



Coburn Tapestries

Visual Art Activities

Sydney Opera House
Digital Creative Learning
Years 3 – 12



Introduction to the Coburn Tapestries

Leading Australian abstractionist John Coburn was renowned for his vivid geometric paintings. Coburn was inspired by Matisse, Picasso and Leger, developing his own style and techniques that gave him international recognition through his paintings and prints.

Inspired by the Australian landscape, and in particular sub-tropical Queensland, he drew on lush botanical plants and shapes for his work.

In 1969, after Utzon was forced to resign from the project, architect Peter Hall was put in charge of finishing the interior design and commissioned Coburn to design two tapestries that were to serve as theatre curtains for the Joan Sutherland Theatre and the Drama Theatre in the Sydney Opera House.

For three years, he created with weavers Pinton Frères in Felletin, France to create the iconic *Curtain of the Sun* (measuring sixteen by eight metres) and *Curtain of the Moon* (measuring seventeen by five metres) tapestries which were commissioned and then hung in the Sydney Opera House from 1972.

The tapestries, made from predominately Australian wool, were the theatre curtains for the Opera Theatre (now the Joan Sutherland Theatre) and the Drama theatre until the 1980s when they were removed due to concerns for their conservation in a live theatre environment.

The tapestries have had a long history, they have been conserved and restored and have made special appearances throughout the decades.

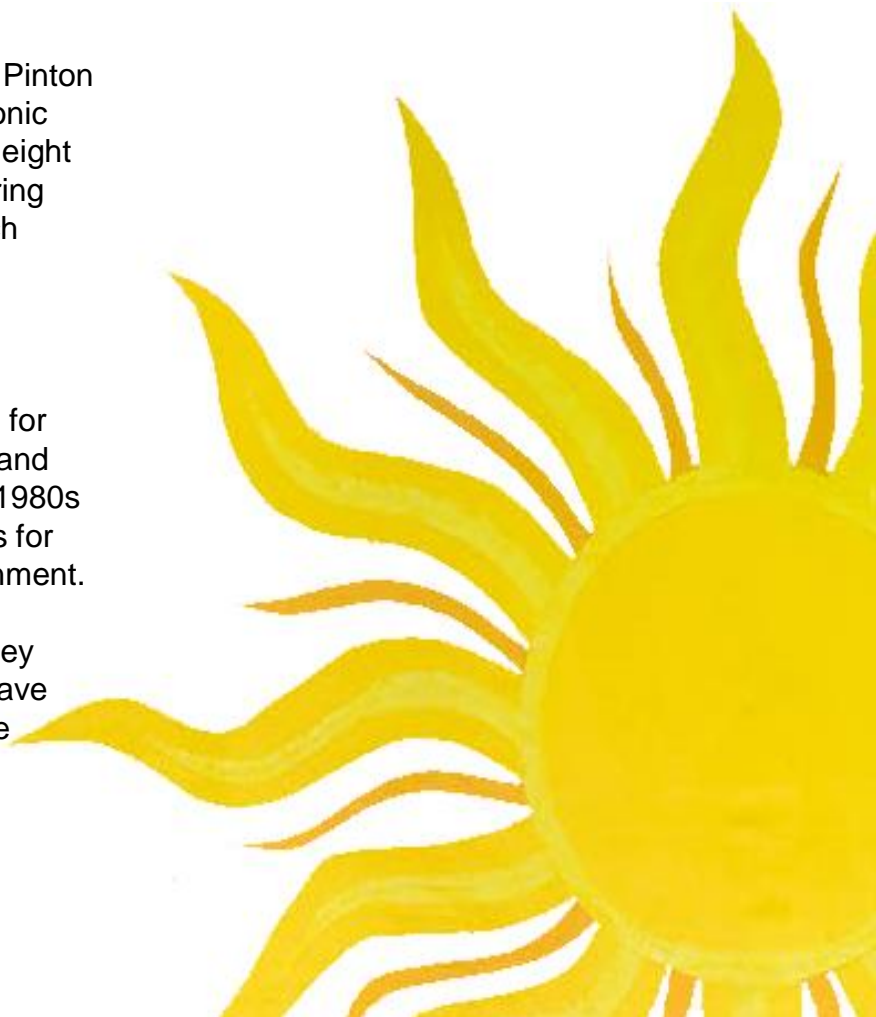
Did You Know...?

