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INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION POSTCARDS
TANGIBLE REFLECTIONS OF AN EPHEMERAL PAST

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The twentieth century was the golden age of the exhibition postcard. Postcard images of national pavilions, interior displays, individual exhibits and visitors circulated the globe in abundance. Exhibitions facilitated cultural connections and the postcard was an accessible and seductive method of linking communities. They were an opportunity for visitors to share their experiences and to demonstrate their national pride. This chapter demonstrates their value as key sources for understanding visitor experience at international exhibitions, through focusing on Australian visitor experiences within the context of the British Empire.

Postcards are so familiar that they need no introduction. Dispassionately described as 'a card of standard size, often having a photograph, picture, etc., on one side, on which a message may be sent and written by post' (Delbridge and Bernard 1988, 764), they are ubiquitous and functional. For these reasons postcards have been traditionally undervalued as a significant historical resource. However, building on Carlile (1971), since the 1980s their worth has begun to be more recognised in international exhibition studies. Greenhalgh (1988), for example, uses postcards as illustrations of exhibition sites. MacKenzie (1984) analyses postcards more generally for their historical significance within the context of the British Empire. In his writing on propaganda and the shaping of public opinion, he argues that

the postcard represented a set of technical achievements – in photography, printing and mass production, not to mention the extension and speed of the postal service – which together symbolised several great achievements of the Victorian age.

As MacKenzie (1984) also observes, 'the democratisation of the visual image was undertaken by the postcard' (21).

The technology of the postcard guaranteed the popular reach of key imperial themes that were illustrated in exhibition cards. Postcards utilised a variety of modern reproductive technologies such as photography and photolithography. They were cheap to make and cheap to post and this ensured their wide availability and wide circulation.

The imperial themes disseminated on postcards included displays of raw materials derived from the colonies, the manufactured goods subsequently created from them, views of colonial courts with their photographs of new colonial buildings, towns or cities, and scientific displays of distinctive flora and fauna. Other postcards depicted the vernacular buildings and exotic stage settings frequently used to represent colonial territories and possessions at exhibition sites in France, the United Kingdom and the United States. In association with these sites, Rydell (1998) has critically explored exhibition postcards that feature the depiction of foreign peoples, often as 'natives' living in mock villages or engaged in performance or craft activities at the exhibitions. In Britain, such images were disseminated in the illustrated press, notably in association with the
Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886. By the end of the century, however, the 'anthropological' exhibition postcard ably exploited the medium of photography and it was 'postcards [that] propelled images of race and empire to an audience far beyond the fairgrounds' (Rydell 1998, 47). Rydell's analysis alerts us to the constructedness of even these photographic images and the ideological freight they carry. As a popular disposable medium and as a form of imperial propaganda, the veracity of the exhibition postcard image was always subject to compromise.

The back of the postcard, while less explored, is a lively medium of communication that offers unique insights into the arcane experience of exhibition visitors. Geary and Webb (1998) observe that 'the role of postcards in the process of communication has received relatively little systematic attention. As symbolic and material connections, they represent an important element in a fabric of social relationships' (4–5). As this chapter will show in its focus on postcards inscribed by exhibition visitors and sent to Australia, exhibition postcards were a vital means of positioning Australians as imperial citizens within the cultural network of the British Empire. While the front side of the exhibition postcard reinforced a sense of colonial membership in the Empire and notions of fraternity and citizenship through the sharing of imperial imagery, the reverse side offered an opportunity for visitors to respond to exhibition displays in a manner that was often, but not exclusively, patriotic. Through writing on and dispatching exhibition postcards, visitors actively participated in the dissemination of ideas propagated at international exhibitions. These visitors' inscriptions are distinct from the work of professional journalists and report writers. As quick impressions or personal anecdotes, responding immediately to the atmosphere or the displays, they offer a complementary perspective to that in the official record. Indeed, they are among the few surviving documents relating to the popular consumption of exhibitions.

