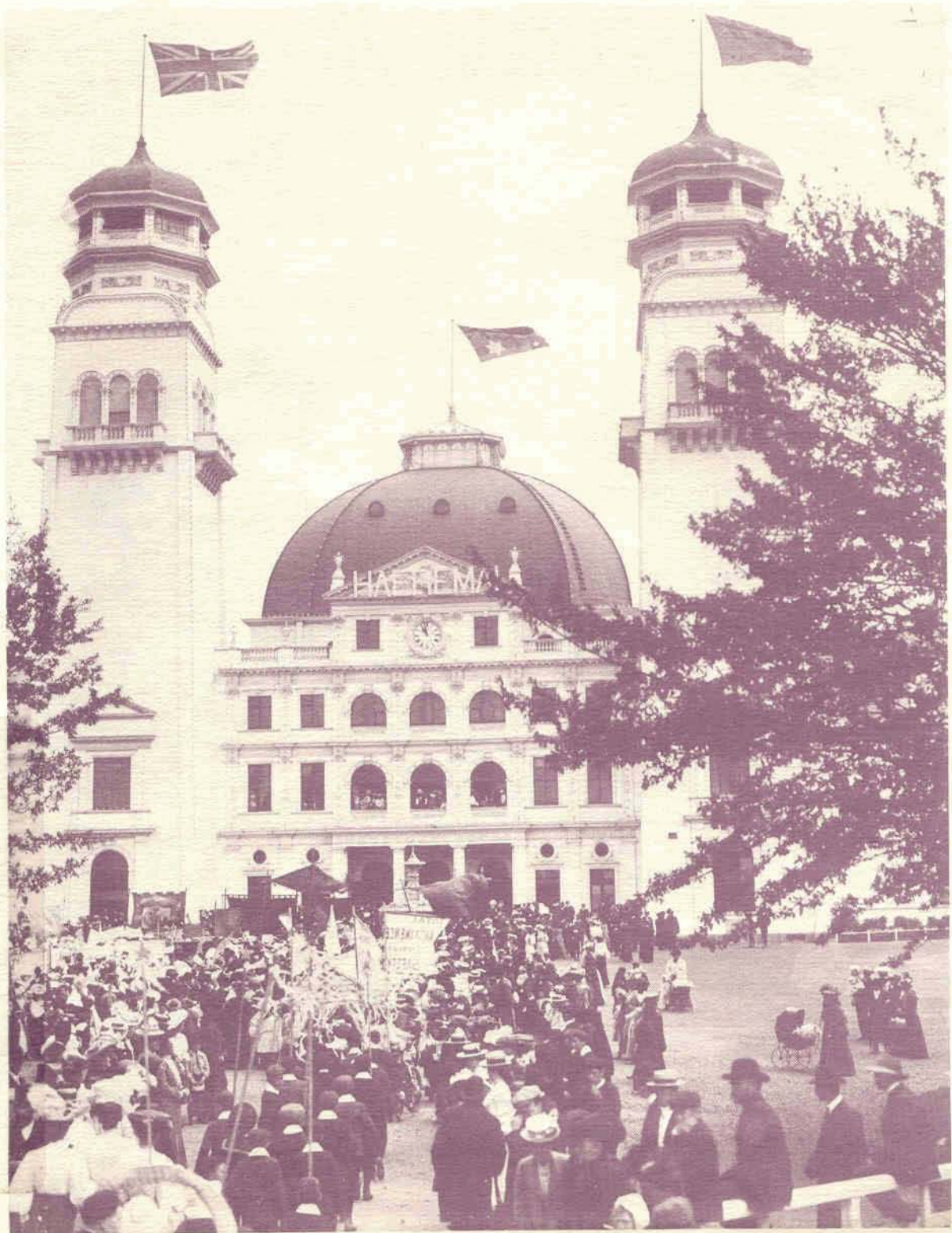


*It is a pleasure to be in
England*



Oh, to be in England

Exhibitions from Home

On the first of November, 1906 The New Zealand International Exhibition opened. The ceremony was triumphantly conducted in a specially constructed pavilion in Hagley Park, Christchurch. The Rt Hon Lord Plunket, KCVO, Governor General of New Zealand and Patron of the Exhibition gave an opening address in which he proclaimed "... that there is rising here a young nation, which, though furthest from the Mother Country, and nine hundred miles from her nearest neighbour, is British in thought and blood, happy and prosperous, standing only on the threshold of her splendid future."¹