The Opera House was designed by a Danish architect – Jørn Utzon.

The original cost estimate to build Sydney Opera House was \$7 million. The final cost was \$102 million and it was largely paid for by a State Lottery.

The use of colour and shapes from the natural landscape surrounding the building site [water, palm trees, sail boats, shells] were important to Utzon's design principles and you can see these shapes throughout the building.

There are more than 1 million roof tiles covering approximately 1.62 hectares sitting over the structure. They were made in Sweden.



Meet the Artist -John Coburn Sydney Abstractionist

Informed by research prepared for the Sydney Opera House by Dr Anne Watson.

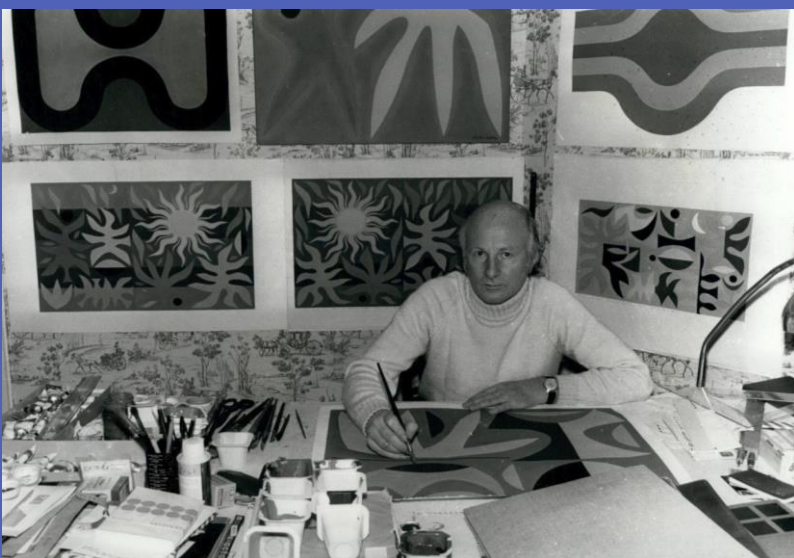
In the mid 1960s John Coburn was one of Australia's leading abstract artists. He was born in Ingham, Queensland in 1925, and while Coburn was enthusiastic about drawing from an early age, the idea of earning a living from art was beyond imagining. Enlisting in the navy he travelled extensively in the Pacific, the imagery he drew while on tour re-emerging in his later abstract work. In 1947 Coburn enrolled in a four-year art course at East Sydney Technical College where he would later teach and in 1953 he married fellow student Barbara Woodward. This same year also marked a significant turning point for the direction of his art towards abstraction when he visited the 'French Painting Today' exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.



John Coburn in Paris (1970), Coburn Family Archives.

The then controversial exhibition included paintings by Matisse, Picasso and Leger as well as several tapestries. In 1956 Coburn also visited an exhibition of contemporary French tapestries where he was able to view the actual weaving of a design by Matisse. Coburn's future as an abstractionist was sealed from the mid 1950s and his reputation steadily expanded as

he developed a mature and confident style. In 1958 he held his first successful one-man exhibition at the Macquarie Galleries, Sydney and in 1960 was awarded the prestigious Blake Prize. Reviewing Coburn's third solo show in late 1960 a young Robert Hughes wrote 'the essence of Mr Coburn's vision is its dedicated, sustained search for the visual equivalent to the underlying order of nature ... this near-religious ambition gives [his work] an impressive inner coherence.'



John Coburn. Zumapress, 1973.

