John Shirlow
The pioneering traditionalist

Emily Wubben

Melbourne-born etcher John Shirlow (1869–1936) made a significant contribution to the development of etching in Australia. The prints by Shirlow held in the University of Melbourne's cultural collections provide a representative overview of his work. I had the opportunity to examine these as the recipient of the university's 2015 Ursula Hoff Fellowship, which supports academic research in printmaking and is funded by the bequest of the eminent curator and art historian Dr Ursula Hoff AO OBE (1909–2005). My investigation into the subject matter, history and acquisition of the university's prints by John Shirlow inspired the following article.

John Shirlow: the pioneer

John Shirlow was born in Sunbury, Victoria, on 13 December 1869. It was as a student at the National Gallery School in Melbourne from 1890 to 1895 that Shirlow received his first impetus to etch. The National Gallery of Victoria's (NGV) historic and well-documented acquisition in 1891–92 of 19th-century prints by Charles Meryon, James McNeill Whistler and Francis Seymour Haden, as well as Old Master prints by Dürer, Rembrandt and van Dyck, made a strong impression on Shirlow, who then set out to make etchings

of his own.[1] Undeterred by the lack of technical knowledge and public interest in etching in Australia at the time, Shirlow visited the Public Library (now State Library Victoria) and borrowed P.G. Hamerton's instructive volume *Etching and etchers* (London, 1868). Shirlow then built a printing press and tools and prepared his own etching ground and varnishes.[2]

From these beginnings Shirlow went on to make etching the focus of his artistic career, becoming a key figure in Australia's painter-etcher movement, which had begun to emerge in the 1880s.[3] The 'painter-etchers' produced prints as original works of art, in contrast with skilled artisans interpreting the work of others in reproductive prints, or early colonial lithographers and etchers whose works were primarily documentary in purpose.[4]

Shirlow first exhibited in 1895, with the Victorian Artists' Society. One of his earliest prints, *Prince's Bridge* (1895),[5] is in the University of Melbourne Art Collection (managed by the Ian Potter Museum of Art). Also titled *The riverside*, it depicts a panoramic view of the bridge as seen from the banks of the Yarra River (see inside back cover). A boat is moored at the water's edge, the bridge is periodically punctuated with its

decorative lamp posts, and the scene, devoid of figures, is still and tranquil. Shirlow's crisp, linear definition of detail is reminiscent of Whistler's *The Thames set*, which Shirlow had seen at the NGV. Whistler produced evocative images of the Thames, celebrating the realism of the sometimes derelict, overcrowded buildings that framed London's waterway.

Prince's Bridge was lauded by fellow artists, such as Lionel Lindsay, who viewed it as among Shirlow's 'finest plates'.[6] In 1920 Robert Henderson Croll, a writer and friend of Shirlow, described it as a 'successful endeavour to deal with an architectural structure from a decorative standpoint'.[7] The university purchased this print in 1987, thereby securing a work dating from Shirlow's initial endeavours in printmaking and one that received high praise throughout his career.

Shirlow was acclaimed for his instrumental role in inspiring fellow artists to take up etching. Indeed, Lionel Lindsay acknowledged his influence by proclaiming, 'I owe to Shirlow the first impetus to etch … [M]y student's mind was struck by the fact that etchings could actually be made in Australia'.[8] In 1904 Shirlow issued the first portfolio of etchings by a painter-etcher ever published in Australia, whereby, according to

the critic William Moore in 1909, Shirlow was 'continuing the role of pioneer'.[9] Limited to an edition of 25, each with a red monogram and ribbon binding, *Five etchings*, which included *Prince's Bridge*, was aimed at rare book aficionados and received praise in London's *Studio* magazine.[10]

Shirlow's love of Melbourne

Shirlow was best known for his city scenes, primarily depicting Melbourne. He represented Melbourne's architecture, laneways, bustling streets and the Yarra River. According to Lionel Lindsay, writing for *Art in Australia* in 1916, 'of all the artists, great and small, that Melbourne has produced, I know of none that has penetrated this character [of Melbourne] so surely as John Shirlow'.[11] Although depicting the 'character' of Melbourne, Shirlow's scenes reveal the influence of his European predecessors, from whom he and his fellow Australian printmakers drew inspiration. Irena Zdanowicz, former senior curator of prints and drawings at the NGV, described how Meryon's influence is evident in the pinched narrowness, exaggerated height and clearly articulated shadows of Shirlow's city laneway scenes.[12] One such example is *The Victorian Railways Building from Flinders Lane* (1919) in the

Baillieu Library Print Collection (pictured right). In this carefully composed vignette, city buildings tower over the laneway, framing the narrow scene and directing attention towards the sun-drenched Flinders Street Station in the distance.

