

An Outline of the History of Landscape Painting in New Zealand

Landscape painting in New Zealand dates back to the colonization of this country in the early 19th century and to the topographical paintings produced by men, occupied by science not art, who travelled on Captain Cook's first voyages to New Zealand.

The small sketches executed in watercolour and pen and ink were unrelated to the *high art* of romantic landscape painting in England. They were produced to depict in an accurate and realistic form the newly discovered land and its fauna and flora to the colonizing power.

With the arrival of the first wave of settlers topographical paintings became popular and became "mainly the work of amateurs: school teachers, housewives, ministers, politicians or surveyors" (Dunn, pg.1), abounding until the mid nineteenth century.

Although few of these topographical works captured the visual quality and atmosphere of this raw land, the word landscape, "...a painter's word, borrowed from the Dutch in the sixteenth century to mean the pictorial representation of countryside (Pound, pg.23)", refers to the land seen in a pictorial form and so these early 19th century paintings reflect the artist's hand and their vision of the New Zealand land.



John Kinder, **St. Paul's, Auckland**. 1856, wash, 252 x 355mm. Hocken Library, Dunedin. (Not in this exhibition).

From the proclamation of British sovereignty in 1840 topographical painting began to depict the degree of civilisation the colonialists had obtained. The New Zealand Company, in the business of acquiring land from Maori and selling it to settlers, employed professional artists to depict areas already settled or suitable for settlement.

These works depict a selected vision, familiarizing the unfamiliar

by portraying a settled and inviting land. Church spires were clearly distinguished, easily accessible coastlines were portrayed and pastures were drawn tamed and contained within fences.

Markedly absent from these paintings were the Maori inhabitants of New Zealand or any indication of possible hostilities that might shade these optimistic scenes of successful colonisation. The topographical tradition continued late into the 1880's but by this time photography was becoming established in New Zealand and the need for topographical paintings had diminished.

In the late nineteenth hundreds the opportunity for professional artists had become possible. As more settlers arrived from abroad art societies were set up for the promotion and sale of work, and public art galleries such as the Dunedin Public Art Gallery and Auckland Art Gallery gave the arts an official and public dimension (Dunn, pg.13).

The majority of works exhibited at this time were landscapes and still mostly executed in watercolour but as facilities improved the number of oil paintings increased. View-type painting continued but more ambitious works, larger in size, were undertaken. The stylistic concerns of high art, light, atmosphere, chiaroscuro and a subordination of detail to the unified view, took preference over observation. A modified and reconstructed landscape was appearing. Picturesque and empty these works reflected an imported romantic European vision of Gods paradise, inviting habitation and civilisation.

An abundance of these picturesque, sublime paintings of mountain and lake scenes began to give way, in the 1890's, to a more intimate, painterly and modern manner of viewing the land (Dunn, pg.20). This was due to a relatively small

number of visiting professional artists entering New Zealand to work. Petrus van der Velden, James M. Nairn and Claude Edward Fristrom brought the introduction of new art movements and techniques to New Zealand landscape painting. Until that time most artists in New Zealand



were unaware of the developments of more avant-garde art in Europe where Impressionism, Art Nouveau and post-Impressionism were changing the direction of painting in unprecedented ways. Landscape painting still abounded but the viewpoint had begun to change.

The professional European artists enlivened the local art scene and the stranglehold of English artistic conventions began to be broken. By the late nineteenth century Impressionist techniques began to appear in New Zealand painting. This gradual change from Romanticism to Impressionism can be seen in the work of **Thomas Loudon Drummond (1850 – 1956)** an amateur pioneer artist based in Whangarei whose work can be seen the **Horizon Line** exhibition that this education kit accompanies.

The European teachers of this period gave the stimulus for young emerging New Zealand artists to explore new ideas. However the greater influence they brought to New Zealand was an awareness of the lure of an exciting international art world resulting in our leading young artists leaving New Zealand to become expatriates in the early twentieth century.

This departure of young contemporary artists from New Zealand meant the uptake of Modernism was slow in the early part of the twentieth century. For the artists that did stay in New Zealand art magazines were limited and those in circulation did not advocate the modernist approach. Art schools and art societies also took on a conservative approach during this era.

It was not until the nineteen twenties, with the introduction of the La Trobe scheme that Modernism accelerated. Art teachers were recruited from Britain under this scheme and among those arriving here were several young and inspired painters who injected a new enthusiasm into New Zealand Modernism. One of these young artists who spent a short time in New Zealand under the La Trobe scheme was Christopher Perkins. Arriving in 1929, Perkins expounded the belief that New Zealand art should develop a national school based on local subject matter. His painting became a popular and influential force in the 1930's and 1940's (Dunn, pg.76), promoting a regionalist approach to New Zealand landscape painting.

Eric Lee-Johnson (1908 – 1993) was one of the artists to take up Regionalism

From the 1920's onwards there was an increased demand for local subject matter and by the 1930's and 1940's a New Zealand regionalism

had emerged. The regionalist painters aimed to make the movement accessible to the general public by appealing to the unsophisticated rather than the intellectual viewer.

