

Natural Curiosity. Unseen art of Australia's First Fleet

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One of the legacies of James Cook's first Pacific voyage, in the *Endeavour*, was the recommendation to found a convict settlement on the east coast of Australia.

The fleet of 11 convict ships, which subsequently came to be known as the First Fleet, carried almost 1,500 people roughly half of whom were convicts, and settled on the east coast of Australia, at the site of modern day Sydney, in January 1788.

It was followed two and a half years later by a second fleet of ships carrying 1200 convicts and a Third Fleet arrived 12 months later carrying another 2,000. The Second and Third fleets also carried a sprinkling of free settlers.

Convict transportation continued in Australia until the 1850s but this research centres specifically on the artwork that was produced by an unknown number of people who arrived with the first three convict transports during the 1790s.

The literature devoted to the FF in general is thick on the ground but nothing substantial has been published about the drawings generated by members of the First, Second and Third Fleets since the 1988 Bicentenary of European settlement.

The various sets and collections of watercolour drawings from the same period, held privately or by many different institutions - in the UK, Germany, New Zealand and Australia, including drawings from the State Library's collections as well as some privately held drawings - still present as a somewhat vexed knot of problems.

Some very few of the drawings are signed, and can therefore be formally ascribed to a small number of either naval and convict artists.

Many more artists are known by name or by reputation but attributions are uncertain.

Adding to the confusion is the fact that that the strong demand for images of new species amongst gentlemen amateurs of science in Britain meant that copying was rife, not only in New South Wales but also in England and possibly also en route back to England, for example by Company Artists in India during stopovers.

Accordingly art historians and curators have, for convenience, assigned comparable works into a couple of broad stylistic and temporal groupings: 'The Port Jackson Painter' and 'The Sydney Bird Painter', for instance.

Though each of these implies a single hand at work, the Port Jackson Painter probably refers to at least six, possibly eight, different artists. The Sydney Bird Painter attribution refers to at least two people. And there is overlap between the sets of drawings produced by each artist grouping.

To complicate things even more, the early history of the drawings, the provenance or sequence of ownership, has for almost every collection of drawings, been obscured quite early in their history.

Some of these related collections have been held by collecting institutions for decades, for over a century, but the connections between them have largely gone unnoticed.

Then in 2011 a new collection came to light.

It contains 745 natural history drawings in six volumes. It is rare for new material to surface to add to the canon of existing drawings but this is exactly what occurred when this large collection of 745 botanical and zoological drawings from the 1790s appeared from a private aristocratic library in England, owned by the Earl of Derby, and were acquired for the collection of the State Library of NSW, Sydney.

Half had not been seen since at least the 1940s; the existence of the other half was completely unrecorded.

The public emergence of this collection, which we now refer to as the Derby Collection – for the 13th Earl of Derby who acquired them in 1842 - has been a little like finding that lost piece of a jigsaw at the back of the sofa. Able now to compare and consider this collection alongside others has shown them to be intimately interconnected.

The drawings are bold and striking examples of Australian birds, plants, fish, a handful of mammals and a single scene, that in 1788, with the arrival of the

First Fleet in Sydney Cove, were so strange and wondrous, puzzling and new they seemed almost the stuff of fairy tales. As responses to those bewildering and captivating first encounters, drawings such as these are like a time capsule that connects us with the unique pre-European settlement natural environment in the Sydney basin.

Because they've only very rarely been consulted during the last century or more, they're also incredibly fresh and new - there is no fading or deterioration.

What the Library acquired with this collection is a large piece of a much bigger, 200 year old natural history puzzle that tells us so much about the value and the uses of drawings, about the fascination that Britain and Europe felt for the natural world they found in New South Wales in 1788; and about responses to the new and the unfamiliar, to a world in which 'nature was reversed'.

A few stories started to emerge.

Copying

Copying has become a central part of the story, copying as a valid way of circulating drawings; as a way of responding to the fascination of the new, of feeding the appetite of people like Sir Joseph Banks and their extensive like-minded networks, to possess their own drawings, to assist their publishing ambitions, to fill in gaps in their knowledge.

Quite the extent of the copying that took place in London and in Sydney Cove had not been fully appreciated – in particular the extent to which artists in NSW were working together or in reference to each other - but it quickly became apparent that the same images appear, again and again, re-used by different artists, and now part of different collections in different institutions and different countries.

Which set of drawings might be the originals is unknown, or perhaps no longer knowable. The quality and style of the known sets of early NSW drawings is variable but there are clues to a possible genealogy, to a possible primacy, which image might be considered to be the source for others.

The common practice before mechanical reproduction, of exchanging drawings and making copies is also what's at the core of confusion and uncertainty that surrounds unsigned and undated drawings relating to the early years of the settlement.

I cross walked the many collections – containing around 2,000 watercolours that originated from the first decade of European settlement in Australia - to each other:

Lack of provenance, and the absence of signatures or dates, mean you need to look for other clues to a possible genealogy of drawings.

Pentimenti

Changes or adjustments made in a drawing often indicate primacy. An artist creating a work may re-position the subject of a drawing either to improve or correct it. These changes are not always evident in subsequent copies.

Detail

Usually more detail is included in the original work and, a little like Chinese whispers, some of this detail is lost each time a drawing is copied.

Copying did not mean creating identical drawings. It meant there was a strong correlation, a conformity between some or all the elements in a drawing. Drawings might easily be compositionally different but still be copies. A copyist might break down elements of an image and create several drawings to reflect the various elements in the original; or several smaller drawings might be copied and combined into a single work. Copies might incorporate all elements of a drawing or select only some components.

Artists might repeat elements of each other's drawings, eliminate or substitute components. Detail might be lost in copies. Backgrounds might disappear, or reappear elaborated and embellished.

Tiny variations, in backgrounds, in composition, or placement and orientation of the subject, in textual detail and annotations are all clues to the working nature of these drawings.

Though drawn by different people and so different in technique, the angle and form of the supporting foreground branch or tree stump is replicated from one version to the next. As the copies progress, the supporting branch is reduced to a floating piece of stick simply pencilled in.

Sometimes though, even the smallest omission is glaring, important and inexplicable - the Wattle Bird drawn accurately with two wattles, one each side of its head. Other versions seemingly replicate it perfectly but for one critical detail, the omission of a wattle that is then repeated in the subsequent copy. It is difficult to reconcile the possibility that the correct drawing could be anything other than the original.

This also suggests that artists were working together or in reference to each other – and more than that, suggests the possibility that they were sharing drawings, and copying each other's work in little de facto drawing schools

The Artists – Convicts, surgeons and naval officers

Convicts artists included obvious professional artists as well as people who were clearly working in allied trades and professions.

The quality of the drawings is variable - some are very poorly executed. Others show the style traits of allied trades or professions such as the more decorative techniques of ceramics painting, for instance, typically characterised by more dispersed arrangements of flowers and leaves, hinting at previous occupations of convict artists.

Surgeons were amateur artists with an interest in recording the medicinal properties of plants.

Little is known of the art training received by aspiring naval officers as part of a suite of compulsory skills required for progression through the ranks of the

Royal Navy. It was certainly basic in comparison with, for example, training at the Royal Academy of Arts.

Copying the work of others to learn and improve was part of a long tradition of art training which mostly began with copying, the purpose precisely to practice, refine and perfect technical conventions and methods. Copying was a bread and butter skill not just in the Navy but in the art world more generally. A style of sorts emerged to meet naval requirements. Naval drawings often feature:

- precise frame lines usually in-filled with beige or pink watercolour inside heavy black lines.
- the inclusion of scales of feet was also common.

Yet drawings with naval origins are perhaps easier to glean by omission, by what was seemingly not taught rather than what was.

Life drawing, for example, was clearly not in the curriculum of the Royal Navy and those officers who did venture into this area show little skill or aptitude for it.

There is little evidence that naval artists learned and honed the technical conventions of representing perspective or scale.

More often than not, engravings and prints, rather than paintings, were used to copy for practice and the effect of this can be seen in many drawings and copies that originated in New South Wales. Shading, volume and tone in engravings are built up through the use of spaced, tapering lines, or by cross hatching seen in naval drawings which often replicate the effect of engraving lines rather than the more painterly technique of blending colour with a brush.

Blending can be seen in the work of this more skilled artist suggesting the possibility that this was not a naval artist.

Materials analysis

Materials analysis and technical knowledge of early colonial drawings goes to the heart of the many mysteries and confusion which surrounds the history of early colonial art in Australia. This is an area which is little understood – traditional connoisseurship has not resolved the ambiguities, so one of the few remaining opportunities for further exploration and comparison is technical observation and analysis.

Metallic leaf

One of the surprising, and confusing, features of drawings from this period was the inclusion of metallic leaf in a surprisingly high number of drawings of New South Wales subjects.

In the absence of provenance information, it has simply been presumed that these drawings, while they might be of NSW subject, could not possibly have been created in NSW because of the skill required to apply gold leaf but, more importantly, because the availability of metallic media in the early settlement in Australia was considered to be so unlikely as to be impossible.

Gold heightening was more usual in presentation drawings intended to be given to patrons or to be sold, and the idea of it having been used in New South Wales seems astonishing. Analysis showed the metals not only looked like gold, they were in fact either gold leaf of a surprisingly high purity, or silver, or another leaf of a copper alloy, known as Dutch metal or schlag metal, used as a gold substitute in cheaper jewellery.

The surprise is that the presence of gold leaf and other leaf, is in fact quite so widespread in natural history drawings of New South Wales subjects, and that it has been so skilfully applied and used to create iridescent effects in the wings, eyes, heads and throats of birds, or the iridescent sheen in fish.

The idea that such rich materials, especially gold leaf, and the expertise to apply them would have been available in New South Wales might, at first, seem unlikely.

Yet from 18th century newspapers, trade cards, catalogues and advertisements we know that gold, silver and brass leaf, shell or saucer gold were readily available in London before the First Fleet sailed in May 1787. And so it is entirely possible that these materials could have been bought and taken to New South Wales.

The technique of laying down gold leaf and layering it with watercolour to imitate the appearance of gold shimmering through the paint was well known in England and Europe.

The process of laying gold leaf is described in great detail in manuals and booklets describing exactly the process we see under micrography of the gold and metallic highlights evident in NSW drawings.

So, both technique and materials were known before the First Fleet sailed, and were available for those who could afford them and had the foresight and interest to acquire them.

The presence of gold leaf certainly marks these drawings out as something to be valued, something that was considered to be important. Their use is a clear sign of the value placed on New South Wales drawings.

Paper

We also looked at the papers used and their watermarks.

While the evidence of watermarks can only ever be indicative of the genealogy of drawings rather than conclusive, they are part of the puzzle around these drawings.

Watermarks, the faint manufacturer's design that can be seen in paper when held up to light, are unique to each mill. Made from wire, watermarks are incorporated, either with wire or by soldering, into the framed moulding that holds the paper pulp used to make an individual sheet of paper, leaving a design mark in the finished paper. Even within a paper mill, each watermark from each moulding is always unique.

Papers in Britain didn't contain dated watermarks until 1794 when it became a statutory requirement to include the year of manufacture. The idea was that the year would be updated annually. In reality though, creating and changing watermarks was fiddly and in any case, they could be re-used for several years to good effect and so most dates continued to be used until they wore out and only then were they replaced.

The earliest dated papers, then, appeared from 1794. Some 1795 papers exist but the next most common year is 1797. This means that paper watermarked 1794 could have been manufactured during the years 1794, 1795, 1796 and into 1797. It does tell us that any drawing on 1794 paper could obviously not have been created earlier than that year.

So a watermark can be indicative of dates rather than authoritative, they give a not-before date, but not an end date, for the creation of drawings.

Exactly matching watermarks tell us something more indicating that the papers was formed in the same paper mould. We've found papers across collections of NSW subjects that have been created not only in the same paper mill but in the exact same paper mould.

Because they're individually handmade, each watermark has slight variations in dimensions, scale and form from one paper mould to the next. Each paper mould carries its own unique mark and produces identical watermarks with no – or negligible - variation.

Because paper supplies were limited in NSW and were replenished only as ships arrived, there is a strong possibility that watercolour drawings thought to have had no relationship to each other in time and place, could in fact have been created if not simultaneously, then within a limited timeframe using the same stock of paper.

