



Contexts for Conservation

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Caught in time: Preserving South Australia's Old Colonists for a digital future

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Abstract

The State Library of South Australia holds one or more versions of 17 photographic portrait mosaics created between 1872 and 1908. They depict close to 1,800 men and women who settled in the South Australian colony between its founding in 1836 and 1876. Known as 'the Old Colonists', the scope of the collection is unique in Australia. The Library is nearing the end of a long-term project to conserve the mosaics in collaboration with Artlab Australia, digitise the portraits, create a consolidated index of names and provide online access to both the index and the portraits. A significant proportion of the mosaics were in extremely poor condition. The treatments applied to restore five mosaics that had been roughly cut into halves or quarters are described in detail. The reasons for the neglect lie in the value assigned to the mosaics by generations of family history researchers. They have not been regarded as cultural artifacts per se but as containers of individual portraits of researchers' forebears. The Library's past management of the collection reflected the public's view of the mosaics' significance.

Keywords

Photographs; portrait mosaics; composites; significance

Introduction

The State Library of South Australia holds a collection of photographic portrait mosaics unparalleled in Australia. It comprises 17 mosaics depicting 1200 men and 600 women identified as colonists and pioneers of South Australia. The mosaics were created between 1872 and 1908; and they survive variously as artifacts, card-mounted studio prints and photographic copies. [1]

Themed portrait mosaics were a popular presentation format in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Mosaics of occupational and special interest groups are common in all Australian states and territories, featuring politicians, businessmen, town councilors, club members and the like. Group representations of ordinary citizens are rare in other jurisdictions. The explanation may lie with South Australia's status as a free settlement without the so-called convict stain, but only in part.

South Australia's Old Colonists mosaics proliferated thanks to the fiercely competitive nature of the colonial society photographer Townsend Duryea who had been in business in Adelaide since 1855. When Duryea's former employee Henry Jones was commissioned to take the portraits of old colonists who attended a banquet at the Adelaide Town Hall in 1871, Duryea responded by marketing no less than seven groups of his own creation.

The competition began with a newspaper advertisement by prominent Adelaide business man Emanuel Solomon. 'As one of the Pioneers of South Australia' it read, he wanted to meet again some of his old associates. He invited all who could date their arrival before 1841, (that is, within the first five years of the colony's existence) to a banquet he would give at the Town Hall on 28 December 1871, to coincide with the 35th anniversary of the founding of South Australia. [2]

Solomon had arrived in Adelaide in 1838, and successfully hid the fact that in 1817 he had been sentenced to seven years transportation to Van Diemen's Land for larceny – so much for South Australians' stainless origins! [3] After the banquet he invited his guests to have their portraits taken at Henry Jones' studio opposite the Town Hall. Townsend Duryea began publicising his intention to create a 'large group picture of the pioneers of South Australia' and the battle was on. Before long the studios' advertisements were jostling one another in Adelaide's daily press.

Women colonists entered the fray by assuming to accept Solomon's invitation to the 1871 banquet. He 'respectfully informed' them by advertisement that 'the Banquet is intended for Old Colonists of the Male Sex'. Nonetheless, in May the following year he invited 'Lady Old Colonists' to sit for Jones for 'a companion group'.

In early 1873 Duryea began advertising his groups of Old Colonists for sale; inviting the public to inspect the large original works at his studio and letting them know that they could buy prints in three sizes, including *carte de visite*. Cabinet cards were not advertised, but the State Library holds several examples of that dimension as well.

Jones completed at least three versions of his Banquet Group, one of which was presented to Emmanuel Solomon before his death in October 1873. Jones' group of women colonists was not finished until 1881. If groups of male colonists are rare, the mosaic of women's portraits is unique. [4]

In 1886 and 1887, to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the founding of the colony and the Jubilee Exhibition, Adelaide's Hammer studio also created one or two large groups. However only a published key, in the form of a pamphlet, seems to have survived. [5] The last flurry of activity was in 1908 when the Mora Studio assembled a group of South Australian Northern Pioneers from a collection of photographs provided by Harry Birt, a former drover and one of the men depicted. The Library holds another four mosaics of regional pioneers in the same style which are unattributed but likely related. It is this group of five mosaics, each in a parlous state of neglect, which the State Library commissioned Artlab Australia to work on first.

Conservation

In 2011 Peter Mitchelson was still completing his studies and applied to work at Artlab for a job over the summer. The Library had already approached Artlab to undertake work on these photo mosaics and the treatment was underway. Sometime in their history the mosaics had been roughly cut either into halves or quarters. The edges of their strawboard backings were both chipped and somewhat battered, and the jagged cuts that navigated between the photos had weakened the board, increasing the likelihood of them being damaged. The boards had also become somewhat warped over time.

