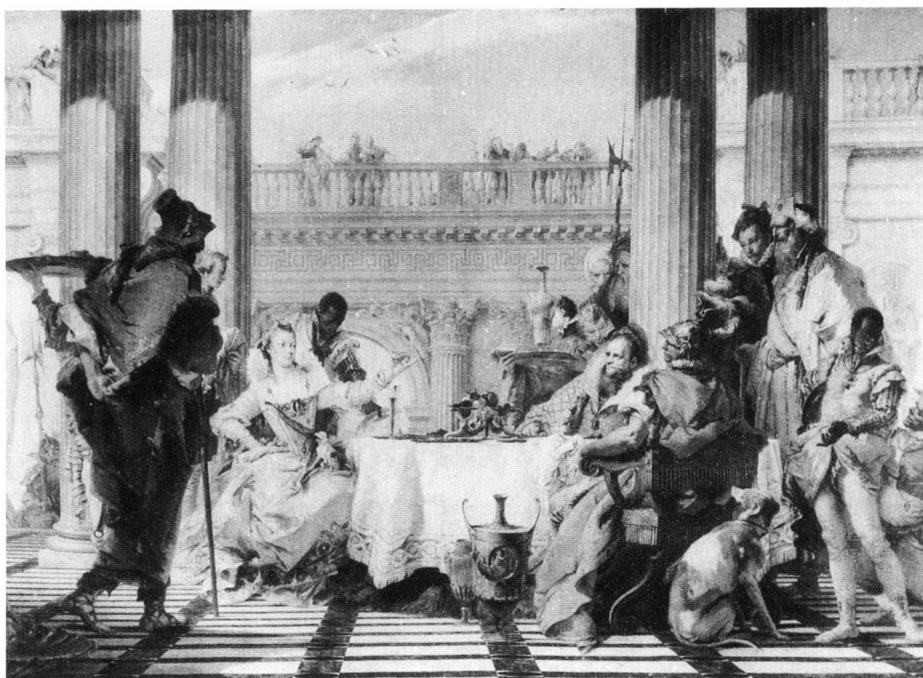




THE QUARTERLY BULLETIN OF THE  
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Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, *The Banquet of Cleopatra*, oil on canvas, 97" x 139". Felton Bequest, 1933.

BY THEIR DECISION to lend Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's *Banquet of Cleopatra* to the Royal Academy Winter Exhibition of 1954-55, the Trustees of this Gallery gave overseas experts the opportunity of renewing acquaintance with a work which had not been seen in Europe for over twenty years.<sup>1</sup> The resulting publications have been of inestimable benefit to the prestige of the Melbourne collection.

The theme of the exhibition was "European Masters of the 18th Century." In his introduction to the catalogue, Sir Gerald Kelly revealed the important place held in it by the Melbourne work: "A lovely selection of Tiepolo's brilliant and enchanting sketches, together with the great picture from Melbourne, must serve as a token representation of this aspect of Italian Art."<sup>2</sup>

Not only for visitors to the Royal Academy, but for English art lovers generally, the showing of the Tiepolo was an important event. In the *Connoisseur* of 1955,<sup>3</sup> Mr. Francis Watson pointed to the lack of easel paintings by Tiepolo in British Public Galleries and continued: "Fortunately one of Tiepolo's largest and most splendid oil paintings has been on public exhibition in London for the better part of the year."

The painting had been well known to the Tiepolo experts at the beginning of this century.<sup>4</sup> During its brief stay in England in 1932-33, it was published in the *Burlington Magazine* by Mr. Roger Fry,<sup>5</sup> who investigated its history, its style and its relation to other known

1. The picture was purchased from Tiepolo by Count Algarotti for the King of Saxony in 1744, but came immediately into the possession of the King's minister, Count Bruhl. In 1760 it was acquired by the Empress Catherine of Russia and was offered for sale in London in 1932, when it was acquired for the Felton Bequest by Mr. Randall Davies, the Felton Bequest Advisor.
2. R. A. Cat. 1954/5, No. 51, p. iii.
3. *The Connoisseur*, Nov., 1955, p. 212-215; review of A. Morassi, G. B. Tiepolo, Phaidon Press 1955 Vol. I.
4. P. Molmenti, *Tiepolo*, 1911; E. Sack, G. B. and D. Tiepolo, 1910.
5. Roger Fry, *Burl. Mag.* Vol. 63, 1933, p. 133.

variations of the theme by the artist. Since then, for exactly twenty-three years, the picture had practically dropped from current art research since scholars had no opportunity of examining it. When, recently, Professor Morassi included it in the first volume of his Phaidon Press *Tiepolo*, he had been able to study the work in detail photographs only. He refers to the picture as "painted with extreme care and refinement," but for more detailed comments we have to wait for the second volume, as yet to be published.

Even while at the Royal Academy, the picture elicited little written comment. As one writer explains<sup>6</sup>: "Its effect at Burlington House was somewhat disappointing; its condition, while not bad, was thoroughly distracting. There were patches of damage clumsily repainted and a dirty ingrained varnish covered the surface so thickly as to produce a uniform yellow tone that was obviously not intended."

The turn towards a renewed interest in the *Banquet* came with the cleaning and the examination, carried out by Mr. Horace Buttery; after which the picture was shown again for several months in the London National Gallery. Since then, two major articles have appeared, both of which establish certain decisive points in its favour.<sup>7</sup>

It is of interest to recall that Melbourne owes the possession of the Tiepolo to a curious error of judgment on the part of a competitor, as described by Mr. Roger Fry: "It is common knowledge that at one time it was offered to the Trustees of the National Gallery (London). It is understood that they refused it on the grounds that the picture was not painted by Tiepolo. Though Mr. Fry could prove by a letter of 1744 that Count Algarotti, who bought the picture in that year, almost certainly had seen Tiepolo at work on it in his studio, some doubts remained and were not dispelled until Mr. Buttery's recent examination: "The recent cleaning must remove doubts lingering in certain quarters that the Algarotti *Banquet* is even in part a studio production (except the architectural staffage which is known to be the work of Tiepolo's perspective painter, Mengozzi-Colonna)." Mr. Buttery "was able to detect no differences in the handling of the paint anywhere except in the head of the negro page on the right, which seems to be a repetition, with slight variations, of the head of the negro page behind Cleopatra."<sup>8</sup> The joint investigations of restorer and scholar have thus splendidly vindicated the judgment of Mr. Randall Davies, who recommended the picture to the Felton Bequest.

Another controversial point relating to the Tiepolo remains as yet unsolved. Roger Fry examined the relation of the Melbourne *Banquet of Cleopatra* to other known variations of this theme by Tiepolo. The Royal Academy catalogue and the articles by Watson and Levey took up the argument, each advancing a different proposition. It is clear that the Melbourne picture, dated by documents 1743-44, precedes the famous fresco in the Palazzo Labia, which dates from shortly before 1750. A clue to the dates of the other version would seem to lie in the treatment of the picture space. The Melbourne painting gains its most striking effect from the stark recession of the foreground, which, introducing a note of fantastic unreality, leaves us in doubt whether we are outside or inside the space inhabited by the painted spectators who watch the banquet. The recent low placing of the picture in the Stawell Gallery lends added effect to this illusion. The introduction of an illusory architectural space between ourselves and the *Banquet* is carried to its height in the Labia fresco, where the banquetting table is placed on top of a painted flight of stairs which leads upwards, flanked by a painted architectural decoration. How the remaining versions fit into this development will be elucidated by Professor Morassi in his second Phaidon volume and in his article on the Melbourne *Banquet* in the Volume of Studies by European, American and Australian Scholars to be presented to Sir Daryl Lindsay.<sup>9</sup>

Ursula Hoff

6. Michael Levey, *Tiepolo's Banquet of Cleopatra at Melbourne*, *Arte Veneta*, Vol. IX, 1955, p. 199-203

7. See notes 3 and 6.

8. See note 3.

9. To be published by the Melbourne University Press.



PUPIL  
AND  
TEACHER

some works by  
FRANCES HODGKINS  
and  
G. P. NERLI  
in Melbourne

Girolamo Nerli, *Woman in a Garden*, oil on board, 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ "  
Alan Henderson Bequest, 1957.

In most cases legends, if they appear at all, form around the career and capabilities of an artist only after his death. There have, however, been some in all the arts who have found to their pleasure or dismay that the romantic stories have circulated while they were still alive to hear them, and Leonardo da Vinci, Paganini and Byron must often have pondered the inadequacy of fiction. In more recent times such artists as Sir Thomas Beecham and Mr. Augustus John have been magnets for latter-day mythologists, but it is unexpected to find Frances Hodgkins, whose appearance and appearances were not dramatic, one of the company. Her legend was a particularly strange and individual one, for it was claimed that she suffered a complete change of artistic personality late in life, and from being a dull traditional watercolourist, became an extreme modern almost overnight. As with most legends, this story contained a grain of truth, but the strongly individual elements in Frances Hodgkins' work which became obvious in the 1930's when she was over sixty, were, I believe, present and visible in the paintings and drawings she produced in her native New Zealand in the 1890's.

