



frances  
hodgkins  
leitmotif



Introduction

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## introduction

In the 1930s and 40s, Frances Hodgkins developed a highly personal response to what she termed 'the Modern question'. The exhibition *Frances Hodgkins – Leitmotif* explores the manner in which the artist's drawing and watercolour techniques become absorbed into her use of gouache and oil paint. Her evolving approach to painting is juxtaposed with the creative manner in which she draws on recurring motifs. These appear not only in Hodgkins' still lifes and landscapes, but also in the unusual still life/landscape combinations that break down the traditional division between space and form.

Underlying the exhibition is the research carried out by Auckland Art Gallery conservators Ute Strehle and Sarah Hillary. Historically, conservation of Hodgkins' work has been hampered by a lack of information about her materials and methods. In 2002, Hillary and Strehle obtained a grant from the Environment and Heritage Committee of the New Zealand Lottery Grants Board Te Puna Tahua. This enabled them to investigate the materials and techniques used by the artist. The project has taken 3 years to complete and during this time Strehle and Hillary have examined many works on paper and paintings from a variety of periods in the artist's career, with particular focus on works from the Auckland Art Gallery collection.

Assisted by funding from Creative New Zealand, further research was undertaken at Tate Britain, London in 2004. Working closely with Dr Joyce Townsend, Hillary carried out a technical examination of Hodgkins' *Wings over Water* (c.1931-32) which uncovered the structural secrets of the painting. The results of that study will be published in the 2005 issue of the *Journal of New Zealand Art History*.



# frances hodgkins

## leitmotif

leitmotif: historically, a recurring short melodic phrase used especially in wagnerian music dramas, to suggest a character, thing etc; an often-repeated image or theme in a literary work

Particular motifs appear repeatedly within the work of Frances Hodgkins (1869–1947). Landscape, still life and portraiture are central to her oeuvre, but she treats each genre as if they are threads in a tapestry, weaving and interweaving them so that still life floats out into landscape, just as everyday objects representing her love of pattern, colour and design become markers of self. In other hands, such a practice might have become repetitious, yet the clarity of her vision and her constant desire to push her painting technique in new directions ensured that each work embodies an untiring vivacity and individuality of expression.

In the 1920s, Hodgkins moved away from the Impressionist technique that defined her earlier European works, and responded in her own way to the movements within Modernism. From her earliest trips to France, she noted in her letters her attraction to the Cubism of Picasso and Braque, as well as the simplified forms and brilliant colours of Matisse and Dufy, among others. The drive to find a new language of expression that spoke of the present rather than the past was central to Modernism. The First World War reinforced the desire for new beginnings, not just in subject matter but also in ways of working. British Modernists focused, in particular, on exploring organic forms in relation to space, light and colour. Artists strove towards ways of expression based on personal response, allowing an individuality of style that would have been inconceivable to earlier generations. Hodgkins' place in British Modernism was endorsed when she was elected to the Seven and Five Society in 1929.<sup>1</sup> Like other Modernists, Hodgkins' work was informed less by history than by the present, interpreting the world through a focus on form and structural relationships.

FIG.1 RED JUG C.1931 OIL ON CANVAS  
AUCKLAND ART GALLERY TOI O TĀMAKI, PURCHASED 1982





The stark forms of the Mediterranean landscape and the vibrancy of life there were an ongoing source of subject matter for Hodgkins. She took particular pleasure in the carefully arranged displays of fruit and vegetables in the markets. In her work she juxtaposes their rounded forms and rich colours with the rough-hewn and often arid landscape, which proved such a contrast to the green, undulating hills and fields of England. In a letter to her sister Isabel Field in 1901, she wrote:

Then comes the green grocer with her two pretty daughters always beaming from behind a barricade of pumpkins, melons, pomegranates, figs and green stuff. This is my favourite stall and I have made many studies of it. Then there is a corner given up to pottery & earthenware of many colours & shapes. These are a great temptation to my purse...<sup>2</sup>

Her passion for such abundance was to stay with her throughout her long painting career. Still life objects, particularly jugs and jars or dishes of fruit, were often drawn individually as notes for form and colour, and then later combined in her still life and still life/landscape paintings.

When she could, Hodgkins spent the winters in France and Spain. Her treatment of the still life idiom underwent subtle changes during these sojourns in Europe. In *Red Jug* c.1931 [fig.1] the brilliant colour and decorative motif of the vessel is juxtaposed with another jug whose more cubist form is flattened by a series of tonal layers. The jug contains lilies, a favourite flower that appears many times in her work. The vessels sit on a metal table close to the picture plane, their forms animated by a twisting piece of pale blue cloth that rises up and drapes over what may be the residual outline of the back of a chair. Throughout the thirties, fabric darts and winds through her still lifes, starting as an animated cradle for fruits and vegetables in a manner reminiscent of Cézanne, but then defying gravity to become a dynamic unifier of forms in a more surrealist space.

