

Could this be the Artist?

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Augustus Baker Peirce 1840 – 1919



This photograph was taken in Hill End in 1872 by the American and Australasian Photographic Company, and is part of the Holtermann Collection at the Mitchell Library, Sydney.

It is my theory that Augustus Baker Peirce is the artist responsible for the mural painted above the fireplace at the Bridge View Inn. This is based on stylistic similarities, the fact that he was in the area between 1871 and 1873, and his known history as a painter of the interiors of hotels. Fortunately for us, he wrote an illustrated memoir titled: 'Knocking About: Being Some Adventures of Augustus Baker Peirce in Australia' that tells us in great detail about his life and shows us examples of his drawing style.

A B Peirce was most often known as Gus Pierce, or Captain Gus Pierce.

He was born in Medford, Massachusetts, went to sea at 19, and jumped ship in Melbourne in 1859. He soon found his way to the gold fields of Victoria, and travelled about doing any job going: grubbing trees, shepherding sheep, washing dishes, writing signs, selling meat pies or Frank Weston's 'Wizard Oil', etc.

His interest in singing, dancing, 'hanky-panky' tricks and legerdemain, led him to the theatre and travelling shows. At Tarrengower, near Bendigo, a company entertaining local miners employed him to sing and act for a half-hour stint per night; during the day he helped with stage carpentry and scene painting.



Here he is, on stage, one of many self-portraits in his memoir.

In 1863 he ventured to the Murray River, met a fellow American riverboat captain, and I suspect talked his way into a job charting the Murray River from Albury to Goolwa. As a result of this pioneering work, Gus became a riverboat captain and had a uniform made. He worked on American built paddle steamers up and down the Murray from 1864 to 1869. He married Agnes Carney in Moama in 1867. When the river was too low for shipping, he returned to comic acting and to painting.

In 1869 Gus painted a panorama titled "A Voyage Around the World". Panoramas were a series of scenes on canvases unrolled across the stage with the entertainer lecturing out front. Music, dancing, songs, juggling, and other artistry rounded out the entertainment.

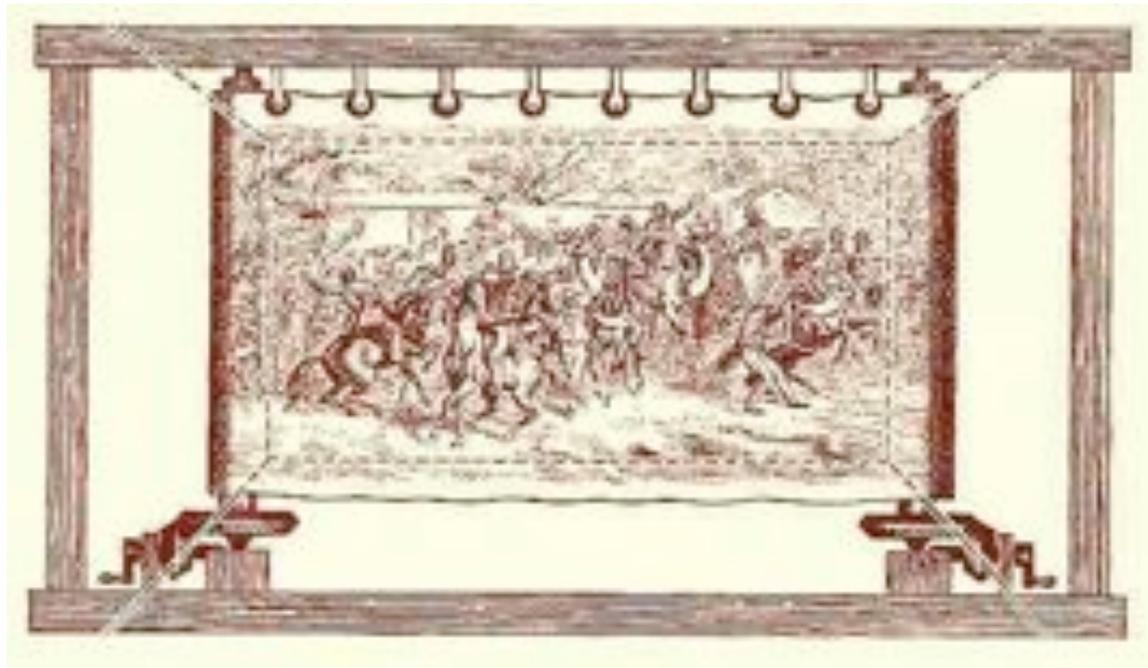


Image showing the mechanism for rolling a panorama across the stage.

