Conrad Martens’ Cave Paintings

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Introduction

During his time in Australia, the landscape painter and watercolourist Conrad Martens (1801-1878) produced a number of works in pencil, watercolour, print and oil relating to New South Wales caves, including the Wellington Caves, Wombeyan Caves and Burrangalong Cave on the Abercrombie River. A list of those works is included below, arranged chronologically and with associated notes and descriptions.

1840 - Wellington Cave

* Interior of cave at Wellington. March 25/40
  Pencil     18 x 27.2     ML PXC970 f.10

* Wellington Caves Mar 25/40
  Pencil     18.5 x 27.2    ML PXC970 f.11

December 7 {Account of Pictures}

* Cave at Wellington Valley.  J.Bell  £8.8. Pd. E

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1841 – Wombeyan Caves

Wombean 31 Decr/1841
Pencil      20.1 x 24.2cm   ML PX*D307-2 f.9
Wombeyan Caves

Wombean Decr 31st 41
Pencil     15.9 x 22.9cm    ML PX*D307-2 f.10
Wombeyan Caves

The attribution of these work to Conrad Martens is doubtful, according to former Mitchell Library Pictures Librarian and Martens expert Elizabeth Imashev, 1993.

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1843 – Burrangalong Cavern

February 15 - Surveyor W.R. Davidson writes a letter to Surveyor General T.L. Mitchell regarding the discovery of Burrangalong Cavern, on the Grove or Rockybridge Creek, a tributary of the Abercrombie River {AONSW, Colonial Secretary Correspondence, 2/1529}.

March - Governor Fitzroy visits the newly discovered caves.

April - W.C. Wentworth visits the caves. He later commissions Martens to produce two works on the locality.

April 25 - Sydney Morning Herald reports on the discovery of the Burrangalong Cavern in February by Surveyor W.R. Davidson.

May 18-25 - Conrad Martens and party visit the Burrangalong Cavern, producing a number of pencil sketches, and painting two oils on the spot, en plein air. This was a novel experiment by the artist, though it is possible he had worked in such a manner previously.

* North Entrance, Burrangalong Cavern on the Abercrombie May 18th 1843
  Pencil           31.7 x 47cm                 DG*D18 f.10
                  12 1/2 x 18 1/2"

* Burrangalong Cavern on the "Abercrombie" May 21/43
  Pencil           31.7 x 47cm                 DG*D18 f.9
                  12 1/2 x 18 1/2"

* View of South Entrance May 23 1843. Burrangalong Caves on the Abercrombie River
  Pencil           32.3 x 47.3cm              DG*D18 f.6
                  12 3/4 x 18 5/8"

* View from the gallery South end May 23/43
  Pencil           31.7 x 47cm                 DG*D18 f.8
                  12 1/2 x 18 1/2"

* Gallery and grand Archway, Southern End May 24th/43
  Pencil           31.7 x 47.3cm              DG*D18 f.7
                  12 1/2 x 18 5/8"

* North end of Cavern looking out May 25th/43
  Pencil           31.7 x 47cm                 DG*D18 f.5
                  12 1/2 x 18 1/2"

* Stalagmites, Burrangalong Cavern 1843
  Painted on the spot
  Oil on board       40.5 x 53.5cm           AGNSW

* Members of an Expedition at the Burrangalong Cavern 1843
  Painted on the spot
  Oil on canvas     41 x 57cm            AGSA
* Burrangalong Cavern, South entrance. 1843  
Pencil       21 x 29.2cm  
8 1/4 x 11 1/2"  
DLPX25 f.8

* Burrangalong Cavern  
W/C         18.1 x 26.1cm  
7 1/8 x 10 1/4"  
DLPX25 f.9

* Wombeyan Caves  
[Interior of Burrangalong Cavern. c.1843]  
Oil      87.9 x 60.5cm  
34 1/2 x 23 1/2"  
DG163

August 23 {Account of Pictures}  
* Burrangalong Cavern.  
W. Wentworth Esq  £15.15.

