

COLIN MCCAHERN

LETTERS AND NUMBERS

ARTWORK LABELS

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Colin McCahon is widely regarded as the most influential New Zealand artist of the twentieth century. He was born in Timaru in 1919 and began exhibiting in the 1940s. In a career spanning almost fifty years until his death in Auckland in 1987, McCahon developed a deeply personal visual language that traversed wide-ranging themes and subjects, including Christian and Māori spirituality, the landscape and environmental concerns, symbolic and spiritual journeys, and the expressive potential of numbers and words.

To coincide with the centenary of McCahon's birth, *Colin McCahon: Letters and Numbers* draws upon the NGV Collection and generous private loans to explore the artist's unique vision, innovative use of text, idiosyncratic adaptation of aspects of international modernism, and his relentless interrogation of the concepts of faith and doubt. It also acknowledges the artist's early connection with the NGV: McCahon's first trip outside New Zealand was to Melbourne in 1951 to study paintings in the NGV Collection. This proved to be a pivotal moment in his career.

Colin McCahon

New Zealand 1919–87

One

1965

synthetic polymer paint and polyvinyl acetate on
composition board

Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of
Mr Robert Raynor AM, Honorary Life Benefactor, 1999

1999.324

McCahon first incorporated text in his work in the 1940s. By the late 1950s he was composing works using words and numbers alone. The 'I' in this work represents both the capital letter 'I' and the roman numeral for the number one, while the word 'one' has dual meaning as a number and, in grammatical terms, a third-person singular pronoun (in contrast to the first-person singular pronoun 'I'). These ambiguities provide what McCahon referred to as a 'slowly emerging order ... built on the arbitrariness of language [and] on the conventions of human communication'. *One* is a nexus of word and number, but it is primarily about individual identity.

Colin McCahon

New Zealand 1919–87

A letter to Hebrews (Rain in Northland)

1979

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria in
memory of the Reverend Stan Brown by the
Reverend Ian Brown, Fellow, 1984

P6.a-f-1984

Drawn to its themes of faith and doubt, McCahon first transcribed sections of Letter to the Hebrews, a book from the New Testament, in his *Written Paintings and Drawings* series of 1969, otherwise known as his 'scrolls'. A decade later, he incorporated passages in several works, including this atmospheric six-part work on paper. Between shafts of light and sheets of rain, words appear to fall across a brooding sky and sea in New Zealand's Northland. This most northerly part of the country held personal significance for McCahon, who associated it with his own experiences and ideas about life, death and spirituality.

Colin McCahon

New Zealand 1919–87

The five wounds of Christ no. 1

1977–78

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Purchased, NGV Foundation with the assistance of Dame Jennifer Gibbs and the proceeds of the 2011 National Gallery of Victoria Annual Dinner, 2012

2012.192

Although McCahon was not affiliated with any particular religious order, he made extensive use of Christian symbolism in his work. This is one of three paintings from 1977–78 on the subject of the five wounds Christ endured during the crucifixion. Against a black ground, which could be interpreted as the darkness that descended during the crucifixion, Christ's wounds are suggested by white lines and rectangles at the edges of the canvas. These are echoed by five points of a dotted line, a recurring motif in McCahon's work that has been interpreted variously as a flight path, a string of rosary beads or the passage of a departing soul.

Colin McCahon

New Zealand 1919–87

I applied my mind

1982

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Loti & Victor Smorgon Fund, 2012

2012.20

One of three final works McCahon made before his death in 1987, this painting features passages from Ecclesiastes that reflect the artist's crisis of faith towards the end of his career. Painted in white against black in McCahon's distinctive cursive script, which appears to fade in and out like a faltering light in the dark, it can be read as a metaphor for faith and doubt, concepts that underscore much of McCahon's art. Although the artist signed and dated this painting in 1982, there is evidence to suggest that a substantial amount of it was made during 1980.

Colin McCahon

New Zealand 1919–87

Poetry isn't in my words...

from the *Written Paintings and Drawings* series

1969

blue pastel and pastel wash on brown paper

O Lord I will be mindful of thy justice done

from the *Written Paintings and Drawings* series

1969

pastel wash and oil pastel on brown paper

Gift of the Reverend Ian Brown in memory of
Annie Christina Brown, 2009

2009.160-161

McCahon first exhibited these 'written' works at Barry Lett Galleries in Auckland in 1969. Numbering more than seventy in total, the so-called scroll paintings were originally installed edge to edge to create an all-encompassing environment. McCahon drew from various texts in his personal book collection for these works, including *The New English Bible*, a gift from his wife, the artist Anne Hamblett; Peter Hooper's *Journey Towards an Elegy and other poems*, a gift from his friend, the poet John Caselberg; and Matire Kereama's *The Tail of the Fish: Māori Memories of the Far North*, a gift from his daughter Catherine.

Colin McCahon

New Zealand 1919–87

A1

A11

A12

A13

From the *Beach Walk (Series A)* series

1973

synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas

Private collection, Melbourne. Promised gift

In 1973 McCahon produced four series of *Beach Walk* paintings in his coastal studio at Muriwai, north-west of Auckland. Each series comprised fourteen panels representing Christ's journey through the fourteen Stations of the Cross, while also making reference to the Māori belief that the spirit of the deceased journeys into the afterlife by travelling north along the coast to Te Rerenga Wairua (Cape Reinga). When he made these paintings, McCahon was coming to terms with the deaths of his mother and two of his close friends: the poets James K. Baxter and Charles Brasch. The *Beach Walk* series can be read as McCahon's lamentation for these losses.

Colin McCahon

New Zealand 1919–87

Fifteen drawings for Charles Brasch

1951, 1976

lithographic facsimile of artist's hand-bound book
published by the Hocken Library, Dunedin, 1976

Private collection, Melbourne. Promised gift

In 1951 McCahon made a book of ink drawings for a friend, the poet Charles Brasch. Earlier that year Brasch had funded McCahon's first overseas trip to Melbourne, where he studied paintings in the NGV Collection with the Australian painter Mary Cockburn Mercer. After Brasch's death in 1973, the Hocken Library at the University of Otago published a limited-edition facsimile, of which this is an example. The drawings depict the life of Christ in a figurative style characteristic of McCahon's paintings of the 1940s. In both style and subject, they have a kinship with the work of the French artist Georges Rouault.