

Transcript of Deaf Creatives: Their Journey

A film by Ruaridh Lever-Hogg

Shots of an artist's studio with oil pastels and paints, a man with long blond hair tied into a bun and round glasses is sitting behind a table covered in paintings on paper.

Ruaridh: Hello! I'm Ruaridh and I'm an artist specialising in painting. This documentary is about meeting deaf creative talents to learn about their journeys.

Shot of an easel with a canvas with the words written 'Deaf Creatives: Their Journey'. Shots of Perth are shown and the exterior of Perth Museum and object and paintings in the museum. Ruaridh is standing in an exhibition room in the museum and faces the camera.

Scotland has a proud history of art and crafts. For example, the Glasgow School of Art was set up in the 1800s. It was designed by the famous architect, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, parking off a boom of skilled artists in Scotland. It was the same era as the Pre-Impressionist and the Scottish Colourist Movement. Included are famous artists like Henry Raeburn and Joan Eardley, amongst others. At the same time, the industrial revolution saw the proliferation of local expert craftspeople: jewellers, tailors and more. Many deaf artists and craftspeople have always been part of these movements. I wanted to find out how these artists were involved and more about their art. I spoke with an art historian who researched deaf art and I found out about a well-known deaf artist from the early 20th century. His art medium was painting, just like me! I think it's a good opportunity for me to see his works on display in the restoration room downstairs!

A shot of the painting storage area, there are large blue roller racks with paintings. A woman in an orange dress opens the racks for Ruaridh to see the paintings. Ruaridh stands in front of a rack of oil paintings in gilded frames.

What is art culture and heritage? How does it evolve in time and revolve around our lives, circumstances, and society? It's the ability to share our stories, to express it on the canvas, in paintings, drawings, photography etc. Here are some perfect examples by John Guthrie Spence Smith, himself a deaf artist. He is known for his quality landscapes and streetscapes, amongst others. He worked on his paintings outdoors in Perthshire, Fife and Edinburgh. I am drawn to his limited colour

representation and lack on specific detail. But it means he represents exactly what he sees. It's the same style and from the same period as the Scottish Colourist movement. You can see, for example, around here [shot of the sky] a dominant use of blue and grey, layered and blending into each other, giving the feel of Scottish weather. Also, the tree does not have any fine detail [close-up shot of a bare tree with simple black lines]. HE was elected as an Associate of The Royal Scottish Academy. Now, all his works are stored in Perth National Gallery.

Ruaridh is now back in the museum gallery in front of a landscape painting.

I am interested in how deaf talents have built up their careers, based on inspiration from Scottish culture, landscape or history? And what challenges they have faced in their careers...I met and interviewed some of these deaf individuals to try to learn about their journeys. What does the future look like for these skilled professionals? The first deaf artist I met, who is inspired by the Scottish landscape, is Morag Eagleson. She is a print artist who lives in Lochaber in the Highlands. Morag works as a climbing and skiing instructor nature and the outdoors influences her work as a printmaker and painter.

Shots of the landscape around Lochaber and a white cottage. A woman with long red hair in plaits is seen making a lino cut print of a lobster in blue ink on white paper. The woman, Morag is now sitting on an armchair opposite Ruaridh in a living room, there is a large pet dog.

Morag: I have always been interested in outdoors instruction, in climbing and skiing. I really enjoyed taking photographs of landscapes and then bringing them back home to look at. It makes me do something creative. It encourages me to make something about the outdoors which will help encourage people to go out and see it for themselves.

Ruaridh: Do you often like going outside to keep your motivation going?

Morag: Yeah, the more time I am out the higher my motivation. It's better than staying in looking at photographs on the internet, those aren't real. You will be inspired if you go out, yeah definitely.

Ruaridh: How did you get interested in printmaking, painting and etching?

Morag: I think I got it from my family, my mother's side. My grandfather was a watercolour painter. My great unt's work is up there [shot of a collage] I was always interested in art ever since I was little and I went to an art school. When I was in school, there were roughly 10 deaf pupils, over half of them had art as their strongest subject, more than any other subject. The were interested in this subject because they had really good observation skills.

Ruaridh: Do you know, going back 50 years, what was different about printing then?

Morag: Yeah, now, it's more colourful, bold and vibrant. Colour was used differently. 50 years ago, it was more detailed and now it's simpler and with a more colourful layer, it's interesting.

Ruaridh: How are you getting on with the market on your own?

