

Education kit

For K–6 Creative Arts
and 7–12 Visual Arts

ART
GALLERY
NSW

Streeton



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Cover image: Arthur Streeton *Beach scene* 1890,
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, purchased
from the Estate of Henrietta Tuson 1954

Introducing Arthur Streeton

‘I just go on with my work, believing in myself that’s all’.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries Arthur Streeton came to be regarded in Australia as its most significant landscape artist. Streeton’s naturalistic impressionism offered a new way to visually experience the light, atmosphere, colour and forms of our natural world. His exceptional abilities as a painter meant he adapted his mark-making to purpose, using the matter of paint with verve to capture a vital sense of place. Streeton’s youthful talent and fresh vision are a given, but he was also a sensitive and deeply romantic bohemian who eventually became one of the most commercially successful and popular establishment artists of his generation. His character was complex and even contradictory: he was by turns provocative and conservative, an individualist and yet immersed in close friendships. He remained throughout his own man and valued his drive as an artist. As he wrote in 1918 to a patron who was critical of his recent paintings, ‘I just go on with my work, believing in myself that’s all’.¹

The new painting

Streeton embraced plein-air oil painting in the 1880s, following the international influence exerted by the Barbizon school of painters in France and the radical artists known as the impressionists. By the end of the decade, Streeton’s vivid paintings of Melbourne, nearby coastal scenes and rural landscapes at Box Hill and Heidelberg, generated both admiration and criticism. Supporters saw a fresh and true vision of Australia delivered in a contemporary way, while detractors viewed his improvisatory brushwork as wilfully untutored and incomplete. The Art Gallery of New South Wales helped resolve the debate over whether Australian impressionism had a future when it purchased Streeton’s wide-format Heidelberg landscape *Still glides the stream, and shall for ever glide* 1890 from the young artist in 1890.²

Streeton in Sydney

On the strength of this support for the new art movement, Streeton came to Sydney and later stayed in the artists’ camp at Little Sirius Cove just across the harbour from the city. Streeton was transfixed by Sydney, the light and warmth, the waterways and beaches, describing it in a letter as ‘a land of passion-fruit & poetry’.³ He immediately set to work capturing the scenes before him, developing his soon-to-be-famous blue in differing shades for ocean, harbour and skies. He was further buoyed by the Gallery’s purchase in 1893 of his great painting of summer heat, industry and incident, *Fire’s on* 1891. His Australian landscapes from this period culminated in his magnificent elevated vistas of the Hawkesbury River from 1896, including his perfectly realised exercise in receding space and bright summer atmosphere, *The purple noon’s transparent might* 1896, purchased by the National Gallery of Victoria in a hometown victory for Streeton. These works remain justly admired and are an important part of our cultural identity, yet they are only part of Streeton’s prolific output over six decades.

Streeton overseas

It is a measure of Streeton’s confidence and desire to both learn and challenge himself that he joined the exodus of artists from around the world to the European art centres at the end of the 19th century. Streeton arrived in London in 1897 but found himself just another young

¹ Arthur Streeton letter to Walter Baldwin Spencer, 11 Oct 1918, in Ann Galbally & Anne Gray (eds), *Letters from Smike: the letters of Arthur Streeton 1890–1943*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1989, p 151.

² The Art Gallery of New South Wales had already purchased Charles Conder’s impressionist painting *Departure of the Orient – Circular Quay* 1888 in 1888, but the Streeton was purchased after *The 9 by 5 impression exhibition* in 1889 had brought debates in Australia for and against impressionism to a head.

³ Arthur Streeton letter to Theodore Fink, early Apr 1890, in Galbally & Gray, p 17.

Introducing Arthur Streeton

colonial striving for recognition in a highly competitive art scene. His hardest and hungriest years followed. He was doggedly determined, and worked through the influence of John Constable, JMW Turner, James Abbott McNeill Whistler and contemporaries such as John Singer Sargent and Philip Wilson Steer in his practice. The resulting large-scale muscularly painted landscapes are supreme examples of Edwardian English painting. These achieved some success at the Royal Academy in London and the Paris Salons and even more success when sent back to Australia. Streeton worked out a formula for return visits to Melbourne and Sydney, producing new Australian subjects to be exhibited alongside European works. His developing good business sense meant he discerned an audience who wanted paintings of both home and away.

