

Australia and Britannia

A tale of two statues

Bethany Holland

This is a brief history of two sculptures that outlived the building they originally decorated and the bank that commissioned them. The two statues, *Australia* and *Britannia*, have been known by different names and have had a number of different locations. However, their original home was two arched niches on the façade of the Union Bank of Australia building. The bank was located at 351 Collins Street, between Elizabeth Street and Queen Street, where the former Stock Exchange building now stands. Although the main bank building was designed by Australian architects Smith and Johnson in 1877, responsibility for the important façade was assigned to London architect John MacVicar Anderson (1835–1915).¹ An important element of Anderson's vision was the inclusion of Classical statues on the exterior and interior of the building.

Anderson's original intention was to have two marble sculptures stationed inside the bank, and two more statues on the exterior.² Correspondence from John McMullen, inspector and general manager of the Union Bank of Australia, advocated that the statues be made from bronze, noting in 1877 that 'unfortunately we have an unruly class here called "Larrikins" who would delight in doing them injury—Bronze is the only suitable material'.³



Opposite: Wolfgang Sievers (photographer), ANZ Bank, 351–357 Collins Street, Melbourne, 1957, gelatin silver print, 24.5 × 20.0 cm. H99.50/104, Wolfgang Sievers Collection, Pictures Collection, State Library Victoria.

Below: Robert Jackson, *Australia* (left), and *Britannia* (right), commissioned c. 1879, limestone, 246 × 85 × 56 cm and 253 × 112 × 59 cm respectively. 1966.015.001.002, gift of the Australian and New Zealand Bank, Collins Street, Melbourne, 1966, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Here they are photographed before treatment, situated in the lower level of the Melbourne School of Design building, University of Melbourne.

But the board of the bank intervened, deciding the statues were to be made from 'fine Portland stone' for £280, and that only the two external statues were to be commissioned.⁴ Thus *Australia* and *Britannia* (illustrated right) were created in England by London sculptor Robert Jackson (active c. 1861–1900). While they certainly served a decorative purpose, their names, which are mentioned in the bank's correspondence, demonstrate that they were also emblematic.⁵

The statues' symbolism

The iconography of the sculptures identifies them as allegorical representations. The *Britannia* statue, bearing a shield, helmet and breastplate, follows the female personification of Britain established since the 18th century, which also featured on Britain's lowest-denomination coin, the halfpenny.⁶ The second statue is interesting because her two main motifs identify her as the Greek goddess Tyche, commonly depicted carrying a cornucopia and wearing a castle-shaped crown.⁷ Tyche was the Greek equivalent of the Roman deity Fortuna, and was also considered the protector of cities.⁸ She had been used to symbolise New South Wales in the decoration of the General Post

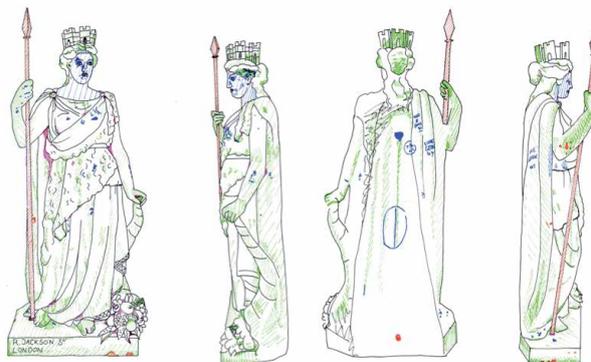


Office building in Sydney.⁹ Australia, unlike Britain, lacked a codified Classical representation; this attempt to construct one could be viewed as an effort to mould Australia in Britain's image. Additionally, both

sculptures were direct products of Australia's early 'cultural cringe'; McMullen argued that the statues for the bank 'must come from London as no good works of art can be obtained here'.¹⁰

Top: Bethany Holland, Diagram and key charting changes to *Australia* and *Britannia* since their creation, 2015.

Below: *Australia* statue holding inserted glass of drink during an opening celebration for the Melbourne School of Design building in 2015. Photograph by J. Turner.



Installation at 351 Collins Street

Although the Union Bank building was finished in 1880, the two statues may not have been installed until 1905, when a third storey was added.¹¹ Ultimately, despite the artworks' rich symbolism, Anderson's original vision was gradually superseded as the two statues became accepted and assimilated into everyday life at the bank. Each statue received a nickname, being fondly named after the wives of the bank's state and national managers:¹² *Britannia* was denoted 'Ada' and *Australia* was dubbed 'Elsie'.¹³ In 1951 the Union Bank became the Australia and New Zealand Bank (ANZ), but the statues' nicknames endured. When the ANZ newsletter, *Chequerboard*, reported on the statues' removal, the 'ladies' were exclusively referred to as Ada and Elsie, demonstrating the evolution of the sculptures' meaning.¹⁴

