

University of Edinburgh

The Torrie Collection

2014-2017

Teaching / Research / Collections / Curatorship



Jacob Isaacksz van Ruisdael (1628-82), *Banks of a River*, 1649, oil on canvas, 143 x 193 cm.

A curatorial, teaching and research partnership between the Talbot Rice Gallery, the National Galleries of Scotland, School of History of Art, University Art Collections and the Centre for Research Collections



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH  
Edinburgh College of Art



Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830), *Portrait of Sir James Erskine of Torrie Bt* (1772-1825)



## Introduction: The Torrie Project

The Torrie Project stems from a constellation of resources and opportunities unique to the University of Edinburgh. It brings together postgraduate teaching in History of Art with University Art Collections research. As a collaboration, it involves students and staff working in partnership with the University's Talbot Rice Gallery, the National Galleries of Scotland, University Art Collections and the Centre for Research Collections, centred around curatorial research and display of the University of Edinburgh's historic Torrie Collection of painting and sculpture.

### **Over three years (2014-17) the Torrie project will deliver:**

- University of Edinburgh's first course giving postgraduate students hands-on training in curatorial research and display.
- Annual student displays in Talbot Rice Gallery that deepen our understanding of key works and themes in the Torrie Collection [www.eca.ed.ac.uk/history-of-art/news-events/rediscover-the-torrie-collection](http://www.eca.ed.ac.uk/history-of-art/news-events/rediscover-the-torrie-collection)
- New research for the University online catalogue of the Torrie Collection <http://collections.ed.ac.uk/art>
- Major exhibition of the Torrie Collection in the Georgian Gallery of the Talbot Rice Gallery, 29 October - 17 December 2016 | 11 February - 6 May 2017.
- Student-led lectures and events on the Torrie Collection that further our knowledge about the collection and contribute to the occasion of its historic redisplay in Talbot Rice Gallery 2016-17.
- A centenary publication in 2017 bringing together academic and curatorial staff with student work to mark the historic bequest of the collection to the University in 1837, its redisplay in 2016-17, and to celebrate 180 years of University of Edinburgh art collecting and patronage of the arts.

## The Torrie Collection: History and Display

The Torrie Collection is a collection of 86 artworks bequeathed to the University of Edinburgh in 1837 that constitutes the historic core of the University's Art Collection. Amassed by the Scottish collector, Sir James Erskine, 3<sup>rd</sup> Baronet of Torrie (1772-1825), in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it represents the flower of Scottish 'Grand Tour' collecting of the period. Erskine served as soldier to Wellington and secretary to George III, his collection testifying to the breadth and strength of his social and cultural connections and princely tastes of the time. Originally intended for the ornamentation of Erskine's home, the Torrie collection comprises two main types of art; landscape and seascape paintings, chiefly of the Dutch 'Golden Age' but also including some good Italian Baroque examples; and Italian bronze sculptures of the late Renaissance and Baroque, chiefly from Florentine foundries. This mix of Dutch and Italian works of art was typical of many aristocratic art collections of the period both within Britain and on the Continent. The Torrie Collection also exemplifies European-wide collecting taste in its subject matter, which may best be understood as issuing from the Renaissance tradition of *kunstammer* collections, with a twin focus on the work of nature and of humankind. Land and seascape paintings are complemented by bronze figurines of animals to represent nature in all its elements, from wild to domesticated. The Italian bronzes also comprise luxury imitations of the most celebrated figural statuary of Antiquity and the Renaissance, as lodestones of mankind's prowess in art as in all areas of human endeavour. Dutch genre paintings, with their emphasis on quotidian family life in the domestic sphere, form a light-hearted counterpoint to the Italianate 'heroic' tradition of figural art.

Key works from the Torrie collection are currently on long-term loan to the National Galleries of Scotland, testifying to the calibre and importance of the Torrie bequest. The redisplay of the Torrie Collection in University of Edinburgh over 2016-17 will reunite the collection within the University for the first time since 2004 and highlight the quality and importance of the artworks for the history of Scottish art collecting and display. The exhibition will take place in the Georgian Gallery, formerly the University's Natural History Museum and now part of the Talbot Rice Gallery, built in the 1820s by William Henry Playfair (1790-1857), who was Erskine's contemporary. The display of the Torrie Collection in this historic gallery will further enhance our understanding of the collecting and patronage of the arts in Scotland in this period, and the significant role played by the University of Edinburgh as a leading cultural patron of architecture and the arts.

