

EDUCATION GUIDE



The Lady & The Unicorn

A COLLABORATION BETWEEN

**ARTHUR BOYD
& PETER PORTER**

BUNDANON TRUST



Australian Government
National Collecting Institutions
Touring & Outreach Program

GUIDE FOR SECONDARY VISUAL ARTS

Collaboration: an artist and a poet

The Lady and The Unicorn, print suite and limited edition book was created through a collaboration between artist Arthur Boyd and poet Peter Porter. Both Australians, Boyd and Porter first met in 1965 at the Royal Court Theatre when Arthur was working on stage design for the poetry component of the Commonwealth Arts Festival.

In the early 1970s English publisher and art critic Tom Rosenthal proposed that Boyd and Porter work together.

Over a period of 15 years from 1973 to 1988, poet Peter Porter collaborated with Arthur Boyd on four major projects: *Jonah* (1973), *The Lady and The Unicorn* (1973-74 prints, 1975 book), *Narcissus* (1984) and *Mars* (1988). The collaborations were pivotal to both of their careers.

The poetry of Peter Porter provided great inspiration to Boyd and both men were interested in reinterpreting myths and legends to comment on the political and social climate of the present. Boyd responded to the work of many writers and poets but it was with Porter that he created the greatest output. Described as a 'distant union', their practice was to work separately, usually on opposite sides of the world.

Their work together with *Jonah* in 1973 was commented on by Peter Porter, giving an indication of the type of collaboration. Porter writes in 1974:

Arthur and I hardly consulted each other; I simply sent him the poems in batches of threes and fours as they were finished. I remember starting the whole series in Venice and ending it in a spurt a year later in London. I was not prepared for the scale and opulence of Arthur's response. He poured into our collaboration an extraordinary cornucopia of pictures — charcoal and ink drawings, etchings, dry points and, for the cover, a beautiful colour painting of Jonah being vomited on to the beach by the whale ... this our first book together remains Arthur's most prodigious response to my writing.

*"Only when I first began to work with Arthur Boyd did I find that there is a fulfilling way of collaborating, and that it requires each artist to go his own way, the resultant works being counterpointed rather than harmonised."*¹

Working together: respectful friendship

The suggestion to work on the story of *The Lady and The Unicorn* was proposed by Boyd's friend, Georges Mora of Tolarno Galleries in Melbourne, and he also (probably) financially supported the production of the print suites and the limited edition book. It was the most decorative and beautiful outcome of the collaborations between Boyd and Porter. In 1975 Porter and his two daughters spent five months in Sydney. Their visit to the Boyd home at Riversdale on the Shoalhaven River led Porter to a new appreciation of Australia, which Boyd was already re-discovering for himself after a 12-year absence. Much later Porter wrote:

...The many paintings, which Arthur has made of the river and its environs are, I believe, the most important breakthrough in painting of the Australian landscape since the days of Streeton and Tom Roberts. Soon after Arthur went to the Shoalhaven he told me of his vision of the river and the rainforest behind it as a sort of paysage for Narcissus. Water is not only the element of reflection and of self-knowledge, but its laziness is the other side of the coin of its life-giving function.

Their respectful friendship spanned the rest of their lives. Peter Porter was often a guest at the Boyd's various homes across the world, particularly at Bundanon and at Paretai, in Tuscany. On the shelves of the Bundanon Homestead library there are well read copies of the poems of Porter and their mutual friend Christopher Wallace-Crabbe.

Arthur Boyd appreciated the "powerfully pictorial" qualities of Porter's poetry, its emotional range and inventiveness, stating:

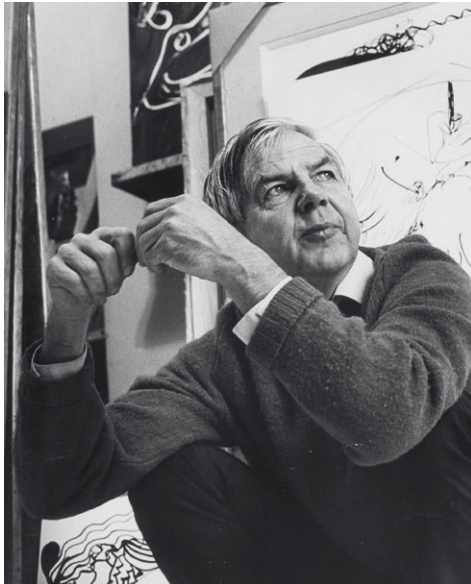
His language is universal ranging from humour to great tragedy so that my response to his work was automatic. I have always felt that as far as I was concerned there was no stage at which I was ever stuck for a stimulus and I've never known this same rapport. His work seems to me to combine delicacy and strength. The whole of each group of poems always gave me all I needed, and more, to create the visual contributions to those joint ventures.

