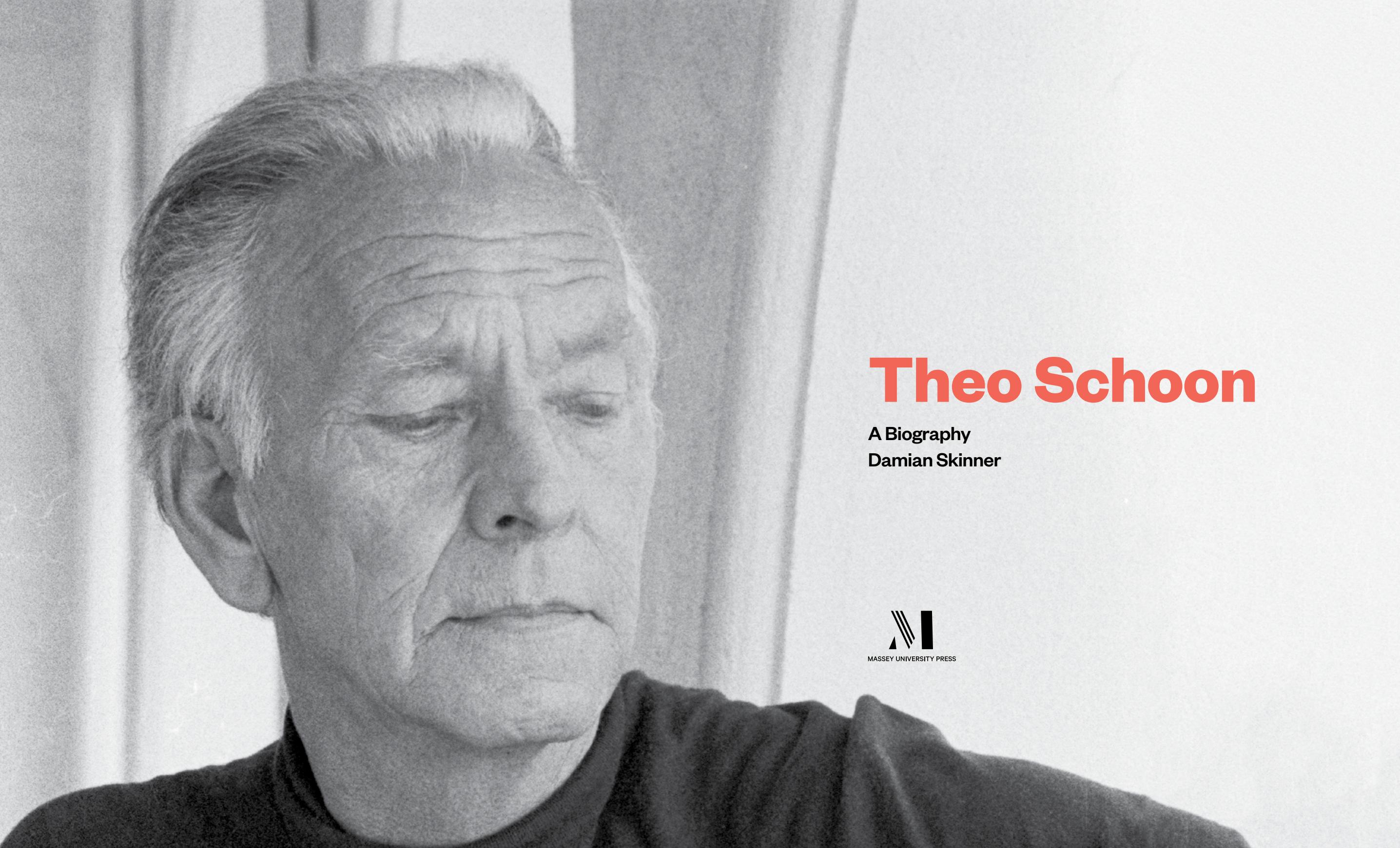


Theo Schoon

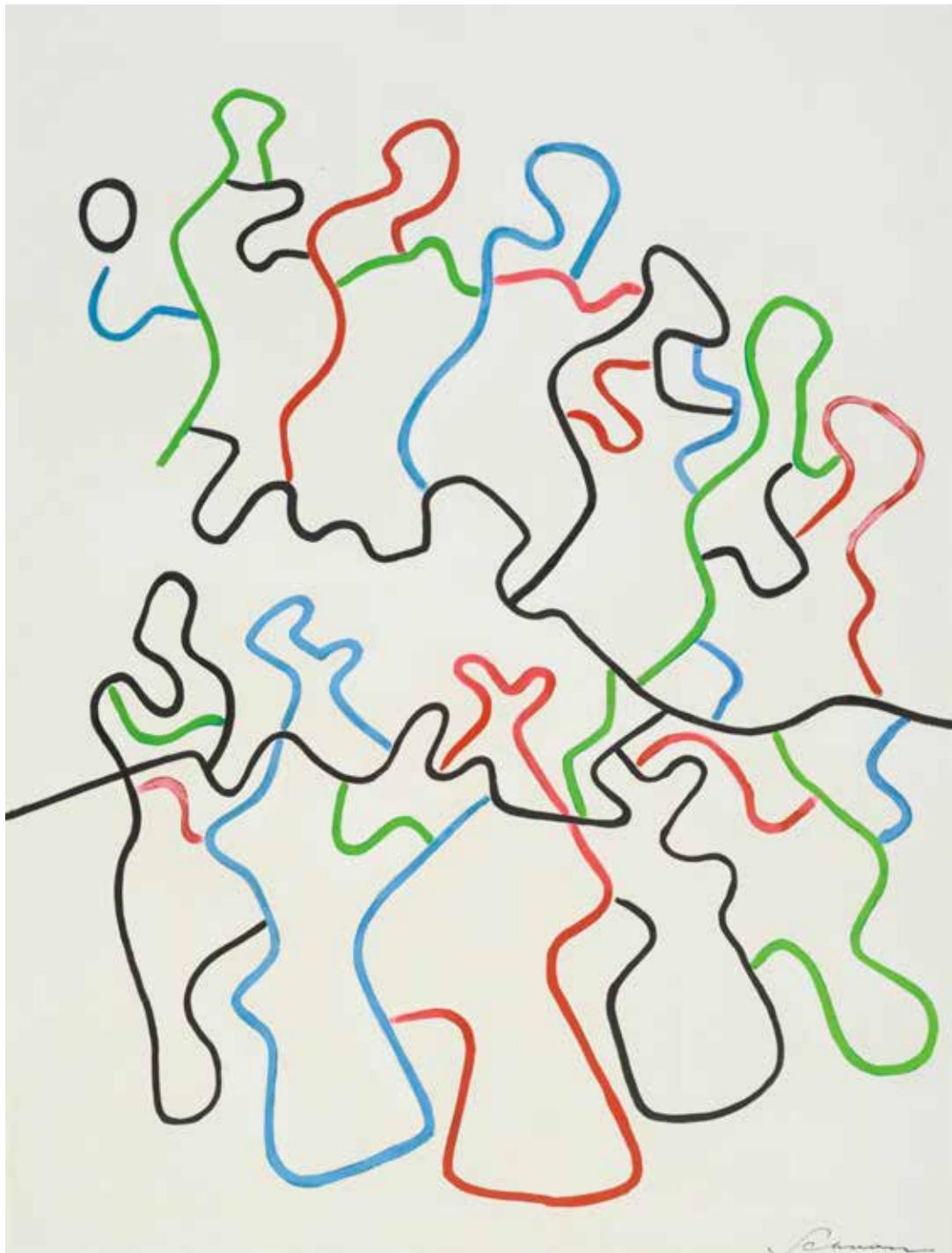


Theo Schoon

A Biography
Damian Skinner



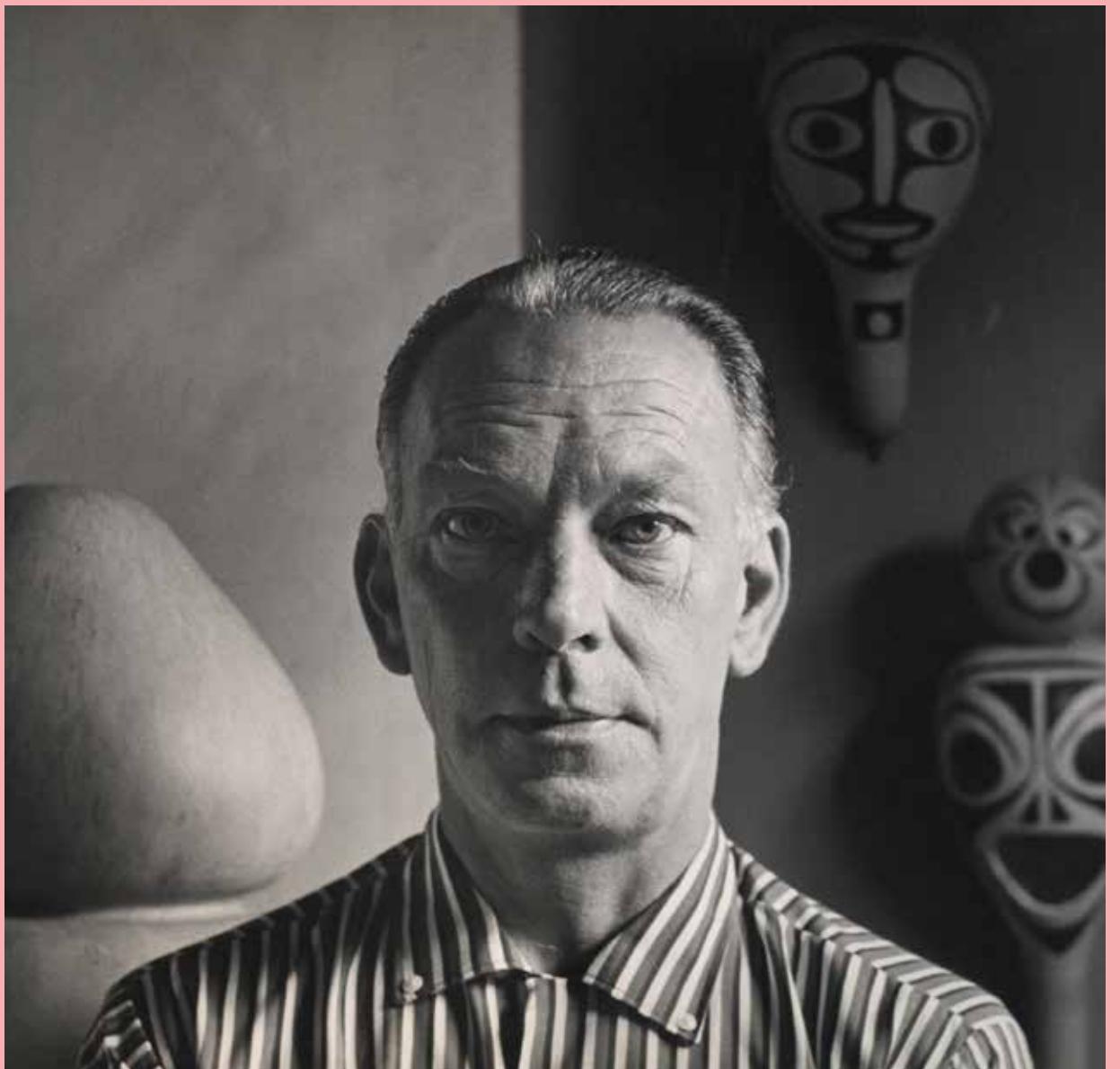
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Introduction



Culture is a loony bin, where some patients are more charming than others.

Theo Schoon¹

In late December 1965 or early January 1966, the writer Janet Frame and the psychologist John Money caught the bus to the home in Grey Lynn, Auckland, of Dutch artist Theo Schoon.² Money, back in New Zealand on a visit from his home in Baltimore, in the United States, had kept in touch with Schoon ever since they had met in Christchurch in 1946. He financially supported the artist by buying artworks whenever he could afford it, just as he did with Rita Angus, another artist he believed to be a genius; and just as he had supported Janet Frame.³ But Schoon hadn't replied to any of Money's recent letters, and he wasn't answering the phone, so Money and Frame had decided to investigate. They found the house at 12 Home Street abandoned, no sign of Schoon. They concluded that he must have moved out.⁴

Schoon had been living at the small weatherboard cottage, set slightly below street level, ever since another old friend had bought it for him to live in for as long as he wanted.⁵ Schoon quickly put down roots there – seeking out and then planting seeds for the gourds that had become so important to him. He lived surrounded by an extraordinary creative mess, and entertained a steady stream of guests, typically those who could put up with his idiosyncratic housekeeping. (Always concerned with the conditions in which his precious gourd plants grew, Schoon would encourage visitors to use a bucket in the bathroom so their waste could be added to the soil, rather than flushed down the toilet and wasted.)

Slowly Home Street filled up with artworks. Painted panels with designs based on kōwhaiwhai (rafter patterns) and tā moko (tattoo) were stacked against the walls. Drying gourds in various states, from newly harvested to fully carved, sat in rows on the floor. Tea chests were filled with photographic negatives featuring a dizzying variety of subjects: Māori rock drawings from the South Island, close-ups of Rotorua mud pools, Māori art from museums and marae, and his own artistic experiments. The house also filled up with other treasures, such as manuscripts for talks and articles – about Māori art mostly – and drafts of letters for the endless stream of correspondence that flowed out of Home Street to New Zealand and the world. There were clippings of newspaper and magazine articles, many written by Schoon in his role as cultural advocate for the overlooked and underappreciated, and some written about him.

The texts, images, artworks and conversations that filled this messy and modest home related to many of the most important developments in New Zealand culture and art, matters that continue to reverberate today.

Schoon was never very settled, and while Home Street was his base for a decade, he actively entertained the idea of leaving – not just Auckland, but New Zealand. By the time of Money and Frame's visit, he had in fact decided he couldn't wait any longer. The most likely catalyst was Schoon's Auckland exhibition at the New Vision Gallery in April 1965. The show was a big deal, a large financial and emotional investment in artworks that he imagined would showcase the contribution he had made to modern art in New Zealand, and cement his place as a visionary and pioneer. It was by no means a failure. It received positive coverage in the Auckland press, and the newspaper art critics were warmly receptive.

But the work didn't sell, and it didn't have an immediate impact on New Zealand art. Schoon's magnificent visual demonstration of what might result from the encounter of Māori and Pākehā art remained interesting to those who already knew about it, and no more important than the many other ways to be a modern artist in New Zealand for those who felt otherwise. Fed up, Schoon left Auckland and moved to Rotorua, in what was to be a brief stopover among the geothermal wonders he loved before his long-intended departure for North America.

