‘Threads that connect places with their past’

Hidden Treasures: the art collection of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society.

When this project was first mooted and the topic for this gathering discussed as ‘threads that connect places with their past’ the question was asked How does history help our understanding of heritage? As an art and design historian who often works on the histories underpinning built heritage the answer was too obvious for words but my interest was piqued and so when talk of the connections between collections, history and heritage was broached my major interest – which is portable cultural heritage – immediately came to mind as an often overlooked resource.

Furniture, costume, jewellery and other objects are part of our cultural heritage that can help to build a lively picture. Places are rendered more meaningful if these connections can be part of the equation. Painting and drawing are the most obvious threads of portable cultural heritage that can help connect our valued places with their past. They can have a vitality that connects more directly with place than words and many photographs.

There is old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words and the little known art collection of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society will primarily be used to illustrate that portable heritage can bring ‘colour’ to history and built heritage. Be they professional or amateur images, they were created lovingly by a living person and are a valuable resource for students of heritage.

I propose that when researching the history of built heritage it is worthwhile considering not only the photographic collections at the SLWA and local historical societies but also their portable heritage collections, in particular the art collections of our public and membership institutions to see if there is a painting, print or drawing that can capture the mood of the time or a detail not obvious in the photograph, something that would not only add worth but embellish the document. These are ‘hidden’ resources found particularly in the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Battye Library and the Royal Western Australian Historical Society.

However I have to put a caveat here. Unfortunately there are still problems with the State Library of WA catalogues as there is no way to bring up artworks as a category so what you can find there and how – will be pot luck – but it is worth a try.

And another caveat
The Art Gallery naturally is a major pictorial resource, however at present the collection is not fully available on line.

So I will confine my talk primarily to the collection of the volunteer organization – the Western Australian Historical Society, which surprisingly has nearly everything in the art section photographed and on line and with information on the artists and most of the subjects.

How do I know this? Because I have nearly completed researching, auditing and undertaking assessments of each artwork in this collection that is now
Researching in the RWAHS collection for images to use in my recent book *Inspired by Light and Land: Designers and Makers in Western Australia 1829-1969* I became aware of the resource but also of the lack of information or even identification of some artists and the subjects of their works.

Ever the enthusiastic researcher I went to work to discover the stories of the artists and the subjects. As an artist myself my primary interest was on the artist biographies but interesting information emerged on many of the subjects as I delved into files by previous volunteers, various accession records, historic meeting minutes and the like to trace the history of the objects and their subjects to add to my previous research into the artists biographies. Quite often there were competing facts, which naturally had to be checked and as most of you will know proving something wrong can be much more time consuming than proving it right and the project is ongoing.

I need not tell anyone here why I bother.

**IMAGES**

2. I am going to focus primarily on the Perth Pool and its surrounds noting changes over time. This is an extremely rare 1840s-50s depiction of Shenton’s mill in working order. Other details such as the Aboriginal fish traps in the foreground and Aboriginal habitations are particularly interesting.

3. Another early depiction of the Perth Water basin. Note the jetties used by the major form of transport at the time. The Esplanade has not yet been created. There is no town hall or major ecclesiastical buildings.

4. The provenance of this image is till being researched but note the houses with grey single roofs in the foreground.

5. Here we can see details of the stone jetty where the quarried stone for building was landed after being ferried on barges from the riverside quarries at Mosman Park. Note also and the scar on the cliff face at One tree Point where regular landslides occurred and where the landscaped terraces are about to be constructed. Note the Old Mill in south Perth has lost its sails.

6. Another view of the ‘Stone jetty’ with piles of stones unloaded from the nearby barges. Also unloaded were occasional loads of timber for adjacent Lawrence the shipwrights. Herbert Gibbs’ painting gives us an idea of what the barges looked like.

7. Mary Livesey depicts the vegetation on the river edge at Mt’s Bay Road at the turn of the century. This once lovely sweep, which used to have lights reflected in the water is now filled in for the freeway and contains John Oldham Park and the David Carr Memorial Park.
8. Valentine Delawarr shows us how the foreshore looked in parts at the turn of the century. The bell tower is situated about here. Note the buildings at the foot of Mt Eliza.