## Contributing Partners:

**History of Art:** Genevieve Warwick, project leader, specialist in Renaissance and Early Modern European Art / Postgraduate students in History of Art 2014-17.

**Talbot Rice Gallery:** Pat Fisher, Principal Curator / James Clegg, Assistant Curator

**Centre for Research Collections:** Jacky MacBeath, Head of Museums / Neil Lebeter, Art Collections Curator & Deputy Head of Museums / Sarah Deters, Learning and Engagement Curator / Emma Smith, Exhibitions Officer / Emma Davey, Conservation Officer

**National Galleries of Scotland:** Tico Seifert, Senior Curator

**School of History, Classics and Archaeology:** Esther Mijers, specialist in early modern Scottish-Dutch cultural history

**School of Veterinary Science:** John Keen, equine vet.

**Reid School of Music:** Benedict Taylor, Chancellor's Fellow, project on foundation of Reid School and Mendelssohn in the 1830s

**Friends of Edinburgh University Visual Arts (FEUVA):** Chair, Robin Paine



Adrian de Vries (1555-1626), *Cain and Abel*, 1612, bronze, h 75 cm

(on loan to the National Galleries of Scotland)

## The Torrie Collection PGT Course 2014-17

### **University Art Collections Project (History of Art) HIAR11086**

#### **Torrie Collection: Research, Presentation and Display**

This innovative course in the History of Art and Curatorship is practice-led and designed to engage students in the research and display of aspects of the university collections of paintings, drawings, sculpture, prints, rare books, and archives. It is an opportunity unique to University of Edinburgh students that evinces the pedagogic value of university collections within research-led teaching. The University's Talbot Rice Gallery has provided a space for student displays in the historic Georgian Gallery using objects from this collection. Student research involves suitable choice of objects for display, attendant research, object conservation, technical requirements for display, publicity and audience engagement projects such as gallery talks. Student display projects form part of Talbot Rice's programme for the general public, thus engaging students directly in the work of a gallery exhibition programme. Students may also undertake research that feeds into the University Collections cataloguing and acquisitions programme, thus assisting in the ongoing development of the collection itself. Through outstanding work, students have the opportunity to contribute directly to the University catalogue of its historic Torrie Collection and to the redisplay of the collection in 2016-17. The course is scheduled over both semesters, with students working collaboratively with curatorial and academic staff as well as their peer working group. The first semester focuses on historical research on the Torrie collection and its objects while the second focuses on the practice of display in discussion with University Collections curatorial staff. Students have an unrivalled opportunity to research and display objects from the collection, and to gain first-hand experience in exhibition research, development and display.



2014-15 Student display in the Talbot Rice Gallery

## Rediscover: The Torrie Collection

### Student Displays in the Talbot Rice Gallery, 2014-15

In the first year of the course, three student groups mounted an exciting programme of displays in the Georgian Gallery, each of which drew out and deepened our knowledge of different aspects of the Torrie Collection.

#### **1. *Living With Art* 14th March - 28th March 2015**



Massimiliano Soldani (1658-.1740) *The Wrestlers*, bronze, h 36.8 cm  
Photograph by Thomas Morgan

Art collections often have long and eventful histories, but it is easy to forget how historic artworks have not always been on show in a museum or a gallery. This exhibition drew attention to the display and viewing experience of artworks in the early nineteenth century home of Sir James Erskine.

Through the display of two pieces from the Torrie Collection, 'Living with Art' explores the juxtaposition between a calm landscape painting (Jacob Isaacksz van Ruisdael's (1628-1682) *A Wood Scene*) and an action-filled bronze sculpture (Massimiliano Soldani's *The Wrestlers*). Both invite different modes of spectatorship, and this exhibition will consider the concept of multi-angle viewing and fixed perspective to reflect the original display of these artworks within Torrie House in Fife.

**2 Powers of a Flag: Dutch Seascapes in the Torrie Collection 31st March - 11th April 2015**



Ludolf Backhuysen, (1630-1708), *A Squall: A Ligger running into harbour*, oil on canvas, 46.4 x 61 cm

Flags can inspire a nation as powerfully as they can define one. After two centuries of Spanish rule, the Dutch emerged from their fight for independence during the 80 Year's War as the United Provinces in 1648. Searching for a national identity became a priority for citizens and artists alike. Artists looked to the shorelines, as the Dutch prided themselves on manufacturing the best ships throughout the world. William Van de Velde the Younger (1633-1707) depicted his patrons' vessels in exact likeness from calculated studies. His contemporary, Ludolf Backhuysen (1630-1708) emphasised the atmospheric effects of the Dutch skyline. These two artists were the most prolific marine painters of the Dutch school.

This exhibition addressed these artists' attempts to capture the era's sense of patriotism and nationalism through maritime scenes. Van de Velde's *Fishing Boats in a Calm* (1658) provides a record of the day-to-day Dutch economy, while *A Squall: A lugger running into harbour* is a politically charged response by Backhuysen to national attitudes of the time. In either case, the Dutch flag was incorporated as an important national icon. But how far can our interpretation push these artists as representatives of their country depicting a portrait of Holland?

### 3. *Athens of the North* 14th April - 2nd May 2015



Giovanni Ghisolfi (1623-83), *Ruins and Figures*, oil on canvas, 97 x 118 cm

This display highlighted the interrelations between paintings of classical architecture and the architectural fabric of Edinburgh, demonstrating the Scottish Enlightenment taste for the Neoclassical in both architecture and art collecting.

This exhibition featured two capriccio paintings by the seventeenth-century painter Giovanni Ghisolfi (1632-1683). Capriccio paintings of illusionistic classical ruins were a popular genre collected on grand tours in the late eighteenth century.

*Athens of the North*, like the other exhibitions, took place in the Georgian Gallery of Talbot Rice Gallery, which reflects the architectural style of Ghisolfi's paintings. Old College, the home of Talbot Rice Gallery, was designed by William Henry Playfair (1790-1857), who was also responsible for designing much of Edinburgh's most iconic Neoclassical architecture.

Playfair designed much of Calton Hill, which brings together classical ruins and romantic atmosphere. Similarly, Ghisolfi's paintings exhibit a romantic vision of an idealised past while retaining a classical idea of architecture, foreshadowing the romanticism of the nineteenth century.

By connecting these paintings to Edinburgh's architecture, this exhibition once again brought exteriors into the interior, a central aim of Neoclassical decoration. Ghisolfi's paintings, much like Playfair's architecture, reflect the yearning for a lost world and the endeavour to make the present live up to an idealised past.

## **Student Testimony:**

"For me, the University Art Collections course epitomized the interdisciplinary reasons I chose to come to the University of Edinburgh in the first place. The course provided exactly what I was looking for: an object-based, 'hands-on' experience in museum work alongside in-depth research on the collections. Because of its on-site, interdisciplinary, object-based focus, I think the course represents new directions in museum studies and the humanities. But this object-based focus wouldn't have been enough for a successful course without the teaching staff's commitment to the success of their students. From the beginning of the course, it was obvious that they were invested not only in creating a unique course, but also in the success of students personally. The course was intellectually innovative, thoughtfully designed, well-organized, well-taught, and comprehensive. We learned the most about how *to be* a curator through the opportunity to watch collections curating first-hand. Perhaps this is the reason the course was so innovative-- because it offered an opportunity to in some small way "shadow" curatorial work in action. The course was definitely an asset when I began to interview for roles in the museum world, giving me experience in almost every area of museum work (including research and exhibitions) and has enabled me to apply to roles in a variety of museum departments. I know the course was integral to my success in finding a museum role after graduating. Since completing the course, my appreciation for the uniqueness of the program has grown, particularly after talking with graduates of other universities whose programs included nothing like the University Art Collections course. For me, this course was a highlight of my studies at Edinburgh and I hope that the course continues and grows to benefit future students."

