

RSA200: CELEBRATING TOGETHER, 2026

The RSA and the SSA: Righting a Wrong in Scottish Art History

As with generational families, artistic organisations seldom appear from nowhere but are the outcome of earlier relationships.

The [Royal] Scottish Academy of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture therefore emerged not in isolation in May 1826, but in reaction to the perceived indifference to contemporary Scottish artists from those charged with looking after their interests.[1]

When in February 1891 in Edinburgh, another small group of artists met to form the new artistic body, The Society of Scottish Artists, they emerged not out of the blue, but as the latest in a group who had come to find limitations in the offer available to them by the Academy.

Just as many of those who founded the Academy had been directly involved with the Trustees' Academy and the Royal Institution, so too the founders of the SSA counted amongst their number many who were elected Members of the Academy (hereinafter referred to simply as Academicians).[2]

The founding of the SSA was, as contemporary accounts testify, viewed as being complimentary to, not in competition with, and bearing no animosity towards, the Academy.

Many of those involved with the SSA were younger men who had enjoyed success as exhibitors at the RSA annual exhibitions, and for a few, the trappings which election to the Academy's ranks provided.

There was a sense that restrictions imposed by the Academy's selection process, allowed even second-rate work by its elected Academicians to take precedence over first rate work by non-members. Moreover, there was a perception that its Associate Academicians had limited powers of representation in shaping the Academy's direction. Combined, these were seen to be to the detriment of the health of Scottish Art in general and that the only way to force change was from outwith.

Prominent also in the aspirations of the SSA was to see women artists properly recognised. In this respect the Academy, whilst accepting women exhibitors since its inaugural Annual Exhibition in 1827, had been worse than lethargic.

A body in which women played a leading role had been established in Edinburgh in 1882 and named the Scottish Atelier Association. In 1889 it had lobbied the Academy to allow women access to its Life School, without success. It is no coincidence that it folded as the SSA emerged, many of its players being agitators and supporters of the new Society.[3]

The Society's first and second Annual Exhibitions were successfully staged in the RSA Galleries in the Eastern wing of the shared RSA-NGS Building on the Mound in 1892 and 1893. [4]

But then came what has been recorded since as a rift in relations. The SSA's application for use of the exhibition space in 1894 was denied "with no reason given." [5]

Although the exhibition rooms were those allocated to the Academy, permission to use them lay with the Board of Manufacturers. [6] Any suggestion therefore that the Academy stymie this or any other exhibition bid by the Society is incorrect, although it has inadvertently become interwoven in the narrative. [7]

Coincidentally the Academy had sought to make changes to its operation. For the Academy to make any material changes it required the sanction of the crown. This was achieved by submitting an application for a Supplementary Charter to the Privy Council.

Before a decision had been made, the text of the application had been made public in the press. [8]

One clause stood out and was seized upon by those who perceived this, on the back of the Society's unsuccessful bid for exhibition space, as a concerted attempt by those championing or entrusted with the welfare of the Fine Arts in Scotland to curtail the fledgling Society, if not crush it entirely.

This was Clause 7; which sought to eject from the Academy's membership "any Member elected prior to 31 October 1891 or subsequent to 31 October 1894 who shall become a member of any other Society of Artists established and exhibiting in Edinburgh."

The Society submitted a Memorial to the Privy Council, arguing that the clause was retrograde and targeted the SSA specifically. In response the Academy submitted a lengthy document countering this and arguing that they were simply seeking to preserve the interests of the Academy. To cut a long story short the Supplementary Charter was finally granted in 1895; with the exception of Clause 7.

The whole incident gave rise to the myth of factions and ill-feeling on the part of the Academy towards the Society.

In fact, the Clause had been in the original Charter granted in 1838. It was dropped at the 1891 Supplementary Charter bid in the belief that it could instead be referenced in the Academy's Laws. Legal opinion, after the event, had indicated that this would not be in order hence the attempt to reintroduce it in 1894.

No sooner had the ink dried on the Supplementary Charter, than further injustice was seen to prevail. The SSA was again unsuccessful in securing gallery space for an exhibition. In April 1895 its bid for Autumn 1896 was declined due to changes being

considered by the NGS which necessitated the NGS decanting its pictures into the RSA Galleries. This time the SSA was not denied it, but refused the offer of a July to September time slot, which was regarded as ill-suited to the mounting of an art exhibition in the capital.

The reason for this tight window was explained by the Rt Hon Sir George Trevelyan MP, the then Secretary of State for Scotland, in response to a question in the House of Commons from the Aberdeen West MP, Dr Farquharson.[9] Tunnelling works by the North British Railway Commissioners had caused damage to the National Gallery Building above and the Board of Manufacturers had kept the Summer and Autumn months clear of exhibitions to allow the NBR to carry out the repairs, but the arrangement had just concluded to give a period of grace until 1 October.

The Society abandoned all hope of exhibition and so none was held that year. They were turned down again in 1896 on the grounds that new flooring was being scheduled for the NGS and it again needed the RSA Galleries to decant into. This time salvation was at hand. Mr Peacock owner of the French Gallery at 11a Hanover Street stepped in and offered his modest rooms for the 1896 exhibition. Members were restricted to two works of cabinet size and the exhibition opened on 19 September.[10]

Further hiccups were experienced as the Annual Exhibitions stuttered along, largely it seemed at the whim of the Board of Manufacturers. The disquiet at their general handling of affairs led in 1902 to a Government Committee of Enquiry into its role to which both the SSA and the Academy submitted evidence. The Board was finally wound up, to be replaced by another Board of Trustees of the National Galleries. The Royal Institution Building was refurbished and renamed the Royal Scottish Academy in 1911, and the provision for Art Teaching transferred to the Board of Governors of the Edinburgh College of Art which opened in 1908.

