

Committee on the Jean F Watson Bequest

10.30am, Friday 23, February 2024

Purchase of an oil painting by George Jamesone

Executive/routine
Wards

1. Recommendations

- 1.1 It is recommended that the Committee approves the purchase of the oil painting *King Kenneth II* (c.1633) by George Jamesone (c.1589-1644).

Paul Lawrence

Executive Director of Place

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2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 Committee is asked to approve the purchase of the oil painting *King Kenneth II* (c.1633) by George Jamesone (c.1589-1644).

3. Background

- 3.1 The City Art Centre's fine art collection traces the development of Scottish art from the 17th 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

- 4.1 The following oil painting by George Jamesone is presented to the Committee for consideration:

King Kenneth II

Oil on canvas, c.1633

69.2 x 59.1cm (unframed dimensions); 83.8 x 72.4cm (framed dimensions)

£17,000 (including museum discount)



- 4.2 George Jamesone (c.1589-1644) is one of the earliest eminent figures in the history of Scottish painting. Although he had a relatively short career, he experienced considerable fame during his lifetime and exerted a significant influence on subsequent generations of artists. He is widely considered to be a founding father of the Scottish school of portraiture, leading the way for artists like John Michael Wright (1617-1694), Allan Ramsay (1713-1784) and Henry Raeburn (1756-1823).
- 4.3 Jamesone was born in Aberdeen in about 1589. He trained in Edinburgh under the decorative painter John Anderson between 1612 and 1618. During the early part of Jamesone's career most of his portrait commissions came from the Aberdeenshire area. However, his growing reputation enabled him to expand his practice across the country. He concentrated predominantly on portraits of the nobility and new bourgeoisie, but he also undertook more ambitious artistic projects.
- 4.4 In 1633 Jamesone was commissioned by the magistrates of the Town Council of Edinburgh to produce a series of royal portraits as part of the preparations to welcome King Charles I prior to his coronation at the Palace of Holyroodhouse on 18 June 1633. The paintings were to be displayed outside, fixed either to buildings or triumphal arches situated on the High Street, so that the King would see them on his route towards the Palace.

- 4.5 It is thought that Jamesone and his workshop produced as many as 109 portraits of Scottish monarchs for this commission, including images of Robert the Bruce, James I and Mary Queen of Scots. Although none of the portraits were painted from life, and most are unlikely to resemble the actual sitters, they served an important political purpose. The paintings publicly asserted and emphasised the longevity and legitimacy of the royal line, demonstrating a continuous connection between Charles I (and his successors) and the ancient kings of Scotland.
- 4.6 After the royal visit the majority of the paintings in Jamesone's series were lost. 26 surviving portraits were acquired by either the 1st or 2nd Marquess of Lothian at some point before 1720, and these remained at Newbattle Abbey until the early 1970s. On 2 July 1971 the collection was dispersed at auction in Edinburgh, with the portraits being purchased by various private collectors. Several of them were acquired by the American art collector John Costin.
- 4.7 *King Kenneth II* is one of these surviving portraits from Jamesone's series of Scottish monarchs. It has recently undergone conservation treatment, and is in excellent condition given its age.
- 4.8 King Kenneth II of Scotland ruled between 971 and 995, a turbulent period of dynastic feuds. Like his father, King Malcolm I, Kenneth conducted numerous raids across southern Scotland and northern England. He is thought to have been assassinated by rivals in 995. The *Chronicle of the Kings of Alba*, a manuscript recording the history of the Scottish monarchy since Kenneth MacAlpin, was written shortly after his reign. No contemporary portraits of Kenneth II are known to exist, and there are few historical images of him. Jamesone's painting is therefore unusual; it is referenced in Duncan Thomson's monograph *The Life and Art of George Jamesone* (Oxford, 1974).
- 4.9 In September 2023 *King Kenneth II* was exhibited by the Fine Art Society in Edinburgh, as part of a group of six royal portraits by Jamesone which had previously been held in the Costin Estate Art Collection in Fayetteville, North Carolina, USA. This group, supplemented by five additional private loans, created the largest display of Jamesone's royal portraits to be seen in Scotland in half a century.
- 4.10 Although the City Art Centre's fine art collection spans the period from the 17th century to present day, it has very few artworks dating from the early to middle part of the 17th century. Among the earliest works in the collection are civic portraits, such as *Sir James Steuart of Coltness (1608-1681)*, which is attributed to David Scougall (c.1610-1680). Despite his significance, George Jamesone is not currently represented in the collection.
- 4.11 The proposed acquisition of *King Kenneth II* is recommended on several fronts. The painting is a strong example of this important artist's work, which would fill a notable gap in the collection. It is also a rare historical artefact in terms of its provenance as one of the portraits created for the Scottish coronation of Charles I. Given that the portrait was originally commissioned by the magistrates of Edinburgh, it seems

fitting that it should return to the City's care, where it can be used to present both historical and art historical narratives relating to Edinburgh's rich heritage.

- 4.12 *King Kenneth II* is being offered for sale to the City Art Centre by the Fine Art Society. The other five royal portraits by Jamesone exhibited in September 2023 have all now been sold, with two of them purchased by the National Galleries of Scotland. *King Kenneth II* is being held on reserve for consideration by the Committee on the Jean F Watson Bequest.

5. Next Steps

- 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

- 6.1 The painting is being offered for sale at a price of £17,000, which includes a £1,000 museum discount. 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. Equality and Poverty Impact

- 7.1 Not applicable.

8. Climate and Nature Emergency Implications

- 8.1 Not applicable.

9. Risk, policy, compliance, governance and community impact

- 9.1 Not applicable.

10. Background reading/external references

- 10.1 *George Jamesone: Painter of Kings*, The Fine Art Society website:
<https://www.thefineartsociety.com/exhibitions/208-george-jamesone-painter-of-kings/>
- 10.2 *George Jamesone*, National Galleries of Scotland website:
<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/artists/george-jamesone>

11. Appendices

11.1 None.