

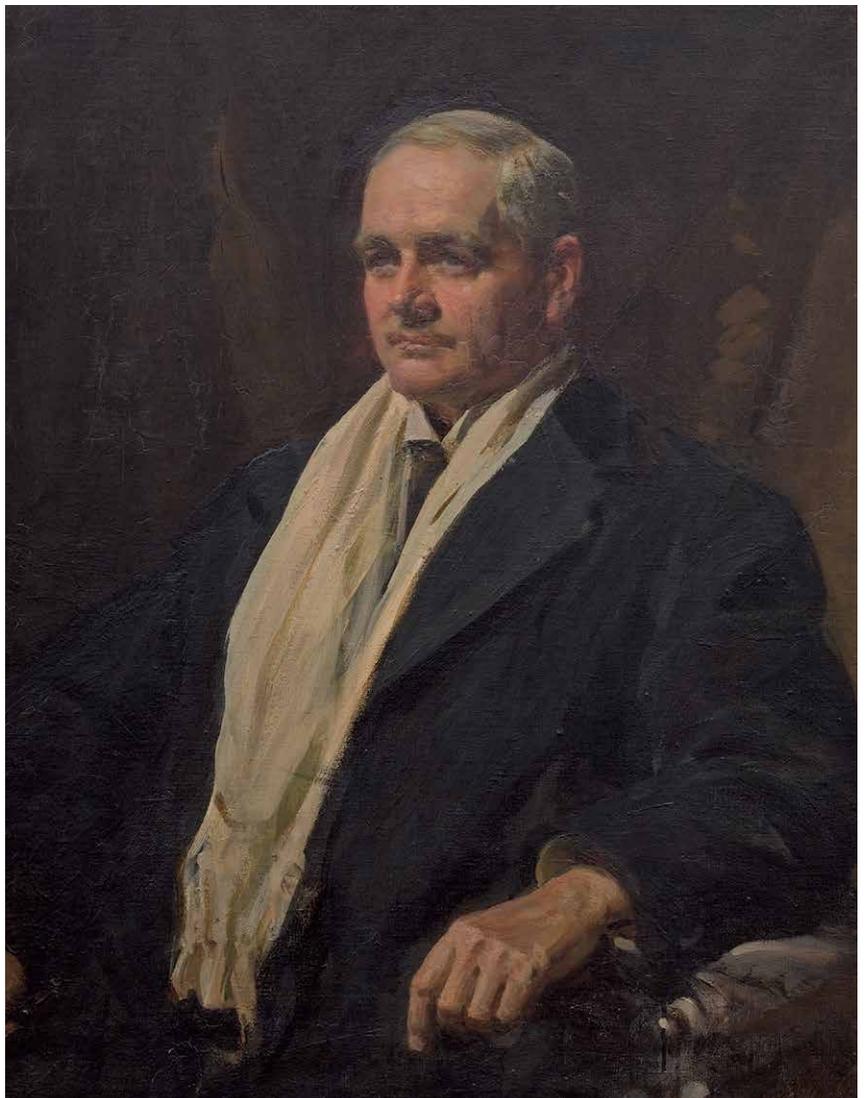
Portrait of a collector

Dr Samuel Arthur Ewing and the Ewing Collection

Cathleen Rosier

A portrait of significance to the history of art collections at the University of Melbourne is that of Dr Samuel Arthur Ewing (1864–1941) by John Longstaff (pictured right).¹ Painted in 1922, this portrait features Longstaff’s characteristic dark palette to tell the tale of one of Melbourne’s prominent surgeons-cum-art-collectors of the time. The sparing use of white first spotlights the face, highlighting the discerning yet shadowed eyes of a collector. The viewer’s gaze is then drawn downwards along the white scarf to rest on Ewing’s hand, the most important tool of a surgeon.

Best known during his life as an ear, nose and throat surgeon, Ewing was also considered one of the leading collectors of Australian art of his day. But today the narrative has changed, and the portrait tells the story of Ewing the art philanthropist. In 1938 Ewing donated this painting and 55 other works of art to the University of Melbourne for the newly opened Student Union. The Ewing Collection became one of the founding collections of what is now known as the University of Melbourne Art Collection, which is managed by the Ian Potter Museum of Art.² By understanding Ewing through the art and artists of his collection, his tale transforms even



