

MONASH UNIVERSITY GALLERY

**BODY  
AND  
SOUL**

## **BODY AND SOUL**

Monash University Gallery  
Monash University  
Clayton, Victoria  
Australia

19th September – 15th October 1988

Published by  
Monash University Gallery  
September 1988

## **EXHIBITION**

Exhibition Curators: Merryn Gates  
Jenepher Duncan

Catalogue Design: Merryn Gates

Typing: Sandra Ellemor

Photography: Jonathon Hogan

Typesetting and Printing: Victorian Printing Pty. Ltd.  
3 George Street,  
Blackburn 3130

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ISBN 0 86746 892 0

**Body and Soul** commemorates the Millenium of  
Christianity in Ukraine.

Catalogue publication generously assisted by  
The Ukrainian Studies Support Fund  
Mr. V. and Mrs. Z. Botte

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**VLADAS MESKENAS**

b. Russia, 1916; arriv.  
Australia 1949

***Portrait of Michael Kmit*** 1966

charcoal  
76.0 x 55.5

Collection The Artist

## PREFACE

### ELWYN LYNN

In this brief, rather capricious preface, there must be space for some anecdotal and combative remarks. Michael Kmit, one of the key figures in this exhibition, certainly brought some elusive soul to the body of late 1950s art in Sydney. His Byzantine luxury, his iconic adulation of ladies' portraits and luscious bodies painted with a rich, glowing touch were like nothing else produced locally before, though New Australians like George Olszanski, Judy Cassab (using an Hungarian modification of *l'école de Paris*) and Max Feuerring (a little heady for many tastes) were breaking the mould. Kmit was critically acclaimed and was doted upon by the Charm School and what was called Society (quite influential at the time) but was by no means a member of that effete charming school so contented with pleasantly innocuous fantasies. Indeed, Kmit was rather remote, withdrawn, his countenance, without being stern, solemn or severe, having a dignified decorum.

(Daniel Thomas has suggested that I coined the term "Charm School"; I certainly used it in the Contemporary Art Society Broadsheet that I edited (wrote) for fifteen years, then so did Robert Hughes in his pungent criticisms).

When I was awarded the Blake Prize in 1957 by Eric Westbrook for my *Betrayal* (admittedly an eclectic or "appropriated" work in sections, like *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*), Paul Haefliger who had written a review in *The Sydney Morning Herald* implying before the result was announced that Kmit should get the prize, followed up with another review denouncing *Betrayal*. Unprecedented, but so it goes. Soon afterwards, Kmit, temperamental and volatile and intensely disappointed at his reception in America, fell ill and was hospitalized at Stockton outside San Francisco. Early in 1959, just before returning to Australia, my wife and I arranged to spend the day with him. I shall never forget what he said and what critics might remember: "I stopped painting in the hospital when they began to use the paintings to analyse me."

A more daring use of colour did result from Kmit's presence (remember modernists were battling tonalism and the leached and bleached heirs of Heidelberg) but abstraction was hardly colourful; its elitist practitioners were subdued.

The end of the 1950s was an irritatingly exhausting and exciting time. In December 1956 came *Direction I* at the Macquarie Galleries; it was hailed as the herald of the new abstraction, but actually only a work by John Passmore, now in Queensland's gallery, was abstract expressionist. Let it suffice to say that critical assessment of its origins was grounded in ignorance. Actually, a few months previously about a third of the annual exhibition of the Contemporary Art Society was given to abstract expressionism of a kind. The artists were roundly condemned by Paul Haefliger for jumping on the bandwagon. Trouble was, they had beaten his chosen sons to it.

*Direction I* and its later expansion to a group of nine was an elitist lot who would not be contaminated by exhibiting with the C.A.S. At a meeting in Victoria Street in the Cross I recall John Olsen solemnly telling Robert Hughes that he was in the group as a writer, not an artist. I forget what I was doing there. Then came *The Antipodean Manifesto* in August 1959, denouncing the effects on art's true role of the rush of painters to join the tachist or abstract expressionist movement. Well, the accounts of abstraction (even geometrical forms) were wrong and I am sure that the signatories had hardly spared a glance at reproductions of the new abstraction. Very few saw any of the very few magazines such as *Art News*.

There were no others of importance except four issues of *It is...*, a title much derided by another enemy of abstraction, James McAuley.

The Manifesto was a thoroughly censorious document, unprecedented in that it did not uphold the cause of a fresh art opposed to domination by orthodox practices, but protected the position of fairly well-established artists. Why it denounced Dada ("as dead as the Dodo") at the very time it was emerging with artists like Rauschenberg, only the secret muses know.

The Manifesto did grave damage to abstraction in this country and one feels that it is still regarded as culturally inferior, especially in Melbourne, but that is perhaps because Sydney has been a little more detached in these issues. For example, the Antipodeans took Sydney's *Muffled Drums* exhibition to be an attack on Melbournian Antipodeanism and the image. At its opening in October 1959, the exhibiting artists received a telegram from "Boyd, Perceval and Smith" declaring, in the words of Nikita Khrushchev, "We will bury you".

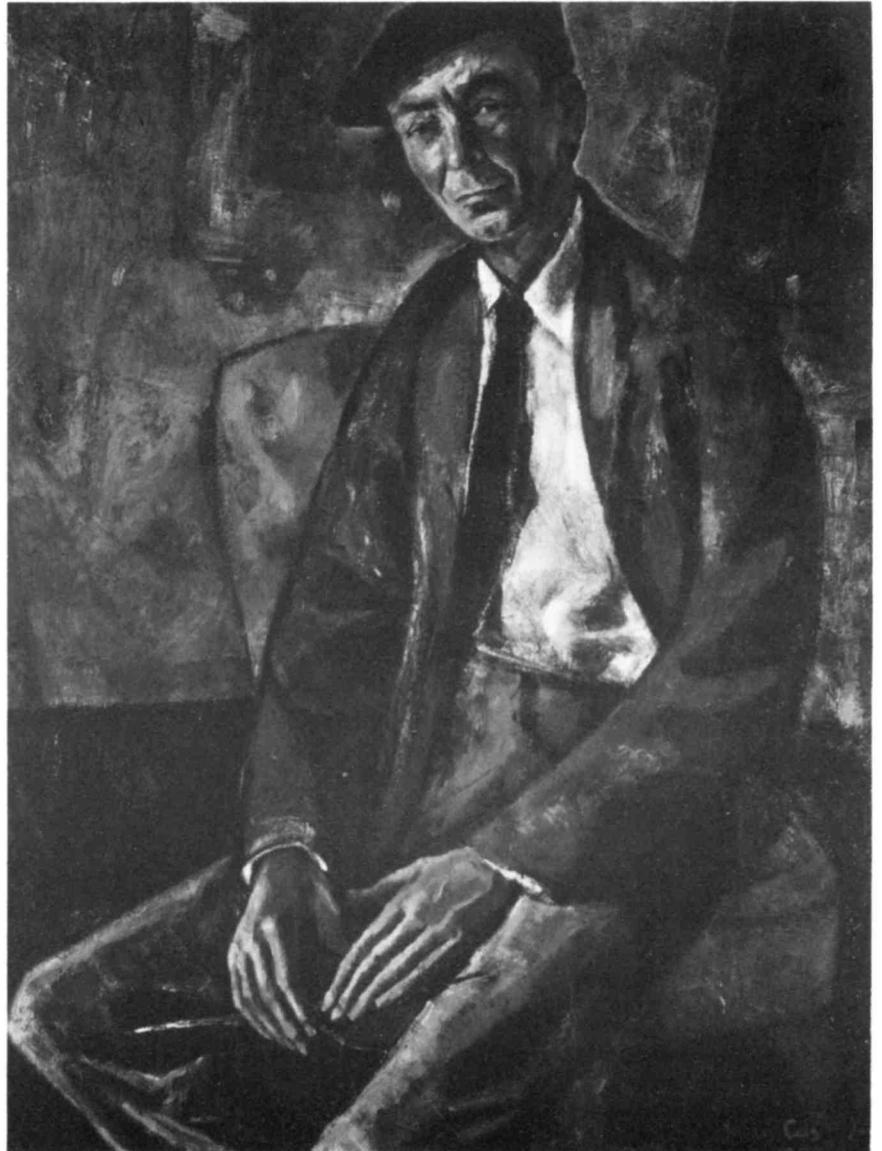
*Muffled Drums* was a spoof on critics (they detested the show), the socialite art-world and even on their own styles by some of the artists. For example, Henry Salkauskas showed an old photograph of a lady with a child on her knee. She wore Ned Kelly's helmet. The title: "Someone had to be Picasso's mother". (When Henry died at 52, as then editor of *Quadrant*, I had the work he produced as the cover to accompany an article on Henry).

There was little real bitterness about the Manifesto expressed in the Broadsheet, but the elitist abstractionists were very angry. (I should say that Bernard Smith in August 1958 opened an abstract show of mine at Melbourne's Museum of Modern Art. It was based, as Smith says in his *Australian Painting on The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* "in the belief that abstract expressionism could communicate, symbolically, emotional states that were otherwise incommunicable". That was right out of Susanne K. Langer's *Feeling and Form* with its admittedly debatable notions, but I doubt whether most artists, except Frank and Marga Hinder, worked with any theoretical underpinning.

There was a partial burial of abstraction and I am afraid grave-diggers of it seem always at the ready, but I do hope a more sophisticated view eventually prevails. In an interview with Peter Fuller in *Modern Painters* (Vol.1, No.2, p.43) Sidney Nolan, in discussing why he did not join the Antipodeans, said: "But to attack modernism, or abstraction, or something in the name of something else: that I couldn't agree with."

As Clement Greenberg succinctly said in 1968 in Sydney, "An artist doesn't paint against figuration or against abstraction".

I've gone on too long and, perhaps, too far in firing a few passing shots. I hope the exhibition, apart from being visually stimulating, might let loose a theoretical fusillade. You see, before me is *Abstract Expressionism, The Critical Developments*, (1987) wherein eminent commentators re-examine the perennial issues. Real issues are involved.



**JUDY CASSAB**  
 born Vienna, Austria 1920; arriv. Aust. 1951  
**Michael Kmit** 1954  
 oil on canvas  
 107.4 x 30.5  
 Collection The Artist



Michael Kmit, 1943

# MICHAEL KMIT : A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

## MARKO PAVLYSHYN

In 988 St Volodymyr the Great, ruler of Kievan Rus', ordered the citizens of Kiev, today's Ukrainian capital, into a minor tributary of the Dnieper and had them baptized by Byzantine Greek priests. The act symbolized the establishment of Christianity in its eastern variant as the state religion of Volodymyr's East Slav realm. The connection between this event, whose millennium the exhibition *Body and Soul* at the Monash University Gallery helps commemorate, and the work of Michael Kmit, a Ukrainian-born painter who spent twenty-five of his most productive years in Australia, is closer than might at first be supposed. A major consequence of the Christianization was the introduction into Kiev and its provinces of Byzantine cultural models — in liturgy, literature, architecture and, perhaps most enduringly, the visual arts. The frescoes and mosaics of Kiev's churches were Byzantine in theme and style. The icon schools which developed, first in Kiev and then in other centres, maintained Byzantine technical and compositional norms.

Kievan icon traditions flourished in northern schools, such as those of Pskov, Novgorod and Vladimir, on territories that today comprise Russia, and on Ukrainian lands, especially in Western Ukraine from the 14th century to the 17th.<sup>1</sup> The icon, as a domestic devotional object or as displayed on the iconostasis of every city, town and village church, remained universally familiar in Western Ukraine, where Kmit spent his youth, well into the 20th century. The city of L'viv, where Kmit received part of his education and began his professional life, was an important centre for the study of the West Ukrainian icon. L'viv had four major icon collections, including that of the Ukrainian National Museum (today the L'viv Museum of Ukrainian Art). Founded in 1905 by Metropolitan Andrii Sheptyts'kyi, the Museum had assembled more than 7000 icons by the Second World War.

Critics seeking to interpret Kmit's work in Australia have recognised this cultural environment. Kmit's allusions to the icon and the Byzantine style have traditionally provided a starting point for discussions of his Australian works, even if such discussions have almost without exception stressed the even greater importance of his reception of European modernism. For some, Kmit's cultural mediation of the Byzantine was his most enduring contribution to Australian painting. "To those who remember that introduction to the Ukrainian icon and what it signified in the burgeoning art of a new country", wrote Alan McCulloch in 1982, "both the man and his work will retain their own special brand of magic."<sup>2</sup>

Michael Kmit was born on 25 July 1910, in the small West Ukrainian city of Stryi near the foothills of the Carpathians. In 1914 his family moved to L'viv.<sup>3</sup> This part of Ukraine, which was to have a chequered history in Kmit's lifetime, was still part of the crown province of Galicia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It would experience a period of Ukrainian independence in 1918-20 and would then be incorporated into the newly-formed Polish state, annexed to the U.S.S.R. in September 1939, occupied by Germany in 1941-44, and finally reoccupied by the Soviet Union in 1945.

