By the Waters of Babylon

## THE ART OF A. LOIS WHITE

Nicola Green

A. LOIS WHITE: figure painter, social commentator, portraitist, creator of decorative allegories. Here at last is a sumptuously illustrated book about the work of this much-neglected artist, a woman who blended traditional pictorial interests with Art Deco eroticism and serious political statement.

The critical controversy provoked by *War makers* in 1937 secured Lois White's reputation as a political commentator. Nicola Green's study traces this work as one of a series in which the artist responded to topical issues such as the Depression and world war. Her "war art", with its uniquely civilian viewpoint, sharply contrasts with official war art of the time.

Yet alongside her political compositions White was also painting works about female sexuality, with an emphasis on decorative stylisation. Her devotion to narrative placed her in opposition to New Zealand's dominant tradition of landscape painting, as well as to contemporary modernist schools of abstraction.

Lois White was gradually alienated from her peers, and her themes — religious, political, sexual — were often lost on contemporary audiences. Now, however, these exquisite, jewel-like paintings, reproduced here in 47 colour plates, speak to a generation ready to accept a stylised art which unashamedly celebrates the female body. By the Waters of Babylon is an essential re-evaluation of the work of A. Lois White, one of New Zealand's most distinctive and individual artists of the twentieth century.

By The Waters of Babylon
The Art of A. Lois White



Lois White, c.1955

A. Lois White Archive

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

 $By\ the\ Waters\ of\ Babylon$ 



# The Art of A. Lois White

Nicola Green

Auckland City Art Gallery



David Bateman

By the Waters of Babylon celebrates the achievements of A. Lois White, one of Auckland's leading artists of the mid-twentieth century. It follows *The Art of Alfred Sharpe* by Roger Blackley, published in 1992 to accompany the Auckland City Art Gallery's 1993 exhibition *Golden Evenings*, which provided a reassessment of a unique colonial talent. These two authoritative monographs, on New Zealand artists whose true stature had previously been overlooked, have been made possible through a rewarding collaboration with David Bateman. The Gallery is delighted that the scholarly endeavours of Nicola Green and Roger Blackley can thus be presented in such an attractive and memorable form and thanks David Bateman for its continuing support.

The Gallery owes an immense debt to all the owners of Lois White's paintings, and to the artist's estate, for permission to reproduce her work. We are grateful for the hospitality received by Nicola Green and Roger Blackley in so many museums, libraries and private homes. Particular thanks are due to the Alexander Turnbull Library and the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, for providing access to the artist's papers.

We gratefully acknowledge the continuing involvement of Ernst & Young, principal sponsor of the exhibition scheduled for March 1994 and subsequently touring New Zealand. Primary support for both the book and the exhibition has been provided by the Auckland City Council through the Art Gallery Enterprise Board.

Christopher Johnstone
Director, Auckland City Art Gallery

I AM PARTICULARLY indebted to Lois White's family, friends, colleagues and pupils: Ralph Boyd, Catherine Broughton, Vic Cleave, Ruth Coyle, Phyllis Crowley, Elaine Dally, Alison and Sue Disbrowe, Joan Edwards, Sybil Ferguson, Patricia Fry, Murray Gittos, Helen Hitchings, Robert Jenkin, Molly Kelling, Eric Lee-Johnson, Linwood Lipanivic, Peter McLeavey, Daphne Mason, Michael Nicholson, Janet Paul, Joyce Phillipps, Muriel Phillipps, Mitzie Price, Mrs Scarry, Moira Shelling, Michael Smither, Ron Stenberg, Margaret and Alan Stevenson, Barbara and Arthur Thompson, Margaret Thompson, Ron Tizard, Flossie Woodward, Sina Woolcott, Blanche Wormald, Jocelyn Young.

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I owe a special debt to Roger Blackley, for his encouragement to continue the pursuit of Lois White, and his collaboration in the preparation of this book.

Nicola Green

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## CONTENTS

			page
	Introduction		7
1	Religion and Life	1903 – 1922	15
2	Success	1923 – 1934	19
3	On the Air	1935 – 1939	28
4	Fleet's In	1940 – 1946	53
5	Foolish Virgins	1947 – 1951	81
6	By the Waters of Babylon	1952 – 1962	92
	Epilogue		119
	Notes		122
	Select Bibliography		126
	List of Colour Plates		127
	Index of Names		128



Pen and ink drawing by Lois White, 92 x 92 mm. (A. Lois White Archive, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa)

### INTRODUCTION



IN 1986, Anne Kirker published *New Zealand Women Artists*, a book which reclaimed the careers of generations of artists who had largely been ignored in the arthistorical record.

It has been my intention to uncover the personal identities of those women who have heeded their abilities as artists. In short, I wanted to answer the questions of what these women have done and who they are. The private view is often missing from art histories or, worse still, titillating aspects of women's lives are blown up out of all proportion to their work, thus obscuring it.<sup>1</sup>

Kirker's pioneering text, while necessarily selective, opened the field for closer investigation of individual artists' achievements. This book attempts to answer those same questions: Who was A. Lois White? What did she achieve as an artist? For answers, we must penetrate beyond the superficial reading of White as little more than a fashionable political commentator of the 1930s, the painter of *War makers* [9], who failed to live up to her early promise. White's is a complex body of work in which allegory, portraiture and decorative caprice all play a vital role.

Research into White's life and career revealed an uncertainty concerning even her name. She was 'Anna' to her mother and close friends such as Archie Fisher, while her companion Ida Eise knew her as 'Whitey'. Her working name as an artist, inscribed in paint, was always 'A. Lois White'. To the world at large, however, she became known as 'Lois White'. A further instability emerged in the pronunciation of her name. People who had been close to Lois White almost invariably pronounced 'Lois' as a diphthong, rhyming with 'Royce'. This was how she herself pronounced her name; the *Auckland Star*, captioning a photograph in 1953, transcribed it as 'Loise White'. These ambiguities are typical of an elusive individual with an intensely secretive nature.

From the beginning of her career in the 1930s, White's paintings were reproduced in newspapers and their topical allegory described in detail. The political commentaries, painted at a time of extreme agitation which led to the election of the first Labour Government, sparked controversy at the Society exhibitions. Within the first few years of exhibiting, White was dubbed 'Auckland's symbolist'. In 1936, the Auckland City Art Gallery purchased Funeral march [7] from that year's Auckland Society of Arts exhibition. The following year came War makers, which was declared 'the problem picture' of the 1937 Academy exhibition in Wellington. War makers was included in A.H. McLintock's National Centennial Exhibition of New Zealand Art (1940), where White is firmly classified as a contemporary commentator:

In some of her interesting figure compositions she has endeavoured to portray certain aspects of modern life.<sup>2</sup>

White brought enormous energy to her painting during World War II, maintaining a steady output of major political comments in addition to smaller allegorical oils featuring female figures. Adapting to the wartime shortage of artists' materials, White

developed a new medium: the varnished watercolour. Priced between three and nine guineas each, these exquisite works consistently found purchasers at the Society exhibitions in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. However, White's political compositions were unfavourably compared with official war painting, and her final venture into a political allegory was *Controversy* (1946), an ambitious mural created for the Workers' Educational Association.

The years 1947-1951 marked White's major period of production. It was also a time when her reputation in Auckland began to fade. She painted religious subjects and portraits of women, both realistic and in allegorical guise. Many of her most accomplished paintings were exhibited with the New Group, which White had helped form in 1948. The Auckland City Art Gallery purchased *Study for Annunciation* from the 1948 New Group exhibition, and *Portrait of Mrs Thompson* from the 1951 New Group exhibition. These Elam-trained artists, interested in figuration and thorough draughtsmanship, were greeted as conservative and traditional by Auckland's principal critics: Tom Bolster, Antony Alpers and I.V. Porsolt.

Emerging artists in the 1950s were interested in adapting the international art movement of Modernism to New Zealand conditions. Colin McCahon, Gordon Walters and Milan Mrkusich among others, saw Cubism, the Bauhaus and the pure abstractions of form and colour in Piet Mondrian's work, as examples of this new direction in art. The Elam style of constructional draughtsmanship, based on the example of the Old Masters, was declared retrogressive. With her work dismissed as irrelevant, this was a distressing time for White, one of bitterness, and loss of faith and ability. Her interest in the figure as a symbolic statement and her 'mannered' style of figure painting guaranteed her marginalisation within New Zealand art history.

In 1970, the Auckland City Art Gallery purchased *War makers* [9] for \$100, and it was subsequently reproduced in black and white in Gil Docking's *Two Hundred Years of New Zealand Painting* (1971). *War makers* was chosen largely because it had



Lois White in her studio, c.1980. (Photograph: Marti Friedlander, Auckland)

been 'the centre of a controversy in 1937'. The two principal complaints which denigrated White's achievement were clearly voiced by Docking: 'She was influenced by A.J.C. Fisher and John Weeks', with 'themes deriving from poetry, religion and history, which she treated in a decorative style'.<sup>3</sup>

A colour reproduction of *War makers* appeared in *New Zealand's Heritage* in 1973, illustrating Janet Paul's essay 'Painting 1920-1950'. Paul described the 'sombre colour and characteristic figure drawing' of the 'Elam School' under Fisher.

Lois White is an example: she was first a pupil and then a teacher at Elam; she had the skill and courage to convey ideas in mural and figure compositions. But ideas in the 1930s could be dangerous, and in 1937 her painting 'War Makers' became the centre of more heat than light.<sup>4</sup>

White's individuality was obscured by her relationship to Fisher and by an emphasis on the relatively brief period during which she focused on social comment.

Gordon H. Brown, in the exhibition and accompanying publication *New Zealand Painting 1920-1940: Adaptation and Nationalism* (1975), stressed the Christchurch school of regionalist landscape painting as the only really vital element in New Zealand art during White's period. Brown summed up the tradition of figurative work as a passing socialist realist attitude brought about by the Depression: 'Such subject paintings were never numerous. . . Any outright protest against social or political issues was rare, but the work of William J. Reed and A. Lois White is not without some modest interest'. White was represented in this exhibition and publication by *Trio*, a varnished watercolour from 1943. T.J. McNamara of the *New Zealand Herald* visited the exhibition and advised others to do likewise, as an 'art historical duty'. White, who was not signalled as a major painter in the exhibition, was picked out by McNamara:

The period is regarded as a desert where the visual arts are concerned and this show called 'Adaptation and Nationalism' does not map any hitherto unknown oasis. . . One painting that does deserve to be much better known is a fine formal piece 'Trio', by Lois White.<sup>6</sup>

In 1975, the Auckland City Art Gallery mounted the exhibition 'New Zealand's Women Painters', celebrating International Women's Year. Lois White was represented by *War makers* and *Study for Annunciation*. Curators Anne Kirker and Eric Young repeated the established view of White's position:

Influenced strongly by Fisher and John Weeks, she developed a special interest in draughtsmanship and in figure drawing. Had a fine sense of colour and design and understood importance of surface. Her subjects tended towards monumental treatment of various themes from everyday life or from literature. . .<sup>7</sup>

Peter McLeavey, the Wellington art dealer, first became aware of her painting through historical reproductions in *Art in New Zealand* and the *New Zealand Year Book of the Arts*. It was Colin McCahon who directed McLeavey's attention to her currently living in Blockhouse Bay, Auckland. Although not personally acquainted, McCahon knew of Lois White as an ex-Elam teacher.<sup>8</sup>

McLeavey first visited White in 1975, and in a stout fibrolite studio at the bottom of a well-manicured lawn viewed the vast residue of a lifetime's work. These soon became regular visits during McLeavey's purchasing trips to Auckland. McLeavey remembers White as a 'fairly energetic seventy year old', impeccable in a brightly patterned dress, her cardigan buttoned up with a touch of jewellery at her throat. They spent the afternoon together, first taking a cup of tea with her sister Gwen, then repairing to the studio. Around five they would break for a glass of sherry or brandy

and then McLeavey would be off to visit one of the first-generation modernists like Colin McCahon or Milan Mrkusich, the artists with whom he started his business.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to the immaculate house, the studio was a cluttered dumping ground. Among the old magazines and newspapers were trunks full of drawings: Elam life drawings dating from the 1920s, and preparatory work for all her major compositions. McLeavey recalls 'the largest colony of silverfish that I had seen extant in a private home for a long, long time'. <sup>10</sup> Most importantly, White still possessed many paintings: female portraits, allegories of female figures, varnished watercolours, and some of the major religious and political compositions from the 1930s.

McLeavey was given sole representation of her work, although she continued to sell to acquaintances from her studio. White still considered herself a working artist, now using more manageable media such as pastel and felt-tip in compositions that were coarse caricatures of her former ability. Works sat for months untouched on her easel, as her time was taken up nursing Gwen, who suffered from many ailments.

McLeavey initially retrieved three oils, *Thunderstorm*, *Deluge* [13] and *Winter's approach* [14], for a small show in 1975 entitled 'Three Regionalists'. The other artists were Olivia Spencer Bower and Robin White. McLeavey wrote to Lois White after the opening:

Many people, particularly young people, were very very impressed by your paintings. Many had never seen your work and it was a pleasure for me to show people it.<sup>11</sup>

In October 1977, at the age of 74, White received her first solo exhibition. McLeavey made a selection of works on paper, mostly watercolours from the 1930s and 1940s. White accepted McLeavey's invitation to fly to Wellington to stay with him and attend the opening. It was a small gathering of about thirty people, and McLeavey recollects people stood in a circle not quite holding hands: 'like somehow after all these years a wrong had been righted. . . something about her vulnerability and her goodness. And here she was. It was her show.' The event cheered White enormously:

. . . I came home full of exhilaration and the urge to start doing some work again. Alas, I came to earth with a thud the next day when Gwen was not well again, although all went well when I was absent. 12



Other members of the household gave her a rapturous welcome:

My return to home was greeted by great joy by Chloe dear who rubbed my face with hers with a purr, and with shouts of glee from Hugo and Fritz who licked my ears clean and danced furiously.<sup>13</sup>

The exhibition was reviewed by Neil Rowe in the *Evening Post*, under the headline 'Late recognition for major painter'. After three decades of critical oblivion, White was now described as 'an important figure in our brief art history':

What is most striking about seeing for the first time a large group of her works is the recognition that Lois White has been much underrated as a painter. The fact that her subject matter has been either contentious or unfashionably mannered has meant that the very real quality of her painting has gone largely ignored.<sup>14</sup>

Exposure at the Peter McLeavey Gallery generated a great deal of interest in White. Works sold to many private collectors in Wellington and to a range of public institutions, including the Australian National Gallery, Dowse Art Museum, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Manawatu Art Gallery, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Hocken Library, National Art Gallery and Alexander Turnbull Library. In 1978, McLeavey advised White that he was increasing the prices to \$100 for drawings, \$200 for watercolours and \$400 for oils. The Turnbull Library solicited documents from White for their archives, although not before she had destroyed some material. In 1979 during a tape-recorded interview commissioned by the Turnbull, White told Gordon H. Brown: 'When I reached my 70th year I had a burn-up, and since then I have been soundly scolded for doing so'. <sup>15</sup> In 1981, Ross Fraser recorded a second interview with White, for publication in *Art New Zealand*.

Brown's third exhibition, *New Zealand Painting 1940-1960: Conformity and Dissension*, toured New Zealand from 1981. There is some reassessment of White in this publication. Brown's comments on her political compositions and the effective negation of her religious statements indicate the prejudice against symbolic figurative painting which still existed:

If A. Lois White could occasionally, in this sense, be a little heavy handed, it was less noticeable due to her ability at organising her material in a rhythmically pictorial manner, as in the mural *Controversy*, or with stronger pictorial unity in paintings like *The Fleet's In* or *Jubilation*. Generally it is the simpler type of social comment, where the artist's feelings have been aroused by a specific situation, as in *The Fleet's In*, or in her religious themes, like the treatment she gives *The Foolish Virgins*, that carry a conviction greater than her more complicated philosophical subjects...<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, White's religious paintings were described as 'carefully modulated, rather decorative compositions' in comparison to the 'immediacy and sense of urgency' in Colin McCahon's religious themes.<sup>17</sup>

Lois White, together with other artists of the 1940s such as Bessie Christie and James Turkington, has been marginalised by Brown's criteria of modernism. This attempt to fit White into 'being modern' completely ignored the message in *Fleet's in*:

While there is the suggestion of shallow pictorial space, the manner in which the figures are treated hardly represents modernism in a true sense. Rather, Lois White is seen to share the backward-looking stylised forms promoted by Archie Fisher.<sup>18</sup>

The frony is that, in Brown's two histories covering the period 1920-1960, White was represented by two works (Trio and Fleet'sin[19]) which hung alongside each other in the 1943 Auckland Society of Arts annual exhibition. Nothing could have been more damaging to a proper appreciation of White's career than this narrow selection of two war-time works.

When White died in September 1984, the *New Zealand Herald* outlined her career with glowing accolades. 'Lois White is regarded as one of the most important New Zealand painters of this century'. '19 *War makers* was the 'masterpiece' of this 'controversial figure in the New Zealand art scene in the 1930s'. The potential of White's imagery to evoke the 1930s and 1940s began to be appreciated by publishers. *Fleet's in* was reproduced on the cover of *Celebration* (1984) an anthology of New Zealand writing from the Penguin New Writing Series. <sup>20</sup> A detail of *War makers* appeared on the cover of the Robin Hyde novel *Nor the Years Condemn*, published by New Womens Press in 1986. <sup>21</sup>

In 1985, *Broadsheet* published 'Lest we forget', Pat Rosier's article on Lois White's career. Rosier reported that little of White's life had been documented. Her sources

Gwen and Lois White in their home at Taunton Terrace, c.1980. (Photograph: Marti Friedlander, Auckland) were limited to several well-known references: the December 1937 issue of *Art in New Zealand* in which Harry Tombs defended *War makers*, Gil Docking, the 1981 *Art New Zealand* interview, and Gordon H. Brown. From a feminist perspective, Rosier disapproved of White's depiction of the women in *Fleet's in*:

The supplicant figures of the three women their admiration of and offering themselves to the grinning men with arched bodies and, in one case, a simpering smile, are contrasted with the open confidence of the men's bodies. The two men who do not have women are drinking.<sup>22</sup>

White's 'apparent' relationship with Fisher had received prominence in the documentation. The reading of her women was confused with the 'titillating' perception of the artist as a spinster infatuated for a life-time with a charismatic married man. Rosier continued to encourage this myth by including gossip which did little justice to White's talent:

. . . it is still disturbing that there is so little information about her life and her work although she received attention in the 40s. (One comment made to me was that was because she was a favoured pupil of Fisher's.)<sup>23</sup>

In her entry on White in New Zealand Women Artists (1986), Anne Kirker pinpointed similar reasons for White's continued obscurity:

Until comparatively recently little has been known of her life and career, and there are at least two reasons for this. On one hand, the highly mannered and decorative treatment of her figure compositions has been difficult to place in the predominantly landscape-orientated context of New Zealand art. On the other, her close adherence to the strictures of a prominent teacher and mentor, namely A.J.C. Fisher, has deflected attention from the personal and individual features of White's work.<sup>24</sup>

While identifying the problems, however, Kirker proceeded to emphasise Fisher as White's only critical support 'when she was controversial, unpopular, and generally misunderstood'. In reality, White received favourable support published by many artists and critics, including Ida Eise, A.R.D. Fairburn, R.N. Field, Roland Hipkins, Arthur Hipwell and Harry Tombs. Kirker added to the availability of White's images by reproducing in colour *Elijah taken up into heaven* [35]. This work had been purchased directly from the artist by the National Art Gallery in 1971.

In Women and the Arts in New Zealand (1986), Elizabeth Eastmond and Merimeri Penfold represented White by On the air [5], a work painted around 1935 which had not previously been reproduced. They noted 'her unique contribution to New Zealand art has received minimal attention in our major art history texts – and none for instance in Brown and Keith's An Introduction to New Zealand Painting'. Her 'general approach owed much to the influence and encouragement of A.J.C. ('Mr') Fisher'. For the first time, the full range of her themes is recognised, with emphasis placed on the female allegories:

An interesting feature of her mythological and allegorical figure subjects is her frequent choice of those which involve or focus on women.  $...^{25}$ 

White's compelling design quality was further exploited in 1991, when *Controversy* was used on the cover of Rachel Barrowman's *A Popular Vision: The Arts and the Left in New Zealand 1930-1950*. White's ability to evoke the intellectual and political fervour of the period was characteristically made to appear of minor significance, along with her influence on several generations of Elam-trained artists:

The notable examples of direct social or political comment in New Zealand art in

Lois White in her studio at 73 Taunton Terrace, Blockhouse Bay, Auckland, c.1980. (Photograph: Marti Friedlander, Auckland)

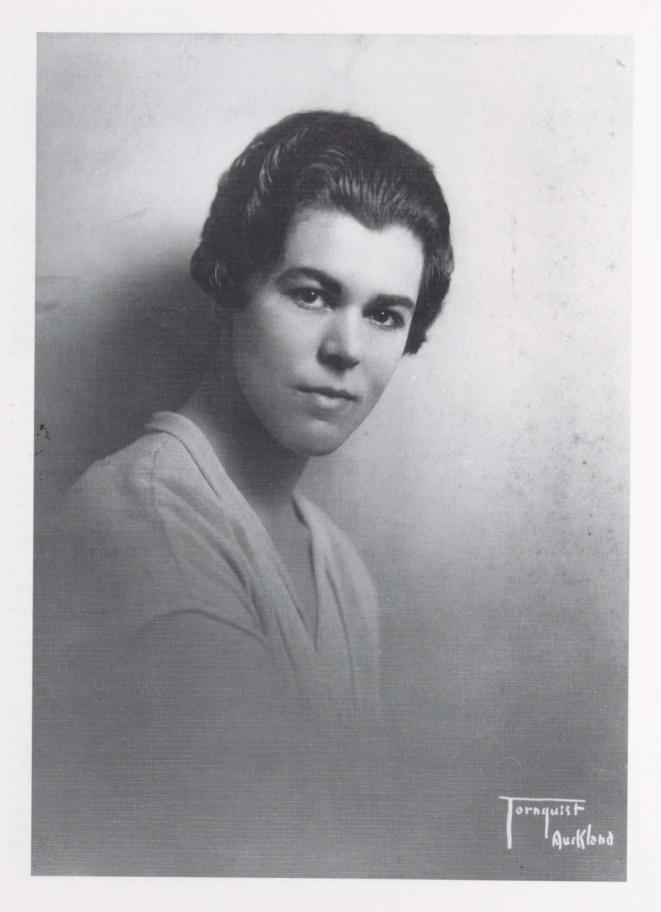


this period were a small number of paintings by Lois White, who studied under A.J.C. Fisher, socialist and tutor at Elam School of Art in Auckland. . . These were certainly significant works, but a discussion of them falls outside the scope of this book. They also represent a very small body of left-wing art, and in the longer term had little influence on the mainstream development of New Zealand art.<sup>26</sup>

Michael Dunn's A Concise History of New Zealand Painting (1991) firmly identifies White with her female allegories by reproducing the 1933 Persephone's return to Demeter [3]. 'For White and Angus at times the female figure is identified with nature in its nurturing and fertile aspects'.<sup>27</sup> Dunn views her work in relation to other female artists from her period, instead of emphasising her association with Fisher.

At the time of White's death in 1984, the Auckland City Art Gallery held three of her oils and 14 drawings. Beginning in 1987, the Gallery extended its collection by purchasing a further nine oil paintings: Back door [47], Pat, Jonah and the great fish [34], Annunciation [39], Poi dance [41], Jubilation [32], Pattern inspired by rain [16], Self-portrait and Civilised [22]. In 1992, Margaret Thompson presented Wild waves [17] to the collection. Belatedly, the art gallery of the city in which she lived and worked has acquired a representative collection that includes the complete extent of her themes.

Far from being meagre, information on Lois White has proved to be extremely rich. Dozens of people who knew her shared with the writer their perceptions of different periods in Lois White's life. The papers from her estate, housed in the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, provided their own insights into her triumphs and disappointments. Above all, the sequence of her major paintings, exhibited over 25 years, told the story of an artist of singular talent working in isolation from fashionable style. Lois White dedicated her life to her art, but during the 1950s and 1960s she saw her ambitious undertaking dismissed as insignificant. By the waters of Babylon [42], painted in 1954, aptly expresses the theme of exile. With her earlier painting effectively buried, White became trapped in a spiral of decline. But the full range of her works, reproduced in this book, reveals A. Lois White's true stature in New Zealand art.



### RELIGION AND LIFE



1903 - 1922

Lois was always proud of the reputation her family had as staunch, conscientious Methodists. The Whites and the Phillippses had helped establish Methodism as a flourishing force in the Mount Albert and Mount Roskill boroughs of Auckland. Being a Methodist White, however, was a double-edged sword for Lois. Her religious upbringing developed a spirituality in her and a love of the literary qualities of the Bible that were constantly to inspire her and later to permeate her art. But she was hampered too by being raised in the socially introverted Methodist community and by a sense of obligation to church and family, impressed upon her at an early age by her domineering, conservative mother. Throughout her life, Lois was required to reconcile two aspects of her personality often in conflict: the God-fearing dutiful daughter and the creative individual.

Anna Lois White was born on 2 November 1903, the youngest of Arthur and Annie's four children. Arthur Herbert White was an architect and, until their marriage, Annie Phillipps had been the eldest child and housekeeper in a family of seven daughters and three sons. They made an unusual couple: the opposite in temperament but equally committed to the Mount Albert church. 'Ma White', as she was affectionately known within the Mount Albert Methodist congregation, is remembered as a formidable matriarch, though to intimates she could show the proverbial heart of gold. Annie White was active in charity work until her death, notably on behalf of the Methodist Women's Missionary Union and the Auckland Methodist Children's Home and Orphanage. She poured her tremendous energy into organising other people's lives, particularly those of her sisters and her children.

Kindly spoken and slightly reticent, Arthur's nature was more spiritual. He had a reserve he shared with his younger daughter. Annie's great-niece, Mitzie Price, who occasionally holidayed with the Whites, was impressed by Lois's self-containment:

Out of total silence and stillness, Lois created an almost tangible world of 'somewhere else'. . . She must have inherited this gravity from [her father] because she certainly did not from her mother! Aunt Annie was a tyrant, bossy, dictatorial and feet firmly planted on the soil until bad legs put her in a chair permanently beside the parrot's stand in a downstairs room. . . <sup>1</sup>

Arthur tended the books in the church library and enjoyed the company of his children. Remembered among his nieces for his 'special way with animals', Arthur always kept birds, dogs, goats, cows and ponies as part of the household.<sup>2</sup> Lois felt that her father 'should have been a farmer instead of an architect because he was so fond of all sorts of animals and I think that has been bred into me too, because I love animals and birds and that kind of thing, which is why I like designing with them'.<sup>3</sup>

His architectural clients included a number of wealthy Methodist families. In his domestic architecture, Edwardian in style, there is a restrained and elegant degree of decoration. He designed the two additional storeys and hexagonal tower for the Caughey residence 'Rahiri', in McLean Street, Mount Albert. In 1914, he was

Lois White photographed by Herbert Tornquist, c.1923. (A. Lois White Archive, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa) commissioned to design the Dominion Road Methodist Church. He was also responsible for the vestibule of the Pitt Street Methodist Church and the original Mount Albert Methodist Chapel.

Arthur won several prizes for drawing competitions sponsored by the Auckland Institute of Architects in the 1886 and 1887 exhibitions of the Auckland Society of Arts. In 1886 he was awarded two prizes:

For construction (for a porch with entrance door – style, Italian). . . [and]. . . For an original design showing the best adaption of native foliage to decorative purposes as for a capital, frieze, or panel, suitable either for modelling or carving.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1887 exhibition the prize was for a bay window and a Corinthian capital and base. Lois recognised the influence her father had on her vocation:

I think that I got some of my talent from him, in that I am a very meticulous person in the way I think and in the way I work.<sup>5</sup>

Annie's father, Frank Phillipps, ran W. Phillipps and Sons, oil and colour merchants prominently situated on Queen Street alongside His Majesty's Arcade. Since the 1870s, the front window had been used by artists to display works for sale, and during Lois's time there was a small gallery in the wallpaper section. The firm imported fineart reproductions as well as selling artists' materials and interior decorating supplies.

Annie's younger brother Cyril Phillipps entered the family business, while the two other brothers went farming. The seven daughters were not required to be economically productive. Nor were they much encouraged to marry. Spinsterhood was a common condition among the Phillipps women. According to Lois's cousin Muriel Phillipps, 'we used to think it was because they were all kept at home so much. My Phillipps aunts, they didn't go out to work and yet there were so many of them. As they got much older they used to say they were battened down at night and weren't allowed out...'6

Lois White seems to have felt an affinity with her two spinster aunts, Ruth and Lizzy. The choice these women made, to live together rather than to marry, was a pattern imitated by Lois and Gwen after Annie's death. As single women of the next generation, Lois and Gwen were beneficiaries of the Phillipps aunts' estate. It was this inheritance which allowed Lois to undertake her overseas trip in 1960.

Lois's father's family established themselves early in New Zealand. They were notable Methodists whose connections went back to the first Wesleyan mission in the Hokianga. Lois's grandfather, Titus Angus White, was an interpreter working for the native land courts who disappeared in May 1865 with the schooner, *The Kate Williams*, returning on its maiden voyage to Auckland from Te Kaha. Titus's wife, Anna Lovell White, was left with nine sons and a daughter to raise. Arthur was only six months old.