* Entrance, Burrangalong Cavern.  

`These two oils were almost certainly burnt in a fire in 1893 at `Greycliffe.' At the time they were in the possession of Fitzwilliam, the son of W.C. Wentworth.' (Mackay, 1984, note 14.)

November 13 {Account of Pictures}  
* 5 Sketches of Cavern.  
W. Brown Esq  £10.10. Pd. wine

These are most likely `Burrangalong Cavern 1843', 5 Wash drawings, exhibited at the Blaxland Gallery on 16 September 1920, cat no 42.

1844 - Burrangalong Cavern

A number of Burrangalong Cavern works from 1844 are also known.

* Burrangalong Cavern, view from the entrance 1844  
P & W/C       23.1 x 32.7cm  
Inscribed in Martens' handwriting.  
NK298

* Burrangalong Cavern, 50 miles south of Bathurst 1844  
P & W/C       23.4 x 33.4cm  
NK299

* View from the Burrangalong Caves 1844  
Wash        20.3 x 28.1cm  
ANL R3310

* Burrangalong Cavern 1844  
Sepia wash 19.5 x 27.8cm  
ANL R3309

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Exhibition for the Society for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in Australia, held at the Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney. Cave paintings exhibited by Martens (as noted in the catalogue) included:

* 338 Interior of Burrangallong Cavern, Abercrombie River, N.S.W.  
  Property of Mr C.Martens  
  This Cavern was first explored and made known by R.Davidson, Esq., of Bathurst. The Gallery high up on the right of the Picture was occupied by the Artist during his sojourn of a week; Nos. 341 and 344, were painted on the spot, and show the entrance to this wild and romantic abode.  
  (For Sale)

* 341 Stalagmitic Columns at the Southern Entrance of the Burrangallong Cavern. (Vide No.338)  
  Property of Mr Martens.  
  (For Sale)

* 344 Return View of the Stalagmitic Columns. (See No.341)  
  Property of Mr C.Martens  
  (For Sale)

* 346 Northern Entrance to Burrangallong Cavern  
  Property of Mr Martens.  
  (For Sale)

2 June 1849 - Review of the Sydney Exhibition, published in the Sydney Morning Herald:

Nos. 338, 344, 346.- Burrangallon Cavern.- C.Martens.- Property of Mr. Martens.- It is to be lamented that this clever artist does not keep his eccentricities under proper control. We have here, on a small scale, what might be four scenes for a play to be termed "Much ado about Nothing! The drawing in each is harsh and rude beyond necessity, and the shadows are mere darkness. The introduction of so outre an object as an artist's easel, apparently as a sort of advertisement, is a piece of childish affectation.

August 7 {Account of Pictures}

1. Burrangalong cave, northern entrance purchased by J. Fairfax  
   Sold at an art union held in conjunction with the exhibition. This work was catalogue no.346.

* Burrangalong Cavern, Rockybridge Creek [c.1849]  
  Oil 47.6 x 65.6cm  
  Provenance - J. Fairfax, 1849  
  ML98

1850

23 May {Account of Pictures}

May 23.  
Small drawing of Cave on the Abercrombie. Mr Barber  
£1.10.
1854

14 December {Account of Pictures}


16 December - *The Abercrombie Cave, near Bathurst*, woodcut by Conrad Martens, published in *The Illustrated Sydney News*, page 441, with the following caption:

The Abercrombie Cave, near Bathurst. Our engraving represents the South-west entrance of the cavern on Rockybridge Creek, about fifty miles South-west of Bathurst, commonly called the Abercrombie Cave, and which was first explored by Surveyor Davidson. It is situated on the course of a stream, which has formed this magnificent tunnel nearly 800 feet in length, and contains an inexhaustible supply of white marble. It was in the vicinity of this cave that the white marble selected to be sent to Paris has been procured.

