

## **John Duncan: “A Man of Sensitive Culture”<sup>1</sup>**

### **Career and Notable Works**

Born a butcher's son in Dundee in 1866, John Duncan spent his childhood years devoted to art, and was already taking steps to carve out connections in the local art world in his adolescence. He attended the Dundee School of Art from the age of eleven, and at fifteen, he began to draw cartoons for *'The Wizard of the North'*, a local magazine. Additionally, he studied at the Dundee School of Art, after which he travelled to London where he worked as an illustrator. Following this, Duncan turned his attention to the continent, studying in Antwerp and Dusseldorf, before returning to his hometown of Dundee, where he exhibited a series of works at the Albert Institute in 1889.<sup>2</sup>

Duncan is well renowned for his artworks which contributed massively to the movement of the Celtic Revival, and more specifically, within the field of Scottish Symbolism. Much of his work takes inspiration from folklore and mythology, usually pertaining to Scottish, Irish and Arthurian legend. Some of the most noteworthy of these works include *'Riders of the Sidhe'* (1911), *'Saint Bride'* (1913), and *'Tristan and Isolde'* (1912).<sup>3</sup> However, Duncan also created many decorative works of an ecclesiastical nature, including "...altarpieces, Stations of the Cross, and wall decorations".<sup>4</sup> One example of this is a sequence of works that he created for St Hilda's Priory in Whitby, North Yorkshire. Duncan also spent some years teaching, first in Dundee, and at more than one organisation. During the late 1890's he taught art and design at Dundee YMCA, the University of Dundee and the Dundee Technical Institute. In 1899, he journeyed to Chicago with his associate Patrick Geddes. He was thereafter appointed as a Professor at Chicago University in 1900, where he served a rather brief tenure before returning to Edinburgh in 1904.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Influence of Patrick Geddes on Duncan's Work**

Duncan's involvement and association with Patrick Geddes had a great impact on his career, and it would be fair to say that without Geddes' support and guidance, Duncan's life would have played out very differently. Geddes himself was professor of Botany at University College Dublin, before moving to Dundee in 1888. He worked on a part-time basis at the University of Dundee where he resided and worked during the summer, returning to Edinburgh for the rest of the year. Geddes had a keen interest in plant biology, sociology, and economics; he took a multidisciplinary approach to his academic work, and was occupied with the marring of and

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<sup>1</sup> Foggie, David, and Mears, Frank. C., *The Royal Scottish Academy*, John Duncan Obituary, <[www.royalscottishacademy.org/artists/1245-john-duncan-rsa/overview/](http://www.royalscottishacademy.org/artists/1245-john-duncan-rsa/overview/)>, [accessed 19<sup>th</sup> May 2024]

<sup>2</sup> Jarron, Matthew, "Independent & Individualist": Art in Dundee 1867-1924, (Dundee: University of Dundee Museum Services, 2015), pp. 49-83

<sup>3</sup> Art UK, John Duncan, <[www.artuk.org/discover/artists/duncan-john-18661945](http://www.artuk.org/discover/artists/duncan-john-18661945)>, [accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2024]

<sup>4</sup> Foggie, David, and Mears, Frank. C., *The Royal Scottish Academy*, John Duncan Obituary, <[www.royalscottishacademy.org/artists/1245-john-duncan-rsa/overview/](http://www.royalscottishacademy.org/artists/1245-john-duncan-rsa/overview/)>, [accessed 19<sup>th</sup> May 2024]

<sup>5</sup> Jarron, Matthew, "Independent & Individualist": Art in Dundee 1867-1924, (Dundee: University of Dundee Museum Services, 2015), pp. 49-83

synergy between art and science.<sup>6</sup> It is thought that Geddes and Duncan may have first encountered one another during the summer of 1891.<sup>7</sup> In the year that followed, Duncan moved to Edinburgh with the express purpose of working with Geddes, and the relationship that was forged thereafter served Duncan with a wealth of opportunities. By virtue of introducing Duncan to other contemporary artistic minds, Geddes gifted him with a sort of unofficial membership into a circle of pioneering artists operating within the movement of Scottish Symbolism, and more widely, within the Celtic Revival. By all accounts, Geddes thought highly of Duncan's decorative work, and had personally commissioned him for works, such as the murals at his halls of residence at Ramsay Garden, as well as the '*Witches' Well*' in Edinburgh in 1894. One of the most significant of these opportunities was Duncan's appointment as the principal artist and artistic editor of '*The Evergreen*', Geddes' magazine which ran from 1895-1897. Here, he was introduced to other artists also featuring in the magazine, one of whom was Robert Burns.<sup>8</sup>

