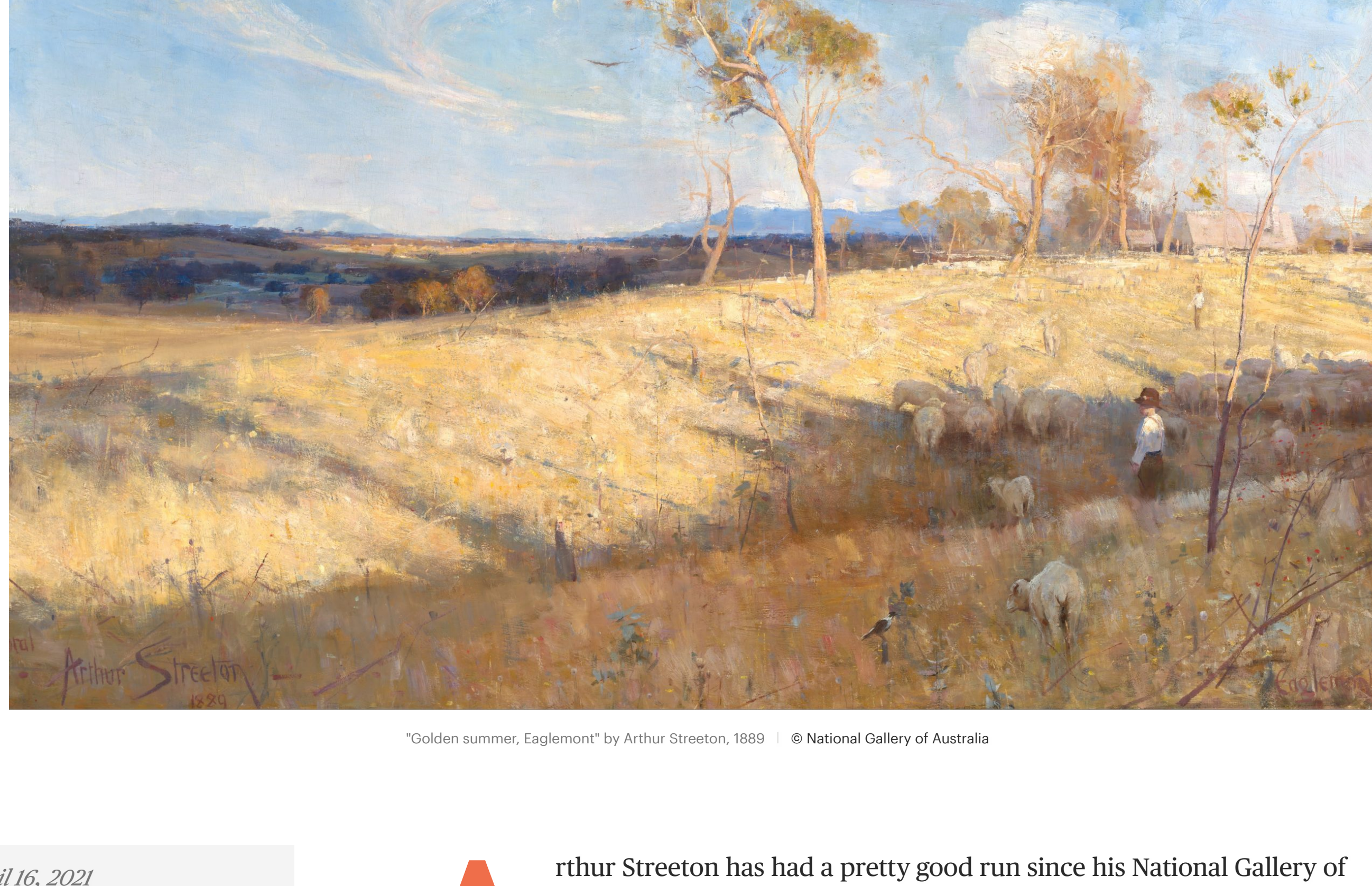


Naturalism and nationalism

The reception of Arthur Streeton, past and present

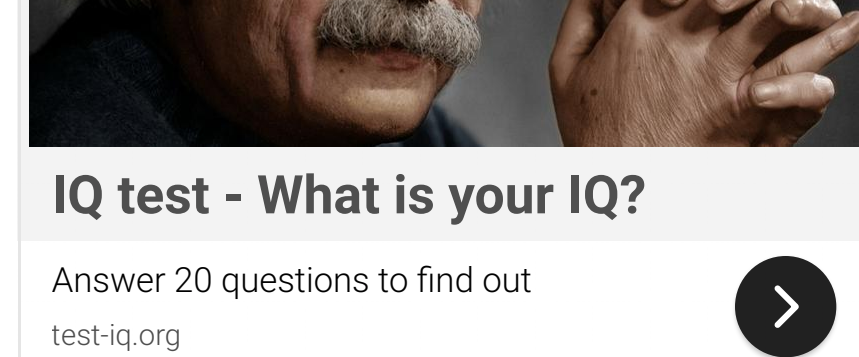
By David Hansen



"Golden summer, Eaglemont" by Arthur Streeton, 1889 | © National Gallery of Australia

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STREETON
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Wayne Tunncliffe, editor



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Arthur Streeton has had a pretty good run since his National Gallery of Victoria retrospective in 1995. The intervening years have seen no fewer than four public exhibitions treating particular aspects of his work:

Arthur Streeton: The passionate gardener (Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2001); *Arthur Streeton and the Australian Coast* (AGNSW, 2004); *Land of the Golden Fleece: Arthur Streeton in the Western District* (Geelong Gallery, 2016); and *Arthur Streeton: The art of war* (National Gallery of Australia, 2017). As a member of the “Heidelberg School” quadrumvirate (with Tom Roberts, Charles Conder and Frederick McCubbin), he was a substantial presence in the NGV’s *Australian Impressionism* (2007) and the more recent London exhibition *Australia’s Impressionists* (2016).

The artist made a triumphant solo return over the Australian summer, in the Art Gallery of New South Wales’s post-Covid reopening exhibition, a comprehensive array of 141 works (plus half a dozen portraits and a couple of photographs by other artists). It is documented in an equally substantial catalogue, simply titled, like the exhibition, *Streeton*. There is no need to say more. Streeton is, as the weight of the catalogue suggests, a premium cultural brand, one firmly established through the artist’s solipsism and