

Adam Bruce Thomson RSA

RSA Obituary by Esme Gordon

Transcribed from the 1976 RSA Annual Report

One sovereign influence over most of our lives comes—inevitably— from those who first teach us. In most cases, the result of no more than Chance, it is Good Fortune alone who decides for us whether they be those best able to turn our faces towards the Light.

How many there must be today who are aware of their debt for this initial illumination to—and thence enduring friendship of that dedicated teacher—Adam Bruce Thomson.

The warmth, the charm of this artist, skilled as he was with hog hair and sable brushes, etching needle, pen and pencil, along with the occasional pastel, was recognized by all he helped—be they his students, children—with whom he had a special rapport—or those privileged to listen to his all too occasional addresses.

It was only necessary to have been with him in any busy gathering of like-minded to become conscious of the far-stretching circle of his admirers, all holding him in immeasurable repute and esteem. The sunshine of his instant smile of recognition was the sign.

Adam Bruce Thomson, born in Edinburgh on 22nd February 1885, was the elder son of Adam Thomson, a cabinetmaker, and his wife, Marion Ritchie. His schooling and further training (for obvious reasons including Furniture Design) took place in Edinburgh. But soon higher things beckoned and having determined on a life devoted to Art, the young Thomson enrolled as a student of Architecture in the Trustees' Academy then held in the Royal Institution, now the R.S.A. building.

But after a short period, Painting supplanted Architecture. There can be no doubt that the disciplines of the earlier foundations, with emphasis on form and structure, remained, to become fundamental in all his subsequent work. It is not unrealistic also to see such characteristics arising from early and enduring devotion to contrapuntal music—Bach.

With him during his student days at the foot of the Mound were Alec Sturrock, Eric Robertson, D. M. Sutherland, Stanley Cursiter, the two latter to remain close life-long friends—and for a short period—Joyce Carey, subsequently to turn to authorship.

These young men were taught by such as John Campbell Mitchell, RSA (1862-1922), Robert Burns, ARSA, later to resign from the Academy, and, appointed at the age of twenty-four, Henry Lintott, RSA (1877-1956).

It is interesting to find that at this time A. B. Thomson's signature was added to the petition lodged with the powers-that-be pleading for the establishment in Edinburgh of a College of Art, at which, along with his future wife's brother, Walter Hislop, he was soon to be one of the first three to receive their Diplomas.

Adam Thomson's concept of the significance—and power—of “colour” came home to him through the persuasive views of that master of the Venetian Evening, Charles Mackie, RSA. On completion of his training he studied in Holland, Paris and Madrid, where the works of Valasquez and, more notably, El Greco made lasting impressions.

Return to Edinburgh and a teaching appointment began an association in the recently opened College of Art which spanned a long and successful professional career. Amongst his assignments over the years, he was in charge of the Etching and Printing classes, he taught Composition and Still Life Painting—he was even to instruct (to their enlightenment, education and considerable delight) the architects on his theory of colour and, with all the greater relevance from his own early training, its application to their designs.

Retirement from the Staff on reaching the age limit brought Adam Bruce Thomson into the Board Room and back, in the capacity of Examiner, to the studios. But that lay far in the future: the first teaching appointment underwent early interruption when, in the services of his country, the volunteer, Sapper Thomson A. B., served in the Royal Engineers during the first world war.

Military service took the young artist to the Curragh following the outbreak of “The Troubles”, so giving him first-hand experience of Ireland's anguish. Thereafter he served in France. But there was one blessed event: on 15th April 1918, 2nd Lieut. Thomson, R.E., married Jessie Inglis, only daughter of John Hislop, of Edinburgh's well-known firm of Printers and Blockmakers, Colour Etchers and Photo-Engravers, and his wife in their Colinton home.

Thus began an exemplary companionship from which, through each being consecrated to the other, came especial strength. With the return of peace, Adam B (an expression of general currency with implications of endearment) found his time divided between the studios of College and home. Our public soon became aware of the presence of a man of vision.

With sincerity as their basis, a succession of pictures of a refreshing outlook began to be shown. There were scenes from the Borders—a dominant area which remained a well of inspiration throughout the artist's life—landscapes and townscapes, Scottish harbours with their boats and seas pounding against coastal rocks.

Portraits were painted and, bearing in mind how sales for artists at that time were few and far between, he accepted some testing—successful—commissions to copy—and all in their acceptable richness, executed with breadth and mastery. A spur came with unusual words of encouragement from the normally reticent S. J. Peplow.

By 1927 The Studio published an illustrated article on him observing that “to compare Mr Adam Bruce Thomson's work with that done some years ago will reveal that he has been no satisfied accumulator of other's attainments.”

