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The Fine Art Society

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148 New Bond Street · London w1s 2JT
+44 (0) 20 7629 5116 · art@faslondon.com
www.faslondon.com

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Bourne Fine Art

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6 Dundas Street · Edinburgh EH3 6HZ
+44 (0)131 557 4050 · art@bournefineart.com
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Ten Paintings by
S. J. PEPLOE

THE FINE ART SOCIETY

BOURNE FINE ART

2010





S.J. Peplie with his wife, Margaret, on Princes Street, Edinburgh. c.1930

Ten Paintings by S.J. Peplie

PATRICK BOURNE

Peplie is one of the great names of Scottish painting – he ranks alongside Ramsay, Raeburn, Wilkie and McTaggart. Coming from a middle class Edinburgh family – his father was a banker – the success of his career was founded on assiduous technical study in Edinburgh and Paris and a wide but profound appreciation of past masters from Frans Hals (he also spent time as a student in Holland) to Edouard Manet. This however was allied to intelligent curiosity about up to the minute developments in avant garde painting in Paris where he spent many of his first years as a professional artist before the first world war. The artists who caught his attention were consistently of the front rank. In this exhibition, the restless all-over movement of the brushwork of the little *Barra* panel (cat.1) shows an understanding of Van Gogh



S.J. Peploe with his son, Willy, on Iona, c.1922.

and by 1910 he was painting harbour scenes in Royan that used intense striking colour combinations that Matisse and the Fauves were developing. When he returned to live in Scotland in 1912 his work was as radical as anything being produced in Britain.

Encouragement for this international approach came from the experiences of The Glasgow Boys, many of whom were only a decade older than Peploe. Not only had they studied on the Continent – Antwerp for some as well as Paris – but they then exhibited abroad, in America as well as in Europe, a path that Peploe and his fellow Colourists were to follow. This broader approach meant that both schools initially kept up with the rapid cultural developments of their time. However what elevates Peploe above the Scottish artists of the previous generation is that, unlike the majority of The Glasgow Boys, he did not settle back into complacent repetition after the initial flourish of modernity as a young man. His solid Edinburgh background equipped him with the determination to study his craft with professionalism but perhaps the fact that both his parents died when he was only a boy meant that he gained a steely independence and self reliance.



Detail from *Still Life with Dark Background* (cat.3)

It is very obvious looking at the development of his career, and especially with the series of still lifes of the 1920s, that he wanted to constantly improve rather than replicate something that had previously proved aesthetically and commercially successful. As with the vast majority of artists this does not mean that his work got better and better. There is an argument that the most satisfying of all Peploe's work were the luscious black background still lifes produced in his Devon Place studio in the first decade of the century. What it does mean though is that his work never stopped changing and developing. Where the work of the last few years of his life does show a falling off is, ironically, in his use of colour. While his earlier painting had been characterized by clear singing colour, the late work acquires a grey tonality that makes it less lively. Almost inevitably the corruscating light in the early work has dimmed and youthful energy has been replaced by a quieter more contemplative manner.

The Fine Art Society have long championed Peploe and the Colourists. We had three exhibitions devoted to their work in 1970s and in 1988 paid the



Girl in White: A Portrait of Peggy MacRae, 1909
Private Collection, France

record price of £506,000 at auction for *Girl in White* (see opposite). When I started in the art market in the early 1970s Peploes were not seemingly dramatically underpriced at between one thousand and two thousand pounds for the still lifes. Obviously with those paintings now selling in the two hundred and fifty thousand to four hundred and fifty thousand pounds range the market has developed massively and collectors of them come from Hong Kong, Paris, Switzerland and America as well as Scotland and London. However in an art historical context he does still appear to be a prophet in his own country, if one extends the meaning of that from Scotland to Britain as a whole. The 1987 Royal Academy exhibition *British Art in 20th Century* reflected the current art historical approach to Modern British art that, apart from St Ives, little significant painting has been produced outside London. The catalogue contained not a single Colourist painting. This is obviously an absolute travesty and an unjust account of what actually happened in artistic circles in Britain in the early 20th century. The Academy has since redressed the balance by staging a Colourist exhibition in more recent years.



