

Purchase of a painting by Francis McCracken

Committee on the Jean F Watson Bequest

30 November 2007

Purpose of report

- 1 To consider the purchase of a painting by Francis McCracken (1897-1959).

Main report

2. The following painting by Francis McCracken is presented to the Committee for consideration:

Blackford Quarry, Edinburgh

Oil on canvas

Signed "F. McCracken" lower right; titled and priced "Blackford Quarry, Edinburgh, Scotland 30-0-0" on label on reverse

69.6 x 89.8 cm

Price: NZ\$ 65,000 (£23,810 on 21 November 2007)

3. Francis McCracken was born in Northern Ireland in 1879. His family emigrated to Australia and his early years were spent on a cattle station. Around 1898 the family moved to New Zealand where McCracken studied at Elam School of Arts under Charles Friström and Archibald Nicoll. He remained in New Zealand until the outbreak of World War I, when he left to serve with the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in France, where he lost a leg.
4. McCracken returned to New Zealand after the war, and in 1920, together with two other soldier-artists, Robert Johnson and John Weeks, held an exhibition of war paintings in Auckland. The so-called "Soldiers Exhibition" toured New Zealand and most of the 250 paintings were sold. The success of this show and the critical acclaim that McCracken's work received encouraged the artist to continue his studies in Edinburgh, at the College of Art, where he was taught by the Scottish Colourist S J Peploe.

5. He was joined there, in or around 1924, by John Weeks, who shared the studio McCracken had established. Weeks left Edinburgh for Paris the following year to study with André Lhôte and McCracken, recipient of a Carnegie Travelling Scholarship, followed soon afterwards. After studying with Lhôte, he travelled in Europe and eventually returned to Edinburgh where he painted the large and impressive Blackford Quarry, Edinburgh.
6. Blackford Quarry, Edinburgh is a major painting by McCracken. It is not dated but given its modernist treatment it must date from after McCracken's return to Edinburgh after studying with Lhôte, ie the late 1920s. Indeed, it shows not only the influence of Lhôte's Cubist-inspired approach to landscape painting but, because the subject is a quarry, it is also reminiscent of John Weeks's paintings of similar subjects.
7. Blackford Quarry, which ceased operation in the early 1950s, is now within the Hermitage of Braid in the south of the city. McCracken's view appears to be from the Braid Hills, looking directly north towards Edinburgh, with the distinctive Salisbury Crags prominent at the top right. Blackford Quarry, Edinburgh is a remarkably modern painting for a New Zealand painter at this time, assured and resolved and fresh in its vision.
8. McCracken visited France, Spain and Tunisia which were a great inspiration. He sent a few works back to New Zealand for exhibition but chose mainly to show at the Royal Scottish Academy and occasionally at the Paris Salon and the Glasgow Institute.
9. He showed few paintings publicly in the last twenty years of his life, following the death of his wife, when he was impoverished and reclusive. McCracken was included in the 1939-40 Centennial Exhibition of New Zealand Art in Wellington. The year after his death, in 1960, the Scottish Arts Council organised a memorial exhibition, which toured Scotland.
10. Most of the major New Zealand painters working between 1900 and 1930 either emigrated to Britain and Europe or spent an extensive amount of time there. Francis McCracken is among the most prominent of these expatriates. It would seem the taste of European art and the lure of modernism was enough to keep him in Europe for most of his painting life. McCracken was known for his exceptional "ability in organising surfaces with the greatest variety in theme." (A. Graham Munro, "Catalog of the Memorial Exhibition 1959", The McCracken Collection, Webbs, 1985, p.38.)
11. While he never returned to New Zealand to live, feeling that "it's a great drawback living so far from the hub of things" (Frank Rogers, "My Old Cobber Frank: Francis McCracken 1879-1959" in Art New Zealand, no.

38, Autumn 1986, p.51), he maintained his New Zealand connection by sending back paintings to various galleries for exhibition.

12. As an important expatriate New Zealand painter, Francis McCracken's reputation continues to grow as fine works, especially from his early decades in Europe, are increasingly available in New Zealand. In 1989 the Auckland Art Gallery purchased an impressive winter afternoon view of Edinburgh by McCracken of around 1924, probably viewed from his flat in Forth Street, near the top of Leith Walk. It joined a very large view of the city showing the National Gallery of Scotland and the Scott Monument and Calton Hill beyond, painted in his later expressionistic style. McCracken also painted some striking large still-lives which reflect the influence of Peploe.
13. The painting is currently in Auckland, New Zealand. If the Committee approves the purchase of the painting, the first step would be to approach the Auckland Art Gallery, to ask if their curatorial and conservation staff would be prepared to look at the painting on our behalf and report on its quality and condition. It would be hoped that this would be undertaken free of charge, on the basis of inter-museum professional reciprocity. The cost of crating the painting is likely to be about NZ\$350 and of air freighting it to the UK an additional NZ\$500.
14. If the Committee approve the purchase, an application for grant aid would be submitted to the National Fund for Acquisitions and possibly also to the Art Fund.

Recommendations

15. Approve the purchase of a painting by Francis McCracken.



22/11/07

JIM INCH
Director, Corporate Services

Appendices	None
Contact/tel	Ian O’Riordan, Manager, City Art Centre, 529 3955 ian.oriordan@edinburgh.gov.uk
Wards affected	City Wide
Background Papers	The Jean F Watson Bequest files are held at the City Art Centre