Anna Lois White was baptised in the Pitt Street Methodist church on 3 August 1904. The family was living on the property of her grandparents Frank and Mary Phillipps when she was born. Her sister Gwen was aged ten; her brothers Lovell and Nigel were aged seven and two. The extended Phillipps family maintained close contact when the children were small.

In 1907, when Lois was five, they shifted to 'Salisbury House', on what is now Taunton Terrace, Blockhouse Bay, where their next-door neighbours were the family of John Phillipps, Lois's great-uncle. By 1911 Arthur had installed his family in the home he built for them at 5 Richardson Road, Mount Albert. Surrounded by paddocks and bush, it was a modest replica of one of the gracious houses he built for his wealthy clients. Stone walls fenced in the animals and large garden and orchard.

The Whites' 'church home' included extended prayer readings at breakfast, with Arthur enjoying the eloquence of the biblical language while the food cooled on the table. During her adolescence, Lois attended the Pocket Testament League as well as Sunday School.<sup>8</sup>

Lois was enrolled by her father at Epsom Girls' Grammar School in 1919. The school had been open for two years, though parts were still under construction. Miss



The White family, c.1918. From left: Gwendolyne (Gwen), Nigel, Arthur, Lois, Annie ('Ma White') and Lovell. (A. Lois White Archive, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa)

Morrison was Headmistress with a staff of 14 assistant mistresses and four visiting mistresses. White's third form initially had modest accommodation, as classmate Moira Shelling (née Donaldson) recalls:

Our form 3a and 3b spent the first term of the year in big tents on the lawn in front of the Headmistress's study. It was very pleasant but not inducive to study – eventually as the building of the school progressed we were given a form room. 9

Lois excelled at languages and came top of her third form in English. She was a model student. Her quiet responsible manner, her ability in English and drawing, her soprano voice and strength as a swimmer, all brought Lois to the attention of her teachers. Accused of being slightly school-marmish by her contemporaries, Lois maintained this characteristic later at Elam School of Art by becoming friendly with her teachers rather than with other students.

In her first year in the Epsom Girls' sketch club, Lois was 'highly commended'. A quarter of the 305 girls enrolled in the school were involved in the club, with the dynamic, diminutive Miss Baker as their teacher. <sup>10</sup> Each month drawings were pinned up in the Hall with marks called out at Assembly. The club raised money to buy glass frames for these displays. Annual exhibitions were judged by Robert Procter from Elam School of Art.

Being no stranger to social aspiration, Annie carefully guided her daughters through a series of church functions, picnics and buggy outings to the beach which were shared by 'good' Methodist families, families of solid means and attractive prospects such as the Spraggs, the Caugheys and the Kerr-Taylors. Occasionally, the carpet was rolled back in one of the congregation member's homes so that teenagers could dance while chaperoned by their parents. Lois sat quietly while Annie cross-examined potential friends. Far more enjoyable for Lois was the annual summer holiday at Green Bay in Titirangi, where she swam endlessly and explored the bays in a dinghy with brother Nigel, her cousins and her school friend, Flossie Woodward.

The early years of Lois's adolescence were marked by the spectre of World War I.

She noted the devastating effects of war on the families of its casualties. Wesley Spragg, her brother Lovell's closest friend and fellow Air Force cadet, was killed during training. His family erected an obelisk at Cornwallis, an event recorded in Lois's collection of photographs.<sup>11</sup>

In 1920, during Lois's second year at Epsom Girls' Grammar, Arthur White died of a chronic heart condition. Flossie Woodward remembers the emotional impact her father's death had on Lois, who became more reserved and determined to succeed, knowing she was lucky to remain at school, as some girls were removed after the death of a parent. She was already keeping her private life separate from the professional image she presented to the world.

Lois threw herself into her art, and into competitive swimming. She collected all firsts at the school swimming sports; age race, open race and race for Upper School Champion. She especially excelled at drawing.

At the recent [1921] Winter Show Lois White took the following prizes: First: Drawing from a group of four objects. First: Drawing from birds, shells, or other natural objects. First: Three drawings of New Zealand foliage. First: Three drawings from plants. First: Three humorous sketches – original.<sup>12</sup>

When Lois matriculated in 1922, she found that career options for young women were limited, consisting principally of marriage or Teachers' Training College. Some of her classmates remained 'at home', while a few went on to study at 'varsity'. Increasing numbers in the 1920s would opt for training as secretaries or clerks.

Lois was at school with May O. Gilbert, Connie Lloyd and Alison Pickmere, all of whom chose to study at Elam School of Art. For Lois, however, money was a problem. The Depression had arrived early for the family, and sacks of vegetables were sent up from Elaine Dally and Muriel Phillipps's family farms in the King Country and the Waikato. The reversal of the White family's fortunes cast doubt on Lois's ability to undertake professional training:

. . . all I wanted to do was something to do with drawing or painting. I didn't like to say so because I knew it didn't bring in very much money. So her idea [Annie White's] was to see if she could get me into a commercial artist position and I remember her taking me down to Milne and Choyce's and I was interviewed there and we went somewhere else, and it ended up that she went to the School of Art and had me enrolled at the School of Art, and I think she was a brave woman because she had very little to rely on from the monetary point of view and it meant that she was going to have to keep me for several years before I could earn anything. . . <sup>13</sup>

Annie also enquired at firms like Smith and Caughey's, while trying to get her daughter an apprenticeship in an advertising department. Annie had connections, as the Caugheys were fellow members of the Mount Albert Methodist congregation. Lois's niece, Alison Disbrowe, remembers the story told with a different twist. Lois quotes her exasperated mother after she had found fault with the options Annie presented to her. 'You're a very troublesome girl! What do you really want to do?'<sup>14</sup> Lois wanted fine art training, though it was financially risky embarking on an artistic career. If she didn't succeed there would be little she could fall back on.



Lois, Epsom Girls' Grammar School champion swimmer, c.1920. (A. Lois White Archive, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa)

### SUCCESS



1923 - 1934

At the beginning of 1923, Lois was enrolled at Elam School of Art. Her first year as an art student was Edward Payton's final as the director. It was another unspectacular year for Payton, who had been in the position since the school opened in 1890. Lois remembered Elam then as akin to a primary school, with the director rarely venturing out of his office:

. . . we painted pretty little flower things and we drew pretty little flower things and we drew common objects and we painted still life. . . A cage would arrive with a parrot in it, or a rooster, or a rabbit, and we did drawings or watercolours of them. <sup>1</sup>

Mid-way through 1925, A.J.C. (Archie) Fisher was appointed director, with the aim of up-grading the status of Elam. Fisher's appointment arose from the scheme designed by the Superintendent of Technical Education, William Sanderson La Trobe, to invigorate art education in New Zealand by recruiting graduates from Britain. Fisher was a startling revelation to the impressionable 21-year-old Lois. Wearing shorts, sandals and a V-necked cricket jumper, he energetically applied himself to his teaching and was quick to recognise those with talent. Lois was particularly impressed by the way he drew, his figures 'bulging' out of the paper. His enthusiasm was infectious:

. . . when he [Fisher] came to the school, it opened a new world altogether for me. The attitude to form and rhythm and sculpture in the human form and anything to do with people was what intrigued me so very much. I hadn't had anything like that before, and as far as I am concerned he was my God. He wasn't just a mentor, he was a God to me because he filled my mind with so many things that I had never thought of. . . And he was such a marvellous person in that way that I will never forget him, nor the influences he had on me in my attitude to what I was doing and what I found I really wanted to do. He introduced me to the Old Masters. . . When that happened I began to feel well I can start to do something like that and that was an introduction to a world I really didn't know existed, in the art world.<sup>2</sup>

At that time Elam was still an alternative grammar school. The majority of students came straight from standard six and were eligible for five years' free secondary education. After Fisher's arrival, additional subjects on the curriculum to cater for these students were gradually dropped. His aim was to obtain students like Lois, who already had a grammar-school education.

Elam was then a three-storeyed building in Rutland Street, flanked on one side by the St Johns Ambulance Hall and on the other by electrical manufacturers Turnbull and Jones. Ron Stenberg, a student in 1932, recalled that there were:

... studios on every floor. Every so often we would have fire drill and all the students would crash down the stairs and the whole building would shake. One weekend someone wrote across the front 'If you can read this you're too

damn close, this building is unsafe!' They put it in the *Herald*. . . There was a certain feeling about the old place in Rutland Street, an ambience we never got anywhere else. . .<sup>3</sup>

Elam was open weekdays, evenings and on Saturday morning. Truancy was not tolerated. Fisher's insistence on discipline was balanced by the personal interest he took in his students. Although there were initial problems with a suspicious Board, his staff were extremely loyal to him. The majority of tutors had trained at the Royal College of Art in London. In addition to his duties as director, Fisher taught life-painting, drawing, design and figure composition. Lois's other teachers were: Leonard Studd, once a designer of posters for the London Underground, who took life-drawing, painting, design and lettering; Stephen Champ, etching, engraving and metalwork; William Wright, life-drawing, drawing from the antique, modelling and sculpture; and Ida Eise, antique, still life, geometry, perspective and elementary drawing. Besides Fisher, perhaps the most influential of her teachers were Wright and Ida Eise.

Wright modelled in plaster and sent his works to England to be cast in bronze, before they were then exhibited with the Royal Academy of Art. His major interest was portraiture but he also produced symbolic groupings of classical figures and individual female and male allegories which Lois would have viewed in plaster.

Ida Eise was to become Lois's life-long friend and companion. She was a student at Elam from 1911 to 1915 under the Swedish painter Claus Edward Friström, 'a master of the outdoor oil sketch'. Eise's teaching qualification, a certificate from the Board of Education, London, was obtained without leaving New Zealand. She worked prodigiously, painting outdoor landscape oils and still lifes of unusual plants and floral arrangements. She was awarded an MBE in 1976 for her outstanding contribution as an art teacher. For almost four decades, from the 1920s until the 1950s, Ida Eise's Grey Lynn home was a salon of sorts for artistic society. Vivacious and outgoing, Eise was a constant support and foil for the shy and sometimes temperamental Lois White.

In the 1920s, Elam was firmly divided between seniors and juniors. Junior classes concentrated on drawing inanimate objects, while seniors were allowed the challenge of drawing from the model. There was a definite Elam style of figure drawing, which owed much to Fisher's example. Crisp defining lines were modulated by carefully graduated shading. Only when the student was fully in control of drawing was he or she allowed to progress to painting. The use of colour was initially limited, the main focus being the rendition of form by tone. This was to change with the appointment of John Weeks in 1930, back from studies in Edinburgh and Paris, who introduced a more innovative use of colour. Weeks opened students to expressionistic and emotional rather than purely optical or realistic colour. An influential and popular teacher at the school, Weeks provided a balance to Fisher's teaching.

Under Fisher's tutelage, Lois White was encouraged to concentrate on life-drawing, painting and composition design. It was a relief to leave behind subjects she found incidental such as lettering or modelling. Other subjects of particular interest to her were English Literature, Mythology and Composition, and History of Art. Contemporaries do not remember Lois as a popular student, but even those who found her painting or personality difficult, conceded her industry and integrity.<sup>5</sup>

Her student years were spent apart from the boisterous crowd. Shy of mixing with groups of girls or rowdy high-spirited boys, she singled out a companion of similar age to enter into the social world of the art school. White's close friendship with the painter, Winifred (Mickey) Simpson, started in their first year of Elam. The thin, chain-smoking Simpson was regarded as a 'brilliant draughtsman'.



Elam School of Art senior life-drawing class on the roof of the Rutland Street building, c.1926. Bottom row from left: Leonard Studd (tutor), unidentified, May Smith, Eva Middlebrook, Ellen McGowan, Winifred Simpson. Top row from left: Seddon McLaran, Eric Lee-Johnson, Lois White, Sina Woolcott, unidentified, Hilda Dixon, A.J.C. Fisher (director). (A. Lois White Archive, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa)

Fisher quickly recognised Lois as one of his more gifted students and recorded on her course card for the first year he taught her, 1925: 'Very great promise. Desires to become qualified teacher of Art'.' Though Lois maintained that she received the same amount of attention that Fisher devoted to other hard-working students, most of her generation comment on the special interest he took in her and her work. Later, when she was an exhibiting artist, Fisher continued to visit her studio to view work in progress. Lois valued his perceptive comments, enjoying a privilege accorded to few others. Sybil Ferguson (née White), who was a student and part-time tutor on the staff in the late twenties, had these observations to make:

They became very friendly. When she was working he would always visit, not exactly supervise but watch what she was doing and was interested in the development of the work. It was quite separate from the school situation, the class situation.<sup>8</sup>

In 1927 when his teaching methods were under attack by the Elam Board, Fisher sent a selection of student work (including Lois's) to William Rothenstein at the Royal College of Art. Rothenstein's praise must have provided a soothing balm:

. . . We were also much impressed by many of the compositions, which show really fine imaginative qualities. . . Indeed, it seems to me remarkable that a single school in a country without long traditions can produce such promising studies. To repeat my suggestion, I think what is chiefly needed is a harder and more precise, or if you like, classical practice, both in drawing, painting and composition. I take it that you have a good provision of photographs of painters like Giotto, Mantegna, Piero della Francesca, Raphael, Ingres as well as the best drawings of Degas and some early Rossetti's. I hope your work has been recognised by the authorities responsible for your school, and that now you have got it [Elam] into working order the quality will grow in dignity, firmness and quality.9

As the Depression approached, career opportunities for Elam graduates became even more limited. Employment possibilities included commercial studios, advertising

departments in the drapers' stores, the sign-writing houses; or apprenticeships in modelling or stonecarving. <sup>10</sup> Fisher presented cases of extreme hardship to the Elam Board for free studentships which covered fees and materials. Many students with no prospect of employment continued on at the school.

Needing money to assist with the family budget, Lois's goal was a teaching post at Elam. In 1927, her friend Winifred Simpson had been appointed as a permanent teacher for junior drawing and design. Lois was appointed as a part-time teacher, taking over Simpson's previous classes in junior drawing.<sup>11</sup> Fisher gave Lois a warm recommendation:

She is a most intelligent, conscientious and consistent person. Her draughtsmanship is very good indeed and her sense of design brilliant... She is possessed of artistic gifts of a very high order. I confidently recommend her for any post for which she applies.<sup>12</sup>

With excellent references from Miss Morrison, the headmistress at Epsom Girls' Grammar School, and again from Fisher, Lois also in 1927 obtained the part-time art teacher's position at Takapuna Grammar School. She held these two positions in tandem for eight years.

Art was compulsory at Takapuna but Lois was not interested in controlling students. She was at this stage the complete opposite of the strict disciplinarian she was to become in later years. Pupils found her engrossed in her art, quiet, and 'disinclined to marry'. <sup>13</sup> By 1929, Lois had initiated a sketch club at Takapuna which attracted 'a good quota' of the school's students. <sup>14</sup> After years of temporary accommodation, she was supplied with an art room in 1934. Lois's tenure at the school received official recognition:

Although handling large classes with little or no atmosphere of art to help her, Miss White has achieved very good results, while she has stimulated interest and enthusiasm in her students, so that members of the voluntary Sketch Club are fully representative of all forms in the school, both boys and girls. The quality of the work handed in is testimony to the instruction given. Thoroughly artistic herself, Miss White has a gift of imparting knowledge to others.<sup>15</sup>

Lois's desire to continue her art studies was defeated by Elam's refusal of a studentship, which would have enabled further study in 1929:

Seventeen out of eighteen applications for re-admission from last year were investigated and approved. One application from Miss L. White for free studentship was not approved as she is now a part-time teacher at this school and the Northcote Junior High School [sic]. <sup>16</sup>

Lois White's student years were over; but she was poised to commence her career as an exhibiting artist. In 1929 the Auckland Society of Arts invited Elam students to participate in their annual exhibition to be held in the Society's Kitchener Street Hall. The Elam Board was impressed by Fisher's instigating this opportunity for students to show their work. The exhibition included the work of architecture students as well as ex-Elam students studying abroad.

Fisher encouraged his best students to continue their study overseas. Lois's fellow students, James Boswell, May Smith, Eric Lee-Johnson, Seddon McLaran, Hilda Dixon, Jocelyn Mays and Sam Williams all went on to study either at the Slade, or the Royal College of Art. Lois's family commitments, however, precluded overseas travel.

Initially intended for display on the staircase, the Elam exhibits in the 1929



Tutors at Elam: Lois White and Winifred Simpson, c.1930. (Private collection, Auckland)



Self-portraits from a photo-booth, c.1925. (A. Lois White Archive, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa)

Auckland Society of Arts show ended up spilling into the main gallery. Months later, a working member complained that the hanging of student work 'broke a fundamental rule of the society and resulted in the crowding out of the works of New Zealand artists'. The report in the *Auckland Star* points to one reason for animosity from current working members:

A feature of this year's exhibition is the work of the pupils of Elam School of Art. They evidently are solidly grounded in drawing, and unfortunately the same cannot be said of some of the people who exhibit colour work in other parts of the gallery. Some of the figure work of the students is exceptionally good. One gathers from the expression on the face of the models that posing to the Elamites is not conducive to hilarity, but that has nothing to do with the work, which is exceedingly creditable. <sup>18</sup>

Lois White exhibited a total of 19 works, dominating the drawing section. The watercolour *Prothalamion* [2] was included in the composition section of the student show. This frieze-like design is reminiscent of the compositions of gypsy women popularised by Augustus John. *Prothalamion* illustrates a minor poem by Edmund Spenser written in 1596 to celebrate the double wedding of the Earl of Worcester's daughters.

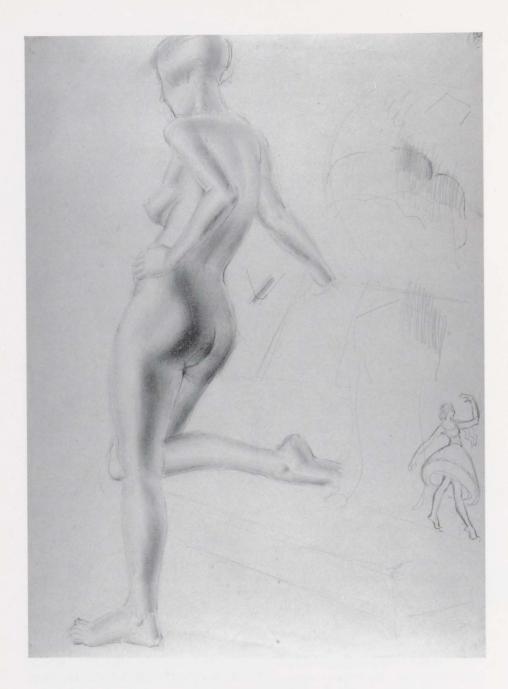
The verse *Prothalamion* concentrates on creating two discrete locations by visualising the activity taking place in each: the mythologised swans and nymphs in a meadow and then a real wedding occurring in London. The reality, however, is subordinated to the fantasy. The marriage appears only a few lines before the final refrain. Spenser's juxtaposition of an actual marriage festival with an imaginary world creates an intense spatial dislocation. The nymphs and swans are far more vividly realised than the wedding event. It is typical of Lois White's temperament and her appreciation of romantic imagery, that she finds the fifth stanza, with its allegorical connection of nymphs and swans, the most attractive part of the poem.

Lois White was rejected for full membership of the Auckland Society of Arts when she applied following the 1929 exhibition, but along with Winifred Simpson, she was made a probationary member of their sketch club. <sup>19</sup> Elam's appeal to have students' work included in the 1930 Annual Exhibition was also rejected. <sup>20</sup> Fisher's students, the vital new generation who eventually dominated the Society shows in the 1930s, were perceived as a threat to the establishment.

Ida Eise and John Weeks were elected to the Society of Arts council in September 1930.<sup>21</sup> Their appointment coincided with a move to accept probationary sketch members as full working members if their work was up to sketch club standard. Lois White and Winifred Simpson were finally accepted as working members in 1931.<sup>22</sup> This was the year that Elam was allocated the old Grammar School building in Symonds Street.<sup>23</sup> Here there was considerably more space indoors and out, and a room for life-drawing with three banks of windows.<sup>24</sup>

White painted and drew a series of highly introspective self portraits, a development from student exercises. *Self-portrait* [1] was exhibited in Auckland, Wellington and Otago in 1932, priced at 15 guineas. She wears a brown painter's smock over her clothes, the colour of her eyes lost in shadow. The Auckland show was reviewed by Fisher in *Art in New Zealand*. Speaking generally about standards of draughtmanship in the Auckland Society of Arts, Fisher focused on 'construction'. He perceived a head as a 'bilaterally symmetrical solid body in perspective'. Total control of the object was required in order to master the subject, though not as a mindless imitation of appearances. Fisher continued:

. . . there seems to be a failure to recognise that if a characteristic form on one side



Life-drawing, c.1927, pencil, 385 x 280 mm. (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa)

of the head is seen and realised, the related characteristic form, in its changed perspective, on the other side of the head, must be seen and realised and made to agree. <sup>25</sup>

*Head*, a pencil drawing by Lois White, was reproduced in Fisher's article as an example of what should be achieved:

'Self portrait', by Lois White, was an extremely well constructed work. Miss White also has a very good drawing of a head in the black and white section.<sup>26</sup>

In Wellington, White's *Self-portrait* was also granted a mention in the *Evening Post.*<sup>27</sup> In these early self-portraits, Lois White analyses her appearance with clinical severity, interrogating her distinctive physiognomy.

Late in 1932, Lois White exhibited three pencil portraits in the Auckland Society of Arts spring exhibition: *Conté drawing of a head*, priced at two guineas, with *Sue* and *John*, not for sale. Her ability at drawing was noted, along with a number of other women who drew 'attractively':

In the black and white section will be found several attractive entries, among others that are distinctly 'amateurish'. Mention may be made of the work of Connie Lloyd, D[orothy] Vallance Young, A[my] M. Davies, B. Jackson, E. Wadham, May O. Gilbert, Lois White and F.P. Worley.<sup>28</sup>

White's early concentration on portraiture parallels the work of her fellow-tutor William Wright. In 1931, he showed a small group of plaster heads at the Auckland City Art Gallery. Titled busts by Wright included studies of students Eleanor Heatherington, Monna Malcolm and Molly Woolcott as well as friends, Jane Fisher and Jeanie Robb, and Elam staff member Louise Tilsley. Lois White's portraiture also used the same familiar sitters. Like William Wright, she rarely accepted portrait commissions. Discourse the same familiar sitters are the work of her fellow-tutor will an expectation of plaster heads at the Auckland City Art Gallery. Titled busts by Wright included studies of students Eleanor Heatherington, Monna Malcolm and Molly Woolcott as well as friends, Jane Fisher and Jeanie Robb, and Elam staff member Louise Tilsley.

White made her debut as a figure painter in 1933, when she exhibited *Persephone's return to Demeter* [3] at the Auckland Society of Arts, priced at 21 guineas. This was the largest work she had produced to date; a major pictorial statement, which commanded an oblique approval in the Society president's opening speech:

In conclusion, Mr Duncan referred to a figure study which, he said, was of astounding technique and craftsmanship. Without identifying it he expressed the opinion that it was worthy to be hung at important exhibitions on the other side of the world. He believed more would be heard of the artist.<sup>31</sup>

White's work needed no identification as it was the only large figure composition in the show. In the *New Zealand Herald* the painting was clearly identified with the style Fisher had instigated at the school:

A large decorative painting of two women in a conventional landscape, by Lois White, strongly reflects the influence of the Elam School of Art. It represents a genuine attempt to use the figure as an element in design.<sup>32</sup>

Persephone's return to Demeter was reproduced in Art in New Zealand in June 1933, along with Fisher's review:

'Persephone's return to Demeter', by Miss Lois White, is the only attempt at real mural decoration I have seen since I have been in Auckland. Fine in design and colour, with a good sense of surface from a mural point of view, it contains some first-class pieces of drawing. Auckland should be proud of this work.<sup>33</sup>

When the painting was exhibited in Wellington at the 1933 Academy Annual, the *Evening Post* called it 'a formal conception of a classical subject'.<sup>34</sup> The *Dominion* thought White's work was 'reflecting the Italian primitive[s]' and saw her composition as 'conventional' and on a 'classic theme':

There are here to be found some lovely passages of painting which in no way isolate themselves from the general scheme of an ecstatic return.<sup>35</sup>

The symmetry of the figures is carefully related to the trees and flowers in the landscape. The embrace itself is frozen in time, the daughter Persephone eternally confronting the mother, Demeter. White's women appear to be of similar age and there is the strong suggestion that the models for the idealised figures are Winifred and Lois herself. Between the women stand a green sapling tree and the lily of purity. *Persephone's return to Demeter*, ostensibly a classical allegory of the return of Spring,

is also both a personal and a professional statement.

Drapery studies, a portrait of Demeter and a life-drawing of Persephone's pose survive among hundreds of life-drawings from Lois White's early years.<sup>36</sup> White worked long hours in life-drawing, even after she began teaching.<sup>37</sup> At this stage in her career she always made careful preparatory drawings for every major composition. An Italian mannequin given to her by Archie Fisher was also valuable for drapery studies.

Persephone's return to Demeter connects with a widespread revival of neoclassical subject matter and forms by many international artists in the 1920s and 1930s. Mythological works painted in Sydney by Charles Meere, for instance, depicted a classical Arcadia stocked with healthy Australian bodies. Just as Lois White's work fell from favour in the 1950s, Meere's allegories met with a similar response. The works in his 1951 retrospective in the David Jones Gallery were criticised for creating 'an emotional temperature close to freezing point . . . their reserve icy, their logic impeccable . . . as immaculate as surgery, as punctilious as a Spaniard and as tasteful as convention can make them'. 38

White's first encounter with recent overseas art came in 1934. The exhibition of contemporary British art from the Empire Art Loans Collection Society provided access to a range of original works by artists she had previously known only from reproductions. The show included allegorical painting by Dod Proctor, Glyn Philpot, William Russell Flint, Augustus John and Stanley Spencer. Fisher thought it important for students to view the exhibition, convincing the Elam Board to acquire a discounted roll of tickets for students who could not afford the full price.

White showed *Decorative panel* in the 1934 Auckland Society annual exhibition. Though the work is untraced, it was extensively reviewed in Auckland and Wellington. The *New Zealand Herald* thought White's panel containing 'three nude female figures . . . more successful, if less ambitious, than the large canvas which the artist showed last year'.<sup>39</sup> The *Auckland Star* championed *Decorative panel* as 'the only nude in oils worthy of mention'. The women were painted with 'rotundity and form' achieved through tonal graduations, with a restrained use of colour. The subject matter, a bathing party of three nude women, one of whom is drying the buttocks of her companion, escapes mention. 'It is interesting as a decorative essay'.<sup>40</sup> Fisher, however, commented on her choice of subject matter in his *Art in New Zealand* review:

I think there should be an increasing attention paid to figure composition in this country, and I am glad to see that Miss Lois White is still working hard at this most important aspect of the painter's job. Miss White has a small, very excellently designed 'Decorative Panel'. I should like to see her tackle a composition with some present day aspect of life as its theme. I think painters should comment upon contemporary life, and leave Greek mythology and religious subjects as depicted in Arab robes alone for a time, and say something about the here and now as well as the past and the hereafter. Surely life to-day is full of the stuff the artist flourishes on.<sup>41</sup>

When exhibited in Wellington, the *Dominion* thought it a 'low-toned but brilliant composition'. <sup>42</sup> *Decorative panel* was reproduced in the *Evening Post* with 'a selection of the more "advanced" art in the annual exhibition', including abstract paintings by Cora Wilding. <sup>43</sup>

Turning to No.151, 'Decorative Panel' by A. Lois White, one cannot but admire the drawing of the three female figures on the edge of a pool, but these drab ladies, in addition to having mislaid their entire wardrobes, have lost their shadows, too, and this gives an effect which, although it may be intended, hardly tends towards cheerful decoration.<sup>44</sup>

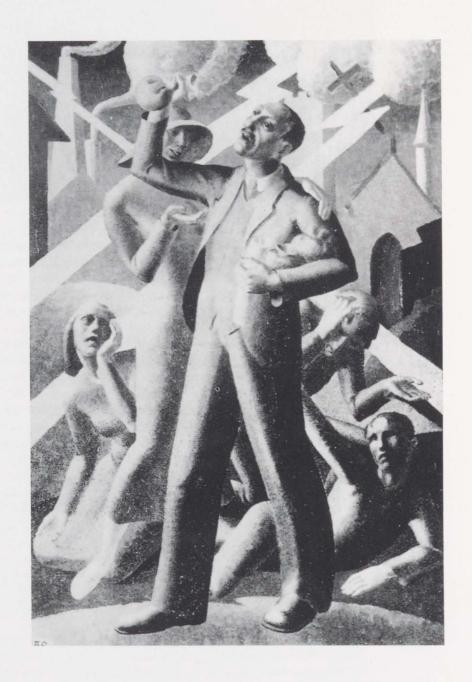
Decorative panel (lower right) was reproduced with 'a selection of the more "advanced" art' in the Evening Post, 5 October 1934. (Photograph: Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington)



White's exploration of female allegories corresponded with an intense period of self-portraiture. The figure compositions painted from 1929 to 1934 mark the beginning of a theme she was to develop throughout her career. From a present-day perspective, Lois White's themes invite a reading of female relations, of friendship and connection, both romantic and otherwise: a complexity absent in any contemporary review.