The war years

The First World War interrupted Streeton's growing London career and prevented his return to Australia for several years. Too old to fight, he threw himself into working in a hospital for wounded soldiers before becoming an official war artist in France. His most poignant war paintings pair the gentle beauty of the French landscape with quiet scenes of desolation. Streeton returned to Australia soon after the end of the war, coming home to a saddened but optimistic country. His big view pastoral landscapes in the 1920s, such as *Land of the Golden Fleece* 1926, painted in three versions, captured the public's imagination as images of promise and plenitude gained from Australia's human endeavour and abundant natural resources. The conservative cultural commentary that grew up around these paintings can now seem uncomfortably nationalistic, though these views were not repeated by Streeton in his own frequent public writing.

The big picture: national landscapes

There is an absence and a presence in all of Streeton's Australian landscapes. Aboriginal people are never depicted and yet they are present as Streeton paints land cared for by Aboriginal custodians over millennia.⁴ This becomes more evident when he began travelling beyond the outskirts of Melbourne, painting areas that are less altered by European farming practices. Streeton's vistas encompass mountains, forests and plains shaped by Aboriginal land management, including landscapes managed by fire and landscapes left to grow, with patchworks of grasslands and bush belts that pre-date European settlement. Sometimes Aboriginal presence becomes even more obvious when Streeton paints ancient spreading gums that have grown in open grasslands shaped by fire regimes. From our point in time, absence can be replaced with overwhelming evidence of other lives lived in this landscape when Country is read from Indigenous perspectives.⁵

The artist as environmental activist

Streeton's carefully self-managed career and consistent sales from 1907 onwards in Australia resulted in homes in Toorak in Melbourne and Olinda in the Dandenong Ranges. Acceptance by the establishment mattered to him later in life, and his public roles as an artist and a critic led to a knighthood from George VI in 1937. He was proud of what he had achieved, but he also used his public platform as a respected person of arts and letters to condemn land clearing and environmental degradation. He published extensively from the late 1920s on conservation and urban planning issues, and exhibited paintings that predicted a desolate and barren future for Australia unless it changed its destructive ways. So many years on, the future he foretold for Australia seems to be coming true.

Adapted from Wayne Tunnicliffe 'Introducing Arthur Streeton' in *Streeton*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2020

⁴ Streeton rarely included any figures in his landscapes after returning to Australia in the early 1920s.

⁵ Listening to traditional custodians or reading books on Aboriginal history and land management, such as Bruce Pascoe's *Dark emu*, Magabala Books, Broome, 2014 or Bill Gammage's *The biggest estate on Earth: how Aborigines made Australia*, Allen & Unwin, 2012, reveals ways of seeing a much richer, ancient and layered history in the places that Streeton painted.

Unpacking the exhibition: themes

The new painting

Clockwise, from top left:

Arthur Streeton
Early summer – gorse in bloom 1888
oil on canvas, 56.2 x 100.6 cm
Art Gallery of South Australia,
Adelaide, gift of Mrs Andrew
Tennant through the Art Gallery of
South Australia Foundation 1982



Arthur Streeton
Australian December 1886
oil on canvas, 39.9 x 65 cm
Newcastle Region Art Gallery,
gift of the Newcastle Region Art
Gallery Foundation 1993



Arthur Streeton
Evening with bathers 1888
oil on canvas, 40.8 x 76.4 cm
National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne, bequest of Sunday
Reed 1982



Arthur Streeton
Windy and wet c1889
oil on cardboard, 14.3 x 24 cm
National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne, purchased 1955



The new painting

The 1880s was an exciting time in Australian art. Plein-air painting – painting outdoors in front of the subject – was embraced and a new style developed that was aligned with art practices in Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States. A desire for change converged with cosmopolitan influences that led away from the carefully detailed studio painting of more conservative artists.