Appropriately, the British Government Exhibit was one of the largest at the exhibition; the fine arts section featured photography, architectural studies, engravings, drawings, etchings, miniatures, watercolours, oil paintings and a wide variety of arts and crafts. New Zealand, a Britain of the south seas was studiously importing culture that had been left at Home — Oh to be in England, or to transport England here.

In his rallying speech Sir Joseph Ward KCMG, Premier of New Zealand and President of the Exhibition demanded that "New Zealanders ought to toe the mark and not allow these pictures to be sold and leave our shores."² Establishing art collections for public edification was seen as the philanthropic duty of New Zealand citizens. Art schools and art societies were developing throughout the country, but with only local resources to hand a feeling of inadequacy pervaded — it was hard to teach students to paint if there were no examples of 'good' painting to study.

The New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts (established 1882) was eagerly collecting works for the national collection which were given to the National Art Gallery in 1936. The Academy purchased a small number of paintings from the International Exhibition held in Christchurch, and in 1912 went on to organise its own exhibition of British art in Wellington — The Baillie Exhibition.

A vacant Harbour Board shed (foreshadowing Shed 11) was converted into a gallery for the Baillie Exhibition and "artistically draped".³ This created an atmosphere suitable for viewing the 400 British artworks which had been shipped out to Wellington. The Academy had initiated the event and John Baillie "an old Wellington boy and member of our society", then living in London directing the Baillie Gallery, selected the pieces.⁴

As with the Christchurch exhibition New Zealanders were exhorted to purchase these fine paintings. The sum of £1,000 was promised for the

purchase of art by the Wellington City Council if £5,000 was raised by public donations. The Academy's minutes record their determination to "spare no effort to raise the requisite amount."⁵ Their fundraising campaign was extremely successful; prior to the exhibition opening they had already raised £833.

The Victorian View

The works imported for these colonial exhibitions reflected middle class Victorian taste: nothing was particularly extreme or avant-garde. Some of the artists had exhibited at the Royal Academy, a bastion of the establishment and many of the works were by lesser known artists who perhaps didn't have the market they desired in Britain.

"Truth, Sentiment and Health were the standards by which Victorian art was judged by its contemporaries from the very beginning of the Queen's reign through into the new century."⁶ The three concepts were closely bound together. Sentiment was the touchstone for the viewer as it facilitated that magic moment of comprehension and empathy which opened an image to the popular imagination. The Victorian notion of right and wrong, the prevalent Protestant morality which the middle class upheld and cultivated, ensured that Victorian art was fit for consumption. Underlying such concerns for a healthy public morality was the concept of 'truth': truth to God's creation, to the natural and proper order of things.

As art became a more popular domain the aristocratic preference for art drawn from Latin culture no longer dominated. The literate middle classes became the consumers of culture; many of the captains of industry became major collectors. Accordingly, art reflected the concerns and desires of this clientele.

The era was one of optimism and expansion. A large and fruitful Empire and increasing industrialisation gave the British wealth and confidence. The Victorians were at the centre of a world which lay before them, its history and its contemporaneity equally vulnerable to the diverse desires of Victorian taste.

