

Curators and Australian art history: a personal view*

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1.

At the end of 1979, having finished my fine arts degree at Sydney University, I was faced with a choice: Should I go on to a course of postgraduate study or should I try for a curatorial job in an art museum? The issue was decided for me when I went, speculatively, for an interview at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. I didn't get the job I applied for, but was offered another, as a curatorial assistant working in the registration area.

Most of my work was in the Gallery's collection store. There, amid the ranked racks of pictures I mused on the way in which the shape of Australian art was very different from the one I had been used to - was much richer, more complex and more fulsomely rounded out (often with mediocrity, sometimes with failure) than the well-established orthodoxies of William Moore, Bernard Smith and (to a lesser extent) Robert Hughes, had led me to expect.

The store was full of works by artists whose names meant little to me, despite my having studied Australian art during my undergraduate years. I realised I knew little about artists such as Fred Coventry, Florence Rodway, Elaine Haxton, Alice Muskett and William Lister Lister, to give just a taste of a long list.

The more I became familiar with the collection and examined its complexities, the more I realised that the curatorial work of collection-building had created a picture of the development of Australian art that was different from the picture created by most writers on Australian art.

The basement store of the Art Gallery of New South Wales presents a subterranean history of Australian art.

As a curator my first big break came after I left the Art Gallery of New South Wales and moved to the Newcastle Region Art Gallery. Newcastle was the home town of William Dobell, so his work and that of his contemporaries had been for some years before my arrival a particular focus in collecting and exhibiting. I was keen to continue this focus and embarked on an exhibition examining the life work of Eric Wilson who lived briefly with Dobell in London in 1937.¹

* This paper was presented at the conference on Art History's history in Australia and New Zealand, Melbourne, 28.08.2010 and has been published without modification.

¹ *Eric Wilson 1911-1946*, Newcastle Region Art Gallery, 1983.

Bernard Smith in *Place, Taste and Tradition* writes:

Some of the best examples of flat-patterned cubism have come from the brush of Eric Wilson. There is a rich colour quality and a love of the tactile values of paint in the varied textures of his best works. [Both in *Place, Taste and Tradition* and the subsequent *Australian Painting* Smith illustrates *Abstract: The Kitchen Stove* in the Art Gallery of NSW collection]²

Yet Wilson's place in the history of Australian art was something other than a cubist follower. The complexity of his artistic journey is shown in his meticulous diaries. Some of Wilson's diaries were in the Australian National Gallery and others still in the possession of painter Jean Appleton to whom Wilson had been married before his early death at the age of 36 in 1946. In the diaries Wilson's struggle for an idea of Truth is revealed as his calling. He was strictly religious man, an adherent of the Seventh-day Adventist church. He began his career painting cosy family groups, clothes lines in backyards and snapdragons in cut glass vases. In such pictures Truth was associated with an intense realism. In 1937 Wilson won the NSW Travelling Art Scholarship and his teachers in London led him to the idea that there was a deeper (or a higher) Truth that could be accessed through abstraction. His late works, painted back in Australia are his most compelling. He painted the forgotten inmates of Lidcombe Old Men's Home (where he worked out the war years as a conscientious objector) and the sparse and often contorted forms of burnt out trees in the Australian landscape.

2.

I feel that in dealing with the subject of curators and Australian art history there is one curator - Daniel Thomas - to whom I should make a dedication. When I arrived at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1979, Daniel had already left to take up his role as the head of Australian art at the Australian National Gallery in Canberra.³ But his presence seemed to be everywhere; his name and his ideas -- indeed his curatorial ideals -- were constantly evoked by his curatorial colleagues Renée Free and Nicholas Draffin.

Daniel made a trip from Canberra to Newcastle specifically to see the *Eric Wilson* exhibition. I was naturally apprehensive as to what he would make of it. Yet I was struck then, as I have been many times since, by his generosity and his curiosity. These seem to me the two ideal qualities of a curator. Along with 'an eye'.

