

The ladies would seem to have turned their attention: tracing the founding members' of Glasgow Society of Lady Artists

In this book you hold, 'Raoul Reynolds: a Retrospective', our primary character's timeline notes that his mother Henriette Aliès-Reynolds leaves her native city Marseille in 1880, to set up home in Glasgow, enrolling at Glasgow School of Art two years later. The art school, which had been founded in 1845 as the Glasgow Government School of Design, changing its name in 1853 to Glasgow School of Art, had been established with the purpose of teaching designers to contribute to the new buildings and manufacturing industries of the city. What kind of an environment would Raoul's mother have found herself in? In 1880s' the day classes were for mainly middle class students, the majority female, whilst the evening classes were populated by male students who worked in industry by day. The art school had amongst its courses, one for design in shipbuilding, which introduced her, through mutual friends, to her husband-to-be, Joshua Reynolds. At the time period that Henriette was at the art school, the premises, since 1869 had been 'The Corporation Buildings', on Sauchiehall Street, later better known as McLellan Buildings, where the studios were in first & second floors and attic, located at the eastern end of the building. It is noted by a later researcher, George Rawson[1] that the studios were 'badly ventilated gas-lit rooms, with south facing windows'. It is not until 1896 that design and work begins on the art school as masterwork by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, a then junior draughtsman for Glasgow firm Honeyman and Keppie.

Henriette is noted to have become involved in the Glasgow Society of Lady Artists. A Society which very much met with her principles, it was founded in 1882 with a primary aim to afford due recognition and opportunity to women in the art field. The Society came into being at a key time, when The Glasgow Art Club [2] had a men-only membership, and the art school itself had through poor decisions by the board, seen its only two female staff members, Elizabeth Patrick and Georgina Greenlees [Georgina Mossman Greenlees m. Wylie (1849-1932), the daughter of the then Glasgow School of Art headmaster Robert Greenlees (1820-1894), resign from their positions. Georgina Greenlees would become the first President of the Society, with Miss Patrick also one of the eight women founding members; all of whom had studied at The Glasgow School of Art. The Glasgow Society of Lady artists was very much supported by Robert Greenlees, who helped them write a 'Book of Rules', and hosted the first annual exhibitions of the womens' work until it moved to other premises. All Art Members paid an entrance fee of 10s 6d, and the annual subscription was 10s 6d. Honorary Members, those women interested in the arts but not necessarily artists, paid an annual subscription of 5s, which allowed them invitations to the exhibition private views. A rule was the women artists must submit two new works for sale, each exhibition, or else expect a fine. The accrued subscriptions would lead in 1895 to the purchase of 5 Blythswood Square for the Society.

This essay will, through archival research, including press cuttings, holdings, online marriage registers and existing scholarly work trace, where possible, where the eight founding members of the Glasgow Society of Lady Artists are recorded; glimpses of the art work they made; and even paint an impression of the atmosphere of the buildings the works were presented in. In doing so, it is hoped through this recording, in turn, the reader can through these fragments, begin to imagine the times that Raoul Reynolds'

mother, Henriette Aliès-Reynolds, moved in. A decision has been made that the research is presented as fragmentary in nature. Primarily, the early records and archives of the Society were lost in a fire. The research itself is ongoing, so discrepancies will be recorded and absences remain. The author is also subjectively drawn to certain members of the group, or has let herself be led in other directions by a sequence of cross-referencing followed by supposition. Her annotations will clearly be stated to represent this slant.

