

Max and Olive

The photographic life of
Olive Cotton and Max Dupain

Education resource

This education resource is designed to assist teachers and students in exploring the National Gallery of Australia's travelling exhibition *Max and Olive: the photographic life of Olive Cotton and Max Dupain*. Activities and inquiry questions are suited to Visual Arts, Media Arts and History subjects in the Australian Curriculum, especially Years 9 and 10. The Year 10 History focus on The Modern World and Australia from 1918 until the present is particularly relevant.

In relation to History the works of art can be used as primary sources to evidence events and attitudes during a period of rapid change. Making and responding activities for Visual Arts and Media Arts students cover the technological advances in photography, the influence of Modernism, the changing role of the artist and the art world, and the role of documentary film, and provide opportunities to explore making options directly inspired by works of art in the exhibition.

This resource is divided thematically into eight sections; each includes a stimulus image by Cotton and Dupain with questions and activities for the different subject areas.

The themes are:

Australian life and leisure

Pictorialism

Surrealism

Modernism

The body

Documentary photography

The extraordinary in the ordinary

War: individual and group portraiture.

More images and information are available on the NGA's website for the Max and Olive exhibition.

Max Dupain

Sunbaker 1937

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
gift of the Philip Morris Arts Grant 1982

Olive Cotton

Teacup ballet 1935

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1983

Background

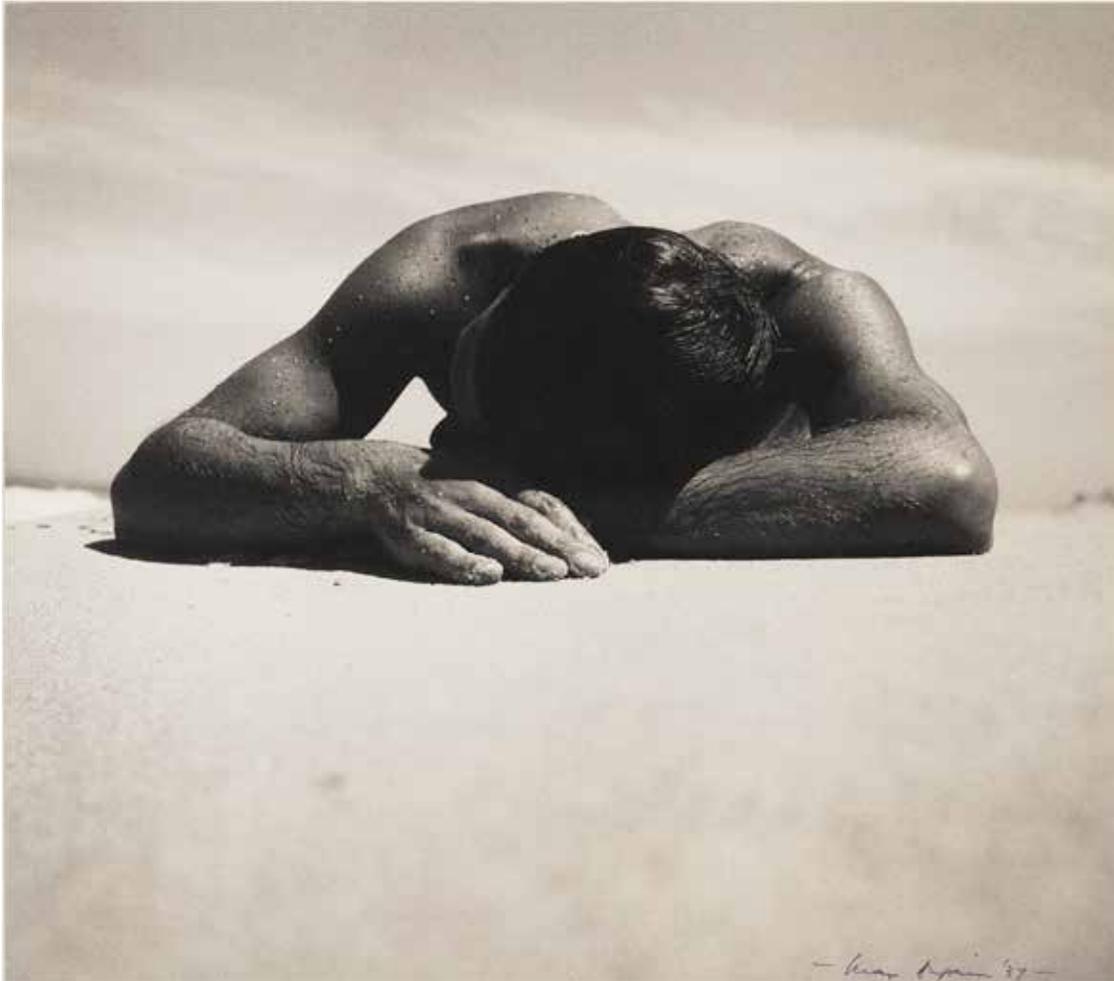
Max Dupain and Olive Cotton were key figures in twentieth-century Australian visual culture. They shared a close personal and professional relationship and this collaboration resulted in the creation of some defining images in Australian photography. This exhibition focuses on the work the artists produced between 1934 and 1945, the period of their professional association and a time when they were at the centre of exciting new developments in photographic practice.

