

A. Elizabeth Kelly



Robert McDougall Art Gallery

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A. Elizabeth Kelly

Introduction

New Zealand has produced many painters who have specialised in portraiture within their oeuvre but few that have reached the stature of A Elizabeth Kelly.

In 1937 J.H.E. Schroder wrote of Elizabeth Kelly;

"She has raised herself steadily in achievement as a portrait painter by thinking, imagining and labouring always to achieve a picture which will be a portrait, and never doing a portrait which is secondary or imperfectly or not at all a picture."

Her activity in portraiture spanned almost four decades, but it was only within the 1920s and 30s that her identity in this genre emerged.

Within her generation Elizabeth Kelly was a leader, a highly professional woman artist who helped revitalise New Zealand portraiture. Her portraits were distinctive in form and colour and notable for their freshness and the ease with which she presented her sitters. As a traditionalist she followed the example of English portraiture which made her work readily accepted both locally and overseas, and enabled her within her generation to gain more recognition beyond this country than any other New Zealand artist.

In many respects she was fortunate to have been active at a time when there was still a strong interest in family portraiture. This declined in the period following World War II as attitudes changed, and apart from official commissions the demand was less strong.

X This fading of interest in portraiture is in part accountable for the fading of attention toward Elizabeth Kelly as a painter. As a dominant practitioner of what was considered to be a less important genre than the landscape, she has slowly lost recognition for her work in the years since her death.

Those who knew her have described a naturally dignified and sensitive person highly self-critical as an artist, but ever conscious of maintaining the highest standards of professionalism, someone who was also generous in her appreciation and support of younger artists.

It is now fifty years since Elizabeth Kelly died and this small exhibition has been prepared to commemorate this event and to recognise her standing as one of New Zealand's foremost artists.

Neil Roberts
Curator

Annie (Elizabeth) Kelly

Annie Elizabeth Kelly was born Annie Elizabeth Abbott at Knightstown (St Albans), Christchurch on 12 April 1877, the eldest daughter of the four children of Thomas George Abbott and his wife, Maud Laura Mason.

At the time of her birth Thomas Abbott was a nursery-man who worked with his father Thomas Abbott senior at the family's Exeter Nursery in Papanui Road. Elizabeth Abbott grew up in St Albans and was educated from 1883 - 1890 at Christchurch Normal School, and during 1891 and part of 1892, at St Albans Main School. She also spent a short time in 1892 at Mr A. Bentley Worthington's private school.

At a very early age she showed a pronounced interest and ability in art and began attending Saturday morning classes at Canterbury College School of Art (CCSA) in 1891. These she continued during 1892 and 1893.

In 1893 she also enrolled in weekly morning classes commencing elementary studies leading towards Student and Art Teachers Certificates. Her tutors in drawing and painting were George Herbert Elliot, the headmaster of the school, Alfred Walsh and Edith Munnings. Later she attended classes in modelling given by Charles Kidson.

From 1894 until 1900 she attended both morning and evening classes at the school, and was awarded several free scholarships between 1897 and 1899.



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In 1900 she was awarded the Drawing from Full Figure Prize and Still Life scholarship which was tenable the following year.

Like many of her contemporaries Elizabeth Abbott was influenced by Petrus van der Velden, and even though she was never one of his pupils she did visit his studio in Durham St, occasionally. She also associated with a number of students, at the School of Art including her cousin Leonard H. Booth who did receive private tuition from him.

The Van der Velden philosophy of the power and impulse of light and nature in art was one that Elizabeth Abbott also shared. Her early portraits in particular reveal much of the Van der Velden influence.

Throughout her life as a painter she remained a naturalist. Whether painting a portrait or a landscape, it was always completed before the subject as an exact descriptive interpretation.

By 1901 she had completed the last of her studies at Canterbury College School of Art (CCSA). She had met all the requirements and had gained a first class pass in examinations held extra-murally through the Department of Science and Art, South Kensington, London for the award of an art teacher certificate, and was invited to join the staff of CCSA as a student assistant. This position she held until 1904.

