

# An Astonishing Variety

Review of

*Owen Merton: Expatriate Painter*

Catalogue of the Exhibition: 11 June - 26 September 2004

By Roger Collins

Christchurch: Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, 2004

31 pages, 14 plates / NZ\$24.95

Reviewed by **John Simpson**

*Owen Merton: Expatriate Painter* is the title of a recent exhibition of drawings and paintings at the Christchurch Art Gallery in New Zealand. We owe this exhibition and its catalogue to the indefatigable scholarship of Dr. Roger Collins, without whose work, over many years, Owen Merton would remain a shadowy figure mostly remembered as being the father of Thomas Merton.

The exhibition of forty-one works reveals an astonishing variety of images. How can one explain such diversity? Let us look at his life, the people and experiences that may have helped shape him. Owen Merton was born in Christchurch into a respected family, his father a musician who taught at Christ's College (New Zealand's Eton). Owen seemed destined for a sound middle-class career as a lawyer or banker, but in 1903, at age 16, he enrolled at the Canterbury College School of Art, which was firmly linked to the South Kensington model of art education. But Owen was adventurous and by 1904 was in London staying with his mother's sister Maud and studying at a number of local art schools. This study confirmed and extended what he had learnt back in Christchurch. He crossed the Channel and followed in the paths trodden by other New Zealand painters attracted to France; indeed Owen took lessons from Frances Hodgkins in Concarneau, a favourite haunt of New Zealand painters. Owen continued in this vein for a number of years until in Spain, on a painting expedition, he met Ruth Jenkins, an American. They married in 1914 and lived in Prades.

Soon after Tom was born in 1915 the family had moved to New York. Life was difficult and Owen scraped a living as a pianist at a local cinema and set up as a landscape designer and gardener to make ends meet. He remained active as a painter and exhibited regularly and in good company. (See *The Merton Seasonal* 26.2 [Summer 2001] for a valuable account by Roger Collins of Owen Merton's exhibitions in America and the artists he exhibited with.) Owen saw the works of artists who were exploring fresh ways of expressing a vision of a world emerging from the conflagration of world war. Many artists, impatient of tired, cold academic traditions, were striving for a brave new world.

The tragic death of Ruth in October 1921 made Owen reconsider his future. Aware of his responsibilities as a father, he still felt compelled to search for new ways to advance his work as a painter. He decided to leave Tom (6) and John Paul (2) with Ruth's parents. Owen traveled to

---

**John Simpson** is Emeritus Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Canterbury Christchurch, where he was Professor and Head of the School of Fine Arts from 1960 to 1990. This is the same school that Owen Merton attended, although the name has changed.

Bermuda for a short visit, and was delighted with the quality of the light which may have reminded him of far away New Zealand, and he was pleased to meet Evelyn and Cyril Scott. He returned to New York but was back in Bermuda, with Tom, by October 1922, now living with Evelyn Scott, a poet and novelist. Arguably the next three years are the most interesting and important of Owen's life as a painter. Witness his *Burning Fields and Cold Motion of Stillness*, overflowing with luminous, clear bright colour arranged in horizontal bands. Nothing from Owen's previous achievements prepares us for such a splendid clarion call of colour celebration! Yet the strange trees in the middle distance are menacing and stand in front of the picture plane – powerful and disturbing “tachiste” elements. (It is fascinating to see how Thomas Merton, many years later, made paintings evocative of Chinese calligraphy and advancing the “tachiste” elements found in some of his father's watercolours.) For Owen, Bermuda marked a new self-confident command of pictorial elements. Why then did he suddenly abandon all this? It is said that Evelyn Scott helped Owen sort out his muddled ideas on art! Perhaps her influence is to be found in the unusual titles given to works of this period. When Owen decided to leave Evelyn, and the superb light of Bermuda, he probably had convinced himself he had good reasons to search for another and different pictorial language.

He found it in the works of Paul Cézanne. Owen may have visited the Cézanne Exhibitions of 1910 and 1912 in London arranged by Roger Fry, but would not have seen any of Cézanne's watercolours. It is more likely he came across works such as *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (watercolour, c. 1900) in Paris at the Louvre. During the winter of 1924-25 he painted a watercolour *Cathedral from the River, Beziers* which evinces something of the structure of a Cézanne canvas but has more of a late Cézanne watercolour, as for example in *Apples, Goblet, Bottle, and Chairback* (1904-1906). However, Cézanne is Cézanne and Owen Merton only his pale shadow. Or is he? The question is answered by Owen himself when once again he abruptly ends his questing attempt to understand what Cézanne was really up to and see to what extent he could mine and extract from this something he could really make his own. Sadly it seems he had lost confidence that he was heading in the right direction and so ended his Cézannesque excursion. Aware his friends, and more crucially his dealers, would be disappointed with this reversion to academic traditions of painting strictly concerned with such things as linear and aerial perspective combined with pale almost monochromatic washes, he forcefully and defiantly wrote, “I have jolly well outgrown their pepper in the eyes school.”

For a number of years he had not exhibited in New Zealand but he now decided it was time to re-establish his links with the country of his birth. Some have suggested commercial reasons lay behind his actions at this time, but given his penchant for sudden changes of direction, such considerations were probably not of crucial importance.

This exhibition, perhaps unintentionally, prompts a couple of important issues. From about 1913 the human figure is virtually absent from his paintings. Yes, there are blobs of purplish blue in his *Convent in Snow, Murat, France* (watercolour, 1926), which might indicate people. If so this reveals a rather cavalier attitude or indifference to the human form. Then again in *Marseilles* (drawing and wash, 1927) the figures are little more than ciphers. Did Owen draw and paint the human form? It is inconceivable he could have avoided it at the art schools he attended and there are no good reasons for doubting his competence. If portraits, figure studies and figure compositions do exist, and more importantly drawings of Tom or John Paul or of Ruth, then the inclusion of one or two would have strengthened the exhibition.

The second point prompted by this small exhibition is the problem posed by Owen's huge and apparently sudden changes of direction. Could this simply be that connecting links have been destroyed or not yet discovered? It is questions like this that make a group of works especially significant. Three works with the same title, *Street with the Bull-ring, Beziers* (1925), comprise a pencil drawing, a pencil drawing with wash (see the reproduction on the cover of *The Merton Seasonal* 26.2), and a watercolour painting. One would assume the drawing came first, then the pencil and wash, followed by the painting. Here at last is an opportunity to study the process of development and growth of the artist! Unfortunately a close stylistic analysis raises only more questions and few answers. Even so, these three works constitute one of the highlights of the exhibition.

During Owen Merton's life as a watercolourist, many newspaper notices and catalogues were published, and these suggest he produced a large number of works. Most of these works, if they still exist, remain hidden and are unknown to us. Some will be in attics, some in storerooms, dusty and forgotten. If these unknown works surface then more "pieces" may be able to be placed correctly in the incomplete jig-saw puzzle that now stands for Owen Merton's achievements as a watercolourist. Only when more works are discovered will be possible to make a more reliable assessment of his life's work. Until then this review must be treated with great caution and reserve. What is beyond doubt is the glorious effulgence of colour of his Bermuda works and the gentle questioning and subtle rhythms of his Cézanne period.