

## CELEBRATING WITH THE NATION: ARTWORK FROM THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF TASMANIA TOURS THE COUNTRY TO MARK THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA JUBILEE IN 1951

by Mary E Koolhof

(with three plates)

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Two paintings from the Royal Society of Tasmania (RST) Art Collection were selected for an exhibition held in 1951 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Commonwealth of Australia. The Jubilee Exhibition of Australian Art comprised 156 works chosen to represent the best of Australian art from Aboriginal art through early colonial times to the latest contemporary art. The exhibition was noteworthy for recognising the artistic merits of Aboriginal works rather than focussing on their anthropological aspects. Paintings selected from the RST Art Collection in Hobart were FG Simpkinson de Wesselow's *The Derwent from the Observatory* and *Geelong, Australia Felix, January 1847*, two of 208 artworks gifted by the artist to the RST in 1900. Touring to every state capital, the exhibition was greeted with critical appreciation and popular acclaim.

**Key Words:** Royal Society of Tasmania, art, Aboriginal art, Simpkinson de Wesselow, Australia, Commonwealth, Jubilee Exhibition, Laurence Thomas.

The year 1951 was filled with festivities in Australia: bonfires, fireworks and military parades; historic plays and pageants; religious and cultural festivals; and athletic and sporting tournaments. All this was to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Commonwealth of Australia – a single federated nation, with Queen Victoria's signature on the Royal Assent. The occasion was equally important for the six Australian states, which 'matured from colonies into sovereign statehood' (*The Queensland Times*, 28 Nov. 1950, p. 7).

Expectations for the Jubilee year were very high, and national pride was evident:

*There will be entertainment on an unprecedented scale, but mainly the appeal will be to our patriotism. We can expect to be stirred by picturesque spectacle and significant pageantry. We shall hear great music and noble speeches. We shall applaud the exploits of famous Australians in the fields of statesmanship, the arts, sciences, war and athletics. We shall be invited to look back upon the storied past and cast our eyes forward into the hidden future.* (*The Sunday Herald*, 31 Dec. 1950, p. 6)

The celebrations, however, came with the high price tag of £350,000, approximately \$18,000,000 in today's terms (RBA 2024).

The aims of the Jubilee celebrations were more nuanced than a simple expression of nationalistic fervour. National coordinator Lieutenant-General Berryman intended the Jubilee year to transcend parades, flag-waving and fine speeches. He was convinced this was an opportunity to progress important national themes: the assimilation of New Australians, conservation of natural resources,

decentralisation of population and industry, and strengthened national defence supported by increased production (*The Queensland Times*, 28 Nov. 1950, p. 7). It was evident that a growing pride in Australian culture was developing as during a meeting of the Society of Women Writers in Sydney, the speaker pronounced it 'shocking' that the Greek tragedy *Medea* had been selected as a Jubilee play rather than something Australian (*The Bulletin*, 2 May 1951, p. 22).

A special exhibition of Australian art was planned to include a selection of the best Australian paintings chosen from the leading art galleries and private collections in the country. It was feted as 'the finest assembly of Australian works of art ever seen in one collection' (*The Sunday Herald*, 31 Dec. 1950, p. 6). The selectors aimed 'to show a small but good collection of aboriginal paintings and sculptures and to gather together ... the best works by the best artists who have worked in this country from the time of the first white settlements to the present day' (Thomas 1951a, inside cover of catalogue).

The Prime Minister of Australia, Robert Menzies, threw his support behind the exhibition, urging galleries, museums, libraries and collectors to lend selected works to make a significant collection. Exhibition organiser Laurence Thomas from the National Gallery of Victoria visited the various Australian states in search of material. When Thomas first set out to seek exhibits for the early period of Australian art, he thought these would have to be mainly prints and drawings but discovered some paintings of excellent quality. Thomas believed most people would be surprised by the quality of artwork produced in Australia before 1856 (*The Queensland Times*, 20 Dec. 1950, p. 2). It was in this category that works from the RST Art Collection would feature.



PLATE 1 — Francis Guillemard Simpkinson de Wesselow's *The Derwent from the Observatory*, October 1847 (RST Art Collection)

Arranged in four sections, the first was Aboriginal art, described as being quite distinct from mainstream Australian art. The artistic merit of the Aboriginal works was recognised apart from their anthropological value: 'It is scarcely necessary to be aware of the totemistic or ritual significance of [artwork] *Spearing a Kangaroo*, for instance, to be able to appreciate its dynamic sense of movement and form' (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 June 1951, p. 2). In his essay for the exhibition catalogue, Leonhard Adam explains some of the nuances and complexities of various forms of Aboriginal art (Adam in Thomas 1951a, pp. 5–7). The remaining sections of the exhibition were: Early Colonial Art; Art of the Middle Period; and Contemporary Art.

The exhibition was greeted very warmly by art commentators of the time:

*Australian art, like Australian wine, is a commodity that would have an honoured place in the world – if anyone outside Australia realised that it existed in its present quantity and quality. Now the proof of its value and extent is before our eyes – and before any comprehending visitors from abroad who may be among us – in the Jubilee Exhibition of Australian Art.* (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 June 1951, p. 2)

Chairman of the National Art Gallery in Melbourne, Sir Keith Murdoch, noted that the exhibition was quite unprecedented in Australia (*The Sun News-Pictorial*, 18 May 1951, p. 5).

The Jubilee Exhibition of Australian Art contained 156 artworks. Of these, two were selected from the RST Art Collection in Hobart: Francis Guillemard Simpkinson de Wesselow's *The Derwent from the Observatory* was number 63 in the catalogue, and *Geelong, Australia Felix, January 1847* by the same artist was number 64 (Thomas 1951a, p. 33). De Wesselow was described in the catalogue as 'a watercolour artist of considerable merit' (Thomas 1951a, p. 33). Two works from the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery were also included: John Glover, *My Harvest Home*; Thomas Griffith[s] Wainewright, *Portrait of Mrs. Wilson*; and three from the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston: Benjamin Duterrau [Duterrau], *Sullivan's Cove, 1839*; John Glover, *On the Tamar*; and John Skinner Prout, *Break of Day*.

While some commentators of the time considered the early colonial art section of the exhibition to be of 'historical rather than artistic interest' (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 June 1951, p. 2), the noted Tasmanian artist Max Angus AM, FRSA, more recently took a different view of de Wesselow's work:

*There is a quality of naturalness in Simpkinson's watercolours that makes them deceptively ordinary in appearance. They are never forced, dramatised or exaggerated, yet nothing can quite explain the extraordinary sense of freshness and vitality that comes to us across almost a century and a half.* (Angus 1984, p. 61)





PLATE 2 — Francis Guillemard Simpkinson de Wesselow's *Geelong, Australia Felix*, January 1847 (RST Art Collection)

De Wesselow's painting *The Derwent from the Observatory* looks upriver across what is now the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens. This work is of particular interest to students of Tasmanian history, as it shows something of the buildings of the Rossbank Magnetic Observatory, where Simpkinson worked; the surviving buildings of the observatory are now within the grounds of Government House, Hobart. Of *Geelong, Australia Felix*, Max Angus observed:

*The delicate watercolour painting of Geelong itself is notable for its clear light and atmosphere, further enhanced by Simpkinson's decision to leave the foliage of the larger group of trees unpainted, their forms indicated only by pencil outline. This device, often used by Turner and others, not only helps to keep the general pitch of the work in a higher key – an indispensable element in the rendering of overall light – but in this case also confines the darker tones almost entirely to the panoramic sweep of the subject, where all the interest lies, and to which the artist obviously wished to direct our attention.* (Angus 1984, p. 86)

The 1951 exhibition was the largest to have toured Australia and the first to travel the country by air. Interest was reportedly great, as it attracted crowds of the most varied kind:

*It meant that art – and, most important, Australian art – had reached beyond the dilettante and plucked at the interest of ordinary men and women. Otherwise, why should the gallery be filled daily and often at night*

*with apprentices and their girl friends, schoolchildren who came back to look at the pictures on their own after an official visit with their teachers, smartly-dressed girls-about-town ... men in uniform, mothers with shopping-baskets and babies?* (Pix 1951, pp. 28–29)

Opening in Hobart on 12 March 1951 and on display there for three weeks, the exhibition then travelled to Launceston, Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide, finishing in Perth. By August, when on show in Brisbane, it had been seen by 215,000 people, with Adelaide and Perth yet to come (*The Queensland Times*, 20 Dec. 1950, p. 2). 'The Exhibition ... should on no account be missed', reported a reviewer following the Sydney opening (ABC, 1951, p. 26). In Perth, the art gallery opened at night to enable more people to see the exhibition (*The West Australian*, 20 Nov. 1951, p. 2). Organiser Laurence Thomas noted the cultural importance of the exhibition to the nation of Australia:

*It is not often that we can see the best works of our artists of all periods together under one roof. In this vast country we have no single artistic centre. We have no London, no Paris, no single centre to which everyone may go once in a while to keep in touch with what has been and is being done.* (Thomas 1951b, p. 26)

The Royal Society of Tasmania played a further part in the Jubilee celebrations, organising documents and pictures in the Society's possession to be shown in an exhibition in Hobart during Jubilee week, and arranging a special evening

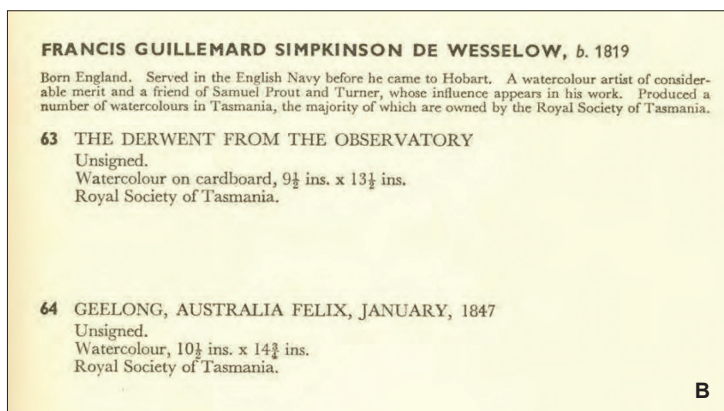
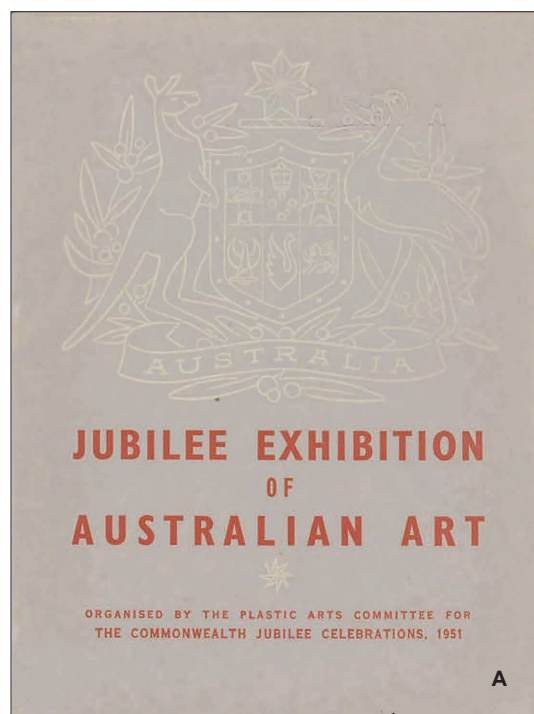


PLATE 3 – (A) Jubilee Exhibition Catalogue cover; and (B) excerpt from p. 33 of the catalogue showing the two RST entries (Thomas 1951a)

at which papers dealing with Federation and Tasmanian history were read (Royal Society of Tasmania 1951).

It was an honour for the Royal Society of Tasmania to have two paintings selected for the Jubilee Exhibition, allowing these works to be seen around the country. The esteem in which the Jubilee Art Exhibition organisers held de Wesselow's art in 1951 was echoed by respected Tasmanian artist Max Angus: 'His work touched me more than that of any other of his period' (Angus 1984, p. 8), and later: 'Topographically, his watercolours are unsurpassed. His genius was to combine this with extraordinary fluency and artistic insight' (Angus 2006). The Royal Society of Tasmania is fortunate to have 207 beautiful artworks by de Wesselow currently in its Art Collection; one work from the original collection was gifted to TMAG in 1910.

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