



Petrus van der Velden
Self Portrait with Otira background 1913
Charcoal
Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu,
bequeathed by Miss D.C. Bates, 1983

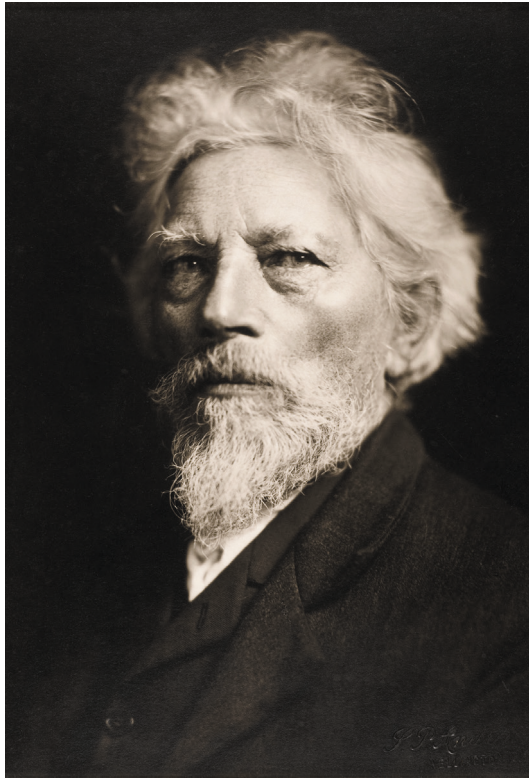
Cover:
Petrus van der Velden
Mountain Stream, Otira Gorge
(detail) 1893
Oil on canvas
Christchurch Art Gallery Trust
Collection



Take a closer look at
Petrus van der Velden's
**Mountain Stream,
Otira Gorge**

**CHRISTCHURCH
ART GALLERY
TE PUNA O
WAIWHETU**

Exhibition copy. Please do not remove



Who was Petrus van der Velden?

The Dutch artist Petrus van der Velden (1837–1913) arrived in Christchurch, half a world away from Holland, in 1890. Within six months he had been drawn west of the city, to the remote Otira Gorge in the Southern Alps, where he spent six weeks sketching in January and February of 1891. The majesty and untouched splendour of the mountains and streams captivated him, appealing to his pantheist notions of divinity being present in nature.

Stanley Andrew *Petus van der Velden* 1909. Photograph. Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, Robert and Barbara Stewart Library and Archives

“Colour is light, light is love and love is God and therefore on Sundays instead of going to church I teach my children drawing after nature. I have come to the conclusion that painting or drawing after nature, instead of being a luxury is the most necessary for the education of man ... The aim of our existence is nothing else than to study nature and with so doing to understand more and more how grand and pure nature is and gives evidence of so much love.”

—Petrus van der Velden, c.1890s

At the time of van der Velden’s first visit to the Otira, the Auckland painter Charles Bloomfield was in the middle of an extensive tour of the South Island’s mountainous regions. The two painters were at the gorge together and met on several occasions, which Bloomfield wrote home to his wife about.

“I was told [van der Velden] was here taking pictures, and that he was one of the best artists in the world, so I wanted to see him, and yet I was rather shy of meeting such a great man. The day I camped there I heard he was coming the next day. That was Sunday. So about eleven o’clock two gentlemen came along, one carrying a large sketching box, and the other a box of colours. The elder of the two was Mr Van der Velden. He came into the tent and lay down on the stretcher, and seemed to enjoy it immensely. He can only speak a little English. He has been living in Christchurch some months and has some large pictures there on exhibition.

He was going up the river a little above my tent to paint a picture of a waterfall, so after a bit I went to see how he was getting on. He has a very strange style of painting – all broad touches, and when you look close in there is nothing but careless drawing, but give it the right distance and the effect is very fine. So he asked us down to see his studies ... we saw all his pictures and some of them were very good, and then we stayed and had tea with him. He is a jolly old fellow with such a pleasant laugh, and very clever, but of course not one of the best artists in the world ... His wife does all her own work, so that shows he can’t be very famous.”

—Charles Bloomfield, 1891

An unattributed account by one of van der Velden’s Christchurch students gives some idea of how much of an impact the Otira Gorge had on the artist.

“I said to him ‘I suppose when you arrived there you could not wait to get your paints and canvas out quick enough.’ ‘No.’ said Van der Velden, ‘First, for three days I did nothing at all but just looked, it took my breath away’.”

The Christchurch artist Leonard Booth was a pupil of van der Velden’s in Christchurch during the mid-1890s. Some forty years later he recounted this wonderfully romantic anecdotal account from an old Otira resident:

“When I was last in Otira, a resident of the place who remembered Van der Velden told me that the Dutchman was evidently quite mad. Evidently? Yes; because at all those times when the thunder rolled, and the wind howled, and rain poured, Van der Velden would go into the Gorge, whereas at all those times when the sun shone from a cloudless sky, he would lie with his back to the grass near the hotel and sleep.”

—Leonard Booth, 1930

Leonard Booth also told another story in which we see the romantic, impulsive side of van der Velden’s character, for whom painting took precedent over other matters, regardless of the financial implications.

“In a state of great excitement Van der Velden entered the shop of his colourman and friend Mr. Fisher. He had in mind a great picture. He must paint it while the idea was fresh, and the mood upon him. Had Mr. Fisher a piece of canvas of a particular size? Mr. Fisher had not. Van der Velden left. A few days later, Mr Fisher had occasion to visit the artist’s studio. Immediately upon entering the place he remarked with alarm – the colourman had offered the artist one hundred guineas for the work – that a certain figure composition was absent from its familiar place.

Fisher asked where the work was that he had wanted to purchase. “she here”, the Dutch artist replied, pointing to the easel he was working on. The work Fisher was so interested in – a Dutch genre painting – had been almost obliterated by fresh paint. Van der Velden ultimately sold the new painting, *Mountain Stream, Otira Gorge*, for just fifty guineas.”

—Leonard Booth, 1930

Peter Vangioni



Petrus van der Velden *Jacksons, Otira* c.1893. Oil on canvas. *Otira Gorge* 1896. Charcoal. Both collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, purchased with assistance from the Olive Stirrat Bequest, 2003