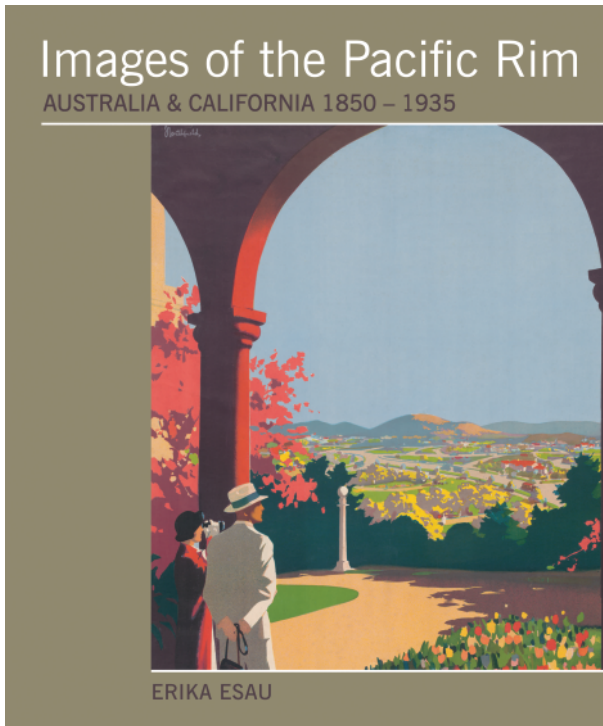


Book Review



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

Erika Esau, *Power Publications, Sydney, 2010. 367 pp., 146 b&w and 21 col. illus, paper, A\$59.95. ISBN: 9780909952396*

Nineteenth-century networks of travel, trade and technology excite keen interest in current art history.¹ Compared with present day electronic image transmission, nineteenth-century information networks were humble predecessors. But as more scholars demonstrate, these networks were crucial conduits of imagery and ideas in an age of less convenience. Erika Esau has contributed an important new study to this field; that of the aesthetic connections established through trade, travel and technology-enabled mass communication between California and the emerging colonies of Australia. Beginning in the 1850s with the gold-induced population booms along the Pacific coasts, and

the arrival of itinerant artists–photographers in ‘gold country’, Esau identifies key moments of shared history and aesthetic exchange between California and Australia in a series of case-studies spanning eighty-five years. She focuses on the ‘lower’ arts of photography, illustration and graphic design, which are characterized by reproducibility, made possible by technological advances in printing, and portability. Esau argues that these factors of reproducibility and portability, together with the itinerancy of artists and artisans, established conditions for a rich flow of imagery and aesthetic ideas between California and Australia. She stops her account at 1935 when, as she points out in a Coda, ‘historic transformations in art and mass media changed the nature of the concepts of itinerancy, reproducibility and portability’, and ‘tracing the specific origins of a particular aesthetic or visual strand became increasingly difficult’ (pp. 330–1). Her range of comparative case-studies, which encompass landscape photography, narrative painting, formations of the picturesque and domestic architecture, tease out the problem of what aesthetics are shared, what remains distinct to each place and, as in the intriguing case of early-twentieth-century California commercial graphics, how the flow of imagery through modern networks across the Pacific created a specific aesthetic, one which eventually produced a modern ‘Pacific Rim’ style.

The point of the travelling artist is an important one for the period as passenger ships took growing numbers of non-immigrant ‘tourists’ across the Pacific. Esau considers how the artists’ ‘cultural baggage’ might be made visible through their creative production or whether stylistic transformations occur when Western artists and photographers confront a different place, a different culture or different ideologies. For the Americans visiting the Australian frontier, their background also brought a certain amount of cultural clout. Esau’s first case-study of the photography industry that grew out of the boom decades of the Australian gold-rushes makes the point that many local photographers traded on an association with American technology and style [1].

Important comparative histories of Australia and America have been published. Philip and Roger Bell (UNSW Press,

1998) offer a comprehensive analysis of America's influence on Australian popular culture, law, government, sexual politics, literature and language. David Goodman (Allen and Unwin, 1994) has considered the shared history of gold-rushes in Victoria and California, and Ian Tyrell (University of California Press, 1999) has compared the Californian and Australian environmental reform of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Esau points out, as California and Australia share the Pacific region, have similar climates, common languages, material trade and shared concepts of law and democracy, comparative histories are perhaps inevitable, and indeed these common factors in some way inform most of her case-study analyses. But at the basis of Esau's comparison of Californian and Australian aesthetics is her point that both were 'cultures on the periphery' in the nineteenth century, both were looking to form identities that diverged from those of their home cultures, whether 'back East' in America, or England in the case of Australia, and both were looking for new aesthetics of place (p. 18). She finds that vernacular imagery in the reproductive arts of the mass media: photography, illustration and graphic design.



Fig 1. Cover, *Sunset*, vol. 34, January 1915. Courtesy of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

While Elizabeth Johns and others have identified high art affinities in Australian and American landscape painting (National Gallery of Australia, 1998), Esau focuses on 'lesser' aesthetic practices, where she argues the similarities appear to be most striking. By doing so, Esau puts in motion Walter Benjamin's famous statement that the 'mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art' (cited p. 17). Her case-studies are living testament to the impact of widely dispersed imagery that was available and understood by far more people than the so-called 'high arts', and variously absorbed into modern, image-dependent societies.

The text is richly illustrated and much of Esau's visual material is new, unearthed through foot-slogging archival research for the journals, illustrations, posters, commercial advertising and popular art magazines, which dispersed imagery across oceans and over great distances. And many of the images are rare finds. There is a photograph of an emu in an 1874 San Francisco street (p. 76), 'Glimpses of some bush bungalows' from *The Home* magazine of 1920 (p. 190), and early advertisements for Sunkist and Ana Co Brand oranges. A number of the images are sourced from superb collections at the Huntington Library in San Marino, but the captions naming collections in Canberra, Sydney, Brisbane, Connecticut and San Francisco and elsewhere reveal how far and wide Esau travelled to find the imagery, and at times, as in the photograph of Hale House, Los Angeles (p. 214) created the source herself. Key images are reproduced in a centre section of colour plates, which enhances a beautiful production by Power Publications.

The rare visual material makes this book an important reference for art history and visual studies. Esau's compelling argument for aesthetic dialogue across the Pacific grounded in specific case-studies which evidence the exchange also extends the readership to include cultural and cross-cultural historians. Two focused chapters on buildings styles will particularly interest the architecture historian. But the novel charm of these case histories, Esau's lucid and engaging text, and the stunning presentation of this book broadens its appeal to a wider public and a general reader.

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Note

- 1 See for instance CAA 2011 Annual conference centennial session Global Art Histories/Multiple Modernities.