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

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Images of the Pacific Rim contributes to an emerging consciousness of the historic cultural intersections between Australia and the United States. The work strikes me as the pièce de résistance of art historian Erica Esau and her long-standing immersion in the aesthetic waters shared by both places. A native Californian who has taught Australian art history in Australia, Esau outlines the transmission of popular cultural images that occurred between these two frontier societies during a critical period (1850–1935) of identity-formation for each. Coupled to increasingly sophisticated methods of mass-communicated artisanal forms, the circulation of leitmotifs across the ocean would produce a ‘Pacific Slope culture’ (77). Esau argues that an aesthetic consanguinity arose with notable alacrity during the 85 years between the gold country rush and the onset of the Depression. Key artisans, politicians and entrepreneurs, like Benjamin Batchelder and Alfred Deakin, figured in the development of a modern Pacific Rim style of art and architecture. The time span of the research is purposive, since globalization, spurred by film, radio, television and the internet, altered the nature and documentability of the post 1935 trans-Pacific conversation between California and Australia.

On the whole, Images of the Pacific Rim is an accessible and visually persuasive account of the emergence of the modern ‘Pacific Rim’ style. Its framework summons Walter Benjamin’s prescient statement from 1936 that the ‘mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art’ (quoted on 17). Indeed, the thrust of the originality of this book is its focus on vernacular images rather than ‘high arts’ which, as Esau (17) observes, ‘were available to so few in these frontier societies that aesthetic ideas were more readily accessible and understood through portable and reproducible artistic mediums’. The author builds a strong case for a mutual ‘aesthetics of place’ (331) made possible by the inter-workings of three characteristic agents of modernity: the itinerancy of artists and artisans, and the reproducibility and portability of images facilitated by technological developments in the mass media. For example, widely dispersed commercial depictions in the form of citrus crate labels (17), brochures for bush bungalows (190) and advertisements for Shell service stations (321) coalesced a Pacific Rim aesthetic as the juxtaposition of iconographies from both sides of the ocean. Esau shows that a common ‘reaction of the masses’ entailed the uptake, absorption and digestion of exotic iconographies. As cultural peripheries in relation to Europe and the eastern United States, the formation of sense of place in California and Australia depended on popular magazines, posters and commercial advertising to disseminate meaning-
making images. Studebakers, eucalypts, red-tiled roofs, Spanish Style homes and
Mediterranean backdrops constitute some of the easily recognizable symbols deployed by
popular artisans of this period. Accessible to an increasingly itinerant public, visual
depictions would assert nascent regional identities, burgeoning marketplace economies
and the transfiguration of the land by settler and, later, suburban expansion.

The readability of *Images of the Pacific Rim* is enhanced by its chronological and
thematic organization. Set against impressive migrations between Australia and California
during the mid-1800s, chapter 1 suggests that visual records reveal some of the ideological
and capitalistic prerogatives underlying the ventures of artists and photographers in gold
country. Through the example of the controversial *Euchre in the bush* by ‘Alphabetical’
Johnson, chapter 2 details the popularity of wood-engraving as a medium of aesthetic
modernism, employed also by sheet music illustrators and advertisers of the era. Chapter 3
illustrates trenchantly the exchange of aesthetic ideals through the *Picturesque atlas*
movement of the late 1800s. Chapter 4 describes the ‘bungalow craze’ (197) sweeping
California and Australia, through which a shared architectural iconography developed
along with mass media in the form of lifestyle magazines. Australia’s participation in the
California Expositions promulgated ‘emblems of modernity’ (245), as chapter 5 explains.
Up to this point in the story, ‘aesthetic exchange’ seemed biased towards a uni-directional
flow from California to Australia, but chapter 6 marks a considerable shift through the
fascinating account of the eucalypt’s absorption into popular Californian motifs. Finally,
chapter 7 goes on to argue that Spanish Style architecture derived from the Californian
precedent has moulded Australian building as significantly as European forms of
architecture. The Coda intimates that images render an aesthetics of place as ‘the result of
prolonged interaction between two peoples whose societies came of age at the same time,
and in an environment that had much in common’ (331).

