

Art and the Highlands

The Royal Scottish Academy Gillies Lecture

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My aim is not to give a comprehensive view, but to discuss some starting points for thinking about art and the Gaidhealtachd. Other starting points can be found in the curation of the exhibitions at An Lanntair and Dundee which built on the Royal Scottish Academy 'Highland' exhibition last year.¹ Not only there but in the book *Highland Art from the Collections of the Royal Scottish Academy: A Window to the West / Ealain Ghàidhealach bho chruinneachaidhean Acadamaidh Rioghail na h-Alba: Uinneag dhan àird an Iar*.

It is an honour to give this year's Royal Scottish Academy William Gillies lecture. This is the first time it has been given outside Edinburgh. It is a real pleasure to give it here at An Lanntair in the Isle of Lewis. My pleasure is both personal and cultural, personal because my own forebears were from Bernera, cultural because this event is a further mark of recognition of the importance of the culture of the Highlands as a living process rather than as an excuse for stereotyping.

The painter Sir William Gillies, after whom this lecture is named, is remembered for many aspects of his work, but a key to understanding him are his Highland paintings and it is appropriate that I begin with one of these. It belongs to the Royal Scottish Academy and is at present on display at the University of Dundee in an exhibition that complements the exhibition here at An Lanntair. It also figures in the book. It dates from 1928 and it shows Mallaig with the Isle of Eigg in the background. It is a fine work from early in the artist's career and it is painted in the full knowledge of contemporary European art. But I show it here not only for its intrinsic interest as an image of the Highlands in the first third of the twentieth century, but also because it illuminates the work of a contemporary of William Gillies, an artist who is little known outside his native Lewis. I refer – of course - to Angus Morrison of Ness, who, thanks to the efforts of Mary Smith and Finlay Macleod, and to the staff of An Lanntair - where his work was first exhibited in 2006 - can now be recognised as the significant artist he is.

Morrison had a typical Highland work pattern, spending early years at sea and then crofting in his native Ness but, as Finlay Macleod notes, 'What sets Angus Morrison

¹ Window to the West: The Highlands and Islands in Art, Lamb Gallery, University of Dundee, 15 March to 21 June 2008. Gaidhealtachd – Highland, An Lanntair, Stornoway, 14 April-11 May 2008.

apart is that he was an artist – a self-taught artist, and probably the first in rural Lewis to try his hand at this, and without any formal training.’ Macleod continues: ‘This would not have seemed peculiar in his day for there were craftsmen and bards in each and every village who turned their mind and hand to the making of carts or boats or songs. But none before Angus had got hold of tubes of oil paints and boards and tried to represent his surroundings in paintings.’

It is, I think, timely to be reminded that visual art is something like making boats or songs, something that we human beings are inclined to do. The German artist Josef Beuys, who contributed a major European dimension to the development of Highland art in the 1970s, used to say that everyone is an artist. What he meant was that the impulse to art is part of the human condition. There could be few better demonstrations of that than the paintings of Angus Morrison.

Consider, for example, his wonderful view the coast south of Ness. I am not sure when this was painted, but it seems likely that it was in the 1920s or 1930s, that is to say within a few years of Gillies’ image of Mallaig. One of the differences in approach between the two artists is Morrison’s interest in a working fishing fleet while Gillies is content with the geographical spectacle of the empty harbour. This symbolises a difference in emphasis between these two artists which runs through a great deal of art. Gillies’ starting point is the landscape of his country, while Morrison’s is the way of life of his people: nevertheless we can see them both as part of the same tradition of early twentieth century Scottish art. That says a great deal for Morrison’s ability for consider the contrast between their lives. William Gillies was a highly-trained professional, who had studied in both Edinburgh and Paris. In due course he became head of painting and subsequently principal of Edinburgh College of Art.

By contrast Angus Morrison was self taught. Morrison’s early years at sea are of immense significance in his work. Rarely has rigging been better understood by an artist. I am sure there is still a great deal of maritime art by Highlanders still to be appreciated. One has only to think of the drawings of George Macleod of Bernera, published in 2005 by Acair as *Muir is Tir* to emphasise this point. Here the value of drawing as a tool for thought could not be clearer, but at the same time each line expresses the nature of its subject. I do not know who did the excellent painting of a fishing boat on the wall of the bar of the Ormidale Hotel in Brodick, but it just indicates the potential wealth of such material. It further underlines the everyday nature of the sea in the Highland experience.

