

A.H. O’Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

Self Portrait 1932

oil on canvas

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

Gifted by Mrs Jane O’Keeffe, the artist’s wife, 1944.

By the time O’Keeffe painted this self-portrait in his mid-seventies, he had witnessed many changes in both his own life and Dunedin’s art world. Born near Bendigo, on the Australian goldfields, he had come to Dunedin with his parents in the early 1860s. He had held the proprietorship of the Liverpool Arms and Outram Hotels, selling pints to the kind of elderly, former gold miners who appear in his early paintings. During the 1880s and 1890s he had enjoyed the convivial companionship of his fellow artists, the ‘brotherhood of the brush’. Inspired to make the transition from amateur to professional artist he had studied in Paris, then regarded as the centre of the art world, in 1894 and 1895. Following his return he had challenged Victorian proprieties with an exhibition of nude life studies, but was forced to return to hotel keeping less than a year later. To his disappointment he had realised *‘it is hard to support oneself in New Zealand by any kind of artistic work ... and almost impossible to support a family’*. He had experienced financial hardship and was declared bankrupt in 1906. He had grieved the deaths of three of his six children, losing both sons at Gallipoli in 1915 and his youngest daughter Eileen to illness in 1917. In 1939 he would be predeceased by another daughter, Linnet. He had taught at the Dunedin School of Art and Design and privately in his studio. He had served on the council of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery Society and, at the time this portrait was painted, was serving on the council of the Otago Art Society and as an honorary judge and critic for the Dunedin Photographic Society. During these years of joy and distress, he had established himself as one of the most interesting, dedicated and well regarded artists working in Dunedin.

A.H. O’Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

Still life with crayfish, beer and parsley 1886

oil on board

Collection of Toitū Otago Settlers Museum

O’Keeffe recalled the elderly landscape painter George O’Brien (1821-1888) ‘*coming to see me once when I was busy painting a crayfish and a glass of beer. He said: “I do not know anyone else who would treat a glass of beer that way”*’. A glass of beer perhaps seemed a natural subject to a publican like O’Keeffe, the proprietor of the Liverpool Arms Hotel in Filleul Street. Forty-six years later he painted *Crust and Crustacean*, another still life with a crayfish. In the early work, we see the young artist grappling with the elements of his craft. The crayfish is placed behind a somewhat uncertainly modelled salt shaker, but in a virtuoso touch O’Keeffe has observed the effects of refraction as the crustacean’s feelers pass behind the glass of beer. While the 1886 still life is tightly painted, in the later painting the forms are defined through clearly visible, directional brush marks. R. N. Field (1899-1987), an artist known for his strident colours and post-impressionist experimentation, praised this work, noting O’Keeffe’s use of a limited palette ‘*to achieve great variety in pearly greys and creams*’. These two works demonstrate both O’Keeffe’s shift in style and his engagement with very different generations of Dunedin artists.

A.H. O’Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

The Model at Rest or Seated Girl 1906

oil on canvas

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

This work was painted at a time when New Zealand artists looked towards Europe for inspiration. To be regarded seriously as an artist it was thought necessary to have studied at one of the art schools in Britain or France. There was also a ready market in New Zealand for nostalgic images of European peasants and artists sometimes painted costumed models in the guise of more exotic subjects. However, O’Keeffe’s rather bored looking model is very clearly located in an artist’s studio, betraying the artifice of this convention. In 1894 and 1895 O’Keeffe spent several months in Paris studying at the Académie Julian. He returned to Dunedin hoping to establish himself as a professional artist, but with a family to support soon returned to hotel keeping. During his time as proprietor of the Outram Hotel he had little time to paint and accumulated significant business debts. This work dates from 1906, the year O’Keeffe returned to painting fulltime after having been declared bankrupt. With its free brushwork and depiction of an artist’s painting materials it is a celebration of creative potential. While fondly recalling the artistic stimulation of Paris, O’Keeffe is clearly acknowledging that his ambitions will have to be realised in this austere Dunedin studio.

