

# From the collection

## Art



*Gordon Walters (1919-1995) Painting no.2 1966, PVA on hardboard 1220 x 910mm*

Variations of the curving stem and bulb form of the koru made their earliest appearances in Gordon Walters' work in the mid-1950s. Joining the Government Printing Office in Wellington in

1954, he prepared gouache studies after work and at weekends. A decade earlier, Dutch Indonesian artist Theo Schoon (1915-1985) had introduced him to Ngai Tahu rock art and invited him to South Canterbury to view the drawings in Weka Pass. What he saw there inspired the later Māori designs in Walters' work.

Abstractions by Piet Mondrian and Victor Vasarely were also subjects of careful study on his trip to Europe and Australia from 1950-53. They led him to "eliminate to the limit", reducing his painting to geometrical shapes, lines and colours. Walters makes over the koru, rendering it as a band with a circle at the end drawn with a compass and ruler. The result is severe, hard-edged and impersonal, designed to achieve an ideal figure ground ambiguity.

Shortages of linseed oil during World War Two had led to the development of new synthetic paints in Britain. Australian artists were early adapters, becoming known as the Dulux and Masonite brigade. From the late 1950s, PVA (polyvinyl acetate) paint was manufactured in New Zealand. By buying their paint from the hardware store instead of the art supply shop, Kiwi artists signalled that their work was leading in a new direction.

Thick and opaque, PVA emulsion paint

encouraged a viewer's attention to focus on the surface of a painting. Walters' aim was a neutral skin of colour but his use of smooth hardboard as his painting support (in emulation of Australian modernism) mitigated against this. Brushstrokes and modulations in paint density are evident in the black centre of *Painting no.2 1966* and Walters later switched to canvas to fix the problem of unwanted texture.

Having not exhibited for 17 years, Walters organised a show of koru paintings at New Vision Gallery in Auckland in March 1966, explaining: "My work is an investigation of positive/negative relationships within a deliberately limited range of forms. The forms I use have no descriptive value in themselves and are used solely to demonstrate relations. I believe that dynamic relations are the most clearly expressed by the repetition of a few simple elements." The New Vision exhibition established Walters' reputation as a painter with an austere personal style which could achieve a wide repertoire of effects and allowed him to become a full-time artist.

*Painting no.2 1966* features in the Gus Fisher Gallery exhibition *The New Vision Gallery 1965-1976* curated by Art History graduate Joanna Trezise on show until 16 August.

Linda Tyler