The fact that Angus Morrison has received no wider recognition until recently bears consideration. Had he lived in England, like his older contemporary, Alfred Wallace, or in Ireland, like his younger contemporary, James Dixon, his work would perhaps be much better known today. This might be seen as an example of the neglect of the rest of Scotland by the central belt, but I think it is in fact symptomatic of a deeper cultural problem which applied for most of the twentieth century not only to the Gaidhaeltachd but to Scottish art as a whole.² What I am saying in specific terms is this. During the

² It is symptomatic of what has been described as the ‘eclipse of Scottish culture’, an eclipse from which we are only now emerging. In short the twentieth century, in the wake of the bureaucratic centralisation

twentieth century, a self taught English artist like Alfred Wallis could be found in accounts of the history of British Art but even a professional painter of high standing like William Gillies - let alone a self taught painter like Angus Morrison - was unlikely to be covered in such accounts.³ That is to say Scottish cultural history has been, for the most part, written out of these accounts. I am not overly critical of the authors of these accounts. They are dealing with a concept of 'Britishness' which once had an imperial value and may indeed still have a political value, according to your point of view, but which, so far as I can see, has never had a useful cultural meaning. So it is not surprising that it is impossible to write about in a coherent manner. It is a bit like 'Scandinavian'. From time to time this is a useful regional description, but as soon as one tries to make it a cultural description, it is simply confusing. For example the term 'Scandinavian art' tells me little. The terms 'Norwegian art' or 'Danish art' or 'Icelandic culture' tell me a great deal. The point here is not to claim some conspiracy among English art historians to miss Scottish art out of 'British' accounts, but to make the fundamental point that if you do not write your own history there is a high risk that your history will not be written at all. And if your own history is not available to you, your presence in the world at large is lessened and distorted. This eclipse of the history of Scottish art has been firmly reversed over the last twenty years or so, but Scottish visual culture is still not really part of the curriculum. Such eclipse applies even more to the visual culture of the Highlands. Here images of deer and hill - which were painted, in the main, to serve the needs of nineteenth century sporting and land owning interests - have obscured our view. I am not against these images as such, but we need a far wider context within which to see them. We must, therefore, be grateful to Finlay Macleod and Mary Smith for beginning to tell the story of Angus Morrison for it is from an understanding of the immediacy of art and place that a true international vision stems.

Angus Morrison was a Gaelic speaker. We do not normally refer to Gaelic and the history of Scottish art in the same breath but we really should. We must never forget that so many of the earliest works of Scottish art to which we can give a reasonably secure date are the work of Gaelic speakers. It is therefore impossible to tell the story of Scottish art or indeed of European art without taking the Gaidhealtachd into account. I refer to the carvers of great stone sculptures such as St Martin's Cross on Iona and the Kildalton Cross on Islay, both created in the eighth century. I refer also to the painters of the extraordinary manuscripts made during that same period. The most famous of these manuscripts is the Book of Kells, illuminated by the monks of Iona around the year 800,

attendant on two world wars, was the period during which so much cultural control became concentrated in London, that issues not just of Gaidhealtach art, but of Scottish art in general became lost in so called 'British' accounts which are in fact first and foremost accounts not of British art, but of English art. During the twentieth century, much more so than in the nineteenth century, British art and British history became too all intents and purposes synonymous with English art and English history.

³ This is, for example, the situation in the book *British Art in the Twentieth Century*. Whether an artist is included in such accounts of 'British' art is dependent, in large measure, on how near to London they worked. Another aspect should be noted. In such books there is very often a perfectly respectable representation of contemporary Scottish artists. So contemporary activity is acknowledged, but activity a few decades back is passed over. Elsewhere, I have called this phenomenon with respect to Scottish art 'eternally recurrent renaissance' for reading these accounts it is as though Scottish art of the present comes from nowhere.

a work that shows the art of the Gaidhealtachd not simply to be thriving but to be setting an example to the rest of Europe. Older histories of Europe describe this time as ‘the dark ages’ as though nothing of significance was happening in the wake of the collapse of the Roman Empire. What an inappropriate term for the Iona of the time. These monks were not merely copying the gospels, they were responding as artists to the extraordinary light and colour of their Hebridean environment. Iona is one of the finest places in the world to explore colour. Its position on the Western seaboard of Scotland exposes it to rapid weather and light changes throughout the year. Following from this, it is important to note that any monk working anywhere in the Hebrides would have had access to a similarly remarkable colour environment. Indeed one of the most intense experiences of Hebridean colour that I have ever had was on the east coast of Lewis north of Tolsta where fresh water laden with peat flows into the sea. A very different colour experience from Iona but again echoing the richness of an illuminated manuscript. We have all had these experiences in many different Hebridean locations. To respond to such experiences as an artist is challenging. To make work which does not pale into insignificance alongside that environment of colour and light in which it is created, is very hard indeed. Yet that is what the artists of the Book of Kells managed to do in Iona. In a sense art can do more than match the world. The Book of Kells does that.

