



# A forgotten collector: Archdeacon Smythe and his collection of British watercolours in New Zealand

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## Abstract

Francis Henry Dumville Smythe (1873–1966), a humble clergyman from England, spent a lifetime amassing his private collection of British watercolours. During the 1950s, he decided to gift the bulk of them to two art institutions in New Zealand – Dunedin Public Art Gallery and the National Art Gallery in Wellington. They were welcomed with open arms and celebrated as “the finest collection of water colour pictures in the Southern Hemisphere.” However, they soon fell out of favour as shifting aesthetic tastes and calls for a new national identity dominated the art scene in New Zealand during the latter half of the twentieth century. This paper will examine Smythe’s collecting habits and tastes in art, as well as the formation, gifting and reception of the collection in Wellington and Dunedin. It is based on two chapters from the author’s PhD thesis “A Matter of Taste: The Fate of the Archdeacon Smythe Collection of British Watercolours in New Zealand” (2021).

## Keywords

art collecting, British art, Francis Smythe, national identity, taste, watercolour

## Introduction

During the 1950s, Francis Henry Dumville Smythe (1873–1966) gifted the bulk of his private collection of British watercolours to two galleries in New Zealand: The National Art Gallery (NAG) in Wellington and the Dunedin Public Art Gallery (DPAG). With 1,436 works and over 500 different artists represented, this is the single largest collection of British watercolours in New Zealand today. Most of these artists, of whom only 15 are women, are represented by a single artwork. Some

of the best-represented are John Leech (27 works), John Sell Cotman (24 works), Joseph Mallord William Turner (20), David Cox (18 works), and Walter Crane (18 works).<sup>1</sup> Most of the watercolours, ranging in date from the late 1700s to around 1900, are landscapes (including marines and cityscapes), followed by figurative subjects (including satirical and illustrations) and architecture. However, soon after its arrival, the collection fell out of favour as shifting aesthetic tastes and calls for a new national identity dominated the art scene in New Zealand during the latter half of the twentieth century.

<sup>1</sup> While the Leech watercolours are all satirical illustrations, primarily made for publication in ‘Punch’ (to be discussed in more detail later in this article), Cotman’s works in this collection are mostly local, rural landscapes with architectural elements, but also include more varied works, such as unfinished pencil sketches and sepia washes, as well as about four marine subjects. Cox’s body of works are landscapes that either emphasise expressive trees or prominent, atmospheric skies, whereas Crane’s consists of about nine fully worked out landscape or figure compositions, and the remainder depict character or costume designs. Turner’s works, which appear to be primarily from his early period of picturesque landscapes, are more difficult to characterise as their attributions are highly contested. While the DPAG has not changed any of Smythe’s original attributions, Te Papa has reconsidered several doubtful attributions. As a result, for example, all the original Turner works are now listed as ‘unknown’ in Te Papa’s database. About 100 works are by unknown artists.

As a busy and prominent clergyman with limited financial means, Smythe took almost 50 years to build his extensive collection of watercolours, which he assembled at his home in Sussex, England in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As was common for many private collectors, he wished to share his legacy with the nation through exhibitions and gifts to British institutions. While museums and galleries in England, however, had been either reluctant or unable to accept the whole of Smythe's gifts, the NAG and DPAG welcomed his generosity with open arms. Yet, just a few decades after this warm welcome, Smythe and his collection had been virtually forgotten. Public criticism of the collection slowly turned to apathy, and while locally produced watercolours continued to be actively exhibited in New Zealand, the Smythe watercolours were increasingly relegated to their storage boxes. This was due to the nature of the watercolours themselves, which was out of step with the tastes of the time. It was also part of a gradual shift away from holding all things British in high esteem in New Zealand, to an institutional attitude emphasising a local art tradition.

This article is the first to chronicle the life and collecting habits of Smythe. The only other publication dedicated to his collection, *People & Places: 19<sup>th</sup> Century British Drawings from the Smythe Collection* (Green 2004) by Tony Green, focuses primarily on the contents of a selection of watercolours, rather than the social and historical contexts of its acquisition and gifting.<sup>2</sup> This paper will further showcase the personal tastes of Smythe as representative of a particular period of collecting, while also contributing to a deeper understanding of the history of art and collecting in New Zealand by exposing shifting policies of acquisition and tastes. These shifting tastes are symptomatic of New Zealand's redefined national and cultural identity during the 1950s–1980s, where art institutions distanced the historical links to the embedded – and embattled – British heritage of the nation. Following the model set by writers like Rex Butler and A.D.S. Donaldson who seek to write “a history of what has been excluded”, this article will find new ways of reintroducing a part of our national art collection that has slipped through the cracks because of its seemingly irrelevant status to our national character.<sup>3</sup>

## Part I: Collecting and gifting

Smythe's life spanned turbulent and changing times in Britain, including the Victorian and Edwardian eras, and both World Wars. With as good as no published material on his life or collection, and limited extant archival material, it is difficult to determine the dates of his collecting activities. Smythe made several gifts to museums and galleries throughout Britain, including the British Museum, the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A), and the National Museum in Cardiff. Yet none of these institutions received anything like the quantity he showered on New Zealand.

### Who was Smythe?

Smythe was born in January 1873, son of Arabella Sophie Smythe and Francis Cooper Dumville Smythe, solicitor of Staple Inn and Girdlers Hall in London (Fig. 1). He had one older brother and two younger sisters. In 1899 he married his first wife, Angelina (1878–1944), and together they had two daughters, Vera and Sibyl. In 1960, just six years before his death, he married his second wife, Phyllis (1906–1998).<sup>4</sup> Smythe was ordained as priest in 1897, two years before receiving his MA from Emmanuel College, Cambridge. He started his clerical career as curate of South Petherton (1897–98), and over the years held various posts, including vicar of Hove (1909–29), prebendary of Chichester (1929–31), and finally archdeacon of Lewes, retiring in 1946.<sup>5</sup>

These positions saw him actively involved in local affairs, as revealed by his appearance in numerous newspaper articles of the time. For example, he was an advocate for building new pedestrian pathways in 1939, and supported a local cinema show to raise money for the St. Richard's (Haywards Heath) Church Building Fund in 1937.<sup>6</sup> He even became involved in politics, dining with the German ambassador in 1939 in an effort to maintain peace between Britain and Germany after rising tensions due to Germany's annexation of Austria and parts of Czechoslovakia the previous year.<sup>7</sup> The community's wellbeing was obviously an endeavour close to his heart. Indeed, where he might have lacked the financial

2 Peter Entwisle's *Treasures of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery* (Entwisle 1990) and the DPAG's collection survey, *Beloved* (Notman and Cullen 2009), are currently the only other books with more than a passing mention of Smythe.

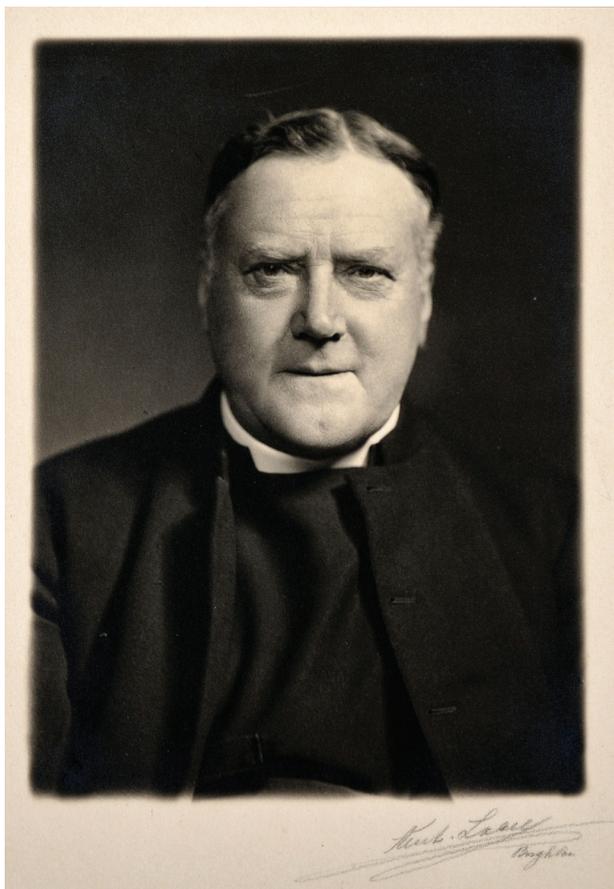
3 Butler and Donaldson (2008).

