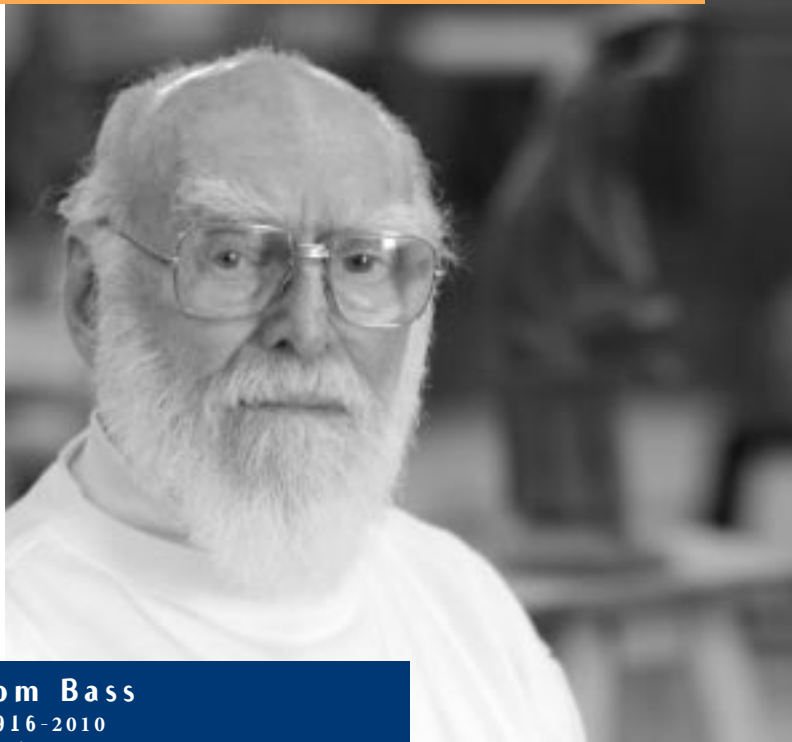


# AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



**Tom Bass**  
1916-2010  
Sculptor

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 10 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

**Australian Biography: Tom Bass**

**Director/Producer** Rod Freedman

**Executive Producer** Mark Hamlyn

**Duration** 26 minutes **Year** 2005

Study guide prepared by Gail Frost © NFSA

Also in Series 10: Noeline Brown, Sir Zelman Cowen, Anne Deveson,  
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## SYNOPSIS

Tom Bass is one of Australia's leading sculptors, having created many of the country's most significant public works. His commissions include pieces for the National Library, Canberra's Civic Square and numerous churches and universities. However, none of his sculptures are in art gallery collections. His philosophy is that the sculptor is the seer or spokesperson for the community, whose role is to create 'public totems', not 'mantlepiece ornaments'. 'I saw the whole of Australia as a blank sheet that had to be written on,' says Tom.

Born into poverty in Lithgow, NSW in 1916, it was his childhood experiences in Gundagai that inspired Tom to become an artist. After working as a swaggie and at other odd jobs, and surviving on a diet of rolled oats in every conceivable form, he studied at Datillo Rubbo Art School and later at the National Art School. In the 1970s, he established his own sculpture school and he is still a passionate teacher at the age of 88.

Tom's own life and work have had a deep spiritual dimension, which he shares in this interview. Married twice, and the father of six children, he reflects on God, religion, war, beauty, family, marriage and his vision of public art and sculpture.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include Visual Arts, Art History, Australian History, Civics and Citizenship and English.

## BEFORE WATCHING

Students need to:

- have an understanding of major historical events in Australia from 1916 to the present
- be introduced to the language of art in the video and what it means—see Art Speak

## Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- discuss and use visual language to communicate their ideas about artists and their works
- talk about and listen to how artists are influenced and inspired by the historical, cultural and aesthetic contexts in which they live and work
- identify and discuss the elements of art and principles of design
- identify and describe the media and processes used in artworks
- identify the subject, composition and content in artworks
- draw, design and make experimental three-dimensional pieces

## ART SPEAK

- Open a discussion with students about situations that require a person to learn a specialised vocabulary. For example, what language do computer programmers learn in order to understand each other? Explain that learning the language about elements and principles of art is the first step in speaking the language of artists and that art viewers who understand this language are more informed to make judgements about artworks.
- Discuss key vocabulary and concepts: shape, form, space, texture, rhythm, movement, balance, proportion, emphasis, unity, freestanding, relief, subject, symbols.

