Transforming the ‘unimaginative and literal’ into an art for the nation: writing and exhibiting New Zealand’s art history in the twentieth century

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On the 1 August 1936, New Zealand’s first state-supported art institution, the National Art Gallery, opened in Buckle St, Wellington, upstairs from the Dominion Museum in new, purpose-built premises. This belated and much anticipated event occurred just four years prior to New Zealand’s centenary, which celebrated the country’s official colonisation signalled by the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi on the 6 February 1840.1 One hundred years is both a long and a short time in the history of a nation, and perhaps, unsurprisingly, the place of New Zealand art in light of these new ‘national’ contexts and the extent to which it could be posited as a kind of narrative to inform the populace of their cultural heritage, was subject to construction and debate. Some kind of historical overview of the development of New Zealand art was necessarily part of both the opening exhibitions of the

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1 The Treaty of Waitangi is New Zealand’s founding document, first signed at Waitangi, in the Bay of Islands on 6 February 1840. It is an agreement, in Māori and English, which was made between the British Crown and about 540 Māori rangatira (chiefs).
National Art Gallery and the centennial celebrations. These took the form of a retrospective survey of New Zealand art at the National Art Gallery in 1936, and two events in association with the centenary: the National Centennial Exhibition of New Zealand Art curated by Alexander Hare McLintock and Eric Hall McCormick’s publication Letters and Art in New Zealand (1940). This article seeks to evaluate how New Zealand art to date – much of which was characterised by McLintock as ‘unimaginative and literal’ – was put to use in constructing a national history of New Zealand art. In the case of the two state-endorsed ventures, McLintock’s exhibition and McCormick’s text, the employment of works from library and museum collections was important for its recovery of more ‘historical’ or ‘topographical’ works for New Zealand’s art history. But they also articulated a desire to identify a modern element within New Zealand art, or ‘an art truly national’. Taken together, these exhibitions and associated publications provided the first attempts at a critical evaluation of New Zealand art and are consequently foundational documents for the writing of New Zealand’s art history.

The centennial exhibition/retrospective as genre

One of the things one comes to appreciate in studying museum history, for example, is how what we imagine to be the characteristic signature or style of the artefacts of a time, place or people is the product as much of an excavation of evidence for consistency as the culling or erasure or destruction (the “de-collection”) of objects deemed as confusingly disparate...the result is a certain homogeneity or purity of a patrimony or legacy, which can be “demonstrated” as developing progressively over time along a particular stylistic trajectory.

The paramount genre for establishing a trajectory such as Donald Preziosi articulates here must surely be that of the retrospective exhibition. Whether surveying an individual artist’s oeuvre, or a nation’s art, the retrospective is a genre that allows for the evaluation and assessment of ‘progress’ in art. By the 1930s the genre of the national retrospective exhibition was firmly established and both on the opening of the National Art Gallery and in association with the centennial celebrations of the founding of the colony of New Zealand in 1940, retrospective exhibitions of New Zealand art were mounted as an adjunct to the greater celebrations. While the convention of holding major international exhibitions to commemorate notable events in a country’s history was established with the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876, which marked the centennial anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the connection of a comprehensive

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2 Alexander Hare McLintock, National Centennial Exhibition of New Zealand Art, Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1940, 16.
4 This Exposition was intended to both celebrate one hundred years of American industrial and cultural progress while asserting America’s status as new world power. See, for example Robert W. Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle, Fair America: World’s Fairs in the United States.
survey of a nation’s art to such an occasion was inaugurated by the artistic capital, Paris, with their Exposition Universelle of 1889, held on the centenary of the French Revolution. On this occasion two distinct art exhibitions were mounted: a retrospective exhibition, L’Exposition Centennale de l’Art Français (French art of the previous century) and a contemporary exhibition, the Décennale (Art of the preceding decade).³

There was, however, a paradox embodied by the association of retrospective exhibitions with major international exhibitions. For the international exhibition celebrated modernity and progress and was located in the present moment, an investment that potentially ran counter to the sweep of a retrospective art exhibition. This issue was addressed in different ways. At the 1933 Century of Progress Exhibition, held to commemorate the founding of Chicago, the Fine Arts exhibition was not solely concerned to demonstrate the cultural produce of America; instead it demonstrated the cultural and economic capital of many American citizens by emphasising their role as collectors, thereby asserting America’s place on the economic and cultural world stage. Further, rather than provide an historical overview of art in America, a conscious decision was made to prioritise the aesthetic value of works of art, rather than include works of historical interest, resulting in a selection that could parallel, even rival, that of the French component.⁴ Four years later, in 1937, in association with the Exposition Universelle des Arts et Techniques, Paris mounted a retrospective art exhibition that surveyed two millennia of French Art. Here, the temporal disparity between the eternality of art and the modernity of the fair was turned to art’s advantage; for it was established that through art French ‘cultural constancy’ could be celebrated.⁵

Art, then, could be put to work in different ways, but ultimately in these contexts retrospective exhibitions became essential to the process of connecting art to both newly emerging and established nation states. Through the retrospective, a nation’s art was put on display, allowing its progress and development to be observed, while also enabling the work of individual artists to be brought to attention. In anticipation of a Retrospective Exhibition in Berlin in 1906, ‘H. W. S’ hoped the exhibition would ‘bring to general notice a number of artists who have been unduly neglected’ and that it would ‘enable us in many cases to pass the final judgement upon an artist, and to assign him his exact position with reference to his contemporaries’.⁶ The retrospective, then, was a means through which an individual artist’s work could be assessed not only in relation to his peers but also to the

Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000, 19. Many similarly commemorative exhibitions quickly followed, such as the Melbourne Centennial Exhibition of 1888-89. Here, there was no attempt to present an overview of Victoria’s art to date or assert its place on the international stage; rather, there was a degree of competitiveness between the colonies.

nation’s art history, which could possibly, as ‘H. W. S’ concluded, ‘entail the necessity of re-writing the history of modern German art’.9

Consequently, the presentation of objects within an exhibitionary context was necessary to the process of constructing a teleological narrative for the modern nation-state. The expected role that objects would play in constructing New Zealand’s history was articulated by Wellington Mayor, T. C. A. Hislop, in his 1936 opening speech for the National Art Gallery, when he stated:

…the artistic and technical merit should not be the sole test. Of equal importance is the national value of a work, its influence upon the community, and its place and effect in the history and development of our country in the past, and its influence in the years to come…10

These sentiments echoed those of Lord Bledisloe who, on laying the foundation stone two years earlier, had stated that ‘a nation was only as great as its art, and that its art was interwoven with the fabric of its history’.11 Objects in New Zealand’s new national institutions were to be embedded in a story or narrative that would provide an evolutionary history of the nation. It was essential that such a narrative be constructed so that the political and cultural identities of New Zealand might be brought together and imag(in)ed as one collective national identity. But there were two ways that objects could function in relation to the past. As Preziosi states, the ‘significance of any object can be made to appear a uniquely powerful witness to part of present events, and to the character, mentality, or spirit of a person, people, place, or time’.12 Thus an object could act as a ‘witness’, providing evidence of an absent past, or it could function in a more spiritual manner, such as in the 1937 Paris exhibition, to demonstrate something of the essence of a nation and its people. Preziosi suggests that museums ‘manufacture a twofold belief’ in these distinct, but complementary roles; that if an object is found to signify in terms of a national narrative, then it can be seen as representative of a common style or mentality, and that this in turn speaks of their being the ‘product and effect of that spirit or mentality’. The trap to be avoided in this discussion, however, is the assumption that a ‘national narrative’ already existed that simply awaited discovery. Rather, as Preziosi is careful to emphasise, the exhibition and the museum are actively involved in the fabrication of such a narrative.

