



BETTY'S NEW LITTLE BLOCKBUSTER

Marcus Fillinger
Series presenter Betty Churcher
in the National Library of
Australia's Council Room,
during filming of *Hidden
Treasures*, series 2
Courtesy Film Australia

Ian Warden previews ABC-TV's
Hidden Treasures, series 2, in which
Betty Churcher discovers some of
the Library's prize holdings

Although all of us have some chance of catching a glimpse of, and even of bumping into, Australia's *living* 'national treasures' (the National Trust maintains a list of 100 of them, including Germaine Greer, Barry Humphries, Paul Keating, Nicole Kidman, Ken Rosewall and Dame Joan Sutherland), many of the *non*-living treasures held in our great museums, galleries and libraries are only rarely seen. Rare maps, manuscripts, books, pictures and artifacts can be notoriously vulnerable and frail, and for preservation reasons must often live almost literally in the shadows. The pure, clear light that illuminates and flatters a living national treasure like Nicole Kidman, can damage a printed or painted treasure.

But now Betty Churcher is to show us, via ABC-Television, some of the seldom-

glimpsed treasures of the National Library of Australia. The 10 programs of her second *Hidden Treasures* series (her first, very popular *Hidden Treasures* series ogled, and celebrated, the National Gallery of Australia, where she was director, 1990–97) have been made by Film Australia.

To talk about the making of the new series, this reporter visited Betty Churcher at her home in the bush, not far from Canberra. Not surprisingly, for the home of a former gallery director, the house walls were festooned with paintings. The living room in which we spoke was an art gallery in its own right: a dozen painted people stared out at us from their frames. Some seemed to scowl, as if to accuse me of impertinence in bothering so distinguished a person with my questions.

Not that Churcher, charming, cheerful, excited and laughing a lot, thought the questions impertinent. Very enthusiastic about the series, she says that its making was 'a labour of love'. She's particularly glad that the short (10-minute) programs are to be shown at a time—just before the

ABC's 7.00 pm weeknight news—when lots of 'average people' will see them. Some of us who saw the previous series will testify that she has a special knack of talking about treasures and their makers—however esoteric and grand—in accessible ways that make their stories fascinating for all.

I didn't want [this series] to be in an "Arts" program. I was once in an arts program ... shown at 10.00 am on a Sunday morning. I don't think anyone saw it! I really am talking to a general public. I'm not talking to scholars and art historians. I wanted to make this series of interest to people other than those purely interested in art.

So, for example, she's pleased that one of the programs, looking at the First Fleet flora and fauna paintings by Captain John Hunter and his vastly more talented 18-year-old midshipman, George Raper, will appeal to anyone interested in Australia's birds. For here are some of our most loved and familiar species, as painted by the first thrilled Europeans to see them. Churcher says that the paint of the Raper watercolours (which were discovered in an outbuilding of an English manor in 2004) 'is as fresh and as brilliant as when it was first applied, because the folio has been closed away from light, undiscovered, unidentified, undisturbed for more than 200 years'.

The Library purchased the Raper paintings soon after they were discovered, but already had in its holdings, as part of the treasure trove of 14 000 items in the Rex Nan Kivell Collection, the sketches of midshipman Raper's less-talented superior, Captain John Hunter. Hunter copied Raper's work, and

Churcher chortles to think that in those days long before our current mean-spirited preoccupations with copyright and intellectual property, young Raper would have found it flattering to be an artistic inspiration to his captain.

Churcher says that when she began research for the series, she started with the Nan Kivell Collection, conscious of how vast it is. Some of the charm of the series has to do with the way in which she enthuses about treasures and stories she's been so excited to stumble across. Rex Nan Kivell himself turned out to be a revelation. 'I thought: I must do one [episode] on Nan Kivell, because he's a fascinating person.'

Although the Library holds his extraordinary collection (comprising anything and everything to do with 18th-century exploration and the early settlement of Australia and New Zealand), Rex Nan Kivell, a New Zealander, never returned to the antipodes after leaving them to serve in the Great War of 1914–1918. Based in London, he changed his name from Reg Nankivell to Rex de Charambec Nan Kivell, establishing himself as a collector and art dealer and London toff-about-town. He seems, Churcher thinks, to have been in flight from the shame-making truth that he was only the illegitimate son of a colonial. Illegitimacy was a terrible stigma in his time (he lived from 1898 to 1977).

