

What's the Matter?: The Object in Australian Art History¹

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My paper is an analysis of the vested interest groups that create conflicting histories and narratives, and carries a suggestion that the study of objects in this country falls between a backwards glance and a looking to the future. Australia is a nation that has a problem in dealing with the period before 1830 but constructs its own traditions nonetheless. Where does a nation's 'aesthetic identity' come from – by looking forward to a better material future, or from the past, where a truncated 'long eighteenth century' created all manner of problems for Australian connoisseurs and also historians? The construction of the narrative of a material past involved questions of taste and was a process of looking backwards in the immediate post-war period – against 'Victorianism', to a more remote European past which barely existed in this continent, and also forwards, beyond the 1950s, considered the nadir of taste for its perceived banality and levelling tendencies. An unsurprising *entente* has existed between those who wish to re-imagine a more pure Georgian past for this country, a concept that was largely invented in the inter-war years in Britain and the United States at any rate, and those who spurned the perceived vulgarity of contemporary commercial life.

In this essay I suggest some of the historiographical issues that inflect the study of objects within Australian art history, firstly for the nineteenth century and then, more briefly, for the twentieth. The possibility of studying a wide range of visual culture within art historical frames has been transformed in the academy since Terry Smith published his 'Writing the history of Australian art: its past, present and possible future' in 1983.² A new interest in affect, materiality, quality, and the sensuous nature of inert objects, as well as the sustainable and indigenous agenda, has transformed the possibility and

¹ I thank my Research Assistant Kevin Su for the preparation of this article. I also thank Mr Clive Lucas, Dr Giorgio Riello and Professor Victor Margolin who kindly read drafts and made suggestions. Parts of the historiography that informs this essay appeared in my 'Rarely Looking In: The Writing of Australian Design History, c. 1900-1990', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 19:44, March 1995, 48-63.

² Terry Smith, 'Writing the History of Australian Art: Its Past, Present and Possible Future', *Australian Journal of Art*, 3, 1983, 17-8.

potential impact of studying the object.³ Nonetheless, as scholarship and museology generally proceed from precedent, certain underlying objects have been imbued with more weight within writing and collecting.

Australia in the years following the 1939-45 war developed an aestheticised vision of the classical tradition, in all things, from mortar to silver. In exactly the same as way as members of the Georgian group in 1920s Britain were also modernists seeking contemporary purity, many of the key taste makers in Australia who proselytized regarding a canon of objects spurned the second half of the 19th century and were equally horrified by life in the decade after World War II⁴. They operated from a purity of intent. What mattered were changing professional standards, authenticity, unity, good taste, a critical eye and the rejection of styles. Ironically, this is precisely the period of intensified materialism and abundance in Australian material culture, a period that continues to suffer a level of distrust within a society that also polarized working and middle class culture⁵. A complex network of social actors ranging from the academic to the museum curator, from the collector to the dealer, from the artist to the amateur historian, created canons that were felt to be worthy of investigation but also proposed new areas of study within Australian visual culture.

In Australia, architects were prominent in analysing and popularising aspects of both the built environment and decorative arts which elsewhere might have been explored by art historians. Architects sometimes held academic posts which provided opportunities for research, they held strong views regarding urban planning and the built environment, and before the profession of heritage consultant arose, they were often required to research sites and take restoration decisions. This paper also considers briefly the significant role of the collector and the rise of this activity from the 1920s to the 1970s, firstly by individuals, later by museums. The priorities of connoisseurship and a nostalgic evocation of colonial history dominated the inter-war period in Australia, resulting in a significant body of largely expository and romanticised writing. Such writing was nonetheless important in raising awareness, changing attitudes and tastes, and documenting survivals.

³ For a fine example of this type of critical writing on materiality and affect see Jill Bennett, 'Communion, consumption and connection: ways of seeing the somatic object', in Sue Rowley et al., *The Somatic Object*, exh. cat., Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney, 1997, 9-13.

⁴ Giorgio Riello, 'Eighteenth-Century Interiors – Redesigning the Georgian: Introduction', *Journal of Design History*, 20:4, 2007, 273-289. The relationship of British politics and taste in the post-war period is recounted in a light manner in Michael Sissons and Philip French eds, *Age of Austerity*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963).

⁵ Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958.

Placing the object in disciplinary frameworks

Objects face multiple challenges within art-historical study. It is partly because they neither fit easily into a scientific paradigm, nor departmental structure nor canon, and also because they cross disciplinary fields ranging from art history itself to anthropology and material culture studies, from design history to the so called new fashion studies, as well as the older and now unfashionable notion of the decorative arts⁶. Art historians are well trained to assess an object from both formal and sociological perspectives, but they would ask different questions of it than an oral or economic historian. Perhaps one of the great skills of the art historian is contextual recreation within precise aesthetic frameworks, a great benefit for the study of material culture. Objects are often decontextualised from their settings, from the interiors that are rarely protected by civic planners and which can be dismantled, sold off, or in rare cases, turned into a house museum or spirited in parts to a museum. They increasingly are resold on the art and second hand market, where once again, they take on new meanings and contexts that might have nothing to do with their original function or intent. Cultural and 'popular culture' studies, which overwhelmingly investigates contemporary culture, has tended to subsume parts of the operation of design history. It sometimes has the disadvantage of being inattentive to the aesthetic dimension, and is less concerned with the act of designing than design history. It also tends to privilege various meta-theories over any empirical let alone archival investigation. 'Design history' is itself another slightly problematic term or umbrella for the study of objects, as it tends to foreground the products of mass production, mass taste and modernity⁷. Emerging in part from the polytechnics and 'red brick' universities of 1960s Britain, it is marked by a strong tendency to study popular, working-class and middle-class visual culture. The decorative arts, on the other hand, tend to study elite survivals. This unfortunate polarity is being adjusted by studies that bring together the creation and purchase of consumables, as well as within the so called new 'global design history', which is also pushing out the chronological and geographical remit of the domain of study⁸.

