

How David Jones saved “Metamorphosis”

How the late David Jones saved the sculpture “Metamorphosis”.

Granny rises from the grave for Women’s Day

Recreating ‘Granny’s’ Grave through textiles.

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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A sculptor with the heart of a Lyon



Award-winning sculptor Jon Dixon has spent 20 years creating the Lyons Sculpture Park, near Heywood, in an organic and creative project that has no end.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] I
[/dropcap]f sculptor **Jon Dixon** had his way, this story would contain only a single sentence: "art is important".

“That’s all you need to write,” he says, as we start our tour of the 15-acre **Lyons Sculpture Park** that he and his wife, Chris, have created on their bush property 21km west of Heywood.

After walking just two or three minutes through what is a combination of sculpture, gardens, raw bush, and farmland it is patently clear, however, that one sentence is not going to cut it. Sorry Jon.

Indeed it is difficult to describe the park, because it refuses to slot into any simple category.

It is a “park”, but not a manicured one. It is a gallery, but without an entry fee or labels on any of the works. And it is full of stone, wood and metal sculptures, some of which are obvious to the eye, but also others that are tucked in nooks and crannies: up a tree, behind a bush, attached to a fallen log.



The natural bush on the 15 acre property is studded

with gorgeous sculptures, including this one from pink dolomite.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] T
[/dropcap]he sculpture park – and the Dixon home – sits on what was once the township of Lyons and covers 30 individual titles: all half acre blocks that were once occupied by the small community built around the timber industry.

Jon and Chris bought the property 20 years ago, after Jon decided to quit his executive lifestyle and return to his first love of art.

“I was running my own industrial door company (in Melbourne) and I watched all of the company executives I knew climbing up the corporate ladder, stepping on heads along the way, burning people off along the way...and they were all miserable,” he said.

Once Jon and Chris, who is a secondary school English teacher, found the Lyons property, they knew it was the perfect place to stretch out and exercise their creativity.

Born in England, but raised in working-class New Zealand, Jon was immersed in the artistic and cultural symbols of the Maori people and this influence is clear in his style today.



[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] M
[/dropcap]ost of Jon's sculptures are worked from local limestone and bluestone, sometimes paired with "found" objects such as a recycled milk vat or a cemetery headstone, or the remnants of industrial farm machinery, equipment or tools. He also creates large metal sculptures, the most striking of which is a life-size silhouette of a rearing horse placed among the tall, yellowing grass of the property.

[box] **Jon has generously donated a gorgeous sculpture valued at \$600 to be given away to one lucky paid subscriber. [Click here for details](#) on how to win this wonderful piece.**[/box]

One of the engaging things about the park is that there is no particular theme and it moves easily from the abstract – an overgrown field full of female torsos – to the spiritual, such

as the “Stonehenge” style installation in a perfectly mown circle of a grass, to the political. The lack of labels or interpretive notes lets the viewer see what they want to see.

The raw bush, which Jon clearly loves and is slowly restoring to its native state, also contains a range of works, including a simple stone disc punctured with numerous holes.

Jon tells the story of a visiting Asian family who were captivated by this piece after he invited them to find “the most beautiful leaf” from the many gum leaves on the ground and place it into a hole.

“This was a family that, at home, had to drive two hours to find open space and here we have beautiful, natural bush. They stood here for a long time, just picking up leaves – dead ones, green ones – and placing them into the holes,” he said.

You are right, Jon. Art is (so) important.



[box type="bio"] Jon Dixon has received numerous accolades for his work, including winning the prestigious [Montalto Sculpture](#)

[Prize](#) in 2003. You can see more of Jon's work at his [website here](#) and find him on [Facebook here](#). The Lyons Sculpture Park is at 4143 Princes Highway, Lyons. Ph: 0437 000 433. Open daily 9am – 5pm. Free. [/box]



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