

Interview: Dr. Mark Stocker Art historian, Otago University.

Mark Stocker was born in Watford, UK. After studying Art History at Cambridge, he went on to do a PhD on the sculptor Sir Edgar Boehm, the most popular and prolific British sculptor of the 1880s. Previously of the University of Canterbury, a past Chairman of Friends of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, editor of the *The Journal of New Zealand Art History*, I caught up with him during a recent visit to Christchurch.

How did art history end up being your field of interest?

I enjoyed art at my north London school (more the drawing than the painting), did the old fashioned O-level in art, but in my heart-of-hearts knew I didn't have the hunger for it. A perceptive art teacher steered me in the art history direction. I must have been one of the first people to have taken the equivalent of the British History of Art A-level. At about 17 I had to make the big decision (education being more specialised in the UK than NZ) of studying either Politics at Oxford or Art History at Cambridge, the art history winning out.

What brought you to New Zealand?

NZ has always been a very special place for me. While my late mother was Czech., my paternal grandparents were New Zealanders. Although I am originally British, NZ was never exactly an unknown place to me. NZ grandparents, cousins, uncles and aunts would visit us while I was growing up. I first came over here as a teenager, an enlightened headmaster letting me miss a term at school to visit, considering the travel very educational. Ten years later I came to Canterbury as a visiting lecturer for a year replacing a colleague on study leave, and was invited to stay afterward. I completed my PhD on St Valentine's Day 1986 and on the following Wednesday was on the plane to Christchurch.

Do you have any particular art/art historical interests?

When I was a student I did history for the first two years, then art history. I grumbled a bit (the Cambridge degree structure was very archaic in those days), but it has been a wonderful foundation. Now being in a history and art history department at Otago, where there are no barriers between the disciplines, I find that a happier fit than say the Canterbury scenario where art history is a sub-field of Fine Arts. I have a big regard for Andrew Drummond, I love his anarchy, and Barry Cleavin. Both are very dear and valuable to me. But, in the essential way I work - unless I was a contemporary specialist, a digital art geek - and I'm not - I feel I have more in common with say, a historian or a classicist: there's an historic component to these disciplines, and that's where I fit best.

Considering your role first at Canterbury, and now at Otago, how do you find the different structures?

I've not changed my identity as a consequence of

the change. Otago is more intimate, we keep a tighter ship (just three immediate colleagues, including the theorist Peter Leech) Canterbury, as a bigger department and one established for more years, has an enviable library and slide facilities but Otago has something special in the air. I have a sense students at Otago are more committed to being there, as a lifestyle. Perhaps their parents discovered 'sex, drugs and rock n roll' back there in the 70s and now their children want much of the same in their own way. A huge advantage of Otago is that it is still a central campus with the Hocken Library and art collection nearby, not to mention the Dunedin



Public Art Gallery, indispensable places for the study of NZ art. This is unlike Victoria or Canterbury which are more scattered.

Do you have any reflections as Chairman of The Friends of the Robert McDougall years ago?

I was Chairman 1997-2000 succeeding Chris Brocket and succeeded by Marianne Hargreaves. During my time I saw the animal change from little more than a dozen people of a certain age 'doing good works' (no disservice to how the *Friends* used to operate) to being executive of a much tighter, professionalised thousand-strong team. It has necessarily had to become a less intimate group now, but doing similar support work to what the *Friends* did in the 'good old days'.

I think it's very healthy that *Friends* do not have a historical role in acquisitions policy. It is my view that the role of the *Friends* is to be friends. Once or twice I got into sticky situations, but regardless of whatever private views I might have had, my role was to be a support to the gallery and its director.

What are the origins of the *The Journal of New Zealand Art History* and your vision for it?

The Journal - which was originally the *Bulletin* - has been going since 1972. It was set up in Auckland by Emeritus Professor Tony Green,

Dr Mark Stocker of Otago University with Ernest Gillick's *Ex Tenebris Lux*, Christchurch Art Gallery, August 2004.



I have a sense students at Otago are more committed to being there, as a lifestyle. Perhaps their parents discovered 'sex, drugs and rock n roll' back there in the 70s and now their children want much of the same in their own way.