

Original portraits of writers, musicians and artists in the Turnbull collections

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When Alexander Turnbull began to acquire the manuscripts that were to become the basis of the Library's present collection, much of the material reflected the activities of the early settlers of New Zealand: the letters and journals of missionaries, explorers, surveyors, the pioneer farmers, this country's first politicians. As New Zealand has developed and matured, her citizens have directed their talents in a variety of new directions, scientific, literary, musical and artistic. Nowadays, therefore, the papers of New Zealanders past and present who have made their mark in all these areas, are collected and preserved in the Library's manuscript collection. The Library has regularly acquired portraits of prominent New Zealanders, particularly of those whose papers or publications are well represented in the collections, but in the mid-1970s a particular emphasis was placed on the purchase of portraits by living artists of prominent New Zealand writers, musicians and artists. This is a new direction for the art collection, which primarily fulfils a historical function, serving as a valuable research tool in the areas of Pacific exploration and the settlement of 19th century New Zealand, documenting the topography, the customs and activities, the artifacts, the cultural and social life of the people until the widespread advent of photography in the 1870s and 1880s, when, with a few exceptions, the role of the art collection is taken over by the camera's lens.

A painting, however, can sometimes say more than a photograph of the same subject. The artist's personal interpretation may afford viewers an extra dimension, particularly with portraits, where we hope to obtain not only a likeness, but also an insight into the character and personality of the sitter. And, to the extent that the artist is revealing his own attitudes and sympathies, we have the bonus of another portrait—that of the artist himself.

The Library has recently made considerable efforts to collect artists' papers, which will furnish research material for students of New Zealand art history. While it is the function of the art galleries to collect significant works of contemporary New Zealand artists, we can certainly enhance our manuscript collections with carefully chosen examples of portraits by these artists.