

Gordon Walters

1919–1995

Wellington Technical College (Art)

Gordon Walters is an artist who is famous for the optical games of his paintings, and if you look closely at *Study For Cover Of Ascent* you will see what this means. Start in the centre, a white vertical stripe with two black 'koru' shapes next to it. So far so easy – the white is the background and the black sits on top in the foreground. But keep going and it gets trickier. The black koru shapes sit next to white koru shapes and all of a sudden something weird happens, because black is no longer on top. It has become the background. This is the visual trick that Walters creates so well in his painting. Background becomes foreground in a shifting pattern that you can never pin down with your eyes.

The bar and circle that Walters uses in *Study For Cover Of Ascent* comes from a lot of different sources but an important one was Māori art, especially kōwhaiwhai, the patterns that are painted on the rafters of Māori meeting houses. When you look closely, Walters's shape doesn't actually look that Māori – it is too precise, too geometric. When Walters first showed these works in 1965 no one saw the connection, but over time people began to think of these as being a form of the koru, one of the elements in Māori art that is often described as the unfolding fern frond. Walters's paintings using this shape came to be called the *Koru Series*. There are hundreds of paintings using this basic element, and they are all different. Imposing limits on what you used in your painting and then showing how many effects you could create despite the limits was a favourite game of modern painters, and Walters is one of the best New Zealand examples of an artist who worked like this.

The title of this work says exactly what the painting is, and why it was done. Walters painted it as the cover design for *Ascent*, an art magazine that was published in the late 1960s, but this hasn't really affected the way it looks. Walters always painted his works carefully so that you couldn't see any brush marks, any signs that they were painted by hand.

Seeing how good they look as graphic designs, it isn't that surprising that Walters did some logos for businesses, and a lot of other designers have used his approach to make eye-catching designs for their clients. There's something about the way black and white merge together and something about the stylish use of Māori art in Walters's paintings that make them strongly New Zealand. In the recent debate about the New Zealand flag, Walters's *Koru Series* was proposed as a suitable replacement for the old flag – a modern emblem for New Zealand. No doubt *Ascent* wanted to suggest something similar when they got Walters to design the cover for their magazine.

Damian Skinner

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.dunedin.art.museum/collection.asp

www.govettbrewster.com

www.suecrockford.com

www.tepapa.govt.nz

Articles:

www.art-newzealand.com/Issues21to30/walters.htm