When they arrived at Home Street, Money and Frame found the veranda totally overgrown with gourd vines. Inside, the house was filled with years of accumulated rubbish, bags of clay and drawing materials. Under the house Money spotted some of Schoon's notebooks, photographs and albums, and art books. With the artist apparently gone, Money worried about what would happen to these abandoned treasures. There were also some plaster casts of the feet and hands of antique statues, the kind that art schools used to teach life drawing. Frame was quite keen to take them home, but had no bags to carry them in. Gathering together what they could easily transport on the bus, Money and Frame left the property.⁶ John Money was not to see Schoon again, but he held on to the items he had rescued, carefully storing them in his house in Baltimore, along with the artworks he had purchased from Schoon in previous years.

In the chaos of Schoon's decision to abandon his house and leave Auckland, much more had been lost from Home Street than Money could have known. A few months before Money and Frame stopped by, the house's owner, Martin Pharazyn, had received a letter from Schoon declaring his deep unhappiness and his intention to leave Auckland. Concerned about his friend, Pharazyn travelled to Auckland in his Kombi van and helped Schoon pack up 12 cases of personal possessions, which were to be stored at the North Shore home of Schoon's old friends Bob and Ellen Boot. When Pharazyn returned to the house a week later, he found the cases gone. Assuming that Schoon had finished moving and taken everything valuable from the house, he contracted some men to clear out and burn the rubbish left behind. He also rang John Parry, head of the art department at the city's Seddon Memorial Technical College, and asked him if he would like to take the clay and unused drawing materials for his students.⁷

Previous: Theo Schoon, April 1962. Photograph by Bernie Hill. Te Papa Tongarewa, CA000856/002/0015.

When Parry arrived at Home Street, he found three men burning Schoon's paintings, prints and drawings on a large bonfire in the back yard. It turned out that Schoon and another friend had packed up the rest of his artworks and stored them under the house, ready to be shipped to Rotorua; these, the men had decided, should be the first things to be burned in the clean-up. Parry rushed outside, explained who he was, and asked if he could have the artworks to show his students. The men agreed, and the artworks were taken to the school art department. But they didn't escape the fire for long. Shortly afterwards, the prefab building in which they were stored burned down, and they were all lost.⁸

The Home Street years of 1956 to 1965 were an incredibly productive period in Schoon's life. During this time he made important artistic discoveries as he searched for an approach that would fuse Māori and European art into something new. Although many artworks and other material survived, packed up by Schoon and Pharazyn and stored safely on the North Shore, some things were lost, and with them any insight they provided into this vital decade and Schoon's discoveries and development as an artist. One of the consistent themes in Schoon's life was his conviction that New Zealanders were coarse and uncaring. It was a belief that dated back to the 1940s, when he first saw the destruction of the Māori rock drawings in the South Island. His railing against New Zealanders' lack of respect for art only grew in subsequent years. It's ironic, and sad, that when Schoon left Home Street, his carelessness and lack of communication with Pharazyn and others led to the loss of his own artworks and other archives.

In 2002 John Money gifted his art collection to the Eastern Southland Gallery in Gore. Schoon's artworks – 114 of them, including paintings, photographs and a carved gourd – are now displayed in pride of place alongside Money's collection of Rita Angus paintings, African sculpture and the work of American artist Lowell Nesbitt. The material that Money rescued from Home Street eventually found its way into the archives of the Hocken Library in Dunedin. These photographs, sketches, books and handwritten texts provide a glimpse of the range of Schoon's life and art. They are part of the evidence why Schoon, in the words of art historian Michael Dunn, 'must rank as one of the most formidable talents to have worked in this country'.⁹

Among the material in the Hocken are two handwritten manuscripts that discuss Māori carving and make a bold claim for the value of Māori art – on its own terms, as the greatest artistic achievement in New Zealand, and also as part of the fusion of Māori and European culture that Schoon promoted as the correct direction for the future of New Zealand art. In the 1950s, when these manuscripts were written, such views were radical, and would remain so for another couple of decades.

