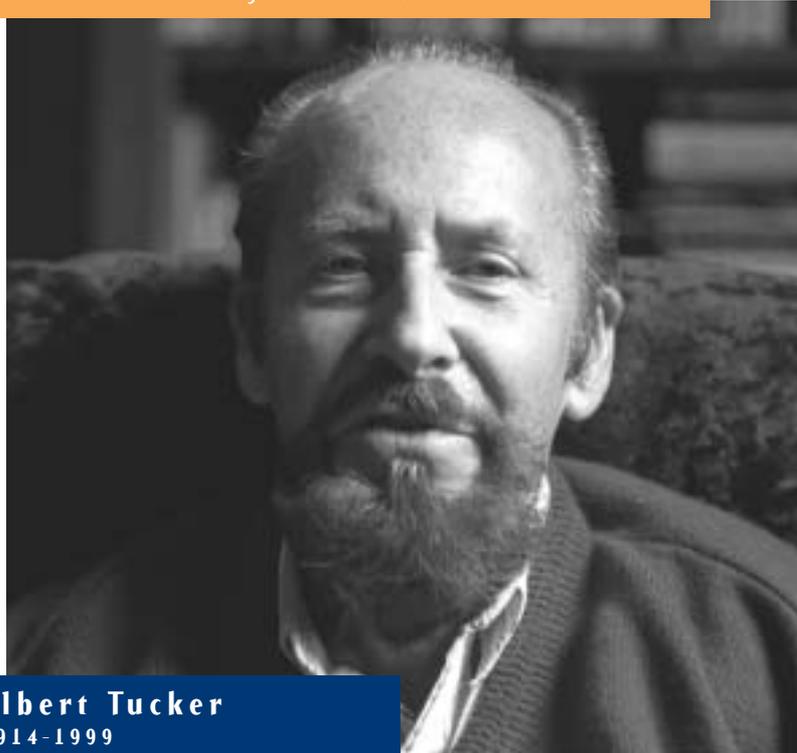


# AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



**Albert Tucker**

1914-1999

Artist

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 3 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

**Australian Biography: Albert Tucker**

**Director/Producer** Frank Heimans **Executive Producer** Sharon Connolly

**Duration** 26 minutes **Year** 1993

Study guide prepared by Kate Raynor © Film Australia

Also in Series 3: Flo Bjelke-Petersen, Veronica Brady, Smoky Dawson,  
Malcolm Fraser, Lois (Lowitja) O'Donoghue, Hayes Gordon

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## SYNOPSIS

Albert Tucker is one of Australia's most influential artists. Born in Melbourne in 1914, he has worked as a house painter, commercial illustrator, cartoonist and professional artist.

Influenced by the poetry of T.S. Eliot, surrealism and German Expressionism, Tucker explored the human condition through his art. In 1947, he travelled to Japan, where he saw the devastation of Hiroshima—an experience that had a profound effect on his work.

Tucker spent 13 years in Europe. His international career finally took off when the Guggenheim Museum purchased some of his work and the Museum of Modern Art in New York mounted an exhibition.

During the 1960s, he began to enjoy considerable popularity at home. All major Australian galleries acquired his work and in 1990 a retrospective of his paintings drew over 90,000 visitors.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include Visual Arts, Art History, English, SOSE/HSIE, Personal Development, Australian History and Contemporary Australian Society.

## ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

### Story of a Life

- Did you know anything about Albert Tucker prior to watching this program? If so, has your opinion of him changed in any way? Does knowing more about him as a person affect the way you feel about his art?
- What part/s of Albert's story resonated with you?
- Did your impression of Albert shift over the course of the program?
- Does this program leave you with any questions about Albert? What would you like to learn more about?
- Imagine that you are a producer on the **Australian Biography** series and that you could have access to three people from Albert's life—family, friends, colleagues, critics. Compile a list of four questions for each of these people, using this additional interview material to further develop the portrait of Albert given in this program. How would you decide who might offer a valuable perspective on his life and achievements? Consider what new details you might gather when formulating your questions. Write a production statement outlining what you hope to achieve.
- The filmmakers intercut shots of Albert responding to questions posed by interviewer, Robin Hughes, with occasional photos and archival footage. Choose four family photos from different periods of your life and use them to construct a series of autobiographical snapshots. Who is in each photo? Who took the photo? Where were you? What was the occasion? What was the mood? Does the photo correspond with your memory of the time? What has happened to the other people (if any) pictured in the photo? How have you changed since then? Do you like the photo? Why/why not?
- Albert shares a number of anecdotes from his life. Choose one of his stories and explain what it tells us about him. Imagine you could tell just one story from your life to convey a sense of you and your family. Write this story and then at the end note what you think it reveals about you.
- Choose six adjectives to describe Albert.
- What do you think are Albert's strengths and weaknesses?

