INSIDEstories

Curator's DOZEN

WANT TO SPEND AN AFTERNOON ON A FASCINATING TREASURE HUNT? GABI MOCATTA REPORTS.





Most (im)moral works ▲

Tavern Portraits: *The Drinker and The Miser,* William B. Gould, circa 1830.

The earthiness of ruddy drinkers' cheeks and the pursed lips of the bespectacled, coin-counting miser are a departure from the beautiful still life, portraits and landscapes of TMAG's Colonial Gallery. These twin works by Gould are both moral comment and caricature, depicting two of the Seven Deadly Sins, gluttony and avarice.

"Gould was a real dude," says Judd, pointing out Gould's nonchalant self-portrait that hangs nearby. "He spent a lot of time in taverns and had rather a wild life and these images may have been drawn from some of the people that he saw there."

The pictures are painted to correspond to the notion of decorum of the time but, with their exaggerated features, they're also tongue-in-cheek: they are as much making fun of the characters they depict as they are moralising. "In the 1830s," Judd explains, "cartoons started to be published and these are pre-cartoon type figures." However, take away the period dress and tone down the embellished features and the characters are as real in 2005 as they were nearly two centuries ago.



TMAG's favourite landscape ▲

My Harvest Home, John Glover, 1835.

In questionnaires, TMAG visitors always cite this luminous landscape as their favourite and it's not hard to see its appeal.

Glover depicts a gentle pastoral scene of the sun setting behind a group of men as they finish the wheat harvest for the day. The grain in the fields is golden and the harvest abundant: it is an idealised scene of peace and plenty, where nothing seems amiss.

"... but how happy was *My Harvest Home* really?" asks Craig Judd. "The picture may be an exercise in bragging by Glover, who came from rural England as a 'nothing' and was now a gentleman farmer with land worth 12,000 pounds. It's also worth remembering that the labourers in the fields are assigned convicts – slaves, by any other name – so the painting leads into the debate as to the type of life convicts endured in the colonies of Australia."

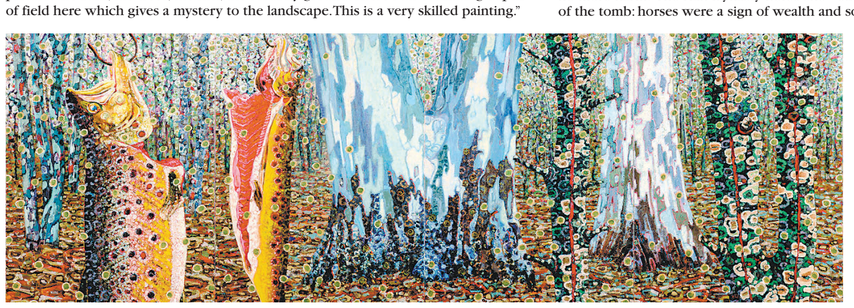
Most contemporary panorama ▼

World that I love (Inhaler), Autumn Camp, Penstock Lagoon, Richard Wastell, 2004.

"Even in 2004," says Judd, "the landscape is still one of the most important elements of Australian art. Australians are still coming to terms with where they are and asking 'Am I a part of this nature?'"

This panoramic landscape, made up of four separate panels, depicts a scene at a bush fishing camp, with rose-fleshed, gutted fish hanging close in the foreground. The whole painting has an unusual perspective.

"Rather than adopting a God's-eye view, the viewer seems to be sitting down, as if at the campfire or by the tent in the forest," says Judd. "There's a pulsing vitality to this picture: the bark, the trees, the fish, the scrubby ground. There's an oscillating depth of field here which gives a mystery to the landscape. This is a very skilled painting."



THINK Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and what comes to mind first? For many, probably taxidermic animals with staring glass eyes and that fusty museum smell that speaks of age and discovery. Few would be able to name any works in the TMAG's art collection, yet it's one that's unique on several levels.

Founded in 1861, the gallery one of the oldest in the country. Also, it houses what's arguably the best compilation of colonial art in Australia.

More than 10,000 items comprise the TMAG's Arts and Decorative Arts collection overall, spanning seven millennia from the Stone Age to the present day. For the gallery's new co-ordinating curator Craig Judd, it's a veritable "treasure trove" – and to illustrate his claim, Judd has picked a "treasure hunt" of 12 wonderful items.

Chosen for the qualities that make them stand out, they form the thread of a whimsical tour through the galleries.

"It's a constantly shifting display," says Judd. "There are special exhibitions and we keep getting new acquisitions, so this is not a definitive list of 'the best' – it's designed to be just a taste."

He wants more of us to "know and love and take ownership" of the state collection: "It's so close to the CBD. It's easy to just pop in here – it's something you can do in your lunch hour!"



Most overlooked work ▲

Sentinels of the Empire: The British Lion and his sturdy cubs", William Strutt, 1901.

Beside the divine beauty of Cupid and Pyche on the Henry Hunter staircase, what painting would not be overlooked? William Strutt's Sentinels of the Empire was painted in the year Queen Victoria died and the year Australia became a federated nation. It depicts Britain and its colonies as a pride of lions; Britain itself is perhaps represented by the powerful head of the pride at the centre, illuminated from the heavens by a miraculous ray of light. The painting depicts 11 lions, all endowed with their own (almost comical) human-like expressions.

"Of all those lions, I wonder which one represents the colony of Tasmania?" asks Judd.



The luckiest find ▲

Sydney Cove, Jacob Janssen, 1842.

How many precious artworks have ended up as landfill or been burned at the tip?

This oil on canvas by Jacob Janssen was found lying on the dirt under a house at Dunalley in the 1970s, buckled and with paint flaking off the surface. The donors Mr and Mrs G. S. Whitehouse suspected it might be something important and brought it to the TMAG for evaluation.

"No one knew about this work," says Judd, "and when the conservation had been completed, historians were very excited." The painting is an early view of Sydney Harbour, looking from The Rocks to Circular Quay and Fort Macquarie, now the site of the Opera House on Bennelong Point. It shows a busy port, including the first Australian depiction of a steamship, and fills a significant gap in historical knowledge of early Port Jackson/Sydney.

"TMAG is always interested in people's finds," says Judd. "Without the foresight of the eventual donors ... this work, and all the knowledge it's brought, would be lost to us."



Most outstanding recent gift ▲

Eloquent Objects: The Wongs' Collection of Chinese Antiquities and Artefacts.

"Our most stunning recent acquisition – if you can call some 250 objects a single acquisition – is the Wong collection of Chinese artefacts," says Craig Judd. It was presented in 2003 by Perth-based Professor Shui Hon and Mrs Nancy Wong after they came here on holiday and fell in love with the state.

The collection includes objects from the Neolithic period (7000 years ago) to the 20th century. "This is a hugely significant gift," says Judd. "The scale and the scope of the collection is magnificent." The curator suggests viewers might like to look for the tomb guardian figures of Zhenmoushou (c. 620-900CE) and the Han Dynasty horse (206-220CE). "Zhenmoushou are strange mixtures of human, bird, dragon, deer and dog. They were placed in tombs to tie down evil spirits so they could do no more harm." The Han Dynasty horse showed the status of the owner of the tomb: horses were a sign of wealth and social prestige.

Biggest battle scene ▶

When False is True, Imants Tillers, 1985.

Made up of a grid of 110 canvas boards, this large work is all about illusion.

"It's a comment on how truth and falsehood are really close together," says Judd. The artist presents a battle scene on a beach and, at first glance, it seems possible to read the figures that make up the scene. Look again and the picture becomes an enigma.

"There's a cannon, what looks like an Aboriginal shield, someone in armour, the head of a horse, a blue-tongue lizard ... and a child," says Judd, "but none of these figures is complete or coherent. It's like a jigsaw that's simultaneously coming together and falling apart – nothing's fixed, everything is moving."

A comment on the nature of truth, falsehood and reality, the picture looks like all battles that ever were, compressed into one: battle itself being the ultimate tester of perceived reality.



Most recognisable picture ▶

Cupid and Psyche, Adolphe-William Bouguereau, 1889.

