Victoria is going to be aesthetic! It is all along of the Exhibition. The apostles of King Cole, of South Kensington, have done it. We shall expect the next young lady we take down to dinner in tight-cut garments of a chromatic scale of burnt-sienna colour, blending with subdued tints of rhubarb and magnesia, to sweetly whisper, 'are we intense?' Oh my! has it come to this? Shades of Murray and Flinders defend us! Mrs. Cimabue Brown has arrived. We caught sight of her yesterday, in clinging garments, in Messrs. Christofle's pavilion. And Mrs. Ponsonby de Tomkyns is coming. No more Australian mutton, duff, and damper. Hellenic concoction of butterflies' wings, syrup of passion-flowers, and aesthetic tea, in future. ¹

Even before it closed its doors in 1881, the Melbourne International Exhibition had been credited with the responsibility of unleashing Aestheticism upon the unsuspecting people of Victoria. So strongly, in fact, did Aestheticism make itself felt at the exhibition that the novelist, Ada Cambridge, writing at the turn of the century, vividly recalled the occasion as the beginning new era of public taste: ²

It was after this home of taste had been completed that we held our famous International Exhibition of 1880, which first taught us as a community the rudiments of modern art ... There is no lack now of what are generally described as artistic things ... but it was otherwise twenty years ago ... when we stay-at-homes were all for gold and white wall-paper and grass-green suites ... in our drawing-rooms.

In what form, then, did Aestheticism manifest itself at the exhibition? Contemporary photographs show that it infiltrated to the very heart of the building itself. Mather's murals in the crossing, particularly his representations of the arts and sciences on the massive piers supporting the dome, were painted in the stylized, two-dimensional manner of contemporary English Aesthetic decorators and book illustrators. In the courts and galleries below, amongst a mass of more conventional goods, the displays of Aesthetic wares immediately caught the attention of the viewer.

Such was the promise of the Australian colonies at the time that most of the leading English manufacturers of art pottery and porcelain - Minton, Wedgwood, Worcester Royal, Doulton and Brownfield - took the trouble to be represented. Photographs of their stands show an abundance of sunflowers,
Japanese shapes and patterns and other forms and motifs drawn from the Aesthetic vocabulary. The response of the British cabinetmaking and furniture trade was understandably more restrained, but the two principal English exhibitors both featured art furniture: 'William Walker and Sons ... had their allotment fitted up in the early English style, with furniture and decorations of the most recherché kind ... Messrs. Conrath and Sons ... in the same manner, with furniture and decorations in the early English, Queen Anne, and Chippendale styles'.

Surprisingly, it was a Melbourne firm, W.H. Rocke and Co., which most clearly demonstrated the character of this essentially English style. Occupying a prime position in the Victorian court, their main exhibit was a square bedchamber, furnished and decorated in the combined Renaissance and Adams' style. More pungently Aesthetic, however, were their tableaux of dining-room and drawing-room furniture, in the 'early English' and 'combined renaissance and early English styles'. The furniture was displayed against stylish backdrops designed by Mr. W. Mather. (fig. 1)

During the remainder of the exhibition and for the next few years, Aestheticism was the rage in Melbourne. Entrepreneurs in all fields were quick to move in and capitalize on it. The Aesthetic comedy, 'The Colonel', was performed in Melbourne in 1882 after its premiere in London the previous year. Likewise, Gilbert & Sullivan's operetta, 'Patience', with its cast of Aesthetic characters, reached the colony in 1882, little over a year after its first London performance.

