

“May Peace soon allow our guests in St Ives to return home; but since Fate has decreed that they celebrate this important holiday abroad, may the sympathy of us all here surround them and be a consolation in their ordeal and a source of comfort in their moments of sadness!”

—Martin Cock, editor of the *St Ives Times*, offers the Belgian Colony in St Ives his best wishes for Christmas 1914

“17 February, 1915. My dearest Mother ... Tomorrow is the day the German blockade of England commences. The British flesh doesn't creep very easily—but I fancy people are uneasy and anxious ... You can imagine it's not easy to paint in the circumstances. And yet I am—I drive myself to it but the feeling of insecurity weighs one down with depression & dark doubts. ... I find I am too modern for people down here & I am conscious of the cold eye of distrust and disapproval by the older members of St Ives.”

—Frances Hodgkins, 17 February 1915

After the war ended in November 1918, Frances Hodgkins moved to London and eventually back to the south of France. She gave up her studio in St Ives, telling her mother that she was burning her boats and definitely turning her back on the place. It's wonderful what one lives through, she said.

One of Hodgkins's first oil paintings, *Unshatterable* was exhibited in London in 1916, and bought by her friend the painter Cedric Morris who sold it to Dr Rodney Wilson, director of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery in Christchurch, in 1980. The identity of the family has not been established, but they will have been among the several hundred Belgian refugees billeted in St Ives between 1914 and 1918.

The swirling background is reminiscent of steam at a railway station, or perhaps suggests the clouds of war. *Unshatterable*—known informally as *Belgian Refugees*—represents Hodgkins's response to the horrors of war as well as a representation of the strength of family bonds.

Lara Strongman

Cover: Frances Hodgkins *Unshatterable (Belgian Refugees)* (detail) 1916. Oil and tempera on canvas. Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, purchased with the assistance of the National Art Collections Fund, London, 1980

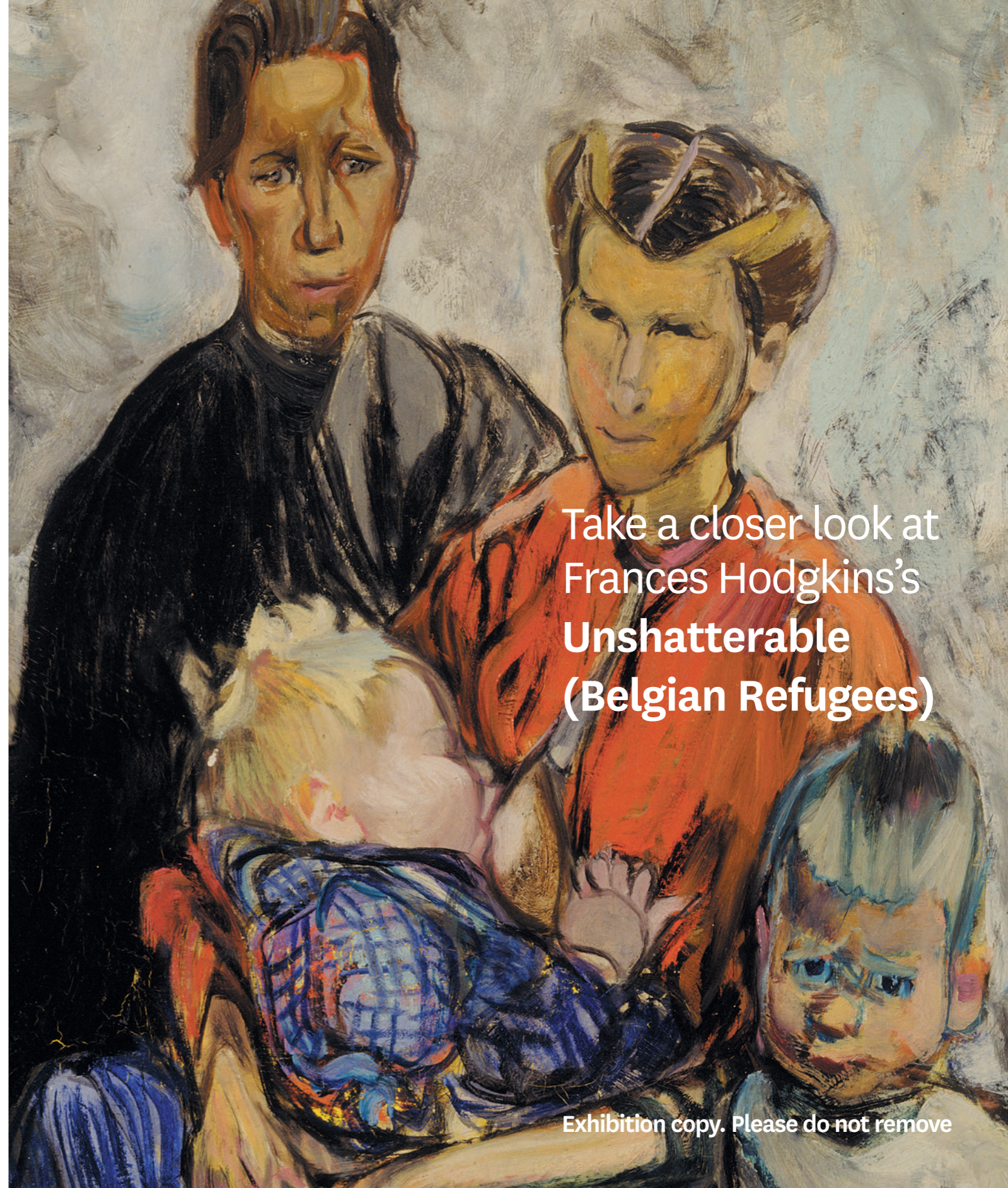
Frances Hodgkins's quotations extracted from *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*, Linda Gill, ed, Auckland University Press, 1993



Frances Hodgkins *Refugee Children* c.1916. Oil and tempera on board. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, on loan from the Thanksgiving Foundation

Frances Hodgkins *Belgian Mother and Child* c.1914. Watercolour on paper. Collection of the Sarjeant Gallery Te Whare o Rehua Whanganui 1968/3/1. Gift of Misses D. and T. Collier, 1968

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TE PUNA O  
WAIWHETU



Take a closer look at  
Frances Hodgkins's  
**Unshatterable**  
**(Belgian Refugees)**

Exhibition copy. Please do not remove



## Who was Frances Hodgkins?

Frances Hodgkins (1869-1947) was a New Zealand-born artist who became a leading British modernist. Her early watercolour portraits and figure studies were produced in a loosely Impressionistic manner and were acclaimed in New Zealand. After a decade of travel back and forth from Europe, she left New Zealand for good in 1912, and developed a highly original style of painting distinguished by lyrical harmonies of colour and radical simplification of form. When World War II broke out she moved from France to the artists' colony of St Ives, where she began to paint in oil. She spent the next twenty years living and working in France and Britain. She was chosen to represent Britain at the 1940 Venice Biennale, and was the only female artist included in the Penguin Modern Painters series of books in the late 1940s. Her work is included in all major public collections in New Zealand, as well as the Tate and the collection of the British Government.

Frances Hodgkins c.1914, E.H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

When war was declared on the 28 July 1914, Frances Hodgkins was living in Concarneau in France. Three days later, she wrote to her mother in New Zealand:

**“My Darling mother, I want you not to be alarmed about me whatever you read in the papers. I shall be out of harm’s way and with friends ... It is all very shocking [...] the French banks have stopped payment at all the country towns & consternation and panic is everywhere – general stampede of nearly everyone but artists & English people who keep cool thank Heaven... It’s impossible even to dream what might happen. The world has never before been faced by such a calamity – it confounds us all. So much for commercialism which we have been taught to believe governs the world.”**

