



PANORAMIC
QUEENSLAND

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PHILIP BACON HERITAGE GALLERY
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pan-o-ram-a (p²n" ...-²m" ..., -r^ä"m...) n. ¹

1. An unbroken view of an entire surrounding area.
2. A comprehensive presentation; a survey.
3. A picture or series of pictures representing a continuous scene.



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Photographs are so ubiquitous today that we rarely reflect on what they are, who they are for, what they mean, their history and place. When looking at early photographs from the nineteenth century, one is struck by a range of emotions – nostalgia, curiosity, melancholy and awe. Aged and faded, buildings and faces from a bygone era ghost the surface of the print. We search for something familiar or identifiable to ground our inquisitive gaze. Never has humanity been more aware of its own history and the effects of time. “Photographs testify to time’s relentless melt.” ²

In an image saturated world, it’s easy to forget that photography is less than two hundred years old. In 1837 for the first time, innovations in lens technology were brought together with new discoveries in chemistry to fix an image of the external world on to a surface. However, from the first moments of its conception, photography was a mediated process. A European invention, photography carried on many of the traditions of Western art practice. It borrowed from art’s techniques and conventions, and although it made picture-making accessible to a broader audience, it also replicated the existing social structure and dominant cultural ideologies of the day.

Susan Sontag in writing *On Photography* surmised that “as photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure.” ³

The panoramic tradition of presenting a continuous scene in a two dimensional plane was alive well before photography existed. A truly panoramic image should capture a field of view comparable to, or greater than, that of the human eye with a horizon of about 160 degrees. The earliest form of panoramic art can be traced to ancient Chinese scrolls of the twelfth century Song dynasty. These hand painted landscapes were unrolled to create a continuous vista.

Some art historians date the antecedents of the panorama to even earlier, charting its descent from the caves of Lascaux, Pompeii and the Bayeux tapestry through to the private and public commissions of the Renaissance. ⁴ Panoramic techniques were also used in early map-making and topographical art, with cartographers attempting to give a bird’s eye view of city prospects from the late 1400s onwards. ⁵ During the Golden Age of Dutch art in the seventeenth century the wide, panoramic format was increasingly popularised in town, sea and landscapes.

However, it was not until the late eighteenth century that the panorama as an all-encompassing view, with multiple points of perspective, came into its own with the patenting of 360 degree panorama paintings by the Scottish artist Robert Barker in 1787. ⁶ These large-scale, continuous circular representations were experienced from viewing platforms in purpose-built rotundas to create a panoramic illusion. Barker dubbed his new creation the ‘panorama’ from the Greek words *pan* (all) and *horama* (view).

In what has been termed the 'society of the spectacle' these panoramic viewing constructions were enormously popular. With viewing theatres opened in London as well major cities in Europe, America and also Australia, the panorama soon became one of the most engaging phenomena and past-times of the nineteenth century. For as little as a shilling a visit, painted panoramas of cities, battles and exotic locations were viewed by thousands, if not millions, of people across the Western world. So enamoured was the Australian public with this new form of mass entertainment that by the 1870s the touring panorama business had become a widespread enterprise.⁷

Theoretically, however, the invention of the panorama could be seen as a response to a nineteenth century need. It represented a new way of organising visual experience.⁸ Rather than having a traditional fixed point perspective based in an idealised horizon, the viewer became the centre of all perception and experience. Instead of looking up to a greater social order, the Western middle classes now looked out, seeing without obstruction in every direction, to take on god-like control of their surroundings. In a time of great social change, it reinforced the feeling that the world was organised around them.

There can be little doubt that early Queensland settlers had some knowledge of the panoramic tradition and some may well have been aware of Barker's cityscapes. The first signed and dated painting of the Moreton Bay colony was in fact a panorama by Commissariat Officer Henry Boucher Bowerman, a trained topographical artist.⁹ His 1835 view of the convict settlement, now held by the State Library's John Oxley Library, takes in the northern bank of Brisbane from the Windmill on Wickham Terrace through to the site of the Botanical Gardens and Kangaroo Point.

