

The painting is a complex composition. The upper right quadrant is dominated by a large, vibrant red bird, possibly a parrot, with a white patch on its face. The background is a lush, textured green. In the middle ground, a dark, winding river or path flows through a landscape. The lower portion of the painting is a still life featuring a brown pitcher on the left, a tall green plant with a yellow flower in the center, and various other green plants and red berries on the right. The overall style is expressive and textured, characteristic of Frances Hodgkins.

**FRANCES
HODGKINS**
EUROPEAN JOURNEYS

EDITED BY CATHERINE HAMMOND AND MARY KISLER



FIGURE 2.10
Alfred Wallis, *The Steamer*, c. 1930

FIGURE 2.11
Christopher Wood, *The Sloop Inn*,
St Ives, 1926

lead the society into closer relationship with avant-garde developments centring on Paris. That same year, 1926, his wife, Winifred Nicholson (1893–1981), gained membership and it is she who first helped the society generate a more pronounced character. In her wake Cedric Morris and Christopher Wood (1901–1930) arrived at the Seven & Five in 1927, and David Jones (1895–1974) the following year. By 1929, when Frances Hodgkins achieved membership after being proposed by Morris, the society had become associated with a painterly lyricism, rooted in a combination of the romantic and the real. The desire for directness and simplicity encouraged a faux-naïve ingredient which, in the case of Ben Nicholson and Christopher Wood, had been partly encouraged by their discovery in St Ives of Alfred Wallis (1855–1942), a self-taught painter and former fisherman. In 1927 Ben Nicholson had asked the Tate Gallery curator H. S. (Jim) Ede, with whom he shared certain aesthetic interests, to write an introduction which would identify the new freedom which Seven & Five art promoted. Ede wrote:

The line of the Seven and Five is, I think, to break quite clearly from the representational in its photographic sense though not like the cubists to abandon known shapes. It is to use everyday objects, but with such a swing and flow that they become living things, they fall into rhythm in the same sort of way that music does, but their vitality comes through colour and form instead of sound and time. They are not so much pictures as ideas settled for the moment on canvas, but ever ready to take flight into some new life.²⁵

Ede's perception of the qualities associated with Seven & Five painting makes it understandable why Hodgkins was welcomed into this group: her still-lives had, by this date, a definite swing, flow, rhythm and vitality in keeping with the society's aesthetic. But she had arrived at this by a different route to the other members of the Seven & Five, bringing to her art a greater awareness of French art, in particular,



FIGURE 2.12
Berries and Laurel, c. 1930





style.²⁴ She had a clear understanding of what she was seeking to achieve in her work, as well as her strengths and weaknesses, and her paintings from this period gradually move from being purely representational to her own individual form of impressionism. Her pupils noted how she tended to use saturated paper onto which she would deftly float pigments, while her brushstrokes became looser and more rapidly applied, sometimes lifting off the watercolour with a dry brush so only the outline remained. This had proved an effective technique in Morocco in 1903 when depicting ‘the intoxicated pergola props’ that ‘help out composition & foregrounds in a wonderful way’ (fig. 3.17). She had a steady hand, using the same technique for spokes of cart wheels and the like, their straight lines a counterpoint to her sweeping brushstrokes (fig. 3.18), just as she later used the point of her brush to lift paint for the patterns in women’s costumes in St Ives.

After her return to Europe, she took up where she had left off, although her limited finances kept her away from Paris. By July 1907 her reputation was spreading in England, and she noted that she had received invitations to contribute to autumn exhibitions in Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds and Brighton.²⁵ These soothed the ego, but they didn’t put any money in the coffers. In spite of ongoing financial difficulties,

FIGURE 3.17 (OPPOSITE)
The Dyer's Courtyard, 1903

FIGURE 3.18
Untitled (Checking the Baskets),
1906



after her death was a letter from English traveller and writer Thomas Wilby from Cairo, dated 3 December 1903, describing the meaning of the hieroglyphs on a scarab beetle he was sending her from the Cairo Museum.²⁰ He accompanied his notes with sketches and, although the letter has nothing personal in it, romance obviously blossomed over the ensuing year, for in December 1904 their engagement was announced in the local Wellington papers. As Eric McCormick notes, a photograph taken around this time shows Hodgkins posed before her easel, palette in hand, her engagement ring glimpsed beneath it (fig. 3.15).²¹ Slender, hair neatly coiffed, elegantly dressed, she looks feminine yet purposeful, full of expectation. Yet ultimately the engagement was called off, and judging by her unhappiness in the following year, the break was made by her fiancé, not her.

Wilby came to world attention in 1912 when he was the first person (along with his unacknowledged support team) to drive across Canada. His account of his adventures was published in 1914, and if his heart had been briefly broken by his separation from Frances Hodgkins, his recovery had been swift, as the book is dedicated to ‘The Companion of Unforgettable Motor Journeyings through American Desert and Wilderness, My Wife’.²² The book reveals him to be a somewhat self-regarding man, yet one with whom Hodgkins would have shared similar interests, not least his curiosity in humanity and a sense of both adventure and social justice.

Sensitive to her daughter’s unhappiness, Rachel Hodgkins generously put her own needs aside and, at the end of 1906, Hodgkins returned to Europe determined to succeed, whatever the odds. The years in Paris between 1908 and 1912 were to be key to her development, giving her access to the latest exhibitions and debates about modern art. She became highly attuned to the pivotal developments within modernism and, while stimulated by each exhibition, book or review or work that she came in contact with, she remained highly independent, encouraged to continue experimenting but never imitating. As early as 1903 she had written to her mother from Hertfordshire, ‘it is so easy to paint like your master & to think other peoples thoughts, the difficulty is to be yourself, assimilate all that is helpful but keep your own individuality, as your most precious possession – it is one’s only chance’.²³ She stayed true to this belief for the rest of her career.

Hodgkins was intent on painting from nature, rather than entering another artist’s studio in Paris, as she feared that many of those who chose that method of study remained imitators rather than developing their own independent

FIGURE 3.15 (OPPOSITE)
Frances Hodgkins in Bowen
Street studio, c. 1904

FIGURE 3.16
Thomas Wilby, October 1912



