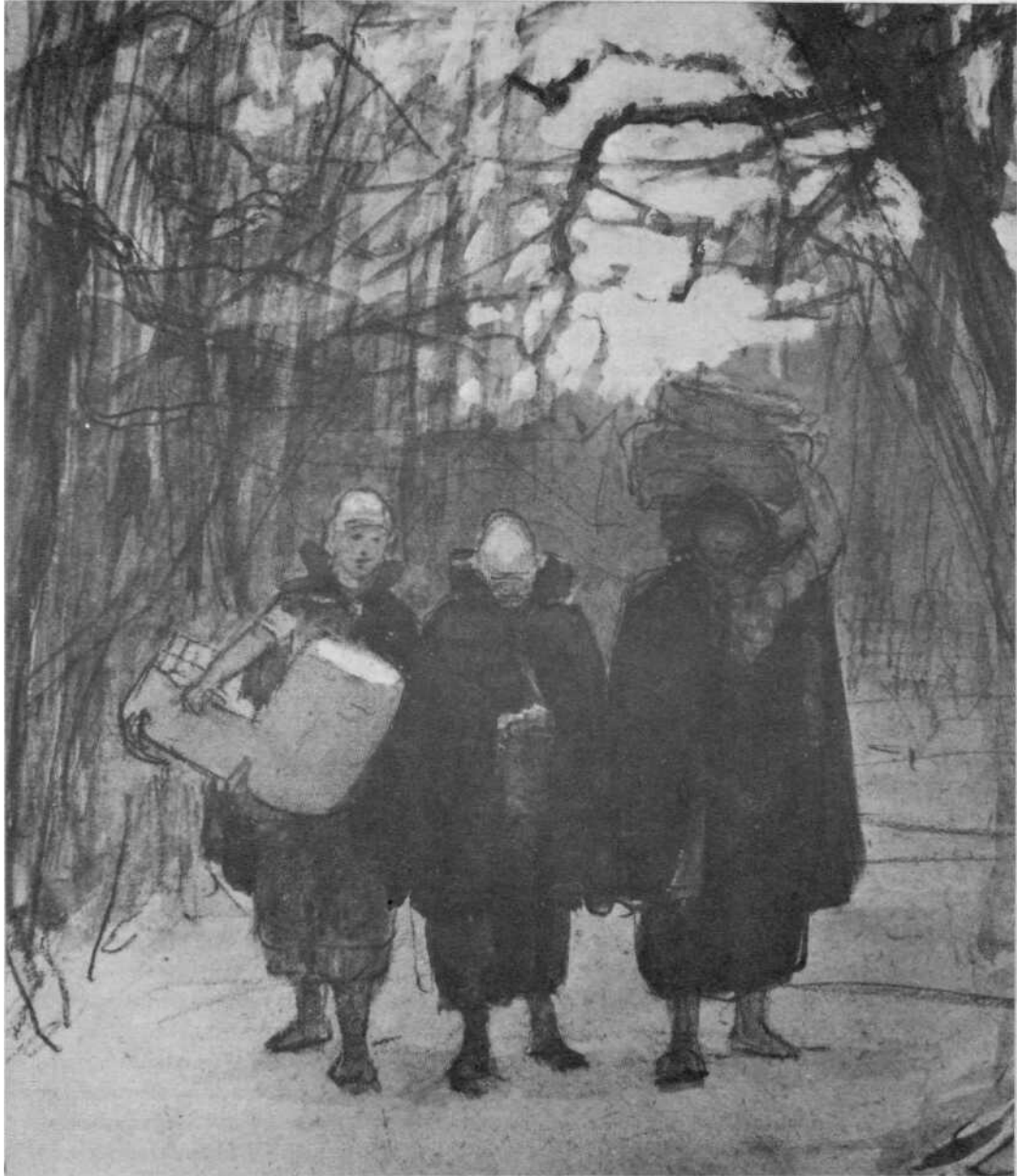


NUMBER 43 1968

AUCKLAND CITY  
ART GALLERY

# QUARTERLY



AUCKLAND  
CITY  
ART GALLERY  
QUARTERLY

NUMBER

43

1968: EDITORIAL

COVER

Petrus van der Velden, 1837-1913

Detail: *Three figures in a landscape*

For complete picture, see page 5

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The *Auckland City Art Gallery Quarterly* is published by the Art Gallery, Parks and Library Division, Auckland City Council; and is concerned primarily with presenting information about works of art acquired by the Auckland City Art Gallery.

