

The new Scottish galleries will open on Saturday

The new Scottish galleries at the National will open to the public on Saturday with more art on display than ever before.

This marks the completion of a seven year building project costing £38.62 million, during which time the National Gallery was still open, but was in large part a building site, especially when the excavation on the south of the site was being carried out. The inconvenience was considerable for everyone, whether visitors to the galleries or not, as the Playfair Steps were closed to the public.

A new entrance was formed from

Princes Street Gardens ahead of the project beginning, and the whole building was already quite altered by 2019 from the one which previously entered off The Mound Precinct.

The National Galleries of Scotland (NGS) undertook market research asking people in nearby places such as the gardens and the railway station which artists or pieces of art they would expect to see. The results surprised them, particularly finding out that the gallery was not always showing Scottish artists who were best known or who visitors would like to see. Key names suggested during the research included Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the Colourists and the Glasgow Boys. That has now been rectified in the new modern spaces.

Display space has been doubled in the dozen galleries which show artworks from the national collection in their best light. The art includes the well known work by Sir Edwin Landseer of course. The Monarch of the Glen has taken up its rightful position in the new space, along with works by William McTaggart, Anne Redpath, Phoebe Anna Traquair, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Glasgow Boys and the Glasgow Girls.

The nation's artistic heritage will be brought to life – from the much-loved Scottish Colourists as well as major works from the first half of the twentieth century to stellar works from the early 1800s onwards. Reimagined displays of drawings and sketches will celebrate artists such as Glasgow Style pioneer Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh and Alloa-born David Allan, whose depictions of 'Edinburgh Characters' will allow visitors to get up close to street life in the Scottish capital in the late eighteenth century.

Progressing through the main doors from Princes Street Gardens, which open majestically and automatically, the new galleries are located off to the left in what was formerly administrative space.



This improvement project was centred on creating a better experience for people visiting and to encourage more visitors to look at the Scottish art on display. The galleries were aware that some international visitors in particular did not come to the National Gallery as they simply “did not know what was there”. Now the National has the feel of an important gallery, much more than it did before.

The pandemic got in the way of course, and The Director-General Sir John Leighton said this was a “complex” engineering project with the main Edinburgh to Glasgow railway line underneath with three tunnels and below a Category A listed building on the surface in the constraints of a World Heritage site to extend the galleries into the former office and storage space. Sir John was also at pains to point out that the galleries are free for everyone to come in and enjoy,

and that now there is more space for visitors and more art to see in an easier way.

He said: “For the first time, there are logical routes through the whole complex, a natural flow, no more dead ends, no more retracing your steps, I hope that that will work well for our visitors.

“When we when we set out on this project, we had some very clear and important aims. We wanted to transform the experience for visitors coming to this site. We wanted to make it much more accessible, much more visitor friendly to upgrade the facilities. And we wanted to make it easier to circulate through what is quite a complex set of buildings and levels, but absolutely key to this project was to be able to show the Scottish collection with pride and ambition. And we feel we have achieved those aims.”

And his favourite space? The room where the embroideries by Phoebe Anna Traquair are hung. To see the intricate handiwork close up is most impressive.



Following a multimillion pound building project the new Scottish Galleries will open to the public on 30 September 2023. PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter

Crawfords Tea Rooms

When you enter up the steps to what is the natural beginning of the new Scottish galleries, the artwork is deliberately displayed with the modern works first, and as you progress through the galleries the art becomes older. One artwork which has a very significant connection to Edinburgh is the huge colourful painting titled *The Hunt* by Robert Burns which used to hang in Crawford's Luncheon Tea Rooms at 70 Princes Street just across the road from the gallery. This painting was always on show for the price of a cup of tea and a scone, or High Tea if you were pushing the boat out. It now takes pride of place in the first gallery or space as you enter the newly completed wing. And if you didn't know before it was Burns who designed the interior of the tea room – down to the cake stands.



Robert Burns, *The Hunt* (About 1926). Oil on canvas. National Galleries of Scotland. Purchased 1987

There are more than 130 works of Scottish art on display in the new space for visitors to enjoy, some of which were just too big to be displayed before.

There is an audio tour of the gallery lasting 1 hour and 45 minutes which you can download and listen to on your own device – even when you are not in the gallery itself using the Smartify app.

Art is grouped in the rooms off to the side of a walkway which is lit by windows with views to the gardens for visitors to

enjoy. It was a key part of the project to provide windows where there had not been any before, showing visitors that they are in the heart of a World Heritage Site.



Following a multimillion pound building project the new Scottish Galleries will open to the public on 30 September 2023. The bust of Sir Walter Scott with Callum the dog behind which according to the original bequest must be on permanent display and never stored away. His owner James Cowan Smith made the bequest along with funding which has bought many paintings in the national collection PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter

There is a natural focus on Sir Walter Scott – fittingly, as the monument to him is framed by one of the large picture windows on the eastern aspect. Scott is associated with the area as he used to walk through this part of the city on his way up to court. Apparently Scott did not like to be painted or depicted but he did quite like one of the busts of him which is on display, and of course he loved Dandie Dinmont dogs, one of which is the subject of a painting beside him.

Landscapes in their place

Walking from the first room up across the railway lines the ceiling is a lot lower than elsewhere which the galleries have used as a location for some of their landscapes.

