

From the collection



Two Auckland brothers, John and Charles Tole, are the northern equivalent of Rita Angus. Neither of them had any formal art school training although they both associated with the Elam painter John Weeks (1886-1975). The Tole brothers lived together at 12 Seaview Road in Remuera and developed their own credo in art which they revealed to University of Auckland's Kurt von Meier in 1964: "We have always been intensely interested in modern developments in style and technique, yet we think these elements should not be arbitrarily or consciously striven for but should emerge and flow freely from the subject matter and from the artist's creative intuition towards the expression and communication of his message."

John Tole (1890-1967) worked as a lawyer from 1919 until 1946 when he became a full-time artist. Thirteen years younger, Charles Tole was educated at Sacred Heart College and Auckland University College and became a civil servant. He started painting with oil paints on prepared boards around 1940 when he was 37 years old. John Tole had taken some lessons in how to work in oils from the English immigrant landscape painter Walter Wright, who, with brother Frank Wright, operated a painting studio in Victoria Arcade at the bottom of Shortland Street.

For 25 years until 1965, Charles Tole's painting was a hobby, and limited to weekends and holidays with perhaps one or two exhibitions a year. He worked in oil and occasionally tempera, and restricted himself to landscape and still life subjects. After he retired at the age of 62, he started to experiment with collage. A 1968 work entitled "Christmas is no time for cutting corners on sherry" is one memorable result. Charles Tole entered his work into Benson and Hedges competitions and received favourable reviews from knowledgeable critics like Gordon H. Brown who saw the resemblance of his cubist regionalism to the Americans Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth of the early twentieth century. John Cawte Beaglehole, in opening an exhibition of paintings by Charles and John Tole at the Architectural Centre Gallery in Wellington in 1957, remarked that he thought of the Toles as twins with their hard design and romantic colour.

In sending notes to Professor Tony Green for an entry in the Thieme-Becker *Kunstlerlexicon* in November 1971, Charles Tole acknowledged early influences from John Weeks and a

friendship with the late Dr Stanley Wallis. The latter worked in the Rotorua region to develop a landscape painting style which broke geographical features into fractured lines in a Cubist manner to form what Damian Skinner has characterised as the "Mudpool Modernism" of the 1950s.

While confining exhibitions of their work to the various art societies around New Zealand, the Tole brothers were members of the Thornhill Group in Auckland which exhibited regularly at the Auckland Art Gallery. Membership included Helen Brown, Louise Henderson, Stanley Wallis and John Weeks – all artists who were interested in continuing to explore the cubist revolution in the construction of form in painting and adapt it to the New Zealand environment.

In the early 1970s, Charles Tole made a number of still life studies, often using a cross motif, and these were titled as "Decorations". The vases which are repeated in outline and solid form in Decoration 3 are combined with areas of golden and blue scumbling and glimpses of other kiwi modernist abstraction such as koru shapes and parallel lines. These show that Tole was aware of the completely abstract work of both Colin McCahon and Gordon Walters which was circulating locally, but content to pursue his own version of the analytical cubism of Picasso and Braque in their interrogation of still life forms in space.

Linda Tyler

Charles Holbert Smales Tole (1903-1988) Decoration 3 1971, oil on board