

From the Collection



John Weeks, 1886-1965 After the Elam Fire, Oil on board 31.0 X 41.0

On 15 January 1949 a fire gutted the Elam School of Art premises in Symonds Street.

Up in flames went a collection of approximately 200 paintings and drawings by lecturer John Weeks. These had accumulated there in the 19 years since Weeks began teaching at Elam in 1930.

The destruction of all this work had a devastating impact on Weeks' career and motivation, and badly affected his 1955 retrospective at the Auckland City Art Gallery. He wrote at that time: "It's been a pretty hard smack...over the years I'd taken the best pencil drawings, watercolours and oils to show the students and others... It's ironic that after all these years I should have pushed on for a

one-man show... I'm trying to paint on as hard as I can in the home studio to keep my mind off this. If I didn't do this I fear I might throw my brushes away".

After the Elam Fire shows the smoke still rising over the blackened skeletal remains of brick and wooden structures. Perhaps it was painted on the spot after the artist had rushed over from his Northcote home that summer morning, wanting to record the scene with the ashes of all his work around him, still warm.

At the time of the fire, Elam occupied part of the former Boys' Grammar School building in Symonds Street at the corner with Wellesley Street East, with the other half of the building occupied by the Workers' Educational Association, which

offered an Adult Outreach programme for Auckland University College.

Founded in 1890 by John Edward Elam, the institution then incorporated a School of Design which had been established and maintained for 11 years previously by Sir John Logan Campbell. It was only in the mid-twentieth century that Elam began to award its own qualifications. John Weeks himself studied at Elam part-time in 1908, following his teacher Archibald Nicoll to Canterbury College School of Art before heading to Australia to study at the Sydney Technical School. After the First World War, he studied at the Edinburgh College of Art and the Royal Scottish Academy School of Painting, where he developed his modernist interests before working at the French Cubist Andre Lhote's Academy in Paris. Travels to the South of France, North Africa and Italy preceded his return to New Zealand and a career of teaching at Elam.

By attracting Weeks and other highly qualified staff back to Elam, Principal Archibald Fisher (who had been appointed in 1924) managed to get approval in principle from the Department of Education to offer a Diploma in Fine Arts in 1945. Fisher's friend, ARD (Rex) Fairburn published a promotional article entitled "The Auckland School of Art" in the periodical *The Arts in New Zealand* in January 1945 causing the roll to rise to 150 in 1946. In the article, Fairburn attacked the Department of Education for relegating Elam to the technical school ranks when he felt it should become part of the University. The disastrous fire of 1949 had some positive repercussions, as Fairburn's wish was granted. The School relocated to larger premises in the buildings of the old Arch Hill Primary School in Newton West and became part of Auckland University College in 1950, four years before John Weeks' retirement.

Linda Tyler