



Planned for Progress

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RESERVE BANK
OF AUSTRALIA

50
years

Modernism and Dr Coombs

In 1952 the Governor of the Commonwealth Bank of Australia, Dr H. C. Coombs (1906-1997), commissioned a painting of Australian wildflowers from the artist, Margaret Preston. He specified that the picture should include native flowers of Western Australia, and when they began to bloom in the west, specimens were transported by airfreight to the artist's house in Sydney's Mosman. Preston combined them with local varieties to create an exuberant, detailed painting. The unlikely companionship of native flora from different states appealed to Coombs, perhaps prompting memories of his earlier life in Western Australia, mixed with current experiences in New South Wales. His mind also made companions of various interests throughout his career: economics, education, art, design, indigenous culture and politics.

Margaret Preston's painting was reproduced on the Bank's Christmas card for that year, and the work was acquired for its art collection. The choice of Preston's wildflowers for a Christmas card now seems pleasing, but in the 1950s conventional images from the northern hemisphere were more customary, and anaemic reproductions of European art were the preference for office walls. Dr Coombs found tiresome the entire enterprise of Christmas cards, so he converted it to a means of supporting contemporary artists and developing an art collection for the Bank.

Margaret Preston (Australia 1875-1963), *Australian wildflowers*, 1952, oil on canvas, 43 x 48 cm.

Cover image: Perspective of the Bonds and Stock banking chamber, Reserve Bank of Australia, Sydney, c.1964, watercolour and ink, 55 x 43 cm.



Other artists selected for the Bank's collection and represented on its Christmas card included Jean Bellette, Russell Drysdale, Kenneth Macquene, John D. Moore and Sidney Nolan. A painting by Grace Cossington Smith titled *Wardrobe mirror* was acquired by Dr Coombs from the Macquarie Galleries and reproduced on the Christmas card for 1955. The painting's subject is the artist's solitary bedroom and its immovable occupant, the wardrobe. The mirrored door is ajar, becoming a canvas on an easel that reflects her view of the interior and the glass door to the garden; it binds her room with the outside and multiplies the work's suggestiveness.

At the time of the Bank's purchase of *Wardrobe mirror*, Cossington Smith's art was largely ignored outside a circle of admirers. In the same year of 1955, Dr Coombs's perplexing interest in contemporary art was depicted in *Currency*, the Bank's journal. A cartoon shows Coombs presenting a portrait to the Assistant Governor, Frank Walters, as a gift on the occasion of his retirement (over page). The cartoon compares the portrait's abstracted representation of Walters with his 'actual' appearance, and finds humour in Coombs's wayward belief that the painting is a good likeness. The cartoon hints that Impressionism remained a progressive term as its caption reads:

'I have very much pleasure in presenting you with this vivid Impressionist likeness, done by a contemporary artist whose work, I think, is also outstanding, reaching such heights of artistry as to be worthy, even, to hang in the Bank.'



More than a decade later, the cartoon proved to be prophetic as Dr Coombs was presented on his own retirement with an abstract painting by Leonard French.

Below: Detail of a cartoon by Sam McHugh of Dr H.C. Coombs presenting an abstract painting to the Assistant Governor, Frank Walters (*Currency*, May 1955).

Right: Photograph of Dr Coombs being presented on his retirement by D.A.Tate, Manager, Establishment Department, with a painting especially commissioned from Leonard French, 1968.





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The International Style

In January 1960, the Reserve Bank of Australia commenced operations as the nation's central bank with Dr H.C. Coombs as its first Governor. It was formed by the Reserve Bank Act of 1959, which separated the central banking role of the Commonwealth Bank of Australia from its commercial functions.

Plans were developed for the Bank's new headquarters in Martin Place Sydney, between Macquarie and Phillip Streets, and Coombs expressed more fully his commitment to contemporary art and culture through this project. Designed by the Commonwealth Department of Works, the architecture of Sydney's Reserve Bank pronounced the aspirations of the International Style, including clarity, functionality and the simplification of form. The design team for the building comprised C.D. Osborne, R.M. Ure, G.A. Rowe and F.J. Crocker, with advice from the Professor of Architecture, University of Sydney, H. Ingham Ashworth, who was consulting during the same period on the Sydney Opera House's progress.

Perspective of the Reserve Bank of Australia, Sydney, showing Margel Hinder's sculpture, c.1964, watercolour and ink, 55 x 39 cm.