In the writing of their second collaborative work *The Lady and The Unicorn*, Porter reveals that neither he nor Arthur Boyd saw the famous tapestries in the Musée de Cluny in Paris until after they had completed their own interpretation of the myth, though Porter at least had seen some reproductions of it. Unable to find adequate authentic information on the subject, Porter said, "I made up much of the material myself", though including in the epilogue, imagery similar to that of the Cluny tapestries.

¹ Peter Porter 'Working with Arthur Boyd', Westerly, March 1987, no.1, pp.69-78, Bundanon Trust Archive.

Text adapted from Ursula Hoff, *The Art Of Arthur Boyd*, Andre Deutsch, 1986; Brenda Naill, *The Boyds*, Melbourne University Press, 2002; *Limited editions: Arthur Boyd in Print*, Bundanon Trust, 2005; Darleen Bungey, *Arthur Boyd: A Life*, Allen & Unwin, 2007.

BIOGRAPHIES & PORTRAITS

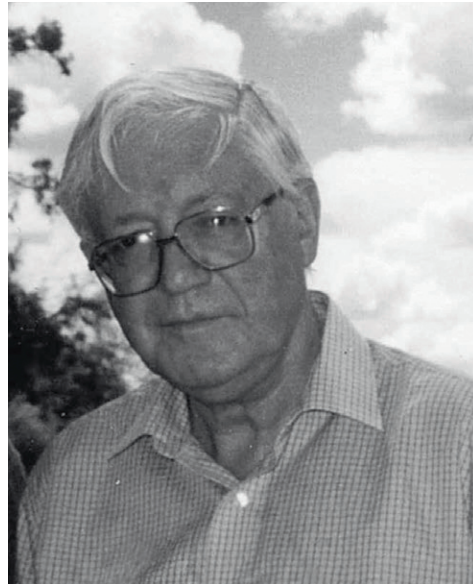


Arthur Boyd

Arthur Merric Bloomfield Boyd was born on 24 July 1920 at his family home Open Country, Murrumbreena, Victoria, eldest son of Merric and Doris Boyd (nee Gough). He was born into a unique artistic dynasty. A painter, potter and sculptor from an early age, he became one of Australia's most significant painters.

As a young man, Arthur built a studio for himself on the family property in Murrumbreena, designed by his cousin, renowned architect Robin Boyd. He worked and raised a family there with his wife, Yvonne.

After the death of his father in 1959, Arthur, Yvonne and their three children moved to London. His recognition as a painter was confirmed with many exhibitions and in 1962 with a major retrospective at London's Whitechapel Gallery.



Peter Porter

Peter Neville Frederick Porter was born on 16 February 1926 in Brisbane.

Referred to as an Australian-born British poet, his works were formal in style and displayed a rueful, concise, clever and amusing wit.

Porter was educated in Australia and worked as a journalist before settling in London in 1951, where he worked as a clerk, a bookshop assistant, an advertising copywriter, and a critic. His first volumes of poetry, beginning with *Once Bitten, Twice Bitten* (1961), reflect a satirical approach to modern society and to his own experiences. Porter continued to publish many collections of his poems from the 1960s through to *Better than God* in 2009.

(left) Arthur Boyd, London studio, early 1960s, photo: Jorge Lewinski, © Jorge Lewinski Archive / Bridgeman Images. Bundanon Trust Archive. (right) Peter Porter at the Mildura Writers' Festival, 2002, (detail) photo: Kristen Headlam.



(left) Arthur Boyd, late 1960s, photo: Axel Poignant. Bundanon Trust Archive; (right) Peter Porter, 2009, photo: Norman McBeath. Collection: National Portrait Gallery, Canberra. Gift of Norman McBeath, 2011.

PRINTMAKING TECHNIQUES

Intaglio

Intaglio is the family of printing and printmaking techniques in which the image is incised into a surface, and the incised line or sunken area holds the ink.

Etching

Etching is an intaglio process where an image is bitten into the surface of a metal plate using acid. The plate is coated with an acid resistant ground and the design is then drawn by scratching into the ground to the metal beneath. When the plate is inked the ink is left in the etched lines. The artist can work on the plate with virtually the same fluency and freedom as on paper.

Aquatint

Aquatint is an intaglio process where powdered resin is melted onto a plate to create tonal or textural variations. The plate is immersed in acid which bites around the resin granules. Tonal variation is achieved by blocking out areas, burnishing and varying the length of exposure of the plate to the acid.

In his assessment of their combined work, Porter writes,

“Boyd’s pictures are striking in every sense. Each picture is white on intense black and the mastery of sheer line and complexity of drawing is virtuosic, surpassed in Boyd’s work only by the similar extravagance of his pictures for Narcissus”.



Arthur Boyd, London studio, early 1960s, photo: Jorge Lewinski, © Jorge Lewinski Archive / Bridgeman Images. Bundanon Trust Archive.

