

Glasgow Boys

Background Notes

Rosalind Whyte - 26 May 2021

The Glasgow Boys were a group of radical young artists who challenged the art establishment and the dominance of classical subject matter in Scotland. The grouping was not a formal arrangement, but a loose coming together of artists with the same interests and motivations. Around 20 different artists could be included in the group, but the main protagonists were William York Macgregor (1855-1923), James Guthrie (1859-1930), James Paterson (1854-1932), Arthur Melville (1855-1904), EA Walton (1860-1922), Joseph Crawhall (1861-1913), George Henry (1858-1943) and Edward Atkinson Hornel (1864-1933). William York Macgregor had an informal leadership role within the group and, as he had the largest studio, the artists would meet there to discuss their work and exchange ideas.

In the early 1880s, united by their disillusionment with academic painting, they painted contemporary rural subjects, often working outside, directly in front of the motif. This allowed them to produce paintings that were true to nature and to paint realistic objects in their natural environment, a departure from the popular, picturesque, stirring landscapes of the Scottish Highlands and images such as Sir Edwin Landseer's (1802-1873) *The Monarch of the Glen*.

MacGregor's extraordinary *The Vegetable Stall*, for example, was a radical departure from traditional Scottish scenes. The large canvas (around 1m x 1.5m) is entirely devoted to the humble vegetables of the stall, without even the presence of a figure to 'justify' it, although X-radiograph tests carried out on the work indicate that he did initially include a figure, but decided against its inclusion. The Austrian artist Oskar Kokoshka (1886-1980) was to say of it "To think that the picture was painted before I was born – and I never knew!", voicing his astonishment at the radical departure the painting represents.



William York MacGregor (1855-1923), *The Vegetable Stall*, 1884,
National Galleries of Scotland

James Paterson (1854-1932) was a friend and frequent painting companion of William York MacGregor, they would go on summer excursions to Fife together. Of all the Glasgow Boys, Paterson's works are closest to the 'picturesque', to classic images of the landscape, but he includes figures within his landscapes, such as in *Moniaive*. The figure walking into the distance directs the movement of the viewer's eye towards the horizon.



James Paterson (1854-1932), *Moniaive*, 1885, Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow

Paterson's works are pictorial statements of the reality of nature and the landscape, but, in spite of the lone figure, they are not really about the reality of life for the human inhabitants of the land, unlike the work of the other Glasgow Boys.

Those who did depict the real lives of the people of the land were influenced in this by the social realism of certain Dutch and French artists, including Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) and, particularly, the naturalist painter Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848-1884). Bastien-Lepage is little known

today, but at the time had a massive impact and his influence can be seen in the work not just of the Glasgow Boys, but George Clausen (1852-1944), Henry Herbert La Thangue (1859-1929) and others in England and, indeed, throughout Europe, particularly in Scandinavia. His philosophy is summed up in this quote:

“We need to renew the education of our eye, by looking with sincerity upon things as they are in nature, instead of holding as absolute truths the theories and conventions of the school and the studio.”

This thinking is strongly reflected in *A Highland Funeral* by James Guthrie, who was born in Greenock and trained to become a lawyer, before turning to art. He had no formal art training, but travelled to London and Paris, exploring the work of other artists and absorbing the realists’ commitment to painting directly from nature, which he applied to his native Scotland. He was in complete accord with Bastien-Lepage in his refusal of the high art tendency to ‘improve’ real facts.



James Guthrie (1859-1930) *A Highland Funeral*, 1882,
Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow

Guthrie's *A Highland Funeral* also pays homage to the realism of Courbet and, in particular, to his *A Burial at Ornans* (1849-50, Musée d'Orsay, Paris). Both paintings focus on a rural burial, with a penetrating gaze and unyielding realism that makes for stark viewing and a stark contrast to what was acceptable in the spheres of the Royal Academy and the Paris Salon. The highland funeral he depicts was one he himself witnessed at Brig o'Turk, a service for the son of a family he had got to know, who had drowned. Guthrie himself was saddened by the tragedy, as, of course, are the villagers we see; their grief is further reflected in the muted palette of the work. His colours were very much lighter in paintings such as *To Pastures New* (Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums), from the same year and he later experimented with pastels and ultimately established a reputation as a successful portrait painter.

The scenes of Scottish rural life that the group was inspired to create by the example of Bastien-Lepage and Courbet challenged the art promoted by the Edinburgh-oriented Scottish art establishment of the time and began a shift to Glasgow as the epicentre of art, which was supported by a group of wealthy industrialists in that fast-growing and industrialising city. The Glasgow-based collector and dealer Alexander Reid (1854-1928), a friend and one-time flat mate of Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890), did much to expose Scottish artists and gallery goers to the work of French avant-garde painters and also exhibited and sold artworks by the Glasgow Boys (and later the Scottish Colourists).

They were always a loose grouping of artists, who provided each other with support, but all of them also continued to look elsewhere for inspiration and their styles differed enormously, both between themselves and over time.

By the late 1880s several of them began to take an interest in Celtic design, George Henry and EA Hornel, in particular, and they worked together on the extraordinary painting *The Druids – Bringing in the Mistletoe* in 1890.



George Henry (1858-1943) and Edward Atkinson Hornel (1864-1933), *The Druids – Bringing in the Mistletoe*, 1890, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow

Subsequently those two artists became increasingly interested in Japan and Japanese prints and Alexander Reid, together with important Glasgow collector William Burrell, funded a trip to Japan for them in 1893-4. This resulted in many works focusing on Japanese subject matter, e.g. *Geisha Girls*, and a much more decorative flavour appeared in their work, with visible brushstrokes, swirls and calligraphic elements.



George Henry (1858–1943), *Geisha Girl*, 1894,
National Galleries of Scotland

In terms of a direct legacy, the figure of Arthur Melville loomed large in the next important group of Scottish artists, the so-called ‘Scottish Colourists’. Melville was a friend of the family of FCB Cadell and, recognising the talent of the young man, persuaded his family to allow him to pursue art and to travel to and study in Paris. Melville also had a significant influence on the early work of another Scottish Colourist, JD Fergusson, who travelled in his footsteps, to Spain, Morocco and Tangier and who said of Melville:

“Although I never met him ... his painting gave me my first start: his work opened up to me the way of free painting – not merely freedom in the use of paint but freedom in outlook.”

Melville was amongst those whose style changed dramatically. Starting in quintessential Glasgow Boys style, with works such as *The Cabbage Garden*,

he later focused almost exclusively on watercolours and developed a distinctive 'blottesque' technique, for which he was most well-known and widely admired.



**Arthur Melville (1858-1904) *Cabbage Garden*, 1877,
National Galleries of Scotland**

As is evident in the examples of Henry, Hornel and Melville, the early rural naturalism of the group evolved in many separate and distinct directions, often in stark contrast to their early work.

Bibliography

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