Collins Street in the 1880s was the hub of the art trade in Melbourne, with an ever-expanding population of art galleries and artists’ studios. What Pickersgill’s *Victoria Railways Tourist’s Guide* of 1885 calls “the most fashionable thoroughfare in the city” extended for a mile up the hill from Spencer Street Railway Station in the west to Treasury in Spring Street to the east. The heart of the fashionable retail trade in Collins Street in the 1880s, as it still is today, was in the middle section formerly known as “The Block”, between Swanston and Elizabeth Streets. Here shoppers once browsed the fancy window displays of drapers, milliners, coiffeurs, tailors and music dealers, and beyond them, those of several art dealers. As a journalist from the Melbourne periodical *Bohemia* remarked in late 1890 “one can generally find a picture in the Collins Street windows worth looking at.”[1]

In the late 1880s and early 1890s, Collins Street east (that is, east of the General Post Office), stretching from The Block to the genteel doctors’ quarter of upper Collins Street, was where many leading artists had their studios. Among them were the purpose-built 1887 studios in Grosvenor Chambers occupied by Tom Roberts, Fred McCubbin, and others (the building may still be seen but the studios were thoughtlessly destroyed in the 1970s).[2] In May 1888, eighteen, or just under one-third of the artists in the Victorian Artists’ Society had studio addresses in Collins Street east. New studios at the top end continued to open up in the 1890s, such as those in the Austral Buildings in 1891 occupied by the portrait painter C. Gordon-Frazer and the landscapist John Mather. Ugo Catani and Girolamo Nerli bucked the trend by having their studio in Collins Street west.[3] Artists' studios were a venue for exhibitions, art classes and private sales. Some artists even invited the public to drop in while they were working. Pickersgill recommends a visit to the sculptor J. S. Mackennal’s studio at 198 Collins St east, where one would usually find "some large or otherwise interesting piece of work in progress, which he is always glad to show to artistic visitors."(p. 49)
Art dealers James W. Hines and George Powis had established a presence in Collins Street as early as 1868. Hines outlasted his rival, Powis, and was still selling miscellaneous watercolours, statuary and old violins from a “large and handsomely-fitted room” at 105 Collins St east between 1884 and 1886 (p. 49). In the 1870s there was little rise and much fluctuation in the numbers of dealers from this base, but from the mid 1880s there was a definite boom, rising to a peak in 1888.[4] In 1884, a Mr Freeman opened his gallery, specialising in Roman and Neapolitan artists, at no. 95, also the address of painter George Ashton’s studio in 1888. Walking up the hill from Freeman’s, one would soon come across Fletcher’s Art Gallery at no. 87 and, drawing closer to Spring Street, Isaac Whitehead’s Gallery of Art and picture frame manufactory at no. 78. Whitehead’s gallery represented the private collection of this well-known frame-maker, which the public could inspect only on application (p. 49).

The west end of Collins Street, downhill from the GPO, dominated by offices and vast warehouses for goods in the 1880s, also contained a couple of the new galleries (p. 43). Henry Wallis’s establishment, a colonial offshoot of Wallis’s French Gallery in London’s Pall Mall, opened in 1884 at Imperial Chambers at 77 Collins St, an address he shared for a time with Madame Mouchette’s studio and painting school for young ladies. Not far away was another dealer, Henry Steinhauer Gibbs, who first appears in 1885 as an “importer of high class pictures” at 64 Temple Court, Collins St, but who had moved to Excelsior Chambers, Elizabeth St, by early 1886. Both sold 'Continental' and British paintings.[5]

It is surprising to find how little is written about the brief efflorescence of these nineteenth-century Melbourne art dealerships (or their counterparts interstate, for that matter). Detail in the secondary literature is scant, and there are no biographical profiles.[6] Perhaps one reason for this neglect is that even at the time the more modest trade of the local dealers was eclipsed by the high-priced art displayed at visiting exhibitions, including the Great Melbourne Exhibitions of 1880 and 1888. Most of these prestigious ephemeral shows were staged by London dealers and societies eager to capitalise on business opportunities in a boom town. They included the Anglo-Australian Society of Artists exhibition at Fletcher’s in 1885 and its royal successor at the Exhibition Building in 1890, and an exhibition of modern British works staged by London’s famous Grosvenor Gallery at the Public
Library in 1887. Koekkeok’s of Pall Mall also brought out several notable exhibitions of English, Dutch, French and Italian paintings between 1885 and 1891. Wallis, as mentioned, set up shop in Collins Street for a time in the mid-1880s and Koekkoek’s rather belatedly set up a short-lived branch in Collins Street in 1890. Little is known about the intercolonial trade of dealers, but at least one made his presence known in Melbourne in the 1880s; E. J. Wivell of the Adelaide Art Gallery on North Terrace held a fine art sale at the Athenaeum in Collins Street around 1883, in which the prize exhibit was William Strutt’s *Black Thursday*.[7]

The backbone of the art trade, however, was the permanent art dealerships, and the most prominent among these was Fletcher’s of Collins Street. This article presents details of Fletcher’s business for the first time, and makes a case that he was Melbourne’s leading art dealer at the time of the nineteenth-century art market peak in the 1880s, before his business collapsed in the depression of the 1890s.