Kmit's was a gifted family. His father Constantine (1885-1926), a major in the Austrian army, and his mother Maria (1883-1953) had six children, of whom three (Michael, Volodymyr and Ol'ha) studied art. In L'viv Michael matriculated from technical school, studied with his brother Volodymyr for a year (1932) under Oleksa Novakivs'kyi, the best-known Ukrainian post-impressionist, and then moved west to the Polish city of Krakow to study at the Academy of Fine Arts, where he worked in the studios of the professors Władysław Jaroński (1932-35) and Fryderyk Pautsch (1935-39). The Academy's orientation was neo-

impressionist, but, according to Maciej Makarewicz, a fellow student and later Rector of the Warsaw Academy, Kmit's departures from this idiom were tolerated. Makarewicz remembers Kmit as a well-liked, sociable and gallant young man, elegant in dress in contradiction of the prevailing bohemian fashion, a passionate card-player and an equally determined worker.

On graduating with the Academy's Diploma, Kmit took a job as a drawing teacher in the town of Biała Podlaska (1939-41), then as a lecturer in painting and composition in the L'viv College of Art and Industry (1942-44). In 1944, as the Soviet armies approached, Kmit, like many of his countrymen, left Ukraine for Western Europe.

The end of the war found him in the refugee camps of Western Austria. In Bregenz on Lake Constance he met and married his Austrian wife, Edda. He painted chiefly landscapes — a subject uncharacteristic of his later Australian work — and exhibited with other East European artists in Bregenz, Baden-Baden, Munich and Innsbruck.

The Kmits arrived in Australia in May 1949. Edda was quartered in a migrant camp at Greta, near Newcastle, with their two daughters, Xenia and Tania. Contractually obliged, like all male refugee migrants, to undertake two years of manual labour, Kmit began working at Cement Industries in Villawood on what were then the south-western outskirts of Sydney.

It was not long before painters of the Sydney Group discovered Kmit's name on a UNESCO list of émigré artists, and James Gleeson sought him out in Villawood in January 1950. Befriended and encouraged by Gleeson and other influential painter-critics, notably Paul Haefliger and Wallace Thornton of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Kmit obtained a new job (he now cleaned railway carriages in Sydney) in order to be closer to the city's artistic life. He moved into the artists' colony at Chica Lowe's Woollahra mansion, Merioola. Here he came into contact with George Olszanski, Donald Friend, the Drysdale family and other Sydney painters. When Merioola was demolished later in 1950, Kmit and Justin O'Brien were among those who moved into Chica Lowe's new boarding house in Elizabeth Bay. Kmit later took private lodgings in that suburb, and Edda and the children were finally able to join him.

Meanwhile, Kmit's new career was developing apace. In 1951 he held his first one-man show in Australia at the Macquarie Galleries and received a commendation for his entry in the competition for the new Blake Prize for Religious Art. A year later he took second place in the Blake competition and in 1953 won the prize itself with *The Evangelist John Mark*. In the July and October 1953 shows of the Sydney Group at David Jones' his works were exhibited alongside those of Ralph Balson, Tim Bass, Jean Bellette, Arthur Boyd, Grace Crowley, Lyndon Dadswell, Russell Drysdale, Donald Friend, James Gleeson, Paul Haefliger, Francis Lymburner, Justin O'Brien, Desiderius Orban and John Passmore. There followed an impressive series of awards: the Perth Prize (1954), the Critics' Prize for Contemporary Art (1955), the Darcy Morris Memorial Prize (1956) and the Sulman Prize (1957). "Of all the foreign aspirants to art who have visited these shores since the war," wrote Paul Haefliger, "Michael Kmit is the only one who has made an impression on the present generation of painters."<sup>4</sup>

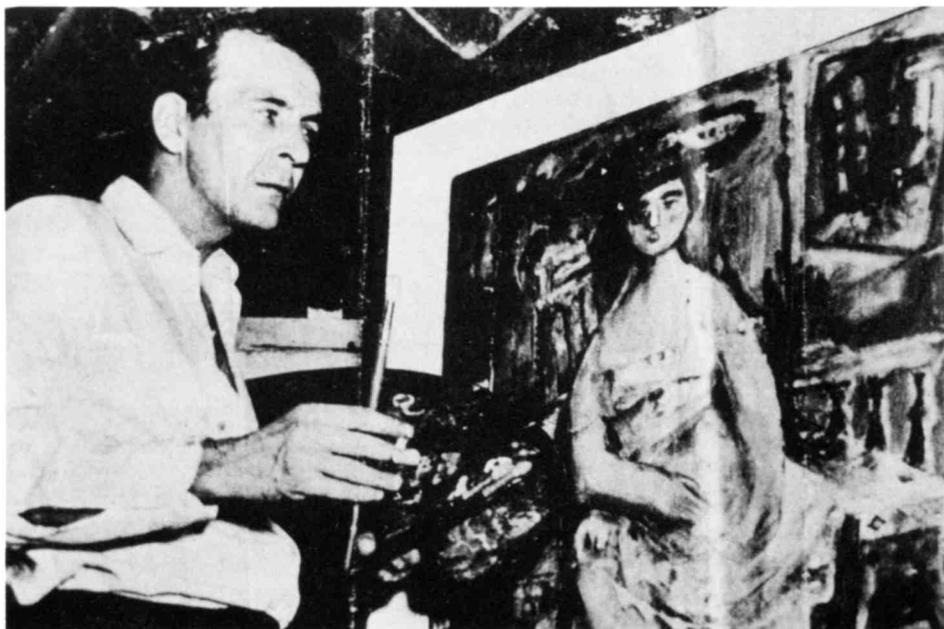
At the height of his acclaim, however, Kmit decided to try his fortunes in the United States. His departure aboard the liner *Orcades* in January 1958 was an event that attracted the interest of the press; it was even filmed for the new medium of television.

But Kmit's Australian successes were not to be repeated. He had difficulty in finding an exhibitor in the San Francisco area, where he at first settled. Personal distress, the disintegration of his marriage, and illness followed. From 1960 onwards, he was able to exhibit regularly in the small Californian city of Stockton. A large number of small paintings, many of flowers, date from this period. More importantly, he began to experiment with montage techniques and with abstraction.

Meanwhile, works sent back to Australia continued to interest buyers. Kmit's abstract works were seen to be making a significant contribution to the Australian abstract movement.<sup>5</sup> Reproductions of his works



Theatrical horseplay, at the Krakow Academy,  
Kmit with monocle (top).



Kmit painting  
*Magenta*, 1963

appeared, not only in books on contemporary Australian art, but also on the covers of the *Bulletin* and the popular historical monthly *Parade*, and in the *Women's Weekly*.<sup>6</sup> Kmit's popularity was attested by the circulation of forgeries of his works. He finally took the advice of friends and returned to Sydney, arriving by the *Iberia* on 2 April 1965. He lived at first with Ukrainian friends in Liverpool, then bought a house in Cathedral Street, Woolloomooloo. When this was claimed for the Eastern Suburbs railway, he bought another in Coogee, with an eastward aspect over the Pacific Ocean. Kmit married again. His wife, Norma, was a musician; their son, Michael, was born in 1968.

Kmit painted with renewed vigour. An exhibition at the Darlinghurst Galleries in July 1966 was much admired, and *The Bride of Woolloomooloo*, which won him the Melrose Prize in the following year, was hailed by James Gleeson as his masterpiece.<sup>7</sup> In 1970 he was to win the Sulman Prize for the second time.

It was Kmit's first Australian period and the years immediately following his return that produced the paintings for which he is best remembered and which, in the main, represent him in the national and state gallery collections. The works are mainly of human figures - statuesque, stylized, large-eyed and impersonal, with long-fingered, graceful and expressively poised hands. "The rest of the body is hidden," writes Volodymyr Popovych, "beneath the strongly geometrical forms of Kmit's garments. Kmit manipulates these with virtuosity, imparting dynamism to a painting through rhythms of form and colour. It is in his geometrical costumes and backgrounds that one detects, happily fused in a curious symbiosis, the influence of the Byzantine style on one hand, of Cubism and Constructivism on the other."<sup>8</sup> Kmit's reputation as "one of the most sumptuous colourists of our time"<sup>9</sup> was established; critics noted with approval the intersection of influences of Ukrainian icon, mosaic and folk art with recollections of the German Expressionists<sup>10</sup>, of Chagall, Rouault and Matisse.<sup>11</sup>

There is a rich folklore concerning Kmit's unusual methods of work during these productive years. From his Villawood period, when he was obliged to spend the day labouring, he retained the habit of painting by artificial light at night. He had a passion for alteration, on occasion claiming back a painting which he had sold or given as a gift, and returning it to the owner, changed beyond recognition. He attributed part of his inspiration to an ability to dream in colour.<sup>12</sup> He asserted that hands and faces were the most expressive parts of the human being and therefore were the focus of his attention in figural compositions.<sup>13</sup> He spoke freely of his art and his life. His friends regarded him as a great raconteur and teller of tall tales, a humorist, a lover of cards and chess, and an inveterate collector of bric-a-brac.

By the 1970s a change was taking place in critics' attitudes that was not favourable to Kmit. In his critical rejection of the so-called Sydney charm school, Robert Hughes had singled Kmit out for an especially barbed attack, denying his paintings more than a bland and superficial resemblance to Byzantine forms and dismissing them as "the smile of the Cheshire cat without the cat."<sup>14</sup> The wheel had come full circle since an enthusiastic critic of 1951 had observed that Kmit's works contained that "which wipes the grin from all the purring pussy-cat productions seen in most exhibitions."<sup>15</sup> In confrontation with the works themselves, as at the Holdsworth Galleries' notable retrospective of 1977, critics' words of praise were seldom without nostalgia for the Kmit of the past.<sup>16</sup>

Ill health — diabetes and heart disease — began to take its toll of Kmit. His flamboyance as a colourist diminished; monochromes made their appearance, and the once bold line became a decorative filigree. Kmit painted more slowly and exhibited sporadically, though in the late 1970s, after surgery to implant a pacemaker, he enjoyed a return of energy culminating in the Holdsworth's mixed media show of 1979 and the 1980 exhibition at the Niagara Lane gallery in Melbourne.

Michael Kmit died in Sydney on 22 May 1981, his place in the history of Australian art surprisingly uncertain for one whose name two decades earlier had been writ so large.

## NOTES

I wish to thank the following for information provided in interview or correspondence, or for other assistance:

Mrs Norma Kmit; Mr T de Cmaylo Kulchychyj for extensive research in California; Ms A von Bertouch, Mrs I Bilyns'ka, Mr O Buchats'ky, Mr P Dubiw, Mrs V Fedewytsch, Mr B Johnstone, Mr M Levytsky, Mr B Nuttall, Mr B Podolanko, Ms G Richardson, Mr M Sadowsky, Mrs G Scheinberg, Mrs T Shukhevych, Mr M and Dr S Strokan, and Mr O Wenhrynowycz. In the preparation of this essay I had access to unpublished materials by Mr O Buchats'ky, Mr S Chorney, Mr W Kmit, Prof M Makarewicz, Mr V Popovych and Mr M Sadowsky.

1 See Sviatoslav Hordynsky, *The Ukrainian Icon of the XXIIIth to XXIIIth Centuries*, trans. Walter Duschnyk (Philadelphia: Providence, 1973) and Hryhorii Lohvyn, Lada Miliiaieva and Vira Svientsits'ka, *Ukrains'kyi seredn'ovichnyi zhyvopys (Ukrainian Medieval Painting)* (Kiev: Mystetstvo, 1976).

2 "Obituary. Michael Kmit", *Art and Australia*, 19(1981/82), No. 3, 270.

3 A reliable account (in Ukrainian) of Kmit's life in Europe is to be found in V Ladyzhyns'kyi (pseudonym of Volodymyr Popovych), "Mykhailo Kmit 1910-1981", *Notatky z mystetstva* (Philadelphia), No. 23, December 1983, 35-47.

4 Quoted in Robert Hughes, *The Art of Australia*, 2nd ed. (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1970), p. 204.

5 James Gleeson, "Painting in Australia since 1945", *Art and Australia*, 1(1963/64), No. 1, 3-19, p.17.

6 *Women's Weekly*, 2 June 1961; *Parade*, December 1964; *Bulletin*, 25 March 1967.

7 "Raising Ghosts from the Past", *The Sun-Herald*, 10 July 1966. See also the exhibition commentary in *Art and Australia*, 4(1966/67), No. 2, 99. *The Bride of Woolloomooloo* is now in the collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia. It was unavailable for loan for this exhibition.

8 "Mykhailo Kmit (1910-1981)", *Suchasnist'* (New York), 26(1986), 7-8, 83-92, here p.86. My translation.

9 James Gleeson, *Masterpieces of Australian Art* (Melbourne: Lansdowne, 1969), p. 166.

10 Eddy Batache, *Le courier*, 8 July 1966.

11 Gertrude Langer, review of Kmit's exhibition in the Johnstone Gallery, Brisbane, 29 August-11 September 1964, *Courier-Mail* (date ?)

