Sweet Profusion: 
The National Gallery of Victoria Renewed
Daniel Thomas

THE ART COLLECTIONS are the main thing in an art museum, not the special exhibitions or other programmes necessary for present-day credibility and fund-raising. Special exhibitions can be easy fast-food show-biz, or else they can be too authoritarian, over-theorised and bullying. Collections, the bigger the better, are where you can drop in, any day of the year, for a bit of reinvention. It’s good to choose your own pace when you want to get out of yourself.

Museum architecture, good or bad, doesn’t greatly interest a real art lover. As Peter Schjeldahl said in the New Yorker, reviewing the new Munich Pinakothek der Moderne: ‘We go to [art museums] for the same reason gangsters rob banks; they have what we want. We appreciate decent light in tranquil rooms, but we will do without them if the art is worthwhile. To ignore the distractions of a bad building or, for that matter, a good one … isn’t all that difficult.’ Schjeldahl was then inspired to create a taxonomy of museums. As with many art lovers, he really likes only ‘the encyclopedia’ (the Paris Louvre, the New York Metropolitan, perhaps the National Gallery of Victoria before its recent split into two parts) and ‘the house’ (the intensely personal Frida Kahlo home in Mexico, maybe Heide in Melbourne). ‘The boutique’ (the NGV Australia at Federation Square?) can be all right, within its restricted range. If the art is good, the same goes for ‘the destination’ based on showy architecture (the Guggenheims at New York and Bilbao). ‘The civic museum’ was his category for the new Munich Moderne, which represented ‘not only a city’s treasures but also its prestige and self-image. The defining ritual of the civic museum is the opening reception, at which members of the local élite pride themselves on being up to date … Civic museums understand that their decisions are fundamentally political. As a consequence they are apt to overdo pedagogy and social righteousness.’

In Melbourne, the NGV is now less of an encyclopedia than it was last century. Former Premier Jeff Kennett railroaded its Australian collections across the Yarra River, to form a second NGV campus. Australian art is now an uneasy anchor tenant of Federation Square, the architectural fashion-victim extravaganza that Kennett hoped would be an urban-renewal ‘destination’. (Andrew Brown-May’s Federation Square, Hardie Grant Books, [2003], gives a good account of the project.) The NGV feels like a civic museum. ‘Fundamental politics’ do break out; if Schjeldahl felt his Munichers were a bit up themselves, so also are our Melburnians. Even when it first opened thirty-six years ago, the building had a Great Hall for civic and state receptions, and an ‘iconic’ waterwall entrance, neither of which was essential for the art. The 1968 ceremonies, and those for the December 2003 reopening as ‘NGV International at St Kilda Road’, both indulged in the social-righteousness rhetoric of being ‘a people’s gallery’.

However, despite lacking several kinds of art, the NGV is certainly the largest quasi-encyclopedia museum in Australia, and profusion and diversity are prime virtues for a people’s gallery. Moreover, though its once unique-to-Melbourne core collections of European and Asian art have been challenged and in some instances overtaken elsewhere in Australia during the past thirty years, it contains many splendid works, and a few that are breathtaking. And it passes another Schjeldahl test in that most works are presented in unusually excellent light and in unfussy, tranquil spaces. Melbourne’s profuse and varied collections are now marvellously renewed and refreshed.

MISSING
Australian art is not entirely absent from NGV International, so, even though we have drifted into an illiterate and peculiar-to-Australia usage that wrongly takes ‘international’ to mean ‘foreign’ or ‘non-Australian’, the new name for this middle-aged building is, at a stretch, correct.

