



Erika Esau

Images of the Pacific Rim: Australia and California 1850-1935

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Images of the Pacific Rim is a leading example of what has been called the ‘transnational’ turn in the humanities. Since the 1990s, scholars have begun to question the connection between disciplinary fields and the category of the nation. The connection was originally necessary to establish many disciplines—*Australian* literature, *US* studies, *Australian* art history, etc.—but these disciplines are now separating from their national frames. In area studies, particularly national histories of literature, this has been occasioned by discussions of globalisation and transnationalism, as well as attempts to revive older models of world history, imperial history, world literature, and

comparative literature. Examples include David Thelen on US history; Ann Curthoys, Marilyn Lake, and Henry Reynolds on Australian history; Veronica Kelly and Jill Julius Matthews on Australian theatre and cinema studies; and Rex Butler on Australian art history (particularly his ongoing ‘un-Australian art’ project).¹

Underlying these examples is a search for alternative postnational, international, or transnational conceptual maps. One of the best accounts of this is Paul Giles’s reimagining of the nation in American literature as ragged or porous at the edges. He argues that

national histories of whatever kind cannot be written simply from the inside. The scope and significance of their narrative involve not just the incorporation of multiple or discordant voices in a certain pre-established framework of unity, but also an acknowledgement of external points of reference that serve to relativise the whole conceptual field, pulling the circumference of national identity itself into strange, ‘elliptical’ shapes.²

While this is a roundabout way of introducing Erika Esau’s book, locating it within this recent trend helps to identify its signal contribution to the transnational turn in Australian art history, especially the history of vernacular modernisms. Like Giles, Esau realises that national histories cannot be written from the inside. Seeking external points of reference to revitalise the conceptual field, her geography is based on what Giles describes as multiple ‘elliptical extensions’ that surround the national spaces of Australia and the US. These extensions relate to the flows of people, capital, intellectual property, and aesthetic forms back and forth across the Pacific.

This transpacific economy is modelled on

three core themes that aid understanding the exchange of vernacular images: *itinerancy*, because the artists, artisans, and craftspeople producing images of these new-world societies travelled extensively, not only within the US and Australia, but often back and forth between them; *reproducibility*, because the images were produced by emerging new technologies, drawing on advances in printing and photography; and *portability*, because the images were commodities whose modularity and portability gave them their exchange value.

These three categories are the basis of Esau's thinking about what she calls a 'Pacific Rim style'—a style based on the idea that new-world cultures felt themselves to be closer to each other across the Pacific than to the old worlds of the Eastern US and Europe. Focused on what cinema-historian Miriam Hansen calls 'vernacular modernity', Esau is not concerned with international high modernism—whose arrival in the 1930s marks the end point of her story—but with vernacular modernisms associated with the reproductive arts and crafts, and commercial mass media: photography, illustration, and graphic design; newspapers and periodicals, posters and commercial advertising, and popular magazines about travel, tourism, the automobile, and the home. Her protagonists are not so much artists as artisans—journeying photographers, commercial engravers, commercial designers, advertisers, architects, builders, and even real-estate developers.

Images of the Pacific Rim offers a series of case studies arranged in overlapping or serried chronological order. Its seven chapters cover photography and engraving in the goldfields societies; early forms of popular entertainment, especially magazines and sheet music; the changing techniques of illustration in popular periodicals, books,

and magazines, including the monumental Picturesque albums of the 1880s; the cross-fertilisation of architecture in the Californian bungalow; the exchange of ideas through the international exposition movement; the acclimatisation of Australian vegetation in California, especially the eucalyptus tree; and the influence of Spanish-revival architecture in Australian homes and public buildings.