In 1870/71 Gus took his family and his panorama to the gold fields of NSW, setting up a base in Bathurst. From there he undertook several tours of Mudgee, Gulgong, Tambaroora, Hill End, Peel and Orange. One of the tours was not so successful. Peirce writes, "I opened at Orange and the venture fell flat. I returned to Bathurst, leaving the paintings for my hotel bill; and on sending for them I received them in utterly ruined condition – they had been transported uncovered during a heavy rain."

Peirce showed in Gulgong during July and August 1871. The review in the Gulgong Guardian of Saturday July 15 said: "Captain Pierce's Panorama. This amusing and instructive entertainment opened at Cogdon's Assembly Rooms on Thursday last, before a tolerably filled house. The panorama comprises views of places historical and geographical interest, in various parts of the globe, and each picture has been painted with considerable artistic taste. The Port Philip Heads is a very striking view, and the lights in the lighthouse and on board ship, and the glittering of the moonlight on the water, gives to the picture a

life-like reality. During the evening Miss Elsie Moffitt, who was evidently labouring under a severe cold, sung several character songs, in a manner that elicited deserved applause. The singing of Mr. Wood, and the excellent comic singing of Captain Gus Pierce, also brought down the house. Captain Pierce's lecture is one of the cleverest, in its way, that we have listened to for many a day, and the laughter it drew from the audience was frequent and hearty. The Captain is an eloquent "talkist," his wit being of the American school, and we advise all who suffer from lowness of spirits to go and hear him. The panorama will stay here for some few nights longer, and we can promise those who visit it a pleasant evening's enjoyment."

In 1872, due to a new rush at Hill End, he formed a partnership with actor William Gill to open a theatre there. They found a tent at Tambaroora, and moved it to Hill End.

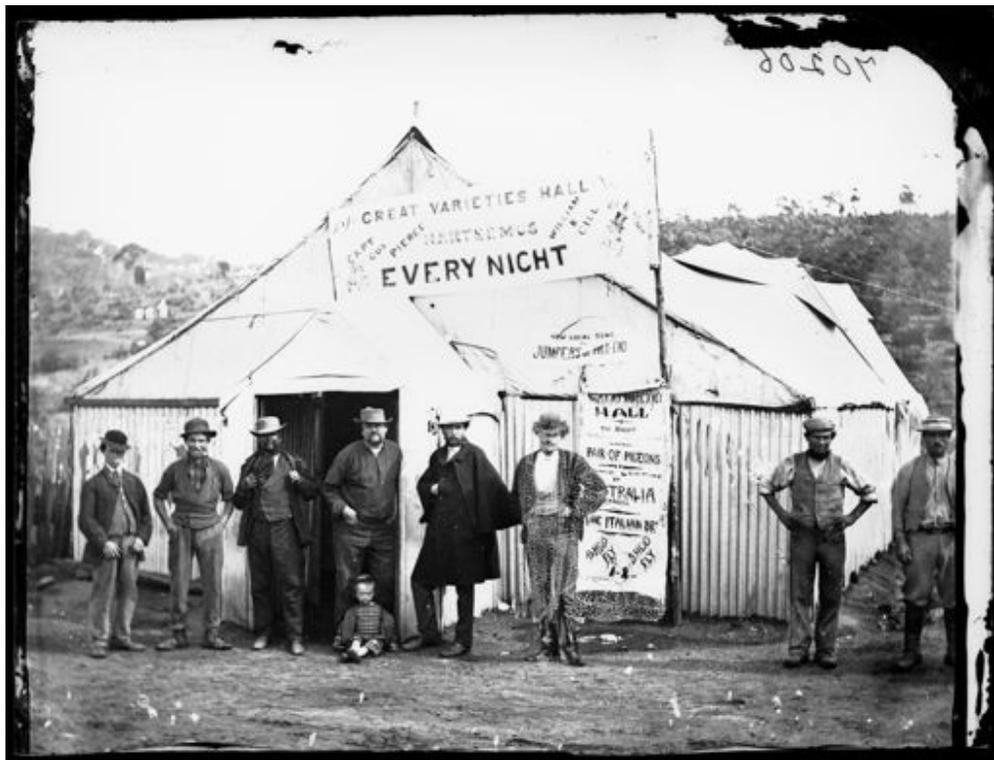


Photo from the Holtermann Collection, Gus is in the doorway with his son at his feet

The tent theatre only operated for 6 weeks, but Peirce decided to stay on in Hill End, doing some mining and finding good employment as a mining surveyor and draughtsman. His memoir describes building a wattle and daub house and lining it with bits of leftover panoramas. He stayed until early 1873 and perhaps longer.

