

Unseen art of the First Fleet

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Our usual picture of the convict colony founded in January 1788 at Sydney Cove, the site of modern-day Sydney, focuses – rightly - on extremes of hardship, isolation and punishment, the sudden dispossession of Indigenous cultures, on the environmental and psychological impacts of colonisation.

The stories we tell are of crimes and misdemeanours, and the slow conquering of a landscape that at the time was considered both alien and inferior. Today the impression remains of a nation built on near starvation, suffering, floggings and hangings and a sense of utter futility.

But could our ideas about the First Fleet have become just a little lazy?

Of course, there is truth in these enduring stories. Life in the colony was without question a difficult, bewildering and alienating experience. The climate was harsh and unfamiliar, the environment was challenging and unpredictable. There were dire food shortages and rationing, and a crippling sense of isolation, of having been dumped, abandoned and forgotten.

But there were also people who found the time and space to explore and observe, and to draw and record the strange new world that they found in NSW.

Drawing started early: on 11 February 1788, just two weeks after the arrival of the fleet of 11 convict ships at Sydney Cove, Arthur Bowes Smyth records drawing this Balsam tree.

The literature devoted to the art of Australia's First Fleet is thick on the ground and it's rare for new material to surface to add to the canon of existing drawings but this is exactly what occurred when a large collection of 745 botanical and zoological drawings from the 1790s appeared on the market, from a private aristocratic library, owned by the Earl of Derby, compiled during the 1790s by a now forgotten but then widely known and acclaimed botanist, Aylmer Bourke Lambert. And were acquired for the collection of the State Library of NSW, Sydney.

The emergence of these drawings prompted new, detailed art historical analysis of the traditions of natural history art production and its convention of copying and trans-Pacific dissemination.

And I think it's fair to say that while we knew the collection was something special, we didn't quite know exactly what we had at the time.

What could the sudden emergence of a large, previously unknown collection of natural history drawings from NSW, add to our understanding of those early years of the colony?

The various sets and collections of watercolour drawings from the 1790s still present as a fairly vexed knot of problems – drawings privately held, or held in collecting institutions in the UK, Germany, New Zealand and Australia.

Only some very few of the drawings are signed and can therefore be formally ascribed to a small number of either naval and convict artists, or ships' surgeons. Attributions then 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, in England which is perhaps not surprising, but also in New South Wales, and possibly also en route back to England, shared by officers, or even copied 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 example.

Though each of these implies a single artist's 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 – one superior artist and one far less talented.

To complicate things even more, the early history and provenance of the drawings has for almost every collection become obscured.

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

The public emergence of this collection, which we now refer to as the Derby Collection – for the 13th Earl of Derby who acquired the collection in 1842 following the death of his friend, Aylmer Bourke Lambert who had compiled the collection during his lifetime - 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 of drawings alongside other known collections has shown them to be intimately interconnected.

The collection consists of 745 natural history drawings, bound into six volumes.

Half hadn't been seen since at least the 1940s; the existence of the other half was completely unrecorded.

Three volumes we knew were well documented copies of drawings from the iconic Watling Collection compiled by First Fleet Surgeon-General John White and lent to botanist Alymer Bourke Lambert who had White's drawings copied. Since 1902 the Watling Collection has been held in London's Natural History Museum.

Lambert's copies have been in the Derby library since 1842.

We know the background and contexts of many of Lambert's drawings because Lambert was such a prolific and enthusiastic letter writer to his friend, James Edward Smith, founder of the Linnean Society. Lambert's letters to Smith are now held in the Linnean Collection in London and reveal his passionate enthusiasm for natural history.

Despite that, three of the six volumes from the Derby library appear completely unrecorded and undocumented before 1842 when Derby acquired them from Lambert's estate.

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 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, little 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 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 story threads started to emerge.

Copying

Copying has become a central part of the story of drawing and art practise in the colony.

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 particularly 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, of which image might be considered to be the source for others.

Which came drawing came first? Or have they been created by two separate witnesses to the same events, working from the same viewpoint? At this stage, it is impossible to know.

But how do you determine the genealogy, or primacy of drawings?

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 but the lack of provenance, and the absence of signatures or dates, mean you need to look for other clues to understand a possible genealogy of the 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 but as in this drawing of a Masked Lapwing, the lead in the white paint used at the time

to obscure a correction, has discoloured to black over time, revealing the alteration quite clearly to the naked eye.

Detail

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

Copying is a fairly loaded word in the art world these days.

Copying in the context of colonial drawings didn't mean creating identical drawings. And it didn't mean forgeries.

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 the reverse - 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.

Sometimes though, even the smallest omission can be glaring, important and, at times, inexplicable. The Wattle Bird has been drawn accurately with two wattles by the Sydney Bird Painter, 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 copying 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

Who were the artists – we still can't put names to drawings in many, many cases.

Convict artists included obvious professional artists, such as Thomas Watling.

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 which are 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 as we've seen with surgeon, Arthur Bowes Smyth.

And drawing was part of a suite of compulsory skills required for progression though the ranks of the Royal Navy.

Naval art training was certainly basic in comparison with, for example, training received 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 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.

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

Life drawing, for example, was 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 probably used to copy for practice and the effect of this can be seen in many drawings 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 – you can see that effect 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.