The younger painters adopted a freer style based on direct observation, experimenting with heightened colour and evident brushstrokes, and focused on the life and landscapes around them. Distinctively local and demonstrably international, it became known as Australian impressionism. Arthur Streeton turned 13 in 1880. He began his art education early in the decade and by its end he was one of the leaders of the new painting movement that delivered its manifesto in *The 9 by 5 impression exhibition* in August 1889.

The now legendary exhibition was carefully staged by the key instigators Streeton, Tom Roberts and Charles Conder in August 1889. The '9 by 5' in the title refers to the dimensions of the cigar box lids that some works were painted on, which determined the scale of most exhibits.

Critic James Smith, decried the paintings' lack of 'finish', likening their 'slap-dash brush work' to 'primeval chaos'. The *9 by 5* paintings were closer to the tonal panels exhibited by James Abbott McNeill Whistler in London in 1884, where Roberts is thought to have seen them, than the vivid colour and broken brushwork of the French impressionists.

Investigate

Imagine walking through *Early summer – gorse in bloom* 1888. List the local features depicted. Now imagine walking through *Windy and wet* c1889. How is your journey different? Write a letter to a friend describing your experience of each place.

Imagine flying over one of these landscapes and describe how the colours make you feel. What are the sounds, smells and textures you imagine there to be? How does plein-air painting offer the audience a greater sense of the landscape?

Create

In *The 9 by 5 impression exhibition*, '9 by 5' refers to the dimensions of the artworks. What is the impact of this small scale and using the same dimensions across multiple paintings? Discuss how the impact would change if the artworks were larger in scale. Create an artwork where scale plays a significant role in its impact.

Reflect

How was Streeton's art radical and avant-garde for its time? How did this new approach to painting shape 20th-century art practices? What are the benefits of the plein-air approach to painting?

An artist's city: Streeton in Sydney

Clockwise, from top left:

Arthur Streeton
*The purple noon's transparent
might* 1896
oil on canvas, 123 x 123 cm
National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne, purchased 1896

Arthur Streeton
Beach scene 1890
oil on canvas board, 39.6 x 29.5 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales,
Sydney, purchased from the Estate
of Henrietta Tuson 1954

Arthur Streeton
The railway station, Redfern 1893
oil on canvas, 40.8 x 61 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales,
Sydney, gift of Lady Denison 1942

Arthur Streeton
*Fireman's funeral,
George Street* 1894
oil on canvas, 45.3 x 38.2 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales,
Sydney, purchased 1980



An artist's city: Streeton in Sydney

Streeton first visited Sydney in June 1890 after the sale of *Still glides the stream, and shall for ever glide* to the Art Gallery of New South Wales earlier in the year. He became entranced with the harbour and beaches and particularly with the changing effect of light on water during the course of a day and in differing weather conditions. Streeton supercharged the colours he had used previously for bush subjects near Melbourne, creating saturated tones including the rich ultramarine that became known as 'Streeton blue'.

On his second visit in 1891, Streeton enthused in a letter to a Melbourne friend 'Sydney is an artist's city – glorious ... a land of passion-fruit and poetry'.

From 1892 Streeton lived at the Curlew Camp on the harbourside at Mosman, on Cammeraigal and Borogegal land. His bold use of colour and experiments with format and cropping during this time encapsulated the energy of late 19th-century Sydney. In 1896 he held *Streeton's Sydney sunshine exhibition* in Melbourne, which was a resounding success, and in 1900 *The Bulletin* asserted that Streeton was the 'discoverer of Sydney Harbour'.

To utter traditional names of the places where Streeton painted is to pause and consider a more complex story than that of his artistic invention of place. Long before Mosman was named after the operator of a local whaling station, and Little Sirius Cove was named after the flagship of British invasion, the area around Mosman Bay was known as Gorma Bullagong by Cammeraigal and Borogegal peoples. Cremorne was Wulwarrajeung. Coogee was Koojah, an important and abundant fishing site of the Bidjigal people before white occupation led to depleted stocks.