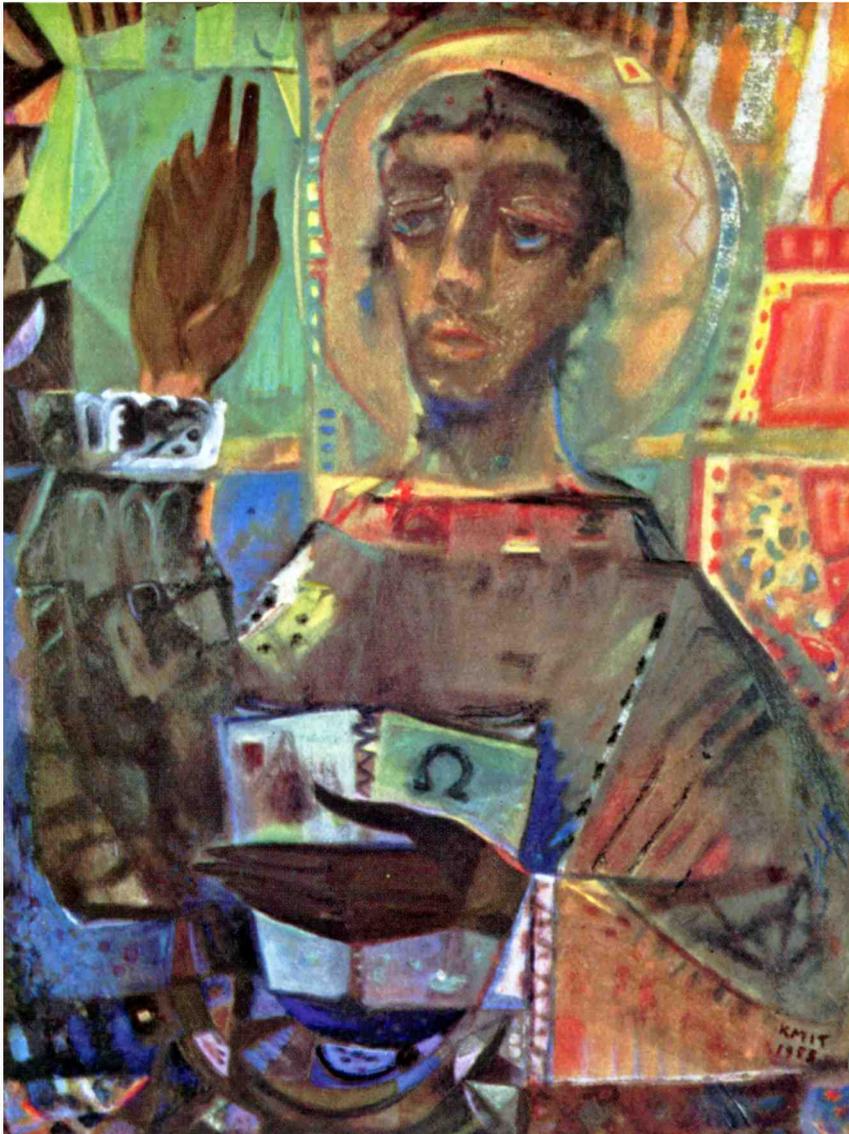
12 John Lapsley's interview with Michael Kmit, *The Australian*, 19 April 1977, p. 10.

13 Memoir of Sviatoslav M Chorney, quoted in Ladyzhyns'kyi, p. 41.

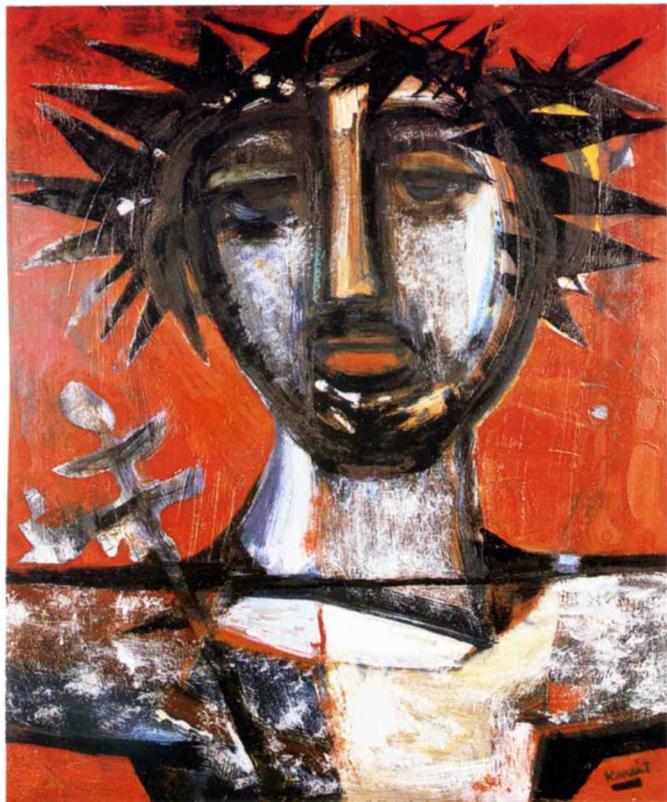
14 Hughes, p. 205.

15 *Daily Telegraph*, 23 October 1951.

16 e.g., Alan McCulloch, "Room at the Top", *The Herald*, 12 June 1980.



**MICHAEL KMIT**  
***The Evangelist John Mark*** 1953  
oil on canvas  
95.0 x 70.0  
Blake Prize 1953  
Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales  
cat. no. 14



**MICHAEL KMIT**  
***Corpus Christi*** 1965  
 oil on composition board  
 60.0 x 50.0  
 Private Collection, Melbourne  
 Photograph Jonathon Hogan  
 cat. no. 31



**MICHAEL KMIT**  
***The Three Wise Men*** 1954  
 oil on canvas  
 79.2 x 63.9  
 Collection National Gallery of Victoria  
 cat. no. 19



**MICHAEL KMIT**

***Edda*** 1956

oil on composition board

182.0 x 120.5

Collection Australian National Gallery

cat. no. 21

# 'RAISING GHOSTS FROM THE PAST'

## JAMES GLEESON

One of the handiest instruments available to the critics is to compare an artist's work with something to which it bears a family resemblance.

Placed side by side in the mind's eye the similarities can be easily assessed and the differences quickly determined.

Confrontation will show whether the similarities are imitations, assimilations, or authentic parallels, and the differences so discovered will act as guides in our exploration of the artistic temperament in question.

The art of Michael Kmit has always been able to raise Byzantine ghosts, and the aesthetic splendours of that vanished Empire have never been more fully materialised than in his present exhibition at the Darlington Galleries.

Like the artists of the Kariye Cami, he too loves to define his images with lines as continuous and as stiff with purpose as the liturgy of the Orthodox Church. The line drives around the form as an unwavering impulse aimed like a prayer to contain the spirit. Justin O'Brien uses line in a similar way. To this linear austerity and steadiness of purpose Kmit again follows Byzantine example by treating the surface as a repository for a votive offering of colour. Colours are hung about the linear images as offerings of precious jewels are hung upon images of particular potency. Often the colour flares with a brilliant irrelevance as though light had glanced upon an offering of tourmaline, emerald and topaz placed arbitrarily on the image because the gesture of giving and the beauty of the gift made its position unimportant. Time and time again the authoritarian firmness of the line is mitigated by the luxury of colour. All this is in the spirit of Byzantium, as is his willingness to dispense with a Western reliance upon perspective, anatomical accuracy and realistic proportions. Kmit was born in Poland and in his youth, no doubt, saw many icons, mosaics and frescoes in the Byzantine tradition. Under the circumstances it is no strange thing that he should have absorbed something of the idiom.

Although he and Chagall have taken very different courses, they still have a sufficient number of characteristics in common to remind us that they both come from Eastern Europe.

Yet Kmit is no revivalist like those who built Gothic cathedrals in the nineteenth century. His art is a personal creation though it has grown from soil made fertile by the humus of a collapsed civilization.

Some characteristics remain as inherited traits, but the most essential part of his art would have been completely foreign to Byzantine ways of thinking. The function of the Byzantine artist was not to devise ways to express his individual beliefs and feelings but to embody the commonly held convictions of his time in strictly regulated forms. He was never a keen explorer or an ardent individualist, but a more or less passive agent whose job it was to pass on the aesthetic and spiritual attitudes of the past with minimal variation. It was an art form wholly devoted to the interests of the Establishment.

Kmit uses a somewhat Byzantine apparatus as a vehicle for self expression. If the form has been inherited, the content has not. The puppets and dolls have all been turned into Petrouchkas hiding a quivering, sometimes agonized, soul behind a gaily painted surface.

They are not quite real people. *Xenia*, *Edda*, *The Bride of Woolloomooloo* and *Medea* are not portraits in the sense that they represent a unique individual; rather are they characters in a puppet play controlled by a puppeteer-magician gifted with the art of endowing each doll with a human capacity for love and suffering. One can only think of them in terms of *Petrouchka* — and once again the Eastern European origins of Kmit's art become significant.

It is a simple matter to appreciate Kmit as a colourist for he is undoubtedly one of the most sumptuous colourists of our time. In the painting *Xenia* for instance, the strong uncomplicated line fencing in the image is made to move through fields of colour that sometimes have the clash and urgency of a fiercely contested tournament, and at other times are as subtle and tenuous as a mirage of black opals.

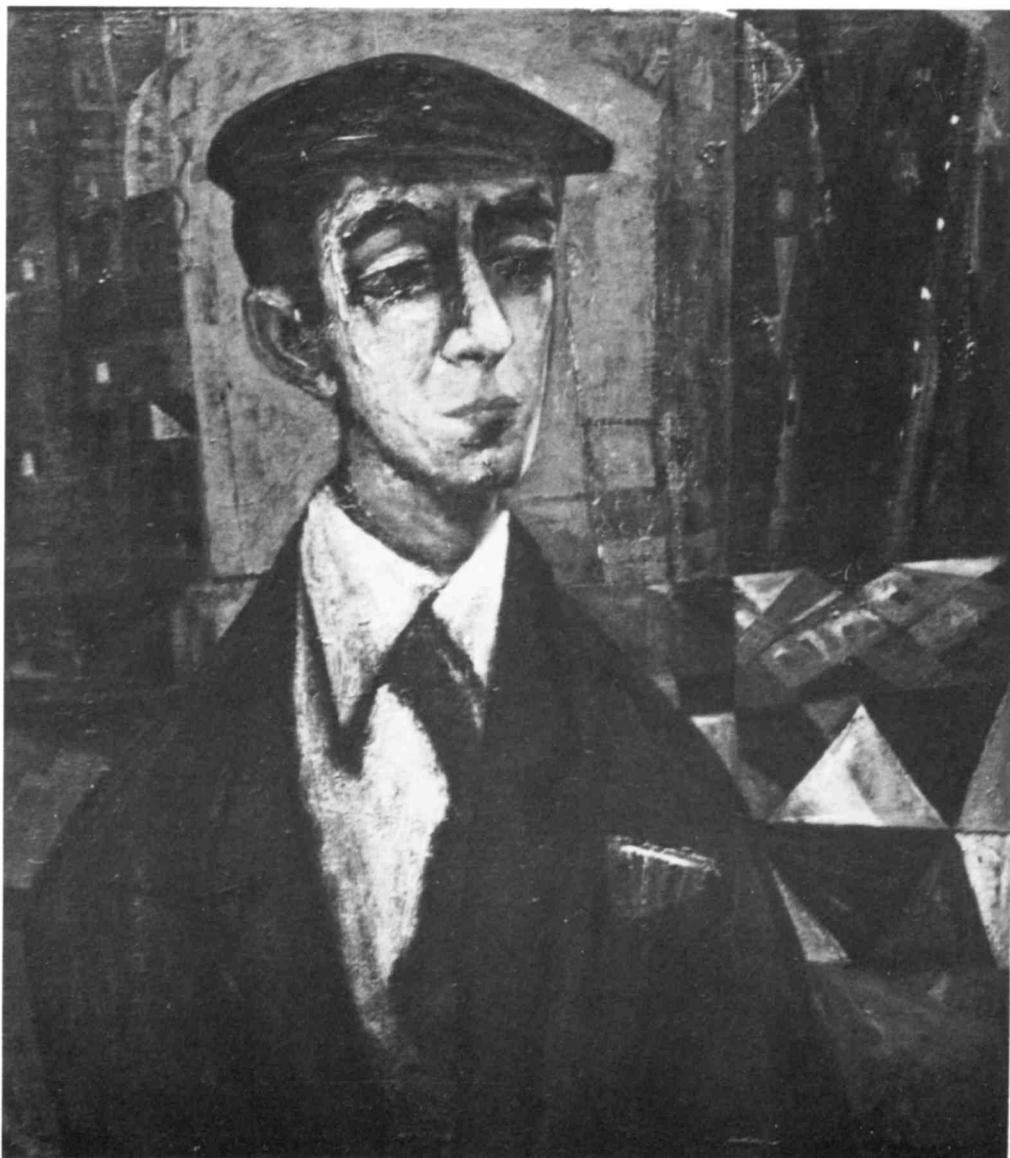
*The Bride of Woolloomooloo*, conceivably his masterpiece, is a miracle of nocturnal lights and shadows. Her cool evening flesh and the iron lace of her balcony are woven into a dream-like image that is more real than reality. It has the heightened reality we sometimes experience in the theatre or while listening to music — or while looking at a very fine painting. It is not the woman who is real to us, it is the work of art that is real.

For several years, some of which were spent in the United States, Kmit's painting seemed troubled and uncertain.

His extensions into a more abstract approach were tentative and unresolved, and the subtlety and vitality of his colour was occasionally wasted on trite pictorial situations.

Now, in these recent works, the shadows have been dispersed; the essays in complete abstraction are fully resolved and his colour and his drawing ring with a new conviction.

