The Empire Look: the installation of the British Art Exhibit at the New Zealand International Exhibition 1906-07 at Christchurch

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ABSTRACT: Organised under the aegis of New Zealand Premier Richard Seddon (1845-1906), the 1906-1907 New Zealand International Exhibition was designed to show the colony's progress to the world and frame Aotearoa as a Better Britain. The British Art Section comprising 2,000 works was organised by the British government but paid for by the New Zealand government. It was housed in its own bespoke gallery in Hagley Park designed by a local architect. This installation remains the largest exhibition of British art in Aotearoa's history, and purchases made by local government authorities formed the basis of metropolitan public art collections throughout Australasia. A principal motivation of the exhibit was to inculcate what was then considered good taste in colonial viewers, as well as to provide a version of the Royal Academy product to sell to middle-class art buyers nostalgic for reminders of Home. The British Government Representative for Fine and Applied Art, Alfred Longden (1875-1954), stated shortly after his arrival in Christchurch that the artworks were selected "with the idea of having [them] represented in the homes of the people there [New Zealand]. That is the motive that has actuated the artists. They have sent work which they feel would be suitable and acceptable for your houses and museums."

Longden was also responsible for decorating the Art Gallery, fitting out the interior in an Arts and Crafts aesthetic style which was well-received by exhibition visitors. Sir Isidore Spielmann (1854-1925) who chose the works for exhibition but remained in Britain, noted in his 1907 report that "the general opinion was expressed that the rooms of the British Section were excellent in taste." The decorative scheme was also adopted for the rooms containing the Colonial Art Section, and this paper will address the ways in which the interior design framed the whole enterprise in terms of Empire.

AI Statement: AI was not used in any aspect of researching and writing this paper.

Organised under the aegis of New Zealand Premier Richard Seddon (1845-1906), who unfortunately died before it opened, the 1906-7 New Zealand International Exhibition in Christchurch was designed to show the colony's progress to the world, frame Aotearoa as a Better Britain, and was organised as part of the lead up to Dominion status being conferred in 1907. New Zealand had previously held international exhibitions; however, this was the first to be hosted and fully funded by the Government. In the words of early New Zealand historian James Cowan, it

> marked a distinct advance in our national life; it denoted the development of a broader note in our national character; and, alike in our outlook upon the world and in our standard of importance in the eyes of the rest of the Empire, it came as a distinct impetus to virile nationhood, and helped to a rather more exact realisation of our value as a civilised State than New-Zealanders had heretofore grasped.[1]

The British Art Section comprising 2,000 works was organised by the British government but paid for by New Zealand. The art was housed in its own bespoke gallery designed by a local Christchurch architect, Frederick Barlow, alongside a much smaller "Colonial Art Section." It remains the largest exhibition of British art in Aotearoa's history, and purchases made by local government authorities formed the basis of metropolitan public art collections throughout Australasia. A principal motivation of the exhibit was to inculcate what was then considered good taste in colonial viewers, as well as to provide a version of the Royal Academy product to sell to middle-class art buyers nostalgic for reminders of Home. The British Government Representative for Fine and Applied Art,

[1] Cowan *Official Record* p 3.

Alfred Longden (1875-1954), stated shortly after his arrival in Christchurch that the artworks chosen were the ones considered most appropriate for the interiors of New Zealand houses and public art galleries. Significantly, it was Longden who was the man responsible for including an Arts and Crafts section in the exhibit, and he also extended a frieze symbolising Great Britain, which had been designed by Walter Crane originally for the St Louis exhibition, throughout all the galleries. This stamped the whole interior, including the Colonial Art Section, with the imprimatur of the British Empire.

The international exhibition phenomenon

Small industrial and artistic exhibitions had been taking place throughout Britain and Europe in the latter eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, focusing on art and industry to improve trade. However, as argued by historian Paul Greenhalgh, they soon changed in size and scope when exhibition organisers understood that exhibitions could exert an international political influence as well, instead of only a local cultural and economic stimulus.[2] They became a way for a country to showcase its national identity. The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations (Great Exhibition), held in Hyde Park, London, during the summer of 1851, was the first international exhibition. Prince Albert, as President of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, worked closely with Henry Cole, a British civil servant and industrial design enthusiast, to plan and organise the Great Exhibition. They wanted to elevate British taste and showcase Britain's manufacturing superiority on an international scale, deciding that the "friendly competition" of an international exhibition would create the potential to expand Britain's consumer market abroad. As art historian Julie Codell has explained, the Great Exhibition linked commerce with culture, creating new relationships between the general public, manufacturing and the arts.[3]

