

Govett — Brewster Art Gallery

New Zealand
Painting
1940–1960

Conformity and Dissension

What was it like living in New Zealand between 1940 and 1960?

The Second World War had a profound influence on daily life. There was a bigger proportion of New Zealand's population in the armed services than in any other allied country except Russia, with most troops occupying many thousands of miles away in the Mediterranean and in the Pacific. The absence of so many fathers, sons and husbands affected family life, with women accepting more burdens and responsibility, both in the home and in factories, shops and on the farm. Essential services were kept going by women and the small numbers of men who could not be spared for the war effort overseas. The war effort at home took the form of production of food and war supplies. Shortages of food and other goods, both essential and luxury, became common, and rationing of a whole range of items was introduced, including petrol, butter and sugar.

At home some art societies responded to the war effort by raising money through the sale of paintings. Many galleries were taken over for use by the military and consequently art activity was restricted in some centres. While many artists remained aloof from the atmosphere and problems created by the war, several artists such as Peter McIntyre, Russell Clark and Austen Deans recorded war activities overseas. Other artists, like Lois White and Evelyn Page painted life at home, including changes in life style created by the war, including the arrival of Allied ships and the hospitality afforded to them by the New Zealand women folk.

The end of the war brought about more changes and dislocations, with the New Zealand troops returning from the war and the economy readjusting to peace-time production. While shortages and rationing were still common for some years, New Zealand experienced a period of rising prosperity with improving standards of living and expanding British and European markets for our primary and manufacturing industries.

While the war had some limiting effects on New Zealand art, it also had the stabilising effect of preventing the permanent emigration of young artists, and in many cases servicemen were awakened to an interest in art by the opportunity to visit galleries, especially in Italy, and experiencing at first hand art treasures preserved there. Some retained their interest on their return to New Zealand, and along with the increasing flow of art books after the war, and the influx of European immigrants such as Gopas, New Zealand benefitted with a growing artistic appreciation and awareness, a trend fostered by increasing prosperity.

New Zealand in the 1950s, with one of the highest standards of living in the world, was a prosperous but extremely conforming



country, with an entrenched reaction against anything or anyone new or different. Poets and social commentators, in their alienation, criticised the shortcomings of the New Zealander, and many left for a more hospitable climate overseas, a trend followed by some painters, who resented the conservative attitudes of art societies and galleries. Painters often joined alternative art groups, such as the long established (1927) Group in Christchurch and the Rutland Group in Auckland, and these contributed greatly to the breakdown of conservative attitudes of the public, whose experience of art was often limited to dark Victorian landscapes and still life. The Group attracted artists with independent outlooks, whose art was often not understood and even ridiculed by the public or critics.

By 1960 much of the experimental work in New Zealand painting had moved to Auckland. The public had gradually become more educated in its taste regarding art, due in part to increased contact with modern trends through touring exhibitions such as the 1956 Henry Moore Exhibition. A greater degree of toleration had evolved, a necessary condition for the social upheaval, political protest and artistic development of the decade which was beginning.

Pleasure Garden Incident

The "Pleasure Garden" Incident is of great importance in this period, as it served as a focal point for the controversy and dissension surrounding the merits of modern art. It involved the painting of the expatriate New Zealand artist Francis Hodgkins (1869–1947). In Europe from 1901 her style became increasingly abstract and the works of her later years were held by British art critics in very high esteem. In 1948 the Canterbury Society of Arts set aside two hundred pounds to purchase one of her paintings and three watercolours and three oils were selected by the British Council, one of which was the watercolour entitled "The Pleasure Garden" which has given its name to the resulting controversy. Unfortunately, after their arrival in Christchurch, both the CSA and the Robert McDougall Art Gallery refused to purchase any of the paintings. For most people this was one of the first contacts with recent art movements, due to the isolation from overseas trends and the paucity of exhibitions and modern art reproductions. The "shock of the new" was just too great for the paintings to be widely appreciated, although many younger painters and other sensitive people came to their defence in the debate which followed in the press and elsewhere. Eventually



several local art lovers subscribed to a fund to purchase the painting. When it was offered to the Robert McDougall Art Gallery it was again rejected, and was not finally accepted until the advisory committee for the McDougall Art Gallery was reformed in 1951. The Hodgkins paintings were exhibited in several other centres in New Zealand, with similar reactions by Gallery administrations and the public. Ironically, while some galleries refused to purchase or exhibit modern art, lavish sums of money were occasionally spent on paintings of a Victorian nature, some of which had minor artistic merit. This incident is a good illustration of the controversy and dissension present in the later 1940's between the supporters for the modern styles and the strongly conservative element who strenuously opposed them. The final victory for "The Pleasure Garden" however marks a turning point in the history of New Zealand Art.



