

# SYDNEY LOUGH THOMPSON

AT HOME AND ABROAD



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JULIE KING



A Robert McDougall Art Gallery exhibition  
organised with the assistance of the  
Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand

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**SYDNEY LOUGH THOMPSON - At Home and Abroad**  
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Front cover: Plate I - Cat.40  
*Garden, La Glacière, Concarneau* 1913-1919  
Oil on canvas  
Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery

# CONTENTS

|                                 |     |                                   |
|---------------------------------|-----|-----------------------------------|
|                                 | 7   | PREFACE                           |
|                                 | 8   | INTRODUCTION                      |
| CHAPTER 1 - COLONIAL BEGINNINGS | 12  |                                   |
|                                 | 13  | BETWEEN CANTERBURY AND CONCARNEAU |
|                                 | 14  | CANTERBURY 1877 - 1900            |
|                                 | 21  | ENGLAND AND FRANCE 1900 - 1904    |
|                                 | 24  | PARIS                             |
|                                 | 29  | BRITTANY                          |
|                                 | 36  | CANTERBURY 1905 - 1911            |
|                                 | 42  | NOTES TO CHAPTER 1                |
| CHAPTER 2 - LIVING ABROAD       | 44  |                                   |
|                                 | 45  | THE EXPATRIATE EXPERIENCE         |
|                                 | 46  | PARIS AND BRITTANY                |
|                                 | 57  | PROVENCE                          |
|                                 | 61  | LIVING AND WORKING ABROAD         |
|                                 | 66  | NOTES TO CHAPTER 2                |
| CHAPTER 3 - RETURNING HOME      | 68  |                                   |
|                                 | 69  | THE NEW ZEALAND EXPERIENCE        |
|                                 | 78  | NOTES TO CHAPTER 3                |
| COLOUR PLATES                   | 81  |                                   |
| CHRONOLOGY                      | 98  |                                   |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY                    | 106 |                                   |
| CATALOGUE                       | 108 |                                   |
|                                 | 110 | PORTRAITURE AND FIGURE PAINTING   |
|                                 | 118 | STAITHES                          |
|                                 | 119 | BRITTANY                          |
|                                 | 126 | TUNISIA, PROVENCE, ITALY          |
|                                 | 131 | INTERIOR STILL-LIFE               |
|                                 | 132 | NEW ZEALAND                       |
|                                 | 138 | MAP OF NEW ZEALAND                |
|                                 | 139 | MAP OF FRANCE                     |
|                                 | 140 | LIST OF FIGURES                   |
|                                 | 141 | LIST OF COLOUR PLATES             |



Plate II - Cat.13

*Mme Thompson, the artist's wife, seated with parasol, St Jeannet*

Oil on canvas

Private collection

## PREFACE

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The quality and quantity of Sydney Lough Thompson's work must place him within the canon of New Zealand art. For over seventy years he was a prolific and widely admired painter. Thompson became one of the first New Zealand born artists to construct a successful professional career.

This exhibition assesses Thompson's place within the context of New Zealand art history and is both instructive and revealing about the intellectual, social and economic forces which produced this gifted artist.

The gallery thanks guest curator Julie King for her lengthy and always positive involvement with this exhibition. We also thank the artist's daughter, Annette Thompson, for her co-operation and advice. We are indebted to the many public and private lenders, without whose generosity this exhibition could not have been achieved. Finally, we gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand for its contribution towards the costs of the project, and the New Zealand Art Gallery Directors' Council for its management of the tour.

John Coley  
Director

## INTRODUCTION

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Sydney Lough Thompson may seem an unlikely choice for an exhibition in the 1990s: an expatriate artist who acquired old master status, a painter of the regional landscape of France whose work filled his viewers in New Zealand with nostalgia for the Old World, an Impressionist artist who captured reflections in high country lakes in the South Island, a landscape artist accused of not painting the 'real New Zealand' in its rawness and harsh light, who nevertheless became "probably the most popular painter in New Zealand."<sup>1</sup>

Not before time, art historians have begun to deal with the phenomenon of lack of recognition. Artists popular in their own times, however, also deserve historical attention, since popularity can be equally revealing in elucidating cultural values within a society.

Early this century, the perceptions of Europe which Thompson inherited, and the myths constructed in his painting, had a powerful reality for many New Zealanders educated within a European tradition.

This exhibition initially aims to establish a chronology for Thompson's life and work. The popularity of his paintings of the harbour at Concarneau and of New Zealand lake scenery is well established. However, his interests ranged much more widely, and included strong contributions to the tradition of portraiture. Emphasis has been placed on the early part of his career; the exhibition traces his beginnings as an art student in colonial Canterbury and his discovery of the artists' colony at Concarneau in Brittany. It highlights his return home in the early 1920s, when his large solo exhibitions dazzled the New Zealand public with revelations of bright colour and expressive brushwork.

Furthermore, the show aims to place his life and work within historical contexts and to explore issues such as patronage, the critical response to his painting, and how shifts in the estimation of his reputation occurred. After being acclaimed in the 1920s, the 1930s found New Zealand questioning its relationship with Europe, and Thompson's position was increasingly challenged by a younger generation of painters and critics. Thompson was born and raised in colonial Canterbury,

and he belonged to a period when the pakeha constructed cultural myths about the Old World and called Britain 'Home'. Thompson's depiction of Europe can be summarised by Curnow's remark in reference to England:

*...gradually 'Home' became fixed in ideal patterns, laid up in a heaven invented by nostalgic recollection.*<sup>2</sup>

No painter in New Zealand conducted a more extensive dialogue with Europe, or constructed a more seductive and appealing myth around the landscape of the Old World, than Sydney Thompson. In the 1990s, we can still look back and enjoy the nostalgia of the paintings of Sydney Lough Thompson, but as New Zealand begins to acknowledge its bicultural nature and recognize its geographical position in the Pacific, his painting is necessarily viewed from a different historical and cultural perspective.

This exhibition has depended on the willingness of owners to lend their paintings. I would like to thank the following institutions for their friendly co-operation in arranging to make works available: Canterbury Society of Arts; National Art Gallery, Wellington; Dunedin Public Art Gallery; Nurse Maude District Nursing Association and the McDougall Family, Christchurch; University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts; Hocken Library, Dunedin; Aigantighe Art Gallery, Timaru; Bishop Suter Art Gallery Trust Board, Nelson; Christchurch Polytechnic; University of Auckland; Auckland City Art Gallery and the Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North. I would like to express warmest thanks to private owners for their generosity in lending works for the exhibition: the Caldwell Collection, C.S.Caldwell, Annette Thompson, Mr and Mrs Peter Mills, and to those owners who have remained anonymous. The exhibition has depended on your benevolence.

I am grateful to many institutions and individuals for their helpfulness in assisting my research. In addition to the institutions mentioned above, I would like to thank staff at the Anderson Park Art Gallery, Canterbury Public Library, Canterbury Museum, University of Canterbury Library, Alexander Turnbull Library, Oxford Historical Records Society, Ngati Tuwharetoa Trust Board, New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts, Art Gallery of New South Wales, National Gallery of Victoria, National Gallery of Ireland, and Mme Catherine Puget at the Musée de Pont-Aven.

Many individuals have allowed me to see their paintings and

have shared their memories and thoughts about the artist with me. Your assistance is much appreciated. My special thanks to Dr Peter and Mrs Mary Caldwell, the Caldwell family, Dr Yan and Mrs J.Thompson, Judith Wright, Joy Dawber, Ian Thompson, Mrs Marion Mabin, Mrs M.Watson and W.A. Sutton.

I would like to thank my colleagues and students at the School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury, especially Judy Boyle, for their helpfulness during the preparation of this catalogue. Thank you to Elody Rathgen, Barbara Burnley, and my friends for all sorts of things, not the least their invaluable support.

This is the second time I have had the pleasure of working on an exhibition for the McDougall Art Gallery. I would like to thank the Director and staff for their professionalism and amiability during the completion of this project.

Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Mme Annette Thompson and to Mme Mimi Tallec. The extensive catalogue and documentation of the work of Sydney Thompson, which they prepared and generously shared with me, have been invaluable. I remember with pleasure their knowledge, hospitality and kindness when introducing me to some of the old world places in Brittany.

*Julie King*

<sup>1</sup> Gordon H.Brown and Hamish Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting 1839-1980*, Auckland, Rev.Ed., 1982, p.59.

<sup>2</sup> Allen Curnow, *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-1945*, Christchurch, 1945, p. 20.



Plate III - Cat.15     *Girl on balcony, La Digue, Concarneau* 1925-1926  
Oil on canvas  
Collection: C.S. Caldwell

# I COLONIAL BEGINNINGS

Sydney Lough Thompson was born in Canterbury in 1877 and died at Concarneau in Brittany in 1973. During his long life he divided his time almost equally between New Zealand and France, and may be described in the terminology of his times, as a painter who was 'caught between two hemispheres.'

Thompson grew up in a colonial society, where inherited cultural concepts of the Old World and its counterpart the New shaped his conception of New Zealand and Europe. His painting developed from the interaction between dependent cultural, but geographically distant contexts.

Belonging to the first generation of New Zealand born painters, he spent his formative years in the Canterbury settlement of Oxford and as an art student in Christchurch, before he, like many of his contemporaries, left for Europe. His first trip took place in 1900 and the time spent in the artists' colony in Concarneau determined the subsequent direction of his painting. He found in this old town on the Breton coast a European past which was absent in New Zealand. The lives of its fisherfolk exemplified an existence which was in accord with nature and which was validated by tradition. This romantic involvement with a European past was expressed in much of his painting.

To understand his work we need to begin at the beginning, with his origins in colonial Canterbury and his arrival at Concarneau in 1902.

Nothing stands out in Thompson's origins which might account for his decision to be an artist. The Thompson family tradition, with features reminiscent of myth, recalls a boy of dreamy disposition, who spent his time drawing rather than minding sheep. Questioning the myth shows that it does bear some relation to fact.

Sydney Lough Thompson was born in Oxford on 24 January, 1877.<sup>1</sup> About forty miles from Christchurch, Oxford owed its prosperity to surrounding forests, and in the early days of European settlement when timber resources were in demand, it developed into a small frontier settlement in a sawmilling region.[Fig.1] By the time Thompson was a small boy, it was an established, close-knit community, a place where settlers prospered and raised their families. Born at home in the general store in High Street, he was christened at the Anglican

1  
Ryde's Mill, Oxford, c.1890. One  
of many sawmills at Oxford in the  
nineteenth century.  
*Oxford Historical Records Society*



church of St Andrew's, learned his lessons at local schools, and when his parents moved, grew up with his brothers and sisters on the farm, not far from town.

His father Charles Abel Thompson was a successful settler whose life was constructed around Victorian belief in hard



2

General Store, High Street, Oxford, where Sydney Thompson spent his childhood, until his father sold the store to Mr Hunter in 1889.

*Oxford Historical Records Society*

work and progress, and a colonist's confidence that adaptability, along with energy and enterprise, reaped their reward in the New World. Charles Abel Thompson went to Adelaide as a boy in 1860 when his family emigrated from England. Some time later, he crossed to New Zealand, and in common with many pakeha settlers at the time of the Land Wars, he came south. By 1866 when he was nineteen, he had joined his brother at Saltwater Creek in Canterbury. As frontiers opened up, he was ready to move about the country and try his hand at whatever opportunities turned up. His varied occupations trace his rise in the world; he worked as bootmaker, wheelwright, storekeeper, auctioneer and farmer. By 1869, he had moved to Oxford, a settlement whose pace of growth offered excellent prospects, and it was here he set up a general store in the High Street. [Fig.2] In 1889, he sold the store and bought a sheep farm and moved into the homestead of the Carleton Run.<sup>2</sup> As a well-off landowner, Charles Abel Thompson had achieved the kind of success which emigration to the New World promised his generation of settlers.

Milling timber and sheep farming were the principal activities of pioneering menfolk, and the formation of artistic ambitions in a young man in the late nineteenth century settlement of Oxford remains extraordinary. Thompson's reminiscences suggest that his mother, Sophia Mathilda

Lough, was a formative influence on the growth of his childhood ambitions. An influential if dimly perceived figure, she is remembered as a culture bearer within the Thompson family. She was a great music lover who often used to set out from Oxford in the trap, with one of her sons enlisted as driver, to hear a concert in Christchurch and return the same night. It was she who urged her son-in-law, Ernest Empson, to pursue his career as a musician.<sup>3</sup> Sophia Mathilda Lough was a well-educated woman, whose father was a schoolmaster. In 1860, as a girl of thirteen, she came with her parents from England to New Zealand. She married Charles Abel Thompson in 1868, and they brought up a large Victorian family of six sons and three daughters.<sup>4</sup>

Thompson's imaginative growth probably owed much to his sickly childhood. When he was a small boy, his mother read to him, expanding his knowledge and stimulating his perceptions. As a child he loved drawing and reading, and had formed dreams of going to Europe.<sup>5</sup> The values of male culture in frontier settlements of nineteenth century New Zealand can scarcely have nurtured such exceptional boyhood aspirations.<sup>6</sup> Early New Zealand was a gendered society with set expectations being established for the different roles of men and women. As a young man growing up in a frontier settlement, Thompson's sensitive nature and his independence were shown in his decision to become an artist.

As for dating Thompson's attraction to painting, the turning point in his life was the first time that he saw paintings by Petrus van der Velden. He was in Christchurch and remembered "in the part of Canterbury we lived in, oil paintings were unknown and when I saw this group of Van's work I was, as the saying goes, knocked right off my feet."<sup>7</sup> This was at the Art Society's Gallery in Durham Street in 1894. That year Van der Velden's group of eight oil paintings, including a landscape of the Otira Region, dominated the exhibition. The critic from the Lyttelton Times described Van der Velden's *The Loser* as "one of the best pictures ever shown at the Society's exhibition."<sup>8</sup> This experience was decisive and in the following year, when he was eighteen years old, Thompson registered at the Canterbury College School of Art and began taking lessons with Van der Velden in his studio in Durham Street.

Canterbury College School of Art opened in 1882 and its courses were based upon those developed by the Department of Science and Art at South Kensington in London. The School's priorities were the instruction of schoolteachers and

training in Design.<sup>9</sup> Its principal objects were to train art masters and mistresses for schools, and to give students skills in drawing, design, and modelling which they could usefully apply to trades and industry.

Students went through a rigid system which trained hand and eye. As a candidate for the Second Grade Drawing Certificate, Thompson began with such tasks as making an outline drawing of a dog's head, drawing the plan and elevation of a cup and saucer, and making an enlarged copy of a frieze.<sup>10</sup>

He advanced from the basic study of form by outline drawing to understanding its definition by tone and colour. From copying drawings, he went on to work from a variety of antique casts shipped from England, before progressing to the live model. His teacher in the life class was G.H.Elliott who had introduced the study of the nude for male students in 1887.<sup>11</sup> It was due to Elliott's efforts that opportunities to work from life increased and by the time Thompson was a student, the school provided eight hours of tuition in the nude class and five hours in the draped class.<sup>12</sup> [Fig.3] Elliott's classes were the

3  
Students and staff at Canterbury College School of Art, c.1896. Sydney Thompson is standing in the back row on the left. Seated in the centre of the front row is G.H.Elliott.



basis from which Thompson and his contemporaries, Annie Elizabeth Abbott (later Kelly), Cecil Kelly, Raymond McIntyre, Leonard Booth, Robert Procter and Charles Bickerton developed. His other teachers included Charles Kidson and Alfred Wilson Walsh.

Nevertheless, it was against an institutional background where Fine Arts were secondary that the impact of Van der Velden was felt by students of Thompson's generation. Van der Velden had arrived in Christchurch in 1890, and began to teach from his studio in Durham Street in 1893. The different atmosphere of Van der Velden's studio from that of the schoolrooms of the School of Art was striking. To an impressionable youth who had grown up on a farm at Oxford, Van der Velden revealed new horizons. As Thompson remembered:

*Van had a studio built in the orchard. This contained two studios really - the master worked in one and we students had the other. Van's studio was a sanctuary into which we entered with great reverence. I shall always remember the first impression it made on me. One which increased as time went on. One seemed to step from the streets of Christchurch into another world.<sup>13</sup>*

4  
Sydney L. Thompson, *The Saddle*  
c.1897.  
Oxford Historical Records Society



The 'master' and his studio with its European ambiance from "old oak carved cabinets with elaborate designs showing through the blackness of age, quaint doublets and old fashioned goblets and bric a brac" defined for his students their earliest notions of artistic life.<sup>14</sup>

For Thompson, however, it was not only Van der Velden's impact as a role model of the professional artist which was influential, it was also his painting. In *The Saddle* [Fig.4], a work which he later acknowledged to be his first painting, he emulated Van der Velden's translucent shadows and dark tonalities. Van der Velden's powers of characterisation seen in figure studies such as *Old Jack* (Dunedin Public Art Gallery) were significant influences on Thompson's genre painting and portraiture. One of his earliest paintings of the Maori, *Maori mother and child* (Cat.1) is marked by its naturalism. The woman has a worn, lined face, thick eyebrows with deeply set eyes and she meets the viewer with a stern expression; the painting conveys something of the woman's patient strength and a sense of her indomitable spirit. Van der Velden's vigorous realism and expressive technique were fundamental influences

on Thompson, and the characterisation which he brought to later works in Brittany such as *Au Pardon* (Cat.2) had its starting point in the Dutch tradition of nineteenth century realism.

In the work of Van der Velden, Thompson was introduced to an expressive technique in terms of brushwork and the handling of light. Although later he was to reject Van der Velden's dark tonalities for high-key tones and direct plein-air working, Thompson continued to aim at a broad and bold realization of his subject. This was emphasized by Van der Velden. At the School of Art under the South Kensington system, students progressed from one detailed rendering to the next. In contrast, Thompson recalled how Van der Velden emphasized the need for a unified effect and used to tell his students that a painting must be "one piece". It was Van der Velden who influenced Thompson's youthful commitment to art. He urged Thompson's parents to support their son's ambition by sending them a congratulatory note in 1897, when his pupil won three scholarships at the School of Art.[Fig.5]

Amongst his contemporaries in Christchurch, Thompson was counted as one of the most promising. The high point of his success in those days came from London when his painting *The Saddle* (Oxford Historical Records Society) took one of fifty silver medals awarded from 6,500 entries in a competition organized by the Science and Art Department in South Kensington. This constituted "the highest award that had ever

5  
Note from Petrus van der Velden to  
Mr and Mrs Thompson, 1897.

Christchurch  
February 8<sup>th</sup> 1897.

I wish to heartily congratulate  
you with Sydney's success at  
the School of Art

P. Van der Velden

To Mr & Mrs Thompson

been gained in the colony."<sup>15</sup> In Christchurch the shining silver medal sparkled with overseas success.

It was probably after Van der Velden left for Australia in 1898 that Sydney Thompson went back to Oxford and set up as a painter. With his father's help he built his first studio on the farm at Carleton. From the outside it looked like a classic New Zealand shed but it had been specially planned with a large window on the south side facing out across the garden to the homestead.[Fig.6]

His starting point as an artist was at the studio/shed on the farm - a structure which symbolizes the difficulties which faced an artist in establishing a career in late nineteenth century New Zealand. At this time in Christchurch the Art Society looked to Britain for its culture, and a tendency to buy British meant New Zealand painters suffered. The emergence of a generation of New Zealand painters with professional aspirations also placed an increasing load on the slender art market.

Thompson's decision to establish his career as a portrait and figure painter was an ambitious and realistic response to the state of the market. At least in portraiture the local artist had the chance to monopolize the market, and portraiture was known to be the "most lucrative branch of the profession."<sup>16</sup> Within several years Thompson had succeeded in being recognized as a portrait painter at a time when "New Zealand can hardly be said to be rich in colonial-born figure painters", and when "most of our figure painters come from the Old World."<sup>17</sup>

It was in this branch of painting that Thompson perceived the possibility of making his career and he set about its construction. The tastes of the Old World determined those of the New, and the desirability of European study and overseas success were compelling. With money that his father had settled on him to establish a career, he set out for Europe in 1900. When he sailed in August that year, Thompson - who had been raised as a colonial child - was also going 'Home'.

6  
Sydney Thompson's first studio at  
Carleton Run, Oxford.



Thompson's first trip lasted over four years; he left New Zealand on the S.S. Taluna on August 25 1900, changed ships in Melbourne, and arrived in London in late autumn.<sup>18</sup> Whilst in Europe, his painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London, and at the Paris Salon. When he returned to New Zealand in 1905, artistic progress and Old World success were rewarded with portrait commissions and purchases by the Art Societies. In the following year, he was appointed to the Canterbury College School of Art and took charge of the life class. The trip had furthered his education, and set him up as an artist.

However, the experience of his first overseas trip had even longer lasting consequences; his life in the artists' colony at Concarneau marked the beginning of a romantic involvement with Europe which drew him back there for the rest of his life. It ended only with his final journey to Concarneau in 1969 and his death there four years later.

In 1900, however, when Thompson sailed from New Zealand, he was a successful art student and a young man of means. [Fig.17] His father had given him £500, which constituted an immense sum.<sup>19</sup> A sense of its relative value comes from the knowledge that New Zealand artist Margaret Stoddart's weekly expenses were only one pound at this time - as Frances Hodgkins noted when she visited Stoddart at St Ives in 1902.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, no letters remain to record Thompson's feelings when he left the country. He emerges as a sensitive, serious young man, only 23 years old and setting out to realize a long term ambition.

Not long after his arrival in London, he began his art training at Heatherley's which was an apt choice for a young man with ambitions in portraiture and figure painting. Heatherley's specialized in preparing students for entry to the Royal Academy School and its teaching was consequently run along old-fashioned lines.<sup>21</sup> Students were provided with a model who would be decked out in an array of costumes to take on a variety of character roles.

Thompson's works from this time, included a *Tyrolean Peasant* (Robert McDougall Art Gallery), and ranged from the

portrayal of a lay brother to that of a parliamentary soldier from the Civil War. However, before nine months were over he had rejected British academic training and escaped to the country.

In the summer of 1901, he arrived at Staithes, a small fishing village on the Yorkshire coast and one of several artists' colonies which had developed in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century. Since the 1880s British painters, having worked in the artists' colonies in Brittany, began to settle in fishing villages along the coast in their own country. From Cockburnspath on the east coast of Scotland where James McLachlan Nairn had worked, right down to Newlyn in Cornwall on the south-west tip of England, artists painted the coastal landscape and the country people.<sup>22</sup>

Fishing villages were close-knit communities where traditional practices and customs had been developed by the fisherfolk to govern their survival. From the end of the nineteenth century, paintings which viewed this way of life as picturesque or uplifting had found a successful reception in London at shows of the New English Art Club and the Royal Academy. Thompson was in London early in 1901 and would have seen his first Academy exhibition with paintings depicting home moorings, clearing nets and running between tides.

About this time several New Zealanders were also working in artists' colonies in England. Walter Wright from Auckland made Newlyn his choice and just after the turn of the century, Margaret Stoddart, D.K. Richmond and Frances Hodgkins were painting in Cornwall.

Thompson made Staithes his painting pitch. It was readily accessible with the advent of the railway, which delivered visitors to a nearby station, from where they descended down a narrow track to the small village below. What attracted painters to Staithes were its picturesque qualities: old houses, with red-tiled or thatched roofs were huddled along narrow streets, a trestle bridge spanned a stream, and the lives of the villagers provided another range of themes. Staithes reached its height of popularity among artists between 1880 and 1910. At the time of Thompson's visit, its most well known residents were Laura and Harold Knight.<sup>23</sup> They had arrived in 1895, and until leaving for Cornwall in 1907, most of their time was spent at Staithes. At this time Laura Knight worked in a sombre realist manner, but recalled that it was at Staithes that she first experimented with painting in spots of colour to capture effects of atmosphere and light.<sup>24</sup>

Two works from this trip show how Thompson's painting was affected by working with artists at Staithes. Within his own development, they represent early attempts to capture atmospheric effects by using a varied range of colours. In *Entrance to o'er t'beck, Staithes* (Cat.21), light striking the red-tiled roofs of houses below is registered in a range of hues on the distant cliffs. Reflections on water, painted in fluent strokes of white, dominate the foreground of *Fishing boat on the river, Staithes* (Cat.22). The old trestle bridge in the background was a popular post-card view, and according to Laura Knight "an inspiration to every painter who came".<sup>25</sup>[Fig.7]

The summer in Staithes introduced Thompson to the picturesque themes which fishing villages presented. His companion was Charles Bickerton and for both young men Staithes was their first experience of working in an artists' colony. For Thompson, this experience introduced him to a pattern of existence which he made his way of life for many future years spent in Brittany.

At the end of the summer, rather than returning to the routines at Heatherley's, he chose instead to cross the Channel and enrol at the Académie Julian in Paris.

