

From the art collection

Believing that fruit depicted on tomb walls would become real in the afterlife and give the hungry inhabitant something to feast on, the Egyptians inaugurated the still life tradition in painting. It endures to the present day.

By the early twentieth century, bowls of apples, oranges and pears had become the testing ground for new ideas about flattening pictorial space for the Cubist artists Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and Juan Gris. Waikato-born Frances Hunt follows their lead a half century later, deconstructing a few wine bottles into a tangle of geometric forms, planes and black outlines in this excursion into Cubism.

Carefully balancing its blocks of colour, the painting's tones are tamped down, creating subtle harmonies of pink, green, brown, and blue-grey, like a tasteful frieze for a foyer. In her treatment of form and composition, Frances Hunt tackles full-frontal modernism, with nothing pretending at depth hiding in the recesses of the composition. Rather than describing a representational content, her title is generic and suggests that this work is one of a series of exercises in still life composition where subject is less important than style. Tellingly, Frances Hunt insists here on the primacy of French painting at a time when gestural and colour-field Abstract Expressionism had already arrived in New Zealand from America. Although ARD Fairburn lamented that there was "falsity in the efforts of a Pig islander to paint like Picasso", this painting is representative of the popular version of cubism which gently cantered through New Zealand's art societies in the 1950s, awakening the public to alternatives to representation in painting without startling them with complete abstraction.

Already 41 years old when she enrolled in the three-year full-time course at the Elam School of Art in 1932, Frances Hunt admired the fracturing



of form she saw in the works created by her favourite tutor, John Weeks. Though English-born, Weeks had grown up on a farm in the Waikato as had Hunt herself. Weeks learned his techniques of geometricisation in Art Deco Paris, enrolling in the Montparnasse atelier of André Lhote in 1925. Lhote wrote treatises on figure painting and landscape, and taught his students to acknowledge the Cubist revolution in their work without getting burned on the barricades of complete abstraction. To make a living from painting, it was necessary not to alienate the buyers, the urban bourgeoisie.

Frances Hunt left New Zealand with her mother and brother Francis for an art gallery-hopping tour of Europe in 1927. After Elam, she joined fellow graduates in the Rutland Group, exhibiting

the still lifes, landscapes and portraits that she produced in the large studio she had added on to her Epsom house. Included in the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition of 1940, she won the Bledisloe Medal and was emboldened to begin her experiments with abstraction, which continued through the 1950s and 1960s.

Frances Hunt (1890- 1981) Still Life Composition V, c.1959, oil on board, 395 x 535mm