

NEW ZEALAND ARTISTS

RUSSELL

CLARK

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New Zealand Artists

RUSSELL CLARK

A selection of reproductions
from his works

With an examination
of the artist and his
work by

JOHN MOFFETT



NEW ZEALAND
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"SELF PORTRAIT" (Pencil)

In the possession of the artist.



"SIR HUBERT WILKINS" (Oil)

In the possession of the Napier Art Gallery.



"TOHUNGA" (Wood sculpture)



In the possession of the artist.



"LATE NIGHT" (*Water colour*)

In the possession of the artist.



"PROCRIS" (Water colour)

In the possession of the artist.

RUSSELL CLARK, ARTIST AND CRAFTSMAN

By JOHN MOFFETT

RUSSELL CLARK is a commercial artist. That in its broadest implications is a most significant statement of his place in the New Zealand community of those who variously practise, wallow, and dabble in the arts. To put it another way, Russell Clark makes a good living out of art, in a country in which the professionals are clock-punching teachers, or designers of jam-tin labels, the dabblers derive their sustenance from business and take a sketch-book out on fine week-ends, and the wallowers—well, they simply wallow. They are mostly disgruntled at the public refusal to recognise (and pay for) their artistic outpourings. They are chronically impecunious, to the extent that impecuniosity tends to become a profession of itself. Keeping their art “pure” is so absorbing an exercise that they affect to find horrid impurities in the work of anybody who dares to make art pay. It was, presumably, the uneasy public consciousness that “pure artists” are not supported by our mundane population in the manner to which they could easily accustom themselves, which guided the Hon. William Downie Stewart the other day in his suggestion that, by allocations from the interminable “Art Unions” conducted in New Zealand, the State should become godfather to indigent painters. Few would deny merit in the proposal. It would do none of us any harm to recognise that paint artfully applied to canvas has a value, even as has a rabbit-skin skilfully stretched; that “hand-painted pictures” may possess a virtue in the home more rarefied than glamorous, blue-and-gold prints of the Garden of Allah, nicely encompassed by a gilt mount and frame.

But Russell Clark could not wait for the unresponsive public to get round to voting artists a license to wallow. His desire for art was insistent and urgent. He was born at Christchurch on August 27, 1905. His realisation that he was destined for art dawned four years and a half later, on February 22, 1910, the date of the Plumbers’ Picnic. That day he made a drawing of his father attired as a knight in pots and pans. This was a part of the picnic procession, and, of course, very topical. It evoked a gratifying response in close, familiar circles, and young Russell from then on knew what he wanted.

If this story is apochryphal it is none the less satisfying as a beginning. Topicality is an element in Russell Clark's art which must be noted. It relates him to the great tradition of painting. Rembrandt painted the civic volunteer constabulary; the Italians included the donors among the assemblage round the Manger; the Impressionists limned Parisian workmen digging holes in the streets. At a later day, Russell Clark was to record, in "Politics," the strange pursuit of the New Zealand unemployed at a critical moment in their history. The very essence of the original New Zealand art which is now emerging from the misty early representations of Mt. Egmont in the garb of Fujiyama, Milford as a Highlands scene complete in everything but the long-horned kine, is topicality. Against the dry russets of a Hawke's Bay station scene, bright red shearing sheds stand out shockingly and truthfully; an Otago Central sun-dried brick cottage, built by an early gold-seeker, is fitted with a green cast-iron roof and serves as a country golf pavilion. This is the day-to-day realism of the Dominion scene.

So Russell Clark at the age of four years and a half became dedicated to art, by his own volition and with family sanction. It is with the years succeeding that culinary avowal of his artistic enterprise that we are next, and mainly, concerned. He attended school. If this is a success story, it is not a story of scholastic achievement, of glory on the too-omnipresent field of sport. The tablets of memory record some striking class reports to acclaim the singular purpose with which he applied himself to a task outside the narrowing dogma of the three R's. As to athletics, if he played around at Rugby, which is more or less inevitable, or flexed a willow wand in Hagley Park, he makes no mention of it. The old school must claim him on other and more universal plea than that his last-minute try or dashing innings while the daylight failed averted some perennial disaster.

