From the Chair

As the economic crisis really starts to bite, the arts are inevitably seen as an easy target. Within museums and art galleries, the whole future of the profession is currently uncertain with the new UK government’s recent announcement that the Museums, Libraries & Archives Council is to be abolished, while in Scotland the Museums Think Tank chaired by the Culture Minister is taking a very critical look at the role of Museums Galleries Scotland and the way that the nationals and other museums in Scotland are funded. Meanwhile almost every museum and gallery is having to make cuts, while at the same time trying to demonstrate more clearly than ever before the value of what they do to the widest possible audience. In this issue we cover just some of the many exciting exhibitions coming up around Scotland in the next few months – can I encourage you to show your support by visiting as many of them as you can?

Within the SSAH, I am sorry to report that two of our committee members have recently had to stand down due to other commitments. Nicola Ireland from the Royal Scottish Academy and Daniel Herrmann from the National Galleries of Scotland have both contributed hugely to the work of the society over the past few years and I am very grateful to both of them for all their hard work. Daniel has recently moved to a new position at the Whitechapel Gallery in London and we wish him well in that.

I am delighted to report that we have recently co-opted three new committee members to join us: Peter Burman (independent heritage consultant), Arielle Juler (National Galleries of Scotland) and Helen Scott (Wilhelmina Barns-Graham Trust). We will tell you more about them all next time!

Matthew Jarron

SSAH Grants

Despite the recession, applications to our grants scheme have actually tailed off notably of late, to the extent that we have not awarded any grants so far this year. Don’t forget that the society continues to offer research support grants from £50 to £300 to assist with research costs and travel expenses. Applicants must be working at a postgraduate level or above and should either be resident in Scotland or doing research that necessitates travel to Scotland. The society will accept applications quarterly throughout the year, our aim being to handle submissions within three months of receipt. Recipients will be asked to write a report for the newsletter, explaining how the grant was used. Grants must be claimed within three months of the award being made. To apply please send:

- a cover letter
- current curriculum vitae
- a brief project description (300-500 words) specifying how the grant will be used and how it relates to a broader research agenda
- a budget
- the name and e-mail address of one reference

Address applications to:
SSAH Research Support Grants
c/o Shannon Hunter Hurtado
1/63 Merchiston Crescent
Edinburgh EH10 5AQ

or by email to sculpthurtado@yahoo.co.uk
SSAH Events

Guided Tour of the Art Galleries of The McManus: Dundee’s Art Gallery & Museum, Saturday 5 June 2010.
Review by Ellen Graves

First stop on this memorable tour of the acclaimed, newly remodelled and refurbished McManus, led by Anna Robertson, Senior Curator of Art, was the exuberant vertical light sculpture Waldella, Dundee (2009) by David Batchelor, specially commissioned for the striking new stairwell (installed to give access to the existing Victoria Gallery and the newly added display atriums on the upper floor). This work gives the word ‘recycling’ a whole new spin and was an indication of the sheer enjoyment of what was to come!

We then proceeded to the Victoria Gallery – the McManus’s main, spectacular, purpose-built, top-lit Gallery, still much as it first appeared in 1889, added onto the original building of 1867-73. As before, this features 18th - early 20th century British art, with the emphasis on Scottish artists. For this viewer, one of the most interesting aspects of this Gallery has always been the slight inward curve of the long side walls towards the top, designed to make sure visitors would be able to read top-hung paintings clearly. Anna illustrated how effective this could be by her discussion of the rehanging of Noel Paton’s Beati Mundo Corde in the upper, incurving part of one of the long walls. Anna’s account of the technical problems involved in this hang, and their eventual solutions, brought the whole process of curating vividly to life – as indeed, she did throughout our tour.

Next, on to the 20th Century Gallery, which at the time of our visit was hosting Consider the Lilies: Scottish Painting 1910-1980, the exhibition of highlights from the permanent collection which toured Britain during the closure of the McManus, co-curated by staff from the McManus and the National Galleries of Scotland. Then on to the Here and Now gallery, which showcases some superb recent works, acquired through participation in the National Collecting Scheme for Scotland. The sheer, sustained quality of curatorial choices made was impressive here.

Then through the Long Gallery with its display of studio ceramics – one of the strongest such collections in the UK – and into the Dundee and the World gallery, in the museum’s beautiful original Albert Hall, where Dundee’s international collections are displayed, mixing Old Master and later paintings with artefacts of splendid quality from the museum’s ethnographic collections.

The emphasis throughout this Gallery is on how different streams feeding into Dundee’s life and culture from the wider world beyond (under the headings Military, Missionary, Merchant and Mystery) also fed into the existence of the wonderful collection we view today. The ‘military’ stream is finally epitomised by a striking 1918 Ellis Ranken painting, Pipe Practice, hung just before the exit from this gallery. Cleverly, this modern, masculine version of the Three Graces, that favourite ‘Old Masters’ theme, in the form of three pipers from a Scots regiment of WWI, plays the visitor out the door and down the impressive main staircase of the Gallery back to the ground floor!

The thought-provoking focus on how galleries come to be, the issues of patronage, power, culture, that lie behind such collections, is reinforced by the small but illuminating display on the ground floor, ‘What is a Museum?’. This display continues the emphasis on linking different types of collections together, focussing on both the upper-storey ‘art’ element of the McManus collections, and the excellent ground-floor historical Galleries (not
covered in our tour – but well worth visiting, from the huge dugout log-boat to the famous Tay Whale). This emphasis embodies what seems to me to be an overarching aim in the new McManus – to make this beloved institution truly relevant to the lives of visitors, both from Dundee and beyond, while fully acknowledging the sheer beauty and quality of the works displayed.

The intelligence, legibility and appropriateness of the interpretation material for the various paintings and items displayed throughout the galleries contribute greatly to the overall effectiveness and near-miraculous sense of coherence achieved for what could at first appear a very disparate collection. The new McManus stands as a shining example of how curatorial vision can successfully overcome the divisions often needlessly erected between art history, visual culture studies and ethnography, yet without abandoning essential expertise.

As a fitting end to our tour – for which we could not thank Anna enough – several of us had excellent hot drinks and baked treats in the all-new Café, which has become a very popular gathering place for Dundonians of all ages; on sunny days the outdoor terrace is filled with customers!

I won’t attempt in this brief review to give further highlights – though I could go on for pages! I strongly recommend you all to explore the excellent website, starting at www.mcmanus.co.uk/content/galleries-displays/galleries for a virtual tour. Better still, see the real thing for yourself – on the lower-right of this webpage are times and dates for free guided tours, talks and other events. Enjoy!