The local press, particularly the Melbourne Bulletin and Australasian Sketcher, found in Aestheticism and Aesthetes a rich and seemingly inexhaustible seam of humour. The Bulletin followed Oscar Wilde's progress through the United States of America in 1882 ('Oscar Wilde's Aesthetic Costume', 'Oscar Wilde, The Apostle of Aestheticism', 'Aesthetic Miners' etc.) noted the redecoration of the White House in the 'greenery gallery style' ('Aestheticism in the White House'); satirized the Aesthetic vocabulary ('Intensely Utter') and warned its younger female readers against the danger of wearing tiger lilies. The Australasian Sketcher's commentary on the fad took the form of a series of cartoons or sketches peopled with Aesthetic stereotypes, many of them based on George Du Maurier characters in London Punch.
Figure 1. 'Dining-room and Decorations'. Part of W.H. Rocke and Co.'s stand at the Melbourne International Exhibition of 1880 (Illustrated Australian News, 31 December, 1880). The 'early English style' sideboard, shown here against a backdrop designed by Mr. W. Mather, was made in Rocke's Melbourne factory. (La Trobe collection, State Library of Victoria)
In the furniture trade, Aestheticism was taken much more seriously. W.H. Rocke and Co. was the first to realise its commercial possibilities. With its Aesthetic suites attracting so much attention at the exhibition, Rockes launched a vigorous promotional campaign for the new style. The first of their 'Aesthetic' advertisements, shows an avant-garde Aesthetic interior with high dado, Japanese scroll, Anglo-Japanese bureau and hanging cabinet filled with blue and white china or art pottery. (fig. 2) An 1882 advertisement lists the various types of art furniture which - together with Doulton art pottery - the public could inspect at the company's Collins Street showrooms. (fig. 3)

So heady was the prosperity of Melbourne at this time that Mr. Cullis Hill, a managing partner of Rockes, judged the time right to break away and set up on his own. On 18 July 1881, he opened his New English Art Furniture and Carpet Warehouse at 62 & 64 Elizabeth Street. His stock included Queen Anne, Chippendale, Old English, and Anglo-Japanese designs. Throughout the eighties, he and Rockes engaged in an energetic public tournament for the attention and custom of the readers of the popular press. (fig. 4) Such was the demand for furniture and furnishings that both firms maintained extensive workshops capable of producing work in the latest London styles. By 1882 Cullis Hill employed between seventy five and eighty hands. In his manufactory the Australasian Sketcher noted 'a large variety of bedroom suites in Old English designs, drawingroom furniture in Queen Anne, Chippendale, or Japanese, and diningroom furniture in either Old English or Jacobean'. A new and rapidly growing sideline for the firm was the manufacture of artistic carved wood mantels and overmantels.

The building boom of the 1880s created ideal conditions for the dissemination of the style, and materials bearing Aesthetic motifs - tiles, painted glass, cast iron, etc. - found their way into the majority of domestic structures erected during the decade. Simultaneously, Aesthetic furniture, wallpapers, textiles, ceramics, etc. gained at least a footing in many houses. Architects like Terry and Oakden clearly kept abreast of developments in England and were capable of designing interiors in the fashionable Jacobean, Queen Anne and Neo-Georgian styles. British-trained decorators like Paterson Brothers and the 'artistic designers' brought to Melbourne by Rockes were soon aware of shifts of taste in the Old Country and, with little delay, could interpret most of the new styles for their clients here.
Figure 2. W.H. Rocke and Co.'s advertisement in the Melbourne Bulletin, 15 October 1880. The stylish interior probably derives from an English journal or catalogue. This was the first of Rocke's Aesthetic advertisements. (La Trobe collection, State Library of Victoria)
Figure 3. Rice paper advertisement inserted in Martin Patchett's Fernshawe - Sketches Prose and Verse (1882). The advertisement, with its stylish graphics, lists the different types of art furniture and ceramics stocked by Rockes.
Figure 4. Cullis Hill and Co's advertisement in the Melbourne Bulletin, 15 May 1885. The advertisement shows the type of art furniture which was fashionable in Melbourne in the mid 1880s. On the left are a table and stand designed by the English architect, E.W. Godwin, and taken from W. Watt's Art Furniture from designs by E.W. Godwin, London, 1877. (La Trobe collection, State Library of Victoria)
A landmark of Aestheticism in Victoria was the 9 x 5 Impression Exhibition held at Buxton's Gallery, Swanston Street, Melbourne in 1889. That keen publicist, Cullis Hill, ever ready to put his name before the public, supplied the furnishings and fitted up the room in which the exhibition was held:

Drapings of soft Liberty silk of many delicate colours, were drawn, knotted and looped among the sketches, while Japanese umbrellas, screens and handsome Bretby jardinières completed a most harmonious arrangement of colour.