Meet the Artist -John Coburn

Sydney Abstractionist

Coburn's flat geometric shapes and strong colours were ideally suited to the tapestry medium and it is not surprising that he was approached by Lucien Dray in 1966 to create maquette designs for weaving at Aubusson based on three paintings – 'In Praise of the Sun', 'Temple' and 'Genesis'. The success of this project and the commencement of a large tapestry commission – 'The Seven Days of Creation' - in early 1969 prompted Coburn to travel with his family to France, initially for six months, and spend some time observing and working with the weavers. The Coburns left in May 1969, about the time the Opera House project was firming up. Before leaving for Europe, Coburn was asked to design the curtains for the new Sydney Opera House. Lucien Dray had approached Peter Hall and suggested that the tapestry curtains could be made for two of the theatres.



John Coburn. Zumapress, 1973.

Coburn went to Sydney and was shown over the Opera Theatre and the Drama Theatre, then still just bare concrete. 'I remember standing right up at the back of the Opera Theatre and looking down on the stage. I could almost see my curtains there; I knew immediately what I wanted to do ... I decided to base the Opera House curtains on [Spanish artist Joan] Miro's 'Wall of the Sun', and his 'Wall of the Moon', which are ceramic walls at UNESCO in Paris. ... I more or less sketched them out roughly that night ...' These were not, however, the final studies. Second, slightly altered maquettes, one with written instructions on the reverse to incorporate gold thread in the sun image, were completed in late January 1970 and are now in the Opera House collection having been donated from the estate of the former NSW Minister for Public Works, Davis Hughes.

Coburn had presented the designs to Hughes on his return to Sydney in early 1972. After protracted negotiations, it was Hughes, as the Opera House client, who gave final approval to proceed with the commission on 26 November 1969. The tapestries were to be paid for in three installments of \$19,333 each and were to be completed in 19 months.

History of Coburn Tapestries

When the Sydney Opera House opened to the public on 20 October 1973, about eight years had passed since the original architect, Jørn Utzon, had withdrawn from the project following a serious disagreement with the Minister for Public Works, Davis Hughes.

In Utzon's wake, a consortium of three Australian architects was engaged to finish the third and final stage of the building, including its interior spaces and the glass walls that would enclose them.

Peter Hall was the design architect leading this new consortium in the completion of the building. After a period of discovery and revisions to the original brief for the project Hall began his work by approaching the "building as a 'found object' which dictates the character of what is built in it."

Hall hoped this approach would bring with it a "design unity even though it was not the work of one architect."

One aspect of the building that had been so important to Utzon was the use of colour in the experience of visiting the Opera House. "The idea was to see a spectacular building as you arrive and as you enter the foyers you see additional colours... ". Whilst Utzon was unable to realise all of his ideas, the spirit of his intentions in the use of colour was captured in Peter Hall's theatre interiors. Coburn's majestic *Curtain of the Sun and Curtain of the Moon*, which adorned these theatres at the building's opening, captured the spirit of Utzon's intentions in the use of colour. The tapestries were made by the celebrated Pinton Frères weavers of Aubusson and Felletin in France.

In the 1960s, the Sydney Opera House Trust (SOHT) commissioned Australian artist, John Coburn, to create two tapestries for the Drama Theatre and the Opera Theatre (as it was then known).

Mr Coburn made the tapestries in Aubusson, France over three years with the Pinton Frères Company. The company was paid \$100,000. Pinton Frères are renowned weavers of Aubusson and Felletin, France. Weaving had been practiced since the fourteenth century in the region, and after World War II the works of artists such as Le Corbusier, Cocteau, Dali, Calder and Picasso had been realised by the talented generations of craftspeople.

The *Curtain of the Moon* (in the Drama Theatre) and the *Curtain of the Sun* (in the Opera Theatre) were in situ when the Opera House opened in 1973.



