

The Whangarei Arts and Literary Society founded by local artists George Woolley and Adele Younghusband in 1921, established impetus for a public art gallery in its growing township. Their motto – “if not the best – our best”; however displayed a pragmatism which was to prove prescient as time went by. A true public art museum was not to be established for 75 years and the society was not able to survive the ‘Great Depression’ or Adele Younghusband’s departure for Devonport Auckland in 1929. Their arts activism did provide the nucleus of a city art collection though.

Thirty years later the Northland Society of Arts was convened along the lines of its predecessor. Foundational members of the society were many of the famous names of Northland’s art elite: - Eric Lee Johnson, Freda Simmonds, Natalie Findlay, Joan Lindsey and Thyrza Bindon amongst others.

Eric Lee Johnson was already famous for his vigorous, rustic landscapes of quintessential Northland and his “Opo the Dolphin” photographs. Freda Simmonds was a member of the Christchurch “The Group” a friend of Rita Angus (who visited often when she lived in Mangonui in 1953 – 1954) and Colin McCahon who was her mentor and supporter. The works in this group have been acquired by WAM over the past 12 years from sources as diverse as art auctions, artist’s exhibitions to the most recent one from the local Hospice Shop!

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