Winifred Simpson resigned at the end of the third term at Elam in 1934, reportedly to get married, leaving a position vacant. Lois White gave up her teaching position at Takapuna Grammar School to join the staff at Elam as a full-time teacher, responsible for junior drawing and design.<sup>45</sup>

Fisher's testimonial praised her 'fine sense of design and composition' and the 'really excellent work' she had already done at the school. The annual income was £220; had she been married she would have received an additional £40 per annum. Gwen White had secured a part-time job as Arts and Crafts teacher at Epsom Girls' Grammar School and in 1935 Annie White was able to claim a widow's pension. But Lois White remained the principal wage-earner in the household, paying her shilling in the pound for the unemployed relief tax to which, as a woman, she was not entitled. At the age of 32, now securely employed, Lois White was determined to establish a reputation as one of Auckland's leading painters.



Lois White's destroyed oil painting *Success*, reproduced from Archie Fisher's 1935 Auckland Society of Arts review. (*Art in New Zealand*, June 1935, p 167)

### ONTHEAIR



1935 - 1939

THE DEPRESSION OF the early 1930s had far-reaching consequences for all New Zealanders. Discontent over unemployment and the inadequate relief system led to riots in 1932. Workers, armed with fence palings, confronted the police, who were charged with dispersing unauthorised political rallies. On his popular IZB radio programme, C.G. Scrimgeour (Uncle Scrim), who was also a Methodist lay preacher, championed the workers, battling the perceived media image of the unemployed and relief workers as parasites.

'Special' police were summarily enlisted to combat workers and many men were threatened with the loss of their jobs if they failed to enrol. The issue rocked Elam. Arthur Thompson, a student who was at Elam from 1929, remembers some fellow-students who participated as 'special' police:

. . . those things stuck in your guts. We were close to it on the ground. We even had two or three members of the school who went and joined the special police forces the headquarters of which were at the University, of all ironies. They were issued with clubs and cudgels and they even brought them to school. And I have never forgotton those two, I like them not.¹

Archie Fisher, along with other staff members Rex Fairburn, Arnold Goodwin and Lois White, was sympathetic to politically left ideals. The three men expressed this professionally through their involvement with the People's Theatre, while Lois White introduced political themes into her paintings. Fisher also contributed caricatures for Labour Party political pamphlets, but was careful not to alienate the Elam Board by directly involving the school.

The Workers' Educational Association occupied the other half of the old Grammar School building in Symonds Street where Elam was now situated. An adult outreach educational wing of the Auckland University College, the W.E.A. was a poor person's university. Fisher became friendly with its lecturers: Professor Arthur Sewell, who taught 'literature and social change', Willis Airey, who lectured in history, and Norman Richmond, whose directorship was considered by the University Council to be radically left-wing. Richmond strengthened trade union links by instigating classes amenable to left-thinkers. Many prominent Labour leaders and supporters frequented the organisation. Some tutors published in left-wing journals like *Tomorrow* and *The International Labour Review*. Increasingly, W.E.A. classses were concerned with cultural subjects emphasising social change.

The young tutor Lois White was profoundly affected by the charged political atmosphere surrounding Elam as the Labour Party came to power. Labour won the election because of the failure of the Coalition Government's deflationary tactics of cutting expenditure to balance the budget. Popular consensus demanded a more socially equitable distribution of wealth. The first Labour Government's election campaign turned on a policy of asset nationalisation and a promise to end individual profiteering, which undermined national interests.

Two paintings, exhibited in 1935 at the Auckland Society of Arts, expressed Lois White's political concerns. Each priced at 15 guineas, *Success* and *Religion and life* [6] were hung side by side, enriching each other's meaning. *Success* is composed with the material effects of the Depression in mind. A suffering family shrinks beneath the raised fist of the capitalist politician, who stands on an elevated stage, glorying in selfish advantage. The evangelical *Religion and life* demonstrates White's apprehension of her church's attempts to modernise by emphasising social conscience.

Success was never exhibited outside of Auckland; the work became mysteriously damaged while travelling to its Wellington venue. Without its companion, Religion and life's message evaded newspaper reviewers in Wellington and Otago. Fortunately, Success was reproduced in Art in New Zealand, with a review by Fisher.

Fisher's assessment in this review focused primarily on White's technique. He recommended her first as a painter, and not for her subject matter. His 'foregoing tirade' is comprised of blunt opinions on the Society's exhibition, which was 'not up to the standard of the last two or three years'. There was a return to 'pretty-pretty', 'poor imitative' and 'sentimental' work with 'a disturbing lack of the application of a sense of construction and form' in draughtsmanship. Lois White's painting was the exception:

Notwithstanding the foregoing tirade, there is some very interesting work in the show. Miss Lois White has two extremely interesting figure compositions, 'Success' and 'Religion and Life'. Both these works are what I call small mural decorations. They both exhibit very sound draughtsmanship and a powerful sense of composition. This form of the painter's means of expression should be definitely encouraged in this country. It demands good drawing and design, and forces the artist to get down to the careful study of heads, hands, feet, drapery, etc.<sup>2</sup>

### The New Zealand Herald announced:

Two remarkable allegorical subjects by A. Lois White, of Auckland, are unique in the exhibition. One [Religion and life] represents the effect of the Christian message upon various types of people. The Saint holds the Cross, blinded by its radiance. A woman kneels in adoration with uplifted arms, a man sits remorsefully with head in hands, while a woman offers to comfort him. A man and a woman turn away, one angry and the other unmoved. Technically it is a remarkable composition, and the colour scheme is original. The other picture [Success] is smaller and is intended as a commentary on the fruits of worldly success.<sup>3</sup>

The reviewer has ignored the symbolic architecture in the background, the church and the skyscraper. The contradiction embodied in these opposing architectures is elaborated further with *Success*. The review by the *Auckland Star* gives the strongest recognition to the controversial subject material:

For sheer drama of construction the two works of A. Lois White, 'Religion and Life' and 'Success', will attract considerable attention. Allegorical in subject, they both tell cynical and tragic stories. The first shows a symbolical religious figure, shielding his eyes while people at his feet are shown in attitudes of prayer, supplication and derision. 'Success' shows a man of wealth surrounded by those who wish to win his favour. The design of both is controlled, and the subjects have been treated with remarkable courage.<sup>4</sup>

The theme of *Success* is conservatively interpreted as the possession of material goods, symbolised by bags of money and the scroll of law held by the capitalist: the fruits of those who succeed in the system. Various women and men remain unrecognised and anonymously sacrificed along the way. The newspaper's reading ignores White's representation of the victims of the capitalist's 'success', as well as the implications of



Isthmus c.1938, linocut, 175 x 130 mm. (Private collection, Auckland)

the supplicating 'wife' to whose attentions he also seems completely impervious. Her insistence in these works on the betrayal of religious values perhaps comes out of her perception that a religion such as Methodism, known equally for its social philanthropy and its espousal of efficient business practice, might find itself compromised by these contradictory interests, especially during an economic depression.

The purely religious message of *Religion and life* proved topical in the Wellington papers. It was reproduced in the *Evening Post*, captioned as a 'problem picture attracting considerable attention' but not discussed in the main review. Roland Hipkins, writing in *Art in New Zealand*, approved. The work was 'executed in a manner essential to mural painting', but he found it difficult 'to listen to the message' because 'the mood cannot come when all one's surroundings proclaim a bank holiday'. The *Dominion* commented:

It is pleasing to find in New Zealand a painter, A. Lois White, who is capable of producing (No. 169) 'Religion and Life' – a carefully considered figure composition which grows in importance upon acquaintance. The atmosphere created by the religious awakening which the simplified and well-drawn figures are obviously experiencing will be felt by visitors to the gallery according to their own experience, though all should appreciate the picture for its well-rendered lighting effect and for the beautiful arrangement of expressive hands.<sup>7</sup>

The painting was reproduced again later in the year when exhibited in Dunedin, the *Otago Daily Times* describing it as 'a modern study by A. Lois White': 8

Another designer of figure compositions that shows considerable enterprise and enlightenment in her treatment is Lois White, of Auckland. Her 'Religion and Life', reminiscent of Stanley Spencer's methods, is immensely strong in form and arrangement. The colour is rich and eminently harmonious and rhythmic elements, such as the repetition of raised hands, heightens a dramatic effect that is full of hidden meaning.<sup>9</sup>

R.N. Field's response to *Religion and life* was also highly favourable. Writing in *Art in New Zealand* about the Otago Art Society showing, he was pleased to see such an 'adventurous work' in a 'place of honour'. Its 'frank statement of religious feeling' was what the artist 'sincerely desires.' This new direction in art was what Field believed the public needed.<sup>10</sup>

Uncle Scrim's popular programme on 1ZB, *The man in the street*, opened up radio as a medium for political news and opinions. His sermons were allied in the public mind to Labour, although the political messages in his broadcasts were liberally disguised with holy script. Fellow Christians could hardly disagree with Scrim's interpretation of Christ's driving the money-changers from the temple. Scrim regarded Christ's teaching in the New Testament as the 'socialist carpenter's sermon of social morality'; a step past faith towards a distributive justice. It was a sermon he continued to preach throughout the Depression to a huge audience.

On the air [5] and Street mission [4] were painted earlier than 1939, the date of their separate first showings at the National Centennial Exhibition, Wellington, and the Auckland Society of Arts. Both paintings can be dated to the mid-1930s, and are closely related to Methodist politics of the time. Street mission was subsequently exhibited with the Otago Society of Arts and the Canterbury Society of Arts. This was the first time White had shown in Christchurch, where the painting was reproduced in the Christchurch Press. Charles Grignon called it 'an original interpretation of its subject': 12

Technically, the picture is not perfect, and the design though excellent in some

parts, fails in others; but the style has the vigour of originality and considerable possibilities of development.<sup>13</sup>

The preparatory studies for *Street mission* show a change of direction in its composition, design and symbolic message. The watercolours present a much more hierarchical and formal arrangement of figures, suggesting calmness and order. <sup>14</sup> The preacher stands at the apex, framed within columned arches, his choir and the attentive shoppers splayed out in concentric semi-circles. In the oil painting, the crowd is much more unruly, pushed up against the feet of an orator, an Uncle Scrim, a man of the time whose rhetoric was needed to move the crowd.

The painting also focuses on the active singing programme which was an integral part of Methodist evangelising. The White women sang in the Mount Albert Methodist choir. Lois enjoyed participating and Margaret Thompson, a student who first met Lois through the Methodist choir, believes it was a major motivation in Lois's regular attendance at church. Lois later recalled:

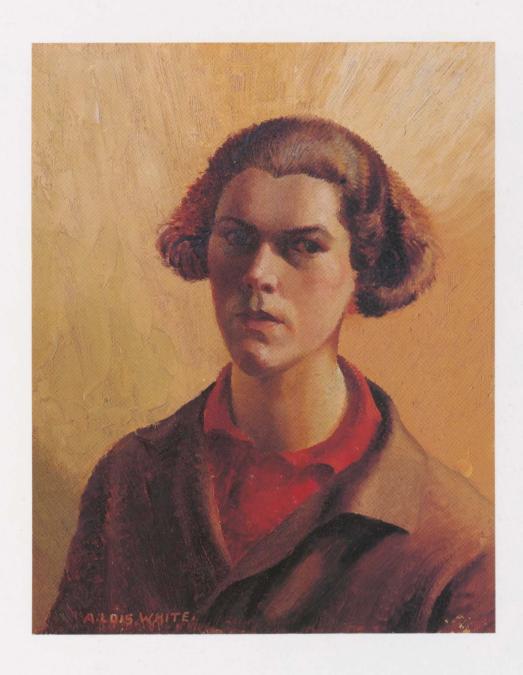
. . . I haven't gone regularly to church for quite a long time now, but I love to sing in the choir and do my stuff and really believed in it and really enjoyed it, but I am too old for that now. 15

On the air was a similarly topical work. The New Zealand Herald called White 'the Auckland symbolist' when in 1940 she showed her 'allegory of broadcasting'. This reviewer described 'a collection of figures representing the whole gamut from symphonies to wrestling', but did not mention the faceless politician with his scrolled papers. <sup>16</sup> Arthur Hipwell, in his review for the Auckland Star, noted only that On the air was 'curiously appropriate'. <sup>17</sup>

The work's topicality relates to the status of the non-profit B radio stations, whose operation depended on donations and subsidies and were therefore run by commercial concerns; and the issue of censorship. The Government was trying to bring more of the B stations under the regulation of the broadcasting board, although 1ZB was still free of controls. Their fate was in the balance after the Coalition Government, fearing that Uncle Scrim would endorse Labour, 'jammed' his 1ZB show on the eve of the Labour election landslide in November 1935. Their bungled attempts at censorship backfired, increasing Labour votes.

In 1936, Lois White and Ida Eise both had works reproduced in the newspapers. Eise's depiction 'of natural New Zealand scenery' was recognised with the award of the Bledisloe Medal for Landscape Painting for *Mangaotaki River*, which subsequently entered the Auckland City Art Gallery collection. *Funeral march* [7] also found a home that year in the Gallery.<sup>18</sup> It was Lois White's first work sold to an institution and the highest price she had ever placed on a painting, 25 guineas. Lois attended the Auckland Society of Arts opening night that year in a dress of 'chocolate crepe de chine', while Ida wore 'midnight blue velvet'.<sup>19</sup> Thirty three years old, Lois White was a handsome woman with arched eyebrows and a shock of dark-brown wiry hair. This was the first time her name had appeared on one of the guest lists featured on the women's page of the newspaper. Socially she was shy and reserved with people, whereas Ida Eise was the opposite, outgoing and extremely popular. Friends considered Lois and Ida 'very much a pair'.<sup>20</sup>

Lois White's friend and colleague, Winifred Simpson, is no longer remembered. She reportedly died from childbirth in 1936. Winifred's death could have inspired the regimented grief of *Funeral march*. A lone mourner, possibly Lois herself, is wailing in the background, next to the allegorical chorus of women representing grief. It was titled *A funeral* when reproduced in the *New Zealand Free Lance*. <sup>21</sup> A.R.D. Fairburn assessed it as 'something that few have the courage to attempt'. <sup>22</sup> Lois later spoke of



1

Self-portrait 1932 oil on board, 505 x 405 mm Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington



2

Prothalamion 1929 watercolour, 303 x 600 mm private collection, Wellington

In a 1978 letter to Peter McLeavey, Lois White related the classical Greek myth on which Persephone's return to Demeter is based:

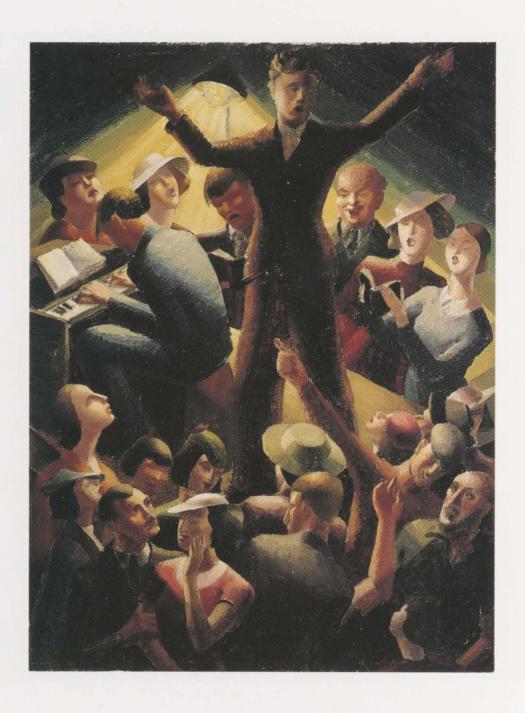
It is an allegory of the return of Spring to the Earth,
Persephone being the daughter of Demeter and Pluto, God of
the underworld, personifying 'Winter'. The arrangement
between the two parents being that through Spring and
Summer, Persephone dwelt in the upper world with her
mother Demeter, and in Autumn and Winter she dwelt with
her father in the underworld. In Spring Persephone awakened
the world with the return to the upper world, to her mother,
bringing new growth to the sleeping world, and an awakening
of flowers and young life to the earth. This, in essence, is the
meaning of the painting.

(Lois White to Peter McLeavey 4 May 1978, Peter McLeavey Gallery)



3

Persephone's return to Demeter 1933 oil on canvas, 1310 x 1310 mm Dunedin Public Art Gallery



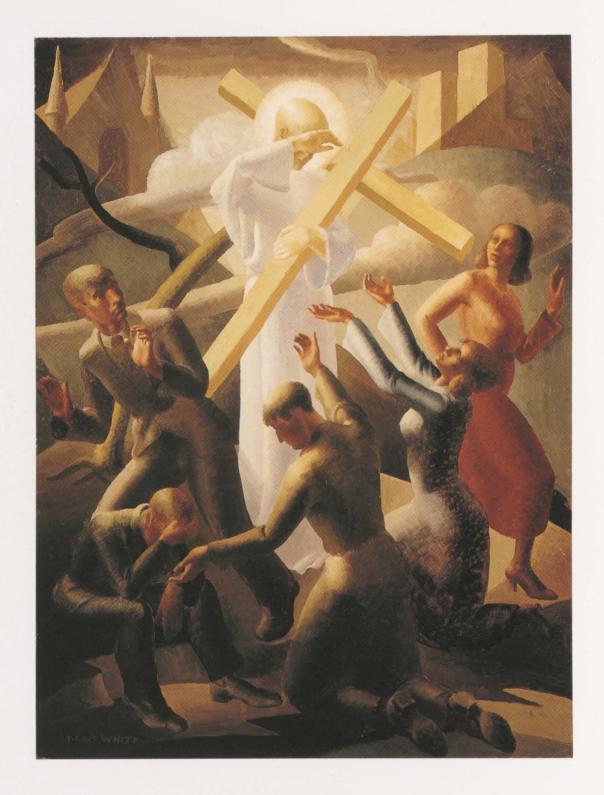
4

Street mission c.1934 oil on textured paper, 520 x 380 mm Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North



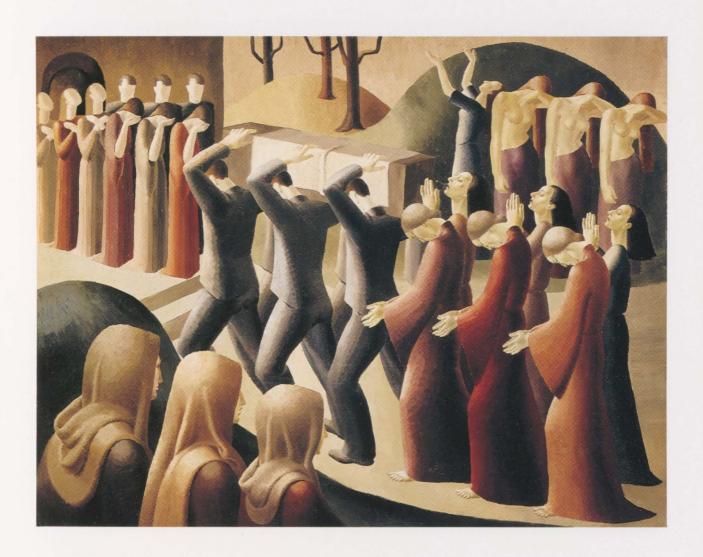
5

On the air c.1935 oil on cardboard, 508 x 407 mm Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North



6

Religion and life 1935 oil on canvas, 990 x 737 mm private collection, Auckland



7

Funeral march 1936 oil on canvas, 720 x 930 mm Auckland City Art Gallery, purchased 1936

In *Religion and life*, Lois White responded to the morally charged atmosphere of the 1935 Labour election victory. A committed Methodist, she also supported the church's attempts to modernise and to address social issues such as unemployment and poverty.

White's symbolism also related to private events. The 'regimented grief' of *Funeral march* was inspired by the death of her close friend and fellow tutor at Elam, Winifred Simpson.

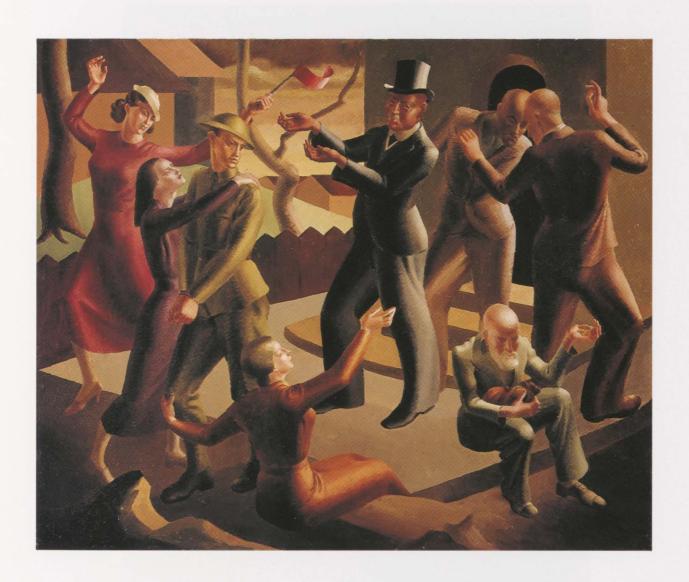


8

News c.1939 oil on cardboard, 305 x 355 mm private collection, Wellington

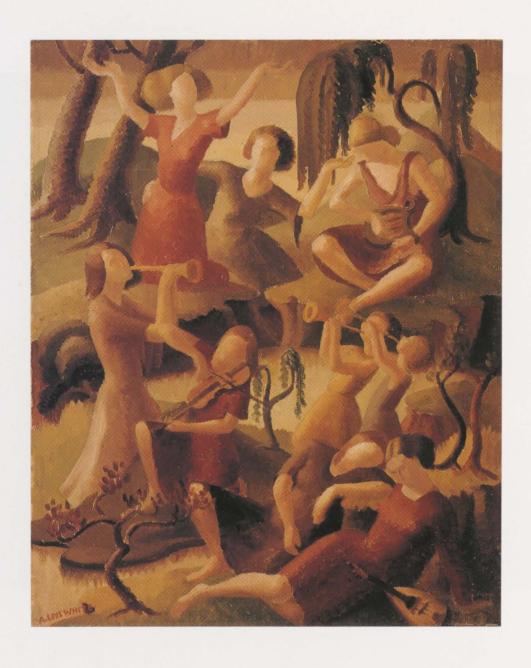
Many of the paintings sold by Peter McLeavey, the Wellington art dealer, had been buried for decades in White's studio. White had a remarkable ability to remember individual works. 'If I remember right, the oil was of people in the street reading war news in newspapers and which I called "News".'

(Lois White to Peter McLeavey, 8 October 1978, Peter McLeavey Gallery)



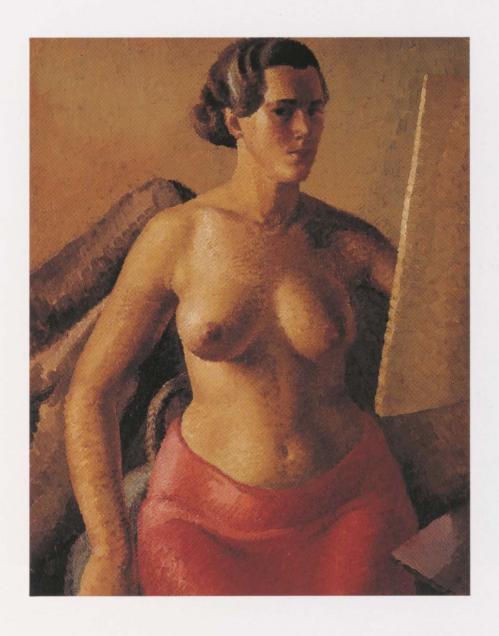
9

War makers 1937 oil on canvas, 705 x 852 mm Auckland City Art Gallery, purchased 1970



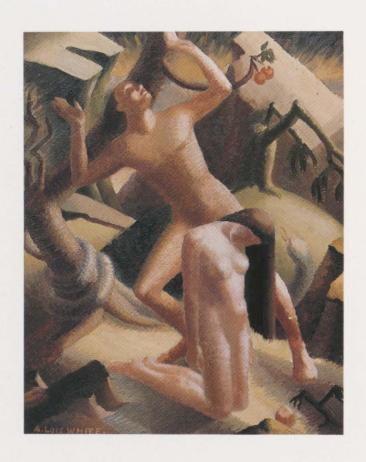
10

Decorative panel c.1938 oil on cardboard, 510 x 415 mm private collection, Auckland



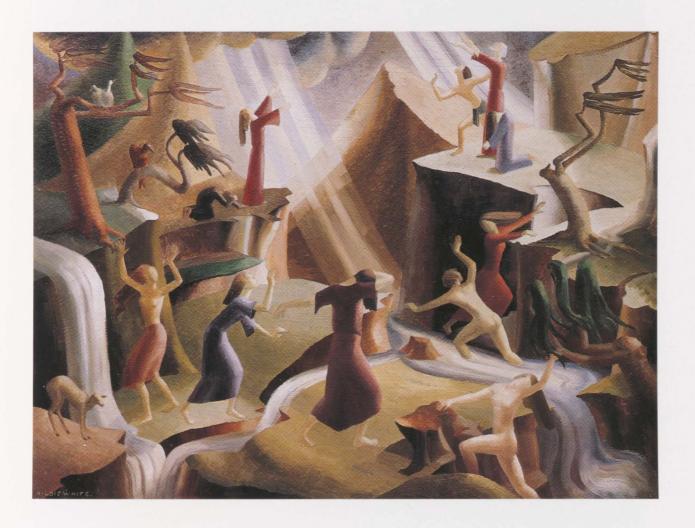
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Self-portrait c.1935 oil on cardboard, 495 x 400 mm private collection, Auckland



12

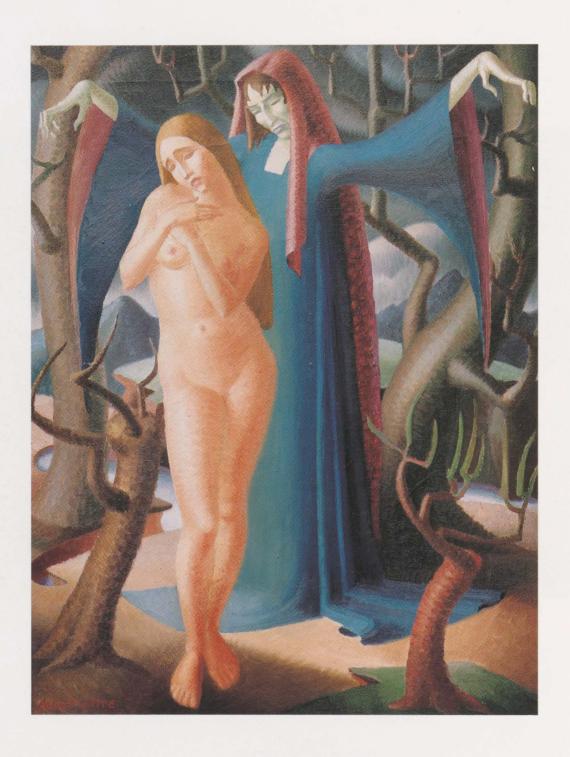
Expulsion c.1939 oil on board, 490 x 389 mm private collection, Wellington



13

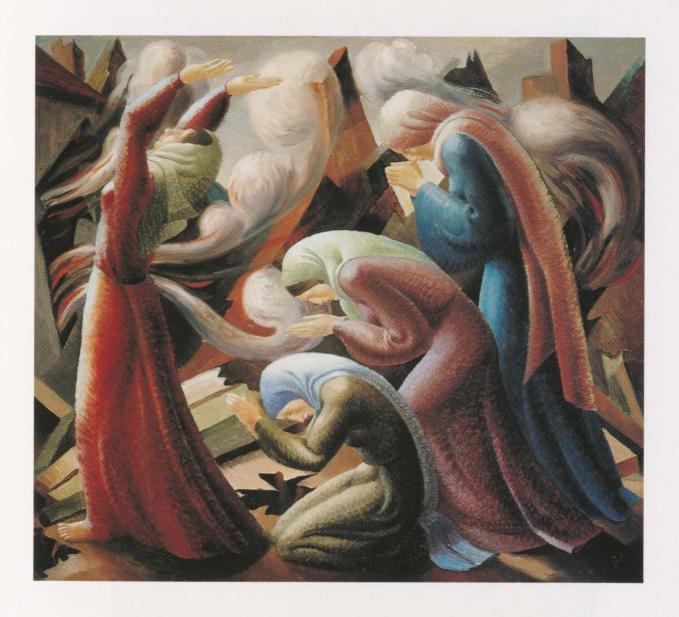
Deluge 1938 oil on board, 700 x 925 mm private collection, Wellington

White's paintings of 1938 and 1939 focused alternately on original sin and female fantasy. Interestingly, most of the figures in these works lack facial features. The setting is reminiscent of the studio landscapes exploited by contemporary American films.



14

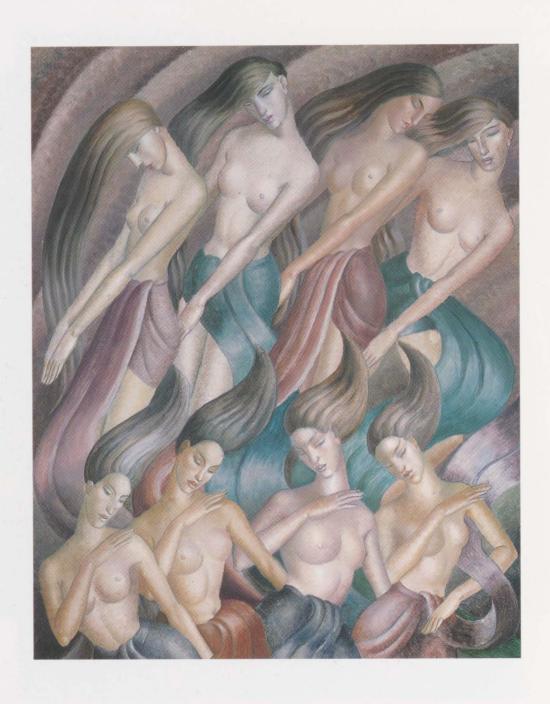
Winter's approach 1939 oil on canvas, 653 x 495 mm Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa



15

Victims of invasion 1941 oil on cardboard, 533 x 610 mm Hawke's Bay Museum, Napier

In 1938, New Zealand audiences thrilled to Walt Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Lois White was a regular visitor to the local cinema, the influence of which is particularly evident in Winter's approach.