canny self-promotion: from the *Streeton’s Sydney Sunshine* exhibition of 1896 to *Arthur Streeton’s Venice* (1909) to *Streeton’s Show of the Sunlit Suburbs of Sydney* (1921). It has been sustained both by Australian settler art history’s constant reiteration of its foundational myths, and by a persistent popular taste for “blue and gold” pastoral landscape painting.

Essays by the exhibition curators Wayne Tunncliffe and Denise Mimmocchi, as well as by Jane Clark and Allison Goudie, document clearly his first *decennium mirabilis*. A key figure in Melbourne’s 1880s avant-garde, Streeton had an innate poetic sensibility that was early attached to the perceptual disciplines of Naturalism and Aestheticism which Tom Roberts had brought back to the colonies from London. Both in his Yarra Valley pastorals of 1886-90 and in subsequent harbourside visions of Sydney, Streeton demonstrates an instinctive, natural painterliness: broad slabs of earth, sea and sky are rendered with a loaded, square-ended brush, while (as Fred Williams observed to the art critic Patrick McCaughey), the calligraphic flicks and dabs of herbage and rippling wavelets in the foreground “tug the picture down and give it its tension”.

Certainly the freshness and quality of Streeton’s vision were quickly recognized by his contemporaries, with the Sydney gallery acquiring “Still glides the stream and shall forever glide” (1890) when he was only twenty-three, and with “Golden Summer, Eaglemont” (1889) shown to considerable acclaim at the Royal Academy and the Paris Salon in 1891 and 1892. Having established a market and reputation in both major colonial capitals, Streeton decided to follow many of his local peers to Europe. En route he spent two months in Egypt; he finally arrived in London in May 1897.

