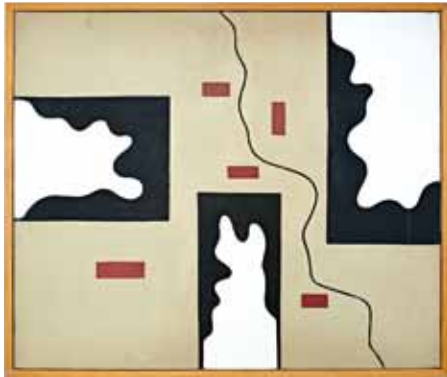


# From the collection



Gordon Walters (1919-1995), *Untitled*, 1955, oil on canvas, 510 x 606mm. The University of Auckland Art Collection.

The emergence in the 1950s of Gordon Walters as one of our most important pioneers of abstract art, along with the likes of Don Peebles and Milan Mrkusich, signalled an important cultural transition in New Zealand.

As critic Francis Pound has argued, it was a shift away from the literary influences of the nationalist landscape painters towards the flat planes of architecture and design, from the rustic countryside to urban modernism.

After attending Rongotai College, Wellington, where there were no art courses offered, Walters became a trainee commercial artist in 1935 and continued studying at Wellington Technical College, taking a keen interest in ethnic art. It was here in 1941 that he became closely acquainted with Indonesian-born Dutch émigré artist Theo Schoon, who raised his awareness of international

art and would later introduce him to Māori rock art in South Canterbury. Walters was particularly attracted to the European surrealists, including Paul Klee and Joan Mirò, and their inspiration in the subconscious and “primitive” forms.

Walters made several trips to Australia before he left New Zealand in 1950 for London, also visiting Paris and Amsterdam, and encountering first-hand the abstract works of Piet Mondrian, Jackson Pollock and Victor Vasarely, the latter a particular influence on his early non-figurative works, executed once back in Melbourne in 1952.

In 1953 he found himself in Auckland for a period before returning to Wellington to work for the Government Printing Office. While working, through the mid-1950s, Walters would produce hundreds of small works on paper, not having any audience to develop larger pieces for.

He would regularly travel to Auckland to visit friends, including Schoon, who had been working in a psychiatric hospital where he had been encouraging and collecting the drawings of patient Rolfe Hattaway. It is in Hattaway’s drawings, experiments with simple linear forms, that we can clearly find the forms on which *Untitled*, 1955 is based, as well as many similar studies and similar works by Schoon also – a shared influence explored fully in the 1997 Lopdell House exhibition: Hattaway, Schoon, Walters: Madness and Modernism.

*Untitled* is one of only a few works from this period to be painted on canvas, including another that resides at Te Papa. Using a common method amongst designers and architects, Walters cut out the shapes to position them into an

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arrangement on canvas. This repetition of forms using a reduced colour palette anticipates the formal relationships of his later work, but in this case is more intuitively placed. Lastly, the wandering line is established by dropping a string on the canvas, a technique used in several works, which recalls the chance experiments of the surrealists, as well as their interest in the psyche.

Schoon also seeded Walters’ interest in Māori moko and kowhaiwhai designs, leading to Walters’ first kowhaiwhai patterns in 1957, followed by his first experiments with his trademark koru design in 1958, largely working on paper with pencil, gouache and brush. Since he was nervous about their reception in conservative New Zealand, it wasn’t until 1966 that Walters publicly exhibited his now-famous koru works, which by then were fully formed; first one in a Christchurch competition and then a solo show at the newly established New Vision Gallery.

From the latter exhibition Auckland Art Gallery would purchase *Painting no. 1*, 1965 and The University of Auckland would purchase *Painting no. 2*, 1966. Both institutions continue to be enthusiastic supporters of the artist’s work.

Walters took up an appointment as visiting lecturer in painting at Elam School of Fine Arts after moving to Auckland in 1971 and became involved in the scene associated with the Petar/James Gallery, which was a focus of a 2003 exhibition at the Gus Fisher Gallery, and where *Untitled*, 1955 was purchased in 1977.

Andrew Clifford