S.J. Peplow, Cassis, 1913

In his 1924 introduction to the catalogue for the Colourist exhibition at the Leicester Galleries, Walter Sickert, one of the greatest and most intelligent British painters of 20th century, wrote of Peplow's early work that it had 'carried on a certain kind of delicious skill to a pitch of virtuosity'. Even so he found the new work even more beautiful. I hope that this small exhibition acts as a reminder of just how good and intelligent an artist Peplow was.



1

Barra

1898 · There is an oil study of a mother
and child on the reverse
Oil on panel · 9¼ × 12 inches

PROVENANCE

Wemyss Honeyman Collection;
Private Collection, Orkney

Around 1897 Peploe visited Barra for the first time when, together with his brother Willie, he went sailing in the Western Isles in a small yacht owned by his friend the painter Robert Cowan Robertson (1863–1910). Robertson built a studio on Barra and Peploe became a frequent visitor. It was there that he first began painting out of doors and with dramatic results as this picture shows. Painted with visible rapidity, almost wildly, with liquid trails and squiggles of paint left fresh on the surface, there is nothing quite like it in contemporary British Art.



2

Promenading, Paris Plage

1907 · signed lower left: Peploe
Oil on canvasboard · 7½ × 9½ inches

PROVENANCE

The Fine Art Society 1981; Private Collection, Switzerland

EXHIBITED

Edinburgh, The Scottish Gallery, Scottish
Colourists Festival Exhibition 1997

Paris Plage on the Normandy Coast was where fashionable Parisians holidayed before the first world war. The lively beach scenes with figures that Peploe and Fergusson painted there around 1907, almost always on a small scale, are stylish and painterly.



3

Still Life with Dark Background

c.1905 · oil on canvas · 7 × 11 inches

PROVENANCE

W. J. Macaulay; Private Collection

This unusually small still life would have been painted at the artist's Devon Place studio in the New Town in Edinburgh. The dark background contrasting with the reflection from the silver and the dramatic orange of the fruit show the influence of seventeenth century Dutch art. However the informality of the composition and the immediacy of the brushwork are entirely modern.



4

Trees at Douglas Hall

c.1915 · signed lower right: Peploe
Oil on board · 16 × 12½ inches

Douglas Hall is on the Galloway coast near Dalbeattie where Peploe would have visited whilst staying in Kirkcudbright. The Mediterranean colouring and the angularity of the brushwork show Peploe at his most Cezannesque.



5

Rough Sea, Iona

Signed lower left: *Peploe*
Oil on canvas · 15 × 17½ inches

PROVENANCE

Alex Reid and Lefevre Ltd., Glasgow, c.1930
and private collection, Scotland since then.

After Cadell introduced Peploe to the island of Iona in 1920, he went there most summers, usually with his young family, for the rest of his life. Unlike Cadell who often painted the island itself and its abbey and crofts, Peploe almost exclusively painted the bays and views to neighbouring islands such as Mull and the Dutchman's Cap. This painting is more fluid and without the angularity that characterized most of the work of both artists on Iona.



6

Roses

c.1920 · signed lower centre: Peplow
Oil on canvas · 20 × 16 inches

This wonderfully fluid still life is similar to another pink roses in the same glass vase in the collection at Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum which they date to c.1920. It is probable that the artist returned briefly in these paintings to the limpid, liquid style of his Manet-inspired works of almost 20 years before as relaxation from the rigidity of the harder, more faceted works of the previous few years.



7

Still Life with Pewter Flagon

Signed lower left: S J Peplow
Oil on canvas · 20 × 24 inches

PROVENANCE

W. B. Menelaws (in 1936); Mrs Margaret Johnson,
Edinburgh c.1975; Private Collection, Switzerland

EXHIBITED

Edinburgh, Aitken Dott, Peplow Memorial
Exhibition 1936 (74); Glasgow,
The Fine Art Society, 1982



8

Roses

1925 · signed lower left: Peploe
Oil on canvas · 20 × 16 inches

PROVENANCE

Private Collection, UK

The great achievement of Peploe's mid-career still lifes, for which he is best known, was his ability to painstakingly create perfect compositional balance without losing any of the immediacy of the visual experience. This example is close to the perfection that he worked so hard for.