A.H. O’Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

Still Life: Roses and Arum Lilies 1906

oil on cardboard

Collection of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki,
purchased 1957.

O’Keeffe is not known to have ever exhibited this extraordinary painting during his lifetime, probably realising that it would have been incomprehensible to many viewers in 1906. Indeed, when *Roses* (1916) was exhibited at the Canterbury Society of Arts ten years later, it was criticised as ‘*too impressionistic in treatment*’ for a still life subject. In this earlier painting, the dark maroon colour of one rose is near identical to that of the background, leaving the bloom almost indecipherable and largely defined through brush marks. While the deliberate retention of a sketch-like spontaneity enhances this striking work, it would have been widely regarded as unfinished. Nonetheless, it is clearly signed and dated, suggesting that O’Keeffe considered the work sufficiently resolved and visually engaging to leave as it was. In the last few years of his life O’Keeffe returned to a similarly reductive treatment of form, dispensing with vases and depicting climbing flowers. In *Roses* (1941), reportedly his final painting, the flowers appear to be floating on the dark background, starbursts of light and energy which seem to be both blossoming and wilting simultaneously.

A.H. O’Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

The Drift of Many Winters

1914

oil on hardboard

Collection of the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu.

Presented by the Canterbury Society of the Arts, 1932.

O’Keeffe originally established his reputation in the 1880s and 1890s as a painter of genre subjects. Many of these showed elderly figures, typically seated alone in an interior, their demeanour suggesting a state of reflection. They reflect the notion of ‘suffering patiently endured’, a common convention for representing old age in Victorian painting. O’Keeffe may have intended to represent the first generation of New Zealand pioneers who by that time had reached old age. As a result of a significant gender imbalance, this generation consisted of a large number of men who had never married, and who lacked family support in their old age. There are similarities with Charles F. Goldie’s paintings of introverted elderly Māori, who usually appear dispirited and preoccupied with memories of the past. In the works of both artists, the melancholic reverie of their subjects is ennobled by the dignity of their stoicism. While O’Keeffe and Goldie both studied at the Académie Julian in Paris during the 1890s, they developed very different styles. Goldie worked in a tightly painted, academic manner, while O’Keeffe took pleasure in the visible application of paint.

A.H. O’Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

In a Dark Setting 1930

oil on canvas

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Purchased 1930 with funds from the Sir George Fenwick bequest.

Notes: At the Otago Art Society’s 1930 Annual Exhibition this painting was awarded a prize of five guineas as picture of the year.

When exhibited at the Otago Art Society in 1930 this painting was praised as ‘a *haunting memory of subtle tones*’. From the 1910s onwards still lifes, especially of flowers, formed an increasingly important part of O’Keeffe’s output. His flowers are typically displayed in simple vessels and either emerge from darkness or are set against a neutral backdrop. He favoured a limited palette and was more concerned with aesthetic effects than botanical accuracy. Rather than trying to evoke the soft delicacy of rose petals, his broad brushwork emphasises the texture of the painted surface. Many of these works evoke the passing of time. In some like *In a Dark Setting* leaves and petals have fallen onto the table, suggesting that the roses are fading. In other works O’Keeffe’s impressionistic technique creates a sense of flux, as if the brushstrokes have only temporarily coalesced to define form. Flowers have traditionally been a popular *vanitas* symbol, as the brevity of their lifespan can be used to signify the transience of human life.

A.H. O’Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

The Defence Minister’s Telegram 1921

oil on canvas

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

Purchased 1921 with funds from the Otago Art Society.

When *The Defence Minister’s Telegram* was exhibited at the Otago Art Society’s annual exhibition of 1921, the reviewer for the *Otago Daily Times* observed:

‘It is easily the finest figure work in the exhibition, and is regarded as the best that has been seen at similar displays for many years. It represents an elderly man, holding in his hand a telegram, presumably announcing the death of a near relative. His head is bowed, and his whole attitude betokens grief, while the expression of the face bespeaks an anguish that there is no reason to conceal’.