The building totals 20 floors, together with a mezzanine and three basement levels. At its summit, the structure includes an observation lounge in the form of a lean pavilion. The ground floor lobby and chambers open to the exterior with expansive glass walls, which prevent the structure from seeming either earthbound, or troubled by bearing the building's weight. A perspective contrasts the fluid space and transparency of the Bank's ground floor chambers with the closed, stone edifice of nearby Sydney Hospital (cover image). The modernist approach of the architecture was understood as an apt setting for the Reserve Bank's new operations. Dr Coombs noted in a speech for the building's opening:

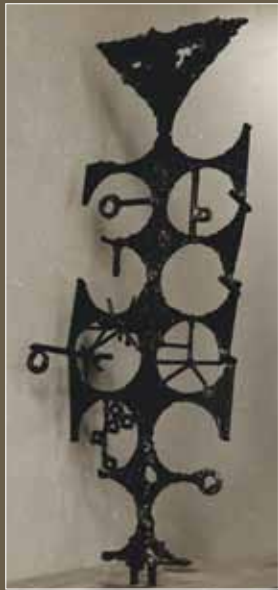
'The massive walls and pillars used in the past to emphasise strength and permanence in bank buildings are not seen in the new head office. Here, contemporary design and conceptions express our conviction that a central bank should develop with growing knowledge and a changing institutional structure and adapt its policies and techniques to the changing needs of the community within which it works ... The designers and architects, builders and engineers, the artists, tradesmen and all those who have taken part in the creation of the addition to the city's changing skyline can justly be proud of the result.'¹

Perspective of the Reserve Bank of Australia, Sydney, showing 3rd floor cafeteria, c.1964, watercolour and ink, 38 x 55 cm.



Plans were also conceived to commission designers and artists to create furniture, sculptures, corporate emblem and garden plan, each component contributing to the marquetry of the building's modernism.

The designer Gordon Andrews received a commission from Dr Coombs to create an emblem for the Reserve Bank in 1960. Andrews recalls that his thoughts were freed by Coombs's advice that the corporate emblem could be purely abstract.² His final design appears to share an ancestral resemblance with heraldic devices like the axe head or the three 'petals' of the *fleur-de-lys*. Its genealogy may have been more recent, seeming to be a distillation from one of Andrews's own abstract sculptures, *One man band*.



Left: Gordon Andrews (Australia, 1914-2001), design for the emblem of the Reserve Bank of Australia, c.1960, gunmetal, 15 x 16 x 1.2 cm.

Above: Gordon Andrews, *One man band*, private collection.

Competitions

Competitions were held in 1961 for a freestanding sculpture outside the building, a sculptural work across the lobby wall and a garden design for the Macquarie Street frontage. Malcolm Munro's garden plan was chosen for its geometric pattern of changing textures through gravel, pools of water and shrubbery. The lobby's relief sculpture by Bim Hilder developed the motif of Andrews's emblem through numerous variations, returning his design to its sculptural environment.

Margel Hinder's winning entry for the freestanding sculpture was also abstract, but it attracted greater bemusement. Interviewers hoped that the sculptor would confess to them the figurative source for her design, so the artwork might then occupy a corner of the known world of things. Correspondents wrote to the newspapers with idiosyncratic analogies, as they had concerning Jørn Utzon's design of the Sydney Opera House. The writers' associations with Hinder's sculpture date their thoughts rather than its abstract form, with comparisons including a broken typewriter, a swastika, and the symbol of the hammer and sickle.

Richard Beck (Australia, 1912-1985), portrait of Margel Hinder in her studio, 1976, gelatine silver, National Library of Australia. Reproduced courtesy of the estate of the photographer.



Meanwhile Margel Hinder filled interviews with details of her sculpture's statistics (measures 25 feet high, weighs two tons, cast from copper with a stainless steel core) and anecdotes concerning its construction (fabricated in the courtyard of her home and inhabited temporarily by a family of possums), but she remained resolute concerning its abstract form when asked to convert it into a single, explicit entity. Coombs supported the artist's resolution, as he had Andrews's abstract emblem, and issued memoranda to the Bank's staff outlining this approach to art and design.

The cartoonist, Paul Rigby, remarked on the competition with a drawing that translates the banking environment into abstraction. The waste paper basket, door, telephone, chair and secretary become sculptural forms. Like an overbearing bank manager, Hinder's winning sculpture accuses Lyndon Dadswell's more timid work of having an overdraft.

Top left: Margel Hinder (United States of America, Australia, 1906-1995), maquette for Reserve Bank of Australia sculpture, 1962, bronze, 129 x 74 x 30.5 cm.

Top right: Lyndon Dadswell (Australia, 1908-1986), maquette submitted for the Reserve Bank of Australia sculpture competition and awarded second prize, 1962, zinc and wire, 134 x 90.5 x 36 cm.

Right: Paul Rigby (Australia, 1924-2006), cartoon titled 'Rigby and the Reserve Bank Sculptures', *Daily News*, 27 April 1962. The cartoonist, Rigby, takes the form of Lyndon Dadswell's sculpture accused by Margel Hinder's winning design of having an overdraft.



'Look here Rigby -- about this overcraft!!'



Interior Design and Art

In the mid-1950s the designer, Frederick Ward (1900-1990), criticised the state of Australian furniture design and advised that patronage by government departments may remedy the industry's 'unintelligent copying for uncritical patrons, both of past styles and present fashions.'³ Dr Coombs was asked in 1958 to open a design conference, and he spoke of the ability of thoughtful design to contribute to the quality of everyday life, commenting that he preferred furniture which avoided imitation, pretension and superfluous decoration.⁴ The harmony of their ideas saw the commissioning of Frederick Ward to design furniture and interiors for the new premises. Ward also reviewed the Bank's art collection and suggested suitable arrangements of the works.

