

Edith Collier: Early New Zealand Modernist.

By Jill Trevelyan, Jennifer Taylor and Greg Donson.

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Reviewed by Sophie Thorn.

Edith Collier: Early New Zealand Modernist is a new substantial publication by Massey University Press 2024 funded by Creative New Zealand, Sarjeant Gallery Te Whare o Rehua Whanganui and the Edith Collier Trust. The publication was shortlisted for the 2025 Ockham Book Awards and builds on two previous publications on Collier's work, *Edith Collier in Retrospect* (1980) and Joanne Drayton's *Edith Collier: Her Life and Work, 1885-1964* (1999).

As Sarjeant Gallery curators Greg Donson and Jennifer Taylor note in their opening remarks, outside of the works in the Sarjeant Collection there are very few works by Collier which reside in public collections. Other holdings are largely in the care of family members. As custodians of Collier's work this publication is just part of the current efforts by the Trust and Gallery to see Collier's work gain the foothold it deserves in the art history of Aotearoa.

The Edith Collier Trust Collection has been in the care of the Sarjeant Gallery since the mid-1980s due to the efforts of former Sarjeant Gallery directors Gordon H. Brown (director 1974-1977) and Bill Milbank (director 1977-2006). The publication was timed to coincide with the grand re-opening of the Sarjeant Gallery after ten years of redevelopment in November 2024 and the exhibition *Edith Collier: Early New Zealand Modernist* (9 November 2024 – 16 February 2025).

This exhibition was guest curated for the Sarjeant Gallery by Jill Trevelyan who also writes the central essay for the publication 'Adventure in art: Introducing Edith Collier'. Trevelyan's essay begins in St Ives in 1920 situating Whanganui's Edith Collier among the antipodean Modernist canon with Collier as a 35-year-old former student of Australian artist Margaret Preston and current student of Frances Hodgkins. The essay is richly illustrated with high quality reproductions of photographs from Whanganui and the Collier family.

Trevelyan's essay provides a detailed well researched account of Collier's life. Beginning with her upbringing as the first born of large family which nurtured music and art as suitable pursuits for young women. It covers her studies at the newly formed Wanganui Technical School of Art and Design between 1903-1911 and shift to London in 1913. Collier lived through a fascinating period in history including the First World War where her flat became a haven for family stationed in London as servicemen.

Her return to conservative Whanganui saw her work ridiculed by critics and in an infamous incident several nudes were burnt by Collier's father in 1926. This makes her decision to exhibit a nude, *The Lady of Kent*, at the Canterbury Society of Arts and the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts in the late 1920s a daring move. The exhibition and latter parts of the book focus on paintings created by Collier in 1928 during a six-month visit to Kāwhia. Collier withdrew from painting in the mid-1940s. It would not be until the 1950s when Collier's work begins to be truly appreciated.

Following this central essay and our formal introduction to Collier's life and work the publication splits into six sections with lush colourful illustrations and short responses by a varied selection of artists, poets, authors and curators. This half of the publication is special,

moving between academic appreciation, artistic response and interview. These latter sections are largely divided by place and include a particularly poignant chapter 'Kāwhia: The Land and the People' with contributions by descendants of the Ngāti Hikairo kuia painted by Collier in 1928. It also details a trip taken by the Sarjeant Gallery to a hui at Maketuu Marae in September 2023 to share Collier's art and learn more about the places painted.

While Collier never married, a prominent thread throughout Trevelyan's central essay is the societal pressures of women to choose family over career. There is an emphasis on Collier's career as having been cut short and impacted by the competing demands on women to choose between career and family life, or that she may not have had the personality and drive to succeed as an artist by shifting to a 'more artistically progressive city'. However, Trevelyan notes that we should not fall into the trap of lamenting that she, like so many women of her time, 'put others first' at the expense of her own creative ambitions. We might leave the 'what if's' aside and instead celebrate what she did achieve. And that further to this that connection to place is part of a new era of growing international interest in uncovering the work and stories of women artists.

This interest is indeed there, several of Collier's works currently feature in *Dangerously Modern: Women Artists in Europe 1890–1940* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney which is set to run 11 October 2025 – 15 February 2026. This is the first time that Collier's work has been exhibited in Australia and the cover image from *Edith Collier: Early New Zealand Modernist*, 'Boy Against Landscape' (1917-18), is currently prominently featured as one of three large banners advertising *Dangerously Modern* in the entrance foyer of the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Edith Collier: Early New Zealand Modernist is a richly illustrated and thoughtfully put together read which adds substance and layers of meaning to both our understanding of Collier's work and the limitations of the world and times she lived in.