

# paint's changing face

It's easy to forget that paint as we know it today is a relatively modern invention.

**For artists and** homeowners alike, paint as we know it today has not always been so readily accessible. Colours were limited and formulations were basic.

That all changed around the middle of last century and in an example of industry affecting art, a number of local artists began dabbling with the cement-based paint that Resene Paints founder Ted Nightingale had begun making in his Wellington garage in 1946.

The emergence and influence of modern paints has been documented and celebrated by an exhibition at the Auckland Art Gallery. Opened in April this year, *Modern Paints Aotearoa* offers a unique insight into the imagination, innovation and sheer resourcefulness of major New Zealand art names of the 20th century, including the legendary Colin McCahon, Gretchen Albrecht and Ralph Hotere.

Earlier artists were limited by the colours and textures of mediums in existence at the time: for example, the medieval era, when only natural pigments and basic handmade paints were available. While various advances occurred along the way, last century in particular saw the introduction of myriad alternatives. These were embraced with huge enthusiasm locally.

Auckland Art Gallery principal conservator and exhibition curator Sarah Hillary tells of one delightful older visitor who told of his own personal connection with the then relatively unknown brand, Resene.

"He left school at 16 and worked for Resene, putting lids on paint tins. He said he was 'chuffed' to see some old tins in the vitrine (glass showcase) and even wondered if he'd placed the lids on those particular ones!"

A huge amount of research underpinned the curation of *Modern Paints Aotearoa*. "Some visitors mentioned that until watching the videos we've put together, they had previously had no idea that art conservation is technical – and that conservators are actually scientists," smiles Sarah.



**Above:** Early Resene paint cans and colour charts.

**Left:** Artworks in the exhibition include Colin McCahon's *Northland* panels, 1958, from the collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

"These new paints had different qualities to traditional oils; they enabled artists to break away from past traditions – something that was already happening internationally and they were cheaper and more readily available than artist-quality paints."

She explains that the artists themselves didn't always remember or note what medium they'd used at the time, but there was definitely a move towards experimenting with general household paints during the mid-20th century – often with the addition of other materials such as sand, which is something that McCahon liked to do.

Identifying the actual paint and other artists' materials might not seem important on the face of it, but to conservators it is absolutely vital.



While overseas artists were using acrylics in the 1960s, Sarah says most local artists were using PVA. "There has been a great deal of research into the cleaning of acrylics, but not PVAs. We know that they are not as durable so great care is required."

As well as admiring and appreciating the paintings, visitors to *Modern Paints Aotearoa* can also see the well-used paintbrushes of Ralph Hotere and read Colin McCahon's original correspondence about his *Northland* panels, which are in the exhibition. There are also touch panels where a number of these artists' paint effects have been recreated.

The exhibition runs until March 2015 with various activities and events planned. For more information, visit [www.aucklandartgallery.com](http://www.aucklandartgallery.com). **H**

**View an archive of old Resene colour charts online at [www.resene.com/colour-archive](http://www.resene.com/colour-archive).**



-  Resene Ragamuffin
-  Resene Resolution Blue



**words** Louise Richardson