“Art as Nature Better Understood” - Seeing Australia in the 1830s: Conrad Martens and the Picturesque

When Conrad Martens arrived in Sydney Harbour in 1835 aboard the Black Warrior from Tahiti via New Zealand, he brought with him the experiences of a professional landscape painter who had spent the previous two years travelling to South America and the Pacific as a member of the crew of the HMS Hyacinth and HMS Beagle, following on a decade of painting in his native England. Martens was then aged 34, and enthusiastic at the thought of bringing his skills to bear upon a landscape which was largely unknown and at that time unseen by European eyes. During his time with the Beagle he had seen all manner of places, topographies and wilderness.

Introduction

Australia can justly claim Conrad Martens (1801-1878) as its own. Though of Austrian descent and born and raised in England, he arrived in New South Wales at the age of 34, married two years later, and went on to become one of our first truly Australian (non-indigenous) artists. A consistent painter of the local landscape, he successfully captured its unique qualities (the light, colour, atmosphere and topography) within his work, despite having spent the first thirty one years of his life in England and a number thereafter travelling to South America and the Pacific islands aboard HMS Hyacinth and HMS Beagle. Martens as a landscape painter was very much a product of the English Watercolour School and Picturesque/Romantic movements, following on from the pioneering work of fellow artists such as J.M.W. Turner, John Constable, A.V. Copley Fielding, and of course influenced by the seventeenth century Italian landscape painters such as Claude Lorrain and Poussin.

Martens’ most accomplished artworks - namely his distinctly romantic and atmospheric landscapes in watercolour - were produced in New South Wales between his arrival in 1835 and death there forty three years later in 1878. Prior to this his output was rather run-o’-the-mill, though his Beagle pictures of 1833-35 have both ethnographic and topographic significance. Individual paintings from his large collection of finished watercolours and oils stand among the masterpieces of Australian colonial period art, while the many hundreds of commissioned works and thousands of preliminary drawings and studies are testament to his enjoyment of, and response to an adopted homeland. Over 3500 individual works by Martens (finished paintings, drawings and prints) are known to have survived in local and overseas collections. They represent a consistent application of Picturesque theory and philosophy to the Australian landscape and mark an important phase in the development of an indigenous, non-Aboriginal, Australian art during the middle part of the nineteenth century.

The Heidelberg School of Impressionist painters, who operated from the 1880s through to the turn of the century, are often cited as the first truly Australian artists, due to their distinct - and popular - depiction of
the local landscape during the 1880s and beyond. They proclaimed themselves as such, and recent blockbuster exhibitions such as *Golden Summers* have tended to reinforce this opinion amongst the general viewing public and art critics. However their flowering and success was not an isolated event - there were many so-called 'Australian painters' well before their time, and successful ones at that. We have only to browse through Dr. Joan Kerr's recently published Dictionary of Australian Artists to 1870¹ to realise the extent to which art was part of everyday life in the Colony during its first century. Dr Kerr's book brings to light the many hundreds of artists working in Australia prior to the advent of the Australian Impressionist movement. No longer can the Heidelberg School be viewed in isolation, or labelled the first flowering of a truly Australian art, for there were many prior artists who successfully captured elements of the local landscape in their work.

For a number of reasons those artists who worked in Australia during the century following on the discoveries of Captain Cook in 1770 and the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788 have until recently been misrepresented and poorly appreciated. For example, the local painter Frederick McCubbin around the turn of the century had the following somewhat disparaging comments to make of colonial period art and artists:

> But the early Australian artists ... strove to portray in their canvases that which the tourist so eagerly seeks for: Nature in her grandeur rather than in her homely moods. They ignored, because they did not understand, the effects of man in his relation to Nature - the sun-bleached landscapes, the farm with its neighbouring clump of Gum trees, the fields that merge into wayward forests, the winding road with bullock wagons, men and women toiling, horses and cattle, and all things that savour of man. Thus it is that these pictures do not arouse our sympathies, for it is precisely the pictures of things familiar to us, of homely subjects, 'Things we have seen nor cared to see,' as Browning says, which most appeal to us, and more often therefore rise to true greatness. All these pioneer pictures leave us cold, they inspire us with no love and with very little interest, beyond the spectacular. They might belong to any country, so little are they Australian...

Harsh words indeed, and indefensible in the case of artists such as Conrad Martens, John Skinner Prout and Eugene von Guerard, who produced some of the finest works of Australian art in the period to which McCubbin refers. There is an objectionable conceit in the man to proclaim of these artists "...so little are they Australia", and to off-handedly dismiss the achievements of the colonial period artists in general. To state that "...their art was essentially alien to its new environment" and thereby imply that an artist needed to be born and raised in Australia to be able to accurately paint the local landscape is shallow criticism. McCubbin did not realise that artists such as Conrad Martens had mastered "the exquisite cool blue-green of the Wattles" and could "understand the Gum" by the time their critic was born in 1855. McCubbin's further claim that "no distinct manifestations in local Art were apparent in this country till the early sixties of last century" is similarly open to debate, and perhaps reflects his Victorian bias and unfamiliarity with the Sydney scene. Another critic of the colonial era artists was artist Syd Long, whose philosophy, as identified by Bernard Smith,³ was that "...unless you were born with 'Australian' eyes you could not hope to 'see' the Australian landscape." Smith points out that despite the psychological absurdity of this argument, it nevertheless became accepted as the distinction between Australian colonial art and the 'true' Australian art of the Impressionists.


³ B. Smith, op cit., p.234.
The majestic landscapes of Eugene von Guerard and Conrad Martens may have left McCubbin and Long cold, however in the 1990s they are a source of inspiration to an environmentally sensitive and post Green Revolution population which values natural landscape and wilderness like never before. More surprising in the fact that McCubbin was a landscape artist who painted in a style similar to John Skinner Prout, another of the major colonial period artists.

It is interesting to note that in listing some of these `pioneer' painters McCubbin fails to mention Conrad Martens. It is unclear whether he was unfamiliar with the artist's work (unlikely) or our subject did not neatly fit into McCubbin's argument that the works of the pioneer painters were cold, uninspirational and ultimately unsuccessful in capturing the atmosphere and feel of the Australian landscape. I would suggest the latter as the cause for omission.

It is unfortunate that McCubbin's comments remain influential to this day and colour our collective assessment of colonial period art in Australia and the arts in Australia generally during the nineteenth century. As a result, those who came before McCubbin and his contemporaries have been lumped into the basket of mere topographical sketchers and painters, giving rise to a general lack of appreciation of the heritage of artists such a Conrad Martens, John Skinner Prout and Augustus Earle, and reflecting a generally limited understanding of the environment in which they operated. Many of our finest colonial period painters have been labelled somewhat derogatorily as merely English or foreign artists who painted in Australia. As they often worked in watercolour (a rather portable medium, therefore ideal for the traveller), it is unfortunate that because of the inherent fragility and susceptibility to light of that medium, some of the most beautiful examples of art from the colonial period are small or faded and do not grace the walls of our metropolitan galleries, therefore are rarely seen by the public. It goes without saying that "out of sight, out of mind" here applies.

Consider the number of monographs and articles produced in recent years on the Australian impressionist painters, whereas our major colonial period artists still await the production of comprehensive catalogue raisonne to do justice to their lifeswork and thereby offer modern reviewers the opportunity to present more considered criticisms. Undoubtedly the nationalistic flavour of many of the Australian impressionist works has been a cause for their continued popularity and the general disregard for those who came before.

As a result, the colonial period artists have been wrongly accused of displaying no grasp of the local light and atmosphere or of reproducing the distinctive qualities of the Australian landscape in their works. This may be true of artists such as Joseph Lycett, however it does not generally apply. This post-1880s trend of criticism led Syd Long to suggest in 1905 that Martens' work was

....entirely unconvincing, from the Australian point of view, and suggests neither the weird mystery of the bush nor the dazzling sunlight of our country. His work, therefore, has little or no Australian value, beyond being among the first legitimate efforts at Art in Australia.4

Even more incomprehensible was Long's reference to "...the darkness of a Martens", a statement any student of that artist would find difficult to agree with for Conrad Martens, above all other colonial period painters, strove to present the strong light and shade of the local landscape in his watercolours. He was usually successful in his attempts, and his most accomplished works are both light and airy. Long's criticism is therefore difficult to comprehend and perhaps indicative of that artist's failure to view some of Martens better works, a large number of which have remained in private collections until recent times. It was perhaps based upon a viewing of his less successful (some would say turgid) oils, which were common in public collections by the turn of the century.

