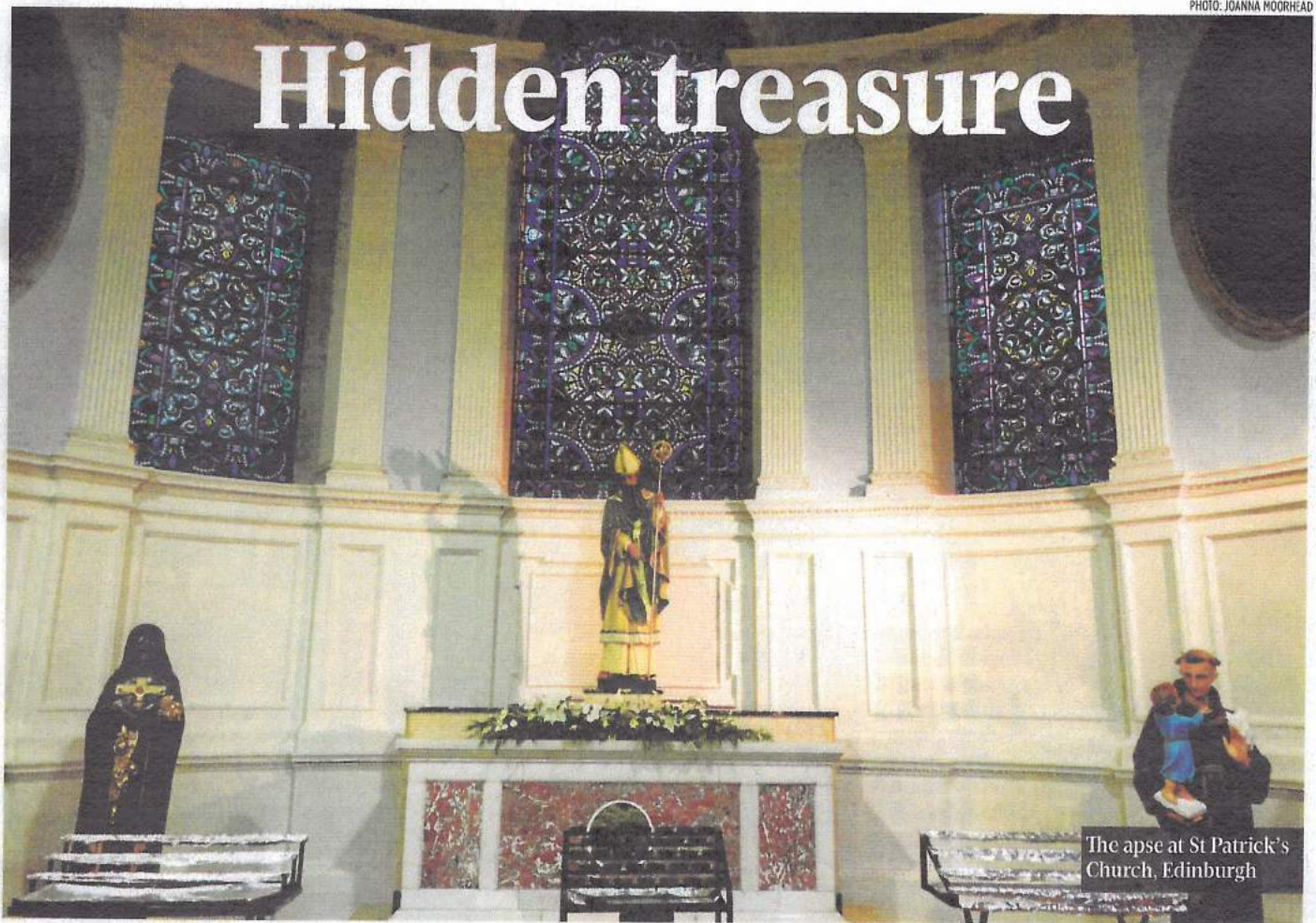


AKHNATEN, English National Opera, London (opens 11 February) • THE PRICE, starring David Suchet, Wyndham's Theatre, London (opens 5 February)
ELIZABETHAN TREASURES, National Portrait Gallery, London (opens 21 February) • COLD PURSUIT, starring Liam Neeson (in cinemas 22 February)

PHOTO: JOANNA MOORHEAD



The apse at St Patrick's Church, Edinburgh

A campaign is under way to uncover Alexander Runciman's lost mural of the Ascension, a masterpiece of the late 1700s painted over in an Edinburgh church

By JOANNA MOORHEAD

THE PLACE they're calling Scotland's Sistine Chapel doesn't look like a Catholic church at all. And for good reason: because when St Patrick's, a handsome, "square-style" church just off Edinburgh's Royal Mile, first opened it was Episcopalian. The year was 1774: its name in those days was St Paul's, and Scotland's Protestant churches were already in the fractious state that defined them for centuries.