10 ‘Art Gallery and Museum: official opening ceremony performed by Governor-General’, Evening Post, 1 August 1936, 10.
In the case of the 1936 opening and 1940 centennial celebrations, it was generally agreed that a high point had not yet been reached in contemporary New Zealand art. The Annual Report of the Museum and Gallery concluded of the 1936 exhibition that the ‘result was a collection of pictures and sculpture which demonstrated that, although we cannot yet claim to have developed a New Zealand School of Painting, the Dominion has produced some artists of outstanding ability’. This summation was echoed in McLintock’s ‘Introduction’ to the National Centennial Exhibition of New Zealand Art, where he wrote ‘Although it is quite apparent that at the present time New Zealand is far from possessing an art truly national, the future is not without promise’. McCormick, in Letters and Art in New Zealand, also concluded that a ‘national voice’ in literature and art was slowly emerging, but more so in literature, which was exhibiting ‘signs, few but positive, of adult nationhood’. The question is: exactly what kind of historical narrative was developed to provide a foundation for the future of New Zealand art? What artist figures were identified as those that might be emulated or serve as a historical point of reference for contemporary artists? What objects were brought together in initial attempts to fabricate a history of art in New Zealand through these exhibitions and publications supported by the state? To deal with these questions, it is necessary to consider the organisation and ideological approaches that informed the opening exhibition of the Gallery in 1936, the centennial exhibition of 1940 and the publication of Letters and Art in New Zealand.

Putting the ‘nation’ into the National Art Gallery

In November 1935 news reached Wellington that Mrs Murray Fuller was in London making arrangements for two of the five opening exhibitions for the National Art Gallery – the British Empire Loan Collection of Retrospective British Art and the Murray Fuller Collection of Contemporary British Art. While the British retrospective exhibition was to consist of loaned works, the Murray Fuller exhibition included works for sale, a fact that alarmed Academy members, not so much from an ethical point of view regarding selling art in the Gallery, but because if British works were for sale it might ‘spoil the sale of New Zealand works’. It was not until

14 McLintock, National Centennial Exhibition of New Zealand Art, 16.
17 Minutes of meeting of the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts (NZAFA), 6 December 1935, Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL): Micro-MS-0570-2. One suggestion put forward to resolve this situation was that Murray Fuller should not be allowed to bring out British works for under £100, thus
this news that the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts (Academy) realised they needed to make some definite plans for *New Zealand* Art at the opening exhibitions for the ‘opening of the gallery was a most opportune time to show how far New Zealand art had advanced and it would be a pity if New Zealand artists did not have the first exhibition in the New Zealand National Art Gallery’. By February 1936 it was decided that the New Zealand exhibits should consist of two parts: a retrospective historical collection and a collection of works for sale by living artists. However, it was soon realised that no financial allowance had been made for organising the opening exhibitions. Consequently, the National Art Gallery and Dominion Museum Board of Trustees resolved that the somewhat paltry sum of £50 be made available to the Academy for the ‘purpose of arranging a retrospective exhibition of New Zealand art at the opening of the new gallery’.

Nelson Isaacs, Nugent Welch and A. D. Carbery, all artists and members of the Academy council, were appointed as a sub-committee to organise the retrospective exhibition. Together, they drew up a list of artists who should be represented but there was no clear agenda for this exhibition, other than that it should be ‘representative of New Zealand art from the foundation of the Dominion to the present day’. To achieve this, the resources of other centres needed to be drawn upon and contact was made with galleries, private collectors and artists who might be able to lend works for the exhibition. The artist Harry Linley Richardson wrote to D. A. Ewen, the Academy President, in response to this request:

> The secretary of the New Zealand Academy has written to me about my being represented in the loan exhibition of New Zealand Art at the new National Art Gallery. The oil painting of the Old Maori Chieftainess – Tauhuri, of the Waikato tribe in your possession is representative of one phase of my artistic activities. If you would be so kind, and could spare the painting, I should like this to be exhibited in the Retrospective section.

So although it was retrospective in scope, the exhibition included the work of living artists, such as Richardson, many of whom were also represented in the concurrent Academy exhibition of *contemporary* New Zealand art. Ironically, the work by Richardson chosen to represent him in the retrospective survey was remarkably similar to that for sale in the Academy’s Annual Exhibition which formed part of the opening displays. A further point of cross-over existed in the display of the National

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18 Minutes of meeting of the NZAFA, 27 February 1936, ATL: Micro-MS-0570-2.
19 Minutes of meeting of National Art Gallery and Dominion Museum Board of Trustees, 27 March 1936, Te Papa Archives (TPA): MU88, folder 4, 1936.
20 ‘Loan of pictures: New Zealand works for Dominion Gallery’, *Dominion*, 20 April 1936, 11
21 Minutes of meeting of the NZAFA, 14 February 1936, ATL: Micro-MS-0570-2.
22 H. Linley Richardson to D. A. Ewen, Academy President, 9 June 1936, TPA: MU88, folder 4, 1936. This painting was reproduced as part of a full page collage of pictures in the National Art Gallery. See *Dominion*, 1 August 1936, 7.
Permanent Collection which included works by New Zealand artists that could equally have been part of the retrospective survey.  

The retrospective exhibition finally consisted of 164 works that were arranged in three rooms, Galleries ‘P’, ‘Q’ and ‘S’. It was well-received by critics, who recognised it represented the first attempt to present a comprehensive collection of historical New Zealand art in a gallery space. The Evening Post noted that the ‘national character of the new gallery is emphasised by the pictures on loan from other centres in the Dominion, which collectively make a most important exhibition of art in New Zealand from 1839 to 1936’. A later article reinforced the importance of art to identifying a developing sense of nation, stating that a ‘study of the progress of art is, perhaps, a surer indication of the evolution of a distinctly national genius than any other easily accessible evidence’. The belief, then, in the existence of a national spirit that might find its expression in the arts, underlay the presentation and interpretation of the art on display in the National Art Gallery.