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1856

February 24 - Letter to Henry Martens (Dixson Library, MS Q313 item 2, page 1)

The view in the Cave has been some time done, as you heard at the time of my cavern trip......The picture has always been a favourite with me and I have more than once refused to part with it. I send you the small view of the cave by way of illustration.

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1857

Fine Arts Exhibition, Sydney. Cave painting by Martens exhibited by John Fairfax:

* 269 Entrance to the Caves, Burrangalong
Oil
Owner: John Fairfax Esq.

John Fairfax had purchased this work in August, 1849.

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1872

20 April {Account of Pictures}

April 20. Abercrombie Cave. 26 x 18 Mr.Joseph 20gns. Pd

* Wombeyan Caves 1872
W/C 45 x 64.5cm DG168

1897

`Loan Exhibition`, National Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. The following cave paintings by Martens were exhibited:

* 59 Abercrombie Caves.
  Oil
  Lent by R.T. Carter, Esq.

* 222 Abercrombie Caves 1872.
  W/C
  Lent by Frank Moore, Esq.

1920

* Burrangalong Cavern 1843
  5 Wash drawings
  Exhibited at the Blaxland Gallery, Sydney, on 16 September 1920 (catalogue nos. 42 A, B, C, D & E. Most likely the collection sold to J. Brown in November 1843.

1922

* Burrangalong Cavern 1843
  5 Pencil & Wash
  Offered for sale at Lawson’s, 7 May 1922, cat. nos. 269-273. From the John Young Collection. Most likely the works sold to J. Brown in November 1843, and exhibited at the Blaxland Gallery in 1920.

1946

* The Abercrombie Caves 1843
  (3 Views)
  Offered for sale by Lawson’s, 29 May 1946, cat. no. 389. Possibly 3 of the 5 sketches purchased by J. Brown in November 1843.
1963

* Stalagmites - South Entrance of Burrangalong Cave
Oil 20 1/2 x 15 1/2" 

* Interior, Burrangalong Cave
Oil 22 1/2 x 16" 
Offered for sale by Lawson’s, 10 December 1963, cat. no. 629. Mary Cosgrove Estate. Sold for 85 guineas. One of 2 works painted ‘on the spot’ in May 1843. Purchased by the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

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1964

* Stalagmites, Southern Entrance, Burrangalong Caves
Oil 15 1/2 x 20 1/2" 

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1974

* Cave Interior [Burrangalong Cave]
W/C 17 x 27cm 
Offered for sale by Leonard Joel, June 1974, cat. no. 5. Sold for $300.

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1978

‘Conrad Martens Centenary Exhibition’, S.H. Ervin Museum and Art Gallery, Sydney:

* 128 Wombeyan Caves 1872
W/C 45 x 64.5cm DG168

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1982

‘The Blue Mountains’ exhibition, S.H. Ervin Museum and Art Gallery, Sydney:

* 35 Stalagmites, Burrangalong Cavern c.1843
Oil 40.5 x 53.3cm AGNSW
1983

* Members of an Expedition at the Burrangalong Cavern 1843
  Oil on canvas 41 x 57cm
  Auctioned by Geoff K. Grey, November 1983, cat. no.160. Sold for $16000. One of a pair, the other in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Both were offered for sale at Lawson’s 12/12/63, lots 628 & 629, Mary Cosgrove Estate. Refer Australian Financial Review 31/10/83. Purchased by Thirty Victoria Street - refer 1984 below.

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1984

* Stalagmites at Southern Entrance Abercrombie Caves
  Oil on canvas 42 x 58.5cm
  16 1/2 x 23in

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1985

* Burrangalong Cavern
  Watercolour & china white on brown paper 16.2 x 25.8cm
  Signed in pencil l.l. and inscribed with title l.r.
  Offered for sale by Sotheby’s, 24 October 1985, cat. no. 104. Sold for $7500. Provenance - R.T. Carter estate sale, W.A. Littles, Sydney 13 May 1919 (not listed in catalogue); sold with the contents of his house, Claines, Darling Point. Purchased by Thirty Victoria Street - refer 1988 below.

