



Love, Sweet Love

**A Display of Images of Love and Romance
from the Collections of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery**

presented in association with the Festival of Romance
with generous support from The George Hotel, Christchurch

The Robert McDougall Art Gallery

Christchurch

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The George
HOTEL OF CHRISTCHURCH

"He is most unsentimental, which probably explains why there has been no first-rate art of any kind produced in New Zealand. Yet he can become maudlin if you mention the gallant All Blacks."

James Michener on the New Zealand male, 1951

♥ At Long Last Love

Prove me wrong, but I do not believe that anyone in Australasia has until now staged an art exhibition on the themes of love and romance. Unlike, say, images of the land or feminist art, love and romance lack intellectual respectability. Movements in art where they are of central importance - the Rococo and Pre-Raphaelitism - have been in and out of fashion. Even now the most obvious qualities of such art - sensuality, lushness and erotic passion - embarrass prim art historians. Renoir, the Impressionist painter with the greatest sense of romance, is a popular favourite but he tends to be snootily sidestepped by intellectuals, who prefer Cézanne or Morisot. Twentieth-century art has deliberately avoided romance: it is considered a low-brow distraction, fine for greetings cards but inappropriate for the art gallery.

True love is pretty elusive in Braque, Dali or Warhol. It is even more elusive in New Zealand art. A stiff upper lipped, Anglo-Saxon temperament (the hangover of the colonists) and the anti-romance of modern art form a deadly combination. Selecting enough New Zealand items that deal in any way with love, sweet love was quite a challenge.

♥ The aim of this exhibition ...

... is to show images of love and romance from the McDougall's collection. *'Love, Sweet Love'* hopes to entertain, to surprise, even to educate. A few old favourites mingle with less familiar works. All address aspects of love, although the sweetness is not always immediately apparent. Sometimes visitors to the exhibition will be tantalised: "How does *that* fit in?" But if, at the end of the day, *'Love, Sweet Love'* produces a palpable upsurge of romantic feeling, then the main aim of the Festival of Romance will be fulfilled.

What kind of love is the focus? 'Boy meets girl' would be the obvious emphasis for this exhibition - but too few works in the Gallery's permanent collection fit the bill. Moreover, 'boy meets girl' is certainly not the only form of love (though popular music and television would have you think otherwise!). Love cuts across barriers of age, gender, indeed species. "Birds do it, bees do it," sings the sultry Eartha Kitt. Finding birds for the exhibition proved easy enough; bees posed a stinging problem but you don't need too much imagination to picture them inhabiting the arcadian worlds of Richard Wallwork or Norman Lindsay, two artists who feature here ...

♥
The Centre Court

As you enter, you are confronted by a pair of bronze statuettes by Auguste Rodin. While *The Eternal Idol* conveys the agony of unattainable love, *The Kiss* shows love about to be fulfilled, the embrace about to be completed: the man's hand caresses but does not yet grip the woman's thigh.

A near-contemporary of Rodin's who also worked in Paris at the turn-of-the-century was the New Zealand artist Grace Joel. *A Rose Midst Poppies* may not directly address 'love, sweet love' but the delightful subject matter, conveyed through the warmth of the colours, makes it an obvious inclusion. By contrast, Linley Richardson's painting of his youngest daughter's birthday celebrations, *Cynthia's Birthday*, seems much more deadpan. Yet the mood behind it is expressed in Richardson's reminiscences: "The coming of my own children brought before me forcibly the beauty of children and I drew, and painted, and etched, and lithographed, and modelled numbers of things from them."

Family love is also uppermost in two stylistically very different paintings, Frank Bramley's *Flowers for Nanny* and Jacqueline Fahey's *Speedy's Return*,



while Helen Rockel's *The Embrace* is thematically closer to Rodin's *The Kiss*. *Huia Couple, Linda and Leo* is a characteristically uncompromising work by Alan Pearson, an explosive symphony in luxuriant and fertile greens which portrays two members of the Huia commune on the Waitakere Hills: the poet Leo Thompson and his pregnant lover, Linda Pirimona.

Other paintings in the Centre Court all date from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *Glasgerion* by Sheridan Knowles was a highlight of the 1897 Royal Academy, an era when imposing and improbable recreations of mythology, chivalry and distant history enjoyed huge popularity. The story comes from an old ballad which relates how the harpist Glasgerion has serenaded the assembled company to sleep, "except the young Princess/ Whom love did waking keep."

Henrietta Rae's *Doubts* needs little introduction to regular visitors to the McDougall. Today, just as much as in its original context of a century ago, we feel compelled to construct a storyline. Will the young woman resist the dubious charms of the middle-aged gallant? You tell me! Another late Victorian "problem picture" is Thomas Gotch's *Consent*. To what? Is love or marriage involved, as the title may suggest? These are questions with which artists of the period loved to tease the public.

