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MECHANICS, GOLD AND THE USES OF ART

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Abstract

This paper will argue that the origins of modern Australian cultural policy can be traced in the establishment of Australia's first cultural institutions, the Mechanics' Institutes. My aim is to investigate those cultural programs that were specifically established to target publics understood to lack access to culture and to be able to derive various benefits from the provision of such access. For Reverend Henry Carmichael, vice-president, Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts in 1833, the provision of cultural programs was based on a double logic. It was to civilise those who were not civilised *and* to protect those who were, from 'receding rapidly on the field of civilisation' (1833, p.78). For reformers in mid-nineteenth century Australia, the development of cultural institutions with a 'popular' remit was specifically connected to the transformation of the colonies from convict to settler societies and then to the provision of civilising influences in the face of 'gold fever'. It is on the basis of the governmental problems related to these transformations that we can understand the establishment of an Australian cultural infrastructure.

Introduction

At the establishment of the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts¹ in 1833, the vice-president, Reverend Henry Carmichael, argued that the colony of New South Wales was:

so placed, that, but for perpetual intercourse with the Mother country, we run the risk of receding rapidly on the field of civilisation ... Yet if we mean to rise in the scale of nations, we must possess a literature and science of our own. And what more likely means of accomplishing this end than by the establishment of an institution where the ambition of ingenious men may be roused through mutual communication of thought and reciprocation of knowledge? (Carmichael 1833, 78)

Announcing a multi-million dollar arts infrastructure investment program 177 years later, Queensland's Labor Premier Peter Beattie stated that 'for too long, regional Queenslanders have been deprived access to world class events and exhibitions ... This ... commitment will help to nurture regional art and to attract national and international class exhibitions and events to regional Queensland.' (16 May 2000, 1) The following month, Arts Minister Matt Foley commented on the \$75 million that had just been granted for the Queensland State Library redevelopment: 'Great cities have great libraries, and great libraries help to make Smart States.' (27 June 2000, 1) Carmichael and the 'improvers' who established the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts aimed to provide access to European culture in order to cultivate the taste of the ex-convicts and new free settlers of the colony. Beattie and Foley, while advocating the importance of providing Queenslanders with access to 'world class exhibitions and events', understand arts investment as something which supports local cultural production. Despite the differences in *which* cultural forms are worthy of support, what is clear for Carmichael, Beattie and Foley — despite a century and a half's separation — is that 'great cities' and 'smart states' have cultural institutions. How did this logical equivalence occur? This question can be answered by asking how cultural institutions were constructed as

useful to the reconstruction and development of Australia from a convict to a free settler society.

This paper will argue that the origins of modern Australian cultural policy can be traced in the establishment of Australia's first cultural institutions, the Mechanics' Institutes.² In the only text devoted to the history of Australian Mechanics' Institutes, *Pioneering Culture: Mechanics' Institutes and Schools of Arts in Australia*, Philip Candy argues that 'collectively the... movement made a unique and distinctive contribution to Australia's colonial, and early post-Federation social, cultural, educational, intellectual and architectural landscape' (1994, 1).³ My aim here is to interrogate those cultural programs that were specifically established to target publics understood to lack access to culture and to be able to derive various benefits from the provision of such access. For Reverend Carmichael (1833), the diffusion of culture was based on a double logic. It was to civilise those who were not civilised and to protect those who were from 'receding rapidly on the field of civilisation' (1833, 78). For reformers in mid-nineteenth century Australia, the development of cultural institutions with a 'popular' remit was specifically connected to the transformation of the colonies from convict to settler societies and then to the provision of civilising influences in the face of 'gold fever'. It is on the basis of the governmental problems related to these transformations that we can understand the establishment of an Australian cultural infrastructure.

The most influential cultural organisations established in the mid-nineteenth century were the Mechanics' Institutes, and the National Art Galleries of Victoria and New South Wales. In these institutions, in the tradition of British cultural critics like John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold, the function of art was to 'civilise'.⁴ However, it would be reductive to describe this rich period of Australian cultural development as 'civilising' and leave it at that. More interestingly, it was in the specific circumstances of the development of a public cultural infrastructure that some of the main discursive coordinates of Australian cultural policy were laid.