Previous page: John Longstaff, *Dr Samuel Arthur Ewing* MRCS DPH FRACS, c. 1922, oil on canvas, 88.9 × 68.9 cm. 1938.0012, gift of Dr Samuel Arthur Ewing 1938, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

further: Ewing also becomes the ethical collector, the supportive friend, the art scholar and, finally, the surveyor of Australian art. The resulting portrayal re-invigorates the legacies of both a Melbourne art collector and one of the university's first art benefactors.³

Ewing acquired the works over more than 30 years, between 1908 and 1940. The line-up of artists is a 'who's who' of Melbourne's late 19th- and early 20th-century art scene, featuring such names as Arthur Streeton, E. Phillips Fox, Frederick McCubbin and Bernard Hall. Oil and watercolour paintings are favoured, although several etchings and a plaster cast are included. The works were produced between 1862 and 1940, and although landscapes predominate, several cityscapes and genre scenes are also present. Longstaff's painting is now the only portrait in the collection, with Ewing forever seated comfortably among one of his life's passions.

Ewing's other passion was medicine. Born in Fitzroy and orphaned at age 19, Ewing initially followed in his late father's footsteps by studying to be a pharmacist. Once qualified at the University of Melbourne, Ewing continued studying, this time to become a doctor. After graduating he worked as a general practitioner in rural Victoria,

and later in a remote hospital outside Kalgoorlie on the Western Australian goldfields. Highly ambitious and with a thirst for education, Ewing then travelled overseas to attend the leading medical institutions of the day, studying at the universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, London and Cambridge, with further short courses in Paris and Berlin. When Ewing returned to Australia in 1902, he was no longer an orphan destined for the family pharmacy on Brunswick Street in Fitzroy, but a European-trained specialist ear, nose and throat surgeon, who took up positions at St Vincent's and the Alfred hospitals and established a private practice in Collins Street.⁴ Here he remained for the following 35 years of his medical career.

In 1903 Ewing married Ethel Godfrey, also a graduate of the University of Melbourne, and one of Victoria's first female dentists. Over the following decade the couple had three children. About five years after their wedding Ewing began collecting Australian art, his first purchase (in 1908) being three paintings by Hans Heysen. By the 1930s, Ewing was known in the press as a 'collector of taste and discrimination', whose collection 'more than rival[ed] the Australian section in the National Gallery [of Victoria]'.⁵

While mystery surrounds the origins of this midlife transformation from medical man to art collector, Ewing described himself as 'always ... [having] had a warm sympathy for artists'.⁶ He was drawn in particular to Australian art, as he believed that Australian artists 'had succeeded where others had failed in revealing the great beauty of their native land'.⁷ However, the beauty Ewing sought also reflected the racism and sexism then prevalent in Australian society. Ewing, who favoured the White Australia Policy and was openly anti-Semitic in his youth,⁸ eschewed an Indigenous presence in both the art and artists collected. Of the 37 artists he patronised, only four were women, and although females feature in the figurative works, they are limited to interior scenes where domesticity dominates.

Nationalism was also present in Ewing's 1938 gift to the university. Outside the gallery displaying the collection, he fixed a plaque bearing the words: 'That our youth may be inspired by the beauty as well as love of their country by the works of our artists'.⁹ Although Ewing's nationalism reflected broader trends in his post-Federation era, his time spent studying abroad may have also strengthened his attachment to the depiction of Australia.

Harold Herbert, *Golden sands*, 1928,
watercolour on paper, 35.2 × 51.4 cm.
1938.0030, gift of Dr Samuel Arthur Ewing
1938, University of Melbourne Art Collection.



On a pragmatic level, Ewing acquired works by Australian artists because it was ‘the only practical way at his disposal’ to be of assistance.¹⁰ And so for 30 years Ewing supported some 37 Australian artists, buying approximately 85 works of art in total. The university’s collection features 56 of them, by 29 artists.

(During the 1980s, Ewing’s daughter, Margaret Ewing Cutten, donated the remainder to the National Gallery of Victoria, the State Library of Victoria, the Fitzroy Public Library and the University of Melbourne.)¹¹ Wanting to support artists financially, Ewing overwhelmingly favoured works by living artists. To ensure his

funds went directly to the creator, Ewing would buy from the artist’s studio or at solo exhibitions, rather than group shows or the secondary art market. Melbourne galleries hosting such solo exhibitions included the Guild Hall, Athenaeum Hall and Fine Art Society’s Gallery. In favouring direct engagement

with artists, Ewing may also have appreciated the opportunity to view works by the one artist that varied in size, medium, subject matter and price. Such exhibitions also helped him keep up to date with the oeuvre of artists he admired.

