

Scottish Challenge in Design Education:
The Trustees Drawing Academy's Pedagogical Vision
for Post-Union Scotland

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Abstract

In the mid-eighteenth century, Edinburgh was confronted with an increase in population and an indication of new prosperity connected to social and economic, as well as cultural and aesthetic, progress. The Union of 1707 between the Scottish and English Parliaments was partly responsible for this social-cultural boom. With the emergence of new money and social demands, Edinburgh was in a position to finally begin improving arts, sciences, manufacturing, industry, and living conditions in Scotland. The improvement of Scottish industry and manufacturing became one of the major issues tackled by the leading circles of Scottish society, which led to the opening of the Trustees Drawing Academy of Edinburgh, the first publicly founded School of Design in Great Britain, in 1760. The aim of the Academy was to provide practical instruction under the guidance of experienced masters to fellow Scots who hoped to get a proper education in artistic skills and abilities for *utilitarian* arts in order to contribute, as a 'designer', to the advancement of Scottish industry and manufacturing.

Keywords: Trustees Drawing Academy of Edinburgh, Scotland, The Select Society, The Honourable Board of Trustees for Fisheries, Manufactures, and Improvements in Scotland, The Scottish Enlightenment, The Union of Parliaments

Introduction

In the mid-eighteenth century, the flowering of the Scottish Enlightenment, Edinburgh, the ‘capital’ of formerly independent Scotland, was confronted with an increase in population and an indication of new prosperity connected to social and economic, as well as cultural and aesthetic, progress. The Union of 1707 between the Scottish and English Parliaments was partly responsible for this social-cultural boom: that is to say, the dissolution of the national boundary between the two nations of Scotland and England finally began to pay off for Edinburgh in the second half of the eighteenth century. With the emergence of new money and social demands, Edinburgh was in a position to finally begin improving arts, sciences, manufacturing, industries, and people’s living conditions in Scotland.

In 1752, Sir Gilbert Elliot of Minto (1722-1777), an advocate for improvement of Scotland and one of the city commissioners appointed in Edinburgh in the following year, claimed that ‘... it is in prosecution of greater objects, that the leading men of a country ought to exert their power and influence’, asking

What greater object can be presented to their view, than that of enlarging, beautifying, and improving the capital of their native country? What can redound more to their own honour? What prove more beneficial to SCOTLAND, and by consequence to UNITED BRITAIN? (Elliot, 1752 August, p. 380)

The subject of improving Scottish industry and manufacturing was a major issue tackled by the leaders of the Scottish Enlightenment, leading to the opening of the Trustees Drawing Academy of Edinburgh, an art school founded in 1760 by the Honourable Board of Trustees for Fisheries, Manufactures, and Improvements in Scotland. The aim of the Academy was to provide practical instruction for fellow Scots who were involved in design for manufactures. The aim of this paper is to examine how the pedagogical vision of a ‘nation’ without political independence led to the institution of a School of Design in which design education was given primary importance, as it was considered to be very beneficial for advancements in Scottish industry, manufacturing, and ultimately living conditions.

The Select Society and the idea of encouraging *utilitarian* arts for Scottish manufactures

In 1827, Sir David Wilkie (1785-1841) discussed Scottish art in an address to young Scottish artists residing in Rome: ‘The younger students should be aware that no art that is not intellectual can be worthy of Scotland.’ (Bayne, 1903, p. 119) This observation was patently true when considering ways in which *utilitarian* art had been taught and practiced in Scotland since the middle of the previous century, for the tradition of design education in Scotland had originated in the intellectual circle of the Scottish Enlightenment, a remarkable age when every aspect of people’s lives was examined and discussed in the prospect of further advancements.

