

MYTHOLOGICAL SCENES: THE JOHN DUNCAN PICTURE

Provenance

1. The official history of St Peter's Church by Michael Turnbull published to mark its centenary in 2006 contains the following description:

"The eminent artist and designer, John Duncan, arrived in the School on 15 February 1912 to view the location for the painting he was preparing to execute in the hall between the two large windows. Mr Duncan was in school for the whole week from 17 November, painting the large picture which illustrated nursery rhymes and fairy tales and using the children as his subjects."

2. John Duncan (1866-1945), one of the leading representatives of the Celtic Revival in Scottish art, first trained as an illustrator in his native city, Dundee. After periods of work and study in London and Antwerp, Duncan settled in Edinburgh in 1892. In the wider European context, Duncan was an exponent of the Symbolist movement. As well as Celtic imagery, he was inspired by the early Italian Renaissance, sometimes working in tempera. His output ranged from murals and paintings through to stained glass and book illustrations. His work is on display in many galleries, including the National Galleries of Scotland, and is frequently for sale at auction.

3. *Mythological Scenes* is signed and dated (1914) by the artist. It is important to recognise that the picture is not an oil painting as generally understood. Measuring some 3.5m x 5m it is more accurately described as a mural, intended to be viewed from a distance. It does not have the finer "finish" of a regular painting in oils and so, in monetary terms, it is likely to be much less valuable than an oil painting.

4. The mural was on display in the Old School Hall until the building ceased to be part of the school and was sold for development as housing. The mural was dismantled in November 2003 and, after conservation at the expense of the parish, was sent on loan for display in Gillis Centre, the offices of the Archdiocese of St Andrew's and Edinburgh. The costs of removal, restoration and transfer to Gillis Centre amounted to £13,225. In January 2018, with the closure of Gillis Centre in the offing, the Archdiocese returned the mural to St Peter's, professionally rolled and wrapped. Because of its size, it lay in the presbytery hall for want of a more appropriate location. The picture belongs to the parish: we are free to dispose of it at will: but equally its curation and insurance are our responsibility for as long as we own it.

5. At its meeting on 29 January, the Parish Property Committee considered the way ahead and agreed that, as a first step it would be helpful to have even a rough idea of what the mural might fetch at auction. Parishioner Jeanine Byrne agreed to approach a contact at Lyon & Turnbull Auctioneers to obtain a valuation. In the event, it was clear that the picture could not be properly assessed in the presbytery and on the intervention of Gavin Strang, the firm's managing director, it was agreed that it should be transferred into the safe custody of Lyon & Turnbull where it remains today.

Disposal options

6. In the interests of transparency, Fr Kevin has spoken about the picture from the pulpit on a number of occasions and has invited parishioners' views on what arrangements should be made for its future. He has received several responses indicating that the picture should be sold with the proceeds going to parish funds. In addition, three more proposals were put forward:

- The first argued strongly that, because of its very close association with St Peter's Primary School, the picture should remain in the ownership of the parish and be displayed in parish property.
- The other response asked that, if the picture was not to be retained in the parish, there should be a final opportunity to see it before it is removed.
- The third supported securing an evaluation of the mural from a reputable auction house before determining the final outcome.

7. These responses are taken into account in the discussion of the available options in the following paragraphs.

Retain and display the mural in the parish

8. Given the mural's long association with the parish and its depiction of contemporary pupils, this seems at first sight a pleasing solution. However, the subject, featuring nursery rhymes and fairy tales, is not an appropriate one for display in the church. In addition, retention can only imply that the picture is exhibited but there is no suitable display space anywhere in the church property for a picture of this size. Retention of the picture, whether on display or in storage, would incur insurance and maintenance costs.

9. It has been suggested that, if the picture is not to be retained, it should be possible to maintain the association by commissioning a copy or reproduction of a size suitable for display in the Parish Room. In 2010, a print of the picture was prepared and presented to the retiring Head Teacher of St Peter's School, and a second copy currently hangs outside the school hall. There would be no problem in commissioning another copy for display in the Parish Room.

Donate the picture to a suitable institution

10. Given Duncan's standing, it seemed likely that we should be able to find an institution, preferably a public one, which would accept the picture free of any charge on condition that it be put on display in a public area. In the first place, St Peter's School have indicated through Fr Kevin that it would not accept the picture, and Lyon & Turnbull have established that the National Galleries of Scotland are not interested in acquiring it (even if they were willing, it would only form part of the reserve collection for research etc and seldom, if ever, go on display). We understand from Anna Kulwicka in the Archdiocesan Property Department that while the picture was being restored several galleries were mentioned as possible recipients. This came to nought and the picture was therefore transferred to Gillis Centre.

Sale of the picture to a private buyer

11. A sale to a private buyer can be attractive for both parties, with tax advantages for the buyer in some circumstances. It is arranged through a dealer or an auction house, attracting fees. The challenge is to find a willing buyer. At one point we were led to understand that the picture might attract a number of prospective buyers but this proved to be the result of a misunderstanding. It might be possible to find a private buyer by advertising in appropriate journals or by sounding out certain galleries with connections to John Duncan. This would incur costs and require investment of time and effort within the parish.

Sale of the picture at auction

12. We have not been able to establish a clear view on where this route might lead. On the positive side, a successful sale might recoup the conservation costs laid out by the parish before the loan to Gillis Centre, and might even bring the possibility of a (modest) profit. On the other hand, the market for the mural is quite uncertain. While, Duncan's paintings are popular and can fetch large sums at auction, Lyon & Turnbull's informal advice is that our mural is an unusual piece and a reliable valuation is not possible. On the day much would depend on the interest among buyers: if there is no interest, we would be back to square one but competition among buyers might bring a tidy sum, even after the auction house charges.

13 There is one significant factor working in our favour. Through Jeanine Byrne's good offices, Gavin Strang, Lyon & Turnbull's managing director has taken a close and benign interest in our proceedings. When the mural was on the floor of the presbytery, he paid a preliminary valuation visit. He approved of the way it had been packed for transport, but warned that to leave it unstretched and rolled as it was would be inviting deterioration, and added that it would be impossible to form a view of its value in its present location. He offered, on a 'no obligation' basis, to have it taken to Lyon & Turnbull's secure storage facility, where it could be unpacked for appraisal, and then stored under controlled conditions and covered by their insurance. His offer was accepted and the painting remains in the firm's care. However, a reliable value could not be established because of the nature of the work (paragraph 3 above).

14. Gavin Strang continues to be very supportive and genuinely wants to help St Peter's get the best possible outcome. Without pressing, he has advised that Lyon & Turnbull will be holding a suitable auction in June and that, if we are minded to sell, we should set the ball rolling soon so that the firm can get arrangements under way to try and stimulate wide interest in the picture's sale.

Conclusion

15. There are clear reasons for tending to set aside retention of the mural in the parish or offering it as a gift to a cultural institution (paragraphs 8-10). Disposal by private sale (paragraph 11) and by sale at auction (paragraphs 12-14) might both bring some financial return to the parish, although identifying a private buyer seems likely to be problematic. So, having fully considered all the available options and taken advice from appropriate quarters, **we firmly recommend that the parish should dispose of the picture by sale at public auction**, recognising that the outcome would be far from certain and that we may still have possession of the mural at the end of the day. However, if Lyon & Turnbull's goodwill continues we can be confident that we are in good hands during the process.

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