

# ART *at* TE PAPA

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## Andrea Mantegna

1431–1506 | Italy

Andrea Mantegna's famous engraving, of which this is only the right half, shows the fierce conflict between two Tritons (half man, half sea serpent), each carrying a female siren on his tail. The exact meaning of the battle is something of a mystery. One clue is the figure of Envy, who appears as a hideous hag in the left half of the print (not in the Te Papa collection), which has led some to suggest that this is a battle of the 'Telchines' – a mythical race of notoriously bellicose and jealous sea creatures who were also sculptors. This combination of classical learning and an allusion to the contemporary Renaissance debate over the relative superiority of painting or sculpture would have appealed to Mantegna and his humanist patrons at the Gonzaga court in Mantua, where Mantegna spent most of his professional life.

This engraving is the largest and most complex of the seven prints generally attributed to Mantegna. Its horizontal format and frieze-like appearance betray the artist's passion for classical sculptural

reliefs, which were avidly collected in Renaissance Italy, and especially in Rome where Mantegna spent two years from 1488 to 1490. It is not known exactly when he made this engraving, but it must have been before 1494 when Dürer made a detailed pen and ink copy of it during his first visit to Venice. Nor is it known why Dürer did not simply acquire an impression of the print. Perhaps it was already rare and expensive. Whatever the case, Dürer's encounter with Mantegna's work deeply influenced his subsequent engravings such as *Hercules* (page 5).

Current debate about Mantegna's prints has centred on the issue of attribution: one scholar has argued that Mantegna never made any prints himself but relied on professional engravers. However, recent stereoscopic analysis of the seven engravings generally ascribed to Mantegna has revealed a technical progression that is consistent with the belief that they were made by the same hand developing over time, rather than by an already fully trained craftsman. Though still inconclusive, this scientific analysis tends to support the traditional attribution to Mantegna. | DML |

**Battle of the sea gods**  
early 1470s–c.1490  
Engraving  
262 x 391 mm  
Gift of Bishop Monrad, 1869

*previous page*  
**Battle of the sea gods** (detail)  
also see page 24



**Portrait of Captain James Cook**  
 c. 1780  
 Oil on canvas  
 1092 x 692 mm  
 Gift of the New Zealand  
 Government, 1960

## John Webber

1751–93 | Switzerland, England

John Webber was born in London, the son of a Swiss sculptor. He was schooled in Berne and Paris before returning to London in 1775 for further study at the Royal Academy. Although relatively unknown at this time and without influential friends or patrons, Webber's fate was determined at the Academy's exhibition the following spring, when his work caught the notice of Daniel Solander, the botanist on Captain James Cook's first voyage. Solander arranged Webber's introduction to the Admiralty, and a few months later he was aboard the *Resolution* as it departed from Plymouth on Cook's third and final voyage.

This is one of three known portraits of Cook by Webber (a fourth was presented to the Tahitian chief Tu, later Pomare I, at Matavai in 1777, and last recorded by Captain Vancouver when he visited Tahiti in 1798). The others, in the National Portrait Gallery, London, and the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, are dated 1776 and 1782 respectively. Unlike those paintings, the date of Te Papa's work is uncertain. It has been suggested that it was painted prior to Cook's departure on his third voyage and given by him to his wife Elizabeth as a going-away present – a romantic but unsubstantiated story. Given its similarity to the Canberra picture, it seems likely that this is also a posthumous work, memorialising but not yet idealising Cook, who is shown in three-quarter length, standing on the shore in his naval uniform, a telescope in his hand. The painting was certainly in the possession of Elizabeth Cook for a time, though, and in 1829 was given by her to Cook's nephew, passing to his descendants who sold it in the mid-nineteenth century. The New Zealand government purchased the painting in 1960 from Canon T Harrison Park, of Marton-on-Cleveland, Yorkshire, and it arrived in the country with much fanfare. Cook had travelled, in his own words, 'farther than any other man has been before me, but as far as I think it possible for a man to go'.<sup>1</sup> The same might be said for Cook's myth, aspects of which have come to permeate this portrait, and which followed his journey. | WM |