*Editor:* Gordon H. Brown.

This year two distinguished art critics visited New Zealand. First was the American critic Clement Greenberg, and later, in September, the Englishman Robert Melville delivered the Chancellor's Lectures at the Victoria University of Wellington. Melville also made a brier, private visit to Auckland. Because of the nature of Greenberg's visit his presence had the greater impact on the public.

At the end of June and into July Greenberg travelled through the country stopping at each of the three main centres to deliver a public address. While some members of the public may have become impatient with him - for they felt that he avoided giving a direct answer to certain questions - Greenberg certainly stimulated a great deal of thinking that was not limited to what he had to say about the New York scene in particular and the international art movement in general, but extended also to matters which could be related to the local situation. Greenberg talked about contemporary painting following a general stylistic trend and only made passing reference to the apparent confusion of styles as a relevant manifestation in the art of our time: a situation he analogized with the development of painting during the Italian Renaissance. However, this main stream view of painting which embraces such painters as Hofmann, Pollock, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski has led a number of listeners to consider him rather conservative in his outlook on recent trends, but this he qualified by stating that it was often difficult to distinguish between what is good and what is bad in works painted during the ninetccn-sixtics because the extremes now permissible in painting would not have been tolerated in the past. If some agreed with Greenberg's reservations about such fashions as 'Op' art, others were less enthusiastic in sharing his reservations about Rauschenberg, Frank Stella and Francis Bacon. Rather than blindly supporting the latest art movement Greenberg was obviously concerned more with the quality in such work than its showiness or way-out-ness.

Greenberg's concern with quality in painting centred on his ideas about artistic taste and judgement which he expressed as being something one either knew about or failed to comprehend. Because this was so it was largely personal and indefinable and therefore unsuitable for public discussion. On this point a few people accused him of eliticism while others who had experienced the frustrations of trying to describe what were the good qualities in a painting became more sympathetic to Greenberg's stand.



## PETRUS VAN DER VELDEN

### THE YEARS IN HOLLAND

There is no doubt that the arrival of Petrus Van der Velden in 1890, like that of James Nairn a little earlier, marks the beginning of a new and significant period in New Zealand painting. Their example, as individuals as well as painters, served as a catalyst for events in a cultural situation that had progressively developed over the previous three decades. The fact of their obvious professionalism and dedication to art would have been sufficient to account for their influence, but it is also true that their talents as painters matched to a large degree, the reputations they acquired.

Apart from their individual influence as painters, Nairn and Van der Velden offered the first generation of New Zealand-born painters a direct contact with two reasonably influential European movements. All the more influential in New Zealand, perhaps, for their emphasis on naturalism.

The school to which Van der Velden belonged, the Dutch romantic realists, had an influence far beyond the quality of the individual painters concerned. Vincent Van Gogh was directly involved with the group and derived much of his basic direction from them. (From Van Gogh's letters we also know that Van der Velden personally had made a considerable impression on him.) Even Piet Mondrian, whose work could be said to be diametrically

opposed to the philosophy of the romantic realists, had early connections with them through his uncle, Frits Mondrian.

New Zealand was not the only non-European country in which their effect was felt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through the painter Albert Pinkham Ryder, American artists were also exposed to the ideas and styles of the romantic realists, although in a highly original form. The Americans had, of course, been exposed earlier to Millet and the Barbizon school, from which the Dutch painters themselves had largely derived their attitudes.

Looking now at the work of Josef Israels, the leader of the group, Anton Mauve, Willem and Jacob Maris and Hendrik Mesdag, it is difficult to account for the widespread influence they had. Possibly their popularisation of the ideas of Millet and, to a smaller degree, the approach to landscape painting of Corot and the Barbizon painters had something to do with it. As Meier-Graefe put it, they may well have appreciated the message of Millet but they 'baptised it with brown sauce, and there was no end to the guests that come to the feast'.

The reputation of the romantic realists was largely based on the group's contemporary approach to genre painting.

