Gordon Crook: Banners and Wall Hangings

PETER STUPPLES

Abstract
Gordon Crook was a British textile artist who came to live in Wellington in 1972, aged 51. Through contacts at the Dowse Art Museum and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Crook was commissioned by the architect Miles Warren to make banners for the New Zealand Chancery in Washington D.C. (1979–80), followed by banners and wall hangings for the Michael Fowler Centre in Wellington (1981–83). Crook's work was suigeneric, idiosyncratic in its imagery and development, a world feeding on itself. Outside any national or current artworld style, Crook extended and enriched New Zealand's public visual art scene.[1]

Introduction

Gordon Crook was born in 1921 in Richmond, Greater London, and died in Wellington in 2011. After armed service in the Second World War, Crook studied textile design at the Central School of Art and Design in London. On graduation, he was employed there, first as a technician, and subsequently as a staff member. One of his first students was Bill Mason, a New Zealander, who had also served during the war in Europe. After Mason returned to New Zealand, he and Crook maintained a correspondence that eventually led to Mason's invitation to Crook to come to New Zealand to join him in his Wellington business, Mason Handprints, with a production studio in Carterton and a shop in Marion Street.[2]

Crook arrived in Wellington on board the *Northern Star* on 17 February 1972. He recalled:

> Waiting on deck for the light of morning to reveal my destination, that was exciting. I wasn't disappointed . . . timbered houses in clean sea colours on hill terraces . . . aqua, spearmint cerulean green, the oxide and cinnamon rooftops. I could feel the stranglehold of European culture fall away. I'm here.[3]

Mason's original plan was that he and Crook, together with a young interior designer, Duncan Dempsey, would run an expanded interior design business. However, Crook, having resigned from his teaching position at the Central School and sold his house in England, arrived to find that Mason was in the middle of negotiating the sale of his own business to Resene Paints. Crook was devastated. He broke off relations with Mason, and it took some years for their friendship to mend.[4]

Crook decided to make the best of it in a country where he had few connections and no experience of the art scene. He bought a house high up on the hill above the Aro Valley at 82 Mortimer Terrace, Brooklyn. He tried to make a living as an artist, exhibiting his work, running art classes, creating theatre designs, weaving small tapestries on a tabletop loom and making pressed paper casts and silk screen prints.

Washington Banners

Soon after his arrival in Wellington, Crook took up another connection from the past. The Wellington painter John Drawbridge had completed a course of study at the Central School (1957–60), where he studied under Crook. In Wellington, Drawbridge introduced Crook to the Director of the Dowse Art Museum in Lower Hutt, Jim Barr, who became his first enthusiastic

Journal of New Zealand Studies NS38 (2024) 176-194 https://doi.org/10.26686/jnzs.iNS38.9587

patron. Barr's colleague at the Dowse, Betty Logan, was later employed to care for the artworks held by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT). A well-known embroiderer, Logan introduced Crook's work to Frank Corner, Permanent Secretary at MFAT. Frank and his wife Lyn were both enthusiastic collectors of contemporary New Zealand art. Corner, in turn, recommended Crook's work to the Christchurch architect Miles Warren, who in August 1978 commissioned him to design banners destined to hang between the open rafters of the Great Hall of the newly constructed New Zealand Chancery in Washington, D.C.[5]

Crook had first to decide where such banners could be made, who could make them to his design specifications, from what sort of material and how they might best be hung. As it was a New Zealand project for the New Zealand Chancery, Crook wrote to Corner, "the banners must be designed and made here in NZ. And I accept my responsibility to see to their design and production. Also, that the banners can be handed over to whom[so]ever appropriately ready for installation, and with no way for mistakes in the hanging."[6] He needed detailed architectural drawings of the site, then being built on, with final decisions yet to be taken. In October 1978:

> Warren will provide exact pattern for tricky angle at the top. He recommends the fixing should be to three quarter inch aluminium rods, bored with holes either end, with strings on the sleeves to prevent slipping. Also, that the banners should be weighted at the base . . . I visualise the making-up like flags are sewn, so the design is the same both sides. I know this depends on getting a suitable fabric (I'm working on forty designs—phew!—just in case it proves easier for you to make them double-sided) . . . will send rough sketch.[7]

These rough sketches were inspired by the flags that Crook had seen in England, at the country house Audley End, in Essex.[8]

Figure 1. Flags in the Great Hall, Audley End, mid-twentieth century.

Rather than square flags, Crook proposed to design 20 hanging banners, five metres high and one metre wide, 10 to hang from each side of the chancery roof. They would be made of dyed cotton duck with dyed appliqué strips and shapes, double-sided to make them opaque.

The search began for craftspeople able and willing to undertake such a large commission in a comparatively short time.[9] The opening ceremony for the Chancery was set for May/June 1979, nine to 10 months away. It was not until October that Crook decided to work with Nancye Seaton, then employed at the New Zealand Ballet and Theatre Workshop, where the banners would be made.

The banners took more than a year to produce, with problems all along the way. The search for a suitable fabric took months: fear of fraying, getting the right weight to sway in a breeze, not hanging too stiffly, the fastness of dyes (light fastness and water fastness), effects of fading; these problems initially appeared insurmountable. Crook lamented: "There is no absolutely and utterly lightfast fabric of course, anywhere in the world. The lovely flags at Audley End have tarnished over the years and faded, though gracefully."[10] They searched New Zealand, the United States, Britain, with letters flying on the wings of anxiety. At the end of November, the order for fabric was finally given to Wolfin Textiles in London for a cotton duck, but with no guarantee of no fading.[11]

Seaton had to hire enough staff, have enough time and find a suitable workshop. The builders of the Chancery in Washington and the architect in Christchurch corresponded almost daily about details that included the precise manner of hanging, the width of the rods and the angle that they would project from the ceiling, the placement of the skylights, their height from the floor—all needed if Seaton was to make them precisely in Wellington for fitting just so in Washington. Crook added project manager to his job description.

