

Margaret Stoddart

New Zealander, 1865-1934

Canterbury Plains from Dyers Pass Road

1888, watercolour, 27.0x37.5 cm

Purchased with assistance from the Olive Stirrat Bequest 1987



About the work

Dyers Pass Road climbs over the Port Hills to connect Christchurch with Governor's Bay in Lyttelton Harbour. The uninhabited landscape of Margaret Stoddart's day is now the well-established Christchurch suburb of Cashmere.

When she did this work Stoddart was attending Canterbury College School of Art and she has painted the scene with a concern for detail that is less common in her later works, which favoured broader interpretations concerned with atmospheric effects. Tuition at the School emphasised the importance of close observation and truth to nature and Stoddart has painted the rock and tussocks in the right foreground with careful realism, though the trees to the left have been done in a more traditional manner.

Stoddart has presented the local landscape as a subject in its own right, devoid of human incident or narrative. Only the old fence post in the left foreground and the farmsteads surrounded by trees on the plain tell the viewer that this land is becoming settled.

The composition of the painting follows the conventional format of forms staggered left and right as they recede back into the picture space. The rather awkward placement of the road in the centre signals this painting is one of Stoddart's early works but the competent depiction of space, using the blurred purples for the distant foothills and snow capped alps,

demonstrates her awareness of perspective. She has handled the watercolour washes with great skill, showing perfect control of colour, form and tone.

As might be expected in an early work by a young New Zealand painter in the 1880s, Stoddart has painted *Canterbury Plains from Dyers Pass Road* in a topographical style, giving careful attention to the natural forms of the landscape. However, the overall gentle misty treatment is associated with the rather poetic approach of the British Academic style, which involves the modification and toning down of colour and light to create a united, idealised scene.

It is likely that Stoddart painted this work out of doors, *plein air*, which was encouraged by one of her teachers at the Canterbury College School of Art, Alfred Wilson Walsh (1859 -1916). Her freedom of handling in this work also suggests Walsh's influence.

Another strong influence on the watercolours of the New Zealand landscape in the 1880s and 1890s was the British Royal Society of Watercolour Artists. The poetic refinements favoured by members of the Society called for washes carefully laid within controlled drawn forms. The paintings of the English artist Joseph Turner (1775 -1851) were also influential.

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About the artist

Stoddart was born in Diamond Harbour, on Banks Peninsula, in 1865. In 1876 the Stoddart family sailed for Britain and Margaret received her early education in Edinburgh, before the family returned to New Zealand in 1879. In 1882 she enrolled at the Canterbury College School of Art and studied there for three years. After a break, she returned to the School in 1887 and continued there until 1890. Stoddart's teachers included A.W. Walsh (1859 -1916) and G.H. Elliot (1860 -1941).

Stoddart had a long association with the Canterbury Society of Arts. In 1883, while still a student, she began exhibiting with the CSA and from 1894 to 1897 she was a member of the Society's Council. Having returned to New Zealand after spending time living in England, she served as Vice-President of the CSA from 1931 to 1934. Stoddart was also a founding member of the Palette Club whose members were concerned with painting out of doors.

In 1894 Stoddart met Australian botanical artist, Ellis Rowan (1848 -1922), in Christchurch. Stoddart later travelled to Melbourne where she held an exhibition. In 1898 she travelled to England and made contact with Australian artist Dora Meeson (1869 -1955) who had for a time studied in Christchurch with Stoddart. In 1899 Stoddart became a pupil of Louis Grier (1864 -1920) at St Ives, in Cornwall, and was influenced by the Newlyn School. That year she also visited Europe and studied under Norman Garstin (1847-1926) and expatriate American Impressionist, Charles Lasar (1856 -1936). While still living in St Ives, in 1902 Stoddart was visited by fellow artists Frances Hodgkins and Dorothy Richmond. In 1906 Stoddart had an exhibition of her work at the Baillie Gallery in London and had paintings accepted at the Paris Salon and the Royal Academy.

Stoddart returned to New Zealand in 1907 and settled in Diamond Harbour. In 1925 she became a member of the National Art Association of New Zealand. Stoddart died in the alpine village of Hanmer Springs, in North Canterbury, in 1934.

Stoddart represents the first generation of colonial New Zealand artists who were to succeed as professional painters.

Other works by the artist in the Collection

There are 44 works by the artist in the Collection, including:

Wallflowers

1893, watercolour
Majorie Bassett Bequest 1964

Old Cornish Orchard

c.1902, watercolour on board
Purchased 2000

Godley House, Diamond Harbour

c.1913, watercolour
Purchased with assistance from the Olive Stirrat Bequest 1990

Mountain Lilies

1920, watercolour
Collection Christchurch Art Gallery Trust

Further reading

Flowers into Landscape: Margaret Stoddart, 1865-1934, J. King, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, 1997.

