

# The Scottish Colourists and their Contemporaries

## *Background Notes*

James Knox, Curator Emeritus, Fleming Collection —  
19 March 2025



(1) S. J. Peploe, *Luxembourg Gardens*, c.1910.  
(Fleming Collection, Edinburgh)

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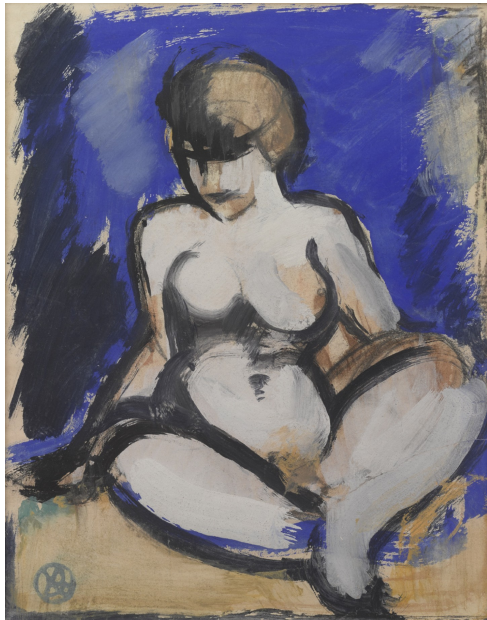
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The Scottish Colourists, S.J. Peploe (1871-1935), J. D. Fergusson (1874-1961), G.L. Hunter (1877-1931), and F.C.B. Cadell (1883-1937), are widely recognized as Scotland's most experimental and distinctive artists of the early 20th Century. Knox's talk will first introduce the early work of the two eldest Colourists, Peploe and Fergusson, as they gained critical and commercial success in the early 1900s as tonal painters with a touch of swagger, inspired by the likes of Whistler and Sargent. However such elegance was soon to be abandoned in favour of a radical transformation in their depiction of reality that was as daring as it was shocking.

This vision was forged in Paris in the years running up to World War 1 when the ferment of the French avant-garde, emboldened the Scots to explore the frontiers of contemporary art from the emerging Post-Impressionist giants, Cézanne and Van Gogh, to the Fauves (wild beasts), led by Matisse and Derain **(2)**, whose work in the 1905 Salon d'Automne cut loose from representational values to convey an emotional reality through an expressive, often brutish, use of colour. To experience this at first-hand Fergusson **(3)** and Peploe **(1 & 5)** ended up living in Paris full-time.



(2) **André Derain**, *The Pool of London*, 1906. (Tate, London)



(3) **J. D. Fergusson**, *Blue Nude*, c.1909-10. (Fleming Collection, Edinburgh)

The Scots were not the only British artists to absorb the shock waves of this revolution. Bloomsbury's Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant exhibited radical work at Roger Fry's 1912 Post-Impressionist exhibition in London. While Welsh artists John Dickson Innes **(4)** and Augustus John, along with Irish pioneer, Roderic O'Connor, brought a colour-expressive approach to landscape. Meanwhile Sickert and the Fitzroy Street School, such as Spencer Gore, Harold Gilman and Charles Ginner, revealed a more nuanced approach to the lessons of the French radicals.

Based on his concurrent breakthrough show in Edinburgh\*, which for the first time brings all these artists together as a British and European 'Colourist' school, Knox will challenge hitherto accepted conventions as to who really were the leaders of the British avant-garde in the early years of the 20th century. His rich and complex story will cover the impact of Roger Fry's 1910 and 1912 Post-Impressionist exhibitions and, in particular, Fry's conscious exclusion of the Scots from the 'British' contemporary section of the 1912 show. He will describe the Scots' fightback with fellow Anglo/Scottish/American Fauves – staging their own exhibition in London to run simultaneously with Fry's, which included the work of four, now largely forgotten, women artists, under the banner of the Rhythmist Group.



(4) **J.D. Innes**, *Arenig, North Wales*, 1931. (Tate, London)



(5) **S.J. Peplow**, *Green Sea, Iona*, 1935. (Fleming Collection, Edinburgh)

World War 1 brought down the curtain on the artistic ferment in Paris. At around the same time the two younger Colourists, F. C. B Cadell **(6)** and Leslie Hunter **(7)**, were just launching their careers as accomplished artists.



**(6) F. C. B. Cadell, *The Dunara Castle at Iona*, c.1929.**  
(Fleming Collection, Edinburgh)

The culmination of Knox's talk will be advent of 'The Art of Peace' in the 1920s which saw all the artists of stature led by Picasso and Derain to draw back from their radicalism of earlier years, which was seen to have pre-figured the carnage of war, in favour of a more classical and traditional approach to their art. The four Scottish Colourists were no exception and became renowned for their contemporary take on still life, landscape and portraiture, marked by the continuing influence of French colour and light. They were first exhibited as a quartet in Paris in 1924, and then in London the following year at the Leicester Galleries. This talk, along with the exhibition in Edinburgh, celebrates their centenary.

## **Useful References**

Fleming Collection

<https://www.flemingcollection.com/>

\*The Scottish Colourists : Radical Perspectives,  
Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh

7 February — 28 June 2025

<https://dovecotstudios.com/whats-on/the-scottish-colourists>



(7) G. L. Hunter, *Peonies in a Chinese Vase*, c.1928.  
(Fleming Collection, Edinburgh)

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