

William Howitt

woodcarver of distinction

1

William Howitt
(1846-1928), c 1920.

Photograph by
Bartletto, courtesy of
Geoff Miller



Dr Dorothy Erickson has uncovered the lives and art produced by a wide range of early Australian craftspeople, whom she has rediscovered through a combination of dedicated research and a search for descendants who might be willing to provide information or still hold some artworks. Here she turns her attention to the British-born wood carver William Howitt (1846–1928), active in both Melbourne and Perth, and represented at several international exhibitions.

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Woodcarver extraordinaire William Howitt was born on 7 July 1846 at Winton near Manchester in the United Kingdom to William Howitt, mechanic, and his Spanish wife Betsy Brahma. The young Howitt studied art in Nottingham, Liverpool and London in the early 1860s. By 1866 he was employed restoring church interiors and carving decorative elements for ship's interiors. He married Isabella Patrick in Glasgow in 1869. Their first son, William, was born in Glasgow that year, then three other children in Liverpool and Birmingham between 1873 and 1877.

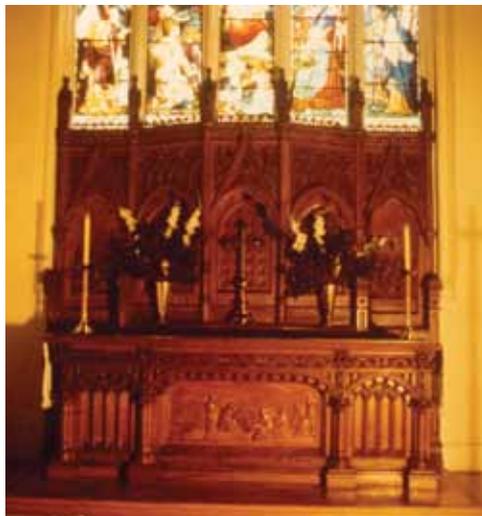
He must have been ambitious, exhibiting in the Indian and Colonial Exhibition in London in 1886 where he received a Bronze Medal for work exhibited. It is probable that he attended and saw the Australian displays and may even have met members of the Australian contingent, because after the birth of their last child the family migrated to Melbourne aboard the *Lusitania*, arriving in August 1888.

In Melbourne, he worked for five years on commissioned furniture, designed by the architect Joseph Reed (1823-1890) in the Gothic style, for St Paul's Anglican Cathedral where he made the reading desk and pew ends. Particularly striking are the bishop's throne and the pulpit, which took

seven months to carve in situ from Tasmanian blackwood.

Howitt became an adviser to the Victorian Government and travelled widely. He advised the timber industry on using timber seasoned by the Rieser process, which Howitt found very satisfactory. Leon Reiser was a Swiss architect living in Australia who sold the patent to the Australian Seasoned Timber Company in Victoria. Doors carved by Howitt were displayed to architects by the Victorian Conservator of Forests, G. S. Perrin, who also wrote an article 'Australian Timbers for Use in the Higher Decorative Artistic Work, Cabinet Making, Fittings, Dadoes etc., with a List of the General & Species Suitable for Railway, Building, Engineering and Harbour Construction works' which was published in *Arts & Crafts: an Illustrated Australasian Magazine of Arts, Handicrafts and Sanitation*.¹ In this Perrin paid tribute to Howitt's skill and illustrated an elaborately carved long case clock made from blue gum for S. J. Browne's home, Kyelah. The carving featured flowers, foliage and scrolling motifs.²

Howitt also worked in marble and stone, sculpting a marble bust of the Rev. Dr Llewellyn. While in Melbourne, Howitt made a pulpit for the Roman Catholic Church of St Peter and St Paul in South Melbourne and carved the models from which were cast the bronze coats of arms on Princes Bridge. In 1893 he carved a reredos and altar for the church of Holy Trinity in Kew. The latter featured carved panels of the Last Supper and Christ washing the disciples' feet (plate 2). By this time, Victoria was in the grip of depression and bank crashes. Other pastures beckoned.



