It was one of the simplest photographs Max Dupain ever made. A friend, Englishman Harold Salvage, runs up Culburra Beach, still wet from the surf, and drops to the sand to dry off…

**DUPAIN, STANDING**

nearby with a Rolleicord twin-lens reflex, takes only two pictures. The first captures the athletic young man just after he falls to the sand. Dupain’s second picture is made, perhaps intuitively, from a slightly lower angle than the first, just above the sand.

For his second exposure, the young Sydney photographer focuses more intensely, perfectly capturing the sculptural pattern formed by the head, arms and muscular shoulders of his friend as he rests on the beach. It is 1937 and on that NSW South Coast beach, 26-year-old Max Dupain has just made the photograph that would eventually become the gold standard of collectable, narrative fine art photography in Australia.

But this picture would not find fame until much later when, in 1975, Graham Howe, inaugural director of the Australian Centre for Photography (ACP), offered Max Dupain an exhibition in its new home in Paddington, Sydney. Howe, now director of Curatorial Assistance Inc in California, vividly recalls Dupain and his searching for a poster image for the exhibition. “I remember looking at a lot of Max’s pictures at [photographer] David Moore’s house; I had seen Sunbaker from the [publisher] Sydney Ure Smith 1948 monograph of Max’s work and it was … terrific! [But] Max thought some of his newer, architectural pictures would be better.

“I said, ‘Max, this is the one that says Australia. It conveys what it is to be Australian’ and he finally relented and said, ‘all right’. The result was that a lot of people identified with [the image]. How wonderful that such a simple image would strike a chord across a nation … and no other nation. Sunbaker was a quintessentially Australian photograph.”

Years later, Dupain would sometimes complain when yet another request, either for print or publication, came for Sunbaker. His former assistant and now director of the Max Dupain Exhibition Negative Archive, Jill White, remembers Dupain grumbling, slightly tongue-in-cheek, “Doesn’t anyone ever think I’ve taken anything else but that bloody Sunbaker! What about my later work?”

Today, the primacy of Max Dupain’s masterpiece has eased somewhat. The growth of conceptual photography in the past two decades has meant that structured, directed and purposeful work is more appreciated. Max’s work and it was … terrific! [But] Max thought some of his newer, architectural pictures would be better.

“It’s like anything in the photographic market. I remember when the [19th-century French photographer] Gustave Le Gray’s *The Great Wave*, *Sète* print brought $A1 million at an overseas auction. An identical image, but in slightly poorer condition, then sold for less than half that amount of money, within a year. Colleagues who viewed the image told me that the one that brought $A1 million was in fabulous condition, faultless … Selling photography at that elite level can be affected by small variations in quality.

“But if you could find the first-vintage print made by Max Dupain of the sunbaker, even if it wasn’t in great condition, it [still] wouldn’t deter an institution or a collector from buying. It would bring at least $100,000. It would be incredibly rare.”
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