So I suggest that we acknowledge the Book of Kells as an early work of Scottish colourism, made more than a thousand years before the arrival in Iona of F. C. B. Caddell and S. J. Peploe, two of the painters we call the Scottish Colourists today. The work of such painters in the early twentieth century is also important to any appreciation of art and the Highlands. What is interesting is that when we see this colourism in terms of the Hebrides we can see it not just as the influence of Parisian modernism on Scottish art, but as a direct attempt by Scottish painters to respond without preconception to Hebridean light. The colourists are rarely thought of as realists, yet with respect to the light of Hebrides that is exactly what they are.

Caddell and Peploe were not the only ones to respond to the light and colour of Iona in the early twentieth century, indeed the path was opened for them by nineteenth century painters like William Bell Scott and following him, the leading painter of the Celtic revival, John Duncan. It is interesting to note this for it shows the interdependence on one another of artists working in very different styles. Duncan was not, so far as I know, ever much of a Gaelic speaker, but he had an interest in the language from the days his youth in Dundee onwards, and was part of the circle of that great collector, translator and editor, Alexander Carmichael. Indeed Duncan was a close friend of Carmichael’s daughter Ella, who was instrumental in the publication not only of her father’s *Carmina Gadelica* but of the influential journal *The Celtic Review*. In 2006 I had the good fortune to be invited to take part in the Alexander Carmichael conference in Benbecula, organised by the Islands Book Trust. It was a fascinating conference which brought together key scholars (among them Donald Meek, William Gillies, Hugh Cheape, Ronald Black and Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart) and members of the families which had provided Carmichael’s original material. The proceedings form the basis of a significant new book edited by Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart.

At that event I gave a paper on the visual dimension of Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*. I concentrated on the remarkable visual relationships to early Celtic art that can be found in the initial letters and other decorations in the book. These images are the work of Alexander Carmichael's wife, Mary and they contribute greatly to the importance of *Carmina Gadelica* as a major example of Arts and Crafts book design. Mary Carmichael is one of a number of neglected women artists associated with the Celtic revival. An example of the direct relationships I found between Mary Carmichael's designs and much earlier Celtic work was her use of an initial letter in the tenth century Book of Deer. This is just one of many intriguing visual references in *Carmina Gadelica*, which can now be seen as a key production not only of Highland verbal scholarship but also of Highland visual scholarship. I should also note that The Book of Deer has the added interest of having marginal additions which are among the first surviving examples of written Scottish Gaelic.

Carmina Gadelica was published in 1900. The previous decade had been equally remarkable from the perspective of Highland art. We gain a sense of the variety and richness of Highland art during this period when we note *Carmina Gadelica* - as a high point of the Celtic revival - alongside some of the most experimental landscape painting ever carried out in Scotland. I refer to the work of William McTaggart who was born in Kintyre in 1835. If anyone has a claim to the title of founder of modern painting in Scotland it is McTaggart. He revolutionised the use of paint in a way that parallels contemporary developments in France, but unlike the French Impressionists, McTaggart always had a core of social realism in his landscapes. In that regard he is very like Angus Morrison. There are very few works by Morrison that are not reflections on the interdependence of place and work and folk. The same can be said of McTaggart. Most of his works are meditations on the Gaidhealtachd in one form or another. This is certainly true of his greatest works, painted in the 1890s. Consider, for example, *The Storm*, which hangs in the National Gallery of Scotland. This is a remarkable experimental landscape painting in which McTaggart extends the technical possibilities of oil paint for Scottish artists, but at the same time it has within it the narrative of the launching of a rescue boat to aid fishermen struggling to make landfall at Carradale. Thus McTaggart is requiring us not only to engage with his modern art as a contemporary activity which is continuously evolving its techniques, he is also asserting with absolute clarity that a fundamental purpose of his art is to be socially engaged with communities and landscape and work. He is painting the experience of the people he knows and he is reflecting on his own experience. At the same time he is in awe, as we all are, of the alternating beauty and danger of the weather and coastline of the western seaboard. He isn't afraid of the Highlands as a spectacle. But he knows this spectacular environment is a place within which people live and work. In short McTaggart paints what one might call total landscape. The Highlands push one in that direction, not least because whatever you paint is mediated not simply by time of day and angle of light but by the challenge of wind and rain. It is to just such challenging weather that McTaggart responds in the storm.