Investigate

Choose one of these paintings and describe the colours used. Why do you think Streeton selected them? List some words to describe the brushstrokes. Can you see details, or has the scene been simplified? How does Streeton show movement? Why do you think Streeton was interested in the changing effect of light on water and in differing weather conditions?

Create

What do you love about the place where you live? Create an artwork entitled 'A land of passion-fruit and poetry' using supercharged colours and 'Streeton blue'.

Reflect

Etched in the landscapes where Streeton painted – along Bradleys Head, around the harbour coves and headlands as well as from Sydney's coastal clifftops – are myriad artistic engravings that assert the prior and enduring occupation of the Indigenous Gadigal people of the Eora Nation.

How has Streeton captured differing experiences of place in these paintings? How do they relate to a contemporary experience of place?

Select one of these paintings and construct a story based on what you see. Describe the mood that Streeton has created.

Streeton overseas

Clockwise, from top left:

Arthur Streeton
The centre of the Empire 1902
oil on canvas, 122.5 x 122.5 cm
Private collection, Sydney

Arthur Streeton
Fatima Habiba 1897
oil on canvas on cardboard,
29 x 27.4 cm
Art Gallery of South Australia,
Adelaide, gift of Douglas and
Barbara Mullins through the
Art Gallery of South Australia
Foundation 1997

Arthur Streeton
Boulogne 1918
oil on canvas, 91.8 x 153 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales,
Sydney, gift of the artist 1926

Arthur Streeton
Santa Maria della Salute (grey) 1908
oil on canvas, 51 x 76.5 cm
Geelong Art Gallery, gift of TS
Hawkes 1914



Streeton overseas

By the end of 1896 Streeton was regarded as one of Australia's leading landscape painters. While his paintings were still occasionally described as French in style, Streeton rejected this when interviewed in November 1896, claiming that his work 'is purely and absolutely Australian, not only as regards colour, but in idea and expression'.

Despite strongly identifying as an Australian artist, Streeton joined the exodus of his talented peers to the art centres of Europe. He departed Sydney in January 1897, travelling to London via Cairo and Naples. In 1898 seven of his paintings were exhibited in a large survey of contemporary Australian art at the Grafton Galleries organised by the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Interest in his Australian paintings suggested Streeton would soon establish himself in London, but he became overwhelmed by the competitive London art scene, and his confidence faltered being away from his friends and the scenes of his early successes.

His hardest and hungriest years followed. Yet he found motivation in the famous art from past and present that surrounded him, and in painting a new landscape and light, and doggedly worked through the influence of John Constable, JMW Turner, James Abbott McNeill Whistler and contemporaries such as John Singer Sargent and Philip Wilson Steer. The resulting large-scale, muscular landscapes are supreme examples of Edwardian English painting.

Investigate

Find examples by John Constable, JMW Turner, James Whistler, John Singer Sargent and Philip Wilson Steer. Where can you see influence from these artists on Streeton's art practice?

What do these artworks tell us about Streeton's experience in other countries. How do they compare to his paintings of the Australian landscape?

Create

Create an artwork inspired by a place you have visited or lived before. How is this place unique compared to where you live today? Think carefully about the colours, textures and forms you include. How do they add meaning to your work?

Reflect

Research Australian artists from the 20th and 21st centuries who have been compelled to work overseas, including Arthur Streeton. Why do some artists feel it necessary to work outside of Australia? How does this journey impact their art-making?

Compare Australian and French impressionist art. How did the artists of the impressionist movement offer unique perspectives of the places they lived?

The big picture: national landscapes

Clockwise, from top left:

Arthur Streeton
Land of the Golden Fleece 1926
oil on canvas, 92.3 x 146 cm
Private collection, Sydney

Arthur Streeton
Our untidy bush 1934
oil on canvas, 76.6 x 64 cm
National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne, Felton Bequest 1934

Arthur Streeton
The valley from Olinda top
'Let the rose glow intense
and warm the air' – Keats 1925
oil on canvas, 63.8 x 101.6 cm
National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne, Felton Bequest 1925

Arthur Streeton
The creek 1925
oil on canvas, 51 x 77 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales,
Sydney, Edward Stinson Bequest
Fund 2004



The big picture: national landscapes

Streeton's pre-eminent place in Australian landscape painting was secured in the first decades of the 20th century. During and after the First World War, discussions of Australian impressionism evolved from representing a national school of art to embodying an ideal of nationhood itself. In 1919 critic and artist Lionel Lindsay wrote of *The purple noon's transparent might*: 'It is a great portrait of our birth place, and blazons high the claim of Arthur Streeton to the status of a great national painter'.

