

Frances Hodgkins

New Zealander / British, 1869-1947

Belgian Refugees

1916, oil on canvas, 71x80 cm

Presented by the National Art Collections Fund London 1980



About the work

Frances Hodgkins has caught the anxiety and vulnerability of this refugee family, mirroring the situation of many Belgians who, during the First World War, made their way to Britain. They were billeted throughout the country, including St Ives in Cornwall, where Hodgkins was living at the time.

The mother and her four children huddle together and all but the baby show signs of anxiety. The baby at his mother's breast, by contrast, is bathed in a clear light in the centre of the group, blissfully unaware and innocently unconcerned. The triangular composition of the group has a gap in it, suggesting a missing family member. Hodgkins could have had in mind the number of refugee families whose fathers would have been fighting in the war.

Belgian Refugees has an interesting background that suggests, perhaps, the billowing clouds of smoke and dust of the European battlefields or the steam and smoke of the railway station on the family's journey to safety.

Having worked with figure studies from her earliest works, Hodgkins was skilled at depicting emotion with just the briefest marks and with nuances of pose and expression.

Belgian Refugees is painted in Hodgkins' inimitable, expressive style, which, since early in her career, had been influenced by Girolamo Nerli (1863 -1926), her extremely influential teacher of the 1890s.

Hodgkins first began painting in oils in 1908 but did not start using the medium seriously until 1915. This is one of her

earliest oil paintings and she has treated it in much the same way as her watercolours. The colours are blended and she has used a loose vigorous style, similar to her watercolour paintings of the period.

Hodgkins has also used richly contrasted blocks of colour, light and dark. She has kept the colours within a very narrow range of red, blue, black and white. The demarcation of the different zones is achieved principally by variations in the textural patterns and she has made considerable use of black, including the subtle use of black outlines around many of the forms. In a letter from St Ives in August 1917 Hodgkins wrote, "I find using pure paint and mixing them with black when you want deeper tones keeps purity and unity throughout."

This loose, vibrant handling of the paint was part of a period of experimentation for Hodgkins. Before the First World War she had a studio in Paris and became deeply interested in the painting of Henri Matisse (1869 -1954), Paul Cézanne (1839 - 1906) and the Post-Impressionists, as well as Pablo Picasso (1881-1973). The composition of *Belgian Refugees* has similarities in the placement of the figures to Picasso's clowns in *Les Saltimbanques* and the boy on the left displays the strongly modelled forms current in Picasso's work at the time. That composition was also used by the British artist, Sir Frank Brangwyn (1867-1956), who worked with a similar theme for a recruiting poster for the London Underground.

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About the artist

Frances Hodgkins was born in Dunedin in 1869. Her first art teacher was also her father, the part-time watercolourist and full-time lawyer, William Matthew Hodgkins (1833-1898). In 1889 Frances joined the Otago Art Society and she began exhibiting with the Society and with the Canterbury Society of Arts from 1890. In 1893 Hodgkins attended classes under the Italian artist G.P. Nerli (1860 -1926) who encouraged his students to concentrate on colour and to paint out of doors. From 1895 to 1896 Hodgkins attended the Dunedin School of Art. There she gained first class passes in the South Kensington Examinations. She began taking private pupils in 1896.

In February 1901 Hodgkins left for Europe and took classes at the London Polytechnic for three months, before travelling throughout France, Italy, Morocco, Belgium, the Netherlands and Tangiers. In 1903 she exhibited at the Royal Academy and was the first New Zealander to be 'hung on the line', signifying that her work was particularly highly regarded by the Academy.

By the end of 1903 Hodgkins had returned to Wellington where she began taking private students. However, she returned to Europe in 1906 and held her first solo exhibition at Patterson's Gallery in 1907. Between 1908 and 1912 Hodgkins was based in Paris where she taught at the Académie Colarossi, the first woman on the staff there.

Although she returned to New Zealand via Australia in 1912, in October 1913 Hodgkins left New Zealand for Europe and was never to return. Between 1914 and 1920 she was based at St. Ives, in Cornwall, and over the next two decades made many trips to the Continent. Between 1925 and 1927 she was based in Manchester.

Hodgkins began exhibiting at the New English Art Club in 1928 and with the London Group in 1929. She was invited to become a member of the Seven and Five Society, a small, exclusive group of contemporary avant-garde artists that included Paul Nash (1889 -1946) and Henry Moore (1898 -1986). By 1932 Hodgkins was exhibiting with the Lefevre Galleries. Hodgkins was invited to exhibit in the 'Contemporary British Art Exhibition' at the World Fair in New York in 1939 and in the previous year had been included in the Paris Salon Autumn Show.

Hodgkins settled at Corfe Castle, Dorset, in 1939. She had work selected for the '22nd Venice Biennale' in 1940 and a retrospective exhibition of her work was held at the Lefevre Gallery in 1946. The harsh conditions of wartime Britain took their toll on Hodgkins' health, although she was still active. She died in 1947, aged 78.

After Hodgkins died there was a programme about her on British radio during which the English artist, Sir Cedric Morris

(1889 -1982), said, "She was a very gallant person. I think of what she did. Of how she faced up to appalling difficulties of that time, without any money, and of her being a woman. Her courage was phenomenal. It was something the same as Modigliani, but it killed Modigliani. It didn't kill her."

Other works by the artist in the Collection

There are 20 works by the artist in the Collection, including:

Girl Feeding Poultry

1890, watercolour
Purchased 1958

Untitled Portrait

1900, watercolour
Majorie Bassett Bequest 1964

Pleasure Garden

1933, watercolour
Presented by a group of subscribers 1951

Phoenician Ruins

c.1937, gouache on paper
Gift from Mr & Mrs M. Ash 1980

Landscape

1938, oil on canvas
Purchased 1979

Still Life - Zipp

1945, oil on canvas
Purchased 1979

Further reading

Frances Hodgkins, Paintings & Drawings, I. Buchanan, M. Dunn & E. Eastmond, Auckland University Press, 1994.

Letters of Frances Hodgkins, L. Gill (ed.), Auckland University Press, 1993.

Portrait of Frances Hodgkins, E.H. McCormack, Auckland University Press, Oxford University Press, 1981.

The Reputation of Frances Hodgkins', Gordon H. Brown, pp. 44-47, *Art New Zealand*, No. 16, 1980.

The Drawings of Frances Hodgkins', Anne Kirker, pp. 40-43, *Art New Zealand*, No. 16, 1980.

'Five Paintings by Frances Hodgkins', E.A. Sheppard, pp. 36-39, *Art New Zealand*, No. 16, 1980.

'The Path to Impressionism: 1892-1912', E.H. McCormick, pp. 28-35/66, *Art New Zealand*, No. 16, 1980.

The Expatriate, E.H. McCormack, New Zealand University Press, 1954.

Frances Hodgkins, Myfanwy Evans, Penguin Books, 1948.