## EARLY INFLUENCES FROM GUNDAGAI

Tom Bass lived in Gundagai for two years when he was eight to ten years of age and he believes this was an absolutely crucial part of his life. Although Gundagai was a small town it seemed full of larger than life characters. The blacksmith in the town threw the old damaged horseshoes he removed into a pile behind his shop. Tom saw this pile as a monument, or totem, that the blacksmith had made. He was fascinated by the making of things and how something came into existence (ie the process).

### Activity: Learning the Language of Visual Art

Learning the language of visual art is key to students understanding, appreciating and creating their own works of art. Have students view a famous Gundagai sculpture—the **Dog on the Tucker Box**. You can use the image at [www.australianicons.com.au/gundagai.html](http://www.australianicons.com.au/gundagai.html) (or one from another source). Ask students to analyse and evaluate the sculpture's aesthetic qualities. This can be achieved through various methods of instruction, however it is important to develop these skills using both written perceptual skills and practical studio skills.

The above-mentioned website also has photographs of Gundagai taken by Dr Charles Gabriel, who was one of Tom Bass's major influences. Remind students that artists are products of the historical, cultural and aesthetic contexts in which they live and work, so by understanding more about these areas, students can develop a greater understanding and appreciation for a particular artist.

Students could also visit other websites to read the verse on the story of the dog to develop a broader understanding of that period of time and the meaning behind this symbol of the past. Some starting points could be [www.canb.auug.org.au/~stmcdona/tuckrbox.html](http://www.canb.auug.org.au/~stmcdona/tuckrbox.html) or [www.walkabout.com.au/fairfax/locations/NSWGundagai.shtml](http://www.walkabout.com.au/fairfax/locations/NSWGundagai.shtml)

As a boy, Tom was taken to visit Frank Rusconi, a local artist and mason, who went on to create the **Dog on the Tuckerbox**. The work was commissioned for the 1932 'Back to Gundagai' celebrations. Tom recalls thinking years later that if ever he could make a piece of sculpture as famous as the Dog, it would be marvellous.

In his book **Tom Bass: Totem Maker**, Tom explains how seeing a wheel being made by the blacksmith was one of the most intense experiences of his boyhood. The image became central to his totemic philosophy of sculpture. 'The hub of the wheel was a totem, the centre which connected all the people who were gathered around it, like spokes driven in the hub. The elemental force and power of the steel rim is the binding power of the whole culture which unifies all these people.'

During his schooling in Gundagai Tom started drawing and enjoyed it very much. He would draw images of his daily experiences. He joined the local scout troop and visually documented many of the activities in which he participated. He longed to learn more about art, however this was extremely difficult in what he states 'was a very ordinary, terribly ordinary town.' Until one day, when Charles Gabriel, the local GP, saw one of his drawings and approached Tom's mother to rebuke her for neglecting his talents. His mother told the story repeatedly and Tom says that he suddenly knew he was an artist. Later, Tom found out that Charles Gabriel had been a keen amateur photographer—the National Library in Canberra now has an extensive collection of his photographs of Gundagai in its archives.

## Discussions Points

- What is meant by the 'Great Depression', which started in October 1929?
- Tom left home and school at the age of 15 years. He worked in a sports shop and glass works and spent two years shearing and working on dairy farms across the country during the Depression years—often he was many miles away from home and extremely lonely. Do you know anyone who has done something similar? Describe your immediate reaction to this idea. Does it frighten you? Excite you? Or is it something you have never thought about?
- Do you know how the Great Depression affected your family? If so, how did they cope and adapt? Do you have family stories of everyday life in the 1930s?

## Further Activities

The following writing activities are designed to further develop students' awareness of this period in Australian history.

- Imagine you are the young Tom Bass. Write four entries in your journal based on some of the experiences Tom mentions in the program. Support your writing with some additional research about this period of Australian history.
- Through Tom's eyes we hear how he coped living away from home and his loved ones. Sometimes being away from what you are familiar with enables you to see things differently. Have you had such an experience? How did you react in this situation? What insights were you able to gain?
- The way we write often depends on who we are writing for, that is, our audience. We might use different vocabulary and we might include or omit certain information depending on our audience. Write two pieces: one a letter to your family and another an article for the local newspaper, telling about your experiences, feelings and reaction to a lonely time in your life.
- Put yourself in Tom's shoes during this difficult and challenging period of time in his life, his late teens. What would you do if your normal support system was not there? What would you do to support yourself in the world of today?

