

Christchurch City Council



The Robert McDougall Art Gallery

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Robert McDougall Art Gallery
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Art
Review



Laurent Joseph Olivier Portrait of a Woman in a Black Dress 1840.

From An Historical Point of View – Works from the Collection February 13-March 31 1991

During February and March we will install within the northern half of the Gallery an exhibition of selected historical works from the permanent painting and works on paper collection.

Most are well known to regular gallery visitors, or are they? As with many a museum collection there is often more to exhibits than meets the eye.

Several works in this current exhibition exemplify this, four in particular have rather unique histories.

Madame X

Among the European portraits that can be seen is 'Portrait of a Woman in a Black Dress' by the Belgian painter Laurent Joseph Olivier (1812-1837) purchased for the collection in 1971. Several months before the gallery acquired this painting a 'Star' newspaper article described the

unknown subject of the portrait as 'Madame X'. Who was she, this rather severe mid-Victorian woman whose features gazed down from the wall of a Victoria Street antique shop. Nobody seemed to know until a descendant of the subject came forward and all was revealed, well nearly all, more was yet to come.

This seemingly innocuous portrait had quite a history.

The mysterious sitter was identified as Madame Justine Delcour and her portrait was companion to one of her husband Judge Lambert Delcour. Both were painted by Olivier probably at his Verviers studio in 1840. After their completion they hung in the Delcour family chateau for the next 70 years. With the outbreak of war in 1914 Belgium was invaded by the advancing German army who occupied many estates in the vicinity of Verviers including that of the Delcour family. With warning of impending invasion the chateau was stripped of its more valuable furnishings which were hidden discreetly around the estate but much was left including the portraits of Judge and Madame Delcour.

After the German army requisitioned the chateau it had troops stationed there who clearly did not like Madame Delcour's expression, as she became the target for more than one carefully aimed bullet. Today the patches on the back of the canvas affixed when the painting was restored attest to the damage done.

The portrait and its companion was rescued for the family which was fortunate as the chateau was eventually shelled and destroyed by fire.

Madame Delcour and her husband it seemed had survived.

The portraits remained with members of the Delcour family in Belgium until 1961 when they were brought to New Zealand.

Several years later they were inherited by the great grandson and great granddaughter of the sitters, then living in Christchurch.

One of the descendants found the portrait of Madame Delcour rather forbidding and a decision was made to sell it.

It was eventually purchased for the collection by the former Gallery Director, the late Mr Brian Muir but the portrait of her husband was not destined to survive. In 1979 while being stored with Kirby Carriers it and other Delcour heirlooms that had escaped the flames in World War I were destroyed by the fire that gutted the premises of the storage firm. It would seem that fate had made its choice.

A Title Problem or A Question of Title

The doubts concerning the identity of subjects are not always just confined to portraiture. Among the British watercolours represented in this exhibition is a work by Samuel Prout titled 'The Porch, Ratisbon Cathedral' which until relatively recently was thought to be the 'Porch of Chartres Cathedral' in France.

