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Fifty Years of Patronage: The Frances Hodgkins Fellowship and its Impact on Contemporary Art in New Zealand



The University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. Wikimedia Commons

Overview

Joanne Campbell's doctoral research explores the history and significance of the **Frances Hodgkins Fellowship** at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. The Fellowship was the **first artist-in-residence program established in New Zealand**. Over the past fifty years, it has been awarded to some of New Zealand's most highly regarded artists and in many cases it has had a considerable impact on their practice and on life at the University of Otago as well.

Research topics and results

My doctoral research explored the history and significance of the Frances Hodgkins Fellowship at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. The Fellowship, which was first awarded in 1966, was established to “aid and encourage painters and sculptors in the practice and advancement of their art, to associate them with the life of the university, and at the same time, to foster interest in the arts within the University.” It is one of a trio of arts awards established at the University in the mid-twentieth century supporting artists, writers and composers. Each allowed its recipient a year of unfettered support for development in their chosen field, was the first of its kind in New Zealand and has enjoyed remarkable longevity by both national and international standards.

Anonymous donors established the Fellowship and my research explores its origins as well as the ideas and ideals that shaped it. Although it cannot be definitely proven, I argued that there was a strong case for the involvement of Charles Brasch, celebrated editor, poet and patron. Brasch was an ardent proponent of modernist New Zealand art in the mid-twentieth century and the Fellowship was clearly shaped by those ideals. When it was established there was minimal state support for the visual arts. Public galleries rarely exhibited the work of contemporary artists and dealer galleries were only beginning to appear in the larger centers. In this context the Fellowship provided a rare and valuable opportunity for artists to focus on their practice free from perennial financial concerns.

There had been very little published research into the impact of residencies on artists or the communities into which they were brought in New Zealand. I explored the history of the Fellowship and highlighted the significant impact it had on individual recipients and the wider community through a combination of archival research and interviews with former Fellows and others involved in the selection and administration of the program.

The Frances Hodgkins Fellowship is unique in many ways. It asks relatively little of recipients and has a strong focus on time for individual development. It has been in existence for over 50 years. Fellows have a full year in the studio with a relatively high stipend, which is permanently linked to the academic salary scale. Over that period there have been numerous examples of significant changes in artistic direction sparked by the experience that have been extremely valuable to the artists in question. The list of recipients includes many of New Zealand’s most prominent contemporary artists. In bringing talented early and mid-career artists to the city, it has also enriched the local cultural landscape. The Fellowship has encouraged some fascinating collaborations between artists, within the broader arts community and with an array of academic disciplines that would not have occurred without its existence. Many Fellows chose to stay on, having a more lasting impact on the region.

Motivation for research

I chose to focus on the Frances Hodgkins Fellowship as I am interested in the impact of private patronage and public funding on the arts. When I was an undergraduate art history student at the University of Otago in the 1990s I became aware of the Fellows in our midst and was grateful for their presence and contribution on campus. Years later as a Teaching Fellow, I drew on their expertise to enhance my own course in contemporary New Zealand art. The fact that there had been no meaningful research into the Fellowship’s relatively long history coupled with the impressive list of

recipients made it an appealing area for study.

The period of its history was also of interest as I was able to look at broader changes in the arts in New Zealand during the period through the lens of the Fellowship. In effect it provided a microcosm highlighting key issues such as gender parity, the role of ethnicity, the craft/art debate, the rise of photography and digital technologies as well as an increasing interest in environmental concerns.

Contribution to the field

My thesis provides an in-depth account of New Zealand's first arts residency and briefly discusses other residency opportunities that have subsequently arisen in New Zealand. It also explores some of the challenges inherent in attempting to establish a long-term residency program. The original donors were very generous and had admirable intentions, however, the Fellowship soon experienced financial challenges that required injections of capital from the University and additional fundraising to secure the Fellowship's future.

In an effort to identify the international precedent for the Fellowships at Otago University, I briefly explored the broader history of residency programs. The most likely inspiration for the Otago Fellowships is the Gregory Fellowships at Leeds University from 1950 to 1980. Like the Otago Fellowships, there was a focus on bringing practitioners of a range of art forms together to enrich the community as well as support individual artists.

Key learnings

In allowing artists to focus solely on their work without the need to worry about income, arts residencies provide time and freedom to explore new ideas, methods and technologies. This often results in changes in direction: some occur immediately, while others go on to have an impact years later. The connections made and ideas encountered can be of lasting value to all concerned. Bringing an artist into a new environment and making the resources of the university available can stimulate artist, institution and community.

Joanne Campbell received her Ph.D. from the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand, with a thesis which discusses the Frances Hodgkins Fellowship and its impact on contemporary art in New Zealand.

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