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Modern critics such as Bernard Smith have been less critical of the work of artists such as Conrad Martens, John Glover, Eugen von Guerard and S.T. Gill (as have art patrons who are prepared to purchase their works at a premium). The influential Smith clearly stated that "...a sense of identification with Australian experience begins to emerge" with the work of the more accomplished colonial period artists.5

The failure of Martens' generation to present a pastoral image of the continent - i.e. to paint the 'outback' or the pioneering family at toil, as was so popular with artists such as Tom Roberts and Frederick McCubbin - is much of the reason for the derision by critics and later artists around the turn of the century. However these critics fail to realise that many of these same rural landscapes, apart from being ideologically unattractive subjects for some of these artists (Augustus Earle and S.T. Gill are exceptions), did not exist in Australia until after the 1850s, when the goldrushes brought people and money to the colony and resulted in a rapid expansion of the population away from the urban and coastal centres such as Sydney and Melbourne. Prior to this the outback was largely the domain of the Aborigines, explorers and itinerant shepherds and stockmen. It was mostly an untouched wilderness which travelling artists sought with much enthusiasm.

Following on the population expansion of the goldrush era, the Australian Impressionist movement a quarter of a century later was made possible not only by the expansion of white settlement and the overseas and local experiences of Australian born artists, but also by mundane factors such as the introduction of the railway to country Victoria and New South Wales during the 1880s. This latter event allowed artists to make day trips to the 'bush' (e.g. Heidelberg), take sketches and photographs, and return to their city studios where facilities were available to work in oil and produce large works on canvas. The important role of the sketchbook was diminished. It was not necessarily due to any profound leap forward in the technique of individual artists, but rather an increasing ease of mobility and access to materials which made plein air painting in Australia after the 1870s easier, cheaper, and more common, thereby assisting the growth of Australian impressionism. The fact that many of these artists were first or second generation Australians, born and raised in the colony, was also a consideration, though not a mandatory one.

Tom Roberts, Frederick McCubbin, Arthur Streeton and their ilk were not the first Australian artists to work out of doors painting the local landscape. Both Martens and Skinner Prout did so during the 1840s, with the former going so far as to set his easel up in the cathedral-like Burrangalong Cavern on the Abercrombie River near Wellington during 1849. He produced a number of impressionistic oils on-the-spot, though they were harshly criticised by the Sydney Morning Herald art critic when put on public exhibition later that year.

The actual placement of the landscape painting of artists such as Conrad Martens and John Skinner Prout in the general scheme of Australian art history has been widely discussed, but often without any true appreciation of individual backgrounds and training in the British landscape and watercolour movements, as is evidenced by the aforementioned critical comments of McCubbin and Long. These omissions are further aggravated by the lack of comprehensive biographies or catalogue raisonne for these and many other colonial period artists, with no such document appearing for any of the major painters, though numerous worthy monographs discussing aspects of their work have been published this century and a biography of Conrad Martens has recently appeared.6

In order to assess any artist's work we need do more than simply amalgamate the utterances of past

critics and look at what are considered his/her best works. We need to develop a detailed biographical profile (as many people have tried unsuccessfully to do with the great English artist J.M.W. Turner); to understand their training and influences - identifying their teachers, patrons, fellow artists and collaborators; to reveal goals and modus operandi; to catalogue output, listing as many works as possible (both extant and otherwise known); and finally to bring all this information together in order to assess their place in the history of respective genre and of society in general. This has yet to be done with Conrad Martens or any of the major colonial period artists.

Questions can be posed which are therefore difficult to answer, such as: what debt, if any, do the Australian Impressionist artists own to artists such as Conrad Martens and John Skinner Prout?; what would have happened if an artist such as Conrad Martens had of remained in England and worked as a professional painter? Would he have been considered a major artist of the British watercolour and landscape movements, or merely a competent regional exponent? Is it warranted to proclaim him Australia's foremost watercolourist of the colonial period?

Answers to such questions are ultimately subjective, however a better understanding of Martens' technique, the philosophy behind his craft, and its specific adaptation to Australian conditions may go some of the way to making these assessments. We can do this by specifically looking at the Picturesque movement in Great Britain between 1760-1830, Martens' backgrounding in it, and its subsequent revelation through his art.

**Nature, Art and the Picturesque**

We find the Works of Nature still more pleasant, the more they resemble those of Art.7

...nature talks to the Poet and the Painter, to the Artist in words and the Artist who transfers nature's highest and most beautiful manifestations to canvas .... Art is but nature better understood. (J. Sheridan Moore, poet, Sydney, 1857)8

The ultimate connection between art and nature was facilitated through the academic study and practical pursuit of the Picturesque. The cult of the Picturesque is both the key to Conrad Martens' art and to its appreciation. A Martens picture is a lesson in the Picturesque, in composition and execution, for throughout his time in the Colony the artist was ever in search of Picturesque objects and localities. But what of the Picturesque - what was it, what did it evolve from, and what was it ultimately responsible for?

Such questions have been addressed in detail in Britain throughout this century,9 however within Australia the Picturesque largely remains a mystery. Defining the term `Picturesque' and its revelation through landscape painting has always been contentious, even during the height of its popularity in England between 1760 and 1830 when it was widely regarded as an aesthetic category. Such a task was almost as difficult as defining Sublime or Romantic and did not lend itself to a simple one-line summation. E.M. Manwaring initially referred to the Picturesque movement by the term `cult' in her Italian Landscape in Nineteenth Century England - A Study Chiefly of the Influence of Claude Lorrain and

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8 Cited in B. Smith, op cit., 1975.

Salvator Rosa on English Taste 1700-1800 (London, 1925). Being both a practical method applied to landscape painting and a way of viewing nature, it has also been labelled a philosophy and aesthetic category.

By the end of the eighteenth century, and around the time of the arrival of the First Fleet at Botany Bay, the term Picturesque was widely acknowledged in Britain in association with objects, scenery, poetry, prose, works of art, methods of painting, the manner of viewing nature, garden design, architecture, town planning, travel and tourism. A recent article by Stephanie Ross 10 addressed the debate over the various definitions, trying to sort the grand assertions ("...The Picturesque became the universal mode of vision..."11) from the practical application as ultimately practised by Conrad Martens. Christopher Hussey further extended the movement's boundaries by citing it as "...a visual analogue of "poetic".12 While B. Denvir observed that "...as the eighteenth century slid into the nineteenth, the world of art in Britain was dominated by controversies about the picturesque."13

Malcolm Andrews' recent study The Search for the Picturesque14 looked at the movement from the aspect of tourism, though it also revealed its intimate association with English poetry, prose and landscape painting. Hussey claimed for the Picturesque era nothing less than "...the discovery of visual qualities by British artists and writers." He went on to declare that during this period "...the relation of all the arts to one another, through the pictorial appreciation of nature, was so close that poetry, painting, gardening, architecture, and the art of travel may be said to have been fused into the single art of landscape..."15 Landscape painting and the Picturesque were therefore intimately connected. As the majority of Australia's colonial period artists were British, the movement is therefore an important influence in the development of an indigenous, non-Aboriginal Australian art.

The Picturesque was more than a mere artistic movement. It was an integral part of a rise in British nationalism which saw expression in the arts via the rejection of Neoclassicism and a new found appreciation of indigenous culture (the familiar) during the second half of the eighteenth century. Australia would see the development of an equivalent art movement just over a century later when the run up to Federation and the stirring of a sense of national identity manifested itself in the Heidelberg School of plein air painting.