7  
Staithes Bridge, 1885.



After less than a year in England, Thompson followed the example of many British art students, by seeking out the possibilities which study in Paris offered. He recalled with terse simplicity that "all the world went to Paris in those days to study art."<sup>26</sup> At the turn of the century, Paris provided more opportunities than London for the student who wanted to concentrate on working directly from life. Its appeal also lay in its representation to the Anglo-Saxon mind, of a place not only for the pursuit of artistic study, but for the liberation of living the artist's life. What it represented to young artists of the time, was expressed clearly in "Student life in the Quartier Latin, Paris", an article in a contemporary magazine:

8  
Sydney Thompson, Charles Bickerton and William Leech, Paris, 1901. Thompson is in the centre, with Bickerton to his right.



*It is to Paris - wonderful Seine-side Paris - with its treasures of art, its freedom for the exercise of instincts in pursuance of the painter's craft and for the untrammelled development of talents, that the true student turns with longing. A year or two at Julian's...is worth a cycle of South Kensington, with all its "correctness" and plaster casts.<sup>27</sup>*

A photograph of Thompson, Charles Bickerton, and an Irish painter who was to become Thompson's life-long friend, William Leech, reflects the Bohemian ideals which governed an art student's life in Paris; attendance at the Académie Julian demanded at the very least from its foreign students a display of disregard for bourgeois convention.[Fig.8]

Foreign students were a significant presence at the Académie; when the English artist William Rothenstein arrived from London, he recalled:

*The Académie Julian was a congeries of studios crowded with students, the walls thick with palette scrapings, hot, airless and extremely noisy...Students from all over the world crowded the studios. Besides the Frenchmen, there were Russians, Turks, Egyptians, Serbs, Roumanians, Finns, Swedes, Germans, Englishmen and Scotchmen, and many Americans.<sup>28</sup>*

When the initial flow of artists to Europe began in the 1890s, New Zealand contributed its share. H.P.Sealy, who was there with C.F.Goldie and Thomas Ryan, remembered that, "even New Zealand, farthest probably of all countries, being almost the Antipodes of Paris, had at one time three representatives in one studio."<sup>29</sup> Dunedin painters Alfred O'Keefe and Daisy Fitchett also swelled the numbers in this decade, making up some of the first of many New Zealanders who continued the tradition into the following century.<sup>30</sup>

Artists were attracted by the chance to study in Paris under established masters from the French Academy. Whereas a language requirement denied many foreigners access to the French Academy School, the Académie Julian admitted all comers for a modest fee. Thompson's day began before seven o'clock when he caught the paddle steamer from Meudon, to arrive at the studios in the Rue du Dragon on the left bank, ready to commence work at eight. Every day was spent in drawing and painting from the model. This appealed to many New Zealand artists who had experienced limited access to life

9  
Sydney L.Thompson, *A French Girl*, painted at the Académie Julian, placed fourth in the portrait concours. (whereabouts unknown)



classes in art schools at home. A series of competitions held each month worked as an incentive for students to apply themselves to the daily routine of eight hours spent working from the model. It was at one of the monthly contests in portraiture that Thompson secured fourth place. [Fig.9]

Every day students worked independently, and on Monday and Saturday the professors made their visit and delivered their verdict. Fortunately for Thompson, his friend William Leech acted as his interpreter.

From its foundation in 1868, instruction instilled a respect for French academic art and the classical tradition.<sup>31</sup> When Thompson was a student, his professors were Bouguereau and Ferrier. However, William-Adolphe Bouguereau, Commander of the Legion of Honour and Member of the Academy, was by now seventy-seven years old.[Fig.10] It was Gabriel Ferrier who was seen by Thompson and Sealy as their lively and effective mentor.[Fig.11] Both 'masters' emphasized academic practice, upholding qualities of 'finish', restrained brushwork, firmly drawn contours, and the gradual registration of light and dark through subtle tonal gradations.

On his first visit to Paris, Thompson was introduced to traditional rather than modern directions in French painting. His experience was shared by the majority of foreigners whose cultural background presented barriers towards understanding the French avant-garde.

The 'masters' directed their students to follow traditional art. An essential part of training was at the Louvre, where, Thompson recalled, they studied Italian and French primitives,

10  
William-Adolphe Bouguereau.

11 (below right)  
Gabriel Ferrier in his studio.



and paintings from the Italian Renaissance; works representing a painterly direction were by Velazquez, Rembrandt and Hals. Their perusal of painters from more recent French art took in Millet, the Barbizon School, and extended as far as Bastien-Lepage.<sup>32</sup>

At the time of Thompson's first stay in Paris, it seemed to him that Impressionist painters were not widely appreciated, and that there were few opportunities for seeing their work. This was true in that official acceptance of Impressionist painting came late. It was not until 1895, over twenty years after the first Impressionist Exhibition, that Caillebotte's bequest of works by Monet, Degas and the group was finally accepted and put on view. When Thompson visited Paris for the International Exhibition in 1900, the Impressionists were given only a token representation. At this time, the best place to see Impressionist painting was at Durand-Ruel's, where Thompson went with students from Julian's to view the dealer's extensive collection. At this stage however, he showed no interest in relating his own painting to these directions. His work continued to develop from the initial direction formed in New Zealand when he responded to the dark tonalities of Van der Velden, rather than to the impressionistic approaches of Nairn and Walsh.

Before dismissing Thompson as old-fashioned it is worth bearing in mind that it was not until 1905 that the British public began to understand the distinctive character of French Impressionism which lay in its treatment of light in terms of varied touches of pure colour. At this time, New Zealand's artistic taste followed that of England where French Impressionists were only beginning to be accepted by the public and by officialdom in 1905, when Durand-Ruel organized a large exhibition of their painting in London.<sup>33</sup>

Between 1900-1904, Thompson's understanding of Impressionism was that of British painters. Impressionism meant either the tonal atmospherics of Whistler or the dashing brushwork of Sargent. These were the artists who had an impact on Thompson's painting at the end of his trip and after his return to New Zealand.

In Paris, Thompson related to traditional art and institutions. He recalled:

*Paris had only two big salons and they were both held in the Grand Palais. The Salon des Artistes Français represented the older tendency, the official point of view.*

*The Salon des Beaux-Arts was modern or was considered modern in the early days of the century. It had been formed by celebrated painters who thought the Artistes Français too old fashioned.*

*Of course, there was another salon, that of the Indépendants but no self respecting person would have much to do with it. At least, we students thought the Salon des Indépendants was really the exhibition of works that had been refused by the other two salons.<sup>34</sup>*

Appropriately, Thompson made his debut at the conservative Salon des Artistes Français in 1904, listed in the catalogue as a pupil of Bouguereau and Ferrier. He showed *Au Pardon* (Cat.2), and the portrait of Miss Edith Ingram, which, after his return to New Zealand, hung over the fireplace of his studio in Christchurch.[Fig.19]

*Au Pardon* was painted in Brittany where he made his base in 1902, after leaving Paris and the crowded studios of the Académie Julian.

12  
The Market, Concarneau.



*Brittany is essentially the land of the painter. It would be strange indeed if a country sprinkled with white caps, and set thickly in summer with the brightest blossoms of the fields should not attract artists in search of picturesque costume and scenes of pastoral life.*

H. Blackburn, *Breton Folk: An Artistic Tour in Brittany*, London, 1880, p.3.

*You cannot possibly do better than choose Concarneau in Brittany as a pitch for your easel. Whether you intend to paint marines, landscapes, interiors, or figures, that is the place for you; if you want, on the other hand, to laze away a month or two, Concarneau affords you every facility for so doing. You may reckon on finding pleasant artist companions, both English and foreign, in the town, and at the village of Pont-Aven ten miles off. Then again, you will live right royally at a cost of five francs per diem, or even less.*

Frank L. Emmanuel, "Letters to Artists, Brittany as a sketching ground",  
*The Studio*, IV, 1894, p.180.

After making a grand tour of Italy with some American students, Thompson made his way to Brittany intending to stay for the summer before returning to Paris. However, Concarneau became his base for the remainder of his stay. [Figs. 12 and 13]

In 1902 when he arrived in Brittany, the region attracted artists in great numbers from around the world. Its appeal was based largely on a myth constructed by bourgeois urban society. Rapid changes in city life, resulting from modernization and commercial and industrial expansion, led to the creation in the last decades of the nineteenth century of the rural ideal of a life lived close to nature. The urban middle class created a myth of the countryside where peasantry and fisherfolk were seen as the embodiment of enduring and worthy values. Since the 1860s, this outlook had brought artists in increasing numbers in pursuit of nature and the primitive ideal, and Brittany's appeal reached its height in the late nineteenth century.<sup>35</sup>

Its attractions drew a wide range of painters: Monet came in 1886 to paint its wild, rocky coastline, Jules Breton painted the religious ceremonies of its people for a sophisticated Paris audience, while Bouguereau and the salon painters transformed its washerwomen and fisherfolk into acceptable classical ideals. Its most famous visitor was Paul Gauguin who arrived in 1886 at the small village of Pont-Aven, an event which has been written into histories of modern art for its significance to Post-Impressionism. To Gauguin, an escapee from modern civilisation, Brittany was the first stop-over in search of a primitive ideal which ended in disillusion in the Marquesas Islands of the South Pacific.

Brittany appealed strongly to artists from the New World, and many Americans, often in flight from their own culture, arrived on a nostalgic journey at artists' colonies. Coming from the New World, they were susceptible to Brittany's historic charm and age-old landscape. American artists first colonized Pont-Aven in the 1860s and from the 1880s, many of them began to visit the fishing village of Concarneau.<sup>36</sup>

For them, as for a New Zealand artist, the completion of a successful painting and its reception in a French salon was a means of securing a career at home. The drift of New

13  
The Harbour, Concarneau.



Zealanders to Europe only began in the 1890s, and Thompson can be counted as the first New Zealander to take up residence in the artists' colonies of Brittany. Subsequently, Brittany was marked on the sketching routes of many New Zealand artists.

When Thompson stayed there, its attractions included the opportunity of living amongst other artists and seeing a variety of work.<sup>37</sup> He recalled meeting the Glasgow impressionist, John Lavery, and the marine painter, Julius Olsson. At this time, the most important figure in expatriate circles was Alexander Harrison, who had succeeded in breaking into the exclusive French art world, and was being lionized at salon exhibitions for his large scale sea studies and plein-air paintings of nudes. He had been a friend of Whistler and painted at Concarneau with Bastien-Lepage and Marie Bashkirtseff.<sup>38</sup> Another American was Charles Fromuth, who had arrived in Concarneau in 1890 and stayed for the rest of his life. In 1901 Fromuth's reputation at Concarneau soared, when Auguste Rodin came to visit him at his studio. Another painter was Alfred Delobbe, a pupil of Bouguereau, who specialized in paintings of idealized, young peasants which hung in the official salon. Thompson recalled meeting these artists on his arrival at Concarneau.

At Concarneau painters worked in a variety of styles and unlike nearby Pont-Aven, Concarneau never produced a school of painting. An academic lead came from its long-standing residents: Alfred Guillou, a native of Concarneau, and his brother-in-law, Théophile Deyrolle. Both were representatives of academic tradition and took up residence in the 1870s.

Confronted by a variety of artistic possibilities at Concarneau, Thompson concentrated on figure studies and retained the dark tonalities which he learned as a student of Van der Velden. His subjects were typical of their times when peasant paintings made up a significant presence at yearly exhibitions at the Salon des Artistes Français and the Salon des Beaux-Arts. The piety of peasantry had become a common theme, conveying reassurance to prosperous Parisian salon-goers. *Au pardon* (Cat.2) was a study of an old man in a reverential attitude at a Breton religious observance; *The crucifix* (Cat.4) featured a young peasant girl turning her rosary beads before a crucifix. These paintings fitted into what one nineteenth century commentator described as "the innumerable peasant studies which find their way to Paris, to sell well and adorn the walls of luxurious houses, where peasants are myths."<sup>39</sup> However, what stands out in Thompson's work is the strength of characterisation in

the portrayal of the peasant and the avoidance of sentimentality in his treatment of the young woman. In his Breton paintings (Cats.2-4), there is the same quality of realism, derived from the Dutch tradition, which had empowered earlier work done in New Zealand, such as *Maori mother and child* (Cat.1).

The favourite themes of the peasant genre determined that his models were old people, children and young women, who found posing for painters supplemented their meagre income.[Fig.14] The economy of Concarneau depended on the fishing industry and the vagaries of the sardine catch. Men fished and women worked in factories, cleaning and processing the catch. Conditions of life were dismal, and were remarked upon by more than one visiting painter.

H.Jones Thaddeus, an Irish artist, recalled how five or six families were often crowded into one house without sanitation and with bad water.<sup>40</sup> On Thompson's first visit to Concarneau, he was struck by the extreme hardship of the people which was brought home to him when a little girl who was his model died suddenly from disease.<sup>41</sup> Conditions of poverty meant disease and drunkenness were commonplace. However, painting of this period did not confront the distasteful aspects of social conditions or respond by articulating political protest. Reasons are not hard to find. Artists working in villages at this period were drawn there by a myth of the countryside which celebrated rural life; their cultural outlook was based upon nostalgia for a way of life which, with the onset of the twentieth century, was to come gradually to an end.

Coming from New Zealand in search of European traditions, Thompson was enthralled by the picturesque scene. The peasant and fisherfolk existed to him and fellow New Zealanders, as cultural symbols of an age-old European past. Nostalgia for a European tradition drew him and his contemporaries to the other side of the world. On his return to Christchurch, he explained how he had discovered at Concarneau, "quaint fisherfolk, with their picturesque boats, and in the other villages characteristic types particularly valuable to figure painters."<sup>42</sup>

The variety of models in Concarneau made this a valuable period in his development. He also completed several outdoor sketches on this trip: including *Harvest, Brittany* (Aigantighe Art Gallery, Timaru) and *Dublin Bay* (University of Canterbury). For many painters, Concarneau's appeal lay in its possibilities for plein-air work and Thompson joined his fellow artists sketching at the market place and along the quaysides.[Fig.15]

14

Artist's model, Concarneau, c.1902.





15  
Sydney Thompson sketching at the  
market, Concarneau, c.1903.

Two small studies of the harbour, dating from this time, reveal an interest in atmospheric effects and pictorial values: in *Boats in the harbour, Concarneau* (Cat.24) his placing of the boats at the top of the panel meant that almost two thirds of the composition was given over to a study of their reflections in the water. In *Outer harbour, evening, Concarneau* (Cat.23), tonal harmonies of deep crimson and green, and the arrangement of masts set against sea and sky, suggest a debt to Whistler. Thompson was familiar with Whistler's painting and Fromuth's pastels which emphasized similar pictorial values. He acquired one of Fromuth's pastels for himself, *Dock Study with Boats* [Fig.16], which he showed in 1905 at the Canterbury Society of Arts' exhibition. It hung on the wall of his studio in Christchurch until it was given to the Art Society.[Fig.19]

After his return to New Zealand, he continued painting outdoors, capturing impressions of atmospheric effects in small tonal sketches such as *Seascape, New Zealand* (Cat.58) in 1907. These studies suggest that he worked in different styles simultaneously, registering his perceptions impressionistically

16  
C. Fromuth, *Dock study with boats.*  
Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch



in outdoor landscape sketches whilst retaining traditional dark tonalities for figure work in the studio.

Although Thompson was based at Concarneau between 1902-1904, he made visits to London and Glasgow as well as to Dublin with the Irish painter, William Leech, and these broadened his knowledge of contemporary painting. He saw work by Whistler, as well as by John Singer Sargent, Augustus John, William Orpen and Walter Sickert, who all represented progressive directions in British art at the time. It was, however, the time spent painting in Concarneau and his contact with the colony's underlying ideals which proved to be influential, and which had a decisive effect on his life and art.



17  
Sydney Thompson, 1900.  
*Alexander Turnbull Library,  
Wellington*

18 (opposite)  
Sydney Thompson, 1906.



In 1900 when Thompson sailed for Europe he was a young art student. His photograph appeared in *The Weekly Press*, along with an announcement of the departure for Europe of "A successful New Zealand Art Student: Mr S.L. Thompson".<sup>43</sup> It presented a serious-minded, earnest, young man.[Fig.17] Six years later another photograph appeared with the caption "A successful New Zealand Artist".[Fig.18] Its appearance marked Thompson's success at 'Home' and his appointment as art teacher at the Canterbury College School of Art.<sup>44</sup> His change of identity from art student to artist was signalled by his distinguished appearance, posed with brush and palette.

In the same article, another photograph showed him in his studio, at 97 Cambridge Terrace, which he had bought after his return.[Fig.19] Breton paintings, furniture and props established the studio's European style and above the fire-place the portrait of *Portrait of Miss Ingram* (private collection) which had been hung at the Paris salon, was a testament to his Old World success.

Returning home brought recognition. He was greeted as a successful artist, and appointed in 1906 to the School of Art as life-class master, "late of London and the Académie Julian, Paris". He had fellow artists, many of them friends from student days, to work with. Together, they formed an Artists Sketch Club, whose members included Cecil Kelly, Raymond McIntyre, Alfred Walsh, William Menzies Gibb, Leonard Booth, Edwin Bartley, A. Kennaway Henderson and his travelling companion, Charles Bickerton. They met regularly and engaged models and worked from life in his studio.[Fig.20]

*Study of female nude* (Cat.10) was painted at one of these sessions. In this study, the dark tonalities learned from Van der Velden gave way to the influence of Whistler and *Japonisme*. In Christchurch, the subject of a female nude, the choice of tonal greys and greens, and the decorated screen dividing the background and halting recession, all declared Thompson's allegiance to advanced artistic practice.

As well as teaching, Thompson concentrated on securing a career as a portraitist. His standing had been enhanced with the acceptance at the Paris salon of his *Portrait of Miss Ingram*

(private collection, compare Cat.5), and he set out to build on his promising reputation. The attraction of portraiture was boosted by its rise in status at 'Home'. When Thompson was in London, portraiture's prestige reached its height with Sargent responding to Edwardian society's taste for fashionable likenesses. As Thompson later recalled, there was universal admiration for Sargent's brilliant rendering:

*His chief charm was his daring technique. No-one before him had ever painted with such large brushstrokes. This we all thought wonderful in those days.*<sup>45</sup>

When Thompson returned from Europe, he brought back with him some of the stylish manners from 'Home'. Portraits of women were his most successful. His portrayals of Miss Ingram captured an appealing mix of innocence and youthful feeling (Cat.5). In *Lady Ferguson* (Cat.6), he displayed the kind of freedom and flourish of the brush which was fashionable in its

19  
Sydney Thompson in his studio  
at 97 Cambridge Terrace, Christ-  
church, 1906.





day. The sketch-like quality gave her an air of naturalness and ease which was appropriate for a private commission and family portrait.

*Lady Mclean* (Cat.7) was a publicly commissioned portrait and treated with more formal conventions. However, the portrait included touches of Thompson's stylish technique: the lace was reserved for a show of his confident handling, and the stole for a display of virtuoso brushwork. The most ambitious work was *Marjory, Jean and Nancy, daughters of R.E.McDougall Esq.* (Cat.8), a large group portrait where the composition drew on recent pictorial design by setting the three little girls casually against the geometric divisions of their oak-panelled room.

The Art Societies responded enthusiastically to his painting. *Au pardon* (Cat.2) which had been exhibited at the Paris salon, was bought in 1905 by the Canterbury Society of Arts for £31-10-0. This was the highest price ever given by the Society for a work by a New Zealand painter, and exceeded the price of £26-5-0 paid to Goldie in 1902 for *A hot day* (Robert McDougall Art Gallery). At this time, twenty, or even ten guineas, was regarded as a good price for a painting by a local artist.<sup>46</sup> Judging by sales and his reception in the press, Thompson was easily the most successful painter in Canterbury early this century.

By 1908, the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts had acquired two paintings: *The crucifix* (Cat.4) and *La vieille Bretonne* (Cat.3). Significantly, it was his Breton painting

which secured his success with the Art Societies. In the French salons of the Third Republic such paintings conveyed a conservative message to the urban bourgeoisie. Within the different context of the Art Society exhibition, paintings of the European peasant carried a nostalgic message to colonial viewers.

At the turn of the century middle class society constructed its pictorial mythology around the European peasant and the old-time Maori. After his return, Thompson did attempt some subjects from colonial life and *The Pioneer's Story* (whereabouts unknown) was his major exhibit at the New Zealand International Exhibition (Christchurch, 1906-07). However, painters in the late colonial period created romanticized images of the peasant rather than building up an imagery of pioneering times. No rural idyll was built around frontier life. Milling the forests and burning the bush were too close for most people to want to mythologize. At the end of the century in New Zealand, more than half the population lived in the country, and there was no large urban group who looked to artists for nostalgic paintings of rural life. Given the pattern of New Zealand settlement, nostalgia was generated by 'Home'. Although by this time most of the non-Maori population was born here, immigrants still made up the majority of the adult population over fifty years of age.<sup>47</sup>

On Thompson's return to New Zealand, painting the Maori rather than the pioneer became a more significant subject for him. In 1908 Goldie's nostalgic portrayals of the old-time Maori had secured his position as the most popular painter in New Zealand.<sup>48</sup> When Thompson showed at the Canterbury Society of Arts *A Maori Belle* (whereabouts unknown) in 1908, and *Aged Warrior* (whereabouts unknown) in 1910, the titles fell within established categories of the time which tended to idealize young Maori women and celebrate the old-time warriors of the past. However, several surviving works such as *Maori Mother and Child* (Cat.1) do show that his characterizations had a broader range and came from a deeper appreciation for the individuality of his sitters. *Untitled (Portrait of a Maori)* (Cat.9) is an intense realization of the man's powerful presence, painted in a style derived from northern realist tradition.