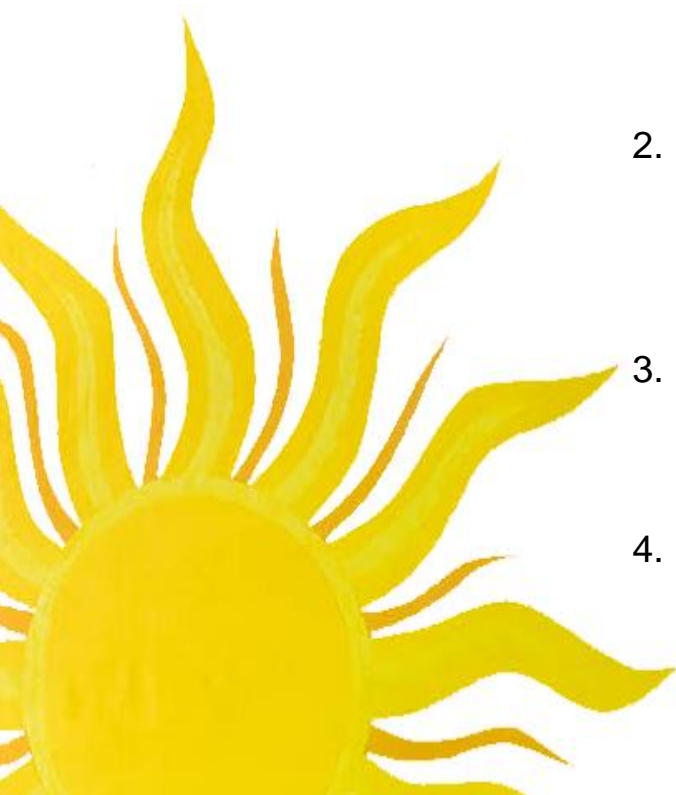
Art Activities

Stage 3

1. John Coburn's vivid works were inspired by the Australian landscape and nature. Look at the *Curtain of the Sun* and *Curtain of the Moon* and identify the shapes that have been used.
2. Create your own piece of art inspired by Australian nature. Go for a walk outside and pick up leaves from different trees and plants. Use these leaves to create your own piece of art. Trace the shapes on an A4 page and then use bright colours to colour each shape in. Cut these out and arrange on a new piece of paper to create your own design.
3. If you can't go outside, print out a copy of John Coburn's *Curtain of the Sun* or *Curtain of the Moon*. Cut out the shapes, rearrange them and trace them onto your own piece of paper to create your own tapestry design. Consider the vibrant colours that he has used and paint your own version of the Curtain's using a different palette of colours. After making your own version write a paragraph explaining your choice of shapes and colours.
4. What are you surrounded by? Using the landscape around you e.g. beaches, parks, rivers, buildings etc. create your own piece of abstract art influenced by your surroundings. Use the steps in the previous exercises to create shapes and choose colours that reflect the landscape you have chosen.