He took to art. For his birthplace he had chosen well enough. The Art School at Canterbury College boasted some two decades ago a conscientious panel of instructors (and may do so still). Wallwork, Nicoll, Booth and Cecil Kelly were its mainstays, firm to swing the fanciful mind into academic line. There is much to be said, that later experimentation never can unsay, for the instilled lessons of careful draughtsmanship and a discreet palette. Ronald McKenzie, water-colourist, was another influence again, and a lasting one. He, like Clark himself, realised that art could be commercial and retain its validity as art. Under another name he has since, in the United States, a land that understands such things, turned the classic technique to fair purpose in industrial design. It is to him that Russell Clark, the spare-figured, dark-eyed, sallow student acknowledges most. The delusively simple contours of the urn having been arduously

disciplined to cartridge-paper, there are qualities of imagination, the dash and *esprit* of the young, seeking novice, which clamour for expression and a sympathetic word. Clark could indulge the one, and McKenzie supplied the other. He went to school for some eight years, and emerged a teacher himself. Art was beginning to pay a dividend, but naturally, since Mr. Downie Stewart's millennium is not upon us yet, no substantial dividend. There was something to be taught, much to be learned, no doubt, in this pupil-teacher period, and greater opportunity than has offered since for leisured contemplation of the finite landscapes which the artist's brush writes down.

But artists—this sordid note incessantly supervenes—must live. Particularly when marriage is among the objects of contemplation. There was a brief time, probably now, when Clark the wage-earner gazed for eight hours a day somewhat morosely from behind a counter in a mixed emporium, vending the materials of his proper trade to other artists. Then the commercialism of art in its exponent form seized upon him. He became a hired designer.

Commercial art seized him. It did not throw him. This is the burden of our tale. In Christchurch briefly, in Dunedin for some years, in Wellington to this day, Russell Clark has, as a commercial artist, retained his integrity as one entitled to practise and exhibit in the "pure" branches of art, as oil and water colourist, and designer in black and white. Most of those who draw, and, showing facility at it, engage themselves to commerce, travel no further. There is a drear routine of fancy lettering, of compressing stout females into "foundation garments"—"The line of Venus can be yours, Modom," as with fingers elegantly crooked you draw in breath and pull the zipper—of terrier heads for dog biscuits, obese cupids for dusting-powder, and melancholy sheep faces for drenches, or perhaps, for woollen underclothes. In this drab market many lose their way. Nearly all, in fact, and art reduces itself to concocting a humorous toast list cover for the staff smoke concert, or obliging water-colour sketches of the blooming azaleas in a neighbour's garden. For Clark, endeavour did not founder on these shoals. In straight commercial art he is pre-eminent in the Dominion. It is not the purpose of this brochure to illustrate that statement, and it can rest. But here, as in all other forms of art, there are problems of proportion and angle, of composition, to be bested, and clear, bold draughtsmanship is master. That mastery may be less than apparent in ordinary commercial design. But he who runs may perceive in Clark's illustrations for the radio magazine, the *Listener*, the lessons of assured draughtsmanship, well-chosen proportions, skilful use of whites—the lessons of display—which have been learned at the drawing board when less

imaginative tasks were on hand. Of his one-man shows, the *Listener* work has provided the latest. The thematic drawing for Moussorgsky's "Night on the Bare Mountain" (Plate XII), the only example from his black-and-white work in this genre here included, presents but one aspect of its variety. It is to be regretted that the *Listener* drawings are over-reduced when presented in the pages of that magazine, probably because of limitations of space. Some value is lost thereby, but they undoubtedly repay the study of readers. The mural depicting the departure of the ship *Tory* from Plymouth (Plate X) is another adventure springing direct from the artist's thorough training in the commercial disciplining of design. This crowded, eventful canvas, which formed the central panel in the main foyer at the Centennial Exhibition, escapes confusion only because the artist knew how to use simplified forms and vivid colour with a distinction arduously acquired. The vivid cosmorama which encircles the bar in a leading Dunedin hotel, the drawings for the Education Department's School Journal, for which Clark has collected his own team of young artists, are further testimony to the fact that the claims of art and commerce can be brilliantly reconciled.

