

Monica R. Brewster



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We are grateful to relatives, friends and acquaintances of Monica Brewster who kindly agreed to be interviewed; and to those who lent objects for the exhibition. Thanks also to Fiona Clark, whose interest in Monica Brewster helped to initiate this project. Thanks to Taranaki Museum for making their archives available for research.

*Pencil drawing on title page by Monica Brewster.*

© Barbara Mare'

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## MONICA R. BREWSTER

Barbara Mare'

I

On 12 December 1962 Monica Romaine Brewster transferred 50,000 pounds by Trust Deed to the New Plymouth City Council for the establishment and development of a public art gallery in New Plymouth. The gallery was to be named the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in commemoration of her own family (the Govetts) and her husband's family.

It is surprising how little we know about this woman who made such a major bequest to the city of New Plymouth. There is very little information about her on public record. For the staff of the Gallery, Monica Brewster has been an enigmatic figure in the background of our daily work. We have only a couple of photographs to remember her by. There were no interviews with her in the press at the time the Gallery was being established. One thing that all who knew her are agreed about, is that Mrs Brewster was a very private person.

The picture of Monica Brewster presented here has been reconstructed from fragments and remains incomplete. Facts and anecdotes have been stitched together loosely in this publication. Much of the information is drawn from conversations with those who knew her. But as she died in 1973 at the age of 87, none of her contemporaries are still alive. The people we talked to were quite young when she was quite old.

It seemed particularly appropriate in 1993, Women's Suffrage Year, to make visible Monica Brewster's contribution to the cultural life of this city.



- Monica Govett was born in New Plymouth on 10 February 1886. Her family were quite well-to-do. Her ancestry connects her with several notable pioneering Taranaki families.  
 Mother: Frances Elizabeth Atkinson (1862-1918).  
 Father: Clement Govett (1852-1914) was a barrister. He founded the legal firm Govett-Quilliam in 1897.  
 Maternal grandfather: Sir Harry Atkinson (1831-1892) politician, social reformer. He was Prime Minister of New Zealand for five terms in the 1870s and 1880s. His family home, Hurworth, is now a historic house managed by the Historic Places Trust.  
 Paternal grandfather: Henry Govett (1819-1903), vicar of St Mary's Church and first Archdeacon of Taranaki.  
 The Govetts were related by marriage to the Richmond family. Artist Dorothy Kate Richmond was a distant cousin.
- Monica was the youngest of four girls. Two of her sisters died young; Marian at the age of ten, and Dorothy at about age sixteen. Her other sister, Marjorie, married John More and emigrated to England.
- Monica attended Wanganui Girls' High School, boarding with her cousin William Atkinson and his family. Later she was enrolled at Chetwoode, Miss Stanford's school for girls in New Plymouth. She received no tertiary education.



Monica Govett photographed at Haslemere, Surrey England. c.1912



Miss Smith  
 Captain Brewster  
 Mrs Elliot.  
 The Chief.

M. R. Govett.

Miss Hall

"A Fancy Lot"

R. M. S. Remuera  
 Nov. 22<sup>nd</sup> 1912.

A page from Monica's autograph book which she kept from 1899 to 1919.

- After completing her schooling, Monica travelled to England with her mother and two sisters. They lived in Haslemere, Surrey. Monica returned to New Zealand in 1912; although she made several further trips to England over the next few years. It was during one of these journeys, travelling on the ship *Kagoma*, that she met Dr Rex Carrington Brewster, senior medical officer on board. Monica Govett and Rex Brewster were married in Wanganui on 21 September 1920. "The bride, who was given away by her cousin, Mr William Atkinson, wore a dainty frock of white georgette with pale blue girdle, and carried a bouquet of primroses and hyacinths."<sup>1</sup>





*The wedding of Monica Govett and Rex Brewster in Wanganui, 21 September 1920.  
Left to right: Edith Atkinson, William ('Billa') Atkinson, Majorie More (Monica's sister),  
Monica Brewster, Rex Brewster, Mrs. Samuels(?), Mrs Brewster (Rex's Mother).  
Photo: F J Denton*