This subject would have had a personal resonance for O’Keeffe who lost both his sons at Gallipoli. Sergeant Laurence Cadogan O’Keeffe of the Otago Mounted Rifles died on 11 August 1915 from a gunshot wound to his right shoulder, aged 24. His 22 year-old brother, Trooper Victor Alfred O’Keeffe of the Canterbury Mounted Rifles, died on 23 August 1915, killed by an accidental gunshot wound to the chest received from a member of his own regiment. Both died aboard hospital ships and were buried at sea. While the man depicted is not O’Keeffe the work can almost be thought of as a self portrait, expressing his psychological state rather than his outward appearance. O’Keeffe exhibited an earlier variant of this subject at the Canterbury Society of Arts in March 1920, before rejecting it in favour of this second version. A photograph of this earlier painting is displayed in the glass case.

A.H. O’Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

Négligée or Woman in Red

1922

oil on canvas wrapped around card

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago.

Donated by Charles Brasch, 1963.

From 1920 onwards, O’Keeffe produced a number of paintings of young women, a subject he had not previously dealt with. In the tradition dating back to Titian, these works were intended as anonymous studies of feminine beauty rather than portraits conveying a sense of specific personality or identity. *Négligée* (1922) is a subtly managed colour harmony recalling the works of the American artist James Whistler (1834-1903). There is a tension between the sense of virginal innocence and sensuality, and between the figure’s physical immediacy and psychological distance. The model for the painting was Elsa Hill, the nineteen year-old niece of the artist Mabel Hill (1872-1956). Between 1923 and 1925 the two artists ran a private teaching studio known as the Barn Studio and frequently shared models. Hill painted a watercolour of her niece wearing the same red wrap, but appearing calmer and less dishevelled.

A.H. O’Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

Erosion *or* **A windy day, St Clair** c.1926

oil on canvas on board

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago.

Bequeathed by Miss Eana Blythe Jeans, 1986.

O’Keeffe began producing seascapes following his move to the coastal suburb of St Kilda in 1905, and they remained one of his main subjects. With their crashing waves, craggy cliffs and massing clouds, they were an appropriate subject for a painterly artist interested in capturing a sense of movement through visible, impressionistic brushwork. He admired the freedom and energy that a broad, painterly approach conveyed, advising his students ‘Don’t paint the feather and miss the flight’. Rather than depicting Dunedin’s southern beaches as recreational spaces populated with figures at leisure, O’Keeffe preferred to focus on the changing effects of nature. Many show the coast in a turbulent mood, often accompanied by overcast or stormy conditions. Rather than washing over an expanse of soft sand, his waves typically break amongst jagged rocks. These rocks appear both threatening and threatened by the force of nature themselves, with the title of *Erosion* suggesting the capacity of the sea as a destructive force. Eana B. Jeans (1890-1986), O’Keeffe’s pupil and the former owner of this painting, recalled that when unable to afford a model he painted the sea, ‘*which he upheld as a substitute for the human, providing life, mood and character*’.

A.H. O’Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

In a Blue Setting 1926

oil on canvas

Collection of the Sarjeant Art Gallery Te Whare O Rehua,
Whanganui. Purchased, 1926.

O’Keeffe explained his interest in *‘the action of light and reflection in relation to colour’* in a 1932 lecture at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. He asked his audience to imagine,

a room which was furnished with a black carpet, a table with a white cover, and daffodils on the table, which had salmon-pink walls and a large open grate, with a brisk burning fire ... One might think that a black carpet and a white cloth made no colour [but] a glance at the carpet showed that the salmon-pink paper appeared to have got down on to the black carpet and white cloth. Again, the cloth was reflected up on the daffodils, which became the colour of new bread. All objects, it would be seen, were tinted by reflection and light in a way that made them appear quite different from their actual colour. Every tone in a picture should be a united whole, governed by reflection and light, thus producing harmony.

