

National Galleries of Scotland Draft Gaelic Language Plan 2011-2016.

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Response from:

Murdo Macdonald, Professor of History of Scottish Art, University of Dundee  
[mjsmacdonald@dundee.ac.uk]

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I welcome the draft Gaelic Language Plan produced by the National Galleries of Scotland (NGS).

The issue I address is not what the plan does, but what it doesn't do.

In particular I was struck by the limited discussion of the significance of the visual art of the Gàidhealtachd. It seems to me that NGS as an organization is in a unique position to contribute to such discussion. Indeed, such a role is implied in the introductory comments by the Director-General of NGS, John Leighton: 'Gaelic language and culture is so fundamental to Scotland, as seen in our place-names, music, literature and art, that we are keen to play our part in securing its future.'

The point is that NGS is a custodian of the visual culture of the Gàidhealtachd. For example, the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, a key part of NGS, has as part of its collection Will Maclean's pioneering *Ring Net* project. This is one of the most significant responses to the Gàidhealtachd by any living artist. Thus NGS has Gàidhealtachd art at its heart. The wonderful collection of work by William McTaggart, the Gaelic speaker who laid the groundwork for modern art in Scotland, simply underlines that point. But the Draft Plan does not indicate how such art might be explored.

I acknowledge here the references to developments at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery (SNPG), but these references seem to refer primarily to information provision in Gaelic (which, of course, I welcome) rather than contributing to the understanding of the visual contribution of the Gàidhealtachd. Similarly reference to Calum Colvin's *Ossian* work is in terms of its interpretation in Gaelic (which, again, I welcome) rather than its exploration of cultural issues. Since NGS (via SNPG) commissioned Colvin's work, produced a pioneering dual language catalogue, and facilitated international touring, I feel that NGS is failing to fully recognize its own cultural achievement. It is that sort of achievement that should be built upon. Again NGS (via SNPG) has shown how that can be done in the symposium in Paris, *Ossian Then and Now*, held on the occasion of the Calum Colvin's exhibition opening at the UNESCO Building in 2005. One of the speakers in Paris was the Gaelic writer Angus Peter Campbell, and that underlines the significance of the visual as a starting point for the discussion of issues of Gaelic language. So there is a track record within NGS itself that deserves to be in the foreground of the Plan but as things stand, it is not.

As an aside, but a relevant one, I note that the whole area of *Ossian* and art has the potential to lead to a major international touring exhibition (for example, French interest would be strong via Ingres, Gerard and Girodet, and there is considerable

interest in *Ossian* at the National Gallery of Finland - in the context of *Kalevala*). In terms of the Language Plan such a project would demand the involvement of Gaelic scholars of *Ossian* and related areas. I am thinking in particular of people like Professor Emeritus Donald Meek and Dr Dòmhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart, both of Edinburgh University. Website based projects that could be involved here include both *Tobar an Dualchais* and *Ainmean-Aite na h-Alba (AAA) ~ Gaelic Place-Names of Scotland*.<sup>1</sup> I emphasize here the possibilities provided by *Ossian* and visual art both nationally and internationally. That is something that I would hope NGS would exploit.

Issues were further characterized for me by section (3.4) of the Draft Plan, which has the title 'Gaelic and Art'. It runs as follows:

'NGS recognizes the relationship between the language, heritage and culture of Gaelic and visual art and the role it can play as a gallery as well as a public body in supporting and promoting the use of Gaelic in Scotland. In June 2010 a three-day conference was held at the National Gallery Complex in Edinburgh entitled *Window to the West* to consider the history of art for the Gàidhealtachd, building the cultural capacity of Scotland's Gaelic speakers. The conference heard from Michael Russell MSP and many other high profile supporters of Gaelic and the arts. There was a call for NGS to become Gaelic Champions.'

I welcome all of that, not least because I chaired the conference mentioned. But what is not said is of interest. For example there is no mention of the Gaelic title of the conference. There is no mention that some papers were delivered in Gaelic. And while 'building the cultural capacity of Scotland's Gaelic speakers' was of course very important, what was equally important was building the cultural capacity of Scotland's non-Gaelic speakers, so that they are able to appreciate the significance of Gàidhealtachd visual culture for Scotland as a whole.

