



Lord Mayor's 'Victory' Dinner, 1945

Foreward

Illusions of Grandeur profiles the value of horticulture in the City of Melbourne's civic ceremonial life - particularly as the city's identity is entwined with its rich garden heritage.

The extravagant floral displays within the Melbourne Town Hall reveal a tradition of municipal horticulture that flourished up until the early 1980s. The displays present a glimpse into the cultural traditions of the practice, the flora that was featured and the horticulturist's expertise. Such brilliant floral presentations were specially composed for important one-off civic events and the annual Lord Mayor's Ball and Lord Mayor's Dinner.

Sweeping garlands and layers of flowers and foliage were arranged in the foreground of imposing painted scenic murals. The three dimensional element of flora served to embellish the scenery. What could be more lasting than to capture a moment in time of pure sensory exhilaration?



FOREWARD

The Tradition

The settings reflect a dazzling ephemeral visual art tradition that was popular in formal municipal affairs in Melbourne from the 19th century. The use of background montage and foreground floral displays allude to a tableaux vivants convention - the intention to simulate or mimic a recognisable image through the use of 'live' objects, such as people, plants, and running water.

Classical and imperial icons fuse with local figures to create an effect that is burlesque for the spectator of today. Whether the content of painted scenes are derived from European allegorical, mythological or historical subjects - Windsor Castle or the Parthenon - they are chiefly rendered to celebrate a European heritage. The re-creation of European cultural symbols is even more

arresting as they appear together with local 'performers' frozen within the same scene. The use of obvious and stereotypical Australian representations suggest a certain self-assurance from the audience of the time: the bearded Aboriginal male figure, boomerang-shaped stage configurations, Melbourne's panoramic skyline, and even Flinders Street Railway Station. This identification of uniquely Australian and/or traditional European symbol was essential in celebrating the dignity and splendour of the occasion.

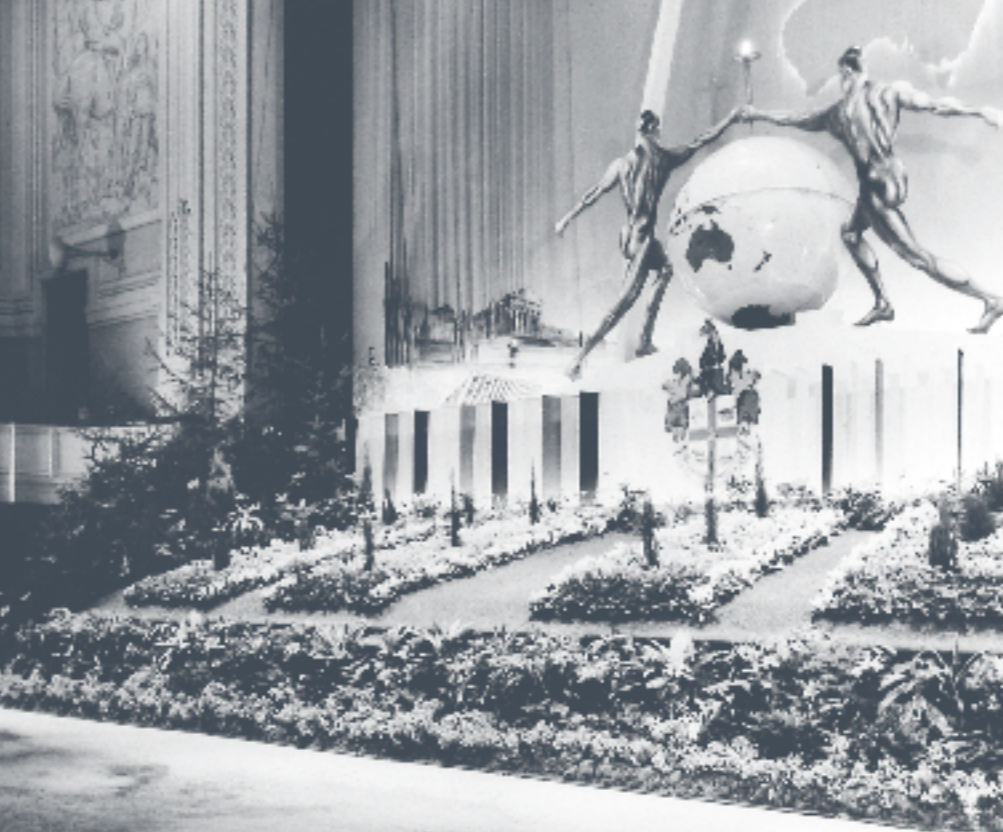
The civic ceremony presented the ideal platform for nationalist sentiment simultaneously with exuberant expressions of loyalty to Great Britain. At a crucial time in world affairs - between and post-wars - Melbourne sought to pitch itself in grand style. The Centenary, the Coronation, the Olympics; the fervent cultural aspirations of young Melbourne town are unabashedly put on show for the privileged of the city. The equivocal nature of being a colonial society insists on the distinctive relevance of such imagery and ceremony. By virtue of their scale and function, the painted scenic backdrops and gardenesque foregrounds serve as a point of illusion and exaggeration - to elevate extravagant ideas!

