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In search of 'Hansen, decorator': finding Peter Hansen

Searching for an artist without documentation is something like painting a portrait without a likeness. When that artist is the art decorator for a 19th-century mansion, the challenge is especially daunting. Of the many hundreds of art decorators employed during Melbourne's building boom of the 1880s, the vast majority of them remain anonymous. Most of their work has been erased through renovation or lost in the rubble of demolition. A poignant reminder of this loss can be seen in the sketchbooks of artist Charlie Hammond, in which teams of forgotten men are shown at work on long-forgotten mansions.¹

Labassa, in Caulfield North, southeast of Melbourne, is unique among Marvellous Melbourne's surviving boom-style mansions.² Although it has endured nine owners and over 700 residents, its lavish 1890 decorative features, hand-painted ceilings and Japanese wallpapers remain largely intact. Within its walls are the remnants of two earlier buildings. Sylliott Hill, a modest eight-room, two-storey villa, was erected in 1863 by Irish barrister Richard Annesley Billing, who extended it into a 20-room mansion in 1873. The mansion as it stands today is substantially the creation of multi-millionaire Alexander William Robertson, a pastoralist and coach line proprietor, who purchased Sylliott Hill in 1887 and renamed it Ontario, after the Canadian province where he was born. Robertson wanted a palatial residence in which to host the social elite and so engaged architect John Augustus Bernard Koch to undertake a major refurbishment in 1889. Fifteen more rooms were

added, and the exterior and interior underwent an elaborate redecoration in the European style. Koch's work on Ontario is well documented. He signed and dated a completion photograph, and articles on his work were published in the *Journal of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects*.³ The art decorator for the mansion's opulent interiors, however, remained a mystery for 125 years.

In searching for this unknown art decorator only one thing was certain: Ontario's owner would have wanted the best artisans for the refurbishment of his colonial palace. Robertson owned several properties in Queensland and New South Wales in partnership with fellow Canadian and investor John Wagner, among them Perricoota Station, near Moama, in New South Wales. Perricoota was bought for breeding horses for their Cobb & Co coach line, but it was much more than that. Robertson used it to entertain aristocrats such as Prince Tommaso of Savoy, 2nd Duke of Genoa, and Archibald Philip Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery, the latter of whom became the British prime minister in 1894. A visitor to Perricoota in 1887 credited Robertson as the 'sole architect' of its elaborate and expensive 'appointments', 'rarely obtained outside the precincts of our cities'.⁴ In 1890, while Ontario was being refurbished, Robertson leased the house of John Campbell Hamilton-Gordon, 1st Marquess of Aberdeen and Temair, at 27 Grosvenor Square, London, for the coming-out party of his daughters Eva and Nina.⁵ No expense was spared in impressing his aristocratic guests, among whom he hoped to find suitable matches for his girls. Robertson even had the drawing room at Grosvenor Square redecorated in Louis XV style by W. Turner Lord & Co.,⁶ the company that in 1895 had decorated the drawing room at Highclere Castle, in Hampshire. The man in charge of Ontario's art decoration would have been a highly skilled artisan with impeccable references.

Ontario was undergoing major construction works in 1889. Establishing the sequence and timing of such works through 'wanted' advertisements can often identify the architect and sometimes tradesmen and artisans. Advertisements in *The Age* show that the Ontario works' foreman, Mr T Bodsworth, had bricklayers on site in September,⁷ followed by plumbers in November⁸ and lathers in December.⁹ Finally, eight months later, an advertisement on 18 August 1890 brought the activity inside the house: 'Paperhanger: First class Hand for Japanese wanted. Ontario, corner Balaclava, Orrong Road. Hansen, decorator'.¹⁰

Advertisers tend to reuse the same key words in a similar sequence. A search of advertisements in the same year using 'Paperhanger', 'First class Hand' and 'for Japanese' produced another advertisement published 11 weeks

earlier: 'Paperhanger, first class hand, for Japanese paper. Dr. Madden's Job, St Kilda, P. Hansen, decorator'.¹¹ No other advertisements were found for 1889–90 using all of these key words in the same sequence.