Dupain and Cotton experimented with the photographic medium to showcase the inventive characteristics of Modernism, aware of developments in photography in Europe and the United States. They were influenced by the visual language of Surrealism and the Bauhaus as well as the sophisticated lighting and compositions of Hollywood glamour photography. They applied the language and stylistic codes of Modernism (clean lines, geometry, dramatic angles and lighting) to the Australian context of the 1930s and 40s, incorporating their very particular relationships to the world and to one another.

Dupain opened his own studio in 1934 and quickly began to attract public attention and patronage. Cotton joined the studio as an assistant in the same year and the couple married in 1939 for a short period. Between 1941 and 1945 Cotton managed the studio while Dupain worked with the Department of Home Security and then the Department of Information during the Second World War.

The artists often shot the same subjects, or pursued subjects and pictorial effects in similar ways. Dupain's response is often more structured and abstract whereas Cotton's depicts a more immersive relationship to place with an intuitive love of light and its atmospheric effects.

Australian life and leisure



During a camping trip in bushland at Culburra Beach on the New South Wales south coast in 1937, Max Dupain took a number of photographs of a friend after a swim. *Sunbaker* 1937 initially appears as a spontaneous image, however it highlights many of the modernist principles that interested Dupain, such as the focus on essential components and the manipulation of composition.

At this time opportunities for women to pursue professional careers were limited and many were restricted to more traditional roles. When Dupain was away during the Second World War, Olive Cotton took over the role as studio manager.

Max Dupain

Sunbaker 1937

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
gift of the Philip Morris Arts Grant 1982

Olive Cotton

The sleeper 1939

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1987

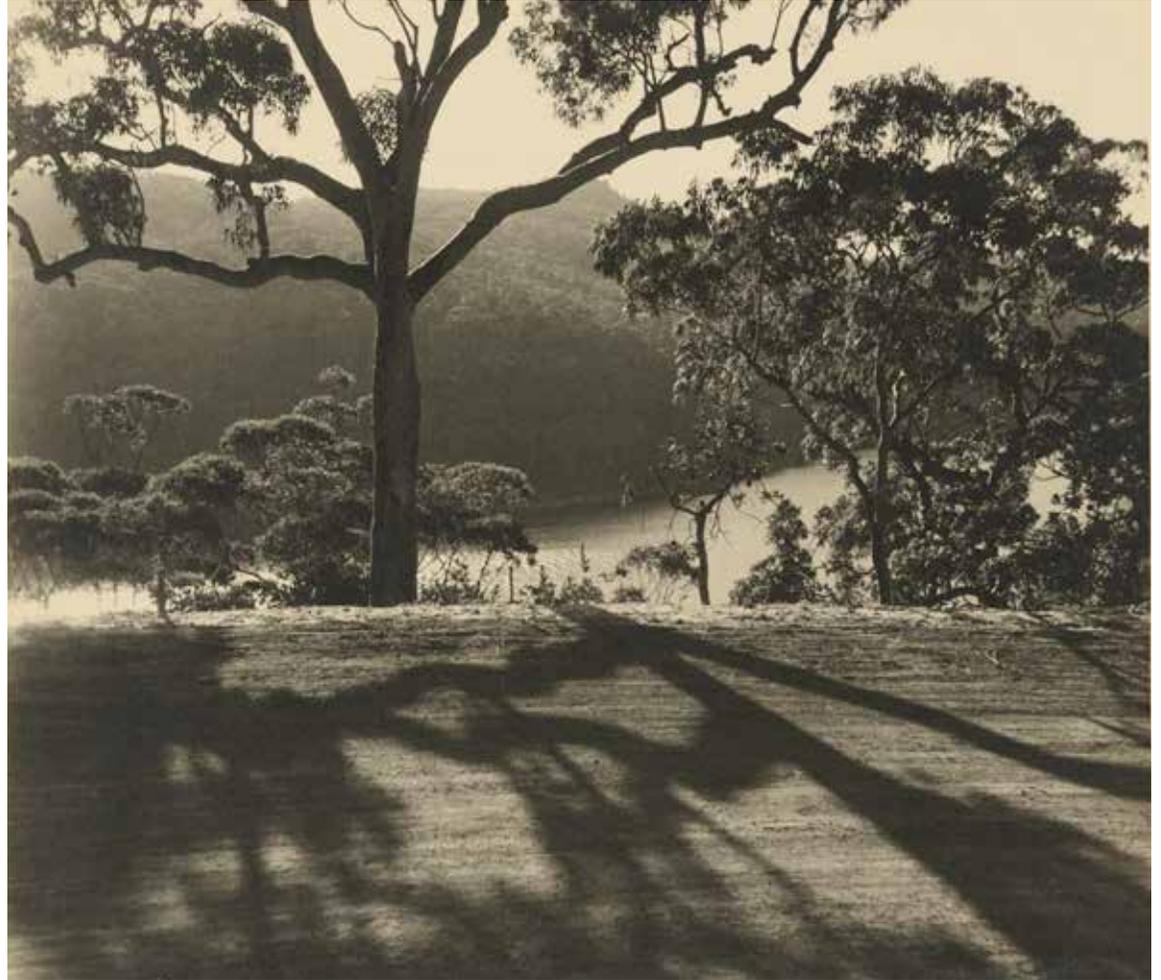
History: Knowledge, Understanding and Historical Skills