McTaggart lived during the time that open air painting was being advocated across Europe. As one might expect, this trend began in France where due to the moderate

climate it was a easily achievable activity. What is interesting about McTaggart is that he considered such open air painting as highly desirable even on a windy Scottish beach. Where Monet might sit quietly at an easel under his parasol, painting a modestly sized canvas, McTaggart pushes the idea of open air painting to the limit. His predilection for large canvasses, combined with the coastal winds of Kintyre, meant that except on the very calmest of days keeping the canvas on the easel would have been difficult. He often needed an array of rock-anchored guy ropes and the attendance of at least one of his sons just to keep the painting on the easel, but what is significant is that he did it at all. This tells us a great deal about McTaggart. In order for him to paint what he wanted to paint, he had to have the experience of being in the presence of the land and the sea along with with the work he was attempting to create. This is not about accuracy of form it is about accuracy of feeling. McTaggart was a Gaelic-speaking Highlander and he knew and felt every aspect of the land and sea he painted. His fellow painter J. D. Fergusson said that no painter had ever painted the sea better than McTaggart and he was right. Why was this? It was because McTaggart painted what he knew. He knew the sea not simply as a source of light effects but as place of fish and shallows and reefs and boats and ships and risk. And for McTaggart, as for Angus Morrison, boats are not only things of beauty they are tools of work and social change with all the joys and sorrows that may entail. But in contrast wto Morrison McTaggart's view of ships are always distant, perhaps because for him the most memorable ships were the emigrant ships that departed from the Kintyre of his childhood. He uses these memories to remarkable effect in his series of emigrant ship paintings from the 1890s. This is one of the great achievements of the art of the Gaidhealtachd. McTaggart's *Sailing of the Emigrant Ship* is both a masterclass in painting technique and a profound reflection on the stress of emigration on the communities of Kintyre.

McTaggart's wider significance can be appreciated when one notes that a century after his emigrant ship series, another Highland artist, Will Maclean, drew directly on his example. At the heart of this work dating from 1992 and entitled *Emigrant Ship* is a tiny image of a ship which brings to mind both scrimshaw work and directly echoes the scale and position of McTaggart's emigrant ship. In this work, Will Maclean unites symbols of clearance and emigration. The window through which this emigrant ship can be seen is itself evocative of loss of land and people and culture for Maclean has based it on the east window of the church at Croick in Sutherland. On this window the evicted tenants of Glencalvie, taking refuge in the churchyard in May 1845, scratched messages of despair. In this evocative work. Maclean brings this window together with a graffiti image of an emigrant ship, which he found scratched on the wall of a deserted schoolhouse in a cleared settlement in Mull. Eight years earlier Maclean showed us another window. This is as resonant a window image as that of his *Emigrant Ship*. It is a construction measuring about 18 inches across and it shows the boarded up window of a deserted croft. Looking out through this window we see the conning tower of a submarine. In this work Maclean draws together two essential and interconnected elements of our visualisation the Gaidhealtachd: clearance and militarism. The title of this piece is *Inner Sound*, and this gives us a specific geographical location for the work. The 'Inner Sound' in question is the stretch of water between Raasay and Applecross, with which in his days as a

fisherman Maclean was very familiar. But there is a hint also of a psychological inner sound that we should be listening for. This sound is the sound of the Gaelic language. To some of us it is the sound of a language we still understand. To others, including myself and Will Maclean, it the sound of a language which we should understand, but which we have lost. A language that has been culturally cleared from us. So there is another layer to Maclean's reference to clearance here for loss of land is often the loss of language as well, and – as his work implies - the trade-off of land and language for weapons systems is not necessarily a good one, anymore than is the destruction of language and culture in favour of sheep walk and deer forest.

