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Paradise Post-Colonialised?

A Perpetual Idealist Gaze at the Australian Seaside[1]

Abstract: The beach resort Rickett's Point in Melbourne inspired Impressionist artists like the English immigrant Charles Conder to create scenes of family outings, picnics, and shell collecting. Conder was part of the 'Heidelberg School', consisting of painters in a small village (now a suburb of Melbourne) which is named after the picturesque Baden town. Their aim was to catch a motif plein air; they found beauty outside and claimed to paint its true nature: "we will do our best to put only the truth down, and only as much as we feel sure of seeing" (Roberts, Conder, Streeton). Painting Australian landscapes and creating mesmerising seascapes, they visually framed the nation of Australia creating new 'Australian art'. They display both modernist aspects of progress through industrialisation as well as leisure and nature. Yet, their paintings could be labelled a "tale of a European culture in a non-European land" (Dunlap) because European-trained artists like Tom Roberts and Conder, as well as Arthur Streeton established this type of art in Australia: Painters set up artists' colonies and caught the seaside with both an imperial and a new post-colonial, nationalistic gaze upholding an illusion that includes an erasure of Australian indigenous life. This article analyses how the 'Australian Impressionists' created a (post-)colonial, Australian self-positioned national painting style.

At the end of the 19th century, a group of painters termed 'Australian Impressionists' created artwork that is debatably considered the first national Australian Art. Among them were young artists that – in the years 1888-1890 – lived in the Melbourne suburb of Heidelberg on Mount Eagle and painted scenes of life and nature, such as the bush or seascapes. This article will address their seaside paintings and give a background to their Impressionist connections and elucidate how the 'Heidelberg School' – specifically Tom Roberts, Charles Conder, and Arthur Streeton – could be interpreted as a metonymy of Australian national attitudes created by heirs of colonialism. I will introduce the Heidelberg group and its relation to European Impressionism, highlight the contradictions surrounding their art, and concentrate on the discussion of a few of their seaside paintings as these include ambiguous representations of an ideal image of the colony.[2]

Impressionism had an "impulse to paint contemporary life and experience directly from nature, to study the atmospheric effects of nature's light".[3] Enthusiastic ideas on the immediacy of the brushwork of *plein-air* painting spread throughout Australian culture in the late 1880s, yet, as in the European art scene,

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1   This contribution was inspired by my friend Arno Chun who introduced me to the Heidelberg group, and to him, I express my gratitude. I would also like to recognise that it has become a tradition paying respect to the indigenous people and recognise their heritage when dealing with topics surrounding their sacred lands. Accordingly, I want to express this while the 19th century debate depicted in this article does not recognise their claims but calls colonisers' efforts inherently Australian.

2   Many of the ideas on seasides in Australia can be traced in Fiske, Hodge, and Turner's volume on Myths of Oz. Reading Australian Popular Culture, especially chapter 3 on the meanings of the beach: "This new paradigm is the characteristically Australian beach which is urban and natural, civilised and primitive, spiritual and physical, culture and nature", John Fiske, Bob Hodge, Graeme Turner (eds.): Myths of Oz, pp. 151 f.

3   Norma Broude: World Impressionism, p. 10.

canvases were often completed in the studio. Two ideas compete here: One is to fix momentary and transitory impressions in paintings versus an idea of the universal. This contrast is underlined by questions of plein-air painting as opposed to "the eternities one knew of"[4] and in Australia, this gained national, political momentum as it could also refer to ideas of nation-building.

It might be debatable to argue that Impressionist paintings are popular because of their undeniable, natural beauty; negative sides are often discarded when artists claim to deliver a "pictorial transcription of natural appearances".[5] To the Impressionists, reality often seemed close to pure illusion. Still the Australian Impressionists Roberts, Conder, and Streeton claimed "we will do our best to put only the truth down, and only as much as we feel sure of seeing"[6] which would be comparable to a manifesto of international Impressionism. The truth, however, is that "Australian art" must be labelled an ambiguous creation that brings to the table ideas of colonial grandeur as well as emerging ideas of a new nationhood. Rosenthal argues that "to claim an Australian counterpart [to Paris Impressionist art] demands some explanation".[7] Vaughan claims that the "art of the painters we are including […] under the title of Australian Impressionism – is clearly very different to the style of the mainstream Impressionists" but that their ideas "came to be readily associated with the new international style of plein-airism which developed in the 1870s and 1880s".[8] One relevant aspect is that the artists were often British citizens: Conder in fact only spent a few years in Australia. These 'Australian' painters had knowledge of Paris and London, St. Ives, Glasgow, or Barbizon. They were influenced by European and British approaches to art, especially Romanticism, Naturalism, and – of course – Impressionism. They had been to England and the continent, in fact, they "encapsulate[d] key elements of the new spirit of naturalistic and plein-air painting which was revolutionising European, and particular French" artwork.[9]

