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**MR. ROBERT DOWLING (1827-1886)**

**A resource pamphlet**

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**Robert Dowling** (1827–1886) holds a special place in the history of Australian art. He was the first locally formed artist in Australia. He specialised in portraiture, but also painted popular genre subjects, as well as literary and biblical themes. He painted the most substantial Orientalist images by any Australian artist of the time, and images of Australian Aborigines. Dowling was Australia’s major portrait and figure painter from the late colonial period (1850–85).

Born in Britain into a devout Baptist family, at age seven Dowling migrated with his family to Australia in 1834 and was raised in Launceston. He worked in Tasmania (1850–54) and Victoria (1854–56) before travelling to London (1857–84). He remained in Britain for twenty-seven years, exhibiting at the prestigious Royal Academy and regularly sending paintings back to Australia for purchase by institutions and private collectors. Dowling came back to Australia in 1884, a highly successful artist. He settled in Melbourne but returned to London in 1886 with the intention of moving back to Australia permanently. This plan was thwarted by his sudden death.



*Mrs Margaret McArthur of Meningoort* 1856, oil on canvas, 98.5 x 74 cm  
Geelong Gallery, Victoria, purchased with the generous assistance of the Trustees of the  
Howard Hitchcock Bequest, and with additional support from the Friends of the Geelong  
Gallery, 2001

## PORTRAITS IN OIL AND COLOURED CRAYON



Robert Dowling announces that after the 18th instant he will be prepared to execute portraits in oils and coloured crayons, as well as miniatures on ivory. He also purposes giving lessons in drawing.

Specimens may be seen at his residence, York Street.

*The Examiner*, 16 Nov 1850, Launceston, Tasmania

**EXTRACTS FROM ROBERT DOWLING'S  
PAMPHLET ON HIS PAINTING  
*A SHEIKH AND HIS SON ENTERING CAIRO***

**Mr Dowling's Oriental Picture**

Within the entrance to the Mosque there stands a young Mahomedan priest, carelessly looking on the approaching pageant. Here, also, is a beautiful study of an old Mussulman, stooping to replace his slippers, on his return from prayer within the Mosque. Then we have a woman in the unpicturesque out-door habiliments of Eastern females. Next, a girl bearing the frequently recurring rude iron frame holding lighted charcoal, for the convenience of smokers; a boy with tongs being engaged in lighting one of the popular companions of the Arab everywhere.

Here we have also represented one of the low settees of bamboo, which abound for public convenience, and upon which there are seated an aged and a younger

Arab, smoking their favourite chibouks—the former wholly unmoved, and the latter but slightly moved, by the rude music and clatter of the passing procession.

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This grand picture occupied the Artist about three years. It was accepted by the Royal Academy, of London, in April, 1875; and obtained a place on the walls of that great school of British art during the exhibition of that year.

It has been sent from London by the artist, for the gratification of his old friends and fellow-colonists, on the sole condition that the expense of conveyance to the colonies and transmission again to England, shall not fall on him; and it has been guaranteed that these expenses shall be defrayed here.

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**WALCH BROTHERS & BIRCHALL**

January, 1877.

Tickets, to admit during the whole period of exhibit, 2s. 6d.; Family tickets, ditto, 5s.—NOT TRANSFERABLE.—To be had of MESSERS. WALCH, BROTHERS & BIRCHALL.



*A sheikh and his son entering Cairo, on their return from a pilgrimage to Mecca 1874 (detail), oil on canvas, 139.3 x 244.5 cm National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, presented by a committee of gentlemen 1878*

## JAMES DAWSON'S DESCRIPTION OF WEERAT KUYUUT

The fine old chief of the Spring Creek tribe, Weeratt Kuyuut—'Eel Spear', occasionally called Morpor, after his tribe and country, and believed to have been upwards of eighty years of age—was both a messenger and teacher.

As a messenger he generally travelled by himself. In his younger days he was a great warrior, and in more mature years was considered such an honourable, impartial man, that he was selected on all occasions as a referee in the settlement of disputes. When a great battle was to be fought, he was sent for by the contending chiefs, who placed him in a safe position to see fair play. In reward for his services he returned home laden with presents of opossum rugs, weapons, and ornaments.

As a teacher he taught the young people the names of the favourite planets and constellations, as indications of the seasons ... He taught them also the names of localities, mountain ranges, and lakes, and the directions of the neighbouring tribes.

As Weeratt Kuyuut had the reputation of being an expert warrior, besides being well known as a messenger, he travelled unmolested all over the country between the Grampian ranges and the sea, and between the rivers Leigh and Wannon; and was received and treated everywhere with kindness and hospitality.

From James Dawson, *Australian Aborigines: the language and customs of several tribes of Aborigines in the Western District of Victoria, Australia*, George Robertson, Melbourne, 1881, p 75



*Minjah in the Old Time (Weerat Kuyuut and the Mopor people at Minjah Station) 1856 (detail), oil on canvas, 76.4 x 101.7 cm Warrnambool Art Gallery, Victoria, presented by Joseph Ware 1886*

# DEATH NOTICE

## THE LATE ROBERT DOWLING

The numerous friends of the late Robert Dowling will receive with the utmost regret the unexpected tidings of his death, which must have occurred shortly after reaching England, on return thither from these colonies ... But apart from his talent as an artist he was altogether estimable as a man. No one was more prompt to recognise ability, or more cordial to praise it in a brother artist. He was absolutely free from envy or jealousy; and the writer has heard him say, 'If I could paint a picture like that' (something that had charmed him from the pencil of another painter), 'I would hasten back to Europe to-morrow and take my place in the first rank.' ... He loved his art but he loved artists more, and it was a pleasure to hear him expatiating on

the merits of a fine picture, or on what he regarded as most worthy of praise in the character, conduct, or skill or genius of the executant. His own nature was breezy, genial and sympathetic. He took cheerful views of life, looked on the bright side of human nature, and was somewhat of a laughing philosopher. He had mixed a good deal with English artists, and was full of anecdotes concerning those with whom he was best acquainted; but his narratives and criticisms were always tinged with kindness and good humour ... Certainly none of his friends were prepared for the melancholy news which has now reached them. Mr Dowling leaves behind him a wife and family to whom he was affectionately attached.

*The Argus*, Wednesday 14 July 1886, p 6



Robert Dowling with the painting *Miss Robertson of Colac (Dolly)*. This photo was taken in 1855 and shows Dolly wearing a white summer dress, which the artist later changed to brown at her request. Compare this portrait with the finished portrait of Dolly on the enclosed card.

## Resources

John Jones, *Robert Dowling: Tasmanian son of Empire*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2010. Published in conjunction with the exhibition (available from the venue or from the National Gallery of Australia, [ecom@nga.gov.au](mailto:ecom@nga.gov.au) or 1800 808 337)

James Dawson, *Australian Aborigines: the language and customs of several tribes of Aborigines in the Western District of Victoria, Australia*, George Robertson, Melbourne, 1881. Available at the National Library of Australia website: [nla.gov.au/nla.us-nk9620](http://nla.gov.au/nla.us-nk9620)

National Gallery of Australia website: [nga.gov.au/Dowling](http://nga.gov.au/Dowling)

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**ROBERT DOWLING**

Tasmanian son of Empire

■ national gallery of **australia**