Dr John Madden, owner of Cloyne, Chapel Street, in the Melbourne suburb of St Kilda, was a prominent barrister in June 1890. Three years later, he was sworn in as chief justice of the Supreme Court and in 1899 became Victoria's lieutenant-governor. Newspapers published regular articles about his public and private life, and through these emerges a long association with art decorator Peter Hansen. Madden engaged Hansen to paint his portrait in around 1901¹² and to redecorate Cloyne in 1902,¹³ when the mansion was being used for Government House functions.

State Library Victoria has an invaluable collection within its Australian Art and Artists File, including one for Peter Nielsen Fuglsang Hansen.¹⁴ Without this file, research into Ontario's art decorator would have been protracted if not impossible. The file comprises letters, photographs and research notes collected by family historians Jean Walker and her sister Laura McDuff over a six-year period from 1976 to 1981.¹⁵ As it was created in the pre-digital era, much of its information could not be readily checked at the time. The key informants were family members, and, as I later discovered, some dates and events had been conflated in the process of creating a cohesive family story. There are no references to Ontario or Cloyne, Robertson or Madden in the file. It does, however, reference other Hansen works which can be directly linked to Madden. For example, it mentions a portrait of Bendigo brewer Jacob Cohn, which is currently on display at Melbourne's Danish Club, at 428 Little Bourke Street. This painting was exhibited in Hansen's Flinders Building studio, at 312 Flinders Street, Melbourne, in 1901 alongside his portrait of Madden.¹⁶

There is also a list of buildings which Hansen is believed to have decorated, including one suggested by Hansen's son Harald, who recalled how at the age of around ten years he helped his father to prick designs onto canvas for the property of Bendigo gold-mining magnate Mr George Lansell. A visit to Lansell's Villa Fortuna, in Chum Street, Bendigo, in 2017 failed to locate any physical or photographic evidence of this work.

According to the family, Hansen was born in Denmark and came to Melbourne via Egypt. He immediately found regular work decorating churches with Estonian carpenter and future brother-in-law Jaan Kannuluik. Hansen would paint the stations of the cross while Kannuluik created the frames. Although many of these churches have been identified, it has proved difficult to confirm Hansen's involvement, as each one has either been renovated

or demolished. According to the Australian Art and Artists File, Father John Curtin at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, Middle Park, in Melbourne, showed a signed mural of approximately 76 centimetres by 51 centimetres to artist and art critic Bernard Boles in around 1969. By 2016, however, the mural was nowhere to be seen, and the Carmelite Library in Melbourne's Middle Park has no record of its ever being there.

The information that Hansen took ecclesiastical commissions nevertheless made it possible to confirm his work in churches with better documentation: St Mary Star of the Sea, West Melbourne, where he painted five altars (1900),¹⁷ the Lutheran Church at Hamilton (1909),¹⁸ the German Lutheran Church, Eastern Hill (1911)¹⁹ and St Joseph's Church, Rochester (1912).²⁰ The German Lutheran Church confirmed Hansen's ongoing professional relationship with Ontario's architect, John Koch, with whom he also collaborated on the German federation arch for the opening of the Australian parliament in the Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne, in 1901.²¹

State Library Victoria's Australian Art and Artists File also provides the gift of photographs, including those of some Hansen portraits and of a rococo screen decorated with cherubs and classical figures. Although these black-and-white images vary in quality and size, they provide insight into his technique and lend substance to his work beyond Ontario. One image of potential significance awaits further research: a photocopy from an unidentified book bearing the citation 'Original Ceiling Design, Alexandria Stock Exchange, carried out by Mr P. Hansen of Melbourne'. Was this perhaps a work completed by Hansen while he lived in Egypt or on a return journey?

