

GIBBONS : CONNOLLY : FLETCHER : GRAY : TAYLOR



**5 SCOTTISH ARTISTS  
RETROSPECTIVE SHOW  
Five Colour Catalogues  
and an Introduction by  
ALASDAIR GRAY**

# 5 Scottish Artists Retrospective

## ORGANISER TELLS EVERYTHING

### ASTONISHING NEWS!

LAST YEAR the British publicity machines broadcast a new and astonishing fact: four recent graduates of Glasgow Art School are making enough money from the sale of their paintings to live by painting alone. Their work was admired by a Glasgow Art School director with the enthusiasm, knowledge and contacts to promote it in New York and therefore also in London, and thus in Scotland too.

So painting in Glasgow is now news: news flowing through catalogues, television, documentaries, Edinburgh literary magazines, English quality papers and the Glasgow Herald. Some local history is needed to explain why this news induces a mixture of anger, envy and hope in other Glasgow Artists: especially in us old ones who grew up in The Dark Age between the emigration of Rennie Macintosh in 1914 and the coming of the Glasgow Pups seventy years later.

## WHATJACK SAID

Recently Jack MacLean, our urban Voltaire, a Glasgow art teacher with a journalist's gift of the gab, said the arts in Glasgow reminded him of a diamanté brooch on a boiler suit. He knew, of course, he was saying what most people in Glasgow, Edinburgh and England take for granted. Once upon a time they thought differently.

## THE GOLDEN AGE

Around 1900 Glasgow had schools of painting and design with international reputations. Like their contemporaries, the French impressionists, the artists of the Scottish middle-west were mostly from prosperous families, yet maintained themselves by their talent. Their products were imported and acclaimed by galleries in Vienna, Munich and London, yet they were respected by an informed Glasgow public *before*, not *after* they got famous abroad. Dying Whistler by-



Alasdair Gray — by himself

passed all the English art galleries and willed his unsold work to the Hunterian Museum because of Glasgow's reputation as a cultural capital.

## SIXTY YEARS HARD

Yet after the First World War all young Scots who showed artistic talent were told by their teachers, "Of course you'll never make a living by your art in Scotland", and for over sixty years this was an almost absolute truth. Talented moderns like Colquhoun and McBride emigrated. The artists who remained became dominies or hermits. The dominies painted between teaching. Some of them, like Cowie, kept their talent bright and effective but produced a fraction of their potential, while the art of the rest became stale and dated, though they dominated the art schools and the official exhibitions. The hermits shrank into eccentric seclusion. Only one of them — Joan Eardley — had a small private income, so developed as she should have done. Most hermits were poor, like Joan's friend Angus Neil, so their talents afflicted them like incurable diseases. In the late sixties a sort of artist appeared who was neither emigré, dominie or hermit, but supported his pictorial art by a share-time literary job. I say "his" pictorial art because the only artists of this sort I know are John Byrne and me.

But an informed Scottish public for modern Scottish art — or any kind of modern art — had almost vanished. Why?

## THE CATASTROPHE

The catastrophe which had befallen Scottish art was the same which befall our other great industries. It is no coincidence that our golden age was before the First World War, in the industrial boom years when the Government had most of its battle-ships built on Clydeside. The later managers of British capital decided they could save money by concentrating it in South Britain or by investing it abroad, so Scottish investors lost confidence in their homeland as a place where good modern things could be originated.

But this cannot be the whole explanation — it is too simple.

For the good fortune of the Glasgow Pups shows that the blighted state of Scottish art this century was not made inevitable by John Knox or Economic Necessity, it could have been cured at any time by an informed and imaginative promotion of the local product. Before 1914 Glasgow had several dealers who promoted modern Scottish painting abroad while bringing in modern painting from overseas. Of course the war interrupted this trade, but the dealers (chiefly Annan and Reid) were still there at the end of it. Why did they not resume their work for Scottish art in 1919?

## THE CURSE OF THE BURRELL

Because they were too busy. Sir William Burrell, shipowner, had sold his merchant shipping fleet to the Australian Government, become a multi-millionaire, retired from business, and decided to give Glasgow the biggest private art collection in Europe. He had very little interest in modern art and none in contemporary Scottish art. Scotland's best private dealers — the ones with international connections — made so much money helping Sir William to acquire foreign antiques that modern Scottish painting became one of their less profitable sidelines.

Burrell was not the only Glasgow millionaire collector, but the other (Cargill) was equally uninterested in local products. When Burrell and Cargill died after World War Two the old Scottish dealing firms had lost contact with contem-

porary painting at home and abroad and dwindled to insignificance. Annan's splendid gallery in Sauchiehall Street became a recruiting office. To get any attention at all Glasgow artists had to appear in self-help organisations like the Royal Glasgow Institute, the Arts Club and the Glasgow Group, which were unable to sustain a general public for themselves or start a controversy interesting enough to be important news. And this was hardly the organisations' fault. A vital idea embodied in a work of art would not have been *news* to our local press and broadcasters. We had become provincial: by which I mean: a people who expect news and initiatives to come from people elsewhere.