⁶ Karen Harvey (ed), *History and Material Culture*, London: Routledge, 2009. For an analysis of the relationship of decorative arts to art history and histories of design see Clive Dilnot, 'The State of Design History. Part 1. Mapping the Field', in Victor Margolin (ed), *Design Discourse. History/Theory/Criticism*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989, 217.

⁷ Tony Fry, *Design History Australia. A Source Text in Methods and Resources*, Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1988.

⁸ See John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds, *Consumption and the World of Goods*, New York: Routledge, 1993; C.M. Guth, *Art, Tea, and Industry: Masuda Takashi and the Mitsui Circle*, Princeton University Press, 1993; Steven Lubar and William David Kingery, *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993; Michelle O'Malley and Evelyn Welch, eds, *The Material Renaissance*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007; Glenn Adamson, Sarah Teasley and Giorgio Riello (eds), *Global Design History*, London: Routledge, 2011.

Object study in Australia

It can be argued that in Australia there exists a strategic advantage and supportive environment for those who think objects matter within scholarly art historical investigation. Australian-based scholars have had both a political and a practical imperative to explore the stuff of everyday life. The country is not awash with Jacobean upholstery or Renaissance marriage chests. If so, they have been bought here, although I am reminded of one essay from a first year, writing that the existence of a university classics collection in Queensland was evidence of the incredible navigation skills of the Ancient Greeks. So rather than prosecuting studies of seventeenth-century Knole chairs and Flemish needle lace, it makes sense to also be able to read and create meaning from examples of both high and low Australian culture, from tea pots to Berlei corsetry advertising or trade catalogues (figure 1). This was undertaken in Australia with great energy in the 1980s and early 1990s with an agenda that was driven by feminism, as well as the imbrication of social, labour, consumer and economic histories⁹.



Figure 1. 'Hardie's Genuine Fibrolite Asbestos-Cement Building Booklet'. James Hardie and Coy[sic]. n.d. [1930-40]. Trade Catalogue. Ephemera Collection. Powerhouse Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences.

⁹ See, for example, Susan Best, 'Foundations of femininity: Berlei Corsets and the (Un)Masking of the Modern Body, *Continuum*, 5:1, 1991, 191-214; Kerreen Reiger, *The Disenchantment of the Home. Modernizing the Australian Family, 1880-1940*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

Much scholarly writing on artefacts is collection driven. The history of the writing of decorative arts studies in Australia is firmly connected with the rise of collecting, firstly by individuals, later by museums. Such a conjunction is not unusual; in a general context, Kenneth L. Ames notes: 'Collecting has usually preceded scholarship and continues to do so, today'.¹⁰ Figure 2 is an image from *The Winterthur Portfolio* of 1954 showing mainly gentlemen scholars discussing methods for analysing material culture in the post-war period. The types of questions they probably posed would have been driven in part by the collection around them, collected by Henry Francis Du Pont at Delaware and with a strong nationalist tenor. The ancillary MA in American Material Culture established at the nearby University of Delaware established new standards of academic rigour in the classification and investigation of North American artefacts¹¹.



Conference on the Place of Objects and Ideas in Early American History to provide a framework and approach for a publication, *America's Arts and Skills*, December 6, 1954.

Figure 2. 'Conference on the Place of Objects and Ideas in Early American history to provide a framework and approach for a publication, *America's Arts and Skills*', Winterthur, December 6, 1954.

¹⁰ Kenneth L. Ames, 'The Stuff of Everyday Life. American Decorative Arts and Household Furnishings', in T.J. Schlereth, ed, *Material Culture. A Research Guide*, Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1985, 83.

¹¹ Examples of the texts generated from such approaches include Gerald W.R. Ward, *Perspectives on American Furniture*, New York: Norton, 1988, 113-126; Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, *Of Consuming Interests. The Style of Life in Eighteenth-Century America*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, 'Furniture as Social History: Gender, Property, and Memory in the Decorative Arts', in Luke Beckerdite and William Hosley, eds, *American Furniture*, Madison, WI: Chipstone Foundation, 1995; Ann Smart Martin, *Makers and Users. American Decorative Arts 1630-1820*, Madison, WI: Elvehjem Museum of Art, 1999; Rosemary Troy Krill with Pauline K. Eversmann, *Early American Decorative Arts: 1620-1860*, Walnut Creek, CA: Altimira, 2001.

An interest in charting nineteenth-century Australian decorative arts and architecture gained momentum in this country in the 1910s and '20s, with the research of the architect William Hardy Wilson and collectors, notably Clifford Craig. Dr and Mrs Clifford Craig collected early nineteenth century Tasmanian furniture from about 1927, as well as forming an important collection of early Australian prints and documents¹². The first institutional exhibition to include early Australian examples appears to have been held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1953, when Australian paintings were displayed with 'period' furniture¹³. The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences acquired its first major example of early Australian cabinet making in 1957 (the James Oatley clock, 1822); contemporary examples of cabinet making had been purchased since 1906, however, as examples of craftsmanship¹⁴. Terence Lane has noted that examples of Australian silver, on the other hand, entered museum collections as early as 1884, and that there were groups of collectors for such materials in the 1930s¹⁵.

