

## Obscured Art Histories: Embracing Unknowns in the Miegunyah Collection.

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Unknown producer

*Paperweight round with image of houses of parliament on base, the top & sides with round facets,*

Nineteenth century

Glass with transfer

4cm (height), 8.5cm (diameter)

The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.

First: A Victorian glass paperweight of the houses of parliament in London. It cannot be confidently determined who made this object, nor where it was made or when—the “truths” that art historians are wont to identify. The object is small and not particularly valuable besides.

Today it is held by the Ian Potter Museum, and it has little to offer art history. The object's personal history as a relic of the tastes and travels by Russell and Mab Grimwade and their desire to decorate their home Miegunyah in Toorak is largely lost. Without that knowledge, the object struggles to hold its own, and how we approach the work is similarly confused: the art history is clouded and incomplete.

The Miegunyah collection at the Ian Potter is a disparate collection of artistic, historical, and decorative objects which are often not the prestige art of popular art historical imagination. Art history has traditionally searched for truths in art objects: be that determinable truths of origin, provenance, authorship, date, ideally by well-known artists, all which form an interpretation and value judgement of the artwork itself.<sup>1</sup> Miegunyah, however, is largely unsuited to the art historical project. There is little that can be discovered about many of the art objects in the collection, such as who created them, where specifically they came from, or even what they depict. As such, the collection abstracts the processes by which we art historicise, in turn obscuring the ways by which we search for value in art.

But the incompatibility of art history to approach Miegunyah is but one of the ways the collection reveals its secrets. Miegunyah is *characterised* by its obscurity. It was the intention of this project to demonstrate how embracing the lacunas or obscurities of Miegunyah paints a holistic picture of its history and value both past and ongoing. This is demonstrated in four

ways and through the application of four objects: a paperweight, a portrait, a landscape, and a print.

To return to our glass paperweight, Debbie Robinson has acknowledged, with a hint of ambivalence, 'Glass paperweights often sit uncomfortably in the representational and conceptual schemata of the typical art museum.'<sup>2</sup> A similar ambivalence is reflected elsewhere: Benjamin Thomas has written that 'Grimwade's collecting provides a strange departure'<sup>3</sup> from the tastes of the time; and John Poynter that there is a 'certain eccentricity'<sup>4</sup> in the collection's content. Of the difficulty to construct histories of the art objects, Rachel Kent and Elizabeth Aders have noted that Grimwade 'left little documentation regarding the sources from which he purchased works of art,'<sup>5</sup> and Alisa Bunbury that 'researching his collection is difficult'<sup>6</sup> and that it is 'idiosyncratic, replete with individual taste and private associations.'<sup>7</sup> Such is the difficulty historians have had with approaching Miegunyah.

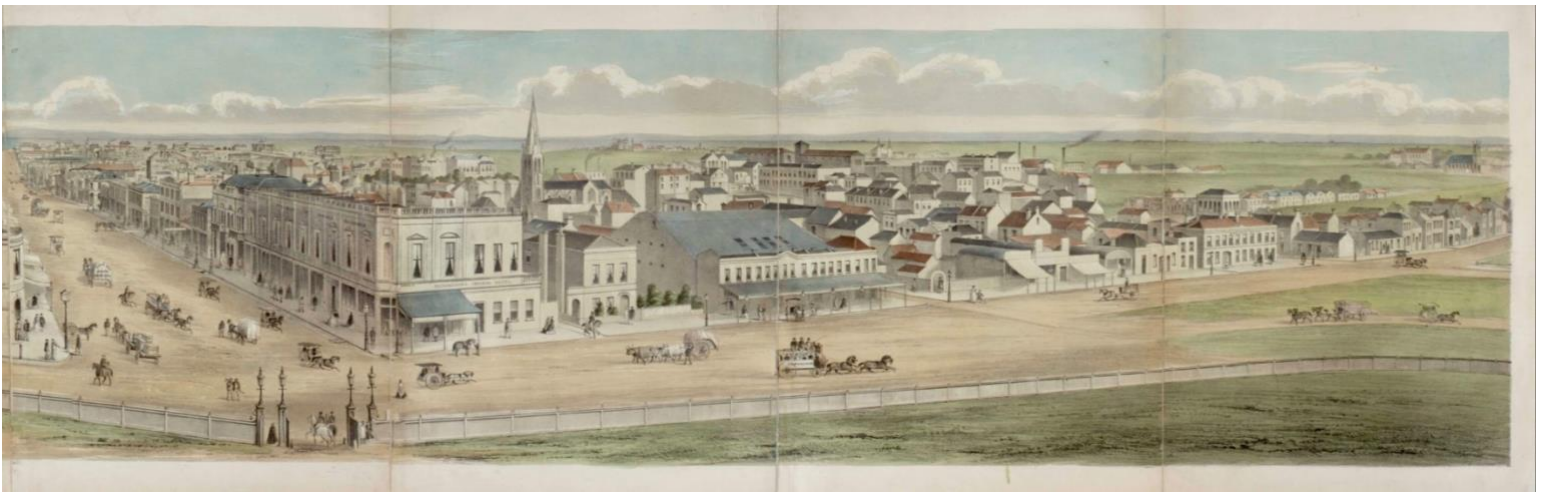
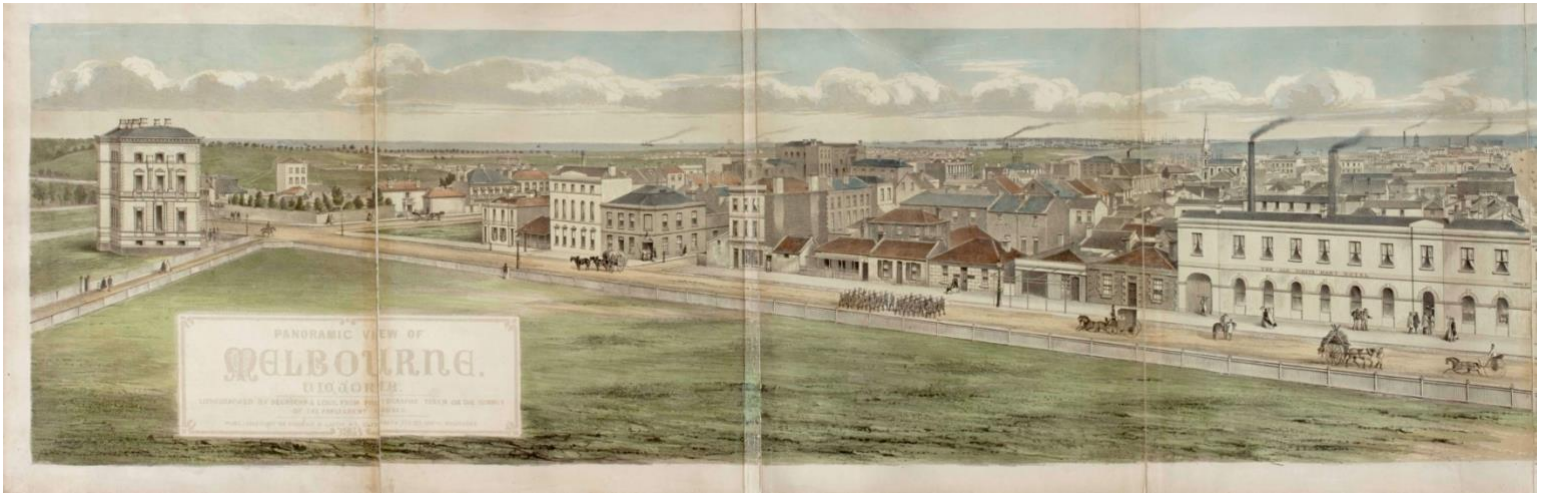
Second: A portrait of a nineteenth century unknown man of unidentified origin illuminates that so much of this collection's history might never be known to us. Miegunyah was a personal collection of personal value, and the significance of prints, furniture and glassware lived and died with Russell and Mab themselves. Upon translation to a museum, much of this personal value is necessarily lost. This portrait, and indeed the paperweight, are the products of a couple's collecting, the desire to decorate their home, and to actualise their personal interests, and the discrete stories therein.



Unknown artist  
*Untitled (Portrait of a man holding spectacles c.1830*  
Watercolour, gouache and gum arabic  
Sight (irreg.): 21cm (height) x 15.7cm (width)  
Sheet: 21.8cm (height) x 17.3cm (width)  
The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.

Russell Grimwade was a veritable Renaissance man with passions spanning sciences, history and arts. The interest Russell took in the early colonial settlement of Melbourne is testament to this, and was reflective of his upbringing, historical context, and social standing. It is, however, an uncomfortable interest to modern audiences. How are we to reckon with the colonial themes of Miegunyah when so much current discourse is an attempt to challenge colonial mythologisations? Russell's collecting was not just documentation of young Melbourne either, but as former Miegunyah intern Henry Skerritt has demonstrated, a form of actualisation: he collected *towards* a vision of Melbourne and young Australia as if his collecting were manifestation of a prosperous reality.<sup>8</sup> There is a lacuna in the prints of colonial Melbourne in the Miegunyah collection, a curious silence of the land, its stories and its people in this civilised and thriving city, familiar to us in the weighty history of the term *terra nullius*. Russell was a man of his time and we forgive him for his contextual neglect of Indigenous peoples, but Miegunyah is not just a collection of unknowns, but a collection of purposeful un-stories. It is as much telling in what is said as what is not said at all.

Third: a panoramic view of Melbourne, by an unidentified artist active between c. 1855-1869.



Unknown artist (de Gruchy & Leigh publishing firm)

*Panoramic view of Melbourne, Victoria 1863*

Lithograph and watercolour

Cover open: 33cm (height) x 50.8cm (width)

Cover closed: 33cm (height) x 25.4cm (width)

The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.

These objects are still art, and my intention is not to do away with art history all together. Obscurity is, above all, a visual phenomenon.

Fourth: a lithograph with a known history. *The city terminus of the M. and H.B. railway complex* by Samuel Thomas Gill 1854. English-born Gill is a well-recognised nineteenth century draftsman, painter, drawer, photographer, and lithographer.<sup>9</sup> During his life, his scenes of Australia, and especially of the gold fields, were popular in Europe and the U.K.<sup>10</sup> This print depicts the Melbourne and Hobson's Bay Railway Company terminus, which operated between the city and Port Melbourne, then known as Sandridge.<sup>11</sup> The print is part of the series *Sketches in Victoria* published by James J. Blundell c. 1855.<sup>12</sup> But I question whether Gill's print is better received because of this art historical clarity.



Samuel Thomas Gill

*The city terminus of the M. and H.B. railway complex* 1854.

Tinted lithograph, laid down onto paper, ruled pencil borders.

Sight: 14.2cm (height) x 21.1cm (width)

Sheet: 16.4cm (height) x 23.3cm (width)

The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.

In Gills' print, figures watch the approaching train, stand and lean on boxes. The lithograph gives the image a diffused quality. It appears as if the scene has materialised from the clouds, or the locomotive's own steam which then fades into the image's vignette. The figures at middle distance do not face us, anonymous behind coats and top hats. What is this image, if not secretive? If not a small and hidden thing?

In peering through the glass of the paperweight, the houses of parliament blur and bubble, an optic play of light and discovery in the minutiae of a frozen world. The portrait of the Unknown man is poorly aged, and the intricate streets of nineteenth century Melbourne inevitably lost to history. These objects are small and detailed. They do not readily give up their secrets.

There is value in the unknowns of a collection like Miegunyah. Art history is not located only in names and dates and the search for these values, but in the recognition that obscurities—whether by way of art history, personal significance, thematic tendencies, or the very visual effect of these little artworks—are fundamental to such a collection. Miegunyah is a collection of silences and secrets: a curiosity befitting the Grimwades' own passions, and true to the people by whose generous bequest these objects now remain in our care.



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<sup>1</sup> Preziosi, p. 374.

<sup>2</sup> Robinson, p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas, p. 138.

<sup>4</sup> John Poynter as cited in Thomas, p. 139.

<sup>5</sup> Kent and Aders, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Bunbury, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Bunbury, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas, p. 142.

<sup>9</sup> National Library of Australia, "Gill Collection," <https://www.nla.gov.au/collections/guide-selected-collections/gill-collection> (Viewed November 2021.)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Tout-Smith, "Melbourne & Hobson's Bay Railway Co., Melbourne, Victoria," [https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/articles/2215\\_](https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/articles/2215_) (Viewed November 2021.)

<sup>12</sup> Gill, n.p.(fourth lithograph). A digitised copy is accessible via the State Library of New South Wales: [https://digital.sl.nsw.gov.au/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?embedded=true&toolbar=false&dps\\_pid=E16496636&\\_ga=2.105307651.1854846370.1636327111-442298716.1635910738](https://digital.sl.nsw.gov.au/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?embedded=true&toolbar=false&dps_pid=E16496636&_ga=2.105307651.1854846370.1636327111-442298716.1635910738)

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