Modern times
The untold story of modernism in Australia

21 March – 12 July 2009

Education Kit

Jeff Carter
At the Pasha nightclub, Cooma c. 1957–59
gelatin silver photograph
Powerhouse Museum, Sydney
Purchased 2000
© Jeff Carter
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INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

*Modern times: the untold story of modernism in Australia* reveals the transformations in art and life across a period of five decades – 1917 to 1967. The exhibition surveys a tumultuous period in Australian history, marked by global wars, economic depression, a technological revolution, major social changes and the shaping of a modern cosmopolitan culture. Including over 250 objects across art, animation, fashion, design, film, photography and architecture, *Modern times* encompasses diverse themes, from international exchanges, the modern body and so-called modernist ‘primitivism’, to the city, modern pools and the Space Age. The exhibition reveals how the urban environment of skyscrapers and the entertainment landscape of cinemas, swimming pools and cafés are all legacies of modernism.

*Modern times* includes the work of major artists such as Sidney Nolan, Margaret Preston, Albert Tucker, Sam Atyeo, Grace Cossington Smith, Max Dupain, Wolfgang Sievers, Janet Dawson and Clement Meadmore, alongside key architects Robin Boyd, Roy Grounds and Harry Seidler, designers such as Fred Ward and Grant and Mary Featherston, as well as many lesser known figures.

Modernism was a the major international movement of the twentieth century, spanning art, design and architecture. The exhibition reveals that it was through émigrés, expatriates, travellers, exhibitions, films and publications that modernism took hold in Australia. It highlights stories of Australian contact with key modernist sources internationally, such as the Bauhaus school in Germany, where artist and teacher Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack ran the first colour classes in 1922–23. Deported to Australia as an enemy alien in 1940, he subsequently taught Bauhaus principles here and was influential both as an artist and teacher. A film reconstruction of his extraordinary *Colour Light Play* of 1923 is shown for the first time in Australia in *Modern times*.

The Bauhaus was a powerful influence on renowned émigré architect Harry Seidler, who was schooled by Bauhaus luminaries Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and Josef Albers. In Australia, Seidler played a key role in shaping the modern city.

An immersive, panoramic audio-visual display celebrates the most Australian of pastimes, swimming at the pool. It features the first artificial public pools designed in this country as part of an international swimming boom in the early twentieth century, and the spectacular modernist designs boosted by the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. Alongside the pools are the swimming costumes of silent film star Annette Kellerman, five decades of ‘Speedos’ and an early bikini.
The exhibition features new forms of public art and design, including the abstract fountains by Gerald Lewers for ICI House and Robert Woodward for Sydney’s Kings Cross. The exhibition ends in an exultant explosion of experiments with new technologies and Space Age forms from the 1950s and 60s, and includes spectacular architectural feats such as Roy Grounds’ dome for the Australian Academy of Science in Canberra and Jørn Utzon’s internationally-acclaimed Sydney Opera House.
KEY TERMS

**Modernism:** This term describes an array of reforming movements in art, architecture, music, literature and the applied arts. It encompasses the works of artists, designers, philosophers and scientists who rebelled against nineteenth-century academic and historicist traditions. They believed the traditional forms were becoming outdated. Their work directly confronted the new economic, social and political conditions of an emerging industrialised, secular and urban world.

**The Bauhaus:** Founded by Walter Gropius, in Weimar, Germany, the Bauhaus was a school that combined crafts and the fine arts and was famous for its approach to design, which it disseminated through publications and teachings. It operated from 1919 to 1933. The Bauhaus style became one of the most influential styles in modernist architecture and modern design, and has had a profound effect upon developments in twentieth-century art, architecture, graphic design, interior design, industrial design and typography.

**Design:** Design is the process of originating and developing a plan for a product, structure, system, or component. As a noun, the word *design* is used to either refer to the final solution or plan (e.g. proposal, drawing, model, description) or the result of implementing that plan in the form of the final product. The person leading this design process is called a *designer*, which is also a term used for people who work professionally in one of the various design areas, such as fashion design or graphic design. Designing requires consideration of the aesthetic and functional aspects of an object or process, and may involve considerable research, thought, modelling, interactive adjustment, and re-design.

