

A COMMEMORATION

Frances Hodgkins' Works
1929 - 1946



Still Life with Red Jar (c1933), Watercolour

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The
British
Council
1947-1997 50 YEARS IN NZ



22 November 1997 - 25 January 1998
Robert McDougall Art Gallery
Botanic Gardens Christchurch



Introduction



Farmyard (c.1940), *Gouache*

The fiftieth anniversary of the British Council, and its link with New Zealand, has been the inspiration to also commemorate the death of New Zealand's perhaps most celebrated expatriate artist, Frances Hodgkins, who died on 13 May 1947. In recognition of this anniversary, the British Council has made available on loan eight works by Frances Hodgkins from its collection and two from the British Government Art Collection. These works, which are touring public galleries throughout New Zealand during 1997, comprise this exhibition, supplemented by many selected from the Robert McDougall Art Gallery collection.

When Frances Hodgkins died in Dorset in 1947, she left a legacy of artistic achievement that was still largely unrecognised in the country of her birth. At that time, she was poorly represented in public collections around New Zealand. What works were held mostly dated from before 1920; there was almost nothing from the last two decades of her life. Few New Zealanders knew how well she was regarded by contemporary British artists.

In Christchurch in 1947, she was totally unrepresented in either the Robert McDougall Art Gallery or Canterbury Society of Arts collections. Yet when attempts were made early in 1948 to secure the watercolour *Pleasure Garden* for the city collection there was fierce opposition to the acquisition from the conservative anti-modern-art lobby, despite the fact that the recognition Frances Hodgkins had achieved within the International Modern movement had not been accomplished by any other New Zealand artist of her generation. The debate that ensued developed into a row that is today a landmark in the annals of New Zealand art history.

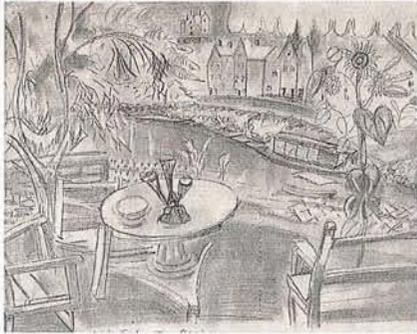
The focus of this exhibition is on the last seventeen years of Frances Hodgkins' artistic activity, from 1929 to 1946, a period that is considered the most important in her career. During the 1920s, '30s and '40s, Frances Hodgkins became highly experimental in her work. She was undoubtedly influenced by modern masters such as Braque, Picasso, Matisse and Dufy in the development of her own calligraphic style. Although much has been written in the last two decades about Frances Hodgkins and her work, the question of the level of her individuality as an artist has still to be determined.

What is not in doubt is that she made a significant contribution to British art. More than any other expatriate New Zealand artist, Hodgkins demonstrated that not only did British artists contribute to New Zealand's artistic development but that New Zealand artists were capable of reciprocal influence.

The Robert McDougall Art Gallery is indebted to the British Council and the British High Commission for the loan of works by Frances Hodgkins that have not been seen publicly in New Zealand before.

Frances Hodgkins

her works between 1929 and 1946



Sabrina's Garden (1932), Pencil

Frances Hodgkins was born in Dunedin in 1869 to William Mathew and Isabel Hodgkins. After local training in art, she left New Zealand for Europe in 1901. Despite two return visits in 1903 and 1913, she chose to live a peripatetic existence overseas.

Although based in England, she visited the Continent regularly, and France in particular. It was as a result of living in Paris in 1911 that she began to absorb something of the Modern movement.

In the 1920s, Frances Hodgkins entered a new and highly experimental phase in her career as an artist. By the late 1920s, the figurative subjects that had always been so dominant in her work began to diminish, though they still held some significance. Among the portraits in pencil from this time was *Boy in the Wood* (cat.

no.1), which was related to another work in oil with the same title. Increasingly, the departure from the figurative led to more interest in still life or landscape, or combinations of both, which emerged as the principal motif to hold her interest in the decades that followed.

