

From the collection



*Marion Lucy Mahony Griffin (1871-1961), Perspective View of Arts Building and Student Club from Symonds Street, Auckland College 1920
Pen and wash on silk, 510 x 1100mm, The University of Auckland Art Collection*

The success of Roy Alston Lippincott (1885-1969) and Edward Fielder Billson (1892-1986) in the competition to design Auckland University College's Arts Building in 1920 was undoubtedly assisted by the contribution of Marion Mahony, one of the most gifted architectural renderers of the twentieth century.

Described as tall, with a tomahawk profile and theatrical demeanour, Mahony had been the second woman to graduate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1894. She was the first woman in history to be granted a licence to practise architecture.

Mahony's pen and wash perspective drawings, often executed on silk sateen, possess a unique refinement of line and delicacy of detail. As is the case here, buildings are framed by trees and plants in compositions that owe much to Japanese art. Mahony developed her architectural and drafting skills while working in the Oak Park office of Frank Lloyd Wright. At the age of 40 in 1911, she married Chicago-born Walter Burley Griffin

(1876-1937) and moved to Australia with him following their success in the competition to design Australia's Federal Capital, Canberra. Lippincott, who was married to Griffin's sister, Genevieve, accompanied the Griffins to Australia and it was from there that he submitted his entry in the Auckland competition.

Like all architectural perspectives, this one presents not what the eye sees but a pictorial representation of a building. It involves imagination and skill and is not mathematically precise. Unlike an orthogonal drawing, in which the vanishing point is assumed to be at infinity, it is subjective rather than objective. Although a perspective drawing should always serve the building represented rather than being an excuse for a bravura display of drafting, many are compelling works of art in their own right.

The rediscovery of a scientific approach to perspective and the ability to depict three-dimensional forms in space occurred in Renaissance Italy during the fifteenth century, but

the use of perspective to create three-dimensional representations of buildings did not come into common practice until the second half of the eighteenth century. The use of the orthogonal set of plan, section and elevation to describe buildings was a product of the increasing professionalisation of architecture and its growing separation from the building crafts. The emergence of the architectural perspective was the result of a need to convey information to clients but also a response to the growth, in the modern world, of a much wider audience for architecture. The great age of the architectural perspective was the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth.

Ian Lochhead

Ian Lochhead is the curator of New Zealand Architecture in Perspective: 150 years of architectural drawing which includes this perspective of the Clocktower. It is on show at the Gus Fisher Gallery until 15 August.