

Pathways to the Past – Images.

How can we as historians make sense of visual sources? What type of information is revealed by visual sources that is not obtainable elsewhere? On close inspection, images can suggest, contain and relate to a lot more than meets the eye. Images are essential sources of evidence about the past, much under-rated by historians. Images come in many forms including photographs, paintings, cartoons, sketches, posters, postcards, illuminated addresses and engravings.

This Learning Module will utilise three historical images - a cartoon, a photograph and a painting – to introduce a range of skills that will help you to read visual material as historical documents, rather than simply as ephemeral illustrations. Images can reveal unique aspects of the past that texts cannot. Like any other evidence, historians can read images with a critical eye.

1. 'Melbourne Starts for the Diggings'

Image Number One, is this cartoon, published in Melbourne Punch in 1856. How much more information might we need about the artist, the publication, and the issues it touches on? How might we begin to understand the humour of the cartoon, when we are separated from the local context in which it was first created and the audience for whom it was intended?

Explore the image by clicking on areas of interest. Your selection will be enlarged on the right of the screen. If further detail is available a button will appear. After exploring all ten themes you may continue to image two.

Grass Widows

The discovery of gold was the catalyst for the remarkable growth of Melbourne from 1851. An average of 259 new immigrants arrived each day between 1852 and 1854. The city's population grew from 29,000 in 1851 to over 123,000 in 1861. In the years leading up to the 1850's women, children and the elderly had been a rare sight on the streets of the city. In 1854 males outnumbered females by almost two to one. Although gold fever caught all ranks and classes in its promise of riches, William Kelly reminisced in 1859 that 'The most respectable of the fair sex in these days did not often appear in public'. The desertion of men to the diggings often left abandoned families and so-called 'grass-widows' in their wake.

While an exodus headed for the diggings, many claims were made of gold being found in the streets of Melbourne itself, including two children chancing across gold in a quartz reef off Lonsdale Street while playing marbles.

Women in Public

'As to ladies, I have not yet seen one at large. If there are any, I conclude that they are secreted in the bush. They certainly are never visible in Melbourne or its environs.'
George Stephen, July 1855.

Mr Punch Downunder

Melbourne Punch was the most successful of a number of colonial imitations of *London Punch*, founded in 1855. *Melbourne Punch* followed London's original format of articles, cartoons, and satirical verse on social and political themes.

Image-makers have a tendency to idealise and satirise the world they depict. Prior to the 1850's there were very few instances of cartoon-style images. George Frankland is attributed with this design of 'Governor Davey's Proclamation to the Aborigines 1816', illustrating the proclamation of equality and justice for Aborigines in Van Diemen's Land.

The tradition of British pictorial satire can be traced from the satirical graphics and caricatures by William Hogarth, James Gillray and George and Robert Cruikshank. The French satirical weekly paper *Le Charivari* (founded in 1832) inspired the birth of *Punch* in London nearly ten years later. *Punch* seized on current events for its political satire and achieved high circulation amongst the middle-class population.

Cartoons are no doubt drawn to elicit a humorous response, but this does not mean that historians should not take them seriously. On closer inspection, and in association with other primary sources, the cartoon can give the historian unique insights into modes of thinking and historical mentalities. The way artists distort reality is evidence of their personal identity, their ideologies and the mentalities and preoccupations of their age. The early editions of *Melbourne Punch* were targeted at a middle-class migrant audience, expressing attitudes in very English terms and familiar conventions.

This cartoon employs a range of devices, it suggests multiple layers of meaning, by personifying historical or mythological situations or representing historical figures as contemporary personalities. Its spontaneity, playfulness, vulgarity and apparent naivety might disguise more serious ideas and opinions. It can of course be difficult for us in "reading" the cartoon, nearly a century and a half later, to understand its humour or satire. References to contemporary social attitudes and political events may now be obscure.

Frescoe No.8

Understanding a cartoon's caption may add a further layer of interpretation to the image, giving us extra clues as to how to read its content, and leading us to explore those satirical reference points which would have resonated for its specific target audience.

At its genesis in 1837, Melbourne had been situated in the Port Phillip District of New South Wales, and was governed from Sydney. Separation of Victoria from New South Wales occurred on the 1st of July 1851. The members of the new Victorian parliament were sworn in on the 21st of November, in the partially built Parliament House. Designed by Peter Kerr, Parliament House was located in the reserve at the intersection of Spring and Bourke streets, now arguably Melbourne's grandest

building and one which evokes the splendour of Imperial Rome and the lofty ideals of 19th century civic architecture.

Images can be more usefully and reliably read if they are part of a series or collection. This cartoon in *Melbourne Punch* is in fact one of a series of 12. The satirical 'Frescoes for the New Houses of Parliament', ran in the weekly publication in 1856. These *Punch* illustrations comprised a series of sketches that parodied key events in the Colony's history. The allocation and sale of land, the Separation of the colony into States, the Eureka uprising on the Ballarat goldfields, the degradation of the Aboriginal peoples and the prevalence of liquor. These cartoons provide a satirical snapshot of Victoria's history to that date and the various political machinations of the era.

The caption and the series to which it relates also throws more light on *Melbourne Punch's* London antecedents, as well as on references perhaps obscure to a present-day reader. In 1843 a competition was held to design the frescoes for the walls of London's newly completed Westminster Palace. A display was held of these sketches or 'cartoons'. Many of the entries were of a mediocre standard. *London Punch* artist John Leech leaped in to print his own 'Suggestions for Cartoons', offering a pictorial parody to ridicule the inept and inane cartoons of the official competition.

Definition

Today we consider a cartoon as a satirical or comic illustration, containing whimsical comment, often a graphic summary of editorial opinion. The popular transformation in the meaning of the word 'cartoon' may be traced to John Leech's response to the competition of 1843.

Sense of Place

The location of this image is defined by street names and directional signboards, contained within the cartoon. The image also conveys a sense of the solidity and civilisation of the city with its commercial establishments, giving way to the uncertainty and open spaces of the road to the diggings. The cartoon exaggerates and distorts the street space for particular effect, blocking the thoroughfare with temporary stalls and character vignettes, and funnelling the populace into the distance.

On the Road

In 1862, a nearby resident remarked upon the absence of a guide post at the corner of Sydney and Flemington roads and Elizabeth Street. 'Being the person living nearest I am continually called upon to direct travellers ... a great number of people travel by night, they therefore have not the opportunity for inquiry and are very likely to go several miles out of their way before population[s] are astir'.

Another View

Note how the Cartoon depiction of the northern end of Elizabeth Street compares to this contemporaneous painting by Samuel Brees, showing a procession of Chinese on their way out of Melbourne up Mount Alexander Road to the goldfields.

Gold Fever

Here is Melbourne starting off for the diggings. Yellow fever gripped the population, all manner of people, from priests and policemen to boot makers and farmhands, left their daily routines to try their luck. While shopkeepers put up their shutters to join the departing hoards, the cost of living in Melbourne soared.

On average, 250 immigrants arrived daily between 1852 and 1854. Many were unaware that British banknotes were not legal tender in Victoria and fetched only four-fifths of their value. Inflated prices were charged for accommodation and provisions in Melbourne.

The colonial audience would have been aware of some of the physical and social effects of the gold rush on Melbourne that are *not* recorded in the cartoon. The so-called 'Canvas Town' on the south side of the Yarra River, was a huge tent city housing thousands of immigrants in response to shortages of affordable accommodation. And at the infamous Rag Fair in Flinders Street between the Customs House and Elizabeth Street, newcomers scrounged for funds by selling personal effects and clothing.

Gold fever changed immigration patterns, and disorganised the whole structure of society. This cartoon holds clues to interpreting the ways in which contemporaries understood the gold rush, the nature of wealth and its effects on social order, and the sort of society gold appeared to be creating. The cartoon was published 5 years after gold was discovered in Victoria. Appearing as it did in a series of cartoons addressing the progress of the Colony, the cartoon is already defining the gold rush as history.

Melting Pot

The *Punch* cartoon gives clues to the national origins of immigrants newly seduced by gold. The Chinese were the largest group of foreign nationals on the goldfields, making up around 14% of diggers by 1857. Germans were the largest group of continental Europeans that included French, Scandinavians, Poles and Swiss Italians. Compatriots often banded together on the goldfields and while this image represents the influx of a range of national groups, there is no suggestion of the cultural tension and conflict that occurred on the diggings. Sectarian rivalry, discrimination and violence attended Chinese-European relations, *Punch* itself, depicted the Chinese with aggressive racial stereotypes.

Around 10,000 Americans flocked to the diggings during the gold rush period, often unwelcome veterans of the 1849 Californian rushes, bringing Yankee tendencies towards disorder, lawlessness, Republicanism, disregard of class and gun-toting habits.

With its carnival-like atmosphere, air of egalitarianism and equality of opportunity, the 1856 cartoon frames a nostalgic impression of the events of a few years before.

National Origins

By the end of the 1850's seven out of ten people on the Victorian gold fields were overseas-born, excluding those from the United Kingdom.

Guns on the Street

In 1852 Englishman William Howitt commented on the popularity of firearms on the diggings:

“The diggers seem to have two especial propensities, those of firing guns and felling trees ... All are armed, and all fire off their guns at night in rapid succession”

Australia’s frontier society ‘bristled with guns’, including revolvers manufactured in America by Samuel Colt. To the conservative Victorian population the pistol-packing Yankee became a symbol of disorder, lawlessness, violence, greed and rough justice. These presumed characteristics of the Californian diggers were contrasted with the British values of stability and peace. When taken too far, notions of American democracy were seen to disregard respectability and class in the Australian context.

Bonnets & Boots

Pictorial representation of clothing may reveal much about changes in everyday styles and fashions, but can also point to other purposes served by clothing as a social and cultural indicator. *Punch* cartoons humorously satirised new fashions of the 1850’s like the crinoline or hooped petticoat. But representations of men and women’s clothes might also tell us about colonial values, national identity, class structure or gender roles.

The cartoon easily parodies the recent arrival or ‘new chum’ in frock coat, high collar and top hat. The standard goldfield apparel is illustrated in the paintings of the time, by artists such as, S.T. Gill, William Strutt and Eugene von Guerard.

The widespread adoption of the diggers costume was seen to help shape the ‘Australian legend’ of mateship and communality, in particular egalitarianism and the mistrust of the tall-poppy.

In the 1850’s, class distinctions were encoded through speech, etiquette, manners, behaviour, and to a large extent, dress. The newfound wealth of the gold generation meant that ornate attire became a less reliable indicator of social status.

The Digger

The standardised uniform of the digger comprised a broad brimmed hat (otherwise known as a cabbage-tree or wide-awake), a brightly coloured red or blue flannel shirt, moleskin trousers, a leather belt rather than braces, a cotton handkerchief as a necktie, and knee-top boots.

Picks & Pans

Outfitting for the diggings could be a hit or miss concern for the new arrival. Should they purchase tools and provisions in Melbourne and lug them to the diggings?

Would they be able to get all the necessary equipment when they got there?

Storekeepers were notoriously the most successful group on the diggings, by charging exorbitant prices and maintaining a monopoly on supplies. Tools were in fact far more expensive to buy at the diggings than in Melbourne, and many found that the cradles, picks and shovels that they brought with them from London were totally unsuited to colonial conditions.

Eureka

In 1851 gold fever gripped Victoria, now newly separated from New South Wales as a colony in its own right.

The cry went up locally and abroad, and gold attracted a quarter of a million immigrants who came and stayed during the goldrush years, 9 out of 10 trying their hand at mining. The allure of gold promised the electricity of chance, the luxury of possibility and dreams of material opportunity. The extent to which such dreams were fulfilled varied enormously, as have historian's interpretations of goldrush mythologies and democratic legacies.

You have now completed image one. Continue onto image two in your own time.

2. Citizens Arch. 1901.

Image Number 2, is this photograph, taken in 1901, in Bourke Street, Melbourne. Image detail is available by exploring the photograph as well as a short exercise to be completed.

Ghosts

A blurred female figure standing in the roadway might lead us to question the interpretation of the photograph as an accurate historical document and the photographic process itself.

By the mid 19th century the popularity of photography had grown and become a widely adopted method of documentation. Because of the need for a longer exposure time than is necessary with modern cameras, moving objects were not recorded very well and often came out blurry or ghosted.

While photography allows the recording of a freeze frame moment of historical time in all its accuracy, technical shortcomings of the medium also meant that photographers were likely to snap their outdoor shots when there were less moving objects around. We might therefore be cautious about what is missing from the frame, and the extent to which photographic subjects can be clarified, staged, posed, or manipulated. What is absent from an image can be as important as what is depicted.

Technical Shortcomings

Having a studio portrait taken required subjects to sit still with their heads supported by frames to avoid movement.

Dummy Tram

Cable trams replaced previous horse-drawn public transport from the mid 1880's. These trams were operated by an underground cable that ran between the tracks, engine houses, located along the route, kept the cable moving. The open-sided car was called the dummy, in which the driver operated levers that gripped the cable in order to move. The enclosed car, like a small version of a conventional tram, was pulled along by the dummy.

The Bourke Street tram route, which ran from Spencer Street to Northcote, was the last to be electrified, and operated until October 1940.

171 Bourke

An urban scene such as this contains much useful evidence for the historian about the cityscape, street architecture, advertising and technology. But how can we identify exactly where the photograph was taken? Interpreting the symbols on the arch may lead us to the conclusion that it is an image of an Australian city in 1901. Cross referencing visible business names with published street directories will lead us closer to finding out the exact street location in Melbourne.

Sands & McDougall's 1901 Melbourne Directory locates for us, a number of businesses. James Lacey's chemist at 171 Bourke Street and Mrs Martha Adams' dining rooms next door at No. 169, running east up the south side of the street towards the Eastern Market facade, clearly visible in the distance.

Streets of Evil

Though an accurate and realistic rendition of its subject, elements of the photograph may still be obscure to us unless we read them in conjunction with other sources. As current-day readers of the image, we might recognise in the formality of the street verandahs, with their cast iron pillars, the heritage value of Victorian-era architecture that is prized in the modern-day city. Yet, while the verandahs of the Victorian city provided shelter from the elements, by the early 20th century they had come to be seen as an obstruction and a nuisance, interrupting the free-flowing circulation of pedestrians, hindering access to shops, and attracting larrikins. Idle men leaning against verandah posts had become, in the eyes of the middle-class shopper, the 'Verandah Post Evil'.

Exercise - Kings & Keystones

This exercise consists of four questions about the symbolic icons and ideas represented in the image. To answer each question, explore the image and select the correct detail. Begin by clicking on question one.

Question One. Which detail on the arch represents Australia's connection with Imperial Britain?

Answer

The British flags and portraits of the royal family illustrate Australia's intimate links with Britain. Federation of the six colonies in 1901 was still nested within a society and culture that paid due allegiance to the Crown and to British cultural values. This was evident in the material associated with the inauguration of the new Commonwealth of Australia.

The Citizens Arch welcomed the visiting Duke & Duchess of Cornwall and York, who inaugurated the new Commonwealth Parliament. Surmounted by a Union Jack flying from a flagpole, the arch features portraits of the royal couple and a portrait of King Edward VII on the keystone of the arch. On the base of the towers are the

King's shields, with the Latin initials E.R.I. (standing for the Latin phrase meaning "Edward King & Emperor").

Other arches in the city referred to Imperial Britain and featured Royal symbols: The Queen's Arch, pictured here, at the intersection of Collins and Russell streets; the King's Arch and the Duke's Arch. Each adorned with shields, Royal crests, portraits and gilded representations of the Royal family, the British Lion and Unicorn and flagpoles bearing the Union Jack.

In your own time, advance to the next question.

Question Two. Which detail on the arch represents the States of the new federation?

Answer

The badges of the six federated states appear on panels on either side of the arch. Victoria was the first state to have its own flag, featuring the Blue Ensign with the southern cross surmounted by a crown. Other state badges date from the mid 1870's, though some have undergone modification in the intervening years. The badge of Queensland features a blue Maltese Cross with the imperial Crown in the centre; Western Australia, a black swan with a yellow circle; New South Wales, a golden lion on a red St George Cross within a white circle; South Australia, a Piping Shrike in a yellow circle; and Tasmania, a red lion in a white circle.

In your own time, advance to the next question.

Question Three. Which detail on the arch represents the citizens of Melbourne and lends the arch its name?

Answer

In 1842 an Act of Parliament incorporated the inhabitants of the Town of Melbourne, which was duly proclaimed a city in 1847, in the then Port Phillip District of New South Wales.

A Town Council meeting in 1843 approved the design for a common seal, used as the arms of the Corporation. The original armorial bearings featured a shield divided into four by the St George's Cross and featuring a royal crown in the centre. The four symbols on the shield all relate to chief exports of the time. The sheep represented the wool industry, the Bull symbolised tallow (a boiled down animal fat used for candle making and grease), the Whale an early maritime industry, and the ship, trade and transportation. The wattle and a kangaroo were Australian features at the top of the design, while the motto was placed at its base.

In 1970 the two lions were incorporated into the design. They were derived from the coat of arms of Lord Melbourne, Prime Minister of England at the time of Melbourne's founding and subsequent namesake.

The Corporation Seal was itself replaced with a new corporate logo in 1993.

The image of the "Citizens Arch" can now be seen to represent ideologies of Empire, nationhood, the confederation of states, civic identity and progress.

An understanding of what ‘citizenship’ meant in 1901, might be further interpreted by what is absent from the symbolism. A year after this photograph was taken, citizenship rights were extended to white women, but excluded most so-called “coloured people”. Aborigines were not counted in the census as Australian citizens until the 1960’s.

Motto

The motto of the Corporation — ‘VIRES ACQUIRIT EUNDO’ is taken from the ancient Roman writings of Virgil. When the story of Aeneas and Dido was spreading through the city of Carthage, Virgil writes that rumour sat over the city – ‘... atque vires acquirit eundo’ - that is, like whispered messages, it kept growing. The usual translation — ‘we gather strength as we go’ — is sometimes facetiously rendered as ‘we gather rumours as we go’. It has therefore been mischievously held that Melbourne’s motto was a classicist’s joke - that Melbourne’s claim to greatness was based on mere rumour and boosterism.

In your own time, advance to the next question.

Question Four.

“A new city was created yesterday to welcome the Heir Apparent and his Royal Consort — a veritable Paris of the South, the city of a faerie dreamland.” “... Our ephemeral house of cards today is worthy to be touched in many places by the wand of a people’s wealth and will, and to be turned by that magic into a Commonwealth of perennial marble and bronze.”

Melbourne Argus, 7th May 1901

Though a temporary structure, the celebratory arch is a solid frame covered with various symbols which, as discussed, we can interpret with reference to supporting materials. But apart from its iconography, can you ascertain another function of the arch?

Answer

The arch itself is a threshold or gateway. Celebratory arches, dating back to the triumphal arches of ancient Rome, are more than just decorative features of the landscape, they play an important part as frames for marches and processions. The meaning and importance of street processions were enhanced by a repertoire of devices and symbols supporting and reinforcing their drama and meaning. These included the actual route of the march itself, as well as the accompanying banners, flags, bunting, illuminations and fireworks, visual props, and costumes. To understand the symbolism of the arch is therefore to place it in a broader context of public space and social ritual.

Melburnians would have been familiar with the arch, not as an everyday sight in the cityscape, but as a feature of very special celebratory landscapes. As a mnemonic device or reminder, therefore, it was important not only for the contemporary symbolic references it contained, but also for the way it tapped into a tradition of such moments, such as the visit to Melbourne, of Prince Alfred, in 1867.

Modern-day celebrations still utilise the basic structure of the triumphal arch, though rework its classical form in more contemporary ways.

Drama

Frederick McCubbin's painting, depicting the 1901 triumphal arch on Princes Bridge is an impressionistic rendering of the ceremonial splendour of the occasion. It highlights different readings of architecture and ritual than other artistic or photographic depictions.

Social Ritual

The Federation Processions passed underneath various arches on their route. There were nine arches that represented the Imperial connections of the new Commonwealth, as well as local cultural and commercial interests. The German Citizens Arch included references to the German Empire, Federation and a bust of the Kaiser.

The Chinese Arch in Swanston Street reflected the culture of the local Chinese community, and was decorated with a Chinese dragon, Chinese calligraphy, bells, lanterns and silk. Despite this representation of the local Chinese-Australian community, it was ironic that one of the first pieces of legislation passed by the new federal parliament was the *Immigration Restriction Act*, which effectively barred non-white immigration to Australia.

You have now completed the exercise. Return to the image by clicking the exit button.

You have now completed image two. Continue onto the third image in your own time.

3. 'Bourke Street' Tom Roberts (1856-1931)

Image Number 3, is this painting of a Melbourne street scene, by Tom Roberts. Paintings are unique texts which give the historian valuable information about material culture, what people wore, technology, what cities looked like; but they might also distort social reality as much as they reflect it.

The original title of Roberts' first major urban scene was '*Allegro con brio*,' a musical instruction meaning 'lively with spirit'. The title of a painting might influence the way the image is interpreted. American born artist James Whistler gave musical titles to many of his paintings from the 1860's — to what extent, we could ask, is Roberts influenced by Whistler's subject matter and compositional style? This painting raises many interesting questions: when exactly was it painted? What was the artist's vantage point? How accurate is its depiction of urban social life and commercial activity? Why didn't the painter choose a more fashionable street scene?

Image detail is available by exploring the painting as well as a short exercise to be completed.

Red, White & Blue

There is conjecture about the extent of influence French impressionism had on Australian art. The apparent French flag on the right of the canvas has offered some scholars a symbolic connection with the street scenes of Claude Monet, amongst others. There was no obvious reason for a flag to be flying in this position at all until 3 years after Roberts supposedly painted the scene, when a tent and flag-making shop was opened on the spot by Charles Wilson. Perhaps the whole painting was completed much later than the accepted date? Perhaps Roberts added the flag itself at a later date, which might lead us to question what other elements of the image were altered.

Looking carefully at the painting we might find other clues which anchor it in time and space. For example, in the centre of the painting is an ice cart as a possible clue to dating the painting, the summer during which Roberts painted the original version was a particularly hot one.

French?

Historian Humphrey McQueen has offered an alternative detail about the flag - suggesting that depending on which way the wind was blowing, it could be a French flag, attached by its blue edge to a rope or pole, or a flag representing the Netherlands, connected to a rope along its tricolour edge.

Artistic License

The fact that the period of the painting straddles the moment when cable-tram lines were laid down in the street, has also offered alternative explanations of Roberts' rationale. Given that the tram lines are not shown, is the painting a nostalgic view of a disappearing frontier town, or is it a forward looking depiction of a modern metropolis?

Three Sisters

Five years after the artist commenced the painting, Elizabeth Anna Fraser recorded in her diary that Tom Roberts set up his easel on the verandah of her Heidelberg house and added to the canvas the three female figures in the left foreground. Fraser and her two sisters acted as models for the figures.

This insight raises questions about the accuracy of detail and the artists' intent. Were the figures added in place of something else? and in what ways might the artist have felt that the painting would be enhanced by such an alteration?

Taxi Rank

Stretching up the Bourke Street hill to the west, Roberts paints a stand of horse-drawn cabs known as jingles, positioned in the middle of the carriageway. The adjacent street contained many associated trades such as horse bazaars, saddlers, harness-makers and blacksmiths.

Roberts' painting is impressionistic in style, and while we might be led to question elements of the scene and whether or not they depict real events or people, the accuracy of the artist in depicting the buildings can be measured against a contemporary photograph of the same street. A close up of the photograph reveals a

striking similarity to the buildings in Roberts' painting, from the Menzies Hotel on the corner of William Street down to Dunn & Collins booksellers.

Hansom Cab

Fergus Hume's detective novel 'The Mystery of a Hansom Cab', the first popular novel set in Melbourne, was published a year after Roberts began this painting, and sold over half a million copies in Hume's lifetime.

Exercise - Mr.X

This exercise consists of one question that requires you to investigate and cross-reference research material.

Question: What is this man's name?

Using the tabs, select the research material, investigate it in detail and then type the answer in the space provided.

You have now completed the exercise. Return to the image by clicking the exit button.

Well done - you have completed all components of this module. You should now have an understanding that images can be read in multiple contexts and while viewing them, should ask; What was their function and how has this changed? What is the biography of an image over its lifetime? Was it created at the time, or after the events it illustrates? And what were the artistic conventions relating to the subject?

You can now exit the module by closing this window, then view the additional resources in Step 2.