4 Black (2014).

5 Black (2014). Most of these places are located around the Sussex region.

6 “Points from Letters,” *Times* [London] (18 February 1939): 8; and “Sussex Church Builders Support Cinema Show: An Impressive Appeal by Archdeacon Smythe,” *The Mid-Sussex Times* [London] (26 January 1937): 9; accessed 3 August 2017, <https://link-gale-com.helicon.vuw.ac.nz/apps/doc/CS135607378/TTDA?u=vuw&sid=TTDA&xid=a897e518>.

7 “Sussex Church Builders Support Cinema Show: An Impressive Appeal by Archdeacon Smythe,” *The Mid-Sussex Times* [London] (26 January 1937): 9; “Desire for Peace,” *Times* [London] (12 January 1939): 12, accessed 21 November 2017, <https://link-gale-com.helicon.vuw.ac.nz/apps/doc/CS203109420/TTDA?u=vuw&sid=TTDA&xid=573d84de>. Later that year, the United Kingdom declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939, two days after Germany invaded Poland.



**Figure 1.** Kent & Lacey Studios (established 1894), Portrait of Archdeacon F.H.D. Smythe, M.A., 1938, gelatin silver print on paper, 138 × 99 mm, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 25-1954.

ability, he made up for with the passionate spirit of a philanthropist, and the gifting of artworks undoubtedly fits into this profile.<sup>8</sup>

## Starting to collect

Letters Smythe wrote during the 1950s, held in the archives of the Dunedin City Council and the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, are a rich primary source on Smythe's collecting activities.<sup>9</sup> These do have to be approached with some caution, though, due to his advanced age at the time of writing them. He repeatedly

makes reference to his age, calling himself “crotchety and old”,<sup>10</sup> and lamenting to Annette Pearse (1893–1981) from the DPAG that “I shall be 89 before this letter arrives, so my years are certainly numbered.”<sup>11</sup> G.G. Gibbs Watson (1891–1971), who was acting as an agent in England for the NAG at the time, further remarked that Smythe was starting to lose his memory.<sup>12</sup> Despite this, Smythe himself is still the most reliable source on his own actions, even if his account of them might be slightly ambiguous or out of order.

In 1956, Stewart Maclellan (1903–1973), director of the NAG, visited the DPAG to look at Smythe's gifts there, after which he related the following anecdote to Watson:

It appears that the Archdeacon worked with Christie's for some years before entering the Church. While there, he bought a picture (I don't know just what it was) for £5.0.0. from a funny little shop in a back street. He sold it at Christie's for £1,000. He gave the little dealer £100 and used the rest to start his collection. He isn't wealthy, but has made a life-long hobby of building up his collection.<sup>13</sup>

If Smythe was working for Christie's – and thus started his collection – “before entering the church”, this would have been before 1897, the year he was ordained.<sup>14</sup> This timeline is also confirmed by Smythe's own statement about his employment at Christie's, as he wrote to Pearse, “I note in your letter you hear from Alec Martin. He & I were young men together at Christies in the year 1896 I think it was, but alas my memory is going.”<sup>15</sup>

Through this work, Smythe would have gained an interest in and knowledge of art, which he exercised through a degree of connoisseurial judgement when making his purchases or describing his watercolours. For example, he demonstrated his knowledge of artists' signatures as well as recognising their style upon closer inspection, as was the case for an early Paul Sandby watercolour he sent to Dunedin in 1957. The accompanying letter stated: “today I am sending for the gallery 4 watercolours one by Paul Sandby ... I am not sure about the signature, but I feel sure from inspection that it is his work.”<sup>16</sup> He went on to say that many unsigned drawings were given signatures by a man who worked for a London dealer (no names given), showing his awareness of the happenings of the art world around him.

8 This sentiment was shared by earlier Victorian art collectors, such as John Sheepshanks, who believed it was their duty to share art with the wider public. See Macleod (1987, 1996).

9 In the following footnotes, abbreviations for the Dunedin City Council Archives and Te Papa Archives will be DCCA and TPA respectively.

10 Stewart Maclellan to Smythe, 11 December 1956, TPA: MU00008, box 3, item 6.

11 Smythe to DPAG, 22 December 1959, DCCA: Box 11, DPAG 15/22.

12 Watson to Maclellan, 26 July 1956, TPA: MU000044, box 2, item 12.

13 Maclellan to Watson, 19 June 1956, TPA: MU00009, box 5, item 9.

14 *Crockford's Clerical Directory*, 1965–66, provided via Becky Loughead (Library Assistant, Lambeth Palace Library) to Annika Sippel, email correspondence, 18 November 2017.

15 Smythe to DPAG, 12 January 1964, DCCA: Box 11, DPAG 15/22.

16 Smythe to DPAG, 14 October 1957 DCCA: Box 11, DPAG 15/22.



**Figure 2.** Peter de Wint (1784–1849), *Barn Exterior*, watercolour, 110 × 185 mm, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 844-195X.

While Smythe had a connoisseurial eye, he also admitted when he lacked the necessary knowledge and was known to ask for advice from higher authorities, such as the British Museum. He explains to Pearse that he consulted this institution about a possible William Blake drawing, describing the rareness and inaccessibility of Blake watercolours due to their high prices.<sup>17</sup> As will be shown later, the question of funds was a constant issue for Smythe, which limited his ability to participate fully in contemporary collecting trends and tastes.

While it is difficult to determine when Smythe started his art collection, it is equally difficult to determine when he stopped collecting. While some collectors provide a record of when they purchased a particular artwork by writing on the verso, Smythe only did so rarely. For example, on the verso of Peter de Wint's *Barn Exterior* (Fig. 2) he wrote "bought at Sotheby's 1945 as De Wint sketch." Thus, we can deduce that he was collecting at least up until his retirement in 1946. From 1953 onwards, he never mentions any new acquisitions in his letters. By 1961 he had clearly halted all collecting activities, writing to Pearse, "my collection of drawings has gone at Christies & £10,000 was the result of a ... sale where they lumped as many as 30 in a lot – alas. However, I am now too old to collect & there is no room in this house for a

collection."<sup>18</sup> He was 88 years old at this stage, so the excitement and effort involved in collecting might have been too strenuous for him.

### Parting with the collection

Smythe had been donating and selling works from his various collections (not just watercolours) prior to his gifts to New Zealand.<sup>19</sup> This coincided with his retirement, and the death of his first wife in 1944, both resulting in his move to Elfinward in Haywards Heath, an Anglican church used as a home for retired clergy. He wrote, "my wife has recently passed away and as [?] as I am I shall sell this house. As the only member of my family after me is a nephew, [?] Commander in the Navy, and in the days that are coming will never be able & keep the large number of pictures I have I intend to sell most of them."<sup>20</sup> The reason he parted with some of his collection, therefore, was simply out of necessity and practicality. He no longer had the room required to house his works, and his descendants were not able to look after them.

British art historian Sir Robert Witt (1872–1952), a contemporary of Smythe's, offers a deeper look into the possible psychological reasoning behind a collector's motivations:

17 Smythe to DPAG, 7 June 1954, DCCA: Box 11, DPAG 15/22.

18 Smythe to DPAG, 11 May 1961, DCCA: Box 11, DPAG 15/22.

19 Smythe was a very broad collector, and an advertisement for a sale at Christie's lists porcelain, glass and needlework among his possessions. Other collectors who collected in different areas, such as painting, porcelain and furniture, included Robert Wylie Lloyd, Stephen Courtauld, Herbert Powell, and Agnes and Norman Lupton, see Sloan (1998) and Herrmann (1999).

20 Smythe to Wace, 5 October 1944, V&A Archives (VAA): MA/1/S2404.

He [the collector] will go on to try his strength with other collectors in some exhibition. The critics publicly appraise his collection and, in doing so, his taste. He is encouraged to do still better. Others ask his advice, what to buy, what to discard. Has he anything good enough to be welcomed by his local gallery, even, dare he hope, the National Gallery at Millbank, or the Victoria and Albert Museum? What a privilege to lend, what an honour to present, a permanent memorial of his taste and courage!<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, this summation may reflect Smythe's own aspirations. He exhibited watercolours several times throughout his lifetime and having works accepted by prestigious institutions like the V&A seems like a natural development. Smythe called himself a "lover of the Victoria & Albert & of fine art", graciously allowing the museum the first refusal of a sixteenth-century purse in 1927.<sup>22</sup> After gaining the museum's attention in this manner and upholding regular contact with the staff, he made the bold move of offering a collection of 150 late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century drawings.<sup>23</sup> The museum's response was positive and about a hundred works were accepted. The only reason for not accepting the whole gift was apparently due to space limitations.