## TRADITIONAL ARTS PRACTICE

When Tom was 19 years old he started posing as a model at different art schools. At Dattilo Rubbo's school, he immediately knew that was where he wanted to study, as he believed Rubbo's way of teaching was ideal for those students wanting to study sculpture.

In **Tom Bass: Totem Maker**, Tom states Dattilo Rubbo 'was a great teacher because he wasn't just teaching from his own skill or talent, he was teaching principles'. Tom feels that Dattilo Rubbo taught from an understanding of those principles, and writes that his approach was a step-by-step way of looking at form. All drawing was done with charcoal, to build the pattern and rhythm within the form. Overall, Rubbo's teaching was a process of discipline and initiation, delivered in a colourful and stimulating manner.

The great Julian of Paris, who had taught Degas and Manet, had taught Dattilo Rubbo himself. There is a continuity of tradition that runs through, from master to master, and Tom believes that he continues to demonstrate these essential principles of teaching today.

Tom met Harry Justilius, a painter and retired public servant who became a father figure to Tom. Harry gave him the book **The Meaning of Art**, by Herbert Read, as a 21st birthday present:

the only present he received for his birthday. This book, Tom states, 'opened the door to the history and principles of the development of art', for him, and adds 'I can still remember Read's definition of beauty. He said: "Beauty is a fluctuating phenomenon which manifests itself in different ways, at different times, in different cultures"'. This remark struck Tom then and has gone on to mean more the longer he lives.

Tom saw the Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art when it came to Australia in 1939. He had never seen anything like it, with artists such as Braque, Picasso, Matisse, Gauguin and drawings by Henry Moore. Moore's drawings of wrapped forms are images that have stayed vivid for Tom over the years.

It was not until after Tom's discharge from the army in September 1945 that his greatest opportunity came via the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme (a program to retrain soldiers after they returned from war), which allowed him to study sculpture full-time for three years at the National Art School under Lyndon Dadswell, who Tom describes as 'a gifted and inspirational teacher'. (Dadswell was first sculptor to be appointed an official war artist.)

After graduation in 1948 Tom faced another challenging time. He needed to support his wife and three children. He became Lyndon Dadswell's assistant and did many odd jobs. He was also trying to work out what sort of sculptor he wanted to be; he had decided he did not want to be a sculptor who exhibited in galleries. He reached the conclusion that 'throughout the ages sculpture has had a totemic function in society, and through sculpture, people, communities and societies have been reminded of the things that are most important to them'.

Once Tom had made his decision not to exhibit in galleries and expressed this view, his peers and relatives thought he was mad, however almost instantly he had formed his philosophy for his sculptural works, commissions started coming in and his career took off.

## Further Activities

The following are ideas for developing further students' understanding of both language and process in freestanding three-dimensional sculptural artworks. They are quick activities that can be experimental, progressive pieces that lead into final works.

- Practise basic drawing skills to explore contour, gesture, light and dark tones as they relate to three-dimensional observational drawings. Refer to exercises in the book **Experimental Drawing** (see References and Further Resources).
- Make a flat sheet of construction paper into a three-dimensional paper sculpture, by using cutting and scoring techniques. Give the sculpture a minimum of five different surfaces. Do not cut the paper into separate pieces. Use only slots and tabs if you wish to join any parts. You may like to experiment with scrap paper before final paper construction. Many are surprised that they can make curved forms from flat paper.
- Hold a large fist-size piece of clay behind your back and model and smooth it into a rounded but uneven form that has at least one opening that goes completely through it. Keep turning the clay as you work so that every surface is affected. When finished, the form should look like a rock that has been worn down by Mother Nature. Then bring the form in front of you. Using clay tools, the form can be refined. Let the clay dry to a leather-hard stage. The form can then be polished with the back of a spoon on some surfaces (burnishing) and other surfaces can be given a rougher texture.

- Make a freestanding three-dimensional design that projects into negative space on all sides. Using pieces of cardboard tubing or small boxes, join the design pieces with glue and tape. Paint the finished work with one colour to emphasise its form. This piece could use any recycled materials.
- Create a relief design showing flowing rhythm. Cut strips of construction paper 15 mm wide. Glue only the edge to a piece of three-ply (or thicker) board. Use analogous colours for the strips and a complementary colour for the background. Curl and arrange the strips so that they will hold their curve after you have glued them. Arrange the strips in sets of almost parallel ridges. Hot glue is good because it is more instant and stays in place, however be mindful of safety issues.

