

# Charles Bayliss Collection

A unique opportunity to purchase a collection of twelve views of Sydney and the harbour by photographer Charles Bayliss (Australian, 1850–1897), containing some of Australia's largest surviving wet-plate collodion process photographs from the 19th century.

**Price on application.**

Collectors' List No. 196, 2019

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[Circular Quay, Royal Botanic Gardens And View Of Sydney Looking North-East, From The Garden Palace], c1879.

## **Civic pride and panoramas — Charles Bayliss** **Australia's most accomplished panoramic photographer**

by Gael Newton

When British-born, Australian-raised photographer Charles Bayliss (1850–1897) died in Sydney aged only 47, the *Australasian Photo-Review* said of him 'As a landscape photographer he had few equals and no superiors... The work he did in every direction was of the best quality and is too well known and wide to be improved by eulogy.'<sup>1</sup> However, like most 19<sup>th</sup> century pioneer photographers, Bayliss was forgotten after the turn of the century. His widow unsuccessfully offered the Bayliss studio negatives dating from 1878 to 1897 to the Mitchell Library in Sydney in 1916 and their fate is unknown.<sup>2</sup> Many of Bayliss' distinctive elegantly composed and richly toned prints from this period survive in public collections and appear from time to time on the market. Most are from half or whole plate cameras. Prints from mammoth plates from the 1870s and 1880s, however, are rare and particularly so the panoramas of Sydney for which Bayliss was well known.

As a youth in Melbourne Charles Bayliss had been taken on as an apprentice around 1866 to Beaufoy Merlin (1830?–1873), a professional photographer from England travelling around photographing towns in Victoria. In 1866 Merlin founded the American and Australasian (A&A) Photographic Company. The American connection appears a fantasy but proclaimed the firm's alignment with modern technology and visual communication. At a time when many studios were permanently based in cities for the lucrative portrait trade, Merlin is unusual in the extent of his travels up and down the east coast of New South Wales and Victoria, photographing people outside their homes and businesses as well as the prominent buildings that attested to colonial sophistication and progress.

The people appearing in the A&A Photographic Company pictures might buy one or two prints, but Beaufoy Merlin saw the opportunity for later sales further afield to intending settlers or investors.<sup>3</sup> For the next decade Charles Bayliss mastered the art of photography while working for Merlin's A&A Photographic Company in New South Wales and Victoria. Merlin was entrepreneurial, but there is little to suggest he was a technical innovator. Subsequent events suggest Bayliss was a naturally innovative and gifted artist-technician.

In 1872 while working in the central west goldfields of New South Wales Beaufoy Merlin met German-born Bernhardt O. Holtermann (1838–1885), a very successful mining businessman and partner in the 1872 discovery of a huge slab containing 93.2 kilograms of gold. Holtermann was an amateur photographer and born promoter with multiple business ventures. By 1873 Merlin and Holtermann announced plans for an international travelling exhibition of photographs as a means of promoting Australian immigration and investment.<sup>4</sup> Holtermann commissioned the A&A Photographic Company to photograph the New South Wales and Victorian capitals and principal regional towns, especially those related to mining. His immediate focus for presentation was on the upcoming 1876 American Centennial International Exhibition in Philadelphia.

Beaufoy Merlin died in September 1873, and over the next three years young Bayliss continued as Holtermann's photographer often using a huge 18 x 22 inch camera (46 x 54 cm) for views and panoramas. It appears likely it was Bayliss who persuaded Holtermann to think big and to import the top quality, large format lenses and supplies needed for mammoth plate camera work. Such work was well known in the American West in the 1860s, but even there, photographers relied on commissions or undertook projects as a means of gaining publicity for their studio. Few customers could afford such huge prints and panoramas. Panoramas were sold as concertinas and on

canvas rolls in leather tubes, but also as individual panels for albums. The panorama also proved a newsworthy project for studios in Australia from the advent of modern wet-plate photography on paper in the 1850s, but was similarly uneconomic for mass sales.<sup>5</sup>

The most ambitious panoramas were made in 1875 when Holtermann built a large home on the heights of the north shore of Sydney Harbour. A 27 metre tower was built to provide a platform for panoramic photographs of the city. Whether Bayliss had a hand in that vision is not known, but it was his skill that made it possible. One of the most impressive productions was on 23 mammoth plates. The finished work was almost 10 metres long, of which a full-size suite of prints on a canvas roll survives in the National Gallery of Australia.<sup>6</sup> The Holtermann panorama is in the grand tradition of the 'bird's-eye view', popular in the panorama and diorama exhibitions held in the 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, as the modern globally interconnected world was being formed. Part of the charm of the Holtermann Tower view is that it simultaneously shows a graceful Sydney city profile across the water and a voyeur's glimpse into the dense housing and backyards of the streets immediately below. Bayliss and others made panoramas from the tower from 1875 and after Holtermann's death in 1885 when the building was acquired by its present owners, the Shore School.

