

Olivia Spencer Bower

New Zealander, 1905-1982

Self Portrait

1950, oil on board, 67.2x52.0 cm

Purchased 1955

Reproduced courtesy of the Trustees of the Olivia Spencer Bower Foundation



About the work

Using a mirror in which to observe herself, Olivia Spencer Bower has captured a lively image which has been cleverly enhanced by her skills with composition, colour and calligraphic brushwork. The very focused and thoughtful gaze is typical of a self-portrait as the artist works to capture the angles and surfaces of her face and body. Sitting at an angle has also given the portrait a sense of action and immediacy. Spencer Bower has chosen a head and shoulders view, leaving out the hands, which are obviously busy with the palette and brush.

The broken brushwork creates a pattern that conveys a sense of the textured surface of the clothes. The thick and more smoothly applied paint layers are used for the face and neck, leaving other areas with very patchily and thinly applied paint. Strong patches of light emphasise the forehead and nose and there is also a play of light on the shoulders and sleeves.

Spencer Bower has carefully orchestrated the colour in the painting. The complementary colour relationship of the pale yellow and mauve enhance each other and give vibrancy to the colour scheme. The small patches of white

under-painting, just visible between the thinly applied yellow tones and the white areas in the background, contribute to the dappled and calligraphic effect of the painted surfaces. This dappled, broken colour effect was one Spencer Bower used in the 1950s after her studies with John Weeks at the Elam School of Art in Auckland.

Speaking of her characteristic calligraphic style and the sense of immediacy that can be seen in her work, Bower said, "When you're working hard you can touch a deeper consciousness. When you're not consciously pushing it, shapes and ideas come into the paintings from the brush."

(*Retrospective: Olivia Spencer Bower*, A. Mitchell, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, 1977.)

Spencer Bower did not paint portraits until 1943 when she studied under A.J. Fisher (1896 -1959) at the Elam School of Art and this is a mid-career work. Although she is better-known as a water colourist of Canterbury landscapes, she painted a number of self-portraits and portraits of people she knew well. These included relatives, friends and associates.

Olivia Spencer Bower

New Zealander, 1905-1982

About the artist

Born in St Neots, Cambridgeshire, England in 1905, Olivia Spencer Bower was the twin daughter of the New Zealand artist Rosa Spencer Bower (née Dixon). The family came to New Zealand in 1919 so that Olivia's twin brother, Marmaduke, could study farming and eventually manage the family's North Canterbury properties. Initially they settled in Christchurch where Spencer Bower attended Rangī Ruru Girls' School and studied at the Canterbury College School of Art under Cecil Kelly (1879 -1954), Leonard Booth (1879 -1974), Archibald Nicoll (1886 -1974) and Richard Wallwork (1883 -1969).

Speaking of her early training in the 1920s at the Canterbury College School of Art, Spencer Bower said, "One meandered rather." (Ibid.) There was no actual degree course in those days, although there were scholarships for which students could compete. Spencer Bower won several of these and was also helped financially during her early career by her family.

She travelled to England in 1929 and attended the Slade School of Art, under Henry Tonks (1862-1937), and the Grosvenor School of Modern Art. She made extensive painting trips to France and Italy before returning to New Zealand in 1931.

Spencer Bower became a member of the New Zealand Society of Artists in the early 1930s and began exhibiting with The Group in 1936. In 1943 she went to Auckland to study at the Elam School of Art. She devoted her life to painting and the care of her aging mother who died, aged 93, in 1960. That year Spencer Bower toured and painted in the Pacific Islands and from 1963 to 1966 she visited Europe.

Before her death Olivia Spencer Bower established a Foundation in her name, to be run in perpetuity, funded from the sale of her estate and her art collection. The Foundation finances an annual scholarship, which enables an artist to work full time for one year. Spencer Bower died in 1982.

Other works by the artist in the Collection

There are 76 works by the artist in the Collection, including:

La Piccola Marina, Capri

1931, pencil / watercolour
Presented by the Canterbury Society of Arts 1932

The Verandah

c. 1935, watercolour
Bequeathed by an anonymous donor 1968

Hokianga

1948, watercolour
Purchased 1986

Further reading

'Afternoon Tea with Olivia Spencer Bower', Grace Adams, *Art New Zealand*, No. 26, 1983, pp. 20-21.

Retrospective: Olivia Spencer Bower, A. Mitchell, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, 1977.

