



OWEN MERTON

EXPATRIATE
PAINTER

TE PUNA O WAIWHETU
CHRISTCHURCH ART GALLERY

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Watercolour

*Collection of the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu,
gift of James Jamieson Family, 1932.*

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Director's Foreword

Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu



Owen Merton was a Canterbury-born artist, and it was in Christchurch that he received his formative education. In 1904, like many New Zealanders prior and since, Merton made a decision to live and study overseas. In doing so, he took the potentially hazardous path that

was too often the lot of the expatriate – risking loss of profile at home and struggling for identity abroad. Despite setbacks, his direct experience of modern art movements internationally enabled him to develop a reputation as an accomplished artist, particularly as a landscape watercolourist.

Lack of exposure within New Zealand has meant that Merton has been more neglected than most expatriate painters of his generation. However, recent research on the artist has revealed a rich, complex life and career within the world of New York modernism. This exhibition, **Owen Merton – Expatriate Painter**, reconsiders a fine artist, for too long overlooked.

His son Thomas Merton, the celebrated Trappist monk and writer on Christian spirituality, once wrote of his father:

His vision of the world was full of balance, full of veneration for structure ... and therefore his paintings were without decoration or superficial comment. My father painted like Cézanne and understood the landscape the way Cézanne did.

Owen Merton – Expatriate Painter is the first significant exhibition of Merton's work since the tour of a private American collection through New Zealand in the late 1970s, and his first comprehensive retrospective. It is an overdue acknowledgement of Merton as a talented landscapist, illustrator, genre, marine and architectural painter.

I would like to thank Otago art historian and our guest curator Dr Roger Collins, whose extensive knowledge of the artist has helped create both the exhibition and this publication. Many private and public lenders, both in New Zealand and overseas, have been generous in providing access to their collections, and their assistance is greatly appreciated.

I commend the Gallery team and all those who have made this publication and exhibition possible, in particular Spicers Portfolio Management Ltd for their very welcome sponsorship.



P. Anthony Preston

Director, Christchurch Art Gallery
Te Puna o Waiwhetu

**Untitled (Houses, Trees
and Red Bank, Bermuda)**
(detail) 1923 (pp. 2–3)
Watercolour
*The Fletcher Trust Collection,
Auckland*

Owen Merton, France
1913–14
Photograph
*Collection of the Christchurch Art
Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu*



Owen Merton

Expatriate Painter

Caricaturist and illustrator, genre, marine, townscape and architectural painter, landscapist, a conservative Edwardian in his teens and early twenties who metamorphosed into a modernist of the New York School in his thirties – Owen Merton was all of these, yet in the general view he has remained an artist of, at best, two pictures: a genre subject, *A second-hand shop, Paris* (1910, p. 7), and a landscape, *Riwaka* (1908, p. 9), both reproduced in major books.¹

The generous coverage of his work by *Art in New Zealand* in 1930 is not easily accessible, and both a 1962 Auckland exhibition of expatriate painters, in which Merton was represented, and a collection of 45 works from a private American collection toured by the National Art Gallery in 1979, have left only shadowy memories, even though some works from this last show eventually entered New Zealand collections. Merton's presence on the art market has also been discreet.

Merton's career parallels those of many of his contemporaries: study in New Zealand and abroad, work in conventional sketching grounds, inclusion in overseas exhibitions, acceptance by dealer galleries, and regular appearances with art societies to maintain a New Zealand link.² The relationship of these 'expatriates' to the development of New Zealand art is ambiguous. Commentators occasionally suggest that they hold no relevance, especially since public acceptance here of their mature work was often fraught. Merton's story mirrors those of his friends – Frances Hodgkins and Raymond McIntyre became British artists, Maud Sherwood became an Australian painter – and Merton, at the peak of his career, became an American one.

Nevertheless, the expatriates as a group are so numerous, the gap created within the New Zealand art establishment by their departures so substantial and the advantages for the artists themselves so pro-

found, that they must be considered a major subset of New Zealand-born artists, however tenuous their ties eventually became.

Christchurch, 1887–1904

Owen Merton was born in Cashel Street, Christchurch, in 1887, into a family active in the church, education and the arts, in a community that admired and honoured musical skill and artistic accomplishment. His father was a musician and a school teacher, but Merton was arguably closer to his mother, who was supportive in both practical and financial ways, university-educated, widely read and also a teacher. He was educated at Christ's College, where his father taught.

Aged 16, Merton attended classes at the Canterbury University College School of Art.³ In the first term, he attended a life class taught by Charles Kidson on Wednesdays, and a drawing and painting class taken by Annie Elizabeth Abbott and Helen F. Gibson on Fridays. In the second, he added instruction in drawing and painting with the same instructors on Mondays, and maintained the same Wednesday and Friday classes. In the third term, the life class was replaced by another drawing and painting class, taught by A.W. Walsh.

Merton also seems to have spent a brief, unhappy time working in a Christchurch bank, but in 1904 he escaped from New Zealand to study in London, apparently at the invitation of his mother's sister, Maud Pearce.

London, 1904–07

Aunt Maud and her husband Ben, who had no children of their own, deserve special mention in even a brief outline of Merton's life. Their successive homes in West London became a stable base in his European life, though he often lived elsewhere in the city and spent much time on the Continent, and enabled him to maintain a

1 *A second-hand shop, Paris* (1910), reproduced in Gordon H. Brown & Hamish Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting 1839–1967*, Auckland, Collins, 1969; and *Riwaka* (1908), reproduced in Gil Docking, *Two Hundred Years of New Zealand Painting*, Wellington, A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1971.

2 Merton exhibited with art societies in Christchurch (1907–17, 1920, 1922, 1929), Dunedin (1907–10, 1913–17), Wellington (1907–17, 1927, 1929), Auckland (1908, 1910, 1912, 1914–15, 1927, 1929), Nelson (1911, 1917) and Palmerston North (1913). He had three solo exhibitions in Christchurch (1909, 1911, 1928), shared, in Wellington, a two-person show with Frances Hodgkins (1908) and a four-person show with D.K. Richmond, Esmond Atkinson and Percy Hodgkins (1913), and organised an auction of his paintings in Christchurch (1909). No firm evidence has been found of a putative solo exhibition in Christchurch in 1904.

3 Register, archives, University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts, 1903, and *Canterbury College, Christchurch School of Art* (prospectus for 1903).

