



Leonard French, Seven Days of Creation: Seventh Day, 1962-65, 365.8cm diam, enamel on hessian covered hardboard, Australian National University

LEONARD FRENCH

SASHA GRISHIN

By now, many people would have heard that Len French died on Tuesday 10 January 2017. He was 88, had been in poor health for a number of years and was out of the public eye.

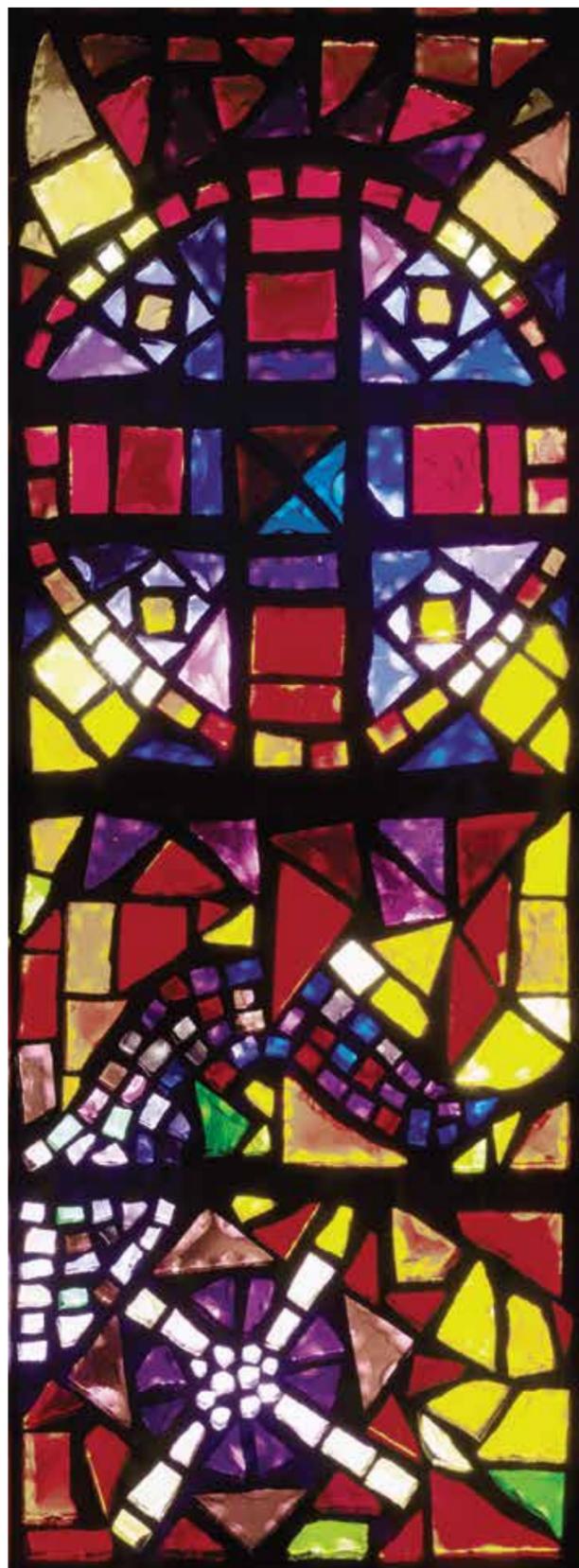
A number of years ago, I published a monograph on the artist and we had known each other for about thirty years. When Len read the first draft of my book, he was mildly horrified and laconically noted that "you should title it the rise and fall of Leonard French". Quite a bit of editing was done and the final section appeared in a much-abridged form. It became one of my books with which I was least pleased.

The problem that I had set myself in the book was to examine the mechanisms in the Australian art world that by 1968 had constructed French into Australia's most popular artist and then, within a few years, largely demolished his standing. In fact, when I was researching the book in the 1990s, people would frequently remark that they thought that he was no longer making art, had retired to a vineyard, or simply had died. The artist remained active until late in life, but had left the limelight.

Leonard French was born on October 8, 1928 into a working-class family in Brunswick in Melbourne and grew up in poverty in the biting years of the Great Depression. His school he described to me as resembling a charnel house or concentration camp.

