

Finding Fergusson: Tracing the Life and Work of a Scottish Artist¹

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‘The Scottish Colourist Series: J. D. Fergusson’ exhibition was held at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (SNGMA) from 7 December 2013 to 15 June 2014. The first major retrospective of Fergusson’s work for 40 years, the exhibition comprised over 100 artworks and a sizeable quantity of archive material. It aroused significant media attention and attracted 30,642 visitors. It went on tour to Pallant House Gallery, Chichester from 5 July to 19 October 2014. Exhibitions of this scale are not possible without significant staff-led research: in this case, curators conducted research over the course of two years. This process was instrumental not only in providing information for labels and the exhibition catalogue, but also played a key role in uncovering and selecting those works that were included in the exhibition. Following a short biographical introduction to J. D. Fergusson, this article serves as a case study of how a national institution researches a major retrospective. It is hoped that by describing the process undertaken by curatorial staff and the resources used, it will aid other curators, archivists and academics in overcoming the typical obstacles in researching the life and work of an artist.

The term ‘Scottish Colourists’ describes the loose grouping of S. J. Peploe (1871–1935), J. D. Fergusson (1874–1961), George Leslie Hunter (1877–1931) and F. C. B. Cadell (1883–1937), and was first used on the occasion of an exhibition held at T. & R. Annan & Sons in Glasgow in 1948. It united four artists who adopted similar approaches in their use of colour and light, influenced by developments in French art pioneered by the Impressionists and the Fauves. As the name suggests, the exhibition ‘The Scottish Colourist Series: J. D. Fergusson’ was one of a series of major retrospective exhibitions at the SNGMA on this small group, now acknowledged as Scotland’s most celebrated modern artists. The series began in 2011 with an exhibition of the work of F. C. B. Cadell, then focused on S. J. Peploe in 2012, before concluding in 2013 with the first major retrospective of the work of J. D. Fergusson to be held in 40 years.

Despite the present interest in the Scottish Colourists, there are significant biographical gaps in Fergusson’s chronology, particularly regarding the early years of his life. Fergusson was born in Leith, near Edinburgh, on 9 March 1874, son of John Fergusson – a wine and spirits merchant – and his wife Christina. One of four children, he attended schools in and around Edinburgh before

¹ This article would not have been possible without the generous help and illuminating anecdotes of Alice Strang and Rachel Smith, Curator and Assistant Curator respectively of ‘The Scottish Colourist Series: J. D. Fergusson’.