- Discuss Cotton's role as studio manager when Dupain was away. Research the broader implications of women in the workforce during the war period and consider the economic and social impact of their activities at this time. Discuss how the wartime workforce may have influenced the rights of women in the late 1940s, 1950s and beyond.
- Study Cotton's *The sleeper* 1939. What features does this image share with Dupain's *Sunbaker*? What do these locations reveal about the Australian lifestyle at the time? How has leisure time in Australia changed since the late 1930s?

Visual Arts and Media Arts: Making and Responding

- Discuss the terms 'realism' and 'pictorial reduction' in the context of Dupain's *Sunbaker* to develop a definition of each. Look closely and identify the compositional features that make this photograph such a striking image.
- Write a list of photographic terms that can be used to discuss art photography and analyse images (consider terms such as depth of field, framing, focal point, horizon line, close up, foreground and viewpoint). Research and discuss their meanings.
- Compare and contrast Dupain's *Sunbaker* with Anne Zahalka's *Sunbaker #2* 1989 and discuss the social and historical context of each. In your answer provide a visual analysis of each photograph and discuss the word 'iconic' in relation to each image. Also consider the changing roles of women in 1937 compared to 1989, and international opinions about Australia that may have relevance in the years between each photograph's production.
- Bring Dupain's *Sunbaker* into the twenty-first century by developing your own interpretation of this iconic image. What essential components would you focus on?
- Discuss Cotton's photograph [Surf's edge](#) c 1935–38 and its relationship to *Sunbaker*. What characteristics do these two images share?

Pictorialism



Pictorialism was an international art photography movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which responded to the idea that photographs could be manipulated to create images characterised by soft, picturesque effects, often produced through hand printing. Max Dupain came to reject Pictorialism as he thought it was constraining photography, however features of the style, such as atmospheric effects, can be found in pictures by both Dupain and Olive Cotton. These often appeared in combination with elements of modernist photography such as an interest in line, form and the rejection of narrative.

Max Dupain

Design – suburbia 1933
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1982

Olive Cotton

The patterned road 1938
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1983

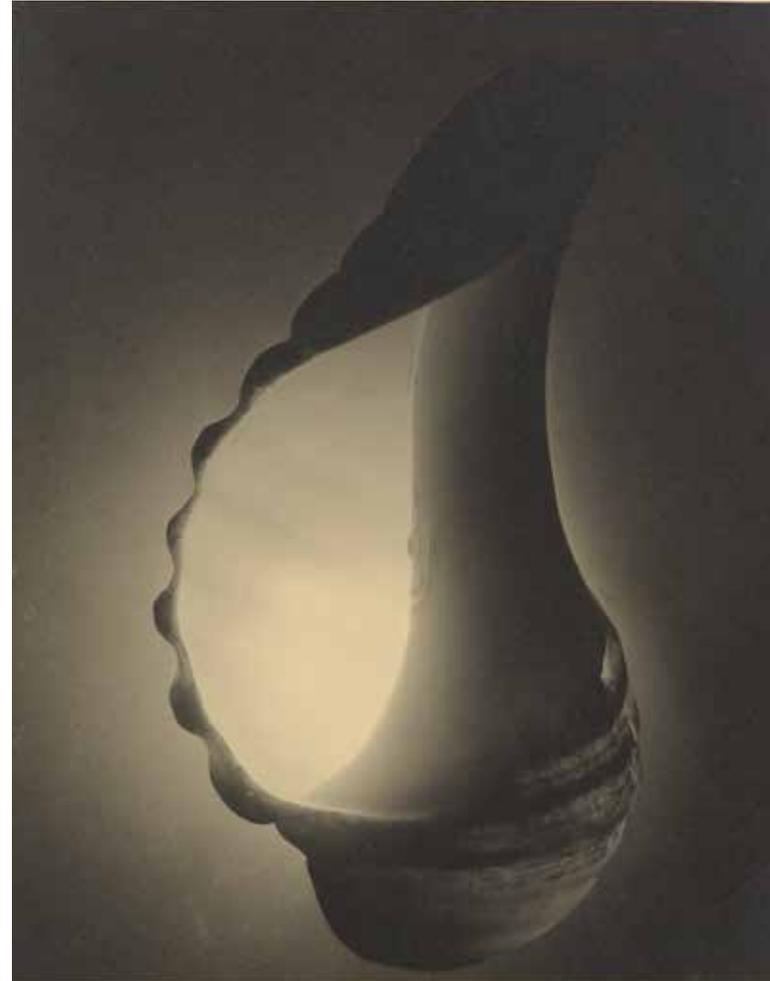
History: Knowledge, Understanding and Historical Skills

