

Bounty: Nineteenth-century South Australian gold and silver

2 June-5 August, 2012
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, SA

Words by Alex Birchmore

In conjunction with the survey exhibition, *South Australia Illustrated: Colonial Painting in the Land of Promise*, the Art Gallery of South Australia's recent display of colonial gold-and silver-ware organised by Robert Reason offered a comparably extensive selection. Entering the darkened exhibition space, visitors were immersed in an atmosphere of quiet opulence and enticed to explore by spotlighted glimpses of polished metal. Ostentatiously patterned flock wallpaper and a rich shade of burgundy provided a sumptuous backdrop to the assortment of centrepieces, medallions, presentation cups and other artefacts of religious, domestic and governmental ornamentation.

It is this diversity which perhaps leaves the greatest impression of the exhibition as a whole, for which Reason brought together an equally diverse array of colonial viewpoints. For all of these interests, the state's rich mineral deposits provide a shared foundation—historically, geographically and economically. Threatened with a financial crisis triggered by the mismanagement of government funds, excessive speculation on land and the delayed development of agricultural infrastructure, the discovery of copper and then lead, silver and gold in the early 1840s saved Adelaide from collapse.¹ Both these minerals and the mines from which they were taken are here commemorated, the latter in the watercolours of S.T. Gill, J.W. Giles and E.C. Frome.

The focus of the show remained the gold- and silver-ware, however, lovingly arranged in glass cases, vitrines and, in one spectacular display, atop a Khai Liew wooden table. Particular emphasis was paid to European artisans who settled in South Australia, including Henry Steiner, C.E. Firnhaber and Julius Schomburgk. In all of their extravagant and beautiful creations, South Australia's mineral bounty is unabashedly celebrated, a testament to their imaginative skill and the ambitious vision of their patrons, but also to the pride and gilded self-image of a young, newly-prosperous colony.

¹ Tracey Lock-Weir, *Visions of Adelaide, 1836-1886*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2005, p.56.