



N J Caire, 1837-1918,  
photographer  
Fitzroy Gardens, central  
roundel, c.1880  
Albumen silver  
photograph  
Pictures Collection,  
State Library Victoria,  
H87.269/21  
Borghese Gladiator  
(Roman copy of a Greek  
original, now in the  
Musée du Louvre)

# *La Trobe's Garden City and the Lost Sculptures of Fitzroy Gardens*

By Dr Monique Webber

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*This is an edited version of an address given at the C J La Trobe Society Annual General Meeting, 1 August 2018 at the Lyceum Club, Melbourne. The presenter acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands on which she lives and works; and pays respect to the Elders past, present and to the future. In the context of this presentation, which discusses a post-settlement history of Melbourne and its physical environment, the term 'Melbourne' refers to the post-1836 city.*

When La Trobe arrived in the Port Philip District in 1839, he declared the nascent colonial settlement to be '16,000 miles from civilization'.<sup>1</sup> He did not intend for it to remain that way. One of his earliest projects was to define parklands, including FitzRoy Square (now Fitzroy Gardens) in 1848. Although La Trobe's governorship concluded before the gardens' completion, the abundant classical statuary that ornamented its walks retained his ideals.

My project, as the 2017/2018 State Library Victoria La Trobe Society Fellow, was to uncover the history of these 'lost' sculptures. Installed in the mid-1860s as a collective emblem of cultural aspirations, and removed in an overnight manoeuvre by a disapproving government in the 1930s, practically all trace of the near-hundred classical casts has now disappeared from the Fitzroy Gardens. All that remain are two incomplete and often-forgotten urns buried in the shrubbery. However, the rich collection of State Library Victoria holds a

**Unknown photographer**  
**Scene in the Fitzroy**  
**Gardens, 1906**  
 Postcard, coloured  
 Pictures Collection,  
 State Library Victoria,  
 H90.160/993  
 Shirley Jones collection of  
 Victorian postcards.  
 John Bell's Dorothea  
 (1839, now in the Royal  
 Collection Trust) adjacent to  
 the *Temple of the Winds* (1873)



**Monique Webber, photographer**  
**Temple of the Winds, 2017**

wealth of previously undiscussed photographs of the gardens as they were in La Trobe's century. Uncovering their story reveals the lasting legacy of La Trobe's hopes for Melbourne as the city grew; and in turn how they continue to define our urban identity today.

The sculptures were part of a broader scheme of the Fitzroy Gardens as a typically nineteenth century European urban garden. Their original plan and function, like the sculptures, has largely disappeared. The gardens as we enjoy them now are the result of a late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century partial redesign of the original plan into a loosely picturesque style with rolling lawns and curved paths. When La Trobe reserved 'Fitzroy Square' in 1848 as part of Melbourne's 'green necklace'<sup>2</sup> of parklands around the city centre, however, he envisioned a very different space.

The nineteenth-century urban garden was, ironically, a child principally of the Industrial Revolution. Rapidly encroaching factories and workers' slums across England prompted a Parliamentary inquiry into how cities could become – and remain – physically and emotionally healthy environments for drastically increasing urban societies.<sup>3</sup> The answer was public squares (hence the originally named 'FitzRoy Square') and gardens that would provide space for the urban population. The same discussion was happening concurrently in France, which had long been enjoying grand royal gardens turned over to the public enjoyment. The result was the urban garden: a decidedly formal space not for escaping the city, but for continuing its activity in a more salubrious environment. This emphasis on 'decorum' and

'civility' manifested in fenced straight paths; infrastructure such as lamps and benches; and most importantly for Melbourne, sculptures that signified collective connoisseurship and 'culture'. This idea was borrowed from the Renaissance sculpture garden, in which private art collections would publicly display their sculptures in garden settings.

As mentioned earlier, this concept of the urban garden is no longer evident in Melbourne. Our Gardens are a refuge from the city centre. The traditional European concept of a sculpture garden is also found very infrequently here. Yet they remain, largely unchanged, in Europe. With the generous support of the La Trobe Society and the State Library Victoria, as well as The University of Melbourne French Trust Fund, I travelled to Europe to discover what sort of space La Trobe imagined for Melbourne and how his successors carried out his aims. Experiencing spaces such as the Jardin des Tuileries and the Jardin du Luxembourg in Paris, and the Giardini di Villa Borghese in Rome, allowed me to understand how these spaces act as extensions of the urban network. Within their gridded paths, sculptures are participants in city life. Through a performative ritual of seeing and being seen, participating in the city's rhythms alongside these casts of classic icons demonstrates your awareness of and inclusion in a collective cultural heritage.

But where did Melbourne find these sculptures little more than thirty years into its history as a European settlement? In the 1850s, La Trobe's colleague Redmond Barry ordered an impressive collection of classical casts from Domenico Brucciani of London, cast-maker to



**Unknown photographer**  
**Statue of Diana, Fitzroy Gardens, Melbourne, c.1908**

Postcard, coloured  
 Pictures Collection, State Library Victoria, H96.200/624  
 Diana of Versailles (trad. Diane à la Biche; Roman copy of a Greek original,  
 now in the Musée du Louvre), at the centre of the Fitzroy Gardens.  
 Victorian postcards, Melbourne parks and gardens (Valentine's series, 53452)

the British Museum. This was at a time when all of the Western world's great museums were building plaster cast collections that allowed their visitors to enjoy the best of classical and contemporary art no matter their location in the world. Again, this is something that Melbourne no longer maintains. When the casts arrived after a long sea journey, many were broken. It fell to the celebrated sculptor of Melbourne's *Burke and Wills* monument, Charles Summers, to repair them before their display in what is now State Library Victoria's Palmer Hall. While they were being repaired, they were seen by Clement Hodgkinson. Hodgkinson had recently assumed responsibility for Melbourne's gardens and realised La Trobe's vision for a formal Fitzroy Gardens by emphasising its geometric paths. He requested permission to have further casts made in concrete for the Gardens that he had taken on as a special project. At the same time, Charles Coppin's Cremorne Gardens closed, and the contents were auctioned. Amongst the lions, monkeys, and pleasure boats up for sale were casts – also from Brucciani's – that Hodgkinson snapped up. And with that, the Fitzroy Gardens sculptures were born.

It is one thing to uncover the narrative of the sculptures. It is quite another to discover what sculptures were included and where. While there is an incredible volume of images in State Library Victoria's collections, the majority of these are untitled and single images without identifiable locations. There is one map that tells

us there were sixty-five cast statues and urns in the gardens in the mid-1860s. The majority of these are included simply as 'statue' or 'vase'; or indicated merely by a dot. Other works, such as the two *Diana* and a *Borghese Gladiator*, are mentioned by name. Eventually, of fifty-one sculptures I identified about forty-five from either their name on Hodgkinson's map, or via research through the hundreds of untitled and loosely dated photographs in the library's collection. And of these, I located thirty-nine on Hodgkinson's map. But there were many red herrings along the way.

The greatest puzzle was an often-cited comment that the gardens included a 'Diana, goddess of mood and contemplation, from the Vatican Museums' that inspired Leslie Bowles' *Moderne Diana and the Hounds* now found outside the Conservatory. There were at least two statues of Diana in the gardens. At the centre of the gardens was a *Diana of Versailles* (trad. *Diane à la Biche*) from which all paths emanated; and nearby was a cast of Giovanni Maria Benzoni's *Diana Hunting*. It is likely that there was also a *Diana of Gabii*. None of the originals of these casts are in the Vatican Museums; and all of them show Diana hunting rather than as a 'goddess of mood and contemplation'. In fact, the often-vengeful goddess of the hunt is not frequently contemplative. While in Rome, I contacted the Vatican Museums. After an exhaustive – but very enjoyable – hunt through the museum halls, tracking down every Diana



**Leslie Bowles, 1885-1954, sculptor**  
**Diana and the Hounds, 1940**

Bronze, granite, concrete  
 City of Melbourne Art and Heritage  
 Collection, 1086739  
 Located in front of the Conservatory,  
 Fitzroy Gardens, Melbourne.  
 Photograph (2015) courtesy MaryAnn Adair  
[maryannadair.com/2015/04/16/the-hounds-of-love-are-calling-for-diana](http://maryannadair.com/2015/04/16/the-hounds-of-love-are-calling-for-diana)

in their collection, I concluded that there is no 'Diana, goddess of mood and contemplation, from the Vatican Museums' that could have been cast for Melbourne. Like much of Melbourne, she is a myth created by an enthusiastic community retelling and elaborating its history. I did, however, uncover a complex sculptural program that made young Melbourne's cultural aspirations part of its physical landscape. This is detailed in my Fellowship outcome that will be published later in 2019.

But what happened to the sculptures? With time, they fell into disrepair, and opinions were divided between their being romantically ruined or embarrassingly decrepit. The debate raged through Melbourne's newspapers and governmental chambers; and all the while the sculptures deteriorated further. At the same time, attitudes were changing. Melbourne did not want a prescriptive extension of the city. It wanted a fashionably picturesque landscape, free of restrictive fences and prescriptive culture. Surprisingly, the different opinions did not reflect the patrician old-guard versus the progressive new wave, as might be expected. Contemporary artists were as divided as the wider public, with Arthur Streeton arguing for the

casts' removal as Paul Montford tried to restore them. Essentially, changing tastes meant that many could not recognise La Trobe's vision of a classical and formal landscape as an emphatically contemporary statement. Chief amongst these was the Melbourne City Council. In an eerie foreshadowing of Ron Robertson Swann's *Vault* being relocated from the City Square in the early hours of the morning in 1981, the Council ordered an overnight removal, and in turn, destruction, of the Fitzroy Gardens sculptures in the 1930s.

The sculptures may be gone. But their legacy – and that of La Trobe's envisioned 'garden city' – remains. When Bowles unveiled his *Diana and the Hounds*, he cited the gardens' original *Diana of Versailles* (trad. *Diane à la Biche*) as his inspiration. This magnificent sculpture still welcomes visitors and Melbournians alike to the gardens in much the same way as the original *Diana* centred its space. Melbourne remains a city physically defined by its gardens and its art, both within and without the museum walls – as well as a community ever-ready to debate its own culture. And with the generous support of the La Trobe Society, we have uncovered another chapter of the story.

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#### Endnotes

- 1 Charles Joseph La Trobe to John Murray, 15 December 1840, John Murray Archives, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh (quoted in Dianne Reilly Drury, *La Trobe: the Making of a Governor*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2006, p.144).
  - 2 'Melbourne's Emerald Necklace', *Vic News*, National Trust of Australia (Victoria), May 2014, pp.6-7.
  - 3 Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. Select Committee on Public Walks. *Report [of the] Select Committee Appointed to consider the best means of securing Open Spaces in the Vicinity of populous Towns as Public Walks and Places of Exercise, calculated to promote the Health and Comfort of the Inhabitants*, London, 1833, Chairman: Robert Aglionby Slaney (U.K. Parliamentary Papers Online).
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