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In 1880 the Melbourne International Exhibition marked Melbourne’s success as a colonial city. This came within a generation of the discovery and exploitation of gold deposits in central Victoria, which had given momentum to the development of the Colony. In 2004 the Royal Exhibition Building and the Carlton Gardens where it stands were inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, recognised because it reflects “the global influence of the international exhibition movement.” According to the citation this produced over 50 exhibitions between 1851 and 1915 that aimed “to chart material and moral progress through displays of industry from all nations.” The movement “showcased technological innovation and change, which helped promote a rapid increase in industrialisation and international trade through the exchange of knowledge and ideas.”

In their heyday international exhibitions were key nodes of international communication. They were popular events that attracted millions of people who visited to be inspired, to learn and to be entertained.

The exhibition hosted by Melbourne was the culmination of 30 years of participation in exhibitions abroad by the Colony of Victoria. From 1851 the Australian colonies regularly took part in international exhibitions in cities such as London, Paris, and
Philadelphia, competing with each other for the attention of potential immigrants, the money of investors, and for lucrative markets for their raw materials. For Victoria in particular, successive exhibition schemes in London in 1862, 1873 and 1886, were conceived as markers of colonial progress and important promotional opportunities. At these exhibitions all manner of products and natural wonders emanating from the colony were displayed. However, colonies also sought to distinguish themselves through quite specific associations. Tasmania primarily emphasized the timber resources of the colony, most successfully through the design and construction of the Tasmanian Timber Tower, while the Victorian exhibition campaign trumpeted the story of gold. The London International Exhibition, 1862, is therefore particularly significant as it was at this event that the Colony of Victoria’s association with gold was first articulated and was received with such success, establishing a seductive theme, which echoed through the rest of the century.

I: Locations – gold on display and the cultural landscape.

The relevance of the display of gold at exhibitions abroad to a discussion of the central goldfields region as a cultural landscape may seem peripheral, however this is far from the case. International Exhibitions were wonder filled sites where a broad public engaged with constructed views of the cultural and natural elements of distant colonial landscapes. These displays not only presented information but they actively participated in a discourse across international borders, which in part shaped the relationship between man and environment. Furthermore, this topic may also seem unconventional in heritage research because the focus is not on an appreciation of the authentic remnants and artefacts of goldfields life, the movable cultural heritage, but rather on the exhibits which were representations of the landscape. Yet, this too, is most relevant to a discussion of cultural landscapes.
It is on the basis of “outstanding universal value” that a cultural landscape may be inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In addressing this criterion, it is customary to focus on either the recognizable natural or cultural features of the landscape. However, Peter Fowler, an advisor on the assessment of cultural landscapes to UNESCO, has argued that the focus of cultural landscape research should not just be on the separate distinguishing elements within a landscape. It is the “interplay between cultural and natural influences” that is of greater interest, and it is the articulation of the relationships between these forces which is the key to demonstrating the “outstanding universal value” of any particular cultural landscape.4 In accordance with this approach to heritage research therefore this topic is most pertinent. The Victorian gold displays at International Exhibitions were a powerful medium through which goldfields experiences were articulated, and in part they shaped the historical meaning of the central goldfields landscape.

Furthermore, within UNESCO’s definition of the cultural landscape is Category 3, the “Associative Cultural Landscape.” It is to this criterion that the gold-narrative at International Exhibitions may be most relevant. In this category, significance is measured by the “definable powerful, religious, artistic or cultural associations” that people have “with the natural element rather than material cultural evidence.”5 In the case of European settlers, an imaginary connection to the landscape was created by the opportunity to acquire wealth. It was the desire for gold that bought people into the region; and, gave rise to creative expression evident in the fashioning of gold into precious objects. These were the trophies of an emigrant’s pilgrimage and they were persuasively used to celebrate colonial enterprise at International Exhibitions. The Victorian displays on the theme of gold at International Exhibitions expressed the artistic and
cultural interface between European settlement and the physical landscape.

