



The silent wilderness
19th century Australian landscapes

All swirling mists, frosty light and of a weird, almost primordial aspect, William Charles Piquenit's *A mountain top, Tasmania*, c. 1886—seen, in detail, on the cover of this publication—epitomises that genre of 19th century Australian art that is the subject of this exhibition. This is the genre of wilderness landscape, the representation as conceived by the trained western eye of spectacular antipodean scenery: remote, geographically distinctive, daunting in scale and ostensibly inaccessible (at least, at the time, from a European perspective) to all but intrepid naturalists and explorers whose quest for knowledge of the unknown resonated still with the influential theories of the German naturalist, Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859).

While 19th century American audiences marvelled at the wilderness landscapes of Frederic Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Cole, their counterparts here were in thrall to the no less majestic Australian scenery depicted by artists including Conrad Martens, Eugène von Guérard, Nicholas Chevalier, Thomas Clark and Piquenit, whose works are the mainstay of *The silent wilderness*.

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Finally, I pay tribute to all members of this Gallery's staff who have worked in one capacity or another on this exhibition while our Curator, Lisa Sullivan, has had carriage of the overall project from conception to presentation as well as writing the accompanying essay and checklist of works.

Geoffrey Edwards

Director, Geelong Gallery

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At the present moment... there is European cultivation and enterprise contrasted with the silent wilderness, and the untrodden solitude of the distant hills.

George French Angas, 1847ⁱ

In the late-1850s, depictions of spectacular wilderness scenes were in great demand within the wider field of Australian landscape painting. The rise in the genre's popularity can be attributed in large part, to the arrival of European-trained artists Eugène von Guérard and Nicholas Chevalier in 1852 and 1855 respectively.

Lured to Australia by the Victorian gold rush, von Guérard and Chevalier had little success at the goldfields and both soon sought local imagery and patronage to support their artistic careers. While early Australian works by von Guérard such as *Tower Hill*, 1855 (CAT. NO. 22) and *Lake Gnotuk*, 1857 (CAT. NO. 23) reveal his interest in the more remote areas of Victoria and their distinctive geological features, it was the excursions made by von Guérard and Chevalier as they accompanied explorers and scientists throughout the colony that provided the artists with even greater access to the vistas that inspired romantic wilderness paintings (defined broadly here as mountain ranges, waterfalls, forests and lakes).

At various times between 1858 and 1864, von Guérard and Chevalier joined early expeditions conducted by explorer and natural scientist Alfred Howitt, and noted meteorologist Georg Balthasar von Neumayer within Victoria (and just beyond). These expeditions were largely initiated as a result of the burgeoning interest in the topography and natural resources of the new colony that had been prompted by the discovery of gold in the early-1850s. Von Guérard's and Chevalier's participation in these expeditions enabled both artists to create works depicting awe-inspiring terrain not previously seen by the new colonists. They subsequently played a key role in fostering interest in this genre from the late-1850s until the late-1860s, particularly within Melbourne's cultural scene.

Paintings and lithographs by Chevalier and von Guérard in the current exhibition that depict locations such as the Parker River waterfall at Cape Otway, Cumberland Creek near Apollo Bay, Mount Arapiles in the Wimmera, the Wannon Falls near Hamilton, as well as the Moroka River Falls in Gippsland and Mount Kosciusko in New South Wales reflect the extent of the artists' journeys with Howitt and Neumayer through 'untravelling wilds and primeval solitudes', and, particularly in the case of von Guérard, his attention to topographical detail in depicting what was to these European-trained artists, a foreign landscape.ⁱⁱ

In joining scientific expeditions, Chevalier and von Guérard were following in a well-established tradition, which dates in Australian

history from the journey of Captain Cook along the east coast of the continent in 1770, accompanied by artist Sydney Parkinson.

In *The silent wilderness*, early precedents to the works of Chevalier and von Guérard include Conrad Martens' *Fall of the Quarrooilli*, 1838 (CAT. NO. 16) which merges his similarly scientific approach to topography and interest in climatic conditions—honed after two years aboard Charles Darwin's *Beagle*—with the romanticism of his earlier training in England.