As well as achieving much success in her time as a student at the School of Art, Elizabeth Abbott was equally successful in annual student competitions held by the Canterbury Society of Arts (CSA).

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Between 1899 and 1902 she was awarded two bronze and two silver medals. This early exhibition of her work became more regular after she was elected a working member of the CSA in 1903. From that year until 1946 she exhibited almost continually, and also served as a council member after 1937.

Elizabeth Abbott's association with other New Zealand art societies also began in her student years, particularly with the Otago and the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts in Wellington. In 1898 she was awarded first prize in the Academy's catalogue cover competition.

In February 1905 she began taking pupils at her studio at 218 Hereford St for day and evening classes in landscape, figure and still life drawing and painting. As classes were offered only twice weekly the remainder of her time could be devoted to painting and some part-time teaching at CCSA.

In 1906 she had six works selected for the New Zealand International Exhibition, at which she was awarded two silver medals for modelling and a gold for drawing and painting from nature. For many years Elizabeth Abbott had had a friendship with a fellow student Cecil Fletcher Kelly (1878 - 1954) which blossomed in 1907. The following year Cecil Kelly joined the full-time teaching staff at CCSA which enabled the couple to consider marriage. They were married on 31 December 1908.

Elizabeth and Cecil Kelly had a close relationship not only as husband and wife, but also as artists. They painted together, particularly in the landscape during summer vacations around Christchurch and beyond. The first of these in 1909 was spent at Kaikoura, later they painted in Westland and from 1915 at Moana and around Lake Brunner.

There were occasional visits to the Southern Lakes of Otago over the years and to the North Island, but these were rare. Over the summer of 1910/11 they spent several weeks painting in Auckland where they had gone to visit Cecil's brother, George Kelly.

For some time after their marriage they continued to live at Elizabeth's Hereford



*Winter, oil on canvas,
Private collection Christchurch*



*D G Sullivan, oil on canvas
Robert McDougall Art Gallery*

St studio, but in 1912 moved to a rented property at 119 Richmond Tce, New Brighton. Although she was frequently engaged in painting the landscape at this time, Elizabeth Kelly continued to paint figurative subjects and increasingly her reputation as a portraitist grew.

In 1912 her portrait 'Diana' (Cat.3) was selected and purchased by the CSA for its permanent collection.

Three years later in 1915 her portrait of the young art student Edna Bruce titled 'Winter' (Cat.4) was chosen for the cover of a World War I Magazine for the troops.

However it was not until 1920 that she received her first major official portrait commission, when she was invited by the New Zealand Government to paint a portrait of Sergeant H.J. Nicholas, VC who had been killed in 1918. This was to be one of a series by New Zealand artists commemorating distinguished soldiers who had fallen during the First World War.

Up until that time neither Elizabeth nor Cecil Kelly had ventured beyond New Zealand, and as both were in their early 40s they felt the need to travel and 'broaden their horizons.' They therefore decided to have a year overseas.

Cecil Kelly gained leave from CCSA and on 29 December 1920 they left New Zealand on board the 'Ionic' with London as their destination. On arrival they rented a studio flat in Kensington and spent many weeks visiting galleries and artists studios, attending lectures and painting.

In the summer of 1921 they travelled to Cornwall where they painted mostly around St Ives and Penzance before crossing the English Channel to Dieppe in France then on to Paris for an extended visit.

In Paris, Elizabeth Kelly spent many days studying master works at the Louvre, and Palais de Luxembourg galleries, as well as painting with her husband around the city and along the Seine. From Paris they travelled to Toulon in the South of France, then on to Italy.

At Naples the Kellys boarded the ship

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Annie (Elizabeth) Kelly

'Ulimaroa' bound for New Zealand, via Cape Town, Durban, Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. The 'Ulimaroa' berthed in Wellington on 6 January 1922 and the Kellys arrived back in Christchurch two days later.

They returned to live in Sydney Thompson's studio at 97 Cambridge Tce, which they had rented for several months prior to going overseas, but by late 1922 had become settled in a first floor flat at 245 Montreal St. This was to be their home for the remainder of their lives.

