

# The painter de Ritz

Commentary by John Barnett and Lesley Kaiser

The myth of de Ritz, when first we heard of him, was that of an itinerant late-nineteenth century painter (a view echoed in Una Platts' 1980 *Nineteenth Century New Zealand artists: a guide & handbook*). Seeing the paintings, one imagined a Romantic wanderer at makeshift easel, smoke rising lazily from a fire whereupon a billy boiled, a river before, a tent beyond: a remittance man, perhaps, a shamed scion escaping old Europe for Antipodean bush, fleeing heartache or financial scandal or the outcome of a duel.

The de Ritz paintings, with one exception, are all signed 'G' or 'by' de Ritz. To avoid repetition, we have simplified the attribution to 'de Ritz'. The paintings are from a private collection, Auckland. The photographs were taken by King Tong Ho



Maori Whare, de Ritz

An enquiry to the Alexander Turnbull Library established that paintings signed de Ritz are of a variety of New Zealand locations, often include whare, and are all of them painted in oil on cardboard, the title and signature being scraped into paint at the picture's lower edge. The Library's reply also informed that there was, in fact, no de Ritz: that de Ritz and De Ritz, G. de Ritz, A. de Ritz, Anthony A de Ritz and de Ritz junior, Paul Wren, Maxwell and Edwards were all names under which Henry Thomas Garratt painted (also, likely, Mayclair and J. A. Bond). Garratt, born in 1875, was a sign writer who lived in Auckland. He had a fondness for the paintings of Charles Blomfield.

A man by the name of Rifkin ran a business in Customs St (a 'picture shop'), and had salesmen travelling around New Zealand selling landscape paintings. Garratt produced paintings for Rifkin 'by the gross', according to Garratt's daughter, of which those paintings signed de Ritz, at between five shillings and seven shillings and sixpence, were the cheapest.

Garratt's output was prodigious, estimated to be in excess of 3000 paintings. These include paintings in oil on board and canvas under his own name. He retired to Waiheke Island, dying there in 1953.

According to Garratt's daughter, there was a lack of preparation with the paintings and, indeed, many of them have warped over time and paint has loosened and dropped off. Garratt's daughter thought the paintings were probably based on photographs,



"Moonlight" - Rangitoto, de Ritz

and thought her father was, perhaps, the most well-remunerated New Zealand painter of his time.

We can add that the Mayclair attribution is now contested. Mayclair, in fact, seems to be a painter in his own right (indeed, there may be two, an R. and a J. R.). We can also add that we have come across the signatures F and F. Maxwell.

The signature on the majority of paintings produced by Garratt that we are aware of is either 'G de Ritz' or 'by de Ritz'. It's difficult to be certain whether it is a 'G' or a 'by' that precedes 'de Ritz' and further research is required. Neither variant is mentioned in the Library's reply.

In terms of frequency, the 'G' or 'by' de Ritz signatures are followed, very distantly, by the signatures 'Paul Wren' and 'F (or F.) Maxwell'.

Of other de Ritz signatures noted we have come across only 'de Ritz', but we have also encountered, though this is not mentioned in the reply, a (capital B) 'By de Ritz'. Both of these signatures are rare.

Three thousand paintings are a lot of paintings, never mind the excess. And though the painting of them may have constituted part of Garratt's work as a sign writer, presumably he also undertook a proportion of sign-writing work, for which materials would have to be bought, accounts would have to be kept and so on. Also, Garratt had a family. The painting had to fit into a life, therefore, with a not