The Evening Post concluded their overview of the retrospective exhibition by writing ‘there is a great deal revealed about the history of art in New Zealand by this section of the exhibition which will make strong appeal to all visitors to the galleries’. But how was this history articulated? Were the exhibits arranged in a manner that facilitated a chronological understanding of art in New Zealand, or in order that aesthetic appreciation might be fostered? The catalogue suggests there was a vague chronological organisation, with Gallery ‘S’ being dedicated to the ‘watercolour pioneers’, or the ‘old-timers’ as A.R.T. referred to them in the Dominion: the ‘late’ Charles Decimus Barraud, Charles Blomfield, William Mathew Hodgkins, James Crowe Richmond and John Gully. Gallery ‘Q’ by contrast seems to have held works by living artists, such as Richardson, as well as those who might be classified as belonging to the ‘impressionist’ school, including James Nairn, Dorothy Kate Richmond, Margaret O. Stoddart and Alfred Walsh. Gallery ‘P’ included a number of Maori portraits, such as those by Charles Frederick Goldie loaned by Auckland Art Gallery, and the star of the exhibition, Petrus van der Velden’s A Waterfall in the Otira Gorge, 1891, from Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Gallery ‘P’ also

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23 Included, for example, were works by Margaret Stoddart, Petrus Van der Velden, Sydney Lough Thomson and Dorothy Kate Richmond, who were also key artists featured in the retrospective collection. See National Art Gallery and Dominion Museum: Souvenir Catalogue of Pictures and Works of Art for Opening Exhibition, August, 1936, Wellington: Blundell Brothers, 1936, 64-5.

24 See the catalogue for lists of works hung in each room. Souvenir Catalogue of Pictures and Works of Art for Opening Exhibition, 64-5.


28 ‘“Retrospect”. Art in New Zealand’, 11


30 One article suggested that the ‘main idea underlying its arrangement is to show how various men and women have left their influence on painting as practised in New Zealand’. See ‘The National Art Gallery’, Evening Post, 30 July 1936, 5. However, this intention only appears to have been partially borne out in the arrangements as they are suggested in the catalogue.
included the ‘black and white’ section of the exhibition, resulting in the anachronistic juxtaposition of, for example, James Crowe Richmond’s 1869 pencil drawing of trees *Detribalised Natives, Taranaki*, alongside etchings by Mina Arndt and others from the early twentieth century, and caricatures by the famous cartoonist David Low.\textsuperscript{31} Within this vague ordering, there was little in the catalogue that conveyed a sense of the historical development of art in New Zealand: no dates were provided that indicated the lifespan of the artist or the dates of their works—the only indicator of chronology was the appendage of the word ‘late’ to the names of deceased artists—and there was no introduction to the scope or approach of the retrospective.\textsuperscript{32}

![Figure 2 Art works in the National Art Gallery, Wellington, 16 June 1936, 1936, photograph, The Dominion Post Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library: EP-Municipal-National Art Gallery-01.](image)

Photographs of the opening hang suggest there was little additional material provided in the exhibition context that might have enhanced the public’s understanding of the works on display. (fig 2) Labelling was sparse, prioritising the creation of an environment of minimal distraction to foster maximum aesthetic appreciation. The works, rather than being arranged in a salon-style hang, cheek-to-jowl, as had been in vogue in the Academy’s gallery in its previous location, were displayed according to the latest in Museum techniques, in a single layer on plain ‘burlap’ walls.\textsuperscript{33} The overwhelming drive behind the hang was aesthetic, and aimed

\textsuperscript{31} *Souvenir Catalogue of Pictures and Works of Art for Opening Exhibition*, 93-4.

\textsuperscript{32} James D. Herbert makes similar observations of the exhibition of two millennia of French art at the 1937 Paris Exposition. He suggests that this approach reinforced the notion that the works required no ‘explanation or interpretation’, that the ‘works of art were permitted to convey their meaning without curatorial interference’. See Herbert, *Paris 1937: Worlds on Exhibition*, 86. The works were, however, organised into period rooms that progressed through historical time. In the case of the New Zealand exhibition, it seems the lack of labelling would only have compounded the lack of clearly organised space.

\textsuperscript{33} The colours decided upon for the gallery spaces were grey-green for the black and white gallery and neutral scrim for the end walls of the large galleries. See Minutes of meeting of the NZAFA, 9 August 1935, ATL: Micro-MS-0570-2.
to make a dramatic impression on gallery visitors. For example, van der Velden’s work, one of the largest in the exhibition measuring 1130 x 1935mm, was hung so it could be seen down the full length of one of the corridors, meaning, as one newspaper commented, that this ‘majestic canvas can be viewed from afar or at close quarters’.  

![Figure 3](image)

Figure 3 J. T. Salmon, *National Art Gallery, View through Western Galleries to van der Velden’s ‘A Waterfall in the Otira Gorge’, 3 October 1936, reproduction from a black and white negative, Te Papa: MA_B.005611.*

The hang was effective in highlighting the status of this work and therefore that of the artist, van der Velden. He, along with Nairn, was regularly cited as a key influential figure in New Zealand artistic practice, establishing both as major figures in New Zealand’s art history. These artists, along with Girolamo Nerli, were recognised for bringing new approaches to art-making to New Zealand, as well as new attitudes about the place of the artist in society, establishing a place for the bohemian, or avant-garde in colonial New Zealand. The *Evening Post* article devoted to discussing this exhibition was based on a conversation with Mary Murray Fuller, in which she singled out the works of van der Velden and Nairn, an approach that was shared by A.R.T., who wrote of van der Velden’s *A Waterfall in the Otira Gorge* that this picture dominated this collection, ‘if not the whole of the contents of the galleries, because it is a masterpiece which would suitably take its place in any

34 *The National Art Gallery: Important collections, works of renowned artists. First display in Empire Tour*, *Evening Post*, 30 July 1936, 5
35 See Minutes of meeting of the NZAFA, 27 October 1936, and 16 November 1936, ATL: Micro-MS-0570-2.
36 Although Mrs Murray Fuller was not elected to the Academy Council until October 1936 or onto the National Art Gallery Committee of Management until November 1936, she appears to have taken on the role of spokesperson for the exhibitions in the National Art Gallery following the opening. See ““Retrospect”. Art in New Zealand”, 11
world-famous gallery’. Local achievements were ultimately judged by their international potential, and in this respect van der Velden’s work clearly triumphed.

While the collection was generally found to be impressive and A.R.T in the *Dominion* was moved to extend thanks to the various ‘art galleries and to citizens in so many parts of the Dominion who have ungrudgingly loaned their treasures’, the artist Roland Hipkins was critical of the very fact that the exhibition was, in essence, a *loan* exhibition. He commented:

One is struck by the fact that some of the best paintings of both past and present artists are privately owned... A National Art Gallery which cannot permanently show a collection truly representative of the art of this Dominion is without the status that its name implies... This retrospective exhibition is a revelation of the high standard of Dominion art, but what have we left when these works are returned to their respective owners?