So much so that when its ministers commissioned a series of paintings for the ceiling above the altar, they decided they should be based on stories that hit home the message that theirs was the "true" faith: Jesus and the woman at the well, the return of the prodigal son, and Moses and Elijah.

Pride of place, though, went to a large mural of Christ's Ascension. The artist was Alexander Runciman, who was born in Edinburgh and studied in Glasgow before being apprenticed to a landscape painter, and working on stage sets. In 1767 he and his brother, John, went

to Rome. John died in Italy, but Alexander remained there for five years and became acquainted with the work of the Renaissance greats as well as contemporary artists. On his return to Britain he exhibited at the Royal Academy and settled in Edinburgh, painting among other pieces a series of subjects from the Gaelic legendary figure Ossian at Penicuik House in Midlothian.

His finest work, however, was almost certainly the Ascension mural at St Patrick's; but how impressive it is no one knows for sure, because in 1818 the Episcopalian community left St Paul's for another church in Edinburgh New Town, to where most of the worshippers had relocated. Their old building was bought by the Presbyterians, one of whose first acts was to paint over the Ascension mural, which they saw as idolatrous.

Since then the ceiling has been painted over perhaps six or seven times – and at some point a plaster dove was added to its centre. But through those same years, there were other

changes: most importantly, the transfer of ownership from Presbyterian to Catholic hands. The church was bought by the local diocese for £4,000 in 1856, because the original St Patrick's Catholic Church had become much too small for the Catholic community.

With the rapid industrialisation of the Scottish cities, Irish workers poured into Edinburgh and the new St Patrick's became the city's biggest Catholic hub. At its busiest, there were more than 600 baptisms a year; and the parish supported four primary schools and two secondaries. They were days, as the current parish priest, Mgr Philip Kerr, agrees, that feel a long way from the current experience of Christianity in the United Kingdom.

For the next few decades the church and the community thrived. The church was reordered, with the new altar moved away from the space with the Runciman paintings, and the artwork was forgotten. Meanwhile, St Patrick's was getting itself on to the map

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EXHIBITION

Light fantastic

Painting the sunshine over the shadows

LAURA GASCOIGNE

Pierre Bonnard: The Colour of Memory

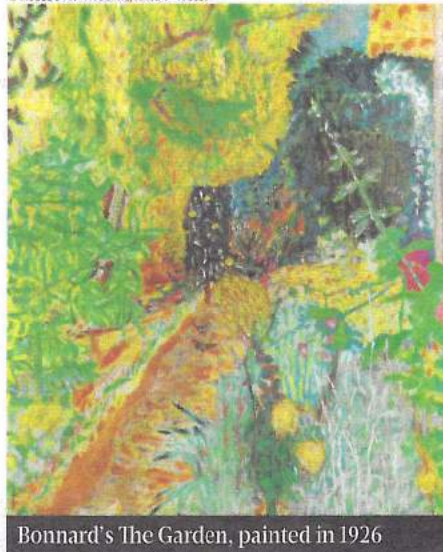
TATE MODERN, LONDON

WHEN THE 65-year-old Pierre Bonnard unveiled his new paintings at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in Paris in 1933, they were greeted as a ray of sunshine in dark times. "Bonnard only paints 'Bonheur,'" enthused one critic; "When I think of Paradise, I evoke Bonnard's world," another gushed.

But the creator of this idyllic world, with its sun-drenched summer gardens and light-filled interiors peopled by women relaxing over tea or in the bath, knew that it was a construct of his imagination. He also knew that its principal subject – his wife, Marthe de Meligny – was not the seraphic domestic muse depicted. Her addiction to bathing as "hydrotherapy" might today be diagnosed as obsessive-compulsive; Bonnard recognised it as a symptom of the "misanthropy" that led his friends to label her a *sauvage*.

Bonnard's art, though, projected another sort of *sauvage* inhabiting the earthly paradise envisaged in Tate Modern's exhibition, "Pierre Bonnard: The Colour of Memory" (until 6

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Bonnard's *The Garden*, painted in 1926

May). Among the show's curiosities are some tiny photos the couple took of each other posing nude in a garden in 1900 as a turn-of-the-century Adam and Eve. Twelve years later, the purchase of his first car – a primrose yellow Renault 11 CV – and country cottage – Ma Roulotte in Normandy – allowed this former painter of urban subjects to indulge his Edenic fantasies to the full, opening the door to a flood of colour.

