

Eugène von Guérard *View of Geelong*



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Eugène von Guérard
Melbourne 1856



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In July 2006, Eugène von Guérard's masterpiece, *View of Geelong*, was finally secured for the Geelong Gallery's permanent collection following a widely publicised and passionately supported public appeal for funds. With major grants from all levels of government, the philanthropic and corporate sectors and numerous private donors, the purchase of the painting through Christie's—acting for the vendor, the English composer, Lord Lloyd-Webber—returned to Australia a work of art long acknowledged as an iconic image of Australia's colonial era, and a supremely significant item of national and regional cultural heritage.

Artistically, *View of Geelong* is a triumph of the German Romantic style—and topographical accuracy—applied to a panoramic 'new world' vista in which the incursions of European settlement have only just begun to make their mark on a palpably fertile, ancient and dramatic landscape. Historically, the image is a detailed and atmospheric document of the appearance from afar of the early township and port of Geelong depicted at a momentous time in Australian history, following the Victorian gold rush.

Painted four years after his arrival in Australia, by which stage von Guérard was well established as Australia's foremost painter of 'wilderness' landscapes and 'house portraits', the particular splendour of this composition was recognised as soon as the work was completed. The following record of a visit by the critic James Smith to the artist's Melbourne studio appeared in the *Argus* newspaper on 9 April 1856:

We have had much pleasure recently in visiting the studio of M. Guérard, of Bourke-street, where the artist has upon the easel a landscape in oil of the country near Geelong, and Port Phillip Bay in the distance. This work of art is, in all probability, the finest of the kind that has yet been produced in Australia, and we trust it may be exhibited to the public before it is taken home by the fortunate proprietor.

The initial 'fortunate proprietor' was Andrew Cruickshank, a partner in the prominent pastoral firm of Dalgety, Cruickshank & Company. Cruickshank's interest in the painting soon passed to Frederick Gonnerman Dalgety himself. The artist's chief patron over many years, Dalgety took the painting with him on his return to England a few years later. There it remained with the family at Lockerley Hall, Hampshire, until 1996 when it was offered for sale through Christie's Australia by Dalgety's descendants.

In spite of the Geelong Gallery's best efforts at the 1996 sale, the institution was outbid with the work being bought for almost \$2 million by Andrew Lloyd-Webber who agreed to lend the painting for display at the Geelong Gallery. Over a period of several weeks it was viewed by enthusiastic crowds who filed past, keen for a last glimpse—or so it seemed to many at the time—of a colonial masterpiece whose loss to Australia, and to Geelong, was keenly felt.

However, a compelling opportunity arose in mid-2005 when Lord Lloyd-Webber made an exclusive offer, again through Christie's, to the Geelong Gallery for the purchase of the painting. Following a major fundraising campaign by the Gallery, and on the strength of successive announcements of generous and unprecedented levels of funding from the City of Greater Geelong, the Victorian Government and the Commonwealth Government, augmented by substantial grants from trusts, foundations, corporations and hundreds of private individuals, von Guérard's *View of Geelong* was returned permanently to its rightful home in a public institution that celebrates the 110th anniversary of its establishment in the year of this remarkable acquisition.

Eugène von Guérard was born in Vienna on 7 November 1811, the son of a Court Painter who was also a specialist in miniatures. From 1826, Eugène travelled extensively with his father in Italy, studying art briefly in Rome. With his father's death in 1836 during a cholera epidemic in Naples, Eugène moved on to Dusseldorf to enrol at the city's famous Art Academy—a progressive and influential school renowned for introducing specialist studies in landscape painting and



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encouraging students to sketch out of doors, recording precisely all aspects of a landscape including foliage, clouds, rocks and waterfalls. Each of these landscape elements were accorded an equal value consistent with the ideals of the German Romantic movement that promoted—in line with theories espoused by the prominent scientist and explorer, Alexander von Humboldt—the silent and solitary contemplation of Nature as a means by which an individual might embrace the universe and thus come closer to God.

Then, in 1852, partly out of a desire to try his luck at the recently discovered goldfields in Victoria, but also no doubt tempted by the promise of travel to a distant land, von Guérard teamed up with a party of Frenchmen bound for Australia on board the *Windermere*, eventually reaching the port of Geelong on 24 December and setting off soon afterwards for the Ballarat diggings.

Following modest success at the goldfields, in late February 1854 von Guérard decided to quit the diggings and head for Melbourne via Geelong and resume his career as a painter. His journal records the events of the last morning of the trek on foot to Geelong, noting his party's arrival at a vantage point from which the sea came into view.

By 7.30 (am) we reached a point from which we could once again see the blue sea... Corio Bay, and a little later Geelong came into view. Many fields and gardens were also visible on the Barrabool Hills. At Ashby we turned in to a nice-looking newly-built public house, and thence we came on here... Geelong has altered a good deal in the thirteen and a half months since I last saw it. The streets are better kept and have sidewalks. Many new buildings have arisen, and the town has extended considerably.