The focus for the eighteenth-century Scottish intellectual scene at its peak was the large

number of societies and clubs that flourished in Edinburgh and encouraged animated discourse and debate. The most pioneering and influential of these was the Select Society, founded in 1754. It provided a place and opportunity for weekly discussions between the leading circles of the Scottish Enlightenment which ranged over philosophy, sociology, laws, religion, aesthetics and *utilitarian* arts. The Edinburgh-born painter Allan Ramsay (1713-1784), son of the poet Allan Ramsay (1686-1758), established the Society. In its issue of March 1755 *The Scots Magazine* reported on 'the institution and intention' of the Select Society, declaring that 'the meetings and transactions of the Select Society have for some time engaged the attention of the public' (Anonymous, 1755 March, p. 126):

This society was formed the beginning of last summer. Its first meeting was on Wednesday the 23rd of May 1754, in the advocates [sic] library. The members composing it were at that time about thirty. The intention of these gentlemen was, by practice to improve themselves in reasoning and eloquence, and by the freedom of debate, to discover the most effectual methods of promoting the good of the country. (Anonymous, 1755 March, p. 126)

The Account of the Life and Writings of William Robertson (1801) by Dugald Stewart (1753-1828) listed the names of the 133 members of the Select Society at the time of October 1759. Many of the members were major figures in the Scottish Enlightenment: David Hume (1711-1776); Adam Smith (1723-1790); Henry Home, Lord Kames (1696-1782), philosopher and judge in the Court of Session, and later Lord of Justiciary, best known today as the author of *Elements of Criticism*, published in 1762; 'father of modern sociology' Adam Ferguson (1723-1816); historian William Robertson (1721-1793), who became the principal of the University of Edinburgh in 1762; six times elected Edinburgh Lord Provost, George Drummond (1687-1766); and Dr. William Cullen (1710-1790), physician and professor of chemistry, and later physiology at the University of Edinburgh, who was also president of the Edinburgh College of Physicians between 1773 and 1775. The rapid increase in the number of members was explained by *The Scots Magazine*:

There appeared so much order, reason, and entertainment, in their debates, and many of the questions were so connected with the improvement of the country, that persons of the greatest eminence, both for station and abilities, were desirous of being admitted members. (Anonymous, 1755 March, p. 127)

It was as an offshoot of the fervent, intellectual activities of the Select Society that the idea of encouraging *utilitarian* art for industry and manufacturing in Scotland first emerged.

In 1707, when Scotland paid the painful price of loss of political independence through its union with England, it nevertheless anticipated economic progress due to access to the English colonies. Yet Scotland hardly gained any economic benefits from the Union during the first half of the eighteenth century. Trade with England and its colonies yielded little profit; instead, the increase of the Scottish share of public expenditures and the failure of trade to benefit Scotland led the Scots to feel that 'England is the heart, to which all the streams which it distributes are refunded and returned' (Smollett, 1771/1998, p. 278). It was only in the second half of the eighteenth century that Scotland finally started to reap economic benefits from the Union.

It is interesting to see, though, that the landed classes viewed the slowness of economic progress from a slightly different perspective. Certainly they had been aware of the necessity to foster Scottish manufacturing and further advancing Scottish industries, but their outlook on economic progress was, in general, positive. Although economic progress in Scotland was far slower than had been expected, the leading circles of Edinburgh simply thought, '[I]f we (Scots) are far behind, we ought to follow further', since 'we enjoy the same Privileges of Trade with them (the People of our Sister Kingdom of England)' (Phillipson, 1970, p. 143). Thus Alexander Wedderburn (1733-1805), a young Scottish nobleman and later Lord Chancellor of Great Britain from 1793 to 1801, wrote in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1755,

The memory of our ancient state is not so much obliterated, but that, by comparing the past with the present, we may clearly see the superior advantages we now enjoy ... (Wedderburn, 1755 July, p. ii)

The Select Society initially aimed to introduce a strong sense of competition in the arts, the sciences, and manufacturing in Scotland, one capable of stimulating creativity in both utilitarian arts and manufacturing. In its issue of March 1755, *The Scots Magazine* featured *The Resolutions of the SELECT SOCIETY for the Encouragement of Arts, Sciences, Manufactures, and Agriculture* and reported on the society's plan to offer premiums for competitions:

That Arts and Manufactures may, by the proper distribution of premiums, be promoted, is a certain truth, founded in reason, and confirmed by experience.

