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# History

## The story of Molly Morpeth Canaday 1903 - 1971

Molly Morpeth was born in Wellington in 1903. In her early years she studied art at the Wellington Technical School.

In 1928 Molly met Frank Canaday on a trip across the Tasman Sea aboard the S.S. Ulimaroa. Molly was coming back to New Zealand with her parents and Frank was on a business trip around the world. They saw each other only for a brief period and after lengthy correspondence, they were married in Toledo Ohio in 1932.

On the art scene at that time 'modern art' was beginning to emerge in America, coinciding with the opening of Museum of Modern Art in New York. Molly saw American expressionism in art developing, particularly through the works of Piet Mondrian and his move from realism to abstraction. Her paintings of this period can be clearly seen as being influenced by this new 'abstract' approach to painting. There was a lot of art discussion in the art communities at the time and Frank Canaday, in his book, referred to this discussion as '*futile attempts to disentangle art definitions*'. He was referring to the art critic E.A. Jewel who wrote about the new abstract expressionism...

*"There can be no doubt, I think, that the general public is prone to accept art that is completely or relatively 'naturalistic', and reject - or, at*

*least, to be extremely wary of - art that completely, or in large measure departs from such procedure."*

Molly was passionate about painting and in the 1960's showed her maturity as an artist when her works became confident, colourful; totally embracing expressionism. Her life drawings need not be overlooked either. They are exquisite loose renderings, as portrayed in the book about her work '*Triumph in Colour*'

A number of New Zealand galleries have displayed works of Molly Morpeth Canaday, and many are owned by the National Art Gallery. According to the register of her completed works, at present there are over 300 held in private and public collections here and overseas.

Of equal importance have been the moves made by Frank H. Canaday to assist the arts in New Zealand, by the establishment of a series of funds. The Molly Morpeth Canaday Trust in Whakatāne is one of the few remaining. It benefits emerging artists nationwide in 2 and 3 dimensional work: the Molly Morpeth Canaday 3D Award and the Molly Morpeth Canaday Award for painting and drawing\*

Why Whakatāne? When Frank was setting up the trust after Molly's death in 1971, he worked in contact with solicitor Rex Morpeth, (Molly's cousin) on the wording that would cover Frank's wishes for the trust document. Rex lived in Whakatāne.

*"I'm aware there are varying opinions on the talents of Molly, but putting that aside it makes for a very romantic story. Molly was passionate about painting and Frank was passionate about Molly, it's a good love story."* - Brian Morpeth 2010.



Compiled by Heather Hourigan, 2010

References 'Triumph in Colour' Frank H. Canaday, Phoenix Publishing, 1977.

Article 'The Art Gallery and Museum Association' Vol 6, 1975.

'In Retrospect' Whakatane District Museum and Gallery, 2010.

Header Image: Frank Canaday in Molly Morpeth Canaday's New York studio after her death in 1971

Image 'Molly Morpeth Canaday' courtesy The Toledo Museum, 1972.

\* In 2023 2D & 3D merged to form one award

## **Molly Morpeth Canaday (1903 – 1971)**

Retrieved from <https://artistsoftoledo.com/molly-morpeth-canaday-1903-1971/>

*I like my work to move from a platform of reality toward the abstract, and to find this expression through an emphasis on color.* – Molly Morpeth Canaday's comment on her method.

A love story.

Anyone who lives in Toledo can't help but come across the name Canaday, but probably not because of Molly. It would be for the generous philanthropy of Willys-Overland Jeep Company's Ward M. Canaday, the brother of Molly's husband, Frank. Consider the University of Toledo's Ward M. Canaday Center for Special Collections, the Canaday Gallery at the Toledo Museum of Art, the Mariam C. Canaday Medical Arts Building at Riverside Hospital. But enough of that, this is about Molly. Well, Molly and Frank.

In 1928, Molly, of New Zealand, met Frank on a steamer in the Tasman Sea. He brought her to Toledo in 1932. (Their wedding was at Ward and Mariam's Ottawa Hills estate, *Inlands*.)