The nineteenth century invention of photography provided new opportunities for panoramic representation. Photographs were not only used as the basis for painted and engraved views but also enjoyed as panoramas in their own right. In Australia and Queensland, photographers were quick to explore and exploit the panoramic potential of the new medium. Whereas painted panoramas took many months to complete, a panoramic photograph could be completed in minutes or hours.

Until specially designed panoramic cameras were developed in the 1840s and 50s, early photographic panoramas were created through a series of daguerreotypes. A sequence of shots would be taken, with the camera manually turned after each shot, to ensure that the images overlapped and formed a seamless scene.

The first known panoramic photograph in Australia was taken of Hobart in 1856. Soon photographers in other States followed, with sequential panoramic views of Sydney, Melbourne and Bendigo taken over the next two years.¹⁰

The earliest photographic panoramas in the State Library of Queensland's collection date from the beginning of the 1860s. By then photography was over twenty years old and professional practitioners had been active in Queensland from at least 1855, although few prints remain from this period.¹¹ Queensland had only just separated from New South Wales, with Brisbane assuming the role of the capital in 1859, when the State Library's 1862 *Panorama of Brisbane* was taken. Photographed from the Observatory at Spring Hill, the panorama takes in the town from a north easterly aspect across to the river and the south bank. The scene was created through a series of images. Though the photographer is unknown the image was undoubtedly for public appreciation. The first Australian panoramic photographs were sold in albums or as sets of prints and by the mid 1860s most cities had panoramas and views for sale.¹²

Nearly all of the surviving panoramas of Brisbane from the 1860s – 1920s were taken of the city, rather than outlying suburban areas, highlighting the role the panoramic tradition had in signally civic pride and Western progress. Taken by colonial photographers, they had a predestined audience in Britain, with views in carte-de-visite and print format sent back to relatives in the 'motherland'. Albums of photographic views of the colonies were also presented to visiting dignitaries and overseas officials.

Occasionally, some were intended for public display in large international and intercolonial exhibitions, playing an important role in immigration and tourism. Albert Lomer, whose album of Brisbane panoramas and views appears in *Panoramic Queensland*, regularly featured his work in large exhibitions, including the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886 and the 1888 Melbourne Centennial.¹³

Primarily pictorial images, these panoramas show the new capital from its most attractive or picturesque vantage points. Whether the image is a sequential 180 degree townscape such as the 1862 panorama or a 360 degree view of the CBD taken with a Circuit camera c. 1922, Brisbane is captured in stasis, without the bustle of pedestrians, transportation, work or industry. Nor do we get any sense of the social and cultural divides that stratified the city's inner urban population. Indigenous inhabitants are notable by their absence. These are images of the capital, removed and at a distance – a symbol of the State's economic might and political success for the appreciation of middle class white Australian and British audiences.

Occasionally, Brisbane photographers applied their panoramic cameras and skill toward aesthetically recording features in the cityscape. In *Panorama of the Victoria Bridge taken from the south-east* c.1874 and Vere Scott's *Panoramic view of Brisbane from River Terrace* of 1915 we are left captivated by the beauty and repose of the panoramic image.

Vere Scott shoots the bend of the Brisbane River at the centre of the picture frame where the wide angle lens distorts the image, deepening the depth between the foreground and the background to open up the river in a rhythmic swell. He successfully captures the sinuous curve and immensity of the waterway. The panorama of the newly completed Victoria Bridge is a photographic study in light and form, with the photographer eloquently interpreting the bridge's span through receding horizontal lines and mirror reflections.

The earliest historical panoramic photograph of regional Queensland in the State Library's collection is of the town of Ipswich in the 1870s. Most original panoramic photographs of the regions are of urban centres clustered along Queensland's coastal green belt where there was a population base to support the activities of both itinerant and professional photographers. Many have no attribution and a great deal of the later images were taken by amateurs for private photo albums.