By premiums, a spirit of emulation is excited in every artist; improvements become universally known; and merit receives the testimony of public approbation.

A more substantial benefit than mere applause, arises also to the artist. He whose merit has been thus distinguished, will find, that although the value of the premium he has gained be inconsiderable, the extraordinary demand for his goods will amply recompense his labour.

The SELECT SOCIETY, determined by these motives, appointed a committee of their number, to consider in what manner a design so laudable might be promoted ...

In the distribution of premiums, the first place, they thought, was due to genius; it was therefore resolved, that the first premium be bestowed on the discoverer of any useful invention in arts or sciences. (Anonymous, 1755 March, p. 127)

While the pursuit of *usefulness* in and of arts, such as production of 'the best printed and most correct book' and the manufacture of 'paper', 'printed cotton', 'linen', the 'art of drawing', 'worked ruffles', 'bone-lace', 'carpets', etc., was strongly encouraged, the *Resolutions* claimed that 'the art of painting in this country requires no encouragement' (Anonymous, 1755 March, p. 127). However, the Society felt that premiums should be given to encourage the 'art of drawing', since it was closely connected to the manufacture of printed cotton and linen:

Manufactures of PRINTED COTTON and LINEN are already established in different places of this country: in order to promote an attention to the elegance of the pattern, and to the goodness of the cloth, it was resolved, that, for the best piece of printed linen or cotton cloth, made within a certain period, a premium should be allotted.

The art of DRAWING being closely connected with this art, and serviceable to most others, it was resolved, that, for the best drawings by boys or girls under sixteen years of age, certain premiums be assigned. (Anonymous, 1755 March, p. 128)

The Scots Magazine also reported that the Select Society intended to contribute ‘by every means’ in its power to ‘the encouragement of arts, sciences, manufactures, and agriculture’ through a society established to implement improvements in art, science, industry and manufacturing (Anonymous, 1755 March, pp. 127, 129). This society was named *The Edinburgh Society for encouraging Arts, Sciences, Manufactures, and Agriculture in Scotland*.

The names of the recipients of the premiums given out in 1755 were listed in the January 1756 issue of *The Scots Magazine*, which further reported that

The success that has attended this institution, has, we are informed, been suitable to the goodness of the design. In particular, it is said, the carpet manufacture has risen 1000 l. this last year; and so great a rise is thought to be owing to the premiums given by the society, which, though of small value, have had the effect to excite a spirit of emulation amongst the manufactures. As it is a matter of the utmost importance to this country, we shall from time to time present our readers with such accounts of the progress of this society as we receive. (Anonymous, 1756 January, p. 48)

The list of premiums for the year 1756, selected by the Edinburgh Society, was published in the magazine’s February 1756 issue (Anonymous, 1756 February, pp. 105-108). The number of premiums given out had increased notably because of ‘the good effects of the premiums given last year; having produced a larger subscription, the society has been enabled considerably to increase the premiums for this year, which it is not doubted will produce effects in proportion.’ (Anonymous, 1756 February, p. 108)

The Honourable Board of Trustees for the Improvement of Fisheries and Manufactures and the institution of the Trustees Drawing Academy

A few years after this, however, the Edinburgh Society for encouraging Arts, Sciences, Manufactures, and Agriculture in Scotland stopped giving out premiums in favour of establishing a School of Design, an educational institute for the art of design or *useful* art, the aim of which was to advance Scottish industries and manufactures through turning out many talented designers. The Society had realized that the premiums had lost their cachet, for ‘although competitors for the awards regularly submitted their designs, the standard of attainment was low’ (Mason, 1949, p. 67). It was thus evident that a School of Design was necessary and ‘a Master was urgently required to teach the art of design’ (Mason, 1949, p. 67), and ‘[t]he need for such a school was appreciated by the Trustees’ Committee who on 24th January 1760 recommended an expenditure of £115 for “teaching and promoting the Art of Drawing for use of” linen and woollen manufacturers’ (p. 67).

