



Mailley-Watt, K. (2020) 'A school is not a product of any one person or of any one mind': the impact of Charles H. Scott and other Scottish Artists on the Vancouver School of Applied Art and Design. *Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History*, 25, pp. 69-76.

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Deposited on 05 March 2021

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‘A school is not a product of any one person or of any one mind’: The Impact of Charles H Scott and other Scottish Artists on the Vancouver School of Applied Art and Design

Karen Mailley-Watt

On the 28 March 1952 at the opening of the new Vancouver School of Art, former Director of the school Charles H. Scott (1886-1964), acknowledged that:

In this building, on the first floor immediately above, during a morning in September 1925, a school was born and there, and then, assembled a group of young people of both sexes - teenagers we would call them nowadays - somewhat shy of each other, and strangely quiet with ebullient youth. This formed the first group of students registered in Vancouver's first art school. We felt that it marked an historic occasion ... A school is not a product of any one person or of any one mind. It is an amalgam of many minds, past and present. Nor is it a mere building, it is a bond between the spirit of the teacher and the spirit of the student - a building up on solid foundations, searching the past for its virtues, living in the present and moving fearlessly into the future.¹

The ideology and sentiment embedded in this address, which marked Scott's stepping down as Director of the School, are very telling. Through this paper, I will show that the Scottish immigrants - Grace Wilson Melvin (1892-1977), J.W.G. Macdonald (1897-1960) and Scott himself (Fig.1) - played a fundamental and often uncelebrated role in shaping the Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Art (VSDAA), now Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Through this paper the notion that a the ideology that a school is 'not a product of any one person or mind' will be brought to the forefront by examining the impact of three immigrant Scots to Vancouver, Canada. It will also reveal how Scott and Melvin carried forward and implemented their experiences from their time at the Glasgow School of Art (GSA) in Scotland by emphasising the parallels in pedagogy, forms of knowledge exchange, and ethos carried across the two schools.

Scottish Immigrants and The Vancouver School of Applied Art & Design (VSDAA)

Both Scott and Melvin (Fig.2) attended GSA during an important time in the School's history and by all accounts, this is where their life-long friendship began. Under the Directorship of Fra Newbery (1855-1946), Scott attended classes at GSA from 1903 to 1910 while continuing to work as a letter artist and art teacher. Crucially, Newbery saw no distinction between male and female students as potential artists or teachers and thus by 1910 the school had an unusually high proportion of female staff members teaching an array of classes and craft skills.² Newbery, who was appointed Director of GSA in 1885, set about immersing his students and staff in the ideology that a good teacher was one who had been immersed in European artistic tradition and valued the importance of individualistic creativity. Newbery stated that:

The expression of artistic personality really made the artist. Art might be and probably was, a quality possessed by every human being, but it was only he who expressed that personality whether he worked in clay, wood, iron or anything he liked that became the artist.³

He further stated that student should not draw or paint 'after some antiquated method' but that the artists individuality in the process be 'nurtured and cultivated.'⁴ Newbery understood the role of GSA in facilitating the improvement of British design by preparing his students for a variety of career trajectories including design for industry. In an address at GSA in 1911 Newbery explained that:

The ideal he had always held before himself was that the school should be a centre of art culture, art education and technical education which should make for the good of the commonwealth as a whole by furnishing it with workers in every medium, means or material, whereby beauty could reveal itself through art.⁵

This principal, which derived from the South Kensington System, was supported by theoretical and practical study as GSA established the Technical Art Studios (TAS) in 1893. The TAS offered both male and female students a range of courses including bookbinding, stained glass, needlework, ceramic decoration, mosaic and enamel work. Similarly, this philosophy was transmitted to Scott through his time

at GSA and implemented during his time as Director at VSDAA. Scott stated that the VSDAA was established to train workers in the graphic and applied arts. The utilitarian aspect of the training was stressed from the school's establishment as there was a belief that many trades and industries in Vancouver, and in wider British Columbia, required the support of trained artist workers. Regarding Scott's curriculum, para can be identified regarding the teaching of Architecture. The prospectus for 1926-1927 Middle School evening courses included an Architectural Evening School. The Architectural Evening School consisted of 'talks on the general outlines of historic styles of architecture, making of drawings.....Instruction of planning and making working drawings and details for domestic and other buildings.'⁶