It is not my aim here to provide an exhaustive account of Australian Mechanics' Institutes.⁵ The purpose of this paper is to identify in the Mechanics' Institute movement some of the formative discourses informing the establishment of a public cultural infrastructure in mid-nineteenth century Australia. Many of these discourses originate in the historical construction of culture as useful for the governance of 'free' individuals (Bennett 1998). I have discussed this broader history elsewhere; my concern here is with how these discourses were articulated in the context of the young Australian colonies.⁶ Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that it was British models for the conjunction of culture and government which were drawn upon in specifically Australian contexts. The second section of this paper will briefly discuss some key aspects of the nineteenth century construction of art as useful to governance, as this was articulated in Britain. The third section will establish an historical overview of the establishment of Mechanics' Institutes in Australia, identifying their original aims and how these changed during the nineteenth century. In the following section, using the example of the Sydney Mechanics' School of Art, I will argue that Australian Mechanics' Institutes aimed to provide both 'useful' knowledge in the form of training in good design and a training in 'civility' for the 'mechanic' classes. While many historians have assessed the Institutes as failures due to their inability to attract these 'mechanic' classes, I will argue in contrast that the Institutes were significant to the development of Australia's cultural infrastructure.

Art and the 'Mechanick Classes'

In 1768, the Royal Academy of the Arts was founded in London. Due to its status as a publicly funded institution, the founding academicians argued that it had a public function. To this end, the public uses of art were understood in the language of civic humanism which constructed the individual as a citizen member of a polis governed above all by actions which

were beneficial to the public (Pocock 1972, 86). John Barrell argues that:

If the Academy was to be represented, and its existence justified, as a public body, this could be done only by reiterating the claim that painting was an art whose function was to promote the public interest, and that claim could be made only by reasserting, in the language of civic humanism, that painting could create or confirm the 'public spirit' in a nation. (1986, 2)

However, this public was not a 'general' public in any modern conception of the term. The first president of the academy, Sir Joshua Reynolds, conceived of art on two different levels. On the one hand, painting was viewed as a liberal profession; on the other, it was regarded as a mechanical trade.⁷ Painting as a liberal profession had a 'public' benefit because it could depict the ideal public spirit; the highest genre of painting was heroic history painting because it depicted the 'great men' of the past so that the 'great men' of the present could emulate them. Within the discourses of civic humanism, this 'great man' was a citizen who pursued only public ends. For Reynolds, there was no distinction between an appreciation of 'fine' art and civic virtue. In a lecture at the Academy in 1776, Reynolds suggested that 'all men of taste are also men of virtue ... because they have cultivated a particular habit of mind: the habit of ... subordinating their personal interests ... to the interests ... of some wider "whole"' (in Barrell 1986, 69). By the nineteenth century, the most common assertion about the utility of art was that its appreciation could lead the mind of the public to a higher plane. However, the public which was Reynolds' concern was a political public, which in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britain was limited to the landed gentry. By the late eighteenth century in post-revolutionary France, the relations between art and the public were conceived as productive, particularly in terms of art's use for the education of a citizenry.⁸ In marked contrast, the contemporaneous British conception of art's civic functions explicitly ruled out the possibility that any civic advantage might result from circulating art outside elite society. The 'mechanick classes' were thought to be constitutively incapable of deriving any benefit from art.⁹

When cultural programs were established with the object of providing access to culture to those who were understood as lacking such access, it was precisely these 'mechanick classes' who were their object. However, this initial conjunction of art, government and a wider public was not based on art's link to a higher sensibility, but on the mechanical aspects of art and how artistic training could benefit the production of manufactured goods. The case for art was put succinctly by Benjamin Robert Haydon, who was a major agitator in favour of government support of the arts. In 1830 he wrote in a letter to the Duke of Wellington:

the public establishment and encouragement of High Art is essentially requisite to a manufacturing country. Taste in design can only be generated by excellence in elevated Art. Our Manchester cottons were refused in Italy at the conclusion of the war in 1816, because their designs were tasteless ... This is a fact, I can assure your Grace, and I submit that it goes far to prove the importance of design to a nation so far advanced as we are. (in Minihan 1977, 42)

As a result of concerns such as these, a Select Committee was appointed in 1835 to look specifically at 'the best means of extending a knowledge of the Arts, and of the Principle of Design among the People (especially the Manufacturing Population) of the country' (in Borzello 1980, 10). One of the committee's major recommendations was the establishment of schools to educate artisans in good design. The function of these schools was to impart commercial knowledge, with the aim of improving the design standard of British manufactured goods. In 1837, a School for Design opened in London and thereafter schools opened in other major centres of the country.

