

## **Auckland's Women Artists: 1928-1940**

### **Introduction**

The positionality of women artists in the Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland art scene from just over a century ago is complex. By the close of the 1920s, women were certainly not excluded from published literature nor from exhibition spaces.<sup>1</sup> However, the trend of the twentieth century tended toward situating men such as John Weeks or Colin McCahon, to be the drivers of art history in Auckland, often at the expense of marginalising the influence of women artists. Praise was spread more lavishly for male artists than it was for women, and the notable attention paid to women in early pieces of art literature was much less frequent.

Women in the 1930s and 1940s possessed excellent artistic capabilities that were (at least) comparable to their male counterparts. Yet, women faced persistent challenges of getting the recognition, exposure, and financial reward that they deserved. The art scene was dominated by male commendation and talented women were often ignored or marginalised, with approval expressed in a sentence or two. The focus of the New Zealand art scene was on praising male artistic skills which played a role in creating a barrier to recognising and valuing the important women artists who were working alongside these men. For many women, recognition of their art has occurred long after the peak of their careers. These articles join the growing chorus of writings, that acknowledge and amplify the work of overshadowed women artists that lived and worked in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland in the twentieth century.

This first article will focus on a few women who were important in shaping the nationalist identity pursued by New Zealand artists in this period, as well as bringing new and innovative ideas and techniques to painterly approaches.

### ***Art in New Zealand***

*Art in New Zealand* (ANZ) was New Zealand's first art journal. When it began in 1928, the editors assured readers that they would give New Zealand (NZ) art a helping hand so that it would not "languish indefinitely," by publishing the leading works of art from NZ's various

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<sup>1</sup> Kirsty Baker, "Constituting the 'Woman Artist': A Feminist Genealogy of Aotearoa New Zealand's Art History 1928 – 1989" (Doctoral thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2020), 38.

centres.<sup>2</sup> It was the first time that artists had a print platform to show their work that was easily accessible and regularly produced, and for art lovers to see what different artists were producing throughout the country. The exposure print afforded artists was invaluable in informing each other on what both upcoming and established artists alike were creating in each art centre, providing a source of inspiration and motivation for artists.

Auckland's John Weeks was a name that would often frequent *ANZ's* pages from as early as 1930. In the September edition of that year, an essay devoted entirely to his artistic progress was written. His landscapes were highly commended, critic E.B.B. Boswell exclaimed that "he seems to extract the living spirit and beauty of a scene."<sup>3</sup> Weeks was also praised for his ability to extricate the character, colour, and beauty of a simple scene, and Boswell suggested he did so in a way that others could not do.<sup>4</sup> There were other artists who certainly could also "extract" these concepts from their paintings too but were not yet selected for recognition by a journal that was dominated by a male authorship. Ida Eise was one of these artists.

### **Ida Eise**

Ida Eise was producing beautiful scenes in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and she could expertly expose the complexion and individuality that characterised New Zealand landscapes. In 1928, Ida produced *Rangitikei River*, a work that showcased her capability of depicting natural light and depth using a refined palette. Her use of subtle blue tones results in the background looking hazy, as it might do on a cold winters morning. Some slightly thicker, more horizontal brushstrokes make the river appear still and serene. Ida's layering of trees in various parts of the canvas cements this painting as uniquely New Zealand, as it has always been known for its dense, lush forests which have characterised our natural landscapes.

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<sup>2</sup> Messrs Proprietors, and Harry H. Tombs. "Ourselves" *Art in New Zealand* 1, no.1 (1928): 5. University of Auckland Special Collections.

<sup>3</sup> E.B.B. Boswell. "The Artistic Progress of John Weeks," *Art in New Zealand* 3, no.9 (1930): 161. University of Auckland Special Collections.

<sup>4</sup> Boswell, "The Artistic Progress of John Weeks," 161.

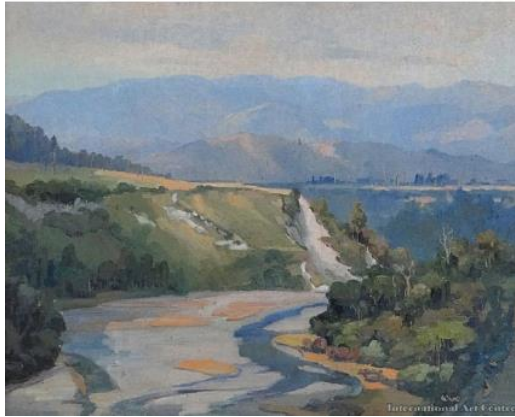


Image 1: Ida Eise, *Rangitikei River*, 1928, oil on board.

(Photograph from Mutual Art <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Rangitikei-River/279CDE937060C478>).

In 1931, Ida painted *Mangaotaki River*, another painting that captured NZ's charm through the detail in the rolling hills, the varying earthy green pigments with developed shadowing to reflect the afternoon light and the soft white glaze over the river. The rendering of these elements all played a role in capturing the peaceful, undisturbed countryside that Ida was greeted with as she painted.