Stage 4

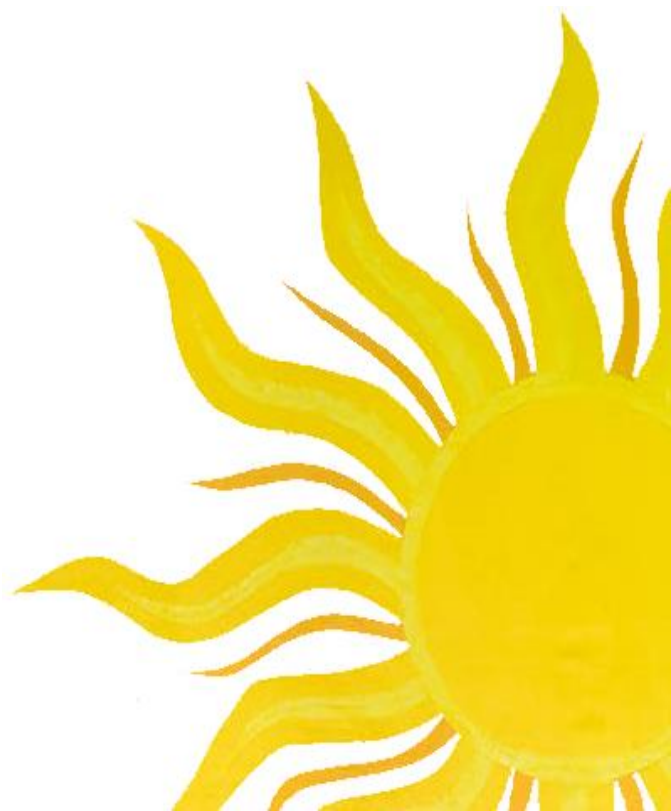
1. John Coburn's vivid works were inspired by the Australian landscape. Look at John Coburn's *Curtain of the Moon* and identify the shapes that have been used. Sketch all these shapes in your Visual Arts Diary.
2. Using these shapes create your own piece of abstract art. Sketch this in your Visual Arts Diary before choosing vibrant colours to enhance your work.
3. Write a reflection on the piece you have created citing how you have used Coburn's art to influence your work.
4. Present your work to your peers and then choose another piece of work that has stood out to you in the class. Write about why you responded to this – was the shapes? the colours? Explain in detail what made this piece stand out.



Art Activities

Stage 5

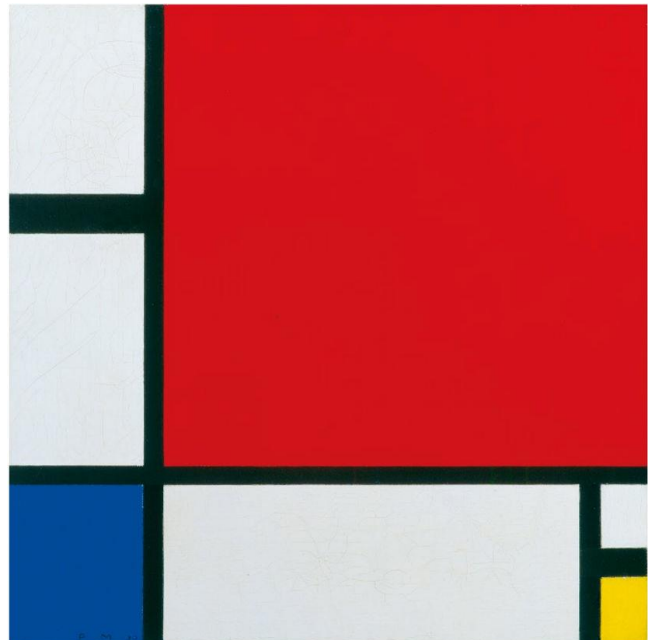
1. Classroom creation: With your class walk around your landscape. On a piece of A4 paper draw a shape that is inspired by the landscape. In class swap these images with your peers and colour them in vibrant colours. Cut the shapes out and as a class create a large piece of artwork by placing each of the shapes together. Discuss the effectiveness of the composition until you are happy with the final piece.
2. Making a Tapestry – Read through *Making a Tapestry—How Did They Do That?* By Sarah Mallory, Research Assistant, European Sculpture and Decorative Arts <https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/2014/making-a-tapestry> Detail the process of making tapestries in your Visual Arts Diary.
3. Look at Australian Tapestry on the Bathurst Regional Art Gallery: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Wv7mle9r8Y>
Write a reflection on the tapestries. What did you find the most striking? Why?
4. Tapestries can rely on complex methods. Watch John Coburn describing the weavers craft: <https://youtu.be/pX7qQ-UnQ0g> Create a simple mini DIY tapestry using a piece of cardboard. Follow the instructions by Jordan Clark on Youtube DIY mini tapestry (using a cardboard loom): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8yJPKUq-Y0>



