

World's first exhibition of 19th century Australia's best unknown artist

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One of Australia's most talented yet least-known artists will finally emerge from the archives when the State Library of NSW stages the first retrospective exhibition of the work of Charles Rodius (1802–1860), opening 17 June 2023.

Over 90 original watercolours, drawings and prints – many never seen by Australian audiences – from public and private collections in Australia and the UK, including the Library's own unrivalled collection, will come together in this ambitious exhibition simply titled *Charles Rodius*.

According to Mitchell Librarian Richard Neville: "Rodius was highly-trained, with a talent equal to that of his famous contemporary Conrad Martens, but his work was rejected by the art world and his name has almost vanished from art history."

"In the 20th century, his exquisite portraits were considered of more historical than artistic interest, and many were transferred from the Art Gallery of New South Wales to the Library. Now we have the opportunity to shine a spotlight on this intriguing artist whose artistic and musical achievements were reported in the newspapers of the day."

Rodius trained as a draughtsman and printmaker in Paris, and later, in London, appears to have supplemented his meagre income as an artist and language teacher with petty theft; in 1829 he was transported to New South Wales for stealing a lady's handbag at the opera.

He worked for a short time for the Colonial Architect's office, and his views of Sydney Harbour and renderings of settlers' houses from this period can be seen in the exhibition. Rodius resumed his portraiture and teaching work after being granted a ticket-of-leave in 1832, just as the colony was experiencing an influx of immigrants. These settlers eagerly sought images of the colony to send back to their British families, and Rodius's 1833 print of Sydney Harbour was particularly popular.

While his core clientele was drawn from the public service and professional classes, Rodius's sitters included people from all walks of life, and both sides of the law, as well as recognisable 'public characters' such as Garigal leader Bungaree, the eccentric ferryman Billy Blue, explorer Ludwig Leichhardt and a young Henry Parkes.

"Rodius did well selling cheap prints to the gossipy and image-starved Sydney community, but the portrait drawings he created over some 25 years are among the best made in Australia in the mid-19th century," said the exhibition's guest curator, Dr David Hansen, who began researching the artist as the Library's inaugural Ross Steele AM Fellow in 2020.



Charles RODIUS *Media Release*



“Visitors will be fascinated by Rodius’s striking portraits, particularly those of First Nations people, and will be able to see the development of Rodius’s works from first sketches through to formal finished drawings and lithographic prints,” says Dr Hansen.

Damien Webb, Manager of the State Library’s Indigenous Engagement Branch, says little is known about Rodius and the First Nations people in his portraits, or how much agency these subjects had in the interaction.

Additional highlights of the exhibition include:

- Rodius’s famous portrait of explorer Ludwig Leichhardt seen together for the first time with two of his Aboriginal guides, Charley Fisher and Harry Brown;
- rare and beautifully-detailed drawings of several Māori who were in Sydney in 1833–34, some of whom were taken hostage by British whalers in order to ensure that their Otago outposts would not be destroyed; and
- a series of pictures in various media of Rodius’s popular view of Sydney Harbour, all taken from the same location at the top of Tallawoladah/The Rocks.

The *Charles Rodius* exhibition will be on display in the State Library’s galleries from 17 June 2023 to 12 May 2024.

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