

Scottish Artists in North America 1714-1946

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Introduction

The emergence of a distinctive indigenous Scottish school of painting in the 18th century coincided with a period when Scottish society and culture were beginning to extend their influence worldwide. In fields as diverse as laws, philosophy, architecture, and science, Scots offered new and innovative approaches that helped to form the modern age. Scottish influence on the development of the nascent cultures of Canada and the United States has been well documented, as have the activities of many of the high-profile emigrants who left Scotland, willingly, during the 18th and 19th centuries. Scots and Scottish ideas have helped to underpin the foundations of many of the great national and cultural institutions of North America.¹

This brief overview highlights a number of artists who travelled to and within North America, as well as those who, once there, never left: both travellers and settlers. It reviews the differing perspectives of the Scottish artistic tradition they brought with them, the effect the people and the landscape of the new country had on their art, and the impact they themselves had on the emergent indigenous schools of drawing and painting. Many of the papers in this journal offer new insights into several of these individuals.

Also falling within the parameters of this overview is the exhibition and dissemination of Scottish works of art in North America, often by artists who themselves never crossed the Atlantic. Subscribers to engravings of Sir Walter Scott's poems in Cleveland and Montreal in the 1850s; visitors to a Glasgow Boys exhibition in Buffalo in the 1890s; millionaire buyers of Sir Henry Raeburn portraits in the 1910s.

Many of the distinctive qualities of the Scottish School played a part in the development of North American artistic traditions. In turn the unique qualities of North American landscape and culture helped to inform the experience of Scottish artists. The timeframe begins with the arrival of the

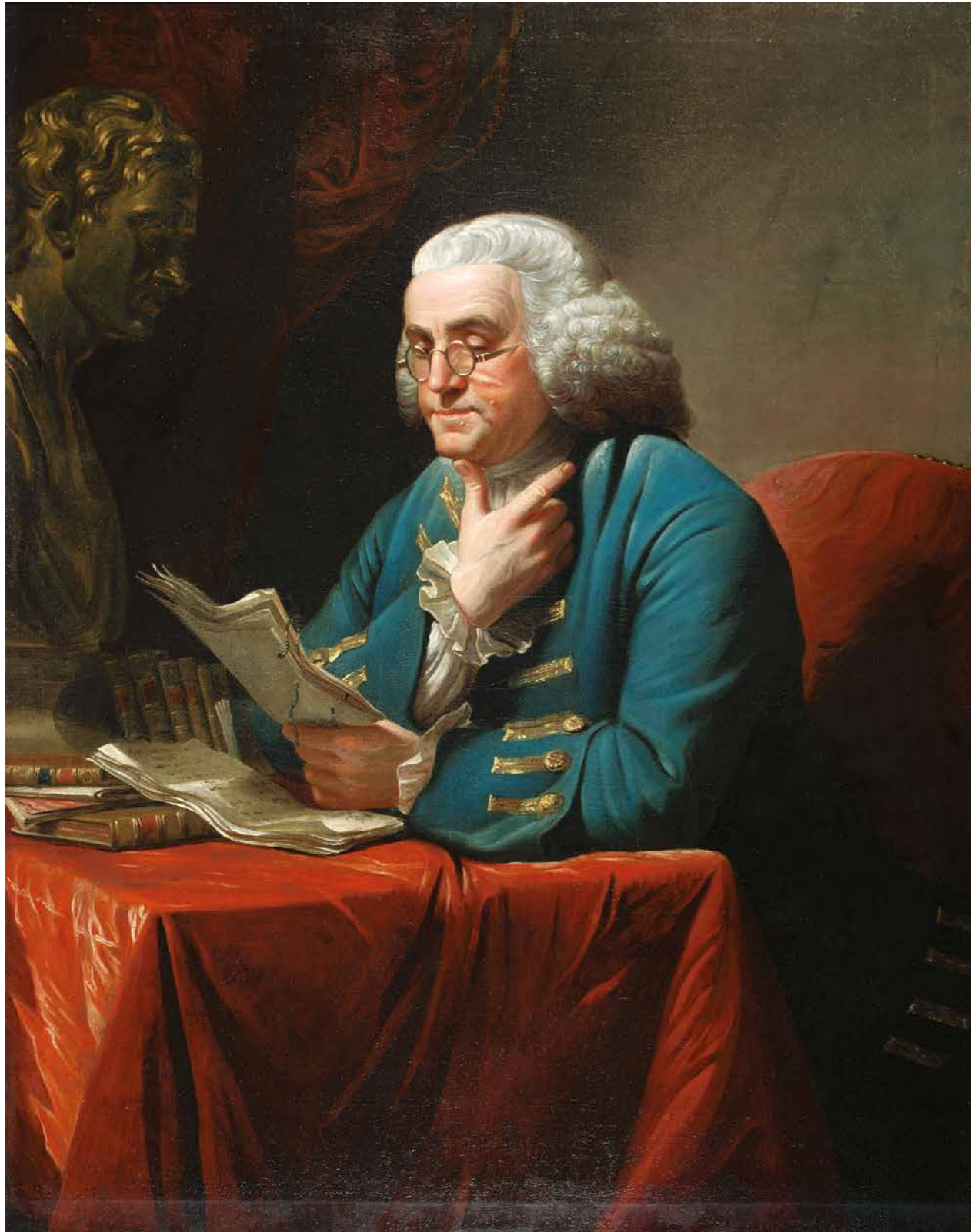
earliest jobbing face-painters in the colonies of New England in the 1710s and ends with a Scots artist flying back to Europe from California aboard a commercial airliner in 1946.