- Rex Brewster had been born in New Plymouth and educated at Nelson College. He had studied medicine at the London Hospital, completing his training in Edinburgh. He had served in the Middle East during World War I, and received the Military Cross.
- The marriage of Monica and Rex Brewster was a happy one.
- In 1927 the Brewsters travelled to Vienna for eighteen months while Rex trained as an ear, eye, nose and throat specialist. He was very ill while he was there; perhaps with tuberculosis. One of Monica's letters describes how he was plunged into ice cold water, then wrapped in hot blankets.
- When they returned to New Zealand, Monica and Rex lived in Wanaka in the South Island for a year or two, because the climate was supposed to aid Rex's recovery.
- On their return to New Plymouth, Rex established his medical practice in the town, working from rooms in their house at 234 Devon Street.

- The Brewsters' home was large, with nineteen rooms, in the style of an English country cottage. The interior was lined with rosewood panelling. Monica had it redecorated in blue and grey. Ann Paterson (Monica's god-daughter) recalls: "...the ballet had come to New Plymouth. And I think it was Princess Aurora's wedding or something. Anyway, the colour scheme was blue and grey. 'Oh', Monica said, 'that's just what I'm planning for the sitting room. Do you think it'll look as nice as that?' And I had to come down here [Wellington] and go to Kirks<sup>2</sup> and get them to send up some samples of grey curtaining. It had a little silver thread in it. It looked quite well. But she got carried away and painted the panelling... I suppose it was pale grey. And then the chintz on the chairs was pale blue and white."



*Monica and Rex's house at 234 Devon Street, New Plymouth.*

- All who knew Monica Brewster recall that she always used to dress very smartly. Ann Paterson remembers that she used to purchase her clothes from someone who "used to come to New Plymouth with rather exclusive garments, and they were on show in a hotel and you were invited down."
- Monica enjoyed a privileged and leisured lifestyle. She employed a hired help to do the housework and cook the meals. She did not have to work for a living, and she did not have children to care for. Her time was her own. She had her own car, so she could travel easily around town or further afield.





*Objects owned by Monica Brewster. The vase was given to her by her husband on the occasion of their silver wedding anniversary. Monica inherited the jewellery box from her mother, Frances Govett.*

- Monica Brewster had eclectic tastes. She collected paintings, ornaments and other small objects that appealed to her, or that reminded her of places she had been. She liked to surround herself with beautiful things.
- Monica was a keen gardener, and took an interest in horticulture. Their house had a large garden with a magnolia tree at the front and a fernery at one end.
- Her other interests: Tennis, golf and bowls; sketching; amateur theatre. She was a member of the New Plymouth Forest & Bird Society, and a founding member of the Pukeiti Rhododendron Trust. Their Brewster Walk is named after her. She was also a founding member of the Taranaki Women's Club, and was patron of the Club until her death.
- Monica Brewster is referred to by everyone who knew her as a 'liberal'. Audrey Gale remembers her as "a very independent-minded woman, and quite advanced in her opinions for the time." One of Monica's closest friends, Edith Bruce ('Brucey'), a teacher at New Plymouth Girls' High School, was also a liberal thinker, admired for her "perennial youthfulness and response to new ideas."<sup>3</sup> She and Monica shared a love of art and

literature. Audrey Gale remembers Monica Brewster often sitting in the lounge of the Taranaki Women's Club: "...I'd see her just sitting reading magazines. They'd got decent magazines. And then she'd often have lunch with Miss Bruce. And they had great conversations that were not everybody's cup of tea. I think they were both intellectually advanced."

