

Remembering the art of Robert Ulmann



The late Robert Ulmann was one of Warrnambool's best known artists – and one of the city's great characters – after making the south-west his home in 1969. Image: [Visit Warrnambool](#).

[dropcap style="color: #abccab;"] 0[/dropcap]ur [campaign to restore](#) the **Robert Ulmann** whale mural in Warrnambool has provided an opportunity to remember one of south-west Victoria's most prolific artists, who died 15 years ago this November.

Despite Robert's enormous contribution to the local art scene as a painter and sculptor during the 30 years that he lived in and around Warrnambool, it is quite difficult to find any formal, public recognition of his work, beyond that which he created himself.

This includes his [studio and gallery](#) overlooking the ocean on Hopkins Point Road, Warrnambool, which is still managed by his wife, **Helen** and daughter **Justine**, and was built after their Naringal property (and Robert's studio) was completely destroyed in the devastating Ash Wednesday fires of 1983.

It also includes Robert's contribution to Warrnambool's public artworks, which is arguably greater than any other single artist.

There are four Ulmann sculptures dotted in high-profile locations around Warrnambool and two privately commissioned murals that are also in very public spaces, but [a search of the Warrnambool Art Gallery website](#) reveals very little about the man or his work.

As an aside, do you know where to find the Ulmann sculptures and murals in Warrnambool?

[learn_more caption="Click here to find an Ulmann work:"] 1. Fletcher Jones Gardens, basalt sculpture, Memorial to Sir David Fletcher Jones.

2. Warrnambool breakwater, basalt sculpture, The Breakwater Centenary Sculpture.

3. Flagstaff Hill, lake side, The Lady in the Wind, Mt Gambier stone.

4. Warrnambool Art Gallery, exterior, The Australian Fur Seal, basalt sculpture

5. Bojangles Restaurant, Warrnambool, mural

6. Flaxman St milk bar, Warrnambool, mural [/learn_more]



The Breakwater Centenary Sculpture, Warrnambool, created by Ulmann in 1990.

[dropcap style="color: #abccab;"] R [/dropcap]obert, who was born in Switzerland, was a larger-than-life character who created an impression on all those he met, even if it was one of slight terror at the sight of what has been described as his “fierce” beard which would bob up and down during his highly animated way of talking.

His arrival in south-west Victoria in 1969 made the local news at the time and Warrnambool historian, **Jenny Fawcett**, has kept a copy of the clipping from *The Warrnambool Standard* in which it was reported that “an interesting personality” was visiting the district with his locally born wife, Helen (Goldstraw).

Robert, it said, “has had an adventurous life, painting and drawing his way through 21 countries,” that included Canada, where he first met Helen, who was working as a school teacher at Coppermine in the Canadian Arctic. It was here that

Robert worked closely with the Canadian first peoples, the Inuit.

The Ulmann's spent two years criss-crossing North and South America and then wended their way down through the Pacific Islands before finally reaching Australia. They settled in Naringal in 1972, having first spent a couple of years working in indigenous communities in the Northern Territory.

With all of that experience, and all of that adventure, no wonder Warrnambool – at times – would have struggled to contain a personality as large and dynamic as Robert's, but he came to call the seaside town his home.



The basalt "Memorial to Sir David Fletcher Jones", created by Ulmann in 1978 and part of the Fletcher Jones Gardens in Warrnambool.

[dropcap style="color: #abccab;"] A [/dropcap]uthor **Penny Olsen** dedicated her 2001 book, *Feather and Brush: Three Centuries of Australia Bird Art (2001)*, to Robert Ulmann, who passed away during its production. In it, she describes how

Robert worked “from nature, fast and with gusto”.

Robert loved to capture the energy of both animals and people as he saw them in the moment, not after the fact. It was not unusual to be talking to Robert and find that, halfway through a conversation, he would start sketching a portrait of you.

It was Robert’s passion for Australian wildlife, however, that won the hearts of so many of his followers.

He not only painted, sketched and photographed the beautiful creatures around him, he often invited them into his home which became a refuge for homeless and abandoned birds, mammals and marsupials.

In 1980, *The Age* newspaper ran a page 3 story about the Ulmann’s being the first people in Australia – and most likely the world – to hand-raise a baby echidna that developed a fondness for crawling up Robert’s trouser leg.

