

DAVID MURRAY

Colonist and collector extraordinaire

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The collection of Old Master prints — woodcuts and engravings, etchings and lithographs — held in the Art Gallery of South Australia is a major Australian cultural resource. Over 2,000 prints were bequeathed to the Gallery to “form the nucleus” of the collection, as the Will put it, 75 years ago. The benefactor, a retired merchant living in London, also left £3,000 “to be applied towards the establishment of a print room in connection with the picture gallery”.¹ The prints, and the many works purchased with the earnings of the original £3,000 since, have indeed been the central part of the fine collection of graphic work in Adelaide today.

This far-sighted man was well known in Adelaide from the time he arrived from his native Scotland in 1852² to his return to Britain in 1900.³ At his death in 1907 all Adelaide papers devoted a number of column inches to his worthy role “as a colonist and as a member of society”.⁴

His name was David Murray and today, as his friend and fellow collector Sir Samuel Way suggested in

1908, the print gallery of the South Australian Gallery is named after him. This article attempts to give some background to this collector extraordinaire and to his collection.

Murray was born in December 1829 in Anstruther, in the county of Fife. His father was a Provost and it seems he had a reasonably liberal education and some experience in business before, as a young man of 21, he set out to make his fortune in the new land of promise. Like many other Scots, he succeeded admirably. With his brother, William, who followed him to Adelaide six months later, he built up a major drapery merchant business with, when he died, branches in London, Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Perth, Broken Hill, Rockhampton, Townsville, and Launceston.

Murray's life seemed to follow the conventions of commercial success, living in a grand house, entertaining in style, and acknowledged as one of Adelaide's establishment.⁵ After building up his business he turned to a more public role, being elected a member of Parliament, serving it with

utmost seriousness (from 1870 to 1891) and elevated to Chief Secretary in the late 1880s. He supported his Presbyterian Church throughout his life and devoted energy in many related public areas.

We do not know when Murray's interest in collecting began — it could well have started in Scotland. So far as his graphic collection is concerned it is, however, tempting to suggest that Murray, newly arrived and eager to do well in South Australia, heard Adelaide's second Mayor, Thomas Wilson, in 1857 give the address at the first exhibition of the Society of Arts on, of all things, the value of having a collection of original prints and, further, having them housed and on display in a public gallery. He said:

I wish that I could prevail to impress on the South Australian society the great and almost necessary desideratum of a consecutive series of prints, in a small collection, containing, nevertheless, the genuine works of the masters themselves, to illustrate the progress of the arts of painting and engraving, including the etchings of painters, and the more modern transcripts by the engraver of some of the noblest works which . . . might be procural, and always be (at least in England) an available property, for about £350, for which sum no one painting of any importance is to be obtained. These might be framed and hung in a reasonable space without injury, and would form a perpetual well-spring of ideas, and a grand studio of art for the rising South Australian generation.⁶
Did this sow a seed in the young man's mind?

Certainly, over 30 years later, in 1890, Murray's collection and interest as a connoisseur were well known.⁷ His interest in collecting would certainly have been given scope by his 12 journeys back to England and Europe throughout his time in South Australia. Towards the end of his life his collection included prints, both in portfolios and displayed framed in his house, as well as a number of



Annibale Carracci (1560-1609) Italian, "The Farnese Sarcophagus" 1598-1600, engraving, 25.5 by 26.4 cm (sheet).

paintings and a library of fine books, many of which were rare and valuable.

Reading *Hansard*, and the documents, reports and biographies in the South Australian Library, as well as the very tangible success of his business,⁸ shows Murray to have been a man of shrewd practical good sense. He no doubt applied this to his art collection as much as to his bolts of material or ministerial decisions. One can imagine that prints and books, with their beautiful 'feel' for fine materials, appealed to this merchant of similar wares, as well as having the *imprimatur* of cultural standards.

Murray's public involvement in the arts started as his role in Parliament waned. He was elected to the Board of the then combined Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery in 1889, became its chairman in 1890 and resigned, it seems to undergo a long trip to Britain (but perhaps also for reasons of health), in early 1894.⁹ He was one of the members of the Fine Arts Committee which had control of both the Art Gallery and the School of Design.

