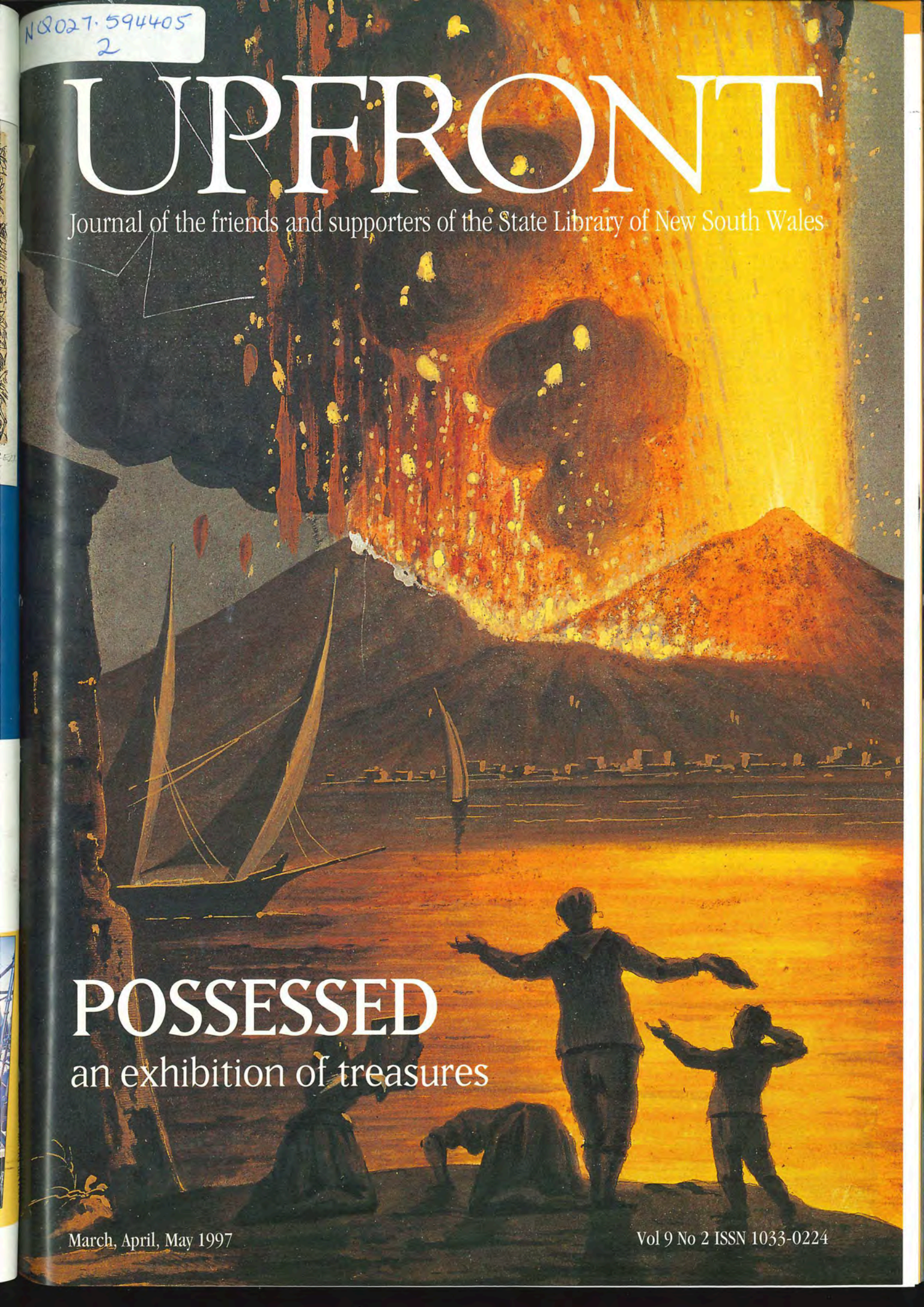


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UPFRONT

Journal of the friends and supporters of the State Library of New South Wales



POSSESSED
an exhibition of treasures

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POSSESSED

BY MICHAEL MANGOLD

The Australian male satin bower bird is one of nature's great collectors, its piercing blue eyes hinting at its predilection for blue objects. A glimpse of the bower it assembles reveals colour as the overriding criterion for classification. Yet each of the objects displayed is a point of interest in itself and a relic of events from another form of life. Objects from everywhere, in a collection revealing much more about the life and times of the bird's world than its biological need to attract a mate.



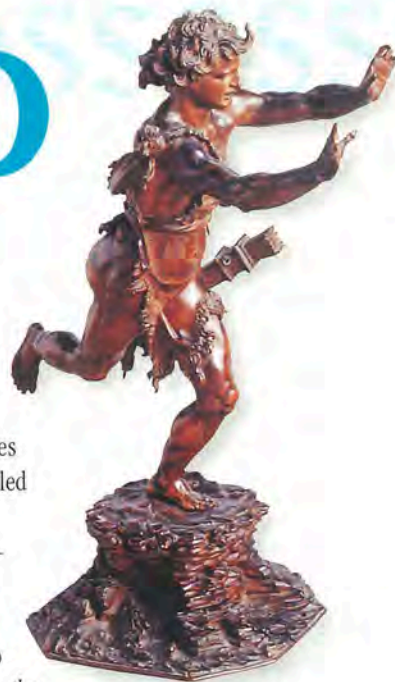
Tulipa suaveolens from the Pierre-Joseph Redouté's *Les Liliacées*.