Conformity and Dissension:

The period between 1940 and 1960 was a particularly significant progressive and controversial period for New Zealand painting. New Zealand was developing a new sense of national identity following the experiences of Europe during World War Two, a new awareness of contemporary developments in American and European painting and a new element of socialism and social awareness which followed the depression. All of these had important effects on New Zealand Painting.

1. *Cabbage Tree* Russell Clark



In the search for motifs which expressed the New Zealand scene for instance, we see painters, like Russel Clark, Eric Lee-Johnson and Mervyn Taylor, deliberately searching for distinctive New Zealand elements, and painting them in a rhythmic and deliberately decorative style.

2. *Split Palings and Clay* Eric Lee-Johnson

Much of the innovation painting of the 1940's and early 50's appeared in distinctively regional schools and break away groups. Local painters were now free from the earlier dominance of the Art Societies. However their interests were still firmly conservative and inclined towards the academic. The old principle of "truth to nature" was still providing what were considered by many as the immutable rules for proportion, shape, scale and colour. Artists like McCahon, Woollaston and Peebles, who rebelled against this principle were ridiculed as dissenters. It was against this background that the Canterbury School made its contribution. Painters like Olivia Spencer Bower were producing a new type of landscape.



3. *Bleached Terraces* Olivia Spencer Bower
Olivia Spencer Bower was influenced by the works of Rita Angus who was working to express the complexity and mood of the land and its people through a simplicity of tone and colour. The Canterbury School painted the land in clear, bright colours with sharply defined linear planes. Their academically based training at the Canterbury School of Art encouraged accurate observation and careful craftsmanship and with this artists like William Sutton produced the new landscapes.

4. *Cass* Rita Angus

Free from the misty atmosphere of earlier paintings we see a new sense of romanticism in the isolation and emptiness or brooding loneliness of the landscapes reflected in the clear bright colours of the new era.



5. *Dry September* William Sutton

Otago produced a similar local style and young artists like Doris Lusk and Colin McCahon began their important careers under the tutorage of Russell Clark, R. N. Field and their colleagues.



New Zealand Painting 1940–60

Alongside this exploration of the figurative motif other New Zealand painters, by the late 1950's, were interested in American abstract Expressionism and the Paris school of abstraction which had developed in America and Europe. With easier travel and communications aiding the availability of good quality art publications, coupled with the effects of film and television, the 1950's was infused with a greater awareness of recent developments in twentieth century painting. Also important touring exhibitions like the 1956 Henry Moore exhibition and the 1958 British Abstract Painters Exhibition had, as Tomory said, "dragged the New Zealand public screaming into the twentieth century". New Zealand painting began to reflect the multiplicity of modern styles.

Immigrants like Rudolph Gopas from Lithuania brought first hand knowledge of German expressionist styles.

6. *Trawlers* Rudolph Gopas



Local painters like Evelyn Page experimented with the new styles.

Generally, however, the New Zealand painters of the 1940's were content with semi-abstracted works still containing a strong figurative element. Tosswill Woollaston recorded his emotional responses to New Zealand figures and landscapes with bold expressionist brushstroke and strong reds and ochres.

7. *Sunset On Grey River* Tosswill Woollaston



Colin McCahon experienced a splendour, or order and peace lying misunderstood and uncommunicated to its peoples. He painted evocative landscapes, religious and abstracted works which he said were "almost entirely autobiographical".



8. *Kauri Trees* Colin McCahon



9. *Tomorrow Will Be The Same...* Colin McCahon

Other New Zealand painters, like Don Peebles, continued a quiet and individual exploration of abstract style, producing in the 50's the evocative "Wellington" series. John Weeks and the Tole brothers in the 50's explored the ideas of a modified form of cubism, but it was not until the 60's that we can see a really confident handling of abstract art styles.

From the dissension or local rebellion of independent and venturesome groups a new confidence and authority had developed in New Zealand art. A new generation of artists, less self-conscious, and less tentative in their relationship with the special qualities of the New Zealand land had appeared.