In displaying their pictures the artists eschewed the heavily moulded, mass-produced frames of the day and chose instead neat wooden panel frames which they bronzed and silvered themselves. Tom Roberts was clearly a pivotal figure in the introduction of this new strain of Aestheticism in Melbourne. During years in Europe (1881-85) he had come in contact with Whistler and espoused Aestheticism. It was clearly he who masterminded the decor of the 'Impression' exhibition and was the first to decorate his studio in an 'artistic' manner. The well-known portrait, 'Mrs. Abrahams in a Black Dress' (fig. 5), most probably shows a corner of his Grosvenor Chambers, Collins Street, studio as it corresponds closely to a description of his studio which appeared in Table Talk shortly after the portrait was painted.

Mr. Roberts' studio - which is one of the best in Melbourne - was most picturesquely arranged ... cunningly placed draperies in rich soft tones, broken here and there by bunches of dry reeds and grasses. Some kind friends had sent in a profusion of lovely flowers for the adornment of the studio, and as these were clustered together in great masses, and kept away from the paintings, they lit up the room ... and so produced a most charming effect.

The improvised nature of the decor, the general air of informality, the exotic nature of most of the props - the Japanese lantern, tray and cloth, the Chinese jar, the oriental cane chair, the 'Art Felt' floor covering and cow skin rug, the 'Old English' table and the extraordinary arrangement of gum leaves and gorse - make this picture one of the most startling documents of the Aesthetic style in Melbourne.

'Aesthetic' accessories - arrangements of reeds and grasses, art fabrics and Japanese screens and vases - continued to appear in Roberts's work for some
Figure 5. 'Mrs. Abrahams in a Black Dress' by Tom Roberts, 1888. This portrait was probably painted in Roberts' Grosvenor Chambers, Collins Street, studio. The interior is rich in 'artistic' accessories: - the 'Old English' table; oriental chair, jar, tray, cloth, lantern and fan; 'Art Felt' floor covering; and floral arrangements - a jar of reeds and grasses, a vase of japonica, and a bowl of gorse and gum leaves. A Whistlerian panel of muslin forms a subtle backdrop for the figure of Mrs. Abrahams. (National Gallery of Victoria)
years, either singly or in combinations suggesting interiors. Similar decorations were to be found in the studios and houses of his contemporaries, both professional and amateur, well into the 1890s. (figs. 6, 7)

Looking more critically at Aestheticism in Victoria, one is struck, firstly, by the lateness of its arrival in the colony, and, secondly, by the general superficiality of its appearance here. 1880 is a late date indeed for the debut of a movement which had its beginnings in England in the 1860s and was a commercial reality there by the early 1870s. Even Ada Cambridge admitted that Aestheticism was not unknown here before the exhibition:

... I remember the satisfaction with which the mistress of G--- wandered from court to court, and found no exhibits more pleasing, in their respective classes, than the treasures she had gathered for herself in foreign parts. Whether it were a Persian rug or a Venetian wine-glass, her specimen was, in her opinion, unsurpassed by any picked model of the like manufacture ... I believe G--- was unique in the colony as the first example of the new order.

