

Marion Manifold

Philip James Gray - Maritime Artist and Social Commentator

Philip once read to me from his school report card from 1957:

“If the boy spent more time concentrating on his work instead of staring aimlessly out of the window at some thing or other that has caught his eye, he might achieve better marks.”

Philip Gray's day dreaming was only an early indicator of his creative vision and interest in the wider world rather than the regimented life of the classroom. As a young student, Philip also told a bemused career counsellor that he wanted to be a tramp; he was inspired by a 'traveller' who had parked his horse and caravan in a secluded field and was quietly contemplating his meal cooking over an open camp-fire, seemingly without a care in the world. This contemplative nature was again a sign of Philip's artistic temperament and a precursor of his interest in human nature. Philip's art practice demonstrates that he went on to become a meticulous scholar and researcher of subjects that interest him. Three main themes developed in his art: historical, social and maritime.

Philip was born and raised in the heavily industrialised and post WW2 East End London near the bombed docks where his grandmother was killed, and his mother barely survived the same bombing. Daily he watched the shipping activity on the river Thames and on holidays by the many waterways of East Anglia he found the inspiration and solitude necessary to develop his art, witnessing both the comings and goings of vessels from the ports and the day to day lives of working people.

Philip went to Barking Abbey School where he was surrounded by history¹, and the tough regimes and corporal punishment in the boys' only school further lead him to question aspects of human nature. At the age of fourteen he began tuition under the celebrated war artist and muralist Fyffe Christie who, with his wife Eleanor, encouraged Philip's art and transported him into a whole new world. Christie recognised artistic temperament and was caring enough to encourage young artists. Philip says it was one of the most happy and enlightening two years of his life. More importantly, it became apparent to the young students that they could consider art as an occupation; it was the era of 'commercial artists'.

Philip's father supported his enthusiasm for art and at the age of fifteen Philip was introduced to some freelance commercial artists. Encouraged by what he saw, Philip was accepted as a full time student for three years at the School of Art Faculty of the South East Essex College of Technology, where he later graduated with a Degree in Applied Arts and a Diploma in Technical Illustrating. Formal elements included perspective theory, illustrating, life drawing, photography, typography, painting and drawing, printing techniques, and engineering practices to aid conceptualisation of cut-away and ghosted illustrations. Like his mentor Christie, Philip's meticulous and disciplined training is exhibited in his seemingly effortless skill and aptitude to work in all forms of drawing and paint media.

Following his studies Philip was employed as an illustrator by A. W. Goddard in London. In 1970, at twenty one years of age, he left London on the last voyage of the Italian steamer, *Castel Felice* to a new world – Australia. The six week voyage – via the Canary Islands, Cape Town and then to Melbourne – gave Philip time to draw and further explore his love of ships and the sea. Disembarking with \$32 in his pocket, Philip had the opportunity to test his first career choice and slept his first nights in the Melbourne Treasury Gardens.

Philip found work in the Australian Defence Force as a full-time illustrator, married and had a family. Like his mentor Fyffe Christie, he juggled his spare time to create paintings in both

watercolour and oil and extended his work beyond that of what he saw as being ‘just an illustrator’. Philip’s interest in history and social commentary now took on Australian themes, such as ‘The Old Sunbury Station’ and ‘Madame at Rupertswood’ with more recent works on Australian colonial life and the goldfields, which are sometimes allegorical and whimsical, inspired by the social and historical aspects of S.T. Gill’s life and work.

Later influences created a more optimistic and egalitarian social narrative in Philip’s work and include the lighter and brighter atmospheric palette of the nineteenth century Australian landscapes and cityscapes of Jane Sutherland, Charles Condor and Girolamo Nerli. An interest in the British industrial landscapes of Edwin Butler Bayliss, particularly ‘An evening in the Black Country’, lead Philip to further study Australian working class subjects, which can be seen in his social realism paintings of dockland subjects, and also interiors such as ‘The Ordnance Factory Forge, Maribyrnong’ and ‘Wicker Men’.

Philip is one of Australia’s leading maritime artists and his meticulous research and social commentary paintings of ships, such as, the *Loch Ard* and *Schomberg* form an important part of Warrnambool’s Flagstaff Hill Maritime Museum. It is these paintings of immigrant voyages in which humans are dwarfed by the elements that Philip shows an ethereal atmospheric mood in keeping with Turner and the great nineteenth century European and American watercolourists such as John Sell Cotman, Winslow Homer, and John Singer Sargent, and early twentieth century social commentators Jack Butler Yeats and Paul Nash.

Philip exhibits regularly and has had several very successful regional art exhibitions and a major solo exhibition in 2010 at the Melbourne airport Hilton Hotel. Philip’s maritime works are in the State Library of Victoria’s Latrobe Collection, and his works have been reproduced as limited edition prints and sold worldwide with many original works held in private collections and published in books. Philip also significantly contributed to the design and completion of Phillip Doak’s book ‘Tales from Australia’s Shipwreck Coast’.

In 1994 Philip produced a painting of the great English warship *Mary Rose* and the art for posters for the Mary Rose Touring Exhibition which was shown at Warrnambool’s Flagstaff Hill Maritime Museum and the National Maritime Museum in Sydney. It was a major exhibition courtesy of the Mary Rose Trust from Portsmouth England with significant sponsorsⁱⁱ.

In 2011 Williamstown celebrated the anniversary of the arrival of the Confederate Raider C.S.S. *Shenandoah* in Hobson’s Bay, and Philip’s painting of the Shenandoah was exhibited as part of the event. A representative from the Museum of the Confederacy in Virginia commented that it was the most accurate painting of the warship he had ever seen. The painting now forms part of a private collection in Melbourne.

Philip James Gray will continue to hold a top place with Australia’s great maritime artists and social commentators due to the incorporation of three fundamental elements in his work: the high-quality technical underpinning of a painting, a result of his extensive art training and diligent research; his artistic sensitivity and insight to create the mood; and his profound social narrative, a result of his interest in history, human nature and an empirical understanding of working people.

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References:

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Philip James Gray. 2014. Discussions with the author.

ⁱ Only the foundations remain of Barking Abbey which is now surrounded by urban sprawl; it was established in 666 AD and burnt by the Danes in 870 AD, and was a thriving Abbey again by 1000 AD. The great maritime explorer James Cook was married at a small church attached to the Abbey.

ⁱⁱ Philip was invited by Warrnambool City Council via the Director of Flagstaff Hill Maritime Museum in conjunction with the Victorian Government's tourism body. Mary Rose sponsors included: Howard Smith Shipping, Cathay Pacific, P&O, Victorian State Government, The Age, The Warrnambool Standard, and Shipwreck Coast Tourism. Philip's painting was given as a gift to the director of the Mary Rose touring exhibition.