"Who could possibly avoid the soaring, sexy nudity of this painting?" says Judd. The heady, sensual work depicts Cupid, son of Venus (of Greek myth), who has fallen in love with a mortal woman, Princess Psyche, as they ascend to the home of the gods on Mount Olympus.

"This picture speaks of what happens to you when you fall in love. You soar, you fly, you go over the top," says Judd. "This is an over-the-top image ... all shimmering surfaces and light."

Most intriguing sculpture ◀

Tripod 3, Oliffe Richmond, 1973-5.

TMAG has a number of archives of significant Tasmanian artists' work and this piece by Oliffe Richmond belongs to one of them.

It's a work that is interested in abstraction, in making a form speak of something other than what it is.

"He's interested in the human figure here," says Craig Judd. "A tripod is a utilitarian object but there seems to be something human about it. Because of the scale of the object, it takes on a kind of robotic, science-fiction quality. It seems it could get up and walk away from you."

Walking around the piece, though, one sees different possible references. "Perhaps it refers to something more industrial," says Judd, "but then it's made of wood, an organic material that's textured and toned. It makes one wonder where it comes from ... and, of course, wood does have a special meaning in the history of the Tasmanian economy, of life here."



Largest single work ▼

Terra Spiritus ... a lighter shade of pale, Bea Maddock, 1993-98.

"Long", in both the sense of the five years it took to create and also because of the 51 sequential panels that make it up, the work is really an encircling panorama. Displayed in Gallery 4 at the TMAG, this painstakingly fashioned work wraps around all four walls of the gallery and presents a view, so to speak, from the inside out.

"Stand in the middle of the room," says Judd, "and you are standing in the middle of Tasmania – but look around you and you see the whole of the shoreline of this island. Like most of Bea Maddock's work, this deals with vision and the way we see things. It's also about topography and the way maps work. It's a very meditative piece ... a meditation on island life."

The work also makes reference to Tasmania's aboriginality, not least in that red ochre was used as the pigment throughout. In a flowing hand beneath the shoreline are also Tasmanian Aboriginal names for each place; under them, in smaller letters, are the English names – in starkly rigid print.





Black and white and beautiful ▲

Hells Gates, Davey River, Tasmania, W.C. Piguenit, c. 1891.

This monochrome oil study – one of a series of 15, of which four are at present on display in the Colonial Gallery – was the result of several intrepid expeditions into the wilderness in the 1870s and '80s. Painted in black and white, they were probably intended to embody a sense of scientific objectivity.

"In 1892," says Judd, "the artist was asked to deliver a lecture on the Western Highlands of Tasmania to the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science. He used these paintings to illustrate his talk, much as an explorer might use slides today."

They are one of the earliest European depictions of the state's wilderness. They came at a time when the world's first national parks were being declared and there was a growing appreciation of wild nature. The chosen painting has a particularly photographic quality to it which reminds of the later works of photographers Olegas Truchanas and Peter Dombrovskis.

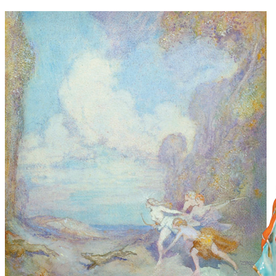
Most interesting story ▼ ▶

Diana Hunting, Norman Lindsay, 1919 and *Jason and Medea,* William Duesberry and company, c. 1780.

These two works belong to the Echoes of Classicism exhibition at present in Gallery 3. Although separated in time by nearly a century and a half, both are inspired by the same Greco-Roman myth based on the goddess Diana. Deity of the moon and witchcraft, the forest and the hunt, Diana resided in the woods with her female companions. Males who dared enter her domain met with swift and violent punishment.

In Norman Lindsay's sensual, light-filled watercolour, we see Diana and her companions in action, although the viewer cannot be sure of the prey ("Is it man or beast?" asks Craig Judd). In contrast, the 18th century Chelsea-Derbyware porcelain group features a statue of Diana, at the foot of which Jason is wooing Medea to gain access to the Golden Fleece.

"In ancient Greek times and myth, any non-Greek man was an uncultivated barbarian," explains the curator, "while any non-Greek woman was a witch. Hence, the location of this scene – at the feet of Diana, goddess of witchcraft."





Design: Marianne Cherrie