

Sir James Lawton Wingate PPRSA

RSA Obituary, transcribed from 1924 RSA Annual Report

James Lawton Wingate was born in Kelvinhaugh, Glasgow, in 1846. In very early life love of Art became a ruling passion, but for lack of means, his father having died when his son was only 11, and having to win his way in the world, at the age of 12 he entered his uncle's office as junior clerk.

During his five years' service he had some Art training in the morning classes at the Glasgow School of Art, which opened then at seven o'clock. The self-confidence which in all his life never failed, was strengthened by the perusal of Ruskin's Elements of Drawing, and he determined to devote himself to painting as a profession.

An opportunity arose, through some friends in the Clyde Shipping Company, of a voyage to Italy, and he spent some time in the leading cities of the centre and the north of that country. It cannot be said that his practice was much affected thereby. Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites were too much in his "study of imagination" to permit of his being moved by the Art of the past, and for some years yet Wingate went his own way of the most rigid naturalism.

On returning from Italy he worked for some five years near Hamilton, where he met the lady who became his wife, Miss Fairbairn, daughter of the well-known landscape painter.

In 1872 he came to Edinburgh, where for some sessions he was a diligent student at the Board of Manufactures School of Design, and at the Academy's Life Class. At the latter he made the acquaintance of the Visitors, William McTaggart, George Paul Chalmers, Hugh Cameron and others, who recognised in this earnest student, with strongly expressed views, a man of the future.

His emancipation from the literalism he had hitherto followed, he always attributed to a conversation he had with Mr. Cameron, which opened his eyes to the true meaning of Art. The effect was immediate, and to the end his work steadily grew in artistic interest.

From 1865 Mr. Wingate had been represented at the Academy's Annual Exhibitions. At Muthill, near Crieff, he found a countryside which appealed to him, living and working in the neighbour-hood from 1881 to 1887, having previously spent three or four months annually sketching there.

The family ultimately removed to Colinton, then Slateford, and finally to Mansionhouse Road, Edinburgh, the summer months being mainly spent in Arran, and latterly at Fairlie, in Ayrshire.

Mr. Wingate was a born landscape painter, and although several carefully searched portraits, including one of himself, are known, it is by his subtle interpretation of the beauty of inanimate nature that he won his high position in Scottish Art.

His great abilities were early recognised by his brother artists, but it was only during the last twenty years of his life that his work found general acceptance, nor would it ever greatly appeal to the man in the street. When he departed from his early practice of strict realism, he adopted more and more freely a synthetic treatment of nature's appearances.

As he himself frequently stated, "I determined thenceforth to appeal directly to feeling as my guide in Art, and only from that date can I see any progress."

His sense of colour developed with years, but from the beginning, he showed a keen appreciation of subtle greys and greens, pale blues and buffs, softened and fused by the moistness of the Scottish climate, and in this restricted gamut he fashioned many a delightful idyll of valley, hill, wood, and sea.

The glamour of the sunset hour appealed to him more and more as age increased; many of his finest works interpret with delicate sympathy the close of day.

The late Dr. W. D. McKay, from whose unfinished notes much in this sketch is drawn, referring to the late President many years ago, wrote of his friend, "The gradual but steady development of his Art from the elaborate studies of the Hamilton days to those emotional lyrics of more recent times, had given his work a unique place in the history of Scottish landscape painting.

That position was not lightly come by, for no man had spent more effort and brain sweat in the attainment of his present position, no man he knew of had suffered more from the malady known as 'divine unrest,' and none had taken more out of himself in response to its promptings than Mr. Wingate."

He was elected an Associate in 1879, and attained Academic rank in 1886. With his development as an artist, he took his full share in the Academy's affairs. He attended regularly Council and other meetings, advocating his views with strong and cogent reasoning, taking a prominent part in broadening the basis of membership, and granting increased privileges and duties to Associates.

These changes, made during the presidency of Sir George Reid, were followed by others resulting from the passing of the National Galleries (Scotland) Bill in 1906.

During Sir James Guthrie's sixteen years' tenure of office as President, Mr. Wingate gave him loyal support in all his efforts to increase the efficiency of the Academy, and when

in January 1919 Sir James Guthrie resigned his position, Mr. Wingate, who had for nearly two years acted as deputy, was unanimously elected in his stead.

Though during the five years he occupied the Chair, Sir James Wingate (he received the honour of knight-hood in 1920) suffered increasingly from illness, Academy business was carried on with vigour, and in his tenure of office he maintained the best traditions of the past. Whilst not disguising his own strong opinions on many subjects under discussion, the views of those of others were accorded full and sympathetic consideration.

Towards the end of 1923 Sir James resigned the Presidentship, and was placed on the Honorary Retired List. It was hoped that relief from the active duties of the Chair would have so benefited his health as to enable him to continue his association with the Academy; but his friends and brother artists were disappointed, Sir James Lawton Wingate died on April 22nd, 1924, in his 78th year.