

THE PAINTER

MARGARET STODDART 1865 - 1934



Margaret Stoddart outside the conservatory at Godley House which was destroyed by the Canterbury earthquakes. This photograph was probably taken by her sister Mary (May) c. 1912.

Source: Collection of the Diamond Harbour Historical Society.

DIAMOND HARBOUR, NEW ZEALAND



Mark and Anna Stoddart with their children taken by A C Barker at Diamond Harbour in 1871. Margaret sits on her Father's knee.
Source: A C Barker, Canterbury Museum Collection.



Anna Ollivier Roses,
by Margaret Stoddart, c.1912.
Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery
Te Puna o Waiwhetu.

Paintings by Margaret Stoddart can be found in public galleries and private collections throughout New Zealand. She was one of the first women to succeed as a professional artist in New Zealand and enjoyed steady popularity during her lifetime. Her 50-year career as a professional painter spanned a time when artists in colonial New Zealand were shedding the cultural baggage of their European homelands and finding a distinctive New Zealand identity. In parallel, Stoddart's personal development as an artist evolved from meticulously lifelike botanical renderings to increasingly impressionistic landscapes capturing the essence of New Zealand's urban and natural landscapes.



A young Margaret Stoddart c. 1882.
Source: M Stoddart Album, Canterbury
Museum Collection.

Born in Stoddart Cottage, Diamond Harbour, Margaret Olog Stoddart was the second daughter of early Canterbury colonists Anna Schjott, a Norwegian governess, and Mark Stoddart, the youngest child of a Scottish naval family. Margaret, her three sisters and two surviving brothers spent their early childhood in Diamond Harbour close to the sea and surrounded by hills. Her father grew food for the growing number of settlers passing through Lyttelton. At this time Stoddart Cottage was set among market gardens, orchards, pasture and maturing gum trees planted by her father.

The Stoddarts were a cultured family that valued education. When Margaret was 11 years old the farm was sold to Lyttelton port developer and entrepreneur Harvey Hawkins for 6,600 pounds. The family left Diamond Harbour and sailed to Scotland where she and her sister attended the Merchant Maiden School in Edinburgh. After three years the family returned to New Zealand to live in the genteel Lismore Lodge in Fendalton. Stoddart, together with her two sisters, enrolled at the newly opened Canterbury College School of Art in 1882 where she studied for the next four years. She was only 17 when she made her debut in the annual exhibition of the Canterbury Society of Arts.

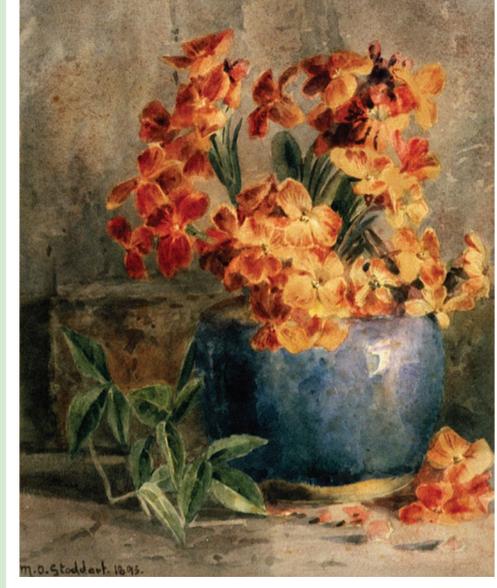
Flowers and plants were Stoddart's usual subject. Her choice was influenced by the interests of her family and neighbours who shared a typically Victorian enthusiasm for the unfamiliar native plants of the new colony and also by the artistic culture of the time which held that flowers were appropriate subject matter for lady painters. With practice and training, Stoddart's skill with watercolour grew and her flower paintings became more and more accomplished.



Corokia macrocarpa (Chatham Islands Korokio), by Margaret Stoddart, 1886. Source: Canterbury Museum Collection.

Margaret Stoddart was a great traveller. Six months after the death of her father in 1885 she made the first of two trips to the Chatham Islands to stay with childhood friend Mabel Chudleigh, daughter of naturalist Thomas Potts of Ohinetahi. There she made studies of native plants and paintings of local scenes which are still held in the Canterbury Museum collection. As a young woman she made regular painting and climbing expeditions to the high country and visits to other places in the South Island to paint or attend exhibitions.

After meeting Australia's leading flower painter Ellis Rowan in 1894 Stoddart went to Melbourne for three months. While there she held a successful exhibition. Her growing network of female artist friends and contacts extended throughout New Zealand and Australia and later into Europe, and was maintained by visits and regular correspondence.



Wallflowers by Margaret Stoddart, 1895.
Source: Collection of Canterbury Art Gallery/Te Pua o Waiwhetu.

