



Hodgkins, Frances (1869-1947)

by Joyce M. Youmans

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New Zealand artist Frances Hodgkins, after early success as a watercolorist, became one of the leading artists of British modernism. Her development as an artist is especially interesting, for she absorbed a range of artistic influences and moved from one medium to another.

Hodgkins was born in 1869 in Dunedin, then New Zealand's leading center for the arts. She learned to draw and paint at an early age from her father William Mathew Hodgkins (1833-1898), who was an accomplished amateur watercolorist and a leading figure in Dunedin's small community of artists. Hodgkins developed her predilection for figure painting when she began to take lessons from a visiting Italian painter Girolam Pieri Nerli in 1893.

Known in New Zealand for her watercolors of human figures, Francis Hodgkins was a relatively successful provincial artist when she took her first trip to Europe in 1901. In England, Hodgkins met up with New Zealand artist Dorothy Kate Richmond (1861-1935), who may have become her lover, and with whom she toured France and Italy.

During the early 1900s, Impressionism influenced Hodgkins' work in both subject and style. Fluid brushstrokes make her images of female figures at leisure or engrossed in mothering appear to flicker in suggested sunlight. Unlike the great female Impressionist artists Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot, who favored oils, watercolor was Hodgkins' medium of choice.

Hodgkins returned to New Zealand in 1903 with Dorothy Kate Richmond and took up residence in Wellington, where the Hodgkins family had settled. The two artists taught art to pupils and exhibited their work.

On the voyage to New Zealand, Hodgkins had met a young English journalist, Thomas Wilby, who left the ship at Cairo. Hodgkins corresponded with Wilby after her return to New Zealand, and in 1904 she agreed to marry him. In 1905, however, the engagement was broken, whether by Hodgkins or Wilby is uncertain.

This was probably the first and only time that Hodgkins considered marriage. Like other talented and ambitious women of the period, she realized the difficulty of combining marriage and motherhood with an artistic career. After the Wilby incident, she was careful to avoid the distractions of close relationships with men. She was also quick to warn her female pupils of the inevitable compromise to their work if they married.

When Hodgkins returned to Europe in 1906, she left Dorothy Richmond behind. Subsequent correspondence indicates that she regretted this decision. From this time on, Hodgkins spent most of her life in Europe, returning to New Zealand for only a few visits.

Hodgkins took her first lessons in oil painting in 1908. During the late teens, she began to experiment fully with this medium and its ability to produce density and texture. She gradually abandoned the Impressionist



A farmyard scene by
Frances Hodgkins.
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style and began to integrate Post-Impressionist trends, including cubism and the decorative aspects of Matisse, into her work.

Between 1928 and 1930, Hodgkins added a new painting type to her repertoire that was integral to her future art: the still-life landscape. These works feature abstraction, surrealist undertones, a color-based and lyrical treatment of form, and an investigation of spatial ambiguity between foreground and background.

Frances Hodgkins began her long artistic career as a minor provincial watercolorist. Various European art movements influenced her work, which was not always original in style and content. By the time she died of a nervous collapse in 1947, however, Hodgkins was regarded as one of the leading artists of the British modern movement.

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