A handful of Australian works appear in the top-floor galleries for late twentieth-century and contemporary art. Tony Tuckson’s and Colin McCahon’s paintings face Gerhard Richter’s; Robert Hunter’s cohabits with a minimal floorpiece sculpture by Donald Judd; Bill Henson’s photowork faces Cindy Sherman’s; Emily Kam Kngwarray’s Northern Territory After rain painting accompanies Anselm Kiefer’s German Evil flowers. A few Australia-related decorative arts lurk in the back corridor high above the Great Hall, among them Derwent Wood’s Buckingham Palace gatepost finials emblematic of Australia, a kangaroo and a merino ram. A small gallery for the photography collection opens with much more than token Australian material. In ‘Natural Inspiration 1840s–1980s’, P.H. Emerson’s Norfolk Broads gaze at J.W. Lindt’s Gippsland fern gully, Ansel Adams’s California at Peter Dombrovskis’s Tasmanian wildernesses. Excellent, but it’s not enough.

Alongside Picasso and the 1950s Europeans, we might have hoped to see paintings by Fred Williams and John Brack displacing the deservedly forgotten Alan Reynolds or Claude Venard; and a sculpture by Robert Klippel. Maybe the Barbizon School could have included a Yarra Valley painting by Louis Buvelot, and French Symbolist art a mythology by expatriate

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Rupert Bunny. (Try, for sentiment’s sake, the latter’s Sea idyll of a flippered merfamily, a gift in 1892 from Alfred Felton, who later surprised the NGV with his bequest of a huge art-purchase fund.) British landscapes by Turner, Constable and Linnell might have shared their space with a Van Diemen’s Land landscape by John Glover if the NGV’s own particular paintings by that early-colonial artist were as fine as those owned by Hobart, Adelaide or Canberra.

African art, however, has not even this light Australian sprinkle. It is totally invisible, and is only scrappily present in the undisplayed NGV collections, whereas the National Gallery of Australia opened in Canberra in 1982 with a splendid display of art from Africa. Seldom on view in recent years, Canberra’s African art urgently needs permanent reinstatement, since no other museum in Australia has yet taken a serious interest in that aesthetically forceful chapter in the art encyclopedia.

Islamic art, similarly, has no real presence at NGV International. There are nineteen Persian objects in two cases in the mostly unlabelled, dreadful-looking mishmash of crowded Chinese, Japanese, Indian and South-East Asian sculptures and decorative-arts objects in a dead-end ‘Asian Art Study Gallery’. NGV catalogues do include a handful of Persian and Indian Mughal miniature paintings, but, before you reach the Asian Art Study Gallery, the inaugural display of highlights from the Asian collections includes only Hindu miniatures, charming but folklorish. The absence of super-sophisticated Islamic art in a specially focused display, not only at NGV but also at the NGA (where great collections of Indonesian batik textiles are not easily read as Islamic), is surely perceived by Muslims in Australia as a silent, if unwitting, insult. In November this year, when the Art Gallery of South Australia displays a collection recently given by William Bowmore, Adelaide will be the one capital where Islamic art is properly visible.

**GRAND TOUR**

What’s offered is, of course, hugely stimulating, despite the two or three missing chapters from the world encyclopedia. Start on the ground floor, where a darkened room is divided between ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian art on one side, and pre-Columbian American on the other. There are no outstanding Egyptian works, apart from a Polynesian gill wooden figure of Ptah-Sokar-Osiris. The mutilated head of Queen Nefertiti is fascinating archaeology — evidence of religious intolerance in the distant Pharaonic past — but it is no longer a work of art. Don’t search for the lone neo-Sumerian stone head, 2100 BC, which would have had considerable presence, compared with the flimsier Egyptian funerary objects: Gudea is currently under investigation and, if he survives the authenticity tests, this room will (re)gain a masterpiece. Pre-Columbian America does better. Especially note a Mayan earthenware vase with polychrome decoration, The Lord of the jaguar-pelt throne. Nevertheless, the flavour of cultural difference is extremely potent, and the coupling of far-flung American and Afro-Asian pyramid-builders is a curatorial masterstroke.

For further high-powered cultural shifts, proceed beyond Egypt to ancient Greece and Rome. Here are many fabulous vases painted with vivid pagan mythologies and domesticities, love and death, music-making, enjoyment of wine and warfare; plus one marble athlete and a couple of Roman emperor heads.

