

# Keys to the collection— Form

## John Brack

“John Brack began his artistic career as a poet. Literature has been of paramount importance to him in helping to provide an intellectual framework for his art...”

—Robert Lindsay, *John Brack*, National Gallery of Victoria exhibition catalogue, 1978.

Cecil John Brack was born in South Melbourne on 10 May 1920. He attended evening classes at the National Gallery School, studying under Charles Wheeler, from 1938 to 1940.

In 1940, during World War II, Brack enlisted in the army and was assigned to the Artillery Corps. He was commissioned in 1943 and assigned to heavy artillery, becoming an instructor, he was later assigned to a field artillery corps unit bound for Bougainville Island, in Papua New Guinea. Fortunately, the war ended before his unit was deployed, and he was discharged from the army in 1946. Brack returned to the National Gallery School as a full-time student, studying under William Dargie. From 1947–48, he shared a studio with Fred Williams, a fellow Gallery School student, in the Salisbury Building on the corner of Queen and Bourke Streets, Melbourne. In 1948 he married fellow student, Helen Maudsley.

Brack completed his studies in 1949 destroying almost all his student works of art, preserving only a few examples. He worked as assistant frame-maker at the National Gallery of Victoria from 1949–1951, then served as Art Master of Melbourne Grammar School until 1962. He was then appointed Head of the National Gallery School, a position he held until 1968.

Brack died in 1999 at the age of 78.



### The hunt—

*The hunt*, painted in 1988, exemplifies John Brack's conceptual and pictorial concerns developed since the early 1970s, when he began to work with postcards and motifs from ancient art. On his first visit to Europe in 1972, at the age of 52, Brack was attracted by works of ancient art. He spent a considerable time in the British Museum studying the Assyrian artefacts, which struck him as the most perfect art objects from any period of time. The striking images depicted on the postcards in *The hunt* are based on the sculptures of ferocious warriors and charioteers from the façade of the palace of the ancient Assyrian king, Ashurnasipal II.

The painting also relates to Brack's series of pencil paintings completed between 1978–1986. The pencils may be at once interpreted as the tools of the artist and as symbols for soldiers and commanders or men and women. This painting represents a microcosmic vision of one of humanity's ancient dilemmas—conflict and the balance of power. These are themes which reverberate throughout Brack's oeuvre.

**Geelong  
Gallery**

AusVELS level 7 to VCE  
[geelonggallery.org.au/learn](http://geelonggallery.org.au/learn)

John Brack  
*The hunt* 1988  
oil on canvas  
Collection: Geelong Gallery

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## John Brack

Australian 1920–1999

*The hunt* 1988

oil on canvas

182.0 x 152.3 cm

Collection: Geelong Gallery

Geelong Art Gallery centenary

acquisition. Purchased through

public subscription, 1996

© Geelong Gallery and Helen Brack

### Question

What do you think John Brack's most notable influence was?

### Research

John Brack was a gentle satirist of suburbia and provincialism, an artist who allowed us to feel fondness for his subjects yet at the same time to subtly mock them. His works of art often read as an elaborate game, or a bit of a joke.

"If something is true" he once said, "its opposite is also true. What I see is always at least a little off balance".

Access the internet to view John Brack's work, *The hands and the faces* (1987). John's wife Helen quoted him as saying, "Humanity is about wonderfulness and awfulness." Explore both *The hunt* and *The hands and the faces* and discuss in response to this quote.

### Activity

Complete a series of drawings around a social comment and produce a three-dimensional work of art. Try to use recycled materials to support your comment.