Within Britain, the promulgation of the Picturesque marked a period when "...art shifted its appeal from reason to the imagination."16 Shakespeare and Milton were taken up, revered and studied; Virgil, Horatio and the Old Master painters were no longer blindly copied. Stonehenge and the ruined castles and abbeys of England were raised alongside Athens and Rome as symbols of antiquity. The British sense of place was promoted by authors such as the Reverend William Gilpin and pastoral poets William

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15 Cited in Ross, op. cit., p.271.
Local scenery was sought for inspiration and tourists were encouraged to study landscape painting in order to raise their perceptions of nature and the scenery around them. Artists were likewise urged to view nature in greater detail and attempt a more faithful representation of it within their art. This meant refining their art away from the studio, in the open air and through travel. This artistic and intellectual activity resulted in an adaptation of the Grand Tour, which prior to the 1790s involved travelling the continent to France, the Alps, Italy and the Middle East. However the political turmoil of that decade - specifically the French Revolution - forced the English to look closer to home for tourism: to North Wales, the Lakes District, and the Scottish Highlands.

The Grand Tour became an integral part of any so-called civilised individual's pursuit of the Picturesque and was de rigueur for a landscape painter, who, after appropriate study and application, would above all others observe nature with an enhanced `picturesque' eye. The quest was in search of essentially picturesque scenery such as "precipices, mountains, torrents, wolves, rumblings" or "rocky walls, woods, a foaming stream, with a rude bridge, a cataract down the mountain." Apart from natural elements, man-made structures were also sought, including castle and church ruins, and gothic structures with their rough and ragged features. These aspects of the Picturesque were a carry over from the Neoclassical works of Italian artists such as Salvador Rosa, Poussin, and Claude Lorrain whose seventeenth and eighteenth century landscapes were dotted with Greek temples, ancient ruins and mythological characters.

When the local landscape was exhausted by the Picturesque tourists, distant lands and cultures were sought, leading the travelling artist to places such as Egypt, Africa, India, South America and Australia. In many ways such localities were seen as even more enticing, due to their foreign, exotic nature and the perceived primitiveness of indigenous civilisations. Also attractive to any landscape artist or picturesque traveller was the thought of discovering a sublime wilderness never before seen by European eyes, though long the domain of the noble savage or barbarian.

As a direct result of these various Tours, local or abroad, young English gentlemen (and women) aspired to develop an appreciation of nature, science and the arts; to become men and women of taste through the study of art and literature. A new English class emerged - the Connoisseur - to which Conrad Martens, the son of an Austrian diplomat, no doubt aspired. They practiced art to varying degrees, built-up a personal library, became informed of recent advances in the arts and sciences, and generally cultivated a wide range of intellectual activity.

This initially unnamed movement developed during the first half of the eighteenth century, spurred on by works such as James Thomson's epic pastoral poem The Seasons, the first part of which was issued in 1730. By the latter part of the century writers and artists came forward to both define and promote a movement which became known as the Picturesque. The practical application of Picturesque tourism and landscape painting in Britain was initially championed by writer/traveller/artist the Reverend William Gilpin (1724-1804) through his many publications during the latter part of the eighteenth century, while

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18 Manwaring, op. cit., p.170.


20 Hussey, op. cit., p.28.

Sir Uvedale Price (1747-1829) and Richard Payne Knight (1750-1824) were the leading theorists between 1794 and 1808. Discussion and elaboration of Picturesque theory reached its peak during this period, with Price and Knight the two main protagonists, pursuing diametrically opposed definitions of the Picturesque. All the while numerous artists (both professional and amateur) quietly worked away at refining its techniques through practical application to landscape painting, though its basic tenants had been set by artists such as Claude Lorrain during the seventeenth century.

Price saw the Picturesque as a new aesthetic category somewhere between the Sublime and the Beautiful, going further to name roughness, sudden variation and irregularity as the three main criteria of Picturesque objects and landscape. He made the then revolutionary suggestion that gentlemen and ladies should take nature as their model and pursue its appreciation by direct observation, as opposed to academic and studio study of Old Master paintings and the classics. This meant going out into the field to both sketch and paint. It was here that the practical qualities of watercolour came to the fore. Price stressed the inherent beauty of Picturesque scenery, especially those localities characterised by "intricacy, variety, and sudden variation." His theories were objective and easily applied to painting, following on from the earlier work of Gilpin.

Knight, on the other hand, defined the Picturesque somewhat subjectively. He saw it as a mode of association, a way of observing nature, and identified Picturesque objects and combinations as "those which exhibit blended and broken tints, or irregular masses of light and shadow harmoniously melted into each other." He concluded that the Picturesque was the beautiful, a definition which especially appealed to Conrad Martens. Knight also noted that "objects and scenes that are picturesque are not..."
recognised as such by all perceivers, but only by those with the requisite knowledge of painting.”

After 1794 Knight's theories cemented the movement's air of elitism (which had been initiated by Gilpin) through the inference that the Picturesque could only be truly appreciated by those having an understanding of painting and solid grounding in the arts. This necessarily resulted in the omission of the majority of the British population, especially the lower and middle classes, and limited any popular support for the cult. Knight's theories would later be partially restated by Conrad Martens' in his 1856 Sydney lecture on Landscape Painting, though with less emphasis on the elitist, class aspect and stressing the social qualities of art and the practical application of Picturesque technique.

Both Knight and Price owed much to the Reverend William Gilpin who in 1768 introduced a vague definition of the Picturesque as "a term expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty which is agreeable in a picture". Gilpin raised the Picturesque to the level of an aesthetic and "opened the great storehouse of picturesque description". He was instrumental in emphasising the connection between the Picturesque, landscape art and travel, though his theories were also widely applied to gardens. The ‘picture’ he referred to in his definition was obviously the landscape art of his day (he wrote during the period 1770-1804), specifically the work of Claude, Rosa and Poussin. John Constable and J.M.W. Turner, the two most influential British artists of the landscape movement, were of a different era and most prominent between 1800-1840, by which time Gilpin's writings had become popular and were widely disseminated.

The Italian Neoclassical artists cited above lay the foundations for British landscape art. Their work was filled with images of Greek temples, Roman ruins, and figures from biblical stories and mythology. The landscape was initially a secondary concern, however Claude Lorrain - who featured both classical mythology and the landscape in his exquisite oils - was especially influential in England, and it was to his works that the artists of the day came when searching for examples of high art which could be adapted to their own locale. Poussin also with time placed increasing emphasis on his ordered landscapes.

Conrad Martens in his 1856 lecture cites Claude alongside Turner as the highest authorities on landscape, indicating their continuing influence on young English artists during the early nineteenth century. His judgement has been proven correct in the years since then, and in assessing Martens' work we can find many examples of the influences of those two master painters.

In regards to the Picturesque, there is no doubt that many of Martens’ watercolours exhibit Gilpin's "agreeable to the eye" quality, based on his somewhat vague definition which did not necessarily apply to landscape painting alone, and which led to ongoing confusion about the true focus of Picturesque art. The term "pretty" has often been used in reference to Martens' watercolours, though somewhat derogatorily.

Gilpin's watercolour sketches and writings were influential during the formative stages of the British landscape movement, from 1760 onwards. He introduced precise formulae for painting picturesque landscapes, speaking of “the rules of art” and "the science of a painter", though accepting nature and Picturesque considerations would often clash. He pointed out that “the painter who adheres strictly to

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27 Ross, op. cit., p.277.


29 J. Dodsley, 'Review of Gilpin's Three Essays on Picturesque Beauty... (1789)', The Annual Register, Pall Mall, 1792, p.170.

the composition of nature, will rarely make a good picture,"\(^{31}\) though natural scenic elements must form the basis for any work.

The Picturesque, like all art movements, was built upon an inherited vocabulary which over time artists would become familiar with and adapt to their own circumstances. Using the landscapes of Claude, Poussin and Rosa, the theories of Price, Knight and Gilpin, and the poetry of Thomson, Wordsworth and others, English artists (especially watercolourists) during the second half of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth created a distinct landscape genre known as the Picturesque which emphasised the local and familiar. Their work had associations with marine painting and owed much to the topographical movement and rising interest in science and natural history, however a Picturesque painting was not meant to be a precise guide to a locality, or a historical record, even though with time many have been viewed as such, and many historical works contain picturesque elements, so blurred are the boundaries.

