



'The art of the process-engravers.' Advertisement for Hartland and Hyde, Sydney, in Art in Australia 2, 1917.

MITCHELL LIBRARY

CHAPTER 6

PICTORIAL SOURCES AND GALLERIES

VICTOR CRITTENDEN

PICTORIAL SOURCES are no longer seen as mere adjuncts to social history but are looked upon as datable documents, and of the same significance as textual matter interpreted by historians. An artist's or a photographer's interpretation of a social situation, a landscape or a historical event is plainly influenced by social and cultural background and by the creator's intention. Photography, often thought to be an objective, documentary art, can be manipulated in terms of the choice and presentation of a subject in much the same way as a painter creates an image. Paintings, sketches, drawings, sculpture and photographs often tell us more about the past than prose accounts. Such pictorial records have been systematically and unsystematically collected by a wide variety of institutions from galleries and libraries to government departments and local historical societies.

European art galleries often grew out of private collections brought together by wealthy persons who occasionally opened them to the general public for admiration and viewing. The concept of art galleries for the population at large was gradually accepted, and municipal and state governments founded and maintained art collections for the delectation of the ordinary citizen. Private donors added to the collections maintained from the public purse, enhancing their cultural and artistic renown, and in some instances the enriched institutions became great national collections.

The Australian colonial governments followed the British and European models and social pressures, as well as financial support from the wealthier citizens, led to the early establishment of art galleries and museums that would house not only European artefacts but also evidence of Australia's own flora and fauna and of the creations of its own arts and crafts.

Colonial governments allocated relatively large sums of money to construct 'national' galleries and to form 'national' collections, containing European masters and the occasional Australian work. Victoria led the way when a Museum of Art (later to become the National Gallery of Victoria) was established in 1861, but the collection grew slowly until it received the Felton bequest in 1904. Other states followed suit and before the end of the century each had its own 'national' gallery. The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery was planned in 1838 and built as early as 1863. Sydney's state gallery started in 1874, Adelaide's in 1879 and Perth and Brisbane had established galleries by 1895. The Australian National Gallery was not opened until 1982 but a collection of works of art commenced soon after Federation in 1901.

Between 1850 and the 1890s most of our photographic records were the work of professional

photographers, working either for the government or from private studios. In some states the best collections for this period are to be found in the government printing offices. Newspapers and periodicals did not carry photographs until the 1890s. Before this they printed images in the form of line and wood engravings. Examples of this high quality pictorial imagery can be found in the *Illustrated Sydney News* (1853–94) and the *Australasian Sketcher with Pen and Pencil* (1873–89).

From the 1890s photographs gradually began to appear in newspapers and periodicals throughout the country. The *Sydney Mail* provided extensive photographic coverage of World War I, as did similar weeklies in all other states. By the 1920s the major metropolitan dailies were accompanying more of their stories with photographic images. In 1922 a newspaper started in Melbourne called the *Sun News Pictorial* in which the text was planned to be secondary to the photographic content. It is of considerable importance in this context that the major newspapers retained large collections of photographs and that the major newspaper archives, particularly those of John Fairfax and Sons in Sydney and the Herald and Weekly Times group in Melbourne now house the largest collections of twentieth-century Australian photographs.

A useful guide to institutions holding Australian pictorial resources, including newspaper archives, government departments, religious groups, clubs, companies, archives, libraries, museums and galleries and private individuals, is the *Directory of Australian pictorial resources* compiled by Mari Davis and Hilary Boyce. Besides comments on the collections, it provides information on addresses and hours of opening.

Information on Australian galleries and their history will usually be found in their own archives, libraries and publications. A useful overview is *Artists and galleries of Australia* by Max Germaine which contains in alphabetical sequence short entries on Australian artists and galleries, including private galleries and those within educational institutions.

All the major Australian galleries have collected works representative of Australian artists as an integral part of their acquisitions policy. More recently major Australian museums have endeavoured to acquire examples of Aboriginal art, which characteristically is linked with utilitarian objects and with ornamentation of the human body. The wall paintings which go back hundreds of years in some cases and have their own mythical and historical significance are, of course, site bound and are cared for under the provisions of the national Heritage Act.