Photographer in New Zealand: 1860s

Alexander Fletcher (1837 – 1914), who was born in Scotland, immigrated first to Nelson in New Zealand as a 24 year old, accompanied by his mother and her second husband. On arrival, Fletcher immediately rented a house and set up in business. An advertisement in the *Nelson Examiner* in December 1861 reads “A. Fletcher, Photographer, Bronti-Street, Next house to Captain Walmsley’s, Babies Photographed”. A willingness to photograph babies must have been a good ploy to earn new custom, because Fletcher was soon the owner of a shop-studio, the “Nelson Photographic Rooms”, one of four photographic businesses servicing the town of 4-5000 people.[8]

Fletcher’s bread-and-butter work was carte-de-visite portraits. An astonishing 750 of his glass plate negatives for these have survived, left behind for the use of the photographer who took over his business when he left Nelson in 1870. Fletcher’s personal ambitions, however, were more artistic. [9] He successfully exhibited photographs of Nelson at the New Zealand Exhibition in Dunedin in 1865 and at the Intercolonial Exhibition of Australasia, held in Melbourne in the summer of 1866-7.[10] Unfortunately, all of his prize-winning landscape and stereoscopic views have vanished,
making it difficult to assess his talents as an artist-photographer.

For Fletcher, the photographic business seems to have been a stepping-stone, because in 1867 he made a trip to Europe "in order to enlarge his experience and come personally into contact with artists and art dealers."[11] Who these were, and the precise length of his trip, is a mystery. It is unclear whether Fletcher was back in Nelson when his mother died in October 1868, but he was definitely back by late 1870, when a good deal of activity is recorded as Fletcher made preparations to leave the colony for good. After tying up his business affairs, and being suitably feted by the town in farewell, Fletcher married Catherine Reid McGee, the twenty-year old daughter of the publican of McGee's Nelson Hotel, and promptly departed for Melbourne by steamer the next day.[12]

Framer and Picture Restorer in Melbourne: 1870s
While the gold-rich, rapidly-growing metropolis of Melbourne was clearly a more promising place than Nelson, for Fletcher to realize his ambitions as a fine art dealer and importer, the evidence is that he had to start off small, as a humble framer, gilder, and picture restorer. It took the best part of the decade to build up the more prestigious side of the trade.

Fletcher and Catherine reappear in Melbourne in 1871, awaiting the birth of the first of their seven children, and living in the inner-city suburb of Emerald Hill (South Melbourne), where they are listed at various addresses up to 1883. Fletcher's business is registered from 1871 at 116 Elizabeth Street as a carver, gilder and picture-frame maker. After seven years, the business moved to Collins Street and began to turn over its premises remarkably frequently. Between 1877, when Fletcher's Art Gallery vacated Elizabeth Street, and 1893, he moved no less than eight different times within Collins Street, even without counting the additional Eastern Market address in Bourke Street that he used in some years in the 1880s. Such frequent shifting was characteristic of framing businesses, which typically leased rather than owned their premises, and perhaps moved to chase competitive rents. Fletcher stayed in the same street, however, so as to remain known as Fletcher's of Collins Street.[13]

Fletcher's third move in Collins Street, in mid 1879, was a decisive step up in the world into a new
and notable building at 29 Collins Street east. The *Australasian Sketcher* hailed the building as a "Collins Street Improvement" (that is, an improvement on the ugly vacant block that was there before) and "a step in advance of the general street architecture of the city", with its use of iron for the arcading and tiles for the decoration of the façade (fig 3). Fletcher’s gallery for the exhibition of paintings took up the middle section upstairs of one of the three shops, all occupied by fashionable businesses. The drawcard was the Café Gunsler, a noted establishment that took up all floors on one side; it had a restaurant that served oysters and coffee at the bar, a bakehouse, and luncheon and banqueting rooms. On the other side was Mullen’s subscription Library, described by Pickersgill a few years later as “a recognized resort and place of meeting for the residents in the fashionable suburbs lying south of the Yarra, as well as the haunt of the intellectual classes” (p.49). Foster and Martin Photographers was above it.[14]