## Rata Lovell-Smith

1894–1969 | New Zealand

In the late 1920s Rata Lovell-Smith began to represent the Canterbury countryside in a new way, using localised imagery which she treated in a simplified and modern manner. *Spring in the foothills* shows the innovative approach that she brought to art during the inter-war years. Rejecting a conventional scenic view and well-known location, she depicts a landscape in the South Canterbury foothills — farming country seen from the road between Geraldine and Lake Opua. The site suited her concerns, and she focuses on a lone settlement set against the ever-present backdrop of hills and distant mountain peaks. With detail eliminated and elements reduced to basic shapes, the large field becomes a dominant area of intense green, divided diagonally by a brown patch of ploughed land and a hedge line taking the view inland. The same formal concerns can be seen in *Arbutus berries* from around the same time, which plays off the decorative contrast of red and green in a vibrant arrangement of patterned fabric and berries.

Lovell-Smith attended the Canterbury College School of Art, and in 1922 married Colin Lovell-Smith, an artist with a background in lithography and an appreciation of design. The couple painted together, and jointly developed a style that challenged a tradition of mild-mannered impressionism based upon free handling and atmospheric light effects. Their broad flat areas of colour and simplified forms, along with the ‘poster-like’<sup>49</sup> qualities that critics detected in their work, were key elements at the time in modern painting. In 1929 art critic GM Lester championed their approach, explaining that the Lovell-Smiths did not seek to imitate nature but that they selected from nature’s patterns and arranged them into individual and creative compositions. The clarity and directness of the Lovell-Smiths’ style, coupled with their distinctive imagery, soon became linked to local light conditions and set the course for regional painting in Canterbury. In 1936 one Christchurch critic observed, ‘A new manner of seeing landscape is becoming noticeable... light is now clear and hard, the colours are in flat planes, and the effect is of seeing the country through a gem-like atmosphere.’<sup>50</sup> |JK|

**Spring in the foothills** c. 1935

Oil on canvas

310 x 446 mm

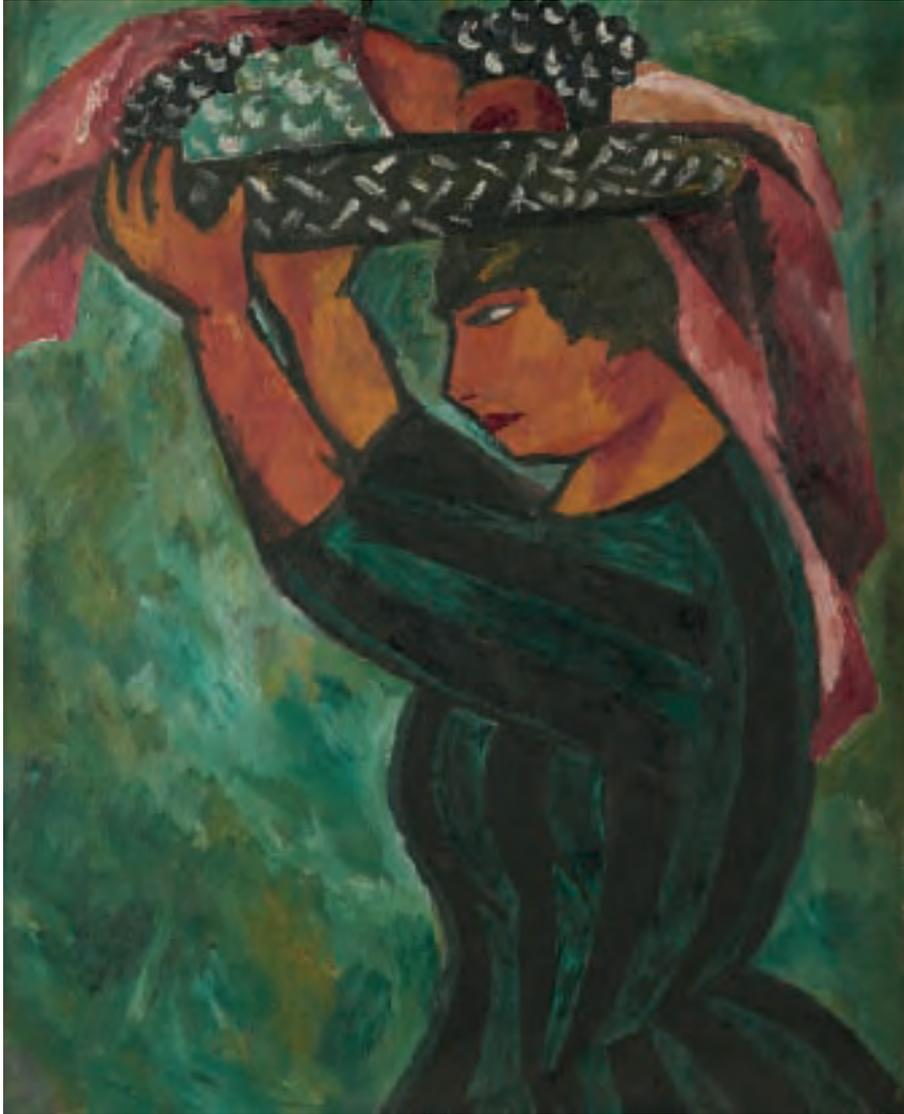
Gift of the Friends of Te Papa, 2006

**Arbutus berries** 1936

Oil on canvas on cardboard

384 x 393 mm

Purchased 1980 with Special Government Grant funds



**Woman carrying fruit on her head**  
 1911  
 Oil on canvas  
 915 x 742 mm  
 Gift of Mme Larionov, Paris, 1973

## Natalia Goncharova

1881–1962 | Russia, France

Natalia Goncharova was a leading member of the Russian avant-garde in the early years of the twentieth century. A founder of the Russian cubo-futurists, and co-creator of neo-primitivism and rayonism, she also participated in international modernist movements, such as the German expressionist group, *Der Blaue Reiter*. *Woman carrying fruit on her head* is one of a group of paintings on the theme of *porteuses*, or fruit vendors, executed between 1910 and 1912. Goncharova had spent much of her childhood at her grandmother's estate at Ladyzhino, and she developed a sympathetic interest in the lives and activities of the peasants, who became a major subject in her work.

Goncharova applied a deliberately naïve aesthetic in this work, including use of a radically simplified and distorted form, flat patterned planes, non-naturalistic colour and bold black outlines. The painting exemplifies the neo-primitivist style developed by Goncharova and others like Mikhail Larionov and Kazimir Malevich to illustrate their solidarity with Russian nationalism. Rejecting the Western European naturalistic painting tradition, the neo-primitives looked to Russian icon painting as well as the crude and brightly coloured sign boards, toys, embroidery and other handcrafted objects of folk art to create a modern art with specific political and cultural overtones. The painting's elaborate surface texture, however, recalls the fauves, some of whose works, along with those of the French impressionists and post-impressionists, she saw on exhibition in Moscow.

In 1915 Goncharova and her companion Larionov left Russia to become designers for Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, then based in Switzerland. In the following year the company visited Spain, where Goncharova designed costumes and sets for Spanish ballets. Her decision to leave Russia effectively cut her off from one of her main sources of subject matter – the Russian peasants and their culture. In Spain she discovered a new, equally absorbing subject in the flamboyantly dressed Spanish women, whom she continued to paint for many years after she left the country, and in a number of styles.

*Espagnole* is undated but has been assigned the date of 1922, as it is one of a number of Spanish women subjects painted in a cubist-inspired geometric style by Goncharova in the early 1920s. The woman's head, with its Spanish comb and lace



## Colin McCahon

1919–87 | New Zealand

Commenting on The Group's 1947 exhibition, in which these paintings were shown, poet ARD Fairburn suggested that 'they might pass as graffiti on the walls of some celestial lavatory'.<sup>3</sup> Fairburn's assessment has gone down in the annals of New Zealand art history, but it was far from typical of the reception of Colin McCahon's work at this time. Another poet, James K Baxter, wrote about it enthusiastically, as did the historian JC Beaglehole. Even reviewers who found McCahon's paintings challenging were prepared to recognise the sincerity that underpinned them. As one commented, 'McCahon's pictures show an audacious and original vision in a tradition as old as religion itself.'<sup>4</sup>

