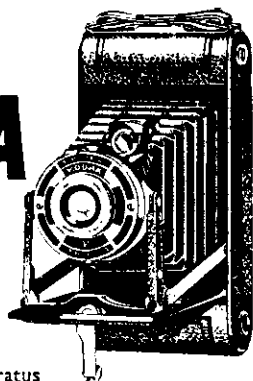
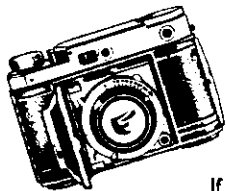


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We've Had Fifty-Seven of Them

(Written for "The Listener")

THE New Zealand Academy of fine arts held its 57th Annual Exhibition in Wellington this month. In a country as young as this, such comparative longevity would suggest a hardihood, a liveliness, among those with creative ability and also a strong public interest. With so much interest, such zest, and so long a time we might look for a real development, not technical necessarily, but a growth in interpretation, in choice of subject, in experiment. Even without a fervid belief in progress one could rightly expect at least a change in half-a-century.

But did this Exhibition, in fact, differ much from one in the 1890's? And would a visitor from that period have felt much startled by anything he saw? Some few things may have puzzled him, but one imagines that the majority of paintings would have left him feeling secure in a known world. Because our local Art Galleries were stocked in the 90's and have not been changed materially since, we can compare the present with the past and realise what a surprising amount of repetition there has been over the years.

Devotion to the picturesque persists and the same tendency to paint the acknowledged beauty spots (Mt. Torlesse in this Exhibition was a favourite) with the same lack of serious interpretation. But surely scenic transcriptions, however faithful, are to-day unwarranted when photography in colour is just as effective and not more mechanical. The difference between the water-colour transcription of 1945 and its last century counterpart is mainly that of differing technical fashion. The 19th century tradition favoured small, careful detail, faithfully drawn, while the preference now is for free drawing and sploidy washes run one into another and rubbed (this gives "atmospheric interest") with pieces of dry brushwork applied afterwards to give form.

* * *

THE wall on the right of the entrance was a particularly unhappy example of the continued strength of 19th Century tradition. It was dreary and insipid—dull because second-hand. Although technically it was not inept, there was nothing individual, nothing which had not been seen before, no picture which demanded any intellectual or emotional effort from the observer or suggested any on the part of the artist (with the possible exception of Grace Butler's more interesting attempt *Sand Hills under Snow, New Brighton*). This wall contained mainly work done by Nugent Welch (who called one water-colour "A Peep of Potter's Peak through Poplars"), Grace Butler, W. S. Wauchop (who in water-colours was even more sentimental and second-hand than in oil), K. Airini Vane, Marcus King, W. Basil Honour, Cedric Savage, and Archibald Nicoll. Nicoll earns respect for his honesty as a portrait painter—the *W. F. L. Ward Esq.* on another wall was a good example of sound painting, and

in landscape also he is by far the best craftsman in the traditional style of all this group.

* * *

THIS wall's dreariness was lightened by two from Bessie Christie, a *Still Life* in which the colour was good, and an unsuccessful but interesting fantasy, *Adam and Eve and the Subtle Serpent*; and by Charles Tole's *Old Kiln, Christchurch*, a good painting, satisfying both in colour and in design. It was interesting to notice that this wall carried the most red stickers, proving perhaps that the buying public likes what it knows, or perhaps that the Academy's Selection Committee, knowing public taste, hangs mainly what it considers saleable. It is certainly time that the buying public in Wellington should take some blame for the poorness of these Exhibitions, since annually it treats seriously these egregious exhibitions, purchasing and so encouraging the persistent reproduction of paintings which, measured by any overseas standards, are laughably without merit.

Of the remainder of the oil paintings the only work outstanding in both subject matter and treatment were the four exhibits of Evelyn Page—particularly the decorative, high-keyed *Hyacinths* and the interesting portrait *Miss Nora Walton*—those and the less good, post-terish but lively *North Canterbury Pastoral* of Juliet Peter.

* * *

AMONG the water-colour section were the few things most worth hanging space and even in these there were taints of repetition, if not of the 19th century, quite often of an artist's previous work. McCormack, for instance, has hit on a shorthand for skies (you see it in the *Landscape, Mackenzie Country*), a mannerism which recurs in most of his landscapes. But that is saying the worst about the best, and his lovely *Still Life* (no illustration in monochrome can do it justice) was far above all the others. It is interesting to compare this *Still Life* with the *Iris* painted about 1930, and to realise that McCormack—unlike most New Zealand artists—has developed over the years to a real maturity. His *Rock Study* was also of interest, not because it was successful, but because it showed that he is in no real danger of becoming static.

Elise Maurant is a painter whose one offering was enlivening—*The Ponsonby Road, Auckland*, a vigorous amusing portrait of a city street, a distinctively New Zealand scene. J. L. Palethorpe, in spite of an appearance of amateurish messiness, has an individual style and his honest efforts to record the countryside around Wellington raise his three landscapes above the ruck of slick empty competence. *The Torokina River, Bougainville* was probably the best that Russell Clark showed. Its good straight reporting escaped the layers of pastiche and jazz which sometimes spoil his work. Mervyn Taylor in two wood-engravings seems to be finding his own style and

(continued on next page)

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