Soon after his arrival in Sydney in 1835, Martens travelled to the Illawarra region and the Blue Mountains. In August 1836 he was the guest of Charles Throsby Junior at Throsby Park near Moss Vale in New South Wales, the Quarrooilli Falls being located on the family's property. Martens is known to have completed a number of depictions of the scenic falls (re-named the Fitzroy Falls in 1850).

After arriving in Australia in 1840, painter and lithographer John Skinner Prout extensively toured New South Wales and published views of the colony in a set of lithographs titled *Sydney Illustrated*. Residing in Van Diemen's Land from 1844–48, Prout made several sketching trips of the island: these travels informed a new lithographic series, *Tasmania Illustrated*, published in two volumes in 1844 and 1846. Although not part of this series, Prout's lithograph *The Wellington Falls, Hobart Town*, 1845 (CAT. NO. 19) holds a significant place in the history of local printmaking as the first colour lithograph from multiple stones printed in Australia. The work was described in a contemporary newspaper report as conveying 'a correct impression of the wild, yet sublime, grandeur of the scenery which the "falls" present'.ⁱⁱⁱ

In 1845, Prout journeyed to Lake St Clair in central Tasmania—south of Cradle Mountain and now part of the Tasmanian World Heritage Wilderness area—inspired by sketches of the area by the colony's former surveyor, George Frankland. These drawings revealed 'glimpses of scenery full of natural grandeur, of unchecked wildness, and savage majesty', according to Prout.^{iv} The oil painting [*Waterfall near Lake St Clair, Tasmania*], 1847 (CAT. NO. 20), as well as his earlier lithograph, display the artist's ability to successfully depict—in diverse media—the atmospheric effects of cascading water.

Among the most popular Australian waterfalls for 19th century artists were the Wannon Falls in the Western District of Victoria and the Weatherboard Falls (now known as the Wentworth Falls) in the Blue Mountains, New South Wales.

The two falls of the Wannon—the upper and lower—were a subject that Victorian-based artist Thomas Clark returned to throughout the 1860s. In Clark's *Falls on the Wannon*, c. 1860 (CAT. NO. 13) the artist adopts a novel viewpoint, unlike those adopted by von Guérard,

Chevalier, and later Louis Buvelot, for example, in their depictions of this scene. In Clark's version, the viewer is placed beneath the deep alcove that effectively frames the composition like a proscenium arch, while the waterfall at left drops into a deep pool, beside which we see a small group of indigenous figures. This inclusion suggests the site is one unseen by European eyes despite this being an unlikely proposition by the time of Clark's sketching visits.

Even more visually spectacular are the Wentworth Falls in the Blue Mountains, a location depicted by a number of late-colonial artists. With two drops, a total height of 187 metres and a location within a vast mountain range, the Weatherboard Falls provided a supremely dramatic vista that was painted on numerous occasions by von Guérard and James Howe Carse.

Adopting similar vantage points in their respective versions of 1863 (CAT. NO. 25) and 1876 (CAT. NO. 5), von Guérard and Carse each include representations of indigenous figures in the foreground: again, a nostalgic reminder of a time prior to the encroachment in the region of non-indigenous people. The first official crossing of the Blue Mountains by European settlers had been made in 1813, and by the 1870s the area had become a popular tourist destination, aided greatly by the establishment of a train line from Penrith to Weatherboard Station in 1865.

Equally popular as a subject in colonial painting was the spectacular Govett's Leap in the Blue Mountains. Von Guérard's *Govett's Leap and Grose River Valley, Blue Mountains, New South Wales*, 1873 (CAT. NO. 31), painted some fourteen years after the artist visited the region, captures the innate grandeur of the landscape. This is emphasised by the relatively small scale of the excursion party in the foreground, members of which appear to be dwarfed by the vastness of the rock formations and deep valley.

While the popularity of wilderness scenes was beginning to wane amongst the buying public by the 1870s, particularly as many of the destinations had become more accessible to the public at large, a number of artists continued to work in this idealistic genre.