- The Brewsters enjoyed travelling, and made several trips to England and Europe. Travel gave her a wider perspective on the world. She also kept up to date with world affairs through her reading. Cydie Strang describes Monica Brewster as "not the least bit parochial".
- John Matthews, a member of the Art Gallery Committee, was very involved with the Govett-Brewster in its early years. He visited Mrs Brewster only twice, in the early 1970s, but she made a lasting impression on him. He recalls: "When I first saw her she was diminutive and frail, but I was absolutely astonished with her mind and her philosophic approach to life." She had great clarity of thought, and a great sense of humour. She was strongly against bureaucracies. She believed in openness and individuality, choice and freedom of expression. Monica Brewster was a "futurist". She didn't live in the past, but was interested in contemporary ideologies and future activities. She was excited for the future.
- Monica Brewster was a close friend of political activist and school teacher Elsie Andrews, whose political views were quite radically left-wing. Audrey Gale remembers Elsie Andrews as "very outspoken; and she was very much to the left too. But you see Mrs Brewster wouldn't mind that at all; in which she was quite different from all the people in her own social circle."
- During World War II Monica declared herself a pacifist; a brave stand to take in a small and conservative town like New Plymouth. In 1939 she and Elsie Andrews wrote a letter to the newspaper in support of pacifism.
- Other women have recorded the problems and stresses of standing by pacifist convictions in small town New Zealand during World War II: "Our pacifist convictions were sorely tried and met some hostility even from a few near relations. ... Some of our friends remained steadfast, others became convinced we had to fight. We could not blame them."<sup>4</sup> Many pacifists were fined or imprisoned for refusing to engage in War work.



## PACIFISM

To the Editor

Sir—The difference between the function of a police force and that of an army has been explained so clearly by numerous well-known writers that one is surprised to find the false analogy still used as an argument against pacifism (vide to-night's report of the C.E.M.S. conference).

A police force exists to preserve order in terms of the law enacted by the public opinion of a country. It is a guarantee of justice to wronged and wrong-doer alike. It prevents a man from being the judge in his own quarrel.

An army, on the other hand, exists to enforce by violence the will of one country upon another, irrespective of right or justice. An army is a nation's weapon for insisting on being both litigant and judge in its disputes.

A comparison therefore between policemen and soldiers is as valueless as between handcuffs and machine-guns.

Wars are not, and never have been, waged to protect women and children. Still less will any future war protect them. The soldiers of a country will be too busy killing men, women, and children elsewhere, to have time to protect their own dependants, even if military law permitted them.

Pacifism does not consist only in objection to war. In its highest conception it is the Law of Love, and thus has a protection to offer which is greater than that of any material weapon.

No doubt many people approved of the recent Anzac Day addresses in North Taranaki: but there are some who were shocked and dismayed to hear such sentiments voiced by professed followers of the gentle Christ Who bade us love our enemies and do good to those who despitefully use us.—We are, etc.,

ELSIE E. ANDREWS,  
MONICA R. BREWSTER.

New Plymouth, May 17.

Taranaki Herald 1939

- Ann Paterson relates how, near the beginning of the War, Monica Brewster worked on a horticultural display in a hall near the New Plymouth army barracks. The exhibit took the form of a large Mount Egmont made of hydrangeas inserted into a wire netting frame. However, when the Horticultural Society decided to make the exhibition into a patriotic affair, Monica, having declared herself a conscientious objector and a pacifist, could no longer support the project.



Monica Brewster's horticultural exhibit displayed in New Plymouth, probably in 1939

- In 1893, the year women first obtained the vote in New Zealand, Monica was only 8 years old. Her mother, Frances Govett, had some involvement with the Christian Temperance Union and with suffrage campaigns. Her step-cousins Ruth and Mabel Atkinson, who lived in Nelson, were keen prohibitionists. Monica's close friend Elsie Andrews was a member of the National Council of Women, and was a delegate at the Pan Pacific Women's Association Conferences of the 1930s. It would be interesting to know whether Monica Brewster became involved with feminist issues; however, no evidence of this has come to light.
- In 1950 the Brewsters moved to a smaller house at 78 Pendarves Street. Rex died at home in the early hours of 23 January 1952.





Photograph of Rex Brester probably taken in the 1940s.

• After Rex's death, Monica lived a quieter and more private life. For the last ten or so years of her life, she kept to her bed. It is not clear whether at first she was actually bedridden through illness or the frailty of age, or whether she simply preferred to retire in privacy. She did have a bad back, and arthritis in her hands. In the late 1960s she moved into the Iona Private Hospital. Monica spent most of her time reading. She often had her radio on, tuned to the National Programme. She would do crossword puzzles, and had an anagram dictionary under a pillow. Friends and relatives would visit her. Monica had quite a reputation for playing a good game of bridge. She was a very heavy smoker.

