Nicholson, The National Gallery of Australia, ACT; Mr. Michael Scarrone, The National Art Glass Collection, Wagga Wagga, NSW; and, Ms. Fiona West and Ms. Maria-Luisa Marino, Latrobe Regional Gallery, Morwell.

The staff of many libraries have been of critical help and in particular my thanks are extended to the staff of the Bailleau Library, The University of Melbourne; the Historical Archive of the State Library of Victoria, Melbourne; the Regenstein Library, The University of Chicago, Chicago, USA; and especially the librarians of the Marquand Library of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, Princeton, USA, whose ability to find any and all materials quickly and with good grace is extraordinary.

The study of Australian glassmaking since 1788 is in relative infancy compared to that of other media, especially painting and sculpture. Few studies of the overall history of Australian glassmaking exist and an even fewer number of monographs concerning the great glassmakers of the past two hundred years have been produced. Thus this research seeks to both address this limited historical knowledge of glassmaking in Australia and through its examination of one artist and the milieu in which his art was produced, encourage others to undertake further study in this field.

This study of Wright's art is the first of its kind and will hopefully prove to be a benchmark concerning his art and life. This is not to say that more could not be done regarding Wright and his contribution to Australian art. Further study of works completed by him after 2010, his drawings and paintings, alongside the discovery and analysis of those works hitherto undiscovered in this research provide further opportunity for research into this exciting and thoughtful Australian artist.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The quality of this project has been immeasurably enhanced by the willingness of its subject, Mr. David Wright, to open his studio, heart and mind to the investigations of this researcher. As detailed in the Preface, Wright's willingness to share so much of his time, and indeed his private collection of documents has provided rich material for this first detailed examination of his contribution to Australian art history. This project has benefited greatly from his generosity of spirit. Access to private correspondence, files, journals, artworks, and notebooks has always been joyfully provided and ready assistance to repeated enquiries about processes, personal history and experiences given without hesitation. Not once has Wright been in anyway obscurantist or unhelpful, encouraging an examination of his artwork without bias or prejudice from him. Most of all I am grateful for his willingness to allow for my assessment of his art, and in some considerable way, his life, with grace and good humour.

A genuine and extraordinary scholar of enormous talent, insight and discipline, my profound thanks to Prof. Jaynie Anderson, for her confidence, friendship, scholarship and encouragement over a long and unexpected journey. I remain in your debt Jaynie. My sincere thanks to Dr. Felicity Harley-McGowan, who has helped shape the course of my research through her patient, precise and wise critique of this project, and her considerable knowledge of Christian iconography, its history and development.

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To my parents, Michael and Christine French, whose dedication and sacrifice to providing me with the very best education has been matched by the opportunities such an education has provided. I am grateful to them both for their love and support and, not least, the months photographing Wright's works all across Melbourne, measuring pieces, speaking with owners and custodians and helping in no small measure in the preparation of a catalogue rich and detailed and the contribution it makes to the history of Australian art.

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The writing of this book was a long-term project requiring extended periods of time for writing and research amidst the rigors of daily life. I am grateful to the community of The Episcopal Church at Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, USA, and to the community of Grace Church Hinsdale, Chicago, Illinois, USA, before them for their support. Mr. Scott and Mrs. Jane Gamber, and Miss Mary Gamber, of Madison and New Canaan, Connecticut, USA, have been generous in their provision of the ideal beach house for extended periods of writing.

Last, but in no way least, I am immensely grateful for those who accompanied me at many a desk – by it, under it, near it, but always under close and constant canine supervision. *Requiescat in pacem* Emma, and *deo gratias* Rupert.

INTRODUCTION

Glass has captured the attention and imagination of humans throughout millennia. Glistening, jewel-like, coloured and transparent, glass has been manipulated into a staggering array of decorative pieces and functional objects from ancient Egypt until the present day. In ancient communities glass was imbued with the magical qualities ascribed the lapis lazuli and jade amulets it imitated, but the magic of glass as a medium transcends imitation such that modern communities prize and wonder at the medium to this day. The ability of glass to serve as both a protection against the elements and as a literal window through which to see the world adds further delight at the vast range of practical and aesthetic applications the medium embodies.

In art, glass has been manufactured, moulded, sculpted, stained and painted. It is collected and exhibited, revered and extolled, both in museums and in homes, from the most humble domestic *accoutrements* through the wonders of ancient and modern glass art pieces. In architecture, the development of glass has accompanied most stages of architectural progress, larger and larger panes of glass allowing for increasingly light-filled built environments. With glass, human constructions no longer bind the inhabitant to the interior but instead open vistas of sight that fuel imagination and creativity, all amidst a sea of streaming light.

Glass plays a pivotal role in the lighting of ancient and modern churches and cathedrals, temples and synagogues. The ability of glass to transmit light has been understood as a divine quality in itself and with the painting and staining of glass from the Middle Ages, glass became a means by which not only this divine light was shone on the practices of the church, but conveyed the very images of God itself, light-filled images describing narratives to a population blind to the text. Ecclesiastical glass was fundamental to the message of God it contained, an exalted art form equated with the transmission of faith and truth.

In modern Australia, glass was first brought as ballast in the earliest of colonial ships, a rare and precious commodity in an embryonic colony. As grander and grander homes, parliaments and churches were built, so too was glass imported to grace these buildings, once blank windows now filled with dazzling illustrations of both the old and the new world. In time Australia made her own glass and the vast iridescent dome of the

Australian sky was invited in to the public and domestic interior and with it, decorated panes that increasingly told the stories of state and faith with images of the Australian landscape, its people, practices, animals and plants.

This volume adds to the study of this extraordinary medium and argues that Australian artist David Wright has made a significant contribution to the practice of glass art, especially with regard to its development in an Australian context. The images Wright employs in his glass are deeply rooted in the land, fauna and flora of Australia and he brings his knowledge and experience to bear upon the images he employs throughout his glassmaking career. This research draws particular attention to Wright's religious iconography, his new and unique imagery now illustrating nationally significant contemporary Australian places of worship and public buildings, providing a new language in which Australians view and understand their God. Wright's imagery of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, of the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, of creation and the sacramental rites of the church and synagogue are illustrated in extraordinary new ways, and are fully examined in this book.

This publication establishes David Wright as an Australian glass artist of note in the period 1970 to 2010. It includes a complete *catalogue raisonné* of his career, the first such catalogue to be produced. This provides the basis of a critical analysis of his work, both chronologically and thematically, and demonstrates the manner in which his distinct iconography, particularly his religious iconography, has developed from the early stages of his career through to his artwork of 2010. It does so by presenting the quality and quantity of his glasswork from the late 1960's to the present day, setting such creative output in the wider context of Australian art of this period.

More than three hundred of Wright's artworks are installed in Australian public and private buildings and his work included in several Australian collections, including The National Gallery of Australia and that of prominent Australian collectors.[1] Since 1975, Wright has exhibited in Australia and internationally, his artwork included in three modern volumes on Australian glass and referenced in Australian and international peer-reviewed glass journals.[2] In recognition of his contribution to Australian art, on Australia Day, 26 January 2013, Wright was awarded an Order of Australia Medal (OAM) in the General Division, "For service to

[1] See Appendix 8.
[2] See the Bibliography and Appendix 1.

the visual arts using the medium of stained glass."[3] Yet despite such recognition and prolific output, this study is the first research to specifically address Wright's art, life and contribution to Australian visual culture.[4]

Thus this research also provides a biographical portrait of a contemporary Australian artist, defining his practice and his engagement with the medium. In so doing, this books draws much needed scholarly attention to Australian glass making in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the early twenty-first. Whilst Australian glass art has a marginal exhibition history in Australia - the reasons for which will be examined in depth below - there is a far larger audience for glass generally in Australia than its exhibition history and critical reception would indicate. The important iconographic impact glassmaking has had in Australian churches, temples and synagogues also points to the importance it plays in symbol and meaning making in religious communities in contemporary Australia.

Through this examination of Wright's art, its manufacture and the variety of public and private contexts in which it is installed, this publication provides a comprehensive understanding of Wright as an artist, his professional history, and especially the influences upon the development of his distinct iconography. The research provides an accurate and illustrated history of his complete *oeuvre* and seeks to supply sufficiently detailed information regarding his art such that Wright's contribution to the history of Australian art, in iconography, technique, material, style and volume, is both recognisable and recognised.