Their concern for this and their debt to Millet is summed up in this appreciation of the French painter by Josef Israels: 'Him it is we have to thank for commonplace humanity being placed on the throne which it has a right to claim, for the history of conquerors, of holy and celebrated men not forming the only subject from which a great master might take his inspiration, but that the labourer ploughing the land, the mother feeding her suckling babe, might have the same loving care bestowed upon them and be acknowledged to have an equally good claim to beauty as any object of creation which surrounds us'. It is not difficult to see how attractive this philosophy would have been to the young Van Gogh who saw in art a means of 'arousing sympathy for the poor'.

In the field of landscape, the romantic realists were much more advanced and it is likely that Jacob Maris and Mesdag had a greater influence on Petrus Van der Velden, than their master, Israels. If Van der Velden had followed genre exclusively, it is likely that his reputation would have been deservedly small. The genre paintings among his output in New Zealand were extremely popular, but they entirely

lack the conviction and authority of his landscapes.

It may be that Van der Velden's weakness in genre contributed to his decision to quit Holland and seek a fresh start in New Zealand. It is possible that here he discovered his real strength in landscape painting for there would have been little encouragement or stimulus in the New Zealand environment to pursue the kind of subjects that would have interested Israels and the majority of his followers.

The best of Van der Velden's work seems no less acceptable than that of the better-known members of the romantic realist group. But in a group of painters with such a common level of achievement and similarity of aims, it is likely that Van der Velden's comparatively late start gave him a serious disadvantage. He was the same age as Mesdag, but Mesdag's reputation was well established when Van der Velden was little more than a student.

Van der Velden no doubt felt some bitterness about his position amongst his contemporaries. There is obvious in his temperament a latent fear of persecution and it is not difficult to see how the award of an art prize to Israels' son instead of Van der Velden, in a competition judged by

Petrus van der Velden, 1837-1913  
*Canal with barge*  
Crayon and wash, 5 X 8 ins



FIGHT Petrus van der Velden, 1837-1913  
*Three figures in a landscape*  
Charcoal, crayon and watercolour, 14 x 9 ins





Petrus van der Velden  
*Interior*  
Oil, II X 145 ins

BELOW  
Petrus van der Velden  
*River landscape with ships -  
Holland*  
Oil, 21 X 32 ins



Israels and Mesdag, was almost too much for him to bear. About the resulting quarrel we have only one side of the story - Van der Velden's - and it is difficult to believe that Mesdag, who had done so much for this group of artists, would have so spitefully persecuted one of them. The outcome of Van der Velden's protest is even more doubtful when one considers the later 'plot to keep my father down

and crush him out of Sydney' imagined by his son Willem.

There is no doubt that much of Van der Velden's life is tragic and the rewards for his dedication to art were painfully few. Despite this he achieved a great deal as a painter and by his example made one of the most important contributions to the development of New Zealand painting.

H.K.

# THE MESDAG MUSEUM

## &•

# THE PANORAMA MESDAG

Out of the fourteen museums listed in The Hague, two carry the name of Mesdag, yet when considering their style and history, both could only come into being and have a *raison d'être* in this town, the home of many collectors and art supporters.

Willem Hendrik Mesdag, the ex-banker who turned artist, as also did Sientje Mesdag (nee Van Hout), a painter of standing in her day, devoted their lives and means to the arts. She is described by a famous art critic as 'a remarkable personality, who influenced the style of the museum'. It is also most befitting that the private picture gallery, built by the wealthy Mesdags at 7 Laan van Meerdervoort, adjoining their residence, should have become a museum of 'la belle peinture'. For behind the little wrought iron fence and oblong tiny lawn, the door was always open to the artists, foreign or Dutch. In the cozy living room, surrounded by oriental *objets d'art*, the great painters of the day: Roelofs,

Weissenbruch, Israels, Breitner and the brothers Maris, would gather to discuss the new art movement - a romanticism intertwined with realism and which involved an intimate relationship to Nature. So it was that the pillars of the Hague School surrounded the generous Mesdag and his wife who also contributed so lavishly towards the artists' centre, the Pulchri Studio.

It is now widely accepted that the Hague School, by its impact on European art and the technique of its great masters, was, after the Golden Age, another zenith of Dutch painting. From 1870 to 1900 the name of The Hague was carried throughout Europe by works of Breitner, Mauve, Israels, Weissenbruch, Roelofs and many others, whose works are now in demand on both continents.