- Research urban planning and development for an Australian city to understand more about urban life after the First World War. How does the title of Dupain's photograph, *Design – suburbia*, reflect the development of Sydney in this period?
- Develop a timeline for an Australian city from 1918 to the present highlighting significant urban changes. For example, you might like to include the Sydney Harbour Bridge project and its implications for housing in The Rocks and North Sydney, or Walter Burley Griffin's designs for Canberra and how these have influenced urban design in Australia's capital city.

Visual Arts and Media Arts: Making and Responding

- Discuss the dominance of line in Dupain's *Design – suburbia* 1933. How has the artist used this feature to dramatic effect? Cotton's *The patterned road* 1938 features a similar aesthetic, even though the shadow forms are more organic. Compare and contrast the two photographs. How do these effects illustrate the artists' interest in Pictorialism?
- When did Pictorialism emerge and what may have influenced its dominance? Research pictorialist photographers in Australia and elsewhere who influenced Dupain and Cotton in their early careers and discuss the influence on the artists' work.
- Discuss the term hybridity in relation to these two photographs. Identify other photographs in this exhibition that display pictorialist and modernist features combined in a hybrid fashion.
- Observe atmospheric effects in your home or school environment. Look for structures that could create dramatic lengthy shadows and patterning effects at certain times of day. Revisit the site over a number of days to capture different effects through photography, drawing and/or montage. Display your works in the classroom in groups with stylistic or thematic links.

Surrealism



Max Dupain's interest in Surrealism was consolidated when in 1935 he reviewed a monograph of the work of the Paris-based photographer Man Ray. Rather than drawing on Man Ray's interest in the unconscious and the world of dreams and desire, Dupain focused instead on the way Man Ray's vision was directly connected to the photographic medium and its own particular properties: chemistry, light, tonal relationships and image 'selection'. Olive Cotton's experimentation with Surrealism can be seen in images such as *The shell* c 1935–38.

Max Dupain

Surreal portrait for the home "Metaphysical compensation between fire and Water" (Diane Dupain) 1938
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1982

Olive Cotton

The shell c 1935–38
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 2012

**Visual Arts and Media Arts:
Making and Responding**

- Dupain has used photo-collage in *Surreal portrait for the home, "Metaphysical compensation between fire and water" (Diane Dupain) 1938* and played with surrealist ideas of incongruous juxtaposition. Write a catchy headline and the first paragraph of a narrative or film script to accompany this image.
 - Investigate some of Man Ray's photographs in the NGA's collection that also use the surrealist technique of collage.
 - A photogram is a photographic picture produced without a camera by arranging objects on light-sensitive paper, which is then exposed and developed. Man Ray developed the process and called it a 'Rayograph'. Identify photographs in the exhibition that were created using this method.
 - Research Australian artists who engaged with the surrealist movement at some stage in their career even though no organised group developed in Australia. How does Cotton's *The shell* capture some of the key features of Surrealism?
- Inspired by Dupain's technique of photo-collage, create an image using figurative and architectural and/or landscape elements that conjure up a sense of mystery with an open narrative. Once each student has completed their photo-collage choose one of your classmate's images and write a short narrative in response.
 - Study Dupain's *Rayograph* in the exhibition. If you have access to a darkroom make your own photogram. If not, see if you can work with digital photography effects to create one with a surrealist edge using materials with textural qualities such as safety pins, paper clips, lace, alfoil, old fabrics, string and cotton buds. Focus on the attributes of these materials and compose your photograph keeping a sense of ambiguity in mind.

