READING NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH ART: A CASE FULL OF COLONIALS

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In recent times a number of major exhibitions have been mounted in Australian drawing from the deep national resource of nineteenth-century British art that was once the staple fare of the colonial gallery. In particular this stockpile of British art, mostly paintings, was tapped for the exhibitions Exiles and Emigrants (NGV 2006) and A Primrose from England (Bendigo Art Gallery — touring Victoria and NSW 2003) to reconstruct our unreachable colonial past. In this paper I will highlight the dangers in attempting to describe and define the aspirations, experiences or attitudes of non-indigenous Australians, living in the nineteenth century, through the prism of British art. I take as a central focus the painting “A Primrose from England” exhibited at the London Royal Academy in 1855 since it is considered one of the most significant emblems of early colonial experience in Australia. It was included in the NGV show and the Bendigo touring exhibition was of course built around Edward Hopley’s painting. To date this painting has been read within the interpretative context that operated for Royal Academy art in Britain with little attention to the economics of exploitive convenience that tied England to its colonies. As I demonstrate in this paper it is possible to show that the sentiments expressed in this painting for British audiences, and still taken at face value today it seems, were totally rejected by colonial Australians as an absurd and condescending projection from London.

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