



An emerging talent,
early works by Frances Hodgkins

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Mahara Gallery
Kāpiti Coast District Gallery

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Frances Hodgkins began painting about 1886 in the small colonial community of Dunedin, thousands of miles from European art centres. During the 1890s she got to grips with the watercolour medium, found her subjects, and discovered ways to paint them. Realising that New Zealand could not give her sufficient experience, she left for Europe in 1901 where her horizons expanded hugely, and she began to develop as an artist. Family ties brought her back to New Zealand on two occasions, but she could not settle, and in 1913 she departed for good.

These years form the first period of her career, and summarised from this distance in time, can seem like an inevitable upward progression. But it did not feel like that to Frances Hodgkins. Her letters show that her painting life abroad was always challenging. She travelled constantly, had very little money, and experienced periods of ill health and disappointing sales. Looking back in 1913 she said, 'I feel that if I had known what was before me, I should never have had the courage to begin.'⁽¹⁾

But it is not surprising that she did begin. She was born into an art-making family. Her father, William Mathew Hodgkins, was an art lover, amateur painter, and mover and shaker in Dunedin's nascent art community. In 1875 he founded the Otago Society of Artists (later the Otago Art Society), an exhibiting venue for the region's mostly amateur artists. He was the centre of a smaller circle of artists in the Art Club which organised drawing classes and sketching excursions. Frances Hodgkins' older sister Isabel also painted watercolour landscapes and still-lives.

Watercolour was the most common medium in New Zealand in the 19th century, popular amongst travelling artists for its portability and small scale. The landscape was the most ubiquitous subject. William Mathew Hodgkins, who was Frances Hodgkins' first teacher, used

watercolour to paint remote, empty landscapes in a style derived from Joseph Mallord William Turner. Frances Hodgkins naturally inherited the watercolour medium, but from the beginning, her artist's eye was most often inspired by people, and in this she showed an early independence from her contemporaries. At first, she did not look much further than home to find her subjects, painting portraits of family and friends, and the unassuming objects and characters of her immediate surroundings: the local stream; the backyard; the maid doing the washing; a water tank and some ducks.

She was particularly keen on painting 'things' and the miscellaneous objects that would become such a feature of her mature style in her still-life/landscape compositions, appeared in her work from an early stage. At this period the dog kennels, baskets, kettles,

cups, fruit, and pottery are often placed in the foreground of the composition where they help to establish the pictorial space.

Although Frances Hodgkins' scenes of domestic life seem like truthful observations, they were based on the genre of realist painting popular in Britain and Europe in the late 19th century. The pictures often imply a charming or sentimental story - the working class life of the girl in *Goose girl* 1905, or the hopes and dreams of the woman in *A fortune teller* 1896.

Frances Hodgkins' painting technique was based on the brush. She 'drew' with her paintbrush using pencil only minimally to sketch in a few lines at the start of painting. In the earliest pictures she used a conventional technique, blending her brushstrokes invisibly

to produce an all-over painted surface, while using a dryish brush gave her more control.

A new freedom emerged in her work in 1893 after some lessons from a visiting Italian artist, G.P. Nerli. A specialist in portraits and figures, with an impressionist interest in colour and light, Nerli reinforced Frances Hodgkins' own preference for painting people, and encouraged her to be more adventurous with colour. His broad painting style also helped her to liberate her watercolour technique. She began to apply watercolour in broader, more visible brushstrokes; to paint 'wet on wet' so that the colours ran a little and blended; to allow the white paper to function positively in the composition; and not to worry so much about 'finish'. This approach gave her work a new immediacy and helped her to capture a casual pose, a fleeting moment.



G.P. Nerli, *Portrait of a Sailor Boy*. Watercolor, n.d.
Courtesy of Avenal McKinnon.

However, Nerli did not teach her to draw anatomically correct faces or figures, and throughout the 1890s, Frances Hodgkins had to work on her draughtsmanship. She preferred to use female models for her portraits and figure subjects, possibly because women and children were more socially accessible to her, but also because she liked to capture the informal poses and intimate moments that their lives offered.

