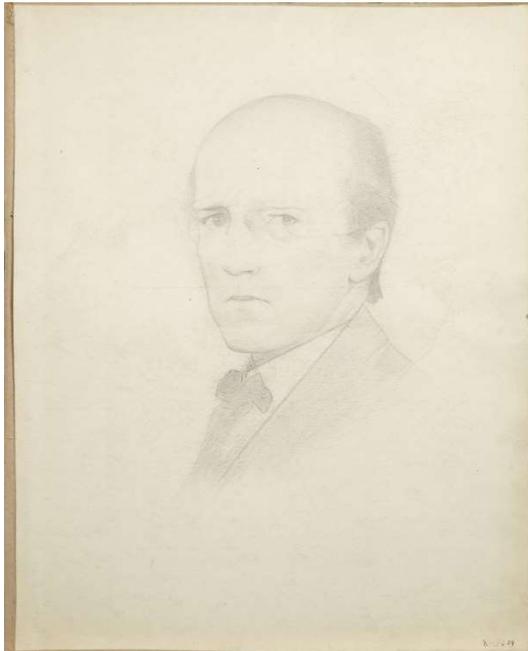


JOHN DUNCAN (1866 – 1945)



John Duncan, self-portrait. Collection of the Royal Scottish Academy of Art and Architecture.

John Duncan was a major contributor to [*The Evergreen: A Northern Seasonal*](#), published by [*Patrick Geddes*](#) (1854–1932) in Edinburgh in four volumes in 1895 and 1896. He was born in Dundee and, apart from some years working in London and Chicago, he made his career in Scotland, first in Dundee, then in Edinburgh. The graphic quality of his art that made him an ideal contributor to *The Evergreen* was nurtured by the strong journalism-related visual culture of his native city. From the age of eleven he trained at the nascent Dundee School of Art. Duncan started work as an illustrator in Dundee at the age of fourteen (*Young Dictionary of National Biography*). As a young man he shared

an interest in Celtic language and culture with his friend William A. Craigie (1867–1957), who went on to become a distinguished philologist and lexicographer (Macdonald 61–3). In the late 1880s he took his skills to London. In 1890 he travelled to Antwerp to study painting at the school of art —the principal was Charles Verlat (1824–90)—and to Dusseldorf (Kemplay 12–13). Later that year he went on an extended trip to Italy, which

opened his eyes to the work of Botticelli and Fra Angelico, and to the possibilities of tempera as a medium.

In 1891 Duncan was back in Dundee. It was around that time that he met the biologist and cultural activist [Patrick Geddes](#). In 1888 Geddes had been appointed part time professor of botany at University College Dundee, spending the rest of his time on projects of cultural revival effected through social activism, urban conservation, and publishing. Duncan made a major contribution to the physical focus of Geddes activities, an area of dilapidated buildings in the upper part of the Old Town of Edinburgh, which Geddes was converting into student residences, family accommodation, and places of study. By 1893 Duncan was fully involved, designing murals (about which he consulted his friend Craigie) for the Geddes family apartment in the newly built Arts and Crafts condominium of Ramsay Garden. That mural scheme (now lost) consisted of panels showing *The Evolution of Pipe Music*. Duncan's work was noted in substantial coverage in *The Studio* (1893–1964) in 1897 (Armour), and in *The Artist* (1880–1902) in 1898 (Anon).

The designs made for Geddes's apartment relate closely to Duncan's work for *The Evergreen*. In the [Spring](#) volume of *The Evergreen* (1895) there are two such images, "[Apollo's Schooldays](#)" (in which Apollo is being taught the panpipes by Pan himself) and "[Pipes of Arcady](#)" (which shows a shepherdess and her shepherd lover playing a bagpipe together). Both were illustrated in the influential *Of the Decorative Illustration of Books* by [Walter Crane](#) published in 1896 (Crane 255, 257). Crane notes that "[t]he publication of 'The Evergreen' by Patrick Geddes and his colleagues at Edinburgh has introduced several black-and-white designers of force and character" and names both John Duncan and Robert Burns (Crane 227), the latter also represented by a full-page image (Crane 259).

In [The Evergreen: Book of Autumn](#) Duncan contributed a double-page image of "[Bacchus and Silenus](#)" surrounded by piping nymphs and fauns, which again has its origin in the mural scheme for Geddes's home. Duncan's other contributions for *The Evergreen* were similarly substantial. There are more full-page illustrations, including for the *Spring* volume, "[Out-faring](#)," a boat setting sail on some adventurous quest, and for the [Summer](#) volume, the mysterious "[Surface Water](#)." An equally mysterious "[Sphinx](#)" followed in the [Winter](#) volume. Duncan also made numerous decorative elements in the form of

headpieces, tailpieces, an initial letter, and two title page decorations. In addition, two full-page works, “[Arbor Saeculorum](#)” and “[Lapis Philosophorum](#)” (published in the *Spring* and *Winter* volumes respectively) were made as precise visual representations of Geddes’s ideas, so much so that Duncan did not claim them (they are signed PG), although he is clearly the artist. I base that identification on stylistic similarity, but there is also a letter from Duncan to Geddes in which he notes that he has been expecting to get details from Geddes for “the ground to go upon” for a symbolic design for *The Evergreen*, which indicates that Duncan worked with Geddes in that manner. While that letter does not refer to either “Arbor Saeculorum” or “Lapis Philosophorum,” it shows that Duncan acted as a visual interpreter for Geddes (Macdonald 62-3). Note also that “Lapis Philosophorum” was first printed in *The New Evergreen* published in 1894, a precursor of *The Evergreen*, which contains another work by Duncan, “Venus Consolatrix” (Macdonald 54-8).

