

The art of Wilson Hall

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Wilson Hall has been an integral part of the University of Melbourne landscape since the first building to bear this name was completed in 1882. Built for the purpose of providing a venue for examinations, conferring of degrees and grand ceremonial occasions, the Hall has been at the very centre of University life for generations of students and staff. The original Hall's destruction by fire in 1952 and subsequent rebirth in modernist form remains one of the more significant events in the history of the University.

The opportunity to curate an exhibition on Wilson Hall led to a journey of discovery,¹ not only of the Hall's fascinating history but also of the rich legacy of art that this building has inspired, in both its incarnations, since the 1870s. Held among the University's cultural collections is a diverse range of prints, paintings, sculptures, photographs and objects which either depict the Hall or were created to adorn it. All of these highlight the significance of the Hall, both within the University as its ceremonial centre, and in the context of Australian architecture.

Made possible through a generous donation in 1874 of £30,000 by the wealthy pastoralist Sir Samuel Wilson (1832–1895),² the original Wilson Hall was designed in the

English Perpendicular Gothic style by Joseph Reed (1822–1890) of the architectural firm Reed and Barnes.³ Construction was undertaken by the building firm James Nation & Co., with work commencing in June 1878 and completed just over four years later in time to host the end-of-year examinations of November 1882.



Later to be celebrated as a classic example of 19th century Gothic Revival,⁴ the Hall, as designed by Reed with buttresses, turrets and arched windows, was 152 feet long by 62 feet wide with a height of 96 feet to the top of the gables.

The external walls were of Oamaru limestone from the South Island of New Zealand, while the internal walls were of Hawkesbury sandstone from New South Wales. A dominant feature of the interior was the richly panelled oak wainscoting that was in keeping with the large panelled oak doors.⁵ The open roof design consisted of hammer-beams terminated by winged angels holding shields, which had been executed by the Melbourne based woodcarver and art metalworker James Marriott (1851–1909).⁶

The architectural details of the Hall are evident in the beautifully drafted floor plans and elevations dating from 1877 and 1878, which are held by the University of Melbourne Archives as part of the Bates, Smart and McCutcheon Pty Ltd Collection.⁷ Arguably the first artworks inspired by the Hall, these hand-drawn and painted ink and watercolour drawings are fine examples of the high quality of architectural drafting at the time.

Executed at a similar time were two presentation perspective drawings in ink and watercolour, depicting internal and external views of the envisaged Hall, complete with robed academics and students as well as elegantly attired campus visitors (illustrated on pages 4–5).

Previous page: Sir Samuel Wilson, c.1879, albumen silver print, 14.5 x 10.0 cm. Published in Samuel Wilson, *Proceedings on laying the memorial stone of the Wilson Hall of the University of Melbourne*, Melbourne: Stillwell and Co., 1879. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

Below: Reed and Barnes, [attributed to A.C. Smart], Exterior presentation view of Wilson Hall, c.1877–1878, watercolour on paper, 53.5 x 82.0 cm. Reg. no. A.1968.0027, Bates, Smart and McCutcheon Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.



In the case of the external view, the Hall is depicted in its surrounding University landscape, including the west facade of the Quadrangle. Believed to be the work of A.C. Smart, the brother of Francis J. Smart (1852–1907) who was later to become a partner in Reed and Barnes,⁸ these two works are examples of the presentation drawings used to promote building projects and which became increasingly popular during the second half of the 19th century.

These two presentation drawings were evidently the inspiration behind a number of wood engravings of Wilson Hall produced during the

late 1870s.⁹ One of these was recently acquired for the Baillieu Library Print Collection: a wood engraving hand-coloured with watercolour which is a version of the above noted external view. A version of the internal view, with slight variations, was also published in *The Illustrated Australian News* on 2 August 1879.¹⁰

A presentation drawing, whereabouts unknown, may also have inspired a wood engraving showing a southern exterior view of the Hall, which was published in *The Illustrated London News* on 31 May 1879. A copy of this version, removed from the newspaper, is held in the

Baillieu Library Print Collection.¹¹

This view was also published in *The Australasian Sketcher* on 7 June 1879, a copy of which is held by Special Collections, Baillieu Library.