The knowledge that Hansen was Danish led to two books, found online, about prominent Scandinavians: *The Scandinavians in Australasia* (1907)²² and *The Scandinavians in Australia, New Zealand and the Western Pacific* (1939).²³ The latter includes an acknowledgment of Hansen as 'outstanding in decorative art. Many of the finest ceilings and wall decorations seen in Melbourne today are of his design'.

A comprehensive Hansen biography was soon after discovered in *Norden*, the Danish-language newspaper published in Melbourne from 1896 to 1940. The only issues of *Norden* to be digitised by the National Library of Australia, so far, are those published from 1914 to 1918. Fortunately, for this researcher, Hansen died in 1916, when two detailed contemporaneous accounts of his life appeared.²⁴ Although the main informant appears to have been a family member, the biographical details concur with Danish census records and the information Hansen himself provided in his memorial for letters of naturalisation in 1900.²⁵



Photograph of self-portrait by Peter Hansen (left) and photographs of drawings by Peter Hansen of his two children (centre and right). Photographer and dates unknown. Location of original portraits unknown. 'Peter Nielsen Fuglsang Hansen', Australian Art and Artists file, Arts Collection

Regrettably, none of these Scandinavian sources mention Ontario or Cloyne, Robertson or Madden. The case for Peter Nielsen Fuglsang Hansen's being Ontario's art decorator is therefore substantially based on two simple advertisements. Other potential candidates, especially any other Hansens, need to be eliminated. Three eminent decorators had been suggested when the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) acquired the property, in 1980: German-born Walter Hugo Guido Brettschneider, English-born Philip William Goatcher and Scottish-born brothers Charles Stewart, James and Hugh Paterson. The timeline doesn't work for Goatcher, as he was contracted to work on the sets of Arthur Sullivan and William Gilbert's musical *The gondoliers* at the Princess Theatre, Spring Street, Melbourne, and only arrived in September 1890.²⁶ Tracking the movements of Brettschneider and the Paterson brothers through advertisements from the beginning of 1889 to the end of 1890, and research into later accounts of their works, produced no links. The only other artist called Hansen, and sometimes confusingly referred to as Mr Hansen, was painter Theodore Brooke Hansen, a student at the National Gallery Painting School in Swanston Street from 1886 to 1893 while Ontario was being redeveloped and decorated. Theo Hansen can be discounted, as there is no evidence that he had the training required to paint the trompe l'oeil ceilings at Labassa or any experience supervising a team of artisans. He also appears to have been fully preoccupied with his studies. In November 1890, he contributed nine works to the annual Victorian Art Students' Exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria.²⁷

A portrait of the only viable candidate as Ontario's art decorator,

Peter Hansen, emerges piece by piece. Born in Winding, Denmark, in 1862, Peter Hansen trained as a decorative artist in Aarhus under master painter WS Kjerbye. In April 1880, he packed his bags and worked his way through France, Germany, Austria, Italy, the Balkans, Greece, Turkey and Palestine, along the way acquiring fluency in eight languages. According to *Norden*:

Peter Hansen did not belong to those who travelled from here and there and then back home again. On the contrary, about him one could sing about 'the eternal wanderer who never finds peace'. But wherever he stayed in the world he had eyes and ears open and always he found the way to the biggest and best artists.

After two years on the road, Hansen arrived in Alexandria, Egypt, around August 1882. For the next five years he lived in Cairo, where he developed a reputation for his ceiling paintings.²⁸ In early 1888, he sailed on SS *Salier* for Melbourne, a city where there was an abundance of work for art decorators.²⁹ A refurbishment of the Grand Hotel (now the Windsor) in Spring Street was underway; Cliveden, the East Melbourne mansion of the colony's largest landowner, Sir William Clarke, was months from completion; and the courts for the Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition were yet to be decorated. According to family records, Hansen initially worked on the Fitzroy Town Hall, in Napier Street.³⁰ There is currently no record of this, but it cannot be discounted, as improvements to the hall were in progress when he arrived, in March 1888.