**Style:** This term describes the overall characteristics of an artwork or designed object that make it identifiable as belonging to a particular movement, school or individual.

**Aesthetics:** This term is commonly used to refer to conceptions of what is artistically valid or beautiful, as well as judgments of sentiment and taste. Aesthetics is also a branch of philosophy, which reflects critically on art, culture and nature.

**Function:** Function refers to how something is used. Designing involves consideration of the function of an object or construction. A well-designed object operates and functions successfully to serve its intended purpose or use.
Prototype: This term describes an original, full-scale working model of a new product. New designs often have unexpected problems. A prototype is often used as part of the product design process to give engineers and designers the ability to explore design alternatives and test theories. Creating prototypes allows a designer to confirm performance prior to starting the production of a new product.

Avant-garde: A French military term meaning 'advance guard' or 'vanguard', which in English is used to refer to any work, style or school that is considered in its own time to be radical or in defiance of tradition. The concept of avant-garde represents a pushing of the boundaries of what is accepted as the norm or the status quo, primarily in the cultural realm.

Functionalism: In architecture, this term is associated with modern architecture based on the clear expression of the purpose or function of a building. In the early twentieth century, Chicago architect Louis Sullivan coined the slogan 'form follows function,' which suggests that a building's form and style should be determined by its function. The implication is that if the functional aspects are satisfied, formal beauty will naturally and necessarily follow. The roots of modern architecture lie in the work of architects Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. Both were functionalists to the extent that their designs for buildings were radically simplified and did away with ornamentation.
PRE-VISIT DISCUSSION AND DEBATE

Modernism was a major international movement of the twentieth century, spanning into art, design and architecture.

- Define the modernist characteristics of an Australian artwork, designed object or architectural building.

- What does the word *design* mean to you?

- Can the work of designers and architects be defined by the national culture they are part of? Give examples.

- Discuss what the terms *function* and *aesthetics* mean in relation to two architectural designs from the exhibition *Modern times: the untold story of modernism in Australia*.

- Do you think that designed objects can be timeless? What do you consider to be a timeless designed object? Give examples and reasons for your choice.

- Choose a Clement Meadmore, Grant Featherston, Harry Seidler or Robert Klippel design. Describe the designed object in terms of its function and form.

- Choose two designed objects and describe how culture or politics has influenced the creative process of their design.
EXPLORING AND RESPONDING

A modernist vision of Australia – the Australian Pavilion at Expo ‘67 in Montreal, designed by architect James Maccormick. Robin Boyd selected the exhibits, which featured Grant and Mary Featherston’s wing sound chairs.

Photograph: courtesy National Archives of Australia

Space Age design
Space Age design was inspired by new technologies developed in the wake of WWII and the meshing of art and science. In this period Australia sought an identity no longer invested in agriculture and mining but in science, space and the atomic age.

Australia’s modernist pavilion at Expo ‘67 in Montreal celebrated the nation’s new alliance with North America. The interior design by architect Robin Boyd featured wing sound chairs by Grant and Mary Featherston, hostess uniforms designed by Zara Holt, and white wool carpet. The pavilion had little exterior emphasis, but a striking interior that conveyed a mix of pop culture and a Space Age aesthetic.

The sound or Expo chair featured was more commonly referred to as the ‘talking’ chair. Although it was designed by Grant Featherston, it was Robin Boyd’s idea to make a stereo sound chair the pavilion’s central feature, to give visitors information on Australian life and culture.
Shade the Art Elements bar graph relative to Robin Boyd’s interior of the Australian Pavilion at Expo ’67 in Montreal.

Show the individual importance of each of the art elements in the artwork’s overall composition (1 = Low importance, 10 = High importance).

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What is the difference between an architect, an interior designer and an industrial designer?

