James Whitley Sayer

1847–1914

Print traditions

sources of Australian printmaking
James Whitley Sayer was an “artist and art enthusiast”. So said writer, Edward A Vidler (1863–1942), in 1930 when he formally unveiled a memorial tablet to JW Sayer that placed on record the eminent services rendered to the cause of art in Geelong and to this gallery in particular by James Whitley Sayer, Obit. 1914, who during a lengthy citizenship devoted his best energies to the furtherance of aesthetic movements in this city.

It was a community service that began, modestly enough, in the small but booming Western District gold town of Dunolly where Rev James Sayer, his wife Lucy and their six children came to live during the early 1860s. The family had migrated from Cornwall, England, in 1857 when Rev Sayer answered the call for Methodist missionaries to come out to Melbourne, Australia. They lived in Collingwood for the first two years before Rev Sayer was transferred to Geelong to take up his appointment at the United Methodist Free Church in Preston Street, Geelong West. Attached to this Church was the Methodist Free Church School, better known as Mowbray’s School after its founder and head teacher, Joseph Dibbs Mowbray (1828–1905). Rev Sayer was transferred to Ballarat in 1861, but James W remained in Geelong, working as pupil teacher at Mowbray’s School.

In 1863 he abandoned his pursuit of a teaching career, rejoined his family in Dunolly—where his father had been appointed Congregational minister—and, through his father’s influence, obtained an apprenticeship with the London Chartered Bank.

James W Sayer was to remain with the London Chartered Bank until his retirement in 1908. It was a career that was to take him to Ballarat, Newcastle, Melbourne, Sydney and, finally, Geelong and that was to directly and indirectly influence his activities as an artist and as a supporter and advocate of art within each of these communities.

The apprentice—
Dunolly to Newcastle

A banking apprenticeship was generally over a term of seven to ten years and Sayer spent this period in Dunolly (c.1864–69) and Ballarat (1869–74). He was sent to Sydney for a brief term in Treasury and then became the Manager of the London Chartered Bank in the mining city of Newcastle, New South Wales.

During his apprenticeship, James W Sayer began studying art—probably initially under the guidance of his father who had been a printer before turning to his religious vocation. He displayed a natural artistic talent and, through the Dunolly Borough Council, three chalk studies were forwarded to the 1866–67 Melbourne Intercolonial Exhibition. The three religious drawings—The Nativity (after Correggio), Abraham and Hagar (after Adrian van der Werff) and Magdalena (after Pompeo Batoni)—were copied from etchings in Payne’s Royal Dresden Gallery, published in 1800.

It was general practice for students to study and copy the Old Masters as part of the learning process.

For the 1869 Ballarat Mechanics’ Institute Exhibition Sayer again submitted copies, but included secular works: in addition to The Nativity (original artist unknown) and two Scottish landscapes, Sanquhar and Ellesland, Sayer included Ophelia (after Arthur Hughes) and Words of Comfort (after Thomas Faed), both of which had been reproduced in issues of The Art Journal of 1865. Four years later, he contributed the crayon drawing Florence to the fourth and final annual exhibition of the New South Wales Academy of Art where it gained a Certificate of Merit and, when it was directly sent from there on to the 1875 Sydney Intercolonial Exhibition, it received a commendation by the judges.

Further success was achieved when, after having just departed Newcastle for Melbourne, Sayer forwarded his crayon copy of a classical subject—Ajax—from the 1879–80 Melbourne International Exhibition, to the concurrent Sydney International Exhibition, where it was awarded third prize in the student drawing category.
At this stage, James W Sayer was still exhibiting as a pupil but, during the preceding years, others had noticed his particular aptitude for art and design and he had received a number of commissions for his work. While in Ballarat, he had joined his father’s colleague, Congregational minister and naturalist Rev Jacob John Halley (1834–1910) in the 1871 production of A Monograph of the Psittacidae or Parrot Family of Australia [cat. no. 1], which was to be a sumptuous publication available by public subscription. Sayer drew a number of watercolour parrot studies for the monograph, three of which were reproduced [cat. nos 2–4] and received critical acclaim for their “artistic” quality.7 Sayer himself was clearly proud of the publication and forwarded it to the 1873 London International Exhibition to be included amongst Australia’s contribution to the ‘Natural History’ section.8

Sayer’s singular skills were again brought to bear when he was commissioned to design the winning prize for the 1874 Ballarat Mechanics’ Institute Art Union—an Etruscan-style gold cup that was deemed to be “a real work of art”.9 In 1878 he won a competition for the design of the National Shipwreck Relief Society of NSW medal [cat. no. 8], which was awarded to those who performed acts of bravery. The design, considered to be “remarkably chaste and pretty and peculiarly appropriate”10 bore, on the obverse, a pictorial design depicting a rescue in progress and, on the reverse, a lifebuoy with nautical tackle and the Society’s name. The following year his design of a wreath of Australian flowers was chosen for the reverse of the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition medal [cat. no. 9]—one of which he was awarded for his bronze-medal-winning drawing Florence.