Modernism



Max Dupain was the first Australian photographer to embrace Modernism, and took a number of photographs of Pyrmont silos in the 1930s. There were no skyscrapers in Sydney until the late 1930s so the silos, Walter Burley Griffin's incinerators and the Sydney Harbour Bridge were the major points of reference for those interested in depicting modern expressions of engineering and industrial power. Olive Cotton's *Drainpipes* 1937 shows the precisely formed circles and curves of the pipes, interspersed with slivers of light and long shadows.

Max Dupain

Pyrmont silos 1935
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1976

Olive Cotton

Drainpipes 1937
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1987

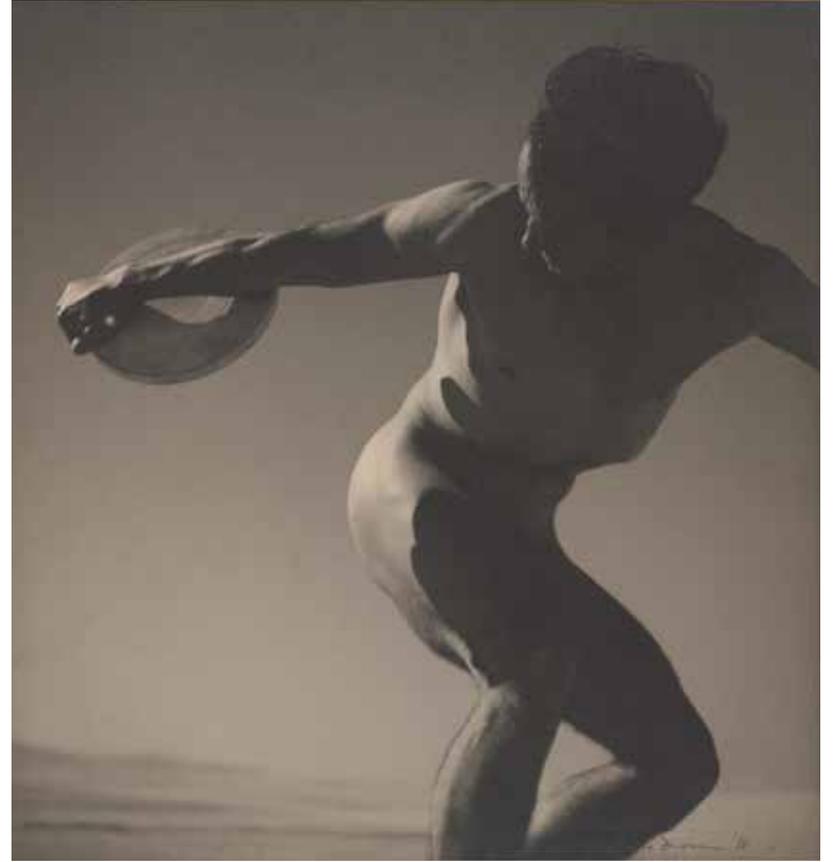
History: Knowledge, Understanding and Historical Skills

- Research the changes in the skyline of Pyrmont, Sydney now compared to the 1930s. In your answer discuss the visual impact and naming of ANZAC Bridge.
- Research the history and land usage of the suburb of Pyrmont, especially its role in the industrial waterfront of Sydney and the heritage implications for its buildings including the Pyrmont silos. What function did the silos serve in the 1930s and what is their function now?

Visual Arts and Media Arts: Making and Responding

- Examine *Pyrmont silos* 1935 and discuss its formal qualities and aesthetic austerity. Why do you think these structures created a sensation among photographers at the time?
- Discuss the role of the photographer's viewpoint in these two photographs. How does this increase the drama of the composition and the monumentality of the forms? How have Dupain and Cotton used light and shadow as a defining element in these photographs?
- Cotton's *Drainpipes* 1937 celebrates the structural circularity of the forms. How does the artist further emphasise this aspect of the composition?
- Dupain examined the silos from a modernist perspective, emphasising their monumentality from low viewpoints under a bright cloudless sky. Investigate architectural structures in your environment and identify how alterations to natural light can heighten their visual impact. Capture this shift in a signature image that elevates your chosen structure into something special.

The body



Olive Cotton's images of bodies outdoors merge classical and modernist motifs and predate similar images by Max Dupain. In *Max in shadows* c 1935 the figure adopts a pose that appears ready to spring into action. This image was made before Dupain's own photographs of sun worshipping such as *Sunbaker*.