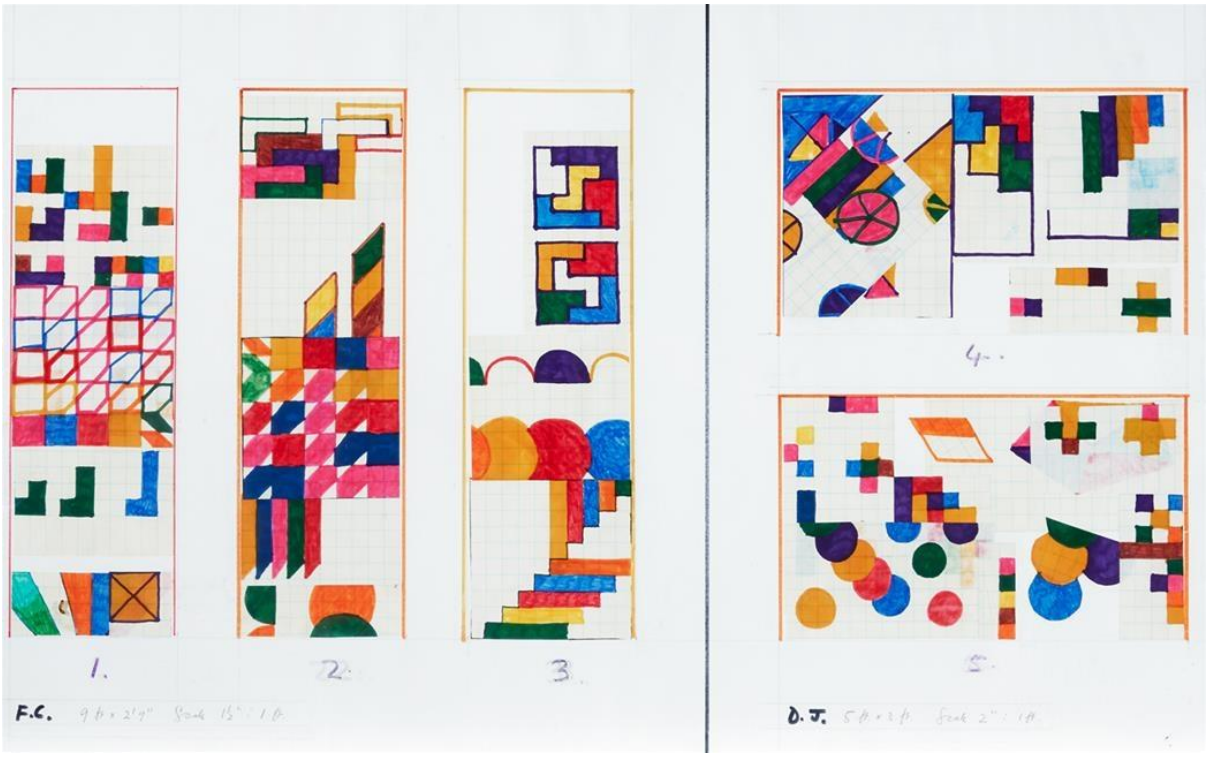

Figure 2. Gordon Crook, First studies for five banners, 1979. Coloured ink on paper, 510 x 760 mm. Gifted by the artist to Frank Corner, 1979.
Sold, Art+Object, Auckland 18 March 2018.

Figure 3. Gordon Crook, Second set of studies for Washington banners, 1979. Coloured inks and collage on paper in five parts, 640 x 850 mm. Gifted to Frank Corner, 1979. Sold, Art+Object, Auckland, 18 March 2018.
This version of the banners was more radical than that finally made for Washington.

Figure 4. This third set of studies (1979, ink on paper) owed more to the Russian Suprematist Kazimir Malevich's crosses and to the imagery that Crook was using in current small tapestries. MFAT storage facility, Newtown, Wellington.
Photo: Peter Stupples, 2019.

Figure 5. These examples (1979; ink on paper) are taken from Crook's fourth and final set of studies in the collection of the MFAT storage facility. Photo: Peter Stupples, 2019.

Figure 6. Gordon Crook, faded banners (1979, printed cotton) in MFAT storage facility, Newtown. Photo: Peter Stupples, 2019. These banners relate to the drawings at left and right respectively in fig. 5 above.

When the fabric arrived, in mid-February 1979, Crook assured Seaton: "The banner cartoons are the exact size, so the top colour border will need to be dropped according to the width of the sleeve you make for hanging purposes, i.e. the sleeve width has to be accommodated within the dimensions of the cartoon, otherwise the banners will hang lower than intended on site."[12] By the end of March, the production of the banners was far enough advanced to start planning publicity and to encourage the National Gallery of Art in Wellington to display them to the public before dispatch to Washington, which it did at the very end of April.[13]

The banners were then sent off to Washington, despite misgivings related to the poor quality of the fabric from London, in spite of all the efforts to obtain the best. Crook complained to Warren: "Their future life-span . . . could be anyone's guess. DSIR reviewing problem with wetfastness."[14] As the Ministry for Foreign Affairs told the New Zealand Ambassador in Washington, "Both we and the artist are upset by this outcome since it is too late to re-do the work and the banners as they may have a fairly limited life." It was proposed to "use the present set of banners for as long as possible and to make a replacement set,"[15] which ideally would be another foot in length,[16] with more white at the apex. Crook was anxious to proceed immediately on the replacements, so that Seaton's experienced team could remain together long enough for their completion. [17] In the end, no replacement set was commissioned. The banners were installed in Washington in mid-September 1979, where they remained in place for over 10 years (fig. 7). They were returned to New Zealand in 1993, and placed in sad storage in Newtown, Wellington, until 2023.

Figure 7. "Gordon Crook's banners at the New Zealand Embassy in Washington," illustrated in Neil Rowe, "Gordon Crook," *Art New Zealand*, no. 16 (Winter 1980): 25. Photo: courtesy Air New Zealand *Skyway*.

