

# Darwin's legacy down under

## Reframing Darwin: Evolution and Art in Australia

Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, Australia

Until 1 November

Australia's unusual fauna and flora, encountered by Charles Darwin during his eagerly anticipated visit of 1836, surely influenced his evolutionary thoughts. Yet writing in his *Journal of Researches* (later known as *Voyage of the Beagle*), he focused more on Australia's human inhabitants — its convicts, settlers and Aboriginal people — than on its natural history. Nevertheless, as the exhibition *Reframing Darwin* at the Ian Potter Museum of Art in Melbourne shows, Darwin's legacy for science and art in Australia is great.

The exhibition includes diverse pieces, from fine images of HMS *Beagle* and Australia at the time of Darwin's visit, to a turn-of-the-century undergraduate exam paper containing a question about Darwinian concepts — set at the University of Melbourne by Walter Baldwin Spencer, who was appointed foundation chair of biology in 1887. Tom Roberts's powerful portrait *Aboriginal Head—Charlie Turner* (1892) conveys great emotion, which was unusual for its time, and may have been a response to Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. Other artworks include Emmanuel Frémiet's shocking bronze statue *Gorilla Carrying Off a Woman* — a gift in 1907 from the artist to the National Gallery of Victoria — that is juxtaposed in the gallery with Julie

Rap's unsettling digital pictures of women's bodies that have been enhanced to comment on Darwin's theory of sexual selection.

Also displayed are several works by Syms Covington, Darwin's servant aboard the *Beagle*. In a letter to his sister, Darwin offers a brief and unflattering description of Covington, who was a potential witness to the evolution of Darwin's key idea. This characterization inspired the embryo of *Mr Darwin's Shooter* (Random House, 1998), the critically acclaimed novel by Australian author Roger McDonald, which places the challenging idea of natural selection in exquisite perspective.

The precise layout of the *Beagle* is recorded in Philip Gidley King's ink sketches of the upper, lower and quarterdeck. King, an Australian-born midshipman who served aboard the vessel, drew them from memory when he was 73. His sketches were used by a Melbourne craftsman to build an exact and finely crafted replica of Darwin's modest cabin — 2.7 metres wide by 1.5 metres deep by 1.8 metres high — a workspace that Darwin shared with King, John Lort Stokes and hundreds of books.

*Reframing Darwin* highlights two watercolours of the *Beagle* in the imposing Chilean landscape of Valparaíso Bay. Originally attributed to artist Conrad Martens who joined the ship at Montevideo in Uruguay, inconsistencies in the palette and composition had long puzzled art historians. However, recent auctions in Santiago and London of pictures by the little-known English artist Carlos Chatworthy

Wood Taylor, also known as Charles C. Wood, suggested that the watercolours are the work of Wood, who lived in Chile for some 30 years. It remains unclear why *Beagle* captain Robert FitzRoy commissioned them.

Shown for the first time in public are ten watercolours by Louisa Anne Meredith, who was born in Birmingham, UK, in 1812 and migrated to Australia in 1839. Meredith is best known for her botanical illustrations, so the vivid images of Tasmanian fish are a surprise. The paintings' extraordinary detail challenges the view that nineteenth-century female illustrators merely pursued the picturesque. Colonial artists such as Meredith made a substantial contribution to our early understanding of Australian natural history by enhancing the lifeless specimen collections with living images. Meredith corresponded with many scientists, including the botanist

Joseph Hooker who was a friend of Darwin, and became a respected authority on Tasmanian natural history. It is remarkable that these lovely paintings have been hidden away for so long.

Colonial Tasmania's sorry history with Aboriginal people did not pass unnoticed by Darwin, who anticipated the decline in the indigenous population. Five haunting monochrome watercolours of Tasmanian Aboriginals, painted by Thomas Boch in 1837, the year after Darwin's visit, reflect a respect by the artist that contrasts with the distasteful popular views of that time. Tom Roberts's portraits of Aboriginals echo a similar sensitivity.

For those who miss this terrific exhibition, its themes are explored in a beautifully illustrated book by Jeanette Hoorn that also serves as a catalogue (*Reframing Darwin*, Miegunyah Press; 2009). It includes a biography of Baldwin Spencer, arguably Australia's first evolutionary biologist, and explains what compelled Frémiet to create his bizarre and compelling *Gorilla*. We also learn that Darwin's apparent indifference to collecting Australian flora and fauna was not down to a lack of time or interest, but to the fact that French naturalists had already done so.

Darwin's new framework for understanding life generated vigorous debate among scholars of science and letters at the time. *Reframing Darwin* stimulates that discussion once more.

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Darwin200



Augustus Earle's 1826 painting of Australia's Blue Mountains — where Darwin walked a decade later.

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