Morag: I find it a bit of a challenge, especially for the outdoor art market. It's because everyone else is hearing I have to put in 110% effort to sell. If I was hearing, I'd probably sell even more because I could chat easily with customers. The last time the market was hard because I was alone.

Ruaridh: So no communication support?

Morag: Understanding English text is a lot of work as I'm deaf. I need someone to help me to support me in the business with understanding English. That's the biggest issue I've got. I have to do lots of administration, pay tax, and so on. It's confusing. And often there is a barrier to my understanding of material costs, doing accounts and valuing the work. I just enjoy painting and giving them away! There's a lot of planning to support making and selling the work, it's hard.

Ruaridh: Do you know any other deaf artists in Scotland?

Morag: No. I don't know any deaf artists.

Ruaridh: Would you like to meeting another deaf artist one day?

Morag: Yeah, I'd like to meet someone with a similar style to me to do etching or a fine art painting of a mountain or mixed media. That would be lovely.

Ruaridh: What can you see 10 years in your future?

Morag: In 5 or 10 years time, I would like to have a balance. Before, I was always going outdoors and never had time for art. But lockdown got me back to art again because we had so much more time. Now it's got a job, three days a week, and hopefully it's long term, so I can make more art and maybe in 10 years time I could become a full time artist. Not sure, we'll see what happens.

Ruaridh is now sitting in a café with a cup of tea and a large old red book on the table in front of him.

It's interesting, Morag's work reminds me of this deaf artist from the late 19th century. It's Walter Geikies, he was a well-known deaf artist. His area of specialism was creating black and white images from ink with full detail to create his prints.

Shot of the red book in detail and with open pages showing black and white etchings of various scenes, people are wearing old style dress.

There's such differences back then using finer detail to draw images in black and white. Interesting, Morag's works are so different, modern, and more colourful. Luckily, I have her work to show you.

Shots of Morag's lino prints of boats and animals in bright colours.

You can see that her etching works are of a similar method as Geikies. Both of them have a different approach. Geikies' are simple, in black and white, and Morag's are modern. It's clear that Morag draws inspiration from the natural world for her art. What I find interesting from her is how lockdown gave her the chance to focus on her art again and develop her skills. Which made her realise that her balance of life is really important, to enjoy what she is doing, rather than just working outdoors all the time. Morag's experience really shows the challenges artists, especially deaf artists and craftspeople, can have in turning their passion into a job, a career that pays the bills.

Shots of Morag and Geikies' prints side by side.

Ruaridh is now back in the Perth museum gallery standing in front of a cabinet of objects.

Other areas of traditional art don't adapt well with modern technology. Jewellery is one of them. It is very difficult and requires a lot of training to

become a jeweller. For example, over time, it's necessary to make more decorative appearances, and jewels are now considered an aesthetic feature. The Celtic and Pictish style has a heavy influence on Scottish jewellery today. Their style of decoration is over 2000 years old and they are still using the same style. Brooches of Kilt pins are popular examples of Scottish jewellery. Today Scotland has a large variety of jewellery style, ranging from the traditional Celtic style to the more contemporary Art Deco style. That last person I am meeting is a deaf jeweller based in Glasgow, who is stuck in the old way of working and his methods of jewellery crafting haven't changed for 57 years, Stephen Butler.

Exterior shots of a town, Barrhead. Ruaridh walks into a house, shots of jewellery making equipment and processes. A man with short white hair and wearing a boiler suits works at a jewellery making table, hammering a ring, setting a stone in place, and polishing a ring.

Ruaridh: How did you get interested in a jewellery career?

Stephen: My mum worked in a bakery. The bakery owners knew about jewellery and were looking for some boys who could work for the jewellers. I was 15 and when I finish school at 3pm I would go straight into central Glasgow and worked there until 8:30pm on weekdays and I finished at 1pm on Saturdays that's who I started being interested in working in jewellery. The boss was impressed with my work and said, "I want you to leave school when you're 15 and work full time with me". After 7 years, I felt there was no way to learn anything new, I wasn't happy with their training methods. Eventually, I left that company and joined another company and worked there for 5 years. That company taught me a lot more and my skills vastly improved. Five years later, I was itching to work for myself and develop my own ideas and left that company too. I then moved into my garage which I converted to a workshop and worked there for 17 years. My works are imported all over the UK, to Canada and America as well. When the demand for making jewellery went down, I decided to work at Deaf Connections and sold my jewellery business.