Shirlow sought out laneways, courtyards, doorways and arches, presenting glimpses of everyday scenes from an artistic viewpoint. In his popular etching of Melbourne's General Post Office (1919) (see p. 32), Shirlow focused on the decorative detail of the cast-iron archway, rather than on the post office itself. The etching has distinct contrasts between light and dark, with clear articulation of shadows in the archway, compared to the softer grey tones of the surrounding facade and the buildings in the distance. The human figures indicate the archway's grand scale, while their casual poses suggest an everyday street scene.

The print is inscribed in the artist's hand: 'To P. Serle / with regards'. Percival Serle (1871–1951) was a member of the University of Melbourne's administrative staff between 1910 and 1920. From 1924 to 1926 he worked at the NGV, cataloguing collections, and from 1933 to 1936 served as curator of its decorative arts collection.[13] Serle's career intersected with Shirlow's, as

Shirlow was an assistant examiner for drawing at the university (appointed in 1913), an NGV trustee (1922–36), and a member of the NGV's Felton Bequest Committee (1933–36).[14]

It is unclear exactly when and why Shirlow gave this particular print to Serle. In 1947 Serle presented works to the University of Melbourne's newly established Mildura branch to decorate the walls of the student union;[15] notes in this print's acquisition file suggest that it may have been among them. The branch closed in 1949 and presumably the print was returned to Serle. At some point it passed to Ursula Hoff, who in 1943 was appointed assistant keeper of prints and drawings at the NGV. By the time of her retirement in 1973 she was assistant director. Hoff moved to London in 1975 as advisor to the Felton Bequest Committee. In the intervening year, 1974, she presumably reviewed her personal art collection and this may have led her to give the print to the university, where she had lectured in the Fine Arts Department since the 1940s.[16] Regardless of the possible Mildura link, what can be confirmed is that this print was given by the artist to Percival Serle, and at some point it passed to Hoff, who presented it to the university.

In a similar manner to Shirlow's depiction of the post office, a decorative archway serves as the architectural backdrop in Shirlow's print *Eastern Market* (opposite). Established in 1847, the Eastern Market, also known as Paddy's Market,

was located at the corner of Bourke and Exhibition streets. In 1960 the building was demolished and the site was sold.[17] In Shirlow's scene a horse and cart speak of a past era, as does the clothing of the men and women meandering through the composition. This print suggests the liveliness of a developing city undergoing change. Lindsay contended in 1916 that Shirlow 'has left Melbourne his debtor for the record he has made of what has already passed, and what is so swiftly passing away'.[18]

Indeed, Shirlow's work has been equally appreciated for its historical value as its artistic value. His portfolios *The 'Sydney set'* (1918) and *The 'Melbourne set'* (1920) gained recognition as compendiums visually documenting these two cities in time. A copy of *The 'Melbourne set'* is held in the Rare Books Collection at the Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.[19] This set of six etchings, published in an edition of 80 copies, includes *Melbourne from the east* and *Melbourne from the west*, which depict the Yarra River and land in the foreground, beyond which the city skyline appears in the distance. The other four prints are narrow vertical compositions of city streets that show bustling Melbourne with motor cars, trams and grand architectural backdrops such as Flinders Street

