‘Venice ... a great place for painting.’

In late April 1908, Arthur Streeton and his wife Nora departed England for Venice on their second honeymoon. It was the first of two Venetian painting trips completed by Streeton that year. Buoyed by the commercial success of exhibitions in Australia the previous year, Streeton worked prolifically in Venice with the aim of producing sufficient works to mount an exhibition. After painting and sketching in-situ and further work in his London studio, by the end of 1908 Streeton had produced up to eighty works depicting the city’s grand architecture and waterways.

'I did enjoy the place so much ... and I worked hard and did some good pieces. What a wonderful place it is', wrote Streeton after his first visit to Venice. He returned later that year in September through to October and completed oils, watercolours and pencil sketches of some of Venice’s most recognisable scenes including the Grand Canal, the island of Giudecca, St Mark’s Square, Doges’ Palace, the Bridge of Sighs and the Rialto Bridge. The Piazza and Basilica of San Marco were the subject of several works by Streeton and on his second trip to Venice he wrote of the hazards of plein air painting in such a central and busy location:

I have worked 2 afternoons lately in the centre of the Piazza San Marco – ... It took some nerve too – Its [sic] the heart of the city & always full of people – so while Mrs S. sat some yards off on a seat of the ‘Florian Cafe’ reading ‘Great Expectations’ I sat surrounded by a great mob of around 40. It was extremely hot with so much humanity like a wall round me a wall 4 feet thick & all 98 temperature made me perspire. – I’ve seen no one else tackle it here – But I pulled it off ...3

In this letter Streeton included a sketch of San Marco and its domes and beside the sketch he wrote ‘all gold & yellow & blue’: a colour scheme with which the artist was very familiar, dating back to his earliest experiences of plein air painting in Australia in the mid-1880s. So strong was the association of Streeton with depictions of the golden pastures and blue skies of Australia, that the art critic JS MacDonald wrote in 1926: ‘When he painted in Venice, an appreciable Australian complexion infused his canvases’.4

In The domes of St Mark’s, Streeton captures the light and warmth of the Venetian sun bouncing off the marble façade of the Basilica. The dark shadows cast by the adjacent Doges’ Palace act as a framing device: their muted tones contrast with, and exaggerate, the brilliance of San Marco’s exterior, its domes and surrounding sky. After painting in Venice, Streeton returned to his London studio where he completed numerous works based on Venetian scenes. He exhibited throughout 1909 at the Royal Society of British Artists’ Exhibition in March; at the Alpine Club in Saville Road, London, in April; and the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. He sent a group of twenty paintings to Australia for the exhibition Arthur Streeton’s Venice at the Guild Hall, Melbourne, 13–27 July.

In addition, two significant articles featuring the work of Streeton were published in international journals in 1909: the first, in London’s The Studio, included five reproductions of Streeton’s Venetian paintings which were described as ‘a series of pictures which are in many respects the most important he has as yet produced’; the second article, in the New York-based The Craftsman, suggested that Streeton had ‘caught the very spirit of Venice as she is today – with all her opulence of colour, her vividness and gaiety’.5
Hoping to capitalise on this increased exposure and international recognition, Streeton returned to Australia to
hold exhibitions of his work in Melbourne and Sydney in 1914. Although largely absent from Australia since 1897,
Streeton effectively maintained a profile in his country of
birth — increasingly so since his successful exhibitions in
1907 — by sending works home for inclusion in group
and solo exhibitions. Professor Walter Baldwin Spencer
of the University of Melbourne, one of Streeton’s greatest
supporters and a collector of his work since 1906,
also lent works to exhibitions ensuring that the artist’s
paintings remained in the public eye. When Streeton
returned to Australia on 27 May 1914 he was regarded
as an artist of great significance and his opinions on
modern art were sought.7

Streeton’s exhibition at the Victorian Artists’ Society, East
Melbourne, in June 1914 included 114 oil paintings and
56 watercolours. The exhibition was a financial success
for the artist and among its visitors — and purchasers —
was Dr Samuel Arthur Ewing. The Melbourne doctor had
begun collecting art in 1908 and frequented many of the
city’s key exhibition venues including the Athenaeum Hall,
Guild Hall, Fine Art Society’s Gallery and the Victorian
Artists’ Society. At the time of purchasing The domes
of St Mark’s from the 1914 exhibition, Ewing’s collection
contained the works of several notable artists including
Hans Heysen, Penleigh Boyd, Walter Withers, Rupert
Bunny, Blamire Young, Constance Jenkins, Max Meldrum
and J.J. Hilder.8 The domes of St Mark’s was Ewing’s first
known acquisition of a Streeton painting. In later years
Ewing added another five works by Streeton to his
collection: the 1918 oil painting Armiens Cathedral,
two watercolour fans, a panoramic view of Sydney Harbour
and the still-life White Icacs.9

Decades after his earliest purchases, Dr Ewing donated
over fifty works from his significant collection to the
Melbourne University Union in 1938. In late 1937 — prior
to the formal presentation of the collection on 6 April
1938 — Dr Ewing sent The domes of St Mark’s to
Streeton’s studio where the artist cleaned the work ‘lifting
all the varnish … which lay like a yellow London fog over
it’ and allowing ‘its Venetian brightness’ to reappear.10

The unique scenery of Venice remained an inspiration
for Streeton and in the late 1920s and early 1930s he
completed several oil paintings, watercolours and
etchings of familiar Venetian locations. The subject matter
also proved to be the commercial success that Streeton
had hoped for: ‘I suppose there is no hope of my buying
back that old Venetian picture. (painted 1908. 30 years
back. I have nothing of that period left in the house)’, wrote
the artist to Dr Ewing. ‘I’d love to possess it again …’.11

Selected works by Arthur Streeton from the University of Melbourne Art Collection:
- Untitled (St Margaret and Westminster Abbey, London), c. 1904, watercolour and pencil on paper
- Sydney Harbour at Cremorne, c. 1907, oil on wood
- Untitled (English farm), c. 1910, oil on canvas
- The Tintoretto fan, c. 1920, watercolour on silk
- Sleeping beauty fan, c. 1920, watercolour on silk
- White Icacs, c. 1938, oil on canvas

Additional information available at www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au

Lisa Sullivan The Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2002

1 Correspondence, Arthur Streeton to Walter Withers, 27 March 1908. Cited Galbally, Ann & Gray, Anne (eds),
2 Correspondence, Arthur Streeton to Frederick Delmer, 1 July 1908. Cited Galbally & Gray, pp. 112–13.
3 Correspondence, Arthur Streeton to Baldwin Spencer, 8 October 1908. Cited Galbally & Gray, p. 114.
5 Streeton completed two similar works in 1908 titled Domes of St Mark, catalogue no.s 379 and 380 in Streeton, Arthur,
The Arthur Streeton Catalogue, Melbourne, 1935. The domes of St Mark’s in the University of Melbourne Art Collection
is the larger of the two (no. 379).
1909, pp. 259–68; MacDonald, Irwin, ‘Arthur Streeton. An Australian painter who has solved the problems of art in his own way’,
The Craftsman, November 1909, re-printed in Streeton, pp. 73–6.
8 Invoice dated 19 June 1914, no. 17 Domes of St Mark’s, purchased by Dr Ewing for £63 0 0. MS 11675, Ewing Family Papers,
La Trobe Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria (Ewing Papers), 2592/3 (a).
9 With the exception of Armiens Cathedral (1918, oil, Collection of Melbourne Grammar School, Gift of Dr Ewing), all works were
gifted to the Melbourne University Union in 1938.
10 Correspondence, Arthur Streeton to Dr Ewing, 17 November 1937. (Ewing Papers), 2591/6 (b).
11 Correspondence, Arthur Streeton to Dr Ewing, 13 November 1937 and 17 November 1937. (Ewing Papers), 2591/6 (b).