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1988

* View from the Gateway, South end Abercrombie Caves, on the Abercrombie May 23/43
  W/C & P on buff paper 23.5 x 36cm
  9 7/8 x 11 7/8"
  ‘The Artist and the Patron' exhibition, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney:

* 51 Burrangalong Cavern c.1849
  Oil 42.1 x 58.7 AGSA
  Illustrated in catalogue.
**Description of Conrad Martens’ paintings of caves in oil**

The following 4 oil paintings are described in detail below:

36 Burrangalong Cavern  
[Northern Entrance to Burrangalong Cavern, c.1849] 1849 Exhibition *346  
ML98

51 Wombeyan Caves  
[Interior of Burrangalong Cavern, Abercrombie River, N.S.W., 1843] 1849 Exhibition *338  
DG163

83 Stalagmites, Burrangalong Cavern 1843  
[Stalagmitic Columns at the Southern Entrance of the Burrangalong Cavern, May 1843] 1849 Exhibition *341  
AGNSW

84 Burrangalong Cavern 1843  
[Return View of the Stalagmitic Columns at the Southern Entrance of the Burrangalong Cavern, May 1843] 1849 Exhibition *344  
AGSA

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No. 36

Title Burrangalong Cavern, Rockybridge Creek  
[Northern Entrance to Burrangalong Cavern]

Date [c1849]

Medium Oil on canvas

Dimensions 47.6 x 65.6cm (18 3/4 x 25 3/4in)

Library No. ML98

Dated -

Signed -

Inscribed -

Collection Mitchell Library


Nos. 338, 341, 344, 346. - Burrangallong Cavern. - C. Martens. - Property of Mr. Martens.-

It is to be lamented that this clever artist does not keep his eccentricities under proper control. We have here, on a small scale, what might be four scenes for a play to be termed "Much ado about Nothing! The drawing in each is harsh and rude beyond necessity, and the shadows are mere darkness....' 

Exhibition `Society for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in Australia', Sydney, 1849, cat no 346, titled 'Northern Entrance to Burrangalong Cavern'.

`Fine Art Exhibition', Sydney, 1857, cat no 269, titled `Entrance to the Caves, Burrangalong'.

Provenance James Fairfax, 1849.

Notes

Based on the pencil sketch `North Entrance, Burrangalong Cavern on The Abercrombie River, May 18th 1843' (DG*D18 f.10).

This is most likely the work entitled `Burrangalong Cave, northern entrance' sold to James Fairfax on 7 August 1849, via an art union held in conjunction with the exhibition of the Society for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in Australia. The value of the work was 12 guineas. This work was one of four cave paintings in oil shown by Martens at that exhibition.

As the work is undated, we can only say that it was executed sometime between May 1843 and June 1849. Whether it was painted in 1843 along with the majority of Martens' other works on the Burrangalong Cavern, or got up specifically for the exhibition in 1849 is unknown - the latter seems more likely in the opinion of this author.

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No. 51

Title Wombeyan Caves

[Interior of Burrangalong Cavern, Abercrombie River, N.S.W.]

Date [1843]

Medium Oil

Dimensions 87.4 x 61.5cm (34 1/2 x 23 3/4in) inside frame.

Library No. DG163
Dated -
Signed -
Inscribed Title from frame
Collection Dixson Gallery - present by Sir William Dixson, 1929.

M.Mackay, 'Notes on Conrad Martens' Cave Paintings', Thirty Victoria Street, Sydney, 1984.


Reproduced -
Reviews Society for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in Australia (Exhibition Catalogue), Sydney, 1849, cat no 338:

'Society for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in Australia', Sydney, 1849, cat no 338, titled 'Interior of Burrangalong Cavern, Abercrombie River, N.S.W.' - This Cavern was first explored and made known by R.Davidson, Esq., of Bathurst. The Gallery high up on the right of the Picture was occupied by the Artist during his sojourn of a week....'