Watermark analysis for this project has strengthened the argument that unprovenanced drawings dismissed as non-Australian in origin and thought to

have been created in England or India because they were so skilful and because they used gold leaf, were drawn in the colony helping to establish the history and context of the collections.

So we're pulling together dispersed sets of drawings that can now be sourced to NSW at the time of their creation, linking together for the first time works of art not previously connected.

Research based on letters and diaries from the colony as well as auction sale records describing the dispersal of collections brought home to England, has now been added to rich data derived from technical observation and analysis providing evidence for comparison of the many related collections of the period to help determine the history and chronology of these foundation Australian drawings to understand how, and where, these drawings were created, using science and observation to advance art historical information

These are amongst the very the earliest European visual representations of Australian flora and fauna and are critical for our understanding of the effect of colonisation on Australian natural history.

Prompted by the appearance in 2011 of a set of early Australian drawings, the story of the Derby Collection had seemed simple enough when they first came onto the market.

We knew how these particular drawings had survived. We knew when they had acquired and from whom. So on the surface at least, it seemed a straight forward enough story to tell.

In reality, it was far more complex and intertwined, and far more seductive than had seemed probable at the outset.

This project has been about investigating primary evidence that also alerts us to the precariousness of thinking we know history, which we know what happened, that we have all the information. These collections raise questions

we hadn't previously thought to ask, suggest possibilities we hadn't considered.

We easily recognise that Europeans were fascinated by Australia's natural history, and see its exotic allure was strong in England.

What's more challenging to understand is quite how this interest expressed itself, how did people, in Australia and in Britain, operate? How did they maximise their efforts? How did they respond to their new circumstances and surroundings, to what was presented, and what was possible to achieve?

How did they record this, in drawings? How were drawings exchanged?

What became clear was that from the very beginning of European colonisation in Australia, far more people were drawing and describing what they were seeing and experiencing, recording natural history in NSW than we can yet put names and faces to.

Added to the number of people who were writing extended accounts and recording their impressions of NSW in their journals and letters, it comes as quite a surprise, perhaps, to realise that from the very earliest days of the settlement, against terrible odds and great physical and psychological hardship, in a place of punishment and with so much uncertainty, there was also space for creative responses. Cultural activities not only found a foothold in the struggling colony, they flourished.

These collections of natural history watercolours open up new patterns to understand other possible histories:

- They engage some of the mythology about European past in Australia
- and question where our perceptions and ideas have come from.
- they open up new and different sources of information creating different perspectives on past experience

The emergence of the Derby Collection of drawings prompted new, detailed art historical analysis of the traditions of botanical art production and its convention of copying and trans-Pacific dissemination.

Importantly, they help demonstrate that the colonisation of Australia was not just physical and cultural occupation of the land but intellectual engagement with it.

The drawings are evidence of the fascination Europe felt for the natural world in Australia and of the responses to the startlingly new and unfamiliar. They were the very tools by which knowledge about Australia found its way into books and museums and from there, into European consciousness.

Today the impression remains of a nation built on near starvation, suffering, floggings and hangings, and a sense of utter futility. And to an extent, that is certainly true but survival was not just a matter of food and shelter but was also very much psychological.

Importantly, the drawings present a view of the early settlement as a culturally richer, more expressive community than commonly thought, expose new lines of investigation and encourage us to look more deeply at our history through the prism of collections.

They're evidence of a healthy engagement, for many, with unfamiliar and challenging surroundings.

Through drawings it becomes possible to imagine the natural world of the Sydney basin in 1788; to demonstrate that the convict colony at NSW was a far more active and expressive cultural community than commonly thought. This has the potential to change our very perceptions of ourselves as a nation.

Collections such as these have the capacity to shake up and challenge the stories we tell about the foundations of European settlement in Australia.

They are direct evidence that in late 18th century NSW people found ways to rise above the isolation, despair and hardship of a remote penal colony, and retain a sense of humanity and connectedness with each other, and with home; and laid the foundation for ways of responding to the land as awe inspiring or alienating, as endless resource or precious heritage, a dichotomy that still challenges Australia today.