

# From the collection

Aerial mapping work carried out as part of National Service in Britain after World War Two later proved influential for Robert Ellis's art.

Abstracted cities began to emerge as images in his painting a few years after his migration to Auckland to work at the Elam School of Fine Arts in 1957. A visit to Spain in 1961-62 triggered depictions of buildings seen through windows, then roads and rivers were introduced as linear connectors in a series of gouaches and ink drawings. Finally in 1964, under the influence of the landscape colours and Aboriginal art seen on a visit to Australia, the motorway series was inaugurated. Spaghetti cities overlaying orange plains and rivers dominated his work for the next decade. Writing the foreword to the catalogue that accompanied Robert's 1965 Barry Lett exhibition, Hamish Keith read portents of doom into these motorway images: "The city in which we live, as young and small as it is, already demonstrates the seeds of its eventual corruption. A hardening, as it were, of the urban arteries." Yet Ellis's paintings seem much more celebratory than this. Buying his first vehicle with the proceeds of the sale of some paintings in 1958, Ellis learned to drive on Auckland's now famously clogged motorways, which were then new and exciting. The first one between Ellerslie and Mt Wellington had only been opened in 1953; the next, from Great North Road to the Lincoln Bridge came into being as the nascent Northwestern in 1955 and the third motorway, the mighty Southern, shortened the journey from Mt Wellington to Wiri in 1956. In 1959 came the ultimate symbol of modernity to crown the achievement of Auckland's efficient road system, the Harbour Bridge to the North Shore, where Ellis chose to live after 1970.

Marrying artist Elizabeth Mountain (Ngapuhi, Ngati Porou), an Elam graduate from Kawakawa in the Bay of Islands, Ellis began to learn about Maori culture. Traffic systems were superseded by depictions of beautiful Te Rawhiti Marae and Rakaumangamanga (Cape Brett Peninsula northeast of Russell) from 1974 onwards in his work.

Though he retired as Professor and Head of the Painting Section at Elam School of Fine Arts in 1994 (after a teaching career at The University of Auckland that had spanned 37 years) Robert continues to paint and hold solo exhibitions in Auckland. City with Orange River is currently on loan to the Whangarei Art Museum as part of an exhibition of works by Buck Nin and Robert Ellis.



ROBERT ELLIS (b.1929), City with the Orange River, 1966, oil and acrylic on board, 1552 x 1216mm.