Notices

Call for Papers: “wildering phantasies”: an inter-disciplinary conference devoted to the Pre-Raphaelites, University of Dundee, 7-10 July, 2011

This interdisciplinary conference will bring together researchers from a range of backgrounds to explore the work of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) and assess their legacy across several media. The conference will be held in association with the Scottish Word and Image Group, and therefore papers related to the interface between word and image in the work of the PRB are particularly welcome. Also of interest are papers exploring the following areas:

- the work of tangential or marginal members of the PRB
- the PRB in Scotland
- the PRB and Victorian Medievalism
- influences on the PRB
- the influence of the PRB on painting, literature and crafts
- the PRB’s relationship to parallel movements in art and literature
- the PRB as radicals and/or traditionalists
- the PRB and music
- the PRB and colour
- the PRB and design
- the PRB and publishing
- films about or influenced by the PRB
- the PRB in popular culture

Please note: there will be a dedicated panel for postgraduate students. The conference will also include an exhibition of Pre-Raphaelite paintings and drawings taken from the University of Dundee’s own collections and loans from other institutions. In addition, there will be a special reception at the McManus with the opportunity to see DG Rossetti’s Dante’s Dream, arguably finest Pre-Raphaelite painting in Scotland, along with works by Millais, Noel Paton and others. Delegates will also be able to visit other related gems, including the recently restored St. Salvador’s Church in Dundee designed by George Fredrick Bodley. The confirmed plenary speaker at the conference is Professor Leonee Ormond (King’s College, London).

Please submit abstracts of 300 words for 20 minute papers with a brief biography or cv to Dr Jo George j.a.george@dundee.ac.uk and Dr Brian Hoyle b.p.hoyle@dundee.ac.uk no later than 15 January, 2011.
**The Wallace Collection: Seminars in the History of Collecting 2011**

This seminar series has been established as part of the Wallace Collection’s commitment to the research and study of the history of collections and collecting, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Paris and London. In 2011, the Wallace Collection aims to organise a series of 10 seminars, and is keen to encourage contributions covering all aspects of the history of collecting, including:

* Formation and dispersal of collections  
* Dealers, auctioneers and the art market  
* Collectors  
* Museums  
* Inventory work  
* Research resources

The seminars act as a forum for the presentation and discussion of new research into the history of collecting. Seminars are open to curators, academics, historians, archivists and all those with an interest in the subject. Papers are generally 45-60 minutes long and all the seminars take place at the Wallace Collection in London. If interested, please send a brief text (500-750 words) as a proposal by 17 September.

For more information and to submit a proposal, please contact:  
Leda Cosentino, Peter Marino Research Assistant  
The Wallace Collection, Manchester Square  
London W1U 3BN  
Tel: 0207 563 9547  
E-mail: leda.cosentino@wallacecollection.org

**New Illustrated Booklet on Andrew Scott Rankin**

An attractive new 24-page colour booklet written by David M Robertson, and published by the Friends of Perth and Kinross Council Archive, describes the life and works of Andrew Scott Rankin, painter, book illustrator and postcard artist.

Born in Aberfeldy in 1868, the son of a banker, Scott Rankin trained at the Trustees' School of Art in Edinburgh in the late 1880s. He first exhibited at the Royal Scottish Academy in 1891, and quickly established himself as an artist in the Capital City. For three years from 1892 he was contributing a monthly caricature to *The Idler*, a leading literary magazine of the time. He went on to illustrate many books and magazines for children. He is perhaps best known in Perthshire for illustrating *The Highland Tay* written by Rev Hugh Macmillan and published in 1901.

After marrying in Edinburgh in 1894, he returned to live most of the rest of his life in north Perthshire. He and his wife lived initially in his native Aberfeldy, but had moved to Strathay by 1900. In 1915, Scott Rankin moved to Pitlochry where he lived until his death in 1942. He became an Elder of the Kirk, President of the local branch of An Comunn Gaidhealach and Convenor of the Mod, and was clearly a well-known figure in Atholl society in the inter-war years.

Scott Rankin’s work as a painter was very much focused on Scottish themes – highland landscapes, Scottish wildlife, crofting scenes, cottage interiors, highland cattle and Scottish breeds of dog. David Robertson’s book is generously illustrated with examples from Scott Rankin’s wide range of subjects, including works from the collection of the Perth Museum & Art Gallery.

Copies of the booklet can be purchased for £5.00 from Local Studies at the AK Bell Library in Perth; or by contacting the author by telephone on 01529 497354 or by e-mail to dmrbraceby@hotmail.com

**Acquisitions**

**Jan Lievens’ portrait of Robert Kerr, 1st Earl of Ancram, acquired by the Scottish National Portrait Gallery**  
*by David Taylor, Senior Curator*

A recent addition to the Scottish National Portrait Gallery’s collection is Jan Lievens’ 1654 portrait of Robert Kerr, 1st Earl of Ancram (1578-1654), which was previously on long-term loan from a private
collection and has now been accepted by HM Government in lieu of inheritance tax and allocated to the gallery. This superb depiction of an old man in the last months of his life, which concentrates on the sitter’s gaunt face and his pensive stare, understandably elicits a sympathetic response from the viewer. Interestingly, the picture is devoid of the posturing swagger one would expect in a seventeenth-century portrait of an aristocrat, and Ancram’s simple and monochromatic costume makes him appear more like a clergyman than as one of Charles I’s favoured courtiers.

Jan Lievens, Robert Kerr, 1st Earl of Ancram, 1578-1654, Royalist, oil on canvas 1654 (copyright National Galleries of Scotland)

Ancram began his royal service in 1604, as a groom to Henry, Prince of Wales and Princess Elizabeth, before being appointed a Gentleman of the Bedchamber to their younger brother, Prince Charles. He accompanied Charles to Madrid in 1623, on his unsuccessful mission to marry the Spanish king’s sister, and afterwards he was awarded pensions by both the prince and King James VI and I. After Charles’s accession to the throne Ancram was appointed to serve on the Scottish Privy Council and was made Keeper of the Privy Purse, and he was created an earl at the king’s Scottish coronation in 1633. He was too old to fight with the king in the civil war, and by the time of the king’s execution he was suffering from a “long and evident infirmity” and was heavily in debt. Ancram left London in 1650 to avoid the Commonwealth regime, deciding to live in the Netherlands, where he would die four years later, in Amsterdam.

As well as being an influential courtier, Ancram had well-known cultural interests, primarily in poetry (his own work was influenced by his friends John Donne and William Drummond of Hawthornden) and paintings. When Ancram was in The Hague in 1629, serving as Charles I’s emissary, he famously sent the king two pictures by Rembrandt (presents from Frederick Henry of Orange) which were the first works by that artist to be seen in Great Britain. It was at the same time that Ancram met Jan Lievens, and when he returned to London he presented the king with two of the young artist’s paintings, *Capuchin Monk Praying* and *Young Man Studying by a Peat Fire*. Lievens was a close friend of Rembrandt’s and the two may have shared a studio in Leiden when they were younger, although Lievens became influenced by Rubens and Van Dyck when he worked in Antwerp before moving to The Hague and settling in Amsterdam.