There is also a copy of the book *Maori Designs*, written by anthropologist W.J. Phillipps and published in the 1940s. Some pencil sketches by Schoon are tucked into the frontispiece, a useful reminder that Schoon was an artist first and foremost. In his introduction, Phillipps wrote that understanding the elaborate system of design created by many generations of Māori artists was the first duty of anyone who wished to prepare New Zealand art for the future. This was a sentiment that Schoon fervently shared, and became the task to which he dedicated his life.

There is also a copy of Swiss artist Paul Klee's book, *On Modern Art*, published in 1945. Klee was one of a number of European artists who challenged the rules and conventions of academic art in the early twentieth century, looking beyond the art gallery for inspiration to what became a kind of holy trinity for avant-garde artists: 'primitive art' made by non-western peoples, children's art, and art made by people suffering from mental illness. Klee was one of Schoon's art heroes. His name was often dropped into correspondence, especially when Schoon was trying to convince New Zealanders of the artistic merits of Māori rock drawings. 'Would you kindly return the book on Klee and the tracings of the rock drawings I sent to you?' he wrote to the poet A.R.D. Fairburn in the late 1940s.¹⁰ The similarity between the rock drawings and Klee's paintings was proof that charcoal and ochre lines on a limestone wall could be art.

Klee's art helped Schoon to understand how to throw off the conventions of his academic training, so that he could begin making his own modern, abstract artworks in the 1950s — which really meant absorbing the lessons of the Māori rock drawings for himself, letting them change the way he drew and painted. Klee also represented a link to the Bauhaus, the famous German art school that provided, for Schoon, the most important insights into the systems and rules that could be found in art from any of the world's cultures. The ideas of Klee and the other artists who taught at the Bauhaus between 1919 and 1933 gave Schoon the tools to see Māori art as a visual language, and to use it in new ways.

But Schoon's copy of Klee's book — inscribed on the title page 'This book belongs to Theo Schoon' — is actually called *Über die moderne Kunst*, because it is written in German. It is another reminder that Schoon was not a typical Anglo settler, but rather a European migrant who spoke a number of languages and had a very different cultural context from the monolingual and British-focused interests of mainstream Pākehā society. He didn't bring the book with him, because he arrived in New Zealand in 1939, but he did have friends and colleagues overseas who could send him such things.

There are also sketch books filled with drawings and notes in Schoon's elegant copperplate writing. Some of the drawings are Schoon's own designs; others are objects he must have copied from books and magazines. Thanks to his academic art training in the Netherlands, it was easy for him to toss off an accurate illustration, using all the tricks needed to create a convincing illusion of three dimensions. One notebook has more than 30 pages detailing the characteristics and cultivation of different rose

varieties. Another is an instruction manual for making and firing ceramics.

Schoon's personal life suddenly comes into view in four sheets removed from a photograph album, the square-format prints arranged in grids and neatly labelled with white pen on the black paper. He is the force around which the people and events captured in the images coalesce. Sometimes they are of well-known individuals, and a jolt comes from their celebrity. Three photographs make a sequence in which the poet James K. Baxter plays a leading role. Other album pages show Schoon and his male friends in Christchurch in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Knowing he was homosexual gives these images a different charge — could one of these characters have been specially favoured; even, perhaps, a boyfriend? But the most striking thing is that Schoon is happy. He smiles, laughs, hams it up for the camera with a little bit of dance and Javanese textiles on the beach.

The white gloves and acid-free cardboard of the Hocken Library reading room transform these items into objects of significant cultural heritage, but they are also mementoes of Schoon's life and personal possessions. It's easy to understand why Schoon might have discarded some of them: after all, you can always get another copy of a book, and ideas can be written out or drawn again. Some projects are completed and the information is no longer required. But some of what he left behind doesn't lend itself to any easy explanation. These materials point to distress, disturbance, disruption, whether self-imposed or externally generated. They point to a life involving sacrifice and loss.

Theodorus Johannes Schoon (1915–85) was a pioneering artistic polymath, a painter, printmaker, photographer, gourd and jade carver, and ceramicist. He was a Dutchman, born and raised in Indonesia, who became a Pākehā in cultural outlook, and also despised the ignorance of New Zealanders and the provincial version of British society he ended up in for most of his life. He was a migrant who lived in Indonesia, Europe, New Zealand and Australia, and who used his sense of difference and being out-of-place to see in new ways, especially when it came to Māori art. He was a bohemian who refused to live a conventional life in mid-twentieth-century New Zealand, flaunting his exoticness through his clothes, his living environments, and his elegant gestures and movements. He was a gay man who didn't like women, and who had intense and difficult relationships with gay and straight men, and few romantic or sexual partners. He was a charismatic teacher and mentor, and entirely convinced of his artistic superiority, demanding that other artists take on the student role, even if they were older and more experienced than he was. His artistic and cultural interests have infiltrated our cultural and visual consciousness, shaping the look of contemporary New Zealand.

Later in life, when Schoon would summarise his personal history for new acquaintances, his early years in Java were always foremost in his mind. He might say, for example, that he was born of Dutch parents in Indonesia, and trained as an artist in Europe before returning to Java where he worked as a portrait painter, especially of court dancers and the concubines of the local Rajahs. He would emphasise his abilities as a Javanese dancer – skills he learned alongside the princes who were his schoolmates. He might talk about visiting Bali, where he also painted portraits of dancers, and met some of the celebrities who were visiting the island in the 1930s. Colour and amusement would come from a choice bit of gossip, such as the story of Paulette Goddard, the child bride of Charlie Chaplin, who scandalised the locals by kissing the lead boy dancer.

But then Schoon's narrative would turn dark, become a tragedy. The Second World War broke out, and he found himself marooned in New Zealand – not just for the duration but, as it turned out, for decades, since the Dutch East Indies achieved independence and became Indonesia, and his white skin and Dutch name made him a target for any Indonesians who resented colonialism and wanted to express it. He was not able to return to the place he loved best.¹¹

Years after he came to New Zealand in 1939, Schoon continued to describe his residence in this country as a kind of exile. It was made bearable only by his chance encounter with Māori art, which grew into an obsession and prevented him from leaving. In Māori art and culture Schoon found objects and ideas and social patterns that evoked what he had left behind in Indonesia. And it was his childhood and early twenties in Java and Bali that explained his ability to see things that other Pākehā could not, and to be open to cultural difference in a way that was unusual in Pākehā society in the 1940s. 'I can assure you,' he wrote in 1966, 'that I am only Dutch by half. The influence of the East has been far more powerful. It was my good parents' despair, that I never became a good Dutchman.'¹²

Schoon claimed to feel out of step with European culture, whether it was the Dutch way of life that he encountered in the Netherlands during his teenage years, or the transplanted British culture he found in New Zealand. 'I have nothing in common with the white New Zealand culture, which is Victorian and dead,' he told one correspondent. 'But the Maori culture, decadent as it may be, still has colour, flavour, and that irrationality which never fails to baffle, astonish, and fascinate me.'¹³ Prepared by a childhood in Indonesia, and the voracious appetite that art students in Europe had for what, in the 1930s, was called 'primitive art', Schoon was ready for the encounter when it came. 'Maori art has never been something that is "on the other side of the fence", he told the historian Michael King in the late 1960s. 'I only had the awareness, that I was ignorant unless I could absorb what it had to offer.'¹⁴

Schoon's life intersects with an impressive number of important people, periods and places. He knew many of the people who shaped New Zealand culture in the twentieth century. After he arrived in

Christchurch, the 'Bloomsbury' of the south, in 1939, he met and socialised with painters Rita Angus and Leo Bensemann, Betty Curnow and her husband, the poet Allen Curnow. In 1942 he moved to Wellington and became part of the flourishing creative scene that grew up around European émigrés who had fled the menace of Nazi Germany. He became friends with artists Gordon Walters and Dennis Turner and, during a later stint in the city, the poets James K. Baxter and Louis Johnson. His three years documenting the Māori rock drawings in South Canterbury from 1946 brought him into contact with anthropologist Roger Duff and poet A.R.D. Fairburn, while Gordon Walters and John Money both stayed with him in this limestone landscape.

Schoon was in Auckland in the 1950s and 1960s when the centre of the New Zealand art world moved north from Christchurch. He befriended potters Len Castle and Barry Brickell, and spent time with the painter Colin McCahon, and printmaker and gallery owner Kees Hos. His fascination with Māori art, and gourd growing and carving, led him to Māori carver Pine Taiapa, and then into the orbit of Māori artists like Paratene Matchitt, while connecting him to the Pākehā curators and academics, including Margaret Orbell, who were researching and writing about Māori art during this period. Later, his work as a jade carver took him to the West Coast, where he had contact with the carver Peter Hughson and others.

His artistic interests were extraordinary and extraordinarily varied, roaming across fine art and craft; Māori, Pākehā and Indonesian art and culture; into the landscapes of South Canterbury for the Māori rock drawings and the geothermal region of the central North Island for mud pools; and even into the confines of the Avondale Mental Hospital, where he encountered an artistic patient called Rolfe Hattaway. Many of these obsessions were decisive for other artists as well. And his example as an academically trained artist with a good knowledge of modern European art, and the commitment to do whatever it took to pursue his artistic projects, was both an inspiring and cautionary tale to those around him.