Early Portraitists

The first Scots artists to cross the Atlantic were portraitists. John Watson (1685-1768) settled in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, in 1714 and was to become celebrated both for his eccentricity and for his portraits of numerous local worthies, both in oils and pencil miniatures. In 1730 he brought over a selection of paintings from Scotland, which he exhibited in a semi-public gallery in his home.² John Smibert (1688-1751) arrived in Boston in 1728 and swiftly established a reputation as the pre-eminent portraitist of the New England gentry. He was to influence a generation of native-born American portrait painters.³ Cosmo Alexander (1724-1772), a former exiled Jacobite, embarked for Philadelphia in 1766 to revitalise his career. As well as an impressive series of colonial portraits, he is also remembered for taking the young Gilbert Stuart under his wing and giving the future portrayer of George Washington the first lesson in his artistic career.⁴ The precocious David Martin (1737-1797), the assistant to Allan Ramsay, never travelled to America, but his 1767 portrait of Benjamin Franklin was to become (and remains) an early icon of the American portrait tradition.⁵

Academicians, Topographers and Naturalists

Alongside portraitists, the earliest Scottish artists to travel to North America were those who wished to delineate the new landscape and wildlife and those who sought careers as teachers and academicians. Amongst the former were Archibald Robertson (1745-1813), who served in the British army in the Caribbean and America from 1762 until 1780 and commanded the British forces at the Siege of Boston in 1776. His sketches (many of which are now in the New York Public Library) give an unrivalled first-hand record of the events of the Revolutionary era.⁶



A few years later, his compatriot Patrick Campbell (dates unknown) 'set out from the Highlands of Scotland, with an intention to explore the interior inhabited parts of North America, attended with an old faithful servant, a Dog, and gun only.' His illustrated account of an epic journey through Canada and the Northern United States was published in 1792.⁷

In 1792 the Haddington-born George Heriot (1759-1839), who had trained under Paul Sandby at the Royal Military College, arrived in Quebec. During his career as Deputy Postmaster General of Canada, Heriot travelled widely, offering some of the most sophisticated depictions of the North American landscape hitherto recorded.⁸

A recognition of the need for art amongst both wealthy and artisan classes encouraged Scottish teachers to emigrate. John and Hamilton Stevenson (d. ? 1785/d. 1788) who trained at the innovative Foulis Academy in Glasgow, arrived in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1773, offering to paint portraits in the 'Zoffany-style' and setting up an academy 'as a Branch of polite Education and [for] Mechanics as an Assistant in their respective Employments.'⁹ Another pair of brothers, Aberdonians Archibald and Alexander Robertson (1765-1835, 1768/1772-1841), settled in New York and established the 'Columbia School of Painting' in the early 1790s. As, respectively, Director and Secretary of the American Academy, they were to become major figures in the early American art establishment.¹⁰

The Scottish traditions of education and intellectual reasoning played a central role in the establishment of many North American educational institutions. The desire to impose order on the new world inspired not only teachers and topographers but naturalists. Alexander Wilson (1766-1813) emigrated in 1794 and, after extensive travels commenced, in 1808, his magisterial seven-volume *American Ornithology*. Engraved by fellow-Scot Alexander Lawson (1773-1846) (who accepted a reduced fee 'for the honour of the auld country') this is one of the major achievements of early 19th-century American publishing and was only surpassed by the publication of John James Audubon's *Birds of America* twenty years later (and it is interesting to recall that Audubon

spent several months in Edinburgh seeking printers and engravers of requisite skill for his drawings).¹¹ Wilson's ornithological tradition was continued by William Paterson Turnbull (1830-1871), born and brought up in East Lothian, whose *Birds of East Pennsylvania and New Jersey* was published in 1869.