Although Lievens painted large-scale history paintings for public commissions, he was chiefly known as a portraitist, and twenty five years after he and Ancram first met he was commissioned to paint the self-exiled Scot’s portrait. Ancram had sat to various artists throughout his life (including John Eycke, Abraham van Blijenberch, Hercules Sanders and Paul van Somer), but this particular commission must have reminded him of the glories of his former life, an attitude the artist seems to capture in the sitter’s searching and reflective gaze. When Ancram prepared to have the completed portrait collected from Amsterdam to be taken to Scotland, he wrote to his son “I grow very old” and that the picture could be retrieved “out of the hands of Mr Lievens, the Duke of Brandenburg’s painter. He lives at the sign of the fleur-de-luce and you may be sure of a good one. He is the better because he has so high conceit of himself that he thinks there is none to be compared with him in all of Germany, Holland, nor the rest of the seventeen provinces”.

The fact that Ancram wanted his portrait by Lievens to be displayed and viewed in Scotland makes it all the more fitting that it has now entered the national portrait collection. The portrait will be included in the exhibition *Church and State* when the Scottish National Portrait Gallery re-opens in 2011.
Features

“Painting a world beyond human ken” - The Reverend Colin Campbell’s Theban Tomb Facsimiles in The Hunterian Museum, Glasgow
By Angela McDonald (DACE, University of Glasgow) and Sally-Anne Coupar (Curator of Archaeology, Hunterian Museum).

These paintings made at the turn of the twentieth century in Egypt have recently been ‘rediscovered’ thanks to collaboration between Angela and Sally-Anne. Since the paintings proved extremely popular with a variety of audiences and offered a wonderful opportunity for creative teaching use, steps were taken to conserve them and to uncover the history behind their creation.

In 1904, at the age of 56, the Reverend Colin Campbell was forced by ill health to retire from his position as minister of St Mary’s Parish Church in Dundee. He had enjoyed an illustrious career. From its beginnings at Glasgow University (1874, MA Hons; 1877, BD; 1892, DD), he applied himself assiduously to his learning, winning around 35 prizes in numerous subjects including Latin, mathematics, philosophy, and English literature. He was still studying when he took on his first parish, St Mary’s in Partick (1878-82), and when he moved to Dundee from there, but he found time to preach for Queen Victoria at Balmoral from 1883-1900, evidently becoming a favourite of hers. It was only after his retirement, however, that he turned his keen intellect towards what had been until then merely a hobby of his - Egyptology.

His first visit to Egypt seems to have been in 1905. Coming across a loose block in the Temple of Luxor inscribed with the distinctive, distorted face of the heretic king Akhenaten, he immediately recognised the significance of his find, and published it in The Proceedings for the Society of Biblical
Archaeology the following year. Thus began his passion not only to discover Egypt for himself, but to share his findings.

He returned to Egypt for eight successive winters, initially probably for his health but latterly to soak up the art and atmosphere of the past. He published four books detailing the art and texts of six tombs as well making the first photographic record of the complex birth scenes in Luxor Temple. At the same time, perhaps for his own pleasure, he painted facsimiles of 13 scenes from tombs on the West Bank, particularly favouring that of the steward Menna. Perhaps he sympathised with the damage inflicted on Menna’s eyes by some ancient vandal — in his publication of the tomb, he notes the pain of ‘watching without being able to see’.

In 1925, he wrote to Glasgow University to offer up his small collection of Egyptian antiquities. He describes it as consisting of several ostraca (inscribed potsherds) that he had amassed, as well as fragments of the Book of the Dead, and ‘a few genuine antikas’. More hesitantly, he added his facsimile paintings to the bequest. University records note that his gift was accepted with ‘high appreciation’, and a display was mounted in the Hunterian to show his paintings to the public. It was, however, only temporary and for many decades the paintings’ large size confined them to the museum’s storerooms.

This scene from Menna’s tomb is the largest in the collection at 425 x 172cm
(Hunterian Museum, D.1925.42/1)

About two years ago, while on a foraging mission through the Hunterian’s collection to identify items that might inspire students, we touched upon the paintings and wondered if we might find a way to use them somehow. We started with a dramatic unrolling (not of a mummy for a change!) of three paintings during a summer lecture in 2009. It was like whisking our audience off to Luxor to see the original walls; if not better, in fact. The life-size, full-colour paintings actually preserve details that have now been lost to damage.

We were quite overwhelmed by the enthusiastic response. We had hoped the paintings would inspire interest in Egyptology, which they certainly have. But they also sparked enthusiasm for the quiet artist behind them. After the lecture, we spent almost as much time discussing how Rev. Campbell managed his task as we did on the scenes themselves. In the heat and the dust of an enclosed tomb space, painting is no mean feat. We also noted the paintings’ fragile state and made conservation a priority.

Detail from the same painting
(Hunterian Museum, D.1925.42/I)

Over the last year, an extensive program was undertaken to clean the paintings and render them hardier for display. Funding was sought and awarded by Museums Galleries Scotland between the period July 2009 and December 2010. There were three phases of conservation, partly dictated by the funding restrictions and partly by design to make the project manageable for the conservator. Of the thirteen paintings, four are very large; the largest measuring 20 feet long by 5’8” wide [6.1m x 1.77m] and the others decreasing in size to the smallest which is a not inconsiderable 3’7” x 4’5” [1.1m x 1.3m]. They are made of paper which has been glued on to a
cotton fabric background. In the case of the very large paintings, the paper panels have been applied in a patchwork pattern to provide the necessary surface area.

We know that the paintings went on display in 1925 on their arrival in the Hunterian. One of the main causes of damage to paintings is light which causes the colours to fade and the paper to become dry and very brittle. Thankfully, the colours of the paintings are still vibrant. Anecdotal evidence from the museum reveals that when the paintings were taken off display in the main museum hall, they were then pinned up on the walls of the museum’s back offices and corridors. Conservators and researchers have previously expressed surprise at the brightness of the colours on the casket of Lady Shepenhor, the Hunterian’s mummy, so in this respect the relative dimness of the Hunterian’s display hall, and gloomy “behind the scenes” spaces in the Gilbert Scott building at the University of Glasgow, has been an advantage.

![Scene from Menna’s tomb after cleaning and affixing of tabs for suspension](Hunterian Museum, D.1925.42/13)

While on display the paintings were clearly pinned directly on to the wall in the museum and the paper became very degraded and weak on some of them and on parts of the others. In addition, dust and dirt became ingrained over their period of exposure and although conservation cleaning has helped, not all of this can be removed. As part of the conservation process, the paintings were relaxed with humidity then tension dried to remove creasing and wrinkles. Repairs were carried out to the tears and weaknesses in the paper using Japanese paper and wheat starch paste. This process helped to heal old holes made by the paintings being pinned up.