In particular, portraits of Maori women and children were a favourite subject. Frances Hodgkins sought visual stimulation, and she undoubtedly found her Maori models picturesque, describing them as 'hugely interesting from an artistic point of view.'⁽²⁾ There was something about them, with their different appearance from her usual middle-class European models that challenged her.

Frances Hodgkins' penetrating observation is especially evident in these early Maori portraits. Unlike her more elaborately composed paintings of mothers and babies, these models are casually posed, simply observed, and their vitality shines through.

Frances Hodgkins' work is noted for its subtle and idiosyncratic use of colour. She tended to paint using a limited palette to create a colour-themed composition, and this practice is evident in her early work. In the 1890s, her colours are soft - the dark areas are brown, the light are creamy, and the theme colours soft pink, blue, sepia, and purple.

In 1895 Frances Hodgkins wrote to Isabel that, '...my painting absorbs me more & more every day. I am slowly settling down to an oldmaidship, and I have only one

prominent idea and that is that nothing will interfere between me and my work.'⁽³⁾

This was the point at which Frances Hodgkins decided that she would try to live by her art. She enrolled for classes at the School of Art in Dunedin to prepare herself for the South Kensington examinations, so that she could 'teach properly later on'.⁽⁴⁾ Gaining first-class passes in the examinations in 1895, she set up as a private art teacher the following year.

Her anatomical draughtsmanship now greatly improved, Frances Hodgkins' paintings started to sell at art society exhibitions in Dunedin, Christchurch, Wellington, and Auckland. *Head of an Old Woman* which had won a prize in Wellington was subsequently purchased by Dunedin magnate Mr Theomin. In November 1896, she was awarded the Otago Art Society's silver medal for a figure study.

In 1897, the Otago Art Society elected her a member of the Society's Council, and subsequently, a member of the selection and hanging committee. But New Zealand now seemed small and unstimulating. She felt 'artistically played out' and wanted 'a change of scenery and pastures new'.⁽⁵⁾

Frances Hodgkins realised that to improve her painting she needed to leave New Zealand. But in 1898 she had much to cope with at home. Her father died in February, and the family having been in increasingly straitened circumstances for some years, was obliged to move again into less comfortable rental accommodation. As the unmarried daughter she may have been expected to stay home and look after her widowed mother. Yet it was in this year that Frances Hodgkins began to plan to study in Paris, or at least to go

'Home' to England before coming back to teach in Dunedin or Wellington. This was a brave decision and shows her growing belief in herself as an artist. All her efforts now went into achieving her plan, and by teaching and selling her work, she managed to raise the money virtually by herself.

In 1898 she wrote to Isabel, 'At the end of this month I will have made £30, the result of two month's teaching. My sketching classes are nearly over and I have an indoor class of six who are coming to me for the winter. After all the bills are settled I think I will take out an insurance policy...it will make me put by a little every year which I would otherwise spend...I hope to paint hard during the winter and try and reap a harvest at our Exhibition...'⁽⁶⁾

She also found another way of making some extra money. 'I have undertaken to illustrate the stories in the Xmas number of the *Otago Witness*. I am to do 20 small wash drawings for which I am to get £10.'⁽⁷⁾ She illustrated three issues and also five numbers of the *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine*. In November-December 1900, she organised an art union - a public five shilling raffle of forty of her own paintings, as well as two by William Mathew Hodgkins and three by Isabel Field. Frances Hodgkins now had public and critical support for her work. In 1901 she left New Zealand for London taking with her £100.

By living frugally, she was able to travel and paint in England, France, Italy, North Africa, and Holland. Periodically she sent packets of paintings back to New Zealand for sale to replenish her funds, and also occasionally sold work in London dealer galleries.

In Europe Frances Hodgkins experienced the social and intellectual freedom she had been craving. She was free of '...the awful social tyranny of a small town..', satirically describing the Dunedin social round as, 'Monday - High St calls - Tues. - Queen St. & Heriot Row - Wed - guild - Thursday - University & Chingford - Friday Andersons Bay - Sat - what can we do. Sunday - why was I born! She contrasts it with her new life where '...everything is given up to painting we think & talk of nothing else which in itself is a tremendous stimulus...'⁽⁸⁾

Looking back over this period in 1913, Frances Hodgkins identified her artistic interests and goals: 'On leaving New Zealand I went first to England seeking schooling, but I did not find what I wanted, I was looking for colour and light...'⁽⁹⁾

In Europe, Frances Hodgkins found artists whom she felt shared her own impressionist approach. She admired John Singer Sargent: 'Sargent is wonderfully masterly in treatment & color - he flings his subjects on the canvas in the most audacious manner no attempt at ellaboration you stand back and behold meaningless blobs shape themselves into the most perfect modelling and form...' ⁽¹⁰⁾ Arthur Melville was another favourite. She describes him as 'a strong painter, at first sight you laugh, then out of a chaos of blots comes wonderful form & color...' ⁽¹¹⁾ It is perhaps not surprising then that in 1909 English newspaper notices compared her work with Sargent and Melville.

Frances Hodgkins also found new subject matter to inspire her. She was captivated by the old continental towns with their bustling markets and streets, and their quaintly dressed

inhabitants. She knew these subjects would appeal to the British and colonial art buyer's appetite for picturesque views of exotic places. But she was also visually entranced and stimulated by the challenge of painting them - of capturing light, and shapes, and colours. Colour was a revelation: in Arles she described the market to Isabel, noting, 'the butcher's stall, made to look as red as possible with crimson coloured tables & awnings...the greengrocer with her two pretty daughters always beaming from behind a barricade of pumpkins, melons, pomegranates, figs and green stuff...a corner given up to pottery & earthenware of many colors & shapes'. ⁽¹²⁾ Her palette expanded and became more expressive: the lights whiter, the shadows coloured blue, purple, or green and the theme colours brighter - oranges and pinks, ochres and greens.

In 1903 Frances Hodgkins went to North Africa. She found exotic subjects: in Tetuan, 'a beautiful Jewess in full dress...' ⁽¹³⁾ and in Tangier, onions: '...great shining pink satin masses of them with a row of feminine haiks with one eye apiece sitting behind them...' ⁽¹⁴⁾ The intense sunlight there and its effect on form and colour was a revelation and a challenge. Writing from Tetuan she despairs that, 'The whiteness & pearliness of the town simply defies you - you cant get it pure & brilliant enough & the shadows drive one silly - you race after them, pause one frenzied moment to decide on a blue mauve yellow or green shadow - when up & over the wall & away & the wretched things gone for that day...' ⁽¹⁵⁾

To capture these fleeting effects, Frances Hodgkins developed a freer painting

technique. She made her forms more schematic in order to deal with complex figure groups, and devised a shorthand of thin broken brushstrokes for the outline of forms under bright sunlight, and brush tip dots for foliage and shadow. Her interest in pattern developed, and she delighted in depicting the fabrics of women's clothes, and the repeating forms of heaps of ceramic pots.

On 23 December 1903 Frances Hodgkins returned to Wellington where her mother was now living and attempted to establish herself as an artist and teacher. But she could not settle, and after the excitement of Europe, life in a small colonial town must have seemed very dull. Her joint exhibition with Dorothy Richmond at the McGregor Wright Gallery was not a great success, nor did she attract many pupils.



Frances Hodgkins, **Ayesha** 1904.
Watercolour.
Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.
Purchased 1904 with funds from the Otago Art
Society ...



Frances Hodgkins, **Babette** 1905.
Collection of The Dowse Art Museum,
gifted by the Atkinson Family 1976.

Frances Hodgkins' best works painted in Wellington seem full of nostalgia for her life overseas. She dressed a model up as an eastern character, 'Ayesha' and another as a French girl, 'Babette'.