Schoon's life was also an ongoing struggle, a story of devil-may-care courage in the face of conservative and provincial values, of bad luck and carelessness, poverty, a willingness to live in miserable conditions in order to pursue his artistic interests, and of extraordinary charm and generosity mixed with intolerance and sometimes cruelty towards those who disappointed him, or who didn't share his beliefs about the best antidote for the ignorance and conservatism of New Zealand culture. He died in Australia, having turned his back twice on the country he grew to despise. Schoon's art and life are fascinating and complex, and so is his legacy.

The Colonial Years



I always enjoyed the mutual astonishment, of Indonesians for European ways and vice versa. But oh, how lovely it was, to live in two different worlds at once. If I sound a bit peculiar in my letters, it is this, which has put its indelible stamp on me. I have double vision.

Theo Schoon¹

Theodorus Johannes Schoon was born on 31 July 1915 in Kebumen, a town in Central Java, close to the village where the brick and tile factory owned or run by his father was located.² Even today, beyond the city limits, there are roads in the countryside flanked on each side by potteries, where bricks and roof tiles are carefully stamped from local clay gathered from the rice paddies, left to dry on large covered racks, and then fired in the kilns. Kebumen was part of the Dutch East Indies, a colony of the Netherlands that had grown from settlements established by the United East India Company in the seventeenth century. By the early twentieth century, the Dutch East Indies covered the archipelago of islands that is now Indonesia, and exported sugar, tin, coffee, rubber, tobacco and tea back to Europe and around the world. Schoon was born into a family that was part of the Dutch colonial elite tasked with maintaining the empire and ensuring the island's wealth continued to flow back to Europe.

Schoon's father, Johannes Theodorus Schoon, was born in the city of Den Helder, in the province of North Holland, in October 1888. His mother, Barbara Isabella Maria Schoon (née Steegemans), was born in Venlo, a city in the south-east Dutch province of Limburg, in May 1888. It was a union of conservative Protestant north and Catholic Francophone south.³ Schoon's grandparents on both his mother's and father's sides were also born in the Netherlands, and there is no record of Indonesian ancestry in the artist's family tree.⁴

Dutch people were never more than a tiny percentage of the total population of the Dutch East Indies, and the majority of the individuals classified as European by the colonial authorities were in fact Indo-European, or what was called Eurasian, having (usually) a Dutch father and Javanese mother. Despite his solidly Dutch ancestry, Schoon placed great importance on the fact of being born in Java, and insisted that the culture of his birthplace was fundamental to his attitudes and his art. As he declared in the 1960s, 'Since I was born in Indonesia, I have Eastern art in my blood.'⁵ Apart from this cultural transfusion, there were no facts of genealogy that might link him to this place and these people.

Dutch and Indonesians married reasonably freely, so it wouldn't necessarily have been a cause for shame had the Schoon family had some Javanese ancestors. But in the stratified society of the Dutch East Indies there would have been economic and social implications. For example, Indo-European employees of Dutch companies didn't get the fully paid and regular furloughs, leaves of absence involving a trip back to the Netherlands that were offered to their Dutch colleagues, because they were

considered not to be fully Dutch and therefore didn't need regular contact with 'civilisation' to make sure they stayed Dutch.⁶ Mostly, racial differences were understood negatively, as Johannes Schoon's own attitudes make clear. A Eurasian, he said in 1939, was someone who denied their mother and hated their father. It was hard, he said, to place Eurasians in service with Europeans, and many of them lived on the fringes of 'low' Chinese and native quarters in the large cities, sometimes getting involved in smuggling drugs or alcohol, or becoming leaders or advisers of the natives in times of political unrest. The reformatory schools in Java set up to deal with this problem kept Eurasians separate from the other races, although there were friendly relations between the groups.⁷ Such views were typical of those held by many Dutch people and all state institutions at the time.

In the early twentieth century, attitudes about race hardened in the Dutch East Indies, and a growing chorus suggested that many Indo-European children did not deserve their status as European. Until the end of the nineteenth century, policies had been focused on reclaiming the stray sheep of the European flock by making sure that the children of European fathers and Indonesian mothers were classified as European, and welcomed into the fold of European culture and values. But gradually words like 'hybrid' started to appear in public conversations about race, and Dutch words like 'volbloed' (pure-blood) began to appear in advertisements for domestic staff and personnel. Johannes Schoon was firmly in line with prevailing conservative opinion, which held that having Indonesian ancestry was tantamount to degeneracy, and that a commitment to social improvement meant opposing mixed marriages.⁸

Johannes Schoon and Barbara Steegemans were married in 1913. They were 'trouwen met de handschoen' – literally 'marrying with the glove', which means they had a proxy wedding. These kinds of ceremonies took place when it was impossible for one of the couple to be present, mostly because the man lived far away. This suggests that Johannes was already in Java, while his fiancée remained in the Netherlands.⁹ The Dutch East Indies offered great opportunities to those who were prepared to make a new life in the colonies, and the enormous expansion of trade and industry in the region demanded many more employees and civil servants. In line with changing attitudes to race, the Dutch government was committed to easing out the Indies-born civil servants who, it was believed, had been adversely affected by the peculiar atmosphere of the colonies, their efficiency undermined by slackness, a fear of objecting or complaining, and an unwillingness to embrace change.¹⁰ Johannes Schoon was part of an influx of Dutch-born officials who, it was hoped, would renew the Dutch East Indies civil service.

By the time Barbara made the journey to Java, perhaps a year after she and Johannes were married, wives were allowed to accompany their husbands.¹¹ Previously the Indies had been a bachelor society in which many Dutch men lived with *nyai*, an Indonesian word for the Indo-European or native housekeepers who looked after the household and took care

Previous: Theo Schoon in his studio, Bandung, Java, 1936–38. Photograph by Theo Schoon. Private collection.



Theo Schoon, aged two or three, circa 1918. Schoon estate collection.

Theo (right) with his brother, Pieter, who was three years younger, early 1920s. Schoon estate collection.

Johannes Theodorus Schoon, Theo's father, in his 'tropical whites', circa 1930. Schoon estate collection.



of any children from the union.¹² Theo was born exactly a year after his mother emigrated, followed three years later by his brother, Pieter, born in February 1919.¹³

At the time of Theo's birth, Johannes Schoon was involved with the ceramics industry around Kebumen, perhaps working for himself, or as part of his job with the colonial government building the schools of trade that educated Javanese students.¹⁴ At some point he may also have been in charge of one of these technical schools. Around 1921, when Theo was five or six, Johannes moved with his family to Bandung, a larger city in West Java, where he became the head of a reformatory school for Indo-European children.¹⁵

Much later, Theo Schoon told friends that his father was trained as an architect, and had been commissioned to design and then supervise the construction of a prison in Java; he did such a good job, Schoon said, that the Dutch colonial administration offered him the role of director of prisons.¹⁶ Schoon also told people that his father was associated with the thriving pottery industry in Java, and he described his memories of spending time at his father's brick and tile factory as a young boy.¹⁷ These two roles are connected historically, since the construction boom in Javanese schools and prisons, many of which were made of brick, kept Kebumen's ceramic factories in business — including, perhaps, the one owned or managed by Schoon's father.¹⁸

It was a fascinating time of change in Java, as the Dutch East Indies underwent a kind of internationalisation, especially in terms of American culture, which became increasingly visible in the 1910s and 1920s. New technologies like telephones, cars, radios and aeroplanes changed the way people lived and entertained themselves. The urban environment was also transformed as dirt roads were paved with asphalt, and cars replaced horse-drawn carriages. Cinemas playing the latest American movies took over from open-air concerts. New buildings in Art Deco style with ornamental references to Javanese art replaced villas with their classical architecture.¹⁹

Surviving family photographs provide a glimpse of Schoon's childhood. One, taken in 1917, shows the Schoon family standing at the entrance of a grand institution of some kind. Against a backdrop of sweeping driveway, manicured lawns and lush trees, they pose and smile for their portrait. On the right, Johannes is dressed in a white suit; on the left, Barbara wears a dark jacket and white skirt; two-year-old Theo stands between them, holding their hands, dressed in an outfit of white fabric with dark trim, and a hat. To the left and behind, separated by a polite distance that reads as deference, a young Indonesian woman (perhaps Schoon's nanny) stands and looks at the camera. In the far background, among the trees where the drive curves out of view, an Indonesian man stands watching the activities. He is not an official member of the portrait, just part of the drift of daily servant life in Kebumen momentarily coming into view and caught by the camera's gaze.

Another photograph, taken in 1920, shows five-year-old Theo standing with his father. Again, a few steps behind, there's an unnamed servant. The theme is the hunt. Against a backdrop of light-dappled trees, Theo stands proudly and somewhat self-consciously, a rifle with its butt resting on the ground in his right hand and his left hand resting on his hip. Johannes, more comfortable with his weapon, has the rifle slung over his right shoulder, but otherwise his pose is an adult version of his son's. Both are dressed in dark hunting clothes, more casual than the jacket and shirt worn by the servant, who is cut off by the side of the image. The photograph is deliberately exotic, a portrait intended to be sent back to relatives in the Netherlands that rehearses the kind of imagery (jungle, hunting mastery, servant) popular since the beginning of the Dutch East Indies three centuries earlier.²⁰

These photographs suggest a pampered childhood, surrounded by Javanese servants and nannies, fine furniture and fabrics, generous architecture, the raucous calls of brightly feathered birds outside the windows in gardens filled with beautiful plants. Schoon was the son of a tropenadel, a mildly pejorative Dutch term meaning 'tropical nobleman'.²¹

It was a complicated cultural situation, a struggle between a fear of the Indies undermining Dutch character, and a welcome embrace of some of the cultural traits associated with living in the Indies. By the early years of the twentieth century, there was a steady stream of literature that extolled the virtues and habits of an Indies lifestyle: generosity towards friends and house guests; an elegance in the slow pace of daily life, and in the adoption of rituals like the morning coffee, midday sleep, and visits that were treated like elaborate ceremonies. The faithful nyai was praised for revealing the mysteries of the orient to her master, while Javanese cooks and nursemaids were celebrated and immortalised in print.

Earlier generations of Dutch colonial civil servants had been effectively out of touch with the homeland, and so had clung to a rigid sense of what it was to be Dutch in clothing and habits. But new technologies like the telegraph, and the ready availability of furloughs home, allowed those in the early twentieth century to adopt a very different lifestyle: wearing 'colonial whites' in the hot climate, leaving the office at two o'clock in the afternoon, and donning batik pyjamas after a siesta and an Indonesian meal. By the time Schoon was born, even a modest Dutch household had a staff of four to six Javanese servants who lived in the compound with their partners and children, meaning that the average Dutch settler family lived in close proximity to more than a dozen Indonesians.²²

Nonetheless, there was relatively little formal cultural contact between Dutch and Indonesian communities. Dutch people were expected to embrace and admire modern Dutch culture, which was imported by the

government as a prophylactic against the ever-present threat of going native. The traditional local cultures were for the natives. As far as art was concerned, the colonial government divided it into two broad categories: 'modern western art' for Dutch inhabitants, and 'traditional oriental art' for Indonesians. The division kept the natives focused on timeless arts and crafts appropriate to their place in the hierarchy (lower down, unchanging), while Europeans were free to embrace the art forms of the modern world (at the top, dynamic). Art helped to maintain the gap between east and west, which was itself an artificial construction to keep the colonial social hierarchy intact.²³

Sometimes, though, art could leak across the rigorously enforced cultural boundaries. In the early Hindu period there had been a lively art form in which strips and coils of terra cotta clay were shaped into figurines and constructions with symbolic and magical significance. 'Although only a few traces of the art are left,' Schoon wrote in 1983, 'in a limited range of domestic ware like piggy banks and children's toys in Java, I learned as a child that this art was still alive when a worker at my father's brick and tile factory was sent to mind me and he entertained me the way they entertain their own; by making clever and lively sculptures of people and animals from such strips and coils.'²⁴

If that's the story of how Schoon first learned about ceramics, here is the story of his first encounter with gourds. Imagine him on Passar market day, the highlight of every child's week. Early in the morning vendors wearing their brightest clothes would come from miles around, an amazing variety of merchandise piled on their heads and shoulders; like pied pipers, they would lead the local children along the main road to the marketplace, where their goods would be laid out for inspection and sale. One day Schoon was surprised by an absurd little creature pedalling furiously, coming straight at him. It was a push toy featuring Petruk, one of the four punokawan or clowns that commonly appear in Javanese puppet theatre, riding his monocycle. Made from two gourds on a wooden wheel, with wooden legs and a bamboo stick, it was being pushed by a small boy who had come to market with his father. 'The little gourd creature moved along crazily amongst bare and sandalled feet, baskets of spice, bales of cloth, meat covered with flies, billy-goats, bird cages, brightly coloured paper toys, until it suddenly came to a stop against a basket of dozing ducks,' wrote Schoon in 1961. 'There was instant pandemonium. The deafening quack of ducks and the angry chatter of the protesting vendor were doing a crazy cha-cha-cha, as people gathered to enjoy the spectacle and find out the cause of all this din.'²⁵

Kites were another artistic delight for Dutch and Indonesian children. For a few cents, a visit to the village kitemaker would yield a fantastic handmade creation featuring a unique and magically powerful decoration. From the grown-ups who smoked, Schoon and his brother collected wayang pictures that came in packets of cigarettes. The cards were used in a game called umbulan, in which groups of boys would throw

Schoon's drawing from November 1961 of Petruk the clown, a gourd puppet that he remembered from market day during his childhood in Java. Te Papa Tongarewa, CA000216.



their wayang pictures into the air; those cards that landed face up were the winners, and were tossed into the air again, until only one card landed face up and its owner could claim all the other cards as the spoils of victory. If a particular card proved to be consistently lucky, then it had asserted its magical potency, and this image would be offered up to the kitemaker, who drew the unique patterns from the costume of the figure on the paper surface of the kite. The strings were dipped in glue and then sprinkled with powdered broken glass; dog fights between kites required every assistance the owner could marshal, including the superior hexing power of a wayang card that had proved itself in the playground.²⁶

It was a childhood of sounds and music. Every morning Schoon would hear the subtle, complicated and shifting beat of women stamping rice, a hard and tedious job that was made more enjoyable by turning the rhythms into music. The heavy loads carried to market on bamboo yokes would squeak at every step, and became music by changing the size of steps, or the gait, or subtle body movements which altered the tempo, and allowed the squeaks with their different pitch to be played like a kind of orchestra.²⁷ Work, pain and weariness were transformed into art.

Even the most cursory tourist to the region recognised that this wasn't an island of sensuous natives idling away the days in a salubrious climate, but rather a society of extraordinary activity. 'Here was an almost incredible busyness; day and night, the roads were full of people walking with a light and swinging step under heavy loads; the air was never empty of music, even in the small hours before the dawn; and it was not mere woodland piping but complicated orchestrated music which bore witness to many hours of concentrated rehearsal', wrote the American anthropologist Margaret Mead, who lived in Bali in the 1930s. 'Upon the hundreds of stone altars of Bali, there lay not merely a fruit and a flower, placed as a visible prayer to the many gods, but hundreds of finely wrought and elaborately conceived offerings made of palm leaf and flowers, twisted, folded, stitched, embroidered, brocaded into myriad traditional forms and fancies.'

It was a world of pattern, from the terraced hillsides and the air filled with music, to the temporary woven palm-leaf decorations for temple gates, and the people themselves arrayed in elegant friezes as they watched a performance or fighting cocks. Such creative activities were practised by everyone: every woman could construct a temple offering, and every man could play a musical instrument, even if it wasn't to professional standard. Art was part of daily life for the average Balinese.²⁸

It seems Schoon was aware of the hierarchies that separated Dutch and Indonesian people from each other. The privilege of colonial society was a constraint on the freedom offered by everyday life in Java. As a child, Schoon spent a lot of time in the kampongs, the little villages around Kebumen. These places, and these people, felt more like his real home than the world of his parents and brother, in which he had to dress up and wear shoes.²⁹ The other world, though, could be just as confining. Javanese society was governed by a rigorous social code, and Schoon observed this

first hand in his household. The son of one of the Schoon family servants, old enough to marry and now seeking a bride, had set his heart on a girl of higher class. The two sets of parents met and shared a banquet organised by the girl's family. Nothing was discussed about the possibility of the marriage, but when the boy's parents returned home, and Schoon's mother asked how the occasion had gone, she was told there would be no alliance. How did they know, she asked, if nothing was said? The servants replied that the banquet had consisted of dishes made up of ingredients that didn't belong together in a proper meal. It was an honourable and inoffensive way of telling the boy's parents that their son didn't belong socially with their daughter.³⁰

As a child of a Dutch civil servant, Schoon was educated with the children of Javanese nobility. The Dutch Ethical Policy, which was introduced by the colonial government in 1901, acknowledged that the Dutch had an ethical responsibility for the welfare of the Indonesians they governed. Education was transformed by this new policy, and it was a point of pride for the colonial government that every Indonesian child received some schooling. There were schools in every village, and it was compulsory for every Indonesian child to attend an elementary school for three years. The more gifted students then went on to a second-class school, where they learned Malay, while the brightest of all attended a higher school, where Dutch, English and German were on the curriculum. After that, the option was to attend a school of trades.³¹

The Dutch students who attended high burgen or secondary school were educated alongside classmates from rich Chinese and Javanese families. Four of the five years were dedicated to languages and other subjects, and the final year to economics. Pupils could then attend one of the two universities (one for medical, dental and engineering; the other for the civil service). There was no entrance examination, as academic success at a high burgen was considered sufficient proof of aptitude. The system meant that only aristocratic Javanese entered the civil service, in the belief that they were more suited to the work, having had the opportunity to observe their fathers doing the same jobs. Hereditary leaders were respected and obeyed by their fellow Javanese, and this kept the business of empire running smoothly.³²

In 1967 Schoon described himself as 'a classical Javanese dancer, up to professional standards'.³³ Not much is known about how this training took place, although it must have started when Schoon was very young: he told friends in New Zealand that as a young boy he had been massaged and his nurses had trampled on his back to make his body supple.³⁴ Children in Java and Bali were exposed to what Margaret Mead called 'a gesture, posture system, to a way of walking and a type of attitude which makes him early susceptible to the more formal patterns of movement and sound which are characteristic of his culture'. Because the style of art was embedded in daily activities, everyone raised in this way could be said to have 'a high aesthetic capacity, both as a potential performer and as critical

spectator'.³⁵ If Schoon was raised by Javanese wet nurses and nannies, it's quite possible that he was exposed to these patterns and systems, which would then have been intensified by dance training as part of his education. Schoon later claimed that he was introduced to Javanese dance at school, studying it alongside his aristocratic classmates.³⁶