One other ritualistic municipal ceremony was observed with equal attention, namely 'The Sunken Garden'. The occasion refers to the formal dinner in which newly elected City Councillors first met, to dine around a large oval table in the Reception Room (now The Yarra Room). The table (four x eight metres) featured a hollow centre in which a 'Sunken Garden' was created. The central display would often contain a running water feature, sculptures, urns and densely surrounded by ferns, flowers and foliage. The entire room was encircled with large palms and garlands

Whether perspective was achieved with the art of trompe-l'oeil on a single canvas backdrop or a series of scenes constructed with bordering plants - and, whatever the content may represent - the whole intention and effect was to create an illusion of grandeur.



THE TRADITION



Olympics Ball, 1956

The Flora

The Melbourne City Council Nursery was prodigious in its production of the large quantity and variety of plants required. The vast output of potted plant stock was interchangeably used to service all the Council's requirements - annual flowers for garden beds and Town Hall decorations, parks shrubberies and street trees. Furthermore, the production process and Conservatory ensured that plants were readily available for scheduled and non-scheduled ceremonials that demanded floral decorating. For example, Azalea flower buds would be judiciously nurtured before 'show-time' in the Conservatory, and later, the bud caps would be handpicked off to burst just in time for the event. Labour, apparently, was not a problem.

The composition of the flora largely depended on what was seasonally available. In any case, the design would generally consist of several layers: background, middle, and foreground. Often, the 'live' flora was placed in a way to blur the distinction between the painted flora in the mural. Consequently, the depth and breadth of the perspective range is heightened to achieve the overall dramatic effect. The background flora consisted of maturely established tree stock placed in large pots. Raising the pots on the constructed platform would enhance the effect of such large specimens. Sometimes the effect was further exaggerated by heaving the pots even higher onto stacked drums. Note, the stature of the background trees often overlap the Town Hall Organ.

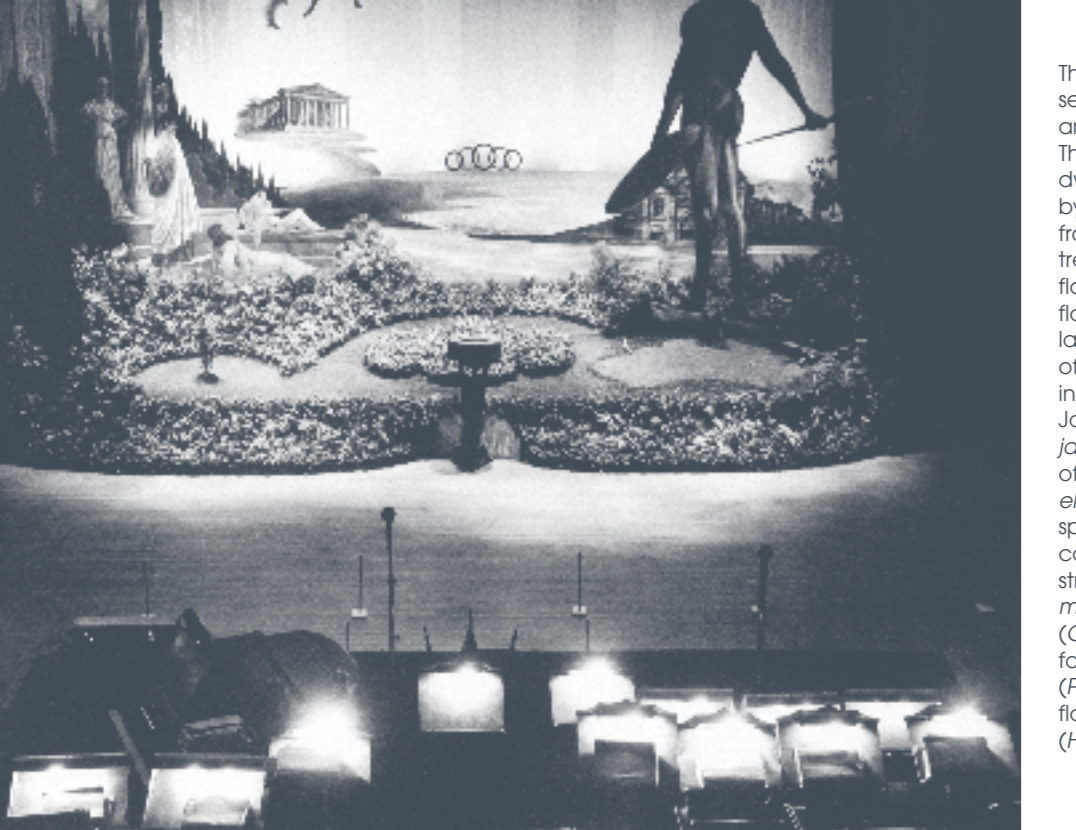
Apart from structural function in the design, the feature characteristics of each specimen was carefully considered: red leaves of the Japanese Maple (*Acer palmatum*) and Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*); golden yellow autumn leaves on long pendulous branches of the Weeping Cut-leaf Silver Birch (*Betula alba pendulatum 'dissectum'*); bright yellow-green tulip-like flowers on bare branches of the Tulip Tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*); ferny fronds of the indigenous Soft Tree Fern (*Dicksonia antarctica*); and, flickering green-silver leaves of the erectly poised Lombardy Poplar (*Populus nigra 'Italica'*). Whether the trees were arranged in rows, groupings or as statements, their scale and individual character contributed significantly to the overall design.



THE FLOWERS



Lord Mayor's Dinner, 1945



Lord Mayor's Ball, 1949

The middle stratum of flora served to fill up the vast stage area with colour and mass. The volume of shrubs and dwarf trees unified the design by creating a progression from the striking background trees to the lower lying, floriferous foreground. The flora selected for the middle layer performed an array of functions and effects and included: 'green' shrub fillers, Japanese Aucuba (*Aucuba japonica*); graceful shapes of Aralia (*Dizygotheca elegantissima*); vivid colour sprays of Rhododendron; contrasting foliage of the strappy Dracaena (*Dracaena marginata*) or Cordyline (*Cordyline australis*); colour foliage forms of Flax cultivars (*Phormium tenax*); and bold flower forms of Hydrangeas (*Hydrangea macrophylla*).

The foreground flora occupied the most prominent position of the display. Seasonal flowers and foliage forms flourished to produce the brilliant colour that would greet guests to the ceremony. Thousands of 'pots of colour' would be lined up or grouped to craft borders, garden beds, rockeries and hanging baskets. The qualities of each species was accentuated by the mass and/or repeat patterning of slender flower stems of Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*); densely rich colour bunches of Chrysanthemums (*Chrysanthemum carinatum 'tricolor'*), variegated foliage of Spider Plant (*Chlorophytum comosum*); and the quaint effervescence of Ladies Purses (*Calceolaria*).