From the 1960s the number of publications and exhibitions concerning nineteenth-century Australian architecture and decorative arts accelerated in tandem with the expansion of the market for Australian painting and the growth of state chapters of the National Trust¹⁶. The standard of scholarship varies, much of it written by dealers and architects who were not necessarily seeking to write meticulous history and who had different priorities and interests than professional historians. The *Australasian Antique Collector* (becoming the *Australian Antique Collector* from 1977) was issued from 1966, and although its emphasis was European, its first number noted, 'each issue will contain something of colonial interest'.¹⁷ The mid-to-late nineteenth century class of object was still somewhat dubious, and in 1966, also not 'antique', or one hundred years old.

In pages from auction number six of Christie's Australia (Sydney 1974) we see the effect of decontextualisation and also a modernist imperative in framing an object from the past (figure 3). An evacuated background has the same effect in an illustration that accompanied an advertisement for Danish design culture, an

¹² John McPhee, 'Clifford Craig. Historian and Collector', *Australian Antique Collector*, 30, November 1985, 71-3. The curator John McPhee, who was influential in building up collections of Australian decorative and folk arts, including contemporary culture, at the National Gallery of Australia in the 1980s and 1990s, knew the Craigs when he was working in Tasmania in the 1970s. Public Lecture, Furniture History Society, Sydney, 2008

¹³ Kevin Fahy, Christina Simpson and Andrew Simpson, *Nineteenth Century Australian Furniture*, Sydney: David Ell Press, 1985, 11.

¹⁴ Fahy, Simpson and Simpson, *Nineteenth Century Australian Furniture*, 10.

¹⁵ 'The Role of the Decorative Arts in Australian Art History. Australian Silver', conference abstract, *Art Association of Australia Newsletter*, 7, 1980, 7.

¹⁶ The first National Trust (NSW) was formed in 1945. Membership of the National Trust (NSW) rose from 1000 in 1960 to 25043 in 1979. D.N. Jeans, 'New South Wales', in Australian Heritage Commission, *The Heritage of Australia. The Illustrated Register of the National Estate*, South Melbourne: MacMillan of Australia, 1981, part 2, 7.

¹⁷ Editorial, *Australasian Antique Collector*, 1, November 1966, 18.

advertisement for a Poul Kjaerholm chair retailed through Neville Marsh Interiors, Sydney. This appeared not in a trade journal, but in *Art and Australia*, June 1971 (figure 4). The same operations are at work as in the black and white photograph of the 'fruity' console (idiom commonly used in Australian historic house curatorial work, meaning elaborate Victorian carving) and robust colonial sideboard (figure 5). They are paired here in the typical incongruous juxtapositions of auction processes before a degree of specialization permits the creation of a more scholarly looking catalogue. It is the opposite of the 'cultural unity' within museum installations described by Andrew Sayers in his discussion of the integrated hangs that were created at the newly opened National Gallery of Australia in the 1980s¹⁸.



Figure 3. Christie's, Sydney 1974. English Regency silver. Emu egg, Victoria, Australia, c1880.

¹⁸ Conference Paper, Art History's History in Australia and New Zealand, The University of Melbourne, 28-29 August 2010

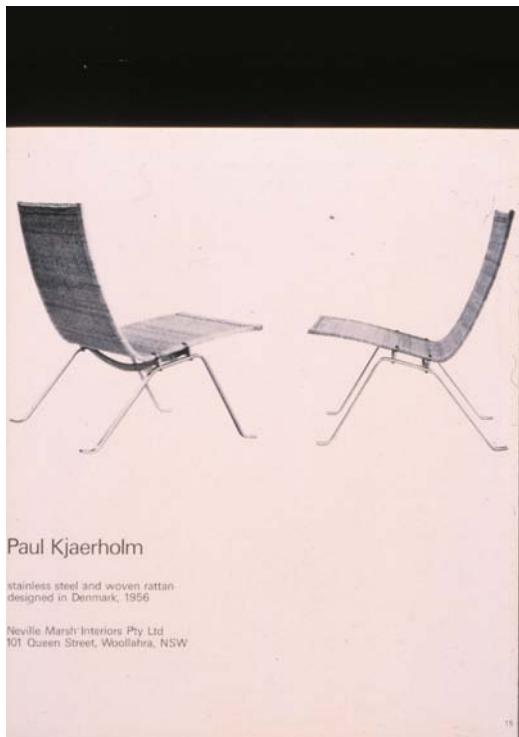


Figure 4. Neville Marsh Interiors, Woollahra, Sydney. Advertisement. *Art and Australia*. June 1971.
Courtesy *Art and Australia* and George Freedman.



Figure 5. Christie's, Sydney 1974. Louis XV console (19th-century revival). Australian cedar
sideboard c1840.

Broader senses of contextual visual culture have been in evidence earlier in Australia, albeit within writing concerning other cultures and societies. Joseph Burke's magisterial *English Art, 1714-1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) for example, had an expanded sense of visual culture in which garden design sat alongside painting.¹⁹ In this contextual approach he might have been influenced by his friend from Yale University, Walpole scholar Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis, editor of the *Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*. At his private house and library in Farmington, Connecticut, Mr Lewis collected everything from furniture to snuff boxes and topographical prints, but only if they had a provenance connected with or illuminated the life and letters of Horace Walpole²⁰. Such approaches did not necessarily mean that people questioned hierarchies in and of themselves, but they had consequences for the way in which scholars approached visual studies.²¹ A highly significant Australian example of the act of collecting material culture (scrimshaw, silver etc) to accompany a collection with its roots in painting and print culture is the Rex Nan Kivell Collection, now housed at the National Library of Australia. The New Zealand born Sir Rex de Charembac Nan Kivell (1898-1977), director of the Redfern Gallery, London, from 1931, formed a significant collection of 15 000 items (artefacts, colonial paintings, prints, drawings, maps, decorative arts and books of the Australasian region). The most recent scholarly catalogue of this collection mentioned the significance of the decorative arts included therein, but with the exception of an essay on scrimshaw, attention remained focused on the painted and printed materials.