The concept of sound chairs was avant-garde at the time. Why do you think Featherston may have created chairs with a sound system that played a recording describing the Australian way of life?

Do you think the design of the chair successfully realises the idea of an 'individual sound shell'? If so, describe how?

Does the wing sound chair design relate to the interior design of the pavilion? Why? Why not?
Research architect Robin Boyd and write a description about his style and influences, referring to examples of his practice.
Describe the Australian Montreal Expo '67 pavilion interior by architect Robin Boyd in terms of:

a. Design

b. Style

c. Materials

d. Colour
Robert Klippel’s ‘Boomerang’ coffee table, c. 1955, was a three-dimensional synthesis of Indigenous inspiration and modernist design. Photograph courtesy Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

**Designs on Aboriginal Culture**

Australian designers embraced the modern era. Through modern designers’ work the boomerang became an Australian rather than a purely Aboriginal signifier, then an international icon. Its geometric curves were suited to modern design. The boomerang was also a multipurpose utensil, that symbolised bold experimentation.

The opinion of Indigenous Australian artists about the appropriation of their work was not sought or understood for many years. In 1966, the Aboriginal artist David Malangi (1927–1999) objected to the Commonwealth using an image he had created without his permission on the new one-dollar note. Since that time Indigenous artists have sought the protection of copyright law.
List the shapes, colours and materials used in Robert Klippel’s ‘Boomerang’ coffee table, c.1955

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Where do you think the inspiration for this object (a coffee table) comes from?
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This designed object (a coffee table) is a functional piece yet also contains strong cultural references. What messages or meanings does the designer convey through the design of this table?
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Robert Klippel was inspired by the art movement known as constructivism. Research and describe constructivism and give two examples of the characteristics of constructivist designs.

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Research Robert Klippel as a designer and artist. Choose two artworks or designs and describe his style and influences.

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Research designs and artworks by Margaret Preston (1875–1963). Choose two of her artworks or designs from *Modern times: the untold story of modernism in Australia* and describe her style.

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Appropriation of Indigenous material and art was fashionable in the 1940s and 1950s. It was referred to as ‘Aboriginal modernism’ yet was made by non-Indigenous people. Margaret Preston campaigned for the integration of Indigenous symbolism into a national artistic consciousness. Do you think this approach is positive or negative for Aboriginal culture. Why?

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Do you think contemporary Aboriginal art today has been integrated into western artistic consciousness? If so, do you think it is positive or negative for Aboriginal culture. Why?

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Popular Swedish champion Arne Borg, a valuable asset in promoting the Speedo brand of swimwear. Borg is pictured wearing the ‘Speedo Racer-back costume’. Photograph: Sidney Riley (1927)

**Bodies & Bathers**
A modern culture of health and pleasure changed the way the body was perceived and presented. This reformation of the body influenced fine art, mass media and fashion as well as popular movements in exercise, dancing and bathing in Australia.

The design and production of competitive swimwear with an aesthetic firmly was based on modern functionalism and embodied in the Australian Speedo brand with its emphasis on streamlined silhouettes. The Speedo name was derived from a staff competition won by former sea captain, Captain Jim Parsons, who devised the slogan ‘Speed on in your Speedo’.

In the 1950s and 1960s Speedo brought in two designers who were to help make Speedo a world-famous global brand: Peter Travis (1927) and Gloria
Smythe (1928). They both brought new visual aesthetics to the swimwear design.

Select a photograph from a recent fashion magazine of a model/s in Speedo swimsuit/s. Describe how it differs from, or is similar to, this 1927 advertisement picturing the popular Swedish champion swimmer Arne Borg.

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Research Peter Travis. How did Travis improve swimwear and what innovative design qualities did he introduce?

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Why did Travis’s swimwear designs for Speedo become internationally famous?
Research Gloria Smythe. What was revolutionary about Gloria Smythe’s Speedo swimwear designs?