Versions of the internal view that appeared in *The Illustrated Australian News*, and of the external view that appeared in *The Illustrated London News* and *The Australasian Sketcher*, were also published in the 550 copies of the book produced by the University to commemorate the laying of the Hall's memorial stone by Samuel Wilson on 2 October 1879.¹²

Although possibly executed by different artists from those whose works were published in the illustrated newspapers, these two wood engravings are clearly copies of the original Reed and Barnes presentation drawings. Copies of the commemorative book are held by Special Collections, Baillieu Library and the University of Melbourne Archives. The Baillieu Library Print Collection also holds a copy of this external view of the Hall, which at some point has been removed from the book and hand-coloured with watercolour.¹³

Publication of these views meant that artistic depictions of the Hall were well known before the building became a reality. Once completed, Wilson Hall physically dominated the centre of the University, soaring above



Left: Reed and Barnes, [attributed to A.C. Smart], Interior presentation view of Wilson Hall, c.1877–1878, watercolour on paper, 50.5 x 39.0 cm. Reg. no. A.1968.0027, Bates, Smart and McCutcheon Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.

Below: Victor Ernest Cobb, *Wilson Hall from the cloister (University of Melbourne)*, 1913, etching, 28.4 x 23.0 cm. Reg. no. 1977.0019, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

the surrounding buildings. From all approaches its turrets and mass clearly located the University within the surrounding landscape and became its instantly recognisable landmark. It is therefore not surprising that its Gothic revival architecture featured prominently in numerous artistic depictions of the University.

Of particular note are the views of the University by the Melbourne artist Victor Ernest Cobb (1876–1945). Cobb is best known for his large output of etchings, including depictions of Melbourne’s colleges and churches as well as city vistas and rural scenery.¹⁴ A number of Cobb’s etchings of the University focus on Wilson Hall, including a rare view of the building from the cloisters presenting the surrounding plant life (illustrated on right). Another etching of interest (illustrated on page 6 and back cover) is Cobb’s depiction of the Hall’s dais doorway shown slightly ajar, allowing an intriguing glimpse of the interior marble bust of Samuel Wilson (executed c.1880; illustrated on page 31) by English sculptor Marshall Wood (d. 1882).¹⁵ These two Cobb works are in the collection of the Ian Potter Museum of Art, which, along with the University of Melbourne Archives and the Baillieu Library Print Collection, holds a large number of Cobb’s works.





Left: Victor Ernest Cobb, *Little doorway Wilson Hall, 1933*, etching, 18.5 x 13.5 cm. Reg. no. 0000.1308, University of Melbourne Art Collection, Ian Potter Museum of Art. See also detail on back cover.

Below: Charles Bristow Walker, *University, c.1888–1889*, in album *Photographs, Melbourne and suburbs, c.1886–1899*, albumen silver photograph, 18.7 x 23.7 cm. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

A 1912 work by Cobb,¹⁶ also held by the Ian Potter Museum of Art, provides a view of Wilson Hall from the main entrance gates almost identical to the scene in an albumen silver photograph taken c.1888 by Charles Bristow Walker (illustrated on right below). Only four collections of photographs by this little-known professional photographer are known to exist, one of which is held in Special Collections, Baillieu Library.¹⁷ This particular scene of the University, with Wilson Hall towering in the background, was popular with many artists and photographers and is one of the better-known views of the University from this period.