Mechanics' Institutes were based on the same principles as the Schools of Design. The first institute was established as the Edinburgh School of Arts in 1821, quickly followed by the establishment of institutes in Glasgow and London in 1823. From these origins, the institutes quickly spread throughout the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth. The institutes were specifically designed to provide a place of learning for the working man and were initially directed at the artisan class with the aim of improving skills in industrial manufacture. In the

first half of the nineteenth century, there was a proliferation of programs designed to provide access to culture for the poorer classes on the basis of a rationale of improving design. Many of these programs were initiated by the Department of Science and Art under the Directorship of Henry Cole. Through these strategies, which included the South Kensington Museum, Cole 'hoped that the Department [would] ... be instrumental in raising the character of our manufactures, as well as the intellectual appreciation of those who have to produce and consume them' (in Minihan 1977, 119). It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that programs were organised in which art was more generally considered as a reflection of and useful to society's moral, social and political health.

In Britain from the mid-nineteenth century, culture was increasingly seen by reformers as useful for the moral and intellectual improvement of the poor. In state museums, loan exhibitions established by philanthropic private individuals, Mechanics' Institutes and other cultural programs, there was an overriding emphasis on art's utility to moral and intellectual improvement. In mid-nineteenth century Britain, the perception that reform needed to target moral improvement was pressing due to the social upheaval caused by a number of factors: the Irish famine and resultant mass migration to Britain, where the slums were already overcrowded and unsanitary; the Chartist uprising; mass unemployment; and a high crime rate. We can view efforts to 'improve' the poor through the use of art alongside other governmental programs developed at this time, such as mass education, urban planning and organised policing (see Bennett 1995, 1998; Hunter 1988; Dean, 1991; Rose 1990). These were schemes designed to make the populace calculable and manageable.

In 1841, the Select Committee on National Museums and Works of Art was established 'to consider the best means for their protection and for affording facilities to the Public for their inspection, as a means of moral and intellectual improvement for the People' (in Minihan 1977, 87). Allan Cunningham, in a submission to the committee, expressed the hope of the Victorian planners. When asked by the committee to class the people he saw in museums during holidays, Cunningham described them as 'Men who are usually called "mob"; but they cease to become mob when they get a taste' (in Minihan 1977, 89). There is a stark difference between this and Reynolds' point of view less than half a century previously that the 'mechanick classes' were constitutively incapable of deriving any benefit from culture.

Why did this change so radically in the space of 50 or so years? A new way of thinking about the population from about the mid-nineteenth century on constituted the conduct of the working classes as a moral and political problem. Thus it was essential that the working classes could be inducted into a new form of life, one governed by sobriety and restraint. This was posed in terms of the survival of the civilised species. It was precisely in order to civilise the young colony that cultural programs were developed in Australia. In discussion of Australian Mechanics' Institutes we will recognise many of the rationales for the utility of art I have described in the context of nineteenth century Britain. However, while we can understand the development of the Australian cultural infrastructure as drawing on British models, this is not to argue that Australian art programs emerged in any simply derivative way from developments in Britain. Rather, British developments were among many influences that Australian art programs drew upon in specifically local circumstances to come up with distinctive institutions and practices. For instance, Australian Mechanics' Institutes *combined* the objects of art's utility to moral and intellectual improvement and the uses of art to improve the skill of colonial artisans much earlier and in different ways than occurred in Britain.