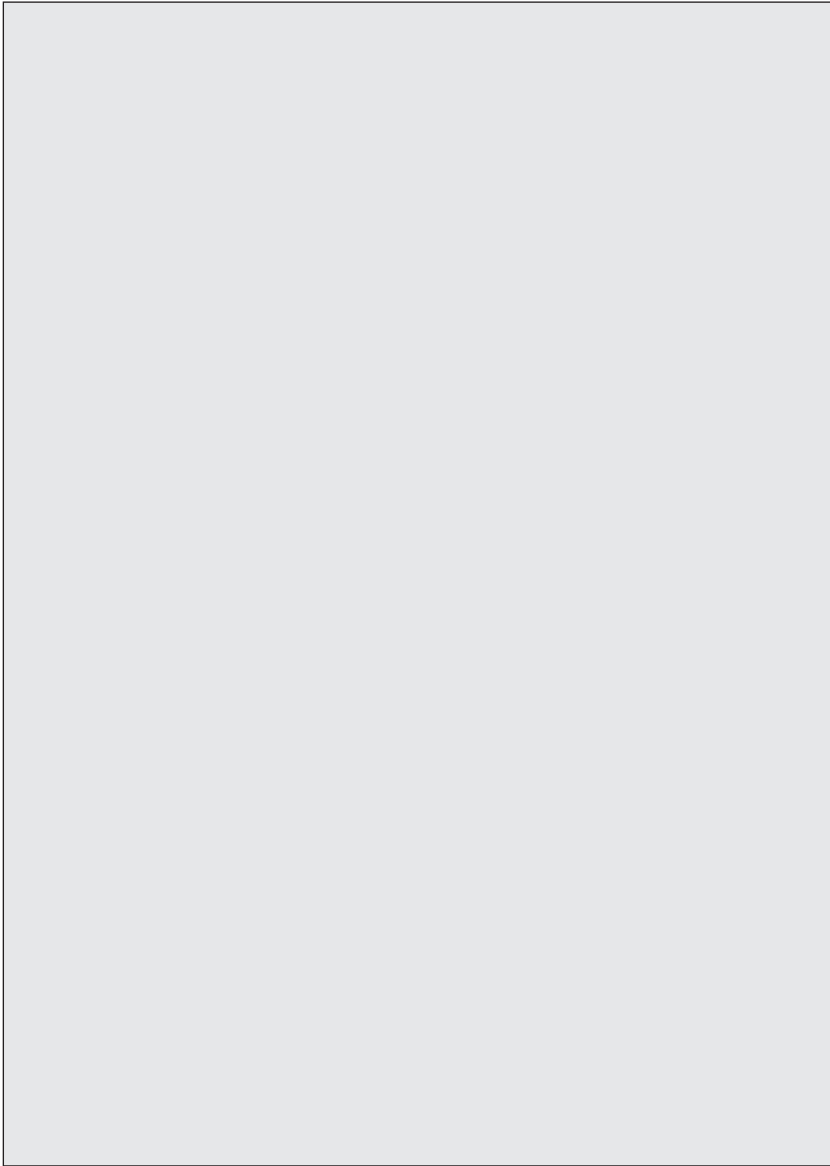


Plate 1 J. D. Fergusson in his Paris studio, *c.*1910. © The Fergusson Gallery, Perth & Kinross Council.

moving to Paris (Plate 1) to study at the Académie Colarossi and Académie Julian in the mid to late 1890s. Upon his return to Edinburgh around 1900, he first met his subsequent close friend and fellow Colourist S. J. Peploe. Settling in Paris in 1907, he associated with a vibrant group of Anglo-American artists, including Jessie M. King (1875–1949), Jo Davidson (1883–1952), E. A. Taylor (1874–1951) and Fergusson’s lover at the time, Anne Estelle Rice (1877–1959). He cut a dashing figure in artistic circles, sketching the fashionable denizens of Paris in the city’s cafés and associating with artists such as Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), André Dunoyer de Segonzac (1884–1974) and Antoine Bourdelle (1861–1929). Fergusson felt that the city was a natural home for an artist: ‘Paris is simply a place of freedom. Geographically central, it has always been a centre of light, learning and research ... where an artist of any sort is just a human being like a doctor or a plumber, and not a freak or a madman.’²

In 1911 Fergusson was invited by Michael Sadler and John Middleton Murry to act as founding editor for the pioneering journal *Rhythm*, which featured artwork and writing by such figures as Katherine Mansfield, D. H. Lawrence, Walter de la Mare and Picasso. Two years later he met Margaret Morris, a dance pioneer, teacher and choreographer who became his lifelong partner and with whom he would collaborate artistically. In her biography of Fergusson, Morris recounts their first meeting:

Armed with an introduction, I presented myself at his studio at about four in the afternoon. The door was opened a few inches and a dripping black head appeared and said – ‘I mean to say ... I’m in my bath, can you come back in half an hour?’³

Morris was a charismatic figure in her own right, who already ran her own dance company and would later found the Margaret Morris Movement dance system (which is still in existence) and she was, unusually for the period, a vegetarian and health enthusiast. The headquarters of Morris’s dance club was based in London, but she visited Fergusson in Paris and Antibes until the outbreak of the First World War. Forced to return to Britain, Fergusson soon followed Morris back to London. His career – stymied by an absence of collectors interested in his work and his own tendency to set his prices above market value – improved during the 1920s and he exhibited in Edinburgh, London, Glasgow, Paris and New York.

