

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

LOUISE DOUGLAS EXAMINES AUSTRALIA'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITIONS

FROM 1851, REMARKABLE WORLDWIDE events—known as international exhibitions in Britain, *expositions universelles* in France and world's fairs in the United States—have regularly brought together between 50 and 80 nations in one enormous physical expression of their achievements.

Following the great success of the inaugural event at London's Crystal Palace in 1851, the French responded in 1855 and then followed with a series of exhibitions in 1867, 1878, 1889 and 1900, each one more extravagant than the last. After the second major 'universal' exhibition in London in 1862, the British moved to specialist exhibitions and events specifically for members of the British Empire. The first event held in the United States took place in New York in 1853. It was followed by the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia and the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. From the 1870s, a kind of exhibition fever saw major exhibitions held around the world, including in Vienna (1873), Sydney (1879), Amsterdam (1883), Melbourne (1880 and 1888), Milan (1881), Barcelona (1888), Budapest (1896) and Brussels and Stockholm (1897).

The First World War somewhat diminished the enthusiasm for exhibitions. The 1904 St Louis exhibition and the Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco in 1915 were the only major events held in the

first two decades of the century. Similarly, the 1930s Great Depression reduced capacity and inclination but Chicago and New York, convinced that exhibitions would be an antidote for the harsh economic times, held major events in 1933, 1934 and 1939. During the inter-war period, France held two events (1925 and 1937) and London hosted the British Empire Exhibition in Wembley (1924), a major event for Britain and her colonies, dominions and possessions. The last great exhibition before the Second World War was the highly futuristic 'World of Tomorrow' exhibition held in 1939 in New York.

The exhibitions were complicated and expensive (few made a profit) and had multiple and sometimes conflicting objectives, primarily education, entertainment, international trade and the promotion of national achievements. Nevertheless, it was crucial to be there and, despite the cost, even the smallest nations or colonies felt bound to take part. By the 1890s, Australia's colonies were exhausted from their involvement and only New South Wales exhibited in Chicago in 1893. There was also irresistible pressure to host exhibitions, partly because they brought the world to the host's doorstep but also because they could justify substantial investment in sorely needed urban renewal.

Australia's colonies were active participants in overseas exhibitions, despite the cost of transporting exhibits over vast distances.

BELOW LEFT
Unknown photographer
World's Columbian Exposition
1893
black and white lantern slide
8.2 x 10.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn4190356

BELOW RIGHT
Unknown photographer
World's Fair, St Louis, Missouri
1904
black and white lantern slide
8.2 x 10.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn4189702



The competitive spirit between colonies, particularly Victoria and New South Wales, was evident in the high degree of 'showing off', with colonial exhibits vying to create the greatest display. All manner of primary produce and raw materials was fashioned into soaring pyramids and dramatic arches: at the 1862 exhibition in London, Victoria's gilded obelisk, standing 44 feet high and representing the 800 tons of gold mined in Victoria since 1851, became legendary in international exhibition circles. From 1851 to 1939, a continuous theme, designed to encourage immigrants and investment to the undeveloped colonies, was the promotion of Australia as a sunny, bountiful land of opportunity. There is some evidence that seeing Australia's international displays was the catalyst for the relocation of people, businesses and capital to the antipodes. As tourism evolved from the end of the nineteenth century, Australia's appeal as a holiday destination was increasingly emphasised.

Logistical problems, particularly associated with transport, were just one of the challenges that Australia faced in exhibiting overseas. The overall cost could be crippling for the struggling colonies. So strong was colonial competitiveness that even Victoria's pre-eminent cultural entrepreneur, Redmond Barry, failed to convince the colonies to work together in order to reduce costs. The colonies continued to organise, fund and exhibit as separate entities. The 1908 Franco-British exhibition in London was the first major event after Federation and, for the first time, Australia exhibited as a nation in a separate pavilion. The states were still highly visible, as coordination of the pavilion occurred through a partnership of London-based state agents-general. For the London exhibition in 1908 and the 1915 exhibition in San Francisco, Australia's space was still divided into separate state courts. However, by the 1924 British Empire Exhibition, the Commonwealth had become more resolved in organising and funding national displays drawn from across the states. Separate state courts were replaced by themed exhibits featuring the staple wool-growing, mining and dairy farming exhibits—but for the first time they were not framed through state rhetoric. For the first time, manufacturing and industry were prominent, having been largely missing from nineteenth-century exhibits.