1879 may establish a rough date for the launch of Fletcher’s art gallery, since his only previous recorded business transactions are for framing and picture repairs for the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV). The painter Eugene von Guerard, curator of the NGV from 1870-81, reported in November 1875 that Fletcher had repaired the frames of three unidentified pictures received from London and cleaned and varnished by von Guerard himself. Fletcher appears several times in the Gallery Register of Accounts between June 1874 and October 1884 for the supply, gilding and repair of frames.[15]

Fletcher enjoyed a favoured if not exclusive relationship with the NGV as a framer and gilder. Between 1874 and 1884 he was employed more often than any other framer. This favoured status is interesting because he was not the artists’ framer of choice. In the 1860s and 1870s, leading artists, including Von Guerard, Buvelot, Chevalier and Clark, preferred Whitehead’s, later taken over by his son of the same name. Subsequently, from the 1880s until well into the twentieth century, the long-lived firm of Thallons (est. 1878) was the undisputed market-leader, patronized by many of the artists of Heidelberg School.[16]

As a framer, it seems fair to say that Fletcher was one of a group of respectable ‘second-stringers’,
whose names crop up with reasonable regularity while posing no threat to the domination of the prestige end of the market of Whitehead’s or Thallon’s. Fletcher probably only cut down bought lengths of frame material to order, unlike Whitehead, who created his own moulds and distinctive patterns. There is a suspicion that some contemporary framers may have copied Whitehead’s mouldings, and Fletcher certainly had the opportunity to do so -- he and Whitehead shared premises in Collins Street in 1884 and 1887, and were adjacent in 1889. However, it is impossible to verify this with the dearth of frames traceable to Fletcher, even in the NGV collection. This is a common difficulty because mid-twentieth-century fashion decreed the removal of many nineteenth-century frames in our public collections, a process that is now being painstakingly reversed.[17]

Fletcher also did restoration work for the NGV, which he contracted out to a picture restorer called George Peacock. When Fletcher was employed at the Melbourne Exhibition in 1880, he sought Peacock’s help over a damaged picture that had come to his attention. The large (two meter tall) religious painting, Noli Me Tangere by Professor Bernhard Plockhorst of Berlin, intended for exhibition in the German Court, had sunk on the steamer Sorata en route to England. It arrived in Melbourne with ‘the whole surface of the canvas…encrusted with a white substance, which looked as if the pigments had been decomposed by the action of the sea-water’. The German commissioner, Professor Rouleaux, disposed of it to Fletcher, presumably for a bargain price, and Fletcher duly passed it on to Peacock. Happily, Peacock “found that the white crust was composed of plaster of Paris, which had been dislodged from the frame, and that this could be detached without any injury to the colours or the canvas.” Fletcher sold the fully restored painting to the trustees of the NGV “on satisfactory terms”, and his coup was reported in three of the Melbourne dailies.[18]

Curator at the Great Exhibitions 1880s

The 1880s were Fletcher's golden years, when his business as a picture dealer and his influence as a connoisseur of art expanded, in close step with the economic boom. One might expect that he might then have dropped the framing and restoration services, but he did not. Diversity and flexibility were evidently a virtue in the art trade, even in good years. His label of 1885 reads:

Gilder and picture-frame maker, &c. to his Excellency the Governor. Picture dealer. Print
This varied practical expertise in the art trade made him attractive to the organizers of the Great Exhibitions, who called upon his services frequently over the 1880s. In this he appears to have been favoured once again over his rivals, whose names fail to crop up in the organization of the Exhibitions. Fletcher’s usual role was as a Superintendent of Courts, rather than as a more prestigious Commissioner. This was a practical hands-on role which involved sourcing works of art from private lenders for the Commissioners, assembling them in the Gallery and overseeing the general management of the floor, the decoration of the courts and the complex hanging of pictures salon-style, closely spaced from mid-wall height to ceiling. Fletcher also sold art at the Exhibitions, lent his own works for display, and adjudicated in the fine arts categories.

In 1880, a Melbourne paper reported that the Fine Arts Committee at the Melbourne Exhibition had been fortunate in securing the services of Mr Fletcher as “curator of this department of the exhibition”. Fletcher hung the pictures in the British court with the assistance of Mr Evans, who had come out in charge of the Royal Collection. Fletcher also hung the paintings in the European courts and co-ordinated the arrangement of the Victorian courts, including the much-admired murals in “terracottas, peacock blue and sage green”. His talents as a dealer were also put to good use and he was praised for having “succeeded in disposing of a greater number of works than was ever sold at an Exhibition”. [20]