*Mangaotaki River* only received formal recognition in 1936 when it won the Bledisloe Medal for 'best landscape of natural New Zealand scenery.' It was purchased by the Auckland Art Gallery and was the frontispiece for the September 1936 *ANZ* edition. Despite such a successful year for Ida, the editors did not devote any pages to praise her achievements. The only mention of Ida's work was in the 'Art Notes' section of *ANZ*, mentioning that her works have "been well known at exhibitions in New Zealand for many years."<sup>5</sup> It is striking that, despite the editors themselves acknowledging that her work frequented New Zealand art spaces and receiving accolades for her art, Ida still did not receive any praise for her achievements in capturing the unique beauty of our country. Further, nothing of substance was written about her in the 'Literary Matter' section of *ANZ* – that was instead reserved for the (male) sculptor W. H. Wright.

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<sup>5</sup> C.A. Marris, "Art Notes," *Art in New Zealand* 9, no.1, (1936): 53. University of Auckland Special Collections.



Image 2: Ida Eise, *Mangaotaki River*, 1931, oil painting.  
(Photograph from *Art in New Zealand*, September 1936).

### A. Lois White

A. Lois White was one of a handful of Auckland women who received praise multiple times over the course of *ANZ*, and several of her works were reproduced in the journals in black and white as well as colour. In 1932, A.J.C Fisher (a highly influential art critic in Auckland), said that her pencil drawing entitled *Head* was “a very good drawing.”<sup>6</sup> In 1935, *ANZ* subscribers got to see one of her more distinctive oil-paintings called *Success*.<sup>7</sup> This artwork was so highly regarded that Fisher said that she “exhibited very sound draughtsmanship and a powerful sense of composition,” and implored that this style of artistic expression should be encouraged in this country.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A.J.C. Fisher, “The Annual Exhibition of the Auckland Society of Arts,” *Art in New Zealand* 5, no.17, (1932): 10. University of Auckland Special Collections.

<sup>7</sup> Lois White, *Success*, in *Art in New Zealand* 7, no.3, (1935): 167. University of Auckland Special Collections.

<sup>8</sup> A.J.C. Fisher, “Auckland Society of Arts Annual Exhibition,” *Art in New Zealand* 7, no.4 (1935): 165. University of Auckland Special Collections.



Image 3: Lois White, *Head*, 1932, pencil drawing.  
(Photograph from *Art in New Zealand*, September 1932).

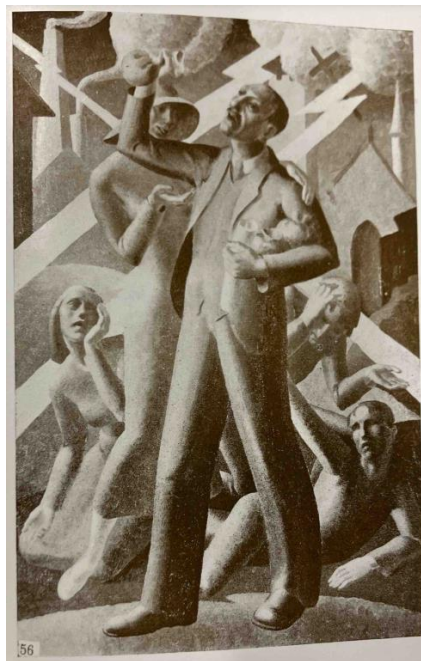


Image 4: Lois White, *Success*, c.1935, oil painting.  
(Photograph from *Art in New Zealand*, June 1935).

Such critical acclaim was well deserved for women like Lois who were elevating the Auckland art scene with their individual artistic flare and creative styles. Lois had a brilliant ability to convey emotion in her work, and she did this through the detailed expressions on her figures. Her works were powerfully composed in a way that created a sense of dynamism to make the characters come alive with energy. Lois's use of colour was also significant

because the bold and bright contrasting colours were excellent at grabbing attention and drawing the viewer in. It is noteworthy that one of Lois's paintings published in *ANZ* in 1939 was chosen to be colourised as this was often reserved for male artists. Due to printings restrictions and costs, there was only a small number of images that could be reproduced in colour in each issue, and the colour of *Gay Ladies* was of vital importance because it heightens the visibility and impact that Lois was capturing.

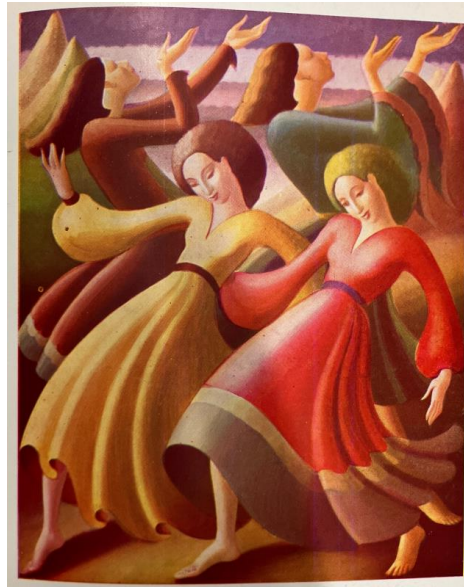


Image 5: Lois White, *Gay Ladies*, c.1939, oil painting.  
(Photograph from *Art in New Zealand*, December 1939).