The conference was an outcome of a project that I lead from the University of Dundee in collaboration with Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. NGS staff - in particular Helen Smailes, Julie Lawson and Patricia Allerston - have given considerable help to the project, including substantial support in the mounting of the conference. But for the record I should point out that the conference title was *State of The Art: Visual Tradition and Innovation in The Highlands And Islands Of Scotland. / Staid Na h-Ealain: Leanailteachd Agus Ùrachadh Lèirsinneach Air Gàidhealtachd na h-Alba*. The title *Window to the West* refers to the project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of which the conference was one outcome. As I write, another outcome of that project, the exhibition *Uinneag Dhan Àird an Iar: Ath-lorg Ealain na Gàidhealtachd / Window to the West: the Rediscovery of Highland Art* is on show at the City Art Centre in Edinburgh.<sup>2</sup> I note that it was supported by, among others, Bòrd na Gàidhlig. As the title implies, the exhibition is a restoration of Gàidhealtachd art to public consciousness. I would be happy to share my experience of curating that exhibition with NGS staff or any other interested parties. My fellow curator was Arthur Watson, Secretary of the Royal Scottish Academy, and the key Gaelic language advisor was Dr Meg Bateman of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. Essential support was provided by the Visual Research Centre at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/> and: [www.ainmean-aite.org](http://www.ainmean-aite.org)

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., <http://northings.com/2010/11/23/window-to-the-west/>

Design (University of Dundee) and members of the Visual Arts Development Group at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (University of the Highlands and Islands).

A speaker at the *State of The Art / Staid Na h-Ealain* conference was Malcolm Maclean, director of Pròiseact Nan Ealan. One of the outstanding projects that Maclean discussed was *An Leabhar Mòr / The Great Book of Gaelic*.<sup>3</sup> The related exhibition of 100 works by Scottish and Irish artists responding to Gaelic poetry has been touring internationally since 2002. I had the good fortune to help open the exhibition at one of its venues in Canada in 2009. Again, I draw attention to the international dimension of Gàidhealtachd visual art. I also draw the attention of NGS to the possibility of acquiring this work in the next few years, when it ceases touring. It could make a substantial contribution to achieving the objectives of a Gaelic Language Plan. The underlying point is that the acquisitions policy of NGS should also be noted as an area of relevance in the Gaelic Plan.

In summary: the opportunity to explore the cultural implications of Gaelic for visual art (both Scottish and international) has not been fully explored.

I realise that some of the issues I have raised here may be under consideration already. If so, I hope that my comments will help to give direction to such consideration.

In closing can I repeat my welcome for the NGS Gaelic Language Plan? My concern here is to draw attention to the opportunity to take it further. NGS is uniquely placed to do this and, in doing so, to enhance the status of Gaelic.

For interest, I append my report on the *State of The Art / Staid Na h-Ealain* conference held at NGS last year.

Yours sincerely

Murdo Macdonald.

*Professor of History of Scottish Art, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee*

*Honorary Member of the Royal Scottish Academy*

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<sup>3</sup> Another Gàidhealtachd art project to which the Visual Research Centre at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design made a significant contribution.

## CONFERENCE REPORT

### **State of The Art: Visual Tradition And Innovation In The Highlands And Islands Of Scotland.**

### **Staid Na h-Ealain: Leanailteachd Agus Ùrachadh Lèirsinneach Air Gàidhealtachd na h-Alba.**

National Galleries of Scotland, 24-26 June 2010.

#### **Key points:**

- The conference was part of a process of building Gàidhealtachd cultural capacity by engaging with visual art.
- The tone was set by Michael Russell MSP, Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning in the Scottish Government. He noted the importance of a unity of cultural vision, capable of reflecting not just language but visual and other aspects of culture.
- The conference was a call to action to restore a history of art and wider visual culture to the Scottish Gàidhealtachd, as essential to the sustainability of the Gàidhealtachd.
- There were 15 speakers. A balance to historical, literary and archaeological approaches was provided by the insights of practicing artists.
- The importance of the SAC-funded Artist-in-Residence scheme at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig was noted as an example of building cultural capacity in both Gàidhealtachd art and in Gaelic language.
- Two papers were delivered in Gaelic thus building cultural capacity in the discussion of visual material.
- The conference was held at a key venue for the promotion of visual art in Scotland, the Hawthornden Lecture Theatre at the National Galleries of Scotland in Edinburgh.
- The support both of the National Galleries of Scotland and of the Royal Scottish Academy was essential to the success of the conference.
- The conference was an outcome of the work of the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project, *Window to the West: Towards a Redefinition of the Visual within Gaelic Scotland* (Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee and Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, University of the Highlands and Islands; Principal Investigator: Murdo Macdonald).
- The issues discussed have relevance to any institution engaged in developing or reviewing a Gaelic Language Plan.

## **Report: Staid Na h-Ealain / State of The Art**

This was a seminal conference. It explored Gàidhealtachd art in Scotland's premier public venue for the discussion of visual matters, the Hawthornden Lecture Theatre of the National Gallery of Scotland. The support both of the National Galleries of Scotland and of the Royal Scottish Academy was essential to the success of the conference. It was a significant outcome of the work of the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project, *Window to the West: Towards a Redefinition of the Visual within Gaelic Scotland* (Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee and Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, University of the Highlands and Islands).

The conference was about building cultural capacity. It was a further step in claiming for the Gàidhealtachd what it should have available as a matter of course, namely a history of art and, indeed, a history of visual thinking in general. It built on previous events at the University of Dundee, at the University of Glasgow, and at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gaelic College in Skye. The international context is reflected in previous presentations at UNESCO in Paris, Academy Hills in Tokyo, the Ateneum Art Museum in Helsinki, Cape Breton University in Nova Scotia, Trinity College Dublin, and at the University of Iceland in Reykjavik. Institutional affiliations of those who attended included the Scottish Government; Sabhal Mòr Ostaig; Bòrd na Gàidhlig; Pròiseact Nan Ealan; Ceolas; Orkney Research Centre for Archaeology; National Galleries of Scotland; Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; Royal Scottish Academy; Creative Scotland; University of Dundee; University of Edinburgh; University of Glasgow; New York University.

The Scottish Gàidhealtachd has produced great art from the time of the Book of Kells begun in Iona in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century, through the West Highland School of Sculpture from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, to the painter who did most to create the conditions for modern art in Scotland in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, William McTaggart. All those artists spoke Gaelic, and the necessity recognized by the conference is the need to reverse the trend away from Gaelic speaking and awareness. Our contemporary artists should be able to speak or in some way engage with the language that informs not just Highland culture, but Scottish culture as a whole. As a result of the residency programme at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, funded by the Scottish Arts Council (now Creative Scotland) that is now happening. Two of those artists-in-residence, Eoghan Mac Colla and Gill Russell attended the conference, and the work of all of them was referred to. That increase in cultural capacity by creating new ways into Gaelic learning through visual art practice, meshes with the intentions of the Gaelic Language Act of 2005 and with the purposes of Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

The conference brought together key cultural activists both as delegates and speakers.

On the Thursday evening the chair of the conference, Murdo Macdonald (Professor of History of Scottish Art at the University of Dundee) explored the issues in a public lecture, *A Highland Art: Reclaiming the Visual for the Gàidhealtachd*. He noted that

‘It is perhaps surprising to note that contemporary art rather than being something that one might tack on in a tokenistic way after historical deliberations, is a key source for the appreciation of the wider visual art traditions of the Gàidhealtachd.’ He concluded by noting that a proper history of art must be restored to the Gàidhealtachd, not just as a matter of cultural justice but for the well being of the Gàidhealtachd as a contemporary culture. That call to action introduced the conference.

The context was broadened by Michael Russell MSP, Secretary for Education in the Scottish Government, who was the first speaker on the morning of Friday 25<sup>th</sup>. His presentation was about Werner Kissling, the German ethnographer and photographer who, among many other visual contributions to the Gàidhealtachd, made the first film in Scottish Gaelic in the 1930s.

Michael Russell epitomised Kissling’s significance in the comment ‘The unity of his cultural vision should give us pause for thought.’ That comment illuminated the purpose of the conference, for it was just such unity of cultural vision, in which visual, verbal and manual aspects are all given their place, that was explored in the presentations and discussions that followed during Friday and Saturday.