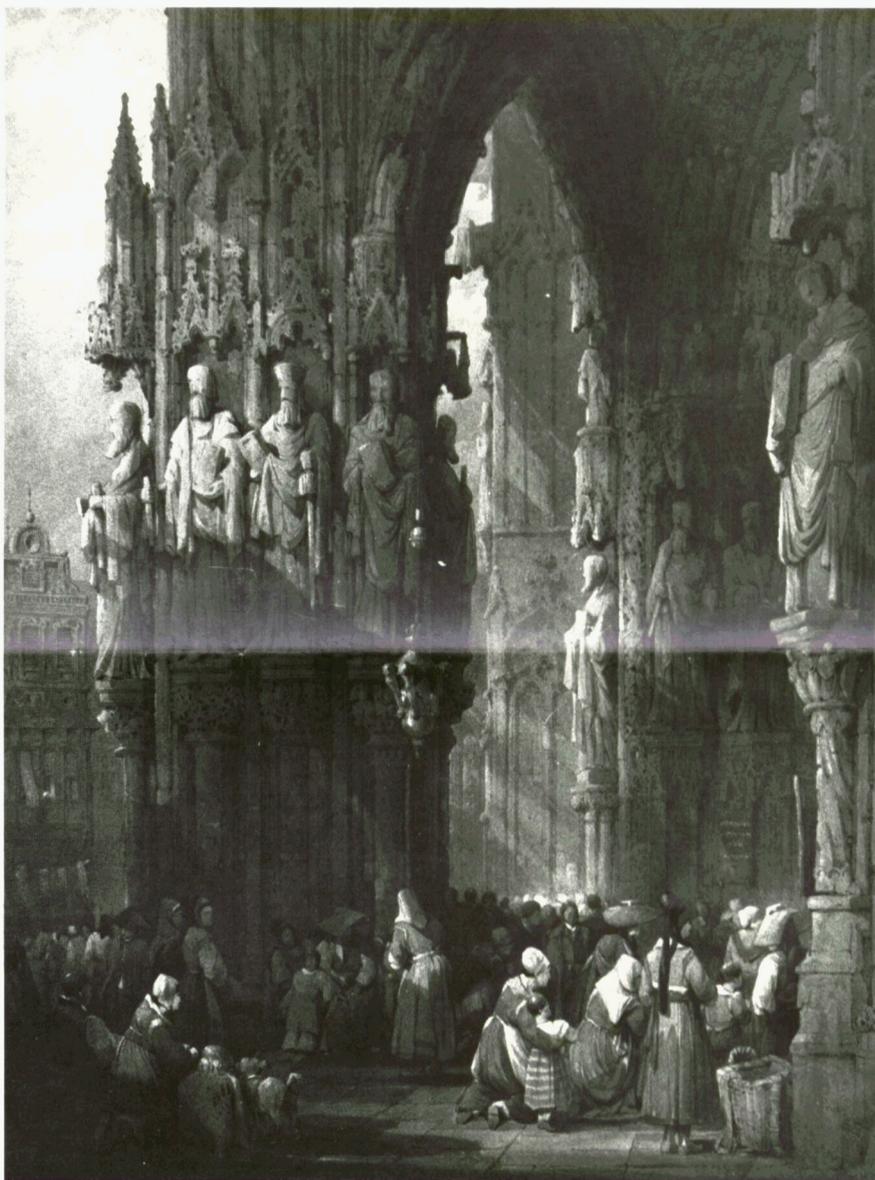
The artist Samuel Prout 1783-1852 achieved distinction as a delineator of the architectural picturesque.

In 1819 when his health showed signs of weakness it was suggested that he visit the continent to take a 'continental cure'.

This visit initiated Prout's travels in Europe which over the following twenty years took him as far as Utrecht in the North, Rome in the South and Prague in the East.

During his journeys he recorded most of the distinctive architectural landmarks.

Prout was often criticised for the licence he took with accuracy and for packing his compositions with groups of peasants in bright costumes. However, he was responsible for bringing into prominence the more picturesque aspects of building in Europe and was well regarded as an artist and teacher in his lifetime.



Samuel Prout The Porch Ratisbon Cathedral c.1823.

The watercolour 'the Porch Ratisbon Cathedral' is a fine example of Prout's powers as a draughtsman. In this work the scale of the cathedral's south east, high gothic porch is admirably worked with crowded figures employed to form a contrast. A grand architectural composition fitted with devotional figures, revealing the busy life of the Bavarian city beyond. Prout's subject is the cathedral of St Peters at Ratisbon or Regensburg as it is known today. Regensburg stands on the river Danube in Upper Bavaria.

Another version of the same composition exists in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum London and there could be others. It was Prout's practice to make on the spot studies which he later worked up in his studio often repeating the same composition many times over. As he rarely dated his paintings the precise date of many watercolours is often difficult to determine.

