

AGSA

**John Lewin
Fish Catch and Dawes
Point, Sydney Harbour**

Interpretive Resource



English-born John Lewin trained as a natural-history painter in London and arrived in Sydney in 1800 with the intention of making his fortune painting and collecting specimens of Australian flora and fauna (particularly birds and insects). He travelled on scientific expeditions around New South Wales and was employed by Governor Lachlan Macquarie as the Colony's first official artist.

Fish catch and Dawes Point, Sydney Harbour is the earliest known oil painting on canvas in Australia. It depicts fish that could be found in the waters of Sydney Harbour. They include the snapper, hammerhead shark, crimson squirrelfish, estuary perch, rainbow wrasse and sea mullet. The fish are carefully arranged in the foreground, suggesting their abundance and the bounty available in the new colony. This painting shows Lewin's skill for scientific detail and a departure from the traditions of natural history painting. It is also reminiscent of Dutch still life painting and sporting paintings that show a fisherman's catch which were popular in Britain at the time. The background stretches to Dawes Point, which is where the northern point of the iconic Sydney Harbour Bridge is located.

Image (below) and image detail (cover)
John William Lewin, Australia, 1770–1819, *Fish catch and Dawes Point, Sydney Harbour*, c.1813, Sydney, oil on canvas, 86.5 x 113.0 cm; Gift of the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation and South Australian Brewing Holdings Limited 1989. Given to mark the occasion of the Company's 1988 Centenary, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.

Did you know:

The hammerhead shark named *Zygaena lewini* and now *Sphyrna lewini* is named after Lewin.

John Lewin – *Fish Catch and Dawes Point, Sydney Harbour, 1813*



Early Years

Responding

Lewin painted fish that could be found in Sydney Harbour during the 1800s. What flora and fauna can be found in your local environment?

The fish in Lewin's painting consist of snapper, hammerhead shark, crimson squirrelfish, estuary perch, rainbow wrasse and sea mullet. After looking at photographs of these fish can you identify the fish in *Fish catch and Dawes Point, Sydney Harbour*.

Making

Investigate the types of fish that can be found in the waterways where you live. Create a collage of these fish using a variety of textures.

Fish catch and Dawes Point, Sydney Harbour shows fish which could be caught and eaten. Create a painting that shows some of your favourite foods.

Lewin was trained as a natural history painter and aimed to collect specimens of Australian flora and fauna. Draw or paint your favourite Australian plant or animal and create a class exhibition which captures Australian wildlife.

Primary

Responding

The Gadigal people are the traditional owners and custodians of the city Sydney, where Dawes Point is located. Research the rock engravings (petroglyphs) which are located here. What do these engravings tell you about the lives of Aboriginal people? Who are the traditional owners of the land where you live? What is the traditional place name for where you live?

What information about Sydney Harbour and Dawes Point during the 1800s could we gather from Lewin's painting? If you were to recreate this painting today, what things might have changed? Research the environment at Dawes Point and identify the changes which have happened since the 1800s.

Investigate examples of natural history illustrations from the 1800s. Compare these to work of Lewin as well as scientific records of plants and animals you might encounter today. Conduct a SWOT analysis on each example. In groups decide which record is the most reliable and why. Why are historical records of plants and animals still important today?

Art and science often work side by side. Find another work of art in the Gallery which you would describe as scientific.

Making

You are a natural history painter who has been asked to document the environment where you live. Select a plant or flower and draw it in detail. Describe this specimen to someone who has never seen it. What other information might be important to include?

Lewin carefully built up layers of oil paint to show the shiny texture of the fish. Make a list of animals whose skin or fur could be described as smooth, rough, soft or spikey. Using paint, experiment with different ways to represent these textures.

Imagine Lewin was on the docks in Sydney Harbour observing the fisherman's catch. What sounds might he have heard? Create a soundscape of these scene using objects found in your classroom.

Secondary

Responding

Locate other works of art on display which were created during a similar era. What is common about these works of art?

Lewin made a living depicting Australia's plants and animals. Discuss the role of the artist in the 1800s. Create a timeline about how the role of the artist has changed. Use artists in the Gallery's collection to support your claims.

Discuss the characteristics *Fish catch and Dawes Point, Sydney Harbour* shares with the Dutch tradition of still life painting. Research different genres of still life painting and locate some examples on display.

Visit your local supermarket or farmers' market and make a list of the types of produce available. What does the selection of food available say about modern diets and lifestyles compared to when Lewin was alive?

Making

Find a plant or flower which grows where you live. Create a series of studies of this specimen using drawing, painting, photography and clay (sculpt and relief). Which of these studies was the most accurate in depicting its size, shape, form, colour and texture?

Seventeenth century Dutch still life paintings often emphasised the home, personal possessions and familiar foods. What are some of the most prized items in your home? Create a still life painting that celebrates these commodities.

Image

Pieter Claesz, The Netherlands, 1596/97–1660, *A still life with a roemer, a crab and a peeled lemon*, 1643, Haarlem, The Netherlands, oil on wood panel, 49.0 x 66.0 cm (panel); Gift of the Fargher Foundation in memory of Philip Fargher with assistance from the Art Gallery Foundation 2010, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.



Resources

Websites

Australian history of Biography

– John Lewin

<https://bit.ly/2DhQcxq>

SBS On Demand: Sydney Rock Engravings

<https://bit.ly/2FriQcX>

South Australian Museum

Biological Sciences

<https://bit.ly/2QcfcJf>

Sydney's Aboriginal History

<http://bit.ly/2Tizblg>

Waterhouse Natural Science Art Prize

<https://bit.ly/1laODSP>

Books

Neville, Richard, 2012, *Mr John Lewin*

Painter and Naturalist, New South Wales

Publishing, University of New South Wales

Ltd

Art Gallery of South Australia

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