Willem Hendrik Mesdag, 1831-1915, who started learning painting at the age of thirty-five, and later abandoned the bank director's desk for a painter's palette, was never

considered a great artist in his own country. Even though, in 1870, he was awarded the gold medal of Paris for two paintings inspired by Scheveningen scenery, he was never classified a first-rank painter of the Hague School. Like many of his contemporaries he was a painter of nature, but especially of the sea. He and his friends like Mauve, Bosboom and Jhr Storm found boundless inspiration in the grayness and movement of the North Sea. One of his greatest talents as a connoisseur and art collector was his sharp eye for works which at the time were hardly appreciated, and which came to prominence only a generation later. Out of the 3,000 canvases on display in the Mesdag Museum eighteen are by Mrs Mesdag, ranging from portraits, still life and landscape and twelve by Mr Mesdag, all impressions

Willem Hendrik Mesdag, 1831-1915

*Winter on Scheveningen Beach*

Oil. Collection: Mesdag Museum, The Hague

of the sea, the play of light and shadows, and the wind.

Most of the Dutch works are closely connected with The Hague, its dunes and Scheveningen: D. A. C. Artz, B. J. Blommers, Johannes Bosboom, George Breitner and P. J. G. Gabriel, while the three brothers Maris are represented by thirteen paintings. *The Kitchen Girl* and *The Bride* by Matthys Maris are particularly memorable. Six works by Gerke Henkes penetrate into the lot of the simple people. That the Mesdags delighted in the work of Joseph Israels is obvious for it was from him that they commissioned their portraits. His paintings *Alone in the World* and *The Harp player*, also in the Mesdag Museum, are amongst the most reproduced masterpieces of the nineteenth century.

Mesdag was a man of the world and no chauvinist where





beauty was concerned. The great number of foreign paintings are mainly from French artists, although there are fifteen Mancinis, of which *Sick Child* or the *Laughing Italian Woman* are good examples of the great Neapolitan's work. Courbet's *Nude* and *Self portrait*, Millet's *Resting Vine-dresser* and the Hungarian Munkacsy's *Condemned*, as well as the twenty-five canvases of Charles Daubigny rendered the Mesdag Museum into an art centre of Europe's best nineteenth-century paintings. While the French treated their subject in a gayer and rather broadminded manner, their Dutch counterparts went into profound study of details.

By The Hague art standards the Panorama Mesdag is not considered a museum of importance. It is in fact an enormous *trompe l'oeil*. An art connoisseur was once heard to have exclaimed: 'Lord, I am facing 1,680 square metres of kitsch, the details of which are art'.

Yet, it is this museum that attracts more visitors than any of the really outstanding ones. In the first six months of 1967 some 54,000 young and old, men and women, went through the turnstiles of the Panorama Mesdag. Most of them no doubt have, when confronted with the giant bluish grey canvas, uttered the words: 'unbelievable!' or 'how true to life!'. The sentiment among the crowd express their indignation that the townplanners did not leave this strip of the North Sea in its natural beauty. Whatever the case may be, Panorama Mesdag transfers the ordinary visitor into the nineteenth century, a time of grim and constant struggle for life of the Scheveningen fishermen and their families.

The story behind this enormous 'illusion box' reveals not only what the Scheveningen village was like, but throws light on The Hague, its art sponsors and pace setters at the end of the century. When in 1879 the city authorities decided to relandscape the Scheveningen dunes to make place for a housing project, a group of Hague artists and nature lovers, headed by Mesdag, protested vehemently. The only way left was to perpetuate this corner of natural beauty by brush and pallet. This love and interest for the seaside resort of the European elite, penetrated as far as Belgium, where a group of businessmen saw a good chance of cashing in on these sentiments. This was also the time when large panoramas, as a public attraction, were much in vogue. The battle of Waterloo and the siege of Sebastopol panoramas were drawing crowds.

In 1880 a group of Belgian businessmen established the Societe Anonyme du Panorama Maritime de La Haye, with the aim to perpetuate the image of the village before modernisation would destroy its natural charm. The Societe soon afterwards commissioned Willem Hendrik

Mesdag to prepare the Scheveningen Panorama in an octagonal building specially designed for the purpose. The Societe could hardly find anybody more suitable than Mesdag for implementing their plans. He loved the sea and he knew every single inch of the village, his favoured hang-out. Mesdag would spend days there regardless of the season painting the sea and the coast, from all angles, mainly from the Seinpost dune or, in rough weather, from the neighbouring hotel windows, which protected him from the strong winds. Mesdag, although deeply influenced by the Barbizon School and those of the Hague School who surrounded him, developed a distinctive character in landscape portraying. The giant Panorama does not convey the greatness of the Hague School, which influenced European painting for more than a generation, it does portray the attitude and art appreciation of the period. But judging by the works and awards displayed in the three narrow rooms leading to the rotunda, Mesdag and his wife were at the time painters of good standing also outside Holland.

The Panorama was the commission of his life. The carefully drawn up contract between him and the Societe even specified in detail the supply of a moving ladder, which would enable the artists to move around the large canvas. First, Mesdag sketched the view in Scheveningen on the walls of a glass cylinder on a decreased scale, which he later enlarged in the studio to the agreed size. The waves and the clouds, the moods of the ever-changing North Sea with its flocks of gulls were faithfully conveyed. From the way he divided the work, it appears that Mesdag knew his limitations as an artist. He undertook painting the beach and the sea, his friend Th. de Bock the air and the dunes, Mrs Mesdag the Scheveningen village and G. H. Breitner the cavalry and artillery men. It is remarkable to what extent this 70-year-old, 14-metre long, and 120-metre wide canvas attracts crowds. In these days of three-dimensional cinerama, many consider it worthwhile to queue, if only to get the illusion of standing in the middle of miles and miles of sand surrounding the stormy grey waters. One can almost feel the wind, upsetting the pinks and blowing away the caps of the fishermen. The Scheveningers gasp at the authenticity of what their village used to be like before the welfare state days.

Mesdag and his wife saw in the Panorama the major work of their lives. In 1910, after the Belgian owners went bankrupt, the couple re-acquired the round illusion box, and converted it into a family property. It is still the only private museum of The Hague. Although the Panorama Mesdag is far from being a *chef-d'oeuvre*, it deserves a visit, if only to recapture a period that will never return.

Edited from material supplied by Royal Netherlands Embassy.

## ACQUISITIONS

The recent additions to the Auckland City Art Gallery Collection given below continues on from the previous list published in the last issue of the *Quarterly*.

William Crabb, 1811-1876

68/72 *Thomas Arnold the younger* 1849  
Oil on canvas, 23 x 19 ins  
Purchased

E. N. Bracey, 1936-

68/73 *Winter Horizon* 3 1968  
Polyvinyl acetate on canvas, 46 x 47 ins  
Purchased

E. N. Bracey, 1936-

68/74 *North Island landscape* 1968  
Polyvinyl acetate on paper, 14 x 15 ins  
Purchased

John Kinder, 1819-1903

68/75 *St Jacques, Dieppe* 0841  
Pencil and Chinese white on paper, 11 x 10 ins  
Purchased

John Kinder, 1819-1903

68/76 *Abbaye de Fecamp* 1841  
Pencil and Chinese white on paper, 10 x 14 ins  
Purchased