In addition, there is a "conspicuous absence of Aboriginal people from Heidelberg landscapes".[10] The dichotomy seems to be one of 'national' Australian and 'colonial' European, rather than indigenous aspects which were still very much neglected not only but also in art at this point in time. Instead, one may distinguish the influence of different art movements in the European countries, such as French art – among them, imitations of Corot, but also Barbizon paintings –, Spanish, Italian, and English styles. American influences are present through Whistler (cf. Watkins); and all these movements were deeply connected. The Australian paintings could then be called a "tale of a European culture in a non-European land".[11]

4   Ann Galbally: Melbourne, p. 176.
5   Michael Rosenthal: Australian Impressionism, p. 441.
6   Tom Roberts, Chas [Charles] Conder, Arthur Streeton: Concerning 'Impressions' in Painting, p. 7.
7   Michael Rosenthal: Australian Impressionism, p. 440.
8   Gerard Vaughan: Some Reflections on Defining Australia Impressionism, p. 16.
9   Ibid.
10   Georgina Cole: The Heidelberg School, p. 241.
11   Thomas R. Dunlap: Australian Nature, European Culture, p. 28.

Thomas Dunlap states that "[t]he settlers though, were less interested in understanding the land than remaking it. […] they sought to make Australia a 'new England' in the South Seas"[12] and he continues that the Australian achievement – in art – is certainly not deficient because of a lack of effort: "Finding the picturesque or the sublime in the new landscape was more difficult, but the settlers tried".[13] As some of the painters came to Australia only for a short while, they are, as such, part of the "colonial aesthetic history".[14] The 'Australian' painters were migrant Europeans in the bush and yet, Burn grants that "[p]erhaps no other local imagery is so much a part of an Australian consciousness and ideological make-up".[15] Dunlap terms their European experience "cultural baggage"[16] while at the same time this fact is sometimes neglected in favour of a concentration on the prospering Australian nationalism, which highlighted the self-sufficient character and professed success of the new place.

The painters proclaimed to have found a locus amoenus down under – a beautiful and seemingly idyllic place in nature which might be associated with ideas of paradise –, but they also painted urban life: "as French Impressionist painters pictured urban modernity, so did they".[17] This can also be compared to the idea of industrialisation: "The city of the 1880s had also seen the rapid consolidation and expansion of a transport and communication network that fed commercial and suburban growth".[18] Such developments are also reflected in the seaside paintings. In fact, Michael Rosenthal claims that "the Australian experience was urban, suburban and littoral"[19] and he highlights the variety of painters' imaginings that were concerned with representation not only and predominantly of land but also of water. Of course, their seascapes are of greater interest to this article. As with the French seaside towns, like Dieppe or Honfleur, or the Paris region, such as Barbizon or Pontoise, the bush in the Sydney or Melbourne vicinity was reached via train; likewise, steamships can be traced in the background of the seascapes.

The bush itself might look like a desirable spot to dwell and enjoy but this pleasant idyll was created by human labour suffering from the prevalent weather conditions. The Impressionists transformed landscapes into admirable paintings but until the 1890s also seemed to partly ignore the perils of the heat while concentrating on light and harmony of sunshine. The economy was dire in some of these regions and the dichotomy between rural farming and industrial progress sometimes clashed. Similarly living conditions depicted in these paintings encompass opposites, hard work on farms on the one hand and tourist attractions on the other hand. While the artists stylised themselves as Bohemians who spend time away from society, they nevertheless painted societal scenes, involving work and leisure, to finance their expenses.

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid, p. 27.
14 Alan McCulloch: The Golden Age of Australian Painting, p. 1.
15 Ian Burn: Beating about the Bush, p. 83.
16 Thomas R. Dunlap: Australian Nature, European Culture, p. 27.
17 Michael Rosenthal: Australian Impressionism, p. 441.
18 Andrew Brown-May: The City's Toil, p. 31.
19 Michael Rosenthal: Australian Impressionism, p. 442.

Before now moving on to the Heidelberg group and their 'Australian' seascape creations, it has become clear that definitions of what Australia exactly was, are difficult to pin down: In the late 19th century, Australian ideas about identity and nationhood were very much discussed. The Heidelberg artists contributed to a sense of Australian nationhood and confirmed their status as proud emerging 'Australian' artists who contributed to a national self-consciousness,[20] while still reminding their audiences of European painting traditions. In fact, on the idea of Australian national landscape painting, Riopelle acknowledges their "evolving sense of national identity […] Each nation can recognise itself in landscape and so in the 19th century its representation on canvas became a privileged forum for collective self-reflection. This proved particularly so in places as yet without a string visual tradition based on the European model".[21] Accordingly, this raises questions of contradictory attitudes today: in the light of a postcolonial recognition of indigenous art, the Australian Impressionist paintings could be labelled 'colonial', while they may have been seen as distinctively 'Australian' and, as such, nation-building at the time.