The Melbourne Exhibition of 1880 gives us one of only two pictures of Fletcher that have come to light. An illustration of a gentleman, standing with his hand propping up a painting, discussing the arrangement of the pictures in the Fine Arts Gallery with a younger man in a dark suit (fig 7) is almost certainly of Fletcher and the ‘Queen’s man’, Mr Evans. Fletcher can be identified by a named caricature of him as "Commissioner in Charge of the Victorian exhibits", one of twelve comic portraits of the organisers of the Adelaide Exhibition of 1887-8 (fig 6). It shows a fair-skinned, portly fellow, with prominent eyes and nose and goatee beard, nattily attired in a too-tight frock coat, gloves and
pale silk topper. His attribute is a little hammer at his feet, presumably for banging nails into walls for hanging pictures. Another portrait of Fletcher was painted by Robert Dowling in his Collins St west studio in 1884 and exhibited at the Jubilee of Victoria Exhibition in the summer of 1885, is now unlocated. [21]

Fletcher had a golden opportunity to use the Exhibitions as a vehicle to showcase his own gallery’s collection. Shortly after the Melbourne Exhibition he mounted his own court, “Fletcher’s Art Gallery”, at the Christchurch Exhibition in 1882, reportedly the biggest and most valuable art collection to be seen in New Zealand up to that time (fig 5). The official record notes:

The collection of oil and water colour paintings which are exhibited by Mr Fletcher in this gallery, far outnumbers any collection ever got together previously in New Zealand. They are valued at £10,000 and insured for £8000, and include works of many of the best known modern masters of the English, French, Italian and German school.

There were 120 pictures in oils and 200 watercolours. [22]

The lofty gallery boasted an entrance of Corinthian plaster columns and statues, draped with maroon and gold curtains “similar to the decorations used in the Paris Exhibition”. The walls were painted in colours to dado height beneath multi-coloured stencilled bands and were hung with paintings by Fletcher himself. Christchurch had over 220,000 visitors during the fourteen weeks of the Exhibition. The exposure for Fletcher’s business in such a massively popular forum, as well as the prestige of his professional association with it, must have provided him with priceless advertising and an expanded clientele. It is therefore no surprise that this energetic merchant would see the value in donating large amounts of his time to this and other exhibitions, even on an honorary basis. [23]

1885 was another busy year for Fletcher. By the beginning of the year he had already put together a collection of 250 watercolours and 200 oils as Superintendent of Fine Arts for the Jubilee of Victoria Exhibition, held over summer at the Melbourne International Exhibition Buildings to mark the first fifty years of the colony of Victoria. [24]
Later, in October 1885, Fletcher hosted the first annual exhibition of the Anglo-Australian Society of Artists at his gallery at 87 Collins Street. The Argus confidently expected this prestigious show to deliver “the pick of the choicest work of the manliest and healthiest section of the English school” to the doorstep of Melbourne art-lovers. An elegant little catalogue on watermarked paper gives pride of place to James McNeil Whistler’s *Note in Blue and Green* (now lost). Regrettably, excitement curdled to contempt when local critics, in place of manliness and health, were faced with Whistler’s ‘unintelligible’ and ‘eccentric’ daubs; W. Ayerst Ingram’s marine paintings and Walter Langley’s Cornish fisherfolk were infinitely preferable. Perhaps the expensive experiment put Fletcher off further involvement with the Society, which was intended to expand in the future to include the cream of Australian artists. Although he was reportedly in line to succeed Ingram in the management of the Society, and to arrange and hang all future exhibitions with the assistance of a committee of colonial artists, the catalogue for their next Melbourne exhibition in 1890 makes no mention of him. [25]

Fletcher was perhaps too busy to dwell for long on the controversy. By the time it had subsided, he had already embarked on his next commission as honorary Superintendent of the Fine Arts Department (Victorian Court) of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, held in London from May 1886. Fletcher’s job was to approach private lenders on behalf of the commissioners for pictures “representing natural features of the colony, and executed by artists of repute”. Fletcher struggled to find enough Victorian works to fit the bill, prompting the Argus to appeal to colonists to give up their Buvelots and ‘historic’ von Guerards for the Exhibition. Fletcher himself lent a Buvelot, *A Waterpool at Coleraine* (a different version to the one now in the NGV) and Mather’s *Waterfall at Riddell’s Creek*. Other works included Australian flower paintings by Mrs Ellis Rowan and Miss Hammond, a Dowling portrait and views in oil by Charles Rolando, J.A. Panton and the late Mr Whitehead. *Fletcher* assembled the works in the Melbourne International Exhibition buildings, but did not go over to London. The picture display was a credit to Victoria, wrote the British Australasian, but failed to excite the British public as much as the life-size models of a “Blackfellow’s Camp and Natural History Specimens”, contributed by the Board of Protection of Aborigines. [26]