It was Nan Kivell's collection of pictures giving different interpretations of the death



above:
Rebecca Emes and Edward Barnard
Silver kettle and spirit lamp given by
Queen Charlotte to Sir Joseph Banks
1813
silver kettle; height 20 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an8005379

below left and right:
Marcus Fillingier
Betty Churcher in the Library's
Maps Collection, and searching
the Manuscripts Collection during
filming of *Hidden Treasures*, series 2
Courtesy Film Australia





above:
Benedict Piringer (1780–1826)
Mort de Capitaine Cook c.1789
(Paris: chez Bance aine, rue St Denis)
aquatint print; 50.2 x 66.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an6016353

below:
Augustus Earle (1793–1836)
Solitude, Watching the Horizon at Sun Set, in the Hopes of Seeing a Vessel, Tristan de Acunha [da Cunha] in the South Atlantic 1824
watercolour; 17.5 x 25.7 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an2818137

of Captain Cook in Hawaii in February 1779 that first engrossed Churcher, as she began 'drifting through' the catalogue of treasures. The TV series has two connected episodes about Cook. The first deals with his arrival in Hawaii (with the ecstatic locals at first mistaking him for an important god), and the second with his death on a beach there, and with stories of how he was killed, and why.

Different pictures give different versions of the event. In George Carter's oil painting, *Death of Captain Cook* (1781), for example, Cook is portrayed as a noble hero of the

white race resisting the savage hordes and using only the butt of his rifle (not musket balls) to defend himself. In the Frenchman Benedict Piringer's aquatint print, *Mort du Capitaine Cook* (1789; after a painting by John Cleveley), what was probably only a deadly skirmish is made into a grand battle, with the cannons of Cook's

two ships the *Discovery* and *Resolution* both blazing away. In a very short space of time, myth has overtaken facts. Then, more soberly, there's Thomas Cook's *Death of Captain James Cook* (1784), an engraving made from the drawings of men who were eye-witnesses to the actual event. In this version, Cook is dying ignominiously, face-down in the shallows, and being dragged along by his ankles.

'I thought,' Churcher reflects excitedly, her busy hands gesticulating, 'how *interesting* that received history comes through the written word, the engraved image or more recently the photograph, but that it depends on what's being focused on or what picture [the reporter or artist] wants to put across. What actually *did* happen? There are all these different versions!'

Other National Library treasures celebrated in the series include what's thought to be the first-ever attempt at a maritime atlas of the whole world. This exquisite work was compiled by Sir Robert Dudley (1574–1649), in 1646. The charts within have great clarity of execution, and are lacking in ornamentation with the exception of many fabulous and forbidding sea monsters.



Churcher fancies these may have been invented by cartographers as a 'scare tactic' meant to frighten gullible mariners away from coveted lands.

Then there are Augustus Earle's autobiographical paintings ('wonderful!' Churcher enthuses) of himself waiting forlorn and accompanied by his dog Jemmy in the bleak, spectacular wilderness of the remote South Atlantic island of Tristan da Cunha, on which he was marooned for nine months in 1824. Churcher, who loves a good story, has entertained the idea that his ship may have sailed without him 'because he was such a prig and a bore, and so they said "let's go"—but thinks it more likely that Earle 'thought to himself, "No living soul's ever painted here!", and got carried away, losing track of the time. Sailing ships, dependent on tides and winds, can't wait for absent-minded artists and their dogs.

Then there's the elegant silver teapot with a built-in spirit burner, given as a present in 1813 by Queen Charlotte to Sir Joseph Banks (botanist on Cook's First Voyage). Inscribed 'the most judicious improvement for comfort indispensably necessary in a sick chamber', it enabled Banks to have a civilised, hot cup of tea while bedridden.

Then there are the floral paintings (900 of them) by Ellis Rowan, a 'a pint-sized Victorian artist and adventurer' who, though her true adventures searching for plants to paint were exciting enough, embellished them further for the press, with tall stories of braving snakes and alligators, and death-defying dangles on ropes over terrible precipices, to paint an orchid.

In choosing which light-sensitive National Library treasures to bring out of the shadows (she admits that the sight of TV lights shining on Raper's pristine paintings 'worried me a bit'), Churcher says that, 'Of course for television I went for visual things, but first of all I went for good stories. I love that idea of history being not necessarily the truth, the whole

truth and nothing but the truth, but [being] really what someone has selected to record,' through the perspective of their culture and prejudices.

One truth among what she rejoices as calling 'the wonderful things I stumbled across' came when she was examining the treasure of M.L. Hutchinson's gorgeous engraved aerial map: *1838–1888, Melbourne Then and Now*. It comes with its attached record of 'The First Land Sale in Melbourne—An Interesting Historical Event.'

Laughing, Churcher remembers how, 'with my magnifying glass, I came across a William Hutton. That was my great, great grandfather! He'd bought a block in Bourke Street for 35 quid! Why did we let that go?'

IAN WARDEN is a Canberra-based writer with a background in newspapers

Hidden Treasures (series 2)

features in 10 weekly episodes, on ABC 1, at 6.50 pm, just before the 7 pm News. The series commences on Tuesday 3 June.

below:

M.L. Hutchinson
1838–1888: Melbourne Then and Now—Together with The First Land Sale in Melbourne and Present Value (Melbourne: M.L. Hutchinson, Glasgow Book Warehouse, 1888)
 two maps on one sheet
 44.2 x 56.1 cm
 Maps Collection
 nla.map-rm1324

