

Ralph Body

book review of

*British Art for Australia, 1860–1953: The Acquisition of Artworks from the United Kingdom by Australian National Galleries* by Matthew C. Potter

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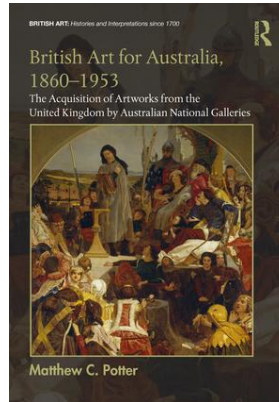
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Matthew C. Potter,  
*British Art for Australia, 1860–1953: The Acquisition of Artworks from the United Kingdom by Australian National Galleries.*  
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Matthew Potter's *British Art for Australia, 1860–1953* examines the acquisition of British art by the five main Australian municipal galleries, from their foundations until the mid-twentieth century. This extends earlier studies that have investigated the histories and collections development of specific institutions, with his book providing a detailed overview of their collective activities, motivations, and experiences of collecting British art. Due to their origins in outposts of the British empire, art from the United Kingdom usually accounts for the greatest proportion of the international works held by Australian galleries. In addition to successful acquisitions, Potter's study considers artworks "that were considered, rejected, or unsuccessfully competed for" (10). He also engages with debates regarding what Australian institutions should collect, the negotiations involved in acquiring works, and the critical and popular reception of British art by Australian audiences. Potter argues that the discussions elicited by the collecting practices of antipodean galleries provide valuable insights into the changing nature of Anglo-Australian relations and that the "language and ideas deployed . . . reflect the status of British identities as mutable and contested, and help explain the complex attitudes of Australians towards their cultural heritage" (230). However, in attempting to better contextualize historic actions and opinions, he is careful to make clear that "scholarship on settler attitudes to their metropolitan culture is an important forensic exercise rather than an apologia for past imperialist actions" (3).

Potter sets out the parameters of his study in the introductory chapter. The ninety-three-year timeframe commences with the opening of the first Australian national gallery in 1861 and concludes in the early 1950s, when changes to immigration policies and closer ties with the United States were diminishing the "Anglocentric" character of Australia (1–2). The five cultural institutions considered are those currently known as the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (est. 1861); the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (est. 1874); the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide (est. 1881); the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

(est. 1895); and the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane (est. 1895). Many of these institutions were previously titled “national” galleries, as they were founded at a time when Australia was comprised of six British colonies. These subsequently became states following their federation as the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901. The present National Gallery of Australia in Canberra was not established until 1967 and is thus excluded from Potter’s study. There were significant differences in the financial resources of the five galleries considered. Following the receipt of the substantial Felton Bequest in 1904, the National Gallery of Victoria benefited from acquisition funds greater than those of London’s National and Tate Galleries combined. Its considerably greater buying power accounts for the prominence of Melbourne’s collecting activities in this book, with more than half the works illustrated drawn from its collection. Conversely, after the initial momentum surrounding their establishment, the galleries in Perth and Brisbane both underwent prolonged periods of stagnation with limited collections development. Thus, they are discussed less frequently (47–50). As the historical marginalisation of indigenous Australians excluded them from most areas of public life and their art from municipal galleries, Aboriginal viewpoints are not examined. Similarly, the debates considered are dominated by men, as few women held roles as gallery trustees, curators, or advisers during this period (18–19).

The eight core chapters of the book are divided into two sections, with chapters two to five focusing upon structural and contextual themes that shaped the operations of Australian galleries, while chapters six to nine investigate their collecting of specific periods or genres of British art. Potter commences by considering the symbolic and affective significance that art from the Imperial metropole held for “Antipodean Britons” (15). Thus, Chapter 2 examines the various ways in which the art collected by Australian galleries was regarded as representing British values. Focusing mainly upon late Victorian works, it considers how a range of subject matter, including religious themes, the monarchy, classical subjects, and scenes from British daily life, history, or literature, were capable of conveying “imperial messages” (29). Potter acknowledges the significant role played by the British art press in shaping the response of Australian audiences, observing that “British ‘ways of seeing’ were inextricably linked to British ‘ways of reading’” (22). London publications like *The Connoisseur* and *The Studio* were widely read, and British art news stories were regularly syndicated in Australian newspapers. The chapter also acknowledges the capacity for works to convey multiple and contradictory meanings. On the one hand, social realist depictions of hardship may have reminded viewers of the socio-economic factors that had encouraged them to emigrate. However, the increased popularity of these works during the 1890s when Australia was experiencing an economic depression suggests that such imagery also evoked “a constant in their lives in both the UK and Australia” (30).

