

ARE THERE NEW ZEALAND PRIMITIVES?

By MARGARET M. DUNNINGHAM

A STRANGE little painting is lying on the table in front of me. A friend of mine in South Otago has lent it to me to have it photographed. It belongs to the family of a present-day New Zealand painter—Gordon McAuslin—and was painted in New Zealand some time in the 19th century, by an ancestor of his. On a smallish brown-varnished wooden platter is depicted a shepherd, the like of whom was surely never seen in the Clutha. He wears a top-hat, flowing ringlets, knee-breeches, and a colourful plaid over his shoulders. In his hand he is holding a long shepherd's crook. His feet, tastefully attired in open-sided slippers, bestride a tiny stream. Three oddly-shaped sheep are beside him, and more of his flock can be seen on the distant hillside, which is as fantastic a crag as ever decorated an imagined landscape by Peter Breughel or Joachim Patinir.

Why am I so interested in this odd and naive little picture? Because it seems to me to be an excellent New Zealand example of a kind of art extremely uncommon in New Zealand. It is a genuine primitive painting.

New Zealand seems to have produced very few primitive painters. There are none in the formal art galleries. A few, mostly indifferent examples, are to be found in such places as Early Settlers' collections. The reasons for this dearth of primitives seem to be that New Zealand was colonised too late and by too homogeneous a population. During the early difficult days of colonisation everybody was far too busy to find time to paint. These difficult days were hardly over before the curses of photography, illustrated magazines, and the machine age were upon us. New Zealand, unlike the United States, received comparatively few European settlers in the 19th century. The only people who wanted to paint the early New Zealand scene were skilled draughtsmen. Or do the primitive painters still remain to be discovered in the attics and basements of old farmhouses?

Now for a definition. The genuine primitive painter is not just a bad amateur artist untrained or incompletely in command of technical skills. Quite a lot of that kind of painting has been done in the past in New Zealand and is still being done. It is not interesting. The primitive painter, it is true, does not call to his aid the illusionist skills acquired by European academic art over the last five hundred years. He does not construct his pictures by the use of correct perspective, vanishing point and chiaroscuro (cast shadows). If he does this he is no primitive but an academic artist. If he tries to reproduce nature—to paint the scene in front of his eyes—he is probably not a primitive, although there are primitive landscapes which may have been painted looking at the scene itself.

The primitive artist does not reproduce nature, he represents it. If he does this with imagination, if he has instinctive talent and originality, despite his lack of training, he may succeed in creating a little world of his own which delights and enchants the beholder by its freshness and naivety. He has made a microcosm, which is one of the functions of the true artist.

The primitive painter is endowed with a vivid, visual memory so that he can represent in his painting not what he sees, but what he remembers. Primitive man had this kind of vivid, visual memory, especially for the animals he hunted. Prehistoric man in the caves of Lascaux and Altamira painted from memory the vital images of animals. So did the South African Bushman. Modern man, assailed on every side by the ready-made images of photography, the cinema, the poster, the advertisement, etc., visually over-stimulated, has almost completely lost this facility. No genuine primitive painter is likely to emerge in present-day New Zealand. Somewhat miraculously a 20th century farming community in the State of New York has produced Grandma Moses. She, however, is a woman more than ninety years old. She grew up in an age simpler than ours and she is still living in it.

The primitive painter, then, usually paints from memory. His picture is composed of memory images.



★ "A shepherd, the like of whom was surely never seen in the Clutha" ★

These are sharply defined, flat, two-dimensional and simpler than actuality. His painting may also be "a remembrance of things past." Grandma Moses remembered the Shenandoah Valley of seventy years ago. Our South Otago painter, working among the swamps of the 19th century Clutha, has remembered his Old Country—Scotland—and so created on this wooden platter a curiously compact little dream-world, as naive and fresh as a child's vision of a September morning.

Affection and pleasure are the emotions we feel when we look at it. And pleasure in his work, and affection for it, is usually felt by the primitive painter. He paints because painting is a pleasure. He likes his results, even if everyone else laughs at them. He is usually completely satisfied with what he has done. Said Douanier Rousseau to Picasso—"We are the two great painters of our age, you in the Egyptian manner, I in the modern manner." Grandma Moses also, is pleased with herself—"I will say that I have did remarkable for one of my years."

A primitive painting can be distinguished by its composition. It is like an embroidery or a piece of tapestry. It is not unified by perspective or chiaroscuro. It usually has no focal point. Everything is of equal importance to the artist who works over every leaf in the trees, every flower in the grass, with loving care. The leafy trees which de-

fine the shape of our platter-picture are painted in this way. To achieve this kind of composition the artist, like Grandma Moses, often puts his picture flat on a table, not on an easel, and works over the whole area filling it all in from top to bottom, or bottom to top.

Portraits, family groups, children, flower pieces, landscapes, seascapes, ships in full sail: these are the subjects of the primitive painters. But where are these painters? Do they exist in New Zealand? I think I found a primitive portrait in a deserted and half-ruined Otago farmhouse—the two-dimensional figure of a woman seated on a bench wearing mittens, a plumed black hat and a white muslin gown of Regency period. I cannot make up my mind whether this is a memory portrait, or, more likely, an inept copy of some English portrait. I also like to look at a primitive painting of Port Chalmers in the Early Settlers' Museum in Dunedin. In the manner of such an American primitive as Joseph Pickett the anonymous painter has delineated every little doll's house with loving care.

I do not expect to discover a New Zealand Douanier Rousseau, but if an exhibition of these 19th century New Zealand Sunday painters could be arranged it would be worth seeing.



GRANDMA MOSES

"I will say that I have did remarkable for one of my years"