Whilst large numbers of amateur artists (including military men and their wives) took up sketching and landscape or topographical painting to illustrate their travel diaries and journals, professional artists also adopted watercolour and began producing landscapes in the Picturesque manner. In most instances such Picturesque paintings were contrived, arranged to a formula, and in the case of Conrad Martens the end result could be more beautiful than reality, an aspect which has caused some criticism amongst modern art historians and commentators such as McCubbin cited above. The contrivance and formulae applied were aimed at recreating the emotional beauty and power of nature, much as the French Impressionists would later attempt to capture light and colour in their work.

More than a precise, topographically accurate reproduction of a scene was called for. A gently trickling waterfall would be transformed into a raging torrent with a crowning multicoloured rainbow generated by its spray; a peaceful coastal scene would become the location for a shipwreck, with monstrous waves breaking against rugged craggy cliffs forming the background to a scene of natural disaster. In such instances the Picturesque painting encroached into the realm of the Sublime.

Not only did the Picturesque movement improve the status of watercolour painting amongst the British art fraternity - for this medium was especially applicable to producing atmospheric landscapes and work out of doors - but it also raised the international regard for British painting in general, as there had been no prior distinctly British art movement. Its artists took to the technique with relish. No longer would working in watercolour be seen as the domain of amateurs and ladies in their parlour, though bodies such as the Royal Academy were slow to appreciate its qualities.

A precise summary of Picturesque philosophy and techniques would take many pages and has been adequately dealt with in the works cited to above, however we can state that the Picturesque painters adopted a compositional and tonal method consisting of three basic parts - darkened foreground, strongly lit middle distance, and pale background - within and around which certain rules applied. The foreground framing trees or rugged landforms were meant to prevent one's eyes straying outside the picture and to draw it into the middle distance. The luminescent central section was a natural attraction, with the viewer unable to resist its pull.

Objects were made more striking (interesting) by shading and framing, with the irregularity of withered trees, broken branches, and craggy, rocky hillsides or cliffs some of the preferred choices.\(^{32}\) The eye was drawn into the middle distance where the item of interest such as a castle ruin or grand mansion would be found. Sky and atmospheric effects were an integral part of the composition, and in the early years a brown tint was usually applied to imitate the rich tones associated with an Old Master painting and thereby artificially age a work.

\(^{31}\) Manwaring, op. cit., p.185.

\(^{32}\) Andrews, op. cit., p.29.
The theory and its practical application was described in minute detail within works such as Gilpin's *Remarks on Forest Scenery* (1791). Therein, for example, he indicates how a river should be viewed in the Picturesque manner, and uses some common Picturesque terms:

Every view on a river, thus circumstanced, is composed of four grand parts: the area, which is the river itself; the two side screens, which are the opposite banks, and mark the perspective; and the front screen, which points out the winding of the river.

The views on the Wye, though composed only of these simple parts, are yet infinitely varied. They are varied, first, by the contrast of the screens. Sometimes one of the side screens is elevated, sometimes the other, and sometimes the front. Or both the side screens may be lofty; and the front either high or low. Again, they are varied by the folding of the side screens over each other; and hiding more or less of the front. When none of the front is discovered, the folding side either winds round, like an amphitheatere; or it becomes a long reach of perspective....

Some of the more precise geometric rules and techniques as proposed by Gilpin and others are referred to by Conrad Martens in his 1856 lecture on landscape painting. These included suggestions on the precise placement of the horizon, the angle of view to be taken in, where the artist should stand when taking sketches, the use of colour, cloud effects, seascape features, perspective, distinct flora and fauna, etc., etc.

During this period the term "the science of painting" was widely used in association with landscape painting and the Picturesque movement. Modern artists would no doubt shirk from this association, however the scientific/analytical interpretation of landscape painting is an important consideration in our study of the art of Conrad Martens and his contemporaries. For example, as part of his own training during the 1820s Martens visited some of the localities painted by J.M.W. Turner in order to measure precise angles of view, observe distinct landscape features, and become familiar with other compositional techniques used by the master.

By the time Conrad Martens came onto the art scene in the 1820s the Picturesque was an accepted and proven method, with a distinct verbal and pictorial terminology - formularised, if you like. Turner, who had learnt his art in the Picturesque manner during the latter part of the eighteenth century, took the movement to new heights after 1820, however John Britton in his Picturesque Antiquities of the English Cities of 1830 was able to state unambiguously that the Picturesque

...has not only become popular in English literature, but as definite and descriptive as the terms grand, beautiful, sublime, romantic and other similar adjectives.... About scenery and buildings it is a term of essential and paramount import.

Such a statement would have reflected the feelings of the young Conrad Martens as he pursued his painting and drawing under the tutelage of Copley Fielding and considered thoughts of a world tour. While some artists and writers had begun to break from the movements rigidity around this time (including Turner), others remained resolutely Picturesque and true to the ideal well into the century. Conrad Martens one of these.

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33 Cited in Dodsley, op. cit., p.174.

Romantic, Picturesque, Sublime and Beautiful

The Picturesque movement marked a transition from the aesthetic dogmatism of the seventeenth century and helped prepare the way for the liberation of the Romantic movement and the French Impressionists. It was contemporaneous with the rise in popularity of the Sublime, though there were differences.

The Picturesque was rough but beautiful. It was never associated with horror, like the Sublime. Edmund Burke stressed that smoothness was the most essential quality of the Beautiful, while roughness belonged to the Sublime, giving rise to Sir Uvedale Price's intermediate definition of Picturesque as beauty with roughness, and the subsequent confusion over the name. Despite these theoretical debates, artists such as Martens strove to combine beauty with the roughness of natural landscape in their expression of the Picturesque, remaining apart from the philosophical vagaries and developing their own distinct interpretation of the genre.

The Reverend Gilpin had initially worked from Edmund Burke's definitions, however his writings led to some confusion when he came to define the term 'picturesque beauty'. Whilst the Picturesque was often closely related to the Sublime - and many picturesque views could simultaneously be categorised as sublime - the Picturesque was also inevitably romantic, in the traditional sense of the word, and a foretaste of the Romantic movement of the second half of the nineteenth century. It is therefore not surprising that terms such as 'picturesque-sublime' and 'picturesque beauty' were used as early as the 1760s in describing a type of landscape painting.

While the term Picturesque has now disappeared from common usage in reference to a distinct art movement, the theory and application of the Sublime is still vigorously discussed.

The Reverend Gilpin in attempting to elaborate the basic qualities of the Picturesque saw nature as an artistic genius, untrained and requiring correction. He went on to differentiate at length between Picturesque and Romantic, and Beautiful and Picturesque.\textsuperscript{35} The distinction was made between something "that is simply beautiful [and] what is strictly picturesque - that which pleases the eye in its natural state, and that which has a quality capable of being illustrated in painting." Roughness, or ruggedness, was the essential difference between the two.

For example, an intact Greek temple was beautiful, but one in ruins was picturesque. Rolling hills of cultivated green fields were beautiful, but a rugged, craggy mountain peak shrouded in mist was picturesque, verging on the sublime. The naked human figure at rest was beautiful (e.g. Michelangelo's statue of David), but a labourer at work with muscles straining and sweat upon his brow was picturesque. A racehorse was beautiful, while the worn-out cart-horse struggling with its load under the whip of its master was picturesque. The mansion was beautiful and the hovel picturesque, though in referring back to the supreme works of Claude Lorrain, where grand mansions and temples were the norm, artists such as Martens and Turner found no conflict in placing elegant mansions within picturesque landscapes in order to satisfy clients and patrons.

This roughness of subject - both physical and emotional - provided the variety and contrast which was most pleasing to the artist, and most applicable to painting. Rarely was a natural scene correctly picturesque, and artists such as Turner and Martens worked hard at developing their skills in rearranging and enhancing nature using various devices, often producing exquisite works which successfully captured the variety, power and beauty of the landscape.

As noted by Manwaring, "...the picturesque view was mainly a luxury of the leisure class, an elegant

\textsuperscript{35} Gilpin, op cit., 1789a.
Unfortunately many of the best Picturesque works of art - whether they be the popular print or a finished painting - often became luxury items, not readily available to the masses, in keeping with the elitism of the cult. The lack of public galleries prior to the end of the nineteenth century also limited exposure of such works. Purchased by the wealthy upper classes, they remained substantially in private collections. Whilst this may have led to the ability of a painter in the Picturesque manner to earn a living from his art (witness Conrad Martens at Sydney), it also meant that there was no consolidated theoretical base or widespread following to champion the movement. As a result, the Picturesque came to be seen as simply a method and part of the wider British watercolour and landscape movements.