Australia kept pace throughout the nineteenth century with changes in exhibition philosophy and practice. The early use of photography, film and interactive exhibits demonstrated the colonial capacity to adapt and innovate. This continued into the next century: at the New York World's Fair in 1939, young designers and photographers, such as Douglas Annand and Russell Roberts, created an international modernist design for the Australian pavilion.

The National Library of Australia has extensive holdings of nineteenth- and twentieth-century official catalogues, the most useful source of information about exhibition content. From the first event in 1851 until the 1930s, it was the convention for the host nation to publish an official catalogue of all exhibits from all countries. While participating foreign countries published and distributed their own catalogues, they also contributed to the combined catalogue which was supposed to be available prior to the first day of opening. Robert Ellis, the editor of the 1851 *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition*, described the production of the catalogue as being 'without precedent in the annals of literature'. Thousands of authors from a variety of linguistic backgrounds had to fill in a range of forms according to specific instructions which were, not surprisingly, not universally followed. The main problem was the:



ABOVE, FROM TOP
Unknown photographer
Garden Palace, Sydney
International Exhibition
Building, Sydney c.1880
gelatin silver photograph
24.0 x 24.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an14213983-23

Australian International
Exhibition medal, 1879
obverse inscription: 'Albert
Edward Prince of Wales,
K.C., President of Royal
Commission'
reverse inscription: 'Australian
International Exhibition,
Sydney 1879-80, Melbourne
1880-81, Andrew Garran,
Ll.D., for services'
bronze; 7.5 cm
Pictures Collection



ABOVE
Johnstone, O'Shannessy & Co.
Main Hall, Looking West,
(Centennial International
Exhibition, Melbourne, 1888)
albumen photograph
23.2 x 29.3 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24793491

BELOW LEFT
C. Troedel & Co.
The Melbourne Exhibition March
1880
lithograph on cover of
sheet music
Music Collection
nla.mus-an6396785-s1

BELOW RIGHT
Frederic H. Cowen (1852–1935)
A Song of Thanksgiving 1888
vocal score
Music Collection
nla.mus-vn2638752

shortness of the period absolutely allotted for the completion of the work, the impossibility of verifying the descriptions given with the objects of which they treated, and the immense variety of subjects comprehended by the Exhibition itself and necessarily described in these forms in a manner in many instances more or less imperfect.

Australian colonies were not blameless in this regard and many New South Wales exhibits arrived too late to appear in the first edition of the catalogue.

The Library also holds a comprehensive collection of reports and reflections published once an exhibition closed, both international and Australian. Official and technical reports from exhibition commissioners, or more reflective histories, either commissioned or volunteered by independent commentators or experts, provide invaluable insight into whether the hopes of exhibition organisers were met. An excellent example is the official

report of the Commissioners of New South Wales' participation in the 1908 Franco-British exhibition. It not only describes the background to the planning, as well as a detailed layout plan of the exhibits, but it also includes comprehensive photographs.

Throughout the twentieth century, fruitless attempts were made to persuade the states to exhibit together. Although Federation had occurred in 1901, the states continued to argue that they should exhibit separately, much to the chagrin of Executive Commissioner J.H. Carruthers, who commented in his report: 'The *tout ensemble* of the combined Australian display was exceedingly striking, and would have been impressive in a greater degree had the States not occupied separate Courts'.

The public response to the exhibitions can be gleaned from publications produced soon after the exhibition. A special example is Frank Todd Morton's five-volume official account of San Francisco's 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition. There is nothing else like this publication—it is the most detailed account and analysis of a twentieth-century international exhibition, remarkable for its length, detail and comprehensiveness. Unusually, it takes an insightful and self-critical approach and includes, for example, a chapter on aspects of the exhibition that did not work well. Luckily, it also features a four-page description of the Australian pavilion, including images, and a valuable account of the main factors influencing the organisation of the pavilion, particularly the war.

The Library also holds a number of more unusual items not found in other Australian libraries, such as a substantial but little known and used report produced in 1908 by the British Board of Trade's International Exhibitions Committee. Literally in the last hour of a week-long research trip, I discovered the report buried in a series of parliamentary papers held in the British Library. I returned to Australia, hoping against hope that a copy could be found in Australia. After some days of detective work, I was delighted when a typically dogged member of staff at the National Library proudly produced a copy for me.

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