Matthew Jarron, curator of museum collections at University of Dundee Museums, characterises Duncan during this period as having a "reputation for creating extraordinarily detailed scenes of supernatural and mythological figures".<sup>9</sup> While this did not necessarily change when Duncan first began to work with Geddes, his portrayal and reinterpretation of these motifs undergoes somewhat of a stylistic transformation. It is evident that this comes as a reaction to Duncan's inclusion into the contemporary movement of symbolism within the Celtic Revival. Geddes himself had encouraged Duncan to become involved in the '*Celtic Renaissance*', a project which he was initiating in Edinburgh. Jarron describes this developing operation as an attempt to "redefine Scottish identity and take it away from... shortbread tin, sort of tartan kitsch imagery that had really come to dominate in nineteenth century Scotland and really try to reconnect Scotland to this ancient Celtic past that linked us to Ireland and to continental Europe".<sup>10</sup> I would argue that within the '*Celtic Renaissance*' lies the intention to pull the Scottish cultural identity away from its enculturation within a 'British' umbrella and to give the nation an opportunity to establish herself independently on the global map.

Duncan returned to Dundee in 1897, and a year later in 1898, he founded Dundee's first design collective, The Graphic Art Association. There, he had enlisted members of his existing circle of associates, many of whom he had come into contact with through his connection to Patrick

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<sup>6</sup> Jarron, Matthew, "*Independent & Individualist*": *Art in Dundee 1867-1924*, (Dundee: University of Dundee Museum Services, 2015), pp. 49-83

<sup>7</sup> University of Dundee Museums, *John Duncan and The Celtic Revival in Dundee*, 2020, <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfNt3Vdwy98](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfNt3Vdwy98)>, [accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2024]

<sup>8</sup> Ferguson, Megan, 'Patrick Geddes and the Celtic Renaissance of the 1890s', *University of Dundee*, 2011, pp. 142-147

<sup>9</sup> University of Dundee Museums, *John Duncan and The Celtic Revival in Dundee*, 2020, <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfNt3Vdwy98](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfNt3Vdwy98)>, [accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2024]

<sup>10</sup> University of Dundee Museums, *John Duncan and The Celtic Revival in Dundee*, 2020, <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfNt3Vdwy98](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfNt3Vdwy98)>, [accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2024]

Geddes. These included Rose Baxter, Nell Baxter, his own sister, Jessie Westbrook, and Stewart Carmichael. The subsequent work that Duncan created following the period he spent in Edinburgh clearly demonstrates a turning point in his visual style and subject matter, and had prompted him to provide a markedly different response to the artistic climate around him. What we see from his work at this point, is an attempt to engage on a deeper level with the contemporary art world around him. This is particularly visible in the paintings Duncan presented as part of The Graphic Art Association's debut exhibition in 1898.<sup>11</sup> There is one specific work that was a part of this collection which I believe demonstrates just how outward looking Duncan's approach to his work had become by this point. *'The Glaive of Light'* depicts an unknown Celtic hero, who is simultaneously protecting a woman from, and fighting off, a large serpentine creature. The title of the work itself refers to the weapon wielded by the warrior: the glaive is the name of a sword which is ubiquitous throughout Celtic mythological tales. What is so curious about this image is the attire of the man in the centre of it. It looks almost as if he is wearing a kimono; the brushstrokes and colours used here evokes what seems to be an east-Asian aesthetic. This, of course, seems unusual at first, but it has been suggested that Duncan's use of this visual imagery may have been due to him being inspired by *'Japonisme'*, which was a trend of Japanese-inspired visual art and illustration that had been extremely popular throughout Europe in the latter part of the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> In her 2011 thesis on Patrick Geddes and his role in the Celtic Revival, Megan Ferguson speaks of the relationship between the two, by declaring that "The Celtic Renaissance brought Patrick Geddes and John Duncan to their respective futures, without the Celtic Renaissance and without each other, they would not have travelled the same path".<sup>13</sup> This certainly seems to be supported by these observations on the effects of Geddes' influence on the direction of Duncan's career.