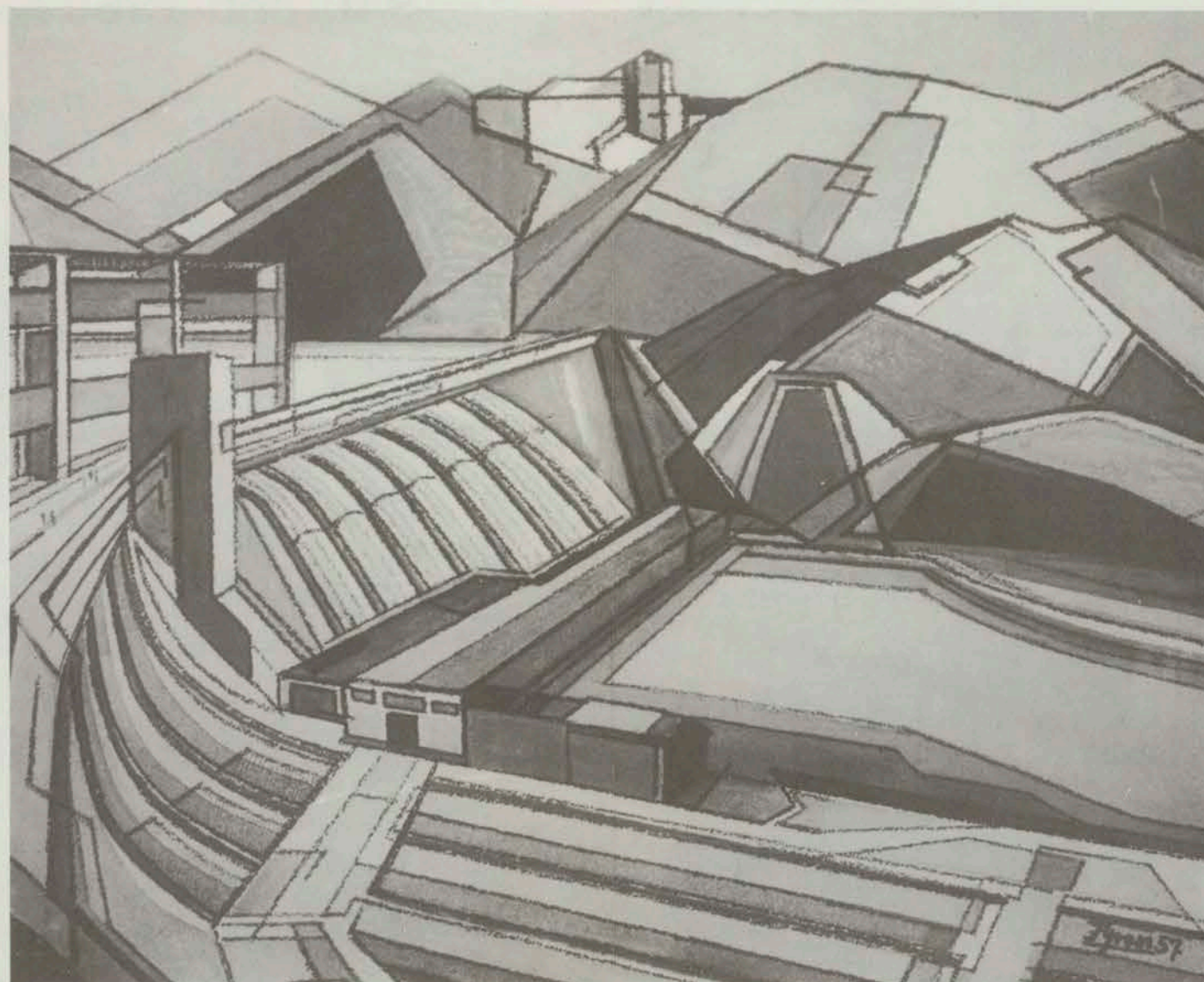
Suggestions for School Visits

- See the countryside from a study of the landscape paintings in the Exhibition, select a piece you would like to visit and study carefully exactly what the artist has selected and how they are painted. Then describe what it would be like to visit this place, how the weather is, what you would be doing there.
- Meet the people. Using the portraits in the Exhibition make a careful study of the sitter's expression, posture, clothing and background. Decide which people you would like to visit. What would this person be like? What could you do together?
- Compare a landscape by Doris Lusk or Juliet Peter with one by Woollaston. Note colour, texture, brushstrokes and consider what each artist is endeavouring to say in the painting.
- Select a number of paintings where the artists have concentrated on a realist approach to what is seen. Discover what changes have occurred in the New Zealand countryside and cities since the 1940's–60's.
- Bearing in mind that the art societies of the 1940s preferred paintings where realism, low-tone colours and careful draughtsmanship were important, select paintings which you feel conform to the period 1940–60 and some which would not have been so acceptable.
- Consider the literature of this period, particularly the poetry of Baxter, Glover, Fairburn, Mason, Brasch and Curnow and the way in which both painters and writers explored common themes.

