

VICTORIA'S ART – THE STORY OF A UNIVERSITY COLLECTION

William McAloon

CULTIVATING DAFFODILS

On the eve of Victoria University College's golden jubilee, E. H. McCormick pondered the character of the four colleges that made up the University of New Zealand. Otago, he generalised 'with some rashness', was still dominated by the intellectual legacy of its Scottish forebears; Canterbury he found gracious, well bred and tired; Auckland wavered between commerce and hedonism.

And what of the man shaped by the youngest of the four colleges? What of the Victorian? Here we are less tentative, for there is solid evidence to go on. The obvious – the too obvious – comment is that he takes after his historical namesake. The issue, one might say, of John Stuart Mill and Charles Darwin, he shows signs of an acquired Scottish strain. In politics he follows a mild radicalism, tempered by expediency, in religion – in all things – he pursues the light of reason. Critical of the present, he has confidence in a future wherein mankind will accept the benign guidance of the social sciences. His finer sensibilities – like those of his spiritual fathers – are imperfectly developed or have atrophied through disuse.¹

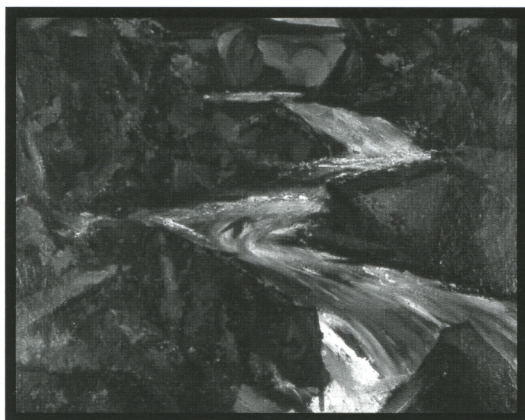
The treatment McCormick prescribed was 'a course of Wordsworth.' Even as he proffered this, another prescription was being drawn up in Victoria's Staff Common Room.

At its first annual general meeting in 1942, the recently established Staff Common Room committee set aside £1 for 'the hiring of suitable pictures from Modern Books'.² Historian J. C. Beaglehole was delegated to make the selection, and two years later the Staff Common Room committee could note with some satisfaction that 'we have not only provided several pictures to cover our bare walls but we seem to have provided an inexhaustible topic for conversation in all emergencies.'³ The possibility of buying rather than hiring pictures for the Staff Common Room was raised over the next few years but without success. Instead, there were more pressing calls on funds, including the provision of cups and saucers and ensuring an adequate supply of tea and sugar during a time of rationing.

1 E.H. McCormick, 'The University and the Community: Essays in honour of Thomas Alexander Hunter', *Landfall* vol. 1, no. 3, (September 1947), p. 213.

2 Staff Common Room annual general meeting minutes, 23 March 1942 (Adam Art Gallery files: VUW collection/Staff Club collection). Modern Books, the retail outlet of the Wellington Co-operative Book Society, ceased offering this service in 1946.

3 Staff Common Room Committee Annual Report, 16 August 1944 (Adam Art Gallery files: VUW collection/Staff Club collection).



JOHN WEEKS,
Mountain Stream (1948)
oil on board

STAFF CLUB COLLECTION,
PURCHASED 1948

It was not until the Staff Common Room's sixth annual general meeting, on 26 June 1947, that a motion was carried that 'at least 5/- of the annual levy be spent on the purchase of original New Zealand pictures'.⁴ A picture committee was duly established, with Beaglehole appointed convenor.⁵ The Staff Common Room's first purchase – *Daffodils* (1946), a small still life by the Wellington painter Sam Cairncross – came in 1948, and this was followed soon after with John Weeks's painting *Mountain Stream* (1948). Beaglehole could thus write in 1949 that Victoria had taken 'one or two of the first necessary steps in the arts (not the 'arts-subjects') which now its duty is, I think, to cultivate.'⁶

THE GREAT AND THE GOOD

To some extent those steps had begun in 1934, when past and present members of Victoria College commissioned a series of portraits of the founding professors. Sir Robert Stout, the driving force behind the establishment of Victoria, had already been memorialised in 1930 by Mary Tripe, but the first professors of chemistry and physics, English, and classics – Sir Thomas Hill Easterfield, Professor Hugh Mackenzie, and Sir John Rankine Brown, respectively – were all painted in 1934 by Archibald Nicoll, the leading portraitist of the day.