The cult ultimately disappeared during the second half of the nineteenth century, overwhelmed by the likes of John Constable (1776-1859) who laid the foundation for a 'natural' English landscape art not tied to any Picturesque constraints, and J.M.W. Turner who wore the mantle of Britain's greatest landscape painter and moved the genre on to new heights after the 1820s. By the 1850s many artists and commentators such as John Ruskin vigorously denied any association with the supposed formularisation of the Picturesque as espoused by the Reverend Gilpin, though their art and writings bore evidence of its all pervasive influence.

The Picturesque in Australia

The Picturesque is little known in Australia as a technique or aesthetic movement, which is understandable considering that this land was not settled by the British as a penal colony until 1788, and professional artists did not become common upon its shores until the 1820s, by which time its popularity was waning, though its practical techniques were widely used by British landscape painters.

Despite the penal colony being setup during a period when the cult of the Picturesque was reaching its peak, the class-based elitism of the cult (a Picturesque 'high' art) and the fact that many of the Colony's first resident artists were untrained convicts or amateur sketchers, meant that during the first decades of white settlement topographical art was the most common form practiced in New South Wales, with smatterings of picturesque elements dependent upon the education and training of the artist.

Modern art historians Bernard Smith and Tim Bonyhady both make brief reference to the Picturesque in their discussions on the development of local landscape painting and drawing prior to the rise of the Heidelberg School in the 1880s, however there has been no comprehensive analysis of its specific influence on eighteenth and nineteenth century Australian art. Helen Proudfoot's 1979 article, 'Botany Bay, Kew and the Picturesque: Early conceptions of the Australian landscape' is the only substantial work to appear on the topic, though it mainly covers the period prior to 1800 and does not emphasise the role of the Picturesque in local landscape painting.

The convict artist Thomas Watling was one of the earliest local exponents during the 1790s, with both his

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36 Manwaring, op cit., p.189.

37 Denvir, op. cit., p.2.


art and associated prose steeped in Picturesque jargon.\textsuperscript{41} According to Smith, John Lewin was the first local artist to depict the Australian landscape "with an eye unfettered by the aesthetics of the picturesque."\textsuperscript{42} Joseph Lycett had sub-titled his 1824 collection of aquatints \textit{Picturesque Views}, and John Skinner Prout made reference to his 'Picturesque tour' through Tasmania in 1845 in a later collection of lithographs of Tasmanian scenery. Within each of these artists works picturesque elements such as composition could be observed, however the success of the finished work ultimately depended upon the skill of the artist, and it was here that professionals such as Skinner Prout and Conrad Martens left their contemporaries behind.

The above are just a few references to the Picturesque in the colonial context. Though the movement as such was little known locally, the term picturesque was widely used until the turn of the century, however by that time its meaning had become ambiguous and it is now only considered a descriptive term.

Perhaps the most consistent exponent of true Picturesque art in the Colony during the nineteenth century was Conrad Martens.

\textbf{Conrad Martens and the Picturesque}

Herein then lies in a great measure the art of landscape painting, not in that of imitating individual objects, but the art of imitating an effect which nature has produced with means far beyond anything we have at hand. (Conrad Martens, Sydney, 1856)

Conrad Martens was born at Crutched Friars, London, in 1801. He took up drawing and painting around 1820 following the death of his father in 1816 and a move by the family from London to Devon, on England's southern coastline.

A long tradition of painting existed in the Martens family, with Conrad's brother Henry well known for his depictions of battle scenes, and other members prominent in the German art scene. His brother William was also an artist.

During the 1820s Conrad became a student of Anthony Vandyke Copley Fielding (1787-1855), the most popular teacher of the day and later president of the Old Water-Colour Society. He was supposedly much influenced by Fielding, though this is difficult to analyse as that artist's work is not well known in Australia. An 1839 watercolour by Fielding of Rievaux Abbey, Yorkshire (a veritable Picturesque shrine)\textsuperscript{43} displays basic picturesque compositional features, with further elements reminiscent of Martens - a luminescent sky and misty, mountainous background - plus the usual colour affinities such as the mandatory brown tint. However by 1839 the student had surpassed the master in both the expressive beauty and romantic quality of his watercolours. Fielding was also expert in marine painting, and Martens undoubtedly learnt much from him in this area, though it was not one of his fortes.

Martens' influences, as he tells us, came primarily from fellow artists of the watercolour and landscape movement such as Danby, Turner, Girtin, Stanfield, Cox, Cattermole, Constable and Fielding, and other earlier luminaries including Sir Joshua Reynolds, Claude, Poussin and the Dutch marine painters. He possessed a copy of Gilpin's influential \textit{Wye Tour} of 1770 which formed the practical basis for the

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p.43.

\textsuperscript{42} Smith, op cit., 1975, p.4.

application of Picturesque doctrine, and from Martens' 1856 lecture at Sydney we can determine he was familiar with its terminology and technique. The fact that Martens remained primarily a landscape painter throughout his life - shying away from portraiture - in some ways bears testament to his belief in the cult, though Australian artist and commentator Douglas Dundas, in a somewhat apologetic attempt to link Martens with the later Australian Impressionists, suggested his "dependence on the 18th-century picturesque tradition gradually lessened [with time]." This is debatable, especially if we look at some of his later works such as *North Head from Balmoral, 1874* (Dixon Galleries), where the basic Picturesque compositional elements remain. Dundas' comments perhaps can be linked to those of Frederick McCubbin in diminishing the artist's success in localising his art while at the same time remaining Picturesque.

The development of Conrad Martens from student to `drawing-master', as Charles Darwin labelled him in 1834, took place over little more than a decade. One of his earliest extant works is an 1824 watercolour depiction of *Ilchester Castle, Abbotsbury*, a typical picturesque subject. It is like many of his English works from the 1820s - sparse, almost a study, with little detail and minimum use of watercolour. However his corresponding pencil sketches are always precise and busy, displaying his masterly use of basic compositional techniques. Martens continued to sketch and paint English landscape in watercolour until May of 1833 when he sailed from Falmouth Harbour aboard the *HMS Hyacinth* bound for South America.

Lionel Lindsay in his 1920 monograph on the artist questioned the Martens' possible rational for leaving England, though he reached no satisfactory conclusion. Without family or professional reasons forthcoming, it could be suggested that Martens saw the need to further his painterly horizons and undertake his own version of the Grand Tour. By 1833 South America was seen as a prime exotic location, especially following the publication of the illustrated volumes of Alexander von Humboldt's tours of that continent during the early part of the century. Perhaps the voyage was also a necessary career move for a professional artist such as Martens who was finding it difficult to make a living in England. For an artist to undertake such a tour is understandable and common for the time, however Martens was different in the fact that he never returned home, unlike his fellow picturesque travellers Augustus Earle and John Skinner Prout.

We are fortunate in being able to assess the immediate effects of this Grand Tour on Martens' art by the numerous changes evident after 1833. As noted recently by Elizabeth Imashev, there was a noticeable improvement in the quality of Martens' output, specifically in his finished watercolours, between the time he left England and the end of the 1830s, following on his arrival at Sydney in 1835. This leap forward in both technique and aesthetic expertise - in his ability to portray light and shadow, weather phenomena, and a general improvement in composition - was no doubt a result of experiences gained whilst travelling during that period.

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44 A collection of books from Martens' personal library was purchased by the National Library of Australia in 1979. Items of relevance included Gilpin's *Observations on the River Wye* (1770) and *Remarks on Forest Scenery* (1834), Daniel Webb's *An Inquiry into the Beauties of Painting* (1777) and John Burnet's *A Practical Treatise on Painting* (1828). Martens also reproduced studies from Turner's * Liber Studiorum* and Aaron Penley's *A Study of Water-colour Painting* (1850).


