

# Vivienne Mountfort

New Zealander, b.1918

## Pohutukawa and Cliff Face

1978, wool, 177.2, 177.2, 59 cm diameter  
Purchased 1978



### About the work

Vivienne Mountfort has been prominent as one of New Zealand's most innovative fibre artists. In the early 1970s, while she was working as a specialist art teacher in intermediate schools and as a weaving teacher at the Christchurch Teacher's College, she developed a circular off-loom weaving method. *Pohutukawa and Cliff Face* is an early example of her experimental work.

Mountfort has long held a concern for the depletion of native woods and her love for the natural environment is expressed in *Pohutukawa and Cliff Face*, which depicts what has become known as the New Zealand Christmas tree, because of its beautiful red flowers. She has said that '... here in New Zealand we would do well to remember follies of the past and recognise that forests are an indispensable foundation and resort.' (*Harmony in Co-existence: Vivienne Mountfort, An Exhibition of Recent Works*, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, 1996).

This tapestry is made up of seven woven discs that form a composite larger circle. Mountfort uses circular motifs and mandala as universal symbols of equilibrium and harmony. As well, she has found the circular motif more versatile than working on a loom because of the variety of designs that can be achieved by adding circles and putting the warp on in different ways.

Traditional weaving involves 'warp', which are the threads stretched lengthwise in a loom, and 'weft', the threads woven across and into the warp to make a web. As well as the loom, it involves the use of string heddles, pattern sticks to part the warp threads and a variety of shuttles. Ply discs with holes drilled around the perimeter presented an economical alternative to the elaborate and expensive looms and Mountfort adapted this idea and integrated it into her teaching and personal practice.

As Mountfort has said of her innovative weaving technique,

'By putting two threads in one hole I can give the weaving a weft-faced tapestry effect in some places, or I can put on two layers of warps to give a double weave effect. By putting a row of holes within the area of the circle I can have the warp stretching in two different directions within the same weaving, as in *Pohutukawa and Cliff Face*.' (*Please Touch: A Survey of the Three Dimensional Arts in New Zealand*, Peter Cape, Collins, 1980)

The naturally coloured, textured wool becomes a sculptural material, often drawn out of the fabric to create a three-dimensional effect. Mountfort collaborated with Christchurch spinner Audrey King, who experimented with natural dyeing techniques using bark, leaves and a variety of plant matter. The organic tones reflect the natural world that Mountfort depicts in her textiles.

Tapestry is among the oldest forms of weaving as art, as opposed to weaving to create something functional. Weaving was taught at the Canterbury University School of Art during the 1950s, under Florence Atkins, but the idea that fabric arts were somehow inferior to painting and sculpting was initially an obstacle to it being taken up by many. Another difficulty was that the equipment, such as the elaborate and large looms, was hard to acquire, having to be imported from overseas. Tapestry and weaving as an art form developed in New Zealand during the 1970s and 1980s. The pioneers were Ida Lough (1907-1985), Gordon Crook (b. 1921) and Vivienne Mountfort. They developed the techniques of layering fibre upon fibre. They also shifted emphasis to that of idea and aesthetic expression as being equal to technique, rather than subservient to technical skill.

The abundance of New Zealand wool fibres and the diversity of texture achieved through spinning fleece has been crucial to the extension of tapestry and weaving as an art form in New Zealand.

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## About the artist

Vivienne Mountfort was born in Christchurch in 1918 and was educated at Avonside Girls' High School and Canterbury College School of Art. Between 1937 and 1939 she attended Christchurch Teachers' Training College where her interest in fabrics developed.

Conservation has been an enduring theme for Mountfort, who has also drawn on indigenous imagery and issues found in Māori and Aboriginal cultures. In recent work she has experimented with hand-made paper made from flax and has collaborated with artists such as the carver Riki Manuel.

## Other works by the artist in the Collection

### *Life is Like a Long Braided River*

1996, mixed media

Purchased 1996

### *Half, but Not Yet Equal*

1993, mixed media

Presented by the artist 1997

### *Wizard Trapped*

1984, mixed media

Purchased 1984

## Further reading

*Please Touch: A Survey of the Three Dimensional Arts in New Zealand*, Peter Cape, Collins, 1980.

*Harmony in Co-existence: Vivienne Mountfort, An Exhibition of Recent Works*, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, 1996.