In 1930 Apollo remarked on his powers of composition which embraced “arrangements in surface and depth and dispositions of colour, variations and repetition of pattern” indeed, enduring verities never more clearly or surely evinced than in his ultimate work, “Rising Moon, Arthur’s Seat,” executed and exhibited this year, when it deservedly became the first winner of the William J. Macaulay Award.

His work is represented in public and private collections throughout the country. A regular exhibitor of oils, watercolours and wash drawings often with his full quota in successive Academy Exhibitions, Adam Thomson was without those worldly ambitions which seek the centre of the stage.

Only on two occasions did he venture a “One Man Show”. The first came in 1948 when the hospitality of a Gallery in Edinburgh was his and practically all of the works sold, resulting in quiet satisfaction.

In 1937, the year of his Presidency of the S.S.A. which later granted him Honorary Membership, Adam Bruce Thomson, at the age of fifty-two, was elected an Associate of this Academy. Becoming an Academician nine years later, he was destined to be in readiness in 1949 to succeed as Treasurer W. O. Hutchison (on his election as President) in the office he was to hold with conspicuous success for seven years of exceptional demand.

This, since it was now that John Kinross in his generosity established our Funds which bear his name, after which, during the following year, he was unanimously voted his Honorary Membership. The harmony between the Treasurer and the son of a former Treasurer, established on mutual respect, soon ripened into life-long friendship.

When the negotiations were concluded the Council of the day addressed itself in thanks to the Office-Bearer for all that he had done in this complex matter “far beyond the normal duties of a Treasurer and the successful outcome owes a great deal to your skill and tact”.

The compassion, knowledge and meticulous attention to the beneficiaries shown by the former Treasurer were such that his generously given services were inevitably sought by, and at the disposal of, the Council of the Scottish Artists Benevolent Association: thence, a matter of pride and importance to him, to its Presidency, an office Adam Thomson still held at the time of his death.

During these years other irresistible calls were made. In 1956 he was elected President of the Royal Scottish Society of Painters in Watercolours, an office he held until his seventy-ninth year! This was followed shortly thereafter by Honorary Membership. At the same time he was giving gentle encouragement each year to the Edinburgh Sketching Club—whose Honorary President he became in 1958—and (nothing parochial here) his annual visits to the Stornoway Sketching Club.

Adam Bruce Thomson possessed a clarity of mind which, doubtless following self-examination, knew not doubt. In all things, right was clearly right and wrong wrong:

the outlooks and the inlooks of a former choir-boy in what he termed "the second eleven" were surely but silently based on his beliefs of his religious faith. He avowed his thanks for the gift of Colour.

Thus there were more reasons than one for his long period of service on the Church of Scotland's Advisory Committee on Artistic Questions, initially established with the help of Sir D. Y. Cameron, RSA, but then under the Convenorship of another R.S.A. benefactor, Rev. Dr J. Arnott Hamilton. This made demands on time for Visitation, Reports, Meetings and, on occasions, onself-restraint.

Adam Bruce Thomson, the artist who gave so much and in seeking nothing for himself took so little, now received special recognition with the award, in 1963, of the Order of the British Empire. It was characteristic of him eight years later, despite unimpaired health and faculties, at his own request, to seek transfer to the Honorary Retired Membership list of the Academy—to make way for some younger member.

But with his deep knowledge of the Academy's ways, its Laws and its Constitution, associated with the clearest of memories and regular attendances at all our Meetings, Adam Bruce Thomson lived on as an extremely active Elder Statesman, a fount of knowledge in cases of doubt or interpretation.

With his spare bearing, the spring in his step that bespoke a superb physique untroubled by illness, with the supple mind seasoned with Attic salt that was filled with interests as disparate as well informed details of the Roman Occupation and those of the Rugby field, with the ready smile—indeed when necessary with crisp and trenchant responses to irrelevances or insincerities—Adam Bruce Thomson, who never said an unkindthing, belied his years.

But the inevitable came in the guise of serious illness early this year, to be accepted with stoic patience—when not fought with sadly unavailing determination for a return to the easel. There were periods in hospital. But those nearest to him knew the meaning of "home" as this splendid life crept nearer to its close.

His wife, regardless of cost to herself, nursed him devotedly. He died on Saturday, 4th December 1976, and is survived by his wife, their son and two daughters.

Now he has gone; having first been hung on the walls of the Academy in 1909, he, who in the course of his long and fruitful life exhibited no less than 306 works in our Annual Exhibitions, has gone. Yet to all who knew him—and, all the more, to those who also knew in greater admiration of a courageously borne burden— he, his work and achievements remain unforgettable.

Could excellence be exemplified in human form, would not all see Integrity in the likeness of this man inseparable from his pipe, with his dry humour, the staunch, loyal companion, the teacher, craftsman and Artist, Adam Bruce Thomson?