Bonnard didn't paint in front of the subject; he preferred to view it through the filter of memory, a process that could take months,

years, even decades. *Young Women in a Garden* (1921–46) was more than 20 years in the making. It frames the two loves of his life in a single image, cropping in on a daydreaming Renée Monchaty, with whom he was having an affair. In 1923 Bonnard proposed to Monchaty, but broke off the engagement before going on to marry Marthe, his companion of 30 years, in August 1925. That September, Monchaty killed herself.

It was during this *annus horribilis* that Bonnard made his first painting of Marthe stretched out in the bath, like Millais' *Ophelia*. "He who sings is not always happy," he would later write. Still, nothing dimmed the radiance of his vision. The discordant wartime note struck by *A Village in Ruins near Ham* (1917), painted in a palette of cold steel and dried blood, was quickly drowned out by the verdant *Summer* (1917), a monumental image of prelapsarian bliss.

It is the self-portraits that give the lie to Bonnard's *bonheur*; in one, ironically titled *The Boxer* (1931), he confronts his mirror image with puny fists. "Bonnard has known the deep source of all things," observed the stained-glass artist Jean Bazaine, a fellow contributor to the modernist decorations of Notre-Dame de Toute Grâce at Assy. Bonnard's contribution was a mural of St Francis de Sales visiting the sick, unveiled in 1943, the year after Marthe's death. Life's imperfections can be corrected on canvas; if paint could heal, Bonnard would have been a saint.

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of history in other ways. In 1869 one of its priests, Canon Edward Hannan, founded a branch of the Catholic Young Men's Society, and its first members came up with the idea of setting up a football team, which they called Hibernian, the old Roman name for an Irishman. Today the club is one of the best-known in the country, and is seventh in the Scottish Premiership.

In 1901 a new curate arrived: Fr John Gray, who had just been ordained. Originally from London, Gray was a poet who had converted to Catholicism a few years earlier but then lapsed. He returned to the Church after being much affected by the trial of his friend Oscar Wilde. Fr Gray – often cited as the inspiration for Wilde's *Dorian Gray* – didn't stay long in the parish before being moved to St Peter's in Morningside.

One of the families in the parish during Fr Gray's short tenure was the Sinclairs, a couple called Andrew and Elizabeth whose third child, a daughter called Margaret, was born in March 1900. Margaret left school at 14 and trained as a French polisher, attending Mass at St Patrick's each morning on her way to work. In 1923 she entered the convent of the Poor Clare Colettines; but she soon became ill with tuberculosis and was sent to a hospital in Essex, where she died in 1925.

Stoical and serene as her health declined, she garnered a following; and two years after

her death, her body was returned to Scotland. Her fame spread, and there were many reports of cures and miracles in her name. In 1978 she was declared "Venerable", and the campaign for her canonisation continues.

Today the chapel dedicated to Margaret Sinclair stands across the church from the Runciman apse, and usually attracts far more attention from visitors. All that will change, however, if the parish raises the £250,000-plus it needs for restoration work on the mural to go ahead (inset, preliminary investigation taking place); although even with the funds, the job will not be an easy one. "The mural has been hidden for many years, and the paint layers on top are very hard," says Fr Kerr.

While no one is sure what awaits when the Ascension painting is revealed, hopes are high that it will be a significant moment in art history. The career of Duncan Macmillan, now emeritus professor of art history at Edinburgh University, has hinged on the painting: when he realised in the 1960s that the mural was still in existence, albeit covered, he changed tack on his research and did his PhD on Runciman rather than Picasso.

Macmillan believes Runciman has a good claim to be the first truly modern artist: he would be far better known, Macmillan argues,

if Penicuik House had not been destroyed in a fire, and all Runciman's paintings with it. Which is why the work in St Patrick's is so significant. "A lost masterpiece and a pioneering work in the history of modern art is sitting there, waiting to be revealed," he says.

For Fr Kerr and the art historian leading the fundraising campaign, Teresa Keenan, the

mural also represents what today's parishioners consider the strongest element of St Patrick's: its diversity and multiculturalism.

Worshippers are far fewer now than in the glory days of the late nineteenth century, but they bring the world under Runciman's roof.

"We're a place of great unity," says Keenan. "This church, after all, has belonged to the Episcopalians and the

Presbyterians as well as the Catholics, and the other denominations are supportive of our desire to uncover Runciman's mural. Art is about seeing something through someone else's eyes, and to welcome and embrace difference: we do that at St Patrick's, and uncovering the Runciman mural will be a symbol of that endeavour."

For more information about the fundraising campaign to restore the Runciman mural, go to runcimanapsetrust.com