The flora awarded the Town Hall ceremonies with sprays of luxuriant colour, an assortment of contrasting shapes, tempting textures, and fresh fragrances. The vegetation may well have been short-lived, but the effect was everlasting!

The Horticulturist
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Smith was well versed in European tradition as his horticultural experience and training were based in working on British estate gardens. As an accomplished horticulturist, Smith augmented Melbourne's rich garden heritage through his beautifying of public parks and gardens, establishment of the Conservatory and the floral decorations for civic events at the Town Hall

JT Smith extended the production facilities of the MCC Nursery to a capacity that could fully adorn the Town Hall, as well as Melbourne's parks and gardens, all-year round. Smith's influence on the 'exterior' is evident, as the municipal-pleasure-garden character of Melbourne's public parks and gardens has not changed much since. Smith's technique to create uniformity of appearance was decisive in the horticultural embroidery of the city - specimen trees, brightly coloured flowerbeds and spacious lawns.

JT Smith was one of the leading proponents of the establishment of the Conservatory in the Fitzroy Gardens, motivated by his ardent belief that the Conservatory would serve for the 'public good'. As a leading figurehead in the influential Tree Planter's Association, he promoted the use of Australian native trees as ornamental street trees.

The eminent horticultural status of MCC Parks and Gardens was maintained by subsequent Directors. The tradition developed within the unit demanded that each Director 'worked up through the ranks', beginning on the grounds as gardeners, in the nursery and then onto manager, super-intendant, and finally Director - all achieved over a twenty to thirty year period. Thus the horticultural skill, knowledge, and artistry would be shared and imparted from one generation to the next. The knowledge of how to use plants and the support of knowledgeable staff made the floral displays easy to put together.

The horticulturists worked alongside the City Architect's Department to bring together the Town Hall displays. The City Architect was responsible for the design and construction of the stage settings. Various MCC internal trades were utilised in bringing together set display, including stonemasons, carpenters, and illustrators. For the scene paintings, notable Melbourne-based theatre scenic artists were employed, such as the eminent W.R Coleman and Rupert Brown.

Before the major restructuring of council's departments in the 1980s, the self-sufficient nature of the Council enabled a fluid relationship to exist between its various departments. The distribution of skills and resources merged for the production of civic ceremonies, resulting in a spectacular finish of the stage and floral decorations. The bygone city council structure and tradition evoke a time of imperious civic pride.

Jela Ivankovic-Waters Curator

Jela is a Melbourne-based landscape gardener and designer with wider interests in the arts. Trained at Burnley, she has had a range of residential, commercial and community-based commissions. She takes an active interest in local garden history, design and culture.

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City Gallery
Melbourne Town Hall
Gallery Times
Monday 10am-2pm
Tuesday-Thursday 11am-6pm
Friday 11am-6.30pm
Saturday 10am-2pm

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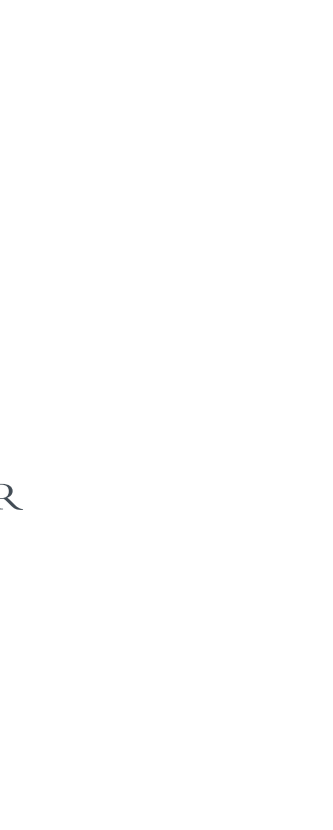
Finally, special thanks to Studio Round and Ross Turner Scenic Studios.

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ILLUSIONS
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Flora and ceremony
at the
Melbourne Town Hall
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6 April - 10 July 2004
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City Gallery



Lord Mayor's Ball, 1939