Scott was active in Glasgow's artistic community before moving to Calgary in Canada in 1912 to take up an appointment as Art Supervisor for Calgary Schools. From archival research it is evident that Scott was involved in the GSA Art Club, a space for both students and staff to critique works and discuss associated topics. Grace Melvin was also active in the GSA Art Club and acted as the Club's Honorary Secretary. During his time in Vancouver, Scott was engaged in new artistic networks in Vancouver and further afield. He was an active member of the B.C. Art League; an elected Associate of the Royal Canadian Academy; a member of The Canadian Group of Painters and a member of The Canadian Society of Graphic Art.⁷

By 1914 Scott was excelling in his role as Art Supervisor in Calgary but like many men of this period, his duties were interrupted by the outbreak of war . He enlisted to join the Duke of Connaught's Own 158th Battalion and on his deployment to Britain, he married Jean Smith Melvin - Grace's sister in 1916. He fought and was wounded in France before returning to Vancouver with his new wife, to resume his teaching duties in 1925. By 1926 Scott was appointed Director of the VSDAA where he began a quest to improve the standard of artistic teaching in Canada by actively seeking-out highly qualified teachers. Scott began to reach out to artists who he knew had the skills and drive to help shape the newly opened VSDAA into a school of recognition. He also widened his search by advertising in various British newspapers. One artist who responded to the advertisement was

J.W.G Macdonald. Upon Macdonald's appointment, he brought new expertise and experience to the Vancouver School. He was a graduate from the Edinburgh College of Art in 1922 with a Design Diploma in Art and a Specialist Art Teacher's certificate. Macdonald specialised in textiles, commercial advertising and wood carving. In 1923 he began working for Morton Sundour Fabrics Limited where he designed an array of goods including textiles, rug and carpets. Ian Thoms states that during his time at the company, Macdonald designed curtains for Holyrood Palace.⁸ Macdonald stayed at the company until 1925 when he was appointed Head of Design at Lincoln School of Art.⁹ His time at the Lincoln School was short lived as in 1926 he answered Scott's newspaper advertisement and was invited to take up a new position at the VSDAA as Head of Design and Instructor for Commercial Art in the Autumn of that year.¹⁰ From student publications of the period, it is evident that Macdonald made a positive impression on the school's students. The Annual student publication, *The Paint Box*, from 1927 dedicates a short section to Macdonald's classes and highlights that he was a 'popular instructor' who gave the students 'individual attention' which would not have been possible in larger classes.¹¹

During this period, Scott had also employed Fredrick Horseman Varley (1881-1969) to lead the Painting Department of the school and a friendship grew between Varley and Macdonald. Varley, who was a member of the Group of Seven, had come to Vancouver via Toronto. The Group of Seven were a group of Canadian landscape painters from 1920 to 1933, which originally comprised Franklin Carmichael (1890-1945), Lawren Harris (1885-1970), A.Y. Jackson (1882-1974), Frank Johnston (1888-1949), Arthur Lismer (1885-1969), J.E.H. MacDonald (1873-1932), and Varley.