16

Pattern inspired by rain 1941 oil on cardboard, 510 x 410 mm Auckland City Art Gallery, purchased 1992

her friendship with Simpson, which had been vital to her in her student years:

. . .there was a friend, she died when she was young, but we were great friends. . . she would try to do better than I did and I would try to do better than she did and it kept us on our toes you know. .  $^{23}$ 

William Wright's headstone *Grief* was reproduced in the September 1936 issue of *Art in New Zealand*. The headstone's pose is similiar to the one White adopted for her trio of grieving women in *Funeral march*. Reference to classical imagery, the strong feminine empathy toward his models and his accurate figure and drapery modelling were aspects of Wright's work which continued to appeal to Lois White.

White's most controversial painting, *War makers* [9], was shown in the 1937 Auckland Society of Arts annual exhibition. It was a boldly pessimistic statement. The *New Zealand Herald* commented on a 'vigorous design in her usual cool system of colours, but the symbolism rather lacks point and the significance of two of the figures is not apparent'.<sup>24</sup> The *Auckland Star* praised it drily:

The meagre contribution of figure studies is one to be deplored. If only for the purpose of exact study, this phase of art should not be neglected, and the efforts of artists in this direction should receive every encouragement. The 'War Makers', by A. Lois White, does not equal the conception of her 'Funeral March' exhibited last year. At the same time there would be a distinct gain if other works of like nature were attempted.<sup>25</sup>

Provoked by comments made by D. A. Ewen in his presidential opening address to the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts, publisher and critic Harry Tombs wrote directly to Lois White. Her reply is the only contemporary statement she made about the conceptual intention of one of her paintings. Tombs had objected to the insinuations Ewen made about artists 'imitating foreign ideas'. His comments, Tombs said, dissuaded artists from working in any challenging strain of ideas. They had to face continuous criticism from the press concerning mediocre and unadventurous displays, as well as such conservative comments from their own Society members. Although Lois White is not named, Ewen uses the unusual double pronoun *he or she*.

In some of the work sent in there appears to be a tendency to imitate unusual representations of ideas which have been exhibited by overseas artists. This, I think, is a pity. The originator, no doubt, knew what he or she wished to portray and did achieve a result. Efforts, however, to reproduce or imitate these methods are apt to fall into the category of plagiarisms and fail in achieving their object.<sup>26</sup>

White's reply to Tombs, which he published alongside a reproduction in *Art in New Zealand* in December 1937, is a strong statement for a person who usually preferred to let her art speak for itself:

Every composition which I have attempted has had its origin in my own brain, my idea being always to give expression to my thoughts of a subject through the medium of design, instead of words. No one could be more willing than I am to admit that the efforts have not satisfied me, but who is there who ceases trying to say things for this reason? The main idea behind the composition in question is the injustice done to youth, by the decision of those of the older generation to have wars and send their sons to be slaughtered and maimed, while many grow fat on the proceeds. Financiers, money-grubbers, politicians, the thoughtless type of hysterical flag-wagging patriotism, are contributing factors which I have tryed to suggest, with helpless youth being torn from equally helpless youth and home.<sup>27</sup>

War makers was indeed the 'problem picture' of the 1937 Wellington exhibition. The Evening Post also had trouble deciphering its meaning. 'But why the title? The

odd groups which make up the pattern seem to have no common relationship'. <sup>28</sup> Exhibited in Dunedin, the *Otago Daily Times* was brave enough to attempt a political reading of White's message, one which addresses the significance of the two figures that the Auckland critic found so puzzling:

A contribution which will certainly engage attention is another of Lois White's large essays in symbolic realism, or something of the kind. There are no gas-masks this time, but the picture is entitled 'The War-Makers', and there figure in it a young man in uniform with gyves upon his wrists, a young woman in red waving a flag, a gentleman on the verge of apoplexy who is evidently a hundred per cent patriotic, an old man who sits nursing money-bags, and two well dressed communing individuals who are no doubt at the back of the whole business.<sup>29</sup>

The exaggerated marionette gestures set against a schematic back-drop give this work a particularly stagey appeal. This probably derives from White's exposure to the People's Theatre, a left-wing theatrical group with strong connections to Elam. Arnold Goodwin, who taught design and applied art at Elam from 1935, was one of the founders of the People's Theatre. Archie Fisher was also involved. White's arrangement of figures and gestures in *War makers* echoes the agitprop style of the People's Theatre, whose productions generally took the form of sketches, cabaret and revue.

White's politician orchestrates the situation with his palms out, in a feigned gesture of innocence, while we look for the strings which must guide his hands. The suited financiers at the back, clicking their fingers with joy, are the couple that caused consternation. Behind them appears the black arch of a mausoleum-like structure, which also appears in *Funeral march* [7] and *News* [8]. On the other side, behind a woman wearing a jaunty hat, is the haven of state housing.

Lois White's independent intellectual assessment of politics during the period has been under-estimated by critical opinion, which has always referred to White as being 'heavily', 'greatly' or 'strongly' influenced by Fisher. This point of view ignores the particularly vital environment from 1935 to 1938 in which Lois White was painting the works, and the intensity of her commitment to the pre-election ideals of the Labour Party, through her newly acquired political understanding as well as her Methodist background. Pacifism was an issue hotly debated within the Methodist church.

In 1938, Lois White's major composition for the Society annual was *Deluge* [13]. Reproduced in the *New Zealand Herald* as 'a futuristic oil painting', <sup>30</sup> it was reviewed as a 'symbolic painting. . . of a particular modern school':

Previous essays by Miss White of this character have aroused much comment, and considerable attention was directed last night to her latest work.<sup>31</sup>

## In the Auckland Star, Arthur Hipwell wrote:

Of the few paintings on exhibition which show an experimental trend, 'Deluge', by Miss Lois White, challenges our attention. Here is a commendable effort in creating style in form, and an attempt to evolve a colour music. It may not be a complete success, but that is not of material consequence. It gives us a very neccessary mental jolt after being left quite cold among the happy commonplaces. Such work should be encouraged. It is full of study and research, and it is study and research that are badly needed to lift our painting from the rut of mechanical production to a higher plane of aesthetic expression.<sup>32</sup>

When *Deluge* was exhibited in Wellington, the *Dominion* was impressed by the simplification of form and lack of concern for detail which gave 'force and vigour' to the composition. 'Important work is contributed by Lois White whose efforts in the



Bathers c.1938, linocut, 175 x 132 mm. (Private collection, Auckland)

direction of enlivening New Zealand art are to be commended'.<sup>33</sup> In Dunedin, the *Otago Daily Times* thought the visitor would find *Deluge* 'sufficiently fearsome and harrowing'. 'The gallery would not be quite complete without an adventure in the realm of the symbolic and imaginative by Lois White'.<sup>34</sup>

White's early religious paintings deal with episodes from the Bible (the Temptation of Eve, the Expulsion, the Deluge) which are allegorical parables concerned with the concept of 'original sin' and punishment for sexual expression. Lois White's understanding of the Bible was as a literary document rather than the letter of the law:

. . . I have done quite a number of paintings on the beginnings of time from the Bible and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. I have done various interpretations of that, but it isn't just the religious point of view that I am thinking about when I am talking about the Bible, but it's from the literary point of view.<sup>35</sup>

A watercolour version of *Expulsion* [12], preliminary to the oil, was exhibited at the 1939 Auckland summer exhibition. It was described as a 'symbolic design of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, in which the angular lines give

a desirable sense of unrest'. Adam and Eve are a vignette of the naked couple in *Deluge*. A passive Eve kneels in front of Adam, obscuring his genitalia, her face featureless. Adam's relatively androgynous body suggests that a female model may have been used. This ambiguity is also evident in *Jonah and the great fish* [34], the only other partially nude male in White's oeuvre.

White's female allegories reappeared alongside her religious compositions. *Gay ladies*, the companion to *Weeping women*, was exhibited at the Academy of Fine Arts centennial exhibition and reproduced in colour as the frontispiece to the December 1939 issue of *Art in New Zealand*. The two dancers in the foreground have their arms entwined, while the pair behind concentrate on the sensual gestures of their hands. Their eyes are glazed; the dancers are entranced. Of *Gay ladies*, White noted that in the composition 'there are opposing diagonals as well as intertwining movement'.<sup>37</sup>

Decorative panel [10] also dates from the late 1930s. On the reverse in Lois's handwriting is the title, a price of ten guineas, and a return address to Elam, but no record has been found of where it was exhibited. Watercolours titled *Music* and *Decorative panel* were exhibited in 1938 and 1940 respectively. The faces of the women in the watercolour *Music* are detailed, unlike the deliberately blank features of the corresponding oil painting, *Decorative* 

panel. The motif of the embrace has developed considerably since Persephone's return to Demeter [3]. Two friends rest in each other's arms after their musical frolics, while their friends continue to play and dance. It is difficult to say whether the allegories project an idealised vision of White's relations with other women, or whether they are specifically autobiographical, dealing with a hidden sexuality. There is a similar ambivalence evident in Winter's approach [14] shown in the 1939 Auckland Society of Arts annual exhibition, priced at 18 guineas.

Angelo Nigro, an Elam student, also exhibited symbolic allegories in 1939. Hipwell, writing in the *Auckland Star*, inflamed Nigro by saying that his works *Mental affinities* and *Elective affinities*, 'do not appear to be so thoroughly "worked out" as the paintings of Lois White's'. Miss White's rhythmic composition is 'familiar'. 'There is much to commend also in her "Winter's Approach", particularly the treatment of



Gay ladies, 1939, oil on cardboard. (Frontispiece, Art in New Zealand, December 1939)

the symbolic figure of winter'. 38 Nigro replied to the criticism, unhappy at having his work compared to White's:

Also Mr Hipwell is wrong when he says my panels do not appear to be so thoroughly 'worked out' as the paintings of another artist, whose work differs in every conception, having a poetical and decorative development against the definite intellectual reality for which I am striving.<sup>39</sup>

In Dunedin the *Otago Daily Times* also compared *Winter's approach* and *Mental affinities* as the only two examples of symbolism in paint. White's was read as 'the effect of contrast achieved between the nude and the draped figure – a transition from light to shade'. Nigro's painting remained 'intriguing'. 40 He eventually stopped exhibiting after the Auckland Society of Arts' council rejected his 1940 summer exhibition entry. When *Unconcious revelation* was described in the *Observer* as '26 square feet of masculine nudity', Nigro was outraged:

. . . the Council had jumped to the conclusion that I was portraying homosexuality. I was absolutely astounded. The picture has no such meaning whatever. It is based on the duality of man's emotions, from a purely unconscious point of view.<sup>41</sup>

Walt Disney's first feature-length cartoon, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), was released in New Zealand in 1938 and enjoyed huge success. It is very likely that White saw it, since she and Gwen loved the movies and went at least once a week. The predatory female figure of winter in *Winter's approach* strongly resembles the cartoon version of Snow White's stepmother. Winter's icy talons mimic the trees around the frozen pond, while her chiselled features and death-like pallor contrast with the rosy flesh tones of the nude: the prey which she threatens to engulf.

The passive nude's eyes are averted, her hips and legs thrust forward in a pose typical of lingerie advertisements from the period. Rather than fear personified, she is presented as an object of desire, the glowing personification of lingering summer. The embrace in *Winter's approach* is deeply sinister. Tony Mackle wrote:

The naked figure makes a dramatic statement about the effects of winter on human sensibilities which is underlined by the ominous cloaked figure and the stark surrounding landscape. As it was painted in the late thirties and another world war was imminent, the painting could be also interpreted on a political level.<sup>42</sup>

Lois White's female allegories were never subjected to censorship or identified as lesbian. Their relationship to her life and the exploration of her sexuality is both intriguing and fraught with problems. There is great difficulty in characterising the relationships of women who, although they did not identify themselves as lesbians, formed their primary emotional commitments with other women, as White did. Her family background and the often oppressive demands of her mother obviously disposed White not to marry, which meant that she was often perceived as asexual. Yet the female allegories and even her self-portraits express sensuality and White was no prude about her own body. Mitzie Price recalls that 'Lois used to get very frustrated because females wouldn't model for her in the earlier days, so a lot of her nudes are of herself. She said stupid people won't take their clothes off for me. She used to strip in front of a mirror. Probably shocked the hell out of [her mother]'.43

White's god-son, Robert Jenkin, indicated that Lois White in her sixties was aware of members of the community who were gay and that she used this word to describe them, but whether she herself was lesbian can only be speculation. Contemporary reviewers responded to the 'message', the 'allegory' and the 'symbolic realism' of the paintings as we do, but because of the nature of allegory, their 'meaning' will always shift according to individual perception.

4

## FLEET'S IN



1940 - 1946

As war raged in Europe, Lois White entered the most productive decade of her career. She was now regularly exhibiting two or three works at the Auckland Society's summer show, and up to five new works at the annual exhibition. Instead of the one or two relatively large figure compositions on which she had concentrated in the 1930s, she developed smaller design-oriented oils as well as watercolours which were varnished and framed in the same way as oil paintings. All art materials were imported and frequently in short supply but White found means to get around the problem. Cheap Chinese watercolours were usually available, and Margaret Thompson recalls that White often used the packing card out of work returned from the annual Education Department inspection as supports for her paintings.

In 1941 at the Auckland Society of Arts annual, White exhibited *Victims of invasion* [15] at 26 guineas, three smaller oil paintings at 10 to 15 guineas each, and a small decorative panel for three guineas. The smaller oils depict women as symbols of atmospheric forces. *Pattern inspired by rain* [16] relates to the surrealist practice of decalcomania, where figures are discerned from abstract shapes. Suggested by the hypnotic pattern of rain, White's fantasy is startling and seductive. In a different emotional key, *Thunderstorm* shows two hysterical females, wild with fear, running through a devastated landscape.

Throughout the 1940s, the art critic Arthur Hipwell continued to be interested in draughtsmanship and figurative work. Artists painting in this manner received prominence in his commentaries for the *Auckland Star*. At the time, Hipwell was painting symbolic works such as his *Coming of the Maori* (exhibited 1940), which included him in a group of Auckland painters identified with local surrealism by the *New Zealand Herald*.<sup>1</sup> On the occasion of the 1941 annual exhibition, Hipwell devoted a paragraph to White titled 'Decorative figure groups':

Lois White's contribution is a notable one. With a lively, creative imagination, she produces strong, rhythmic designs employing a fine colour sense with emotional effect. Her paintings are all of a symbolic character, and she is one of the very few who can successfully compose decorative figure groups. 'Rain' is an inspiration of high merit, 'Victims of Invasion', more expressive than any literal picture could hope to be, and equally successful are 'Night Zephyr' and 'Thunderstorm'.<sup>2</sup>

Lois White also submitted a small varnished watercolour design showing a panther among stylised foliage. Minnie White, a fellow painter, chose *Panther* as her Art Union prize. Lois White said of these distinctive works:

My decorative urge had its outlet in small watercolour paintings, treated decoratively, on cardboard in dulux flat white ground, the finished work then varnished with dulux clear, which gave the watercolour the same luminosity as when first applied wet.<sup>3</sup>

The New Zealand Herald thanked the 1941 hanging committee for 'wisely' bringing together 'in the entrance room a really interesting collection of oil paintings

which does much to atone for what appears on some of the other walls'. These were 'a symbolic and imaginative' grouping by Lois White, James Turkington, Adele Younghusband, May Smith and Bessie Christie. White's *Pattern inspired by rain* was deemed by the *Herald* the 'outstanding success' in her 'rhythmical arrangement of female figures forming a design in delicate colour'.<sup>4</sup>

'Gadabout girl-friend Sherry' from the New Zealand Woman's Weekly was at the private afternoon viewing along with many of the artists, including May Smith and Lois White. Smith's Characterisation in colour 'attracted a large crowd', though White's work was among 'those most greatly appreciated'. Ida Eise reviewed the show for Art in New Zealand where she compared Lois White's two principal compositions. Victims of invasion was 'strong and forceful' in 'distinct contrast' to Pattern inspired by rain, which had 'delicate pastel colouring and flowing design'.

At the 1941 Annual Academy exhibition in Wellington, *Pattern inspired by rain* hung near work by Nancy Bolton and Arthur Hipwell. *Art in New Zealand* identified these three artists' work as 'off the beaten track': all 'paint the aspect of things controlled by and adjusted to an idea'. White's fantasy of rain 'rings true'. The opening of the Otago Society of Arts exhibition overlapped with the Academy closing dates, so *Thunderstorm* alone went to Dunedin. The *Otago Daily Times* was impressed:

Lois White's symbolic and imaginative paintings are always worth looking for. This time her wild-eyed women in a 'Thunderstorm' is very successful.<sup>8</sup>

The following year both paintings were exhibited at the Canterbury Society of Arts in Christchurch. Charles Grignon of the *Press* felt inclined to compare Lois White's women and express his preferences. Instead of the sensual absorption of the barebreasted sirens, he preferred women driven into a frenzy of fear:

She never fails to produce harmonies of colour and form. Where she sometimes fails is in her effort to produce rhythmic movement. Her 'Pattern Inspired by Rain' for



instance, seems to fall short of what was intended, because of a certain deadness of line and over-smoothness of finish. Her 'Thunderstorm', in some respects less consistent and complete, is more alive and convincing.9

White's sinuous mermaids, with their rhythmic pattern of drapery, arms and hair, form one of her most beautiful works. It was purchased by Bill McLeod, an enthusiastic patron of White's work, who bought it between 1947 and 1949. In his correspondence with the artist, he described the bewitchment by her painted women which caused him to build the first private collection of Lois White's art:

But I'm not kidding myself that I'm getting off as lightly as that. I've got a feeling that it's only a matter of days before I succumb to the teamwork of the eight women of Rain who are relentlessly working their magic on me to bring home your women bathing in pool. After that they are capable of keeping me filled with wonder about your vague reference to work I've not seen such as Thunderstorm. Please don't bother sending a receipt.<sup>10</sup>

Years later, when Lois first met Peter McLeavey, she spoke of McLeod's interest in her work:

... you remind me of a friend (now deceased) who became interested in my work and consequently in me because of it, and who bought a whole heap of my paintings and drawings and started corresponding with me, sometimes weekly! I'm not expecting this of you, I hasten to say! He was a very successful business man but had an intense interest in humanity and being a New Zealand born Scot, as I think you are, we had many intellectual tussles about life and 'man's inhumanity to man'. A great Robbie Burns fan, he gave me two books by someone I think called Barke and was highly insulted when I told him I thought and said Robbie was oversexed! He did his best to make me do a painting on Robbie's ideas about 'man's inhumanity to man' but it has never yet been painted, although some I have done have had a similiar flavour.<sup>11</sup>

The third British Art exhibition of the Empire Art Loans collection was held in 1940. Hipwell identified 'advanced works' in the surrealist section as those by Eileen Agar, Samuel Haile, William Johnstone, Reuben Medniknoff, Dr Grace Pailthorpe and Julian Trevelyan. The show contained 'an imposing range of work from academic sentimentalism to super-realism'. 'Household names' in British art were also there: Augustus John with *The Caravan*, Glyn Philpot, plus a younger generation of artists represented by Mark Gertler, Stanley Spencer, and Matthew Smith. <sup>12</sup> Artists and audience were still interested in the allegorical figure.

In November 1941, a photograph appeared in the *Auckland Star* of Lois White and Margaret Thompson painting a mural in the Westhaven Social Hall. The caption ran: 'What they can do when given a free hand – Auckland's aquatic life is depicted by Elam School of Art students'. <sup>13</sup> The Auckland Motor Yacht Club had commissioned a mural stretching the entire length of the back wall. The clubrooms were a popular dance venue, accessible by ferry from Devonport or on free buses from the City Terminal and Ponsonby Post Office. <sup>14</sup> Working on Thursday afternoons, White was assisted by 15-year-old Margaret Thompson in this ambitious mural project: the only time she painted directly onto the surface of the wall. A tutor of 15 years standing, White was again described as a student when their work was reported in the art notes of *Art in New Zealand*:

Another mural reaching completion is one by the students of the Elam School of Art. This large panel, 31 feet by 11 feet 6 inches, is a very colourful pattern, boldly conceived and executed, and decorates the wall of the new Westhaven's Social Hall. When one considers the difficulties of dealing with such a large area in pictorial form, and the inexperience and youth of these artists in

Elam tutors on a school picnic at Browns Bay, December 1941. From left: Ida Eise, Arnold Goodwin, Lois White and William Wright. (Private collection, Auckland) this particular branch of art, it is really a remarkable achievement. 15

The mural provoked an uproar between older members and 'the younger fry' of the Richmond Yacht Club, who took 'an almost proprietary interest in the wall.' Expecting 'white sails in the sunset and maybe a palm or two', some of the more conservative yachties found the riot of figures overwhelming. There were 'dark whisperings' of a plot to have the mural painted over. The *Auckland Star*'s sports reporter was sent to investigate the fuss:

At first glance, the general effect is of a tangled mass of naked limbs with an intermittent glimpse of the seashore, the sea and a couple of brace of yachts 'way on the horizon where Rangitoto sprawls uncertainly. Working from left to right you have a nautical-looking gent with head tilted back busily engaged in lowering the contents of a bottle of something or other; a couple embracing in a casual fashion on the foreshore; a distinctly overcrowded cove with a fisherman landing a bloated snapper while a regular school of bathers disport themselves round his dingy; somnolent sunbathers on the far shore where campers' tents show startling virgin white – and in the background a touch of sea with a launch. North Head, Rangitoto and a few white sails struggling to catch the eye. Say what you will, a striking effort.<sup>16</sup>

The reporter concluded that the general opinion was favourable: 'it is reliably reported that people who understand all about murals – unlike myself – have been impressed by the Westhaven exhibit'. The mural remained intact until the premises were taken over by the cabaret nightclub, Trillos, in the 1970s. At least three layers of paint (gold, cream and white), as well as subsequent repairs to the wall, have obliterated this, the largest of all of White's murals.

James Turkington, who taught design at Elam, mixed the large batches of emulsion for the Westhaven mural. Turkington's mural medium consisted of boiled linseed oil, borax and lysol, made soluble in water by the addition of casein. This solution was then mixed with commercially available dry powdered colours. Turkington's technical assistance, circumventing wartime shortages of paint, was of vital importance to the success of White's first commissioned mural. <sup>17</sup>

Few of Turkington's own murals remain intact, most having disappeared due to building demolitions or renovations rather than degeneration of the paint surface. His considerable expertise in mural-painting was the subject of an essay by Eric Lee-Johnson in the December 1942 issue of *Art in New Zealand*:

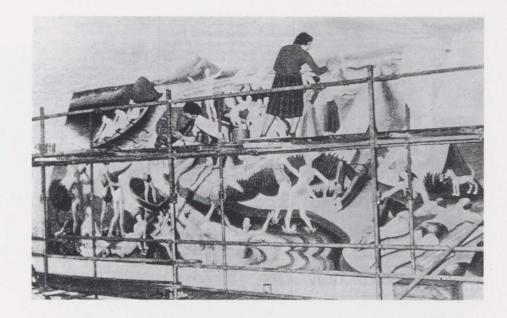
For some time this able designer has been engaged almost exclusively in the specialized branch of decorative art, with the result that a wealth of refined design now lends dignity, colour and entertainment to the interior of some of our best planned public buildings.<sup>18</sup>

Student numbers at Elam were falling steadily. In 1942, the school year began with the news that the Department of Education had requested Elam to reduce their staff by one full-time member. White was given three months' notice. Fisher wrote references for positions at Auckland Boys' Grammar and Stratford Technical High School:

In losing her services this school will suffer a great loss both from the artistic and personal point of view. Any school acquiring her services will be very fortunate.<sup>20</sup>

Fisher was still battling to keep her on when William Wright became ill during the middle of the year. Lois White's employment at Elam was extended to teach English as well as Wright's life-drawing classes. Monna Malcolm, a student of Wright's, was placed in charge of the sculpture department. Wright died in 1943.

Lois White and Margaret Thompson painting the Westhaven mural, reproduced in the Auckland Star, 1 November 1941. (Auckland City Library)



White's major contribution to the 1942 Auckland Society of Arts annual exhibition was *Civilised* [22], painted in oils and priced at 21 guineas. (A consignment of oil paints must have arrived at the Auckland Society of Arts, which was arranging their importation on behalf of members.) Her other works were smaller varnished watercolours of dancers and animals: *Allegro* [21], *Frolic* and *Elephants*, priced at eight, six and four guineas respectively. *Allegro* was reported by the *Auckland Star* as confirmation of a new direction in White's art:

Lois White has developed a new technique in a series of lively decorative panels. They possess the unusual quality of two-dimensional design allied with vibrating movement.<sup>21</sup>

The varnished watercolours proved popular with the purchasing public, diminishing White's status as the painter of sizeable oil paintings which made significant social statements. Critics increasingly viewed White's switch in mood from doom and death in *Civilised* to dancing girls with billowing skirts in *Allegro*, as an indulgence in design and effect at the expense of serious expression. Hipwell was not impressed by *Civilised*:

A few efforts have been made to depict the present world situation but the results are self-concious and lack the spiritual impact of actual experience. Lois White exploits her ability in design and colour in 'Civilised'.<sup>22</sup>

Art in New Zealand, however, thought there were 'several interesting unconventional efforts depicting the world situation'. These included Turkington's War effort and White's Civilised: 'a masterly composition clearly illustrating her sense of design and individuality'. <sup>23</sup> In 1942, Civilised was also shown at the Academy annual in Wellington. In Art in New Zealand, Stewart Maclennan declared: 'I felt the sting in Lois White's 'Civilization'. <sup>24</sup> Early in 1943, Civilised appeared in Christchurch at the Canterbury Society of Arts. Art in New Zealand reflected: 'The war as felt in New Zealand had a noticeable influence on subjects, if not on execution, in this year's exhibition'. This trend was more applicable to South Island work than North Island artists, with Lois White cited as an exception. <sup>25</sup>

Civilised confronts the viewer with explicit narrative, unlike the symbolic treatment of refugees in Victims of invasion [15]. In Civilised, disharmonious juxtapositions of



colour add to the chaotic pattern of figures tumbling onto the road. Two of the children are dead. As a civilian view of war, White's work contrasted sharply with the official exhibitions then being assembled by the Official War Artist Board as well as by enlisted artists who continued to exhibit.

Official war art concentrated predominantly on portraits of soldiers, the daily routines of the armed forces and distant views of conflict. White created her own charged image of what the bombing of Europe's cities meant for the populations of these 'civilised' nations. Exhibitions of war art were popular attractions at the Auckland City Art Gallery. *London's Ordeal by Bomb and Fire* opened in November 1941 with sixty-four photographs from the Press Club, London. The photographs emphasised the destructiveness of Nazi bombing of civilian populations and revealed the damage done to historic buildings: 'once imposing structures. . . from which are rising dense, choking clouds of smoke'. <sup>26</sup> Death was screened out of the official version, which was marketed as entertainment as well as edification.

White's social commentaries received hostile reviews from most critics, who consistently favoured United Kingdom and New Zealand war artists. The first show of war paintings was held at the Auckland City Gallery in May 1942. It lasted for a fortnight, with an extension of three days 'owing to the exceptional interest shown in the collection'. The same exhibition was reviewed at the National Art Gallery venue by *Art in New Zealand*. Peter McIntyre painted as 'one with the troops' in the Middle East:

We know now about crash landings of troop planes, about parachute troops in clouds, machine gun crews in a tight spot and a bit wounded already, how an enemy looks after being shot dead, stretcher bearers, dressing stations, and 'give us a fag, mate' of one walking wounded to another.<sup>28</sup>

As a female and a civilian, White had difficulty competing against the immediacy of work such as Peter McIntyre's *Again in the thick of it with Monty*, reproduced in the *Herald*, showing 'Dominion anti-tank gunners in action during the Libyan campaign'.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, artists involved in the war effort were appreciative of her work. R. Jack Hutchison wrote to White in 1941, explaining that he was leaving his 'own art studies in the meantime in favour of military training and probably service abroad':

In your work I find a wider outlook than in much of the work of New Zealand artists. Especially in 'Flight into Egypt' and 'War Mongers' I found a mental uplift and then again the composition and the colour were in my mind virile and worthwhile.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting of all White's war-related paintings is *Fleet's in* [19], which she exhibited at the Auckland annual in 1943, priced at 12 guineas. This time, the civilian perspective could not have been more localised. In her 1981 *Art New Zealand* interview, White expressed strong memories of the American marines stationed in New Zealand from 1942 to 1944:

One had to have one's armour on, because the town would be full of sailors, looking for the opposite sex. That was the atmosphere that was abroad. So I think that's how *The Fleet's In* got painted. I haven't got American sailors in the painting though: it's a more generalised evocation of that period. . .<sup>31</sup>

The marines arrived on 18 June 1942, much to the relief of an Auckland population whose worry about a potential Japanese invasion evaporated as they enthusiastically greeted the Americans. Large camps sprang up in and around the central city; in all, 29,500 troops were accommodated over two years in Auckland.