Streeton brought his Somme battlefield scenes to Australia in 1920 and exhibited them alongside Australian paintings from the previous decades, sensing our evolving identity was closely linked to the fighting in Europe. With the death of 60 000 Australian soldiers and with another 15000 Australians dying during the Spanish flu pandemic in 1919, it is little wonder audiences also responded to the familiar pastoral scenes of Streeton's new Australian works, painted in a style they now trusted. Streeton's 1920s landscapes were widely celebrated and occasionally criticised for being conservative or glibly painted. While they are not modernist, they participated in the making of a modern Australia shaped by both progressive and traditional cultural values.

There is an absence and a presence in all of Streeton's Australian landscapes. Aboriginal people are never depicted and yet they are present as Streeton paints land cared for by Aboriginal custodians over millennia.

Investigate

What do you notice about these landscapes when viewed from a distance and close up? Reading these landscapes from an Indigenous perspective, can you see evidence of other lives lived here? Consider the management of the land and the presence of grasslands and gum trees.

Create

Create an abstract interpretation of a Streeton landscape. Reflect on Streeton's use of scale, composition and paint handling. Use these ideas in your work. Compare your work to the original Streeton painting.

Reflect

Analyse the ideas being communicated in these paintings? Research why this choice of subject matter was important after the impact of the First World War. Do you think this vision of an idealised agricultural life was correct at the time? How do you think these paintings have contributed to the development of an Australian identity today?

The artist as environmental activist

Clockwise, from top left:

Arthur Streeton
Beneath the peaks,
Grampians 1920–21
oil on canvas, 63.5 x 76.1 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales,
Sydney, purchased 1920 and
completed in 1921

Arthur Streeton
Last of the messmates 1928
oil on canvas, 62.5 x 75 cm
Private collection, Sydney

Arthur Streeton
A mountain side 1935
oil on canvas, 86.5 x 111.5 cm
Westpac Corporate Art
Collection, Sydney

Arthur Streeton
Silvan Dam and Donna Buang,
AD 2000 1940
oil on canvas, 75 x 62cm
Private collection, Hope Island, Qld



The artist as environmental activist

Streeton believed that artists should participate in public life and that their opinions mattered. He did not hesitate to express his own ideas on a wide variety of topics and was often published in the major newspapers of the day. Acceptance by the establishment mattered to him later in life, and his roles as an artist and cultural commentator led to a knighthood from King George VI in 1937. He was proud of what he had achieved, but he also used his public platform to campaign on issues he felt were significant.

Streeton's life-long love of nature led to his speaking out against the destruction of Australia's old-growth forests from the mid 1920s. He was equally concerned about urban planning, and in 1925 campaigned to prevent a tramline being built through Melbourne's Botanic Gardens. He titled a drawing of the gardens *Beware of the axe*. From the late 1920s Streeton exhibited many paintings which sought to bring attention to the logging of old-growth forests and predicted a desolate future for Australia if deforestation continued. It is remarkable that almost a century on we are still having the same debates.

Investigate

Locate Sherbrooke Forest and Olinda on a map and look at satellite photos. Find out about the climate and vegetation of this region. Notice the colours and patterns of this country. Compare the images with Streeton's painting *The vanishing forest* 1934.

Silvan Dam and Donna Buang, AD 2000 is a painting of Streeton's vision of the year 2000. How close was the prediction of his future? Think about the year 2100. How do you perceive Australia to be in 80 years?

Create

What is an important environmental issue to you? Produce a variety of sketches and photographs based on your observations of a landscape that is important to you. Use these to create an artwork that responds to the state of world we live in today.

