

## Why Did Colonial Art Make Australia Look So English?

The Anglicisation of early settler art reflects intercultural misunderstandings in the first 25 years of contact.

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As early as Levels 3–4, the Victorian Curriculum—History suggests ‘examining paintings and accounts (by observers such as Watkin Tench and David Collins) to determine the impact of early British colonisation on Aboriginal peoples’ country’.<sup>1</sup> At Levels 5–6 students should be ‘investigating the impact of settlement on the environment, for example, comparing the present and past landscape and the flora and fauna of the local community’.<sup>2</sup> At Levels 7–8 students learn to examine and compare ‘their accuracy, usefulness and reliability’ as they ‘analyse the different perspectives of peoples in the past using sources’.<sup>3</sup> At Levels 9–10 they become competent using ICT to help ‘identify literal and symbolic features of sources and explain their purpose and inferences’ and ‘evaluate different historical interpretations and contested debates’.<sup>4</sup>

This article offers several ways of achieving these goals with materials that can be adapted up and down the curriculum levels.

### An Antipodean English Park

The first British settlers found it very difficult to draw kangaroos and wallabies in their correct proportions for at least the first thirty years, despite seeing these animals frequently and eating their dissected corpses.<sup>5</sup> The few artists among them—several of whom perished on the return journey to Britain—also found: ‘The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.’<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, ‘when an image is presented as a work of art, the way people look at it is affected by a whole series of learnt assumptions about art ... [concerning] Beauty, Truth, Genius, Form, Status, Taste etc.’<sup>7</sup> But if one is transported from one culture and natural environment to another: ‘Many of these assumptions no longer accord with the world as it is.’<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 1. Joseph Lycett added loincloths to his paintings of Aboriginal people, perhaps because the arrival of free settlers was introducing more bourgeois values.**

This isn't to say that newcomers to exotic images and behaviours always feel compelled to render them as exotic. Homesickness can arouse nostalgia for the familiar.

This is probably one reason why the earliest British painters in settler-colonial Australia Anglicised their presentations or pictures. Another reason was that while a living could be made from depicting early settler-colonial life, flora, fauna and the topography of the growing settlements with scientific accuracy, there was also a commercial market back in Europe for more palatable ‘picturesque’ renderings of what they were seeing in the new world before their eyes. Investors in the growth of the new colony often had only the drawings, paintings and etchings to show them where they were putting their money, and potential free settlers wanted to be reassured about what they were getting into.

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- 1 Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, *The Victorian Curriculum—History* (Melbourne: VCAA, 2016), 38.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 73.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 74, 84.
- 5 Janelle Evans, 'Painting the Unfamiliar: Why the First European Paintings of Australian Animals Look So Alien to Our Eyes,' *The Conversation*, 21 August 2023, <https://theconversation.com/painting-the-unfamiliar-why-the-first-european-paintings-of-australian-animals-look-so-alien-to-our-eyes-202719>;
- Sue Rabbitt Roff, 'The Curious Case of the Memetic Marsupial,' *The Rabbitt Review*, January 2021, <https://www.rabbittreview.com/the-curious-case-of-the-memetic-marsupial>; Sue Rabbitt Roff, 'Whose Kangaroo Was It Anyway?' *Pearls & Irritations*, 27 December 2020, <https://johnmenadue.com/whose-kangaroo-was-it-anyway>.
- 6 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin, 1972), 8.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 'Art Term: Picturesque,' Tate Gallery, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/picturesque>.

The UK's Tate Gallery defines the art term 'picturesque' as referring 'to an ideal type of landscape that has an artistic appeal, in that it is beautiful but also with some elements of wildness'.<sup>9</sup> The theory of the picturesque landscape was being developed by William Gilpin in 1782 (*Observations on the River Wye*) and Uvedale Price in 1794 (*An Essay on the Picturesque as Compared with the Sublime and Beautiful in the Late Eighteenth Century*) when the colony's first professional artist, John Lewin, was training in England prior to embarking for Australia in 1800 to paint commissioned works of the new settlements spreading out from Port Jackson and Sydney Cove.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, parts of the new world reminded Britons who arrived in the late eighteenth century of their homeland. John Hawkesworth wrote of the landscape of New South Wales: 'It is upon the whole rather barren (sic) than fertile ... yet the rising ground is chequered with woods and lawns'.<sup>11</sup> Sydney Parkinson wrote, 'The country looked very pleasant and fertile; and the trees, quite free from underwood, appeared like a plantation in a gentleman's park.'<sup>12</sup>

Bernard Smith comments:

The opinion that the land in the neighbourhood of Port Jackson was in many places like an English Park, with the authority of Parkinson to back it, was expressed by several members of the First Fleet. Describing the entrance to Sydney Harbour, [John] Hunter wrote: '... the trees stand very wide of each other, and have no underwood: in short, the woods on the spot I am speaking of resemble a deer park, as much as if they had been intended for such a purpose.'<sup>13</sup>

Elizabeth Macarthur 'applied this particular description more generally,' according to Smith.<sup>14</sup> In a letter to her friend Miss England she remarked that 'the greater part of the country is like an English park, and the trees give it the appearance of a wilderness or shrubbery, commonly attached to the habitations of the people of fortune'.<sup>15</sup>

According to Smith, the view that the Australian landscape was in parts like an English nobleman's park is also suggested in early pictorial representations of it.

The Port Jackson Painter places his amiable aborigines in a countryside composed of gentle lawn-like foregrounds which slope down to a lake-like harbour backed by evenly rounded hills which are dotted with isolated clumps of trees and fringed with long belts of timber. It is all like a whimsical antipodean commentary upon the landscaping of Capability Brown whose taste and methods had transformed so many of the country seats of England during the 1750s and 1760s.<sup>16</sup>

But interestingly Smith also writes:

Despite such homely comparisons observers were, of course, well aware of the essential difference between English and Australian scenery. Men became aware of an element of deceit in this apparently beautiful park.<sup>17</sup>

This 'element of deceit' is apparent in Joseph Lycett's paintings of Aboriginal life in the early years of the nineteenth century. While the Port Jackson Painter had depicted Aboriginal people climbing trees naked in the 1790s, and John Heaviside was still doing so in 1813, Lycett added loin cloths to all of his Aboriginal paintings—perhaps because the arrival of free settlers was introducing more bourgeois values (Fig. 1).<sup>18</sup>

However, Barron Field, Esq (a Judge of the Supreme Court of New South Wales from 1816 to 1824 who was also a respected botanist and Fellow of the Linnean Society of London) noted in his 1822 travels that many Indigenous communities:

... possess the art of very neatly sewing together, with the sinews of the kangaroo and emu, cloaks of skins, the hide of which they also carve in the inside with a world of figures. They use these cloaks for the sole purpose of keeping themselves warm, and have as little sense of decency as the natives around Sydney; for in the middle of the day, when the weather is warm, they throw back their cloaks across their shoulders.<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 2. Thomas Watling—A Direct North General View of Sydney Cove, 1794** State Library of New South Wales. <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/collection-items/view-sydney-cove-1794-possibly-thomas-watling>

### A Picturesque Landscape

Smith points out that the ‘picturesque landscape was never meant to be a faithful representation of a scene from one point of view. They were composite, contrived landscapes wherein motifs from several sketches were assembled according to the rules of picturesque beauty.’<sup>20</sup>

The compositional features that make Figure 2 ‘picturesque’ in European terms are the trees that frame the picture of the landscape and settlement. These features would often be further worked upon by the engravers of several books that were published from the notes and artwork of the first voyagers from Britain to the Antipodes.

Twenty years later we see this yearning for the familiar in Field’s journal [emphasis added]:

On the banks of the Nepean, I saw almost the only deciduous native tree in the territory, namely, the white cedar (*melia azedarach*), the common bead-tree of India, beautiful in itself and congenial to me from that singularity. All the other indigenous trees and shrubs, that I have seen, are evergreens;

the eternal eucalyptus, with its white bark and its scanty tin-like foliage, or the dark casuarina tell, and *exocarpus* funeral; all as **unpicturesque** as the shrubs and flowers are beautiful ... New South Wales is a perpetual flower-garden [but] there is **not a single scene in it of which a painter could make a landscape, without greatly disguising the true character of the trees. They have no lateral boughs, and cast no means of shade**; but, in return, it is to this circumstance, which causes so little vegetable putrefaction, that the healthiness of the climate is mainly to be attributed.<sup>21</sup>