In a Blue Setting shows similar visual effects. O’Keeffe has subtly mixed the blue of the tablecloth into the shadows of the peach parasol and the leaves of the roses. A lighter form of peach recurs in the roses, while the greener tones of their leaves reappear in the shadows of the tablecloth.

A.H. O’Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

The Broken Vase 1929

oil on canvas on board

Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

In the late 1920s artists such as Robert N. Field (1899-1987) began introducing elements of European modernism into New Zealand art. Certain features of this work show O’Keeffe’s awareness of and experimentation with this new approach. The intensely blue curtain that occupies the left third of the painting hangs parallel to the picture plane but bears no logical relationship to the corner of the table depicted. The orange flowers are equally bright and form a complementary contrast with the blue. However, the background, table and vase are all depicted in sombre tones and show conventional spatial relationships. This awkward union of tonal realism and post-impressionist experimentation has a disruptive effect and suggests the incompatibility of the two approaches. While able to admire modernist qualities in the works of others, ultimately O’Keeffe did not adopt these developments himself. The title of this painting is incorrect. The vessel in which the flowers are displayed is not in fact a broken vase, but a landscape patterned jug which also appears in *In a Dark Setting* (1930). However, the fracture suggested in the title does capture the awkward relationship between the two different styles utilised in this work.

A.H.O’Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

Portrait of Frank Barron *or* An Artistic Friend c.1934-35

oil on canvas

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Bequeathed by Frank Barron in 1957.

Frank Barron (1882-1957) was a friend and patron of O’Keeffe’s during the 1930s. He co-owned the Moa Seed Farm, in Ettrick, Central Otago and was an inveterate collector of paintings, glassware and china, bequeathing part of his collection to the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. In September 1934 O’Keeffe wrote to his friend W. H. Allen,

‘I have painted a portrait of a man (nine hours all told) most of those who have seen it have begged me not to touch it. I have not looked at it since for fear. The subject was in town for five days and then went back home. A Mr Frank Barron who is on the Art Gallery council very good looking, age 52’.

According to Esther Lyders (1905-68), a pupil of O’Keeffe’s in the early 1930s, even when Mr Barron fell ill and was in Stafford Hospital, O’Keeffe pursued him there with paints and canvas. She also recalled that,

‘He was never satisfied with any picture he painted and would go on and on, often losing something infinitely good in trying to capture the something better. Only when an exhibition came round would he relinquish a canvas to the framer and then likely as not would pursue it into the gallery with his palette’.

The finished portrait was exhibited in 1935 under the title *An Artistic Friend*.

Thomas Jenkin

[1899-1958 New Zealand]

Portrait of A H O’Keeffe or Homage to a Brother Artist 1928

oil on canvas

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

Gifted 1971 by the artist’s wife Mrs Dorothy Jenkin and son Michael Jenkin, and presented by Francis A Shurrock on the occasion of the Otago School of Art Centennial.

Thomas Jenkin’s portrait documents O’Keeffe’s favoured materials. He took pleasure in the materiality of oil paint and usually worked with a broad flat brush and occasionally a palette knife in order to achieve the breadth and texture of pigment he desired. His student Esther Lyders recalled that he,

‘hated to see anyone tickling about with small brushes. He never wore his glasses to paint even when over eighty years. He thought slightly dimming eyesight was an asset. “You see only the big values that way and don’t get messing with detail”’.

His core palette consisted of flake white, yellow ochre, light red, new or French blue, burnt umber, raw umber and, if he could afford them, rose madder and lemon yellow. Here it appears rather clean, but according to Lyders,

‘His palette was always a mess. Always hard up and short of paint, he would carefully preserve any left over paint by putting a drop of oil on to prevent hardening and then use it next time’.

