

Drawing in the Colony

Louise Anemaat

Executive Director, Library & Information Services and Dixson Librarian, State Library of NSW

Email: louise.anemaat@sl.nsw.gov.au

Abstract

Before photography, recording images required drawing or painting, and, without printing, reproducing images required copying by hand. This paper discusses drawings dating back to first European settlement in New South Wales, specifically a large collection of 745 zoological and botanical drawings from the 1790s which was bought by the State Library in 2011. Who were the artists? Which were the originals and which the copies? Answers are not easily obtained. We can however enjoy the images, very well preserved.

Introduction¹

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

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.

This has prompted us to look more closely at natural history drawings, and the practice of drawing during roughly the first twelve or so years of the colony.

Drawing in the Colony

Drawing started early in the colony. The first drawing likely to have been made in the colony was of a Grass Tree, drawn on 11 February 1788, just two weeks after the arrival of the fleet of eleven convict ships at Sydney Cove, by surgeon Arthur Bowes Smyth (Illus. 1).

The literature devoted to the art of Australia's First Fleet is thick on the ground and it is rare for new material to surface to add to the canon of existing drawings but this is exactly what occurred in 2011 when a large collection of 745 botanical and zoological drawings from the 1790s appeared on the market, from a private aristocratic library

¹ A lecture given at the Australian National Maritime Museum, on 15 June 2019, under the auspices of the Australiana Fund. The article is extracted from Anemaat (2014).

held at Knowsley Hall near Liverpool, England, and owned by the 19th Earl of Derby. The drawings had been compiled during the 1790s by a now forgotten but then widely known and acclaimed botanist, Aylmer Bourke Lambert. They were acquired for the collection of the State Library of NSW in 2011.



1: Grass tree or “A View of the Tree at Botany Bay, wh yields ye Yellow Balsam, & of a Wigwan,” 1788/Arthur Bowes Smyth. Watercolour (Mitchell Library ML Safe 1/15 no. 6 FL1607156)

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 is 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?

We will look more closely at how this collection fitted in with other, known collections from the same period, why and how its appearance has made us look again at what we thought we knew.

The various sets and collections of watercolour drawings from the same period still

present as a tangled knot of problems — drawings held privately, or held in collecting institutions in the United Kingdom, Germany, New Zealand and Australia.

Only some very, 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.

Two artists who consistently signed their drawings were Midshipman George Raper, who had a distinctive personal style; there is a lovely sinuousness in his drawings (Illus. 2). Thomas Watling, a convict with art training, also signed his work against the explicit instructions of his overseer and patron, First Fleet Surgeon-General John White. Watling had been transported for forgery, escaped en route at Cape of Good Hope, and eventually arrived in NSW in 1792.



2: “Bird and flower of Port Jackson,” or Kookaburra (*Dacelo novae guineae*), 1789/George Raper. Watercolour. (Raper Collection drawing no. 57. Natural History Museum, London)

Adding to the confusion is the fact that that the strong demand for images of new species amongst gentlemen, and occasionally women, amateurs of science in Britain meant

that copying was rife — in England which is perhaps not surprising, but also in NSW, and possibly also on board, shared by officers on board returning ships, 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 instance.

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.

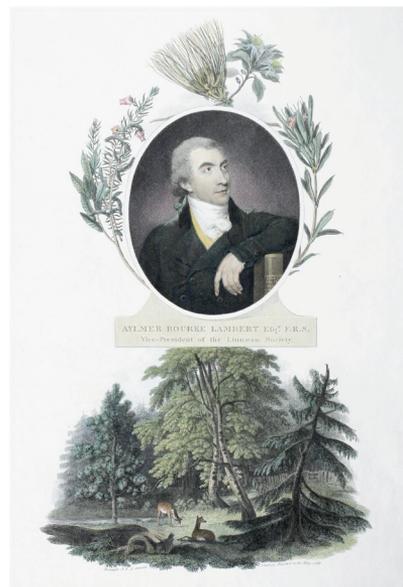
The Derby Collection

We now refer to the Knowsley Hall drawings as the Derby Collection for the 13th Earl of Derby (Illus. 3) who had purchased the collection in 1842, following the death of his friend, Aylmer Bourke Lambert (Illus. 4). Lambert had compiled the collection during his lifetime. The public emergence of this collection has been a little like finding that lost piece of a jigsaw at the back of the sofa. Comparing and considering this newly emerged 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 had not been seen since at least the 1940s; the existence of the other half was completely unrecorded.



3: Edward Smith-Stanley, 13th Earl of Derby, 1837/William Derby. Oil on canvas. Courtesy The Rt Hon. The Earl of Derby



4: Frontispiece Lambert (1803–07)

Three volumes we knew were well documented copies of drawings from the iconic Watling Collection compiled by John White who had lent his collection to botanist Alymer Bourke Lambert in 1797. Lambert then had White’s drawings copied. Since

1902 the Watling Collection has been held in London's Natural History Museum while Lambert's copies have been in the Derby library since Lambert's death in 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 Linnaean Society, London. Lambert's letters to Smith are now held in the Linnaean Collection. Lambert, Derby and Smith were friends and passionate enthusiasts for natural history.

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

The drawings, 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 have only very rarely been consulted during the last century or more, the images are 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 the British felt for the natural world they found in NSW 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 practice in the colony: copying was a valid way of circulating drawings, 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. 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 are variable but there are clues to a possible genealogy, to a possible primacy, of which image might be the source for others.

The Derby collection includes a single scene of Norfolk Island (Illus. 5) which is, in fact, a copy of two drawings, one by Raper and the other unsigned, showing the wrecking of the *Sirius* off Norfolk Island (Illus. 6, 7). Which drawing came first? Did one person record the events in a drawing, and the other make a copy? Or have they been created by two separate witnesses to the same events, working from the same viewpoint? One was George Raper, who we know was a witness to the wrecking. We don't yet know who drew the other.



5: “A View of the West side of Norfolk Island taken from the west side of Turtle Bay,” ca 1797/ artist unknown. Watercolour (Derby Collection ML PXD 1098, vol. 1 FL357843. Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)



6: “The Melancholy Loss of His Majesty’s Ship Sirius, Wreck’d on Norfolk Island, on Friday Noon March 19th 1790,”/George Raper. Watercolour (Raper Collection, drawing no. 23. Natural History Museum, London)

Stripped bare of the desperation of the wrecking, the people and the desperate activity — everything that made the original drawings genuine and dramatic — the copy



7: “A View of the West side of Norfolk Island and the manner in which the crew and provisions were saved out of His Majesty’s Ship the Sirius, taken from the West side of Turtle Bay after she was wreck’d,” ca 1790/Port Jackson Painter. Watercolour (Watling Collection drawing no. 22. Natural History Museum, London)

is a bland and uninteresting drawing. The drama and detail of what is actually unfolding and what the loss of the *Sirius* meant for the colony, were unimportant to a copyist in a London drawing room.

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

Determining Primacy

First, the contents of the many collections — around 2,000 watercolours that originated from the first decade of European settlement in Australia — were crosswalked to each other. The lack of provenance, and the absence of signatures or dates mean though that one needs to look for other clues to understand a possible genealogy of the drawings.

Pentimenti, those changes or adjustments made in a drawing, can often indicate primacy. An artist creating a work may reposition the subject of a drawing either to improve or correct it. These changes are not always evident in subsequent copies but as in the drawing of a Masked Lapwing from the Derby Collection, the lead in the white paint used at the time to obscure a correction



8: Masked lapwing or Spur winged plover (*Vanellus miles*), 1790s/artist unknown. Watercolour (Derby Collection ML PXD 1098, vol. 4 FL345345. Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)



9: Detail of Masked lapwing or Spur winged plover (*Vanellus miles*), 1790s/artist unknown. Watercolour (Derby Collection ML PXD 1098, vol. 4 FL345345. Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)

has discoloured to black over time, revealing the alteration quite clearly to the naked eye (Illus. 8, 9).

Usually, more detail is included in the original work and some of this detail is lost each time a drawing is copied. Or it could be embellished.

Copying is a fairly loaded word in the art world these days. Copying in the context of colonial drawings did not mean creating identical drawings. And it did not mean forgeries.

It meant there was a strong correlation, a conformity between some or all of 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 is glaring, important and, at times, inexplicable. The Wattle Bird, drawn by the Sydney Bird Painter, accurately depicts the bird with two wattles, one each side of its head (Illus. 10, 11, 12). 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.



10: Red Wattle-Bird (*Anthochaera carunculata*), 1790s/Sydney Bird Painter. Watercolour (ML Safe PXD 226 f. 60 FL8966136. Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)



12: “Wattleed Bee-eater,” ca 1797/artist unknown. Watercolour (Derby Collection ML SAFE PXD 1098 vol. 1 f. 37 FL357938 Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)



11: “Wattleed Bee-eater” (*Anthochaera carunculata*), 1788–1793/Port Jackson Painter. Watercolour (Watling Collection, Natural History Museum, London Watling drawing — no. 166)

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.