The Holtermann Tower served as a camera in its own right for a giant four-panel panorama on 16 kilogram glass plates up to 1.6 metres wide, that had to be coated and handed up the stairs and then processed in a darkroom at the base.<sup>7</sup>

Between 1876 and 1878 Bernhardt Holtermann was overseas touring his 'World Exposition' in America and Europe, which prompted Bayliss to establish his own studio in George Street, Sydney, where he would remain until his death. He was starting from scratch; the A&A Photographic Company Sydney branch negatives had been sold in 1872 and Bayliss would have had no rights to the A&A Photographic Company or later work commissioned by his now absent patron. Bayliss was, however, alert to the potential business in Sydney from the planned 1879 International Exhibition for which a building known as 'The Garden Palace' was being built in the Sydney Domain.

In August 1879 Bayliss ascended into the lantern above the central dome of the still incomplete Garden Palace building to make a 360 degree panorama of Sydney.<sup>8</sup> The resulting panorama, consisting of eleven 22 x 18 inch plates, was 22 inches high by 20 feet in length, and was mounted on a canvas scroll. Six panels covered the Circular Quay prospect, and five the view over to Farm

Cove. The *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 4 October 1879, p. 5, reported that the work could be seen in Bayliss' studio in George Street and how,

Availing himself of the splendid opportunity afforded by the erection of the centre dome in the Exhibition, this artist has recently taken a set of views of Sydney and its surroundings from that altitude (200 feet), and the result of his labours constitutes the best panorama of Sydney we have ever seen. The work of art to which we allude consists of a series of pictures taken on 22 x 18 ins plates, forming an extensive representation of the city and its suburbs, measuring 20 feet in length by 22 inches in breadth. As a specimen of photography it is almost faultless, and has called forth much praise on all hands, as well from brother photographers as from art critics. Every point of interest in the photograph is finely and distinctly marked, and the clearness and completeness of the picture is surprising. There is some probability of the panorama being placed in the Exhibition, and it is decidedly to be wished that an opportunity may be given to the lovers of beauty in art to see this, the cleverest work that has for a very long time issued from a colonial gallery.

During the exhibition visitors could replicate Bayliss' experience by ascending to the dome of the building in the first passenger lift in Australia, an American Whittier Steam Passenger Elevator in the north tower. Bayliss possibly hoped to capitalise by selling visitors a permanent record of the view they too had seen.

The celebrated Garden Palace panorama by Bayliss was exhibited in the International Exhibition, but as Government Printer Thomas Richards dominated the exhibition with his department's extensive photographic displays, Bayliss got little attention. Government Printer Office photographer John Sharkey also made a panorama from the Garden Palace dome but that work elicited no public comment.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, in 1885 the committee for the upcoming Colonial and Indian Exhibition chose to purchase a copy of Bayliss' panorama. Bernhardt Holtermann also acquired or was given a copy of the 11-panel Bayliss Garden Palace panorama, which is among the Holtermann family collection at the Mitchell Library.<sup>10</sup>

Bayliss made a number of views of the Garden Palace from the North Shore and other angles and is reputed to have made another panorama from the Garden Palace dome some months after the International Exhibition closed on 20 April 1880, and one of the ruins after the fire of 22 September 1882.<sup>11</sup>

He definitely made an eight-panel panorama during the visit to Sydney of British Royal Princes Albert and George, between 14 July to 10 August of 1881.<sup>12</sup>

Only a few complete copies of his later panoramas survive in the State Libraries of NSW and Victoria. East and west segment views of the Garden Palace panorama may have been marketed separately.<sup>13</sup> While not as romantic as the North Shore views of the harbour and city skyline, the Garden Palace panoramas show Sydney as a grown-up modern city.

Charles Bayliss continued with large format panoramas in the 1880s and 1890s. The *Sydney Morning Herald* of 3 June 1882 reported on a grand photographic panorama Bayliss had on display in the office of real estate agent Hardie & Gorman, promoting the latter's Beaconsfield land development at Ryde, noting that 'He has employed an unerring agent which cannot lie or misrepresent that which it has to produce for the information of the world – photography'. He made panoramas from the Observatory, Government House and the GPO and several of Hunters Hill and Potts Point in the mid-1890s. Bayliss returned to the Holtermann Tower to work from 1885 to 1889.<sup>14</sup>

Charles Bayliss' most ambitious and accomplished work came back into view as part of the acquisition in 1951 of the Bernhardt O. Holtermann collection of negatives by the State Library of NSW. Various prints from the original negatives were made in the early 1950s, including by Kodak Pty Ltd for historian Keast Burke, who took on the research of the Holtermann collection and worked as the editor of their company-owned magazine the *Australasian Photo-Review*. A world premiere of the "B.O. Holtermann Photographic Collection 'Eighty Years After'" featuring Australian life and scenes during 1871-1876' was presented in March 1953 across four locations: Mitchell Library, Sydney; the Public Library of Victoria (State Library of Victoria); the Kodak Salon in Sydney and in Melbourne. The focus was on the human interest subject matter of the colonial gold fields.

