



Amongst the more than 1000 artworks in The University of Auckland Art Collection, there are some whose origins aren't always clear, and it is often fascinating to track down who they're by and how they ended up with us.

Although every work officially purchased for the collection has been well documented by Keith Sinclair, Robert Chapman, Michael Dunn and Peter Simpson, who curated the collection for most of its first four decades from 1966, there are other works that have been bought by various departments with University funds, or received as gifts, for which we have very little or no record.

One such mystery work is a portrait of poet James K. Baxter by Joseph Alach, which was gifted to the General Library in 1975, presumably by the artist, and is now cared for as part of the Art Collection.

Alach does not appear in any significant books on New Zealand, in any of the main library databases, or the National Library's Papers Past website which makes it possible to do an online search of major New Zealand newspapers and periodicals published from 1839 to 1945.

Nor does a Google search reveal much; the online *Australasian Art Sales Digest* shows that another 1973 painting, titled *Ostend, Waiheke*, was put up for auction at Webbs, in 2005 but not sold; and the *New Zealand Electronic Text Centre* has digitised the publication *Book and Print in New Zealand: A Guide to Print Culture in Aotearoa*, which contains in the section on Croatian publishing a mention of two short-lived newspapers, *Jedinstvo (Unity)* and *Vjesnik (Messenger)*, published and edited by Joseph Alach in 1942 and 1946 respectively.

A few years ago, that seemed to be the end of the search for Alach, short of ringing all 20 Alachs in the phone book, which is hardly a priority given the minor nature of this painting. But in July on the Auckland Art Gallery's relaunched website it was noticed that the E.H. McCormick Research Library has an artist file on Alach.

In it are three newspaper clippings; a 1967 article in the *Central Suburbs Leader* on the artist's second exhibition, held at the Giotto Gallery, a *New Zealand Herald* review by T.J. McNamara of the same exhibition, and another (undated) review by McNamara of a subsequent show.

From these fragments, we can establish a sketch of who the artist was.

The *Central Suburbs Leader* article has a photo of Alach, describing him as a Sandringham resident who decided to teach himself to paint after his retirement five years earlier.

He is Yugoslavian, came to New Zealand when he was 17 and

worked in the gumfields of Northland. He briefly returned home after World War I and then dabbled in a range of jobs including hand-colouring photographs.

Although he hasn't been home for many years, most of his work depicts Yugoslavian scenes, mostly from memory but some are from magazine images or of New Zealand subjects.

McNamara notes that Alach's drawing is not very good and that the scenes painted from memory, seen "with his inward eye", are better than those that are copied.

In the later review, from the inaugural exhibition of the Spiral Gallery in Dominion Road, he is described as a prolific primitive painter but the reviewer wonders about the distinction between what is truly naive and what is just badly drawn with unsophisticated colour and composition.

Tantalised by this new information, we undertook a renewed search, including the online *Index of New Zealand Art* (INZART), launched by the Elam Fine Arts Library in 2008 as a database of periodical articles.

In it, there are two references to Alach - McNamara's 1967 review and a 1998 *Herald* article by Pat Baskett titled "The good the bad and the folksy", about an exhibition of folk art at Lopdell House Gallery.

The latter story mostly focuses on exhibition curator and folk art collector, John Perry, but also talks to Dick Lyne, a 70-year-old who also took up painting in his retirement. It notes that two works in the exhibition, including one by Alach, were previously owned by the late Tony Fomison, who was a renowned painter and champion of "naive" artists.

Baskett's article notes that Perry contributed an index of artists to Richard Wolfe's 1997 book *All Our Own Work: New Zealand's Folk Art*, which doesn't include any work of Alach's but does have an entry in Perry's section. Perry puts Alach as living c.1896-1980 and has him also working as a land agent, in a fish shop and running a boarding house.

Two works are said to be owned by the Onehunga Library, while Lopdell House curator, Kate Wells, has in her exhibition records reference to five paintings at the Onehunga Library - an initial call to the library doesn't confirm the presence of any paintings, although it is suggested that they may now be in the community centre.

Also in the Elam Archive is a small typed catalogue from the exhibition at the Giotto Gallery, which was run on Queen Street by Franciscan monks.

In this publication, Alach says: "I think it is the nicest thing in one's life to create something beautiful. I know my pictures are not perfect in any way, but they give me pleasure to paint them, and I hope they might please someone else."

As to why the work was gifted to the General Library, that remains a mystery, as does the reason he painted a portrait of New Zealand poet James K. Baxter.

Baxter did live briefly in Grafton in the late 1960s, although it seems unlikely that the retired Alach would have been amongst the druggies that frequented his Boyle Crescent squat, and biographer John Newton has no recollection of Alach being amongst those in the Jerusalem commune Baxter established next.

In 1972 Baxter, in poor health, left Jerusalem for Auckland, where he died in a small commune, but it is probably the subsequent headlines about the passing of this renowned poet that caught Alach's attention for the portrait he painted soon after.

Elam Senior Lecturer, Sean Kerr, has also taken an interest in Alach's portrait of Baxter and "remixed" it into a multimedia installation that has the late Baxter talking to fellow poet Sam Hunt, as portrayed by Robin White.

You can see this work in Sean Kerr's survey exhibition, which opens on 3 September at the Gus Fisher Gallery and Artspace.

Andrew Clifford

*Joseph Alach (c.1896-1980)
Portrait of James K. Baxter, 1973
Acrylic on board, 605 x 410mm
The University of Auckland Art Collection*

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