Who were the Artists?

Who were the artists? We still can’t put names to drawings in many, many cases but we can often identify categories of artist.

The quality of drawings by convict artists is often variable. Some are 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 (Illus. 13). Convict artists included obvious professional artists, such as Thomas Watling.



13: Christmas Bush (*Ceratopetalum gummiferum*), 1788–1794/artist unknown Watercolour (DGD 38 f. 1 FL1000688 Dixson Galleries, State Library of NSW)

Surgeons, such as Arthur Bowes Smyth, were often amateur artists with an interest in recording the medicinal properties of plants, and drawing was also part of a suite of compulsory skills required for progression though the ranks of the Royal Navy, needed to record the coastal profiles and features of places passed, named or claimed.

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 practise, refine and perfect technical conventions and methods. Copying was a bread-and-butter skill in the art world more generally.



14: “Taking of Colbee & Benalon. 25 Novr 1789”/William Bradley. Watercolour (ML safe 1/14 FL1113938 Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)

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 (Illus. 14). The inclusion of scales of feet was also common.

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 it seems engravings and prints, rather than paintings, were used to copy for practice, and the effect of this can be seen in many drawings that originated in NSW.

Shading, volume and tone in engravings are built up through the use of spaced, tapering lines, or by cross hatching. The effect of this can be seen in naval drawings which often replicate the effect of engraving lines rather than the more painterly technique of blend-



15: Detail of Illus. 2 above

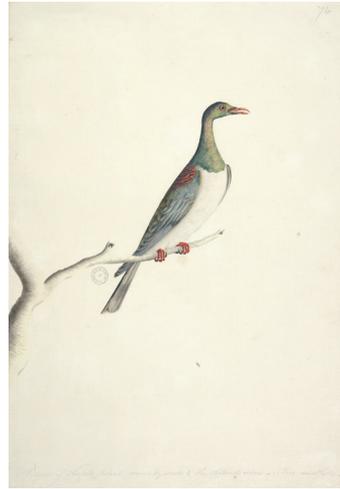


16: Little Grebe (*Podiceps ruficollis*), 1790s/
Sydney Bird Painter. Watercolour. (ML SAFE
PXD 226 no. 95 FL8966171 Mitchell Library,
State Library of NSW)

ing colour with a brush (Illus. 15). Blending can be seen in the work of more skilled artists such as the Sydney Bird Painter, suggesting the possibility that this talented but unidentified artist was not a naval artist (Illus. 16).

The Use of Gold Leaf in the Drawings

The Sydney Bird Painter's drawings are in a volume of a hundred drawings that came into the collection of the State Library of NSW in 1902. Its provenance is completely unrecorded and for the last three decades it has been believed to have been drawn in



17: Norfolk Island Pigeon (*Hemiphaga novæseelandiæ spadicea*), 1790s/Sydney Bird Painter. Watercolour with gold leaf on head and throat (ML PXD 226 f. 84 FL8966160 Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW) [now extinct — Ed.]

India because of the extensive and expert use of gold leaf (Illus. 17).

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. One of the few remaining opportunities for further exploration and comparison has been technical observation and analysis.

One of the unexpected features of early colonial drawings from this period is the inclusion of metallic leaf — gold, silver and alloy — in a surprisingly high number of drawings of NSW 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 cre-

ated in NSW, not only because of the lack of 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.

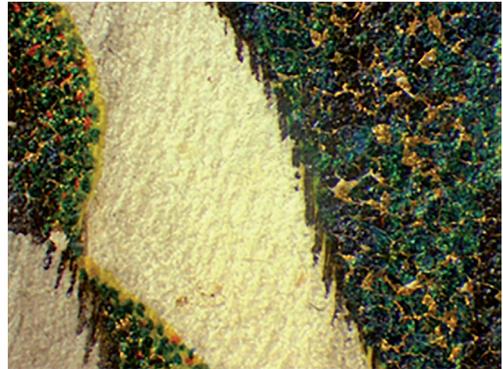
Yet X-ray fluorescence analysis showed the metals observed in early NSW colonial drawings not only looked like gold, they were in fact either gold leaf of a surprisingly high purity, or silver, or Dutch metal, used as a gold substitute in cheaper jewellery.