The experience of visiting Britain and Europe had reinforced Elizabeth Kelly's approach to academic naturalism, and her 'interpretations' as she termed her portraits, became more lively in design and colour. However they remained carefully controlled, so that a successful likeness was not lost. Her portrait 'Arabesque' (Cat.6) painted in 1922 is at the beginning of this change.

In 1924 Elizabeth Kelly was one of several New Zealand artists selected to show at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, London. This was to be the first occasion in which she had the opportunity to exhibit overseas, but was by no means the last.

During the 1920s and 1930s she completed many portraits, mostly of fashionable and elegant sitters, and often young women from the post-World War I generation of Canterbury society like Roma Carey, who sat for several portraits in the late 1920s including 'Youth' (Cat.8).

Such portraits became popular and quickly established Elizabeth Kelly's reputation for a certain type of painting that was very close to her Royal Academy contemporaries in London. By the early 1930s she was being described as 'New Zealand's foremost woman painter.' Much of this acclaim can be attributed to her success overseas at that time.

In 1931 she exhibited her first canvas at the Royal Academy exhibition in London, and from 1934 she exhibited there annually until 1940. After 1932 she began showing regularly at the Salon of the Société des Artistes Français receiving honourable mention for her portrait 'Edith Bryant,' and in 1934 a silver medal for her portrait 'Edith May' (Cat.10).

This was the first occasion that a medal had been awarded to a New Zealand artist by the Salon, making it the highest official award



*Edith May. oil on canvas
Dunedin Public Art Gallery*

received to that date. During 1934 she also exhibited at the Royal Cambrian Academy, Wales and participated in a group exhibition at Sunderland Art Gallery. The following year she began showing with the Royal Institute of Oil Painters.

In July of 1936 the first solo exhibition of her work in England was held by invitation at the Public Art Gallery, Lincoln. This was followed in October by a much larger solo exhibition at Walker's Galleries, New Bond St, London. Included was her portrait of Miss Helen Buchanan (Cat.11), which she had shown at the 1936 Royal Academy exhibition three months earlier. The following year she was invited to exhibit in the Royal British Colonial Exhibition, Birmingham and began showing at the Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh.

During 1938 and 1939 Elizabeth Kelly also accepted an invitation to exhibit with the Royal West of England Academy.

Official recognition for her standing as an artist in New Zealand came in 1938 when she was awarded the CBE for services

to art, and remains still the only woman artist to achieve that high official honour. Among the New Zealand sitters for portraits made during the 1930s and 1940s were many distinguished individuals from varying professions. Included were portraits of Arthur Broadhurst, founder of St Peter's school, Cambridge, M.C. Keane, Editor of the Press 1919 - 1929, Brigadier Murray Gardner, DSO, Mr D.G. Sullivan, MP, Mayor of Christchurch 1931 - 1936 (Cat.23), and James Parks, Professor of Geology at Otago University from 1901 - 1931.

In 1940 the portrait of Professor Park was purchased for the National Portrait Gallery Edinburgh. Between 1940 and 1944, she was restricted to exhibiting in New Zealand because of war conditions, and much time during these years was given to landscape painting, frequently involving Christchurch city subjects. However the regard for her work had not flagged, and in 1945 several of her paintings were included in the 'British Art of Today' exhibition which opened in London during September of that year, then toured to several public galleries in northern England including Blackpool, Bolton and Lincoln.

Elizabeth Kelly exhibited in December 1945 at the Royal Society of Portrait Painters London, and was proposed for election as a member of that Society.

This was to be Elizabeth Kelly's last exhibition abroad, as she died in Christchurch on 4 October 1946.

A. Elizabeth Kelly

Chronology

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|---------|---|------|--|------|--|
| 1877 | Born 12 April at Knightstown (St Albans), Christchurch. | 1908 | 31 December marries Cecil Fletcher Kelly at Christchurch Registrars Office. | 1928 | Rejoins the staff of CCSA in a relieving capacity. (Junior life classes). |
| 1882 | Demonstrates earliest efforts at painting. | 1909 | Summer spent in Kaikoura painting. | 1930 | September granted a Diploma in Fine Arts. |
| 1883 | Begins attending Christchurch Normal School. | 1910 | Over the summer of 1910/11 visits Auckland with Cecil. | 1931 | Begins exhibiting at the Royal Academy, London (RA) with the portrait 'Edith Bryant'. Also exhibits with Royal Society of Portrait Painters. |
| 1889 | Leaves Normal School during term II having reached Standard V. | 1911 | Elizabeth and Cecil visit the West Coast during the summer of 1911/12. | 1932 | Commences showing at the Salon of the Société des Artistes Français. Receives honorable mention for her portrait of 'Edith Bryant.' |
| 1891 | Enrolled at St Albans Main School from term I. Begins Saturday classes at Canterbury College School of Art (CCSA). | 1912 | The portrait 'Diana' (Cat.3) purchased by CSA for its permanent collection. The Kelly's move to live at 119 Richmond Terrace, New Brighton. | 1933 | Exhibits portraits of 'Helen Buchanan' and 'Mrs Wilfred Sim' at the Salon, Paris. Portrait of Miss Ward-Smith shown at CSA annual exhibition. |
| 1892 | Attends Saturday morning class terms I - III. Leaves St Albans Main School in Standard VI at the end of term I to attend Mr A.Bentley Worthington's private 'Temple of Truth' school. | 1913 | During summer 1913/14 begins the first of regular visits to Moana. | 1934 | Exhibits portrait 'Edith May' (Cat. 10) at RA and Salon Paris. Awarded a silver medal by the Société des Artistes Français which is the first for a NZ woman artist. May exhibits at Royal Cambrian Society Exhibition, Wales. July/August participates in a group exhibition at Sunderland Art Gallery. |
| 1893 | Commences morning and evening classes at CCSA, continues morning classes until 1901 and evening classes until 1899. | 1914 | Paints 'Winter' (Cat.4) Exhibited in 1915 at CSA annual exhibition. Used as a cover for a World War I military magazine, 1915. | 1935 | Exhibits at Royal Institute of Oil Painters, London. The 'Portrait of a Maori Toi Toi Hinetauhara' (Cat.15) is exhibited at the Salon, Paris. |
| 1897 | Begins taking examinations towards Student Certificate and Art Teachers Certificate which included examinations set by the Science and Art Department, South Kensington, London. These continued until 1900. Awarded an Evening Free Scholarship. | 1916 | Summer 1916/17 spent painting at Kaikoura with Cecil. | 1936 | In July holds first solo exhibition at City of Lincoln Public Art Gallery. In October solo exhibition at Walker's Galleries New Bond St, London. Shows Portrait 'in Blue and Silver' (Cat.18) at Salon Paris and 'Helen Buchanan' (Cat.11) at RA. Also exhibits in New York. |
| 1898 | Receives the award of a Morning Free Scholarship and an Evening Free Scholarship. Awarded first prize in the student competition for a catalogue cover design for the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts. | 1917 | The Kellys purchase land at Moana on which to camp during painting visits. Has work illustrated in the Winter Number 1916/17 of 'Studio' magazine. | 1937 | Elected to the Council of CSA. Exhibits portrait Ngaire Stevenson-Smith at Paris Salon, in May. Is included in Royal British Colonial Exhibition, Birmingham. Invited to exhibit at Royal West of England Academy (RWEA). Begins exhibiting at Royal Scottish Academy (RSA) with a portrait, 'Rima' (Cat.14) |