Look closely at two volumes of drawings: one, a volume of 100 drawings that came into the collection of the State Library in 1902; its provenance is completely unrecorded and it has been believed for the last three decades to have been created in India because of the extensive, and expert, use of gold leaf.

Materials analysis

Analysis of the materials used in colonial drawings, and technical knowledge of early colonial drawings goes to the heart of the many mysteries and confusion which surround the history of early colonial art in Australia.

This is an area which is surprisingly little understood – and traditional connoisseurship has not resolved the ambiguities, so one of the few remaining opportunities for further exploration and comparison has been technical observation and analysis.

Metallic leaf

One of the unexpected features of early colonial drawings from this period was the inclusion of metallic leaf – gold, silver, alloy - 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 a NSW subject, could not possibly have been created in NSW because of the skill required to apply gold leaf but also because the availability of gold in the early settlement in Australia was considered to be so unlikely as to be impossible.

Yet XRF analysis showed the metals observed in early NSW colonial drawings not only looked like gold, they were in fact either gold leaf of a surprisingly high purity, or silver, or Dutch metal, used as a gold substitute in cheaper jewellery.

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

The idea that gold and silver leaf, and the expertise to apply it would have been available in New South Wales seems unlikely.

Yet 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, the materials were available well before the First Fleet sailed from England in 1787. Naval officers often supplied their own art materials.

There's also an intriguing reference in the journal kept by Arthur Bowes Smyth to the officers giving red cloth and gold foil to the Aborigines which they twisted into their hair.

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.

The second volume is from the Derby Collection – previously unrecorded and thought at the time of acquisition, in 2011, to have been drawings created in England rather than NSW – we call it Derby volume 4

Features a number of giant birds in Lilliputian landscapes thought to represent English country side – their park-like qualities accord with the frequent comments of the British that the land around Sydney and inland reminded them of parks:

- 'we have met a great extent of parklike Country ... with extraordinarily luxuriant grass' (Worgan)
- 'the Woods here ... resemble Deer parks, as much as if they were intended for that purpose.' (Hunter)

- the grass is 'as fine as in any Park in England' (Phillip)

These estate-like effects are now understood to have resulted from the systematic management of the land by Aboriginal people who regularly burned the growth and created grasslands and networks of track'

Could these drawings have originated in NSW rather than England?

Paper

And we looked at the papers used and their watermarks.

Not so interested in dating of watermarks – though that's also interesting - the evidence of watermarks can only ever be indicative of the genealogy of drawings rather than conclusive, they give a not-before date, but not an end date, for the creation of drawings.

Watermarks, the faint manufacturer's design that can be seen in paper when held up to light, are unique to each mill. Handmade from wire, and incorporated into the framed moulding that holds the pulp used to make an individual sheet of paper, watermarks leave a design mark in the finished paper. Because they're handmade, even within a single paper mill, each watermark from each moulding will be unique.

So exactly matching watermarks tell us that the papers were formed in the same paper mold.

And we've found papers across collections of drawings of NSW subjects that have been created not only in the same paper mill but in the exact same paper mould.

Including this volume of drawings – Derby volume 4, thought to have been created in England but now reconsidered as possibly – even probably – NSW.

Because paper supplies were limited in NSW and were replenished only as ships arrived, there is a strong possibility that previously unrelated watercolour drawings could in fact have been created if not simultaneously, then within a limited timeframe using the same limited stock of paper.

Watermark analysis of drawings of NSW subjects has strengthened the argument that unprovenanced drawings previously dismissed as non-colonial in origin and long thought to have been created in England or even 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.

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.

And so, in such a small community as Sydney Cove it becomes easy to imagine that drawings might have been circulated and shared, repeated, honed, refined and copied in much the same way as stories and gossip.

Research based on letters and diaries from the colony as well as auction sale records describing the dispersal of collections brought back to England from NSW, has now been added to rich data derived from technical observation and analysis.

This has provided evidence, comparing the many related sets of drawings from the early colonial period, to help determine the history and chronology of these foundation Australian drawings, to understand how, and where, they were created, using science and observation to advance art historical information.

Responding to and investigating the drawings as primary evidence of colonial art practise also alerted us to the precariousness of thinking we know history, that we know what happened and have all the information. These collections raised questions we hadn't previously thought to ask, they suggest possibilities we hadn't considered.

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 and recording life in NSW than we can yet put names and faces to.

Cultural activities – writing extended accounts, recording impressions in letters and journals, drawing what they saw and did - not only found a foothold in the struggling colony, they flourished

- 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.

Looking at collections of drawings anew, opened up new patterns to understand other possible histories:

- They engage with, even challenge, some of the mythology about early 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 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.

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, these collections 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.

They exist, in part, as a tribute to our incessant inquisitiveness about what lies outside our reach, what is beyond our current knowledge and comprehension, and the compulsion to try to make sense of it. They signal the enduring nature of human vitality and curiosity, of the need to push boundaries and explore, and to try to understand the world and our place in it.

All this is not to suggest that the colony wasn't patriarchal, authoritarian and controlling. It was principally a place of punishment. But in spite of this there were people who saw an opportunity, who were intrigued, even enchanted by what they found.

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 perceptions of Australia as a nation.

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

They are a powerful reminder of how our collections both reflect and inform, and even obscure, our understanding of history and ourselves.

They are direct evidence that in late 18th century NSW, more people than we can yet identify and name, 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.