



Scotland in the frame

Jo Caird visits the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, which has been able to broaden its appeal thanks to a recent £17m restoration project

"If people come in thinking it's going to be the old Portrait Gallery, they're going to be surprised." It is January 2012 and James Holloway is talking to me on the eve of his retirement from the role of director of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery (SNPG). At the beginning of December 2011 the Edinburgh gallery reopened following a two-and-a-half-year £17.6m restoration project, the first major refurbishment in its 120-year history.

As Holloway explains, it is far from business as usual at the world's first purpose-built portrait gallery. The renovation "allows us to show far more works of art than we've been able to in the past and a much more varied selection ... It's actually about Scotland and Scottish people and a much more wide-ranging view of society ... not just the great and the good."

The gallery was founded in 1882 and, owing to the reluctance of the government

of the day to fund the ambitious project, was paid for by the philanthropist John Ritchie Findlay, chief proprietor of *The Scotsman* newspaper. It has its origins, however, in the private collection of David Erskine, 11th Earl of Buchan, whose portraits of famous Scots formed the foundation of the present collection. The building itself, which was opened in 1889, was designed as a 'visual encyclopaedia', with portraits of well-known politicians, writers, economists and monarchs part of the very fabric of the magnificent Main Hall.

Shift in focus

Works depicting important contemporary and historical figures are still a major part of the gallery's collection – the SNPG has been commissioning portraits of living Scots by contemporary artists since 1982 – but with the refurbishment came a subtle shift in focus. "It's a portrait of

Scotland the country as well as Scotland the people, but also the narrative is the relationship between people and the country or the towns that they come from”, says Holloway.

Having increased public space at the gallery by more than 60 percent, the team are now able to show a far greater number of the SNPG’s massive collection of portraits, which comprises 3,000 paintings and sculptures, 25,000 prints and drawings and around 38,000 photographs. By re-hanging each of the exhibition spaces regularly – “the idea is that every five years the gallery will be completely re-hung”, says Holloway enthusiastically – the SNPG’s holdings will become a truly accessible public resource.

Arguably the most significant aspect of the SNPG’s transformation is the new Photography Gallery. A limited number of photographs were exhibited at the gallery before the renovation took place, but now there is space available to begin to truly do the collection justice. The inaugural exhibition in the new space, which is located on the first floor of Sir Robert Rowand Anderson’s distinctive Neo-Gothic building, is called *Romantic Camera: Scottish Photography & the Modern World* and brings together over 60 of the photography collection’s most striking works.

Elsewhere in the gallery are three further photography displays. Not only are photographs always popular with visitors, Holloway says, but they “can reach parts of Scotland that the portrait collection can’t reach”. *Close Encounters: Thomas Annan’s Glasgow*, for instance, gives visitors a unique glimpse into a subject that was never captured in any other medium than photography: the Glasgow slums of the 1860s. Holloway regards the whole photography collection as “a fabulous resource”.

Attracting a new audience

Widening access to the SNPG’s collection was central to Holloway’s plans for the gallery’s restoration. As well as exhibitions designed to give a chronological span of Scotland’s history from when the collection begins in the 16th century up to the present day, some quirkier themed displays have been created to give the gallery a broader appeal. Exhibitions on sport in the 19th century (*Playing for Scotland: The Making of Modern Sport*) and tartan (*Blazing with Crimson: Tartan Portraits*) are just two of the new displays that Holloway hopes will tempt new visitors into the gallery for the first time. “What we’ve tried to do is to make it genuinely popular but not dumbed down”, he explains.

Other tools the gallery is using to open up

01 *Karen Gillan* by Suki Dhanda, 2010. C-type print (Fujifilm Crystal Archive paper, matt finish) Scottish National Portrait Gallery ©

02 *Kenneth Sutherland, 3rd Lord Duffus, d. 1734. Jacobite* by Richard Waitt, c.1712 Oil on canvas. Scottish National Portrait Gallery ©



the collection include a new education suite that has immeasurably improved the experience of visiting school parties, an extensive learning programme to help visitors engage with works, and a Touchscreen Gallery in which children and families can browse through images from the collection at their own pace. There are also plans to tour SNPG exhibitions to smaller galleries around the country, allowing the works to be seen by a much wider audience than has been possible up to this point.

It’s still early days of course, but the response from the public to the newly refurbished SNPG so far has been extremely positive. For Holloway, who has held the post of director at the gallery since 1997 (having first joined the institution in 1983), there could be no better moment than this to pass the baton on to the next director. “What’s been thrilling”,

says Holloway, “is that the attendance numbers have gone up fourfold since we’ve opened. It’s been absolutely staggering ... I felt that this was a huge project that I’d spent 15 years overseeing and that’s what I wanted to finish on.”

Just days before my interview with Holloway, Scotland’s First Minister Alex Salmond launched a public consultation on the Scottish National Party’s plans for a referendum on Scottish independence. Holloway is keen to stress that the SNPG doesn’t “take any political line at all”, but acknowledges that the timing of the gallery’s reopening is “probably fortuitous”. “The Portrait Gallery is very relevant because we’re all about Scotland and Scottish identity and what that means. That doesn’t mean we take a nationalist view any more than we take a necessarily unionist view, it’s just that we have the raw materials for people to come in and think about it.” ■