

## Reframing Darwin: evolution and art in Australia

During the last century art and science became separate fields of inquiry, however the new millennium is witnessing a return to ways of thinking that originated during the Renaissance, as once more we come to realise that these two fields are inextricably entwined. So thought Charles Darwin, whose famous observation in *On the origin of species* that nature is itself an 'entangled bank', has become the leitmotif for *Reframing Darwin: evolution and art in Australia*.

Darwin arrived in Australia on 12 January 1836 aboard HMS *Beagle* and, as this exhibition reveals, in many ways he has never left. His influence has shaped Australian science, the humanities and arts throughout the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From the arrangement of plant and animal species into taxonomic systems, to the study of human and animal behavior, to the emergence of natural history illustration, and the vigorous debates around creation and evolution, Darwin's impact in Australia has been profound. His stature as a thinker in the twenty-first century is indeed growing and his ideas are being revisited as integral to the study of science, technology and art. The human genome project, conservation of endangered species, and the role of the emotions in humans and animals, are concerns at the forefront of national and international research, and all emanate from and vindicate this extraordinary thinker. These are themes taken up by the work of artists here displayed; work which spans colonial Australia to the present.

Darwin's cabin on the *Beagle*, complete with his shipboard library, is vividly recreated in *Reframing Darwin: evolution and the Baillieu* currently on exhibition on the third floor of the Baillieu Library. This display includes many of the same editions as those that went to sea with him on HMS *Beagle*. A large display of first editions of Darwin's major works and those of his contemporaries such as Thomas Huxley, Joseph Hooker and Alfred Russel Wallace, as well as engravings of botanical and zoological specimens by artists from a range of voyages, are also on display.

Professor Jeanette Hoorn, guest curator  
Amelia Scurry, assistant curator

## HMS *Beagle* in Sydney

Early in the morning a light air carried us towards the entrance of Port Jackson ... A solitary lighthouse, built of white stone, alone told us that we were near to a great & populous city.—Having entered the harbor, it appeared fine and spacious; but the level country, showing on the cliff-formed shores bare & horizontal strata of sandstone, was covered by woods of then scrubby trees that bespoke useless sterility.—Proceeding further inland, parts of the country improved; beautiful Villas and nice Cottages were here & there scattered along the beach; and in the distance large stone houses, two or three stories [sic] high, & Windmills standing on the edge of a bank, pointed out to us the neighbourhead [sic] of the Capital of Australian civilization.

Charles Darwin, *Beagle* diary.

These were Charles Darwin's first observations as he sailed into Sydney Harbour on board HMS *Beagle* on 12 January 1836. Neither artist Augustus Earle nor Conrad Martens were on board that morning.

Earle had left the ship at Montevideo where Martens had replaced him. His views of Sydney Harbour were published as lithographs in London in 1830, just before the *Beagle's* second voyage and after the artist had returned from his wanderings across the globe. A windmill is visible in the left middle ground of *Coming to anchor off Sydney Cove*, which also features warehouses and large ships moored in the harbour. Earle offers a celebration of the harbour's beauty, the changes wrought by British settlement as testimony to the power of the British nation.

Conrad Martens' views of Chile, Tahiti, Tierra del Fuego and Madeira seen here were produced over many years. Some were executed on board the *Beagle*, others during his excursions in the Pacific after he had left the expedition in Valparaiso, while others were painted in Sydney after his travels.



# The journey of HMS Beagle



Reprinted in the 1890 edition of Darwin's *Journal of researches*, this map outlines the route taken by HMS Beagle between 1839 and 1841.



## Darwin's journey to the Blue Mountains

After a day or two in Sydney, Darwin set out for the Blue Mountains. Having heard of their 'absolute elevation' he was initially underwhelmed by the sight of the blue hills in the distance. However, upon reaching the plateau Darwin was awed by the prospect before him. It was, he wrote, a view as if from the 'head of a bay ... the line of cliff diverging on each side' revealing 'headland behind headland, as on a bold sea-coast'.

During the journey Darwin met with Philip Gidley King and his father at Emu Ferry. King took Darwin to his home Dunheved, later the subject of several paintings by Conrad Martens. King organized for Darwin and members of the *Beagle* crew to be entertained at Hannibal Macarthur's home, Vineyard. Conrad Martens' charming oil of the stately homestead produced in 1840 titled *Vineyard*, shows architect John Verge's Greek Revival style villa. Darwin was impressed, writing:

**The house would be considered a very superior one, even in England.—There was a large party, I think about 18 in the Dining room.—It sounded strange in my ears to hear very nice looking young ladies exclaim 'Oh, we are Australian, & know nothing about England'.—In the afternoon I left this most English-like house & rode by myself into Sydney.**

En route, Darwin encountered a group of Wiradjuri people:

**At Sunset by good fortune a party of a score of the Aboriginal Blacks passed by, each carrying in their accustomed manner a bundle of spears & other weapons ... They were all partly clothed & several could speak a little English; their countenances were good-humoured & pleasant & they appeared far from such utterly degraded beings as usually represented.—In their own arts they are admirable; ... in tracking animals & men they show most wonderful sagacity and I heard many of their remarks, which manifested considerable acuteness.**

Earle's drawings of Wiradjuri people executed ten years earlier show their physique and ceremonial markings. Earle has given delicate attention to their stature, facial features, dress and demeanor.

