

FRANCES HODGKINS

## **Red Cockerel** 1924

Oil on canvas

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Purchased 1957  
with funds from the Dunedin Public Art Gallery Society.

---

The dead game bird or domestic fowl has been a motif in still life painting since classical times and the pose Hodgkins has chosen is a traditional one. Her treatment of the subject is, however, very modern and the influence of French Cubism is evident in the disjointed, interlocking planes of the background.

In one of her many letters to her sister Isabel, Hodgkins' glowing word picture of the market at Arles included this description:

*... the butcher's stall [is] made to look as red as possible with crimson coloured tables & awnings to help out the illusion of a plentiful supply of meat – this stall is flanked by the poulterer on the left who is always in a cloud of feathers and distressed cackling & gurgling from the strangling victims.... [1901]*

A letter to her friend Dorothy Selby a couple of years later spoke of her experiences of a meal of chicken in Morocco:

*A brown ghost came out of the attic door & clapped hands & in two minutes we were sitting Moorish fashion round a brown earthen-ware pot smelling as no pot has every smelt before or can again...there was one pang for the tender little chicken that had travelled alive with us all day then our better feelings were smothered & we fished voraciously for drum sticks & wings with our own forks & sopped up the gravy in a way you would have particularly disliked.... we only left off eating because there was nothing more in the pot.... [23 March 1903]*

FRANCES HODGKINS

**Still Life with Fruit Dishes** c 1937

Oil on canvas laid on hardboard

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Gifted 1949 by a group of anonymous donors.

---

Melons – exquisitely scented, delicious and voluptuously formed, an age-old symbol of abundance. No wonder Hodgkins revelled in these luscious fruits of the European summer. In 1906, more than thirty years before this picture was painted, she wrote to her mother from Avignon:

*It really seems as though it were the fountain head of all fruits of the earth so rich is the supply in the market: melons seem to gush out of the ground & lie in heaped up piles of ripeness & grapes in riotous Bacchanalian profusion make you giddy as the wine they are destined for....*

Of another painting, and at a time of real physical hardship, Hodgkins wrote to Eardley Knollys during World War II:

*The picture you mention owned by Mrs Dugdale dates from a sumptuous short period at St Raphael. I bought hundreds of melons in the market to paint in my room – melons give intense satisfaction....*

She included these glorious fruits in many of her still lifes. Often they lie, cut open, exposing their succulent insides; and we can imagine her studio pervaded with their sweetly unmistakable, almost overpowering fragrance. Here, they are grouped with grapes, apples and arum lilies, all set against the tilted, crumpled ‘tablecloth’ background characteristic of many of Hodgkins’ later still life paintings.

FRANCES HODGKINS

## **The Baker's Shop** 1945

Gouache

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Purchased 1971  
with funds from the Dunedin Public Art Gallery Society.

---

Here is the baker's shop at Corfe Castle in winter. Without depicting so much as a currant bun, Hodgkins uses icing colours - white, pink and peppermint-green - to evoke the happier days of a visit to the baker's shop, while warm browns and rounded forms suggest cob loaves and pastries.

This was painted in the year World War II ended. Food rationing, which had made life so difficult for most Britons, continued for several more years. Not long after the outbreak of war, Hodgkins wrote to her brother Willie in New Zealand:

*As it happens I am very well ... and am really pretty comfortable, no food shortage to speak of, I heard the one & only Baker complaining today of a possible scarcity of almond icing for Xmas Cakes & the butcher said firmly 'No miss NO cats meat.' [28 October 1939]*

This situation did not last long. Sugar was in particularly short supply during the war. Hodgkins appears to have had a sweet tooth (barley sugar, bitter mints, chocolate, dried fruit, ice cream and cake are all enthusiastically mentioned in her letters), and her friends indulged it when they could:

*Dearest Dorothy*

*The turkish delight was heavenly!*

*Where on earth did you find it - & having found it how angelic of you to pass it along - I had forgotten what a delicious sweet it is, wild honey and camels' milk? Was it John Baptist who fed on it? - with locusts if so He did not do so badly.... [to Dorothy Selby 13 April 1944]*

