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HEAD OF A MAN, Aquatint, by Georges Rouault.

THE QUARTERLY BULLETIN

of the

NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA

## OUR CONTEMPORARY BUYING POLICY

Laurence Vail Coleman, in his admirable analysis of Museums of America, says, "Dealing with the present gives art museums a lot of difficulty". How right he is! He goes on to point out that the art museum is not primarily concerned with the economic support of the living artist except through its invaluable influence on public taste, and adds, "In this sphere lies the Museum's greatest duty to living painters".

Mr. Coleman's words are particularly applicable to present conditions in Australia, where so much ill-considered criticism is levelled at the policy of the Trustees, particularly in the buying of contemporary work. It might interest readers of the Bulletin to know something of our problems in this respect and the general lines on which the present buying policy of the National Gallery are based.

In common with most public galleries in England and America (excepting institutions like the National Gallery, London, and the Louvre, which deal exclusively with Old Masters), the Melbourne Gallery considers it its duty to give the public a lead by the judicious purchase and display of the best contemporary work as well as building up the historical and educational assets by the purchase of Old — and near-Old — Masters. Thanks to the generosity of the Felton Bequest, such works are usually acquired for Melbourne through the Bequest's Funds.

With regard to the buying of contemporary work, it is the policy of the Trustees of the National Gallery of Victoria to do all in their power to help the provincial and country galleries, and generally to bring art to the people of the country districts — particularly to those towns which have no galleries.

Trustees have a definite obligation to the Government, who has made funds available for this specific purpose. It may surprise you to learn that at the present moment between £30,000 and £40,000 worth of pictures are out on loan to various institutions throughout the State, and despite the rich resources of our National Collection, it cannot keep pace with the ever-increasing demand for exhibitions and loans. To cope with this very real problem the Trustees' buying policy has been considerably widened and extended to embrace the purchase of pictures suitable for this purpose. Their policy can now be said to favour the purchase of works which fall into one or other of the following categories —

1. Major works that conform to the highest standards — both past and present — for the general collection, and
2. Less expensive and important works suitable for Travelling Exhibitions sponsored by the National Gallery and to go on loan.

It is obvious that any policy of buying by any board of trustees will not please everybody, but if a little thought is given to the matter it must be conceded that the present policy of the Trustees of the National Gallery of Victoria is framed on sound and broad lines. Its obligation to the public and to posterity is not to limit itself to the purchase of works of any one or two schools of thought, but to all schools of thought — from the highly academic to the most advanced "modern".

The standard of contemporary works purchased is, of course, the responsibility of the Trustees and their advisors, which brings me to that most discussed problem — What is a "Gallery standard"? Schools of painting change from one generation to another, but it seems to me that the tradition of fine painting over a long period of time is the only logical standard on which contemporary work can be assessed.

The whole history of art shows that there have been periods which produced great art, and periods which degenerated to the bad and mediocre. These cycles will continue. As I see it, it is not the function of the museum to assess contemporary work on its aesthetic value to future generations. We are too close to the painting of our own time to see it objectively, uncoloured by our own personal reactions. All we can do is to purchase such contemporary paintings as seem best to express the age in which the painter lives and works. Whatever the verdict of posterity, we shall at least have built up a collection of definite importance to future scholars and historians, so that the moving present gradually becomes the past.

Time alone will prove if our judgment is right. But as Sir Kenneth Clark pointed out during his recent visit to Australia, the buying policy is a courageous one. The Melbourne Gallery is definitely out to acquire the best available works by living artists — in this country or anywhere else.

DARYL LINDSAY



## THE CROSSING OF THE RED SEA

By Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665)

Canvas, 60½ x 84 in.