As he was achieving success with these designs, James W Sayer was also producing more paintings, watercolours and drawings, particularly as a pupil of the New South Wales Academy of Art. With the cessation of the Academy’s annual exhibitions, there would have been less opportunity to show his works, but this was the year that the Academy decided to establish the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

James W Sayer was not to experience that moment of triumph when the Art Gallery of New South Wales formally opened. Instead, he was transferred to Melbourne to receive additional training as Inspector’s Secretary in the Inspector and General Manager’s Department under Edwin Brett (1827–1884). Together with his wife Jane (also known as Jenny who he married in 1876), daughter Ada, and a nurse, the family arrived in Melbourne in August 1879 where Sayer focused primarily on his banking career.

He did, however, produce some artwork, amongst the most stunning items the 1880 Illuminated address to Edwin Brett, Esq [cat. no. 10], which was signed by staff from all of the London Chartered Bank’s Australian branches. The occasion was Brett’s resignation and impending return to London. In addition to classical figures and floral borders, the dedication page bore delicate, miniaturised watercolour vignettes of the interior of the Melbourne branch bank, Brett’s St Kilda mansion, Corinella, and views of London and Queenscliff. It was lauded as being “without exception, the daintiest and most delicate piece of illuminated writing and ornament that has yet been executed in this colony”.11

Sayer received several more commissions for illuminated addresses for leading citizens such as Lord Charles Robert Carrington, the Governor of New South Wales (1886), Sydney Congregational minister, Rev Joseph Francis Cullen (1886), the Sydney Branch Manager of the London Chartered Bank, Malcolm C Machardy (1888) and Queensland parliamentarian, Hon John Scott (1888).

James W Sayer spent approximately two years in the Inspector and General Manager’s Department before he was appointed as Accountant to the Bank’s Head Office in Sydney and moved into the Bank’s residential quarters. He was now a more experienced banker and, with that, the tentativeness that previously had been apparent with the presentation of his art, was replaced with a corresponding sense of technical confidence.
Sayer immediately immersed himself in the cultural life of Sydney joining the Masonic Hall that undertook fundraising activities such as the charity concerts that greatly appealed to both James and Jenny Sayer’s musical sensibilities. He also became a member of the Art Society of New South Wales (established 1880) and its honorary secretary the following year.

As a member, he could participate in the Society’s exhibitions. As secretary, he virtually organised the Society’s exhibitions. This included the 1884 black and white exhibition to which he contributed four monochromes: a pair of studies on Tuggerah Creek, NSW, A summer idyll and Glenrock Lagoon (now known as The lagoon—Glenrock or A southerly buster cat. no. 14), which reflected “considerable credit on the artist.” Sayer was no longer the student producing copies. Instead, he was willing to have his works judged purely on their own merits. He was well rewarded when his landscapes and seascapes proved popular and saleable. Although receiving less critical attention than some of his peers his works were appealing and “liberally supported by art admirers.”

As one critic so aptly noted, “His merits are modest, but enduring.”

His paintings, both oils and watercolours, depicted familiar locations around Sydney and popular holiday destinations that Sayer had visited such as Katoomba—a favourite place that he was to return to in later years, as seen in the impressionistic painting, Creek bend, Katoomba cat. no. 15. The works were informed by years of art lessons and were influenced by the artists around him. They were filled with light and space and a sense of joy as he sought to capture the scenes in front of him.

As secretary of the Art Society of New South Wales—which was trustee of the Art Gallery of New South Wales—Sayer was intimately involved in re-establishing the Gallery’s collection after a fire in 1882 destroyed the building in which it was housed as well as finding a new home for it. He participated in discussions on prospective designs for a purpose-built gallery on the present Domain site.

Before real progress was made, however, James W Sayer was promoted and transferred to Geelong as Manager of the London Chartered Bank in Malop Street. He had now reached the peak of his professional career, and would settle into this new position for the remainder of his working life.

Although he sent two paintings to the Art Society of New South Wales exhibition that year (Corio Bay—a Winter evening and The Gulf of Bridgewater) James W Sayer’s attention turned away from exhibiting his paintings and toward establishing a permanent art gallery in Geelong.

Having been so closely involved with that of New South Wales, and noting the recent openings of galleries in Ballarat (1884), Warrnambool (1886) and Bendigo (1887), he recognised the need for a similar institution in Victoria’s second largest city. Utilising his past experiences, he began agitating for a gallery, hoping that the 1892 Art Exhibition and Music Festival (which included his Corio Bay and Bridgewater views as well as A summer idyll in Kurrajong and Weeping rocks, Wentworth Falls) would succeed as well as the Sydney International Exhibition had.