Taking me gently by the arm as we strolled down the street to get some lunch, Daniel gave me his assessment of the exhibition I had curated. I'm sure we talked about Westminster School abstraction and many other things I've forgotten. Yet what stuck in my mind was his observation that in curating the exhibition I had included too

² Bernard Smith, *Place, Taste and Tradition*, 1945, 2nd ed. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1979, 201.

³ Daniel Thomas was Senior Curator of Australian Art at the Australian National Gallery from 1978 to 1984.

many uninteresting late paintings of Paris street scenes. There is no doubt that Eric Wilson's departure from Europe at the outbreak of war in 1939, just as he was making headway, just as he was about to take up a teaching role, saw the end of his ambitions. He never got over that abrupt break and he spent his remaining years in Australia painting Parisian scenes - the Pont Neuf, the twisting alleyways - based on the drawings he made during a few short weeks in the city in 1937.

I included a swag of this tourist stuff in the exhibition because the Paris pictures were widely available in state and regional collections, not because they were Eric Wilson's greatest contribution to Australian art. Daniel was right, of course. These are often dull paintings, of an entirely conventional type.

And Daniel has been right about so many things, not simply matters of emphasis and matters of detail but also, importantly, he has been instrumental in *creating shapes* for histories of Australian art, particularly in the Australian courts of the Art Gallery of New South Wales where he was curator from 1958 until 1978 and in the initial hang of Australian art at the National Gallery of Australia in 1982.

It is in shaping displays that curators are at their most influential.

Very few visitors to art galleries read art history. Yet in looking at the displays of the national gallery and state galleries (and the larger regional galleries) they are presented with the ambient array of art history. Curators shape these public art histories.

Daniel Thomas has been the most influential shaper of public collections of Australian art. In 1966 he toured the United States and was impressed by a number of museums in which integrated displays of paintings, decorative art, works on paper and folk art created meaningful stylistic ensembles.⁴ He was able to apply this principle in 1972 in the redisplayed collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. By the time the ANG opened a decade later, the display was underpinned by an explicit philosophy that Daniel described as 'a policy for cultural unity'. He put it in the following terms:

In most art museums permanent displays are divided, for convenience, into several different media or cultural categories. Paintings and sculptures are normally found in one series of galleries within an art museum, prints and drawings in a second series, decorative arts in a third, ethnographic arts in a fourth, photographs, if not displayed with prints and drawings, are sometimes found in a fifth series of galleries, and folk arts, if collected at all,

⁴ I have written about this display in ' "No mere container" The collection display in the National Gallery of Australia', in Pauline Green (ed.) *Building the Collection*, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2003, 118-127.

will normally be found in yet another. The Australian National Gallery, instead, displays Australian art in its full range of media and cultures.⁵

This argument for displaying visual culture intact has been tremendously influential in art museums; it is now the standard display practice in our state and some regional galleries.

I would argue, too, that this display policy has been influential in diluting medium hierarchies in Australian art history. Furthermore it co-incided with one of the imperatives of feminist art history in which it was necessary to push against orthodox medium hierarchies, to dispense with them, in order to better see the importance of artists who worked in the previously relegated mediums – Thea Proctor, Olive Cotton, Joy Hester are some obvious examples.

One innovative element of the ANG display in 1982 was the integration of Indigenous artists' work with that of non-Indigenous artists. Bark paintings were included at various points in the display – in explicit recognition that the settler art of Australia developed alongside continuing (and subtly changing) traditions. The juxtaposition of bark paintings with the work of Margaret Preston drew attention to the beginnings of an appreciation for bark paintings as they entered the commercial art world in Sydney in the late 1940s – a world in which Margaret Preston was a significant player.

3.

In making art history the curator has to take account of 3 constraints – *wall space*, the associated physical limitation of *label size* – and *attention span*. Each one of these necessitates art historical generalisation.

In terms of label-writing curators have the capacity to be both specific and general. The specifics of artist's name, dates, the accurate title and dating of the work and a summary of its provenance - the simple conciseness of these facts presented on a label can belie the laboriousness and time-consuming processes involved in getting these things right. This is almost the most important work a curator undertakes.