Scale drawing for Ode to Autumn c.1945, pencil, 585 x 380 mm. (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa) Hannahs, the Bank of New Zealand, Odlins, Tisdalls and other buildings became stores, offices and Red Cross Clubs for the troops and officers. The public viewed the Americans smartly turned out for parades up Queen Street or met them in small groups as they came into town on leave. Middle-aged women took them into their homes as substitutes for husbands and sons abroad; younger unattached women greeted them even more enthusiastically.

Public perception of the Americans was inextricably linked to Hollywood movies. The popular musical *The Fleet's In* was released in 1942 by Paramount, and starred William Holden and Dorothy Lamour alongside comic sidekicks Eddie Bracken and Betty Hutton. A lightweight comedy, the film kept the pace rolling with vaudeville song and dance routines. The plot revolves around a bet that Casey Kirby (William Holden), the shy, serious milk-drinking sailor with the reputation of a lady killer, will get the Countess of Swingland (Dorothy Lamour), a woman completely impervious to sailors, to kiss him in public.<sup>32</sup>

In White's lighthearted version of civilian relations during the invasion, the central couple is still dancing, while her friends will soon succumb to the kiss. Rangitoto towers above them as they frolic on Takapuna beach. Two alternative sketches for the composition have sailors disembarking from a pleasure cruise on Auckland harbour. They are greeted by dogs, children and middle-aged couples, as well as young women with swirling skirts and pert hats. Initially visualising a cross-section of the most popular hosts of the American troops, White then narrowed the focus to explore the boisterous sailors (generalised 'British' sailors, as censorship forbad reference to or depiction of the Americans) with the compliant New Zealand women.

The *Herald* described *Fleet's in* as 'a figure composition of sailors and girls holding a jollification'. <sup>33</sup> It hung in the central vestibule devoted to oils which showed 'special originality in subject or treatment'. *Fleet's in* was included with paintings by Charles and John Tole, Eric Lee-Johnson, Ron Tizard, John Weeks, Margaret Thompson, Adele Younghusband, Elise Mourant and Bessie Christie. Alongside *Fleet's in*, White also exhibited three 'rhythmic designs': *Fire* [20], *John Gilpin's ride* and *Trio*. Arthur Hipwell identified a spread in design-oriented compositions:

Strongly patterned abstractions and semi-surrealism extend the interest and the scope of the exhibition with a uniform high standard of accomplishment which has not yet received the wide recognition it deserves. Aspects of this type of work can be seen in the excursions into technique made by Bessie Christie, in the rhythmic designs by Lois White, in the abstractions of Madge Clayton, in the decorative compositions by Margaret Thompson and the surrealist trend of Adele Younghusband.<sup>34</sup>

Eric Lee-Johnson, in the June 1943 issue of *Art in New Zealand*, also remarked on this tendency. In the 'abundance and the standard of painting', Lee-Johnson saw 'a demonstration of the courage, determination and resourcefulness' of the artists:

For the difficulties encountered and the pre-war introduction of the import restrictions have been calculated to discourage even the most ardently enthusiastic; and with the war-time shipping situation the position regarding materials has steadily deteriorated until it is only by a display of considerable ingenuity that it becomes possible to complete any work at all. 35

Far from deteriorating, production had advanced and 'resulted in more virile statements from artists of every calibre and school of thought'. 'Stronger designing was noticeable coupled with a more courageous attack'. Paintings reproduced to accompany the review were *Composition* by Elam student Madge Clayton and White's *John Gilpin's ride*: 'A rollicking design expressed in a charming colour scheme.'<sup>36</sup>

Fire, priced at nine guineas, was one of White's largest varnished watercolours. The six women of Fire are a further stylisation of those in Fleet's in, their swirling skirts revealing a glimpse of stamen-like limbs. The flavour here is of an uninhibited cabaret show, of the type that made the Wintergarden one of the magnets of Auckland's nightlife.

White described two separate aspects of her work to Eric Lee-Johnson, acting editor of *Art in New Zealand*, for its September 1943 survey of Auckland painters, 'The Under-Forties'. About to turn 40 in November, White only just scraped in. *Fleet's in* was one of the works chosen for reproduction.

My particular interest as far as my personal work is concerned, is in the realm of design and figure composition. Both decorative work and the more serious type of composition are attempted in which there is the effort to interpret ideas on various phases of present day life, through the medium of three dimensional figure composition, with emphasis on arrangement of shape and colour, to express, as far as possible, the feeling I have of the subject.<sup>37</sup>

Fisher added his opinion to the bottom of her letter: 'I think Miss White is the only artist doing real Figure Composition – in the classical sense – in New Zealand.' Lee-Johnson published Fisher's comment on White in his survey. Critics like Hipwell, however, failed to make any distinction between the 'decorative work and the more serious type of composition'.

In 1944, White's major piece was *Collapse* [23], priced at 25 guineas, a smaller oil, *Startled*, at 15 guineas (which sold), and two varnished watercolours, *Beside the pool* and *Carefree*. Hipwell reviewed the exhibition, displaying a subtle shift in favour towards what he called 'the purely aesthetic', led by John Weeks: 'it must be conceded that the line of cultural advance lies through the more profound aspects of painting'. The strongly designed or decorative painters still reached 'a high standard', a category in which White was included: 'The symbolic compositions of Lois White are always interesting for their rhythmic design and rich colour. She had developed this type of work to a high degree which is shown to advantage in her striking painting "Collapse" and also in "Carefree".' White's comment on capitalism, the central message of *Collapse*, was not noticed. The *Herald* titled this section 'Novel work shown, caricature in paint', and explained:

There are at least two unusual features in the exhibition. One is a corner devoted to decorative compositions in flat pattern, mostly in brilliant colours. Among contributors to this section are Bessie Christie, Ruth Lumsden, Madge Clayton, Olive Laurenson, Margaret Thompson, Joan Edwards and A. Lois White. Visitors appear to enjoy the rather surprising number of pictures which are frankly caricatures and intended to be humorous.<sup>39</sup>

Collapse, an oil intended as a major social commentary, was simply 'an allegorical canvas from A. Lois White characteristic of this artist'. A.R.D. Fairburn in Art in New Zealand pronounced Lois White's group of pictures 'well up to her usual high standard. Startled is a beautiful composition, rich in colour and full of fine rhythm. Collapse is a little trite as allegory, but finely composed'.<sup>40</sup>

Collapse proved problematic for White in a way she had not foreseen. The painting features a capitalist with cigar, top hat and gold chain, who wears a five-pointed yellow star at his throat. Originally, however, this emblem was the six-pointed Star of David. Traces of it are still visible. Bill McLeod, Lois White's patron and friend, caused a temporary rift in their friendship when he criticised her symbolism:

Three years ago H. G. Wells tore the veils from the royal altar and showed us the

royal family secretly contributing funds to Oswald Moseley. Princes have always needed scapegoats. Poor Chiang Kai Shek with no Chinese Jews! You said that although an employee of his majesty's flunkeys you painted as you pleased, witness 'Collapse'. But 'Collapse' is loyally anti-Semitic! Concerned to exclude incitements from your mental hospital mural you airily incite the insane at large. 'Collapse' incites to murder, for Sir Oswald's slogan is "Kill the Jews!" The murder of a race of workers and paupers. Yiddish literature and music are pervaded, like Negro spirituals, with ghetto poverty. I love Theodore Dreiser, brooding with tenderness for the humiliated. Once he made the mistake you made in 'Collapse'. He redeemed his mistake.<sup>41</sup>

White responded to this criticism by censoring the painting, but the swarthy oriental Jewish caricature of the capitalist remains unmistakable. She was clearly offended when McLeod pointed out her mistake. Her huffy comments in defence of *Collapse* were quoted back to her by McLeod, revealing a far from liberal outlook:

You accuse me of making a mistake in the painting. I don't know what it is. . . the Jews have the very acquisitive instincts which lead to persecution. . .

Though his comments had been astute and necessary, McLeod tried to lighten the impact of his objections: 'Forgive me if my notes about "Collapse" needlessly insulted you, for I value your friendship. I value it very highly'. After the blunder of identifying the capitalist as a Jew, standing side-by-side with a Nazi soldier, White chose not to exhibit *Collapse* outside of Auckland. In the 1944 Wellington Academy exhibition, she substituted *Wild waves* [17].

White began to devote her work exclusively to female allegory, developing the themes previously reserved for varnished watercolours and smallish oil panels. Interestingly, the female allegories rarely bore the high prices which White placed on the social commentaries. Although of a similiar size to *Victims of invasion*, priced at 26 guineas, *Wild waves* was only nine guineas. Reproduced as *Dancing girls* in the *New Zealand Listener*, the reviewer added his sarcastic comment: 'Some of the artists are still obviously searching and seeking – Lois White for example'. It was reproduced again in *Art in New Zealand*, described as 'a most delightful canvas, several nudes, a very special work'. Margaret Thompson purchased the work soon after and presented it to the Auckland City Art Gallery in 1992. The paint layer in the wartime oils, *Pattern inspired by rain*, *Fleet's in* and *Wild waves*, is extremely thin. The blue lines which bleed through from beneath the oil paint are the initial design, transferred from a preparatory drawing with tailors' carbon paper.

At the 1945 Auckland Society of Arts annual, White exhibited *Wind witches*, priced at 17 guineas, and *Ode to Autumn* [25], at 18 guineas. Both works sold, suggesting that the public found the allegories more accessible than her moralising social comment. While Hipwell's taste for White's subjects had waned, he still appreciated her technical prowess:

Lois White has an established reputation as a decorative figure painter. She exhibits two outstanding paintings of this type in 'Wind Witches' and 'Ode to Autumn'. They are notable examples of excellent draughtsmanship, rich colour sense and highly organised design.<sup>45</sup>

Arthur Sewell, Professor of English at Auckland University, reviewed the 1945 exhibition for *Art in New Zealand*. He expressed a 'diffidence' in dealing with the 'judgement of painting', he was not quite up to picking out 'the best painter in New Zealand' as one of his friends recently had. (Sewell no doubt refers to Fisher's repeated public claims for White.) On the whole, he expressed dissatisfaction with the show: 'I was struck by the sameness in much of the work. . . Lois White could never be guilty







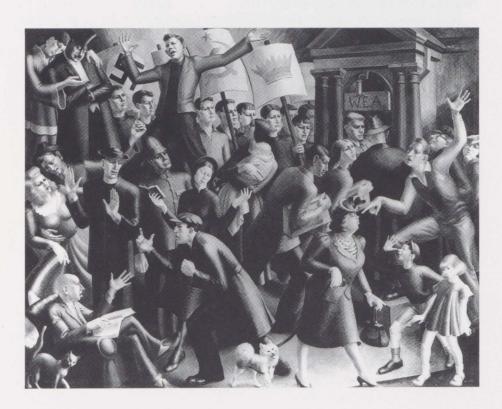
of faulty drawing'. Despite finding 'the Keatsian "luxury" of her colour attractive, Sewell concluded that Ode to Autumn was 'reminiscent, except for its excellent modelling, of much of Pre-Raphaelite decoration'. 46 'Pre-Raphaelite' here is an insult, White's subjects being associated with what were then regarded as the sentimental excesses of Victorian painting.

Ode to Autumn, inspired by John Keats's famous poem 'To Autumn', is one of White's most exquisite works of the 1940s. The figure fills the entire picture plane, accompanied by a cornucopia of fruits and flowers. There is a perfect match between her theme, of nature's abundance, and her meticulous handling of colour and form. The painting was purchased by a close friend of White's, whom she had known since they were at Epsom Girls' Grammar together. Wind witches, which remains unlocated, was a favourite of Lois White's. A framed black and white photograph of it hung in her studio in later years. Using the pet names she and Ida had for one another, she inscribed on the back 'To Gertrude with Whitey's love'. 47 Margaret Thompson recalls Lois White using Margaret's profile for the women in Wind witches. The model for Ode to Autumn was Monna Malcolm, White's colleague in the sculpture department at Elam.

White's most famous mural, Controversy, was painted for the Workers' Educational Association in 1946. Donated to the association by White, Fisher had also been involved in its acceptance as a gift:

Figure composition mural paintings were very rare, Mr Fisher said, and it would not be easy to find another painter to carry out such a work. In making the gift to the W.E.A. the artist had not done so in any spirit of largesse, but rather as an expression of her deep interest in art and her desire that students might come to have a greater appreciation of art in their day to day lives, and in the world generally.48

Controversy was reproduced in the Auckland Star, along with further bold claims by



Black and white photograph of White's mural Controversy 1946, painted for the Workers' Educational Association and later lost in the 1949 fire which destroyed Elam. (A. Lois White Archive, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa)

Elam students photographed

by Lois White for her mural Controversy 1946.

(A. Lois White Archive,

Te Papa Tongarewa)

Museum of New Zealand

Fisher: 'The painting is said to be the only real mural on traditional lines to be found in New Zealand'.<sup>49</sup> 'It was, in his opinion, as great a work as would be found anywhere in the world'.<sup>50</sup> White records the work's dimensions as 8 by 10 feet.<sup>51</sup> It was painted *in situ* in the W.E.A. building, probably because of constraints on space in the school, rather than White's desire to paint directly onto the wall. The dimensions are similar to her surviving mural, *Magna Carta* [40], which was painted on a panel formed from three pieces of hardboard. White's crowded composition relied on juxtapositions of colour to retain order and balance within the mayhem of figures. Preparation included careful portrait studies for the faces, many of whom were personalities from Elam, as well as snapshots of students holding poses from the composition she had already developed.<sup>52</sup>

In *Controversy*, White attempts to record the ideological turmoil of the 1940s. During this decade the W.E.A.'s work as a university extension programme was gradually taken over by Auckland University. By a series of constitutional manoeuvres the University reduced the W.E.A.'s representation on the tutorial course committee to that of other voluntary adult education organisations. Prior to the 1947 Act, the W.E.A. had equal representation with the University.

In the bottom left-hand corner of the mural White refers to this tug of war between the radical left element of the W.E.A. and the university's academics. She indulges in a private joke by using old 'Bowdie', the Elam caretaker, as her model for the fusty academic who points out the letter of the law to the trade unionist in cap and trenchcoat. Earnest young students disappear into the W.E.A building behind tutors, who look remarkably like Fisher and Turkington. A column of young men marching under different flags are a reminder of the brigades of 'helpless youth' that White in *War makers* [9] had predicted would be slaughtered. A solo mother stands alone amongst the clamour, similar to the protective mother in *Civilised* [22]. A capitalist reappears, with his sycophant woman; his hand is gloved and tucked inside his overcoat, hers outstretched ready to receive.

Lois White was elected to the Auckland Society of Arts council in September 1946, alongside other respected artists including Bessie Christie, Ida Eise, John Tole and Herbert Tornquist.<sup>53</sup> The war years had provided White with exciting subjects for her work, and the wartime lack of materials was a challenge she had overcome. During this period White was prominently noticed in reviews and reproduced by art periodicals. With the war over, she looked forward to many productive years. In the event, the normalities of civilian life would have far less to offer.



Wild waves 1944
oil on cardboard, 408 x 508 mm
Auckland City Art Gallery,
presented by Margaret Thompson, 1992

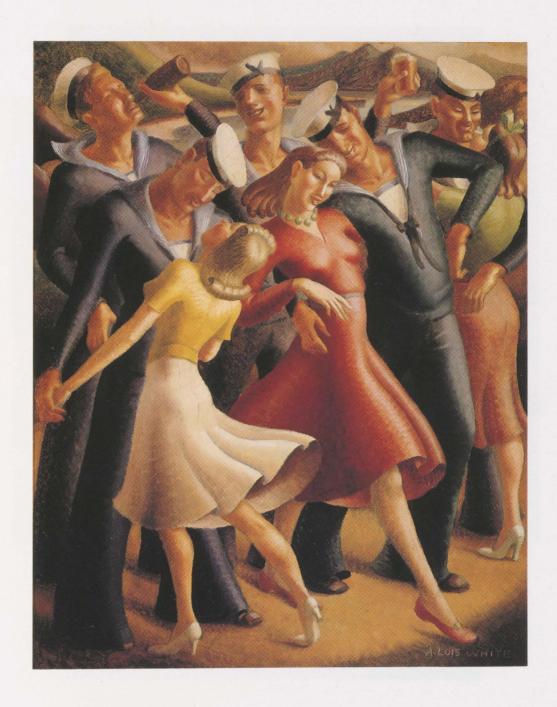


18

Phases of life c.1943 watercolour, 170 x 350 mm private collection, Wellington

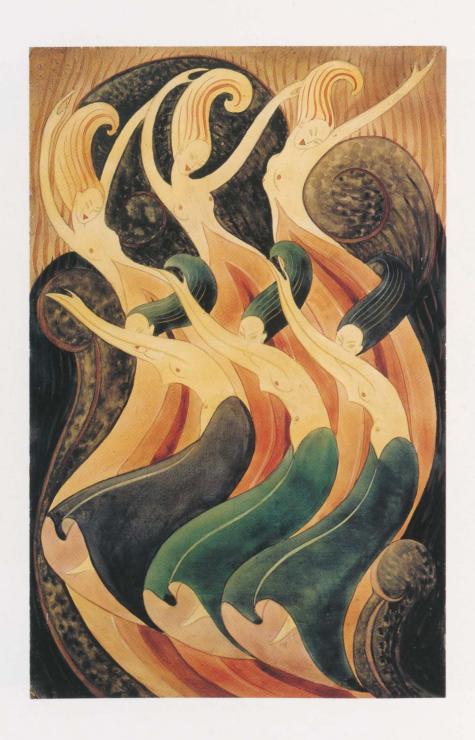
The format of *Phases of life*, a lunette similar to the Westhaven mural, suggests it may be a preparatory study for a mural. In her 1945 essay, 'Murals for New Zealand', Cora Wilding records that 'Lois White painted murals for the one time American hospital'. Along with most of White's murals, these works have since disappeared. The watercolour incorporates several familiar themes. To the left is a couple worshipping the cross; a second couple embraces the figure of capitalism (top hat and tails); a third couple salutes the troops marching out of the frame. The figure of vanity (a nude woman holding up a mirror) appears in the right-hand foreground.

Cora Wilding, 'Murals for New Zealand', New Zealand Listener, 28 December 1945, p 6.



19

Fleet's in 1943 oil on cardboard, 505 x 400 mm private collection, Auckland



20

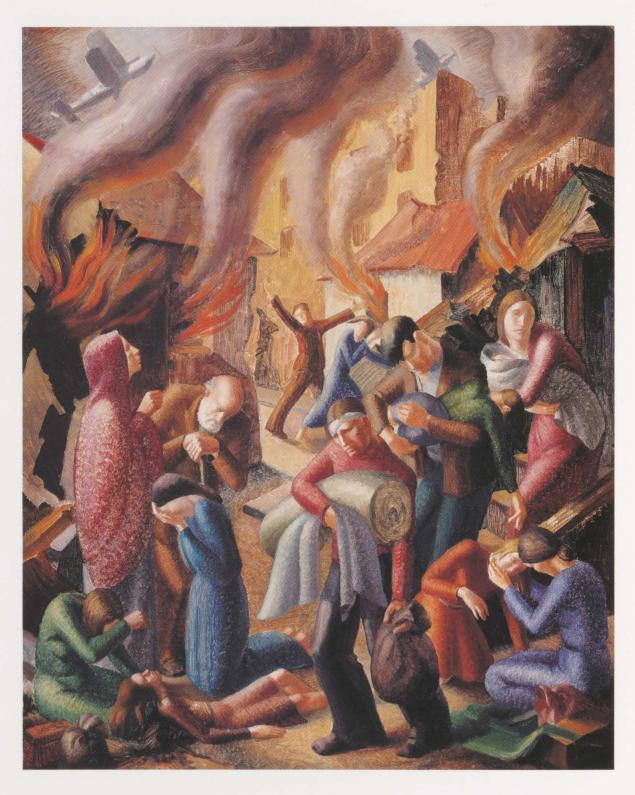
Fire 1943 varnished watercolour, 558 x 354 mm National Gallery of Australia, Canberra



21

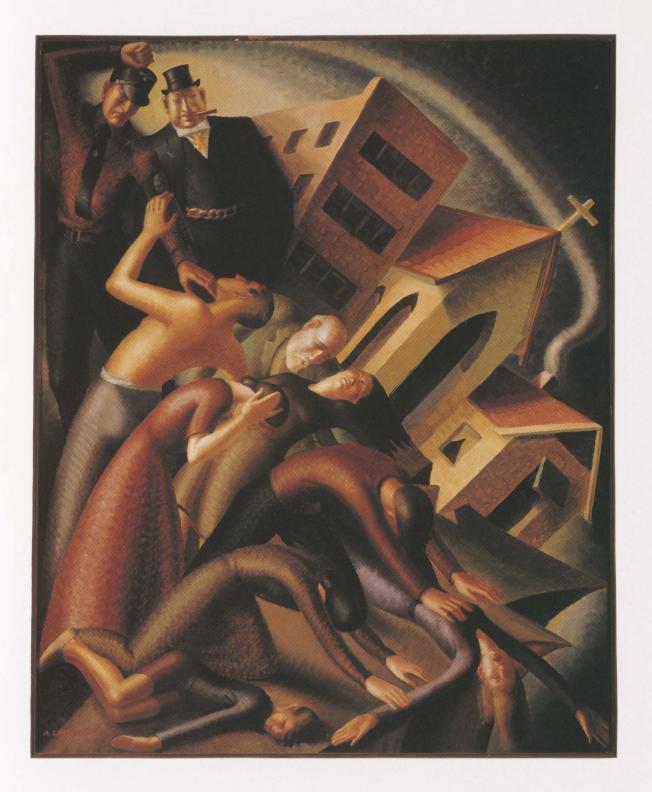
Allegro 1942 varnished watercolour, 350 x 425 mm Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt

Allegro is one of the first of White's varnished watercolours. She devised the medium to overcome wartime shortage of oil paints, and the vibrant results proved extremely easy to sell. Their lighthearted themes provided a decorative foil to the serious social commentaries alongside which they were exhibited.



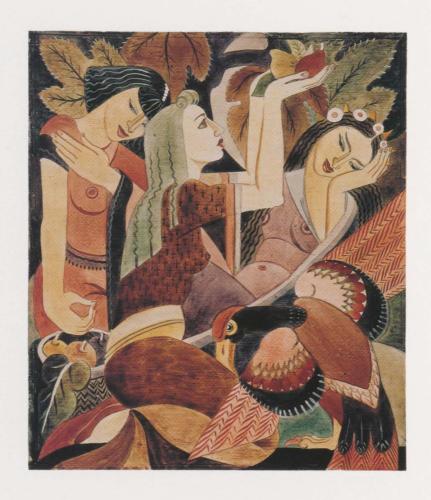
22

Civilised 1942 oil on cardboard, 765 x 610 mm Auckland City Art Gallery, purchased 1992



23

Collapse 1944 oil on cardboard, 750 x 605 mm private collection, Christchurch



24

Design c.1944 varnished watercolour, 350 x 300 mm Bank of New Zealand collection, Wellington

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store? Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find Thee sitting careless on a granary floor, Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind. John Keats, 'To Autumn'



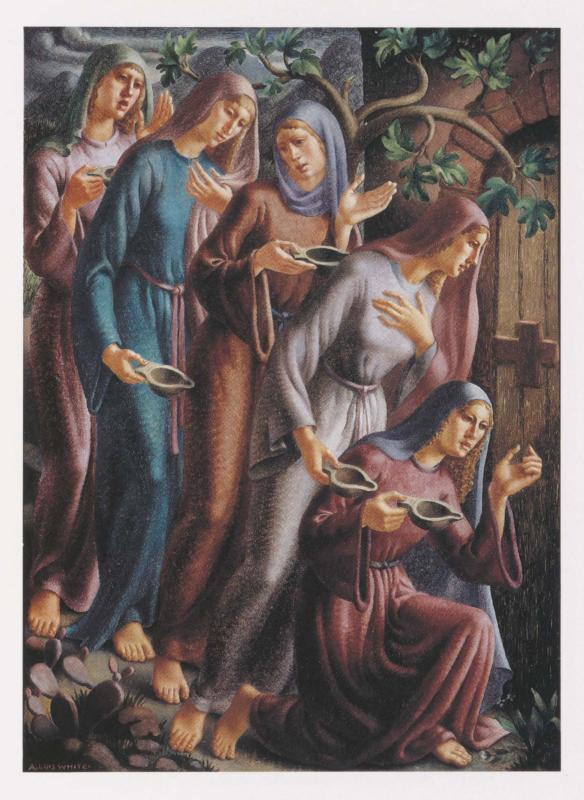
25

Ode to Autumn 1945 oil on board, 595 x 396 mm private collection, Auckland



26

Self-portrait c.1945 oil on board, 760 x 360 mm Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa



27

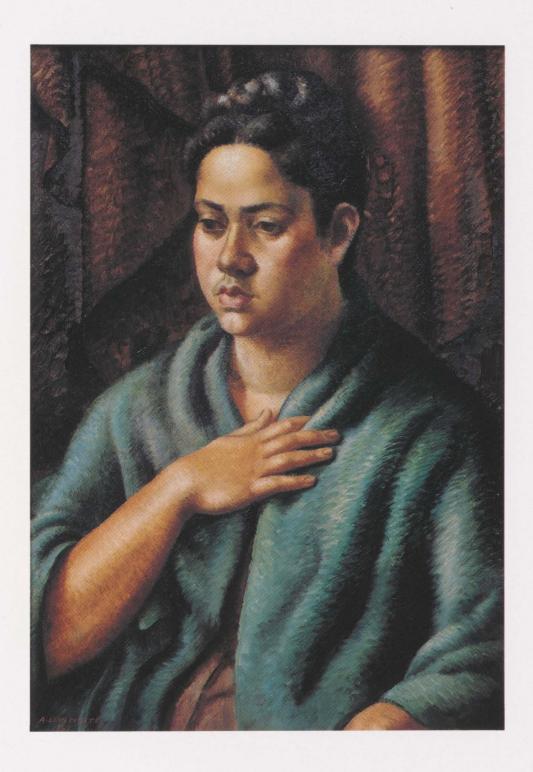
Foolish virgins 1947 oil on board, 755 x 560 mm private collection, Auckland



28

Blonde 1947 oil on cardboard, 435 x 355 mm private collection, Auckland

Blonde and Brunette were exhibited together at the inaugural 1948 New Group exhibition in Auckland. Both are inscribed with a date alongside White's signature, a rare indication of her satisfaction with a painting.



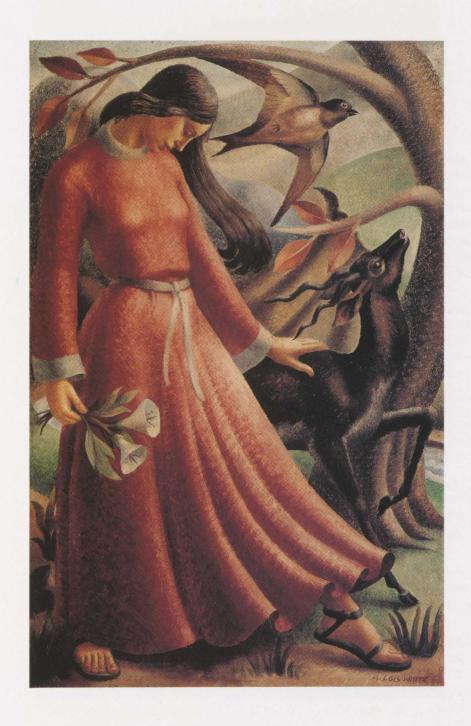
29

Brunette 1947 oil on cardboard, 570 x 390 mm Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa



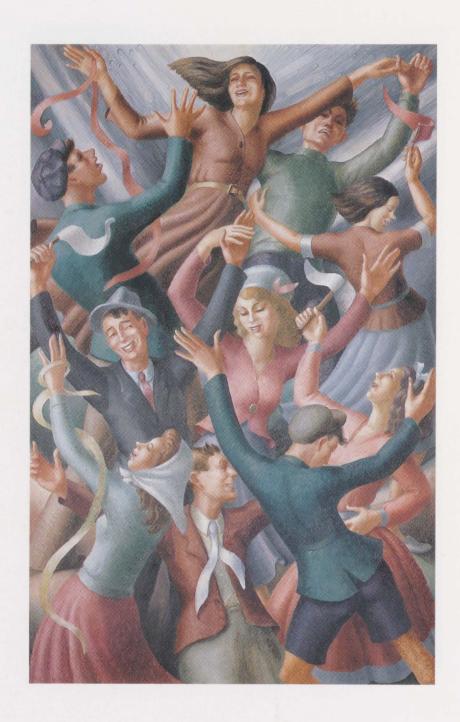
30

Bathers 1949 varnished watercolour, 310 x 255 mm private collection, Waikato



31

Girl with antelope 1949 oil on cardboard, 485 x 315 mm private collection, Auckland



32

Jubilation 1948 oil on cardboard, 585 x 380 mm Auckland City Art Gallery, purchased 1990

## FOOLISH VIRGINS



1947-1951

A PRODUCTIVE PERIOD in the life of the Auckland Society of Arts was drawing to a close. For Lois White, however, the years 1947-1951 saw her exhibiting many of her finest paintings. Alongside her signature, some of these works bore dates, rare indications of her satisfaction with the final piece. White's technique was by now highly refined, her colour harmonies taking full advantage of the extended range of fine art materials available in the post-war period. The subject matter developed into major religious allegories, painted concurrently with realistic female portraits, and a series of women in symbolic guise. The varnished watercolours, an outlet for her 'decorative' tendencies, continued to be popular with purchasers.

