

# **THE SOCIETY OF SCOTTISH ARTISTS**

## **"Making Scottish Art Matter since 1891"**

Presentation by Vasile Toch, SSA President

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### 1./ Summary

The aim of our presentation is to underline the contribution made by the SSA to the Scottish culture and to highlight our desire to support the Scottish Government in the process of forming and delivering cultural programmes, both nationally and internationally.

The SSA Climate Change action plan to include organising the annual exhibition on a specific theme "21<sup>st</sup> Century, Climate Change and War".

### 2./ SSA History

The Society of Scottish Artists was established in 1891 and had a major contribution to the development of the Scottish arts and culture over the last 133 years, promoting the best of national and international artists.

It was on Monday, the 16<sup>th</sup> of February 1891, that Robert Noble and a group of individuals interested in the promotion of Arts held a meeting in the Albert Hotel in Edinburgh.

The principal object of the society was defined as, (quote) "to foster a taste for Art by instituting an Annual Exhibition of different Schools and to facilitate the intercourse of those connected with and interested in Art". (unquote)

Two classes of members were proposed – professional and lay; the first to consist of professional painters, sculptors, and architects and the second to allow for those others "who professed an interest in these arts". Initially all members were men but by November of that same year, 1891, the Constitution was amended to include the resolution that (quote) "ladies be admitted as professional members on the same footing as gentlemen".(unquote)

This was a rather visionary act, given that women's right to vote was introduced 37 years later, in 1928.

The first exhibition took place in Edinburgh, November 1892 in part of the galleries called the Royal Institution (currently the National Galleries on the Mound).

There were 572 exhibits and the list of exhibitors numbered 242.

A bust by Rodin and paintings by Joseph Farquharson and Noel Paton were exhibited along with works by Rembrandt and Raeburn.

The exhibitions mounted before the First World War included young artists like Peploe and Cadell, Kate Cameron, Henry Lintott and also established artists like Guthrie, Walton, Hugh Cameron, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and William McTaggart.

The best of Europe was also represented, with the French painters Monet, Manet, Rousseau, Gustav Moreau and the Post-Impressionists Cezanne, Gauguin, Matisse and Van Gogh.

The post war period saw exhibitions of works by Penelope Beaton, William Wilson, William Gillies, John Maxwell, Tom Whalen followed in 1922 by exhibitions which included works by Edvard Munch, Picasso, Daumier, Degas, Forain, Jean Lurcat and Modigliani.

Several exhibitions were held before the start of the Second World War, SSA mounting an ambitious display of works by Paul Klee, Picasso, Matisse, and Salvador Dali.

The exhibition of 1945 included contemporary French painters Leger, Rouaul, Manessier, Suzanne Valadon, Utrillo, Braque and Picabia, shown along the SSA members Ian Fleming, Joan Eardley, Margot Sandeman, William Crosbie, Sinclair Thomson, Alberto Morrocco, Dorothy Peach, Brenda Mark, and Robin Philipson.

The fifties and the sixties brought to light the new generation of artists represented by Jack Butler Yeats, Elder Dickson, Eduardo Paolozzi, John Houston, David McClure, Alan Davie, Bernard Meadows, Hubert Dalwood, Jack Knox, William Turnbull, William Tucker, Elizabeth Blackadder, Edward Gage and Frances Walker.

Extensive information on the SSA history could be found in the "SSA, The First 100 years" book, published in 1991 . The book in digital form can be accessed on our website, [www.s-s-a.org](http://www.s-s-a.org).

### 3./ SSA Structure and aims

The SSA is a charitable organisation operating under the OSCR rules and regulations.

With over one thousand six hundred members, we are the largest independent art organisation in Scotland representing artists from all Scottish regions and international artists too.

We organise multiple exhibitions, lectures, public workshops, and international residency exchanges on a yearly basis.

The aims of the SSA are as follows:

- to promote the contemporary arts in Scotland and widen public access to the Art scene
- to support the young generations of Scottish artists in their professional development
- to promote Scottish art and culture on the international scene
- to promote educational projects for encouraging a wider understanding and appreciation of contemporary art
- to work under a policy of equal opportunities, access, and inclusion.