**A second-hand shop,
Paris 1910**
Watercolour

Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa,
Wellington

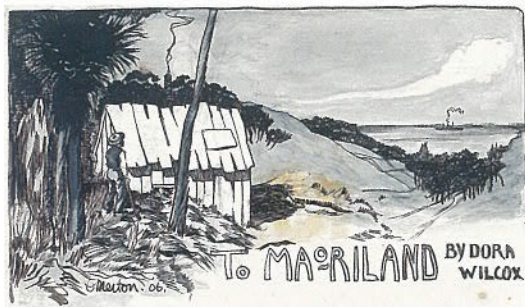


façade of respectability, though his emotional entanglements sometimes reduced him to devious expedients. Merton, and later his elder son, always found a generous welcome with the Pearces. Aunt Maud also funded Merton's studies, at least from his first visit in 1904 until his marriage in 1914. The Pearces took him on holiday with them on several occasions, and they gave him a home from the time when ill-health declared itself until he entered hospital in 1929.

Obscurity surrounds Merton's first period of overseas study, and no firm evidence has yet been found to confirm the claim that he studied from 1904 to 1906 at both the New School of Art in the Clareville Grove Studios, Gloucester Road (under John Hassall and Charles van Havermaet), and the Ealing Art School (under William Mouat Loudan).

At the New School of Art, he may have received 'Instruction in Drawing and Painting in Oil and Water-Colour from Life and Still Life; also Poster Design and Black-and-White'.⁴ The 'serious' watercolours of Hassall (1868–1948) are now largely forgotten, although once upon a time they earned him membership of the Royal Institute of Watercolour Painters, while his 'commercial' work – which included illustrations for children's books, advertisements and posters – has retained a respected place in the history of English art. Van Havermaet (fl. 1895–1911), who had left Belgium where his exhibition career had started in 1895 to follow his profession in London, was another of the School's principals. He showed figure and genre paintings at the Royal Academy from 1901 to 1911 and, according to Merton, eventually developed a lucrative line in portraiture.

Loudan (1868–1925) had been born of Scottish parents in London and was educated first at Dulwich College and then at the Royal Academy Schools. Loudan was known as both a genre painter and a portraitist, but



eventually he devoted himself almost entirely to the latter.⁵ Although it could be said that the title of Loudan's *Blue and Gold* (1909, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa) focuses on the painterly question of colour, the young woman sitting pensively in a shady woodland setting belongs to a Victorian sentimental genre, and the title of a second work in the same collection, *If no one ever marries me* (undated), belongs even more emphatically to that aesthetic. Furthermore, we can muse on the iconography of Royal Academy pictures, collections unknown, by van Havermaet such as *Sleep and his brother Death* (1906), *The end of the story* (1909) or *Something interesting* (1911).

If Merton did attend these schools, his two years there did not expose him to any innovative art, but rather confirmed tastes already familiar from his colonial background. He also demonstrated a particular affinity for caricature and illustrations, especially as exemplified in the periodical press. He executed some genre and figure subjects, such as a watercolour of his aunt at a writing desk and a drawing of himself working at the easel (both in private collections, Auckland), pencil studies of buildings and village scenes, as well as caricatures (Canterbury Public Library) and pen and ink scenes of farming life, two of which are explicitly linked to the New Zealand-born writer, Dora Wilcox. *To Maoriland by Dora Wilcox*

4 Advertisement for the New School of Art, *The Studio*, Vol. 38, No. 160, 14 July 1906, advertising p. XVII. On Hassall, see *Times*, 9 March 1948, p. 2.

5 Bénézit, Thieme-Becker & Algernon Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts: A Complete Dictionary [...] 1769 to 1904*, London, Henry Graves & Co. and George Bell & Sons, 1906; *Royal Academy Exhibitors 1905–1970*, East Ardesley, Wakefield, EP Publishing, 1981, 1982; *Who Was Who [...] during the period 1916–1928*, London, A. & C. Black, 1929, p. 645; Anne Kirker & Peter Tomory, *British Painting 1800–1900 in Australian and New Zealand Public Collections*, Sydney, The Beagle Press, 1997, p. 126.

To Maoriland by Dora Wilcox 1906 (above)
Pen and ink

Collection of the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, presented by the Merton Family, 1975

Riwaka 1908
Watercolour

Collection of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 1963



(1906, p. 8) and *Grass Seeding* by Dora Wilcox (1905, Christchurch Art Gallery) were presumably conceived to illustrate two of Wilcox's poems ('To Maoriland' was included in her second collection, *Rata and Mistletoe*),⁶ but no evidence has been found that they, or two other related drawings dated 1905, were ever published. During this time, Merton also travelled to various corners of southern England, and crossed to France at least once.

New Zealand, 1907–1909

Sailing home early in 1907, Merton sketched in Naples, Port Said, Suez, Colombo, Fremantle and Adelaide, and views of these places were eventually exhibited in New Zealand's four main centres – Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. Among the records of his encounter with the exotic East are a vibrant study of a *P. & O. Boat at Suez* (1907) and a major watercolour of a *Fruit Stall, Port Said* (1907, p. 11), painted on his arrival in New Zealand and exhibited in Wellington in October of the same year. In this confident and accomplished picture, a dignified Arab stands in the shade of his stall's awning, with a group of figures placed in bright light beyond.

In writing of this and similar works, some critics flaunted their familiarity with contemporary British painting by suggesting analogies with the work of the orientalist painters Frank Brangwyn (1867–1956) and Arthur Melville (1858–1904).⁷ The most obvious similarity with these artists lies in the choice of subject, but Merton also uses strong chiaroscuro, like Melville, and seems, on occasion, to enjoy working with the same range of rich colours as Brangwyn. Brangwyn's *Orange Market* (1897, collection unknown), which Merton could have known through a reproduction published in 1905,⁸ offers disconcerting similarities with *Fruit Stall, Port Said*. Two figures, partly in sun and partly shaded by an awning, are seated in the foreground with their stock of oranges on which the light falls; the awning of the stall creates a band of shadow

through the centre of the picture space, and more figures appear in a sunny open area beyond.

Merton also sketched and worked from the motif (in front of the subject or on-site), but did not range far: Wellington in the north, Motueka in the north-west, Christchurch in the south, Arthur's Pass in the west and perhaps Mount Cook in the south-west, define the limits of his travels. Some of these works, such as *In Hagley Park, Christchurch* (1908) and *Wellington from the Botanical Gardens* (1908), are rather subdued, but others display a sensuous joy in bright colour. *Riwaka*, with its large patch of blue-and-white sky and dominant bright gold and tan washes, and *Near Motueka* (1908) are examples.