Restoring the past

A series of vested and sometimes conflicting interests are at work when it comes to the material artefact. The creation of the first histories of material objects since the early twentieth century is inseparably bound up with design practice, as both commentary and practice frequently proceeded from the same hands, informed by the personal tastes and aims of highly motivated individuals. The confluence of social class, collecting, building, home decorating and design choices is understudied, although a fine example concerning 'Post-Colonial Chic: Fantasies of the French Interior. 1957-62' was published in *Art History* (27:5 November 2004, 770-805) by Daniel J. Sherman. In inter-war Australia, architects, in particular, set both

¹⁹ Joseph Burke, *English Art, 1714-1800*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.

²⁰ Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis, Lewis, Collector's Progress, Alfred A Knopf, 1951; Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis, *Horace Walpole's Library*, Cambridge, The University Press, 1958.

²¹ See *Paradise Possessed. The Rex Nan Kivell Collection*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1998. I am grateful to Sheridan Palmer (University of Melbourne) for pointing out Nan Kivell's quest to protect the ephemeral, naïve or 'low arts', as he put it. Unpublished lecture courtesy the author; see also her 'Men who make their own history: The legacies of Bernard Smith and Rex Nan Kivell', *Magazine of the National Library of Australia*, March 2011, in press.

the agenda of study - the local canon - and influenced the appearance of upper middle-class dwellings that dominated ideas of aspirational good taste that informed parts of the renovation of historic houses in Australia. For example, the architect and illustrator William Hardy Wilson duplicated the hostility held in collecting circles to the second half of the nineteenth century, 'the blank of the Victorian period' as he described it²². Wilson formulated a notion of a disappearing heritage - but an eighteenth century one - and attempted to revive a chaste Georgian mode for contemporary Australian architecture. With relatively few Australian examples of late eighteenth-century design extant, Wilson's attention was focused on Francis Greenway's work (and supposed work) of the first decades of the nineteenth century. Wilson's Georgian mode furnished with symmetrically-arranged eighteenth-century British antiques was endorsed by the Ure Smith publications *Art in Australia* and *Home* magazine. It very much resembles the taste endorsed by the first publications on how to collect and arrange Georgian or reproduction objects for the middle classes (figure 6), replacing the dense effects of the aesthetic movement and the *fin de siècle* (figure 7).²³

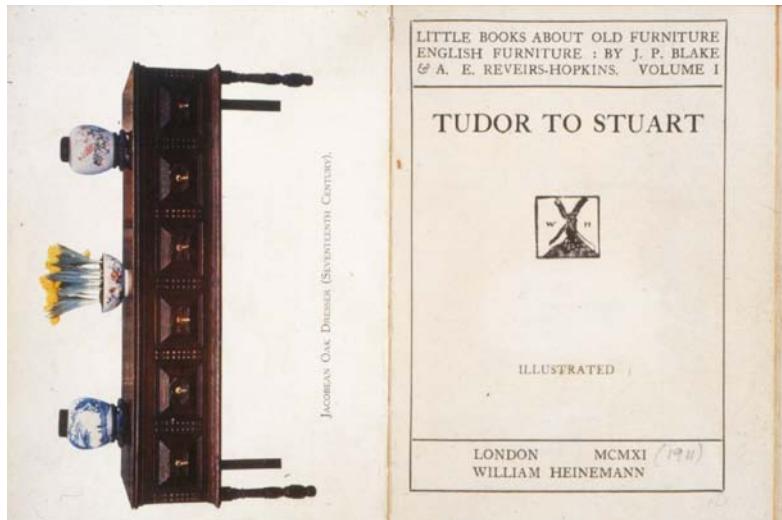


Figure 6. Frontispiece. John Percy Blake and Alfred E.R. Hopkins. *Tudor to Stuart*. London 1911. Collection the author.

²² Cited in Terence Lane and Jessie Serle, *Australians at Home. A Documentary History of Australian Domestic Interiors from 1788 to 1914*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1990, 54.

²³ Examples of popular guides to collecting and assimilating antiques in a domestic interior include Frederick Litchfield, *How to Collect Old Furniture*, London, George Bell and Sons, 1904; John Percy Blake and Alfred E.R. Hopkins, *Little Books about Old Furniture*, London, William Heinemann, 4 vols, 1911-1922; John Gloag, *English Furniture*, London, Adam and Charles Black, 1934.



Figure 7. Cover. Frederick Litchfield. *How to Collect Old Furniture*. London 1904. Collection the author

Modernist architects had not much interest in analyzing the interior in Australia, let alone the objects that once populated them, although they arranged them for themselves and their clients. Their focus on façade and plan, and their disinterest in the interior, and the objects that might disfigure them, was in fact noted by University of Melbourne art historian Franz Philipp in his review of Morton Herman's *The Early Australian Architects and Their Work* (1954), the first wide-ranging architectural history published in Australia. Significantly, it was written by an architect sympathetic to modernism, and examined the period pre-1840, before 'an orgy of ornate bad taste and rich vulgarity' had debased Australian architecture²⁴. The incisive contemporary review by Philipp noted that this was the first history to succeed W. Hardy Wilson's evocative but ahistorical account *Old Colonial Architecture in New South Wales and Tasmania* (1923)²⁵. The Sydney Ure Smith publishing house energetically promoted an interest in colonial Australia in the late 1920s and 1930s, publishing three relevant books in 1928, an *Early Days*

²⁴ Morton Herman, *The Early Australian Architects and their Work*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1954, 220.

