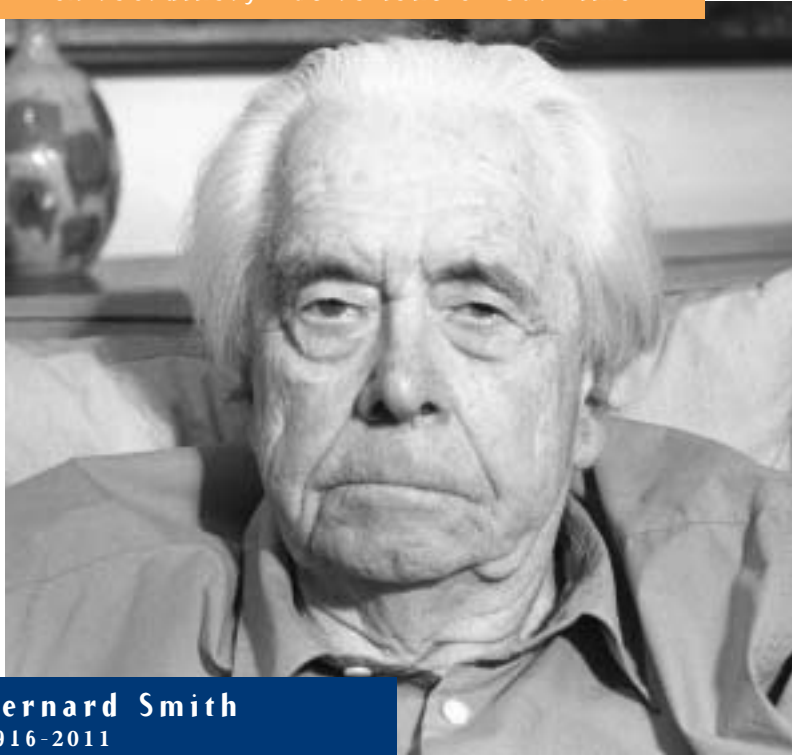


AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

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



Bernard Smith

1916-2011

Art Historian

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 9 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: Bernard Smith

Director/Producer Rod Freedman

Executive Producer Mark Hamlyn

Duration 26 minutes **Year** 2003

Study guide prepared by Sara Hennessy and Geraldine Carrodus © NFSA

Also in Series 9: Betty Churcher, Marjorie Jackson-Nelson, Thomas Keneally, Bill Mollison, Charles 'Bud' Tingwell, Joan Winch

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SYNOPSIS

'What Australia suffers from is not a lack of artists but a lack of audience for their art.'

Developing Australians' interest in, and knowledge of, our artistic traditions has been the focus of Bernard Smith's life. He is one of the founders of the discipline of art history in this country and among its most distinguished practitioners.

Bernard Smith set benchmarks with his books **Place, Taste and Tradition** (the first systematic history of Australian art), **European Vision and the South Pacific** and **Australian Painting**. He caused a sensation with **The Antipodean Manifesto**, a criticism of abstractionism that was signed by a group of artists including Charles Blackman, Arthur Boyd, Clifton Pugh and John Perceval. He inspired debate again as a professor at the Power Institute with his contentious definitions of contemporary art. And he was still courting controversy at the age of 85 when he posed nude for a portrait entered for the Archibald Prize.

Passionate about politics, painting and history, in this interview he talks of his decisions to be a Communist rather than a Catholic, an art historian rather than a painter. He discusses his own art and years of scholarship, writing and teaching.

He speaks openly about his relationship with his first wife Kate ('she civilised me') and takes us back to his childhood (mother Rose Anne, a domestic servant, was left at home with the gardener, after which Bernard 'eventuated').

It's a fascinating portrait of a man, earthy and erudite—a working class boy who resisted the idea of an élite, 'an intellectual living in a very anti-intellectual society'.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. It is particularly suitable and valuable for courses in Art, English, History, Media Studies, Psychology, Personal Development and Religious Studies.