After returning to France in 1929, Fergusson was again forced to move back to Britain on the outbreak of the Second World War, this time to Glasgow. He settled at 4 Clouston Street in Glasgow, where he would remain for the rest of his life. Fergusson was an active member of the Glaswegian arts scene, becoming a founder member of the New Art Club and president of the New Scottish Group in addition to being art editor of the journal *Scottish Art and Letters*. The first touring retrospective of his work took place in 1948 and he

² J. D. Fergusson, *Modern Scottish Painting* (Glasgow, 1943), 70.

³ M. Morris, *The Art of J. D. Fergusson: A Biased Biography* (Glasgow, 1974), 15.

continued to write, exhibit and support other artists until his death of chronic bronchitis on 30 January 1961. Two years later Margaret Morris established the J. D. Fergusson Art Foundation, as a means to look after his estate and support young Scottish artists, and in 1962 the first of his works entered the collection of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. In 1991 the Fergusson Art Foundation gifted its artworks and archive to Perth and Kinross Council: the following year The Fergusson Gallery opened in Perth. Following Fergusson's lead, the Foundation and Gallery continue to support up-and-coming Scottish artists, in addition to staging exhibitions of Fergusson's work and aiding research into his life and career.

Alice Strang was appointed as Curator for all three exhibitions in 'The Scottish Colourist Series' in 2010, later aided for the Peploe and Fergusson exhibitions by the appointment of an externally funded Assistant Curator, Rachel Smith. Exhibitions on such a large scale – each including over 100 works of art, in addition to significant quantities of archive material – require much preparation, with a lead-in period for each exhibition of at least two years. However, working on a series of retrospectives focusing on a single group of artists allowed Ms Strang and Ms Smith to establish a research pattern over the course of the exhibitions, with sources used early on in the process proving vital later on in the series as well.

In terms of researching J. D. Fergusson – and indeed any artist – there were some obvious places to start. The curators began by consulting the Library and Archive at the SNGMA. The SNGMA Archive contains over 120 separate holdings relating to 20th- and 21st-century artists, collectors and art organisations (including the Gallery's own papers). These comprise files of papers, drawings, sketchbooks, photographs, textiles, diaries, news cuttings and other printed ephemera. There is a particular focus on Scottish art and artists, sitting beside a world-class collection of Dada and Surrealist publications and archive material. The SNGMA Archive holds correspondence by and to Fergusson in a number of its collections, and was understandably the first repository to be consulted by our curators. A number of letters from Fergusson to a Scottish artist named Donald Bain (1904–79) were donated to the archive in 1977 and highlight the supportive role Fergusson played for many young artists: in a draft of a letter addressed to Picasso, Fergusson asks that he take a look at Bain's work, being 'one of our best young artists'. Correspondence from the Archive contributed towards the exhibition labels and catalogue, and was also exhibited in the display 'Behind the Canvas: J. D. Fergusson in the Archive', a collection of archive material intended to complement the rest of the exhibition. This exhibition within an exhibition was housed in the Keiller Library, a display space designed specifically for the exhibition of archive material and artist books. Keiller Library displays often complement major exhibitions taking place at the SNGMA, and indeed accompanied all three Colourist exhibitions of 'The Scottish Series'.

The SNGMA reference Library consists of around 50,000 items, including monographs, catalogues raisonnés, exhibition catalogues, periodicals, auction