In this chapter, the display presented by the Colony of Victoria at the London International Exhibition, 1862, is discussed. In describing the circumstances of its production and consumption - the ways in which the importance of gold was constructed in the display of objects and the ways in which the displays were interpreted - it will become clear that these displays were of enormous significance to understanding the interaction of nature and culture in the central goldfields landscape. Through the mediating writings of observers we can witness the formation of a popular view of the colonial landscape, and understand the critical role the gold narrative played in the process, ultimately helping to shape the identity of Australia. This makes an important contribution to our understanding of the international significance of the central goldfields cultural landscape.

II: Learning from The Great Exhibition, 1851

The precursor of the London International Exhibition, 1862, was The Great Exhibition of the Industry of all Nations, 1851, also referred to by contemporaries as “the Crystal Palace”, after its innovative glass and iron building. It was perhaps the most ambitious of the mid-nineteenth century European exhibitions. Some Australian colonies participated in a modest way under the rubric of the British Colonies, although the Colony of Victoria was absent. After it was granted autonomy from New South Wales in 1850, it waited another eleven years to demonstrate its accomplishments at the follow-up exhibition in 1862.

However, there were some important lessons learnt from the colonial experience at the Great Exhibition, which were relevant to the approach taken for the display of colonial gold. The exhibition medium encouraged the participation of commentators
In a critical discourse about the effectiveness of display techniques, and colonial exhibition planners were able to refer to many column inches of descriptions and opinions, which were disseminated from the exhibition site. For example, in the response to the display concerning the mines at Burra Burra, South Australia, *The Illustrated Exhibitor*, a weekly journal published during the exhibition, reported:

> Although as a whole, the collection has apparently little to attract, the sources of great wealth are evident in the number and extent of her mineral productions...A model of a mine and smelting house is attached to the collection of ores, which includes cabinet specimens of the different qualities.\(^6\)

If the display as whole from South Australia failed to impress, then the accompanying statistics certainly did not. The journal devoted a paragraph to relating the quantity and value of the ore that had been mined, enthusiastically noting the ‘extraordinary success of the undertaking’. In five years from 1846 to 1850, the mine raised 56,428 tons, two hundred weight of copper ore, worth 738,108 pounds.\(^7\) These facts and figures were important to Empire commerce, an activity in which the settlement colonies were active contributors. In recognition of this perhaps, the exhibition judges awarded the display of specimens “A Prize Medal” in the utilitarian category, Class 1: Mining, Quarrying, Metallurgical Operations, and Mineral products.\(^8\)

*Displays of specimens of raw materials such as copper ore were not unusual at industrial fairs, but in the highly competitive arena of the Great Exhibition they were not the most effective way of engaging visitors. Critics found that the South Australian displays “had little to attract”, and others too found the things in other Courts far more memorable. Mrs Turton, an Australian visiting London, wrote home, that:*
...as new comers always likely to see what was most remarkable and striking – such as the splendid furniture in “Russia”, all made of Malachite, a beautiful green stone, of which by the way, I saw very good cut and mounted specimens in “Australia”, from Burra Burra Mines.⁹

The colonially disposed Mrs Turton seems only to have remembered the award winning cut and mounted specimens from Australia in association with the striking malachite furniture she had seen in the Russia Court.

The new exhibition environment certainly encouraged the display of raw materials, but it also demanded that they be fashioned into designed objects, especially the kind that would command attention. This lesson became clear to the Americans as some months into the exhibition The Californian Gold Service arrived at the Crystal Palace. As The Illustrated Exhibiter wrote in a caption to a full page illustration of the tea service:

At a late period (Sept. 14th) the fine specimen of manufactured Californian gold shown below made its appearance in the Great Exhibition. Not more than six months previous it had lain undisturbed in its dark mine in the valley of the Sacramento! ... As an example of decorative art workmanship it is remarkably fine, while its mere value may be estimated at not less than a thousand pounds.¹⁰

In illuminating the miraculous transformation of raw materials into beautiful objects this commentary is not unusual. The seductive qualities of gold were accentuated by the high-Victorian decorative style of The Californian Gold Service. It was a successful display that glistered through the following decade. Those objects destined for International Exhibitions needed to demonstrate both the material resources of the place of origin, and the intellectual and artistic capacity of the people who lived there. It was even better if these objects came from within the Empire.
In the years between the Great Exhibition, 1851, and the London International Exhibition, 1862, gold mining in the Colony of Victoria physically reshaped an ancient landscape and unearthed a commodity so desirable that it became one of the most visible symbols of Imperial achievement. In the warm light of the London summer of 1862 objects associated with the story of colonial gold – a professionally designed gold trophy amongst them – were welcomed in South Kensington, where their display transformed frontier dreams into imperial rhetoric. The extensive display at this exhibition, confirmed the Australian colonial gold-narrative as a persistent feature of international exhibitions, a means through which views of golden colonial landscapes were disseminated around the globe.

III: Golden Empire

The London International Exhibition was seen as a promotional opportunity for the Colony of Victoria, and it was taken up with gusto. In 1861, The Governor, Sir Henry Barkly confidently saw the London show as a chance for the colony “to assert its rank and importance amongst the provinces of the British Empire.” As he boldly stated, the International Exhibition display would demonstrate:

the astonishing progress which this colony has made in all the arts of civilization and appliances of wealth in the last ten years – progress unsurpassed by any other British possession – nay unrivalled, I believe, by any other country on the face of the globe.
This spirited patriotism is indicative of the political and economic significance of international exhibitions. They were the nineteenth century Olympics of culture and commerce, places to spruik colonial assets and achievements.

In preparation in 1861, many objects from around the colony were assembled in Melbourne, and some designers were called upon to make special objects for the display. Two objects that were designed as features of the exhibition campaign were a gold trophy, which was known as the “Gold Pyramid”, and a decorated display cabinet, gothic in style, which was known simply as the “Gold Cabinet” or “Gold Case.” Trophies were freestanding three-dimensional displays celebrating a theme. These objects are conspicuous in Samuel Calvert’s contemporary illustration of the exhibition hall in Melbourne, where potential exhibits were assembled and assessed before being dispatched to London. Early in 1862, as the exhibition scheme took shape in London, the Victorian Agent General was able to report to the Chief Secretary in Melbourne that the special allocation for the Colony’s display was “especially satisfactory.” In the event, the “Gold Pyramid” and the “Gold Cabinet” were positioned in prestigious locations of the exhibition building.

The Gold Pyramid at the London Exhibition, 1862, is arguably one of the most significant Australian exhibits of the century. It was the monumental kingpin of a narrative that emphasized the importance of the discovery of gold in the Colony of Victoria. It affirmed that the Colony was a rewarding place of settlement, and it also symbolized the economic benefit of the Colony to the British Empire. It was an object that effectively represented the link between natural and cultural elements of the goldfields.

One measure of the significance the Gold Pyramid was the central location assigned to it by the British Commissioners. The diminutive British colonies that attended the London
International Exhibition were primarily congregated in the North East Transept of the building. However, the Colony of Victoria had been quite undisciplined in some aspects of its selection of objects, and in total its display was spread over 5 distinct sites. All sorts of paraphernalia were included to demonstrate progress in the Colony. However, most topical were the gold related exhibits and the Pyramid was given the highest status and proudly positioned under the Eastern Dome of the exhibition building at the apex of the British Nave. It was the first object visitors encountered when they entered the building from Exhibition Road, and it was a golden vanishing point when seen from the other end of the long central arcade.

The “Gold Pyramid” was designed by the architect J. G. Knight, who later designed the Victorian Court at the Paris Exhibition 1867. It was forty-five feet high and ten feet square at the base; basically, a very large stage-prop of timber, canvas and plaster finished with a lustrous gold patina. It is understandable therefore that Routledges guide book to the exhibition called it as one of the most “striking” objects on display. But the Pyramid did not only address the colonial fear of inconspicuousness. The trophy was an ingenious exercise in exhibition design that provided information about the Colony of Victoria; it embodied numerical facts and human experiences and made these tangible for cosmopolitan exhibition visitors. The mass of the Pyramid matched the exact amount of gold that had been exported from the Colony in the intervening years since the Great Exhibition, 1851. In monetary terms a sum that was understood to be equivalent to one eighth of the British national debt. And, although it was gigantic, the Pyramid was also engaging up close. On each side, at human height, the surface incorporated individually modelled reliefs of the gold nuggets discovered by miners in the central goldfields. Furthermore, alongside some of the nuggets were the names of the lucky individuals who had
found them, an alignment that confirmed that good fortune awaited new settlers in the land of opportunity.

The architect’s reasons for adopting this form may have been numerous. Firstly, there was a practice of displaying raw materials in stacked configurations at industrial fairs. Secondly, like many other members of Melbourne society, the designer saw the use of classical and geometric forms as a metaphor for intellectual and artistic sophistication. Thirdly, while contemporary archaeologists were completely baffled by the history of the Egyptian pyramids, they nevertheless viewed them as wondrous things, similar to the miraculous rise of the Colony of Victoria. In drawing these threads together J. G. Knight created an innovative and elegant exhibit, which was freestanding and easily transportable. Overwhelmingly though the “Gold Pyramid” reflected the superior status of gold in nineteenth century Europe, both as a valuable commodity and as a symbol of fortune and wealth.

It would be misleading though to see the “Gold Pyramid” in complete isolation. The theme of colonial gold-narrative was developed through the use of other exhibits. Displayed in the Victorian Court were a series of photographs showing daily life on the goldfields, related models of mines, and geological survey maps. The “Gold Cabinet” was positioned adjacent to the Court on a public thoroughfare and was filled with real specimens of gold. These exhibits were enlivened with public demonstrations, including those by a costumed colonial prospector, who demonstrated the technique of alluvial panning.

Alluvial deposits turned up the most impressive nuggets but as these became less profitable attention turned to the extraction of gold from quartz. Therefore, also important to the Colony of Victoria’s gold-narrative was the industrialization of mining practices on the goldfields. Thus a quartz crushing machine, replicating those that were in current use at Clunes, it
was thought would make an effective exhibit and be of particular interest to “scientific visitors” and potential investors, a view strongly advocated by Sir Redmond Barry, The Victorian Exhibition Commissioner. In January 1862, the Agent General in London reported that the English Commissioners are:

I think, really anxious that the quartz crushing machine should be exhibited, and while at the present moment they have no unallotted space which they can reserve for it, I am assured they will do their utmost to receive it, and I believe some place will be found. I have pointed out that it must be exhibited in motion.

In the event, the quartz crushing machine was squeezed into the North Open Court of the Eastern Annexe, where it was operated by workers and noisily demonstrated the crushing process daily throughout the exhibition. This exhibit was distinguished as a purpose designed machine developed for particular conditions, and as such it became the sole Australian entrant in D. C. Clark’s book The Exhibited Machinery of 1862. Clark reported that it was a half size exact copy of the machinery used at Clunes, with a capacity to crush 70 tons of quartz per week. In the Reports by Juries, the differences between it and the English type and the use of iron in the gearing system and crushing rods was expressly noted, and despite the fact that the design was not seen as “all that progressive”, a commendatory medal for the quartz crushing machine from Clunes was awarded to the Victorian Commissioners.

Eye catching and engaging exhibits such as the “Gold Pyramid”, the “Gold cabinet” and the “Quartz crushing machine” were key signifiers in a gold-narrative celebrating the Victorian goldfields. Newspaper critics, official catalogues and popular guidebooks contributed to their success in representing the goldfields landscape by linking them together into seductive
stories. The *Popular Guide* pointed out that specimens of “the real metal itself” were neatly presented in “a rich Gothic case”, and that this was displayed along with a set of “photographs of the various goldfields illustrating the various phases of life amongst the diggers.” Positive reports such as this one reinforced the exhibition’s central message that the Victorian goldfields were a glistening source of prosperity.

**IV: Golden Culture**

In the cavernous halls of the London International Exhibition it was not sufficient to be conspicuous. Objects on display were also appreciated for their design, which was understood as an intellectual process. For example, the English industrial designer Owen Jones, who had contributed to the interiors at the Great Exhibition, 1851, also led a group at the South Kensington Museum in the extensive documentation of the design motifs and patterns used by the different cultures of the world. Apart from European traditions, examples from the Pacific, as well as India, China and Japan, were surveyed and reproduced in striking colour lithographic plates in the volume *The Grammar of Ornament*, first published in 1856. This codification aligned particular motifs and patterns with racial and cultural groups and nationalities, making it possible to compare the distinctive styles of the Japanese and Indian decorative traditions, for instance.

This exercise in the articulation of design distinction effected the appreciation of the work of the British settlement colonies whose non-indigenous inhabitants were mostly European. Unlike India, where an ancient artistic culture was clearly evident, the white settlement colonialists were viewed as utilitarian, and their artistic practice was considered derivative of the metropolis. This had implications for how commentators interpreted the Victorian exhibits at International Exhibitions. As the Victorian exhibition commissioners understood from the
display of The Californian Gold Service, to impress the British commissioners and the public, and in turn to attract emigrants and investment, the Colony needed to demonstrate a level of cultural sophistication through artistry, which was in some way distinctive.

The presence of European silver and gold smiths in the Colony of Victoria, including on the goldfields themselves, therefore had a marked influence on the process of representation. They were able to bring market knowledge, sophisticated craft techniques, and a local flavour to the production of luxury goods, seeking to emphasise the direct association between gold and place. This included the ornamental use of motifs such as small nuggets and miniature miner’s tools and the adoption of other key symbols drawn from local flora and fauna. In part this responded to a growing market in 1850s for exotic goldfields souvenirs - as this 1855 newspaper report describing the work of Louis Mier suggests:

A ring of pure gold is contrived as to show in separate compartments small specimens of the produce of the different goldfields in its native nuggety form. In another case, a specimen of gold commingled with its quartz matrix is affixed to a pretty little figure of a kangaroo, and forms an elegant and significant souvenir of the colony.26

This market-led stimulus to the use of distinctive motifs was by the end of the 1860s being mirrored in the official government strategy for colonial representation, particularly for objects destined for display at international exhibitions - an “Australian grammar of ornament” was developing, which was to became ubiquitous.

In preparation for the London International Exhibition, Sir Redmond Barry, ordered that woven textiles ought to be made for display in the Victorian Court, and stipulated that they should
feature “appropriate patterns, suggested by flowers of native growth.” Significantly, Barry not only saw the advantage of promoting unique features of Australia, but in advocating the value of design, he also reflected the progressive atmosphere of the British design reform movement, which was opposed to the use of literal naturalistic ornament. It was Jones’ primary intention to distil an underlying set of universal design principles from his research. All ornament he concluded, should be based in geometry and in Principle 13 he asserted that:

Flowers or other natural objects should not be used as ornaments, but conventional representations founded upon them sufficiently suggestive to convey the intended image to the mind, without destroying the unity of the object they are employed to decorate.

The Grammar of Ornament heightened the connection between design and identity and spurred Barry on to articulating and promoting the use of unique flora for Australian design. His call for appropriate patterns in 1861 reflected this emerging idealism and move towards geometric pattern making developed in the designs of William Morris and others. Ironically, perhaps, this suggests that Barry may well have started to find some Australian silver of the mid-Victorian period, with its sometimes grotesque mix of figurative and applied ornament, rather capricious.

At the London International Exhibition, 1862, the Victorian object, which most successfully represented the cultural sophistication of goldfields artistic practice, was a “gold inkwell” designed and made in the 1850s in Castlemaine by the silversmith Ernest Leviny. It was reproduced in the Art Journal Illustrated Catalogue, where the incorporation of real gold nuggets into the design was particularly admired. This particular virtuoso object demonstrated that not only was there an abundance of raw material, but that this metal could also be skillfully rendered into
useful and artistic objects. Along with some other gold objects, the inkwell was also illustrated in the book *Masterpieces of Industrial Art and Sculpture at the International Exhibition 1862*, where the author J. B. Waring expressed his admiration in the accompanying caption:

> In the history [of Australian Colonization] the discovery of gold will always form a principle episode and we now see that not only have thousands of stalwart arms been at work in its production, but delicate fingers and minds have not been wanting in Australia itself to fashion the rugged nuggets into well designed and finely executed works of art, characterized by very good taste and much originality of treatment. 29

The elaborately decorated inkwell with its striking nuggets and exuberant rococo curves was charged the very important task to convince British mediators such as Waring that there was an active intelligentsia in the Colony, something it apparently achieved with ease. In the company of the other exhibits from the Colony of Victoria the inclusion of skilfully crafted precious objects was an essential link in the campaign strategy to use gold as a powerful signifier of colonial success.

**Conclusion**

The goldfields of the Colony of Victoria thrived in a larger colonial system; they were dynamic places responsive to the movement and settlement of people, most of who came from other parts of the world. These relationships developed and were confirmed within an international exchange system managed within the British Empire. In this period International Exhibitions were amongst the most effective means of reaching masses of people, and the production and dissemination of a vision of
colonial prosperity was squarely aimed at fostering emigration and investment.

At the London International Exhibition, 1862, the gold-narrative was stimulated by the use of exhibits including the "Gold Pyramid", the "Gold Cabinet", the "Quartz crushing machine", and Leviny’s extraordinary inkwell. The evident success of the scheme firmly established the popularity of the theme and ensured its inclusion in future exhibitions. At the Paris Exhibition, 1867, the Pyramid had grown to such an extent that it could not be fitted into the enclosed Victorian department. At the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, 1876, the Victorian display included 35 facsimile gold nuggets that had been discovered in the previous twenty years, with specific details of the history of each nugget itemized in the catalogue. This display included the famous "Welcome" nugget that was "found on 11 June, 1858, at 180 feet beneath the surface" at Bakery Hill, Ballarat. It weighed an astonishing 2195 ozs. A decade later (and a few years after the Melbourne International Exhibition) at London’s Colonial and Indian Exhibition, 1886, the climax of this officially orchestrated crescendo occurred when the theme of gold was most dramatically presented; visitors entered the Victorian Court by passing through the massive "Gold Triumphal Arch."

Over a period of thirty years, as people around the world encountered these engaging exhibits, the association of the central Victorian landscape with gold was continually reinforced, reflecting the never ending intersection of nature and culture. Victorian gold was beyond local significance; by the end of the century it had become more than a cause of the reshaped central goldfields topography and demography, it was metallurgically fused with the identity of Australia and the British Empire, and critical to the global economy.


5 Fowler, op. cit. p.19

6 ‘Australian Contributions to the Crystal Palace’, The Illustrated Exhibitor, No.4, June 28, 1851, p.74.

7 The Illustrated Exhibitor, p.74.

8 ‘Official Awards of the Judges’, (Introduction to bound collection), The Illustrated Exhibitor, p.ix.


10 ‘The Californian Gold Service – Main Avenue, American Department’, The Illustrated Examiner, No.22, November 1, 1851, p.402.

11 Barkly Catalogue of the Victorian Exhibition, 1861; with preparatory essays indicating the progress, resources and physical characteristics of the Colony, John Ferres, Melbourne, 1861, pp.31-32.

12 Barkly, op. cit. pp.31-32.


14 Letter: Agent General (Childers) to Chief Secretary, 27 January 1862, Public Records Office Melbourne, series 927, Boxes 2-5.


The Pyramid was described in detail in the Illustrated Catalogue of the London International Exhibition: 'representing the quantity of gold exported from Victoria from the 1st of October 1851, to the 1st of October 1861, viz 26,162,432 ounces troy, equal to 1,793,995 lbs. Avoirdupois, or 800 tons 17 cwt. 3 qr. 7 lbs., equal in solid measurement to 1,492 ½ cubic feet of gold, of the value 104,649,728 l. sterling.' Illustrated Catalogue of the Industrial Department, Vol.3. Colonial and Foreign Divisions, (London: Her Majesty's Commissioners, 1862) p.72.


Sir Redmond Barry, 'Opening Address', Catalogue of the Victorian Exhibition 1861: with preparatory essays indicating the progress, resources and physical characteristics of the Colony, (Melbourne: John Ferres, Government Printer, 1861) p.25

Letter: Agent General (Childers) to Chief Secretary, 27 January 1862, Public Records Office Melbourne, series 927, Boxes 2-5.

Hunt, op. cit., p. 322.


Barkly op. cit., p.25.


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