As Anne Gray shows, his first few years in the city were a time of poverty and loneliness. In addition to his initial, disabling encounters in the flesh with “Constable Turner Titian Watts & all the masters”, Streeton struggled to find the right pictorial accent for his new geographical and professional setting; foliage and clouds grew clumped, tone lower, palette more glaucous, surfaces more aligned with the mannerism of the Edwardians Philip Wilson Steer, Arnesby Brown and David Murray. Gray notes the colonial genuflections, too: just a year after Australian Federation, we see Streeton painting two “frosty, foggy” pictures of Trafalgar Square, one entitled “The centre of the Empire”. However, with the encouragement (and useful contacts) of his new love, the Canadian violinist Nora Clench, he began to make some headway, and when he visited Australia in 1907, he took 160 pictures to sell. Three successful exhibitions that year made enough money to enable him to marry Nora, and encouraged him in what would become a regular pattern of sabbatical return, to sell European subjects to Australian patrons, as well as to paint (and sell) more local ones.

After the First World War (during which he had obtained a commission as a war artist), Streeton’s domination of Australian painting became almost absolute. His pre-eminence was sustained and enhanced by conservative friends and supporters, artists and critics whose attitudes reflected the views of Australia’s landed “gentry”, those pastoral capitalists whose possessions and positions are celebrated in works such as “The Land of the Golden Fleece” (1926). J. S. MacDonald, painter, critic and Director of successively the Sydney and Melbourne galleries, famously described Streeton’s paintings as “pointing to the way in which life should be lived in Australia, with the maximum of flocks and the minimum of factories”, continuing with the unfortunate declaration (this was the 1930s) that “If we so choose we can yet be the elect of the world, the last of the pastoralists, the thoroughbred Aryans in all their nobility”. Another friend and colleague, Lionel Lindsay, who described Streeton as “our national painter” as early as 1919, later published a hysterical, antisemitic diatribe against the “putrid meat” of modernism, which he decried as a conspiracy of Jewish dealers, critics and collectors, *Added Art* (1942).

Tunncliffe has to concede that “the conservative cultural commentary that grew up around these paintings can now seem uncomfortably nationalistic”. Such nationalism is actually at the heart of what we might call the Streeton Paradox. The “Heidelberg School” mode (well summarized here by Goudie and Clark) is described in contemporary sources as Impressionism, or Modern Art. However, it can be clearly identified as a variant of the Naturalism that flourished in France in the 1870s and 80s. As one critic observed, referring to the movement’s leading proponent: “The whole world paints so much today like M. Bastien-Lepage that M. Bastien-Lepage seems to paint like the whole world”. Indeed, we find such plein-air, bucolic realism all over the place; it spread around the globe as rapidly as those other 1870s inventions the telephone, the phonograph, the lightbulb and the cash register. In France, in addition to Jules Bastien-Lepage there were also Pascal Dagnan-Bouverat and Jean-François Raffaëlli, in the UK the Newlyn School and the Glasgow Boys, in Italy the Macchiaioli, in Sweden Anders Zorn and Georg Pauli, and in America William Merritt Chase and Childe Hassam. Naturalism’s stylistic tropes were scattered as far afield as Canada (William Brymner), Brazil (Eliseu Visconti) and even Japan (Kuroda Seiki), not to mention the Australian colonies.

Yet the strange truth is that this first truly global art movement becomes in each of its several locations the very language of localism, of chauvinism, perhaps even of racism: in Streeton, a presumptuous, *gemütlich*-sentimental celebration of settlement - of the trees, grasses, flowers and cicadas of Box Hill and Heidelberg, of the cyan, ultramarine and Naples yellow of Sydney Harbour’s waters, of the dusty blue and gold of the Western District of Victoria in summer.

The essays here make a point of identifying prior ownership and Indigenous names for Country, collapsing traditional and contemporary belonging. Clark, for example, acknowledges that Heidelberg and Eaglemont were “part of the traditional land of the Wurundjeri people”; in considering Streeton’s paintings of the mountain range known as “The Gloucester Buckets”, Tunncliffe writes: “Gloucester is in Biripi Country, and the Buckets is a corruption of Buccan Buccan, the Aboriginal name for the mountains, which means many rocks”. Furthermore, since the correct identification of his eco-apocalyptic “Silvan Dam and Donna Buang AD 2000” (1940) - formerly thought to be a Flinders Ranges desert landscape - and the publication of Tim Bonyhady’s *The Colonial Earth* in 2000, with its account of his strenuous campaign against coal mining at Cremorne on Sydney Harbour, Streeton has been widely applauded for his perceptive, prescient environmentalism. Bonyhady’s chapter here, “Beware of the axe”, points to the valedictory tone of paintings such as “The Last of the Messmates” (1928) and “The vanishing Forest” (1934), and describes a number of the artist’s environmental protest campaigns: not only against the miners, but also against a tram line through Melbourne’s Botanic Gardens, against logging of native forests in the Cumberland Valley and against pulpwood concessions in Gippsland.