The alignment of her work with contemporary British art was such that early in 1929 she was proposed for membership of the Seven and Five Society. This group, founded in 1919 as an exhibiting society, had set out to provide alternative opportunities for young artists to show their work. The 1929 Seven and Five group included among its twenty-one members Ivon Hitchens, Cedric Morris, Christopher Wood, Ben Nicholson and expatriate New Zealander Len Lye.

Whilst all the group's artists still held to the objectivity of the real world, freedom of expression was perceived to be paramount. Common to each of them was an interest in naturalistic subjects, particularly still life and the landscape. But eventually, the group's ideas moved in a more non-representational direction with which Frances Hodgkins did not feel comfortable.

Always in financial straits, Frances Hodgkins had some hope of relief early in 1930 when London art dealer Arthur Howell, who ran St George's Gallery, offered her a contract that promised a measure of security for some time. In the exhibition she held at St George's Gallery that year, her departure from the figurative was evident as the works were mostly still life or still life set against the landscape. The pictorial space had also become substantially flattened, denying traditional spatial concerns with interior and exterior often merging into a continuous space. Such work was the consolidation of a decade of experimentation.

In the early 1930s, Frances Hodgkins explored a variety of still life objects as subjects including, as well as flowers and fruit, fish and shells as in *Fish* (cat. no.2) and *Still Life, Fishes and Shells* (cat. no.6). Much inspiration during this time also came from the landscape, particularly that of England, Wales and Spain. When in 1932 the St George's Gallery failed, Frances Hodgkins signed a contract with the Lefevre Gallery, which was to remain her principal agent for many years.

In the summer of 1932, she holidayed with friends at Bridgnorth, Shropshire, on the river Severn. The result of this visit was a number of paintings, watercolours and drawings, including *Sabrina's Garden* (cat. no.3) and *Pleasure Garden*. Also in 1932, Frances Hodgkins received an invitation to join the avant-garde Unit One group and accepted. However, the following year she resigned as she did not support the group's non-objective philosophy and its leaning towards abstraction. A decision in 1934 to resign from the Seven and Five group was made for a similar reason.

During the period from 1934 to 1936, Frances Hodgkins was based in London but made visits to Tossa de Mar near Barcelona in Spain in 1935 and 1936. At this time, she expanded her interest in the landscape and its possibilities in combinations with still life and experimented with gouache as a medium.

The painting *The Return of the River* (cat. no.10) dates from this period. It reveals an interest in geometrifying landscape elements, creating many angular distortions that give rise to some spatial ambiguity. It is thought that this may have been a direct response to Picasso, whose work had greatly impressed Hodgkins at an exhibition in Barcelona. On 15 February 1936 she wrote, 'I was lucky enough to see the Picasso show... a most purifying experience. All my energy was torn from me.'

From May 1937 until 1939, Frances Hodgkins lived at Worth Matravers near Corfe Castle. There she used a cowshed as a studio and she also frequently stayed with friends on a farm in Wiltshire. It was in



Still Life - Zipp (1945), Oil on Canvas

this environment that she developed her interest in farmyard subjects. The objects of the farmyard gave her inspiration for a number of paintings, including *Tanks, Barrels and Drums* (cat. no.11). In this work she moved further in the direction of abstraction than she had hitherto, arriving at a new approach to the object in the landscape.

At the end of 1936 she had been invited by Contemporary Lithographs Limited to make a lithograph as part of a contemporary artist series. The work *Arrangement of Jugs* (cat. no.12) was the result, although it was not published until 1938. It was based on a watercolour with a similar title. The artist John Piper assisted her in making the lithographs and, as a result, she became firm friends with him and his wife, Myfanwy Evans.