Field wondered:

Can this circumstance be partly the cause of their unpicturesqueness—of the monotony of their leaf? Or is it merely their evergreenness? ... no tree, to my taste, can be beautiful that is not deciduous. What can a painter do with one cold olive-green? There is a dry harshness about the perennial leaf, that does not savour of humanity in my eyes. There is no flesh and blood in it: it is not of us, and is nothing to us ... I can therefore hold no fellowship with Australian foliage, but will cleave to the British oak through all the bareness of winter.<sup>22</sup>

10 William Gilpin, ‘Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, &c. Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty; Made in the Summer of the Year 1770 / by William Gilpin. 1792,’ Royal Collection Trust, <https://www.rct.uk/collection/1077313/observations-on-the-river-wye-and-several-parts-of-south-wales-c-relative-chiefly>; Uvedale Price, ‘An Essay on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful; and, on the Use of Studying Pictures, for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape / by Uvedale Price. 1794,’ Royal Collection Trust, <https://www.rct.uk/collection/1151382/an-essay-on-the-picturesque-as-compared-with-the-sublime-and-the-beautiful-and-on#:~:text=Its%20author%2C%20Uvedale%20Price%20believed,contained%20aspects%20of%20the%20two>; ‘John Lewin 1770–1819,’ National Portrait Gallery, <https://www.portrait.gov.au/people/john-lewin-1770>.

11 Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 179, [https://archive.org/details/europeanvisionso0000smit\\_h7xl/page/179/mode/2up?q=barron](https://archive.org/details/europeanvisionso0000smit_h7xl/page/179/mode/2up?q=barron).

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid, 180.

17 Ibid.



Figure 3. Two oil paintings of kangaroos attributed to John Lewin. The Royal College of Surgeons of England

Perhaps these views account for the debate about the provenance of the two paintings of kangaroos that have been displayed in the Hunterian Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons of London for more than 220 years (Fig. 3). The Museum's records classify them as oil paintings donated to the Museum between 1800 and

754 HISTORICAL RECORDS OF NEW SOUTH WALES.

1802 settlement of New South Wales. I am also to request that you will move their Lordships to cause an appointment to be made out for Mr. Grimes, the Deputy Surveyor of Norfolk Island, as Mr. Alt's successor in New South Wales, and that a proper person be sent out as Deputy Surveyor for Norfolk Island.

14 May. —  
 Ah to be succeeded by Grimes.

I am, &c.,  
 JOHN SULLIVAN.

GOVERNMENT AND GENERAL ORDER.

14th May, 1802.

THE constables are to take any prisoner into their charge and lodge them in the goal until delivered by due course; and they are strictly forbid releasing any prisoner whatever whom they have taken or received in charge, but by order of the Governor, Lieutenant-Governor, or a magistrate.

Those prisoners whose terms of transportation will be expired on the 26th of May are to attend at the Secretary's office on Monday, the 31st of May, for their certificates.

A general muster will be made about the 10th of July.

The Governor feels it necessary to remind those officers possessed of stock (who drew their ration of salt meat on Saturday last) of the convenience that leaving it in the public stores would be of at this time.

PHILIP GIDLEY KING.

COMMANDER FLINDERS TO SECRETARY NEPHEW.

H.M.S. Investigator, Port Jackson, New South Wales, 15th May, 1802.

15 May. Sir,  
 There being no naval stores or salt provisions to be procured in this colony but at the most exorbitant prices, and frequently not at any price, I have to request that their Lordships will be pleased to order that the following stores and provisions may be sent out by the first opportunity to this colony for the use of H.M. sloop under my command, in addition to the twelve months' provisions applied for by letter dated at Spithead, July 17th, 1801—

Two 1½-inch cables.	Beef and pork for six months.
One 8-in. stream cable.	Pease
Two muskets.	Spirits
One 2-inch lawver.	Limejuice
One 22-cwt. lower anchor.	Essence of malt
Two barrels of tar.	Mustard, in bottles
Forty gallons of black varnish.	Essence of spruce
One mill of sail, complete.	Molasses
(The Investigator fitted at Shoemans).	Sour krusut
Depottery's Stores.	
Linseed oil, 50 galls.	

I am, &c.,  
 MATTHEW FLINDERS.