Mechanics Institutes in Australia

Mechanics' Institutes were established in Australia during a period of significant population change. In 1831, the British government began subsidising the passage of free settlers to New South Wales. In the 1820s, some 8000 such settlers arrived; by the 1830s this figure had risen

to 30 000 (Macintyre 1999, 75). In 1840, convict transportation was suspended to New South Wales and was abandoned in 1849 (Macintyre 1999, 77). The increase in the colonial population, from 30 000 in 1820 to 400 000 in 1850, is indicative of the impact this change had on the governance of New South Wales (Macintyre 1999, 81). As New South Wales developed from a convict society to a society of free settlers, there was a great deal of concern for its 'civility'. Visitors commented on the colony's vulgarity: Francis Adams, a disciple of British cultural critic Mathew Arnold, was appalled at the 'crude provincial hedonism' and philistinism he encountered in Australia (in Serle 1974, 54). In fact, 'the colony presented a picture of barbarisation ... denounced by almost all colonial writers and thinkers' (Nadel 1957, 5). George Nadel noted in his authoritative text, *Australia's Colonial Culture*, that 'the necessity to build a culture lest preoccupation with material concerns endanger the moral and mental equipment of the colonists was the staple of their discussion' (1957, 5). It was this dual focus on retaining the 'civilised' connections with 'Home' and the need to civilise those colonists who were regarded as uncivilised that initiated the establishment of a network of associations, including cultural institutions.

In *The Great Tradition*, one of the key histories of the Australian adult education movement, Derek Whitelock typifies Mechanics' Institutes as a 'cultural epidemic' (1974, 87). Whitelock describes the Institutes in the following terms:

There was no centralised policy behind this diaspora of mechanics' institutes throughout the Empire and the English-speaking world. They proliferated because of local initiative driven by common enthusiasms and loyalties. They exemplified the full-blown Victorian self-help principle, although occasionally, as in Australia, some official aid was needed. It could be argued that, as repositories of English culture, educational ideas, books, and journals — and humbug — the institutes contributed more to the sense of imperial community than all the rhetoric in the press and the stately tours by proconsuls. In their heyday in the 1850s, the traveller would have found ... 'people's seminaries', easily identifiable with British mechanics' institutes, from the British Pacific Islands to India, from Ontario to Otago. (1974, 87)

The Institutes were to provide an oasis of civility in the 'savage' colonies of the British Empire. John Lhotsky described 'The State of the Arts in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land' in 1839 in the following terms:

The assertions of Goethe, that 'man cannot live without poetry and art', has been no where so fully understood by me, as in Australia, when I saw a country, which only a few years back had been reclaimed from a primeval, nay savage state, already occupied by the works of the architect; when I saw the mansion, and the cottage ... filled in a few cases with the works even of first rate artists, in many with respectable pictures and engravings. (in Smith 1975, 71)

The Mechanics' Institutes were to provide a forum for the diffusion of culture which would civilise the 'savage' colony. In order to exert this influence, the institutes offered cultural education in the 'Great (European) Tradition' (Whitelock 1974). John West, founder of the Launceston Mechanics' Institute, encapsulated the aim of the Mechanics' Institute to diffuse European culture as the epitome of democratic civilisation. In a speech given in 1848, West characterised the use of art as essential to democracy:

Nor is liberty unimportant to the perfection of art. It was during the age of freedom, or before its momentum was spent, that the choicest models of antiquity were produced. It was during the era when mental liberty was revived, and ancient literature regained the ascendant, that the arts recovered their lost graces and power. Angelo was contemporary with Luther and Erasmus. Mental independence is indispensable to intellectual grandeur. (in Smith 1975, 84)

In this way, art's utility was directly tied to the production of an educated and civilised mind and society. In the opening speech of the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts, the Surveyor-General, Major Thomas Mitchell, also emphasised the importance of the Institute in terms of its ability to civilise the colony by providing a forum for the distribution of *European* culture:¹⁰

When we consider that the power to extend the dominion of civilised Man across regions peopled hitherto only by savages is derived from Art and Science ... and the great extent of the savage regions which now surrounds, which we are about to transplant the Arts, Science

and Literature of Europe, thus to assert the sovereignty of our nature, and assume that Empire for which providence intended us; we may then form some idea of the vast importance of such an Institution as that now proposed. (in Atkins 1981, 15)

In mid-nineteenth century Australia, there was a logical equivalence between *European* cultural forms and democratic civilisation.