FIG. 2 EVENING 1932-33 OIL ON CANVAS  
PRIVATE COLLECTION, AUCKLAND



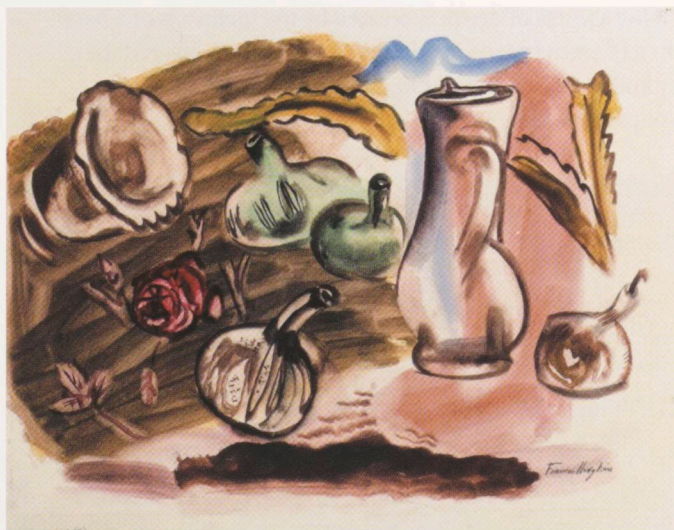
In *Red Jug* a sense of depth is created by the inclusion of a bare tree, again a favoured motif. Hodgkins had always preferred the simplicity and structure of trees in winter and early spring. In England once she wrote:

We had gone to bed under blue skys & woke up under low grey ones hanging over long reaches of red ploughed land broken by hedges & little clumps of leafless trees looking like delicate etchings against the skyline. They are so beautiful these leafless trees ...I hate the idea of spring with its foolish green leaves & sentimentality everyone here is babbling about it, the first primrose etc.... The beech trees are brown with bud & in a week or two the wretched leaves will be out. They are to me infinitely more beautiful in their present state and I must hurry up & get some sketches before they turn.<sup>3</sup>

A number of paintings from the early thirties are differentiated by a radical treatment of the sky which is comprised of broad bands of colour, giving a prismatic effect of atmosphere. While it is often difficult to locate Hodgkins' paintings, which she invariably signed but hardly ever dated, works that demonstrate particular painterly effects generally indicate a particular period. *Green Urn* c.1931 bears the same striated sky as *Red Jug*, although the precarious position of a vase beside melons on the lip of a large urn is a composition possibly influenced by an earlier work by Picasso.<sup>4</sup> In these paintings, still life objects – vases, jars, urns, jugs – are judiciously placed to create diverse readings of their relationship to the landscape beyond. In *Red Jug* and *Green Urn* they dominate the foreground so that we have to look through them to the countryside, whereas in another Ibiza painting, *Evening* 1932-33 [fig.2], the table is like an altar and we look over the vases to a broader landscape beyond. The rosy tones of the land seem to cast light back over the table, while an isolated white house stands in the background, framed in the middle ground by grape leaves on a residual loggia. Hodgkins once described working on an indoor still life, 'I bought 2 white lilies to give it the white note – it just gives it that 'kick' as a composition. The

FIG.3 PHOENICIAN POTTERY AND GOURDS C.1933 WATERCOLOUR  
AUCKLAND ART GALLERY TOI TĀMAKI  
PURCHASED WITH FUNDS FROM THE WINSTONE BEQUEST, 1954

FIG.4 IBIZA, C.1933 OIL ON CANVAS  
AUCKLAND ART GALLERY TOI O TĀMAKI, PURCHASED 1982



black pot was introduced at a later stage – to the picture’s enhancement...<sup>5</sup> A considerable number of paintings from this decade use a white house or barn as an anchoring device in the landscape.

Hodgkins described how differently the light appeared in Ibiza in a letter to painter and textile designer, Karl Hagedorn:

...in this clear ivory light every common object looks important & significant ... things appear in stark simplicity minus all detail – nothing corked up (bouchée) or hidden as in grey, or brown light of the north. Of course, later on, this intense sun light will convert colour & form into absolute negation but at the moment there is complete livlieness [sic]. The pale coloured flat roofed houses without windows give a blind restful feeling, of immense space.<sup>6</sup>

Certain of her paintings took on a surrealist aspect. In *Phoenician Pottery and Gourds* c.1933 [fig.3] objects float in their own individual space, hovering above the strong brown diagonal strokes of watercolour which evoke the rich ploughed Mediterranean earth. On the right, a jug and gourd stay anchored to the ground, a soft wash suggesting a ghostly cloth behind and beneath them. A single flower, surrounded but not attached to vestigial twigs, seems to have emanated from some other scene, while a lone flash of blue implies the distant hills more clearly defined in views of the harbour at Ibiza.