2
William Howitt (1846-1928), altar for Holy Trinity, Kew with a central panel featuring Christ washing the disciples' feet



3
William Howitt (1846-1928), panel carved in 1896 of New Zealand pine for an unknown monastery. It appears to be the parable of the Wedding at Cana. Photograph by Bartletto, courtesy of Geoff Miller

4
William Howitt (1846-1928), settee featuring carvings of a chrysanthemum, sunflower and rose, 1900. Photograph by Bartletto, courtesy of Geoff Miller

5
Western Australian Court at L' Exposition Universelle, Paris, 1900. Photograph Battye Library, Perth 606.944





6
Timber Court in the Western Australian pavilion at L' Exposition Universelle, 1900. Lady Forreest's paintings of wild flowers were displayed here, with eight other artists' work in another section.
Photograph Battye Library, Perth 606.944

7
William Howitt (1846-1928), Marguerite leaving the Church, exhibited at the Paris Exposition Universelle, 1900.
Photograph by Bartletto, courtesy of Geoff Miller.
Private collection

8
William Howitt (1846-1928), font carved from a solid piece of jarrah, 1899. The large piece of timber was discovered when digging up Hay Street to lay tram lines. It was exhibited in the Western Australian pavilion in Paris in 1900. Whereabouts unknown.
Photograph Battye Library, Perth BL 606.944

Howitt, his wife and two daughters moved to Western Australia in 1896 at the height of the gold rushes and quite soon he had Government commissions to undertake. Their son Charles had preceded them. Howitt, who probably had introductions to J. Ednie-Brown the Conservator of Forests, was retained by the Forests Commission to make pieces to show the local woods to advantage and promote the local timber industry. In 1899 he was busy at Mr Bickford's factory in Murray Street, Perth making a book of inlaid timbers to exhibit at the Western Australian Agent General's Office in Savoy House in London and preparing further exhibits for the Western Australian Pavilion at the Paris Exhibition of 1900. The exhibit for Savoy House resembled a folding book and was made of inlaid timbers: – jarrah, karri, tuart, marri, jam tree, sandalwood, she-oak, blackbutt, York gum, wandoo, banksia and prickly pear.

In the 1890s the independent colony of Western Australia was the focus of world attention. It had escaped the world depression and the bank collapses of the eastern colonies. The golden mile, as Kalgoorlie-Boulder was known, was the richest concentration of ore the world had ever seen and the Western Australian Government was anxious to promote themselves to the world.

Accordingly, Western Australia had its own pavilion at L' Exposition Universelle held in Paris in 1900 (plates 5-6). Extensive displays of wildflower paintings by Margaret Lady Forreest, May Creeth, May Gibbs, Annie Dorrington, Henrietta Finnerty, Dircksey Cowan, Gertrude E. Ford, Mr J. S. Anderson, Mrs E. Hardy of Geraldton and Mrs W. C. Thomas of Albany were set against jarrah panelling and architraves designed by John Grainger (father of Percy) the Chief Architect, who won a gold medal for his design for the entrance to the mineral court.

Howitt's work for this exhibition covered three areas: furniture, caskets and plaques. He exhibited a delicate carved panel entitled Marguerite leaving the Church inspired by a passage in Faust (plate 7), a font of jarrah (plate 8), a marquetry table (plate 9) and the sample panels of Western Australian woods decorated with a carving of the foliage of each. The Western Australian Commission was awarded a Bronze Medal for 'Ecclesiastical and Household Art Furniture and Panels with their Foliage of Western Australian Timbers' and a Silver Medal

for Household and Art Furniture made by William Howitt. At a later date, art critic Leslie Rees commented on the Marguerite: 'Although the carving is at no point more than three-eighths of an inch in relief, the girl appears to stand remarkably boldly out of the picture.'³

The Paris exhibits were also shown at the Glasgow International Exhibition in 1902. Here was displayed the font which took Howitt three months to carve from a single piece of jarrah, unearthed when the Hay Street tramway was being constructed. It was one and a half metres high with an octagonal bowl, four large decorated panels and four smaller ones. The symbols of the four evangelists – Matthew's angel, Mark's lion, Luke's ox and John's eagle – were carved on the font which was covered with a conical lid carved with eucalyptus foliage and flowers.

Other works included a jarrah door with carved panels. The octagonal jarrah marquetry table was inlaid with local timbers (plate 9). The centrepiece is York gum with a black swan of native pear. Other woods used include she-oak, jarrah, sandalwood, karri and banksia for the Maltese cross, Egyptian border and Greek key border. Howitt did not varnish his work, which was finished with French polish or a light waxing.

Meanwhile in 1901, Howitt received a commission to carve a casket for presentation to the Duke of Cornwall & York when he and his Duchess visited Western Australia on their way home from opening Federal Parliament. He promised to carve a section through a gold mine for the Royal children, which was duly dispatched to London and a thank you letter received via Sir A. Bigg from the Princess of Wales.