The slump period of the 'thirties in Dunedin brought no depression to his canvas. It is necessary to consider his development here as an artist and a craftsman. His mind and his talents are avid of experience. He was a worker in water-colours when he came to this grayly-beautiful town. His pictures showed a nice appreciation of light, the clear southern light that filters through leaves, or reflects from a lagoon, out of a low, hard sky. The incidental figures which so often take their place in his landscapes were bolder and better-assembled than is the New Zealand water-colour convention. But these were pretty pictures for any sketch-club exhibition. In Dunedin, Russell Clark learned, with no tutorship save that of his own eyes, to practise economy of line and to dispose his colour. The scratchiness and, not to put too fine a point upon it, messiness, that are the besetting sins of the English water-colourists were eliminated from his work. Toulouse-Lautrec, regarding a canvas by Piero della Francesca in London's National Gallery, paid it this tribute: "It's painted as simply as the door of a carriage!" From the time of his migration to Dunedin, Clark commenced to seek a new simplicity. His technique changed from elaboration to elimination. In the course of his graduation to the bold clarity of to-day, this trend has remained constant. An early draft of the genre oil "Politics," made in Dunedin, was clearly conceived. But compare it with the later development (Plate VIII), and the studied use of simplified forms to achieve strength and eloquence arrests and is endorsed by the eye. A "Susannah and the Elders" from this productive period of trial and error comes to the mind. There was a confusion here (apart from that the lean, top-hatted Elders

might arouse in those who do not understand the Antipodean symbolism for the "wowser"). The palette was plain enough, but a striving after modernity produced some angular riot, and integrity was lacking. Now examine "Procris" (Plate V). Here the composition is built on the simplest diagonal forms. The deer cut across the shaft of light up which the hound leaps to meet them. The stylised trees, the muted waterfall, create a dramatic backdrop for the spot-lighted figure of the huntress, with white bow poised. Her scarlet drape, the one dash of pure colour in the work, at once unites the elements in the design, and gives full value to its pregnant chiaroscuro. This is a most satisfying water-colour, which might be said to represent the perfect climax to Clark's searchings with uncomplicated forms.

To the making of the artist-craftsman, Dunedin contributed many experiences and opportunities. There were varied influences contending for their place on an impressionable palette. The vivacious Orpen, some of whose dashing oils toured the Dominion at this time, was placed under tribute. A blanket as a backdrop, a slashing use of bold colour to vie with the neutral secondary forms, marked Clark's early portraiture in oils. It was, in a sense, the water-colour technique applied in oils—and vice versa. His portraits now began to attract more than local attention. In the art exhibitions they stood out amid a few more pallid essays—there is little New Zealand portraiture even attempted—and the assured, academic contributions done on commission by Nicoll. Sometimes he succeeded, and sometimes, perhaps, he failed. The failures, if an unduly harsh word be accepted to describe them, were brilliant surface impressions in the manner of "Billy Orps," with a dash of John. Something of depth and character was missing—as with so rapid a painter is ever likely. Tintoretto, called by his contemporaries "Il Furioso," demonstrated this hazard, as has Orpen in this century. But the successes succeeded. The portrait of that amiable, stubborn adventurer, Hubert Wilkins (Plate II), is witness to something more than an extreme talent. Interestingly, in passing, would any careful observer of this work need to be told that the sitter is hard of hearing?

He was experimenting now with the figure in all its bewildering and fascinating mutations. Models, in a reserved Presbyterian community, are hard to find. It is characteristic of Clark that when he espied his ideal subject—she was engaged in some exhibition stall at the agricultural show—false reticences were soon broken down. With parental sanction, red-headed "Ruth" became the subject of several skilful studies, sometimes "solo," at others in more elaborate Proctorish compositions—ambitious beyond the range of the staid Dominion professors.