Then a shock. Beyond the smallish antiquities from the ancient Mediterranean is a high space filled with big, gutsy bark paintings and carvings by indigenous artists from contemporary Oceania. Especially enjoy the cross-cultural Fantom, c.1998, by Tobi Waniik: it’s a shield actually used in recent tribal warfare in the Wahgi Valley of Papua New Guinea; it’s made from a 44-gallon steel drum and it is decorated in enamel paints with an American retro comic-strip jungle hero. If ‘NGV Australia at Federation Square’ ever expanded its brief and embraced our entire neighbouring region of Australasia, as is the tendency elsewhere, then this Oceanian material could depart St Kilda Road and thereby liberate an ideal space, beyond Greece and Egypt, for a future collection of African art.

**ASIAN ART**

Chinese paintings, ceramics and ancient bronzes have had high visibility at the NGV for more than half a century. Japanese, Indian and South-East Asian works also have a good presence but, as mentioned, West Asian Islamic art does not. In 1968 there were clear and equal options for visitors, who could glimpse Asian art to the south of the foyer and European to the north. That arrangement is now echoed one floor up. Scroll paintings, screens, miniatures and woodcuts, on silk or paper, cannot, of course, be displayed permanently, so in one of its four galleries Asian art will constantly change. The inaugural temporary display, called ‘Resonance’, is a splendid view of East Asian paintings and ceramics, plus Buddhist sculptures, and some Hindu art. (There are no Chinese or Japanese costumes, or Indonesian cloths.)

Another room displays Chinese ‘Tombwares’, of bronze, jade or pottery, and a third has ‘Domestic ware’, which is mostly Chinese porcelains, plus a set of furniture for a Chi-
inese scholar’s study. The fourth room, as mentioned, is the densely crowded ragbag that only an antique shop scourer could love. However, senior curator Mae Anna Pang disarms us, at the very start of her Asian display, the Domestic room, with a label of love. The pure white Cizhou-ware vase came from the widow of H.W. Kent, who in 1938 had given the collection its greatest boost. The label tells that the unornamented meiping shape was ‘made specifically for holding plum blossoms to contemplate in the spring … and epitomises the refinement of 11th-century Song dynasty taste …’ It was Kent’s most prized ceramic vessel. Had he been entombed, it would have been placed beside him.’

Compared with the newly expanded space for Asian collections at the Art Gallery of NSW, all this past perfection from China and Japan seems a little old-fashioned. In Sydney, as well as high-art Chinese scrolls and Japanese screens, we now see unrefined indigenous sculptures from the Philippines, Indonesian Borneo and Timor, also Indonesian textiles and Vietnamese art, and contemporary Asian art. The AGNSW thereby engages with its present-day immigrant communities. If work by a contemporary Chinese-Australian artist such as Guan Wei or Ah Xian could not easily find a place in the NGV’s Asian galleries, then it could go to the top-floor gallery for contemporary international art, with Andy Warhol.

The NGA has developed perhaps the world’s best collection of Indonesian textiles as Canberra’s art-political showpiece of scholarship, and, in other ways, is catching up with the NGV’s Asian art. The Queensland Art Gallery is developing a specialisation in contemporary Asia-Pacific art. And the Art Gallery of South Australia’s small but choice Asian collections now include a pair of thirteenth-century Shinto (not Buddhist) deities, carved in camphorwood in a cubist-looking style, probably the rarest and finest Japanese work of art in Australia. Yet if the NGV no longer has Asia to itself, and is modern-minded about these collections, it is still Kent’s most prized ceramic vessel. Had he been entombed, it would have been placed beside him.

European Art

Here is what we used to believe made the post-Felton Bequest NGV the only ‘world-quality’ art museum in Australia, though sometimes, fresh back from overseas, one saw that this was not quite so. (And now we understand that any assertion of ‘world quality’ is itself a kind of cultural cringe.) However, the same collection looks far better than ever before. The works of art are renewed.