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The Mitchell Library Archives and Special Collections research:

A slim volume, entitled 'History of the Society of Lady Artists' Club', (Privately printed for the Society by Robert Maclehose and Company Limited, the University Press, Glasgow 1950) is the first I find to list the names of the eight Glasgow School of Art women students who were founding members, in a chapter entitled, 'Mrs Stevens account of the early days of The Club'. This script was read at the 'Diamond Jubilee Exhibition' in 1942 by Miss A Raeburn:

Mr Greenlees, headmaster of the School of Art, had some very promising pupils just finishing and it seemed a great pity that this painting should degenerate into the painting for bazaars, on terracotta plaques, tambourines, etc, so he interested himself in the forming of the 'Glasgow Society of Lady Artists', with the help of his daughter, Miss Patrick, Mrs Robertson, Miss Nisbet, Mrs Agnew, Mme Röhl, Mrs Provan, Miss Katherine Henderson – these were the eight who (with the help of friends) started the society. Miss Greenlees became President, Mme Rohl, treasurer, Mrs Joseph Agnew, Mrs Robertson, Miss Nisbet - to these we owe a great debt of gratitude. These formed our first committee. (P.9)

Convention of the period sees Christian names mostly unmentioned, where Miss, Mrs and Mme prevail. In the Mitchell Library [3] as part of the Glasgow Society of Lady Artists holdings, there are press cuttings of exhibition reviews dating from 1884 of predominantly the annual exhibitions. This allows for at least an indication to search for the eight womens' names and to begin to build a picture of their work.

In the blue press cuttings book that holds the earliest of the clippings, here six of the eight women are referenced. Glasgow Herald 5 Jan 1884, p4:

A well painted figure subject from Miss Greenlees ... Study of gladiolus, artistic in drawing and good in colour is shown by Mrs Provan ... Mrs Robertson sends nicely painted vases, while Madame Röhl shows to advantage in birch trees. .. Miss Nisbet artistic drawings of poppies and Miss Henderson, well painted lilies. Whilst there is much commendable work there is a lack of variety and a total absence of domestic subjects which might be expected in such an exhibition.

Figuration at this period is mostly the domain of the male artists, so Greenlees' 'figure subject' would have stood out. Indeed, her earlier study for 'An Itinerant Musician', (1883) where a seated woman pauses from playing a violin, 'captures the moment when women began to perform in public concerts' (illustration to be found P.47, 'Professional

Women Painters in Nineteenth Century Scotland, Janice Helland) must have been revolutionary to viewers and critics, when this 1884 exhibition is the vessel for a cacophony of flowers – gladiolis, poppies and lilies, whilst Madame Röhl, the treasurer, is drawn to the outdoors and trees. The Married Women's Property Act has only been passed two years before this article, allowing women to own land and keep earnings. The Glasgow Herald critic is perturbed that the domestic domain is under-represented by these women artists.

The 'correct' subject territory of the women is further staked to home and the small-scale, in The Glasgow Herald (Sat Mar 22, 1890):

Still life has great attraction for lady artists. Their fine sense of colour finds its natural expression in flowers; their treatment of fruit is indicative, one may say, of high appreciation. Perhaps the finest example of the latter class is Mrs HJ Robertson's 'Fruit'(no.15) a tempting melange of grapes, black and white, and melon and pomegranate.... figure subjects on the other hand, are more numerous, and the ladies would seem to have turned their attention also to the animal painting. In genre, mention may be made of GM Greenlees 'Village Dorcas', (no. 41), a comely maiden carrying lightly in one hand a basket filled, it may be assumed, with delicacies to tempt some invalid. Her errand of mercy takes her through the fields, now ripe for harvest, the red dress which she wears telling well against the rich yellow.

In animal painting the lady artists have not attempted the great horned natives of the Highlands. They have kept within their strength- confined themselves to dogs and domestic pets. No.44, 'the children's pet', by Miss J Nisbet is a well finished picture of a black and white kid reposing in leafy quarters. Miss Nisbet also contributes a Persian Cat (no. 36), a longhaired Bushy-haired creature in soft white. Mrs J.H Robertson has a capital head of a donkey which goes by the name of 'Billy' (no 15) and the same lady makes a charming little picture- delicate, minute and painstaking - out of 'a corner of my studio' (no.13)

This claustrophobia of the woman pinned firmly in her place and that place being indoors is perhaps fittingly felt in North British Daily Mail (1890): 'Glasgow Society of Lady Artists' review with this single title and subject: "The lack of a gun' (39) by Miss J Nisbet representing some curlews hung against a panel is a fine piece of work, both in picturesque arrangement and realistic effect.' The wild has been killed and brought indoors.