Audrey Gale comments that this was regarded as quite unusual at that time, particularly for a woman: "...in those days people were quite surprised at anybody chain smoking, and it seemed quite incongruous for her."

- Monica died of pneumonia at Iona Private Hospital on 13 December 1973.
- Monica Brewster is buried in Te Henui cemetery. She has no headstone. The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery is her legacy and her memorial.



Pencil drawing by Monica Brewster.

### III

#### MONICA BREWSTER AND THE GOVETT-BREWSTER ART GALLERY:

Monica Brewster had no immediate family to bequeath her money to. Her sister Marjorie had no children. Rex's sister Alice (known as 'Bantam'), who married Tom Waddell, was also childless. The money she had inherited from her own family and from Rex's family had all been made in New Plymouth, so she believed it should be used to benefit the local community. She felt that establishing an art gallery in New Plymouth would create a significant cultural asset for the town.

Mrs Brewster's Trust Deed which establishes the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, is a shrewdly written document which put in place a number of mechanisms and safeguards which have worked to the Gallery's long-term advantage. John Matthews comments that he had great admiration for Mrs Brewster because "she laid down some very good rules with respect to the independence of the Trust fund. It couldn't be readily tampered with and whittled away." The Trust Deed formed a close relationship between the Gallery and the City Council. It provided for the appointment of a professional Gallery director. It also set up a unique administrative vehicle in the form of an Advisory Committee to resolve any disputes between the director and the Council.

When in February 1966 the City Council purchased the old Regent Theatre building in Queen Street for conversion into the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery,



Regent Theatre, Queen Street, New Plymouth 1966.





The interior of the Regent Theatre as it was being converted into the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in 1967.

the *Daily News* reported that Mrs Brewster was "not only very happy with the idea itself, but gratified that it had been possible to take the first and major step in providing an art gallery for the city."<sup>5</sup>

John Maynard took up the position of director in January 1967. He wanted a gallery that was modern and functional; as one newspaper article put it, "a 'swinging' building for the 21st century".<sup>6</sup> This was not to be a mausoleum of the past, but a gallery for the future. The concept of the Gallery was informed by the tenets of Modernism. The model for its architecture was the American Modernist art museum of the 1960s and '70s. Brian O'Doherty has described the ideal Modernist gallery space as a "white cube" which "subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is art."<sup>7</sup> John Maynard commented in 1967 that the Regent Theatre was "the perfect building for an art gallery"; "a rectangle with no windows".<sup>8</sup> The shell of the old Regent Theatre was an ideal space because it had no decorative architectural features, and was a completely enclosed box,

with nothing to distract the viewer's attention from the artworks. Maynard wrote that the building "should have a high degree of dignity and poise and an architectural style of elegance that the average citizen rarely experiences".<sup>9</sup> The high blank walls were appropriately austere.

Maynard established a policy that the Gallery collect contemporary art from the Pacific region, with particular emphasis on New Zealand art. This policy was partly determined by what the Gallery could afford. It was also inspired by a wish to sever colonial links with Britain and Europe and to start collecting the here and now; to create a new Pacific identity.

The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery opened to the public on 22 February 1970. The opening exhibition was an environmental installation by Leon Narbey, constructed of neon tubes, sheet aluminium, black PVC sheeting and chromium strip, activated by electric eyes which responded to the movements of visitors: "A single work of art, Leon Narbey's *Real Time* floated, swung, boomed and flashed all over three floors of exhibition space."<sup>10</sup>

# The Responsibility Of An Art Gallery

The battle rages about him, but young Australian John Maynard, the director of New Plymouth's Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, cheerfully maintains his cool.

While the New Plymouth-based Taranaki Society of Arts argues its right to stage, en bloc, an exhibition of its members' works in the gallery, John Maynard politely says no dice.

Early this week, the forces of the Taranaki Society of Arts led by president Mrs Theima de Lancy Green, were making it hot for the gallery's director and its administrative body, the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery Committee.

By the end of the week, after a considerable splash of newspaper correspondence — enlightened and otherwise — the mood of much of Taranaki's art world had swung behind the art gallery committee, its director and its policies.