Limited space was certainly one major reason for a gallery or museum not to take a gift. Another reason was specialised acquisition practices. For example, the V&A rejected another of Smythe's works on the grounds that it was an oil painting, which "for many years [have] been considered outside the scope of our collections."<sup>24</sup> Further, Smythe's collection of early British watercolours did not fit into the rapidly increasing demand for contemporary art. With the Contemporary Art Society (CAS) growing both in number and influence – the Society had 300 members in 1946, and 1,750 members by 1953 – collecting contemporary twentieth-century British art became the prime focus for many collectors and institutions.<sup>25</sup> Historical watercolours like Smythe's would only be accepted if they helped to fill gaps in an already existing collection. This severely limited Smythe's potential gifting activities within Britain.

Additionally, Smythe's collection was sometimes faced with stark discrimination by the art world elites. Paul

Mellon and Tom Girtin, a descendant of the watercolourist Thomas Girtin (1775–1802), both received numerous works from Smythe, only to dismiss them as low quality or even "junk."<sup>26</sup> Girtin wrote to Mellon in 1950:

I have had parcel after parcel of the most appalling junk from our mutual friend the Archdeacon, and after crabbing stacks of Girtins, Gainsboroughs, Wilsons, Cromes & Boningtons, I have just been pulled up short by a most intriguing drawing which he calls 'in the style of Cozens'. For once he is right.<sup>27</sup>

While this does acknowledge Smythe's keen eye, the overall tone of the letter suggests that British watercolour circles questioned his tastes and connoisseurial skills.

The ability to house his legacy locally in Britain, however, was an important factor for Smythe's selling and donating practice. Though he did end up selling parts of his collections through auction houses, he expressed his preference for leaving them with local galleries "rather than put it with Christies where some American might purchase it."<sup>28</sup> Revealing his own prejudices and national ambitions, the thought of his collection being shipped off to America was a clear deterrent for Smythe.

## Why New Zealand?

Smythe's first New Zealand contact was the DPAG's curator, and later director, Annette Pearse. In *Treasures of the Dunedin Art Gallery* (Entwisle 1990), Peter Entwisle recounts how Pearse went to England in 1951 to make some acquisitions for the gallery. At Christie's she came across a French illumination that caught her fancy. When she was told that the owner of this particular work had requested that it be sold only to a British institution, she insisted on contacting the owner personally. The owner was Smythe, and Pearse's resolve became the beginning of a long-distance professional friendship that lasted until Smythe's passing.<sup>29</sup> After Pearse returned to New Zealand, the two continued to exchange letters that shed invaluable light on the motivations behind Smythe's generous gifts. Even after Pearse had left the DPAG in 1964, she still reminded the gallery's council to send Smythe his yearly Christmas gift

21 Sir Robert Witt, in his preface to C.E. Hughes, *Catalogue of the Herbert Powell Collection of Water-Colours and Drawings of the Early British School* (1931), cited in Sloan (1998), 31. Smythe was aware of Robert Witt's theories, as he also donated a brochure on Witt's lecture *The Art of Collecting* to the NAG, now held at TPA.

22 Smythe to Wace, 20 September 1927, VAA: MA/1/S2404. See the purse on the V&A website here <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O74959/purse-unknown/>.

23 Smythe to V&A, 18 November 1948: VAA: MA/1/S2404.

24 Eric Maclagan (director and secretary) to Smythe, 12 October 1944, VAA: MA/1/S2404.

25 Joseph Darracott, "British Arts and Patrons 1940–1960", in Bowness (1991), 71.

26 Tom Girtin to Paul Mellon, 14 September 1950, Paul Oppé Archive, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art: APO/1/11/2

27 Girtin to Mellon, 30 July 1950, Paul Oppé Archive, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art: APO/1/11/2.

28 Smythe to Wace, 20 September 1927, VAA: MA/1/S2404.

29 The last archived letter from Smythe to Pearse is dated 28 October 1965, Dunedin City Council Archives (DCCA): Box 11, DPAG 15/22.

as a thank-you for his generosity, which could well have motivated him to continue sending gifts of art in return.<sup>30</sup>

The first offer to the DPAG was made on 12 June 1953.<sup>31</sup> There were several factors contributing to his decision. On the one hand, it has been suggested that Smythe was simply charmed into parting with his collection by Pearse herself.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, her initiative to write to the owner of that illuminated manuscript must have impressed Smythe, and the pair obviously shared a love for art. Pearse's business strategies and amiable character would most certainly have been a contributing factor for Smythe's decision to donate his collection to Dunedin at this time. And even though he did send over 300 works to Stewart MacLennan in Wellington between 1956 and 1957,<sup>33</sup> the close relationship with Pearse gave him more motivation to prioritise the DPAG.<sup>34</sup>

Smythe expresses several different reasons for his gifts, including his religious conviction. He wrote, "I feel I am giving to God as well as to you, for art is the gift of the fruit of God."<sup>35</sup> As a clergyman with the family motto *tenax in fide* (steadfast in the faith), gifting his collection was a religious act of honouring God. Not only that, but Smythe was convinced that God Himself wanted him to give his collection to Dunedin, using Pearse as an agent for his Divine Plan. He wrote, "God must have put it into my heart to share my treasures where they would be best appreciated, and I think He used you as His agent."<sup>36</sup> Therefore, Pearse is still seen as a significant factor in Smythe's decision, not because of her own persuasive ability, but rather due to having been chosen by God.

The act of sharing itself was another strong motivator for Smythe. Consistent with his philanthropist nature as an active member in the community, and following in the footsteps of previous collectors in Britain, he saw sharing as a joyful activity, claiming "I don't want to be thanked, I want to help people to see the joy of sharing, for we are very apt ... in the nation, where there is plenty, and sometimes a neighbour has only a pittance."<sup>37</sup> This

demonstrates that Smythe particularly felt the need to share with someone less fortunate than himself. He wrote to Pearse, "I hope I have filled some gaps."<sup>38</sup> In his view, there were many gaps to fill, as he saw New Zealand as the poor neighbour whose art galleries hardly had any British watercolours of their own. Thus, sharing his collection with New Zealand, rather than the already well-fed English galleries, would have given him more satisfaction and a prideful sense of accomplishment, in keeping with his philanthropic ideals.

He further revealed that the gift was a sign of appreciation and gratitude for New Zealand's services to Britain, which at times he personally witnessed: "The honest truth is I sent the little gift as an unknown, who has a very grateful memory of New Zealand's immediate response of help to the old Mother Country in her hours of peril. I saw this in two world wars and as a chaplain I met New Zealanders and Maoris in the Hospitals."<sup>39</sup> As a former colony, New Zealand was known as the "Britain of the South" and shared a close relationship to "the old Mother Country," despite its physical distance from it.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Entwisle has claimed that, "to be New Zealand was automatically to be British,"<sup>41</sup> and Britain was generally considered 'home', as suggested by the title of Alan Mulgan's popular book *Home: A Colonial's Adventure* (1927). Such imperialistic sentiments were also reflected by New Zealand art galleries and their audiences during the early twentieth century. At the touring *Centennial Exhibition of New Zealand Art* in 1940, for example, the most popular painting was Frank Salisbury's *Coronation of King George VI* (1938) – a British work – despite the show supposedly being a celebration of *New Zealand's* achievements in art.<sup>42</sup>

In a similar vein, Smythe called New Zealanders *his* people when he wrote, "I wished on our people overseas to know what the old country was like in their ancestors' time, and to see some of the work of her painters."<sup>43</sup> Indeed, he wondered how many people in New Zealand

30 See DCCA: Box 11, DPAG 15/22.

31 Smythe to Pearse, 12 June 1953, DCCA: Box 11, DPAG 15/22.

32 Kisler (2008); also Entwisle (1990), 28.

33 Smythe to NAG, 24 June 1956, Te Papa Archives (TPA): MU00008, box 3, item 6.

34 Smythe to Pearse, 14 July 1956, DCCA: Box 11, DPAG 15/22.

35 Smythe to Pearse, 31 December 1953, DCCA: Box 11, DPAG 15/22.

36 Smythe to Pearse, 14 July 1954, DCCA: Box 11, DPAG 15/22.

37 Smythe to Watson, 29 July 1956, TPA: MU000044, box 2, item 12.

38 Smythe to Pearse, 14 October 1953, DCCA: Box 11, DPAG 15/22.

39 Smythe to Pearse, 30 September 1953, DCCA: Box 11, DPAG 15/22.

40 Novitz and Willmott (1989), 93. See also Jock Phillips, "Visitors' Opinions about New Zealand – The 'Britain of the South', 1860–1900," *Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, accessed 23 June 2020, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/visitors-opinions-about-new-zealand/page-2>.

41 Entwisle (1990), 12.

42 Rice (2012), 16. See also James Cowan's comments on a 1906–7 exhibition in Christchurch, observing that the British works stole the spotlight from any New Zealand works: "There was a great deal of honest artistic work throughout the rooms, and some exceedingly beautiful work, but inevitably the lustre of the New Zealand artists was dimmed by the glory of form and colour that filled the adjoining British gallery." Cited in Rice (2010), 214.

43 Smythe to Governor General, 16 July 1954, DCCA: Box 11, DPAG 15/22.

actually knew of these artists, but expressed his delight at being able to help future generations know them better.<sup>44</sup> This way, although his collection was technically going overseas, it was still in the trusted hands of England's descendants. Such sentiments carry colonial overtones, but seeing that the 1950s was an era of decolonisation in other parts of the globe, Smythe's gift was in a sense a personal gesture of colonial largesse at a time when England's empire was fragmenting. This was to have a lasting effect on the collection, especially when New Zealand art galleries moved away from the British models as New Zealand gained an independent cultural consciousness by bringing focus to its physical location and bicultural status as an island nation.

## Part II: Smythe's taste

Before examining how the collection was received in this shifting New Zealand environment, one should first consider the contents of the collection itself, to better understand the conservative nature and resultant neglect of the Smythe collection. By analysing Smythe's collecting habits and tastes within a broader socio-historical context, he emerges as an example of a lower middle-class collector. By further considering the tastes of contemporary British collectors who developed collections over a similar period (about 1895–1950), we can determine how much Smythe's collecting engaged with that of his peers. This approach, as modelled by Jessica Feather's PhD thesis, "The Formation of a Modern Taste in Watercolour: Critics, Curators and Collectors c. 1890–1912" (Feather 2014), seeks to answer questions like: was Smythe following a trend or sticking to his own, unique preferences? And was his collection representative of its time?

During the late nineteenth century, there was an established canon of popular British artists, reflected in the sculpture busts commissioned in 1883 for the façade of the Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours.<sup>45</sup> These busts represented Paul Sandby, John Robert Cozens, Thomas Girtin, Turner, David Cox, Peter De Wint, George Barrett Junior and William Henry Hunt. Apart from Barrett, all these artists are represented in the Smythe collection. However, by the time Smythe started his collection, two major challenges to the canon had emerged: the new-found appreciation of Cotman and the demotion of Hunt. These changes in turn were directly

related to a shift in taste regarding stylistic aesthetics, wherein Cotman represented the newly preferred "sketch", and Hunt the now less favoured, highly finished "complete" Victorian watercolour.<sup>46</sup>

### Cotman and the sketch aesthetic

Today, John Sell Cotman (1782–1842) is regarded as one of the leading watercolourists of the early nineteenth century, but this was not always the case. In fact, had Smythe been collecting just a few decades earlier, he might not have paid much attention to acquiring Cotman's work at all. Instead, with a total of 24 works (8 at Te Papa and 16 at Dunedin), he is one of the best-represented artists in the collection. In this, Smythe was following a new trend that established Cotman as a significant figure of British watercolours for the first time.<sup>47</sup>

Cotman's watercolours tended to consist of almost abstract, broad planes of pure colour, applied in layers to ensure clear, crisp lines. He also eliminated details from his compositions and reduced his subjects to their bare essentials, as can be seen in *Cottage* (DPAG) (Fig. 3), where the walls look rather incomplete, without detailed brickwork to indicate its material substance. The result appears fresh, genuine, and often unfinished. The art critic Elizabeth Pennell, who saw Cotman's work exhibited in London in 1892, praised these aspects of his "delightful sketches", which she believed showed that he truly "understood" his art.<sup>48</sup> Other writers agreed that these "sketches" comprised the most notable part of his oeuvre. In 1902, Laurence Binyon (1869–1943), for example, said that they were his "finest work", as opposed to his "finished paintings," due to their air of spontaneity and sketch-like aesthetic.<sup>49</sup> It was this sketch aesthetic – influenced by the increasingly popular Impressionist style – that continued to grow in England during the early twentieth century, creating a modern taste for fast, informal, unfinished, and sometimes near-abstract watercolours (Fig. 2).

In fact, the lure of the sketch had already fascinated collectors and art critics as early as 1800, when they were valued as evidence of an artist's formative ideas or documents of inventive creativity. As the English artist, writer and cleric William Gilpin (1724–1804) had observed, sketches engaged the imagination of the viewer and gave them "an opening into all those glowing ideas, which inspired the artist; and which the imagination *only* can translate."<sup>50</sup> In other words, works like *Cottage*

44 Smythe to Pearse, 7 June 1954, DCCA: Box 11, DPAG 15/22.

45 Feather (2014), 11. This society was originally founded in 1831 as the *New Society of Painters in Water Colours*, directly competing with the *Royal Watercolour Society* (RWS), which had been founded in 1804. Both societies were established to allow watercolours to be exhibited professionally, as the Royal Academy did not accept the medium as serious art.

46 Feather (2014), 34–35. For the development of different aesthetic traditions in British art, see Costelloe (2013).

47 Timothy Wilcox, "From Obscurity to Immortality: The Growth of Cotman's Fame," in Moore et al. (2005), 50–51.

48 Elizabeth Pennell, "Old Masters at the Royal Academy," *The Star*, no. 12204 (January 1892): 4, cited in Feather (2014), 189.

49 Binyon (1903), v.

50 Gilpin (1793), 20.



**Figure 3.** John Sell Cotman, *Cottage*, watercolour, 180 × 230 mm, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 146-195X.

were appreciated for revealing the working processes and thoughts of the artist. This led to a commodification of the sketch as a sought-after collector's item. While the Society of Painters in Water-Colours had banned unfinished watercolours in 1823, by 1862 they had established a regular winter exhibition devoted solely to sketches and studies.<sup>51</sup>

Many of the works displayed at these exhibitions were not actually sketches as such, but rather carefully worked-out paintings made to look like spontaneous sketches. David Cox (1783–1859) intentionally created a rough look, through broad sketchy washes and at times dry brushes to create texture. In *Landscape with trees and cottage* (Te Papa) (Fig. 4), he left small areas of the paper exposed, seemingly by accident, and the white of the paper shines through the greens of the trees, resulting in a sense of movement as the wind rustles the leaves. During Smythe's own time it was the visual aesthetic of this loose manner that collectors like Sir Hickman Bacon (1855–1945) admired and sought in Cox's "sketches", rather than the documentary

significance praised by Cox's own contemporaries. Smythe seems to have been aware of this fashion and with 18 works, Cox is also one of the best-represented artists in his collection.<sup>52</sup>

### Rejection of Victorian art

A by-product of this new modern taste was the rejection of the highly finished works of the Victorian era, and the demotion of artists like William Henry Hunt (1790–1864) from the established canon. While Smythe was engaging with the 1890s–1910s British taste for impressionist-like works, a large portion of his collection was still very much focused on a more conservative taste from previous decades. This older Victorian taste preferred the highly finished, often figurative, watercolours of artists like the Pre-Raphaelites or George Kilburne (1839–1924) (Fig. 5). The domestic, medieval, and sentimental nature of these subjects was in line with the later-nineteenth-century aspirations of viewers and collectors of art, who

51 Fenwick and Smith (1997).

52 Wilcox (2008).



**Figure 4.** David Cox (snr) (1783–1859), attributed, *Landscape with trees and cottage*, watercolour, 398 × 515 mm, Te Papa, 1957-0009-65.