It is not only a matter of Mario Bellini’s better proportioned rooms, better flooring and wall colours, better glass cases and better lighting. Many old-master paintings are now cleaned, and reframed in correct period style. More refreshing, some artistic dead wood is cleaned away. A disgraced ‘Goya’ portrait and a big ‘Claude Lorrain’ landscape have long since disappeared, attributions have shifted, problem pictures are candidly acknowledged. The one-time star of the entire collection, a ‘van Eyck’ Madonna and Child, is still displayed, but not as his. Eight Constables are now four. The Canaletto bought in 1919 is now by Bellotto. Rubens’ Hercules and Antaeus is no longer quite by Rubens; Veronese’s Nobleman between Active and Contemplative Life is similarly downgraded. Rembrandt’s ‘Self-portrait’ is now by his ‘studio’, and Bernini’s is neither by nor of Bernini. Continuing scholarship has lifted cobwebs from our gaze, though it is doubtful that we need to see quite so many of the paintings about whose lesser status NGV has come clean.

Master prints and drawings were always less tricky to acquire than European paintings, so those collections always seemed to be NGV’s greatest delight. For connoisseurs they still are: sexy Dürer engravings, earthy Rembrandt or Goya etchings by the dozen, wild Blake watercolours. The new NGV gallery for prints and drawings is on the ground floor closest to the entrance, and its inaugural display offers a run through six centuries of greatest hits: from Renaissance nudes by Pollaiuolo and Mantegna to pop art by Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol, and minimalism by Sol LeWitt. Drawings include magical Roman landscapes by Claude and, by Ingres, an imaginary classical tomb for gorgeous Lady Jane Montagu, who died in Rome aged twenty. After this one roomful of major European art in minor media, you could, at a pinch, skip the remaining twenty-one upstairs.

Not all those twenty-one galleries are for paintings and sculptures. Nine are largely given to decorative arts, though most paintings galleries have a few decorative arts to emphasise period style, and most decorative arts galleries similarly have a few paintings. The only NGV painting by Matisse is very small, which is perhaps why it is banished to live with French art deco furniture, but Matisse is great, however small, and one hopes the painting will return to the company of Picasso and Bonnard.

On the other hand, the pair of oval paintings by Boucher might not have lived up to the company of Tiepolo’s Banquet of Cleopatra, and they are well placed among the Sèvres and Meissen porcelains. A cluster of philosopher busts, including Houdon’s Voltaire and Rousseau, is a pleasing occurrence within these finest manufactures of the Age of Reason. Similar friendly breakthroughs — small conversation pictures of the Brockman family, by Edward Haytley, and marble busts of men from the Shirley family, by Peter Scheemakers — show the sensitive, family-loving humans who might have used these sweet domestic objects. There are more Chelsea and other British wares than any museum really needs, but, even so, the extreme Continental rococo of a Bustelli or Kaendler figurine, though present, still awaits supreme examples.

Once we shift into Robert Adam’s neoclassicism and, above all, the period when Victorian England led the world in art manufactures — Pugin, Christopher Dresser, E.W. Godwin, William Morris — the decorative-arts collection is extraordinary. The pace keeps up in the twentieth century: high-style Vienna (c.1910) with whole suites of furniture by Adolf Loos and Josef Hoffmann, French art nouveau glass and art deco silver, British pottery by Bernard Leach, Shoji Hamada and Lucy Rie, and a favourite wanton woman on a Picasso earthenware vase (1950), which swells below its narrow waist to accommodate a delicious bum.
On the top floor, a room of twentieth-century mass-produced design, from Mackintosh to Philippe Starck, seems always to be filled with stylish young families pondering their stylish new homes. Most of these modern classics are in current production and available in Australia, and if an Eames lounge chair designed in 1952 in Hollywood (the world’s most comfortable chair?) is pretty expensive, Alvar Aalto Savoy vases (Finland, 1937) or Arne Jacobsen Cylinda-line coffee pots (Denmark, 1965) are not. Elsewhere, one-off contemporary craft objects seem to find few excited visitors; Dale Chihuly’s art glass no longer looks worth a punt as it might have twenty years ago.