The Medical School and the hospital were called on to yield evidence of less-sentient flesh. There were some tense studies from the dread, impersonal atmosphere of the operating-theatre, which may not have been given public exhibition. It is well-known that students frequently faint at their first sight of the scientific probing of the living matter of man; but in Clark, no sign of collapse was detected by eager observers. The concentration of the artist, eager to record all impressions, can ignore physical reaction to the sight of humanity in the most extreme of crises. Again, there was the theatre. "Party for Theatricals" celebrates one aspect of the visits of occasional stage folk, whose tawdry glamour, great thirsts, and loud clothes captured the artist's attention, but scarcely his admiration. An exciting impression, full of movement, of the Cherniavsky-Kurz trio resulted from a concert visit. While others listened, Clark was translating into line the patterns of weaving bows; and while others supped, was freezing this vivid impression in a sketch he has probably himself forgotten.

The touch of the rebel, which is in all artists, manifested itself in various ways. One of the not infrequent breaches between the younger group and the traditionalists in the local art society flared in the thirties. Amid great pother and excitement (confined, be it said, to the rebels) a rival society came into defiant being. Clark was president. An exhibition was held, quite as notable as these things usually are in a community which never scatters the red seals of success broadcast among the works displayed for sale. On the opening night, Clark, reluctantly, was induced to stand on a chair and make one of the few speeches he has essayed. If its text has departed from the memory, an impression of sincerity remains. Clark was then, and he still is, an experimentalist. Upon this matter of timidity and stodginess in New Zealand art he can become fiercely eloquent. Artists are far too content to learn to draw and paint in one way, and then keep on repeating themselves interminably, ignoring all the other phases. The annual shows, he will declare, are "morbid" in their repetitiousness, and they will always be the same as long as the schools squash individuality out of the youngsters, and discourage them from any sort of experimentation. The Auckland and Dunedin Art Societies, Clark thinks, are showing some signs of life, but in the other centres the Academicians rule unchallengeable, placing far too much emphasis upon the tried and proven work, throwing out all that suggests initiative and imagination. How many artists are there in the Dominion, he asks, who are versatile? And he does not require all the fingers of one hand to enumerate those that are.

As a commentary upon this charge, mention may be made of "Plantation After Rain" (Plate VI). This water-colour, with its emphasis upon the strong figure of the keeper of the plantations, surely rebuts Mark Rutherford's complaint that he never saw a "view" which was worth a happy

thought, or an hour with a friend. It is a "view" presented with the heightened intensity of the artist who wishes the onlooker to share with him an exhilarating experience. Such a prospect as this one might miss, plodding rain-soaked through the pines, but Clark has given it a demanding emphasis. It was shown abroad at the British Empire Exhibition in London and evoked notice, yet in the city of Clark's adoption, the traditionalists who so often write about art in cautious clichés could find nothing but fault with it. One wonders what good they may see in "White Sails" (Plate XI), with its provoking triangular, or almost conical patterns. They will probably, mesmerised by the sharp contrasts in the composition, murmur disparagingly "unconventional design," "an experiment which fails to convince"—and not noticing, or noticing will fail to perceive, how subtly the sea is graduated from white through yellow, bright green to deep grey-green, and how the sombre blacks and purples of the background build up the luminosity of the central concept.

Versatility! If it is folly to carry more than one arrow in a quiver, or several tricks in a hand at bridge, Russell Clark invites a reprimand. This brochure proves nothing if it fails to assert the many-sidedness of the artist-craftsman's legitimate preoccupation with his trade. Pencil, brush, pen, knife, landscape, figure, not to mention a few witches and warlocks, come all within his province. From the straightforwardness of "Otago Coast" (Plate IX), which is broken into a pattern of colour, light and shade, after the manner of mosaic, to the cosmic humanity of "Late Night" (Plate IV), Clark shows his versatility and his right to be versatile. "Late Night" is now on its way to the United States in an exhibition of Australian and New Zealand work. It will have a strenuous tour, through cities and small towns alike. And we anticipate that if the Dominion landscapes prove inexplicable to the Middle West, or if New York fails to comprehend the filmy sense of distance in the Australian "bush" scenes, there will be no visitors, rural or citified, sophisticated or naive, who will fail to recognise the authenticity of Clark's New Zealand township, lit up for the shopping, lounging, prayer-meeting community that is a world in microcosm. Here is something nearer to our universal understanding than the New Order, the League Covenant, or Cézanne's "sensations in the presence of nature."



"PLANTATION AFTER RAIN" (Water colour)

In the possession of R. G. Meldrum, Wellington.