An excerpt from the 'Highlights' [March 27 1885], is strident in its conclusions- that as the artists are women, they must be amateurs:

A private view was given on Sat of the second Annual exhibition of the Glasgow Society of Women Artists which is presently on view in the rooms of the society 136 Wellington Street. The Society of Lady Artists, notwithstanding their high-sounding title, have no very high pretensions. With one or two notable exceptions they are all amateurs, painting mostly for the love of it....such a modest collection of works hardly calls for too candid criticism.

As with pregnancy, a later reviewer in the Glasgow Herald (March 14, 1891), aligns the humble nature of women's art with that of confinement: 'With the modesty of their sex, the ladies confine their exhibition of the present year to one week'.

Anthea Callen, in 'Angel in the Studio: women in the arts and crafts movement 1870-1914' [BAS Printers Limited, 1979. P124], delves further into the supposed modesty of women's arts and how they were critiqued:

'... in discussing women's art, writers were consistently faced with the problem of a double standard of criticism, since traditionally women's work was criticised by more lenient standards than those used for men, as they were felt to be incapable of equal equality. In the nineteenth century in particular this seems to have been complicated by calls for a 'womanly' art, necessarily distinct from man's art, because of all that society attributed to the sex in terms of softness and sentimentality.'

A review is slightly more grudging in praise several years later, in March 27 1891, in the Stirling Journal and Advertiser:

The results of this year's work of the members of the Society, if one may judge by the pictures- displayed on the walls of the inner room were in the main satisfactory. There were of course degrees of excellence but on every hand one recognised good honest work. And there was nothing absolutely bad, more that can be said of some Exhibitions with more pretensions. Mrs HJ Robertson and Miss J Nisbet had gone to Wales, to the far famed Vale of Llangollen' for their inspiration and had brought thence some lovely sketches. Especially excellent and interesting were 'The home of the ladies of Llangollen' with its quaint oaken porch and windows by Miss Nisbet, and Mrs Robertson's 'plas Newydd' an old timber fronted house set in greenery and her 'bridle path'.

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136 Wellington Street, Glasgow:

In 2018, 136 Wellington St still exists. It is now Glasgow Tribunal Hearing Centre (Wellington House). In the 'History of the Society of Lady Artists' Club', (1950), Mrs Stevens describes how the women felt in the rooms the Society took on there in May 1882:

We were a very happy little band there, and several of us worked in the studio. We were also rather primitive, a few cups and saucers, a teaspoon or two, brown teapot, milk bottle and sugar basin. I remember what adepts we became at shooting tea slops into the fire.

The studios became the site of the annual exhibition. The stairs at 136 Wellington Street are described by two critics. In the Lady's Pictorial (1890),

In a miniature gallery perched atop of an excruciating number of stairs winding up to one of the high-"lands" of Wellington Street, which traverses the heart of the local artistic colony.

The Stirling Journal and Advertiser (March 27, 1891): 'I climbed the interminable stairs and found myself in the eyrie'. In standing outside 136 Wellington Street today, one must still strain one's neck in order to see the line of small windows on the top floor.

A critic describes how the studios were transformed for the exhibition:

The Society has use of rooms in Wellington Street which are somewhat too small for the purposes of an exhibition. But ladies have the knack of making the most of wall space and even converting structural defects into decorative triumphs... dull gold drapery is a background to some of the pictures and the deeply recessed window seat is festooned with leaves and laid with moss, having a living fern at its centre.'

