



The Ethnological Court at
the Garden Palace, Sydney
1879-80
Photograph
Australian Museum Archives, Sydney,
AMS351/V11460

The Ethnological Court at the Garden Palace

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¹ Sydney International Exhibition, 1879, 'Preface', *Official catalogue of the general ethnological collection*, Thomas Richards Government Printer, Sydney, 1880, p v.

² Silvia Spitta, *Misplaced objects: migrating collections and recollections in Europe and the Americas*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2009.

The original proposal for the formation of an ethnological collection in the Garden Palace included:

1st: The erection of full-sized typical models of the habitations of man, and of the buildings used for public purposes by the various races found in the South Pacific Ocean, together with samples of the natural history surroundings of each tribe.

2nd: Specimens of articles of costume and personal ornament, and of those used in ceremonies; weapons of warfare and of the chase; articles of furniture and of pottery; implements and machines used in agriculture and other industries.

3rd: Specimens of food, animal and vegetable.¹

The Ethnological Court at the Garden Palace was built to showcase the material culture of Indigenous peoples from the Pacific, and it was the first of its kind. The objects remained in the pavilion, and were destroyed in the 1882 fire. The 1879-80 Sydney International Exhibition, housed at the magnificent Garden Palace, occupies a peculiar place in the Australian imaginary. As with other international exhibitions or world's fairs, people visited the Garden Palace to be entertained, taught and charmed by example of successful trade, industrial and technological progress, fine and decorative arts, agriculture, manufactures, architecture, music and exotic displays of heard-of, but faraway peoples. These objects and events, and the way they were presented and exhibited in national pavilions or 'courts', generated spaces that enacted particular narratives of progress, modernity and nationalism. International exhibitions were conceived with precise conceptual and ideological narrative frames in mind, and the displays of objects made these narratives visible. Things, though, not always went to plan. Objects escaped the frame and generated other narratives, entanglements and disjunctions. This is in evidence in the Garden Palace court dedicated to ethnology. The trajectories of its objects were traced by the exhibition's material and visual culture, by the events that animated the space, and by the discursive arena produced by the exhibition's publications and the press. The intentional narratives can be understood from the written archive around the exhibition and from the scant photographic record. The spatio-material organisation of the Garden Palace created not only narratives of a future based on advancement, but also an atmosphere and affect of success, optimism and progress. But there were also other, unintended trajectories that the objects displayed in the Ethnological Court enacted. Considering the court as a transcultural zone where Indigenous material culture and white Australian imagination met, and in reference to the work of cultural historian Silvia Spitta, the objects exhibited at the Garden Palace in 1879 can be understood to have entered the order of things of Australian imagination and epistemologies and to have created a rift, destabilising known categories.²

³ Lissant Bolton, Geoff O'Donnell and John Wade, 'Lost treasures of the Garden Palace', *Australian Natural History*, vol 19, no 12, 1979, p 416.

⁴ See for instance the extensive coverage given to the event by the *Illustrated Sydney News and New South Wales Agriculturalist and Grazier* and *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1879.

⁵ Graeme Davison, 'Exhibitions', *Australian Cultural History*, no 2, 1982–83, p 6.

⁶ *ibid*, pp 7–10.

The planning for the Sydney International Exhibition has a long history. Begun as a proposal of the Agricultural Society in 1877, it received a royal commission from Queen Victoria in 1878.³ The exhibition building was designed by James Barnet, its construction starting in January 1879. Sydney-based newspapers of the period followed the stages of construction for several months, and at times highlighted the symbolic investment in the project.⁴ Within the International Exhibition, in fact, Australian colonies, especially the hosting New South Wales, not only promoted their trades and progress, but also gained international recognition as part of the 'family of nations', making their claim to modernity and representing themselves as desirable destinations for migrants. As a result, the exhibition was also part of the process of constructing an Australian imaginary, although still entangled with a British imperial imaginary.

