



John Irvine (1805 – 1888) had been honoured by election as an A.R.S.A. (Associate of the Royal Scottish Academy) by 1835. Born in the Shetlands, he trained as an artist at first in Edinburgh and then in London. He emigrated first to Australia and then in 1863 appears to have arrived to settle in Dunedin as the first accomplished and professional artist.

Irvine's art work is not so well-known today, but he specialised in commissioned portraits. He was in demand painting children as well as adults, and occasionally

portraying groups in local settings. He also painted some fine landscapes, including views of various parts of Dunedin (an 1870 view of the city from above George St and 1878 view of the “Botanical Gardens” that was later the site of the Otago University are among the Hocken Collections’ holdings).

Irvine became the inaugural president of the Otago Art Society in February 1876, one of its keenest founders, William M. Hodgkins (father of the famous Frances Hodgkins) deferring the position to him in acknowledging Irvine’s professional standing and reputation. Hodgkins becoming vice-president, with David Con Hutton, appointed first “provincial drawing master” for Otago in 1870, elected as secretary.

For the Art Society’s inaugural exhibition in 1876 Irvine submitted four works. With Hutton and artist George O’Brien he also acted as the selection committee that chose about 150 paintings that were hung, from 168 submitted. (Hodgkins attended to the cataloguing.)

Due to illness John Irvine often had to apologise for absence from the society’s council meetings during his three years in office, with Hodgkins then acting as chairman. Irvine resigned as president OAS in 1879 because of his “advanced age” and was then succeeded by Hodgkins (who remained president for almost 19 years.) On his resignation it was acknowledged that Irvine had made a handsome present of some 14 art books, to form the nucleus of a library for the society.

Irvine painted various city dignitaries and made lithographs and engravings for the *Otago Witness* newspaper. He also exhibited with the Art Society regularly until his death.

John Irvine died on 22 June 1888, aged 83 years, and is buried in Dunedin’s Northern Cemetery alongside his wife Jessie who had died in 1878.

Prepared by the Historic Cemeteries Conservation Trust of New Zealand (www.cemeteries.org.nz) from information supplied by Geoff Adams of Dunedin.