While training to be a signwriter, he was increasingly drawn to art. By the time he was nineteen, he had been commissioned to paint a couple of very large church murals and at twenty-one he had his first solo exhibition which was received well by critics and collectors.

In 1949, he travelled abroad for the first time and to his earlier love of the Mexican revolutionary muralists. In London at The Abbey Art Centre he met the Scottish painter Alan Davie, and the Irish painter Gerard Dillon, two prominent artists who had an impact on his work. The artist with whom he may be best compared and the one he admired most, was Fernand Léger who also came from the working class and was a leftwing radical who made art for the masses.



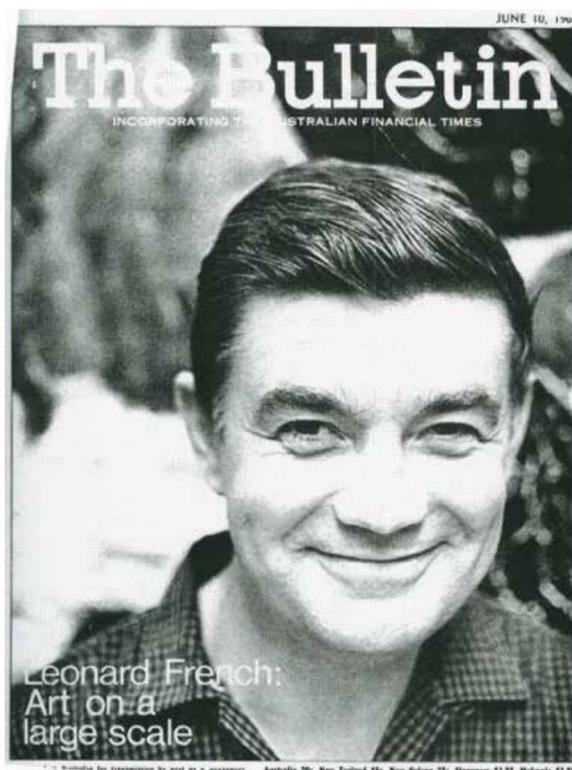
Publicly he became the most prominent and the best-known artist in the Australian art scene with his work acquired by most Australian public art galleries and by key international collections

Any attempt to place Len French within his Australian context opens up a host of contradictions. Born of working class stock, he always felt himself an outsider within the circle of art school graduates.

He came to art from a background as an apprentice to the signwriting trade and his limited exposure to art schools confirmed in his mind that art schools were largely irrelevant to the training of a real artist. At his first solo exhibition in 1949, the 21-year-old artist defiantly declared: 'All painters don't come out of art schools. I don't see any value in art schools –an utter waste of time!'

His techniques and materials of art production point back to his training in signwriting with his built up, well-crafted enamel surfaces with professionally applied areas of gold leaf, his painted murals and the vast coloured glass works—none of this has a debt to an arts school training.

This page and next: National Library of Australia, window detail, 1965-1967



The Bulletin cover, June 10, 1967

French may well be the only Australian painter who could declare that he has not touched a tube of paint in the last half century—he mixed all his paints himself from powder pigments, and his workshop resembled more a carefully arranged factory designed for the production of art than a traditional artist's studio.

Len French was also a remarkably well read and cultivated person (with a very refined wine palette), but one who was totally selfmade and self-taught. State school was something which he survived until he was thirteen and then, with a passion characteristic of the self-educated, he sought out knowledge that would help him in his personal quest.

As a trade apprentice, he became a regular at the Swanston Family Hotel which was the hub of Melbourne's left wing intelligentsia— this was his alternative university education, where Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Albert Camus and Dostoevsky were passionately consumed and discussed, not to pass exams and attain grades but because they held a possible key to the understanding of life.

