

telling a story through alla prima

'At the first' is the literal translation of the Italian expression 'alla prima'. When a painting is created alla prima it is often painted in front of a live model or standing in the landscape 'en plein air' (outdoors in the light and air). Paint is applied in one session or wet into wet, not fully drying between applications. Alla prima oil, and watercolour paintings often do not have the perfection and luminosity achieved by traditional layered painting methods but rather a freshness and vitality instead. Alla prima provides a representation of what the artist sees and feels in front of their art materials and subject - a captured moment.

In Tuscany Italy, 1473, Leonardo Da Vinci, aged 21, makes his first known landscape sketches in the Arno River valley. His pen and ink depiction of Montelupo Castle, tilled farms, mountains and foliage, reveals his understanding of perspective as he creates his wet markings. This process has not yet been given a name.

In Rome, the alla prima tale emerges when the Flemish artist Paul Brill (1554-1626) introduces landscape painting to Rome. His pupil Agostino Tassi (1580-1644) is thought to be the first artist to paint 'en plein air' - outside, in front of his subject, alla prima. Through Tassi's contemporaries, the alla prima story is enriched.

Tassi's student Claude Lorrain (1600/05-1682) returns to France from Rome bringing his plein air painting techniques. Landscape painting is a departure from classical, contrived scenes designed to prove a patron's piety and mastery of literature. Based on alla prima outdoor sketches, this new painting is an honest vision of the effects of weather and atmosphere and tells the story of humans interacting with their landscape. The technique catches on.

Caravaggio (1571-1610), a contemporary of Tassi, is an impulsive violent character who, breaking from tradition, paints spontaneous scenes using common folk and natural gestures. He shuns preparatory drawing and works alla prima directly from his human models posed in front of him. He adds drama through alla prima realism and very strong lights and darks. A love for a sword fight, a charge of murder and a fugitive at the end of his short life, Caravaggio embodies his richly dramatic painting style.

In the Southern Hemisphere, a unique Australian painting story has unfolded. Early Palaeolithic rock art, possibly 48,000 BCE – 5000 BCE, describes, among other imagery, human and animal bone structure, their unique appearance and body shape. Our artist ancestors inhabit a world without selfies - they are 'ecocentric' rather than 'human centric' - living as part of their environment rather than in their environment. Pictographs express First Nations peoples' respect for their natural surroundings, their social hierarchy, storytelling, community, ritual and records of events. These images may be familiar and repeated shapes but this art is not sketched, meticulously planned and workshopped. Pigment is ground then mixed with wet - sometimes water, animal fat or saliva - and then applied to the stone wall. A living story described. First attempt. Alla prima.

Stories of injustice in Australia are also told through alla prima. Born in England, John Glover (1767-1849), a successful artist and teacher, follows his sons to Tasmania in 1829. Glover paints in the land 'en plein air' absorbing the characteristics of Van Diemen's Land - the bright light and the unusual plants. Unlike many of his contemporaries who reproduce English vegetation into Australian landscapes, Glover paints in front of his subject and in doing so, faithfully records the true appearance of the native flora. Although few indigenous people remain in Tasmania at the time, Glover is determined to visualise the indigenous Palawa people living on country. His oil paintings are an artistic objection to the colonial treatment of these tribes who are perishing from introduced disease, being brutally slaughtered or banished to the Furneaux Islands in Bass Strait. Glover reportedly describes his neighbour John Batman (1797-1868) pastoralist and perpetrator of crimes against indigenous Australians as 'a rogue, thief, cheat and liar, a murderer of blacks and the vilest man I have ever known'.