Senior curator Christopher Menz has performed a very hip update to the decorative arts collections. Only the Art Gallery of South Australia competes across the same four- or five-century range, but with a much smaller collection. The NGA owns outstanding nineteenth- and twentieth-century European decorative arts, including fashion and textiles, but, like its African collections, Canberra is now making little use of them. The NGV has always been superb at decorative arts, and still wins by miles.

Fashion and textiles began to enter the NGV later than porcelain, silver and furniture. One dedicated gallery has an inaugural display of highlights, called ‘House Mix’. With only token presence of pre-twentieth-century fashion, this is a groovy, intelligent show that takes in pure Fortuny elegance, the wilder shores of Seditionaries punk, Doc Martens practicality in boots, and John Galliano’s present-day extravagance for Dior. Menswear is not ignored. Senior curator Robyn Healy is postmodern-minded but has high-spirited fun, an unusual combination. Great stuff.

**European Paintings and Sculptures**

At last the collections upon which an encyclopedic museum must pass much stiffer tests than with prints and drawings, or decorative arts. The NGV, and all the colonial/state museums in Australia, began by collecting nothing but contemporary art, and most of that was British. The past was unfamiliar to a world without art history, and expensive.

The first shopping trips with big money from the 1904 Felton Bequest stuck to new art by senior or recently dead artists such as Rodin, Ford Madox Brown and Pissarro. Landscapes by Corot, Constable and Turner (watercolour), and a non-Watteau, were a few earlier Felton purchases before, at last, around 1920, old masters seriously entered the collecting programme. As mentioned, there were lots of failures, notably Kenneth Clark’s dodgy recommendations of the non-Claude and the semi-Veronese in the late 1940s.

I don’t know whether it has been a fairly normal failure rate. Art historian Jaynie Anderson’s enthraling new book, Tiepolo’s Cleopatra — which concludes that the NGV masterpiece is probably the world’s greatest eighteenth-century painting — is clear-headed about such matters: ‘Great works of art, when bought by committee, are almost always acquired by accident rather than through knowledge or taste, which inevitably remain the enviable attributes of the private collector, who never has to make compromises.’ So let’s enjoy the many happy accidents at the NGV and not complain about the failures.

We’ll start with one stained-glass panel, an enamelled casket from around 1200, and a few medieval illuminated manuscript books, their pages turned at intervals appropriate for conservation. Then a bit of Byzantine-style Russian painting, some gothic saints carved in wood, a St Jerome painting once thought to be by Dürer, the Madonna labelled ‘Flanders’, that was once a van Eyck. Soon one’s heart leaps at Hans Memling’s tiny The Man of Sorrows in the arms of the Virgin (c.1477), a great buy in 1924. Superfine paintcraft would have recommended it then, but we can also enjoy the surrealism of grisly crucifixion implements floating emblematically on the gold ground.

A favourite little Italian St George slaying the dragon is now ‘attributed to Uccello’, then some pagan and secular Renaissance paintings swing in, and maiolica and bronze statuettes of naked gods. The room climaxes with Agnolo Gaddi’s Madonna and child with saints (c.1389), specially unveiled for the renewed building, and probably the best NGV acquisition for thirty years: quite large, excellent condition, rich colour and a useful art-history piece with reference to Giotto’s revolutionary style; note the touches of body awareness added to the Christian spirituality, an emphatic collarbone, long bare toes. A good room, but nevertheless some day it could give part of its space to an as-yet non-existent collection of medieval Islamic miniatures and decorative arts. Islamic art grew out of Byzantine culture, and its interesting difference from Christian art is not Renaissance paganism but a deep reluctance to depict the human figure; Islam, instead, is full of delightful flower gardens and birds.

Next, one is pleased to see that the sober A monk with a book (c.1550), bought in 1924, is given back to Titian, and amused to learn that the large Garden of Love (c.1467) has had nine different attributions since 1939 but has now settled on the Master of the Stories of Helen, who worked in the studio of Antonio Vivarini. Italian mannerist paintings in Adelaide (a huge new Passerotti) and Sydney might have overtaken the Fontana and the Perino del Vaga. A small Claude Lorrain that eventually replaced Kenneth Clark’s mistake is not a patch on Adelaide’s large and beautiful canvas by the first great master of landscape painting. A wonderfully pagan Pan, white-bearded, hairy goat-legged and muscular, by Annibale Carracci, nicely compensates for too much simpering Christianness in this room, by Carracci himself, and Murillo, and a new Madonna in prayer (c.1645), by Sassoferrato. The last is the source of what one sees everywhere in Catholic kitsch shops, an interesting point, and though better than Carracci’s and Cavallino’s, it’s at the limit of Madonna overload.