Following this introduction, the book is divided into six chapters. In the first chapter David Wright is introduced through a comprehensive description of his personal and family life, the influences upon the development of his iconography and by the identification of important early artworks. The second chapter then examines in detail the manufacturing methods used by Wright in the design, construction and manufacture of his glass. The distinctive manufacturing methods employed by the artist are highlighted and the extent to which Wright has instructed others in his particular methods of working with glass. Given the artist's personal history, influences and methods of manufacture,

[3] http://www.gg.gov.au/australia-day-2013-honours-lists, accessed May 16, 2013.

[4] By comparison, see publications dedicated to Wright's contemporaries, including Grishin, S., *Leonard French*, Craftsman House, NSW, 1995; Zimmer, J. (ed.), *Klaus Zimmer: Glass Artist*, Macmillan Art, Victoria, 2000; Thomas, D. (ed.), *The Art of Christian Waller*, Bendigo Art Gallery, 1992; and, Bottari, M., *Klaus Moje: Glass*, Portland Art Museum, Oregon, 2007.

Chapter Three draws attention to the context in which all of this occurs, examining trends in Australian art history after the Second World War, Australian and international glassmaking in the period in which Wright is working (1970 until 2010) and the profile of Australian glassmaking in this period. An analysis of Wright's success as an artist in this era is then provided, with the overwhelmingly positive critical response to his artwork illuminated, such that an overall picture of the artist's professional success in the period 1970-2010 is firmly established. An integral part of the chapter focuses upon the religious climate in Australia in this same period as the context within which Wright produces new and unique religious iconography for Australian places of worship.

The last three chapters focus upon Wright's religious iconography. Chapter Four commences with a detailed description of the location of all of Wright's artworks, his extensive collection and exhibition history and the significant number of Australian churches who have commissioned him to produce artwork for their buildings. Further commissions are also described, in particular those for works within hospitals, schools and universities that have religious affiliations, such that Wright's religious iconography within a large number of institutional chapels can be better understood. Having thus considered his personal and professional history, the context in which he worked and his extensive religious patronage in Australia at the end of the twentieth century, Chapters Five and Six are devoted entirely to detailing the new religious iconography that Wright produces in this context. With a preponderance of artworks in Christian churches, the artists' distinctive representations of each the persons of the Christian Trinity are closely described, with his new iconography of each, and the influences behind these, especially highlighted. Further examples of Wright's biblical iconography, including his images of creation, of the persons of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, of angels and the eucharist, are then detailed in Chapter Six, such that the extent of the range of new imagery Wright is providing, and the importance of this, is able to be clearly observed. Such unique religious iconography is then briefly compared with the iconography of Wright's contemporaries in the fields of glassmaking and in painting.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCING DAVID WRIGHT

This chapter introduces the reader to Australian glass artist David Wright and describes in detail his family background and the contexts in which the young artist grew up, such that this information will form an intimate portrait of the artist and the early personal and artistic influences that help shape the rest of his life and career. Such knowledge is integral to the examination of Wright's iconography, for many of his childhood and young adult experiences in Flinders and Melbourne, Victoria, are key to the artist's use of images that feature repeatedly throughout his forty-year career. Wright's parents and grandparents are described, as are the circumstances by which Wright as a child first came to experience Flinders and the critical place such a place has in his life both as person and artist.

His early life is closely described, as is his school and university education. The early influences of artists Ron Millar (born 1927) and John Brack (1920-1999) and the manner in which Wright first began to manufacture glass art are explored. The chapter also details the manufacture and installation of several important artworks in the early part of his career, including his first public and private commissions, those for his first public exhibition and the impact of his first ecclesiastical commission.

Wright's personal history and the identification of early and important influences upon him both as a young man and as an artist provide the context from which his forty-year career in glass began and are fundamental to an understanding of Wright and his art. As will be observed, his experiences of the Australian landscape and seascape as a child and as a young man, are profoundly important to the creation and development of many of his key iconographies.

Personal History

David Willmer Wright was born on 3 February, 1948, at 9 Sutherland Road, Armadale, an inner city suburb of Melbourne, Victoria. He is the

third child of Ferdinand Heathcote Wright, an Australian, and Anne Wright (née Willmer), an American.[1] He has two older siblings, Heathcote McMichael 'Michael' Wright QC (born 13 January, 1943), a barrister, and Susan Beekman Thompson (born 25 April, 1945), an artist; and a younger sister, Margaret Anne Barton (born 28 August, 1953). In 1945 his parents Ferdinand and Anne moved permanently from Boston, Massachusetts, to Ferdinand's hometown of Melbourne, where David was born. He is married to The Revd Susan McPhee Wright with whom he has two children, Edward (born 28 March, 1978) a digital marketer, and Josephine (born 2 June, 1980), a filmmaker.

