

From the collection



Originary moments of modernism in New Zealand art are usually recounted anecdotally - Toss Woollaston in Nelson asking if he could copy Flora Scales's notes taken in classes at the Hans Hofmann School in Munich or Colin McCahon encountering Mary Cockburn-Mercer hobbling around on crutches in Melbourne in 1951.

Not all local interrogation of European experiments in abstraction starts on such a shaky footing. John Weeks (1886-1965) spent four years in Paris, drawn there originally from Edinburgh by the 1925 Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes, the famous seven-month long Art Deco exhibition which dominated the French capital from April to October of that year.

Weeks came to painting through his work in advertising. As a signwriter, he took night classes at Elam School of Fine Arts in 1908 with

Edward Friström before graduating to the full-time course at the Canterbury School of Art. There he schooled the other students in Lettering and Design, before setting off to enrol at the Royal Scottish Academy School of Painting at the Edinburgh College of Art. Two years later, he was painting in a cubist style under instruction from André Lhote at a private academy in Montparnasse.

Travelling to French North Africa for 15 months in 1927-28, he returned to Paris with a repertoire of figurative and landscape subjects developed, including the Jewish washerwomen seen here. He explained what he had learned in a letter to his parents in 1929: "the more design and decoration there is in a picture, the more artistic it is. It is this artistic quality that I am going to work my hardest to obtain".

Broken into geometric shapes and colour blocks of russet red, blue, yellow and brown with black patterning, this watercolour shows Weeks flattening the form of figures to emphasise the two dimensional materiality of painting. Bending at their labours, the three washerwomen are arranged in a circle around a tub that is marked by a folded cloth which falls straight towards the bottom of the composition. Each one's head is at a different angle, and covered with a mitpachat, the headscarf worn by Jewish married women.

White sweeps of cloth suggest aprons, while the angularity of each woman's arm conveys the energy and rhythm of their dousing of the clothes. Bright sunshine attends their ritual, while behind them the background is as busy and vibrant with pattern as they are with scrubbing and rinsing.

Working in Paris in the Jazz Age, Weeks developed a form of modern painting that was embedded in decoration. The French adjective *decoratif* described a schematic or abstracted image, and decorative treatments of traditional themes such as landscape, still life or the genre painting of everyday life of common people, extended the repertoire of subjects acceptable for exhibition. In Weeks' work, decoration is achieved through the independence of colour as an element in composition. Losing its primary representational character, its function is to link areas of the composition together. Variations of hue, tone and value mark the recurrence of each colour around the picture plane.

The tonal value to give a particular colour was a technical problem which Weeks laboured over, and he believed that composing a picture was like composing music: "the colour must lead through from one passage to another, the forms must fill up and the tune make in itself a harmony", he wrote. Here is the echo of his French teacher, Andre Lhote, who frequently referred to colour harmonies, orchestration, melodic line and pictorial music. These ideas were introduced to New Zealanders in the works he exhibited on his return to Auckland, where he taught at the Elam School of Fine Arts from 1930 until 1954.

Linda Tyler

John Weeks, Jewish Washerwoman, watercolour on paper, 336 x 406m