*Felton Bequest, 1948.*

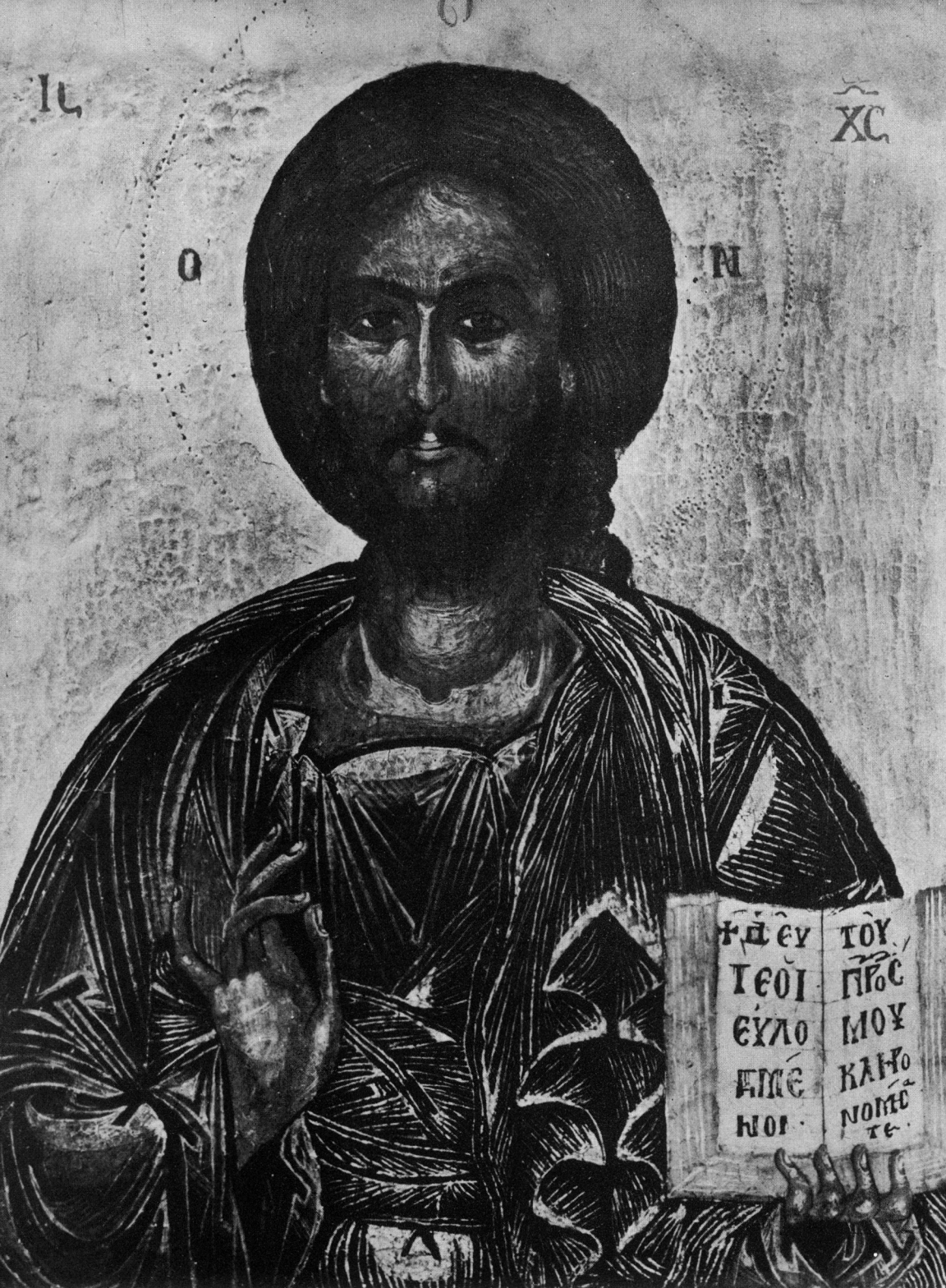
This important work by a great French historical painter was originally the companionpiece to the Adoration of the Golden Calf, now in the National Gallery, London. Painted circa 1638, it changed hands several times before it was finally acquired by Viscount Longford in 1741. Since that date it has remained in the possession of the Earls of Radnor at Longford Castle until it was sold to the National Gallery of Victoria last year.

Nicolas Poussin was born in Normandy in 1594. As a young man he went to study in Paris, where he assisted Philip de Champaigne in the decoration of the Palais de Luxembourg. He later spent much time in Rome, where his natural feeling for form was strengthened by study of the sculpture and paintings of classical antiquity. Poussin's highly formalised classical style was to exert a powerful influence on the subsequent development of French painting.

