



Moffat, S. and Riach, A. (2017) The lost art of Robert Noble. *National*, 2017, 16 June.

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/161606/>

Deposited on: 01 May 2018

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow  
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

## **Another of Scotland's forgotten modern artists: Robert Noble (1857-1917)**

### **Alan Riach and Alexander Moffat**

**The exhibition, *The Art of Robert Noble*, is currently running at The John Gray Centre, Haddington, from May 13 until 5 July. Sandy Moffat and Alan Riach introduce and explore his story: why has he been so neglected?**

**Alan Riach:** Sandy, I've been looking at the little book celebrating the East Linton artist Robert Noble that goes with the current exhibition and even from the reproductions there it's evident that he's as good as some of the Glasgow Boys, just to start with.

**Sandy Moffat:** He's unique in the Scottish art world of his time, both as a painter and a reformer. In a European context, he should be seen alongside Daubigny and the Barbizon School. He was among the leaders of the movement that helped form the Society of Scottish Artists and became its first President in 1892. The SSA was a revolt against the establishment, the Royal Scottish Academy, and the need for it was felt by many young artists.

**Alan:** So Noble was a rebel against the moribund institutional establishment?

**Sandy:** You could say that. Like the RSA, the SSA held an annual exhibition, but unlike the RSA where the works of Academicians were automatically hung, members of the SSA had their works scrutinised by a democratically-elected selection committee. That structure would ensure its own regeneration and prevent the accumulation of a reactionary hierarchy. Noble's legacy as their first President was to oversee the birth of a new organisation – an artist's co-operative if you like – that was much more youthful and progressive than the RSA and would exercise a real influence on the way Scottish art would develop in the 20th century.

**Alan:** But when I look at his work, there's a conservatism, a patient attention to the detail of local realities, the inhabited landscapes and village communities he's depicting. There's a sense of affection that comes through in the warmth of the colours, and a sense of austerity and grandeur, in fact, that comes through in the scale of the skies and the whole context of the natural world. He presents these scenes with easeful accomplishment and a kind of painterly engagement that's both exciting and reassuring. That's an odd combination.

**Sandy:** He was certainly not a radical or a revolutionary. By all accounts, he was quiet and unassuming. One London critic said in 1895 that in his own painting he carefully avoided "the extravagance of the Glasgow young men." His fellow-artists all describe him as broad-minded and tolerant of the various approaches to painting constantly coming to the fore. They praise him for his yeoman service to Scottish art.

**Alan:** So he himself might be described as an establishment figure?

**Sandy:** It's not as simple as that. He was elected to the RSA almost as soon as he became President of the SSA. They wanted him on board, "inside the tent" and he remained loyal to both organisations and provided a valuable link between them. But that was when he was in his thirties.

**Alan:** So as a younger man he was more independently-minded?

**Sandy:** In his twenties, he was part of a group of younger artists influenced by the Barbizon School, committed to painting landscape directly from nature. This was a method that academic dogma decreed unacceptable as the basis for a finished painting. It took time for the work of the *plein air* painters to be properly appreciated. That would only happen when it became recognised that the spontaneity and immediacy of their paintings enhanced the viewer's sense of sharing the painter's response to nature.

**Alan:** That seems part of a wider European context.

**Sandy:** In 1874 the first independent Impressionist Exhibition took place in Paris, and the protest against the conservatism of the Academy led to the founding of the Salon des Independents in 1884. Scotland was ahead of the game with the launch of the SSA in 1892. Towards the end of the 19th century, the main European capitals saw groups of artists breaking away from the academies to set up new exhibiting societies. The Secession in Vienna was founded in 1897 with Gustav Klimt as their first President. This was where Charles Rennie Mackintosh and his wife, Margaret MacDonald would exhibit an entire room in 1900. The Secession in Berlin was a year later in 1898. The first shock waves of modern painting – Fauvism, Expressionism, Cubism and so on – were about to burst forth. The role of the Academy as a dominant authority laying down the law on aesthetic matters was now over.

**Alan:** So this is aligned with modernism, in a broad sense, the eruption of new art forms that shake up the complacency of the traditional. It's aligned with Hugh MacDiarmid's Renaissance in Montrose in the 1920s, or before that the Irish literary revival. Like W.B. Yeats, MacDiarmid and Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Noble's paintings arise not from urban experience but from a rural, village or small-town world. These writers are producing their best work after the First World War, though Yeats (1865-1939) is of an older generation, more contemporary with Noble.

**Sandy:** You could go much further than that. Take the long historical view. Throughout the 19th century, Scotland and Europe were connected by a steady stream of artists eager to study the works of established masters and to acquaint themselves with all of the momentous changes taking place in the visual arts. In France, as a result of the Revolution and with the subsequent beginnings of a democratic society, there was a fundamental change in the relationship of the artist to society, leading to a new freedom for art and the individual artist. This opened the way for a new view of the world.