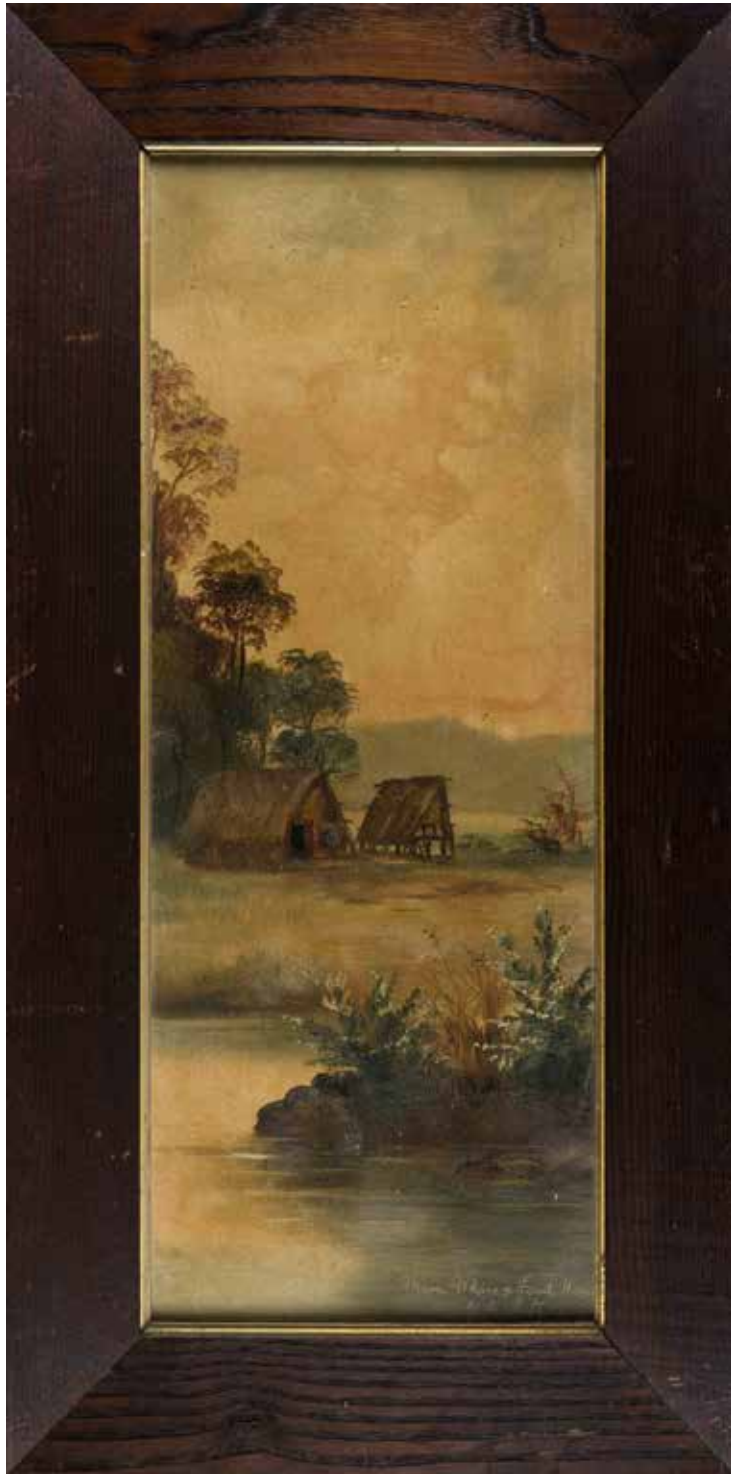
Wanganui River, de Ritz



Moonlight Rangitoto, F. Maxwell



Evening Rangitoto, Paul Wren



Maori Whare, de Ritz

insignificant amount of potentially available time already accounted for, which gives an indication of the speed at which Garratt, to produce those many paintings, must have worked.

The overwhelming majority of de Ritz paintings (and paintings under other pseudonyms) that we have seen, taking the original frames into account, have an aspect ratio around 2:1: they are approximately twice as high as they are long, that is, or twice as long as they are high, depending on whether they are portrait or landscape in format.

The paintings tend to be portrait overall, with landscape being especially used for certain views of Rangitoto and of certain lakes and rivers. They are mostly painted on boards of a similar size (around 250 x 630 mm).

This standardisation is reflected in the framing. The frames of all the de Ritz paintings (and those of paintings under other pseudonyms) where these are original, show remarkable uniformity. The frames are of dark wood, wide, with mitred corners, and slope inward from the outer edges. There is often a metal (silver or gold in colour) inner frame between the outer frame and painting. Some few paintings are vignettted in oval mats.

It's reasonable to assume, we think, speculating on the facts to hand, that the paintings Garratt supplied to Rifkin were framed at Rifkin's 'picture shop'. In this model, the paintings would have been commissioned by Rifkin, who then packaged them in standard frames and supplied them to his salesmen.

The industrialisation apparent in all this presumably also applied to the way Garratt worked. That he produced three thousand plus paintings becomes then a touch more comprehensible. For instance, in terms of time management, Garratt may well have worked on several paintings at a time, grouping these by format. He may have worked on several de Ritzes at a time or several Paul Wrens, say, maybe with similar subjects, or he may have worked on several paintings of the same subject at a time, each by a different 'name'. There are, particularly, some quite similar paintings of Rangitoto signed by each of de Ritz, Paul Wren and F. Maxwell that raise this possibility.

The paintings themselves point to this industrial turn. They are, overwhelmingly, formulaic in construction: a riverbank view and a whare, a Wanganui River view and a whare, Rangitoto and the moon. The application of formulae to format would have drastically reduced the time Garratt would have required for composition and would thus have speeded things considerably.

Some de Ritzes are more formulaic than others; some are more



detailed in their rendering. They range (and this may tell of varying time spent in their production) from this side of folk art to genre paintings of sophistication.

We have seen several works Garratt produced under his own name. These are more 'painterly', with more attention paid to detail, and they utilise a wider colour range than paintings signed de Ritz. They are highly evocative. We have the feeling, though (and considering also those works under other pseudonyms), that painting as de Ritz was where Garratt was most at home: the de Ritzes have an ease that seems born of long practice, and, in fact, they constitute the bulk of his production.

As a body, paintings by de Ritz (painted between 1895–1940, for argument's sake) are firmly located, in terms of their subject matter, their treatment and in the vision that they present, in the era spanning 1875, say, up until the First World War. They look 'late colonial', to put a label to it. Paintings signed de Ritz and produced after 1914, then, are consciously 'harking back'. (There is a rare exception: a genre of Waitemata-sailboat-Rangitoto paintings that bear traces of the 1920s.)

The paintings have gravitas, and a rewarding, meditative stillness. They engage the imagination and emotions in a dreamscape both timeless and just beyond reach. They have about them what we may call nostalgic yearning. And they have a high degree of charm.

The de Ritzes appear, in general, as the products of a single sensibility, one subtly different, for example, from that of Paul Wren or Maxwell, judging from the paintings, and subtly different, but more so, from that of Garratt. Garratt, let us say, assumed a persona (an 'unconscious stance') when painting as de Ritz (or as Paul Wren, Maxwell, etc.).

Not a lot is known of Garratt. We know he had three brothers, that he married Pearl Mary Agnes Christmas in Auckland in 1902, that he was President of the Balmoral Lawn Tennis Club for some years in the 1930s, that he was at one time a superintendent of St John Ambulance, and that he served as secretary of the Ostend Ratepayers' and Residents' Progressive Association and chairman of the Ostend Road Board. (We know also that his father, Henry Thomas Garratt senior, 1844–1903, was born in England and came to New Zealand in 1866, and that he served on the Auckland City Council for some years, likewise the Hospital Board, and was for twenty years secretary of the Ancient Order of Foresters, Auckland District. He was, as well, a Mason.)

Of de Ritz, though, we know more than we do of Garratt. And that is because we have the paintings: the end point of both persona

Sunset – Rangitoto, de Ritz



and the projection of that persona and all that that involves. And when we look at the paintings, bearing the name 'de Ritz' in mind (and wondering what 'de Ritz' conjured up for Garratt), as they exert their pull we get to glimpse the painter.

He stands near to a river bank in hazy dusk. His clothes are worn, the elbows of his jacket roughly patched. His beard is long and streaked with white. He wears a hat.

A tui calls. He turns.

The river runs.

The setting sun . . .

Garratt (not to forget Rifkin) discovered a gap in the national imaginary. De Ritz worked extensively to fill it.



Untitled, Henry Thomas Garratt



Evening - Rangitoto, de Ritz



Untitled, de Ritz

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