On a few occasions Murray acted for the Board, recommending works

Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) Flemish. 'St Catherine', etching and engraving, 29.4 by 20 cm (image).

Below: William Hogarth (1697-1764) English. 'The Polling', 1758, engraving, 40.2 by 54 cm (image)

Below right: Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) German. 'The Resurrection', woodcut, 38.6 by 27.5 cm (image), 12th plate of 'The Large Passion' 1507-13. The entire set bequeathed by Murray.





Abraham Bosse (1603-76)
French. "New Shoes",
engraving, 25 by 33 cm
(image).

for the colony's collection. The first time was soon after his election, when, taking advantage of a trip to Melbourne, he recommended acquisition of three smaller works, *Destiny* by Thomas Cooper Gotch (for £525), *A Summer Day* by Keeley Halswelle (for £350), *Cairo* by Goodall (for £150) and a major purchase, only now coming back into its own, *Zenobia's Last Look on Palmyra* by Herbert G. Schmalz for sale for 1000 guineas.

All were in the Anglo-Australian Exhibition of Pictures and there was an eager rush to view early and secure the 'best' works. The papers excitedly told their Adelaide audience of Murray's venture, and how the rest of the Board lobbied the Minister for adequate funds to back his recommendation. The *S.A. Register* noted, explaining Murray's role in the case, that he 'has the reputation of a connoisseur and certainly has the judgement to be guided by the opinion of experts'.¹⁰

These choices, especially the Schmalz, are entirely in character with the popular taste of the upper middle class of the day, a taste for large, splendidly conceived and finished, well-upholstered Victorian Olympians.

Murray's other major venture in exercising his choice for the Gallery occurred seven years later, but things didn't quite go so smoothly then. Long retired from the Board but obviously still keeping informed, Murray offered to do anything he could for it on his next trip to Britain with Sir Samuel Way in 1897.

The *S.A. Register*, of 20 April 1897, noted he was to 'assist' Way 'in selecting pictures for the South Australian Gallery'. He attended the Board meeting to ascertain views, during which Mr Murray stated that although there were a good many of

what might be termed "good second class pictures" in the Art Gallery there was not one in his opinion by an artist of the very first rank.¹¹ A fairly inflammatory letter regarding this coming trip was written to the *S.A. Register* on 24 July. It ran:

Now, judging from the character and quality of the works bought by these gentlemen for their own homes and the gratification of their individual tastes grate doubts might be reasonably ascertained of their fitness for the onerous and delicate task of judiciously spending so much money. Sir Samuel was a fine lawyer and Mr Murray a successful merchant (the letter continued), but surely something more than a knowledge of the law, however extensive, or success as a merchant, however assured, is necessary.

To add insult to this injury Murray's subsequent single recommendation was rejected: he had, in late 1897, met the highly revered G. F. Watts in London and suggested to the Board that Watts be commissioned to do a work for South Australia. In was on the advice of the Hon Curator of the Gallery, Harry P. Gill, that this recommendation was refused — perhaps there was some tension between the ex-Board member and his curator in deciding who was to recommend works for purchase. The recommendation for the Watts is another example of Murray's taste for the splendidly, conventionally popular. The Gallery did in fact buy two Watts works later, a *Nymph* in 1899 and, spectacularly, in 1901 *Love and Death* for £3000.

For whatever reason, soon after this Murray sought the return of 16 of his paintings on loan, it seems, to the Gallery from 1894. These works are, unfortunately, unlisted, with the

exception of *An Arab Squadron* by Giuseppe Gabani left with the Board for further loan.¹²

At what stage did Murray decide to leave his prints and a sum of money to the Gallery? Perhaps he remembered Wilson's words.

Certainly when he was involved in Gallery business in the 1880s and 1890s, there was continuous growth in the print collection. The collection began with a gift of engravings by Sir James Barry in 1882,¹³ a year after the Gallery was opened, followed by 11 etchings made and given by South Australia's expatriate son Mortimer Menpes in 1889, then 54 etchings by Pietro Testa given in 1891. Further, when a major consideration was how to spend the splendid Elder Bequest, the Gallery committee received advice from the Board's solicitors that this Bequest was not available for purchase of graphic works of art.¹⁴