Fletcher next arranged the Victorian court at the Adelaide Jubilee International Exhibition, 1887-8.
Most of the exhibits were meant to be sent on to the grander Centennial International Exhibition held in Melbourne in 1888, where Fletcher was Superintendent of the British Court. He was also appointed an ‘expert’ at the Centennial Exhibition, along with James Smith, who had judged Fletcher’s own photographs in 1865, to adjudicate on the appeals made by local artists against decisions by the fine arts jury. These appeals were ferociously contested and held up the distribution of awards for months. Fletcher went on to take charge of the Victorian section at the New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition, Dunedin, 1889-90, and loaned pictures including Sir Edwin Landseer’s *Puppies* and some John Gully watercolours to the Victorian court. Out of 203 works of art exhibited, no less than 141 were from Fletcher and other contributors who give Fletcher’s Gallery as their address.[27]

**The 1880s Boom: Fletcher’s of Collins Street**

Fletcher’s business was flourishing in the 1880s, no doubt in no small part due to his exposure in the merry-go-round of Great Exhibitions. Besides his key role in the Exhibitions, there is a range of evidence to support the argument that Fletcher was by now pre-eminent among local art dealers, of whom there was no shortage by the middle of the decade. The opinions of the press, for example, were highly flattering. *Table Talk* commented that “Mr Fletcher's name has long been associated with the development of art in Melbourne, not only in connection with the International Exhibitions of 1880 and 1888 but as an excellent judge of pictures and engravings, as well as a reliable authority on their commercial value”. [28] *Table Talk* reported that Fletcher was also keenly interested in technical education and that he was a member of the Royal Technological Commission. One unidentified newspaper reports adds that he was well known as an art critic, and for several years wrote in that capacity for the Melbourne papers, although I have not been able to verify the latter claim.[29]

From the mid 1880s, Fletcher’s exhibitions also received generous coverage in the two journals that regularly commented on art. This set him at an advantage over Gibbs and Wallis, who seem to have been his closest rival dealers in quality British and Continental paintings. In ‘Melbourne Art Notes’ in *Once a Month* (fl. July 1884–June 1886) Fletcher is mentioned only once in 1884, but in 1885–86 he
is a regular fixture, mentioned much more often than Wallis, who took out regular advertisements in the journal. Later, *Table Talk* gave regular coverage to Fletcher’s exhibitions between 1889 and 1892.

Fletcher had a gift for attracting patronage in other ways as well. Governor Loch lent his endorsement to the Gallery on Fletcher’s label of 1885, the year he held the prestigious Anglo-Australian Society of Artists exhibition, and his successor, the Earl of Hopetoun, visited it in April 1891, leaving well pleased with what he had seen. [30]

According to other sources, by the mid 1880s Fletcher’s gallery was established as a showpiece of the city. Pickersgill’s tourist’ guide of 1885 singles out Fletcher’s as “unquestionably the finest collection of high-class oil paintings and watercolour drawings in the Southern Hemisphere. It is a local specialty, which ought on no account to be omitted from the visitor’s programme.” This assessment is backed up by *Table Talk in 1889*, which claims that Fletcher’s “now well-known” art gallery is the place where “a large proportion of the paintings now gracing the walls of numerous Australian mansions were first introduced to the public”. Other news stories about Fletcher assert that he supplied paintings to Melbourne’s gentry as well as “some of the finest works adorning the public galleries of Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide”. [31]

Proof of a just a few of these sales is enough to lend credence to these claims. Industrialist and art collector, Alfred Felton, famous for the massive endowment he left to the NGV on his death, had regular dealings with Fletcher. In July 1888, he sold nine pictures to Fletcher, some of which were still in Fletcher’s stock in 1891. Later in the 1890s, Felton purchased works from Fletcher and paid him an agent’s commission to buy works for him at auction. [32]. Two major state galleries, the Victorian and South Australian, bought works direct from Fletcher, and others contain works that can be traced to him. *Noli me Tangere*, the wrecked picture from the 1880 exhibition Fletcher sold to the NGV, was at the time a cause for congratulation as a major purchase, although its sentimental treatment of a religious theme has since seen it consigned permanently to the vaults. Fletcher also sold Bennetters’s *Flight between the Ship of the Line ‘Jupiter’ and the French Frigate ‘Preneuse’* to the NGV for £300 in 1884, among other works. In 1885, Fletcher sold a good work by Jose Gallegos
y Arnosa (1859-1914) an Orientalist and genre painter, to the Art Gallery of South Australia. *Before the Bullfight*, 1883, was purchased by South Australian Government Grant, and is the only work in the collection traceable to Fletcher. Other works, like the Bendigo Art Gallery’s large painting by Gustave Doré, *Flight into Egypt*, purchased in 1902 from Wivell, the Adelaide dealer, eventually made their way into public collections after having been originally exhibited by Fletcher. Fletcher also acted as a buyer for the NGV in May 1891, when he purchased from the auctioneers Gemmell and Tuckett a portfolio of fifty sketches by S. T. Gill for £100.[33]