In a letter written in the 1970s, Schoon described a particular dance, called *kuda kepang* (literally 'horse' and 'woven from bamboo'), which involved the dancer mimicking a horse with their legs and feet and a rider with their upper body. According to Schoon, it had been bastardised in the 1920s and 1930s by the fashion for wearing sun goggles and gaudy costumes covered with glittering beads while performing it. 'I can do that dance myself very well,' he said, 'because as a kid I spent hours and days practising it all, and learned to do the whole walk perfectly.' The challenge was to create a kind of rhythmical counterpoint between the music and the capers of the horse and rider, and this took a fair bit of creative ingenuity. Schoon would hum the music as he practised the dance moves.³⁷

The best evidence of Schoon's childhood dance training was the way he moved as an adult: his physical grace and his elegance of gesture, and his ability to hold poses and perform hand gestures of different kinds. He was extremely flexible and strong. One of his party tricks was to sit in a lotus position and then use his arms to push himself up, wobbling his legs in the air. He didn't use chairs, preferring to sit on the floor in a lotus, just as he had learned to do at school. The pleasures of Javanese art and music and dance, and the refined elegance of the Javanese aristocracy, were memories of a culture that stayed with him all his life.³⁸

In 1927, when he was almost 12 years old, Schoon and his brother were sent back to the Netherlands to receive a proper Dutch education.³⁹ Many Dutch colonial officers in the nineteenth century and later were concerned that their children, born in the Indies, either did not become fluent in the Dutch language or acquired an accent and a tendency to transpose certain consonants. All these were obvious signs of being colonial-born. There were questions around the quality of education in the Dutch East Indies, and critics pointed to the fact that some children raised by Indonesian servants couldn't understand Dutch as fully as the education system required.⁴⁰ Johannes and Barbara Schoon were clearly keen to ensure their boys did not transgress any of the rules around race and class in the colonies. Having the means to educate them in the Netherlands, they sent them 'home'.

Theo and Pieter arrived in the Netherlands in June, and went to stay with relatives in Rotterdam, the city that Johannes and Barbara Schoon had left a decade earlier. As a government official, Johannes Schoon had taken paid leave to return home with his family, so this trip in 1927 was not Theo's first time in the Netherlands, but it must have come as a

shock to move permanently. The architecture, the food, the climate and the people were so different. At school in Java, Schoon and his fellow pupils learned from Dutch text books filled with images and references to the Dutch way of life, like ice and snow and skating on frozen canals: all things that had no reality for children born and living in a hot tropical environment.⁴¹ What had previously been conjured by the magic of a painted backdrop in a portrait photographer's studio became part of the fabric of everyday life.

Rotterdam was an industrial city, and the harbour was its heart – a vibrant and unruly space of round-the-clock activity. Water connected Rotterdam to the world through the port, and to the rest of Europe through the Rhine River. In the 1860s the Rotte River, after which the city was named, was filled in because it was too small to handle the increasingly large ships, and was replaced with a railway to the water. New shipping facilities were built in 1874; and then in 1890 the Nieuw Waterweg, the New Waterway also known as the Rotterdam Seaway, connected Rotterdam to the open sea. The city became an economic powerhouse, and the flow of boats and cargo in its port determined how well Rotterdammers lived. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was home to more than 300,000 people, and it was the fastest-growing urban centre in the Netherlands.⁴²

Rotterdam was also, in the mid-1920s when Schoon arrived, a city undergoing extraordinary transformations. Canals were being filled in, and exciting modern architecture was replacing the eighteenth-century buildings. This was a working-class city, and it could not compete with beautiful Amsterdam or fashionable The Hague, but it did have its own charms – bustling streets and waterways, the industry of the port, and a commitment to buildings in the modern style, with clean lines, flat roofs, glass curtain windows, machines for living and working. By 1929 Rotterdam had a reputation as the most American city on the continent.

In Rotterdam, Theo and Pieter Schoon would have been considered 'Indische', a Dutch adjective to describe the opposite of 'Hollands' (Netherlandish): it meant 'not Dutch'. The term could be used for everything associated with the Dutch East Indies: people, culture, ways of living.⁴³ What Indische-ness implied for any one person was shaded by factors of education, social status and geographical location. After the Second World War the term began to refer to ex-colonials still emotionally connected to Indonesia – in other words, to people like Theo Schoon, who was still pining for his youth there many years later.⁴⁴ The first sense of rupture, the experience of exile that became a core part of Schoon's identity, must have been laid by this journey that was intended to teach him and his brother what it meant for them to be Dutch.

Schoon would have seen his parents when they made their regular visits to their sons and wider family in Rotterdam, and there were opportunities for discord between the generations to grow – and it did. Schoon reserved his greatest vitriol for his father, 'the director of prisons' as he often referred to him, exaggerating Johannes' actual role as head

From left: Theo, his aunt Elisa Hubertina Anna Westerink, née Steegemans, his brother Pieter, and his aunt Antonia Anna Steegemans, photographed in a Rotterdam portrait studio possibly during one of the Schoons' furloughs in the Netherlands, early 1920s. Schoon estate collection.



of a reformatory school. No doubt the epithet reinforced the impression Schoon wanted to leave with his listeners — that his father was, as he wrote in a letter in 1967, ‘a cantankerous and cruel person, forever pushing his vile temper on his helpless retinue’.⁴⁵ It is a vivid description that usefully served Schoon’s agenda in painting his father as a monster, but it also names something factual about his father’s life. As a Dutch civil servant in Java in the 1920s, Johannes Schoon would have had a group of Indonesian officials and assistants following him around, ready to respond to his requests.

One memory from Schoon’s years in Rotterdam remained with him, and became an anecdote through which to explain his feelings towards his father. As he told it, he was ten or perhaps 12 years old, busy with a project, maybe art of some kind, when the time came to go to the photographer for a portrait. ‘He had to wash his face, he had to comb his hair, he had to smile for the photo, but he was busy with something else and he was crying bitterly’, is how his friend Kees Hos remembers Schoon relating the story in the 1960s. ‘His father really brutalised him in order to smile for the photo’.⁴⁶ In many ways, it’s common enough. What child hasn’t had the experience of an intense preoccupation with something being interrupted by parental command? But the fact that Schoon held on to this piercing memory for so long reveals how deeply hurt he was, and remained.

It wasn’t just Schoon’s father who came in for criticism. Schoon had strong feelings about every member of his family. If Johannes was a dictator, then his younger brother Pieter was a manipulator. As Schoon told another Dutch friend, Krijn Dolman, in the 1950s, ‘My brother, if he did something wrong, he had the idea of crying all the time and yelling and so on and blaming me, and I was always beaten up with a stick. And my brother always got free out. He made a whole policy of that, a whole tactic of that, to always see that I got the blame.’ His mother’s failing was her unwillingness to get involved or challenge the status quo. Schoon told Dolman, ‘My mother was passive, did what her husband told her to do, never spoke up, so she was no help to me.’⁴⁷

Schoon’s parents had arranged for their sons to stay with Barbara’s three sisters in Rotterdam. Anna Maria Barbara was the eldest sister, born in 1886, two years before Barbara. Antonia Anna, born in 1890, was two years younger. The baby of the family, Elisa Hubertina Anna, was five years younger than Barbara.⁴⁸ Anna died young, Antonia was unmarried, and Elisa was married, so it isn’t clear with whom the Schoon children lived, or exactly what their domestic situation was like.⁴⁹ What is known is that when Theo and Pieter arrived in Rotterdam, their aunts were between 41 and 34 years old, and they fussed over the children. The boys were not allowed to play with others, and when one afternoon Pieter brought home a playmate from school his friend was sent home straight away.⁵⁰ The aunts were ‘lace curtain’ types, with a very precise and narrow code of ethics. Unsurprisingly, Schoon pushed back against their authority.⁵¹

For the first two years in Rotterdam, Schoon and his brother lived in an apartment in Mathenesserdijk, a street that runs parallel to one of the



Theo (right) and Pieter (left), with their maternal grandfather, wearing school uniforms, possibly soon after they moved to Rotterdam for schooling in 1927. Schoon estate collection.

Schoon’s aunts, with whom he stayed in Rotterdam. From left: Elisa Hubertina Anna (22), Antonia Anna (25) and Anna Maria Barbara (28). Schoon estate collection.

Schoon dancing with his mother, Barbara, in Rotterdam during one of her visits to the Netherlands, circa 1930. Schoon estate collection.



canals in the west of the city.⁵² Official records also show that a few years later Schoon lived in the village of Hillegersberg, now a suburb of Rotterdam but at that time a separate municipality to the north of the city, but it isn't clear whether he was still in the company of his relatives.⁵³ Little is known about Schoon's secondary education in Rotterdam but it is most likely that he went to one of the several Hogere Burgerschool (Higher Civic Schools). These were attended by the sons of general managers, factory owners and merchants — the children of the upper middle class — who received an education that would set them up for management roles in trade and industry. He studied languages, learning German and English. As for Pieter, in September 1930, when he was 12, he was sent to a lyceum in Zeist, a town close to Utrecht, about 50 kilometres east of Rotterdam.⁵⁴ Lyceums were selective secondary schools that took academic students, from the age of 12 to 18, and, depending on the stream they were placed in, prepared them for university or polytechnic.