When asked why he loved to work on Australian animals, Robert told the reporter in typical style:

“You know why? They’re bloody hard to get hold of, specially the marsupials. They’re all nocturnal. That’s what makes the challenge...and people love furry things – specially the ladies.”

Robert died suddenly at the age of 71 on November 1, 1999.



A portion of the colourful – and cheeky – Mr Bojangles murals in the Bojangles restaurant, Warrnambool, painted by Ulmann in the 1980s.

[box type="bio"] **The Robert Ulmann studio is at 440 Hopkins Point Rd, Warrnambool ph: 03 5565 1444 or email: eubalena@westvic.com.au. Free entry.**[/box]

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Revealing the eye of the tiger: Peter Clayfield



Photographer – and collector – Peter Clayfield in his mini museum of a lounge room: “I have always been what you might call acquisitive”.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] P[dropcap]hotographer **Peter Clayfield** lives on the edge of a cliff which, on a clear day, has the sort of view that stretches all the way to Tasmania – well, almost.

The invisible thread that connects his home overlooking the Southern Ocean to the rugged coastline of north-west Tasmania is symbolic, as Peter has a self-confessed obsession with the

thylacine (Tasmanian tiger) and has devoted a large part of his life to collecting imagery of the animal.

“It started when I was about 15 and my parents bought me a book about the thylacine and from that point I was hooked,” he says.

Peter now owns more than a dozen books on the subject and, perhaps more importantly, a couple of hundred pieces of thylacine imagery including lithographs, 19th Century etchings, hand-coloured engravings, antique prints and more modern incarnations that he has collected from around the world.

“The thylacine is a very potent symbol of the environmental movement and this is part of its appeal to me, that symbolism,” he explains.



The poster to be used for Peter's collection of thylacine material that will be exhibited at the Warrnambool Art Gallery later this month.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] A[/dropcap] substantial chunk of Peter's collection is now with the **Warrnambool Art Gallery** in preparation for his exhibition that opens on July 25 and will run concurrently with the [Glenn Morgan retrospective](#).

"Recapturing the tiger: a personal collection of thylacine imagery from past and present" is a departure from what most people have come to expect from Peter's exhibitions, which normally showcase his exquisite photography.

An alumni of the now defunct Warrnambool Institute/Deakin University Diploma of Visual Art, Peter has exhibited over the past 30 years in just about every gallery in Warrnambool – past and present – and is known for his ability to transform every day urban landscapes, people and objects.

"Those art classes in the 80s opened up a new world to me about the possibilities with photography, especially by being exposed to the great photographers and artists in the US and Europe," he explains.

Peter recalls, in particular, how the head photography lecturer **Ian Cosier** would stock the campus library with books by photographers that came to be major influences on his work, including **Diane Arbus**, **Henri Cartier Bresson** and the wonderfully named **Ralph Eugene Meatyard**.



Peter's photography is known for capturing the unusual in the usual, like these topiaries draped in protective netting.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] Peter now has a collection of books by these same artists, among many others, that line the walls of his cosy lounge-room which is, in itself, a work of art because of the many rare and beautiful objects that he has accumulated. Thylacines are only a part of it.

"I have always been what you might call acquisitive," he says with a soft laugh.

It is difficult to describe the scope and diversity of what has caught Peter's eye over the years, but imagine squashing the Smithsonian Institute into a small cottage and you are getting close.

Among his eclectic tastes are tribal masks and carvings, delicate silver spoons, palm-sized ceramic bowls, select

pieces of Australian pottery, charms, chimes and dozens of animal and religious bells that create the most wonderful sounds.



Peter's house on the edge of the world where, on a good day, you can almost spot Tasmania.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] T[/dropcap]he complete Peter Clayfield Collection may well be an exhibition of the future, and deservedly so, but for the moment the spotlight will remain on the thylacine which, some believe, still exists in parts of north-west Tasmania.

Does Peter?

He pauses to consider his answer.

"Definitely in the 60s and 70s, yes, but those areas in which it was living have since been heavily logged," he says.

"I guess I have a faint hope that it might still be surviving in those very remote areas, but it is only a faint hope."

[box] ***Recapturing the tiger*** will be officially opened at the W'bool Art Gallery on July 25 by Dr Carol Freeman, author of ***Paper Tiger: a visual history of the thylacine***.[/box]

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Forget cover ups: roll right over Rolf



Convicted pedophile Rolf Harris happens to paint: does this mean his art is worth

more than sending a strong message to sexual abuse survivors? Image: The Guardian.

