

## Sam Cairncross (1913-76)

Sam Cairncross was twenty years old when he first began painting in his kitchen in Kilbirnie, Wellington. Born in 1913 in Sydney and moving five years later with his parents to Eastbourne he left school aged thirteen to take on a series of odd jobs. In 1943, while working as a hospital porter, he began art classes with Fred Ellis (1892 –1961) and in 1944 he had his first show at the French Maid Cafe in Wellington. In a 1946 solo show Cairncross's work was noticed by the French Minister to New Zealand. The minister was impressed with the direct conversation Cairncross's work engaged in with the French Post Impressionism and in 1947 he awarded Cairncross a Government scholarship to study in France. This, at a time when Paris was the mecca of modern painting, made Cairncross a figure of lively curiosity on the New Zealand art scene. After a bumpy start he took to Paris and his work was well reviewed as he struck a good rapport with the artists and critics around him. A letter home to his wife mentions his friendship with Georges Braque, 'I met Braque the other day and spent the morning in his studio. He is a great painter. I took some of mine along to show him and he liked them very much.' He became known as 'the expressionist from the Pacific.'

Cairncross's painterly style was always in open acknowledgement of Vincent van Gogh's. Using vivid colours, impasto and energetic brush strokes this was a style Cairncross would continue to play with for the duration of his career. More than painting in an expressionist style however Cairncross cared that his paintings served his country. On his return to New Zealand he wrote: 'We have everything here a painter can need in the way of subject matter, and I want to try and do for this country what Van Gogh and Cézanne did for Provence and Paul Gauguin did for Oceania, and I hope I have brought back with me a little of the spirit that moved them to immortalise what they loved'.

Safe to say Cairncross achieved what he set out to. While his portraits and landscapes offer whimsical glances into the personal lives of mid-century New Zealanders, husbands and wives, fish and chips, beach days and country walks; his cityscapes offer a grandparent's eye view of the Wellington that exists today. Taking on an archival significance his careful observations show vehicles of the mid twentieth century with the buildings of the nineteenth century. It is in these works that Cairncross makes his most significant mark combining New Zealand subject matter with imported European style.

Cairncross painted and exhibited the rest of his life making his own paints and canvases, framing his own paintings and organising exhibitions for himself around Wellington and New Zealand. He died in 1976 aged 62.

Maeve Hughes

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### Sam Cairncross (1913-76)

*Looking Towards Courtenay Place*

oil on canvas

signed & dated '64 (lower right)

60 x 75cm

\$3,000 - \$6,000

#### PROVENANCE

Sale, Dunbar Sloane Ltd, Wellington

16.4.1997 (lot 4)

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### Sam Cairncross (1913-76)

*Perrett's Corner Wellington*

oil on canvas

signed & dated 'Sam 72-73' (lower right);

signed, inscribed with title and dated to

reverse

75 x 100cm

\$4,000 - \$8,000