*Katie Altizer, class of 2015 MSc Renaissance & Early Modern Studies (Distinction).*

"Working with staff on the University Art Collections course was invaluable to our education this year. Throughout they have shown their commitment to our development as curators with continual feedback on our work. Staff are always going above and beyond for students. It is clear that they are invested in our futures."

"The opportunity to plan an exhibition is not only unique, it is professional development that can aid in PhD or employment pursuits. It is great to see how different departments interact and how academics and curating can come together. I appreciate the time that the leaders have taken to organise the structure. Having the opportunity to organise an exhibition is an invaluable experience, working with experts to really learn about the inner workings of producing an exhibition. This course covered things that just cannot be learned from books. Learning about real people's first hand experiences in the working environment was invaluable."

*MSc students, History of Art, class of 2016.*

### **Future Cohorts**

For the 2015/16 & 2016/17 course, students will curate displays in the ground and upper floor of the Georgian gallery, again linked to the Torrie Collection and ongoing research. As well as the curation of the space, the 2016/17 group will have an increased emphasis on audience and academic engagement and will be tasked to design and deliver events throughout the run of the Torrie exhibition itself. This will include Curator's talks and an academic conference and will give them valuable experience in this area.



**Student exhibition dates: 28 May – 5 June 2016**

**Student Exhibition Preview: Friday 27 May 2016**

<https://vimeo.com/168365012>

## 2015-16 Student Exhibition Themes

### *Hunting for a Story*

This inventive display will challenge viewers to ‘find the story’ for themselves, through a selection of artworks from the university’s collections that all relate, in different ways, to one of the major paintings of the Torrie Collection, Jan Steen’s *Doctor’s Visit*. By displaying these works on different levels and locations within the large space of the gallery, it will prompt viewers to develop their own narratives within its broad theme of art as a visual form of narrative or story-telling.



Jan Steen, *The Doctor's Visit*, oil on canvas, 1660

### ***Fake or Fact?***

This original display will consider the relationship between labels and objects in the display of art within museums. It poses the question of the authority of the museum label in directing visitor engagement with objects. When a work is attributed to a major artist, it attracts much higher levels of audience engagement. If that attribution is then brought into question, how does this change viewer response? The exhibition guides viewers through a selection of works that have undergone changes or questions in their attribution. By giving each of these works two labels, it prompts audiences to 'look again', and to think about the significance – or otherwise – of labels themselves.



Meindert Hobbema / Follower of Hobbema? 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch,  
*A wooded lane with a thatched cottage and a pool of water*, oil on panel.

As result of an exhibition held in 1981, the painting underwent scientific analysis. After an x-ray revealed an underpainting of a still life, the painting's attribution was called into question, notwithstanding its apparent signature by Hobbema. While reusing canvases is not an uncommon practice, the dating and style of the hidden painting challenges its authorship.

### ***Through a Gendered Lens***

This challenging exhibition asks viewers to think about our changing social and cultural frameworks for viewing art works that address, in different ways, issues of sex and gender. Originally assembled as a 19<sup>th</sup>-century gentleman's art collection for a private home, the Torrie collection contains works on mythological themes that present perspectives on gender very different from our own. How can museums best present these objects to today's audiences and what kinds of frameworks and questions are most useful in addressing these works?



17<sup>th</sup>-century Florentine bronze, after Giambologna's *Abduction of a Sabine* (1583)



Giambologna (1529-1608) *Anatomical Figure of a Horse (ecorche)* 90.2 x 87.3 x 23 cm, (1585)



Talbot Rice Gallery

*the* **TORRIE  
COLLECTION**

29 October 2016 – 6 May 2017

Preview Friday 28 October 6–8pm

**Talbot Rice Gallery**

The University of Edinburgh  
Old College, South Bridge  
Edinburgh EH8 9YL

**Admission Free**  
[www.trg.ed.ac.uk](http://www.trg.ed.ac.uk)



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ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL

Image: *Fishing Boats in a Calm* (1658), Oil on canvas, William van de Velde the Younger,  
The University of Edinburgh Art Collection.