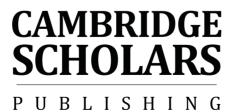
# English, Colonial, Modern and Maori

# English, Colonial, Modern and Maori: The Changing Faces of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand, 1932-2002

By

### Anna Crighton



English, Colonial, Modern and Maori: The Changing Faces of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand, 1932-2002, by Anna Crighton

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#### For PB and MG

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#### **FOREWORD**

#### DR. MARK STOCKER

As its title implies, Anna Crighton's English, Colonial, Modern and Maori is much more than a case study or a storytelling history of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, which over its 70-year lifespan was the leading art institution of Christchurch, and a major cultural presence within New Zealand. The book stems from the author's PhD research at the University of Otago, where I formerly worked. From the outset, as Anna Crighton's principal supervisor, I encouraged her to thematically explore the gallery where, for over 10 years, she had been the registrar, and where she literally knew all its 'ins' and 'outs'. Her institutional knowledge was matched by a dedication to the rigours of archival research and the pleasures of interviewing past directors, colleagues and art world players. Added to this, Anna Crighton gave her study intellectual depth by siting the McDougall within the wider museological discipline, looking at the gallery through selection and presentation culture 'lenses'. This methodology convincingly underpins the thesis. On the one hand, the gallery conforms to a 'British World' model, but at the same time its history and identity raise distinctive and fascinating cultural issues that are very much those of Canterbury and of Aotearoa New Zealand. If there are heroes in the piece, then they are the dedicated, cultured people of Christchurch, while the chief villains (or at least philistines) are the members of the Christchurch City Council.

The book is both readable, particularly when dealing with the distinctive 'reigns' of the gallery's five directors, and admirably evenhanded. This applies whether the author addresses the (much berated) conservatism of the gallery in its early years, or the (much heralded) recent Maori cultural renaissance. The PhD examiners were unanimous in acknowledging the significance and quality of Anna Crighton's research, and accordingly awarded the thesis a distinction. I believe that some of this 'distinction' deserves to be enjoyed by the academic community and a wider public, and publication as a book will now make this possible. *English, Colonial, Modern and Maori: The Changing Faces of the Robert* 

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McDougall Art Gallery Christchurch, 1932–2002 is an invaluable contribution to history, art history and museology locally, nationally and internationally.

Dr Mark Stocker Curator, Historical & International Art, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

June 2014

### **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

The doctoral thesis from which this book stems was conceived in 2007 after I had left the Robert McDougall Art Gallery where I held the position of administrator and registrar from 1983 to 2001.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

In the production of this book I have drawn on the assistance of many people, including the following former staff members of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, who kindly provided interviews and recollections: Elizabeth Caldwell, Lynn Campbell, John Coley, June Goldstein, Barbara de Lambert, Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, Felicity Milburn, Tony Preston, Neil Roberts, Lara Strongman, Peter Vangioni and Rodney Wilson. My appreciation also goes to the many anonymous staff members who maintained the gallery's newspaper clippings book from the 1960s.

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Among the librarians, archivists, academics, Christchurch Art Gallery staff and staff from other New Zealand art galleries and museums, I would particularly like to thank Associate Professors Mark Stocker and Alex Trapeznik of the University of Otago, the supervisors of my doctoral thesis that was the basis for this book, Chris Adam, Paul Brooker, Roger Collins, Merilynne Evans, Brian Gilberthorpe, Andrew Glennie, Warren Feeney, Heather Galbraith, Richard Greenaway, Ken Hall, Catherine Hammond, Gina Irish, Julie Koke, Jane Macknight, Conal McCarthy, Caroline McBride, W. David McIntyre, Gillian Roncelli, Devon Sinclair, Eva Sullivan, Helen Telford, Jude Tewnion, Celia Thompson, Linda Tyler, Pat Unger and Genevieve Webb.

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Finally, I would like to thank my partner, Mark Gerrard, for his continuing patience and support during the research for and writing of this book.

Anna Crighton Christchurch, 2014

#### **ABBREVIATIONS**

ACAG Auckland City Art Gallery
\*AGC Art Gallery Committee

AGMANZ Art Galleries and Museums Association of New Zealand

\*BELAG Baths, Entertainments, Library and Art Gallery

Committee (CCC)

BFD By-Laws, Finance & Departmental Committee (from

1941)

CAG Christchurch Art Gallery \*CC Cultural Committee

CSA Canterbury Society of Arts
CCC Christchurch City Council
CPL Canterbury Public Library

EALCS Empire Art Loan Collection Society
EALES Empire Art Loan Exhibitions Society

\*LAG Library & Art Gallery Sub Committee

NACF National Art Collections Fund

NAG National Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand

NGV National Gallery of Victoria

\*P&RC Parks and Recreation Committee

\*PRC Parks, Recreation and Cultural Committee

\*RC Recreation and Cultural Committee

RMAG Robert McDougall Art Gallery

<sup>\*</sup> In January 1952 the administration of the affairs of the Gallery passed to the Library and Art Gallery Committee (LAG). This committee amalgamated

with the Baths and Entertainment Committee in December 1953 (BELAG). 1

A reforming of the old The Art Gallery Committee was made in October 1960. This replaced the structure for previous reporting to BELAG. The Committee consisted of all the members of BELAG and Art Gallery Committee with representatives of the CSA and the School of Art, University of Canterbury (1 each). After the Director reported to the Parks and Recreation Standing Committee, this reporting line changed again in November 1968 when he then reported to the Cultural Committee of Council. Thereafter it was Parks, Recreation and Cultural Committee.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> BELAG Minutes, 24 June 1958.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> AGC Minutes, 12 October 1960.