As a class, investigate and research some fashion styles from 1920s to the 1970s. Talk to your grandparents, parents and friends and make a list of the names of some of the clothing such as knickerbockers, platforms, tube skirts, etc. Create a timeline showing when such items entered popular culture.
What is a *prototype* and what is the significance of creating a prototype during the design process?

What steps are involved in the design process to create a prototype for a garment?
Mike Brown

*Happenings on a wintry morning* 1964
oil on composition board
122.0 x 91.5 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne
Gift of Sir Roderick Carnegie 1987
© The Estate of Mike Brown

Mike Brown was an important figure in Australian art. He was part of a group referred to as the Imitation Realists who, in the early 1960s, produced playful and often provocative artworks that reflected the group’s interest in American Pop-inspired assemblages, collage, junk art and the art of non-western cultures. Brown’s work positioned itself against conventional social and cultural attitudes and morals. He was also a covert graffiti artist producing works on the walls around Fitzroy in Melbourne.
Artwork analysis: Mike Brown, *Happenings on a wintry morning* (1964), oil on composition board.

Shade the Art Elements bar graph relative to *Happenings on a wintry morning* (1964).

Show the individual importance of each of the art elements in the artwork’s overall composition (1 = Low importance, 10 = High importance).

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Research the Pop art movement. Give a definition of Pop art and list some Pop artists. What elements in Brown’s work would you consider to be inspired by Pop art?

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What were the defining characteristics of Imitation Realism? What is your response to this type of artwork?

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In the boxes provided use adjectives to describe *Happenings on a wintry morning* (1964).

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Use your list of adjectives to assist you in writing a description of what you see, think and feel when you observe this work.

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What is the focal point of *Happenings on a wintry morning* (1964)?
How does Brown direct your attention to different parts of the composition?
The Seidler studio in Point Piper, as illustrated in Art and Design, no. 1, 1949.
Photograph: courtesy Penelope Seidler
Harry Seidler played a major role in introducing modernist principles to architectural design in Australia. With the rise of Fascism, successive waves of European refugees like Seidler arrived in Australia and brought with them new modernist values and culture, profoundly challenging the insular character of Australian society through ground-breaking designs.

Seidler’s Studio

Architect Harry Seidler was trained by Bauhaus luminaries such as Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and Josef Albers in New York. He then worked with Oscar Niemeyer in Brazil. He arrived in Sydney in 1948 and designed his first studio in the basement of a block of flats. This simple box featured a glass front wall based on a Mondrian grid, its pattern repeated in the free-standing bookcase that divided office from living space. The room was furnished by modernist works Seidler had brought from New York, including Eames chairs and Josef Albers prints. Seidler’s cosmopolitan lifestyle was widely publicised. It was described in 1952 by the New Australasian Post as ‘a perfect nutshell example of his basic constant/basic target – functionalism’. The office is recreated in this exhibition Modern times: the untold story of modernism in Australia.
Artwork analysis: The Seidler studio in Point Piper, 1949.

Shade the Art Elements bar graph relative to the Seidler studio in Point Piper, 1949.

Show the individual importance of each of the art elements in the overall composition of the space (1 = Low importance, 10 = High importance).

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Harry Seidler brought with him from America and Europe furniture by designers such as Charles Eames, Eero Saarinen, Barwa Associates and paintings and prints by Josef Albers, all of which he placed in his new studio in Sydney. Why would he do this?

Seidler's architectural designs are influenced by the movement known as functionalism. Define what functionalism is, referring to a Seidler architectural design.
Harry Seidler was inspired by Walter Gropius designs. Research Walter Gropius. What is Gropius renowned for in the modernist period?

Australian modernism was heavily influenced by Bauhaus design. What is the Bauhaus and what was the nature of its influence?
Research a designer or teacher from the Bauhaus. What did he or she design? Why is it a significant design?

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The Seidler simple box studio design was based on a Mondrian grid. Research the art and designs of Piet Mondrian.

a. Select an artwork by Mondrian and describe it.

b. How did Seidler make use of the Mondrian grid in his studio design?