We will recognise in these statements the civic humanist philosophy that an appreciation of 'fine' art is necessary to the exercise of civic virtue identified earlier as informing the establishment of the Royal Academy of the Arts in late eighteenth century Britain. In Australia, Mechanics' Institutes were specifically targeted at those who the late eighteenth century British Academicians considered unable to derive benefit from exposure to the arts. In a lecture to the Hobart Mechanics' Institute in 1849, the artist Benjamin Duterrau described the object of the institute in the following terms: to 'increase the number of enlightened characters, which will not only lessen the number of loose and wanton characters, but will eventually sink them into nothingness ... As the School of Athens has proved much in the great world, so may the school of Hobart Town do much in the little world where our happy community subsist.' (in Smith 1975, 95)¹¹

The Mechanics' Institutes were also organised on the basis of the provision of that great Victorian cure-all, 'useful knowledge'. The institutes aimed to diffuse 'useful knowledge', including technical education, to the 'mechanic' classes. Like the Schools of Design in Britain, the Mechanics' Institutes had a specifically utilitarian function to improve manufactured design. In 1857, Joseph Sheridan Moore wrote the first published article advocating government assistance to the arts (Smith 1975, 141). In this article, Moore argued that government should support the establishment of a Professorship of Painting and Drawing (including Design) in every municipal town possessing a Mechanics' Institute and that the Sydney branch should be called the 'Australian Central Academy of Fine Arts and Design' (Moore 1857, 6). What is notable about Moore's argument is that, for him, there was no distinction between the functions of the liberal arts in relation to the production of civility and the function of training in design in relation to the production of good quality manufacture, in addition to promoting civilisation — in other words, 'art pays' (1857, 1-2). This combination — 'civilising' and 'useful' — proved successful, judging by the speed that with which the institutes multiplied throughout the nineteenth century. Jean Riley (1994) argues for an historical account of the institutes which describes them as a success. She argues that a list of institutes receiving subsidies from the New South Wales government in 1928 'places the figure as high as 434 institutions, and recent field studies in Victoria indicate that there could have been as many as 1000 kindred organisations there as well' (1994, 211).¹²

It is remarkable that Australia's first Mechanics' Institute was established in Hobart. Van Diemen's Land, as Tasmania was then known, had a high proportion of transportees. In 1840, three-quarters of its population was still made up of convicts, ex-convicts and their children (Macintyre 1999, 77). The Van Diemen's Land Mechanics' Institute was established in 1827, just four years after an institute was established in London. With a population in need of 'civilising', there were few to provide this 'civilising' impetus. Nadel argues that culturally 'improving' developments were strongest where Scottish settlement was heavy; needless to say, Van Diemen's Land had a strong Scottish settlement (1957, p. 40). In this context, the Van Diemen's Land Mechanics' Institute was founded on the following principle: 'The object to be obtained is Instruction in the principles of the Arts and in the various branches of science and useful knowledge.' (in Galbally 1992, 11) Although, like other Mechanics' Institutes, the Van Diemen's Land institute was established to diffuse useful culture amongst the mechanics of the colony, as Ann Galbally (1992) argues, it was soon 'taken over by the middle classes eager for knowledge and culture which they saw as stepping stones for social advancement' (1992, 11). This struggle between the provision of 'useful knowledge' which

would be of use to the mechanic classes and the middle-class demand for cultural advancement was a tension which characterised Australian Mechanics' Institutes throughout the nineteenth century. It is this division which has led historians to conclude that the Australian Mechanics' Institutes were a 'failure'.

The failure of the institutes to attract the 'mechanic' classes was identified as early as 1865 by the Bishop of Tasmania, Francis Russell Nixon, as essentially arising 'from their benevolent founders failing to ascertain the conscious wants of the working classes' (in Nadel 1957, 182). I will discuss this negative historical assessment further in the next section. For now, it is important to note the social and cultural *significance* of the Mechanics' Institutes in nineteenth century Australia. Jean Riley (1994) has argued that the 'school of arts movement *overall* made a positive contribution to the cultural history of New South Wales through its libraries, lectures and involvement in adult education' (1994, 211-12). Despite the fact that the institutes were not a success with their original target population — the 'mechanic' classes — they are significant to the history of the development of an organised Australian cultural infrastructure because of the spread of the institutes and their nineteenth century popularity. The institutes provided a community space for the diffusion of culture in suburbs and regional towns, and it is impossible to underestimate the importance of the Mechanics' Institute tradition in terms of the development of community halls. Most importantly, the institutes operated as a discursive space. Through them, the expectation was articulated that providing access to culture to 'the people' was an important role for the colonial governments in order for the colony to be 'civilised'.