The next speaker was Hugh Cheape from Sabhal Mòr Ostaig who complemented Michael Russell’s presentation by exploring the photography of Walter Biggar Blaikie. Like Kissling, Blaikie worked predominantly in South Uist and Eriskay, but a generation earlier. Blaikie was an outstanding visual thinker, for example he was the controlling presence behind the design and production of the first edition of Alexander Carmichael’s *Carmina Gadelica*, published in 1900. Many of his photographs were preserved by John Lorne Campbell, and it was that collection that Hugh Cheape explored.

The two papers that followed extended perception of art and the Gàidhealtachd. Lesley Lindsay of the University of Dundee (whose role as co-ordinator of the conference was appreciated by all present) examined the neglected 20<sup>th</sup> century Gaelic-speaking artist, Finlay Mackinnon. He made poignant works during his service with the Seaforth Highlanders in the First World War, and later worked closely on a number of projects with the notable writer and naturalist Seton Gordon. Joanna Soden of the Royal Scottish Academy then explored another ignored set of Highland works, namely sculptural reliefs for Hydro Board buildings, based on Pictish art, and carried out by artists such as Hew Lorimer and Tom Whalen. Such works revived an imagery to be found in Gàidhealtachd art since the time of the Book of Durrow in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. These two papers were strong indicators of the work that still needs to be done to restore a full account of visual art and the Gàidhealtachd.

Three papers from staff at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig further explored the discussion of the visual and the Gàidhealtachd. The first, from Mike Cormack, noted the predictability of the structure of external perceptions of the Gàidhealtach in film. There followed two papers - by Meg Bateman and John Purser - that can be thought of together as a pivot of the conference. Both were presented in Gaelic. That is nothing new. What was new was to have papers in Gaelic, on visual topics, which were structured first and foremost round the visual discourse. This is an important development because it offers an alternative way of engaging a non-Gaelic speaking audience. Translation was, of course, available, but the point here is that if a talk is structured round a strong

visual discourse it is not entirely dependent on words. By the same token it is then possible to introduce the language in question to non-speakers through that visual discourse. Meg Bateman examined tree imagery not least as one finds it in the West Highland School of Sculpture. John Purser explored the persistence of Celtic symbols, such as the boar's head, from prehistory to the present.

Following on from this session was a presentation by Malcolm Maclean, director of Pròiseact Nan Ealan. Maclean's contribution to the advocacy of Gàidhealtach arts has been second to none; he was crucial to projects such as *As an Fearhann / From the Land* in 1986 and *An Leabhar Mòr / The Great Book of Gaelic* in 2002. He reflected on these and other projects under the title of, 'Building from the Rain and Stones', a title taken from a passage by Iain Crichton Smith 'we must build from the rain and the stones until we can make a deer on the high hills and let its leaps be unpredictable'.

It is instructive to set those words alongside Michael Russell's comment that 'the unity of cultural vision should give us pause for thought', for it was just such unity of vision that Iain Crichton Smith knew must be rebuilt.

The final presentation on the Friday was by Arthur Watson and Will Maclean. Just as the visual in the Gàidhealtachd should, when possible, be discussed in Gaelic, visual art should, when possible, be discussed by artists. Their discussion included the print series *A Night of Islands*, a remarkable visual response to Gaelic poetry, and the sculpture *Crannghal*, installed overlooking the Sound of Sleat at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. The latter symbolises the unfinished task of restoring its own culture to the Gàidhealtachd.

The first paper on Saturday was an incisive assessment by the art historian Georgina Coburn, of the work of two contrasting contemporary artists working within the Gàidhealtachd, Mhairi Killin and Steve Dilworth. Much of Killin's recent work, including her 2009/2010 exhibition, *Absent Voices*, has focused on the loss of Gaelic in Iona and Mull. Dilworth by contrast engages with a material world of rock, wood, and nature. Both contributed work to *An Leabhar Mòr*.

That was followed by a presentation by Alastair Noble on his recent conceptual land art at Isle Martin. Noble is currently Artist & Fellow of New York Institute for the Humanities at New York University. He concluded with a report of his work on BBC Alba, a reminder, if any were needed, of the cultural value of that channel.

In the final session the archaeologist Antonia Thomas looked outwith the Gàidhealtachd, to her own work place of Orkney, to explore issues of contemporary art and prehistory. That comparative perspective resonated strongly with cognate issues both in the Gàidhealtachd and in international contexts. Direct links to contemporary art included the work of Richard Demarco.

