

Sir George Reid RSA

RSA Obituary transcribed from the 1913 RSA Annual Report

The death of Sir George Reid, early in the year, brought to a close a career of exceptional brilliancy and versatility; for not only did Sir George, like some of his predecessors in office, continue and sustain the tradition of Raeburn in Scottish portraiture; he was also a painter who had won distinction in almost every department of the craft.

A native of Aberdeen, where he was born on 31st October 1841, George Reid early showed his art leanings, and his ability with his pencil led to his being apprenticed at the age of thirteen with a firm of lithographers practising in his native city. The severe training he there underwent had, no doubt, much to do with the precision of drawing he soon attained, and the skill of handling which characterizes his earlier work in oil and water colour.

Indeed, when young Reid entered as a student at the Trustees' Academy in the spring of 1862, he was already a craftsman of some accomplishment; and, with the contribution of a small landscape, "A Border Tower," the same year saw the commencement of his long association with the Academy's exhibitions.

During the years immediately following his exhibited works—mostly north country landscapes, with now and then an interior or figure subject—showed a rapid development on kindred lines. "Spynie Palace and Loch" (1866), now in the municipal collection, Aberdeen, was the most notable of these.

A few months spent in the studio of Alexander Mollinger at Utrecht later in that year, brought an eventful change in the young painter's manner, which for some time thereafter was characterized, not so much by the old precision of touch, as by the broader lighting and lower tonality of his Dutch master; a change which, at the time, was not very favourably regarded by his brother artists.

Ultimately, the closer influence of colourists like Paul Chalmers and Orchardson, led gradually to the more luminous schemes of his later work; but the early Continental apprenticeship, reinforced as it was later by short periods of study under Yvon and Israels, left its impress to the end.

When Reid returned from Mollinger's studio, another change which conditioned his future career was at hand. From almost his earliest practice he had from time to time painted portraits; but he had been chary of submitting these for public exhibition.

In 1868, however, his portrait of George Macdonald, the well known novelist, attracted universal admiration, and from that time till the close of his working life George Reid was most widely known as a portrait painter, and his sitters included most of the eminent Scotsmen of that generation and the next, with, towards the close, not a few from south of the Border.

Those of Dr. Thomas Keith (1871), the Lord Justice General Inglis (1881), the Rev. Professor Mitchell (1896), the Marquis of Tweeddale (1899), and the Earl of Halsbury (1910), may be mentioned as typical of his various periods. Cabinet portraits of his more intimate friends and of distinguished personalities were a feature of his practice, and of these not a few have already found their way into the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

Of Sir George's portraits of ladies, which were comparatively few, those of the Marchioness of Huntly, of Mrs. Argyll Robertson, and of Mrs. Best, the mother of Lady Reid, were amongst the most successful.

Towards the later seventies Sir George's talent manifested itself in yet another direction, and in the Exhibition of 1879 he surprised and charmed the Scottish art public with the first of that delightful series of "Roses" which, varied in after years with "Marguerites," "Rhododendrons," and "Gladiolus," placed him in the first rank of flower painters.

From an even earlier date, few years had passed without its tale of works in black and white, for which his early training had given him a special aptitude. In this way he contributed illustrations to some well-known volumes, and executed for the Royal Association sets of drawings dealing with the rivers Tweed and Clyde.

Such variety of accomplishment had for some years given George Reid a leading place amongst his brethren of the Academy, and when, in 1891, the President's Chair became vacant by the death of Sir William Fettes Douglas, he was offered and accepted the position. Shortly afterwards the honour of knighthood was conferred on him by Her late Majesty Queen Victoria.

Within a month or two of his taking office a Supplementary Charter was granted to the Academy, and the newly elected President had to guide its affairs through a period of no little difficulty. Notably, he exerted himself in restoring architecture to its rightful place in the membership, and in remedying some defects and omissions in the recently conferred charter.

For eleven years Sir George Reid presided with great dignity over the affairs and assemblies of the Academy. In 1902 he resigned office, and thenceforth, owing to an increasing number of commissions in the south, he resided for part of the year in London.

In all movements which had for their object the advancement of Scottish art, Sir George was deeply interested. As a member of the Hon. Board of Manufactures, he superintended the reorganisation of the Scottish National Gallery in 1894-5, and he was the means of introducing examples of Scottish art to various public collections in the Colonies.

He was a generous contributor to the funds of the Scottish Artists' Benevolent Association, and of the Scottish Arts Club, when these were founded in 1889 and 1894, and he was ever ready to hold out a helping hand to artists struggling with the difficulties of their profession.

Whilst avoiding a publicity beyond that entailed by the duties of his office, Sir George was known amongst his more intimate friends as a man of wide and varied culture. In more than one direction he contributed to current literature; and it was in recognition of such qualifications, as well as of the position he held in the field of art that the Universities of Aberdeen, St. Andrews and Edinburgh, conferred on him their degrees of LL.D.

Sir George was elected Associate of the Academy in 1870, and Academician in 1877. He was an Hon. Member of the Royal Hibernian Academy and of several other art societies, both north and south of the Tweed. Feeling the strain of a long and continuous activity, he settled, a few years ago, at Hillylands, Somerset, where he died on 9th February 1913.