Eugene von Guerard – an artist on the goldfields

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Portrait of von Guerard sketching, 1855

Johann Joseph Eugen von Guerard (known as Eugene von Guerard) was an artist remembered mainly for his romantic and delicate Australian landscape drawings and paintings.

Eugene von Guerard was born in Vienna in 1811 and studied painting in Italy from his mid teens. He moved to Germany in his 20s and exhibited his landscape work in salons across the country. In the late 1840s, adventurous von Guerard may have spent some time in the Californian goldfields and it seems that gold fever struck him hard. In London, in 1852, von Guerard joined a company of continental Europeans (mainly French) who were setting off for the newly discovered Ballarat goldfields to make their fortune. The group consisted of fourteen men and one woman. After four months at sea, von Guerard arrived in Australia in December 1852, and headed almost immediately for the goldfields around Ballarat.

During his time on the diggings, von Guerard kept a diary, in German, which was later translated and transcribed, probably by his daughter. This copy, which is now in the State Library’s collection, also contains sketches of von Guerard’s camp, landscape and mates, which he made between 1852 and 1854. Von Guerard
returned many times to the goldfield areas, sketching the people and landscapes he observed.

Although he didn't strike it rich on the goldfields, von Guerard fell in love with the Australian countryside and travelled extensively around south eastern Australia and New Zealand. In 1855 he attempted to sell some of his paintings through the Mechanics Institute in Melbourne.

Although the Argus reviewed his talent very favourably, the response from the public was initially disappointing.

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[Stoneleigh, Beaufort near Ararat, Victoria], 1866 / Eugene von Guerard

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Von Guerard persevered, however, and made his living by commissions from wealthy land owners and businessmen, finally earning the patronage of Governor Henry Barkly who commissioned a series of sketches of the Western District of Victoria.

Von Guerard’s paintings reflect an understanding and sensitivity towards the Australian landscape, which at that stage was undergoing unprecedented change and modification by human settlement. Von Guerard’s images offer several interpretations of the Australian bush and its people – from wild, brooding romantic landscapes, to sensitive, and sometimes humorous, sketches of its inhabitants. He sketched extensively on his travels around the countryside, later working some of these sketches up into spectacular oil paintings for exhibition and sale.

Eugene von Guerard remained in Australia for 30 years. He married fellow German, Louise Arnz and had a daughter, Victoria. Von Guerard was a founding director of the National Gallery in Melbourne and an active member of the community. The von Guerard family returned to Europe in the 1880s where Louise died in 1891. The Australian bank crash of 1893 affected his investments badly and Eugene von Guerard died in poverty in Chelsea in 1901 at the age of 89.

Jan. 18th.
After travelling for a week we have arrived at Ballarat... Ballarat consists of a camp of tents, and some...
buildings constructed of boards. One building, made of the trunks of trees, constitutes the prison, and is often the temporary abode of bushrangers, and also of diggers who can’t - or won’t - pay their licence.

Jan. 25th.
Yesterday we went to peg our our claims at Eureka Hill. Our nearest neighbours are Chinamen, Englishmen and Americans. We afterwards went on towards Gravel Pit, and repeated our pegging there. Two of our company remained at each claim. Digging was begun in four-hourly shifts, to continue day and night.

The Ballarat flats
Eugene Von Guerard and his gold digging partners concentrated their search on the Ballarat area. The company they had formed broke up within a few weeks of their arrival at Ballarat in January 1853, but von Guerard stayed on, staking claims with several of his mates from the group as well as men he met on the diggings. He staked several claims during his two year stay, starting at Eureka Hill and Gravel Pit, then moving on to other areas around Ballarat including Warrenheip, Canadian Gully, Little Bendigo, Black Swamp.

Von Guerard made many drawings of the Ballarat flats while on the diggings. Several were later worked up into evocative oil paintings which he displayed in Melbourne in 1855 at the Mechanics’ Institute.

Diary entries written by von Guerard during his first week on the diggings in 1853 describe the scene.

See more from A pioneer of the fifties : leaves from the journal of an Australian Digger, 18 August 1852-16 March 1854 by Johann Joseph Eugen von Guerard [7]

Scenes from goldfield country
The State Library holds an extensive collection of working sketchbooks by Eugene von Guerard, as well as larger drawings and paintings. The sketchbooks cover regions as diverse as Italy and Germany as well as Tasmania, New South Wales, and of course, Victoria. The drawings below are all of the Victorian goldfield regions around Ballarat, Castlemaine, Daylesford and Geelong.

The only known copy of Von Guerard's 1852-1854 diary of his time on the diggings is a typescript translation made from the original German (whereabouts unknown). The translation may have been made by his daughter, Victoria, who was born in Australia and married an English man. Bound with the typescript copy are ten sketches which give a fascinating visual insight into camp life.
Ballarat flats, 4 May 1853, Irish hole from A pioneer of the fifties : leaves from the journal of an Australian Digger, 18 August 1852-16 March 1854 / Johann Joseph Eugen von Guerard

Call#
Page 8 of 46
My tent on Black hill, 2 November 1853 from A pioneer of the fifties : leaves from the journal of an Australian Digger, 18 August 1852-16 March 1854 / Johann Joseph Eugen von Guerard
a3809059h.jpg [12]
Chinaman’s gully, 23 November 1853 from A pioneer of the fifties : leaves from the journal of an Australian Digger, 18 August 1852-16 March 1854 / Johann Joseph Eugen von Guerard

Chinaman’s gully, 23 November 1853 from A pioneer of the fifties : leaves from the journal of an Australian Digger, 18 August 1852-16 March 1854 / Johann Joseph Eugen von Guerard
Edmond Armand, Chinaman’s gully, 23 November 1853 from A pioneer of the fifties: leaves from the journal of an Australian Digger, 18 August 1852-16 March 1854 / Johann Joseph Eugen von Guerard

Call #
Chinaman’s gully, 23 November 1853 from A pioneer of the fifties: leaves from the journal of an Australian Digger, 18 August 1852-16 March 1854 / Johann Joseph Eugen von Guerard

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Chinaman’s gully, 17 November 1853 from A pioneer of the fifties : leaves from the journal of an Australian Digger, 18 August 1852-16 March 1854 / Johann Joseph Eugen von Guerard
Black Swamp, 11 November 1853 from A pioneer of the fifties : leaves from the journal of an Australian Digger, 18 August 1852-16 March 1854 / Johann Joseph Eugen von Guerard

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St Alipius Catholic chapel at Gravel Pit, 19 February 1854 from A pioneer of the fifties : leaves from the journal of an Australian Digger, 18 August 1852-16 March 1854 / Johann Joseph Eugen von Guerard
Volume 01: Sketchbook XXII. No. 4 Australian. Australia, Apr. 1854-Dec. 1857, 1858 / by Eugene von Guerard

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Volume 01: Sketchbook XXII. No. 4 Australian. Australia, Apr. 1854-Dec. 1857, 1858 / by Eugene von Guerard

Call # DGB 16 / vol. 1 [27]
About this item:
Eugene von Guerard, painter and teacher, was born in November 1811 in Vienna. He studied in Dusseldorf and travelled in Germany and Italy before arriving in Victoria in 1852. He visited the Ballarat goldfields and later travelled in Victoria, N.S.W, S.A. and Tas. In 1870 he was appointed Curator of the National Gallery of Victoria and Principal of its Art School where he remained until his retirement in 1881.
Collection of views, 1855 - 1875 / Eugene Von Guerard

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Collection of views, 1855 - 1875 / Eugene Von Guerard
Digital ID: a1835015
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Digital ID: a1835013
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