In 1897 Stoddart, with her aging mother and two sisters, moved back to Diamond Harbour to live in the grand white mansion (known later as Godley House) built by Harvey Hawkins on a prominent site on Stoddart Point. The estate had reverted to the Stoddart family after Hawkins was declared bankrupt. While living in the 'Big House' Stoddart and her sisters grew and sold flowers as well as paintings.

EUROPE

Early in 1898 Margaret Stoddart left her family in Diamond Harbour and set off to England. There she settled in St Ives, Cornwall, the centre for English impressionism, where her interests broadened and landscape emerged as a principal theme. She learned from tutors and other artists who worked outdoors ("en plein air") painting mainly rural and maritime subjects. During the nine years she was in Europe Stoddart also travelled to Norway, France, Capri, Greece and Italy. She painted and exhibited widely. In Paris she showed at the Salon de la Soci t  des Artistes Franais for seven years in succession, and also at the Soci t  Nationale des Beaux-Arts. At an exhibition in 1902 at the Baille Gallery in London, her work was singled out for praise by the Sunday Times. Before returning to New Zealand in 1906 she exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts and with the Society of Women Artists.

However, on returning to Christchurch the impressionistic paintings, radical for the time, initially provoked criticism. The "modern style" was seen by some as "untrue to nature".



A photograph of Margaret Stoddart from the Weekly Press 9 June 1909. Source: Canterbury Public Library.

THE 'BIG HOUSE' DIAMOND HARBOUR

Stoddart expected to go back to live and paint in Europe in due course but her sister Mary (May) died from complications following the birth of a daughter. The little girl lived nearby with her deaf father at the original homestead (now known as Stoddart Cottage). Stoddart, her mother, and her remaining sister Agnes helped with her care. Two years later in 1911, Stoddart's mother Anna died.

In her early 40s and living in the 'Big House' at Diamond Harbour, Stoddart went back to painting the familiar landscapes around her, producing some of her best work of local subjects including the well-known pictures of Stoddart Cottage and the wharf at Diamond Harbour which are now part of the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu permanent collection.



Godley house, Diamond Harbour, by Margaret Stoddart, c.1913. Source: Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery/Te Puna o Waiwhetu.

In 1913 the whole Stoddart estate was sold to Lyttelton Borough Council to develop a new garden suburb. Before leaving Diamond Harbour for the last time, Stoddart painted one of her best known paintings of the 'Big House'.



Diamond Harbour, by Margaret Stoddart, 1909. Source: Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery/Te Puna o Waiwhetu.

HACKTHORNE ROAD

A year later Stoddart, her sister Agnes, and Francie their niece were settled in their new home in Hackthorne Road, Cashmere. Here Stoddart continued to paint and gave private painting lessons encouraging her students to work “en plein air”. She actively participated in the cultural life of Christchurch, devoting time and energy to civic and philanthropic activities such as the Sanatorium Service Society, St Saviours Orphanage, Imperial Culture Society and the Citizens Association. She was a founding member of the Canterbury Womens Club and a lifelong stalwart of the Canterbury Society of Arts where she served on the council for several terms, eventually being elected vice-president.

Living in town, the subject matter for Stoddart’s painting changed to the urban parks and suburban gardens of Christchurch and to scenes of Sumner, the Estuary and Brighton which could all be reached by tram. There were also regular trips inland to paint natural landscapes of the high country in her confident impressionistic style which became increasingly austere and monochromatic as she matured. Stoddart worked continuously from 1914 until her death in 1934. On a visit to Hanmer Springs, she died from a heart attack, aged 69.

Several months after her death a retrospective exhibition held by the Canterbury Society of Arts showed no less than 206 works, evidence of her remarkable productivity. In his speech at the opening, society president Sydney L. Thompson said,

“Truth was a keynote of her work, truth to self and to the highest principles of art. By this I do not mean a photographic copy of nature, for she retained all personality while yet working on the great traditions. Here we have reality transposed by the artist and given us as something vital and poetic.”

Margaret Stoddart is buried in Bromley Cemetery in Christchurch.



Mountain Lillies by Margaret Stoddart, c.1930.
Source: Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery/ Te Puna o Waiwhetu.

Want to know more?

Flowers into Landscape, Margaret Stoddart 1865-1934
by Julie King. 1977. Robert McDougall Art Gallery and Hazard Press.

Adderley to Bradley, A history of the Southern Bays of Lyttelton Harbour
compiled by Mary Stapylton-Smith. 1993. Friends of the Diamond Harbour Library.

Or check out the website of Te Puna o Waiwhetu Christchurch Art Gallery
www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

Produced by Stoddart Cottage Trust, July 2017. www.diamondharbour.info