If these works were fairly conventional depictions of 'the great and the good', two other early portraits stand out for their artistic qualities as much as their subjects. Christopher Perkins's 1933 portrait of Professor George William von Zedlitz, the controversial first professor of modern languages, was presented to Victoria by one of von Zedlitz's students. In 1947, at the initiative of J. C. Beaglehole, Evelyn Page painted Sir Thomas Alexander Hunter, Victoria's earliest teacher of psychology and first principal. The lively portrait was the first of several paintings by Page to adorn Victoria's walls. Other artists later to provide the university with portraits included Peter McIntyre, W. A. Sutton and Garth Tapper.

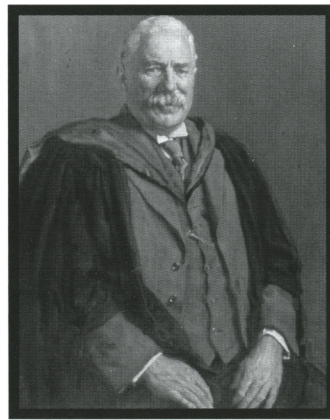
TOO MUCH AND THEN TOO LITTLE

Back in the Staff Common Room, the collection was growing. Late in 1955, the picture committee resolved to buy a work by expatriate painter Frances Hodgkins. Douglas Lilburn and J. C. Beaglehole, who were on leave in

4 Staff Common Room annual general meeting minutes, 26 June 1947 (Adam Art Gallery files: VUW collection/Staff Club collection). An amendment put to the meeting to delete the words 'New Zealand' was defeated, although the word 'pictures' was changed to 'works of art' at the seventh annual general meeting.

5 The other members were Professors Robert McGechan (law) and D. C. H. Florance (physics), and Mr Frederick Page (music).

6 J. C. Beaglehole, *Victoria University College: An Essay Towards a History*, New Zealand University Press, Wellington, 1949, p. ix.



ARCHIBALD NICOLL,
Professor Hugh Mackenzie
1934
oil on canvas
VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF
WELLINGTON PORTRAIT
COLLECTION
PRESENTED BY PAST AND
PRESENT MEMBERS OF THE
COLLEGE

7 Letter, J. C. Beaglehole to Frederick Page, 7 February 1956 (Tim Beaglehole papers, copy in Adam Art Gallery files: VUW collection/Artworks/Hodgkins). In comparison, Beaglehole noted that paintings were being offered for over £300, watercolours £65, and drawings – ‘not very distinctive’ – £50.

London, spent the first weeks of 1956 visiting galleries in search of a suitable work. The paintings they initially saw were too expensive, while the watercolours and drawings on offer they deemed unsuitable – ‘too much and then too little’, Beaglehole wrote.⁷ The Redfern Gallery did have a likely candidate – ‘quite the best we have seen, bar possibly one’ – but at a price of £179, *Kimmeridge Foreshore* (c.1938) greatly exceeded the £100 earmarked for the purchase.

Despite this, Beaglehole wrote to Frederick Page to say that he and Lilburn had effectively bought the painting on the spot.

But you say plaintively, like any politician, where is the money to come from? Simple, we answer; you send all the cash the Common Room has, and you, Douglas, and I put up the rest – and any other mug on the staff you can take down – to be repaid later.

Arrangements were made for the painting to be sent to Wellington, with Beaglehole’s only regret being that he ‘[wouldn’t] be back till after the first fury of indignation and astonishment is over.’

A special general meeting was called to discuss the purchase. Rather than presenting a *fait accompli*, Page told members of the Staff Common Room that ‘if they didn’t agree to it the Auckland Art Gallery would probably buy it.’⁸ The strategy worked, and a subcommittee was appointed to raise the necessary funds through voluntary subscriptions.

As well as securing *Kimmeridge Foreshore* for Victoria, the special general meeting had another outcome. In the course of discussions, Lilburn had wondered whether ‘in view of the progress being made with College buildings, the Council should be asked to think about creating a fund for the purchase of pictures.’⁹ The idea was put to the meeting in the form of a motion and received with unanimous approval.

CONFIRMING PRIORITIES AND RESOLVING DOUBTS

Victoria’s Council took two years to adopt the idea, but in 1958 an annual grant of £100 was made ‘with a view to establishing over the years a collection of pictures which should be regarded as meritorious and which would

8 Staff Common Room special general meeting minutes, 30 May 1956 (Adam Art Gallery files: VUW collection/Staff Club collection). The Auckland Art City Gallery had recently established a Frances Hodgkins collection.

9 *ibid.*

eventually constitute a valuable historical record of the graphic arts in New Zealand.’¹⁰

R. S. V. Simpson, a member of the council and later Chancellor, was appointed as convenor of the Purchase of Works of Art Standing Committee, a position he held until 1984. Joining him were the Director of the National Art Gallery and the President of the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts, appointments made ‘to reassure Council members that sound judgement would be brought to bear in the expenditure of the annual grant’.¹¹ The university librarian became a member of the committee in 1966, in his new capacity as curator of the collection.¹² A student representative was added in the mid 1970s, a position that was erratically occupied.

Douglas Lilburn was the first staff representative on the committee. It was a vital role: according to political scientist John Roberts – a frequent spokesman for the collection – ‘the Staff Representative [took] the initiative of making acquisitions but ... the advice of members of the committee [was] consistently important in confirming priorities and resolving doubts.’¹³

Lilburn’s first acquisitions included Colin McCahon’s *North Otago Landscape* (1950) and Toss Woollaston’s *Landscape with Fire* (1960). It is perhaps surprising that Lilburn did not complete the troika of New Zealand’s founding modernists with a painting by Rita Angus, especially given his long relationship with the artist. It was an oversight that remained uncorrected by his successors.¹⁴ Other artists whose works Lilburn bought included W. A. Sutton, Evelyn Page and Louise Henderson. He also gave Victoria a painting from Don Peebles’s *Wellington* series, complementing one he had earlier bought for the collection. Concluding his period as staff representative on the purchase committee, Lilburn could be proud of the solid foundations he had laid for the collection.

THE SOCIAL CONDITION OF THE WORLD

Another of the works that Lilburn acquired for Victoria was a West Coast landscape by Paul Olds, an artist and teacher who played an indirect but significant role in the development of the collection. In 1966, Olds was appointed a lecturer in art at Victoria’s Department of Extension (now the Centre for Continuing Education). In addition to his teaching activities, Olds

10 Council minutes, 12 August 1958, quoted in Rachel Barrowman, *Victoria University of Wellington 1899–1999: A History*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 1999, p. 297.

12 The librarian was John Sage, who was succeeded by Vic Elliot in 1986.

14 Lilburn later gave Angus’s *Central Otago* (1954–56/69) to the National Art Gallery. Angus was a regular exhibitor at Wellington’s Academy of Fine Arts and Centre Gallery during the 1960s and had a solo exhibition at the Victoria University library in 1968.

11 Tim Beaglehole, *Victoria University of Wellington: Catalogue of the Art Collection*, Victoria University, Wellington, 1984, p. 3.

13 John Roberts, ‘An Institutional Collection: Victoria University of Wellington’, *Art New Zealand* no. 46 (Autumn 1988), p. 71. Beaglehole later suggested that the real reason for the committee’s success ‘is that it rarely meets and has always worked very informally.’ (*Catalogue of the Art Collection*, p. 4.)



PAUL OLDS,
Untitled
(**West Coast landscape**)
c.1960
oil on canvas
PURCHASED 1960

initiated a series of exhibitions in the university library, alleviating Wellington's shortage of exhibition venues and bringing contemporary work to the attention of the university community.

A number of works entered the collection following their exhibition at the library, including Ralph Hotere's *Song Cycle: The Voyage* (1975), Gretchen Albrecht's *Drift* (1976), and Michael Smither's *Christ Driving the Money Changers from the Temple* (1972). Artists already represented in the collection also had exhibitions in the library, providing their works on campus with a larger context.¹⁵

When Olds died suddenly in 1976, a memorial exhibition at the library recorded his 'profound conviction that art cannot be separated from the social condition of the world' and paid tribute to his 'ability to make art intelligible to the layman'.¹⁶ Management of the library exhibitions was taken over by critic and curator Neil Rowe, who continued to present a varied programme until he left Victoria in 1979.¹⁷ Exhibitions in the library came to an end in the late 1980s.

A MORE HISTORICAL DIRECTION

The focus of the collection had thus far been largely contemporary. However, in 1961 Victoria received a bequest of 29 works of art from Mr and Mrs T. D. H. Hall, which moved the collection in a more historical direction. A law graduate of Victoria and later Chief Clerk of Parliament, T. D. H. Hall was married to Katie Mackenzie, daughter of Professor Hugh Mackenzie and also an alumna of the college.

Together, the couple had assembled a small collection of early 20th century New Zealand art, including works by Petrus van der Velden, Margaret Stoddart, Grace Butler, Sydney Thompson and D. K. Richmond. The Hall collection included several paintings by H. Linley Richardson, including the iconic *Mrs Thornley, Titahi Bay* (1931-32).¹⁸ Six works by the veteran painter Nugent Welch, whose work T. D. H. Hall had written about in *Art in New Zealand*, completed the bequest.