Lists of Australian artworks are published by the principal art galleries whose collections warrant such an expense. Some of these gallery catalogues have become notable: Whitelaw's *Australian landscape drawing, 1830–1880, in the National Gallery of Victoria*, *Picture book: selected works from the collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia* and *The great south land: treasures of the Mitchell and Dixson galleries* by Mourot and Jones. A select list of these documents can be found in R. Choate's excellent *A guide to sources of information on the arts in Australia*.

State-supported art galleries, like all other statutory bodies, have to submit annual reports on their activities to the state parliament which allocates their budget. Many of these reports contain details of major acquisitions, educational or extension activities, lecture series and workshops. They are published as parliamentary papers and can be found in that rather drab series; in addition, some state galleries issue a more attractive version of the annual report for the general public, friends of the gallery and other supporting bodies.

Almost all the major galleries try to keep the public alerted to new acquisitions, both by close liaison with the daily press and by special exhibition catalogues. Such publications are not always produced on a lavish scale but may nevertheless serve as effective resources on artists as well as the gallery collection.

There is considerable historical value in these exhibition catalogues and all state libraries, in addition to receiving copies under legal deposit regulations, make a special effort to maintain a collection of those that relate to their own state. The working library—the collections of books, pamphlets, documents and journals acquired for the use of the staff—of every gallery will, of course, also endeavour to maintain a complete collection of such exhibition catalogues, but these working libraries are not always open to the public although access to them for study purposes is possible.

Regional galleries in Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong, Victoria, preceded those in all other states with the exception of the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston, Tasmania. There are now many such regional galleries throughout Australia and they are listed in Germaine's *Artists and galleries in Australia*.

Photographic collections often form part of an art gallery or museum and are frequently found in libraries and in the collections of historical societies. Apart from the newspaper archives already mentioned, the largest photographic collections in Australia are to be found in the state libraries and the specialist Australiana collections. The photographic image has its own aficionados and some institutions have created specialised sections or departments within their general collections to house, catalogue and render accessible this important evidence of the past. Davis and Boyce have included numerous references to photographic collections, and Davies and Stanbury in their *The Mechanical eye in Australia* (OUP 1985) describe the history of photography in Australia to 1900 with numerous references to collections and to the early journals on photography. Gael Newton takes the story of photography in Australia up to 1950 in her book *Silver and grey* but her survey is restricted to a small number of professional photographers.

The most important work in this area is the endeavour to create a comprehensive national index of photographic images. Entitled for the present 'Australia as Australians saw it', this project is to canvass the public to arouse awareness of the importance of photographs of the past; to invite the public to submit photographs and to allow them to be copied; and to provide a subject approach to the photographs, with appropriate cross-references, by means of a computer-based indexing program. The project is directed by Euan McGillivray and Matthew Nickson who also edit a bulletin called *WOPOP: working papers on photography* which offers detailed descriptions of the structure of the index and the initial limitations of the collecting program. In another field, the Australian Museum in Sydney holds a major collection of photographs of Australian fauna and has published a list of species covered which is revised from time to time.

Pictures, drawings, sculpture and photographs do not have to stem from the dim past to have significance for the historian, but contemporary artists are more frequently found in commercial art galleries where their work is exhibited for a limited period, or in the exhibition rooms of art societies, mainly in the capital cities. Catalogues, reports and reviews of such exhibitions may help historians to identify persons and places and the sales registers should help to keep track of the location of the works of art sold.

Art societies, photographic societies and artists' associations continue to contribute to the discussion on the aesthetic and social issues raised by visual culture; the minutes and record books of these societies form an important archival source for our social and cultural history.

'The ponies and the new dog-cart, Bondi', 27 Aug 1901. Photograph in the albums of Arthur Wigram Allen. This informal family photograph stands in contrast to most Victorian photography. The collected albums of A.W. Allen, a keen amateur photographer, provide a record of the lives of the leisured classes around the turn of the century. The presence of the waiting dog-cart suggests that for wealthy Sydneysiders relaxation was tempered by the responsibilities of the upper classes.

MITCHELL LIBRARY



II GENERAL REFERENCE WORKS AND STATISTICS



*An example of the bookbinder's craft by Jack Harding of
New South Wales. The gumleaf border and the
central wattle design are carved into tan leather stained with tan
colouring. The book measures 280 × 240 × 17 mm.*

Photograph by John Storey.

CRAFTS COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA