

Gordon Walters

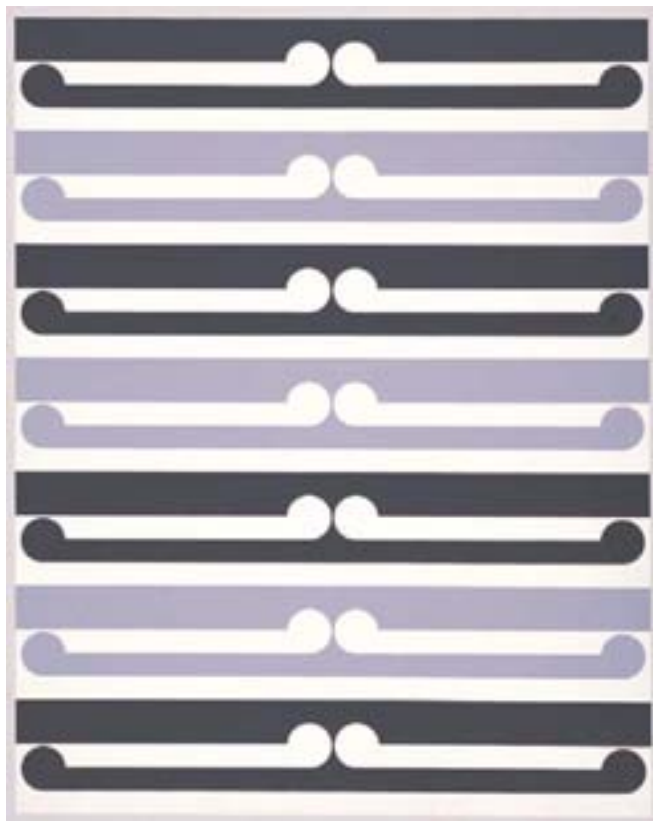
New Zealander, 1919 - 1995

Untitled (Koru Series)

1981, acrylic on canvas, 102x82 cm

Purchased 1982

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About the work

This is a modernist abstract work in which shape and colour form the painting's subject. It is the interplay between positive shapes and negative spaces which enlivens the hard-edged composition and the internal logic of the geometric relationships which we are invited to consider. "My work," Walters said, "is an investigation of positive/negative relationships within a deliberately limited range of forms... I believe that dynamic relations are most clearly expressed by the repetition of a few simple elements." (*Gordon Walters*, Michael Dunn, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1983, p.124)

The spiral koru, or fern bud, is a traditional Māori decorative form, used on kowhaiwhai panels in meeting houses, on gourds and in the moko or tattoo. Walters has straightened the stem, drawing it with the aid of a ruler, and altered the bulb to make it a circle, thereby arriving at his own motif. Walters has alluded to this shape as the essence of form. The title emphasises the fact that there are no symbolic meanings or outside references.

There is a classical order, restraint and harmony to this work, presenting a balanced composition of vertical and horizontal elements. The repetition of the form, and the colour shifts, give the canvas a sense of movement. Colour, too, is classically cool and restrained, limited to three greys (one as the framing border) and white.

The koru form is visually similar to other significant shapes found in disciplines such as mathematics and music, and in other cultural contexts. It can be seen as an archetypal symbol of growth and change. Walters' ultimate intention was to geometrize the form, to make it more neutral in the style of the geometric abstractionists.

In 1950 Walters travelled to Europe. There he studied the paintings of Piet Mondrian (1872 - 1944) as well as the work of French geometric abstractionists Victor de Vasařely (1908 - 1997), Auguste Herbin (1882 - 1960) and Alberto Magnelli (1888 - 1971). Hard-edged geometric abstraction, which Walters exemplified throughout his career, has an art historical precedent in the rigid abstractionism of Russian Suprematism and the work of Kasimir Malevich (1878 - 1935) and the work of Mondrian. Walters was also interested in the work of Paul Klee (1879 - 1940), with its removal of conventional composition and the rudimentary nature of the imagery.

This work is part of a series begun by Walters in the late 1950s. As the series evolved, the organic koru was gradually stylised into a simple horizontal bar with a circular end. In other words, Walters abstracted the form, reappropriating it for the modern cultural context.

Gordon Walters

New Zealander, 1919-1995

About the artist

Born in Wellington in 1919, Walters began studying art at Wellington Technical College in 1935 while he was working as a trainee commercial artist. After travelling overseas, in 1955 Walters returned to Wellington to a position at the Government Printing Office. He began painting full-time in 1966 but moved to Auckland in 1971 and taught briefly at the School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland. In 1976 Walters moved to Christchurch where he lived until his death in 1995.

He was granted a Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council Fellowship in 1972 and in 1979 he travelled to America. Walters exhibited extensively nationally and internationally, and is represented in all major art institutions in New Zealand.

In 1946 to 1947 Walters visited Theo Schoon, the Dutch-Indonesian painter and photographer, who was also a friend. Schoon was making a study of pre-historic Māori rock art sites, and Walters realised the potential of these designs to form the basis for advanced abstraction. He became interested in the meanings conveyed by symbolic forms and finally isolated the koru, making many studies of it.

Walters began introducing Māori names for his later koru paintings, acknowledging his debt to Māori art and also paying tribute to it. His intention was not to appropriate a spiritual Māori art form. His main concerns came from the European tradition. These were to apply the optical effects of abstraction and effect a drawing together of opposites, black, white, curved, straight.

Other works by the artist in the Collection

There are 8 works by the artist in the Collection, including:

Untitled

Pen

Purchased 1974

Rauponga

1984, Screenprint

Purchased 1984

Then

1984, screenprint

Purchased 1984

Arahura

1985, screenprint

Presented by Mr Peter Webb 1985

Untitled

1985, PVA/acrylic on canvas

Purchased 1987

Untitled

1987, acrylic on canvas

Purchased 1987

Further reading

'Gordon Walters (1919-1995)', Michael Dunn, *Art New Zealand*, No. 78, 1995, pp 92-93.

'Gordon Walters', Michael Dunn, *Art New Zealand*, No. 63, 1992, pp 73-75.

Walters, Gimblett, Bambury, Lita Barrie, Jonathan Jensen Gallery, 1992.

'Gordon Walters at Seventy', Lita Barrie, *Art New Zealand*, No. 56, 1989, pp 107-108.

Gordon Walters: Order and Intuition, James Ross & Laurence Simmons (eds), Walters Publications, 1989.

'Putting the Record Straight: Gordon Walters 1944-1982', Leonard Bell, *Art New Zealand*, No. 27, 1983, pp 42-45.