Back to earth in the seventeenth-century Netherlands. After Claude, the other great early master of landscape is here: Jacob van Ruisdael. Mud, weeds, cattle, tired travellers, low life sympathetically shown carousing and grooping in taverns, middle-class respectability honoured as well, and flowers and fruit and animals. It’s always a salutary surprise to see David
in the Winter's Tale shows a much-admired actress risen to be Countess of Derby, but here again playing the moment when Shakespeare's Hermione, posing as a statue, comes to life. Joseph Wright of Derby depicts The Synnot children, of County Armagh in Ireland, at play around a birdcage, learning a moral lesson about the nature of freedom and captivity. Nathaniel Dance's The Pybus family shows domestic contentment back home after a diligent working life overseas with the East India Company. Miss Susanna Gale, aged fourteen, a sugar-plantation heiress from Jamaica, was in London to complete her education and to be painted by Reynolds. Lady Frances Finch married at twenty-one, and another portrait by Reynolds was her father's loving souvenir of a departed daughter. Australia's Britishness can be an advantage; the Synnot and Pybus pictures eventually found their way to descendants in Australia, and thence to the NGV, where the Pybuses are now unveiled for the first time.

Great landscapes by Gainsborough, Turner and Constable maintain this British grace and grandeur. We wonder why the Duke of Westminster gave Turner's Dunstanborough Castle to the NGV in our centennial year 1888. We smile at the presence of sheep in paintings chosen by the Felton Bequest committee for our Land of the Golden Fleece: Turner's Walton Bridges shows a sheepwash on the Thames; Constable's West End Fields, Hampstead is home to a white-wooled flock.

Gears then shift. A hectic room of paintings climbing up the walls and bronze statuary standing crowding the floor recreates the look of, say, a London Royal Academy exhibition or a Paris Salon in the nineteenth century. Art had to be crowd-pleasing, populist, unsubtle, even kitsch. Here, for the first time in living memory, we see many of the then-contemporary works received in the NGV's forty pre-Felton years (1864–1904). It's good to expose the institutional history. It's good to be reminded of the tear-jerker shipwrecks and sickbeds and waifs, the marriages for money, the prurient gaze at naked Christian girls about to be fed to lions in the Roman Colosseum, the anguished ewe who bleats at crows who will eat her frozen, snowstormed lambs, the fairy fantasy stories and the raunchy sexualities that then, as now, constituted popular culture.

The paintings are sleek, the bronzes gleam. One electric blue figure catches the eye, its intensely powerful formalism unexpected in this illustrative context. It turns out to be a sexpot Madonna by Ingres, no less, a loan from a private collection. A new acquisition, Regnault's painting Toilet of Venus (1815), is another fine example of neoclassical near-nude, focused on perky breasts. For sexual even-handedness, bronze statues, not paintings, offer many eye-level encounters with penises. The room's key work might be an image of Venus, about to be fed to lions in the Roman Colosseum, a moral lesson about the nature of freedom and captivity. The Synnot children, of County Armagh in Ireland, at play around a birdcage, learning a moral lesson about the nature of freedom and captivity. Nathaniel Dance's The Pybus family shows domestic contentment back home after a diligent working life overseas with the East India Company. Miss Susanna Gale, aged fourteen, a sugar-plantation heiress from Jamaica, was in London to complete her education and to be painted by Reynolds. Lady Frances Finch married at twenty-one, and another portrait by Reynolds was her father's loving souvenir of a departed daughter. Australia's Britishness can be an advantage; the Synnot and Pybus pictures eventually found their way to descendants in Australia, and thence to the NGV, where the Pybuses are now unveiled for the first time.