| 1899 | Awarded an Evening Free Scholarship, CCSA and a bronze medal by the Canterbury Society of Arts for a student competition. (Modelling from the cast or from nature). | 1920 | Commissioned by the New Zealand Government to paint a portrait of Sergeant H.J. Nicholas, VC. The Kellys move from New Brighton to live at Sydney Thompson's studio, 97 Cambridge Terrace. In October Elizabeth and Cecil decide to travel overseas. Cecil is granted a year's leave of absence from Canterbury College. 29 December they depart on the 'Ionic' for England via Australia. | 1938 | Awarded CBE for Services to Art. Exhibits at RA and RWEA. |
| 1900 | Awarded CCSA Still Life Scholarship (tenable in 1901). Participant in a national competition illustrating New Zealand poetry. Awarded an Art Class Teachers Certificate and a First Class Certificate for Drawing from Life. | 1921 | Arrives in London, February. They take a studio in Kensington. Summer spent in Cornwall, then to Paris painting and studying gallery collections. In November, the Kellys travel to Toulon and Naples, then home to NZ via South Africa. | 1939 | In January, the portrait 'Lorna' is chosen for the cover of the Danish magazine 'Tidius Koinder'. Portraits shown at RA, Salon Paris, RSA and RWEA. |
| 1901 | Awarded CSA bronze medal for Head from Life. CCSA prize for Drawing from the Full Figure. Begins on the staff of CCSA as a student assistant teacher of Drawing and Painting classes. | 1922 | On 5 January the Kellys arrive at Wellington on board 'Ulimarua' after a stormy passage across the Tasman. On 11 January they are interviewed by the 'Lyttelton Times' about their trip. They return to live at 97 Cambridge Tce, but later in the year moved to first floor flat at 245 Montreal St. 'Arabesque' (Cat.6).is exhibited at CSA annual exhibition. | 1940 | Portrait of Professor James Park purchased for the National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh. Exhibits at RA for last time. Works are included in the National Centennial Exhibition of New Zealand Art Wellington. Shows mostly landscapes in CSA annual exhibition. |
| 1902 | Awarded a silver medal for Study of a Head from Life and Colour in the annual CSA student competitions. | 1924 | Begins the first of a number of portrait commissions for individuals and families in Canterbury society. Sends work to British Empire Exhibition, Wembley, London, with other Canterbury artists. | 1941 | Painting mostly landscapes. |
| 1903 | 23 March elected a Working Member of the CSA. | 1925 | Becomes a member of National Art Association of New Zealand. | 1942 | Portrait 'Lorna' exhibited at RSA. |
| 1904 | Begins exhibiting at CSA annual exhibitions. Leaves the staff of CCSA at the end of term III. | 1926 | Paints 'Youth' (Cat.8), a portrait of Roma Carey, that is exhibited at CSA annual exhibition in 1927. | 1943 | Continues to paint local landscape. Paints portrait of D.G. Sullivan (Cat.22) |
| 1905 | 4 February gives notice that she is commencing classes in drawing and painting at her studio, at first in the AMP building on Thursdays and Saturdays then at 318 Hereford Street. | 1927 | Among the works exhibited are portraits of Cecil Kelly (Cat.7) Archibald Nicoll, and Dr J. McMillan Brown. | 1945 | Has several paintings included in 'British Art Today' exhibition which opens in London, Blackpool, Bolton, and Lincoln. On 3 December, proposed for election to Royal Society of Portrait Painters. |
| 1906/07 | Exhibits six works at New Zealand International Exhibition. Awarded two silver medals for Modelling and a gold for Drawing and Painting from Nature. Employed part-time at CCSA. | | | 1946 | Dies 4 October. |