David Wright's father, Ferdinand Heathcote 'Heath' Wright grew up in Melbourne, was educated at Melbourne Grammar School, South Yarra, like his brother and father, completed an MBA at Harvard University and went into business. Intelligent, warm, engaging, and very much a people person, Heath and his son had a very good relationship, David recalling a loving man of gentleness, encouragement and nurture. Unlike many of his peers, Heath did not serve in the armed forces during the Second World War, and spent much of his working life in the fuel industry, in which he was well-respected. After a series of strokes and their complications, David, the eldest child remaining at home, cared for his ill father, bathing and toileting him, which he recalls was never difficult or distressing but was rather an experience that was "wonderful and full of humanity."[2] Heath died in 1965, when David was seventeen years old.[3] David was saddened by his death but retained an optimism and hope for the future that balanced his grief and sadness. His death instilled in David a keen sense of the finitude of life.

David's Wright's mother, Anne, was a gregarious, progressive and adventurous woman, qualities that aided her sometime difficult experience of being an American *émigré* in Australia, torn between remaining in Australia with her husband's family, or returning to her own in the United States. Educated in New York, she was the dux of her Episcopal school, was intelligent and good-looking. In Melbourne she served on the Board of the Royal Children's Hospital, and as President of the American Women's Association. After the death of Ferdinand, Anne worked for the Australian Tourism Authority, work which often involved taking Japanese tourists around Australia. Wright remembers his mother as being an enthusiastic and adventurous soul, whose American background gave her a different perspective on the world, especially that of the tight-knit, often introspective world of the Melbourne establishment. A sailor, Anne instilled in her son a love for the sea: "[My mum] used to sail with me on the catamaran, when all the other mums were in their twin sets and pearls

and high heels, sitting on the beach, mum would be out there on the *Quickcat* sailing with me. [The Revd] Sue [McPhee-Wright] has very early memories of me and mum sailing down to Point Leo, [from Flinders, Victoria] and all the other mothers standing on the verandah of the yacht club being absolutely amazed 'that mothers could sail.'"[4]

Shortly after moving to Melbourne, Heath and Anne invited Anne's parents, Edward Albert Brittain Willmer and Anne Fleming Willmer (née Fish), to emigrate to Australia in 1947, taking up residence in Shoreham, a small beachside town on Westernport Bay, 100 kilometres south-east of Melbourne, Victoria.[5] Before they emigrated, Edward, an Englishman, and Anne, an American, had suffered a crippling financial disaster, which severely hampered their ability to purchase a property of their own in Melbourne. Their options remained limited until Heath's father, Colonel Wright, purchased a block of land that bordered the beach in the newly subdivided Rest Estate in Flinders, a neighbouring town of Shoreham. Colonel Wright's brother, Harry, had an old, uninhabited cottage on his property in Toorak, that was promptly cut in half, transported by flatbed truck to Flinders and ensconced upon the newly bought land for Edward and Anne Wilmer to live in. Edward, "then spent the rest of his life putting the two halves back together and fixing the roof… a gorgeous cottage, right on the beach."[6] As will become clear later, this relocation to Flinders by David Wright's maternal grandparents and the place that Flinders occupies in the life of the artist is profoundly important.

David Wright's maternal grandparents had a wonderful and adventurous effect on the young David. "Anne was gregarious, a party girl and just great fun to be with," while Edward fueled David's imagination with tall tales and true of his travel around the world, of camping in the snake-laden Brazilian jungle and sailing off the storm-whipped Canadian coast. David distinctly remembers, "My 'Flinders grandfather' was an engineer who had had this amazingly exciting life - building railways in Brazil and sailing schooners for Sir Wilfred Grenfell, who ran a mission to the Eskimos in Labrador."[7] An engineer and a handyman, an adventurer and storyteller, he was for Wright "the perfect grandparent." Upon his death Wright would treasure the set of tools bequeathed to him, many of which he still has, "and that's really important to me, that male thing of passing tools down the line and you pick up a pair of pliers and you know they have been handled by your grandfather."[8] Such tools have a place not only in Wright's memory but also in the studio in which he works today.