Although Ewing favoured living artists, when acquiring works by deceased artists he continued to prefer avenues of most financial benefit to the artist's networks. Of the 10 such paintings he collected, half came from memorial exhibitions, where profits helped the late artist's family. These exhibitions were held within one or two years of the artist's death and included E. Phillips Fox (1865–1915), J.J. Hilder (1881–1916) and Alfred Vincent (1874–1915). Ewing purchased *Rocks and seas* by Phillips Fox at a memorial exhibition in 1916 in the Upper Athenaeum Hall on Collins Street, Melbourne.

Ewing occasionally entered the secondary art market in order to buy works by long-dead artists. For instance, he bought *Evening at Croydon* by John Ford Paterson (1851–1912) from the 1919 sale of the collection of his acquaintance Professor Walter Baldwin Spencer at the Fine Art Society's Gallery. While collecting enabled Ewing to support artists and their families directly, when acquiring 19th-century art he

favoured his broader social network.

Friendships played a leading role in selecting artists to patronise. Ewing was personally acquainted with most of the artists represented in his collection, and was particularly close friends with those he met through the Melbourne Savage Club. He was a member of this men's social club for more than 30 years, along with almost one-third of the artists represented. One such member and close family friend was Harold Herbert, who, along with John Longstaff, attended Ewing's daughter's wedding. Herbert features strongly in the collection, with five works, produced over a 15-year period. According to a family anecdote, Ewing's patronage also extended to helping alleviate a bout of depression from which Herbert was suffering, by paying for the artist to take a painting trip to Tasmania.¹² Friendships such as these may have encouraged Ewing to also view collecting as a way of supporting artists emotionally.

Personal associations with the art similarly influenced Ewing's choices. This can be seen in his purchase of Herbert's painting *Golden sands* of 1928 (see p. 23), a watercolour depicting a beach scene on Phillip Island. For Ewing, the painting portrayed the location of

many youthful fishing trips;¹³ as a pharmaceutical student in the 1880s, Ewing would take his boat out fishing on Port Phillip Bay once or twice a week, noting his daily catch in his diary and even making yearly entries of the amount and types of fish caught.¹⁴ Ewing's acquisition of this painting may have centred on the youthful nostalgia evoked by the landscape.

Although Ewing had intimate ties to a number of works and artists in his collection, his overarching concern as a collector was artistic merit. He wanted art of quality and a collection that was scholarly. To achieve this, he turned to the art establishment of the day through text. He is known to have owned at least 20 books on Australian art and artists printed between 1916 and 1939.¹⁵ As well as more general texts such as *Australian landscape painters of today* (1929), he owned biographies of one-quarter of the artists represented in his collection. Even after purchasing a work of art, on occasions Ewing would maintain an interest in the artist through print. One was J.J. Hilder, whom Ewing held in particular esteem, describing him to a colleague as 'one who is in Australian art what Keats is in English literature'.¹⁶ Ewing acquired several Hilder watercolours and,

following the artist's death, bought the books *J.J. Hilder, watercolourist* and *The art of J.J. Hilder*.¹⁷ For a collector lacking an arts background and entering the scene in his middle age, such books may have provided Ewing with confirmation of his taste and the quality of art already owned, while offering additional guidance for future acquisitions.

The role played by the art establishment in Ewing's collecting can be seen in his 1919 acquisition of *Despair* by Bernard Hall (1916) (right). According to Ewing's daughter, Ewing bought the painting to ensure it remained in Victoria, as the Art Gallery of New South Wales had intended to purchase it. To do so, Ewing paid 300 guineas, well over 10 times the average price of his other 55 works of art.¹⁸ Despite this being the most expensive work Ewing acquired, he was—curiously—not so strongly attracted to its subject matter. Hall had named the work *Suicide*, suggesting that the reclining nude woman was dead. Ewing instead favoured the title *A study in line and colour*. After negotiations with Hall, a name change to the less dramatic *Despair* was agreed upon. Ewing's preference reflects an earlier description of the painting by Lionel Lindsay in *Art in Australia*; in 1918 Lindsay described the nude, Hall's