A. Elizabeth Kelly

Catalogue

- (1) Self Portrait Relief c1901
Plaster 335 x 422mm
Private collection, Christchurch.
- (2) Untitled (Laura) c1902
Plaster 600 x 420 x 330mm
Private collection, Christchurch
Laura Abbott was the artist's younger sister.
- (3) Diana c1911
Oil on canvas 670 x 520mm
Robert McDougall Art Gallery collection
Exhibited at the Canterbury Society of Arts, - 1912 and purchased for its permanent collection.
- (4) Winter c1914
Oil on canvas 440 x 490mm
Private collection, Christchurch
Exhibited at the Canterbury Society of Arts, 1915.
- (5) Kathleen Penney (Mrs Harwood) c1915
Oil on canvas 930 x 760mm
Private collection, Christchurch.
- (6) Arabesque c1922
Oil on canvas 616 x 511mm
Hocken Library, University of Otago collection. Exhibited at Canterbury Society of Arts, 1922.
- (7) Portrait of Cecil F Kelly c1925
Oil on canvas 767 x 630mm
Robert McDougall Art Gallery collection
Exhibited at the Canterbury Society of Arts, 1925.
- (8) Youth c1926
Oil on canvas 913 x 718mm
Robert McDougall Art Gallery collection
Exhibited at the Canterbury Society of Arts and purchased for its permanent collection, 1927.
- (9) Frederika Ballin (Mrs Henry Crust) c1928
Oil on canvas 915 x 713mm
Robert McDougall Art Gallery collection
Presented by Mrs E. Myers, 1973
Exhibited at the Canterbury Society of Arts 1929 in the Paris Salon, 1932 and the Royal Cambrian Society, 1933.
- (10) Edith May c1932
Oil on canvas 915 x 715mm
Dunedin Public Art Gallery collection
Exhibited in the Paris Salon, 1934 (awarded a silver medal).
- (11) Miss Helen Buchanan c1932
Oil on canvas 915 x 750mm
Private collection, Christchurch.
Exhibited in the Paris Salon, 1933 and Royal Academy, London, 1936
Walker's Galleries London 1936.
- (12) Self Portrait 1933
Oil on canvas 1025 x 760mm
Otago Art Society collection.
- (13) Miss Ward Smith 1933
Oil on canvas 997 x 680mm
Robert McDougall Art Gallery collection
Exhibited at the Canterbury Society of Arts 1933.
- (14) Rima 1934
Oil on canvas 760 x 637mm
University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts Collection. Exhibited at Walker's Galleries, London, 1936, and Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh, 1937.
- (15) Toi Toi Hinetauhara c1934
Oil on canvas 915 x 715mm
Robert McDougall Art Gallery collection
Exhibited in the Paris Salon, 1935.
- (16) Self Portrait c1934
Oil on canvas 668 x 511mm
Hocken Library, University of Otago collection.
- (17) Portrait of Cecil F Kelly c1934
Oil on canvas 650 x 520mm
Hocken Library, University of Otago collection.
- (18) Portrait in Blue and Silver (Margaret Hatherley) c 1935
Oil on canvas 993 x 740mm
Robert McDougall Art Gallery collection.
Exhibited in the Paris Salon, 1936 and Canterbury Society of Arts, 1938, New Zealand. Academy of Fine Arts, 1939 Otago Art Society, 1939, and the International and New Zealand Exhibition 1939.
- (19) Margaret c1935
Oil on canvas 895 x 698mm
Robert McDougall Art Gallery collection.
- (20) Mrs Margaret Hight c1939
Pastel 380 x 280mm
Robert McDougall Art Gallery collection presented by Mrs E.O' Malley, 1987.
- (21) Joy 1940
Oil on canvas 1110 x 830mm
Private collection, Christchurch.
- (22) Joan Cunningham c1934
Pastel 545 x 445mm
Private collection, Christchurch.
- (23) Portrait of D G Sullivan c1943
Oil on canvas 1020 x 768mm
Robert McDougall Art Gallery collection
Presented by Cecil Kelly 1949. Exhibited at the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts Wellington, 1943 and Canterbury Society of Arts, 1944.
D.G. Sullivan (1882 - 1947) was a Mayor of Christchurch from 1931 - 1936 and a Labour Member of Parliament.

Acknowledgments

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References: Kelly, A.E. Papers 1920-1946 MS, Robert McDougall Art Gallery Collection.

Schroder J.H.E, Cecil F. and A. Elizabeth Kelly, 'Art in New Zealand 9 No.3 (March 1937), pp123-133.

Wauchop W.S.A, Elizabeth Kelly CBE, An Appreciation; MS, Robert McDougall Art Gallery

The Press, 7 October 1946, p2

Cover - Blue and Silver, (Portrait of Margaret Hatherley), oil on canvas, Robert McDougall Art Gallery.



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