Stimulated by the unexpected gift, the purchase committee resolved to 'build up a collection which will have historical value'.¹⁹ An attempt to buy a John Gully painting at auction saw the university outbid, but Victoria was able

15 Don Binney, Gordon Walters, Don Driver, Ian Scott and Richard Killeen, for example, all had exhibitions at the library.

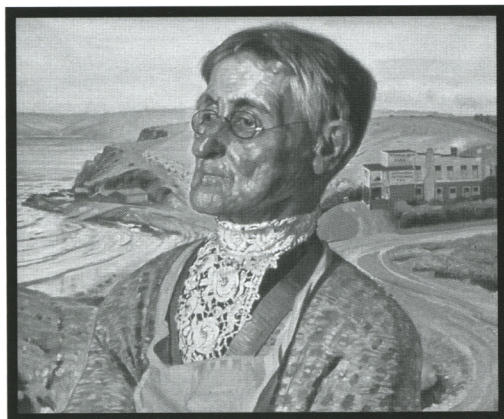
17 Rowe also had an influence on the collection. Tim Beaglehole recalls lively discussions with him about potential acquisitions (personal communication, 13 December 2004).

19 Purchase of Works of Art Standing Committee Annual Report, undated [c.1962] (Adam Art Gallery files: VUW collection / Art Purchase Committee).

16 Paul Olds memorial exhibition, Victoria University Library, Wellington, 1976.

18 Regrettably, this significant painting is currently unable to be located.

H. LINLEY
RICHARDSON,
Mrs Thornley, Titahi Bay
1931–32
oil on canvas
GIFT OF MR & MRS
T. D. H. HALL, 1961



to acquire a watercolour by Alfred Baxter. Further works by Richmond, Stoddart and van der Velden were added to the collection over the next decade. Taken together, this didn't quite amount to the intended collection of 'historical value'. Rather, it served to demonstrate that the future of the collection was better served by concentrating on the present.

TEACH US TO ORDER OUR DAYS RIGHTLY

The present was vibrant, as the 1960s saw a rapid growth in the ambition and range of contemporary art in New Zealand as well as expanded opportunities for its exhibition. As staff representative on the purchase committee from 1963, Tim Beaglehole was in an ideal position to oversee the acquisition of many of Victoria's key works.

Among Beaglehole's first purchases were works by Wellington painters Helen Stewart and John Drawbridge. Soon he was looking further afield, however, and in 1966 asked Colin McCahon to find Victoria a suitable work by Auckland painter Don Binney. McCahon chose *Tabernacle* (1966), describing it as 'very tough' but 'probably the best for some time, and quite the best in the present show.'²⁰ With its use of religious text – 'THE WORD OF GOD WILL BE PREACHED HERE EACH LORD'S DAY IF THE LORD WILL' – the painting's appeal to McCahon was understandable. He did, however, caution Beaglehole that 'some could be shocked but I see no reason why. Binney is not being meanly satirical.'

McCahon was also worried that he had spent too much on the painting. Although at £105 it consumed half that year's acquisitions fund, there was enough money left over to buy a Suzanne Goldberg painting and studio pottery by Doreen Blumhardt and Peter Stichbury.²¹ The acquisitions budget slowly increased: in 1971 it was \$1,000 and by 1984, thanks to Beaglehole's persistent lobbying of the university council, it had reached \$8,000.

The advent of dealer galleries in Wellington provided another significant boost for the collection. A work by the young Auckland painter Ian Scott was purchased from the recently established Peter McLeavey Gallery, joining a similarly pop-influenced work by his contemporary, Richard Killeen, acquired from Barry Lett Galleries. Paintings by artists of an earlier generation, including Gordon Walters, Don Driver and Milan Mrkusich, were also bought

20 Letter, Colin McCahon to Tim Beaglehole, 18 May 1966 (Adam Art Gallery files: VUW collection/ Artists/Binney). The painting was included in Binney's 1966 exhibition at Auckland's Barry Lett Galleries.

21 Although a few more pieces were added, including works by Barry Brickell and Mirek Smíšek (later destroyed by contract cleaning staff), studio pottery did not become a major part of the collection.

from McLeavey. The university added another McCahon to its collection at this time – *Agnus Dei, Donna Nobis Pacem* (1966) – which, with the Staff Club’s recent purchase of *Kauri Forest* (1955),²² brought the number of McCahons at Victoria to three. Another McCahon soon took pride of place on campus.

