

Cultural Memory – A short history of the Whangarei Art Collection 1921 - 2008

Scott Pothan and Ashley Remer trace the complex genesis of Northland's leading public art museum and its collection, illustrating the shifting fortunes and struggles of culture in provincial politics.

EARLY PROMISE

In 1919, Adele Younghusband formed a partnership with painter and photographer George Woolley (1878 - 1969) in a business at the Art Studio in Whangarei's Bank Street, specializing in family and wedding portraiture. Widely acknowledged now as one of Northland's and New Zealand's most significant artists, she was involved in many activities in her struggle to support her three children. She held art classes and exhibitions, created all the make-up for the Whangarei Operatic Society and exhibited her photography at the Whangarei Winter Show. The Art Studio became a local cultural landmark opposite the impressive Town Hall building. The Whangarei Arts and Literary Society founded by Woolley and Younghusband in 1921 had its official premises there. With its motto, 'If not the best – our best', they hoped the new society would fulfil its aims, "to foster a love of art among the people to hold exhibitions of art and to found an art gallery." Thomas Loudon Drummond (1850 - 1926), a well-known local artist and a founding member of the Auckland Society of Arts from 1875 to 1921, was invited to be president of the society, but declined due to failing health. Younghusband was elected as the secretary.

INTRODUCTION

The Whangarei art collection began in the 1920s with the fitful philanthropy of artists and their descendants as well as the enthusiasm of the Whangarei Arts & Literary Society. Yet it was not until Whangarei's Silver Jubilee in 1989 that Mayor Joyce Ryan established a modest acquisitions fund to purchase artworks for a permanent collection. The current Heritage Collection of the Whangarei Art Museum is based around the bequests of Gilbert Mair, Thomas L. Drummond, Olive Hawken-Udy, George Woolley and Ron Kirkwood. Many of these works, including the rather dour, but historically significant portrait of Sir George Grey, which will be exhibited for the first time nationally in the NZ Portrait Gallery's *The Cabinet Makers – New Zealand Prime Ministers* exhibition in November 2009, are among the foundational works in the district collection. It took some seventy years before the Art Museum was fully established, following a somewhat tortuous route, and even now the final destination may be some years off.

"There are a number of people in Whangarei or the neighbourhood who feel that the community should make more definite efforts than it has done yet to promote the production of fine arts...If the wishes of the promoters are realized an art society will be established, to assist artists and students, to foster a love of art among the people to hold exhibitions of art and to found an art gallery...No town of any magnitude can make its life completer without means of enjoying the refining influences of the higher arts...It should be doing something for the talent it already possesses, and a good deal can be done by the establishment of such an organization, as is proposed. We hope that the project will be launched successfully at tonight's meeting, and that a flourishing society will be making its beneficent influence felt throughout the district."

The Northern Advocate, June 16, 1921



Figure 1: The original Plunket Rooms in Cafler Park which became the first home of the Whangarei Art Museum in 1995, but which no longer meet the needs of an active 21st century art museum. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: WHANGAREI ART MUSEUM.

Remarkably, the district flourished with cultural wealth and many of the founding families, like the households of Gilbert Mair Sr. and Eugene Cafler, hosted regular cultural evenings and events. There was the Regent Theatre to catch up on world affairs in the Movietone News and a branch of George Courts Department Store for the fashion-conscious. Many well-known artists emerged from Whangarei, such as Olive Hawken-Udy, Beatrix Dobie and Capt. Gilbert Mair's daughter, the Hon. Airini Vane, and the legacy continues to this day with sculptor Charlotte Fisher and composer Dame Gillian Whitehead.

FOUNDING GIFTS

In 1922, Captain Gilbert Mair gifted two paintings by his late wife, E. Kate Sperrey, to the Whangarei Borough Council. These works are the *Portrait of Sir George Grey* and a splendidly lyrical late landscape oil painting *Bushstream Wainuiomata*, gifted in her memory and as "an offering of goodwill and regard." There is no legal documentation of this deed of gift, only an archive reference in the *Northern Advocate* at the time. This famous son of Whangarei was also a major founding benefactor of the Auckland Museum.

The Whangarei Borough Council voted in 1933 to provide the town with a public gallery and the original designs for a new municipal library in 1936 included an attached gallery; however, it did not materialise. A further 24 works were given to the city by Mr and Mrs G. E. Woolley, including a c.1920 painting by Adele Youngusband, one of the earliest known works by this artist, in 1950. In 1954, Youngusband herself gave 24 of her works to the city and four of Minnie White's, "on condition a building

is established to house them." Yet it was not until 1976 that council plans were announced for the Forum North project, which was to include a gallery and collection storage space as well as a theatre and concert chamber. Forum North opened in 1982 as the region's flagship performance and meeting centre, unfortunately without the promised gallery spaces. In 1983, the Northland Society of Arts Inc. (NSA), which had replaced the original Whangarei Arts and Literary Society in the 1950s, approached the Whangarei District Council to build a purpose-built gallery space at the rear of the Library building, which had originally been proposed to house the collection in 1933.