Besides the many works of art depicting the Hall, the building itself, as the ceremonial heart of the University, was progressively furnished with artworks consisting of portraits and busts depicting the University's founding fathers and later office bearers.¹⁸ Along with these works, a number of benefactions allowed for the commissioning of art in the form of leadlight windows to adorn the building. The largest of these was the Stevens window (also known as the South window), which was unveiled in 1928 and named after Edward and Eliza Stevens who had donated the funds for the project.¹⁹

Mervyn Napier Waller (1893–1972) completed the design for this window (destroyed 1952), which depicted men through the ages who had made significant contributions to their respective fields, including literature, exploration and the sciences.²⁰ The historic figures represented included William Shakespeare, Charles Darwin and Matthew Flinders. Importantly, as the window was first and foremost a testament to the University, such time-honoured individuals were depicted alongside noteworthy figures in the history of the University, notably Sir Redmond

Barry (1813–1880) and Hugh Childers (1827–1896), the first Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor respectively. A silver gelatin photograph hand-coloured with gouache, now in the collection of the Ian Potter Museum of Art, provides a unique illustration of the window's design. Stevens received this painted photograph from Napier Waller as a Christmas present in 1928 and later gifted it to the University of Melbourne Art Collection.²¹

The Leckie window, which miraculously survived the fire that largely destroyed the Gothic



Napier Waller, *The Leckie window* (detail), 1935, stained glass and lead, approx. height 10 metres. Reg. no. 1935.0002.001.059, gift of John E. Leckie, 1935, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Shown here are Artemis and Ceres (left) and Apollo and Prometheus (right).

Hall in 1952, provides us with first-hand access to the art of the 'old' Wilson Hall. Through the depiction of biblical stories and figures from classical mythology, the window's design, again entrusted to Napier Waller, traces the growth of civilisation.²² The six days of creation from the Book of Genesis are represented in the window's arch, while the female figures in the three oblong panels on the left, in descending order, are Artemis (the moon), Persephone (the Roman Ceres) and the poet Sappho. On the right, the corresponding male figures are Apollo (the sun), the Titan Prometheus and the sculptor Pheidias.²³ Named after the donor John E. Leckie (1856–1942), the window was formally presented to the University community at a conferring of degrees ceremony on 2 September 1935 as a tribute to Sir John MacFarland (1851–1935), the Chancellor of the University who had died earlier that year. After decades in storage after the fire, the window was conserved and installed in the Ian Potter Museum of Art in 1998.

On 25 January 1952 the Gothic centre of the University was forever altered when fire destroyed the roof and badly damaged the west wall of the Hall. This calamity was deeply felt by the University and wider



community and engendered a creative response by a number of artists. This is evident in the Ian Potter Museum of Art's oil on cardboard painting by the artist Ellen Rubbo (1911–1977), who was married to Sydney Dattilo Rubbo (1911–1969), a professor of microbiology at the University. In this vibrant, expressive painting, an angel from the beamed ceiling is visible amidst the fire-engulfed ruins.²⁴

The Ian Potter Museum of Art also holds an oil on canvas painting of the burnt remains of the Hall by the Melbourne artist Reginald Wilfred Whiting Rowed (1916–1990) (illustrated on page 8). In Rowed's scene, figures stand and view the gutted building, eerily reminiscent of an English church destroyed by wartime bombing. Rowed studied painting and drawing at the Melbourne Technical College under the guidance of Napier Waller and John Rowell between 1934 and 1938.²⁵ He enlisted in the army in 1940 and later became an official war artist, which perhaps explains the wartime allusions in his painting.

Following the fire the University was polarised by the debate over whether to restore the Gothic ruins or rebuild in modern style. Eventually succumbing to the realities of available funds, the Gothic splendour of the old Hall gave way to the

Reginald Wilfred Whiting Rowed, *Old Wilson Hall ruins*, 1952, oil on canvas over board, 61.6 x 74.9 cm. Reg. no. 1956.0013, gift of Dunlop (Australia), 1956, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Reproduced courtesy of the estate of the artist, 2010.



modernist building that we know today. Designed by the architectural firm Bates Smart and McCutcheon (formerly Reed and Barnes), the new Wilson Hall was completed in 1956.

The new Hall is now recognised as a significant early Australian example of the post-war International Style, which is especially distinctive for the incorporation of ornament and art within its design.²⁶ The Hall's highly crafted interior, textured external surfaces and integral artworks, which were envisaged by its leading

architect Sir Osborn McCutcheon (1899–1983), all combine to form what prominent architect and critic Robin Boyd described as 'the most beautifully fitted jewel-box'.²⁷ Of all the Hall's features, however, the individual artworks of the Hall are certainly worth a look.