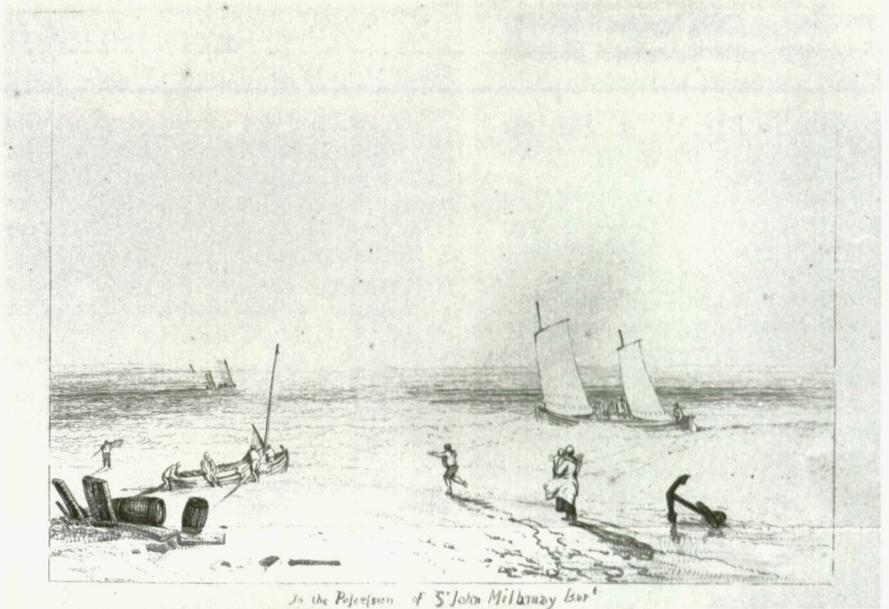
For many years the title of the gallery's Prout watercolour was not in dispute. It had been shown at the British International Exhibition in Glasgow in 1901 as 'Porch Chartres Cathedral' but the architectural features in the painting did not seem to be quite right. In 1983 two German tourists happened to visit the gallery while the Prout watercolour was on exhibition. Both were from Regensburg and they recognised immediately the porch depicted as that of St Peters cathedral in their home city. When they brought this to our attention there were still a few doubts, as members of the public are often apt to draw all kinds of conclusions about paintings they see. However, several months later we received a number of photographs of the Regensburg cathedral porch as it is today. There was little doubt that whilst Prout had been selective and had deliberately used licence with some architectural details it was not Chartres that the painting depicted.

Turners Magnum Opus in Print

One section of the current exhibition is devoted to historical European prints from the collection, some of special significance, in particular a print by J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851) titled 'The Mildmay Seapiece'. This is from his 'Liber Studiorum'. In 1987 the gallery was fortunate to acquire several works from the 'Liber Studiorum' or 'Book of Studies' including an original first state etching of 'The Mildmay Seapiece' that was one of eleven sold from the Turner estate in 1873. During the seventeenth century the great French landscape painter Claude Lorrain had made a well known body of monochrome watercolours known as 'Liber Veritatis' or 'Book of Reality' as a record of compositions he had made. His purpose was to counter forgeries of his work. Turner had similar motives to his predecessor and was inspired to propose a series along the same lines, which he called 'Liber Studiorum' or Book of Studies.

He set out to publish this to also ensure his reputation and prove his mastery of the various aspects of landscape genre.

It was originally intended to comprise 100 plates arranged in 20 parts including subjects from the many categories into which Turner grouped his landscapes such as Marine, Pastoral architectural, etc.



J. M. W. Turner *Mildmay Sea Piece* c.1811.



J. M. W. Turner *The Mildmay Sea Piece – Liber Studiorum* c.1811.

After looking at hundreds of drawings and paintings made on his travels through Britain and Europe he began making preparatory drawings for plates in 1806.

The 'Mildmay Seapiece' was etched in 1811 after an oil painting now lost, titled 'Fishermen coming ashore at sunset' painted in 1797. Turner drew on the copper plate with outlines of the composition first then passed them on to artist engravers for further working.

Over the seventeen years that he worked on the 'Liber Studiorum' a total of nine different etchers and engravers were employed.

The first five plates were published in 1807 and the last, the seventy first, in 1819.

Preparation for further plates continued until 1823 but no more were issued.

In all a total of 180 sets of the 'Liber Studiorum' were produced and continued to be sold from Turner's gallery up until the time of his death.