Prosopography (or career biography)—tracing the movement of people, images, and ideas—has become something of a hallmark of transnational scholarship.³ Esau's book is enlivened by an engaging cast of characters, who wend their way back and forth across the Pacific, as she herself has done in her career as an art historian. Some of them, such as Alfred Deakin, B.J. Waterhouse, and Water Burley Griffin, I already knew well; others I did not. There are the goldfields-photographers Beaufoy Merlin and Charles Bayliss, and the incredibly mobile Batchelder brothers, Benjamin and Nathaniel, who worked on both sides of the Pacific. Planning for the *Picturesque Atlas of Australasia* in the 1880s brought what Esau describes as 'an entire fleet of artists, engravers and printers'. The Sydney *Bulletin* actively sought to emulate American styles, bringing the famous illustrator Livingston Hopkins, among others, from the US. Hopkins would go on to invent that quintessentially Australian icon, the little boy from Manly. In the exchange of architectural styles one encounters relatively well-known names, such as John Horbury Hunt, but also lesser-known figures like Sydney real-estate developer Richard Stanton, who introduced Sydney to Pacific-style modernity with the garden suburb of Haberfield.

Esau's research is wide and deep, and turns up extraordinary details. I was amazed to find, for example, that the first timber-framed house built at Monterey

in California—a predecessor for the California bungalow—was imported from Australia. This is the Bushton-Allen House, reassembled from timbers brought from Hobart by a stone mason who immigrated to the Californian goldfields in the early 1850s.

These stories of exchange not only reflect Esau's own transpacific experience, they also illuminate Australia's local environment, including my own immediate surrounds at the University of Sydney and Glebe precincts. One example is the buildings on Physics Road at the University of Sydney, designed by its first Professor of Architecture, Leslie Wilkinson, who looked to California to create a 'present-day Australian architecture'. One engraving reproduced in the book shows Australia's biggest lumberyard in the 1870s and 1880s at Blackwattle Bay, Glebe, from the end of Ferry Road around to the Sydney fish markets, where the Glebe Secondary College is currently located. This was a site for the 'Redi-cut' timber used in Sydney's first 'arts and crafts' style houses that were copied by builders and developers from American models. They eventually fed into the so-called 'Federation style' and the later bungalow style used in suburbs like Burwood and Haberfield.

Another personal favourite among the illustrations was an exhibition home built for the *Panama-Pacific International Exposition* in San Francisco in 1915. This quintessential Californian bungalow, with its overwhelming horizontality, red roof, weatherboard walls, multiple balconies, and bay windows, could have been the model for my own former 'Queenslander' home built in the 1920s in the Brisbane suburb of Graceville. I'd always thought the Queenslanders to be uniquely Australian, but here it was, a few years earlier, in San Francisco.

Esau's book is a milestone in transnational scholarship that resonates in illuminating

ways with our own built and visual environment. Towards the end of the book, she explains that

Australians in the 1920s . . . looked directly to Southern California, at least on a popular level, for many of their markers of modernity. Through magazines, posters and films, they were aware of the popular manifestations of the Hispanic and Mediterranean-inspired modes showing up everywhere on the other side of the Pacific. In the hands of many Australian architects and builders, these fashionable adaptations had as much to do with California—and, in its final manifestations, with Hollywood—as did any direct appropriation of the building forms of the Mediterranean region.⁴

The sense of 'can-do' optimism in these two new-world societies is perfectly captured in the anecdote with which Esau ends the book. In 1938, when former Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes opened a direct radio-telephone service with Washington, he stressed the affinities between Australia and the US: 'What we are, you were; and what you are, we hope to be . . . On us, the people of the new world, much of the future of civilization depends.'⁵

1. See Robert Dixon and Nicholas Birns, eds., *Reading Across the Pacific: US-Australian Intellectual Histories* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2011).

2. Paul Giles, *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 6.

3. See Robert Dixon and Veronica Kelly, eds., *Impact of the Modern: Vernacular Modernities in Australia 1870s to 1960s* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2008).

4. Erika Esau, *Images of the Pacific Rim: Australia and California 1850-1935*, 294.

5. *Ibid.*, 331.