By the late 1930s, her interest in random objects in the landscape had increased. Arrangements that occurred by chance rather than by decision or as a result of selection appealed more and more and can be found in a work such as *Houses and Outhouses Purbeck* (cat. no.13) where the rubbish accumulated around buildings on a south Dorset farm forms an important focus as the motif in the painting.

After 1939, Frances Hodgkins was unable to travel abroad because of war conditions and she made Corfe Castle her home. There she made a studio in a former Methodist chapel. In 1940 her work was, however, exhibited beyond Britain, being shown at the Venice Biennale and the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition.

Her interest in random discarded objects expanded to include disused farming implements and machinery of the rural community and these replaced selected still life as a principal motif. Rather than an object being posed against the landscape, as it was a decade earlier, it was now presented as being naturally a part of the landscape. This lifting of the common object and giving it a new identity bordered on the romantic. The wheel was a motif that regularly appeared in both Frances Hodgkins' painting and also in the works of a number of British artists at this time. It was while she was staying with John Piper and his wife that she discovered a farm with a yard full of agricultural junk that became the inspiration for another set of farm object paintings, including *Farmyard* (cat. no.16).

By 1944 Frances Hodgkins was feeling the effects of war conditions: the stressful sound of planes constantly overhead, the need to shelter from bombing raids and having strangers billeted into her home. All this greatly upset the 76-year-old artist. Among the works that she made in 1945 was *Still Life - Zipp* (cat. no.17), which continued a theme that she had explored in earlier paintings in which there was a merging of self-portrait and still life, the motif becoming a symbolic representation of both. Unlike the 1935 *Self-Portrait - Still Life and Self-Portrait* and the 1940/41 *Still Life with a Red Beret*, the mood of *Still Life - Zipp* expresses her personal trauma and the dark shadow that the effects of war had cast over her life.

Frances Hodgkins continued to paint until 1946. Among her last works is the gouache *To the Castle Corfe* (cat. no.18) that, in common with several other paintings of this time, has the bridge and river as the principal subject focus.

In November 1946, Lefevre Gallery in London held a large retrospective exhibition but by then Frances Hodgkins had ceased to paint. By early 1947 she had become increasingly unwell and unable to care for herself. During March, while staying at the Greyhound Inn in Corfe Castle village, she began having hallucinations and her screams throughout the night eventually led to her being certified insane. Her last weeks were spent at the Herrison House Psychiatric Hospital near Dorchester. She died there on 13 May 1947.

Catalogue



Frances Hodgkins (left)
with Annie Coggan,
Bradford-on-Tone,
Somerset.

1. *Boy in the Wood* (c.1929)
Pencil
Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery
2. *Fish* (c.1931)
Watercolour
Collection: British Council
3. *Sabrina's Garden* (1932)
Pencil
Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery

4. *Drawing with Landscape* (c.1932)
Pencil
Collection: British Council
5. *Flowers in a Vase* (c.1932)
Watercolour
Collection: British Government Art Collection
6. *Still Life, Fishes and Shells* (c.1933)
Watercolour
Collection: British Council

7. *Still Life with Red Jar* (c.1933)
Watercolour
Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery
8. *Spanish Still Life and Landscape* (c.1933/34)
Oil on canvas
Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery
9. *Youth* (c.1934/35)
Pencil
Collection: British Council
10. *The Return of the River (Tossa de Mar)* (c.1936)
Gouache
Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery
11. *Tanks, Barrels and Drums* (c.1937)
Oil on canvas
Collection: British Government Art Collection
12. *Arrangement of Jugs* (1938)
Lithograph
Collection: British Council
13. *Houses and Outhouses Purbeck* (c.1938)
Oil on canvas
Collection: British Council
14. *Spanish Pottery* (c.1939)
Watercolour
Collection: British Council
15. *Primulus* (c.1940)
Pencil
Collection: British Council
16. *Farmyard* (c.1940)
Gouache
Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery
17. *Still Life - Zipp* (1945)
Oil on canvas
Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery
18. *To the Castle Corfe* (c.1946)
Gouache
Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery