

John McKenzie

(1897 - 1972)

JM



# John McKenzie

(1897 - 1972)



LISS FINE ART



Cat. 1 - *SCDA Design*  
signed with initials, Welsh slate, carved in high relief, 6 5/8 x 5 1/8 in. (17 x 13 cm.)

## P r e f a c e

The remarkable work of John McKenzie has only recently come to light. Despite exhibiting his slates at the Royal Scottish Academy Summer Exhibition, the Royal Glasgow Institute of Fine Arts, and The Arbroath Art Society, (and in two solo exhibitions at the Arbroath Public Library), McKenzie sold no more than a handful of sculptures during his lifetime.

Initially McKenzie worked in wood, but disappointed with the results, he turned to roof slates and other materials found to hand. McKenzie accentuated the depth of his shallow designs by polishing them with linseed oil mixed with slate dust. The works have retained their original presentation - the wall plaques with a narrow oak moulding and the free standing reliefs set onto angled stands with bronze coloured resin set around the asymmetrical edges. He produced no more than three to four reliefs a year, which amounted to less than one hundred and fifty over his entire career. By day a charge-hand mess-man on HMS Condor (and later a railwayman), the reclusive McKenzie indulged his passion for carving by night and at the weekends.

Inspired by Antiquity and his own system of recurrent motifs, he found it entirely natural to add into his compositions figures in contemporary dress. A rich symbolism imbues his work, complemented by lyrical titles such as '*Lightsome Interlude*', '*Fruitful Tree*' or '*Moon Shot*'.

When McKenzie died, in 1972, his estate was left to his housekeeper. A type written inventory lists 112 works of art. The twenty-seven works selected for this catalogue include some of McKenzie's finest designs.

*Paul Liss*  
*July 2012*

## JOHN McKENZIE : A Sophisticated Innocent

It is rare for a creative artist to work in the privacy of his garden shed, in a challenging medium, and almost entirely for his own pleasure, but such a one was the slate-carver, John McKenzie. His day job was working as a steward in the Petty Officers' Mess aboard H.M.S. Condor, the Fleet Air Arm Training School at Arbroath, Angus, on the east coast of Scotland.

It has been said that sculptors can be divided into two categories - whittlers and modellers. McKenzie definitely falls into the former, as he was clearly never happier than with a knife or some other cutting or engraving tool in his hand; rejecting wood as too soft, perhaps too feminine, he sought for something more challenging and settled on Welsh slate, a hard and obdurate material. The small body of work he produced, probably not more than a hundred and fifty pieces in total, form a unique record of the dreams as well as the everyday genteel world of this working-class Phidias from Glasgow who, after his father's death, moved to Arbroath with his mother, living with her for the remainder of her life.

His reliefs are, in many ways, like three-dimensional drawings, and it is not surprising to read in that rare interview he gave to The Arbroath Herald that he kept on '*drawing, and redrawing, till what I've produced simply asks to be carved.*'<sup>1</sup> These low-cut slate reliefs have all the modulation and shading of an obsessive and perfectionist draughtsman, the sort who draws and redraws until the paper is lacerated. There is also an affinity between the two materials - graphite and slate.

McKenzie's work is totally unpretentious, but it reveals a cultivated familiarity with the carvings of ancient Babylon and Mesopotamia, as well as classical mythology, suggesting that as a boy he had haunted Kelvingrove Art Gallery - and may have continued to do so - as well the public libraries of Glasgow and Arbroath. His father may have been a railwayman and

his mother in domestic service, as the records tell us, but they would also have attended the kirk or chapel and probably read the works of Ruskin and Morris, and possibly of Carlyle too. Such sources are an inherent part of his natural vocabulary, a heritage with which he was both familiar and comfortable, and which he exploited in his small plaques, not as an antiquarian, but rather as an observant, though detached, onlooker. There is something puritanical in his approach, even when treating the female nude, which links his vision of everyday life to that of the Quaker tempera painter, Joseph Southall. The mediums of both slate-carving and tempera are rooted in antiquity, demanding, equally, a disciplined technique and eschewal of the hasty or ill-considered.

There is also, of course, an affinity with some of Eric Gill's relief carvings; McKenzie never has the overcharged sense of Gill, but many of his reliefs share qualities with the Stations of the Cross in Westminster Cathedral - considered by some to have been Gill's finest achievement - and the Leeds University War Memorial, particularly the low depth of field, the simple, clear outlines and the stasis. That sense of stillness even in motion - not to be confused with stiltedness - the sense that the scene, whether contemporary or quasi-mythological, is frozen in time. The use of oil colour too, such as Gill used in his 1914 carving *Boxers*, provides another link between the two men.