## REFLECTIONS AND TRANSFORMATION

In his late fifties Tom decided to open his own school. Teaching was a new direction for him and it had become very important to him. Tom believes that the main thing people need to learn is how to see, and then how to translate what they see into the language of sculpture. He teaches in a way that comes out of a great tradition, one that he belongs to and in which he has earned his qualifications.

In the program, Tom refers to a statement by English sculptor Eric Gill: 'The artist is not a special kind of man. Every man is a special kind of artist.' This message has become very important to Tom in his later life: it has become a guiding principle for him. Having rediscovered his faith and looked to find his inner self, he is also interested in exploring questions of art and the sacred. He reflects:

'I admired Socrates' inductive reasoning method of asking questions. I admired it but couldn't bring it into my life. Over the years, it gradually dawned on me that to clarify something in my mind I needed to formulate it as a question, and then trust that the answer would be given. This was largely related to giving up my victim consciousness and taking responsibility for my own life.'

Tom Bass intends to remain involved in the training of teachers to carry on the tradition in which he so passionately believes.

### Reflection Activities

- Discuss Tom's decision not to exhibit in galleries. What do you believe are the costs and benefits for him, for cultural organisations and for the general public?
- Tom asked himself these questions—can you answer them? How can people be touched and moved by art? How can it really affect their lives?
- Select one of the Tom Bass artworks from one of the websites in the References and Further Resources section. Looking at the composition of the sculpture, what messages do you receive? How has Tom conveyed his message/s? Do you think he is successful in communicating his view? Why or why not?
- Investigate the various influences, sources of inspiration and working methods of Tom Bass and Henry Moore. Write a comparative essay.
- Write a biography or brief resume for Tom Bass after viewing the program, or write a review of the program itself and what you have learned from it.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

### Books

- Tom Bass and Harris Smart, **Tom Bass: Totem Maker**. Australian Scholarly Publishing, Kew, 1996
- Nevill Drury, **New Sculpture: Profiles in Contemporary Australian Sculpture**. Craftsman House, Sydney, 1993
- Michael Hedger, **Public Sculpture in Australia**. Craftsman House, Sydney, 1995
- Sandra Jane, **Art is...Making, Creating & Appreciating: 2**. John Wiley & Sons, Australia, 1999. Excellent formats for students to use for analysing artworks, both two- and three-dimensional.
- Robert Kaupelis, **Experimental Drawing**. Pitman House, London, 1980. Creative exercises illustrated by old and modern masters including da Vinci, Michelangelo, Degas, de Kooning, Rauschenberg and many others. Excellent for developing ideas for three-dimensional artworks. Suitable for use with students of all year levels.
- Desmond MacAulay, **Spirit & Space: Artworks on Commonwealth Properties in Australia and Overseas**. Australia Council, Sydney, 1988
- Herbert Read, **The Meaning of Art**. Penguin Books, 1949

### Websites

- ArtsACT—[www.arts.act.gov.au](http://www.arts.act.gov.au)
- Civic Public Art Walking Tour. A snapshot of some of the many types and styles of public art that have been commissioned for Canberra, including Ethos in Civic Square by Tom Bass.
- Australian War Memorial Artist Profiles: Lyndon Dadswell—<https://www.awm.gov.au/people/P65045/>
- Tom Bass Sculpture Studio School—<http://tbsss.org.au/>
- University of NSW Art Collection—[www.artcollection.unsw.edu.au](http://www.artcollection.unsw.edu.au)
- Sculpture Walk. Take a virtual tour of the sculptures and public art in the UNSW Art Collection, including three images of Tom Bass artworks.
- VCE Studio Art—[www.vceart.com/index4.html](http://www.vceart.com/index4.html)
- Download student worksheets to help with analysing artworks and exhibitions, both two- and three-dimensional.

### Articles

- Tom Bass, 'Sculpture and architecture with discussion' in **Architecture in Australia**, v 53, September 1964, pp 122-126
- Anne Gray, 'Building art at the national library' in **National Library of Australia News**, v 1, no 10, July 1991, pp 8-10

