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Two Friends, Two Major Artists Revalued: William Gillies and John Maxwell

Alan Riach and Alexander Moffat (Friday 9 September 2016)

An exhibition running till October 23 at Edinburgh's City Art Centre brings together a major collection of work by William Gillies (1898-1973) and John Maxwell (1905-1962), drawing on the collection of the Royal Scottish Academy. The City Art Centre has had a key role in consistently presenting, for many years now, a series of vital exhibitions exploring Scottish art and artists, both old and new, often putting our National Galleries to shame; however, the lack of catalogues or books accompanying such exhibitions is a disservice to the vital research done by staff and to the history of art and artists in Scotland.

Following from our essay on the American artist Alice Neel last week, we'd like to look at the work of Gillies and Maxwell. What does it have to say to us now? Both are often been dismissed as too tame in comparison with their great French counterparts. But this is to miss the point – they were amongst the first Scots to see themselves as modern European painters and their example of dedication and independence helped succeeding generations find a way forward.

William Gillies was born in 1898 in Haddington, about 20 miles east of Edinburgh, and John Maxwell in 1905 in Dalbeattie, on the Dumfries and Galloway coast, 90 miles south of Glasgow. During the First World War, Gillies was on active service near Arras. He was wounded twice, gassed, and hardly ever spoke of his experience there. Two of his most striking works in this exhibition are a landscape of his native place with the river Tyne in flood, a mass of swirling vivid colours, water, earth and sky tumbling around each other in evident fecundity of motion and potential, thick with life – and a small grey drawing of a desolate, war-shredded field with a bare-branched tree. The one word that summed up all that war meant for Gillies was “waste”.

Just as J.D. Fergusson and S.J. Peploe had gone to Paris before the First World War, after it, both Gillies and Maxwell went there the 1920s, Gillies studying with Andre Lhote, Maxwell with Leger. Both dabbled with Cubism but rejected it, and both became aware of Hugh MacDiarmid's modern Scottish Renaissance centred in Montrose in the same decade.

When the Edward Munch exhibition first came to Edinburgh the early 1930s, it was a revelation. The young William Gillies was bowled over by the work of the great Norwegian. This meant swimming against the tide of public opinion as the Munch exhibition was greeted with outrage in letters to *The Scotsman*.

That there was serious hostility to Modernism in Scotland wasn't in doubt following the scorn heaped upon Peploe's paintings on his return from France in 1913 and this climate of negativity persisted throughout the 1920s. The architect Robert Hurd (1905-1963), who later became President of the Saltire Society from 1943 to 1948, was one of the few who defended Munch's paintings. In a letter to *The Scotsman* (18 December 1931), Hurd concluded: “The critical opinion recently displayed has indeed brought to the surface an

unconscious narrowness of vision that seems to increase within us alongside the growth of that provinciality which threatens to make Scotland in some ways the most backward and philistine country in Northern Europe.” For Gillies to respond to Munch’s work in the way he did and travel to Norway in 1932 to seek further insight into Munch’s world tells us a great deal about his radical intentions and his position as a modern artist.

No major Scottish artist after Mackintosh was really able to connect with that central European, German-Austrian axis of what was happening in Berlin, Vienna and Prague: Expressionism, the *neue sauchlichkeit* movement, the Bauhaus, the meshing of art and politics during the Weimar Republic. That was pretty much unknown in Scotland. Paris and France still remained the first port-of-call for Scottish artists venturing abroad, although by the mid-1920s, Berlin had become the centre for Modernist music (both composition and performance), for Expressionist art, theatre and film.

When Hitler came to power, most of the leading German artists emigrated to the USA, where they became hugely influential in the reshaping of western art after the Second World War. Because of its newly acquired superpower status, American cultural values dominated all over the world. Those German émigrés based in the USA – Gropius, Schoenberg, Bruno Walter, Beckmann, Albers, Thomas Mann, Adorno, Kurt Weill, Billy Wilder, Fritz Lang – all assumed leading roles within this cultural hegemony, paradoxically bringing about what was in effect the triumph of German Modernism. In Scotland, we missed out on all of that. And it took years to find out about it.

Immediately after seeing the Munch exhibition, however, new expressive tendencies became readily apparent in Gillies’ work in both watercolours and oils. Similarly, seeing the work of Paul Klee in 1933 had an immediate effect upon Maxwell. But there was also Scotland itself.

Just as Fergusson toured Scotland in the 1920s, Gillies and Maxwell together went on painting trips around Scotland throughout 1930s, Gillies in his kilt, driving cars and motor bikes with a strengthening appetite for seeing. Georgia O’Keefe and her American landscapes currently on show at Tate Modern in London are comparable. As Nancy Durrant said in *The Times* (July 5, 2016): “The picture that emerges from a selection of her work, is of an artist whose intense love of her country’s land underpinned everything, resulting in a body of work that is startlingly, authentically American.” We could claim the same for Gillies. He worked fast and produced painting after painting. Maxwell was the exact opposite: slow, careful, considered and pondered. Both were joined in firm friendship while diverging completely in their visions.

Both the friendship and the different visions come through powerfully in the exhibition. For Gillies, after the First World War, Scottish landscapes are of paramount importance. There are four big watercolours on show here, mountains and seas around Skye, epic in scale yet with nothing flashy or merely excessive: they are full of subtlety, nuance, movement. Others seem to occupy an almost Ibsen-like territory of foreboding, dark values, impositions. He paints trees and forests as though they are symbols of a psychological state, a

place of continual conversation, like endless running water or evolving clouds. Mood inhabits all his works. After the Second World War, he predominantly produces still life paintings, marvellously arranged dynamics of colour and shape, texture and structure. Each is an indoor adventure in colour and form, with the outdoors visible through windows or doors. The only painting that doesn't seem to hold together in full coherence includes his mother and sister, as if the presence of people disturbed the authority of mood and objects.