BEFORE WATCHING

Before watching this program, students could be introduced to some of its underpinning themes and questions. These include:

- The impact of childhood experiences on the way in which a person's life develops.
- The significance of particular teachers in shaping the life choices of individuals.
- Whether 'doing' is more or less important than commenting on what is being done.
- The extent to which art critics and historians are able to influence movements and trends in art.
- Whether there is something distinctive about Australian art.

AFTER WATCHING

Childhood and Adolescence

Bernard Smith's childhood and youth had all of the hallmarks of disadvantage. Born to a single mother who was unable to look after him, Smith was fostered by 'Mum Keen' who took him into her large family of state wards. When Mum Keen died, before Bernard had finished school, his care passed into the hands of Mum Keen's daughter who could not have been much older than Bernard himself.

Nonetheless, Bernard makes no excuses about his childhood and appears to have made the most of his educational opportunities, winning a scholarship to teachers college on completion of his secondary schooling.

- Identify three significant aspects of Bernard Smith's childhood and explain how each was to shape the man that he became and the life's work that he followed.
- When Mum Keen died, the child welfare department agreed to continue payments to Bertha. Write a dialogue between Bertha and the child welfare representative in which Bertha explains why she should be allowed to take over responsibility for Bernard.
- Bernard met his father only once, when he was four years old. How does he describe that meeting? What does this tell us about Bernard's attitude to his father?
- Bernard says of the meeting with his father that he remembers 'the dark hair on his arms'. Later he speaks of his mother commenting on Bernard's 'beautiful hands'. How far are observations like this influenced by the fact that Bernard is an artist and art critic?
- Bernard is asked about the house he grew up in and remembers 'we had this baby kookaburra' and recalls the incident with the pea shooter—'the bird was singing and it stopped'. What does the incident and the way he recalls it tell you about the man?
- Well into his eighties, Bernard still remembers two of his high school teachers. What was significant about these teachers and why did they have such an impact on him?

Artist and Teacher 1935–1944

In 1934, Bernard Smith entered Sydney Teachers' College where his interest in art was stimulated by the 'excited and passionate' May Marsden. Between 1935 and 1944, he combined teaching about art—I was a good art teacher—with his own painting and drawing. During this period, he also grappled with issues of religion and politics and met his wife Kate.

- As a young teacher in western NSW, Bernard 'didn't chase the local ladies'. Why was this, and what does it tell about the vision that he had for his life at that stage?
- On his return to Sydney in 1939, Bernard had a number of experiences that were to shape his life. Comment on the influence of the following:
 - His involvement with the left book club and the Communist Party.
 - His meeting with Kate.
 - His involvement with the teachers college art club/society.
- During this period Bernard still saw himself as a painter. What does he identify as the three main influences on his art?

- The two paintings that he still regards as his most important works were painted at this time. How do 'The Advance of Lot' and his 'Brethren and Pompeii' each reflect Bernard's attitudes and beliefs in different ways?
- How does Bernard explain his decision to give up painting and concentrate on being an art historian? Would you call it an idealistic decision or a pragmatic one?

Artist to Art Historian

In 1945, Bernard published his first art history text, **Place, Taste and Tradition**. He described it as 'the first structured history of Australian art'. However, his work over the preceding ten years had laid the foundations for his entry into the world of art history.

- What influences had led Bernard to this first art history publication?
- In what ways did this publication enhance and enlighten the study of Australian art?
- During this period, Bernard broke his ties with the Communist Party. Why was this? Did his new interest in writing about Australian art have anything to do with the decision?
- To what extent was Bernard's work with the teachers college art society influential in preparing the ground for his work in art history?
- Bernard says of his first book, 'It was ... written as an historian, not an antiquarian'. What does he mean by this? What does he say about the structure of the book that puts it in the 'history' category?
- When Bernard was at the Courtauld Institute in London, he worked under the Director, Anthony Blunt. Blunt told Smith that 'catalogues are good for art historians' souls'. What did he mean? Can you suggest similar activities in other professions that are 'good for the soul'?
- Explain the various stages that led to Bernard's four-volume work on the art from Captain Cook's voyages.

A Significant Figure in Australian Art

After nearly six years in England and Europe, Bernard and his family returned to Australia in 1951 and he spent a year creating a catalogue of paintings in the Art Gallery of NSW. He pursued further studies in fine arts and embarked on an academic, research and writing career that was to make him one of the leading figures in Australian art.

- Speaking of the controversy following **The Antipodean Manifesto**, Bernard suggests that art is tied up with politics. Is this true? Must it always be the case? Suggest other examples of art being used for political purposes.
- Bernard met Kate Challis in Sydney in 1940. What was it about her that attracted him? How did she deal with his 'first post-marital affair'? How does Bernard describe his sense of loss after her death? Are there any references to the contributions she made to his career? Would you expect that there should be?
- Education has been the general focus of Bernard's art career. It started in 1938 with the introduction of the teachers college art club, and it continues today in his teaching and cataloguing. Why is he so eager to educate Australians in the history and appreciation of Australian art?

- In explaining why he posed nude for the Archibald Prize, Bernard says, 'It makes a comment about me and my personality'. What comment does it make about his personality? How does he refer to it exactly?
- As respected public figures go, is it more appropriate for one associated with the arts to pose nude for a painting than, say, a politician or a church leader?
- Is there something about the arts that not only allows but encourages its leaders to be avant-garde? What does this mean for the role of the arts in our society?
- Throughout the interview Bernard makes it clear that he dislikes 'becoming a kind of traditional icon'. What does it take to become a 'traditional icon' in Australia? Do you think he is at risk of becoming one? Suggest three other Australians who could be described as 'traditional icons' and compare each to Bernard Smith.
- The program begins with the words: 'I grew up in a working class situation, and I've always resisted the idea of being élite', and closes with 'I mean ... [I] prefer not to be called the grand old man of Australian art, but rather the dirty old man'. Do you think there is some sort of contradiction or inconsistency in these two observations that Bernard makes about himself?

ESSAY TOPICS

- 'I realize that I am an intellectual living in a very anti-intellectual society.'
- To what extent do you agree with this statement? Refer to specific aspects of Australian society and to features of Smith's life and work.
- 'To write confidently and sympathetically about art, one needs to be an artist.'
- Do you agree with this assertion? Answer with reference to several artists, critics or art historians.
- 'Bernard Smith is a conservative art historian who uses sexual references to suggest he is more interesting than he is.' Discuss.

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

- Imagine that you have been asked to propose a toast to Bernard Smith on the occasion of his 90th birthday (3 October 2006). Prepare a speech that highlights his personality, some key events in his life, his contributions to art and art history and his tendency to challenge the art establishment.
- In many professions there is a stereotype—the slim serious surgeon, the glamorous well-spoken news reporter, the pushy real estate agent, the kind optimistic primary teacher, the smug self-important barrister. Is there a stereotype of an art historian? If so, does Bernard Smith fit the mould? Would he want to?
- During his time at the Courtauld Institute in England, Bernard Smith worked with Anthony Blunt. In the program Smith makes a passing reference to Blunt's 'spying operations'. Conduct some research into Anthony Blunt and prepare a talk on the double life led by this art curator and spy with links to the Royal family.
- Choose from the list below six words that would appropriately describe Bernard Smith. Justify your decision by providing a definition of the word and evidence from the program to support your choice. Add three extra words that you also consider to be appropriate.

larrikin	creative	stylish
disciplined	flamboyant	attractive
supercilious	wise	self-deprecating
confident	dignified	overpowering
extroverted	measured	sincere
pragmatic	generous	self-preoccupied
romantic	sensitive	aesthetic
colourful	warm	kind
reflective	honest	superstitious

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Manuscripts

The State Library of NSW holds copies of Bernard Smith's correspondence and other papers. The collection is updated annually. Search from www.sl.nsw.gov.au

The National Library of Australia holds three oral history interviews with Bernard Smith as well as his published essays and other literary documents. Papers of Smith at <http://nla.gov.au/nla.ms-ms8680>



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