For their size, each section of board was relatively heavy and although reintegrating them with their current backings was considered, options such as countersinking them into alternative mounting arrangements would have increased their weight further and possibly introduced new tensions and adhesives into the structure to counteract the warping and compensate for the weakness along the joins. The edges would also have required substantial consolidation and some material would need removing to achieve satisfactory butt joins of the various panels.

After discussions with the Library, the decision was made to remove their backings, create a new lining with a heavyweight Japanese paper and remount the mosaics onto a Tycore™ board which would provide even tensions with paper-on-paper as well as being much lighter and therefore easier to handle, store and hang for exhibition.

The backing removal was undertaken over some months with each panel of the mosaic placed over a layer of blotter and Bondina®. Water was brushed onto small sections and left under Mylar® to humidify. Each section was then scraped back using sharpened butter knives for the bulk and septum elevators for the final layer. The work was checked regularly to monitor the impact upon the photos and their inscriptions. No photos appeared to have suffered any damage and as only minor losses were incurred to their inscriptions, very little retouching was required to compensate for these losses.

As this backing removal took many hours of scraping, it was important to take regular breaks to avoid straining our wrists and fingers. As there was no exhibition deadline to meet, staff were able to interchange periods of scraping the top layers with other work to ease the strain on their joints. The last layer demanded lengthier periods of sustained concentration to avoid puncturing the surface. Peter found it best to work on the final layer in the morning when he was fresh.

Once backing removal was completed the lining paper was prepared. A sheet of Perspex® was abraded with sandpaper and a sheet of Terylene® was pasted onto its surface. After this had dried, a thick, heavyweight Japanese paper was pasted down with the rough side up to achieve the best bond with the panels. Its grain direction was run vertically to match that of the mosaic.

Once these preparations were completed the panels were gently humidified using wet blotters under a large sheet of Gore-Tex® within a Mylar® chamber. A section of the lining paper was pasted down with wheat-starch paste and each panel laid in place. This

stage was the most critical in the whole treatment because many hours of preparatory work had the potential to go wrong very quickly.

The thinness of the paper on the panels presented the greatest challenge. It was critical to get each panel aligned properly from the beginning, as we were unlikely to get a second chance. Paint rollers proved very useful in working away any pockets of air to the edges but the paper also presented many small ridges as the panels were laid down and the roller proved ineffective in dealing with these. By quickly trialing different tools and techniques one team member discovered that rubbing a bone folder through a protective sheet of Bondina® was the ideal method to smooth these ridges perfectly flat without tearing the paper or leaving burnishing marks. When the mosaic was safely adhered to its new lining it was then pressed under felts and boards.

At this point the Library requested the return of the mosaic, as it was easier to scan as a loose sheet rather than after having been mounted onto its backing board. After being digitised the work was returned to Artlab, edging strips of the same Japanese paper were attached to the sides of the lining paper and used to drum-mount the mosaic onto the Tycore™ board before finally being returned to the Library.

Significance

The mutilation of the five mosaics is now reversed, but it is shocking to contemplate. So too is the apparent neglect of other mosaics in the collection. Artlab is now working on several of the card-mounted studio prints that Townsend Duryea so vigorously marketed in 1873, including the sub-group he created of colonists who arrived in 1837; it has suffered water damage and mould at some stage of its life. Of the original works, the 1839 sub-group is in the worst condition. Most of the portraits have faded beyond restoration. [6]

The question of why this unique body of cultural heritage has been so badly neglected in the Library's care is inescapable. The answer lies in the value assigned to the mosaics by generations of family history researchers. The mosaics' significance is not as cultural artifacts but as containers of individual portraits of researchers' forebears. Once a researcher identifies a forebear, they order a copy of the individual portrait, disassociated from the surrounding mosaic. The portraits are published in genealogies in the same way. Because Jones and Duryea offered free sittings to any old colonist who cared to participate, the portraits represent many families whose forebears would not otherwise have been photographed in the 1870s.

The Library's past management of the collection reflected the public's view of the mosaics' significance. The Library's first darkroom was set up in 1946 and for the next 50 years individual portraits were photographed in black and white - and re-photographed from surrogate photographs - until both the catalogue and storage areas were littered with versions greatly varying in quality.

Indeed, this situation was the original motivation for the Old Colonists project. As a result of the project, the public can now obtain colour, high-resolution digital images of each

portrait. But now each mosaic has also been digitally photographed or scanned to document it as an artifact in its own right.