Art Activities

Stage 6

1. What is Abstract art? TATE defines Abstract art as “art that does not attempt to represent an accurate depiction of a visual reality but instead use shapes, colours, forms and gestural marks to achieve its effect” (<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/abstract-art>). Using the link explore abstract art across the century and research the different theoretical ideas behind abstract art.
2. There were several artists that John Coburn was inspired by. These include Matisse, Miro, Mondrian, Picasso and Rothko. Choose one of these artists and research their work. Use this to create a piece of work that is influenced by abstract art. Write a reflection after creating your piece citing how you used the artists work to influence your own.
3. One of the artists that John Coburn was inspired by was Piet Mondrain. One of Mondrain’s most famous works was *Composition II in Red, Blue, and Yellow*, 1930. Conduct research into the significance of the piece and write a report. Using your research create your own body of work using Mondrian as a source of inspiration



Piet Mondrian, *Composition II in Red, Blue, and Yellow*, 1930

4. The Sun and the Moon tapestries were directly inspired by Miro’s murals at UNESCO headquarters in Paris. Look closely at these murals and write a reflection on the connections you see between the two.
5. Using both Miro’s murals and Coburn’s Sun and the Moon create a mural that is influenced by the shapes and the prints of both artists.





Curtain of the Moon, Sydney Opera House, maquette designed by John Coburn. Sydney Opera House Collection.



Curtain of the Sun, Sydney Opera House, macquette designed by John Coburn. Sydney Opera House Collection.

Additional Resources

Grace Ignacia See Most Famous Abstract Artworks In The Last 100 Years

<https://theartling.com/en/artzine/famous-abstract-art/>

Australian Tapestry on the Bathurst Regional Art Gallery:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Wv7mle9r8Y>

Sydney Opera House Coburn Tapestries return to grace our stages

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDHA51Z_Ezg

Sydney Opera House John Coburn describing the weavers craft:

<https://youtu.be/pX7qQ-UnQ0g>

Art Gallery of NSW – Works by John Coburn:

https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/?artist_id=coburn-john

Elizabeth Fortescue, Arts Editor, The Daily Telegraph *John Coburn's magnificent tapestry curtains to be hung at the Opera House after years in storage*

<https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/entertainment/arts/john-coburns-magnificent-tapestry-curtains-to-be-hung-at-the-opera-house-after-years-in-storage/news-story/546a125cd70174697866fc7d97d98d57>

Helen Pitt, The Sydney Morning Herald The 'crazy and epic' story of John Coburn's Opera House curtain call

<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/the-crazy-and-epic-story-of-john-coburn-s-opera-house-curtain-call-20190410-p51csz.html>

Alex Mitchell JOHN COBURN: SPIRIT OF ABSTRACTION <https://artcollector.net.au/john-coburn-spirit-of-abstraction/>

How Did They Do That? By Sarah Mallory, Research Assistant, European Sculpture and Decorative Arts

<https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/2014/making-a-tapestry>

JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: JOHN COBURN 30 May 1979

<https://nga.gov.au/research/gleeson/pdf/coburn.pdf>

Jordan Clark on Youtube DIY mini tapestry (using a cardboard loom):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8yJPKUq-Y0>

International Conservation Services: John Coburn Tapestries

<https://icsconservation.com.au/project/john-coburn-tapestries-corporate/>

TATE <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/abstract-art>

Google Arts and Culture Institute

<https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/curtain-of-the-sun/2gLCIFeIldIalw>

<https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/the-coburn-tapestries-at-the-sydney-opera-house/WwJi5G5FUWPmlw>

<https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/curtain-of-the-moon/gQKClSdf4HosKA>



Let's keep in touch

Sydney Opera House
Creative Learning
Bennelong Point
Sydney NSW 2000
Australia

sydneyoperahouse.com
Call us 02 9250 7770
or email creativelearning@sydneyoperahouse.com

Follow and subscribe

 Sydney Opera House for Teachers
and Educators Facebook Page

 Sydney Opera House – Children, Families
& Creative Learning LinkedIn Page

 Sydney Opera House
YouTube Channel

