

Sam Cairncross

1913–1976

École des Beaux Arts, Paris

Sam Cairncross was awarded a scholarship to Paris in 1947, where he became immersed in modern European art. The self-taught Wellington painter studied in a prestigious Parisian art school and exhibited in a major dealer gallery. The story goes that Cairncross befriended Cubist Georges Braque and became known as ‘the Expressionist from the Pacific’.

Cairncross returned to New Zealand, armed with the lessons and experiences gained in Europe. No longer ‘the Expressionist from the Pacific’, he was ‘the Expressionist *in* the Pacific’, applying an enhanced and assured post-impressionist mode of painting to local subjects. He was once famously described as ‘New Zealand’s van Gogh’.

Cairncross’s paintings of Wellington are highly valued today, primarily for the way they document a developing city. But while these paintings hold informational value, they are better thought of as interpretations of the physical world. *Boys And Boats* demonstrates how the real world provides a starting point for Cairncross’s art. It depicts a recognisable scene, but is more about the act of painting, and the process of looking at local subjects through eyes inflected by modern European art.

The subject gives way to an exuberant expressionism. It is a swirling mass of vigorous brushwork, raw colour, and thick paint that conveys a sense of energy and movement. The dramatic sky provides wind-blown impetus to the painting. Cairncross lets loose with gestural brushwork, setting up the contrasts of colour, form and light with which the painting is really concerned.

Cairncross’s contemporary, Len Lye, identified Wellington’s wind patterns and cloud formations as a decisive influence on his kinetic sculptures, which refuse to sit still and keep quiet. This painting, though not explicitly identified as Wellington, suggests that Cairncross has similar objectives to Lye – to capture motion and energy, but through the more static medium of oil paint.

Many of Cairncross’s street and beach scenes pull back to give a distanced view of their subject. *Boys And Boats* utilises a more casual, snapshot-like composition. The action spills out beyond the edges of the frame; a young boy walks across the front of the picture plane. Cairncross strives to capture how the act of looking can be conveyed through paint. This makes it tempting to see *Boys And Boats* as a painterly interpretation of the classic ‘day at the beach’ family photograph. Cairncross’s paintings work in just this manner, by forcing us to look at familiar objects and scenes in new ways.

Cairncross’s scenes of city and beach life were a painterly respite from the more conventional and realistic landscapes of ‘Kelliher’ (a prestigious prize for landscape painting) artists like Peter McIntyre. Kelliher painters cornered the popular market through this period, and were locked in battle with an emerging modern movement. By 1973, Cairncross’s fiery expressionism had lost the radical qualities it carried two decades earlier. But with paintings like *Boys And Boats*, Cairncross carved out a distinctive and productive space between these warring approaches.

Aaron Lister

Galleries and museums:

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.fernergalleries.co.nz

Web search:

Georges Braque

Len Lye

Peter McIntyre

Vincent van Gogh