This was also a time of considerable philosophical change. Many fundamental tenets and beliefs were challenged as new concepts were discussed. An information explosion occurred with the publication of numerous newspapers and pamphlets expressing opinions and giving facts about everything — from royalty and the railways to politics and art. In 1859 Fitzgerald's edition of *The Rubaiyat of Omar*

Khayyam, Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* and John Stuart Mill's *Essay on Liberty* were all published. Darwin's work, refuting the literal truth of Genesis, shocked devout believers and scientists alike, yet it raised and reinforced the doubts of many. Mill's essay, from a similarly radical stance, questioned the structures of society, championing individual rights over the demands of conformity. Intellectual inquiry threatened the Victorian moral code which was reinforced in art through cosy vernacular imagery.

From the National Collection

A anecdotal sentimental imagery was popular. Frederick Hall's *The result of high living* exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1892 and purchased from the Christchurch Exhibition, exemplifies these qualities. An old man scrutinises his medicine bottles watched by an ailing pathetic King Charles spaniel, a victim of indulgence. This moralising tone would have appealed to the Victorian sense of propriety, yet also hints at its reverse, a delightful forbidden decadence.

An autumn idyll by Paul Davis and *Far and away* by Alfred Carlton Smith now appear trite, yet such sweet scenes of melancholy maidens were very

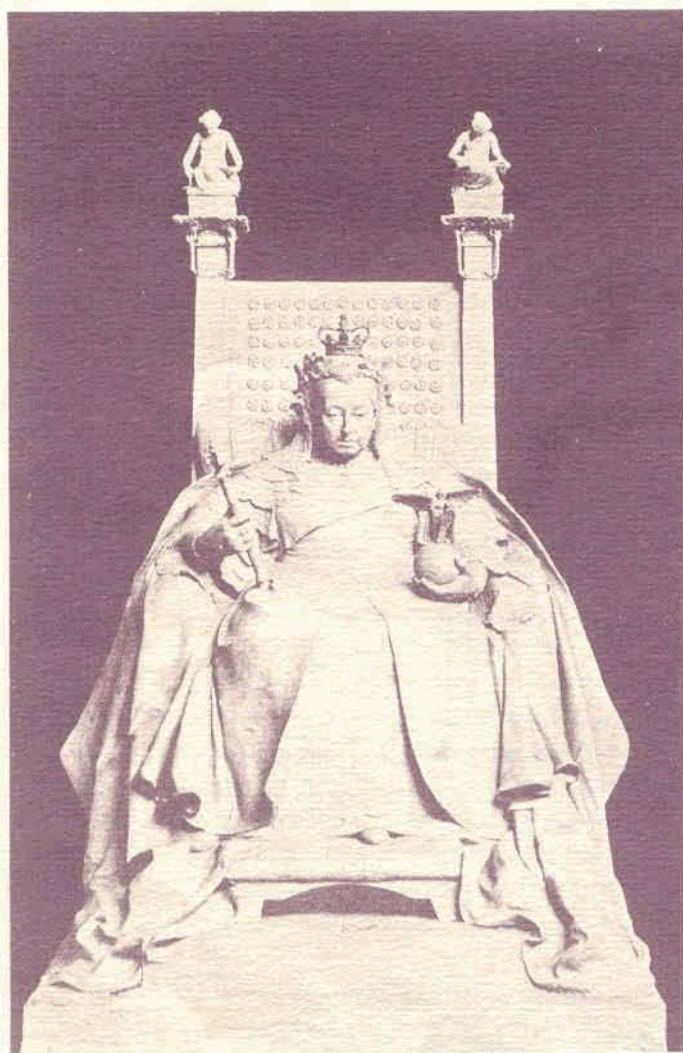
popular. Similar gauche sensibilities can be seen in the affecting impoverishment of *The dying horse* by Edward Ward and *The young gleaner* by H. Hobson. *His only pair* by Frederick Bauhoff tells yet another tale of woe as a poverty stricken mother is reduced to darning her son's only pair of socks.

Many of these works rely upon the representation of forlorn females to create this unabashed sentimentality. Although it is a cruel world which confines young women to kitchens, or flower factories, the artists emphasize how sweet they look when working hard yet remaining powerless. Poverty is a handmaiden of morality: the lot of poor pretty women may now seem a little hard to bear yet was quite proper to the Victorian mind.