In his own lifetime Murray gave few actual pieces to the North Terrace institutions, much being made of his gift of two terracottas by George Tinworth in 1893 to the Gallery. The lastingly important gifts made in his lifetime were two 'interesting and valuable ethnological specimens from Benin City, West Africa, which he recently purchased', given to the Museum, as the minutes of the 19 May 1899 Board meeting ran. These two Benin bronzes are outstanding pieces, it seems the only two to find a permanent home in the Southern Hemisphere.¹⁵

Murray's other part in South Australia's art activity was, it would seem, in his role for nearly 20 years until his death, as Vice President of the Society of Arts. However, though he kept being regularly elected to the position every two years, he did not attend one meeting. After Murray's death the Society offered to show his collection of 'prints and engravings' in their Gallery.¹⁶

One wonders what interest Murray did have in Australian art. One of his biographers, H. T. Burgess, says he was an art critic,¹⁷ though reviews under his own name (not the practice for public men) have not come to light.

The collection left to the Gallery is entirely of European works, dating from the 15th to the 19th centuries. The images were well-known to both Way and to Harry P. Gill. We owe our knowledge of it at first to the former, who wrote in 1908 that Murray "secured this collection when he was residing in Italy on the advice of the Director of the Pitti Gallery in Florence". He added 'I understood from Mr Murray that he was offered as much for two or three of the prints as he gave for the entire collection'.¹⁸

implying Murray did indeed buy well. The bundling of prints bequeathed to the Gallery further confirms that Murray bought the works as groups: 27 portfolios containing up to 206 prints each. The quality of some of the works, some torn, faded or late impressions, also bespeaks group buying, these prints not being worth single acquisition. There were however major single pieces in the collection and both Way and Gill recalled Murray showing them 'with enthusiasm his Etchings by Rembrandt, his Engravings by Dürer, his Marc Antonio engravings after Raphael's designs and his Marc Antonio piracies (forgeries) of Dürer's engraving; there is also a series of Gillray caricatures or lampoons'.¹⁹ Way, in 1909, remembered the different 'states' of the Rembrandt portfolio.²⁰

Way noted how he had urged his friend to bequeath the prints to the Art Gallery from the time 'the first brought this collection to South Australia'.²¹ It was with great pleasure that Way wrote about the Bequest on first hearing of it, calling it 'probably the finest collection of Prints and Engravings in any Art Gallery south of the Line'.²² He was quick enough himself though to see a catch in the Will: that all Murray's Prints and Engravings in portfolios were to form the nucleus of the new printroom, so in haste wrote to Murray's widow that he had spoken to Mr Murray on the subject of his 'magnificent collection of engravings' and he hoped she 'will take care that the engravings which were framed come with the portfolios'. I am sure it would be Mr Murray's wish that the collection should be complete'.²³ Unfortunately, the framed works were kept apart and both Way and Gill expressed disappointment at what did arrive from London. This was however partially saved by the offices of Mr John Gordon, Adelaide Manager of Murray's firm, a local executor and his cousin. On Mrs Murray's death in 1909 Gordon contributed around £200 for the purchase of prints at the sale of her estate.

Were any prints kept by Murray's other relatives in the intervening two years? David Murray's only child, Willie, had died aged four or five on a trip back to Scotland some 42 years earlier, but his brother William and his three children lived in London. One niece, Louisa, had shown interest in art, studying previously at the Adelaide School of Design. A nephew, son of Murray's only sister, who lived in Anstruther, also lived in London and worked for the family firm. Any of these could have been

given framed works from David Murray's collection.

Illustrated on these pages are some of the interesting and important works to come directly from both Murray's portfolios and, a little later, from his widow's estate. The original number of works in 1907 was 2,057, plus those purchased in 1909. These thousands of images of four centuries of cultural endeavour are, of course, despite some paleness of ink of a number of works, a remarkable resource in this remote and newly European land. One follows the adventures of the classical heroes, the agonies of the Christian martyrs, the development of style and manner in 16th century Italian engraving,²⁴ the evolution of portraiture in the German courts, or the languors of 18th century French romantic visions.

Of equal importance is the £3,000 for the development of the 'printroom'. This has been interpreted freely, as Way believed Murray meant. For example, it has been used to subsidise the salaries of the early professional curators of the Gallery, hired in part to catalogue the prints, among whom was the renowned English printmaker Henri van Raalte.