sales catalogues, audio-visual material and ephemera broadly relating to modern and contemporary art (i.e. around 1900 onward) and specifically to the Gallery of Modern Art collections. The Special Books Collections comprises over 2,500 artist books and limited edition *livres d'artistes*, dating from 1897 to the present day. As with the Archive and Library holdings, a particular emphasis is placed on Dada and Surrealism, and Scottish art and artists. In Fergusson's case, the curators undertook a survey of the current literature, consulting the exhibition catalogues and publications which had been produced over the course of his exhibiting career; in addition to surveys of the Scottish Colourists⁴ and Margaret Morris's illuminating if patchy biography of her partner.⁵ Art and artist encyclopedias – such as *The Dictionary of Scottish Art and Architecture*⁶ and *The Dictionary of Artists in Britain Since 1945*⁷ – were used in conjunction with the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* to uncover biographical information. In addition to searching the SNGMA Library's physical holdings, the website Copac⁸ – which brings together the catalogues of over 90 major national, university and specialist UK and Irish libraries – allowed our curators to search multiple catalogues to locate relevant publications. The SNGMA Library also holds artist lists of the major exhibiting societies, such as The Royal Academy, The Royal Scottish Academy, The Society of Scottish Artists, The Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts and The Society of Women Artists. When consulted in conjunction with the annual exhibition catalogues, the curators discovered which works Fergusson had contributed to these societies' exhibitions – their title, medium and price for sale – which was invaluable in researching Fergusson's exhibiting history. Some societies' publications also list the personal addresses of artists, which proved useful in determining a biographical chronology. All of these societies are still in existence and can advise on where other lists and archive material can be consulted.

Easily accessible to curators, the SNGMA Archive, Library and Special Books Collections are also available to external researchers and can be consulted at Modern Two on Belford Road. Due to the small scale of the department, an appointment system is operated, with the reading room open for public access from 10 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. on weekdays. The catalogues of both the Archive and the Library are now accessible to search online, via the CalmView public access portal on the National Galleries of Scotland website.⁹

⁴ See P. Long with E. Cumming, *The Scottish Colourists 1900–1930: F. C. B. Cadell, J. D. Fergusson, G. L. Hunter, S. J. Peploe* (Edinburgh, 2000) and T. J. Honeyman, *Three Scottish Colourists: S. J. Peploe, F. C. B. Cadell, Leslie Hunter* (Edinburgh, 1950).

⁵ Morris, *The Art of J. D. Fergusson*.

⁶ Peter J. M. McEwan, *The Dictionary of Scottish Art and Architecture* (Ballater, 2004).

⁷ D. Buckman, *The Dictionary of Artists in Britain Since 1945* (Bristol, 1998).

⁸ <http://copac.jisc.ac.uk>.

⁹ Access to both catalogues is available at: <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/research/scottish-national-gallery-of-modern-art-library-archive-and-special-books-collection>.

Consulting material relating to Fergusson's schooling, training and career were vital in establishing a chronology of his life and work, and was found in a variety of institutional collections: Tate Archive, The Courtauld Institute of Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London; The Stewartry Museum, Kirkcudbright; the University of Glasgow and The Mitchell Library, Glasgow; Edinburgh College of Art, the National Library of Scotland and Central Library, Edinburgh. Their holdings can be searched via a number of online resources which detail institutional archives' collections, including SCAN (Scottish Archive Network),¹⁰ NRAS (National Register of Archives for Scotland),¹¹ NRS (National Records of Scotland),¹² Discovery on The National Archives' website¹³ and the Archives Hub.¹⁴

However, it is The Fergusson Gallery in Perth which has, unsurprisingly, proven the most useful and comprehensive resource in researching Fergusson. Margaret Morris's determination to secure her partner's legacy meant that she kept much of the correspondence, photographs and publications that he produced over the years. The SNGMA borrowed a variety of such material for the retrospective, including photographs and correspondence but also art paraphernalia such as paint tubes, brushes and palettes. Such archive material provides an insight into particular periods in Fergusson's life: his address book, for example, illustrates his relations with his artistic contemporaries, neatly noting down Picasso's address in the 'P' section. A significant quantity of correspondence also survives in The Fergusson Gallery's archive. Fergusson often doodled and sketched in his letters, and these additions provide an insight into his relationship with Morris, art dealers and fellow artists as well as his thoughts about the artwork he was producing at the time. Although perhaps not as self-analytical or reflective in his writing as, for example, S. J. Peploe, they do provide snapshots into his career and relationships at different points in his life. However, there is some correspondence from Fergusson to Morris that we chose not to show in the exhibition, due to its sexual content and explicit marginalia: although these offered an intimate view into the nature of their relationship, their inclusion seemed prurient and irrelevant to Fergusson's artistic output.

