

Books & Culture

Poster boys for Modernism

A new book about tourism advertising locates a missing piece in the New Zealand art history jigsaw. **by GUY SOMERSET**

Imagine an alternative history of New Zealand art where the ground-breaking 20th-century painters we celebrated weren't Rita Angus, Toss Woollaston and Colin McCahon, but names such as Leonard Mitchell, Marcus King and Howard Mallitte.

Never heard of them? That's because the works they produced were mainly for railway platforms and billboards here and overseas, not for the gallery wall.

But Mitchell, King and Mallitte, and other artists and designers employed by the Tourist Department and Railways Department till the 1960s when colour photography and television took over, are now celebrated in *Selling the Dream: The Art of Early New Zealand Tourism*, a new book that reproduces hundreds of examples of their posters, as well as their covers for annuals, brochures and magazines.

In essays supporting the images, *Selling the Dream* also sells the idea that these commercial artists were at the forefront of New Zealand Modernism and the forging of a national identity through movements such as Regionalism.

"Perceived as contemporary and distinctly modern, Regionalism in New Zealand undoubtedly shared much in common with commercial art," writes Warren Feeney, art historian and head of the Academy of Fine Arts in Wellington.

"It was not just its style. Even the subjects of Angus's and [Rata] Lovell-Smith's paintings had been anticipated by commercial artists: the railway hoardings, barns, telegraph poles, bridges and other man-made motifs from the rural landscape were recurring themes in numerous Regionalist paintings."

Meanwhile, the emergence of Modernism and abstraction in the late 1940s "was equally preempted by the work of commercial artists and designers", writes Feeney. "Often praised for his 'radical' depiction of the New Zealand landscape, Colin McCahon recalled he became aware of European Modernism through the work of advertising and design artists in New Zealand in the 1920s."

In another essay, art historian Gail Ross writes of how conservatism wasn't an option for those in the advertising sector – whether it was of form or content (for example, looking back to the Mother Country and anglicising the local landscape to fit into their notion of the Britain of the South).

"What separated artists in the advertising sector from those in the fine arts was that commercial artists had to be aware of the latest trends in modern art if they wanted to stay employed, and they had to



BOOKS

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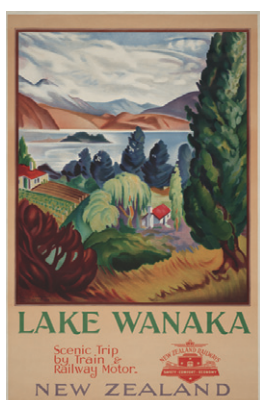
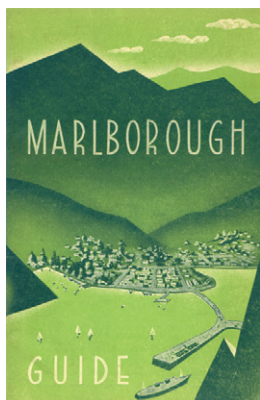
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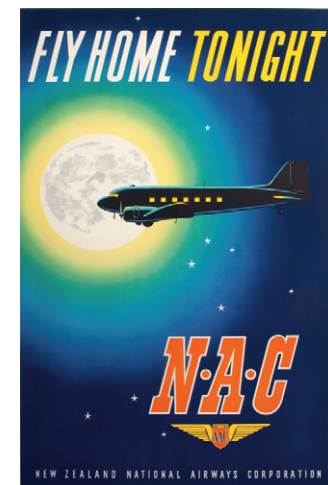
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Posters and advertising artwork from *Selling the Dream: The Art of Early New Zealand Tourism*.

"Even the subjects [of fine art] had been anticipated by commercial artists: the railway hoardings, barns, telegraph poles, bridges ... were recurring themes."





focus their efforts exclusively on contemporary New Zealand ... Commercial artists in the tourism sector played a major role [in the search for a modern art of national identity], creating iconic posters and publicity featuring New Zealand landscapes, flora and fauna."

They were, after all, in the advertising speak of today, charged with promoting the country's Unique Selling Point – and that USP, then as now, was in large part constructed around the idea of 100% Pure (even if that particular copy line was yet to be invented).

At the same time, they were, like advertisers everywhere, as art director Arnold Goodwin is quoted as saying, "ever in the position of having to provide a new excitement ... What was new last year is now a mummified corpse."

The driving force behind *Selling the Dream* is co-editor Peter Alsop, by day general manager of the Productivity Commission of New Zealand, by night pretty productive himself as a poster collector and for the past two years working from 8pm till midnight on the book

("with a very tolerant wife and a couple of babies growing up").

"I guess the idea for the book came about from having a large personal collection and thinking, 'How can I make better use of this stuff so it is publicly celebrated?'"

In particular, he wanted to see the posters properly recognised within art history. "The fine arts community is quite disparaging about posters as artworks and looks down upon them and yet it was the commercial artists that were pretty much blazing the trail for artistic development in New Zealand, as well as keeping their hand in their fine arts work alongside it – with some reports saying they thought they benefited from working in both commercial and fine arts."

Initially, Alsop had planned an exhibition, but that didn't come together – although he is returning to the idea now the book is out of the way.

As well as celebrating the artists and designers, the book is a tribute to the craftsmen who made their ideas work through lithography and silk-screen printing.

"There's a story in the book of a Wellington chap called Gerald Phillips who had to cut 19 stencils for a flower poster in the book where we show the poster actually building with nine images on the left-hand page and then there's the full poster on the right.

"It's an incredibly intricate process. Right down to cutting a stencil for the artist's signature, Eugene Collett. And I was quite amazed when I talked to Gerald that if you look at the signature up close it almost looks like an original signature with a fountain pen. The curves are so smooth and it's so refined. But that was handcut using basically a Stanley knife. So they are incredible craftsmen that brought those posters to life."

And now *Selling the Dream* is bringing them back to life. ■



SELLING THE DREAM: THE ART OF EARLY NEW ZEALAND TOURISM, edited by Peter Alsop, Gary Stewart and Dave Bamford, foreword by Fran Walsh (Craig Potton Publishing, \$79.99).