Hodgkins was particularly drawn to the Mediterranean’s simplified block-like architecture [fig.4]. Her appreciation of their cubic shapes was later translated into the domestic architectural forms in the English landscape, although she found it much harder to interpret the verdant growth so different from the spare landscape of the South. Once, when staying in Suffolk, she wrote, ‘My brain reels trying to reduce this exuberant Nature to pictorial form – it is so gross green & lush... I shall have to make for France if I am to get any work. Here I feel lost in a deadening sea of growth...’<sup>7</sup> It was only after the Spanish Civil War made it difficult to return to the Mediterranean that Hodgkins finally came to terms with the



FIG.6 ELSIE BARLING 1931 PENCIL  
AUCKLAND ART GALLERY TOI O TĀMAKI  
GIFT OF GERALD SELBY, FROM THE ESTATE  
OF DOROTHY SELBY, 1954

FIG.5 PUMPKINS AND PIMENTI C.1935-36  
OIL ON CANVAS  
THE FLETCHER TRUST COLLECTION,  
AUCKLAND



soft, delicate forms and light patterns of the English countryside, ultimately declaring that there was nowhere else quite like it.

Friends and critics were fascinated by her use of colour. Myfanwy Evans, who later wrote the Penguin book on Hodgkin's work, described it as having 'the same quality as some fine poetry ... She has no formula, but the colour of each picture is as indicative of a mood as a blushing and sensitive skin'.<sup>8</sup> *Pumpkins and Pimenti* c.1935-36 [fig.5] was one of a group of paintings that came from a winter spent in Tossa de Mar in Catalonia between 1935 and 1936. In these works Hodgkins' palette changed radically, while her bird's eye view of the landscape heralded the more abstract works of the 1940s. Eric Newton wrote:

To call her colour 'delicious' is merely to praise it without giving an inkling as to its quality: but, for want of an adequate vocabulary, one must leave it at that. Titian's colour glows, but it lacks acidity; Matthew Smith's is luscious and exuberant, but it is simple like tropical sunshine. Frances Hodgkins needs a finer adjustment. Hers is a twilight colour. It is queer and surprising. Moreover, it continues to be surprising. Looking at her best gouaches, the eye, long after the first impact, goes on receiving little subsidiary shocks of delight.<sup>9</sup>

He returned to the theme on a later occasion:

She can... make certain colours 'sing' as they have never done before – in particular a certain milky purplish-pink, a most unpromising colour: she can make greys and browns look positively rapturous: she can juggle with colour orchestrally.<sup>10</sup>

Not all her work was of still life and landscape, as she also produced a considerable number of portraits throughout much of her career. Her drawing of *Elsie Barling* 1931 [fig.6] was done at Wilmington in Sussex. Barling recalled coming down a little winding staircase and Hodgkins asked her to stay still for a moment while she drew her. The drawing, which reflects the artist's eye for pattern and design, was given to their mutual friend Dorothy Selby, who was

FIG.7 KIMMERIDGE FORESHORE C.1938 OIL ON CANVAS  
VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON COLLECTION





also staying there. Hodgkins was particularly adept at suggesting intimacy in both the double format, a composition to which she seemed drawn, and in family groups which often comprised a mother and her children. Furniture or the patterned fabric of garments was often used to link the figures together in a rhythmical manner.<sup>11</sup>

Rather than creating a dynamic surface in a three-dimensional space on which objects were placed, in later still lifes fabric became a kind of inner frame, rising vertically on the surface of the canvas. This is particularly evident in her wry self-portrait still lifes, where an arrangement of brightly patterned scarves intertwine, a jumbled nest for items from her wardrobe, such as a shoe, handbag, belt or mirror.<sup>12</sup> Dating these self-portraits is particularly difficult. They were given originally to close friends such as Geoffrey Gorer and Cedric Morris, and so may never have been intended for public display. In a letter to her friend the Neo-Romantic painter, John Piper, in the latter part of 1941 Hodgkins described how she perceived the relationship between herself and her work; 'Myself, I would say that I, my medium, and my subject act & react to produce new & vital creations &, if possible, achieve a perfect balance'. While she felt comfortable translating the figures of others, Hodgkins pre-empted Postmodernism in recognizing the impossibility of capturing the self in a single image.