Despite these problems, however, Crook was delighted: "What a splendid building this chancery is. It is so right. So elegant and substantial. I guess everyone involved must be feeling very proud."[18] When he saw black and white, and later coloured, photos of the installation, Crook exclaimed: "I like especially the effects of light and pattern where the 'whites' of the banners have changed to subtle blues, the supplementary patterns provided by the beams, then the hangings descending into darkness. Quite unreal, of course, but exciting nevertheless."[19]

As usual with Crook, his initial euphoria was followed by profound disappointment. His imagination reengaged with the realities of the project. He now regretted the modesty of his vision: "the final results miss the whipped cream on the fanciful cake . . . I just wish they were three times the size! Or, totally different! Parrots, live, maybe perching on the rafters! Flamingos in your conservatory. Yes. That'd be nice." However, inspired by his engagement with such a large project, the banner designs were now influencing the images he was playing with in his many current commissions as well as his prints and woven carpets.[20]

Neil Rowe wrote in *Art New Zealand* in 1980:

> . . . [Crook's] work was not well known until the installation of his brilliantly-coloured, medieval flag-like banners in the Miles Warren-designed New Zealand Embassy in Washington brought him public acclaim. . . . The heraldic and ceremonial overtones are entirely appropriate to their official diplomatic surroundings and to the architecture of the main hall of the chancery where they are hung. Perhaps, on the strength of the success of the Washington Banners the beleaguered textile industry in this country will realise that artists and designers of the calibre of Gordon Crook will be of immense value in the establishment of a strong indigenous local textile industry. [21]

Two years later, during an interview with Elva Bett, Crook recalled that "the colours [of the Washington banners] needed to be [brilliant], because pastel colours would have disappeared in the vast space of the foyer and, with a large skylight behind them, the fabric had to be solid enough not to let light through." He took as his themes, he recalled, "abstract derivation, association of South Pacific imagery and the heraldry of flags, nothing specific, factual, but like a quick out-of-the-corner-of-the-eye glimpse of New Zealand's neighbours—Japan, the Polynesian islands and windy Wellington, capital city."[22]

This is the only reference Crook made to the visual content of the banners. Whereas the memory of the banners at Audley End Great Hall might have suggested squared images, spaced far apart from each other on different levels, and clearly heraldic, based upon family coats of arms and proclaiming pedigree, Crook's designs are unique, owing no firm allegiance to any previous art movement or heritage, marking no ethnic alliance. One design nods at Lazar Lissitsky's constructivism, another carries a Kazimir Malevich cross which featured in earlier tapestries, but these are small motifs in a larger scheme of sheer playfulness. Crook alludes to New Zealand's Pacific neighbours—perhaps, in one instance, to Japanese *mon*—but there are no obvious references to Māori or Pacific Island fine mat or rafter patterns. This playfulness extends to a refusal to relate any one banner to another. In a very positive review of the architecture of the New Zealand Chancery in Washington, the *Washington Post* art critic, Wolf von Eckardt, praised Warren's architecture precisely because of its lack of adherence to a tradition, local or otherwise, to a school of architecture, to any currently fashionable style. He continued:

> I find the building most handsome, with its simple rhythm of brick arches that seem to grow out of the earth like trees. I also find it quite sophisticated in its simplicity which unselfconsciously overcomes the clichés of Modernism without straining for new modes. Warren was not trying to be original, he was just trying to build a good building.[23]

Equally, it could be said that Crook's cosmopolitanism is not worn on his sleeve but carried forward as a natural consequence of his ever-inventive celebratory mind. In addition, the severity of Warren's built environment was elevated into that celebratory mode by Crook's banners.

It may be asked, however, whether the Chancery and banners "represented" New Zealand in any way. They were part of the fabric of an embassy representing the country to the most powerful nation on the planet at the time. The Warren-Crook combination did not overtly reference "Aotearoa New Zealand," its history or diverse culture, except maybe its uniqueness, a country inventing itself, as the pulse of cultural development and ethnic tensions played

through their historical trajectory. Both Warren and Crook laid aside what was, perhaps, expected of a "national style," in preference to an affirmation of unique and specific aesthetic imperatives that may in themselves, eventually, briefly flourish as a "style." Like Pablo Picasso and Malevich, neither Crook nor Warren was content to rest on tradition or even to portray a "national ethos," just as Picasso's modernism is not "Spanish" nor Malevich's suprematism "Russian."

In May 1993, the Washington embassy realised that the fast-fading banners were no longer fit for purpose. There was a proposal to have them "repainted" by a local Washington artist. However, nothing came from this flurry of correspondence and the banners were removed from the Chancery and returned to Wellington.

New Town Hall Banners and Wall Hangings

On 25 March 1980, Crook wrote to Miles Warren about the now installed Washington banners, ending with the hope that they might be able to work together in the future. On 23 July Warren phoned Crook with an invitation to do just that. Crook wrote back enthusiastically: "I wondered if you would emerge into my world unfurling the topic of banners for the [Wellington] town hall."[24] Warren indeed commissioned Crook to design banners (fig. 8) and acoustic hangings (fig. 13) for the New Town Hall, now known as the Michael Fowler Centre. By August 1980, estimates of costs for banners and hangings were presented to the Wellington City Council (WCC). Crook decided to design the banners first, being somewhat overwhelmed by the size of the task of making 700 square metres of wall hangings.

