

Thomas Bock

6 December 2017 – 11 March 2018



Thomas Bock, *Mithina* (Mathinna) (1842), Watercolour.
Presented by J H Clark, 1951, AG290. Courtesy Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

Ikon presents the first UK exhibition dedicated to the work of convict artist Thomas Bock (c.1793 - 1855). Comprising a selection of drawings, paintings and photographs, it demonstrates not only Bock's technical skill, but also his sensitivity to a wide range of subject matter.

Trained in Birmingham as an engraver and miniature painter, in 1823 Bock was sentenced to transportation to Australia for fourteen years, having been found guilty of "administering concoctions of certain herbs ... with the intent to cause miscarriage". He arrived in Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania) the following year where he was quickly pressed into service. An early commission encompassed a number of portraits of captured bushrangers, before and after execution by hanging, including the notorious cannibal Alexander Pearce.

There are no surviving diaries that document his personal journey. However, Bock's artistic output on arrival, through conditional and absolute pardons until his death - marked by an obituary that described him as "an artist of a very high order" - is a rich seam of observation, at once subtle and astonishing. Most significant in this respect is Bock's series of portraits of Tasmanian Aboriginal people, now in the British Museum. His drawing throughout is fine and the likenesses probably very true, and having them at the heart of this exhibition conveys the tragedies suffered by these indigenous people through the British settlement in Australia. The sitters have a demeanour that conveys both pride and despair, thus suggesting that Bock, being marginalised himself, closely identified with them.

Bock proceeded to make a living for himself through his portraits of British colonists, usually government officials, wealthy farmers, businessmen and their families. He advertised himself as a "portrait painter", but it is in his drawings (esp. crayon, chalk and/or gouache) that we see an evocative liveliness. The sketches he made in his studio or at home, often of his family, and sometimes outdoors, are like pieces in a jigsaw of social history. Another fascinating side to Bock's artistic practice is revealed in his life drawing, a number of nude studies that are as tender as they are well observed.

This exhibition also includes some daguerreotypes by Bock – tiny images in silver plate, mounted and glazed in cases – depicting the kinds of people that he would have otherwise drawn or painted. They provide further evidence of his openness to new experience, incorporating it into his existing practice.

It is interesting to speculate on what might have happened to Bock had he remained in Birmingham. Tasmania afforded him recognition within his field, and the body of work by him that survives is remarkable not only for its inherent quality, but also the light it shines on the early years of a penal colony in Australia – the aspiration and the awfulness of it. The unintended consequence of probably his only criminal offence, it amounts to a compelling story that should be more widely known.

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, with texts by Gaye Sculthorpe (Curator, British Museum), Jane Stewart (Principal Curator, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery) and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart (Professor of Social History, University of Tasmania).

The exhibition is organised in partnership between Ikon and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and runs 6 December 2017 – 11 March 2018. The exhibition is supported by the Australian Government through the Australian Cultural Diplomacy Grants Program of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Gordon Darling Foundation, the John Feeney Charitable Trust, the Owen Family Trust, and a Jonathan Ruffer Curatorial Research Grant from Art Fund.

Social Media Handles:

Instagram, Twitter and Facebook: @ikongallery #IkonGallery

Note to Editors:

1. The exhibition is organised in partnership between Ikon and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart.
2. Ikon exhibition opening: 6 December 2017
3. Ikon is an internationally acclaimed contemporary art venue situated in central Birmingham. Established in 1964 by a group of artists, Ikon is an educational charity and works to encourage public engagement with contemporary art through exhibiting new work in a context of debate and participation. The gallery programme features artists from around the world and a variety of media is represented, including sound, film, mixed media, photography, painting, sculpture and installation. Ikon's off-site programme develops dynamic relationships between art, artists and audiences outside the gallery. Projects vary enormously in scale, duration and location, challenging expectations of where art can be seen and by whom. Education is at the heart of Ikon's activities, stimulating public interest in and understanding of contemporary visual art. Through a variety of talks, tours, workshops and seminars, Ikon's Learning Team aims to build dynamic relationships with audiences, enabling visitors to engage with, discuss and reflect on contemporary art. ikon-gallery.org
4. Ikon is open Tuesday – Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am - 5pm. Admission is free. Ikon Gallery is supported using public funding from Arts Council England and Birmingham City Council. For the latest news and events follow @ikongallery on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).
5. For more information or high-res images please contact Rebecca Small, Head of Communications or Emily Luxford, Communications Manager at Ikon on 0121 248 0708 or email r.small@ikon-gallery.org or e.luxford@ikon-gallery.org

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