Our membership system includes professional members, artist members, student members and associate members.

The SSA regional groups are covered by our Satellite Associates who are involved in various projects over the whole of Scotland.

The Satellite Associates activities are coordinated by my colleague Gill Walton, with the support of the SSA Council.

#### 4./ Recent memorable events

The period 2022 -2023 was rich in history making events, starting with our annual exhibition at the National Galleries, December 2022, marking the SSA 130 years of existence.

The efforts of our past presidents Olivia Turner and Jamie McAteer brought into the exhibition memorable masterpieces which were part of SSA exhibitions between 1892 and 1970, including artworks by Robert Noble, Auguste Rodin, Edward Munch, Frances Walker, Eduardo Paolozzi, Bet Low, George Wyllie and Richard Demarco.

The exhibition also included over 300 new art works from our practicing artists, together with moving image from CutLog organisation and contributions from year 2022 graduates from all Scottish Art schools.

The year 2022 is also memorable for the end of the COVID pandemic and lockdown.

The SSA initiated during the lockdown period a Mentoring Programme which was aimed at providing professional and personal support to many artists who were stranded in loneliness. The Mentoring Programme was a great success and an exhibition of the art produced under such difficult circumstances was held at CASSART in Glasgow, November 2023.

My colleague Vibha Pankaj will expand on the Mentoring programme in a few minutes.

Then in 2023 we celebrated our 125<sup>th</sup> exhibition.

The SSA annual exhibitions are traditionally held at the National Galleries in Edinburgh, and it will continue for the years to come, but it is our intention to expand our presence across Scotland and the UK bringing the best of contemporary Scottish arts to the larger public.

The first step in this new direction was the 2023 annual exhibition at Maclaurin Gallery in Ayr, presented under the title, "Art for the People".

The 125<sup>th</sup> exhibition included 150 new works by artists from across Scotland, with several contributions from the international scene, exploring a variety of themes.

The SSA commitment to supporting recent graduates continued with the 125<sup>th</sup> exhibition and we presented works by graduates of year 2023, representing all Scottish Art Colleges, with a variety of works, from paintings and sculptures to installations and performance art.

Once again, we collaborated with artist led organisation CutLog to showcase moving image works by Scottish and international artists.

Peter Howson OBE has generously contributed three of his paintings to this exhibition.

## 5./ Expansion of the SSA national activities

This year will see the continuation of our "Art for the people" project with several national exhibitions, from North West of Scotland to the Borders.

### Gairloch Museum exhibition

The first 2024 exhibition on the theme of "Treasures" will be a collaboration with Gairloch Museum, North West of Scotland, calling on all SSA members to interpret the title in their own unique ways.

The exhibition will take place across both the Upper and Lower galleries in Gairloch Museum, from 6 July to 28 September 2024.

### Galashiels Exhibition

The second 2024 exhibition will take place at the Old Cala House , in Galashiels between 20<sup>th</sup> of July and 30<sup>th</sup> of September 2024, on the theme of "Threads", exploring the diverse and intricate connections that weave through the fabric of human experience, and celebrating the past industries of the Borders.

A significant source of inspiration for this exhibition is 'The Great Tapestry of Scotland', which is housed in its own building in Galashiels.

Milton Art Gallery, Aberdeen: negotiations under way for October 2024.

The year 2024 will end with our annual exhibition at the National Galleries in Edinburgh over the months of November and December.

The event mobilises great contributions from all our members including overseas artists and this year we will bring a special exhibition dedicated to climate change.

Year 2025

The year 2025 will start with the SSA exhibition at the Dick Institute in Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, on the theme of "IT Solitude" , bringing to the general public our views on the impact of Information Technology on our personal life, social life, education, creative industries and global security.

The exhibition will run from January to March, punctuated by several talks and workshops which will take place in the specialised studios dedicated to art education and experimental performance production.

The talks and workshops will be coordinated with the activities of the local Ayrshire colleges and high schools.