On a visit to Auckland in early 1971, Beaglehole saw *Ten Big Paintings*, an exhibition of works commissioned to celebrate the reopening of the Auckland City Art Gallery. McCahon’s *Gate III* (1970) was widely agreed to be the standout painting in the exhibition. With its vast scale, defining ‘I AM’, and selection of didactic texts – ‘Teach us to order our days rightly that we might enter the gate of wisdom’ (Psalm 90:12) – the painting seemed to Beaglehole to be an ideal work for a university. The artist agreed, apparently favouring Victoria over several other possible buyers for the work and offering it to the university at a reduced price.²³

As with the Staff Common Room’s earlier and equally bold purchase of *Kimmeridge Foreshore*, the only problem was finding the money. Even at the reduced price of \$4,000, the cost of the painting vastly exceeded the annual acquisitions budget. An approach to the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council was successful, and a grant of \$2,000 was offered on the condition that Victoria match the amount. The university obliged and advanced the funds to the purchase committee.²⁴ *Gate III* was now Victoria’s.

FINDING WAYS, FINDING MEANS

The Staff Club collection had continued to grow since the purchase of *Kimmeridge Foreshore*, and by 1970 it comprised 16 works. A proposal put to the Staff Club’s annual general meeting that year argued that ‘there would be advantages attached to the amalgamation of the Staff Club collection with the University collection.’²⁵ The proposal was adopted and the collection was offered to the university on permanent loan in 1971. Works from the amalgamated collections were exhibited at the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts later that year, and the convenor of the purchase committee reported that ‘the exhibition provided a fine opportunity to see the collections as a whole and to assess their noticeable strengths.’²⁶

Those strengths were becoming more widely recognised. Works from the collection were lent to public galleries for inclusion in major touring

22 The Common Room became known as the Staff Club in 1965.

24 The advance was repaid from the purchase committee’s annual allocation over the next four years.

26 Purchase of Works of Art Standing Committee report, 5 July 1972 (Adam Art Gallery files: VUW collection/Art Purchase Committee).

23 File note by J. P. Sage, 21 March 1972 (Adam Art Gallery files: VUW collection/Artists/Colin McCahon).

25 Staff Club annual general meeting agenda, 19 October 1970 (Adam Art Gallery files: VUW collection/Staff Club collection).

exhibitions, including H. Linley Richardson's *Mrs Thornley, Titahi Bay*, Doris Lusk's *Pump Station, Tuam St* (1970), Don Peebles's *Wellington no. 11* (1959), and Toss Woollaston's *Landscape with Fire*. The last was featured in Gil Docking's 1971 book *Two Hundred Years of New Zealand Painting*, which also included John Drawbridge's *Coastline – Sunbreak* (1965) and T. A. McCormack's *Sunset* (1960), which had recently been given to the university. Such gifts continued to enhance the collection.²⁷

Works entered the collection through other channels. The untimely death of Ernest Beaglehole in 1965 and the retirement two years later of his brother J. C. Beaglehole led to calls for a suitable memorial. Funds were raised to commission a sculpture from Tanya Ashken, although the plan foundered and an existing work by Ashken, *Seabird IV* (1974), was later purchased instead. One commission, overseen by anthropologist Joan Metge, was successful. Fred Graham's sculpture *Tāne and Tūpai* (1975) depicts the quest for knowledge of its eponymous figures. It was unveiled in the old lecture block on 22 May 1976, but removed shortly afterwards following damage. *Tāne and Tūpai* was later relocated to the library foyer.

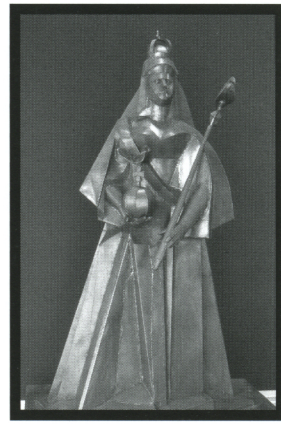
The purchase committee had earlier recommended to the university council that a portion of the budget for new campus buildings be set aside to commission substantial works of art. Writing to the collection's curator on behalf of the university council in November 1975, Godfrey Wilson confirmed that the policy had been adopted, but warned that

... grants are not in fact made for individual buildings, and that the matter would therefore need to be discussed with the Grants Committee on a broader basis. We were also reminded, inevitably, of the current economic situation and the unlikelihood of Government sympathy for this kind of expenditure at the present time.²⁸

Wilson's caution was to prove well founded. Despite a building boom at Victoria over the next few years, the possibility of commissioning works went from committee to committee without resolution. Only one work resulted from the policy – George Kojis's 1979 ceramic sculpture for the courtyard

27 Douglas Lilburn, for example, provided Victoria with its first work by Ralph Hotere – *Lines to Maree* – in 1969. Paintings by Sydney Thompson, Cedric Savage and Maud Sherwood were also given to Victoria at this time.

