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Talk title: Whisperings of Wilderness in Australian Centenary and Federation Landscapes

Abstract:
This paper looks at the long nineteenth century and how, from the centenary of settlement to the federation era, the idea of wilderness permeates Australian paintings, whereas this trend differs somewhat in American art. Landscape paintings carry meaning, they are not mute, because landscape, as WJT Mitchell reminds us is a medium of exchange.

Australian colonial art is rich in a history of progress and civility**.** Settlement implies the clearing of land, its dispossession by the First Nations people, and the growth of modern cities. These occurred at different times in America and Australia, and in the latter country the centenary of settlement in the 1870s and the 1880s was a time of 'celebration' of progress, leading to moves to bring the separate colonies together as a federated nation, achieved in 1901. This paper will examine how these two issues: the centenary of settlement and an impending federation led to a new range of urban images alongside nostalgia in Australian art of the day for a bush life and wilderness long since lost**.** In 'celebrating' settlement, imagery of the Aboriginal people almost completely disappeared from art in the centenary years, but in the 1880s, a small number of Aboriginal artists such as William Barak nostalgically recorded a lifestyle mostly lost in their drawings of ceremonies once enacted in landscape.

This paper finally considers how in Federation era art the idea of wilderness again comes to the fore as a foil to counter this coming of age in the sublime grandeur of Piguenit's Tasmanian landscapes, in Hans Heysen's carefully composed anthropomorphic gum trees, implying the validity of nature over culture, and in a series of paintings bemoaning the loss of the wilderness. In all, wilderness, or its lack, is an unstated thread binding Australian art of these years, whereas the American artists of the later nineteenth century such as William Merritt Chase, Childe Hassam and Thomas Eakins, like some of their Australian impressionist counterparts, had moved beyond sublime and national imagery, and extended the neo-impressionist and cosmopolitan range of subjects of their expatriate years to American life.

Biographical note:

Catherine Speck is Professor of Art History at the University of Adelaide, and coordinator of postgraduate programs in Art History and Curatorial and Museum Studies co-taught with the Art Gallery of South Australia. Her publications include *Painting Ghosts: Australian Women Artists in Wartime* (Craftsman House /Thames and Hudson, 2004); *Heysen to Heysen: Selected Letters of Hans Heysen and Nora Heysen* (National Library of Australia, 2011), *Beyond the Battlefield: Women Artists of the Two World Wars* (Reaktion, 2014), 'Forging Culture: Australian art in the Nineteenth Century', in Michelle Facos (ed), *A Companion to Nineteenth Century Art* (Wiley Blackwell, 2016) and *Australian Art Exhibitions: A New Story* (Thames and Hudson, 2017).

Painting for discussion: Albert Fullwood, *View Across a Mountain Range*, 1880s