Hipkins’ observation is borne out by a quick tally, which shows that the exhibition featured approximately 36 works from the National Collection compared with 70 or so loaned from private collectors, nearly 30 from artists themselves, with the remaining works coming from other galleries. However, rather than a negative feature of the exhibition, one could suggest that this demonstrated a spirit of co-operation between the centres, the lack of which had been criticised two years earlier in the 1934 report on New Zealand’s Art Galleries and Museums. The exhibition also acknowledged the fact that it drew heavily on other sources by its title ‘The Loan Collection of Retrospective Art in New Zealand’, but did include works from the National Collection. Most of these were works by the ‘old timers’ who featured in the ‘pioneer’ gallery, as well as key works by Nairn and van der Velden. What is interesting in this tally is that only one work was loaned from the Turnbull Library, Charles Blomfield’s landscape painting of the *Pink Terraces* the iconic tourist destination of the Roturua region destroyed by the eruption of Mt Tarawera in 1886. Rather than explore the richness of colonial art, the sub-committee made a very ‘safe’ selection – a broader and more thorough investigation of colonial art would, instead, be presented as part of the retrospective exhibition held in association with the centennial celebrations four years later.

Birthday celebrations: exhibiting New Zealand’s art

There is no doubt that the timing of the opening of the Gallery and Museum as well as the centennial celebrations was fraught: the first Labour Government was elected
in 1935, just as New Zealand was emerging from the Great Depression; and in 1939 world war once again broke out. But rather than putting a damper on New Zealand’s centennial celebrations, these events heightened the need to reinvigorate New Zealand society by bringing the pioneering spirit that such events would both commemorate and foster back into the public eye. In his study of worlds’ fairs Robert Rydell argues that such events ‘injected hope and optimism into a nation suffering from economic collapse’ and helped to focus attention on past achievements and possible future developments. This belief underpinned the government’s decision to persevere with the celebrations in the face of a second world war. The opening of the Gallery and the centennial celebrations also coincided with new discussions regarding the very nature of national culture, largely centred in the literary realm. And perhaps most importantly, the centennial celebrations provided an opportunity for New Zealand to look at itself and ‘take its place in the world’. For just as the individual ego is formed in part through relations with others, so too are nations, which are similarly defined as much by their abstract as their physical differences.

A key figure behind the centennial celebrations was Joseph Heenan, who returned to government under Labour as Under-Secretary for Internal Affairs. Heenan was, as Rachel Barrowman writes, the imaginative and administrative power behind the ‘flurry of institution building’ which ‘set the state at the core of the infrastructure of post-war cultural development’. While a key event in the centennial year was the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition in Rongotai, Wellington, from 8 November 1939 to 4 May 1940, Heenan’s plan was for 1940 to be conceived not so much a ‘centenary year as a year of centenaries’. Consequently, commemorative events took place throughout the country and ranged from the erection of public monuments to the re-enactments of pioneering moments. There was, however, a strong focus on the cultural dimension of nationalism associated with the centennial celebrations. This was manifest in the support of a variety of projects that fostered recognition of New Zealand’s achievements over the last century in learning, science and the arts, such as the historical surveys, the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, and the pictorial studies titled New Zealand in the Making.

42 William Renwick notes that while plans were reviewed, the government decided to proceed with the programme of national events. Visitor numbers to the Exhibition were, however, not as high as had been expected and several international contributors chose not to participate. See William Renwick, ed. Creating a National Spirit: Celebrating New Zealand’s Centennial, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2004, 19.
47 For an indication of the range of events and associated publications, see Renwick, ed. Creating a National Spirit.
As far as art was concerned, as Roger Blackley notes, there was no ‘single, triumphant showing of art’ associated with the centennial celebrations. Instead there were at least five different exhibitions held in different locations that could cater to the desires of an art-seeking audience. The New Zealand Artists Society and the Academy exhibition focussed on contemporary New Zealand artists and their works, while the main drawcard at the Gallery was a collection of international art organised by Mary Murray Fuller consisting of 562 works by British, French and Belgian artists for sale. (fig 4)

The idea of a comprehensive, touring exhibition of New Zealand art, the ‘National Centennial Exhibition of New Zealand Art’, was appealing to Heenan, who favoured events that would have national, not just central, relevance. Although

49 These included the ‘Centennial International Exhibition of International Art’ and the ‘Annual Exhibition of the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts’ at the Gallery, the ‘New Zealand Artists Society (Inc)’ and the ‘Australian Pavilion’ at the Centennial Exhibition, Rongotai and the ‘National Centennial Exhibition of New Zealand Art’ which toured the country. ‘Our Centennial’, Art in New Zealand, 7: 2, 1939, 69.
50 This Society had come into existence for the sole purpose of ensuring the work of New Zealand artists was ‘on view at the Exhibition’, that is, on site at the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, the focus of official celebrations. ‘Our Centennial’, 1939, 81.
51 This exhibition took place from November 1939 to April 1940. The works exhibited were mostly for sale and the fact that they were unable to be returned to their origins due to the outbreak of war, meant that a disproportionate number were ultimately acquired for the National Collection.
he was not officially appointed in charge of the exhibition until April 1939, Alexander Hare McLintock, a historian temporarily employed by the Centennial Branch, had come up with the idea, and was probably involved in drafting the following memorandum which outlined the proposed scope of the exhibition. This is worth quoting at length:

The Centennial year affords an excellent opportunity for a complete visual survey of New Zealand Art – a national stock-taking, as it were – and we should like to suggest that this is the proper time for organising such an Exhibition, ranging in scope from the work of the earliest artists and surveyors who visited New Zealand before white settlement up to the present day. The exhibition would begin with the work of Parkinson, who accompanied Captain Cook, and aim at including representative drawings by the early pioneers who were really the first New Zealand artists…The exhibition should be thoroughly representative at all stages so as to show the development of art through the century, and on to the present day. If this line is followed a complete survey of New Zealand art in all its aspects would be achieved. It is not suggested that the exhibition should be confined to one centre, but that it should be displayed in all centres throughout New Zealand in order to extend its range of influence and interest.\(^52\)

The scope outlined here is at once more comprehensive and more wide-ranging than the Gallery’s opening retrospective exhibition of 1936. As well as extending the historical scope to include pre-colonial material, it was also imagined from the outset that the exhibition ‘would consist not only of paintings, but also of drawings, etchings, lithographs, caricatures, cartoons, book illustrations and sculpture’.\(^53\) This effectively erased the perceived boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art and, in a way, brought together the works of art that were artificially separated between the upper and lower levels of the Museum and Gallery. Some material was, however, left out of the picture: photographic art was not included in the exhibition, but the committee ‘urged’ that ‘photographic societies…stage local exhibitions of their work’. Likewise, although sculpture was to be included, the practicalities of transportation meant that ultimately it was only represented through the insufficient medium of photography. The initial hope that specimens of Maori art might be included was never realised.\(^54\)

The appointed committee consisted of representatives from throughout New Zealand, meaning the project was geographically national in conception. One of the first issues the committee faced was how to define a “New Zealand artist”. As item three on the agenda of the first meeting, this was clearly a matter requiring clarification. However, the fact that the following ‘definition’ was recorded in pencil on the typed minutes suggests there was difficulty reaching a consensus: ‘Any

\(^{52}\) Memorandum for Under-Secretary of Internal Affairs, 16 March 1939, Archives New Zealand (ANZ): IA1, series 1, record 62/106, part 1.
\(^{53}\) Memorandum for newspapers, 12 September 1939, ANZ: IA1, series 1, record 62/106, part 1.
\(^{54}\) Minutes of National Centennial Exhibition Committee, 29 June 1939, ANZ: IA1, series 1, record 62/106, part 1.
artist who at any time has been domiciled in New Zealand and whose work, in the opinion of the Committee, has had sufficient influence on New Zealand art to warrant his inclusion.\(^{55}\) This definition was broad enough to allow works by artists as diverse as Sydney Parkinson, artist on Cook’s first voyage, and David Low, expatriate caricaturist, to be included in the exhibition.

It was intended that material should primarily be drawn from public collections, followed by appeals to collectors and artists. The selection process was democratically conceived: regions were asked to draw up lists of deceased artists who should be included and living artists were asked to submit two works to a selection committee in the four centres, Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. McLintock made the final selections and clearly had a strong idea as to what he wanted on show and what would be most relevant to constructing a historical picture of the development of art in New Zealand. For example, McLintock wanted to exhibit Mabel McIndoe’s (née Hill) portrait of James Nairn, but she resisted, writing ‘I have a feeling that as I am still alive, I should like to be represented by a painting done at the present time, as well as one painted over forty years ago.’\(^{56}\) McLintock replied that it was unlikely another painting would fit, and that the ‘Nairn would be most interesting to the general public as it would be a portrait of an outstanding artist.’\(^{57}\) In contrast McLintock requested a second painting, preferably a portrait, from Sydney Lough Thomson, who had asked to be represented by *Horses on the Quay*. In this way, the number of works by which an artist was represented offered some indication of their perceived importance to the national narrative. McIndoe eventually came around to McLintock’s preference, writing:

> I have been “smithering” over your letter...and have come to the conclusion that you are right and I am wrong – that Jimmy Nairn’s portrait has more historical interest in an Exhibition such as we are going to have, than all the silly little rose pieces I can paint at the present, good, bad, or indifferent...please reverse my “preference for my more recent work” to that of “my ancient of days” and probably better effort.\(^{58}\)

Through such carefully managed negotiations, and polite refusals of inappropriate works, McLintock achieved an exhibition that comprised the most comprehensive and inclusive survey of New Zealand art to date. Loans were negotiated from a wide range of institutions and individuals, with over half of the 355 works on display drawn from public collections. In contrast with the 1936 exhibition, where only one work was loaned from the Alexander Turnbull Library, the Library was a key contributor, lending some 50 works for exhibition.\(^{59}\) This reflected the centrality

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55 Minutes of National Centennial Exhibition Committee, 29 June 1939, ANZ: IA1, series 1, record 62/106, part 1.
56 Mabel McIndoe to McLintock, 30 December 1939, ANZ: IA1, series 1, record 62/106, part 3.
57 McLintock to McIndoe, 4 January 1940, ANZ: IA1, series 1, record 62/106, part 3.
58 McIndoe to McLintock, 12 January 1940, ANZ: IA1, series 1, record 62/106, part 4.
59 The Alexander Turnbull Library was established with the bequest of Alexander Turnbull’s collection to the state in 1918. Turnbull (1868-1918) was a bibliophile whose collection focussed on material
of the Library as a well-utilised resource for the Centennial celebrations, a point that was emphasised in Turnbull-generated publicity after the event:

Taken together, the reproductions and originals in the Pacific collection ...have proved to be an immense asset in the recent extensive historical research done for the Centennial of this country, in particular for the numerous publications, much of the material and illustrations of which were garnered in the Turnbull Library.\textsuperscript{60}

The heavy borrowing from the Turnbull meant that pre-colonial works were well-represented in the exhibition, such as works by the artists on board Cook’s voyages, as well as early French expeditions to the Pacific: the ‘first visiting artists to New Zealand when it was almost a terra incognita’.\textsuperscript{61} Early surveyor artists including Charles Heaphy and William Fox, settler artists William Strutt and John Alexander Gilfillan and soldier artists such as Horatio Gordon Robley and Gustave Von Tempsky, were also represented. This more historical body of work proved the most interesting to many reviewers. In Auckland, a writer for the *Star* asked:

How many New Zealanders realise that the name of Major Von Tempsky, which stands out so romantically from the pages of early Dominion history, would be found in an art exhibition? There are two examples of his work, one from the Turnbull Library and one from the Hocken Library. Both of them reveal him as having been quite an accomplished watercolourist’.\textsuperscript{62}

Despite this historical strength, approximately 123 of the 223 artists on show were classified as contemporary and only 100 as retrospective, women were outnumbered by men and painting remained the dominant medium, despite initial attempts to be more inclusive in terms of media.\textsuperscript{63}

The exhibition was scheduled to tour 15 venues throughout the North and South Islands and generally received positive reception in the press, particularly regarding its rich chronological sweep. (fig 5) It aimed to enlighten New Zealanders as to their own cultural heritage, for, as McLintock proudly wrote ‘I venture to state that this work is barely known to anyone outside a limited circle which is acquainted with art collections in the Turnbull and Hocken Libraries’.\textsuperscript{64} But although it was democratically conceived and made widely accessible, the exhibition was not wholly taken to the hearts of New Zealanders. From Invercargill, McLintock wrote ‘the local committee are fairly good, but in a place where art has

\textsuperscript{60} Alice Woodhouse and A. St. C. Murray-Oliver, ‘Art Treasures of the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington’, *Art in New Zealand*, 8:3, 1941, 118.

\textsuperscript{61} McLintock, June 1939, ANZ: IA1, series 1, record 62/106, part 1.

\textsuperscript{62} ‘Was too big! Gallery picture: window was enlarged. Salisbury’s coronation’, *Auckland Star*, 12 June 1940.

\textsuperscript{63} The exhibition included pastels, pen and ink drawings, and a wide variety of printing techniques, caricatures and cartoons. See McLintock, *National Centennial Exhibition of New Zealand Art*.

\textsuperscript{64} McLintock, June 1939, ANZ: IA1, series 1, record 62/106, part 1.
been as dead as a Dodo, it’s not easy to get things moving’.\textsuperscript{65} Mary Murray Fuller later wrote to Mulligan from Hamilton, ‘the response here is very bad’.\textsuperscript{66} McLintock summed up the problem, complaining ‘Everyone moans about the war but I’m afraid the term “N. Z. Art” damns it. If we called it Hottentot, Chinese, or even German, we’d get a better run. What we do need is the “Coronation picture” to provide a boost. That drew the crowds in Wellington’.\textsuperscript{67} McLintock was clearly run down by the demands of organising and running the exhibition and when offered a position as Lecturer in History at Otago University to begin mid-April 1940, he dropped the exhibition. The Director of Centennial Pageantry, W. S. Wauchop, took over until mid-June when the indomitable Mary Murray Fuller was appointed director of the exhibition.

Figure 5 Hanging paintings for the opening of the Centennial Exhibition in Dunedin, \textit{Otago Daily Times}, 15 February 1940, p. 13. McLintock stands third from right, Gordon Tovey holds a painting and Mabel Hill is on the far right. The painting being hung is Walter Wright’s \textit{A Native Gathering}, oil on canvas, Auckland Art Gallery.