28 Letter, Godfrey Wilson to J. P. Sage, 25 November 1975 (Adam Art Gallery files: VUW collection/Art Purchase Committee).



GREER TWISS,
Victoria and the Birds 1994
galvanised iron
GIFTED TO THE HUNTER
BUILDING BY THE FRIENDS
OF HUNTER

outside Rankine Brown – although the building boom indirectly led to the acquisition of another. In 1994, the Friends of Hunter presented the university with Greer Twiss's sculpture *Victoria and the Birds* (1994), celebrating victory in their long-fought campaign to save the Hunter building.

PERCEPTION AND EXPRESSION

If commissions proved problematic, buying for the collection continued unabated during the 1970s and 1980s. Significant paintings by mid-career artists including Robin White, Richard Killeen, and Pat Hanly were purchased, as were works by senior painters such as Ralph Hotere and Don Peebles. An unexpected gift from Colin McCahon, the painting *Storm warning* (1980-81), arrived in 1981. McCahon had earlier declined an honorary doctorate offered by Victoria, but the gift may have been a way of acknowledging this. With its darkly apocalyptic text – 'YOU MUST FACE THE FACT the final age of this world is to be a time of troubles. Men will love nothing but money and self...' – *Storm warning* was one of McCahon's final works.

In 1984, a selection from the collection was exhibited at the Academy of Fine Arts, and an updated catalogue, now listing 173 works, was published. Briefly describing the history of the collection, Tim Beaglehole outlined its purpose. This, he wrote, was to

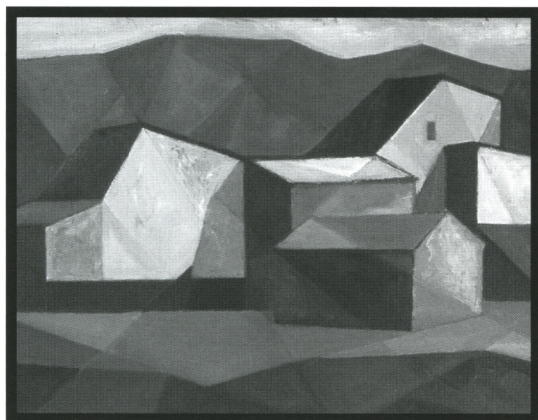
... give members of the university community some appreciation of the artists' reaction to our society, of ways of perception and of expression which differ markedly from those employed in our own academic disciplines. Whether we have succeeded in this is not easy to tell. It is hard to imagine that the great McCahon [*Gate III*] ... would not have an impact on most who look at it, but there is no way of knowing this.²⁹

29 Beaglehole, *Catalogue of the Art Collection*, p.4.

Instead, Beaglehole noted that reactions had more commonly come in the form of complaints. Trevor Moffitt's painting *Good Evening Rosie* (1974), for example, was the subject of a petition from 16 members of the library staff requesting its removal, with one anonymous correspondent objecting to its 'lack of "normal decency"'.³⁰ The purchase committee defended the work on artistic grounds, but it was later shifted to another location.

30 Purchase of Works of Art Standing Committee meeting minutes, 15 October 1975 (Adam Art Gallery files: VUW collection/Art Purchase Committee).

CHARLES TOLE,
Quarry Buildings 1967
 oil on board
 PURCHASED 1967



Regardless of whether it was motivated by artistic concerns, the theft in 1976 of Charles Tole's *Quarry Buildings* (1967) highlighted the issue of the collection's safety. Although the painting was later recovered unscathed, other works on campus were subject to damage or deterioration. Ilana Paris, the student representative on the purchase committee, was so concerned by the situation in 1987 that she wrote in *Salient*, 'the time has come for the ... Committee to decide whether they should curb their ... purchases and use their allocation of funds to restore the damaged works they have'.³¹ A conservation programme was eventually instituted.

AN EDUCATED TASTE

That programme received special impetus as preparations began for another exhibition. *Town and Gown* opened at City Gallery Wellington on 17 November 1994 and featured 50 works from the collection, many of which had been cleaned, repaired and reframed especially for the occasion.

Jenny Harper, a former Director of the National Art Gallery who had come to Victoria to head the new Department of Art History, paid tribute to Tim Beaglehole upon his retirement from Victoria. As well as the 'passion, enthusiasm and occasional idiosyncrasy' he had brought to the collection over 30 years, Beaglehole's role, Harper noted, had been a practical one: 'He has carried paintings, climbed ladders and hung all the works, single-handedly in many cases. He assures us that he enjoys this as much as the buying'.³² Beaglehole's close involvement, suggested Harper, could be seen as 'an extension of his private collecting. Beaglehole is disarmingly candid when he suggests that the University collection is what was too big to fit in his own home.'