NO SHELTER

Meanwhile, the homeless collection had fallen into dire conditions. The Council commissioned a report in 1988 on its parlous state and the lack of collections management policy. With the grant of funding from the Cultural Conservation Advisory Council a stipulation was made that the collection never be allowed to return to that level of evident neglect. From the community there was much pressure to conserve the collection on an on-going basis and for the acquisition of new work. Consequently, the Whangarei City Council established an acquisitions budget in 1989. As a further sign of civic support for arts and culture, the Northland Harbour Board, "resolves to set aside \$5000 in order to commission a painting as a gift to the Whangarei City Arts Acquisition Fund". *Kuparu* by Robert Ellis was selected to be retained, "until the new district council decides on the direction of the Arts Acquisition Fund."



Figure 2: View of the exhibition *Plumb Lines: a survey of the Visual landscape through the Surveyors Lens, 2009*, curated by Scott Potahan. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: WHANGAREI ART MUSEUM

In 1991, the NSA, which had administered the North Gallery in Whangarei on a completely voluntary basis for more than six years, requested the City Council Community Services Division to assist with funding for staff salaries and operational costs. The Council declined to do so, instead stating its intention to take over administration of the space entirely. The North Gallery was subsequently formally vacated by the NSA in 1991, and instead administered by a voluntary group under the auspices of the Council's Community Services Division, as an interim arrangement, until a long-term gallery space was acquired or built.

THE CONTINUING SEARCH FOR A HOME

The interim gallery space was briefly named Whangarei Art Museum and administered through a government-assisted employment Restart scheme. The Forum North Trust Board was charged with maintaining and operating the gallery, but not the collection. The art collection was dispersed throughout the Forum North complex, having been previously housed in the old Town Hall. How this happened is unclear, but some of the collection found its way to the Whangarei Museum in Maunu. In 1990, the collection to date was recorded manually and accessioned by one of the members of the committee, artist Jo Hardy.

Also in 1991, the Art Acquisitions Committee approached the internationally renowned Austrian artist and architect Friedensreich Hundertwasser who had established a home in the Bay of Islands in the 1970s. He had agreed to donate his services to developing an art gallery in Whangarei. At the same meeting, the Committee tabled a proposal that the existing library building, "should become a visual arts centre and art gallery complex...for permanent display of the city collection." In 1992, artist and potter Yvonne Rust obtained the unanimous support of the Committee for the proposal to involve Hundertwasser. There followed a period of disagreements between various parties – the Council, the Forum North Trust Board and the Art Acquisitions Committee, among others – on the merits, or otherwise, of pursuing both a local gallery and the Hundertwasser proposal and in what order, but neither materialised. No artworks were purchased from 1991-1995, but in 1993 the Society of Arts had the collection appraised by then art consultant Scott Pothan. The Whangarei District Council was prompted into action, re-activating a committee for the purchase of art works and reconsidering the idea of an art gallery for Whangarei.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES - with a happy ending

In 1991 the arts committee of the Council was offered for purchase several key artworks with intimate connections to the district. These included a selection of works by Adele Younghusband, a very important watercolour of *Whangarei Heads* by J.C. Hoyte and a naïve painting of the *Whangarei Regatta* 1880. All these works were declined in favour of other acquisitions. The regatta painting was then offered to the New Zealand National Maritime Museum in Auckland. Dr Rodney Wilson, then its director, requested assistance from the Whangarei District Council towards the purchase of this painting. Again this request was declined, but the Maritime Museum subsequently acquired the work.

Whangarei Art Museum was then offered the same Hoyte painting in 1996 for the city collection, unaware of the previous owners' approach. The five figure sum was well beyond the reach of the Art Museum, so NorthPower and the New Zealand Oil Refinery were invited to help in securing this highly important painting for future generations. These efforts were also declined, and after several months the 'hold' on this work was withdrawn, and the painting was subsequently sold for the asking price. However, the new owner, Bob Fyfe, had heard of the Art Museum's efforts to acquire this painting. He informed the Director of his longstanding connections to Whangarei, having been General Manager of the Dairy Company in Hikurangi in the 1950s and his intention to leave the painting in his will to the Whangarei Art Museum. The painting is now named in a bequest to WAM and its cyclic history complete.



Figure 3: Whangarei Art Museum – Te Wharetaonga O Whangarei – today still at Caffell Park in the former Plunket Rooms. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: WHANGAREI ART MUSEUM

A FIRST HOME

The Council appointed Scott Pothan as project manager to design and establish a public art gallery in the former Plunket Rooms in Cafler Park, still the collection's current home. The formal establishment of the Whangarei Art Museum (WAM) by the District Council in 1995 and the appointment of Scott Pothan as curator/director saw a new phase in the development of Whangarei's cultural infrastructure, establishing professional collections management and an acquisitions programme. The Museum operates as an independent trust, with Council representation on its board and council contributions towards operation under a service agreement. Formally opened in 1996 by then (and current) Mayor Stan Semenoff, the Museum was launched with the exhibition, *Classic Hanly – Survey of the Life and Works of Pat Hanly* and two collections exhibitions.