Commercial galleries with a long history of exhibiting also proved a fruitful resource when researching Fergusson. For example, The Scottish Gallery in Edinburgh – established in 1842 and still trading today – provided much information, in addition to lending archive material for the display. Originally titled Aitken Dott and functioning as a framer and art supplier, it opened an exhibiting space in 1897 where Fergusson and the other Scottish Colourists

¹⁰ <http://www.scan.org.uk>.

¹¹ <http://www.nas.gov.uk/nras/>.

¹² <http://catalogue.nrscotland.gov.uk/nrsonlinecatalogue/welcome.aspx>.

¹³ <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>.

¹⁴ <http://archiveshub.ac.uk>.

often showed.¹⁵ It holds correspondence to and from artists in addition to daybooks that record the sales of artworks from the 1890s, and proved most useful in determining the provenance of paintings and sculpture by Fergusson. Unfortunately, other commercial galleries who exhibited Fergusson's work over the course of his career – such as Barbizon House or the Hazlitt Gallery in London – have changed hands or closed down, and much material has been lost. Pockets of similar material survive in institutional archives (such as the Lefevre Gallery holdings at Tate Archive, which our curators consulted frequently), but due to the nature of the commercial gallery such material is often completely lost.

Although most of the correspondence and photographs relating directly to Fergusson are held at The Fergusson Gallery, other caches of relevant material are still held by private individuals – family members, friends of the artist and collectors with a particular interest in the artist. During the course of our research a significant gift of exhibition catalogues was donated to the SNGMA Archive by a private collector, many of which were displayed in the exhibition. The same collector kindly lent a number of other items, including Fergusson's accounts book dating from 1912 (also shown in the exhibition) which carefully lists his expenditure on coal, kippers and milk, testifying to his frugal lifestyle early on in his career. One Glaswegian woman's father was closely involved in the New Scottish Group and had carefully looked after the exhibition catalogues and publications produced by the group in the 1950s. A private collector had acquired the records of the Annan Gallery, a business in Glasgow which is still extant though it has now changed hands: at some point their archives were broken up and dispersed, but these papers survive. Our curators were allowed research access to them for the first time in decades, and one ledger was lent for display in the exhibition. The SNGMA curators established a network of collectors, dealers and experts over the course of 'The Scottish Colourist Series' exhibitions who could advise and direct them towards such holdings: over 30 people who knew Fergusson and Morris were interviewed as part of the curators' research (a process which was not possible with either Cadell or Peploe, who both died in the 1930s). Of course, it may be more difficult for the independent researcher – without similar resources or such an institutional profile – to track down privately held papers such as these.

Auction house records played a crucial role in tracing Fergusson's artistic output, and are obviously particularly useful when tracing the provenance of works by such popular and consistently selling artists as Fergusson, Peploe, Cadell and Hunter. The SNGMA Library holds physical copies of the major auction houses' sales catalogues: Bonhams, Christie's, Sotheby's and Edinburgh-based Lyon & Turnbull. Auction sales results can also be found online, either on the auction houses' own websites or via specialised subscription-based search engines such as Artnet.

¹⁵ Incidentally The Scottish Gallery is now operated by Guy Peploe, grandson of Fergusson's friend and fellow Colourist S.J. Peploe.

Digitised collections and the provision of online catalogues have, over the past fifteen years, revolutionised the way in which researchers consult and understand collections. They allow the public to access records remotely, to consult vulnerable records without damaging them through handling, and they often open up new areas of research by raising the profile of certain collections. It is clear that public – and political – expectations for such ease of access are increasing, a result of the development of digital technologies and the central role they now play in our society.¹⁶ Despite such advances, archives and libraries are often underresourced and overstretched, and such digital resources often prove to be only excerpts or highlights from collections, and not representative of entire holdings. Researchers should understand that such resources should be used in conjunction with physically visiting repositories and consulting archive staff, rather than as a sole source of information.

