

Scottish Art: Then and Now

by Clarisse Godard-Desmarest

“*Ages of Wonder: Scotland’s Art 1540 to Now*”, an exhibition presented in Edinburgh by the Royal Scottish Academy of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture tells the story of collecting Scottish art. Mixing historic and contemporary works, it reveals the role played by the Academy in championing the cause of visual arts in Scotland.

Reviewed: Tom Normand, ed., *Ages of Wonder: Scotland’s Art 1540 to Now Collected by the Royal Scottish Academy of Art and Architecture*, Edinburgh, The Royal Scottish Academy, 2017, 248 p.

The Royal Scottish Academy (RSA) and the National Galleries of Scotland (NGS) have collaborated to present a survey of collecting by the academy since its formation in 1826 as the Scottish Academy of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. *Ages of Wonder: Scotland’s Art 1540 to Now* (4 November 2017–7 January 2018) is curated by RSA President Arthur Watson, RSA Collections Curator Sandy Wood and Honorary Academician Tom Normand. It has spawned a catalogue as well as a volume of fourteen essays, both bearing the same title as the exhibition. The essay collection, edited by Tom Normand, includes chapters on the history of the RSA collections, the buildings on the Mound, artistic discourse in the nineteenth century, teaching at the academy, and Normand’s “James Guthrie and the Invention of the Modern Academy” (pp. 117–34), on the early, complex history of the RSA. Contributors include Duncan Macmillan, John Lowrey, William Brotherton, John Morrison, Helen Smailes, James Holloway, Joanna Soden, Alexander Moffat, Iain Gale, Sandy Wood, and Arthur Watson.

The starting point of the exhibition is the 1910 agreement between the academy’s president, James Guthrie, and the curator of the National Gallery of Scotland, James Caw. This agreement, and the ensuing 1910 Parliamentary Order which regulates the cohabitation of both institutions on the Edinburgh Mound, enabled the National Gallery to expand into the entire building, previously shared with the academy, which in turn, was able to move to

the adjacent Royal Institution building facing Princes Street. Important works from the RSA collection were then transferred to the national collection, and *Ages of Wonder* is the most comprehensive exhibition since this transfer took place. The collections of the two institutions share a close identity through the artists they represent but have been assembled differently. While the NGS collection results from strategic decisions made by successive curators, the core of the RSA collection is the work deposited by each individual member on election, along with gifts and bequests, deposits from artists through scholarships and awards, and to a lesser extent purchases. A number of the works displayed in the central gallery (Gallery 2) of the exhibition refer to the “transfer” in a contemporary legend impressed on their frames. Such works include Jacopo Bassano’s *Adoration of the Kings*, painted in the 1540s and bought by the academy in 1856 when it was attributed to Titian. The best of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Scottish art was moved to the national collection, which contributed to making the National Gallery a distinctly Scottish institution. This included David Roberts’s panoramic *Rome: Sunset from the Convent of Sant Onofrio on the Janiculum* (1856) and portraits by the most appreciated eighteenth-century Scottish painters, including William Aikman, Allan Ramsay, and Henry Raeburn (who is represented by *Major William Clunes of Crakaig* in full-length, c.1810). The reinvention of the academy and the expansion of the Scottish national collection was James Guthrie’s great triumph. He remained, however, an artist and a celebrated portrait painter. His diploma piece for the academy, a subject-painting, is of one his most feted artworks; *Midsummer* (1892), on display in Gallery 2, is “a celebration of light, air, sunshine, leisure, and timeless summer,” Tom Normand explains (p. 132). Its fluid touch and palette make it an impressive impressionist piece.

Revealing the academy’s historic and contemporary identity

The essence of the RSA as a teaching institution is reflected in a number of testimonies of the Academy Life Class—an important part in the education of an artist in Scotland before this function was passed over to the colleges of art (Joanna Soden, p. 135). When it was created, the RSA looked at an established academic tradition including to the Royal Academy of Arts in London, an institution which attracted many Scottish talents thanks to its specialist training on offer. The exhibition points to the availability of private collections of top-quality material for students to be able to study old master paintings and drawings, including the collection of bookseller and antiquarian David Laing (1793–1878), whose art collection was bequeathed to the RSA in 1879 and mostly transferred to the NGS in 1910. Among the eighteenth-century pieces on display from this collection are Alexander Runciman’s colour sketch for his Ossianic masterpiece at Penicuik House, *The Blind Ossian Singing and Accompanying himself on the Harp* and Salvator Rosa’s *A Sulptor Carving a Figure out of a Stone Slab*.