Many paintings of the Maori were made between 1906 and 1910 when Thompson travelled north for the summer to the King Country and stayed at Tokaanu, near Lake Taupo. Goldie and Ryan also worked in this region but Thompson recalled that it was through his friendship with the Te Heu Heu family

21  
Kaitaka, presented by the Ngati  
Tuwharetoa to Sydney Thompson.  
Detail of border with taniko design.  
Canterbury Museum





22  
Maude Ethel Coe.

23  
Life class at Canterbury College  
School of Art, taken by Sydney  
Thompson, 1906-1910. Thompson  
is standing far right.



that he found sitters who were willing to pose for his paintings. Returning regularly during the summer months, he became accepted by the people and was known as Tamehana.<sup>49</sup> He painted tribal elders and in return the Ngati Tuwharetoa recognized him as a rangatira and presented him with four cloaks, a kaitaka (fine dress cloak), as well as making him three korowai which were delivered to his home in Christchurch three years later.<sup>50</sup> The cloaks stayed with him during his expatriate years in France and at the age of ninety-one he presented them to the Canterbury Museum. In 1929, in a painting of his children in his studio at Brittany, in one corner of the room was a painting of a French landscape with an almond tree in blossom, and beside it - the kaitaka he had been given by the Ngati Tuwharetoa (Cat.17).[Fig.21]

However, it was the painter's life in Brittany which retained its hold on his imagination and after six years he returned to France. In New Zealand, being an artist had meant living for the most part as a teacher and a portrait painter.[Fig.23] In 1911, he married Miss Maude Ethel Coe, and together they returned to Europe.[Fig. 22] In Ethel, Sydney Thompson found a remarkable woman and the perfect companion. She

was devoted to him as well as independent enough to face the challenges which their life together in France brought her. As the daughter of English colonists who settled in Canterbury, Europe was not unfamiliar to her. She had made her first trip Home in 1904, toured the continent and celebrated her nineteenth birthday in Florence. She had been an art student herself, and after her marriage committed herself to supporting her husband's ambition to become a painter. Their return to France in 1911 began as a romantic journey which led back to Concarneau and its rural rhythms of life. Something of the spirit in which the journey was undertaken is suggested by a sketch by one of Thompson's colleagues at the School of Art. It showed him after his recent marriage, sailing with "hys bride" for "the fayre lande of France." [Fig.24]



24

E.M.Lovell-Smith, *The Departure of Sir Sydney L. Thompson, April, 1911.*

University of Canterbury, School of Fine Arts

- 1 Index of Church Registers, Canterbury Public Library.
- 2 See *Cyclopedia of New Zealand: Canterbury*, Christchurch, 1903, Vol.3, Part 2, p.493; *Macdonald Dictionary of Canterbury Biography*: Charles Abel Thompson. Canterbury Museum; O.A.Gillespie, *Oxford: The First Hundred Years*, Oxford, 1954, p.255.
- 3 Janet Paul and Neil Roberts, *Evelyn Page-Seven Decades*, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, 1986, p.20.
- 4 Records supplied by Mme Y.A.Thompson. Two daughters also died in infancy.
- 5 *Christchurch Star* 12 August 1967, p.11.
- 6 See Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country*, Auckland, 1987.
- 7 S.L.Thompson, "2nd Talk 4 September 1940", manuscript in possession of Mme Y.A.Thompson.
- 8 T.L.R.Wilson, *Petrus van der Velden (1837-1913)*, Sydney, 1979, Vol.1, p.42.
- 9 G.H.Elliott made this clear in his yearly report, by stating that although facilities had improved, and "the school is better equipped for teaching fine art, it must be remembered that fully seventy five per cent of our students do not come for this purpose, and this, I do not hesitate to say, will always remain so for many years." *Appendix to the Journal of the House of Representatives*, 1889, Vol.2 E-7, pp.4-5.
- 10 Examples of exercises from the system are taken from F.Graeme Chalmers, "South Kensington and the Colonies: David Blair of New Zealand and Canada", *Studies in Art Education*, 1984, Vol.26 No.2, p.71.
- 11 *Appendix to the Journal of the House of Representatives*, 1888, Vol.2 E-7, p.10.
- 12 The inadequacies of training at the School of Art were distressingly apparent to G.H.Elliott in 1889 when he contrasted the position of his students, who were restricted to only four hours a week of life drawing, with that of equivalent students in Britain or America where "classes are held from four to six days per week, four hours each day." *Appendix to the Journal of the House of Representatives*, 1889, Vol.2 E-7, p.5.
- 13 S.L.Thompson, "2nd Talk 4 September 1940", manuscript in possession of Mme Y.A.Thompson.
- 14 See T.L.R.Wilson, p.43.
- 15 *Appendix to the Journal of the House of Representatives*, 1900, Vol.2 E-8, p.8.
- 16 *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine*, November 1901, Vol.V No.2, p.147.
- 17 *Ibid.* p.144.
- 18 Passenger list and shipping timetable. Artists File: S.L.Thompson, Robert McDougall Art Gallery.
- 19 *Christchurch Star*, 12 August 1967, p.11.
- 20 E.H.McCormick, *The Expatriate: A Study of Frances Hodgkins*, Wellington, 1954, p.69.
- 21 For Heatherley's see: C.Neve, "Heatherley's", *Country Life*, 17 August 1978, pp.448-50; 31 August 1978, pp.570-71.
- 22 See Michael Jacobs, *The Good and Simple Life: Artists Colonies in Europe and America*, Oxford, 1985.
- 23 P.Phillips, "Early Days and Hard Times at Staithes", *Art and Antiques*, 1 October 1977, pp.22-24.
- 24 Laura Knight, *Oil Paint and Grease Paint*, London, 1936, p.87.
- 25 *Ibid.* p.107.
- 26 Undated and untitled ms. in possession of Mme Y.A.Thompson.
- 27 Clive Holland, "Student Life in the Quartier Latin, Paris", *The Studio*, October 1902, Vol.XXV11, No.115, p.33.
- 28 Mary Lago, ed., *William Rothenstein: Men*

- and *Memories 1872-1938*, Columbia, 1978, pp.40-41.
- 29 H.P.Sealy, "L'Académie Julian, Paris", *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine*, October 1901, Vol.V No.1, pp.21-22.
- 30 P.Entwisle, *William Mathew Hodgkins and his Circle*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 1984, p.95.
- 31 Catherine Fehrer, "New light on the Académie Julian and its founder Rodolphe Julian", *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, Mai-Juin 1984, 6 période C111, pp.207-216.
- 32 Undated and untitled ms. in possession of Mme Y.A.Thompson.
- 33 Few works sold and when an attempt to acquire an Impressionist painting for the British nation raised the requisite £165 the trustees of the National Gallery refused the offer. They finally accepted a work by Boudin. Frances Spalding, *British Art since 1900*, London, 1986, pp.20-21.
- 34 S.L.Thompson, "Exhibitions in France", undated ms. in possession of Mme Y.A.Thompson.
- 35 Michael Jacobs, pp.42-87.
- 36 See David Sellin, *Americans in Brittany and Normandy 1860-1910*, Phoenix, 1982.
- 37 *The Weekly Press*, 11 April 1906, p.34.
- 38 Largely forgotten today, Alexander Harrison's reputation was enormous in his time. In England, Dewhurst believed he painted "some of the most successful Impressionist work of the last fifteen years." W.Dewhurst, *Impressionist Painting*, London, 1904, p.92.
- 39 Blanche Willis Howard, *Guenn*, Cambridge, 1883, p.235.
- 40 H.Jones Thaddeus, *Recollections of a Court Painter*, London, 1912, p.33.
- 41 Conversation with Mme Y.A.Thompson, June, 1987.
- 42 *The Weekly Press*, 11 April 1906, p.35.
- 43 *The Weekly Press*, 17 October 1900, p.9.
- 44 *The Weekly Press*, 11 April 1906, p.35.
- 45 Undated and untitled ms. in possession of Mme Y.A.Thompson.
- 46 *The Press*, 11 March 1905, p.9.
- 47 *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, ed. W.H.Oliver, Auckland, 1987, p.135; Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand*, Harmondsworth, 1980, p.327.
- 48 Alistair Taylor and Jan Glen, *C.F.Goldie: His Life and Painting*, Martinborough, 1977, p.24.
- 49 Although Thompson's visits to Tokaanu were between 1906-10, Mr J.T.Asher recalled that "my late Grand-Uncle, Takuira Wakautu who died in August 1947 spoke of Tamehana who lived in Tokaanu in the early part of this century however, other than this reference by Takuira, I have no other knowledge of Tamehana or Mr Thompson." Letter to the author from Mr J.T. Asher, Tuwharetoa Trust Board, 7 March 1990.
- 50 Conversation with Mme Y.A.Thompson, June, 1987, and transcript of recorded interview between S.L.Thompson, Annette Thompson and Beverly Simmons, 28 April 1967.

## 2 · LIVING ABROAD

When Sydney and Ethel Thompson left New Zealand in 1911, they planned to spend several years in Europe. War intervened and what began as a short stay grew into over twenty years residence in France. It was not until 1923 that they made a brief return to New Zealand, and only in 1933 that they finally decided to leave France and come home.

During this period Thompson developed his distinctive approach to painting. He began working out-of-doors and directly expressing his response to a scene through varied brushwork and harmonies of tone and colour. He experimented with a range of approaches derived from Post-Impressionist painting, and introduced a more structural composition into his work.

Subjects were found in the regional life and landscape of Brittany and Provence, and a lifestyle evolved which was structured around his painting. During these years Thompson and his family followed an itinerant pattern of existence, often spending summer and autumn in Concarneau, and then going south to Provence for the winter and spring.

During twenty years abroad his early ambition to become a figure painter and portraitist in colonial New Zealand faded; when he returned home he had become a painter of picturesque landscapes of the Old World.

When Sydney Thompson arrived in Paris in September 1911, it was only seven years since he had made his debut at the Paris salon as a student of Bouguereau and Ferrier. Whereas on his first trip he had confidently disregarded the exhibitions of the Indépendants, on his second visit it was no longer possible to ignore the explorations made by modern movements.

His starting point was the Académie de la Grande Chaumière where he took lessons from Lucien Simon. To Frances Hodgkins, Simon was an artist who played a mediating role amongst competing artistic directions in Paris during the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> He won respect as a teacher for his artistic freedom and rather than imposing his method and style, he was known for encouraging painters to discover their own approach.<sup>2</sup> It was a liberating doctrine for Thompson when he was confronting the challenge of changing artistic direction. Thompson shared Simon's interest in the portrayal of Breton life and would have responded to the broad vigorous handling in his work.[Fig.25]

During six months in Paris Thompson first became aware of



25

Lucien Simon, *Chevaux dételés*  
(Unharnessing horses).

Robert McDougall Art Gallery,  
Christchurch

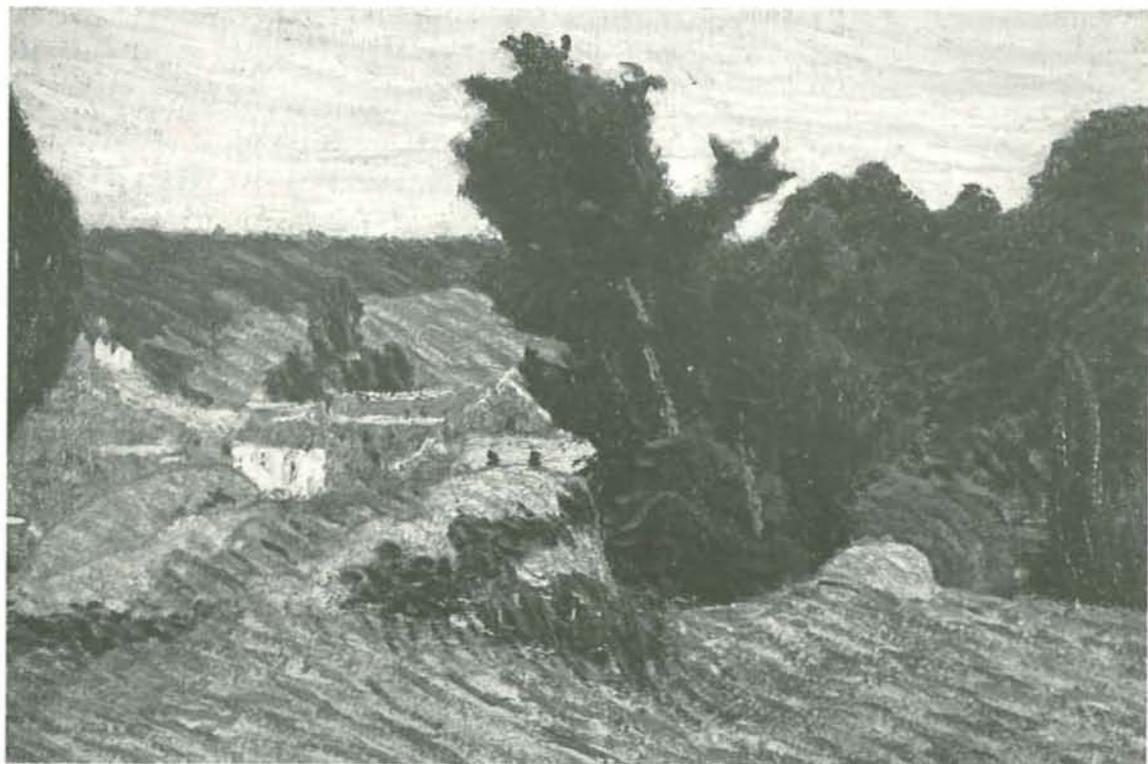
Cézanne and the varied stylistic currents represented by Post-Impressionism.<sup>3</sup> He met Barne and Milner Kite, who belonged to the expatriate circle of the Irish Post-Impressionist, Roderic O'Connor.<sup>4</sup> Barne exhibited at the progressive Salon d'Automne and was well known to O'Connor and Clive Bell.<sup>5</sup> Kite was a life-long friend of O'Connor and specialized in impressionistic scenes of Breton life.<sup>6</sup> Thompson's contact with both men suggests that he may have become aware of O'Connor's experimental approach to painting. O'Connor, who had met Gauguin in 1894 and was familiar with Van Gogh's work, became a leading figure in the expatriate world. He was exceptional for the way he had responded to radical directions in French painting by adopting an expressive use of colour and brushwork.[Fig.26]

Thompson renewed his old friendship with William Leech whom he had met on his first trip to Europe. Leech was a painter with a life-long interest in light and colour.[Fig.28] A recent exhibition of Irish Impressionist painters has revealed how Leech responded to the work of Van Gogh, Bonnard and Matisse, and although he never attained O'Connor's brilliance, Leech emerged with O'Connor as one of the "great 'colourists'" of Irish art.<sup>7</sup> During Thompson's years in France, Leech often visited him at Concarneau, and they painted together frequently in Provence as well as in Tunisia in 1919-20.<sup>8</sup>

New Zealand painters in Paris provided another forum for discussing new developments in painting. Ethel Thompson referred to frequent meetings her husband had with Hodgkins, Owen Merton and Cora Wilding. Frances Hodgkins' casual reference to how Thompson had called at her studio, suggests that this may have been one of a number of similar encounters.<sup>9</sup> At this time Hodgkins was an enthusiast for what seemed new and challenging in French art and it is likely that her views were communicated directly, or via the New Zealand network, to newly arrived painters. She had been living in Paris since 1908 and acted as mentor for Cora Wilding on her arrival. Cora Wilding recalled how Frances Hodgkins had directed her to see the work of Picasso, Cézanne, Gauguin and other Post-Impressionists.<sup>10</sup>

For Thompson in 1911, the challenge of the new came from Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art. After six months in Paris, he left for Concarneau to work out his new artistic direction.<sup>11</sup>

His pursuit of new aims meant a change in working methods. Instead of continuing with studio practice, he worked



26  
Roderic O'Connor, *La Ferme*, c.1892.  
Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland

out-of-doors concentrating on capturing colour and movement. When Maud Sherwood (née Kimbell) visited him in Concarneau in August 1913, he was in the midst of revisions. She recalled having seen “hundreds of Mr Thompson’s sketches” but also noted her disappointment in his work which was heightened only by the fact that she had always regarded him at home, as “one of our best N.Z. painters”.<sup>12</sup> Thompson’s encounter with modern directions led to changes in his painting which failed to come up to Maud Sherwood’s, and possibly his own, expectations. His efforts to come to terms with new developments also meant jeopardizing his reputation in New Zealand where taste lagged several steps behind. Maud Sherwood and Thompson went over the difficulties which working abroad and returning home combined to pose. Painters of this generation were the first to face the problem of trying to relate to modern developments in Europe whilst continuing to maintain links with New Zealand. This dilemma is reflected in Sherwood’s account of their conversation:

*Mr Thompson said the last thing he sent out the press gave an awful drubbing and I must agree with Miss Hodgkins that*

*great modern art would be as high above the heads of 999 out of 1000 New Zealanders as the stars.*

*They would not understand or appreciate it. I feel sad to think it. I certainly do and suppose it is only what one must expect from a young country.<sup>13</sup>*

The earliest major work to show how Impressionist sensibilities had transformed his practice was *The Woman in White* (Cat. 11), painted at Concarneau in the garden at La Glacière, where he and his wife lived for monthly intervals between the summer of 1913 and 1919.<sup>14</sup> This work is undated but its closeness in style to a painting dated 1913, *The Artist's Wife and Son in the garden at La Glacière* [Fig. 27], suggests that it was painted about this time. *The Woman in White* is a more ambitious work and probably dates from the summer of 1914 or even 1915.

His wife Ethel acted as model and posed beneath the trees beside the blue gate in their garden. Maud Sherwood had visited them in the summer of 1913, and described La Glacière as "a delightful little place" where they all enjoyed such "a jolly tea in the garden." The subject stemmed from themes beloved by Monet whose paintings in the 1870s of elegant women in sunlit gardens, first defined the halycon world we associate with Impressionism.

Women in white dresses became a celebrated theme for Impressionist painters to display bold and adventurous colour effects. The New Zealand artist Frances Hodgkins took her inspiration from Impressionism in *The Hill Top* (National Art Gallery, Wellington), which she painted whilst living in France between 1908 and 1912.

In *The Woman in White* Sydney Thompson revised the making of his paintings. Setting up his easel and working out-of-doors, he captured a range of colour effects perceived in the sunlight and shadow of his surroundings. He added bright colours to his palette, contrasting red and green to intensify the brilliance of flowers and foliage, and using blues and yellows in the white dress. However, in the figure's carefully modelled face and in his retention of earth colours, conservative influences continued. This kind of duality was not uncommon in the work of British painters at this time and appears in a painting by Leech which treated a similar subject of women dressed in white in a sunlit garden, *A Convent Garden, Brittany*. [Fig. 28]

*The Woman in White* related to international trends and

showed how Thompson, after four years as an expatriate artist in Europe, had joined British, Irish and American artists in working within popular conventions of salon Impressionism. The work marked a significant development in which Thompson first applied new techniques to figure painting.

La Glacière was the site for a number of paintings where the portrayal of the figure took second place to his pursuit of overall colour effects. After moving to France, Thompson continued to paint portraits of family and friends but gradually he moved away from portraiture and figure painting. In *Garden, La Glacière, Concarneau* (Cat.40), he captured the varied hues and tones made by dappled sunlight across the path and by light striking the far walls.

After arriving at Concarneau, he worked at the harbour on a series of small sketches in which he developed his command of new technical procedures by restricting the size of his work,



27

Sydney L. Thompson, *The Artist's Wife and Son in the garden at La Glacière, Concarneau*, 1913.  
(Whereabouts unknown)

and by limiting the subject. Art critic James Shelley described how Thompson concentrated for several years on working almost exclusively at small studies.<sup>15</sup> A number of these sketches, such as *Tunnyboat in the harbour, Concarneau* (Cat.30), are fluently handled and register light and atmospheric effects by predominantly tonal means, akin to the plein-air sketches of British Impressionists. *Plage des Dames, Concarneau* (Cat.29) shared similar interests in light and atmosphere but differed in its theme drawn from middle class beach life. For Thompson this was a rare excursion into modernity; he was drawn to the harbour and the lives of fisherfolk rather than to the beach to paint the fashionable aspects of life at Concarneau. However, both sketches shared similar treatment and were painted on the same small scale which might suggest their early date. According to Shelley, Thompson progressed by working systematically on increasingly large formats.



28  
W.J. Leech,  
*A Convent Garden, Brittany.*  
National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin



29  
The return of the fishing fleet,  
Concarneau.

Thompson's perceptions of the harbour went beyond the scenic to an analysis of the work along the quaysides. The theme for much of his painting was the interrelationship of fisherfolk with the harbour. Consequently a number of sketches are figure studies in which he drew with the brush and captured in a few strokes a range of characteristic poses and movements. (Cats. 25-27) In what may be assigned on stylistic grounds as the latest of these studies, *Fishermen on the slip at the Digue, Concarneau* (Cat. 27), heightened colour and bold directional brushwork went beyond Impressionism. By giving prominence to the figures and treating them and their surroundings with the same dynamics of colour and brushwork, he expressed his sense of the powerful links existing between fisherfolk, boats, sea and sky.

Sketches were his preparation for paintings on a large scale at the end of the First World War and during the 1920s; the harbour became much less attractive to him as a theme after its modernization which began in 1934.<sup>16</sup> The major event of life at Concarneau was the return of the fishing fleet which

provided the key themes of his painting: tunny boats with coloured sails, the arrival of sardine boats, counting the catch, unloading boats and loading the waiting carts. Thompson recalled how the harbour used to come alive with the arrival of the fleet:

*...sometimes in one day 2 or 300 tunny boats would arrive and that meant between 1400 to 2000 fishermen from all parts of the coast living crowded on the wharfs and in the cafés. Men excited by having made a big catch or by not having caught anything.<sup>17</sup>*

In 1921 Thompson's home and studio were near the entrance to the harbour, and the return of the fishing fleet was a familiar and magnificent sight from his balcony. [Fig.29] The studio was ideally situated for observing the life of the harbour and for sharpening his perceptions of light and colour.[Fig.30]

Many paintings were completed at La Digue and along the quayside near his home which looked out across the harbour to the wooded banks opposite. He composed *Untitled* (Cat.35) in colour and tonal harmonies, relating the sails of boats to a touch of bright red in the foreground. The handling is broad and free, showing the painting's light ground which adds to its overall luminosity.

**30**  
Unloading tunny fish at La Digue, Concarneau. Thompson's studio was in the building overlooking the harbour, next to the Atlantic-Hotel.



However, his work at this time shows a variety of stylistic approaches and in *Horses on the quay* (Cat.34) he went beyond Impressionist spontaneity. The subject was a common sight at Concarneau - loading tunny fish at the Digue - but it was treated to express mood and create emotional effect.[Fig.30] In this painting, Thompson sought personal expression and symbolic meaning. The overall atmosphere was one of drama. Paint was loaded on to the canvas in a variety of directional strokes.

The dark shapes of men and horses along the Digue were set against the sky in a way which recalls works by Van der Velden and the sombre mood of Dutch coastal scenes. Thompson rarely discussed his artistic beliefs but Shelley reported in 1936 that he was aiming beyond simply capturing appearances in his painting and tried "to express something in himself." According to Shelley he turned to the lives of the fisherfolk because they embodied a sense of the "complete scheme of life".<sup>18</sup>

The efforts of the fishermen and ponderous horses waiting on the quayside were treated as symbols expressing the close bond between the cycles of human life and nature. Thompson revealed how he experienced in the landscape of Brittany, a sense of nature's transcendence:



31  
Sydney Thompson and his family in  
the studio at La Digue, Concarneau,  
1921.

*There is something in the air, the atmosphere of L'Armorique that belongs to the natural agents of the sky, the landscape and the sea that is indefinable - something that is spiritual and that one feels otherwise than by the senses.*<sup>19</sup>

*Horses on the quay* must be counted as amongst the most successful of his works for the powerful expression of these feelings.

This was a productive and successful time for Thompson which was recorded in several photographs of him in his studio at La Digue, with paintings of *Untitled* and *Horses on the quay*. [Figs. 31-32]

At a later date, probably between 1925 and his departure for New Zealand in 1933, he completed some works in a new manner adopting fluent brushwork and using flat colour. *Sardine fishers on the quay of the Bassin, Concarneau* (Cat.38) probably dates from about this time. Its compositional structure, subdued tones and fluently drawn forms suggest his familiarity with the quayside scenes of the Fauvist painter Albert Marquet. Several studies of Wellington Harbour painted in 1936 employ similar conventions (Cats.62-63). The majority of images of the harbour were painted before leaving for New Zealand in 1933.

32  
Sydney Thompson in the studio at La Digue, Concarneau, c.1922.



When Thompson returned to Concarneau in 1937 he was bitterly disappointed at the modernization which was progressively transforming the port and fishing industry. He reported to his family that "my first impressions of Concarneau is that I wouldn't live here for anything" and in the following year he noted bitterly that "Concarneau is a little uglier than last autumn as they have built a huge *criée* (auction house) on the Quai Carnot, a perfect horror."<sup>20</sup> Modernization robbed him not only of his favourite painting spot, but was threatening to destroy the old town and put an end to a way of life which had first drawn him to the artists' colony thirty years earlier.

Another favourite theme at Concarneau was the market held in the square (Cats.31-32). A succession of New Zealanders, including Frances Hodgkins and Olivia Spencer Bower, responded to the market's picturesque charms. Sketching the scene in 1913, Maud Sherwood recorded how she "positively gloated over it all" and only wished "every day was a market day".<sup>21</sup>

The nostalgia which appeared in Thompson's painting was a colonial susceptibility and his outlook developed from the time of his first visit to Concarneau when the idealisation of nature and the past were established attitudes. However, a resurgence of similar sentiments occurred in the 1920s in the widespread revival of landscape and rural life painting which took place in Britain after the First World War. Art in the 1920s expressed the feelings of a generation who looked back to nature for renewal after the war. Thompson's painting can be related in this respect to a dominant trend in British art.

Looking to nature and the past are recurrent attitudes in western culture, and Thompson's painting of the markets, harbour, old churches and religious festivals constitutes an expression of popular and enduring sentiments.

Sydney Thompson made his first trip to Provence in 1915, and dating from this visit, an itinerant pattern developed by which he divided his time between painting in Brittany and Provence. After 1925 when he and his wife bought a house in Grasse, with the onset of winter the family used to undertake the long journey from Concarneau to the south.

Provence's popularity with painters, although lagging behind Brittany by several decades, was well established by the time of Thompson's visits. In the late nineteenth century, the painting of Cézanne at Aix and Van Gogh at Arles had defined the character of the region for many French and Anglo-American artists who followed. The distinctive art traditions and different landscape of the sunlit south affected Thompson's work in a variety of ways. Whereas in Brittany his major themes drew on the work of the fisherfolk and life of the harbour, his paintings in Provence were redolent with pleasure and enjoyment. In his paintings of almond trees in blossom and vines in autumn, he celebrated the seasonal cycle of the south. He experimented with working in a high key and lightened his palette in response to the brilliance of light in Provence which bleached out local colour. It was in Provence, under the influence of Cézanne, that he first began to introduce a structural approach to composition.

At this time, a variety of towns and villages attracted painters as well as travellers and tourists to the south, and their special qualities as painting sites were described in contemporary magazines. For example, Bormes-les-Mimosas, one of Thompson's favourite locations (Cats.42,43,46), was described in an article in *The Studio* in 1909:

*The town, built on the side of the Montagnes des Maures, has a step like appearance, with its masses of grey-red tiled roofs...the houses are tall, often dirty, with nearly flat roofs, picturesque green shutters and verandabs...these, together with a glimpse of a church...and here and there patches of vine, make a very interesting study.*<sup>22</sup>

St.Jeannet was another of his favourite sites (Cats.47,54).

When Frances Hodgkins was there in 1930 she described the place as "rough and primitive - with no hotel" but added "it is fine country and one has it to oneself."<sup>23</sup> Between 1915 and 1923 Thompson worked for several painting seasons at Bormes and St. Jeannet as well as staying at Le Lavandou, Martigues, Cros de Cagnes and Grasse which became his base in the south from 1925 until 1933. After his departure for New Zealand in 1933, subsequent painting expeditions to Provence were made in 1937-1938, 1948-1951 and finally in 1964-65.<sup>24</sup>

Some of his earliest paintings of trees in blossom were completed at Bormes-les-Mimosas. *Ruins and almond blossom, Bormes-les-Mimosas* (Cat.43) is comparable in strong colour and brushwork to his sketch *Fishermen on the slip at the Digue, Concarneau* (Cat.27) and to *Horses on the quay* (Cat.34). Its expressive paintwork and vibrant colour combinations of blue, violet and green in the sky and red, yellow and blue in the pillars, express his vivid response to the arrival of spring in the south.

In a characteristic group of paintings blossom trees were painted in thickly impasted strokes of paint and placed before an extensive Provençal landscape: *Almond blossom, Bormes-les-Mimosas* (Cat.42) and *Almond blossom, Grasse* (Cat.48). The success of these paintings depended on working quickly to capture the precise colours before him, whilst all the time adjusting the balance of values and tones in the foreground and background.

Trees in blossom fascinated Thompson for several decades. When he was in St. Tropez in February 1938, he wrote with resigned good humour that "I had vowed last week I would never paint another tree in bloom but here I am quite prepared to commit that folly again."<sup>25</sup> Before even the following week was out, he was describing with evident delight how he had painted three sketches of another tree in blossom "one in the morning light and one in the evening and the third against the evening sun". The subject's appeal lay partly in the technical challenge it represented. He lamented:

*...all very heavy going for I loaded on the paint too soon. This makes it difficult to get in accents. With anything that stays put, it can be allowed to dry and then carry on, but almond trees in bloom are so much a matter of days or even hours that they have to be painted in one go. It is hit or miss with them.*<sup>26</sup>

He found another striking seasonal theme in the brilliant

colours of vines in autumn (*Vines, autumn, Grasse*, Cat.50).

The intensity of light in Provence and its effect on colour were the motivation for a number of paintings of walls and buildings. *The Rocks, Le Baou de St.Jeannet, south of France* (Cat.47) was probably painted between 1921 and 1923 when he first visited St.Jeannet. Stylistically it compares with works which were painted on a trip to Tunisia between December 1919 and April 1920: *A street in an Arab village, Tunisia* (Cat.44) and *Arcades, Hammamet, Tunisia* (Cat.45). The choice of viewpoint in *The Rocks, Le Baou de St.Jeannet*, its advancing warm and receding cool colours, and its thick layer of opaque paint boldly emphasised the surface of the painting.

The distinctive hillside villages set within the Provençal landscape provided motifs which led to new stylistic developments. In *Bormes-les-Mimosas in Winter* (Cat.46) an Impressionist sensibility to light remained, but by using the tall block-like shapes of the buildings he introduced a tight compositional order into his painting. In *Bormes-les-Mimosas in Winter* interlocking planes drew attention to the surface and to the way in which paint was applied in thick slabs for the walls of the mellow old stone houses. Thompson found in the landscape of Provence a range of motifs around which he was able to organize a more structured composition. He had first become aware of Cézanne in 1911, and it was in the landscape of Provence that he first applied to his own work some of the principles upon which Cézanne's painting was based.

This direction was continued in a series of works based on the canal close to his home in Grasse where he lived between 1925 and 1933: *The canal bridge, Grasse* (Cat.51) and *Our bridge over the canal, Grasse* (Cat.52). This motif provided a sequence of angles which he used to impose compositional order. From his study of Cézanne he used directional brushwork to suggest form and define planes.

The example of Cézanne and the landscape of Provence with its block-like buildings constituted a challenge to Thompson, prompting him to develop new stylistic approaches and inspiring some fine work painted over several decades: *Cell of St Francis at Carceri* (Cat.53), *St. Jeannet, Southern France* (Cat.54) and *Village of Tourrette-sur-Loup* (Cat.55).

In 1933 the Thompsons sold their home in Grasse and returned to live in New Zealand. In 1937, before four years were out, Thompson was back once again in France. By now he was 60 years old and travelling alone, but he set out as in the past, south to Provence for the painting season. He discovered

in Provence, as he had found at Concarneau, that the encroachment of modern developments was beginning to threaten the landscape. He worked happily in the inland towns and villages, but found beside the Mediterranean that "all along the coast from Menton to Nice and to Cannes is simply ruined for a painter."<sup>27</sup> He reported how class antagonisms and the rise of communism in the 1930s, were changing the painter's life as he had known it:

*[the Provençals] now appear to have accepted the worst kind of communism. I was told by a painter in Nice that he didn't like painting anywhere near Nice because of the ill feeling. He said that they think that anyone who paints is a capitalist and act accordingly. All the rich are idle and useless. Up here in Tourrettes they seem to accept us painters and are quite gentille.*<sup>28</sup>

Since his first visit over twenty years earlier, Thompson had preferred the remote parts of Provence and kept away from the urban centres. He liked to stay in small hotels where he was welcomed, given a table and treated 'en famille.' The simplicity of this lifestyle became increasingly hard to find in the twentieth century. Modernization, industrial development and political and social changes, combined to challenge the outlook upon which his work was based.

His letters from his trip in 1937 and 1938 show how artistic travel was set against a background of disturbing political developments. His journey to Italy, where he described one of the greatest thrills of his life in seeing the frescoes of Piero della Francesca, was clouded by Hitler's visit to Mussolini. For the second time around he recognised the signs of approaching conflict in Europe. At the small hotel at Tourrettes where he was staying in 1938, he met a Jewish woman seeking refuge from Nazi Germany. When news came of the German ultimatum to Austria he wrote home to his wife in New Zealand "and so the days pass, drawing Europe nearer and nearer to a very grave crisis. One wonders how it will all end? We are living in a mad world."<sup>29</sup>

When he revisited familiar sites, he found that the Europe which he had first known was fast disappearing, and that war, again, was threatening life in France. At the end of 1938, he returned to New Zealand where he stayed throughout the war until 1948, when he set out again for France in search of the disappearing landscapes of the Old World.

Thompson's painting and way of life were closely connected between 1911 and 1933, when he lived in France. This long period of residence, however, resulted from a chance combination of circumstances.

When Maud Sherwood visited the Thompsons at Concarneau during the summer of 1913, she recorded that they were planning to return to New Zealand the following June.<sup>30</sup> Whatever caused them to delay their return, they were still in Concarneau when news came in July 1914 of the outbreak of war, and on August 1 of the mobilisation of France. Frances Hodgkins, who was also at Concarneau at the time, described the chaos which prevailed as they waited anxiously for news from Paris. There were no papers and each day fears rose over access to foreign funds, price rises and the restrictions imposed on travel. Frances Hodgkins described the feeling of despondency amongst artists there, at their own futility before the sequence of events. Her view of the consequences of war for painters was expressed in a letter written that July from Concarneau:

*As artists - we all feel our present insignificance in the scheme of things. Why work? Who wants it? Who cares?*<sup>31</sup>

She made a decision to leave and cross the Channel to England. According to Hodgkins, life at Concarneau had been devastated that summer:

*I was thankful to get out of Concarneau. The desolation there was utter, more noticeable on account of its flourishing industry suddenly brought to a full stop horse man fish boat spirited away, all the pleasant things gone...*<sup>32</sup>

No records remain to reveal Thompson's feelings at this time. Ethel Thompson recorded how he and another painter, Bulfield, set out for Nantes to offer their services as interpreters.<sup>33</sup> They were turned down and he returned to Concarneau. The Thompsons ended up staying in France throughout the war. In the summer of 1914 when war had broken out, they

already had a two year old child, Yannick, and their second child, Annette, was born in April 1915. These were the most difficult years which Sydney and Ethel Thompson spent in France. They were safely away from the war-stricken areas, but these were times of uncertainty when they had little money and there were even periods when food was scarce. They never forgot the support which they and other expatriate artists received from the Mayor of Concarneau. They spent most of their time in Brittany although they also went south where the climate was mild and life was more primitive but also much cheaper.

It was not until war ended that Thompson was able to concentrate on painting and try to establish himself in France as a professional artist. The last time he had exhibited was in 1913 in Auckland and Wellington, and in London at the Royal Academy, where he had a portrait accepted. With the revival of artistic life after the war, he undertook a major exhibition of 59 works at the Galeries Georges Petit, one of the leading galleries in Paris.<sup>34</sup> When Thompson's exhibition opened in December 1920, critics were full of praise for the attractiveness of his painting. *Le Figaro* recognized him as "a vibrant painter, gay, truthful, full of life who has rendered in broad lively strokes all the aspects of Concarneau."<sup>35</sup> *La Chronique des Arts* responded to the spirited and direct way he painted his scenes.<sup>36</sup> The Daily Mail reported to its English readers in Paris that:

*Practically unknown in the city when he opened this little exhibition on December 1, the luminous quality of his colouring and atmosphere, with his skilful handling of groups of figures in movement reveals very personal talent, and no exhibition of this now closing autumn season has been more striking or more appreciated by the public.<sup>37</sup>*

Reviews show that the exhibition had popular appeal, and reveal the recognition he won in Paris in 1920, for his strengths as a colourist. Louis Vauxcelles, a celebrated critic in France who had named 'les fauves' and bravely praised Matisse as early as 1905, gave his personal approbation in a letter:

*He is vigorous, and yet very delicate and full of nuances. His harmonies are very much his own. And he has a distinctive sense of values.<sup>38</sup>*

However, Vauxcelles' decision to mention Thompson's painting

in *Le Carnet des Arts*, rather than in the periodical, *L'Amour de l'Art*, may have related to the context in which Thompson's painting succeeded. Thompson's success in Paris was not in advanced circles; he had not been placed within the context of the modern movement in French art in the 1920s or 1930s.

He showed again at George Petit's in 1923 and was well received. He also won awards at the Salon des Artistes Français where he exhibited regularly between 1922 and 1933, but the Parisian context never brought fulfilment. After 1933, he gave up on the salon and ended up by reflecting:

*I am quite sure that to have one's work hung in the Academy or the Salon des A.F. is something less than a compliment...this year the two salons in the Grand Palais were beautifully hung and presented. All this costs a lot so they have to hang acres of rubbish to pay expenses.<sup>39</sup>*

Essentially Thompson's success lay in establishing himself in Brittany as a professional painter. He became well known as a painter within his own region, where he is represented at the Musée de Pont-Aven, the Musée de Beaux-Arts de Quimper, as well as at the civic collection at Concarneau. He developed a following of enthusiastic collectors and a high number of his works have remained in France in private collections.

Throughout these years, Sydney and Ethel travelled with their family, making their home together in Brittany and Provence, for the length of each painting season. A number of paintings of the succession of places where they stayed reveal something of the lifestyle which they followed. These include two charming paintings of the view from his studio at the Digue, Concarneau: *Studio balcony, la Digue, Concarneau* (Cat.41), which looks out towards the entrance to the harbour, and *Girl on balcony, La Digue, Concarneau* (Cat.15), which shows the old walled town in the background, with a portrait in the foreground of his youngest daughter, Mary, standing at the open window. His two daughters, Annette and Mary, appear in a painting from the garden at their home in Grasse, *The artist's daughters, Annette and Mary at Happy Valley, Grasse* (Cat.16). Portraits of his wife and young children reflect an atmosphere of peaceful pleasure and tranquil enjoyment. *Mme Thompson, the artist's wife, seated with parasol, St. Jeannet* (Cat.13) is a stylish portrait painted in 1923 in the garden at St. Jeannet where the family stayed each late autumn until May or June from October 1921 to 1923.

The many paintings of his wife and children reflected the pleasure he took in their life together after the war. It was not until they returned to France in 1925, after a series of successful exhibitions in New Zealand and Australia, that they bought their first house and made their home near Grasse. Throughout the initial difficult years abroad, Ethel Thompson had been her husband's devoted supporter and she continued to run the household and encourage him in his work. She played a key role in his success as an artist. A large portrait group, *In my studio at Kerizett, Concarneau, Annette, Yan and Mary* (Cat.17), reveals a glimpse of the close world within the family. The sunlit garden outside contrasted with the secluded space within the room, where all three children were shown absorbed in their pursuits. The painting conveys an atmosphere of peace and security. It hints at the life within the family which overcame the isolation of expatriate experience, and brought companionship and adventure to their lifestyle which was always on the move.

The attachment which Thompson felt for New Zealand was symbolized in this painting by the still life in the corner of his studio. Leaning against the wall was a French landscape painting with a tree in blossom, and next to it was one of the cloaks given by the Ngati Tuwharetoa.

By returning home in 1923 and 1933, the Thompsons never lost their link with New Zealand. Family, friends and artists called on them in Concarneau. Maud Sherwood's visit has been mentioned. Archibald Nicoll, former student of Thompson's at Canterbury School of Art, was also in Europe at about the same time and visited them.<sup>40</sup> Brittany was an established stop on the sketching routes for artists, and in the summer of 1929, Olivia Spencer Bower spent some memorable times with them at Concarneau.<sup>41</sup> There were contacts with other artists in these early years, including Mabel Hill, Cora Wilding, Flora Scales and Frances Hodgkins, as well as the Australians Kate O'Connor, Will Ashton and Charles Bryant.<sup>42</sup>

However, within the New Zealand context, Thompson's grasp of modern painting secured him a prominent position in the early 1920s. From 1914 at La Glacière, when he first explored light as colour in *The Woman in White* (Cat.11), he progressed coherently towards Post-Impressionist conventions of expressive brushwork, and colour and tonal harmonies. By 1920 he began to introduce a more structural approach to composition in his paintings in Provence. Thompson deserves long overdue recognition for the bold explorations he made in

his work in the 1920s. He never broke his ties with New Zealand and by exhibiting his painting in New Zealand in 1923, he introduced painters and public to some of the advances made by Post-Impressionist art.

From the perspective of modern art, the limitation of his painting lay in his poetic approach to themes. He remained committed to a nostalgic belief in a pre-modern world which idealized the past and nature. His art never confronted the transformations in Europe which came with two World Wars. Although he lived throughout the First World War in France, and recognized the signs of impending conflict in the 1930s, he continued painting the same familiar themes. He avoided the harsh facts of reality and created in his painting of Brittany and Provence a vision of a beautiful, age-old, unchanging landscape. In his painting, the evocative imagery of the Old World was never far away. His strength as a painter lay in investing this myth with imaginative reality.

- 1 E.H.McCormick, "Frances Hodgkins: the Path to Impressionism 1892-1912", *Art New Zealand*, 1980, No.16, p.66; for a discussion of Lucien Simon's importance to Hodgkins, see Anthony S.G. Green, "Reflections on the Hodgkins Exhibition", *Ascent*, 1969, pp.29-30.
- 2 Musée des Beaux-Arts de Quimper, *Lucien Simon 1861-1945*, 1981.
- 3 Information given to the writer by Mme Y.A.Thompson.
- 4 M.E.Thompson mentioned in her notes frequent meetings with Barne, Kite, W.J.Leech, Meynard, Miss MacCausland and with Owen Merton, Frances Hodgkins and Cora Wilding. Information given to the writer by Mme Y.A. Thompson.
- 5 "...have just arrived from Paris where I was a couple of weeks for the sending in of the Salon d'Automne. I saw Barne there. He and Morrice are going to Concarneau..." Autograph letter from Roderic O'Connor to Clive Bell, 7 Oct.1913, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin; Letter OCCB 10, refers to paintings by Barne at the Salon d'Automne.
- 6 Caroline Simon, *Joseph Milner Kite 1862-1945*, Whitford and Hughes, London.
- 7 Julian Campbell, *The Irish Impressionists*, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, 1984, p.114.
- 8 Alan Denson, *An Irish Artist: W.J.Leech R.H.A. (1881-1968)*, Kendal, 1968, Vol.2, p.112.
- 9 "Thank Will for sending catalogue - it is most interesting - many of the names quite new to me - I have just passed it on this very minute - to Mr S Thompson who was at my door with a message." Letter from Frances Hodgkins to her mother 14 Dec.(1911), MS Papers 85 (Isabel Field):25, ATL National Library of New Zealand.
- 10 M.E.Thompson also recorded in her notes that her husband sometimes went along in the afternoons to work at Colarossi's. Information given to the writer by Mme Y.A.Thompson.
- 11 E.H.McCormick, 1954, pp.140-141.
- 12 M.E.Thompson recorded that they arrived in Concarneau on 17 April 1912. Information given to the writer by Mme Y.A.Thompson. Raymond McIntyre mentioned receiving a card from Thompson from Paris, in a letter to his father, 7 March (1912). Raymond McIntyre Autograph letters, National Art Gallery, Wellington.
- 13 Maud Sherwood letters to her sister Amy and others from triplicate carbon folder book, 21 August 1913. Robert McDougall Art Gallery.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Information from M.E.Thompson's notes sent to the writer by Mme Y.A.Thompson.
- 16 James Shelley, "Sydney L. Thompson - Painter", *Art in New Zealand*, March 1936, Vol.VIII No.3, p.131.
- 17 See: Ville de Concarneau, *Concarneau de Pas en Pages*, 1987, pp.35-101.
- 18 S.L.Thompson, "Artists in Brittany". Undated manuscript in possession of Mme. Y.A.Thompson.
- 19 James Shelley, p.131.
- 20 S.L.Thompson, Undated and untitled ms. in possession of Mme Y.A.Thompson.
- 21 Letters from S.L.Thompson to his family, dated 11 Sept.1937 and 11 June 1938, in possession of Mme Y.A.Thompson.
- 22 Maud Sherwood letters to her sister Amy and others from triplicate carbon folder book, 7 June 1913. Robert McDougall Art Gallery.
- 23 Walter Donne, "Bormes-Les-Mimosa - a winter sketching ground", *The Studio*, 1909, pp.175-182.

- 23 Arthur R.Howell, *Frances Hodgkins, Four Vital Years*, London, 1951, p.27.
- 24 Information given to the writer from Mme Y.A.Thompson.
- 25 Letter from S.L.Thompson to his family, 25 Feb. 1938, in possession of Mme Y.A.Thompson.
- 26 Letter from S.L.Thompson to his family, 2 March 1938, in possession of Mme Y.A.Thompson.
- 27 Letter from S.L.Thompson to his family, 31 December 1937, in possession of Mme Y.A.Thompson.
- 28 Letter from S.L.Thompson to his family, 23 January 1938, in possession of Mme Y.A.Thompson.
- 29 Letter from S.L.Thompson to his family, 8 March 1938, in possession of Mme Y.A.Thompson.
- 30 Maud Sherwood letters to her sister Amy and others in triplicate carbon folder book, 21 August 1913. Robert McDougall Art Gallery.
- 31 Letter from Frances Hodgkins to her mother, 29 July (1914) MS Papers 85(Isabel Field):28 ATL. National Library of New Zealand.
- 32 Letter from Frances Hodgkins to her mother, 16 August (1914) MS Papers 85(Isabel Field):28 ATL. National Library of New Zealand.
- 33 Information given to the writer by Mme Y.A.Thompson.
- 34 New York Herald 5 December 1920. Clipping from Artists File: S.L.Thompson, Robert McDougall Art Gallery.
- 35 *Le Figaro*, 8 Décembre 1920. Clipping from Artists File: S.L.Thompson, Robert McDougall Art Gallery.
- 36 *La Chronique des Arts*, 15 Décembre 1920. Clipping from Artists File: S.L.Thompson, Robert McDougall Art Gallery.
- 37 *Daily Mail*, 14 December 1920. Clipping from Artists File: S.L.Thompson, Robert McDougall Art Gallery.
- 38 Letter from Louis Vauxcelles to unknown recipient, 30 Novembre 1920. Artists File: S.L.Thompson, Robert McDougall Art Gallery. Vauxcelles explained that he would devote some space to praise Thompson in his criticism for *Le Carnet de la Semaine*, but was unable to include him in *L'Amour de l'Art*.
- 39 Letter from S.L.Thompson to his family, 14 August 1938, in possession of Mme Y.A.Thompson.
- 40 "Today I had a visit from Archibald Nicoll. He leaves for Edinburgh tonight. He brought good wishes and remembrances from Sydney Thompson. He stayed with the Thompsons a week." Letter from Raymond McIntyre to his father, from London, dated 22 Sept.(1913) Raymond McIntyre auto-graph letters, National Art Gallery, Wellington.
- 41 "I was absolutely thrilled with Concarneau. All the tonniers were in - a lovely sight and the men in their scarlet and blue lounging about. A letter from Mrs Thompson awaited me." July 17 1929, Olivia Spencer Bower Diary, Robert McDougall Art Gallery.
- 42 Information given to the writer by Mme Y.A.Thompson. For the reference to Mabel Hill, see Elizabeth Mason and Jane Vial, "Mabel Hill 1872-1956", *Bulletin of New Zealand Art History*, 1990, Vol.11, pp.19-28.

### 3. RETURNING HOME

## The New Zealand Experience

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When Sydney Thompson left New Zealand in 1911, he was regarded by many "as the leading painter of portraiture in the Dominion."<sup>1</sup> He returned in 1923 with a reputation boosted by shows in Paris, and his success outstripped all previous recognition. A succession of solo exhibitions dazzled the buying public in New Zealand and Australia. In the early 1920s he was easily New Zealand's most celebrated painter. Thompson became a model of the professional artist who had achieved expatriate success. His fame progressed through subsequent decades and he became "probably the most popular painter in New Zealand."<sup>2</sup> However, from the 1930s onwards with aspirations for a distinctive New Zealand art, his supremacy became increasingly challenged.

Thompson had answered colonial aspirations early this century for a New Zealand born portrait and figure painter. His portraits featured in annual exhibitions at the Canterbury Society of Arts between 1906 and his departure in 1911, and critics claimed him as "probably our best portrait painter."<sup>3</sup> The British art representative in Christchurch in 1906 and 1907 for the New Zealand International Exhibition flatteringly compared the handling of rings in Thompson's portrait of *Lady Mclean* (Cat.7) with the facility of Sargent.<sup>4</sup>

Thompson's sitters came from leading families in South Island society which added to the painter's prestige. One of the grandest group portraits of the time, *Marjory, Jean and Nancy, daughters of R.E. McDougall, Esq* (Cat.8), was commissioned by Mr Robert E. McDougall, a successful businessman in Christchurch.<sup>5</sup>

Thompson's decision to become a portraitist and figure painter meant that he found buyers in what was then a limited market. His patrons included business and professional classes in the cities, and land-owning families in Canterbury. He had the approval of art societies, commanding in 1905 the highest price given by the Canterbury Society of Arts for a work by a New Zealand painter.<sup>6</sup> Before his departure in 1911, Thompson succeeded in putting a price on his paintings which, although not rivalling the price of British paintings, began to assert the economic worth of his work.<sup>7</sup>

After his return in 1923, successful exhibitions in New Zealand and Australia confirmed this trend. At a time when painters were struggling against colonial attitudes which upheld British art, Sydney Thompson became a successful professional New Zealand painter. His return to New Zealand in 1923 brought official, financial, and critical success. No New Zealand artist had attained such rapturous acclaim.

He was greeted in Christchurch with a civic reception as a painter who "had become a pride not only to the city, but to the whole Dominion."<sup>8</sup> Critics upheld his overseas salon success with national pride, and reported that "apart from those who represented us in the second Boer War and in the Great War I suppose Thompson is one of New Zealand's three most distinguished sons, the others being Rutherford and Mellor."<sup>9</sup>

When his solo exhibition of 87 paintings opened in Christchurch, in festive times on 15 December 1923, the Canterbury Society of Arts celebrated his return by acquiring two paintings: *Horses on the quay* (Cat. 34) at £100 and *Evening Glow* (Robert McDougall Art Gallery) for £50. Once again Thompson commanded the highest price given by the Society for a New Zealand painting.<sup>10</sup> From his Auckland exhibition, the Council added *At Rest* (Auckland City Art Gallery) and *Patient Horses* (Auckland City Art Gallery) to their collection, and in Wellington, the Academy of Fine Arts bought *Patient Horses* for 84 guineas and *Last Rays, Cale de la Criée* (National Art Gallery) for 45 guineas.<sup>11</sup> In 1924, when *White Horse on the quay, Concarneau* (Cat. 33) was presented to the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, the four main cities had examples of Thompson's recent work from Brittany.