Sydney Morning Herald, 2 June 1849:

'Nos. 338, 341, 344, 346. - Burrangallong Cavern. - C.Martens.- Property of Mr. Martens.- It is to be lamented that this clever artist does not keep his eccentricities under proper control. We have here, on a small scale, what might be four scenes for a play to be termed "Much ado about Nothing! The drawing in each is harsh and rude beyond necessity, and the shadows are mere darkness....' 

Exhibition 'Society for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in Australia', Sydney, 1849, cat no 338, titled 'Interior of Burrangalong Cavern, Abercrombie River, N.S.W.'

'Loan Exhibition, National Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1897, cat no 56, titled 'Abercrombie Caves. Lent by R.T.Carter, Esq.'


Notes This oil is based on the pencil sketch 'Gallery and Grand Archway, Southern End. May 24th/43' (DG*D18 f.7), taken by Martens during his 1843 expedition to the Burrangalong Cavern.

This is the largest of Martens' cave paintings, and is most likely the work which he kept as one of his personal favourites. He had noted, possibly in reference to this work, the following in an 1856 letter to his brother Henry:
The view in the Cave has been some time done, as you heard at the time of my cavern trip....The picture has always been a favourite with me and I have more than once refused to part with it. I send you the small view of the cave by way of illustration.

The trip referred to had taken place in May 1843, and there is the suggestion that the large oil under discussion was painted around that time. No subsequent reference is made to its sale in his account books following 1856, though Martens did sell a watercolour view of the entrance to the caves in 1872.

There is some doubt whether the above oil painting, or the smaller version referred to in Martens letter of 1856, was the one shown in the 1849 Sydney Exhibition and marked 'For Sale' within the catalogue. The reviewer for the Sydney Morning Herald had pointed out in his criticism:

We have here, on a small scale, what might be four scenes for a play to be termed "Much ado about Nothing!"

This suggests that the four cave paintings on show were smallish in size, though there is no doubt that cat no.338 refers to the same scene as portrayed in the large work under discussion. The whereabouts of the small version of this view, sent to Henry Martens in England in 1856, are unknown.

It is possible that this large oil was also the work exhibited by R.T.Carter at the Art Gallery of New South Wales opening exhibition in 1897. Carter, a collector and art dealer, was a close friend of the artist and his family during Martens' latter years. He obtained possession of a number of the artist's sketchbooks, paintings, and personal memorabilia, both from Conrad himself, and his daughter Rebecca who died in 1909. Carter died in 1919, and it is possible that Sir William Dixson obtained the oil prior to Carter's death, or during the disposal of his estate.

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No. 83

Title Stalagmites, Burrangalong Cavern
[Stalagmitic Columns at the Southern Entrance of the Burrangalong Cavern]

Date [May 1843]

Medium Oil on board

Dimensions 40.5 x 53.5cm

Dated Painted `on the spot', May 1843

Signed -

Inscribed -

Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales

M. Mackay, `Notes on Conrad Martens' Cave Paintings', Thirty Victoria Street, Sydney, 1984.


Reviews Society for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in Australia, Sydney, 1849, cat no 341, `Stalagmitic Columns at the Southern Entrance of the Burrangalong Cavern':

`This Cavern was first explored and made known by R.Davidson, Esq., of Bathurst....Nos. 341 and 344, were painted on the spot, and show the entrance to this wild and romantic abode.'

Sydney Morning Herald, 2 June 1849:

Nos. 338, 341, 344, 346. - Burrangallong Cavern.- C.Martens.- Property of Mr. Martens.- It is to be lamented that this clever artist does not keep his eccentricities under proper control. We have here, on a small scale, what might be four scenes for a play to be termed "Much ado about Nothing! The drawing in each is harsh and rude beyond necessity, and the shadows are mere darkness. The introduction of so outre an object as an artist's easel, apparently as a sort of advertisement, is a piece of childish affectation.