The locating of this work in Raasay gives us another clue as to how we should read it, for this boarded window refers to Sorley MacLean, specifically to the lines of his great poem *Hallaig* which read, in the poet's own translation from the Gaelic: 'The window is nailed and boarded / through which I saw the West'.⁴ We stand at a point in our history today that gives us an opportunity to unboard that window. I have had the good fortune to help in this process over the last few years as leader of a research project which adapts Sorley MacLean's words for its title. At the suggestion of Will Maclean, we called it 'Window to the West'. The project is an interdisciplinary collaboration between the Visual Research Centre of Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design at the University of Dundee and the Gaelic college in Skye, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig which is part of the University of the Highlands and Islands.⁵ It is driven by the rethinking of the history of Highland visual art. The Dundee University group consists of myself, Will Maclean, Arthur Watson, Norman Shaw, Jane Cumberlidge, Don Addison and our research fellow Lesley Lindsay. At Sabhal Mòr Ostaig the group is Norman Gillies, John Purser and Meg Bateman with advice from Hugh Cheape and key support from Donnie Munro. Our Lewis-based advisor is Finlay Macleod, and I owe to Finlay my awareness of Angus Morrison's work and much else besides.

It is important to note here the wider context of our research. Despite setbacks like the present closure of An Tuireann in Portree, recent years have seen a significant growth of purpose-built art centres in the Highlands, notably Taigh Chearsabhagh and of course the new An Lantair. Further impetus has been given by the opening, at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, of Fàs – the Centre for Creative and Cultural Industries, which includes studios, archive and study facilities and has already established a programme of artists' residences. But that commitment to the provision of infrastructure was led by significant projects and exhibition and that is what I want to emphasise here. Among the most important of these was the An Lantair originated exhibition *As an Fhearann / From the Land: Clearance, Conflict and Crofting* which dates from 1986. This was a key precursor to the Window to the West project, as was in 1989 *Togail Tir / Marking Time: The Maps of the Western Isles*, an exhibition which provided a cartographic underpinning for visual-cultural debate. From a contemporary art perspective the significance of the *Calanais* exhibition of 1995 should also be stressed. The contributions to that exhibition ranged from the

⁴ 'Tha bùird is tàirnean air an uinneig / triomh 'm faca mi an Aird an Iar'; 'The window is nailed and boarded / through which I saw the West.'

⁵ See www.vrc.dundee.ac.uk/Research/window_to_the_west.html. Funded over five years (2005-2010) by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

sensitive realism of Frances Walker's lithography to the minimalism of Alan Johnston's painting. Other notable contributions came from, among many others, Jake Harvey, Fay Godwin, Will Maclean, Calum Angus Mackay and Eileen Lawrence. Like the book accompanying *As an Fhearann*, this exhibition catalogue stands the test of time. It is a key part of the reappropriation of contemporary art for the Highlands. A further contribution was from Richard Demarco who used the exhibition as an opportunity to revisit his remarkable journey through neolithic Europe from Malta to Orkney in 1976. Calanais was a key site on this journey, but one must also mention here the wider dimensions of Demarco's Highland activity, in particular the guidance he gave to the German artist Josef Beuys with respect to his work on Rannoch Moor. Documentation of this work can be found in the Demarco archive digitisation project which forms part of the exhibition at An Lanntair.

The variety of responses to the Calanais stones ranged from attention to astronomical alignments to awareness of the peat in which the stones were once embedded. An artist interested in both aspects is a member of our research group, Norman Shaw, who lived most of his childhood in Calanais: he writes of the relevance of 'denudation and deposition' and of 'the interplay between organic and geometrical form'.⁶ Shaw contributed not only to the Calanais exhibition but also to another key project, *An Leabhar Mor /The Great Book of Gaelic* edited by Malcolm Maclean and Theo Dorgan. This major project from 2002 resulted in a book and exhibition of one hundred works, each of which involved the collaboration of an artist, a calligrapher and a poet. The exhibition is still touring internationally. The poetry ranged from that of anonymous medieval monks to contemporary poets. The artists, calligraphers and designers worked together to make what could be considered a modern equivalent of an illuminated manuscript, but informed by the values of contemporary art. For example, designer Don Addison worked with Elizabeth Ogilvie on her response to one of Mary Macleod's songs and he was also the designer for artist Helen Macalister who worked with the words of poet Christopher Whyte. Among numerous other fascinating interactions, one finds the artist Donald Urquhart working with the calligrapher Louise Donaldson on the first verse of Sorley Maclean's *Hallaig*, Will Maclean working with the Irish calligrapher Frances Breen on Aonghas MacNeacail's poem reflecting on the arrival of St Columba in Scotland, and Meg Bateman working with Mhairi Killin, again with calligrapher Frances Breen.