In late 1872 Gus painted the interior of Dodd's Hotel, Hill End. This was reported in the *South Australian Advertiser* of 7 November 1872, pg 2: "By the following paragraph from the *Tambaroora Herald*, we learn that a gentleman well known in Adelaide, and still more so on the Murray, has transferred his talents and varied accomplishments to the most flourishing of the New South Wales gold-fields: - "We must congratulate Gus Pierce upon the admirable manner in which with his facile brush and inventive powers he has conferred

beauty on the wall of Dodd's Hotel, Clarke Street. He has portioned off the walls of the bar, parlors, &c, into panels, upon which he has depicted with great skill a variety of beautiful objects. Over the door leading from the bar into the passage, he has painted the figure of the Goddess of Liberty, reclining upon the back of America's eagle, with the following legend beneath: - "We're little, but some! You bet.' This is the facetious Gus's rendering of the motto of the Union - 'E Pluribus," etc. We have no doubt that many will be induced to follow the example of Tommy Dodds, and engage the services of one who can make of dingy bar walls and bar parlours 'Things of beauty and joys for ever.'"

Did Goodwin Spires Hall, the publican for whom the Bridge Hotel was built, follow the advice of the promotional article?

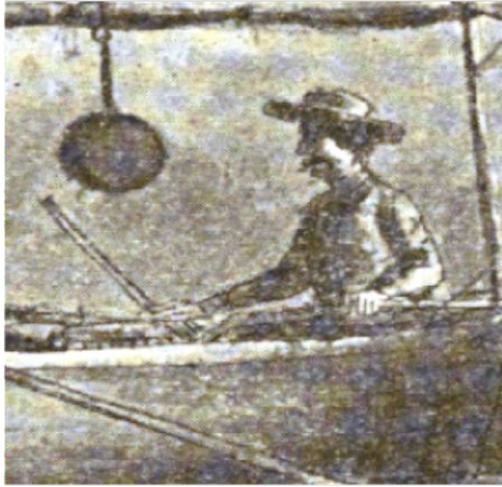
In his memoir, Peirce talks about painting the interiors of hotels, including scenes of Niagara Falls at the Niagara Hotel in Melbourne, and the royal arms of Britain on the bar room wall of a patriotic British hotel keeper in Wentworth.



This sketch from 'Knocking About'...depicts William Chisolm, the publican and owner of the Hotel Niagara in Melbourne, with Gus on the right side. Note the images of the waterfall on the panels below the bar.

Now, let's examine the imagery in the Rylstone mural and compare them with other images sketched or painted by Gus.

Note the strong similarity between these two figures:



The fisherman at left is in the centre of the Rylstone mural; the boatman on the right is in a sketch on page 57 of 'Knocking About'. Note the shape of the hats and general rendition of the figures and especially the use of highlights and shadow on the hat, face, shoulder, arm and body.

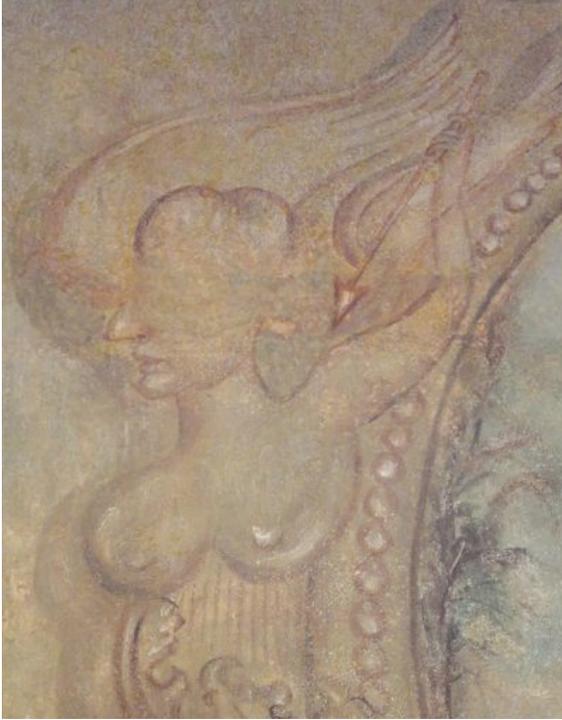
Compare the Pan from the bottom centre of the Rylstone mural and Peirce's character sketch of 'Old Forty' from 'Knocking About':



OLD FORTY

Note the similarity of the ears, a solid dot for the eyeballs looking right, and the lower lips. The eyebrows, eyes and teeth in the Pan's mouth appear to have been repainted at some stage.

