Water is one of our most precious resources. It is essential for life and survival, and also for cultural and artistic expression. Water is vital for human needs, for homes and gardens, for agriculture, industry, and the environment. It can provide a means of transportation, and is also a focus for leisure, social and sporting activities.

Water is essential too for our health and our economy. Australia is the driest inhabited continent in the world, and it is important that we protect this precious resource and ensure a sustainable water future.

This trail will take students to works of art that connect with the theme of water. Art works about the sea, coast, rivers, creeks, lakes, and dams, as well as the fauna and flora inhabiting these areas which serve as inspiration for artists, also provide a setting for, or window on, social history and cultural traditions in our country.

There are many themes that connect with the subject of water, including
• the environment
• transportation
• industry and trade (agriculture, food production, and manufacturing)
• leisure and sporting activity

Only 1% of the world’s water is fresh water, and not all of this can be used by humans as some is located deep under ground, and some may be too polluted. In Australia, freshwater comes from surface water (rainfall and run-off into streams, dams, rivers and lakes), and groundwater (water from underground sources).

PLEASE NOTE THAT WE CANNOT GUARANTEE ALL WORKS OF ART ARE ON DISPLAY. Please contact Education Services on 8207 7033 if you wish to check on a particular work.

Image: Evening shadows, backwater of the Murray, South Australia, 1880, H.J JOHNSTONE, 1835-1907, Gift of Mr Henry Yorke Sparks, 1881, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
This is an idyllic environment unlike that shown in A break away! by Tom Roberts which you will see later when you move through the Gallery. Compare these two paintings in terms of environment and availability and use of water.

Napier WALLER
Australia, 1893-1972
The Pastoral Pursuits of Australia
1927, Melbourne, oil on canvas
James & Diana Ramsay Fund 1987, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
Courtesy of the Trustees of the Waller Estate

This is a large neoclassical mural painted in 1927 showing Australia as a land of great wealth, abundance, a place of happiness and contentment. The work was designed to inspire and encourage national pride. At the time it was painted Australia had emerged from World War 1 with a new, positive and confident perception of itself.

Australia is shown as an Arcadia. Arcadia is a mountainous region of ancient Greece traditionally known for the contented pastoral lifestyle of its people, a place offering peace and simplicity. Arcadian images usually include classical sculptural poses, ancient Greek costumes, and classical ruins.

Napier Waller is considered Australia’s finest mural painter. When he lost his right arm during World War 1 he had to re-learn to write, paint and draw with his left hand. He designed this work which consists of five panels (of which three are displayed in the Gallery vestibule) for the grand dining room of the Menzies Hotel in Melbourne. The hotel was where many wealthy farmers and graziers stayed during visits to the city. They would have enjoyed and been inspired by these images of pastoral life. The hotel was demolished in the late 1960s. By this time Waller’s work had been removed and sold.

The landscape in the painting looks similar to the sheep grazing district in Western Victoria where the artist was born and raised. The shores of a lake or river can be seen in the background flowing through pastoral land. It is a scene of plenty in which water is a vital element, needed for human survival.
English artist John Glover migrated to Tasmania from his home in London in 1830. He bought land and set up a farm near Launceston.

Glover’s Tasmanian landscapes often showed his liking for the natural bushland, and his interest in the disappearing indigenous peoples who once lived on the land he now owned.

This painting shows a summer’s day at Glover’s new farm. A shingle-roofed stone house and wooden studio look out onto his extensive cottage garden full of flowering plants. The size of this garden shows Glover’s dedication to familiar plants from his home country. He had brought plants and seeds with him on the long journey in a sailing ship, and planned the garden while on the ship, even though a fellow passenger’s monkey ate many of his seedlings.

Glover painted the natural bushland beyond the edges of his garden. The hilly bushland shows the soft olive greens of the Tasmanian manna gum trees. At the front of the garden we see he has made formal pathways, and a small pond or lake, and there is a vegetable plot to the right of the house.

Glover’s garden is a display of introduced plants thriving in their new environment. Some of them are easy to identify: willows, roses and hollyhocks.

Most of Australia’s problem weeds began as escaped garden plants introduced by immigrants, travellers, and later by plant nurseries. Weeds often threatened and smothered the growth of native plants by doing too well in this new country.

Focus

Look closely at the painting. Where do you think the water for both household use, and the garden, came from?

Would any part of Glover’s garden have needed more water than other parts? Do non-native plants have the same water needs as the native plants?

Find out how South Australians are now adapting to limited water supplies and changing water regulations.

We use water in our homes for washing, cooking, cleaning and gardening. Water comes into our properties through underground pipes. Drains take away the dirty water. Visit the SA Water website to find out how we can use water more efficiently.