In 1902 Howitt carved the pulpit and lectern for Christ Church, Claremont. The cost of the project had been donated by Mr Justice Burnside, a parishioner who lived nearby in 'Craigmuir', now part of the grounds of Methodist Ladies College. The lectern is in the form of an eagle on a spherical stem terminated with pierced trefoils in the base. The feathers are realistically carved, and talons firmly grip the sphere. The pulpit is somewhat similar to that Howitt carved for St Peter and St Paul's in Melbourne with floral and foliated patterns. At a later stage he was commissioned to carve a matching prayer desk and choir stalls. These feature a diamond motif.

Technical excellence was his forté. Howitt taught woodcarving to the trade students at

9

William Howitt (1846-1928), octagonal marquetry table featuring many Western Australian woods made in 1899 for the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1900, 76 x 70.5 cm. WA Dept of the Environment and Conservation – Forest Products Commission

10

A section of the Franco-British Exhibition in London 1908. The panels are by Howitt, the chair is by Edward Madeley. Photograph Battye Library, Perth 816B/893 Series A

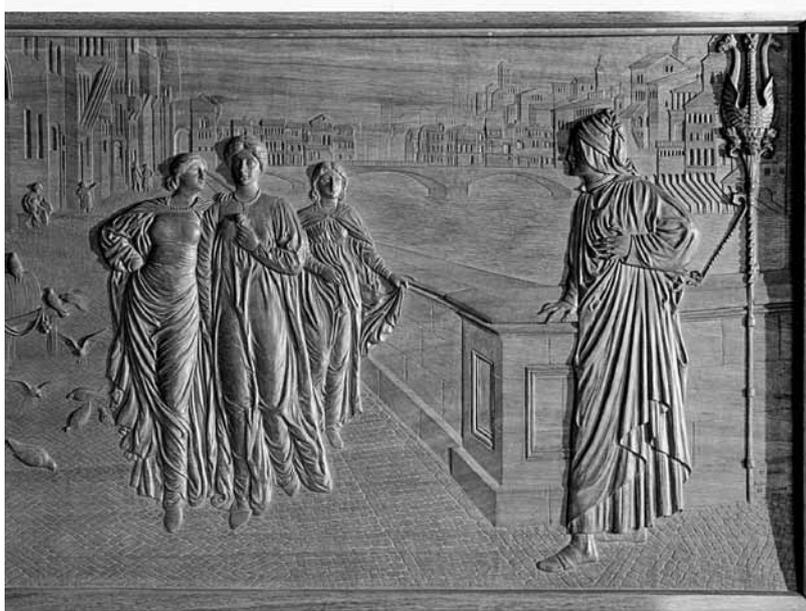




11
William Howitt (1846-1928),
Vestal virgin panels carved
from Kimberley cypress pine,
1911. Whereabouts unknown.

12
William Howitt (1846-1928),
chair carved from Kimberley
cypress, 1911. Forests Products
Commission, WA Dept of
Environment and Conservation

13
William Howitt (1846-1928),
Dante and Beatrice, jarrah
panel, 56.7 x 84 cm, exhibited
in San Francisco and London.
State Art Collection, Art
Gallery of Western Australia



Perth Technical School at the turn of the century and then in the art section until 1906. Woodcarving had begun as a structured two-year course for the trades with 32 graded exercises to be undertaken. In the Art Department he came into conflict with the art teachers James Linton and Fred Williams who considered he did not encourage the students to be individual and develop their own motifs. By 1907 Linton was taking some of the classes in his place and others were employed. Howitt continued to take private students. One of these was Marion St Clair Layman.

Howitt exhibited in Adelaide in 1905, Melbourne and Perth in 1906, the Franco-British Exhibition in London in 1908 (plate

10), at the Museum for Economic Forestry Roubaix, France in 1911, the Panama Exhibition in 1915 in San Francisco and the British Empire Exhibition in London in 1924, winning other medals. In the 1908 exhibition he was awarded a Diploma and the Grand Prize for 'Ecclesiastical and Art Furniture in Western Australian Timber'. The over-mantel carved in 1903 with a central panel showing Lord Nelson in his cabin on board HMS Victory may have been part of the Franco-British exhibition held at Shepherd's Bush, London in 1908. An undated cutting in the Howitt archives has a reporter from the London Standard writing 'There are specimens of the famous red Jarrah wood carved, for all its hardness, into shapes and designs by Mr Howitt, that would do credit to an art school rich in countless traditions handed down by masters of the middle ages.' According to his great grandson, other pieces exhibited at this exhibition were a table the top of which was one piece of timber, chairs, dinner wagon and sideboard.⁴