Originally from Sheffield, Varley was heavily influenced by the beauty of British Columbia. By the early 1930's the VSDAA, with a finely selected body of instructors was fast becoming one of Canada's noted art schools by offering a wide range of disciplines including leatherwork, bookbinding, etching, linocuts, block-printing, ceramics and design application. Macdonald is noted in the 1927 publication of *The Paint Box* as having a 'perpetual vision of fabric design, designs for wallpaper,

carpets, pottery and other forms of applied arts.’¹² However, by 1933 the Depression had caused the VSDAA to take drastic measures to survive. Such measures included ‘drastic salary reductions’ causing both Varley and Macdonald to leave VSDAA stating that they felt that they could not continue on little pay. Instead, the men established their own competing art school called The British Columbia College of Arts, which specialised in an interdisciplinary teaching approach. However, the school only had a brief flurry of success and was only active for two years, closing in 1935.¹³

Around 1927 Scott reached out to his friend, colleague and sister-in-law, Grace Melvin who accepted a teaching position at VSDAA in 1928. Never one to not accept a challenge, Melvin stated that she viewed the move as an ‘opportunity to impact her rich background of Arts and Crafts knowledge in a relatively untilled but fertile ground.’¹⁴ On the 29 September 1928, aged thirty-five, Grace Melvin arrived on the ship *Anthenia* in Canada to start her teaching career at the VSDAA. Melvin’s career at the GSA is well documented.¹⁵ However, her time and impact on Vancouver’s artistic community is not. In 1907 Melvin started her art education at the GSA attending various afternoon classes including Drawing and Painting.¹⁶ During this period, GSA was a forward-thinking experience for middle-and-upper class women wishing to seek professional art instruction with a good grounding in design skills under Newbery. Melvin received a rich art education studying under influential teachers Ann Macbeth (1875-1948), Maurice Griffenhagen (1862-1931), and Robert Anning Bell (1863-1933).¹⁷ Shortly after graduating in 1920 with a Diploma in Art and a special certificate in embroidery, Robert Anning Bell offered her a teaching position within the Design Department. For seven years Melvin taught lettering and illumination at GSA until she emigrated and took up her position at VSDAA.¹⁸

The VSDAA’s curriculum was further restructured when Melvin arrived at the School in 1928. The pottery course, which was taught by Melvin, was a subject which was previously not available at the School due to a lack of an instructor with practical pottery experience and equipment. In an interview from 1974 Melvin discusses how the purchase of the pottery firing kilns brought together Vancouver’s

artistic community. In the interview she boldly stated that she ‘introduced pottery to B.C. and we had the only kilns - even commercial people used to come to us to get us to fire for them.’¹⁹ The addition of the kilns allowed the artistic community of Vancouver to gather around the Art School, which not only provided new skills and equipment, but a new artistic support network with Scott, Melvin and Macdonald in the centre.

By the late 1930s Scott had created a syllabus strikingly similar to GSA by offering a wide range of disciplines to students. The 1929-30 VSDAA Prospectus lists an impressive staff roll. The full-time staff consisted of Scott as the Director, Varley instructing Drawing & Painting; Macdonald teaching Design & Craft’s and Melvin teaching Lettering, Illumination, Embroidery and Pottery’. Furthermore, the VSDAA had several experienced part-time and evening staff including Charles Marega (1871-1939) who instructed the Modelling classes, and the Newcastle-born architect Robert Percival Stirling Tweizall (1875-1964) who was in charge of ‘Perspective & Architecture’.²⁰ By this period the school had begun to impact in the manner Scott had envisioned. He stated in the 1928 edition of *The Paint Box* that:

Happily, Vancouver is beginning to be aware that Art is a necessity of Life, and that with the increase of commerce comes the designer and the artist.²¹

His primary objective of creating an art school which was supportive of Vancouver’s trades and industries was starting to prove fruitful.

‘Methods used in the old Country’

Several parallels regarding the methods of knowledge exchange and skill transference can be drawn between GSA and VSDAA. Grace’s teaching methods were also greatly influenced by her time at GSA with its ethos of art and design for industry and everyday applications. In an interview recorded in 1974, she discussed her teaching methods saying that she was:

always very keen on the methods used in the old country. Better schools of art - established schools of art - and that was we believed, and I still do, in a thorough good grounding in drawing, composition, in colour harmony, and these structural qualities that I think make for a good artist.²²