The Great Exhibition proved an additional means of facilitating British foreign policy in that it educated Britons on the importance of having an empire and promoted the idea of a "Greater Britain" which included territories gained through imperial expansion. The event also worked symbolically to bring the monarch closer to her subjects, and this new intimacy is portrayed in a commemorative group portrait by Henry Courtney Selous (1803-90). It represents the connection between the Crown and the Church of England with *The Opening of the Great Exhibition by Queen Victoria on 1 May 1851* showing the Archbishop of Canterbury blessing the Exhibition. By the 1880s, Britain had begun holding empire-only exhibitions which are seen by historians as occasions to display the advantages of empire to the British public and make them feel proud of their country's achievements, as well as an opportunity to symbolically reinforce the idea of the British Empire as a unified entity.

In the 1890s, when New Zealand was suffering the effects of the worldwide Long Depression, the colony kept its continued focus on Britain as a destination for its exports and therefore was not represented at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. This had an "art palace" designed by Daniel Burhham as an adaptation of the plans of the late George Root. Heavily classical and symmetrical, the dome of the gallery was surmounted by a colossal statue of winged

[2] Greenhalgh *Ephemeral Vistas* p 9.

[3] Codell "International Exhibitions" pp 221-222.

victory. Top lit, it had a collection of sculpture displayed on the main floor of what are described in the exhibition documentation as "the nave and transept," reinforcing the idea that this was a cathedral for art. An important consideration in the design of international exhibition art galleries was that they be fireproof, and this one was solid brick, plastered over, with iron for the roof, floors, and galleries. Glass skylights in iron frames lit the galleries by day, and gas by night.

Participation in the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St Louis eleven years later in 1904, was essential for New Zealand given the recent establishment of the world's first government tourism department in 1901. The Palace of Fine Arts, designed to outlast the exhibition, became the St. Louis Art Museum and housed 11,000 works of art by nearly 1,500 professional artists from 26 countries for the exhibition. It can be argued to have both reinforced and dismantled cultural and artistic hierarchies in its displays, showing Filipino people as uncivilised, with the country being "rescued" by acquisition as a colony by the United States in 1898 after the Spanish-American War. Despite this colonialism, it included Native American arts in its Fine Arts gallery whereas the New Zealand International Exhibition of 1906-7 confined Māori participation to a model pā in Hagley Park, with no Māori art included in the galleries.

New Zealand International Exhibitions

At the same time as New Zealand was participating in exhibitions overseas, it began hosting its own international exhibitions. The first was the 1865 New Zealand Exhibition, held in Dunedin and organised by geologist and nascent Colonial Museum director James Hector to capitalise on the city's goldmining wealth. The 1889–90 New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition also took place in Dunedin and, like an earlier 1882 exhibition, it was organised by two entrepreneurs Joubert and Twopeny, the latter being the editor of the *Otago Daily Times*. Some of the £10,000 government subsidy went towards the building of an art gallery designed by William Mathew Hodgkins, the president of the Otago Art Society, to become a permanent institution for Dunedin to house its art collections after the exhibition's end. He managed to secure 42 works from the British loan collection which had been exhibited at Melbourne and Sydney, making the art gallery with its six galleries displaying around 1,500 artworks, a popular destination for visitors. The roof, which was in three spans and held up by iron columns was atop (fireproof) brick walls and was perforated by 60 skylights in iron frames. The floor is described as asphalt covered with a thin coating of cement, with chocolate-coloured walls featuring a stencilled frieze of stylised acanthus motifs in a buff colour and a darker coloured dado. Photographs by David de Maus documenting the British display include images of the large 1883 oil painting by Stanhope Forbes which subsequently became part of the collection of the new Dunedin Public Art Gallery and therefore stayed in the building.

