

“It was very nice to have you open the exhibition (Auckland Art Gallery Retrospective, 1983) Tim, and I do very much appreciate the excellent job you made of it. Everything went off very well and it was very instructive for me to see all the work together on the wall. It helps me to see what I am about more clearly and what I can do in the future. Once again, thank you for lending the works of mine from your collection. There would have been a serious gap in the exhibition if they had not been there.”

Gordon Walters

Gordon Walters

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Gordon Walters
Mahuika
 PVA and acrylic on canvas, 1968
 1520 x 1145mm

Exhibited:
 ‘Gordon Walters: Paintings’, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, 6 – 24 May 1969.
 ‘Exhibition of New Zealand Prints, Pottery and Paintings’, Singapore National Library, Singapore, 23 February – 1 March 1971.
 ‘Gordon Walters’, Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland, March 23 – April 24, 1983.

Illustrated:
 Michael Dunn, *Gordon Walters* (Auckland City Art Gallery, 1983), Cat. No. 40.

Provenance:
 Acquired from Peter McLeavey in 1969.
 Accompanied Tim and Sherrah Francis to diplomatic postings in Singapore, Washington and New York.

\$300 000 – \$400 000

Mahuika is the Maori name of a fire deity and this title was given to the painting after it had been completed. It was originally called *Black on Blue* by Walters in line with his system of titling his works objectively. The use of Maori titles for some works of this period was encouraged by his dealer Peter McLeavey with whom the work was first shown in 1969. It is likely that McLeavey suggested the title of the painting and the related work *Tamatea* at the time of the exhibition. Walters never intended to illustrate the title of a painting such as this, as Professor Ngahuia Te Awekotuku supposed in her critique of the work for *Antic* magazine in 1986. He incorporated the titles as recognition of his respect for Maori art and as the source of his motifs.

Often Walters is thought of as a painter more concerned with tonal contrast and formal relations in his works than with colour. Indeed some of the strongest koru works are those in black and white or grey and white. But he did introduce colour into his earliest gouache studies using the koru motif in 1956, and used it in some of his later large paintings of the series from 1965 onwards. For example, he used a strong blue/black combination in *Painting No. 7*, 1965, and it appears also in the upper section of *Rongotai*, 1970. In *Tamatea*, of the same year and time as *Mahuika*, he used a lime green and blue combination with reduced tonal contrast. In that example the colours interact to create virtual effects of haloing and spatial movement. The narrow band width encourages optical effects which are a part of Walters’ practice of this period. He admired the works of Bridget Riley, among others like those of Vasarely, connected with the then fashionable Op Art movement. *Mahuika* can be seen in this context because the blue/black palette and narrow bands generate some optical movement which enhances the figure/ground counterpoint of the imagery.

Mahuika is a hard edge geometric painting with minimal signs of manufacture. Walters would have planned it out in advance by studies on paper and possibly with collage to finalise the position of the motifs. He used a relational type of composition with allowance for intuitive placing of elements at the creative stage. An example of his intuitive approach is the unexpected ‘absence’ of a circle in the lower part of the painting where a gap is left between the black terminations. The final execution was possible when the whole work was finalised and could be drawn out on the canvas. Only after it had been painted could Walters assess its success or failure. He was a harsh self-critic and rejected quite a number of completed works which seemed to him to be unsuccessful.



Gordon Walters' *Mahuika* installed in the Francis residence, Singapore, circa 1971, with Tim Francis conducting a puppet show.

Mahuika reads from top to bottom and from left to right. It is also possible to reverse this process. The koru bands and terminations register positive in blue at the top of the painting and black in the lower section. In the centre there is an alternation of uninterrupted blue and black bands. In the disposition of the koru elements there is what Walters called 'a controlled scattering of the motif down the centre of the canvas.' But none of the circular motifs or terminations is placed on the main vertical or horizontal axes of the canvas. It was painted in PVA and acrylic on canvas, a medium that dried quickly and allowed a smooth, mechanical finish. This was important because the artist had to work bending down and over the canvas and could not have any irregularities, running or smudging of the pigment. Walter would have painted the canvas first in blue and applied the black on top after it had dried. Hence the original title *Black on Blue*. *Mahuika* is a fine early example of the koru series and a discerning purchase in 1969 by Tim & Sherrah Francis.

Michael Dunn

"We never decided to become collectors—I think we were in denial for a long time. It seemed a bit pretentious. I don't think until very late in the game that anybody coming here thought this was a collection. We just bought things we liked or because they fitted into a history of painting we'd built up in our minds."

Sherrah Francis