

# Frances Hodgkins

New Zealander/British, 1869-1947

## Phoenician Ruins

c.1937, gouache on paper, 44x60 cm  
Gift from Mr & Mrs Ash 1980



### About the work

This work belongs to the Post-Impressionist style of early 20th century abstraction. Between October 1935 and April 1936 Frances Hodgkins established a studio in the Spanish village of Tossa de Mar, on the Costa Brava north of Barcelona. There she completed paintings from sketches and studies made outdoors and sent them back to the Lefevre Gallery in London. It is probable that it was in Tossa de Mar that she painted *Phoenician Ruins*. The Phoenicians were master seafarers and traders throughout the Mediterranean but they were conquered by Persia in the 6th century B.C.

While she was based there, Hodgkins began experimenting with gouache, an opaque watercolour, as a medium and she continued to use it throughout the rest of her career. Using gouache allows fluid calligraphic brushwork and the freedom to layer and overlay the coloured washes. It creates delicate and subtle harmonies of complex colour. Hodgkins has painted the forms with a spontaneity that suggests a minimum of calculation and a maximum of intuition.

*Phoenician Ruins* shows Hodgkins' interest in abstracting landscape elements, creating distortions that give rise to the spatial ambiguity seen in the foreground of the painting. This may have been a direct response to the work of Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), which had greatly impressed Hodgkins at an exhibition in Barcelona. On 15th February 1936 she wrote to her dealer, Duncan McDonald, at the Lefevre Gallery that she was lucky enough to see the Picasso show, "... a most purifying experience. All my energy was torn from me." (*Letters of Frances Hodgkins*, L. Gill (ed.), Auckland University Press, 1993, p.470)

The forms of the imaginary landscape in *Phoenician Ruins* have been selected from the natural world but are operating within an overall abstract composition that has its own reality as

an interplay of shapes and colours and spaces within the picture space. This modification, or abstraction, of the natural world is not the main aim of the work. Hodgkins was more interested in abstracting the forms and colours in order to explore a sensation. One interpretation of *Phoenician Ruins* is that it creates the sensation of a far off and romantic land, viewed through the veil of memory. Many other responses or interpretations are valid. There are no signs of human figures in the painting, only their relics in the landscape.

Hodgkins has created a slightly surreal landscape where the strong, eerie blue of the mountains in the background sets up a colour discord with the overall warm tans and orange/ ochre highlights, to create a sense of a twilight fantasy landscape.

There is a sense of immediacy and spontaneity in the brushwork but the forms and the unerring placement of the almost luminous orange highlights display the hand of a master painter. The sculptor Barbara Hepworth (1903 -1975) said she had great admiration for the strength and purity of Francis Hodgkins' paintings and remarked that her style was so individual that it was like a new world.

*Phoenician Ruins* can be seen to be influenced by the works of artists like Henri Matisse (1869 -1954) or Picasso but, as a work of an innovative contemporary artist, it is also an expression of her own experimentation and developments at the time. The unique style Hodgkins developed during her late career makes her work impossible to define or describe in relation to other artists of her time.

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## About the artist

Frances Hodgkins was born in Dunedin in 1869. Her first art teacher was also her father, the part-time watercolourist and full-time lawyer, William Matthew Hodgkins. In 1889 Frances joined the Otago Art Society and she began exhibiting with the Society and with the Canterbury Society of Arts from 1890. In 1893 Hodgkins attended classes under the Italian artist G.P. Nerli (1860 -1926) who encouraged his students to concentrate on colour and to paint out of doors. From 1895 - 1896 Hodgkins attended the Dunedin School of Art. There she gained first class passes in the South Kensington examinations.

In February 1901 Hodgkins left for Europe and took classes at the London Polytechnic for three months, before travelling throughout France, Italy, Morocco, Belgium, and the Netherlands. In 1903 she exhibited at the Royal Academy and was the first New Zealander to be 'hung on the line', signifying that her work was particularly highly regarded by the Academy.

By the end of 1903 Hodgkins had returned to Wellington where she began taking private students. However, she returned to Europe in 1906 and held her first solo exhibition at Patterson's Gallery in 1907. Between 1908 and 1912 Hodgkins was based in Paris where she taught at the Académie Colarossi, the first woman on the staff there.

Although she returned to New Zealand via Australia in 1912, in October 1913 Hodgkins left New Zealand for Europe and was never to return. Between 1914 and 1920 she was based at St. Ives, in Cornwall, and over the next two decades made many trips to the Continent. Between 1925 and 1927 she was based in Manchester.

Hodgkins began exhibiting at the New English Art Club in 1928 and with the London Group in 1929. She was invited to become a member of the Seven and Five Society, a small, exclusive group of contemporary avant-garde artists that included Paul Nash (1889 -1946) and Henry Moore (1898 - 1986). By 1932 Hodgkins was exhibiting with the Lefevre Galleries. Hodgkins was invited to exhibit in the 'Contemporary British Art Exhibition' at the World Fair in New York in 1939 and in the previous year had been included in the Paris Salon Autumn show.

Hodgkins settled at Corfe Castle, Dorset, in 1939. She had work selected for the '22nd Venice Biennale' in 1940 and a retrospective exhibition of her work was held at the Lefevre Gallery in 1946. The harsh conditions of wartime Britain took their toll on Hodgkins' health, although she was still actively painting. She died in 1947, aged 78.

## Other works by the artist in the Collection

There are 20 works by the artist in the Collection, including:

### *Girl Feeding Poultry*

1890, watercolour  
Purchased 1958

### *Untitled Portrait*

1900, watercolour  
Majorie Bassett Bequest 1964

### *Belgian Refugees*

1916, oil on canvas  
Presented by the National Art Collections Fund London 1980

### *Pleasure Garden*

1933, watercolour  
Presented by a group of subscribers 1951

### *Landscape*

1938, oil on canvas  
Purchased 1979

### *Still Life - Zipp*

1945, oil on canvas  
Purchased 1979

## Further reading

*Frances Hodgkins, Paintings & Drawings*, I. Buchanan, M. Dunn & E. Eastmond, Auckland University Press, 1994.

*Letters of Frances Hodgkins*, L. Gill (ed.), Auckland University Press, 1993.

*Portrait of Frances Hodgkins*, E.H. McCormack, Auckland University Press, Oxford University Press, 1981.

The Reputation of Frances Hodgkins', Gordon H. Brown, pp. 44-47, *Art New Zealand*, No. 16, 1980.

The Drawings of Frances Hodgkins', Anne Kirker, pp. 40-43, *Art New Zealand*, No. 16, 1980.

'Five Paintings by Frances Hodgkins', E.A. Sheppard, pp. 36-39, *Art New Zealand*, No. 16, 1980.

'The Path to Impressionism: 1892-1912', E.H. McCormick, pp. 28-35/66, *Art New Zealand*, No. 16, 1980.

*The Expatriate*, E.H. McCormack, New Zealand University Press, 1954.

*Frances Hodgkins*, Myfanwy Evans, Penguin Books, 1948.k