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If you enter the room not from Turner and Constable but, as is more likely, from high-minded Symbolist art by Burne-Jones and Puvis de Chavannes, you pass between a pair of vast crystal candelabra. Originally designed by Baccarat for
Tsar Nicholas of Russia, in 1925 they arrived in Melbourne from Paris to flank the cinema screen in Walter Burley Griffin’s jazzy Capitol Theatre. It’s another curatorial masterstroke. The candelabra emphasise that cinema merely took over the populist role of a previous century’s salon exhibitions.

Overheatedness palls. Corot’s *The bent tree (morning)* is a cool return to real art. Manet’s single green *Melon* has never looked so fresh, nor his airy summerscape *House at Rueil*. Monet, Pissarro and Cézanne connect us bracingly, through the vibration of impressionism, with the energies of earth and air and water. Bonnard’s *Siesta* (1900) — his naked mistress stretched out asleep on a dishevelled bed — is a masterpiece of private Rembrandtian sensuality updated by impressionism, but, after this, the twentieth century falls dreadfully short of what a great museum might offer. Balthus’s *Nude with cat* (1949) is boldly lubricious, Eugene Jansson’s *Swedish Ring gymnast* (1911), suspended naked in the air, is a startling take on homoeroticism in physical culture. The too-British twentieth century does throw up some unfamiliar delights, notably the strong women in Dod Procter’s *In a strange land* (1919), and Gwen John’s *Nun* (c.1917). Jacob Epstein’s *Sunflower* (c.1912) is a tough stone carving. However, too much, from France as well as Britain, is decorative and trivial. Before we leave for contemporary art upstair, which is still too British, there are thrills from two small paintings of 1937: Magritte’s *In praise of dialectics* and Picasso’s *Weeping woman*. The NGA and the AGNSW far outshine the NGV for twentieth-century masters: think Brancusi, Malevich, Miró, Magritte and, of course, Pollock in Canberra; Bonnard, Morandi, Braque, Picasso, Beckmann, Kirchner, Kandinsky in Sydney.

**THE BUILDING**

The outside has been cleaned up, out-of-scale sculptures by young local artists moved from the moat to garden settings elsewhere. Now it’s time to bring to the St Kilda Road forecourt the grand nineteenth-century equestrian bronzes, *Joan of Arc* by Frémiet and *St George and the Dragon* by Boehm, that are still in front of the State Library on Swanston Street, though bought for the NGV when it was in the same building.

There is now a view straight to the back sculpture garden from the front entrance, through a low opening made in the Great Hall. It’s very necessary, since the views into the internal courtyards, which a blank-walled fortress always needs, are now mostly lost. Two courtyards have been filled with new galleries. The central courtyard is roofed with glass to make, with the Great Hall, a huge all-weather party space, and an easy lead-in to special exhibitions, which are on the ground level, and also to a bookshop, coffee shop, restaurant and, one level up by escalator, bistro; Mario Bellini’s furniture is everywhere, and more elegant than in any museum you might know.

No art is visible as you enter, or from the new central courtyard, whereas most art museums offer immediate tantalising glimpses, or else, as in Canberra, Sydney and Brisbane, immediate profusion. It’s a bit deadening. You have to hunt for the art, squeeze through the upstairs bistro, though you discover it soon enough. The circulation is very confusing compared with the previous incarnation of the building; there are lots of dead ends. But after all, nobody minds getting lost in the Louvre or the Met; we are glad to have the promise of wonderful art waiting to be discovered, beautifully displayed and informatively labelled, as it is at the NGV, in beautifully proportioned, well-lit, well-coloured rooms. Except the top-floor infill rooms for contemporary art: white cubes, the white floors bizarrely dotted with steel air-conditioning ducts that look like shower drains — on which minimalist, floor-based works such as Donald Judd’s are extremely unhappy. The most beautiful art museum I know, Renzo Piano’s Menil Collection in Houston, has black floorboards. It doesn’t help that these two white-cube rooms are overcrowded and overpartitioned by curators eager, as always after years closed to the public, to show more than is wise.