The Heidelberg School and Australian Nationalism

The 'Australian school of landscape painting', usually referred to as 'The Heidelberg School'[22] got its name from the small village Heidelberg, "a pretty rural backwater easily accessible from the city",[23] – named after the picturesque Baden town in Germany – which is now a suburb of Melbourne. It was there that a few painters set up an "artists' colony" to sketch the adjacent scenery,[24] a pastoral, rustic idyll. The young painters Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton, and Charles Conder knew each other loosely and had already spent time some together painting in other places. Because of colonial industrialisation, this new locus amoenus was within easy train reach: "In 1888 […] Heidelberg was connected by railway to the city".[25]

It might strike as surprising that Sidney Dickinson in 1891 named the group after Heidelberg[26] as they spent only two years there. Also, as "Burn (1980) has pointed out, the paintings of the Heidelberg School artists are composed from the perspective of the *visitor*, for whom the landscape is a site of imaginative projection and recreation".[27] One could argue that the Heidelberg painters did not feel at home when painting Australia but that they were looking at the situation from an educated outsider's – a tourist's – perspective. Yet "they were recognized as possessing a group identity predicated on place",[28] the reason why the

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20   Christopher Riopelle: Australia's Impressionists in a World Context, p. 11.
21   Ibid, p. 14.
22   Cf. Tim Bonyhady: The Sunny South, p. 25.
23   Jane Clark, Bridget Whitelaw: Golden Summers. Heidelberg and Beyond, p. 89.
24   Cf. Michael Rosenthal: Australian Impressionism, p. 441.
25   Leigh Astbury: Memory and Desire: Box Hill 1885-88, p. 56.
26   Cf. Georgina Cole: The Heidelberg School, p. 238.
27   Ibid., p. 24, emphasis added.
28   Ibid., p. 238.

Heidelberg School could still be defended as 'Australian' as they gave "Australian Impressionism an intensity and radiance".[29] This dichotomy also addresses the issue of the colonial home/exile situation and resurfaces later.

1888 marked the Australian centenary and questions of rising patriotism and national identity surround the paintings of the Heidelberg group. Their art was not necessarily mainstream in Australia and the painters styled themselves as Bohemians. However, at the same time, they were cosmopolitans and sought to finance their endeavours.[30] As such, they formed part of the commercial, colonial and evolving national market, selling their paintings and interacting with critics and society. So the Heidelberg lifestyle "of happy fellowship and brotherhood"[31] was not a closed off space. In 1888, Melbourne hosted the Centennial International Exhibition to praise European settlement in Australia and the formation of a new nation, including not only industrial but also cultural achievements, and this celebration of the new nation also included paintings by the Heidelberg group. Their aim was to create a distinctly or genuinely "Australian art" that would represent life in the new nation.[32] So there are indeed aspects of financial, societal, and political implications in the interaction of these painters; these are sometimes ignored when idealised aspects of a beautiful, impressionist, Elysian refuge surface – also in their seascapes. Riopelle confirms that this national self-consciousness was not necessarily original: "Australia was not alone in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in its growing fascination with its own unique landscape, burgeoning cities, distinctive ways of life",[33] but here, the painters have been hailed for creating the *first* 'Australian art': "Streeton, Roberts, Conder and their contemporaries deployed the radical new tools of Impressionism to produce an art that they understood as characteristically 'Australian'".[34]

If a distinction of Australian art in contrast to the European tradition is sought, then Australian paintings are sometimes labelled more tonal in atmosphere than the colourful displays of e.g. French Impressionism – but of course, there are exceptions to both claims. Georgina Cole, who published a brilliant chapter in the recently released 'Companion to Australian Art' claims that these painters "developed a new way of representing the Australian bush, the city, and rural life that *exploited* its poetic and sentimental potential".[35] This, as might have become clear, not only draws on the painting style but also reverberates with the above-mentioned contradictions. Cole explains that "Heidelberg artists attempted to establish a role and an expressive language for art in Australia in a period of *self-conscious* reflection on national character and identity".[36] As such, this inherently Australian school of painting (though some painters were English at birth) did create an ideal and not any more solely colonial but national locus amoenus and its representation on canvas. Such ideas will now be examined

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29 Terence Lane: Introduction, p. 15.
30 Cf. Jonathan Watkins: Australian Painting in the Late Nineteenth Century, p. 178.
31 Ibid., p. 182.
32 Cf. Virginia Spate: The Sunny South. Australian Impressionism, p. 125.
33 Christopher Riopelle: Australia's Impressionists in a World Context, p. 11.
34 Sarah Thomas: Creating a National Identity, p. 49.
35 Georgina Cole: The Heidelberg School, p. 230.
36 Ibid., p. 231.

with regard to the seaside oeuvres of the painters Tom Roberts, Charles Conder, and Arthur Streeton.

