

Transcript for Recording Scotland Video

Hi, my name is Stephanie Williams and I work at the Wardlaw Museum at the University of St Andrews. Today I'm going to tell you a bit about the "Recording Scotland" collection.

In 1942, the Recording Scotland Collection scheme was established to create a permanent record, visual record, of Scotland. If we think to our history books, we'll remember that in the 1940s Great Britain was in the midst of World War II and times were changing. It was a scary time for the British people. Not only had they already sent their fathers, sons and brothers to the front to fight, they were trying to protect their own lives and property back home.

It was these special things, these places that people were fighting to protect that they also wanted to document. And that meant creating a scheme that would protect those places. Now it so happened that in 1930, a business man from America was so moved by the efforts of the British people during WWI that he decided to put his millions of dollars to work. His name was Edward Harkness and he had inherited millions of dollars from his father who'd invested well.

Mr Harkness was ultimately, just about the sixth wealthiest man during World War I and because he felt so fondly towards the British people he donated funds to museums, art institutions, and hospitals. And so his funds went to the Recording Scotland Scheme.

Now, initially, it started as a Recording Britain Scheme with painters being sent out all over England first and then later Scotland was due its own group, own collection. These paintings are just about Scotland.

Mr Harkness donated the funds through a group called The Pilgrim Trust and they were going to be the ones that kind of oversaw everything and it was established that there should be a committee and the committee should accept paintings or turn them away and create this permanent record.

Now, a good question, why watercolours? Did they have cameras? They did. In a 1940s, you could've taken a photograph, it black and white but it was hard detail of these locations and so it meant that especially during war time there were certainly a lot of artists who were out of work and so the scheme also helped put artists back to work.

Now, they were sending them out to different locations or look to what the artists had already created. And the reason they chose watercolours is because it is a distinctly British institution. Its something that is a favourite cultural tradition to paint with watercolours, soft lines, its beautiful.

And also watercolours add literal colour to the images and they give you a sense of emotion, based on what the artist is painting. And so this was a way to approach collecting the history and don't worry, ultimately, there was also a plan to document architecture through photography as well, also funded through the Pilgrim Trust. But at this point, we're talking about the watercolours.

And in the Recording Scotland Collection, it wasn't actually just watercolours. There are a few oil paintings and some pencil sketches, so a combination of things, but they did focus mainly on watercolours.

Now, for the artists who got chosen, both men and women contributed work to the collection and they were only paid between £5 and £20 for their art which is still fairly cheap for them and I know they certainly would've wanted to make more money but times were as they were and so ultimately they accepted it.

Now the artists had to go out and collect those images and another good question is what? What were they collecting? What images were they looking at? You have to think for yourself, when you go some place new, what kind of postcard do you buy? What image do you post to Instagram? What do you want to remember forever?

And for them, it was landscapes. It was these historic settings, it was these beautiful structures that they were afraid were going to be changed forever during the war and I like to say the Recording Scotland collection really covers the churches, crofts and castles. When you look at our collection you'll see that its everything from Edinburgh Castle, all the way to a barn with chickens.

And through the artwork that we can see, you also have to listen to what the artist is telling you about that day. Now, certainly, this artwork was done in the 1940s but it seems really timeless. When you look to the images of the harbours and the towns, you see a few people, and they're dwarfed by their surroundings, you usually don't see much fine amount of detail of the person, sometimes even the clothes are hard to make out, a lot of times you don't even know what they're doing.

And so they're part of the landscape, but they're not the focus. This was contributing towards capturing that old world approach to Scottish history and so we look at it to understand what life was like in the 1940s and even earlier.

Now, beyond that, the landscapes are amazing. They cover everything from these grand castle architectures to a very common harbour with people working with nets.

Now, when the artists when out and explored these landscapes, it was dangerous too. During the war, you didn't trust everybody, maybe they could be a spy and so it was difficult sometimes to get to places.

And you can see what they prized, as far as the committee what they chose, because there was lots of paintings as options and this is what they chose to tell you about this time period.

Now, ultimately, the Recording Scotland collection has over 130 paintings and if you go to the University of St Andrews website you can actually explore them. You can see a map and find out where the paintings were taken. You can see a bit about the artists, about the men and women who contributed. And you can just explore the different themes that these artists are looking at.