The Art Gallery at the 1889–90 New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition in Dunedin set an important precedent for the 1906–7 Exhibition as Hodgkins' efforts provided the first opportunity for the colony to see contemporary British painting in person in an architecturally-designed interior. The 1906-7 Exhibition Fine Arts Committee originally planned to loan works from British, European, American and Japanese artists, complemented by a room of New Zealand and Australian artists, but disagreements between the committee and the government led to New Zealand's High Commissioner William Pember Reeves taking on the organisation of

the art exhibit. He immediately delegated all responsibility to Sir Isidore Spielmann who was well known for his work organising British art exhibits for earlier exhibitions, including the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition. Spielmann believed in the superiority of British art, and his choices for New Zealand reflected a conservative, academic view of art prevalent in Britain at that time. Expatriate artist Frances Hodgkins, whose own artworks were rejected for the Colonial Art Section at the 1906-7 in Christchurch, wrote a letter home to her Dunedin-based mother Rachel Hodgkins from London, summarising her view on the selection of works: "why buy pictures for a young colony by derelict artists of bygone time and taste?"[4] Spielmann's principal motivation was not to show the latest developments in British art, but to educate colonial viewers on what "good" art was within the Empire, and to cater to a market of middle-class art buyers nostalgic for "Home."

Art in the interiors of the landed gentry in New Zealand

New Zealand's landed gentry and monied classes bought art for their homes, and the exhibition occurred right at the time their wealth was booming. Large homes and mansions influenced by Britain's Arts and Crafts Movement were built for New Zealand's wealthy at the turn of the century and were often named after places in Britain such as Littlebourne, Acton, Merchiston and Antrim. Displaying what they believed to be their sophisticated tastes and in an economic climate which aided upward mobility, educated and wealthy settlers developed a style of home décor that distinguished them from the middle class.[5] A photograph of Clitherbeck, a large 14-room house built in 1903 for company manager Thomas Coverdale and his wife, Nina, in the Christchurch suburb of Riccarton, shows it filled with items denoting the family's status. Crowded with patterned armchairs, the centre of the carpeted room is the ornate mantlepiece with its family photographs and vases of freshly cut flowers. Surrounding walls show a decorative wallpaper frieze, with mirrors hung throughout and notably two large gilt framed art works, one a landscape and the other a portrait. The British Art Section of the Exhibition provided an excellent opportunity to buy art works to furnish such rooms, with the added bonus of the purchasers' names being published in local newspapers and recorded in the British government's official report on the Exhibition. Having an art collection during this period signalled, according to art historian Dianne Sachko Macleod, that the owner possessed a "cultural acuity and discrimination to others which mitigate against charges of mere conspicuous consumption."[6]

The design of the exhibition buildings

Images of the architecture of the 1906-7 New Zealand International Exhibition in Christchurch became its principal marketing tool. The "palace of white and gold" dominated Christchurch's skyline, with a Main Building, Concert Hall and Fernery designed by Christchurch architect Joseph Clarkson Maddison. It presented the cultured and elevated image of New Zealand which Seddon had wished to promote to the world. English-born, Maddison had studied at the National Art Training School in South Kensington, London, and emigrated to New Zealand in 1872. He had been elected to the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1887 for his public buildings in the Italianate style in

[4] Hodgkins quoted, Tyler "Art for Empire" p 102.

[5] Petersen *New Zealanders at Home* p 65.

[6] Macleod *Art and the Victorian Middle Class* p 11.

Christchurch. Despite his architectural style being considered unfashionable by the early twentieth century, the classic and conservative French Renaissance design of the Main Building had been chosen by Seddon as European-looking, signalling New Zealand's maturity to Exhibition visitors.

The interiors were dominated by statuary, with the Government spending a total of £3,790.6.8 (almost NZ$800,000 today) on first plaster copies of classical sculptures and then marble sculptures by Melbourne sculptor Charles Frances Summers to replace the plaster ones which nearly all got broken in transit. Only the half-size plaster copy of Antonio Canova's Pauline Bonaparte as Venus Victrix arrived intact and was immediately placed in pride of place in the Grand Hall. The Decorative Committee's preference for promoting European over Māori culture is indicated by the placement of James McDonald's Māori statuary group, which was designed and scaled specifically to sit in the centre of the Grand Hall under the dome, but was relegated to a position halfway down the Main Corridor opposite the Fijian Court. A decorative porcelain fountain loaned to the Exhibition by Royal Doulton took its place in the main entrance.