So this is the rich background of activity that our project has drawn on. An Lanntair has played a key role in much of this, so it is with a sense of repaying an intellectual debt that I speak here this evening.

Taken together the skills of the research group members include history of art, contemporary art practice, and Gaelic language and culture; but much of our work deals with issues of loss of language and culture, so the perspective of those who are not themselves fluent Gaelic speakers but have links to the language via Gaelic-speaking forebears and relatives, and as learners, is significant. This perspective, as I have already noted, is my perspective.

⁶ *Calanais* catalogue, Stornoway: An Lanntair, 1995, 68.

Exploring this in 2007 I said the following in an interview about Window to the West conducted by Georgina Coburn for the Hi Arts web magazine 'Northings':

'As a non-Gaelic speaker myself one of my own starting points was to learn to pronounce my own name, instead of the English approximation of it I normally use. Why did I do that? It is not much use to me in everyday life –yet – but it began to tell me what I am missing. Literally missing. In that sense I am myself an example of cultural clearance and I am joined in that experience (whether they know it or not) by every non-Gaelic-speaking person throughout the world with a 'Mac' in their name, and many more without.'

That is a seemingly small point but it has major ramifications. How many people throughout the world whose origins lie in the Gaidhealtachd cannot even pronounce their own names in the language that gives origin to those names, let alone speak that language? That is an almost unimaginable cultural loss. And just as the language of the Highlands has been systematically ignored so also have the visual traditions. So for me on the one hand our project is about unboarding Sorley's window, on the other it is about retrieving my own culture.

An example of how Window to the West is currently developing this agenda is the conference, *A Context for Highland Art*, held at Dundee Contemporary Arts in September last year, thanks in large part to the efforts of our research fellow, Lesley Lindsay.⁷ There was a fine mix of academic papers and reflections on the making of contemporary art. Among much else, John Purser presented a pioneering exploration of the links between the modernist artists William Crosbie and the founding of the Celtic Ballet. William Crosbie was, of course, the artist who made the images for Sorley MacLean's *Dain to Eimhir*. Later in the day Will Maclean and Arthur Watson presented a visual account of the ideas and techniques which led to their *Crannghal* sculpture, which was installed at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in November 2006. The site, overlooking the Sound of Sleat, is of such visual impact that it demanded a work of the highest quality. As I have noted already, because of their qualities of light and colour, the Highlands have been raising the game of artists ever since the monks in the monastery founded by Saint Columba in Iona made the Book of Kells at the turn of the eighth century.⁸ Maclean and Watson's sculpture was inspired by the vessel in which Columba came to Scotland and it also relates back to the collaboration between Will Maclean and the poet Aonghas Macneacail which I have noted as part of *An Leabhar Mòr*. The conference ended with discussion of the sculpture's iconography in terms of wider Gaelic literature by Meg Bateman. Crossing the boundary between academic thinking and creative practice, she did this through her own poetry, written as a direct response to the sculpture. Other contributions included that of Hugh Cheape, who explored the intriguing realities of the

⁷ In collaboration with the Scottish Society for Art History, the conference, *A Context for Highland Art*, was held at Dundee Contemporary Arts in September 2007. This was extensively reviewed in the Hi-Arts web magazine *Northings*. www.hi-arts.co.uk/Default.aspx?LocID=hianewn21&RefLocID=hiacg5005&Lang=EN.htm

⁸ Not to mention their prehistoric predecessors.

history of tartan rather than the stereotypes; and Malcolm Maclean reflecting on visual art activities relating to the Gaidhealtachd from *As an Fhearann* to *An Leabhar Mòr*. Further contributions came from Joanna Soden, Tim Neat and Sarah McIntyre. Another was from Duncan Macmillan, who revisited his seminal work on the eighteenth century Romantic artist, Alexander Runciman, the first artist to fully engage with James Macpherson's *Ossian*. Runciman's etchings are among the most experimental works of European art from the 1770s, so it is all the more interesting to note the Highland link here. I should also note that over the last three decades scholarship - notably that of Donald Meek building on the work of Derrick Thomson, and of Howard Gaskill and Fiona Stafford - has revised our perception of Macpherson's contribution, very much in Macpherson's favour. In terms of contemporary visual art Calum Colvin has used Runciman's *Ossian* imagery to exceptional effect. These works were a key part of the Highland aspect of the 2007 Royal Scottish Academy annual exhibition. This was the exhibition that led directly to the development of the Highland exhibitions here at An Lanntair and in Dundee.