Seascapes

It is a mixture of contrasts that can be traced in the Heidelberg painters' seascapes: the subject-matter consists of "nature and modern life",[37] pastoral life, idyllic leisure, the hum of the city, industrialisation, "building national sentiment, and […] represent[ing] characteristic moments of Australian life".[38] The seaside representation needs to be seen as quintessential to a constructed perspective that also reflects on urban society's Australian experience, as Fiske, Hodge, and Turner argue.[39] There are harbour scenes containing ships as well as societal beach outings. The painters showed life at the coast along "the Melbourne shoreline, at Sydney and in New South Wales"[40] in an attractive way: industrial harbours speak of a well-functioning new nation and beach scenes display society at leisure. They visually constructed the coastline as a mesmerising paradise, framing and displaying the imagined, imperialistically embraced Eden at the other end of the world. The ideas connected to their paintings can be compared to Dening's thoughts on the meaning of this liminal zone: "'Islands and beaches' is a metaphor for the different ways in which human beings construct their worlds",[41] drawing on different categories, roles, and institutions.[42] Seascapes construct circumstances and refer to their context – this, too, is evident with the Australian Impressionists.

As Fig. 1 illustration demonstrates,[43] the beach resort Rickett's Point in Melbourne, for example, inspired Impressionist artists like Charles Conder to create scenes of family outings, picnics, and shell-collecting.[44] The representation of outdoor activities would also attract buyers. De Lorenzo and van der Plaat argue how photographic art in the late 19th century tried to please all parties: "nature lovers, tourists, and the petty bourgeoisie, whose transport and accommodation businesses stood to profit from their enterprise",[45] not only but also of representations of the coast. The demands of the market caused the self-proclaimed Bohemian painters to be part of the same commercial end of art. In fact, its exchanges and entanglements drew a mixture of all classes together – of colonial, commercial, and idealist motivation.

37　Georgina Cole: The Heidelberg School, p. 252.
38　Ibid.
39　Cf. John Fiske, Bob Hodge, Graeme Turner: Myths of Oz, p. 152.
40　Michael Rosenthal: Australian Impressionism, p. 440.
41　Greg Dening: Islands and Beaches, p. 3. Thank you to the reviewer for making me aware of this monograph.
42　Cf. ibid.
43　Charles Conder, 'Rickett's Point', 1890. Oil on Canvas. 31.0 x 77.2 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Thanks to the open access policy of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, I am allowed to reproduce this painting.
44　Hans Gercke (ed.): Australische Impressionen, p. 36.
45　Catherine De Lorenzo, Deborah van der Plaat: Redefining the Urban Limits, p. 12.

Fig. 1: Charles Conder, 'Rickett's Point', 1890

Tom Roberts (1856-1931) has posthumously been termed the father of Australian landscape painting. He was born in England, his family emigrated to Australia and settled in Melbourne when he was a teenager, but Roberts revisited Europe in the early 1880s to study art, learn about the techniques of transitory impressionism in London and the Paris region.[46] Critics have commented on Roberts' indebtedness to Whistler and his interest in the beauty of landscapes, meteorological phenomena, mist, dusk, and the effect of light:[47] "Roberts returned to Melbourne with an invigorated sense of the expressive possibilities of painting".[48] Indeed, in his own words, he claimed to "have tried to look into the deep quiet face of Nature" and find "beauty in odd corners of some country shanty, or by some lagoon which palely reflects the banks all bathed in a great shimmer of trembling, brilliant sunlight", as he writes in 'The Argus' on 30 September 1893.[49] He greatly influenced the new style of painting in Australia with his ideas of immediacy and direct painting.[50] He also had a passionate belief about catching the Australian experience and creating 'Australian' art covering Australian subject matter. As such, Roberts contributes to the formation of a new national character of Australian painting from formerly colonial ideas.

Terence Lane writes that "Melbourne in the 19th century was a maritime city"[51] which is reflected in Roberts' paintings. One, if not his most famous painting is The 'Sunny South' from 1887. It was painted at Ricketts Point in the Melbourne suburb of Beaumaris. It depicts a summery seaside visit – recreation at the Australian shoreline: naked young men defy prudish Victorian laws and relish the

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46   Cf. Alan McCulloch: The Golden Age of Australian Painting, p. 18 ff.
47   Cf. Jonathan Watkins: Australian Painting in the Late Nineteenth Century, p. 181.
48   Georgina Cole: The Heidelberg School, p. 232.
49   Tom Roberts: The Loan Collection of Victorian Artists, p. 14; see also Georgina Cole: The Heidelberg School, p. 238.
50   Cf. Terence Lane: Introduction, p. 14.
51   Ibid.

Fig. 2: Tom Roberts, 'Holiday Sketch at Coogee', 1888

warm weather. It could be labelled an innocent outing but at the same time, it is a sensuous painting of attractive bathers. Jonathan Watkins analyses that the "group of nude bathers […] particularly the central figure, suggest a liberation. It is as if something burdensome is being shrugged off".[52] The artwork presents leisure. Yet there is a paradox conflict between this apparent freedom from European social morals and a new national responsibility that nevertheless comes with the self-inflicted task of creating great Australian art. This dichotomy continues throughout a lot of the seaside paintings.