Perhaps to escape Wellington, she travelled in May with Dorothy Richmond to Paraparaumu and then to Rotorua. At both places she made some sketches of Maori which she had been eagerly anticipating in Europe: '...I am more than ever set on painting Maoris & the thought that I am going back to a whole island full of them gives me infinite comfort - they are still to me so much more beautiful than anything I have seen on this side of the world...' ⁽¹⁶⁾

In 1906 Frances Hodgkins returned to Europe, promising her mother that she would be back within a year or so. On the voyage back she rediscovered 'the glamour of a continental town... & all the mystery & charming color & light that we know nothing of in N.Z....'⁽¹⁷⁾ She continued to travel and paint in Europe, supplementing her painting sales by taking private pupils on continental sketching classes to places such as Concarneau in Brittany. For a few months of 1909-1910 she taught watercolour at the Academie Colarossi in Paris, the first time a woman had been appointed to its staff. In 1911 she opened her own highly successful painting school in Paris where she taught classes attended by other New Zealanders, including Owen Merton.

Frances Hodgkins continued to experiment with colour and technique. A review of an

exhibition of 27 French and Dutch works at the Ryder Gallery in London in 1910 acknowledged her singularity: 'Nervous in touch, elusive in colour, and strange in technique, it is the strongest contribution of a woman to art for some time past.'⁽¹⁸⁾ Works painted in 1911 show a bold expressionist approach anticipating future developments.

By 1912 Frances Hodgkins had established herself in Paris and was beginning to make significant advances in her work. In Paris she was exposed to recent movements in modern art: she was aware of the French impressionists, Cezanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and the Italian Futurists. Her return trip to New Zealand in July that year was an interruption to this, and she made it clear that she would not be staying, for '...its on this side of the world that my work & future career lie'.⁽¹⁹⁾

A somewhat strangely worded review of a much visited exhibition of her work in Melbourne illustrates the impact that her work had on viewers at the time. The *Argus* critic described 'the virility of her methods' as 'amazing'. Her recent works showed that, 'with masculine strength and free and flashing brushes' she entered 'the dominion of the ultra-impressionists'.⁽²⁰⁾ Two further highly successful shows in Sydney and Adelaide left Frances with £300 with which to pay her debts.

'Frances Hodgkins A Dunedin Girl Conquers Paris' read the headline in the *Otago Daily Times* in 1913. Hodgkins held two exhibitions in Dunedin and Wellington which were highly acclaimed, if not purchased from quite as eagerly as in Australia. She visited Waikanae and Rotorua for the last time where she again painted Maori. On 21 October, she said goodbye to her family and left for Sydney on the first leg of the return journey to Europe. Her apprenticeship behind her, a new phase of her career was about to begin.

Notes

1. A.G. Stephens, 'Frances Hodgkins', Supplement to *The Bookfellow*, Sydney, 1 May 1913, pp ix-x
2. Letter to Rachel Hodgkins 18 September 1899, *Letters of Frances Hodgkins* p 62
3. Letter to Isabel Field 19 June 1895, Linda Gill, *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*, 1993, Auckland University Press, p 37
4. Letter to Isabel Field 18 February 1895, *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*, p 34
5. Letter to Isabel Field c.19 October 1897, *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*, p 49
6. Letter to Isabel Field 8 May 1898, *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*, p 55
7. Letter to Isabel Field c.30 May 1898, *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*, p 56
8. Letter to Rachel Hodgkins 26 August 1901, *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*, p 95
9. A.G. Stephens, 'Frances Hodgkins', Supplement to *The Bookfellow*, Sydney, 1 May 1913, p ix
10. Letter to Rachel Hodgkins 15 May 1901, *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*, p 86
11. Letter to Isabel Hodgkins 28 June 1901, *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*, p 90
12. Letter to Isabel Hodgkins 6 November 1901, *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*, p 105
13. Letter to Rachel Hodgkins 31 March 1903, *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*, p 161
14. Letter to Dorothy Richmond 7 March 1903, *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*, p 156
15. Letter to Dorothy Richmond 23 March 1903, *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*, p 158
16. Letter to Rachel Hodgkins 8 July 1902, *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*, p 131
17. Letter to Rachel Hodgkins 13 February 1906, *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*, p 178
18. Cited in Eric McCormick, *Portrait of Frances Hodgkins*, 1981, Auckland University Press, p 68
19. Letter to Rachel Hodgkins, *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*, p 259
20. *A notable exhibition*, The Argus 22 November 1912, p 6