Alla Prima watercolours further tell the story of Australian exploration. Born in Darmstadt, Germany, Ludwig Becker (1808-1861), trained in sciences and painting, travels first to Tasmania and then arrives in Bendigo in 1852 to mine for gold. In 1860 Becker joins an expedition to complete the first South North crossing of the Australian continent as the explorers' official scientist and illustrator. At his suggestion, camels are purchased by the Victorian Government for the trip which is to become known as the Burke and Wills expedition. Becker faithfully paints water colours of the new environments. Together with records of the flora and fauna, the atmospheric paintings help build a picture of the natural landscape before the introduction of European plant and animal species. Poor provisions and harsh conditions cause the death of Becker in 1861, his trek not completed but his valuable scientific and artistic observations preserved.

Female equality is woven into the Australian story with strong, often brave women painting outside in front of their subject matter. English born Elizabeth Parsons (1831-1897) arrives in Melbourne in 1870, pregnant, accompanied by her husband and 3 children. She works hard to establish herself as a serious artist and exhibits alongside notable male artists such as Louis Buvelot. Despite significant opposition, characterful Parsons is the first female artist to be elected as a council member of the Victorian Academy of Arts. Social conventions of the day discourage women travelling 'unaccompanied' on painting expeditions, yet Parsons insists on painting 'en plein air', her alla prima studies being a visual record of the 'colour and form' in landscapes around her. Travelling widely, Parsons helps to pave the way for the camping/painting trips of the Heidelberg school and the inclusion of women artists as independent professionals in their field.

Federation sees the 6 colonies joined as one Australia. Nationalism is embraced. Artists are influenced by the French Impressionist movement. The alla prima technique is the perfect voice to tell the story of Australian identity. Artists break the shackles of traditional art and explore the city streets and the bush around them. Painters such as Jane Price (1860-1948), Jane Sutherland (1853-1928) and Clara Southern (1860-1940) along with their male counterparts, become the Heidelberg School. They paint alla prima, 'en plein air', camping in the bush and infusing their work with a freshness, a brusqueness and a passion for the raw landscape and light. Tom Roberts (1856-1931) and Arthur Streeton (1867 - 1943) take their alla prima sketches to the next level and produce, from small fresh studies, a vision of Australia on a grand scale. For many, the beauty and human endeavour these impressionists portray, engender a sense of national pride.

Painting alla prima directly in front of her landscapes and figures allows Hilda Rix Nicholas (1884 - 1961) to hold her own as a painter of 'National' subject matter. Rix is mentored by her artistic parents and influenced by the likes of Bunny, Phillips Fox and McCubbin. She travels with her mother and sister to Europe painting plain air and sketching in France and Morocco. Despite suffering trauma through the loss of her family during war time, Rix Nicholas continues painting. Remarkably successful overseas, Rix Nicholas spearheads Australian post impressionism with her depiction of light, colour and simplified forms however, on her return to Australia, she is criticised for her work's 'masculine' style. In NSW Rix Nicholas continues to paint the unique Australian landscape and figures, juggling marriage, motherhood and career in the face of fading local recognition and support.

In 1934, Heide, an old Victorian era dairy farm on Wurundjeri land in Bulleen is established by John and Sunday Reid who encourage and financially support young modernist artists. Along with others in the daring 'Heide Circle', Joy Hester (1920-1960) and John Perceval (1923-2000) work alla prima - pushing and playing with paint to make it work in ways which express emotion and atmosphere as well as representing their live subject. Consequently the narrative of 'change' in the Australian story is chronicled. In a time of rising fascism and communism, and the upheaval and trauma of war, the alla prima painting style not only represents simply a landscape view or a person's face, but now explores political, philosophical and literary ideas. A gaunt, troubled stare like a prison camp inmate, a series of hectic brushstrokes in jarring colour - alla prima is part of a new humanist reaction to the world.

Alla prima facilitates the expression of a national conscience. Arthur Boyd (1920-1999) is born into a family of artists and lives and breathes alla prima from a young age. His childhood is spent in Murrumbidgee in a humble, nurturing environment respectful of the natural world, family, tradition and spirituality. The effects of WW2 and his own war service sees Boyd reeling at the plight of refugees, the outcasts and the violence thrust on the innocent. Boyd's witnessing of segregation and white oppression of the indigenous community on his travels to Central Australia result in his moving 'Bride Series'. Experiencing 1960's Europe and the Baroque paintings of his gallery visits, Boyd returns regularly to biblical and allegorical figures exploring violence, lust and social inequity. On his return to Australia in 1971 Boyd settles on the Shoalhaven River where he paints 'en plein air' celebrating the natural landscape. His works highlight environmental conservation and consider our relationship to the land and white settlement.

Artists working alla prima capture the war machine in all its guises. Recording the experiences of war for Australia, Englishman Ashley George Old (1913-2001), malnourished and exhausted, grinds local clay in his Thai-Burma railway POW camp and creates water colour records of fellow inmates' medical conditions for the POW medical staff and Australian POW surgeon Major Arthur Moon. Ray Parkin (1910-2005) records his POW experiences but also paints the beauty of the flora and fauna around him. A delicate landscape view from the camp, a butterfly sketch, Parkin expresses escapism from suffering. Ivor Hele (1912 -1993), utilises his superb academic art training capturing from life the Australian troops in combat in WW2 and the Korean War. His figures are powerful renditions of brutality and exhaustion, often intimate in their depiction of individuals. Hele eventually becomes Australia's longest serving official war artist. Alan Moore (1914-2015) travels to the Middle east and Europe and is present at the liberation of the infamous Bergen-Belson Concentration camp in 1945. Moore paints alla prima the atrocious scenes before him. He takes photographs as proof because he is in doubt that his confronting plein air work will be believed. Ben Quilty (1973-) travels to Afghanistan attached to the ADF. On his return he expresses the experiences of soldiers and their psychological pain through his textural oils. He creates insightful alla prima life portraiture – a symbolic stripping bare.

Alla prima expresses the Australian migrant story in fresh form. Fred Lowen (1919-2005) is born in Germany and flees Nazi occupation of Europe. He travels by ship to Australia in 1940 as a 'Dunera Boy' and spends the first 6 months of his new life in the Tatura Internment Camps. He produces alla prima watercolours of life outside the wire – his first impressions of his new home.

Alwy Fadhel arrives in Australia in 2007 and is detained in Villawood detention Centre. He is taught to paint by an Iraqi refugee using instant coffee and water. Surrounded by his subject matter, Fadhel continues the tradition using alla prima 'coffee painting' to express emotions and visions of his experience in detention.

Kurdish refugee Mostafa Azimitabar seeks asylum in Australia and is held in detention on Manus Island and then in a Melbourne hotel. He creates his wet on wet paintings using a toothbrush, coffee and whatever else he can find. Once freed and in contact with the art community who connected with him in detention, he creates a self portrait with a message of love and humanity. He calls it KNS088 which is the number he is assigned for 8 years. It is shortlisted for the Archibald.

The story of contemporary Australia continues to be narrated through the alla prima technique. Daily, unplanned, wet-on-wet markings are created through graffiti and street art, freehand tattoos and unfiltered preschool paintings. They express a social story encompassing emotion, lived experience and belonging.

In camera-free trials, courtroom artists make alla prima sketches of legal proceedings. They illuminate the 'characters' in the court drama providing an insight into our society's due process.

Plein air artists interpret the Australian landscape in new ways, experimenting with often raw, recycled unconventional materials, studying the minutia, deciphering shape and colour. Artists have a developed sensitivity towards the environment which, through global warming, is more fragile and vulnerable than ever before.

Palliative care patients, people living with mental illness, and people in incarceration respond creatively through structured art therapy sessions. Their feelings and experiences are explored and translated through alla prima.

Describing history, telling a story, alla prima is an important part of our Australian record. In a modern sense, it has come to represent also, not just our achievements and our surroundings but also our emotions and our humanity. Brief and uncontrolled, it speaks of a moment in time. In this sense, wet paint into wet paint is both vulnerable and enduring.