There are two more full-page images by Duncan, each of which is important in a different way. “[Anima Celtica](#)” for the *Spring* volume is a remarkable visual manifesto of the Celtic revival showing material from Celtic legend, James Macpherson’s *Ossian*, and Highland history, underpinned by archaeological artifacts. But the composition also emphasises the importance of the present, for the figure at the heart of the composition has the features of the outstanding Celtic scholar, Ella Carmichael (1870–1928). Ella was the daughter of the leading Celtic scholar of the day, Alexander Carmichael, who wrote “[The Land of Lorne and the Satirists of Taynuilt](#)” for *The Evergreen: Book of Spring*. In his image Duncan stresses the Gaelic language aspect of the Celtic revival, as distinct from the Anglophone aspect represented by [William Sharp](#) (Macdonald 80-84). The other image, “[The Way to Rheims](#),” is for the *Summer* volume. In its painted form, under the self-explanatory title of *Jehanne d’Arc et sa Garde Ecossaise* (Joan of Arc and her Scots Guard), it was part of the decoration of one of Geddes’s student halls of residence. It is a reminder both of the traditional Scottish alliance with France and of the wider European orientation of *The Evergreen* as a whole.

As a decoration for a student residence *Jehanne d’Arc et sa Garde Ecossaise* also relates to another important mural scheme by Duncan, namely for the common room of Ramsay Lodge, a student residence at the heart of Ramsay Garden. Those panels brought

together Celtic legend and Scottish intellectual history. The first six were opened to a public viewing in April 1896: *The Awakening of Cuchullin*, *The Combat of Fionn*, *The Taking of Excalibur*, *The Journey of St Mungo*, *The Vision of Erigena*, and *Michael Scot*. A seventh panel, *The Admirable Crichton*, was completed slightly later. Duncan's panels survive but the Celtic interlace borders provided by his students—all talented *Evergreen* artists—Helen Hay (fl.1895–1953), Nellie Baxter (1874–1952), and Marion Mason (dates unknown), are mostly lost (Macdonald 64–5).



John Duncan's mural, *The Awakening of Cuchullin* (1896) for Ramsay Lodge, Edinburgh, showing a border by one or more of Helen Hay, Nellie Baxter, and Marion Mason.
Source: *Interpretation of the Pictures in the Common Room of Ramsay Lodge*, University Hall, 1944.

Duncan was a key teacher at the Edinburgh summer schools Geddes developed in the 1890s. In 1900 the “Summer Meeting” was transferred to the International Exhibition in Paris. That same year, after teaching in Paris, and on Geddes's recommendation, Duncan took up a teaching role in Chicago. In a postcard written to Geddes as he travelled

to America, he describes himself as Geddes's "faithful disciple" (Kemplay 34). In a letter to Duncan's potential employer-to-be in Chicago, Francis Wayland Parker (1837–1907) of the Chicago Institute, Geddes had written of Duncan as an inspiring teacher (Kemplay 32). In due course Duncan would move on to another Chicago foundation, Hull House, a pioneering establishment devoted to community service and art education, founded by Jane Addams (1860–1935) and Ellen Gates Starr (1859–1940). Geddes had lectured there in 1899, as did Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959) in 1901. There Duncan taught, and painted two murals, one of Tolstoy, the other of Lincoln (both lost). The significance of Duncan as part of that Chicago milieu is becoming clear thanks to the research of Annie Storr of Brandeis University. Much later (1924) Duncan would accompany the social activist Ellen Gates Starr to the Hebridean island of Iona.

In 1903 Duncan returned to Scotland, where he provided images for Geddes's influential Dunfermline report, *City Development*. He was one of the earliest Scottish artists to explore the colour qualities of the Hebrides, and his painting trips to those islands from 1904 onwards opened the way for Colourists such as Samuel John Peploe (1871–1935) and Francis Campbell Boileau Cadell (1883–1937). In 1910 Duncan visited the modernist painter John Duncan Fergusson (1874–1961) in Paris. He found the experimentation of the Parisian art scene inspiring and his friendship with Fergusson is a reminder that cultural revivalism and modernism are deeply interlinked. Another Scot who understood that was Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868–1928), and a closeness developed between the circles of Mackintosh and Geddes. That is illustrated in a letter from Mackintosh's wife, Margaret Macdonald (1864–1933), to Geddes's wife, Anna Morton (1858–1917), mentioning a visit to the then recently married John Duncan and his wife in their new house in Edinburgh (Macdonald 114).

John Duncan married Christine Allen (b.1885) in 1912. They had two daughters, born in 1913 and 1915, but they separated in 1925. His wife was part of a Celtic revival network which had developed around Glastonbury in England, with a particular focus on the Celtic goddess and saint, Bride (Macdonald 143–4). That gives wider context to Duncan's *St Bride* from 1913 (National Gallery of Scotland). It shows the young saint transported by angels from Iona to be present at the birth of Christ. That legend had been

elaborated in “[Mary of the Gael](#),” a piece by William Sharp in the guise of his alter ego Fiona Macleod, published in 1895 in *The Evergreen: Book of Autumn*. In a work from 1917, *The Coming of Bride* (Glasgow Museums), Duncan shows the goddess in her pre-Christian form as the bringer of Spring. That mixing of pre-Christian and Christian traditions is underlined in another work, *Christ Walking on the Sea* (location and date uncertain, reproduced in *The Studio* in 1920) which has as a border inscription a quote attributed to St Columba, “My Druid is Christ.”

Duncan became a Theosophist in 1909, and after that date he produced several of his most important works (these also coincide with the time of his courtship and marriage to Christine Allen, who was also a Theosophist). After the faerie world of *Riders of the Sidhe* painted in 1911 (McManus Gallery, Dundee) came a scene from Arthurian legend, *Tristan and Isolde* (1912, City Art Centre, Edinburgh). *St Bride* was painted the following year, *The Adoration of the Magi* (private collection) in 1915, and *The Coming of Bride* two years later. There was substantial interest in that phase of Duncan’s work in *The Studio*. A full-page colour illustration was given to *Tristan and Isolde* in 1917, while both *The Coming of Bride* and *The Riders of the Sidhe* were reproduced as full-page monochrome plates in 1917 and 1920, respectively. The last mentioned appears as part of an assessment of Duncan’s work by Ernest Archibald Taylor (1874–1951). Accompanying that article there is also a full-page image of *The Queen of Sheba* (c. 1915, Glasgow Museums), which provided the model for Duncan’s diploma work for the Royal Scottish Academy (see below). That *Studio* article from 1920 is an invaluable reflection on Duncan’s work. Taylor was himself a painter, and husband of the outstanding Glasgow school illustrator Jessie M. King (1875–1949). Also illustrated were *Christ Walking on the Sea* and drawings of Deirdire (one of a variety of spellings for this legendary figure), Ossian, Fionn, and Alcestis. The last mentioned relates to a painting made by Duncan the following year, *A Masque of Love* (1921, Paisley Museum and Art Gallery). It shows a procession of lovers both real and imaginary, from Orpheus, Semele, and Sappho, via Aucassin and Nicolette, and Tristan and Isolde, to Dante’s vision of Paolo and Francesca.

Much of Duncan’s work can be seen in terms of the mutual illumination of Eastern and Celtic cultures. In one of his notebooks, he writes of oriental art as having “more for

me than occidental” and of thinking that Celtic ornament expressed Buddhistic ideas (Ireland 54). Such breadth of interest is clear in *The Adoration of the Magi* from 1915. The setting is a Hebridean shore and Duncan includes a Chinese Yin-Yang symbol on the robe of the elderly Mage, a very early use of that symbol in Western art. Later Duncan was to make a portfolio (date not clear) of teaching images of the life of the Buddha, at the behest of a Theosophical foundation, the Ananda College in Colombo in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka).

Duncan was elected an associate of the Royal Scottish Academy in 1910 and a full member in 1923. His diploma work, from that year, was *Ivory, Apes, and Peacocks*. It was a tour de force in his favoured medium of tempera exploring the legendary visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon. Also in the 1920s, Duncan explored historical events with legendary overtones in *St Columba Bidding Farewell to the White Horse* from 1925 (Carnegie Dunfermline Trust) and *Mary, Queen of Scots at Fotheringhay* from 1929 (University of St Andrews). He also returned to mural decoration, adding five more panels at Ramsay Lodge. These commemorate John Napier, James Watt, Walter Scott, Charles Darwin and Joseph Lister and were made in 1927–8. On a larger scale are two angels painted in the spandrels of the chancel arch of St Cuthbert’s Church in Edinburgh, dating from 1931. During this last phase of his career, he became a skilled stained-glass artist, designing major windows for the former North Morningside Church in Edinburgh, and for Paisley Abbey.

In 1941 John Duncan had a retrospective exhibition of his work at the National Gallery of Scotland, the first living artist to be so honoured. He died at his home in Edinburgh in 1945.

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Murdo Macdonald is an honorary member of the Royal Scottish Academy of Art and Architecture, and an honorary fellow of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies. He is author of *Scottish Art* in Thames and Hudson’s World of Art series (2000, new edition 2021), and of *Patrick Geddes’s Intellectual Origins* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

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