Perhaps the most prominent is the mural dominating the south wall behind the dais, titled *A search for truth* (illustrated on page 33).²⁸ This work was designed by Douglas Annand (1903–1976) and executed by

the sculptor Tom Bass (1916–2010). The mural represents humanity struggling out of the bog of primitive ignorance towards knowledge, symbolised by the light of the sun.²⁹ While some people voiced reverent praise when the mural was first presented to the public, an *Argus* critic wrote, 'do you like Mr. Pigface? ... he is nude, but even with clothes on he is not the kind of person you would invite home to Sunday night's tea'.³⁰ Subsequently, this symbolic mural has acquired both fans and detractors.

Annand also designed the memorial screen that separates the main hall from the foyer.³¹ Commissioned by the Victorian Women Graduates Association and friends, the screen marked the centenary of the University and stood in memory of the female graduates of the first 100 years.³² This artwork is situated between two panes of glass and is composed of multiple elements of brightly coloured glass, outlines of black-leading, as well as irregular shapes of gold leaf adhered to the rear pane of glass. It is believed this work was inspired by Annand's first trip to Japan early in 1956.³³ Furthermore, the use of coloured glass could be seen as a tribute to the 'old' Wilson Hall and its majestic stained glass windows.

Wilson Hall, designed by Bates, Smart and McCutcheon. Along the west wall is visible the series of relief sculptures by Tom Bass: *Observation; Contemplation; Teaching and learning; The talents of knowledge*, c.1957, pressed cement, each sculpture 275.0 x 397.0 cm. Reg. no. 0000.0087.001.004, commissioned c.1957, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Photography by Michael Silver.

Two significant external features of the current Wilson Hall include the west wall series of relief sculptures and the panel above the main entrance, all created by Tom Bass at the request of McCutcheon. The four relief panels of reconstituted stone symbolically express the idea of the university. The first panel, titled *Observation*, depicts a sea voyage of intellectual discovery, as a captain and his crew sail into the uncharted waters of knowledge in the spirit of objective inquiry. The following panel, called *Contemplation*, portrays

an individual scholar probing the sun to further refine discovered knowledge, while a group of scholars are shown literally putting their heads together in contemplation. The third panel, *Teaching and learning*, depicts the academic life of the university. The central figure portrays a teacher inspiring the surrounding students, who are shown actively learning by engaging in activities and societies. Finally, *The talents of knowledge* refers to the obligation that comes with higher learning. The central Christ figure is either distributing talents

or receiving them back multiplied, while the hunched figure on the left describes a student who has buried his talent. Here Bass aimed to convey the belief that students should use their talents for the good of society and to show appreciation to God for giving them such gifts.³⁴

The copper panel above the entrance depicts the famous oration given by Socrates at his trial. Bass chose this subject matter because he believed it aptly conveyed the sacrificial integrity essential to true scholarship or to any endeavour.³⁵ The composition presents the standing figure of Socrates on the right, reaching out to receive the fatal hemlock, while holding a mirror to reflect the sun's light onto another figure, thereby demonstrating that truth was not in him but that he could only reflect the light of truth onto humanity. The continuation of this lesson is alluded to in the figure on Socrates' right, who reaches up to take the mirror. The seated individual represents Plato, who holds his tablet of writing up to the sun, while the little figure that appears in the fold of Socrates' garment is a reference to Alcibiades' story.³⁶ Overall, this panel, held in place by 53 pins, was a significant task undertaken to artistically embellish



Tom Bass, *Trial of Socrates*, 1956, copper, approx. 350.0 x 457.0 cm. Reg. no. 0000.0086, University of Melbourne Art Collection.



Wilson Hall in accordance with the building's ceremonial and symbolic importance.