**THE SPECIAL EXHIBITIONS**

The opening splash is an art-political demonstration of commitment to newest international art, ‘World Rush_4 artists: Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Doug Aitken, Lee Bull, Sarah Sze’. Two big video installations in darkened rooms, two huge suspended sculptural installations. Ahtila, from Finland, is unusually engaging; her kitchen, her psychoses, her bad driving, her birch forests and her cows all speak of common human condition. Vermee’r’s calm meets Munch’s scream.

After this, it will be money-making blockbusters, to cross-subsidise free shows like ‘World Rush’. Caravaggio and Co. moves down this month from the AGNSW. Mid-year will see treasures of French impressionism from the Musée de l’Orangerie.

**THE PUBLICATIONS**

The NGV has always published its collections well. For the new International Art régime, there is already a pair of small handbooks: *The Building*, very informative, by Philip Goad; and *The Collection*, edited by Isobel Crombie, Senior Curator of Photography, and Tony Ellwood, Deputy Director, Interna-
tional Collections. The director contributes a large-format 31 New Acquisitions. Best is a series of substantial picture books by senior curators, the first six being Asian Art, by Mae Anna Pang, Decorative Arts, by Christopher Menz and Margaret Legge, Fashion and Textiles, by Robyn Healy, and three titles by Ted Gott and Laurie Benson: Paintings and Sculpture before 1800, Nineteenth-Century Painting and Sculpture and Twentieth-Century Painting and Sculpture. Antiquities, and Prints and Drawings, will follow soon. The picture books expand on the excellent seventy-word labels that you will have read in the galleries.

THE SPLIT

The NGV Australia at Federation Square opened just over a year ago. Some believe its existence gives a new symbolic importance to Australian art. I would have preferred a full display of Australian art to remain at St Kilda Road. Federation Square seemed a good site for a Museum of Contemporary Art. The NGVA has in fact become more an exhibition gallery for Australian art and less a collection display. A huge and splendid Peter Booth exhibition filled the top floor over the summer. Small displays of Norman Lindsay, Lionel Lindsay and Hugh Ramsay were also inserted into the main galleries. We can concede a backlog of exhibition projects might have mounted up during the closed-down years, but now we would like to see the missing late twentieth-century collection.

Meanwhile the gap is partly filled by the new TarraWarra Museum of Art established by Marc and Eva Besen at their vineyard near Healesville. Or go to Adelaide, where the AGSA always presents Australian art more fully then elsewhere, or to Canberra, where the NGA’s current display is the best ever. NGVA’s collection display rightly emphasises its local late twentieth-century Australian greats, Fred Williams and John Brack, but it should also permanently display Queensland’s Ian Fairweather and Robert MacPherson, Tasmania’s Bea Maddock, South Australia’s Hossein Valamanesh and Western Australia’s Howard Taylor.

Once again, we are reminded, the name ‘National Gallery of Victoria’ is silly not only in regard to federal/state ownership but also in its implicit claim to represent the nation’s art. Its Australian collection is parochial. Jeff Kennett recently succeeded in changing the name of the National Museum of Victoria to the Melbourne Museum, and was about to change NGV, too. ‘NGV International’ and ‘NGV Australia’ are useful only as art-world shorthand. Taxi drivers don’t know those abbreviations, or even a carefully articulated ‘National Gallery of Victoria on St Kilda Road’. Pending a full act-of-state-parliament name change, I suggest right now for the St Kilda Road entrance a very big sign ‘Art Museum’ above a much-diminished ‘National Gallery of Victoria’, and the same by the three entrances at Federation Square for the invisibly signed NGVA. Art Museum is an accurate short description; taxi drivers might notice it. Meanwhile, for NGV International you have to ask a driver for ‘The Arts Centre’. Premier Steve Bracks has been spiteful about Kennett’s bright ideas (he killed an architectural ‘Shard’ at Federation Square), but spite is unbecoming in a state premier. Go ahead Steve, find a good new name and ditch the silly one.