Despite Lois being a mainstream Auckland artist in the 40's and 50's, her reputation would fade until the 1970's when the Art Deco style was revived. When her work was rediscovered in the late 1970's, Lois's full range of art was revealed. Lois's disappearance from the art scene was perhaps also due to living in comparative obscurity in Blockhouse Bay and it would take until 1977 (when Lois was 74 years old) to have her first solo exhibition thanks to art dealer Peter McLeavey.<sup>9</sup> Lois is an example of an extremely talented and highly innovative artist who did not receive substantial recognition in the peak of their career.

## Bessie Christie

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<sup>9</sup> Nicola Green, "White, Anna Lois," *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 1998. Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4w13/white-anna-lois>.

Bessie Christie also uplifted the Auckland art scene with her original, inventive style, often depicting characters in vibrant social surroundings. The 'Art Notes' section of *ANZ* often commented on her successful displays at exhibitions in Auckland, but the artworks themselves were not reproduced for people to see in the journals. In the September 1939 edition, it was noted that Bessie was a great contribution to the ASA annual exhibition that year.<sup>10</sup> Her work was described as cleverly expressing "her own individual vigorous manner" and it was noted that Bessie had also produced bright, colourful flower studies, well done water-colour landscapes, and contributions to the black and white section of the ASA exhibition.<sup>11</sup> While other *ANZ* editions would observe that her work had been on display at various points in the year, it raises the question: why were her artworks never actually published in *ANZ*? She was clearly versatile in her subject matter, choice of medium and colour palette, and should have had her work presented in *ANZ* so that other artists could be inspired by her techniques and ideas.

It is fortunate, then, that when *Art in New Zealand* came to an end in 1946 and the *Year Book of the Arts in New Zealand* began the preceding year, there was a greater focus on showing more of the artworks themselves rather than simply discussing them. The people that Bessie painted had a lot of character to them. *Portrait of an Art Critic*, for example, was in the 1947 *Year Book* and depicts a plump man whose body takes up three-quarters of the painting.<sup>12</sup> The effect of these proportions drowned out the two paintings that lay behind him and it appears that Bessie was poking fun at art critics by suggesting their domineering nature.

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<sup>10</sup> C.A. Marris, "Art Notes," *Art in New Zealand* 12, no.1 (1939): 57. University of Auckland Special Collections.

<sup>11</sup> Marris, "Art Notes," 57.

<sup>12</sup> Bessie Christie, *Portrait of an Art Critic*, from *Year Book of the Arts*, 1947, 58. Angela Morton Room Te Pātaka Toi Art Library.



Image 6: Bessie Christie, *Portrait of an Art Critic*, c.1947, oil painting.  
(Photograph from *The Year Book of the Arts*, 1947).

*Us at the Arts Ball* from the 1949 edition of the *Year Book* also provide a clearer picture of what critics had meant in ANZ when they described her works as ‘vigorous.’<sup>13</sup> This particular oil painting feels chaotic, her quick brushstrokes around the figure with sunglasses gives a spinning effect. The composition of the characters not only overlapping one another but also positioned at different angles imparts a heightened sense of disarray and disorder, it is hard to know where to draw your attention to first. Bessie has cleverly made the viewer feel part of the image by having the figures appear to be staring out at the audience, conveying an illusion that you have stepped inside and joined the chaos.

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<sup>13</sup> Marris, “Art Notes,” 57.





Image 7: Bessie Christie, *Us at the Arts Ball*, 1948, tempera.  
(Photograph from *The Year Book of the Arts*, 1949).

### **Closing remarks**

The *Art in New Zealand* journals demonstrated the glass ceiling in the New Zealand art scene during the 1930s and 1940s. The myth that men were the drivers of art history was propagated in part because they were much more likely to be focussed on, for their work to be appropriately praised, and for essays to be dedicated to them and their works in leading art publications. While Ida, Lois and Bessie were not entirely disregarded by *ANZ* and the *Year Book* as they did get published on occasion, they were still much less likely to receive critical acclaim and were often overshadowed by these men despite their artistic ability and ingenuity. The experiences of women artists reflected the wider social and cultural gender inequity of the 30s and 40s.

One way that New Zealand fostered its national identity was through the articulation of high-quality landscapes. Ida's landscapes were on par with leading artists of this movement, but it took much longer for her work to be recognised and then still, it was not satisfactorily praised. She deserved greater acknowledgement for the role that she played in shaping the nation's character. Lois and Bessie both improved the quality of art in Auckland in a number of ways too. Each artistic centre in NZ would have wanted to prove that they had distinguished artists contributing to their town or cities cultural development, and Lois and Bessie helped keep the Auckland art scene innovative and stimulating with their unique

techniques and depictions of Auckland's social scene. The next article, centring around the 1950s and 1960s, will look at how women continued to face issues of marginalisation despite their artistic growth and contributions.

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