The Royal Scottish Academy's Highland exhibition brought together major contributions from Academicians such as Frances Walker and Marian Leven, both of whom have held the artist's residency at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. Our project complemented these works by contributing drawings by Will Maclean and Norman Shaw, sound works by John Purser and Norman Shaw and my own DVD presentation of one hundred research images.⁹ Will Maclean contributed rarely seen images relating to land struggle memorials at Balallan, Aignish and Gress and along with other images from the project these went on to form part of the current An Lanntair exhibition. The RSA exhibition as a whole was well received: *Studio International* summed it up, noting that it 'powerfully develops the Highlands and Islands theme in contemporary art and sits well within global aspirations and directions'.¹⁰ It balanced contemporary and historical work in a remarkable way, and at the heart of the historical discourse was a selection from the Academy's own collection, made by Joanna Soden, and this formed another crucial starting point for the exhibitions developed for Dundee and at An Lanntair.

It is Joanna Soden's selection that forms the basis of the book *Highland Art from the Collections of the Royal Scottish Academy: A Window to the West / Ealain Ghàidhealach bho chruinneachaidhean Acadamaidh Rioghail na h-Alba: Uinneag dhan àird an Iar*. I should mention also the contribution of the designer Donald Addison, whom I have already mentioned in connection with *An Leabhar Mòr*. Both the exhibitions and the book demonstrate the potential for constructive interaction between contemporary art galleries, historical collections and university-based research projects. This is just a starting point, what is important is how these interactions lead on to other activities.

⁹ See, e.g., Murdo Macdonald's catalogue essay in the catalogue of the Royal Scottish Academy Annual Exhibition 2007. Also 'Highland Space' work by Macdonald (as part of the *Nozomi* research group) published in *Metronome 11: What is to be done? Tokyo*, shown at Documenta 12, Kassel, 2007.

¹⁰ Iain Gale, 'On the high road to Damascus', *Scotland on Sunday*, May 13 2007; Duncan Macmillan, 'Finding a sense of direction', *The Scotsman*, 25 May 2007; 'RSA Reflects Visual Arts Presence at Sabhal Mòr', *West Highland Free Press*, 11 May 2007; Giles Sutherland in *Northings*, 6 June 2007. Michael Spens, '181th Annual RSA Exhibition', *Studio International*, 7 June 2007.

So that is how we are beginning to repair Sorley Maclean's 'window that is nailed and boarded'. Will Maclean's art in particular helps us to understand the parameters within which were made stereotypical images of the Highlands of the *Monarch of the Glen* variety. Maclean's work often addresses that grand disjunction between those who hunted deer but did not need to and those who would have liked to hunt deer to sustain them and their families, but were prevented from doing so. In 1887 this tension was expressed sharply in Lewis, when the men of Pairc put human rights before the legal rights of the estate owners and hunted the deer. It is, of course, that deer raid of November 1887 which is commemorated by Will Maclean's memorial at Balallan, built in 1994, with masonry by Jim Crawford. It is one of a set of three memorials commissioned to mark different phases of the struggle for land in Lewis from the 1860s to the 1920s.¹¹ Considering their importance both in Scottish and in European terms, these works have received relatively little attention and, to go back to my earlier point, the history of these monuments, not just the events they commemorate, must be written also.

So far I have suggested several starting points for gaining a wider perspective on art and the Gaidhealtachd. But there are, of course, many, many more. Another is the history of photography of the Highlands. In terms of the Western Isles this area is particularly fascinating, and it is beginning to receive the attention it deserves. The recent Robert M. Adam exhibitions at An Lanntair and the accompanying books by Finlay Macleod are an example of this. I would also note the remarkable photographs of Dan Morrison, and I think I am right in saying that Dan is related to Angus Morrison, so there is clearly something of a dynasty of visual thinkers in Ness. Michael Russell's work on Werner Kissling is also of considerable significance here and I know that Hugh Cheape is currently exploring the work of Walter Blaikie.

Consider the interest of Blaikie's photograph of wool waulking in Eriskay in 1898 which John Lorne Campbell reproduces in his *Hebridean Folksongs*. He also reproduces Keith Henderson's wonderful image of wool waulking from Barra, painted in the 1930s, which we had the good fortune to include in our Dundee exhibition, courtesy of the University of Edinburgh. Blaikie was a close friend of Father Allan McDonald, whom we see in his photograph, and also of Alexander Carmichael. The network between oral, literary and visual traditions is clear, and I have not even mentioned Paul Strand's *Tir a Mhurain* yet, all the more interesting because of his connection with Alan Lomax. Let alone the contributions of contemporary photographers such as Murdo Macleod, Gus Wyllie and Calum Angus Mackay.