Regionalism concerned itself with the realistic depiction of scenes that typify rural New Zealand and reflected the American regionalist painters of the late 1920's closer than the influence of Modernism brought from Europe. Regionalist paintings continued to be produced into the 1950's but most of the impetus was exhausted by the mid 1950's as modernism's influence increased.

There was a revival of interest in Regionalism in the mid 1960s and early 1970s, building on the realism of earlier regionalist artists. Flattened outlined forms were added creating a more intimate connection between the viewer and the environment depicted.

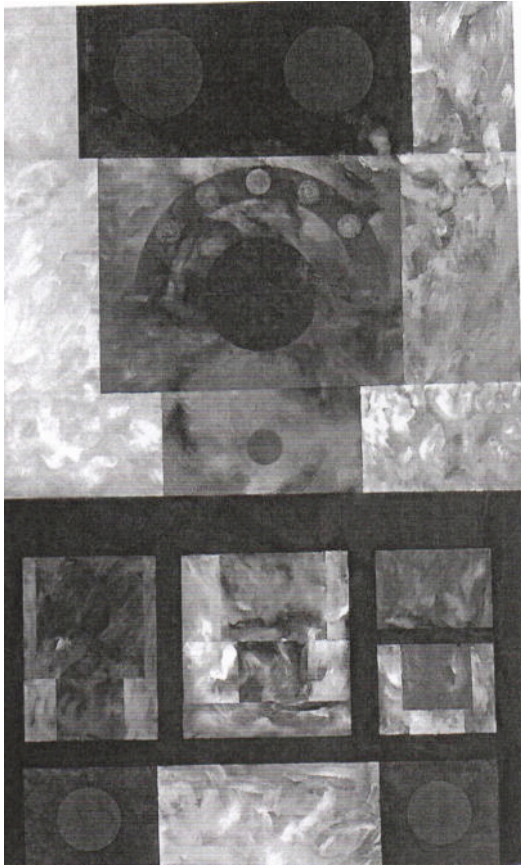
It was not all our New Zealand artists in the 1930's and 1940's that turned to regionalism as a way forward. Modernist techniques were gaining more and more acceptance and by the mid 1940's and 1950's a strong response to European modernism could be seen in the work of young contemporary artists committed to living in New Zealand. One such artist was Sir Mountford Tosswill Woollaston, a pioneer of modern art in New Zealand. Woollaston saw painting as an invention of the artist conceived in terms of a two-dimensional surface. He experimented with bold planes of colour juxtaposed and in the modernist tradition found the ordinary rather than the grand as inspiration for his landscapes.

Another young contemporary artist, Colin McCahon, regarded today as New Zealand's most famous and important modern artists, looked to the landscape as an important motif throughout his career. For McCahon the landscape was a metaphor for the way God works with Man. (Dunn, pg.106). McCahon's landscapes of the 1940's, although of a regionalist type, already expressed his modernist interest and by the 1950's McCahon's paintings reflected his exploration of non-representational abstraction as can be seen in his work *French Bay, 1956*, exhibited in *Representation and Reaction*

The Auckland Art Gallery employed McCahon during this period where he helped with the exhibition of contemporary paintings.

Object and Image, held in 1954, was one of these exhibitions focusing on the non-representational abstract works of young contemporary New

Zealand artists. It featured, among others, the work of a young contemporary Northland born artists Milan Mrkusich and Dame Louise Henderson.



Canvas, 1370 x 875 mm
The Fletcher Trust Collection.

Milan Mrkusich, **The Contained Waters**, 1963, Acrylic on

Mrkusich was a pioneer of modernist non-representational abstract painting in the 1950's, often experimenting with opposing forces within his works; a juxtaposition of abstract expressionism and geometric abstraction as seen in *Contained Water*, 1963.

By the mid 1950's the modernist tradition had taken root in New Zealand art. Non-figurative abstract painting was being explored and exhibited by contemporary New Zealand born artists. Neo-expressionism, though slow to appear, was also developing and was to become a strong influence in the art of early 1960's and 1970's.

It was at this period in New Zealand art history, as Modernism's belated influence abounded, that Sir Henry Kelliher founded the Kelliher Art Award. He established the award in 1956 as a means to promote the continuation of a New Zealand landscape tradition by insisting

the competing works portrayed the New Zealand landscape in a realistic and traditional way.

By creating the award Sir Henry ignited debate between the advocates of traditional landscape painting and the advocates of Modernism in New Zealand.



Leonard Mitchell, ***Summer In The Mokuiti Valley***, 1956, Oil on Canvas, 915 x 1150 mm.
Sole Award Winner 1956 Kelliher Art Award.
D.B. Breweries Ltd.

It is a debate that can be revisited and re-evaluated by viewing the works that caused such a spirited reaction in the period from 1956 to 1977 in the exhibition *Representation and Reaction*, open at the Whangarei Art Museum from the 18th of August to the 12th of October 2003.