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(Te Papa, n.d.[b])

## Topic: Biography of Frances Hodgkins

Frances Hodgkins was born in Dunedin, the home of New Zealand's first art school and public art gallery. She was the daughter of William Mathew Hodgkins, a lawyer who was also an amateur watercolour painter. It was his influence that helped shape the creative ability of his daughters Frances and Isabel.

In her early twenties Hodgkins studied with Girolamo Nerli, an Italian painter who was visiting Dunedin. Under Nerli's guidance Hodgkins began to develop a bolder style which concentrated less on landscape and more on the human figure.

In 1901 Hodgkins left New Zealand for Europe. She travelled extensively on the Continent and in North Africa, and during this time she produced many fine watercolours. In 1902 she exhibited in London for the first time and the following year had work accepted for exhibition at the Royal Academy.

Later that year Hodgkins returned to New Zealand and settled in Wellington, where her family had also settled. She was intending to marry but the engagement was broken off. She produced little work during this period and in 1906 returned to Europe, determined to pursue a career as an artist.

Hodgkins travelled extensively in Europe and enjoyed success. She had her first solo exhibition in London, won two art competitions, and her paintings were accepted by prestigious institutions in Paris – the Salon and the Société Internationale d'Aquarellistes.

In 1908 Hodgkins settled in Paris where she painted and taught, becoming the first woman to be appointed instructor at the Académie Colarossi, one of the city's leading art schools. Hodgkins returned briefly to New Zealand in 1912, mainly to visit her parents, but while here she also organised exhibitions of her work. After the visit Hodgkins returned to Europe to settle permanently, intending to resume her life as an artist and teacher.

The outbreak of World War One forced Hodgkins to move from Paris to St Ives, a small fishing village in Cornwall, England. Here she found it difficult to travel or earn money and endured considerable hardship. However, it also meant that she had time to paint, and she experimented with larger works, using oil and tempera as an alternative to watercolours. Her works from this time show the influence of Post-Impressionism.

The artist referred to her post-war period as her 'experimental years'. She wrote to her mother that the reason she didn't send more work out to New Zealand from this time was that 'it has become a bit too modern and I find it very difficult to return to my earlier and more easily selling style.' (1). When Hodgkins sent some paintings completed in 1921 to the Academy of Fine Arts in Wellington, they were rejected.

The years following the war were marked by hardship and lack of success. Her 1923 exhibition in London was a financial failure, and in 1924 Hodgkins resorted to working as a fabric designer in Manchester for six months.

However, in 1926 eighty of Hodgkins' paintings were shown in Manchester, her largest solo exhibition to date. The exhibition was moderately successful and in 1927 she decided to give up teaching, which had been sustaining her for many years, and attempted to establish herself as a full-time painter in London.

In 1929 Hodgkins was invited to join the avant-garde Seven and Five Society, a distinguished and progressive group of young English artists. This provided an important outlet for Hodgkins' work.

During the 1930s Hodgkins exhibited with many important London galleries and gained a contract from the Lefevre Gallery to produce work for a full-scale exhibition every second year. To fulfil the terms of her contract she had to produce thirty-three works a year. Despite this exhausting schedule her exhibitions around this time were highly successful.

Towards the end of her life Hodgkins finally gained the acclaim denied to her for so long. In 1939 she was invited to represent Britain at the prestigious 1940 Venice Biennale. This was a great honour; however, wartime travel restrictions meant that her works never made it to Venice.

In her later years Hodgkins painted in her studio at Corfe in Cornwall, England, still continuing to experiment with different mediums and styles. 'Probably Frances Hodgkins' most impressive quality was this ability to recharge her artistic vocabulary, to search continually for a more meaningful way to express her vision. She approached most of her paintings, whether in oil, watercolour or gouache [watercolour mixed with opaque white paint], as though facing unexplored territory.' (2).

By the time she reached her seventies, Hodgkins' paintings were highly sought after. Although she produced some of her best-known works in her later years, ill health and failing strength made it difficult for her to meet the demand for her



Cut melons, circa 1931, Hodgkins, Frances (1869–1947), England. Purchased 1980 with Special Projects in the Arts funds. Te Papa

abstract expressionism

work. When she died in 1947 at the age of seventy-eight, Frances Hodgkins was regarded as one of Britain's leading artists.

While many in New Zealand were hostile to Hodgkins' work during her lifetime, and important works like *Pleasure Garden* caused considerable controversy, she is now generally accepted as one of this country's most prestigious and influential painters.

#### References

(1) Kirker, Anne. (1993). *New Zealand Women Artists: a survey of 150 years*. New South Wales: Craftsman House. Revised edition. p 47.

(2) Kirker. (1993). p 51.

*Text originally published in Tai Awatea, Te Papa's onfloor multimedia database.*

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