

**COLIN McCAGHON 16**

(1919 – 1987, New Zealand)

LET BE, LET BE, 1959

Elias series

enamel and sand on board

183.0 x 122.0 cm

signed and dated lower right: McCahon. 59.

inscribed lower left: It has always been like this

signed, inscribed and dated verso: Colin McCahon /

No.29 / LET BE WILL HE COME / TO SAVE HIM /

JAN – AUG 59 / SOLPAH + SAND / 60 gns

ESTIMATE: \$800,000 – 1,200,000

**PROVENANCE**

The McCahon Family, Auckland

Webb's, Auckland, 29 March 1995, lot 1

Martin Browne Fine Art, Sydney

Private collection, New South Wales

**EXHIBITED**

*An Exhibition of Paintings by Colin McCahon,*

Gallery 91, Christchurch, New Zealand, 1959

*Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand*

*Contemporary New Zealand Painting 1965*

Commonwealth Institute, London, U.K.

November 1965 (cat. 39) (label attached verso)

*McCahon's McCahons – An Exhibition of 24 Paintings*

*from the Artist's Collection* (not for sale), Moller's Gallery,

Auckland, NZ, 1969, cat. 18

*Colin McCahon: A Survey Exhibition,* Auckland City Art Gallery,

New Zealand, 1972, cat. 38 (illus.)

*Gates and Journeys,* Auckland City Art Gallery,

New Zealand, 1988, cat. E19

*Headlands: Thinking through New Zealand Art,*

Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and National Art Gallery,

Wellington, New Zealand, 1993-94 (label attached verso)

*A Selection of Post War International Painting and Sculpture,*

Martin Browne Fine Art, Sydney, July – August 1997, cat. 14

*Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith,* Stedelijk Museum,

Amsterdam, The Netherlands, August – November 2002,

then touring to: City Gallery, Wellington, NZ;

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Auckland, NZ;

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia;

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

**LITERATURE**

Brown, G.H., *Colin McCahon, Artist,* A.H. & A.W. Reed Ltd,

Wellington NZ, 1984, p. 116, pl. 58 (illus.)

Pound, F., *Forty Modern New Zealand Painters,*

Penguin Books, 1985, pl. 25 (illus.)

Barr, M., (ed.), *Headlands: Thinking through New Zealand Art,*

catalogue accompanying the exhibition curated by

Robert Leonard and Bernice Murphy, 1992, p. 55 (illus.)

