

# Committee on the Jean F Watson Bequest

2.00pm, Thursday 2 February 2023

## Purchase of an oil painting by Steven Campbell

Executive/routine  
Wards  
Council Commitments

### 1. Recommendations

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- 1.1 It is recommended that the Committee approves the purchase of the oil painting *Portrait of the Lost Travelogue Writer* (2006-2007) by Steven Campbell (1953 - 2007).

**Paul Lawrence**

Executive Director of Place

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# Report

## Purchase of an oil painting by Steven Campbell

### 2. Executive Summary

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- 2.1 Committee is asked to approve the purchase of the oil painting *Portrait of the Lost Travelogue Writer* (2006-2007) by Steven Campbell (1953-2007).

### 3. Background

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- 3.1 The City Art Centre's fine art collection traces the development of Scottish art from the 17<sup>th</sup> century until present day. Filling historical gaps in the collection is an important part of the acquisitions policy, ensuring that the collection provides a comprehensive overview of Scottish art for future generations.

### 4. Main report

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- 4.1 The following oil painting by Steven Campbell is presented to the Committee for consideration:

**Portrait of the Lost Travelogue Writer**

oil on canvas, 2006-2007

220 x 183cm (unframed dimensions)

£32,000 (including 20% museum discount)



- 4.2 Steven Campbell was born in Glasgow in 1953. Having attended Rutherglen Academy, he left school aged 16 to work as a maintenance engineer at the Clydebridge Steelworks in Cambuslang. In 1978 he decided to retrain in the visual arts, enrolling as a mature student at Glasgow School of Art. Initially he was drawn to performance art, but soon changed direction to focus on painting.
- 4.3 Campbell graduated from the Painting Department of Glasgow School of Art in 1982, winning the Bram Stoker Gold Medal. Shortly afterwards he was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship, which allowed him to study at the Pratt Institute in New York. Campbell remained in New York for the next four years, quickly establishing an international reputation.
- 4.4 In 1983 a group of Campbell's paintings were exhibited at Barbara Toll Fine Arts in New York, where they were admired by influential art critics including John Russell. From this point onwards, Campbell enjoyed increasing commercial success, with

his artworks sought by both public and private buyers. The Hirshhorn Museum (Smithsonian Institution) and the Art Institute of Chicago were among the first major American collections to acquire examples of his work.

- 4.5 During his time in New York, Campbell was involved in several important exhibitions in the UK. In 1985 he featured in *New Image Glasgow*, an exhibition at the Third Eye Centre curated by Sandy Moffat. Campbell's work was displayed alongside pieces by Peter Howson, Ken Currie and Adrian Wiszniewski, a grouping that would be hailed in the media as the 'New Glasgow Boys'. Together these young artists reinvigorated the tradition of figurative art in Scotland.
- 4.6 Campbell returned to Glasgow in 1986. His painting *The Dangerous Early and Late Life of Lytton Strachey* was acquired by the Tate the same year. The following summer, Campbell was prominently included in the group exhibition *The Vigorous Imagination: New Scottish Art* at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, cementing his position as a key figure in the contemporary Scottish art scene.
- 4.7 In 1990 Campbell staged the pioneering solo exhibition *On Form and Fiction*, which toured venues in Glasgow, Llandudno, London, Aberdeen, Manchester and Southampton. This exhibition saw drawings and paintings by the artist completely covering the walls of a constructed museum-like setting, with dramatic lighting and an absurd soundtrack. The installation proved highly influential for the next generation of Scottish artists. It was recreated in 2014 for the exhibition *GENERATION: 25 Years of Contemporary Art in Scotland*, and in 2016 it was jointly acquired by the National Galleries of Scotland and Glasgow Museums.
- 4.8 Campbell continued to paint during the 1990s and early 2000s, with high-profile exhibitions in London, Glasgow and Edinburgh. He died in 2007. His estate is now managed by the Steven Campbell Trust.
- 4.9 Throughout Campbell's career, he cultivated a distinctive painting style that was rich in narrative and symbolism. His dream-like imagery was inspired by literature, history and philosophy, as well as film, fashion and sport. He was well-read and knowledgeable about art history, enabling him to incorporate into his work references to artists like Pablo Picasso and René Magritte. Campbell's paintings were often executed on a large scale. Their monumental size and detailed imagery have the combined effect of creating an immersive experience for the viewer.
- 4.10 *Portrait of the Lost Travelogue Writer* is an oil on canvas painted between 2006 and 2007, the final years of Campbell's life. The work is a strong example of the artist's late work: a complex, large-scale narrative composition populated by various symbolic elements. The imagery is typically enigmatic. A semi-self-portrait appears to the centre-right of the composition holding a giant pencil. Although this figure bears a clear resemblance to the artist, according to his wife it was not initially intended to be a self-portrait, and can be alternatively interpreted as representing the eponymous 'lost travelogue writer'. The theme of international travel is suggested by the famous buildings and monuments positioned in the distance, including Notre Dame Cathedral, the Great Sphinx and the Pyramids of Giza.

- 4.11 The painting explores concepts of reality and illusion, constantly prompting the viewer to question what they are seeing. The drawing on the papers beneath the giant pencil can be read as either depicting a skull or an image of two children in Renaissance costume holding a dog. The male figure who lies face-down to the left, partially submerged in the earth, is painted in a representational style, while the blue shapes that surround him are abstract forms with disjointed facial features. Some of these elements are recurring motifs in Campbell's work, but the spatial and narrative relationships between them are deliberately ambiguous.
- 4.12 *Portrait of the Lost Travelogue Writer* was included in the posthumous exhibition *Steven Campbell (1953-2007): "...Wretched stars, Insatiable heaven" – Paintings 2006-2007* at Marlborough Fine Art in London in 2009. It also featured in the digital exhibition *Dressing Above Your Station*, produced by Panel and presented by Tramway in 2022.
- 4.13 The City Art Centre currently holds only one artwork by Steven Campbell: an early oil painting entitled *Gesturing Hiker with Furnace*, which dates from 1983. By comparison, the collection contains multiple works by Campbell's contemporaries: eight by Peter Howson, two by Ken Currie, and two by Adrian Wiszniewski. It is felt that the purchase of *Portrait of the Lost Travelogue Writer* would help to rectify this imbalance, and ensure that the range of Campbell's prolific career is better represented.
- 4.14 *Portrait of the Lost Travelogue Writer* is being offered directly for sale to the City Art Centre by the artist's widow Carol Campbell. She recognises that it is a significant painting, and has expressed a preference that it should be acquired by a public museum rather than entering the collection of a private individual.

## 5. Next Steps

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- 5.1 If the acquisition of the painting is approved, it is intended that an application for grant aid will be submitted to the National Fund for Acquisitions.

## 6. Financial impact

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- 6.1 The painting is being offered for sale at a price of £32,000, which includes a museum discount of 20%. Funds for this purchase would come from the Jean F. Watson Bequest, and it is intended that an application for grant aid would be submitted to the National Fund for Acquisitions.

## 7. Stakeholder/Community Impact

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- 7.1 Not Applicable.

## **8. Background reading/external references**

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- 8.1 The Steven Campbell Trust website: <https://thestevencampbelltrust.com>
- 8.2 *Steven Campbell*, National Galleries Scotland website:  
<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/artists/steven-campbell>
- 8.3 *Dressing Above Your Station* digital exhibition  
<https://www.wearepanel.co.uk/projects/dressing-above-your-station>

## **9. Appendices**

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- 9.1 None.