Fletcher specialized in English, Scottish and European prints and paintings, which by all accounts the local market very strongly favoured. Fletcher’s advertising emphasizes that his works were imported from overseas, and that they were the latest available. Australian art was not a selling point. An exasperated *Australasian Critic* in 1891 remarked that Mr Callan, of Callan’s Gallery in George Street, Sydney, was “the only picture dealer in New South Wales, if not the colonies, who has made any attempt to encourage Australian art, by making periodical exhibitions of it”. The writer claimed this was because better profits could be made by “buying indifferent English or foreign pictures at a small price, and selling them for a large one in this country…than by dealing with local productions, on which they take a simple 15 or 20 per cent.” [34]

Fletcher was probably guilty as charged of buying cheap and selling dear, and of helping to flood the local market with modern imports. At the same time, his tactic of seeking out promising artists in the early stages of their career was as prudent now as it was then. Fletcher’s policy, stated in 1884, was “to secure the works of young and rising artists” “direct from the easel” thus guaranteeing that those who had purchased from him could “in most instances, dispose of them, if they so desire, at a greatly enhanced value”. [35]

Fletcher’s artists, mostly living and mostly British, typically produced works with titles like *My Laddies on the Sea* and *Storm on the Moor*. Alongside the Highland cattle and baskets of spaniel puppies, there was also a cosmopolitan array of Venetian lagoons, red-robed cardinals, Servian dancers and Spanish bullfighters. Such works admirably catered to the preferences of middlebrow Victorians for highly finished paintings of great verisimilitude, preferably laden with an abundance of emotionally
affecting narrative detail.

Among the potboilers were some rare treats. Works highly praised by local artists and critics included John Faed’s teeming canvas, *The Hiring Fair*, exhibited in mid 1885. *Once a Month* recommended its purchase by the National Gallery, saying it was “a picture to return to over and over again…innumerable stories may be woven out of the thirty and more figures grouped about”. Some months later, Robert Dowling wrote an urgent appeal to the *Argus*, enclosing a cheque to start up a subscription for the trustees’ purchase of two pictures forwarded to Fletcher from Tooth and Sons in England (a gallery that reproduced modern paintings as engravings, for which Fletcher was the local agent by 1892). The paintings were Benjamin Leader’s *A Worcestershire Hamlet*, 1885, and Sir John Millais’ *Love Birds or Une Grande Dame*, which had been exhibited at the Royal Academy (RA) in 1883. Dowling argued, “art students in Melbourne have but little to see in the way of really high-class paintings in figure or landscape and to let two such valuable works pass out of their reach is to be regretted in the extreme.” James Smith at the *Argus* concurred and hoped a wealthy benefactor might be persuaded to buy the Millais for the NGV. Laslett T. Potts’ *Disinherited*, exhibited at the RA in 1884, also attracted Smith’s attention. Alas, the Gallery’s letter files are full of rejections of Fletcher’s offers of works. [36]

Fletcher did not entirely neglect Australian and New Zealand artists, but they were not the focus of his business. He selected many for the Exhibitions, selectively exhibited them in his gallery, and probably traded them on the secondary market. Among his exhibitions was a group of six views of Italy, Egypt and Arabia, painter overseas by von Guerard in July 1885. *Table Talk* also carefully notes several up-and-coming Australian artists in its regular reports on Fletcher’s exhibitions of the late 1880s and early 1890s: the Witches’ Sabbath by Rupert Bunny in 1889, fresh from winning a bronze medal at the Paris Salon, flower paintings by Ellis Rowan in 1890, landscapes by the late John Gully in 1891, and John Longstaff’s *Mother and Child*, which received an honourable mention at the 1892 Paris Salon. Arthur Streeton wrote to Tom Roberts that he had gone to see the Longstaff at Fletcher’s. [37] However, these significant works by local artists were in the minority among Fletcher’s usual imported stock. Streeton’s letters incidentally offer a rare glimpse of Fletcher, albeit an unflattering one. After a party both attended at the Café Anglais for the painter John Ford
Paterson in June 1892, Streeton described Fletcher to Roberts as: “(the picture dealer and shark generally). (Can’t stand him)”.[38]

The Bust: 1890s
Fletcher had entered the 1890s apparently in good shape. In 1889 he and his family shifted from Emerald Hill to the new middle-class suburban development of Grace Park (now Hawthorn), a sure sign of upward mobility. His calling card gives the address as ‘Maitai, Grace Park’. The name of the house comes from the picturesque Maitai Valley in Nelson, the subject of some of Fletcher’s prize-winning photographs at the Dunedin Exhibition in 1865. This suggests that he owned it, but the house was leased, like the rest of the Grace Park estate.[39]