The design of the art gallery

Built as an annex to the Main Building, the Art Gallery was designed by Christchurch architect Frederick John Barlow in a simpler, more modern style than the Main Building. Barlow was Christchurch-born and had been articled to Alfred Simpson between 1882-86 before leaving to work in Australia and being appointed Head Instructor in Architecture and Building Construction at Gordon College in Geelong. He returned to Christchurch in 1893, and while his drawings for the Art Gallery at the NZIE 1906-7 do not survive, his splendid candy-striped Rangiora Borough Council Chambers with its domed interior built at the same time does, and as his most substantial surviving building gives an idea of his style and flair. The Art Gallery was built with solid brick walls strengthened by exterior buttresses, ceilings lined with asbestos slabs to provide maximum fire protection, and four towers built to support each corner of the building, with electric lighting designed to showcase colour almost as clearly and as naturally as in daylight. The building was divided into twelve separate rooms — two central galleries with five smaller adjoining galleries on each side – designed to be walked through in a clockwise direction.

Although over 30 of the British artworks which were shown in St Louis were also sent to Christchurch (21 oil paintings, eight watercolours and multiple sculptural pieces and prints), there were differences between Spielmann's selections for the American and New Zealand exhibitions which illustrate that he was distinguishing between two different markets. For Christchurch, Spielmann specifically chose artworks of moderate size and price to help facilitate sales. He did not travel to New Zealand, appointing a younger man, Alfred Appleby Longden as his representative. Longden was an artist, training at the Royal College of Art who had been the Representative of the Applied Art Committee in St Louis.[7] It was Longden's choice to include a large proportion of Arts and Crafts exhibits in the 1906–7 Exhibition and in choosing these he was assisted by Walter Crane, who had supplied the heraldic frieze for St Louis. The picture hanging order was arranged by artist Edward Gregory before the artworks were packed and shipped to Christchurch, so that "the important and difficult work of hanging was not left to chance."[8] The British Art Section used nine of

[7] Obituary p 10.
[8] Spielmann *Report* p 9.

the twelve rooms in the Art Gallery, and artworks were differentiated by medium. Rooms of watercolours, (one of which included a display case containing a collection of miniatures), were followed by rooms of oil paintings, then a room each of drawings, etching and engravings, and finally the Arts and Crafts room.

Longden's promotion of the Arts and Crafts aesthetic delighted Exhibition visitors and his employer alike. Spielmann noted that "the general opinion was expressed that the rooms of the British Section were excellent in taste"[9] and the decorative scheme was extended to the Colonial Art Section. Floors were covered with a dull green linoleum to within two feet of the walls, which were stained a dark brown colour and oiled. The walls were covered with a rich dark crimson burlap, dyed specially and fireproofed.[10] As in Chicago and St Louis, red was the colour thought to provide the best contrast with the gold of the picture frames. Crimson burlap curtains were hung on each side of the archways linking the rooms to one another, with views through creating a sense of an enfilade of rooms. The walls were also detailed with grey-coloured woodwork and surmounted with a frieze painted on scrim by Walter Crane which combined the symbols for England, Scotland and Ireland uniting them as Great Britain. A series of shields and the Union Jack were connected by scrolls of oak, rose and bay foliage. Smaller shields featured the red lion of Scotland, the Irish harp and the thistle and shamrock. Only intended to be used in the rooms containing the British Art Section, the frieze was replicated for use throughout the entire Art Gallery, including in the rooms designated for the Colonial Art Section. This featured 355 artworks, predominantly oil paintings, from 100 New Zealand and Australian artists (237 artworks from New Zealand and 118 from Australia). Spielmann was reported to be pleased with the "harmonious" result[11] but there is no record of what the New Zealand and Australian artists thought of having an emphatically British design hanging over their artworks. It had the effect of diminishing the difference of the colonial art on display, rendering it indistinct from the British art. Numerous photographs of the British Art Section printed in *The British Government Exhibit at the New Zealand International Exhibition (1906–1907)*, record almost every wall of the nine gallery rooms dedicated to British art while there are only two known photographs of the Colonial Art Section, both of the larger gallery, and one of which is a composite taken while the hanging was still underway.