A counterpart to this image is the woman of mystery, beauty and religious ecstasy: a manufactured image of male fantasy and desire. At the forefront of this perception and portrayal of women were the painters of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of which Sir Edward Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti were founding members. *Pomona* and *Flora* are embroidered copies of Burne-Jones tapestries portraying beautiful unobtainable Greek goddesses. Rossetti's *Design for a stained glass window* portrays Mary, the highest, most virginal woman of the Christian tradition. Frank Craig's *Goblin market* was



British art exhibit New Zealand International Exhibition
Christchurch 1906-7.



George Frampton, Jubilee monument to Queen Victoria for Calcutta, 1897-1901. From *Studio* July 1898, Vol. 14, p. 121.

painted earlier this century in a last burst of Pre-Raphaelitism and exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1911. A poem by Christina Rossetti, the artist's sister, first published in 1862, provides the subject matter for this work. *Head* by Simeon Solomon and *St. Christina* by Sir George Frampton clearly show the influence of Pre-Raphaelitism in their mystical presentation of women.

Neo-Classicism was another concern of many artists during the eclectic Victorian era. It was the high art of Victorian taste. Greek and Roman subjects were painted with all due dignity, gravity and nudity. *Asterié* by Sir Edward Poynter exemplifies this style of titillating grandeur portraying one of the countless maidens pursued by Zeus. Poynter was President of the Royal Academy when this work was painted assuring it of establishment approval. *Asterié* was bought privately from the exhibition in Christchurch and later given to the National Art Gallery.

Almost fifty works were purchased from the Baillie Exhibition for the National Collection, the majority of them from public subscription and many from particular organisations:

Will no one marry me by William Mouat Loudon was the gift of R. Hannah and Co., now Hannah's Footwear Retailers

His only pair by Bauhoff was suitably gifted by the Union Clothing Company.

The flower makers of Clerkenwell by Samuel Melton Fisher was the gift of Levin and Co., a large importing firm.

Other donors were:

The primary schools of Wellington

The officers of the New Zealand Railways

The residents of Masterton district

The Wellington Industrial Association

The staff of the Post and Telegraph Department

The Evening Post

The Wellington Savage Club

The Wellington Chamber of Commerce

The Wellington branch of the NZ Institute of Architects

An extraordinary public involvement in these large scale events resulted in huge records of attendance. Popular cynicism had not yet undermined widespread interest in formal organised spectacle. The organisers of the Baillie Exhibition even discussed special arrangements "for bringing country people to town to view the exhibition" with the Minister of Railways.⁷ The Christchurch exhibition had visitors totalling 1,970,000, an astounding figure considering that the population of New Zealand was only 975,000. ('Te Maori' the most recent event of national acclaim had visitors totalling just over 750,000, less than half the Christchurch figure).

An interest in culture reflects the well being and maturity of a society, and many New Zealanders were painfully aware that we had little European culture to speak of. Now that farms had been established and refrigeration of beef and butter on the liner *Home* perfected, it was time to pay more attention to the realm of Art. New Zealanders were ready and willing to import these symbols of civilisation and establish an outpost of culture.

1. Compiled by I. Spielmann *The British Government Exhibit at the New Zealand International Exhibition 1906-1907*. London, 1908, p. 21.

2. *ibid* p. 23.

3. *The New Zealand Times*. 20 April 1912.

4. Letter from Secretary NZAFA 29 March 1915.

5. Minutes of NZAFA Council Meeting 10 April 1912.

6. R. Treble *Great Victorian Pictures*. Arts Council of Great Britain 1978, p. 7.

7. *The New Zealand Times*. *op cit*.

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Trainee Curator
January 1988

Cover illustration:

Exhibition Pavilion of the New Zealand International Exhibition Christchurch 1906-7 Alexander Turnbull Library.