Ultimately, as McLintock predicted, it was the ‘Coronation picture’ by Frank Salisbury that drew the crowds. Wauchop wrote from Auckland that “it is a case of “hundreds being turned away” as the coronation picture is not here and they “will come later”’.\textsuperscript{68} (fig 6) This echoed the situation at Philadelphia’s International Exposition of 1876, where the crowd in front of William Frith’s \textit{Marriage of H.R.H}

\textsuperscript{65} McLintock to Mulligan, 27 March 1940, ANZ: IA1, series 1, record 62/106, part 5.
\textsuperscript{66} Murray Fuller to Mulligan, 14 August 1940, ANZ: IA1, series 1, record 62/106, part 5.
\textsuperscript{67} McLintock to Mulligan, 27 March 1940, ANZ: IA1, series 1, record 62/106, part 5.
\textsuperscript{68} Wauchop to Arthur, 14 June 1940, ANZ: IA1, series 1, record 62/106, part 5.
and the Prince of Wales ‘was impassable from the opening to the closing of the doors, and it was necessary to have a guardian continually stationed there to protect the picture, and keep the crowd moving’.69 The irony at both Philadelphia and New Zealand was that while the governments were attempting to nourish a locally inscribed national culture, it seemed the masses would only emerge for reminders of

the imperial centre. In New Zealand, this response also reflected the complicated coexistence of national independence and colonial deference that underpinned the conceptualisation of the centennial celebrations. For, as Stuart Murray writes, these championed the ‘achievements of New Zealand as an independent nation while stressing the place of the nation within the extended family of Empire’.\(^{70}\) The fact that Salisbury’s painting was commissioned by the Dominions for presentation to the King and Queen reinforced this paradoxical position, for the painting could be seen to embody a sense of pride in colonial achievement and their collective ability to present something of such a grand scale to the imperial centre. In practical terms, too, the scale of the work, 17’6” by 10’4”, meant it undoubtedly fulfilled a public desire for spectacle, and provided a touch of royal glamour that had perhaps been missing from the humdrum of existence in 1930s New Zealand.\(^{71}\) Van der Velden’s *A Waterfall in the Otira Gorge*, which had provided such a dramatic centrepiece for the opening retrospective exhibition and which could have provided a comparable degree of the ‘spectacular’, was not part of the touring exhibition due to its size and weight and the difficulties involved with its transportation.

**Writing New Zealand’s Art History**

One final publication needs to be introduced before the writing of New Zealand’s art history can be more closely examined: Eric Hall McCormick’s *Letters and Art in New Zealand*. This was one of eleven Centennial historical surveys produced under the guidance of the National Historical Committee. These publications were intended to be ‘scholarly, popular and affordable’, and ranged in subject from *New Zealanders in Science* to *New Zealanders in the World*.\(^{72}\) *Letters and Art in New Zealand* was a distillation of McCormick’s Cambridge thesis and provided a dual account of the progress of literature and art in New Zealand from first contact to the present day. It was praised as ‘easily the best of the surveys and the first important critical work by a New Zealander’ by Canterbury academic Leicester Webb.\(^{73}\) It was, however, heavily biased towards the literary, rather than the artistic, devoting only one quarter of the text to art, a fact that invited criticism from the press. One reviewer suggested McCormick ‘should have been allowed another volume to deal with the manner of native self-expression through the medium of line and colour’\(^{74}\) while the *Times Literary Supplement* felt that ‘it tells us less about the less familiar art

\(^{70}\) Murray, *Never a Soul at Home*, 22.

\(^{71}\) Van der Velden’s *A Waterfall in the Otira Gorge*, which had provided such a dramatic centrepiece for the opening retrospective exhibition was not part of the touring exhibition due to its size and weight and the difficulties involved with its transportation.


\(^{73}\) Quoted in Heenan to ‘Mac’, 25 February 1941, ATL: MS-Papers-0166-14.

than about the comparatively accessible letters’. This bias is also reflected in more recent critical evaluations of McCormick’s text, which primarily deal with the literary side of *Letters and Art in New Zealand*, but seldom address the art historical. Nonetheless, McLintock’s catalogue essay and McCormick’s survey text are commonly considered the founding documents of New Zealand’s art history, so it is worthwhile comparing their approaches. (see figs 7 and 8)

**Figure 7** A. H. McLintock, *National Centennial Exhibition of New Zealand Art: Catalogue*, Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1940. Cover featuring *A Valley in the Seaward Kaikouras* by Alfred W. Walsh.

**Figure 8** E.H. McCormick, *Letters and Art in New Zealand*, Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1940, cover.

As noted, the touring exhibition differed from the 1936 exhibition through its more inclusive approach and the attempt to articulate an overview of the development of New Zealand art to 1940. The Christchurch Press noted, the exhibition was ‘far more than a collection of paintings, for it represents the development of New Zealand and the gradual appearance of new ideas in art’. But as in the case of the 1936 exhibition, a lack of documentation makes it difficult to evaluate the visual presentation of the wide variety of material at its various venues. One clue is provided by Harry Tombs’ critique of the exhibition, which suggests the works were arranged by media, meaning that the ‘beholder who desires to know what work was done, say, in the first twenty-five years of our history, has to hunt through the water-colours which begin one end, then the oils which begin at the other, and finally the drawings’. Presumably taking a dig at the aesthetically and commercially-minded Murray Fuller, Tombs suggested that the ‘ordinary rules regarding hanging such as those generally adopted when pictures are for sale should be over-ruled by considerations of the purpose for which the exhibition was got together, ie., an historical survey of our art for the century’. Tombs proposed a five-part periodisation: the period prior to colonisation; from colonisation to the formation of art societies; the art society period to van der Velden and Nairn; from van der Velden to the end of the Great War; and from last Great War to present time. C.R.S, possibly Cedric Savage, writing for the Christchurch Press, condensed the first two of Tombs’ categories to suggest four categories: the ‘topographical work of the pioneer surveyors and explorers’; the ‘work of early emigrant artists and visitors’; that of the ‘schools which arose from the influence of Van der Velden and Nairn; and of the ‘modern school done in the last 20 years’. Dividing the exhibition into chronological sections, particularly in newspaper reviews, would have helped make sense of the works on display for a lay viewer, and act as a preparatory guide to interpreting the exhibition.