"CONVERSATION" (Water colour)

In the possession of the artist.



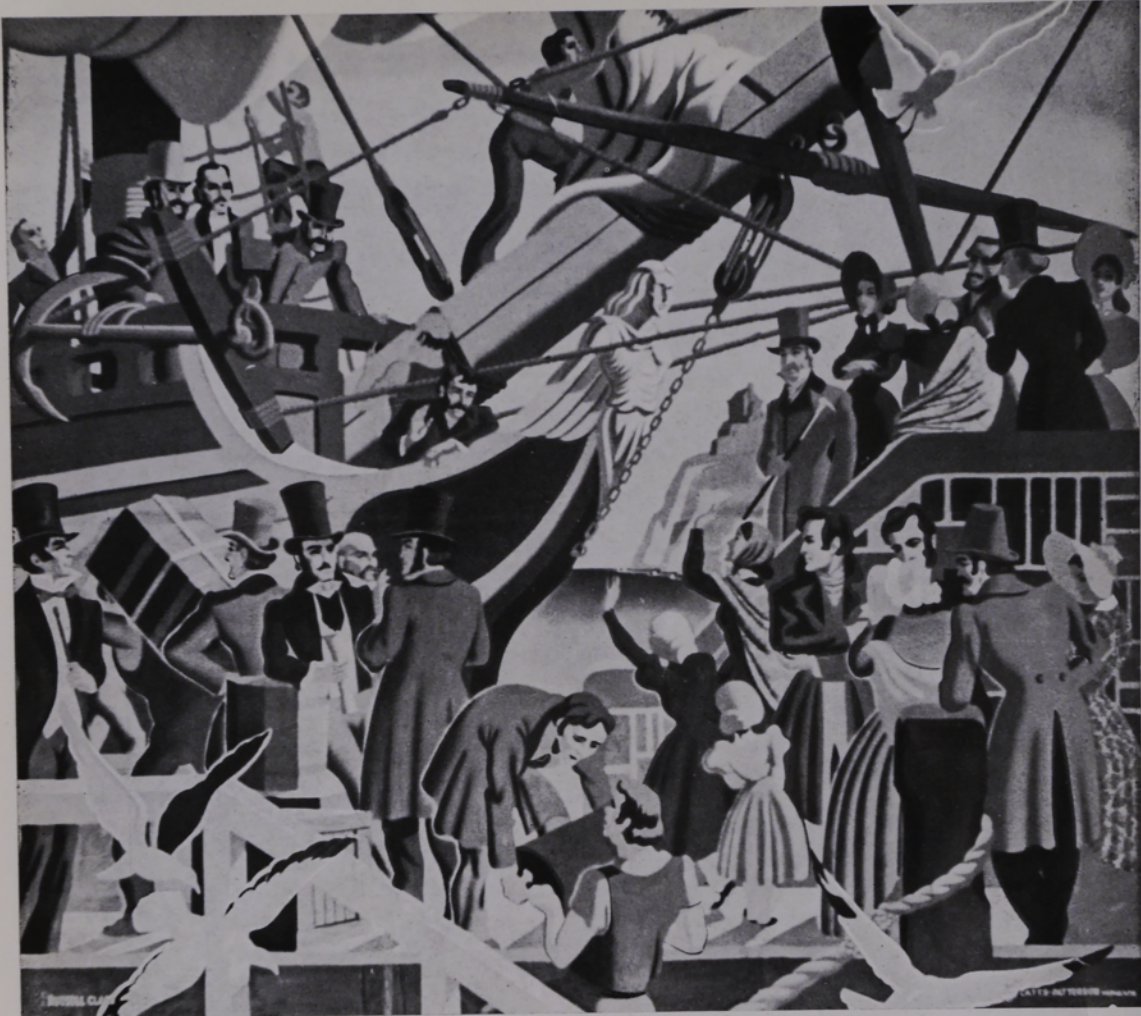
"POLITICS" (Oil)

In the possession of the artist.