Hanging tabs of linen were then attached at intervals of about 40cm to the back of the top edge of each of the works using adhesive. The tabs are attached to enable the works to be displayed: they can either be pinned through, or held by people so that the paintings can be used for teaching without being touched. Rods can also be inserted through the loops to hang the works up. This eliminates excessive handling but is flexible enough to allow the paintings to be portable, as they are now stored rolled up, and therefore can be used for teaching in various locations.

Now that the paintings are conserved, other uses, such as displays, are possible, and we anticipate increased use for teaching and research in the coming year. The paintings are so much more than a teaching tool, though, although they perform that task marvellously. They stand as a reminder of what passion and determination can accomplish - and not just in the energetic blush of youth. Ironically, the author of one of Campbell’s ostraca, a little hymn in praise of ancient Thebes, makes claim to just this kind of industry: ‘I will make for myself a productive stay on earth until the last days of my lifetime!’

**Sketching the Universe: the Artistic Influence of D’Arcy Thompson**

*By Matthew Jarron, Curator of Museum Services, University of Dundee*

“I know that in the study of material things number, order and position are the threefold clue to exact knowledge; and that these three, in the mathematician’s hands, furnish the ‘first outlines for a sketch of the Universe’” – D’Arcy Thompson, *On Growth and Form*

What do Henry Moore, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Jackson Pollock, Salvador Dali, Richard Hamilton, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe have in common? As well as being among the most celebrated artists and designers of the 20th century, they were all fans of a professor of natural history in Dundee called D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson, whose 150th anniversary is being celebrated internationally this year.

Born in Edinburgh in 1860, D’Arcy came to Dundee in January 1885 to take up the first Chair of Biology (later Natural History) at the newly formed University College, Dundee (now the University of..."
During the 32 and a half years that he would remain in Dundee, he built up an impressive museum of zoology specimens from around the world to use in teaching, and established a worldwide reputation through his work for the International Fur Seal Commission, the Scottish Fishery Board and the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea.

David S Ewart, Professor D’Arcy Thompson, 1938/1950
(University of Dundee Museum Services)

D’Arcy is best remembered today, however, for his ground-breaking book *On Growth and Form*, which pioneered the science of mathematical biology. Although it was not published until 1917, his final year in Dundee, he had been thinking about it for many years. In 1889 he wrote to one of his students: “I have taken to Mathematics, and believe I have discovered some unsuspected wonders in regard to the Spirals of the Foraminifera!” He was soon passing on such interests in his classes – another student later recalled: “I shall never forget his description of the triradiate spicules of the calcareous sponges with their rays forming coequal angles of 120 degrees, because for the first time I became aware that mathematics may be applied to give precision to biological observations and thus to open up a fascinating vista of speculations.”

D’Arcy became increasingly convinced that the laws of mathematics could be used to explain the growth and form of living organisms, but when he first shared these ideas publicly the result was discouraging. “I confess I am not very much attracted by the line of work,” he was told by a former colleague at Cambridge, “and doubt if it’s likely to be very fruitful”. D’Arcy’s assistant Doris Mackinnon later claimed that “he had no thought of writing what was in his mind, and that he would walk up and down the Laboratory thinking his thoughts aloud and discussing his ‘heresies’ with her.” It would be 1908 before he first published on the topic – a paper in *Nature* on ‘The Shape of Eggs and the Causes which determine them’. In 1911 he raised the subject at the British Association meeting in Portsmouth, claiming that “the form of an object is a ‘diagram of Forces’;— in this sense, at least, that from it we can judge or deduce the forces that are acting or have acted upon it”.

Finally in 1915 his various ideas were assembled into book form and he sent it to Cambridge University Press under the title *On Growth and Form*. “I have tried to make it as little contentious as possible,” he wrote. “That is to say where it undoubtedly runs counter to conventional Darwinism, I do not rub this in, but leave the reader to draw the obvious moral for himself.” The “obvious moral” was that Darwin was wrong in seeing evolution purely as a slow, gradual process – D’Arcy’s Theory of Transformations, the most famous and radical chapter in the book, proposed that sudden changes could also occur, based on mathematical laws, to transform one species into another. The diagrams that he used to demonstrate this astonished readers at the time and continue to do so today.

Diagram from *On Growth & Form* showing the mathematical relationship between *Argyropelecus olfersi* and *Sternoptyx diaphana*
(Cambridge University Press)
A combination of wartime shortages and D’Arcy’s insistence on numerous last-minute changes meant that the book was not published until 1917, but it made an immediate impact within the scientific community. Said the review in *Nature*, “This book, at once substantial and stately, is to the credit of British Science and an achievement for its distinguished author to be proud of. It is like one of Darwin’s books, well-considered, patiently wrought-out, learned and cautious – a disclosure of the scientific spirit.” Since then even more generous compliments have been paid to D’Arcy’s great work – Stephen Jay Gould described it as “the greatest work of prose in twentieth-century science”. P D Medawar claimed it was “beyond comparison the finest work of literature in all the annals of science that have been recorded in the English tongue.”

When the book sold out in 1923 the publishers wanted a reprint, but D’Arcy prevaricated. He felt that further alterations were needed, but it would be another twenty years before he completed them. By the time that the much-expanded second edition appeared in 1942, the work was already proving influential in the art world. In the early 1930s the sculptor Henry Moore discovered the book, which clearly informed the series of *Transformation Drawings* he produced around 1932. Moore was soon discussing the book with the influential art critic Herbert Read, who introduced it to artists such as Paul Nash and Naum Gabo. D’Arcy’s work soon found its way around other members of the St Ives circle of artists, including Wilhelmina Barns-Graham who had met D’Arcy in her native St Andrews. For these pioneers of abstract art in Britain, D’Arcy’s work shared their concern with revealing hidden structures of life. The Hungarian artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy was staying in Britain at the time and enthusiastically took up D’Arcy’s ideas, later writing of their significance in his posthumously-published book *Vision in Motion*. It may have been through Moholy-Nagy that other Bauhaus figures such as Mies van der Rohe also discovered *On Growth and Form*.

The second edition of the book was enthusiastically taken up in the 1940s by a group of students at the Slade School of Art, including Nigel Henderson, Richard Hamilton, Eduardo Paolozzi and the Dundee-born William Turnbull. In 1951, Hamilton staged an influential exhibition called *Growth and Form* at Herbert Read’s new Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), which was opened by Le Corbusier. In a recent interview in *Tate Magazine*, Hamilton described the impact of D’Arcy’s book:

“It opened my eyes to the idea that the world is as it is because it must follow certain mathematical principles. He describes phenomena, like the spirals on a cauliflower, so that you see it has to be this way, because time and the activity of growth are related. It is a beautiful notion; it hangs in the mind as an explanation of life itself. Organisms start as a single cell, and then this cell splits into two, then two into four and then 8 and 16 and 32 and so on… That this procedure should create something as complex as a human being is magical. That it should produce this extraordinary object at the end is one of the mysteries of existence. Thompson describes it in that way.”