SUN HERALD, July 10th 1966



**MICHAEL KMIT**  
***Self Portrait*** 1954  
oil on canvas  
78.0 x 65.0  
Collection  
University of  
Queensland  
Gallery  
cat. no. 18

# MICHAEL KMIT

## EXHIBITIONS 1951-1984

### PRIZES

<b>1953</b>	Blake Prize
<b>1954</b>	Perth Prize
<b>1955</b>	Critics Prize for Contemporary Art
<b>1956</b>	Darcy Morris Memorial Prize
<b>1957</b>	Sulman Prize
<b>1967</b>	Melrose Prize for National Gallery of S.A.
<b>1967</b>	The Newcastle Prize
<b>1968</b>	Woollahra Art Prize
<b>1970</b>	Sulman Prize
<b>1977</b>	Blake Prize, entry Commonwealth Savings Bank, Martin Place, Sydney

### SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

<b>1951</b>	23 Oct-5 Nov	Macquarie Galleries, 19 Bligh St. Sydney
<b>1952</b>	2-12 Dec	The Johnstone Gallery, 6 Cintra Rd. Bowen Hills, Brisbane
<b>1953</b>	1-13 July	Macquarie Galleries, 19 Bligh St. Sydney
	18-27 May	Bissietta Art Gallery, Pitt St. Sydney
	1-11 August	Peter Bray Gallery, 435 Bourke St. Melbourne
<b>1956</b>	4-16 April	The Johnstone Gallery, 6 Cintra Rd. Bowen Hills, Brisbane
<b>1957</b>	27 Mar-8 April	Macquarie Galleries, 19 Bligh St. Sydney
<b>1964</b>	23 June-3 July	Dominion Art Galleries, 192 Castlereagh St. Sydney
	29 Aug-11 Sept	The Johnstone Gallery, 6 Cintra Rd. Bowen Hills
	6-16 Oct	Australian Galleries, 35 Derby St. Collingwood

### 1965

20 April-	Dominion Art Galleries, 192 Castlereagh St. Sydney
25 May-4 June	Australian Galleries, 35 Derby St. Collingwood
October	The Johnstone Gallery, 6 Cintra Rd. Bowen Hills, Brisbane

### 1966

5-17 July	Darlinghurst Galleries, Arts Council Centre, 162 Crown St. Darlinghurst
23 Sept-11 Oct	von Bertouch Galleries, 50 Laman St. Newcastle
Nov	Theatre Centre Gallery, Canberra

### 1968

16 Aug-9 Sept	von Bertouch Galleries, 50 Laman St. Newcastle <i>The Faces of 68</i>
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### 1969

29 Feb-10 Mar	Toorak Art Gallery, 277 Toorak Rd. Toorak
10 Oct-1 Nov	Toorak Art Gallery, 277 Toorak Rd. Toorak

### 1971

16 April-8 May	The Johnstone Gallery, 6 Cintra Rd. Bowen Hills <i>Night Images</i> .
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### 1972

January	Lister Galleries, 252 St George Terr. Perth
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### 1973

February	Mosman Gallery, Sydney
12-25 Oct	Barry's Art Gallery, 34 Orchid Ave. Surfers Paradise

### 1976

	Beth Mayne's Studio Shop, Palmer & Bunton Sts. Darlinghurst
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### 1977

19 Apr-7 May	Holdsworth Galleries, 86 Holdsworth St. Woollahra <i>Retrospective</i> . 61 paintings, 1953-1976
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### 1979

19 June-5 July	Holdsworth Galleries, 86 Holdsworth St. Woollahra
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- 1980**  
7-27 June 27 Niagara Lane Galleries,  
Melbourne
- 1981**  
September Battery Point Gallery, Hobart
- 1982**  
26 Feb-14 March von Bertouch Galleries, 50 Laman  
St. Newcastle
- 1984**  
10 September Hunter Room, Sheraton-Wentworth  
Hotel, Sydney  
Private loan collection

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1963**  
17-27 Sept The Dominion Gallery, 192  
Castlereagh St. Sydney  
*Three Australian Expatriates*,  
Louis James, Francis Lyburner,  
Michael Kmit
- 20 Oct-19 Nov Art Gallery of New South Wales  
Exhibition to mark the 175th  
Anniversary of the founding of  
Australia.  
Sydney Ure Smith, Elaine Haxton,  
Francis Lyburner, Lloyd Rees,  
John Passmore, Michael Kmit, Tom  
Gleghorn.
- 1966-1967 Gallery A, 21 Gipps St.  
Paddington, 275 Toorak Rd. Toorak  
*Summer Exhibition*
- 1967**  
26 Oct-19 Nov Newcastle Art Gallery  
date? Gallery A, 21 Gipps St.,  
Paddington  
*The Nude in Australian Art*.  
John Bell, Patrick Boileau, Arthur  
Boyd, John Brack, Donald Brook,  
Mike Brown, Russell Drysdale,  
Max Feuerring, William Frater,  
Donald Friend, Anne Hall, Richard  
Havyatt, Kenneth Hood, Michael  
Kmit, Richard Larter, Francis  
Lyburner
- 18 Aug-5 Sept von Bertouch Galleries, 50 Laman  
St. Newcastle  
*Paintings of People*, Charles  
Blackman, Robert Dickerson, Frank  
Hinder, Louis James, Michael  
Kmit, Jeffrey Smart, Francis  
Lyburner

- 1969**  
29 Feb-10 Mar Moomba Festival Exhibition.  
September Ballarat Art Gallery  
*Paintings from Private Collections*  
von Bertouch Galleries, Newcastle  
Collector's Choice.
- 14-30 Nov
- 1970**  
30 Sept-25 Oct Queen Victoria Museum,  
Launceston  
*Launceston Art Purchase*.  
von Bertouch Galleries, Newcastle  
Collector's Choice.
- 20 Nov-6 Dec
- 1972**  
3-26 Nov von Bertouch Galleries, Newcastle  
Collector's Choice.
- 1973**  
9 Nov-2 Dec von Bertouch Galleries, Newcastle  
Collector's Choice.
- 1974**  
June-7 Aug Grand Central Galleries, 205  
Queen Street, Brisbane  
John Aland, Arthur Boyd,  
Lawrence Daws, Robert Dickerson,  
Sam Fullbrook, Michael Kmit, Jan  
Riske, Hugh Sawrey
- 15 September Bonython Gallery, Sydney  
Fundraising auction for Chiron  
College, organised by Barbara  
and Charles Blackman
- 1 November Philip Bacon Galleries, 2 Arthur St.  
New Farm, Brisbane  
Charles Blackman, Lawrence  
Daws, Robert Dickerson, Pro Hart,  
Michael Kmit
- 1975**  
June-July Green Hill Galleries, 140 Barton  
Terrace, Nth Adelaide  
*Spectrum NSW, 75*
- 1977**  
24 Feb-23 Mar Realities, South Yarra  
*Aspects of Love*
- 1977-78**  
29 Nov-11 Feb The Darnell Gallery  
*Aspects of Sydney Painting*
- 1978**  
19 June Fine Arts Gallery, Perth  
Western Australian Opera  
Company Tenth Anniversary Art  
Auction

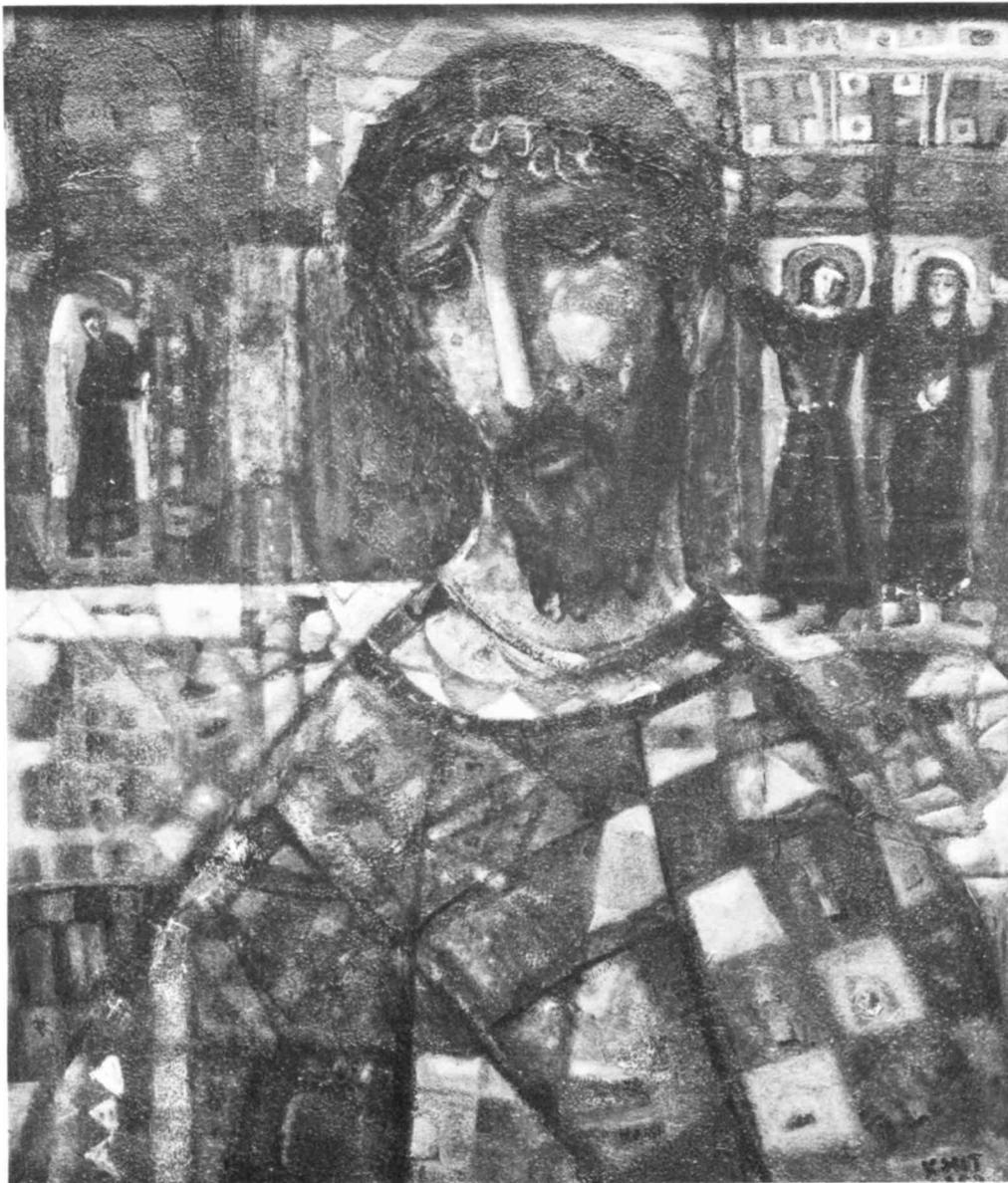


Fig 1 **MICHAEL KMIT**  
**Christ** 1957  
oil on canvas  
65.3 x 54.4  
Collection Australian  
National Gallery  
cat. no. 13

## BODY AND SOUL

### MERRYN GATES

Michael Kmit was born in Ukraine in 1910. He trained as an artist at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow, Poland between 1933-1939. After graduating he was employed as a lecturer in painting and composition in the College of Art and Industry in Lviv (1942-1944) before migrating, in 1949, to Australia. By 1950 he was exhibiting with the Sydney Group. Paul Haefliger has observed that Australia "...just hadn't seen his sort of painting before"<sup>1</sup> and it made an enormous impact on the art community. The Slavonic origins of his work were immediately picked up by local critics. In particular, they detected "...The Byzantine icon which he brought with him from the schools and villages of the Ukraine where he was born..."<sup>2</sup>

Nowhere has this debt to the Byzantine icon been more thoroughly explored than by James Gleeson in the article reproduced above. See *Christ* (1953), (fig.1).

Accounts of Michael Kmit comment upon the relationship of his work with that of Marc Chagall and Henri Matisse. Whilst this is a useful reference point to an understanding of his painting, it is not a matter of direct influence. Although Kmit, like Chagall, had an interest in a Slavic peasant theme, his pictures do not look like those of Chagall. They have neither the element of personal narrative nor the romance of Chagall, and Kmit's sense of composition is almost strict by comparison. Similarly, his strong colour sense relates to Matisse's palette, but it is employed to different ends. Matisse disengaged colour from the object, using it to define form and space; Kmit's colour dances across figure and background alike, making of the picture plane a vibrant and shimmering, but flattened surface.

Kmit's work recalls all of these influences (the splendour of the icon, the peasant heritage of Chagall, Matisse's primitive colour). But these had also been synthesized as aspects of the work of a group active in another part of Eastern Europe — the Russian Neo-primitivists.

#### THE HERITAGE OF NEO-PRIMITIVISM

Chagall had been closely associated with Russian Neo-primitivism, a cohesive avant-garde force which exerted considerable artistic influence in Moscow between 1908 and 1913 whose founders and main exponents were Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova. As a group, they dissociated themselves from the dominance of French modernism. Rather than seeking new forms and devices in the arts of foreign and primitive cultures, as did Picasso and Matisse, the Russian Neo-primitivists looked to their own heritage, and "...declared themselves emphatically for, and responsive to, native Russian folk art — the *lubok*\*, signboard painting and the icon."<sup>3</sup>

\* The *lubok*, brightly hand-coloured, block printed cartoon or broadsheet.

