

# Harbouring various delights

Visitors to sports-mad Sydney could do worse than stroll through its art galleries for a snap history lesson, says Benjamin Genocchio

**S**YDNEY was a city of felons and whores — or at least that was the judgment of all but a few of the first Europeans to visit the miserable penal colony in its infancy, riddled as it was with every species of depravity.

The accepted turning point in our public image — shackled for decades to the legendary horrors of Botany Bay — came with the visit in 1871 of the then famous English author Anthony Trollope, lately embarked on a literary tour of the colonies.

Dazzled by the natural splendour of the harbour, Trollope wrote a justly celebrated description of the city, and from that moment Sydney's fame was sealed — no longer as an open-air prison but an international tourist attraction.

What is equally apparent in early accounts of the birth of Sydney is that Australia was a multicultural society from the start, not to mention the immense diversity among the indigenous population. Although it is not well known, the first boatloads of brigands dumped here by the British crown contained — among what was inarguably a disconsolate rabble — no fewer than six nationalities as well as representatives of at least four religions.

Even Arthur Phillip, the architect of the penitentiary without walls, was the British-born son of an immigrant German Jew, a detail some Australian historians seem to have found uncomfortable and thus politely ignore.

It seems odd that it should take an international sporting event for us to focus attention on our past, but right now it is possible to navigate and delight in the history of Sydney through art-works. It is a startling achievement for which our city's numerous galleries and art museums should be proud.

I am referring, of course, to the bevy of shows organised for the 2000 Olympics Games, exalting Sydney and its splendid harbour, which follow on from a minor publishing craze that during the past year or so has led to the release of many fine books on the topic, notably Tim Flannery's collection of early historical writings titled *The Birth of Sydney*, which I highly recommend.

The story of Sydney begins at the State Library of NSW, where some of the earliest European artistic impressions of Australia are on view, including three images of Sydney Cove believed to be the first oil paintings executed in the colony.

From there it is a short walk to the Museum of Sydney for a selection of



paintings of Sydney Harbour from the 19th and 20th centuries, complemented, across the Domain at the Art Gallery of NSW, by a handful of important works in the Australian Icons show. Half a dozen photographic exhibitions at venues dotted around the city depict the rise of the city as a modern metropolis and document our burgeoning ethnic diversity.

With so many fine exhibitions to choose from, I would like to take the unusual step of focusing this review on a single but in my view exemplary image of Sydney — John Olsen's 1963 painting *Five Bells*, on view at the AGNSW in the Icons show.

I have been circling this puddle of a picture for weeks, returning again and again to where it hangs in a small alcove to the left of the main reception area. It is a terrific picture, arguably Olsen's best, and a truly resplendent image of the clamour and clatter that is modern Sydney Harbour.

People think living by the harbour is beautiful — it is, but it is also like living next door to a freeway, with endless noise and traffic. Painted in 1963 as a private commission for the harbourside home of George and Eva Clarke, where it remained obscured from public view

until last year, *Five Bells* is a wild and reckless picture.

Marking the canvas with flowing speed, not unlike the way great murals and frescoes were done centuries ago, Olsen crowds his imagery for visual effect. Explosive and organic, the dense central section looks like a suppurating wound — a wound that bleeds its way into hundreds of little bays and coves separated by fingers of land bedecked with waterside mansions and the occasional tuft of verdant reserve. No artist this century has so evocatively captured the natural rhythms of the harbour.

The allure of the work derives chiefly from its unusual combination of an aerial view and microscopic detail, and the way in which the forms of the harbour are meshed with the glaze-like water and the flutter of light. But what is equally interesting are the acres of empty canvas that give you the feeling of looking at the page of an artist's sketchbook or graffiti hurled across a once pristine white wall.

Tense and hurried, the work is like a mental sketch of the harbour, one conjured to the meter and rhyme of Kenneth Slessor's meditation on time and

**Mind's eye:** John Olsen's *Five Bells* (1963) — 'a terrific picture, arguably Olsen's best' — captures the natural rhythms of Sydney Harbour

flux, *Five Bells*, from which the picture takes its title and, according to comments by Olsen, its primary inspiration.

Like Slessor's poem, Olsen's picture tells its story in fragments and incidents, tiny calligraphic marks inspired by Jean Dubuffet and Joan Miro but whose overall tonal variations appear to owe more to his teacher, the great Sydney artist (and harbour painter) John Passmore.

But what distinguishes Olsen's *Five Bells* from all other views of Sydney is that we never get the impression of viewing the harbour from just one place or perspective. The harbour is viewed, you could say, through the mind's eye, affording a simultaneous sense of "a thousand different aspects of the water" — the very quality that so enchanted Trollope, our first literary champion, a little less than 130 years ago.

*Australian Colonial Art, State Library of NSW, to December 3. Australian Icons, Art Gallery of NSW, to October 29. Sydney Harbour, Museum of Sydney, to December 3.*