A list of the hundred and twelve carvings that were still in his possession at the time of his death exists, but forty years on we will never know what books he had on his shelves, what postcards, photographs and cuttings from the local paper, what references he used. John McKenzie may have worked in solitude but it is clear that he did not work in isolation.

*Peyton Skipwith  
July 2012*

1. The Arbroath Herald, February 1, 1963



Cat. 2 - *SCDA Design*  
signed with initials, Welsh slate, carved in high relief, 6 5/8 x 5 1/8 in. (17 x 13 cm.)



Cat. 3 - *Drama Award*  
signed with initials, Welsh slate, carved in high relief, 7 5/8 x 5 3/4 in. (19.5 x 14.5 cm.)



CAT. 4 - *The Builder*  
signed with initials, inscribed with title on reverse,  
Welsh slate, asymmetrical, carved in high relief, 5 1/2 x 3 1/2 in. (14 x 9 cm.)



CAT. 5 - *Gents' Barber*  
signed with initials, inscribed with title to reverse,  
Welsh slate, carved in low relief, 10 1/2 x 8 in. (27 x 20 cm.)



CAT. 6 - *Lightsome Interlude*  
signed with initials, inscribed with title to reverse,  
Welsh slate, carved in high relief 9 1/4 x 7 1/4 in. (23.5 x 18.5 cm.)



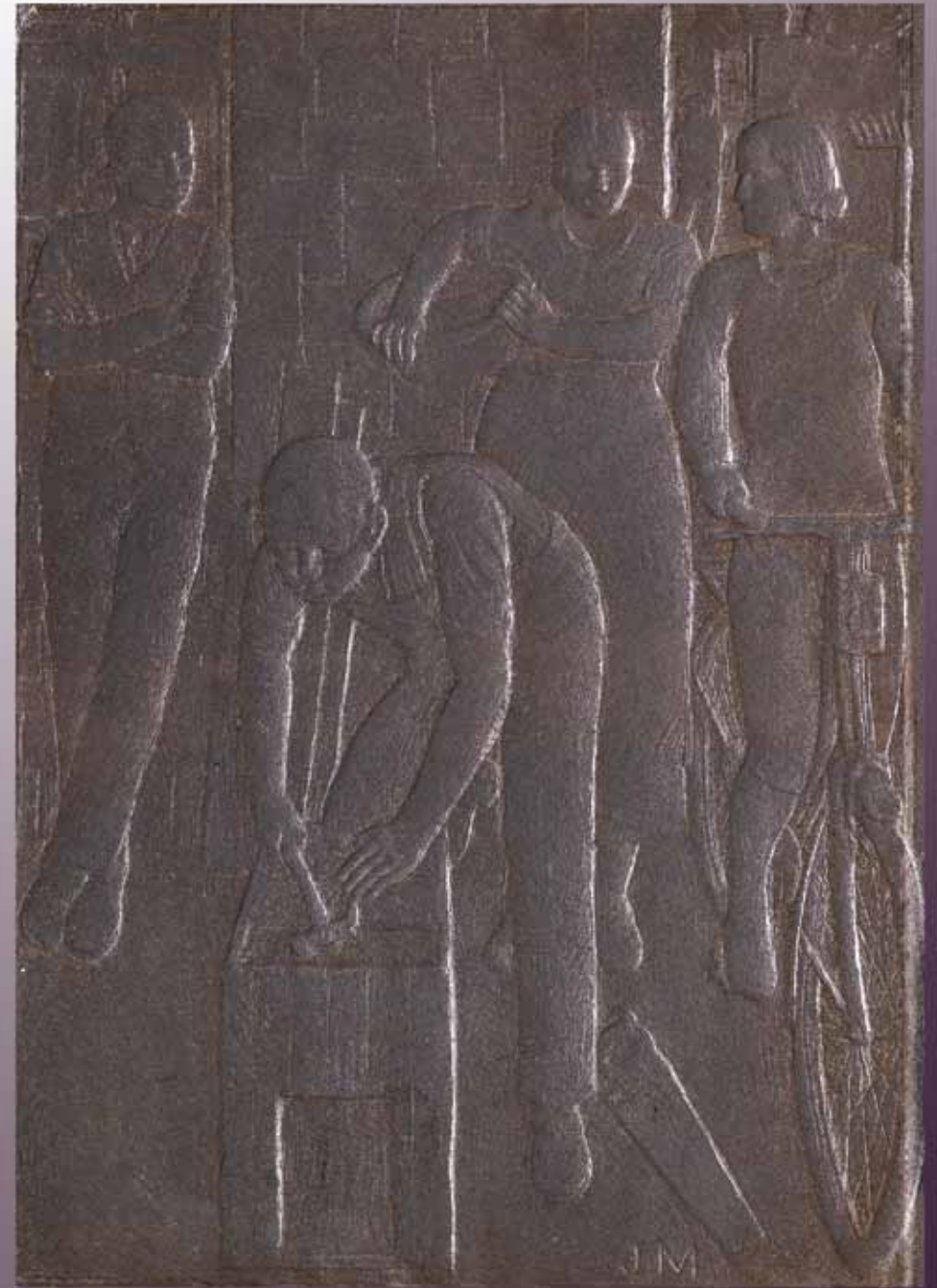
CAT. 7 - *Moon Shot*  
signed with initials, inscribed with title on reverse,  
Welsh slate, asymmetrical, carved in high relief, 7 1/2 x 5 in. (17.5 x 12.5 cm.)