²⁵ Franz A. Philipp, 'Notes on the Study of Australian Colonial Architecture', *Historical Studies*, 8:32, 1959, 405.

number of *Home* magazine in July 1929, as well as various articles within this magazine and its annual, and a range of illustrated limited editions such as *A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay by Captain Watkin Tench of the Marines* (3rd ed. London 1789) [Sydney, 1938] and M. Barnard Eldershaw's *An Historical Narrative of the Life and Times of Captain John Piper* [Sydney, 1939], both illustrated by the artist Adrian Feint. Feint's military men owe more to his fantasy of contemporary ballet dancers or male revue performers than the probable appearance of a gentlemen of the armed forces. This interest in 'early days' is contemporary with the North American interest in the significance and preservation of its colonial past, of which Hardy Wilson at least was undoubtedly aware, having made a six year study tour of Europe and North America, returning to Australia in 1910²⁶. 'Upon these old buildings of ours, which are the stepping stones to greater styles, can be founded better work than that which is being introduced from Chicago or English garden suburbs', Wilson wrote²⁷.

Of Hamann's survey of architecture, Philipp also observed that, 'Perhaps the most striking gap in Mr. Herman's account... is the very slight regard given to interiors'.²⁸ It established a precedent which Australian architectural studies tended to follow ever since, an 'architectural extroversion' as Philipp phrased it, which examines buildings from the outside, but rarely ventures within²⁹. Architects, especially as they worked within twentieth-century civic planning, were interested in a notion of the cityscape generated from facades, streets, roads, buildings and street furniture. They very rarely came inside for their studies. Interiors were seen as private, as a part of the personal dimension, generally feminine. They can be sold, dismantled, sent to the museum. They are disposable and dispensable.

The professionalization of the activity and business of dealing in objects such as furniture and porcelain is historically specific. Although there have been dealers trading in paintings and antiquities for centuries, as well as the French guild of *marchand-merciers*, who created and retailed luxury goods, they were not running businesses that at all resembled an 'antiques dealer'³⁰. In both Britain and America, pioneering antique-furniture studies were published in the 1890s (Irving W Lyon,

²⁶Wilson visited and sketched colonial building while in North America and at times compared American and Australian exemplar. Hardy Wilson, 'Building Purulia', in Sydney Ure Smith and Bertram Stevens, eds, *Domestic Architecture in Australia. Special Number of Art in Australia*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1919, 12. See also James Broadbent, 'Colonial Interiors' in Maisy Stapleton (ed), *Historic Interiors: a collection of papers*, Sydney College of the Arts Press, n.d. [1983], 16-21. For a discussion of the earlier revivalist activity see Conrad Hamann, 'Nationalism and Reform in Australian Architecture 1880-1920', *Historical Studies*, 18: 72, April 1979, 393-411.

²⁷ W. Hardy Wilson, *Catalogue of Drawings of Late-Georgian Architecture in New South Wales and Tasmania by Mr. W. Hardy Wilson*, Melbourne, The Fine Arts Society, 3-15 October 1919, 6.

²⁸ Franz A. Philipp, 'Notes on the Study of Australian Colonial Architecture', 409.

²⁹ Philipp, 409.

³⁰ Carolyn Sargentson, *Merchants and Luxury Markets. The Marchands Merciers of Eighteenth-Century Paris*, London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1996.

Colonial Furniture of New England, 1891; Frederick Litchfield, *Illustrated History of Furniture* [British], 1892), followed by the energetic establishment of national canons of seventeenth and eighteenth-century furniture types in the 1910s and 'twenties'. Many of the writers were dealers, part of a new 'antique-infrastructure' established after the turn of the century, its emphasis being the authentication of objects³¹. The British Antique Dealers' Association of Britain was established in 1918; the American magazine *Antiques* commenced publication in January 1922; the Art and Antique Dealers' League of America was formed in 1926. Australia possessed determined collectors (including of colonial Australian furniture) such as Hardy Wilson at least by the 'teens, *Art in Australia* noted in 1921 that it would offer articles on antiques and china, but the Australian trade as a whole lacked a professional infrastructure with its own journals until the 1960s. Nonetheless, the existence of a large trading network is suggested in other ways. The department store David Jones (Sydney) conducted an Old Sydney exhibition of 'engravings, lithographs, paintings, etchings, pencil sketches and furniture used by our forefathers' in 1922³². In an undated letter c.1926 the Australian artist and aesthete Thea Proctor wrote to a Mr Connor 'Your show of antiques must have been very interesting – There must still be a lot of lovely things in Tasmania in spite of the dealers'³³. That these collecting interests were relatively new explains why decorating with antique or reproduction pieces in the 1920s and 1930s was frequently described as novel or even 'modern'³⁴. An accelerating nostalgia for the Australian-colonial past is apparent in a range of exhibitions and publications from the 'teens, much of it flowing from the interests of Hardy Wilson and Sydney Ure Smith. Ure Smith illustrated C. H. Bertie's *Old Sydney* (1911) and *Stories of Old Sydney* (1912), in 1914 published his drawings as *Relics of Old Colonial Days*, and in 1918 Smith and Bertram Stevens authored *The Charm of Sydney*. Hardy Wilson's *The Cow Pasture Road* (1920) provided his usual mix of romantic longing and veneration for the colonial era, in which buildings were illustrated as if restored, surrounded by characters in nineteenth-century fancy dress. Lionel Lindsay's *Conrad Martens. The Man and his Art* (1920), published by Angus and Robertson for Ure Smith, marked the beginning of an interest in colonial painting and was also the first substantial Australian art monograph. *The Macquarie Book, Special Number of Art in*

³¹ Stefan Muthesius, 'Why do we buy Old Furniture? Aspects of the Authentic Antique in Britain 1870-1910', *Art History*, 11:2, June 1988, 242.