Our picture shows the moment in which the Israelites have crossed the Red Sea and are watching the returning waves engulf the forces of Pharaoh. The drowning Egyptians are barely indicated in the sea at the right, where the noble figure of Moses makes a valuable vertical in the design. In the foreground, an Israelite is pulling ashore a drowned Egyptian warrior, while others are recovering Egyptian armour from the waves.

Poussin has chosen for his main theme the reaction of the Israelites to the miracle, yet we feel that the artist himself was as profoundly moved by the rhythmic line of the figures, the contours of the distant mountain peaks, and by the shape of the mystical "pillar of cloud" which dominates the upper right hand of the canvas and gives a dramatic unity to the whole.





(I)

CHRIST PANTOCRATOR

(Twelfth Century)

(II)

THE NATIVITY

(Circa 1550)

(III)

THREE SAINTS

(Seventeenth Century)

The three panels, reproduced here, are the first examples of Byzantine art to have been acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria.

Byzantine art forms the link between the era of classical antiquity and that of the medieval period in Europe. Byzantine mosaicists decorated the cupolas and walls of Christian churches in Greece and Italy with images wholly religious and devotional. On gold ground, hieratic figures of Christ, the Virgin, the Saints and small scenes illustrating the New Testament, presented the faithful with a magic mirror of the Divine World.





The three panels shown here, small altar-pieces or ikons, follow closely the manner evolved by the mosaicists. Christ Pantocrator, the earliest of the three, dates from one of the best periods of this style (12th-13th century). The outline of the head follows the circular shape of the halo. The stylized outline of the shoulders, the gold fold pattern of the mantle, the dark fleshtones, the gold background stress the non-naturalistic, transcendental character of the figure. Awe-inspiring sternness and regal splendour combine in this image of Christ, the Ruler of All.

The other two panels, of much later origin, testify to the inherent conservatism of the Byzantine style. The Nativity, painted by Victor, an artist of the Cretan School, in the 16th century, is arranged in a flat and formal pattern which is enlivened by brilliant colouring. As in all Byzantine art the Madonna is depicted reclining in front of a cave in which appear ox and ass and the Child Christ in a manger. In front St. Joseph converses with an evil spirit disguised as a shepherd. To the right two women wash the new-born Child. The Magi, the Annunciation to the shepherds and a group of angels appear at the back.

St. Chrysostom, St. Basil and St. Gregory face the spectator in hieratic frontality, solemnly arrayed in the sumptuously patterned garments of high ecclesiastics. The donor, in 17th century wig and gown, crouches at the side in the minute size corresponding to his spiritual status.

URSULA HOFF

*A formalised approach has been the outstanding characteristic of much of the art of our own period. In the remote and austere "Head of a Man" reproduced on the cover of this issue, contemporary painter Georges Rouault has created a symbol of feeling, rather than a naturalistic image. Rouault, born in a Paris cellar in 1871, was originally apprenticed to a glass painter. The influence of medieval stained glass with its heavy black lines and luminous richness of colour persists throughout his work. Vitally expressive of the age he lives in, yet indubitably linked up with the early Byzantine masters shown on this page, the contemporary French artist, is the first to admit his debt to the great fresco painters of the past of whom he says — "Beside them, we often appear so small".*



GEMS FROM THE  
ART MUSEUM  
No. XII

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ESCRITOIRE - FRENCH  
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

From the collection of the late Earl of Lonsdale,  
Lowther Castle.

*Felton Bequest, 1949.*

A perfect example of Louis XVI cabinet work, this handsome piece bears the signature of J. Dubois (1690-1765), an outstanding master in the delicate and exacting art of inlay. The fall front opens to disclose a set of small drawers, while the double panelled door below encloses a shelf and larger drawers. The blonde colouring of the satinwood and various rare woods used in the inlay are perfectly suited to the designs on the panels and pilasters, which include a variety of objects such as a vase of flowers; bellows, baskets, etc. Although the influence of Chinese art is apparent in the design, the French craftsman has conformed to the ornate setting demanded by European taste of the period, the whole being mounted in ormolu and surmounted by a slab of Brecia pink and gold marble.

PORTRAIT OF  
A YOUNG GIRL

By  
E. PHILLIPS FOX

Canvas, 36 x 56 in.