One of the many achievements of a major new exhibition in the galleries of the State Library is its success in imparting the similarly instinctive nature of collecting by humans. By boldly shaking off the distinctions of nomenclature and codified order, inherent in the classification systems of museums and libraries, Curator, John Murphy has brought to the surface intriguing and bizarre objects from the depths of the State Library's collections. The blood of King Charles I, a lock of the hair of the author of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley, a tiny coffin made and presented to the widow of Captain James Cook by his crew (complete with a lock of his hair and depiction of the scene of his murder inside) and a fragment of the flag from Admiral Horatio Nelson's ship the *Victory*.

These are some of the curiosities in the first of three of the Library's galleries devoted to the exhibition evocatively titled *Possessed*.

This first gallery is the Wunderkammer, a Cabinet of Curiosities, that unsettles superficial ideas of the nature of collecting by taking us backstage into the minds of the collectors. Here we enter the psychological and metaphysical maze of the need humans have to anchor themselves in time with objects and to seek universal order. The centrepiece of this section of the exhibition is the c. 1820 'Collector's Chest' decorated with oil paintings depicting Australian landscapes, wildlife and kaleidoscopic displays of shells. In a series of panels and drawers the chest is a treasure-trove that is a fold-out exhibition in itself.

Amongst the objects in the Wunderkammer there are many surprises: pistols, a cat-o'-nine-tails, David Scott Mitchell's erotica (on display for the first time), and the Library's magic collection; including a book inscribed by the great escapologist Houdini. Visitors to the exhibition will be fascinated and delighted to discover the correspondence between the Australian-born author of *Mary Poppins*, P.L. Travers, and Walt Disney, expressing her reservations of the magical properties of animation in the screen adaptation.

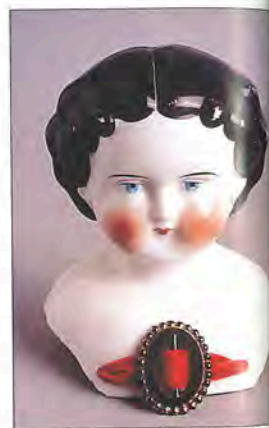


Statuettes of the mythic figures, Apollo and Daphne, c. 1750.

Possessed is exuberant; it brings the past to life in a remarkable display of apparently lifeless objects. This exhibition engages our intellects not through education but experience, and the presence of the Curator is strongly felt in the way we are invited to develop our feelings for the past. He recalls, "Seeing original manuscripts and relics in museums as an adolescent I was struck by the reality of the lives of historical identities. At a practical level it also made me aware that these artefacts and products of previous ages still existed and were in a way alive."

John Murphy has orchestrated this added dimension of historical reality, a reality beyond the rational and chronological. The exhibition is in three distinct stages paralleling the movements in the performance of a classical concerto. In the Wunderkammer, the visitor's curiosity and expectations are aroused.

Photograph of P.L. Travers, the Australian-born creator of the quintessentially English nanny, *Mary Poppins*. Travers worked as an actress in Sydney and is shown in the role of Titania from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.



The china bead of a bride doll which was treasured for a lifetime by Miles Franklin, the author of *My Brilliant Career*.



Then in the second gallery of *Possessed* the tempo becomes slower and enters a more restrained meditation of the book. "If the form of the book is the soloist of the concerto, then maps from the Library's wonderful collection provide an orchestral interplay," John says. "The maps include a decorated map of

Africa, Asia and the East by Evert Gijsbertsz, 1599, and the fine Tasman Map, describing the voyages of Abel Tasman in 1642 and 1644 to discover the Great South Land. The maps develop the theme of navigation and the voyages which encouraged the European culture of collecting."

The books exhibited embrace the full range of human experience from the transcendent literature of Shakespeare's *First Folio* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* to the original log book kept by William Bligh on the *Bounty* in 1789. The overall theme of this gallery is the evolution of the book from the illuminated medieval manuscript to the first printed works.

Different elements of the Library's vast collections have also been made to resonate quite deliberately across the galleries. The original manuscript journal Matthew Flinders

kept during his imprisonment in Mauritius underscores the poignancy of the flowers collected from his grave by his widow after his untimely death at the age of 40.

The final gallery of *Possessed* brings the exhibition to a crescendo with some of the Library's largest oil paintings and grand folio volumes. "Here we see the ambition, folly and grandeur of European collecting," John explains. "Items and themes which were

A seaweed specimen from an album of seaweeds collected by Bertha Bonn in Tasmania in 1890.



presented in the Cabinet of Curiosities now become the seeds of these expansive exhibits. The sketch of Cook's death within the tiny coffin, for example, develops into major public oil paintings of the scene such as the one by John Webber, the official artist of Cook's voyage."

"Delicate specimens of dried seaweed from the Cabinet of Curiosities become hydrated in the last gallery with the voluptuous appearance of

Pierre-Joseph Redouté's *Les Roses*. The plates of Redouté's books record the collection of roses grown by the Empress Josephine at her chateau, Malmaison, outside Paris. She also kept a menagerie that included kangaroos, black swans and dwarf emus from Australia. Redouté's books provide a sense of the period's insatiable desire for classification and variety.

"Here we see the triumphant statement of Europe's confidence in its ability to collect and



Image from JJ Audubon's The Birds of America.

codify nature with Audubon's *The Birds of America*, a double-elephant folio depicting life-size birds in one of the largest and most ambitious books ever published. Nearby is the largest glass plate photographic negative in the world.

"Within the State Library of New South Wales there is an accumulated intensity of centuries of passion, obsession, violence and beauty. Through an exhibition like *Possessed* it may be released to the public."

POSSESSED

Treasures of the State Library of New South Wales

On display in the Galleries
4 March – 29 June 1997

Sponsored by more than 50 individuals and groups who will be acknowledged in the exhibition and the catalogue.



The Library's 'Collector's Chest', c.1820, which opens to reveal painted panels and collections of shells.