often saw such works as opportunities to escape realities of living in a modern, industrial society.<sup>53</sup> By the turn of the century, however, critics had started to publicly criticise this choice of sentimental subject matter.<sup>54</sup> D.S. MacColl wrote in 1892 that “In a few short years those complexions, those sheep, those pies, will have gone the dusty way after the Augustus Eggs and other perishables.”<sup>55</sup> Laurence Binyon also confirmed in 1933 that “the prestige of Victorian masters has waned.”<sup>56</sup>

In addition to their sentimental subject matter, Victorian artists were also considered old-fashioned due to their painting technique. The high finish, immaculate detail and evident use of bodycolour created a direct contrast to the new sketch aesthetic. Richard and Samuel Redgrave, authors of *A Century of British Painters* (1947), were

among those critics who emphasised the importance of rejecting bodycolour and focusing on the translucent quality of watercolours. They especially criticised the use of opaque whites, claiming it was “wholly at variance with true water-colour painting, destroying some of its finest qualities, the freshness and purity of colours, as seen by light transmitted through them from the white paper, being wholly lost.”<sup>57</sup>

However, while MacColl characterised William Hunt’s elaborate works as “niggling for niggling’s sake”,<sup>58</sup> the Redgraves actually viewed him as an exception to this rule, describing Hunt’s limited use of opaque white in his many still lifes and flower pieces as a “union of opaque and transparent colouring”, giving his work force and richness.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, critic Frederick Wedmore

53 Raissis (2017), 17.

54 Denvir (1986), 240.

55 MacColl, “The Winter Exhibition at Burlington House I. English Masters,” 55, cited in Feather (2014), 60.

56 Binyon (1946), 173.

57 Samuel Redgrave, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Historical Collection of Water-Colour Paintings in the South Kensington Museum* (London, 1877), 59–60, cited in Feather (2014), 25.

58 MacColl, cited in Feather (2014), 60.

59 Redgrave (1877), 44 and 59–60, cited in Feather (2014), 25.



**Figure 5.** George G. Kilburne, *The River*, watercolour, 280 × 390 mm, Te Papa, 1957-0009-156.

(1844–1921), in his review of the 1892 winter exhibition, makes “no contradiction in his admiration of what he perceived as Turner’s sketch-like watercolours alongside the very different pictorial qualities in Hunt’s works.”<sup>60</sup> The presence of Hunt’s *Still Life* (Fig. 6) in the collection shows that Smythe did not agree with MacColl and at times included works with bodycolour too.

### Collecting contemporary and modern

The noticeable absence of any contemporary artists in the Smythe collection also reveals the outdated nature of Smythe’s taste. During the early twentieth century, there were many watercolourists in Britain exploring new possibilities for the medium, partly in an attempt to challenge the opinion that the Golden Age of British watercolour had ended around 1850.<sup>61</sup> A new generation of artists engaged continental painting styles, modernist avant-garde experimentation and current affairs in Europe. Edward Marsh (1872–1953), a civil servant who worked

many years for Winston Churchill, was a collector who illustrated this taste for contemporary artists. Initially, Marsh focused on acquiring Old Master works and then early English watercolours, spending on average £200–300 a year on pictures.<sup>62</sup> However, after the purchase of Duncan Grant’s vibrantly coloured and painterly *Parrot Tulips* in 1911, Marsh concentrated on such contemporary artists as Stanley Spencer (1891–1959), Walter Sickert (1860–1942), John and Paul Nash (1893–1977 and 1889–1946) and David Bomberg (1890–1957).<sup>63</sup> This group of avant-garde painters displayed characteristically expressive, distorted and semi-abstract styles, strongly influenced by Cubism, and often focused on gloomy and rural subject matter.

Meanwhile, public institutions also turned towards contemporary watercolourists for their own collections. The Contemporary Art Society (CAS) was founded in 1910 “to improve the representation in public art galleries of contemporary British artists.”<sup>64</sup> Former British Museum curator Kim Sloan describes a fund that was set up in 1919 specifically to help acquire modern prints and drawings.<sup>65</sup>

60 Frederick Wedmore, “The Winter Exhibition at Burlington House,” *Standard* (7 January 1892), cited in Feather (2014), 58.

61 Jessica Feather, “A New ‘Golden Age’? The ‘Modern’ Landscape Watercolour,” cited in Sloan (2017), 68–91.

62 Buckman (2003).

63 Buckman (2003).

64 Sloan (2017), 19. For more information about the CAS, see Bowness (1991).

65 Sloan (2017), 19.



**Figure 6.** William Henry Hunt (1790–1864), *Still Life*, watercolour, 185 × 285 mm, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 22-1954.

As a result, the museum received more than 200 works through the CAS by 1960, which reflected the tastes of the Society’s various committee members.<sup>66</sup> These new purchases and selected gifts, therefore, illustrate a new twentieth-century canon of artists.

In Smythe’s view, the sketchy washes of Hercules Brabazon Brabazon (1821–1906) and the simplified figures of John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) make up the most “modern” part of his collection. By the 1920s, however, their watercolours certainly seemed out of touch alongside this new avant-garde.<sup>67</sup> Thus, without any contrasting contemporary works by Nash, Ravilious or Pissarro, Smythe’s collection would have indeed appeared outdated and not representative of its time. One could assume from this that Smythe simply did not keep up with his contemporaries. However, we also know that he was still actively collecting up into the 1940s and was well aware of other popular art movements. He simply made the personal choice not to collect them. He wrote, “but not the Vorticists or that sort of rubbish, because tho some like them I ... can’t see any art in them.”<sup>68</sup>

Despite Smythe’s attempt to bring New Zealand “up to the moderns”, his gift was still considered a collection of “*Early Watercolours*”, requiring the DPAG to make additional purchases in the “*Contemporary English Section*” in order to balance out the Smythe collection.<sup>69</sup>

### Personal preference

Smythe’s taste and personal preferences were further influenced by feelings of nostalgia and familiarity. For example, it seems that a John Leech (1817–1864) watercolour of a nurse struggling to carry a child as big as herself (Fig. 7), was originally added to the collection for intimately nostalgic reasons.<sup>70</sup> Responding to one of Smythe’s letters, which is missing from the archives, MacLennan wrote, “how thrilled you must have been to discover the original of ‘More trouble than all my Money’, having remembered it since childhood.”<sup>71</sup> The missing letter must have explained how Smythe knew the subject of this watercolour in print format, most likely

66 Sloan (2017), 19.

67 Feather in Sloan (2017), 69.

68 Smythe to Pearse, 23 April 1954, DCCA: Box 11, DPAG 15/22.

69 MacLennan to Watson, 22 May 1956, TPA: MU00009, box 5, item 9.

70 John Leech is the best represented artist in Smythe’s collection, and most of his watercolour are for ‘Punch’ illustrations. There are just a few from the collection I was not able to directly link to a ‘Punch’ illustration.

71 MacLennan to Smythe, 21 November 1956, TPA: MU00008, box 3, item 6.



**Figure 7.** John Leech (1817–1864), *Drat the child*, watercolour, 160 × 123 mm, Te Papa, 1957-0009-162.

through the published collection of Leech's best *Punch* drawings in book format, *John Leech's Pictures of Life and Character: From the Collection of "Mr. Punch"*.<sup>72</sup> This book was intended for those who did not see Leech's work in the magazine, such as families. This is the likely setting in which Smythe would have first encountered this picture as a child. Finding it at an auction or dealers as an adult struck a sentimental chord with the collector, enough to acquire it.