OPINION

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] T [/dropcap]wo very unsettling things have emerged from the debate over whether a mural by convicted pedophile **Rolf Harris** should be kept in Warrnambool's Lighthouse Theatre, and neither offer any comfort to victims of sexual abuse.

The first was a comment by Warrnambool City Council chief executive officer **Bruce Anson** in which he compared Harris's systemic abuse of minors to an artistic "foible" – a weakness, a blemish on his character, a minor flaw.

Here is the quote in full, as taken from the *Warrnambool Standard* report of July 2:

"I'm not justifying in any way what has happened (but) I don't think we should destroy art as a result of inappropriate behaviour.

"Many of our great artists had foibles."

A dirty old man in a rain coat who sexually abuses children is seen as the predatory pervert that he is, whereas an entertainer who fooled the world with his charm and natty dress sense – and who also sexually abuses children – is considered to have a "foible"?

I waited for the torrent of outrage against Mr Anson's comments, but there was barely a trickle, despite Mr Anson holding one of the most influential positions in our city.



Warrnambool City Council CEO Bruce Anson earlier this week described Harris's behaviour as a "foible", but the outrage was saved for the Rolf Harris mural. Image: ABC Radio

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] T [/dropcap]he outrage was instead saved in response to calls by some – including *Bluestone Magazine* via our [Facebook page](#) – that the Rolf Harris mural be painted over. Bluestone supports this move in order to send a clear message that the work of a convicted pedophile should not be honoured via public display in a public building.

If the Rolf Harris work was on a canvas, instead of a wall, it would be removed immediately (as is happening [elsewhere in Australia](#)), but *because* it is on a wall, we need to be even braver and bolder in our response and this is where we have become weak-kneed.

Despite Harris painting this mural in the very same year as he was actively abusing minors, the artwork is seen by some as

separate to the artist, as if one Rolf Harris is the jocular painter, and “another” Rolf Harris is the pedophile.

This is a false comfort, as the hand that held the brush that created this mural is the same hand that could not keep itself off children – the art and the artist are inseparable.

There is also an argument that because Harris happens to be a visual artist, his “work” immediately deserves higher status and preservation than, say, the work of a pedophile priest, teacher or judge who – once exposed for their crimes – are [stripped of all public honour](#).

Imagine if the Lighthouse Theatre decided to stage a musical tribute to pedophile and Harris associate, **Jimmy Savile**? Would we be as forgiving of the need to preserve *his* talents as an entertainer?



Would we tolerate a musical tribute at the Lighthouse Theatre to the late entertainer, and pedophile, Jimmy Savile?
Image: The Guardian.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] B[/dropcap] keeping the

Harris mural in place, we are sending a message to every victim of sexual abuse that a piece of art is worth more than them: that we, as a community, value the work of a convicted, systemic abuser more than we value them.

We can argue around it, through it and over it, but that is the bottom line.

If we keep the mural, we must also be prepared to argue that a recent work by a convicted pedophile is more precious to our collective community consciousness than standing up for the one in three girls and one in six boys who are [sexually abused in Australia](#).

But wait, some say, the history of art is littered with examples of child abusers having their work celebrated in public, such as Caravaggio's erotic paintings of young boys painted in the 17th Century.

I would like to think we have come a long way as a society in four centuries and understand – fully and painfully – the lifelong ramifications of child sexual abuse that, in the case of Harris, is clear cut.

I am also still struggling to find an artist who is a convicted pedophile and is still feted by the public – Caravaggio included.



In Australia, one in three girls and one in six boys are [sexually abused before they turn 18](#). Image: Courier Mail.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] S[/dropcap] why not just cover the mural up, as has been suggested?

Because that, to me, is a cop out. It says we are frightened to make the tough call and that one day, when we all “get over it”, the cover will come down again. Otherwise, what is the point?

Collectors can keep all of their Rolf Harris’s in their private collections and galleries – although it appears that the Queen has [disposed of her portrait](#) – but there is only one thing to do with our Harris mural: run a paint roller right over it.

Gather a group of women who have suffered sexual abuse (you won’t have to look far) and invite them to reinterpret the mural as a work of defiance: a work that says, loudly, we will not tolerate or condone this man’s disgraceful behaviour, no matter how well he paints.

With this work, we have the opportunity to make a very clear statement about a living, breathing sexual predator who

happens to be an artist, and we at Bluestone are dumbfounded as to why it is proving so hard.

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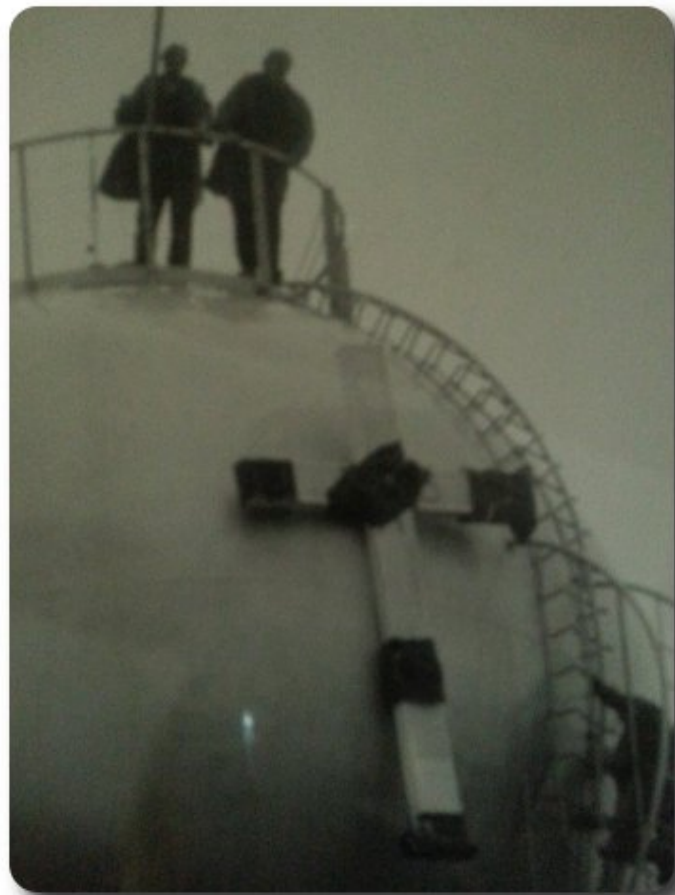
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Fletcher Jones cross came a cropper



Brian Fitzgibbon and Anthony Kelly winch the original Fletcher Jones cross up the silver ball for one of the last times. Image courtesy Amy Fitzgibbon.

The mystery of the missing Fletcher Jones cross has been solved, and, unfortunately, the ending is not pretty.

As [we wrote](#) recently, the very first illuminated cross that sat on top of the Fletcher Jones silver ball water tower in Warrnambool every Christmas and Easter for about 20 years has not been seen since it was removed from the ball sometime in the 1980s.

The replacement cross – made of aluminium – has also since been replaced by a newer, more eco-friendly illuminated cross

that no longer tops the silver ball, but the Warrnambool Uniting Church in Koroit St.

One of the few people who knew the first two crosses intimately was **Brian Fitzgibbon**, who worked at Fletcher Jones' for 15 years as a leading hand in the maintenance department.

"It was made of galvanised iron folded over, with fluorescent lightbulbs running up each of its sides, that were then covered in perspex: all of which made it very, very heavy," Brian said.

The cross, which was made by **Bill Lovell** and **Alan Beales**, was winched into place before each Christmas and left until after Easter, but one year things went awry.

"It was blowing an absolute gale, harder than it's even blowing today," Brian said.

Amid the atrocious conditions, the cross was hauled into place but, Brian now confesses, he forgot to fully secure one of the toggles that held the cross in place.

"So the wind is working away, working away, and the toggle is getting looser and looser and eventually the cross crashed completely on its side," he said.

The cross broke in half from the fall and was partly dangling over the side of the silver ball in a spectacle that was apparently captured by the local newspaper, *The Warrnambool Standard*.

Unfortunately Brian can't remember the exact date that it happened, but he does remember the awful guilt at having not fully secured the toggle.

"I will admit it, I am the one to blame," he said.

The damaged cross was relegated to the skip bin and a new, aluminium cross – the one now in storage at the Warrnambool

City Council depot – was hastily assembled to appease a very unhappy public.

“We modelled the new one on the star that they used to have at the Warrnambool Drive-In, which had lights all around the outside,” Brian said.

“It was so, so much lighter and easier to handle.”

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