It is perhaps even more difficult getting the generalisations right when it comes to introductory wall texts – the texts that introduce an exhibition, a room or a theme. The National Gallery of Victoria is exemplary in this regard; an example from the NGV's *Modern Britain* exhibition:

Any cursory examination of portraiture over a period of half a century or more will reveal, in subtle ways, the prevailing stylistic influences and cultural paradigms that characterise particular periods. But it is the portrait's paradoxical qualities of timelessness and deadness, wherein the subject is

⁵ Daniel Thomas, 'Australian Art', *Art and Australia*, vol. 20, no. 1, 63-70.

given a kind of false eternity, which lies at the heart of the continuing popular fascination with the genre.⁶

Here we have a wall text perfectly pitched in tone and content, verging on the philosophical. Yet too often texts are confused as to whether they are marketing tools – intended to ‘sell’ an artist or an exhibition to the visitor – or intended to answer the simple questions that a visitor needs answered as she approaches the exhibition.

In certain types of art museums – National Portrait Galleries, for example – the quality of label text can be as important as the quality of the portrait, even though the former appears to be in a subordinate relationship. That is because in the NPG context a portrait is a synecdoche for a life – and the life must be told. Or summarised.

More on generalisation: Works of art have a unique capacity to resist generalisation. This is one limiting factor in art history, clear to the perceptive visitor in any art museum. It is both a risk for the curator and the thing that keeps us going back to look at pictures again and again. The importance of going back to artworks time and time again is brilliantly elaborated in T.J. Clark’s *The Sight of Death; an experiment in art writing*.⁷

Yet more on generalisation: In my survey of Australian art, which came out in 2001, I was keen to create a shape for the subject – not only in the arrangement of chapters and in the generalisations made, but also in the way in which the plates unfolded. Pictures were chosen as much for their resonances across the book as they were chosen as exemplary of the artists illustrated. It was as much *curated* as written.

The book was based on the premise of co-terminous Indigenous and non-Indigenous art production. This was not a strikingly original idea in 2001 having been by that time part of the Australian art displays of most state galleries. The book followed on from my 1994 publication *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century* which had led me to an understanding of some of the complexities of Australian art narratives.⁸

My interest in these artists came about through my work as curator of Australian drawings at the NGA and it grew from what I might describe as a basic curatorial instinct. Initially I wanted to make a simple list of the drawings of as many named Aboriginal artists working in the nineteenth century as I could find. Much of the work was looking in collections (mostly not art gallery collections) such as the State Library of New South Wales to see if I could get beyond some of the crude colonial descriptors, many unchallenged since the card catalogue was compiled, to the

⁶ *Modern Britain* at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2007 was curated by Ted Gott.

⁷ T.J. Clark., *The Sight of Death; An experiment in art writing*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006

⁸ Andrew Sayers., *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994.

identities of known artists. I wanted to search out works in overseas collections.⁹ I wanted to compare styles. Only when I had a listing of some 200 examples of the work of these draughtsmen did it become clear that some synthesis could be attempted. The story was first one of artistic exchange, and secondly of a shared set of experiences in the lives of the three most prolific artists, William Barak, Tommy MacRae and Mickey of Ulladulla. These three artists had each been born at a time when it was possible to experience the ways of life and knowledge that had been traditions of their people; they each experienced the full force of the incursion of settler society; they each lived until old age. It was in their later years they made their drawings, casting a retrospective view and combining that with current realities. They each died within a few years of the turn of the twentieth century.

The point I want to draw out here is that *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century* was first a list, then a book, and only then did it become the basis of an exhibition.

The corollary is this: curators need to have confidence that art historical ideas will grow out of the work of researching collections. In patiently seeking answers to the questions that arise in the course of that work, new insights and new avenues will open up; Promised Lands are glimpsed.