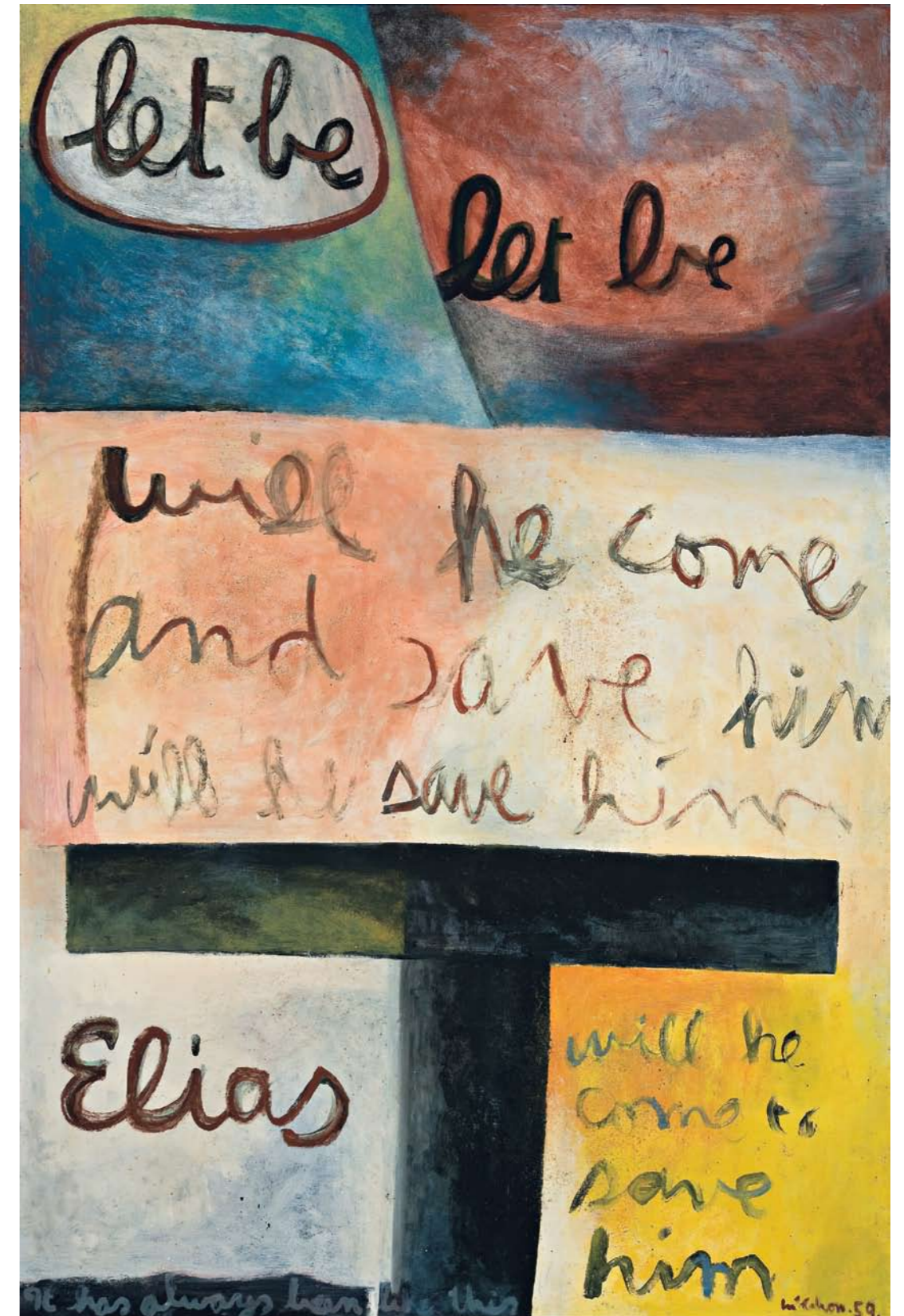
Bloem, M., & Browne, M., *Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith,*

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam & Craig Potton Publishing,

New Zealand, 2002, pp. 89, 192, 254, 258, (illus. p. 89)

The Colin McCahon Database and Image Library # cm000005

**A PRIVATE COLLECTION OF IMPORTANT WORKS BY COLIN McCAGHON**



'...The written word, too, most often quoted from the bible is... without apology used as a subject for painting... The matter is... the one most people want to lay down rules about. But how do we lay down rules for this sort of painting? Part of a painter's work is to discover rules and... test them as he goes along, to see if they will work for him and for us. When a whole sky cries "Elias"...who shall say lettering shall not be big in a picture?'<sup>1</sup>

Exploring the ambiguity inherent in the comments of observers at the Crucifixion, the Elias series – of which the present *Let be, let be* 1959 is arguably one of the most celebrated examples – represented McCahon's first great foray into the 'word paintings' which today so distinguish his oeuvre. Commenced in January 1959, with the greatest period of concentrated activity taking place between June and August, the series was, according to the artist, initiated as a reaction against what he perceived as the domination of his painting by purely landscape concerns. Departing from his personal interest in solving technical and stylistic challenges posed by the Titirangi landscape, now McCahon sought rather to pursue art as a means of communication, to address himself to a potential audience. Thus, the Elias works delve into the deeply human concept of doubt, contemplating the doubt of bystanders, of the suffering criminals crucified at the same time as Christ, of the artist himself, and not least, the doubts of his viewers.