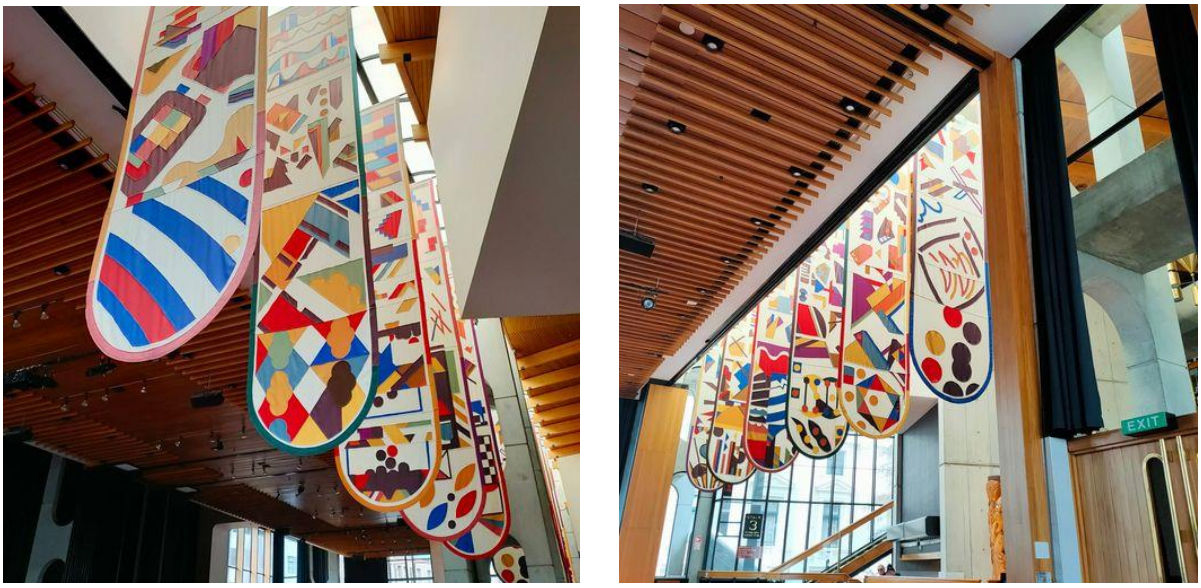

Figure 8. Gordon Crook, Banners, Michael Fowler Centre, Wellington, in 2019.
Photo: Vivienne Morrell.

Banners

The New Town Hall commission was for 12 banners, 7 metres by 1.2 metres, under the general theme "Definitely Wellington"—though Crook paid less attention to this theme as the design developed from one version to another, albeit without abandoning it altogether.

At first, he wondered if the banners could be made as tapestries by Lesley Nicholls. She was asked to make costings and to weave a sample, but both soon realised that the time to make so many large tapestries would stretch the completion date way beyond what the architects and

WCC had in mind. So, once again, Crook engaged Seaton at NS and Associates (with Christine Keyzer and Pat Stagg) to make the banners out of white linen using appliqué shapes of purple, red, green, yellow and black. These shapes were to be strictly abstract in design, each unique. The work of the Russian pioneer of abstraction Malevich was the inspiration for the central sections of the banners, but elsewhere they simply flow out of Crook's own vivid imagination. There is one reference in the Wellington City Archives, suggesting that they represent the months of the year, but there is no further suggestion of this serving as a theme anywhere else in the documentation.

Warren sent an estimate of costs for the banners and wall panels to the WCC on 27 February 1981:

> Banners, artist's fee for preliminary design concept $500; artist's fee for designing and, [*sic*] production and hanging $5,000: making costs at $700 each, total $8,400 and estimate of materials cost $6,000, total approx. $20,000.
> Hangings: estimated cost per square metre $50, total $27,250, say $30,000. Not included in building contract and must be funded separately. . . . They would be very appropriate items for the QEII Arts Council to contribute to the project, either in total or at least to the extent of the artist's fees.[25]

Warren reported confirmation of these costs to Crook on 25 March. Crook subsequently worked on the concepts for both parts of the commission during the autumn of 1981, interrupted by the need to complete a wall panel for the New Zealand High Commission in Nuku'alofa, Tonga, in April.

The first ideas for designs paid some heed to the "Definitely Wellington" concept. Crook wrote to Warren on 4 June: "Nos 5 and 6 theme, illustrating my admiration and love of Central Park in Wellington . . . I have plenty to do now with the banner cartoons . . . No. 5 starts with fantail and shows leaves and through the leaves—one end of the park, No. 6 vertical tree trunks and the light and dark spaces between."[26] Whilst No. 5 still retains a geometric fantail (though it is next to impossible to identify the shape as such without Crook's note), all other traces of these ideas have been transformed into abstractions in the final version of the design.

Crook had six cartoons of banners ready for Seaton by early July, soon after which she sent her requests for purchase of materials to the WCC: 17 sets of fabrics to be supplied from various outlets— J.P. Keys, Auckland, E.H. Lund, Wellington and Robert Malcolm and James Dunlop, Christchurch, with quantities and price, the total bill $3,276.[27] Though Warren was concerned about fireproofing, Crook and Seaton both felt that it would seriously affect the intensity of the colours during the process and vetoed the idea. Further interruptions followed—a Print Club request for work to go into a show run by Ian Wedde—so that by September Crook was feeling the strain of his sudden popularity: "Project going on too long. Becoming unreal . . . I feel like a goose that lays thrushes eggs when only a golden one is required."[28] But the genial Warren needed the pressure to be maintained: "We are holding back colours and carpet patterns and finishes so that we can follow the Master."[29] By 27 October, Crook could report to Warren: "The banners are well under way, six are already finished . . . I have allowed a sleeve seam at the top of each . . . each banner weighs approx. 5 kilogrammes."

The banners were machine stitched with boning along the edges threaded through a French seam. There is also a sleeve at the top for them to be threaded through a slender beam above. Seaton began work on the banners in July 1981, cutting patterns from the paper cartoons. They

were ready for hanging in January 1983, and finally installed by August (fig. 9). The process had taken two years from start to finish. Crook had hoped to avoid the problems with the Washington banners in respect of light and water fastness, but in 1986 concerns were already being raised about the fading of some upper parts of the banners exposed to light, and the WCC suggested a fund for possible replacements.[30]

Figure 9. Installation of Gordon Crook's banners in the Renouf Foyer, Michael Fowler Centre, Wellington, 1983.

Just as with the Washington banners, there exist a number of preparatory designs, collages and drawings, but the final and most authoritative set, made for the WCC, are housed in the City Archives in two folders dated 1981 (fig. 10). These were drawn with felt tip and highlighter pens on paper, with collaged additions on secondary supports. Some sections of the drawings have tissue paper overlayers with alternative designs: most of these were not used in the final version. These drawings were very professionally conserved in August 2021. The drawings were only of 12 banners, but each has a reverse where, though the basic design of the obverse still serves as template, on the reverse there are transpositions of colours and the arrangements of the pieces. In addition, the banners are not hung in the Renouf Foyer in quite the order of the drawing numbers. For these reasons it is difficult to compare exactly the banners with the WCC archive drawings. Nevertheless, they are close enough to relate an analysis of the designs of these drawings to the finally installed fabric banners.

Analysis of the Design Drawings

Each banner has three broad sections: a curved base, a centre and a top. The centre is almost invariably made up of what I call "Malevich Free Floating Figures [Floaters]." The curved base sets the theme for the banner: for example, *Flowers of Summer* for banner 12, *Playful Hexagon* in banner 8 and *Lozenge and Jigsaw* for banner 3 (my own descriptive titles). The curved bases are the most visible to the public staring up from below. The most difficult to see are the more static elements at the top, such as balls on a cross on banner 1, inverted roof on banner 4 and the city grid on banner 10.

There is no way that these designs fit any rational theme sequence—neither 12 months of the year or regions of Wellington or any other logical sequence. All are the wayward fruit of Crook's unconscious mind and mood. As a whole, the Michael Fowler Centre banners, in themselves, do present a unity of mind and mood—celebratory, playful, positive and energetic, in the same way that the Washington banners project dignity, history and chivalry.

Figure 10. Gordon Crook, cartoon drawings for banners, 1981. Felt tip, highlighter pen on paper collage, 1060 x 762 mm. Wellington City Council Archives, 00472. Photo: Wellington City Council Archives.

Journal of New Zealand Studies NS38 (2024) 176-194 https://doi.org/10.26686/jnzs.iNS38.9587

Wall Hangings

Crook's first ideas for the wall hangings in the Michael Fowler Centre were for pictorial panels, showing trees and birds, inspired by his walks through Central Park between Te Aro and the Aro Valley. Writing to Seaton in October 1980, he pointed out that any idea of tapestry panels was out of the question, "too vast in dimensions": "Offhand, I'd imagine the acoustic panels would require a close weave and fairly absorbent woollen fabric—something taken from a reliable furnishing range and in plain colours, good range of colours. (No dyeing this time!) For us, I mean . . . I visualise extremely bold, simple patterns."[31]

It was not until nearly a year later that the conceptual phase of the wall panels began to come to a resolution. Crook told Warren that he envisaged the panels as

> . . . one continuous strip . . . [an] overall "flow"—the way the panels will link patternwise. On my notes I've indicated two choices for the "light" ground colour. The light tone is essential. It brings out the formation of the grouped units. Introduction of any positive colour would drain the colours from the patterned areas. The light ground also helps avoid the repeat pattern from looking like as ordinary textile design—turns it more into a painting, if you know what I mean.[32]

In October 1981, Crook had serious doubts about the banners after seeing his Anniversary Banner at the Dowse Art Museum (fig. 11), which must have alarmed Warren:

> Janne Land . . . and I went to the Dowse to see the new birthday banners. First thing we saw . . . was the tapestry I had woven by Lesley Nicholls as a sample for the sort of design we might use for the panels. It hung near my birthday banner. Both worked extremely well . . . but the "depth" of brilliance of the tapestry colours, well, they won, hands down.
> "Can you imagine Janne," I said, "500 square metres of that in the Town Hall." (Interestingly, the banner and tapestry were the same size and cost the same to produce finally) . . . Before leaving for the gallery, I showed Janne the designs I submitted for the panels, plus the latest I didn't send you. Apart from Nancye, she is the only person outside ourselves who has seen these designs . . . She was staggered by the space they would occupy! . . . [on decision making] When I look at the design I have chosen as best, there is never an inclination to alter it . . . But it really would be foolish to go ahead with anything if the pair of us were unsure . . . just a statement to show my present quandary and that I await to learn how you will proceed.[33]

Crook later added:

> If I am to go ahead, I'd like to do so right away as I don't want to have Nancye waiting too long for cartoons . . . and I need to clear the decks, as it were, for my new work plans for the coming year. . . . so far I've received only $500 for more than a year's work and I'm really finding it very hard to make ends meet now. I can't get on with any other work until a decision is made on the panels.[34]

Figure 11. Gordon Crook, *Birthday Banner for the Tenth Anniversary of the Dowse Art Museum*, 1981. Coloured linen, 2380 x 1170 mm. Commissioned with assistance from the Friends of the Dowse and the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand.

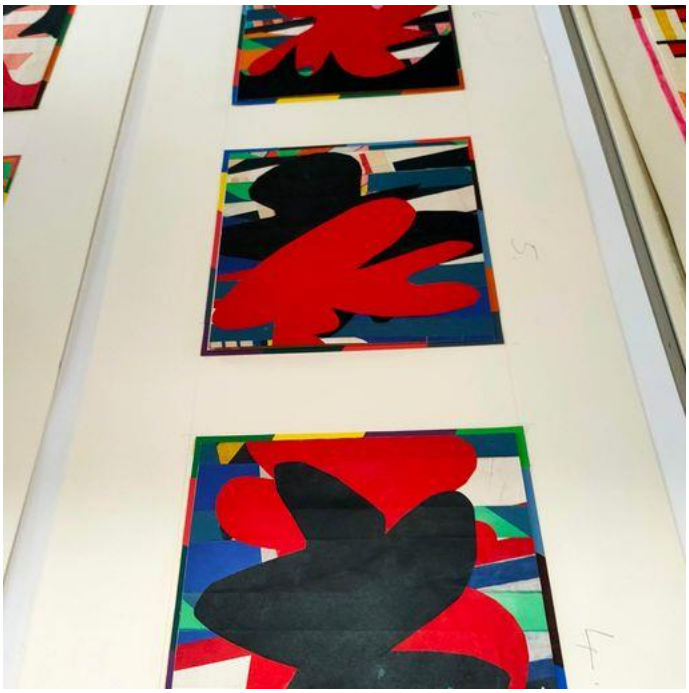

Figure 12. Examples of wall cartoons by Gordon Crook, 1982, for the Michael Fowler Centre Wellington. Ink on paper, 210 x 210 mm. Wellington City Council Archives. Photo: Vivienne Morrell