Reflect

Streeton believed that artists should participate in public life and that their opinions mattered. Do you agree with this statement? What is the role of an artist?

Research Streeton's contributions to environmental activism. Compare Streeton to contemporary artists who respond to environmental issues today. How can art play a role in environmental conversations?

Focus works

The national game 1889

Arthur Streeton
The national game 1889
oil on cardboard, 11.8 x 22.9 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales,
Sydney, purchased 1963



An effect is only momentary ... it has been the object of the artists to render faithfully, and thus obtain first records of effects widely differing, and often of very fleeting character'

– *The 9 by 5 impression exhibition catalogue*, 1889

These small paintings were first hung on the walls of a Melbourne art gallery in 1889, alongside similar works by Streeton's contemporaries. Little did the artists know this would become one of the most legendary exhibitions in Australia's history.

The 9 by 5 impression exhibition was organised by Streeton and his friends Tom Roberts and Charles Conder. Its name simply came from the size of the pictures (they were all roughly 9 by 5 inches) and the idea that they were 'impressions', mostly of the Australian landscape – waterfronts, country lanes, city streets, manicured parks, even a football field.

In these works, details are described in the briefest of brushstrokes. And those brushstrokes are visible – thick and textured, or thin and brushy – sometimes letting the surface peek through. This outraged conservative critics, who dismissed them as mere sketches, unfinished and unfit for exhibition.

But the artists were proclaiming that their small landscapes – painted outdoors to capture the effects of light and atmosphere – were as valid as large-scale paintings of high-brow subjects. In fact, they were claiming these quick impressions were more honest to the artist's perception of place. In doing so, they aligned themselves with the international impressionist art movement.

Focus works

The national game 1889

Early Stage 1–3

Engage

Describe the colours, subject and composition of these paintings. How do they represent Australia?

Create

As a class, create a group of landscape paintings inspired by the environment of your school. Choose from both natural and man-made environments. Use the same artwork dimensions and materials, and work in the plein-air technique to capture different scenes. Write a citation or label for your work. Exhibit your artworks and invite others to the opening.

Reflect

Find out about the era Streeton lived in. How was Australia changing? How was that time in history similar and different to today?

Stage 4–6

Investigate

What is the difference between a sketch and a finished artwork? *The 9 by 5 impression exhibition* included paintings that would normally have been considered preliminary sketches. How do these artworks differ from traditional painting at the time?

Create

Create an artwork with the briefest of brushstrokes. How does this add new meaning to the artwork?

Reflect

The 9 by 5 impression exhibition was staged by Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts and Charles Conder. Streeton was 22 years old and the only one among them born in Australia. He represented a new generation of artists with no first-hand experience of Europe or England. How would this impact his painting practice? What were his ambitions and that of his contemporaries?

Focus works

Still glides the stream, and shall for ever glide 1890

Arthur Streeton
*Still glides the stream, and shall
for ever glide* 1890
oil on canvas, later mounted
on hardboard, 82.6 x 153 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales,
Sydney, purchased 1890



*I see what was, and is, and will abide;
Still glides the Stream, and shall for ever glide
The Form remains; the function never dies*
– William Wordsworth's sonnet of 1820
on the River Duddon.

In this early landscape, Streeton takes in a view of Victoria's Yarra River flats from the hillside of Eaglemont near Heidelberg – lands of the Wurundjeri people. Today, Eaglemont is a residential suburb of Melbourne, but in Streeton's time it was a country town and the surrounding rich floodplains were an important source of Victoria's produce. In the summer of 1890, Streeton, Charles Conder and Tom Roberts camped at the Eaglemont Homestead, where they immersed themselves in nature and painted outdoors. Their distinctive paintings of the region earned them the name the 'Heidelberg school'.

Streeton was only 22 when he made this work – and the Art Gallery of New South Wales bought it right away. This marked the launch of Streeton's career and the beginning of his Sydney story. It was also a serious sign of the art establishment supporting Australian impressionism.

