



# Media release



## Secret photos of 1880s Sydney revealed in new exhibition

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Some of the world's earliest street photographs, capturing many previously unseen views of Sydney from the 1880s will go on public display for the first time in a new exhibition opening at the State Library of NSW, from Saturday 4 April.

*Crowd Source* presents over 50 rare snapshots of Sydneysiders and Sydney's bustling streets secretly taken with the world's first hand-held camera – branded the 'Detective Camera' – by amateur local photographer Arthur Syer.

"Arthur Syer took candid photographs of ordinary people in everyday situations which he supplied to illustrators to use as 'source material' to help them create a life-like quality and characters in their drawings," says exhibition co-curator Margot Riley.

"Syer's distinctive low angle photographs evocatively capture the buzz of 1880s Sydney showing the shoe-shiners and fruit sellers, road workers, transport deliveries and barrow shopping, queues at Circular Quay, children playing, shipping and scenes at the horses races," said Ms Riley.

Syer crossed into the publishing industry through his artist brother Walter, who introduced him to internationally renowned English cartoonist, Phil May. Invited to Sydney by *The Bulletin* in 1885, May often used Syer's images to add authenticity to the backgrounds for his illustrations, for example drawings of people at the racecourse.

When the hand-held camera was introduced in Australia in the mid-1880s "it became a craze much like the smart phone or selfie stick of today, with photographs for the first time being able to be taken quickly and unnoticed," said Ms Riley.

The camera resembled "a square case... disguised as a ... shoeblack's box, or even a book. The operator places it upon the ground, or under his arm, the pressure of the pneumatic ball opening or closing the hidden lens at the required moment." (*The Sydney Mail*, 2 July 1881).

No skill was required to operate the Detective Camera, signalling the beginning of mass photography. It used dry plate negatives – commercialised by George Eastman of Kodak fame – which were available over the counter at photography shops where negatives could be taken for developing and printing.

"This new technology, which also saw the introduction of other novelties like the 'vest camera' and 'watch camera', triggered debate around issues of privacy which led to the passing of new privacy laws in America," says Ms Riley. "Manners and rules around candid photography continue to be a hot topic today."



#1880Sydney



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The State Library holds over 170 original Arthur Syer photographs – the most extensive collection of early Australian street photography known to exist. With the help of the Flickr community the Library has been able to label many of the images in the collection.

*Crowd Source* is a free exhibition at the State Library of NSW from 4 April to 23 August 2015. #1880Sydney @statelibrarynsw

**Margot Riley is available for interviews.**

**For more information, interviews and images, please contact:**

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