FRANCES HODGKINS

## **Pleasure Garden** 1932

Watercolour

Collection: Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu

---

*... As the later work of this famous New Zealand-born artist emerged like a free and colourful butterfly from the chrysalis of such technical bondage, naturally her painting does not confirm to the moribund formulas of many honoured with representation in our gallery....*

*The tone is not good, the colour is not good, and the composition is all over the place. A child could do it.*

The first of these comments – in a letter written by artist Doris Lusk - appeared in the *Christchurch Press* on 21 June 1949, the second – penned by the more senior (and more conservative) painter CF Kelly – a day later. Both were written during the debate that was raging in Christchurch about the merits of Frances Hodgkins' *Pleasure Garden*, the acquisition of which had been spurned by both the Canterbury Society of Arts and the Robert McDougall Art Gallery. Eventually, after reforms were made at the McDougall and the 'troglodytes' (as poet ARD Fairburn described them) ousted, the painting was accepted and is now one of the jewels of the Christchurch gallery's collection.

*Pleasure Garden* was painted during a sketching holiday to Bridgnorth in Shropshire. The work evokes a summer idyll, supping wine under the shade of an awning on a sunny day. The River Severn, framed by flowers and statuary, is visible in the middle distance, with the town beyond. The painting's delicate colouring suggests coolness and ease – a pleasure garden indeed.

FRANCES HODGKINS

## Spanish Still Life and Landscape

c 1932-3

Oil on wood panel

Collection: Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu

---

The landscape of the title is almost a token presence in this work; all the emphasis is on the still life in the foreground, with its evenly spaced vases and dishes and the draped and twisted cloth that frames them. A far cry from the sombre *Pumpkins and Pimenti*, this painting pulsates with intense colour, reflecting Hodgkins' positive experience of the balmy Balearic Islands in the winter of 1932-3. The food there was, however, not to her liking:

*I am the victim of a bad skin rash — caused by food.... The local doctor ... advised a herbal cure which if you persevere will cure you in six months ... A favourite & frequent dish is Tortillas, a sort of tough omelette mixed with maize — incredibly dull ....*

[to Dorothy Selby, 10 January 1933]

---

FRANCES HODGKINS

**Fish** 1931

Watercolour

British Council, London

---

Here Hodgkins celebrates the fruits of the sea in all their sinuous and delectable beauty. The 'herringbone' form of the ferns is a witty echo of the pattern on the fishes' skins.

---

FRANCES HODGKINS

**Still Life, Fish and Shells** 1933

Watercolour

British Council, London

---

Frances Hodgkins spent the winter of 1932-3 in Ibiza in the Balearic Islands off the coast of Spain, where she enjoyed warmer weather than Britain could offer. She chose not to portray the octopus (“a revolting sight”) that she complained was a “never failing dish” on the local menu but may have painted this ‘bird’s eye view’ still life of fish and shells there.

Fish was still on the menu when she returned to London later in 1933. She wrote to her great friend Dorothy Selby “I am all alone in my Studio – that is with 2 deserted cats who share my fishbones – absolute stillness. I have really got down to work & have finished the bulk of it ....”

---

FRANCES HODGKINS

**Dish of Fruit – notes for colour**

c 1935

Pencil on paper

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, purchased 1971

---



FRANCES HODGKINS

**Broken Pottery** 1939

Watercolour on paper

Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

FRANCES HODGKINS

**Two Plates** c 1931

Watercolour and pencil on paper

Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

---

Hotel du Forum, Arles, s. Rhone. 6.II.01

*Two days ago we made our farewells to our beautiful Arlesian friends — in the market where we paint nearly every day. ...there is a corner given up to pottery & earthenware of many colours & shapes. These are a great temptation to my purse, but I have learned to deny myself, partly because of the expense, partly because they are so brittle & won't travel. I remember my first day in Caudebec, I bought as many as I could carry away — delighted to get so much for so little but alas when it came to packing them it was quite another pair of shoes....*

[Frances Hodgkins to Isabel Field, 6 November 1901]

---

FRANCES HODGKINS

**Pumpkins and Pimenti** c 1935-6

gouache

The Fletcher Trust Collection, Auckland

---

Casa Steyer, Tossa de Mar, Gerona, Spain.