## A SOURER NOTE

So when a Glasgow baillie refers to Glasgow's culture he is probably thinking of the Burrell: a collection of tapestries, church furniture and antiques from France Italy Germany Spain Egypt China Japan, chiefly maintained by English art specialists, in a building designed by an English architect, and visited by thousands of tourists from France, Italy, Germany etcetera who are able to enjoy the art of their own lands in a south Glasgow setting. If their feet get tired they visit the restaurant and sit on expensive chairs of tooled hide and polished timber bought from Denmark. Nobody recalls that between the wars Glasgow firms furnished the interiors of luxury liners and State Capitals. But Glaswegians have the consolation of knowing that, though the money which originally paid for all this was Australian, it was raised by a sale of ships built by some of their ancestors. Though nothing of Scottish make appears in it, the whole show *belongs* to them.

## DISCLAIMER

This monologue is not another lament for *puir auld* Glasgow. I believe that, even off the football pitch, Glasgow art exists, but in such broken patchy ways that most folk think it is not there at all, or mistake something else for it, or believe, with Jack MacLean, that it is the pretentious hobby of wealthy snobs. He may be right. I will stop talking historically about Glasgow art and explain how I started trying to make the stuff, and met others with the same obsession.

## PERSONAL NOTE

I grew up in Riddrie, a corporation housing scheme in East Glasgow where

the Edinburgh and Cumbernauld roads diverge. Our tenements were fronted with red sandstone, and the greens at the back were all grass with no bare earthy bits. The neighbours up our close were a nurse, a postman, a printer and the local tobacconist-newsagent, so I was naturally a bit of a snob. I took it for granted that the best part of Britain was owned and managed by folk like our neighbours.

But though I thought Riddrie an ideally normal place I often did not want normality. I wanted exciting heavens, hells and farcical riots. My childhood would have been a dull business without art: Hollywood art of Walt Disney, Tarzan and slapstick comedy: the BBC art of Broadcast, music halls and serial dramas based on fantasies by Conan Doyle and H G Wells; the cartoon art of D C Thomson's *Dandy*, *Beano*, and *Sunday Post*. Had there been television I would have become an addict. In those days my greed for extravagant existences brought me to Riddrie public library where I ate up all the existing stories and illustrations I could find.

This would have been just healthy self education if I had also enjoyed the social arts which bring people together physically: football, dancing, or the hillwalking my father enjoyed. But I was bad at these and used poor health as an excuse to avoid them. I stimulated my daydreams with more and more books and pictures. I found the heavens and hells of William Blake, Aubrey Beardsley and Hieronymous Bosch. In Kelvin-grove museum I saw an exhibition of the real oil paintings by Edvard Munch, who showed heavens and hells happening in places like Riddrie, and crowds and skies of a sort I had seen in and over Glasgow. I suspect I would have gone mad if my parents and teachers, from an early age, had not encouraged me to write and paint, though they also said, "Of course you'll never make a living by your art in Scotland".

Instead of going mad I went to:

## GLASGOW ART SCHOOL

The money which created this school had been raised in the last century by wealthy manufacturers who needed designers for their buildings, furniture and vehicles. Since a designer's basic training requires drawing and painting they did not mind producing some professional artists too. When our Golden Age ended most students looked forward to careers in teaching. I

attended art school in a boom period for potential teachers. The increased birth-rate following the war had made more teachers necessary, and the new welfare state was paying for the further education of people like me whose parents could not have afforded it. So for four or five years a lot of us were able to feel we were entering the profession of Michelangelo and Rembrandt, though we well knew that after we received our diplomas there would be no great patrons to commission work from us, no dealers to handle it, and hardly any manufacturing firms who wanted our skills as designers.

It is not strange, in such circumstances, that few teachers in the art school excited their students' imaginations. There had been a fine Head of Painting in Glasgow during the war — Colquhoun, McBride and Eardley were trained by him — but the Art School governors thought him a bad influence and got the Director to dismiss him. So our teachers painted in what was then called "the academic tradition." They painted as they thought Van Dyke or Corot would have painted had these great men been forced to work in Glasgow. They warned us against Post Impressionism, though one said Cézanne would have painted perfectly well if his eyesight had been repaired by decent spectacles. Students who wanted to make new, exciting art had to learn from each other. Luckily Alan Fletcher was among us.

