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Margot Philips: Painting a Familiar Vision of an Unfamiliar Land, 1930s to the 1980s

Petra Burns



Figure 1: Margot Philips, *Waikato Landscape*, circa 1961
(Image 1970-65, courtesy of Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato).

Margot Philips was a respected landscape artist whose works focused mostly on her visualisation of the Waikato. As a Jewish immigrant, her brushstrokes painted the wonderment she saw in the alien terrain, with all its greens and browns, and curves and furrows, so different to her hometown of Cologne, Germany.

Margot was born to middle-class Jewish parents in Germany in 1902. Her formative years were spent weathering the storm that was the early twentieth century in Germany.

Escaping the violence of World War 2, she fled to London in 1935, her parents having both died shortly after World War 1. She then followed her brother Kurt to New Zealand in 1938.¹

Kurt opened Hamilton's first café — called The Vienna — in Victoria Street, and Margot worked there upon her arrival in New Zealand. Through her time spent waiting tables, she got to know the Hamilton locals and wider community. She formed friendships with her customers, including Princess Te Puea, a leader of the Kīngitanga Movement and granddaughter of the second Māori King, Te Wherowhero Tāwhaio. Princess Te Puea became a regular customer.²

Margot's serious interest in art came in the late 1940s, which is not to say she had not appreciated art before then. Margot felt that she had had an intrinsic love of colour and form within her from the beginning of her life. As a girl she would spend time gazing at the art housed at the Art Gallery in Cologne, her hometown.³

This interest inspired her to enrol in an Adult Education art class, after a failed stint at Technical School. Run by Geoff Fairburn, these classes were Margot's first taste of landscape painting, often depicting the Waikato River or Lake Rotoroa. She also attended two summer schools at Ardmore Teachers' College, where she was tutored by Arthur Hipwell. Subsequently, in 1951 Margot 'enrolled in the Summer School organized at the Auckland City Art Gallery by its new director, Eric Westbrook.' It was the first of nine consecutive Summer Schools she attended there.⁴

After two unsuccessful tries with different tutors, on her last chance Margot went along to work with Colin McCahon. In what turned out to be her most formative experience as an artist, Margot was helped by McCahon to overcome her fear of failure and her insecurities about being the oldest in the class. He encouraged her to move away from drawing, as it wasn't her strength, and directed her with oil paints.⁵

Throughout these summers Margot developed confidence and certainty about her direction as a painter. Influenced by her time under the tutelage of Geoff Fairburn, she began to paint Waikato landscapes. The scenery of the Waikato excited her because it was so different to the setting of her motherland. Almost fearful of painting from a photograph or in person, Margot always painted from her memory.

This method was fully developed by 1961, when she moved away from painting an identical copy of a certain landscape. She realised that she didn't have to see the scene before her to be able to paint an image, and having it in front of her almost seemed to disrupt her vision. Her friend Janet Paul said about this technique, 'this is where I feel the angel's eye comes in. She is making her own amalgam of shapes she's seen at different times, different

places. I think it's the poet's ability to take experience and depth of detail and put it together. It is the experience of all the landscape that she's living in.'⁶

Margot is revered for her talent in creating distance in her paintings; the feeling that the painting extends miles into the distance is almost tangible. She had a very specific way of painting and spreading the image across the canvas. Tim Walker described it: 'She would start at the top left, and literally "knit" the images in bands, moving down the canvas as she painted. And from this process these deeply felt, remembered images emerged — hauntingly reminiscent of *our* subconscious experiences of these landscapes.'⁷ Her painting environment would be filled with the swelling melodies of classical music, including Mozart, Bach, Beethoven and Schubert, helping to inspire and encourage her.⁸ Her palette of colours was wide-ranging, with the greens and browns and blues forming an accurate representation of the landscape, but simultaneously giving a surreal edge to each and every one of her paintings.⁹ While Margot suffered fear and anxiety about many other aspects of her talent and her work, colour was one element of which she was truly confident. Janet Paul said about her certainty of colour: 'Oh, you wouldn't have dreamed of offering any colour advice to Margot! She was absolutely sure of colour. What one noticed about meeting Margot from the very first was the careful colour of her dress.'¹⁰

Margot's first solo exhibition was in 1966 at the New Vision Gallery in Auckland, and included paintings from her trip to Europe and Israel the previous year, including one called *San Gimignano*. Janet Paul talked to Tim Walker about the reaction to the northern hemisphere paintings: 'At the time people said, "Oh, they're not at all successful. Margot can do Waikato landscapes but she can't handle that."¹¹ However, a rare review of the exhibition in the *Auckland Star* by I. V. Porsolt was entitled, 'Margot Philips: No Primitive Painter',¹² showing that undoubtedly there was positive feedback on her talents. She visited the Coromandel and Northland, and from her memories of those places she created some art in her distinctive style. These were included at her next exhibition, again at the New Vision Gallery, in 1972.¹³

From 1980, Margot's deteriorating health prevented her from painting, but a major retrospective exhibition, *The Paintings of Margot Philips*, was held in 1983 by the Waikato Museum of Art and History. The Museum held another, smaller exhibition in 1987, the catalogue from which included a comprehensive interview with Margot by Tim Walker, the curator.¹⁴ The holding of these exhibitions illustrates the appreciation and celebration of Margot's work amongst the Waikato community.

Margot offered a unique experience to all viewers of her paintings. With her knitted brushstrokes, she draws them into a long-reaching image and has them gaze miles and miles into the distance, recognising the lie of the land and the hues of their home. The exquisiteness of the images she depicted is the fact that any local of the Waikato will distinguish the scene in each of her paintings as distinctly ‘Waikato’, and each one feels inherently familiar. Yet the landscape renders them incapable of finding a name or place to categorise it, other than ‘the Waikato’.

Notes

¹ Christopher Johnstone, *Landscape Paintings of New Zealand: A Journey from North to South* (Auckland: Random House, 2006), p. 64.

² *Margot Philips – Her Own World*, ed. by Tim Walker (Hamilton: Waikato Museum of Art and History, 1987), p. 17.

³ *Margot Philips*, p. 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁷ Johnstone, p. 64.

⁸ *Margot Philips*, p. 52.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹² I. V. Porsolt, ‘Margot Philips: No Primitive Painter’, *Auckland Star*, 24 September 1966.

¹³ Johnstone, p. 64.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.