Crook made full scale cartoons from January 1982 using the floor of Janne Land's gallery on Jessie Street, empty between exhibitions over the summer. He wrote:

> I can't imagine how many kilometres I've covered on my knees! Bandy-legged I am when, as one of God's images, I rise from all fours! . . . The cartoons [of the auditorium panels] are done [to the exact sizes of the bays] . . . are good. Moments and movements within I find quite exciting. I shall be very surprised if they are not exactly the right scale for the job. They dance. Take a curve . . . follow it . . . lovely!

Seaton started the pattern tracing in March 1982 after full WCC approval on 11 February 1982: "Not a dissenting voice!"[35]

Michael Fowler was intimately involved in the whole process, which Crook appreciated:[36]

> I don't know whether you talked with Michael Fowler but quite unprompted by me, he did remark on the colours and liked them just as they are. My own opinion, we ought to avoid using the dark brown substitute for black, for although it might "harmonise" easily with other furnishings, it would also have the effect of making the panels somewhat dull and drab. . . . I am convinced it is right to pitch the colour so it complements by contrast, I think the near-navy blue and light yellow will do the trick—and we'll still be able to use browns etc for the carpets and curtains. The space between the promenade and the walls seems designed especially for a more daring and exciting use of colours—more crisp and smart and original.[37]

There were still doubts about sun and fading:

> I was by the town hall yesterday and noticed how exposed the panels were to the blast of sunlight—also where the banners would hang too. So, the old bogey—the lightfastness of any dyed cloth. However good the fastness I am certain the material will fade eventually when exposed to light. And judging from the strength of sunlight I saw on the panels the designs will disappear quickly unless afforded adequate protection. Should we proceed?[38]

The next few months were given over to getting swatches of colour samples, changing the colours of the designs "so that they sparkle." Crook was always insistent on having his way where colour was concerned, as any of the weavers or banner makers who worked for him would confirm. He wanted "exact colour match of fabrics according to my selection from the samples submitted by the firms. Until then making up cannot proceed . . . It is critical to the success of the panels that all the colours match up to the samples . . . If the colour is not 'spot on' maybe Lunds can arrange for a re-dyeing [of] it. Whatever, it simply has to be right."[39]

Crook, being an idealist, was also concerned about the future of the site of the New Town Hall, as it was still called. He envisaged a parkland setting, lawns, trees, not buildings, traffic close by. He was to be disillusioned. From July to November 1982, the architect, building contractors and not least Crook himself were still dealing with exactly how the hangings would be fitted to the concrete wall. The 10 wool crepe images were stretched across the outer walls of auditorium, each 7.5 metres long by 5.5 metres wide, machine stitched, all edges making a sleeve through which steel rods pass and tension the work. A spongy padded backing covered by silver foil was placed behind each wall hanging, which acted as sound insulation and

protection from the concrete wall. Rods were to be placed on pins bringing the hangings 80 centimetres from the wall. The hangings were to be attached to the rods by stitched edges: "The edges of all the panels at present remain unsewn, and borders could be added without gaining extra width. I think the general effect would look very good and would establish the somewhat 'drained appearance of colour' as being contained and intentional, and correct. Let me know what you think."[40]

Warren and Fowler were constantly feeding their comments to Crook as he laboured with Seaton and the contractors to get the 10 panels fixed "just right." Fowler went to observe the installation of the first hanging in July 1983, just like Pope Julius II coming to see how Michelangelo was getting on with the Sistine Chapel, though it seems reasonable to assume that Crook was humbler in his manner and the atmosphere less charged!

The banners and wall panels were finally in place by late August 1983. Warren wrote to Crook after the official opening:

> The great pleasure of the evening for the whole architectural team was to see the hangings and the banners. These transform the building. They are incomparably better than our best hopes. Do you remember when you first presented the sketches? I said I thought the result would be Gordon Crook's hangings with Warren and Mahoney's town hall as an incidental background. Then that disastrous trial run when they died on the concrete shell. Now they have come into perfect balance, adding, complimenting, and beautifully relating to the building as a whole. They look inevitable. Each time I visit Wellington I get the taxi to detour along Jervois Quay so I can enjoy them again.[41]

Crook also congratulated Fowler for his constant support: "Congratulations on this long-needed, marvellously 'real' civic and cultural amenity, the fact that you made it possible. PS. Nancye [Seaton] puts it better, she simply says 'he gets things done.'"[42] At last Crook was paid $4000 as "final design fee" for "supervision of 'making up' and installation" by the WCC.[43]

The *Evening Post* described the now-named Michael Fowler Centre as "being lit up like a bonfire" and Anne Philbin, director of Wellington City Art Gallery, said "it was wonderful to see an artist's work being used in conjunction with architecture. This was rare in Wellington."[44]

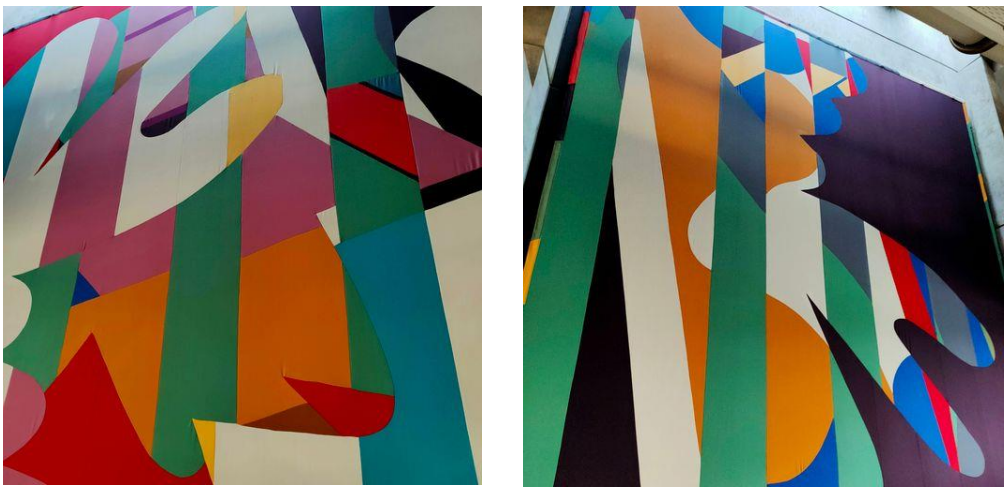

Figure 13. Gordon Crook, Wall panels, Michael Fowler Centre, Wellington, in 2019. Photos: Vivienne Morrell.

Renewal, 1999

The original banners suffered severe fading and UV damage and were removed in 1999. The present banners (fig. 13) were re-created from the originals by The Workroom in Petone, which had to construct large tables especially to handle the work, at a total cost of $120,000. Mike Lamb, architect at Lamb Design, was commissioned by the Wellington Festival and Convention Centre to match the colours and specify materials: wool, colour fast and fade free. The now elderly Crook was invited to see them after completion and was very happy with the work.

Conclusion: National Carrier?

Gordon Crook was not a New Zealander. He was 51 years old when he arrived in the country, with no previous knowledge of it and with the intention of joining an interior decoration business. Those intentions were immediately cast aside by circumstance. Crook's experience in Britain had been broad-based: whilst textile design had been his academic core, he made a name for himself as a tapestry maker,[45] he painted, he created collage images, received awards for wallpaper design and was a charismatic, if somewhat testy, teacher. He brought some of his British work to New Zealand, mainly tapestries and paintings. These are in what may be broadly termed the style of Art Brut and owed nothing to any style that may be termed "British."[46]

In New Zealand, Crook began to exhibit paintings, small tapestries and hand-made impressed (moulded) paper works. He painted murals, created theatre designs and public installations. As he became established, it was his tapestries—becoming larger as he handed much of the making over to professional weavers—and his painted and collage-based prints that received the favour of collectors and gallerists. He was promoted and celebrated by Mary and Jim Barr at the Dowse, his tapestries, screen prints and pastels bought by the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, by the Auckland and Christchurch art galleries, as well as being richly represented in the Wallace Arts Trust Collection and the homes of private collectors. He appeared on television, a film was made about his life and he had a retrospective exhibition touring the country. In other words, Crook, from being "fresh off the ship," eventually established himself as an artist in New Zealand, achieving not inconsiderable acclaim and success if not prosperity.

It was through the Barrs, Frank Corner at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Miles Warren that Crook was chosen to decorate institutions of national significance—embassies and the hub of Wellington's musical life, the Michael Fowler Centre. All this, whilst not turning his attention in his practice specifically to the New Zealand landscape, its history or visual culture. The one exception was the 1982 series of works dedicated to Oceania and, in particular, the legend of Maui the trickster. Crook, however, turned Maui's struggle with Hine-nui-te-po into his own struggle both to love and separate himself from his own mother, emphasising the value of allegory to turn the personal into the universal. He never returned to Māori mythology.

But why were Crook's abstract, and in the case of the Michael Fowler Centre, modernist designs, without any obvious "New Zealand" component, chosen as "national carriers," as it were, to decorate such front-of-house national institutions? We can only hazard guesses. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' embassies were showcases on the international circuit. However, under Corner's management, the Ministry eschewed parochial decoration. Warren's architecture itself had no relationship with New Zealand as such. It is in the international modernist idiom of its time and could be placed in any city centre of the late twentieth century. In turn, Crook's work emphasised and helped to anchor the institutions to their time in history

(including art history), just as Drawbridge's murals enhance the Beehive, New Zealand's Parliament building,[47] and Ralph Hotere embellished Auckland Airport[48] with modernist décor.

Crook's manner of working was essentially eclectic. Collage prototypes enhanced this aspect of his work, the not quite random choice of sub-images contributing to a "final," "just right" work. For Warren, these were also "just right" for the buildings he had in mind. Public art changes the nature of the built environment, adds to the complexity, the interest of a space, and makes out of nothing "something" that may become, over time, "heritage." As Laura Woodward, the WCC's collection manager, told the editor of *Our Wellington* in 2021:

> These 22 massive textile works [Michael Fowler hangings] have become icons of Wellington's artistic culture and heritage and have helped ignite interest and appreciation of textiles as an art form. And it's easy to see why, they are vibrant, joyful and a little quirky. They exude the energy of all the concerts and crescendo inside the auditorium, and being at the foot of Cuba Street they reflect the life happening outside too. They are definitely Wellington.[49]

The 1970s and early 1980s was a time when the multicultural or even overtly culturally anarchic, anti-identitarian imperatives of European modernism began to find a place in the practice of New Zealand artists, particularly those who had extensive European experience and training—Pat Hanly, John Drawbridge and Ralph Hotere, for example. Crook was most decidedly of their number. Such artists were not only attracted to non-objective abstraction, but also added elements of their intersubjective life worlds—their social and art historical biographies were intimately interwoven into their practice. Their art was never not personal, despite its abstract core. They were cosmopolitan, of the world, at the same time as being culturally nomadic, owing no allegiance to any school or local "culture." This was the new internationalist world order that fractured conservative cultural certainties and siloed communitarian values. Crook had been part of this world all his life: his manner of working in any medium broke boundaries. Indeed, as an artist, a correspondent and a poet, he never kept to culturally bound rules. Accordingly, his work was a refreshing presence on the Wellington art scene. At the same time, this anarchic, deviant attitude to medium, to subject, to "history"—this de-territorialisation—alienated him from others caught in the web of more parochial concerns. Thus, Crook and other modernists working in New Zealand extended the nature of what might be called the local "culture" towards the ever growing multicultural, internationalist order. Under his influence, New Zealand culture became increasingly destabilised and decontextualised, subject to constant revision, a contested space.