Larionov and Goncharova had established a radical exhibiting group called the *Knave of Diamonds* society, which held its first exhibition in 1910. Larionov shared a love of the *lubok* with Chagall who contributed to most of the exhibitions organized by the Neo-primitivists between 1911-1914. Similarly, Malevich, who would later be a major figure in the development of abstraction, exhibited with the *Knave of Diamonds* until Larionov left Russia in 1915.

Neo-primitivism underwent a major revival in 1927 when a big retrospective show of the *Knave of Diamonds* society was organized in Moscow, generating a great deal of interest among Russian artists, for whom the exhibition represented an appealing alternative as "...an art form which was neither abstract nor obviously Realist."<sup>4</sup>

The art community in Poland would have been aware of this revival as in the same year, Malevich travelled to Poland and Germany with a retrospective exhibition of his own work, including many of his early Neo-primitivist paintings. Some of these paintings were exhibited in Warsaw and were accompanied by Malevich's theoretical charts which made frequent reference to the icon in the explication of his theories. (fig.2)

The Neo-primitivists had discovered that the pictorial devices of these traditional Russian folk art forms allowed for a radical reinterpretation of the picture plane, giving them the means to explore alternatives to both conventional realist representation and the then current forms of Western European modernism — fauvism, cubism, and the remnants of impressionism and symbolism.

Matisse himself visited Russia in 1911 when he stayed with his friend and patron Shchukin, a collector of icons, and one of the first to appreciate them for their aesthetic rather than religious importance. Matisse was deeply moved by the newly cleaned icons in his friend's collection, finding in them an affirmation of what he was pursuing in his own art. He "...delighted in (the icon's) formal characteristics, the flat, rich colour; the dematerialized subjects, the inverse perspective, which effectively prevents the viewer from entering the holy image..."<sup>5</sup>

During his stay in Moscow, Matisse met with artists from the *Knave of Diamonds* society.

Michael Kmit was studying art in Cracow within six years of Malevich's visit to Poland. In view of the visual evidence of his early work, such as *Village Landscape* (1949), (fig.3), it is likely that he came to explore folk art forms with a knowledge of the Neo-primitivist's work.

Kmit assimilated the various formal conventions which the Neo-primitivists derived from both the *lubok* and the icon, such as the use of vivid colour, emphatic linear work, intense stylization, a monoplane depiction of action and flattened perspective. Kmit also drew on their repertoire of subject matter. The Madonna and Child motif, so beloved of the icon painters, for instance, appears in many guises in his work, see *Woman and Girl* (1957), (fig.4). His *Three Figures* (1955), (fig.5), shows the affinity of his approach to the composition of group figures with that of Goncharova (fig.6), who draws on the folk art tradition of the *lubki* woodcut. Such characteristics as the prominent, flattened hands, and the stylized and accentuated facial features point to the pervasive influence of this artistic idiom. In his portraits such as *Edda* (1956), (cat. no. 21), Kmit's use of this idiom effects a depersonalization of his sitter.

Kmit's studies of young peasant girls, clothed in traditional costume, are reminiscent of the Carpathian hutsul figure from the Ukrainian mountains. Goncharova had recognized that the limitation of subject matter, as in these traditional forms, allowed the modern artist to concentrate on formal concerns. She wrote: "An artist knew what he was representing and why, and that fact clarified and determined his thought, there remained only to create for it the most perfect, the most definite form."<sup>6</sup>

## COLOUR

Kmit, above all, impressed the Australian public with "the barbaric splendour"<sup>7</sup> of his colour. As he himself claimed, "...he could find a rainbow prism in anything."<sup>8</sup> Although he is remembered by some primarily as a colourist, his success was due to more than simply a heightened palette. Colour in Kmit's paintings is used to bind the composition together. Colours move freely and decoratively between figure and background in the tessellated surface on which he builds, recalling again the approach to colour of the Neo-primitivists, described in a 1913 pamphlet by Shevchenko: "Flowing colour is encountered as a quite definite painterly principle, in our icons, where it is expressed in the highlighting of the garments by colours flowing on into the background."<sup>9</sup>

The capacity of colour to transform the everyday into something extraordinary is a characteristic of icon painting, recalling the sacred role of colour in traditional religious art: blue of the Madonna's gown, for instance, and gold leaf to signify a heavenly space. For Kmit, colour itself was precious because

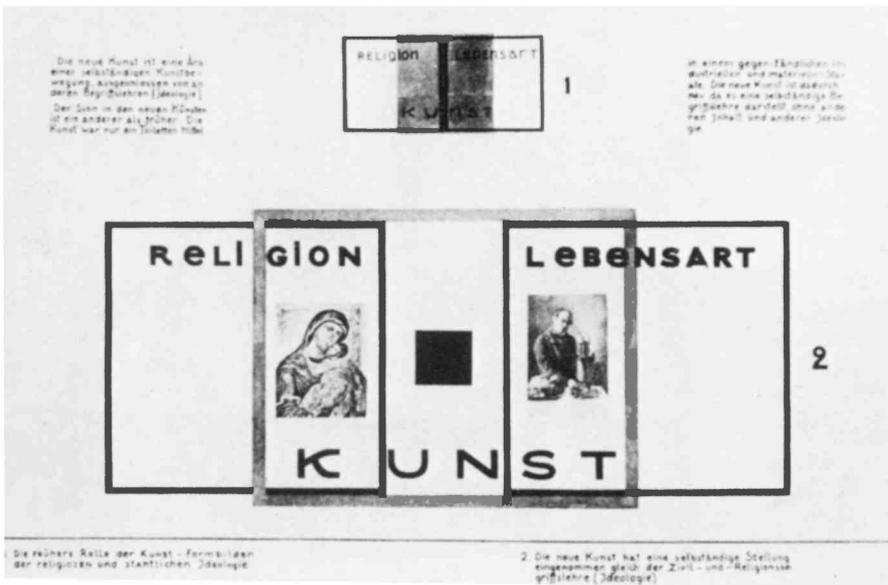


Fig 2 **KASIMIR MALEVICH**  
 Chart no. 9  
**Now art as an independent movement of thought**  
 Collection Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam  
 Doc. 18, 72 x 102 cm  
 Prepared by the Formal Theoretical Department of the Institute of Artistic Culture in Leningrad, est. 1922  
 Completed between 1924–27  
 Malevich, catalogue raisonné of the Berlin Exhibition, 1927.  
 Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1970, p.121



Fig 3 **MICHAEL KMIT**  
**Village Landscape** 1949  
 oil on canvas  
 55.5 x 65.2  
 Collection Art Gallery of Western Australia  
 cat. no. 12

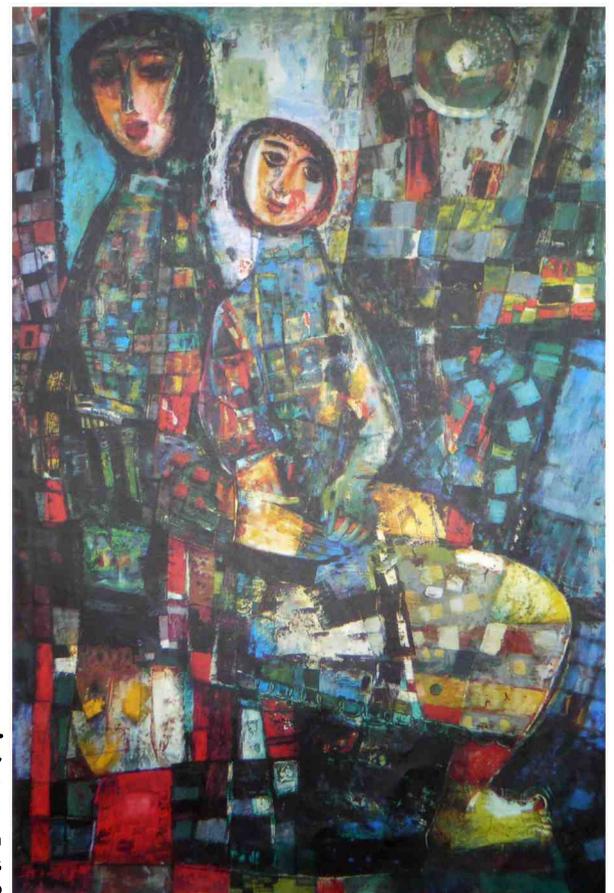


Fig 4 **MICHAEL KMIT**  
**Woman and Girl** 1957  
 oil on composition board  
 182.9 x 121.9  
 Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales  
 cat. no. 26



Fig 5 **MICHAEL KMIT**  
**Three Figures** 1955  
 oil on canvas  
 106.7 x 53.5 cm  
 Collection Newcastle Region Art Gallery  
 cat. no. 20



Fig 6 **NATALIA GONCHAROVA**  
**Flight into Egypt** 1908-9  
 Reproduced in Camilla Grey,  
 The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922  
 Harry N Abrams, N.Y., 1962, p.101

it transformed both the image he described and the surface on which he built, making of his world a place apart, set in a timeless, splendid and calm place. As James Gleeson has remarked, the surface of Kmit's paintings becomes "... a repository for a votive offering of colour."<sup>10</sup>

The work of Justin O'Brien shows a similar conviction in the preciousness of colour. O'Brien was a resident of the Sydney artists' colony, Merriolla, when Kmit moved there in 1950.<sup>11</sup> As in Kmit's work, colour for Justin O'Brien bestows a metaphysical significance on the reality represented in his images. In *Resurrection* (c1955), (fig.7), "... the warmth of the pink rock and glowing sky. ... lift the work above personal tragedy."<sup>12</sup> O'Brien's debt to the icon tradition has often been noted, although the artist himself repudiates this connection.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless his work shares with the icon an air of quiet stillness, and has that spiritual, contemplative quality which Goncharova believed was as much a result of the icon's form as of its subject matter.

O'Brien's expressive use of colour and line is matched by an absorption in the pictorial surface. His technique of "... overlaying a light colour with a heavy one, then scraping it off to varying scales of transparency"<sup>14</sup> constructs a finely wrought surface, elusive and full of innuendo. The patient construction of this procedure gives to his work a mood of quiet poise.

The enamelled surface, built up with glazes, is characteristic of the work of Leonard French. The tiny works from the early 60s, eg. *Symbol over Red Fish* (1964), (fig.8), absorb the viewer in their encrusted surfaces, glowing beneath layers of colour. In size, composition and imagery they confirm that the image can still be, like the traditional, sacred icon, a symbolic bearer of meaning.

Donald Friend had left Merriolla by the time Michael Kmit arrived there in 1950 but had already been working in a neo-byzantine mode. His experiments with the iconic conventions are less well known, and again are employed to transcend the temporal bounds of representation. He adopts the conventions of the icon, such as gilding, a tilted perspective and the compartmentalization of action. See *Fountain of Youth* (1957), (cat. no. 8). In the Bennelong series, *Bennelong's Duel with Colebee* (c1960), (cat. no. 9), Friend makes of our own historical moments something precious and enduring. They become intrinsically linked to a more distant past.

## **SYDNEY : A BROADENED HORIZON**

The sense of history in Kmit's work found a receptive critical audience in Sydney in 1950. A more international emphasis had been propagated in the preceding decade. In 1941, Peter Bellw, newly appointed editor of *Art in Australia*, recognized that one outcome of war-torn Europe would be the refugee. In an early editorial he predicted that "... the countries which opened their doors to the outcasts will be the richer"<sup>15</sup> The policy of the magazine was broadened to present "... the art of all countries, all periods and all schools"<sup>16</sup>

Contributions to *Art in Australia* included those by Swiss born Paul Haefliger and his wife, painter Jean Bellette who wrote six articles for the magazine in the brief period of Bellw's editorship. Haefliger and Bellette wrote on quattrocento and medieval art, stressing in their articles the relevance of these masters to the modern artist. In his role as the art critic for the *Sydney Morning Herald* (1943-1957), Haefliger, who knew Kmit well, brought a European sensibility to the understanding of art, encouraging artists who were not inclined towards either a realist or a nationalist expression to look to the art of the old masters. In emphasizing the enduring and timeless quality of art, he offered an alternative voice during the immediate post-war period when critical attention was largely being directed to art which addressed local and current issues.

Michael Kmit's influence has been likened to that of Danila Vassiliev on Melbourne artists ten years earlier.<sup>17</sup> His rise to prominence in the Sydney art world was 'meteoric', as Judy Cassab recalled.<sup>18</sup> Kmit was considered outstanding among the many émigré artists whose European background has helped shape our cultural history, artists such as Desiderius Orban, Judy Cassab, Peter Kaiser, George Olszanski,

Henry Salkauskas, Stanislaus Rapotec and, later, Ignacio Marmol. Many worked together with Australian artists in such havens of internationalism as Merioola. In the mid-1950s studio spaces were made available in large premises run by Sheila McDonald, where artists could meet, work together and exchange ideas. As members of Sydney's art societies, their work was seen and appreciated by emerging artists. Elwyn Lynn remembers Kmit being revered for his rich, luminous colour and enamel-like surface. Students would pay great attention to Kmit for his ability to "make of the icon a solid thing . . ." and the way he would "...fill the image up!"<sup>19</sup> See *Signature* (1953), (fig.9).

Discovering a new art form in the pages of an international art magazine may be dramatic, but a regular familiarity with artists' working methods should not be underestimated.<sup>20</sup> Many commentators note that "The changing pattern of Australian painting owes much to the influence of post-war migrant artists from Europe",<sup>21</sup> but few attempt to outline the exact nature of that influence.

