



The Napier Waller murals at the Melbourne Town Hall by Terence Lane

A new hall within the old

In the early hours of Sunday 1 February 1925 a spectacular fire swept through the Melbourne Town Hall destroying much of the roof and interior. The principal casualty was the main hall, including its famous organ and many of the full-length portraits of former mayors and Lord Mayors that hung in the panels down the side walls. After surveying the damage, the City Councillors decided not to restore the Renaissance Revival interior of the hall but to redecorate in the modern style. Special requirements arose from the fact that the hall was a multi-purpose space, used for concerts, mayoral balls and dinners and other civic functions. Acoustics were important and it was decided to clad the panels with Celotex tiles, a type of fibreboard (like Caneite) made from bagasse or sugarcane refuse.

The commission

In July 1927 the Melbourne artist Napier Waller was invited, through the architects Stephenson & Meldrum, to submit designs for a mural scheme for hall. (The scheme eventually numbered twenty-one panels, including the ten main side panels.) Originally, the City Council had hoped for a full-colour mural cycle depicting the founding of Melbourne and incidents from its early history, but this proved to be impractical because the tiles should not be sized or extensively overpainted without interfering with their acoustic qualities.

Instead, the Committee 'adopted the conventional line decoration, which will enable all but a very small portion of the panels to remain uncovered.' Napier Waller wrote: 'The line itself will be a warm umber line drawn on with a volatile spirit. No binder is necessary as the stain becomes fixed in the absorbent Celotex.

The decorative effect will depend on the warm tones of Celotex itself with the play of the umber line and the suggestion in small quantities of a powder blue background. The character of this line will be heraldic rather than naturalistic, so that a rhythm of line will be sustained.' Waller may have been influenced in his choice of medium by the three vast (465.0 x 287.0, 465.0 x 345.5, 463.0 x 285.0cm) Puvis de Chavannes sepia cartoons that had been presented by the Felton Bequest to the National Gallery of Victoria in 1925.

Arcadia

In all his murals Waller was concerned to protect the 'integrity' of the wall, keeping his figures very much in the foreground close to the picture plane, and avoiding deep perspective. He also deliberately suppressed narrative in the panels: 'The subjects of the panels are not intended to be allegorical, mythological or descriptive,' he wrote, 'for decoration is the first thought'. Nevertheless, he surmised that 'probably the individual will find many subjects he knows.' - a prediction that countless concertgoers over the decades know to be true.

Although non specific, the figures conjure up an Olympian, Arcadian or Golden Age world - of the gods on Mount Olympus, of the inhabitants of an ideal rustic paradise, or the Greek and Roman poets' evocation of 'the first period of history', when the human race lived in an ideal state. Such subjects had been common since the Renaissance but abounded from the late nineteenth century, as painters plundered the past for subjects that would contrast with contemporary life. Waller had already gained a reputation for his classical subjects in

watercolours and prints, and depicted a similar world in his murals for Menzies Hotel (1927) and the Melbourne Public Library (1926-28).

The principal side panels were a challenging 530 high by 402cm wide. 'To be effective, these spaces necessarily demand heroic treatment, and the figures in Mr Napier Waller's designs will be from 12ft (366cm) to 15 ft (457.5cm) high. From the floor they will appear to be about life size.'

Process

Waller prepared the designs at his Fairy Hills, Darebin studio. He worked on what is called 'half scale', which is a quarter of the size of the finished decorations on the walls of the Town Hall. Each figure would have been based on a life drawing made specifically for this commission or taken from his portfolio. Even the dogs that appear in some of the panels would have been adapted from drawings of the Wallers' Airedale terriers.

A trial panel, the St George and the dragon design for the side wall of the south balcony (its subject puzzlingly out of sync with the rest of the panels, and perhaps a discreet war memorial), was submitted to Council early in August 1927. The design was approved on 8 August and a memorandum of agreement prepared on 15 August. Waller's squared designs were delivered to the Town Hall as they were completed, and were then transferred to the walls under Waller's supervision by a Mr R Sheele and other tradesmen employed by the contractors, the Toorak decorators, Messrs Henry Oliver and Sons.

The grid formed by the 12 inch (30.5 cm) tiles must have been invaluable in this process. The panels were complemented by the overall décor of the hall, 'a warm old ivory with slight contrasts of tone scumbled on pilasters and cornices.' This was said to produce 'an entire effect of quiet richness.' The hall was reopened to great acclaim with an Official Opera Concert on the evening of 15 December 1927.

Waller's life

Mervyn Napier Waller was born in Penshurst in Victoria's Western District in 1893. In 1913 at the age of twenty he came to Melbourne to attend the National Gallery School under Frederick McCubbin (drawing) and Bernard Hall (painting). He was an assiduous and talented student and won many prizes. His artistic career was interrupted by the Great War. In August 1915 he enlisted in the AIF 22nd Infantry Battalion and went into training. The following year he married Christian Yandell, a fellow student at the National Gallery School. Shortly afterwards he embarked for Europe where, after further training in England, he fought in several battles in France. He was injured at Bullecourt in 1917 and lost his right arm.

With great determination he taught himself to draw with his left hand. Back home in Melbourne he earned a reputation for his watercolours and relief prints and could have been expected to remain an easel painter. In the later 1920s, however, particularly after his and Christian's European study tour in 1929-30, he became increasingly preoccupied with stained glass and murals, undertaking some of the most important commissions awarded in this country. The largest of them - the stained glass windows and mosaic mural decorations for the Australian War Memorial, Canberra - occupied him and a team of assistants from 1952 to 1958. He continued working on stained glass windows and murals until his death in 1972.

Waller and mural painting in Australia

Waller was the greatest exponent in Australia of the international mural painting movement. This had its roots in the nineteenth century but flourished in the between-the-wars period. Between 1926 and 1967 Waller completed nine murals for public and commercial buildings in Melbourne's CBD. (Two have been relocated: the Menzies Hotel murals are at the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; and the Royal Insurance Company murals, c.1940, are in the School of Architecture, University of Melbourne).

The in situ works range from the Peace after victory mural on the staircase of the State Library of Victoria, to the Myer Mural Hall, 1933, and the spectacular mosaic I'll put a girdle round about the earth, 1933, on Newspaper House, Collins Street. Each mural presented a different set of challenges, in scale, medium and location. The scheme Waller devised for the Melbourne Town Hall has continued to intrigue and delight Melburnians since its unveiling in December 1927.