The apparent lack of narrative developed in the exhibition itself was, in part, Tombs admitted, made up for by the accompanying ‘well-produced catalogue, complete with biographical notes and illustrations’. The catalogue was conceived as an essential part of McLintock’s project and was closely modelled on that produced for A Century of Canadian Art staged at the Tate in 1938 (fig 9) It provided details of artists’ lives and brief biographies where they could be recovered, and it was felt that the publication would ‘form the basis of a history of New Zealand art’. However, according to Murray Fuller the catalogue was:

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77 ‘New Zealand Art: work since earliest times. Centennial display at Gallery’, The Press, 17 April 1940, 15.
79 Tombs, ‘New Zealand and American Art, 155.
80 C.R.S., ‘New Zealand Art. Two important influences: the period before the war’, The Press, 22 April 1940, 7.
81 Memorandum for Under-Secretary of Internal Affairs, 16 March 1939, ANZ: IA1, series 1, record 62/106, part 1.
82 A Century of Canadian Art, London: Tate Gallery, 1938. This decision was noted in the Minutes of National Centennial Exhibition Committee, 29 June 1939, ANZ: IA1, series 1, record 62/106, part 2.
...full of inaccuracies and omissions. Several important figures in the history of New Zealand art had been left out. The director had apparently referred to obsolete directories instead of approaching the artists themselves or people who could have given him accurate information. The Chairman and other members expressed the opinion that the catalogue was inaccurate and the introduction badly compiled. It was a great pity that the catalogue should have to go through the country as an official history of New Zealand art.  

The archival material relating to the exhibition preparation records the difficulties that McLintock encountered in bringing together this information for the catalogue. Not only was it the first time such an effort had been made, but the project was convened within six months, an extraordinary feat by any estimation. Further, artists had been approached, but had proven lax in providing information, causing McLintock to ask of John Barr ‘Finally, could you tell me if these people are to be classed among the “quick” or the “dead”? One wonders, too, who Murray Fuller

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84 Minutes of meeting of the NZAFA, 26 February 1940, ATL: Micro-MS-0570-2.
85 McLintock to John Barr, 14 December 1939, ANZ: IA1, series 1, record 62/106, part 3. Further inquiries were made to the Deputy Registrar to attempt to find out dates and places of birth and/or death of artists such as J Peele, E. Gouldsmith, Alfred Sharpe, and T. S. Cousins. See Mulligan to G. G. Hodgkins, Deputy Registrar, 12 January 1940, ANZ: IA1, series 1, record 62/106, part 3. NB. ‘Native’ in
would have included, and it is worth noting that this criticism was made prior to her taking responsibility for the exhibition in June 1940.

Central to these retrospective exercises was a ‘search for origins’ that would enable diachronic comparisons to take place so that connections between the past and present as well as patterns of development over time might be observed. Although both McLintock and McCormick noted the presence of a cultural tradition in New Zealand prior to the arrival of Europeans, that of the Maori, no further consideration of this tradition was provided in either of their accounts. Instead, as Hilliard observes, this acted as a narrative device, a Maori prologue of sorts that was set aside in order to allow the ‘real’ story to begin. In the planning stages McLintock had anticipated that the display of early cartoons, drawings and caricatures would ‘reveal the beginning of a virile native art which has produced a David Low’. Likewise, it was considered that contemporary art would ‘form the logical conclusion to the whole display and will provide the public with an opportunity of comparing the past with the present’. Despite this intention, McLintock’s introductory text largely shied away from drawing such comparisons, and from Tombs’ critique, it seems that little in the exhibition layout fostered an interpretation based on this approach. Neither, as has been discussed, did the 1936 opening exhibition at the Gallery encourage a critical or historical reading of New Zealand art in context. Even with its literary bias, it was McCormick that most thoroughly carried through out a comparative evaluation of the progress of art in New Zealand.

The colonial artists Charles Heaphy and John Buchanan were central to the development of McCormick’s thesis. Throughout Letters and Art, Heaphy, in particular, stands as a point of reference, a standard against which other artists’ achievements are compared and measured. In both literature and art, McCormick sought to identify an ‘authentic’ authorial voice, one that had thrown off the shackles of inherited British and European modes of representation and developed a confidence in engaging with the local on its own terms. Thus he wrote ‘throughout the range of Heaphy’s work you are aware of a man wrestling with the strange contours and colours of a new environment and, moreover, attempting to define the peculiar quality of each part of New Zealand, as he visited it in turn’. This quality was also valued by McLintock, who most keenly appreciated the efforts of young

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this context, refers not to the indigenous inhabitants of New Zealand, Maori, but to an art born of New Zealand by Pakeha, born and raised in the colony.

86 Such an approach was typical of other colonies’ art histories. One of the first histories of Canadian art began by considering Indian art, only to dismiss it as purely utilitarian, while an early history of Australian art considered much early rock art to be attributed to cultures other than Australian Aborigines. See Newton MacTavish, The Fine Arts in Canada, Toronto: Coles Publishing, 1973 [1925], 1 and William Moore, The Story of Australian Art: From the Earliest Known Art of the Continent to the Art of Today, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1980 [1934], 1-3.


88 McLintock, June 1939, ANZ: IA1, series 1, record 62/106, part 1.

89 McLintock, June 1939, ANZ: IA1, series 1, record 62/106, part 1.


91 McCormick, Letters and Art in New Zealand, 34.
New Zealanders who interpreted the ‘characteristics of their country without undue reliance upon European styles and methods’. That this turn of phrase is closely modelled on Vincent Massey’s ‘Foreword’ in the 1938 catalogue of *A Century of Canadian Art* is unsurprising, for the identification of this quality in art became central to the identification of an independent ‘national’ art in the various art histories of the British Dominions. To this end, McCormick drew textual comparisons between artists working at different times and within different modes throughout his text, while McLintock provided less an evaluative account and more a brief overview of New Zealand art to date. Thus, where McLintock discussed the nineteenth-century artists John Gully and John Buchanan separately, as representative of different approaches to art-making – Buchanan a ‘surveyor-explorer’ whose attitude was ‘topographical rather than interpretative’ and Gully one of a group of individuals ‘eager to devote their talents to the furtherance of national art’ – McCormick acknowledged their divergent backgrounds, yet compared their output according to his criteria. As was the case with Heaphy, McCormick saw that Buchanan’s strength lay in the very fact that his work was that of a draughtsman, not an artist, for this meant he was ‘free from the nineteenth-century Romantic conventions which so hampered his contemporaries, both the artists and poets’ and was therefore able to ‘escape the tyranny of an imported tradition to achieve a degree of emancipation found only rarely among later writers and artists’. In their respective images of Milford Sound, McCormick found grandeur in Buchanan’s stripped back emphasis on line and form, while Gully’s attempt to convey grandeur by depicting a ‘microscopically exact foreground and its tiny ship to emphasise the immensity of the mountains’ used a well-worn trope that was merely ‘insipid and obvious’. McCormick also compared works from different media, for example Gully and poet Alfred Domett, seeing in both their work a romantic approach to their subject which relied upon extensive description rather than the distillation apparent in Heaphy and Buchanan.

