

Video Transcript

Title:

The Two Roberts | Colquhoun and Macbryde

Summary:

Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde's relationship began when they met at Glasgow School of Art in 1933, and continued until Colquhoun's death in 1962. Patrick Elliott, Fiona Green and Christopher Barker discuss the partnership that lasted almost three decades, and the influence it had on the Two Roberts' work.

Duration:

06:04

Speakers:

Fiona Green, artist and friend of Robert Macbryde (Fiona)

Patrick Elliott, Chief Curator Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (Patrick)

Christopher Barker, writer and friend of Robert Colquhoun and Robert Macbryde (Christopher)

Transcript

Patrick

The Two Roberts were Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde. Both from working class Ayrshire backgrounds. They both won grants to go to Glasgow School of Art, and they went there in 1933, and they became lovers very quickly.

Fiona

I think the two of them were utterly inseparable. Inseparable emotionally, but also inseparable in terms of their work together – they consulted and discussed their work endlessly with each other.

Voice of Robert Macbryde

I think this thing perhaps of someone who's known your painting, coming into the room, seeing that you're blundering about, and you're half looking for assistance as it were. Sometimes they're able to tell you; it's like restoring your sight. Things fall into place again and you're able to continue the painting.

Patrick

They were both very influenced by Cubism, Picassos Cubism and also by Georges Braque. I think he had a particular influence on MacBryde. In fact McBryde got the nickname 'MacBraque' at one stage. Their work is almost impossible to tell apart at certain moments. We've got a terrific pair of greenish paintings done in 1944, Colquhoun's *Card Player* and MacBryde's *Chess Player* and I think if you swapped the labels around no-one would be able to tell the difference.

Fiona

All the paintings that have got two, seem to me like a kind of repetition of their love affair. It's like their obsession on canvas.

Patrick

They didn't disguise the fact that they were gay, it's just that it wasn't something that would have been openly talked about. But does come through in some of their pictures, there are a number of paintings by Colquhoun which show two figures, and if you've got photographs of Colquhoun and MacBryde to hand, you can see that they're them.

In two of them, the MacBryde figure in blue morphs into a woman. It's so contemporary, it's the kind of thing you'd expect Andy Warhol or Cindy Sherman to get excited about.

In 1951, they were turfed out of their flat in Notting Hill and had nowhere else to go – so a friend of theirs, Elizabeth Smart, who was the partner of the poet George Barker, she'd got four kids; and she rented a house in Essex countryside - Tilty Mill House it was called. And she said, 'Look after my four kids, I work in London during the week, you can look after them and I'll come back at weekends'. So these two hell-raisers, you know, classic bohemians, ended up looking after the four kids.

Christopher

Their fame had largely started to ebb then, and they just needed somewhere quiet to paint and of course Robert Colquhoun was the one who seemed to paint, and we didn't really ever think of MacBryde as a painter; he was always the one who just looked after us.

But then again, later on we realised that he had been a painter and he had been doing his stuff, but probably on the side in the studio, whereas Colquhoun always seemed to be the presence there.

Patrick

MacBryde was actually very happy to be regarded as Colquhoun's lieutenant. He was the one who enabled Colquhoun to do his work. I think Colquhoun had more difficulty getting into the right frame of mind for painting, he was the more sort of moody, taciturn, explosive of the two. And he was also the one, Colquhoun was known as they artist who had the greatest talent. He was touted as the great future of British art, at a time when Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud were around, so that was really some compliment.

I think in the later forties, when their reputations began to slide, they sold less for all sorts of reasons, I think he's the one who took it most to heart I think part of the problem was drink. It's a sad truth that I think by the late forties, early fifties they probably would have been classed as alcoholics and I think it all just started to spiral and catch up on them.

Christopher

Colquhoun died at forty-seven or forty-eight. I mean, my god think what would have happened if he'd gone on to become a painter, like, as old say as Francis Bacon or Lucien Freud. They would have had a great body of work later on if they'd survived.

Fiona

I kind of believed all the hype over the years as being about Colquhoun being the great artist. To me, and I know it isn't actually just because I loved Robert and I knew him, I actually think MacBryde is probably... well he's definitely as good. I mean, I think they're wonderful pictures, absolutely marvellous.

Patrick

I think one of the appealing things about them is that they're not known. If you read memoirs of the period, books on post-war art, they appear as a sort of flash in the 1940's and then their work is often dismissed or forgotten or they're remembered as hard-drinking, awkward characters. The key thing for me, working in a museum was to resurrect their pictures. One of the main things that I've got out of the show is seeing just what great artists they were.

[end credits]