

ROSALIE GASCOIGNE

EDUCATION RESOURCE



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This education resource has been designed for teachers, and Middle and Later Years students. It contains information about the life and work of Rosalie Gascoigne and suggested questions and activities that teachers are encouraged to adapt to the level and interests of their students.

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© All works by Rosalie Gascoigne © Rosalie Gascoigne Estate administered by Viscopy, Australia

Above: *Cloister* (1978), painted wood and collage, 61.1 x 34.8 x 15.5 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
Gift of James Mollison AO, 1999 (1999.402) Photo: Christian Markel

Further Information

An extended bibliography, is included in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition: *Rosalie Gascoigne*, by Kelly Gellatly with contributions by Deborah Clark and Martin Gascoigne, 2008. Exhibition dates: 19 December 2008 – 15 March 2009. Available for purchase in the NGV Book Shops and online: ngv.vic.gov.au.

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INTRODUCTION

What you need in an art work is to awaken an emotional response, a blow in the solar plexus, something that moves you. You don't have to intellectualise: what does it mean?

Janet Hawley 'A late developer', *Sydney Morning Herald, Good Weekend*, 15 November 1997, p. 43

Your art has to come out of your daily life. I really believe that if anyone is born an artist they've only got to look at what's round their feet and what's available to them. They don't have to be clever, they don't have to go to art school, they don't have to get the exotic stuff—make it with what's there. People think art's like you strike it lucky and you're famous tomorrow, but it isn't like that, it's a search for honesty on your own terms. The journey to self-recognition took me decades.

Vici MacDonald, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, Regaro Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1998, p. 9

Rosalie Gascoigne is one of Australia's most acclaimed and respected visual artists. Her distinctive style is characterised by her recognition of beauty in the most humble of objects such as soft drink crates, linoleum, retro-reflective road signs, dried grasses and feathers. Collecting and arranging these items, often rescued from rubbish dumps, and scarred and faded by the ravages of weather, is an integral part of her practice. Like a magician she transforms these discarded materials into sculptures, wall pieces and assemblages, which create evocative visual poetry, capturing the essence of things or an experience rather than conveying a literal representation.

Gascoigne like Picasso realised later in life that one is not made an artist, one is born an artist. Some of her fondest memories as a child are of collecting shells on summer holidays at the beach, and the yellow china her grandmother owned. At the age of ten she won first prize for her entry in a table decoration competition that included yellow flowers, an unusual Indian brass vase and Indian brass bowls.

Her journey to becoming a professional artist was highly unconventional. She received no formal art education, openly declared that she could neither draw nor paint and was not officially recognised as part of the Australian art scene until she held her first critically acclaimed exhibition at the age of fifty-seven.

Gascoigne was born in New Zealand in 1917. She studied for a Bachelor of Arts degree, specialising in English and Latin, at the University of Auckland. During this time she got to know her future husband Ben Gascoigne. In 1943, following a short teaching career, she moved to Australia to marry Ben. They lived as part of a small isolated scientific community around Mt Stromlo Observatory outside Canberra, where Ben had taken up a position. The transition from the gentle, green landscape of her home to the hard, unforgiving, dry slopes of Mount Stromlo, bounded by seemingly endless space, was initially a tough and lonely experience. She didn't fit into the mould of the happy domesticated wife expected of this era. The lack of stimulating conversation with the other wives on the establishment made her feel particularly alone. She befriended nature instead and as she brought up three children in these alien conditions she remembers:

I'd push the children's prams around that lonely mountain until I knew the shape of every stone and tree, the texture of every patch of dirt and grass, the colour of every leaf and weed. I'd gaze down at the valley below, a vastness of dry blond grass and grubby sheep and the sky used to hang, from there to there.

Janet Hawley 'A late developer', *Sydney Morning Herald, Good Weekend*, 15 November 1997, p. 40

She acclimatised to this new terrain and began to gather unusual natural forms. She displayed these found objects in her home, much to the bemusement of the conventional local community. Gascoigne began creating distinctive flower arrangements in the 1950s and won prizes for them in horticultural shows. When the family moved from Mount Stromlo to the Canberra suburb of Deakin in 1960, she studied ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging, under Norman Sparnon, a master of the Sogetsu School. Gascoigne appreciated the strict discipline of this form of arranging, which imposed a sense of order on her collected found objects. The emphasis on line, form and sculptural properties was to become a key part of her later practice.



Steel magnolias 1994, painted corrugated iron on plywood, 104.5 x 98.5 cm.
Collection of Amanda Love, Sydney. Photo: Courtesy City Gallery Wellington,
New Zealand

When Gascoigne’s three children had grown up, she had increasing freedom to pursue her growing interest in art. She visited art galleries more often, looked at art books and met people in the art world who were to shape her future career, including James Mollison, who became the inaugural director of the Australian National Gallery (now National Gallery of Australia). Her discussions with those in the arts community taught her much about looking and thinking about art, and confirmed her sense of identity as an artist.

In the mid-1960s she began making assemblages of rusted iron, which were followed, from 1973, by assemblages in boxes. These miniature surreal and often humorous worlds, such as *The colonel’s lady*, 1976, employed rich patterning and repetition through the arrangement of man-made objects, including advertising symbols used on the packaging of products.

The eclectic mix of objects and surfaces in these early works gave way to her later wall-based works that were elegant compositions limited to one or two materials, and subtly evoke culture, nature, language and the landscape, particularly the country around Canberra, which she came to love.

Scrub country, 1982, and *Monaro*, 1989, epitomise these works. They are made from soft-drink crates – weathered by the sun, rain, wind and time – dismantled, sawn into strips and reassembled.

Gascoigne reached meteoric heights in her career which spanned over two decades until her death in 1999 at the age of eighty-two. She was given a major survey show at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in 1978, only four years after her first solo exhibition at Macquarie Galleries, Canberra. In 1982 she represented Australia with artist Peter Booth at the Venice Biennale. Her work is included in major public, corporate and private collections.

(clock wise from top left)
Rosalie Gascoigne in her studio, 1997.
Photo: William Yang

Untitled assemblage of natural materials
and found objects showing the influence of
ikebana, early 1970s
Photos: Courtesy Rosalie Gascoigne Archive

Wiggly tin shed: Big shed in afternoon light, 2008
Photo: John Merriman

Grasslands of the Monaro Plains near
Bobundara Nature Reserve
Photo courtesy of The Department for
Sustainability and the Environment