The art galleries in Sydney and Melbourne crowned Thompson's Antipodean triumph. He returned to France via Australia, and held an exhibition in May 1925 at the Macquarie Galleries, where the Art Gallery of New South Wales bought two paintings.<sup>12</sup> This success was followed up with an exhibition at the Fine Arts Society in Melbourne, where the National Gallery of Victoria bought *Souk, Hammamet* (National Gallery of Victoria) and *When the fleet comes in* (National Gallery of Victoria).<sup>13</sup>

Thompson's success reached unprecedented heights: sales from his exhibition in Christchurch in December 1923 were £700 and his Wellington show in 1924 raised £800.<sup>14</sup> In the short time that he was in New Zealand, total sales from his paintings reached £3000.<sup>15</sup> Exhibitions in Australia were even more successful, and in Sydney, he sold paintings worth £2000

within one week.<sup>16</sup> In the following year when he sent 39 works out to Sydney from France, he was unable to rival his previous record, but he did sell almost half the works and realized over £400.<sup>17</sup>

No other New Zealand artist, not even Frances Hodgkins on her return in 1912-13, came near to rivalling Thompson's reception in New Zealand and Australia. However, it was an Australian critic and historian, William Moore, author of *The Story of Australian Art* (1934), who argued for the wider significance of this event in the context of New Zealand art:

*The influence of Mr Thompson was felt not only in art circles, for the success of his exhibition made a strong impression on the public, which hitherto had never appreciated the work of its own painters as much as it deserved.*<sup>18</sup>

Moore made Thompson's success the starting point for an article on the development of New Zealand art. He pointed to the rise in sales at art societies throughout New Zealand, and highlighted Christchurch, where sales from the annual exhibition in 1925 had reached £1000. Moore interpreted Thompson's success as an indication of the beginnings in New Zealand of a national pride, which showed that collectors were prepared for the first time to back one of their own painters by purchases.

At the same time his bright colour and brushwork represented a challenge to the New Zealand public in 1923. Some critics complained that his skies were "a jazzy phantasmagoria of clashing colours" and that his painting was merely evidence of "a good thing carried too far."<sup>19</sup> Others, in the light of "an objection which has often been voiced about Sydney Thompson's pictures that it is necessary to stand at some distance from them in order to see what they represent", sprang to his defence by lecturing their readers on the difference between artistic truth and mere photographic illusion.<sup>20</sup> Thompson's work raised the issue of the right of the painter to seek artistic effect rather than photographic illusion.<sup>21</sup>

After the years of artistic isolation experienced as a consequence of the Great War, Thompson introduced the New Zealand public to new directions in painting. Whilst hardly modern within a European context, one critic pointed out that in New Zealand his work seemed "something of a revelation of what is being done by the modernists in the Old World."<sup>22</sup> His work suggested "the methods of Vincent van Gogh, Cézanne

or Manet.<sup>23</sup> The majority of critics revelled enthusiastically in his bright colour and painterly brushwork.

Olivia Spencer Bower recalled the impact which Thompson's work had on artists in Christchurch in the early 1920s:

*That same year Sydney Thompson returned to New Zealand and showed his work in Christchurch. Everyone took notice; he'd brought more colour than had been in the place. Even though a lot of his colour was not like N.Z. colouring. He probably knew far more about it; he was influenced by Cézanne and the Post-Impressionists. He gave impetus to the local art world and one noticed from that time a bold change in the colour of local artists.<sup>24</sup>*

Although Olivia Spencer Bower noted that the colour in his landscapes differed from that which she associated with New Zealand, she did suggest that his painting stimulated increased attention to light and its relation to tone and colour. This was confirmed by Margaret Frankel, who had been a founder member of The Group in 1927:

*I think his main influence came from his paintings shown in exhibitions. We were all full of admiration for his use of light and colour.<sup>25</sup>*

Thompson contributed to a tradition of landscape painting based on outdoor working, and on relating light effects to colour and tonal relationships, which already existed in Canterbury from the presence of Cecil Kelly and Archibald Nicoll. It was Cecil Kelly, in paintings such as *The Dome, Southern Alps, 1925* (Robert McDougall Art Gallery), who was to establish one line of descent amongst Canterbury landscapists. Thompson's bright colour and use of complementary contrasts probably had an impact on Grace Butler and on the early work of Evelyn Page.<sup>26</sup>

Thompson's presence stimulated a renewed interest in art after the doldrums of the war. His brushwork, and understanding of colour and tonal relationships introduced New Zealanders to some of the advances made in modern European art.

Although Thompson never presented himself as a modern artist, explaining candidly that "as painters go in France, I consider myself one of the antiques", he did assert his allegiances to the modern school and to French art.<sup>27</sup> He declared

in an interview that, "I am more interested in the art of France than that of England. I think French art more alive. Artists are slower in England in getting away from traditions."<sup>28</sup>

However, critics responded with most pleasure to his paintings of Brittany and Provence. After viewing his recent New Zealand landscapes, one reviewer found that "the eye wanders back to sleepy horses on a sunlit quay, yellow and orange fishing boats...a Brittany orchard in the full flood of spring blossom...or a glimpse of the dreamy Mediterranean through a vine-wreathed pergola."<sup>29</sup>

Since the end of the nineteenth century views of Old World places were a significant presence in art society shows. Thompson's large solo exhibitions presented the most extensive and appealing definition of the European landscape to date. The popularity of his painting was associated with a cultural climate which looked with nostalgia to Europe. Although as early as 1890 the majority of the non-Maori population was native born, up until the 1920s the majority of adults aged over fifty were immigrants.<sup>30</sup> In 1923, Thompson's painting presented a harmonious view of the Old World which banished recent memories of France as the battleground of the Great War. Thompson's painting brought re-assurance to the New World that the garden landscapes of blossoms and vineyards were still there. This message made it easier for many viewers to delight in the modern conventions which Thompson used in his paintings of Old World places.

In 1933 the Thompsons sold their house in Grasse and left France. Political uncertainties, warning signs of the outbreak of war, and a decline in the value of the franc from ten pence in 1926 to two pence, forced him to return to Christchurch with Ethel, Annette and Mary.

World economic recession meant that he faced a depressed art market and a changed artistic and cultural climate. Whereas in 1923 his work had been considered "violently iconoclastic", in 1935 it was "accepted by the most conservative."<sup>31</sup> Within the nine years or so that he had been in France, the New Zealand public had seen a range of new artistic developments: including an exhibition of paintings by Rhona Hazard, the return of John Weeks to Auckland, the arrival of R.N.Field and W.H.Allen in Dunedin, Christopher Perkins in Wellington, and a new approach to the Canterbury landscape developed by Rata Lovell-Smith. Although Thompson retained his popularity with collectors and in official circles, a younger generation of painters increasingly challenged his position.

It is a measure of Thompson's continuing success that he sold 41 paintings from a solo exhibition in 1937 in Christchurch.<sup>32</sup> This was at a time when sales had dropped throughout the country. In 1937 the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts announced optimistically that sales from their exhibition "amounted to £395 - just a little above the average for the last four years."<sup>33</sup> In 1934 at Christchurch, sales at the Art Society dropped to £300 from £1000 in 1925.<sup>34</sup>

In the difficult years of the mid-1930s, Thompson also profited from a significant venture in the history of patronage in New Zealand. In 1935 the Wellington Harbour Board commissioned three painters, Thompson, Nugent Welch and Archibald Nicoll, to paint scenes of the harbour (Cat.61). In lean times it was hoped that as in Britain where "commerce and art are steadily growing closer together for mutual benefits...there is every reason why a similar co-operation should not in time develop in this country."<sup>35</sup> The Lyttelton Harbour Board took up the challenge and in 1937 Thompson completed a commission for *Lyttelton from the Bridle Path* (Cat.64). To highlight their patronage, Thompson presented them with one of his paintings of Lyttelton Harbour (Cat.65), "in recognition of its being the first public body in Christchurch to encourage art."<sup>36</sup>

Thompson also received official honours. Recognition for artists came in 1937, when Sydney Thompson received an O.B.E. and in the following year, when Annie Elizabeth Kelly was presented with the C.B.E. In 1954 the government chose Thompson's *Seaward Kaikouras* to present to Sir Winston Churchill on his eightieth birthday, and, in 1956, they selected a North Island scene by Peter McIntyre and Thompson's painting of Lake Sarah to present to the Duke of Edinburgh to mark his visit to New Zealand.<sup>37</sup> In official circles, these paintings represented typical scenes of the New Zealand landscape. By this date, however, a younger generation of painters had defined a different notion of what constituted the typical New Zealand landscape. Cultural nationalism imposed a 'new frame on the land'.

Aspirations for cultural independence, growing out of the Depression years, led to a changed perception of what constituted the essential character of the New Zealand landscape. Critics constructed a definition of New Zealand which demanded a new iconography and style in landscape painting. In 1934 A.R.D. Fairburn furnished his classic prescription of New Zealand landscape, in which "hard clear light reveals the bones,

the sheer form of hills, trees, stones and scrub.”<sup>38</sup> The characteristic New Zealand landscape was no longer the colonist’s untouched wilderness or scenic wonderland, but a landscape marked by “the natural bleakness of our man-made scenery - buildings, bridges, railway stations and cuttings, telegraph poles.”<sup>39</sup> Fairburn’s list supplied a collection of national emblems which appeared in painting for several decades. The formulation of new themes demanded a new style which was found in the hard-edged naturalism practised by such painters as Perkins. Although this was an international style in the 1930s, it was identified as a distinctive New Zealand style. At the same time, Impressionist conventions were rejected as unsuitable for capturing the special quality of the New Zealand landscape. Fairburn argued that Impressionism “failed to express the character and singularity of our natural landscape.”<sup>40</sup> Impressionism was branded as a foreign style.

Whereas in the 1920s Thompson had been acclaimed as a successful New Zealand artist, in the 1930s his identity as a New Zealand painter was put in doubt. Leonard Booth observed:

*Sydney Thompson is not a painter of New Zealand subjects. He is a French painter of French subjects. He is imbued with ideas of the French painters since the Post-Impressionists.*<sup>41</sup>

His perceptions of the New Zealand landscape were rejected by a younger generation of critics and painters. One of the strongest assaults on Thompson’s work was launched in 1950, by Allen Curnow in a review of painting in Canterbury:

*A pupil of Van der Velden is still with us, in Sydney Thompson; he might have learned no more from the Dutchman than how to hold a brush, for all that can be observed in the characteristic work of both painters. Other influences supervened in Mr Thompson’s case, chiefly French, with some imperfectly fitted lendings from the Post-Impressionists, to produce a strangely disoriented, heavily sugared mode; much surface glamour, but rhythmically dull, against the brilliance with which the subject has been painted away.*<sup>42</sup>

Curnow’s comments amounted to an exclusion of Thompson from the development of painting in Canterbury. Some years later art historians Brown and Keith argued that “the crisp, clear light found in New Zealand appears to have been too much for his neo-impressionist style.”<sup>43</sup>

33  
Sydney Lough Thompson, Wairau  
River, Blenheim. February 1962.



It is time to see Thompson in context. He belonged to the same generation as Goldie and Frances Hodgkins and his contemporaries in Canterbury included Elizabeth and Cecil Kelly, Raymond McIntyre and Robert Procter. While Hodgkins and McIntyre stand out as the advanced artists in this group, they were painters who established their position by cutting their connections with New Zealand. McIntyre left in 1909; he never returned nor painted for the New Zealand public. Frances Hodgkins was more hesitant about her departure, and it was not until her mother's death in 1926 that she gradually let go of her need to belong to New Zealand and defined herself within twentieth century British art.

Thompson was not forced to confront his position as an expatriate in the same way as Hodgkins and McIntyre. By the 1920s he had established himself as a professional artist in

France and been highly successful in New Zealand and Australia. He was also married with a family and his ties with New Zealand remained strong.

Thompson ended up dividing his time between two hemispheres and he painted from this perilous position. Paintings completed on his return to New Zealand in 1923, such as *Haystacks, Scotston, South Canterbury* (Cat.60) and his sketch, *Under Sefton and Mueller Glacier* (Cat.59) raise the question of how he would have developed had he remained. However, he did not stay long enough to define his work in a New Zealand context. He was acclaimed for his French landscapes and by 1925 had settled back in France.

In later years, he continued to travel between New Zealand and France, working as a professional artist whose paintings had great public appeal. Although historians have never considered this stance sympathetically, Thompson was not compromising his aims. He developed his characteristic mix of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist style on his second trip to France when he was approaching forty years of age. This constituted the one major change in his work; from this time he remained committed to working outdoors and creating harmonies of colour and tone. In his eighties he toured New Zealand, working at his favourite sites.[Fig.33] His last painting, of an old Breton chapel, was completed before his ninetieth birthday. He was a painter who never lost his delight in painting.

Thompson was an artist who enjoyed the appreciation of his public but who has been denied historical recognition. This has been because he has been viewed out of context. By upholding modernist values, inappropriate to the cultural climate of New Zealand, art history has devalued the work of New Zealand artists of the early twentieth century. They have been judged in terms of avant-gardism and been found wanting. Thompson's landscapes of Brittany and Provence were expressions of a period which looked back nostalgically to the Old World and which sought to sustain links with 'Home'. New Zealand artists in Europe who retained these colonial sensibilities remained detached from the modern movements of early twentieth century European art.

On his return to New Zealand in 1923, Thompson was acclaimed for introducing new directions in painting, but he cannot be considered as - and he never claimed to be - an advanced artist in the European context. His significance lies in the way his painting expressed the experiences and aspirations shared by many New Zealanders from his time and background.

- 1 Gordon H. Brown, *New Zealand Painting 1900-1920: Traditions and Departures*, Wellington, 1972, p.43.
- 2 Gordon H. Brown and Hamish Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting 1839-1980*, Auckland, Rev. Ed. 1982, p.59.
- 3 *The Press*, 31 May 1907, p.8.
- 4 Review of C.S.A. Annual Exhibition, 1907. Unreferenced clipping from Artists File: S.L.Thompson, Robert McDougall Art Gallery.
- 5 R.E. McDougall built up the firm of Aulsebrooks and became one of the city's philanthropists, gifting £25,000 for the foundation of the city's art gallery. See Robert McDougall Art Gallery, *A profile of the Art Gallery of the City of Christchurch 1932-1982*, pp.7-8.
- 6 See Chapter 1.
- 7 See Julie King, "Art Collecting by the Canterbury Society of Arts: The First Fifty Years", *Bulletin of New Zealand Art History*, 1990, Vol.11, pp.41-50.
- 8 *The Press*, 28 November 1923, p.5. Clipping from Artists File: S.L.Thompson, Robert McDougall Art Gallery.
- 9 *Weekly Press and Referee*, March 1925. Clipping from Artists File: S.L.Thompson, Robert McDougall Art Gallery.
- 10 As a comparison, in 1925, the Canterbury Society of Arts purchased Cecil Kelly's *The Dome, Southern Alps* (Robert McDougall Art Gallery) for £42 and W.M.Gibb's *A Canterbury Pastoral* (Robert McDougall Art Gallery) for £25.
- 11 "The Library Committee...recommended that two pictures, "At Rest" and "Patient Horses", be purchased for the Art Gallery at the catalogue price of 75 and 85 guineas respectively, less 10 per cent, and the council agreed...Both pictures were exhibited at the Paris Salon, where they were awarded honourable mention." Unreferenced clipping from Artists File: S.L.Thompson, Robert McDougall Art Gallery; for purchases by N.Z.A.F.A., see N.Z.A.F.A Index, compiled by Robin Kay and Tony Eden, Drawings and Prints Collection, A.T.L. Wellington.
- 12 Information supplied by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Australia.
- 13 "The European-residing New Zealander, Sydney Thompson, struck a note new to Melbourne with an exhibition of vivid landscapes that met with immediate approval, the National Gallery showing the way by buying two typical canvases." J.S. MacDonald, "Melbourne", *Art in Australia*, 3rd Series No.14, December 1925.
- 14 "New Zealand Artist", Unreferenced clipping from Artists File: S.L.Thompson, Robert McDougall Art Gallery.
- 15 William Moore, "The Revival in New Zealand", *Art in Australia*, 3rd Series No.14, December 1925.
- 16 Unreferenced clipping from Artists File: S.L.Thompson, Robert McDougall Art Gallery. Cf. "A genuine success was achieved in the same galleries by Sydney Thompson. His was one of the most stimulating shows of the year. His boldness of colour and sure drawing invested the work with rare interest. No other show by a New Zealand artist has attracted so much attention in Sydney." William Moore, "Sydney", *Art in Australia*, 3rd Series No.14, December 1925.
- 17 Information supplied by the Macquarie Galleries' record purchases of 392 guineas at Thompson's exhibition on 7-18 September. Supplied to Mme Y.A.Thompson, 19 January 1977.
- 18 William Moore, "The Revival in New Zealand".

- 19 *New Zealand Times*, 25 September 1924, p.4.
- 20 W. Page Rowe, "Impressionism", unreferenced clipping of 1924 exhibition in Auckland, from Artists File: S.L.Thompson, Robert McDougall Art Gallery.
- 21 "If these pictures are studied first at the right focal distance from the canvas, then closely with a view to realizing the means by which the effect is attained, I am convinced that most men will yield to their charm." *The Press*, 28 March 1924, p.11.
- 22 Unreferenced clipping, dated 1923, from Artists File: S.L.Thompson, Robert McDougall Art Gallery.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Robert McDougall Art Gallery, *Olivia Spencer Bower Retrospective*, Ex.Cat. by Alison Mitchell, Christchurch, 1977.
- 25 Letter from Margaret Frankel to Tony Mackle, 24 August 1983. National Art Gallery.
- 26 "Eve Page reminded me of a class we ourselves organized in a friend's garden where we had a model and Sydney Thompson taught and criticized." *Ibid.* Grace Butler also attended one of these classes.
- 27 *The Sun*, November 1923, Artists File: S.L.Thompson, Robert McDougall Art Gallery.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 Unreferenced clipping, dated 1925, from Artists File: S.L.Thompson, Robert McDougall Art Gallery.
- 30 Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand*, Auckland, Rev.Ed., 1980, p.327.
- 31 CASCA, "Canterbury Society of Arts Annual Exhibition", *Art in New Zealand*, June 1935, Vol.VII No.4, p.181.
- 32 *Art in New Zealand*, September 1937, Vol.X No.1, p.50.
- 33 *Art in New Zealand*, December 1937, Vol.X No.2, p.73.
- 34 Gordon H.Brown, *New Zealand Painting 1920-1940: Adaptation and Nationalism*, Wellington, 1975, p.52.
- 35 *Art in New Zealand*, December 1935, Vol.VIII No.2, p.68.
- 36 *Art in New Zealand*, September 1937, Vol.X No.1, p.50.
- 37 *The Dominion*, 30 October 1954, p.13; Unreferenced clipping, dated 1956, from Artists File: S.L.Thompson, Robert McDougall Art Gallery.
- 38 A.R.D. Fairburn, "Some aspects of N.Z. art and letters", *Art in New Zealand*, June 1934, Vol.VI No.4, p.215.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 L.Booth, "The 1939 Canterbury Society of Arts", *Art in New Zealand*, June 1939, Vol.XI No.4, p.172.
- 42 Allen Curnow, "Painting in Canterbury", *New Zealand Listener*, 8 December 1950, p.8.
- 43 Gordon H.Brown and Hamish Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting 1839-1980*. Auckland, Rev.Ed. 1982, p.108.

## COLOUR PLATES

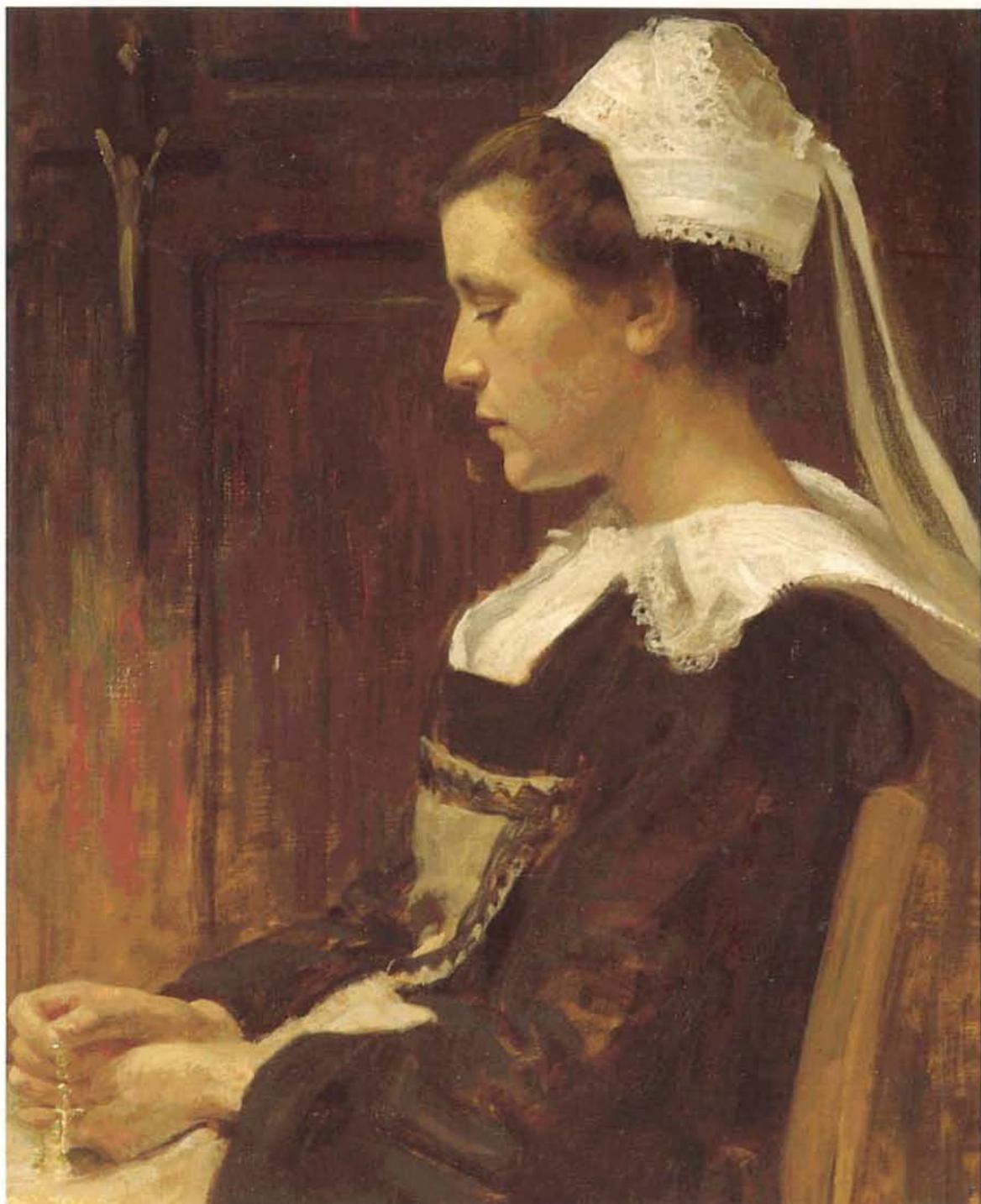


Plate IV - Cat.4

*The crucifix* (1902-1904)

Oil on canvas

Collection: National Art Gallery, Wellington



Plate V - Cat.7

*Lady Mclean* 1907  
Oil on canvas  
Collection: Dunedin Public Art Gallery

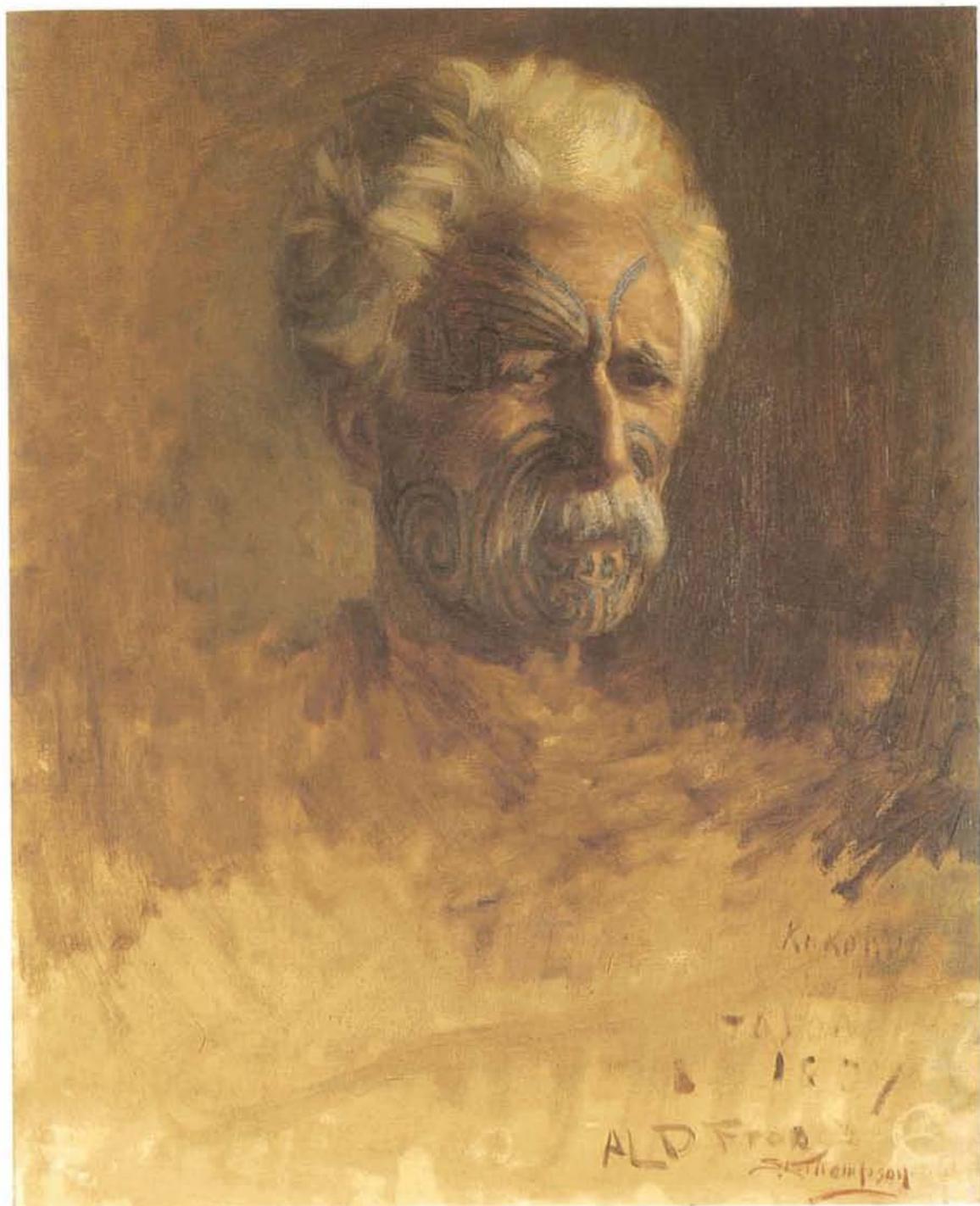


Plate VI - Cat.9     *Untitled (Portrait of a Maori)* (c. 1907)  
Oil on canvas  
Private collection



Plate VII - Cat.11 *The Woman in White* (c. 1914)  
Oil on canvas  
Collection: Dunedin Public Art Gallery

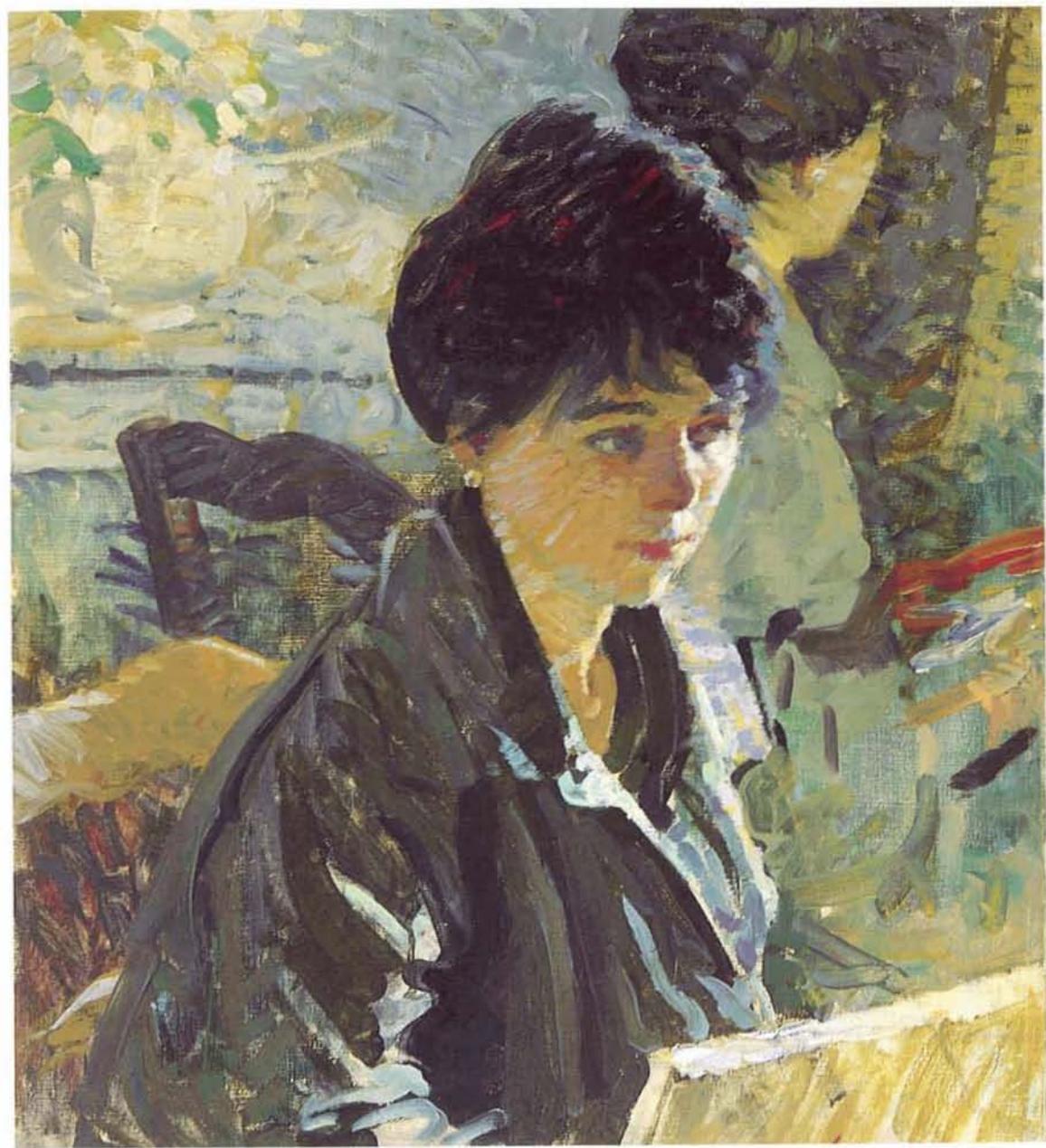


Plate VIII - Cat.12 *Portrait of Joy Clark* (c. 1917)  
Oil on canvas  
Collection: Canterbury Society of Arts



Above

Plate IX - Cat.17

*In my studio at Kerizett, Concarneau, Annette, Yan and Mary* 1929

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Opposite top

Plate X - Cat.27

*Fishermen on the slip at the Digue, Concarneau* (c. 1920)

Oil on board

Private collection

Opposite

PLATE XI - Cat.31

*Earthenware Market, Concarneau* (c. 1916)

Oil on wood panel

Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch





Plate XII - Cat.34 *Horses on the quay* (c. 1920)  
Oil on canvas  
Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch



Plate XIII - Cat.38 *Sardine fishers on the quay of the Bassin, Concarneau* (1925-1933)  
Oil on canvas  
Collection: National Art Gallery, Wellington



Plate XIV - Cat.46 *Bormes-les-Mimosas in winter* 1920  
Oil on canvas  
Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch

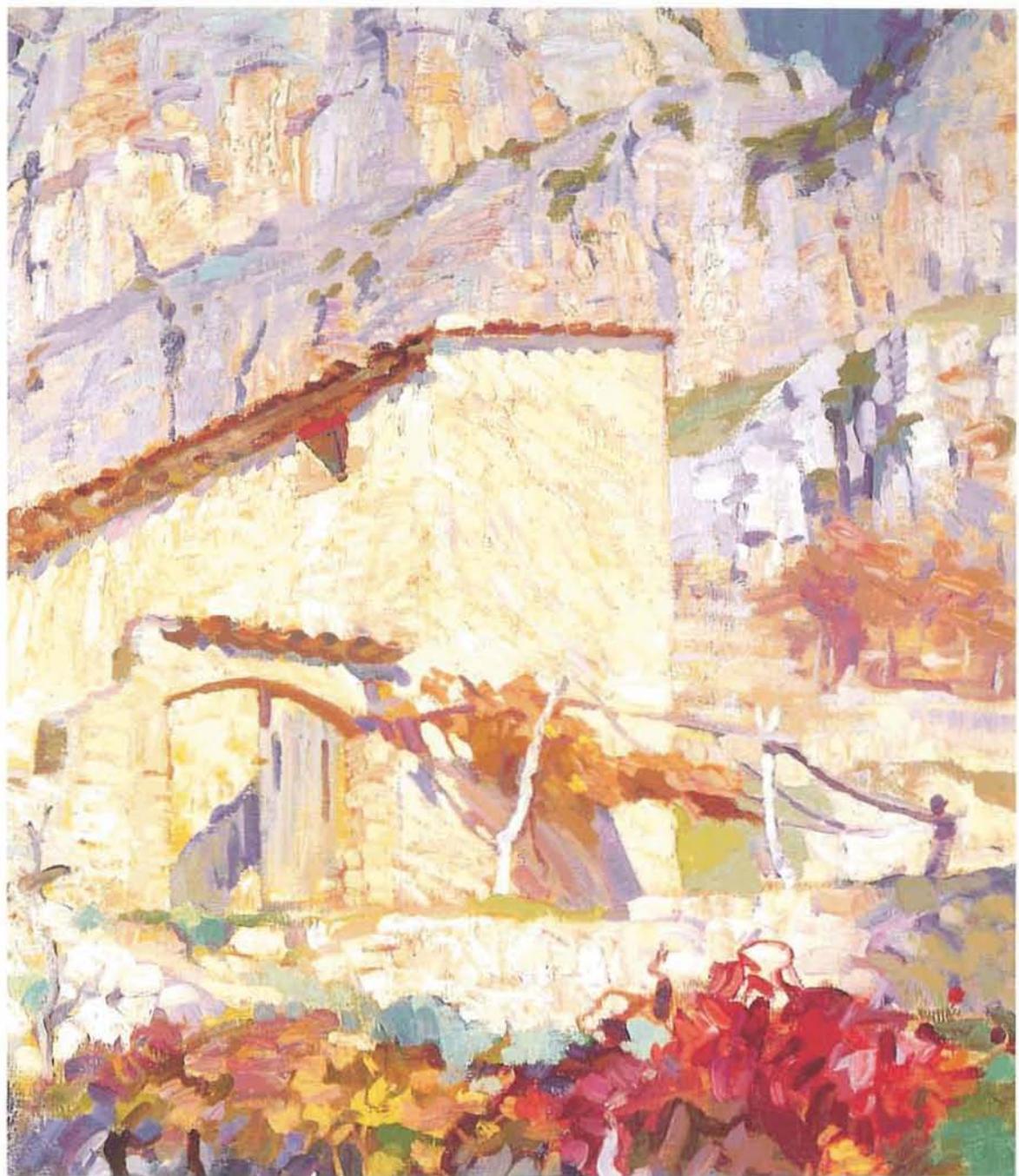
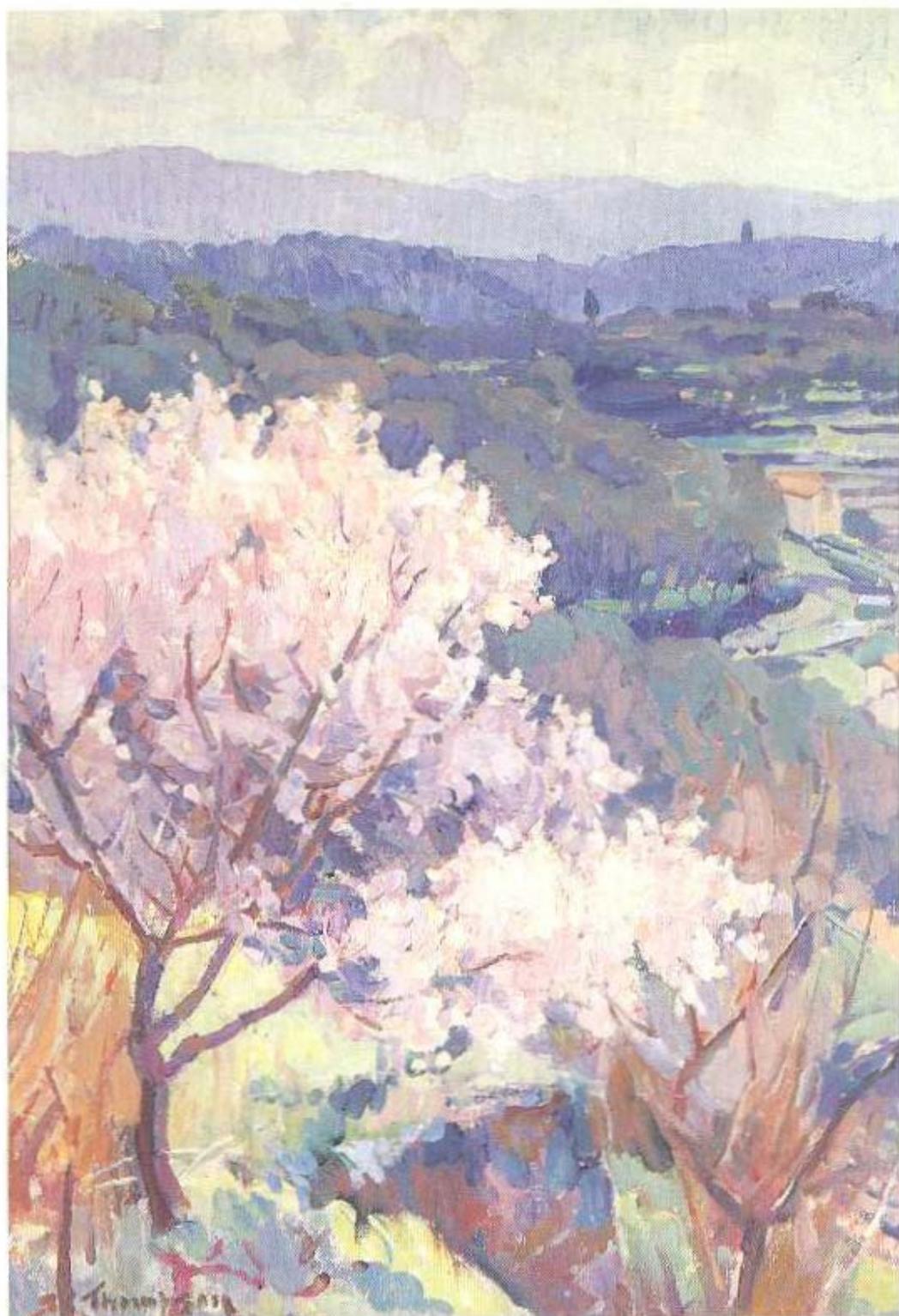


Plate XV - Cat.47     *The Rocks, Le Baou de St Jeannet, south of France* (1922)  
Oil on canvas  
Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch





**Opposite**

Cat XVI - Cat.48

*Almond blossom, Grasse* (c.1927)

Oil on canvas

Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch

**Above**

Cat XVII - Cat.49

*Lavoir en Provence* c.1930

Oil on canvas

Collection: Bishop Suter Art Gallery Trust Board, Nelson

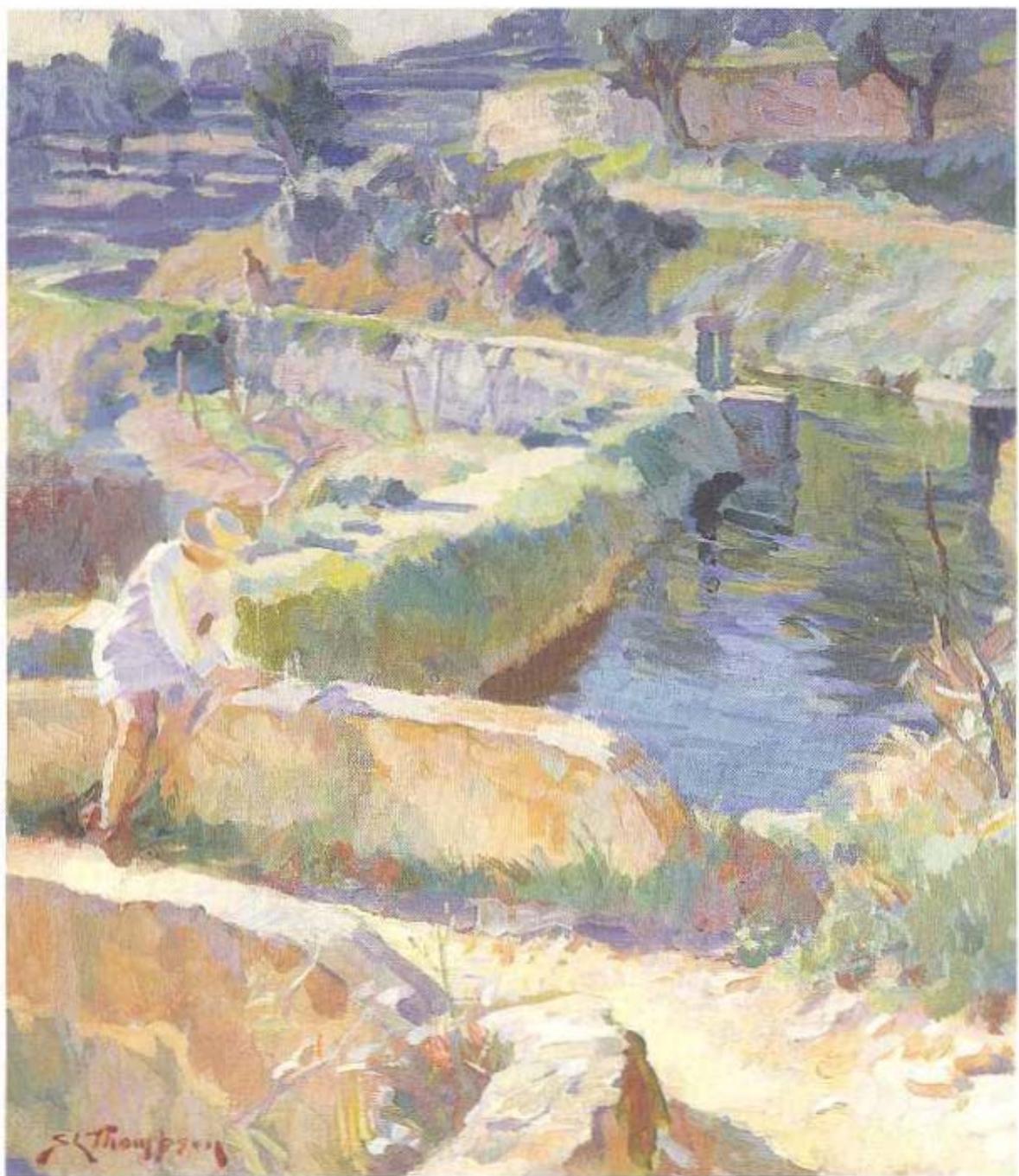
**Page 94**

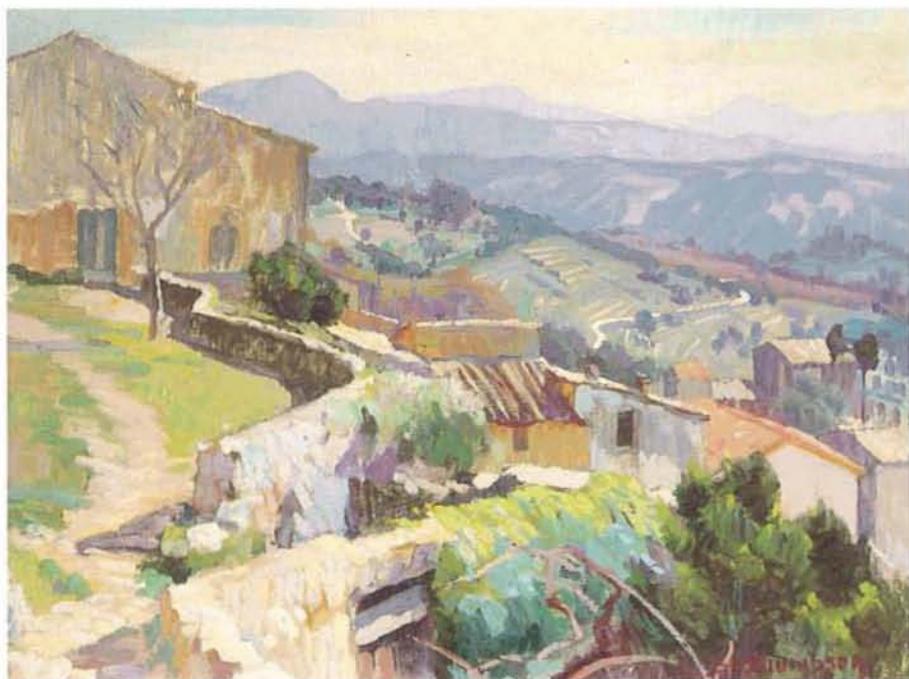
Plate XVIII - Cat.51

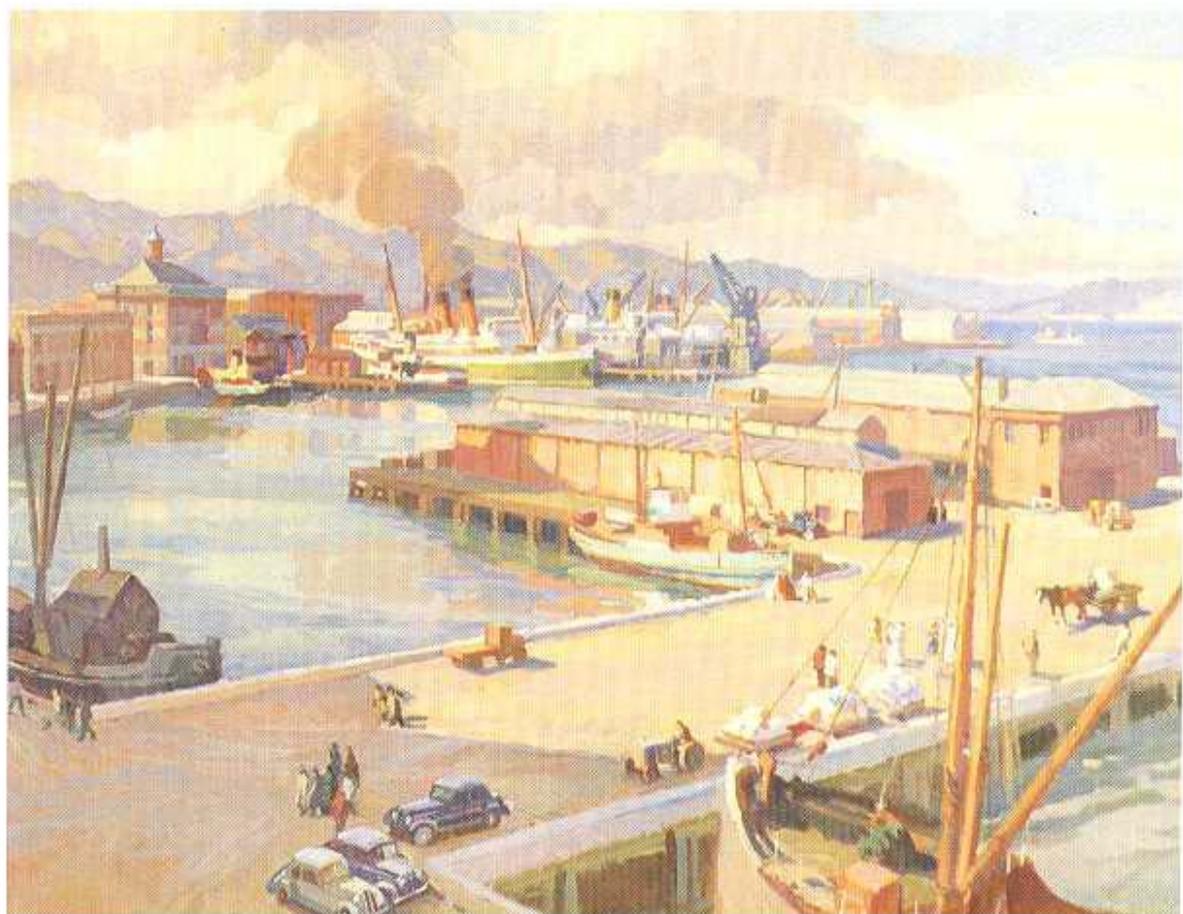
*The canal bridge, Grasse* (c.1927)

Oil on canvas

Private collection







Page 95, top

Plate XIX - Cat.54

*St Jeannet, Southern France* (1948-1949)

Oil on canvas

Collection: National Art Gallery, Wellington

Page 95, bottom

Plate XX - Cat.59

*Under Sefton and Mueller Glacier* 1924

Oil on canvas

Collection: National Art Gallery, Wellington

Above

Plate XXI - Cat.61

*Shipping, Wellington Harbour* 1936

Oil on canvas

Collection: National Art Gallery, Wellington



## CHRONOLOGY

## CHRONOLOGY

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- 1877 Sydney Lough Thompson is born at Oxford, Canterbury on 24 January.
- 1882-94 In 1882 begins school at East Oxford where he receives his first drawing lessons, comprising copying exercises from Miss Reston. In 1889 his father sells the general store and buys the Carleton Run where the family go to live. About 1891 he begins work on his father's sheepfarm.
- 1895 Registers as a student for the Second Grade Certificate at Canterbury College School of Art and begins to take lessons from Van der Velden at his studio.
- 1896 He is awarded Free Studentships at the School of Art in Drawing from the Antique, Drawing from Life and Painting from Life.
- 1897 After completing one term, he discontinues at the School of Art, returning in 1900 in the evenings to attend the Life Class. Wins prize in the Annual Competition Study from Life at N.Z.A.F.A.
- 1898 Wins prize in the N.Z.A.F.A. Annual Competition Still Life and takes the Bronze Medal at C.S.A. for Still Life. Becomes a working member of C.S.A. Visits Australia to see art galleries.
- 1899 Wins Silver Medal at C.S.A. for Landscape as well as a Silver Medal from the Department of Science and Art, South Kensington.
- 1900 Is elected to the Council of C.S.A. but sails on 25 August for Melbourne on S.S. Taluna; on 4 September he leaves Melbourne for London on S.S. Ortona. Visits Paris for the International Exhibition. Returns to London and attends Heatherley's.
- 1901 Spends the summer with Charles Bickerton painting at Staithes. In the autumn, they leave for Paris to attend the Académie Julian where their teachers include W.A. Bouguereau and G. Ferrier. A fellow student is William Leech.
- 1902 After visiting Florence, Pisa, Rome, Milan and Venice, he leaves for Concarneau which becomes his base for the rest of his stay.