The surprise is that the presence of gold leaf and other metallic leaf is in fact quite so widespread in natural history drawings of NSW 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 NSW 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 (Illus. 18). Naval officers often supplied their own art materials. George Raper's will included the dispersal of his art materials after his death.

There is also an intriguing reference, in the journal kept by First Fleet surgeon Arthur Bowes Smyth, where he refers to some of the officers giving red cloth and gold foil to the Aborigines which they twisted into their hair (Bowes Smyth, ML Safe 1/15).² Gold foil is thicker than very fine gold leaf, thick enough to support its own weight and be twisted, as Bowes Smyth described. Gold leaf, as can be seen in drawings, is created by



18: Detail from Sydney Bird Painter, showing gold leaf. Micrographic photograph by Kate Hughes (ML SAFE PXD 226 Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)

gently beating the thicker foil to something that is less than wafer thin.

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 NSW drawings.

Sydney Countrysides, and Watermarks

Volume 4 of the Derby Collection is one of those previously unrecorded volumes, thought at the time of acquisition in 2011 to have been drawings created in England rather than NSW.

The volume is distinguished by drawings of giant birds in Lilliputian landscapes thought to represent the English countryside (Illus. 19). The park-like qualities depicted in the drawings accord with the frequent comments of the British that the land around Sydney and inland reminded them of parks with tracks winding through them. We have, wrote surgeon George Worgan, “a great extent of parklike Country ... with extraordinarily luxuriant

² Bowes Smyth, ML Safe 1/15)



19: Hawkesbury duck or Australasian shoveler (*Anas rhynchos*), 1790s?/artist unknown. Watercolour (Derby Collection ML SAFE PXD 1098 vol. 4 FL345396 Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)

grass.”³ John Hunter described “the Woods here ... resemble Deer parks, as much as if they were intended for that purpose,”⁴ and Arthur Phillip noted that the grass is “as fine as in any Park in England.”⁵

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 tracks.⁶

So, could these drawings have originated in NSW rather than England?

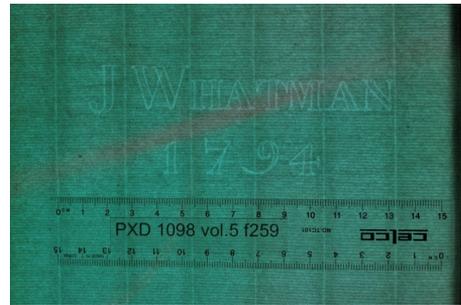
We looked systematically at the papers used and their watermarks. The interest was not so much in the dating of watermarks, though that’s also interesting. The evidence of dated watermarks can only ever be indicative of the genealogy of drawings rather than conclusive: they give a not-before date, but not an end date, for the creation of drawings.

³ Worgan, ML Safe 1/114

⁴ Hunter, Safe DL MS 164

⁵ Phillip to Banks, ML/DL Series 37.08

⁶ See the discussion of fire-stick farming in Gammage (2012). [Ed.]



20: “J Whatman 1794” watermark. (Photograph by Kate Hughes)

Here the interest was more in what the actual designs might tell us.

Watermarks, the faint manufacturer’s design that can be seen in paper when held up to light, are unique to each mill (Illus. 20). 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 mould.

Across collections of drawings of NSW subjects we have now found papers that have been created not only in the same paper mill but in the exact same paper mould, including drawings in Volume 4 of the Derby Collection thought at the time of acquisition to have been created in England but now reconsidered as possibly, even probably, created in NSW.

Paper supplies were limited in NSW and were replenished only as ships arrived, so there is a strong possibility that previously unrelated watercolour drawings on paper bearing exactly matching watermarks 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.

Conclusions

So we are 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 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.

Comparing the many related sets of drawings from the early colonial period has provided evidence that helps 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 practice also alerted us to the precariousness of thinking that we know history, that we know what happened and have all the information. These collections raised questions we had not previously thought to ask; they suggest possibilities we had not 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. We 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 the collections of drawings anew has opened new patterns to understand other possible histories. They engage with, even challenge, some of the mythology about the early European past in Australia. They question where our perceptions and ideas have come from, and they expose 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, the Collection helps demonstrate that the colonisation of Australia was not just physical and cultural occupation of the land but intellectual engagement with it.

To repeat, 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, it 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 are 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, but also 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 to retain a sense of humanity and connectedness with each other, and with home.

They laid the foundation for ways of responding to the land as awe-inspiring or alienating, as endless resource or precious heritage, as *terra nullius* or a land that had been actively managed for millennia, dichotomies that still challenge Australia today.

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