Out of Hours Art

LIVING THE DREAM

The Scottish Colourists Series:

JD Fergusson

7 December 2013 – 15 June 2014

Scottish National Gallery Of Modern Art
(Modern Two)

73 Belford Road, Edinburgh EH4 3DS

In *Midnight in Paris*, Woody Allen transports his leading character back to the Paris of La Belle Époque, the glorious period at the start of the 20th century when the French capital was the centre of artistic freedom. Just over a century ago, a young Scottish medical student similarly transported himself to live in that fantastic, creative melting pot.

John Duncan Fergusson spent 2 years at Edinburgh University before giving up his medical studies to become a painter, initially visiting France in summers when he stayed as long as he could afford, but in 1905 he moved permanently, abandoning family and convention, to live the rest of his life, a self-taught painter, 'trying for truth, for reality, through light'.

He was often very poor, but he never borrowed money; he lived on porridge for lunch, and onion and potato soup for dinner, with an occasional night out when he met his friends at a cheap restaurant in Montparnasse. He was gloriously happy; the Paris tradespeople were interested in artists, his laundress mended his clothes without being asked, and only added a few sous to the bill. He always said that Paris was the best place to be poor in; painters, writers, and musicians could meet at a café and talk for hours over a cup of coffee. Most evenings Fergusson walked to the Dome or l'Avenue on the boulevard Montparnasse to meet his friends. Sometimes they walked the boulevards arguing fiercely for whole nights on end.¹

A contemporary and acquaintance of Matisse, Braque, Picasso, and Gertrude Stein (he chose not to be one of her 'discoveries'), he enjoyed success from the start, showing his work in the progressive Salon d'Automne. He wrote:

'We were all very excited with the Russian ballet when it came to Paris. Bakst was a Sociétaire of the Salon d'Automne and used all the ideas of modern painting for his décor. Diaghilev made a triumph, surely even greater than he hoped for. No

J. D. Fergusson (1874–1961). Summer 1914, 1934. Oil on canvas 88 x 113.5 cm. The Fergusson Gallery, Perth & Kinross Council — presented by the JD Fergusson Art Foundation 1991.

wonder S.J. (Peplow, Fergusson's fellow Scottish Colourist) said these were some of the greatest nights of his life. They were the greatest nights in anyone's life — Scheherezade, Petruschka, Sacre du Printemps, Nijinsky, Karsavina, Fokine'.²

Like Diaghilev, Fergusson edited an art magazine *Rhythm*, giving expression to his wide range of interests. In 1913 he met Margaret Morris, the dance pioneer and they were married for 48 years. Following the example of Isadora Duncan, she rejected classical ballet training favouring a freer more improvised approach.

They moved to the Cap d'Antibes before it became fashionable, to soak in and paint the colour and heat of the Mediterranean. His painting *Summer 1914* captures the languor and idyll of that time. When war was declared, they moved to London, their careers progressing in tandem, exploring their joint interest in movement, rhythm, creativity, form, design, and colour.

Charles Rennie Mackintosh was a friend. Morris pioneered the therapeutic potential of dance, retraining as a physiotherapist to be more respectable with the health establishment. The Margaret Morris Movement is still active (www.margaretmorrismovement.com) and she

is perhaps still more famous than her partner.

Fergusson returned to Paris after the Great War, but in 1939, they both relocated to Glasgow for their final move. Welcomed into the Glasgow Arts Club, he attended

JD Fergusson (1874–1961). Eástre (Hymn to the Sun), 1924 (cast 1971). Brass. Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art: purchased 1972.

once, but never returned, 'because it did not include women'. He set up the Glasgow New Arts Club, which did. Morris established the Celtic Ballet of Scotland, the forerunner of Scottish Ballet.

Fergusson mainly painted women, initially his acquaintances ('independent women who had risen above social mores') whom he painted in the fashions and hats of the time. Later he painted many nudes, celebrating the female form, but he could also paint still life, Cezanne-inspired Scottish landscapes and brass sculptures, and packed more in a beach scene (*Grey Day, Paris Plage*, 1906) than Vetriciano could dream of. An admirer of Matisse ('the painter who annoys the bourgeois most'), their largest paintings both featured rings of naked male and female dancers. Fergusson's *Les Eus*, celebrating rhythm and dance (and nakedness) is on permanent display at the Hunterian Art Gallery at Glasgow University, while *Rhythm* and 13 other paintings are on show at the University of Stirling.

JD Fergusson (1874–1961). *Le Manteau Chinois*, 1909. Oil on canvas 199.5 x 97 cm. The Fergusson Gallery, Perth & Kinross Council — presented by the JD Fergusson Art Foundation 1991.

J. D. Fergusson (1874–1961). *The Log Cabin Houseboat*, 1925. Oil on canvas 76.2 x 66 cm. Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh: purchased 1966.

Despite his granite features and somewhat stern appearance (like Matisse, he often looked the country doctor; dressed in tweeds) Fergusson was a passionate Scot, who left Scotland to escape its conservatism but then returned to explore and celebrate his Celtic roots.

JD Fergusson and Margaret Morris (Fergus and Meg) had no children, but they were the father and mother of generations of painters and dancers. Fittingly, their ashes are scattered on the summit of Schiehallion, an iconic Scottish mountain, which dominates the land.

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The first large retrospective of Fergusson's work after 40 years is on show at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh until 15 June 2014, followed by a tour of selected works to the Pallant House Gallery, Chichester from 5 July to 19 October. There is a permanent exhibition of the work of JD Fergusson and Margaret Morris at the Fergusson Gallery, Perth.

REFERENCES

1. Morris M. *My life in movement*. Garelochhead: International Association of MMM, 2003
2. Morris M. *The art of JD Fergusson: a biased biography*. London: Blackie Academic and Professional, 1974.