The Holtermann collection has now been completely digitised by the State Library of NSW. In 2017 following a campaign by the State Library of NSW, three giant plates (one at 151.7 x 96.5 cm and two at 136 x 95 cm) surviving from Bayliss' 1875 four-panel panorama of Sydney Harbour were officially recognised on the UNESCO International Memory of the World Register as the world's largest surviving wet-plate era negatives.<sup>15</sup>

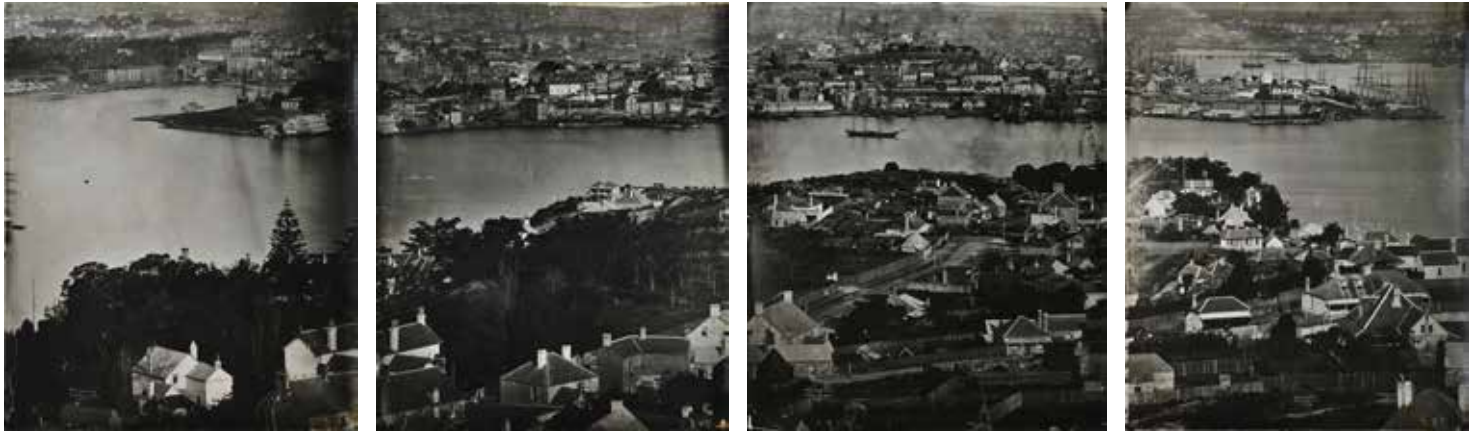
Charles Bayliss was a superb photographer, whose work appeals on both historical, technical and aesthetic grounds, rivalling that of his European and American contemporaries. His achievements over his whole career were

reinstated in the bicentennial year with National Library of Australia's 2008 monograph *A Modern Vision: Charles Bayliss, Photographer, 1850–1897*. Written and researched by the eminent photography curator and writer Helen Ennis, the monograph celebrates Bayliss as one of the greatest photographers in 19<sup>th</sup> century Australia for his combination of aesthetic skill and technical expertise. For his remarkable output of now rare, large format panoramas from 1875 to 1895, Bayliss might well be at the top of that cadre.