The English immigrant Charles Conder (1868-1909), after spending his youth in India, lived in Australia from 1884 to 1890 only and painted pictures of beach outings of exceptional beauty.[53] Ann Galbally states that Conder reached a new maturity from 1888 onwards when he joined Roberts and Streeton. "Tom Roberts […] led Conder to focus anew on his professionalism".[54] The National Gallery of Australia comments on Conder's seaside paintings that he "depicts the activity of *visitors* to the beach. Women in long dresses search for seashells, a small group watches a sailboat travel across the bay and a child paddles in the foreground".[55] The twenty-year old Conder caught a scene of leisure, and fresh energy, but there is also a smoky cloud coming from a steamship in the background, revealing the simultaneous duality of recreation and industry.

52 Jonathan Watkins: Australian Painting in the Late Nineteenth Century, p. 178.
53 Cf. Mary Eagle: The Oil Paintings of Charles Conder, p. 61.
54 Ann Galbally: Portrait of the Surveyor as a Young Artist, p. 78.
55 National Gallery of Australia: Conder, Charles. Rickett's Point, Beaumaris, n.p., emphasis added.

Fig. 3: Charles Conder, 'Coogee Bay', 1888.

Roberts' and Conder's earlier joint outings at Sydney's Coogee Bay yield fascinating paintings of family scenes of beach picnics, sandcastles, and collecting shells: seaside tourism. Roberts' 'Holiday Sketch at Coogee' (Fig. 2)[56] from a visit to Sydney in 1888 shows a "carefully composed picturesque scene".[57]

In fact, Roberts' painting as seen here, from the perspective of a sightseer of the popular bay, displays a touristy atmosphere of beach attractions. Alex Taylor claims the following:

> The naming of this work as a 'holiday' sketch as much describes his own brief visit to Sydney, as it does the swarms of sightseers he depicts buzzing along the shore. A quick trip from the city by tram, the popular leisure spot had become especially busy since the opening of the Coogee Palace Aquarium in December 1887, luring tourists with its swimming baths, skating arena, toboggan rides and ever-changing program of displays and concerts.[58]

It is this contrast of a short artist's visit to capture the beauty of nature of the Sydney Bay (Fig. 3),[59] which at the same time shows how much Coogee Bay is not an untouched paradise anymore but a site of tourism, luring the middle classes to amuse themselves and also to spend money.

56 Tom Roberts, 'Holiday Sketch at Coogee', 1888. Oil on Canvas. 40.3 x 55.9 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Thank you to the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), Sydney for allowing me to reproduce this painting.
57 Alex J. Taylor et al.: Picture Notes, p. 115.
58 Ibid.
59 Charles Conder, 'Coogee Bay', 1888. Oil on Cardboard. 26.8 x 40.7 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Thanks to the open access policy of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, I am allowed to reproduce this painting.

All three artists painted the same view – here the similarity between Roberts and Conder becomes apparent – their paintings convey the lure that draws humans straight to the beach. Rosenthal recognises many of the paintings as additionally having "a quirky humour […] – ladies in billowing dresses wading over beaches, encounters between urbanities and animals".[60] Roberts' painting, as the others, reflects both the call of the sea and the growing tourism industry. This constitutes an economic aspect included in the paintings.

Arthur Streeton (1867-1943) was born to immigrated English parents and only travelled to the old continent after the Heidelberg period, yet, having a great interest in European art and their way of life, he attached himself to Roberts and the group associated with Australian Impressionism. Roberts appreciated Streeton's eye for the effect of light, the "impression of light and atmosphere in the landscape".[61] Together, they worked at Box Hill and Heidelberg, painting the vicinity[62] – for example the Yarra river – and exhibiting together, in 1889 in the '9x5 Exhibition',[63] termed this way as the paintings were created on 9x5 inch cigar boxes.[64]

According to Watkins, "Streeton […] was determined to maintain a distance between himself and the establishment, and his association with Roberts was a means to an end"[65] because Roberts was considered progressive. Thomas claims that Streeton had a "new vision [of Australia] that continues to captivate the viewer today".[66] It is Streeton who luckily organised the stay at an abandoned house on Mount Eagle in Heidelberg. During his Heidelberg phase, Streeton concentrated mostly on paintings of the bush. Yet, later he would also create paintings of the seaside. After the Heidelberg group fell apart and Conder returned to England, Streeton continued to paint with Roberts for a few years. During this time, he often painted harbour scenes and coastlines that would often be influenced by an industrial buzz: as in Conder's paintings, steamships puff their smoke in the background of most of Streeton's seaside canvases. This awareness of industrial progress defies pure romantic or idyllic images. At the same time, the blurred smoke can evoke fog and an ephemeral consistency in what is being depicted – aesthetically, smoke and fog might reveal formerly unknown images and yet hide clear and specific impressions, and draw on ideas of romantic landscape paintings – this could be read as a clouding of something new forming in the background, based on new ideas, possibly the economic success of this new continent. In later paintings, Conder would also recognise the growing demographic expansion of Sydney and Melbourne. This dichotomy between withdrawal into nature, "much desired images of pastoral wealth and beauty"[67] and at the same time the growth of the new continent dominates his paintings,