One of the challenges these paintings offered was their representation of biblical stories within a recognisably New Zealand context. *The Angel of the Annunciation* shows Mary, whose features McCahon modelled on a friend, receiving the news of her miraculous pregnancy. Nelson's ochre hills rise up in the background, while a building McCahon later

identified as the Tahunanui golf clubhouse is shown in the middle distance. By giving local, vernacular expression to the mysteries of the Bible, McCahon was consciously taking his cues from the art of the early Renaissance, suggesting that if such events could be depicted as reality in Florence or Siena, so too could they belong to contemporary New Zealand.

McCahon's use of words had similar origins, in the painted scrolls and illuminated script of earlier religious art. The text in *King of the Jews* had a contemporary source too, as McCahon revealed to a friend: 'The inspiration – the legend from a Rinso packet & the yellow I suppose from Byzantium',<sup>5</sup> while the figures of Christ and the Virgin were modelled on the work of Luca Signorelli. McCahon had recently encountered Signorelli's paintings as tiny black and white illustrations in Thomas Bodkin's 1945 book *Dismembered masterpieces*, and pronounced them 'magnificent, magnificent, magnificent'.<sup>6</sup> This blend of disparate sources, an admixture of high art and popular culture, modernity and tradition, the local and the universal, signals the formation of the extraordinary vision that would propel McCahon's work throughout his career. |WM|

**The Angel of the Annunciation**  
1947  
Oil on cardboard  
647 x 520 mm  
Purchased 1980 with Special Projects  
in the Arts funds

**King of the Jews** 1947  
Oil on cardboard  
635 x 520 mm  
Bequest of Ron O'Reilly, 1982

# Robert Mapplethorpe

1946–89 | United States

New York photographer Robert Mapplethorpe was best known for his images made in the 1970s and 1980s of celebrities, male nudes and, most controversially, the underground world of gay sadomasochism — a scene in which he was an active participant. He also prolifically photographed flowers, though his images are not of the ‘get well soon’ greeting card variety. His version of beauty, as critic Arthur C Danto wrote, ‘is a compound of elegance and menace, as in a finely balanced sword or an ornamental dagger. It has little to do with pleasure.’<sup>17</sup> In this pursuit of elegance, Mapplethorpe famously claimed that his approach to photographing a flower was little different from photographing the male sexual organ — that it was all about lighting, composition and ‘looking for perfection in form’.<sup>18</sup> Certainly his intention with explicitly sexual material was to formalise and aestheticise it, to take gay pornography and turn it into art by raising its production values and co-opting the visual language of the past. Classicism, perhaps via the nude glamour photograph of the 1940s and 1950s, and more particularly the ‘figure study’ of pictorialism, was a tradition he clearly drew on for his nudes.

Some critics have seen Mapplethorpe’s playing with past styles as ironic in intent, as an interrogation of tradition, but it seems more likely that he was simply an enthusiast, enlisting previous genres and forms to add meaning. In this image, the planes of grey recall Piet Mondrian, and in particular the 1926 photograph by André Kertész of Mondrian’s studio in which a vase of flowers stands in a strong directional light against a softly geometric background of tones. There are other Kertész images that have a similar look, but perhaps Mapplethorpe was drawing more generally on the appearance of high-end product photography of the late 1920s and 1930s — especially that informed by the exaggerated, luxurious sensuousness of an art deco sensibility.

As in so many of his photographs, Mapplethorpe infuses this darkly toned image with desire while locating his subject in a deadened, artificial space that seems halfway sealed in the past. Even more than his nudes, the too-perfect flesh of these flowers speaks heavily of mortality. |AM|



**Tulips, N.Y.C.** from the portfolio ‘Y’  
1977  
Gelatin silver print  
195 x 195 mm  
Purchased 1986 with  
Ellen Eames Collection funds



## Robin White

born 1946 | New Zealand

Robin White's *Mangaweka* effortlessly captures the scenery and feeling of a rural New Zealand town. White knew the Rangitikei town from childhood, and in 1971 her friend, poet Sam Hunt, wrote 'A Mangaweka road song', capturing the town as she remembered it – 'this one-pub town / approached in low gear down / the gorges through the hills'.<sup>11</sup> The artist's characteristic composition of layered planes of crisply edged colour is heightened by the strong horizontal lines, particularly the line of the veranda that divides the painting and the shadow that just appears under the Bedford truck.