One or two other writers, though, draw attention to an earlier and clearly the first major manifestation of the style here: the decoration by Gillow and Co. of London of a suite of rooms in the Aesthetic style at 'Mandeville Hall', Toorak, in 1878. (fig. 8) 'Ixion', in his 'A Saunter through a Fashionable Suburb' (1891) correctly linked Mandeville and the Exhibition:

The large house showing over the trees is Mandeville-hall, the residence of Mr. Joseph Clarke. This was one of the first Melbourne homes in Victoria to be decorated and furnished in the new art style introduced into the colony just before the opening of the exhibition in 1880. A leading London firm sent out a special man to execute the designs, and when the work was finished it was as great a revelation to Melbourne people as were the art furniture and glassware that formed such distinctive features in the exhibition of that time. Until Mandeville-hall was decorated the house decoration in the style that obtains in stately homes of England was unknown.

Aestheticism, then, was not entirely unfamiliar to Victorians in the late 1870s although its appearances were generally of an isolated or sporadic nature. By 1876, for example, an Aesthetic ebonized wood cabinet stood in the otherwise classic drawingroom of Werribee Park. In 1877 the Weekly Times advised its sporty readers of the arrival of the dado.
Figure 6. 'A.E. Aldis' Room at "Killala", Glenferrie, Victoria', by A.E. Aldis, c.1891. Aldis, an English painter, arranged this Aesthetic tableau whilst boarding in Rose Grainger's Hawthorn house. The grasses, ginger jar, fans, oil sketches and shuttlecock are shown against a Pompeian red wall. (Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne)
Figure 7. Ella Mackinnon's Room at 'Marida Yallock' in Victoria's Western District, c.1890. Assymetry reigns supreme in this 'artistic' arrangement of a mantelpiece and chimney breast. Miss Mackinnon, an amateur painter, was probably responsible for the decorations on the doors of the built-in clothes press.

(La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria)
Figure 8. Mrs. Ross Soden and three of her sons in the drawing-room of 'Mandeville Hall', Toorak. (Melbourne Punch, 7 January 1904). Decorated by Gillows of London in 1878 for millionaire, Joseph Clarke, Mandeville's principal rooms lay claim to being the earliest and most consummate interiors executed in Victoria in the Aesthetic style. By 1904 Gillows' satinwood furniture had been removed from the room, but the ceiling and mural decorations remained intact.
(La Trobe collection, State Library of Victoria)
Victorian mansions in the late 1870s, Aesthetic figures and other motifs were often encountered. But these were exceptions rather than the rule, and the low profile of the style in the years before 1880 — when it was the height of fashion in London — is difficult to explain. Mention of Aestheticism is notably absent from W.H. Rocke's Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses (1874) and from his advertisements of the 1870s. The fashion-conscious Rocke could not, however, have been unaware of the movement, having made at least two extensive buying trips to Britain in the 1870s (1873, 1877-78) and having had an agent or representative in London for most of the decade. In local trade catalogues of the 1870s, such as McEwan's Illustrated Catalogue of Furnishing and General Ironmongery, Aesthetic goods, readily available in England by that date, are not illustrated.

The flood gates, though, were clearly opened by the 1880 Exhibition, and the style, in its various guises, remained predominant in interior decoration until the turn of the century. By 1880, however, Aestheticism in England had lost its fire and become yet another decorating fad or conglomerate of fashions, to be picked over and exploited as quickly as possible by the fashion-conscious before it filtered down to the hoi polloi. Sadly, it was this late, debased form of Aestheticism which was most influential in the colony. The Melbourne Bulletin, probably quoting from an English journal, caught the mood:

People are beginning to get a little tired now of Japanese ornaments, and enterprising manufacturers are searching every country for new and picturesque styles ... The rage for Louis Quinze furniture has lately been superseded by a fancy for the semi-classical style affected at a slightly later date. The prevailing mode at present is an imitation of the Adam style ... this is what has supplanted the luxurious Louis Quinze fashions which were so popular a short time ago. Sheraton furniture is just now more popular than Chippendale ...