The theme of colonial engagement with British values is continued in Chapter 3, which considers the influence of metropolitan ideals of civic humanism upon the foundation and early histories of the Australian national galleries. Like their counterparts in the United Kingdom, larger Australian cities established public libraries, botanic gardens, museums, universities, and art galleries during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For many Australian centers, the provision of cultural and educational amenities also served as a means of distancing themselves from their earlier history as penal colonies. This is a motivation Potter could have investigated further when detailing the establishment of the five Australian institutions. The nascent municipal galleries prompted discussion regarding whether their function was primarily to educate art students or to entertain and edify the

taste of the broader public. In both instances, it was generally agreed during the late nineteenth century that Australian galleries would best serve the needs of their communities by collecting the works of recent British artists, rather than attempting to secure Old Masters (53–54). Similarly aligned with civic humanist principals of benefaction were a series of important bequests from 1897 onwards, which advanced the purchasing power of some Australian galleries. The chapter concludes by considering potential benefits of the imperial connection, including access to advice from British experts and commencing in the 1930s, the loan of important artworks from United Kingdom collections.

In contrast to the high ideals that shaped the galleries' cultural aspirations, the next two chapters address practical considerations integral to purchasing artworks from the opposite side of the world. Chapter 4 investigates the complex economic aspects of the Anglo-Australian art trade, while Chapter 5 examines the use of British-based advisers to recommend prospective acquisitions. In both chapters Potter challenges the persistent belief that imperial hegemony effectively "forced Australian national galleries to buy overpriced" and inferior works of British art "for metropolitan gain" (69). Instead he argues that "the discussion surrounding decision-making on art purchases" reveals "the Australian national galleries as proactive agents, as ships rather than corks, navigating . . . the British art world's imperial art market" (71). This chapter demonstrates that transnational collecting opportunities were significantly affected by such non-aesthetic factors as trade infrastructure, global economic crises, wartime disruption, protectionist policies, and the business practices of dealers and auction houses.

Potter identifies "information supply" and the opportunity to secure advice from United Kingdom experts as further incentives for Australian galleries to "Buy British" (71). When wishing to acquire European art, Australian institutions would occasionally send their own directors overseas on purchasing trips, but more frequently they engaged British-based individuals, committees, or organisations to identify suitable works for their collections. Prominent British artists appointed to recommend works for Australia included Charles Lock Eastlake, George Clausen, Edward Poynter, Alfred East, and Hubert von Herkomer. Charles Bage, a member of the Felton Bequest committee, believed that "the standards of knowledge, taste and criticism were, of course, higher in London than in Australia" (106). Such sentiments may reinforce perceptions of colonial subservience, but ultimately the collecting activities of British advisers were directed by their Australian employers who usually retained the executive power to endorse or reject their recommendations. As Potter observes, the selectors' "personal tastes and abilities as connoisseurs . . . always had to be subordinated to the interests of the [Australian] trustees" (113). Significantly, many British advisers recommended that Australian galleries should also collect works by continental European artists, only to be informed of the antipodean preference for British works. From the 1910s onwards, Australian collections increasingly appointed critics and art historians, rather than artists, as selectors, with Frank Rinder and Kenneth Clark recommending several noteworthy acquisitions.

Having established the practical and ideological parameters within which the Australian galleries operated, Chapter 6 investigates their ventures into collecting British art produced prior to 1800. Although nineteenth-century academic art education emphasized the value of the Old Masters as exemplars for students, few older works entered Australian collections

prior to the Edwardian period. The high prices that British Old Masters commanded proved a major obstacle, particularly given the inflationary effect of wealthy US collectors competing for such high-status works. However, after receiving the Felton Bequest, the National Gallery of Victoria was better able to expand its collecting in this field, with its endeavours forming the main focus of this chapter. Ironically, the effect of the 1930s depression upon the art market further rendered historic paintings more affordable. Potter observes that access to British Old Masters provided Australians with “authentic historical sources,” which reinforced a British cultural identity, in contrast to “the ‘staged’ interpretations of the past” created by nineteenth-century historical genre painters (121). The acquisition of eighteenth-century British paintings became a particular objective for many Australian galleries, with the portraiture of Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough, and Henry Raeburn enjoying a popular appeal “due to their celebrity and familiarity” (140).

