

# LOOKING CLOSELY AT Eugene von Guérard

## **Eugene von Guérard**

Born in Vienna, Austria he received his formal art training in Düsseldorf. He also traveled extensively on the continent and spent some years in Italy before coming to Australia in 1852 to seek his fortune on the Victorian goldfields around Ballarat.

After a year of unsuccessful prospecting, he resumed painting and received commissions for landscapes and studies of pastoral properties. He quickly became respected for the meticulous accuracy and fine scientific detail of his landscapes.

## **Fern Tree Gully, Cape Otway Ranges**

This major work encapsulates two main aspects of the work of Eugene von Guérard - the application of European artistic traditions particularly German Romanticism and the sublime movement to the Australian landscape and the role of the artist as a recorder of the approach of European settlement.

## **18th and 19th century Landscape painting**

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century saw two major styles of landscape painting emerge in Europe. One was based in the *topographical tradition* and imported principally to Australia through British trained artists like John Glover. The other tradition, *the sublime*, was also derived from European ideas and artists. Eugene von Guérard was the principal exponent of the sublime tradition in Australia.

## **The Sublime**

The sublime found expression through the work of European artists like Salvator Rosa and de Louthembourg who wished to portray the magnitude and awe-inspiring strength of nature as God's ultimate creation.



Eugene von Guérard, Fern Tree Gully, Cape Otway Ranges, c. 1870

## **A Craze For Ferns**

In the mid nineteenth century Victorian Britain had a craze for ferns. Houses were decorated with fern plants and motifs, special botanical gardens were established and artists incorporated fern elements in paintings, china furniture and fabrics. This craze was transferred to Australia and as the hinterland was explored, new ferns found their way into domestic gardens and houses.

Eugene von Guérard reflected this fashion in 1857 when he exhibited a painting of a fern tree gully in the Dandenong Ranges. That work is now in the National Gallery of Australia collection. This painting *Fern Tree Gully, Cape Otway Ranges* is a companion piece and was completed after visits to the Otway Ranges in October 1859 and April 1862 when von Guérard went on an expedition with the scientist Professor von Neumayer and fellow artist, Nicholas Chevalier. Von Guérard made numerous sketches of the wild and impenetrable forest area, these drawings are now in the Dixson Galleries in Sydney.

Artists interested in representing the sublime through the Australian environment often decried the lack of dramatic landforms. The English philosopher Edmund Burke advocated that silence and stillness could also encapsulate the sublime. In following Burke's principle, some artists in Australia turned instead to try and capture the sublime moment through expressions of stillness, silence and transcendence.

## **German Romanticism**

Eugene von Guérard's training was imbued with the philosophy of the German Romantics epitomised by the work and teachings of Caspar David Friedrich. Landscape painting, for Friedrich, was an intermediary between man and God, a way of expressing the spirituality of the land as well as humanity's place in it. In line with this, Von Guérard's training at the Düsseldorf Academy focused on the intensive study of the elements of nature in order to know nature as a physical reality and spiritual truth. Nature was a living organism with cycles of life and death that were part of God's design.

## **God in Nature**

God in nature could also be expressed in the symmetry of natural forms like rock faces and the arches formed by trees that often frame von Guérard's compositions. To further reinforce the cyclical nature of the world, his compositions are frequently circular, moving from a central focus of interest, through other elements towards the infinity of the view back to the focal point. *Fern Tree Gully, Cape Otway Ranges* typifies this approach, the eye moves from the human element framed by a canopy of ferns and trees towards the peak in the middle of the picture and the unfolding Otway Ranges in the distance.

Art changes the way we see the world

Produced by the Art Gallery of Western Australia with the aim of making art more accessible for visitors

# LOOKING CLOSELY AT *Colonial landscapes*

## Holdings in The State Art Collection

There are a total of four works by the Eugene von Guérard in the State Art Collection. These join a collection of nineteenth century works which includes several icons such as Frederick McCubbin's *Down on his luck* 1889, Louis Buvelot's *On the road to Dromana* 1878 and John Longstaff's *Breaking the news* 1886. *Mount William from Mount Dryden* 1857, illustrated to the right is acclaimed as one of von Guérard's best works.



Eugene von Guérard, *Mount William from Mount Dryden* 1857,

## Colonial Comparisons

Notwithstanding the formal compositional elements of von Guérard's work, it is the symbolic spiritual content of which provides a crucial contrast to the work of other colonial artists, notably John Glover.

Glover, trained in the British tradition and influenced by the English Romantics, mixed sentimental regret of the passing of an arcadia with ethnographic documentation. The painting in the State Art Collection *Patterdale van Dieman's Land* 1834 is a good example of this. In contrast, von Guérard's work seeks to illustrate purely a moment of being, dominated by the patterns of life and Nature as part of God's will.



Eugene von Guérard, *Fall of the first creek near Glen Osmond*, 1855



Eugene von Guérard  
*Mount William from Mount Dryden* 1857, detail  
*Fall of the first creek near Glen Osmond*,  
1855 detail



John Glover, *Patterdale van Dieman's Land* 1834 oil on canvas