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Research the designer Eero Saarinen and write a summary of his designs.

Choose and research a piece of furniture designed by Charles Eames and explain all aspects of the design that you feel are ‘modernist’. What do you find interesting about this piece of furniture?
Roy de Maistre (1894–1968) and Roland Wakelin (1887–1871) shared an interest in modern art, practising amongst a small group of like-minded Sydney artists keen to develop and explore new ideas in paintings. For a short period between 1918 and 1920 de Maistre and Wakelin practiced a means of painting according to de Maistre’s colour theory. De Maistre’s theory was defined in ‘scientific’ terms, based on an alliance between the seven colours of the spectrum and notes on a musical octave and was established in its first format as a colour wheel. The results of their experiments culminated in the exhibition Colour in Art, which showed eleven paintings, three colour organisations for interior decoration, as well as discs, charts, scales and a colour keyboard.

Annabel Pegus, Curator, Ivan Dougherty Gallery.
Artwork analysis: Roland Wakelin, *Beach and Houses* (1918), oil on board

Shade the Art Elements bar graph relative to *Beach and Houses* (1964). Show the individual importance of each of the art elements in the artwork’s overall composition (1 = Low importance, 10 = High importance).

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Research de Maistre’s and Wakelin’s interest in colour-music theory. Explain this theory.

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In the boxes provided use adjectives to describe Roland Wakelin’s *Beach and Houses* (1918).

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List everything you can see in *Beach and Houses* (1918).

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List the three shapes that Roland Wakelin has used the most.

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Use your lists to assist you in writing a description of what you see, think and feel when you observe this work.

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What is the focal point of *Beach and Houses (1918)*? How does Roland Wakelin direct your attention around this artwork?

Describe how Roland Wakelin has applied colour to the surface of this artwork.

Describe how Roland Wakelin has used shape and form in this painting.

Is this artwork appealing to you? Why? Why not?
Atyeo was a critical artist in Melbourne’s modernist movement. He was considered to be one of a new and small group of rationalistic young designers. He actively promoted the idea of modernism as a total environment, echoing Bauhaus principles. Atyeo received more financial reward for his furniture design, architectural commissions and murals than for his paintings, yet he continued painting and was considered a controversial figure in Melbourne’s art scene. In 1932 his painting entered in a travelling scholarship prize, *A Gentle Admonition*, caused an outcry when it was rejected from the scholarship exhibition by director and academic artist Bernard Hall. Atyeo had depicted fellow students naked and painted in an abstracted, mechanical manner, as a protest against the National Gallery’s conservatism and traditional tonal realism.
Artwork analysis: Sam Atyeo, *The Dancer* (1936), oil on canvas.

Shade the Art Elements bar graph relative to *The Dancer* (1936).

Show the individual importance of each of the art elements in the artwork’s overall composition (1 = Low importance, 10 = High importance).

**Art Elements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Art Elements</th>
<th>10</th>
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What formal elements does Atyeo concentrate on in *The Dancer* (1936)?

Describe how colour is used in this work.
In the boxes provided use adjectives to describe Sam Atyeo’s *The Dancer* (1936), oil on canvas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjective</th>
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List everything you can see in *The Dancer* (1936).

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Use your lists to assist you in writing a description of what you see, think and feel when you observe this work.

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What is the focal point of *The Dancer* (1936)?
Describe how Atyeo directs your attention around the artwork.
CREATING AND MAKING

Practical art activities based on *Modern times: the untold story of modernism in Australia*

- Design a piece of furniture inspired by either the designs of Clement Meadmore or Grant and Mary Featherston from the exhibition *Modern times*. Include the design process in your presentation.

- Refer to Harry Seidler’s design for his first architectural studio. Make a model for a home office or an architectural studio from foam core. You may consider including a presentation board that portrays a colour scheme, materials, furniture and layout.

- You have been selected as the fashion consultant for Speedo for the 2012 Olympic Games. Design a swimsuit that represents Australia in the Olympics. Consider the function and the look of the swimsuit.