Since the 1870s, both incarnations of Wilson Hall have been adorned with art and have inspired artists. For the original Hall, its Gothic architecture and towering presence over the campus ensured that it was the focal point of artistic depictions of the University. For the new Hall, the collaboration between architects and artists resulted in a building that encompassed art as an integral element of its design. Within the cultural collections of the University can be found many of the works

Wilson Hall has inspired; these, along with the surviving artworks of the old Hall and those which adorn the new, allow us to appreciate the history and significance of this building at the ceremonial centre of the University.

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Notes

- 1 The exhibition *Wilson Hall: Centre and symbol of the University* was held in the Leigh Scott Gallery, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne, from 15 March to 23 May 2010.
- 2 Sir Samuel Wilson was knighted in 1875, partly in recognition of his funding of the Hall. His gift was the largest single donation received by the University during the 19th century.
- 3 Reed and Barnes was one of the leading architectural practices of 19th century Melbourne. The firm's works included the State Library of Victoria (1856), Scots Church (1871–1874) and the Royal Exhibition Building in Carlton Gardens (1880) to name but a few; the practice was the principal architect for the University between 1860 and 1909. Bearing a variety of names as its principal partners changed, the practice now operates under the name of Bates Smart.
- 4 Philip Goad, *Bates Smart: 150 years of Australian architecture*, Fishermans Bend: Thames and Hudson Australia, 2004, p. 157.
- 5 Raymond Maxwell Crawford, *Wilson Hall: Centre and symbol of the University*, Carlton: University of Melbourne Press, 1952, p. 6.
- 6 Marriott was also responsible for the University's ceremonial furniture including the chancellor's throne, currently located in the foyer of Wilson Hall, and the convocation table and chairs. For a description of Marriott's career see 'The chancellor's carved chairs', in *Environs: The Newsletter of Property and Campus Services*, September 2009, p. 6, <http://tinyurl.com/23s3j6w> accessed 5 July 2010.
- 7 Reed and Barnes, Floor plans and elevations of Wilson Hall, c.1877–1878, watercolour and ink on card. Reg. no. A.1968.0027, Bates, Smart and McCutcheon Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 8 Mark Richmond, 'Interior perspective of old Wilson Hall', in Chris McAuliffe and Peter Yule (eds), *Treasures: Highlights of the cultural collections of the University of Melbourne*, Carlton: Melbourne University Publishing, 2003, p. 276.