48 Ms. Imashev is Pictures Librarian at the Mitchell Library and responsible for the largest single collection of the artist's work. The following comments were made during her lecture on Conrad Martens delivered at the State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, on 22 April 1992. c.f. *The Australian Antique Collector*, Sydney, January-June 1989, pp.46-49.
Between November 1833 and October 1834 Martens visited South America and the rugged coastlines of Tierra Del Fuego and Cape Horn as official artist with the **HMS Beagle** survey expedition (1833-34). He followed this with a seven week sojourn in Tahiti during 1835, whilst en route to New South Wales. Along the way he met with, and was much influenced by scientists and naturalists such as Charles Darwin and Robert FitzRoy, plus fellow travel artists Augustus Earle and the Bavarian J.M. Rugendas. From 1835-40 he travelled extensively throughout New South Wales.

By far the most powerful influence upon our young artist and traveller was the variety of picturesque landscapes he encountered along the way, varying from the harsh, bitterly cold, rain and windswept wilderness of Tierra del Fuego - the veritable 'ends of the earth'; through the rugged, sublimely picturesque Basalt Glen of the Santa Cruz River and surrounding wilderness of the pampas plains; to the tropical forests and clime of central South America and Tahiti.

Martens' education in landscape was further reinforced by what he found upon arrival in New South Wales - his first view was of Sydney Harbour, one of the finest and most picturesque of all anchorages, with an associated light and atmosphere which would enchant him for the rest of his days. Visits to nearby Illawarra and the Blue Mountains also excited him, though the absence of sublimely picturesque mountain ranges a la the European Alps would have been a disappointment.

All of these experiences were a world away from the pastoral and seaside landscapes of Devon and Exeter with which he was familiar, both during his youth and throughout his initial years as a painter and student of Copley Fielding. The grey skies and damp atmosphere of England and Cape Horn gave way to the brilliant, dry light and blue skies of New South Wales. It was the representation in his art of this atmosphere - specifically the light and shadow - which the artist saw as his main task upon reaching the Colony. However he had first to locate Picturesque objects and scenery to which he could apply his talents as part of the process of acclimatisation.

**The Search for the Picturesque in New South Wales**

...the enlightened amateur returned from his tour .... built up his cabinet of paintings and prints, read treatises on the arts, improved his estate, and travelled the countryside seeking out picturesque scenes.49

Conrad Martens' own search for the Picturesque in New South Wales began almost immediately upon arrival. He knew he had ultimately to localise his art, and as an experienced topographical sketcher with skills proven and refined during his period as ship's artist on the **Beagle**, he was able to move on from this genre to the production of truly Picturesque works of art, expressive of his response to the local landscape.

Picturesque artists such as Conrad Martens believed the ultimate aim of any painter was to "create images analogous to various feelings and sensations of the mind."50 As he told his Sydney audience in 1856, "...It is through the medium of art only that we learn to see nature correctly", and in reiterating Knight, "the head as well as the hand is to be employed in painting a picture; the mental operation being by far the most important."

In order to achieve this he had first to find objects and localities to inspire. This led him early on to the

49 Ross, op. cit., p.272.

50 Andrews, op. cit., p.38.
naturally picturesque, and in some cases sublime elements of the landscape such as Sydney Harbour, west to the Blue Mountains gorges and waterfalls, and south and north to the semi-tropical rainforests of Illawarra and Brisbane Waters. He was also attracted to the estates, gardens and pastoral properties of fellow men and women of taste within the Colony who would become his patrons. These included the Governors Bourke, Gipps and Denison, landed gentry such as the Macarthurs and Kings, and wealthy merchants including A.B. Sparke, Sir Daniel Cooper and T.S. Mort, the latter being an avid collector of British watercolours during the eighteen fifties and sixties. We know the identity of Martens’ clients from the detailed account books he kept between 1835-78.

Upon arrival in Sydney in April 1835 Martens immediately engaged in a flurry of activity which did not abate until the onset of economic depression throughout New South Wales after 1841. During this initial period he was forced to call upon all the skills learned both in England and during his Tour, to build his reputation as a professional artist amidst the small Sydney art community. That he was ultimately successful in both securing clients and refining his art can be judged from one of his earliest local works, View of Sydney Harbour from Craigend, 1836 (National Library of Australia), commissioned by Surveyor General Sir T.L. Mitchell for 10 guineas. This exquisite watercolour creates an impression of the house Craigend as a Greek temple, perched high above a rugged mountain top, overlooking a picturesque lake in the distance. However in reality this was no Italian lake, but rather Sydney Harbour; and the mountain top was merely one of the many craggy sandstone cliffs which were typical of its south-eastern foreshores.

The watercolour owed much to the landscapes of Claude and Poussin, and was no doubt appreciated as such by Mitchell, a fellow artist, traveller, and ‘man of taste’. In both subject and composition it very much expresses Martens’ Picturesque philosophy, though few of his colonial works exhibited such Neoclassical overtones. It was also a far cry from the impressionistic renderings then issuing from Turner's brush back in England, as best exemplified in his 1840s masterwork ‘Rain, Steam and Speed - The Great Western Railway’.51

The Travelling Artist

During his time in the Colony Conrad Martens travelled widely throughout the settled districts, visiting such picturesque localities as Illawarra (1835) and the Blue Mountains (1835 et al.); Arthursleigh and Fitzroy Falls on the Southern Highlands (1836); the caverns of the Abercrombie River and Wellington (1843, 1849); southern Queensland and New England (1851); and the Shoalhaven (1860). One of his final picturesque tours took him over the Blue Mountains to Lithgow in 1873 to view the construction of the Zig Zag railway.52 This major engineering undertaking, requiring tunnelling, excavation, and the emplacement of sandstone viaducts on the steep slopes of Lithgow Valley and concurrent scaring of the landscape with railway cuttings, was a naturally picturesque subject which delighted the then aging artist. Throughout these years he continued to return to Sydney Harbour, attempting to capture some of its myriad light and atmospheric effects until his final days.

When he could not travel Martens would work at his commissions in Sydney studios and after 1844 tend his own estate on the North Shore, with its Gothic-style house Rockleigh Grange. This picturesque locality was visited by the artist George French Angas during July - September 1845. He describes it as follows, in a manner reminiscent of the writings of the Rev. Gilpin:

In a spot embowered by the shade of a grove of eucalyptus, and overlooking one of the


most lovely prospects in New South Wales, my friend Martens ... has chosen to locate himself and his family, and has built a snug picturesque cottage in keeping with the charming seclusion selected for its site. Below the garden is a deep dell, through which runs a gurgling stream, almost choked with the luxuriance of the flowers that surround it; amongst which the gay warrantor rears its crimson-blossomed head, like a hugh peony. Here and there the decaying and withered branches of some aged gum-tree stretch their leafless arms against the blue sky, whilst the distant scene embraces the windings of the harbour, backed by the far off range of the Blue Mountains.53

Martens had found for himself an ideal picturesque location in which to raise his family (he had married in 1837) and practice his art. From his studio at Rockleigh Grange and various city localities he would attend to his commissions and try to keep up to date with events and art movements at home. His own library contained texts on art by Gilpin, Ruskin, da Vinci and Burnet. His friend and parson, the geologist W.B. Clarke, further extended the boundaries of Australian landscape as then known by promoting the travels and writings of local explorers in his guise as features editor for the Sydney Morning Herald during the ‘forties and fifties.

Martens' pursuit of patronage and his own nautical connection with the Beagle resulted in his meeting with various local and visiting explorers, often in association with his friend Rear Admiral Philip Parker King (retired). He sold works to T.L. Mitchell, G.W. Evans, Captains Robert FitzRoy and John Lort Stokes, and worked up one of Mitchell's views of Australia Felix (Victoria) for that explorer's 1838 publication Three Expeditions into Eastern Australia.54

The direct result of the artist's various Tours in New South Wales, apart from visual memories and ongoing familiarisation with the landscape, was the accumulation of an extensive catalogue of pencil sketches and studies taken of each locality. These formed a valuable resource for the artist, and one which he returned to regularly to both satisfy new clients and reinterpret former works. For example, a brief visit to Illawarra in 1835 supplied the artist with a number of landscape subjects which resulted in over 30 commissions and were used in his art up until 1877, the year prior to his death.

Conrad Martens' need to locate picturesque scenery in the Colony and become familiar with the landscape upon his arrival in 1835 was very real and urgent. He may have considered returning to England if he or his patrons thought him unsuccessful in capturing some of the essence of the local environment. He would not have wanted to produced views reminiscent of the finished watercolours and prints of Joseph Lycett in the 1810s and 1820s - with their bright greens, lack of atmosphere and composition more typical of an English parkland than the Australian bush.

Apart from coming to terms with the local light and colour - a lifetime process Martens refers to at length in his 1856 lecture - specific picturesque scenery was also required to inspire the artist. Arthur Young, in his Tour of 1768, pointed out the need for not only variety but contrast in the landscape, and gave a description which could just as easily be applied to some of Martens' Blue Mountains views:

> For the general emotions which arise on viewing the rocks, the hanging woods, and deep precipices ... are all those of the sublime; and when that is the case, the beautiful never appears in such bewitching colours, as those it receives from contrast: to turn suddenly from one of those romantic walks, and break full upon a beautiful landscape, without any intermixture of rocks, distant prospect, or any object that was great or terrible .... would be

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In the absence of Palladian architecture, Greek and Roman temples, castle ruins or majestic mountain ranges (not the mere hills and gullies of New South Wales), Martens was forced to use local residences such as Camden Park, Tempe, Craigend and Elizabeth Bay House as the features of his landscapes. The ancient ruins of Britain had no equivalent in Australia and he was left with no option but to emphasise the natural landscape in his colonial paintings. He nevertheless produced some views of English castles whilst in Australia, supposedly based on his own earlier drawings or taken from books of prints. He also copied works after other artists, such as Turner's *Temple of Minerva, 1853*, adapted from one of the plates in that artist's *Liber Studiorum*.

**A Man of Taste**

Martens saw himself as a man of taste, a connoisseur, and his pursuit of like-minded individuals during his years in the Colony is evident from the many patrons listed in his manuscript 'Account of Pictures Painted in New South Wales.' The merchant and patron of the arts A.B. Sparke of Tempe and Sydney was one such connoisseur with whom Martens was friendly during the thirties and forties. When Sparke saw Mitchell's *View from Craigend* and other works in 1836 he declared them "superior to any thing I have seen in this Colony." Martens and Sparke went on to purchase two works by Gilleman in 1838, and the artist later took a view of Sparke's Tempe estate by the Cooks River near Sydney. The resultant watercolour is one of his most successful and romantically beautiful works, with typical picturesque elements such as a withered, knurled tree and local brush in the left and front foreground, a winding river in the middle ground, and the distance revealing the house Tempe - reminiscent of a Greek temple - situated upon a rising ground and backed by a wooded hill.

Conrad Martens was no social commentator, ethnographer, or cartoonist like contemporary travel artists who visited the Colony, such as Augustus Earle, George French Angas and S.T. Gill. They were all aware of the Picturesque and followed its compositional rules to some extent, looking for variety and picturesque elements in the local landscape, however Martens pursued the philosophy with vigour. He above all others saw his work as high art, or a watercolour version thereof, and adopted both the practical ideas of Price and Gilpin and the philosophical dictates of Knight in creating his personal version of the Australian landscape and living out the picturesque ideal.

In catering to men of taste such as Sparke and Mitchell the artist naturally maintained his distance from the convict and lower class masses and troublesome social issues of his day such as the mistreatment of Aborigines. Martens was no social reformer. There are no depictions in his art of the convict work gangs in miserable physical condition, rotting clothes and chains which he would have seen during the 1830s;

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57 Dixson Library, Sydney, MS142-3.


59 Ibid, p.91.
of the public floggings and hangings which took place close to his Sydney residence; the blatant use and abuse of power by the military and free settlers; or the decimation and degradation of the Aboriginal population, though strictly speaking such subjects were classified as picturesque.

As a resident of the Rocks area of Sydney between 1837-44 (he lived in an elevated section to the west known as Bunkers Hill) he was in the middle of the most corrupt and licentious part of the penal colony, then popularly known in England as Botany Bay. Colourful descriptions of the area around this time can be found in Alexander Harris' *Settlers and Convicts*. They tell of sly grog inns, gambling, runaway convicts and prostitution. Yet Martens gave us no views of the corruption and vice surrounding him. Many have asked why? Was he oblivious to such suffering?

I would suggest the artist simply saw such events and subjects as having no place in his art. They were ugly and outside the parameters of picturesque beauty which he sought to achieve in his painting. As Malcolm Andrews points out

> ...the trouble is that the Picturesque enterprise ... with its almost exclusive emphasis on visual appreciation, entailed a suppression of the spectator's moral response to those very subjects which it could least hope to divest of moral significance - the ruin, the hovel and rural poverty.\(^61\)

Martens was able to shut out the hovels of the Rocks, the abuses of the convict system and the city poverty surrounding him. He was a landscape painter, pure and simple. The fact that he was weak with figures is also worthy of note. Whereas the landscapes of Claude and Poussin saw figures as an integral part - a focus - by Martens' time these features had become mere devices to the English landscape painters, though as ever Turner was an exception. Certain figures were still used to give dimension and scale to any work, and in Martens' case this included the local Aborigines during his first decade in Australia. However this is not to suggest that he was necessarily interested in the custom and fate of the local people, for as Andrews further points out, when it came to implementing picturesque landscape theory "...in a moral view, the industrious mechanic is a more pleasing object than the loitering peasant [or Aborigine]. But in a picturesque light, it is otherwise."\(^62\) In later years the Aborigine would completely disappear from Martens' work, to be replaced by the 'loitering peasant' or a local white family group. The Aboriginal figures of his 1844 lithograph were in many cases painted over prior to sale.

A superficial analysis of Martens' art could suggest he was oblivious to the suffering around him. He appears to have remained apart from it throughout his life, especially after moving to the North Shore in 1844. Such criticism fails to realise that Martens' art was his profession, and though he may have been passionate about its execution, the resultant watercolours and oils did not necessarily reflect his moral view of life. In this point alone does Frederick McCubbin's criticism of the pioneer painters that their art does not `savour of man' apply. Martens meaningfully omitted evidence of the human figure from the majority of his landscapes, or gave them a minor and romanticised presentation if inclusion was unavoidable. Though blind to the plight of his fellow man in some regards, he was also able to see nature and the scenery around him like no other. He truly possessed the trained eye of a Picturesque landscape painter.

Instead of the lively social statements given us by Augustus Earle and S.T. Gill, we are left with Martens' work...
interpretative and composed picturesque panoramas of Sydney Harbour and adjacent localities. Two examples are the pair of 1843 oils titled by the artist View from the Window and taken just prior to his move from the Rocks to Rockleigh Grange on Sydney's North Shore.63 They are views from his residence in Cumberland Street, the Rocks, looking east across Sydney Cove and up the harbour towards the Heads. Though they are neither primarily social statements nor topographical records, their breadth and grandeur as landscape pieces places them easily alongside the similar views of Sydney Harbour taken by Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton half a century later. Both Lindsay and Dundas cite these works as Martens' greatest successes in oil, and Anne Gray lists the National Library copy as one of the major pictorial 'icons of place' in Australia's artistic heritage.64 The two oils sit easily alongside Australian impressionist works of the 1880s.

Without denying their importance as some of Martens' finest achievements in the use of oil and canvas, their acclamation as his greatest work is perhaps more a reflection of the taste and background of many of Australia's art historians, rather than a true reflection of their status in the artist's total oeuvre. It is without doubt in this author's mind that Martens' greatest achievements lie in his use of watercolour. If his best oils can be lauded to such a degree, then his finest watercolours deserve even higher praise.

Oil was a medium Martens was not at ease with, having been forced to adopt it after 1837 and during the depression of the 1840s as a result of demand by patrons. He persisted with it until the mid fifties, though he was never very successful. Martens was most adept in the use of watercolour and his oils are usually lifeless, dark, and rare attaining the picturesque beauty or luminescence of his watercolours. Despite this, oil was a popular and durable medium, as is revealed by the fact that in the major Australian galleries it is the Martens oils which are on permanent display, not his best watercolours, thus distorting the public and critical image of him and his standing in Australian art history.