³² Typescript of exhibitions, David Jones Archive, Sydney; *Daily Telegraph*, 24 May 1922, Press Clippings 1919-1924, David Jones Archive.

³³ Facsimile, Proctor Files, National Gallery of Australia Research Library. This is possibly addressed to the Tasmanian Joseph Connor, a watercolourist. The significance of artists in creating and discussing more general systems of taste is the point to emphasise here.

³⁴ The entry of antiques into Australia became duty-free in 1928; from this point the number of London antique firms operating here increased. Home magazine remarked that 'Australia is one of the last civilised countries to awaken to the value of the antique as a national asset'. *Home*, 2 April 1929, 20; on duties see *Ibid.* 60, 62.

Australia, including Hardy Wilson's essay 'Greenway, Macquarie's Architect', was published the following year.³⁵

Fiske Kimball's *Domestic Architecture of the American Colonies and of the Early Republic* (1922) was the pioneering scholarly text in this area, and like Wilson's Australian project, can be viewed as part of the 'filopietistic movement to preserve and restore American antiquities'.³⁶ Despite the suggestions of a market for Australian colonial furniture existing in the 1920s, no study of Australian furniture appeared until the publication of Earnshaw's *Early Sydney Cabinet-Makers 1804-1870* in 1971³⁷. The lack of the highly esteemed eighteenth-century furniture types, as well as the often assumed inferiority or provincial nature of Australian pieces, partly explains this absence. The genre of furniture studies is also relatively recent, very few being published before the twentieth century. As Stefan Muthesius' study of British examples found; 'no comprehensive books on the history of furniture appeared before the end of the nineteenth century. Neither did there seem to be reliable, specialist dealers before the early nineteen hundreds'³⁸.

Australia and the 'small house'

So far I have discussed the taste for a fantasy of the early colonial past. The 20th century presented different issues. The high tradition of European references was a bulwark against the banality of that dreadful place, the suburb³⁹. Historical overview of twentieth-century Australian interior design first occurred in the critical writings of the architect and polemicist Robin Boyd in the 1950s. His much-reprinted texts *Australia's Home. Its Origins, Builders and Occupiers* (1952) and *The Australian Ugliness* (1960) were written with an advocacy role to promote a modernist sensibility free from the 'featurism' - cloaking or camouflage he found everywhere in suburban Australia. He detested the riot of colour and shapes employed for shops and housing; in his view, what was required for post-Second World War Australia was modernist unity, which he believed to be inevitable. Boyd

³⁵ Art in Australia, *The Macquarie Book*, Sydney: Art in Australia, 1921.

³⁶ Ames, 'The Stuff of Everyday Life. American Decorative Arts and Household Furnishings', 63.

³⁷ 'Anthony Hordern's Shopping Page' illustrated a sideboard which it claimed 'dates back to the early Colonial days'. *The Home*, 1 August, 1928, 69. The *Burdekin House Exhibition* catalogue (1929) carried two advertisements for dealers that mention colonial furniture. *The Burdekin House Exhibition. A loan collection of good furnishings, including old and modern furniture and fittings...*, Sydney, 8 October - 21 December, 1929, unpaginated.

³⁸ Stefan Muthesius, 'Why do we buy Old Furniture? Aspects of the Authentic Antique in Britain 1870-1910', 231.

³⁹ Bernard Smith, 'On Perceiving the Australian Suburb', in Bernard Smith, *The Antipodean Manifesto. Essays in Art and History*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1975, 90. On the preoccupation with 'the mansion or comparatively large and elaborate dwelling' as opposed to ordinary dwellings see Peter Balmford and J.L. O'Brien, 'Dating Houses in Victoria', *Australian Historical Studies*, 9:36, May 1961, 379-380.

both established the ordinary Australian dwelling as relevant social history - 'Australia is the small house' - and much of the subsequent framework of writing.⁴⁰ That Boyd's arguments have enjoyed a long afterlife is indicated by the way they continue to inform recent texts such as Archer's *Building a Nation* (1987).

Australian population and visual culture expanded enormously in the late 19th and 20th centuries. The arrival of immigrants and their objects also transformed the society in remarkable ways. A great many general concerns can be raised. In post-war Australia an 'optimism society' emerged, embracing new colours, materials and textures. The distinction between rural and urban Australia became more marked.⁴¹ More surviving material culture created new challenges for acquisition policies. The distinction between a museum and a gallery collection became more specialised and more pronounced, and the local and regional gained new prominence.

