

## TOPIC 5: NATIONALISM: PAINTING AND ARCHITECTURE

### How did Nationalism impact on art and architecture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?

Between 1890 and 1910, colonial Australians experienced a rising sense of national awareness and identity through the establishment of Australia's federation. The excitement of a new united nation, under one flag, governed by a democratically elected party established a great sense of Nationalism. It was the "extreme self confidence and quickly-made wealth of the boom period of the 1880s"<sup>1</sup> that was the catalyst for a uniquely Australian style. In terms of art and architecture, Nationalism led to the creation of a style that was initially based on British traditions, but progressed to uniquely Australian subject matter. The growing sense of national identity and a newly formed federation, paved the way for a uniquely Australian national style which is best reflected in the Federation style, a term coined by Smith (1973)<sup>2</sup>

Federation art reflected a radical move away from early colonial art of the 1800s. Early colonial art had an entirely different style, drawing from classical and traditional figure and landscape painting. Artists like John Glover, take slices of England and place them in the Australian bush. Glover's *A View of the Artist's House and Garden, in Mills Plains, Van Diemen's Land*,<sup>3</sup> illustrates a modest Georgian house with a lavish, colourful, linear garden in the front yard which vastly contrasted with the reality of subdued colours of the Australian bush. This type of painting, linked largely with Europe became unpopular during the late 1800s due to the rising national pride and the looming federation. As Nationalism set in, the artists became more patriotic and instead of looking abroad for inspiration they started to find it in Australia.

During the Federation era, a new school of art flourished, The Heidelberg School. Artists like Frederick McCubbin, painted landscapes in and around the rural township of Heidelberg Victoria. The Heidelberg artists created works that were much less decorative than early colonial works. They were also more emotive and displayed an impressionistic influence characterised by "wistful landscapes of subdued light, winter evenings or frosty mornings."<sup>4</sup> The main goal of the Heidelberg School was to present to the world the Australian bush, not as a concept but as a real place with real beauty. Galbally (1986), states that the works of these artists "has long taken pride of place in Australia's cultural mythology..."<sup>5</sup> Galbally (1986) then goes on to describe the works as depicting "pastoral wealth and beauty coupled with the idea of progress..."<sup>6</sup> Galbally's (1986) description of the Heidelberg art works

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<sup>1</sup> Howells, T., 1989, P.13

<sup>2</sup> Howells, T., 1989, P.13

<sup>3</sup> Radford, R., Hylton, J., 1995, P.72&73

<sup>4</sup> Radford, R., Hylton, J., 1995, P.160

<sup>5</sup> Galbally, A., 1986, P. 1

<sup>6</sup> Galbally, A., 1986, P. 1

presents the idea that the Heidelberg artists were Australian patriots with a strong sense of Nationalism.

Frederick McCubbin's internationally renowned work in particular depicts the natural welcoming beauty of the Australian bush with huge gum trees and lush undergrowth,<sup>7</sup> His work was also notable for its ability to illustrate the hardship of early pioneers. The contrast of the figures against the Australian bush can be seen in all of McCubbin's works, but mainly in his painting, *Down on His Luck*, where he depicts a single sombre figure, appearing disheartened for some reason. Loneliness and contemplation is conveyed by the posture of the figure and through the sameness of the bush that surrounds him.<sup>8</sup> There is a unique quality to the figure that bushmen of the time may have found confronting but familiar. McCubbin's use of subdued light and raw emotion reflects a sense of Nationalism through a recognition of a harsh pioneering past that, to many, represents the 'true Australia'.

Nationalism's impact was not only significant to Australian art but it also had a profound effect on Australian architecture, initiating the 'Federation style'. This style directly linked the new national identity of Australians with architecture that illustrated the very essence of a new Nationalistic Australia.

In reference to the need for a book on Australian architecture, Haddon (1908) states that "when we remember the large and ever increasing expansion of building operations throughout the Commonwealth, we are reminded that our own peculiar conditions, climate, and materials must require special and peculiar consideration."<sup>9</sup> Evidence of Nationalism on Australian architecture can be seen here as a shift from traditional Victorian styles to the Federation style. As a result, Federation architecture became the iconic architectural language of Australia, bringing together many European styles from Tudor to Victorian to sometimes Gothic or Romanesque.

Federation houses signalled a "radical departure from the tightly packed terrace house suburb"<sup>10</sup>, to more open Burley Griffin style garden cities without the corner shop, rear lanes, warehouses and factories. Howells (1989) states that "Whilst Federation architecture was often whimsical, sometimes impractical, it was seldom overstated, excessive or vulgar."<sup>11</sup> This can be applied to the Australian state of mind, as a country and population. The 'down to earth' nature and dry humour, resulting from harsh living conditions, both illustrate the rarely overstated character of Australians and the subtle, slightly whimsical Australian sense of humour. Therefore, we can conclude that Howells' statement reaffirms the notion that, as a style, Federation architecture captures the essence of Australian Nationalism.

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<sup>7</sup> MacDonald, J., S., 1986, P.5

<sup>8</sup> MacDonald, J., S., 1986, P.22

<sup>9</sup> Johnson, D., L., 1972, P.3

<sup>10</sup> Fraser, H., 1986, P.13

<sup>11</sup> Howells, T., 1989, P.13

Sharing many stylistic traits with the Queen Anne style, the Federation style of architecture is typically built of unplastered and unpainted, tuckpointed red face brickwork, a playful and sometimes busy roof forms consisting of projections and hips, clad with unglazed terracotta Marseilles tiles. The Federation style roof was often punctuated by picturesque chimneys. Federation houses usually had an asymmetrical plan of protruding rooms utilising bays and turrets.

One of the most distinctive stylistic traits of Federation architecture was the instillation of “fretted, turned or, occasionally, carved timber verandah posts, brackets, valances, barge boards, balustrades, balconies and screens”<sup>12</sup> instead of the traditional Victorian use of decorative cast iron ‘lace’. Another example of the shift from Victorian traditions is the application of many different and unique window design types in the Federation house. One that features frequently is the Georgian double-hung sash window.<sup>13</sup>

The Australian climate also had an influence on the federation style. The subtropical climate and vast distances between towns and cities in the state of Queensland made it extremely difficult to transport building materials.<sup>14</sup> This led to an innovative design approach that utilised the local resources of timber and corrugated iron. These alternative building materials were a great substitute for the traditional Federation style red brick and terracotta tiles. The “deeply rooted building tradition”<sup>15</sup> of elevated housing for cooling purposes in Queensland, easily carried over to the Federation style, creating what we now know as the ‘Queenslander’.

An unusual effect of the pursuit of Nationalism is the radical pairing of Federation style housing with Art Nouveau influences. In an attempt to explain why Australia would choose to implement such a popular style when trying to be as unique as possible, Fraser (1986) state that it “was an attempt to create a fresh beauty based on the sinuous flowing lines of plants, animals and insect forms...”<sup>16</sup> The idea that Australia would apply extravagant free-curving natural forms in its architecture is not unreasonable, given Australians’ relationship with the natural environment. This is evident through Australia’s pioneering history and its international reputation as being abundant in natural features. Art Nouveau’s undulating roof lines and abstract plant motifs in timberwork, leadlight windows and glazed tiles, coupled with the already unique Federation style, creates a direct architectural reflection of Australia and its way of life.

The Federation style and its reflection of Nationalism is not limited to architecture and motifs; it also encompasses the landscape architecture of the house. As Layton (2005) states “architecture and gardening are very closely-related arts, and with regard to domestic architecture they

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<sup>12</sup> Howells, T., 1989,P.17

<sup>13</sup> Howells, T., 1989,P.17

<sup>14</sup> Howells, T., 1989,P.13

<sup>15</sup> Howells, T., 1989,P.13

<sup>16</sup> Fraser, H., 1986, P.30

seem to be quite inseparable”<sup>17</sup>. Layton makes the point that in the Federation style, the garden and house are one. Once again this is a reflection of Australian living where the built environment and the natural environment are equally important. This notion, though not uniquely Australian, has been adopted by Australians, which strengthens the contention that the Federation style captures the essence of the new Nationalistic style.

In summary, the growing sense of nationalism, fuelled by a newly united federation in 1901, was the perfect motivation for the development of a uniquely Australian design style. Australia’s pioneering spirit, the beauty of the Australian landscape, the Australian climactic conditions, and the availability of local building materials were all combined to create the iconic Federation style, both in art and architecture. This also extended to the adoption of existing styles such as art nouveau which was reinterpreted for the purpose of expressing the flowing forms of nature found in the Australian bush.

It is difficult to discuss the impact of Nationalism on art and architecture without also discussing the Federation style as the two are interconnected. It was through the desire to create a style that expressed the true Australian lifestyle that non-traditional design principles in art and architecture were adopted. This helped to elevate the Federation style to an iconic representation of Australia’s own Nationalistic ideals and principles.

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<sup>17</sup> Dernelley, K., 2005, P.1