BIRDS!

A NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA EXHIBITION
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The National Library of Australia acknowledges the generous support for and interest in the exhibition by the Canberra Ornithologists' Group, Nigel Lendon of Canberra, Graeme Chapman of Vincentia, and John Hawkins of Moss Vale.

The Library also acknowledges the support of the following institutions: the State Library of New South Wales, the National Gallery of Australia, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Art Gallery and Museum of the Northern Territory, the Art Gallery of South Australia, the Museum of Victoria.

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Birds—the only creatures of our earth with the gifts of both flight and song—were flying and singing across the great southern continent (only recently called Australia) for millions of years before humans heard them. Potent symbols of the natural world, their flight and endurance also make them symbols of the human spirit. Their lives seem to us numinous and eternal, but they are dangerously threatened by our activities.

This exhibition is about birds that fly and sing in the Australian imagination. Its images may vividly remind us of the birds that live in the world around us, but they also trace our changing attitudes to birds and our practical, scientific and artistic uses of birds. Even ornithological illustration is only illustration. While it reminds us of birds we recognise, it equally reveals passing artistic values and a 'scientific' way of seeing which contrasts strikingly, for instance, with Aboriginal bird drawings. Even today, a 'bird in the hand' is often held to be 'worth two in the bush', but the 'hand' of this exhibition is more that of the artist than of the shooter, collector, taxidermist or more recent bird bander.

The colonisation of Australia coincided with the development of the new European bird science, ornithology, and of a wide popular interest in birds. It also coincided with James Thomson (trans.) and Bertram Dobell (ed.), Essays, Dialogues and Thoughts (Operette Morali and Pensieri) of Giacomo Leopardi. London: George Routledge, [18—].
with the flowering of print culture: illustrative engraving, lithographic and other colour-print technologies, fine book-making and photography. Today, just as these arts face the radical challenge of new electronic technologies, this exhibition presents a retrospective of images of birds produced by that period of spectacular art and paper work.

Most of the birds of this story come from the diverse European-Australian collections in the National Library of Australia; from European scientific and artistic traditions recreated progressively within our colonial and recent pasts. Generous loans of modern Aboriginal bird sculptures and paintings show that ancient indigenous and younger European forms have existed side by side in Australia, but have only recently begun to learn from one another.

The image of the rock painting *The Emu Hunter* of 15 000 years ago, photographed by the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, attests to the breathtaking antiquity of Australian culture. In the light of this painting, the birds of a medieval manuscript from fifteenth-century Europe spring into recent time. Following these historic images from the two great streams of our tradition—indigenous and European—the collections of the National Library go on to tell their story of birds and modern Australia.

**Songless Bright Birds**

In 1870, Adam Lindsay Gordon (1833–1870) wrote of Australian lands ‘where bright blossoms are scentless, / And songless bright birds’. This common colonial prejudice could not long defy what people actually heard in the bush.

Yet the predatory activities of visitors and settlers quickly created an actual ‘songlessness’ in the spreading, colonised lands. In the first starvation years of invasion, many birds, like the abundant mutton bird on Norfolk Island, were simply eaten out. Many admired birds were destroyed by their admirers’ mania for imported field-sports and competitive, lucrative collection. The Kangaroo Island and Macquarie Island emus were extinct before John Gould’s *Birds of Australia* (1841–1848).
Early colonial bird sketches record the naturalists' fascination with the marvellous southern birds, and show that Australian animals, along with the land and its sovereign people, were invaded. Birds were shot, collected, sketched, stuffed and shipped home as specimens of science by the invaders. Ships returning to England and its insatiable collection trades carried, even into our own century, countless cargoes of songless bright birds.

And Human Bones

Every 'bird in the hand' mirrored the enduring attempt to silence the historic songlines of the world's oldest human culture. "Enlightened" European greed for an exploitable new world did not, as several works in the exhibition make clear, distinguish between human and animal domains. The whole country seemed one vast repository of specimens.

Brilliant Curiosities

Art enlivens dead things. Many of the images of colonial bird art were drawn (as many still are) from skins, often by Londoners in London. The skins hold form, colour and texture motionless for copying, but, remote from their bushland, produce sketches that seem naive and awkward. Often it is the radiant hand-colouring that makes these birds live.

