

I learned about the breakthrough these painters had made in France in the late nineteenth century, painting the way they believed in despite all but implacable opposition from a public and its art officers hugging the dregs of a three-hundred-year-old Renaissance, filling their pictures with literary allusions and virtuously smoothing their surfaces, till Cézanne roared 'The finish of imbeciles!'

The battle had reached England apparently about the time of my infancy. I read the writings of Roger Fry, an Englishman who defended these painters against the kind of hostility their work had met in France fifty years before and was meeting in New Zealand now. (It was 1933, I think, when I was walking down Willis Street in Wellington, almost deserted at six o'clock in the evening, and saw a knot of people in front of a shop, all excited and gesticulating. Thinking it must be an accident or a fire, I hurried to see. It was neither of these, but a small print of a Van Gogh in a picture-shop window. 'Good God,' the people were saying among themselves, 'fancy thinking God ever made anything that looked like that!') That was it: the function of art was to copy the look that God had provided things with. It is a good thing that God has now been relieved of the function of making things look as they did before the painting of Van Gogh: they now look much more like his painting than they did to those people in Willis Street in 1933!

I didn't think at the time about Bob Field's being English, too. Trained, I believe, at the Royal College of Art. For me his painting needed no nationality; nor that of Cézanne, or Picasso, or Modigliani. That they happened to be French, Spanish, or Italian was, to me, irrelevant information. If they had been African, Eskimo, or even men from Mars, I would hardly have noticed, their painting excited me so. If I was going to be able to paint like that what did it matter whether my painting was of New Zealand or not?

What a different English, anyway, was the work of Bob Field from that of Hugh Scott, Archibald Nicoll, Richard Wallwork, or the gentry of the Suter Art Gallery; an English revitalised by the influence of the French. And the French themselves? They were not even French, a number of the painters of the 'School of Paris'. Van Gogh was a Dutchman, whose work was influenced by the Japanese. Modigliani was Italian, and he was influenced by African sculpture as was the Spaniard Picasso too at one stage. The new Renaissance of painting drew inspiration from all the world. Its artists came from many countries of Europe. Its influence was to spread to many beyond Europe during this century.

One of them was born in New Zealand—Frances Hodgkins. In Dunedin in 1932 they were looking at prints of the new British