As well as two rooms for the paintings, one is dedicated to the exhibition of decorative work, very much in keeping with arts and crafts ideals:

In one of the rooms, there is shown a variety of decorative work, in which artistic use of material and proper adaptation of ornament are conspicuous. The articles here include wood carving, hammered copper work, decorated vases, painting on satin, plaques and other work. In all of these the crudeness not infrequently seen in amateur work is conspicuous by its absence, each piece being a specimen of really artistic and skilful work. (North British Daily Mail', Mon March 24, 1890)

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Naming

I send the list of eight names from 'History of the Society of Lady Artists' Club' (1950) to Glasgow School of Art archivist Susannah Waters and archival assistant Cat Doyle who check GSA student registers from 1881. Waters points out that the records only include the student's name as it was when they enrolled and never note a surname when it has changed due to marriage.

They find the following:

Miss Jane Nisbet is noted in the annual reports as follows:

1871: Local competition, Haldane Prize, Stage 10a, drawing flowers from nature.

1874: Local competition, Haldane Prize, analysis of plants from nature.

No Katherine Henderson but there is a Catherine Henderson who studied at GSA between 1882- 1884. Her address was 17 Belhaven Terrace and she is listed as an art student.

Miss Catherine Henderson has donated a painting as a member of the Glasgow Kyrie Society, to hang in Cowcaddens Mission Hall. Glasgow Kyrie Society, as described in 'Hand, Heart and Soul', by Elizabeth Cumming, (Birlinn, 2006) '... was established end of 1883 to bring influences of natural and artistic beauty home to the people' (P.1).

Elizabeth Patrick, the former GSA tutor, had studied at GSA herself, and is noted in GSA annual reports in the following years:

1884: Gained second prize in a local competition, Class 5, for painting in the round.

1849: Local Competition: Class of Colour, females, oil study of flowers from copy.

1854: National Competition, National Medallion, Stage 23 (Applied designs, technical or miscellaneous studies.

Cat Doyle, the GSA assistant archivist deduces a set of four likely 'Mrs Provans'. A further check using 'Scotland's People' online database for marriage records, deems it likely that it is Margaret M Campbell, a GSA art student 1881/1883, living in 1881-82 at 111 Finlay Drive. Margaret Campbell married Andrew Provan in 1881. The couple were registered in Hutchesontown, Glasgow.

Mrs HJ Robertson is not forthcoming at first. The online database only has a series of Mrs JH Robertsons, as I assume it is her husband's initials she has taken. I later, through using the online census for 1881, find Henrietta J Robertson. A further online search lists a work of hers 'As Red as a Lobster' de-accessioned from Leeds City Art Galleries Collection. Her work has hung in England.

Mrs Joseph Agnew stays unknown. Then, GSA Archives finds information on the woman who has intrigued me the most out of the group:

'A Mrs Frieda Röhl studied at GSA 1883-4. She lived at 136 Wellington St and is listed as an artist'.

Frieda Röhl calls herself an artist, whilst the critics call women artists 'amateurs'. She is listed in the student register as Mrs Röhl. In 1886, as we see below, she becomes Mrs Frieda Macgillivray. Her student listing at 136 Wellington Street means her home address is the same as the studios held by the Society.

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Tracing Frieda

She can be found in her husband's papers:

The Inventory in National Library of Scotland Manuscripts Division Dep.349, J Pittendrigh Macgillivray includes, Item 219, out of 223 items: 'Projected volume of reminiscences of Frieda Rettig Macgillivray (c. 1910), and of her daughter Ina, (d. 1917), being typescripts of their correspondence, and photographs of them.'