We will return to Maclaurin gallery in Ayr in April 2025 for a collaborative exhibition involving artworks from the vast Maclaurin art collection and reflective artworks from the SSA artists. This will create a journey through the history of art, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to our modern times, presenting paintings, sculptures and prints from British and European masters, in dialogue with contemporary pieces produced by the SSA members.

The students from Belmont Academy and Ayr College will take part in guided tours and talks delivered by SSA members and invited art historians.

We are on course to concluding exhibition arrangements with Perth Museums and The McManus Galllery in Dundee, for Summer and Autumn 2025.

The year 2025 will end with our annual exhibition at the National Galleries in Edinburgh over the months of November and December.

## 6./ International events

Promoting Scottish art and culture on the international scene is one of our most important goals and we are currently firming up several events in Romania, the Netherlands, India, Germany, and Canada.

Our main 2024 international event will take place in October, with an exhibition at the Romanian Academy in Bucharest, Romania.

This is the first collaborative project with the Romanian Artists Union, and we are working towards making it into a yearly event, aimed at generating a continuous cultural exchange between Scotland and Romania.

Crossing the Atlantic , the SSA members will be present in a joint exhibition at Engramme in Canada, May – July 2024

This will be followed in June 2025 by an SSA exhibition at the “Arti et Amicitiae” galleries in Amsterdam.

“Arti et Amicitie” is a Dutch art organisation, similar in size to the SSA., and they are actively pursuing the idea of a permanent cultural exchange with Scotland.

Tentative approaches have been made to explore the possibility of cultural cooperation with India and I would like to take this opportunity and thank Mr. Singh, Consul General of India, for his support and guidance.

More details about the Indian connection will be published in the second half of this year.

The war in Ukraine came as a nasty surprise, and soon enough a feeling of solidarity started to emerge.

We are currently working with the Ukrainian Institute towards organising an art exchange programme under the title “Ukraine, recording the war”. This exchange will present artworks recording the war in Ukraine as seen by the SSA artists from the safety of our island and as seen by the Ukrainian artists struggling to survive.

Other international avenues are the artist residency programmes, offering the possibility of experiencing the international art scene and create new artworks in foreign locations.

The current residency arrangements involve the Eichstatt Lithography Studios, Eichstatt, Germany.

## 7./ The SSA and Climate change

The irreversible destruction of our environment is of great concern to us all, and many of our SSA members are calling for the implementation of concrete measures which may contribute to reducing the levels of man-made pollution.

Effective measures, possible at political level only, may include:

- generalising the use of clean energy technologies
- intelligent and coordinated land use for food production and distribution on a global scale
- upgrade the World Bank and IMF financial models for supporting the developing economies
- financial support from the strong economies to the developing ones by means of mutually advantageous trading agreements.
- address armed conflict in an effective way.

What can we do?

At a personal level we may take steps for reducing travel, using recycled paper and water-based art materials, eating less meat, powering our homes by means of solar panels and wind turbines and any other conceivable measure. Every little step matters.

At SSA level, we need to make our voice heard on the national and international scene, pressing the main players to take effective action.

They say, "A picture tells a thousand words".

How shall we use the "picture" for pressing the issue?

I suggest the following possible actions:

- launch a call to all SSA members for producing artworks on the theme of "Environmental responsibility"
- organise national and international events where these works will be presented.

The first direct opportunity for action is using the platform offered by our annual exhibition at the National Galleries in Edinburgh.

The theme for our next annual exhibition will be " 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Climate Change and War" and this could put forward a very strong image of the

climate change impact and hopefully accelerate the formation of an effective national and international front against environmental disaster.

## 8./ Conclusion

I will end now by mentioning the subtle link between successful international relations, global trade and national cultures.

The projection of the Scottish national culture, in its various forms, could confer identity to trade activities and the visual arts could play an important role.

The SSA is an active cultural agent, deeply involved in building and promoting our national culture on the globalised world. We are willing and able to provide high quality artistic contributions in support of Government initiatives.

The mechanism for inducing a direct effect of culture on international relations and trade may include:

- a closer cooperation between the Scottish Government, Trade organisations and art organisations like the SSA;
- adopting the SSA as a visual arts agent acting on behalf of the Scottish Government on both the national and international scenes.

Vasile Toch  
President