

## *Parisian Beauties Light Up A Carousel Downunder (Again!)*

**Patricia Mullins**

A 66-key Limonaire Frères organ has resided for 84 years in Australia, at Melbourne’s famous Luna Park in the bayside suburb of St. Kilda. This 66-key Orchestrophone has accompanied a carousel, the 68-horse Philadelphia Toboggan Company [hereafter PTC] #30, since at least 1923 and possibly earlier. The fact that a French organ of this size and quality came to Australia early in the 20th century is remarkable. That it has survived to this day is even more surprising. The organ is the only 66-key Limonaire in Australia and one of only four known in the world.

How, and exactly when, the organ came to Australia has still not been established. It is likely that it arrived for installation to the carousel PTC#30 late in 1913 for the opening of the White City Amusement Park in Sydney. Entrepreneur and park owner Cozens Spencer had traveled widely seeking out the “biggest and best” rides for his new venture, including the carousel which he ordered directly from the PTC factory. It’s speculation that Spencer may have been “tipped off” about the availability of the 66-key Limonaire, maybe even through Louis Berni, the “Band Organ King” and friend of Henry Auchy at PTC. But, according to PTC records, the carousel was shipped to Australia “excluding organ.”

By 1923, the carousel had arrived at its current location in St. Kilda, Melbourne, acquired by Luna Park. A photo taken in the same year clearly shows the organ façade in the centre of the carousel (**Figure 1**). The original paintings of Art Nouveau beauties can be seen and all match the illustration of the façade in the Limonaire catalog of circa 1908. The top three sections of the façade have been removed to fit the carousel. A carved head was added at the top to cover the area

where the central panel was removed. On of five, 18th century style original figures are also visible on the organ shelf. Sadly, these are no longer with the organ but the evidence of their attachment remains on the shelf. The photo also shows that three upper panels on the façade had been removed in order to fit onto the carousel.

The Luna Park carousel, of which the organ is an integral part, is now included in the heritage listing of Luna Park on the register of Heritage Victoria, Australia and classified by the National Trust of Australia.

While the façade has always remained on the carousel, for over a decade the instrument operated in the Park’s “Giggle Palace” playing to audiences inside the fun palace. When a huge fire destroyed the Giggle Palace in 1981, fortunately the organ was saved with only minor water damage. Over the years the organ had undergone minor repair work to keep it going, but after the fire the organ was placed in storage and has not operated since.

While on the carousel, the organ façade received many repaints along with the horses and other parts. At least ten paint layers were found on some panels, totally obscuring the finely painted Limonaire decoration.

Between 1999 and 2001, PTC #30 underwent a major AU\$2 million dollar restoration, returning it to the original appearance of 1913. The organ façade (but not the organ itself) was included in the project. When conservators began investigating the façade panels it was realized that the original paint was intact under the top layers. Unfortunately, the budget did not cover the painstaking work required to conserve and reveal the original paint. It was decided to make temporary cardboard covers for the panels and simply repaint these and the wooden frame. The idea was to give the façade a fresh look while leaving what was underneath in tact and undisturbed for appropriate conservation work sometime in the future.



Figure 1. PTC#30 at Luna Park, Melbourne photographed in 1923 showing the organ façade in the center of the carousel. Note the addition of the figurehead and the missing top sections.



Figure 2 (left). Carver, Max Geranio reconstructed the wooden crown for the centre of the façade using a Limonaire catalogue illustration and old photos of the façade for reference.

Figure 3 (center). Patricia Mullins of Equus Art painting the new crown in the Limonaire scheme. She also painted the original frame according to the original paint findings.

Figure 4 (right). The completed panel with reconstructed parts.

In 2006, Luna Park changed ownership and the new management with Friends of Luna Park, Equus Art and Lillico Thompson Conservation successfully applied for heritage funding to conserve and restore the organ façade. Through the Australian Government National Heritage Investment Initiative a grant of \$80,000 was awarded in September 2006.

Once the temporary covers were detached, the approach was to carefully remove the non-original paint layers to reveal the original Limonaire Frères artwork beneath. This work was done over five months. The paintings were cleaned and sealed, in-painted where losses had occurred and then finally varnished. Lost areas were reconstructed and included a carved wooden “crown” to match the original on the top panel that was removed when the façade was fitted to the carousel (**Figures 2-4**). The carved head that is shown in this position in the 1923 photo was part of the façade for over fifty years. However, by the 1980s it was missing, possibly souvenired when the carousel became run down. After much debate, it was decided that the most appropriate element to reconstruct here was the original crown design.



Figure 6. Maria Hromek removing over paint from a lower panel, revealing the original painting.

were applied, providing further protection for the wood. Selected areas of the frame were investigated for original paint and documented. From this information the original scheme was understood. The frame had been originally painted an ivory color with shades of pink blended in the concave, snake-like curves. Gold leaf highlights followed the fluid lines of the carving, accentuating the Art Nouveau curves of the frame.



Figure 5. Side portrait revealed under many layers of park paint.

The carved frame was treated differently. While it had been prepared and re-painted in 2001, many old layers and some original paint had been retained underneath (**Figures 5-7**). As this surface was stable it was decided to leave these layers intact with minor surface preparation. New top coats



Figure 7. After paint removal, Cathy Lillico Thompson of Lillico Thompson Conservation reconstructed the missing area of this panel. She also established "witness boxes" leaving the evidence of later paint layers in selected small areas.



These findings compared with other Limonaire organ façades, notably the 66-key in the collection of Bob Gilson in Wisconsin, restored by Rosa Patton and the Limonaire façade in the collection of Jasper Sanfilippo, Illinois, restored by Will Morton.

Of all the surprises encountered during the restoration of the façade, nothing prepared us for the brilliance of the original colors on the façade panels. Mauves and melon pinks, light mint and olive greens with both painterly and linear female portraits were revealed. They demonstrated typical colors and styles of the Art Nouveau period (**Figure 8**). While the intensity of the background colors was surprising, the skill of the Limonaire artists was astonishing! The style of portraiture indicates they must have been well aware of the work of Alphonse Mucha and Gustav Klimt, artists whose names became synonymous with the Art Nouveau movement. While investigating the panels it was clear that the decorative painting had all been done freehand, applied over loosely penciled guidelines on the base paint. Even the repetitive wheel shapes and leaves were all free line-work.



Figure 8. Lower panel after conservation of the painting and restoration of the frame to the original colors and designs.

The façade paint work revealed appears to match that seen in the Boyer photo (see Fred Dahlinger's article—to follow) which shows a Limonaire façade being assembled. Given that comparatively few 66 key Limonaire organ façades were produced (and accompanying facades) and that the other known facades for these organs are all different, my feeling is that the façade pictured in the Boyer photo is so close to the façade on the 66 key in Melbourne they could well be the same façade.

The remaining future challenge in Melbourne is to restore the Limonaire organ to working order, and reconstruct its delightful figures, so the organ can once again assume its role as the voice of the carousel.

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Figure 9. The organ facade as it is now installed, complementing the carousel.

Patricia Mullins has restored rocking and carousel horses for many years in Australia and is the author of *The Rocking Horse*. In 1999 she traveled to the United States to research PTC #30. She was appointed artistic director of the Luna Park carousel restoration project 1999-2001 and with her company, Equus Art Pty Ltd, returned the 68 PTC #30 horses to their original appearance.