The exhibition's early documentary drawings begin with the jewel-like paintings of the Hunter sketchbook, and with watercolours from the Sarah Stone album. They continue with work by James Sowerby, John William Lewin, Ferdinand Bauer and Charles Lesueur, displayed in the form of original paintings, hand-coloured engravings in rare books, and, in the case of Ferdinand Bauer, in the form of recent hand-printed lithographs. They culminate in examples of the famous lithographic work of Elizabeth Gould.

John Gould produced his remarkable volumes of Birds of Australia (1841-1848) from his publishing house in Golden Square, London. He used the lithographic work of his wife, Elizabeth Gould, and, after her sudden death in 1841, that of Henry Constantine Richter, William Hart and others. With John Lewin's Birds of New Holland ... (1808) and Birds of New South Wales (1813) their only predecessors, these great books inaugurated a remarkable tradition of fine Australian bird book-making. The exhibition complements books by John Gould and Gregory Macalister Mathews with original sketches and watercolours, and with fascinating related documents from the Library's Manuscript Collection. Also featured is a rare Victorian cabinet of stuffed Australian fauna which was made by Henry E. Ward, the famous London taxidermist and friend of John Gould. Almost certainly exhibited at the London International Exhibition of 1862, this large cabinet filled with hundreds of specimens illustrates the grandeur and ambition of high Victorian versions of eighteenth-century 'cabinets of curiosities'.

Geraldine Rede (1874-1943)

The White Feather c.1900 [Portrait of Miles Franklin]
pencil and crayon; 23.5 x 30 cm R681
This scientific strand in Australian bird portraiture is seen throughout the exhibition in bird paintings by Louisa Atkinson, Neville William Cayley, Ebenezer E. Gostelow, Betty Temple Watts and Lilian Medland; then in spectacular paintings by William T. Cooper and in a selection of the work of photographers for the National Photographic Index of Australian Birds. The late twentieth-century paintings in books by Frank Thomson Morris register both the continuing life of traditional bird art and the life of birds in the natural world, though Morris’s work is represented by one pencil drawing only—in his book Pencil Drawings 1969–78.

Across its 200 years, Australian naturalistic bird illustration traces an evolution from awkwardly posed curiosities to bright recognisable friends in home foliage and habitat. The changing illustrative styles also mirror a history of attitudes toward birds, from the time when fading, insect-infested skins were more valuable than living birds, to our own time, when protection attitudes still fail to stop the devastation of habitats that threatens all Australian birds. The birds our aggressive suburbs and industries drive away do not fly elsewhere; they die.

**Birds for Art’s Sake**

From early on, expressive art recorded elements of the same story of exploitation. The centred lyrebird fan of Nicholas Chevalier’s entrancing watercolour *Fancy Costume Emblematic of Australia* (c.1860) pointed the sorry way to Australian involvement in the devastating worldwide plumage industry which lasted into the 1920s. The arts of taxidermy were now drawn boldly into the adornment and decorative crafts, as Eliza Catherine Wintle’s splendid *Kookaburra Handscreen* (c.1892) shows. Dazzling Australian birds like the white egret and heron were transformed to spectacular feather-work, and brought close to extinction.

Expressive bird art, uninterested with identification, addresses the emotional and symbolic value of birds. Over a century before Australian colonial work, Simon Verelst’s portrait *Lady Anne Russell* (c.1670s) used an imported cockatoo in a flashy imperial variation on the use of birds in European child portraiture. The cryptic *Boy with a Sulphur-crested Cockatoo* (c.1815?), attributed to John William Lewin, presents its bird and child as wistful images in a colonial setting. These cockatoos, accurate enough to the eye, exist to express human values and emotions.

Colonial works also soon appeared which remind us of more practical reasons for bird killing than studying natural history. John Heaviside Clark’s *Throwing the Spear* (1813), S.T. Gill’s *Sportsmen with Game by Coast* (c.1856) and the chromolithograph *Animals of Australia ...* (1880s?) all feature bird hunting, and all incorporate imported arts and styles which
change, as they record, an invaded world.

Only at the close of the nineteenth century, however, do birds seem generally to fly free from the cage of specimens. Margaret Fleming’s *The Cockatoo* (1895), though boldly centring a dead bird, wholly transcends any reference to natural history. Beautiful even in death, Fleming’s cockatoo appears as a lost companion whose limp death-fall is light years away from the attitudes of gun-happy naturalists. If exploited, this cockatoo is exploited by art.