Since its inception, the Whangarei Art Museum continues to be enhanced through acquisitions and further gifts and bequests, strengthening its holdings in both historical and contemporary art. The Museum participated in the New Zealand Museum Standards Scheme with its policies and practices subjected to an independent peer review by senior art museum professionals. A regular programme of exhibitions has brought local, national and international art to Whangarei, while also generating some innovative touring shows exhibited at other New Zealand museums. The Museum has also

organised local art projects, commissioned major public sculptures by Charlotte Fisher, Chris Booth, Te Warihi Hetaraka, Manos Nathan and Warren Viscoe, produced publications, and commissioned public artworks for Whangarei, and established links with galleries at home and abroad, including Northtec and curators in South Korea. Educational programmes and other activities have been developed alongside different exhibitions, and the Museum has been actively supported by volunteers in all its achievements.

The Museum achieved public recognition as a fully professional regional gallery when it became the recipient of three highly valued works from the Government's overseas collections (Johnson, 2002). The most important addition to the Heritage Collection was the portrait of Harata Rewiri Tarapata, Nga Puhi, *Maori Woman* painted by Charles Frederick Goldie in 1904, which had previously hung in the New Zealand High Commission in London for forty years. The art museum director negotiated successfully with the Government, which formally gifted them to the Whangarei Art Museum through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, in 2002. Then Prime Minister Helen Clark said that, "the decision to return this significant artwork to New Zealand gave a wonderful opportunity to build regional art collections," and she was, "delighted that the Whangarei public would be able to view Maori Woman in their own gallery." The others were a large painting by Ralph Hotere, *Requiem*, and Milan Mrkusich's *Emblem Series*, also both with strong Northland connections.

HOPES RAISED... AND DASHED

Having established solid core collections of both heritage and contemporary works, and a sound track record of exhibitions appealing to a diversity of audiences, the Museum found itself hampered by the confines of its limited premises. There was so much more it could do for the people of Whangarei, if it had more room. In 2003, the Museum signalled to the Council its interest in moving into the old library which was due to be vacated, and in 2005 it received a 'Letter of Agreement in Principle' to this idea. The following year, WAM's proposed move to old library building was adopted in Council's Long Term Community Plan with \$1.5m towards the project allocated in the Annual Plan.

Moving forward, in early 2007, WAM opened an educational-based gallery "e-north" at the back of the old library. Design Specification Documents, architects' Expressions of Interest for a move to old library building and a Lotteries Grants Conservation Management



Figure 5: *Maori Woman* by Charles Frederick Goldie in 1904. Portrait of Harata Rewiri Tarapata of Nga Puhi, gifted to Whangarei Art Museum through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: WHANGAREI ART MUSEUM

Plan were then all in progress for developing the new premises. However, by the end of the year, WAM was advised by Council of cessation of all further activity towards moving to the old library. The cold winds of a new Council with new priorities blew through the proposal. In 2008, cuts to operational funding led to the closure of the e-north gallery. Council attention was diverted

towards a separate proposal for a Hundertwasser gallery, in a potential partnership with the Hundertwasser Foundation in Vienna, Austria. Hundertwasser himself died in 2000. This leaves Northland's by now significant art collection barely resourced to continue even at a basic level, let alone fulfil its potential to serve its growing local audiences through an even more dynamic and imaginative programme of exhibitions and arts events.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

In May 2009, Whangarei Art Museum successfully acquired a historically highly important collection of fourteen paintings forming the basis of a dedicated Selwyn Wilson – Northern Maori Project collection. A year ago, the Art Museum initiated a memorial wall to Northland's Selwyn Wilson, the first Maori student to enrol in formal art training at Elam in 1945, as part of the Auckland Art Gallery *Turuki! Turuki! Paneke! Paneke!* exhibition at WAM celebrating the first exhibition of Maori Contemporary Art in Auckland fifty years ago.

However, at the time of writing, new premises for the WAM are no nearer, but the arts community remains hopeful that the Council will actively consider the special local value of this regional art collection and its place in the hearts and cultural memory of the Whangarei district residents. The objectives reported at the founding of the Arts Society in 1921 hold true for the art collection today: "to assist artists and students, to foster a love of art among the people, to hold exhibitions and to found an art gallery". After some eighty years of collecting, a good home still seems some way off.

K. Scott Pothan has been the project leader, designer and founding director of the Whangarei Art Museum - Te Wharetaonga O Whangarei since 1995. He curated the exhibition, 'Cultural Memory: a history of the Whangarei Art Collection 1921-2008', the research for which assisted in the preparation of this article.

Ashley Remer is a freelance editor, writer, curator and critic who travels the globe in pursuit of art, adventure and work. Most recently, she founded Girl Museum, the first museum entirely dedicated to girlhood and entirely online, located at www.girlmuseum.org.



Figure 4: **Head Study of Adele Younghusband in 1946.** ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: WHANGAREI ART MUSEUM

REFERENCES

- Johnson, Alexa, (2002). The art of matchmaking. *Te Ara - Journal of Museums Aotearoa*, 27(2), pp. 8-10.
- Pothan, Scott. (2007). 'Cursive Line – Adele Younghusband'. Whangarei: WAM publications.