While White paints what she knows and feels affection for, her aim is not simply to produce faithful copies of real landscapes. She is more concerned with representing places that are overlaid with memory and experience. 'I'm not concerned with *just* recording something,' she wrote in 1977. 'I take great liberties with the environment, using it to my own ends. I've always been conscious that painting is fundamentally an abstract thing.'<sup>12</sup>

White's depiction of her local inhabited landscape has affinities with the New Zealand regionalist painting tradition. She acknowledges a particular connection with Rita Angus, citing her appreciation of both Angus's work and her dedication as a woman artist. Along with her contemporaries Richard Killeen and Ian Scott, White was taught by Colin McCahon at Elam School of Fine Arts, and she credits McCahon as another important influence on her development and commitment to her art.

Motivated by the wish to make her imagery more affordable and accessible, White taught herself to screenprint after moving to Bottle Creek, north of Wellington, in 1969. She frequently made screenprints after paintings, including *Mangaweka*, and has noted, 'If I get a *good image*, then I like to reproduce it. To confine it to one painting, one oil, is to block it off from other people'.<sup>13</sup> In 1982 White and her family moved to the Republic of Kiribati where she continued to make art, working almost exclusively with woodcut prints as the materials were more readily available. White returned to New Zealand in 1999, and she continues to make artworks in a variety of media. |CH|

**Mangaweka** 1973  
Oil on canvas  
1005 x 1005 mm  
Purchased 1994 with New Zealand  
Lottery Grants Board funds



## Peter Robinson

born 1966 | New Zealand

*My marae, my Methven* was made for and used as the signature image of *Cultural safety*, an exhibition of contemporary New Zealand art shown at the Frankfurter Kunstverein, Germany, in 1995. Suggesting mobility, economics and the 'dynamics of cultural interaction',<sup>4</sup> Peter Robinson's patchwork aeroplane embodies the notions of cross-cultural translation that underpinned the exhibition.

Like the exhibition's ironic title, *My marae, my Methven* comments on the bicultural nation New Zealand was then becoming. The term 'cultural safety' was drawn from an educational framework designed for the health sector which recognised the need for cultural protection for Māori people. The implementation of the framework provoked a Pākehā backlash and media headlines proclaiming political correctness and apartheid.

Some of the works in *Cultural safety* reflected the contemporary cultural and political moment when Māori identity, perspectives and traditions were the focus of renewed attention. Clad in the stereotyped red, white and black colours often aligned with

Māori art, and crafted for an exhibition in Europe, *My marae, my Methven* reveals the ways 'cultural stereotypes are maintained and dispersed within global economies'.<sup>5</sup>

Robinson's use of the aeroplane was inspired by a symbol used by Tahupotiki Wiremu Ratana, founder of the Rātana faith. For Ratana the plane depicted spiritual aspirations (while a car, attached to the plane by a ladder, represented the mundane). Robinson's aeroplanes also refer to Colin McCahon, who in his 'Jet out' drawings of the early 1970s used the aeroplane to represent the departure of the soul into the afterlife. The sculpture's title has a further personal reference: Robinson grew up in Methven, a small town south of Christchurch.

Of Ngāi Tahu descent, Robinson has long contested the role he might have been expected to occupy as a Māori artist, using his work to critique, rather than fuel the identity debates of the treaty claim era. His 'percentage paintings' of the early 1990s make explicit reference to his 3.125 percent inheritance of Māori blood. Like those works, *My marae, my Methven* is part of Robinson's bid to create a less prescriptive, less traditional definition of contemporary Māori art. | MTC |

**My marae, my Methven** 1994  
Polystyrene, fibreglass, glass, wool,  
velvet, linen and aluminium  
Overall 1620 x 4500 x 4100 mm  
Purchased 1997 with New Zealand  
Lottery Grants Board funds