The SNGMA curators took advantage of the digitised collections available online. Members of the National Library of Scotland have free access to their digital collections, which include hundreds of thousands of digitised books, periodicals and manuscripts spanning over five centuries, as well as access to digitised newspapers, journals and reports. Running a keyword search of the Scotsman Digital Archive 1817–1950 and the Times Digital Archive 1785–2007 databases uncovered a number of reviews of Fergusson’s work, which helped to pinpoint exhibition dates and provided snapshots of contemporary critical responses to his work. Although Fergusson struggled to sell his work during his lifetime, such quotations reveal that his art generally provoked a positive reaction from critics. A quotation by critic Stephen Bone was included in the exhibition and neatly encapsulates Fergusson’s style: ‘Nudes and nosegays, bathers and yachts and sunlight – these form the dominant themes of [Fergusson’s] art, so witty, sensitive and “mondaine”.’¹⁷

Another vital resource utilised by the Fergusson curators was, simply put, people. Numerous individuals in the private, public and commercial art sectors were consulted for both research and loan purposes, in addition to those academics and researchers who have worked on the Scottish Colourists for decades: Roger Billcliffe and Elizabeth Cumming were incredibly generous and supportive of the project. Existing research by these figures provided solid groundwork for further investigation, but also turned up some piquant anecdotes about the painter which served to illuminate his character and give a sense of him as a real person rather than simply as an art historical figure. For example, Fergusson’s 1929 painting *S.S. Transylvania Souvenir (The Pink Box)*, (Plate 2) appears at first glance to be a rather straightforward, if beautiful, portrait of a female sitter surrounded by fruit, sculpture and – in the foreground – a small

¹⁶ See the policy ‘Archives for the 21st Century in action: refreshed 2012–2015’, available at: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/archives21centuryrefreshed-final.pdf>.

¹⁷ S. Bone, ‘Two Scottish Artists. Paintings by J. D. Fergusson’, *The Scotsman*, 2 March 1932, 14.

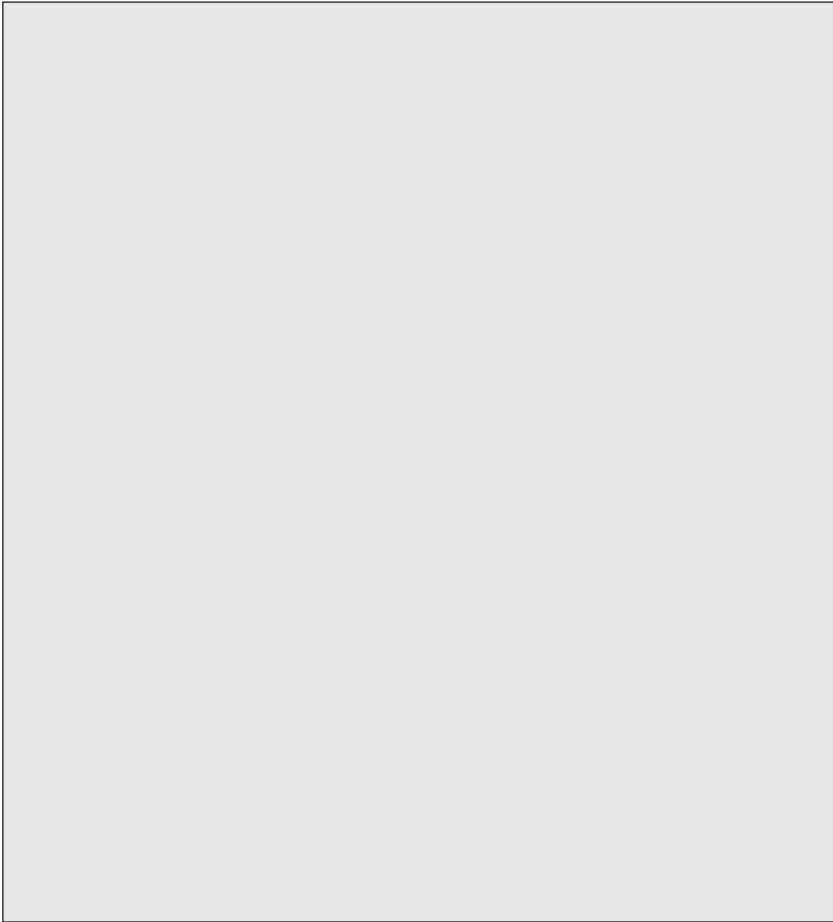


Plate 2 S.S. *Transylvania Souvenir (The Pink Box)*, 1929. © Private Collection, courtesy Christie's.

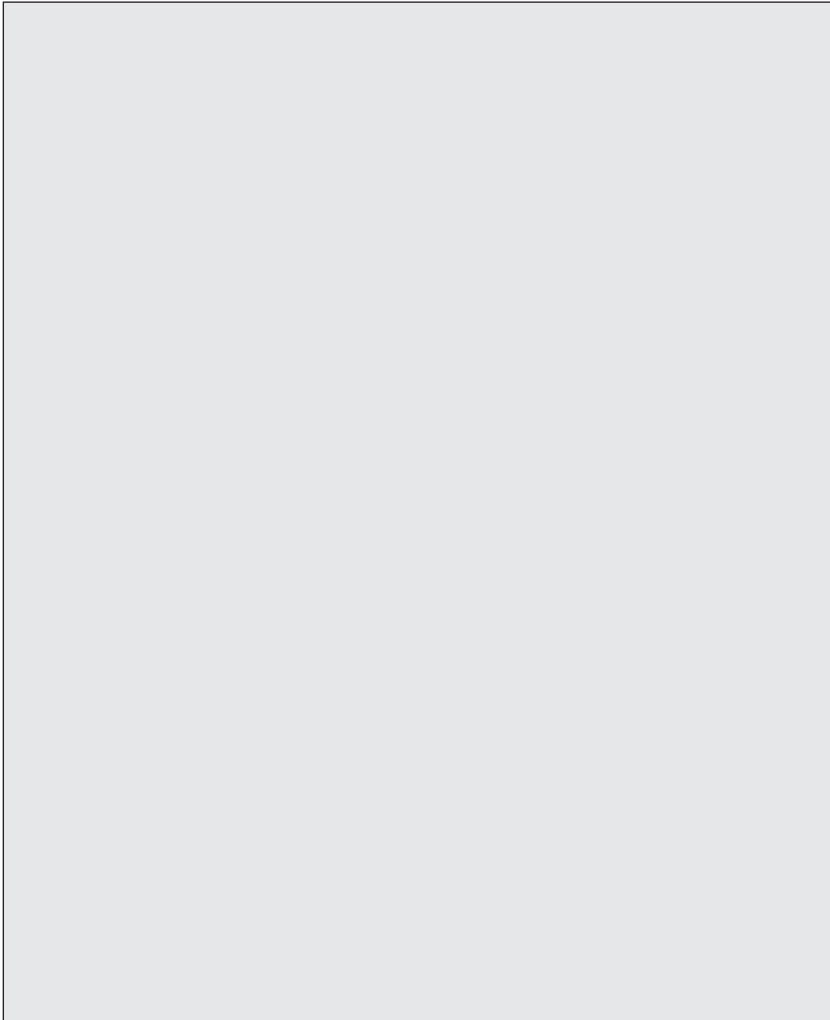


Plate 3 *The Silk Hat*, 1903. © Llangoed Hall, Brecon, Powys.

pink box. It is only from past interviews with friends of Fergusson, conducted by Elizabeth Cumming and Philip Long, that we now know that this pink box is where the artist was rumoured to have kept his contraceptives.¹⁸ Placing it in the forefront of the composition adds an extra frisson of illicit sensuality to the work, a subtext only identifiable through such research.