This is the first known oil painting to be made in Australia and was painted in Sydney about 1813. It is a still life painting by John Lewin depicting species of fish found in Australian waters. The life-size fish in this arrangement have all been identified. From the top they are snapper, hammerhead shark, crimson squirrel-fish, estuary perch, rainbow wrasse and sea mullet.

Fish can live anywhere there is water – oceans, freshwater lakes and rivers. Fish come in many different sizes and there are more than 13,000 kinds of fish. Most swim and live near the surface; others live deeper, and a few actually live on the ocean floor.

The artist was a trained natural history painter who made many illustrations of Australian flora and fauna. Several kinds of fish Lewin discovered were named after him, and among them was the hammerhead shark. Its official (scientific) name is Sphyrna lewini.

The sea and associated harbours and rivers are sources of food, especially important for the early settlers inhabiting Sydney at this time.
The knowledge and skills of shell gathering and weaving are cultural traditions passed down by Aboriginal women through generations. Shell necklace making is a delicate and labour-intensive process of collecting, cleaning, sorting and stringing shells. It requires great skill and patience as well as knowledge of coastal resources. The making of necklaces is dependent on the availability of shells. Shell collecting along Tasmania’s beaches remains a seasonal activity.

Before European settlement Aboriginal women would smoke the shells over a fire, and then rub off the outer coating in grass to reveal a pearly surface which was later polished with penguin or mutton bird oil. After piercing each shell with a tool made from the bone of an animal such as a kangaroo or wallaby, the shells were threaded and strung on fine sinews from a kangaroo’s tail, or on string made from natural fibres.

Strings of shells were of great value, and as well as being made for ceremonial adornment, they were also used as items of trade. Many of the shells have become scarce and today the shells most treasured are the green maireener shells. These days it takes two years to collect enough to make a long necklace. Necklaces are now used almost entirely for decoration and the women who collect the shells are vitally aware of sustaining the supply for future makers.

Focus

Why do you think the shells, and others like them, are becoming harder to find?

Look around the room for other shell necklaces. Notice what they have in common, but also how they are different.

What other plant or animal material found in the sea or on the beach can be made into necklaces, or other decorative objects?
This work represents how water is important for trade and cultural contact between peoples. It shows a Malay sailing boat or prau. From at least the early 1700s until the early 1900s, men from Macassar (Sulawesi), part of Indonesia, sailed to northern Australia each year to gather trepang (sea cucumber), a seafood delicacy traded to China.

The Macassans established trading and cultural relations with Aboriginal people from northern coastal areas. Exchanges were made of exotic materials such as cloth, metal knives and axes, rice and tobacco. This was Australia’s first export industry.

Many Aboriginal men also travelled across the water to Macassar (particularly to Ujung Pandang, on Sulawesi) after the wet season’s harvest of sea cucumber. On Groote Eylandt, off the northern Australian coast, Macassan influences remain in language, landscape and beliefs through introduced words and plants, incorporation of boats into creation stories, and the adoption of boat and wind ‘totems’.

Focus

What other sea creatures might be a source of food for people in this area?

What navigation ‘tools’ might have been used by these early traders?

As you walk through the Gallery, look for other works that show sea travel and trade.
At the time of European settlement when Captain Arthur Phillip and the First Fleet arrived from England on January 26, 1788, about 34 Aboriginal groups lived in the Sydney region close to waterways such as the Parramatta River. Aboriginal people had managed the water sustainably for thousands of years, and were careful not to pollute the water supplies which provided fresh drinking water, and supported food such as fish, crustaceans and birds.

The first managed water supplies for Sydney’s colonial population were holding tanks cut into the Tank Stream that flowed through the settlement into Sydney Harbour, at Circular Quay. By 1826 the stream was polluted with sewage and rubbish and was abandoned in favour of water from Busby’s Bore, a convict-built tunnel from Lachlan swamps to Hyde Park. The water was distributed throughout the city by water carts.

All cities, towns, and settlements have to manage water. Over time they have developed complex systems for collecting, distributing and treating water for people’s needs. Using stormwater, rainwater tanks, desalination plants, and recycling, means that communities can reduce their reliance on rivers and dams for water supplies.

Focus

What can you see in the painting that would need/use water?

How would the water for household use have been collected at this time?

This is a painting about the past, about arriving in a new colony and having to start everything from scratch. When new towns or cities are developed and settled now, the problem remains of providing water and sewage to households. Most Australian cities are centred on natural water features such as deep harbours, and rivers. But some water needs to come a long way. Where does Adelaide’s water come from? And what happens to Adelaide’s stormwater and sewage?
Isaac Whitehead painted this large landscape to show the scale and mystery of the magnificent forests of the Dandenong Ranges, east of Melbourne. He was interested in showing how the Australian landscape matched the imaginations and perceptions of its European settlers, as being an ancient and impenetrable wilderness.