Sunday in the Backwoods – Scottish art and North America

The theme of emigration to North America inspired a number of iconic masterpieces by Scottish artists, including John Watson Nichol's *Lochaber No More* (1883) and Horatio McCulloch's *An Emigrant's Dream of his Highland Home* (1860). The principal exponent of this genre was Thomas Faed (1826-1900). His *The Last of the Clan* (1865) has become an enduring motif of the Highland emigrant experience. His major trilogy: *First Letter from the Emigrants* (1849), *The Scottish Emigrants Sunday in the Backwoods* (1859), and *Oh Why Have I Left my Hame* (1886) explore the same theme from a North American perspective. *Sunday in the Backwoods* became a hugely popular, if misleading and sentimental image whose iconic status was confirmed when it was subsequently gifted to the Montreal Museum of Fine Art. Faed's, younger brother, John, also dabbled with American subject matter. His *Washington taking the Salute at Trenton* (1856) became one of the most expensive 19th-century Scottish paintings to be sold at auction when it was acquired by the Warner Collection, Alabama, in 1997. Although neither brother ever travelled across the Atlantic, they established reputations in North America as the pre-eminent representatives of the Scottish school.¹²

The work of other Scottish artists became more widely known thanks to the success of the Art Union – the Royal Association for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in Scotland – which distributed engravings after Scottish paintings to subscribers in the Eastern States, the mid-West and Canada throughout the 1840-1880 period. More importantly, the Association became the inspiration and model for the hugely successful American Art Union, and its many imitators, which together brought European and American art into thousands of homes in America. Arguably they were the most influential artistic organisations in North America during the 19th century.¹³

In Search of the New

For many artists, the American landscape offered unparalleled subject matter – like the Highlands of Scotland, it was deemed to offer truly 'picturesque' scenery. The Hudson River painter William Hart (1823-1894) arrived in New York at

Fig. 1 David Martin *Benjamin Franklin*, 1767. Oil on canvas. 49 1/2 x 39 1/2 in. (125.8 x 100.4 cm.) Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Gift of Maria McKean Allen and Phebe Warren Downes through the bequest of their mother, Elizabeth Wharton McKean, 1943.16.1.

the age of seven and would have fallen outwith the ambit of this overview were it not for the close ties he maintained with Scottish painters, culminating in a three-year visit to Scotland in the 1850s. Daniel Wilson (1816-1892) became one of the leading academics at the University of Toronto but is equally well-remembered for his jewel-like watercolours of 'landscapes unaffected by human settlement,' recorded on journeys taken throughout the length and breadth of North America on the new railway system.

John David Borthwick (dates unknown) was one of the first artists of any nationality to travel to California and record the rough frontier society of the 1850s. Edinburgh painter Robert Gavin (1827-1883) headed south to New Orleans in search of the exotic, returning to Scotland to exhibit a series of paintings and sketches of African Americans at the Royal Scottish Academy.¹⁴ John MacWhirter (1839-1911), one of the best-travelled artists of his generation, also reached the west and painted Salt Lake City and the Golden Gates. San Francisco was also home to future Scottish Colourist Leslie Hunter (1879-1931), who first made his name as an illustrator of Brent Harte westerns. The earthquake of 1906 totally destroyed his first one-man exhibition, but his Californian experience continued to inform his bold and vivid palette throughout his subsequent career.

For Hunter, and for many American artists at the turn of the century, the lure of French art proved irresistible. A few went against the flow – notably 'Glasgow Boy' Thomas Millie Dow (1848-1919), who spent some of the 1880s with artist Abbot Anderson Thayer in the Hudson Valley and the 1890s in Canada, painting a series of luminous, haunting landscapes.