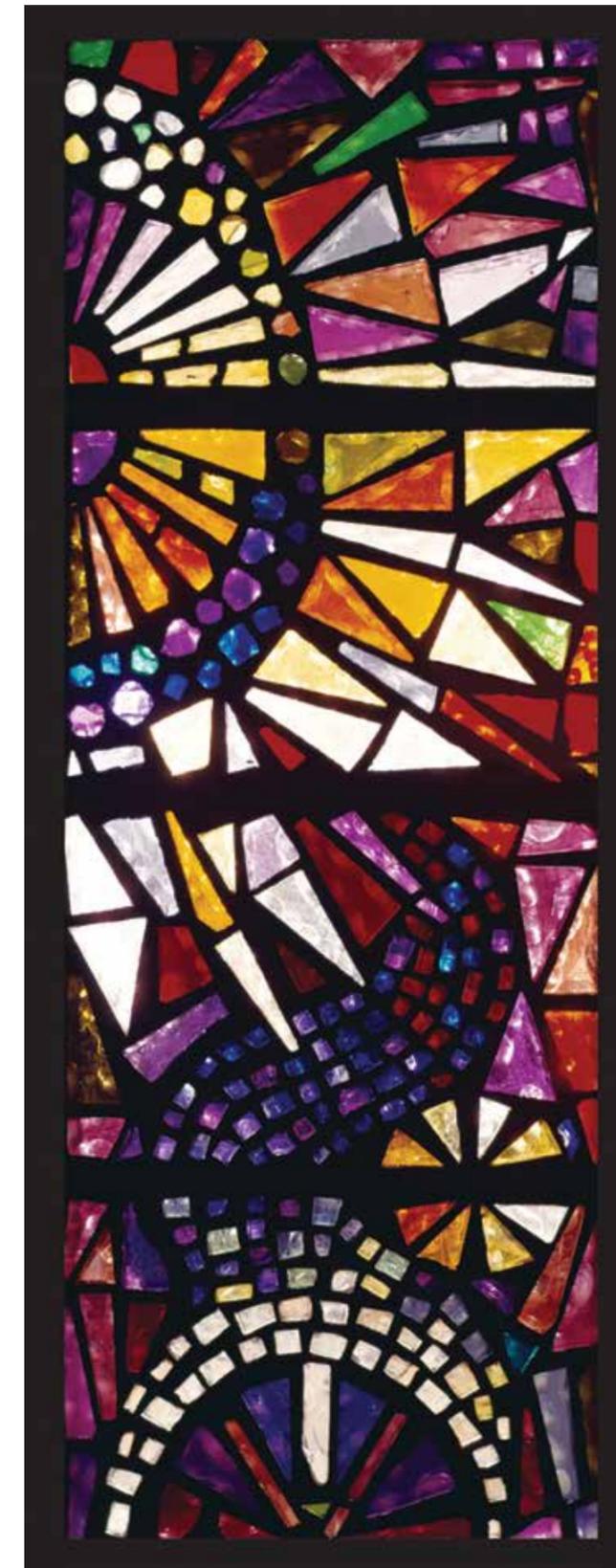
Gerard Dillon initiated French into James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* and directed him towards a journey to early medieval Celtic Ireland rather than chasing the avant garde in Paris. Subsequently, he developed a passion for Latin American literature and for non-European arts, particularly New Guinean artefacts, pre-Columbian art and black African art.

Although Leonard French's art training and education were unconventional, even if extensive, his art production and activities as an artist, particularly in the sixties, placed him in the centre and arguably at the top of the Australian art world.

The year he turned forty, in 1968, the *Sydney Morning Herald* ran the headline *The year of Leonard French*. That year in Melbourne, amidst a blaze of national and international publicity, the new building of the National Gallery of Victoria opened as part of the multi-million dollar Victorian Arts Centre and Leonard French's colossal coloured glass ceiling became the featured image and was catapulted into prominence as a newly created national icon.

Publicly he became the most prominent and the best-known artist in the Australian art scene with his work acquired by most Australian public art galleries and by key international collections, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

It was also in that year that Len French's monumental coloured glass windows for the National Library of Australia in Canberra, which had been installed the previous year, opened to the public.



Endowed with exceptional energy and a personality which attracted friends and controversy, (French) to some extent, created his own legend

His art was handled by the most successful art dealer on the commercial Australian art scene, Rudy Komon in Sydney, in whose stable French was the leading star and its most influential talent scout.

Leonard French had already spent a year in America at Yale University on a Harkness scholarship, and in 1969 collected an OBE and was appointed to the Council of the newly established Australian National Gallery in Canberra. His portrait had made the cover of such leading magazines as *The Bulletin* and his name became synonymous with success in the art world.