Art collector Derek Clifford strongly advised that personal feelings should play a role in assembling a collection, concluding "it is the personal quality of judgements of this sort which make every collection so unlike every other if it is genuinely made. It is collections made on expert advice which always seem so alike."<sup>73</sup> For example, art historian Dianne Sachkothe Macleod recounts how the earlier Victorian collector and amateur gardener Elhanan Bicknell (1788–1861) chose to collect landscapes over genres because of his love for horticulture.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, the American art dealer and collector Charles Carstairs (1865–1928)

acquired numerous works with Venetian subject matter due to his intimate personal connection with the city. In May 1918, for example, he purchased a Singer Sargent watercolour of a Venetian scene, even though, as he wrote to his colleague Charles Henschel, "there was not much profit in it."<sup>75</sup>

Likewise, Smythe was not deterred by the fact that the religious architectural watercolours in *his* own collection were not sought-after collection items that would guarantee him financial gain. Churches, primarily local English churches in the Gothic style, make up most of the architectural subjects in his collection. While the bulk of these are unnamed and remain to be identified, there are others which depict churches from the Sussex region where Smythe lived and worked, including Bodim Church, Coombes Parish Church, Climping Church, and St. Mary's Church in Sompting. In addition to personal nostalgia and national pride in Britain's architectural heritage, the reason for Smythe's interest in such watercolours is also linked to his own profession as a member of the clergy and his personal conviction that art and religion are closely interlinked. He wrote in 1958 that "art is part of religion to me, because real art is inspired by the Holy Spirit of God, at least, so I believe."<sup>76</sup>

## Prices and financial limits

As well as general and personal tastes, Smythe's collecting was also influenced by prices of works and his financial situation. The methodological approach for studying historical collections like Smythe's, therefore, also requires a degree of economic history. His collection includes a large number of social satirical watercolours by artists such as Hablot K. Browne, George Cruikshank, John Leech, and Thomas Rowlandson. While the subject matter must have appealed to him personally, as mentioned above, the less expensive prices of such works would also have been a deciding factor. He was following a similar approach to William Lever (1851–1925), whose earliest decorative purchases were also "cheap, illustrative drawings and watercolours, often of a literary and comic nature."<sup>77</sup> These light-hearted watercolours were appreciated for their narratives and political references rather than aesthetic qualities and could be purchased for relatively low prices.

In his letters, Smythe repeatedly refers to himself as a poor man and laments the fact that he "often missed good specimens for lack of means to buy them."<sup>78</sup> John Tomlinson, in his PhD thesis on the shifting Anglican

72 Leech (1887), 114.

73 Clifford (1976), 33. For more on collecting practices, see Blom (2003) and Pearce (1995).

74 Macleod (1987), 337.

75 Charles Carstairs cited in Iacono (2017), 100–101.

76 Smythe to DPAG, 1 December 1958, DCCA: Box 11, DPAG 15/22.

77 Feather (2010), xii.

78 Smythe to DPAG, 2 May 1956, DCCA: Box 11, DPAG 15/22.

Clergy in Staffordshire from 1830–1960, explains that this was a common situation for members of the British clergy at this time. He writes, “by the middle of the twentieth century there were no clergy with large incomes, indeed by then they would be just a faint memory. Whereas doctors, lawyers, engineers and accountants were enjoying an increase in real income, clergy were growing poorer.”<sup>79</sup> Low pensions prevented many clergy from retiring, and effectively only those with private income could afford it.<sup>80</sup> The fact that Smythe was able to retire, remarry and move into a new house therefore does suggest that he had some private wealth to fall back on.

Nonetheless, when one considers the actual prices of the fashionable watercolours at the time, it is easier to understand his dilemma. Philip McEvansoneya, in his article “Creating the Crampton Collection of British Watercolours in the 1850s” (McEvansoneya 2009), mentions “the great inflation in watercolour prices, notably for works by Cox and Copley Fielding, which began during the 1860s and reached its peak in the 1890s.”<sup>81</sup> This peak occurred exactly when Smythe started collecting, by which time a Cox could reportedly fetch £3,000 or more.<sup>82</sup> In 1924, Smythe’s contemporary Lever is known to have paid £2,583 for Turner’s *Lucerne* and £609 for Madox Brown’s *Cordelia’s Portion*.<sup>83</sup> Yet, unlike Smythe, Lever was a wealthy industrialist. Such prices were unattainable for Smythe, who said that one of the highest prices he ever paid for an item in his collection was £60, which he had to pay off in multiple instalments.<sup>84</sup>

We can therefore conclude that Smythe was part of the lower strata of the professional British middle class, which is also reflective of his overall taste described in this article. In her study on Victorian middle-class tastes and collecting habits, Macleod explains that the middle class of the nineteenth century favoured art that was easy to interpret: “They preferred the familiar to the exotic: landscapes, scenes from daily life, or romantic costume pieces inspired by their favourite novels or historical characters.”<sup>85</sup> The reason for this was that, unlike the nobility, the businessmen of the middle class did not have the time to repeatedly travel abroad for connoisseurial development. With his busy duties as a clergyman, neither did Smythe, which helps to explain the overall prominence of the accessible and relatable subject matter of British landscapes and genres in his collection.

### Part III: Reception and rejection

With a better understanding of the collection itself, and the realisation that already during his own time Smythe’s collection did not represent contemporary tastes fully, we will now return to 1950s New Zealand. The DPAG and the NAG were very satisfied with the collection when it first arrived. Macleod’s letters to Smythe are filled with words of gratitude for and praise of the watercolours, such as “a most valuable addition”<sup>86</sup>; “all the works are very welcome indeed”<sup>87</sup>; and “This means that you have now sent us 267 works to date, and we certainly have an enviable representation of the Early English School.”<sup>88</sup> While Pearse’s letters to Smythe don’t survive, there is a significant letter from Dunedin, written by A.H. Allen (the DPAG Society president) in 1955, that is worth quoting some of it here:

It is freely acknowledged that in your gift we now possess the finest collection of water colour pictures in the Southern Hemisphere of which we are very proud. [...] Your Pictures now entirely occupy the walls and screens of two of our largest rooms and present a lovely display, known by our public and visitors as ‘The Archdeacon Smythe Collection’. Your name and generosity will be perpetuated for generations to come, which we trust will give you pleasure, and express, though very inadequately, our grateful thanks to you.<sup>89</sup>

Allen uses very strong language to express, and at times, exaggerate, the Gallery’s reception of the gift.

Smythe’s name, however, was clearly not perpetuated for as long as was predicted. Within just one decade, information on Smythe and his gift was scant. For example, Charlton Edgar (1903–1976), the director of the DPAG from 1965–71, wrote to Macleod in 1966, “In talking over arrangements this week I was interested to learn from Mr. Miller that Archdeacon Smythe had given the National Gallery a collection of watercolours. I had always been under the impression that he had given works only to the Dunedin Public Art gallery.”<sup>90</sup> It is surprising to see that, within just ten years, the new director of the DPAG was not aware that the NAG had also received watercolours from Smythe, or that there had been former conversations between the two galleries about this collection.

79 Tomlinson (2007), 217.

80 Tomlinson (2007), 214.

81 McEvansoneya (2009), 107; See also Reitlinger (1982).

82 Binyon (1946), 173.

83 Feather (2010), xix.

84 Smythe to Wace, 20 September 1927, VAA: MA/1/S2404.

85 Macleod (1987), 329.

86 NAG to Smythe, 19 July 1956, TPA: MU00009, box 5, item 9.

87 Macleod to Smythe, 26 November 1956, TPA: MU00008, box 3, item 6.

88 Macleod to Smythe, 26 November 1956, TPA: MU00008, box 3, item 6.

89 A.H. Allen to Smythe, 31 October 1955, DCCA: Box 11, DPAG 15/22.

90 Charlton Edgar to Macleod, 8 September 1966, TPA: MU000044, box 2, item 12.

The next part of Edgar's letter, however, is even more shocking: "actually we have over 800 here but there are very many that are not very good. Some of the collection would be better destroyed though that is strictly off the publication."<sup>91</sup> There is a stark difference between the letter written in 1955 by Allen, and Edgar's opinion in 1966. While the former claimed it was the finest watercolour collection in the Southern Hemisphere, the latter now wished for some of it to be destroyed. Do these opinions simply reflect the different personal tastes of two individuals, or do they reflect a general shift in taste that was occurring at this time?