Removal from Collins Street

In 1962, ANZ decided to demolish the old Union Bank building, raising the question of the fate of the façade and sculptures.¹⁵ The professor of architecture at the University of Melbourne, Brian Lewis, suggested the university's new Architecture Building (which Lewis designed) as a home for the two statues,¹⁶ and they

were relocated in July 1966.¹⁷ During the process *Britannia's* trident and *Australia's* spear were removed and lost. As well as the statues, the university gained six Corinthian capitals from the façade.¹⁸ The statues were installed on the ground level of the Architecture Building, while the capitals were placed on the university's South Lawn.¹⁹ Recent research by masters student Jasper Coleman contends that two additional decorative elements of cherubim, originally located on the exterior of the second storey, were also preserved and are presently located at the university's Werribee campus.²⁰ The remaining façade was demolished, with the Stock Exchange being subsequently constructed on the site.²¹

Life at the University of Melbourne

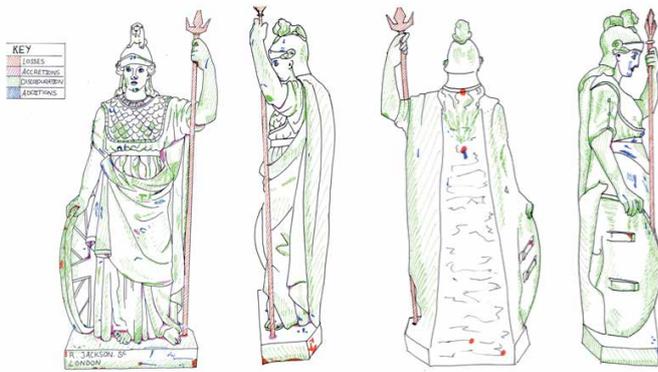
Both statues remained on the ground level of the Architecture Building, one at each end of the foyer, until 2012.²² They were easily accessible and were often the victims of student pranks; during conservation treatment, we found residues of makeup, bubble-gum and graffiti on both works.²³ The statues' titles once again changed, with the sculptures being catalogued as 'Britannia' and 'Goddess' in the university's

records.²⁴ In 2012, the Architecture Building was demolished, at which time the statues were crated up and removed. During construction of the Melbourne School of Design building, the statues were placed in the basement level, and the building was erected around them. They are now permanently located in the basement level, outside one of the major lecture theatres.

2015 conservation project

Decades of exposure to Melbourne's elements before 1966 left general weathering on both sculptures. Years





Below: Part of *Australia's* lower arm, before and after conservation treatment, 2015. Photograph by Eamonn Jackson.

of open display at the university also left their mark (literally). The faces are believed to have had ‘makeup’ applied to them, presumably as a prank, and even in their new location have had items placed in their hands (see opposite). The diagram above charts the extent of surface change that had occurred on both statues over their lifetimes. In 2015, the two statues underwent conservation treatment by a team of six students from the university’s Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation. The intention was not to return the statues to their original condition, but to restore their aesthetic coherency. Ultimately that meant reducing the visual obtrusiveness of black crust and general staining. Every mark on the two statues attested to some part of their fascinating story and, therefore, the decision to remove any evidence was carefully considered and documented.

The statues’ indoor location and the limited budget for the project eliminated many treatment steps commonly taken to preserve stone, such as laser cleaning.²⁵ For this reason we used other methods. One technique we tested was poulticing, which involves wetting the stone and then applying a moist substance, such as clay or pulp, imbued with

chemicals. As the poultice dries, the dirt is drawn out of the stone and into the poultice by capillary action.²⁶ A specific poultice recipe, called *Mora*, was used on *Britannia's* shield. However, as the site had no water access or drains, it was difficult to control the removal of the *Mora* paste. So we decided that mechanical cleaning was the most effective method. The image below shows the area on *Australia* where graffiti was gently removed with a scalpel, but the majority of the treatment involved lessening the discolouration with conservation-grade erasers.²⁷

Another important aspect of the conservation project was recontextualising the artworks. Close inspection of the plinths revealed the inscription *R. JACKSON. Sc. / LONDON*, which had been obscured by the darkening of the stone. The University of Melbourne had little information on either sculpture except their previous location,²⁸ and ANZ records had the sculptor incorrectly listed as H. Jackson. Research revealed an identical inscription on a bust of the Hon. Alexander Francis Henry Campbell in the collection of the Victoria and





Britannia's eyes, shown before, during and after conservation treatment, 2015. Staedtler Mars, Generals Gum and Xyron Adhesive erasers were used to reduce discolouration. Photographs by Bethany Holland.

Albert Museum in London, which was firmly attributed to Robert Jackson. This consequently allowed the conservation team to make a confident attribution of Jackson as the sculptor of both *Britannia* and *Australia*.

Continuing legacy

The Melbourne School of Design could never have crossed architect John MacVicar Anderson's mind as the resting place for his two limestone statues. But their reinvention and assimilation into multiple sites and communities attests to their artistic appeal. We hope that in the near future text panels will be displayed with the two sculptures, describing their significance and colourful history. Both statues are important pieces of evidence, reflecting early colonial tastes and attitudes, as well as attesting to the ways students interact with art, from unfortunate pranks to conservation study and treatment. They deserve to be protected and promoted in their new setting.

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Bethany Holland recently graduated as a Master of Cultural Materials Conservation from the University of Melbourne. She was a member of the student conservation team that treated *Australia* and *Britannia* in 2015 and is seeking to further her experience in conserving stone objects.

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- 10 McMullen to Mewburn, 10 July 1877.
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- 27 Coleman et al., 'Minor treatment report', pp. 6–7.
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