

MUSEUMS IN FLUX

by merlin james 2/5/13



[VIEW SLIDESHOW](#) Mannequin heads hanging in the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum. Courtesy Glasgow City Council.; Rembrandt: Entombment of Christ, ca. 1635, oil on panel, 12 1/2 by 16 inches. Courtesy Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow.;

GLASGLOW MUSEUMS IN GLASGOW, as in other cities, are often battlegrounds for ideological conflict, as well as barometers of economic and political pressure. When I first visited here some 15 years ago, maverick museum director Julian Spalding was causing a furor with his recently founded Gallery of Modern Art, where he tried to counter prevalent institutionalized avant-gardism with what many found a clunky populism. He left in 1999, but since then controversies around Glasgow museums have continued.

The stakes are high, because the city's museums are pretty great. There's the Kelvingrove, a Victorian chateau containing the city's main public trove of painting and sculpture (as well as natural and historical artifacts). There's the Burrell Collection, a postwar bequest of fine and applied arts from many periods and cultures, housed in a 1970s glass-and-concrete pavilion in Pollock Park, south of the city center. Glasgow University's Hunterian Museum has (besides science, archeology and numismatic material) an art gallery based on the collection of 18th-century anatomist William Hunter. The Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA), in the porticoed Royal Exchange building, showcases contemporary art. There are several other specialist museums, including a museum of transport, recently moved into a CAD-morphed shed by Zaha Hadid sited at the former Clyde shipyards. Postindustrial Glasgow doesn't have huge civic wealth, but its museums budget has traditionally been generous, with good attendance from across the social spectrum. Nearly \$29 million recently went to upgrading the storage facilities of city-sponsored museums, making reserve collections accessible by appointment.

The city's fine art treasures may not quite equal those of nearby Edinburgh, but Kelvingrove has such works as a van Gogh portrait, a major Seurat figure study, a Fauvist Derain, a Braque still life, a Matisse portrait of a woman, apples by Cézanne and Courbet, Vuillard interiors, a Monet, a Renoir and much else. Old masters include Botticelli, Bellini, Rembrandt, Ribera, Ruisdael and Rosa. The Burrell Collection is strong in Degas, owning one of his greatest ballet rehearsal paintings and major figure pastels. They also have a dazzling Cézanne landscape, very presentable examples from Cranach and Bellini, Manet's brilliant Ham, a lurid Courbet gypsy scene, a Géricault sketch and two Chardins. At the Hunterian you have three more fantastic Chardins—Lady Taking Tea, Scullery Maid and Cellarboy—along with work by George Stubbs, a powerhouse landscape by Philips Koninck, important holdings of Whistler and Glasgow's own Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and much more, including modern and contemporary art. The Hunterian prints and drawings room is especially strong in Baroque drawings, works by old masters (notably Rembrandt), and 19th-century graphics, particularly by Whistler. GoMA, meanwhile, has a growing selection of local and international postmodernism. When it opened in 1996, in an 18th-century building ill-suited to modern art display, its purchasing and presentation seemed eccentric, and it lacked credibility. But it has since gained in coherence and consistency, doing some very good shows and recently spending \$1.6 million in UK Art Fund money on acquisitions. In addition, it has just received a donation of 14 works by Niki de Saint Phalle.

THAT'S THE GOOD NEWS. But Scotland's museums have some of the problems besetting cultural venues throughout Britain.

Economic recession means huge funding cuts, with some municipal museums struggling to cover basic operating costs. Curators respond creatively, but putting on a good front risks letting the politicians feel that cuts are acceptable. Today's austerity also strengthens the hold of an awful "business model" that's become prevalent in arts institutions (as in health and education). It's a syndrome marked by over-management, obsession with performance indicators, audits, measurable outcomes and targets. Governments want immediate and specific returns for their "investment" in the arts. Museums tick the boxes with excellence incentives, efficiency and accountability drives, technological enhancement of "visitor experience" and a frenzy of restructuring, rebranding, marketing, franchising, outsourcing and consultancy. (Glasgow's city museums are run by an autonomous company called Glasgow Life, set up for the delivery of public services.) In this climate, new building projects, makeovers and high-profile campaigns can take priority over the basic acquiring, conserving, researching and showing of collections. Over \$120 million were found for Hadid's hype-able hulk, while the Burrell—an equivalent landmark development 30 years ago—suffers chronic leaking roofs, failing facilities and neglect. (Grants are hopefully forthcoming to address the troubles there.)

Funding apart, aspects of Glasgow's museum policy are questionable. In 2006, the Kelvingrove Museum relaunched after a multimillion-dollar refurbishment. The makeover was trumpeted as a triumph of democratized culture, but to some it looked like dumbing down. Intrusive and gimmicky audio-visually flickered and chattered away. (Crude pedagogic diagrams were projected directly onto a Botticelli.) Trade-fair-style graphics and partitions swamped the works. Flip-chart labels presented often lame informational tidbits about exhibits. Kids' activity stations cluttered the painting galleries.

In a letter to the Burlington Magazine, I called it all "demystification of art to the point of disrespect."

Some supporters of the new Kelvingrove dismissed such criticism as elitist, but similar protests came from all social and political quarters. The left-wing Variant magazine saw market-led New Labor politics behind Kelvingrove—a mollifying rhetoric of social inclusion disguising "a technocratic fix on the part of bourgeois cultural managers." Glasgow poet Tom Leonard blogged devastatingly about the museum: "a patronising insult to people coming through the doors, as well as an insult to art and culture." Novelist and polymath Alistair Gray, another Glasgow cultural hero, went online to lament (in sorrow more than anger) the museum's revamp. Leonard and Gray had both been working-class boys for whom the old Kelvingrove represented inspiration and aspiration.

Five years on, the museum's makeover remains in place. In a building full of truly resonant artifacts, the image that has effectively become Kelvingrove's public logo is a bunch of tacky, grimacing mannequin heads, commissioned from a communications firm, hanging—apropos nothing—in a main stairwell. They shriek shopping mall.

Serious curatorship does survive, however. A refurbishment of the Hunterian's galleries has left them both refreshing and dignified, and an impressive online catalogue offers scholarly information on the collection. A recent temporary exhibition there was also superb. It highlighted an entombment of Christ by Rembrandt—a prize of the collection—with a tight selection of related paintings, drawings, books and prints. Included were the artist's larger Entombment from the Munich Alte Pinakothek, a Jan Lievens Raising of Lazarus that Rembrandt owned, and other relevant works sourced locally and internationally. A publication presented new research, and the overall project provoked meditation on what is, for all its small size, a profound and complex painting.

Showing Christ's body slung low in the Golgotha cavern, the composition recalls, with poignant irony (yet of course aptness), the Nativity. The stooped mother of Jesus shields with her hand the candle that lights the picture's whole world, and her gesture suggests nursing a child. Other attendant figures are like shades occupying a dim underworld, as yet unaware of resurrection and redemption. Numerous details have pathos and resonance, partly thanks to Rembrandt's loose, openly suggestive facture. The face of Christ, unconscious, transported, teeth glinting in the open mouth, is touching beyond words. The work's poetic sophistication could stand lengthy critical discussion, but to mention just one brilliant conceit, the structure of the image seems to have hidden within it—not too literally, but unmistakably—a skull.

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