'SIDERE MENS EADEM MUTATO'
NINETEENTH-CENTURY ART COLLECTIONS
AND ARCHITECTURAL STYLE
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

by

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Synopsis

This thesis seeks to examine the nineteenth-century art collections and architectural style of the original buildings at the University of Sydney in order to demonstrate ways in which visual material may be employed to shape public perception of an institution. I shall argue that the architectural style of the original university buildings was specifically chosen with particular aims which extended beyond the mere establishment of a tertiary institution for the colony. I will also argue that the style shaped the character of the institution, contributed to the maintenance of law and order in the colony, linked the colony more firmly than hitherto to the mother country and provided social benefits for the founders of the institution.

The instant history and character thus imposed upon the institution was reinforced by the assembly of a portrait collection in emulation of other collections of portraits at leading institutions of the colony and the mother country, including the Oxbridge universities. Once the building proclaimed that the institution was comparable with the great universities of the world, the subjects of the portraits at the university could be placed in the class of founders of a great historical institution, thus at the same time enhancing the reputation of the institution and the individuals.

The construction of an identity through visual images was extended by the benefactions of Sir Charles Nicholson, the principal donor of works of art to the university in the nineteenth century. I argue that his intentions in relation to his collections were didactic but were also concerned with the entrenchment of the imperial hegemony over the colony, and again with the enhancement of his personal reputation. This analysis shows how, by a complex of personal ambition and aspiration for the colony, the style of the buildings and the art collections formed were used to establish the colony as civilized and the new university as a bastion of English tradition.
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