THE FRONT OF THE POSTCARD

The images on the front of postcards need to be approached with care when used as historical documents. The design of postcards occurred within a tightly framed legal and technological context and this prescribed their role and function, but it did not control their contents. Postcard images were often representational rather than accurate depictions of exhibition buildings and displays. This tendency for manipulation of the exhibition image was already evident at the Great Exhibition of 1851 where images of displays were packaged for popular consumption in sets of engravings. In folio engravings such as those illustrating Edward Concanen's Remembrances of the Great Exhibition, artists were adept at bringing order to chaos and using perspective to distort the scale of individual objects, enhancing some and diminishing others. A clinically symmetrical view of the American Department for example, features the apparently gigantic sculpture, The Greek Slave by Hiram Power, in the central vanishing point of the scene (Figure 1). This is a very powerful image, although the exaggerated height of the sculpture is more representative of the public notoriety the work attained (noted by Hobhouse [1937]), rather than its actual size.

Steel engravings presented seductive images of international exhibitions scenes either in sets or in the popular press, but by the 1860s photography was increasingly utilised. Photography offered new opportunities for the development of exhibition merchandise. At the London International Exhibition 1862, the London Stereoscopic and Photographic Company comprehensively documented the exhibition site and many of these photographic views were subsequently used for stereoscopic cards. In this form they created a three-dimensional illusion of objects in the
exhibition space, seeking to recapture something of the experience of being there. Stereoscopic cards represented many exhibition subjects available across a wide range of themes. Favoured scenes of the exhibition could be ordered and revisited at home – number 141, for example, depicted the ‘Australian Gold Cabinet’ (Figure 2). Uniquely numbered views became a convention that survived into exhibition postcard publishing well into the twentieth century. While the stereoscopic card was technically more ambitious than the postcard, being more complex to make and to use, it was a novel and engaging way of disseminating information beyond exhibition sites – an important precursor to the postcard. Exhibition photography offers a comparative means to assess the accuracy of artistic representations of exhibition displays. The Colony of Victoria’s ‘gold pyramid’, a large trophy displayed at the London International Exhibition 1862, is an example. A watercolour impression of the Eastern Transept misrepresents the scene in a number of significant ways (Sweet 2001, 90–91). Firstly, as it is a composite image, ‘the gold pyramid’ appears within the Victorian Court with other exhibits from the colony when, as can be seen from a contemporary photograph and the exhibition floor plan, ‘the gold pyramid’ was positioned in a far more significant location, under the Eastern Dome of the exhibition building at the apex of the British Nave. Secondly, the artistic licence of the watercolourist ignores the ‘Tasmanian Timber Tower’, which clearly dominated the space (Sweet 1997, 241–251).

Figure 1: American Court at the Great Exhibition 1851 featuring The Greek slave. Steel engraving published by Edward Carcasen, 1851. (Author’s collection)
Figure 2: Stereoscopic card showing the Colony of Victoria's Gold Cabinet at the London International Exhibition 1862.
London Stereoscopic and Photographic Company, 1862. (Author's collection)
The sheer quantity and variety of exhibition images, ranging from documentary photography to colourful artistic impressions, makes generalisations about their veracity impossible. For example, at the British Empire Exhibition, Wembley 1924–25, although the total number of cards dispatched is unknown, it has been determined that nearly 3000 different images were available (Perkins and Tonkin 1994, ix). However, it should be noted that photographic images were not necessarily more reliable images than watercolours and engravings. Aside from the earliest manufacturing processes which hindered the accuracy of the images (Carlile 1971, 20–21), Sandberg (2003, 212–213) has demonstrated that as early as 1895 photographic postcard views of exhibition sites could be deliberately deceptive through the superimposition of misleading settings. Nonetheless, many international exhibition postcards do retain a degree of historical veracity, particularly those photographic cards published in the twentieth century that document the exhibition sites or the displays within particular courts. Photographic postcard views of Australian displays at the Franco-British Exhibition 1908, for example, can be read as fairly objective. These international exhibition postcards offer an insight into the design of the displays and certainly provide a valuable source of historical information (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3: Postcard of the display of preserved fruit in the South Australian Court at the Franco-British Exhibition, London, 1908. (Author’s collection)
Ethnographic postcards, however, are in a different category and demand critical contextualisation. Rydell (1998) has analysed these in convincing detail, exposing the conventions that underpinned the construction of images of people and their relationship to imperial authority. This is a crucial reminder of one pitfall of using international exhibition postcards as historical sources: representations of other cultures at exhibitions attained authority and influence through their novelty and association with imperial power, rather than because of any cultural authenticity, and these highly constructed displays were disseminated widely through published postcards, many of which still exist in circulation today. Rydell (1998, 47) urgently points out that ‘even today postcards of African, Asian, and oceanic displays at world’s fairs can be misread as authentic reflections of these cultures’.