## ALAN FLETCHER

There is no such thing as an artistic type. Artists have been henpecked husbands, Don Juans, cautious batchelors and reckless homosexuals. They have been orthodox diplomats working for catholic monarchs (Rubens), fanatical agents of revolutionary republics (David), and comfortable bourgeois Hedonists (Renoir). Alan Fletcher is the only artist I know who naturally looked like the Bohemian artist of legend. He was the free-est soul I ever met, and impressed me so mightily that a diminished version of him has been a main character in all the novels I ever wrote. He had to be diminished, or he would have stolen attention from my main characters, who were versions of me.

Alan was maturer than most of his contemporaries, having come to art school after serving his national military service. His father was an engineer who maintained the heating in the Grand Hotel at Charing Cross. Alan had taught himself to build up a painting in broad, simple strokes by

studying the Whistlers in the Hunterian museum. From reproductions in books and magazines he absorbed essential lessons from contemporary artists like De Stael and Giacometti. He could talk easily to anyone, looked with interest on everything, but laid aside all that was not practically useful to his own vision, his own soul or self. Like a true teacher he did not move others to act or work like him, his example helped us grow more like ourselves. It is not a coincidence that his closest friends (John Glashan, Douglas Abercrombie and Carole Gibbons especially) went on to become professional artists of very different sorts.

I believe that Scottish painting, especially in the Scottish middle west, would have been a healthier, more public growth had Alan lived. Even without the machinery of art-dealing and patronage his existence as a strong creative intelligence would have drawn attention to his native city and given more courage to the rest of us. But he died.

## MORE PERSONAL NOTES

Alan and I had only one thing in common: we both loved painting, but the painting teachers did not want us in their classes. He was directed into sculpture and I into mural decoration. Neither of us minded. Alan could master any medium and I was intrigued by the thought of painting on a public scale. Like many artists since the days when most art was commissioned to decorate public buildings, I often regretted that most of my work, if sold, would become just private property. At the age of thirteen I had read *The Horse's Mouth* by Joyce Cary, which made me want to paint the murals I imagined Gulley Jimson painting. It also described accurately how this would be. The greatest act of intelligent heroism I could clearly imagine was making a great art work for folk who could not like it. It would be nobler still to die in the attempt. I had no intention of dying, but readers of my first novel will notice that I was looking for the raw materials for it in my own life.

So in the autumn of 1957 I was given my Scottish Education Department Diploma of Design and Mural Decoration, and left Art School for the wilderness of the world. Though not inspiring, the staff had been tolerant. They had not stopped me learning what I most wanted to do, and I was grateful.



Alan Fletcher with a putative Turner watercolour, circa 1956

I worked as a part-time dominie from 1958 - 1962, while painting, in a Church near Bridgeton Cross, a mural which I hoped would make me famous. It didn't, but this is not a hard luck story. I stopped teaching and some plays I wrote were bought by television: not enough to support me, but enough to comfortably support half of me while the other half was supported by occasional portrait or mural jobs. I got friendly with Alasdair Taylor and John Connolly, whose addiction to painting and sculpture would have made them very lonely hermits, had they not had good wives who loved their art too. They lacked the means to exhibit it, however. When I first met them Alasdair was a dustman and John an electrical engineer. I was luckier.



Alasdair Taylor, right, 1961

By the sixties the private galleries which had flourished when Glasgow was an industrial and artistic force had dwindled to nothing very useful. They could be rented, but were dear, so from 1959 to 1974 I put on at least one exhibition a year in places which could be rented more cheaply, such as the R G I Gallery (later called the Kelly Gallery) and places which would cost me nothing: in foyers of the Cosmo Cinema and Citizen's Theatre, in Glasgow University Research Club, Strathclyde University Staff Club, and once (to coincide with my first TV play) in a colour television showroom in Cuthbertson's music shop on Cambridge Street. I also showed in the Edinburgh Traverse Theatre Gallery, which was run for a few years by Sheila Ross. At none of these shows did I sell enough to pay for the framing and publicity costs, but they proved I was an artist. When the *Herald* or *Scotsman* printed a few inches of criticism by Martin Bailie or Cordelia Oliver my heart would leap up and I would think "I exist! I exist!"

And some folk bought my work. Andrew Sykes, an eccentric curmudgeon who will not bring a libel action against me for saying so, bought steadily from the time he was a mature student at Glasgow University to the time he became a Professor at Strathclyde. In 1974 Mr Steven Elson of the Collins Gallery visited Professor Sykes, saw his collection of Grays, and offered me a large retrospective show for which I did not have to pay. It went well. I sold three

pictures, which was all sheer profit. And the three usual Scottish art critics were quite kind, though Emilio Coia was a little surprised that such a big show had been offered to one so unvenerable. (I was only 40.)

## A GOOD RESOLUTION

But I decided never again to pay for an exhibition of my art, or display it unless someone else asked me to do it.