Official publications connected to the exhibition such as catalogues and magazines, as well as the popular press, contributed to the distribution of not only news, but also narratives. Here the concerns about the making of an Australian imaginary found their voice. Political and economic interests also collided and coalesced around the Garden Palace, and the exhibition became a catalyst for producing an imaginary of a new, young country, separate from both Great Britain and Aboriginal Australia. The symbols provided by the Garden Palace were therefore also at the intersection, and disjunction, of problems in the definition of race, gender and, to a certain extent, class.

The key to understanding how these intersections and disjunctions were articulated in the Garden Palace is to consider the role of looking as a learning practice in the late nineteenth century. Writing about the place occupied by great exhibitions in Australian historical consciousness, historian Graeme Davison described the cathartic and educational process implicit in world's fairs. He argued that mid-nineteenth-century pedagogy stressed the value of looking in the process of learning. This pedagogy:

postulated that people learned first of all by observation of everyday objects, secondly by comparison and classification, and only finally through abstract reasoning. The nineteenth-century exhibition was nothing more than an extension of those principles of classification and comparison, which eighteenth-century men of science had first applied to the natural universe.⁵

These taxonomy principles therefore informed the way exhibitions were articulated in spatial, material and discursive assemblages. According to Davison, visitors to the exhibitions wandering through the displays of technological, natural and industrial products were offered the possibility to learn at a glance, to absorb and understand difference. These differences were orchestrated in national courts in a neat classification that ranged from natural produce to refined pieces of art. In addition, by visiting different courts and countries, visitors could also learn by comparison. Differences, however, were smoothed out by the ubiquitous narrative of 'progress of natural and industrial products', as we often read in official records, under which label fell every example of known, and often unknown, object. In one visit, everybody, irrespective of class and gender, could witness the 'progress' at work in disparate things, from big pumpkins, to plum jelly, to propellers, coming from disparate corners of the world. The spatial and oral rhetoric, the ceremonies, the cantata composed for the occasion, the rituals of the opening, animated the exhibitions and reaffirmed, in the Garden Palace's case, New South Wales leadership in matters of progress in Australia and the Pacific.⁶

The idea of progress itself, though, was made possible by the counterpoint provided by the Ethnological Court. Here, objects from Australia and the Pacific were exhibited

⁷ Anne McClintock, *Imperial leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial context*, Routledge, New York, 1995, pp 36–42.

⁸ For a history of visibility see Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The right to look: a counterhistory of visibility*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2011.

⁹ Nicholas Mirzoeff in his work on visualisation defines these three effects as a 'complex of visibility'; see 'The right to look', *Critical Inquiry*, vol 37, no 3, 2011, p 476.

¹⁰ *Official catalogue of the general ethnological collection*, *op cit*, pp 1–68.

¹¹ Sydney International Exhibition, 1879, *Notes on the Sydney International Exhibition*, Thomas Richards Government Printer, Sydney, 1880.

¹² 'Waiting room of history' is a metaphor used by Dipesh Chakrabarty to describe the way only the West is envisaged as modern, in *Provincialising Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000.

together with prehistoric objects from Europe and the Americas. Feminist scholar Anne McClintock coined two interrelated definitions in her discussion of the first international exhibition, the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in 1851, to describe the same kind of imperial dynamic at work in the Ethnological Court: panoptical time and anachronistic space. With panoptical time she describes the late-nineteenth-century spatial idea of history as a spectacle to be consumed at a glance from a privileged standpoint. With anachronistic space McClintock indicates the Victorian sense of empire as a journey in time from civilisation to prehistory.⁷ These two ideas also apply to the Garden Palace and link it to the British imperial discourse that had animated the first international exhibition.

To present history as consumable at a glance and visualise progress as a journey in time, objects were organised and exhibited in a way that visualised history according to colonial authorities.⁸ Like other forms of visualisation, the Garden Palace displays were intended to have material effects: they named, classified and ordered objects and people in precise taxonomies; they separated those who were visualised and interrupted their connections, thus preventing them from becoming political subjects; and they aestheticised what was visualised, thus making objects understandable through the category of 'curiosity', or of beauty and pleasantness, and normalising, in the case of Aboriginal objects, the often-violent frontier histories that had brought the objects to Sydney.⁹ This ordering created a specific time-space compression and generated three effects: it enabled the telling of the story of white Australian progress; it erased Aboriginal histories, including histories of struggle and resistance to invasion; and it represented Australia as terra nullius. The list of objects in the official catalogue of the Ethnological Court and more descriptive articles on the exhibition give us some information about the narratives specifically articulated in this spatial, material and discursive assemblage.

The official catalogue provides a repetition of weapons classified in imaginative taxonomies: spears, one-pronged, two-pronged, of rough wood, with a stone head, barbed, with a straight point, with bamboo shaft, for fishing; nulla-nullas, black, curved, sharp, with three grooves, with red bands; woomerahs; shields, broad, not so broad, East Coast; stone implements, for skinning kangaroos, axes, spearheads, tomahawk, knives; clubs; boomerangs. Occasionally a shell necklace is mentioned, a 'bamboo trumpet', a dillybag, drawings on bark (from the Australian Museum, the largest contributor to the court). And bones. And skulls.¹⁰

One of the publications printed by the New South Wales Government on occasion of the Garden Palace exhibition dedicates a chapter specifically to the Ethnological Court.¹¹ Here we learn that, first of all, the Ethnological Court was meant to be unique: it collected for the first time a large number of objects from Australia and the Pacific. Second, these objects were considered relics, salvaged records of extinct or about-to-be-extinct peoples, an idea that was reinforced by the recurrence of stone implements in the exhibition. Third, New South Wales, and Sydney in particular, by contrast, were imagined as having played a great civilising role, bringing civilisation where once there was cannibalism and functioning as the main port in the region—a gateway, a colonial outpost, the centre of Pacific trade. Fourth, the civilising power of colonialism was offset against the perception and representation of Aboriginal peoples as dying off. Fifth, the collected material culture was considered 'prehistoric' and Aboriginal Australia as well as the Pacific were thus relegated to the 'waiting room of history' and cut off from the possibility of sharing the same time as white Australia. And sixth, as in other international exhibitions, the main interest of the collectors and then exhibitors was in weapons.¹²



Richards and Company
(photographer)
The Sydney International
Exhibition at the Garden
Palace—the Colonial Sugar
Company's exhibit in the
New South Wales Court
with the Ethnological Court
in the balcony gallery behind,
1879–80
Photograph
State Library of New South Wales,
Sydney, Q606/S

pp xx–xx
Charles Bayliss
The Garden Palace, Sydney,
looking up towards the dome,
1879
Photograph
National Library of Australia, Canberra,
nla.obj:140655241

¹³ Henry Reynolds, *The law of the land*, 2nd edition, Penguin Books Australia, Ringwood, 1992, pp 24–5.

The objects exhibited in the Ethnological Court thus generated certain effects. They materialised, for instance, the perception of a rather homogenous Aboriginal Australia as hyper-masculine, either because the collectors were predominantly men and simply did not see women's material culture or because women refused to part with their objects. The predominance of weapons over any other kind of object, though, also played a role in imagining Australia as terra nullius. Displays of weapons framed Aboriginal peoples as hunters and gatherers, and this framing was directly connected to the British legal discourse of land ownership, as historian Henry Reynolds has explained. Reynolds examined some of the positions promoted by eighteenth-century Scottish philosophers on the evolution of the idea of property. These theories go hand in hand with the representation of Aborigines as noble savages at first, and second as hunters. Reynolds writes:

Common to numerous scholars was a belief that human development had passed through a series of distinct phases beginning with the age of hunters or savages, which was succeeded by the age of nomadic pastoralists or barbarians. In these two earliest stages there was no idea of property in land. In his *Remarks on the influence of climate etc*, published in 1781, W Falconer argued that hunters and gatherers were ignorant of the nature of property and because hunting required 'a large scope of ground, and a frequent change of situation', there was 'but little local attachment' and almost no 'local affection'.¹³

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *Tasmanian contributions to the Universal Exhibition of industry at Paris, 1855*, H and C Best, Hobart, 1855, pp 22–24.

¹⁶ See, for instance, International Exhibition, London, 1851, *Official catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the works of industry of all nations*, 1851, Spicer Brothers, Wholesale Stationeries and Clowes and Sons Printers, London, 1851; Melbourne Exhibition, 1854, in Connection with the Paris Exhibition, 1855, *Official catalogue of the Melbourne Exhibition, 1854, in connection with the Paris Exhibition, 1855*, F Sinnett Company, Melbourne, 1854; Paris Universal Exposition, 1867, *Catalogue of the natural and industrial products of New South Wales forwarded to the Paris International Exhibition of 1867 by the New South Wales exhibition commissioner*, Thomas Richards Government Printer, Sydney, 1867; Colonial and Indian Exhibition, London, 1886, *Colonial and Indian Exhibition, London, 1886, official catalogue*, Clowes and Sons Printers, London, 1886.

Reynolds continues his analysis with John Locke, another philosopher often quoted on matters relating to land owning. In his seventeenth-century *Two treatises of government*, Locke provided the useful distinction between being in a state of nature and having an idea of property. The last one was confirmed only by the sign of mixing labour with the land through cultivation.¹⁴

The displays of weapons in international exhibitions, including at Sydney's Garden Palace, materialised the idea that Aboriginal society was one of male hunters, and to a small extent gatherers, and that therefore land ownership was an unknown concept. As a necessary corollary, as we have seen, these weapons stressed also the narrative of progress, implicit in the achievements of the Australian courts. The piles of wheat, cereals, wool, copper and gold showed the ability of the industrious colonists to mix labour with land. Aboriginal weapons showed nomadic tribes wandering on a land with which they had little connection. In this way, dispossession was legitimised and materialised.

There are many photographic records of the interior of the Garden Palace, but only one of the Ethnological Court, focusing on the Australian Museum's contribution. In this photograph the objects seem to have had a riot. They probably did. Objects escaped the frame and spilled everywhere, hanging from the ceiling, in cabinets, lost in a grove of spears suspended from the ceiling, propped against the cabinets and hanging on walls. A tangle of fish-nets dangles from the ceiling, together with a drum and a canoe. Shields, coolamons and clubs decorate the walls. Some Port Essington bark paintings, which were the first barks to be collected by the Australian Museum, recede in the background and are almost invisible.

What did these objects do, when they travelled from their culture to another? On the one hand they made possible the official narrative, as promoted in the Garden Palace documents and press, by providing an ideological backdrop to the Australian colonies' progress and related narratives of dispossession. But on the other hand they also disrupted the order of things at the Garden Palace. Aboriginal objects interrupted the classification system at the core of international exhibitions, creating a rupture in the colonial epistemology that produced these classification systems. The Ethnological Court in itself was the result of a series of rifts that can be understood following the development of the taxonomies reported in official records and catalogues. In the first international exhibitions, for instance, Aboriginal objects were unclassified. Then they were included in the class of 'every thing relating to the management of trees, hunting, shooting, fishing and products obtained without cultivation'.¹⁵ Later, Aboriginal material culture was simply framed as curios, or portable weapons, or even in the category of the arts.¹⁶ Until finally, with the Ethnological Court, Aboriginal objects were contained in an anachronistic space to tell at a glance a story of progress on the one hand and of extinction and dispossession on the other.

But the entangled, glorious mess of the Ethnological Court—which had undergone budget cuts and a drastic scaling down from the aforementioned original proposal—unsettled the visualisation and the understanding of Australian colonial history as linear progress. Perhaps, then, the objects exhibited at the Garden Palace, uprooted from their place and cultural context, transplanted into a new one, and finally lost, opened up the possibility of engendering a different understanding of Australian histories.