Merton's colour received frequent favourable comment in these years. Works seen in Christchurch in June 1907, including *P. & O. Boat at Suez*, showed 'a fine appreciation of colour,' according to the *Press*'s reporter; 'The colouring is mostly pleasing,' said an unidentified Wellington newspaper in 1908; and 'Mr Merton, in the major portion of the collection, has been very effective in his use of colour,' observed the *Lyttelton Times* in February 1909.⁹ On another occasion, Merton was placed in a group of 'exponents of the atmospheric school [...] who are examples in the strongest way of the movement towards tone and colour'.¹⁰

Some individual works came in for more detailed comment, including *Fruit Stall, Port Said*. The *New Zealand Times* spoke of 'a blaze of colour' while the *Evening Post* took obvious pleasure in naming the colours: red, black, orange, brown, sapphire, white. Another Wellington newspaper used the same strategy, although in a curiously lower key – red, dark, swarthy, ruddy, brown, blue, deeper blue, white – but made a perceptive addition to its description by recognising that the white building was intended to throw 'the other colours into greater

6 London, George Allen, 1911.

7 *Evening Post*, 15 October 1907, p. 2; *Lyttelton Times*, 25 March 1908, p. 7.

8 Reproduced in W. Shaw Sparrow (ed.), *The Spirit of the Age: The Work of Frank Brangwyn ARA*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1905, plate 1.

9 *Press*, 11 June 1907, p. 7; unsourced clipping, 1908, Thomas Merton Centre (TMC), Kentucky; *Lyttelton Times*, 25 February 1909, p. 3.

10 *Lyttelton Times*, 24 March 1908, p. [8].

Fruit Stall, Port Said 1907
Watercolour

Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington



prominence'.¹¹ In 1908, the *Evening Post's* writer described another oriental subject, *The Stranger* (date and collection unknown), in the same way, but went beyond description to identify the importance of the colour of a heap of oranges which provided 'a strong note', 'a sort of chromatic staccato', recognised as one of Merton's traits.¹²

England, the Netherlands and France, 1909–10

Merton returned to England at the end of May 1909 and resumed study under van Havermaet, in whose house he lived until the following March. He worked hard, even incorporating into his programme a little over a month (mid-July to late August) of sketching in the Netherlands, where he revelled in picturesque buildings, sailing craft on the canals and scenes of everyday life.

Back in London, he then spent an extended period working indoors, which allowed him to develop more complex works such as 'a big study of a bit of the Studio' he was working on in mid-September. He also began the first of a series of carefully staged genre compositions for which he collected props and hired an appropriate model, in this instance a study of an old Jewish model in a shop 'full of pots pans, lamps & old pictures, & it ought to be fine, if we have the chance to keep him here'.¹³ Neither this work nor its immediate successor, the interior of a sweet shop, can now be located; the same applies to *Dutch Toy Shop* (date unknown) and *Second-hand bookshop* (date unknown), which were exhibited in London in the spring of 1910.¹⁴ The whereabouts of a further work, *At an Auction Sale* (1910, p. 13), are known, however. All three were described collectively in the *Christchurch Press* as belonging to the 'dim interior class, in which [Merton] is so successful'.¹⁵

In *At an Auction Sale*, Merton seems to display the range of his skills. The elderly gentleman's clothing – the sheen

of his top hat and the shine of his shoes, and the matt overcoat in a range of tones depending on whether the light falls directly or casts shadows – offers a fundamental contrast with the colours in the rest of the work: in the pictures, their frames and mounts, in some blue and white porcelain vases, and in the multi-coloured, patterned carpet. Merton further shows off his skill with textures by placing the carpet on a highly polished wooden floor that reflects nearby objects. The sensuous curves of the vases and the rectilinear rigour of the framed pictures contrast effectively.

These genre compositions doubtless owe something to the example of van Havermaet, who had exhibited paintings titled *The restorer* (date and collection unknown) and *The connoisseur* (date and collection unknown) at the Royal Academy in 1903 and 1904 respectively, but they also sit very easily in the general company of Edwardian painting. In 1910, Duncan Grant made a portrait of James Strachey (Tate Gallery) in which the subject sits cross-legged in a chair with a book on his lap. A folding screen encloses him in a small space created within the larger space of the room, which is alluded to by the pattern on the Persian carpet extending around the screen. For Frances Spalding, this work 'shows the Edwardian love of elegant restraint. The tonal shading and receding pattern in the Persian carpet help situate the figure within a convincing space. His relaxed pose finds an echo in the positioning of the motifs on the screen behind. The apparent informality distracts attention from the careful deliberation that guides the whole.'¹⁶ There is no 'elegant restraint' in *At an Auction Sale* – indeed, Merton's virtuosity is almost extroverted – but the painting does fulfil Spalding's other criteria.

By March 1910 it was time to move on, and Merton left London for the popular sketching ground of Saint Ives, in Cornwall, where he remained until the end of June. Once he got into his stride, he kept more than one work on the

11 *New Zealand Times*, 15 October 1907, p. [7]; *Evening Post*, 15 October 1907, p. 2; unsourced clipping, [October 1907], TMC.

12 *Evening Post*, 28 September 1908, p. 3.

13 Owen Merton (hereafter, OM) to his mother, Gertrude Merton (hereafter, GM), London, 23 September 1909, Humanities Research Centre (HRC), Texas.

14 Merton was elected to membership of the Royal Society of British Artists in March 1910, was represented in four successive exhibitions (1910–11), and resigned in March 1912.

15 *Press*, 4 May 1910, p. 4.

16 Frances Spalding, *British Art since 1900*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1986 (1989 reprint), p. 39 (repr. p. 40).

At an Auction Sale 1910
Watercolour

From the collection of the Ivanson Family, Auckland



go simultaneously – the outside view of a particular shop on grey days, for instance, and something else for sunny afternoons.¹⁷ His practice included drawing, working in oils and taking photographs, despite the incongruity this involved: 'I must say it looks extremely bad for a man who is supposed to be painting to be seen snapshotting the boats coming in in the evening sunlight. However he is barefaced enough to do it.'¹⁸ It is impossible to assess how important photographs were to his work, but it is possible that his barefacedness may have extended to the careful copying of his own, or others', images. Several of Merton's watercolours of St Ives, including *The Beach, St Ives, Cornwall* (1910) and *St Ives, Barnoon Hill* (1910, p. 15), correspond closely to early photographs of the town. The angles from which the subjects are taken, the massing of volumes and even the fall of shadows are the same in each.¹⁹

In July, he travelled to the Breton fishing town of Concarneau – like St Ives, a place much frequented by artists – to join a class taken by Frances Hodgkins.²⁰ She now became his ideal model of professional achievement and generosity as a teacher. Several of his Concarneau paintings were exhibited in New Zealand in the following years – one of them was even reproduced in a Canterbury Society of Arts catalogue – but none can now be located. Here, too, he was fascinated by the local fishing boats, the colours of their sails, the geometry of the buildings around the port and the challenge of capturing the effects of light on the water.