Olive Cotton

Max in shadows c 1935
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1998

Max Dupain

Athlete 1937
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1982

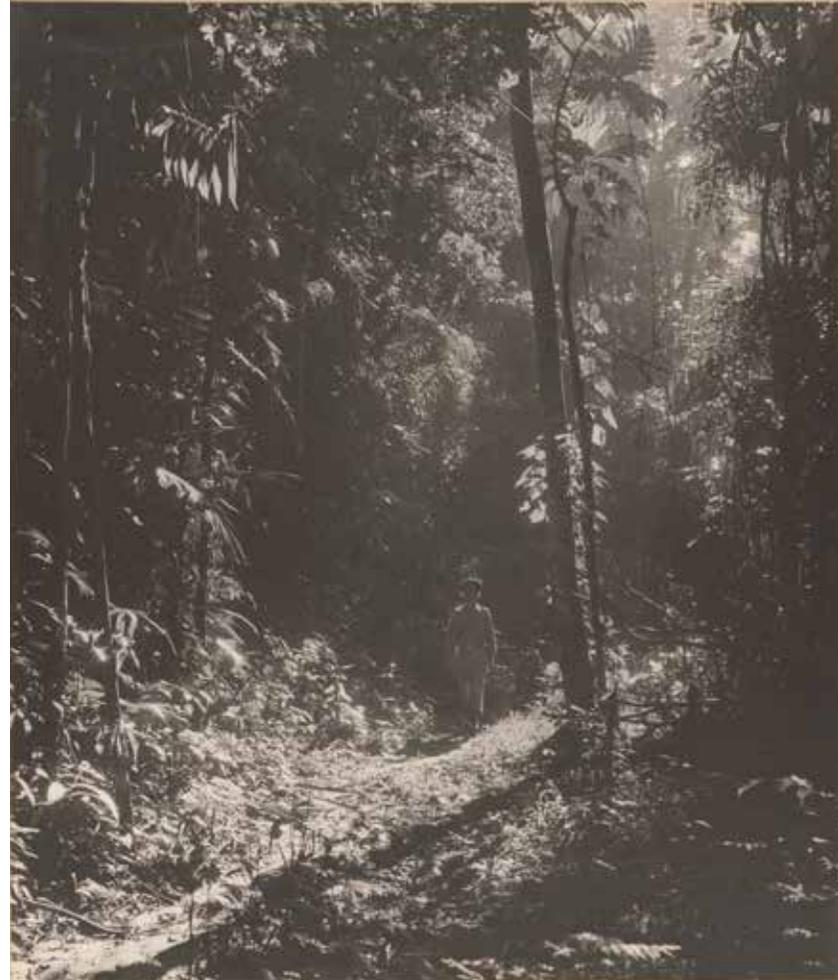
History: Knowledge, Understanding and Historical Skills

- Study Dupain's *Athlete* 1937. Analyse the composition and discuss how this image could be viewed as a representation of strength during a period of global uncertainty in the lead up to the Second World War.
- Research the work of the filmmaker, Leni Riefenstahl. How does Dupain's *Athlete* share stylistic features with some of the footage in the Riefenstahl's film *Olympia* (1938)? Why might Ancient Greece have been seen as a reference point during this period?
- Dupain's photographs throughout the 1930s also contained allusions to classical forms. Fashion photographs and advertisements, society portraits and exhibition photographs often included pieces of classical statuary or subjects that assumed a classical pose. Look for other photographs in the exhibition and record those that include these influences.

Visual Arts and Media Arts: Making and responding

- How does the positioning of the figure in *Max in shadows* emphasise movement? Discuss how the figure's torso has been used as a 'canvas' to project shadows onto the surface of the skin. What purpose does the foliage in the top left corner serve?
- In what ways were Dupain's exhibition photography and his commercial practice interconnected? How did the studio environment facilitate this?
- Research the *Standing Bodhisattva* in the NGA's Indian art collection. Identify the similarities and differences between this work and the figures in these photographs. How is movement conveyed in this sculpture?
- Divide into pairs and photograph your partner in the outdoors in black and white. Experiment with capturing different angles of the body to indicate movement. Consider the framing of your photograph and the camera angle to create the most dramatic effect of a body in motion.
- Research Classical Greek sculpture such as the *Doryphorus* and *Lacoön and his sons*. Identify another two photographs in the exhibition that reference classical sculptural forms. Develop a work of art or series that references these influences.

Documentary photography



In 1942 Max Dupain joined the Camouflage Unit of the Department of Home Security and was sent to Alice Springs, Darwin and then Papua New Guinea to photograph local life and the landscape. This focus on daily life continued when Dupain was commissioned by the Department of Information in 1946 to document Australian life, supporting postwar migration campaigns.

Olive Cotton received commissions such as the book illustrations *Aircraft mechanics* for the Royal Australian Air Force's publication, *Wings of tomorrow* (1945), which focused her work on a more documentary style of photography. While continuing to do work for advertising and fashion clients, these experiences of capturing real life had a lasting impact on the ongoing work of both Dupain and Cotton.