The idea of opening a School of Design, which was to be ‘the first School of Design in the three Kingdoms established and maintained at public expense’ (p. 67), was also connected

to the activities of the Honourable Board of Trustees for the Improvement of Fisheries and Manufactures, a governing organization responsible for promoting and encouraging Scottish industries. The Honourable Board of Trustees had been established in 1727, and public funds, grants and financial aid had been invested in its activities by both the Crown and Parliament. As Scottish industries progressed, the Board's focus gradually shifted to the advancements of artistic skills and abilities of designers to be employed in the art of drawing for use in manufacturing; and, 'as a part of its obligation to the improvement of the Scottish textile industries,' the Honourable Board of Trustees elaborated a plan to establish the 'Trustees' Academy for training Scots in skills of drawing for manufactures' (Brookes, 1989, p. 30). Not a few of the trustees of the Honourable Board of Trustees were party to the vigorous discussions which took place amongst the members of the Select Society, so that it is not surprising that an awareness of the necessity for design education for Scottish industries and manufactures was shared by the two organizations. Henry Home, Lord Kames, a member of both the Select Society and the Honourable Board of Trustees for the Improvement of Fisheries and Manufactures, is said to have been 'largely responsible for the establishment of the school' (Mason, 1949, p. 68).

The establishment of a School of Design was thus based upon both the need to improve artistic skills and abilities of Scottish artists to encourage Scottish industries and manufactures and the realization that a 'proper education,' conducted under the guidance of experienced masters, was essential for Scotland to be able to flourish economically.

In 1757, David Hume, being closely associated with the activities of the Edinburgh Society for encouraging Arts, Sciences, Manufactures, and Agriculture in Scotland, wrote a short but highly influential essay, 'Of the Standard of Taste'. The significance of this essay is that it was the first notable and earnest inquiry into aesthetics in which the authoritarian or canonical rules of classical aesthetics were formally challenged.

The essay bases its arguments on the concepts of 'experience' and 'individuality'. Hume expounds on these two concepts throughout the essay; for instance,

... though there be naturally a wide difference in point of delicacy [of the taste of beauty] between one person and another, nothing tends further to encrease [sic] and improve this talent, than *practice* in a particular art, and the frequent survey or contemplation of a particular species of beauty. When objects of any kind are first presented to the eye or imagination, the sentiment, which attends them, is obscure and confused; and the mind is, in a great measure, incapable of pronouncing concerning their merits or defects. The taste cannot perceive the several excellences of the performance; much less distinguish the particular character of each excellency, and ascertain its quality and degree. If it pronounce the whole in general to be beautiful or deformed, it is the utmost that can be expected; and even this judgment, a person, so unpractised, will be apt to deliver with great hesitation and reserve. But allow him to acquire experience in those objects, his feeling becomes more exact and nice. (Hume, 1757, pp. 274-275)

Hume emphasizes here the importance of one's own experience of 'practice' in a particular art, experience gained through surveying or contemplating 'a particular species of beauty' as an indispensable pre-condition on which one can 'encrease [sic] and improve' one's delicacy of the taste of beauty, *viz.*, one's talent in arts. As one of the major founding members of the Select

Society, Hume maintained his influence on the conduct of the Edinburgh Society for encouraging Arts, Sciences, Manufactures and Agriculture, for this society was undoubtedly 'the first organized effort at improving taste in Scottish visual arts' (Brookes, 1989, p. 18).

Not only Hume, but Scottish Enlightenment thinkers in general, emphasised the indispensable role of 'experience' in acquisition of fine taste in the arts. Thus the Honourable Board of Trustees carefully searched for and appointed a 'well-experienced', 'long-practicing' artist in the field of *useful* arts as Master of the Trustees Drawing Academy.

John Mason (1949) gives a full account of the success of the academy's first Master, William De La Cour (Delacour) (1700-1768), a French-born painter and decorative artist:

According to the Regulations governing the school, de la Cour taught three days in the week from 3 p.m. until 7 p.m. His students were charged one guinea per quarter. All except those nominated by the Trustees who were taught gratis. The course of study lasted for four years. At the end of each year, the Master of the school submitted his annual report showing the names of the students, their ages, designations, places of residence, and dates of admission and of leaving. (p. 68)

The Honourable Board of Trustees must have been very pleased by the fact that, under the guidance of De La Cour, the school flourished and that '[w]ithin four years of its institution its influence had spread' (Mason, 1949, p. 68). Following the death of De La Cour in 1767, the Trustees 'relied on' the assistance of Robert Adam (1728-1792), the greatest Scottish architect of the second half of the eighteenth century, also known as the most fashionable and successful architect of the day, to procure 'a master skilful in design in general and the drawing of Patterns for the manufactures & c in particular'; and 'before the middle of November 1768', De La Cour's successor, Charles Pavillon (1726-1772), was formally appointed. Following Pavillon's death in 1772, Alexander Runciman (1736-1785), 'the well-known painter, who, born in Edinburgh, had served an apprenticeship as a coach painter, and for five years had studied in Italy' (Mason, 1949, p. 69), was appointed as the third Master of the Trustees Drawing Academy. His appointment was the result of a careful consideration of each candidate's teaching ability, and the Honourable Board of Trustees was convinced that, by appointing Runciman, who himself had experienced apprenticeship in a *useful* art, the Academy, as an educational institute aiming for lifting up the standard of useful artistic skills and abilities for manufactures, would benefit greatly. The Honourable Board of Trustees, however, was soon let down, for, according to John Mason (1949), under Runciman's mastership 'the usefulness of the school declined' and '[s]tudents were admitted who made "drawing only an amusement"', (p. 69).

It was in such a state, several decades after its establishment, that the future of the Academy was discussed: 'whether it should be discontinued and whether the interests of designing might not be better served by awarding premiums for the best patterns submitted in open competition were debated' (Mason, 1949, p. 69). The Minutes of the Honourable Board of Trustees of 23rd January 1786 states that 'A Report from the Secretary relative to the Board's Drawing Academy' [Fig. 1-6] was read by Robert Arbuthnot, Secretary to the Honourable Board of Trustees (Boswell, 1791/1833, vol. 1, p. 329), that day, and that Arbuthnot asserted that:

Natural genius without the advantage of a proper education will seldom or never enable an Artist to excel. He must be assisted with advice, and by good models being shown to him. Without knowing those mechanical rules of art which have as it were been established, and are now sanctioned by the General practice of all Artists, genius may long labour to little purpose. Hence the use of a master whose mind is stored with the knowledge of the true principles of art, and who has taste to select and combine whatever is beautiful and pleasing in it. (Minutes, 1786, p. 112)

The same Minutes record that, in this meeting, ‘the several letters’ referring to the question of whether the Academy should be discontinued or not were ‘read to and duly considered by the Board’ (Minutes, 1786, p. 113). According to the Minutes, ‘[t]hey were of opinion that the Academy ought to be continued’ (Minutes, 1786, p. 113). Those who had long experience in utilitarian arts, such as Robert Adam, John Stirling, who ‘was largely concerned in the printing of linen and cotton’, and Robert Fulton of Paisley, ‘one of the largest manufacturers of flowered silk and thread gauzes’, were ‘all of opinion that the Academy could serve a useful purpose to manufacturers and house furnishers’ (Mason, 1949, p. 71).