## A (generally) positive response

Initially, the Smythe watercolours certainly did enjoy an enthusiastic welcome. The Art Gallery Council meeting minutes from 20 October 1954, for example, state that the Dunedin Mayor suggested to invite Smythe to Dunedin as "the guest of the City".<sup>92</sup> The watercolours were also put on display almost immediately after arriving, with the first official exhibitions being held in 1953 in Dunedin, and 1957 in Wellington in the *Recent Acquisitions* exhibition. MacLennan described the exhibition as "a brave showing"<sup>93</sup> that would "bring the ducks off the water."<sup>94</sup> The exhibition opened together with the gallery's new Print Room on Wednesday, 27 March 1957, and a few days later MacLennan wrote to Smythe that his gifts were indeed the star of the show.<sup>95</sup>

The exhibition pamphlet lists all 159 works that were on show, 45 of which came from Smythe's collection (lots 110–155).<sup>96</sup> They were displayed in Gallery 5 and the gallery's new Print Room. MacLennan was very optimistic about the public reception of the works and outlined a plan for the future, wherein "we propose to show about 50 framed works at a time, changing them every few months. The rest will be available to visitors in portfolios we have

had made. They may be studied, under supervision of course, in our new print room."<sup>97</sup> The educational value of the works was thus strongly emphasised. MacLennan also highlighted that the watercolours' popularity led to the NAG extending their opening hours to accommodate the high number of visitors.<sup>98</sup>

This led to more ambitious plans for the collection, including a full exhibition and a combined catalogue, produced with Pearse, detailing the collections of Wellington and Dunedin.<sup>99</sup> Previously, at the Dunedin Council meeting on 11 August 1954, it was also announced that two anonymous donors had given the DPAG £100 "to be used in the purchase of screens for, and the framing and mounting of the Archdeacon Smythe gift of Early English Water-Colours."<sup>100</sup> Similarly, another anonymous donor wished to present "a brass tablet with a suitable inscription for the Archdeacon Smythe Gift."<sup>101</sup> Apparently, not only the galleries, but also private individuals saw value in these works.

Positive sentiments were also echoed by the press, with newspaper articles using flattering language to describe the collection. The *Otago Daily Times* called it "one of the most valuable art collections ever given to an organisation in New Zealand or Australia,"<sup>102</sup> and the *Evening Star* described it as "a benefaction of inestimable value."<sup>103</sup> Newspaper articles also gave further indication of how the works were received by providing quotes from gallery staff members and others. In this manner, Dunedin's Major, L.M. Wright, was cited as saying, "Dunedin must be the envy of many centres in the Dominion and Australia in having such an important and valuable collection."<sup>104</sup> Similarly, on the occasion of the opening exhibition in 1953, H. Mandeno, the president of the DPAG Society, stated, "that gift is just terrific. It almost takes our breath away."<sup>105</sup> Finally, Pearse herself was quoted as saying, "if someone had come along and emptied out a sack of golden guineas I could not have been more overwhelmed."<sup>106</sup> Indeed, she ambitiously

91 Edgar to MacLennan, 8 September 1966, TPA: MU000044, box 2, item 12.

92 Council 20 October 1954, DCCA: Box 1, DPAG 4/5.

93 MacLennan to Smythe, 14 September 1956, TPA: MU00008, box 3, item 6.

94 MacLennan to Watson, 19 June 1956, TPA: MU00009, box 5, item 9.

95 MacLennan to Smythe, 1 April 1957, TPA: MU00008, box 3, item 6. (see also MacLennan to Smythe, 18 March 1957, TPA: MU00008, box 3, item 6).

96 National Art Gallery (1957).

97 MacLennan to Smythe, 1 April 1957, TPA: MU00008, box 3, item 6.

98 MacLennan to Watson, 19 June 1956, TPA: MU00009, box 5, item 9; MacLennan to Smythe, 3 July 1956, TPA: MU00008, box 3, item 6.

99 MacLennan to Smythe, 17 May 1957, TPA: MU00008, box 3, item 6.

100 Council 11 August 1954, DCCA: Box 1, DPAG 4/5.

101 Council 23 February 1955, DCCA: Box 1, DPAG 4/5.

102 "Art Collection Opening Tomorrow," *Otago Daily Times* (18 November 1953), DCCA: DPAG 26/3.

103 "Another Notable Gift from English Donor," *Evening Star* (9 January 1954), DCCA: DPAG 26/4.

104 "Smythe Collection," *Otago Daily Times* (3 March 1954), DCCA: DPAG 26/4.

105 "Gift of Water Colours Opened at Art Gallery," *Otago Daily Times* (20 November 1953), DCCA: DPAG 26/3.

106 "Priceless New Gifts to Art Gallery: Archdeacon Sends Dunedin More Pictures," *Otago Daily Times* (26 February 1954), DCCA: DPAG 26/4.

claimed that the Smythe watercolours “would make the Dunedin gallery the mecca of every art lover.”<sup>107</sup>

### Out of sight, out of mind: Criticism and apathy

The public hype around the Smythe watercolours, however, started to fade quickly. Already during a council meeting on 4 July 1955, the DPAG’s Chairman “expressed his disappointment with the very poor response of the general public on this occasion [opening of a new Smythe collection exhibition], members concurring with his remarks.”<sup>108</sup> Not only did visitation numbers decrease, but the press was also more hesitant to blindly praise the collection’s contents. H.V.M., writing for the *Evening Star*, examined the works with a critical eye, claiming, in contrast to previous opinions, that many of the watercolours were not the best.<sup>109</sup> Therefore, public display of the collection quickly started to diminish, despite Pearse’s and Maclellan’s initial plans to have regular – and indeed permanent – exhibition spaces set aside for the Smythe watercolours.

A writer for the *Otago Daily Times* observed that the DPAG lacked the necessary means to exhibit the works:

The present resources of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery Society, both financial and physical, are certainly not sufficient to enable the Smyth [sic] collection to be displayed, except at a loss to the walls of the gallery of many other pictures having joint appeal of merit and familiarity to commend them to gallery-goers. ... What, in fact, is required is someone – or some body of citizens – to match the generosity of Archdeacon Smyth [sic] by providing a gallery for the water colours. Until this is done – and until, incidentally, the pictures are catalogued and annotated – the art-loving people of Dunedin will not have carried out their obligation to an unknown benefactor.<sup>110</sup>

By 1970 this issue had still not been remedied, as can be gleaned from a letter by John Borrie (a former DPAG director) to Charlton Edgar:

Three times now I have had forcefully brought to my notice the fact that we are not showing any of the Smythe collection. Indeed one of our members from Auckland

very forcefully said to me. ‘With these holdings of the Smythe collection, should we not have as a matter of Art Gallery policy, one display room always set aside for choice pictures of the Smythe collection’.<sup>111</sup>

Thus, even though other New Zealand centres, such as Auckland, showed an interest in seeing the Smythe watercolours, this desire was not fulfilled. As the collection was shown less and less, its status in New Zealand’s institutions and public sphere similarly slowly diminished. In 2004, Tony Green, formerly Head of the Department of Art History, University of Auckland, curated a two-part exhibition at DPAG that looked exclusively at works from the Smythe collection.<sup>112</sup> The first part, *Characters: High and Low* (March-May), focused on figurative works, and the second part, *Home and Abroad* (May-July), considered landscape subjects. In the brief publication that accompanied these exhibitions, Green began by highlighting the direct link between British watercolours and the New Zealand tradition:

British drawings and watercolours of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are an important part of the inheritance of New Zealand artists. The circle of William Matthew Hodgkins was brought up on them. So was his famous daughter Frances and so were the Christchurch artists of the 1910s and 1920s. Even in the 1950s and 1960s these landscapes were still important enough as models to be the subject of critical discrimination by our modernist artists, who rejected the conventions of the atmospheric mood paintings of the school of Turner, favouring instead the barest topographical drawings and coastal profiles, in the name of truth to New Zealand reality.<sup>113</sup>

This also acknowledges that the Smythe watercolours had already become the victim of “critical discrimination” by the 1960s, due to the rising interest in a local tradition.

The reduced interest in displaying the Smythe collection was in fact part of a wider shift in exhibition trends in twentieth-century New Zealand. In 1949–1950 and 1953, the Empire Art Loan Exhibitions Society had put on two large-scale British watercolour exhibitions, which received shining reviews.<sup>114</sup> The 1950s–1960s, however, saw a distinct rise in exhibitions on New Zealand-based watercolourists like Albin Martin, J.C. Hoyte, and James Crowe Richmond in exhibitions like *Early Watercolours*

107 “‘Invaluable’ Art Collection Given to Dunedin,” *Auckland Star* (1953), DCCA: DPAG 26/3.

108 Council 4 July 1955, DCCA: Box 1, DPAG 4/5.

109 H.V.M., “For Those Who Draw,” *Evening Star* (14 May 1954), DCCA: DPAG 26/4.

110 “Art Gallery Has Further Needs,” *Otago Daily Times* (27 February 1954), DCCA: DPAG 26/4.