Fletcher’s public activities continued into the 1890s. In March 1891, he lent over twenty mostly British oils and watercolours, including a Gainsborough and a Turner, to the People’s Palace Exhibition of Loan Collection of Pictures, held in the Exhibition Buildings. He was the second most important lender to the exhibition, after the Chairman of the Exhibition Trustees, Dr L. L. Smith, who contributed over one hundred paintings.[40]

One year later, in March 1892, Table Talk visited his gallery and described it as a good place in which to browse for an hour or two, especially if Fletcher had the leisure to chat with the visitor about art matters: “there are more pictures than can be hung on the walls, and so the visitor has the pleasure of handling many himself, placing them on the easel in what light he chooses, noting contrasts and effects as he would in an artist’s studio”. And, “when the paintings are all finished with there are the numerous portfolios of etchings and engravings to examine.”[41]

Then Fletcher all but disappears. After 1890 he was not invited to officiate at any more Great Exhibitions, the People’s Palace exhibition of 1891 being his last public excursion. Table Talk, which had been a faithful reporter of Fletcher’s exhibitions for several years, ceases to mention him after October 1892. Not only does the business disappear from the 1894 directory, but also his usual residential address. From 1894 it is difficult to pinpoint his whereabouts.
The timing of Fletcher’s business disappearance suggests a connection to the effects of the 1890s depression and the bank crash of April-May 1893. Luxury purchases like pictures are usually the first to be sacrificed when belts are being tightened. Fletcher’s business may also have been more marginal than appearances might suggest. In Melbourne, unlike New Zealand, he did not own his city business premises, or even his own home. Was Fletcher ruined by the 1890s depression, like so many others? If so, can it be attributed to a general collapse of the market for quality pictures or some other factor? And how did Fletcher support himself and his dependent family after the crash?

Some minor entries in the wealthy Alfred Felton’s ledgers and accounts provide some clues to Fletcher’s fate. In June 1893 Felton bought a ticket in the “Fletcher Art Union”, indicating that Fletcher must have raffled off his remaining stock. In April 1895 Felton bought two pictures from Fletcher for £13 and on seven occasions in 1895-96 paid him small amounts of agent’s commission for buying works on his behalf. In May 1897 he bought another two drawings from Fletcher. In June 1897 he loaned Fletcher £8.5 and in February 1898, he recorded the transfer of a gold watch worth £20 from his Fletcher loan account to his ‘Chattels’ account. Presumably the watch was put up for security against the loan, which could not then be repaid. Lastly, in October 1897, Felton donated three guineas to a fund for Fletcher. The small loans and gifts of 1897, replacing the earlier pattern of occasional patronage, suggest Fletcher’s worsening financial crisis. The sacrifice of his gold watch is a poignant detail. He was then sixty years old. Fletcher died in 1914, aged 77, at the Old Colonists’ Homes in Rushall Crescent, North Fitzroy, and is buried in the Melbourne Cemetery. His wife died a year later.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Fletcher’s career as an art dealer is how closely it tracked the fortunes of “Marvellous Melbourne”. Partly this was timing – having worked his way up from provincial photographer in the 1860s to urban framer in the 1870s Fletcher was at an age and stage in his career to make the most of the boom of the 1880s. He had cultivated good connections in the art world in Australia and overseas, and anticipated the modest but adequate clientele in Melbourne for imported prints and paintings. He was also prominently involved in the organization of fine art at the Great Exhibitions of the 1880s, providing evidence of a trade influence in that department that
has hitherto been overlooked. His grasping of the opportunities to make money and a reputation out
the constant shuttling or art back and forth between the colonies and the centre of Empire in the
Exhibitions was one reason Fletcher prospered in this decade. The effects of the crash on Fletcher’s
twenty-year-old business in Melbourne, however, were sudden, drastic and irreversible. Likewise,
many of the Collins Street artists, like Streeton and Roberts, went to Sydney after 1890 and to try
their luck in the Salons of Paris and London. The demise of Fletcher’s of Collin’s Street, linked as it
was to a major economic downturn, also marks the end of an era in the colonial art world.

