

IS THE NEXT INIGO JONES LOOKING AT YOUR LIBRARY RIGHT NOW?

In 1853, when Joseph Reed won a competition to design the Melbourne Public Library, his drawings evoked the grandeur of Britain's great buildings. While the recreation of British authority and culture in Melbourne may have been his intent, his designs have their true origins in the architecture of antiquity, transplanted into Britain via an unlikely route—tourism.

The Melbourne Public Library became the State Library of Victoria and today people stream through Reed's great portico at its entrance. The library bears the unmistakable hallmarks of his English heritage and influences, most strongly that of British architect Inigo Jones who brought Italianate Renaissance design to England two centuries earlier. Jones, while travelling in Italy, observed buildings created by the Venetian architect Palladio, whose sixteenth-century buildings were, in turn, strongly influenced by classical temple architecture of the ancient Greeks and Romans.

When Jones first encountered Palladio's work he was on what TV personality Kevin McCloud describes as the seventeenth-century equivalent of the gap year, - arguably the first great tourist route - the 'Grand Tour'. Here wealthy young Englishmen immersed themselves in European culture, eating the food, listening to the music, viewing the art of classical antiquity and great works of the Renaissance and generally having a pretty good time. It was an educational and recreational rite of passage for generations. A star attraction of The Grand Tour was the Tribuna of the Uffizi in Florence (now part of the Uffizi Gallery). Here the tourists found outstanding High Renaissance paintings and Roman sculptures that would inspire their own creations. This collection of works could not be seen anywhere else in the world. It was a unique experience.

In his essay *Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) the English philosopher John Locke argued that the human mind is a blank page on which experience writes the chapters of knowledge. Who we are, indeed who we are to become, he asserted, can be explained by our worldly experiences. For the Grand Tourists, experiencing Paris, Florence, Rome and Venice in person allowed new chapters of their lives to be written. I believe people travel for similar reasons today—to say I was there, I saw it, I felt it, I tasted it and now I understand. Is the State Library of Victoria a place that needs to be experienced to be understood? Could it be part of a modern Australian Grand Tour?

Last year, while helping a TV crew film Ned Kelly's armour, I was approached by a man from Swan Hill. He had travelled to Melbourne with his son, "to see Ned". They had both read Kelly's *Jerilderie Letter* when a library tour brought it to their home town and now they wanted to see more. I asked the man why it was important for him to see the armour in person. "It's our history—there's only one Ned Kelly," he said as his son pointed at the armour, desperate for his father to join him. He's right of course. There is only one Ned Kelly. He's dead. What the man and his son had come to see was the bullet-proof evidence that

Ned was real—something more than a tale, more than a myth. They had to experience it for themselves.

Kelly's armour is part of the State Library's own Tribuna of the Uffizi: our galleries exhibit treasures ancient, beautiful and historically significant. In a balcony surrounding the breathtaking La Trobe Reading Room sits a cuneiform tablet from 2050 BCE. It marks the beginning of an exhibition celebrating the history of the book. A few steps further and three thousand years later are priceless medieval manuscripts decorated with gold and silver, labours of devotion perhaps years in the making. Further still lies an artist book, each page meticulously crafted and beautifully bound, to be viewed with the same gaze we reserve for Leonardo, Raphael and Michelangelo. One floor above live the last notes of Burke and Wills, scribbled faintly in pencil by the dying explorers. Across the hall hangs Hoddle's chain used to measure and mark out Melbourne's streets and, below it, daguerreotype images of Victoria's early settlers. The treasures housed under our great Dome are the unique collections of this library, gathered and displayed to communicate a story told nowhere else.

What will our Grand Tourists take away from this? What chapters of their lives will be written by the experience? In an almost invisible ribbon of words surrounding the La Trobe Reading Room is a quote from René Descartes, "The reading of all good books is like a conversation with the finest men of past centuries."

I believe that sentiment extends to the buildings, the artworks and treasured objects housed alongside the books in this library. The personal experience of this may be nothing more than a souvenir of a day well spent. But somewhere amongst our visitors is another Palladio, Jones or Reed, drawing on the past to build the future. It is an enterprise worth supporting.

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*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

"Little Gidding", T.S. Eliot

Editor's note: Has the mouthwatering array of treasures described here reminded you of other glorious or quirky collections? Tell us where they are -December INCITE will be featuring treasures and special collections. Email incite@alia.org.au.