Esau sketches the concept of aesthetic exchange in light of the common Mediterranean
environment between areas of Australia and California. Discussions of aesthetic
discourses, however, prompt questions of aesthetisication and its implications as part of a
post-colonial critique. While reading, I therefore became keenly interested in the impact of
visual representations of flora, fauna and landscapes on values towards the natural worlds
of each place. Unfortunately, many of these questions remain unaddressed by this work.
The author’s claim that ‘Australia’s greatest aesthetic, one could even say iconographic,
contribution to popular culture centred, as it still does, on its unique flora and fauna’ (76),
though intriguing, goes under-developed and points to broader considerations. For
instance, the iconography of eucalypts in California as detailed in chapter 6, contrasts
starkly with the ‘aesthetic aversion’ (254) of early Australian settlers to gum trees. Why
was there an enthusiastic uptake of the eucalypt in California when it clearly inverted
aesthetic sensibilities inherited from Europe and was consistently disparaged on its own
soils? Was it simply the ‘urge to vegetate’ (254) that propelled gum trees into the southern
Californian iconography? Or were there colonial attitudes at work, blazing the way for the
‘settlement’ of the Californian biota by exotic species?

*Images of the Pacific Rim* further reiterates the modern conceptualization of aesthetics
as the science of images with an ocular-centric emphasis. As such, it hinges on historicized
readings of appearances in popular sources over the tacit exchanges of smell, taste, touch
and sound that accompany material networks of aesthetic productions, architectures,
plants, animals and other lived spaces and bodily experiences. The notion of aesthetic
exchange invariably leads into the contextual discussion of the colonization of the land, first
peoples and the non-visual senses. For example, the illustration ‘Semi Tropical Northern
California Pictures’ (figure 3.26, 212) glorifies resource-intensive agricultural practices
that impose a two-dimensional managerial grid over the land. The aesthetisisation of
naturalized flora in ‘Eucalyptus King of the Forest’ (figure 6.10, 218) consists of orderly
rows of pin-straight tree trunks occupying the distance with the composition centred on a
gracefully winding track through the trees, all symbolizing the inroads of colonization. An
aesthetics of the sublime in the latter subtexts the erasure of original habitats as terra
nullius devoid of the first peoples of both California and Australia.

Esau’s notion of aesthetic exchange implies the underlying structuring of power
relations between settler societies, the land constructed as landscape, and the
marginalization of pre-existing networks of sustenance. Comparably, the development
of landscape photography by Edward Weston and Ansel Adams in the early 1900s framed
the national parks movements in the United States that would later influence Myles
Dunphy and other Australian conservationists through the idea of wilderness as a pure
visual construction delimited from cultural spaces. A wilderness aesthetic associated with
what ecocultural theorist Rod Giblett calls ‘sanctuarism’ (2011, 141) accompanied images
that propounded the trope of conquering the wilderness through modernist expansion, with
the land itself broadcast as a series of visual representations.

Images of the Pacific Rim raises multiple questions of colonial power hegemonies,
leaving them unanswered and offering potential for future research on what the aesthetic
exchange between regions actually has entailed. A related work could focus on aesthetic
dialogue between California and Australia through representations of flora and fauna, and
the evolution of landscape values in each place. This kind of research presented by Esau
could readily be broadened to the rest of the United States, not only California, and the rest
of Australia, not only the eastern half. For instance, the aesthetic exchange between
Western Australia and the western United States included works of artists such as itinerant
landscape painter Marianne North who produced popular renderings of karri trees as well
as depictions of the Californian flora. The resistance to the Americanization of Australian
aesthetic identity would also be an interesting outgrowth of Esau’s research.

Images of the Pacific Rim, nevertheless, is a glowing addition to the emerging canon of
interdisciplinary scholarship querying the relationship between Australia and the United
States. Whilst the complex ambiguities of globalization increasingly obscure the idea of an
‘aesthetic exchange’ in a contemporary contexts, Images has set a strong standard of
scholarship for its designated period. Academics specializing in the study of the
relationship between Australia and the United States will be interested, although the
book’s targeted audience is a general readership. I would suggest this meticulously
researched and impressively presented text as required reading for anyone interested in the
cultural relationship between the two nations. In light of globalization’s rapid
dissemination of leitmotifs worldwide towards often instantaneous effects, Images
prompts us to re-visit the influence of regional character linked to climate and the genesis
of local artisanal and architectural styles.

Reference


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