Far-famed city

The new city of Melbourne excited global interest in the second half of the nineteenth century. Numerous authors, many writing for a curious audience in Europe, described the urban environment and settler society of the ‘far-famed city of Melbourne’ as capital of the ‘British El Dorado’. Even before the discovery of gold, visions of Melbourne were coloured by ambition. To picture Melbourne’s present, or imagine its future, was to speak of the expansion of the British Empire, of commercial opportunity, of progress and modernity.

Many images of early Melbourne were produced in this spirit. There was practical information to communicate: the lie of the land, anchorage for ships, water and pasture. But there was always the suggestion of expansiveness and with it the prospect of development. The widescreen format of the panorama united intense foreground detail with distant horizons in a deep perspectival space, suggesting that the activities and values of the city would inevitably spread across the colony. Fact was enhanced by rhetoric and it was occasionally difficult to separate the actual from the potential city. Whitlock and Teale’s 1855 vista was dubbed a ‘work of fiction’ by a contemporary reviewer; the terrain was implausibly green and the engraver’s hand had too eagerly converted proposed buildings into actual structures.

In many of the artworks displayed in this room, the Melbourne scene is larded with indications of progress and modern amenity (crowded masts, laden drays and industrious workers). Later images of chuffing trains, rising steeples, welcoming parks, institutions of science and learning—all enjoyed by a passing parade of well-dressed citizens—quietly insist that British modernity has securely taken root. The original inhabitants of Port Phillip—the Wurundjeri, Bunurong and Wathaurong of the Kulin nation—rarely appear but the processes of occupation and displacement are evident in the signs of tree-felling, land-clearing, and pastoral and mercantile activity.
Many images of Melbourne are shaped by a conscious use of artistic conventions. The picturesque mode is evident in colonial works by John Skinner Prout, Louis Buvelot and ST Gill, where pictorial devices were used to ‘process the messy world ... for civilized consumption’, as garden historian JD Hunt put it. The jarring irregularities of nature were smoothed into decorative curves, and intrusions such as farms and suburban homes nestle pleasantly in the landscape, suggesting a balanced integration of nature and the works of man. By the late nineteenth century, the language of the picturesque was melded with developments in modern art and a growing historical consciousness. Encountering Melbourne became a more lyrical experience; the commercial hubbub of the colonial era was set aside in favour of muted twilight scenes or impressionistic effects shaped by the seasons and time of day. Melbourne’s history, too, becomes picturesque; a landscape of quaint stables and shadowy lanes peopled by the legendary merchants, pastoralists and administrators of the colonial era.

In the adjacent room, we see that in the twentieth century more critical and even sceptical visions of Melbourne developed. The expansive vistas of the colonial era were replaced by the flattened, densely packed space of a crowded metropolis. Elements of modern art styles were used to highlight the negative sides of urban experience: Charles Blackman’s expressionistic space is claustrophobic and threatening, Max Dimmack’s cubist geometry speaks of a congested suburb, while Louis James’s fusion of Pop and abstraction is suggestive of a fragmented and bewildering modernity. A persistent gothic tone in the art of recent decades is in marked contrast to the ‘boosterism’ of the colonial era and the picturesque of the early modern period. Today, Melbourne is far-famed as among the most ‘liveable’ cities in the world but artists present a dark, melancholy city threatened by over-development, haunted by memories of colonial occupation, and uncertain of its future.