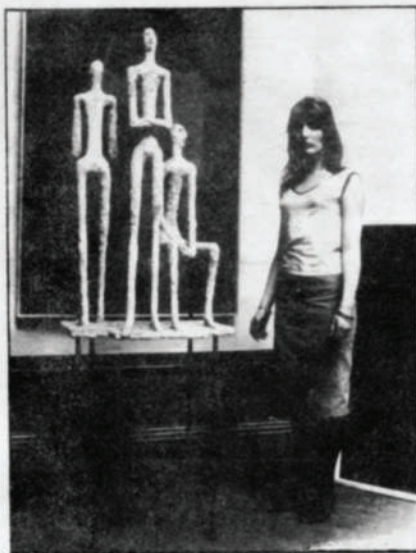
## WESTMINSTER DOES ITS BEST

Now, the government in South Britain had noticed Scotland was now a depressed province. Within fifteen years it appointed three Royal Commissions to investigate the problem, but since all three had advised that Scotland be given government of its own affairs, their findings had to be ignored. So while our main industries were acquired by outside companies which pulled them out or closed them down, some organisations were created to promote activities which might help us to feel something better was happening. Various Boards were set up, and we got our very own Arts Council. And the Arts Council helped to create new galleries and art centres, so by the late seventies we had many more salaried modern art administrators than self-supporting modern artists.

The new galleries presented travelling shows of work from South Britain: also art by our own locals, though few of these left the place where they started. So I was delighted when Chris Carrell, director of Glasgow's Third Eye Centre, offered me a big new retrospective which he wished to take to other cities. So he posted advertisements for this show to other British galleries, asking if they would like to take it. Hardly any answered, and those who did said, "No."

## A RESOLUTION SHATTERED

Hell hath no fury like the neglected egoist. I was now really keen on a travelling show of my work, a big one which would appear in cities with perhaps more ardent publics. Since the Third Eye could not arrange this I decided to do it for myself, but to do it successfully I needed company. Galleries which had ignored the Third Eye offer of my work might



*Carole Gibbons at Alan Fletcher's Memorial Exhibition, McLellan Galleries, 1959*

accept me if I hid among Fletcher, Gibbons, Connolly and Taylor who are a very important, but hardly ever visible, part of Scottish painting. Most art students have never heard of them.

The ploy worked, though it detached me from the Third Eye Centre which lacked the space to put on such an ambitious show in Glasgow. So my first act was to rent the greater part of the McLellan Galleries for the December of 1986, and seek venues for it elsewhere in galleries which would pay the costs of transport, hanging and publicity.

I was very lucky in Edinburgh where Dr Duncan MacMillan offered the Talbot Rice Centre in the Old College of Edinburgh University and Andrew Brown his 369 Gallery in the Cowgate. Neither is big enough to show us all, but in January the Talbot Rice will show Alasdair Taylor, John Connolly and me, the 369 Carole Gibbons and Alan Fletcher. And in February 1987 we recombine in the splen-



*John Connolly with 'Embrace', steel, 1967, now at Heriot Watt University, Edinburgh*

did municipal gallery of Aberdeen. I failed to get places in England because I did not work sufficiently hard on that. I nearly got a place for it in Ireland through the assistance of Ted Hickey, curator of Belfast municipal art gallery, and something may still come of this. But the show in its present form will not leave Scotland, so will be a financial loss, although (I dearly hope) an imaginative victory.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Scottish Arts Council helped us by lending us our work in their collection, and serving as a forwarding address when I advertised for information about works whose present ownership is not known. They could not help us under their partial guarantee against loss scheme because the panel considering my request "was particularly concerned about the basic concept of the exhibition." I never learned what that meant but it sounded final. The panel also felt the rent of the McLellan Galleries was too high.

I tried to do something about that. The gallery is owned by Glasgow District Council, so I asked for advice from one of the few Glasgow baillies who has helped the living arts as much as the antique ones. He said there were a couple of committees with the power to reduce the galleries' rent, and if I sent him some copies of an information sheet about the show he would give them to the relevant people. I did so. A few months later we met by accident and he was not surprised to hear I had had no response. Many decision makers who don't say yes to a request respond with silence instead, since a refusal often offends. But I suspect the fault may have been mine. My information sheet was seven pages of factual detail and most politicians, whether local or national, have not time for a lot of reading.

## SO GOODBYE

I have been able to organise the show through the generous help of friends like Donald Saunders, Gordon Manning, Jim Kelman, Jim Cunningham, Angela Mullane, Tony Mullane, Chris Boyce, Dave Foulis, Eric Thornburn, Philip Reeve, Andrew Young, Hilda Butler, Malcolm Hood and others. But most of all I owe what success this show has to the other artists — all four of them.



"I'm afraid we're too late — they're dead"