At some point, Schoon must have decided that he wanted to go to art school, and his parents agreed. He was about 16 when he enrolled at the Academie van Beeldende Kunsten en Technische Wetenschappen (Academy of Fine Arts and Applied Sciences). It was a venerable school, formed in 1851 from the merger of the Rotterdamse Tekengenootschap (Rotterdam Drawing Society) and the Rotterdamse Industrieschool (Rotterdam Technical School).⁵⁵ Perhaps, when pitching the idea of art school to his father, Schoon played up the applied arts credentials of the institution, emphasising that it covered both fine art (like painting and sculpture) and studio craft and applied art (pottery, textiles and graphic design, for example). There were courses in lettering, perspective, life drawing, still-life drawing, marbling and wood-graining, as well as some art history and art theory. Johannes Schoon, a man involved in the ceramics industry, would have appreciated this emphasis on practical craft skills that had clear commercial applications.

If this was an argument Schoon used, it didn't go any further. Schoon enrolled to study fine arts. Around 1900 the Academy's curriculum had been reorganised, and the Department of Fine Arts had been divided in two, becoming Freehand Drawing & Painting, and Decorative & Industrial Arts. In practice, this meant that students were either training to become artists or training to become designers.⁵⁶ Unfortunately for Schoon, the Fine Arts Department was extraordinarily conservative, and the teaching he received when he joined the Academy in 1930 or 1931 was exactly the same as it had been 30 years earlier, and even taught by some of the same teachers.

That wasn't true of the Applied Arts Department, which had been transformed by the innovative ideas of Jac. Jongert, a Dutch graphic designer who joined the Academy in 1918 and believed in a strong relationship between art and industry. He appointed a series of influential teachers like Piet Zwart, Gerrit Kiljan and Paul Schuitema, whose ideas were contemporary and revolutionary.⁵⁷ Some of the students in Freehand

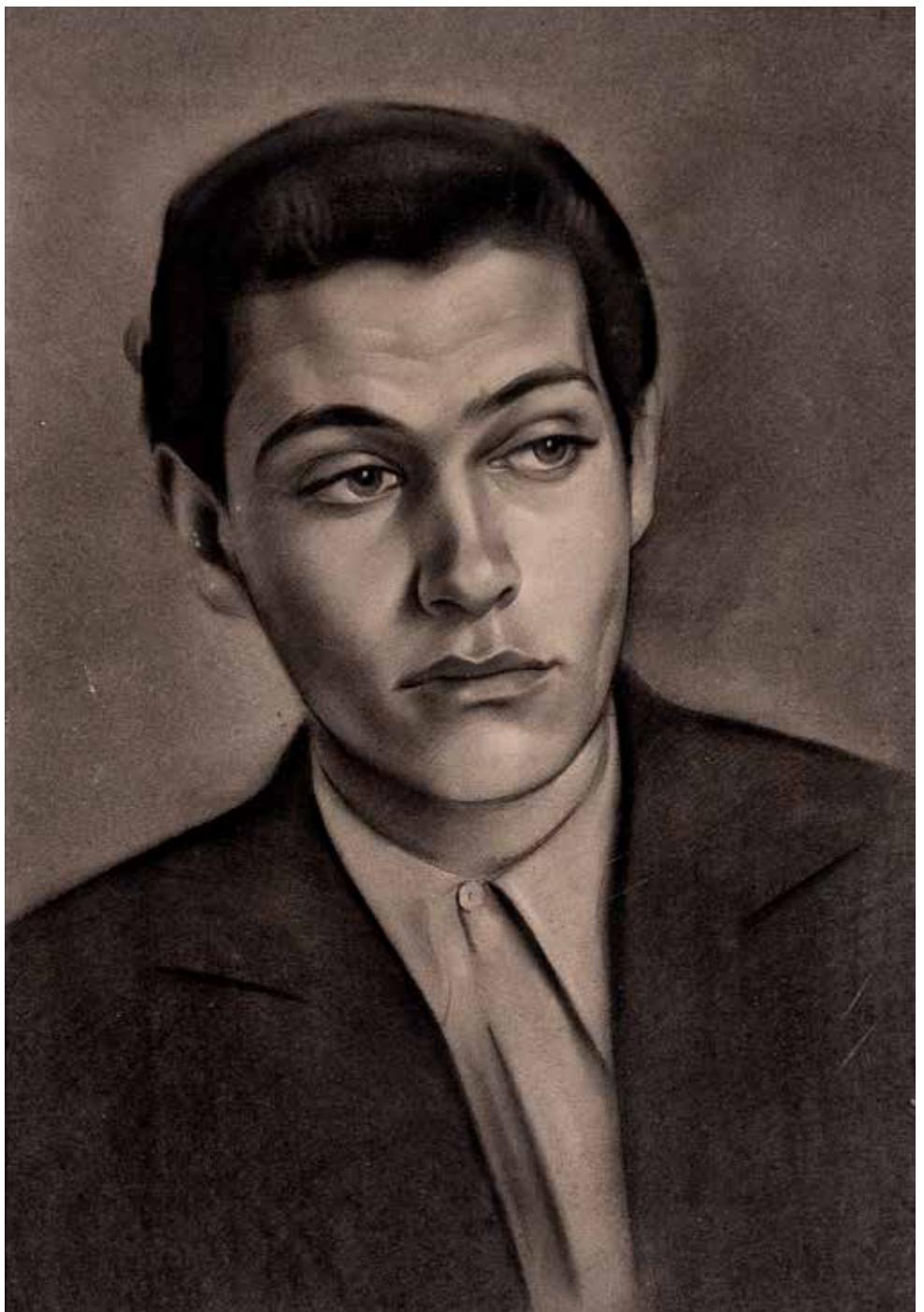
Drawing & Painting were jealous of the more up-to-date teaching enjoyed by those in Decorative & Industrial Arts, even though the fine arts were supposed to be more prestigious and important than the applied arts.⁵⁸

Students at the Academy attended classes either in the day or in the evenings after work. Schoon was one of the approximately 80 day students, which meant he belonged to a group made up of the sons and daughters of wealthier families who could afford to study full time. Most of the day students were younger than the 160 students who attended in the evening.⁵⁹ These evening students formed the heart of the institution, which in the early twentieth century had basically been a de facto secondary school for poorer students.⁶⁰

The Academy was located on the Coolsingel, one of the major thoroughfares through the centre of town. It was originally a canal, the Coolvest, which was filled in between 1913 and 1922 to become a broad avenue. The Academy was just down the street from the city hall and the post office, close to the administrative and formal part of the city. The two-storey building had a narrow neoclassical façade that faced the street, and opened up into a much larger space of offices and studios where students and teachers worked. Long corridors had ornate Romanesque arches, and plaster-cast copies of Greek and Roman statues were housed along the walls.⁶¹ In 1935 the Academy building was demolished to make way for the new Rotterdam stock market, one of the few buildings in the central city that survived the devastating German bombing and subsequent firestorm in 1940. With no dedicated building, the Academy's classes were dispersed around the city; Schoon's final year of study took place in whatever empty spaces could be found to house the students and lecturers.⁶²

The curriculum was based on the belief that skill and technique could be taught but originality could not. Classrooms were filled with still-life arrangements of teapots and jugs on tables, and students were supposed to copy them in a way the Dutch artist Rembrandt, working four centuries earlier, would probably have recognised.⁶³ Willem de Kooning, who became famous in the United States as part of the Abstract Expressionist movement in the 1940s and 1950s, took night courses at the Academy between 1917 and 1921, about a decade before Schoon enrolled as a student. De Kooning studied lettering in his first year; the second year was spent copying complex wall designs; the challenge of drawing after nature occupied his third year; and in the fourth and final year he created still-life compositions, drew plaster casts of the human face, and learned how to apply the rules of perspective and correctly draw the proportions of the human body. De Kooning's instructor exhorted his students to 'draw without ideas! Draw what you see, not what you think!'⁶⁴

The technique involved was exacting. Students, who were not allowed to speak during class time, would begin their drawings of a still-life arrangement by laying in the outlines as faint charcoal lines, and then modelling each object, facet by facet, with conté crayon, which was gently smudged and wiped with soft chamois cloth. The drawing was constantly



A self-portrait by Schoon, probably completed while he was studying at the Rotterdam Academy in the 1930s. Photograph by Chris Coad. Schoon estate collection.

checked against the model, and the students trained themselves to keep their eyes at fixed levels and angles, and their paper and bodies at the same distance from the still life day after day. Too much rubbing and the fibres of the paper would become unstuck, producing areas of charcoal that were overly shiny and black. And once the volumes of teapot and jug had been properly established, the sheet was rubbed and stamped so that there would be an even layer of pigment across the surface. A three-hour class might involve work on a section no bigger than three or four centimetres square, and a single drawing often took between three and six months to finish.⁶⁵

It was a traditional art education, and it set Schoon up by teaching him to observe closely and giving him access to superb technique. One of the students' tasks was to draw an everyday and familiar object from memory — an exercise that quickly revealed how little most people actually know about the things they see. To accurately construct a motorcycle or a wheelbarrow in this way demanded an extreme level of observation and retention.⁶⁶ He studied the anatomy of the human body, drawing plaster casts of feet or hands and then naked life models. There were lessons in composition, in how to arrange objects like jugs, bowls and fruit into pleasing designs. Once Schoon was able to draw accurately, he began to use oil paint, learning all the technical tricks that came with this more prestigious material. He also studied modelling with clay, the closest students were allowed to get to sculpture.⁶⁷ His education finished when he had mastered all the skills and techniques the Academy had to offer, but this didn't mean he was an artist. The Academy equipped its graduates with a solid foundation, but it was up to them to develop their own ideas: to make art, the thing that couldn't be taught, with the technical skills that could be.