His love for her:

In the article 'A Guarantee and a slogan; James Pittendrigh Macgillivray (1856-1938), no ordinary sculptor', National Library of Scotland's Folio Newsletter Issue 9, Autumn 2004,

(written by Louise Boreham, the sculptor's grand-daughter), Frieda is first introduced in the text at their point of marriage in 1886 as 'Frieda Rettig Röhl, a German painter'; the next mention, after she had bore him two daughters, Ina and Ehrna, by the time the family settled in 1894 in Edinburgh. Then at the point of her death, forming for him a 'personal tragedy... Frieda died in 1910, then Ina seven years later, only thirty'. She remarks that she belongs to him, signing her letters, 'your own Rhet'. P.10, of the newsletter, 'Macgillivray's tribute to her describes their last outing:

Away into the country we went in the sunshine – saw the gathering of the corn, the golden stooks, and the ruddy colouring of the Autumn on the trees; more splendid than it had been for many years in this part. It was all beautiful! – a fine moment for one who had loved and painted landscape, as she had, to take farewell of the outer world – and her last outing it proved. ... (how quiet she was, what long dreamlike memories were passing with the landscape we drove by – we scarcely spoke – her hand in mine). (Dep.349/219)

Her hand in mine.

She can again be found in the final sentences of her husband's catalogue biography, for University of Glasgow Mackintosh Architecture 'context, making and meaning'[4] We see her though her relation to him: 'He married Polish-born Frieda Rettig Röhl (d. 1910) and was the father of two daughters.' Her nationality, here staked as Polish-born, although previously referred to as 'a German painter', in Library of Scotland's Folio Newsletter.

In the only photograph of her in Folio Newsletter to accompany the essay on her husband, her un-gloved hand casually clasps her blond haired daughter's wrist and small hand. Frieda Macgillivray is seated, one daughter leaning into her, whilst the older daughter stands behind them both, one hand on hip, the other round her mother's shoulders.

Frieda is buried at Gogar Kirkyard Edinburgh, with her husband. He made the headstone for her grave, which has an inset relief bronze profile portrait of her. Carved into the stone, she is referred to by her Christian name only:

'Frieda

Wife of Pittendrigh Macgillivray

Born at Konizsberg

Died at Edinburgh 1910

A true lover, mother

And friend.'

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Postscript

In Janice Helland's book 'Professional Women Painters in Nineteenth-Century Scotland; Commitment, Friendship, Pleasure', (Ashgate, 2000), she proposes some different names for

the eight founding members of Glasgow Society of Lady Artists, mentioning Isabella Ure as a founding member. She also writes:

Within about two years of tendering their resignations as teachers of GSA, Georgina Greenlees and Elizabeth Patrick, along with friends such as Jane Nisbet and Helen Salmon, and students such as Jane Cowan Wyper, Margaret Macdonald (not to be confused with Margaret Macdonald of the 'Glasgow Four') and Henrietta Smith Robertson joined together to form the Glasgow Society of Lady Artists'. (P.31)

I insert this postscript to be true to discrepancy. The founders cannot neatly be placed in a box.

Jenny Brownrigg (2018)

Footnotes

[1] 'The Flower and the Green Leaf: Glasgow School of Art in the time of Charles Rennie Mackintosh', George Rawson, P.17 (2009), edited by Ray McKenzie, Luath Press Ltd, Edinburgh.

[2] Glasgow Art Club was established in 1867 by William Dennistoun. Professional membership flourished in the 1870s', with monthly meetings focused around each member bringing in a painting to discuss. The Glasgow Art Club purchased two town houses on Bath Street, which were converted by John Keppie, opening in 1893. Two years later, in 1895, The Glasgow Society of Lady Artists purchased 5 Blythswood Square, only a street away from the Glasgow Art Club.

[3] The City of Glasgow's Archives are housed in Mitchell Library. This public library was initially established in 1877 with a bequest from Stephen Mitchell, a tobacco producer, whose company became a member of the Imperial Tobacco Company. Many of Glasgow's buildings, including Gallery of Modern Art, were built with the money of tobacco trade merchants, directly made through enslaved labour in the Colonies.

[4] <http://www.mackintosh-architecture.gla.ac.uk/catalogue/name/?nid=MacPitt>