### Art for Art's Sake

- Why is art important?
- Who was Ern Malley?
- What exhibitions are currently on at Heide? (See website references) Write a history of this space, noting some of the significant artistic and cultural events that have taken place there.
- Choose one of Albert's paintings and present an analysis of it to the class.
- Essay topic: Albert Tucker says, 'Every experience in this life feeds into one's painting. Death is as much a part of life as being alive: suffering and torment are as much a part of life as joy and happiness and fulfilment, and there's no-one escapes it. We are all our own executioners and our own tormentors'. Discuss. How does this quote make sense in the context of what you learn about Albert's life from this program?
- Using the references at the end of this guide, find and review two critical assessments of Albert's importance in the history of Australian art.
- Albert's paintings from the 1940s are often labelled 'realist'. What does this mean?
- Does your state or territory's art gallery have any works by Tucker in its collection? Choose one work and trace its history, including details of its acquisition.

### A 'Declassed' Childhood of Loss and Anxiety

- Albert describes his parents as 'two very good people'. How do you think his parents would assess their son's achievements? How would you describe your parents?
- Albert's father was one of twelve children: his paternal grandfather was the Honourable Albert Lee Tucker, MLA, three times mayor of Fitzroy. When Albert's namesake died, all of his children were left 'a fair bit of money'. Albert's mother had middle-class aspirations, and encouraged his father to buy a house for the family in East Malvern. Albert says he received the advantages of a middle-class upbringing, but he was immersed in 'the awful anxiety and tension of not having enough money to sustain that lifestyle... Everything was on hire purchase, everything was in debt, the house was finally mortgaged'. They were ultimately forced to move into rental accommodation. What does Albert mean when he talks about this experience 'declassing' him? What class do you see yourself belonging to? How important are issues of class in contemporary Australian society?
- Albert speaks of a childhood of great anxiety, the constant fear of debt collectors and unpaid bills. He says that even today he has 'a pang of terror' whenever he goes to the letterbox and finds it full of letters. What were you afraid of as a child?
- When Albert was 17 his younger brother died of meningitis. He describes racing to his brother's room at three in the morning, roused by his parents' cries. His mother called out hysterically, 'He's going! He's going!' and Albert placed his hand on his brother's chest, feeling his final heartbeats. His parents were shattered and Albert felt pressure to be 'the man of the family'. What does it mean to 'be a man' in circumstances like these? Create a visual response to the described death scene.

- How do you think such an early encounter with loss and suffering might have informed Albert's artwork? Albert says that for an artist, such experiences are 'enormously valuable... because they enable one's empathic imaginative faculties [to have] full reign'. Do you think art can help us make sense of suffering?
- Albert says that more than once that he worked out the resolution of many conflicts, struggles and difficulties through images. What other means are available to people to resolve their problems and work through their losses?

### Albert's Women

- Albert met Joy Hester when he was 23 and she was 17. How would you describe their relationship?
- Albert says that Joy had 'a quiet but powerful ego and a terrific ambition', which he didn't initially recognise. He claims she was drawn to him because he could be of use to her own artistic career. He opened up 'a totally new world for her that she never knew existed'. Write a biographical outline of Joy Hester. Choose one of her paintings and analyse it. How would you compare her style with Albert's?
- While he was in Paris, Albert met an American woman, Mary. What was it about Mary that made him describe her as 'a most rare kind of female'? How did his relationship with Mary end? What did she do to further his career?
- Albert says, 'Male and female are two halves endlessly in search of each other, trying to find the right half'. What do you think he means by this statement? Do you agree with his assertion? If so, how might you know that you've found 'the right half'?
- Albert says, 'You women have an insidious power to invade the male psyche and take it over and manipulate it this way and that'. How would you characterise this opinion? Discuss.
- Imagine the three most important women in Albert's adult life could meet. Write the script for a conversation between Joy, Mary and Barbara about their lives with Albert.