The Art Business – Portraiture and Engraving

Few artists had the means or liberty to become landscape painters. Portraits and prints were the money-earners, and Scots excelled in both disciplines. John Cameron (1828-?) made a successful career in New York City working as a lithographer on many of the famous Currier and Ives prints.¹⁵ Alexander Hay Ritchie (1822-1895) had trained in Scotland under Sir William Allan, emigrating to the USA in 1841, where he painted and engraved portraits and historical scenes. His engravings of the *Death of Lincoln* and *Washington and his Generals* can be found in many American museum collections, including the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

Portraits, even of the crudest variety, were always in demand. In Wisconsin, Glaswegian Alexander Marquis (1811-1884) painted over 300 portraits in the 1850s and 60s. George Linen (1802-1888) was equally prolific in Maryland and Indiana during the same period. Interestingly, the latter state was one of the first to commission portraits of all its state governors. Scots painter James Forbes (1797-1881) had the unenviable task of producing portraits of six previous governors, including two who were deceased. The Indiana portraits remain a remarkable archive of the period.¹⁶

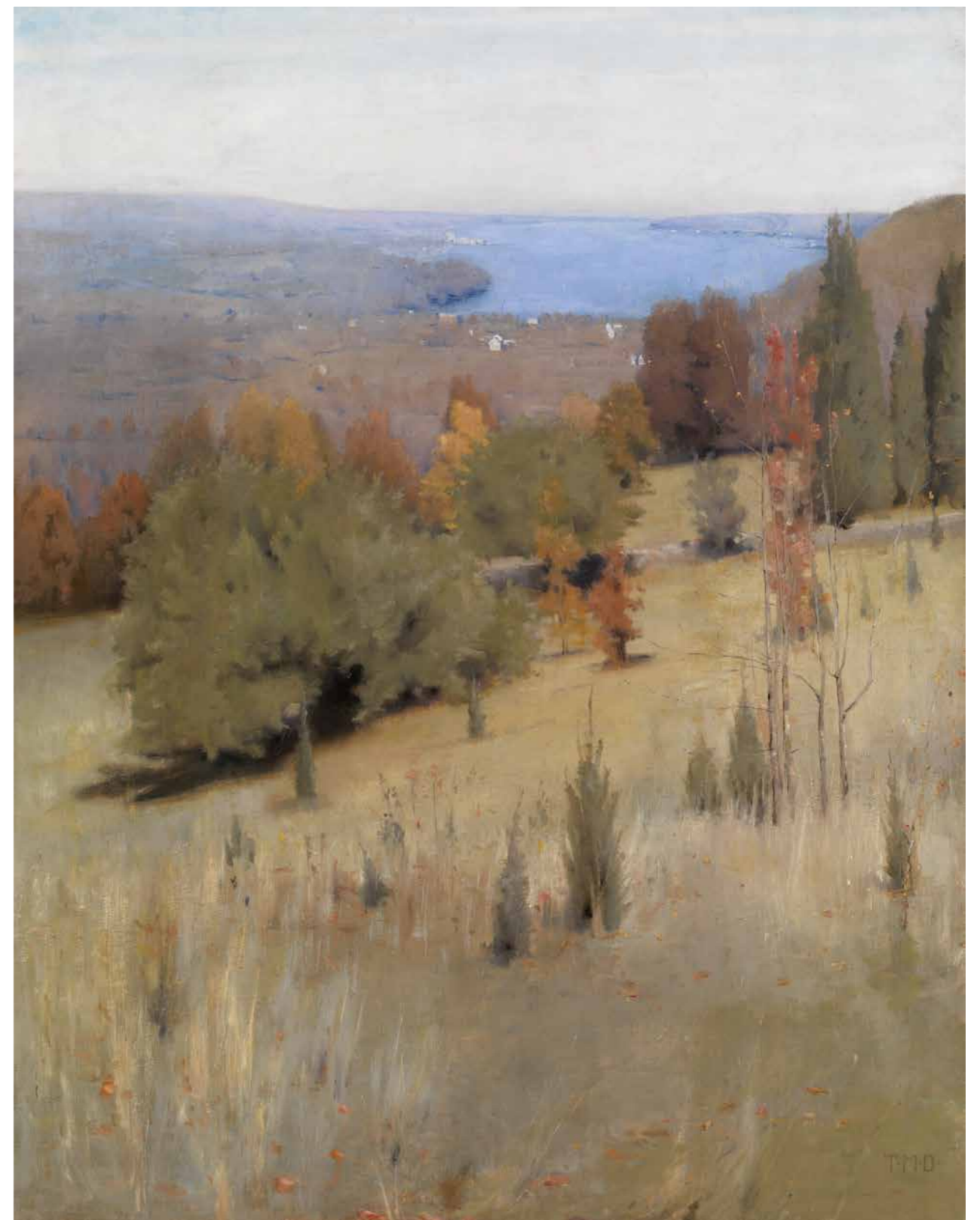
At the more sophisticated end of the scale, Scottish portraitists catered for the newly wealthy of New York. Several Glasgow painters found commissions: Alexander Roche (1861-1921) painted Mrs Andrew Carnegie in 1902, and Edward Arthur Walton (1860-1922) painted her husband nine years later. Harrington Mann (1864-1937) found New York such a lucrative market that he established a studio there in 1900, as did William Bruce Ellis Ranken (1881-1941), an under-evaluated figure who was one of the leading society portraitists, alongside John Singer Sargent, in early 20th century America.