Although Danish born, Hansen had been raised as a Lutheran and was fluent in German. In May 1892, he married Anna Marie Fankhauser, daughter of a German migrant family who were orchard farmers in the Doncaster area in northeast Melbourne.³¹ It appears that Anna and Peter Hansen's children attended a German school, as Peter was a member of the German School Association between 1902 and 1907.³² These close cultural connections within the German and Scandinavian communities assured Hansen of regular work. Apart from decorating the German federation arch in 1901, Hansen also painted federation banners for Denmark³³ and Norway.³⁴ Celebrations for the opening of Australia's first Commonwealth parliament at Melbourne's Exhibition Building began on 6 May 1901 with the arrival of George, Duke of Cornwall and York. An elaborate series of nine commemorative arches lined the city's main streets, complemented with 'foreign' banners bearing good wishes for the new nation. In 1902, the German shipping company Norddeutscher Lloyd commissioned him to decorate their offices in Collins Street, in central Melbourne, which he completed entirely at night.³⁵

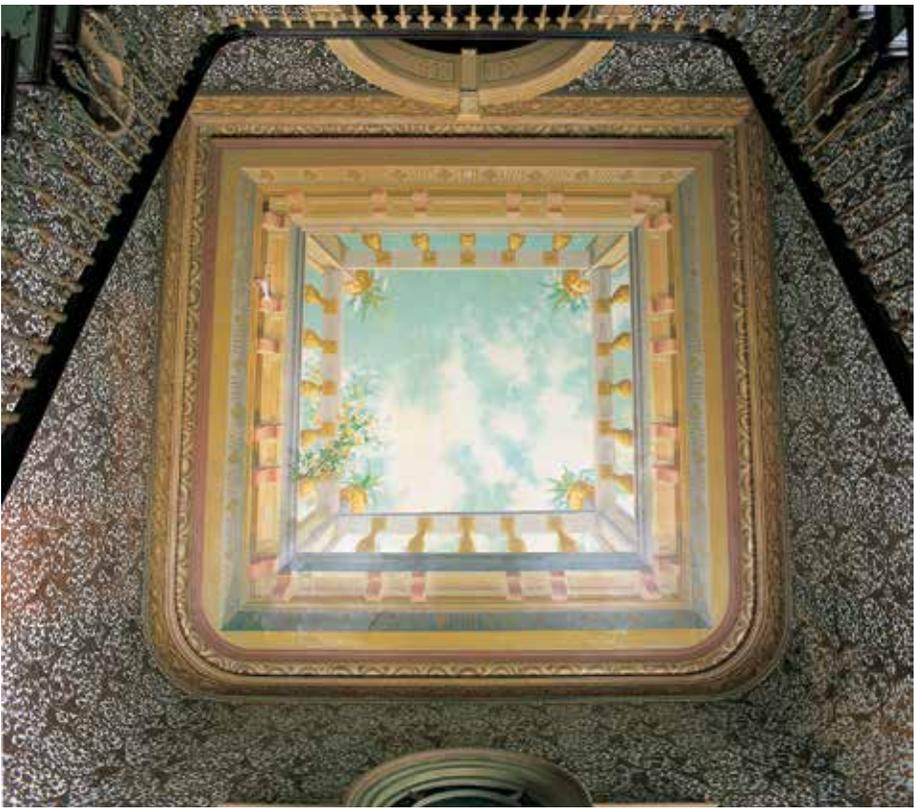


Ontario, later known as Labassa, Caulfield, Victoria. JAB Koch, architect, built in 1890 for pastoralist and investor William Alexander Robertson. Photograph of image from Imperial Institute series of bromide photographs of Victoria, vol. 1, c. 1890–93. Photographer unknown. Pictures Collection, H93.64/6

There are several explanations as to why Hansen's work between 1888 and 1894 is lacking in documentation. Art decoration was his bread and butter, not his passion. He aspired to be a painter of portraits in the manner of the European masters and in 1894 left Melbourne with his young family to study art in Copenhagen, in Denmark, and at the Munich Royal Academy, in Germany. He also spent time at the Pinakothek art museum, in Munich, studying the masters, including Peter Paul Rubens, Anthony van Dyck and Jean-Baptiste Greuze.³⁶