111 John Borrie to Charlton Edgar, 11 December 1970, DCCA: DPAG 23/9.

112 Green (2004).

113 Green (2004), 1.

114 For example in *New Zealand Listener* (5 August 1949) and *Star-Sun* (2 February 1950). The Empire Art Loan Society was founded by Sir Percy Sargood of the DPAG Society in 1932, in order to bring exhibitions from London-based art museums to New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. See Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, “Empire Art Loan Collections Society Archive,” accessed 10 March 2020, <https://www.aucklandartgallery.com/explore-art-and-ideas/archives/19628>.



**Figure 8.** Colin McCahon (1919–1987), *Northland panels*, 1954, oil-modified alkyd on canvas, 5638 × 1779 mm, *Te Papa*, 1978–2009-1/A-H to H-H. Courtesy of the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust.

of *New Zealand* (1963). While the romantic, picturesque landscapes of Turner’s generation, so prominent in Smythe’s collection, were generally acknowledged as a major influence on the first Western depictions of New Zealand, this style was rejected from the 1950s onwards in favour of works featuring local topography. Amateur artists like Kinder, Hoyte, and Heaphy were believed to be untainted by British models and instead responded directly to the landscape.<sup>115</sup>

### Shifting tastes and identities

Pearse and Maclennan, and their respective galleries, were largely opposed to accepting modern art and still adhered to a conservative, Anglo-centric taste when Smythe’s collection arrived in the 1950s. As Athol McCredie writes in his thesis “Going Public: New Zealand Art Museums in the 1970s” (McCredie 1999), public galleries “had become bastions of tradition and symbols of enduring values for whom change was not going to come easily.”<sup>116</sup> The gallery directors that influenced the acquisition practices of each institution were driving factors in this change. While Pearse was later criticised for her conservative tastes, she was actually merely continuing a tradition already in train at the DPAG, reinforced when the gallery commissioned the British National Art Collections Fund (now called The Art Fund) to buy Victorian art, an arrangement that continued until 1982.<sup>117</sup> Maclennan displayed a similar traditionalist taste and also continued the artistic model set by the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts, despite public hopes for a more progressive approach for the NAG<sup>118</sup>. Fortunately for contemporary New Zealand artists – but unfortunately

for the Smythe watercolours – this approach did manifest in New Zealand galleries from the 1960s onwards.

Pearse and Maclennan were followed by a new generation of gallery directors who introduced a modern aesthetic of the European avant-garde, such as Abstraction and Expressionism, to the DPAG and NAG. For example, Maclennan was succeeded by Melvin Day (1923–2016), who was director of the NAG from 1968–1978. Day, an artist himself, had a love for Cubism and became the first New Zealander to study art history at the Courtauld Institute in London. Among his most significant modernist purchases was Colin McCahon’s masterpiece *Northland panels* (Fig. 8), acquired in May 1978. Painted after a four-month stay in the US, this work perfectly illustrates the influence of international modernist art, including Abstract Expressionism, as well as emphasising a local New Zealand landscape. In 1970, Day focused on acquiring local artists such as Milan Mrkusich, McCahon, Pat Hanly, Bill Sutton, John Drawbridge and Jan Nigro.<sup>119</sup> He also organised the exhibition *Contemporary New Zealand Painting* (National Art Gallery 1972) to showcase such works.<sup>120</sup>

The emerging taste for modernism and abstraction was therefore accompanied by a powerful preference for local contemporary artists. Thus, while the German-British art historian Nikolaus Pevsner claimed in 1958 that he had learnt little about New Zealand art because none of our galleries had a collection of New Zealand painting, by the middle of the 1980s Peter Entwisle could observe that “almost every institution is collecting contemporary New Zealand art.”<sup>121</sup>

This shift towards modern and local art was just one symptom of a wider change taking place in New Zealand during the twentieth century, which witnessed a

115 Brown and Keith (1982), 13.

116 McCredie (1999), 59.

117 Notman and Cullen (2009), 13.

118 James (2003), 12.

119 McCredie (1999), 69.

120 National Art Gallery (1972).

121 *Auckland Star* (25 August 1958): 5, cited in Notman and Cullen (2009), 25; Entwisle (1985), 4–5.

move away from anything British amidst a search for a uniquely New Zealand cultural and national identity. New Zealand's former reputation as "the Britain of the South" was hard to shake, and in 1956 MacLennan still wrote in one of his letters to Smythe: "many of our Christmas cards depict snow scenes, though it is almost midsummer here. We like to retain English customs and even indulge in substantial Christmas dinners with plum puddings, although salads would really be more seasonable!"<sup>122</sup> However, in the post-war period, a Māori indigenous history and New Zealand as a bicultural and Pacific nation were becoming firmly embedded in the psyche of New Zealanders and in the practices of public art institutions.

In line with this, public art acquisitions and exhibitions had to conform to a national art history which supported this new New Zealand identity by highlighting art that responded directly to the country and sought to emphasise what was unique to New Zealand; hence the exhibition of early New Zealand artists mentioned above. British watercolours, which were once called "as national as the language itself",<sup>123</sup> held an uncomfortable position in this new ideological framework. Due to their influence on New Zealand's early colonial art, they were arguably an extension of colonial enterprise itself<sup>124</sup>. The author of a 1958 catalogue essay admitted as much, writing that the "early colonial artist tried to do much the same with his subject as the settler intended to do with his land: to impose on it a European pattern, a transplanted culture."<sup>125</sup> But as has already been discussed, those artists with British heritage, like the Bath-born emigrant to New Zealand John Gully, were simply rejected by the new national art history that was being written by scholars like Gordon H. Brown and Hamish Keith and put on display by galleries.<sup>126</sup>

More recently, scholars like Francis Pound have criticised such an "invented" version of art history in New Zealand. "In order to invent a new national self," he writes, "what had to be done was to invent a new version of the past – a revolutionary version appropriate for the forming of the national self to come."<sup>127</sup> In writing their history of 'UnAustralian' art, Rex Butler and A.D.S. Donaldson have applied a revisionist approach to further challenge such ideas about what kind of art should be discussed in "national art histories."<sup>128</sup> This article agrees that excluding art like the Smythe collection because it uncovers irrelevant or uncomfortable aspects of our histories runs the risk of losing significant aspects of art history and national identity in New Zealand.

## Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of Smythe's collecting practices and tastes, in order to shed light on one of New Zealand's biggest yet most obscure art donors. We can see that while Smythe was following some trends that reflected the interests of middle-class collectors during his time, he was largely conservative in his choices. At the turn of the century, he actively pursued works by sought-after artists such as Cotman and Cox, demonstrating an interest in the sketch aesthetic. However, it seems that he remained stuck in that collecting habit throughout his life, rather than actively engaging with contemporary twentieth-century trends as they developed. His choices were not only affected by general taste, but also by his financial circumstances, personal preferences, and market availability. By the time he donated his collection to New Zealand in the 1950s, it is fair to classify it as out of step with public tastes. This should not have rendered it inconsequential, yet it fell out of favour shortly after arriving in New Zealand.

The Smythe gift is the single largest collection of British watercolours in New Zealand. Green called it "certainly the richest resource of its kind in New Zealand."<sup>129</sup> It comes as no surprise that the collection was welcomed with open arms, seeing that there was a strong local tradition of watercolour artists in New Zealand and the Anglo-centric taste of British-trained gallery directors dominated art acquisitions. Still, within just a decade the Smythe collection became relegated to the storage rooms and ultimately almost forgotten. It did not fit into a twentieth-century New Zealand art scene that witnessed shifting tastes and identities, moving towards a modern and local aesthetic vision for the nation.

Therefore, not only did the Smythe collection reflect a belated taste in art, but it was also an unwanted reminder of British imperial domination at a time of a New Zealand cultural awakening. Yet it has been shown that even a marginalised collection such as this can prove insightful when examining links between the artistic tastes and collecting habits of its time. In the end, by looking at something that has fallen out of mind and out of fashion we can discover new ways of engaging with our national art collections, histories and everchanging identities.

122 MacLennan to Smythe, 21 November 1956, TPA: MU00008, box 3, item 6.

123 Bury (1934), 85.

124 Pound (1983), 20, 42.

125 Auckland City Art Gallery (1958), 4.

126 Brown and Keith (1982).

127 Pound (2009), 329.

128 Butler and Donaldson (2008), 119.

129 Green (2004), 1.

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