



Rata Lovell-Smith

Hawkins  
1933

TE PUNA O WAIWHETU  
CHRISTCHURCH  
ART GALLERY

From the mid 1920s Christchurch painter Rata Lovell-Smith and her husband, fellow artist Colin Lovell-Smith, made many painting trips into the Canterbury foothills and mountains. On one of these trips they happened upon the small farming settlement of Hawkins, which Rata Lovell-Smith later returned to paint.

*Hawkins* is a painting of great immediacy: it hits the eye at high speed. The tightly controlled design, simplified forms and the decorative effect of the crisp blocks of colour are characteristic of Lovell-Smith's painting in the 1920s and 1930s.

A newspaper critic writing in 1927 described Lovell-Smith's painting as 'on the whole too poster-ish'. Her paintings, with their strong lines, clear colours and matter of fact nature challenged the academic tradition of landscape painting in New Zealand, in which dramatic or scenic aspects of the landscape were depicted with academic aplomb.

However, Lovell-Smith was not interested in imitating nature. Instead, her work is in tune with contemporary British trends that favoured simple forms, blocks of colour, strong compositions and the use of clear light and bold shadow. Her use of colour is particularly sophisticated. Rather than using painted outlines to separate shapes, she lays flat areas of vivid, sometimes exaggerated colour against each other. By stripping every feature of the painting back to a simple form, then placing it carefully in the composition, Lovell-Smith created an attractive sense of order and clarity in her work.

While early critics may have thought her work was 'counter to good tradition', Lovell-Smith's depiction of a railway siding in a rural landscape anticipates a theme that became very popular amongst Canterbury artists in the 1930s and 1940s. Artists like Rita Angus and Bill Sutton depicted the gradual spread of industry and infrastructure throughout the countryside, using the same simplified approach to the landscape that Lovell-Smith pioneered.



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