### The Influence of Romanticism on Duncan's Work

During the early twentieth century, Duncan began to experiment with the tempera technique (also known as 'egg tempera'); which utilises egg yolk as a binding agent within its composition and is typically known for its use in the creation of icons. Some of the benefits of employing this technique are its fast-drying nature, its durability, and its longevity.<sup>14</sup> It is believed that Duncan carried out extensive practical investigations into the technique, but as the results of which have

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<sup>11</sup> Jarron, Matthew, *"Independent & Individualist": Art in Dundee 1867-1924*, (Dundee: University of Dundee Museum Services, 2015), pp. 49-83

<sup>12</sup> Williams, Mark, 'Highland Divinities: The Celtic Revival in Scotland' in *Ireland's Immortals: A History of the Gods of Irish Myth*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 361-405

<sup>13</sup> Ferguson, Megan, 'Patrick Geddes and the Celtic Renaissance of the 1890s', *University of Dundee*, 2011, pp. 142-147

<sup>14</sup> Mayer, Ralph, *The Artists' Handbook of Materials and Techniques*, (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1976), pp. 228

never seen the light of the day, it is unknown what the outcome of those investigations was.<sup>15</sup> What we do have instead, are the consequential artworks that Duncan produced with this technique, some of which are amongst his more well-known works, such as *'Riders of the Sidhe'* (1911), *'Ivory, Apes and Peacocks'* (1923), and *'Saint Bride'* (1913). As we can infer from these works, the use of tempera had allowed Duncan to produce a level of visual detail much finer than what is seen in his earlier paintings. The colours, brushstrokes, and even the scenes and figures within them appear increasingly intentional in their depiction, viewed as brighter and bolder than before.

Duncan's use of the symbolist style throughout his career lent itself both to the subject matter and the themes of his work. Over the years, he was consistently fascinated by a range of different mythological traditions, but was chiefly inspired by Celtic folklore, more specifically, the *Tuatha De Danann* of Irish Mythology, the Arthurian tales of Brythonic Celtic folklore, and even the tale of Tristan and Isolde, which exists somewhere between the two respective traditions. As illustrated above, his representation of these themes varies in its stylistic nature throughout the years. However, I think it is also important to discuss the ways in which Duncan's adaptation of Celtic themes tells us much about the broader context of his work, and the way he was influenced by his contemporaries, as well as by other movements outside of Symbolism.

Of late, I have begun to notice parallels between the stylistic nature of Duncan's illustrations and those of Phoebe Anna Traquair, who herself was a contemporary of Duncan and had also provided works for *'The Evergreen'*. I would highlight her 1904 painting *'The Awakening'*, in which the central angelic figure is presented amidst a natural landscape, bathed in light and evoking a sense that we have left the earthly realm altogether.<sup>16</sup> I would also purport that Duncan's visual style bears a resemblance to such Pre-Raphaelite works as the paintings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. This is demonstrated by their use of pastoral imagery, and heavy emphasis on the natural world. I do not believe that this comes as a coincidence; the Pre-Raphaelite artists and those working under the umbrella of the Celtic Revival all share in the appreciation and appropriation of Romantic principles. This is evident when one considers that they both fixate on and consistently depict classical, pseudo-historical, and mythological narratives. Their use of colour and light is also akin to one another, the application of which is reminiscent of an otherworldly, supernatural, and even spiritual element. Within the portfolio of John Duncan, I believe this is embodied in his representation of female figures (which is also a common instance in Rossetti's body of work). In his reinterpretation of pseudo-historical and ecclesiastical scenes alike, Duncan constantly and consistently centres women, utilising the artistic instruments of light and shade to place them firmly into the vision of the viewer. The women in such works as *'Aoife'* (c.1914), *'The Taking of Excalibur'* (1897), and *'The Coming of Bride'* (1917), are presented as gleaming with an effervescent, otherworldly and angelic light, as

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<sup>15</sup> Foggie, David, and Mears, Frank. C., *The Royal Scottish Academy*, John Duncan Obituary, <[www.royalscottishacademy.org/artists/1245-john-duncan-rsa/overview/](http://www.royalscottishacademy.org/artists/1245-john-duncan-rsa/overview/)>, [accessed 19<sup>th</sup> May 2024]

<sup>16</sup> *Art UK*, Phoebe Anna Traquair, <[www.artuk.org/discover/artworks/search/actor:traquair-phoebe-anna-18521936](http://www.artuk.org/discover/artworks/search/actor:traquair-phoebe-anna-18521936)> [accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2024]

if glowing from within. As previously mentioned, these principles are present also in Pre-Raphaelite art. In many of Rossetti's works, such as '*Beata Beatrix*' (1877), feminine figures are depicted in a similar vein: ethereal and beautiful creatures, whose physicality is inherently connected to a spiritual or otherworldly realm.

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