By 1855, having based himself in Melbourne, von Guérard embarked on a series of sketching trips through Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia, New South Wales and New Zealand. Occasionally, he accompanied scientists on survey missions to remote destinations including the Otway Ranges, northeast Victoria and Mt Kosciusko and parts of Gippsland. On these frequently arduous treks he used small, leather-

bound sketchbooks to record details and observations of the countryside seen along the way. Certain of these drawings were the basis for full-scale paintings executed afterwards in the studio—such as several depicting the sweeping vista looking towards Corio Bay and the port of Geelong from a vantage point near Highett's farm in the Barrabool Hills.

For a number of years in Melbourne, von Guérard held the post of curator at the recently established National Gallery and head of its art school, only resigning these roles prior to his return to Europe in 1882. In spite of these responsibilities, his reputation as the foremost landscape painter in the colony survived well into the 1860s until his detailed, topographical style was superseded in popularity by the more intimate and broader manner exemplified by the Swiss-born painter Louis Buvelot, who brought to Australia a new interest in the *plein-air* method (working out of doors directly from the subject) pioneered by the French artist, Camille Corot, and his fellow members of the Barbizon School. Von Guérard died in London in 1901.

His 1856 masterpiece, *View of Geelong*, is suffused with a warm and mellow afternoon light while the panoramic composition is typical of the artist's grand manner. Careful attention is paid to the observation and recording in almost microscopic detail every aspect of the vista in which the township of Geelong, the distant You Yangs and the even more distant Dandenong Ranges, the steamer on the bay, the bullock team in the foreground, a trap close behind, far-flung fields under cultivation, and the deeply-cut valley of the Barwon River are all represented in a manner that recalls the German Romantic approach to art not as 'imitation of antique models' but of Nature herself.

The eloquent play of light in the composition, the vast sky with its dreamy cloud formations, the rich reddish colour of the earth, the foreground with its diminutive figure groups immersed in deep shadow, and the sense of the glorious completeness of the whole evoke for the viewer a sense of being absorbed, as Humboldt would have it, in solitary contemplation of the glories of Nature and thus of the universe.

View of Geelong joins a number of previous acquisitions of early views of the city and the region in the Geelong Gallery's permanent collection. It likewise becomes the magnificent focus of an existing group of works by von Guérard that includes *The barter* (1854), *Mr Levien's hut on the Barwon* (1860), *View of Mt Feathertop from the Valley of the Ovens* (1862), *Weatherboard Falls* (1863)—this last work a gift from no less a benefactor than Alfred Felton—and a copy of the artist's imposing album of chromolithographs titled *Australian landscapes* (1866–67). Similarly, *View of Geelong* joins other highly significant 19th and early 20th century Australian and international landscapes and seascapes in the collection such as Louis Buvelot's *On the Woods Point Road* (1872), Stanhope Forbes' *The pier head* (1910), Walter Withers' *A breezy day off Point Henry* (1901), and most famously of all, Frederick McCubbin's *A bush burial* (1890)—a work that was acquired in 1900 in consequence of a major public fundraising initiative.



COVER IMAGE

Eugène von Guérard
born Vienna, Austria 1811;
working in Australia 1852–82;
died London, Great Britain 1901

View of Geelong 1856
oil on canvas
89.0 x 152.5
Collection: Geelong Gallery
Purchased through the
Geelong Art Gallery Foundation
with the generous support
of the City of Greater Geelong,
the Victorian Government, the
Commonwealth Government
and numerous community
and other donors, 2006

LIST OF IMAGES

All measurements height
by width, in cm. All works
by Eugène von Guérard unless
otherwise stated.

IMAGE NO. 1
John Botterill
(*Mr Eugène von Guérard*)
c. 1871–82
silver albumen photograph,
carte-de-visite
10.7 x 6.5 (approx.)
Collection: La Trobe Picture
Collection, State Library
of Victoria

IMAGE NO. 2
(*Windermere at Geelong. Evening*)
24 December 1852
pencil on cream paper
7.4 x 10.9
Collection: La Trobe Picture
Collection, State Library
of Victoria

IMAGE NO. 3
(*Highett's [sic] farm*
(detail) 2 December 1855
pencil on paper
28.5 x 83.6
Collection: Mitchell Library,
State Library of New South Wales

IMAGE NO. 4
(*The barter* 1854
oil on canvas
46.0 x 75.5
Collection: Geelong Gallery
Gift of W Max Bell and
Norman Belcher, 1923

IMAGE NO. 5
(*Mr Levien's hut on the Barwon* 1860
oil on canvas
45.8 x 76.2
Collection: Geelong Gallery
Gift of W Max Bell and
Norman Belcher, 1923
Images 1–3 reproduced
courtesy of the State Library of
Victoria and the State Library
of New South Wales.

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