

## Pohutukawa and the Great Depression

One of the most interesting juxtapositions in the **Cursive Line** exhibition is between ***Charm Tree of the Beach*** 1928 and ***Karakas and Pohutukawas Manganese Point Whangarei Harbour*** 1936. Both being oil paintings on stretched canvas indicate she valued and could afford the materials in this brooding period of severe hardship. The artist Jan Nigro has recently described during the Depression Elam art students were so poor and starved, that they used to secretly eat all of the back of the fruit and vegetables on display, in Ida Eises' still-life class, leaving the uneaten 'front' to draw!

***Karakas and Pohutukawas*** is in my view, Youngusband's keystone work from this era and one of the most important of her career. It is undoubtedly a serious and supremely confident painting bringing all of her art deco design skills and technique to bear in this large canvas. Youngusband's painting and printmaking was most often, very consciously domestic in scale. This is a rare work in the monumentality of its treatment.

***Charm Tree of the Beach***, similarly a study of pohutukawa in full vibrant bloom is viewed from the opposite side of the Whangarei Harbour from Manganese Point, (where the new port and oil refinery are now situated), viewed from the curvaceous north side of the harbour with a broad aerial view of the sweep out to the Heads rather than the smaller, tantalizing glimpse of beach seen in ***Karakas and Pohutukawas***. Painted eight years prior the smaller painting from the Whangarei Art Museum collection has a more romantic disposition, just as its chosen title signals. Close inspection invites enjoyment of some vigorous almost calligraphic brushwork – dabs and dashes of loose gestural painting. It is truly transitional in style, vaguely impressionistic, but avoiding any slick pictorial romanticism.

Displayed together for the first time, and merely eight years distant from ***Charm Tree***, is an outstanding leap in creative confidence with ***Karakas and Pohutukawas*** in every context. Its point of visual focus is not the traditional, vertical central foreground as in the ***Charm Tree*** but emphasizes horizontal mid-centre ground with the skyscape and lower foreground subliminal to the central horizon line. This is a highly design-oriented painting and clearly one of the most successful 'Art Deco' paintings of its era in New Zealand. The foliage and tree trunks are treated as interconnecting design composites of tubular forms and circular colour fields. Pohutukawa blooms which can sometimes seem too luridly red in lesser hands are sensitively outlined in a purple/indigo colour, presumably her own technical invention to soften the harshness of the red within the surrounding landscape. She echoes the cloud forms above within the landscape and tree canopy forms below. This is a clever design motif she probably developed herself. In her paintings of landforms the skyscape is often as important as or sometimes even more important than the landscape below. For once, this is not the case in ***Karakas and Pohutukawas***.

As well as being stylistically important to her *oeuvre* this painting is symbolically important too. The pohutukawa tree is very spiritually significant, a place of burial for *rangatira* and *taonga*, and an emblem tree of our nationality, its vibrant primary red is as evocatively nationalistic as the primary yellow of the wattle tree is to Australians. There is a **Tainui** and **Te Arawa** **iwi** oral tradition of an outburst of jubilation aboard the first migratory *waka*, upon first glimpsing the vibrant red bloom of the pohutukawa tree as the **waka** landed. This was seen as an auspicious sign representing the *kura* of the homeland.

The acknowledged 'queen' of the pohutukawa painting from this period was her fellow Northland artist the Hon. Mrs. (Kitty) Airini Vane, daughter of the famous Gilbert Mair and pioneer colonial artist Kate Sperrey (Mair). Her populist interpretations of the subject contrasted Youngusband's modernism. They were both working members of the Auckland Society of Arts at the same period and exhibited together often. Five years after ***Karaka and Pohutukawas*** was painted, and amidst the height of the War, Kitty Vane gathered together a rather famous group of artists in Northland to stay with her and paint pohutukawa. They were Sydney Thompson, Olivia Spenser-Bower and Esther Hope, who each specialized in their own separate media; tempera, watercolour and oil paint. They were required to paint pohutukawa in their own medium exclusively. This was a fascinating but minor art historical moment. The year before Adele Youngusband's 1938 painting, Kitty Vane also facilitated a more controversially profound art historical moment when she brought her friend, the famous British artist Lamorna Birch RA and his wife to New Zealand to paint pohutukawa. Many New Zealand artists railed against his conservative and culturally detached style, but collectors snapped them up!

The pohutukawa tree has featured often in many New Zealand paintings, notably by Alfred Sharpe and Clas Edvard Fristrom and the art museum holds a painting by another renowned Whangarei painter of the period, Beatrix Dobie of pohutukawa at Cape Reinga. Clinging voraciously and almost perilously to the coast from Northland to the Coromandel, and botanically named *metrosideros*

*exce/sa* they are fascinating not just for their brief month of Christmas vermilion, but for the tortured sculpture of their trunk and root systems and the vaulted canopy network above. Younghusband's paintings of this subject are an important national contribution to the significance of the pohutukawa, its relationship to the history of the conservation movement, and its contribution to a sense of national pride and identity through landscape which emanated during the War era.

Adele Younghusband's life as a determinedly solo mother, pioneering business woman and free-spirited humanist throughout the deprivation of the Great Depression and two Worlds Wars make a remarkably engaging story in a period of introspection and cultural insecurity in New Zealand's history.

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