Once war was declared in 1939, neither the bold clarity of the Mediterranean with its brilliant light and seductive forms, nor the lush English countryside were easily accessible. By necessity Hodgkins was forced to paint the surroundings close to hand, which for the most part were defined by the area known as the Isle of Purbeck, with Corfe Castle, her home for much of the war, near its centre. *Kimmeridge Foreshore* [fig.7], begun in 1938 but not exhibited until 1940, reflects her ongoing practice of painting from memory, where her concentration on form and composition would not be marred by the profusion of detail in the landscape. During this period

FIG. 8 PURBECK FARM 1942 GOUACHE  
AUCKLAND ART GALLERY TOI O TĀMAKI, PURCHASED 1955



she made a number of paintings which depicted ghostly farmyard machinery, their forms looming out of spaces only faintly defined by the outline of barns, hayricks and harvesters. Whereas her earlier still lifes often floated into the landscape, now the objects themselves are fused with atmospheric effects that seem to wrap around them. Farmyard activities had been the focus of British artists in the early 1920s as symbols of timeless productivity in harmony with the land [fig.8]. By contrast, the Neo-Romantics, with whom Hodgkins was loosely grouped in this latter period, saw such machinery, especially when decayed or inactive within a rural setting, as emblematic of the effects of war on society. Some of Hodgkins' most powerful works during the war refer to the blackout – abstracted nocturnes – darkness filled with traces of colour and the memory of light.

Invocations of favourite motifs continued to take the viewer by surprise. A review of her exhibition in 1937 noted:

Frances Hodgkins is a genuinely individual painter who has slowly evolved her own idiom to express her own novel vision... [She] looks at the objects she depicts – flowers and fruit, landscape and animals, implements of farm and household – as though she were seeing them for the first time, without meaning or association; nothing for her is too common or mean, or too rare and exotic.<sup>13</sup>

Hodgkins' career was marked throughout by her determination to succeed as a painter. She confronted the wide-ranging developments in Modernism, experimenting with painting techniques to create her own personal and innovative style of working. Her ability to interweave favoured motifs into her paintings, while never ceasing to explore their relationship to space and form, ultimately led Frances Hodgkins to what Arthur Howell recognised as an astounding abstract control of all she put on her canvas.

Mary Kisler

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## notes

1. The Seven and Five Society was formed in 1919 and evolved into the leading Modernist art group in Britain. Other members included Henry Moore, Paul Nash, Cedric Morris, Ivon Hitchens and Ben and Winifred Nicholson. However, in 1924 after it was renamed the Seven and Five Abstract Group, Frances Hodgkins resigned. Contracts to exhibit, first at St George's Gallery from 1929, and then at the Lefevre and Leicester Galleries were turning points in Hodgkins' career.
2. Linda Gill, ed., *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*, Auckland, 1993, p.105, written from Hotel du Forum, Arles sur Rhone.
3. Gill p.119, letter to Isabel Field, 7 March 1902, Penzance.
4. Elizabeth Eastmond, in Iain Buchanan, Michael Dunn, Elizabeth Eastmond, *Frances Hodgkins: Paintings and Drawings*, Auckland, 1994, p.138.
5. Gill p.414, letter to Lucy Wertheim, 23 April 1929, London.
6. Gill p.456, letter to Karl Hagedorn, 29 January 1933, Ibiza.
7. Gill p.432, letter to Lucy Wertheim, c.9 August 1930, Bergholt, Suffolk.
8. Myfanwy Evans, 'Round the Art Exhibitions', *Listener*, 18 April 1940, p.778.
9. Eric Newton, review of Frances Hodgkins exhibition Leicester Galleries Oct 1941, in *Listener*, 2 October 1941, p.473.
10. Frances Hodgkins Retrospective Exhibition, Lefevre Gallery, Nov 1946, foreword by Eric Newton, p.3, quoted in Gill, p.9.
11. Hodgkins worked briefly as a fabric designer in Manchester in 1927.
12. Although the colour is quite different, the items included in both Auckland Art Gallery's *Self Portrait Still Life* and that owned by Te Papa in Wellington are similar in many ways.
13. Review by Geoffrey Gorer in *Listener*, 17 November 37.
14. Arthur R Howell, *Four Vital Years*, London, c.1951, p.24.

## frances hodgkins at her best

'Try to be a little freer & more spontaneous...' wrote Frances Hodgkins to her pupil, Hannah Ritchie in 1917. 'Don't reproduce - Get the character & essential spirit of the place in the simplest manner - '.

Although Frances Hodgkins' technique varied considerably during the course of her long career, spontaneity and simplicity remained essential components throughout. Her lively and calligraphic brushwork, modification of form and colour, all worked together to produce something unique. Hodgkins' high standards meant she was frequently dissatisfied with the results of her work, causing her to carry out major changes or sometimes to reject the work completely. She did not slavishly follow traditional painting methods but experimented to gain the freshness that she desired in all of the media she used. Furthermore, the financial difficulties that plagued Hodgkins all her adult life had an effect on her choice of materials, another re-occurring influence on her painting practice.