The title of the work is *Still glides the stream, and shall for ever glide*, which is a line from a William Wordsworth poem. Streeton was a poetry lover and, like Wordsworth and the Romantics, he recognised the enduring power of art. The stream at Eaglemont may no longer look like this, but it 'glides forever' here in Streeton's majestic painting.

Still glides the stream is persistent in another way, too – the painting has hung on the Gallery's walls continuously since it was purchased almost in 1890.

Focus works

Still glides the stream, and shall for ever glide 1890

Early Stage 1–3

Engage

Follow the line of the meandering stream. What do you see along the way? What sounds, textures and movement do you notice? Note the layers of colours and forms. What time of day could this be? Create a dance and music performance based on your observations of this artwork.

Create

Create an artwork inspired by a poem you have written. Think about how you can use colours and composition to shape the meaning of your written piece.

Reflect

Find images of Eaglemont today. How has the environment changed and how has it stayed the same? Why was this place important for Arthur Streeton and the Heidelberg artists?

Stage 4–6

Investigate

Streeton was inspired by Wordsworth's sonnet of 1820 on the River Duddon, a Romantic expression of mortality and the transience of human life contrasted with the enduring beauty of art. How has Streeton visually captured the essence of the poem?

Create

Create an artwork *en plein-air*, finishing the artwork completely outdoors. What are the challenges and benefits to this approach? Why did artists of the late 1800s feel the need to work in this way?

Reflect

Compare Streeton's painting with contemporary artworks that reference mortality and transience.

How have people's opinions and connections with this artwork changed over time? What do you imagine the response was when this painting was first displayed at the Art Gallery of New South Wales? What is your response to it now? Discuss how this artwork is relevant in our current world?

Focus works

Fire's on 1891

Arthur Streeton
Fire's on 1891
oil on canvas, 183.8 x 122.5 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales,
Sydney, purchased 1893



Next morning I'm perched on my rocky point from the sight from which I retreat as usual at the cry of 'Fire! Fire's on' – all serene – Boom.

– Arthur Streeton to Theodore Fink
14 October 1891

Under an intensely blue, cloudless sky, a rocky hillside is dramatically lit by the midday sun. The place radiates with unrelenting heat. And something curious is happening at its centre.

Fire's on is a defining painting in the history of Australian art. In many ways, it's an unusual picture: the vertical format emphasises the dizzying height of the mountainside and hostility of the terrain.

Streeton was painting outdoors in the Blue Mountains on Darug country which runs from the mountains and across the plains to the east. A railway tunnel was being cut through the mountains – workers blasting the rocks with dynamite. The artist was positioned up on the rocks with his paints and, hearing the warning call 'Fire's on!', ran for cover. When the blast was over and the smoke had cleared, he saw a body being carried out on a stretcher.

This is the drama he has portrayed in the lower right quarter of the canvas – a plume of smoke still rising from the tunnel, the stretcher-bearers emerging from the dark into the glare of daylight, and fellow workers lined up to witness the sombre event.

Curiously, art critics didn't mention the accident when the painting was first exhibited. Instead, they were struck by Streeton's ability to so convincingly portray this distinctive heat, light and terrain. Streeton had expressed a drama altogether different to the incident in the railway tunnel: the uncompromising conditions of the Australian bush.

Focus works

Fire's on 1891

Early Stage 1–3

Engage

Describe the scene that is being depicted in this painting. List everything that you can see. What time of day is it? What season? How has the artist captured the light?

Create

Consider the composition of this painting. How would an audience read this picture – from the bottom to the top? Paint your own vertical landscape using watercolours and quick brushstrokes.

Reflect

Think about the scale of this painting. How does it compare to other landscape paintings you may have seen? Why do you think Streeton chose to paint such a dramatic moment in this way?

Stage 4–6

Investigate

Explore the way Streeton has used colour in this work. Describe the way he has used blue in the shadow of the rock forms. Why would he use a cool colour to depict a hot summer day? Find traces of red in the painting? Why does it jump out at you?

Observe the workers in *Fire's on*. Describe their activities. Analyse their size in relationship to the landscape.