This idea of 'methods of the old country' were not only apparent in the teaching styles of Melvin and Scott but also in the ethos of what they believed an art school should be. Melvin drew from her pedagogical experiences at GSA, bringing them to her new post at VSDAA. For example, the above quote is very reminiscent of a statement made by GSA teacher and needlework pioneer Jessie Newbery in 1898. Newbery states:

I believe in education consisting of the best that can be done. Then having this high standard set before us, in what we like to do: that for our fathers, thus for us ... Design for a pepper pot was important in itself as that of a cathedral.²³

As George Rawson aptly demonstrates, Newbery believed that students had to develop an 'intuitive understanding' of symmetry and master the discipline of drawing.²⁴ This belief is visibly evident in Melvin's educational texts and was echoed by Scott in 1939. In Scott's justification of the VSA's curriculum to the Superintendent of Schools he stated:

So far as the Vancouver Art School is concerned it anchors its training in a sound knowledge of drawing, design, colour and composition as the basic elements in all art expression. With that as a central anchorage it branches art into such specific field as Commercial Art, Interior Decoration, Design and Crafts, Mural, Portrait and Landscape Painting and Illustration.²⁵

Furthermore, the quote by Scott at the start of this article clearly indicates that he believed that an art school was not merely a building but almost a form of spirituality - one where teacher and student bonded together to create something new. The school benefited from this ethos via Melvin and Scott's formative years at GSA. Both artists championed the GSA philosophy by fostering what they believed an art school should be - not just a place of learning but an organic artistic community. The school changed its name from VSDAA changed its name to the Vancouver School of Art (VSA) in 1933. The newly named VSA, similar to GSA,

undertook an immersive ethos of design, making and performing plays throughout the 1930s. In regard to performance and theatre, Melvin alludes to the playfulness and fun at the Vancouver school still being used as an important teaching tool. The performances and plays were performed in the old attic in the Old High School building which housed VSA from 1936. The space was transformed into anything from an 'Indian Camp' to a stately European hall or cathedral to house the yearly nativity play. Imagination, colour and design got full play. Personal accounts from students of the period affirm that Scott and Melvin were immersed in such activities and often served small reminders of their Scottish heritage, including scotch broth.²⁶

Both Melvin and Scott drew inspiration from the Canadian landscape. Archival evidence shows that they travelled all over British Columbia visiting idyllic beauty spots, including Yellow Point on Vancouver Island and Buccaneer Bay. From the early 1930's they also implemented a version of the GSA's Director Vacation Sketching Scheme in Canada. Newbery's scheme, which both Scott and Melvin were part of, along with Mary Watt (1885-1954) and Archibald McGlashan (1885-1964), ran as part of the GSA Art Club from May to October. Melvin and Scott continued this practice in an official capacity at the Vancouver school. The artist Jack Shadbolt (1909-1998) states in 'A Personal Recollection' that he attended 'the first Art School camp at Tribune Bay, Hornby Island - a place that Charles Scott and Grace Melvin had become attracted to.'²⁷ By the mid 1930s, the school summer camp moved to Savary Island with its own daily bulletin called *The Savoury Pudding* (Fig.4). The camp was an inclusive and welcoming experience for 'past and present students who are willing to come in the spirit of mingled work and play.'²⁸ Scott and Melvin were taking their teaching outside into the rich Canadian landscape, which sought to ignite their students imaginations. Scott alludes to the otherworldliness, magic and adventure which the landscape posed in 'Savoury Pudding' featured in the April 1928 publication. It reads that:

Savary is no ordinary island, for its makeup, it hints of Robinson Crusoe, South Seas, and Treasure Island. Its very shape, that of a crescent moon, seems to suggest something of the magic of that glamorous orb.²⁹

By all means, the annual trip to Savary Island was one which many students looked forward to. The VSA student annual publication *Behind the Palette*, stated that the students had made part of the island their 'comfortable home' in a 'roomy hotel' in the Western region of the island known as 'Indian Point'.³⁰ The fact that the camp was 'open to all past and present students' indicates that the School still provided support and training to graduates once they had successfully completed their formal studies. Furthermore, the location must have deeply inspired Scott as he held a solo exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery entitled 'The Spirit of Savary' in 1935.