In 1911 he carved panels featuring Vestal Virgins in Kimberley cypress (plate 11). These were exhibited in Brennan's Store in Hay Street before going to Roubaix, near Lille in France to win a gold medal. They had been commissioned by a new company set up to exploit a large forest of cypress on the Cambridge Gulf near Wyndham. The carved panels show a delicacy of touch and mastery of technique. He also carved an armchair, formerly in the CALM Museum, then in the Forest Products Commission and due for another move (plate 12).



Of the Dante and Beatrice (plate 13) purchased by the Western Australian Government from Howitt for the exhibition held in San Francisco in 1915 to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal and later exhibited at the Wembley exhibition of 1924, art critic Leslie Rees wrote:

Probably the most monumental achievement in plaque-making to which Mr Howitt could lay claim was his copy of Henry Halliday's painting, 'Dante and Beatrice'. The panel, done in jarrah, in 1914, ... is now in the Perth Museum. The great merit of the work is the drawing of the human figure and the carving of the drapery. He has given the light folds of the women's dresses a diaphanous texture which almost reminds one of the draperies of the Grecian Victory Adjusting her Sandal. The gowns which clothe Beatrice and one of her companions in the panel swirl freely and the form of their limbs pressing through the garments is finely carved. And Mr Howitt has retained with an artist's hand the grace which flows from the gentle curves of Beatrice's figure. He has also caught more facial expression than is his wont. The Dante stands motionless, his hand over his heart, his tragic face intent on Beatrice, who returns the gaze with more than mildly-interested eyes.⁵

The 1899 font was exhibited again in 1924 at Wembley. These are recorded in photographs formerly held by the Conservation and Land

Management Museum. Commemorative medals were issued to all exhibitors so as not to cause unpleasantness between Commonwealth countries. The Dante and Beatrice is now part of the collection of the Art Gallery of Western Australia.⁶ Howitt also carved a casket featuring another artwork – a popular painting by Harry Bate ARA of Aeneas.

Much of Howitt's commissioned furniture was in a medievalist or neo-renaissance style as seen in the work undertaken for the family of Richard Hardey of Mt Lawley. In 1909 he made a desk, which featured Kathleen Emily Hardey and seven well-known authoresses (plate 18). From 1915–18 Howitt's family lived in her home 'Tranby Croft' in Maylands, as she had been detained in London due to World War I. He spent six years carving a dining room suite and other furniture for her. The dining chairs each featured a carved portrait of a world figure:

14
William Howitt (1846-1928), Dante observing the death of Beatrice, 1914. Bartletto photograph, whereabouts unknown

15
William Howitt (1846-1928), Dante mourning Beatrice, 1914. Bartletto photograph, whereabouts unknown

16
William Howitt (1846-1928), the Aeneas jarrah casket, c. 1904–10. Along the front of the casket is carved 'Under the Waves'. Bartletto photograph, whereabouts unknown





17

William Howitt (1846-1928), carved jarrah portrait of his daughter Bessie. She married Frederick Guy Mannering, who owned the Bartletto Photographic Studio and took the heritage photographs reproduced here. Family collection

18

William Howitt (1846-1928), writing desk 1909 made for Mrs Hardey carved with portrait medallions of important women writers of the time, eg Marie Carelli and Ada Willcocks. Bartletto photograph, private collection

19

William Howitt (1846-1928), Joseph Hardey memorial settee, 1918. It features a portrait of Hardey, who was killed at Pozieres in WWI, and the rose of peace between the dogs of war. Private collection



Woodrow Wilson, Marshall Joffre, General Botha, General Birdwood, Maharaja Bikaner (plates 20-21), General Haig, Lord Kitchener and King Leopold of the Belgians. Eight-year-old Gretchen Hardey was featured in the sideboard. The carved over-mantel featured a portrait of pioneer Joseph Hardey. Sometime later when the house was sold the over-mantel and other carved panels were removed and incorporated into a coffer. A settee was decorated with the snarling dogs of war and had a central panel depicting her son Joseph Hardey who was killed at Pozieres in France (plate 19). A stool made for Mrs Hardey had the face of Kaiser Wilhelm on the seat so that one could present one's bottom to 'Kaiser Bill'. This furniture was inherited by Hardey descendants in Melbourne.