Create

Paint a landscape where the colour of the sky and the ground become progressively lighter towards the horizon. Add a number of different-sized trees and bushes to create depth in your landscape. Add elements that indicate a human presence in the landscape.

Reflect

Imagine you were Streeton on this day. How would you respond to the call of 'Fire's on'?

Consider the vantage point of the artist – is he part of the action or is he looking down as an observer, separate from the scene? Consider the balance of the composition between the action of the narrative and the cliff face.

Focus works

Villers-Bretonneux 1918

Arthur Streeton
Villers-Bretonneux 1918
oil on canvas, later mounted on
hardboard, 63.5 x 100.9 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales,
Sydney, purchased 1920



...unless a barrage or raid is in progress, the battlefield is usually a lifeless expanse of wrecked fields and villages, silent and deadened in expression, relieved by an occasional burst above with black smoke indicating shrapnel; or a loud report and upheaval of red dust.

– Arthur Streeton
The Herald, 25 April 1936

This painting, *Villers-Bretonneux*, depicts the French battleground in the aftermath of the allied forces' victory. And yet, there is no sense of triumph or commemoration. This is typical of Streeton's First World War paintings, which focus more on the features of the landscape than on the victories or horrors of war.

Streeton became an official war artist in 1918 and was sent to the front, in France, in May. He was given a stipend of £2, plus £15 for equipment. In exchange, he was expected to produce 25 drawings and watercolours and at least one large-scale oil. Ever ambitious, Streeton vastly exceeded this with over 180 works, mostly

watercolours and drawings, which he used later to work up more elaborate oil paintings.

This painting was made soon after the Australian Imperial Force's famous victory at the Second Battle of Villers-Bretonneux. Australian soldiers had led a daring night raid to capture the town, which overlooked a crucial railhead at Amiens. Here, Streeton positions us on the ground, almost from a soldier's vantage point. In the foreground, mud and dirt are piled high either side of trenches that run across the breadth of the canvas. The rough earth is described in blocky, flat strokes of red-brown paint.

Beyond this, we look across the fields through which the Australians had advanced. On the distant hill, the town of Villers-Bretonneux quietly smoulders – a line of blackened, skeletal trees with just a few ruined buildings. The only figures visible are three stretcher bearers in the middle ground and – in the foreground, to the right – the legs of a dead soldier, which peek over the side of a trench.

Focus works

Villers-Bretonneux 1918

Early Stage 1–3

Engage

Can you find any figures in this landscape? Are they detailed or more simplistic? Can you see how the figures disappear into the landscape? Why do you think Streeton would choose to do this?

Create

Take note of the foreground, middle ground and background. How has Streeton created a sense of depth in this painting? Create a landscape painting using the same approach.

Reflect

Imagine you were an Australian official war artist in 1918. What equipment would you need to bring? What would you wear? Describe how would you create your artworks? What issues would you need to overcome?

Stage 4–6

Investigate

Research the history of the Second Battle of Villers-Bretonneux. How does this victory fit with the narrative of Australia's involvement in the First World War?

Create

Identify the devices the artist has used to create atmosphere. Why has Streeton positioned the viewer on the ground, from a soldier's vantage point? Create your own landscape scene of a specific moment in history and aim to draw the viewer into the story.

Reflect

Why do you think Streeton focused on the features of the landscape rather than the victories or horrors of war? Does the audience read the painting physically and emotionally – are they absorbed in the narrative and moved by the scene? What is your overall impression of this work? How would you describe the mood of this painting?

Credits

The Gallery thanks the lenders of artworks for permission to reproduce them in this education resource.

Photos: AGNSW – Jenni Carter, Felicity Jenkins, Mim Stirling

Text: Wayne Tunnicliffe, Josephine Touma, Denise Mimmocchi, Alexandra Gregg, Erin Vink, Leeanne Carr and Louise Halpin

Indigenous content reviewed by: Wesley Shaw and Amanda Peacock

Developed and written by the Gallery's education team
© Art Gallery of New South Wales 2020
Art Gallery of New South Wales
Art Gallery Road, The Domain
Sydney NSW 2000
61 9225 1700 | artgallery.nsw.gov.au