Olive Cotton

Sesquicentenary procession, Sydney 1938
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1987

Max Dupain

Early morning, Nadzab jungle 1944
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 2000

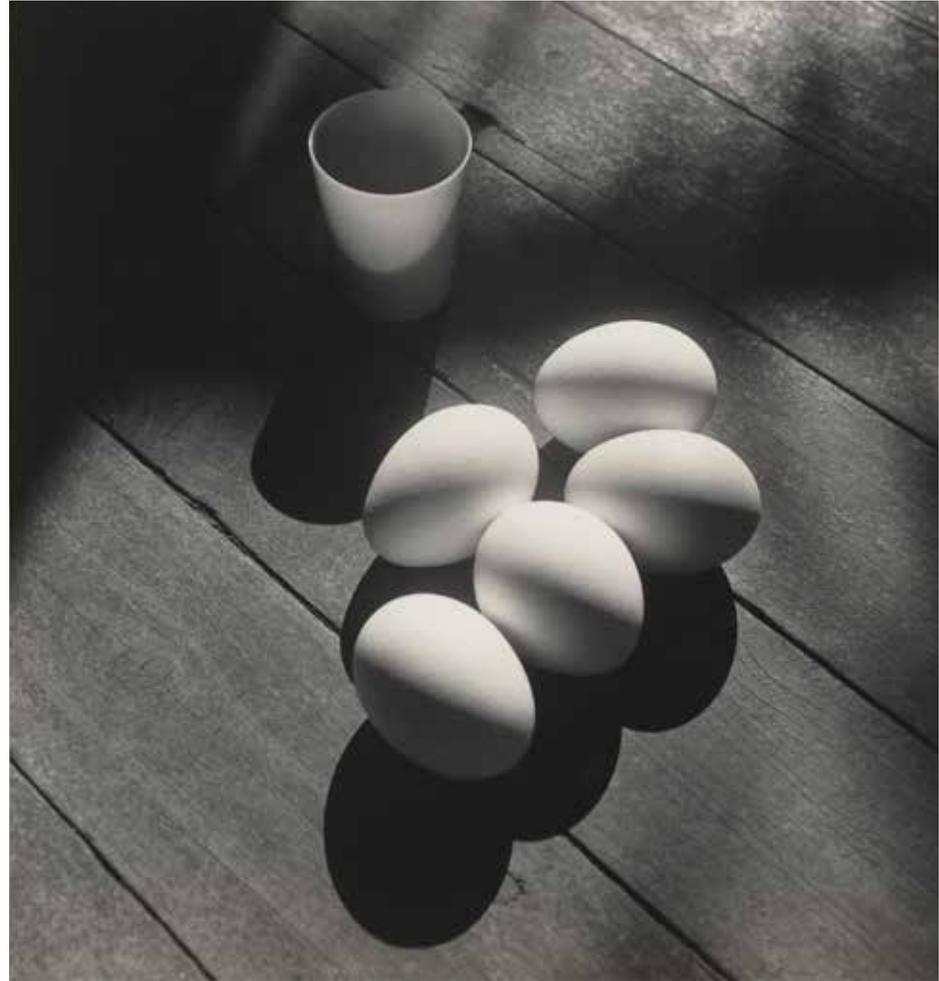
History: Knowledge, Understanding and Historical Skills

- Olive Cotton photographed the 'March to nationhood' parade that took place in Sydney on 26 January 1938. What did this event commemorate and what other celebrations took place?
- Research Australia's role in the history and politics of Papua New Guinea. Discuss the importance of the Kokoda Track and its role as a pilgrimage site for Australian hiking groups.
- The New Guinea offensives of 1943–44 were the single largest series of connected operations Australia has ever mounted. Research these offensives to discover important locations during the campaign including Nadzab jungle, Lae, the terrain of the region, the number of troops involved and the logistical elements of the campaign.
- Research the Landing at Nadzab to learn more about this New Guinea campaign.

Visual Arts and Media Arts: Making and Responding

- Cotton photographed the 150th anniversary parade of the arrival of Captain Phillip at Sydney Cove from the window of the Dupain studio and focused on the people watching the parade from a number of vantage points. What features of this composition help to clarify the period of its production?
- Take a photograph at your school or local community that includes features that could indicate the date of production for observers in the future and capture something of today. What elements will you decide to focus on and why?

The extraordinary in the ordinary



Modernist photography often includes some of the following features: abstract beauty, clear lines, geometric shapes and bold content. These two photographs show how everyday objects can be used to create images of a great beauty. The stars in Olive Cotton's famous teacup ballet are six cheap cups and saucers bought at a Woolworths store close to the studio. When reflecting on the work the artist said that 'their angular handles suggested to me the position of "arms akimbo" and that led to the idea of a dance pattern'. The picture uses a range of formal devices that became common in Cotton's work, especially the backlighting used to create dramatic tonal contrast and shadows. Max Dupain's *Eggs* c 1935 reflects the pleasure he took in the effects created by light.