Leonard Booth, Richard Wallwork and Sydney Thompson were all near-contemporaries who worked in Christchurch early this century. Booth fell in love with the beautiful model of *The Awakening*, who died tragically young. Wallwork's idyllic escapism, often suggesting love as its theme, establishes him as one of the first and last of the New Zealand romantics. By contrast, a more robust note is struck by Sydney Thompson's *Maori Mother and Child*. This early work conveys, in Julie King's words, the mother's "patient strength and indomitable spirit" and, underlying them, her love.



The Print Room

Love in all its aspects is far more important in this exhibition than the fame of the artists or their style and period. In the old-fashioned sense of the terms, the hanging aims to be both 'promiscuous' and 'seductive'! Famous love stories from the classical past are displayed: Jean-Antoine Coyel's *Venus and Adonis* alludes to the goddess of love's hopeless passion for the beautiful Adonis. Bacchus stages his well-lubricated rescue of Ariadne in the painting by Jacopo Amigoni, one of the most internationally successful Rococo decorative artists. Amigoni was celebrated for introducing Cupids wherever possible into his works! The most famous woman artist of the eighteenth century, Angelika Kauffmann, is represented by an engraving based on *The Triumph of Love*.

A classical theme is given an updated but highly lyrical interpretation by Sidney Nolan in his *Leda and the Swan*. This was probably inspired by Edmund Spenser's rendition of the myth: "She slept; yet twixt her eyelids closely spyde/ How towards her he rusht, and smiled at his pryde."

Left: *The Proposal*, by Hilda Wiseman. Linocut (detail).
Collection: the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch.

Famous British caricaturists Thomas Rowlandson and George Cruikshank take a more jaundiced view of love, sweet love. Rowlandson wickedly but not unaffectionately satirises a 'sensitive new age eighteenth-century couple' in *Sympathetic Lovers*. William Lee-Hankey is represented by two gently affecting works, *Consolation* and *We've been in the Meadows All Day*, while his better-known contemporary, the New Zealand born Frances Hodgkins, is seen in a rare moment of Victorian pathos in her very early watercolour, *The Dead Robin*.

Not everybody would agree with the American critic, Wendy Lesser, when she claims that Picasso's works "have not only presented us with specific women whom Picasso taught us to love; they have also helped to define, for both men and women, what it has meant to be female in this century." Yet his portrait (one of many) of his second wife, *Jacqueline* should modify the image of Picasso as a "walking scrotum", to quote Robert Hughes's vivid description. In real life Picasso might have been just that, but in his art, certainly in this etching, love obscures lust.

Eric Gill, 'man of flesh and spirit', also had a notoriously torrid and far from sweet love-life; this, however, should not concern us when we admire his wood-engraving of two children, *Teresa and Winifred*. Executed with his characteristic technical perfection, it is an image that is at once 'tough and tender.' Parental love, allied to a similarly rigorous technique, is evident in Graham Sydney's etching, *My Daughter*. Sydney's unfashionability is surely exacerbated by his readiness to address emotional themes avoided by more cerebral abstractionists.

Love among the animal kingdom is represented by Eileen Mayo's prints, whose importance has been revealed in the current touring exhibition of her work. 'Birds do it' in a work by the Auckland printmaker, Hilda Wiseman. *The Proposal*, her charming lino-cut of two devoted penguins, symbolises 'love, sweet love' as infectiously as any work in this exhibition.



Last but not Least

You are invited to ponder over the assorted miniatures, several of which contain locketts of loved ones; a group miniature of the children of George V, showing the Royal Family 'in happier days'; display cases of tokens and gifts of love, kindly supplied to this exhibition by local lenders with a touch of romance in their souls; and a marble bust of *Dante's Beatrice*, carved by a major early twentieth-century Italian sculptor, Alfredo Biagini. Dante's consuming love for Beatrice requires exquisite expression if the artist is true to the theme and here Biagini rises to the challenge.

Mark Stocker, Christchurch 1993



About the Gallery

The Robert McDougall Art Gallery, situated in the Christchurch Botanic Gardens, was gifted to the City by prominent businessman R.E. McDougall.

Built to specifications of architect Edward E. Armstrong, the neoclassical structure opened to the public on June 16, 1932. At the time, the building was considered one of the most up to date art galleries in the southern hemisphere. The Collection comprised just 160 paintings and sculptures, mainly of British and European origin.

Today the building stands much as it did then, with some service additions made since the early 1960s. However, the Collection has grown to just under 4500 works of art, and the Gallery's acquisition policy now focuses on the art of Canterbury in particular, and New Zealand art in general. In 1988, in response to an ever increasing need for exhibition space, the McDougall Art Annex was established in the Arts Centre of Christchurch. Since then, the Art Annex has become one of New Zealand's leading contemporary exhibition venues.

The Robert McDougall Art Gallery is now classified by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust as a building which merits permanent preservation because of its historical significance and architectural quality.