Greatly influenced by these experts in *useful* arts, the Honourable Board of Trustees resolved to continue the Academy, on the condition of re-emphasising that the ‘conduct of the Academy ... would “render it of real utility to the ornamental manufacturers;” and prevent the

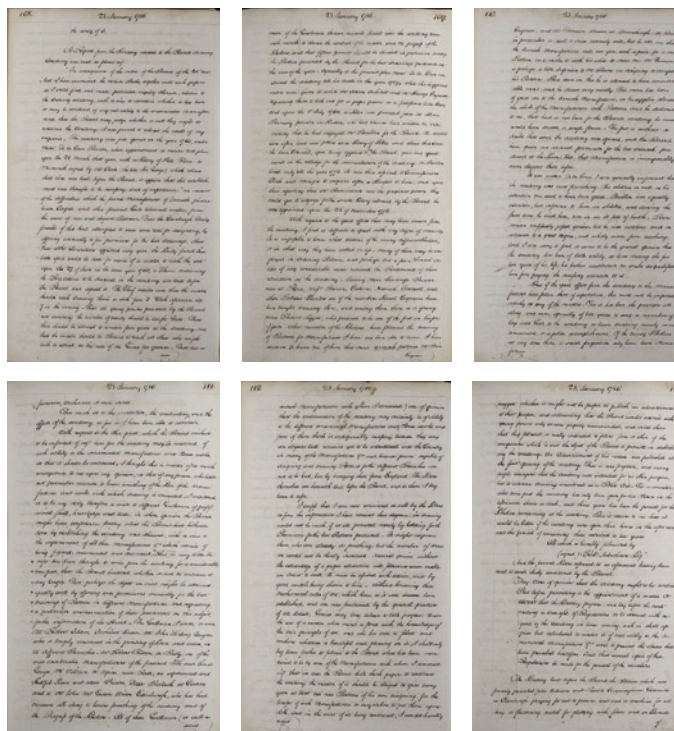


Fig1-6 ‘A Report from the Secretary relative to the Boards drawing Academy’, recorded in the Minutes of the Board of Manufactures, 23 January 1786. (National Records of Scotland, Edinburgh)

abuses which [had] hitherto prevailed' (Mason, 1949, p. 71). The Minutes, dated 6th February 1786, record the regulations, agreed upon on that day, to achieve properly 'the object' of the Academy, that is 'to promote and diffuse "an elegant taste" among manufacturers' (Mason, 1949, p. 71). The determination of the Board of Trustees to re-establish the Academy as a serious School of Design, not one for dilettantes, is made clear through the following regulation:

That students could only be admitted on the authority of the Trustees, and those only who could produce evidence that they followed or intended to follow the occupations of an ornamental manufacturer, of a house decorator, or a furniture manufacturer, or that they intended to become designers for such trades. (Mason, 1949, p. 72)

Furthermore, the method by which the appointment of Master of the Academy was made was also clarified. Later the Academy created various classes such as 'pattern drawing' in 1835 and 'colouring' and 'ornamental and architectural drawing' in 1837: for each these classes a Master

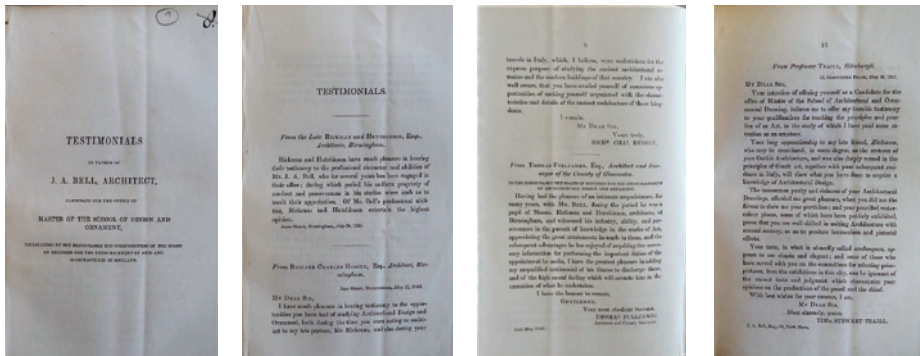


Fig.7-10 Testimonials in favour of J. A. Bell, architect, now a candidate for the office of master of the School of Design and Ornament: established by the Honourable the Commissioners of the Board of Trustees for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures in Scotland, Edinburgh: Publisher not identified, 1843?, pp. 1, 7, 8, 13. (Special Collection, The Centre for Research Collections, The University of Edinburgh)