*Felton Bequest, 1942.*

One of the most admired paintings on view at the Phillips Fox Exhibition held at the National Gallery during the winter months.



The most important exhibition shown at the National Gallery for some time was the comprehensive exhibition of works by the late Phillips Fox (1864-1915) which was opened by Sir John Medley on 23rd June, in the presence of a representative gathering which included the artist's widow—Mrs. Ethel Carrick Fox. This exhibition once again proved that an artist's worth can seldom be truly and dispassionately appraised during his life-time, and threw a valuable spotlight on a fine Australian painter increasingly acknowledged as a vital influence in the history of painting in this country.

This comprehensive exhibition, gathered together from public and private collections, is being shown at the Interstate Galleries throughout Australia, including Tasmania. The work covers all periods of the artist's painting life, and maintains a surprisingly uniform standard of quality. Fox was here revealed as a painter of the highest artistic integrity—a man for whom technique was a servant, never a master, who affected no "isms" that did not serve the individual purpose of his heart and mind.



THE NATIONAL GALLERY SOCIETY OF VICTORIA WAS INAUGURATED IN SEPTEMBER, 1947, and now, at the end of its second year, it seems fitting that some account should be given of its activities. The Council of the Society set out to attain 1,000 members in two years, and it is most encouraging that this figure has been reached within eighteen months. To-day the membership is 1,056, and it is hoped that this number will be doubled in the next few years.

During this short period the Society has found its feet and laid the foundations of a solid organization that should have far-reaching effects in furthering the future interests and activities of the Gallery. It has arranged lectures, musical and other evening entertainments, and made available funds for the appointment of a Guide Lecturer and a permanent Secretary. It has produced a Guide Booklet of the various collections and has other publications under consideration. It has also been responsible for the presentation of a number of works of art through individual members.

Already in its short life the Society has achieved some of its objectives, and can be congratulated on its valuable work in acting as a liaison officer between the public and the National Gallery.

### RECENT ACQUISITIONS TO THE ART GALLERY INCLUDE:

#### OILS

Evensong — Hill End, Russell Drysdale .....	Purchased
Flowers, Ludmilla Meilerts .....	Purchased
Portrait, Tom Roberts .....	Purchased
Banksia and Flannel Flowers, Margaret Preston .....	Purchased
Bernard Shaw, Colin Colahan .....	Purchased
New York — East Side, Elaine Haxton .....	Allan R. Henderson Donation Fund

#### WATER-COLOURS

Queen's Square — Sydney, Frank Macnamara .....	Purchased
Grey Days — Barwon Heads, R. Malcolm Warner .....	Purchased
Everlastings, Vida Lahey .....	Purchased
Driftwood, Len Annois .....	Purchased

#### ART MUSEUM

The Olympian (Bronze), Daphne Mayo .....	Felton Bequest
Bristol Teapot (Porcelain) .....	Purchased
Figure Group — "Charity", 1769 .....	Purchased
Whieldon Salt Glazed Teapot, 1756-9 .....	Purchased
Pair of Glazed Figures — Ralph Wood, 1770 .....	Purchased
Staffordshire Group — "The Tithe Pig", 1760 .....	Purchased
Three Bowls — Aboriginal Design, Carl Cooper .....	Purchased

### GENEROUS DONATIONS TO THE NATIONAL GALLERY INCLUDE:

Two Etchings, Sir Anthony Van Dyck .....	Presented by Sir John Medley
Thirty-one Drawings and Various Prints .....	Presented by Daryl Lindsay, Esq.

#### TRUSTEES OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA:

Sir Keith Murdoch (Chairman)	Allan R. Henderson, LL.M.
Sir John Medley, M.A. (Vice-Chairman)	A. T. Smithers, C.B.E.
H. W. Kent (Treasurer)	D. Max Meldrum
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Guide Lecturer .....	Arnold Shore
Head of the National Gallery Schools .....	William Dargie
Drawing Master .....	V. Murray Griffin
Assistant Drawing and Painting Master .....	Alan Sumner
Supervisor .....	William Morphett

*N.B.—National Gallery lunch-time talks are given on the second and fifth Thursdays of each month.*

*(There is, however, a lecture or films EVERY Thursday — some arranged by the Public Library and others by the museums.)*