It is always a pleasant game to guess at the development of an artist if he or she had not come under certain influences, but generally such speculations are a waste of time, and I certainly do not wish to attempt an assessment of what Frances Hodgkins' achievements might have been had she not been taught early in her career by that strange Italian migrant G. P. Nerli. I believe that her most obvious characteristics as an artist appeared almost as soon as she started to paint seriously, but I also believe that Nerli was responsible to a large extent for the direction in which these talents were developed. According to the New Zealand art historian, Mr. E. H. McCormick, to whose pioneer work on this



Frances Hodgkins, *Rosamund*, watercolour, 21½" x 20", by permission of The Ewing collection, University of Melbourne.

artist we owe so much, Frances Hodgkins had her first lessons from Nerli in 1893, three years after he had arrived in Dunedin. The Italian painter's course before reaching New Zealand has yet to be fully charted, but he had already painted portraits of R. L. Stevenson in Samoa, and, according to Mr. Bernard Smith (*Place, Taste and Tradition*, 1945) he had worked in New South Wales, where he had "strongly influenced" the young Charles Conder. Thus Nerli was the unlikely link between two artists who are completely of the 19th century and one who did not flower fully until almost the middle of the 20th. But he himself was more than a mere link, for he had considerable technical skill, and, as shown by our "Woman in a Garden" from the Allan R. Henderson Bequest, some originality. The idea of throwing the figure into the middle distance and placing an equally important still-life subject in the foreground is brilliantly carried out. Would it be too much to suggest that this theme was one which he taught to Frances Hodgkins and to which she returned at all stages of her career? In her beautifully painted and witty "Rosamund" in the University of Melbourne Collection, the parallel with the Nerli is certainly striking, for in the same way equal emphasis is given to the figure and the still-life, and in many of her later works Frances Hodgkins shows a love of an extended and full foreground with the ostensible "subject" thrown far back.

After Nerli's rather mysterious and hurried disappearance from Dunedin in 1896, his pupil was a little too ready to discount his influence upon her work. From the young student's enthusiastic report that "Nerli has been most awfully good to me and gives me an extra lesson Saturdays at his studio," she tells her sister a little later that he was "absolutely useless" as far as advice goes. This may be partly accounted for by the natural irritation of an enthusiast at Nerli's extremely easy-going teaching methods and his frequent surrender to the public house rather than to an appointment with a pupil, but there seems little doubt that Hodgkins caught a love for, and skill in, figure drawing from him which turned



Francis Hodgkins, The Wheelwright's Shop.

her away from the routine landscapes of her fellow "lady artists" in Dunedin. She also learnt a great deal about the handling of pigment, and there are paintings by her in New Zealand which, with the signature erased, would easily pass as being by Nerli.

Liberal, and in his own way original as he seems to have been, Nerli would, one imagines, hardly have found Miss Hodgkins' late and most personal work, that is, the paintings dating from about 1930 to her death in 1947, to his taste. And yet, in Dunedin, he saw the seeds being planted and he helped to rear them through their most tender stages. The strange colour relationships which appear in our recently acquired "The Wheelwright's Shop" can be seen fragmentarily in her early water-colours, for even in these it sometimes seems that such colours have never met in quite that way before. The shapes left between the arm of a figure and the body, or through the branches of a tree seem already isolated and refined in the youthful water colours, and this refinement continues until each shape has its own character and yet fits into a pattern as tightly and inevitable as in a jig-saw. Yet Frances Hodgkins was never an "abstract" artist. Always she needed the stimulus of person or place to generate the desire to paint and always this subject controls the design. Hodgkins was a highly professional and skilled painter, but her methods so well described by Mr. Eric Newton ("Each time she painted it is as though a bird had launched itself precariously into space and had reached its destination by the exercise of pure faith") meant that at times when conditions were unfavourable she fell short, for even her great faith could not sustain her beauty on every flight. But when she soared, the beauty of the flight was breathtaking, and there was no other performance quite like it in contemporary English art.

How much of this faith was given to the intelligent but unsophisticated young woman in New Zealand by the self-styled "painter to the Vatican" can only be judged if much more of the work of both artists can be assembled here, either permanently or in the form of a temporary exhibition. The prospect is one which I, at least, look forward to.

ERIC WESTBROOK

Joseph Herman, although Polish by birth, has become an important figure in British art since the Second World War. In his paintings and drawings (an exhibition of which from the collection of Dr. Henry Rolland was recently shown in the Childers Gallery) he has concentrated on the life and labour of Welsh miners, English farm workers, and more recently, French peasants, all of whom he depicts as if they were made of the very soil which they handle. In style he is an isolated figure in England, his close contacts being with the Belgian Expressionists like Permeke and their German counterparts. Through these men his approach is clearly connected with that of the young Van Gogh. The low tone, sombre colour and blunt powerful drawing of the present picture represents Herman admirably, and in presenting this work to the National Gallery, the Contemporary Art Society of London has made another valuable addition to our collection of twentieth century European painting.

E.W.

Joseph Herman, Miners, oil on canvas.



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The cover design in this issue is a detail from Tiepolo's Banquet of Cleopatra.