Once in Bathurst, Darwin was disappointed by the dry aspect of the country he encountered. Having arrived during a heat wave and in the middle of a drought he did not recognize the pastoral potential of the region.

## Darwin in Hobart

After returning from Bathurst to Sydney, Darwin rejoined the *Beagle* and set sail for Tasmania. His impressions of the environs of Hobart were positive, taking in the climate, geological character and the landscape before him. He wrote enthusiastically about the flora of Mount Wellington.

A considerable part of Darwin's diary reviews the decline of the Indigenous Tasmanians. Referring to the warfare between the Europeans and the Palawa, Darwin lays considerable blame at the feet of the colonists:

**The Aboriginal blacks are all removed and kept (in reality as prisoners) in a Promontory, the neck of which is guarded. I believed it was not possible to avoid this cruel step; although without doubt the misconduct of the Whites first led to the Necessity.**

He notes with alarm the decline in their numbers after they were taken to Flinders Island:

**They were then removed to an island, where food and clothes were provided them. Count Strzelecki states, that 'at the epoch of their deportation in 1835, the number of natives amounted to 210. In 1842, that is, after the interval of seven years, they mustered only fifty-four individuals; and, while each family of the interior of New South Wales, uncontaminated by contact with the whites, swarms with children, those of Flinders' Island had, during eight years, an accession of only fourteen in number!**

This episode in Tasmania's colonial history constitutes a disgraceful event in the history of the invasion of the continent. Some of the paintings produced at the time constitute the most unpleasant and morally unsound works in the history of Australian colonial art. Not so the cycle of monochrome watercolours painted by Thomas Bock in 1837, the year following Darwin's visit to Hobart. The fate of the members of the Palawa nation here represented was tragic, bearing out the concerns that Charles Darwin expressed in his diary.

## Nineteenth-century art and science

In the nineteenth century the arts and sciences were not separated in the way they are today, rather the disciplines complemented and extended each other. The discussion of typologies was prominent in science, art, literature and popular culture by the mid-nineteenth century in Australia. The significant advances in taxonomy and classification that had begun in the eighteenth century, emerged strongly in nineteenth-century colonial endeavours. The disciplines of natural history, botany, geology and cartography, among others, offered exciting opportunities for artists who were on-the-spot and able to record new species, environments and races of humankind. This led to debates around human typologies, and attempts to distinguish the similarities and differences between different members of the human family. The portraits executed by Tom Roberts around the time of his trip to the Torres Strait in 1892 were a direct result of his interest in representing the different 'types' to be found on the eastern seaboard of Australia. These included Indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, among them individuals of Polynesian and Malay background that formed the subjects of *A turbaned man* and *Dick Rotumah*.

## Tom Roberts: typologies and *The expression of the emotions in man and animals*

The portrait of Charlie Turner—whose identity remains the subject of research—is an unusual painting in Roberts' oeuvre on account of the way it depicts the emotional state of the artist's sitter. The expression of sadness and melancholy reflects closely Darwin's own writing in *The expression of the emotions in man and animals*:

**... as soon as some melancholy thought passes through the brain, there occurs a just perceptible drawing down of the corners of the mouth, of a slight raising up of the inner ends of the eyebrows, or both movements combined, and immediately afterwards a slight suffusion of tears.**

Roberts' portrait follows Darwin's description, and it is likely that he was influenced by debates then circulating both in Melbourne and internationally about the representation of the emotions.