I think this is amply demonstrated in the work of one of Daniel Thomas's protégés, Tim Bonyhady. Tim was employed by the Australian National Gallery in 1980 specifically to work on the Gallery's colonial paintings. Although an admittedly thin collection, there were some significant works in it and Bonyhady set out their provenances and gave them succinct and precise histories.¹⁰

This basic work of cataloguing gave rise to a broader set of questions of relationship between works, and context. One of the most telling comparisons in the NGA's collection is between the two renditions of fern-gully rainforest by von Guérard and Buvelot. There is a clear spilt that could be observed between the specificity of von Guérard and the generalising tendency of Buvelot, a comparison that was obvious to the two artists' contemporaries. This was but one aspect of a dialectic that could be applied across the whole of Australia's colonial art world and Tim developed a sophisticated argument around polarities between the Indigenous and the European, the cultivated and the wild, the grandiose and the intimist.

This is, as you would recognise, a somewhat crude rendition of his Bonyhady's 1985 book *Images in Opposition*.¹¹ But it is the progression from the work of cataloguing a collection to structuring a book that is germane to my subject today. In carrying

⁹ Here I must acknowledge the work undertaken by Carol Cooper in identifying European collections with relevant drawings. She contributed a chapter to *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*.

¹⁰ Tim Bonyhady, *Colonial Paintings in the Australian National Gallery*, Canberra: Australian National Gallery, 1986.

¹¹ Tim Bonyhady, *Images in Opposition: Australian Landscape painting 1801 – 189*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1985.

through a collection-based examination and in progressing from the specific to the general – or, to put it another way, from the object to the idea – Bonyhady produced a new shape for our understanding of colonial art, one that has been profoundly influential.

The same point could be made of Bernard Smith. His work on the catalogue of the paintings collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, published in 1953, led to a richer and more inflected history that shows up if we compare his *Australian Painting* (1962) with the more synthetic approach adopted in his earlier *Place, Taste and Tradition*.¹²

4.

Another essential curatorial discipline is tracing provenance. Curators are not exclusively interested in the circumstances surrounding the creation of a work but become engaged in the subsequent lives of the object. This may point to a fundamental difference in the way curators add to art historical knowledge. It also highlights different frames of interest in art galleries and museums – something that interests me a great deal at the moment.

When the National Museum of Australia was given the painting *Arreyonga Paddock, James Range* by Albert Namatjira in 2008 it was the story surrounding the work that was of greatest interest. It had hung for decades in the Cootamundra Aboriginal Girl's Training Home and its display context in the Museum is as part of the story of the 'Cootamundra Girls' (as they call themselves) and the history of the institutionalisation of Indigenous children. This is a very different context from the standard art museum treatment of the display of Namatjira's work, in which the emphasis tends to be on the subject matter or the artist's place in the art-making at Hermannsburg. The watercolour here is considered emblematic, an artefact which carries the weight of another story.

Museums often privilege collection histories in this way, particularly the histories of the collecting of Indigenous material culture, where the emphasis is often on the *collector* – Baldwin Spencer, Basedow, Berndt etc. rather than the *collected*. In art museum contexts the histories of collecting are of generally of much less significance. Where the collector is privileged – which happens when collections that otherwise would be distributed throughout the displays are sequestered, in, say, a set of rooms devoted to a single collector – art history suffers.

In contemporary usage the word *curator* is applied to people carrying out a range of activities. But I want to draw a distinction between the use of the word to denote someone who has responsibility for a collecting area – a curator working within an institution – and the word applied to someone who puts together an exhibition – say the curator of a survey or group show in a contemporary art space.

¹² Bernard Smith, *A catalogue of Australian oil paintings in the National Art Gallery of New South Wales 1875-1952*, Sydney: National Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1953.

One circumstance characteristic of the institutional curator, particularly the curator working in a large art museum, is the capacity to access the technical resource of their allied professionals in the conservation areas of their institutions. This opportunity is not always taken up as effectively as it might be, but it can be of great assistance in art historical enquiries of various kinds.

Some of the combined work of curators and conservators is in the form of simple art historical footwork – defining authorship.