It is true, however, that using Murray's own works as 'the nucleus' of the collection, as Murray's Will read, this £3,000 has 'established a printroom' of fine quality in South



Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) German, "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse", woodcut, 39 by 27.2 cm (image). Fifth plate from "The Apocalypse of St John" 1511. The entire set bequeathed by Murray.

Australia, with work by van Dyke, Hogarth, Goya, Turner, Blake, Toulouse-Lautrec, Hiroshige and Canaletto all proudly bearing the label 'purchased through the David Murray Bequest Fund'.

Footnotes

- The relevant part of the Will dated 10 July, 1906, read '£2000 to the Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery of South Australia at Adelaide, to be applied towards the establishment of a printroom in connection with the picture gallery of that institution. All his prints and engravings in portfolios to the said institution, to form a nucleus of such a printroom'.
- His date of arrival is often quoted as 1853, which was indeed when his brother William Murray came to South Australia. Our merchant had, in fact, left Liverpool on 6 April, 1852 on the *Anna*, travelling intermediate class and arrived at Port Adelaide on 14 July of that year (see *S.A. Register*, 15 July, 1852, p. 2c).
- He paid one more visit to South Australia after this, in 1902.
- This quotation is actually the merchant's own. He used it in reply to a testimonial from leading Adelaide citizens when they heard in 1889 that he was to return to Britain. He added that he 'had ever looked on the Colony as my home and owe it whatever good things of this life I have been blessed with' (see *The Register*, 8 January, 1907, p. 7d).
- An unpublished thesis in the S.A. Archives, *The Adelaide Gentry* by Dirk van Disell (University of Melbourne, 1973) includes Murray as one of the 'older gentry'. His extremely grand house 'St Andrews' in Stanley Street, North Adelaide (discussed in Eric Ganton 'St Andrews, of North Adelaide' *South Australian Homes & Gardens*, 1 October, 1948, pp. 36-7, 7f) bears testament to the fine style in which Murray lived, especially during the 1880s when it was one of the show places of the colony.
- See S. C. Wilson and K. B. Andrews 'The Bridge Over the Ocean', *Thomas Wilson (1787-1863)*, *Art Collector and Mayor of Adelaide*, Adelaide, 1973, p. 219, and A. Carroll *Graven Images in the Promised Land: A History of Printmaking in South Australia 1836-1987*, Adelaide 1981, pp. 6-7.

7 See *S.A. Register* 26 April, 1890.

8 For example, Murray left over £200,000 in 1907.

9 He was elected to the Board on 28 October, 1889, and was Chairman from 21 November, 1890 to 17 November, 1893.

10 See *S.A. Register* op. cit. See also the Minutes of the Board of the Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery of 18, 23 and 28 April for reports of this undertaking.

11 See *S.A. Register* 24 April, 1897.

12 The request for the loan of works occurred just at the end of Murray's Chairmanship in late 1893 (see Board Minutes, 30 October, 1893 and Fine Art Committee Minutes, 10 November, 1893, and 12 January, 1894). The return was noted in the F.A.C. Minutes of 11 February and 13 May, 1899. Gabani (1846-95) was a painter of romantic military subjects.

13 William L. Pressly, author of *The Life and Art of James Barry Yule*, 1981, has suggested this particular set of 29 images given by the London Society of Arts is the only complete one anywhere.

14 See Fine Arts Committee Minutes, 12 August, 1898.

15 See P. A. Howell 'More Varieties of Vice-Regal Life', *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, 9, 1981, note 156.

16 See Minutes of the Society of Arts, 7 July, 1908.

17 See H. T. Burgess *The Colopet of South Australia*, 1, Adelaide 1907, p. 586.

18 See 'Memorandum as to the David Murray Bequest' by S. J. Way, 15 May, 1908. (S.A. Archives, P. L. M. & A. G. Docket 8, 1908.)

19 Letter to the Fine Arts Committee, from Harry P. Gill, 6 June, 1908. Docket 8 bid 20 Memo for the President, from Way, 13 March, 1909. Docket 8 bid.

21 See memorandum of 15 May, 1908, op. cit.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 See an article on Mantegna and his followers in the *Bulletin of the Art Gallery of South Australia*, 1977, with all but one work coming from the Murray Bequest.