The RSA became the very epitome of the Victorian era, and every year from 1827 it organised an annual exhibition to which any artist, amateur or professional, could submit works. One of the rooms in *Ages of Wonder* recreates a Victorian “salon-style” presentation of works exhibited, practically from floor to ceiling, including paintings by Henry Raeburn, David Wilkie, William Allan, John Watson Gordon, Joseph Noel Paton, Robert Gibb, David Young Cameron, and David Octavius Hill. The changing conventions of exhibiting in the modern and contemporary periods are explored in the exhibition, as the story of the collections unfolds through a presentation of works from all disciplines and in a variety of media, from marble to film, print to photography, and sculpture to portraiture. On show are calotypes by Scottish pioneers of photography Alexander Hill and David Octavius Hill. The latter was a landscape painter and one of the longest serving and most successful secretaries of the RSA. His views of the High Street with John Knox’s house (c. 1850) are a record of Edinburgh’s past, when the Town Council threatened the old in its course of destructive action.

In an analysis of the RSA in the 1950s Tom Normand focuses on Anne Redpath’s career and explains that, although the academy had elected women artists as associates from the early nineteenth century, “institutional barriers, social mores, and the dominance of patrician hierarchies had served to exclude women from this ‘professional’ establishment” (p. 156). Normand explains that Redpath, perhaps more than any other woman, and without self-consciousness, did most to undermine this discrimination. The paintings of Redpath, like those of contemporaries Sir William Gillies and Sir William MacTaggart, must be read within the context of European modernism; indeed, Scottish art and culture in the 1950s inherited from Paul Cézanne, George Braque, Henri Matisse, and Nicholas de Staël. Alexander Moffat’s chapter provides an analysis of the RSA in the 1960s, and the new and challenging context for the arts in Scotland (pp. 167–76). Arthur Watson’s essay focuses on the most recent trajectory of the RSA and alludes to the challenges the institution, which is still largely operated by academicians, will be addressing as it approaches its bicentenary in 2026 (pp. 217–36).

In keeping with the academy’s historic and contemporary identity, newly commissioned work is on display during the run of the exhibition, including Richard Murphy’s Wunderkammer display cabinet, housing selected exhibition items from the RSA collection, and Calum Colvin’s studio installation on Scottish national poet Hugh MacDiarmid. A contemporary portrait of James Guthrie, one of the few academy presidents without a portrait, has been created especially for the exhibition by sculptor Kenny Hunter. Revealing the Academy’s artistic practice, a live Life School takes place in the upper galleries every week under the tutelage of John Byrne, George Donald, Jennifer McRae and Robert Rivers —the RSA operated a Life School between 1840 and 1932 at a succession of locations in Edinburgh.

The legacy of David Wilkie, Thomas Hamilton and William Henry Playfair

Although the earliest attempt to create a drawing academy in Scotland, the Foulis Academy (1753–76), was located in Glasgow, the national Academy of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture was based in the capital. Painting was viewed as the “queen of the arts.” In introducing the academy and its early years, Duncan Macmillan focuses on the career of the eminent Scottish artist David Wilkie, “without doubt the most successful British artist of his generation, even though his contemporaries included Turner and Constable” (p. 17). Wilkie’s influence on the nascent academy, in the 1820s, was subtle and direct (the institution was recognised by Royal Charter in 1838); the nature of his subjects and painting was indeed emulated by early academicians. The early history of the academy was also shaped by the commanding presence of an architect, Thomas Hamilton (1784–1858). Hamilton was the first treasurer of the academy and an active participant in its foundation. His role in the creation of Edinburgh’s neo-classical urban landscape saw him in competition with William Henry Playfair (1790–1857), who was elected an academician in 1829. Hamilton’s ambitious proposal for twin buildings in the Greek-Revival style, for a National Gallery and the Royal Scottish Academy (1848), is presented in the exhibition, but this prestigious commission was secured by Playfair, and the foundation stone was laid in August 1850. The contest is the subject of John Lowrey’s detailed essay on the topography and cultural history of the Mound, a landmark site (p. 31–48). Hamilton’s designs are superbly picturesque, creating a high contrast to the surrounding buildings. The design for the Royal High School on the Calton Hill, begun in 1825, shows the same degree of completion. Hamilton’s design of the front façade of the building shows neo-classical refinement and elegance, and Thomas Allom (1804–72) offers a magnificent view of the school and the Burns Monument in a watercolor and gouache on paper, c.1830. Playfair’s diploma design for Surgeons’ Hall is included in the exhibition display. By providing significant buildings in the Greek Revival style, both architects further established Edinburgh as the “Athens of the North,” a phrase reputedly coined in 1824 by the landscape painter Hugh William Williams (1773-1829).