In particular, 'It is Christ's exclamation, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthan?' and the bystanders' comment 'Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him', that are the key to the *Elias* series. McCahon exploits the ambiguity that arises from the crowds' apparent mistaking of Christ's cry, 'Eloi, Eloi...' ('My God, my God...') for an appeal to Elias (or Elijah). A 9th century BC Hebrew prophet, Elias was popularly believed to have 'never tasted death', having been taken up to Heaven in a whirlwind, seated in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11). By implying the possibility of alternative responses to the same combination of words, McCahon sought to explore the uncertain nature of doubt, faith and belief.<sup>2</sup>

As Gordon Brown elucidates, 'The multiple readings of the two utterances become clear immediately several paintings from the *Elias* series are examined. This is so even when the texts are divorced from their painterly context and considered simply as words. If, however, McCahon's intentions are to be appreciated to their fullest extent, then the non-naturalistic imagery and mood established by the combination of shape and colour in a particular painting must be considered, along with the words, as a single unified entity. In a real sense these paintings do require viewers to modify their normal pattern of looking at pictures. Some viewers may feel that a see-sawing action is required between the acts of seeing and reading. For others no such problem exists.

In *Let be, Let be* 1959, the initial 'let be' is enclosed, well-lit and in both the visual and verbal sense given emphasis over the second 'let be' which is shaded and has the illusion of being placed slightly further back in the picture. The main part of the text occupies the central area where part of the inscription seems to fade as the words 'will he' echo the opening of the text in a loss of confidence as they merge with the light supporting ground colour. Below this inscription the persistent image of the cross dominates the bottom portion of the painting: the symbol of the Crucifixion, dark and foreboding. Beneath the left arm of the cross, set in isolation, is written 'Elias', while under the other arm – as if balanced against the name Elias and all he represents – is inscribed 'will he come to save him'. This in turn is a variation of the statement found in the central portion of the painting, repeating it but in diminished lettering, as if hope is fading. The colour in this work is delicate, but while the harmonious qualities impart an aura of silence to the visual appeal of the work, it is applied in a supportive role to the words and not for any decorative quality it may possess.<sup>3</sup>

For indeed, as with the best of McCahon's work, in *Let be, let be* '...it is the existential situation that prevails. While this can be seen as the agony of expectation and of doubt, fixed within the immediate landscape where light and shade, hope and despondency alternate across hill and valley, the greater concern of the *Elias* series is for the human predicament seen at close quarters. The viewer is asked to stand with the artist, in a situation where each person must decide the issue in their own way. The *Elias* paintings are a personal confession in which the artist's concern is less with art than with the meaning of life. It is a confession that, while it affects a solitary person, has become externalised and addressed to all. It is art used to give the conflict of faith and doubt coherence of thought, effort and expression in its most positive form. As R.N. O'Reilly observed about McCahon and his work, "Faith and doubt is a recurrent theme in the paintings... He writes of himself as a doubter. Certainly he is no angel but a vulnerable mortal with all our common frailties and passions, and we can sense how near he has often come to desperation"....<sup>4</sup>

1. M.T. Woollaston, 'Man's Predicament in his Own World', *Christchurch Star*, 14 October 1959 quoted in Bloem, M. & Browne, M., *Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam & Craig Potton Publishing, New Zealand, 2002, p. 192
2. Bloem & Browne, *ibid.*, p. 191
3. Brown, G., *Colin McCahon: Artist*, A.H. & A.W. Reed, Wellington, 1984, p. 115
4. *ibid.*, pp. 117–119

VERONICA ANGELATOS



Colin McCahon in the attic studio, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1963. Photograph by David Moore (1927 – 2003)



**COLIN McCaHON** 17

(1919 – 1987, New Zealand)

GATE, 1962

Gate series

enamel on board

76.0 x 61.5 cm

signed and dated lower left: McCahon '62

ESTIMATE: \$120,000 – 160,000

**PROVENANCE**

Gow Langsford Gallery, New Zealand

(label attached verso)