The avant-garde in Sydney in the 1950s and 60s was concerned with the issues of abstraction. Elwyn Lynn enumerated the diverse forms this exploration took in a 1961 *Meanjin* article.<sup>22</sup> The strong presence of artists from a central European background in Sydney at this time suggests that the development of abstraction in Australian art is closely linked with the history of multiculturalism. But the Melbourne-based artists in *Body and Soul* — Leonard French (cat. nos. 3-7), Donald Laycock (cat. no. 34), Lawrence Daws (cat. no. 2) — also suggest an interest in exploring the principles of abstraction was not confined to Sydney artists.

## A PLACE OF CONTEMPLATION

It was perhaps because of the European milieu in Sydney that Lynn was most responsive to the abstract work of Spanish matter painter Tapies while visiting the 1958 *Venice Biennale*.<sup>23</sup> During the previous decade, Lynn had become familiar with the work of such artists as Kmit and Orban. These artists showed a heightened concern for surface texture, a sensitivity to the materiality of the paint they manipulated, and through these means, their work evoked a metaphysical presence. *Minos of Hades* (1960), (cat. no. 36), from Lynn's first exhibition of matter paintings, confirms his concentration on surface quality.

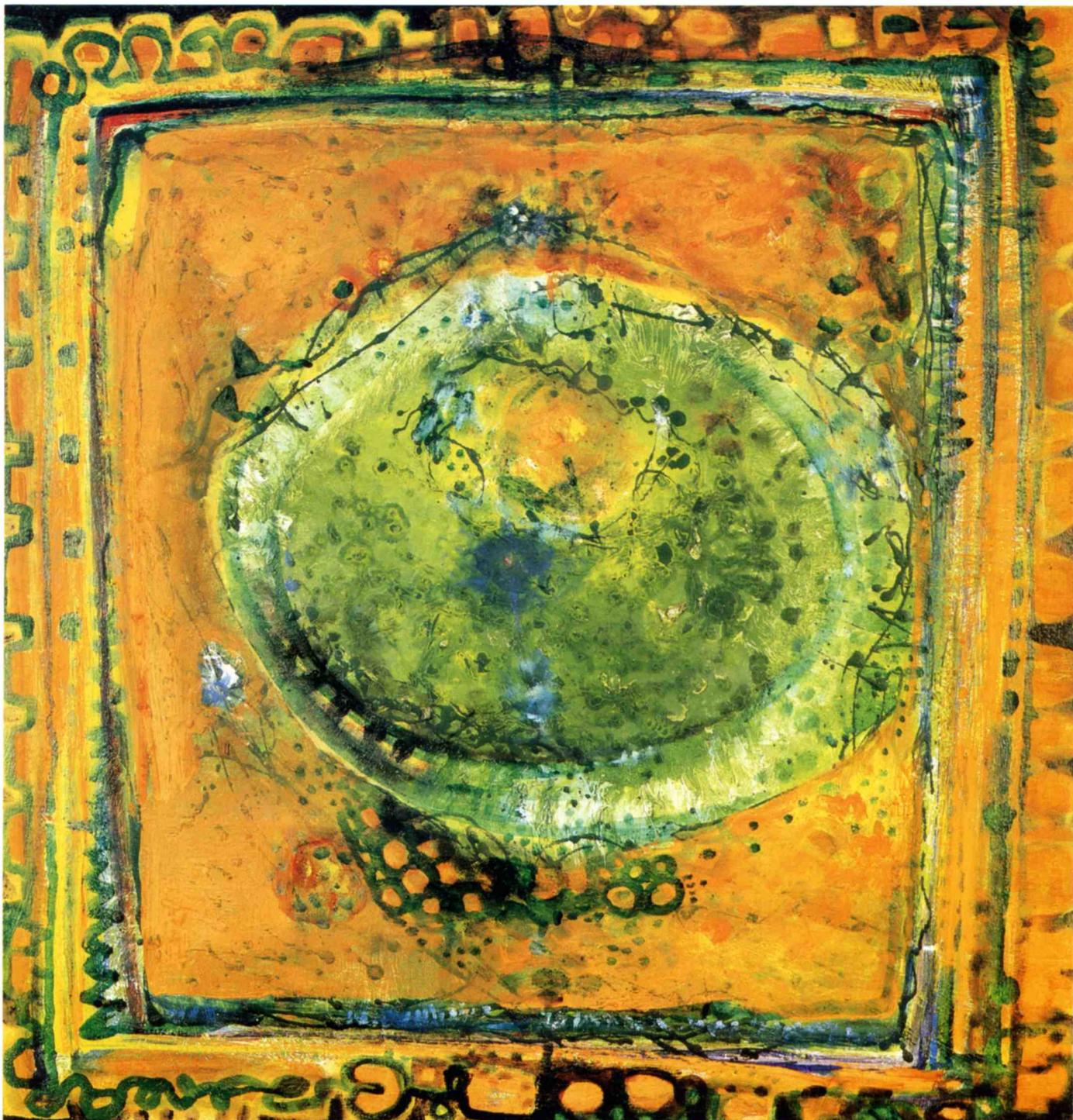
Lynn was not the only local artist experimenting with texture and the corporeality of material in his paintings at this time. Other artists included in this exhibition demonstrate a similar interest in exploiting the painting's surface, such as Peter Kaiser (cat. no. 10) and Ignacio Marmol (cat. no. 40), and even Fred Williams, some of whose early sixties and most abstract forest paintings, are emphatically encrusted to accentuate the surface plane, *Sherbrooke Forest* (c1960), (cat. no. 46).

Tapies' reverence for his materials, like the icon painters' stress on the material qualities of the paint, is founded on religious ritual. As distinct from the surrealist *objet-trouvé*, materials are handled more in the spirit of a sacred relic to "emphasize the sacral quality, for centuries attributed to material in its raw state in Catalan art."<sup>24</sup>

It is not surprising that Lynn found himself drawn to an abstract art based on these almost meditative principles rather than to those abstractionists who engaged the canvas to act out the artist's ego — the underlying *gestalt* of American abstract expressionism. Lynn tended to agree with Tapies, for whom "...the canvas (was) not a place for representation but for. . .contemplation."<sup>25</sup>

## THE CIRCLE WITHIN A SQUARE

Prompted by major exhibitions in the 1970s, Neo-primitivism is now seen as having "...contributed directly to the formation of many of the revolutionary ideas which we associate with later Modernist art".<sup>26</sup> The most revolutionary art was the severely reductionist abstraction developed by Malevich which he called "Suprematism". Malevich's abstraction was an extension of his association with Neo-primitivist sources and not a break with them. As Betz has pointed out, "...in painting especially, the analysis of the formal traits of the Russian icon, as well as of the *lubok* print, lent itself to formalist concerns."<sup>27</sup>



**MICHAEL KMIT**

***Ovum*** 1968

oil on canvas

57.0 x 75.0

Collection Mr and Mrs S Rapotec

Photograph Jonathon Hogan

cat. no. 32

**MICHAEL KMIT*****Synopsis*** 1961

oil on composition board

75.0 x 59.0 composition

Private Collection, Sydney

Photograph Jonathon Hogan

cat. no. 28

**MICHAEL KMIT*****Soubretts and kookaburra*** 1953

oil on composition board

55.0 x 58.0

Collection Mr and Dr Strokon

Photograph Jonathon Hogan

cat. no. 16

Fig 7 **JUSTIN O'BRIEN**  
**Resurrection** c.1955  
 oil on canvas  
 77.0 x 57.0  
 Collection Dr J Barnes  
 Photograph Jonathon Hogan  
 cat. no. 42



Fig 9 **MICHAEL KMIT**  
**Signature** 1953  
 oil on composition board  
 95.0 x 68.0  
 Collection Tasmanian Museum and Art  
 Gallery  
 cat. no. 15

Fig 8 **LEONARD FRENCH**  
**Symbol over Red Fish** 1964  
 enamel on composition board  
 25.0 x 30.0  
 Private collection, Sydney  
 Photograph Jonathon Hogan  
 cat. no. 7



It was these formalist concerns Haefliger first noted in the paintings of Michael Kmit which he had perceived as being "... a mixture of abstract(ion) and realism."<sup>28</sup> Even in Kmit's representational paintings formalist concerns remain paramount. As Kmit said "... the subject itself is of no account; what matters is the way it is presented, it is a matter of shapes trapped by the four sides of the canvas."<sup>29</sup>

Traditional Slavic folk art proved to be one of many alternatives in the early twentieth century which allowed "... the painter to think in terms of the painting itself rather than in terms of its relevance to external reality".<sup>30</sup>

Entirely in keeping with this characteristic of Neo-primitivism is the Suprematist statement of 1916; "... a chair has four legs, but that's important only to the person sitting on it — the artist should be content with one leg."<sup>31</sup> This has become a canon of modern art. In Judy Cassab's diaries she recalls Desiderius Orban repeating the formula to her: "You must forget that a table has four legs... forget the object. Try to construct."<sup>32</sup>

Malevich simply took the proposition further and directed his art against 'representation' itself. He found a more vital essence existed in the surface-plane of a painting. It is to the 'supremacy' of this value that the name of his abstraction refers. Malevich wrote in 1915 :

Any painting surface is more alive than any face from which a pair of eyes and a grin jut out.  
A face painted in a picture gives a pitiful parody of life...  
But a surface lives, it has been born.<sup>33</sup>

The reference to a painted face in this quote is extremely important to Malevich, as it directs us back to his interest in the icon. *The Savior Not Made By Human Hands*, (fig.10) a twelfth century Novrogodian icon, is believed to be one of the earliest Russian icons, and to have begun the use of representation in Christian art. From its divine making, like the Shroud of Turin, comes the belief that an icon is not a representation but the very presence of the Divine. If we look beneath the representational layer we have the mystical geometry which alone, for Malevich, could express metaphysical truth: the circle within the square. If abstraction was to be that which could express a higher reality, it would be through an anthropomorphic geometry derived from the icon.<sup>34</sup>

From the votive face to the metaphysical circle, from Neo-primitivism to abstraction — this transition which Malevich had undertaken earlier in the century was in a sense mirrored by Kmit's own painting career in Australia. By the 1960s he was experimenting in a completely abstract mode while retaining figurative titles such as *Ovum* (1968), (cat. no. 32). In *Ovum's* textured and heavily worked surface can be seen the familiar format of the framed iconic head, now abstracted to the circle within a square. The noumenal possibilities of this symbolic format (circle within square) were being explored by several Australian abstractionists during the sixties, some of whose work is included in the exhibition, for example Elwyn Lynn's *Afloat* (1967) and Ignacio Marmol's *Red with White Ball* (1966), (figs. 11 and 12). Such pregnant terms as *Noumenon* and *Mandala* were frequently used as titles for these artists' paintings, such as Lawrence Daws (cat. no. 2), Donald Laycock (cat. no. 34), Elwyn Lynn (cat. no. 39) and Alun Leach-Jones (cat. no. 35).

The heritage which Michael Kmit brought with him to Australia helped to foster a climate which was redolent with implications for Australian painters during the sixties; for those who sought a poetic expression of the spirit — Justin O'Brien (cat. nos. 42-44); for those who treated the surface as a repository of meaning — Fred Williams (cat. no. 46), Elwyn Lynn (cat. nos. 36-39) and Ignacio Marmol (cat. no. 40); and for those developing a symbolic language of geometric forms — Leonard French (cat. nos. 3-7). In recognition of this contribution, *Body and Soul* gathers together artists who sought in the corporeality of art — through its material means — the expression of man's soul.