But can such cultural re-positionings undo the larger, painful history of British colonialism? After the opening of the Sydney exhibition, Bonyhady revealed a disturbing document from 1895, which he had discovered while revisiting Streeton’s correspondence with newspaper editors, as research for “Beware of the axe”. Bonyhady addressed this letter in detail in an article in the December-January issue of *The Monthly*. Responding to public debate about the “Syrian nuisance”, and a particular report of a Lebanese or perhaps Punjabi hawker having menaced three “lonely women” on the Bathurst road, Streeton wrote to the *Daily Telegraph* suggesting that “an effective way of dealing with the unclean devils would be to shoot them down like dogs wherever they are sufficiently offensive”. It may be that Streeton’s proposition, and his description of the Middle Eastern or South Asian travelling salesmen as “scum of the earth” and “ugly parasites”, reflect the attitudes of the majority population during the 1890s, attitudes which found legal expression in the fledgling nation’s infamous “White Australia Policy”. Today, however, this revelation looks set to do fatal damage to the Streeton brand.

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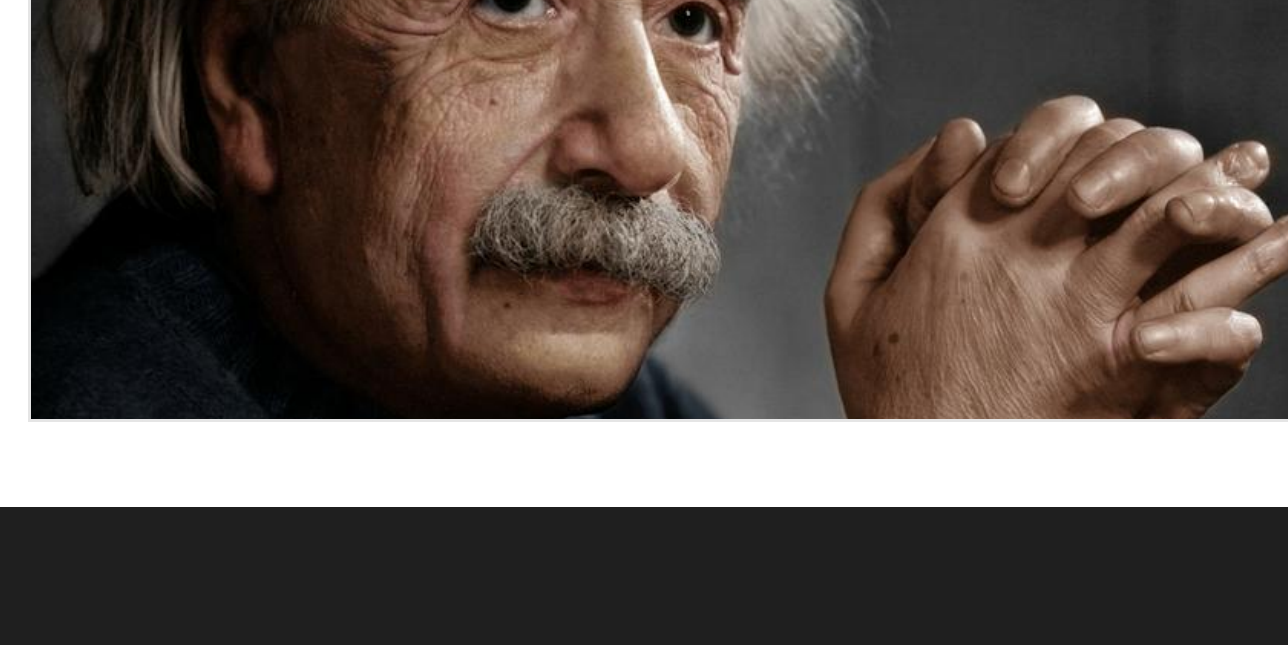
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