

Forum

Should the Burrell Collection be loaned overseas?



When Sir William Burrell gifted his collection to the city of Glasgow in 1944, he stipulated that it should never be loaned overseas. But with a planned refurbishment of the Burrell Collection likely to see the museum close from 2016–20, Glasgow City Council has introduced a private bill at the Scottish Parliament to relax the terms of the bequest and allow objects to tour. *As Apollo* went to press, a parliamentary committee had just endorsed the bill. But has it made the right recommendation?

YES BRIDGET MCCONNELL

Sir William Burrell was not against lending. Across the 70 years in which he amassed one of the world's greatest single collections, he continually loaned items to institutions across the UK. Indeed, it has been claimed that he wished to exhibit items to improve his status and reputation as a discerning collector with an expert eye.

It can be argued that transport across road and rail in the early part of the last century was inherently more dangerous than today. As a shipping magnate, he saw as many as 30 of his own vessels go down over the course of two World Wars. Indeed, he would have been well aware that his friend, Lord Carmichael, Governor of Bombay, who built a unique collection of Indian art, lost his treasures when the ship bringing it home was torpedoed off the Devon coast in 1917.

Sir William was not against lending, then: he was against shipping by sea. In the 70 years since he gifted his collection of almost 9,000 artefacts to the city in 1944, his express wish has been that his trustees look after his interests with regard to the bequest. The committee considering the arguments in the Scottish Parliament recognised that Glasgow Life, which delivers cultural and leisure services on behalf of Glasgow City Council, has stringent safeguards in place to mitigate against risk.

We [Glasgow Life in partnership with Glasgow City Council] have agreed a new

Lending Code and, ultimately, Sir William's Trustees have the power to veto any loan request. However, Sir Peter Hutchison, Chair of the Burrell Trustees, told the Parliament he cannot envisage a time when such a veto would have to be used. Our conservators and curators have devoted their lives to protecting the objects they care for – they would not put any at undue risk.

Glasgow has the skills and expertise required to assess an object for an outward loan. In 2010, Dalí's *Christ of St John of the Cross* was the star attraction at the High Museum, Atlanta, and treasures from our Italian Renaissance collection – described as the finest civic collection in the UK – are currently touring several North American museums. We are working with the National Gallery, who have requested that arguably our most important painting – Rembrandt's *Man in Armour* – be sent to London for a major exhibition later next year.

It is worth noting that the national collections in England and Wales do not have to pursue the legislative route we are currently undertaking. They have the legal powers to overturn a bequest – without recourse to the benefactor's heirs – after 50 years. In Scotland, the limit is just 25 years. Next year will mark 70 years since Sir William made his gift to Glasgow.

Our priority is to ensure that the Burrell Collection is available for the enjoyment and enrichment of generations to come. However, the building where it is housed, while of significant architectural importance, is in need of a major refurbishment. Only recently we had to close a tapestry gallery because of water ingress – and it hardly befits Sir William's generosity to have huge tarpaulins catching water from a leaky roof.

The city is exploring plans for a refurbishment which will cost in the region of £45m, with the gallery closing from 2016 for up to four years. While we hope the Heritage Lottery Fund will support us, there is a finite amount within the public purse for such capital projects.

An international tour, beginning at the British Museum before travelling to major

institutions across the world, will not raise cash – but it will significantly raise the profile of the collection and allow us the leverage to attract major sponsors for the refurbishment.

Important as that may be, the benefit to scholarly research and knowledge, by creating the opportunity to put objects which may have been part of a set together for the first time, is difficult to put a price on. As well as academic benefits, the people of Glasgow will benefit from reciprocal loan arrangements, which will allow us to host – across our nine civic museums – treasures from some of the world's finest collections.

The time is now right to share this flagship collection with the world. It is an international calling card not only for Glasgow, but for Scotland. The Trustees and a committee of the Scottish Parliament agree with us, that Sir William's fears have been well and truly allayed by the safeguards we have agreed and advancements in transportation and conservation.

Sir William was never against lending. Now, as we prepare to refurbish the gallery – to make it fit for his gift – we have an opportunity to unlock the potential of this unique collection on a global stage.

