

# Charles Tole

1903–1988

Self-taught

Imagine you are looking out the window of a downtown building, across the roofs of shops. A tall skyscraper stands on the right, blocking your view. It's a bit misty or hazy, so everything is blurred slightly; patches of colour and light and dark. It's hard to make out the edges of each building. In fact, without the title we might not be sure this is some kind of cityscape.

Charles Tole has called his painting *Buildings*, so clearly he wants us to know it is a picture of something concrete in the world. But look at how he has painted it. The surface is really important. We are made aware that we are looking at an object made out of paint on board. The artist has built up a crusty surface with gesso, over which he has applied his paint. He wants the viewer to appreciate the areas of paint for their intrinsic qualities – colour, texture and shape – as well as their representational function in the painting, as the walls or roofs of buildings. In other words, Tole wants us to see two things at once: that this is a painting of buildings, and that it is a painting, oil paint on board.

Tole, who worked full-time as a civil servant, didn't start painting until he was in his 30s. Although he was essentially a part-time painter and didn't have any formal art training, he nevertheless took it very seriously and kept up to date with developments. His older brother, John Tole, was a painter, and through him Charles learnt about art, as well as making contact with the Auckland art scene.

John Weeks, who was an influential teacher at the Elam School of Fine Arts in Auckland from 1929 to 1954, had a big impact on Tole's painting. Weeks, who had studied in Europe and practised a Cubist style of painting, passed on a lot of knowledge to Tole, whose interest in Cubism would have been further stimulated by seeing the work of contemporaries like Colin McCahon and Louise Henderson, both of whom painted in a Cubist style during the 1950s.

Tole's interest in buildings and industrial subjects stemmed from his admiration for early Cubist paintings by Pablo Picasso

and Georges Braque, that featured houses and buildings in the landscape. Tole reduced his subjects to flat geometric forms, dividing his picture surface into overlapping and interlocking squares, rectangles and other shapes, which he then brought to life with colour and texture.

Although Tole was influenced by Cubism, he continued to experiment. *Buildings*, for instance, although roughly geometric, is much looser than pure Cubism. He was also very interested in colour, which in Cubism was usually less important than structure. In part that explains why he was attracted to Weeks's theories of colour, in which the artist was supposed to 'orchestrate the colour', choosing colours that related to each other so that no part of the picture was more prominent than the other parts. Bold, geometric subjects – like a cityscape – were perfectly suited to this way of painting.

## Damian Skinner

### Galleries and museums:

[www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz](http://www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz)  
[www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz](http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz)  
[www.tepapa.govt.nz](http://www.tepapa.govt.nz)  
[www.natlib.govt.nz](http://www.natlib.govt.nz)

### Web search:

Georges Braque  
 Louise Henderson  
 Colin McCahon  
 Pablo Picasso  
 John Weeks