In addition to conserving and digitising the mosaics and portraits, the third component of the project has been the creation of a consolidated index to the collection. The painstaking process helped to reveal variations in versions of mosaics that had not previously been apparent. For instance, the Library holds two variations of the Mora Studio's Northern Pioneers mosaic - the original artifact that Artlab has restored and a distorted black and white photograph one-third of the size of the original. Each version includes eight portraits that are not on the other. Clearly more than one original was made, and the distorted photograph has taken on new significance in the Library's collection. [7]

Efforts to locate mosaics of early settlers from other Australian colonies have had few results. The co-author's interstate colleagues have only found two among the usual groups of politicians, businessmen and club members: Thomas Chuck's *Explorers and Early Colonists of Victoria, 1872*, and William Sargent's *Distinguished Colonists NSW, ca. 1878*. Their crowded designs offer interesting contrasts to the very orderly mosaics produced in South Australia.

The most striking mosaic located in the region to date is 'British colonists and natives in Fiji'. The image is pasted into a photograph album formed in about 1880. It depicts a mosaic created by the Dufty brothers, Victorian photographers prominent in Fiji in that era. The mosaic includes many native Fijians, and probably predates the arrival of Indian indentured labourers by just a few years. [8]

The combination of painting and photography was another practice in this era. Two of the most curious local examples are elements of two oil paintings of balls at the Adelaide Town Hall in 1866 and 1867. The artist James Shaw stuck photographic portraits on to the surface of the paintings. Apparently he also took commissions to accurately represent the ball gowns ladies wore. One day it should be possible to use facial recognition software to determine whether these gentlemen are also represented in the Library's mosaics. [9]

Conclusion

The Old Colonists project has proven to be more complex and time-consuming than expected. The priority conservation work and digitising are nearing completion, but there is still much work to be done getting most of the mosaics and individual portraits into the Library's online catalogue for the first time. The project has created a good deal of interest among State Library staff, who support the co-author's vision of creating a photographic mural of all 17 mosaics, to scale, along with their most significant surrogates, as a feature wall in the Library's Family History research area. [10] The Library's Preservation team has been engrossed in the project for so long that they have dubbed themselves the 'Old Preservationists' and created a born-digital mosaic of their own.

Brief biographies of presenters:

Beth M Robertson is manager of Preservation at the State Library of South Australia, encompassing collection maintenance, conservation, reformatting and storage. She completed a History Honours degree at the University of Adelaide in 1979. From 1987 to 1999 she was the foundation Oral History Officer at the State Library. Her *Oral History Handbook* is in its fifth edition and is regarded as the Australian standard.

Peter Mitchelson completed a Masters in Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne in 2011. He worked at Artlab Australia for one year before moving to the National Library of Australia in Canberra where he now works as a paper conservator. Previously he completed a Postgraduate Diploma in Art History and worked in the art industry in Australia and overseas.

Endnotes

1. The descriptive term 'mosaic' is used in preference to the technical 'composite' following the style of Bob Noye's *Photohistory SA* www.artgallery.sa.gov.au/noye
2. *South Australian Register*, 16 December 1871. This and subsequent advertisements can easily be located now by word searches in the digitised newspapers section of Trove <http://trove.nla.gov.au/>
3. Eric Richards 'Emanuel Solomon (1800-1873)' in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/solomon-emanuel-4623>.
4. Jack Cato *The Story of the Camera in Australia*, Institute of Australian Photography, 1977, p. 173.
5. *Key to Hammer & Co's pioneer commemorative group, as shewn at the Old Colonists' gathering, December 28, 1886*, Whillas & Ormiston, Adelaide, 1886.
6. The 1837 group is held at B18891; the 1839 group at B 16006. Fortunately, every one of the portraits in the 1939 sub-group are represented in better condition on Duryea's larger groups, B 8235 and B 47770.
7. The original Mora Studio work is held at B6912; the variation is held at B 8502.
8. The image was located in a sale catalogue on the website of Antipodean Books, Maps & Prints, www.antipodean.com/elist10/antipodean10cc.html
9. Margaret Harker Farrand 'Composite photographs: intentions and achievements' in *Photoresearcher*, No. 1, 1992, pp.4-12.
10. Both works, 'Opening Ball in the Town Hall Adelaide 22nd June 1866' and 'City Ball in Honour of HRH The Duke of Edinburgh, KG. 5th November 1867', are held in the Adelaide City Council Civic Collection.
11. Significant surrogates include a mass produced poster of one of Henry Jones' versions of 'The Old Colonists Banquet Group', probably created by photographer Ernest Gall to coincide with South Australia's centenary in 1936. It is held at B 7677.