It is not known for certain why Turner abandoned his magnum opus in print before completion, but it is thought that the project had become too costly, but it is also very likely that it got in the way of Turner's commitment to other work in paint.



Petrus van der Velden
Professor Alexander William Bickerton.

Kindred Spirits

Within the installation of New Zealand historical works that forms part of this exhibition is a recently acquired portrait of Professor Alexander William Bickerton by Petrus van der Velden, that has hitherto had little public exposure.

Up until a few years ago it had lain rolled up in the possession of decedents of the Professor. Its careful conservation by the Auckland City art gallery revealed a study by Van der Velden of some sensitivity.

It is not known exactly when van der Velden and the controversial Professor first met or when they established their friendship but it was probably soon after the artist arrived in Christchurch in 1890. By that time Bickerton had already been in Canterbury some sixteen years as Professor of Chemistry and Physics at Canterbury College and because of his unorthodox scientific views he carried on a constant feud with the College's Board of governors.

Both artist and scientist were perceived in the 1890's as 'bohemians' but both were kindred spirits and shared similar opinions on politics, religion, art and many other topics which they frequently discussed at length for hours at a time.

Bickerton's unorthodox ideas and unconventional behaviour amazed staid Victorian colonial Christchurch almost from the time of his arrival. His 'Partial Impact' theory of cosmic construction by partial impact, formulated in 1878 challenged not only conventional scientific theory regarding the evolution of the cosmos, by explaining the mysteries of the universe, but also threw doubt on the role of God in creation. Such ideas denied the validity of church teachings.

When in 1898 he published 'Romance of the Earth' in which he questioned the whole institution of conventional marriage, and the following year established a 'federative home' at Wainoni it seemed to some that he was also challenging the sanctity of the family.

By holding such views Bickerton literally denied the whole basis of Victorian society. To a number of Canterbury College board members such ideas were intolerable in an academic professor and there was a strong lobby to unseat him from his position.

In 1894 an enquiry was unsuccessful in securing his dismissal but some years later a second enquiry did succeed and he was dismissed in November 1902.

History now shows that Bickerton was a brilliant scientific theorist and teacher, an inspiration to his students among them Sir Ernest Rutherford. After his sacking he turned 'Wainoni' into a 'Pleasure Park'. Thousands of visitors flocked to see the eccentric professor and his menagerie. In 1910 he returned to England and up until his death in 1929 continued to seek acceptance of his 'Partial Impact' theory.

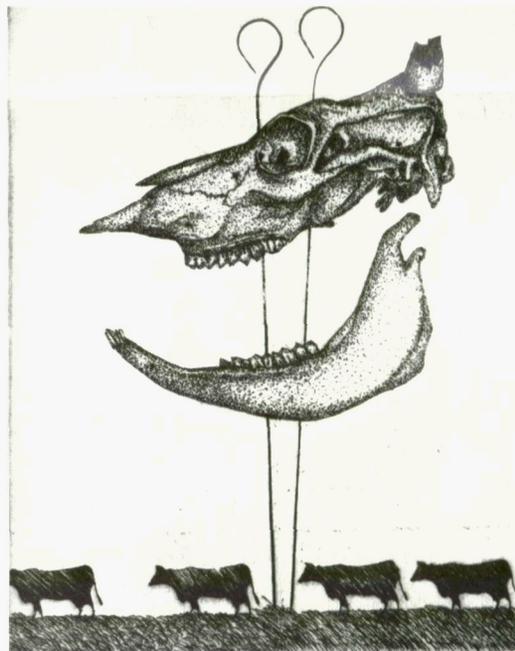
This painting is not the only one of Bickerton painted by Van der Velden. Another, more formal full length portrait, is in the collection of the University of Canterbury but reveals little of Bickerton the individual. The Bickerton that van der Velden has painted in the portrait in the current exhibition is more than the professor in academic garb. He is his friend and kindred spirit.

Recent Acquisitions:

The following works have been acquired for the collection:

Barry Cleavin
Magic Square ff7, 1989
Relief Etching/colour, A/P

Obscurities, 1989
5 Print Suite 2/20
Etching and aquatint



Barry Cleavin *Obscurity* – *Prime Specimens* 1989.

