



Arthur Boyd Nebuchadnezzar in a clearing, c1969, oil on canvas

NEBUCHADNEZZAR

Arthur Boyd's Nebuchadnezzar Series from the Bundanon Collection
Featuring works currently in the Homestead and in the Collection.

EDUCATION GUIDE

BUNDANON

ARTHUR BOYD'S NEBUCHADNEZZAR SERIES

The Old Testament story of the fall from grace of Nebuchadnezzar forms a significant body of work for Arthur Boyd. This series represented highly inventive responses to religious subject matter. Boyd's paintings on this theme relate to his fascination with the visionary art of William Blake and to memories of graphic biblical stories read to him as a child by his grandmother.

Nebuchadnezzar was the greatest of the Kings of Babylon who captured and then later destroyed Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar was born about 630 B.C., and died around 562 B.C. at age 68. He was the most powerful monarch of his dynasty, and is best known for the magnificence of his capital, Babylon. During Nebuchadnezzar's time, Babylon was the largest city in the world, with the Euphrates River flowing through it. The name of the city came to symbolize the entire empire. Nebuchadnezzar was a successful ruler who engaged in many military campaigns. Best known through biblical accounts in the Old Testament Book of Daniel, he is said to have become carried away with his power to the point of thinking himself God-like. Punished for his pride and arrogance, Nebuchadnezzar was cast into the wilderness for seven years, undergoing many trials and tribulations.

Arthur Boyd often drew inspiration from the Bible and ancient mythology. Sometimes he placed these themes in the midst of the Australian landscape. His most recent biographer, Darleen Bungey describes how Arthur was responding to the suffering and madness around him, at the time of the Vietnam war.

This story of Nebuchadnezzar gave rise to a series of powerful and disturbing works, perhaps the most charged and challenging of Boyd's work, commenting on the Vietnam War. It was started in 1966, continued in 1967 and extended into the 1990's. This spectacular collection of work, numbering over 70 works, is said to have been inspired by Boyd's witnessing of a self-immolation protest against the Vietnam War at Hampstead Heath, near his home. Boyd equates Nebuchadnezzar with America pushing into the Vietnam war. The series is permeated with intense anger at the urgent political issues posed by Vietnam; it simultaneously grapples with many of the psychological themes with which Boyd struggled throughout his career.



“Intoxicated with the might of his empire, Nebuchadnezzar began to boast of it as his own achievement, created without the aid of God. According to the Bible, the Lord punished him for his presumption by banishing him to the wilderness where for seven years he led the life of an animal- exposed to the elements, eating grass, insane.”²

Arthur Boyd Nebuchadnezzar being struck by lightning, c1968-69, oil on canvas

RETURN TO PAINTING

Arthur Boyd had been working on etchings, lithographs and ceramics in the period before he started the Nebuchadnezzar series. Darleen Bungey describes his approach at this time:

“When he returned, he tore into the paint with a fury, his hands over the canvas like a concert pianist deprived too long of his grand piano. Given the impact, the size and the range of sustained but varying notes, this group of paintings ...was worthy of a symphony. These works would eventually be universally hailed, with one critic declaring the series to be ‘one of the triumphs of modern figurative art’ (Arthur Boyd: A Life)

SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

In some of the Nebuchadnezzar works Arthur Boyd revisits personal symbols used in other works. The dark clouds sweeping in from the top right of the painting *Nebuchadnezzar in a clearing* echoes the clouds in *Potter sketching*. The diagonal slanting rain is also used to suggest a dark sombre mood. Arthur Boyd’s *Ramox* hybrid creature can be seen in the dark swirls of hair on the figure of Nebuchadnezzar. Exaggerated scale in hands, and prone position of the figure suggests the defeat of a great man brought down by his ego and greed. The stars of the Southern Cross appear in some of the Nebuchadnezzar works. Bright red painted testicles signify ego, and animal lust.