John Shirlow, *Wilson Hall, University of Melbourne*, 1922, etching, 22.0 × 15.0 cm. 2012.0039, purchased 2012, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.
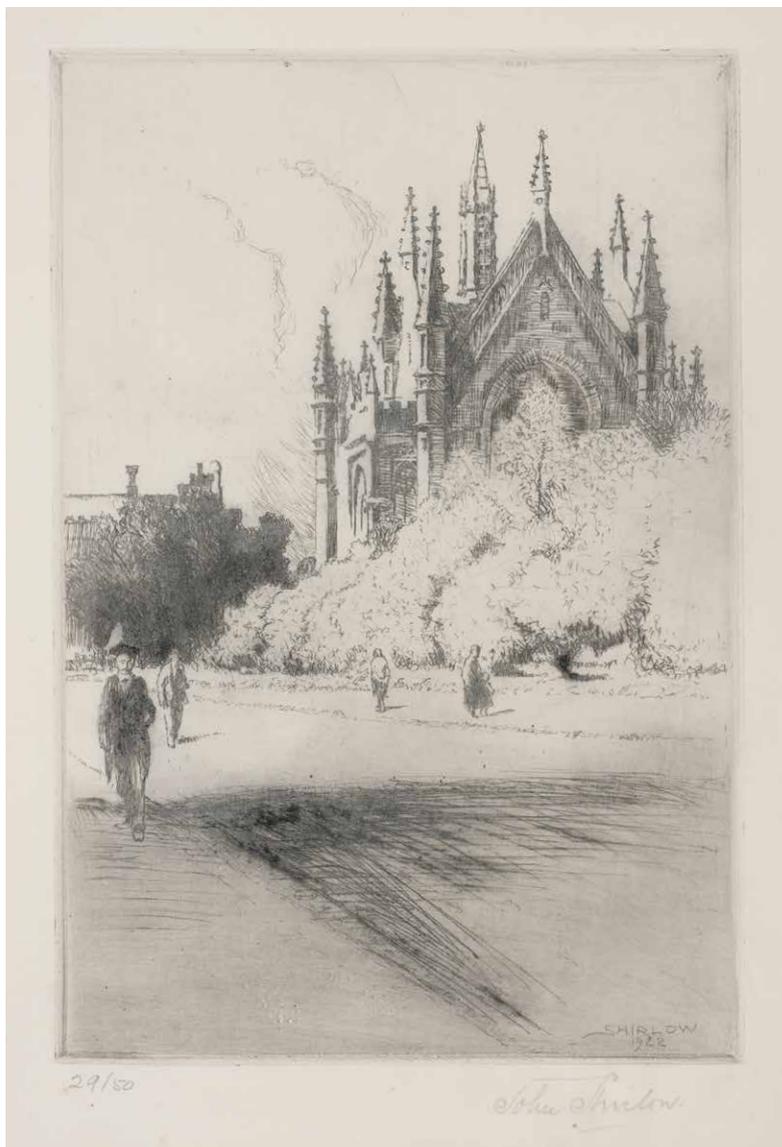
Station. In 1921 critic Bertram Stevens noted that 'the Melbourne Set were sold promptly' and Shirlow 'was finally recognised in his native land'.[20]

Shirlow and the university

The University of Melbourne, in addition to acquiring works by John Shirlow, also captured the artist's imagination. In 1922 he etched a view from the South Lawn looking towards the Quadrangle and the imposing gothic structure of the original Wilson Hall (destroyed by fire in 1952).[21] The building's multiple steeples heighten the hall's imposing prominence, while the people walking along the path cast shadows that suggest bright sunlight (see left). The Baillieu Library purchased a copy in 2012 and the Potter also has two impressions, one inscribed 'To AW Greig, Esq'. Alfred Woolley Greig became a clerk in the University of Melbourne's Registrar's Office in 1913 (the year Shirlow was appointed assistant examiner for drawing), then chief clerk in 1920 and registrar in 1937.[22]

The Potter also holds a 1927 print by Shirlow depicting the campus, wherein the viewpoint is more centrally positioned on the South Lawn, looking towards the Quadrangle. A cropped glimpse of Wilson Hall is on the right, and the clock tower of the Arts Building,