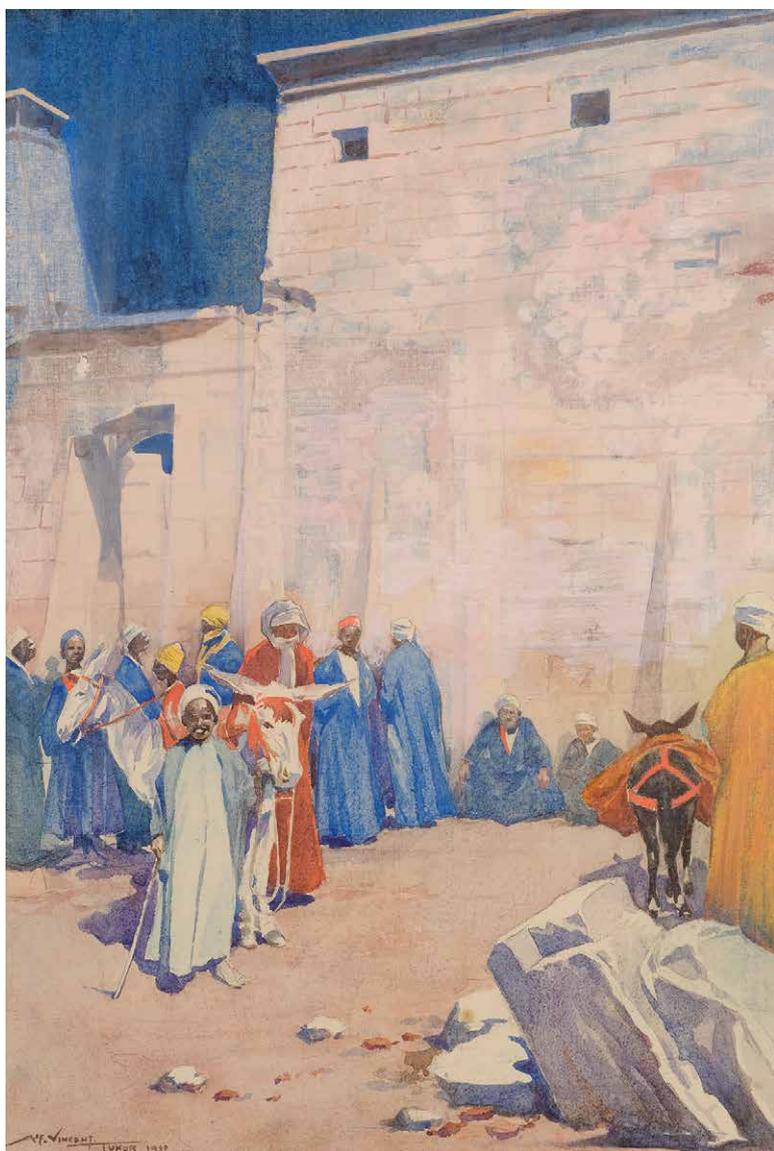
most recent work, as 'haunted by undulant grace of line, poise and pattern'.¹⁹ Ewing's preferred title similarly focuses the subject towards an academic exploration of aesthetic formalism.

The financial weight Ewing placed on preserving the Victorian public's

access to Hall's painting relates perhaps more to the significance of Bernard Hall than to the subject portrayed. Hall taught at the National Gallery School in Melbourne from 1892 to 1935 and thus played a central role in the development of Victorian artists for almost 40 years.



Alfred Vincent, *Luxor*, 1911, watercolour on cotton canvas, 42.5 × 28.5 cm. 1938.0053, gift of Dr Samuel Arthur Ewing 1938, University of Melbourne Art Collection.



It was through history that Ewing provided overall cohesion to his collection. He stated that he wanted to ‘form a group of paintings which would endure as a demonstration of the varying phases and individualities of a period in the art of the country he holds dear’.²⁰ Furthermore, according to then Professor George Paton, Ewing described his collection as ‘a sort of historical development of Australian art’.²¹ The 80-year period spanned by the collection and the variety of styles present can then be understood as evidence of an early survey collection.

Ewing’s desire for stylistic variety may have influenced his purchase of *Luxor* by Alfred Vincent (pictured left). As the only work by Vincent that Ewing acquired, a city scene in colour is an unusual choice to represent an artist best known for his black-and-white work, whose cartoons and caricatures were regularly printed in journals and magazines in Melbourne and Sydney. Furthermore, as the two men were acquainted through the Savage Club, Ewing would have been familiar with Vincent’s oeuvre. Significantly however, this watercolour painting is also the only Orientalist work Ewing is known to have acquired. While Ewing chose representative artists

in the past, as in the case of Bernard Hall, in this instance the idea appears reversed. Instead, the Middle-Eastern subject and the manner of depiction are of central importance.