Institutional exhibitions have accorded increasing prominence to Australian design since the 1980s, notably the Australian National Gallery and the National Gallery of Victoria, both of which have published partial catalogues of the collections.⁴² In 1990 the first extensive history devoted to Australian interior design was published by Lane and Serle, *Australians at Home. A Documentary History of Australian Domestic Interiors from 1788 to 1914* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press). The nineteenth century forms its focus and, like Mario Praz's *An Illustrated History of Interior Decoration from Pompeii to Art Nouveau* (1964) on which books of this type are ultimately modelled, it consists of a set of illustrations with lengthy captions and bridging chapters.⁴³ Sheridan Palmer has described the confluence of post-war modernist taste and the new curatorial interest of Robert Haines, Assistant Director of the National Gallery of Victoria, in bringing together Australian furniture and other decorative arts there after 1948⁴⁴.

Regarding the study of Australian history, McQueen notes that, 'writers performed some of the work of historians, as Eleanor Dark did in the 1940s, since the story of this continent was little researched or written about before the 1960s'. Academic support for the study of Australian design history was not forthcoming until this period, when post-graduate architectural topics were undertaken. Morton E. Herman's *The Architecture of Victorian Sydney*, M. Architecture, University of Melbourne, 1960, appears to be the first post-graduate thesis written in any field of

⁴⁰ Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, Melbourne, 1960, 3.

⁴¹ For a classic reading of the post-war 'Australian way of life' see 'Everyman and his Holden' [an Australian-made car], in Richard White, *Inventing Australia. Images and Identity 1688-1980*, Sydney, George Allen and Unwin, 1981, 158-171

⁴² John McPhee, *Australian Decorative Arts in the Australian National Gallery*, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1988.

⁴³ Mario Praz, *An Illustrated History of Interior Decoration from Pompeii to Art Nouveau*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1964.

⁴⁴ Sheridan Palmer, *Centre of the Periphery*, North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008, 220.

architectural history in Australia. This development was concurrent with the beginnings of design history as a valid scholarly endeavour in an international context, when university-trained historians began to apply primarily art-historical methods to fields such as furniture and ceramics.⁴⁵ The establishment of art history as a discipline had not been consolidated in Australia until the 1950s, with the first post-graduates completing their work in the early 1960s. With no local art historical journal apart from the *Bulletin of the National Gallery of Victoria* in existence, important articles concerning architectural history appeared in *Historical Studies* and the *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*.

Historians of Australian art have indicated occasional interest in researching aspects of Australian interior design, generally in connection with painting. Aestheticism attracted the attention of several scholars; Patricia Dobrez examined the descriptions of interiors in the novels of Martin Boyd; Ann Galbally researched the impact of Aestheticism on Melbourne interior-design and consumer goods in the context of late nineteenth-century Australian art. Mary Eagle signalled most forcefully that the understanding of a particular period of Australian art cannot exist without recognition of the role of the applied arts - design, advertising, fashion⁴⁶. In her 1978 essay and subsequent book regarding early-twentieth century painting, she argued that modernism entered Australian art not through the hallowed reaches of 'high' art but through 'their secondary manifestation in fashion goods for a growing consumer market'.⁴⁷ Eagle cited *Home* magazine as a compelling example of the mingling of art and design in which the *moderne* was espoused as both fashionable and desirable. Conferences of the Art Association of Australia (representing mainly art historians) have included sessions devoted to Australian design history, particularly architecture, since at least 1976. Considerable momentum for these studies was generated in the first issues of the Association's scholarly publication *Australian Journal of Art*, the first issue of which included two articles on Australian architecture. Dealers were present and gave papers at the first conferences; they are now conspicuously absent, and the types of knowledge that they possess (material connoisseurship, keen sense of provenance and cycles of taste, archival and other research) is often not taken up by scholars unless they conduct personal friendships.

Identity politics has structured much graduate research and teaching in this field for the past thirty years; it can have the effect of masking alternative questions that were rendered less fashionable, including the aesthetic dimension. Some of the

⁴⁵ The best summary of general scientific approaches to dress, textiles, ceramics, furniture and interior design is Hazel Conway (ed), *Design History. A Student's Handbook*, London, Unwin Hyman, 1987.

⁴⁶ P. Dobrez, 'Martin Boyd's Aestheticism: a late Victorian Legacy', *Australasian Victorian Studies Association, Brisbane Conference Papers*, August 1978, pp. 29-39; A. Galbally, 'Aestheticism in Australia' in A. Bradley and T. Smith (eds), *Australian Art and Architecture: Essays Presented to Bernard Smith*. Melbourne, 1980, pp. 124-133.

⁴⁷ M. Eagle, *Australian Modern Painting Between the Wars 1914-1939*, Sydney, 1990, p. 15.

most useful studies of domestic architecture and interior design have emerged from outside the ranks of art and architectural history. Kerreen Reiger's *The Disenchantment of the Home* (1985) analyses the domestic sphere, popular culture and ephemeral material such as trade catalogues and women's magazines as forces actively shaping familial, sexual and medical discourses in Australia. Such approaches challenge the models of connoisseurship and linear histories of style within which design was frequently positioned in the past, and which continues to shape popular conceptions of the field (the cult of 'lifestyle television', from *Antiques Roadshow* to *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* reinscribes this position).