John Kinder, 1819-1903

68/77 *Old St Paul's Church* 1861  
Pencil, 10 x 14 ins  
Purchased

Harold Oilman

*Lake in the hills*



John Barr Clark Hoyte, 1835-1913

68/78 *Milford Sound*

Watercolour, 7 x 16 ins

Purchased

Wilhelm Lehmbruck, 1881-1919

68/70 *Contemplative girl* (Kleine Sinnende) 1911

M480A Terracotta, 20 ins high

Presented by the Mackelvie Trust

Harold Gilman, 1876-1919

68/80 *Lake in the hills*

Oil on canvas, 21 x 26 ins

Presented by the Contemporary Art Society, London

Douglas MacDiarmid, 1922-

68/81 *The Loire Valley* 1965

Oil, 23 x 39 ins

Presented by Mr G. M. Hall

William Crabb

*Thomas Arnold the younger*

William Beechey, 1753-1839

68/82 *Rev Thomas Collins*

Oil on canvas, 29 x 24 ins

Presented by Mrs Beechey

Christopher Perkins, 1891-1968

68/83 *Taranaki* 1931

Oil on canvas, 20 x 36 ins

Purchased

*The Auckland City Art Gallery Quarterly*

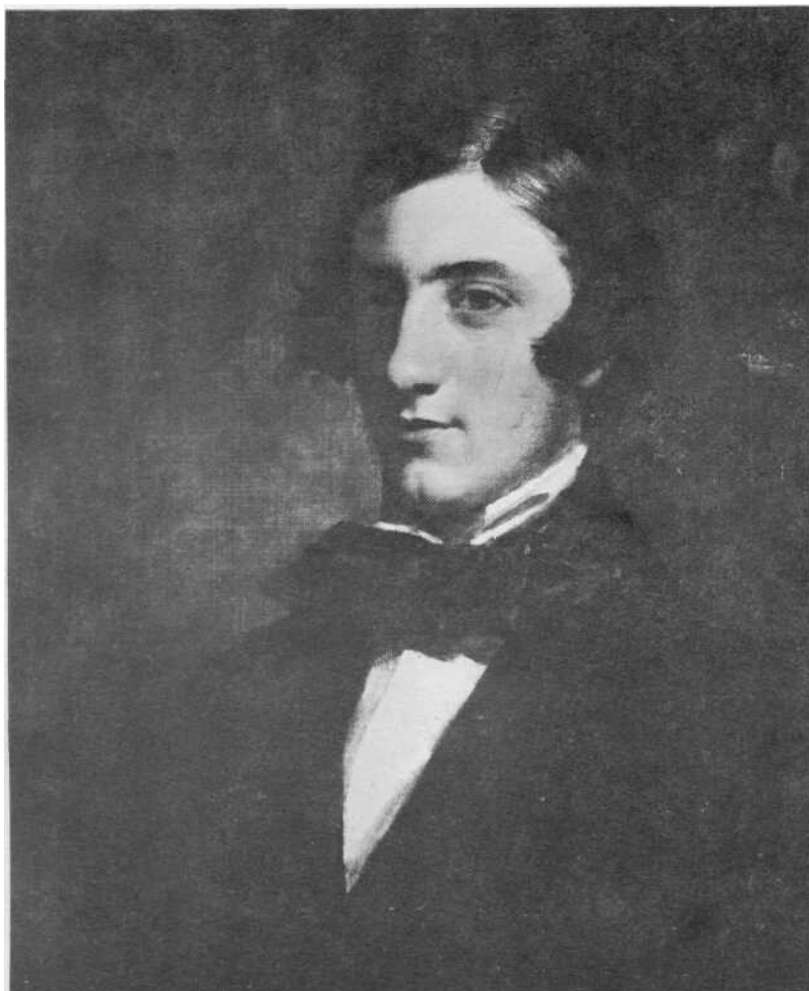
*Subscription:* \$1.00 a year: single copies 25c: free to members of the Auckland Gallery Associates.

Printed by the Pelorus Press Limited, 21 Great South Road, Auckland.

Layout and typography by G. H. B.

Wilhelm Lehmbruck

*Contemplative girl*



# AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY: WELLESLEY STREET EAST: AUCKLAND

Location: During alterations to the Gallery Building the entrance is off Wellesley Street East along the path behind the Auckland Public Library and bordering Albert Park. The Administrative Offices are temporarily located on the second floor of the Town Hall Building, at the corner of Queen Street and Greys Avenue.

Telephone: 31-796 (Town Hall: 74-650)

Coffee Room: Monday, 12 noon to 4 pm. Tuesday to Friday, 10.30 am to 4 pm.

Gifts and Bequests: Gifts to the Art Gallery in the form of *cashfront income* upward to \$50 are allowable for purposes of income tax deductions. Gifts in the form of paintings, or other property do not qualify for such deductions. Gifts to the Art Gallery of money or property would not attract gift duty, and the value of such gifts made during the donor's lifetime would not form part of his dutiable estate. An exception to this is where an intending donor declares a gift to the Art Gallery, but reserves to himself, during his life, an interest in the property so that the full beneficial interest does not attract duty, but the property remains part of the donor's estate and qualifies for purposes of estate duty.

Auckland Gallery Associates: The aims of the Associates are to stimulate and sustain public interest in the Art Gallery; to extend the Gallery's influence throughout the community; and to acquire funds through gifts, subscriptions and bequests, for the purpose of adding to the Art Gallery's collection of New Zealand painting, drawings and sculpture.

Any member of the public is eligible for membership. Members are invited to previews of exhibitions arranged by the Art Gallery, to lectures, discussions, film evenings, and social functions arranged by the Associates. Regular newsletters are sent out, and Members also receive the Art Gallery's *Quarterly*. Further information can be obtained from the Hon. Secretary, c/o Auckland City Art Gallery.

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