

Auckland's Women Artists: 1950-1960

In tracing the lives and careers of (these) women, it shows that New Zealand women painters, sculptors and other art makers have achieved vital and significant imagery. In doing so, it brings fresh insight to the development of the visual arts in New Zealand.¹

For the Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland art scene, the 1950s and 1960s would be characterised by women artists expanding out to enhance diverse perspectives and pioneer artistic innovation. This article will explore a range of women who enriched the art scene in Auckland and influenced artists on a national level too. It will reveal how women in the Rutland Group would be encouraged alongside their male counterparts to elevate the standard of art in Auckland during these two decades resulting in artists freely exploring new innovative approaches to art. And, it will examine a range of women who not only influenced but also uplifted the standards of the Auckland art scene, often because of their individuality and artistic flare.

The Rutland Group

The Rutland Group were forward thinkers of their day, being an inclusive and revolutionary social home for Auckland artists. The group began in the late 1930s but ran throughout the 1950s and had around 100 members in its heyday.² Created at the behest of Elam director A.J.C Fisher, the Rutland Group was largely made up of former Elam students meeting monthly to appraise and critique each other's work.³ Unfortunately, once they dissipated in 1958, they were largely forgotten until the early 2000s, when Rie Fletcher and Ian Thwaites revived their history.⁴

Ruth Coyle and Blanche Wormald were two of the women who lived to witness this revival and shared their personal experiences being members of the Rutland Group. Ruth and

¹ Anne Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists*, (Auckland: Reed Methuen, 1986).

² Ian Thwaites and Rie Fletcher, *We Learnt to See: Elam's Rutland Group 1935-1958* (Auckland: Puriri Press, 2004), 7.

³ Linda Herrick, "Rutland times revisited," *New Zealand Herald*, December 8, 2004.

⁴ Ian Thwaites and Rie Fletcher wrote *We Learnt to See: Elam's Rutland Group 1935-1958* to bring attention back to this forgotten art group in Auckland's art history.

Blanche were described for their versatility as artists, dabbling in a variety of forms over the years, including oil paint, watercolours, fabrics, and weaving.⁵ By all accounts, the Rutland Group was an inclusive environment, “women smoked and wore trousers. Its members included staunch feminists and pacifists.”⁶ Because the Rutland Group embraced people for who they were, women were free to pursue their artistic abilities without fear of being scrutinised from a society that still thought women should adhere to their conventional duties as housewives rather than pursuing careers as artists.



Image 1: Photograph of Blanche Wormald (left) and Ruth Coyle (right).

(Photograph from *INZART* “Love of art paints a lifelong friendship,” *New Zealand Herald*, November 13, 1998).



Image 2: Two examples of works by Blanche Wormald using the same medium (acrylic on board) before and after joining the Rutland Group. *Farmland*, 1933 (left) and *Yesterday*, 1963 (right).

⁵ Alex Spence, “Blanche, Ruth and the Rutland Group,” *Listener* (Wellington N.Z.), August 16, 2003.

⁶ Spence, “Blanche, Ruth and the Rutland Group.”

(Photographs from “Blanche Wormald,” Mutual Art,
<https://www.mutualart.com/Artist/Blanche-Wormald/7010E42866620D8E/Artworks>).

Much of the history of Rutland Group has been lost, a large part of this reason is due to the minute books vanishing. However, it is known that young and old, experienced and otherwise, were encouraged to take part in exhibitions.⁷ Blanche and Ruth were two artists who often strayed away from conventional paths, having dabbled in abstraction and modernism before it was the norm.⁸ Ruth and Blanche stayed with the Rutland Group until it was disbanded. They were primary members throughout its establishment and are examples of women in leadership positions in the arts.⁹ They provided their services for many years and deserve recognition for their efforts in helping build a safe environment for men and women to contribute their artworks in what appeared to be a community of equals.

Professionalisation in the arts

As increasing numbers of women sought to enter the workforce after the Second World War, the general perception was that they did not do so to the same professional standards as men.¹⁰ The art world was not immune to this gender generalisation and Auckland’s women artists challenged this stereotype. Suzanne Goldberg and Alison Pickmere were two artists that would invite people to rethink this narrative. By the late 1960s, Suzanne’s style was described as “in the borderland between representational painting and the abstract.”¹¹ In 1967, one critic wrote that Suzanne was “without question one of the most important painters of her generation.”¹² She was praised for her style, which was unmistakably her own, with an originality and technique that any judge highly regarded.¹³

⁷ Thwaites and Fletcher, *We Learnt to See*, 4.