60   Michael Rosenthal: Australian Impressionism, p. 442.
61   Leigh Astbury: Memory and Desire, p. 55.
62   Cf. Tim Bonyhady: The Colonial Earth, p. 193.
63   Cf. Hans Gercke (ed.): Australische Impressionen, p. 42.
64   Cf. Allison Goudie: The 9 by 5 Impression Exhibition, pp. 36 ff.
65   Jonathan Watkins: Australian Painting in the Late Nineteenth Century, p. 178.
66   Daniel Thomas: The Sunny South, p. 87.
67   Ann Galbally: Melbourne. The Heidelberg School, p. 176.

too. From today's point of view, aspects of nationhood coming into being could be read into these images.

Steamships appear in most of Arthur Streeton's paintings of the Tasman Sea in the South Pacific. Their smoke is visible in the background of Streeton's later representations of the view from his camp near Sydney in the 1890s: Near 'Streeton's camp at Sirius Cove', 1892; 'The Point Wharf, Mosman Bay', 1893; and 'From my camp (Sirius Cove)', 1896. But the existence of the growing industry is just as visible in Conder and Roberts. They do not focus on trains either that were just as valuable for their transport around Sydney and Melbourne, as Monet did in his depiction of the Gare St. Lazare, but they clearly put a focus on the shipping industry – already in 1888.

Conder's 'Departure of the Orient, Circular Quay', the painting of a shipping scene from 1888 shows the life of the centenarian colonial country.[68] The awareness of shifting times is apparent at this stage. And the Heidelberg artists recognised Australians' "healthy productivity"[69] and sacrificial "productive labor".[70] There is an atmosphere of expectation. Large ships, small boats, an expectant crowd. The industrial buzz and commercial aspect of Australian life becomes even clearer in Roberts' 'An Autumn Morning, Milson's Point', 1888 (Sydney). There is an energy and enthusiasm about the "smoke and mist rising from the city", as 'The Argus'[71] published on 30 April 1888 about this painting of departure which also recognises the murky industrial atmosphere of a "polluted waterside"[72] that speaks of the rapid expansion of the city.

Conder's 'Sydney Harbour, Sunset' with thick layers of paint created by a spatula in a golden sky which is reflected on the waters, emblematises the dichotomy of this time: there is a sailing boat and a steamship. It "depicts a yacht and a ferry moving at converging angles across dull green water. […] Fluid and mobile, the paint handling captures the trajectory of the boats in the fleeting and indistinct light of dusk".[73] This is the momentary, ephemeral representation of leisure and past means of traffic while at the same time showing a clash between the nostalgic old and the new quickly industrialised age.[74] The loose brushwork promotes transient effects of time passing. This painting was part of the '9 x 5 Exhibition' in 1889 where the artists insisted on the purity of fleeting art.[75]

However, an exhibition also shows the need for commercial recognition and social connections. It underlines an ambition to be connected with society, and it served, as in the 9 x 5 case, as a display of national importance. As such, it plays a political part, exhibiting – via art – an Australian "cultural identity"[76] or enduring Australian settlement, in fact, a national vision.[77] This ambiguity of transience and value – as it needs to be called from a postcolonial perspective – is

68   Cf. Ann Galbally, Gary Pearce: Charles Conder, p. 84 f.
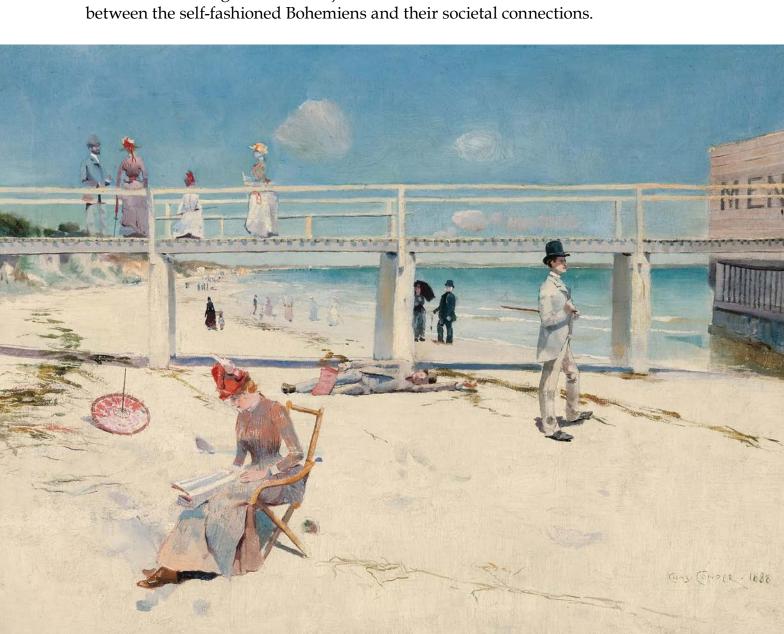69   Georgina Cole: The Heidelberg School, p. 249.
70   Ibid.
71   Exhibition of the Victorian Society of Artists.
72   Jane Clark, Bridget Whitelaw: Golden Summers, p. 95.
73   Georgina Cole: The Heidelberg School, p. 242.
74   Cf. Andrew Brown-May: The City's Toil, p. 32.
75   Cf. Alan McCulloch: The Golden Age of Australian Painting, p. 44.
76   Georgina Cole: The Heidelberg School, p. 245.
77   Cf. Ibid, p. 249.