David Wright's paternal grandfather, Colonel Ferdinand Henry Wright (1897-1978), was a patriarch of the Wright family, a friend of former

Australian Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies, and a proud survivor of the disastrous Gallipoli landings of 1915, an experience that David Wright recalled left him "severely traumatised."[9] Promoted to the rank of Colonel in 1943, Ferdinand referred to himself by his rank and insisted others do the same. "Kerny," as he was affectionately named by the family, was for David Wright an, "amazing, self made man, who built this house in Toorak and, typical of that generation, was fastidious about his appearance, his fitness, his friends."[10] A dedicated correspondent, Colonel Wright maintained contact with friends all over the world, his letters written in lively and beautiful prose, and the contents of which were often shared with his family.[11] As ambitious for his family as he was for himself, Colonel Wright insisted upon the education of his daughters as well as his sons, encouraging his family to prize education and to be as accomplished as they were able. Colonel Wright was a staunch churchman, a vestry member of some thirty years standing at St. John's Anglican Church, Toorak, a feisty member of that congregation, known for storming out of church should the vicar preach about the war in a manner the Colonel disagreed with.

Colonel Wright was married to Rosa Davies, a collector of notable Australian paintings. By the time David Wright was a child his paternal grandmother had purchased art by Harold Herbert (1891-1945), Hans Heysen (1877-1968), Charles Conder (1868-1909), and George Lambert (1873-1930), and these paintings hung in his grandparents' rambling Toorak home, alongside windows still covered in World War Two era blackout paper.[12] A gentle and highly cultured woman Rosa was, "very Welsh, with pale skin," who played the piano, and took her grandchildren to see the annual Christmas pantomimes in the city of Melbourne. Rosa died in 1961, when David was a teenager, leaving him with a thin memory of her person but whose artistic tastes, as we shall observe, must be included in any assessment of early influences upon Wright's life as an artist.[13]

Background and Early Influences

Childhood in Flinders and Melbourne, Victoria

Whilst Wright's parents were not overtly religious, both sent their children on a regular basis to Holy Advent Church of England, in Kooyong Road, Armadale. David and his siblings attended Sunday School there and Wright recalls that his experience of the church was what he describes as, "a typical Church of England upbringing," where the church was a positive and natural part of a child's environment, but one that did not appear to intrude too much on daily life.[14] It did however have an impact, for as a child Wright learnt the stories of the Christian faith and began to develop a mental inventory of images of the biblical narrative. Further to regular church attendance, Michael and David were educated at a church school, Melbourne Church of England Grammar School, South Yarra, their sisters Susan and Margaret at Lauriston Girls School, Armadale, Victoria.

Art, imagination and public performance was a natural part of David's childhood.[15] David and his elder sister Sue were artistic children, collaborating together in drawing, painting and building things. Sue was a strong influence upon David, and their artistic escapades were encouraged by their parents. Aged nine and eleven, the two children made puppets, constructed miniature stages and wrote plays, giving performances of their craft for the neighbourhood children. In March of 1957, David and Sue were invited to bring their puppet show to television, on HSV 7's "The Judy Jack Show," a well-known children's show broadcast in the very early days of Melbourne television history. Such was the popularity of their puppetry, stages and narratives, the pair received repeated return invitations, such that a positive experience of the connection between art, performance and narrative were established in their minds from an early age.

A burst appendix at aged eight nearly killed David Wright. Following surgery he was dispatched by his parents to Flinders to live with his grandparents for several months to recuperate, and there experienced, "this totally other life which is still very vivid to me."[16] No cars, no electricity, kerosene lamp-lit nights, no school and unrestrained reconnoitres in the surrounding bush and sea inserted Flinders into an important place in Wright's psyche and his art. At age ten his parents gave him an eight-foot single sail Sabot dinghy and his first experiences of freedom and independence at Flinders were further enhanced by long hours sailing and rowing about in the boat. Wright remembers rowing close to the jagged rock wall edges and, on very still days, gazing down into the deep and the

worlds beneath, feeling as though he were suspended on this layer above, watching silently the world below him gliding by.