France, Spain, England and Italy, 1910–14

These weeks in Brittany, and a breathless holiday he took travelling in western France in August, converted Merton to the idea of formal study in one of the Parisian art schools. He settled in Paris in mid-September 1910, working first of all (1910–11) in the well-known

Académie Colarossi (where Hodgkins had taught the previous winter) and then (1911–13) under Canadian-born painter Percyval Tudor-Hart. The handful of paintings recorded from these years includes some townscapes, among them *Rue des Canettes* (1911, p. 17), which continues his exploration of three-dimensional space constructed by rigid architectural geometry, and three genre subjects that extend the theme of a carefully defined interior space inhabited by a single figure.

In mid-November 1910, Merton was sweating over a 'shop' painting, 'trying fearfully hard to make a good thing out of it' and 'praying for sense to see straight'.²¹ Rather unconventionally, he worked on a preliminary study in oil, before tackling the final version in watercolour, but things did not go easily: 'I am puzzling my brains over this last shop I am at – It is a problem to work at a thing like that in oil, full of small things, and anyhow it is only as a study for a water colour.'²² In the first days of December he went around 'all the low shops [...] getting things for my old man's shop'; by the 12th of that month, his oil study was well advanced and he also had 'an elaborate drawing all ready for the water colour', and on that day he had his model for the first time.²³ This became the work exhibited as *A second-hand shop, Paris*. Another subject he was working on in the same winter, and which he completed at about the same time, became the oil *Brittany Epicerie* (1910, private collection, New Zealand).²⁴

Hodgkins believed that Merton 'went off' as a painter after he switched from Colarossi's to Tudor-Hart's school. Nevertheless, Tudor-Hart was a charismatic teacher who would remain an influential figure through much of Merton's life. Merton followed him to London at the end of 1913, again working under his guidance in the late 1920s. In 1928, Tudor-Hart offered Merton a fixed annual payment in exchange for a selection of his output.

17 OM to GM, St Ives, 29 March 1910 (HRC).

18 OM to his sister, Ka Merton, St Ives, 10 May 1910 (HRC).

19 See Cyril Noall, *The Book of St Ives* (Chesham, Barracuda Books, 1977) and *Yesterday's Town St Ives* (Buckingham, Barracuda Books, 1979). The former contains a photograph of Barnoon Hill, the latter one of the fish market that corresponds to *The Beach, St Ives, Cornwall*.

20 See Roger Collins, 'The Summer of 1910: Hodgkins, Merton and Concarneau', *Art New Zealand*, 99, Winter 2001, pp. 94–97.

21 OM to GM, Paris, 14 November 1910 (HRC).

22 OM to GM, Paris, 21 November 1910 (HRC).

23 OM to GM, Paris, 6 and 12 December 1910 (HRC).

24 Probably the work later exhibited in New Zealand as *A Brittany Interior* (1913) and *Shop, Concarneau, Brittany* (1922 and 1927).

St Ives, Barnoon Hill 1910
Watercolour
Collection of the Christchurch Art
Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, gift of
James Jamieson Family, 1932



Merton spent the summer of 1911 in a group led by Tudor-Hart, painting in the Spanish Basque country where he continued to study architectural forms, usually, but not exclusively, expressed in a bright palette. In the coastal town of Pasajes, for instance, he was attracted to 'Victor Hugo's house', as it was called. The French writer had once stayed there and a commemorative plaque recorded the fact. 'Victor Hugo's house is a delight in itself,' Merton told his mother. 'Quite apart from its sentimental interest, every stone in it is charming. I don't believe there is a house in Fontarabia as beautiful, and I hope I shall have at least one thing of it done.' He then confessed that he was inclined to 'loaf horribly' but, with an active professional conscience, admitted that 'the sight of some old houses or other [would] be sufficient to get [his] blood up'.²⁵

These statements are consistent with the watercolours from this summer's sketching that have been located – all are studies of buildings – although there is evidence that he painted some landscapes too. The 'architectural' theme had occupied an important place in Merton's work up to this point, not simply as an excuse for more-or-less exotic or romantic meditations, but as one way of structuring experience, of finding order in the wider world.

In the summer of 1912, Merton accompanied Tudor-Hart to two sketching grounds in England, producing, among other things, studies of farm buildings and haystacks, and some moody landscapes. *Udimore, Sussex* (1912), in which Merton's preoccupation with the construction of objects in space addresses the awkward angularity of a windmill, exemplifies the best of his work from this summer.²⁶

Meanwhile, during the Spanish interlude, Merton had met an American art student named Ruth Jenkins, whom he would later marry. The pair spent from early April to late June 1913 together, travelling, painting and studying art in the south of France and Italy – mostly south of

Naples on the Amalfi coast. Merton stayed on after Ruth travelled to New York in June, returning to London only in early October.

He needed to produce a substantial body of saleable work in these months, as a preparation for his future professional life, but first he had to adapt his vision to the light in this unfamiliar landscape: 'The difficulty of tuning one's eyes to the new light is quite enough to make one waste six or eight weeks.'²⁷ By July, his eyes were 'tuned' and he realised how much he felt at home in this environment: 'I am a good man when I am down in the South in the strong light & colour, & the air & the sea bathing keep me fresh.'²⁸

Merton was already a spontaneous colourist, as both *Riwaka* and *Near Motueka* demonstrate, and his studies with Tudor-Hart had made him very conscious of the scientific side of his craft. Too conscious perhaps, for he seems to have become entangled in ideas and hampered in his painting by earnest attempts to master theoretical issues. Nevertheless, he was slowly working through this problem: 'I think I am learning a lot about colour. The theory that I have driven into my head actually simplifies things enormously.'²⁹

But he was more than a conscientious student unpicking ideas. He saw the world as a highly coloured place, and when he took the time he could paint a word-picture every bit as rich and sensual as those he made in watercolour.

[...] when I climb any height at all, I believe I am looking at the most wonderful landscape I have ever seen. The rock of the hills, on which it is all built up, is red, and orange, and neutral colours, that is set down on a wonderful smooth plain of blue violet & grey, & all upon the hills which are scarred by yellow & red bands of roads & walls, and the thickest green foliage, & growths of plants, (the way the lemons grow so

25 OM to GM, Pasajes, 17 October 1911 (HRC).

26 Merton exhibited in Paris twice (Salon des Indépendants in 1913 and 1914). In the same period, he exhibited once in Liverpool (Walker Art Gallery, Forty-First Autumn Exhibition of Modern Art, 1911) and twice in London (New English Art Club, 1913; International Society of Sculptors Painters & Gravers, Spring Exhibition, April – May, 1914).

27 OM to his sister, Gwynn Merton, Amalfi, 21 May 1913 (HRC).

28 OM to GM, Amalfi, 2 July 1913 (HRC).

29 OM to GM, Amalfi, 20 May 1913 (HRC).

Rue des Canettes, Paris 1911
Watercolour
Private collection, Tekapo



upright, & strong pushing, was new to me) cover tightly everything over, & solid houses stand wherever they can manage to in the crush. Green here is wonderful because it is in the midst of so much of the opposite colours [...]³⁰

The solitary Italian watercolour that has been located, a view of *Amalfi* (1913, p. 19), seems to arise logically from preceding works, although the architectural components are here subservient to the forceful landscape. The artist's reflective processes are revealed by a delicate infrastructure of pencil lines that is dominated by contrasting free washes of strong colour and a network of nervous calligraphic lines. Areas of orange and the touches of intense red acknowledge the Mediterranean sun and heat.

Meanwhile, in New York where she was spending the winter with her family, Ruth organised an informal (and unsuccessful) exhibition of her fiancé's watercolours at her parents' home on Long Island, in December 1913.

South of France and New York, 1914–21

The young couple married in London in April 1914 and settled in Prades, in the French Pyrenees, where they lived until poverty forced them to retreat to the United States in mid-1916. By this time, their family had grown: their first son, Tom, was born in January 1915 (Tom later redefined himself as Thomas in the 1930s). A small number of Merton's paintings dating from this period were subsequently exhibited in the United States and New Zealand.

Life in the United States was difficult. There were tensions between the Mertons and Ruth's parents: the young couple was unwilling to accept money from their parents, who, in turn, felt frustrated. Ruth wrote articles on domestic architecture and interior design; they both worked as farm labourers for a time; Owen played the piano in a local cinema and the organ in a local church,

set himself up in business as a landscape gardener and designer, and of course painted. Within a short time of reaching New York, he had joined one artists' organisation, and from 1917 to 1925 exhibited his works at least twenty-five times in group and solo exhibitions, with artists' groups and in dealer galleries, sometimes in prestigious curated shows alongside the leading American modernists. However, although numerous works from this period are known by their titles as reported in exhibition catalogues and press reports, only one can now be located.

A second son, John Paul, was born in 1919. A short time later in 1920, Ruth fell gravely ill and was diagnosed as having cancers of the stomach and colon. It is clear that Tom returned to live with his grandparents in New York around this time, and likely John Paul too. It is plausible that Owen, and perhaps Ruth for a short time before she was finally admitted to Bellevue, the major public hospital in Manhattan's Lower East Side, also moved with their children. Ruth died in October 1921, after which it seems Merton was freer in his movements, although he remained aware of his responsibilities to his sons.

Bermuda, 1921–23

In the winter of 1921/22 Merton left Tom and John Paul with their grandparents and travelled to Bermuda to paint. While there, he formed a friendship with an American couple – the modernist poet and novelist Evelyn Scott and her husband, Cyril Kay Scott.

Merton returned to the United States in the summer of 1922, part of which he spent at Cape Cod with one of his sisters, visiting from New Zealand, and his son Tom. At just age three, John Paul remained with his grandparents when Merton went back to Bermuda in October 1922, this time accompanied by Tom, and painted watercolours original in their composition and remarkable for

30 OM to GM, *Amalfi*, 21 August 1913 (HRC).

Amalfi 1913
Pencil and watercolour
Private collection, Dunedin



their intense colours. During this time, Merton became Evelyn Scott's lover. They were to live together until mid-1925, in a passionate but tempestuous relationship; they contemplated marriage but Tom's antagonism to his de facto stepmother scuttled that possibility.

In general, Merton's surviving works from the years before 1914 demonstrate a concern with the construction of three-dimensional objects in space – mostly buildings but sometimes landscapes; however, from then to the early 1920s, too few works have been located to allow close examination of the development of his work.

When the sequence of evidence resumes, with a group of major, innovative works painted in Bermuda, Merton has undergone a profound transformation. His colour is now incandescent (as it had been in *Amalfi*), but the picture space is compressed and the surface of the sheet is emphasised by occasional patches of uncoloured paper. Everything contributes to a modernist concern with the picture plane. He had spent several years away from Tudor-Hart's influence; he had been living and painting on the fringes of the New York School, sharing exhibitions with painters such as John Marin (with whom he seems to have most affinity), Charles Demuth and Marsden Hartley; and he had met Scott, whose ideas and example must have contributed to his evolution.

Merton's constant concern had been to find a firm structure for his pictures, and most of the island paintings feature a straight horizon, sometimes interrupted by low hills, usually placed about halfway up the picture. The broad skies are pulled down vertically, the fore- and middle-grounds are stacked up in bands, and three-dimensional illusion is sacrificed to an emphatically flat picture plane. It is almost as if, especially in paintings such as *Burning Fields and Cold Motion of Stillness* (1922–23, p. 21), he were trying to illustrate the following description in Scott's autobiographical memoir, *Escapade*, completed in Bermuda and published in July 1923.

The sky, without a sun, is a formless solution of light, and the horizon rises against it and is flat like a wall with a deep-colored steel edge. Straight up over the house, clouds, dull purple, move across the zenith with vast unhurried rapidity. The sun bursts open the sky. On the cold ocean it makes a pool of hot glass. The horizon line, momentarily illuminated, is thin like white-hot wire stretched taut.³¹

Indeed, Scott would later make the plausible claim that she had influenced Merton's art: 'Actually the constant contact with my much clearer mentality has given continuity [sic] to his intuitions and sharpened his own mental sense in art.'³²

Some of the Bermuda paintings have the matter-of-fact titles indicating place that Merton used throughout his career. Others, however, are composed in a poetical style quite unlike his standard practice: the instances in this exhibition are *Burning Fields and Cold Motion of Stillness*, *The Road of Sky – Laughter passing below* (1922–23) and *Bastion of the day with assaulting trees* (1923).