Along with another D’Arcy enthusiast, Victor Pasmore, Hamilton would go on to become an important teacher at the Department of Fine Art in King’s College, Newcastle. The new Basic Design Course they introduced proved to be hugely influential on art schools around the country, and it included *On Growth and Form*-based exercises. Through teaching such as Hamilton’s and exhibitions at the ICA, the work that D’Arcy wrote in Dundee in
the 1910s became fully integrated into British contemporary art years after his death. Since then many other artists have drawn on D’Arcy’s work, including Jackson Pollock, Andy Goldsworthy, Susan Derges, Peter Randall-Page and Will Maclean. In the world of architecture too, On Growth and Form has inspired creators and practitioners such as Sir Edmund Happold, Cecil Balmond and Lars Spuybroek.

What would D’Arcy himself have made of this artistic interest in his work? We know that he had a great love of art with a particular interest in the emblematic role of animals in the art of the Ancient World. He was an art collector himself and knew many artists personally, from Sam Bough, D O Hill and Joseph Noel Paton to John Duncan, Keith Henderson and Laura Knight. But his tastes were more traditional than contemporary, and in 1946 he wrote to Herbert Read: “I envy you your knowledge of, and your sympathy for, a number of modern men whom I have had too little patience to study and understand… Ben Nicholson [is] within my ken. But I have got along without Picasso, easily enough”!

Although D’Arcy’s original museum was demolished in the 1950s, what remains of his collections are now re-housed in the new D’Arcy Thompson Zoology Museum at the University of Dundee, and continue to be a source of inspiration for artists, particularly students at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design. As one of numerous anniversary activities that are being staged this year, the University’s Museum Services are curating an exhibition of artistic responses to D’Arcy, which will include contemporary works alongside key works by Moore, Hamilton, Paolozzi and others on loan from the National Galleries of Scotland. The exhibition opens on the evening of 2nd September following a free public lecture by leading art historian Professor Martin Kemp (University of Oxford) entitled ‘Splashing Around: Themes from D’Arcy Thompson in the Visual Arts’. This will be followed on 4th September by a one-day academic conference exploring the contemporary legacy of D’Arcy’s work in art, biology, mathematics, ecology, anthropology and geography. There will also be events held at the University of St Andrews, where D’Arcy spent the final 31 years of his career. For further information, visit www.darcythompson.org or email museum@dundee.ac.uk
Exhibitions

Celebrate: 125 Years of Aberdeen Art Gallery
By Alison Fraser (Lead Curator, Collections Access)

Aberdeen Art Gallery opened on 7 July 1885. In the preceding years several successful industrial exhibitions had been created and held locally in the Town House. A number of travelling exhibitions were also brought to the city, including the nationwide tour of gifts presented to the Prince of Wales on his visit to India in 1875. The success of these ventures, coupled with the Victorian spirit of collecting and desire to create public access to the objects acquired, resulted in the determination to create a public venue – Aberdeen Art Gallery and Industrial Museum.

Three men were particularly instrumental in realising this goal. John Forbes White, art collector and connoisseur, his protégé, the artist George Reid and Alexander Macdonald, a granite merchant and collector of art. White operated a flour milling business in both Aberdeen and Dundee and was thus sensitive to the fact that Dundee already had a public gallery. Indeed he alluded to this at the opening of the Aberdeen Gallery, saying that “we had been completely discredited…by Dundee…” (The Aberdeen Journal, 8 July 1885).

With the support of the Town Council, an Art Gallery and Industrial Committee of Management was formed with the aim of providing a permanent exhibition space in the city. At the first committee meeting on 3 February 1882 methods of raising funds by subscription were agreed. An Aberdeen architect, Alexander Marshall Mackenzie, was appointed to design the building which would be constructed using granite, in keeping with the other civic buildings in the city. Alexander Macdonald died in 1884 and bequeathed not only his collection of paintings and sculpture, but also funds to build a gallery in which to house it. At the opening ceremony, Lord Provost Matthews stated that the gallery was “not to be a mere collection of antiquated articles of vertu, but was to be a living and active factor in the education of the mechanical classes…” (The Aberdeen Journal, 8 July 1885). As well as exhibitions of art (one of the first was of drawings by JMW Turner) and industry, the new gallery became home to Aberdeen Artists’ Society’s exhibitions of contemporary art which continue to the present time.

An exhibition has been organised to celebrate the 125th anniversary and tell the story of how the objects on display came into the collections. It will be held in Aberdeen Art Gallery from 4 September to 13 November, 2010. The first room concentrates on the early years of the gallery. Notable is the recently rediscovered painting by the Sienequattrocento artist Lorenzo di Pietro (1410-1480), known as Vecchietta, which has recently returned to Aberdeen after inclusion in the exhibition, Da Jacopo della Quercia a Donatello, in Siena. An original inscription on the reverse indicates that the owner decided to bequeath the painting while the Art Gallery was under construction, “to be given at my death or my sister’s to the new picture Gallery at Aberdeen, Georgina E Forbes - Florence October 1883.” The donor spent part of the year in Florence where she bought the work and it was catalogued as by an unknown artist until 2009 when it was correctly attributed to Vecchietta (see Burlington Magazine CLII, March 2010).

The 1921 bequest of the advocate, Alexander Webster, is represented by a watercolour by Sherrin (1819-1896), A Bird’s Nest and Apple Blossom and a Meissen figure group, The Gardeners, dating to the mid eighteenth century. The exhibition also encompasses items from the archaeological, maritime, scientific and industrial collections. An early medieval coin hoard, stored in a copper-alloy cooking pot, was discovered in Upperkirkgate in 1886, a few months after the gallery opened and became one of the earliest additions to the collections. A half model of the Salamis cargo and passenger steamer of 1899 illustrates Aberdeen’s trade and sea-faring history.

When the Art Gallery was extended in 1905 it was decided that a central court in classical style should be incorporated, again designed by the original architect, Alexander Marshall Mackenzie. Samples of granite, donated in 1901 by the Aberdeen Granite Association (founded in 1887), will be on display and may be compared to the granite columns with gilded capitals, features of the centre court, twelve of which were also gifted by the Association. The classical theme of the centre court was reinforced by the installation of plaster casts,
including the Venus de Milo, which was donated by the architect of the gallery. Although the centre court was given over to sculptures of classical origin, over 200 casts in various styles were funded by public subscription. A replica of a Pictish stone, the 9th-century Christian cross-slab from St Fergus Chapel, Dyce (the original is still in situ) is shown in the exhibition.