—Frances Hodgkins, 31 July 1914

Events moved quickly. On 4 August, Hodgkins wrote:

**“Saturday was a day of suspense & agitation, nobody could work. .. About 5 the town crier announced the fateful news we were all waiting for. Declaration of War by Germany & General Mobilisation of the French Army. Women wept & fled to their homes with their aprons over their heads...”**

—Frances Hodgkins, 4 August 1914

Hodgkins made immediate arrangements to leave France for Britain. She continued to write home to New Zealand about the effects of war in Europe:

**“It has been a black week. The fall of Antwerp a great blow. The misery & horrors too awful – Belgium is a mere skeleton of herself, two thirds of her population are flocking to England, penniless and starving... Any woman who can say “Avez vous famm?” is allowed to snap up a Belgian refugee & cherish them. One smiles at these things in order not to weep for the tragedy is heart breaking.”**

—Frances Hodgkins, 15 October 1914

By November 1914, Hodgkins had arrived at the Cornish artist’s colony of St Ives, where she was to stay for the rest of the war.

**“Just a short line dearest Mother to say I am well & busy fixing up a Studio with the aid of an old man hired for the purpose ... It is a huge barn that will do nicely for a Class not pretty—but useful. It gives on a yellow sandy beach & at high tide the waves beat against the walls & sometimes the window.”**

—Frances Hodgkins, 19 November 1914

St Ives took nearly 100 Belgian refugees over the course of the war.

**“A party of twenty-one Belgian refugees arrived at St Ives by the last train on Friday night. They were received by the Rev. Father Scully and other members of the local committee; and notwithstanding the late hour, a large number of the inhabitants (estimated at over one thousand) assembled at the railway station ... to witness the arrival of the unfortunate visitors from Belgium, who were conducted to the St Ives social clubroom, where they were provided with refreshments.**

The refugees, consisting mainly of family groups, are now comfortably housed at nos 1 and 2 Richmond-terrace... The party are delighted with the hearty and cordial Cornish welcome extended to them, and have expressed gratitude to St Ives folk for placing them in such ‘beautiful surroundings’.”

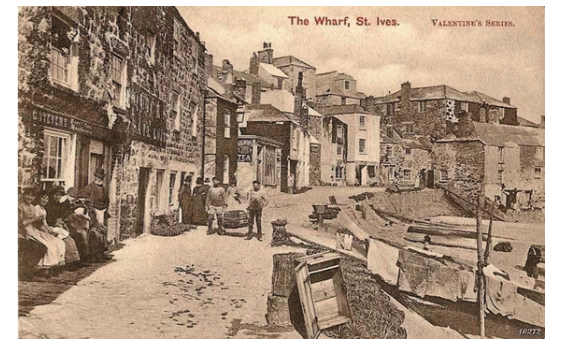
—*The Cornishman*, 22 October 1914

English artists living near the coast were forbidden from painting and sketching landscape during wartime, in case their images gave away important information to the enemy. Frances Hodgkins began instead to concentrate on portraits, and painted several images of refugees living in St Ives.

**“Fate has decreed that we should spend Christmas here in St Ives, in Cornwall, far, far from home, from our familiar surroundings, our houses, and our Our land is trampled by the brutal invader, the blood of thousands and thousands of Belgians has reddened our field, our cities are under the oppressor’s heel, our homes destroyed or violated and the odious enemy may even now be sprawling over our furniture, sleeping off the wine from our cellars ...**

**... Families are separated and we wonder anxiously about the fate of those who remained in the country, our old people who could not, or would not, follow us, determined to stay where all their lives had been spent. There they are, isolated from the world, in our dark sad cities, weighed down by the rule of the cruel conqueror.”**

—‘Belgian Notes’, *St Ives Times*, 18 December 1914



Top and centre: Belgian refugees during the 100 Day Offensive, August to November 1914

Bottom: The Wharf, St Ives. Postcard, early 1900s.