At the 1947 Society of Arts annual, White exhibited two oil compositions: Foolish virgins [27], a large religious panel priced at 50 guineas, and Harbinger of storm, a female allegory priced at 18 guineas. Two varnished watercolours, Bird design and Deer, immediately found purchasers at five guineas each.<sup>2</sup> Hipwell respectfully acknowledged White's entries, but the Pre-Raphaelite label had stuck:

Two decorative panels by Lois White again display this artist's very accomplished draftsmanship and design. Using pre-Raphaelite subject matter and treatment, she adds a personal colour sense which is highly developed. The subject of the larger panel is 'The Foolish Virgins', the second being an allegory, 'Harbinger of Storm'. Both are very able works.<sup>3</sup>

The *Herald* briefly mentioned White's work, simply recording 'a mural-like effect has been gained'. Sent to Wellington for the Academy spring exhibition, *Foolish virgins* was mentioned alongside James Turkington's *Moa hunters*. The *Evening Post* viewed them both as 'suggestive of a Pre-Raphaelite influence'. When in Christchurch, Charles Crome was more withering about the development of White's subject matter:

To appreciate the spirit with which A. Lois White, of Auckland, has imbued 'The Foolish Virgins' one has to go back only 50 years. This feat accomplished, it is possible to realise the thought the artist has put into her painting and her thorough workmanship.<sup>6</sup>

The Canterbury Society of Arts showed interest in purchasing *Foolish virgins*. C.S. Baverstock (secretary for Canterbury) wrote to Laird Thomson (secretary for Auckland): 'Lois White's "Foolish virgins" would have sold at 40 gns but failed to do so at 50 gns'. Despite this price being more than double what she had charged for any previous painting, White was not prepared to allow any discount. The apparently inflated prices White placed on several works suggest that she was attempting to retain some paintings in her own possession, at a time when she had never been so successful in selling her work. This partially explains the large number of works in her studio when she met Peter McLeavey, her dealer in the 1970s and 1980s. *Foolish virgins* eventually sold for \$110 in an exhibition of New Zealand women painters at the Auckland Society of Arts in 1968, at a time when White's work could be had for a song.

The five foolish virgins from Christ's parable [Matthew 25:1-13] stoop to listen to Jesus' reply to their late request to enter the marriage feast. White's virgins are all based on one model, shown in ascending attitudes of comprehension of her fate. Throughout her paintings, White's drapery appears to be derived from a communal wardrobe. Eventually it became an expressive motif in its own right: a sensual delineation of form and movement that operated independently of limbs. Although she had placed a high monetary value on *Foolish virgins*, she typically refused to enlarge on the significance of this. Gordon H. Brown tried to prompt White to make a statement about *Foolish virgins*, suggesting he could see a relationship between the rhythm of the figures and the meaning of the work:

White: Does it to you? Well I'm glad it did. I haven't got that painting now. . . 8

In 1948, White exhibited two major oils. *Jubilation* [32], a comment on the end of the war, was priced at 30 guineas, while the religious parable *Elijah taken up into heaven* [35] was 48 guineas. Two varnished watercolours, *Flight* and *Decoration*, were again both sold for five guineas each. Hipwell's interest was temporarily revived by these oils, both signed and dated 1948. White's work appeared vibrant beside the 'parade of coloured snap shots, odd bits of still life and a jaded flower show' seen in other parts of the show.

Lois A. White [sic] again exhibits a number of decorative panels of symbolic figure subjects, maintaining her fine standard of draughtsmanship and design. The flame line composition in 'Elijah taken up to Heaven', and the ascending rhythms in 'Jubilation', together with a studied distribution of colour, give vitality and lively movement to these panels.<sup>10</sup>

In a crowded composition of ten figures, locked into an extremely shallow picture plane, White captures a state of elation. *Jubilation* evokes her first-hand experience of World War II victory celebrations in Queen Street on 8 May, 1945. In 1981, she described her memory of the declaration of peace:

I was working on the large mural that later got burned [Controversy]. I was working in the old W.E.A. building on it. I heard an awful hullabaloo in the street outside. It sounded as if there was a crowd of people who had all drunk a lot of beer. I thought: I wish they'd stop making that row. I want to get on with this work. I can't concentrate. Then I discovered what it was. Peace had been declared, and everyone had gone mad. It was quite a long walk from the W.E.A. building down to Queen Street.<sup>11</sup>

Later in 1948, *Jubilation* was exhibited in Christchurch, and in 1949 in Dunedin, where the Otago *Daily Times* greeted it warmly: 'A. Lois White finds endless variety in the pattern of well-rounded human forms, of which her "Jubilation" is a pleasant example'. Nora Dickie, the Headmistress of Timaru Girls' High School, persuaded the Old Girls' Association to purchase *Jubilation* from the Dunedin exhibition. Nora Dickie established a New Zealand art collection for the school which also included works by E. Mervyn Taylor, Austin Deans, Archibald Nicoll, Louise Henderson and Rhona Fleming. Writing to White during the negotiations, she was ecstatic in her appreciation of the painting: 'I still love "Jubilation" – feel I shall not be able to let it out of my room for long'. In danger of being thrown in the school's incinerator in 1970, *Jubilation* was saved by the school caretaker, who 'thought it might have religious significance'. It hung in the smoko hut for 5 years, and from 1975 in the School Library, until it was sold at auction in 1990 and purchased by the Auckland City Art Gallery. White's conception remains concentrated on the buoyancy of a young crowd, released from their present troubles, confident of the future.

Ida Eise and Lois White on holiday at Mairangi Bay, c.1948. (Private collection, Auckland)



Elijah taken up into heaven was later exhibited in the 1948 Academy exhibition in Wellington. White's biblical allegories were based on her profound personal study of the Bible. Moving away from social comment, White, always a committed Christian, was entering an intense religious period in her subject matter. In biblical concordances, the Book of Elijah is given an allegorical reading: through miraculous events such as Elijah's ascension to heaven, Christ's message of redemption appears to all people irrespective of race, colour or creed. As in Foolish virgins [27], White simultaneously depicts a sequence of events within the one picture. Elisha's hand appears in the lower-right hand corner taking up the prophet Elijah's mantle, the symbol of his miraculous work. In the main body of the composition the mantle is being removed by an angel as Elijah ascends to heaven.

In 1948, Lois White joined with other Elam teachers and graduates in establishing the exhibiting collective known as the New Group. Ida Eise, James Turkington, Ron Stenberg, Margaret Thompson, Kay Robson, Jocelyn Harrison-Smith, Peter Brown, Monna Malcolm, Francis Wright and Pauline Blomfield shared what they called a 'visual' approach to their subjects. In the face of increasing interest in abstraction, they unashamedly continued painting portraits, nudes and landscapes. The New Group's 'genesis', the *Auckland Star* informed the public, was in 'the masters of the Renaissance period: Thus, though known as the "New Group", the motives, philosophy and approach of these Aucklanders are in fact quite old. But they are in the company of the immortals'. <sup>16</sup>

Not surprisingly, the New Group received Fisher's support, his teaching having created the group's outlook. Opening the first show, he announced: 'We feel that people with similar outlook sweat better together'. Abstraction lowered standards of draughtsmanship, and the New Group were firm in their disapproval: 'Beside it much so-called modern art could be blatant egotism or rank emotionalism. It could even be pure exhibitionism'.<sup>17</sup> Informal meetings took place on Saturday afternoons, usually



Study for Annunciation c.1948, pencil, 485 x 355 mm. (Auckland City Art Gallery, purchased 1948)

with a life model in attendance. James Turkington was the initial spokesperson, while White negotiated space in the Art Gallery for the first show. Ida Eise was another leading member involved in its organisation.

In the 1948 New Group show, White exhibited three recent oils, *Blonde* [28], *Brunette* [29] and *Eve tempted* [33]. She also showed two drawings, *Pam seated* and *Study for Annunciation*; this latter study was purchased by the Auckland City Art Gallery for its collection. *Brunette* is a portrait of Pauline Blomfield, a vivacious Maori woman who taught part-time at Elam on Saturday mornings. Blomfield painted nudes and large mural compositions similar to White's.<sup>18</sup> White presented her as a contemplative madonna. *Blonde* made an ideal companion picture.

Hipwell, who had previously supported many of these Elam artists in his *Auckland Star* reviews, welcomed the New Group's presence on the exhibiting scene. 'Integrity, discipline, sensibility and intelligence appear as watchwords of the New Group. They are virtues worth cultivating':

Two drawings by Miss Lois White, 'Pam seated' and 'Study for Annunciation', are of excellent merit and worthy of a place in any public collection. In her portrait studies Miss White realises the physical appearance within her own artistic convention. 'Brunette' and 'Blonde' are admirably spaced, firmly constructed and well balanced in tone and colour. In these, the use of strong verticals and horizontals develop a series of static rhythms in contrast to a pre-Raphaelite 'growth' exhibited in 'Eve Tempted'. The later conception is an excellent example of her ability to weld the ideal with the real.<sup>19</sup>

Eve tempted has progressed from the ambiguous passive figure in Expulsion [12], to a psychological study of Eve and the implication of the Fall as taught by Paul [1 Corinthians 14:34], an historic justification for women's representation in the church as second-class citizens. As if hypnotised, Eve contemplates the fruit, seemingly unaware of the serpent entwining her thighs and breasts. Tightly confined, close to the viewer's space, Eve is placed in a landscape of threatening, jagged rocks. Her presentation emphasises the proximity of her flesh, forcing the viewer both to admire the nude, which is painted with extreme refinement, and to recognise it as the source of Eve's tribulation. The model for Eve is a young woman who earlier appears as a student in Controversy, and may have been a life model for the New Group. One of White's paintings of this period shows her seated against a draped backdrop. Margaret

Thompson recalls modelling for Lois in a similar pose on a Sunday afternoon at Lois's home in Richardson Road, while Ma White was having her afternoon nap.<sup>20</sup>

White now began to exhibit with smaller art societies. In 1948 she sent *Harbinger of storm* to the inaugural exhibition of the Southland University Association. The Invercargill City Council recognised an ideal opportunity to secure a work from this important Auckland artist and bought the painting for its civic collection. The *Southland Times* reported the purchase of this 'beautiful symbolic painting valued at 25 guineas'. The painting depicts a woman wading across a stream, while ominous lightning bolts strike above her head and angry birds dive-bomb her ready to peck. White's woman is a messenger who announces the arrival of the force of destruction in nature.

Just before the start of the 1949 teaching year, the W.E.A. and all but one of Elam's buildings were destroyed by fire. While the W.E.A had recently upgraded its wiring, the school had not, and an electrical fault was thought to be responsible for the blaze. White, without any insurance cover, estimated her total loss at £229. This did not include the large mural *Controversy*, which had been installed in the W.E.A. for two years. Another mural appears in the list of her works lost in the fire: 'Mural recently completed for the Avondale Mental Hospital, piece of pinex 8 feet by 4 and a half feet, powder colours, brushes, paper clips, book *Fictitious Creatures in Art*, preliminary work for large mural, including designs, drawings, cartoons charcoaled and large primed masonite panels'.<sup>22</sup>

The theme of the Avondale mural might have derived from the book she recorded losing. Many of White's animals appear to be painted from books rather than from life, and an ambitious treatment of creatures would be consistent with her continued interest in the varnished watercolours and religious and female allegories. Bill McLeod made reference to this lost mural when he took White to task for her portrayal of the Jewish capitalist in *Collapse* [23]: 'Concerned to exclude incitements from your mental hospital mural you airily incite the insane at large'. White presumably selected the animals to be non-threatening, concentrating on the



Oil study for *Harbinger of* storm c.1947, 588 x 305 mm. (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa)

decorative potential of benign mythological beasts such as the unicorn or phoenix.

White's additional fire losses included two oil paintings priced at 15 and 50 guineas, along with masonite panels, Swedish boards and canvas. John Weeks, however, suffered most from the fire, as a large number of his best paintings had been brought into the school for Janet Paul to view for a proposed retrospective. Weeks was devastated by the loss.<sup>23</sup>

To the 1949 Auckland Society of Arts annual White contributed *Girl with antelope* [31] and three varnished watercolours, *Bathers* [30], *Decoration* and *Hunter resting*. Bill McLeod purchased *Girl with antelope* for 21 guineas, and *Bathers* sold to a Wellington collector. Other artists were not so lucky with sales. In his presidential address, Pascoe Redwood berated the Auckland audience, who 'should be ashamed of itself for the small amount of art work that was bought in comparison with other centres'. <sup>24</sup> Bill McLeod's brief note, asking White to reserve *Girl with antelope*, reveals the trust that existed between White and her patron:

I just phoned a man on the society's table at the Exhibition and asked him to keep me your 'Girl with Antelope'. He insisted that I should dance down town and back to his tune of 'no cash, no keep'. To make the money to buy the picture takes time, so I can't spare the time to deliver him the money just now. Will you tell them it is OK?' <sup>25</sup>

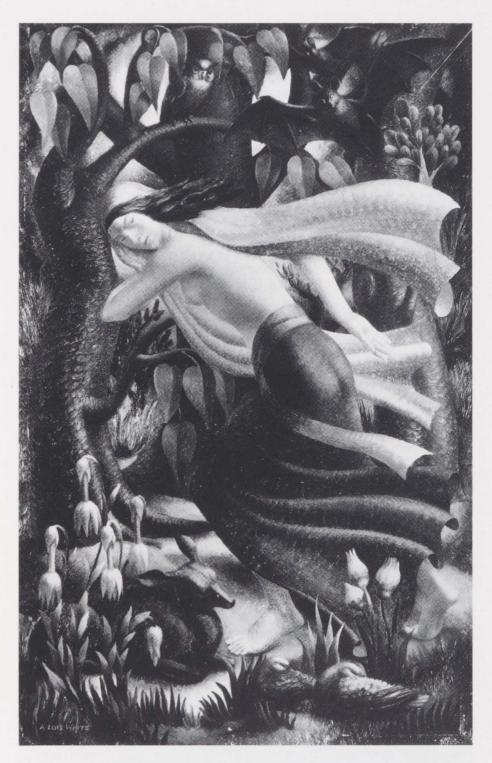
Hipwell announced 'much good work' in the 1949 exhibition while overlooking White's female allegories, the works he least preferred and rarely mentioned. <sup>26</sup> The woman, antelope and swallow in *Girl with antelope* are caught in a brief moment of tranquillity and balance. Delicate parallels are drawn between the woman's feet and the antelope's as they step out together in the strange dream world they inhabit. In 1949, White also exhibited *Brunette* at the Academy in Wellington, when it was purchased by the council for the National Art Gallery collection at £26-5. <sup>27</sup> The chalk drawing exhibited with the oil was also sold. The *Evening Post* reported the purchase of 'a portrait of a young girl – correctly described and smoothly painted'. <sup>28</sup>

The New Group exhibition for 1949 was dismissed by Tom Bolster, who had taken over Hipwell's position as art critic for the *Auckland Star*. Bolster began a crusade against them for what he termed their 'insistent homogeneity'. Previously seen as a positive characteristic and part of the reason for exhibiting together, it was now identified as a weakness. White exhibited two oils, *Fugitive night* and *Girl in blue* [36], along with a pastel figure study, *Blue study*.

The show abounds in portraits, most if not all of which have feminine subjects, and all are solidly realistic. . . like the 'Girl in Blue' by A. Lois White and others, they are more pleasing than distinguished. . . Another blue study in pastel by Lois White, freed from a sense of recreating a likeness, achieves more freedom and expressiveness.<sup>29</sup>

Bill McLeod consoled her as she began to feel threatened by the dismissal of her themes: 'They will greet Mr Fisher and you with "liberal and benevolent exteriors". Behind your backs they will tend to treat you with arrogance, and will use their talents to have this "increasingly regarded as a virtue".'30 He assured her: 'whatever you paint, I am a likely buyer'.31 Now concentrating on portraiture, White used female models whom she selected for their interesting and strong facial features. The finest brushwork was reserved for the face, while the background became a sensually worked rhythm of paint. Their clothes are singularly undistinguished: lumpy jumpers, or a twin-set, nothing which distracted from the face. White carefully signed the portraits and placed high prices on these apparently modest works. *Girl in blue* is priced at 45 guineas in Lois White's handwriting on the reverse, as is *Pat*, another portrait of the period.

Black and white photograph of Fugitive night 1949. (A. Lois White Archive, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa)



Brunette (25 guineas) and Blonde (20 guineas) were half the price, even though they are painted with a similar amount of care. Evidently, White had her own reasons for retaining the highly priced portraits in her possession.

Kenneth Thomas's 1949 article in *Home and Building* quotes a member of the New Group who sounds remarkably like White: 'It has been our aim to see not only with our eyes but with our minds.' As 'visualists', we see 'more fully into the soul of

the subject'. However, Thomas did not see the beguiling temptress in *Fugitive night* as anything more than 'a study in figure composition'. <sup>32</sup> The woman disappears into a lush landscape, her clothes in disarray. An atmosphere of dormant fecundity prevails amongst the leaves, flowers, ducks and deer, while startled bats and an owl fly above her head. Pressed into White's 1945 edition of *Augustus John* by John Rothenstein is a manuscript copy of Fisher's poem 'Cycle', on a similar theme:

When sleeping night is ravished by the sun, She, in her darkest hour, gives birth to virgin dawn. Who, in her turn becomes the prey Of her incestuous sire And so begets the day. . . <sup>33</sup>

Fugitive night was purchased from the 1950 Canterbury Society of Arts annual exhibition by Mrs Ruth Crisp, for 35 guineas. White also exhibited Cooling stream, which found a purchaser at 10 guineas. Out of a total of 73 works sold, seven were from Auckland. White's success is especially remarkable as her price for Fugitive night was far in excess of anything asked by the other Auckland artists.<sup>34</sup> The Press recognised her national standing:

One Auckland painter, Miss A. Lois White, one of the few consistent painters of figure compositions in New Zealand, has a fine allegorical work in 'Fugitive Night' in the classical style.<sup>35</sup>

At the beginning of the 1950 academic year, White was appointed to a University lectureship in figure painting and head and figure composition. Her courses included antique and life-drawing, life-painting, portraiture and figure composition. For a 26-hour week, with Monday afternoon free, <sup>36</sup> White collected a salary of £660. This rose to £760 in annual increments of £50. <sup>37</sup> Not until 1954, after 27 years teaching, did White receive the same salary increases as her male counterparts. Her pay was always pegged at a much lower level. <sup>38</sup>

To the 1950 Auckland Society of Arts annual exhibition White contributed *Jonah and the great fish* [34], priced at 30 guineas, together with three varnished watercolours at six guineas each: *Design: girl and birds, Hare and tortoise* and *Fish.* Ida Eise chose



The hanging committee of the Auckland Society of Arts select works for the 1950 annual exhibition. From left: Pascoe Redwood (President), Lois White, John Weeks, Ida Eise, Ron Stenberg, Herbert Tornquist, Bessie Christie, James Turkington, John Tole and (holding lvy Copeland's Mexican hat) Laird Thomson (secretary). Reproduced in the Auckland Star, 1 May 1950. (Research Library, Auckland City Art Gallery)

Fish as her Art Union prize, while the other 'decorations' also found purchasers.<sup>39</sup> White's contributions were ignored by both newspapers, although she appeared in an *Auckland Star* photograph of the Auckland Society of Arts selection committee.<sup>40</sup> *Jonah and the great fish* is another example of White's growing interest in depicting allegorical subjects from the Bible. She was particularly attracted to episodes which have a fantasy quality in their narrative, requiring the believer to suspend rationality to grasp the meaning behind the literal text.

Later in 1950, the New Group exhibition was opened by Fisher, who pronounced it 'the most significant exhibition they had yet done'. 41 Bolster, on the other hand, slated the show as 'more conservative than radical – aesthetically speaking', asserting that the aim was to 'please more than stimulate'. The artists showed no 'promise of daring new "acrobatics"'. Though the majority of other exhibitors were briefly listed, White was not mentioned and it is not known what she exhibited. 42 Signed 'One of Them', a letter in the *Auckland Star* answered criticism felt by the New Group to be unjust:

It seems wrong to allow T.B.'s criticism of the New Group Art exhibition to go unchallenged. Does he – I presume a competent art critic – look for 'acrobatics' to provide loud controversy, or does he look for genuine self expression based on sound study.<sup>43</sup>

White's New Group entries were probably a combination of works she exhibited elsewhere in 1950. *Blonde*, *Nude* and *Figure study* appeared at the 1950 Otago Society of Arts annual exhibition in Dunedin. Here they were recognised in the *Evening Star* as work in a 'conventional mood,' of 'evenly high technical merit'. \*4 *Spring* went to the 1950 Academy spring show in Wellington, where it was reviewed in the *Evening Post* as 'a symbolical figure perfectly drawn, chastely adorned, and exquisite in its colour'. \*45

Early in 1951, White was selected as a representive Auckland artist in the Women's International Art Club exhibition in London. She sent her most recent major composition, *Jonah and the great fish*. Part of the 1951 Festival of Britain, the exhibition featured a special Commonwealth section from Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The New Zealand organiser was Stewart Maclennan, director of the National Art Gallery, who also selected painters Grace Butler, Alice Whyte, Jenny Campbell, Barc [Helen Crabb], Ivy Fife, Rata Lovell-Smith and sculptors Margaret Garland and Molly Macalister. When interviewed for a statement on her painting, White gave one of her forthright opinions:

Describing the painting, Miss White said 'it is essentially a visualist conception as one would see it and nothing to do with surrealism, cubism, impressionism or any other 'fancy-pants' medium.<sup>46</sup>

It is unlikely that many others would have 'visualised' Jonah's tribulations as White did. The hallmarks of her design are obvious, the figure occupying a tightly framed narrow field, in which luminous colour and swirling background detail animate the composition. The exhibition was reviewed in the *Studio* as 'of a high level, considering the large membership'. <sup>47</sup> Six rooms in the R.B.A. Galleries in London were filled with just over four hundred works.

The Auckland City Art Gallery's newly renovated Mackelvie wing hosted the 1951 Auckland Society of Arts annual exhibition. White showed a small oil, *Nesting*, which sold for eight guineas, and two varnished watercolours: *Lady Godiva*, priced at seven guineas, and *Bears* at six guineas. Bolster's review condescendingly concluded: 'Nevertheless, an Auckland School – with the Elam School of Art as its midwife – is

beginning to emerge'. The paintings of Bessie Christie, Elise Mourant, James Turkington, May O. Gilbert, Charles and John Tole, John Weeks, Alice Whyte, Vida Steinert and Eric Lee-Johnson were 'deliberately pleasing and readily understood'. <sup>48</sup> There had been no change in the quality of White's painting, yet her work was overlooked by this reviewer. She did, however, receive mention in Bolster's *Auckland Star* article several pages later. It remarked on the fact that half the exhibitors were women. In fact, women artists had dominated the exhibitions for most of the war years. The writer presented these women as hobbyists and 'housewife-artists':

'Home duties', are the primary occupations of many, and as one of the exhibitors put it, 'we are mostly week-end and two-weeks-a-year artists'.<sup>49</sup>

Many of White's contemporaries were mentioned, women such as Ida Eise and Alison Pickmere, who began exhibiting in the 1930s and had maintained a professional career. White's professionalism, however, was acknowledged:

Another Festival of Britain contributor is Miss A. Lois White, lecturer in painting the figure and the head and figure composition at the Elam School. 'Jonah and the Great Fish' was the painting she forwarded. Today she exhibits three works. Two decorations of bears and of Lady Godiva, are varnished watercolours, which makes the work as brilliant as when wet. Even when at home this artist cannot get away from her current work. A mural showing the signing of Magna Carta is too big to fit into her studio and she has had to place it along the living room wall. The painting has taken her 18 months so far, and a considerable amount of research has had to be done.<sup>50</sup>

John Bell, a visiting Scottish artist and art teacher, gave his opinion in the *Auckland Star* on the 1951 annual exhibition :

Transplanted English art wilts and dies in this alien soil. Decayed Victorian art cannot inspire new creative effort. Scrap the lot and let your own artists create a New Zealand tradition from scratch.<sup>51</sup>

In his opinion, John Weeks and Eric Lee-Johnson were the most inspired of the Auckland painters, and among the 'women artists', Alison Pickmere, Elise Mourant and May Smith were the 'leaders' in 'their sort of art'.

The absence of a major statement in the 1951 exhibition is explained by the hours White spent toiling on *Magna Carta* [40]. Now in the dining hall at Southwell, a preparatory school for boys in Hamilton, the mural was initially commissioned with other public secondary schools in mind. Hamilton Boys' High School declined the work as too large, as did Hamilton Girls', and it was finally offered on permanent loan to Mr Sergel, the Headmaster of Southwell. Mrs Gwendolyne Rogers, doyenne of the arts in Hamilton, commissioned the mural as 'a gesture of sympathy to the artists' who lost work in the Elam fire. <sup>52</sup> Gwendolyne Rogers greatly admired White's painting. She already possessed *Eve tempted* [33] and later acquired *Annunciation* [39]. *Magna Carta* was painted on a panel formed from three sheets of hardboard joined together. Mrs Scarry, White's next-door neighbour in Richardson Road, remembers it as 'a beautiful thing'. She looked closely at the mural when her son built the frame in which it travelled to Hamilton:

When it was framed it was standing up against my wall. I said, 'Miss White how much would that be?' She said 'My price would be £500' and I thought 'that's a lot of money!'53

White carefully researched her topic, trying to obtain historical accuracy in the 'reddish colouring and burly build' of King John and 'the personal banners of the

Barons who are known to have been present at the signing'. The portrait of Archbishop Langton was thought to be a 'remarkable' likeness. On her sabbatical trip in 1960-1962, White viewed the document in the Tower of London. *Magna Carta* was signed by Fisher as well as White, and both were present at the reception when it was officially unveiled. Fisher presumably assisted with some of the painting. Gwendolyne Rogers wrote to White and Fisher after the reception for the mural:

There is surprise and delight by all hands, the impact pronounced in some, Mrs Tait (the wife of the head of the H. H. S [Hamilton Boys' High School]) said 'I expected to like it but I had not expected what I saw, it is beautiful, it is alive, it was an experience I shall never forget to my dying day.' All connected with the H. [High] School will be so sad and moved at losing it that I think a concerted effort will be made to get one for the new building. I told Mrs Tait of the hope to have 4 in the Waikato. <sup>55</sup>

Later in 1951, White sent three works to the Academy spring show in Wellington. An oil titled *Dancing girls* was priced at 23 guineas, while *Leap frog* and *Bears* were 'decorations' which both found ready buyers at six guineas each.<sup>56</sup> In Wellington, White was still greeted as 'A regular and individual exhibitor. . . Outstanding of these is a typical graceful figure pattern in stained glass colours.'<sup>57</sup>

At the 1951 New Group exhibition, White showed *Portrait of Mrs Thompson* and *Aspiration* [38], each priced at 20 guineas. New exhibitors included Marjorie Masters and Alice Whyte, along with two students, Garth Tapper and Selwyn Wilson. The *Herald* announced: 'Free from the shrill tones of dissension which had characterised many "new" movements in the local art world, it is of such impressive individuality and personality that it is to be numbered among the best offerings Aucklanders have had the pleasure of seeing'. <sup>58</sup> In the *Star*, Bolster tartly congratulated them on the number of nudes and figure compositions, and their obvious ability to find models when most artists, questioned as to why they painted landscapes, shook their heads sadly and said 'We simply can't get models'. The success they achieved however, was 'the atmosphere of an Elam School of Art drawing class carried over with good marks on to the city gallery's walls'. <sup>59</sup>

Aspiration is a finely painted female allegory, the left figure profile closely resembling a younger Lois White. Portrait of Mrs Thompson, Margaret's mother, was purchased by John Barr with Jobson Trust funds for the Auckland City Art Gallery collection. 60 The face is abbreviated, the stippling allowing the hardboard to show through. White was beginning to experiment with open brushwork, in her search to offer something new.

White saw that her position as a leading painter was gradually being eroded. Her reputation as a successful Auckland artist continued for a few more years in other centres, until they also caught up with the trend towards abstraction. The allegorical figure, indeed recognisable subject matter, was now considered anathema to any artist who wished to consider herself as 'modern'. Without support from an appreciative public, White became disconsolate.

## BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON



1952-1962

The appointment of Eric Westbrook in January 1952 as director of the Auckland City Art Gallery, radically changed the course of a number of Auckland artists' careers. Lois White, who for 20 years had submitted work to the Auckland Society of Arts annual and summer exhibitions, no longer made regular appearances. Brief spurts of energy produced a few notable works, but generally she was ignored by reviewers and public alike. She retained some admirers, principally in cities further south. Her subject matter wandered into landscape, a hitherto unexplored field for White. She also continued to paint female and religious allegories, weak imitations of her earlier compositions.

'Hokusai', who wrote the 'Art in Auckland' column for *Here & Now*, hailed Westbrook's arrival as an 'astringent for Auckland Art'. Describing the 'bleak mausoleum of a gallery', an art school as 'dull as ditchwater' and an art society 'badly in need of shock treatment and massive transfusions', Hokusai concluded:

So art in Auckland still stands where it has always stood, in its dinner-jacket: the paramount things are still the age-old decencies, sound drawing, a net profit on the Arts Ball, and the annual trading gain of the Auckland Society of Arts (Inc).<sup>1</sup>

Two or three 'independent' groups (including the New Group) were 'really only branch offices of the big firm'. Hokusai offered Westbrook the jawbone of an ass as the only effective weapon against such a dreary lot.

