

Theo Schoon

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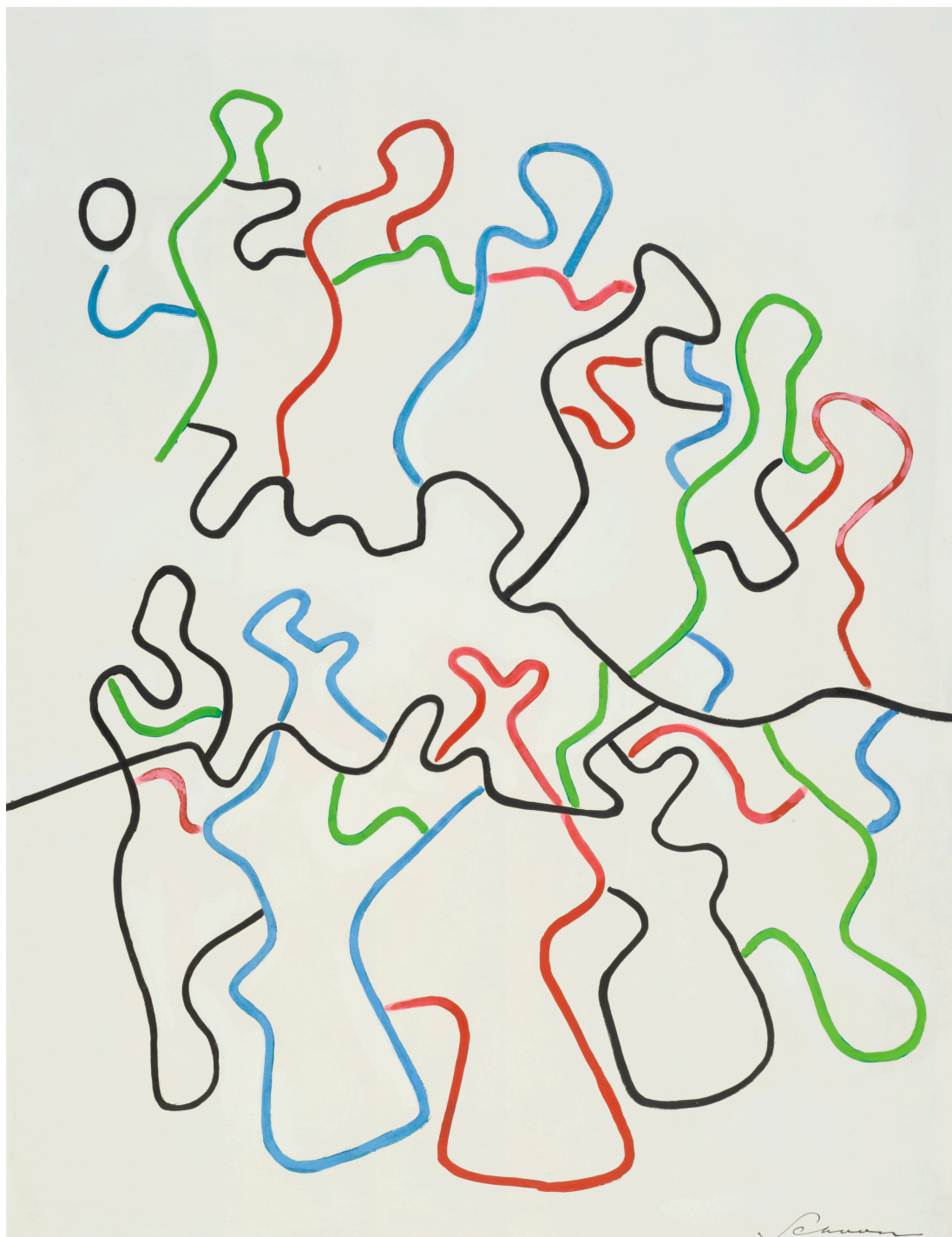
A Biography