**Alan:** So what was Noble's story?

**Sandy:** Noble's first visit to France in 1879 with his fellow painter Joseph Farquharson took place towards the end of the first great decade of Impressionism. Noble was in his early twenties. This was a golden era of French painting in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 and a period of immense social change in the fabric of French life with the rise of industrialisation, set against agricultural depression and rural depopulation. He studied for a time in the studio of Carolus-Duran, the eminent portrait painter, but it's at this point he grasps that landscape painting holds the key to the future. He then spends time in Honfleur, on the Normandy coast, which was identified with the Impressionists. But the modernity of Impressionism was not for him. He remained steadfast to his principles concerning the truth of nature: "Paint what you see" was his motto. He regarded Impressionist methods as mere "scamperings" –

**Alan:** He seemed a bit bamboozled by their overwhelming use of colour: why so many? "Pourquoi ces trente-six couleurs?" he would ask. There's no allegiance at all with the Impressionist painters.

**Sandy:** Well, he wasn't alone in holding that point of view. The great French composer Claude Debussy was eager to rid himself of the "Impressionist" tag and sarcastically dismissed Claude Monet: "Impressionism... What freedom, what ease of workmanship! A preliminary drawing for a wallpaper pattern is more finished than this seascape." Noble also visited the village of Grez-sur-Loing where an artist's colony had sprung up in the 1860s. He joined two of the Glasgow Boys there, William Kennedy and John Lavery. Sadly there seems to be no record of Noble's French experiences.

**Alan:** Then he returned to Scotland.

**Sandy:** After his apprentice period in Edinburgh studying at the Trustees Academy from 1873-77 (where he would encounter the work and teaching of William McTaggart) and his

travels in France, Noble settled in East Linton in 1887 where he spent the rest of his life, encouraging dozens of artists to come and paint there and founding the East Lothian landscape school. In the years around 1900, the small village must have resembled Grez-sur-Loing in the number of artists working there. The 40 or so pubs and inns must have done a roaring trade. The locality provided him with everything he needed in terms of subject matter. Almost all of his paintings were made within a mile or so from his cottage. In that sense he's the personification of the local artist. The charge of parochialism often levelled against Scottish art fails to understand that in every part of Scotland the richness and diversity of the work of artists can be encountered. To describe him as "merely" a local artist is hopelessly wide of the mark.

**Alan:** That's also a quality that's intrinsic to Scotland's character, what you might call the geography of Scotland's imagination. You see it in the diversity of the writers' work as much as in that of our artists.

**Sandy:** Yes. Think of it. Just as Noble gave us his East Lothian landscapes, McTaggart gave us Kintyre, and in the 20th century, Joan Eardley gave us Catterline and John Bellany, Port Seton. Identification with the local is essential to the work of all artists. It's the specific place, the locality, the landscape and terrain that informs and nourishes their vision. The notion that Noble was isolated and cut off in East Linton is contradicted by his European credentials and the fact that his paintings were regularly exhibited in the Royal Academy in London, not to mention the award of the Bronze medal in the Paris International exhibition of 1900. His career was both productive and visible, with his paintings in the annual RSA exhibitions enthusiastically praised "as always redolent of the open air."

**Alan:** So he was valued. That reciprocates his own valuation of the local. I'm reminded of Allan Ramsay's Preface to *The Ever Green*, his 1724 anthology gathering poems from before 1600, regenerating the tradition. He says of his poets: "When these good Bards wrote, we had not yet made Use of imported Trimming upon our Cloaths, nor of foreign Embroidery in our Writings. Their poetry is the Product of their own Country, not pilfered in the Transportation from abroad: Their Images are native, and their Landskips domestick; copied from those Fields and Meadows we every Day behold." Ramsay was writing at precisely the time when Scottish artists like Gavin Hamilton with their preference for classical subjects are giving way to a new focus on native landscapes and portraiture. Ramsay's writing itself is clearly pictorial: "The Morning rises (in the Poets Description) as she does in the Scottish Horizon. We are not carried to Greece or Italy for a Shade, a Stream or a Breeze. The Groves rise in our own Valleys; the Rivers flow from our own Fountains, and the Winds blow upon our own Hills." So the art of Robert Noble is a bridge from this 18th-century shift of emphasis to the native and local, to the 20th-century world of rural modernism, and while its address is to the local, the international context informs its authority, but doesn't taint it by prompting mere emulation.

**Sandy:** Like the Secession in Vienna, the SSA recognised from the outset the necessity of bringing artistic life in Edinburgh into contact with the latest developments in the visual arts.

**Alan:** And the SSA maintained the radical purpose with which it began.

**Sandy:** Without doubt! Just consider their loan exhibition of 1913 which included works by Matisse, Cézanne, Van Gogh, and Gauguin. So the art-interested public had an opportunity to see what was currently happening in European art with the aim of encouraging the appreciation of a modern view of art. It's fascinating to ponder what Noble made of these modern masters, so far removed from his own preoccupations. He never admitted any modern tendency into his own work, but he moved on from his early adherence to Barbizon ways and as he grew older colour and light began to play a much more important role. What might he have done had he lived longer? Would there have been a fruitful late period as with

Daubigny? On the day of his funeral the Saltire was flown at half-mast above the RSA in Edinburgh, a fitting tribute to a fine Scottish artist.

**Alan:** Noble's work fell into obscurity but remained highly regarded in the locality of East Linton. The current exhibition gathers work from local people and collectors who have loved his paintings over generations since his death and held them in high esteem. It gives us the opportunity to look at them again. Anyone who sees them will remember them. They're full of a sense of fondness and longing, openness and unsentimental warmth, and they stay in the memory.

**Sandy:** Artists of his stature shouldn't be forgotten.