By the 1980s a second generation born since the post-war period became interested in popular culture, and the academic debate concerning the validity of 'kitsch' provided another incentive to investigate popular culture⁴⁸. The art and design schools were merged with the university sector quite early, in the late 1980s early 1990s. Craft theory and craft discourse is sophisticated in Australia and has been led by figures such as Sue Rowley, who trained in sociology and women's studies, and who been a leader in the practice-based research agenda for visual artists.⁴⁹ As Neil Brown has noted of this conjunction, crafts conducted within a university setting had to 'embrace literary and cultural meta-representations of their domain... There was an imperative that the notion of freedom to act with professional independence comes eventually and only through theoretical reflection'.⁵⁰ Australian feminists in the 1980s and 1990s collaborated a great deal with independent feminist scholars abroad such as Jasleen Dhamija of Delhi, India. This led to a set of hybrid and cross-cultural practices and investigations that are not particular to Australia but are surely significant and weighty. A new generation of curators and scholars who are not anxious about boundary disputes now publish their work on Australian visual culture within international settings. Indeed, many of their arguments concern the imbrication of Australia within global culture and transnational settings. A characteristic example of such high quality scholarship is *Modern times. The Untold Story of Modernism in Australia* (eds. Ann Stephen, Philip Goad and Andrew McNamara, Miegunyah Press, 2008), which accompanied an exhibition at the Powerhouse Museum (Sydney) of that name. Erika Esau's *Images of the Pacific Rim. Australia and California 1850-1935* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2010) is an important recent example of art historical scholarship unpacking 'the deep aesthetic connections between these modern cultures' (19). Another impressive example of this strategy is the research of Dr Sally Gray's on art and fashion interfaces. It brings together postmodern historiography, queer theory and

⁴⁸ For an example of this close critical attention to kitsch see Wilhem, Daniel, 'The Kitsch Quarrel', *Art & Text*, no. 41, January 1992, pp. 58-68

⁴⁹ Sue Rowley (ed), *Reinventing Textiles. Vol. 1. Tradition and Innovation*, Winchester, Telos Art Publishing, 1999.

⁵⁰ N.C.M. Brown, 'Theorising the crafts: new tricks of the trades' in Sue Rowley (ed), *Craft and Contemporary Theory*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1997, 5.

historical biography to bear on understanding of the materiality of objects. Gray has placed the making, wearing and aesthetics of clothing and adornment within specific urban subcultures of New York and Sydney. Her most recent work investigates aesthetic relationships between groups of creative practitioners and the global circulation of ideas of fashionability.⁵¹

Conclusion

The place from which designs originate renders them distinctive and connected to the global and the local in specific ways. I conclude with an example from the first exhibition of Australian fashion clothing held at the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art (Brisbane) in 2009. In 1989, fashion designers Pam Easton and Lydia Pearson began to create from an Australian provincial city of Brisbane their range of garments that were deliberately nostalgic and feminine, with an air of knowing retrospection generated through an engagement with historical and ethnographic sources. At first they were not widely known and their market was completely local. Within ten years their female clothing-line, manufactured in Brisbane but made of textiles garnered from Vietnam and India, as well as Italy and France was retailing to a global clientele: in Browns, London; Neiman Marcus, USA; and Alta Moda, Kuwait. Within Easton Pearson's design imagination, traditional designs from within and outside Australia are not simply copied but rather amended to create new allusions and aesthetics. In going to the 'source' of ethnic textiles and re-commissioning in India fabrics that had not been produced in some cases for decades, their practice raises questions about authenticity, intervention and revival. As the economic historian Giorgio Riello has noted of another Indian case, once Gujarati textile printers gained access to a monograph published by a westerner (John Guy's *Woven Cargoes*) they were able to copy the designs and literally 'reappropriate' 'their past via museum scholarship'.⁵² In the clothing designs of Easton Pearson, the reference to an imperial or colonial past to create a 'new global present' can be seen not just in the choice of fabrics and their material mixing, but also in cultural references to imagined literary personalities and historical periods. Perhaps it makes a great deal of sense that Easton Pearson generated this design practice from a city and a region that had been noted for awkward and hostile race relations with indigenous peoples and a frontier

⁵¹ Sally Gray, 'Reinterpreting a Textile Tradition - David McDiarmid's Klub Kwilt', *Textile History, The Journal of the Pasold Research Fund*, 38: 2, November 2007, 198-210; Sally Gray, 'Crafting Hip and Cool: David McDiarmid's Handcrafted Lamb Suede Dancefloor Outfits, 1980-1989', *The Journal of Modern Craft*, 3:1, March 2010, 37-54.

⁵² Giorgio Riello, 'Global Cotton, The Asian Fabric that changed the world', monograph in preparation for Cambridge University Press, communication with the author, November 2010.

mentality based on an economy of primary production and mining.⁵³ Within the 'experience economy', the 'cultural turn' and the era of the 'new economy' that dominates contemporary tourism and up-market shopping, the conjunction of geographical difference, eccentricity, and artisanal specialisation can confer prestige and market advantage. Objects – goods –material culture – are always valued within local or regional terms but generated thorough global mappings. We might not require that linguistic construction the 'glocal' in order to understand that centre-periphery and metropolitan-provincial binaries have never been neat nor simple one-directional flows.

Peter McNeil trained in the history of art with a focus on design history. His research engages with different ways in which visual imagery and materiality shaped lives from the eighteenth century to the present day. Recent publications include *The Fashion History Reader: Global Perspectives*, 2010 (Routledge; with G. Riello); and *Fashion: Critical and Primary Sources, Renaissance to the Present Day* (4 Vols.), Berg, 2009. McNeil is currently a Principal Investigator in the Humanities in the European Research Area funded project 'Fashioning the Early Modern: Creativity and Innovation in Europe, 1500-1800'. He is Professor of Design History in the School of Design at the University of Technology, Sydney and Foundation Professor of Fashion Studies at Stockholm University.

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⁵³ See Peter McNeil, 'Portable Decoration: Easton Pearson, History and Traditions', in *Easton Pearson. Twenty Years*, Brisbane, Gallery of Modern Art, 2009, pp. 108-119