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New Zealand Painting 1940–1960 Conformity and Dissension

A Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council Exhibition organised by the Robert McDougall Art Gallery and touring the country in 1982–1983.

This exhibition is a sequel to the 1900–1920 and 1920–1940 exhibitions which have already toured New Zealand. The Robert McDougall Art Gallery was approached by the Arts Council to tour the show and Gordon Brown has once again produced the catalogue and selected the paintings. As presented in the catalogue, the paintings comprising this exhibition fall into four overlapping categories:

- A. The Second World War
- B. The continuation of stylistic factors established in the 1930's
- C. The taste for modernism
- D. The influence of Cubism and Abstract Art

The seventy two paintings which make up the exhibition will travel to many New Zealand Art Galleries during 1982–1984.

Robert McDougall, Christchurch	August 12–October 14
Bishop Suter, Nelson	November 29–December 27
Hawkes Bay, Napier	March 5–April 17, 1983
Manawatu, Palmerston North	June 12–July 10
Sarjeant, Wanganui	July 27–August 28
Auckland City Art Gallery	September 28–October 30
Waikato Art Museum, Hamilton	April 5–May 6, 1984
Govett Brewster, New Plymouth	May 30–July 1
Dowse, Lower Hutt	July 18–August 26
Dunedin Public Art Gallery	September 25–October 28

Plates

Upper

Russell Clark
Cabbage Trees
Robert McDougall Art Gallery

Frank Gross
Tamed River 1957
Canterbury Public Library

Lower

Colin McCahon
Kauri Trees
Canterbury Public Library

William Sutton
Dry September 1949
Robert McDougall Art Gallery



Biographical Notes

Rita Angus 1908–1970
Born in Hastings and educated in Palmerston North and the Canterbury School of Art. An active member of 'The Group' in Christchurch, Rita Angus later lived for a period in Otago and Hawkes Bay before settling in Wellington in 1955.

Eric Lee-Johnson 1908–
Born in Suva Lee-Johnson came to New Zealand in 1912. He trained at the Elam School of Art from 1923–26 and studied in London 1930–34. Lee-Johnson lives and paints in the Auckland area.

Doris Lusk 1916–
Born in Dunedin, Doris Lusk studied at the Dunedin School of Art. In 1941 she moved to Christchurch where she was a member of 'The Group'. After living for a period in the Nelson area Doris Lusk returned to Christchurch and later took a teaching position at the Canterbury School of Art.

Colin McCahon 1919–
Born in Timaru McCahon studied in Dunedin before moving to Nelson and Christchurch. In 1953 he moved to Auckland and became the keeper of the Auckland City Art Gallery before taking a teaching position at the Elam School of Art.

Don Peebles 1922–
Born in Wakatane, Peebles moved as a young child to Wellington where until the Second World War he worked for the Post Office Services. Following his War Services he studied in Florence and later in London and Sydney. In 1965 he took a teaching position at the Canterbury School of Art.

Olivia Spencer-Bower 1905–
Born in England Olivia Spencer-Bower came to New Zealand in 1920 and studied at the Canterbury School of Art. From 1929–31 she worked in England and Italy before returning to New Zealand and exhibiting with 'The Group'. After a period in Auckland she returned to settle and work in Christchurch.

William Sutton 1917–
Born in Christchurch and trained at the Canterbury School of Arts. After serving in the Second World War Sutton studied in England in the 1940's on his return to Christchurch exhibited with 'The Group'. Later he took a teaching post at the Canterbury School of Art.

John Weeks 1888–1965
Born in Devonshire John Weeks came to New Zealand as a young child and studied at the Elam School of Art. After studying in Sydney and serving in the First World War Weeks returned to New Zealand to settle and work in Auckland where from 1930–54 he taught at the Elam School of Art.

Lois White 1903–
Living and teaching in Auckland Lois White first emerged as a painter in the 1920's. Her works concerning social themes aroused considerable interest in the 1930's but it was not organised into a solo exhibition until 1977 when she had stopped painting.

Sir Mountfort Tossill Woollaston 1910–
Born in Taranaki, Woollaston studied briefly at Canterbury and Dunedin before settling in 1950 in Motueka and later in Greymouth.