also reflected in the financial dealings with the Heidelberg's middle-class clientele and their smugness towards journalist criticism which reflects the contrast between the self-fashioned Bohemiens and their societal connections.

Fig. 4: Charles Conder, 'A Holiday at Mentone', 1888.

Among Conder's paintings and similar to the buzz of the Coogee bay paintings discussed above, the 1888 'A holiday at Mentone' (Fig. 4)[78] stands out as especially decorative, fashionable,[79] and noteworthy: "Conder's A holiday at Mentone […] features the sauntering figures, parasols and beaches that seemed to fascinate painters wherever they might be at the period".[80] One might even confuse Mentone with Dieppe where Conder did in fact paint later in the mid-1890s.

78 Charles Conder, 'A Holiday at Mentone', 1888. Oil on Canvas. 46.2 x 60.8 cm. Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. Thank you to the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide for allowing me to reproduce this painting.
79 Sarah Thomas: Creating a National Identity, p. 46.
80 Michael Rosenthal: Australian Impressionism, p. 441.

There is no better description of the Mentone painting than the following citation by Georgina Cole:

> Wavering skeins of seaweed draw the eye to the muted dots of promenading figures in the background, while in the stage-like foreground three oddly disconnected figures create a sense of accident and ambiguity. The well-dressed woman seated in a folding chair has her back to the water and reads a newspaper, ignoring the flight of her parasol, now upturned on the sand. A dapper gentleman behind her gazes solemnly at the bathhouse, his upright stance repeating the pylons of the bridge. Between them, a second man lies prostrate on the ground, his arm raised in an awkward pose and his body following the line of shadow beneath the bridge. His rigidity makes him seem comical, almost unreal, and his strange behavior underlines the sense of self-conscious display in the painting. The seated woman and the horizontal gentleman have been reading the radical Sydney-based journal 'The Bulletin', with its literary "red page" (Smith 2002, 119). Both can be identified as fashionable and progressive members of the middle class (Spate 1990, 126). As Galbally and Pearce (2003, 34) and Smith (2002, 119) have argued, Conder's painting adds a social dimension to the practice of plein-air painting. While the beachscape and bathhouse were painted from the spot, the figures were added later in the studio, and their staccato arrangement and lack of unity suggests Conder's interest in the rhythms of modern art and social life and its particular forms of leisure and display.[81]

The painting has a colourful, playful luminosity; it is also a comment on society in that it depicts a provocative situation[82] as laws condemned a mixed audience at a swimming resort. People should not be able to watch the other sex bathing. So images of such "Australian pastoral economy"[83] at the same time reflect the paradox of the tourism industry. Indeed, a painting's 'pastoral' quality then becomes questionable and illustrates instead a self-conscious reflection about its multifaceted and original perspectives, including economy, and nationhood.

Opposites seem to attract here, too: The mixture of social classes in the colonial context, opportunities of leisure, communication via journalism in this painting, reachability via transport, trains to connect work and nature – the contrast between rural ideals and industrial progress in the colony – show themselves in many of the Heidelberg seascapes that are considered national depictions but do not include indigenous topics. They constitute art that shaped the new nation down under that seemed ambitious to define itself as self-contained if not autonomous. The Heidelberg group – though descendants of British immigrants or maybe because of this – seem, through their artworks, to have aided in establishing a sense of national identity.

After Heidelberg

The Heidelberg residents disintegrated after 1890. Conder left Australia for France and England, joined the avantgarde movements, and died before the first world war. Both Streeton and Roberts relocated to Sydney and travelled the south

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81   Georgina Cole: The Heidelberg School, p. 236.
82   Cf. Ann Galbally: Portrait of the Surveyor as a Young Artist, p. 78.
83   Georgina Cole: The Heidelberg School, p. 246.

of Australia, both also spent time in Europe again in the early 20th century but returned to Australia.

In the 1890s, as the group fell apart, the motifs of the former Heidelberg group members changed. The sun became a principal actor in their paintings and Streeton as well as Roberts put more focus on its effect on the land. Had the energetic effect of light and colour dominated the enthusiastic late 1880s paintings, they now recognised sun-drenched heat-filled landscapes, and the 1890s paintings do speak of hardship, the "drought-affected landscape around Heidelberg",[84] e.g. the dry surroundings of the Yarra River. Their paintings reflect how, like the settler shaping life on his farm, society – alongside money – shapes life on the urban coast.