Hodgkins' father, William Matthew Hodgkins, (1833-98) was a gifted amateur artist in New Zealand and taught both of his daughters how to paint with watercolour. In 1893, visiting Italian painter Girolamo Pieri Nerli gave Frances further instruction, two years before she enrolled in the Dunedin School of Art to obtain her South Kensington examinations. The Dunedin School provided a traditional training in the use of watercolour, illustrated in the 'vignette' style of her portraits of Maori women and children. The background remains unpainted and the faces are modelled with thin washes utilizing the

FIG.9 *BERRIES AND LAUREL* C.1930 OIL ON CANVAS  
AUCKLAND ART GALLERY TOI O TAMAKI, PURCHASED WITH FUNDS  
FROM THE WILLIAM JAMES JOBSON TRUST, 1982



texture of the paper, before sponging out colour to achieve the desired light effects. Hodgkins would continue to refine this method of sponging [fig.10] for many years. When she moved to Europe, the brushwork of French Impressionist Berthe Morisot (1841-95) is thought to have been a particular influence and Hodgkins' work shifted from illusionist representation using washes to strong articulate brushstrokes which emphasised the surface of the paint itself.<sup>2</sup> An interest in the materiality of the paint and a focus on surface effects becomes more apparent in Hodgkins' later use of oil and gouache.

In 1908 Hodgkins enrolled in the Paris studio of Pierre Marcel-Beronneau for lessons in oil. However, it wasn't until she had settled in the artist's colony in St Ives during the First World War (1914-1918) that she took up painting in oil with any regularity. It was hard to get sufficient recognition as a watercolourist, which was considered rather an amateur preoccupation compared to oil painting. However, Hodgkins' technique in early oils such as *Loveday and Ann*, 1916, is very similar to her approach in watercolour, with washes of transparent colour and calligraphic brushstrokes. The same can be said about her paintings in oil and tempera<sup>3</sup>, for example, *Refugee Children*, which was painted the same year. The mixture allowed the tempera to be brushed in a fluid, transparent manner but with a matte finish [fig.11]. Instead of utilizing the paper texture, an irregular gesso surface provided a degree of animation.

A change to a much thicker and more opaque oil paint, layered and impasted, is first illustrated in *The Edwardians* c.1919 and is increasingly apparent in the late 1920s, reaching a peak in paintings such as *Lancashire Children* c.1927. Modernist

FIG.10 DETAIL OF DÉCOLLETÉ SHOWING SPONGING TECHNIQUE, PORTRAIT OF A GIRL (WATERCOLOUR)

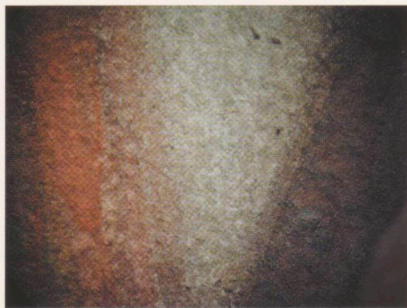


FIG.11 OIL AND TEMPERA WASHES IN A DETAIL FROM REFUGEE CHILDREN



FIG.12 RAKING LIGHT OF A DETAIL FROM BERRIES AND LAUREL (OIL ON CANVAS) SHOWING SGRAFFITTO



FIG.13 TOOLING OF WET PAINT FROM *PURBECK FARM*  
(GOUACHE)



FIG.14 PHOTOMICROGRAPH OF BRUSHWORK APPLIED  
WET-ON-WET, *BERRIES AND LAUREL*



FIG.15 USE OF PENCIL ON TOP OF GOUACHE IN A DETAIL  
FROM *PURBECK FARM*



techniques such as the use of strong colour, thick impasto and varying degrees of abstraction were not considered feminine art practices and as one writer noted, could be seen as painting 'as a man, rather than as a woman'.<sup>4</sup> It was necessary for Hodgkins to adopt these practices to be taken seriously as an artist and to break out of the amateur status generally afforded to women at the time.

By the 1930s, Hodgkins' technique in oil was increasingly consistent and involved a thick application in a painterly fashion. Drawings and watercolour sketches were done in front of the subject and then reworked in oil in the studio. *Berries and Laurel* c.1930 [fig.9] is typical of this period in which a palette knife or brush-end is used to scrape back calligraphic outlines and patterns, or *sgraffito* [fig.12]. Hodgkins also used this technique when she took up gouache, an opaque watercolour paint [fig.13]. In both cases, the *sgraffito* reveals underlying contrasting colours and the paint is applied wet-on-wet [fig.14]. This links back to her use of watercolour where a rapid process of paint manipulation was required before the paint dried or the paper surface was disturbed. The transparency of the watercolour medium is less forgiving, whereas the opacity of gouache and oil made corrections easier as well as emphasising the surface texture. Hodgkins also modified the dry watercolour or gouache by drawing over them with pencil [fig.15], charcoal or chalk for emphasis.

