

28

Rita Angus (1908-1970)

Mt Stewart, Waiau, North Canterbury
c.1931-2.

oil on hardboard

signed 'Rita Cook' in pencil and in brush-
point to the reverse

40 x 49.5cm

\$180,000 - \$280,000

PROVENANCE

Sale, Peter Webb Galleries, 24 July 1985
(lot 178)

Private collection, Wellington

LITERATURE

Christchurch Press, 6 September 1932, p. 11.

Julie Catchpole *'The Group' Thesis*,
University of Canterbury, 1984

Ed. William McAloon & Jill Trevelyan, *Rita
Angus Life & Vision* (Te Papa Press 2008) p.
33. (colour illustration)

Jill Trevelyan, *Rita Angus: An Artist's Life*
(Te Papa Press 2020) p. 62 - 63. (colour
illustration)

EXHIBITED

Christchurch, *The Group*, 1932, no. 70.

Dunedin, Otago Art Society, 1932

Rita Angus Life & Vision Touring Exhibition,
Te Papa Tongarewa 6 March - 5 July 2009,
Dunedin Public Art Gallery 12 November
2008 - 15 February 2009, Christchurch Art
Gallery 7 March - 5 July 2009, Auckland Art
Gallery 1 August - 1 November 2009,
cat no. 17.

A true pioneer of modern art in New Zealand, Rita Angus' works are among the nation's best-loved paintings - her beloved *Cass* (1936) is an icon of 20th-century New Zealand art. *Cass* was a watershed in Angus' own career and for New Zealand landscape painting of the 1930's. It signalled a break from academic traditions expounded at local art schools to a new crisp hard-edged Realism, revitalising the Regionalist tradition. With her fellow Group contemporaries including Colin McCahon and Toss Woollaston, they set the foundations of which contemporary art in New Zealand is based.

Angus developed a personal conception of the New Zealand landscape, simplifying it back to its essential nature, while expressing her own distinctive experience of the region. Her work is an expression of her commitment to her country and celebration of place. She was inspired by her environment, the places she lived, and the people she encountered as well as informed by a keen interest in anthropology, history, and Māori culture. She frequently travelled the New Zealand countryside and North Canterbury was a favoured location. A change of scenery meant new subjects and fresh inspiration as well as a chance to escape from the mundane routine of daily life.

Mt Stewart, Waiau, North Canterbury, completed c.1931-2 has been identified as Angus' most significant pre-*Cass* landscape. Completed five years prior, *Mt Stewart* is a complex work which anticipates the *Cass* series in its linear, rhythmic forms. It is a work of two halves, with contrasting view points and style. The top half of the work illustrates the Southern Alps in a naturalistic style with carefully modulated forms. In contrast the Waiau riverbed is depicted from a high viewpoint and employs a much bolder, more vigorous style. The valley and riverbed utilise strong diagonal lines and colour contrasts, while the river is a distinct form in itself, with its modern, bracing zig-zags of colour. Form is flattened and colour simplified with a clear pervading light so key to her oeuvre .

Exhibited in 1932 at The Group, Christchurch and also the Otago Art Society, the work received critical acclaim. A critic praised the 'solidarity of form' and 'clear light' in both her and her husband's work shown in the 1932 Group show 'Mrs Rita Cook and Mr Alfred Cook see New Zealand in a way that contrasts greatly with the work of those who concern themselves with finding a fragment of landscape of the popular "English" type, and who paint it in a manner suited to that type.' Whilst influential artist and teacher Robert N Field who described the work as 'a splendid translation of truly New Zealand country' in response to the Otago Art Society showing.

Angus sold little work during her lifetime, but this was partly by choice: even close friends sometimes found it difficult to persuade her to part with her work. When she died in 1970, her family deposited the contents of her studio, numbering more than 600 works, in the National Art Gallery (now Te Papa Tongarewa). Today, few of her works remain in private hands. *Mt Stewart* was formerly reported as one of Rita Angus' lost works, especially after experts involved in organising the National Art Gallery's 1982-83 Retrospective Exhibition were unable to trace it. However in 1985 the work was discovered in England by former New Zealander art dealer Lance Crawford. It was subsequently auctioned in Auckland and purchased by the current owners in the same year.

Ninety years after it was painted *Mt Stewart, Waiau, North Canterbury* remains as vivid and captivating as the day it was painted, a true 'mistresspiece' of New Zealand art.

Helena Walker