---

[1] See my three articles on the work of Gordon Crook: "Gordon Crook: tapestries," *Tuhinga* 31 (2020): 70–90; "Gordon Crook: The Pastel Triptychs," *Tuhinga* 32 (2021): 120–34; and "Gordon Crook and the Wolf-Man," *Tuhinga* 33 (2022): 1–29.

[2] For the history of Mason's interior design business, see Douglas Lloyd-Jenkins, *Mason Handprints* (Napier: Hawke's Bay Cultural Trust: 1998).

[3] Manuscript notes of Crook's voyage to New Zealand, "Passenger from Southampton to Wellington," 1972, Peter Stupples Archives.

[4] These initial problems for Crook are covered in detail in his collected correspondence in the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, MS-Papers-11213-001.

[5] Correspondence related to the Corner/Warren commission can be found in the Alexander Turnbull Library, MS-Papers-11213-006, Chancery Project.

[6] Gordon Crook to Frank Corner, 28 August 1978, MS-Papers-11213-006.
[7] Crook to Nancye Seaton, 19 October 1978, MS-Papers-11213-006.
[8] Crook to Miles Warren, 5 October 1978, MS-Papers-11213-006.
[9] Earlier attempts to work with Flags International in Howick, Auckland, fell through due to their inability to meet the timeline, and also, realistically, because of their distance from Wellington.
[10] Crook to Corner, 25 October 1978, MS-Papers-11213-006.
[11] Crook to Warren, 28 November 1978, MS-Papers-11213-006.
[12] Crook to Seaton, 31 January 1979, MS-Papers-11213-006.
[13] Crook to Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 30 April 1979, MS-Papers-11213-006.
[14] Crook to Warren, 20 March 1978, MS-Papers-11213-006. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade sent samples of the Wolfin fabric to the Research Institute Textile Services in Lower Hutt in March for testing. In their results, the Institute indicated that many of the colours had poor lightfastness and even worse results for fastness to water. The Institute considered the fabrics unsuitable for "areas where there is strong light or a possibility of condensation." However, this information arrived too late. Copies of this correspondence are in the Peter Stupples Archive.
[15] Letters of MFAT to NZ Ambassador in Washington, 5 April 1979, together with Crook's additional remarks about the complexity of dying and colour fastness, 11 April 1979. Further correspondence also took place into September; Peter Stupples Archive.
[16] Warren to Crook, 26 September 1979, MS-Papers-11213-006.
[17] Crook to Diana Jefferson, MFAT, 2 October 1979, MS-Papers-11213-006.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Crook to Warren, 30 November 1979, MS-Papers-11213-006.
[20] Crook to Warren, 25 March 1980, MS-Papers-11213-006.
[21] Neil Rowe, "Gordon Crook," *Art New Zealand*, no. 16 (Winter 1980): 25–27.
[22] Elva Bett, "Flying the Flag," *NZ Listener*, 15 January 1983, 30. Bett's article was based on notes she sent to Crook for approval on 18 November 1982. A copy of Bett's notes together with Crook's emendations can be found in the Hector Library, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.
[23] Wolf von Eckardt, "Well-mannered Embassy," reprinted in the *NZ Listener*, 8 February 1980. Originally published in the *Washington Post*, 15 September 1979.
[24] Crook to Warren, 3 July 1980, MS-Papers-11213-113.
[25] Warren to Wellington City Council, 27 February 1981, MS-Papers-11213-113.
[26] Crook to Warren, 4 June 1981, MS-Papers-11213-113.
[27] Seaton to Wellington City Council, 15 July 1981, MS-Papers-11213-113.
[28] Crook to Warren, 21 September 1981, MS-Papers-11213-113.
[29] Warren to Crook, 24 September 1981, MS-Papers-11213-113.
[30] "Banners to be Replaced," *Evening Post*, 5 August 1986.
[31] Crook to Seaton, 21 October 1980, MS-Papers-11213-113.
[32] Crook to Warren. 30 September 1981, MS-Papers-11213-113.
[33] Crook to Warren, 5 October 1981, MS-Papers-11213-113.
[34] Crook to Warren, 27 October 1981, MS-Papers-11213-113.
[35] Fowler to Crook, 11 February 1982, MS-Papers-11213-113.
[36] Crook to Fowler, 15 February 1982, MS-Papers-11213-113.
[37] Crook to Warren, 15 February 1982, MS-Papers-11213-113.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Crook to Seaton, 24 June 1982, MS-Papers-11213-113.
[40] Crook to Warren, 8 January 1983, MS-Papers-11213-113.
[41] Warren to Crook, 29 August 1983, MS-Papers-11213-113.
[42] Crook to Fowler, 14 August 1983, MS-Papers-11213-113.
[43] Wellington City Council to Crook, 29 August 1983, MS-Papers-11213-113.
[44] "Bedecked with Bright Banners," *Evening Post*, 22 August 1983, 28.
[45] See Stupples, "Gordon Crook: Tapestries."
[46] See the holdings of paintings in Te Papa and a tapestry in the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū. Other works are in private collections.

[47] See Gregory O'Brien, *John Drawbridge: Wide Open Interior* (Wellington: City Gallery Wellington, 2002), plate 31.
[48] Megan Tamati-Quennell, "Hōtere, Hone Papita Raukura (Ralph)," *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 2019, Te Ara—the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, accessed 9 April 2024, https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/6h3/hotere-hone-papita-raukura-ralph.
[49] Wellington City Council, *Our Wellington*, 4 March 2021.