commonly known today as the Old Arts Building, appears on the left (see below). Old Arts was built between 1919 and 1924—the last stone building to be constructed on campus. Before this, popular university views presented by photographers such as Charles Bristow Walker (1835–1901) and artists including Shirlow's contemporary Victor Cobb (1876–1945) tended to be positioned on the left side of South Lawn's main drive, angling focus towards Wilson Hall in the distant right. However, in 1927, Shirlow adopted a central position, taking advantage of the wide architectural vista afforded by the recently completed Arts Building.
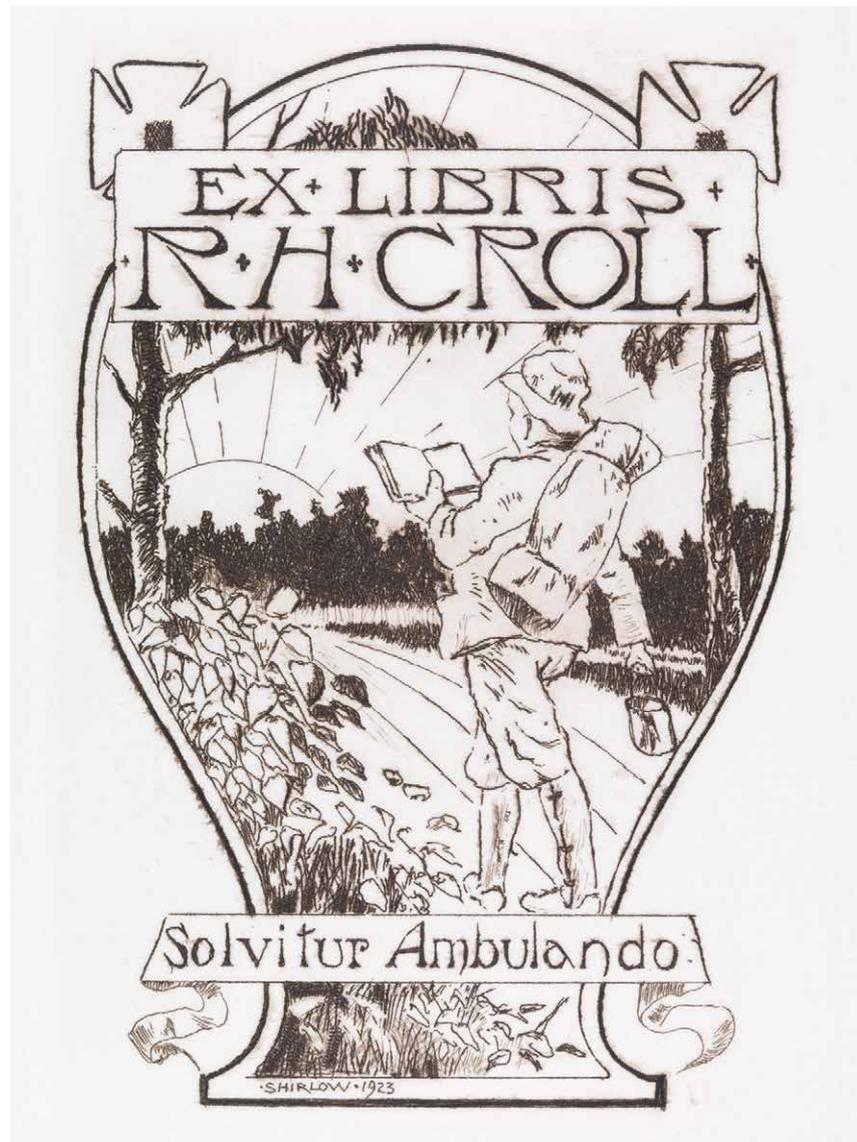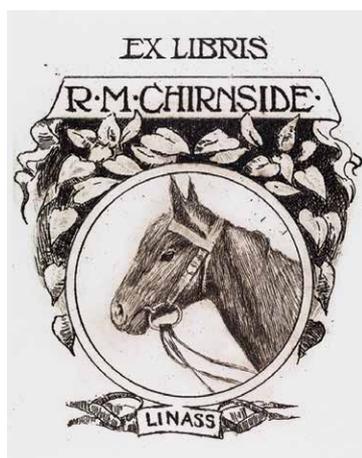
Bookplates

Another distinct aspect of Shirlow's work that is represented in the university's collections is his popularity as a bookplate designer. A bookplate is a decorative label or print inserted inside a book to identify its owner—typically an enthusiastic collector or rare book aficionado. Bookplates typically feature a motif that relates to the owner. In 2014 two bookplates by Shirlow were donated to the Baillieu Library Print Collection. The first, dated 1923, depicts a swagman on the road, reading from a book as he walks towards the horizon (pictured right). The caption '*Solvitur Ambulando*' translates to 'It is solved by walking'. Shirlow carefully constructed this design for writer and friend Robert Henderson Croll to represent Croll's defining interests. Croll was an enthusiastic bushwalker, while his writing is symbolised in the book the swagman holds in his left hand.

The second bookplate is Shirlow's design for R.M. Chirnside, depicting the head of a horse surrounded by a garland, with the name 'LINASS' in a scroll below, flanked by a pair of stirrups. Chirnside was a leading Victorian racehorse owner and Linass was one of his racehorses in the 1910s and 1920s. Interestingly, on the inside cover of the Baillieu

Library's copy of *The 'Melbourne set'* is a different version of this bookplate, showing that Chirnside was a prior owner: here the scroll is absent, the garland and stirrups differ in style, and the horse (which is based on a photographic reproduction) has a longer, more muscular, face—collectors often commissioned more than one bookplate (above, right). Shirlow also designed a bookplate in 1935 for the Public Library, further demonstrating the attention given to his bookplate etchings.

Conclusion

Prints by John Shirlow now held in the University of Melbourne's cultural collections provide multifaceted insights into this artist's career. They offer an entry point into the history of etching in Australia at the turn of the 20th century, and also document past views of Melbourne. Moreover, Shirlow's work preserves a visual record of the university campus and points to a fascination with bookplates among contemporary collectors. John Shirlow was a pioneering figure in Australian etching, and his prints continue to offer aesthetic and historical value for audiences today.

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1 Irena Zdanowicz, *Great impressions: A centenary exhibition celebrating the founding of the European Old Master collection of the National Gallery of Victoria*, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1992, n.p.
2 Bertram Stevens, 'Etching in Australia', *Art in Australia*, no. 9, 1921, n.p.; William Moore, 'Shirlow, the etcher', *The Lone Hand*, 1 March 1909, p. 604.
3 Brian Seidel, *Printmaking*, Melbourne: Longmans, 1965, p. 2.
4 Anne Ryan, 'Introduction', in *Australian etchings & engravings 1880s–1930s from the gallery's collection*, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2007, p. 2; Seidel, *Printmaking*, p. 2.
5 Known today as 'Princes Bridge', this icon of Melbourne was originally named 'Prince's Bridge'.
6 Lionel Lindsay, 'John Shirlow', *Art in Australia*, no. 1, 1916, n.p.
7 Robert Croll, 'John Shirlow: A biographical sketch', in *The etched work of John Shirlow*, Melbourne: Alexander McCubbin, 1920, n.p.
8 Lionel Lindsay, 'Etching in Australia', *The Print Collector's Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1924, p. 296.
9 Moore, 'Shirlow, the etcher', p. 604.
10 'Five etchings by John Shirlow', *The Studio*, no. 33, 1905, p. 370.
11 Lindsay, 'John Shirlow'.
12 Irena Zdanowicz, 'Prints of fortune: Hubert Herkomer's 1891–92 etching purchases for the National Gallery of Victoria', *Art Bulletin of Victoria* (National Gallery of Victoria), no. 33, 1993, www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/prints-of-fortune-hubert-herkomers-1891-92-etching-purchases-for-the-national-gallery-of-victoria/, viewed 10 March 2016.
13 Geoffrey Serle, 'Serle, Percival (1871–1951)', *Australian dictionary of biography* (vol. 11, Melbourne University Press, 1988), National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, adb.anu.edu.au, viewed 20 May 2016.
14 Roger Butler, 'Shirlow, John Alexander Thomas (1869–1936)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 11, Melbourne University Press, 1988, p. 600.
15 J.S. Rogers (edited and illustrated by Norman H. Olver), *The University of Melbourne Mildura branch 1947–1949: A short history*, Melbourne: University of Melbourne Mildura Branch 40th Anniversary Reunion Committee, 1991, p. 59.
16 Irena Zdanowicz, 'Obituary: Ursula Hoff, AO OBE 1909–2005', *Art Bulletin of Victoria* (National Gallery of Victoria), no. 45, 2005, www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/obituary-ursula-hoff-ao-obe-1909-2005, viewed 15 March 2016.
17 Andrew May, 'Eastern Market', in Andrew Brown-May and Shurlee Swain (eds), *The encyclopedia of Melbourne*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2005 (*eMelbourne* School of Historical Studies and eScholarship Research Centre, University of Melbourne, www.emelbourne.net.au/about.html, viewed 20 May 2016).
18 Lindsay, 'John Shirlow'.
19 John Shirlow, *The 'Melbourne set': Etchings by John Shirlow*, Melbourne: Edward A. Vidler, 1920. Rare Books Collection, University of Melbourne Library (purchased 2009 from specialist book dealer Douglas Stewart).
20 Stevens, 'Etching in Australia'.
21 See Jason Benjamin and Emily Wubben, *Architectural ornament: The history and art of Wilson Hall at the University of Melbourne*, Cultural Collections Department, University of Melbourne, 2012.
22 University of Melbourne Library, 'Greig, Alfred Woolley', https://digitised-collections.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/60851, viewed 20 May 2016.