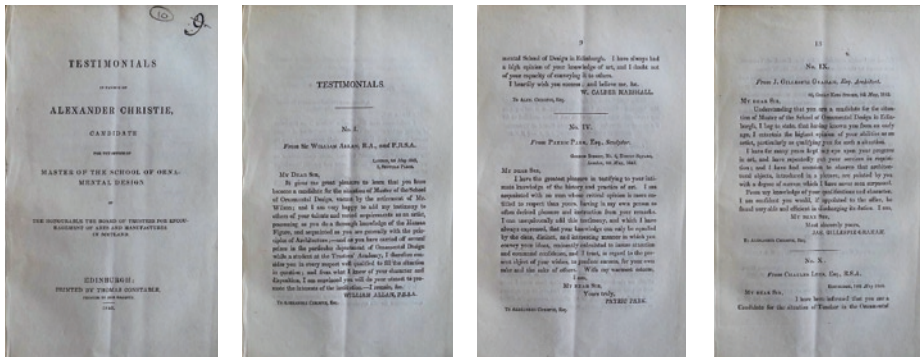


Fig.11-14 Testimonials in favour of Alexander Christie, candidate for the office of master of the School of Ornamental Design of the Honourable The Board of Trustees for Encouragement of Arts and Manufactures in Scotland, Edinburgh: Printed by Thomas Constable, 1843, pp. 1, 7, 9, 13. (Special Collection, The Centre for Research Collections, The University of Edinburgh)

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with considerable experience and skills was to be appointed. As early as 1845, classes established by the Academy included: 'antique', 'life', 'colour', 'anatomy', 'architectural design', 'ornamental design', and 'frescoes'.

The Centre for Research Collections of the University of Edinburgh (The Trustees Drawing Academy of Edinburgh later became the Edinburgh College of Art in 1907 and has been a part of the University of Edinburgh since 2011) holds in its collection the records of how applications for those masterships of the Academy were made in the middle of the nineteenth century, including a number of testimonials for each candidate [Fig. 7-14]. The Centre also has in its collection teaching materials used at the Academy in the early 1840s which reveal the Academy's dedication to teaching and promoting the art of drawing for use in manufacturing and to the education of designers who were able to further advance the progress of industry in Scotland [Fig. 15-24].



Fig.15-24 Plates for teaching design, from the library of the Drawing Academy of the Board of Trustees for Manufactures in Scotland (Paris: 1841). (Special Collection, The Centre for Research Collections, The University of Edinburgh)

Closing Remarks

‘By striving to improve the art of design,’ by instituting the Trustees Drawing Academy, and by ‘providing facilities for the instruction of artisans in the elements of pattern drawing and directing their activities to the creation of manufactures revealing artistic taste and elegance’ (Mason, 1949, pp. 95-96), the Select Society, The Edinburgh Society for encouraging Arts, Sciences, Manufactures, and Agriculture in Scotland, and the Honourable Board of Trustees for Fisheries, Manufactures, and Improvements in Scotland all played central roles in the post-Union development of Scottish industry.

The Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Adam Ferguson once wrote that ‘the virtues of men have shone most during their struggles, not after the attainment of their ends’ (Ferguson, 1767/1966, p. 206). The institution of the Trustees Drawing Academy, through its pedagogical vision and patient campaign for education in design in order to further the advance of manufacturing and industry in post-Union Scotland, manifested the virtues of mid-eighteenth century Scots, who were willing to struggle to achieve a long-anticipated industrial prosperity. The Academy’s institution, reformation and improvement of design education was an essential part of the progress of Scottish society and the struggle to demonstrate Scotland’s own imagination and creativity after the national boundary between England and Scotland had been abolished.

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Author Biography

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