Mechanics, Culture and Civilisation: The Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts

I have commented on the 'surprising' and 'remarkable' nature of the establishment of Mechanics' Institutes in the Australian colonies. However, describing the establishment of the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts in 1833, Nadel (1957) argues that it is:

not surprising that immigrants in the early eighteen-thirties should have established the ... Mechanics' Institute in New South Wales, nor that they should boast a few years later that its membership had reached six hundred. The Manchester Mechanics' Institute, they pointed out, comprised only three times as many members, yet Manchester's population of over 200 000 was ten times that of Sydney in 1839. These men had brought with them the habits of the decade before the Reform Bill, the period in which the Mechanics' Institutes in Britain flourished and were looked to as providing a solution to educational and social problems. (italics added) (1957, 111)

However, to imply that the Mechanics' Institutes 'solution' was simply imported and applied is to ignore the specificities of the Australian context. I have argued that, in Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century, art programs targeted at the poorer classes were educational in nature and were specifically designed to improve the quality of British manufacture. In the second half of the nineteenth century in Britain, access to art and culture was understood to provide moral and social benefits to the poorer classes. In Australia, these two functions for art were combined much earlier: the institutes were to impart useful technical knowledge which would be of use to the construction of the new colony and also to exercise a civilising influence.

Sir Richard Bourke, Governor of New South Wales from 1831 to 1837 (and known as the 'Botany Bay Liberal'), was the first patron of the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts. Bourke described the institute's importance as twofold: in a country short of labour, the School would give 'the utmost efficiency which knowledge can impart'; and at the same time it would raise the moral tone of the community by superseding 'those tastes for idle dissipation which are unhappily too prevalent' (in Nadel 1957, 112). 'I wish to have some conversation with you upon the possibility of establishing a Mechanics' Institute in Sydney,' Bourke wrote to the Reverend Henry Carmichael in 1833 (in Nadel 1957, 111). Following this discussion, Carmichael called a meeting of interested parties on 1 March 1833. By 22 March, this provisional committee had called a public meeting, attended by over 200 citizens, at which

the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts was established. The aim of the school was to diffuse 'scientific and other useful knowledge, as extensively as possible, throughout the Colony of New South Wales' (Carmichael 1833, 69). It was to do this by:

- 1 The formation of an Institute under the title of the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts;
- 2 The formation of a library containing Books of Scientific and Useful Knowledge for the use of Members;
- 3 The purchasing and collecting Apparatus and Models for illustrating the principles of Physical and Mechanical Philosophy;
- 4 The delivering of Lectures upon the various branches of Science and Art;
- 5 The formation of Classes for mutual material instruction. (in Atkins 1981, 9)

Bourke called on Carmichael to discuss the establishment of the Institute for good reason. According to Carmichael's 'introductory discourse' at the opening of the school, its origins were on board the *Stirling Castle*, the ship on which Carmichael emigrated in 1831. During the journey, Carmichael organised a series of short courses for the steerage passengers. Prior to arrival at the colony:

the expediency and benefits were discussed of forming ... an association which should combine the advantages of a Mechanics' Institution and a Benefit Society: and a skeleton of such a society was accordingly drawn up, with the intention, on the part of the Mechanics, of bringing its plan into operation, as soon as circumstances would permit ... Amidst the difficulties of a first settlement however ... the scheme sketched on board for their guidance on shore was not followed up. (Carmichael 1833, 66)

In the event, and in common with the general trend of the later history of Australian cultural organisations, the impetus for the Institute's foundation came from the government. In 1836, the Legislative Council awarded the institute an annual grant of £200.¹³ According to Nadel, 'it was not until almost a century later that a government in the midst of a severe depression was to withdraw this and other subsidies to Mechanics' Institutes' (1957, 117).