The remote landscape of the island of his birth remained a constant motif within the oeuvre of Tasmanian artist William Charles Piquenit. In his early career as a draftsman for the Tasmanian Lands and Survey Department he prepared maps of the colony that often incorporated landscape scenery. Most importantly, the role brought him into contact with a number of the island's surveyors, scientists and explorers with whom he travelled to its more remote areas 'to bear testimony, from an artist's point of view, to the wealth of beauty that exists, comparatively unknown, in this *terra incognita*...'^v

Despite relocating to Sydney in 1880, Piguenit made repeat visits to Tasmania: one such trip in 1884 is likely to have been the inspiration both for *Fern tree valley, Huon, Tasmania*, 1884 (CAT. NO. 17) and *A mountain top, Tasmania*, c. 1886 (CAT. NO. 18). The artist may have also drawn from the extensive sketchbooks and notes that he is known to have kept throughout his career.

Similarly exacting in his preparatory sketches and documentation, von Guérard made two visits to Tasmania during his time in Australia: the first in 1855, and again twenty years later with the specific intention of travelling to the Great Lake in the centre of the island. Von Guérard’s sweeping vista, *The Great Lake, Tasmania*, 1875 (CAT. NO. 32), has been referred to as one of the defining wilderness images in 19th century Australian art.

This work, as do von Guérard’s many other extraordinarily detailed paintings of wilderness imagery, provides an important record of the landscape in its purest form, prior to the incursions of European settlers. Indeed, the accuracy of the artist’s rendering of plant life in his 1855 painting *Tower Hill*, for example, informed the careful re-vegetation of the area by the Victorian Ministry for Conservation in recent years.

Conversely, in some instances, the popularity of wilderness paintings in their day led to an increased interest in the actual locations themselves, resulting in the potential for environmental impact from unchecked visitation. One such example is von Guérard’s 1857 painting *Ferntree Gully in the Dandenong Ranges* (in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia): one of the most celebrated Australian paintings of its day. Ten years after von Guérard completed this work, a lithographic version was one of 24 plates published in *Eugène von Guérard’s Australian Landscapes*, by which time the image’s accompanying text referred to the presence of ‘a comfortable hotel in its immediate neighbourhood’ and ‘the Gully [being] a favourite resort for summer tourists’.

The popularity of von Guérard’s painting and the subsequent lithograph, *Ferntree Gully, Dandenong Ranges (Victoria)*, 1867 (CAT. NO. 26) could be considered an extension of the mid-19th century enthusiasm for ferns and fern-growing which spread from England to the colonies. This phenomenon was largely inspired by the writings of the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt who, among other subjects, championed the exotic flora of specific geographical regions.

Towards the latter part of the 19th century, photographer Nicholas Caire also depicted lush fern forests, as well as mountain peaks and flowing waterfalls. In the mid-1860s and 1880s, Caire photographed several of the locations that had earlier been toured by von Guérard and Chevalier, including Gippsland and Mount

Buffalo. In images such as *Eurobin Falls, Buffalo Mountains*, c. 1880s (CAT. NO. 2) and *The Hump, Buffalo Mountains*, c. 1880s (CAT. NO. 3), the photographer employs a popular visual device used by many of the earlier painters of wilderness scenes: the inclusion of a figure in the foreground to provide a sense of scale and to emphasise the grandeur of the Australian landscape.

Caire’s photographs provided an alternative format for recording the landscape, as did the lithographs based on wilderness paintings published in *Eugène von Guérard’s Australian Landscapes* and *N Chevalier’s Album of Chromo Lithographs* in the mid-1860s. Such publications vastly increased the exposure of the original images, providing information to the wider community about the inaccessible areas of the colonies.

While it is difficult to assess the exact extent of the influence that the wilderness genre in Australian art had at the height of its popularity on the movement for environmental protection, it is significant that Australia’s first national parks were established in the late-19th century: in New South Wales in 1879, for example, and Victoria in 1898. Certain of the sites popularised in the 19th century paintings, but perhaps wilderness regions in general, continue to engage artists in the 21st century—even if the contemporary idiom does not necessarily enjoy the same high profile as did the late-colonial equivalent.

With ever increasing community awareness of the significance and vulnerability of the natural environment, these early images of wilderness scenery are rare and indispensable records of the appearance of the Australian landscape more or less as the notional *terra incognita*—the unknown land (to non-indigenous eyes) prior to an era of European exploration, discovery and settlement. These works serve today, as they did previously, as glorious pictorial celebrations of Australia’s acclaimed natural heritage.