It was a view shared by John Roberts, who had earlier described Beaglehole – 'who has a fine private collection' – as 'the amateur of art immersed in the visual culture of the society by lifelong active interest'.³³ Roberts reiterated these sentiments in a review of *Town and Gown*: 'What is on show here is the product of the educated taste of people who are not curators but whose devotion to New Zealand art has been refined through many years of observation and collection'.³⁴

As is usual in matters of taste, not everyone was of the same opinion.

31 Ilana Paris, 'Campus Canvas', *Salient*, 28 September 1987, unpaginated.

32 Jenny Harper, 'Town and Gown: Public and Private', *Town and Gown: Victoria University Art Collection City Gallery, Wellington, 1994*, unpaginated.

33 J. L. Roberts, 'Moving it around', *Listener* 15 December 1984, p. 61.

34 John Roberts, 'University collection a feast of fine NZ art', *Evening Post* 19 November 1994, p. 15.

35 Luit Bieringa, 'An academic meeting of art and education', *Dominion* 3 December 1994, p. 24.

Noting that 'the original intention was to acquire works of art by younger artists', Luit Bieringa wrote in the *Dominion* that recent acquisitions for the collection 'hardly represent the more exciting direction of New Zealand art over the last decade and a half.'³⁵ If this assessment seems harsh, measured against Beaglehole's own intention – 'to build a representative collection of works by contemporary artists'³⁶ – it does contain a measure of truth. While the collection had achieved that representative status in the 1960s and 1970s, many of the artists who became key figures in New Zealand art during the 1980s and early 1990s were absent.

Harper acknowledged such absences, noting, for example, that 'there is no photography, a medium that Beaglehole does not seem to greatly care for. As with any private collection, this absence needs no further explanation.' Bieringa, however, suggested that a new approach was needed: 'With due respect to Tim Beaglehole's administration of an amazing project now is the time to move beyond the conservative art-historical approach reflected in the selection ... to ensure a more racy and relevant future for this worthy collection.' That future would indeed be racy and relevant, but the means by which it was secured were enormously controversial.

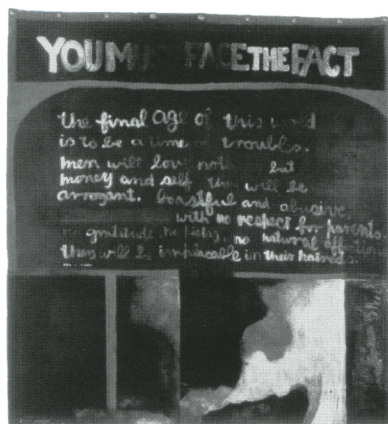
YOU MUST FACE THE FACT

Following her arrival at Victoria, Jenny Harper was able to secure a major sculpture by expatriate artist Bill Culbert for the collection. The university acquired its first photographs – two works by Peter Peryer – the following year. Harper, however, had bigger ambitions, and presented the idea of a university gallery for Victoria at the purchase committee's April 1995 meeting. A steering committee was later established to develop the idea.³⁷

A site for the proposed gallery was selected – the Culliford stairwell next to art history's new home in Old Kirk – and concepts were sought from several architects. Wellington's Ian Athfield provided the successful design, making elegant use of a difficult location. A budget for the project was drawn up, and early in 1997 Wellington philanthropists Denis and Verna Adam – who had a long association with Victoria – agreed to donate nearly half of the projected \$2.2 million cost, on the condition that the university raised the balance. Fundraising began in earnest.

36 Beaglehole, *Catalogue of the Art Collection*, p. 4.

37 As well as Jenny Harper, the art gallery steering committee included David McKay (Dean of Humanities), and Michael Hirschfeld (Pro-Chancellor).



COLIN MCCAHOON,
Storm warning 1980–81
acrylic on unstretched
canvas

PRIVATE COLLECTION
REPRODUCED COURTESY OF
THE COLIN MCCAHOON
RESEARCH AND PUBLICATION
TRUST

When the university council agreed to support what was now known as the Adam Art Gallery, it had done so in straitened financial circumstances. In the event of a budget shortfall for the project, council decided in March 1998 that the balance would have to be raised by selling a work from the collection. Despite considerable fundraising efforts by the steering committee, a shortfall of nearly \$80,000 remained in November 1998. Following consultation with the artist's family and agreement from the university council, the steering committee decided to sell Colin McCahon's *Storm warning*.

