

Of Waikato born Garth Tapper, art critic Hamish Keith wrote: ... *he is completely with the mainstream of New Zealand life and reports upon it. He is perhaps the only genuine social observer we have in New Zealand and should be cherished for that.*

All of Keith's observations ring true in Tapper's major 1987 work, *Black Gold*. The once familiar sight of road workers clad in grey overalls, leaning on shovels is captured to great effect by Tapper's erudite brush strokes. Choosing a limited palette of grey, blue, turquoise and white Tapper positions his men at work against a backdrop of soft green hills. The title *Black Gold* is a reference to the laying of tar-sealed roads and the awarding of lucrative government roading contracts. From a 21st century vantage point the element of social commentary is every-more appreciated in Tapper's work. *Black Gold* was painted in one of the most pivotal decades of New Zealand's history, and in a year which saw massive reversals of fortune on the world stage.

Tapper studied at Elam School of Fine Arts from 1945-51. A Carnegie Scholarship enabled him to travel and study in Europe . While at the Slade and Chelsea Schools of Art he made contact with Augustus John and Vivian Pitchforth. Returning to New Zealand in late 1953 Tapper taught at various Auckland secondary schools until 1960. He then joined the staff of Elam School of Fine Arts where he lectured for 17 years before retiring in 1977 to paint full time. Tapper is best known for his figurative paintings of New Zealanders at work and play. He painted the New Zealand of his day creating series as diverse as those based on the legal profession, hotel and bar patrons along with gum-diggers and roadside workers. The passage of time sees these paintings gain momentum, not only in the auction room, but more importantly as visual historical commentaries on New Zealand life in the second half of the 20th Century.