The Heidelberg painters had shown a rustic colonial paradise down under. Their paintings are celebrated as Australian art and in the 20th century, their values were still perpetuated e.g. in the 1985 exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria 'Golden Summers: Heidelberg and Beyond', as Galbally argues convincingly: "In essence the 'Golden Summers' exhibition offers re-assurance of these myths [of pastoral wealth and beauty], rather than posing any questions or revelations".[85] Outdoor activities like hiking or bushwalking[86] – nature tourism to "a place to revive the senses and spirit"[87] – prospered at this time; however, nature preservation ambitions were rather muted. "Conservation in Australia was little and late", Dunlap argues.[88]

Inspired by the colonial spirit of Australian Impressionist paintings and surfing the wave of vibrant enthusiasm, the tourist industry today – like the Heidelberg visitors – still look for such a paradise, paradoxically and very anthropocentrically often disrespecting ecocritical thoughts surrounding Australian seascapes. In addition, the majority of Australians live by the coast, a fact that could be interpreted on the one hand as a realistic settling strategy of proximity to water and on the other a fulfilled touristic dream of settling by beautiful beaches beside the seaside.

It is noteworthy that some recent exhibitions in this century – e.g. 2007 in the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2016 in the National Gallery in London, or in 2021 in the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne again –, have professed more awareness and recognition of nature's fragility. However, there is a continuous search for an Edenic myth of Australian beaches that does not recognise the endangering effects of the Anthropocene. Tourists perpetually long for peace and a preserved, untouched land- and seascape. Ambiguities that can already be traced in the Heidelberg paintings might seem repetitive but tourist consumers today still follow this ideal, wanting to catch nature's beauty in the perfect wave or a peaceful beach scene, and thereby follow the laws of the tourism industry.

Ricketts Point now hosts a Marine Sanctuary and an education centre which insists on displaying the beauty of the ocean while teaching an awareness of its

84   Ibid., p. 237.
85   Ann Galbally: Melbourne, p. 176.
86   Cf. Thomas R. Dunlap: Australian Nature, European Culture, p. 33.
87   Georgina Cole: The Heidelberg School, p. 241.
88   Thomas R. Dunlap: Australian Nature, European Culture, p. 33.

fragility: "Crystal clear shallow waters, sandstone reefs, sea caves, and rockpools make Ricketts Point the perfect place to discover the wonderful sea creatures of Port Phillip Bay. […] beaches and coasts are natural environments".[89] While there is an absence of indigenous motifs in Heidelberg paintings, Ricketts Point Marine Sanctuary also recognise indigenous peoples and their lands on their webpage: "Ricketts Point Marine Sanctuary sits within an Aboriginal cultural landscape in the traditional Sea Country of the Bunurong People. Parks Victoria respects the deep and continuing connection that Bunurong Traditional Owners have to these lands and waters, and we recognise their ongoing role in caring for Country".[90] This guides today's visitors from touristic and anthropocentric thoughts towards a more postcolonial and ecocritical awareness.

The Heidelberg seascapes, too, demonstrate that the Australian littoral experience is not one of complete idyllic leisure – as Fiske, Hodge and Turner have long demonstrated by underlining these self-same "contradictory paradigms".[91] The sea is an ambiguous space. Leisure and industrialisation might be perceived as ideal, but there are counterpoint arguments in urban life and, as we know today, "beauty might come at an ecological risk".[92]

As this contribution has demonstrated, there are arguable inconsistencies to be detected when approaching Australian seascapes. As beautiful as they may be, these 19th century paintings must also be seen as commodities,[93] and they are witnesses to socially constructed spaces – full of contradictions in their colonial and national context – which can be seen as still reflected in postcolonial idealism today. As has become apparent, the seascapes establish Australia as a new nation – in continuity with European ideals but creating something specifically 'Australian'. From today's point of view, the artists' connection to Europe could be labelled as reflecting a continuously existing colonial spirit in that they not yet acknowledge the rights of Indigenous peoples that would recognise British 'settlers' as invaders. They could also be interpreted as sites of a colonial and national spirit that neglects and yet simultaneously reminds modern viewers of non-acknowledged Indigenous claims by their absence.

However this may be read, the Heidelberg School prospered from the Australian national momentum in the late 19th century and they contributed to its presentation. Their paintings of seascapes were part of an aesthetic movement which remains influential and adored. They, too, are a component of the touristic attraction of the former European colony and now well-established Australian nation.

89   Parks Victoria: Ricketts Point Marine Sanctuary.
90   Ibid.
91   John Fiske, Bob Hodge, Graeme Turner (eds.): Myths of Oz, chapter 3, here p. 151.
92   Cf. Catherine De Lorenzo, Deborah van der Plaat: Redefining the Urban Limits, p. 4.
93   Cf. Macarena Gómez-Barris: The Axtractive Zone, p. 5.

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