The importance of Flinders to David Wright cannot be underestimated and its impact upon his art and iconography is of major significance. The young artist's experience of a cornucopia of imagery, of brimming rockpools, of creatures such as fish, squid, and native birds, of plants, seaweed, and native ferns, all set against a backdrop of a sea that healed, restored and excited Wright, form as much of a mental collection of Australian images as his childhood compendiums were the astute observations of a world around him. "Being at Flinders started becoming part of my soul."[17] His early life there, saturated with the grand tales, hospitality and freedoms of his *émigré* grandparents fused with his Melbourne life, his formal education and a world filled with art, church and the love and support of an extended family.

Flinders remains an important part of Wright's personal and professional life. His current home, which he designed and built himself, is on Spindrift Avenue, Flinders, near the very same land that his grandfather Edward Willmer had bought sixty years before. The house sits up on the cliffs with an expansive view of the sea, beach, promontory and kelp filled rock-pools. His local church, St. John the Evangelist Anglican Church Flinders, was where Wright attended as a child, where his grandfather played the organ and is the very same church that his wife Sue was Vicar of from 2002 until 2005. Flinders' main street, Cook Street, is where Wright has had his studio from 2002 until 2014.

The two worlds of Flinders and Melbourne form the basis upon which Wright built the rest of his life. From his Melbourne family and his schooling came early confidence, affirmation and education. From Flinders, an artistic skill combined with a nuanced and informed iconography. These two worlds were sufficiently different for Wright, with sources of inspiration and influence in both:

> "I had this establishment past, and this establishment life, and then I'd come down to Flinders and have this totally *different* life where my heroes were the local fishermen... It teaches you that interesting people can be found everywhere, and that really bright people can be found everywhere… Yes, there are these two worlds."[18]

Wright's upbringing in the well-heeled Melbourne suburb of Toorak, of regular holidaying in Flinders and his education at Melbourne Grammar School might lead one to presume that this accurately titled "establishment" background furnished him with the financial means by which he could devote all of his time to pursuing his art, such as that

afforded writer Patrick White, for example.[19] Quite the opposite was true, and Wright's lack of financial resources instead ensured his seeking of the professional qualifications that could provide him with an income in the future. In the early period of his career, his wife Sue's consistent and reliable income was essential, ensuring that Wright could both continue in his architecture studies whilst also making glass. Their frugal living whilst at University is contrasted by the experience of some of his classmates and old school friends, whose family wealth rendered the need for them to work unnecessary.[20] Always acutely aware of the need for careful stewardship, Wright's accurate bookkeeping, organization of commissions and his careful attention to legal and insurance issues speak of a diligent and methodical approach to the business side of being an artist.

Primary and Secondary Education, 1953-1966

David Wright's formal education commenced at age six when he entered the first grade at Wadhurst, the preparatory school of Melbourne Church of England Grammar School, South Yarra, Victoria. A popular and able child, gregarious and with many friends, the school encouraged his talents, outgoing nature and emerging confidence. He engaged in all manner of school activities, including playing sport, drama productions and attending chapel.

Like many children, Wright was episodically unwell, suffering from occasional bouts of asthma and eczema. Upon the advice of the family doctor, and amidst the accepted medical wisdom of the day, Wright's parents decided that the best way to treat his asthma was for the schoolboy to be encouraged to live as much of a "normal" life as possible, one unimpeded by illness or medical intervention. Thus even when Wright was suffering the symptoms of either illness his parents would continue to send him to school and, when his symptoms got the better of him, Wright ended up in the school "sick-bay," replete with "matron" and a leather-clad bed. Sequestered, Wright could hear the world going on around him, unable to participate, yet conscious of events and life passing by. These episodic illnesses never isolated or ostracized him, but rather developed within him a sense of "standing-on-the-outside-looking-in," fueling his imagination and fostering a yet untapped observational skill.

In Year Seven at Melbourne Grammar, aged twelve, Wright became increasingly interested in religion and philosophy, although had little sense that different philosophies or religions could have an equal claim on his mind. In that same year he was due to be confirmed as an adult member of

the Church of England in a liturgy in the school chapel, the Chapel of St. Peter. He remained unconvinced however that, "he believed all this [Christianity]."[21] His Chaplain at Wadhurst, The Revd Imray, thus became the recipient of his religious angst and disappointed the young man when he could not answer his concerns with any kind of robust intellectual engagement. The Chaplain's flippant reply, "Don't worry about it, just go and get confirmed anyway," left Wright dissatisfied - yet relieved - that his questioning would not cause him to run afoul of the Church.[22] Convinced that if there were a God, then God probably would not be too interested in him, "going along with everything just for the sake of it," and not questioning further the questions of existence and faith. "If God gave me a brain to think and question," Wright reasoned, "it would be silly of me not to use it."[23] By coincidence or consequence, a curious and unique feature of Wright's figurative art is the distinctly visible brain in his representations of the human person.