### Antipodean Medicis: The Reeds

- Albert describes Sunday and John Reed as sophisticated and wealthy, more like characters from an Agatha Christie novel than real people. What sort of images does he evoke with this reference to Christie?
- Albert says that Sunday Reed was 'the magnetic centre' of the artists' colony that developed around the Reeds in the 1930s and 40s. How does he describe the dynamic between John and Reed?
- What was John Reed's profession?
- What were the Reeds trying to achieve with Heide?
- Who were the Angry Penguins? Who came up with this name?
- Albert says that they appeared as a group, but 'we were a willy-nilly coincidental arrangement'. He mentions many other high profile Australian artists in this interview: for instance, Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd and John Perceval. Choose one of these figures and write an account of their life and career.
- Who was Max Harris?

### A Dark Vision of the Human Condition

- What does Albert say were the two most 'trauma-producing events of his life'?
- During the war, Albert was in hospital for five weeks, where he witnessed firsthand the effects of combat trauma on soldiers, many of whom were 'gaga ... their nervous systems shattered'. These were images that Albert 'fed on all my life'. Many artists have been inspired by the horrors of war. Choose a war photo or painting by another artist and discuss its imagery, historical context, tone and mood.
- After his release from hospital, Albert was shocked by the brutality of civilian life, where drunken men pursued brazen prostitutes in the street. What shapes did Albert use in his paintings to depict this 'sexual gremlin...haunting us all'?
- After several years abroad, Albert became nostalgic for Australia, in particular an image he had in his head of a 'wounded landscape': he speaks of the corroded, cracked earth and split gum trees. Choose one of his paintings from this period and describe its mood.

### The Artist and Society: Marriage and Parenthood

- John Reed told Albert, on his return from Japan in 1947, that his wife Joy had been diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease. What is this illness? Joy had not yet been told of her condition. Before Albert could break the news, she informed him that she was seeing another man and wanted to leave him. Albert describes this as a 'double-whammy'. Imagine you are Albert. Write an account of your feelings about this complicated situation. Albert says of this time that you wouldn't believe it if you read it in a book. Have you ever had a 'truth is stranger than fiction' experience?
- Albert and Joy's son, Sweeney, was two at the time of Joy's diagnosis. He went to live with John and Sunday Reed, while Albert spent four years in Europe. Do you think artists are exempt from the rules of morality and responsibility that mainstream society lives by? Imagine you are Sweeney Tucker. How might you reflect on your parents and your childhood?
- Imagine you are Joy. Write a letter to your son explaining why you felt you needed to leave him. Why might a woman such as Joy find motherhood incompatible with the pursuit of her artistic ambitions? Is it possible to be both a good mother to young children and an artist? Consider the cases of some other famous female artists (painters, writers, musicians etc) and how they have confronted or resolved this dilemma.
- Albert signed the papers for the Reeds to officially adopt Sweeney: 'They were quite legitimate in this, he'd been with them so long and they'd invested so much of their life in him'. Write a letter to Sweeney as if you were Albert, explaining your decision. Under what circumstances might you give a child up for adoption? What difficulties do some adopted children face? How common is adoption in Australia today?
- While the doctor had initially said she would live for only two more years, Joy's illness repeatedly went into remission, and she lived for another 13 years. Sweeney suicided some years after that. Albert explains the cause of his death in two ways: the abandonment of his mother at a crucial, formative age, coupled with Sunday's over-indulgence of him. Sunday made him 'develop expectations of life which life would never fulfil for him... he was foredoomed

to a tremendous frustration'. Do you think Albert accepts any responsibility for Sweeney's death? He speaks of adapting or reconciling to these crises in his life. How do you reconcile yourself to insurmountable problems, to losses that can never be recovered?

- Albert says that he envies a friend of his who has three daughters, because 'they're quite marvellous to their father'. What makes a good father? Do you think Albert was a good father to Sweeney? Do you hope to be a parent one day? Why or why not?

### Summing Up

- When asked what has been the happiest period in his life, Albert answers that he finds the concept of happiness meaningless, 'a very superficial notion of what life is about'. Do you agree or disagree? What do you think constitutes a happy life? It's common today for people to feel almost as if they're entitled to happiness and that someone or something must be to blame if this happiness is not forthcoming. What are your views?
- Essay topic: 'The truest test of one's character lies in how one deals with unhappiness'. Discuss.
- Albert says he is grateful 'to have had the opportunity to fight the good battle'. What does he mean by this expression? He says that when he gets to the end of his life, he will feel that he's won more than he's lost, and this means he has led a fulfilled life. What is the difference between fulfilled and happy?
- Albert's legacy is his body of art, a few hundred paintings (he's never counted them) constituting a 'diagrammatical account' of his life. 'I feel that I've left a few footprints behind...so that'll have to be a substitute for the children'. What legacy would you like to leave? What would you like to be remembered for?

## FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

### Article

Christopher Zim, 'Angry Penguin Whose Raw Canvases Captured Australia's Underside', *The Guardian*, 27 October 1999

### Books

**The Angry Penguins: An Exhibition of Highly Important Works by Boyd, Nolan, Perceval, Tucker**, Gould Galleries, South Yarra, 1997

**Angry Penguins and Realist Painting in Melbourne in the 1940s: An Australian National Gallery Exhibition**, Australian Exhibitions Touring Agency, Melbourne, 1981

**The Boxer Collection: Modernism, Murrumbena and Angry Penguins**, Australia Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1981

Janine Burke (ed), **Dear Sun: The Letters of Joy Hester and Sunday Reed**, William Heinemann, Port Melbourne, 1995

Janine Burke, **The Eye of the Beholder: Albert Tucker's Photographs**, Museum of Modern Art, Bulleen, 1998.

Janine Burke, **Australian Gothic: A Life of Albert Tucker**, Knopf, Milsons Point, 2002

Phillip Goad, **Heide: The Architecture of Heide Museum of Modern Art**, Pesaro Publishing, Balmain, 2002

Deborah Hart, **Joy Hester and Friends**, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2001

Christopher Heathcote, **Albert Tucker: The Endurance of the Human Spirit**, Malakoff Fine Art Press, North Caulfield, 2000

Michael Keon, **Joy Hester: An Unsettling World**, Malakoff Fine Art Press, North Caulfield, 1993

Alan and Susan McCulloch, **The Encyclopaedia of Australian Art**, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1994

James Mollison and Nicholas Bonham, **Tucker**, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1982

James Mollison and Jan Minchin, **Albert Tucker: A Retrospective**, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1990

Barrett Reid and Nancy Underhill, **Letters of John Reed: Defining Australian Cultural Life, 1920-1981**, Viking, Ringwood, 2001

Albert Tucker, **A History of English Civilization**, Harper & Row, New York, 1972

Albert Tucker, **Faces I Have Met**, Hutchinson, Melbourne, 1986

Christopher Uhl, **Albert Tucker**, Lansdowne, Melbourne, 1969

### Videos

**Albert Tucker**, Australia Council, 1986, 98 minutes

**Albert Tucker: A Retrospective**, Arena Film and Video for the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1990, 13 minutes

**The Australian Eye: Melbourne—School of the Forties 1943-1947**, Film Australia, Lindfield, 1986, 43 minutes

**The Painters, The Sculptors: Albert Tucker**, Archival Art Series, Australian Film Institute, 1986, 100 minutes

### Websites

ABC Online—Express Highlights—Albert Tucker Interview with Stephen Feneley

[www.abc.net.au/express/stories/tucker.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/express/stories/tucker.htm)

Ern Malley—The Official Website  
[www.ernmalley.com](http://www.ernmalley.com)

Heide Museum of Modern Art  
[www.heide.com.au](http://www.heide.com.au)

Trinity College—Albert Tucker  
<http://library.trinity.wa.edu.au/subjects/arts/art/austart/tucker.htm>