⁸ Thwaites and Fletcher, *We Learnt to See*, 4.

⁹ Thwaites and Fletcher, *We Learnt to See*, 7.

¹⁰ 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), 71.

¹¹ “One Woman,” *New Zealand Herald*, July 12, 1969.

¹² R.D.G, “First of series on our artists,” *New Zealand Herald*, September 23, 1967.

¹³ R.D.G, “First of series on our artists.”



Image 3: Suzanne Goldberg, *Self-Portrait*, n.d.

(Photograph from *INZART*, “First of Series on our Artists,” *New Zealand Herald*, September 23, 1967).

T.J. McNamara, a critic with exceptionally high standards, confirmed that Suzanne was one of the outstanding young painters in New Zealand.¹⁴ McNamara articulated his appreciation for Suzanne's paintings, declaring that they had a “very feminine quality; each uses colour in new and surprising harmonies. This colour is obtained from memories of the landscape and bears a close relationship to it.”¹⁵ Not only was McNamara commending Suzanne for being such a proficient painter, but he also acknowledged that by utilising her femininity, she enhanced her overall standard of work. Suzanne demonstrated that women were just as capable as men in creating works at a professional level, and even McNamara, one of the most revered judges at the time, recognised this too.



¹⁴ T. J. McNamara, “Standing of artist confirmed,” *New Zealand Herald*, July 26, 1966.

¹⁵ McNamara, “Standing of artist confirmed.”

Image 4: Suzanne Goldberg, *Landscape*, 1964, oil on board.

(Photograph from Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 1964).

Alison Pickmere also proved that her works could be on par with male contemporaries in terms of skills and professionalism in the 1960s Auckland art scene. Alison contributed many works relating to the native bush and birds, furthering the sense of national identity that critics were still looking for to prove that the NZ landscape, represented through its art, had qualities unique to anywhere else in the world. She also had a knack for depicting urban life with a sense of genuineness.



Image 5: Photograph of Alison Pickmere.

(Photograph from *INZART*, “Artist Can’t Believe It’s True,” *Auckland Star*, April 17, 1970).

One article from the *New Zealand Herald* praised Alison for showing “a percipience for the people of this country which many artists overlook in their search for the New Zealand character.”¹⁶ Her painting entitled *Two Boys* was used to exemplify this depth of understanding, depicting them with a level of authenticity that other artists might have struggled to capture.¹⁷ In *Two Boys*, Alison epitomised the urban life of youth, not attempting

¹⁶ “Picture of the Week: “Two boys” by Alison Pickmere,” *New Zealand Herald*, October 13, 1962.

¹⁷ “Picture of the Week.”

to perfect their appearances but rather show their “sort of arrogance – a “take me as I am” attitude – and the owlish eyes suggest perhaps too little sleep and too much excitement roaming the street.”¹⁸ This shows a unique skill that Alison brought to the art scene, and one that other artists would undoubtedly attempt to emulate.

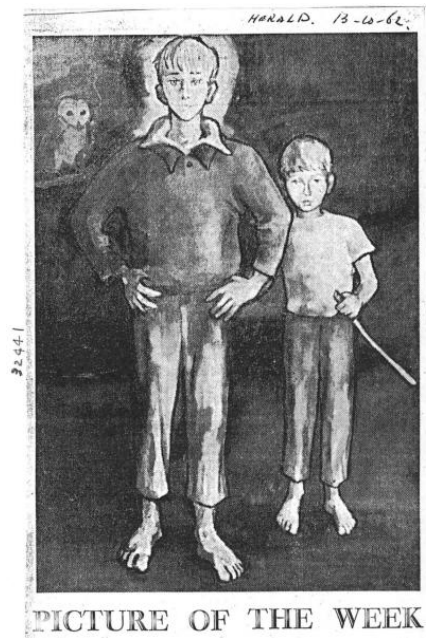


Image 6: Alison Pickmere, *Two Boys*, c.1962, oil on canvas.

(Photograph from *INZART*, “Picture of the Week: “Two boys” by Alison Pickmere,” *New Zealand Herald*, October 13, 1962).

In the *Auckland Star*, I.V. Porsolt wrote, “Alison Pickmere is one of a generation which has helped so much to pull New Zealand painting up by its shoestrings.”¹⁹ Porsolt believed that her ability to keep up with developments in an ever-increasing changing art scene, using a stylish fashion, marked her as an integral artist for Auckland.²⁰ The life and work of Alison is another example of women artists in Auckland who produced innovative and critically acclaimed artwork that not only showed their high skill as artists, but these women also contributed to invigorating and progressing the art scene more generally. Suzanne and Alison positively progressed the Auckland art scene during a period that was still in the process of self-discovery in the visual arts. The work of these talented artists displayed the nation’s

¹⁸ “Picture of the Week.”

¹⁹ I.V. Porsolt, “A Gentle Woman’s Style of Painting,” *Auckland Star*, July 28, 1966.

²⁰ Porsolt, “A Gentle Woman’s Style of Painting.”

artistic advancements, and showed future generations of artists that women possessed the qualities to be professionals too.

Contributing International Influences on Auckland's Art Scene

Louise Henderson and Jean Horsley are two more artists who, with their distinctly different styles, were highly influential to the Auckland art scene. Their contributions were mainly due to the works they entrusted to galleries in Auckland whilst overseas. It was common for artists to move overseas for periods so they could base themselves in some of the leading artistic centres such as Paris, London, or New York. Jean was born and raised in Auckland and lived in London between 1960-1968. Her trip to New York during this time would inspire her to work towards abstraction.²¹



Image 7: Photograph of Jean Horsley.

(Photograph from *INZART*, “Horsley still makes an impact,” *East & bays courier*, July 26, 2006).

In 1960, Jean sent several of her recent abstracts from abroad to mark the opening of the Ikon Gallery in Auckland.²² Anne Kirker described Jean's paintings and charcoal drawings produced in the sixties as “the most conscious manifestations of an Abstract Expressionist

²¹ Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists*, 145.

²² Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists*, 145.

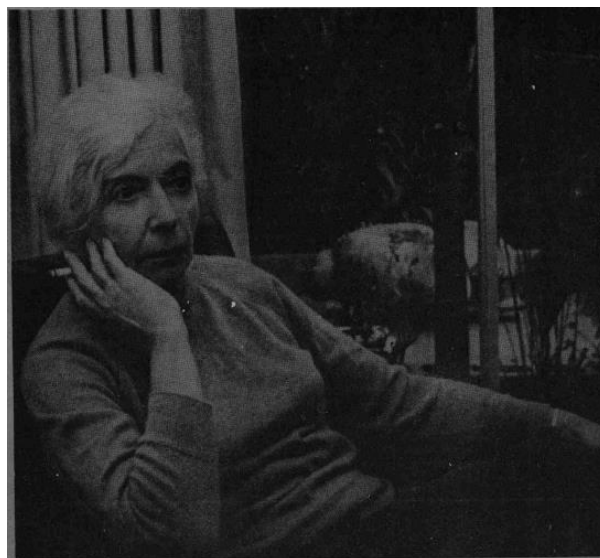
style (in New Zealand).”²³ Kirker credited Jean for helping to generate a greater awareness of abstract modes of expression in this country.²⁴



Image 8: Jean Horsley, *Dancing Figures*, 1962, oil on canvas.

(Photograph from Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Chartwell Gift Collection, 2011).

Louise Henderson, on the other hand, relocated from overseas and was initially based in Christchurch. She moved to Auckland by 1950, and despite travelling extensively, she would return to Auckland on numerous occasions to exhibit her works, making her a significant part of the Auckland art scene in the 50s and 60s. It was under John Weeks's guidance at the beginning of the 50s that Louise "confirmed her method of abstracting form to emphasise the salient qualities of a chosen motif."²⁵



²³ Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists*, 143.

²⁴ Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists*, 145.

²⁵ Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists*, 140.

Image 9: Photograph of Louise Henderson.

(Photograph from *INZART*, "Louise Henderson: new visions for old," *National business review*, June 12, 1974).

In 1966, Jean and Louise had a joint exhibition at the New Vision Gallery, cementing their place in Auckland's art history. This exhibition compared "two of our best women painters", noting that they both were free in their imaginative 'painterly' approach and intimate sense of colour, but each had a strong personal sense of identity.²⁶ Because overseas influences are a large part of both women's works, Jean and Louise would help broaden the horizons of the art scene by exposing new movements, styles, and techniques to fellow local artists and their audiences.



Image 10: Louise Henderson, *Houses in Dieppe*, 1958, oil on canvas.

(Photograph from Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 1991).

Some of these women's best and most inventive paintings were produced in this period, and it was vital for a country so far from creative art meccas to see how the arts were evolving internationally so that artists in NZ could keep up with these art evolutions. The international lives of Jean and Louise and their artworks that showed these trends had a profound influence on this period.

²⁶ Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists*, 145.

Teuane Tibbo

Lastly, Teuane Tibbo deserves recognition for her contributions to the Auckland art scene in the 60s. Teuane started painting at 71 years old, inspirationally showing that it is never too late to pursue a passion. Her painting was described as folk art, and in all its unlearned splendour, fed directly into the anti-capitalist mood of the time.²⁷ Further, Teuane helped to diversify the art scene by drawing on memories from her Samoan childhood. Barry Lett became her dealer soon after she started painting, and her first solo exhibition was at the Barry Lett Galleries in 1964. Barry Lett fondly described her work as "quite raw, with no obsessive realistic details. She used to bash the paint on and complete a work in a couple of sessions."²⁸

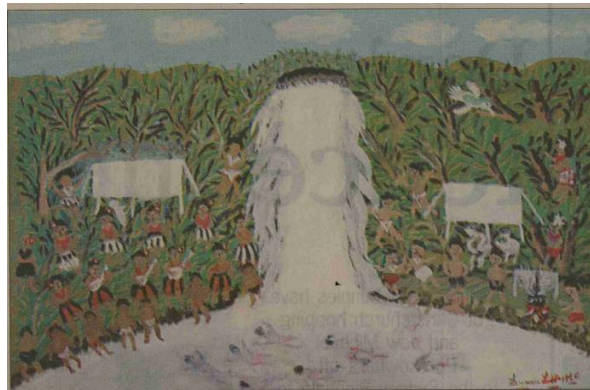


Image 11: Teuane Tibbo, *The Waterfall*, 1968, acrylic on hardboard.

(Photograph from *INZART*, "Return of the matriarch," *New Zealand Herald*, April 29, 2002).

Teuane was at the forefront of artistic innovation for artists in Auckland and she was not afraid to paint in a style that was uniquely her own. Her creativity pushed boundaries which contributed to keeping the Auckland art scene lively. Even if some critics were not sure what to make of her "childlike" works, Teuane painted in a style that was true to herself. *Self-Portrait in the Garden* exemplifies her ability to capture her wholesome, uncomplicated nature as she undertakes a hobby in her beautiful, peaceful garden. The lack of complexity shows that her goal in art was to create works that did not require an obsession over technical details.

²⁷ Bronwyn Fletcher, "Between Fine and Folk: The Paintings of Teuane Tibbo," *Art New Zealand*, no.105, (2002-03).

²⁸ Linda Herrick, "Return of the matriarch," *New Zealand Herald*, April 29, 2002.



Image 12: Teuane Tibbo, *Self-Portrait in the Garden*, 1965, synthetic polymer paint & oil on composition board.

(Photograph from *Art New Zealand*, “Between Fine and Folk: The Paintings of Teuane Tibbo”).



Image 13: Photograph of Teuane Tibbo.

(Photograph from *INZART*, “Return of the matriarch,” *New Zealand Herald*, April 29, 2002).

Conclusion

This article has showcased some of the artists that contributed significantly to progressing Auckland’s art scene. From these case studies, it is evident that women could meet the same professional standards as men when given the opportunity. The Rutland Group embodies this when they treated all members as equals, providing an inclusive community, with women members provided a supportive space to diversify their practices which enhanced their skills and abilities as artists. At the same time, other women were proving their vitality to the

Auckland art scene by contributing all sorts of unique, interesting or excellently composed works that introduced to the local scene innovative styles from overseas.

Please note: Every effort has been made to locate the artists or copyright holders and obtain permission to use the relevant works, we welcome any contact information on the current status of artists or copyright holders.

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