The painting shows a thickly-wooded forest valley where the undergrowth is damp and ferny. There is a crystal clear creek shaded by huge, ancient eucalypt trees. Many micro-environments exist within the general forest area here. Tiny figures of loggers clamber over mossy logs. The figures are dwarfed by the towering trunks around them.

This painting was originally titled ‘Victorian Forest with Loggers’. Unlicensed loggers were starting to degrade the forest by cutting down these giant, old-growth trees for their valuable timber. Australia’s new furniture and building industries depended on these beautiful timbers.

In this work Whitehead was responding to an international mania for ferns from the Dandenongs. Ferns were so popular that patterns and images of them were often incorporated into decorative arts in silverware, pottery and textiles. Look around the room to see some of these objects.

People are drawn to watery locations, and will picnic, bushwalk and camp by rivers, dams and in rainforests. Some people also enjoy such locations for bird-watching and animal-spotting.

Focus

What happens to these micro-environments when old growth forests are cut down?

How much rainfall a year does a rainforest require to survive? Are there any rainforests in South Australia?
This is an unusual landscape painting as it has no horizon and very little vegetation. It is dominated by dramatic shapes. The darkness of the cave emphasises the lighter stalagmites, columns, and cliff face. The artist has included several tiny figures and dogs to convey the scale of the giant cavern entrance.

Conrad Martens painted this cave system only three weeks after it had been found by explorers, south of Bathurst, in New South Wales. New discoveries such as this stimulated visits by inquisitive tourists and artists.

Cave systems are labyrinths of underground erosion, created over millions of years by water seeping, dripping and running through cracks from above. The moving water dissolves minerals from the soil and rock, carrying them along in underground streams. These minerals are often deposited along the way, dropped by slowly moving water to build dramatic forms inside the caves.

Water dripping downwards from a drip point can make hanging ‘fingers’ of new rock-like icicles, called stalactites. Below the drip point the same dripping will build up stone fingers called stalagmites. Sometimes these two meet in the middle to make columns.

Focus
Wherever it travels, water carries chemicals, minerals and nutrients. Find out what minerals dissolve and rebuild to form stalactites and stalagmites.

Think about ways in which water forms or changes landscapes. Choose a particular South Australian landscape - for example the Flinders Ranges, the Murray mouth, Naracoorte Caves, or a coastal area, and consider how water has played a part in its formation.
This painting shows how artists are inspired by the mirroring and reflecting qualities of water.

Aboriginal people have lived in the Murray-Darling River area for thousands of years, understanding how to live sustainably with the land and the river’s cycles of flood and drought. The river has provided them with food such as fish and birds, while the giant river red gums have provided the bark needed for canoes and for shelter.

This painting shows a twilight scene along a backwater of the Murray River in the late 19th Century. There are Aboriginal people in their bark dwelling, and also standing by the water.

The Murray-Darling is Australia’s largest and greatest river system. It collects the water that drains from parts of Queensland, New South Wales, The Australian Capital Territory, Victoria, and South Australia. The water flows out to sea at Goolwa in South Australia.

The two major rivers in the Murray-Darling system are the Darling, which is 2,740km long, and the Murray, which is 2,520 km long. The system includes 23 rivers in all.

The Murray-Darling is home to hundreds of species of native fauna and flora which rely on the seasonal flooding of the river system. The area is also home to over two million people. It is Australia’s most important agricultural region, producing over one third of Australia’s food supply. Nearly three quarters of the irrigation in Australia occurs in the Murray-Darling Basin.
James Shaw was one of colonial South Australia's most enterprising artists. He was self-trained as a photographer and painter, and used both skills to record many early events in South Australia. This painting shows a ship wrecked on a reef, and being torn apart by huge waves.

This was a significant event in colonial South Australian maritime history. The Admella was a “steam-sailer”, that is it could travel under sail but also as a coal-fuelled steamer. It had three watertight bulkheads (similar to those on the Titanic) and was the most technologically advanced ship of her time, and was thought to be unsinkable.

Travelling by sea was the quickest and most comfortable choice for early colonial travellers. When the Admella was commissioned she was a popular choice of transport, and made regular runs between Adelaide, Melbourne and Launceston. (Thus its name).

The Admella was travelling from Port Adelaide to Melbourne on the night of 6th August 1846 when it ran aground across the reef of Carpenter’s Rocks off the lower south-east coast of South Australia near present-day Mount Gambier. Ships in those days didn’t have good compasses or maps. There weren’t many lighthouses, and no radio to signal for help.

Passengers and crew clinging to the wreckage had no water and very little food. Captain McEwan shared out what food remained and had to prevent survivors from drinking salt water, which had begun to take the lives of those who drank it.

Survivors clung to the wreckage for eight days before being rescued. Only 24 people from a total of 113 survived.

James Shaw
Australia, 1815 - 1881
*The Admella*
1858, Adelaide
oil on canvas
South Australian Government Grant 1977, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

Focus

*Find out how long humans can survive without water.*

*Why can’t we drink seawater?*

*Research how sea water can be turned into drinking water.*
This painting is about the absence of water. It had not rained for a very long time in Victoria at the time this painting was done, and the artist shows a hot, dry, thirsty land. It was painted in a shearing shed in the Riverina district, New South Wales. It is very much a ‘country’ painting. The artist portrays a stampede of sheep towards water at the bottom right of the painting. If the stockman in the foreground is unsuccessful in ‘cutting them off’, many sheep may be crushed or drowned.

The artist never saw this ‘break away’ happen. He travelled through outback Victoria and camped out with the drovers, who told him about life on the land. Using these stories and his own experiences as inspiration, he created the painting.

Some critics at the time didn’t like this painting because it looked ‘too Australian’. They thought it would give people overseas a negative impression of Australia.
This painting celebrates leisure culture, the joys of the beach and the Australian sunlight. It shows the popular beach of Mentone near Melbourne on a bright sunny day in 1888. A day at the beach was a popular activity at the time, and people in this painting have caught the train down for the day to relax and walk on the promenade.

At the time, men and women had to swim separately in bathing enclosures, such as that shown (in part) at the right of the work. Between sunrise and sunset only gentle paddling was considered respectable.

The beach today has come to symbolise the Australian way of life – pleasure, freedom, independence and enjoyment. It is an important part of our national identity and culture. Australians love the coast, with many taking beach holidays and owning seaside shacks and holiday houses.

Did you know that the Australian coastline stretches over a distance of more than 36,000 kilometres?
Water is not always visible as ocean, lake or river. Sometimes it is less obvious, as Clarice Beckett’s paintings often show.

Clarice Beckett is recognised as one of Australia’s most important Modernist artists. Her paintings are ‘everyday’ landscapes: suburban scenes that feature fog, mist, or rain often suggesting an illusion of reality.

Beckett often walked the streets and cliff tops near her seaside home with her painting cart loaded with easel, paint and canvasses. She painted incessantly, and in all weathers. She died at the age of 45 after contacting pneumonia following a spell of painting outside during a storm.

Beckett’s favoured painting ‘times’ were dawn and dusk. Her paintings often seem blurry, foggy or misty; objects are made shiny - and different - by rain. This painting shows a Melbourne city streetscape in mist and fog. Fog is tiny droplets of water which are light enough to float in the air.
Oceans and seas cover more than two-thirds of the Earth’s surface, and contain 97 percent of all the water in the world. The oceans are filled with many living things, ranging from tiny shrimp-like creatures that float on the surface to different kinds of fish, crabs, sharks, turtles, dugongs, and whales.

In 1948 the South Australian Museum’s honorary ethnologist, Charles Mountford collected hundreds of Aboriginal bark paintings and other art objects when he led the eight month American Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. Controversially, during this field trip Mountford pioneered the collecting of bark paintings as works of art, not as anthropological objects. In 1956, these bark paintings were distributed by the Commonwealth government to state art galleries and today they form the foundation of their Aboriginal art collections.

These bark paintings were created by indigenous people living by the coast, and using the surrounding waters to source food such as crabs and turtles.
Catherine Truman is a contemporary South Australian artist who is well known in Australia and internationally for her finely-crafted objects. The fish – a recurrent symbol in her early work – are used here by the artist as a metaphor for the human spirit.

This work provides an example of how water is an inspiration for artists. Catherine Truman has imagined playful fish leaping in and out of the water. The bronze fish seem to dive into the slate ‘pool’ or become caught in the ‘net’ of the gateway.

Focus

Consider how the artist has created a visual game. You are walking on, or through, water. How has the artist made the stone slate look like water?

Back at school, using plasticine and/or cardboard, create your own fish or sea-creature sculpture.

Paint or draw an image which focuses on one of the ideas/themes explored during Water Week.

Catherine TRUMAN
Australia, 1957
Slate pool walkway
1993-1996, Adelaide
Mintaro slate, patinated cast bronze fish, painted steel gates
South Australian Government Grant 1996, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

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