

James Waltham Curtis, *Falls of Wannon*

Pictures Collection H2009.112

Acquired 2009

At first glance, James Waltham Curtis's painting of the Wannon falls appears to be an example of the colonial sublime. While two Europeans occupy themselves with scientific observation, their Indigenous companion lifts his arm in a theatrical gesture of awe at the descending columns of water and rising clouds of spray. It is only when we look more closely that we notice, in the upper left, that sheep are already grazing on the pastures above the falls.

At the time Curtis painted this view, these falls on the Wannon River, near Hamilton in Victoria's Western District, were becoming a popular spot for sightseers. They were also popular with artists and were depicted by Eugene von Guérard, Thomas Clark, Louis Buvelot and Nicholas Chevalier. This painting is possibly one referred to as *Falls on the Wannon* that Curtis exhibited at the Victorian Academy of Arts 1878 exhibition, held at its gallery at Eastern Hill (East Melbourne).

After arriving in Victoria from England in the late 1860s, Curtis (1839–1901) initially made his living colouring photographs for the firm of Johnstone, O'Shannessy and Co. He also painted landscapes, and he began to exhibit his works. He attracted enough favourable notice that by 1874 he was providing illustrations for the *Illustrated Australian News* and other publications.¹

Today, Curtis is not a household name of colonial art, but in his lifetime he attracted two important patrons. The first was Joseph Syme, sometime co-proprietor of the *Melbourne Age*, who commissioned Curtis to provide artworks for his grand home 'Rothermere' in Elwood. The second was American businessman Thomas Welton Stanford, who had lived in Melbourne since 1859. Stanford put Curtis on a permanent retainer and travelled with him through Victoria in search of subjects for landscapes. He ultimately presented a collection of around 70 works by Curtis to Stanford University in California, founded by his brother, Leland Stanford.

In 1954, Stanford University offered to sell some of these works to the National Gallery of Victoria. By that time Curtis had been so utterly forgotten that the director, Daryl Lindsay, could tell the gallery trustees almost nothing about him, and the press wrote of Curtis as a 'mystery artist'. The gallery did, however, acquire four landscape paintings on paper. Presumably Stanford University disposed of the rest of the works one way or another, as today a search of the online catalogue of its art collection shows no works by Curtis.²



James Waltham Curtis, *Falls of Wannon*, c. 1878, oil on canvas. Pictures Collection, H2009.112