Martin Browne Fine Art, Sydney

Private collection, New South Wales

**LITERATURE**

Brown, G.H., *Colin McCahon, Artist*,

A.H. & A.W. Reed Ltd, Wellington NZ,

1984, pp. 60, 121 – 130, 214

Bloem, M., & Browne, M., *Colin McCahon:*

*A Question of Faith*, Stedelijk Museum,

Amsterdam & Craig Potton Publishing,

New Zealand, 2002, pp. 194–198

The Colin McCahon Database

and Image Library # cm001471

'In each of the *Gates* McCahon pursued a two-fold objective. In technical terms he explored his ideas about abstraction and, in particular, the challenge he had posed himself of how he might bring another dimension to the two-dimensional picture plane. The source of the *Gate* paintings' structure lay in the ideas and precedents of Braque, Gris and Mondrian which had already fascinated McCahon for some years. The opposition of dark forms and the white field – the latter representing nothingness, the space beyond, or light coming through darkness – combined with the strong diagonals, which by implication stretch beyond each painting itself, were the result of McCahon's notion of obstructions and the possibility of 'a way through' the picture plane. Reflecting on Braque's use of pictorial space, McCahon commented admiringly 'there is nothing enclosed, there are ways through', where 'you can look... into infinity.'

On a broader spiritual and philosophical level, the *Gate* paintings reflected McCahon's meditations on the world around him and, specifically, the enormous obstacles to human progress and happiness that seemed to be posed by the threat of nuclear holocaust at this time – the peak era of the Cold War – and the necessity for mankind to find 'a way through' these threatening situations. The structure of each image rests on the placement of rectangular shapes on the picture plane in such a way as to leave a gap between them into the pictorial space beyond...<sup>1</sup> 'These dark, formalised shapes can be likened to two converging walls which, as they move closer, restrict the area in which there is room to manoeuvre. As the two walls squeeze in upon the future of humanity, the gap that still exists between these converging walls becomes the gate that opens a way of escape from this entrapment.'<sup>2</sup>

As John Caselberg poignantly reflected in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue accompanying the M.T. Woollaston & McCahon touring retrospective in 1963, '...The great *Gate* series of panels on nuclear weapons concerns the destiny of man. Because of so much newness and scalding truth and faith, we may shield ourselves from the beauty of these pictures and the call to action which all such beauty must contain. But if we ourselves work; if we inspect the paintings searchingly, patiently, fearlessly, with open minds and honest hearts, then, transported by the resounding music of their great shapes, subtle colours, space and light always encompassing the dark, beyond the cyclones of change and ruin girdling creation now... we may by grace see. Only a change of heart can let mankind enter the kingdom of tomorrow. The purpose of these paintings is to change our hearts.'<sup>3</sup>

1. Bloem, M. & Browne, M., *Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam & Craig Potton Publishing, New Zealand, 2002, p. 195.

2. Brown, G., *Colin McCahon: Artist*, A.H. & A.W. Reed, Wellington, 1984, p. 122.

3. Caselberg, J., 'Introduction', *A Retrospective Exhibition: M.T. Woollaston – Colin McCahon*, Auckland City Art Gallery, New Zealand, 1963, pp. 5–6.

VERONICA ANGELATOS

A PRIVATE COLLECTION OF IMPORTANT WORKS BY COLIN McCA HON



**COLIN McCAGHON 18**

(1919 – 1987, New Zealand)  
THE FIRST BELLINI MADONNA  
(SECOND VERSION), 1961

enamel on board  
120.5 x 75.5 cm  
signed and dated lower right: C.M Oct. '61  
inscribed lower centre: THE FIRST BELLINI  
MADONNA. [SECOND VERSION]

ESTIMATE: \$300,000 – 400,000

**PROVENANCE**

Martin Browne Fine Art, Sydney  
Private collection, New South Wales

**EXHIBITED**

*20<sup>th</sup> Century Australian and New Zealand Painting*,  
Martin Browne Fine Art, Sydney, March – April 1995, cat. 18  
*Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith*, Stedelijk Museum,  
Amsterdam, The Netherlands, August – November 2002, then  
touring to: City Gallery, Wellington, NZ; Auckland Art Gallery Toi  
o Tamaki, Auckland, NZ; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne,  
Australia; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

**LITERATURE**

Brown, G.H., *Colin McCahon, Artist*, A.H. & A.W. Reed Ltd,  
Wellington NZ, 1984, pp. 73, 125–127, 144  
Bloem, M., & Browne, M., *Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith*,  
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam & Craig Potton Publishing,  
New Zealand, 2002, pp. 92, 196, 197, (illus. p. 92)  
The Colin McCahon Database and Image Library # cm001516

'The inspiration for the Bellini Madonna series resulted from Colin undergoing religious instruction within the Catholic Church, c1959–62. These attempts at a Marian subject reflected the huge difficulty he was having with the notion of the bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary, which was at odds with his background of Presbyterian and Quaker philosophies. Ultimately he was asked to submit to the authority of the Church by swearing belief in the Marian concept, a commitment normally only required of priests who take confession. Colin could not do so and his religious training ceased.'<sup>1</sup>

As implied by the title, the series of five paintings collectively known as the 'Bellini Madonnas' pays poignant homage to the Venetian Renaissance artist, Giovanni Bellini (c1430–1516) whom McCahon had long admired for the tenderness, sensuousness and humanity with which he infused his work. Extrapolating from certain compositional structures in favourite images by the old master, McCahon explored the possibilities they offered to address his ongoing challenge to introduce a third dimension to the two-dimensional picture plane – 'a way through' as he had previously pursued in the Gate paintings (see lot 17).

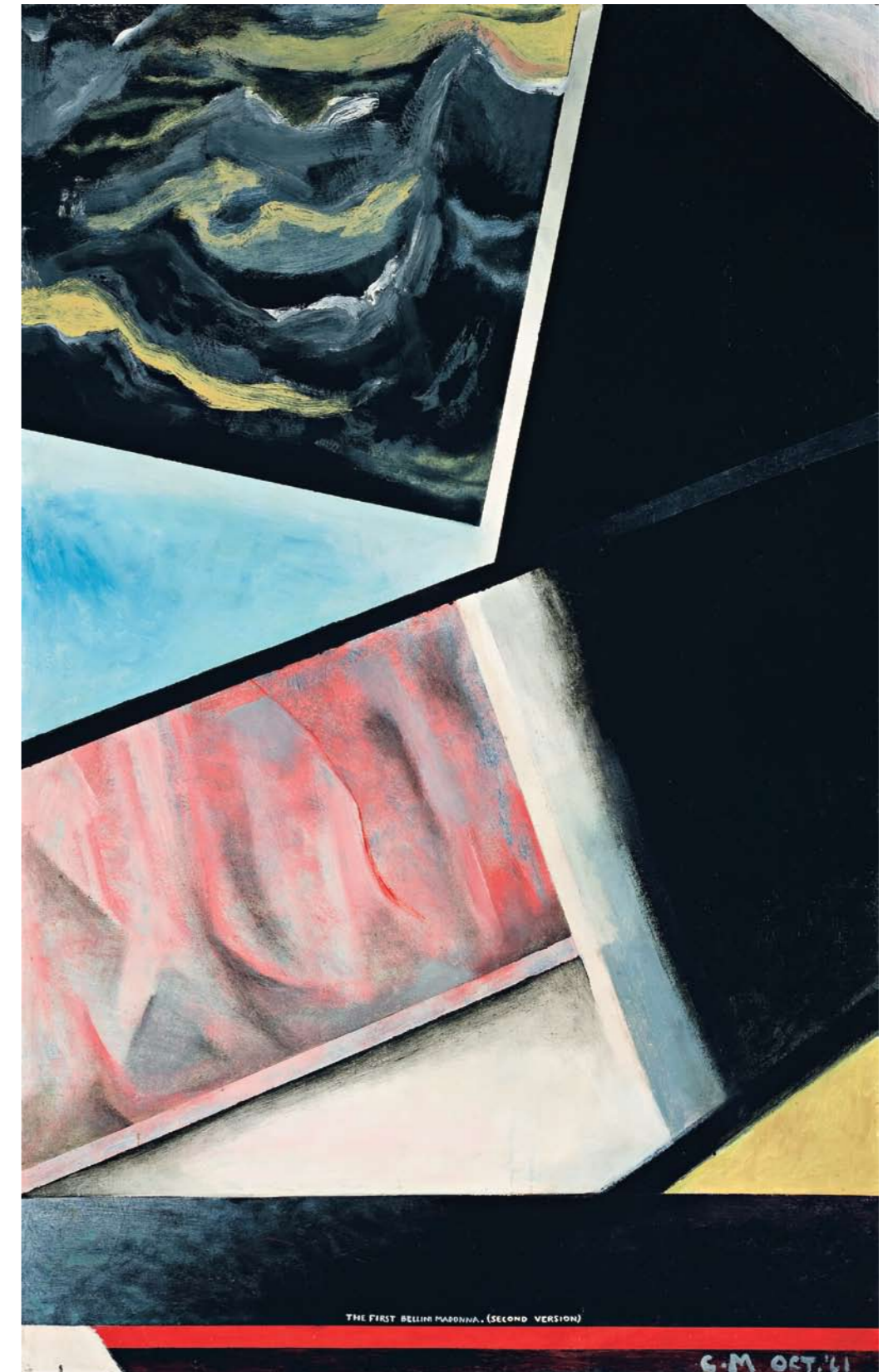
Of particular influence were Bellini's 'Madonna and Child' paintings such as his celebrated *Madonna of the Pear* which typically feature Mary and the Holy Infant juxtaposed before a low marble sill overlooking a landscape scene. Indeed, as the present *First Bellini Madonna (second version)* 1961–62 illustrates, the series constituted a powerful reworking and synthesis of the Italian artist's main compositional structures, decorative effects and symbology. For example, where Bellini typically triangulated these compositions, McCahon here employs a similar triple overlaying of planes, as well as emulates details such as the inscribed title lower right, the marbling effect of the sill, and the triangular corner shapes. Yet while Bellini's original audience would have instantly appreciated his allusions to the Trinity, for contemporary viewers arguably less conversant with Christian symbolism, McCahon's message remains perhaps more elusive. Instructive therefore, are the insights offered by the artist's son, William McCahon, into the present work:

'...The confounding figure of Godhead appears partly stated above the horizon, its base on the left-hand margin and its form implying that it is an ever-repeating triangular shape... The abstracted figure rising above the landscape shows two natures, one each for Christ and Mary. The black, white and gold marbling, together with the blue of the sky, represents Mary... Christ is the area beneath. Here, in the red marbling, Christ's blood becomes a sunset, with the white light of a sunlit rainstorm below. Within the 'sunset', Colin uses the 'crescent moon' wound symbol that Bellini almost always used when portraying the dead Christ. The complex black area is God, the unknowable, the void...

By the composition, Colin seems to be saying that Mary and Christ are part of God and the Trinity. This group is flanked by the two implied triangles that cut the top corners of some of Bellini's works. Here, the yellow one symbolizes truth revealed and the two combine with the Madonna's pure blue triangle to restate the Trinity in a third way. Bellini's marble sill is now the edge of the world and the sky beyond a new Trinity comprising God, Christ and Mary. In this one highly complex image, Colin has succeeded in paying homage to Bellini as one of his de-facto teachers; extended his efforts to introduce the sense of a third dimension into the picture plane first explored in the preceding Gate series; and found a way to give a visual representation to the viewing of God – albeit an oblique view of one of God's many manifestations.'<sup>2</sup>

1. William McCahon, 'The First Bellini Madonna (second version)', unpublished essay, January 2002 cited in Bloem, M. & Browne, M., *Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam & Craig Potton Publishing, New Zealand, 2002, p. 196  
2. *ibid.*, p. 197

**A PRIVATE COLLECTION OF IMPORTANT WORKS BY COLIN McCAGHON**





**COLIN McCAGHON** 19

(1919 – 1987, New Zealand)

FRENCH BAY, 1957

oil on board

45.5 x 66.0 cm

signed and dated upper right: C.M. 57

inscribed verso: Colin McCahon /

French Bay / oil on hardboard / 1957

ESTIMATE: \$75,000 – 100,000

**PROVENANCE**

Estate of Rodney Kennedy, Dunedin, NZ

Martin Browne Fine Art, Sydney

Private collection, New South Wales

**EXHIBITED**

*A Private Collection of New Zealand Paintings: Thirty Seven*

*New Zealand Paintings from the Collection of Charles Brash and*

*Rodney Kennedy*, Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland NZ, 1958

*Recent Paintings by Colin McCahon*, Public Library Lecture Hall,

Dunedin, NZ, April 1959, probably cat. 23 (not for sale)

*20<sup>th</sup> Century Australian and New Zealand Painting*,

Martin Browne Fine Art, Sydney, November 1993, cat. 21

**LITERATURE**

Brown, G.H., *Colin McCahon, Artist*, A.H. & A.W. Reed Ltd,

Wellington NZ, 1984, pp. 59–60

Bloem, M., & Browne, M., *Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith*,

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam & Craig Potton Publishing,

New Zealand, 2002, pp. 185 (illus. p. 92)

The Colin McCahon Database and Image Library # cm000709

‘During latter half of 1956 the Manukau Harbour again became the source of inspiration for McCahon’s paintings, but this time his interest was restricted to the locality of French Bay. The most noticeable formal elements in the *French Bay* paintings are the strongly stressed horizontal lines, then the less dominant, shorter, vertical divisions which counter the horizontals. These combine to give form to the landscape: the firm, narrow strip of low-lying hills that edges the distant horizon of the harbour. Above the hills are layers of receding clouds: below, the calm seas and smooth lines of the flowing tide. The other notable factor is the suggestion of atmospheric light as it is absorbed, reflected or bounced off the clouds, the distant hills and the surface of the water. If the semi-geometric construction of the composition imparts a sense of solemnity to the landscape, the cool blues, the brownish-greens and flashes of white give an impression of clean, crisp light and sparkling water...

During this period a decisive change affected McCahon’s approach to the Titirangi landscape, although it took a while to become fully effective. It started with an increased emphasis on colour as its use relates to atmospheric light. A clearer indication of this change was the way in which the small diamond and square shapes, originally employed to represent the play of light across the surface of objects, began to be used in an abstract manner that went well beyond this surface overlay of reflected light... Because McCahon was to give a dominant role in this series to the effects of light, his descriptive term ‘impressionistic style’ probably had greater significance than he himself realised at the time. Notwithstanding his use of small squares and oblongs to create the images on which he concentrated with such intensity... his paintings had in their conception become far removed from anything resembling the Cubists’ transcription of reality. Indeed, the fragmentation of his imagery into many small units of light and dark shades of colour enhanced the impression of landscapes enveloped in an ‘atmospheric’ luminosity derived from his exploitation of light as an observed phenomenon. In this respect, he had moved closer to the perceptual spirit of Impressionists such as Claude Monet, if not to the practical method of their pictorial ‘impressionism.’<sup>1</sup>

1. Brown, G., *Colin McCahon: Artist*, A.H. & A.W. Reed, Wellington, 1984, pp. 57 & 59

VERONICA ANGELATOS

A PRIVATE COLLECTION OF IMPORTANT WORKS BY COLIN McCAGHON