HOMAGE AND APPROPRIATION

Arthur created a number of works relating to the life of his father. The image of white gums in *Nebuchadnezzar in a clearing* is a reference to Merric Boyd, and is based on the ceramic jugs and vases, like the one in the Ceramics cabinet in the Homestead. This appropriation imagery can be interpreted as homage to his father. The madness of Nebuchadnezzar relates to Merric’s issues with mental health.

CONSERVATION

This large work *Nebuchadnezzar in a clearing* was part of the gift, and was originally rolled up and placed in a shipping container. Over about 5 years our painting conservator David Stein used a vacuum table, and special adhesive to repair the damage. Cracks and fold lines can still be seen in the painting. This work has been displayed for the first time in 2016.

Boyd’s Nebuchadnezzar is a strange bewildered man, a fallen idol who transmutes into an animal-like creature and is forced to wander in a nightmarish and infinite wasteland harassed by lions, crows and other beasts.



Arthur Boyd Nebuchadnezzar in a clearing, c1969, oil on canvas

ALLEGORY

In many works, Arthur makes use of allegorical themes to make comments on universal themes of love, vanity, racism, poverty and war.

WHAT IS AN ALLEGORY?

- a work in which the characters and events are to be understood as representing other things and symbolically expressing a deeper, often spiritual, moral, or political meaning
- the symbolic expression of a deeper meaning through a story or scene acted out by human, animal, or mythical characters
- allegories considered as a literary or artistic genre
- a symbolic representation of something

TECHNIQUES AND MEDIUMS

The Nebuchadnezzar series were created using a variety of mediums. Arthur Boyd enjoyed experimenting by using the same theme or subject matter in a variety of different mediums. Examples of mediums include collagraph prints, oil on canvas and lithographic prints. Arthur Boyd, quoted in a catalogue for the graphic work of Arthur Boyd, Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin, 1972, said:

“I think it is a very good idea to be able to turn to a number of different techniques. A new medium offers the artist a variety of keys: it allows him to re-state and sum up without repeating himself.”



Nebuchadnezzar with blue flowers and white dog, c1969, oil on canvas,

WHAT IS A COLLAGRAPH?

Arthur Boyd translated the Nebuchadnezzar theme into many different mediums, including collagraph. A collagraph is a form of printing in which prints are pulled from a block on which the design has been made up with collage techniques. A great variety of objects can be placed or stuck on the block to create interesting textures. The block is inked with a roller to pick up the top surface- a relief print. It can also be used as an intaglio print by rubbing ink into the surface and wiping away the highlight areas. Arthur Boyd created many collagraphs, some which were based around the Nebuchadnezzar theme.



Nebuchadnezzar blind on a starry night, 1992, collagraph on paper

In a collaboration with the artist Indra Deigan, Arthur used the collagraph technique to respond to a traditional Indonesian myth, producing an artists book called Sangkuriang.

TAPESTRY

This tapestry was developed from a painting of the same name at right. Another tapestry made from an Arthur Boyd Painting, hangs in the Great Hall at Parliament House in Canberra. Works from the St Francis series were made into very large tapestries.



Nebuchadnezzar making a cloud, 1968-9, tapestry



Nebuchadnezzar making a cloud
1968
oil on canvas
174.8 (h) x 183.2 (w) cm
signed l.r., oil "Arthur Boyd", not dated
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra NGA
1975.3.94
The Arthur Boyd gift, 1975

DISCUSSION AND QUESTIONS

How has Arthur Boyd chosen to represent Nebuchadnezzar in works from this series ?

What techniques have been used to convey emotional states in these works?

Discuss the use of rhythm and movement in the composition of the Nebuchadnezzar works. How has Arthur Boyd communicated power and control in his artworks?

What meaning is communicated through the use of colour in these works?

QUOTES

“Discussing Nebuchadnezzar, Arthur explained the king’s weakness as he saw it: ”He wanted to possess every-thing.....he wanted to possess people, possess animals...he wanted to be them.”

“Magenta, yellow and cyan; the primary pigments depicting the primary element, the fire of creation...”



Nebuchadnezzar in a fire, 1969, oil on canvas