Melvin and Scott, moreover, continued to have an impact on the artistic community by helping to establish an artist colony on Hornby Island, situated between the mainland and Vancouver Island. Melvin purchased a hut which they turned into a studio space. Both artists wished to immerse themselves in the Canadian landscape and like their fellow GSA student Jessie M King (1875-1949), Melvin and Scott are credited with helping to establish an artist colony. In 1949 Melvin purchased land to build a studio on Tribune Bay, Hornby Island, when 'there was only farmers, loggers, fishermen' on the island.³¹ Upon returning from Paris with her husband E.A. Taylor in 1915, King in a similar way helped to foster a community of women artists. As a successful artist and teacher, King had the financial means to purchase a series of buildings at Green Gate, Kirkcudbright, in Galloway. Kirkcudbright hosted many artists throughout the interwar years including Dorothy Johnstone (1892-1980), Helen Paxton Brown (1876-1956) and Cecile Walton (1891-1956). In a similar fashion, artists were attracted to Hornby Island after Scott and Melvin's arrival, including the former students and colleagues sculptor George Norris (1928-2013) and the painter Jack Shadbolt (1909-1998).

In conclusion, this article has touched upon the impact of Scott, Melvin and Macdonald in Vancouver, Canada. However, there is scope for a fuller investigation regarding educational texts and the social and professional connections of Scottish immigrant artists in Canada during the interwar years. Melvin is on record declaring that they 'were always very keen on the methods used in the old country. Better schools of art -established schools of art -' This is apparent through

their educational texts, which were published for the B.C. Educational Board and used as manuals at various school levels. Scott's recruitment of both Melvin and Macdonald allowed for these qualities to be taught and transferred across the artistic community of Vancouver thus allowing VSDAA to continue, develop and nurture artists and designers. Although Scott was honoured at the newly opened VAS in 1956 (Figs 5,6), his legacy is uncelebrated today in both his native Scotland and adopted home. Yet the strong foundations which Scott, Melvin and Macdonald helped shape and nurture, and the sense of kinship which they cultivated within the artistic community cannot be ignored. Scott, Melvin and Macdonald played an extensive role in VSDAA which allowed the institution to develop, and still continue today, in the form of the Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Scott's forward-thinking and savvy recruitment strategy allowed the syllabus to grow and respond to the changing demands of commerce. It was truly an 'amalgam of minds' and spirit.

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Figure 2: Charles H. Scott painting *Canadian Youth* on Buccaneer Bay in British Columbia, 1939. The painting is now in the collection of Emily Carr University Art + Design. Photograph courtesy of the Scott/Melvin Estate, Private Collection, Vancouver, Canada.

Figure 3: Charles H. Scott painting *Canadian Youth* on Buccaneer Bay in British Columbia, 1939. Photograph courtesy of the Scott/Melvin Estate, Private Collection, Vancouver, Canada.

Figure 4: 'The Savoury Pudding' in *Behind the Palette*, March 1935. Image courtesy of the Special Collections at Emily Carr University of Art + Design.

Figure 5 & 6: Charles H. Scott being honoured at the official opening of the new Vancouver School of Art building on 28 March 1952. Image courtesy of the Scott/Melvin Estate, Vancouver, Canada.

¹ 'Address by Mr. Charles H. Scott, A.R.C.A, F.R.S.A on the Occasion of the Opening of the New Vancouver School of Art.', 28 March 1952, Charles H. Scott Artist File, Vancouver Art Gallery.

² Ray McKenzie (ed.), *The Flower and the Green Leaf: Glasgow School of Art in the Time of Charles Rennie Mackintosh*, Edinburgh 2009, p.23.

³ George Rawson, 'Francis Henry Newbery and The Glasgow School of Art' (Glasgow, The Glasgow School of Art, 1996), p.73.