Olive Cotton

Teacup ballet 1935

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased 1983

Max Dupain

Eggs c 1935

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased 1983

Visual Arts and Media Arts: Making and Responding

- When did modernist photography emerge and what historical factors may have contributed to its evolution?
- Examples of photographs by Dupain and Cotton are almost always on permanent display at the National Gallery of Australia. Why do you think this is so?
- Why did the NGA's photography curators develop a travelling exhibition of the artists' work? Discuss the exhibition's title and its relevance to their professional relationship.
- How different is it seeing the photographs in a gallery setting compared with seeing them on a website or in the classroom?
- In a room, restrict and manipulate the lighting with curtains and blinds to allow shafts of light to enter. Collect and position groupings of objects or even folded paper shapes on a surface to create dramatic effects. Experiment with backlighting in a number of ways to create a composition that embodies the notion of the 'extraordinary in the ordinary'.

War: Individual and group portraiture



Max Dupain worked with the Department of Home Security's Camouflage Unit during the Second World War and during this time Olive Cotton managed the busy studio. Damien Parer was a war photographer, cameraman and close friend and collaborator of Dupain and Cotton. Parer's footage of the Australian withdrawal along the Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea was used to make the Academy Award winning newsreel, *Kokoda Front Line* (1942). Introduced by Parer, the film and commentary brought home to Australians the realities of the war in the Pacific. Cotton's study of aircraft mechanics at de Havilland's aircraft factory at Bankstown, Sydney was a favourite image of hers.

Max Dupain

Damien Parer c 1943
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1982

Olive Cotton

Aircraft mechanics 1945
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1983

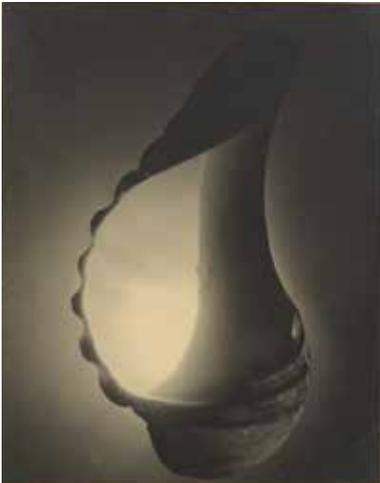
History: Knowledge, Understanding and Historical Skills

- Research the location of the Kokoda Track and watch the newsreel *Kokoda Front Line*. Discuss the role of documentary at the time, especially the collective nature of the viewing experience compared with the immediacy of images of war today.
- Research Parer's other activities during the Second World War and discuss his legacy in Australian history.

Visual Arts and Media Arts: Making and Responding

- What characteristics has Dupain captured in this portrait of his friend?
- In *Aircraft mechanics* 1945 Cotton liked the way the figure arrangement mirrored the endeavors of the mechanics. Their placement and concentration evoked the workings of the complicated machinery moving in a circular fashion and generating speed, which linked to modern transportation. Develop a series of group portraits that reference the professional skills and attributes of the subjects in a similar way to Cotton's image.
- Compare Cotton's photographs of factory workers to other Socialist or nationalistic prints, paintings or sculptures of workers from Europe or China. What is the impact and intention of such images?

Major class exhibition



Top left to right

Olive Cotton

The sleeper 1939

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased 1987

Max Dupain

Design – suburbia 1933

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased 1982

Max Dupain

Pymont silos 1935

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased 1976

Bottom left to right

Olive Cotton

The shell c 1935–38

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased 2012

Olive Cotton

Teacup ballet 1935

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased 1983

Max Dupain

Surreal portrait for the home "Metaphysical

compensation between fire and Water"

(Diane Dupain) 1938

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased 1982

Pictorialism versus Surrealism versus Modernism: Light versus geometry versus atmosphere

- After viewing *Max and Olive* develop a class exhibition where each student identifies a style of photography that interests them, inspired by the images in the exhibition. Focus on some of the key characteristics of your preferred style as mentioned in this resource and use your creative skills to make your image reflect something in the exhibition.
- Write an extended label of up to 150 words to accompany your photograph or that of one of your classmates.
- Write a critical review of the *Max and Olive* exhibition and include your opinion on the rationale for the exhibition, the reasons why it is a travelling exhibition, the role of the National Gallery of Australia in regional areas, and the influence of Dupain and Cotton on contemporary photographic practice.

Glossary

Hybridity: mixing materials, styles and ideas across a range of disciplines including art

Incongruous: seemingly out of place or not in character

Juxtaposition: placing things close together, especially for comparison or contrast

Aesthetic: the idea of beauty at a given time and place

Austerity: harshness, strictness, especially of economy or life

Monumentality: massive or imposing scale