A pair of 19th century Nasmyth paintings of Princes Street have been reunited here, [one which was in the collection](#) and another which has been gifted to the galleries from a private collection on long term loan. The two views, one of the morning and one in the evening, were painted by the Edinburgh born artist. (And if you are not familiar with the artist Alexander Nasmyth then think of the poet Robert Burns as Nasmyth painted the best known portrait of him). Later in his career he turned to landscapes.

These pictures show the main thoroughfare looking both [east](#) and west, and are now reunited and hung around a window through which visitors can see at least part of the landscape as it is today. Sir John said that the galleries thought "it would be fun for people to see 19th century views of the city and then give a half turn and look out the window to see how much or indeed how little has changed in the time since then".



Following a multimillion pound building project the new Scottish Galleries will open to the public on 30 September 2023. PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter

As with all modern buildings, accessibility is key and there are ramps inside to help those in wheelchairs get around more easily. Part of the rationale for creating the ramps outside in the gardens was said to be for reasons of accessibility as well as recreating the original external view.

Chief Curator Dr Patricia Allerston gave us a guided tour and explained that the works on display begin with 20th century art and the further you go into the rooms and spaces beyond the older the art is.

She said: “We have the cream of the National Gallery’s collection of early 20th century art out – things that are very often shown at the Modern Art Gallery. And that is really one of the points of the strength of the collection.

“This area – the first two rooms are 20th century going up to 1945. The aim is to change that every three years and to have

different thematic displays, so there's always a fresh look, using the 20th century works."

Dr Allerston explained that one of the strengths of the collections is landscapes and views of Scotland both paintings and works on paper. The new expanded space allows the artworks to be grouped together rather than shown chronologically as they were before. She also said that it was a deliberate move by the galleries to hang the landscapes in places where members of the public can get up close to the paintings and see the way they are painted.

And the work which has become emblematic of the gallery since its purchase, *The Monarch of the Glen*, is back in a lovely light space along with typically Scottish works surrounding it.



PHOTO Jane Barlow Sir Edwin Landseer, *Monarch of the Glen*. Oil on canvas. Purchased by the National Galleries of Scotland as a part gift from Diageo Scotland Ltd, with contributions from The National Lottery Heritage Fund, Dunard Fund, Art Fund, the William Jacob Bequest, the Tam O' Shanter Trust, the Turtleton

Trust, and the K. T. Wiedemann Foundation, Inc. and through public appeal, 2017.

Several issues were discovered when the 1970s building was fully stripped back to its core concrete structure. These included multiple instances of undocumented asbestos deposits which required safe removal, damp and water ingress issues which substantially changed the extent of the waterproofing requirements and undocumented obstructions including remnants from previous developments, which added significant complexity to the building work.

Deeply buried layers of dense concrete had to be extracted, impacting on the sequencing of the works while managing the unique complexity of the engineering works. Just over 800 cubic metres of concrete were removed from site. All these challenges were successfully overcome to create what the galleries describe as “generous, high-quality new spaces for the world’s most important collection of historic Scottish art”.

Official opening

There will be an official opening on Thursday with local children who will join Sir John Leighton, Culture Minister Angus Robertson and The National Lottery Heritage Fund Director for Scotland Caroline Clark, to open the new galleries.

Sir John said: “This is very different from the character of the other spaces at the National Gallery which people may be familiar with. It’s quite contemporary, it’s modern in its feel, and has great views out to the city as you walk past and hopefully very inviting.”

Culture Secretary Angus Robertson said: “The National Galleries of Scotland has the world’s finest collection of Scottish Art and I’m delighted that the new galleries will now have space to showcase this to a national and international

audience. We have supported this redevelopment project from the start with a significant contribution of £15.25 million and it's wonderful to see the new galleries open, allowing everyone to enjoy them."

Caroline Clark, The National Lottery Heritage Fund Director for Scotland said: "National Galleries of Scotland have created a truly world-class facility showcasing Scotland's distinctive and internationally important artistic heritage.

"This iconic building at the heart of Edinburgh's World Heritage Site is safeguarded for the future, creating a focus for our cultural and economic renewal. We are proud and excited to welcome the world to Edinburgh to enjoy the new galleries. We believe heritage helps us to understand who we are and where we are from; and so, we join with the National Galleries of Scotland in declaring this is a place for the people of Scotland. Our support for this project is thanks to National Lottery players and we encourage them to visit as soon and often as they can."

As part of the project an huge number of paintings, sculpture and works on paper have been conserved, restored, reframed, remounted, researched and glazed. Conservation of important and rare historic frames has also been a priority.

- This included:
- 673 paintings, about 700 frames and 240 artworks on paper were surveyed
- 15 major painting restorations and about 200 paintings treatments were completed
- 100 drawings were technically examined, with 30 works treated and 100 remounted
- About 250 frames were treated, 7 reproduction frames were made from scratch for paintings and 100 new frames were made for works on paper

The massive project was financed by both public and private donations:

- The Scottish Government £15.25 million
- The National Lottery Heritage Fund £6.89 million
- Public donations £16 million

The new Scottish galleries at the National have been designed by one of Scotland's leading architectural practices, Hoskins Architects. Exhibition design is by award-winning firm, Metaphor.

<https://www.nationalgalleries.org>



Following a multimillion pound building project the new Scottish Galleries will open to the public on 30 September 2023. PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter