

A HISTORY OF THE PAINTED CEILING OF BALQUHIDDER

Written by Anne Macpherson



The magic & the mystery of the Art of the Scottish Renaissance has shown down through the ages.

The meaning, artistry and history of the painted ceilings of Scotland in the 15th through 17th centuries has preserved distinct Scottish tradition and heritage.

"The Scottish Ceiling Mural"
painted by Kimberley Ray ©2013

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The Renaissance that swept through Europe changed everything that it touched. Effecting everything from social mores to art, architecture, literature and a rather extravagant lifestyle, especially for the nobility and gentry. As the power of the Catholic Church began to wane, a new artistic freedom was unleashed. Music, art, fashion, all fell under the spell of the wild doings at the King's Court of France.

Under the reign of King James the VI, the Scottish Renaissance reached its zenith. The arts especially took on a joyous glow of freedom from the Church. Castles and manors were rebuilt or re-dressed to suit the style of the day. One of the most striking examples of this new view of art was the painted ceiling. From manors to great halls, the marvelous painted ceilings of Scotland showed off in indulgent detail the most popular designs of the time.

The Scottish painted ceiling is, in a way, also the story of the fantastic change, the very attitude of the upper classes to reach the very top level of display. From Court costumes to the castellated style of buildings, done more for show than defense, this was just a taste of the intricate interior decoration.

The Renaissance was not all fun and games however. The lords and ladies walked a fine ecclesiastical tight rope. Outwardly supporting the just birthing concepts of Protestant theology, while inwardly holding on to the generational life based in catholic teachings, these centuries old beliefs would not surrender easily.

The Painted Ceiling followed the newest trends from Paris using images of parables, fables, bestiaries and scenes from the Bible-copied from Flemish pattern books. There was also contained within the art, the “hidden in plain sight” influences of the bazaar, the forbidden and touches of an older and less reverent way of life that moved through the Celtic spirit for thousands of years.

How would you like to take a self-guided tour of each panel? Come on let’s go! You will learn the meanings of the characters, both human and non if you look closely you will discover the influence of pagan symbols to add an extra special and unique reading of the work.

Each panel contains many illuminations and not all of them are what they seem to be. The images that make up the schemes are figurative and the viewer’s task is to reconstitute the aura of meaning and associations in which it was traditionally created in this period of Scotland’s history.

PANEL EIGHT THE NINE WORTHIES

Much that influenced the Renaissance was rooted in classic heroes and literature. In this panel we see Caesar. Although no favorite of the Celts, Caesar represented the pinnacle of bravery, leadership and warrior spirit.

There were three categories of Worthies;

The Pagan Heroes: Hector, Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar; The Jewish

Worthies, Joshua, David and Judas

Maccabeus and finally Christian: King Arthur, Charlemagne and Godfrey of Bouillon. These men represented all that was considered noble, the models for knighthood and chivalry.

In the center grouping we see two of the Muses; first up Tricacor, playing an early version of the viola degamba. At the bottom, Euterpe, playing the wind instrument. In the middle we see a Grotesque, three ladies nestled in a crown. Now, the fun part. Hidden in the right lower corner, do you see him? He certainly has an eye for the ladies and raises his “flag” in honor. Fruits and lush vegetables are the bounty of summer and the fullness of fertility. More grotesques adorn and fill in the colorful design element.



Try to find the upside down lady if you can. The influence of Robalilase, “to eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we may die,” was about to come true as the plague began its march on Scotland

PANEL SEVEN: Abundance

This panel is loaded with symbolism, Center stage is the figure of abundance (also perhaps Charity and her kind heart. She is overflowing with the bounty of mid-summer. Also featured figures and grotesques representing human gross humor, over indulgence, bold and bawdy figures and the lushness of the natural world. Charity reappears in the form of the sacred apple. Magical flowers, fruits and vegetables represent summer in full bloom. Now to the animals.



The Hare in the upper right hand corner represents female energy and fertility, she is a transfiguration-shape shifter. The Hare is a major totem animal of the Celts, sacred to the Goddess Andraste. The movements of the Hare were sometimes portents of things to come. The Hare represents the receiving of hidden teachings and intuitive thinking and foresight.

Upper right hand corner; The Cock, male energy, drives away negative thought and evil spirits by crowing at dawn, He represents the power of the world to dispel negativity.

Lower left: the Hen, the female power, fertility, bountifulness and prosperity. The hen's magical ability to both provide food from its flesh and eggs represents the circle of life.

Lower Right: The Bull, Powerful shamanistic magic, the ultimate symbol of male virility and prowess. The bull is one of the most powerful animals in Celtic mythology. The bull also represents strength and potency-hence the reason that the bull shows up on so many Clan crests. He is a sacrificial animal dating back thousands of years, especially the white bull.

PANEL SIX: THE CHURCH

This panel really proves the point of one symbol having many meanings. Not only is the church the central figure and one of the Virtues-Faith-but perhaps if we look closer, is she also representing the veil between the worlds? Is she holding Moses's Ten Commandments, or is she holding a tomb stone, dust to dust, ashes to ashes. Our Virtue is surrounded by the totem animals most important to the ancient Celts. The great stag, yet untamed, Cernuous, the horned one,



and symbol of male virility, speed, stamina and strength. The stag represents wild nature. He is Lord of the animals and the forest. Fleet of foot, alertness, aggression and potency the wild stag conveys the power of all things wild. A favorite symbol for clan crests as he is only rivaled by the horse, bull and unicorn. He is the very symbol of the forest. Least the stag lose his antlers or be

caught and collared, he is rendered powerless and humble. The stag and the Oak tree unite the forest, both represent wisdom and everlasting reincarnation for just as the stages antlers bud anew so does the tiny acorn become the mighty oak. Animals in general, but the stage in particular represent seasonal change and the cycles of birth and death and rebirth. Each season he loses his proud antlers only to have them reappear bigger than ever. The stag is also a shape shifter, so if you dress up as one I can promise that you will get around quite well and no one will recognize you.

The two snakes on the right represent wisdom and healing, the little sea sprite blows his horn to call unwary fishermen to their final earthly resting place. What about the little child supporting Faith? Is that Christ holding up the church? And then we see the spirits of the air, angels? Perhaps the south wind representing Virtue, Faith and Wisdom.

PANEL FIVE: the MacLaurin Crest

The most important item in this panel is of course the MacLaurin crest. I will let the Lord of the Manor tell you all the details about this. The crest also sports one of the Clan's tartans.

Featured on this panel are several Muses, and the Virtues. The Muse on the right plays a forerunner of the violin, surrounding her are many fanciful shapes. Standing in the middle is possibly the image of Virtue, she balances in her hand a ball with



intersecting lines, is that the balance that Virtue brings to life, or is it a subtle reference to Mother Earth? The three headed figure above and to the left is quite fascinating. What is it? Does it represent the Trinity and the oft painted "three headed Christ?" But wait a minute, could there be a fourth head hidden from view? Could that four headed symbol represent the four directions or the four elements; earth, wind, water and fire? Perhaps they could be the four seasons as well. Now we come to the harpist. One of the Muses for sure, but also a representation of the Bardic Tradition of story and song There are some really odd grotesques and under the Virtue hides the Green Man. Three Graces are found here; playing the fiddle I Thailia, the harp is Teposochore and the middle figure also represents Urana. The Muses play an important role in the arts. Together they ensure immortal memory, fame and much more. Robert Burns was in love with his Muse. Can you name here?

PANEL FOUR: SEE NO EVIL

The most outstanding figure in this panel is also the most fun. Added at the request of Anthony the little monkey representing "see no evil" What is he doing there? Certainly there were no monkeys' in Scotland except for the outlanders and they walked erect. The figure in the red dress could represent the power of the Church, and the Virtue, Faith the upside down woman with the cornucopia hat could in fact reference



the plenty of the earth. Or she has had too much of the Water of Life. Wonderful flowers and fruits blush with the coming of the harvest. The many apples are two voiced. One, don't eat me or you will be thrown out of the garden. The other voice is that of the Lady of the Lake and the famous apples of Avalon, home to Nieme, who cured King Arthur of his battle wounds and would later sail the boat to the King's final rest. Many of the grotesques are typical of the Flemish pattern books, but some also bear a faint resemblance to some of the pagan characters of song and story.

PANEL THREE: Queen of the Sea

Stella de Mar, Mary, Queen of the Sea stands proudly her anchor a beacon of hope for those who sail the oceans. She represents a safe harbor for the soul. In her right hand she holds what looks to be an oar or perhaps a symbol of choosing the right path in life. She also holds out the anchor of the church. To the right and down from Mary there are three salmon. In ancient Celtic myth there were four, but the Christians turned them to



three to represent the trinity. In the Celtic myth the four salmon of wisdom lived either in a well or in a stream that was fed by the oak tree, the oak stands for knowledge, wisdom, steadfastness and honesty. This oak being the Tree of Life from which all mankind and animal kind receive the knowledge to live and prosper. The salmon fight the mighty battle to make sure of a next generation. Their wisdom, intelligence, fortitude show up in their mighty swim to the sea and returning again to lay their eggs and die. Life, Death, Rebirth. The stag raises his mighty head here as well. The two Mer-people holding up the stag also play a large part in Celtic and Classical lore. Are they the sea creatures who transform from animal to human form? The two love birds atop the Virgin Mary's head are singing of love of all creatures. On the other hand some birds such as the Raven have a darker meaning and often portent an imminent death or war. The red roses also signify Christ, mortal love and the passion of Christ. "My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose and I shall love till all the seas run dry." I wonder where that came from

PANEL TWO: ROBERT THE BRUCE

Robert the Bruce, one of the great kings of Scotland. However many consider Macbeth the greatest of Scottish kings because it was he who fought valiantly to unite warring clans and create a Scotland woven like a tartan. Shakespeare however held a rather negative view of King Macbeth, perhaps because his patron was not a fan of Scotland. "Trouble, Trouble, Boil and Bubble." Seems as if those witches are still quite active in our beloved country.



Robert the Bruce is depicted in kingly and warrior stance. His crown supporting his valor and bravery. The stag in the upper right hand corner represents, as it always does cunning, freedom, strength, nobility and fortitude, all kingly virtues. The swan in the lower left quadrant is the

symbol of beauty, bravery and music. But beware the swan for she is fierce in protecting her offspring.

The rampant lion stands proudly in defense of Scotland, His ungloved claws ready to slash the enemy. "Touch not the cat but a Glove. This symbol is of course full of male energy, pride and fierceness. Today the lion still appears on one version of the Scottish flag. Did you know that the St. Andrew's flag. The Saltire is the oldest national flag in the world? Yup. The fool appears as an underpinning to the lion, perhaps representing the total stubbornness of the Scots. Look closely at the grotesque in the top left hand corner, is that a portent of what is to come for Scotland? Perhaps

PANEL ONE: THE KING & QUEEN

*"Oh mother what I have done"
This must have run through King James the VI of Scotland and then King James the 1st of England. Born of Queen Anne of Scots and raised primarily in the French court, King James the VI was totally besotted with the styles and flamboyance of the French Court. King James the VI was a great proponent of the arts and they flourished under his reign. Mary Queen of Scots did not do so well and is still looking for her head.*



The grotesques that surround the king and queen are quite marvelous. It is as if the artists pulled out all the stops on this panel. Grinning faces, strange flowers, semi-animal forms and fantastic flowers adorn the work.

Note: These wonderful murals are the work of internationally known muralist [Kimberley Ray](http://www.kimraymurals.com). Her choice of palette adds so much depth and brightness of color. Kimberley Ray has been a decorative painter specializing in custom fine art work and Murals since 2001. Please view Kim's portfolio for public and private commissioned works throughout New England and the USA and beyond.

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