Hodgkins used gouache in her watercolour paintings from the early 1930s. Initially it was primarily for highlights, but gradually the gouache took precedence and from 1934-45 she was using the paint overall and thickly applied

[fig.16]. In *Hill Landscape* 1935-36, up to 19 layers of paint have been identified in a paint cross-section [fig.17], revealing a wide range of colours. Although gouache was in common use at the time, this was generally in combination with pen and ink.<sup>5</sup> Aware that the appearance might confuse the viewer Hodgkins writes, '...it so happens they are rather more heavily painted and some art ignoramus might mistake them for oil.'<sup>6</sup> The thick gouache paintings were not without their problems; '...I must admit that I have been quite a gruesome long time over these gouache things, the nasty stuff proving just a bit too difficult for my technical subtleties.'<sup>7</sup> As gouache ages it becomes harder and inflexible due to oxidation and hydrolysis, so if maintained improperly may shrink, crack and flake [fig 18].<sup>8</sup> Because many of Hodgkins' paintings on paper had to be rolled for transportation, this exacerbated the problem and the artist sometimes had to repaint damaged sections. Thickly painted gouaches are particularly vulnerable and require special care.

'A shilling pot of Coverine & plenty of sand is about all the young modern requires nowadays – plus a wire pot cleaner for scraping purposes – Surface is the idea...'<sup>9</sup> Despite these disparaging comments in a letter to her friend Dorothy Selby, Hodgkins herself was increasingly focused on surface as her choice of paint became more opaque, in both gouache and oil. Paintings such as *Wings over Water* c.1931-32 and *Spanish Shrine* 1933-34 have a greater amount of fillers and white pigment mixed into the paint, compared to the earlier *Berries and Laurel* c.1930. *Spanish Shrine* was altered many times resulting in a very thick paint layer [fig.19], but rather than the brushwork highlighting the image, it has smoothed off the texture in a rather incongruous fashion, which

FIG.16 DETAIL IN RAKING LIGHT SHOWING THE APPLICATION OF GOUACHE FROM BRADFORD-ON-TONE, GEOFFREY GORER'S COTTAGE (SEE ALSO FIG.22)



FIG.17 A CROSS-SECTION FROM HILL LANDSCAPE (GOUACHE) SHOWING PAINT LAYERS.





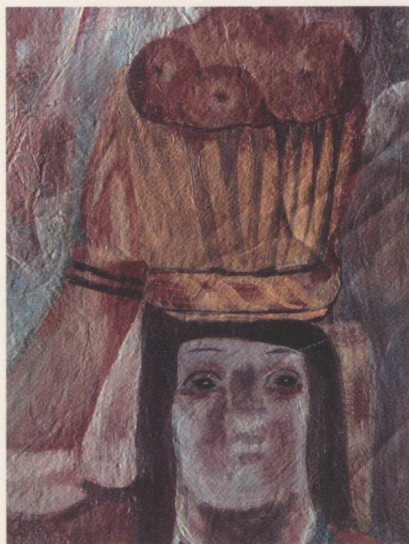
FIG.18 PHOTOMICROGRAPH OF CRACKED GOUACHE REVEALING UNDERLYING LAYERS OF PAINT FROM HILL LANDSCAPE



FIG.19 A CROSS-SECTION SHOWING THE NUMEROUS LAYERS OF OIL PAINT AND LARGER PIGMENT PARTICLES ADDED DRY BY THE ARTIST, SPANISH SHRINE



FIG.20 THE SURFACE TEXTURE OF A DETAIL FROM SPANISH SHRINE IS VISIBLE UNDER RAKING LIGHT



appears to be intentional [fig.20]. As with the gouaches, the multiple layers of oil paint with added fillers have been too much for the flexible supports and cracking is commonplace.

Despite her desire to paint with spontaneity and simplicity, Hodgkins had great difficulty achieving satisfactory results in oil [fig.21], a problem that was aggravated by the unrealistic pressure from her art dealers. Duncan Macdonald rejected works and sent them back for repainting, and Reid and Lefevre put impractical demands on her to produce more. A friend and fellow artist recounts that she had, 'two things to worry about, the obligation to give them [Reid & Lefevre] enough pictures, but to be true to herself and not paint pictures just to fulfill the debt... She used to get very savage with her paintings & destroy them [when she didn't like them]... oils were a great struggle. But to herself, they were far more important than the watercolours.'<sup>10</sup> Hodgkins was paid a lot more for the oils but still struggled financially, so the pressure on her was very great. She wrote in frustration to her dealer AJ McNeill Reid in 1935, 'I am in danger of forgetting I am primarily a Water Colourist – if you want me at my best & most prolific encourage me to return to them...'<sup>11</sup>