THE BACK OF THE POSTCARD

While a modern standardised system controlled postcards as a means of communication, postcard design also encouraged and legitimised the role of individuals through the production of information in the form of personal messages, short notes, and impressions, which were forwarded to others across great distances. The act of buying and sending postcards and the content of these personal messages can be read as both personal and general, prescribed by shared rituals of cultural consumption at international exhibitions. Richards (1990) has argued that the Great Exhibition 1851, was significant because:

[It] prescribed the rituals by which consumers venerated the commodity for the rest of the century. It was the first world’s fair, the first department store, the
first shopping mall [and, through it] the commodity became and remained the
still center of the turning earth, the focal point of all gazing and the end point
of all pilgrimages (17–18).

While the majority of visitors to international exhibitions may have gazed at an abundance
of objects with desire they could not necessarily possess them. Visitors needed a more accessible
tangible connection to their experience, and the availability of the cheap commodity of the
postcard answered this need.

As objects, postcards cross the private–public divide because they arrive at their destinations
without envelopes. Messages and signatories are therefore in the public domain. Further, Stewart
(1993, 137–138) has argued the postcard inscription transforms the public into the private, by
reducing ‘the public, the monumental, and the three-dimensional into the miniature’, including
‘a complex process of captioning and display which represents [the] transformation of public
into [the] private’ realm. This process is evident in a postcard sent from the Paris Exposition
Universelle 1900, which shows visitors aboard ‘the moving platform’ (Figure 5). This raised
pedestrian pavement slowly traversed the city for three kilometres. It was an innovative application
of conveyor technology that yielded an engaging visitor experience, providing spectacular views
of the principal exhibition buildings. As the inscription says, ‘of course you can’t see it going
around but it does in a circle & you see a great deal of the Exhibition in this way. It is such a
lovely place and I wish you were both here’.

Figure 5: Postcard of the Moving Platform with inscription, Exposition Universelle, Paris, 1900.
(Author’s collection)
Marx’s belief that ‘the product only obtains its “last finish” in consumption’ (Walker 1989, 69) is literally true of postcards. Postcards invited the participation of consumers in the creation of the final product and postcards that have been inscribed and sent ought to be considered as unique objects – no two inscribed postcards are ever the same. While sending postcards may have occurred within a highly structured set of conventions, imagine the probability of duplication, when consumers of postcards not only selected subjects from a vast range of options, but they also created their own messages.

The form of postcards circumscribed and justified a new casual style of writing that allowed authors freedom to be critical without having to justify their argument. Derrida (1987) recognised the appeal inherent in the postcard’s limitations when he explained why he liked to write on postcards:

First of all because of the support, doubtless, which is more rigid, the cardboard is firmer, it preserves, it resists manipulations; and then it limits and justifies, from the outside, by means of the borders, the indigence of the discourse (21).

The informal nature of postcards gave writers permission to express their active agency as consumers of exhibitions, as demonstrated in the critical views they sometimes penned. An example sent from the Franco-British Exhibition, London 1908, to St Kilda, Australia, carries the message: ‘Went over the Exhibition before leaving London, it was simply wonderful, only I do not think they did justice to the Victorian exhibits’.

Another sender’s pithy critique of the diminutive Cape Town Exhibition 1904: ‘This exhibition reminds me of Sunday School Picnic’ (Figure 6) is of a quite different order to sustained literary responses, such as those of Dostoevsky, who visited the Great Exhibition 1851, or Whitman, who was a regular visitor at the 1853 Crystal Palace Exhibition in New York (Roy 2004, 68–69). The nature of postcard inscriptions is, unsurprisingly, closer to reflections on exhibition displays that were expressed in personal letters. In this example, Mrs Turton is writing to her acquaintance in the Colony of Victoria about the Great Exhibition 1851:

... 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 Barra Barra Mines ... (Brown 1963, 223).

Mrs Turton demonstrates a cumulative and comparative thought process. Her memory scanned the known world associating one exhibit with another. Not uncommonly, the raw and the cooked have been drawn together in the mind of the visitor. This spontaneous, free-association approach is characteristic of personal responses inscribed on international exhibition postcards. Postcards were most often scribbled-out quickly, and sent from the exhibition site itself. This was an engendered impulsive act that grew in popularity after visitors were given the opportunity to post their cards from the top of the Eiffel Tower at the Paris Exhibition 1889 (Carline 1971, 43–44).

Although some postcard writers expressed their agency by engaging in criticism of aspects of the exhibitions, others heartily affirmed the official rhetoric of Empire expressed in them. Most of the examples of inscribed postcards sent to Australia considered here are from inter-
national exhibitions held in Britain between 1908 and 1939. The existence of these postcards underscores the cultural, political and economic relationships that existed between Britain and Australia. For example, in 1924 ‘J’ wrote to a niece in Carlton, Australia, from the British Empire Exhibition, Wembley:

Now Dear, I hope you received the P.C. which I sent from the Exhibition, what a mighty Empire, you could spend a month here easily. Hope by the time this P. C. reaches you we shall have a Con. Gov. in power with a good working majority (Figures 7 and 8).
Figure 7: Postcard of the Palace of India, The Great Lake and Australian Pavilion at the British Empire Exhibition (Wembley), 1924. Photograph by Campbell-Gray, Beagles Postcards. (Author's collection)

Figure 8: Inscription on the reverse of the Postcard of the Palace of India, The Great Lake and Australian Pavilion at the British Empire Exhibition (Wembley), 1924. (Author's collection)
Figure 9: Postcard view of Ireland and Australia Pavilions and the Tower at the Empire Exhibition, Glasgow, 1938. Valentines & Sons Ltd. (Author’s collection)

Figure 10: Inscription on the reverse of the postcard view of Ireland and Australia Pavilions and the Tower at the Empire Exhibition, Glasgow, 1938. Valentines & Sons Ltd. (Author’s collection)
Clearly 'J' was an exhibition enthusiast of the first order. There are also instances where exhibition visitors link their comments to specific displays or pavilions in their postcard offerings, infusing their comments with proud patriotism. In another example, Winnie wrote from the Empire Exhibition, Scotland 1938,

Dear Uncle Charles, You would enjoy this fine Exhibition. The Australian pavilion is beautiful inside with artificial sunlight & real tree ferns, budgerigars etc. I was up the Tower yesterday, & saw all Glasgow below. Your loving niece, Winnie (Figures 9 and 10).

As in the case of Winnie and Uncle Charles, or 'J' and his niece in Carlton, many of these postcards were apparently sent across the world from one family member to another. In another example, 'Auntie Thackeray' writes to her nephew in Sydney,

... just one more card to greet you from Wembley before it closes next Saturday.
Do so wish you could have seen it, so much to interest and amuse.

Thackeray confirms that her expectations were met by the British Empire Exhibition, which delivered the key tenets of the exhibition experience, a balanced opportunity for learning and recreation.

This chapter has examined the ways in which international exhibition postcards were an integral aspect of the dynamics of the British Empire, foremost as imperial propaganda. It has also placed the construction of postcard images of exhibition sites, scenes and displays within a tradition of the representation of international exhibitions, and drawn attention to their complexity as visual records and as evidence of visitor consumption. These streams have framed the analysis of inscribed postcards, with their emphasis on Australian experiences at international exhibitions. In some cases visitors' responses are whimsical or critical, in others they confirm that exhibitions were not only emotive demonstrations of imperial or national aspirations but were also pleasurable places to visit. In all cases, they demonstrate the interest of international exhibition postcards as tangible reflections of the ephemeral past.

ENDNOTES

1 In other areas postcards have been used as markers of the cultural history of the twentieth century (Phillips 2000) and to illustrate the specific history of international nursing (Zwerdling 2004). One collection of postcards has been presented as art in a public forum (Bienes Center for Literary Arts 2003), while Parr (1999) drolly focuses on 'boring postcards' of mundane subjects and sterile scenes, which he re-packaged in books. Bennett (1988) and other writers such as Richards (1990) and Fox (1989; 1990), while not explicitly dealing with postcards, have explored the role of international exhibitions in the political and economic matrix of empire and global capitalism in ways relevant to the discourse on exhibition postcards.

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