

Australian Flora

in Sydney Town Hall

Built in the grand tradition of nineteenth century civic halls, Sydney Town Hall was among the first buildings in Sydney to feature Australian flora as architectural decoration.

Tender documents prepared in 1876 for the Vestibule included the proviso that the ornamental artwork was to incorporate Australian flora and fauna, and that it was to be introduced at the direction of the City Architect.

On the external façade inside a triangular pediment above the entrance to the Town Hall, the City's coat of arms can be seen carved in sandstone, amid a profusion of waratahs. Inside, etched glass windows were decorated with ferns, waratahs, and cabbage palms, lyrebirds and cockatoos.

National fervour reached new heights with the construction of the second stage of the Town Hall, when the Main Hall was added to celebrate the Centenary of the founding of the colony of New South Wales in 1888. The emerging Australian identity was expressed through a variety of forms of architectural decoration. The stair railings, designed in part by George McRae, then City Architect, incorporated native flowers and foliage including the waratah and flannel flower. The light fittings in the gallery of the Main Hall and in the North and South Stairwells featured suspended waratahs; and the semi-circular clerestory windows which light the Main Hall feature native flowers found in New South Wales, including native fuschia, native rose and flannel flowers.



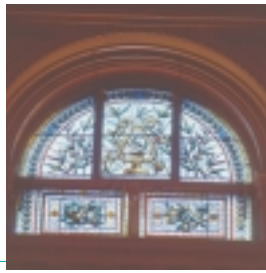
Captain Cook window, designed by Lucien Henry and manufactured by Goodlet and Smith, 1889
Photo by Sue Stafford @ Powerhouse Museum, Sydney



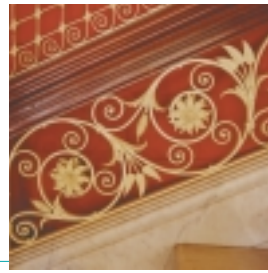
Australia window, designed by Lucien Henry and manufactured by Goodlet and Smith, 1889
Photo by Sue Stafford @ Powerhouse Museum, Sydney



Wrought iron waratah pendant light fitting, Main Hall.
Photo by Greg Piper



Clerestory window, Main Hall.
Photo by Greg Piper



Detail of stair railing, North Staircase.
Photo by Sue Stafford,
Photo by Greg Piper



Invitation to the Opening of the Centennial Hall, 1889. City of Sydney Archives.

Lucien Henry (1850-1896), an expatriate Frenchman trained in architecture, formerly exiled political prisoner, is credited with the first serious attempt in Australia to create a national art form. Henry arrived in Sydney in 1879, as preparations were in full swing for the International Exhibition. Nationhood was not far away and the time seemed right. Henry advanced the idea that the native flora and fauna could become the totemic symbols for a uniquely Australian style. The invitation for the opening of the Centennial (Main) Hall, for which Henry had designed the staircase windows as a powerful statement of Australia's emerging identity, is evidence of how well those symbols could be adapted.

The ultimate celebration of the Centenary is to be found in the stair wells flanking the Main Hall and dominated by the stained glass windows designed by Lucien Henry and made by Goodlet and Smith in 1889. The *Captain Cook* window depicts Captain James Cook standing on the deck of a ship, his hand holding a telescope. On either side are the sailing ships "Endeavour" and "Discovery", in which Cook travelled to Australia in 1770 and 1779. The imagery is rich in maritime devices including a globe, chart, anchor, bunting and oars, and the heraldic flowers of Great Britain, the thistle, rose and shamrock. The two side windows feature English floral motifs.

By contrast, the *Australia* window is a dazzling display of colonial sentimentality. The central figure is Oceania, the allegorical figure of New South Wales, the ruler of the southern seas, Draped in the the Union Jack and the flag of St George, she wears a solar halo and a headress formed from the horns and wool of a ram, a symbol of pastoral bounty. In her hands she holds a trident, denoting maritime authority; and a miner's lamp, a reference to the mineral wealth of the colony. The stars of the Southern Cross illuminate the central window which is flanked by two panels of waratahs, flannel flowers and stenocarpus and the text "Advance Australia 1788 and 1888".