

National Galleries of Scotland

All Change in the Print Room

Introduction

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The doors of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery opened for the first time on July 15th 1889 to an expectant Scottish public. For many years there had been a growing displeasure at the lack of an institution where the greats of Scottish History could be viewed and celebrated. As early as 1778 Lord Buchan and Lord Hailes communicated that, “National Antiquities and National Portraiture have a natural if not a necessary connection” and subsequent generations joined in the call for such an institution.

This long awaited institution was finally realised through the generosity of one man: Sir James Ritchie Findlay. Findlay was the proprietor of the national newspaper, The Scotsman, and it was he who made the pledge to not only build the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, but to set aside funds by which a national collection of portraiture could be built.

The architect Sir Rowand Anderson was chosen to create the Gallery and he set about using the secular Gothic style and using the Doge's Palace in Venice as inspiration. The completed design was awarded a gold medal at the Munich Annual Exhibition of 1890. When the Gallery opened it contained around 400 paintings, drawings and sculptures and occupied only one half of the building – the other half was given over to the Museum of Antiquities who had also been looking for a home for their growing collection at the same time and with Sir James Ritchie Findlay being their Secretary, it seemed like an obvious move.



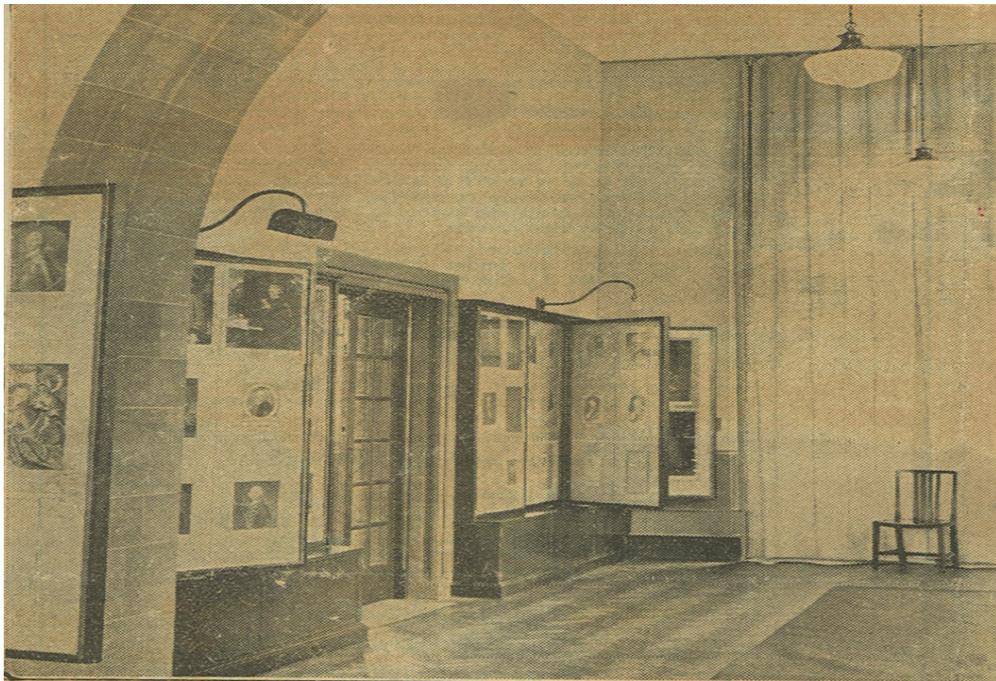
Top Floor Gallery showing framed prints and sculpture circa 1890

Despite displaying many framed prints in the top floor galleries, the early collection of prints and drawings, around 3000 in number, were largely boxed up and stored when not exhibited, thereby denying the public any real access to them. The Gallery was slow to establish a Print Room/Reference facility and growing frustration with this situation was evident in the early 1930s in a letter written by the then Keeper of

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the Gallery, Sir Stanley Cursiter to the Scotsman newspaper. In it he highlighted the lack of a Print Room not only in the SNPG, but in Scotland as a whole stating, “It is not sufficiently realised how the National Print Collections such as exist in London are almost entirely lacking as part of our Scottish National Galleries. The student who is resident in London is so fortunate as to find in these collections and in the students' rooms of the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum a complete and satisfactory source of reference, whereas the poor unfortunate who is situated in Scotland has no such advantage.”

This lobbying by Cursiter paid off in the end when appropriate resources were made available to establish the first Print Room in Scotland, comprising a dedicated permanent display of prints within purpose built display cabinets recessed into the walls with swinging, hinged cases made up of glazed brass frames allowing a great many prints to be displayed at one time.



Hinged wall cases for permanent display of prints in Print Room



Original leather-bound portfolios with internal linen pockets

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Around this time the collection was expanded to around 13000 prints and a concerted effort was made to mount each print onto a card support, using guard hinges to hold them in place. The mounted prints were stored in leather bound portfolios and stored in long cases - the tops of which were utilised as viewing stations for the prints. At this time a collection of some 6000 photographs were also added to the collection – finally, Scotland had a print Room!