- 1903 Visits Scotland where he works on portraits of Miss Edith Ingram. Spends time at Glasgow where he meets artists who knew Nairn and recognized him as one of the best painters of the Glasgow School.
- 1904 He and Leech contract typhoid fever at Concarneau. They recover at Leech's home in Dublin. Makes his debut at the Royal Academy, London with his painting *Sly* and exhibits *Au Pardon* and his portrait of Miss Edith Ingram at the Salon des Artistes Français in Paris. He is listed as a pupil of Bouguereau and Ferrier. At the end of the year, he leaves for New Zealand.
- 1905 Arrives in New Zealand. He is elected to the council of the C.S.A. and serves until he leaves for Europe in 1911. Exhibits at C.S.A., N.Z.A.F.A. and O.A.S. His painting, *Au Pardon* is bought by the C.S.A. He establishes a studio at 97 Cambridge Terrace, Christchurch.
- 1906 He is appointed to the staff of the Canterbury College School of Art where he takes life-classes until the end of 1910. An Artists' Sketch Club is formed whose members include Cecil Kelly, Raymond McIntyre, Alfred Walsh, W.Menzies Gibb, Leonard Booth, Edwin Bartley, Kennaway Henderson, Charles Bickerton and Sydney Thompson. They meet regularly and often in his studio.  
Between 1906 and 1910 he makes numerous painting trips to Lake Taupo and stays at Tokaanu. In 1906 he exhibits at annual exhibitions of the C.S.A., O.A.S., N.Z.A.F.A., A.S.A. and *The Crucifix* is purchased by the N.Z.A.F.A. He shows in Christchurch at the New Zealand International Exhibition 1906-07.
- 1907 Travels to Dunedin where he executes a commission for a portrait of Lady Mclean. He exhibits at annual exhibitions of the C.S.A., O.A.S. and N.Z.A.F.A.
- 1908 Exhibits at annual exhibitions of the C.S.A., O.A.S., N.Z.A.F.A. and A.S.A. His painting of *La Vieille Bretonne* is purchased for the N.Z.A.F.A.
- 1909 Exhibits at annual exhibitions of the C.S.A., O.A.S., N.Z.A.F.A. and A.S.A.
- 1910 Exhibits at annual exhibitions of C.S.A., O.A.S. and N.Z.A.F.A.
- 1911 He is married to Ethel Coe on 28 March. Together they leave for Europe, arriving in England in late spring. Places they visit include Staithes, Whitby and Huntingdonshire. They arrive in Paris in autumn. He attends Lucien Simon's classes at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, goes to Colarossi's, and takes some anatomy classes at the 'Beaux-Arts'. About this time he meets up again with Leech and makes contact with J.M.Kite, Barne, Katherine MacCausland and Ferris Maynard. He meets with New Zealand artists in

Paris, including Frances Hodgkins, Owen Merton and Cora Wilding. Exhibits at C.S.A. annual exhibition.

- 1912 He and his wife leave in spring for Concarneau where their son, Yannick, is born in May. Exhibits at annual exhibition of the C.S.A. and at Le Salon des Artistes Français, Paris.
- 1913 Maud Sherwood visits them at Concarneau in the summer and Archibald Nicoll calls in September (or possibly September of 1912). Sends work back for exhibition at N.Z.A.F.A. and A.S.A. annual exhibitions. Succeeds in having a portrait accepted at the Royal Academy, London.
- 1914 After the outbreak of war in August he leaves for Nantes to volunteer his services as an interpreter but returns to Concarneau.
- 1915 Birth of their daughter, Annette, in April 1915 at Concarneau. The family make their first trip together to the south of France.
- 1916-1919 During these years Concarneau remains their base but in 1916 they also stay at Le Lavandou and Bormes-les-Mimosas; in 1917 at Bormes-les-Mimosas and Martigues; in 1918 at Martigues, Langogne, Pernes de Vaucluse, Bormes-les-Mimosas; in 1919 at Bormes-les-Mimosas before they leave in December for Tunisia.
- 1920 After working in Tunisia with Leech, he returns with his family to Concarneau where their daughter, Mary, is born in May. In December he has a major exhibition of 59 paintings at the prestigious Galeries Georges Petit in Paris.
- 1921-1923 Concarneau remains their base although they make regular trips to the south and stay at St. Jeannet. He often paints with Leech in the Provence region. In June 1923 he exhibits again at the Galeries Georges Petit in Paris. He also shows at Le Salon des Artistes Français in 1922 and 1923. In 1922 he is awarded 'mention honorable' for his painting, *Patient Horses*, purchased in 1924 for the A.C.A.G. Also begins to exhibit in the south of France and in 1922 the Société des Beaux-Arts at Nice purchase *Sur la Digue, Concarneau* and present it to the Musée Cheret, Nice. In autumn 1923 the family leave for New Zealand and he is welcomed to Christchurch by a civic reception on 27 November. A successful exhibition of 87 works at the C.S.A. Art Gallery opens on 15 December. The C.S.A. buys *Horses on the Quay* and *Last Rays*.
- 1924 Works on landscapes in the Mt. Cook region and paints at Scotston, St. Andrews, where he stays with the Mills family. He makes a visit to friends

at Waihi, Lake Taupo. Holds an exhibition at Wellington and N.Z.A.F.A. buy *Patient Horses* and *Last Rays, Cale de la Crieé, Concarneau*. Also exhibits at Auckland where the Auckland City Council buy *At Rest* and *Patient Horses* for the gallery.

Exhibits at C.S.A., O.A.S., N.Z.A.F.A., A.S.A. and at Le Salon des Artistes Français, Paris.

- 1925 After holding an exhibition in his studio in Christchurch in March, he leaves with his family for Europe. They stop over in Australia and in May, he holds a successful exhibition at the Macquarie Galleries, Sydney, where the Art Gallery of New South Wales buys *Concarneau, unloading boats* and *Noon on a summer's day*. He also exhibits at the Fine Arts Society Gallery in Melbourne where the National Gallery of Victoria buys *Souk, Hammamet* and *When the fleet comes in*.

After returning via England to Concarneau they travel to the south of France and buy a house at Grasse. He also exhibits at the annual exhibitions of the C.S.A. and N.Z.A.F.A.

- 1926 Summer and autumn are spent in Concarneau and winter and spring at Grasse. An exhibition of 39 works is held at the Fine Arts Society Gallery in August at Melbourne and in September at the Macquarie Galleries, Sydney. He also exhibits at Le Salon des Artistes Français and at the annual exhibitions of the C.S.A. and N.Z.A.F.A.

- 1927-1933 During these years the family divide their time between living at Concarneau and Grasse. In 1933 he makes two visits to Italy. At the end of 1933 he leaves France with his wife and two daughters and they return to settle in New Zealand. Their son stays in England to complete his education.

From 1927-1931 he exhibits with the Union Artistique des Amis de Concarneau and in 1927, 1931 and 1933 at Le Salon des Artistes Français, Paris. He also participates in exhibitions organized by Mrs Murray Fuller in March, 1928 at an exhibition of Contemporary British Art at the David Jones Gallery, Sydney, and in an exhibition of British Contemporary Art in Christchurch in 1932. He shows in New Zealand at the annual exhibitions of the O.A.S. and N.Z.A.F.A. in 1928 and 1932 and at the C.S.A. Jubilee Exhibition in 1930. Visitors to Concarneau during this period include Mabel Hill, Cora Wilding, Flora Scales, Frances Hodgkins, Will Ashton and Charles Bryant. Olivia Spencer Bower and Maureen Raymond call in 1929.

- 1934 They arrive in January in New Zealand and they live at 21 Repton Street, Christchurch. He returns to his studio at 97 Cambridge Terrace, Christchurch. Becomes Vice-President of the New Zealand Society of Artists. In October, holds an exhibition of 80 paintings at the C.S.A. Also shows with the New Zealand Society of Artists in Dunedin in September and in October-

November in Christchurch. Exhibits at the annual exhibitions held by C.S.A., O.A.S., A.S.A. and N.Z.A.F.A.

1935 He serves as President of C.S.A. until 1937 when he becomes Vice-President. Holds an exhibition of 65 works at Dunedin's Pioneer Hall in March. Also shows at annual exhibitions of C.S.A., A.S.A. and N.Z.A.F.A.

1936 Shows at annual exhibitions of C.S.A., A.S.A. and N.Z.A.F.A. He exhibits *Shipping, Wellington Harbour* which was commissioned by the Wellington Harbour Board.

He is commissioned by the Lyttelton Harbour Board for a painting of Lyttelton Harbour. He is represented in the opening exhibition of the permanent collection of the National Art Gallery. In May he exhibits 60 paintings at David Jones Galleries in Sydney.

1937 Is awarded O.B.E. in May. His wife and daughters remain in New Zealand and he undertakes a trip to France, arriving in Concarneau in September. In November visits exhibitions held in Paris before leaving for Provence for the winter. He exhibits at annual exhibitions of C.S.A., O.A.S. and N.Z.A.F.A.

1938 Stays on for the spring in Provence and visits Italy in April and May. He is in Paris in the summer where he buys several works which include Lucien Simon's *Actors of a Sideshow*, Othon Friesz's *In the woods*, Asselin's *Girl reading* and Lebasque's *Across the bay* for the Robert McDougall Art Gallery's Schlesinger Bequest. Whilst in Paris he meets up with Kate O'Connor whom he had known from previous trips. Paints in Brittany for the rest of the summer and works on a number of paintings of old chapels as well as figure paintings of 'Josepha' or 'Josepha from Martinique.' After meeting with his son in autumn in England and painting port scenes with Leech at Billingsgate, he leaves for New Zealand, arriving at the end of the year. This year exhibits only at C.S.A. annual exhibition.

1939 Holds an exhibition of 92 works with N.Z.A.F.A. in the new National Art Gallery building. The following works are added to N.Z.A.F.A. collection: *Sardine fishers on the quay of the Bassin, Concarneau* and *Darning, (portrait of Mme Ethel Thompson at Grasse)* and the following were bought for the national collection: *A Norwegian ship at Billingsgate* and *Almond tree at Vieille*. Also exhibits at C.S.A. and contributes to Centennial Exhibition of New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts.

1939-1948 Remains in New Zealand throughout the war years, returning to France in 1948. In 1940 he is represented in the National Centennial Exhibition of New Zealand Art and shows at the annual exhibitions of N.Z.A.F.A. from 1940-45 and in 1947. Also shows at annual exhibitions of A.S.A. in 1940 and

in 1943 and of C.S.A. 1940-48. He exhibits between 1942-43 and in 1947 with the O.A.S.

During this period he paints in New Zealand, working with Esther Hope at the Grampians in 1939 and 1946, after a previous visit in 1934, and with Olivia Spencer Bower at Mahurangi in 1943. He paints at Whangarei in 1944 and 1945, Mahurangi in 1946. Favourite South Island sites include Lakes Sumner, Pearson, Sarah, the Cass district and Waimakariri Gorge.

In winter 1948, he leaves for Europe and after visiting his son in England, returns to Brittany in September and leaves for Provence for the winter.

**1949-1952** Spends these years painting in France, dividing his time between winter and spring in Provence and summer and autumn in Brittany. He returns to favourite sites such as St. Jeannet and Tourrette-sur-Loup; other sites include Le Rouret and Pont-Croix and Locronan. Also visits galleries in Berne and Basel in 1949. During these years holds an exhibition of 80 works at Fishers in June 1948 and exhibits at annual exhibitions of C.S.A. in 1949 and 1950.

**1952-1963** In late summer of 1952 arrives back in New Zealand where he remains until leaving for France in 1963. During these years he travels in the South Island making numerous excursions to paint lake scenery in Canterbury and working in 1955, 1956, 1958 and 1963 in Central Otago. Other important painting sites are found around Kaikoura, Blenheim and Nelson, as well as closer to home in the Cass region and along the Waikari river.

In 1954 the New Zealand Government select *Seaward Kaikouras* to present to Sir Winston Churchill for his 80th birthday and in 1956 they choose *Lake Sarah* for the Duke of Edinburgh to mark his visit to New Zealand. In 1956 Mr Kelleher donates *Lake Wanaka, Summer Morning* to the Dunedin Public Art Gallery and in 1958 Mrs T.T. Gough presents *Autumn, Greta Cutting* to the Robert McDougall Art Gallery.

He continues to exhibit at annual exhibitions of N.Z.A.F.A. between 1953-56 and 1959-60 and of C.S.A. between 1953-60 as well as with O.A.S. in 1956. He also shows at numerous society exhibitions in Nelson, Timaru, Invercargill and Kaikoura. In 1957 he is included in the major touring exhibition '8 New Zealand Painters' opening in November at Auckland City Art Gallery. In August-September 1962, a major 'Retrospective Exhibition' of 183 works is held by the C.S.A.

His wife dies in August 1961. In May 1963 he leaves again for Europe. After visiting his son in England, he sets off for France on a painting trip with his daughter, Annette, in a motor caravan.

**1963-1966** During these years they are often on the move, following a familiar pattern of dividing their time between Concarneau and the south. In October 1963, after spending the summer painting in Brittany, he leaves with his daughter for Spain in their motor caravan looking for "an interesting port to paint in."

In February 1964 they return to a favourite haunt, St. Jeannet, where they stay at the camping site until returning for summer and autumn to Concarneau. Winter is spent in Spain and Portugal and they return once again to St. Jeannet for the spring of 1965. In May 1965 they return to Concarneau until leaving for New Zealand in December 1966. During this time he continues to go out and paint. One of his favourite sites is Locmaria on Hent. In his absence, in January 1966, the C.S.A. award him a Silver Medal for his services to the arts.

- 1967-1969** Lives at his home at 21 Repton Street, Christchurch until April 1969 when he leaves once again - this time by air - for England where he stays with his son before returning to Concarneau. A Complimentary Retrospective Exhibition of 65 works is held at the C.S.A. in October 1968. In November 1968 a Sydney Thompson Retrospective Exhibition of 47 works is held in Dunedin.
- 1969-1973** Arrives for the last time at Concarneau in June 1969. He and his daughter stay with Mimi Tallec until he goes to live at the newly built house known as Kost Ar Pin. He dies on 8 June 1973. He is buried at the cemetery in Concarneau.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

|            |                                  |
|------------|----------------------------------|
| A.C.A.G.   | Auckland City Art Gallery        |
| A.S.A.     | Auckland Society of Arts         |
| C.S.A.     | Canterbury Society of Arts       |
| D.P.A.G.   | Dunedin Public Art Gallery       |
| N.A.G.     | National Art Gallery             |
| N.Z.A.F.A. | New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts |
| O.A.S.     | Otago Arts Society               |

The author would like to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of Mme. Annette Thompson in the preparation of this chronology.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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# CATALOGUE

## CATALOGUE

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The catalogue is arranged according to subject and place. Within these categories the order is broadly chronological.

- \* (*asterix*)      Indicates that the work has been included in the touring exhibition.
- Title*              Works which have not been known consistently by the same title and variations have been recorded in the *Notes*.
- Date*              When dates are known from the inscription on the work or from external evidence such as a commissioning date, they appear without brackets. Dates in brackets have been assigned by the curator.
- Measurements*    All measurements are in millimetres, height before width.
- Abbreviations*    A.C.A.G.    Auckland City Art Gallery  
A.S.A.      Auckland Society of Arts  
C.S.A.      Canterbury Society of Arts  
D.P.A.G.    Dunedin Public Art Gallery  
N.A.G.      National Art Gallery  
N.Z.A.F.A. New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts  
O.A.S.      Otago Arts Society



1\* *Maori mother and child*  
1898

Oil on canvas 770 x 615

Signed and dated lower right 'S L Thompson 1898'

*Exhibited:*

1975 Face Value: a study in Maori Portraiture

*Collection:*

Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, presented by R.E. McDougall, 1932



2\* *Au pardon*  
1902-04

Oil on canvas 730 x 510

Signed lower left 'S L Thompson'

*Exhibited:*

1904 Le Salon des Artistes Français, Paris

1905 Annual Exhibition, C.S.A.

1972 New Zealand Painting 1900-1920: Tradition and Departures

1990 A Canterbury Perspective

*Notes:*

Purchased for the C.S.A. for £31-10-0 from the Annual Exhibition in 1905. According to the conservator, Thompson probably used a pigment in this painting which has subsequently darkened.

*Collection:* Canterbury Society of Arts

3\* *La vicille Bretonne*  
(1902-04)

Oil on canvas 810 x 660  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Exhibited:*

1912 Exhibition of Pictures by the N.Z.A.F.A.

*Notes:*

Purchased for the N.Z.A.F.A. for £15-15-0 in 1908

*Collection:*

National Art Gallery, Wellington, presented by the N.Z.A.F.A. in 1936



4\* *The crucifix*  
(1902-04)

Oil on canvas 731 x 538  
Signed lower right 'S L T' (scratched on paint surface)

*Exhibited:*

1906 Annual Exhibition, N.Z.A.F.A.  
1912 Exhibition of Pictures by the N.Z.A.F.A.  
1962 Retrospective Exhibition, C.S.A.

*Notes:*

Purchased for the N.Z.A.F.A. for £15-15-0 in 1906

*Collection:*

National Art Gallery, Wellington, presented by the N.Z.A.F.A. in 1936



5. *Miss Ingram*  
1903

Pastel on paper 700 x 450 (sight)  
Signed and dated lower right 'SLT/03'

*Notes:*

Thompson's portraits of Miss Ingram were executed whilst she was on a visit 'home' to Scotland. Her portrait in oils was exhibited at the Paris salon in 1904. This pastel drawing belonged to the artist until he presented it to the Robert McDougall Art Gallery. Edith Ingram came from Oxford, Canterbury. Her father, John Ingram, settled there in 1870, establishing himself as an estate agent and auctioneer who played a leading role in public life in the district.

*Collection:*

Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, presented by the artist, 1969





6. *Lady Ferguson*  
1906

Oil on canvas 815 x 610

Signed and dated lower right 'S L Thompson/06'

*Notes:*

Lady Ferguson was an educated woman, and an active and generous supporter of the arts in Dunedin during the early years. She was married to Sir Lindo Ferguson, Dean of the Medical School. This portrait was painted in 1906 for her family; it belongs to her granddaughter.

Private collection



7\* *Lady Mclean*  
1907

Oil on canvas 1020 x 770

Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'.

*Exhibited:*

1907 Annual Exhibition, C.S.A.

1966 One Hundred Years of Painting in Dunedin, Dunedin Municipal Centenary Exhibition

*Notes:*

Commissioned from the artist, paid for by subscriptions from the public, £10. Painting recorded in D.P.A.G. inventory, 1931. Lady Mclean was an energetic supporter of the arts and effectively campaigned for the Public Art Gallery. She was married to Sir George Mclean who was prominent in Dunedin's business and commercial life. The Early Settlers Association owns another portrait of Lady Mclean as well as a portrait of her husband.

*Collection:*

Dunedin Public Art Gallery

8. *Marjorie, Jean and Nancy, daughters of R.E. McDougall, Esq.*  
1910

Oil on canvas 1090 x 1645

Signed and dated lower right 'S L Thompson/10'

*Exhibited:*

1911 Annual Exhibition, C.S.A.

*Notes:*

This large group portrait was a major commission for Thompson. R.E. McDougall was a successful businessman in Christchurch who built up Aulsebrook and Company and went on to become one of the city's philanthropists, gifting £25,000 for the foundation of the city's art gallery.

Exhibited with the kind permission of the Nurse Maude District Nursing Association and the McDougall Family.

9\* *Untitled (Portrait of a Maori)*  
1907

Oil on canvas 615 x 460

Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

Inscription not legible but appears to include 'Kokuhu To-oa A.L.D. Fraser 1907'

*Notes:*

The painting is thought to have been painted in the Napier region and bought directly from the artist about the time of its execution. It has been known as 'Portrait of a Maori Chief'.

Private collection

10\* *Study of female nude*  
(1906-10)

Oil on canvas 645 x 900

Unsigned

*Exhibited:*

1962 Retrospective Exhibition, C.S.A.

*Notes:*

This unsigned study was probably painted at one of the sessions of the Artists Sketch Club held at Thompson's studio at 97 Cambridge Terrace.

*Collection:*

University of Canterbury, School of Fine Arts





11\* *The Woman in White*  
(c.1914)

Oil on canvas on hardboard 920 x 700  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'. Inscribed lower centre frame on plaque 'The Woman in White Sydney L. Thompson. Bequeathed by Mr. P.L. Halsted 1943'

*Exhibited:*

1925 Annual Exhibition, C.S.A.  
1962 Retrospective Exhibition, C.S.A.

*Notes:*

In old catalogue files at Dunedin Public Art Gallery, it has been recorded as *Lady in White*, *The Woman in White* and *Woman in White*. It was exhibited at the Annual Exhibition of the C.S.A. in 1925 as *The Woman in White* (unfinished study). The painting depicts the artist's wife, Ethel Thompson, who posed for the painting in their garden at La Glacière. See: *Garden, La Glacière, Concarneau* (Cat.40).

*Collection:*

Dunedin Public Art Gallery



12\* *Portrait of Joy Clark*  
(c.1917)

Oil on canvas 550 x 463  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Exhibited:*

1968 Complimentary Retrospective Exhibition, C.S.A.  
1972 New Zealand Painting 1900-1920: Traditions and Departures

*Notes:*

Purchased by the C.S.A. from the Complimentary Retrospective Exhibition, 1968, for \$255.

*Collection:*

Canterbury Society of Arts

13. *Mme Thompson, the artist's wife, seated with parasol, St Jeannet*  
1923

Oil on canvas 810 x 650

Signed and dated lower left 'S L Thompson/23'

*Notes:*

"This was painted in the garden at St Jeannet where we lived each late autumn till May or June from October 1921 to 1923." Letter from Mme Y.A.Thompson to the writer, 22 December 1987.

Private collection



14. *Portrait of the artist's father, Charles Abel Thompson*  
1924

Oil on canvas 604 x 500

Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

Private collection



15\* *Girl on balcony, La Digue, Concarneau*  
1925-26

Oil on canvas 650 x 535

Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Notes:*

This painting, which included a portrait of his youngest daughter, Mary, was executed at his studio overlooking the harbour at Concarneau. See: *Studio balcony, La Digue, Concarneau* (Cat.41).

*Collection:*

C.S. Caldwell





16. *The artist's daughters, Annette and Mary at Happy Valley, Grasse 1926*

Oil on canvas 730 x 545

Signed and dated lower left 'S L Thompson/26'

*Notes:*

After Thompson and his family returned to France in 1925, they bought a property at Grasse where they regularly spent the winter and spring months, before leaving in 1933 to settle in New Zealand.

Private collection



17. *In mystudio at Kerizett, Concarneau, Annette, Yan and Mary 1929*

Oil on canvas 975 x 1300

Signed and dated lower right 'S L Thompson/29'

*Notes:*

In the corner of the studio, Thompson included one of his paintings of almond blossom and beside it, the kaitaka with its intricately designed taniko border, which he had been given by the Ngati Tuwharetoa just after the turn of the century. This painting may have been exhibited at a solo exhibition at the C.S.A. in October 1934 as "Etude - in my studio".