With many of his oils muddy, flat and lifeless, and his finest watercolours housed in private or archival collections away from the public's gaze, Martens has not been treated as kindly by critics as he warrants. Artists such as Eugene von Guerard (who produced numerous large oil paintings which are popular to this day due to their photographic qualities) find preference with galleries, though private collectors continue to put a premium on Martens' work.

In criticising his oils, we can also turn to his technique, for even by the 1840s Martens' adherence to Picturesque doctrine and composition would have been viewed by some art critics as old-fashioned. He was not to know that shortly after his departure from England the Picturesque cult would fall out of favour and disappear altogether as an aesthetic within a decade. He was undoubtedly aware of the 'bad press' it received from writers such as John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite artists,65 and it is telling that he only used the word 'picturesque' once during his 1856 lecture, despite continuing to paint in the Picturesque manner. Martens was not alone in persisting with the method, for many British landscape artists were left behind by the advances of Turner, including his old master Copley Fielding. Martens could not easily abandon a technique which he had spent years perfecting, and which was obviously so popular and profitable in Australia. His physical isolation from developing art movements in Britain and Europe was also a factor.

I would suggest that Conrad Martens remained in the Colony because his art was accepted with some enthusiasm by a generation of men and women of taste who continued to hold romanticised, old-fashioned views of their homeland - Mother England, while the reality of a post Industrial Revolution

63 Dixson Library and National Library of Australia.
England was directing the more adventurous artists such as Turner away from the formulae of the Picturesque, into an early form of Impressionism. Martens' romanticised views of the New South Wales landscape were popular because they masked the harsh realities of both climate, geography and social condition, and brought an element of culture and high art to the Colony.

In questioning why a talented Picturesque artist such as Conrad Martens should prove popular with the Sydney art community, successfully finding a niche in a market which up until the latter part of the nineteenth century saw imports of Old Masters and European art as the only real art, we should also remember that Australian art and taste continued to lag behind that of Britain and Europe for at least another century. This may also explain why John Skinner Prout, who arrived in the Colony in 1840, departed eight years later after being unable to live off his art either in Sydney or Tasmania. Skinner Prout, having left England almost seven years after Martens, was more aware of the rapid changes in British landscape painting being brought about by the likes of Turner and Constable.

Martens had studied Turner's work while a student, and freely cited that artist's Liber Studiorum as a classic guide for any budding landscape artist. There are many examples of Turner's influence in his work, yet John Skinner Prout was the more 'modern' artist. His Australian landscapes are usually freer, busier, not as overtly picturesque and less finished than Martens' equivalent views, which display that artist's undoubted skill in draughtsmanship and use of watercolour. It is ironic that our subject should warn his students in 1856 against the use of excess finish, though he was here referring to those highly finished Old Master and Neoclassical works.

Martens' best painting, especially his watercolours of the late 1830s and 1870s, have an ethereal, almost luminescent quality similar to Turner's best work, with the sun and sky playing a prominent part as he became engrossed in a search for an expression of Australian light and shadow in his work. Some of his finished watercolours, such as *Elizabeth Bay House, 1838*, are the ultimate expression of picturesque beauty - beautiful to look at ("pleasing to the eye" to quote Gilpin) full of atmosphere, botanically accurate, and well executed with regards to colour, composition, light and shade. With time the brown tint of these early colonial works gave way to the dull blue-green bush, blue sky and bright colour which is typical of Martens' landscapes after the 1850s. These works, truer to the reality, are a clear sign of his own process of acclimatisation and success at adapting his technique. To call them anything but 'Australian' is derisive.

Conrad Martens was both student and advocate of the Picturesque. His education in its philosophy and application to landscape painting was reinforced during his period of tuition under Copley Fielding (though it was almost ubiquitous among British watercolour artists at the time). He was much influenced by the early works of Turner, though his art was never as dramatic or adventurous as that artist's.

Martens' education as a sketcher and painter saw its fullest expression following his world tour of 1833-5 and for the remainder of the his life he remained true to the Picturesque, constantly refining his approach and technique, forever remaining an enthusiastic student of the science and art of painting in watercolour. His finished works, especially those in watercolour, have variously been labelled by commentators and critics as 'romantic', 'picturesque', 'beautiful', 'sublime', and even formularised and mundane. They can be all of these or none, however they most often display a basic adherence to the definition of Picturesque as outlined above.

In assessing Martens' role in the history of Australian art, and his place in the British landscape movement, we need to be aware of his background and training in the Picturesque. This article has introduced the basic Picturesque concepts and philosophy as applied to landscape painting, thereby helping us understand elements of his art and also going part of the way to unravelling his somewhat mysterious personality. Martens' seeming aloofness and cultivation of the upper echelons of local society - the fellow men and women of taste - may all stem from his adoption of a Picturesque persona, though his family background would also have played a part.
We should not criticise Martens for not being a Turner, Earle, Heysen or Roberts - but rather for what he was, if criticism is indeed warranted. Nor should we look forward for comparisons with our local Impressionists, but rather go back from them in revealing the role Martens played in their acquisition of an indigenous painterly vocabulary upon which they based their later successes. After all, Martens spent over forty years painting the Australian landscape and his works were commonly exhibited during his lifetime. The fact that a 'Martens School' did not develop following his death should not diminish his reputation. Perhaps it was as a result of his 'drawing master' aloofness and solitary personality that no one appeared during his lifetime to take up the mantle of protégé, though his daughter Rebecca did paint and sketch in his style.

Conrad Martens was not always successful in his art and his standard sometimes lapsed, like all professional artists at times producing works verging on the mundane. As Martens himself admitted in his 1856 lecture, he sorely felt the isolation of an artist's life in New South Wales and looked for informed comment, criticism and collaboration, though it was rarely forthcoming. Despite this isolation, he produced decided masterpieces right up until his final days. As with any talented artist he was able to develop a unique style - a localised romantic version of the Picturesque - and he pursued it throughout his professional life. Unfortunately his physical separation from the art scenes of England and Europe meant that the real advances in his painting which became evident during the second half of the 1830s were never extended as they were with one such as Turner. Martens, in his isolation, therefore remained true to his training and Picturesque philosophy until his death.

In understanding the cult of the Picturesque and Conrad Martens' backgrounding in it, perhaps many of the criticisms of Frederick McCubbin and others directed at colonial period artists may be tempered as we measure Martens' achievements against the ideals of Knight, Price and Gilpin, and fellow artists of the British watercolour and landscape schools.

Despite the development of a unique style, we can always look for influences in any artist's work - in a Martens we will find them and more besides, both in the teachings of the Picturesque movement and in the influence of artists such as Turner, Fielding and Claude. However beneath it all was a belief in the cult of the Picturesque and adherence to its basic principles. Beginning with a simple piece of blank art paper upon which was applied watercolour with a masterly touch, and using various Picturesque devices, Martens was able to imitate the emotional power and beauty of nature. This he achieved on numerous occasions (viz. *Breaking of the Storm, 1857*) and for this reason he remains one of the premier exponents of picturesque beauty to have emerged from the British landscape and watercolour movement. His standing as Australia's foremost watercolourist of the colonial period remains secure.

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66 Illustrated L. Lindsay, op cit., 1968, plate 4.

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An history of the Impressionist Movement and biographies of the greatest painters of Impressionism: Manet, Pissarro, Degas, Monet, Renoir, Sisley, Bazille, Caillebotte, Cézanne, Guillaumin, Gauguin, Van Gogh. Impressionist painting remains the most attractive period in the history of modern art and the most appreciated by the public. Series of exhibitions, an abundant literature and record sales give evidence of today's extraordinary resonance of works of the Impressionist painters, of which a number are engraved on our artistic conscience. At their time, Impressionist works appeared to be so outrageously modern, that it took their contemporaries more than thirty years to finally admit them - if not to like them. Many of Martens's views of the landscape, in oil or watercolour, were commissioned by patrons wishing to convey the peace and prosperity of their new homeland, with its fine climate and picturesque topography. Martens's great gift was his ability to incorporate minutely observed effects of nature into compositions which embodied all the precepts of landscape art as he -- and his patrons -- understood it. Trained in England by the fashionable landscape painter Copley Fielding, Martens set sail in 1832 for three years in India. However in 1833 he left that first ship in South America a