

## **Alexander Ignatius Roche RSA**

### ***RSA Obituary by J Lawton Wingate. Transcribed from the 1921 RSA Annual Report***

Alexander Ignatius Roche was born in Glasgow in August 1861, and, as his name implies, he was of Irish-French extraction. As is the case with most of the profession who have attained distinction, his artistic leanings were early in evidence, and these were further developed when he enrolled at the Glasgow Art College as a pupil of Robert Greenlees.

He had to fight the battle of life; and as the readiest means of utilising his art faculty to this end, young Roche entered an Architect's office, where he remained for some time. But the Painter's life was that which specially appealed to him, and in spite of its risks he threw in his lot with some of his more ardent contemporaries and set his face Paris-wards. There he remained for about three years, studying at Juilen's under Lefebvre and Boulanger, and at the Ecole des Beaux Arts under Gerome.

Very soon afterwards, and before entering seriously on his professional career, he accompanied some of his West Country fellow students on a visit to Italy. Traces of this first acquaintance with the Artists' Mecca are to be found in the titles of some of his contributions to the Academy's Exhibitions during the earlier and middle nineties e.g. "The Sunlight at Venice," "Palaces, Venice," and "A Sabine Woman."

An outlying district amongst the Sabine hills, of which the last named is a product, seems to have greatly attracted him, and in after years he often spoke of the picturesque costume and the primitive life of its inhabitants.

Mr. Roche had contributed to the exhibitions of the Glasgow Institute from 1881 onwards, but, for the most part, their catalogue titles give little clue to their nature or locality till "The Good King Wenceslas," shown there in 1889, brought him prominently before the public.

A few years later he was associated with other local artists in the decoration of the banqueting hall of the Glasgow Municipal Buildings. The subject chosen was the mythological history of the city, the panel undertaken by Roche depicting St. Kentigern capturing the fish which figures in the Armorial bearings of the Capital of the West.

At the Academy's Exhibitions Roche is first represented in 1887, from which time till the close of his career his name is only once absent from the catalogue. From studios in Glasgow and its neighbourhood his contributions to the Academy during the next ten years gradually increase in number and importance.

These are of all genres, landscape and figure painting in their various subdivisions, realistic and idyllic, being represented, whilst toward the close of the period one or two portraits on the list.

In 1897 Roche first exhibits from an Edinburgh address, and from that date portraiture takes an increasingly important place in his work, though he never became a professional portrait painter. For even in the years when they bulk most largely, there is little diminution in the stream of landscape and figure subjects with which they are interspersed.

It was during this prime of his professional activity and shortly after spending nearly a year in New York on portrait commissions that Mr. Roche was suddenly overtaken by a great calamity, a stroke of paralysis which for the remainder of his life deprived him of the use of his right hand and arm.

The indomitable manner in which the artist set himself to overcome the well-nigh hopeless position by cultivating the use of the left hand, and his triumph in doing so is known to all interested in Scottish Art. Much of the work he produced under these trying conditions - mainly landscape - shows an increasing sensitiveness of observation, with a charm of execution little inferior to that of his most vigorous years. For these later landscapes he found the subjects in southern England or on the continent.

We are justly proud of the national character of our Painting, and in its main departments, Portrait, Figure and Landscape, there has been for more than a century as strongly marked type, recognised as Scottish, both in subject and technique. This cannot be said of Roche's Art. By heredity, training and most of his affinities he was a cosmopolitan, and the pictorial element attracted him equally where the suggested by Venetian sunlight, Sabine peasant, or the reed-fringed streams of the English Fen country.

He thus became one of the strongest influences in bringing a new and vitalising element into Scottish Painting; an influence which his interest in the Academy's Life School, to which he had recently been reappointed a Visitor, enabled him to exert to the fullest extent.

It may be recalled in this connexion that the Academy's Travelling Scholarship instituted by Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Carnegie in 1903 was the direct result of Mr. Roche's friendly relationships with the donors, on the occasion of his painting the portraits of Mrs. and Miss Carnegie during his stay in New York.

Roche was very popular amongst his brethren of the brush, and at their informal social gatherings he dearly loved a discussion on whatever might be agitating the studios, when he would defend his sometimes very pronounced views with great ability.

His pre-occupation with his own craft left him little time for the cultivation of relationships with the kindred Arts, of which music and the poetic department of literature chiefly attracted him. In his more robust days he was fond of some outdoor exercises, and during the same years he made acquaintance with various European Collections, amongst which those of Venice and Madrid specially interested him.

As became his descent, he was endowed with a fine and delicate sense of humour, and withal of seriousness and reverence in everything touching the Art he lived for. He died on 10th of March at Hailes Cottage, Midlothian.