Vogue's Guide to Living featured Dr Coombs's office in a series of executive premises including Dior Perfumes, Fiat and Revlon, which shared modernist principles in their interior design. The offices coupled the requirements of a working office with elegant settings of sofas and chairs, large oil paintings and works of sculpture.

Photograph of the office of Dr H.C. Coombs, from 'The new look of executive offices ...', *Vogue's Guide to Living*, Spring 1968. Courtesy of State Library of NSW.

'High above Sydney, with a magnificent view, is the office of Dr. Coombs, Governor of the Reserve Bank. The Commonwealth Department of Works, under the direction of Mr Fred Ward, carried out all interior design, using Australian materials almost exclusively. Wool carpet and upholstery were specially woven; all timber is Queensland black bean, easy chairs and doors are covered in hide. Beige linen walls hold an oil sketch for Dobell's portrait of Dame Mary Gilmore, [and] a bold Leonard French' (*Vogue's Guide to Living*, Spring 1968).



As well as being the date of the Reserve Bank Act, the year 1959 is associated in Australian history with the *Antipodeans* exhibition in Melbourne. Its manifesto by Bernard Smith advocated the lasting significance of figurative art, and warned against fashionable abstraction which had taken hold in 'New York, Paris, London, San Francisco or Sydney, [where] we see young artists dazzled by the luxurious pageantry and colour of non-figuration.'⁵

If the Reserve Bank's art collection is viewed in relation to the distinction between figurative and abstract artists, it seems balanced. Artists involved in the *Antipodeans* exhibition are represented with paintings by Arthur Boyd, Clifton Pugh, Robert Dickerson and Charles Blackman. Equally, the collection includes major abstract works by Margo Lewers, Carl Plate, Leonard French and J.Stanislaus Ostoja-Kotkowski, who also designed covers of the bank's journal *Currency* in the style of Op Art. During the 1960s, *Currency* reproduced non-figurative works by young artists including Janet Dawson, Leonard Hessing, Michael Johnson, Col Jordan, Andrew Nott, Paul Partos and Vernon Treweeke.

Through its architecture, corporate emblem, interior design and art works, the Reserve Bank engaged with contemporary Australian culture and with ideas of international currency. The Bank also commissioned a film to document the construction of the building and installation of the sculptures. Titled unambiguously *Planned for Progress*, the film opens with scenes of Sydney Harbour; a hydrofoil passes the rising vaults of the Sydney Opera House and the future seems to be unfolding presently.

Leonard French (Australia b.1928), *The coming of the turtle*, 1962, oil and gilt on hessian on board, 122.3 x 92.7 cm. © Leonard French/Licensed by Viscopy, 2010.

Dr Coombs felt an affinity with the art of Leonard French and displayed this painting in his office.



Carl Plate (Australia, 1909–1977), *Blue monument no.4*, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 138 x 183 cm.
Reproduced courtesy of the estate of the artist.



Robert Dickerson (Australia, b.1924), *The sisters*, 1964, oil on hardboard, 111.5 x 89.5 cm.
Reproduced courtesy of the artist.



Sidney Nolan (Australia, 1917-1992), *Northern Territory*, 1950, ripolin on hardboard, 120 x 150 cm.
Reproduced courtesy of the estate of the artist.



J. Stanislaus Ostoja-Kotkowski (Poland, Australia, 1922-1994), *Form in landscape*, 1959, oil on linen, 88 x 150 cm. Reproduced courtesy of the estate of the artist.

Notes

1. Dr H.C. Coombs, speech and press statement for the opening of the Reserve Bank of Australia, Sydney, 10 December 1964, Reserve Bank of Australia Archives. Dr Coombs prepared a 'mock speech' and press statement for the building's opening, but no official function marked the occasion.

2. Gordon Andrews, *A Designer's Life*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1993, p.152.

3. Frederick Ward, 'The Problems of Furniture Design', paper delivered at the Sixth Australian Architectural Convention, Adelaide, 1956, published in Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara, Philip Goad, *Modernism & Australia, Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917-1967*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2006, p.819.

4. Dr H.C. Coombs, opening speech for the symposium, 'Design in Australian Industry', University of New South Wales, 1958, published in Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara, Philip Goad, *Modernism & Australia, Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917-1967*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2006, p.834-836.

5. Reprinted in Bernard Smith, *The Antipodean Manifesto, Essays in Art and History*, Melbourne University Press, 1976, p.165.

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Unless otherwise stated, all material illustrated in this booklet is from the Reserve Bank of Australia Art Collection and Archives. Measurements are in centimetres; height x width x depth. All reasonable efforts have been made to ascertain the holders of the rights to the images.



Perspective of the Board Room, Reserve Bank of Australia, Sydney, c.1964,
watercolour and ink, 38.5 x 55 cm.

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Curated by the Reserve Bank of Australia

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