Prominent placement of symbolic works

The arrangement of the works in the interior indicates that the display was configured to be instructive to visitors, in keeping with the promotion of the educative function of museums and galleries which prevailed in the Victorian period. Visitors to the British Art Section were first greeted by a terracotta bust, *John Ruskin* by Conrad Dressler. Spielmann was a follower of Ruskin, particularly his advocacy for a national British art. The sequencing of the pictures led viewers past less important artworks to larger and more significant oil paintings such as *The Light of the World* by William Holman Hunt, hung in the centre of the furthest wall, which could be seen the entire length of the Art Gallery, and this was noticed by one reporter who commented "to a certain degree the paintings are graded in importance, the most prized being hung in rooms furthest from the

[9] Spielmann *Report* p 10.

[10] "Jottings" p 8.

[11] Spielmann *Report* p 10.

entrance."[12]

The Royal Family, and in particular the late Queen Victoria, were ever present as subjects in the paintings, and there were also many portraits of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra. A report on the Exhibition in the *New Zealand Times* noted that "special efforts were made to send works of historical and national interest" to Christchurch, confirming that the pictures depicting "occurrences of Imperial interest" were a "continual source of fascination and admiration to the patriotic people of New Zealand."[13] Readers were encouraged to believe that New Zealand remained a loyal British colony despite its transition to self-governing Dominion in the British Empire later in 1907.

The Arts and Crafts pieces displayed in the ninth and final room included jewellery, wooden furniture, drapery, wallpaper, stained glass, silverware, metalwork, sculptural reliefs, illuminated manuscripts, books, embroidery and lace work. These proved influential for both colonial artistic taste in New Zealand and future art students, and the Canterbury Society of Arts instituted a crafts section in its annual exhibitions immediately. Discussion in the newspapers indicates the close study of the exhibits in this display:

> even those who were not prepared to buy the articles asked many questions and sought much information, which Mr Longden was very glad to give. Quite a large number of people have written to the manufacturers in England with, the object of obtaining articles made of less expensive material than that used in the samples displayed in Christchurch.[14]

Conclusion

For New Zealand, purchases of British art from the Art Gallery were a matter of national importance. The New Zealand Government, which took a 10% commission from every artwork sold, exhorted the colonial public to buy British art from the Exhibition. Premier Joseph Ward clearly expressed his views about the British Art Section and expectations at the Exhibition's opening ceremony:

> There has never been within the walls of any picture gallery such a magnificent display of art as is to be found within the walls of that gallery. There are here already people who have come for the special purpose of making a selection of these pictures with a view to purchasing. New Zealanders ought to toe the mark and not allow these pictures to be sold and leave our shores.[15]

The visitors to the exhibition obliged, and nearly 600 artworks were bought, with over £17,000 spent by art societies and galleries in Christchurch, Wellington, Auckland and Dunedin, by the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Art Gallery of South Australia, and by numerous private collectors. By September 1907, when Dominion status was conferred on New Zealand by Great Britain, the artworks purchased from the British Art Section of the Exhibition were hanging on the walls of their new homes, both public and private. The unsold artworks were sailing back to Britain to their artist owners and the Art Gallery was being demolished alongside the remaining exhibition buildings. The reporter for the Christchurch evening paper, *The Star*, described its demise:

> The Art Gallery, half its roof broken about, its floor scattered with timber, the hangings of its walls in strips, and the walls themselves in process of being pulled down, was a scene of dripping desolation in the rain.[16]

Christchurch's Hagley Park was returning to how it looked before construction began — a

[12] "The Exhibition" p 6.

[13] "Pictures from Abroad" p 2.

[14] "Art at the Exhibition" p 3.

[15] Spielmann *The British Government Exhibit at the New Zealand International Exhibition* p 23.

[16] "Local and General" p 3.

gentle, cultivated landscape reminiscent of an English countryside in the Britain of the South. James Belich's recolonisation theory argues that in the early twentieth century London effectively became New Zealand's cultural capital.[17] New Zealand had already imported British cultural values and tastes as a result of colonisation, but during the recolonisation that took place in the early twentieth century, Britain had renewed relevance for New Zealand's cultural development and education. Wealthy members of colonial New Zealand society, in a partial reconstruction of Britain's social hierarchy, sought to distinguish themselves through their acquisition of British art which demonstrated their superior cultural and artistic taste. The success of the British Art Section at the Exhibition with its carefully orchestrated interior dominated by Walter Crane's frieze was built upon a pre-existing taste for British art in New Zealand and reinforced the idea that British art, and British tastes, were "best."

[17] Belich *Paradise Reforged* p 30.

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