Private collection



18\* *Darning, (Portrait of Mme Ethel Thompson at Grasse) (c.1927)*

Oil on canvas 723 x 495

Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Exhibited:*

1939 Sydney L. Thompson exhibition, N.Z.A.F.A. gallery, Wellington

1962 Retrospective Exhibition, C.S.A. Christchurch

1975 New Zealand Painting 1920-1940 Adaptation and Nationalism

*Notes:*

Purchased with Macarthy Trust Grant by N.Z.A.F.A. for £84 from the artist's one man show on 14 August, 1939.

*Collection:*

National Art Gallery, Wellington, presented by the N.Z.A.F.A. in 1940

19. *Yellow frock, Mary*  
1934

Oil on canvas 808 x 650

Signed and dated lower right 'S L Thompson/34'

Private collection



20\* *Josepha*  
1938

Oil on canvas 550 x 455

Signed and dated lower left 'S L Thompson/38'

*Notes:*

This was one of a number of paintings using the same model, which Thompson painted in Brittany in 1938.

*Collection:*

Hocken Library, Dunedin





21. *Entrance to o'er t'beck, Staithes*  
(1901)

Oil on canvas 460 x 610  
Signed lower right 'S L T'

*Notes:*

A painting with the title 'Across the Beck, Staithes, Yorkshire' was exhibited at the Annual Exhibition of the A.S.A. in 1909.

*Collection:*

Aigantighe Art Gallery, Timaru, presented by Mrs. H.M. Thompson, 1968



22. *Fishing boat on the river, Staithes*  
(1900-01)

Oil on canvas 405 x 510  
Signed and dated lower right 'S L Thompson/00'

*Collection:*

Aigantighe Art Gallery, Timaru, presented by Mrs. H.M. Thompson, 1968

23. *Outer harbour, evening, Concarneau*  
(1902-04)

Oil on panel 250 x 160  
Signed lower right 'SLT'

*Notes:*

The owners recall that it was signed by Sydney Thompson c.1962. Inscribed on the reverse is '1901'. However, Thompson arrived in Concarneau in 1902.

*Collection:*

Mr and Mrs Peter Mills



24. *Boats in the harbour, Concarneau*  
(1902-04)

Oil on panel 265 x 160  
Signed lower right 'SLT'

*Notes:*

The owners recall that it was signed by Sydney Thompson c.1962. Inscribed on the reverse is '1901'. However, Thompson arrived in Concarneau in 1902.

*Collection:*

Mr and Mrs Peter Mills





25. *Fishermen sorting sardines, Concarneau*  
(c.1913)

Oil on board 240 x 330  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Collection:*  
Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, presented by  
Sydney L. Thompson, 1968



26\* *'Le Mousse' or Blue figure, Concarneau*  
(c.1915)

Oil on board 375 x 285  
Signed lower right 'SLT'

*Notes:*  
'Le Mousse' is a young boy training to become a fisherman.

*Collection:*  
Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch



27\* *Fishermen on the slip at the Digue, Concarneau*  
(c.1920)

Oil on board 330 x 405  
Signed lower right 'SLT'

*Notes:*  
Bought from the artist.

Private collection

28. *Unloading, Concarneau*

1920

Oil on board 330 x 408

Signed lower left 'S L Thompson'

Private collection



29. *Plage des Dames, Concarneau*

(c.1919)

Oil on board 215 x 270

Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

Private collection



30. *Tunny boat in the harbour, Concarneau*

(c.1917)

Oil on board 210 x 265

Signed lower left 'S L Thompson'

Inscribed lower right 'à mon ami J Shelley'

*Notes:*

This painting was given by the artist to his friend, James Shelley.

Private collection





31\* *Earthenware Market, Concarneau*  
(c.1916)

Oil on wood panel 370 x 455  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Collection:*

Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, Marjorie Bassett bequest, 1964



32. *Morning on the market, Concarneau*  
1916

Oil on canvas 380 x 460  
Signed and dated lower right 'S L Thompson 1916'

Private collection



33\* *White horse on the quay, Concarneau*  
(1920-23)

Oil on canvas 505 x 620  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'  
Inscribed on the back of frame, centre: 'Title The White Horse on the Quay, Concarneau, artist Sydney L. Thompson, price £52.10.0. no. 4.'

*Exhibited:*

1924 Otago Art Society Exhibition

*Notes:*

In old catalogue files at Dunedin Public Art Gallery, it has been recorded as *The White Horse* and *White Horse on the Quay*.

*Collection:*

Dunedin Public Art Gallery, presented by R.G.Storey, 1924

34\* *Horses on the quay*  
(c.1920)

Oil on canvas 730 x 1040  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Exhibited:*

- 1922 Le Salon des Artistes Français, Paris
- 1923 Sydney Thompson exhibition, C.S.A.
- 1924 Annual Exhibition, C.S.A.
- 1976 Sydney L. Thompson exhibition, Robert McDougall Art Gallery
- 1990 A Canterbury Perspective

*Notes:*

Bought by C.S.A. from Sydney Thompson's show in Christchurch in 1923 for £100.

*Collection:*

Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, presented by C.S.A.



35. *Untitled*  
(c.1921)

Oil on canvas 547 x 735  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Notes:*

Known as '*Untitled no. 1: Return of the Sardine Fishers, Concarneau*' in National Art Gallery records. Bequested to the N.Z.A.F.A. by Annie Alice Smith as a memorial to her husband in 1960.

*Collection:*

National Art Gallery, Wellington, presented by N.Z.A.F.A.





**36\* *Fisherman in red***  
(1925-1933)

Oil on canvas 510 x 610  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Exhibited:*

1962 Retrospective Exhibition, C.S.A.

*Notes:*

Purchased from the artist for £60 on 5 April 1935 from Sir George Fenwick Bequest with assistance from the Dunedin Branch of the New Zealand Society of Artists 1935.

*Collection:*

Dunedin Public Art Gallery



**37\* *Harbour scene, evening, Concarneau***  
(1925-33)

Oil on canvas 595 x 720  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Notes:*

Also known as 'Fishing boats, Concarneau' in art gallery records.

*Collection:*

Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, presented by Lady A.L.M. McGibbon



**38\* *Sardine fishers on the quay of the Bassin, Concarneau***  
(1925-33)

Oil on canvas 510 x 600  
Signed lower left 'S L Thompson'

*Exhibited:*

1939 Sydney L. Thompson exhibition, N.Z.A.F.A. Gallery, Wellington

*Notes:*

Purchased with Macarthy Trust funds by N.Z.A.F.A. from the artist's one man show on 14 August, 1939 for £47-15-0. Its title was *Sardine Fishers, afternoon, Concarneau*.

*Collection:*

National Art Gallery, Wellington, presented by the N.Z.A.F.A. in 1940

39\* *Fisherfolk, Late Afternoon*  
(1925-1933)

Oil on canvas 380 x 612  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Notes:*

Purchased from the artist

Private collection



40\* *Garden, La Glacière, Concarneau*  
(1913-19)

Oil on canvas 655 x 545  
Signed lower left 'S L Thompson'

*Notes:*

Inherited by Annette Thompson from her father in 1973.

*Collection:*

Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch



41. *Studio balcony, La Digue, Concarneau*  
1920

Oil on canvas 610 x 500  
Signed and dated lower right 'S L Thompson 20'

*Notes:*

On reverse of painting is the label from 1968 Complimentary Retrospective exhibition, inscribed 'Studio Balcony, La Digue, Concarneau Year: 1925 No. 19. Price \$300'. This painting may have been exhibited as no. 74 in 1962 Retrospective Exhibition. It was painted at the studio at La Digue and depicts the view towards the entrance of the harbour. See: *Girl on balcony, La Digue, Concarneau* (Cat.15).

*Exhibited:*

1968 Complimentary Retrospective, C.S.A.

Private collection





42. *Almond blossom, Bormes-les-Mimosas*  
(c.1918)

Oil on board 430 x 510

Signed lower left 'S L Thompson'

Private collection



43. *Ruins and almond blossom, Bormes-les-Mimosas*  
(c.1919)

Oil on canvas 650 x 540

Signed lower left 'S L Thompson'

*Exhibited:*

1968 Complimentary Retrospective, C.S.A.

Private collection

**44\*** *A street in an Arab village, Tunisia*  
1920

Oil on canvas 540 x 650  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Collection:*  
Annette Thompson



**45.** *Arcades, Hammamet, Tunisia*  
1920

Oil on canvas board 455 x 380  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

Private collection



**46\*** *Bormes-les-Mimosas in winter*  
1920

Oil on canvas 600 x 730  
Signed and dated lower left 'S L Thompson/20'

*Collection:*  
Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch





47\* *The Rocks, Le Baou de St. Jeannet, south of France*  
(1922)

Oil on canvas 732 x 604  
Signed lower left 'S L Thompson'

*Exhibited:*

1962 Retrospective Exhibition, C.S.A.

*Collection:*

Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch



48\* *Almond blossom, Grasse*  
(c.1927)

Oil on canvas 725 x 500  
Signed lower left 'S L Thompson'

*Notes:*

Rosa Sawtell bequest, 1940.

*Collection:*

Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch



49\* *Lavoir en Provence*  
c.1930

Oil on canvas 600 x 730  
Signed lower left 'S L Thompson'

*Exhibited:*

1931 Le Salon des Artistes Français, Paris

*Notes:*

Purchased July, 1932.

*Collection:*

Bishop Suter Art Gallery Trust Board, Nelson

50. *Vines, autumn, Grasse*  
(c.1930)

Oil on canvas 510 x 615  
Signed lower left 'S L Thompson'

*Collection:*  
Caldwell collection



51\* *The canal bridge, Grasse*  
(c.1927)

Oil on canvas 650 x 540  
Signed lower left 'S L Thompson'

Private collection



52\* *Our bridge over the canal, Grasse*  
(1932)

Oil on canvas 650 x 500  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Exhibited:*  
1934 S.L.Thompson Exhibition at C.S.A.

*Collection:*  
Annette Thompson





53\* *Cell of St Francis at Carceri*  
1933

Oil on canvas 373 x 445  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Exhibited:*

1934 Exhibition of Pictures of Brittany and Provence, C.S.A.

*Collection:*

Christchurch Polytechnic



54\* *St Jeannet, Southern France*  
(1948-49)

Oil on canvas 545 x 730  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Notes:*

Purchased in 1967 for \$1050 from the collection of Nugent Welch. Previously titled '*Landscape, Southern France*' and '*Landscape, Southern France, view from St. Jeannet (a.m.) France*'.

*Collection:*

National Art Gallery, Wellington



55\* *Village of Tourrette-sur-Loup*  
(1950)

Oil on canvas 500 x 650  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Exhibited:*

1968 Complimentary Retrospective Exhibition, C.S.A.

*Collection:*

Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch

56. *Morning coffee*  
(1942)

Oil on board 750 x 780  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Exhibited:*  
1944 Annual Exhibition, C.S.A.

*Collection:*  
Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch



57. *Roses and St Anthony*  
1950

Oil on canvas 460 x 545  
Signed and dated lower left 'S L Thompson 1950'

*Exhibited:*  
1959 Annual Exhibition, C.S.A.

*Collection:*  
C.S. Caldwell





58. *Seascape, New Zealand*  
1907

Oil on board 172 x 250

Signed lower left 'S L Thompson' and signed lower right 'S L Thompson/07'

*Notes:*

This view resembles that seen looking towards Taylors Mistake from Sumner.

*Collection:*

Aigantighe Art Gallery, presented by Mrs H.M. Thompson



59\* *Under Sefton and Mueller Glacier*  
1924

Oil on canvas 505 x 614

Unsigned

*Notes:*

This painting was discovered in 1983 by the conservator. It was attached to the same stretcher as *Mt. Sefton* which was presented to the National Art Gallery by Sir James Mills in 1936. Thompson completed several paintings in the Mount Cook region in 1924.

*Collection:*

National Art Gallery, Wellington

60. *Haystacks, Scotston, South Canterbury*  
1924

Oil on canvas board 375 x 460  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Notes:*

Thompson and his family stayed at the farm at Scotston in 1924.

*Collection:*

Mr and Mrs Peter Mills



61\* *Shipping, Wellington Harbour*  
1936

Oil on canvas 1330 x 1635  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson/36'

*Notes:*

Three paintings of Wellington Harbour, including this work by Thompson and others by Archibald Nicoll and Nugent Welch, were commissioned by the Wellington Harbour Board. They were shown in 1936 at the annual show of the N.Z.A.F.A., held in conjunction with the opening of the National Gallery.

*Collection:*

National Art Gallery, Wellington, presented by the Wellington Harbour Board



62. *Wellington Harbour*  
1936

Oil on board 380 x 459  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

Private collection





63\* *Wellington Harbour, No. 1*  
1936

Oil on board 380 x 455  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Collection:*  
University of Auckland



64\* *Lyttelton from the Bridle Path*  
1937

Oil on canvas 980 x 1300  
Signed lower left 'S L Thompson'

*Exhibited:*  
1990 Two Centuries of New Zealand Landscape Art, A.C.A.G.

*Collection:*  
Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, presented by the  
Lyttelton Harbour Board, 1938



65. *Lyttelton from the Bridle Path*  
1937

Oil on canvas 550 x 720  
Signed and dated lower left 'S L Thompson/37'

*Exhibited:*  
1990 A Canterbury Perspective

*Notes:*  
Presented by the artist as a tribute to the late W.K. McAlpine,  
Chairman, and to the Lyttelton Harbour Board, the first public body  
in Canterbury to recognise in a practical manner the importance to  
the community of the art of painting.

*Collection:*  
R. McDougall Art Gallery, presented by the Lyttelton Harbour Board, 1989

66\* *Up the Hapuku Valley*  
1937

Oil on canvas board 385 x 475  
Signed lower left 'S L Thompson'

*Exhibited:*

1937 Annual Exhibition C.S.A.

*Notes:*

Presented anonymously to the Gallery in 1937. Inscribed on reverse  
"Up the Hapuku Valley Sydney L Thompson £21-0-0".

*Collection:*

Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch



67\* *In the Grampian Hills*  
(1934-35 or 1939)

Tempera on grey paper on cardboard 370 x 510  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Notes:*

S.L. Thompson spent the autumn months in 1934 and 1935 with the Hopes at the Grampians. He returned there in 1939. In the 1930s, Thompson painted numerous works using body colour on paper, which he termed *détrempe*.

*Collection:*

Auckland City Art Gallery, purchased 1979



68\* *Canterbury Landscape*  
(c.1934-39)

Tempera on paper 370 x 510  
Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Collection:*

Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North





69\* *A Corner of Lake Wanaka, Autumn*  
1954

Oil on canvas 380 x 460

Signed lower right 'S L Thompson'

*Exhibited:*

1962 Retrospective Exhibition, C.S.A.

*Collection:*

Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, presented by Mrs. M. Bradshaw, 1989



70\* *Autumn, Greta Cutting*  
1956

Oil on canvas 765 x 940

Signed and dated lower right 'S L Thompson/56'

*Exhibited:*

1978 Sydney Lough Thompson Retrospective Exhibition, New Zealand House, London

1990 A Canterbury Perspective

*Collection:*

Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, presented by Mrs Tracy Gough in memory of her husband, 1958



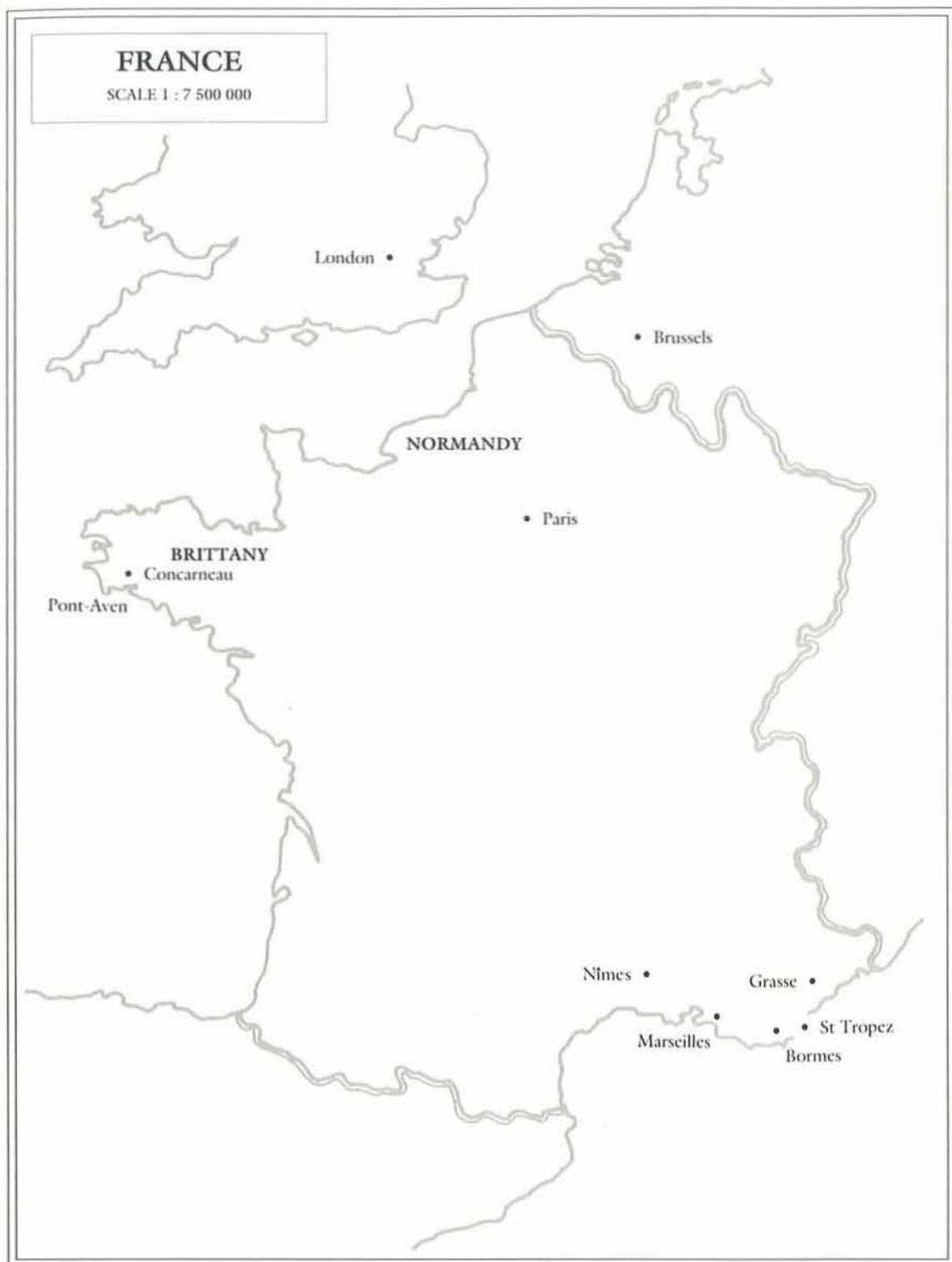
# NEW ZEALAND

SCALE 1 : 7 500 000



# FRANCE

SCALE 1 : 7 500 000



## LIST OF FIGURES

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|    |          |   |
|----|----------|---|
| 1  | Page 14  | Ryde's Mill, Oxford, c.1890   |
| 2  | Page 15  | General Store, High Street, Oxford, after 1889  |
| 3  | Page 17  | Students and staff at Canterbury College School of Art, c.1896  |
| 4  | Page 18  | Sydney L. Thompson, <i>The Saddle</i> (c.1897)  |
| 5  | Page 19  | Note from Petrus van der Velden to Mr and Mrs Thompson, 1897  |
| 6  | Page 20  | Sydney Thompson's first studio, Carleton Run, Oxford  |
| 7  | Page 23  | Staithe Bridge, 1885  |
| 8  | Page 24  | Sydney Thompson, Charles Bickerton and William Leech, Paris, 1901   |
| 9  | Page 25  | Sydney L. Thompson, <i>A French Girl</i> , painted at the Académie Julian, placed fourth in the portrait concours |
| 10 | Page 26  | William-Adolphe Bouguereau  |
| 11 | Page 26  | Gabriel Ferrier in his studio, Paris  |
| 12 | Page 28  | The Market, Concarneau  |
| 13 | Page 30  | The Harbour, Concarneau   |
| 14 | Page 32  | Artist's model, Concarneau, c.1902  |
| 15 | Page 33  | Sydney Thompson sketching at the market, Concarneau, c.1903   |
| 16 | Page 33  | C. Fromuth, <i>Dock study with boats</i>  |
| 17 | Page 34  | Sydney Thompson, 1900   |
| 18 | Page 35  | Sydney Thompson, 1906   |
| 19 | Page 37  | Sydney Thompson in his studio at 97 Cambridge Terrace, Christchurch, 1906   |
| 20 | Page 38  | The Artists' Sketch Club, 1908  |
| 21 | Page 39  | Kaitaka presented by the Ngati Tuwharetoa to Sydney Thompson, detail of border with taniko design                 |
| 22 | Page 40  | Portrait of Ethel Coe   |
| 23 | Page 40  | Life class at Canterbury College School of Art taken by Sydney Thompson, 1906-10                                  |
| 24 | Page 41  | E.M. Lovell-Smith, <i>The Departure of Sir Sydney L. Thompson, April, 1911</i>                                    |
| 25 | Page 46  | Lucien Simon, <i>Chevaux déçelés (Unharnessing the horses)</i>  |
| 26 | Page 48  | Roderic O'Connor, <i>La Ferme</i> , c. 1892   |
| 27 | Page 50  | Sydney L. Thompson, <i>The Artist's Wife and Son in the garden at La Glacière</i> , Concarneau, 1913              |
| 28 | Page 51  | W.J. Leech, <i>A Convent Garden, Brittany</i>   |
| 29 | Page 52  | The return of the fishing fleet, Concarneau   |
| 30 | Page 53  | Unloading tunny fish at La Digue, Concarneau  |
| 31 | Page 54  | Sydney Thompson and his family in the studio at La Digue, Concarneau, 1921  |
| 32 | Page 55  | Sydney Thompson in the studio at La Digue, Concarneau, c.1922   |
| 33 | Page 76  | Sydney Lough Thompson, Wairau River, Blenheim. February 1962  |
| 34 | Page 138 | Map of New Zealand  |
| 35 | Page 139 | Map of France   |

## LIST OF COLOUR PLATES

---

|       |         |         |  |
|-------|---------|---------|--|
| I     | Cover   | Cat. 40 | Garden, La Glacière, Concarneau                                  |
| II    | Page 6  | Cat. 13 | Mme Thompson, the artist's wife, seated with parasol, St Jeannet |
| III   | Page 11 | Cat. 15 | Girl on balcony, La Digue, Concarneau                            |
| IV    | Page 81 | Cat. 4  | The crucifix   |
| V     | Page 82 | Cat. 7  | Lady Mclean  |
| VI    | Page 83 | Cat. 9  | Untitled (Portrait of a Maori)                                   |
| VII   | Page 84 | Cat. 11 | The Woman in White   |
| VIII  | Page 85 | Cat. 12 | Portrait of Joy Clark  |
| IX    | Page 86 | Cat. 17 | In my studio at Kerizett, Concarneau, Annette, Yan and Mary      |
| X     | Page 87 | Cat. 27 | Fishermen on the slip at the Digue, Concarneau                   |
| XI    | Page 87 | Cat. 31 | Earthenware Market, Concarneau                                   |
| XII   | Page 88 | Cat. 34 | Horses on the quay   |
| XIII  | Page 89 | Cat. 38 | Sardine fishers on the quay of the Bassin, Concarneau            |
| XIV   | Page 90 | Cat. 46 | Bormes-les-Mimosas in winter                                     |
| XV    | Page 91 | Cat. 47 | The Rocks, Le Baou de St Jeannet, south of France                |
| XVI   | Page 92 | Cat. 48 | Almond blossom, Grasse   |
| XVII  | Page 93 | Cat. 49 | Lavoir en Provence   |
| XVIII | Page 94 | Cat. 51 | The canal bridge, Grasse   |
| XIX   | Page 95 | Cat. 54 | St Jeannet, Southern France                                      |
| XX    | Page 95 | Cat. 59 | Under Sefton and Mueller Glacier                                 |
| XXI   | Page 96 | Cat. 61 | Shipping, Wellington Harbour                                     |

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Robert McDougall Art Gallery  
1990

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1990  
THE ROBERT McDOUGALL ART GALLERY



SYDNEY LOUGH THOMPSON  
AT HOME AND ABROAD

A ROBERT McDOUGALL ART GALLERY EXHIBITION  
ORGANISED WITH ASSISTANCE FROM THE QUEEN ELIZABETH II ARTS COUNCIL OF NEW ZEALAND  
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