Wright was duly confirmed but the church had little claim on him as an adolescent and he sought further secular intellectual engagement, continuing to read philosophy and the history of religion. Later in his senior years at school Wright recalled that The Revd Brown was Chaplain at Senior School, "…but I don't remember anything about him at all."[24] Chapel was not high on his list of priorities either, although he did enjoy the chapel services and especially the singing: "Chapel was of minimal influence to me - and I wasn't remotely interested in the stained glass windows."[25]

What was of interest to Wright was the study of art and any other subjects where he was able to draw or illustrate the subject matter. His sister Sue, who would read through his class notes with him for revision, recalls that even in Senior School her brother's notes were beautifully illustrated, "in all the most inappropriate points," and there were often elaborate and overly detailed capital letters beginning many a sentence of his English and History essays.[26]

Wright was influenced by two of his art teachers at Melbourne Grammar, John Brack (1920-1999) and Ronald Millar (born 1927). Headmaster Sir Brian Hone had employed Brack as a resident artist in the hope of encouraging students to study and practice art, no doubt conscious of the School's contribution to Australian art through the work of former students, principally print artist Victor Cobb (1876-1945) and painter Derwent Lees (1884-1931).[27] John Brack was Art Master from 1952-1962, and an identity on the school campus. Whilst Wright cannot recall being directly taught by him, Brack's influence on Wright's work is evident, especially in Wright's precise line-work in his cartoons, a precision so

critical in the construction process of glass art. Wright remembers John Brack as a private, intellectual man with a very sophisticated view of art and could not imagine him teaching art to children. His art was, however, very attractive to the young artist, Wright making detours on his tram rides home to visit galleries exhibiting John Brack's work. One exhibition at James Mollison's *Gallery A* in Toorak, Wright remembers thinking, "Gosh, I would love to be able to own those paintings."[28] In the early 1960's Brack's works were already commanding "impossible prices" but neither price nor gallery quelled Wright's enthusiasm for his work.[29] Indeed a John Brack lithograph, *Model with Islamic Carpet*, 1977, now hangs in Wright's living room (fig. 1).

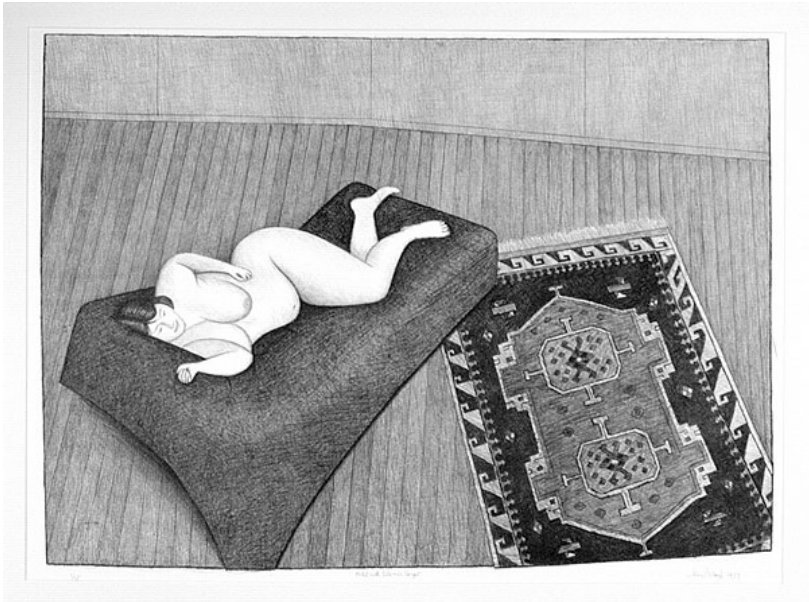

Figure 1. John Brack (1920-1999), *Model with Islamic Carpet*, 1977, lithograph, 480mm x 685mm, Collection of David and Sue Wright.