Quite often, these regional panoramic photographs document townscapes and vistas at a closer, more human scale than the capital. In the Nambour and Ayr streetscapes, we are able to identify and date the images from the buildings, vehicles and people that figure in the foreground. Although Queensland's regional development followed closely on the heels of Brisbane, most of the State Library's regional images date from the early twentieth century when mass produced panoramic cameras made the format more accessible to amateurs.

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Queensland photographers quickly sought to create a visual encyclopaedia of the State and its regions, recording their surroundings at the same pace as regional expansion and reconfiguration of the natural terrain. Popular coastal holiday destinations, such as Redcliffe, the Gold and Sunshine Coasts, also begin to be documented, prefiguring the later adoption of the panoramic photograph in travel guides to promote Queensland and its beaches as a holiday destination. A comparison of the townscapes of today with the panoramas of yesteryear reflects the urban change in Queensland's regional centres, albeit somewhat slower than the capital.

From the late nineteenth century Queensland photographers also started using panoramic photography as a means of recording significant occasions or disasters. The wide angle format allowed the photographer to take extended views of incidents and large groups of people, making it ideal for documenting 'newsworthy' events, where the subject-matter was more important than style.

Images of the Brisbane floods of 1893 were some of the first photographs to be reproduced as drawings in the Brisbane press and were republished as commercial prints and in souvenir albums.¹⁴ One has only to compare the 1893 panorama of the Brisbane River during flood featured in the exhibition with Lomer's *Panorama of Brisbane River from Bowen Terrace* taken from the same viewpoint c.1882 to see the level of devastation to the State's capital city. Add the 1890s Depression to the mix and this episode in Queensland's history was an incident of catastrophic proportion.

Apart from natural disasters, early Queensland panoramas also portray commemorative civic events. Momentous occasions captured in full panoramic splendour include the Brisbane Exhibition c.1909, *Ceremonial laying of the foundation stone for the Holy Name Cathedral, Brisbane*, 1928 and the *Panorama of Anzac Day Celebrations in Mackay*, c.1924–1929. In a State with large ethnic minorities at the time, however, these official pictures leave us pondering about those who don't appear in the image as much as those who do.

Gael Newton observed that panoramas remained popular in Australia until the late 1920s when they degenerated into 'hack' works with little of the quality of the nineteenth and early twentieth century prints.¹⁵ In the same way that panoramic photography supplanted painted panoramas in the nineteenth century, so was cinema to alter the reception and appreciation of photographic panoramas in the twentieth century. The panning filmic image offered more scope for innovation, with panoramic photography becoming increasingly commercial and formulaic. Relegated to photographic records and promotion, panoramas soon proliferated in tourist literature and ephemera as well as coffee table publications.

Still the preferred format for recording major events and sweeps of landscape by some professional photographers, the panorama took to new heights and orientations to document the cityscape. Phil Gray's aerial panoramas of the opening day of Expo 88 reveal the dramatic impact the world exposition had on Brisbane's cultural and urban landscape. Queensland had entered the international arena and Brisbane came of age on the world stage.

The history of the panorama photograph in Queensland will always be partial and incomplete. This large format 'visual ephemera' is prone to damage, loss and deterioration. Those that do remain in the photographic archive only give vignettes of Queensland's history. In piecing together journeys through our panoramic past, Paul Carter's words hold true:

"... to look into a country which is composed photographically is to look into a mirror revealing what lies behind the explorer's shoulder. The strangest place in this looking-glass world is where we stand looking into it but fail to see ourselves mirrored there, glimpsing instead the strangeness of our origins."¹⁶

Stephanie Lindquist

Curator

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A. Lomer & Co, *Panorama of Brisbane River from the Observatory* c.1884 from the *Lomer Photograph Album* 1884, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland Acc. 6145
Leif Ekstrom, *Panorama of Brisbane from the Windmill* 2008, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, Acc. 8097



R. Vere Scott, *Panoramic view of Brisbane from River Terrace* 1915, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland Acc. 6926