On his return to Melbourne in 1897, he set up a studio in the Flinders Building, where, as 'Herr Hansen', he showed facsimiles of the Old Masters.³⁷ He also presented works at the Austral Salon, in Elizabeth Street,³⁸ and the National Gallery of Victoria.³⁹ Excellent reviews of his paintings gave him prominence within Melbourne's art circles. *Table Talk's* review of the Austral Salon exhibition enthused:

It is the studies of heads that Mr Hansen has made from life that show his own originality and mastery over his brush. As a student of the Royal Academy of Munich, his work cannot be otherwise than interesting. These qualities appear at their best in an old peasant head, the contour of which is illumined, with the rest of the face in shadow. Typical studies of age and lusty youth, of matronhood, and manhood are remarkable for the perfection of finish and the strong firm modelling.⁴⁰



The trompe l'oeil ceiling above Labassa's main stair-hall was painted in 1890. Such decoration is rare in Australia and is of great national significance. Photograph by Christopher Groenhout. Reproduced courtesy of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria)

Hansen's paintings included portraits of Lieutenant-Governor Sir John Madden (1901), Bendigo brewer Jacob Cohn (1901) and gold digger and war veteran Claus Grønn (c. 1901). Apart from the Cohn portrait, none of these paintings has been located. *H.M. Queen Victoria*,⁴¹ *After the boom* and facsimiles such as that of Peter Paul Rubens's *The last judgement* are also missing.

At the time when Hansen's reputation was flourishing, Ontario's was fading. Robertson had died in 1896, and his mansion was no longer the setting for high society gatherings. Due to the lengthy wind up of the Robertson estate, Ontario did not find a new owner until 1904, by which time it was in need of some refurbishment.

As an acknowledged painter of some quality, Hansen also received favourable reviews for his art decoration on public buildings. His redecoration of the Grand Hotel in 1899 demonstrates both his artistry and his skill at managing a large project. Highlights of this redecoration were an exotic 'Moorish lounge' and several 'cleverly' painted ceilings. *Melbourne Punch's* detailed review concluded: "These decorations, and all the other ornamentation of the hotel, were carried out by Mr P. Hansen, and reflect the highest credit



Labassa's upstairs hallway featuring the 1890 embossed and gilded 'Acanthus'-design kinkarakawakami filler-paper, beneath the trompe l'oeil ceiling. Photograph by Anthony Basheer. Reproduced courtesy of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria)

upon his artistic taste both in design and execution'.⁴²

Hansen won the tender for the redecoration of the Hawthorn Town Hall in 1902 over John Ross Anderson, art decorator for the redecoration of Melbourne's Exhibition Building in 1901.⁴³ The local papers were euphoric in their praise following the first viewing of the hall, at a mayoral ball on 4 July 1902:

On the ceiling are panels in which are portrayed dragons, and oval representations of precious stones, also large panels painted in imitation of satin tapestry. In panels on the ceiling are also painted cupids in various scenes, representing worldly amusements – singing, drinking and feasting, dancing being represented in a large panel over the entrance and in a similar panel over the proscenium, tragedy and comedy. Below these panels is a wall frieze in Raphael's style. At the sides of the panels are sprays and wreaths of laurel and oak braziers, supported on tripods, also being depicted. The pilasters are decorated in festoons, the Corinthian capitals being gilded; near the base of the pilasters are alternate shells and heads. A dado frieze is done in a ribbon pattern, light and shaded very effectively. The walls are embellished

with large panels in imitation of Gobelin tapestry, the shading of which gives a most noticeable and pleasing effect. Over the entrance is a fine painting of a Venetian scene.⁴⁴

Following successive redecorations of the hall, all that remain of Hansen's work are female heads on pilasters, which have been restored, perhaps multiple times, and no longer exhibit the fine detail apparent in period photographs.

Norden suggests that Hansen's career as a painter of portraits and masters was far less lucrative than he had hoped it would be:

An artist's conditions in Australia are not to be envied, and the deceased [Hansen] was probably not wrong when he in his sarcastic way said that the man who could rummage through a dung heap with a pitchfork would do all right in Australia, but pity the man who thought he could live by the brush and palette.⁴⁵

Hansen continued to support his family as a decorator of churches, mansions and public buildings until his death, in 1916.

Hansen and Labassa

John Boyd Watson II purchased Ontario in 1904 and renamed the property Labassa. It remains the only known largely intact example of Peter Hansen's art decoration. Given that he most likely worked with a team of artists, forensic study may be required to attribute specific ceilings to the man himself. Nevertheless, painted ceilings were Hansen's main oeuvre, and Labassa has several in which freehand elements demonstrate the confidence of a skilled artist. A conservation analysis by Kosinova Thorn in 1987 noted that the music room frieze was painted freehand directly onto plaster. Even the modest boudoir had trompe l'oeil ('deceive the eye') effects, achieved by using a combination of freehand painting, stencilling and oil gilding. The billiard room is the most highly decorated intact scheme in the mansion. Kosinova Thorn found that its rectangular paintings, cartouches and roundels, depicting travel scenes, were executed entirely freehand.⁴⁶

Arguably the most spectacular ceiling is the trompe l'oeil above the main staircase. This had been hidden for 23 years before it was rediscovered in 1986, when a false ceiling was removed. Now restored, it is a splendid example of trompe l'oeil technique. The use of shading and perspective draws the viewer's eye up through an open balustrade towards palms and urns and out into a blue sky. Another partially revealed trompe l'oeil ceiling in an upstairs bedroom may in time enhance our understanding of Hansen's techniques.

The search continues

Although much of Hansen's art decoration is likely lost, there are many more avenues to be explored. Finding the descendants of Hansen and his brother-in-law Jaan Kannuluik could reveal the whereabouts of ten paintings and a rococo screen listed as being in the possession of family members in 1981. The inventory in Hansen's probate papers noted that there were 20 paintings in his 'spare room' together with his easel and paints.⁴⁷ Although Hansen's wife, Anna, was the sole beneficiary of his estate, the couple had eight children, who eventually inherited many of his works.

Norden provides a few clues to these additional paintings, as well as to the existence of other portraits:

[His] patience and accuracy gained him entry to the few people that weren't wholeheartedly sworn to the photographers' '12 × 7/6 plus enlargement' ... Among his effects are many excellent pencil studies and sketches from Italy. He himself prized best a picture which he called 'A Study in Black'; on the whole his home is telling proof of his ability as an artist.⁴⁸

Hansen's work in Egypt was particularly praised in the 'English press', according to *Norden*. Hansen worked in Egypt for nearly six years, so it is possible that there are articles about him in the *Egyptian Gazette*, a weekly tabloid published in Alexandria by Britons from 1880.

Beyond that is Europe itself, where Hansen lived and studied from 1894 to 1897. There is nothing to suggest that he ever had a patron or independent income, so it is probable that he relied on art decoration to support himself, his wife, Anna, and their young children. The existence of a cleverly painted, signed ceiling in a Bavarian *Schloss* is not inconceivable.

The progressive digitisation of government and institutional records will certainly help to flesh out the details of Hansen's artistic achievements. Digitisation, however, is unlikely to assist in the search for works held by family members or for portraits other than those noted above. As original works are passed down through families, details of their provenance and associated stories are often lost. Unsigned works depicting unknown people can end up in an auction house or be given away. At the time when State Library Victoria's Australian Art and Artists File on Hansen was completed, 37 years ago, Hansen's adult children were located in Queensland, New Zealand and the United States. Finding the extended families of these now-deceased descendants remains the greatest and most time-critical challenge.