The basic issue could hardly be more simple. Should the Taranaki Society of Arts be permitted to stage its own annual exhibition in the New Plymouth gallery, or should the gallery exhibit only those works by society members which it considers warrant exhibition?

The policy of New Plymouth's Govett-Brewster Art Gallery concerning the exhibiting of work by local societies came in for criticism this week. Today that policy is discussed by the gallery's director, Mr John Maynard, together with the gallery's aim of concentrating on contemporary art in the Pacific Basin, in this interview with staff writer Terry O'Meara.

The issue is one of those thorny, local problems, containing all the elements of a right royal civic controversy and which can engender a great deal of heat among people closely involved with it.

The gallery recognises, and strongly believes, that it has a responsibility to exhibit the best of the work by these Taranaki artists. "But it should be recognised that the best work will not necessarily come from any particular art society functioning as a group.

Art is not, and never can be by its very nature, a group activity. Art is an individual activity.



standards it itself imposes. "Anybody can submit work for display, but we reserve the right to exhibit it," said John Maynard.

Well, that would seem to be a reasonable sort of policy.

Nobody is denied the right to exhibit in New Plymouth's new art gallery — providing their work is good enough and that it meets the criteria, not of their own parent art society, but of the gallery authorities.

The "Taranaki Review" referred to by John Maynard, which will be staged for a month between July 23 and August 28, seems to be a reasonable sort of vehicle for the exhibition of local art.

A maximum of five works may be submitted by anyone who has been resident in Taranaki for a year preceding the exhibition.

There is no limit to the size, subject or medium of exhibits — which are expected to include paintings, drawings, free-standing and relief sculpture, photographs, graphics (ink screen, linocut, etchings, lithography) and tapestry and pottery.

Conditions governing the exhibition set out clearly the gallery's policy

Director John Maynard and "Formality II", a painted steel and aluminium exhibit by New Plymouth-born Darcy Lange now on display in the gallery.

In specific terms, John Maynard spelt out the policy of the gallery 18 months ago in these words:

"That it be the general policy of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery to purchase works of art which are representative of current ideas and are significant in the development of contemporary forms in the plastic arts from New Zealand, the United States, Australia, Japan, Mexico and other countries in and around the Pacific Ocean where a body of work of substantial artistic merit is to be found."

There has been a plea from people in newspaper correspondence for an emphasis on "comprehensible" art in the gallery.

character of the gallery. Contemporary art of the Pacific, contemporary art of New Zealand, the United States, and those many other countries used by the waters of the sea.

