



Top: Eric Thake, *Chinese Shop, Lt. Bourke Street (Lilly Buk)*, 1942, oil enamel on board. Pictures Collection, H2006.146/2

Above: Eric Thake, *Chinese Shop, Lt. Bourke Street (Lilly Buk)*, 1942, oil enamel on board. Pictures Collection, H2006.146/1

Eric Thake, two paintings of Chinese shops in Little Bourke Street

Pictures Collection H2006.146/1-2

Acquired 2006

Oil paintings by Melbourne artist Eric Thake are rare, so when the opportunity arose to purchase two, the Library's selection committee jumped at the chance. The Library already held a significant body of work by Thake, including more than 90 prints, linocut Christmas cards and photographs.

The purchase of the two paintings was partly funded by the State Library Foundation. The works are unique documentary views of shopfronts in Melbourne's Chinese quarter during World War II. Little Bourke Street had long been at the heart of Melbourne's Chinese community, but by the 1940s it was in decline. Fruit and vegetable wholesalers, once a mainstay of Little Bourke Street, had moved to Queen Victoria Market. Factories had also moved away.

By the time these paintings were created in 1942, the Chinese quarter had shrunk to the block between Swanston and Russell streets, and many of its itinerant workers had gone. It was precisely this obscure, forgotten quality that appealed to Thake who worked in the city as a commercial artist:

My interest in shop windows and their contents springs from the end of WWI when I first started work ... not the fashionable shops of Melbourne but those old dusty ones ... in those days [on] the outer edge of the city ...¹

Armed with a sketchbook, Thake would wander the city's streets and laneways during his lunchbreak because 'you can never tell when an idea will present itself, and very often ideas turn up in the most unlikely [of] places'.²

Eric Thake had a knack for finding the unfamiliar in the familiar, and so it was with these Chinese shopfronts, oddly devoid of human life, although signs of humanity are everywhere – in the 'no peanuts sign' above the window ledge; the ceramic figures displayed in orderly rows; the freshly cut watermelon stacked by the door. There is an air of recent departure, as if the occupants have dropped everything and left.

When World War II was finally over, the *Argus* reported:

Melbourne will not be entirely without fireworks on V-P Day, for one shop was discovered in the fast disappearing Chinese section of the city with a few crackers.³

Perhaps it was one of these two shopfronts that came to the rescue.

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