

*A History of Collection Development
at the
Suter Art Gallery, Nelson, 1896-1997*

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Abstract

The dissertation outlines the history of the collection at the Suter Art Gallery and traces patterns of collecting and collection growth there. The broader New Zealand historical, sociological and museological context of the collection is considered and discussed with reference to literature on collecting in other New Zealand institutions. The influence of shifting cultural fields and their effect on collecting at the Suter Art Gallery is considered. Reassessment of the collection and changes in collecting practices at the Gallery are examined with reference to specific events and influences. The extent to which the collection is representative of the growth and development of the arts and artistic production in the Nelson Region is discussed. Unique characteristics of the collection are identified and discussed. Possible directions for the future of collecting at the Gallery are outlined.

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Introduction

There has been an increasing awareness in New Zealand and overseas that our understanding of art institutions and their collections can be greatly enhanced by detailed historical analysis. Although studies of individual art museums have been available and the centennial anniversaries of some museums have encouraged publications, there has been until recently no systematic study of the growth and status of collections in smaller regional art museums.

In 1992 B.Mare completed a valuable study of three regional art museums in the lower North Island (Govett-Brewster, New Plymouth; Manawatu, Palmerston North and Sarjeant, Wanganui) In 1996 Hawke's Bay Cultural Trust published a history by R.Fea and E.Pishief which added to the literature about regional museums in New Zealand.

The Suter Art Gallery, Nelson, is a small regional art gallery with its origins in the late nineteenth century. Operated by a private, self-perpetuating trust, (The Bishop Suter Art Gallery Trust Board), its history and collection have been largely unstudied.

In 1996 the writer completed a Research Practicum in association with the Suter Art Gallery to ascertain future storage requirements for the collection. This led to an interest in and many questions about the history of the collection.

The Suter Art Gallery Trust Board appointed its first director in 1976. A new director was appointed in 1995. While curators were employed from 1976-1991, there has been no curator's position at the gallery for the last seven years. Exhibition and maintenance work is carried out by a small staff with volunteer assistance. Selections of works from the collection are displayed intermittently throughout the year. The collection usually remains in storage and overcrowded conditions there make access difficult.¹

A written policy for "acquisitions and donations", and "deacquisition" was adopted for the collection in 1989. An accessions register has been in use since the Gallery's inception. However many questions about how the collection was formed and what factors influenced its development are largely unanswered. This study attempts to understand the dominant influences and how informal policy has operated in regard to collection development. A review of art-historical and museological literature, interviews, data analysis of the collection and a search of archival resources such as Gallery minutes formed the basis of the research. As some material in the minutes is of a confidential nature not all information was available for the purposes of this study and some events have been omitted at the request of the Director.

The collection at the Suter Art Gallery is the central subject of the study.

Pomian defines a collection as “a set of natural or artificial objects, kept temporarily or permanently out of the economic circuit, afforded special protection in enclosed spaces, adapted specifically for that purpose and put on display”² The motivations for collecting are various and according to Wittlin fall into six groups. Wittlin’s analysis suggests that collections can be a form of economic hoarding or may be the embodiment of social prestige. Objects may be collected for their magical powers, for their expression of group loyalty, for the stimulation of curiosity and inquiry or as a means of emotional experience. All of these factors have an influence on the formation of art collections.³

The history of collecting has been a complex one. Collecting is an essential function of museums and remains a primary justification for their existence. The process of collecting within institutions is equally complex. In art museums especially there is a strong element of opportunism in collecting which stems from the nature of art itself. Unique and irreplaceable individually created objects are its subject.⁴ Local history and personalities play an important part in the shape and quality of any collection. Each collection is therefore as unique as the works that constitute it.

Lack of singularity or consistency in museum identity or collecting strategy makes comparative studies somewhat limited in helping us to develop an understanding of collections. Research has generally focused on similarities between collections and their development from a single historical antecedent. Hooper-Greenhill suggests that there has been difficulty in accommodating a “plurality of histories”⁵ which restricts the possibility of analyses, understanding and articulation of present practices. Hooper-Greenhill maintains that recognition of the uniqueness of historical manifestations would allow for the possibility of change by providing some tools for rereading the past. It would also make clear that meaning and interpretation in the art gallery context are not constant.

This study is not intended as a comprehensive history of the Gallery and collection. Rather than developing a comparative or narrative approach, this study attempts to illustrate how notions about the purposes of collecting within the institution have been influenced by its wider social context. Discussion of the collection’s development centres on phases of change and reassessment of collecting. The historical, social and cultural construction of the gallery is acknowledged. The study attempts to discern guiding motivations for particular collecting practices. Statistical analysis of the collection is provided where appropriate.

The first section of the study discusses the museological context within which the origins of the Suter Art Gallery collection is placed. Approaches to the discussion of collection history and a theoretical framework are outlined. The early development of collections and public art museums is discussed and issues central to art museum development are examined.

Section two outlines the early development of New Zealand collections and the specific social context within which the Gallery originated. The relationship of the Gallery to the development of other cultural institutions in the Nelson Region is explored. The role and influence of international exhibitions and other entrepreneurial exhibitions on the development of the collection is assessed. The period up to 1940 is covered.

Section three focuses on the period 1940-1970 and the gradual acceptance of modernism and the resulting reassessment of collecting fields. Related educational and infrastructure developments which influenced collecting are discussed.

In the final section the period up to 1997 is outlined and contemporary issues are examined. These include the rise of professionalism, economic influences and deaccessioning and the recent development of new collecting fields at the Suter Art Gallery, ceramics and New Zealand contemporary art. Women's art and Maori art are discussed in the context of post-modernism and its changing interpretations and collecting fields. Possible future directions for collecting are discussed.

Major bequests and gifts to the collection are listed in the appendices. Works which could be considered key works in the collection are also listed. Aspects of the collection have been statistically analysed and this information supports the text where appropriate. The conclusion outlines the unique characteristics of the collection and patterns of collecting. Possible new directions and the relationship of policy to collecting practices are considered.

It is hoped that the information and analysis presented will promote a deeper understanding of the uniqueness of the institution and its collection. Recognition of the possible strengths and weaknesses of the collection and collecting practices may lead to the development of a defined future strategy for collecting and collection management at the Gallery.