*My Dear Mr. Macdonald*

*I scribbled a line to you from Gerona when sending off my Paintings.  
Now I am back again in Tossa finishing a second lot ready to follow in a  
few days time*

*This will complete my winter's work. There will be a few I hope that will  
appeal to you. May I suggest that you await to see the full set, series,  
suite before making up your mind about them*

*You will see that I have put a large amount of Frances Hodgkins into  
them, even into the joyless marrows, and I do hope that you will not  
say that this woman's work is not worth a penny a day to me. I am sure  
you will realise that I have had to adapt myself to local conditions & do  
the best I can — I defy anyone to paint lovingly & buoyantly through a  
Spanish winter, or be incited to imaginative heights*

[Frances Hodgkins to Duncan Macdonald, c. 12 November 1936]

The colouring of this painting, which was very probably painted during the challenging winter at Tossa de Mar, is most unusual, all chilly blues and greys with only a faint hint at the warm red and golden tones one might expect from the subject matter. The relationship between the vegetable still life and its landscape setting is equally extraordinary. The influence of Surrealism is clearly evident, but, as usual, Hodgkins has made its elements very much her own.

FRANCES HODGKINS

## Flowers and a cat 1941

Gouache on paper

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Gifted 1982  
by Mary, Dora and Esmond de Beer through the National Art  
Collections Fund, London.

---

The *joie de vivre* of this work belies the anxiety Hodgkins was feeling about the war at the time it was painted. Her letters are full of references to bombings and other distressing events:

*We caught it fairly badly 2 nights ago in an all night raid on Swansea — planes were noisy & near guns loud & continuous, about 7 o’c there was a big bang ... a Land Mine laid quietly down at the end of [the] village.*

[to Geoffrey Gorer, 18 January 1941]

*Times are too awful for comment, still there is a hopeful aspect in peoples’ willingness to “endure the unendurable” and cooperate — at last —*

*For instance we are going to help put out each other’s fires to which end a bucket of sand is placed at yr. front gate this morning, (we already have 2 inside & out) & mop, brooms, rake etc handy — a ladder might be a help — bath is kept 1/2 full — the cottage is fairly cluttered with candles, matches torches & so on*

*I get plenty of sprouts, roots etc from the garden, potatoes ... a daily pint of milk — for cat & me — Mrs C is dotty on rabbits. I am not partial.*

[to Geoffrey Gorer, 14 January 1941]

Whatever her hardship, there was always enough food for the cat!

FRANCES HODGKINS

## **A Jug of Flowers** c.1929

Pencil on paper

Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

---

*The reason I refused your lovely flowers was that I couldn't bear to have them near me & not paint them – it was tantalizing me too much – also it makes me sad to see them die before I have painted them – also I had no bowl to put them in.*

[Frances Hodgkins to Lucy and Paul Wertheim, August-September 1928]

The 'flower piece' is a still life subject that dates from classical times; it reached its apogee in the work of 17th and early 18th century Dutch painters like Willem van Aelst, Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, Jan van Huysum and Rachel Ruysch. Their elaborate renditions of a great variety of blooms, painted in astonishingly life-like detail, were almost certainly intended as a reflection on the transience of human life although, in some cases, they may have served as a record of a plant collector's greatest treasures. The arrangement of several different kinds of flowers and the elaborately patterned jug in this work seem to hark back to those works; however, the two non-matching coffee mugs and round tray give Hodgkins' image an informal, domestic quality quite different from the elaborate formality of earlier Dutch masterpieces.

---

FRANCES HODGKINS

**Wild Violets and Honesty** 1941

Gouache

Private collection, Auckland

---

FRANCES HODGKINS

**Primulas** 1940

Pencil on paper

British Council, London

---

Nothing could be further from the great set pieces of 17th and 18th century Dutch flower painting than this artless arrangement of modest flowers, lightly set down. Hodgkins loved to paint flowers and they appear in many of her still lifes, either in the starring role or adding delicacy and colour to images of fruits, pottery and landscape.

---