In 1925 a further extension to the building incorporated the war memorial and the Cowdray Hall, a performance area. Redevelopment of the rooms which housed the Alexander Macdonald collection allowed more of the growing permanent collections to be displayed. The same year saw an exhibition of Venetian glass and Oriental wares collected by James Cromar Watt (1862-1940), the Aberdeen architect, jeweller and enameller, whilst travelling in Europe and Asia. These items were loaned to the Art Gallery until they entered the collections permanently in 1941 after Cromar Watt’s death. The private collection of Sir James Murray, Chairman of the Art Gallery Committee from 1901 to 1928, was also shown and he was active in acquiring paintings for the gallery when he sold his collection in 1927, including *Going to School* (1882) by Bastien-Lepage, who was a particular influence on the Glasgow Boys and Monet’s *La Falaise à Fécamp* (1881), both of which are displayed in the 125th anniversary exhibition.

This exhibition aims to tell the story of how artworks and objects were collected, from the early days of private donations to later years of grant funding. One of the original benefactors, Alexander Macdonald, bequeathed funds for acquisitions, stipulating that works bought should be no more than 25 years old, which has ensured more than a century of contemporary collecting. In the late 1930s, The Contemporary Art Society presented examples of studio pottery and The Art Fund awarded the first of many grants to support purchases. In the 1980s the collection of early Aberdeen silver was developed with grant aid from organisations such as the National Fund for Acquisitions and the Incorporation of the Goldsmiths of the City of Edinburgh. Often, when match funding has been required, the Friends of Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums (formed in 1975) have stepped in to make up the balance. Participation in the National Collecting Scheme for Scotland has also encouraged contemporary collecting. Installations such as *Sarah Walking* (2003) by Julian Opie and *Head and Shoulders (with Conditioner)* (2003) by Jim Lambie along with various examples of craft acquired through this scheme are on display.

The exhibition shows how a civic collection has developed over the last 125 years. Stemming from the enthusiasm of local benefactors, the collection is now internationally acclaimed, with items frequently requested for loan and recognised in its entirety as a Collection of National Significance. Generous funding through the Recognition Scheme, managed by Museums Galleries Scotland, has allowed for the purchase of new display cases which will initially be used for the 125th anniversary exhibition.

**Celebrate** 125 years of Aberdeen Art Gallery runs from 4 September to 13 November 2010. It is accompanied by publication of a new book, *Aberdeen Art Gallery - A History* by Jennifer Melville, Lead Curator (Fine and Decorative Art).

Aberdeen Art Gallery is open 10am-5pm Tuesday to Saturday and 2-5pm Sundays, admission free. For further information please contact Alison Fraser on 01224 523676.

Vecchietta, *Madonna of Humility*, c.1450 (copyright Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums Collections)
2010 marks the 100th anniversary of the Scottish artist William McTaggart’s death and Fife Council has also designated this the Year of Celebrating Fife. We are celebrating both events with a major exhibition, McTaggart’s Children, at Kirkcaldy Museum & Art Gallery until 3rd October 2010.

We are fortunate to have one of the best collections of McTaggart’s work in the country with 31 original paintings. These range from an early figure painting dated 1858, Going to Sea, to one of his later seascapes, The White Surf, painted exactly 50 years later. The heart of this superb collection was provided by John Blyth, local linen manufacturer, art collector and Convenor of the Kirkcaldy Art Gallery Sub-Committee. During his life he lent many of his pictures for display in the Gallery and after his death his family sold much of his art collection to Kirkcaldy Town Council. 21 of these were by William McTaggart and more works have been added to the collection since then. Most of these pictures feature children and it is from this fact that the theme of the exhibition grew.

Susanna Hastilow, freelance curator, was commissioned to carry out research, develop the theme and identify potential paintings for loan. As a result of her work we’ve borrowed 28 works to hang alongside 20 of our own. Paintings from outside Scotland (lent by the Tate, the Fleming-Wyfold Foundation, the Fine Art Society and Bradford Museums and Galleries) are included with works from many Scottish galleries and several private lenders. McTaggart family photographs, letters and a sketch book, kindly lent by the Bonnyrigg and Lasswade Local History Society and the National Libraries of Scotland, give an insight into the artist’s own family life.

William McTaggart is widely acclaimed today as one of Scotland’s most original landscape painters but he was also an extraordinarily gifted portrait painter. McTaggart often painted for his own pleasure – he was reluctant to change his work to suit the taste of others. We know that children appear in so many of his paintings because he wanted them there. They were an important part of his world and reflected his view that we are part of nature.

In 1954, an exhibition of McTaggart’s work was held at the Royal Scottish Academy in Edinburgh. The pictures were chosen for the exhibition by John Blyth, the local industrialist referred to above. He wrote in his introduction:

“We frequently hear...that McTaggart’s children are all the same, but this exhibition should quickly dispel that erroneous notion. McTaggart’s use of figures in his composition is one of the most fascinating features of his art. They are always part of the impression. In some cases the impression is a strong one...or it may be so slight that the figures appear only as notes of lovely colour.”

The exhibition shows how, over his long career, the style of his painting changed from the traditional to one uniquely his own where the figures have become ‘notes of lovely colour’ embedded in nature.

William McTaggart, born in 1835 near Machrihanish, was the son of a West Coast crofter, and grew up in a large, close-knit family. McTaggart’s apprenticeship to a chemist and druggist in Campbeltown proved lucky. His employer encouraged William’s natural artistic talent so much that he left home for Edinburgh to train as an artist at the Trustees Academy. By this time he was such a good portrait painter that he was able to support himself with paid commissions. Although he left...
home at the age of sixteen, and became very successful, he never forgot his family ties. He went on to have fifteen children of his own and often used them as models.

McTaggart sometimes painted scenes of childhood from an adult perspective. He was interested in childhood being just one stage in the cycle of life, and a short lived one at that. He contrasted the innocence of youth with the adult world, both by painting different generations together and by including older children on the cusp of adulthood. The Yarn (1861) lent by Ann Gloag, depicts a young sailor sitting opposite his father and sister in the back of a cart telling them of his adventures at sea. He is possibly the boy McTaggart showed us in Going to Sea and now, returned, a young man. His sister is wide-eyed with wonder. They are driving through harvest fields, heading for Campbeltown, pictured in the distance. This home-coming mirrors McTaggart's own after many years of study in Edinburgh. When the picture was exhibited in Dundee in 1912 he gave it the title The Home Coming. The Yarn was painted during the summer of 1861 at Campbeltown. We think the model for the old man was McTaggart's father who died later that year.

