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THE ART OF GORDON WALTERS

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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University of Auckland, 1984.

THE ART OF GORDON WALTERS

Michael Dunn

Volume One: Text



Gordon Walters, 1944

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I have been helped by staff at the Auckland City Art Gallery, the National Gallery, Wellington, and the Hocken Library, Dunedin. I also owe a debt to private collectors who allowed me to study works in their homes and arrange photography. Kees Hos, formerly of the New Vision Gallery, Auckland, allowed me access to the gallery's Walters files. Mr Peter McLeavey also entrusted me with correspondence from his gallery's file in Wellington. Mervyn Williams discussed his collaboration with Walters in printmaking and allowed me to witness the printing of two works in 1983.

The printing of photographs was carried out at the Audio-Visual Department at the University of Auckland. In many instances I was able to borrow negatives from the artist and have fresh prints made. This was essential for recording the appearance of lost or destroyed works.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis documents and discusses the work of the New Zealand painter Gordon Walters. By a careful examination of his development in chronological sequence, the thesis traces the sources of his distinctive style of abstract painting. It shows that Walters was a major figure in the evolution of abstraction in New Zealand as early as the 1950s. His best-known works, the koru paintings, are the focus of the thesis. For the first time a large group of these paintings, including destroyed and lost works, has been catalogued and reproduced. This shows the range and quality of his achievement over a period of some thirty years.

Chapter One traces the origins of Walters' art by discussing his training at Wellington and his meeting with Theo Schoon in 1941, an event which changed his outlook and directed him towards contemporary developments in European painting. His Surrealist works are examined and placed in the context of this movement in New Zealand art.

Chapter Two is concerned mainly with the introduction of Maori and primitive art influences into Walters' work. It shows how his study of modern masters like Paul Klee and Joan Miro made him receptive to indigenous art sources. In particular, his study of Maori rock drawings is explored and related to his paintings of the late-1940s. It helped him to evolve a more abstract style. His trip to Europe in 1950 is also examined with reference to his development as a geometric abstractionist on his return to New Zealand.

Chapters Three and Four discuss for the first time the importance of Walters' paintings of the years 1953-1956. The thesis shows how Walters arrived at a distinctive style of abstraction by transforming motifs from schizophrenic and primitive art into something personal. The influence of European art theory, especially that of Mondrian and Herbin, is discussed in relation to Walters'

artistic practice. His increasing use of geometric forms is noted, and its importance shown.

Chapter Five is concerned with the evolution of his koru paintings. The thesis shows that Walters first used the Maori art motif in studies of 1956. The importance of the changes he made to the Maori motif are pointed out. He modified the motif to make it conform to a European style of hard-edge abstraction. In fact, his achievement represents a synthesis of two traditions, the European and the Polynesian. This was arrived at only after years of study and experiment.

Chapters Six and Seven show in detail the stages Walters went through before arriving at his first major exhibition of the koru paintings in 1966. The transformation of his original source motif into a geometrically-constructed band and circle is complete. The influence of Op art on his style is also discussed.

Chapters Eight to Ten study the work of Walters between 1966 and 1983. His refinements to the koru paintings are noted and his change of style to a larger scale and a more harmonic handling of tone and colour. His interest in systemic art in the Genealogy series and in paintings based on the Maori rauponga design is examined.

The final chapter discusses Walters' work as a print-maker. His collaboration with the printer and fellow-artist Mervyn Williams is explored in detail. The importance of his prints for making his work more widely known and accessible. The thesis shows the relative importance of printmaking in Walters' late career.

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INTRODUCTION

Among New Zealand painters Gordon Walters is an isolated figure. In a country noted more for its sporting than its artistic achievements he has pursued his career in the face of indifference and ignorance. His decision to become an abstract painter contributed to the solitariness of his life. The majority of his contemporaries continued to work with figurative art, especially landscape, long after Walters had lost interest in it. He became in the 1940s a pioneer of abstract painting in New Zealand. With the exception of the Auckland artist, Milan Mrkusich, Walters was the first New Zealander to evolve his own style of abstraction, and to pursue his interests in New Zealand.

Because of the limited dialogue between painters in the 1940s, Walters was not fully aware of contemporary developments in New Zealand painting. He did not know the work of Mrkusich until the 1960s and did not meet the artist until 1971. He became used to working in a near vacuum, sustained by the interest of a few friends, notably the artist Theo Schoon. There was little critical interest in his painting even after his major shows of the late-1960s. He did not even face the hostility from the public and critics in the way Colin McCahon, his exact contemporary, had in his early years. Abstract painting found few supporters at any period of his career, and was often ignored.

Despite these difficulties, Walters has persevered to produce one of the most sustained and authoritative oeuvres in the history of New Zealand art. A feature of his work is its uncompromising standards of quality in both conception and execution. It is unique in the depth of its reading of Oceanic art and of European abstract painting. Early in his development Walters saw the untapped potential of New Zealand's indigenous heritage in the visual arts. Instead of ignoring the traditional arts

and crafts of the Maori, he made a study of their formal language. This study helped to shape his style as a painter, and to compensate for his remoteness from the major centres of European art. A feature of this thesis is the study of his stylistic evolution paying careful attention to his visual sources in both European and Oceanic art. His painting can be seen as a synthesis of two cultural traditions - Polynesian and European - which are found in New Zealand. It is significant that Walters is one of the few New Zealand painters of his generation who drew on the rich resources of Oceanic art.

*7 years!*  
 At the time I began this study of Gordon Walters in 1977, he was a mature artist in his late fifties. But, he had only recently been able to devote himself full-time to his art. It is easy to forget that the possibility of making a living from serious painting only emerged as a reality for New Zealand artists in the 1970s. Walters is one of the painters who contributed to the enhanced status of art in the community by his unremitting concentration on raising standards and his refusal to accept the amateurism so rife in the arts during his early years as a painter.

Walters' painting is a provincial development. Although his work has been reproduced a few times in international magazines and books, it has not been accepted into the mainstream of post-war abstract painting. This is not because of lack of quality. Nor is it because the work is derivative. In fact, the art of Gordon Walters has its own identifiable style, something rare in geometric abstraction. That this has been achieved in part from its derivation from Maori art in no way detracts from its integrity. Simply, the work of Walters is not known outside New Zealand. It is my aim in writing this thesis to provide more information about Walters' paintings so that his achievement can be better understood.

In writing this thesis I have been fortunate in having the full co-operation of the artist. I first met him in 1965. My introduction was supplied by Theo Schoon,

his mentor and friend. I have been able to discuss many aspects of the work with Walters over the years and to form an idea of its evolution. This has been a slow process. Until I began my research in 1977 there was no existing archive on Walters and no reference collection of photographs. Since then I have compiled a long correspondence with the artist, touching on many facets of his art. This compilation of letters, on which I have drawn heavily in my text, provides a major resource for any future student of Walters' art. Thanks to the help of the artist, I have made an extensive collection of photographs of his work, many of which are included in the thesis. Because so much of his painting is in private collections, access to the originals is difficult. The photographs also record damaged or lost works essential to a full understanding of the artist's development.

Although I have been able to discuss many matters concerning his art with Walters, I have not felt any pressure to conform to his views. Errors of fact that might occur are my responsibility, even though every attempt has been made to eliminate them by having the artist read the manuscript in draft form. In choosing to write on the work of a living artist, I consider the advantages to outweigh the disadvantages. Walters is now in his late career as a painter. At the time of writing, 1983-1984, he had been painting for some forty-five years. That has provided more than enough work to study and document. Furthermore I believe that the long-term understanding between the artist and myself has a unique aspect to it. It is very unlikely that Walters will be prepared again to spend the time discussing and unravelling his career with a writer that he has expended on this project during the past eight years.

Until the retrospective exhibition in 1983, it did not seem possible to bring the thesis to the writing stage. The exhibition enabled works to be compared in the same room and Walters' overall status as an artist to be assessed fully for the first time.

The retrospective proved conclusively the quality and range of Gordon Walters' art. It was a critical if not a popular success. It endorsed my belief in the importance of Walters as a major New Zealand painter and justified the writing of this thesis.

I am aware of the many limitations of this account. It is a pioneering study which I hope will lead on to further writing and discussion.

Michael Dunn  
Auckland  
February, 1985.