CAT. 8 - *Dance Record*  
signed with initials,  
inscribed with title to reverse,  
Welsh slate, carved in high relief  
8 1/4 x 5 1/4 in. (21 x 13.5 cm.)



CAT. 9 - *Two Nudes*  
signed with initials,  
inscribed with title to reverse,  
Welsh slate, carved in high relief  
7 7/8 x 5 1/8 in. (20 x 13 cm.)



CAT. 10 - *Hammer and Saw*  
signed with initials, inscribed with title to reverse,  
Welsh slate, carved in low relief, 8 1/2 x 6 1/4 in. (21.5 x 16 cm.)





CAT. 11 - *Steel and Earthenware*  
signed with initials,  
asymmetrical slate, 7 x 7 in. (17.8 x 17.8 cm.)



CAT. 12 - *The Fruitful Tree*  
signed with initials,  
Welsh slate, carved in low relief, 8 1/2 x 7 1/2 in. (21.5 x 19 cm.)



CAT. 13 - *Harvest Chat*  
signed with initials, inscribed with title to reverse,  
Welsh slate, carved in high relief, 8 x 7 in. (20 x 17.5 cm.)



CAT. 14 - *Afternoon Tea*  
signed with initials, painted carved oak relief, in an integral frame,  
17 x 9 1/2 in. (43 x 24 cm.)



CAT. 15 - *The Jester*  
signed with initials, inscribed with title to reverse,  
Welsh slate, carved in high relief, 7 x 5 1/2 in. (18 x 14 cm.)



CAT. 16 - *The Apprentice*  
signed with initials,  
Welsh slate, asymmetrical, carved in high relief, 7 x 7 in. (17.8 x 17.8 cm.)



CAT. 17 - *Figures in a Sitting Room with Budgerigar*  
signed with initials, polychrome carved wood, in the original oak frame,  
15 x 9½ in. (38 x 24 cm.)



CAT. 18 - *Pavement Traffic*  
signed with initials, Welsh slate, carved in low relief,  
13 ¾ x 4 ¾ in. (35 x 12 cm.)



CAT. 19 - *The Barbed Shaft N° 1*  
signed with initials,  
Welsh slate, carved in low relief, 7 x 6 in. (17.7 x 15.2 cm.)



CAT. 20 - *Passing Moment*  
signed with initials,  
beige granite, carved in low relief, 5 x 6 3/4 in. (12.5 x 17 cm.)



CAT. 21 - *The Victor's Crown*  
signed with initials,  
red granite, carved in low relief, 6 x 5 3/4 in. (15 x 14.5 cm.)



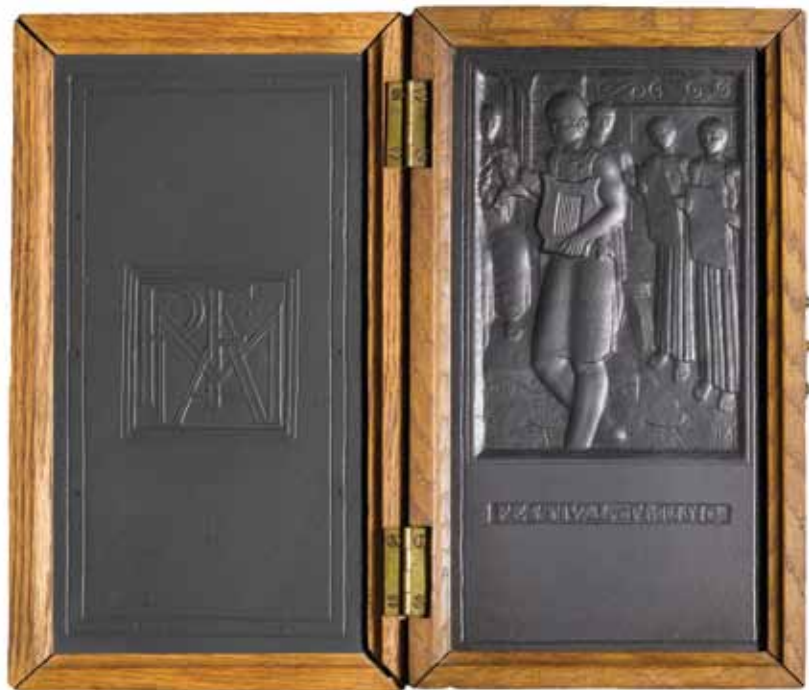
CAT. 22 - *Untitled*  
signed with initials,  
ceramic cement & resin tile, 6 7/8 x 8 in. (17.5 x 20 cm.)



CAT. 23 - *Music*  
inscribed with title and signed with initials  
Welsh slate, asymmetrical, with patinated resin frame, 6 1/2 x 5 1/8 in. (16.5 x 13 cm.)



CAT. 24 - *Policeman Directing Traffic*  
signed with initials,  
Welsh slate, carved in low relief, 6 3/4 x 7 1/4 in. (17.5 x 18.5 cm.)