The concluding paper of the conference was by Coinneach Maclean. He rounded off and extended of the issues raised over the previous days, not least by challenging the patronising inadequacies of both universities and the heritage industry with respect to Gaelic. Maclean emphasised the need to properly use and contextualise Gàidhealtachd visual material. His message complemented the call to action with which the conference began.

This conference, *State of The Art: Staid Na h-Ealain*, can be a turning point in the perception of the visual culture of the Gàidhealtachd. We are now in a position to realise the potential of that visual culture.

I note in conclusion that the conference has relevance to any institution engaged in developing or reviewing a Gaelic Language Plan.

Particular thanks must go to Michael Russell for finding time in his ministerial schedule to communicate his research.

Thanks also to Lesley Lindsay and Jane Cumberlidge of the University of Dundee, to Patricia Allerston and Ross Macdougall of the National Galleries of Scotland, and to Pauline Costigane of the Royal Scottish Academy, for enabling the conference to run smoothly.

Murdo Macdonald,

Professor of History of Scottish Art, University of Dundee.

Conference Chair, *Staid Na h-Ealain / State of The Art*.

Email: [mjsmacdonald@dundee.ac.uk](mailto:mjsmacdonald@dundee.ac.uk)

*See next page for programme.*

## Programme

### **Staid Na h-Ealain: Leanailteachd Agus Ùrachadh Lèirsinneach Air Gàidhealtachd Na H-Alba**

### **State of the Art: Visual Tradition and Innovation and the Highlands and Islands of Scotland**

**Thursday 24th to Saturday 26th June, 2010, Hawthornden Lecture Theatre, National Gallery of Scotland, The Mound, Edinburgh**

Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> June

5.45–7.00 Murdo Macdonald, Professor of History of Scottish Art, University of Dundee: *A Highland Art: Reclaiming the Visual for the Gàidhealtachd.*

Friday 25<sup>th</sup> June

9.30–10.00 REGISTRATION

10.00–10.15 Murdo Macdonald, conference chair: *Introduction.*

10.15–10.45 Michael Russell MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning in the Scottish Government: *Werner Kissling: from Ethnographer to Photographer.*

10.45–11.15 Hugh Cheape, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig: *An Art of Narratives: Walter Blaikie's Hebridean photographs, 1898-99.*

11.15–11.45 COFFEE

11.45–12.15 Lesley Lindsay, University of Dundee: *'A Mind [always] on the drawing': Artists of the Gàidhealtachd, Finlay Mackinnon and Sketches of War.*

12.15–12.45 Joanna Soden, Royal Scottish Academy: *Sculpture and Industry in the Highlands, Reinforcing Celtic Roots.*

12.45–1.45 LUNCH

1.45–2.15 Mike Cormack, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig: *The Highlands and Islands in the Popular Mass Media: Photography, Film and Television.*

2.15-2.45 Meg Bateman, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig: *Ìomhaigh Bhuan na Craoibhe ann an Dualchas nan Gàidheal / The Abiding Image of the Tree in Gaelic Culture.*

2.45-3.15 John Purser, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig: *Emblems and Totems of the Clans—the language of tourism, or imagery that goes deeper than is comfortable?*

3.15-3.45 TEA/COFFEE

3.45-4.15 Malcolm Maclean, Director, Pròiseact Nan Ealan: *Building from the Rain and the Stones.*

4.15-4.45 Arthur Watson, Senior Lecturer, University of Dundee, and Will Maclean, Professor Emeritus, University of Dundee: *Collaborative Works in Highland Landscape and Language.*

5.00 RECEPTION hosted by the Royal Scottish Academy.

Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> June

10.00–10.30 Georgina Coburn, Independent Art Historian and Critic, *Boundaries of Perception – A New Highland Territory.*

10.30-11.00 Alastair Noble, Artist & Fellow of New York Institute for the Humanities at NYU: *Mapping Arcadia: Isle Martin and the Topography of Place.*

11.00-11.30 TEA/COFFEE

11.30-12.00 Antonia Thomas, Orkney Research Centre for Archaeology: *Monumental Visions: Art and Archaeology in the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site.*

12.00-12.30 Coinneach MacLean, Tourism and Heritage Consultant, specialising in Gaelic Scotland: *Highland Art: An Icon for Gaelic tourism.*

12.30-12.45 Murdo Macdonald, conference chair: *Closing Remarks.*