**Harping on Lyrebirds and Investing in Emus**

Many works from the Library’s collections suggest a changing popular focus on different birds. An early settler fascination with the elusive lyrebird grew from scientific excitement about mound-building birds. The lyrebird appears in many works, including John William Lewin’s watercolour *Lyrebird of Australia* (c.1810). First known by settlers as ‘colonial pheasant’ (as in Pheasant’s Creek near Bargo, NSW), even this shy creature did not escape the colonist’s Sunday oven—nor avoid sacrificing its tail-feathers for fans and drawing-room display cabinets.

Late nineteenth-century bird stories for children—one eye on English morals, one on dawning Federation—include many Australian birds, but argue the rise of the emu. Kookaburras, heads to one side, were clearly wise as owls, but lyrebirds, silly and proud as peacocks, were self-declared liars. Emus by contrast, tall and stern, might come to represent a nation’s authority. So began the emu’s flightless parade on sculpted silverware, the decorative carving of its eggs, and the development of its image on the national coat of arms.

As early as 1853, the decorative frame of S.T. Gill’s *Tattersall’s Horse Bazaar, Melbourne* had as good as invented Australia’s national coat of arms. Here a jumped-up kangaroo and startled emu anticipate and already parody Federation heraldry.

Fun and games with birds—as well as ceremony and ritual—had
begun long before in Aboriginal lore. White Australians, such as K. Langloh Parker in her *Australian Legendary Tales* (1896), soon made English versions of Aboriginal creation stories. Along with these, there emerged a children's story land of birds, and an exciting new era of book-making. Storytellers and artists such as Ida Rentoul Outhwaite, J.J. Hall, Dorothy Wall and May Gibbs made emus, cockatoos and honeyeaters as familiar to generations of white Australians as they had always been to indigenous people.

And the day of the kookaburra was near.

**Laugh, Kookaburra, Laugh**

In the twentieth century, the kookaburra, no longer the settlers' weird bush clock but a familiar friend in an urban setting, easily stole popular attention from the not-so-bright emu and elusive lyrebird. Wise bush mother of children's literature, the kookaburra twined herself into wrought-iron balcony lace, and laughed from the faces of the first Australian postage stamps, the first kitchen Kookas, the signatures of Radio Australia and Movietone News. During the World Wars, happy transvestite, she assumed digger uniform on postcards to carry cheering messages into the trenches of Europe and the Pacific war zones. 'She' became a ubiquitous icon.

In 1920, May Gibbs produced Australia's most successful ever poster of social instruction, a cunning kookaburra cartoon teaching wise maternity and serving womanhood. No fewer than a million copies of this image—as both a poster and cover of a New South Wales Department of Public Health handbook—coaxed Australian morals between 1931 and 1959.

For white Australia, strange birds of the colonies were strangers no more, but true native companions and the winged carriers of social virtues and a changing Australian culture.

**Bird Watching**

The beginnings of this flexible universalising of bird motifs lay in late nineteenth-century story art for children and in movements such as Art Nouveau, which showed its own fascination with birds and produced the flattened, haunting grace of Sydney Long's *Music Lesson* (1904).

The strong lines and elegant composition of such work also fed the fashion for bookplates and decorated books. Later it influenced the graphic work of bird print-makers and screen-makers Ethleen Palmer, Lesbia Thorpe and Irena Sibley. The superb bird wood engravings of Lionel Lindsay reflected the moods and characters of birds flown free of the sentimental restrictions of nineteenth-century bird iconography.

Though highly stylised, this new art freed the imagination's engagement with the natural world. It later made possible the radical line-drawing of artists such as John Olsen and Francis Lymburner and the generous, interpretive drawing of the mid-century, seen in Charles Bush's *Golden Bird* (1940). It also opened bird studies to a comic anthropomorphism, where attentively observed birds comment on mid-century issues and speak of the vagaries and possibilities of Australian social identity.

Like Margaret Fleming's *The Cockatoo*, Eric Thake's early surreal oil *Archaepopteryx* (1941) punctures the natural history story of the exhibition. Working with the visual pungency of cartoons, *Archaepopteryx* wittily compounds two great experiments: the ancient pre-history of the bird and the modern evolution of the aeroplane. The huge broken egg and flying feather mock a fledgling
mechanical attempt to get off the ground while an ancient (r)evolving land rolls over.

Watching Birds

The three black birds in the top band of David Malangi's painting *The Snake That Bit Gurrmirringu* (1992) watch over the rest of the story which tells of the Manyarrngu Mourning Rites. The swan of Eric Thake's linocut *Bird Watching* (1965) mocks our presumptuous bird watching. She challenges our intrusions on her world and identity.

Fabulous Birds

Nothing of the many things we have made of birds—ornament, trophy, specimen, art work, exhibition—finally holds them. Their alien natures, enviable wings and song remind us again and again that we are earthbound. The ever-naming of our science and art does not dispel their mystery.

The exhibition's final selection brings together a variety of images which illustrate the multiple facets of the cultural vision that has become ours. A diverse use of natural images itself suggests the mystery of the natural world, so these native companions are as much fabulous as friendly birds. Here are fantastic birds from Donald Friend's manuscript book *Birds from the Magic Mountain*. Here stand Lesbia Thorpe's 1994 imported Guinea Fowl, stylised, but naturalised, in a swirl of black hills and spiralling dots. And stepping clean from air and space, Aboriginal wood sculptures challenge the European naming story with mythic statement.

Elizabeth Lawson
Curator
January 1999
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19
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wood engraving; 15.5 x 11.5 cm S6216
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wood engraving; 13.4 x 13.4 cm S6111
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wood engraving; 15.6 x 12.7 cm S6154
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wood engraving; 17.6 x 22.3 cm S6132
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watercolour; 27.7 x 19 cm R6617 plate H
Dromiceius novaehollandiae and Other Birds c.1930
watercolour; 27.5 x 19.1 cm R6640 plate P1
Falco longipennis and Other Birds c.1930
watercolour; 27.5 x 19.7 cm R6620 plate K
Geophaps scripta and Other Birds c.1930
watercolour; 27.6 x 19.3 cm R6635 plate K1
Donald Trounson (b.1905) and Molly Clampett (b.1928)
Gouldian Finches
photographic print; 27.5 x 19.5 cm
National Photographic Index of Australian Birds, no. 1173

unknown artist
Animals of Australia c.1880
chromolithograph; 19 x 23.5 cm
U4080 NK2137

unknown artist
The Emu Hunter c.13 000 BC
reproduced from transparency
height of emu 93 cm
original photography by George Chaloupka
Courtesy of Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory

unknown artist
'Job on a Dunghill: Vigils of the Dead'
Book of Hours c.1450 France
manuscript on vellum MS1097/5

Simon Verelst (1644–1710)
Lady Anne Russell c.1690
transparency
original is oil on canvas; 124.5 x 99 cm
Woburn Abbey, Woburn, Bedfordshire, UK

Betty Temple Watts (1901–1992)
Diurnal Birds of Prey c.1960
monochrome wash drawing; 37.5 x 27.3 cm
R4825

Swifts, Swallows and Martins 1959
watercolour; 38 x 27.1 cm R4809

Brett Whiteley (1939–1992)
Bookplate for Barbara Corrigan
14.5 x 11 cm S8994

F. Erasmus Wilson
Facts about Egret Plumes
Melbourne: Bird Protection Court, c.1910

Hardy Wilson (1881–1955)
Australia 1952 [Black Swan]
pencil and french crayon; 30.5 x 39.3 cm R708

attributed to Eliza Catherine Wintle (c.1848–1907)
Kookaburra Handscreen c.1892

S.6.5 x 42 x 13 cm
Private collection

V. Woodthorpe (fl.1794–c.1802)
Emu
hand-coloured engraving; 20.5 x 12.5 cm
London: M. Jones, 1802 S8929

[Vignette of a Black Swan and Reeds]
hand-coloured engraving; 3.9 x 8.6 cm
on the title page of George Barrington's History of New South Wales
London: M. Jones, 1802 U1458 NK894

Nawurapu Wunungmurra (b.1952)
Homeland: Gurrumuru; Clan: Dhaliwangu
Wayin ga Mokuy
painted wooden sculpture; height 71 cm
Private collection

William Wyatt (1838–1872)
The Duke of Edinburgh's Welcome by the Natives 1868
lithograph; 23.9 x 32.1 cm S6869 NK7004

Lionel Lindsay (1874–1961)
Pelicans 1938
wood engraving; 17.6 x 22.3 cm S6132

12
Sarah Stone (1761/62-1844)
Tabuan Parrot c.1790
watercolour; 23 x 17.2 cm
plate 3 in Natural History Specimens of New South Wales 1790
R11198