Schoon recalled the teaching he received from the Academy with little fondness. He graduated with what he later called 'the burden of getting too much rammed down my throat, without a decent chance to digest it, or to orientate myself'.⁶⁸ He had skill and technique, but no originality. One of Schoon's works from this period was a deer with elongated legs standing in a forest glen, drawn in fine pencil and reminiscent of the sugary soft drawings of Han van Meegeren, a Dutch artist notorious for his forgeries of Vermeer and Frans Hals.⁶⁹ It was, remembers a friend who later saw a photograph of the work, pretty awful.

Schoon's teachers in the fine arts found the vivid colours and bold brushstrokes of Vincent van Gogh too radical, which meant that more contemporary painters like Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg, who were making abstract paintings from geometric forms, lines and primary colours, were not even acknowledged.⁷⁰ But these were exactly the kinds of artists that the teachers in the applied arts were discussing, and encouraging their students to explore in their class work. Jongert and his colleagues were preaching that there shouldn't be any distinction between fine art and commerce; and to back up his ideas, Jongert became the chief designer of the local Van Nelle tea company, giving its packaging and posters a sleek, geometric look that was futuristic and exciting. In 1926, a

few years before Schoon joined the Academy, Jongert had redesigned the school's logo. Gone were the sinuous curves, curlicues and floral designs of the Art Nouveau-style image, with its central figure of a Grecian-robed woman holding the tools of fine art (a brush) in one hand, and the tools of applied art (a mallet and set square) in the other. In its place, Jongert used sans serif fonts and a striking silhouette of a cog with three holes — a literal sign of industry.

Suddenly, the decorative arts were claiming the future, while the fine arts clung to the old world of academic standards. It was cool to be a commercial artist. As de Kooning put it, 'We weren't at all interested in pure art, or in the person who earned his living being an artist.' A truly modern artist didn't make nice paintings; in fact, he didn't paint at all, but rather worked as a designer, in publicity.⁷¹ Piet Zwart and Paul Schuitema were fans of the Dutch De Stijl movement, and the Constructivist movement that emerged from Russia in the work of El Lissitzky and Alexander Rodchenko. As active members of the avant-garde art world, these teachers brought their knowledge and contacts into the classroom.

But this wasn't Schoon's experience. Days were spent in the Academy's studios, learning to draw correctly, the susurration of charcoal sticks and pencils whispering on paper, students looking up to study the plaster cast on the table before them, and then down to the image taking shape in front of them. Everything was subject to rules and techniques, to skills acquired by repetition. The injunction — 'Don't draw what you think, just what you see' — shaped everything Schoon and his fellow students created. But once classes finished, these aspiring artists were let loose into the streets of Rotterdam, where they could go to galleries, gather together in coffee houses for rowdy debates, and eagerly search the shelves of bookshops for the latest publications about modern art. Rotterdam had an extraordinarily vibrant nightlife in the interwar period: no other city in the Netherlands had such a high density of cinemas, theatres, cafes and dance halls. The productive exchange between art and industry that was fostered by the graphic designers and photographers working at the Academy also meant that experimental photography, design and architecture were on display around the city. Urban life took place in a built and visual environment shaped by the bold new aesthetic of modern art.

There were documentary makers, such as Joris Ivens, whose time-lapse films showed Rotterdam transforming from a river village to an industrial powerhouse. Architects like J.A. Brinkman and L.C. van der Vlugt were designing modern masterpieces such as the Van Nelle factory, a building that was a three-dimensional equivalent to the clean lines and sharp elegance of the commercial designs that Jongert was producing for packaging the tea made inside it. And even back at the Academy, in the library, Schoon would have been able to read books published by the Bauhaus and by artists who taught there, such as Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee.⁷² As he recalled in 1971, 'In the library we saw some publications of the Bauhaus, though the Faculty frowned on it.'⁷³ The Fine Arts faculty,

The modern graphics and architectural style of the Cafe de Unie demonstrate how Rotterdam was changing in the 1930s, and how avant-garde ideas were available to art students like Schoon in everyday life. Circa 1933. Te Papa Tongarewa, O.003575.



certainly, but not all the staff. The Applied Arts Department was certainly ordering these works for their students, and a curious student from another department could have looked at them too.

Schoon was one of many art students at the time who were dissatisfied with the standard art books recommended by his professors; he was hungry for the art of his own time.⁷⁴ He and his fellow students were keen on what was called ‘primitive art’ – objects from Africa, the Americas and the Pacific made in a bewildering variety of materials, and gathered together in the collections of anthropology museums. It was a world away from the ancient Greek and Roman art that had been interpreted by Renaissance artists to create the western tradition they were being force-fed at the Academy – and which they were still experiencing first hand when they had to accurately copy a plaster cast of an antique sculpture in their course work.

‘There was a voracious appetite for this material amongst the young artists of my generation in Europe,’ wrote Schoon in 1985. ‘Any new book in this field was eagerly snapped up by any art student who could afford it.’ It was in a Rotterdam department store that Schoon first came across a book on African rock drawings by German ethnologist and archaeologist Leo Frobenius. As one of the lucky students who, thanks to the largesse of his parents, could afford to buy such books, he took it home and pored over the text and illustrations; it was followed, a bit later, by another book on American Indian rock drawings.⁷⁵

Schoon didn’t yet have a way to realise the potential of his extra-curricular reading. But what he was slowly collecting in the various books he purchased, read, and discussed with his friends were the tools he needed to go beyond his artistic education – to assert his own originality, and create the space that would let him consciously decide what he should value from his art school training and what he should discard.

Out with perspective, and the idea that art should be naturalistic, accurately capturing what the eye saw. In with exaggerated forms and colours, bold brushwork and surface textures, even abstract images that gave up on the idea that there should be a relationship between the artwork and the world beyond it. The hunger for art from Africa or the Pacific gave birth, as Schoon saw it, to a new kind of visual literacy and a new global sophistication. This must have been especially exciting to someone who not only aspired to be a modern artist but also treasured the Javanese art and culture of his childhood. What Schoon learned in Rotterdam in the early 1930s was that there could be a viable artistic connection between his past in Indonesia and his future as a modern artist.

Towards the end of his life, Schoon was able to describe what this moment represented. What he was experiencing, what he sensed, was that his training at the Rotterdam Academy was in conflict with his interest in Javanese art. Academic art, concerned with representing precisely what the eye saw, using all the tricks of perspective and modelling and foreshortening, was actually just one stream of human creativity, but those

who championed it mistakenly believed it to be the most important. Schoon was attracted to the Bauhaus because its ideas seemed to be universal somehow. They provided a way to understand non-western art and allowed him to come to grips with the art that had surrounded him as a child in Java. As he wrote in 1983, ‘At that time I did not understand it fully intellectually. I saw it however quite well, in a juxtaposition of actual works of art. It was the beginning of my passion for the oldest art of man and the very newest. I did no longer want to become a modern Western painter, but a new breed, that was “at home” amongst the art of mankind, both in its enormous diversity of strictly formal idioms, but also its strong sense of structure and form.’⁷⁶

During the years Schoon studied art at the Rotterdam Academy he was also becoming an adult and discovering a great deal about his sexuality. He was certainly not shy about telling close friends that he was gay, and sometimes he would talk about his past. He told one friend in the 1950s that his upbringing had made him homosexual. Lacking love from his mother and father, he met a pilot, a gay man who showed him affection, and Schoon, longing for love, fell hard. He recalled the time his lover broke up with him because of another man. Schoon sat in a tree for the whole night, watching the window of his ex-boyfriend’s flat, alone and heartbroken in the freezing cold of a Rotterdam winter.⁷⁷

According to a different story, Schoon came out to his father when he was studying at the Rotterdam Academy. ‘His dad took out his revolver, put it to Theo’s head and he said, “Now you tell me who seduced you”,’ recalls Gerald Moonen, who heard the story from Schoon in the 1960s. ‘And then Theo picked up his courage and told his father, “Nobody seduced me. It was me who seduced him. That was in the back of a movie theatre.” He had a lot of courage with a gun to your head to say, it was me who did it.’⁷⁸ It’s hard to know how true this story is, since it plays up the violence and intolerance that Schoon associated with his father, without any evidence that Johannes would behave like this. But it also reveals the courage that Schoon showed at many moments in his life, when he refused to allow conventional beliefs or behaviour to determine how he would live and act.

The Netherlands was fairly tolerant when it came to homosexuality. In 1911 the Dutch government had passed a law that set the age of consent for same-sex partners at 21; the age for heterosexual partners was 16. Cities sometimes had bars and other venues where gay men and women could meet, but most socialising happened at parties and within circles of friends. If the police suspected minors were involved, they would break up these groups or parties, ‘outing’ people in the process. There were four bars in Rotterdam, and homosexual men would also cruise for sexual partners in public toilets and parks. The Hague, easily reached by train, had a much better reputation as a gay destination, and many men – including Schoon – travelled there, and to the coastal towns where beaches and dunes provided many opportunities for socialising and hooking up.⁷⁹

In November 1934, when Schoon was 19 years old, his parents returned to Rotterdam for a year’s leave. They had been living in Malang,