

The collection of Dr Samuel Arthur Ewing

Dr Samuel Arthur Ewing donated this collection of late nineteenth century and early twentieth-century art to the Melbourne University Union in 1938. It now forms part of the Melbourne University Art Collection. Like many collections, it reflects the taste and times of the patron. Dr Ewing favoured art that reflected a colonist's aspirations towards prosperity, security and self-improvement. When he began collecting art in 1908, the painting, poetry and literature of a new nation sought to establish a distinctive identity and secure future. The Ewing Collection, then, is more than a fine collection of pictures, or a fine act of philanthropy; it is a living register of the civic and national ideals of Edwardian Melbourne.

Dr Ewing's gift of fifty-six paintings, watercolours, drawings and prints was motivated by his belief that these artworks would play a strong role in nation building and the instruction of young Australia in love of beauty and love of country. That Dr Ewing harboured such an ambitious program for his work is not an indication of aggrandisement, but the consolidation of the institutional function of art in the post-Federation period.

Beauty, nationalism and pedagogy are all combined in Dr Ewing's wording of the plaque that accompanied the original display of the collection at the Melbourne University Union Gallery in 1938: 'That our youth may be inspired with the beauty as well as a deeper love of their country by the works of our artists.'

Dr Samuel Arthur Ewing was born in Melbourne in 1864 and studied medicine at the University of Melbourne from 1884 to 1890. He was a qualified pharmaceutical chemist and surgeon and had a private practice in Collins Street for over thirty years.

In Dr Ewing's day, art and science were mutually supportive disciplines. An advanced empirical skill base was seen to define the visual artist and align him (or her) with the senior surgeon. A number of distinguished doctors in Melbourne were strong supporters of the arts in the early 1900s. Dr Ewing himself befriended many artists and subsequently acquired their work.

Though the Ewing Collection contains exceptional examples of figurative works, the landscape tradition provides the real focus for the collection. Post-1900 landscape painting was set against a complex series of social, political and cultural issues. The two contrasting thematic directions of landscape pre-1940—positive and triumphant nature on the one hand and lyricism and emotionalism on the other—are eloquent expressions of the high hopes that newly federated Australia raised in its citizens. Traditional landscapes were charged with the duty of keeping the flame of identity and memory.

Recent years have seen reassessments of artworks previously deemed old-fashioned or conservative. Dr Ewing's paintings enter into key, yet difficult debates about the nature of settler Australia. They console and challenge aspirations and preconceptions about Australian identity and enrich our understanding of our positions within these debates today.