Nothing to rival Mandeville Hall was created in the colony in the 1880s or 90s, and the application of the style was remarkably piecemeal. (fig. 9) Italianate town houses erected in Melbourne suburbs like Hawthorn and Kew often sported quite extreme Aesthetic decorations in the painted glass surrounds of their front doors. Internally, too, a very smart imported Aesthetic cast iron gate, fitted with tiles by Moyr Smith, could unblinkingly be set into a classic white marble mantelpiece, as at Villa Alba, Kew (c. 1883).
Figure 9. Drawing-room of 'Tudor Lodge', Hawthorn, the home of the art furniture warehouseman, Cullis Hill, c.1890. This eclectic interior - with its European and oriental hangings, 'Chippendale' cabinet, Chinese export furniture and treasures from the 1888 Centennial International Exhibition - would have been considered 'artistic' by style-conscious Melbournians of the late 1880s. (Private collection)
Aestheticism was obviously little understood here. The colony appears to have largely missed out on the lively philosophical debate which formed the backdrop to the movement in England. Some discussion of Aestheticism, though, would have taken place in intellectual circles here, and individuals like J.E. Neild could strike a very convincing Aesthetic pose as early as 1878, as, for example, in his description of Mandeville Hall:

>a concert of relevant shapes and colours ... a poem of chromatic rhythm and symmetric forms ... an art glow whose beauty changes, but does not lessen, with every movement of the eye ... a dream, the memory of which comes back with a joyous fitfulness of recollection ... In truth there is such a flood of beauty, that the old allusion of embarras des richesses almost inevitably occurs to you. You cannot take it all in at once. You are like an unimprisoned bee, let loose into a garden of honey-laden flowers.

Charles Conder was undoubtedly an 'Aesthete' and the so-called 'Heidelberg School' is one of the most substantial manifestations of the movement here. The intellectual and philosophical bases of the 'School' can readily be traced back to the contemporary English debate on the nature of experience and of the beautiful.

Generally, though, Aestheticism in Victoria in the 1880s and 90s was notable for its superficiality, justifying the words of the Sydney journalist who in 1882 complained that Aestheticism in the colonies was 'a burlesque of a burlesque', 'a catch-phrase in the mouths of city clerks and drapers' assistants.'
Note on the Aesthetic Movement

The Aesthetic Movement originated in England in the 1860s as a reaction against the 'falsity' and banality of mid nineteenth century British design. It sought to bring 'taste' and beauty to all spheres of design, from architecture to dress. Initially it had a firm literary and philosophical base in the long standing debate on the nature of 'beauty' and 'taste', but in the 1870s it became faddish and commercial. It drew heavily for inspiration upon Japanese and late seventeenth and early eighteenth century British design, but soon came to encompass a ragbag of styles, from Adams revival to neo-Renaissance. The movement, its high priest Oscar Wilde, and disciples, were much satirised in the years around 1880 by journals such as *Punch*, and in the musical comedies of Gilbert and Sullivan.

References

7. ibid, 12 May 1882, p.1.
8. ibid, 14 July 1882, p.10.
9. ibid, 21 April 1882, p.7.
10. ibid, 3 March 1882, p.10.
11. ibid, 22 September 1882, p.6.
12. See Galbally, op.cit., figs. 1-3, for three typical illustrations.
14. See their *What to Build and How to Build It*, Melbourne, 1885.
15. Paterson Bros. was established in 1875. James Paterson, who came to Australia in 1873, served his apprenticeship with Purdie, Bonnar and Carfrae, 'the most eminent house painters and decorators in Scotland'. Hugh Paterson returned to Edinburgh in 1879 where he was engaged as a figure decorator by Cornelius, the famous Scottish art decorator. He returned to Australia in 1881. On another visit to Britain in 1886 he met William Morris, Sir Frederick Leighton, Walter Crane and many of the leading painters and decorators of the day. See *Australasian Decorator and Painter*, 1 November 1909, pp.29-30.
16. *Table Talk* 23 August 1889, p.4.
17. ibid, 26 April 1889, p.5.
21. For example, Dhurringile, near Shepparton, (1876-77).