Finally, an appeal was made to the public. An article¹⁹ was published in *The Herald* newspaper asking for information about Fergusson from those who knew him. This was invaluable in uncovering facts and anecdotes about the artist, and also in turning up little-known paintings, sculptures and archive material. One of the key works in the retrospective – an early 1907 portrait of the beautiful and mysterious ‘Mademoiselle H’ – was loaned after the private collector spotted the appeal. These personal anecdotes from friends and family can provide a direct link to the deceased, illuminating their character in a way impossible to achieve solely through academic research. Curator Alice Strang interviewed a 92-year-old woman, whose father had met Fergusson while sketching in an anatomy class at Edinburgh University in the 1890s: this led to her lifelong friendship with both Fergusson and Morris, and a fund of anecdotes and affectionate reminiscences. Additionally, a wall text in the exhibition space itself invited members of the public who knew Fergusson and Morris to contact Alice Strang with their memories. As members of NGS staff the curators are bound by confidentiality agreements, so were entrusted at times with sensitive information which, on occasion, we were able to publish with the permission of its source.

Indeed, information can emerge simply through informal conversation. Alice Strang uncovered a stunning portrait by Fergusson after chatting with an art dealer who recalled acquiring *The Silk Hat* (Plate 3) for Sir Bernard Ashley, husband of the designer Laura Ashley. It had been purchased with intention of hanging it in Llangoed Hall, a Welsh country house hotel. Ms Strang rang up the hotel reception with the dim hope that it might still be in their possession: the receptionist cheerily responded, ‘Oh yes, it’s hanging in the snooker room.’ Llangoed Hall was happy to lend the portrait, and it featured prominently in the retrospective.

The retrospective has encouraged further research on Fergusson, which has been disseminated both through a substantial lecture programme and by a one-day seminar held on 20 March 2014, which featured papers by speakers from Sarajevo, France, the USA and the UK. New information and previously unknown works have come to light since the exhibition opened and the catalogue was published.

The role of the exhibition curator is different from that of the academic or family historian. In addition to undertaking research which will feature in

¹⁸ See Long and Cumming, *The Scottish Colourists 1900–1930*, 147, n. 23.

¹⁹ ‘Gallery in public appeal for works by Scottish Colourist’, *The Herald*, 27 December 2012, <http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/home-news/gallery-in-public-appeal-for-works-by-scots-colourist.19755151>.

the exhibition's labels and signage – and in the catalogue, which will form the basis of the exhibition's legacy – the research process aids in identifying, selecting and then requesting the loan of the artwork and archive material they hope to display in the exhibition. Additionally, due diligence procedures²⁰ – established to ensure that lenders have legal ownership of the works they donate or lend and that no third-party claims to ownership exist – are reliant on provenance checks, conducted through extensive research into the ownership and movement of an artwork. As evident from this article, representatives of a national institution, such as the SNGMA curators, have certain advantages when conducting research into artists: the opportunity to consult in-house libraries and archives, the ability to draw on the expertise of their colleagues and utilising the publicity attracted by a high-profile exhibition. On the other hand they are constrained by the administrative demands of coordinating a large-scale exhibition (and accompanying catalogue) and the limited time-frames involved. However, it is hoped that the description of this process can help archivists, curators and academics in their own research.

'The Scottish Colourist Series: J. D. Fergusson' exhibition was a partnership between the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh, and The Fergusson Gallery, Perth & Kinross Council in 2013/14. Selected works toured to Pallant House Gallery, Chichester in 2014. The entire 'Scottish Colourist Series' of exhibitions at the National Galleries of Scotland was sponsored by Dickson Minto.

²⁰ For information on the National Galleries of Scotland due diligence procedures, see: http://www.nationalgalleries.org/media/_file/about_us/ngs_due_diligence_policy_for_loans_for_temporary_exhibition.pdf.