Hodgkins recommended the use of black to her student Hannah Ritchie, and often used it for mixing in her watercolour paints, frequently as dry pigment added to commercial paint.<sup>12</sup> She added other dry pigments to her oils and gouaches, such as a vivid organic red to the orange tube paint in *Wings over Water* 1931-32 and blue to the greenish grey in *Bradford-on-Tone*, *Geoffrey Gorer's Cottage* 1940 [fig.22 and fig.23]. Hodgkins' colour is considered 'unique and unforgettable'<sup>13</sup> and the secret seems to be the combination of

disparate hues facilitated by the use of powder colours.<sup>14</sup> Mixtures included viridian green and rose madder for skies in 1917, and a combination of viridian, organic red and yellow, carbon black and lead white for musty pink in *Berries and Laurel* 1930. Other pigments used by the artist in both water-based and oil-based paints were earth colours: yellow ochre and Mars red; organics: yellow, red and rose madder; and inorganic pigments: artificial ultramarine, Prussian blue, chrome yellow, and lithopone (zinc sulphide and barium sulphate). At least until the early 1920s, Hodgkins not only used lead white for highlights in her watercolours and gouaches, but she also mixed it with other pigments. A surprising number of organic colours mixed with lead white were identified in the oil paintings from the 1930s, particularly in *Wings over Water*. This may indicate a less expensive brand of paint was used as organic pigments tended to be cheaper, despite many artists avoiding them because of questions about their permanency.

Hodgkins was considered a leading British Modernist by the 1940s, even though for most of her life she had found it impossible to rely on her painting alone and was forced to supplement her income by teaching. Her poor financial situation and wartime shortages inevitably affected the choice and the availability of materials. Friends often helped her out, not only because of the cost but also because of her preference for working in rural locations without well-stocked art suppliers. For this reason, the artist used whatever papers were available for drawing and painting, although she did obtain high quality materials from time to time. The watercolour *Ibiza – Study for oil* 1935 for example, is painted on a 100% fine cotton rag paper produced by J Green & Son, who ran the

FIG.21 RAKING LIGHT HIGHLIGHTS THE CHANGES TO RED JUG (SEE ALSO FIG.1).



FIG.22 BRADFORD-ON-TONE, GEOFFREY GORER'S COTTAGE 1940 GOUACHE, AUCKLAND ART GALLERY TOI O TĀMAKI, PURCHASED 1970

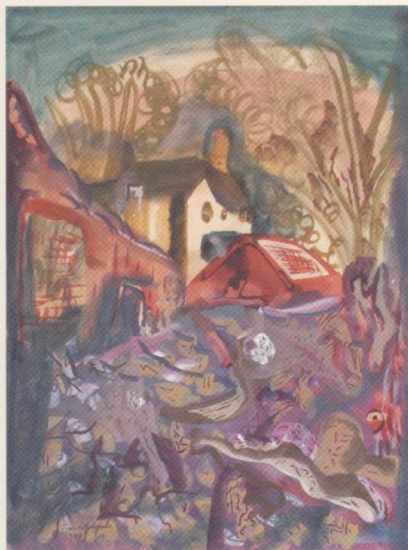


FIG.23 PHOTOMICROGRAPH OF DRY PIGMENT MIXED INTO THE PAINT BRADFORD-ON-TONE, GEOFFREY GORER'S COTTAGE



FIG.24 WATERMARK FROM THE COMPANY FJ HEAD & CO IN TRANSMITTED LIGHT FROM IBIZA – STUDY FOR OIL (WATERCOLOUR)

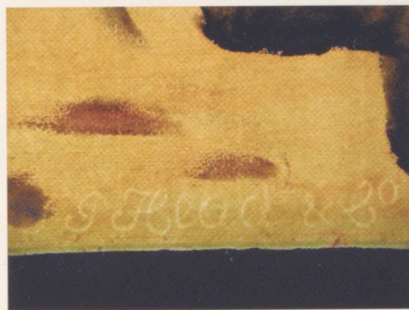
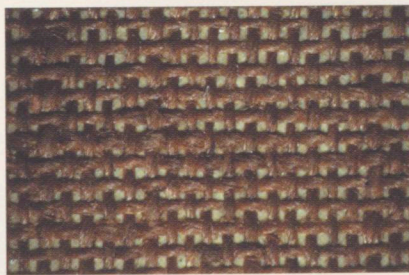


FIG.25 DETAIL OF THE LOOSE WEAVE CANVAS USED FOR STILL LIFE WITH LANDSCAPE



Hayle Mill in Kent [fig.24], whereas the watercolour *Boys heads, Treboul* 1927 is painted on a poor quality machine-made paper. When she has used commercially prepared canvases they are often of a lower grade, being loose-weave with single grounds and lightweight stretchers [fig.25]. Hodgkins certainly re-used papers and probably canvas supports as well. There are faint images of works on the reverse of watercolours, *Eggs & Ferns* c.1931 and *Phoenician Pottery & Gourds* c.1933 [fig.3] which have been rejected and wiped out, whereas in an earlier oil, *The Edwardians* c.1919, the artist has reused the canvas and stretcher of another work and painted over the top.<sup>15</sup>