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#### Notes

- 1 *Australasian Photo-Review*, 19 June 1897.
- 2 Email information from Alan Davies, former long serving curator of photography, SLNSW, July 2018.
- 3 Alan Davies <http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/blogs/holtermann-and-aa-photographic-company>
- 4 *Argus*, 10 March 1874, p. 4.
- 5 See Gael Newton, 'On magnitude as an element of attractiveness in photography' in 'Expeditions, Excursions and Expositions', ch. 6 of *Shades of Light: Photography and Australia 1839–1988*, originally published by National Gallery of Australia, Collins, 1988. Retrieved from <http://www.photo-web.com.au/ShadesofLight/06-expedition.htm>
- 6 See 'Holtermann Panorama' brochure: <https://nga.gov.au/Exhibition/PictureParadise/pdf/Holtermann.pdf>  
For online information on the Holtermann/Merlin/Bayliss story see <https://photo-web.com.au/bayliss/bio.htm> and Helen Ennis, *A Modern Vision: Charles Bayliss, Photographer, 1850–1897*, NLA, 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.nla.gov.au/exhibitions/bayliss/index.html>
- 7 'Mr. Holtermann's Photographs', *Evening News*, 11 February 1876, p. 2, gives a description of the difficulties.
- 8 The *Illustrated Sydney News*, 9 August 1879, p. 8, shows the cage in which visitors to the as yet incomplete building could ascend the dome. The camera operation was very difficult. Bayliss had to deal with gusts of wind, dust clouds, temperature drops and shifting light which made choosing the day to attempt a panorama critical.
- 9 Copy held by SLNSW.
- 10 See Holtermann family photographs mainly of Sydney belonging to Bernhardt Otto Holtermann, c1873–c1879. ML PXD 762. As far as known Bayliss was not in Holtermann's employment in 1879. A copy of the complete 11-part panorama is held by NLA and five panels of the same work in 'Album of photographs of the Sydney Exhibition Building and other Sydney buildings.' See <https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/22449858>
- 11 'Views of Old Sydney' no. 56 DL PXX 65.
- 12 The Mitchell Library panorama ML 1073 has been dated 1881 from the presence of the Princes' ship in Farm Cove. It has 8 panels with images 20.5 x 205.5 cm on a mount 33.7 x 213.5 cm. Another copy SPF/568 has images 18.9 x 25.8 cm each.
- 13 The Mitchell Library ML XV1/1878/ , XV1/1878/2 , XV1/1878/3 is a three-panel 'Panorama of Sydney from the Garden Palace', dated 1878–1882, mounted on board.
- 14 Mitchell Library, ML XV1/Har/1888-90/2, holds photographs 8 1/2 x 5 ft. 5 3/4 ins in 6 sheets. The Stanton Library, North Sydney also holds the same 6-part panorama by Bayliss LH REF PF 749/1-6 dated 1885-89, as clearly later by decade than the 1875 work and has no sign of railway work at Milsons Point which began in 1891.
- 15 See <http://www.amw.org.au/register/listings/holtermann-collection> and [www.sl.nsw.gov.au/Blogs/StateLibraryofNSW](http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/Blogs/StateLibraryofNSW).



1. [Four Panels From "Panorama Of Sydney Harbour And Suburbs From The North Shore"], 1875/1950s. Four silver gelatin photographs, three captioned and numbered "12", "14" and "15", and two annotated "P.W.5." and "P.W.6." in negative lower left or centre, 50.5 x 44.3cm (approx. each). *Minor developing flaws, handling creases, stains. Framed.*

Annotation reads "Holtermann's Exp. N.S.Wales Scenery."

These four panels form the central portion of the original 23-panel panorama. They were taken from a specially constructed tower built by Bernhardt Holtermann at his home in Lavender Bay on Sydney's North Shore, known as the Holtermann Tower. The four panels show McMahons Point and Blues Point in the foreground, and Dawes Point, Sydney Town Hall, Observatory Hill, Darling Harbour and the Pyrmont Bridge across the harbour. Ref: NGA.



2. *[Four Panels From Bayliss' Sydney Panorama From The International Exhibition Building], 1879. Four albumen paper photographs, 34 x 52.4cm (approx. each). Slight foxing or discolouration to edges, one with repaired tear to upper centre of image and edge. Laid down on original backing. Framed.*

Charles Bayliss took his 11-panel panorama from the tower of the Sydney International Exhibition Building (Garden Palace) while it was still under construction in either 1878 or 1879 (the building burnt down in 1882). These four panels comprise images 3, 5, 7, and 10 of the panorama, and show the city centre including Town Hall, terraces of Macquarie Street looking across the city to the current Barangaroo, the Sydney Conservatorium including parts of the Exhibition Building in construction, Potts Point and Darling Point. Ref: NLA.





3. *[Views Over Sydney From The International Exhibition Building]*, c1881. Two albumen paper photographs, one with photographer's line "Bayliss Photo Copyright Regis'td" in negative lower right, 20.7 x 27cm (approx. each). *Slight foxing. Framed.*

These images were taken from the tower of the Sydney International Exhibition Building (Garden Palace) after construction had been completed. They show a view of Macquarie Street terraces looking across the city to the current Barangaroo, and lower Macquarie Street across Circular Quay to the Rocks.



4. *[Circular Quay, Royal Botanic Gardens And View Of Sydney Looking North-East From The Garden Palace]*, 1880–1881. Albumen paper photograph, five-panel panorama, photographer's line in negative lower left of one panel, 14.3 x 129.7cm. *Linen-backed, framed.*

These images were taken from the dome of the Sydney International Exhibition Building (Garden Palace) which opened in 1879 and burned down in 1882. The Exhibition Building stood in the grounds of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney.



5. *Sydney From North Shore*, c1885–1889. Albumen paper photograph, four-panel panorama, titled with photographer's line in negative lower centre of one panel, 14 x 111.6cm. *Slight foxing. Linen-backed, framed.*

Shows a view over Lavender Bay towards Walsh Bay, Balmain, and east of the harbour.