Aug 1890, p. 4.
[3] *Table Talk*, Roberts, 27 April 1888, p. 2; Catani, 27 Feb 1891, p. 7; Mather, 20 March 1891, p. 12; Gordon-Frazer,
24 April 1891, p. 5; *May 1888 Victorian Artists’ Society Catalogue Autumn Exhibition ‘Grosvenor Gallery’: National
Gallery, Melbourne*, Addresses of exhibitors.
observations based on listings under categories ‘Fine Art Exhibitions’, 1872-6 (discontinued) and ‘Fine Art Galleries’,
1885-95 (continuing). Hines and Powis appear in alphabetical listings from 1868. Inconsistencies in the Directory’s
listings mean it is inadequate on its own as a guide to Fine Arts establishments; advertisements and ‘art notes’
in newspapers and journals are often more helpful. *Once a Month: An Illustrated Australasian Magazine*, Hines, 15
August 1884; p.152; 15 April 1885, p.313; 1 January 1886, p.72.
xxvi; Gibbs, March 1 1886, p. 265, May 1 1886, p. 456.
An Analysis of Taste and Patronage”, BA Hons Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1976, with its section on dealers;
also see Tim Bonyhady, *Images in Opposition: Australian Landscape Painting 1801-70*, Melbourne, Oxford
[7] *Art Pamphlets*, vols. 19 and 21, Arts Collection, State Library of Victoria (SLV), contain catalogues for Anglo-
Australian, Grosvenor, Wivell & Koekkoek exhibitions; Vaughan, “Art Collectors in Colonial Victoria”, p.71..
‘Shipping Intelligence’, *Nelson Examiner*, Oct 26 1861, p. 2; Nelson Board of Works Rating Rolls 1862/3, 65/6, 69/70;
for 1865*, Nelson, R. Lucas, 1865, p. 69.
[9] *Nelson Evening Mail*, 3 September 1879, p.3; plates now in the collection of the Nelson Provincial Museum, some
finished portraits are in the collection of the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.
*Intercolonial Exhibition of Australasia: Melbourne 1866-67 Official Record*, 1867, p. 350 and *Intercolonial Exhibition
[11] *Table Talk*, Oct 11 1889, p. 5; MS 11015, Alexander Fletcher papers. Latrobe Australian Manuscripts Collection,
State Library of Victoria, unsourced biographical news item no. 1; Departure notice, *Nelson Examiner*, Feb 5 1867, p.


[20] “The Picture Galleries”, unidentified news clipping, *Victorian International Exhibition (Press Cuttings) compiled by Melbourne Public Library 1880*, unpaginated, La Trobe Collection, SLV; Fletcher papers, SLV, unsourced biographical item no. 2; also see the *Australasian* 28 August 1880, p.276.

[21] Caricature is unsourced, from Fletcher papers, SLV; Dowling, *Once a Month*, 15 Nov 1884, p. 394.


[29] *Table Talk*, 11 Oct 1889, p.5; Fletcher papers SLV, unsourced biographical item no. 1.


[31] *Table Talk*, 11 Oct 1889, p.5; Fletcher papers SLV, unsourced biographical item no. 2.

[32] List of paintings sent to Mr Fletcher on Mr Felton’s account, 5 July 1888 in ‘F. G. & Co. Private Letters Jan 31 1884-Aug 12 1895’ (Partners Letterbook), Drug Houses of Australia Ltd, Special Collections, University of Melbourne Archives. Two paintings on this list were shown by Fletcher at the People’s Palace Exhibition, *The People’s Palace… Exhibition of Loan Collection of Pictures...1891* catalogue; ‘AF Personal Gifts and Sundries’ Book c. 1890-1901’, The ANZ Executors and Trustee Co. Ltd. Melbourne, see n. 40.

[33] Letter from Fletcher re. Bennetter to NGV, 16 Sept 1884, Archives, NGV, p. 6; Gallegos, *Once a Month*, 15 Jan
1885, p. 77, further information from Sarah Thomas, Art Gallery of SA; Dore, *Table Talk*, 4 March 1892, p. 13; Gill, *Table Talk*, 1 May 1891, p. 6.

[34] *Australasian Critic*, 1 May 1891, p. 192.


[37] Von Guerard, *Argus*, 31 July 1885, p. 6; Further information from AGNSW which has one of the group. I am grateful to Terence Lane of the NGV for supplying a list of references to Fletcher from Gerard Vaughan’s manuscript index to *Table Talk*, from which these are drawn: Bunny, 18 Oct 1889; Rowan 12 Sept 1890, p. 16; Gully, 27 Feb 1891, p. 7; Longstaff, 14 Oct 1892, p. 2; R. H. Croll, ed. *Smike to Bulldog: Letters from Arthur Streeton to Tom Roberts*, Sydney, Ure Smith, 1946, p. 37.


[40] *The People’s Palace* catalogue.

[41] *Table Talk*, 4 March 1892, pp. 13-14.

Author/s:
Jordan, Caroline W.

Title:
Fletcher's of Collins Street: Melbourne's leading nineteenth-century art dealer, Alexander Fletcher

Date:
2005

Citation:

Publication Status:
Published

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/34364

File Description:
"Fletcher's of Collins Street": Melbourne's leading nineteenth-century art dealer, Alexander Fletcher

Terms and Conditions:
Terms and Conditions: Copyright in works deposited in Minerva Access is retained by the copyright owner. The work may not be altered without permission from the copyright owner. Readers may only download, print and save electronic copies of whole works for their own personal non-commercial use. Any use that exceeds these limits requires permission from the copyright owner. Attribution is essential when quoting or paraphrasing from these works.