The re-occurring practices identified in the work of Frances Hodgkins can be seen to display a *leit-technique*, where the use of watercolour is fundamental and has an influence throughout her career. Early oils and tempera paintings have a direct connection in their transparent colours, washes and calligraphic lines. Later the rapid and fluid brushstrokes of her oils and gouaches continue the watercolour legacy. During Hodgkins' time in Paris, a change in her watercolour technique from traditional washes to long brushwork saw a shift in focus from naturalistic representation to an interest in the paint materials and the surface itself. This was then further developed in her use of opaque, textured oil and gouache and in the use of colour, from brilliant transparency to milky hues. Despite Hodgkins' evocation '...that a good picture will *out* like MURDER...' the work seems effortless and retains a wonderful lyrical quality so desired by the artist.<sup>16</sup>

Sarah Hillary and Ute Strehle  
Conservators  
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

## notes

1. Gill p. 326. Letter to Hannah Ritchie, August 1917, St Ives, Cornwall.
2. Maxwell Edith Riddle, *Women and Modernity: The case of Frances Hodgkins, an investigation of her use and abandonment of the image of women*, unpublished MA thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1997, p. 97.
3. The tempera medium is primarily animal glue mixed with some oil (walnut, or poppy and linseed oil), and may have a little egg or casein added. Protein analysis was carried out by Brian W Singer, Northumbria University, August 2005; and the oils were identified at Tate Britain in July 2004 (Julia Jonsson, Bronwyn Ormsby, Tom Learner, *Analysis of Frances Hodgkins' Paints*).
4. Riddle pp. 128-9, *Evening Post*, January 1907, quoting the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Cedric Morris (1889-1982), a fellow painter who Hodgkins befriended and stayed with at his house in Newlyn in 1919, also had a love of paint texture and this was particularly overt in his work from 1920-25.
5. English artists Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975) and Henry Moore (1898-1986) also used this technique.
6. Gill p. 544, letter to Duncan Macdonald, 31 January 1944, Corfe Castle, Dorset.
7. Gill pp. 471-2, letter to Duncan Macdonald, c.12 November 1936, Corfe Castle, Dorset.
8. Archival mounting and framing, the display in a location with a stable temperature and humidity away from high light levels, can considerably aid the painting's longevity.
9. Gill p. 459, letter to Dorothy Selby, 3 September 1933, London. Coverine was a white household paint and there is evidence to suggest that it was used by Christopher Wood, Ben Nicholson and others in the 1920s. It was applied as an undercoat as well as to paint over previous paintings so that the canvas could be re-used. Harriet Standeven, personal communication, 13 June 2005.
10. Douglas Glass, from the complete transcript of tapes by June Opie, Hocken Library, Otago University, CIP IRN 74/63.
11. Gill p. 464, letter to AJ McNeill Reid, 11 January 1935, Corfe Castle, Dorset.
12. Gill p. 326, letter to Hannah Ritchie, August 1917, St Ives, Cornwall.
13. Gill p. 9.
14. Technical examination at Auckland Art Gallery and Tate Britain.
15. Apart from the four labels for *The Edwardians* on the reverse, there are two others for a work titled *Nightpiece*. A work of that name was exhibited in 1919 at the Society of Women Artists, a year before *The Edwardians* was first shown (brought to our attention by Iain Buchanan). Although the canvas edges are very uneven in length, the regular spacing of the tacks would appear to indicate that the canvas was commercially prepared and has not been removed. There was certainly time to re-paint, and the numerous layers with unrelated impasto would appear to confirm this theory.
16. Gill p. 563, letter to David Brynley, 2 November 1945, Corfe Castle, Dorset.

## Works referred to in the text but not illustrated:

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki collection:  
*Boys heads, Treboul* 1927, watercolour  
*Eggs & Ferns* c.1931, watercolour  
*Ibiza – Study for oil* 1935, watercolour  
*Refugee Children* c.1916, oil and tempera  
*Spanish Shrine* c.1933-34, oil on canvas  
*The Edwardians*, c.1919, oil on canvas

## Tate Britain:

*Loveday and Ann* 1916, oil on canvas  
*Wings over Water* c.1931-32, oil on canvas

## Private collections:

*Hill Landscape* 1935-36, gouache  
*Lancashire Children* c.1927, oil on canvas  
*Green Urn* c.1931, oil on canvas



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AUCKLAND ART GALLERY TOI O TĀMAKI, PURCHASED 1982

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