Damian Skinner





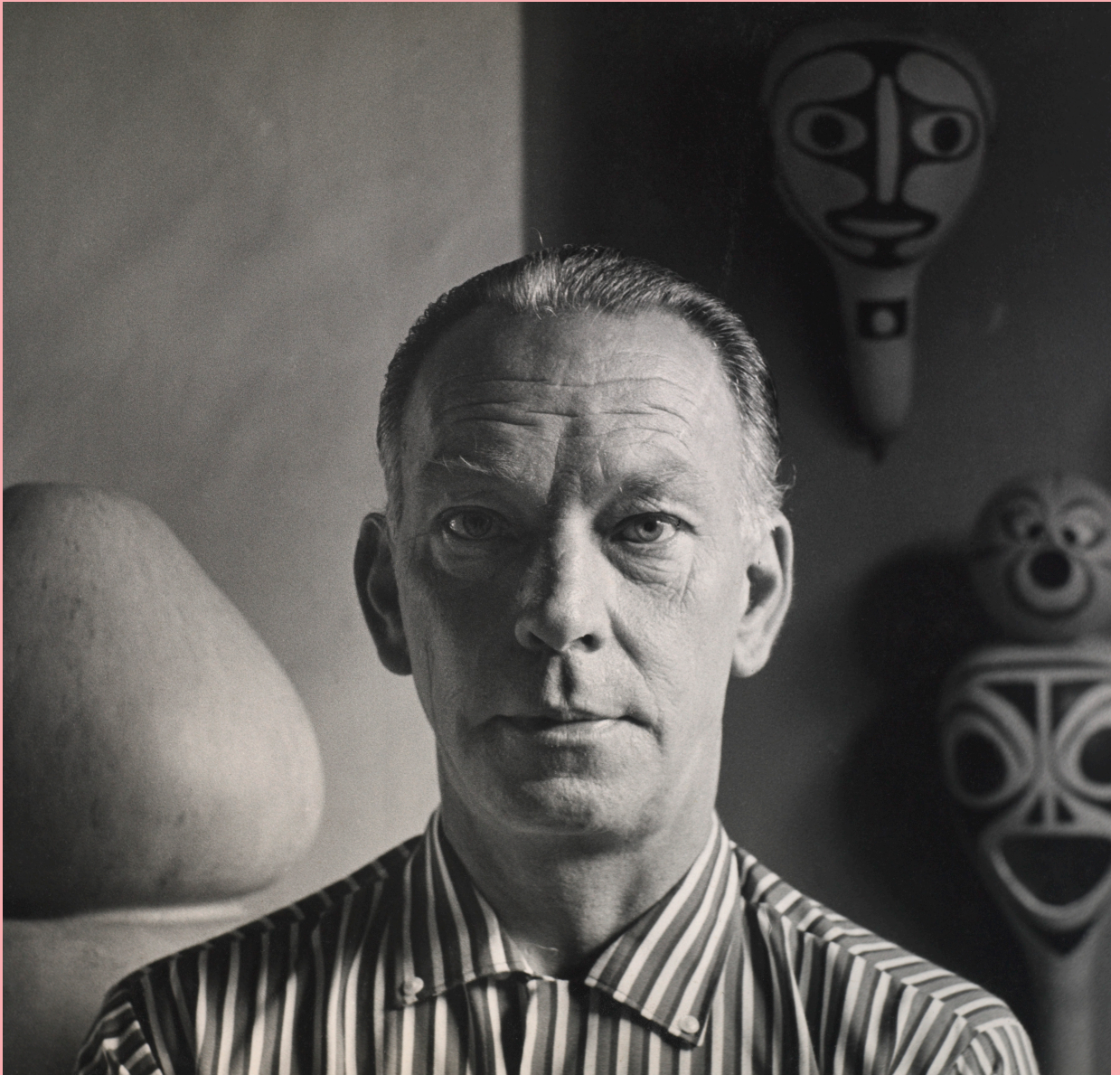
Meringue, circa 1964. Painting
by Theo Schoon. Te Papa
Tongarewa, 1992-0023-2.



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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.