

SCOTLAND'S FINEST EXILES

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Typical. The greatest recent collection of our nation's art is in... London. Anna Burnside meets the Yorkshirewoman in charge of it.

Perform a mental Wikipedia search for Scottish Art and most of us come up with the following: *The Reverend Robert Walker skating on Duddingston Loch*, the *Monarch of the Glen* gazing impetuously down his nose, the colourists surrounded by jugs of tulips, orange blinds and elegant ladies in hats... of Douglas Gordon peeping out from his peroxide mop of hair. The settings are the grand galleries of Edinburgh, the art colleges of the big cities or dingy studios that smell of Calor Gas heaters and last week's roll-ups.

Which goes to show that you can't trust everything you think you know. One of the most important collections of Scottish art in the world lives in the heart of Mayfair, next door to the Land Rover showroom, round the corner from the Ritz. It begins in the 1750s and goes right up to the present day, with work from Turner-shortlisted Nathan Coley and Charles Avery, veteran of the Venice Biennale, hanging beside 19th-century landscapes and still lifes on its highly polished, wood-panelled walls.

It is ironic that, as there is no national institution dedicated to presenting, preserving and purchasing Scottish Art, it has fallen on an English woman who works in the heart of London to do the job.

The national galleries have, belatedly woken up to the fact that Scotland has an important historical and influential contemporary art scene, and are finally buying the work of living artists. But they must combine this impulse with the need to get feet through the door and put on crowd-pulling, ticket-selling big name exhibition. (See Andy Warhol at the RSA or Kylie's costumes, coming soon to Kelingrove.)

The Fleming Collection offers art for art's sake in a postcode better known for voracious earning and profligate spending. Despite coming from an ancient Yorkshire family and having an accent that makes the Queen sound common, the curator, Selina Skipwith, has become a professional enthusiast for Scottish painting. Rather like the creation of the collection itself, this was a happy accident that has grown into something much bigger.

The first canvases arrived in the London offices of Fleming's merchant bank in 1968, when David Donald, one of the directors of the family-run company, suggested some art might liven the place up. The board decided that, since their eponymous founder had been born in Dundee in 1900, they would hang only works by Scottish artists or with a strong Scottish connection.

Their timing could not have been better. Unlike today, when the best Peploes go at auction for more than £500,000, Scottish art was unknown, underpriced and ripe for the plucking. Fine canvases by the Scottish colourists cluttered regional salesrooms and dealers' dusty corners. A painting by one of the Glasgow Boys cost less than a Vauxhall Viva. When they were not tied to the FTSE, two directors who already had an eye for art set about decorating the bank's headquarters with Hornels, Cadells, McTaggarts and whatever else caught their attention.

By the time Selina Skipwith arrived in 1996, Flemings had grown from a 60-person family firm to an international force with 7,500 staff. "I went in to catalogue

the collection for two months and never left,” she recalls. “I got all that in order and then realised that it was a very important collection. The family realised as well, and I became their first full-time Keeper of art.”

As well as appreciating the treasure trove she had found hiding among the red braces and old copies of the Financial Times, it soon dawned on Skipwith that, in the febrile environment of international finance, an art collection like this one needed some extra protection. “This was something quite important, you couldn’t start it from scratch today.”

Her response was to put an emergency plan into place in case the whispered rumours came true and Flemings was ever sold. “Banks can collapse, like Barings, merge, sell, you never know what’s going to happen. We agreed that, if the bank sold or was taken over, I would come in and, with the support of the family, buy the entire collection back at market value. The family would give the money to do that, then it would be gifted straight back to a charitable foundation, which would own the paintings and be endowed by the family.

“This had all been done and put on ice, then, in April 2000, the story broke that Chase Manhattan was buying Flemings. Our plan went instantly into action.”

For Skipwith, a history of art graduate from Newcastle University, this was a leap into the dark. Her first proper job had turned from a curatorial mystery tour into project managing the establishment of a private gallery. If she was daunted at the time, she does not let on. The Fleming family set up a new asset management company, Fleming Family and Partners, in Mayfair. Skipwith, a team of architects and, eventually, her paintings, moved into their ground floor and basement. The gallery finally opened its door on Burns Night 2002.

“We had not idea before if we would get two people a day or 200,” she recalls. “Our first exhibition was from our own collection, works by the Glasgow Boys. In the first two weeks we had 20,000 people through the doors.”

Today, under Skipwith’s guidance, the Fleming Collection has grown into an important body of work lovingly tended by a key player in the Scottish art world. She has a considerable (but undisclosed) budget, a generous hand when lending to other museums and galleries, and if an artist has not lived up to early promise, she has no qualms about selling again.

Unlike publicly funded museums, which must kowtow to taxpayers and politicians, Skipwith has a free hand to select whatever she thinks will work with the rest of the collection. This can be the degree show of a promising young Scot, or historical works depicting important scenes of national life. The collection holds rare images of the Highland Clearances and a Lowry painting of Clydeside. She recently paid about £100,000 for a David Wilkie portrait.

“We mainly buy contemporary works to keep it a living collection, but we do have historical gaps,” says Skipwith.

The airy abstracts of Callum Innes and Joan Eardley’s portraits of Glasgow urchins are a couple of the items on her wish list. Skipwith is also approached by individual collectors and descendants of artists who have paintings they want to sell, but which they don’t want to disappear into a private home or museum vault. The Fleming Collection’s reputation is such that important institutions, such as the Tate, have also passed on paintings they have in storage with no plans to hang.

Skipwith is free of the commercial imperative that forces the National Galleries in Scotland, or the Kelvingrove in Glasgow, to depend on money-raising crowd-pleasers. The Fleming Collection’s next show eschews golden hotpants in favour of William McTaggart, considered to be the grandfather of modern Scottish

painting. Not greatly appreciated at the start of his career, his seascapes and snowscapes, many featuring children, share the loose brushstrokes and lifelike light of the Impressionists. By the time of his death, in 1910, he was considered one of the great Scottish painters.

The Fleming show uses their own collection of McTaggarts, supplemented with work from the National Gallery of Scotland, other galleries and private collectors. One of these collectors, Allan Murray, is a Scottish expat living in Hong Kong. He has become a dedicated collector of Scottish art ever since he worked in the painting-laden offices of none other than Flemings in London.

“He bought his McTaggart at Sotheby’s auction in Gleneagles in 2001,” says Skipwith. “His love of Scottish art dates back to when he first worked at Flemings and he now has a huge personal collections, several hundred paintings.”

Murray is living, chequebook-waving proof that corporate collections are more than eye-candy for the boardroom. It introduces people to art they never knew existed. Soon he will need a Skipwith of his own.