The genesis of the titles may lie in Merton's association with Scott, for they are similar to descriptions in her novel *The Golden Door* (1925), also written in Bermuda. One of the book's striking features is Scott's use of incongruity or paradox in her landscape descriptions, what another writer would one day call 'extraordinary marriages between words that [are] far apart'.³³ She writes of a 'glittering agitated' silence, converging 'rays of silence', 'the roar of the wind [sweeping] through the bright silence of the fields', clouds sweeping by in 'static haste', wet fields of a 'cold burning green' colour, lights burning 'with a glowing stillness' and twilight rising 'in a cold grey stillness'.³⁴ The title *Burning Fields and Cold Motion of Stillness* combines several of these descriptive details. Scott's description of 'night [rushing] down from the sky [...] with a roar of darkness' echoes *The Road of Sky – Laughter passing below*.³⁵

31 Evelyn Scott, *Escapade*, New York, Carroll & Graf, 1987, p. 96.

32 Evelyn Scott to her friend, the writer Lola Ridge, [New York], 18 July 1925, Lola Ridge Papers (LRP), Massachusetts.

33 Andreï Makine, *Dreams of My Russian Summers*, translated from the French by Geoffrey Strachan, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1997, p. 29.

34 Evelyn Scott, *The Golden Door*, New York, Thomas Selzer, 1925, pp. 87, 87, 92, 105, 147, 204 and 251 respectively.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 37.



France and Algeria, 1923–25

In mid-1923, Merton left Bermuda in the company of the Scotts and another friend for the south of France. Later that year, Merton and the Scotts journeyed to Algeria, returning to France in April of the following year, at which time Cyril Scott left.

The rugged Algerian landscape, echoed in hard-edged fortifications and stone embankments, inspired one approach in which he used strong, ready-made forms as the basis of his pictures – for example, a view in Laghouat uses a stone wall passing along one side of the picture-space. At his most audacious, in works such as *Village Pool with Palms* (1924, p. 23), the emphasis given to diverging lines in the landscape recalls the feverish dynamism John Marin made visible in some of his New York cityscapes. The tranquil inertia of a classic tourist view is transformed into an explosion of energy made even more dramatic by the contrasting peaceful sensuality of graceful, almost calligraphic, date palms. He also continued to emphasise the picture plane by leaving areas of white paper, in pictures such as *Street scene and figures* (1924).

Painting in the southern French city of Béziers in the winter of 1924/25, Merton at first continued to explore his lyrical manner, as demonstrated in *Cathedral from the River, Béziers* (1924–25, p. 26). This work, with a geometric infrastructure deftly painted in by brush, also foreshadows an evolution towards a more cerebral approach. Drawings of Béziers cathedral and of a view down a steeply plunging street present precisely drawn three-dimensional townscapes, and two finished versions of the street-scape build on their grid-like base with careful patches of colour. This Cézannesque approach will reappear in views painted in central France in 1927.

In May and June 1925, Merton had the first of two solo exhibitions at London's Leicester Galleries;³⁶ in June he

was included in a group show at New York's New Gallery; and in November he had a second solo exhibition in New York's Daniel Galleries. He made a brief visit to New York, before returning to Europe in August 1925, again accompanied by his son Tom, who had been living with his grandparents since 1923.

France and England, 1925–31

They settled in the small town of Saint-Antonin-Noble-Val in south-west France where Tom attended primary school until he had learned enough French, and then went as a boarder to the secondary school in the regional centre, Montauban. Merton painted in various parts of southern France, and made short visits to London and Paris, but anchored himself in Saint-Antonin by buying two pieces of land on which he built a house.

In the winter of 1926/27, part of which was spent in the mountains of central France, Merton was still wrestling with an approach to landscape derived from the work of Cézanne. *Convent in Snow, Murat, France* (1926, p. 25) shows a street curving down and to the right between buildings represented by simple, two-dimensional geometrical shapes. The picture space is compressed by a cluster of buildings in the centre of the image, which culminates in a church tower rising above the village and cutting the horizon-line of a hill in the middle distance. In a similar way, Cézanne's *Bibémus Quarry* (1898, Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pennsylvania) leads the viewer's eye down a foreground slope into a small valley that runs to the right, while a rocky hillside opposite closes the picture space. In the centre, a tall tree rises above the crest of the further hill, but Cézanne's oil affirms the picture plane and denies illusionistic space in a way that Merton's watercolour does not. However schematically they are presented, Merton places his buildings in a three-dimensional space. In

³⁶ The second show at the Leicester took place in May 1928. Other gallery shows in London in the 1920s including work by Merton were *Contemporary English Water-Colours*, St George's Gallery, October 1925, and *Contemporary English Water-Colours*, St George's Gallery, October 1926.

Village Pool with Palms 1924
Watercolour
Private collection, Dunedin



Street in Snow, Murat, France (1927), Merton has used the same simplification of forms in a composition that focuses on a single building set in a well-defined space; in comparison, Cézanne has pulled the building in *Le Cabanon de Jourdan* (1906, private collection, Milan) much closer to the picture plane and made it impossible for the viewer to perceive it in three-dimensional terms. By August 1927, Merton was defiantly aware that his New York contacts would not approve of the stylistic shift he was making: 'I am equally sure that Daniel etc will think [my works] have gone off – and I am glad they will – because I have jolly well outgrown their "pepper in the eyes" school.'³⁷ Most dramatically, he reverted from an audacious emphasis on the picture surface to an illusionistic picture space, and from fluid, exuberant calligraphy to meticulous draughtsmanship, with extensive, sometimes even monochrome washes, perhaps the 'economy of [...] colour' noticed by the Christchurch Press in 1928. One such work is the view of the Vieux Port in *Marseilles* (1927).

There are two possible (and simultaneous) explanations for this change. On the one hand, he had moved away from the stimulus of the New York art world and Evelyn Scott's challenging intellect, and on the other had renewed contact with Tudor-Hart and conservative trends in contemporary British painting.

This about-turn may also explain why Merton had works exhibited in New Zealand in 1927, after a five-year gap, although financial desperation must not be ruled out as another explanation. *The Little Shop of Concarneau* (1910) (which had, in fact, already been shown in Wellington in 1913 and Christchurch in 1922) and a new drawing of Chartres Cathedral may have appealed to

the New Zealand public in a way that the Bermudian, Algerian and Béziers works would not.³⁸

After 1928, Merton's movements became even more erratic as he crossed the Channel several times, taking Tom with him to England where he lived in boarding schools and with the Pearces in London. In June 1929, he returned to Saint-Antonin to sell his house – a transaction which was concluded a year later. During this time, his painting suffered from what were probably the advancing symptoms of a terminal brain tumour. After an increasingly desperate journey back to England in early July, followed by periods of convalescence in London and Scotland, he was admitted to London's Middlesex Hospital in August or September 1929. He died there in January 1931.

Roger Collins

A Note on Sources

Apart from biographical details implied by the works themselves, the principal sources for Merton's life are:

Catalogues of New Zealand, British, French and American art societies, art galleries and dealer galleries with which he exhibited, and press notices;

Archives of Christ's College, the Canterbury University College School of Art, and the Royal Society of British Artists (Tate Gallery, London);

Letters to and from his family and friends, and letters between his friends (Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Houston, Texas (HRC); Bassett Collection, Massachusetts; Thomas Merton Center, Louisville, Kentucky (TMC); Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC (AAA); Lola Ridge Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Massachusetts (LRP)).

37 OM to Reginald Marsh, Saint-Antonin, 11 August 1927 (Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC).

38 Nothing painted between the time he first arrived in New York in 1916 and 1925 (when he finally returned to Europe) was shown in New Zealand in his lifetime.

Convent in Snow, Murat, France 1926
Watercolour

Collection of the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, presented by the citizens of Christchurch, 1941

Cathedral from the River, Béziers 1924–25 (p. 26)
Watercolour

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery

Street with the Bull-ring, Béziers (detail) 1925 (p. 27)
Pencil and watercolour

Collection of the Hocken Library Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago, Dunedin









List of Works

The list of works reflects their grouping in the exhibition.

Early Works, 1905–12

Illustration, Exoticism and Genre

Bringing Out The Seed 1905

Pen and ink, 91 x 252 mm

Collection of the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, presented by the Merton Family, 1975

To Maoriland by Dora Wilcox 1906

Pen and ink, 125 x 224 mm

Collection of the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, presented by the Merton Family, 1975

Note: Wilcox's *Verses from Maoriland* were published in London by George Allen in 1905.

P. & O. Boat at Suez 1907

Watercolour, 310 x 248 mm

Private collection, Auckland

Note: Exhibited Christchurch 1907, Wellington 1908.

Fruit Stall, Port Said 1907

Watercolour, 545 x 379 mm

Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington

Notes: Exhibited Wellington 1907.

In the "Fruit Seller, Port Said" (92) the artist is almost Brangwynian in conception, colour and design. The fruit seller, a tall Negro in red burnoose and black fez, stands in the shade of the awning over his stall of oranges – which, by the way, are a trifle too brown – and from out of the cool foreground a glimpse is caught of the sapphire sea, flecked with white sails, and the opulent sunlight over all. *Evening Post*, 15 October 1907, p. 2

Basque Houses (detail) 1911

Watercolour

Collection of The Suter Te Aratoi o Whakatu, Nelson

The Studio, West Kensington 1909–10

Watercolour, 355 x 258 mm

Private collection, New Zealand

At an Auction Sale 1910

(Also known as *The Connoisseur*)

Watercolour, 388 x 332 mm

From the collection of the Ivanson Family, Auckland

Notes: Exhibited London 1910, Auckland and Wellington 1912.

The special quality of Merton's work has always been its slickness. This is again specially pronounced in his "Old Gentleman at an Auction Sale" (45). There is here a far away suggestion of Walter Gay interior but at the risk of being captious I would question the accuracy of the drawing. Are the ceramic treasures on which the venerable connoisseur – his very pose is delightfully suggestive of blended curiosity and admiration – on a floor level with the foreground, or are they on a space at the head of a flight of stairs? There is something radically wrong in this picture.

New Zealand Times, 15 October 1912, p. 2

A second-hand shop, Paris 1910

(Also known as *The Old Curiosity Shop*)

Watercolour, 533 x 622 mm

Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington

Notes: Exhibited London 1911, Auckland and Wellington 1912.

Meanwhile I am puzzling my brains over this last shop I am at – It is a problem to work at a thing like that in oil, full of small things, and anyhow it is only as a study for a water colour.

Owen Merton to Gertrude Merton, Paris, 21 November 1910

Today have been round all the low shops [...] getting things for my old man's shop.

Owen Merton to Gertrude Merton, Paris, 6 December 1910

I got my old model this morning and am well on with an oil study of the things & have an elaborate drawing all ready for a water colour. But all the same, seem to be getting nothing done at all.

Owen Merton to Gertrude Merton, Paris, 12 December 1910

"A Second-hand Shop, Paris" inclines towards the impressionistic, but the treatment is quite appropriate to the subject, having that dusty, jaded appearance one usually associates with such an establishment.

New Zealand Herald, 18 May 1912, p. 5

The "Parisian Curiosity Shop" (No. 75), has been bought for the permanent collection of the Academy. There is an immense amount of work in the detail, but the general effect is morne and flat. The figure does not, as it ought to do, dominate its surroundings, but seems to have been put in as an afterthought.

New Zealand Times, 15 October 1912, p. 2

The Little Shop of Concarneau 1910

Oil, 535 x 447 mm

Private collection, New Zealand

Notes: Exhibited London 1911, Christchurch 1922 and Auckland 1927.

The only New Zealand artists in the exhibition of the Royal Society of British Artists this year are Mr E. W. Christmas R.B.A., and Mr Owen Merton R.B.A., the clever young Christchurch painter. Mr Merton's pictures are both French scenes, one a shop interior (his special forte) in Paris, and the other in Brittany.

Clipping from unidentified newspaper

Among the artists whom one would gladly see more

largely represented is Mr Owen Merton, whose

contribution to this year's exhibition consists of one

picture only, "Shop, Concarneau, Brittany" (40), a low-toned, well-painted work reminiscent of Van der Velden, and full of fine quality.

Press, 8 April 1922, p. 9

New Zealand, 1907–09

In Hagley Park, Christchurch 1908

Watercolour, 350 x 245 mm

Collection of the Hocken Library Uare Taoka o

Hākēna, University of Otago, Dunedin

Wellington from the Botanical Gardens 1908

Watercolour, 280 x 222 mm (irregular)

Collection of the Hocken Library Uare Taoka o

Hākēna, University of Otago, Dunedin

Riwaka 1908

Watercolour, 223 x 285 mm
Collection of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 1963

Near Motueka 1909

Watercolour, 280 x 216 mm
Collection of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

Europe and the United States, 1909–21**The Beach, St Ives, Cornwall 1910**

Watercolour, 229 x 306 mm
Collection of the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, presented by Dora Wilcox Moore NSW, 1946

St Ives, Barnoon Hill 1910

Watercolour, 188 x 222 mm
Collection of the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, gift of James Jamieson Family, 1932

Rue des Canettes, Paris 1911

Watercolour, 546 x 439 mm
Private collection, Tekapo

Notes: Exhibited Wellington 1912 and Christchurch 1913. Mr Merton's two large Parisian street scenes may be accurate enough topographically, but they savor [sic] of mere book-illustration. There is no special interest or beauty in them, no contrasted light or shade – all is dull and monotonous.