White's contribution to the 1952 Auckland Society of Arts annual exhibition was *Parrots*, a decoration priced at eight guineas. In the *Star*, Bolster concentrated on a younger generation of artists, including John Holmwood and Nan Manchester whom he identified as the 'new generation', 'fresh' elements in the society. He wondered if Westbrook's appointment had sparked this unexpected revival of enthusiasm within their ranks.<sup>2</sup> White, exhausted by the effort of painting *Magna Carta* [40], had a nervous breakdown and was admitted to an Epsom private hospital.<sup>3</sup> Many years later, when Peter McLeavey wrote to Lois about his sister's ill-health and the early death of Kim Wright, director of Barry Lett Galleries, <sup>4</sup> Lois replied with understanding:

I've had some problems myself in my long life and know how hard it is to cope with a highly keyed nervous system. I think from the tone of your letter, that you like wise have one of these intensely sensitive nervous makeups and patience and the help of a good doctor is needed to help one win the battle against times of depression.<sup>5</sup>

Lois's friend and supporter, Gwendolyne Rogers, wrote with words of encouragement about the mural programme for secondary schools they were still planning:

Directly Mr Fisher comes back, we wish you and he to decide upon the subject and get to work at once upon a mural the same size as Magna Carta. Tim is putting aside £50 and by the time the mural is finished we hope to raise the remaining

 $\pounds 215$ . Mr Turkington tells us that you are not yet completely recovered, that is most disappointing. You must deeply breathe and do all the things you should do, to be fit to tackle the job ahead.

Gwendolyne had begun negotiating the scheme with Mr Algie, the Minister of Education, and Hubert Henderson (husband of Louise Henderson), of the Fine Arts Board of Auckland University College. Her programme was ambitious and extended to include other artists who were currently involved in mural decoration, such as May Smith and James Turkington. Among the subjects Gwendolyne suggested to Lois were: 'The Reformation' and an interpretation of 'the most valuable step in the upward progress in the standard of art appreciation of the "common people" and the freedom of the individual'.<sup>7</sup>

In 1952, the Whites shifted from Richardson Road to 73 Taunton Terrace, a small asbestos-clad house in a cul-de-sac perched on the cliffs overlooking Blockhouse Bay. As Auckland's population grew more affluent in the 1950s, Mount Albert became increasingly subdivided. Blockhouse Bay, however, was still rural and the Whites were once again surrounded by the very paddocks and bays where Lois had initially lived as a child. Taunton Terrace was purchased from Grace Jenkin, the mother of an old school friend from Epsom Girls' Grammar.<sup>8</sup> At 88 years of age, Ma White was increasingly immobile, though she was mentally alert and remained firmly in control of the household. White drew her as a compact form wedged into her chair, spectacles perched on her nose while she crocheted. In her interview with Gordon H. Brown, White mentions the apprehension expressed, when she and her sister uprooted their mother from the memories of a life-time. But Ma White, it seems, was undaunted by the move:

Not she, out she came and she was wielding a stick then too, but she was able to set to work and say that's going there... and that's going there and she had a lot to do with the arranging of the house and where the furniture went.<sup>9</sup>

White sent Aspiration [38] to the 1952 Canterbury Society of Arts exhibition. Later that year it travelled to the Academy annual in Wellington, along with Lady Godiva and Parrots. After the show opened, she heard from a collector, John Jennings:

I always look first to see if you have anything entered in the Wellington Gallery shows, and was very pleased to see your three this time – all of which I admire; particularly the little 'Parrots'. If by any chance it should not be sold at the exhibition I wonder if you would consider letting me have it for five guineas? I know it is worth more. . . <sup>10</sup>

The New Group rarely bothered to produce catalogues for their exhibitions. White's precise contributions to these later shows are difficult to deduce, as works are seldom mentioned in reviews. In 1952 Bolster made some scathing remarks about the 'visualists' of the New Group:

Their varied craft notwithstanding, the New Group artists mostly bear the stamp of their home port. They are students, ex-students and teachers from the Elam School of Art. With hardly an exception, they cautiously steer a common course – called by Elam artists the 'visual' approach.<sup>11</sup>

He also made an oblique side remark: 'There are the nudes we get regularly from the New Group painters – looking somewhat lumpy and life-like, but even more like art school exercises'.

Ron Stenberg, who served with White on the Art Society Council at this time, remembers a startling work: a nude self-portrait with direct eye contact. White

produced these studies throughout her career, as did the Canterbury artist, Rita Angus. Bolster's comment, as well as the *Herald*'s remark, suggests White's entry could be the portrait Stenberg remembers causing such a stir:

Miss Lois White shows a development in a well-studied self-portrait, a change from the stylised, often over-rounded figures of her allegorical paintings.<sup>12</sup>

Gwendolyne Rogers' mural scheme proceeded at a snail's pace. She had persuaded Mr Sayer, Headmaster of the Hamilton Technical School, to agree to the topic of the Crusades. White started on the preliminary scheme, and Gwendolyne wrote to her: 'Your idea for Mr Sayer's parcel sounds good'. The arrangements amounted to nothing as Sayer left to be Headmaster at Takapuna Grammar School at the beginning of 1953. Gwendolyne postponed work on the mural until the next headmaster was appointed. She continued to write to White about the second proposed scheme, for the Hamilton Boys' High School. White favoured the Treaty of Waitangi and Gwendolyne replied with the Headmaster, Mr Tait's, comment:

He rather suggested that there was something a bit 'shady' about the Treaty!! & for local colour the arrival of the early settlers on the shores of the Waikato River, if it would compose, might be better? 15

Several subjects were passed around, but the negotiations between Gwendolyne Rogers, Hamilton headmasters and Education Department officials amounted in the end to very little: a watercolour of the Crusades and preliminary drawings of various figure groups for the Treaty of Waitangi. Lacking support, the project was finally abandoned.

Westbrook's comments on the arts received extensive press coverage. At the official luncheon for the opening of the 1953 Auckland Festival of the Arts, he announced that New Zealand art was 'over its awkward stages' and on the 'threshold of great works'. Westbrook alluded to the way art in New Zealand had been held back in the 'second phase' of its development for far too long. In the first phase, 'writers and painters are merely in a sort of suburb of the Mother Country'. The second was a self-conscious obsession with local allusions, 'tuis or kauri or something'.

We in New Zealand are now about to enter, slightly later than some other countries, the third stage. So far there has been no New Zealand masterpiece in any of the art forms, . . . <sup>16</sup>

He finished with a superior analysis of the situation: 'Mr Westbrook said that artists in Auckland were now beginning to have art as their main purpose in life and not as a weekend interest.'

In a letter to Peter McLeavey, White indicated how she felt about Westbrook's directorship. She was never good with dates, and was only able to place *Flight into Egypt* (1940) in the era before Westbrook:

I think the work was painted in the late 1940's. It was exhibited in the Auckland Gallery before Eric Westbrook took over and cut out all outside exhibitors, so I have tried to fix a time before that.<sup>17</sup>

Westbrook continued to allow the Auckland Society of Arts to use the Gallery, along with the New Group's annual exhibitions. Summer and autumn shows of the Society of Arts were held in the Society clubrooms at Eden Crescent. It was the next director, Peter Tomory, who eventually excluded all art society exhibitions from the Gallery.

Poi dance [41], priced at 50 guineas, was White's 1953 contribution to the Auckland Society of Arts annual exhibition, shown in conjunction with the Auckland

Festival. White had focused a considerable amount of energy on the work, but it passed unnoticed. She again had her photograph in the *Star* with other members of council, who took the platform at the Auckland City Art Gallery to officiate at the first evening



In 1953, Lois White was photographed at the evening opening of the Auckland Society of Arts. Her name was given as 'Loise White', a phonetic transcription on the part of the photographer. Reproduced Auckland Star, 5 June 1953. (Auckland City Library)

opening for 20 years. White laughs while chatting animatedly to two elderly members of the Society, Clarice Brass and Miss R. Bell. <sup>18</sup> White's student from the 1930s, Ron Stenberg, was also photographed. He had been awarded the prize in figure composition for his painting *Private Bar*, 5.25 p.m.

White's *Poi dance* was derived from several Rotorua postcards she had collected, showing the Model Pa at Whakarewarewa and a line of poi dancers. The patterns on the women's piupiu are repeated in the painting, but the snug village under the mountain and the reassuring wafts of steam are White's own inventions. It was a town she had visited when staying with Phillipps cousins during school holidays and the work recreates the nostalgic atmosphere of a golden age. *Poi dance* went to Wellington for the Academy exhibition in 1953, where

it received no mention in reviews. Helen Crabb (who exhibited under the anagram 'Barc') wrote to White 'So much satisfied you have used a Maori motif this time'. 19

Barc, who was well known for her lively pen and ink portrait drawings, thought White an excellent artist and had previously written to tell her. Patricia Fry, a student and biographer of Barc's, indicates this was a frequent habit which some artists responded to, while others were repelled. White replied, whereupon Barc invited her to one of her 'soups', also extending an invitation for her to stay, with a week's notice, if she were ever in Wellington.<sup>20</sup> To be invited to a 'soup' on Friday lunchtime in the basement flat, 16 Aurora Terrace, was to be issued a welcome from the queen of Wellington's Bohemia. Patricia Fry speaks of 'a royal command. . . those invited dared not decline'.<sup>21</sup>

Later in 1953, White exhibited an earlier *Self-portrait* [26] with the Canterbury Society of Arts, which the Society purchased for its permanent collection. Surrounded by the accoutrements of her craft, White is poised in the act of placing another stroke on her painting. Her face bears an almost belligerent expression.

Westbrook was heavily critical of art education in New Zealand. Discussing the Auckland Star Exhibition of Post-Primary School Art in September 1953, Westbrook declared:

The two art schools of any importance in New Zealand are too set in their ways. They are too concerned with diplomas, too concerned with the smart boy who'll do what teacher says . . . Frankly, I'm horrified at this prospect of some of the talent we see on these walls going into that sausage-machine.<sup>22</sup>

Fisher, just back from his first return trip to England, replied benignly in the *Star*. Of the 'sausage machine' metaphor for Elam, he said 'I do not think it merits a comment'.<sup>23</sup>

In 1954 White showed four works at the Auckland Society of Arts. *Fowls*, which was purchased at eight guineas, *Lady with lute* eight guineas, *Design* 15 guineas and *Peat fire*, a landscape in mud-brown tones, priced at 10 guineas. It was a crude, loosely painted picture of a burning hillside. The *Herald* remarked on 'a new departure in subject matter for this artist'. <sup>24</sup> *Peat fire* represented a major shift in White's subject matter. Effectively she was joining the ranks of the widely disparaged 'society artists',

painting innocuous, small-scale domestic landscapes. *Peat fire* suggests that White had become bereft of inspiration. The loose brushwork, by an artist who had always been meticulous in execution and technically well-grounded, is evidence of her loss of assurance. Alpers in the *Star* called the exhibition 'confusing' because of 'clashing styles and purposes'. Representational art was now regarded as passé. The guest for the 1954 Auckland Festival of Arts was the British abstract artist, John Tunnard.

The New Group, which had not exhibited since 1952, held an annual exhibition in 1954. Alpers referred to them as 'the opposite of liberators' while making concessions to 'some competent work' by Clifford Murray, Jocelyn Harrison-Smith, Jack Crippen, Peter Brown, Ida Eise, Joan Stevens, Garth Tapper and 'several others'. It is not known whether White exhibited work in this show.

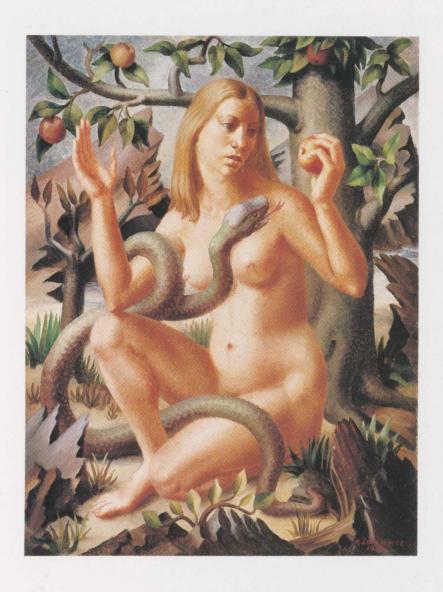
Revealing some return to form, White entered the ambitious oil panel *Gethsemane* [43] in the 1954 competition for a 'Religious theme in art', organised by the Auckland Society of Arts. This panel has suffered periodic cracking of the top layer of paint, cracks which have needed overpainting by conservators. This supposes that the ground beneath was not carefully prepared in White's usual manner, or that she used a drying compound in order to finish this large work in time for the competition. Other entries came from Adele Younghusband, Arthur Hipwell (who also tackled a version of Gethsemane), Colin McCahon and William Jones. At first White priced *Gethsemane* at 100 guineas, increasing the price to 150 guineas when it was later exhibited at the Canterbury Society of Arts. The competition was judged by the Society's council, to which White was not re-elected in September 1953.<sup>26</sup>

Alpers reviewed the competition in the *Star* and predictably found it 'disappointing'.<sup>27</sup> He alluded to a number of artists he might have expected to see, but who apparently did not bother to enter, though none is named. The show's 'chief distinguishing features are incidental rather than essential to religious art'. Only one picture out of 37 was devoid of figures, most were in upright frames and there was a predominance of 'crude symbolism – poster ideas that don't come off'. Colin McCahon's *Crucifixion* had merit 'simply as a painting – if you can look at a Crucifixion in that way'.

The Agony in the Garden by William Jones was the winner, and a compromise between the representational figure of Christ, and the landscape treated in a semi-abstract manner. Christ, as an isolated figure, inhabits a desert-scape with a few primitive amorphic tree forms for company. White sversion of the agony in the garden came from her combined reading of Matthew, Mark and Luke. White includes the three disciples, Peter, James and John, who were supposed to watch while Christ prayed. They sleep, nestled in the darkness of White's paintwork. Christ is wracked by emotional prayer, expressed in the elongation of his body, like a flaring torch stretched over a tree stump. White also added an attendant angel with wings, a creature which had earlier appeared in Annunciation [39]. The Herald gave White an excellent review:

A work of high merit comes from A. Lois White, well known for her figure compositions. 'Gethsemane' is a large, dramatic canvas with many passages of fine colour and a sense of movement in the human body.<sup>30</sup>

White's spirits were temporarily revived and in 1954 she entered two 50-guinea oils, *Psalm 137* and a portrait, *James Turkington*, in the Academy exhibition in Wellington. The *Dominion* reviewed the 'able women artists' in isolation from other exhibitors in the show. It was simply stated that White had exhibited 'one of her biblical subjects'. <sup>31</sup> *Psalm 137* or *By the waters of Babylon* [42] was the translation in paint of one of her favourite Biblical passages. A subdued colour range and drooping



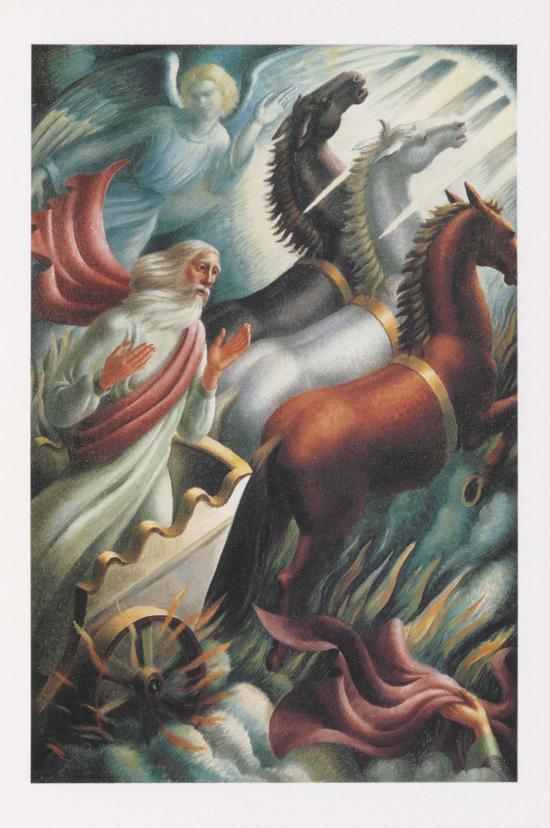
33

Eve tempted 1948 oil on cardboard, 405 x 305 mm private collection, Waikato



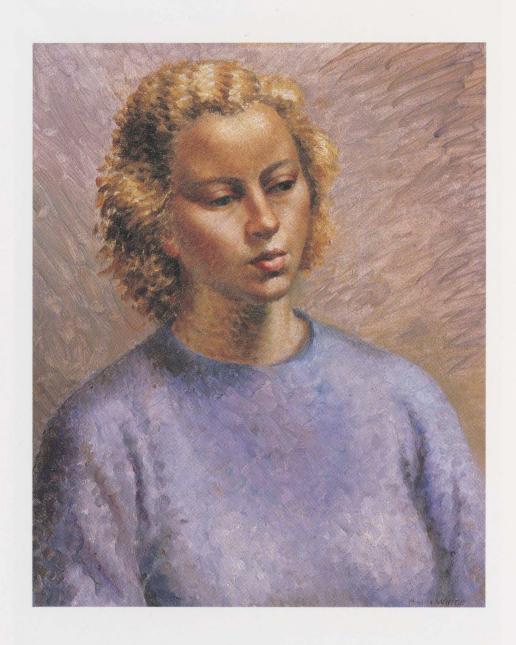
34

Jonah and the great fish 1950 oil on cardboard, 560 x 385 mm Auckland City Art Gallery, purchased 1988



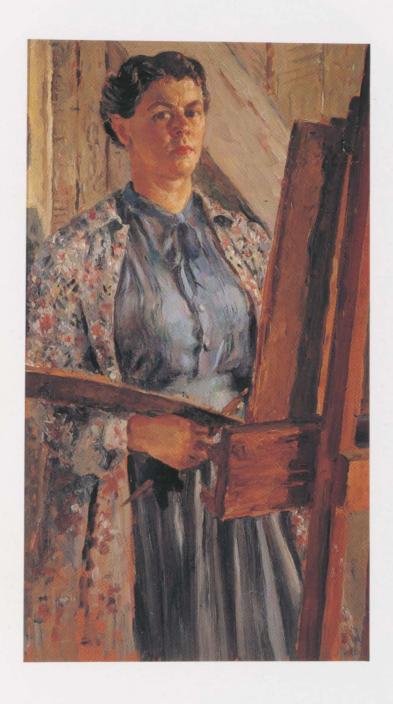
35

Elijah taken up into heaven 1948 oil on canvas, 750 x 520 mm Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa



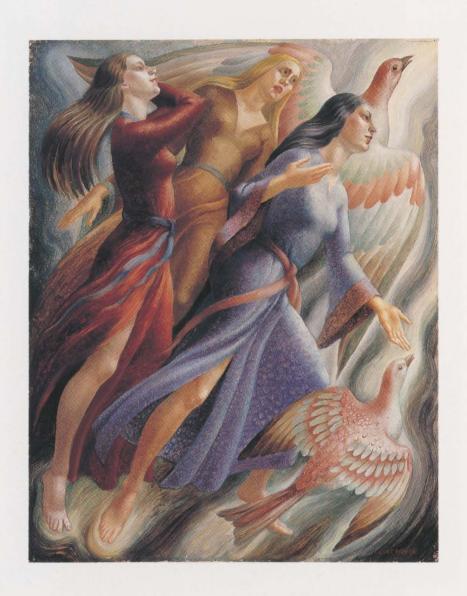
36

Girl in blue 1949 oil on board, 470 x 370 mm private collection, Wellington



37

Self-portrait c.1953 oil on cardboard, 500 x 280 mm Fletcher Challenge collection, Auckland



38

Aspiration 1951 oil on board, 490 x 390 mm Aigantighe Art Gallery, Timaru



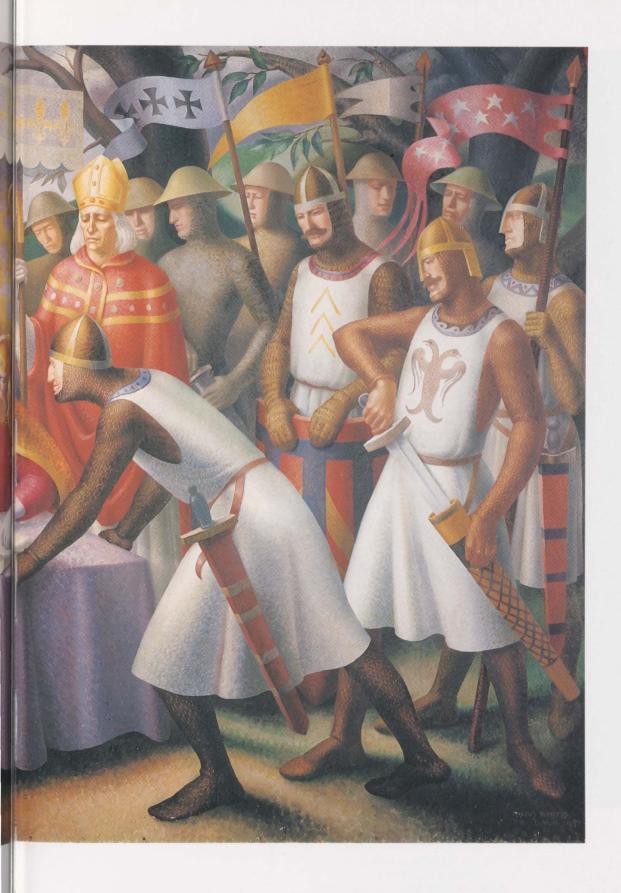
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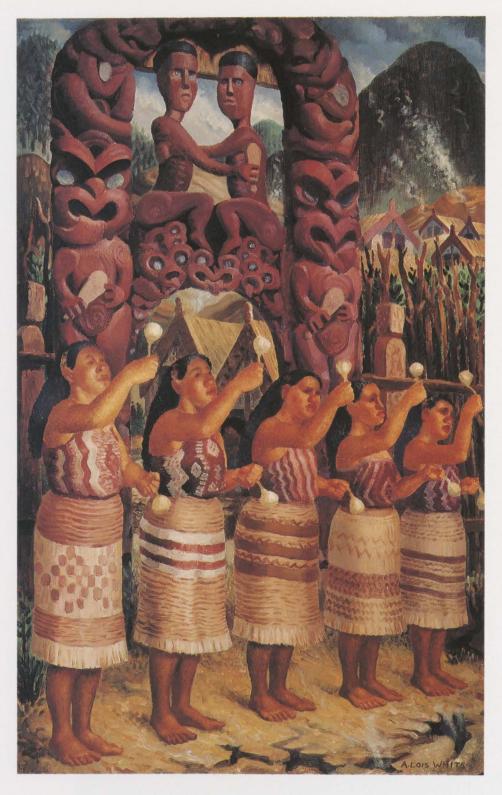
Annunciation c.1952 oil on board, 855 x 587 mm Auckland City Art Gallery, purchased 1988



40

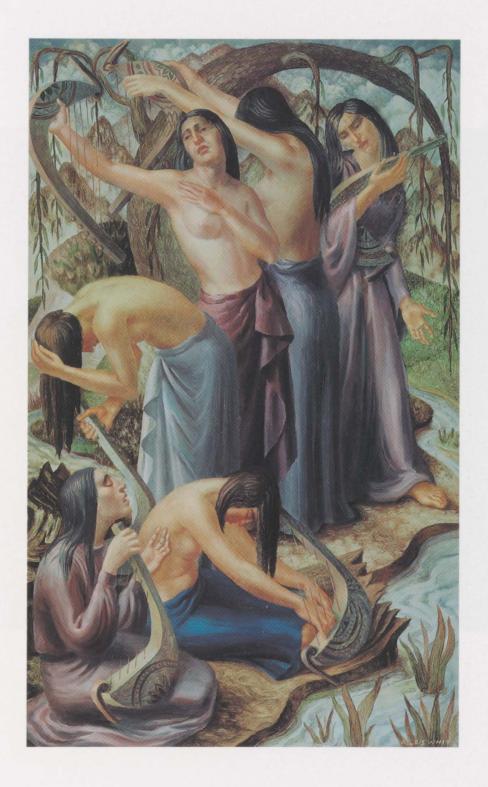
Magna Carta 1951 oil on board, 3040 x 2130 mm Southwell School, Hamilton





41

Poi dance 1953 oil on board, 810 x 502 mm Auckland City Art Gallery, purchased 1989



By the waters of Babylon 1954 oil on cardboard, 790 x 490 mm private collection, Christchurch



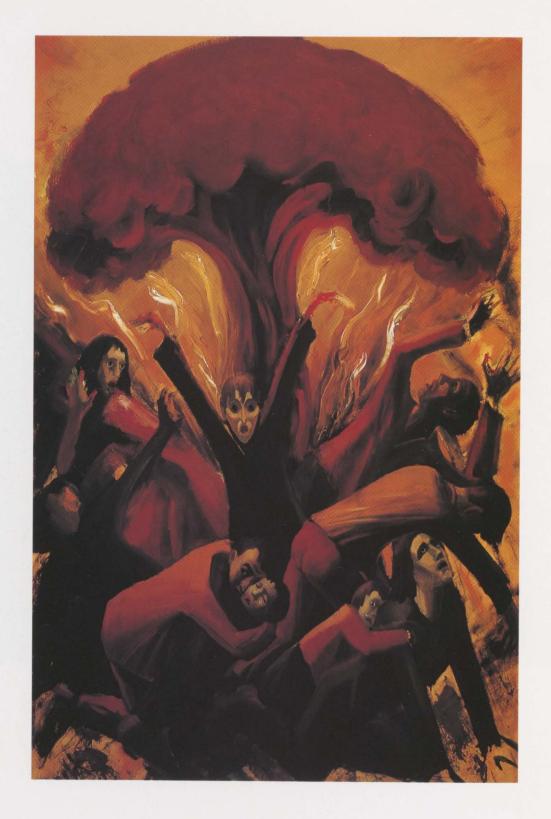
43

Gethsemane 1954 oil on board, 1205 x 1525 mm Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui



44

Sleep 1958 oil on board, 580 x 760 mm private collection, Auckland



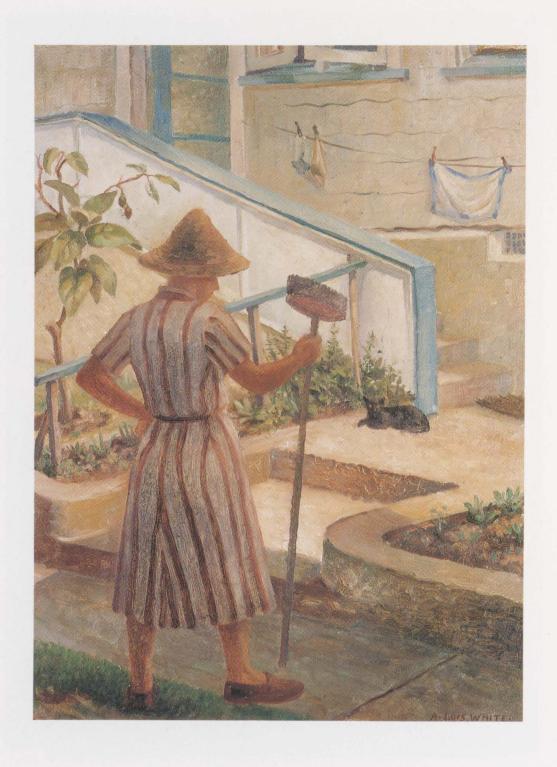
45

Hiroshima c.1960 oil on board, 1490 x 985 mm private collection, Auckland



46

No bus shelter here 1960 oil on canvas, 752 x 556 mm Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa



47

Back door 1958 oil on board, 600 x 446 mm Auckland City Art Gallery, purchased 1987

forms emphasise the melancholy story of an exiled race. The women are arranged like those in *Foolish virgins* [27], in descending rather than ascending rhythms. White demonstrated once again, for all to see, her virtuosity in drawing the female form. Barc wrote from Wellington, after hunting out *By the waters of Babylon* from among the several hundred works hung at the Academy exhibition:

Dear Lois White and Mrs Younghusband and Minnie White, but especially Lois White, for me your stuff is such a comfort. It is so equipped with developed skills, thought and capacity. Such RUBBISH clutters the walls of the exhibitions of the Dominion. The small works of Lois White as well as the larger effort. Of the large effort, the figure at the bottom left corner is really perfect and complete. Am going tomorrow when no one is there, to see again. 32

In 1955, White exhibited two landscapes at the Society of Arts, priced at 10 guineas each, together with *Lizards*, a varnished watercolour. She reserved a religious painting, *St Francis*, priced at 48 guineas, for the 1955 New Group exhibition. The air around St Francis' hands is filled with a pattern of birds, among White's favourite creatures. Compared with her earlier religious paintings, the palette is much paler and the composition stilted. Her sensitivity to nuances of tone is noticeably diminished. Alpers reviewed the show:

The New Group which last year stuck out for something called 'visual painting' now returns, showing some relaxation of the rules . . . the New Group inevitably discovers that sterile principles about 'painting what you see' only render themselves absurd. For in this exhibition Lois White has 'seen' St Francis, and Garth Tapper has 'seen' Don Quixote.<sup>33</sup>

Later that year, White sent *By the waters of Babylon* (titled *Psalm 137*) and *James Turkington* to the Otago Society of Arts. The *Otago Daily Times* noted it was 'some time since A. Lois White has been represented at a Dunedin show'. *Psalm 137* was 'a graceful and rhythmical composition, painted with feeling and rare skill'.<sup>34</sup> The *Evening Star* also commented on White's entries:

Very welcome indeed are the distinguished oils by A. Lois White, whose finely composed figures in 'Psalm 137' makes this an outstanding painting in any exhibition. Her portrait of James Turkington, low in tone, but sensitive in colour and design, compares favourably with the academically rigid portraits. . .  $^{35}$ 

Elam and the Auckland Society of Arts, institutions with which White was inextricably connected, continued to attract adverse criticism from Westbrook. He insisted that a 'small group is making a bid to get control of the Auckland Art Gallery', identifying Archie Fisher, Vernon Brown, Rex Fairburn and Pascoe Redwood as the plotters. Their idea of appointing an advisory sub-committee to the Library and Art Gallery Committee of the Auckland City Council was really a secret directive designed to 'rob the director of his independence' and 'retard progress at the Gallery'. <sup>36</sup> The controversy raged in the newspaper for several weeks, before Westbrook left to take up his new position as director of the National Gallery of Victoria. A reputation as diehard reactionaries, however, was irrevocably fastened to Elam and the Auckland Society of Arts by Westbrook's supporters.