9. At this time another section of the foreshore near the causeway was littered with camps of the would be miners who found no room at the inn.

10. Much more detail is provided by former barge master Henry Passmore in his embroidered panorama of a cricket match on the Esplanade. The ship builder's yards are clearly seen at the foot of William Street, The Barracks and the Observatory can be seen and grand houses up Mount Street and along Bellevue Terrace. Horses pulling drays loaded with barrels of beer have just left the brewery at the foot of Spring Street. The Swimming baths appear on the very left.

11. Dorothy Allen's very fragile 1903 painting of the Perth Basin also shows very interesting details of the shipbuilding yards, the stone jetty, the old mill and a growing number of houses on the South Perth Mill Point. A steam vessel, possibly the Black Swan that dredged the river can be seen in the mid field. We hope to have what is left of this painting conserved.

12. Ten or twenty years later the lush private gardens of some of the riverside mansions can be seen in the foreground of this view of Perth Pool.

13. Another thirty or forty years later saw the building of the Narrows Bridge to connect southern suburbs to the northern ones.

14. Meanwhile here is an example of a reconstruction of what the Miller's Pool and the South Perth Mill looked like when a working mill as told to the artist by an old man who remembered it from those days.

15. ‘Satan’ Browne restored the old mill on the Hamersley Estate in South Perth built by Shenton and developed it as a pleasure resort with hotel facilities and gardens. Alta Gardens was opened in April 1880. The Inquirer of April 21 1880 has a full description. Alta Gardens Hotel became Perth's most fashionable social centre. However it was not too last. The expiree entrepreneur soon went bankrupt. In 1896 Goatcher captures some of the detail added by Browne after it had once again fallen into disrepair.

16. The vegetation on Mt Eliza can be identified in the foreground and various jetties and buildings in middle ground.

17. Berthold's pen and wash can show greater detail. Wesley Church, the Town Hall, the stone jetty etc. can be identified.

18 David Edgar’s painting gives us details of the brewery and the gardens at the foot of Mt Eliza around the Old Men’s Home. On the escarpment is the second of Kings’ Park rotundas. The foreground gives a detail of the Terraces at King's Park.

19. Henri van Raalte provides an evocative image of a train crossing the railway bridge at Fremantle in 1926.
20. Three years later Beatrice Darbyshire provided detail of the structure of the traffic bridge at Fremantle.

21. Joseph Allen's architectural drawings of the Strelitz brothers' Viking House in Perth are also in the collection of the RWAHS.

22. Some of the original façade detail of Desborough House on the corner of Hay and Havelock Streets in West Perth can be seen in this painting.

23. This building can still be identified as part of the current Ravenswood Hotel on the Murray.

24. The RWAHS hold an almost complete copy of the Douglas Cummings rural homesteads drawn for the *Western Mail* in the 1930s.

25. Some drawings cannot yet be located. This important drawing of Louisa Clifton's marital home was still in the collection in the 1980s. We hope to find it when all locations have been audited and photographed.

26. This little c.1843 gem by Richard Goldsmith Meares gives us a description of the steam mill built by American Solomon Cook to grind corn in York.

27. A delightful sketch by 12 year old Kitty Shenton depicts the original St John's Anglican Church in York as it stood in 1898. The gravestones remain in the grounds.

28. Here is a building we need help in identifying. It is possibly in the Woodanilling and surrounding area districts. Does anyone recognize it?

29. RWAHS also has some interesting paper-cuts and portraits. This is Jane Dodds who arrived in 1830 as part of the unfortunate Peel group. They went on to have an interesting life in Western Australia.

30. There are also witness accounts of historic episode in our history in the RWAHS collection. Here is a lively rendering of the finding of the bodies of Harding, Panter and Goldwyer attributed to one of the party who found them. I trust this gives you a glimpse of the treasures that can be found if you search.

**These collections are both our history and our heritage to pass on to other generations. Do explore them for yourselves.**

Dr Dorothy Erickson  April 2017