During the period surveyed in Potter’s study, landscape was both the most prevalent genre in Australian art and the subject esteemed as best able to convey ideas of national identity. Thus, Chapter 7 offers a valuable point of comparison, exploring “the potential ideological and psychological impact” of the British landscape paintings collected upon “the selectors and audiences of the Australian national galleries” (146). The Australian population was predominantly urban, although rural imagery remained significant to their national self-image. The further physical detachment of many viewers from the often harsh realities of British rural life arguably served to increase “politically conservative and nostalgic” interpretations of idyllic pastoral scenes (147–48). Potter observes that while such paintings “could continue to appeal in a georgic manner” to large-scale landholders “who had gentry aspirations, they could also serve not only the historicist intentions of curators seeking to build survey collections but also the Romantic ideals of the middle-class and the agricultural expertise of their rural audiences” (148). Once again, only the National Gallery of Victoria possessed sufficient funds to collect the preeminent exponents of British romanticism and naturalism, purchasing representative landscapes by Gainsborough, J. M. W. Turner, John Constable, and the Norwich School. However, all the Australian national galleries acquired examples of Victorian and Edwardian landscape paintings. Indeed, Australian collections could sometimes antedate their British counterparts, with the Art Gallery of Western Australia purchasing Philip Wilson Steer’s vibrantly impressionist *Yacht Racing on the Solent* (1893) in 1898, eleven years before the Tate Gallery acquired its first work by that artist (165).

Missed opportunities feature just as prominently as successful acquisitions in Chapter 8, which considers the attempts of Australian galleries to secure Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Notable attainments include the purchasing of Ford Madox Brown’s *Chaucer at the Court of Edward III* (1847–51) by the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1876 and John Everett Millais’s *The Rescue* (1855) by the National Gallery of Victoria in 1923. By contrast, Brown’s *Cromwell on his Farm, St. Ives, 1630* (1874, Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight) and Holman Hunt’s *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple* (1854–60, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery) were lost to Adelaide and Sydney, respectively, due to disagreement amongst their trustees. Detailed attention is given to Melbourne’s inability to acquire Millais’s ground breaking *Christ in the House of his Parents* (1849–50). In 1921, the National Gallery of Victoria successfully negotiated to purchase this work, only for the National Art Collections Fund to intervene to prevent it from leaving Britain, ultimately securing the painting for the Tate Gallery. The protracted debates that ensued provide fascinating insights into ideas of

“reciprocal imperial obligation” and cultural identity. Frank Rinder argued that “Melbourne has a moral right” to the work in view of Australia’s support of Britain during the First World War, while one Australian asserted: “We overseas British . . . have not lost our claim to our heritage” (185–90). Potter demonstrates that the main reasons for the sparse representation of early Pre-Raphaelite works in Australian collections were their higher cost, limited supply, and competition from British institutions, rather than either conservative or modernist antipathy towards the movement. Although no oil paintings by Dante Gabriel Rossetti feature in Australian galleries, they secured several works by his acolyte Edward Burne-Jones. It would have been interesting to learn more about their antipodean reception, particularly as the three Burne-Jones paintings acquired between 1902 and 1919 all possess distinctly erotic undertones.

Following this detailed coverage of a specific movement, Chapter 9 seems more cursory in its discussion of the acquisition of British modernism by Australian galleries prior to 1953. Many of the themes Potter engages with—such as the influence of British art theories upon Australia, the significance of touring exhibitions of contemporary British art and the variety of Australian responses to different manifestations of British modernism—could easily form the basis of a book in their own right. As this chapter outlines, during the first few decades of the twentieth century Australian galleries favoured artists associated with such establishment institutions as the Royal Academy or Slade School. However, from the 1930s they broadened their acquisitions to include moderate examples of figurative modernism by the likes of Augustus John, Ethel Walker, and Jacob Epstein. Despite the widespread tendency to equate the British preferences of Australian galleries with aesthetic conservatism, Potter shows that amongst Australians responsive to modernism “anti-Victorianism did not always neatly mesh with anti-Britishness” (205). Instead, many progressive Australians “were eager to learn metropolitan Modernist lessons,” while some conservatives advocated rejecting British influences to better facilitate Australian nationalism in art (209). Potter also asserts that while Australian galleries were initially more inclined to acquire “insular” and “conservative” manifestations of British modernism, their “desire to build representative collections often led more radical examples to follow” (221). This is demonstrated by the acquisition of significant works by Henry Moore, Ben Nicholson, and Francis Bacon following the Second World War.

*British Art for Australia* makes a valuable contribution to the histories of Australian art collecting and Anglo-Australian cultural identity. In addition to enriching an understanding of Australian galleries, it will also provide a useful point of comparison for studies investigating the collections development of institutions in other former British settler societies, such as Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa. Potter’s study is well supported by extensive archival research. Although he generally writes clearly, on occasions the points Potter is seeking to convey are obscured amid the sheer number of examples and amount of contextual evidence he provides. However, this is largely the result of his commendable desire to demonstrate the full range and complexity of the activities and discourse under consideration, rather than condensing these into broad generalisations. By providing a detailed and nuanced engagement with both the cultural debates and structural factors that shaped Australian acquisitions of British art, Potter has usefully situated this phase of collections development within its cultural and historical context.

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