Molly took her first art classes at the Toledo Museum of Art. After five years at the museum, she studied privately for another five years with renowned painter, Israel Abramofsky. "Dark – light, dark – light!" is what Abramofsky would often tell her, and that would be her lesson for the day.

She began exhibiting in the Toledo Area Artists Exhibition in 1938, won "Honorable Mention" in 1942, and won the show's top award, the Roulet Medal in 1944 for *Winter Bouquet*.

In the early 1940's she began to study with Joseph Floch in New York.

For the sake of Molly's artistic growth, Frank and Molly moved to Greenwich Village, New York City in 1947. (And Frank, who was less interested in business than he was in the arts, wanted to work on his writing.)

The Toledo Museum of Art gave her a one man show in 1948. She then had several shows in Vermont, Connecticut, and New Zealand, before having her second one man show at the Toledo Museum of Art in 1958. Her painting style ranged from post-impressionist to abstract expressionist. Her line gesture drawings showed an excellent understanding of the human form while being loose and expressive. When she died in 1971, a Retrospective exhibition of her paintings from 1935 to 1971 was organized by the Toledo Museum of Art.

After she died, Frank spent his last years compiling a loving tribute to Molly with his book, *Triumph in Color*. Frank's book sets forth his renewed belief in the values of the "lonely and difficult struggle – against illness and discouragement, to find a lasting creative expression." Above is a photo of the distraught widower in his wife's studio after she died, so missing her, while picking out a canvas for the *Women's Annual Exhibition* in the National Academy Galleries in New York. He wrote that she spoke to him through the signature she put on a particular painting, titled *Studio on 25th St. / 1969* – saying, *choose this one*. Frank died in 1976, as he was completing the book. For the cover image, Frank chose a photo of her palette of oil paint on glass, not a painting.

Frank donated about 70 of her paintings, and her papers, letters, etc. along with his notes for the book to the Museum of New Zealand. He couldn't have sent them farther away (with the exception of sending them to outer space.) He set up a Molly Morpeth Canaday fund to benefit New Zealand artists.

The book asks: How good a painter was Molly Morpeth Canaday?

But....that was Frank being Frank – that's how he was, always questioning.



Frank and Molly, Mamo, Mariam and Ward at Inlands – Canadays all.

## The history of the Molly Morpeth Canaday Award

The original award began as the Shell Art Award in 1986. It was instigated by Jacqui Hughes and Lynn Dawson of the Whakatāne District Community Arts Council (Arts Whakatāne) and then became the cornerstone event of the multi-disciplined annual Whakatāne Summer Arts Festival.

In 1991 the Molly Morpeth Canaday (Whakatāne) Fund became the principal sponsor and the award became known as the Molly Morpeth Canaday Award – Painting and Drawing, held annually in conjunction with the Whakatāne Summer Arts Festival.

The Molly Morpeth Canaday Award – 3D was first discussed 1997. The Trust (through Greg Reid) approached the Whakatāne District Community Arts Council (Arts Whakatāne) with ideas for the new project, and together with Museum and Arts collectively came up with the Molly Morpeth Canaday 3D Ceramics Award to compliment the Molly Morpeth Canaday Painting and Drawing Award. From 2018, the 3D Award developed and alternated with the Painting and Drawing Award, launching during February each year. In 2024, the award has been refined yet again, merging all disciplines into the dynamic and diverse contemporary art exhibition you see today.

Frank H. Canaday wanted to assist the arts in Aotearoa New Zealand by the establishment of a series of funds to benefit emerging and established arts practitioners. Named for his artist wife, The Molly Morpeth Canaday (Whakatāne) Fund is one of the few remaining.

Why Whakatāne? When Frank was setting up the trust after Molly's death in 1971, he worked in contact with Molly's cousin - Whakatāne local Rex Morpeth, and a solicitor on the wording for the trust document that would cover Frank's wishes for the fund.

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