He was able to see the world through a child’s eyes too and through their other senses. When you look at the pictures you can feel the warmth of the sun on their faces and smell with them the fresh grass. Spring, 1864, lent by the National Galleries of Scotland, is one of a pair (the other called Autumn) in which McTaggart fills the canvas with clear light, fresh green grass, lambs and spring flowers. This is the season of new growth in nature, and McTaggart likens this to the young girls – in the “spring of life”. This painting is special because, perhaps for the first time, the children are in the landscape. Bareheaded and barefoot, they are part of nature, which is no longer a simple background. Through them we can enjoy spring’s warmth and scents from a child’s point of view. Despite its realism, Spring was painted in McTaggart’s Edinburgh studio, probably from sketches made outdoors.

Another aspect of McTaggart’s art is where there is a story to be told involving children and human relationships. There might be a clue in the painting’s title or in the mood, light or background.. In Dora (1869, on loan from the Royal Scottish Academy), based on a poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Dora waits patiently for the old man, the little boy’s grandfather, to take notice of the child. Her hope is to mend a family feud following the death of the child’s father. The little boy fidgeting on her knee is blissfully oblivious of the situation. His childish innocence and beauty is in contrast to the world of adult experience and guilt.

William McTaggart grew up by the sea. Throughout his life he made annual pilgrimages to the east and west coasts of Scotland to paint, and his first hand knowledge of fishing communities meant that he could show their lives with real sympathy and understanding. From the end of the 1860s, the artist often painted the work and lives of fishing communities. He focused on the children of these families, capturing their brief childhoods as they played on the shore or gathered bait to help with the fishing–a foretaste of their future working lives. Visitors to the exhibition are invited to compare two paintings: Father is at the Helm (from Bradford Museums and Galleries) and A Fresh Breeze (from the McManus, Dundee). In the former McTaggart painted carefully realised portraits of real fisher folk. The later work shows a more atmospheric style of painting where the figures are in harmony with the landscape.

McTaggart was fascinated by the sea. The power and drama of this elemental force appealed to him as an artist. He saw in it also the huge gulf that stretched between the emigrants forced to sail to America during the Highland Clearances and the families they left behind. In his paintings about emigration McTaggart often includes children. They have an important role–their vulnerability is a contrast to the harshness of the ocean but they may also represent hope for the future, which is a journey into the unknown. Emigrants Leaving the Hebrides, 1891-8, from our own collection, shows tiny figures highlighting the vastness of the sea and sky against man’s insignificance. Fishing boats are ferrying people
to a sailing ship anchored off shore. The ship will take these emigrants far across the sea to America.

William McTaggart, *Emigrants Leaving the Hebrides*, 1891-98 (Fife Council, Kirkcaldy Museum & Art Gallery)

As well as McTaggart’s dramatic paintings of the sea, the artist had a second recurring theme: the rural idyll. Often a gentle retreat, his paintings of the countryside offer a tranquil contrast to the adventure or wildness of his maritime images. Here paintings are of homecoming, growth, abundance and the cycles of life – and children play a key role. In 1889, having made his home in Edinburgh for over 30 years, McTaggart and his growing family moved out to Broomieknowe, just south of the city. Here he became fascinated by the agricultural landscape around him, and used the children in his paintings to reflect his interest in the changing seasons and natural cycles of life, death and regeneration. *Cornfields* (1896) contains intriguing details which encourage us to linger with these children. The boy plays a mouth organ, and is the bundle on the ground beside them a picnic? Holding a jug, the girl may be carrying refreshments for the women who can be seen bending and stooping, gathering the harvest in the field behind them. In this way McTaggart cleverly draws us in to the landscape. The adult work going on in the background emphasises the innocence and happiness of the children, enjoying a lovely autumn day painted with soft warmth. *The Barley Field, Sandy Dean* (1905, on loan from The Fleming-Wyfold Art Foundation) was painted nearly ten years on from *Cornfields*, but McTaggart is still fascinated with vast fields stretching out to distant hills. Here the paintwork is a loose mesh of criss-crossing brushstrokes capturing the restless movement of the barley heads in the late summer breeze. The children are even more lightly sketched than usual, appearing in complete harmony with nature. Romping neck-deep in barley, their pink faces seem like poppies in a field.

*McTaggart’s Children* concludes with his masterpiece *Consider the Lilies*, painted towards the end of his life in 1898, which brings together ideas developed throughout his career. *Consider the Lilies* encourages you to enjoy a childish innocent pleasure in nature; to reflect on the changing of the seasons and the transience of childhood; to examine the contrast between the present and the children’s unknown future. The lilies in the title refer both to the children and the flowers blooming in the artist’s garden at his home at Dean Park. They symbolise summer and innocence. Despite its apparent spontaneity, this picture was very carefully planned and worked on in his studio. The children in the foreground are playing a game called ‘Merry-matany’ – a marriage game danced to the tune of *Nuts in May*. The two children inside the ring (the models for whom are believed to be two of McTaggart’s own family) are the bride and her chosen sweetheart unconsciously mimicking the adult marriage ceremony. The title of the picture, the way the artist applies the paint to the canvas, and the dancing children invite us to review our own lives.

William McTaggart, *Consider the Lilies*, 1898 (Fife Council, Kirkcaldy Museum & Art Gallery)

The 1890s saw the culmination of a long, prolific and successful career. William McTaggart died in 1910 leaving us a legacy which we should celebrate and treasure. In his beautiful paintings of Scottish sea and landscape, in his unique style, the children of his paintings invite us to lose ourselves in his and their world. *McTaggart’s Children – a centenary celebration* is on show at Kirkcaldy Museum & Art Gallery until 3rd October 2010. The Museum is next to Kirkcaldy Railway Station in War Memorial Gardens. Opening
hours are: Monday to Saturday 10.30 to 5.00 and Sunday 2.00 to 5.00. Admission is free.

Free lectures:
25 August, 7.30pm - *Children in Art* by Paul Harris
8 September, 7.30pm - *Kirkcaldy Museum & Art Gallery's Fine Art Collection* by Dallas Mechan
To book call 01592 583213 or email kirkcaldy.museum@fife.gov.uk

**William McTaggart at the National Gallery**

The McTaggart centenary celebrations continue at the National Gallery of Scotland with two displays this autumn. The first in the Weston Link will look at McTaggart’s early training at the Trustees’ Academy, founded in 1760. It will feature studies made by McTaggart from the Academy’s cast collection, many of which are now in the collection of Edinburgh College of Art. These casts are currently being conserved as part of a Lottery funded restoration project at the College. At the same time, an exhibition in the Graphics Display area in the lower galleries of the National Gallery will feature a selection of McTaggart’s stunning watercolour and a number of studies for his paintings. Also on show will be items of personal memorabilia, such as the artist’s paint palette, brushes, sketchbooks and medals.

The displays run from 11 September – 5 December. Admission is free. The galleries are open daily 10am – 5pm (7pm on Thursdays). Visit www.nationalgalleries.org for more information.

