

# V&A Dundee: The Scottish Design Galleries

The objects held in the galleries at V&A Dundee are a celebration of Scottish achievement and influence as well as Scottishness. These can, however, be distinct things. The journey from Robert Adam's overmantel from Northumberland House in London (one of the treasures of the V&A's collections, and very firmly in his Roman manner) to a provincial laburnum dining chair (from Blair Castle but collected by the 8th Duke in the twentieth century) of a similar generation, is conceptually a very long and complicated one. It is,

though, only a matter of metres in the gallery. Standing between mantel and chair in the display is a chest on chest attributed to Thomas Affleck, a Scot who emigrated to America; it is not known where Affleck trained (his work does not obviously betray Scottish influence) and Americans firmly claim him as one of their own. Now, there is an interesting story to be told about this piece, but there is no space in the gallery to do anything but hint at it.

The laburnum chair sits comfortably next to a humble horn spoon shown nearby, made by hand by travellers in Scotland in the nineteenth century. Close by is a staved-wood vessel, immediately recognisable and distinctive to Scotland – and certainly of interest to Regional Furniture Society members – but these are of such a different category of object to Adam’s overmantel, that one’s mind spins.

The nineteenth century is firmer ground, and here the breadth of influence is impressive. Bruce Talbot, undoubtedly hugely influential but whose designs have always seemed to me to owe little to Scotland, is represented by a sideboard manufactured, appropriately, by Holland & Sons in London. Daniel Cottier, again manufacturing in London (and Australia), is represented by a chair arguably inspired by Alexander ‘Greek’ Thomson of Glasgow but firmly grounded in the Egyptian-influenced taste of Aesthetic London. A Glasgow style cabinet designed by George Logan for Wylie & Lochhead of Glasgow, introduces Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the titan dominating the genre as he does, literally, the museum. The beating heart of the gallery, and the museum itself, is the installation of Mackintosh’s Oak Room from the Ingram Street tea rooms in Glasgow. It is wonderful, rich in detail and texture but, on close inspection, economical in execution. People will flock to see it. What was, however, a cocoon for furnishings and people and cake, has, separated from its function, acquired an inevitable sterility. Nevertheless, it remains a breathtaking coup-de-theatre, floating in the middle of the building.

Mackintosh was of course versed in the Scottish vernacular, and a fine Orkney chair from the workshop

of David Kirkness is expressive of this narrative. Similarly, Basil Spence (who was born in India) always seemed a product of Scotland, and his plywood dining chair, manufactured in Glasgow, speaks to a modern bentwood stool by Angus Ross of Aberfeldy, made from timber grown in his own woods in Perthshire.

The museum declares that ‘these galleries represent the richness of Scotland’s design creativity’. And indeed they do. Among my favourite objects are the neo-Classical maquettes used by the Carron company to ornament cast-iron objects made in Falkirk and whose export disseminated the Adam style around the world.

But the history of design museums is fraught. The concept itself is at once immediately obvious – ‘the designed world is all around us’ as the museum states – but also extraordinarily slippery. Can the Neolithic stone benches of Skara Brae really be said to have been ‘designed’, rather than simply made, or built? As the introductory panel explains, this display is largely drawn ‘from the permanent collections of the V&A’ with some supplementary objects which together represent ‘Scotland’s broader design heritage’. There is an implication that this is the whole story of Scottish design, but the reality is a selection of slightly random, if often wonderful, objects - each in themselves of interest but lacking a coherent narrative. Swimming costumes designed by an émigré Scot but manufactured in Australia. Glass manufactured in Scotland but designed by Spaniards. Linoleum. Carpets. Cars. Power stations. Wellington boots. A Vivienne Westwood suit made with Harris Tweed. Perhaps this is the point: we should write our own narratives and inspiration. This is a subjective story of Scottish enterprise and design – largely unmoored from history, class, even geography. There are, and hopefully will be, many others. But there is much inspiration to be had here and a visit would not go unrewarded.

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