Bridget McConnell is the Chief Executive of Glasgow Life.

NO MICHAEL DALEY

Overturning the terms of Sir William Burrell's magnificent bequest to the citizens of Glasgow would be wrong in principle and dangerous in practice. Glasgow City Council's irresponsible attempt to press an ethically unattractive and legally untenable case in a forum as open and probing as the Scottish Parliament was unwise, exposing the proposed changes to near universal scrutiny. It has drawn embarrassing acknowledgement that the clarity and force of Burrell's prohibition on loans to foreign countries – as set out in both his will and a separate agreement with the Council –

precludes any reversal through the courts: 'As there is no legal remedy which would allow all the restrictions on lending and borrowing to be relaxed, Glasgow City Council must pursue a private bill in order to achieve this end.'

ArtWatch UK was invited to give evidence as 'campaigners for the protection of works of art' (and has further submitted online documents and reports testifying to travel injuries that still arise during foreign travels). The National Gallery's director, Nicholas Penny, offered confidential disclosure of travel injuries he has directly encountered as a curator. (His offer travelled worldwide when accidentally posted on the Scottish Parliament's website.) In the *Museums Journal* the Art Fund's director of development, Amy Ross, argued that where no family members survive who might agree to renegotiate a bequest's terms, existing arrangements should stand. A *Sunday Times* (Scotland) journalist, Mark Macaskill, did what Glasgow Council, the Burrell Trustees and their lawyers had all failed to do: speak to the descendants. One responded that neither she, nor the wider family, had been consulted and that it was her suspicion that 'they have tried to smuggle this through', adding 'this debate was thoroughly rehearsed in 1997. Experts warned then, as now, that every time you wrap and unwrap a tapestry, some sort of damage can occur. It is inevitable. We should leave matters as they are.'

The present trail of parliamentary documents to the Burrell Museum exposes the culturally deadening and administratively debilitating consequences for individual art institutions of Glasgow City Council's unhealthily top-down direction of the arts. When ArtWatch attempted to meet curators of the Burrell at their own museum, we were thwarted and met by three officers of Glasgow Life, the body which is both a charity and a company, whose officers are appointed by the Council. Burrell gifted a fabulous collection, and the means to house it, on condition that loans may be permitted within but not outside Britain. We now know that Glasgow City Council neglected this jewel for years,

allowing its award-winning building to leak to the point where entire galleries are closed, while others contain buckets to catch the drips. Had the Council acted in 2001, as it promised to do, the cost of all repairs and some improvements would have been £4m–£5m. Today the Council seeks £40m–£45m – which (unexplained) sum it hopes to recoup in part by sending plum examples of all categories of work, including fragile textiles and pastels prohibited by Burrell from being loaned even within Britain, on a hazardous world tour, beginning for six months at the British Museum, and then to the Metropolitan Museum, New York, and elsewhere.

When US courts gave the Barnes Foundation in Merion, Philadelphia, exceptional leave to tour key works around the world, barely £5m was raised and many works were damaged – as Barnes Watch submissions on the Scottish Parliament's website disclose.

The British Museum's director, Neil MacGregor, agreed to be co-opted as an adviser to a Glasgow Life subsidiary, 'Burrell Renaissance', on the planned world tour but was unable to accept an invitation to give testimony before the Scottish Parliament. In a subsequent written submission, he departed from his previously declared position of strict neutrality in 1997, with a call to overturn benefactors' terms as soon as decently possible so as to lend and borrow at will. He denies that helping to organise a tour that would include his own museum might leave him, as the parliamentary committee's convener suggested, 'in a position of conflict of interest', by claiming that his museum 'would not profit financially' from the exhibition. That would only be so if visitors were not charged and if they spent no money in the museum's shops and cafes. It is not clear how, without entrance charges, lending works to the British Museum might offset the estimated high costs of putting the Burrell Museum to rights during the period of 2016–20, when its building is scheduled to be closed for already urgently needed repairs. **A**

Michael Daley is the Director of ArtWatch UK.