Buchanan and Heaphy recur as positive ancestral figures for New Zealand art throughout McCormick’s text and are drawn upon to reinforce his opinions regarding the social conditions for art-making. For example, in the chapter ‘Between two hemispheres’, where McCormick deals with expatriatism and its effect on New Zealand artists, Alfred Walsh emerges as an example of an artist who, like Buchanan was by training a draughtsman, and who, alone among his generation had no experience abroad. For McCormick, this raises the question as to ‘whether

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92 McLintock, *National Centennial Exhibition of New Zealand Art*, 16.
93 Vincent Massey wrote ‘In the early years of the present century a determination appeared among the younger Canadian artists to attempt an interpretation of their country without undue reference to European styles and methods’. See *A Century of Canadian Art*, np.
the stimulus of Paris or a training at the Slade were indispensable prerequisites to a career in New Zealand art’. 98

Lastly, while the plates at the back of McLintock’s catalogue are in no logical order, either by chronology or alphabet, McCormick reinforced his textual observations with pertinent visual comparisons, juxtaposing, for example, Heaphy’s c.1840 and Christopher Perkins’ 1931 representations of Mt Taranaki to iconic effect. 99 (fig 10) While Heaphy’s view remained the superior, Perkins was seen to exert an invigorating influence on young New Zealand artists that might help them recover the ‘freshness of vision’ that Heaphy had brought to the landscape. 100 Both artists were seen to strip away any romantic atmosphere, refuse any narrative, and convey the scene with clear outlining. Consequently, admiration for Perkins was not based on his ability to ‘accurately’ describe a view, but on the idea that he was using line, colour and form to convey some deeper, inherent truth about the land. In this comparison then, ideas about modern art were beginning to be applied to nationalist ends.

McCormick’s comparisons were carefully considered to illustrate what he considered the ‘better’ of two different approaches. To this end, Gully’s ‘insipid and obvious’ Milford Sound was played off to detrimental effect next to Buchanan’s version of the same subject, which according to McLintock, abandoned detail in order to place emphasis on the ‘superb lines and masses of the mountains, as they rise and fall’. 101 Similarly Goldie’s ‘archaeological’ Maori portrait was criticised, both because it represented a defeatist vision of the race and its old-fashioned hyper-realism, next to Frances Hodgkins’ ‘resurgent’ depiction of a Maori Woman and Child. 102 (figs 11 and 12) In each example, the play off was between a ‘hackneyed’ and ‘derivative’ representation, with one that was apparently ‘true’ to its subject.

In conclusion, then, it is clear that some kind of ‘authenticity’ was a crucial factor in McCormick and McLintock’s assessment of New Zealand art. In New Zealand’s art criticism to this point there was a prevalent tendency to judge pictures according to how accurately they recorded evidence of a direct experience of a depicted scene. In contrast, McCormick and McLintock were working within a modernist framework and were concerned with authenticity of artistic expression. This did not rely on a truthful description of place, but a truthful response to place that was conveyed honestly, without reliance on inherited pictorial models. This requirement was central to the modern attitude in art, which demanded an individual, expressive response to subject. For this reason, the identification of ancestral figures who exhibited such characteristics was crucial to present and future developments in New Zealand art.

100 McCormick, Letters and Art in New Zealand, 192.
101 McCormick, Letters and Art in New Zealand, 102.
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Indeed—no more than this; they portray experiences of an elusive kind, rarely to be expressed in words—words in fact being the wrong medium, unless they are used by a sensitive poet, and poets, as distinct from versifiers, were few in early New Zealand. Throughout the range of Hephy’s work you are aware of a man wrestling with the strange contours and colours of a new environment and, moreover, attempting to define the peculiar quality of each part of New Zealand, as he visited it in turn. The magnificent sweep of Cloudy Bay, where sea, hills, and bush unite in one curving harmony; then, in the sub-tropical north, the oyster bed of a tidal river overshadowed by dense kauri; and, again in the south, the waves, open WairarapaPlain, contrasting with the glooms of the upper Buller region which no sunshine can quite dispel—all this was within Hephy’s compass. Sometimes the work fails, more often than not because his vision is blurred by the softer greens and blues of the English landscape or because he cannot forget the subdued palette of his earlier days. When he does get away from the conventions of his time, ignoring the requirements of directors and treating a New Zealand subject freely in his own way, the result is a small masterpiece. Such is the beautifully decorative ‘Kakariki, from Ship Cove and Tiwaii’ (1853) and such ‘Mt. Egmont from the southward’, which remains one of the few satisfying

Figure 10 McCormick, Letters and Art in New Zealand facing page 34, showing Charles Heaphy’s and Christopher Perkins’ views of Mount Taranaki.

Letters and Art in New Zealand

Figure 11 Letters and Art in New Zealand facing page 102, showing John Buchanan’s and John Gully’s views of Milford Sound.
The irony is that in the works of Heaphy and Buchanan the qualities of truth to place and truth to self were seen to coexist, and consequently their achievements might be positively emulated by contemporary artists. For as surveyor artists, their depictions were relied upon to convey a reasonably accurate sense of place – they were witness to an historical moment – yet they also conveyed an engagement with the essence of place and could therefore stand as representative of the spirit of a nation and its people. It is here, then, that the separation of the historical from the aesthetic, in an assessment of colonial New Zealand art becomes problematic, and, arguably, redundant.

However, the aesthetic rehabilitation and establishment of those early colonial artists espoused by McLintock and McCormick as fit for a canon of New Zealand art was not wholly taken up by institutions. Most notably, the National Art Gallery continued to exemplify an aesthetic and conservative approach to the collection and display of art, one that clearly sought to demarcate its collections from those of its fellow government institutions, the Alexander Turnbull Library and the Dominion Museum. This approach is evident in the entry on New Zealand art in the 1966 Encyclopaedia written by Stewart McLennan, the first appointed director of the National Art Gallery from 1948 to 1968:

We have to decide, however, whether we are to accept as our starting point the works of charming but minor British artists like Heaphy, Angas, and
Brees, just because they happened to come to New Zealand, or to forge the links back to Cotman, De Wint, Constable, and Turner. Believing this to be the proper course, the National Art Gallery has acquired through the Sir Harold Beauchamp Fund, a small but choice collection of eighteenth century English watercolours.103

This approach impacted greatly on the strategies of the Gallery throughout most of the twentieth century, meaning that the ground-breaking efforts of McLintock and McCormick were not taken up by McLennan, but were built upon by the efforts of Auckland Art Gallery exhibitions and publications during the 1950s and 1960s under the influence of Gallery Directors Eric Westbrook and Peter Tomory, and curators and art historians, Gordon H. Brown and Hamish Keith.104

As demonstrated, the ‘invention/discovery of precursors’ or antecedents for a national tradition, as Francis Pound puts it, was initiated by McCormick and McLintock’s efforts in association with the centennial celebrations of 1940.105 The retrospective exhibition held in conjunction with the opening of the National Art Gallery failed to contextualise the works on show in any way that might support such a project. Consequently, while the book, Letters and Art in New Zealand, and the exhibition were supported by the state, neither McLintock nor McCormick was directly connected to any of the state’s cultural institutions, the Museum, Gallery or Library. From this position they were able to actively mobilise colonial works of art from the state collections, primarily the Library, to support their germinal histories, performing what Preziosi characterizes as ‘the basic historical gesture of separating out of the present a certain specific ‘past’ so as to collect and recompose (to re-member) its displaced and dismembered relics as elements in a genealogy of and for the present’.106 In doing so, they established a genealogy that has proved remarkably persistent in the writing of New Zealand’s Art History.

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