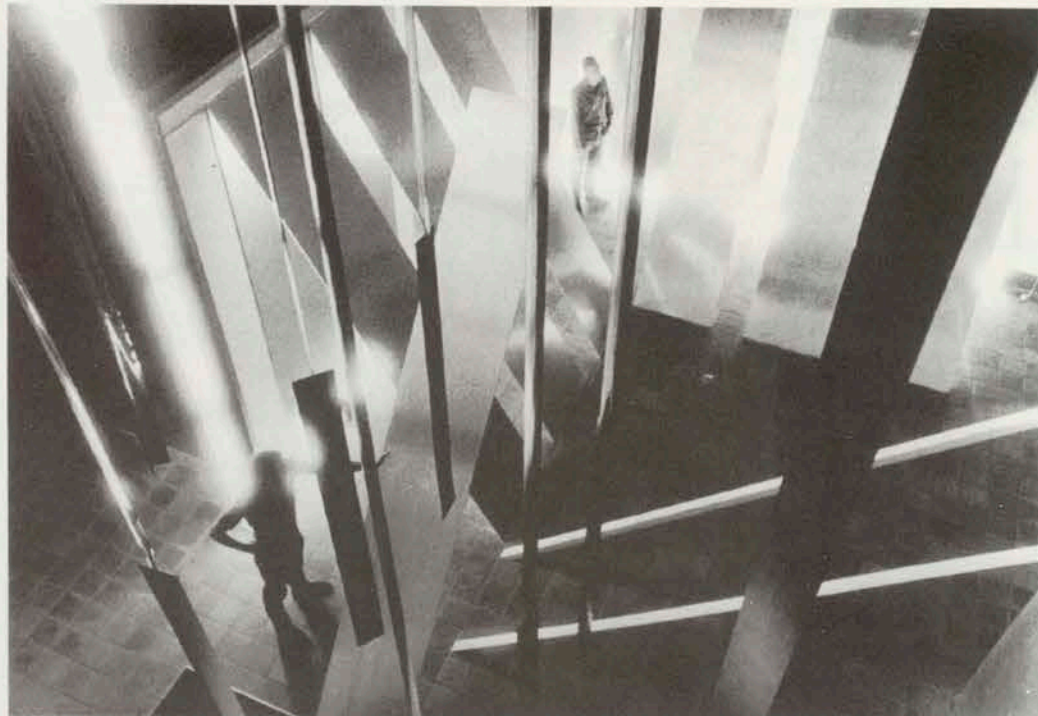
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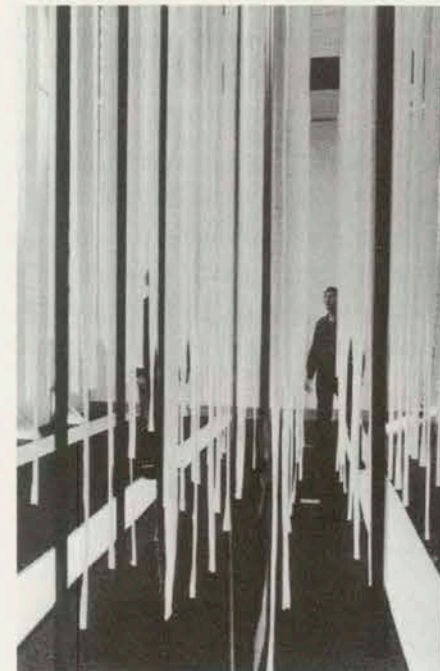
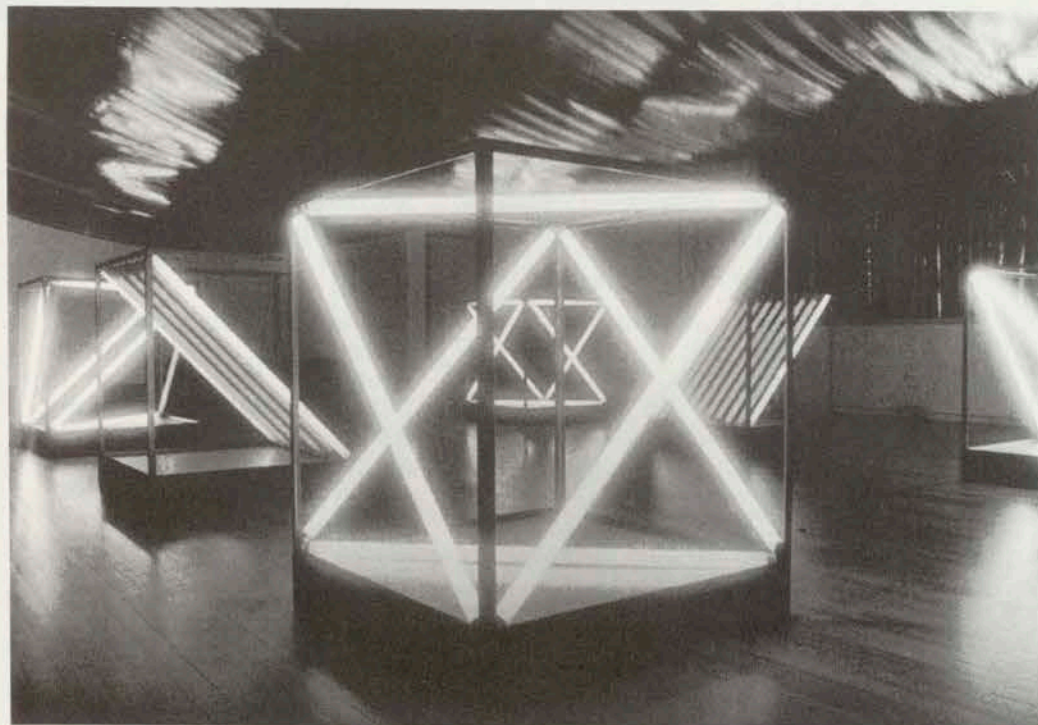
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was contained in the 20 acquisitions made by the gallery in the past three years. Seventeen of these ex





Leon Narbey's Real time, the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery's opening exhibition in 1970.



