

# Facing New Worlds: Comparative Histories of Australasia and North America, 1750-1850.

In 2020, Australia's National Portrait Gallery (NPG) will host a major joint exhibition with the US-based Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. It will focus on the portrait traditions that evolved in Australia and the US before 1850 and explore how they reveal common or distinct histories about people in both places during a crucial period of indigenous dispossession and settler establishment. The aim of the project *Facing New Worlds* is to provide the critical research arm to this exhibition, expanding significantly its ability to advance public and scholarly understanding of both historical indigenous experience and settler cultural formation in comparable sites.

The immediate background to this project lies in an exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) nearly 20 years ago. In 1998 the NGA and the ESSO Corporation exhibited *New Worlds from Old*, which compared Australia and the US before 1850 through the lens of the landscape tradition. The exhibition was considered ground-breaking due to its "intellectual ... ambition in trying to conceptualise a large, complex subject" (Bonyhady 1998). Reviewers at the time appreciated its rare research-based accomplishments, and its promise. One noted that "placing the art of these two countries side by side should be seen not as a finished statement, but the first phase of a much larger project, the beginning of a new dialogue" (Brown 2000). The exhibition slated for the NPG twenty-one years later is in many ways a conscious attempt to continue the dialogue, but this time addressing the portrait tradition of two settler sites. *Facing New Worlds* will not only help match the research excellence exemplified by the NGA/ESSO show (see Johns 1998) but also go beyond it, both by casting a wider intellectual net than the exhibition alone and by seeding grounds through its activities for ongoing collaboration between curators and scholars.

The more general background to the project lies in the recognition that the histories of the two general "New World" regions, Australasia and North America, have much in common but that this comparability has generated relatively little scholarship. Both regions have witnessed complicated processes of encounter and engagement between indigenous populations and European settlers. Both have seen the uneven establishment of settler cultures, with their distinct attitudes towards home, independence, and dispossession. And both have grown large modern nations, which have forged complex relationships with Europe and each other. How similar were indigenous responses to European settlement, despite enormous differences in origin and collective identity? How distinct were settler attempts to create new cultures over both indigenous worlds and the "Old World"? Due to the long dominance of nationally-defined approaches, few scholars, or curators, have considered these comparative questions in depth—particularly for the transformative century, 1750-1850.

## References

- Bonyhady, T. 1998. "Landscape of Ideas," *Eureka Street*, May: 8-35
- Brown, J. K. 2000. Review of *New Worlds from Old*, *Great Plains Quarterly*, 20/3: 241.
- Johns, E., A. Sayers & E. Kornhauser. 1998. *New Worlds from Old: 19<sup>th</sup> Century Australian and American Landscapes* (Canberra: NGA)