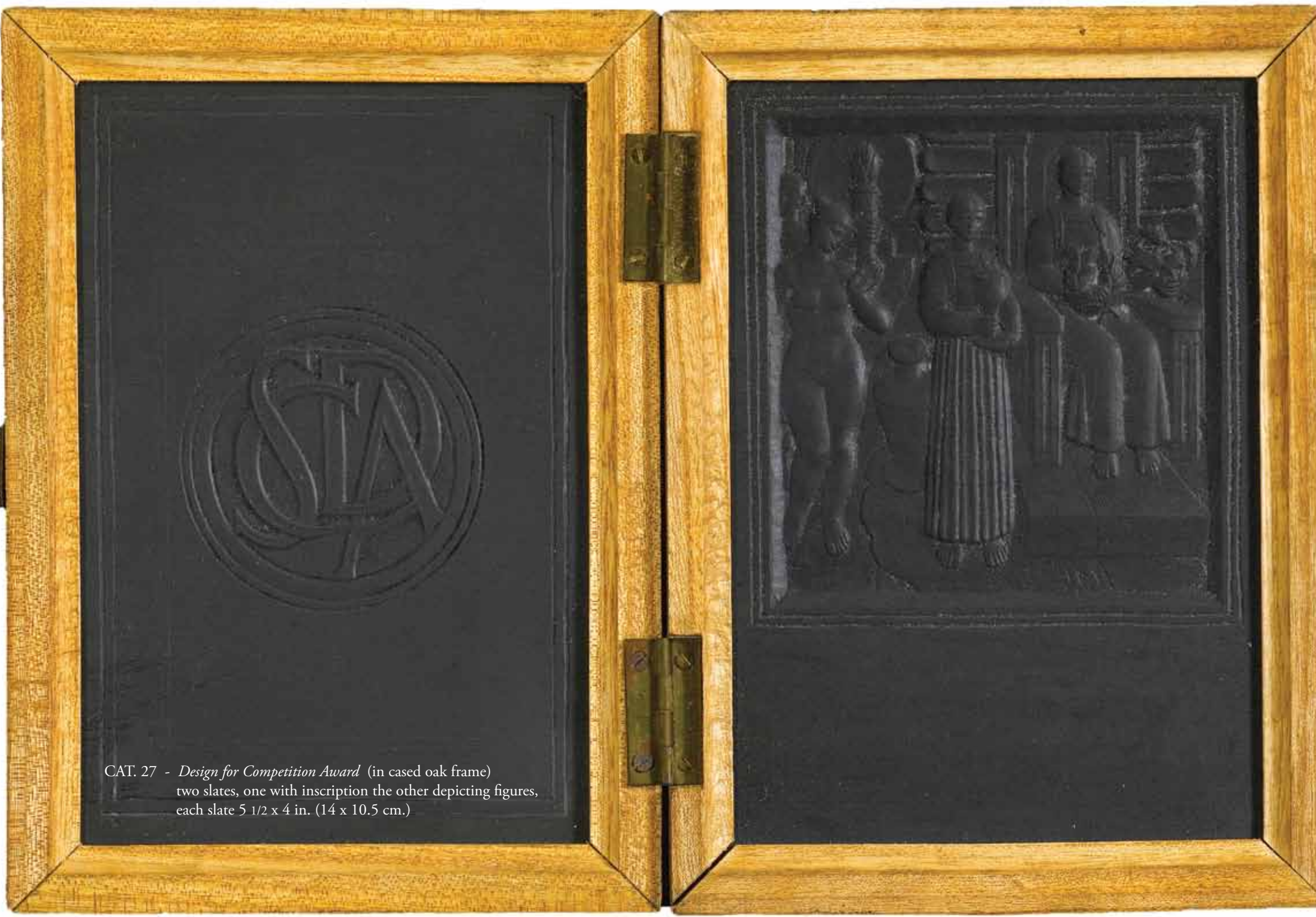


CAT. 25 - *Festival of Music* (in cased oak frame)  
 two slates, one depicting figures the other with monogram,  
 each slate 8 3/4 x 4 1/2 in. ( 22.5 x 11.5 cm.)

RIGHT: Detail



CAT. 26 - *SCDA Annual Festival Award* (in cased oak frame)  
 two slates, one with inscription the other depicting figures,  
 each slate 6 1/2 x 4 1/4 in. ( 16.5 x 11 cm.)



CAT. 27 - *Design for Competition Award* (in cased oak frame)  
two slates, one with inscription the other depicting figures,  
each slate 5 1/2 x 4 in. (14 x 10.5 cm.)





## Chronology

- 1897 Born in Glasgow, the son of John (who worked on the railways) and Isabella (who was in Domestic service).
- WW1 Fights in Royal Artillery. John's younger brother Alan, who fought in Gordon Highlanders is killed in action 15th June 1918.
- 1930's Following the death of his father moves with his mother from Glasgow (427 Hawthorn Street Glasgow) to Arbroath. From 1940 to 1971 his address is 46B Fergus Square, Arbroath, Angus. Joins HMS Condor, which was stationed at Arbroath as part of the Fleet Air Arm Training School, as a steward in the officer's mess.
- 1924 -1971 Exhibits at The Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts Annual Exhibition, twenty times, (an average of two works per show).
- 1931 -1971 Exhibits at The Royal Scottish Academy Exhibition Edinburgh, twenty nine times.
- 1972 (February) Dies leaving his estate - including 80 works - to his housekeeper who had looked after him and his mother for many years.  
(July) Exhibition of Slate Carvings by John McKenzie, The Art Gallery of the Public Library, Arbroath.
- 2000 Signal Tower Museum, Arbroath acquires seven pieces: *Country-Dance*, *Day Dreams*, *Declaration of Independence, 1320*, *Design for Music Festival Trophy*, *Music*, *Pictish Elephant Symbol* and *St John Chapter 23 V 1-11*.
- 2007 (April 4<sup>th</sup>) The Studio Collection of John McKenzie, Woolley and Wallis, Salisbury Salerooms.

# LISS FINE ART LIMITED

paul@lissfineart.com

sacha@lissfineart.com

0207 380 1131

Founded in 1991, Liss Fine Art specialises in the unsung heroes and heroines of British art from 1880 to 1980. During the last 20 years Liss Fine Art have worked in association with museums to develop a series of in-depth exhibitions to encourage the reappraisal of some of the lesser known figures of 20th century British Art.

[www.lissfineart.com](http://www.lissfineart.com)

## Acknowledgements

Dr John Johnston  
Angus Council Cultural Services

*John McKenzie, Mapping the Practice and Profession of Sculpture in Britain and Ireland 1851-1951*, University of Glasgow History of Art and HATII, online database 2011

Paul Viney, Wooley and Wallis

Peyton Skipwith

Designed by David Maes

Text © Paul Liss, Peyton Skipwith  
Photography by Glynn Clarkson  
Printed by Nicholson & Bass Ltd, N Ireland, 2012

ISBN: 978-0-9567139-5-7





LISS FINE ART

ISBN: 978-0-9567139-5-7