On launching the SSA the new body was at pains to point out that it sought to work in harmony with the Academy; their respective primary concern being the betterment of the Fine Arts in Scotland.

The RSA Council Minutes of the period make no reference at all to the Society, or any issues therein. The Academician Robert Noble ARSA was elected the SSA's first President and Sir George Reid RSA (who was elected President of the Academy six months after the SSA was founded) alongside many fellow Academicians showed their support for the new body.[11]

Even during the public spat which played out in the letter columns of *The Scotsman*, over clause 7, relations continued with no restrictions being placed on SSA Members being shown at the RSA Annuals and vice versa, and healthy representations of Academicians attended various social functions mounted by the SSA.[12]

The intervening period may have seen the occasional difference of opinion, but on the whole reflects the harmonious co-existence between two bodies which the SSA

founders envisaged back in 1891. Both the RSA and SSA are now firmly part of the establishment, but both are also more alert to, and representative of, our nation's diverse artistic community than at any time in their existence. Celebrating and promoting artists, appealing to and supported by the public, and collectively presenting all that is best in Scottish Art.

Robin H Rodger, RSA Documentation Officer

[1] The Artists who founded the Academy did so in reaction to the perceived neglect by the Honourable The Board of Manufacturers and the Directors of the Royal Institution Building (since 1911 The Royal Scottish Academy Building) of living artists.

[2] Of the fifteen men who held the Presidency of the SSA from 1891 to 1914 all bar three were, or would become, elected Academicians, and by the time the Society's Centenary was reached 30 of its 44 Presidents had been, were, or would become, elected Academicians. Until 2005 there were two ranks of membership of the Academy; Associate and Academician. At the founding of the SSA both ranks were in existence. The use of our current terminology is here used simply to save on space.

[3] At a Council Meeting of the SSA held immediately before its Public Meeting on 27 November 1891 it was agreed that women members be admitted. Following a ballot thereafter taken Miss Margaret Dempster, Miss Christina Ross and Miss Jessie Gray were duly admitted. All three women had been involved with the Atelier Association, based in the Albert Institute, Shandwick Place, and were signatories to the Memorial submitted to the Academy in 1889.

[4] Cordelia Oliver in her essay in the book *The Society of Scottish Artists; The First Hundred Years* (Edinburgh, 1991) erroneously states (p.10) that these early exhibitions were held in the former Royal Institution Building (since 1911 The Royal Scottish Academy Building).

[5] Oliver, *op cit.* (p.11)

[6] These powers were granted on the establishment of the joint RSA-NGS Building in 1849 and effectively remain in place to the present.

[7] Oliver, *op cit.* (p.11)

[8] Largely to quell disquiet amongst its Associate rank, the Academy had secured a Supplementary Charter in 1891 which gave them a greater say in the decision-making process and granted them the use of the Library Room for their meetings which hitherto they had to conduct outwith the Academy's confines. A Committee was established to prepare the Draft which then went before the full membership in General Assembly where it was taken page by page and alterations and amendments voted on, before the final text came back for a final approval. Copies of

the Drafts were issued to all Academicians, and it must have been from one of them that it found its way into the hands of the press. The identity of the leak is not known.

[9] As recorded in Hansard, House of Commons, 1895-06-20; accessed online 2025-09-22

[10] *The Scotsman* newspaper reported in its issue of 17 April 1896 that Mr Peacock of the French Gallery, 11a Hanover Street, had offered his modest rooms for the Society to hold its exhibition in 1896. Due to the space restrictions, Members were limited to 2 works of cabinet size (19 September – 31 October). The 1897 exhibition was held in Messrs Dowell's Rooms at 18 George Street (9 July – 31 August) and the 1901 exhibition once more in The French Galleries now at 131 Princes Street (13 July – 28 September).

[11] Reid has been unfairly criticised in this regard, (Oliver, *op.cit.* p.12) whereas the evidence suggests that he was sympathetic and supportive of the Society whilst careful to protect the interests of the Academy. In both regards his own successor, Sir James Guthrie continued to plough the same furrow. It was Reid's predecessor as President of the Academy, Sir William Fettes Douglas RSA, who was generally considered anti-progressive. Reid succeeded to the Presidency following Douglas' death in July 1891. Reid himself intimated his intention not to seek re-election and at Assembly on 12 November 1902 he was succeeded as President of the Academy by Sir James Guthrie RSA.

[12] Apologies were sent by Reid to the SSA for his being unable to attend the public meeting at which the SSA was officially launched in November 1891 due to a clash with the prize giving for the RSA Life School. Those who exhibited in the SSA's first exhibition included the following Academicians; J Campbell Noble, William Walls, Charles Hodge Mackie, Peter Wishart, Mason Hunter, James Cadenhead and Otto Leyde. A healthy number of Academicians were amongst those who attended a Musical Evening hosted by the SSA in February 1895.