Of asses, mad dogs and F III's after the attack on Libya 15/April/1986
colour etching/aquatint

From a tree at Oaro, 25 August 1984
Etching/etching embossed 1/6

Denise Copland
Surviving the Acid Test
suite of 9 prints and frontispiece 3/3
Etching/aquatint

Matrimonial Property Act 4
Woodcut A/P

Tree of Liberty
Etching/Aquatint 6/15

A Union between the earth and the Sun
No. 4
Etching/Photoengraving 9/10

Natural Structures/Unnatural conditions
– 1
Etching/Softground 1/10

Natural Structures/Unnatural conditions
– 4
Etching/Softground 1/10

Philip Trusttum
Digging
Acrylic on loose canvas

Neil Dawson
Whiteout
Steel Mesh

The following works have been generously gifted to the gallery:

William Hounsom Byles
Dr H. T. J. Thacker, M.P. 1907
Oil on canvas
from Mrs M. A. Thacker

Alan Pearson
Lovell Smith, 1971
Pencil sketch from the artist

P. Van der Velden
Untitled
Pencil and wash on paper from
Mr J. P. Webster

Footrot Flats™ IN FOCUS



A 1990 PERSPECTIVE

Footrot Flats in Focus — a 1990 Perspective until January 22 1991

In Denmark it is known as 'Faehunden'. In Germany it is "Dog Von der Stinkfussfarm". New Zealanders know this international phenomenon as 'Footrot Flats'.

Beginning in the pages of the Evening Post newspaper, Wellington, early in 1976, the cartoon strip now appears in 120 newspapers around the world. It is published in New Zealand, Australia, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Germany.

This creation from the mind and pen of Murray Ball has taken other forms — cartoon books which have sold more than six million copies, an award-winning feature film, a musical and soft-toy dogs.

The Dog, who alone among the animals of Footrot Flats is gifted with human insights, is the unchallenged star of the strip. Fan mail floods into Murray Ball's Gisborne property each year on The Dog's birthday, October 13.

There are constant requests from children for The Dog's real name (which Aunt Dolly gave him when he was a pup in her cattery). "But I won't tell", Murray Ball is reported as saying, "I wouldn't let my mate down".

Ball says of his characters, "They inhabit a place just over the horizon of my mind".

Basically, the cartoon strip is about the relationship between Wal, a farmer, and his sheepdog. More deeply, it is a chance to look at human behaviour with fresh eyes through the singular vision of The Dog.

Ball explains "Animals can say things about people that people can't. On a farm such things as life and death and procreation are all very evident. Because The Dog is an animal — but with the mind of a human being — he can react either naively or brutally to death, impotence, straight sexuality or old age — subjects that are not easy to deal with man to man or woman to woman."

Footrot Flats in focus: A 1990 Perspective runs until January 22 1991 at the McDougall Art Annex in the Arts Centre. The exhibition, organised by the Gisborne Museum and Arts Centre, consists of original cartoon material, examples of fan mail and press clippings, large soft-toy versions of The Dog and a video of the **Footrot Flats** film. There is a small charge for entry to this popular exhibition, the proceeds of which will be used to help support the activities of the Annex, the Robert McDougall Art Gallery's venue for contemporary art.

Di Ffrench January 31 — February 26 1991

The first exhibition of the new year at the Annex will present recent work by 1990 Trustbank Canterbury Artist in Residence, Di Ffrench, who has spent the last year living and working in the Arts Centre.

Ffrench uses a specialised technique to produce her distinctive photographic images. Initially she takes a black and white photograph of her model, which is made into a slide transparency. The slide is then projected from a height on to a pit of crystals — she has worked recently with coal dust — which Ffrench moulds into and around the projected image. Props and colour can also be added at this stage. Ffrench then re-photographs the projected image from various images to create a new, large format photograph.

