



Look this way

Roland Hipkins ARTIST/EDUCATOR

10 November – 3 March 2008

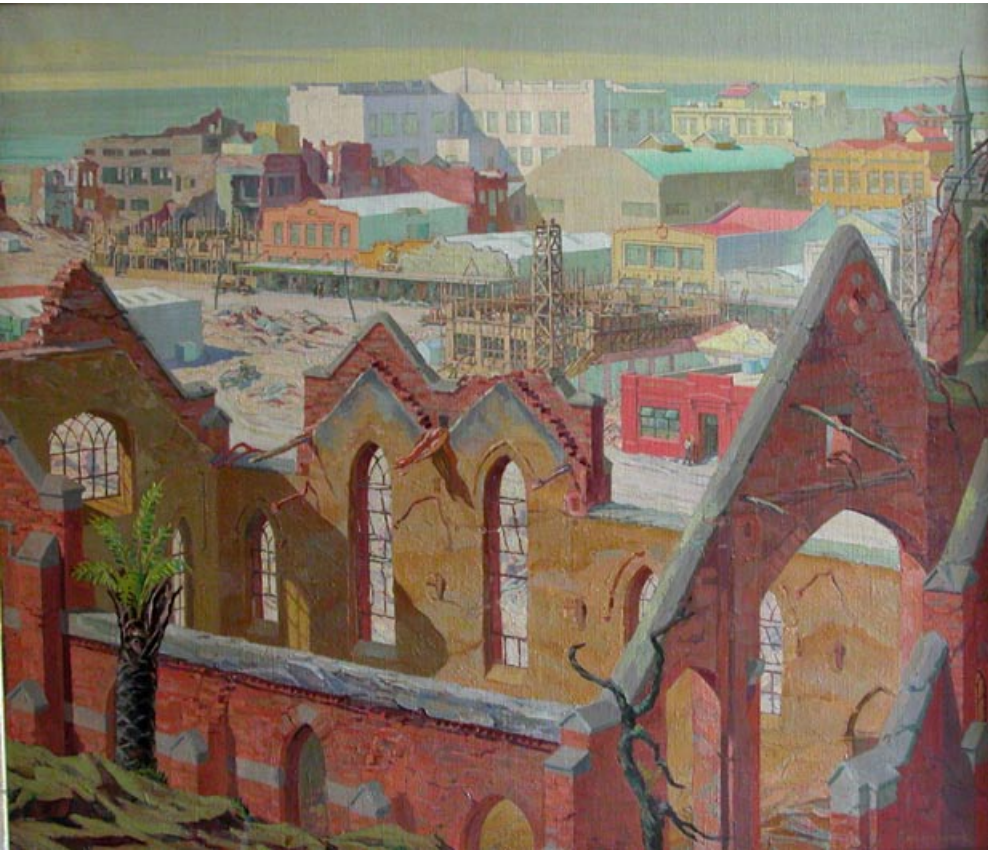
A vigorous proponent of nationalism in the arts, Roland Hipkins used his dual roles as educator and artist to further its direction. Arriving in New Zealand in 1922 Hipkins was an early recruit to the La Trobe scheme. This government plan initially aimed at importing British art school graduates to improve the standard of art education in New Zealand schools brought with it the seeds of early modernism. Among the schemes recruits were artists, Christopher Perkins and Robert N Field who joined Hipkins in advocating for a strong local voice in New Zealand art and literature. Promulgating their views in the classroom and through their own practice the La Trobe scholars helped shape notions of contemporary art in New Zealand during the interwar period, 1920 - 40.

A key figure within this group, Hipkins began his teaching career in Napier at the local Technical College; transferring to Wellington Teachers College in 1930 just after the arrival of Christopher Perkins. It was under the influence of Perkins that

Hipkins was to embark on his best known painting *Renaissance*. Painted in the aftermath of devastation wrought by the Napier earthquake, this work evokes the aspirations of the nationalist movement. Instead of destruction, Hipkins chooses to focus on renewal; his potent symbols the sprouting native tree fern and modernist town illuminated in the sharp clear light of a Pacific morning, alluding to a 'new order arising from the old'. They represent Hipkins coded metaphor for a cultural renaissance and not as blandly stated in a review of the time; *Napier under reconstruction... a pictorial record of an historical scene*.

The conservatism that prevailed in New Zealand during the interwar period made existence as an artist difficult. Dispirited, Perkins chose to return to England in 1933, leaving a legacy of unsold paintings, his departure sorely regretted by Hipkins. While continuing to paint and teach Hipkins attention became increasingly absorbed by the demands of art politics; dominated by local art societies during the 1930s. As

a member of the Wellington Society of Arts and then in 1936 elected to the Board of the Academy, he maintained the artist's role came with social responsibilities, claiming that, 'art is a communal necessity and that the energies of the artist are stimulated when he feels himself to be an essential part of the social order'.



Articulate and considered he used his position within the Academy to castigate against their more conservative attitudes and argue for the promotion of a New Zealand style. An essay by Hipkins published in *Art in New Zealand* identifies elements of the New Zealand landscape he considered could best contribute to a national style, - *the richness and mystery of the virgin bush; the almost unexplored wonder and weird beauty of the thermal regions; the mighty snow clad mountains; the rivers and lakes of almost unlimited variation and character; and many other aspects of the country, which at times is austere beautiful rather than charming.*

Sadly his political responsibilities took their toll and exhausted by the bitter divisions within the academy he resigned in 1941. He continued to teach, but retracted from art politics to his holiday home in Taupo, concentrating mainly on landscapes and his experimental tempera painting, *Abstract Composition*.

Like Perkins his work was slow to sell and after his death in 1951, Jenny Campbell his wife and fellow artist gifted several of his major works to Hawke's Bay Art Gallery & Museum. These works along with loans from family members and public institutions will allow us to reassess the impact of

Hipkins and his colleagues in their endeavours to build a sense of identity unique to New Zealand during the first half the twentieth century.

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