Yet there have been more profound insights that have emerged from close curator/conservator investigations. Perhaps Anthea Callen has been exemplary in demonstrating the far reaching nature of the close physical examination of pictures. She opens her influential 1994 article on varnish and mattness in the understanding of late nineteenth century French painting with the observation that ‘In addition to changing markedly the appearance of the object, varnish – or the lack of it – carried an ideological message: the decision not to varnish signalled the modernity not only of the work but also of the artist’.¹³

This is part of a larger argument that curators would consider fundamentally important; that ‘apparently marginal phenomena – such as varnish or frames – can be extremely important, both aesthetically, and in terms of a picture’s meaning’.¹⁴

A curator working closely with a conservator can also answer questions about process. This can be important in dispelling any number of art historical myths.

5.

I want to turn now to look at a question that is pertinent to the subject of curators and art history: To what extent do the judgements of curators create art historical canons? Of course there is no simple answer to this question. The relationship between the art market, the apparently confirming judgements of curators, the creation of value in the secondary market and the action of readjustment for individual enthusiasms or blind-spots – this knotted fabric of relationships is hard to untangle. Yet, clearly, curatorial consensus can have a significant effect in elevating the work of particular artists.

Consider the case of von Guérard, now considered, by curatorial consensus to be the best landscape painter in Australia in the mid 19th Century. This elevated view has been steadily building over the past four decades. In his appendix to the catalogue of the 1980 travelling exhibition organised by the ANG and the AGDC, Daniel Thomas outlined the reasons for the rehabilitation of von Guérard’s reputation starting in the

¹³ Anthea Callen, ‘The Unvarnished Truth: Mattness, “Primitivism” and Modernity in French Painting c. 1870-1907’, *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. CXXXVI, November 1994, 738 – 746.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

1960s after a century of neglect.¹⁵ He cited the disciplined study of Australian art-history launched by Bernard Smith in the 1950s at the Art Gallery of NSW and the University of Melbourne. He pointed to international art-history trends in highlighting German and regional artists. He pointed to the Art Gallery of New South Wales consciously altering its display from 'a parochial shop window of Sydney art to a fully Australian collection'. And finally he acknowledged the role of two dealers – Joseph Brown and Frank McDonald who began to specialise in 19th C. work and who supported corresponding scholarship.

This set of circumstances, in which Daniel Thomas's own enthusiasm played no small part, illustrates the interdependent nature of academic art historians, curators, dealers and institutional structures.

The one dimension excluded from Thomas's summary of von Guérard's rehabilitation is the role of the critic. That is another subject altogether. Many curators have first been critics – Daniel Thomas is himself an example – he was a newspaper critic at the same time as he was art museum curator. Mary Eagle was a critic before she took up the position as a curator of Australian painting at the National Gallery of Australia; John MacDonald, a long-standing critic, has undoubtedly been a fairer one following his brief and unhappy stint as a curator at the same institution. Ted Snell in Western Australia has managed to juggle both roles.

So, in short, the role of the curator in creating art history is specific but inevitably contingent; art histories are complex things in which many strands are interwoven and each part of the fabric is mutually dependant and supportive.

I am going to leave this last observation in the words of a critic, the late David Sylvester, although 'critic' is too narrow a word to apply to the breadth of his activities. In a wonderfully expressed summation of his own art world involvements (that mirror in their variety those of our exemplar Daniel Thomas) Sylvester writes;

The attraction of teaching... is partly the feedback of ideas and the constant stimulus of other minds, partly that it involves discourse which requires tentativeness rather than encourages patness. The attraction of editing is that it is much easier but equally gratifying at the time of birth to be a father than a mother. The attraction of serving on committees is that one can influence events -- the purchase of works, the choice of artists for exhibitions -- far more than one can by writing in the press. *The attraction of curating exhibitions is that it is more rewarding to manipulate the works of art themselves than it is to try and talk about them.* The trouble with discourse is that one almost always either

¹⁵ Candice Bruce and Daniel Thomas, *Eugen von Guérard*, Australian Gallery Directors Council in conjunction with the Australian National Gallery, 1980.

says too little and goes nowhere or says too much and makes statements that are beside the point.¹⁶

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¹⁶ David Sylvester, 'Curriculum Vitae' in his *About Modern Art; Critical essays 1948-2000*, Pimlico, London, 2002, p.28.