After his wife Isabella died in 1924, Howitt lived with his daughter Mary Jane Legge in Claremont Howitt until his death on 19 June 1928. A fellow artist said; 'He has carved everything from a ship's figurehead to the tiniest coat of arms for a royal casket. He was one of the finest wood carvers in Australia.'⁷ Leslie Rees wrote a fine obituary and later summed up Howitt's career:

Howitt was a man possessing remarkable dexterity with the chisel, which he used in making furniture, decorative panels and ornaments. So much so did he love to carve that his work sometimes becomes florid through excess of design.⁸

Brian de Garis in the Australian Dictionary of Biography concluded

Although his effects were sometimes florid through excess of design, Howitt's work had a practical as well as an artistic dimension in that he was expert in the qualities and use of a wide range of native timbers and an effective propagandist for their value.⁹

Collections represented

- Art Gallery of WA: carved panel, Dante and Beatrice, 1914
- Western Australian Museum: inlaid Premier's table
- WA Dept of Environment & Conservation (formerly CALM, formerly Forests Commission, various sites): carved cypress chair, octagonal table, side table, casket, library of timbers and a collection of glass negatives of the various exhibitions
- Christ Church, Claremont WA: pulpit, prayer desk, lectern, choir stalls

- St Paul's Anglican Cathedral, Melbourne: pulpit, Bishop's throne, reading desk, and pew ends
- Holy Trinity, Kew, Vic: reredos and altar
- Roman Catholic Church of St Peter and St Paul, South Melbourne: pulpit
- St Ildephonsus College, New Norcia WA: Shield trophy
- Private collections Perth: settee, fruit bowls, side table, Robbie Burns tray, panel & mirror, smoking case, panel of Bessie Mannering
- Private collections, Melbourne: suites of furniture made for the Hardey family, long case clock.

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- 'Timber exhibits for the Paris Exhibition' *West Australian* Dec 1900
- *Magazine of Art* 1904 p. 241 for the Aeneas by Harry Bate ARA.
- Undated cutting Melbourne newspaper 1906
- 'A handsome table', *West Australian* 7 Dec 1906 p 5
- 'Local wood-carving', *West Australian* 10 Jan 1907 p 6
- 'The Cypress pine forests at Kimberley' *Daily News* 18 March 1911
- 'The liedertafel's serenade', *West Australian* 9 July 1914 p 8



- 'Robert Burns in jarrah', *Western Mail* (Perth) 17 July 1914 p 32
- 'Art in Perth. Mr W Howitt's wood carving', *Sunday Times* (Perth) 29 July 1917 p S6
- 'Art in jarrah', undated cutting late 1920s
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- 'Valuable carvings could be in Perth', *Sunday Times* 23 March 1980

Acknowledgment

The modern photographs are by Geoffrey Miller, Howitt's great grandson, for whom I am indebted for much of the original research.

Dr Dorothy Erickson is a well-known Western Australian historian and internationally renowned contemporary jeweller who has published extensively on Western Australia's artists and craft practitioners. Her latest book, *Gold and silversmithing in Western Australia: a history* was reviewed in our May 2011 issue.

Notes

- 1 Vol 1 no 1 (October 1895), pp 12, 13.
- 2 See T. Lane & J. Serle, *Australians at Home*, OUP, Melbourne 1990, ill 351.
- 3 *West Australian* 30 June 1928.
- 4 Geoffrey Miller, 'William Howitt: Woodcarver, Sculptor and Furniture Maker, 1846-1928', in *Early Days* vol 12, pt 3, 2003 pp 277-278.
- 5 Leslie Rees, 'Perth', *Art in Australia*, 3rd Series no 26, Dec 1928.
- 6 See 'Art in Perth. Mr W Howitt's wood carving' *Sunday Times* (Perth) 29 July 1917 p S6.
- 7 Geoffrey Miller, op cit p 282.
- 8 Leslie Rees, op cit.
- 9 Brian de Garis, 'William Howitt, ADB, 1983, p 384.

20
William Howitt (1846-1928), World leaders – the Maharaja Bikaner chair and detail. This is part of a set made 1914–18. Private collection

21
William Howitt (1846-1928), Maharaja Bikaner chair, detail, 1914–18. Private collection