

MEDIA RELEASE

Tuesday 4 April 2017

Sidney Nolan's man behind Ned Kelly mask revealed

In the year of Sidney Nolan's centenary, Australian Synchrotron technology provides insight into the development of the iconic Ned Kelly figure, which would define Nolan's acclaimed series.



Working in collaboration with the scientific research centre Australian Synchrotron, and utilising its state of the art technology, art conservators have imaged pigments buried underneath layers of paint to reveal a face behind the mask of Sidney Nolan's painting *Ned Kelly*, "Nobody knows anything about my case but myself" 1945.

When examining the painting in 2012, Paula Dredge, Paintings Conservator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, and Kendrah Morgan, Curator at Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne noticed brush strokes underneath the mask of the Kelly helmet. "As this work is one of the first times Nolan painted Kelly, we thought the paint below the helmet might provide insight into his development of this iconic figure," Dredge said.

Dredge and Morgan contacted Australian Synchrotron, part of the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation, and the painting was analysed using an X-ray fluorescence beamline which identified elements to the resolution of the finest brush stroke. With powerful processing, previously invisible layers of colour were revealed to show a face beneath the helmet.

"A curious array of blue, yellow and red dots were also visible across the painting and strangely Nolan turned the painting upside down before obscuring the face with Kelly's black helmet," Morgan said.

Is the face Nolan's or Kelly's? The dots provide a clue. In 1943, while in the Australian Army, Nolan painted *Self portrait*, (Ripolin enamel on hessian sacking, Art Gallery of NSW), in which he wears strips of blue, yellow and red across his forehead, suggesting an artist's war paint. By 1945 he had absconded from the Army and was hiding from the authorities. Nolan's identification with Australia's best known outlaw is suggested by the title of the work, in Kelly's own words, and the portrait under the mask.

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From April 22 to May 14 2017, visitors can view the face behind the mask as part of a virtual reality display created by Andrew Yip and iGLAM at the University of New South Wales. It will be presented in the library of Heide I, the original home of John and Sunday Reed. Both *Ned Kelly, "Nobody knows anything about my case but myself" (1945)* and *Kelly at the Mine (1946-47)* will be displayed alongside a selection of Nolan memorabilia in commemoration of the centenary of Sidney Nolan's birth.

Presented with support from:

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Australian Synchrotron

Art Gallery of New South Wales

About Sidney Nolan

Born 22 April, 1917, Sidney Nolan is arguably Australia's most celebrated twentieth-century artist. His name is forever linked to his iconic black mask of Australian bushranger and folk hero Ned Kelly, the subject of the artist's famed Kelly series, painted in the Heide I dining room from 1946 to 1947. Nolan spent several crucial formative years at Heide, where John and Sunday Reed did much to support his practice and launch his early career. The Kelly paintings were left at Heide as a parting gift to his lover and muse, Sunday Reed. Sunday subsequently donated the series to the National Gallery of Australia in 1976, stating that the gift was made 'with love'.

Available for comment:

Kendrah Morgan, Curator at Heide Museum of Modern Art

Paula Dredge, Paintings Conservator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales

Daryl Howard, X-ray Fluorescence Microscopy Beamline, Australian Synchrotron

Images:

1. Sidney Nolan, *Ned Kelly: 'Nobody knows anything about my case but myself'* 1945, ripolin enamel on cardboard, 63 x 75 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne

Purchased with funds provided by the Friends of Heide and the Heide Circle of Donors 1998

2. Digital colour recreation of first stage of the painting based on X-ray fluorescence

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Media Enquiries:

Sue Curwood | Marketing & Communications Manager | sue.curwood@heide.com.au | +61 (0) 3 8850 5943

Claire Miovich | Marketing & Communications Coordinator | claire.miovich@heide.com.au | +61 (0) 3 8850 5924

Heide Museum of Modern Art

7 Templestowe Road, Bulleen, VIC 3105

heide.com.au

Museum Opening Hours

Tuesday-Sunday 10am-5pm. Closed Mondays.