Within such density of material, painted, sculpted, constructed or photographic, starting points are easy enough, but how can we get a perspective? There is an image that helps me here. It is a bird's eye view – if a bird could fly that high – that takes the Highland point of view. Broadly speaking it reverses the view of the notorious BBC weather map. It is a drawing by the geographer Arthur Geddes and Geddes' interest in such a perspective would have been influenced by the fact that his grandfather was a native Gaelic speaker and the fact that he was a Gaelic learner himself. He also played the fiddle and made his own distinctive contribution to the folk revival of the 1950s and 60s with

¹¹ The masonry in each case is the work of Jim Crawford.

his *Songs of Craig and Ben*. His image was published in 1948 to accompany a seminal paper, *The 'Outer' Hebrides*, a paper in which he redefines centre and periphery by the simple device of adding quotation marks to the word 'outer'. In this paper he takes on board the ideas of his father Patrick Geddes and of his father's friend the French geographer, Elisée Reclus. This is a visualising of the Highlands in European terms and of Europe in Highland terms.¹² At the same time, both Scotland and Europe are seen as part of the globe itself, in an ecological vision extending from Scandinavia to Africa. This map provides a fine perspective on the Highlands, whether one wants to explore the work of Beuys on Rannoch Moor, or the work of the manuscript illuminators on Iona. In a sense it marks the end of my paper, but a new perspective is also always a new beginning.

Consider one of the first places we come to on Arthur Geddes' map: the west coast of Lewis. This is where the chess pieces were found and instead of seeing Lewis from a metropolitan point of view as a strange peripheral place, Arthur Geddes' map allows us to see it at the heart of medieval European trade routes, and chess pieces in this location in the middle of the twelfth century begin to make considerable sense. The more so when we observe that although these pieces were probably – although by no means certainly - made in Norway, as we can see from the side details on several of the thrones, aspects of the decoration are distinctly Celtic. Perhaps these works were made for the retinue of Somerled, perhaps they were en route to the Mediterranean. Whatever the story the decoration reflects the interplay of Norse and Celtic cultures which defined so much of the Scotland and Ireland of the period. We may never know how the chess pieces got to Lewis or where they were bound. But we should be very aware of the fact that in their decoration they would have been appropriate to the Hebrides of the twelfth century. This point is rarely noted, but it strengthens the possibility that their destination was in fact somewhere in the Hebrides or the West Highlands. Thus the Lewis chess pieces should be considered as very much part of the art of the Gaidhealtachd. The more so because the Celtic aspects of their decoration can be seen as a link back to the work of the Gaels who made the great crosses and manuscripts of the eighth century in Iona and Islay.

At the same time these aspects link forward to the Gaels who carved the grave slabs and crosses of what we now know as the West Highland School of sculpture from the 14th to the 16th centuries. This school is another of the hidden treasures of Gaidhealtachd art, which we tend to overlook simply because it has been researched under the heading of archaeology rather than art. Yet artists have certainly not been absent from this effort. Indeed what I think of as the first artist's book by a Scottish artist, James Drummond's *Sculptured Monuments in Iona and the West Highlands*, published in 1881, is devoted to this West Highland work. Drummond's work also serves to emphasise another great Norse contribution to Highland culture, the Highland galley, which appears on many of these, not least at Iona, and in one of the late expressions of this school, the Macleod tomb in the church at Rodel.

That really does bring me to something of a conclusion for such clinker built boats are the precursors of the clinker built fishing boats of the Hebrides. I would remind you here of

¹² Arthur Geddes (1948) 'The "Outer" Hebrides', *The New Naturalist*, Summer, 1948, 72-76.

the work of Angus Morrison who often painted the Ness *Sgoth* in his work. This type of fishing boat, thanks to the building of *An Suilair* in the mid 1990s has now itself become part of the contemporary art of the Hebrides through the work of Ian Stephen and others. Indeed such work was a key part of the *Sail Loft* show that marked the opening of the new An Lanntair in 2005.

It is that theme that I have explored here: the theme of contemporary Highland art linking back into the history of Highland culture and bringing it into focus for the present.