Thirteen members of Victoria's colonial society corresponded with Darwin about *Expression* (2nd edition, 1890). He noted:

**The Aborigines of Australia express their emotions freely, and they are described by my correspondents as jumping about and clapping their hands for joy, and as often roaring with laughter. No less than four observers have seen their eyes freely watering on such occasions; and in one instance the tears rolled down their cheeks.**

Darwin quotes Templeton Bunnett, a grazier from Echuca:

**Mr Bunnett informs me that the Australian aborigines when out of spirits have a chop-fallen appearance. After prolonged suffering, the eyes become dull and lack expression, and are often slightly suffused with tears. The eyebrows not rarely are rendered oblique, which is due to their inner ends being raised. This produces peculiarly-formed wrinkles on the forehead which are very different from those of a simple frown; though in some cases, a frown alone may be present. The corners of the mouth are drawn downwards, which is so universally recognised as a sign of being out of spirits, that it is almost proverbial.**



## Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer

When, in 1859, Charles Darwin's *On the origin of species* extended time and society beyond an Edenic timescale, it profoundly influenced Walter Baldwin Spencer's life and career. Spencer was born in the year following *Origin's* publication, and was educated in biology by enthusiastic first-generation Darwinian scientists. His most significant Oxford research explored evolutionary ideas through an investigation of the existence of the parietal (third) eye, which had been found in some reptiles. He looked at twenty-eight lizard species, as well as the New Zealand tuatara (*Sphenodon*). Darwin's defender, Thomas Huxley, was a member of the electoral committee that chose Spencer for the foundation chair of biology at the University of Melbourne.

Following his arrival in Melbourne, Spencer immediately set out to improve the research and teaching facilities of the university. He submitted ambitious building plans within a month of arrival, and the buildings were complete just two years later. The attractive Gothic sandstone exterior contained unadorned, utilitarian laboratories. Spencer claimed that they offered space and window illumination equal to the best available in England. Each student had dissection and microscope study space. The significance of his arrival for evolutionary studies is evident in the *Melbourne University calendar 1888–89*. While his predecessor, Sir Frederick McCoy was a creationist, the calendar under Spencer prescribed reading Darwin's *Origin*, and the works by Alfred Russel Wallace and Thomas Huxley.

Spencer taught and researched evolutionary biology at the university from 1887. In 1894 he switched his chief interest from biology to the application of evolutionary principles to Aboriginal society, thus exemplifying the dictum of his Oxford friend, RR Marett, that 'Anthropology is the child of Darwin.'

Spencer was among the first to set examinations on Darwinian theory, as the papers here displayed make clear. He died in Tierra del Fuego in 1929, where he had been reading Darwin's *Beagle* diary as his guide.



## Melbourne's Gorilla Debates

In February 1907 Melbourne's *Age* newspaper reported the imminent installation at the National Gallery of Victoria of a 'remarkable' new bronze statue. It was 'the gift of the sculptor to the institution', which was 'sure to attract considerable attention'. The subject of this statue, readers learned, was:

**... a gorilla at bay, threatening his unseen assailants with a huge stone, whilst with one monstrous paw he holds tightly a struggling woman ... The gorilla has been wounded by an arrow, which has pierced his shoulder, and he faces his pursuers with snarling teeth and an expression of mingled ferocity and pain.**

The work in question was the French sculptor Emmanuel Frémiet's *Gorilla carrying off a woman*. When first exhibited as a life-sized plaster at the Paris Salon of 1887, this dynamic composition won Frémiet a medal of honour and attracted vigorous debate about both its intrinsic aesthetic merits and its engagement with then topical Darwinian discourse. Affordable reduced-size bronze copies of Frémiet's work proved popular; and it was one of these that the artist had presented to the NGV in 1907 in appreciation of the gallery's recent commission to create a new and very expensive bronze cast for Melbourne of his celebrated, life-sized equestrian statue, *Joan of Arc* (1872–89). A lively debate involving members of the scientific community, the Church and the press ensued, forming an interesting chapter in the international annals of the Gorilla Debates.



## The post-Darwinian body

Barbara Creed's term 'post-Darwinian' body is fashioned as an extension of Darwin's theories. Darwin's thinking was based on the identification of the variations in species as evidence towards evolution's influence on morphology over time. For Darwin, it was the principle of natural and sexual selection that directed this process. In formulating the idea of adaptation to an environment, Darwin's method envisages its 'others', the monstrous and the strange.

In the visual arts, the evolutionary post-Darwinian body is a body capable of assuming strange and wondrous forms. It may be the monstrous body of an animal-human hybrid, or the perfected body of the super-human organism. The artists assembled here all deal in different ways with the Darwinian revolution through an examination of evolution, adaptation, mutation and genetic manipulation. Patricia Piccinini sees a bond of common humanity forged between viewer and her 'creatures' as vital; in asking questions about the ethics of genetic manipulation she calls for empathy from her viewers. Julie Rrap makes satirical references through her photographs, which offer a witty commentary on adaptation. Rosemary Laing's work contains parodic references to the study of the emotions, while Ricky Swallow takes ideas of post-Darwinian forms into the realm of cybernetics. Lyndal Jones' video work *I read somewhere he married his cousin ...* relates to her *Darwin translations*, a series which she has worked on over many years. The work incorporates film footage recorded by the artist in the Galapagos Islands.