THE MYTH

The myth of *The Lady and The Unicorn* tells of an Emperor who collected animals. He orders his officials to arrange for every kind of creature to be collected into his menagerie. As time goes by he becomes more fanatical about possessing every type of real and imaginary animal but still he has no unicorn. This mythical creature is believed to live in the region but no matter how hard they try to devise traps for it, they are unsuccessful. Meanwhile, the Unicorn falls in love with a young lady. For some time they are happy together but the Lady becomes bored and betrays the Unicorn to agents of the Emperor. Following its capture, the unicorn dies in prison.

The moral of the story is that acquisitiveness leads to disappointment, if not to wanton destruction although Boyd and Porter focussed their attention on the changing relationship between the Lady and the Unicorn, rather than the acquisitive Emperor.



THE LADY AND THE UNICORN

(1)

Invocation

Unpick the gold thread which lies
over the other gold thread, release
the beast who ran into the picture:
we are in a knot dream. They
have poisoned the wells of plainness,
the forest is down. Come out, beasts,
who know to a cross-grain the sides
of the Ark, come out and be recognized -
the humped and ^{the} crinkled, the gnarled
and the laminate. My pure Unicorn,
whom books believe in, dip your horn
in the freshet of death,
the circle you make
will never die.



Boyd made a small series of paintings in the early 1980s, each depicting the same ceramic jug made by his father Merric Boyd in 1942. Set on a plain green-grey background, unusual for Boyd, the jug is decorated with Merric's iconic white gums, built up with layers of slip and incised to emphasise the tree trunks. One of these jug paintings has a skate, one a sculptured head of Arthur as a baby, and this one with a unicorn bowing down to the jug.

Adapted from exhibition catalogue *White gums and ramoxes*, written by Grace Cochrane. Bundanon Trust, 2007

Arthur Boyd, *Merric Boyd jug and unicorn*, 1979, oil on canvas.
Bundanon Trust Collection.

APPROPRIATION & HOMAGE

Arthur made many paintings and prints that referred directly to his father. Arthur appropriated images and objects from his father's paintings and ceramics to use as a homage to his father.

After the demolition of Open Country in 1964, Boyd started to include references to his parents in his work. Returning to England from Australia after a short visit in 1968, Boyd was able to look closely at his father's drawings, and had discovered synergies with his own work. Talking about his father Boyd said:

*We went away straight after he died ...
When I came back all his things were
packed away. So it was a surprise when I
got back to London to find that they still
had great energy. My father's drawings
always seemed to depict nature in an
anthropomorphic way. Tree trunks were also
animals; animals were like people ... This
metamorphosis has become a constant theme
in my work.*

Reference: *Arthur Boyd: seven persistent images*, Grazia Gunn, 1985, p66



Merric Boyd, *Vase with trees*, 1940, ceramic.
Bundanon Trust collection.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Question 1

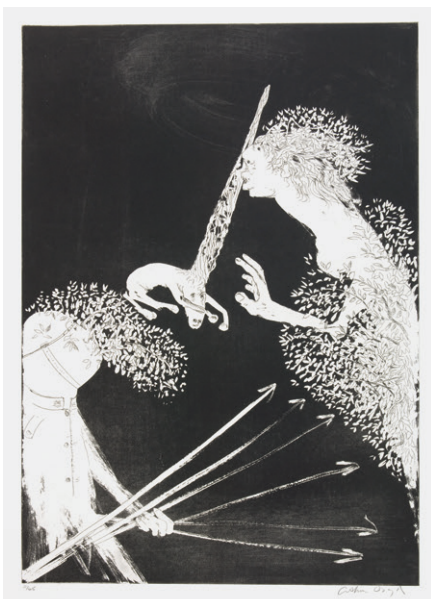
Compare the prints *The Unicorn* and *The Ark* (below left) with *The Unicorn's Survival Litany*, (below right)
What are the similarities and differences in the composition of the two prints?



Question 2

Consider the prints *Enter the Emperor I* (below left) and *Enter the Emperor II* (below right)

- How has Arthur Boyd used scale to indicate, power and magic in these two prints?
- Compare the representation of the Emperor's clothing in both prints- what do you discover?



Question 3

Discuss the portrayal of freedom and constraint in the prints *The Hunter's set out to trap The Unicorn I* (below left) and *The Unicorn sees The Lady* (below right) ?



Question 4

Using the Subjective Frame, compare the prints *Death of a Unicorn II* (below left) and *The Hunters set out to trap The Unicorn II* (below right) ?



Question 5

Peter Porter revealed that neither he nor Arthur Boyd saw the famous tapestries in the Musée de Cluny in Paris until after they had completed their own interpretation of the myth, though Porter at least had seen some reproductions of it. Arthur Boyd had a number of his works made into tapestries throughout his career.

Find two examples of tapestries created from Arthur Boyd art works and describe them.



Arthur Boyd, *Nebuchadnezzar making a cloud*, 1967, tapestry.
Bundanon Trust Collection

Attribution

The prints and poems

Etchings and aquatints by Arthur Boyd, 1973-74.
Dimensions: plates 605 x 430mm, paper 795 x 575mm.
Bundanon Trust Collection.

Poems by Peter Porter. Published by Secker and Warburg, 1975.
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