Reasons for his meteoric rise to stardom in the Australian art world are several. The work itself was impressive and readily won popular acclaim. Its use of emblematic shapes with immaculate, decorative and glittering surfaces and luminous planes of coloured glass appealed to a broad cross-section of the population, as well as to many members of the art community.

His semi-abstract imagery with the iconic starkness of recurring emblematic symbols attracted the support of the Melbourne figurative humanists and also won the respect of the Sydney based abstract artists.

Churchmen, including the influential Reverend Michael Scott, hailed him as a significant religious painter and he was twice awarded the Blake Prize for Religious Art. While French never claimed any Christian affiliations, the deeply spiritual quality of his work and its preoccupation with eternal themes of human suffering and deliverance won the support of Christians of many denominations.

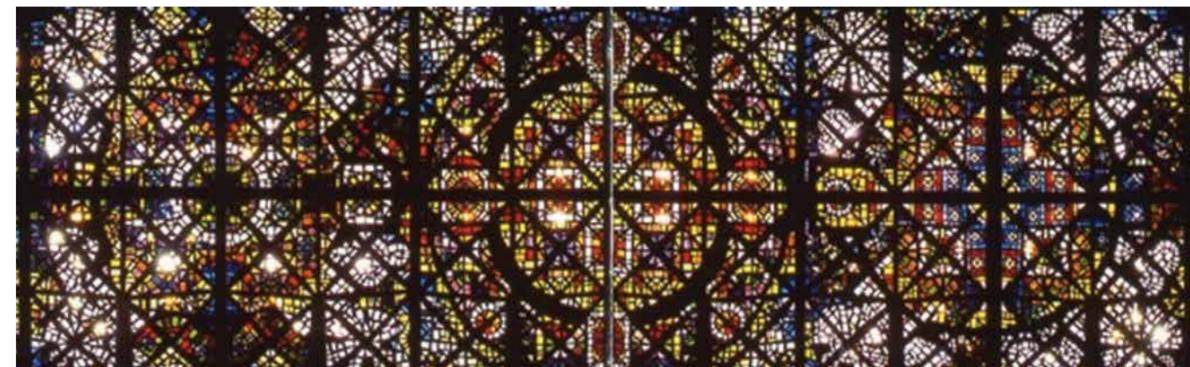


Leonard French 2002

Beyond its intrinsic qualities, the work also appeared as a valued commodity on the Australian art scene around which art critics, museum curators, art dealers and academics built their careers. While the artist may not have directly participated in art politics—and in the case of Leonard French whose output was prodigious, he may have been too busy making the work to have the time to worry about its positioning in the art world, at least on a very basic level—battles did rage around his work which, to some extent, determined its public acceptance.

Ironically in 1968, at the moment of his greatest popularity, there was also a clear expression of the changing tide of fashion among some of the major power brokers on the Australian arts scene. His move to rural Heathcote maybe interpreted as a conscious move away from the centre of art politics to preserve his integrity as an artist.

Len French has been something of an enigma on the Australian art scene. Endowed with exceptional energy and a personality which attracted friends and controversy he, to some extent, created his own legend, one which has received radically differing interpretations over the last half-century.



A small, handwritten mark or signature in black ink, located at the bottom left of the page.

He was an unconventional artist, not only in his style, iconography and medium, but also in the manner in which he straddled the usual art forms. Apart from easel painting, which has largely dominated the art historical constructs of Australian art since the period of white settlement, French was also a significant printmaker, muralist and coloured glass artist. All of these factors have contributed to his unusual standing as an artist in Australia.

Despite the support of Ken Myer and Nugget Coombs, French appeared increasingly side-lined and spent the final forty years of his life away from the limelight and centre of the Australian art world. With the passing of Leonard French, Australia has lost one of its most distinguished, original and unusual artists.

Sasha Grishin

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Opposite page: Ceiling, National Gallery Victoria, Melbourne, 1962-67, chunk glass in plywood laminated with aluminium, 51.2 x 14.6 metres

Sasha Grishin AM, FAHA is the author of more than 25 books on art, including *Australian Art: A History*, and has served as the art critic for *The Canberra Times* for forty years. He is an Emeritus Professor at the Australian National University, Canberra; Guest Curator at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; and Honorary Principal Fellow, Faculty of Arts, at the University of Melbourne.

Below:
Leonard French, National Library of Australia, window detail, 1965-1967

