

MacDiarmid Arts Trust

Abstract 1963 (Trees)

Signed 'MacDiarmid '63'

Oil on board, framed

53.5 x 45 cm

Provenance: Lot 60, Dunbar Sloane's Part II Fine Art Day Sale of their two-day NZ & International Fine & Applied Arts auction, Wellington. 27 March 2025 catalogue of 88 lots. Estimate \$800 - \$1600.

<https://auctions.dunbarsloane.co.nz/1845/catalogue/0060>

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An abstract European landscape looking down over an orchard of fruit trees, a scene Douglas painted more than once. The essential shape and colouring of this painting looks very much an abstracted form of a significant early work *Assisi olive groves* 1947, which was a vertical view from higher ground of a typical Italian olive grove in the countryside near Assisi with ploughed ground under orchard trees in a hilly landscape.

The olive grove in this painting is a particularly significant scene for MacDiarmid, one he discussed with his first great love and lifelong friend, composer Douglas Lilburn in letters during his first overseas trip – describing it as “*one of the permanent points of reference.*” Those trees are forever connected to the second of three personal “*shocks*” he encountered in Europe. These revelations contributed to his painterly awareness and spiritual awakening, deeply influencing his thoughts and creative practice ever after.

He describes the experience in the Introduction of the 2002 art history book *MacDiarmid* by Dr Nelly Finet, published in French and English language editions to coincide with his 80th birthday solo art exhibitions in Wellington, Auckland and Paris... “*The second [shock], in Italy, on meeting Giotto at last. Until I stepped into that upper basilica, my experience of churches in New Zealand had led me to expect either cleaned-out empty Presbyterian, or dimly cluttered-up Catholic. England had raised the concept at least into a blend of noble architecture and dark. Nothing had prepared me for Assisi where streams of light became inseparable from walls of painting – and what painting! Giotto's 'simple' statements in no way denied the weight of the physical world in all its interest – which may be a fair description of vision complete. It was food for something deeply, unconventionally religious in my nature.*”

“*And it was from the olive trees in the hills behind Assisi that I gained first glimmerings of total human continuity from antiquity to the present (even if it took time before working out my use for this).*”

The painting is reproduced in black and white in Chapter V Landscapes of Finet's art history. Here she writes: ‘*Assisi Olive Groves, 1947 (fig.24) was one of the first European landscapes done when, after some months in England, MacDiarmid took a holiday in Italy. The pinkish Umbrian soil, silver green light reflected from the backs of olive leaves, struck not only his eyes as perfection in their way, but also reached receptive layers of the subconscious. Following the 'shock' of Giotto's frescos in the upper basilica, came this personal experience of the same benevolent nature as that which Giotto used to illustrate parts of his narrative of St Francis at the turn of the 13th century. MacDiarmid's Assisi olive groves are quietly full of gladness, each tree contributing.*’

Assisi olive groves 1947, which MacDiarmid called *Assisi – for D.G Lilburn* 1947, was owned by Lilburn, and hung in his house for decades. It is one of a quantity of MacDiarmid works in the Alexander Turnbull Library's permanent art collection in Wellington.

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Anna Cahill

Biographer | *Colours of a Life - the life and times of Douglas MacDiarmid* (Mary Egan Publishing) 2018 and *Letters to Lilburn - Douglas MacDiarmid's conversations from the heart* (Mary Egan Publishing) November 2022

Director | MacDiarmid Arts Trust Ph +61 450 429 481

Email: hello@douglasmacdiarmid.com | anna.m.cahill@gmail.com Website: www.douglasmacdiarmid.com