

Exhibition Reviews



Painting the Rocks: The Loss of Old Sydney. THE MUSEUM OF SYDNEY, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA. Mounted at The Museum of Sydney, 7 August–28 November 2010.

Tourists to Sydney, Australia flock to The Rocks, a trendy jumble of twisty streets and heritage buildings nestled against the enormous buttresses of the iconic Sydney Harbour Bridge. The area is now filled with cafés and boutiques catering to sightseers and wealthy urbanites eager to catch a glimpse of the famous Opera House.

This was not the case one hundred years ago when The Rocks was a seedy warren of slums, wharves, and docks. A recent exhibit at the Museum of Sydney explores the area's shift away from these gritty beginnings. "Painting the Rocks: The Loss of Old Sydney," documents the moment in the early 1900s when city officials, intent on demolishing the tenements in the name of "improvement," came into conflict with Sydney's nascent built heritage movement, which advocated the preservation of urban history.

Led by Julian Ashton, one of the foremost artists of the day, a delegation of painters convinced the government to fund their efforts to capture the old slums on canvas before they were demolished. The 145 works that resulted from this commission of 250 pounds were part of "An Exhibition of Old Pictures of Sydney," mounted in 1902 by the Society of Artists. This early example of the Australian interest in urban history and conservation was recently rediscovered when Museum of Sydney curators stumbled across the 1902 exhibition catalogue. Inspired by the paintings, they restaged the exhibition, using thirty paintings from the original show as the basis for their exploration of the history of The Rocks. The paintings are documentary in nature, and of varied levels of accomplishment and style. They provide a rich and detailed portrait of the neighbourhood at a crucial moment of change. The images record everyday life, from the colourful clotheslines looping from home to home, to the varied vendors and peddlers selling their wares in the streets. Softly lit and always locating the beauty in the everyday, the paintings

are striking for their romantic and sentimental depiction of life in the slum.

Despite these rose-tinted images, the reality was quite different. At the turn of the twentieth century, The Rocks was a dangerous, dirty, and desperately poor neighbourhood. Sailors, dockworkers, and new immigrants gravitated to the densely populated area. When the bubonic plague hit Sydney in 1900, anti-immigrant hysteria and increased concerns about hygiene brought attention to its impoverished streets. Urban planners intent on rooting out the cause of filth in their city, focused on the slums around the harbour.

Exhibit curators highlighted the disconnect between what the painters depicted and the reality of The Rocks, through their judicious use of archival documents, photographs, and artifacts. Employing official records, photography, maps, period music, wallpaper samples, and even doorknobs, they attempted to recreate the feel of the neighbourhood in the early 1900s. Visitors to the exhibit could walk across wooden slats soaked in tar, replicating the sidewalks used in the period. The scent of tar and the sounds of echoing footsteps helped bring The Rocks of 1902 to life. The exhibit's overwhelming impression was of a vibrant neighbourhood filled with new immigrants and the working poor, each struggling to earn a living.

Curators wisely focused on the human side of life in The Rocks, using archival documents to follow the fortunes of one immigrant family. The Avedos owned a corner store in the neighbourhood. Through the use of photographs, letters, and maps, the exhibit evoked the family members' lives; reading over their impressions of their neighbours, business, and life in Australia, the exhibit viewer came to realize how important a sense of place and belonging was, especially to new immigrants.

The exhibit also demonstrated the interaction between the citizen and the state by including reports of health and safety inspections that became more invasive as fears of pestilence spread. One inspector's report on the condition of the homes he visited captured the censorious tone of the times. The report stated that of the five houses visited, the first was dirty, the second filthy, and the third "disgustingly offensive." Perhaps the most startling artifact in the exhibit was a rat skeleton from the period, which, along with screaming newspaper headlines, demonstrated the fears of plague that gripped the city. This sense of panic and urgency sealed the neighbourhood's fate; by the mid-1930s, large swathes of The Rocks had been demolished to make room for the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Indeed, it was not until the 1970s that the fate of the remaining heritage buildings in the area was secured and local activists succeeded in preserving the remnants of the neighbourhood.

The exhibit's archival and physical evidence contrasted sharply with the thirty paintings created in 1902. The evident dedication of the original artists to the nostalgic and positive vision of The Rocks demonstrated their commitment to preserving part of the past. Perhaps they felt that unless they disguised the less savoury aspects of the neighbourhood, The Rocks would not

be deemed worthy of conservation; the government's decision to fund paintings rather than photographs of the area is a testament to this interpretation. The discipline of photography was still seen as a purveyor of truth and fact in 1902, and perhaps it was feared that photographic images of the slum would only feed the desire to demolish the area rather than preserve it.

The juxtaposition between the original paintings and the archival evidence provided by the curators raises interesting questions about our perceptions of the past, and the "truth" found in archival documents. The exhibition reminds us that the nostalgia that influenced the painters is no less true than the official government documents, and both tell us valuable information about the attitudes and opinions of people at that time.

Perhaps one of the exhibition's most interesting features was the self-guided walking tour (available in paper format or as a smart phone app) of the actual buildings and streets in The Rocks, painted by the artists in 1902. Following the map, visitors could search out the exact spots where paintings were created, forming their own conclusions about what was lost and what was preserved.

The curators concluded that heritage concerns today do not differ that much from the initial 1902 project; they remarked that the impulse that drove the painters to seek a grant to document the neighbourhood foreshadows our own interest in preserving urban history. Such a conclusion, however, ignores the difference in attitudes between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. One hundred years ago, the paintings in the exhibit demonstrate that there was a real anxiety to hide uncomfortable truths about Australia's poor immigrant beginnings in order to create a noble story about the nation's founding. By contrast, in the twenty-first century, conservators seek to explore and understand the dark and unsavoury aspects of built heritage, recognizing that such truths do not diminish an area's historical value.

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Vera Frenkel: Cartographie d'une pratique / Mapping a Practice. SBC GALLERY OF CONTEMPORARY ART, MONTREAL. Mounted at the SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art, 2 October–4 December 2010.

It is rare to see a contemporary art exhibition consisting almost entirely of archival documents – archives *per se*, not as materials repurposed for art-making – and engaging deeply with archival themes. In "Vera Frenkel: Cartographie d'une pratique / Mapping a Practice," curator Sylvie Lacerte and artist Vera Frenkel demonstrated that an artist's archives can hold their own in a gallery setting. The documents selected served multiple roles: as stand-ins