

# Olivia Spencer Bower

New Zealander, 1905-1982

## The Verandah

c.1935, watercolour, 44.5x59.8 cm

Bequeathed by an anonymous donor 1968

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### About the work

*The Verandah* is a watercolour by a leading Canterbury artist of the 1940s to the 1970s. The verandah in question is that of the Spencer Bower family home, 'Claxby', at Swannanoa in North Canterbury. Painted around 1935, this is one of several watercolours Olivia Spencer Bower made of the same subject in the 1930s. One version was exhibited at the Canterbury Society of Arts Annual Exhibition in 1935.

This work was painted at the time when Spencer Bower was finding it difficult being back home in New Zealand after her time away in England and Europe. She wrote to a friend, "Here I was back from England with my pretty clothes and self confidence I hadn't had before, and I was incarcerated in the slump (the Depression)." (*Retrospective: Olivia Spencer Bower*, A. Mitchell, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, 1977.)

At this time Spencer Bower had turned her attention to painting scenes close to home through the use of a simple,

liquid and direct application of watercolour, supported by calligraphic brushwork and with the elimination of all unnecessary detail. The thinly applied watercolour washes capture the effect of the bright sunlit spaces without having to resort to the traditional techniques of strong shadows and light / dark contrasts. The absence of the horizon line and the more agitated rhythms of the plants in the garden background help to emphasise the open sunny deck of the verandah and the poignancy of the two empty chairs.

The freely drawn forms, the use of the white paper and the direct rhythmic shapes in *The Verandah* are similar to the contemporary works of T.A. McCormack (1883 - 1973) whose paintings Spencer Bower described as a "breath of fresh air". (Ibid.) She was greatly impressed by his "wonderful lightsome touch".

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## About the artist

Born in 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 and Spencer Bower studied at the Canterbury College School of Art in Christchurch under Cecil Kelly (1879 -1954), Leonard Booth (1879 -1974), Archibald Nicoll (1886 -1974) and Richard Wallwork (1883 -1969). In 1929 she travelled to Europe where she attended the Slade School of Art, under Henry Tonks (1862 -1937), and the Grosvenor School of Modern Art. She travelled widely in Europe.

Spencer Bower returned to New Zealand to live with her family at their farm at Swannona, North Canterbury, at the end of 1931. She became a member of the New Zealand Society of Artists during the early 1930s and began exhibiting with The Group in 1936. At that time The Group included the artists Rata Lovell-Smith (1894 -1969) and Louise Henderson (1902 -1995). It merged with the New Zealand Society of Arts in the 1930s, when Rita Angus (1908 -1970), and T.A. McCormack (1883 -1973), who were also experimenting with new techniques and approaches, also became exhibitors. In 1943 Spencer Bower attended Elam School of Art in Auckland under John Weeks (1886 -1965) and A.J.C. Fisher (1896 -1959).

She spent many years caring for her elderly mother who died, aged 93, in 1960. That year Spencer Bower toured and painted in the Pacific Islands. From 1963 to 1966 she visited Europe.

Before her death Spencer Bower established a Foundation to be run in perpetuity, funded from the sale of her estate and her art collection. The Olivia Spencer Bower Foundation finances an art scholarship that 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

### *Hokianga*

1948, watercolour  
Purchased 1986

### *Self Portrait*

1950, oil on board  
Purchased 1955

## 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.