Research by the Dunedin Public Art Gallery’s conservation team suggests he preferred to paint on a flat surface, often removing a canvas from its stretcher to paint. Some of the works in this exhibition feature visible tack holes, where he has nailed the finished painting back onto a stretcher. He may have also reused canvases, painting over the top of existing works.

A.H. O’Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

Life’s Awakening 1933

oil on canvas

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Gifted 1957 by Mr F D Bell.

According to his daughter, once when asked to paint roses O’Keeffe instead painted onions in order to show that they were just as beautiful. He is known to have painted the humble vegetable on at least five occasions between 1891 and 1933. With its expressive use of impasto, directional brushwork and respect for underlying geometric forms, the present painting shows an awareness of the works of Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) and Paul Cézanne (1839-1906). During the 1920s and 1930s O’Keeffe expressed admiration for these Post-Impressionist artists and most likely learnt about their approach through reproductions in art magazines. While it has previously been suggested that he saw their works firsthand while studying in Paris in 1894 and 1895, this claim can no longer be sustained. In the present painting the five onions possess a shining rotundity, their warm beige tones subtly contrasting with the violet-grey beneath. The overall luminosity of the work has been enhanced through the addition of touches of blue to areas like the uncurling onion skin on the left.

A.H. O'Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

Crust and Crustacean 1932

oil on canvas

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago.

Gifted by Mrs Eve Anderson, the artist's daughter, 1967.

A.H. O'Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

Roses 1941

oil on canvas stretched on plywood

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago.

Donated by Mrs G. E. Lyders, 1968.

A.H. O'Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

Charlie 1937

oil on canvas

Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.
Gift of the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts, 1938.

A.H. O'Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

Millers Flat Farm 1934

oil on board

Collection of Anderson Park Art Gallery, Invercargill

A.H. O’Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

Roses 1916

oil on panel

Collection of Olveston, Dunedin

A.H. O’Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

Southerly Sea – Lawyer’s Head c.1910

oil on canvas on board

Aigantighe Art Gallery Collection, Timaru. Purchased using
G Sevicke Jones Trust with assistance from the QEII Arts
Council in 1971.

A.H. O'Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

Otago Harbour 1910

oil on canvas

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago. Purchased with the assistance of the Hocken Library Endowment Fund, 1990.

A.H. O'Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

A Breaker 1927

oil on canvas wrapped on card

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago. Bequeathed by Miss Eana Blythe Jeans, 1986.

A.H. O’Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

**Derelicts *or*
North Otago Coast** 1931

oil on canvas

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago. Purchased with the assistance of the Hocken Library Endowment Fund, 1999.

A.H. O’Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

Self Portrait 1941

oil on canvas stretched on plywood

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago. Bequeathed by Miss Eana Blythe Jeans, 1986.

A.H. O'Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

Elegante 1935

oil on board

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

Bequeathed 1957 by Mr Frank Barron.

A.H. O'Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

Portrait of Doreen Hanlon

1925

oil on canvas on board

Private Collection, Dunedin

A.H. O'Keeffe

[1858-1941 New Zealand]

Moisture in the Air 1920s

oil on board

Private Collection, Dunedin

Left: **A. H. O’Keeffe: [newspaper clippings]**

Bound volume of newspaper clippings and ephemera relating to A. H. O’Keeffe from 1892 to 1947

Heritage Collections, Dunedin Public Libraries

Centennial exhibition: the Otago Art Society Inc.

and Hocken Library ... Art in Otago, 1840-1948: a survey representing the progress of Otago artists of the first 100 years

Printed by Whitcombe & Tombs, Dunedin, 1948

Heritage Collections, Dunedin Public Libraries

Letter from A H O’Keeffe to W H Allen

30 September 1934

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago

**Catalogue of The Annual Exhibition of the
Canterbury Society of the Arts 1906**

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago

**Catalogue of The Annual Exhibition of the
Canterbury Society of the Arts 1920**

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago