

BRONZED AUSSIE GODS: SURF LIFESAVERS



The thing about surf lifesaving is — it is a reflection of the whole of Australia.

John Brown, member of Grange SLSC and Chiton Rocks SLSC

Photo: Dragi Markovic, National Museum of Australia

An icon emerges

The history of surf lifesaving in Australia extends back 100 years to just after the Federation of Australia. The tough, quiet stockman and the heroic digger had been symbols that emphasised mateship and bravery, but with Australia's increasing urbanisation along the coastal fringe of the country, there was a need for a new type of 'hero'. Enter the surf lifesaver, a figure who was to become one of the most easily identifiable symbols of nationhood. Like the digger and the bushman, the surf lifesaver represented the young nation's determination to tame nature in the spirit of voluntary self-sacrifice.

Discussion point: What is a national icon?

'Shooting the breakers'

After the ban on swimming during daylight hours was lifted around Australia from the early 1900s, surfing became a popular national pastime. In the nation's search for a unique identity, body surfing or 'shooting the breakers' became an important part of the national image. Australians were increasingly seen as a healthy, athletic people, free from the constraints of the colder, northern hemisphere and 'wowsers' attitudes. The beach became a way of life, and surfing a part of what it was to be an Australian.

Asserting an Australian identity

Every nation has its mythical figures, and surf lifesaving was seen as a means through which an Australian identity could be asserted. As early as 1924, Australian lifesavers were featured at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley. This unique representation of identity continued at the 1937 Paris Exposition and at the 1939 New York World's Fair. In the 'lifesaver', Australians were able to identify nationhood with an ideal type of heroic manhood.

Discussion point: What aspects of surf lifesavers lend themselves to iconic stature?

Promoting Australia

The surf lifesaver also proved a popular and effective icon for advertisers, who were fully aware of the sex appeal of the bronzed young men who patrolled the beach. In the 1920s, lifesavers provided a way of presenting the body without offence, and by the 1930s, the Australian Tourist Association used images of lifesavers to promote international travel. Lifesavers were also used to promote everything from hair products to cigarettes, from soaps to gin, and even headache powders.

Discussion point: What image comes to mind today when you think of surf lifesavers patrolling our beaches?

Women in SLSA

Until the 1980s, women were unable to become surf lifesavers as it was believed they were not strong enough to carry or use the rescue equipment. The prohibition of women further enhanced the notion that surf lifesaving was dangerous and that Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA), with its strict membership guidelines, was the organisation best suited to protect the public interest at the beach.

Discussion point: How do you think women's roles have changed over the past 100 years in the surf lifesaving movement?



Photo: State Library of WA, Online image no: 006550d

Community perceptions

SLSA states that part of its community role is 'the articulation of an Australian image'. After research disclosed that the majority of lifesavers come from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, SLSA began to encourage Australians from diverse ethnic backgrounds to join its many surf clubs, allowing it to better represent and serve the needs of all Australians visiting the beach.

Surf lifesaver Doug McGhie, from Western Australia, initiated a successful program through Nippers that encouraged young migrant children to become actively involved in SLSA. 'We have kids from China, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, Burma, Korea, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan. We've had children from France, Belgium, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Czechoslovakia — really, absolutely everywhere. And they all have a go,' said McGhie.

So while the media continue to represent lifesavers as glamorous specimens of health and fitness, the organisation now welcomes members of all shapes, sizes, religions and cultural backgrounds to help with safety on the beach.

Discussion point: Why do you think Australians from different migrant backgrounds might not join up as surf lifesavers?

Education
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Did you know? During the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, the first international surf carnival was held at Torquay Beach. The event drew crowds as large as any of the Olympic events in Melbourne, with 70,000 people packed onto the beach to watch more than 2000 surf lifesavers in action. The Melbourne newspapers proclaimed the arrival of 'Olympic sun gods', who thrilled the crowd with daring surfboat riding!

ACTIVITIES



Activity 1

Calling all curators!

Ask students to bring in anything they have at home related to surf lifesaving: old photos, articles, costumes, T-shirts, caps, etc. Create an exhibition in the corner of the classroom on surf lifesaving. Ask students to consider what is primary and secondary evidence. Ask them what the display could say about surf lifesaving and how they can present this with the objects they have.

Activity 2

Creating an icon: Surf lifesavers as portrayed in film

Have your class watch the Michael Edgely film *The Coolangatta Gold* (1984). Critique the film. Discuss the aspects of surf lifesaving it covers and those it does not. What image does it create of Australians?

Activity 3

The surf lifesaving initiative

Surf Life Saving Australia offers training courses in the inner suburbs for kids who don't feel comfortable or welcome in the clubs. The goal is to raise minority representation in surf lifesaving above 5 per cent. Ask students to brainstorm ways they could encourage inner suburban kids to become more involved or connected to surf lifesaving clubs? What activities could be initiated in the suburbs to create greater understanding of beach safety issues?

Activity 4

Body mapping

On a large sheet of paper, trace around two students lying in a pose appropriate to a surf lifesaver on patrol. Get students to design smart costumes for them. Using brightly coloured pencils, students fill the rest of the figure with as many words as they can think of that have some association with surf lifesaving.

Activity 5

Journals of a surf lifesaver

Ask students to imagine being a surf lifesaver during summer — taking away the flags at the end of a long day on patrol. What does the beach look like, what does it smell like, what can you hear, what does the sand feel like under your feet, what is the coastal breeze like on your face? What is the surf like as you enter it for one last swim, what is the temperature like, can you taste the salt in your mouth? Create a painting or collage that captures the sensory qualities of the relationship between the beach and the surf lifesaver at the end of a long day on patrol.



Photo: Dean McNicoll, National Museum of Australia

Activity 6

Beach textures

Get students to make rubbings of patterns found within the school environment, on bricks, fence palings, playground equipment, etc. These are then cut out and pasted into a beach scene — complete with safety flags.

Activity 7

An Australian icon — a light-hearted look

Using photos found on the web or in magazines as references, students create a caricature of surf lifesavers on patrol, depicting an amusing scenario.

Activity 8

Read all about it!

Get students to design the front page of a newspaper, complete with headline, to depict an exciting rescue by a surf lifesaver on patrol. Ask them to write a short report and illustrate the page.

Activity 9

Sharing the sand

Students consider what they enjoy about visits to the beach. What activities do they like to participate in — building sandcastles, playing volleyball, bodysurfing, boogie boarding or lying on the sand reading a book? Starting with the iconic red and yellow surf lifesaving flag, students create an artwork inspired by their experience of the beach. The artwork can be created in a variety of media — photography, collage, acrylic, watercolour, oil pastels, etc. This activity provides students with an opportunity to reflect on how we share our beaches with communities who might use the beach in different ways.