Wright enjoyed visiting all manner of galleries and exhibitions, inheriting perhaps his grandmother's love for such experiences. The work of John Olsen (born 1928) and John Perceval (1923-2000) caught his attention even as a schoolboy and his admiration of them both continues to this day. Olsen, with "his anything but linear painting," and "enthusiasm for the landscape and the curliness of everything."[30] Perceval with "his thick daubs of bright and strong colours."[31] The same can be said for his

admiration of the work of John Brack and Fred Williams (1927-1982): "people like that were extraordinary to me."[32] Such was his admiration for John Olsen that an etching by him, *Frog in the Rain*, 1975, also hangs in his home (fig. 2). The influence of such established artists is evident in Wright's opus. John Brack's dedication to precise linearity alongside Wright's own architectural training brings forth high-quality drawings and cartoons that are essential to the making of Wright's glass. Olsen's playful and whimsical displays of Australian fauna, for example, can be glimpsed in Wright's own presentation of a variety of animals. Echoes of John Perceval's bold painting of the Australian seashore and its exploration of the often dramatic intersection of sea and earth can be seen in Wright's many and varied explorations of the theme of creation.

Figure 2. John Olsen (b. 1928), *Frog in the Rain*, 1975, etching on paper. Collection of David and Sue Wright.

Whilst Wright visited State and commercial art collections around Melbourne, he no doubt encountered high-quality private collections held by the families of school friends. *Collector's Collections*, an astonishing exhibition of both contemporary and historical works of Australian art showed in the School's Memorial Hall from the ninth until the seventeenth

of August, 1969, were comprised of artworks lent by Melbourne Grammar families. Whilst Wright was no longer at the Senior School, the exhibition contained works loaned by the families of his friends and contemporaries, giving a glimpse into the art that the young Wright would have encountered in domestic interiors at the time he was developing his own artistic style.[33] Of particular note were the exhibition of major pieces by Arthur Boyd (*Storm at Rickett's Point,* 1959, *Old Mine Shaft*, 1958-59, *The Bridge, Lysterfield,* 1959) and John Perceval (*River Forest*, 1959), paintings depicting the Australian landscape in bold and now iconic fashion.

Such an interest in art and this exposure to eminent Australian artists both at his home, in the homes of others, and at school, did not however instill in Wright a sense that he himself was an artist nor did it convince him that a life sustained by his own artistic ability could ever be an option for him. Subsequently, Wright was enormously surprised when he discovered that while he certainly did not consider himself an artist at school - most of his school friends did. To others Wright was definitely an artist, for to them he was constantly drawing, sketching and participating in school events that required artwork, such as the illustrating of backdrops for school plays, musicals and, memorably, the annual school dance, for which Wright once designed, "an appropriately sixties-style enormous psychedelic backdrop."[34]

It was for one such backdrop of a school theatrical production that Wright's desire to work with glass was born. Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* had premiered in London's West End in 1960, with Australian Leo McKern playing the role of the "Common Man," and with its popularity and favourable reviews, ensured much press coverage in Australia. Ambitiously or otherwise Melbourne Grammar School chose the play for its school production in 1966. One scene required the set to include a stained glass window, which Wright made from paper, cardboard and colored transparent plastic according to a design developed from, "a doodle drawing made whilst bored in class."[35] His window was entitled *Jonah and the Whale* (fig. 3).

Figure 3. *Jonah and the Whale*, 1965, ink on paper. *The Melburnian*, Melbourne Church of England Grammar School, South Yarra, Victoria, 1965, p.17.

Having successfully manufactured the theatrical piece, Wright became enchanted with the idea of making the "real thing" and set about making enquiries as to how he could do so, starting with one of his art teachers, Ronald Millar.

Millar had little time for boys who had little time for art. For those students like Wright however, who were imaginative, creative and willing to work on their craft, Millar was both encouraging and enthusiastic. Millar painted and contributed criticism and reviews to *The Australian*, *The Herald* and *The Age* newspapers and Wright remembers him as a very positive person, always able to provide feedback with which to move forward, primarily because Millar himself empathized with the creative process. "I really enjoyed the art department and Ron Millar as my teacher, especially in my later years at school, just a wonderful and sardonic and bright and encouraging person."[36] A painting by Millar, *Early Morning Nude*, 1971, hangs in Wright's home.