...In the full daylight of early afternoon, a number of travellers were held up and robbed by bushrangers. A man was placed over the captives, who were tied together in groups of two and three, with strict orders to fire upon them if a hand was stirred, the ringleader exclaiming: “Put them all together, so that, if you miss one, you will kill another.” In this position they remained for some two hours and a half, during which time seven other travellers were held up and added to the first sufferers, being secured in like manner. At sundown the bushrangers, apparently satisfied with their plunder, drew off the man acting as guard, and shortly afterwards was heard the sound of horses galloping off through the bush in the direction of South Yarra. The prisoners were then at last able to set themselves free and proceed on their way.

It was this descriptive account of the events upon which William Strutt’s 1887 painting Bushrangers, Victoria, Australia 1852 was based that first sparked the interest of collector Sir Russell Grimwade. According to his biographer, Professor John Poynter, it was in 1954 that Grimwade read a 1912 edition of The Windsor Magazine in which the account and a colour reproduction of the painting were published. A keen collector of Australiana – particularly of works documenting the history of Victoria – Grimwade decided to acquire the painting to add to his extensive collection. He employed the assistance of AJL McDonnell, the then London adviser to the National Gallery of Victoria’s Felton Bequest, to locate the painting. With little available information other than that which was published forty years earlier in The Windsor Magazine, McDonnell began the search. After limited success he placed an advertisement in the personal columns of The Times, through which the much sought-after painting was located in England.

Although the price placed on the work was more than Grimwade wished to pay, he travelled to England to persuade the reluctant owner – a descendant of the original purchaser – to sell the work. Generally a financially cautious buyer, Grimwade was reminded by a colleague’s only lasting regrets were for the things he had failed to buy and, in regards to the reluctant owner, Grimwade was advised to ‘choke him with gold!’ to secure the purchase. In August 1955 McDonnell wrote to the owners of the painting offering the sum of £1,000. The offer was accepted and Bushrangers, Victoria, Australia 1852 arrived in Australia only months before Grimwade’s death in November 1955.

The bargaining over purchase price that McDonnell entered into on Grimwade’s behalf was not the first to which the painting was subject. In July 1887 while Bushrangers ... hung on the walls of the Royal Academy, the artist wrote to potential buyer Charles Brooke Crawshaw:

I am sorry my price for “Bushrangers” is beyond your expectations. I should like you to have stated what you were prepared to give – as perhaps I might have met your wishes … I hope when you are in London you will favour me with a visit as I have several popular pictures I could show you … and not having nearly so many figures as the “Bushrangers” I could sell at a much lower figure …
Negotiations between the artist and purchaser continued. A second letter from Strutt, dated only days after the first, reveals details of the work’s production as well as the artist’s enthusiasm to finalise a sale:

The price I asked – considering the time it took nearly 6 months, and research necessary, and very expensive frame was moderate, also I brought the costumes over from Australia and they are the very ones worn by the Colonists at that time – Still as I am very anxious to sell from the walls of the Academy … I feel inclined to acquiesce in your proposal hoping it may be the means of opening up a fresh connexion … I am certain you will feel so pleased with the picture when you see it nearer as the various expressions are lost thro’ its being hung so high …

CB Crawshaw, a Yorkshire colliery owner, purchased the painting from the Royal Academy in 1887 and it remained in his family until its purchase by Grimwade in 1856. It was bequeathed to the University of Melbourne by Sir Russell and presented after the death of Mab Grimwade in 1972, along with Sir Russell’s extensive art, book and archival collections.

Bushrangers, Victoria, Australia 1852 was one of several historical paintings which drew on Strutt’s colonial experiences and which he completed after his return to England.

Born in England in 1825, William Strutt studied at the Paris studio of portrait and history painter Michel-Martin Drolling and at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts under Paul Delaroche and Horace Vernet. After working as a draughtsman in Paris – a position that greatly affected his eyesight – Strutt travelled to Australia to regain his health. He arrived in Melbourne in early July 1850, only months before the separation of Port Phillip District from New South Wales and the beginning of the Victorian gold-rush. The rapid social and political changes that occurred in the new colony at this time provided Strutt with a variety of historical subjects – many of which he revisited decades later including the Victorian bushfires of February 1851, the death of explorer Robert O’Hara Burke and bushranging activities at the height of the gold-rush.

The Australian Journal of William Strutt, ARA, 1850–1862 extensively documents the artist’s experiences in Australia and New Zealand including the events of 16 October 1852 when, according to Strutt, ‘one of the most daring robberies attempted even in Victoria’ occurred. At the time of the hold-up, Strutt resided in nearby Prahran and he visited the scene of the outrage only hours after the event.

Strutt returned to England in 1862, where, thirty-five years after the dramatic events in colonial Melbourne, he completed Bushrangers, Victoria, Australia 1852.

Related works by William Strutt from the University of Melbourne Art Collection:
- Untitled (Study for ‘Bushrangers’), c. 1886, oil on paper
- Study for ‘Bushrangers’ (middle section), c. 1886, pencil on paper
- Study for ‘Bushrangers’ (fallen man), c. 1886, pencil on paper

Additional information available at www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au

Lisa Sullivan
The Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2002

3 Correspondence, A.J. McDonnell to Mr Browning, 4 August 1955, University of Melbourne Archives, Sir Russell and Lady Mab Grimwade Collection, series 4/3 (UMA).
4 Receipt dated 11 August 1955 (UMA).
5 Correspondence, William Strutt to CB Crawshaw, 4 July 1887 – Potter files (copy).
6 Correspondence, William Strutt to CB Crawshaw, 6 July 1887 – Potter files (copy).
7 William Strutt, Black Thursday, February 6th 1851 1864, oil on canvas, La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria; William Strutt, The burial of Burke 1911, oil on canvas, La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria.
9 William Strutt made over thirty preparatory drawings for Bushrangers … including figure studies and compositional groupings. Extensive infra-red analysis completed by Sean Loughrey of the University Conservation Service has revealed several compositional changes on the canvas itself. See Loughrey, Sean, ‘Infra-red research on William Strutt’s Bushrangers, Victoria, Australia, 1852 …’, AICCM National Newsletter, no. 62, March 1997, p. 19. Infra-red analysis completed on this work was presented in the exhibition Seeing Red: the Art and Science of Infra-Red Analysis, The Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, 23 September to 3 December 2000.