Coming Events

- January** 13 'Bloodlines', 'Cries and Whispers' and 'Fish Out of Water' close.
18 'Recent Acquisitions' opens.
22 **Footrot Flats in focus: a 1990 Perspective** closes at the Annex.
30 Preview of Di Ffrench, Trustbank Canterbury Artist in Residence, at Annex, 7.30 p.m. All Welcome.
- February** 2 **Saturday Club** 10.30 a.m.
3 **Sydney Lough Thompson — At Home and Abroad** closes.
6 **Wednesday Club** 10.30 a.m.
8 **Volunteers Club** 10.30 a.m.
9 **Continuing Club** 10.30 a.m.
13 **Historical Works** from the Collection opens to the public.
20 **Speaker of the Month** Ted Bracey at the Annex
21 **Kilmarnock Club**
26 Di Ffrench, Trustbank Canterbury Artist in Residence closes at Annex.
- March** 1 **A.G.M.** of the Friends 7.00 p.m.
2 **Saturday Club** 10.30 a.m.
6 **Wednesday Club** 10.30 a.m.
6 Preview of recent works by **Sandra Thompson, Lorraine Webb, Rachel Harre** at Annex All Welcome.
9 'From Australia' opens to the public.
9 **Continuing club** 10.30 a.m.
20 **Speaker of the Month** Lynn Campbell at the McDougall Art Gallery
21 **Kilmarnock Club**
31 **Historical Works** from the Collection closes.

Ffrench is widely known for her work as a sculptor, a photographer and a performance artist, and the process which she has evolved to produce her cibachrome images borrows from each of these three disciplines. Unlike her public 'performance installations' in galleries of the early 1980's the performance aspect of her recent work takes place within the privacy of her studio as she manipulates the projected image from a high platform or 'tower'. The Annex hopes to install one or more of the tower structures and beds of crystal to allow the viewer to become involved in the process.

The preview of the exhibition will be at 7.30 p.m. on Wednesday 30 January and Friends of the Gallery and other interested parties are most welcome to attend.

Sandra Thompson, Lorraine Webb, Rachel Harre

Following the close of Di Ffrench's exhibition, the McDougall Art Annex will mount an exhibition of works on paper by three woman artists — Sandra Thompson and Rachel Harre from Christchurch, and Lorraine Webb from Wanganui. The preview of the exhibition is at 5 p.m. on Wednesday March 6 and everybody is welcome.

Volunteer Security Staff Needed at the Annex

If you could spare up to two hours during a weekday or at the weekend and are willing to assist at the Art Annex with minding the desk, answering the phone and seeing to general public enquiries, please contact Lara Strongman or Martin Young on 650-915 ext 824.

Friends of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery Inc.

President – Ian Miles 519-955

Vice-President – Hilary Langer 348-3982

Treasurer – Chris Brocket 557-133

Secretary – Marie Lockety 885-075



Salute to Mr W. A. Sutton C.B.E.

W. A. Sutton has been featured at the Gallery on two occasions recently – Roads to Rome exhibition in which his Italian watercolours were prominent, and the Speaker of the Month for Friends at which John Coley spoke of his life and work. But the gathering on Sunday October 14 was not thereby in any sense superfluous: it recognised and honoured Bill Sutton directly and personally.

There was a very large attendance of well-wishers who first enjoyed refreshments that included Italian delicacies and were entertained by the Sarabande Group led by Peter Low on the harpsichord.

Ian Miles, president of the Friends, then chaired the formal part of the gathering. He introduced no fewer than eight speakers, each of whom revealed different aspects of their subject, Bill Sutton, the man and his work.

The Deputy Mayor, Dr Morgan Fahey began, expressing the pleasure and the thanks of the citizens of the Christchurch City Council for the contributions which the guest of honour had made and was still making to the cultural life of Christchurch. Professor John Simpson, formerly head of the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Canterbury, reminisced about Bill Sutton as a scholarly colleague

Tribute to Doris Lusk

Addressing a large gathering on 6 November during the exhibition of 'Friends', Grant Banbury began by recalling his first meeting with Doris Lusk as a young student in 1976. That was the year in which, following her first visit to Europe, she completed the ten works of her Italian Awnings series – "Perhaps her finest series of mature works", he said. They made a vivid and lasting impact on him. He photographed them, admiring 'their bold fluidity of wash, subtlety of drawing and psychological presence of opening and closing'.

