

Art in Westland

LAST month when the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh were in Westland a car containing a well-known BBC commentator whirled along a country road near Greymouth and enveloped in clouds of dust an artist painting near the roadside. Later, when the commentator was returning to town he stopped by the solitary painter to apologise for covering him with dust. As a man interested in the arts he found himself attracted by the picture the artist was painting, and later he visited his studio. He is reported to have been greatly excited by the work he saw there, which gave him "the first kick" he had got out of New Zealand painting during his visit.

What he saw was the work of a small and obscure group who have been working for a few years near Greymouth under the leadership of M. T. Woollaston. While Mr. Woollaston was in Wellington last week exhibiting some of his Greymouth paintings *The Listener* paid him a visit to find out a little about what he and his associates are doing in Westland.

"For a number of years there have been one or two keen painters living on the coast," he said. "And about eight years ago they formed the Greymouth Sketch Club. A few years later they became bolder and changed the name to the Westland Art Society. This group had been going for three or four years before I came down to Greymouth from Nelson, and among the foundation members were St. Clair H. Sofield, Arthur Foster and Allan Holcroft. The working membership is now 16.

"Arthur Foster has now left the district, and the nucleus of the group at present are Sofield, Holcroft and myself.

"These artists are really painting Westland. They are making a genuine effort and they are succeeding. Their work is not that uninteresting academic painting you get in bucketfuls from gangs of modern painters. They are not painting West Coast tourist scenery, but are working on unpretentious subjects near Greymouth—ordinary everyday life subjects, things you have really to think

about to get interested enough to paint."

Mr. Woollaston does not profess to be the leader of the Greymouth group, but he believes that to a certain extent some of these painters have assimilated and adapted a number of his ideas about painting. He made it clear that not all members of the Westland Art Society follow what he has to say about art. But it seems equally clear that as a painter who for some 20 years has slowly and carefully tried to work out his own ideas about art he has been at least partially responsible for much of the interest and originality of the Greymouth group.

A little over five years ago *The Listener* asked M. T. Woollaston and Eric Lee-Johnson to discuss the meaning of the "new art." In the article Woollaston wrote at that time he said: "We must paint by our inner vision and not by appearances, or our work is dead. Your inner vision by which you see everyday things in a new way must not be vague, or your pictures will be vague and sloppy, or empty and showy. . . . Nature is not something to be used in place of vision, and the virtue of nature is not a sort of magic that ensures safety to a picture that copies her exactly."

The characteristic of his work, apart from its strength and solidity, is its distortion of perspective and colour, and we asked him what had first led him to paint in this manner, and explain in general what his theories are.

"When I was in Nelson years ago, about 1935," he said, "I became acquainted with Flora Scales, a New Zealand painter who had just returned from studying at the Hans Hoffmann school of modern painting in Munich.

"Flora Scales showed me a technique of space construction quite distinct from the commonly accepted ways taught in the schools here. She persuaded me deliberately to give up any strict adherence to the rules of vanishing perspective and aerial perspective, that is, to the ideas that objects get smaller in the distance and colours weaker. I'm no



Spencer Digby

M. T. Woollaston

longer aware now of the old convention of dividing a picture into foreground, middle distance and far distance. The picture is a unity. I give full value in colour to every part of the picture, regardless of the distance from the observer of the objects represented. Similarly, in my drawing I compensate for the apparent loss in importance of, interesting objects in the distance.

"You might say that I represent objects, while the impressionists and the photographic-realists represent that which makes objects less clearly visible. In other words, what they are representing is the substance or the atmosphere which destroys the clear visibility of objects, whereas I either ignore atmosphere or use it as a clear conveyor of the different objects. I represent it as transparent; they represent it as opaque. This accounts for such things in my work as the use of dark lines on the tops of distant mountains, which some people object to. But it also frees me to make a better design.

"The construction of space in a painting under these conditions, if perspective is done away with," he continued, "must obviously be arrived at by other means. In my case it is done through what I call the movement and tension relations between planes and volumes. My work is not inspired by the desire to make an exact transcript of nature, but by a passion for the pure elements in the design and construction of the picture, although these elements must be combined in such a way as to represent the subject adequately.

"These ideas had become current in the world of art at that time through the analysis of the methods of Cezanne, but they had not been disseminated very widely," he said. He added that he had developed them to suit his personal needs, and to suit the New Zealand conditions he has met, first in Nelson, and now in Westland. He says he has become intimate with the landscapes of the South Island which he has been painting over the past 20 years, and the work he is doing now is a result of his own natural growth, and a modification of the ideas first expounded to him by Flora Scales.

One interesting result of his years in Westland is the change that has come over his colour tones.

"The Coast has a wetter, rainier look and feel about it," he said. "I have become more interested in greys, greens and blues, whereas in Nelson the predominant note in my work was a tawny brown."

The West Coast painters he is associated with were not just painting for a hobby, he said finally, even though they were able to paint only at weekends or at night, as he did, after he had finished his daily round as a door-to-door salesman. "They are seriously interested in painting. It isn't a hobby or a spare-time pleasure for them."

Mr. Woollaston is dedicated to his work and his theories, and he still stands by a statement he made in this journal in 1948: "The climate of art is hard, and its rigours are salutary. If the spectator refuses to share these with the artist, if he will not have adventure and hazard, he runs the risk of demanding that his art be easy and good for nothing."



"GREYMOUTH, WITH TOWER," by M. T. Woollaston—"unpretentious, everyday life subjects"

N.Z. LISTENER, FEBRUARY 26, 1954.

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