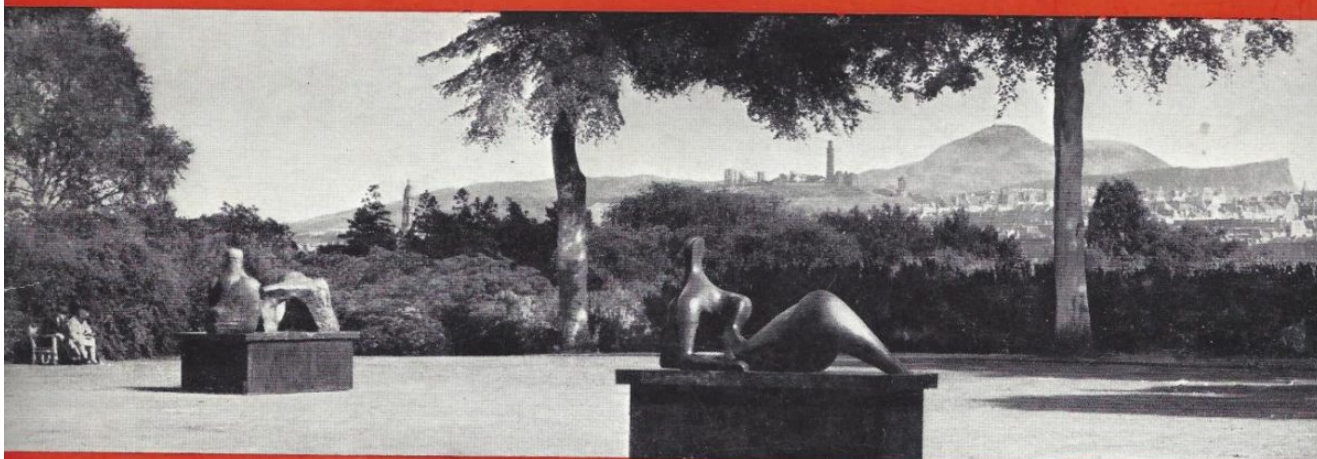


# The Silent Archive at Inverleith House

Edinburgh has a substantial number of superb galleries and museums. These range from obvious examples such as the National Museum of Scotland to lesser known little gems such as the Music Museum at St Cecilia's Hall.

One of those that is sometimes overlooked and undervalued is Inverleith House in the Royal Botanic Gardens. As a gallery, Inverleith House has a natural warmth and tranquil atmosphere.

It has long pedigree as a gallery, having been the home of the National Gallery of Modern Art from 1960-until the early 1980s. An early 1960s guide to the then new Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art describes how the 'conversion' of the building between 1956 and 1959 created a fantastic exhibition space: 'it is remarkable how this process of clearing away, done with the object of providing a simple environment for modern pictures, has also revived the classical air of the whole interior'. Similarly, the authors of the 1976 volume *Another Edinburgh*, described Inverleith House as 'probably the city's most attractive gallery'. Almost 40 years after the Gallery of Modern Art moved West, Inverleith House, refurbished in 1990 and 2004, remains one of the best art exhibition spaces in the city.



***Scottish National Gallery  
of Modern Art  
Edinburgh***

In recent years, it has hosted a series of superb exhibitions which have made full use of RBGE's wonderful archive collections. In some ways it's a reflection of a trend within galleries and museums towards the archival; what the critic Hal Foster termed the 'archival impulse'. Recent examples at Inverleith House include **Shipping Roots**, by Australian artist Keg de Souza which was a fantastic example of the way that visiting a gallery can be a healing balm. From the first moment you entered the building, your nostrils and lungs were filled with the deeply calming aroma of eucalyptus. That exhibition combines contemporary work and research with material from the RBGE archives, including include beautiful botanical drawings collected by Hugh Cleghorn.

The current exhibition, [The Silent Archive](#), also makes fantastic use of the archives. Twelve international artists have offered their own interpretation of aspects of the collection 'challenging us to discover hidden narratives and hear long-ignored voices that are preserved in our collections.' This includes a room focusing on jute

manufacturing, connecting the vast jute mills of Dundee (such as Cox Brothers' Camperdown Works) with present day factories in India. These factories, interestingly, use machinery built in Glasgow. The sound of the clattering, juddering jute machinery, played on videos, is one of the few noises in the building. Elsewhere, it's snatches of whispered conversation and creaking floorboards. There is an inherent stillness to the place, much needed in our notifications rich culture.



The first gallery in the exhibition is dominated by music. Music by Karine Polwart with Pippa Murphy (A Pocket of Wind Resistance), fills the air as you wander through. This evocative piece commemorates the large palm tree which once stood in the Glasshouse, but wasn't able to be moved when restoration began. Included in the exhibition are clamps which held the tree in place: you have that sense of the tree imprisoned, wanting to escape into the city. Movingly, a last stump of the tree lies outside the gallery. There's a wonderful example of the way that art can help us make sense of loss and change. The way it can be a healing balm.



SABAL UMBRACULIFERA IN THE OLD PALM HOUSE.

Image: *Sabal umbraculifera* in the Old Palm House, published in *The Gardeners' Chronicle*, 19 December 1874. From the RBGE website <https://www.rbge.org.uk/>

The gallery has been freshly painted for the exhibition and this 'fragrance' washes through the building. On a bright early March day, light floods through the windows. There was a stark contrast between the rich colours of some of the art and archival material, and the paleness outside; the trees are still bare and the grass on the lawn outside still yellowed in some patches. Elsewhere in the gardens, signs of new growth

starting to emerge. It fills the place with a sense of rebirth and optimism as winter starts to ease its grip.

Underlying this exhibition, add this with other recent ones, is the way that the archive is considered something alive, pregnant with potential. It's not a dusty collection but something full of material that can be reconsidered, reinterpreted and its full value clearly demonstrated. This desire for visitors to reconsider the whole notion of archive is expressed in the final room, where interesting reading material on the theme are laid out. This sitting area provides a place to pause and reflect on a fascinating exhibition in a superb location.

The [Silent Archive](#) runs at Inverleith House, Royal Botanic Garden until 12 May 2024.

Open daily from 10am. Free entry.