Lisa Sullivan

Curator, Geelong Gallery

- ↑ George French Angas, *South Australia Illustrated*, 1847, preface. Cited in Tim Bonyhady, *Images in Opposition– Australian Landscape Painting 1801–1890*, Oxford University Press Australia, Melbourne, 1991, p. 59

- ↑ ‘Professor Neumayer’s scientific tour in Victoria’, *The Mercury* (Hobart), 12 July 1862, p. 6

- ↑ *Hobart Town Courier*, 17 April 1845, p. 2. Cited in Roger Butler, *Printed–Images in Colonial Australia 1801–1901*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2007, p. 165

- ↑ John Skinner Prout, *The Sketcher in Tasmania*, 1862, p. 275. Cited in Bonyhady, p. 64

- ↑ William Charles Piguenit, ‘The Western Highlands of Tasmania’, *The Mercury* (Hobart), 24 September 1887, p. 3. Cited in Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, *WC Piguenit 1836–1914*, ex. cat., Hobart, 1992, p. 9

List of works

all works height by width in cm

Nicholas Caire
born Guernsey 1837;
arrived Australia 1858;
died Australia 1918

CAT. NO. 1
Scene on the Black Spur, Nr Fernshaw, Victoria c. 1870
albumen silver photograph
18.2 x 12.3
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

CAT. NO. 2
Eurobin Falls, Buffalo Mountains c. 1880s
gelatin silver photograph
22.5 x 15.3
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1983

CAT. NO. 3
The Hump, Buffalo Mountains c. 1880s
gelatin silver photograph
22.4 x 14.9
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1983

CAT. NO. 4
Fern gully at Gembrook c. 1896, printed c. 1900s
gelatin silver photograph
20.4 x 14.9
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1983

James Howe Carse
born Scotland c. 1818;
arrived Australia c. 1867;
died Australia 1900

CAT. NO. 5
[*The Weatherboard Falls, Blue Mountains*] 1876
oil on canvas
61.4 x 107.0
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
The Joseph Brown Collection. Presented through the NGV Foundation by Dr Joseph Brown AO OBE, Honorary Life Benefactor, 2004

Nicholas Chevalier
born Russia 1828;
arrived Australia 1855;
died England 1902

CAT. NO. 6
Parker River waterfall, Cape Otway 1862
oil on canvas
130.8 x 183.4
Art Gallery of Ballarat, Victoria
Bequest of Mrs Blondel, 1923

CAT. NO. 7
[*Red Rock, Colac*] 1862–63
oil on canvas
58.5 x 91.5
Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne

CAT. NO. 8
Cumberland Creek, near Apollo Bay 1863
oil on canvas
46.0 x 61.2
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
South Australian Government Grant 1976

CAT. NO. 9
with **Charles Troedel** (printer)
Ferntree Gully, Mt Useful, Gippsland 1865
colour lithograph
32.8 x 24.4
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1976

CAT. NO. 10
with **Charles Troedel** (printer)
Mount Arapiles sunset 1865
colour lithograph
20.8 x 31.8
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 2007

CAT. NO. 11
with **Charles Troedel** (printer)
Serpentine Creek Falls, McAlister River, Gippsland 1865
colour lithograph
33.2 x 24.8
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1976

CAT. NO. 12
with **Charles Troedel** (printer)
Wannon Falls 1865
colour lithograph with additional hand-colouring
33.2 x 24.8
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1978

Thomas Clark
born England c. 1814;
arrived Australia c. 1852;
died Australia 1883

CAT. NO. 13
Falls on the Wannon c. 1860
oil on canvas
92.0 x 138.0
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Felton Bequest, 1973

CAT. NO. 14
[*The upper falls on the Wannon*] 1867
oil on canvas
76.5 x 122.5
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
The Joseph Brown Collection. Presented through the NGV Foundation by Dr Joseph Brown AO OBE, Honorary Life Benefactor, 2004

James Waltham Curtis
born England 1839; arrived Australia c. 1850s; died 1901

CAT. NO. 15
Station Peak, You Yangs 1875
oil on canvas
61.5 x 91.5
Geelong Gallery, Victoria
Acquired 1963