However, it took another four years before the Geelong Art Gallery committee, of which Sayer was to be treasurer and then secretary as well as trustee, was formed. Four years later, largely through Sayer’s unrelenting efforts, a collection was formed and the Gallery was opened. Primarily a loan collection, Sayer acquired—through donation and purchase—several works by members of the artists’ societies in Sydney and Melbourne, namely WC Piguenit, John Mather, Frederick McCubbin, Walter Withers and Arthur Loureiro. He also contributed one of his own paintings, The Cowrie Pool, Torquay, a large work depicting the innocent play of four of his children cat. no. 34.
James W Sayer became closely involved in the design and planning of the permanent gallery building on its current site in Johnstone Park. Before construction began, however, he fell ill and, at the age of 66, died of Bright's disease in 1914. While he did not live to see the ultimate fruition of his endeavours, those closely associated with Sayer did not forget that he was the driving force behind the establishment and early growth of the Gallery and its collection. In obituaries, personal reminiscences and at the 1930 unveiling of the Memorial plaque to James Whitley Sayer it was acknowledged that “it was entirely owing to his efforts that the Geelong Art Gallery was established”.

George King (1872–1950), Principal of Gordon Technical College and former member of the Geelong Art Gallery committee, observed that “Mr Sayer was the life and soul of the Art Gallery movement” as well as an accomplished artist and that “of him it can truthfully be said that he gave of his time and talents for the beautification of the city which for so long esteemed him as one of its most worthy citizens.”

This retrospective exhibition, James Whitley Sayer 1847–1914, brings together a selection of his paintings, drawings, medals and illustrated works in celebration of his invaluable contribution to the development of art and art appreciation in Geelong.

Veronica Filmer
Exhibition curator, Geelong Gallery

1. Geelong Advertiser, 3 February 1930
2. James W Sayer was born in December 1847 in Redruth, Cornwall, which was one of several Cornish circuits to which his father had appointed.
3. After falling out with the Methodists in Ballarat and converting to the Congregational Church, under the guidance of Rev Jacob John Halley.
4. So too did his only surviving brother, William Thomas. Their youngest brother, Edward Arthur and converting to the Congregational Church, under the guidance of Rev Jacob John Halley.
5. AH Payne, Royal Dresden Gallery: Being a Selection of Subjects Engraved after Pictures by the Great Masters, D Appleton and Company, New York, 1800, vol. 2, pp. 98, 105 & 130 respectively. The Dunolly Library had opened in June 1866—only four months before the exhibition’s opening.
6. Sydney Morning Herald, 12 April 1875, p. 8
7. Sydney Morning Herald, 7 September 1871, p. 5
8. The London International Exhibition of 1873. The Victorian Exhibition Official Catalogue of Exhibits, Francis A Masterman, Melbourne, 1873, cat. no. 860. The book is now extremely rare, with only four known copies in existence: Museum Victoria, Melbourne; Mitchell Library, Sydney; and two private collections.
9. The Argus, 3 August 1874, p. 5
10. Sydney Morning Herald, 20 August 1878, p. 5
11. The Argus, 24 September 1880, p. 5
12. Jenny was an accomplished soprano and sung in many of the musical activities with which her husband was involved.
13. Sydney Morning Herald, 17 April 1884, p. 7
14. Sydney Morning Herald, 10 December 1887, p. 14
15. Sydney Morning Herald, 8 December 1887, p. 7
16. Sydney Morning Herald, 4 June 1887, p. 7. A number of designs were considered before that of Walter Vernon (1846–1914) was selected with the finished building opening in 1897.
17. It was located at the Town Hall for four months before finding a more suitable home at the Geelong Free Library.
19. The Argus, 9 February 1914, p. 9
20. Geelong Advertiser, 22 March 1920
First and foremost, I would like to thank Mrs Betty Cornford, the artist’s granddaughter, who began the journey into family history and the subsequent ‘rediscovery’ of James Whitley Sayer. I would also like to thank Norman Crossley, Sayer’s great grandson, who has carried on Betty’s work and who, with the same passion, energy and dedication of his forebear, has made this exhibition possible.

I would like to thank all other descendants of James W Sayer who have honoured his memory by preserving his works of art and who, with Norman’s assistance, have generously had their inherited paintings, watercolours and drawings cleaned, conserved and, in many cases, reframed for this exhibition as well as to ensure that they can be handed on to future generations.

My thanks also to the other lenders to the exhibition who have kindly allowed their works to be included in the exhibition. These include Peter Watts and Sandra Cunningham; Moorabool Antique Gallery; Museum Victoria; and the Bailieu Library Collection, The University of Melbourne.

I would like to express my appreciation to John Perry and Sara Keranen whose combined efforts in conserving and framing have given Sayer’s works of art a new lease of life.

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Veronica Filmer

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EXHIBITION CURATOR Veronica Filmer
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Geelong Gallery
Little Malop Street
Geelong Victoria 3220
Telephone 03 5229 3645
Email geelart@geelonggallery.org.au
www.geelonggallery.org.au

COVER James W Sayer
The Cowrie Pool, Torquay (detail) c. 1896
oil on canvas
92.7 x 134.7
Collection: Geelong Gallery
Gift of the artist, 1902