Compare the left female figure from the Rylstone mural and Peirce's self-portrait as snake oil salesman from 'Knocking About'. Note especially the tapering arms and small hands:

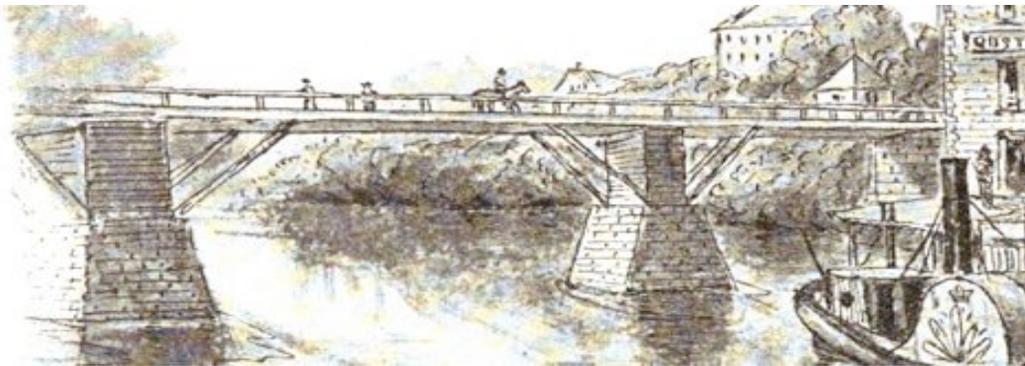


Compare the tree from the Rylstone mural at left with Peirce's trees from other works:



Note the leaning, swaying trunks with a strong shadow on one side, the arched branches, the bits of trunk showing through the leaves, and dabs of colour to describe the leaves.

Compare the depiction of the timber bridge at the centre of the Rylstone mural with the bridge over the Murray at Wahgunyah (sketch in 'Knocking About') and the quay at Echuca (details from the painting at the National Library of Australia titled 'PS Eliza at Echuca Wharf'):



Note the simple way in which the bridge or wharf structure is rendered, with no attempt to describe the detailed under-structure of the bridges or the wharf.

Peirce returned to the Murray in 1874. In 1876 he painted the interior of the Steampacket Hotel in Echuca. The Riverine Herald of 27 January 1876 wrote the following: "Hotel Decoration: Lovers of art will be rewarded by visiting Mr. J. Bauld's Steampacket Hotel, its enterprising proprietor having converted it into a most attractive pictorial exhibition. It is ornamented on all sides with handsome paintings, all of an eminently Australian type, and executed in the highest order of the artistic excellence and taste. Prominent among the pictures is a beautifully executed sign of the house fronting the bar, comprising a view of a symmetrical and handsome river steamer of magnificent proportions under full steam on the Murray, towing a barge, loaded to overflowing with a cargo of wool – the scene depicting the Riverina trade in the height of its prosperity. This, the centrepiece, is surrounded on all sides with smaller meritorious illustration, the whole being delicately tinted

and giving the room a light and airy appearance most suitable for our hot climate. Mr. Bauld is to be congratulated upon his enterprise which will doubtless bring a highly increased patronage. The well-known local artist, Mr. Gus. Pierce has designed and executed the whole of the paintings, which do him the greatest credit." Sadly, the building caught fire a few years later and the pictures were destroyed.

SO IS PEIRCE THE ARTIST RESPONSIBLE?

Dr Anita Calloway, Art Historian at the University of Sydney, first pointed to him as our possible artist.

He painted in a naïve style. His figures have odd proportions: tapering elongated arms and legs with small hands, or no hands. The faces, though well observed, are sometimes crudely drawn. He painted simplified landscapes, with simplified structures. His trees sway.

He knew about Bacchus and so is likely to know about Pan and the nymphs who accompanied the God of Wine. In the memoir he remarks that an ex convict named 'Old Forty' ran a dance hall in Wahgunyah. "In this temple of Terpsichore all who danced must drink, and each round of homage to the muse ended in a libation to Bacchus". Pg 104/5

His painting shows wit and humour. Here are two self-portraits before and after an encounter with a swarm of bees:



Note the signature at bottom right of 'Before'.

He was in the area. Peirce was in the district between 1871 and early 1874, living for almost two years in Hill End. This would give him plenty of opportunity to come to Rylstone to paint the parlour of the Bridge Hotel.

He is known to have painted at least four other hotel interiors:

Niagara Hotel in Melbourne - memoir

Unnamed hotel in Wentworth – memoir

Dodd's Hotel in Hill End – Tambaroora Herald 1872

The Steampacket Hotel in Echuca – Riverine Herald 1876

Gus Peirce remained in Australia until 1892. From the Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers he returned to Melbourne, where he ran a pub in Melbourne's meat market, developed advertising for along the railway line in Victoria, operated in a print studio with S. T. Gill, that other famous artist of the gold fields, devoted quite a lot of his time to art. He did get more accomplished. One of his later paintings is in the collection of the Geelong Art Gallery.

He returned to Medford Massachusetts, where he continued to paint. He died in 1919.

Conclusion

The conservation and restoration of the mural over the fireplace at the Bridge View Inn did not reveal a signature. However I believe that on the basis of opportunity, known history and style, it is highly likely that Gus Peirce is the artist responsible for painting the mural.

Virginia Hollister

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