

Rare Birds, a Board Game and a Matchbox

Linda Groom celebrates the variety of pictures acquisitions in the exhibition *Future Memory: National Library Recent Acquisitions*

The items from the Pictures Collection in the exhibition *Future Memory* illustrate the many ways in which the Library acquires its rare and unique collection material. Some were donated by relatives who inherited family treasures; others were bought at auction, or directly from the artist or photographer. Some came to the Library through that invaluable government initiative, the Cultural Gifts Program.

Donations from descendants often begin with a letter. The exquisite 1846 watercolour of Mary Murray with her daughter Leila, by William Nicholas, was one such donation. From Melbourne, Grant Aubrey Garrioch, the great-great-grandson of the influential landholder Terence Murray, sent a letter to 'The Director, National Library of Australia' offering four paintings. With the courtesy of another age, he wrote,

As I am now in my 85th year, and not in robust health, it appears unlikely that,



in the event of your Library accepting these works, I could deliver them in person.

We were delighted to accept the donation and speedily sent a specialist art courier to collect it. The portrait of Mr Garrioch's great-grandmother charms, and to some extent saddens, all who see it. Delicate and almost childlike, Mary Murray suffered the fate of many nineteenth-century women. Three of her five children did not survive infancy, and Mary herself died at 41 from complications of childbirth.

Another donation received through a descendant is the Archibald James Campbell collection, represented in *Future Memory* by the intriguing album of 'Nature Prints', which was presented to the Library by A.J. Campbell's grandson, Ian Campbell. A pioneering Australian ornithologist, A.J. Campbell (1853–1929) founded the Wattle Club in 1899 and later enthusiastically supported the work of the Australian Wattle Day League, with the aim of enshrining the wattle as Australia's floral emblem. The photographs in 'Nature Prints' were presumably taken by A.J. Campbell to publicise the wattle cause. Many contain young women posed against the appropriate acacias, in softly-draped gowns which allow scandalous glimpses of ankles and breasts. In considering whether to accept a donation, curators naturally have due and proper recourse to the

Antoine-Germain Bevalet (1779–1850) *Voyage de l'Uranie, Oiseaux: Cassican fluteur (White-backed Magpie)* [c.1820s] watercolour and pencil; 26.8 x 18.8 cm Pictures Collection nla.pic-an24283548



William Nicholas (1807–1854) [Portrait of Mary Murray with Her Daughter, Leila] 1846 watercolour; diameter 17.4 cm Pictures Collection nla.pic-an23259419

Library's Collection Development Policy. But where material combines sex and politics, we lean towards instant acceptance.

The Pictures Collection items in the exhibition received through the Cultural Gifts Program include the beautiful silk batiks by Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Gloria Petyarre, and the cartoons by George Molnar and Alan Moir. The Cultural Gifts Program, which offers tax-deductibility for some donations, has made a particular contribution to the Library's increased collecting of cartoons over the last few years.

Among the many methods by which we acquire items for the Pictures Collection, nothing compares with auctions for urgency, intrigue and the occasional touch of panic. Catalogues may arrive only a few days before the

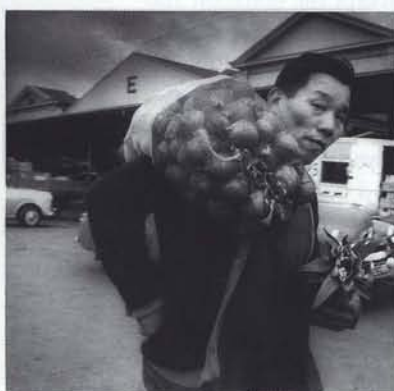


Archibald James Campbell (1853–1929)
[Scrub Wattle (*Acacia leprosa*)] [between
1896 and 1903]
albumen photograph; 20.4 x 12.7 cm
Pictures Collection nla.pic-an24232230

auction, and it is often necessary to do historical research, and write a proposal and see it through the various approval processes, at a breakneck pace. The auction of the Freycinet Collection in London in September 2002 was one such event. The paintings and maps to be auctioned were made during French voyages to Australia in 1800–04 and 1817–20; their beauty and rarity brought interest from many Australian institutions and private collectors. A complicating factor was the discrepancy between our limited acquisitions budget and the high price estimates in the catalogue. My colleague, Map Curator Maura O'Connor, and I churned out the necessary written arguments and added restrained excitement and looks of mute appeal designed to win over senior management. A rapid campaign by the Library to secure donations from Library supporters gathered enough funds for a number of strong bids. The result was more than worth the effort. Lots 91 and 92 fell to us, and we added four rare bird paintings by Arago, Taunay, Bevalet and Oudart, and a drawing of an Aboriginal burial ceremony in 1819 to the Pictures Collection.

Although we sometimes buy in London, New York and other overseas

locations, most of our acquisitions activity occurs within Australia. It is one of the great pleasures of the job to meet living Australian photographers. Some, such as Wolfgang Sievers and Jeff Carter, have international reputations. Others may be people who just happened to have their camera in the right place at the right time, like the many Canberra residents who contributed photographs of the January 2003 bushfires to the Pictures Collection. On occasions when we need to make sure that photographers are present at the right place and time, we arrange beforehand for photographers



Jeff Carter (b.1928)
*Chinese Market Gardener at the Queen
Victoria Markets, Melbourne* 1956
gelatin silver photograph; 26.4 x 27.1 cm
Pictures Collection nla.pic-an24071921

to document an event. Most of this work is carried out by the Library's staff photographers, who have walked through Canberra's bushfire-ravaged suburbs, attended protests, captured the excitement of Sydney during the Olympics, and visited detention centres, all in the course of duty.

Many who visit *Future Memory* will be intrigued by, and may even question, the variety of acquisitions to the Pictures Collection. Where, they might ask, is the common sense of purpose in a collection that includes wilderness photographs by Peter Dombrovskis, cartoons by George Molnar, a board game and a matchbox? The answers are all carefully recorded, in case an auditor or a taxpayer should come asking, in the acquisition files and in that monument

of instalment prose, the Pictures Branch Monthly Report.

The Dombrovskis photographs form an important part of the record of the conservation movement in Australia, their aesthetic appeal a testament to the use of beauty as a political weapon. Cartoons such as those of Molnar capture social attitudes and a satirical view of Australian politics that is often not expressed in any other medium. Like cartoons, board games such as *Courtship and Marriage, a Fascinating Game for 2, 3 or 4 Players* distil social attitudes, in this case the attitudes of 1905 to a stage of life of unquestionable significance. The 'Dickheads' matchbox, withdrawn by Dick Smith from the market after a few weeks of threatened legal proceedings, is one piece of the Buy Australian campaigns that have been a feature of the retail scene in recent years.

The real answer to the question about commonality is, however, that to achieve the Library's aim of documenting Australian life and society, diversity in collecting, rather than commonality, is essential. The concept of 'balance' in a collection may sound a little dull, until it is redefined as variety or contrast or surprise. We hope you will find much to surprise you in *Future Memory*.

LINDA GROOM is Manager of the National Library's Pictures Collection

*Courtship and Marriage, a Fascinating
Game for 2, 3, or 4 Players*
[Melbourne: National Game Co., c.1905]
col. cardboard and paper; 36.8 x 36.8 cm
Pictures Collection nla.pic-an21318296