Nadel has argued that it is possible to view the development of the Mechanics' Institutes in two stages. The first stage was characterised by 'the enthusiasm for the moral and social benefits of knowledge, and its diffusion among the lower orders' (Nadel 1957, 127). The second stage 'beginning in the late eighteen fifties' saw the civilising mission of the Institutes giving way 'to providing recreational facilities for an amorphous and democratically inclined multitude' (Nadel 1957, 127). In general, though, the institutes tended much more towards imparting 'useful knowledge' which was useful to the cultural cultivation of the middle classes rather than the provision of technical education for the 'mechanic' classes. In the 1835 *Annual Report* of the Sydney School, the Committee reported that it could not:

but regret that so few of that class, viz., the mechanics of Sydney, for whose benefit this Institution was mainly founded, should be entered among its members; and when they think that the annual contribution is hardly a third part of a week's earning, they cannot but express themselves deeply disappointed at such apparent indifference to their own individual improvement ... It is frequently urged by individuals of this class, that slender inducements are held out to become a member ... In a moral point of view, this Institution has a claim upon all classes of our society ... How much happier and better is that individual who leaves the halls of such an Institution fraught with Knowledge useful to himself, and beneficial to his fellow creatures — than he who reels from the abode of the drunkard or the debauchee, tainted with the vices which such society is sure to entail! (in Atkins 1981, 40-41)

It is for this lack of interest from mechanics that historians have assessed the institutes in general as a 'failure'. Nadel argues that this idea of failure was because the institutes were 'not adapted to the colonial economy by failing to define educational functions according to the needs of colonial utility' (1957, 124). In the absence of the provision of knowledge which was technically 'useful' to the mechanics, the Sydney school sought to provide a varied cultural and scientific education which was understood to be 'morally' useful. For instance, when the artist John Skinner Prout arrived in Sydney in 1840, he consented to give lectures

on art at the institute (Moore 1980a [1934], 152).¹⁴ Prout gave two series of six lectures which were so popular that, although seating was provided for 500 people, it was insufficient for the number of people attending (Moore 1980a [1934], p. 152). Prout visited Hobart in 1843, where his lectures aroused widespread interest in the subject of art. Prout was central to the organisation of the island's first art exhibition in 1848 (Smith 1995, 41). In an account of life in Tasmania written in 1852, Louisa Ann Meredith wrote that: 'The prevalent fashionable epidemic, instead of betraying symptoms of the ancient Berlin wool influenza or the knitting disorder, had taken an entirely new turn ... a landscape-sketching and water-colour fever raged with extraordinary vehemence.' (in Smith 1995, 41) Despite the popularity of these lectures, it is hard to see how 'landscape-sketching and water-colour fever' could constitute 'useful knowledge' for mechanics!

The period of Reverend John Woolley's vice-presidency marked a significant change in direction for the Sydney school.¹⁵ Woolley argued that the function of the school was 'to train up not citizens and men, but mechanics, merchants, physicians, lawyers. All is unprofitable and idle, which has no bearing upon our trade.' (Woolley 1860, 10) Woolley crystallised this argument in an address to the Wollongong School of Arts in 1861: 'Our wants are not those of England 30 years ago. We require not only skill in a section of the people, but education for all; not more art culture but preparation for the general duties of society.' (in Warburton 1963, 76) In line with this educational philosophy and its focus on technical education, a Mechanical Drawing class was established in 1865, the School of Design was established in 1870 and the Working Man's College proposed in 1873 (Sydney Mechanics School of Arts 1881, Appendix E). In 1878, the Technical or Working Men's College opened as a satellite of the school with government assistance of £2000. The college's initial enrolment was 500, growing to 1000 in the following year, of which 400 were manual workers (Warburton 1963, 77). The Working Men's College soon grew larger than the school, with almost 2000 enrolments by 1881. The origins of formal technical education in Australia can be traced to 1883 when the New South Wales government established a Board of Technical Education which took over control of the college (Whitelock 1974, 113).

While the early institutes did fail to attract their target audience — mechanics — the *general* characterisation of the Institutes as a 'failure' is nevertheless misleading. I have already commented on the radical growth in the numbers of institutes in the second half of the nineteenth century, which demonstrates their popularity at this time. It is also possible to query Nadel's point that 'education for Mechanics was soon to give way to amusement for the middle classes' (1957, 123). J.W. Warburton (1963) has argued in relation to the Sydney Mechanics' School of Art that Nadel's argument is misleading because, while mechanics 'did not support the institution in the early years ... they did in the 1870s when technical classes were established' (1963, 74). More importantly, the dismissal of the institutes as a 'failure' does not account for their importance in initiating the demand for and impetus of other organisations, in particular local libraries and technical education. Because of the combination of aims for the utility of art which characterised the formation of Mechanics' Institutes in Australia, the institutes were involved in the establishment of a *range* of organisations characterised by different articulations of the utility of art. For instance, and in contrast to the function of art in the Sydney Technical College, the origins of the New South Wales Academy of Art can be traced to a meeting at the Sydney school in 1871 (Moore 1980a [1934], 161). The physical as well as the discursive spaces provided by the institutes were crucial to the larger development of Australia's cultural infrastructure.