Hamilton and Playfair developed the aesthetic of the picturesque in Edinburgh. Almost simultaneously with the RSA show, a selection of designs by Playfair, *Playfair and the City* (1 December 2017–25 February 2018), is exhibited at the City Art Centre in the Old Town, organised by the city in partnership with the University of Edinburgh, and curated by John Lowrey and Kirsten Carter McKee. This exhibition, relying on the university’s unique collection of over five thousand Playfair drawings, pays homage to the architect’s enduring legacy to the city, where his monuments and buildings can be found in many places. The sections of the display focuses on the city and the landscape, monuments and public buildings, views and vistas, institutions, grand routes in the city, Playfair’s connection with Robert Adam, the city’s observatory, shopping malls, the buildings on the Mound, and the west end of the city.

Playfair's plan for the third New Town to Leith (George Heriot's Trust Collection, on loan from Historic Environment Scotland), which covers essentially the area bounded by London Road, Easter Road, and Leith Walk, constitutes the starting point of the exhibition. Like his master William Stark, author of a *Report to the Lord Provost* (published posthumously in 1814), Playfair insisted on the importance of bringing the landscape into the urban setting, an attitude which fundamentally departed from the formal and regular approach taken some fifty years earlier by James Craig for the first New Town (1767). A cross-section of the rise of ground from London Road to Royal Terrace, north of the Calton Hill, shows Royal Terrace half way up the hill, with gardens at the front and trees at the back. A general elevation of Regent Terrace on the southern flank of the Calton Hill (dated 1821) and an elevation of Blenheim Place highlight the grandiose architectural style of Playfair. His meticulous attention to detail, also reflected in his high building standards, appears in the detail of the design —the name of each prospective home owner is carefully inscribed. –

Although Playfair worked on the university buildings for twenty-four years, none of his one-to-one designs for the university are on display in the City Art Centre. Instead, the eclecticism of Playfair's style and his adaptation to site and setting provides the thread to the exhibition. Although Playfair's reputation favours his Greek Revival legacy, he worked in a wide range of historical styles, from Italianate and Gothic to Tudor and Scottish Baronial. Of Playfair's post-university commissions, the most important were Donaldson's Hospital (1842–54), the National Gallery of Scotland (1850–57), and the Free Church College ("New College," 1845–50). Two oils on panel displayed in the exhibition feature *Princes Street from the Mound* by Charles Halkerston, 1843, and a *View of the Mound* by William G. Herdman, 1854. They reflect Playfair's careful handling of the urban landscape and his understanding of the value of contrasting the Old and New Town. For example, in his designs for the Royal Scottish Academy, 1848, Playfair formally aligned the buildings on the Mound with the main vista through the New Town, but he also contrasted the neoclassical Royal Institution building on Princes Street with the neo-Gothic New College at the top of the Mound. One of Playfair's most iconic designs, the City Observatory on Calton Hill (ink and gouache on paper, c.1825), is particularly relevant, given the contemporary restoration and redevelopment project for the monument.

Conclusion

These two exhibitions, of RSA works and Playfair designs, fully reflect the post-Enlightenment context and the early nineteenth-century self-perception of Edinburgh as the "Modern Athens." The exhibition on the Mound celebrates the cultural landscape of Scotland by presenting an artists-run institution and a collection of national significance. The RSA collection is unique, explains curator Sandy Wood, for it has been built by eminent artists; "the collection was created to recognise and inform Scotland's artists, sculptors and architects,

as well as aspiring artists, in perpetuity. In this sense the collections are both cultural memory, and a memorial” (p. 193). The central position of the academy in Edinburgh, in two of the most impressive neo-classical buildings in the city, reflects the need for art and artists to be placed at the centre of modern Scotland. Each essay in the collection offers rare insights and unique perspectives to the nation’s visual culture.

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