Leon Narbey's Real time 1970

Local reviewer Noeline Blackman commented: “..for the general public it was literally a culture shock. A quiet provincial centre with down to earth kiwi values was dragged screaming into the contemporary world.”<sup>11</sup>

Monica Brewster did not attend the opening of the Gallery. She was unwell, and she did not like crowds. However, John Maynard and a few others showed her around just before the building was completed, and before the opening exhibition was installed. They carried her up and down the stairs in a chair. She loved the Gallery, but the excitement and movement upset her and she was ill. After her first visit, she did not see the Gallery again.

New Plymouth was a very conservative place in the late 1960s. John Maynard described the town as the “last outpost of Victorian morality” when in 1968 a travelling exhibition of Rodin sculptures sparked a number of letters to the newspaper protesting about nude figures being on public display.<sup>12</sup> During the first decade of its existence, the Govett-Brewster was surrounded by controversy. The Gallery’s Modernist founding philosophy led to accusations of elitism. Modernism maintained that art speaks for itself; it needs no mediation, no labels, no explanations. This philosophy likewise determined the sort of art that was shown. Maynard repeatedly denied the Taranaki Society of Arts space for their annual exhibitions, arguing that their work was not of a sufficiently high artistic standard. People were also offended by the art the Gallery collected. In 1979 the *NZ Listener* reported: “Almost every purchase the gallery has made for its permanent collection over the past 10 years has been the subject of controversy, furore, or even, it would seem, near riot in the city of New Plymouth.”<sup>13</sup>

Most people who knew Monica Brewster believe that with her liberal, open-minded attitudes she would have been enthusiastic about the Gallery ‘going modern’. John Maynard adds: “The extraordinary thing was that she was prepared to take a ‘hands-off’ approach to the Gallery once she had seen proper mechanisms set in place”; once she had seen that the Gallery was



being run in a professional manner. He remembers that she was always very supportive and encouraging. In 1973, Monica Brewster made a second bequest to the Gallery, which was to be used solely for the purchase of artworks for the collection.

Mrs Brewster revelled in the debates and controversies that surrounded the Gallery. She kept herself well informed by reading the newspapers; and people of all opinions would come and talk to her about the Gallery. John Matthews comments: "I think those who went in wringing their hands and looking to her for support, were probably quite disappointed [.by] her joie de vivre for all this debate and excitement and argument..."

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Unsourced press cutting, *Wanganui Chronicle?* September 1920.
2. Kirkcaldie and Stains department store, Wellington.
3. Christine Cole Catley, *Springboard for women*, 1985, p.72.
4. Lauris Edmond (ed.), *Women in wartime*, p.29.
5. "Theatre to be New Plymouth Art Gallery", *Daily News*, 2 Feb. 1966.
6. "New Art Gallery a 'swinging building'", *Evening Mail*, Nelson, 10 May 1969.
7. Brian O'Doherty, "Inside the white cube", *Artforum* v.14, March 1976, pp.24-5.
8. "Gallery director arrives in NP", *Taranaki Herald* 28? Feb. 1967.
9. John Maynard, "Requirements for the new building to be named the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery", unpublished report, 7 March 1967.
10. Hamish Keith, "Govett-Brewster Gallery", *Daily News*, 11 Jan. 1980.
11. Noeline Blackman, "Gallery Story", unpublished typescript, 1981.
12. "'Last outpost of Victorian morality'", *Taranaki Herald*, 16 August 1968.
13. Neil Rowe, "Ten turbulent years", *NZ Listener*, 17 Feb. 1979.

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#### NOTE:

The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery is developing an archive about Monica Brewster. If you can tell us anything further, please let us know.

We are also interested in any information about the early history of the Gallery.



Govett-Brewster Art Gallery from King Street in the 1970s.



Govett-Brewster Art Gallery from Queen Street, 1993