- 9 Sharing many identical features, including the decorative shaping of the top of the internal view, the lithographer was clearly copying the Reed and Barnes drawings.
- 10 The internal view, which appeared in *The Illustrated Australian News*, is attributed to the painter, engraver and illustrator Albert Charles Cooke (1836–1902), who had immigrated to Victoria from England in 1854. It is possible that he was also responsible for other engravings of the Hall produced at this time. For further information on Cooke see Joan Kerr (ed.), 'Albert Charles Cooke', in *The dictionary of Australian artists: Painters, sketchers, photographers and engravers to 1870*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 172–173.
- 11 Unknown artist, *The Wilson Hall*, University of Melbourne, published in *The Illustrated London News*, 31 May 1879, hand-coloured wood engraving, image 13.3 x 19.5 cm. Reg. no. 2010.0001, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.
- 12 Samuel Wilson, *Proceedings on laying the memorial stone of the Wilson Hall of the University of Melbourne*, Melbourne: Stillwell and Co., 1879. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 13 Unknown artist, *The Wilson Hall, Melbourne University, Australia*, 1879, hand-coloured wood engraving, image 21.3 x 31.3 cm. Reg. no. 2010.0002, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.
- 14 R.E. Nott, 'Cobb, Victor Ernest (1876–1945)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 8, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1981, p. 40.
- 15 The marble bust of Sir Samuel Wilson, which survived the 1952 fire, is presently on display in the foyer of Wilson Hall: Marshall Wood, *Sir Samuel Wilson*, c.1880, marble, on granite plinth, height: 83.0 cm approx. Reg. no. 0000.0438, University of Melbourne Art Collection (illustrated on p. 31).
- 16 Victor Ernest Cobb, *Wilson Hall, Melbourne University*, 1912, etching, 8.0 x 11.5 cm. Reg. no. 1970.0003, University of Melbourne Art Collection.
- 17 Albums of Walker's work are also held by the State Library of Victoria and in two private collections. The University of Melbourne Archives also holds later reproductions of a number of his photographs.
- 18 A number of the artworks on display in Wilson Hall at the time of the fire were destroyed but a few were salvaged and later conserved. Fortunately some of the portraits that normally hung in the Hall had been removed for cleaning at the National Gallery of Victoria shortly before the blaze.
- 19 Edward Stevens (1858–1930) was a University of Melbourne council member from 1926 to 1930, who, along with his wife Eliza (née Snelgrove, d. 1952), gave several benefactions to the University. One of the most significant was the clock in the tower of the Old Arts Building which was presented in memory of their son who had died in World War I. See T.A. Hazell, 'Stevens, Edward (1858–1930)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 12, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1990, p. 78.
- 20 William Montgomery (d. 1927), a specialist in the art of stained glass, was first commissioned to design the Stevens window but died before its completion. Napier Waller was chosen to finish the project.
- 21 Mervyn Napier Waller, *South window, Wilson Hall (Stevens window)*, 1928, gouache over silver-gelatin photograph, 49.5 x 27.0 cm. Reg. no. 0000.0083, gift of Edward Stevens, University of Melbourne Art Collection, Ian Potter Museum of Art. An image of the Stevens window in situ can be seen in Ernest Scott, *A history of the University of Melbourne*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1936, opposite p. 60.
- 22 Lisa Sullivan and Jay Miller, 'Highlights of heritage: The shaping of a university art collection', in *UniNews*, vol. 14, no. 3, March 2005, <http://uninews.unimelb.edu.au/news/2123/> accessed 25 January 2010.
- 23 Lisa Sullivan, *In detail, Napier Waller: The Leckie window*, University of Melbourne, 2002, <http://tinyurl.com/28pshhs> accessed 3 January 2010.
- 24 Ellen Rubbo, *Wilson Hall (After the fire)*, c.1952, oil on cardboard, 36.2 x 24.8 cm. Reg. no 0000.0064, University of Melbourne Art Collection.
- 25 Australian War Memorial, Artists' profiles, 'Reginald Wilfred Whiting Rowed 1916–1990', www.awm.gov.au/people/artist_profiles/rowed.asp/ accessed 22 January 2010.
- 26 Australian Institute of Architects Victoria Chapter, Register of Significant 20th Century Architecture website, 'Wilson Hall', www.architecture.com.au/i-cms?page=4048/ accessed 5 August 2010.
- 27 Goad, *Bates Smart*, p. 158.
- 28 Douglas Annand, designer and painter, Tom Bass, sculptor, *A search for truth*, 1956, plaster and paint, height: 914.0 cm. Reg. no. 0000.0085, University of Melbourne Art Collection.
- 29 Sullivan and Miller, 'Highlights of heritage'.
- 30 Quoted in John Poynter and Carolyn Rasmussen, *A place apart: The University of Melbourne: Decades of challenge*, Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 1996, pp. 113–114.
- 31 Douglas Annand, Untitled (Memorial screen), 1958, stained glass, 198.1 x 457.2 cm. Reg. no. 1956.0015, commissioned by women graduates and friends to mark the centenary of the University in 1956 and in memory of the women graduates of the first 100 years, University of Melbourne Art Collection.
- 32 Women were first allowed to enrol at the University of Melbourne in 1881, with Bella Guerin the first to graduate (Arts) in December 1883.
- 33 Sullivan and Miller, 'Highlights of heritage'.
- 34 John Allen, *Tom Bass*, unpublished paper presented to the Melbourne Beefsteak Club, 26 August 2005.
- 35 Allen, *Tom Bass*.
- 36 Alcibiades, a student of Socrates, compared the classical Athenian philosopher to the little figures of satyrs sold in Athens, containing gold statues of the gods. Through this comparison, Alcibiades aimed to convey his belief that regardless of Socrates' unattractive appearance (represented by the satyrs), this philosopher possessed inner beauty and godlike qualities.