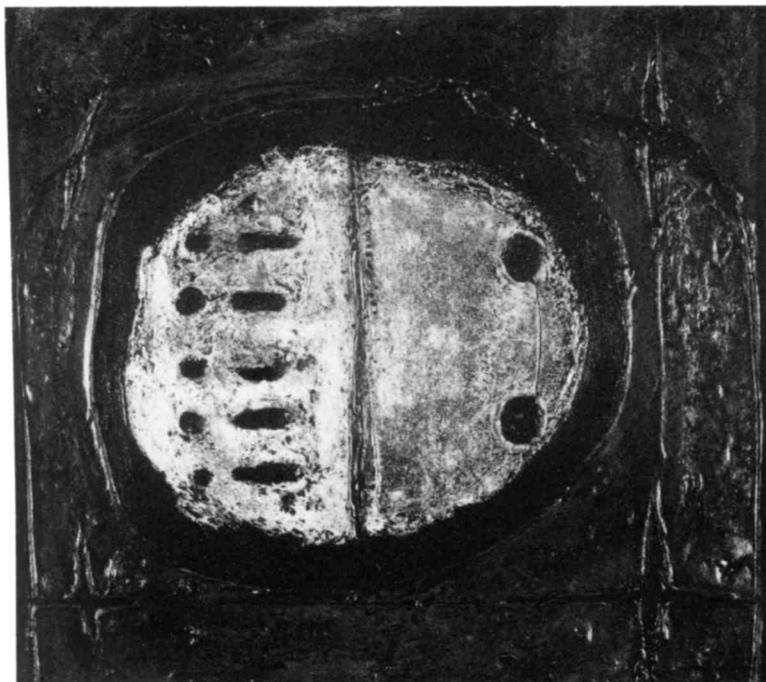


Fig 12 **IGNACIO MARMOL**  
**Red with White Ball** 1966  
 Synthetic polymer paint, oil on  
 composition board  
 42.3 x 45.7  
 Collection Art Gallery of New South  
 Wales  
 cat. no. 40



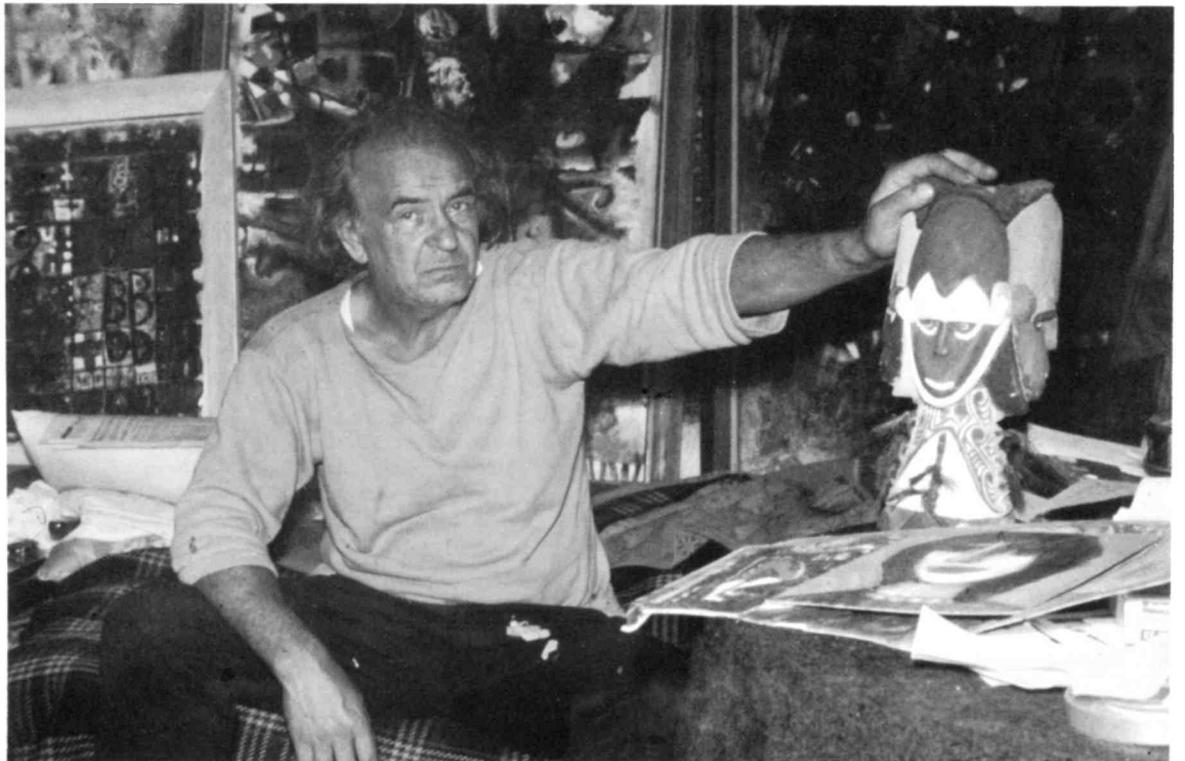
Fig 10 **The Saviour Not Made by Human  
 Hands** 12th Century  
 Novgorodian School  
 Tempera on wood  
 76.2 x 70.5  
 Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow  
**Burlington Magazine** 53, December 1978, p.131



Fig 11 **ELWYN LYNN**  
**Afloat** 1967  
 mixed media on canvas  
 117.5 x 133.0  
 Collection  
 Mr Charles Nodrum  
 Photograph Jonathon  
 Hogan  
 cat. no. 38

## NOTES

- 1 John Lapsley, "Interview with Michael Kmit", *The Australian*, April 19, 1977, p.10
- 2 Alan McCulloch, "Room at the Top", *The Herald*, June 12, 1980.
- 3 Margaret Betz, "The Icon and Russian Primitivism", *Art Forum*, 15, Summer 1977, p.40
- 4 John E Bowlt, "Neo-primitivism and Russian Painting", *Burlington Magazine*, March 1974, p.139.
- 5 Betz, p.39.
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 Alan McCulloch, "A Ukrainian with plenty to offer", *The Herald*, August, 1955.
- 8 John Lapsley, p.10
- 9 Betz, p.40
- 10 James Gleeson, "Raising the Ghosts from the Past", *The Sun Herald*, July 1966, reprinted above.
- 11 Residents at Merioola would have been familiar with Kmit's Neo-primitivist sources, as one of their number, Harry Tatlock Miller had organized a large exhibition, *Art for Theatre and Ballet*, which toured Australia in 1940. Works for the Colonel de Basil Ballet Company by Larionov and Goncharova were in that exhibition.
- 12 Christine France, *Justin O'Brien: Image and Icon*, Craftsman House, NSW, 1987, p.14.
- 13 "The press of the day, (1947), often referred to O'Brien's and Friend's work of this period as Byzantine but as O'Brien says: "I had not really seen any Byzantine art at this stage and any influence was very vague indeed."  
Christine France, *Merioola and after*, catalogue, S H Erwin Gallery, Sydney, 1986, p.6.
- 14 Christine France, *Justin O'Brien : Image and Icon*, p. 16.
- 15 Peter Bellew, "Our Duty to Art", *Art in Australia*, Sept. 1, 1941.
- 16 Peter Bellew, "The New Art in Australia", *Art in Australia*, March 1, 1941.
- 17 James Gleeson in interview with Jenepher Duncan, August 1988.
- 18 Judy Cassab in interview with Jenepher Duncan, August 1988.
- 19 Elwyn Lynn in interview with Jenepher Duncan, August 1988.
- 20 To explore the unique set of historical circumstances that shaped this period of our history is more valuable than to overemphasize particular aspects. In a recent article Theodora Green noted the influence of post-war American art on Australian abstract painting, claiming that :  
...the changing environment within Sydney's art community had been brought about by the post-war flood of illustrated art books and magazines, the impact of visiting American lecturers and revised interest in overseas travel.  
Theodora Green, "Abstract Expressionism in Australia: American parallels and influences", *Art and Australia*, 23:4, 1986, p.488.
- 21 Alan McCulloch, "A Ukrainian with plenty to offer".
- 22 Elwyn Lynn, "The Avant Garde in Sydney", *Meanjin*, September 1961.
- 23 Patrick McCaughey, *Elwyn Lynn*, Robert Bolton, Adelaide, 1969, p.2
- 24 Vera Linhartova, *Tapies*, Harry N Abrams, N.Y., 1972, p.11
- 25 Linhartova, p.6
- 26 Bowlt, p.133
- 27 Betz, p.26
- 28 Paul Haefliger, "Michael Kmit Exhibition at Macquarie", *Daily Telegraph*, October 23, 1951.
- 29 Michael Kmit in interview with Hazel de Berg, November 17, 1965, transcript. National Archives, Canberra.
- 30 Bowlt, p.140
- 31 *ibid.*, p.137
- 32 Lou Klepac, *Judy Cassab, artists and friends*, Beagle Press, Sydney, 1988, p.58
- 33 W. Sherman Simmons, "Kasimir Malevich's Black Square: the transformed self, part three: the icon unmasked", *Arts Magazine*, 53, December 1978, p.128
- 34 Contemporaneous theosophical writings envisaged man's phenomenal life as the two-dimensional square and his metaphysical aspect as a cube. Ref. Bragdon's *Man the Square*, 1912. Malevich's *Black Square* is the imprint of a portrait as a slice of a cube. i.e. a higher self.



Michael Kmit in his  
Studio c.1969  
Photograph Vladas Meskenas

# CATALOGUE

- 1 **Asher Bilu**  
born Tel Aviv 1936; arriv. Australia 1957  
**Graphite II**  
mixed media on composition board  
137.0 x 137.0  
not signed, not dated  
Collection Mr Charles Nodrum
- 2 **Lawrence Daws**  
born Adelaide 1927  
**Mandala V** 1962  
oil on canvas  
137.0 x 137.0  
signed and dated l.r., Daws '62  
Collection The Artist
- 3 **Leonard French**  
born Melbourne, 1928  
**Iconoclast** 1957  
enamel on composition board  
122.0 x 152.0  
not signed, not dated  
Collection City of Caulfield
- 4 **Fish Transfixed** 1960  
(From *The Campion Paintings*)  
enamel on hessian covered composition board  
27.0 x 30.5  
not signed, not dated  
titled on paper, on reverse, "Of a Fish"  
Private collection, Sydney
- 5 **Temples with Red Fish** 1962  
enamel on composition board  
19.0 x 14.0  
signed, dated and titled on paper on reverse  
Private collection, Sydney
- 6 **Dark Temples** 1963-4  
enamel on composition board  
25.0 x 30.0  
signed, dated and titled on paper on reverse  
Private collection, Sydney.
- 7 **Symbol over Red Fish** 1964  
enamel on composition board  
19.0 x 14.0  
signed, dated and titled on paper on reverse  
Private collection, Sydney
- 8 **Donald Friend**  
born Sydney, 1915  
**Fountain of Youth** 1957  
oil on canvas  
106.0 x 190.0  
signed l.r., Donald Friend  
Collection Holdsworth Galleries
- 9 **Bennelong's Duel with Colebee** c. 1960  
(From the *Bennelong Series*)  
oil and gold leaf on composition board  
28.0 x 38.0  
signed l.r., Donald Friend  
Collection Sydney Opera House Trust
- 10 **Peter Kaiser**  
born Germany 1918; arriv. Australia 1940  
**Mur blanc (White wall)** 1956  
oil on hessian  
96.0 x 129.0  
signed and dated u.l., Kaiser '56  
titled on reverse  
Collection Mr Charles Nodrum
- 11 **Michael Kitching**  
born U.K. 1940; arriv. Australia 1952  
**Spanish dancer** 1962  
oil on composition board  
91.5 x 55.0  
signed and dated l.r., Kitching '62  
titled on reverse  
Collection Charles Nodrum Gallery
- 12 **Michael Kmit**  
born W. Ukraine 1910; arriv. Australia 1949; d. 1981  
**Village Landscape** 1949  
oil on canvas  
55.5 x 65.2  
signed and dated l.r., Kmit 1949  
Collection Art Gallery of Western Australia
- 13 **Christ** 1953  
oil on canvas  
65.3 x 54.4  
signed and dated l.r., Kmit 1953  
signed, dated and titled on reverse  
Collection Australian National Gallery
- 14 **The Evangelist John Mark** 1953  
oil on canvas  
95.0 x 70.0  
signed and dated l.r., Kmit 1953  
Blake Prize 1953  
Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales
- 15 **Signature** 1953  
oil on composition board  
95.0 x 68.0  
signed and dated l.r., Kmit 1953  
Collection Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

- 16 **Soubrette and Kookaburra** 1953  
oil on composition board  
55.0 x 58.0  
signed and dated l.r., Kmit 1956  
signed, dated and titled on reverse  
Collection Mr and Dr Strokon
- 17 **The Ruler (David the King)** 1954  
oil on composition board  
43.0 x 35.0  
signed l.r., Kmit  
signed and titled on reverse  
Private Collection, Queensland
- 18 **Self Portrait** 1954  
oil on canvas  
78.0 x 65.0  
signed and dated l.r., Kmit 1954  
Collection University of Queensland
- 19 **The Three Wise Men** 1954  
oil on canvas  
79.2 x 63.9  
signed and dated l.r., Kmit 1954  
Collection National Gallery of Victoria
- 20 **Three Figures (Supraorbital Composition)** 1955  
oil on canvas  
106.7 x 53.3  
signed, dated and titled on reverse  
Collection Newcastle Region Art Gallery
- 21 **Edda** 1956  
oil on composition board  
182.0 x 120.5  
signed and dated l.r., Kmit 1956  
Collection Australian National Gallery
- 22 **Synclinal Composition** 1956  
oil on composition board  
55.9 x 43.2  
signed and dated l.r., Kmit 1956  
signed, dated and titled on reverse  
Collection Art Gallery New South Wales
- 23 **Two Boys** 1957  
oil on composition board  
66.1 x 71.1  
signed, dated and titled on reverse  
Collection Mr James Fairfax
- 24 **Lobster** 1957  
oil and enamel on composition board  
44.0 x 122.0  
signed and dated l.r., Kmit 1957  
signed, dated and titled in reverse  
Collection Mr James Gleeson
- 25 **St George and the Dragon** 1957  
oil on canvas  
70.0 x 94.0  
signed and dated l.r., Kmit 1957  
Collection Macquarie University  
on loan from Ukrainian Scouts
- 26 **Woman and Girl** 1957  
oil on composition board  
182.9 x 121.9  
signed and dated l.r., Kmit 1957  
Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales
- 27 **Communication** 1961  
oil on composition board  
44.0 x 58.0  
signed and dated l.r., Kmit '61  
signed, dated and titled on reverse  
Private Collection, Sydney
- 28 **Synopsis** 1961  
oil on composition board  
75.0 x 59.0  
signed and dated l.r., Kmit '61  
signed, dated and titled on reverse  
Private Collection, Sydney
- 29 **Ocellations** 1962  
oil and enamel on composition board  
46.5 x 61.0  
signed l.r., Kmit  
signed, dated and titled on reverse  
Collection Mr and Mrs Holobrodskyj
- 30 **Gerisol** 1962-3  
oil on composition board  
101.0 x 50.0  
signed and dated l.r., Kmit 63  
signed, dated and titled on reverse  
Collection Mr and Mrs Holobrodskyj
- 31 **Corpus Christi** 1965  
oil on composition board  
60.0 x 50.0  
signed l.r., Kmit  
signed, dated and titled on reverse  
Private Collection, Melbourne
- 32 **Ovum** 1961-68  
oil on composition board  
57.0 x 75.0  
signed, dated and titled on reverse  
Collection Mr and Mrs S Rapotec
- 33 **Byzantine Madonna** c. 1968  
oil on composition  
49.5 x 31.5  
signed and titled on paper on reverse  
Collection Charles Nodrum Gallery