Peter Tomory was appointed director of Auckland City Art Gallery in March 1956. Where Westbrook's image had been that of 'reformer', Tomory was seen as a 'consolidator'. His policy included establishing a permanent display in the Lindauer room, with four to five art shows a year 'mostly from overseas, with the addition of an open exhibition of New Zealand contemporary painting to be selected by the staff'. So Colin McCahon, then keeper of the collection, became responsible for

curating and designing contemporary painting and sculpture shows. He concentrated on abstract and semi-abstract artists in exhibitions such as 'Object and Image' and 'Unit 2'. McCahon's paintings were prominent in his own shows, but there was no place for White's work.

Many changes were also afoot at Elam. Robert Ellis, a 27-year-old graduate from the Royal College of Art, was appointed to Elam in September 1956. He was employed with the express purpose of running a design course. Refer the 1949 fire, Elam was divided between two sites: the painting, sculpture and administration buildings at Newton West Primary School, and the design section in Symonds Street in the surviving Elam building. Michael Nicholson, who started in 1954, taught in the design department with Robert Ellis. Nicholson felt Fisher did not quite know what to do with them, so left them to themselves in Symonds Street. They considered themselves 'in a sense, a school within a school'. The design department's agitation as the most progressive element in the school succeeded in attracting White's painting students.

Margaret Cooke and Alan Stevenson were students of White's in 1955 and 1956. As a teacher they found her 'impatient', and 'intolerant' with students who disagreed with her concept of painting: 'She would say "your work's not right" but wouldn't say what she expected'. There were emotional scenes and a resentful and sometimes weepy Lois turned to Ida for comfort and support. Ida Eise, however, was teaching at Symonds Street, while White's headquarters were at Newton West. As Fisher's health worsened, he was increasingly absent from Elam on sick leave.

White's teaching methods had never changed. Students were set a range of subjects for composition, of which one would be completed throughout the year. An idea would be taken from the initial free line drawings, through various preparatory stages until they were ready to paint the final work. Once the topic and the subsequent rhythm in the composition was decided, the free flowing lines would be turned into shapes and figures. White checked students' designs at this stage, to see if they were suitable to continue. Many students withered under her sarcastic comments, or were exhausted by the tedious process.

The competent ones proceeded to paint a small colour sketch which was then squared up. Individual life-drawings of each pose were made. The design was then blown up in outline to the size of the final work. This was transferred to the canvas or panel, usually by rubbing the back of the drawing with charcoal and tracing over it. Students then began to paint the final work, with frequent reference to the preparatory colour sketch and life-drawings. Many of the students were unaware of White's own earlier work, and few penetrated her stern exterior. They knew her as a teacher obsessed by sound draughtsmanship, and a strong sense of design. White would not tolerate the student who attempted a more experimental approach.

White did not exhibit with the Society of Arts in 1956, and the New Group show was cancelled later in the year. <sup>41</sup> The New Group's final exhibition, in April 1957, was reviewed by Imi Porsolt, who taught at the School of Architecture. The only artists mentioned by name are Garth Tapper, Ron Stenberg, Peter Brown and Jack Crippen:

The names are not new to Auckland. The insistent 'visualist' style of work is not new either . . . the only thing that is new about it is a distressing drop even in the level of competence one came to expect of them.<sup>42</sup>

The *Herald* took them soundly to task for calling themselves the New Group, claiming that 'they succeed beyond belief in preserving the conservatism of 20 or more years ago'. 43

Annie White died on 21 July 1957 at the age of 93. She was survived by all her

Lois White in her studio at 73 Taunton Terrace, Blockhouse Bay, Auckland, c.1965. (A. Lois White Archive, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa)



children, though her estate was divided between Gwen and Lois. Small obituaries appeared in the Auckland papers for this local character: a respected daughter of Frank Phillipps, the widow of Arthur White the architect, and a hard-working woman known for her charity work in Methodist organisations.<sup>44</sup>

In 1957, White sent two earlier paintings, By the waters of Babylon and Aspiration, to the South Canterbury Society of Arts in Timaru. Aspiration [38] was purchased by the Society for 15 guineas. The Timaru Herald was delighted by her contribution:

A. Lois White's allegorical paintings 'By the Waters of Babylon' and 'Aspiration' possibly are being shown in the South Island for the first time. These would stand out in any exhibition for their strong imaginative qualities, the sureness of the technique, and the mellowness of the colourings.<sup>45</sup>

White missed the 1958 Auckland Society of Arts annual exhibition but entered three works in the autumn show: a large female allegory, *Sleep*, priced at 45 guineas, together with *Pot plants* and a landscape, *Near Stanmore Bay. Pot plants* was exhibited in Wellington in 1959 where it sold for 12 guineas. *Sleep* [44] portrays three women and a small girl asleep in a barren landscape. They lie in unnatural positions, looking more dead than dormant. The trees resemble vicious pronged forks, with the women placed on a tilted oval between them. The livid colouring emphasises the impression of death or disease.

Gethsemane [43] was purchased by the Wanganui City Council in 1958. The painting created a sensation among local art commentators, who ironically overreacted to the 'modern' depiction of theme. The Webb-Jones bequest was available for the purchase of a religious painting and White was suggested as a source by Thomas Barrett, the Gallery's curator. White initially offered several works in her possession, dropping the price of Gethsemane to 125 guineas. It was still in a crate and ready to be sent. When Gethsemane was selected, White offered a further reduction of £20 to match the amount of money in the legacy. The painting was reproduced in the

*Wanganui Herald*, letting the public know that the prospective purchase was on view at the Gallery. Lois White was described as a 'well known painter who is a prominent member of the Auckland Society of Arts'. <sup>48</sup> The lawyers acting for Webb-Jones wrote to the Council immediately, stating that his daughters were now 'unanimously of the opinion that the painting is not one that their father envisaged'. The purchase was cancelled in favour of a work to be sought abroad. <sup>49</sup>

Hugh Jenkins, past president of the Arts and Craft Society and member of the Gallery committee, had urged Webb-Jones's daughters not to buy the work. His criticisms appeared in an editorial published in the *Wanganui Chronicle* on 19 July:

No hand, foot or face has any semblance of a near approach to anatomical form, while no face has any sensitive expression in it. There is no depth, and no perspective rules are obeyed. The composition is scattered and draws attention off the picture; the placing of the lighting is faulty, and in the endeavour to suggest night the painting is not dark but muddy. But it is modern. It screams out. It's like nothing on earth. That proves it must be good. 50

Thomas Barrett, the curator, defended White's work in a letter to the paper, quoting Roland Hipkins's assessment published in the *Studio* in 1948:

[A. Lois White] is one of the very few artists in New Zealand who has exclusively used the human figure as a basis for her painting. In this she shows mastery of three-dimensional form, volume and strongly graduated tonal values.<sup>51</sup>

Gethsemane was finally purchased for the Sarjeant Art Gallery with the Margaret Duncan bequest at 110 guineas.<sup>52</sup> Barrett wrote to White a couple of months later: 'The controversy has not yet died down. At least the picture has caused more discussion and not a few visits to the gallery than any other purchase that I know of . . . if I buy nothing else, persuade the committee to buy that is, while I act as curator, I am satisfied'.<sup>53</sup>

In 1959, White sent two works to Palmerston North for exhibition with the Manawatu Society of Arts: *Back door* [47], priced at 14 guineas and *By the waters of Babylon*, reduced to 40 guineas. *Back door*, a self-portrait, is a dry comment on White's final years of association with the Art Society exhibitions and with Elam. Hand on hip, she turns her back to the viewer in a defiant gesture, a broom rather than a paintbrush firmly in her hand. To assist with the composition, White took photographs of Gwen holding one of their dachshunds, Hugo or Fritz, on the back steps of Taunton Terrace. In the final painting, executed in broad, painterly gestures, White is unmistakably painting her own figure.

Archie Fisher died on 7 November 1959, on the last day of the school term. An obituary by Mac Vincent in the *Star* spoke of the 'devotion he drew from most of his pupils':

And yet Archie Fisher was a most outspoken man with strong views on many things, and he made enemies, for he had an uncompromising regard for what he considered to be the truth.<sup>54</sup>

A personal note, 'On the death of Archie Fisher', records White's response when Turkington rang to tell her Fisher had died. 'All I can remember was my mind crying "Never more will I hear his voice pulling my elastic leg, and pouring words of wisdom in my ears", my tears came much later. The previous day being the last of the term, he had said, "I shall be over to see you tomorrow morning".'55 This was a sad day for Lois; she had not only lost one of her dearest friends, but also her closest ally at Elam. John Kavanagh, head of sculpture, became acting head until Paul Beadle was

appointed director in 1961. White was away on sabbatical leave when Beadle arrived.

In December 1960, White left with Ida Eise for a year's travel in Europe. Confident of where they wanted to go, the tour was booked and organised before they left. It was an extensive itinerary for the two women, one aged 57, the other 66, but White had longed for years to travel overseas. Released from the burden of nursing her mother, she was determined to cram in as much travelling as possible. They sailed on the Wilhelm Ruys via Lima, Panama and Miami, to Southampton. Here they caught the train to London and then crossed the English Channel to Limoges. They spent several months on the Continent, travelling to Madrid and Barcelona, before making a fairly comprehensive tour of Italy, Austria, Germany and Holland. After a brief sojourn in Paris, they returned to London. During this time, White and Eise were

indefatigable in their exploration of art galleries, museums and

They based themselves in London for five months, taking small excursions into the English countryside: to Cookham where White photographed Stanley Spencer's swans from the bridge at Upping; St Ives for a week, where White felt her Cornish blood stirring; to Winchester, Canterbury and Rochester. They made an excursion to Scotland, as far as Dundee, where they ran into Ron Stenberg, then director of the Dundee School of Art.<sup>56</sup> Stenberg took them driving further north into the Highlands. In February 1962, they made their way home on the Canberra through the Strait of Gibraltar to Naples, Strait of Messina, Aden, Colombo, Fremantle, Melbourne and finally Auckland. White kept an extensive journal, primarily for Paul Beadle to read as a report on her art interests when she returned. But on her arrival home, Beadle made no inquiries into White's sabbatical trip.<sup>57</sup> It stands, however, as an impressive and stimulating record of White's first time abroad.58

At the Prado in Madrid, White 'made straight for El Greco who lived up to my highest expectations – marvellous feeling created by design and colour'. Ribera, Goya, Velázquez and Zubarán impressed her, with Titian and Veronese 'trailing well behind'. 'They are very perfectly conceived and painted but somehow don't "get" me as the others do . . . Perhaps I have too much "sentiment", "feeling" . . . in my make up. Give me the Primitives and El Greco and I'm satisfied spiritually'. She especially enjoyed Goya's 'black' paintings, his satirical drawings and sketch compositions.

They stayed longer than they had planned in Florence, in order to see everything of interest. The Italian 'primitives' were particularly compelling; Duccio is singled out in Siena

and in the Vatican Museum, Giotto, Fra Angelico, Francesco del Cossa, Perugino and Raphael. They travelled to Assisi to see Giotto's frescos in the Basilica di San Francesco and also to Padua for Giotto's frescos in the Scrovegni chapel. In Venice, in Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, White had to reassess her appreciation of Titian. 'I was knocked silly with Titian's great "Assumption". I felt I had not previously seen the real Titian and now understand his supreme genius'.

In Munich, in the Städtliche Galerie und Lenbachhaus, they viewed a large



Lois White and Ida Eise outside the Prado, Madrid in January 1961. (A. Lois White Archive, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa)

collection of Kandinsky, Gabriele Munter, Franz Marc and Paul Klee. The 15th and 16th-century German religious paintings in Nuremburg were an unexpected treat: 'They are simple, austere in colour and design, never sentimental and flowery as Italians sometimes are, at times grim'. The still apparent evidence of war destruction was depressing. In Paris she was disappointed by Cézanne and Monet. The Gauguins did not stand up to the expectations she had through well-known reproductions. However, Degas' bronzes of ballet dancers and some of his horses did engage her, as did the pointillism of Seurat's *Circus ring*.

Back in London by April 1961, they were exhausted by their travels on the continent. But after a brief respite, they were once again out 'studying works'. White was 'appalled by the amount of dreadful rubbish' in the Royal Academy. She found the architecture of English churches sad and dreary. Neither was she taken with the design work at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, though she was impressed by the facilities the students had for painting murals. They also took guided tours of the Slade, the Royal College of Art and the Royal Academy School of Art.

White and Eise viewed a large number of London dealer gallery exhibitions. At 'British Painting Today and Yesterday' in the Arthur Tooth Gallery, White 'was very interested in small water colour sketch compositions by Stanley Spencer'. Edward Burra's

large watercolours at the Lefevre gallery, were 'beautiful with unusual colour'. White made a point of inspecting the work of abstract painters, preferring the Australians to the Americans. Nevertheless, White's journal records a persistent dislike of abstract art.

They returned many times to the Tate Gallery, where White was interested in Daumier's drawings and especially his oil paintings, in the Turners and in the room of works by William Blake. The Pre-Raphaelites were not to her liking: 'I passed quickly past the Rossettis and Burne-Jones, horrible sentimental stuff'. White did no painting herself on the trip. However, sketch books were filled and photographs taken of potential compositions, mainly buildings and street scenes, to paint on her return.

While on the boat trip home they had a day in Naples where they climbed to see Solfatara, a semi-extinct volcano, which White described as a 'rather tame little corner of Whakarewarewa, minus the geysers'. They visited the National Museum and the Cathedral, and in the afternoon they took a stroll in the city, but were overwhelmed by the stench and decay, while being harassed by vendors trying to sell them watches. Back on ship any unpleasantness was quickly forgotten, as they were serenaded that night by Neapolitan singers. White arrived back in Auckland enthusiastic and refreshed, ready for the 1962 academic year and her introduction to the new director, Paul Beadle.



Lois White and Ida Eise with the Captain of *H.M.S Canberra*, returning from their sabbatical trip to Europe in February 1962. (A. Lois White Archive, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa)

# EPILOGUE



IN A JOURNAL entry, Lois White described the predicament in which she discovered herself in 1962, upon returning to Elam under Professor Beadle's directorship. She would enter her class and 'find a model to pose but no students. I found that often they were working in the sculpture dept. with Jim Allen, or off doing work for someone else'. She would discover the work of her painting students laid out in the classroom:

. . . as if a criticism had been given on it to the students from another staff member. I found this was so and that the person concerned was Robert Ellis. <sup>1</sup>

Faculty meetings were dominated by Jim Allen, Kurt von Meier (who taught History and Theory of Fine Art) and Robert Ellis. White found her situation untenable. 'I expressed my opinion on the running of classes on one occasion and was forthwith fiercely browbeaten and shouted down by a young newcomer to the staff, Kurt von Meyer [sic]. The professor made no attempt to intervene'. 'She came to the conclusion that Beadle chose to run the school in this fashion and that she was being ostracised by students and staff alike. Eventually, she found a note in her pigeonhole from Beadle asking her to settle her superannuation entitlements with the registrar. White was forced into taking early retirement and a reduced payment:

I left him to stew for some time then feeling too crushed and unhappy to stay in the school sent my resignation to the registrar. . . Until the advent of the Beadle regime my association with the school has always been happy in the extreme and I have always had the well being of the school very much at heart. After this experience I regret that I have little interest in the place, feeling that it is just an institution which bears no relation to the one I knew and revered.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the old guard, staff who had taught under Archie Fisher, departed between 1959 and 1960 with the exception of John Weeks, who had left in 1954. Lois White and Seddon McLaran in the painting department and John Kavanagh in the sculpture department, were the last to leave. Don Binney, now senior lecturer in painting at Elam, had been a student of White's in 1958:

. . . it was really like stepping into a bath full of tepid sort of time-and-place water, from which the heat has long since evaporated from the tub.<sup>4</sup>

Michael Smither, who was taught drawing and painting from the nude by Lois White in 1960, described her as 'an imposing figure that gave off an aura of solid grey':

Her approach seemed to me to be striving mightily to remove any hint of the sensual or sexual from the subject . . . She was disliked by many students for her habit of painting over our work in that dib, dib, dib style of hers.<sup>5</sup>

White, hurt and despondent, retired from Elam in January 1963. She continued to tutor in the life class at the Auckland Society of Arts for many years, exhibiting with

them until 1979. White met Peter McLeavey in 1975 and his success in selling her paintings between 1975 and 1984 restored her faith in the importance of her earlier career. She wrote to McLeavey in September 1980:

There seems to be an upsurge of interest in what I have done over the years and your efforts on my behalf have helped to re-arouse this interest. Someone [Ross Fraser] visited me last week to make a recorded interview which he is writing up for publication [Art New Zealand]... all these 'arty doings' have helped me from slipping over the edge of 'the Slough of Despond' so vividly portrayed in 'Pilgrims Progress'.6

White's correspondence with McLeavey during these years reveals a constant anxiety over the state of her sister's health, which prevented her from painting:

I'm not the kind of person who can detach herself from these personal problems. I must have an untrammelled mind to be able to work happily and at my best.<sup>7</sup>

Her life as an artist had been reduced by age and circumstance to the point where she could no longer contemplate working in her preferred medium. Her letters to McLeavey continued to express gratitude for his efforts on her behalf as well as frustration at the atrophy of her career:

Inspirations hover in my mind, but situated as I am with watching over a sister ten years my senior, I cannot start on any work which requires day to day attention. Hence my reliance on a medium like pastel, in place of my old favourite oils.<sup>8</sup>

Many of her contemporaries were now gone and worse, as White confided to McLeavey, Ida Eise, her constant friend and companion, was now terminally ill:

I am not good company just now, being steeped in sadness because Ida Eise is seriously ill and her time is ebbing out. I find it hard to keep it out of my mind – I am going to lose a life long friend and cannot stop grieving.<sup>9</sup>

Eise eventually died from cancer in March 1978. Shortly after this, Gwen, too, died. In early December 1979 White suffered her first mild stroke. Soon after, she wrote to McLeavey:

I am the last of my family now; mother, father, 2 brothers and a sister keep knocking on the door of my memories. This is when I sweep up my little dog and talk nonsense to him and then cuddle my cat. They are comforting company to a solitary, sometimes lonely soul.<sup>10</sup>

White's niece recalls taking her to the hospital for dental treatment, after the first stroke. 'And she sat in the waiting room and straightened all the pictures on the wall. She said, "I can't bear crooked pictures".'11

Lois White was hospitalized by a second massive stroke in 1981 and died on 13 September 1984 in Hillsborough Private Hospital.



Lois White's studio, 73 Taunton Terrace, Blockhouse Bay, c.1980. (Photograph: Marti Friedlander, Auckland)

Short entries refer to publications cited in the bibliography (see page 126)

The following abbreviations are used: AS - Auckland Star; ASA - Auckland Society of Arts; ATL - Alexander Turnbull Library; Brown interview ATL - Gordon H. Brown interview with Lois White, 15 March 1979, ATL MS 1764; EP - Evening Post; LWA, MONZ - A. Lois White Archive (MS 22), Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa; NZH - New Zealand Herald; ODT - Otago Daily Times.

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# List of Colour Plates

	page
1. Self-portrait 1932	33
2. Prothalamion 1929	34
3. Persephone's return to Demeter 1933	35
4. Street mission c.1934	36
5. On the air c.1935	37
6. Religion and life 1935	38
7. Funeral march 1936	39
8. News c.1939	40
9. War makers 1937	41
10. Decorative panel c.1938	42
11. Self-portrait c.1935	43
12. Expulsion c.1939	44
13. Deluge 1938	45
14. Winter's approach 1939	46
15. Victims of invasion 1941	47
16. Pattern inspired by rain 1941	48
17. Wild waves 1944	65
18. Phases of life c.1943	66
19. Fleet's in 1943	67
20. Fire 1943	68
21. Allegro 1942	69
22. Civilised 1942	70
23. Collapse 1944	71
24. Design c.1944	72
25. Ode to Autumn 1945	73
26. Self-portrait c.1945	74
27. Foolish virgins 1947	75
28. Blonde 1947	76
29. Brunette 1947	77
30. Bathers 1949	78
31. Girl with antelope 1949	79
32. Jubilation 1948	80
33. Eve tempted 1948	97
34. Jonah and the great fish 1950	98
35. Elijah taken up into heaven 1948	99
36. Girl in blue 1949	100
37. Self-portrait c.1953	101
38. Aspiration 1951	102
39. Annunciation c.1952	103
40. Magna Carta 1951	105
41. Poi dance 1953	106
42. By the waters of Babylon 1954	107
43. Gethsemane 1954	108
44. Sleep 1958	109
45. Hiroshima c.1960	110
46. No bus shelter here 1960	111
47. Back door 1958	112

# Index of Names

Agar, Eileen 55 Airey, Willis 29 Algie, Mr 93 Allen, Jim 119 Alpers, Antony 8, 96, 113 Angus, Rita 13, 94 Barc (Helen Crabb) 89, 95; 113 Baker, Miss 17 Barr, John 91 Barrett, Thomas 115, 116 Barrowman, Rachel 12 Baverstock, C.S. 81 Beadle, Paul 116-119 Bell, John 90 Bell, R. 95 Binney, Don 119 Blomfield, Pauline 83, 84 Bolster, Tom 8, 86, 89, 90, 93, 94 Bolton, Nancy 54 Boswell, James 22 Bracken, Eddie 60 Brass, Clarice 95 Brown, Gordon H. 9, 11, 12, 82, 93 Brown, Peter 83, 96, 114 Brown, Vernon 113 Butler, Grace 89 Campbell, Jenny 89 Champ, Stephen 20 Christie, Bessie 11, 54, 60, 61, 64, 88, 90 Clayton, Madge 60, 61 Cooke, Margaret 114 Copeland, Ivy 88 Crabb, Helen (Barc) 89, 95, 113 Crippen, Jack 96, 114 Crisp, Ruth 88 Crome, Charles 81 Dally, Elaine 18 Deans, Austin 82 Dickie, Nora 82 Disbrowe, Alison 18 Dixon, Hilda 21, 22 Docking, Gil 8, 9, 12 Duncan, Margaret 116 Dunn, Michael 13 Eastmond, Elizabeth 12 Edwards, Joan 61 Eise, Ida 7, 12, 20, 23, 32, 54, 63, 64, 83, 84, 88, 90, 96, 114, 117, 118, 120 Ellis, Robert 114, 119 Ewen, D.A. 49 Fairburn, A.R.D. 12, 29, 32, 61, 113 Ferguson, Sybil 21 Field, R.N. 12, 31 Fife, Ivy 89 Fisher, A.J.C. (Archie) 7, 9, 12, 13, 19-27, 29, 30, 50, 56, 61-64, 83, 86, 89, 92, 95, 113, 114, 116, 119 Fisher, Jane 25 Fleming, Rhona 82 Flint, W.R. 26 Fraser, Ross 11, 120 Friström, Edward 20 Fry, Patricia 95 Garland, Margaret 89 Gertler, Mark 55

Haile, Samuel 55 Harrison-Smith, Jocelyn 83, 96 Heatherington, Eleanor 25 Henderson, Hubert 93 Henderson, Louise 82, 93 Hipkins, Roland 12, 31, 116 Hipwell, Arthur 12, 32, 50-54, 57, 60-62, 81, 82, 84, 86, 96 Holmwood, John 92 Hutchison, R. Jack 59 Hutton, Betty 60 Hyde, Robin 11 Jenkin, Grace 93 Jenkin, Robert 52 Jenkins, Hugh 116 Jennings, John 93 John, Augustus 23, 26, 55, 88 Johnstone, William 55 Jones, William 96 Kavanagh, John 116, 119 Keith, Hamish 12 Kirker, Anne 7, 9, 12 La Trobe, W.S. 19 Laurenson, Olive 61 Lee-Johnson, Eric 21, 22, 56, 60, 61, 90 Lloyd, Connie 18, 25 Lovell-Smith, Rata 89 Lumsden, Ruth 61 McCahon, Colin 8, 9, 10, 11, 96, 113, 114 McGowan, Ellen 21 McIntyre, Peter 59 McLaran, Seddon 21, 22, 119 McLeavey, Peter 9, 10, 11, 55, 81, 92, 94, 120 McLeod, Bill 55, 61, 62, 85, 86 McLintock, A.H. 7 McNamara, T.J. 9 Macalister, Molly 89 Maclennan, Stewart 57, 89 Mackle, Tony 52 Malcolm, Monna 25, 56, 63, 83 Manchester, Nan 92 Masters, Marjorie 91 Mays, Jocelyn 22 Mednikoff, Reuben 55 Meere, Charles 26 Middlebrook, Eva 21 Morrison, Miss 17, 22 Mourant, Elise 60, 90 Mrkusich, Milan 8, 10 Murray, Clifford 96 Nicholson, Michael 114 Nicoll, Archibald 82 Nigro, Angelo 51, 52 Pailthorpe, Grace 55 Paul, Janet 9, 86 Payton, Edward 19 Penfold, Merimeri 12 Phillips, Cyril 16 Phillipps, Frank 16, 115 Phillipps, John 16 Phillipps, Lizzy 16 Phillipps, Mary 16 Phillipps, Muriel 16, 18 Phillipps, Ruth 16 Philpot, Glyn 26, 55 Pickmere, Alison 18, 90 Porsolt, I.V. 8, 114 Price, Mitzie 15, 52 Procter, Robert 17 Proctor, Dod 26 Redwood, Pascoe 86, 88, 113 Reed, William J. 9 Richmond, Norman 29

Robb, Jeanie 25 Robson, Kay 83 Rogers, Gwendolyne 90, 91-94 Rosier, Pat 11, 12 Rothenstein, John 88 Rothenstein, William 21 Rowe, Neil 10 Sayer, Mr 94 Scarry, Mrs 90 Scrimgeour, C.G. 29, 31, 32 Sergel, Mr 90 Sewell, Arthur 29, 62, 63 Shelling, Moira 17 Simpson, Winifred 20-23, 25, 27, 32, 49 Smith, Matthew 55 Smith, May 21, 22, 54, 90, 93 Smither, Michael 119 Spencer Bower, Olivia 10 Spencer, Stanley 26, 31, 55, 117, 118 Spragg, Wesley 18 Steinert, Vida 89, 90 Stenberg, Ron 19, 83, 88, 93-95, 114, 117 Stevens, Joan 96 Stevenson, Alan 114 Studd, Leonard 20, 21 Tait, Mr 94 Tait, Mrs 91 Tapper, Garth 91, 96, 113, 114 Taylor, E. Mervyn 82 Thomas, Kenneth 87, 88 Thompson, Arthur 29 Thomson, Laird 81, 88 Thompson, Margaret 13, 32, 53, 55, 57, 60-63, 83, 85, 91 Tilsley, Louise 25 Tizard, Ron 60 Tole, Charles 60, 90 Tole, John 60, 64, 88, 90 Tombs, Harry 12, 49 Tomory, Peter 94, 113 Tornquist, Herbert 15, 64, 88 Trevelyan, Julian 55 Tunnard John 96 Turkington, James 11, 54, 56, 57, 64, 81, 83, 84, 88, 90, 93, 96, 113, 116 Vincent, Mac 116 von Meier, Kurt 119 Walters, Gordon 8 Webb-Jones 115, 116 Weeks, John 9, 20, 23, 60, 61, 86, 88, 90, 119 Westbrook, Eric 92, 94, 113 White, A.H. (father) 15-18, 114 White, Anna Lovell 16 White, Annie (mother) 15-18, 27, 52, 85, 93,115 White, Gwen (sister) 9, 10, 16, 27, 52, 115, 116, 120 White, Lovell (brother) 16, 18 White, Minnie 53, 113 White, Nigel (brother) 16, 17 White, Robin 10 White, Titus Angus 16 Whyte, Alice 90, 91 Wilding, Cora 26 Williams, Sam 22 Wilson, Selwyn 91 Woodward, Flossie 17, 18 Woolcott, Molly 25 Woolcott, Sina 21 Wright, Francis 83 Wright, Kim 92 Wright, William 20, 25, 49, 54, 56 Young, Eric 9 Younghusband, Adele 54, 60, 96, 113

Gilbert, May O. 18, 25, 90

Goodwin, Arnold 29, 50, 54

Grignon, Charles 31, 54



Photograph: John McIver

NICOLA GREEN was born in Auckland in 1962. A pupil of Epsom Girls' Grammar School, she graduated with first-class honours in art history from the University of Auckland in 1990.

Nicola Green's M.A. thesis, *A. Lois White:* 1903-1984, revealed a body of work which had been overlooked in an art history dominated by issues of nationalism and modernism. Invited by the Auckland City Art Gallery to develop an exhibition and publication on White's work, Green spent a further two years researching the career of this elusive artist.

*By the Waters of Babylon* is dedicated to Nicola's daughters, Ruth and Eleanor.