9

Roses in a blue and white vase

Signed lower right: Peplow
Oil on board · 6¾ × 9½ inches

PROVENANCE

Alex. Reid & Lefevre Ltd.; Major Blair, 1927;
Private Collection, Switzerland

EXHIBITED

Alex. Reid & Lefevre Ltd, December 1926



10

The Lobster

Signed lower right: Peplow
Oil on canvas · 18 × 16 inches

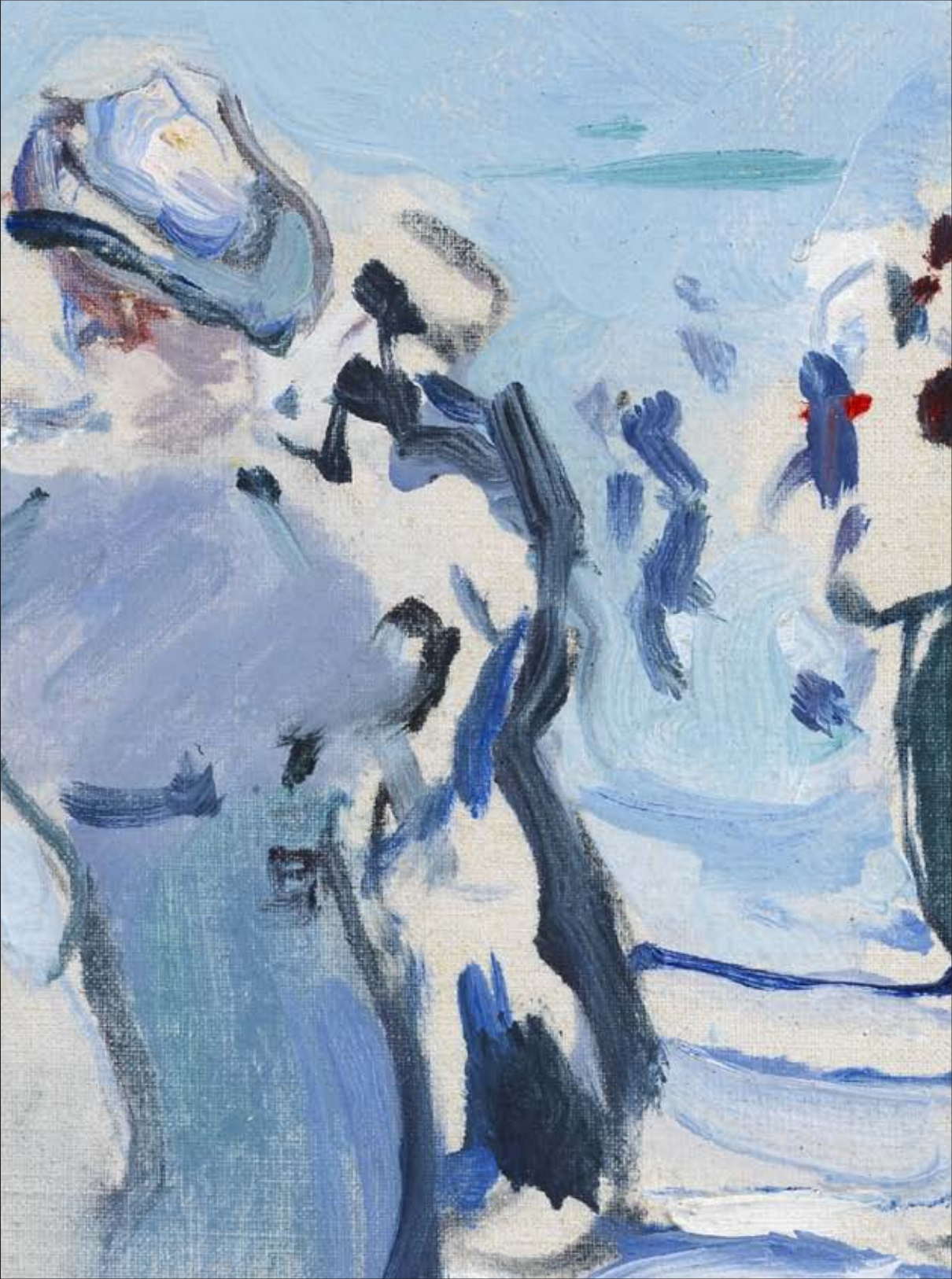
PROVENANCE

Howard Bliss Esq.; Aitken Dott & Son, Edinburgh

EXHIBITED

London, The Fine Art Society, Centenary
Exhibition, 1976 (120)





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