Conrad Martens
born England 1801;
arrived Australia 1835;
died Australia 1878

CAT. NO. 16
Fall of the Quarrooilli 1838
watercolour
45.0 x 65.6
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Felton Bequest, 1950

William Charles Piguenit
born Australia 1836;
died Australia 1914

CAT. NO. 17
Fern tree valley, Huon, Tasmania 1884
oil on canvas
91.5 x 66.0
Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
Purchased 1976

CAT. NO. 18
A mountain top, Tasmania c. 1886
oil on canvas
76.0 x 127.5
Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart
Presented 1955 by the Tasmanian Government

John Skinner Prout
born England 1805;
arrived Australia 1840;
died England 1876

CAT. NO. 19
with **Thomas Bluett** (printer)
The Wellington Falls, Hobart Town 1845
colour lithograph with additional hand-colouring
38.2 x 26.9
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 2006

CAT. NO. 20
[*Waterfall near Lake St Clair, Tasmania*] 1847
oil on board
44.9 x 34.8
Art Gallery of Ballarat, Victoria
Purchased with funds from the Wendouree Charitable Trust, 1975

Edward Roper
born England c. 1830;
arrived Australia c. 1854;
died England 1909

CAT. NO. 21
In a fern tree gully, Mount Dandenong c. 1867
oil on canvas
39.3 x 77.7
Art Gallery of Ballarat, Victoria
Gift of Mr and Mrs Andrew Ferry, 1986

Eugène von Guérard
born Austria 1811;
arrived Australia 1852;
died England 1901

CAT. NO. 22
Tower Hill 1855
oil on canvas
68.0 x 122.0
Fisheries and Wildlife Division, Ministry for Conservation, Victoria, Melbourne
Gift of Mrs E Thornton

CAT. NO. 23
Lake Gnotuk 1857
oil on canvas
35.2 x 56.7
Art Gallery of Ballarat, Victoria
Gift of Lady Currie in memory of her husband, the late Sir Alan Currie, 1949

CAT. NO. 24
Spring in the valley of the Mitta Mitta with Bogong Ranges in the distance 1863
oil on canvas
43.2 x 69.0
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
The Joseph Brown Collection. Presented through the NGV Foundation by Dr Joseph Brown AO OBE, Honorary Life Benefactor, 2004

CAT. NO. 25
The Weatherboard Falls 1863
oil on canvas
46.2 x 76.2
Geelong Gallery, Victoria
Gift of Alfred Felton, 1900

CAT. NO. 26
with **Hamel & Ferguson** (printer)
Ferntree Gully, Dandenong Ranges (Victoria) 1867
colour lithograph
32.5 x 51.0
The University of Melbourne
Art Collection, Melbourne

CAT. NO. 27
with **Hamel & Ferguson** (printer)
Forest, Cape Otway Ranges 1867
colour lithograph
32.5 x 51.0
The University of Melbourne
Art Collection, Melbourne

CAT. NO. 28
with **Hamel & Ferguson** (printer)
Moroka River Falls, (foot of Mount Kent) (Gipps Land) 1867–68 [in *Eugène von Guérard’s Australian Landscapes*]
colour lithograph
49.8 x 67.4
Geelong Gallery, Victoria
Gift of Miss Gladys Bell, 1945

CAT. NO. 29
with **Hamel & Ferguson** (printer)
Reedy Creek Falls, near Beechworth 1867
colour lithograph
32.5 x 48.0
The University of Melbourne
Art Collection, Melbourne

CAT. NO. 30
with **Thomas McLean** (publisher)
North east view from the top of Mount Kosciusko, New South Wales 1867–68
colour lithograph
31.5 x 49.5
Geelong Gallery, Victoria
Purchased through donations, 2008

CAT. NO. 31
Govett’s Leap and Grose River Valley, Blue Mountains, New South Wales 1873
oil on canvas
68.5 x 106.4
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 2000

CAT. NO. 32
The Great Lake, Tasmania 1875
oil on canvas
73.7 x 149.8
Private collection
Courtesy of Sotheby’s Australia, Melbourne





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COVER
William Charles Piguenit
A mountain top,
Tasmania (detail) c. 1886
oil on canvas
Tasmanian Museum
and Art Gallery, Hobart
Presented 1955 by the
Tasmanian Government
Photographed by Robert Colvin

LEFT
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