

James Nairn

Scots / New Zealander, 1859 -1904

A Summer Idyll

1897, oil on canvas, 34.0x44.5 cm

Presented by the Canterbury Society of Arts 1932



About the work

In *A Summer Idyll* James Nairn has followed the impressionist idea of choosing a very ordinary, typical scene in which nothing special is happening and there are no grand or spectacular landscape features being celebrated. The subject of the work is really the study of light, atmosphere and colour. The figures are just features of the landscape like the grasses, large tree or distant cottage.

A Summer Idyll was painted in the area around Pumpkin Cottage in the Hutt Valley near Wellington, which in the 1890s was still sparsely populated and had many market gardens. Close to the city, Pumpkin Cottage was a favourite weekend retreat for Nairn and fellow members of the Wellington Art Club. It became the hub of the Wellington *plein air* (outdoor) movement.

Nairn has painted this work with a distinctly freer brushstroke than was typical of this period in Britain or New Zealand. The free strokes of thick impasto paint give the scene a sense of immediacy. The scene is depicted as though we are looking towards the light, capturing the dazzle of the sunlight on the forms, the dark silhouette of the tree against the sky, and the denseness of the cast shadows.

Nairn was a firm believer in the *plein air* style of painting, working outdoors, directly from nature. He urged his followers "To paint the thing as one sees it". The immediacy of a *plein air* work, with its convincing realism, is seen in the treatment of the rough grasses in the pasture and the billowing clouds boiling up over the distant hills. In a lecture in 1892 Nairn said, "If we want art we must begin at the point where all

great artists have begun. The study of nature from life or outside." Nairn had a very significant impact on New Zealand painting. The critical response, however, when his followers held an exhibition in Wellington in 1893, was scathing. *The Evening Post* noted, "the shattered sense of form and colour".

Nairn was a member of the Glasgow School of painters (The Glasgow Boys) who were influenced by developments in French painting of the 1870s and 1880s, in particular Impressionism. His associates in the Glasgow School were William Macgregor (1855 -1923), James Paterson (1854 -1932), Edward Walton (1860 -1922) and George Henry (1858 -1943). The Scottish Impressionists, however, used a modified form of French Impressionism which tended towards more subdued colours and a more regulated brush stroke, but which still sought to capture the immediacy of outdoor light, particularly the effect of strong sunlight on outdoor forms. Nairn's *plein air* approach also shows a link with the French Realists, such as Jean Millet (1814 -1875) and Jules Bastien Lepage (1848-1884).

Painted towards the end of Nairn's short career, *A Summer Idyll* is typical of his painting at this time, both in its toned down impressionist treatment and rural outdoor subject matter. It was exhibited at the Canterbury Society of Arts in 1898 with a price tag of £5.5.0 and was purchased by the Canterbury Society of Arts.

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About the artist

Nairn was born in Aberfoyle, near Glasgow, in 1859. He studied at the Glasgow Institute of Fine Arts under Robert Greenless (1829 -1896) in 1880, and then at the Académie Julian in Paris. He worked in Glasgow with the Glasgow Art Club, a group of artists, led by W.Y. Macgregor (1855 -1923), who were influenced by the French Impressionists' interest in colour and light. Nairn exhibited with the Glasgow Institute of Fine Arts from 1880 to 1889 and with the Scottish Royal Academy from 1882 to 1885.

Due to ill health, however, he emigrated to New Zealand in 1890. There is a story that when he disembarked from the *Forfarshire* in Dunedin on his arrival in New Zealand, the captain complained that Nairn's cabin would have to be repainted and that the artist was 'stark staring mad'. During the voyage he had painted his cabin gold, blue and green - a colour scheme that would have delighted an Impressionist.

In 1891 Nairn was appointed teacher at the Wellington School of Design (Wellington Technical College). He first exhibited with the New Zealand Academy of Fine Art but, dissatisfied with this institution, in 1892 he formed the Wellington Art Club which held their own exhibitions. In 1894 he rented Pumpkin Cottage to which many artists interested in *plein air* painting were attracted. These including Mabel Hill (1872-1956), Mary Tripe (1867-1939), and George E. Butler (1870-1936). However Nairn later rejoined the Academy and exhibited with them. Nairn's devotion to *plein air* painting was not good for his fragile health and he died of pneumonia in Wellington in 1904.

Other works by the artist in the Collection

Touching Up

1893, oil on canvas
Purchased 2001

Sunlit Estuary

1898, watercolour
Robert Bell Bequest 1943

Hoeing the Crop

date unknown, oil on canvas
Presented by the Canterbury Society of Arts 1932

Further reading

An Introduction to New Zealand Painting 1839- 1980, G. Brown, & H. Keith, 1982, Collins, Auckland, pp. 78-86.

'James McLauchlan Nairn, The Glasgow Years', V. Hearnshaw, *Art New Zealand* # 58, 1991, pp. 74-77, 100.

'A Battle of the Critics, The Concept of the Avant-Garde comes to New Zealand', F. Pound, *Art New Zealand* # 28, 1983, pp. 24-27.

Frames on the Land, F. Pound, 1983, Collins, Auckland, pp. 84-89.