**Stella Steyn: Irish Modern Artist**

**Perth Museum & Art Gallery**

*By Maria Devaney, Principal Officer (Art)*

Stella Steyn c.1932

Perth Museum & Art Gallery is highlighting the work of Stella Steyn (1907-1987), an artist much admired and collected in Ireland, but hardly known in the UK. Steyn was born in Dublin where she attended a prestigious private school for girls. She studied art briefly in Berlin and then for two years at Dublin’s Metropolitan School of Art. Between 1926 and 1931 she spent several lengthy periods in Paris where she had a studio and continued her studies. While there she contributed illustrations to the first edition of *Finnegan’s Wake* by James Joyce, her expatriate fellow countryman.

By 1931 she had exhibited her work in group shows in Manchester, Dublin, New York, Boston and Berlin, and in solo exhibitions in Dublin and London. In that year she moved to the Bauhaus in Germany. This school professed an ultra-modern synthesis of architecture with arts and crafts, expressed through a spare, functional style. Among her teachers were major figures of European modernism. But they fell foul of local Nazis and Steyn left after a year.

Between 1932 and 1938 Steyn moved between Dublin and London. She supplied graphics for fashionable magazines and exhibited some of them, but the record is otherwise silent on her activities. With her marriage in 1938 to David Ross, she left the world of Irish art. The couple spent a period in Newcastle-upon-Tyne before returning to
London around 1947-48 where they settled near the British Museum.

It is said that she painted little and exhibited nothing in the decade following her marriage but, by 1950, Ireland's loss had become London's gain. During the 1950s she was regarded as part of the 'modern' tendency in the London art world ('modern' relative to the conservatism of the Royal Academy where her work was nevertheless shown most years). The critic David Sylvester, an important champion of modernism in Britain in the second half of the century, thought highly of her figure studies. But they puzzled The Times and did not figure among her exhibits at the RA after 1955.

Stella Steyn, The Necklace, oil on canvas about 1950 (Private Collection, copyright the Artist's Estate)

After 1960, Steyn virtually disappears from view. It is not known why, but it is known that she disliked the direction French painting was taking. Also, it was difficult for artists schooled in the values of 1920s Paris to hold their own in the increasingly fragmented and Americanised world of modern art. She remained invisible until the mid-1990s when exhibitions, mainly of her pre-war work, were mounted in Dublin and London. Then, in 2005, a body of her post-war work became available and further exhibitions were mounted in Edinburgh and Dublin.

The Perth exhibition (which runs until 16 October) is the first to show examples of Steyn's pre- and post-war work together in a public gallery. It mainly consists, first, of designs from her time at the Bauhaus and, second, of examples from the series of figure studies, mostly based on herself, that she painted between the late 1940s and early 1950s when she was revitalising her career. Most of the latter have not been exhibited for sixty years, if ever. They are the work of a spirited and progressive artist, emerging from years of post-war austerity, and trying to establish a presence and idiom in a world still predominantly male. In this respect, they foreshadow the greater and more varied freedoms that women artists were to assert in the 1970s and after.

The facts of an artist's life serve sometimes to tell us only how little we know of what was truly important to them. Steyn herself gives us some help, however, in a short, autobiographical memoir of her pre-war years. She came eventually to see her time at the Bauhaus as a wrong move: "It had the effect of turning me... permanently to the painting which had its roots in tradition - which included Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, but... not the Bauhaus or the École de Paris in their late stages". For his part, David Sylvester detects in addition earlier, 'museum', influences as well. He talks of the paintings', "profound debt to a variety of late classical, early Christian and early medieval sources" which give to the figure studies, "an unforced pathos engendered by their air of vulnerability, and, at the same time, a dignity they are not aware of because it is their birthright".

What led Steyn in this direction? She does not tell us, but there are several factors to be weighed. First, her upbringing was privileged and progressive, not unlike that of other Irish women artists who trained in Paris and later upheld a torch for modernism in Dublin and London. This was a background, second, that made her sensitive to male misogyny and hypocrisy. She was, for example, critical of what she saw as James Joyce's dismissive treatment of the aspirations of his daughter Lucia, and of his apparent contempt for women's place in professional artistic life. Lucia was institutionalised for the last four decades of her life but Steyn, who knew her well, had thought her perfectly sane. On the other hand, Steyn was aware that
cosmopolitanism had its downsides. Two tutors close to her committed suicide. What place was there for women in such a world, and for what sort of women?

Then, third, there is the complex question of her identity on other fronts. Who was she? Where was she safe? Her parents were Jewish. Against a background of pogroms, their families had left Kurland (between Latvia and Lithuania) only to meet anti-Semitism and violence again in Limerick where they first settled. It was orchestrated there by a militant branch of the Catholic Church. Later, in Dublin, Stella’s parents prospered. The school they chose for her was Protestant. But the ground then shifted again, with the nationalist Easter Uprising of 1916 and the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922. Steyn’s elder sister married a lawyer to the first President of the new state, a politician who, ironically, had for a time condoned the anti-Semitism suffered several decades earlier by the Steyns’ extended family in Limerick. But his wife was to become a friend to Steyn’s parents.

For a time, then, both cosmopolitan and national options seemed equally viable. But then, with her marriage in 1938, the ground shifted yet again. She found herself in mainland Britain, bombed by the Germans who were murdering her people throughout Europe, while her country of birth remained neutral. Nothing was simple or enduring, neither individuals nor civilisations.

Finally, there is the question of her childlessness: an accident of biology? A response to the instabilities of her life? Or perhaps a considered choice to protect her time as serious professional artist competing in a man’s world? Whatever the explanation, a concern with body-image, self-image and ageing clearly informs the work of her early forties.

Stella Steyn, Red and Green, oil on canvas about 1950 (Private Collection, copyright the Artist’s Estate)

Is all this to over-interpret? Possibly, and possibly the release of family papers would cast more light. But it nevertheless seems unlikely that none of these considerations influenced her art. They are, moreover, concerns that are consistent with the qualities of dignity and vulnerability that David Sylvester sensed in Steyn’s vision of humanity when, in his view, she was painting with a subtlety and economy, “hardly surpassed in England today”.

Steyn’s work adds to our understanding of the different directions in which continental modernism could take Irish and British artists. But it also stands at an intermediate point between the advances made by women artists before 1914 and those made in the 1970s and after. One may speculate that, in a era of globalised warfare, genocide, and disrupted gender roles, Steyn’s interest in signifiers of female identity and, later, in the iconic women of western culture, was in part fuelled by the ideas of Jung (which became current in her lifetime) on the animating role of universal archetypes in legends, literature and the visual arts.

The Stella Steyn exhibition can be seen at Perth Museum & Art Gallery until 16 October. Opening times: Monday - Saturday 10am-5pm; Sundays 1-4.30pm (until 31 August). For further information call 01738 632488.
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