Exhibition `Society for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in Australia', Sydney, 1849, cat no 341, `Stalagmitic Columns at the Southern Entrance of the Burrangalong Cavern'.


Provenance Lawson’s, Mary Cosgrove Estate, 10 December 1963, cat no 629, 85 guineas; Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Notes

Painted `on the spot' at the Burrangalong Cavern in May 1843. This is a companion work to `Return View of the Stalagmitic Columns at the Southern Entrance of the Burrangalong Cavern' (Art Gallery of South Australia), which was also painted `on the spot'.

Though offered for sale at the 1849 Sydney exhibition, Martens does not record the sale of this work in his account book. Its history from that point on is unknown, until it appeared for sale at Lawson’s in 1963, as part of the Mary Cosgrove estate.

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<table>
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<tr>
<th>No.</th>
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| Title | Burrangalong Cavern  
[Return View of the Stalagmitic Columns at the Southern Entrance of the Burrangalong Cavern] |
| Date | [May 1843] |
| Medium | Oil on canvas |
| Dimensions | 42.1 x 58.7cm (20 1/2 x 15 1/2in) |
| Dated | Painted `on the spot' May 1843 |
| Signed | - |
| Inscribed | Section of torn label on back of stretcher, in handwriting `...Burrangalong Cavern painted on the spot. C.Martens.' |
| Collection | M.J.M. Carter Collection, Art Gallery of South Australia |
M. Mackay, `Notes on Conrad Martens' Cave Paintings', Thirty Victoria Street, Sydney, 1984. |
| Reproduced | The Artist and the Patron, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1988, p73, b/w. |
| Reviews | Society for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in Australia, Sydney, 1849, cat no 344, `Return View of the Stalagmitic Columns':  
`This Cavern was first explored and made known by R.Davidson, Esq., of Bathurst....Nos. 341 and 344, were painted on the spot, and show the entrance to this wild and romantic abode.'  
Sydney Morning Herald, 2 June 1849:  
`Nos. 338, 341, 344, 346. - Burrangallong Cavern.- C.Martens.- Property of Mr. Martens.-  
It is to be lamented that this clever artist does not keep his eccentricities under proper control. We have here, on a small scale, what might be four scenes for a play to be termed 'Much ado about Nothing! The drawing in each is harsh and rude beyond necessity, and the shadows are mere darkness....' |
| Exhibition | `Society for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in Australia', Sydney, 1849, cat no 344, `Return View of the Stalagmitic Columns'; `The Artist and the Patron', Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1988, cat no 51. |
Provenance  Lawson’s, Mary Cosgrove Estate, 10/12/1963, lot 628, un-sold; Lawson’s, 29/9/1964, lot 357, 55 guineas; Geoff K.Grey, November 1983, lot 160, $16000; Thirty Victoria Street, 1984, $65000; Art Gallery of South Australia.

Notes

Painted `on the spot' at the Burrangalong Cavern during May 1843. This is a companion work to `Stalagmitic Columns at the Southern Entrance of the Burrangalong Cavern' (Art Gallery of New South Wales), which was also painted `on the spot'.

An almost identical pencil sketch entitled `Burrangalong Cavern, South entrance. 1843' (DL PX25 f.8) is known, but it was most likely taken in Sydney, sometime after the expedition.

Though offered for sale at the 1849 Sydney exhibition, Martens does not record the sale of this work in his account book. Its history from that point on is unknown, until it appeared for sale at Lawson’s in 1963, as part of the Mary Cosgrove estate.

In the Geoff K.Grey catalogue of 1983 the above oil painting is referred to as `Members of an Expedition at the Burrangalong Cavern, 1843'. Around the time of that sale is was cleaned and conserved - refer to the Conservation Report by Angela Meeson Pty Ltd, 20 October 1984, prepared for Thirty Victoria Street.

Bibliography