Figure 4. Oils were scarce in the colony, but these records show that on 15 May 1802 Matthew Flinders requisitioned 50 gallons of linseed oil that John Lewin could have used to create the first known oil painting in Australia, which reached London in 1806.

1806. However, it is generally accepted that Lewin was not able to paint in oils in his early years in Australia until he produced what is thought to be the first known European oil painting in Australia—his c. 1813 'Fish Catch and Dawes Point, Sydney Harbour,' which is currently in the Art Gallery of South Australia.<sup>23</sup>

Oils were scarce in the first years of the nineteenth century, but I have recently found a requisition order from Matthew Flinders for fifty gallons of linseed oil in May 1802 that probably would have arrived at Sydney Cove in early 1803 (Fig. 4).<sup>24</sup> As a government artist it is possible that Lewin was given some of this oil to enable him to paint in oils. These paintings could have reached the Hunterian Museum in London by 1806.

Is it possible that Lewin was painting in the acceptable 'picturesque' style for the two to be shipped back to Britain, where they ended up in the Hunterian Museum?



Figure 5. A picturesque painting attributed to John Lewin (c. 1815). State Library of New South Wales

Although Lewin was a fine botanical painter, Alexander Riley in London was unwilling to commission a townscape from him because ‘as a Landscape or View painter he is too loose and deficient to answer the purpose required’. Riley did acknowledge that ‘Lewin would be admirably adapted ... for any Grouping of scene of the Natives for the Foreground, or for any **picturesque** [emphasis added] scenery’ (Fig. 5).<sup>25</sup>

### Using This Material in Class

Teachers can use the material presented here to help students develop their critical historiographical skills in understanding what early settler art tells us about Australian–British intercultural understanding—and misunderstanding.

Primary students can easily consider how the depiction of fauna such as kangaroos and wallabies was ‘seen’ through British eyes. As the students progress to the upper levels they can consider the different cultural perspectives of the Indigenous and settler peoples. In the senior years they can critique the provenance of two cultural artefacts in relation to the contested debate about their circumstances surrounding their creation.

An online resources page provides links to the images described here, along with a series of exercises that progress from junior to intermediate and senior levels, and can be adapted to a spiral curriculum to consolidate learning through the years.<sup>26</sup>

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... while a living could be made from depicting ... the topography of the growing settlements with scientific accuracy, there was also a commercial market back in Europe for more palatable ‘picturesque’ renderings of what they were seeing in the new world before their eyes.

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- 18 See <https://www.sciencephoto.com/media/569912/view/aboriginal-tree-climbing-18th-century-Port-Jackson-Painter>; [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Climbing-trees-by-John-Heaviside-Clark-del-M-Dubourg-sculpt-1813-Field-Sports-of\\_fig5\\_338017057](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Climbing-trees-by-John-Heaviside-Clark-del-M-Dubourg-sculpt-1813-Field-Sports-of_fig5_338017057); <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-138498775/view>.
- 19 Barron Field, ed., *Geographical Memoirs on New South Wales; By Various Hands: Containing an Account of the Surveyor General's Late Expedition to Two New Ports, the Discovery of Moreton Bay River, with the Adventures for Seven Months There of Two Shipwrecked Men, a Route from Bathurst to Liverpool Plains: Together with Other Papers on the Aborigines, the Geology, the Botany, the Timber, the Astronomy, and the Meteorology of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land* (London: John Murray, 1825), <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks13/1304421h.html>.
- 20 Smith, *European Vision*, 182.
- 21 Field, *Geographical Memoirs*, 421.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 John William Lewin, ‘Fish Catch and Dawes Point, Sydney Harbour,’ Art Gallery of South Australia, <https://www.agsa.sa.gov.au/collection-publications/collection/works/fish-catch-and-dawes-point-sydney-harbour/23928>.
- 24 *Historical Records of New South Wales*, Vol. IV (Sydney: 1892), 754, <https://archive.org/details/historicalrecor01walegoog/page/754/mode/2up>.
- 25 Richard Neville, *Mr JW Lewin: Painter & Naturalist* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2012).
- 26 Sue Rabbitt Roff, ‘Resources,’ *The Rabbitt Review*, <https://www.rabbittreview.com/resources-page>.