Before it could be formally announced, news of the impending sale of the painting broke in the *Sunday Star Times* on 18 April 1999, sending shock waves through the university community and beyond.³⁸ That shock was compounded a week later, when a letter from the artist was discovered in the files of the Centre for Continuing Education, which had organised the artist's exhibition at Victoria 18 years earlier. Announcing his intention to give the painting to the university, McCahon had written that 'it is a public work and I don't want it disappearing into a private collection.'³⁹ Despite this, and growing objections from within the university community and beyond, the sale of the painting to an anonymous private collector was confirmed on 4 May.

AFTER THE STORM

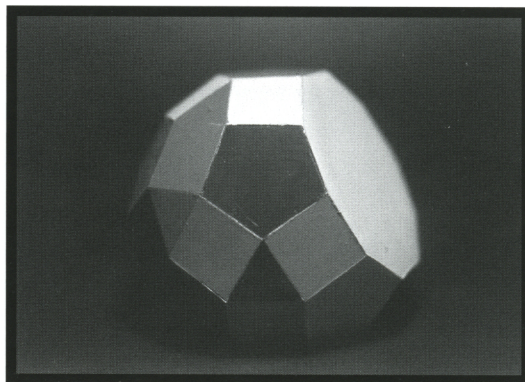
Although tainted by the sale of *Storm warning*, the establishment of the Adam Art Gallery did have benefits for the collection. Responsibility for managing the collection passed to the gallery, and inaugural director Zara Stanhope developed policies for the display, handling and care of the collection. The university introduced protocols for accepting future donations of works of art, and its annual allocation to the collection was redirected towards the costs of conservation and display. The surplus from the sale of *Storm warning* was invested to establish a trust to fund future acquisitions.

The fund would take some years to mature. In the meantime, the university's centennial was marked with a major commission from Wellington photographer Gavin Hipkins. *The Model (Action)* (1999) was designed to occupy the site left vacant by *Gate III*, which went on permanent display in the foyer of the Adam Art Gallery. The Staff Club celebrated the opening of the gallery by commissioning a large sculpture from Brett Graham, whose

³⁸ Simon Jones, 'McCahon treasure for sale', *Sunday Star Times*, 18 April 1999, p. A3. For an account of the sale see Philip Matthews, 'Prophet motive', *Listener* 29 May 1999, pp. 36–37. Further reactions to the sale appear in Gregory O'Brien's essay 'Somebody say something', *Sport* 23 (Spring 1999), pp. 9–32.

³⁹ Letter, Colin McCahon to Victoria University of Wellington, 2 June 1981 (Adam Art Gallery files: VUW collection/Artists/McCahon).

40 *Manufacturing Meaning: The Victoria University of Wellington Art collection in context* (22 September 1999 – 31 January 2000). Ten curators were each commissioned to develop an exhibition based around a key work from the collection.



GAVIN HIPKINS
The Model (Action), 1999
(detail)
92 colour photographs
COMMISSIONED 1999

father's work *Tāne and Tūpai* was an earlier commission from the university.

While it was the subject of the Adam Art Gallery's opening exhibition *Manufacturing Meaning*,⁴⁰ the collection was never intended for permanent display at the gallery. Works have, however, been included in its exhibitions and those exhibitions have in turn stimulated further developments in the collection. Niki Hastings-McFall's sculpture *Flock of Blooms* (2001), for example, was commissioned for the exhibition *Botanica* and later added to the collection.

SHIFTING VIEWPOINTS, CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

Nearly sixty years after it was established, Victoria's art collection continues to grow. The Victoria University Art Collection Trust now oversees an active acquisitions programme, one that includes regular purchases and occasional gifts. The collection remains on show in the public spaces of the university's various campuses and works are periodically rehung.

Some of those works have become closely identified with Victoria. McCahon's vast *Gate III* is one. Appropriately for a painting in a university collection, it invites us to 'enter the gate of wisdom'. Sam Cairncross's *Daffodils* can equally be seen as a reminder of the collection's history – that it grew from small things, and that this growth was nurtured by a sense of duty to cultivate the arts. One recent gift, however, provides a fitting moment at which to conclude this history of the collection.

In 2000, prominent art patrons and Victoria alumni Roderick and Gillian Deane presented the university with Neil Dawson's outdoor sculpture *Flying Steps* (2000). Suspended high above the Hunter courtyard, the impressive work responds to shifting viewpoints with a range of changing perspectives. No less than *Daffodils* or *Gate III*, *Flying Steps* seems an appropriate analogy for Victoria University of Wellington's art collection. Built into the fabric of the campus, it is an essential part of the view – but what you see depends on where you stand.