Conclusion

The discourses which informed the establishment of Australian cultural programs designed for broad access were above all to do with the utility of art in 'civilising' a population. This 'civilising' view of the utility of art was first applied in the establishment of the Royal Academy of Art in late eighteenth century Britain. It was not until the early to mid-nineteenth

century that art programs were developed in Britain which sought specifically to target those who were considered to lack access to culture. However, in the first instance, the benefit which was thought to derive from providing access to culture for mechanics was primarily in relation to training in 'good design'. In the early to mid-nineteenth century, Australia was undergoing a significant shift from a convict to a settler society. However, the colony was considered 'savage' and vulgar. When Mechanics' Institutes were established in Australia, they were to function in the first instance to provide a *civilising* influence on the colony. The institutes were *also* to provide training in 'useful knowledge' to mechanics. In the event, the institutes functioned more to provide access to 'civilised culture' for the middle classes than to provide access to 'useful knowledge' for mechanics. The primary reason for this was that the institutes did not adjust themselves to colonial conditions; they were essentially based on the premise that their function was to 'civilise' the colony by providing access to *European* culture. As for the eighteenth century civic humanists or the nineteenth century cultural critics, the civilising influence of culture was only exerted by access to, and education in, cultural forms which were part of the 'Great European Tradition'. It was this access which provided an education in 'correct taste'.

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¹ In the nineteenth century, the word 'mechanics' meant specifically craftsmen or loosely a working man, but was extended to refer to men pulled in from the villages to the industrial towns to tend machines in the new factories.

² For a further development of this argument and the subsequent history of Australian cultural policy see my *The Uses of Art: Constructing Australian Identities* (2001).

³ Australian Mechanics' Institutes were variously known as schools of art, athenaeums and literary institutes, as well as Mechanics' Institutes.

⁴ Elsewhere I have explored the relations between cultural criticism and the establishment of art programs which aimed to target 'the masses' in mid- to late nineteenth century Britain; see Gibson (1998).

⁵ See Candy and Laurent (1994), Whitelock (1974) and Nadel 1957 for histories of the Mechanics' Institutes. For histories of the National Gallery of Victoria, see Cox (1970), Galbally (1987) and Hoff (1973). For discussion of the relationship between the Galleries and the Institutes see Gibson (2001).

⁶ See Gibson (1998).

⁷ Reynolds notion of painting as a liberal profession was unusual for the late 1700s, as painting was thought of as a profession not fit for gentlemen.

⁸ Elsewhere I have discussed in detail the development of the relations between art, citizenship and government in eighteenth century France: see Gibson (1998).

⁹ A museum model which allowed access by a broadly defined citizenry, such as the Louvre, was actively resisted in Britain until the mid-nineteenth century.

¹⁰ Mitchell was elected first president of the institution.

¹¹ Dutterau exhibited six portraits at the Royal Academy between 1917 and 1923. He emigrated to Van Diemen's Land and began lecturing at the Hobart Mechanics' Institute in 1833 (Smith 1975, p. 87).

¹² Candy comments that, while 'no one knows for certain ... how many ... institutes there were ... Research ... reveals that there were probably in excess of 2000 nationwide.' (1994, p. 2).

¹³ While both the Sydney and the Hobart Mechanics' Institutes received government assistance, the Melbourne Mechanics' Institute received no assistance and indeed Sir George Gipps, Governor of New South Wales (1837-46), regarded the minimum price paid by the institute for its land as a 'plan to defraud the Government' (Eastwood 1994, p. 71).

¹⁴ According to Bernard Smith, Prout, along with Conrad Martens and George French Angas, was one of the most important artists working in the Australian colonies during the 1840s (Smith 1995, p. 42).

¹⁵ Woolley was Principal and Professor of Logic and Classics at the new University of Sydney.

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