Fin-de-siècle

The avant-garde artists of the Glasgow School – the 'Glasgow Boys' – enjoyed a remarkable profile in America thanks to the championing of their work by critic and curator Charles M. Kurtz. As co-organiser of the St. Louis Exposition of 1895 and subsequently curator of the Albright Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York, Kurtz organised a series of travelling exhibits of Glasgow School paintings – including major works by Lavery, Hornel and several others – that were seen, not only in St. Louis and Buffalo, but Chicago, Cincinnati, New York City, Philadelphia, and Toronto. Many important Glasgow School works entered nascent American public collections (although many have since been de-accessioned). These exhibits offered the American public a very different Scottish vision.¹⁷

A more traditional vision was offered by the major Royal Academy exhibit at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which included John Pettie's reactionary history painting *Monmouth pleading his life to James II* (1882) and *Bonnie Prince Charlie at Holyrood* (1892) and John MacWhirter's *Isle of Arran* (1876). Works in a similar vein were included

Fig. 2 Thomas Millie Dow *The Hudson River*, 1884. Oil on canvas. © CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection.



by other Scottish establishment artists, including William Quiller Orchardson, Peter Graham, Colin Hunter and David Murray.

A similar reactionary impetus informed the taste of the newly wealthy American art collectors who, in the 1890s and 1900s, competed to acquire British 'Old Master' portraits – Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough, George Romney and Henry Raeburn – paying prices that in real terms have never been equaled. Their acquisitiveness, and subsequent generosity, have ensured that many of Raeburn's finest portraits grace American public collections today.

A more quintessentially *fin-de-siècle* medium was the graphic arts. New techniques in printing encouraged the emergence of illustrated periodicals, one of the most successful of which was the Chicago *Chap Book*, first published in 1894. The visionary patron and sociologist, Patrick Geddes (1854-1932), was directly inspired by the *Chap Book* in the production of his *Evergreen* periodical, a lavish publication which was published simultaneously in Edinburgh, London, and Philadelphia. A visit paid to the USA in 1897 by Geddes was insufficient to boost sales and the publication folded after four issues. Geddes did, however, arrange for *The Evergreen's* principal artistic contributor, the Symbolist painter John Duncan (1866-1945), to take up a post in 1900 as Director of Art at the Chicago Institute.¹⁸

Modernists and Travellers

The new century brought diverse Scottish talents to North America. The etching boom ensured David Young Cameron (1865-1945) a warm reception in New York, but he, in turn, learned much from the work of American artists such as Winslow Homer (1836-1910).¹⁹ The most complete collections of his prints are still to be found in the USA. Mabel Royds (1874-1941) worked with Walter Sickert before spending several years in Canada in the early years of the century. Fellow woman artist Majel Davidson (1885-1969) trained in France with Scottish Colourists S.J. Peploe and F.C.B. Cadell, prior to working alongside the nascent Group of Seven in Toronto in the 1920s. During the same period, Anstruther-born James Kerr Lawson (1864-1939) was working in both Canada and Britain, including commissions for the Canadian War Memorials. Grace Wilson Melvin (1892-1977) also departed for Canada, having served on the staff at Glasgow School of Art from 1919-1927. In Vancouver, she rose to be Head of the Department of Design at the School of Art.

The work of Scottish etchers such as Muirhead Bone (1876-1953) and James McBey (1883-1959) was assiduously collected by American connoisseurs. The US dollar did much to escalate and maintain the etching 'boom', and many of the finest collections of these artists etchings remain in the USA. Bone visited New York in the 1920s and was fascinated by the scale and vigour of skyscrapers and the many construction projects underway. One of his masterpieces, and indeed one of the finest examples of the genre, is his *Manhattan Excavation* of 1928.²⁰

McBey had married into the wealthy Loeb family of Philadelphia in 1930, and he and his wife were stranded in the USA at the outbreak of the Second World War. Despite setting up a studio in New York City, the peripatetic couple travelled widely visiting San Francisco in 1941, McBey commenting, 'I have seen nothing like it in all my wanderings.'²¹ In 1943, this son of a humble Aberdonian farmer, received the ultimate accolade, with a major retrospective at the Smithsonian. The end of the war finally allowed them to return to Europe – for the first time flying on a commercial airliner, an event that marked the end of the era of the wandering artist and the beginning of an age of mass transit and mass communication.

Epilogue

As this overview, and the papers in this journal will emphasise, the contribution of Scottish artists to the visual arts in North America was considerable, both indirectly and directly. The timing of the symposium on which these papers are based (early February 2020), was prior to the cataclysmic events that have engulfed us all. It has opened a new perspective. Art museums are re-writing the narratives of the role artists played in engagement with the 'foreign' or the 'exotic' and the 'colonialism' they represented (perhaps inadvertently). Many of those artists referenced in this paper were part of a systemic issue. Since McBey and his wife flew back to Europe the art world has become internationalised and, hopefully, a force for good in a fractured world. As Scottish art historians, or art historians of Scottish art, we have the Enlightenment in common and David Hume's words perhaps resonate more than ever: '*Truth springs from argument among friends*'.

¹ For example, J. Buchanan, *Capital of the Mind, How Edinburgh Changed the World*, London 2003.

² T. Bolton, 'John Watson of Perth Amboy, Artist', *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society*, LXXII, 1954, pp.233-47.

³ R.H. Saunders, *John Smibert: Colonial America's first portrait painter*, New York 1995.

⁴ G.M. Goodfellow, 'Cosmo Alexander in America', *Art Quarterly*, 26, New York, 1963, pp.309-22.

⁵ C.L. Sellers, *Benjamin Franklin in Portraiture*, New Haven 1962, pp.328-40.

⁶ H.M. Lydenberg, (ed.). *Archibald Robertson, His Diaries and Sketches in America, 1762-1780*, New York 1930.

⁷ P. Campbell, *Travels in the Interior Inhabited Parts of North America in the Years 1791 and 1792* (ed. H.H. Langton), Toronto 1937.

⁸ G. Finlay, *George Heriot: Postmaster-Painter of the Canadas*, Toronto 1983.

⁹ A.W. Wells, 'Artists in the Life of Charleston from Restoration to Reconstruction', *Philadelphia American Philosophical Society Transactions*, 1949, part 2.

¹⁰ J.E. Stillwell, 'Archibald Robertson, Miniaturist, 1765-1835', *New York Historical Society Quarterly Bulletin*, XIII, 1929, pp.1-33.

¹¹ C. Hunter, *The Life and Letters of Alexander Wilson*, Philadelphia 1983.

¹² R. Nicholson, "Lochaber No More: Landscape, Emigration and the Scottish Artist 1849-95", *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, Vol. 19, issue 1, 2008.

¹³ M. Mann, *The American Art Union*, Jupiter, Florida 1987.

¹⁴ J. Soden, 'Robert Gavin', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford 2004.

¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Currier_and_Ives

¹⁶ W.D. Peat, *Portraits of the Governors of Indiana 1800-1878*, Indianapolis 1978.

¹⁷ C.M. Kurtz, 'The Glasgow School', *Academy Notes*, Vol. 1, no. 6 and 7, Buffalo, New York 1905.

¹⁸ J. Kempplay, *The Paintings of John Duncan, A Scottish Symbolist*, San Francisco 1994, pp.31-39.

¹⁹ W.N. Smith, 'Sir David Young Cameron', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford 2004.

²⁰ R. Ingleby, *Muirhead Bone* (exhibition catalogue), London and Edinburgh 1990.

²¹ J. Melville, *The Art and Lives of James and Maguerite McBey*, Aberdeen 2001, pp.49-58.