⁴ Rawson, (n.3), p.73.

⁵ Rawson, (n.3), p.74.

⁶ 'VSA Prospectus', 1926, The Vancouver Art Gallery Library, pp.12-13.

⁷ Colin Graham, foreword in the "'Canadian Group of Painters" Exhibition Catalogue Held at The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 16th March to the 4th April 1965', 1965, Private Collection, The Scott and Melvin Estate, Vancouver.

⁸ Ian M. Thom, 'Jock Macdonald: A Biographical Sketch', in *Jock Macdonald Evolving Form*, London 2015, 9–13. See p.9.

⁹ J. Craig Stirling, 'The Scottish Diaspora: Charles Hepburn Scott and Grace Wilson Melvin, Pioneers of Art and Design Education in Vancouver, British Columbia' (Unpublished, n.d.), The Scott and Melvin Estate, Vancouver p.9.

¹⁰ Thom, 'Jock Macdonald: A Biographical Sketch' (n.7). p.9.

¹¹ Vito S. Cianci (ed.), 'The Paint Box (Vol 2)' (The Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts, 1927), Emily Carr University Special Collections, p.10.

¹² Cianci, (n.10).

¹³ Thom, 'Jock Macdonald: A Biographical Sketch' (n.7), p.10.

¹⁴ J. Craig Stirling, 'The Scottish Diaspora' (n.5). p.13.

¹⁵ Liz Arthur, *Glasgow Girls: Artists and Designers 1890-1930* (Kirkcudbright 2000 Ltd, 2010), p.77.

¹⁶ 'GSA Register' (The Glasgow School of Art, n.d.), GSAA REG/2/3, The Glasgow School of Art Archives & Collections.

¹⁷ Stirling, (n.8), p.12.

¹⁸ Stirling, (n.8), p.13.

¹⁹ 'Transcript of Videotaped Interview with Grace Melvin and Dorothy Metcalfe', 17 June 1974, Grace Melvin Artist File, The Vancouver Art Gallery Library, p.3.

²⁰ 'The Vancouver School of Decorative & Applied Arts for the Session 1929-1930', 1930 1929, The Vancouver Art Gallery Library, p.3.

²¹ Sibyl Hill (ed.), 'The Paint Box' (The Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts, 1928), Special Collections, Emily Carr University of Art + Design, p.10.

²² 'Transcript of Videotaped Interview with Grace Melvin and Dorothy Metcalfe' (n.17), p.12.

²³ Sandra Lois Hefferman, 'Design from Artefacts: Innovate or Intimate - Issue of Aesthetics, Education, Collecting, Making and Marketing in Coats' Needlework Scheme 1934-1962', p.71

²⁴ George Rawson, “‘The Renfrew Street Panopticon’: Francis Newbery and the Reinvention of Glasgow School of Art’, in *The Flower and the Green Leaf: Glasgow School of Art in the Time of Charles Rennie Mackintosh*, Edinburgh 2009), pp.17–27.

²⁵ ‘Art in Vancouver Schools’, 4 April 1939, Private Collection, The Scott and Melvin Estate, Vancouver.

²⁶ ‘Transcript of Videotaped Interview with Grace Melvin and Dorothy Metcalfe’, (n.17), p.4.

²⁷ Jack Shadbolt, ‘Personal Recollection’, in *Vancouver: Art and Artists 1931-1983* (The Vancouver Gallery of Art, n.d.), pp.34–56.

²⁸ Charles H. Scott, “‘Savoury Island” in Behind the Palette’ (Vancouver Art School, April 1935), Special Collections, Emily Carr University of Art + Design, p.6.

²⁹ Charles H. Scott, “‘Savoury Island” (n.26), p.5.

³⁰ Jessamy Carey (ed.), ‘Behind the Palette’, 1936, Special Collections, Emily Carr University of Art + Design, Vancouver.

³¹ Carey, (n.30).