Holtermann panorama

The Holtermann panorama is one of the most impressive Australian photographic achievements of the nineteenth century. Taken in 1875 by Bernard Otto Holtermann and his assistant, Charles Bayliss, the panorama comprises 23 albumen silver photographs which join together to form a continuous 978-centimetre view of Sydney Harbour and its suburbs. The photographs were taken from a specially constructed tower built by Holtermann at his home in Lavender Bay on Sydney's North Shore.

At the top of a 27-metre tower, Holtermann installed several large-format cameras with telephoto lenses and at the base he built a dark-room in which to develop the photographs. Holtermann and Bayliss used the collodion 'wet-plate' process, so called because the glass plate negative was coated with an emulsion of collodion and, while still wet, was exposed in the camera and then developed.

The problems associated with handling these glass negative plates were considerable, particularly as Holtermann and Bayliss preferred to use large negatives, generally measuring 46 by 56 centimetres. In 1875, they also made the world's largest glass plate negatives, which measured 152 by 91 centimetres. After exposure, the negatives were carried by hand down the stairs of the tower to the dark room.

The cost of Holtermann's photographic projects was substantial at around £1,000, with most of this money deriving from a large gold strike he had made at Hill End in New South Wales in 1872.

Holtermann emigrated from Germany in 1858 at the age of twenty to seek his fortune in the 'far-famed Gold Land (of) Australia'. After working in a variety of odd jobs, he joined the vast number of other immigrants who had been lured to the colonies by the promise of success at the gold-fields. He prospected in the Hill End and Tamboroora region for nine years, but met with little success until 1878, when the Star of Hope Gold Mining Company, in which he was a partner, struck a rich vein of gold. Shortly afterwards, on 19 October 1872, the world's largest nugget of reef gold was discovered in the mine. Although Holtermann was only one of several involved in the find, the huge nugget subsequently bore his name and he used a montage photograph of himself with 'the Holtermann nugget' when promoting his later ventures.

Holtermann's interest in photography is believed to date from 1872 when he met the photographer Beaufoy Merlin (Australia, 1830-1873) who had travelled to Hill End with the American and Australasian Photographic Company. At Merlin's suggestion, Holtermann began to arrange a grand International Travelling Exposition. Both men believed that this Exposition would reveal Australia's glories to Europe and America through a display that included mineral samples and primary produce collected from various parts of the colony. A major feature of the exhibition was an extensive series of photographs and Merlin was duly appointed as the project's Photographic Artist.

In early 1873 Merlin began to travel through New South Wales in a specially constructed van, collecting samples and photographing country towns and cities. Later that year, however, he died and the project was continued by his young assistant, Charles Bayliss.

Bayliss approached his new position with enthusiasm, taking over 200 photographs, largely in Victoria, in 1874. One of the most notable of these is a nine-print panorama of Ballarat, taken from the tower of the City Hall. In May of the following year Bayliss went to Sydney to help Holtermann fit out his tower in preparation for taking the huge panoramas of the harbour and suburbs.

It has been maintained that Holtermann's main function in the panorama project was as a financial patron and interested observer. However, there is evidence to suggest that he was a more active participant. In his diary for 1875, held in the National Gallery of Australian's collection, Holtermann notes his own photographic activities. On 23 May, for instance, he wrote: 'Splendid day took 14 negatives and identified sights at night'. While none of the entries specifically mentions the panoramas, Holtermann does refer to them in other documents as having been a collaborative effort, with his own role clearly more than that of a passive spectator.

Whatever the extent of his involvement, Holtermann took a great deal of personal pride in the project and firmly believed that his photographs could play a significant role in encouraging emigration to Australia. He frequently proposed that the Government should support his undertakings and in 1883, as the member for St Leonards in the New South Wales Parliament, he brought an (unsuccessful) motion on this question before the House.

By the end of 1875 the panoramas had been completed. The following year Holtermann's photographs, including the large Sydney panorama, were featured in the official New South Wales display in the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition which attracted nearly ten million people over a 159-day period.

Holtermann travelled to the United States in 1876 and visited the Philadelphia exhibition, where his exhibition of photographs received a bronze medal. During his tour of America, Holtermann presented lectures and displayed an eight-foot length of canvas covered with photographic views of New South Wales. He also sold copies of the photographs and panoramas and it is believed that the Gallery's panorama is one of those sold in the United States at this time.

After leaving America, Holtermann continued his travels through Europe, visiting France, Germany and Switzerland. He later wrote that public interest in his photographs was high and that he had received many enquiries regarding immigration to Australia. He returned to Sydney in 1877, leaving the large panorama in Europe for inclusion in the Exposition Universelle Internationale in Paris the following year. This exhibition was even more

popular than the one held in Philadelphia, with an astounding thirteen million people visiting the displays. Contemporary Sydney newspapers proudly recorded their State's own court in this grand exhibition, frequently noting Holtermann's large panorama as the most important work in the photographic display.

