'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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1.

**Introduction**

The nineteenth-century collections of the University of Sydney and the situation of the university within the cultural milieu of the colony have never been discussed, or if so, it has only been in a general or superficial way. This thesis sets out to redress the obvious lacuna in relation to both the history of the university and the history of the university art collections. Further, it goes some way to redressing the general lacuna which exists in relationship to nineteenth-century art collections in colonial New South Wales, a subject for which the literature is regrettably sparse. ¹

The art collections at the university are a subject of considerably neglected significance, not only in terms of recording the collections and in relationship to nineteenth-century colonial art collections generally, but chiefly in terms of colonial culture. Although the choice of the Gothic style for the main buildings at the university has been discussed in terms of architectural history, it has not been analysed in relation to the way in which the style projected the image of the colonial university, which, as I will propose in this thesis, was linked with the art collections.

To date there have been three histories of the University of Sydney published: G.L. Fischer, *The University of Sydney 1850–1975* (1975), R.A. Dallen, *The University of Sydney, Its History and Progress* (1925, 1938), and H.E. Barff, *A Short Historical Account of the University of Sydney* (1902). ² Fischer's pictorial history is composed principally of photographs with captions and information but no interpretation, although reproductions of three paintings are included for illustrative purposes. Barff and Dallen both include lists of portraits, indicated in the index of Barff as 'pictures in the hall', with a similar entry by Dallen. Barff devotes a few lines to Nicholson's benefactions:

The tapestries and pictures which adorn the walls were all his gifts ... the most important was the Museum of Egyptian Etruscan, Greek and Roman antiquities ... collected by him ... at considerable cost.
2.

This echoes Nicholson's own letters of benefaction to the University. Both Barff and Dallen outline steps taken in erecting the original buildings. Nowhere in any of this literature is either the use of the Gothic style for the buildings questioned, or the significance of the works of art analysed in terms of understanding the reasons for and the results of their existence at the university.

The extent to which Australian colonial culture was dependent on the mother country is generally recognised. Nowhere is this more apparent than at the University of Sydney, its style and courses, and in relation to this thesis's particular line of enquiry, the collections which were formed. Bernard Smith has pointed out that 'our European based culture came to us in small transportable things ... ' and he comments on 'the degree to which material things have shaped our heritage'. 4 George Nadel writes:

The intellectual history of early Australia reveals the attempt to cast the colonial mind into a mould of the old world. This was no political conspiracy on the part of the conservatives, nor despite appearances, an attempt at sowing loyalties in outposts of the British Empire, the colonists simply drew on ideas they knew. 5

While Bernard Smith's points are indisputable, Nadel's complacent acceptance of the status quo is not affirmed by this thesis. Although it will not be asserted that the 'Englishness' of colonial culture was due to a conspiracy, it will be shown that there were other than passive elements at work. While it must be agreed that Richard White's assertion that the visible symbols of culture constructed by colonial society 'encouraged immense pride ... in their own progress', it will be contended that the collections at the University of Sydney were also used in the interests of imperialism. 6

The argument to be addressed in this thesis is that whilst works of art can be appreciated for their aesthetic qualities alone, the meaning of the work of art is closely linked to its use. I will argue that, in relation to the years 1850-1900 the collections and style connected with the University of Sydney, be they paintings, sculpture, items of antiquity or a particular approach to architecture, were used to signify a chosen set of values, and thus to shape
the public perception of the institution as well as the way in which the university functioned. This effect was achieved in spite of the fact that in some cases the works of art are copies and not originals. The collections and architectural style of the university were significant factors in establishing the institution as one which would perpetuate imperial dominance of the colony while apparently instituting political independence and even a national Australian identity through training native-born potential administrators who in theory could be drawn from any strata of colonial society.

The subtext to this complex situation has to do with the manoeuvring and subtleties of colonial society. While on the one hand the rhetoric of the university's founders concentrated on the magnificence of the colonial university with its Gothic buildings and so on and the preparations for a great future, as asserted by F.L.S. (Futurity) Merewether and others, on the other hand, it will also emerge that the style of the university buildings and its art collections were a means of advancing the worldly interests of the founders themselves and there was personal gain for them in terms of status and reputation.  

The historical location of the thesis must also be considered. While the sparsity is already noted of information on collections not only at the university but also in the general context, information on the period of colonial history addressed in this thesis is readily available. The following short survey, however, provides a brief but important body of information against which the arguments advanced and events described may be understood.

By the 1850s the population in eastern Australia was 400,000 of which only four per cent was educated. About one third of the population was urbanised. From 1851 the gold rushes tripled the population and by 1861 the population of Sydney was 95,789. In 1858, however, there were only thirty-three students attending the University of Sydney. The discovery of gold left Australians probably the richest citizens in the world per capita at that time, although the increased wealth was also due to exports of primary products such as coal and wool. As a result of the increased prosperity of the 1850s, Sydney could boast a number of
modern improvements. These included gaslight, sewerage and a running water supply. By 1855 there were some suburban trains and by 1858 telegraphic communication existed between Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. Closer physical links with the old world were provided by the introduction in 1856 of combined sail and steam ships, which negotiated the voyage between Melbourne and London in only sixty-five days. The steamships were not always reliable, however, as instanced by the drowning of Professor Woolley when the steamship London sank in the Bay of Biscay in 1866. The modern improvements in colonial life were not available to all citizens, for colonial society was one of marked social hierarchies. Divisions between rich and poor, landowner and currency lad, intellectual and mechanic were distinct and bitter. While the University of Sydney would 'lead to an increase in the education of the youth of the higher classes', the streets of Sydney were 'infested by a large number of vagrant children' and 'the house accommodation of the working classes of Sydney (was) admitted on all hands to be deplorably bad.' The elite of the colony suffered from conflict amongst themselves and were unsettled by issues such as the shortage of labour, the land question and the proposed introduction of self government, as well as moves towards democracy and suggestions that the United States of America, not England, should provide a model. Conneil and Irving have isolated racial, religious and industrial conflict as features which contributed to a populist radicalism amongst other orders in colonial society in the 1850s.

The state adopted methods of control based on 'associational' and cultural processes. It was suggested that by schools and learning, by frequent exhibitions of painting and sculpture that 'the ardent minds of the sons of the soil may be prevented from running to waste, may be raised above the unsatisfactory pursuit of sensual enjoyment to revel in the lofty and inexhaustible pleasures of the intellect.' Educational organisations such as the Schools of Arts and the Mechanics Institutes, which were well patronised, were used, however, not so much to instil moral values, but as examples of self government, order and regularity which would be advantageous to the ruling classes in controlling society.
It will be argued in this study that the associationism resulting from the style of the new university, the planning of which was vested in the hands of English ex-patriates whose aim was to establish a stable institution and society and then return to the mother country was an important factor in maintaining both control of society and links with the mother country.

A number of cultural institutions and societies were initiated by the wealthy and elite of the colony. Founders of the university and particularly Sir Charles Nicholson, played a prominent role in most of them. The Public Library was established in 1826 by Governor Darling. Nicholson was elected to the committee in 1838 and by 1854 he was president. Other prominent citizens associated with the University of Sydney also held office. The Mechanics Institute (School of Arts) was founded in 1833. Nicholson was president from 1844-51 and delivered several lectures on geology, science and Egyptology and two lectures in 1842 on 'The application of taste to the arts'. Nicholson was also vice-president of the Philosophical Society of New South Wales and a committee member of the Australian Museum. There were also private groups of intellectuals, such as the Stenhouse circle of which Professor John Woolley was a member.

Another prominent member was Daniel Deniehy, who proposed the appointment of the select committee to enquire into the university's expenditure of funds. The arts did not receive universal support by any means, one evidence of which is the Sydney Morning Herald report of 17 July 1857 on the failure of the opera. The promising Sydney Magazine of Science and Art, in its second issue, for instance, dealt only with labour-saving machinery for extracting stumps of trees and omitted any reference to art.

The Society for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in Australia was established in 1847. Sir Charles Nicholson was elected first president, an office he held for two to three years. As with other societies all the committee members were prominent Sydney citizens, many of whom were also associated with the university but there were no artists on the committee. The Society's exhibitions of 1847 and 1849 are only two of a list of eighteen important exhibitions held in the colony by various organisations between 1840 and 1877.
The Australian Artists' Society of 1850 was short-lived, although it met with initial enthusiasm. In 1855 a sketch club was formed under the presidency of Conrad Martens. Chronologically the next important art association to be established was the New South Wales Academy of Arts, founded on 25 April, 1871. Edward Reeve, the curator of the Nicholson Museum, was the instigator and first secretary of the academy, and Professor Charles Badham, the second professor of classics at the university, gave the address at the first conversazione. There were other activities of a cultural nature, including a demand for domestic portraits and busts referred to in Chapters II and III, but these examples outlined above serve to set the scene in the colony in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In spite of the burgeoning cultural activities, Professor Badham, for one, regarded the citizens of Sydney as philistines. In 1882 his opinion of colonial society was that:

This country now presents, what to European eyes, are strange phenomena, (1) an enormous amount of wealth in the hands of men utterly illiterate, (2) the learned professions including the church with very little learning to divide between them, (3) the mercantile classes of all grades very much below the standard of their congeners in western Europe in literacy and intellectual tastes.

The following chapters will investigate the way in which the style and art collections established at the University of Sydney were accommodated within the environment outlined above.

In terms of methodology, this study concentrates on the unique and particular, that is, works of art and styles, and seeks to draw from them conclusions which will support the argument. I also seek to place the particular material examined in a social, political and economic as well as art historical context. Therefore, if Pascoe's analysis of Australian historiography is taken as a model, the methodology of this thesis leans toward his formist category, in that it concentrates on the particular, but also to his mechanist/sociological category in that the social context is taken into account. In terms of art history the objects discussed
are in most cases examined as documents of history as well as within the framework of nineteenth-century art history. As an adjunct to these approaches the taste exhibited in the choices of the Gothic style and the particular works of art has also been taken into account from the viewpoint expressed by T.J. Clark, who maintains that:

taste seems to me a category which always disguises under its generality and appearance of an immediacy of intuition, a complex construction of understanding - of the place and significance of objects in a certain, sometimes very impoverished and sometimes very rich, notion of history. 32

It should be noted at the outset that this thesis deals mainly with one class of society - the educated bourgeoisie. Further, there are few if any references to two particular groups, that is, women and aborigines. The material used deals largely with the elite of colonial society who were the founders of the university, and whose interest in it has to some extent been preserved by documentation. The general public were excluded from the university, except as sightseers; even documented comments on the buildings and portraits for instance came from either members of the educated elite or their mouthpiece, the press. Favourable comments from this class were not always forthcoming, however. Was the independent thinker, wit and member of parliament, Daniel Deniehy, referring to the foundation of the university, to which he was opposed, when he wrote:

What we have to do for the present in this young country is to lay the foundations of society, and I say put in as many corner-stones and ashlers as you can, in the shape of thoroughbred gentlemen of the best stamp ... 33

These sentiments, expressed by Deniehy in his highly satirical lampoon of colonial society, are disturbingly similar to those of the founders of the University of Sydney.

There are few references to women in this thesis because they were most notable by their absence from anything to do with the foundation of the university and were not admitted as students until 1881 let alone as teachers. 34 Research to date has uncovered no nineteenth-century references to aboriginals in relation to the university. This does not necessarily imply that the founders
had no knowledge of aboriginal culture. Indeed, Sir Charles
Nicholson, on his return to England, addressed a learned society
on the topic of aboriginal rock art. 35 Yet whilst in Australia
he did not see fit to include any aboriginal artefacts in his collections,
let alone provide a museum for them, as he did for the artifacts
of other ancient civilizations, for instance the Roman and Egyptian.
His actions in this regard indicate that there was something else
at work, for they coincide with nineteenth-century imperialist
ideology generally. In analysing the history of museums, Brian
Durrans points out that 'colonized societies were not thought complex
or important enough to deserve museums of their own, as were provided
for ancient Mediterranean civilizations or the high arts ... 36

To introduce the argument in this thesis, the first chapter
is devoted to the Great Hall and the reasons for the choice of the
Gothic style of architecture. It would have been possible to build
in styles other than the Gothic, yet no other style was considered.
The reasons for this choice relate to theories of associationism, to
colonialism and empire-building and in particular to reinforcing the
link between the colony of New South Wales and the mother country.
The Gothic style of architecture was used to impose an instant but
pseudo heritage upon the newly established university.

Chapter two deals with the painted portraits at the university.
In view of the paucity of literature on nineteenth-century portraiture
and because of the colonial situation in New South Wales, the
nineteenth-century English context for portraiture is briefly
surveyed in order to provide a framework for the discussion.
The introduction of portraits of founders, benefactors and academics,
and especially their placement in the Great Hall is discussed in relation
to funding, commissioning artists, and execution. The main argument
in this chapter, however, relates to the reasons for the implementation
of a portrait tradition, its effect on the university and the benefits
in terms of their personal reputation and prestige to the sitters.
The portrait busts and statues are dealt with in a similar way in
chapter three. Encompassing both chapters is the underlying
theme of patronage. Local portrait painters were not chosen for
commissions until the late nineteenth century but on the other hand, the
majority of the sculpture was produced in the colony. These choices are examined. It will be shown that the official portraits, both paintings and sculptures contributed to the artificially imposed heritage and strengthened the image of the colonial university as a bastion of British tradition.

Sir Charles Nicholson, the principal benefactor and prime mover in matters of culture at the time the university was founded, is the subject of chapter four. Nicholson's collections are discussed in the light of his own background in the visual arts and culture as well as in relationship to local and English collections in general. The variety of Nicholson's benefactions is outlined, followed by an examination of each section, including pictures, tapestries, manuscripts and antiquities. Sir Charles Nicholson was the chief donor of works of art to the university in the nineteenth century. He was aware that not all the paintings he donated were of a high calibre, although his other benefactions had more integrity, but his aspirations to a high moral stature and a position in English society were fulfilled through his own insistence on the value of his benefactions. Nicholson's intentions in relation to his benefactions, the reasons for donation - whether items were given through expediency or as genuine benefactions - are seen in relationship to the effect they had upon the university and the personal prestige he himself acquired through setting himself up as a benefactor.

In summary, the reasons for producing this thesis are based on Bernard Smith's view of the philosophy of history. He asserts that the value of history is as an understanding of the past which is of great importance in ordering our future. This thesis presents an analysis of the nineteenth-century art collections and style at the University of Sydney. Both collections and style played a major role in establishing the identity of the institution, re-inforcing the link between the colony and the mother country and enhancing the reputation of certain individuals. This study of the nineteenth-century collections and style at the University of Sydney thus contributes to an understanding of the legacy of colonialism which shaped the first university to be established in Australia.