#### INTRODUCTION

The Robert McDougall Art Gallery in Christchurch, New Zealand displayed several distinctive if not unique features during its 70-year history. This book traces its development, considering such matters as the role of the public art gallery, the criteria for the selection and presentation of works, and the post-colonial tensions between transplanted imperial notions of heritage and New Zealand's indigenous and autochthonous heritages.

The public art galleries in New Zealand's other three main centres, Auckland, Wellington and Dunedin, have published books that provide sound overviews of their respective histories and collections. The Auckland City Art Gallery published *A Centennial History* in 1988 and in 2011, *Art Toi*, an overview of key works in the collection into the 2000s; Wellington published *Art at Te Papa* in 2009; while the Dunedin Public Art Gallery has issued two milestone histories: *Treasures of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery* in 1990, and *Beloved* in 2009. All these contain useful information and quality reproductions of key works but offer little or no insight into the attitudes, values and symbols associated with the selection of art for their permanent collections or temporary exhibitions. Although Te Papa is New Zealand's national public art gallery, its collections are treated on the same basis as those of Auckland and Dunedin since, in its previous incarnations, it long doubled as both a national and a Wellington metropolitan gallery.

The lack of secondary source material – whether books, periodicals, articles or previous theses – relating to the McDougall means that research has relied extensively on primary sources. Interviews with former gallery directors and staff have elicited considerable retrospective and unofficial assessments of, and insights into, the culture from the 1970s to 2002. Archival research into gallery records, newspaper reports and Christchurch City Council minutes has revealed unofficial and official statements dating back to the 1900s. But the need to verify that the gallery's actions were in accord with its words – and to cover historical gaps in the sources – has required substantial further research, involving, for example, collating and analysing the gallery's acquisitions over its seven-decade history. It has

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necessitated searching catalogues, newspaper art reviews, gallery floor plans and photographs, sketches or diagrams that show how the gallery presented art works to the public.

The book considers both the gallery's *selection* culture – the values, attitudes and symbols associated with its choice of art works – and its *presentation* culture – how and why it displays art works to the public. For example, a key change in the McDougall's selection culture was the more positive attitude shown to non-representational styles of art from the 1960s and to Maori styles and practitioners of art from the 1980s. In terms of presentation, there was, for instance, a move away from crimson walls and gold frames to white walls and frameless works.

The selection culture of the McDougall was marked by post-colonial heritage tensions. The most obvious example from the 1930s until the late 1950s was the tension *within* the transplanted art culture. This escalated into open conflict between adherents of modern and more traditional art when a public controversy erupted over the acquisition of a work of abstract art. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, there was at least tacit tension between the transplanted heritage and the indigenous and autochthonous heritages – the latter term, meaning 'sprung from that land itself' in ancient Greek, refers to the heritage produced by a colony itself during the colonial era or after it becomes an independent nation state. The McDougall's apparent reluctance to exhibit or acquire indigenous and autochthonous art works was highlighted by the more positive attitude not only of other New Zealand public art galleries but also of Christchurch's other two public cultural institutions, the Canterbury museum and the public library.

Much less distinctive is the way in which the McDougall's presentation culture was monopolised by the transplanted, Western heritage. There were, for example, changing attitudes to styles of picture hanging. Even the architectural design of the gallery followed a transplanted evolutionary path: the first design of the McDougall imitated the European concept of the gallery as a temple of art; the design of its successor imitated the Western concept of the gallery as a warehouse or department store of art.

The McDougall and its successor were *municipal*, not national, museological institutions. Nor were they the municipal galleries of a major cultural or commercial centre, such as New York, Chicago, Toronto, Quebec, Johannesburg, Sydney or even Auckland. For much of its history

Christchurch was a substantial agricultural and pastoral service town with a predictably provincial and practical civic culture. It was eminently pragmatic about its need for an art gallery, which was mostly valued in a *pro forma* way – as a matter of form – rather than as a result of a burning cultural conviction, fervently championed by great and good city fathers. There was, nonetheless, an inherent cultural belief that, if it claimed to be an urban centre of some standing, Christchurch ought to have an art gallery – just like two other South Island cities, Dunedin and Nelson, whose art galleries had been established in the late nineteenth century.

The civic authorities were, however, opposed to any lavish spending on their public art gallery as a 'temple of art' and symbol of municipal pride. Almost from the outset, an attitude of benign neglect prevailed towards the gallery's funding. This approach would have a major influence on the McDougall's selection and presentation cultures throughout its history. On the other hand, the city council valued the role of what would now be termed a 'public-private partnership', which supported the gallery's activities and would compensate to some extent for the lack of public funding. From the 1930s to the 1960s private benefactors and the city's small art community would have a major effect, directly and indirectly, on the development of the selection culture inherited by later generations.

And then there was the dramatic influence, on both selection and presentation, of key individuals, notably the gallery directors.

The Robert McDougall Gallery eventually become too small, too cramped and too old-fashioned. It bore its share of criticism and accusations of conservatism. But it acquired a remarkable collection of art and built a fine reputation in the seven decades between its opening in 1932 and the final closing of its doors in 2002. This book tells its story.