In a sad coincidence, the setting of Vincent's painting later became one of deep personal significance for Ewing. One year after Ewing had donated his collection to the university, his eldest son, Geoffrey, died in Luxor, after diving into a shallow area of the Nile.²² To add to the heartache, the Ewings learnt the tragic news from a newspaper report, as the Melbourne press had seen and printed the news from the Cairo telegraph before it was delivered to the family. The harrowing letter detailing poor Geoffrey's final hours is now held in State Library Victoria.²³ While Vincent's work originally occupied a stylistic position in the collection, *Luxor* later became an intimate signifier of Ewing's presence.

Although there is but one visual likeness of Ewing in the collection, aspects of his life emerge from every work of art he acquired. As the collector permeates that which is collected, the art now contains a dual narrative: of the creators and of the collector. Through the art of his collection, Ewing's tale is not only that of a surgeon, nor of an art collector, but also one of generosity,

many friendships, youthful exploration, family, and affection for his Australia. Once we understand this, we see that Longstaff's portrait is not alone.

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- 1 This article is based on a talk on the Ewing Collection given by the author at the Ian Potter Museum of Art in April 2016.
- 2 The most recent published catalogue of the collection is by Juliette Peers and Lisa Sullivan, *The full majesty of nature: The collection of Dr Samuel Arthur Ewing*, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 2002.
- 3 As well as the specific references cited below, sources include Ewing Family Papers 1828–1983, MS 11675, State Library Victoria; Ethel Margaret Ewing Cutten Papers, MS 12963, State Library Victoria; and *The Ewing Collection*, Ewing Gallery, Melbourne University Union, 1981.
- 4 *The Ewing Collection*, pp. 3–9; Box 2591/9, Ewing Family Papers.
- 5 Basil Burdett, 'Formal presentation of gift collection', *The Herald*, 5 April 1938, in Box 2592/6, Ewing Family Papers.
- 6 'Exhibition officially opened', *The Age*, 9 October 1929, p. 15.
- 7 'Exhibition officially opened'.
- 8 While touring North America in 1920, Ewing gave an interview to a newspaper in favour of the White Australia Policy (Box 2592/9, Ewing Family Papers). In a meeting of the University of Melbourne Science Club in 1888, Ewing gave a lecture titled 'Jew or bearded lizard' ('University Science Club', *The Argus*, 15 September 1888, p. 8).

- 9 The plaque was originally outside the Ewing Gallery in the Union House building, and is now held in the Ian Potter Museum of Art as part of the Ewing Collection.
- 10 Alexander Colquhoun, 'Melbourne's private art galleries: Dr. Ewing's collection', *The Age*, 1 March 1930, p. 7.
- 11 See Geoffrey Edwards, *The Ewing gift: Presentations to the collections of Asian art, Australian art, decorative arts and the library of Mrs. M.E. Cutten in memory of her father, Dr. S.A. Ewing and her brother, Mr. George Ewing*, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1982; Box 2591, Ewing Family Papers.
- 12 Box 2591/8, Ewing Family Papers.
- 13 Colquhoun, 'Melbourne's private art galleries'.
- 14 The diaries are now held in Box 2591/1, Ewing Family Papers.
- 15 The books are now held in the Shaw Research Library in the National Gallery of Victoria.
- 16 The inscription on the front page of Ewing's copy of *The art of J.J. Hilder* (1918), now held in the Shaw Research Library, reads: 'To Dr W[illiam] Mayo, From one who in his youth visited Parleon [*sic*], Lister, and in his maturity Rochester, the works of one who is in Australian art what Keats is in high literature. With the sincere language of S.A. Ewing. 31/03/1924'.
- 17 Julian Ashton and Bertram Stevens, *J.J. Hilder, watercolourist*, Sydney: Tyrells, 1916; Sydney Ure Smith and Bertram Stevens (eds), *The art of J.J. Hilder*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1918.
- 18 Box 2592/1, Ewing Family Papers.
- 19 Lionel Lindsay, 'L. Bernard Hall', *Art in Australia*, series 1, no. 5, 1918.
- 20 Colquhoun, 'Melbourne's private art galleries'.
- 21 Note dated 9 July 1945, in Registrar's correspondence (UM312), 1962, 485: Ewing Gallery. 1999.0014, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 22 'Doctor's death: Bathing accident', *The Argus*, 28 April 1939, p. 11.
- 23 Box 2, sections 2.3 and 2.4 (a), Ethel Margaret Ewing Cutten Papers.