- Inspired by the modernist abstract fountains in *Modern times*, design a fountain that will feature in the plaza of Federation Square, then create a model based on your design.

- Photograph famous contemporary buildings around Melbourne such as ICI House, Federation Square, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Harry Seidler Building (Number 1, Spring Street, Melbourne), Eureka Tower etc. Take photos in black-and-white and also colour. Use unusual angles to capture the details of the architecture.

- Observe the artwork of Sam Atyeo in the exhibition *Modern times*. Study his artistic style through sketching his paintings. Use these sketches to design a final drawing to then create a sculpture or painting.
• Collect photocopies in black-and-white of architecture designed by either Harry Seidler, Robin Boyd or Roy Grounds. Then create a sculptural piece using geometric shapes inspired by the original forms of the building and attach selected parts of the photocopies onto the surfaces of these shapes. Include some hand colouring on the surface and/or within the photocopies attached to the cubic forms.

• Based on a drawing or sketch of a three-dimensional object created while visiting the exhibition *Modern times*, construct a sculpture using either clay, foam, cardboard or wire.

• Explore a social issue that you feel strongly about and create a painting or a series of small paintings either on canvas or on found objects inspired by the questions and emotions it raises. You may like to work in the style of Mike Brown's artworks.

• Collect images or reproductions of furniture or architecture featured in the exhibition *Modern times* and, using cropping, sketch a range of dramatic viewpoints.

• Using a series of geometric shapes dissect and rearrange the shapes, to create a series of interesting compositions to be used as the basis of a furniture or building design.

• Create a series of landscape sketches from a particular site and then compose these landscapes in the style of Roland Wakelin or Roy de Maistre.
GALLERY VISIT ACTIVITIES

Choose either a textile, fashion design, furniture design, architectural model, maquette or sculpture from the exhibition and make a sketch of it in the box provided.

Fill in the following details:

Designer: ____________ Date of Production: _______________
Object: ______________ Materials: __________________________

_________________________
Complete a PMI chart for your chosen design:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plus (Positive aspects of the design)</th>
<th>Minus (Negative aspects of the design)</th>
<th>Interesting (What makes the object likeable)</th>
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</table>
Choose two designed objects from the exhibition such as a textile, fashion design, furniture design, architectural model, maquette or sculpture. Use the Venn diagram to compare and contrast the designs you have chosen.
FURTHER RESEARCH QUESTIONS FOR SENIOR STUDENTS

- In Harry Seidler’s early career, he was influenced by his teachers Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer. Research the work of Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer and compare their designs and philosophies with that of Harry Seidler. Write an analysis that outlines the similarities and differences in their design style and philosophies.

- Describe and analyse the composition and design of a Grant Featherston furniture piece.

- Compare the style and designs of Grant Featherston and Charles Eames.

- Interpret the meanings and messages of a Max Dupain photograph using the framework of either Psychoanalysis or Symbolism.

- Describe Jørn Utzon’s architectural style and designs, referring to his iconic design of the Sydney Opera House.

- Describe Roy de Maistre’s use of colour, shape and composition. How does this contribute to the mood of his paintings?

- Describe Roy de Maistre and Roland Wakelin’s colour theory and its relationship to music, by referring to an artwork from each of the artists.

- Choose one of the following works and write a formal interpretation of it. Plan your response by completing the table overleaf.

  - Mike Brown, *Happenings on a wintry morning* (1964)
  - Sam Atyeo, *The dancer* (1936)
  - Roland Wakelin, *Beach and Houses* (1918)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual Analysis</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Meanings and Messages</th>
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EDUCATION KIT
Modern times: the untold story of modernism in Australia
21 March – 12 July 2009

Written by Anna Caione, Education Officer, Heide Museum of Modern Art, with reference to the publication Modern times: the untold story of modernism in Australia. Edited by Ann Stephen, Philip Goad and Andrew McNamara.

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