Ruaridh: You decided to retire but then you came out of retirement?

Stephen: No, I've stopped...but people won't let me stop, they're always begging me. I'm 73 now. One of my clients was from Nottingham, England. She contacted me, wanting me to make diamond ring but I didn't have any of the equipment or materials. She Told me that she remembered me from when she was a little girl looking at my jewellery.

She as very disappointed, but then, I received a package with £800 in banknotes. She wrote a note saying that the money was to cover the equipment I needed to make the ring.

Ruaridh: She gave you money to buy equipment?

Stephen: Aye, I started over again. So I made her a ring. The equipment only cost me £1400. I packaged the ring and sent it to her. I decided to reduce the price from £1400 to £800, but she decided to pay the full price, £1400. Then I received a document, letting me know she's names a star after me! I really appreciated her.

Ruaridh: It means to be you a lot, yeah, that's really something?

Stephen: Yeah. I used to work for a living but now I work to live. It's something to do, it has allowed me to meet many people across the world...

Ruaridh: Can you show me photos of your work?

Stephen passes Ruaridh photos of his work showing gold brooches and masonic necklaces.

Ruaridh: So...based on your knowledge about the past and the present, what change have you seen in the last 57 years?

Stephen: It's a big change. It's become more difficult and challenging because apprentice jewellers changed a lot over those years. Jewellery stores in Glasgow are closing down or have already closed down. Suppliers have begun to withdraw and stop their supplies to Scotland.

Ruaridh: How do you continue your career without giving up? Many deaf people who continue without support or opportunities, eventually give up. How do you manage to keep going?

Stephen: I myself have been fully aware about the struggle. My father told me that I have to work on my own. Nobody is around to help and everyone has their own problems. Everyone have their own problems, more than your own problem so it is up to you to remain strong. I have to keep driving myself to continue. Once, someone did try to control me and pull be down and I wasn't happy. I decided to take a chance to leave the situation. Imagine if I was still with the company for the rest of my life? I feel if I hasn't made a move now and put it odd, I would retire and

look back on it with regret. I had to take the chance to work by myself, and I did.

Ruaridh is now standing outside the stone building of Perth museum and art gallery.

It's really interesting to hear his life and career story. I found it a very touching moment when he showed his emotions after he decided to come out from retirement, putting his heart and soul into jewellery, working to live. What I find inspiring from him is that he has to embrace himself to get through his business after he left the company, to prove them wrong, that he can work on his own without relying on hearing colleagues. It's important to have this belief, to keep going to achieve something in the end.

Shots of an artist studio, with paint and pens, Ruaridh is sitting at a desk drawing with pencil on paper.

It's been inspiring meeting people working in art and skilled crafts today. What was really interesting was seeing the influence of Scottish history and culture on deaf people working today. Stephen, continuing the proud history of Scottish silversmithing, and the discovery of the Scottish landscape which has inspired Morag's print works. Can remember, my first memory of art when I was very young. I went to the Dali Museum and I was amazed at his paintings which got me more interested in painting. Since then, I have been involved in art. I graduated with a Master's degree, taught art workshop to a variety of people and have been involved in a number of exhibitions. Recently, I have been drawn to Scottish culture which inspired me with a new idea, the tartan themes project. I was focused on the theme of converting tartan fabric into canvas for oil paintings of people and animals. The tartan's character blends the subjects into the background or the tartan, revealing the individuality of the subjects. For examples, families' heritage clan colours, or portraits on tartan to represent their character or a tartan colour strip to give definition to identity.

What I find interesting is that technology is taking over, evolving modern art styles such as contemporary art, photographs, or visual conceptual, there are more projects centred on digital art. It shows the big evolution art is going through. It's still creative, to work digitally, there are animations, documentaries, or anything else like photography without dialogue, visual art, signing, it could be anything. I could see a benefit for deaf people showing their creativity. Like in my career path toward digital

art to produce a film project, but my passion for art will always remain in my heart and I will continue painting. I can see Scottish art surviving my evolving, as do the deaf artists and craftspeople. What lies in the future?

The film ends with credits

Project Co-ordinator: Trudi Collier

Script Editor: Cathy Herffernan

Camera: Scott Campbell, Will Clark

BSL Monitor: Lucy Clark

Proofreader: Thomas McWhinney

Producer/Director/Editor: Ruaridh Lever-Hogg

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