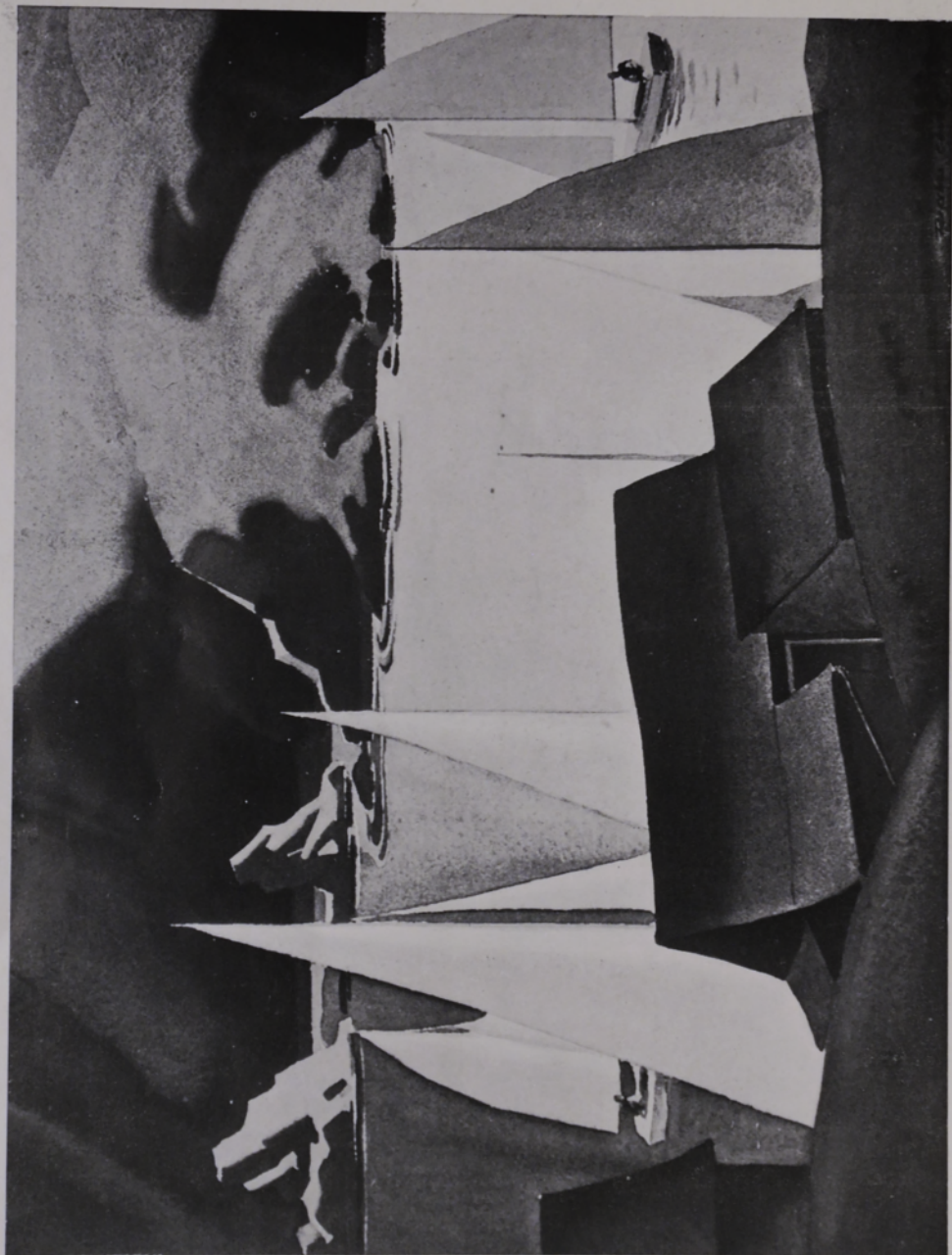


"OTAGO COAST" (*Water colour*)

In the possession of the artist.



"MURAL" (Tempera). 10 ft. x 12 ft. N.Z. Centennial Exhibition.
Original cartoon in the possession of Sir Charles Norwood, Wellington.



"WHITE SAILS" (Water colour)

In the possession of R. G. Meldrum, Wellington.



"NIGHT ON THE BARE MOUNTAIN" (Line drawing illustration)

In the possession of George Woods, Wellington.

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