For Maxwell, by contrast, symbol and dream motivate and propel the vision. Even the vase in the "Yellow Flower Piece" (1953) is covered with symbolic figures. People – in strange, dream-like garlands of flowers, with birds and animals around them – or latterly moths and butterflies, sinister-looking birds, sleek and streamlined, moving through thickly coloured air, all speak of a thoroughly different sensibility. He provided the frontispiece and cover illustration for *So Late into the Night* (1952) by the poet Sydney Goodsir Smith. In Maxwell's personal copy, Sydney's inscribed dedication reads: "To John Maxwell / a poet in paint". This was also John Berger's view in his *New Statesman* review of Maxwell (27 March 1954). The subtle eroticism of Maxwell's female nudes reinforces the sense of allurements and depth. Arguably, Maxwell remains more of a mystery, while Gillies, though we think we know what he's doing, inhabits something of that mystery too. The psychology of landscapes, the working of inexplicable myths, figures, animals, life-forms, household objects, the internal and external forces at work in human seeing – all these are the material of the art of both men. And at different points of the compass from Alice Neel's social world. If Neel has her affinities with Bertolt Brecht, the modernisms of Debussy, Joyce, Rimbaud and the studies of Freud are the intellectual contexts for Gillies and Maxwell.

Both began teaching at Edinburgh College of Art from the late 1920s onwards. In 1935, Maxwell's big mural "Children's Games and Amusements" was completed at Craigmillar Primary School, Edinburgh. In 1939 Gillies moves to the village of Temple, 14 miles south of Edinburgh. From here he could commute to the Art College and guests could visit easily.

Now a crucial event took place which has lasting importance for art education. Along with David Talbot Rice, Professor of Art History at Edinburgh University, Gillies introduced a new 5-year Degree Course combining studio practice with art history. This course helped practising artists gain knowledge and see into the history of their art, internationally and nationally, while encouraging them to work in their own distinctive ways. Sadly, the other art schools in Scotland either ignored or declined to follow this pioneering example and we now find ourselves in the deplorable situation where almost all students, after a four year course in Fine Art, graduate with little or no knowledge at all of the history of their subject.

And Gillies faced difficulties from the incoming ECA Principal, Englishman Robert Lyon, whose failure to comprehend why Scottish artists looked to Paris rather than London was a source of constant tension within the College. Gillies proved more than a match for him but the problems generated were painful. We could link this with a story recounted by Stanley Cursiter in his memoir of S.J. Peplow which took place at the annual examination of diploma work by the English external assessor Philip Connard RA in 1934: "He [Peplow] was

in great form, acute in his comments and occasionally outrageous in discovering unexpected qualities, leading the assessor up on questionable slopes and keeping the judging out of too obvious conventional ruts.” Once again, we are talking about examples of high ranking Directors of our cultural institutions arriving from England without any kind of knowledge of Scottish art or culture.

Gillies became Head of Painting in 1945 and Maxwell worked alongside him before returning to Dalbeattie to paint full-time. Working at the College made them influential and they might seem like establishment figures. Not so.

Maxwell died in 1962, leaving in his will instructions that Gillies should select from his estate which works should survive and which should be destroyed. Gillies died in 1973, after receiving public honours and major retrospective exhibitions but this is the first time in more than 20 years that their work has been shown together.

In assessing their work today, and their legacy, we can see that both produced paintings of real stature. We can also see they were masters in the deployment of colour. Indeed, their paintings are more realised and with a greater range of painterly sensibilities than those of the Scottish Colourists. The paintings of Gillies, especially, possess not just the look of Scotland, but articulate the deeper urge to put Scotland onto the canvas, tangible and exact. It’s a startling and profound accomplishment.

In the 1930s a serious debate about modern art and nationalism was taking place in Scotland culminating in a huge exhibition of Scottish art in the Royal Academy in London in 1938. In the book accompanying that exhibition, *The Arts of Scotland*, John Tonge begins with a chapter on the Celtic and Mediaeval legacy before launching forth on a brief historical overview of Painting, Architecture, Sculpture and the Plastic Arts, and the crafts: Furniture, Ceramics, Metalwork, from the 17th century onwards. He brought the story right up to date with mention of both Gillies and Maxwell: “Edinburgh is once more a centre of experiment. Of the youngest generation, William Gillies, who brought back new ideas from the studio of Andre Lhote, and John Maxwell, who worked in the studio of Fernand Leger, have added to the liveliness of the capital.”

The St Andrews-based art historian Tom Normand, in his book *The Modern Scot: Modernism and Nationalism in Scottish Art 1928-1955* gives us the following outline of events: “With the foundation of the National Party of Scotland in 1928, Scottish intellectuals began to consider the nature of national identity and the characteristics of a national art. The Scottish Renaissance Movement, under the voluble leadership of Hugh MacDiarmid, set out to articulate these interests, developing a vernacular poetry and literature. For Scottish artists the way forward was harder to identify, as they fought to reconcile the demands for a Scots national art with the stylistic revolution of international modernism.”

The importance of Tonge’s book is that it sets out to recover the history of Scottish art and rescue it from charges of provincialism. In this respect there was a real attempt to establish a meaningful tradition, tracing a lineage setting Scottish art firmly within a European context. The book, now long out of print, remains a crucial text for us today. If

culture is to form part of a renewed independence campaign as it must, it's an excellent place to start. But first, see and study closely the great works in this exhibition.