Outlining her artistic development and her many achievements, he emphasised her remarkable capacity for transforming whatever material she came across. Her life-long commitment to portray the landscape grew out of her early training in Dunedin and was continued and further developed during her association with The Group in Christchurch. Here she joined a generation of artists who, like her, were intent upon fresh recordings and interpretations of local landscapes. Such artists were strongly represented in the exhibition: Rita Angus, Olivia Spencer-Bower, Leo Bensemann, and Bill Sutton.

and a teacher who encouraged rather than criticised. Mrs Pat Unger a local art critic, then gave an appreciation of his artistic achievements. The pleasurable intimacies of sitting for a portrait by Bill Sutton were then recounted by Sir Hamish Hay. Speaking as a former student and then a colleague, Mr Max Hailstone, dean of the Faculty of Music and Fine Arts at the university, told of field trips and other occasions which showed the leadership, the adaptability, and the warm humanity of the man.

Mrs Gwen Wilton, a life member of the Friends, then made the presentation, offering a hamper that was satisfyingly and appropriately weighted down with, among many good things to eat, a few bottles of the guest's beloved Chianti. It was then time for Bill Sutton to reply. He did so in his typically modest but sincere manner, acknowledging his satisfaction at the remarkable changes in art that he had witnessed in his lifetime. On behalf of the audience, Mrs Marie Lockety, of the Friends, then proposed a vote of thanks which was carried enthusiastically.

It was altogether a memorable occasion, an opportunity to appreciate in a rounded way the many facets of Bill Sutton. We are grateful for the enormous contributions he has made to painting, to painters and to the people of Christchurch and Canterbury. Long may he continue to do so.

Pottery in Canterbury was also enriched by Doris Lusk through her teaching at Risingholme and by her own activities as a potter at that time. At the School of Fine Arts from 1966 until her retirement she championed an open student-teacher relationship, and characteristically she kept alive her contacts with former students. Strong commitments to both the Canterbury Society of Arts and the Friends of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery further exemplified her interest in and zeal for promoting art in the community.

The kinds of responses that Doris' works drew from poets, writers, and art critics were signs that her achievements will not only endure but are likely to be more highly valued in future. The 1990 Governor General's Art Award – on display in the exhibition – was one such indication, though unfortunately not presented until after her death. A further recognition was the announcement that a book about her work is already under way – appropriately by the local publishers Hazard Press.

In conclusion, Doris Lusk's family were thanked for their generosity in making the whole exhibition possible. All the items came from her private collection.

New Members

S. Alexander

B. Brice

Ted Dillon

Hugh and Anne Lovell-Smith

Dorothy McKenzie

John Noble

October Speaker of the Month

To describe Di Ffrench, Trustbank Canterbury Artist in Residence for 1990 and Speaker of the Month at the October meeting of the Friends of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, simply as an exponent of photographic art is doing only partial justice to her. Her skills and imagination go well beyond the traditional use of this medium, as she most ably demonstrated with the aid of two slide projectors, working in tandem and supported by excerpts from a film. The original subject is first photographed and then combined with other materials, drawings or structures, eventually to be recorded on a slide transparency. The combined effect of these compositions is further heightened by projection on a specially prepared surface which is then photographed and printed on a large scale. These techniques enable Di Ffrench to produce infinitely variable images which fascinate the viewer and allow for plenty of personal interpretation. Her interesting talk not only demonstrated the range of her creativity but also served as an introduction to an exhibition of her work to be held in February 1991.

February

Speaker of the Month

On February 20, Mr Ted Bracey, Head of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury, will talk on "Some recent ideas about art education and how they might apply to galleries."

Coffee will be served at 10.30 a.m., \$1.50 at the McDougall Art Annex.

March

Speaker of the Month

On March 20, Lynn Campbell, Conservator at the McDougall Art Gallery, will speak on her trip to the Antarctic during January 1991.

Coffee will be served at 10.30 a.m., \$1.50 at the McDougall Art Gallery.

FRIENDS A. G. M.

1st March 1991 7 p.m.
followed at 8 p.m. with
a forum of artists.

Topic:

The State of the Visual Arts