The appeal of the panorama lay both in its sheer impressive size and in the clarity of the photographs which, as Holtermann wrote, 'showed distinctly All the Principal Buildings of Sydney and Suburbs for a distance of 4 Miles and more accurately than can be seen with the naked eye'. The photographs were also invested with an authority that painting and printmaking did not have. The camera was then considered a scientifically accurate recording instrument and as such could make precise and truthful records of the city's development, while seemingly unimpeded by the artist's imagination.

Holtermann and Bayliss were not the first photographers in Australia to make panoramas. The earliest extant example is believed to be an eight-panel view of Melbourne, taken in 1854 by Walter Woodbury. The first photographic panorama of Sydney was produced by the Freeman Brothers four years later.

Nineteenth-century photographers were, however, working within a long tradition of panorama making. The origins of the panorama lie in the painted panoramas on canvas patented by the English artist Robert Barker in 1787 and in panoramic prints. One important early Australian example of a panoramic print, which is held in the Gallery's collection, is the *Panoramic view of King George's sound, part of the Colony of Swan River*, printed by Robert Havell in London in 1834 after a drawing by Lieutenant Robert Dale.

The most common subject in Australian photographic panoramas was the city. Public demand for such images reflected the shift in population in the nineteenth century from rural to urban centres. The population of Sydney, for instance, more than doubled, increasing from around 95,000 in 1861 to nearly 225,000 twenty years later.

Associated with Sydney's rapid development was a desire for visual documents which would record and celebrate the city's progress. Holtermann and Bayliss's panorama is a stunning example of one such work in which locals could proudly note the large number of ships on the harbour, indicative of the thriving mercantile trade; the spread of the population into the suburbs; and the many fine large private and public buildings in the city.

However, the panorama is more than a valuable historical record of nineteenth-century Sydney. It is an impressive photographic achievement which successfully combines precise detail and large scale in a dramatic format.

The Holtermann panorama: Sydney in 1875
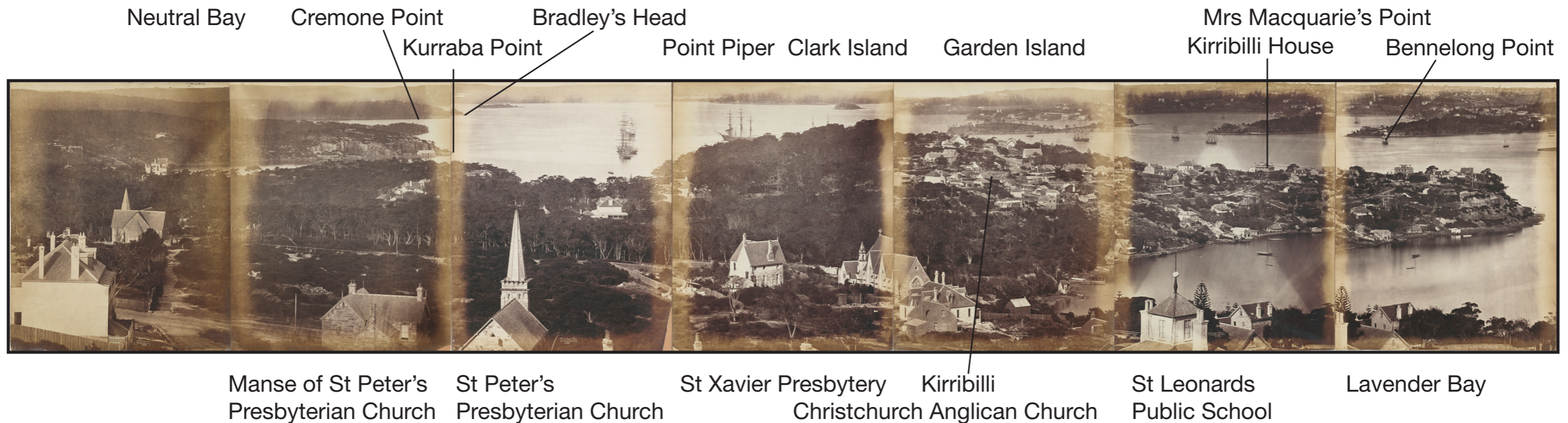
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Section A Panels 1–7 **Section B** Panels 8–14

Charles BAYLISS
*Panorama of Sydney Harbour
and suburbs from the north shore*
1875 (detail, 14 panels)
Sydney, New South Wales, Australia
albumen silver photographs
(23 panel panorama)
commissioned by Bernardt O. Holtermann

Section A

Neutral Bay Cremone Point Bradley's Head Point Piper Clark Island Garden Island Mrs Macquarie's Point / Kirribilli House Bennelong Point

Kurraba Point

Manse of St Peter's Presbyterian Church St Peter's Presbyterian Church St Xavier Presbytery Kirribilli St Leonards Public School Lavender Bay

Christchurch Anglican Church

Section B

Fort Macquarie / Government House Circular Quay / Dawes Point Town Hall / Observatory Hill Darling Harbour / Pyrmont Bridge Millers Point University of Sydney Goat Island

McMahons Point Blues Point