- 34 **Donald Laycock**  
born Melbourne 1931  
**Mandala** c. 1963  
oil on composition board  
137.5 x 82.0  
Collection Mr Charles Nodrum
- 35 **Alun Leach-Jones**  
born U.K. 1937; arriv. Australia, 1959  
**Noumenon XXXVII Alap** 1970  
acrylic on cotton canvas  
178.0 x 178.0  
signed, dated and titled on reverse  
Collection of  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Brisbane
- 36 **Elwyn Lynn**  
born Canowindra NSW, 1917  
**Minos of Hades** 1960  
mixed media on canvas  
121.0 x 155.0  
not signed, not dated  
titled on paper on reverse  
Collection The Artist
- 37 **Millstone** 1965  
diptych  
mixed media on canvas  
103.0 x 244.0 each  
signed, dated and titled on reverse  
Collection The Artist
- 38 **Afloat** 1967  
mixed media on canvas  
117.5 x 133.0  
signed and dated on frame, Elwyn Lynn Afloat  
signed, dated and titled on reverse  
Collection of Mr Charles Nodrum
- 39 **Mandala** 1966  
mixed media on canvas  
129.0 x 129.0  
signed, dated and titled on reverse  
Collection Dr and Mrs J Indyk
- 40 **Ignacio Marmol**  
born Spain 1934; arriv. Australia 1962  
**Red with White Ball** 1966  
synthetic polymer paint, oil on composition  
board  
42.3 x 45.7  
signed with monogram and dated l.r., MRML  
'66  
Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales
- 41 **Sidney Nolan**  
born Melbourne 1917  
**A Duck Plate** c.1965  
oil on canvas  
122.0 x 115.5  
signed with monogram l.r.,  
signed, dated and titled on reverse  
Private collection, Sydney
- 42 **Justin O'Brien**  
born Hurstville NSW 1917, resides Rome 1967  
**The Resurrection** c.1955  
oil on canvas  
77.0 x 57.0  
not signed, not dated  
Collection Dr J Barnes
- 43 **St. George's Day, Skyros** 1965  
oil on canvas on composition board  
92.5 x 59.0  
not signed, not dated  
Collection Holdsworth Galleries
- 44 **Still Life with Angel Fresco** 1972  
oil on composition board  
73.5 x 54.5  
signed l.r., O'Brien  
Collection Mr James Fairfax
- 45 **Desiderius Orban**  
born Hungary 1884; arr. Sydney 1939, died 1987  
**Universe** 1969  
triptych  
oil on aluminum on paper on composition  
board  
123.0 x 91.5 each  
not signed, not dated  
Collection Holdsworth Galleries
- 46 **Fred Williams**  
born Melbourne 1927-1982  
**Sherbrooke Forest** c. 1960  
oil on composition board  
90.0 x 90.0  
signed l.r., Fred Williams  
Collection Charles Nodrum Gallery

## ABBREVIATIONS

l.r. lower right

u.r. upper right

All measurements in centimetres, height before width

u.l. upper left

l.l. lower left

# 'PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA'

## JEAN BELLETTE

The gentle enchantment of colour and the slow poetry of the seasons persuaded the sculptors to enter the world of two dimensions. This was the origin and the awakening of Italian painting.

Because all artists worked together and gave each other their secrets, and, despite the constant wars, maintained the integrity of their profession, every town, however small, could boast a great man. The doctrines of the church became but a running accompaniment to personal awareness of this life, and the powers to be enjoyed on this side of the grave. The pursuit of glory was called "a splendid preoccupation," and tremendous efforts were put forth by the individual. Some were more fortunate than others in that they found it possible to settle in one place, and work for one master. Others, Giotto, Angelico, Gozzoli, Uccello, Piero della Francesca, Signorelli, Pinturicchio, all in turn travelled on the roads around Pisa, Siena, Florence, Urbino, Arezzo, and San Sepolcro, decorating the town buildings, the monasteries, and even the facades of the palaces. But there was nothing idyllic about the nomadic conditions and the rough times. All must have watched the battles of the condottiere in the mountain passes, scraped a bare living in the valleys, and prayed for a heavy cloak against the winter's cold.

Above Arezzo, in Borgo San Sepolcro, where the country is stony and bare, the herbage sparse, blue is fragile, yellows are pale, pinks tenebrous, and green and purple precious. Here, in the rarified atmosphere of high-up places, Piero della Francesca was born. In his work he is always amongst the hills, the sky is pale, there is a hint of spring. He halts an army by an icy steam and frozen trees. He paints a resurrection in the light of dawn, while guards sleep beneath the solemn cypresses, or, on rocky slopes above a river, angels in grey robes play precise music for the Nativity. His ability to convey in spatial harmonies the ideas of both heart and intellect give him a place peculiarly his own. Homogeneous, he never sacrifices his superb architecture to the play of sentiment, any more than does the finest Asiatic art. He created according to the geometric principles that had formed his mind. He carried the agreement between science and art further than did Uccello. He had more weapons than Giotto. His was an idea of human grandeur, of a constructed splendour. His is a powerful, cylindrical, Roman form.

Italy had earlier been roused and possessed by the words of Petrarch — "O inglorious age! that scorns antiquity, its mother, to whom it owes every noble art; that dares to declare itself not only equal, but superior to the glorious past." During Francesca's youth Donatello and Brunelleschi were already digging for ancient statues in the bed of the Tiber. These were more precious to them than jewels, and it was such renewals of hope and such severe self-examination that produced the Renaissance.

The classic relationship of hills, figures and architecture is so perfect in Francesca, and the focal points of emphasis so mathematical in their inevitability, that a certain proud energy radiates from all his works.

He has seen the tall and gentle virgins of Arezzo pass beneath the olive trees. The followers of the Emperor of Constantinople have lent their dark countenances and their rich brocaded robes to his dreams. The fierce hard battles of the Florentines and the Milanese have created his armies, white horses, pikes and flying pennants.

It is a good thing that in every age we have among us men who rise up unafraid and above melancholy. Francesca was one of these. Surrounded by discontent, disturbances and quarrels, but endowed by a nature which wished to be universal, he created timelessness and impassivity. The problem of each man is, after all, to generalise sufficiently to reduce the desperate adventure of a lifetime to something equable, calm and capable of enduring.

ART IN AUSTRALIA, March, 1942.

# 'GIOTTO' IN ASSISI'

## PAUL HAEFLIGER

The middle ages were slowly coming to an end marked by a tremendous revival of human activity. It was still the time of the Crusades and the Troubadours and the first great names in Art and Letters appeared.

England of the 13th century was the England of the Magna Carta, of St. Thomas Aquinas, and Roger Bacon. In France, the cultural centre of Europe, the finest Gothic cathedrals — Chartres, Reims and Amiens — were in the process of creation. The German Empire, constantly at war, was facing a Mongol invasion, and towards the end of the century Marco Polo undertook his voyages.

In Italy the liquidation of the feudal system had proceeded on a large scale, and the vassals had become free citizens. However, soon the commune split up into rival factions — the wars of the Guelfs and Ghibellines were being fought and finally the power over the cities was usurped by the "first families", notably the Medici at Florence and the Visconti at Milan, while the Pope ruled over practically the whole of Central Italy. In the preceding and 13th century, the universities appeared and with them a revival of Greek philosophy, especially that of Aristotle. The great latin authors of this and the following century, Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, were also the first writers in the vulgar tongue which now reached its full development.

The artists of the time were seeking to liberate themselves from the Byzantine tradition, which had completely degenerated into frozen imagery. First among these was the sculptor Niccolo Pisano, who attained a severe classic style of purely Greek origin. He was followed by Cimabue, the first great painter of the modern world, and Duccio of Siena. Giovanni Pisano early absorbed the Gothic idea, which came only with the fourteenth century to Italy, having flourished already for 150 years in France. Perhaps only Siena was fully able to develop a Gothic tradition with its chief protagonists Simone Martini and Ambrogio Lorenzetti.

It was in this age that Giotto Di Bondone lived. He was born in 1276 (or 1267?) at the small village of Vespignano, about fourteen miles from Florence. His early life was spent in simple rural tasks. A legend goes that when he was ten years old an event occurred that changed the history of art: "For there came riding through the valley the famous painter of Florence, Cimabue, then at the height of his reputation, and passed close to where the boy shepherd was sitting, neglectful of his duties, trying to draw one of his flock with a piece of sharp slate upon the surface of a rock." Cimabue, recognising the boy's talent, took him to Florence and apprenticed him to his studio.

Under his guidance Giotto developed quickly, studying not only his master's work and the Byzantine paintings and Mosaics, but also the illuminations in old missals and books of hours. Above all did the work of Niccolo Pisano fill him with wonder. Almost immediately after the death of St. Francis in 1226, the magnificent double church of Assisi, S. Francesco, was begun in his honour and leading painters were later commissioned to decorate it. Giotto was probably in his middle twenties when he commenced his first important work, the St. Francis cycle in the upper church. He also painted in the lower church, notably the allegories on the virtues which distinguished the mendicants of Assisi.

In twenty-eight murals, of which the last four and possibly the first are not by Giotto, the life of the Saint unfolds itself: "Son of Pier Bernardone, St. Francis was born to affluence, but preferred even in those years in which the passions prompt youth to the pursuit of pleasure, to exercise of charity, so that he was much revered by the poor and simple." Therefore, following his inclinations, St. Francis renounced his worldly life and in imitation of Christ adopted, with a few followers, the existence of a wandering preacher. He lived in complete poverty and taught a communistic Christianity. How profound and yet intoxicating in its brilliance was Giotto's perception of the life of St. Francis! The colour is bright and gay and sparkling, and tells of a young man's happiness in finding the road to liberty from an outworn tradition, and his confidence in his power to create a new one. Giotto had that supreme gift — the genius for clarity and understanding of the psychological moment. Even with his limited material he was able to give expression to the most complex emotions and rise far above the thoughtless epitaph of "primitive".

As line follows upon line in undulating harmony, as form builds upon form and a gesture bespeaks the pervading sentiment, be it a back bent in commiseration, hands clasped in anguish or lifted in wonderment or only the smiling glance of unbelievers, the dramatic moment as interpreted by Giotto has few equals in the history of human expression.

The story of St. Francis merges into the story of art and becomes one.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Body and Soul* was developed from an initial request by Dr. Marko Pavlyshyn of the Department of Slavic Languages at Monash University, to organise an exhibition focussing on the artist, Michael Kmit, to mark the millenium of Christianity in the Ukraine. Dr. Pavlyshyn has been an invaluable source of advice and assistance during the organisation of this exhibition.

The Monash University Gallery gratefully acknowledges the generous financial assistance of the Ukrainian Studies Support Fund and Mr. V. and Mrs. Z. Botte.

The Gallery would like to thank the following who have kindly lent works to the exhibition: Dr. J. Barnes; Mr. Lawrence Daws; Mr. James Fairfax; Mr. James Gleeson; Mr. and Mrs. Y. Holobrodskyj; Mr. Elwyn Lynn; Mr. Charles Nodrum; Mr. and Mrs. S. Rapotec; Mrs. Gisella Scheinberg; Mr. M. and Dr. S. Stokon; and those lenders who wish to remain anonymous; to the Directors and Registrars of the Australian National Gallery; the Art Gallery of New South Wales; the National Gallery of Victoria; the Art Gallery of Western Australia; the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery; the Newcastle Regional Gallery; the University of Queensland Gallery and the Museum of Modern Art, Brisbane; the University Librarian, Macquarie University; to the General Manager of the Sydney Opera House Trust and the City of Caulfield Arts Centre; and to the directors of the Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne and the Holdsworth Galleries, Sydney. Particular thanks are due to the institutions who gave permission to reproduce works loaned from their collections, Mrs. Norma Kmit for permission to reproduce all works by Michael Kmit and John Fairfax & Sons Limited for allowing the reproduction of materials originally published by them.

The assistance and co-operation of the following individuals are gratefully acknowledged: Mrs. Norma Kmit, Mr. Elwyn Lynn, Ms. Judy Cassab, Mr. James Gleeson, Mr. Vladas Meskenas, Mr. Barry Pearce, Curator and Ms. Deborah Edwards, Assistant Curator of Australian Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales; Ms. Jan Minchin, Curator of Australian Art, National Gallery of Victoria; Mr. Jonathon Hogan, photographer and in particular, Mr. Leigh Astbury, Lecturer, Department of Visual Arts, Monash University.

The support of the Vice-Chancellor and Chairman of the Gallery Committee, Professor Mal Logan and the Comptroller, Mr. Peter Wade, is gratefully acknowledged.