New Zealand Times, 15 October 1912, p. 2

Mr Merton's best work is shown in the "Rue des Canettes" (No. 182), which is distinctly good of its kind, and the "Church of St. Marie, Paris," another purely architectural study.

Press, 1 April 1913, p. 8

Victor Hugo's House, Pasajes, Spain 1911

Watercolour, 436 x 262 mm
Private collection, Auckland

Notes: Exhibited Wellington 1913 and Dunedin 1917.

Victor Hugo's house is a delight in itself. Quite apart from its sentimental interest, every stone in it is charming. I don't believe there is a house in Fontarabia as beautiful, and I hope I shall have at least one thing of it done.

Owen Merton to Gertrude Merton, Pasajes, Spain, 17 October 1911 (Original: Humanities Research Centre (HRC), Texas)

Basque Houses 1911

Watercolour, 308 x 250 mm
Collection of The Suter Te Aratoi o Whakatu, Nelson

Udimore, Sussex 1912

Watercolour, 357 x 470 mm
Private collection, Auckland

Note: A variant of this composition is held in another private New Zealand collection.

Amalfi 1913

Pencil and watercolour, 363 x 278 mm
Private collection, Dunedin

Long Island Landscape 1919

Watercolour, 660 x 559 mm (framed)
Collection of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky, USA

Bermuda, 1921–23**Burning Fields and Cold Motion of Stillness 1922–23**

Watercolour, 455 x 625 mm
Collection of A.J. & S.M. Wakefield, Christchurch

Bermuda 1922

Watercolour, 532 x 730 mm
Collection of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, New York, USA

Note: Exhibited New York 1922 and 1924.

Bermuda 1922–23

Watercolour, 762 x 610 mm (framed)
Collection of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky, USA

Barge 1923

Watercolour, 405 x 612 mm
Private collection, London, UK

The Road of Sky – Laughter passing below 1922–23

Watercolour
Private collection, Auckland

Bastion of the day with assaulting trees 1923

Watercolour, 420 x 440 mm
Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington

Untitled (Houses, Trees and Red Bank, Bermuda) 1923

Watercolour, 465 x 577 mm
The Fletcher Trust Collection, Auckland

Interior 1922–23

Watercolour, 414 x 550 mm
Turkington Collection, Auckland

Note: The decorative panel hanging above the fireplace is either Merton's watercolour panel or the patchwork hanging conceived by Evelyn Scott.

I have done, with Merton's cooperation, the most luid [sic] living room you ever saw. I designed it and he helped me with the planning of a lamp shade, a water color panel on the wall, and the designing of a patchwork hanging which I have conceived but was finding most awfully hard to execute.

Evelyn Scott to Lola Ridge, Bermuda, 1922–23 (Lola Ridge Papers, Smith College, Massachusetts, USA)

France and Algeria, 1921–31**Algerian landscape with trees 1923**

Watercolour, 546 x 521 mm (framed)
Collection of Tim Hoover and Rusty C. Moe, Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Village Pool with Palms 1924

Watercolour, 352 x 924 mm
Private collection, Dunedin

Street scene and figures 1924

Watercolour, 315 x 250 mm
Collection of the Hocken Library Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago, Dunedin

Village ensemble – Banyuls-sur-mer 1924

Watercolour, 380 x 452 mm
Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington

Note: Probably exhibited London 1925.

Cathedral from the River, Béziers 1924–25

Watercolour, 555 x 472 mm
Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery
 Notes: Formerly in the collection of Sir Michael Sadler. Exhibited in London 1925. Another version of this composition is in a New Zealand private collection.

The effectively piled up mass of "Cathedral from the River, Béziers" (24), proves that his severe economy of treatment is not inconsistent with an appreciation of volumes, design, and construction.

Frank Rutter, *Sunday Times*, 31 May 1925, p. 5

Cathedral, Béziers 1924–25

Pencil, 559 x 610 mm (framed)

Collection of Dr Paul M. Pearson, USA

Note: The contrasting views of the same subject seem to mark Merton's transition from the lyrical calligraphy he had used in Algeria, in Banyuls and even in Béziers when he first settled there, to the more rigorous, Cézannesque manner that he explored in 1925–27.

Street with the Bull-ring, Béziers 1925

Pencil, 560 x 367 mm

Collection of the Hocken Library Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago, Dunedin

Street with the Bull-ring, Béziers 1925

Pencil and watercolour, 545 x 343 mm

Collection of the Hocken Library Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago, Dunedin

Street with the Bull-ring, Béziers 1925

Watercolour, 470 x 610 mm (framed)

Collection of Dr Paul M. Pearson, USA

Convent in Snow, Murat, France 1926

Watercolour, 326 x 333 mm

Collection of the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, presented by the citizens of Christchurch, 1941

Notes: Possibly exhibited London 1928; exhibited Auckland and Christchurch 1929.

The "Convent in Snow, Murat" (383) [is] an astonishingly clever piece of æsthetic abstraction. This is no mere picture of buildings prettified by snow – it is the very soul of bleakness and desertion.

Professor J. Shelley in an unidentified newspaper

Mr. Owen Merton, a New Zealander who is now established in England, has three pictures in the show. He is definitely of the moderns, and his effects are gained by sweeping emphasis on outstanding points rather than consideration of normal detail. There is, for the uninitiated, a difficulty in coming to terms with such painting. "Convent in the Snow" and "Murat, France" are both works in which his methods are exploited. They are low-toned, and those who like them will probably have difficulty in impressing sceptics with their significance. *The Sun*, 4 June 1929, p. 7

Street in Snow, Murat, France 1927

Watercolour, 361 x 244 mm

Private collection, Auckland

Note: Possibly exhibited London 1928; exhibited Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington 1929.

Marseilles 1927

Drawing and wash, 464 x 540 mm

Collection of the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, presented by Miss M. L. Grigg, 1932

Notes: Possibly exhibited London 1928.

The Marseilles [picture] was the view from the room in a little hotel where we stayed on the Vieux Port, and I remember lying around reading Kipling's Just-So stories while Father was painting at the window.

Thomas Merton to Sister Therese Lentfoehr, 20 December 1954, in Robert E. Daggy (ed.), *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, New York, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989, p. 218

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Back cover: **Bastion of the day with assaulting trees** 1923
Watercolour

*Collection of the Museum of New Zealand
Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington*



OWEN MERTON

EXPATRIATE PAINTER

11 JUNE – 26 SEPTEMBER 2004

This full colour publication has been produced by the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu to support the exhibition *Owen Merton – Expatriate Painter*, the first comprehensive retrospective exhibition of paintings by landscape watercolourist Owen Merton (1887–1931), revealing the rich and complex career of an accomplished painter.



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