The Library’s rich collections of natural history drawings have been enhanced by the acquisition of the William T. Cooper studio archive of diaries, papers, drawings, paintings and prints, 1944-2015.

A selection of William T. Cooper’s notebooks and original works held by the State Library

The State Library has recently received the working studio archive of artist William T. Cooper. Cooper, (1934 –2015). Generally considered to be one of the world’s pre-eminent natural history artists of the late 20th century, Sir David Attenborough once described him as ‘Australia’s greatest living scientific painter of birds … possibly the best in the world’. Cooper is primarily known for his bird paintings, but also universally regarded as one of Australia’s greatest botanical painters.

In 1992 Cooper became the first and only Australian recipient of the gold medal, with distinction, awarded by the Academy of Natural Sciences (Philadelphia). In 1994 he was awarded an Order of Australia for his contribution to art and natural history. His most recent award was an Honorary Doctorate in Science from the Australian National University in 2014.

Growing up in Newcastle, Cooper’s father taught him bushcraft while his mother encouraged his interests in bird books and drawing. From childhood, Cooper had always painted birds and was fascinated by the works of the great 19th century bird illustrator, John Gould, whose work he encountered in the Newcastle public library. During his teenage years, Cooper learned taxidermy at the now defunct Carey Bay zoo. Leaving school at 15, he was advised by fellow Newcastle artist, Sir William Dobell, not to attend art school, but to develop his own style. Cooper began his career as a self-taught landscape and seascape artist in Newcastle, while working as a salesman and...
window dresser, painting backdrops for a local Newcastle clothing shop. At the time, there was no market for ornithological art.

Wompoo fruitdove, original drawing by William T. Cooper

His breakthrough came in 1968 when he published his first book, *A portfolio of Australian birds* [5], with text supplied by Sydney ornithologist, Keith Hindwood. This work launched Cooper’s career as an artist, it was clear that he was a major talent in Australian ornithology. His rise to prominence in the late 1960s coincided with a renaissance of natural history illustration, possibly brought about due to the burgeoning interest in environmental issues.

Many other books followed, including *Parrots of the world* [6], *Australian parrots* [7], *The birds of paradise and bower birds* [8], *Visions of a Rainforest: A Year in Australia's Tropical Rainforest* [9], *Australian rainforest fruits* [10], *Pigeons and doves in Australia* [11], A biography of William Cooper, *An eye for nature: the life and art of William T. Cooper* [12] by Penny Olsen was published in 2014.

Cooper’s deep knowledge of his subjects is clear in all his work, displaying extremely detailed, precise depictions. Rather than depending on photographs to ensure scientific accuracy, he preferred to draw from life, which entailed tracking each bird species to their natural habitat. Cooper is particularly known for capturing the exact display of his avian subjects within their distinct natural environment, including depictions of their food sources. This meant tireless field observations and exceptionally detailed rendering of bird species. He succeeded not just in depicting exact likenesses of birds, but in creating artistically appealing bird portraits.

The archive [13] includes rough preliminary drawings, along with fine-detailed field sketches and observational notes where Cooper recorded the date, time of day, location and species documented; a great aid for researchers of the future. There are around 28 volumes of diaries and field books that William Cooper used during his many trips and excursions throughout Australia, Africa and Indonesia. They include preliminary ideas, notes and illustrations with detailed descriptions of the birds he was observing.
Barking owl Upper Burdekin River NQ 88, original drawing by William T. Cooper

The collection also includes some personal correspondence and business papers and dates from the 1940s, with examples of the teenage Cooper’s rendering of the Little Grebe in 1949 and Azure Kingfisher in 1951, through to Cooper’s most recent field notebooks from 2014.

The acquisition of the archive neatly rounds out the William T. Cooper collection already held by the Library.
In 2012 the Library acquired the complete set of 22 signed watercolour drawings from Cooper’s first publication, *Portfolio of Australian Birds* [14], PXD 1309/1 and in the same year, the Library acquired a manuscript archive [15] relating to Cooper’s publishing career (1967-2011), along with the entire suite of artworks for *Fruits of the Australian tropical rainforest* [16], PXD 1309, PXE 1495/1-4.

In 2015 the Library acquired the suite of 31 original watercolour and gouache artworks published in the book, *Pigeons and doves in Australia* [17].

These acquisitions of Cooper’s work bookend the Library’s significant late 18th and early 19th century holdings of natural history illustrations, most notably, Australian bird species. This is a great strength of the Library’s collections and are an important record of documenting Australian bird species, from European’s first attempts at depicting Australian birds through to contemporary ornithological identification.

**On DISPLAY:**

A small selection of works from this collection will be on display in the Library's Amaze gallery [18] from Saturday 16 September, 2017 through to mid December 2017.

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