In 1962, a unique piece of interior decoration was discovered during alterations at Prestongrange House by its current occupants The Royal Musselburgh Golf Club. Known now as The Prestongrange Ceiling it is the earliest dated example of a Renaissance painted ceiling in Scotland. It is one of the largest and best preserved examples of such work and is now admirably housed in the Council Chamber at the top of Napier University's Merchiston Tower in Edinburgh.

1 THE CEILING'S ARTISTIC BACKGROUND

In keeping with the rest of Catholic Europe interior painting in Scotland before the mid-sixteenth century was largely ecclesiastical. It is difficult to assess the true nature of early church interiors since little remains of the mediaeval structures where such painting might be found. However, the National Museums of Scotland and the National Gallery hold examples of painted church furnishings and these, together with surviving fragments such as those at Dryburgh Abbey and Glasgow Cathedral, as well as late 15th and 16th-century examples from Foulis Easter and Guthrie Castle, demonstrate its widespread presence in pre-Reformation Scotland.[2]

15th century Scotland was a nation turning its back on the vivid religious decorative traditions of the past in favour of a more austere style of worship. In terms of ecclesiastical art the most significant development was undoubtedly the reaction against the concept of idolatry. Reformers argued that places of worship furnished with statuary, relics and painted imagery turned the mind away from contemplation of the interior landscape of mind and soul, even to the extent of replacing the worship of God with worship of the object itself.

The social as well as theological impact of the Reformation was profound. Lands previously held by the great religious houses of Scotland were transferred into the ownership of individual families. Those whose influence rose with the acquisition of former church lands were keen to transfer the skills of journeymen painters into a wider secular environment. Prestongrange House, home of the Ker family, was one of the earliest of these conversions rebuilt between 1560 and 1581.[3] Alexander Seton's country house at Pinkie, enlarged in 1613, and Northfield House in Prestonpans, built in 1611, are also examples of East Lothian mansions built or extended

around this time and all are liberally embellished with painted imagery on walls and ceilings:

> *"... almost without exception, at this period Scottish houses of any standing were extensively decorated with a gaiety, freedom and confidence which was the outward expression of a nation in the throes of intellectual expansion."*[4]

The fashion for such domestic decoration was not limited to the nobility. It also extended to the dwellings of the growing merchant class. Merchiston Tower, home of the Napier family, burgesses and merchants of the city of Edinburgh is an excellent illustration of the rising status of these merchant classes.

These extensive building programmes were frequently financed by revenues from the estates which passed from the church to the crown and thereafter into the hands of the nobility and gentry. Before the 16th century the use of coal had been restricted to heating large dwelling places such as castles and great monastic houses and to industrial use, such as heating salt pans for the extraction of salt from sea water. However, land clearance in Scotland for agricultural and building purposes had been ongoing for generations and by the middle of the 16th century Lowland Scotland was almost bereft of trees. The need to find alternative fuels resulted in a significant increase in the value of coal despite the pollutants released when it was burnt.

Increased demand greatly added to the value of estates which contained coal deposits, such as those of Prestongrange and Culross in Fife. This increased the funds available for building which, in turn, increased pressure on dwindling supplies of timber. Building work was dependent on imports mainly from Scandinavia and the Baltic and much of the wood used for structural work lacked the aesthetic qualities of timber such as oak. There are twenty-four oak beams in the Prestongrange ceiling, for example, but the boards which they support (twenty-three in all) are pine.[5]

This combination of two different timbers is typical of such ceiling construction, a circumstance which provides at least a partial answer to the question of why such painted decoration was popular at this time. Paint represented a quick and effective means of disguising such inferior timber. It was:

> *"...the easiest and most cost-effective way to express exuberant display and to communicate the important symbols of the household."*[6]

The availability of journeyman painters previously employed on ecclesiastical decoration provided a source for the expertise required to carry out the work.

2 THE CEILING'S PAINTERS

It is possible that the skills required were imported along with the timber: limited documentary evidence exists of painters from Europe and England at work in Scotland at this time.[7] However, although the fashion for this style of interior decoration may have been imported, there is no evidence to suggest that the work was carried out by any painters other than local craftsmen, though little evidence remains of who these painter journeymen were. In Scotland the individuals who carried out such work were considered to be tradesmen, not artists, and painters were members of the same guild as wrights and masons. The only known example of decorative work signed by the artist during the period 1560 to 1660 is in the Montgomerie Aisle at Largs, inscribed *'J. Stalker fecit 1638'*.

Stalker is recorded as an apprentice in Edinburgh in 1632.[8] There is no record of a painter's identity on any other work except for the initials *'JM'* at Delgaty Castle, thought to refer to a painter named John Melville or Mellin.[9] Stalker's work also offers interesting evidence that embroidery and painting not only used the same sources, but often relied on the same method, since some of the pattern is outlined in pounce work i.e. pricking out a pattern and using the holes to trace the outline of the finished work which is a technique more commonly associated with needlework.[10]

3 STRUCTURE AND TECHNIQUE

Where builders had to take account of the angles created by the roof above, ceilings were 'barrel vaulted' i.e. formed from wooden boards bent into a curved shape and nailed to the rafters thereby providing one large surface for decoration. This surface was generally divided into smaller areas for the artist to work within, as is the case with the Emblem Chamber at Culross Place, Fife, commissioned by Sir George Bruce, inventor and merchant.[11] More commonly the painting surface was formed from the underside of the floorboards of the room above as was the case at Prestongrange. These

boards were supported by beams which remained visible from the room below, creating a long, narrow space interrupted by the beams running the length or breadth of the room:

> *"The painting was normally executed in situ with the artist working above his head. The surface was first prepared by laying on a white ground … and the design was drawn onto this in a black outline which was then filled in with colour. The black outlining remains visible and should not be seen as the sign of crude or unskilful work."*[12]

Typically, such Scottish interior decoration of the period 1550 to 1650 was executed in glue-tempera:

> *"…a simple medium where dry pigments are mixed with glue or size generally made from the skins of such animals as the rabbit or the deer. The surface to be painted was usually first primed with several coats of size … the final coat having some whiting or chalk added for the dual purpose of filling minor irregularities and giving a white ground on which to work the decoration."*[13]

The narrow surface available to work on was a major challenge to the painters' art. The subject matter of the paintings therefore relied heavily on images which lent themselves to such a surface. These images were rarely the invention of the journeymen painters who executed the work and, even where images are original, as is the case with much of the work executed for Sir George Bruce at Culross in the early 1600s, their conceptual origins derive from fairly specific sources.[14]

4 THE GROTESQUE ARTISTIC CONTEXT

It is important to bear in mind that, despite a rich variety of cultural traditions, the scholars of pre-Reformation Europe were unified by a shared language – Latin – and a shared body of concepts, both Christian and classical.

It was within this shared context that Scotland's journeymen artists created the vivid, richly decorated interiors demanded by their patrons. Decoration was not, of course, restricted to ceilings: walls and alcoves were also illustrated, with occasionally Christian but more frequently classical, scenes, as were ceramics, embroidered wall hangings, cushions and other soft furnishings.[15]

By the opening years of the 16th century refinements to printing techniques signalled a radical change in the nature of communication, when it became possible – and highly desirable – to obtain copies of books which were in simultaneous multiple circulation. Artists and writers embraced the opportunity to expand their audience while preserving the integrity of their ideas and images through the medium of the printed book. 'Pattern books' of engravings by artists mainly of French or Flemish background were in increasing circulation at this time.[16] These offered images in a style appropriate to the long narrow shape created by the ceiling beams and provided the source for much interior decoration.

Many of these pattern books are in the 'grotesque' style which in Britain is called 'antique work'. The Oxford Dictionary defines grotesque as, 'comically or repulsively distorted; monstrous, unnatural', but in its original form grotesque meant literally, 'in grotto style' and referred to the origins of such patterns in the painted walls of underground vaults or grottos of classical Rome. These antique *grotesqueries* were a strong contrast to the ordered formality more commonly associated with classical architecture and decoration. Painting or other ornamentation in the grotesque style comprises a bizarre disharmony of human, animal and plant forms combined in ways which contradict the laws of nature.

> *"Our contemporary artists decorate the walls with monstrous forms rather than reproducing clear images of the familiar world. Reeds are substituted for columns, fluted appendages with curly leaves and volutes [spiral scrolls] take the place of pediments."*[17]

This type of renaissance decoration is attributed originally to the painter Raphael, whose 16th century Vatican paintings are based partly on the images found in these grottos. Throughout the 16th century, the style became increasingly fashionable: between 1565 and 1571 Hans Vredeman de Vries of Antwerp published his *Grottesco: in diversche manieren*, a series of engravings which provided much of the imagery for ceiling decoration throughout Scotland, as did his *Caryatidum* published in 1565.[18]

In keeping with a more formal classical style, heraldic devices and emblem books also formed part of the source material for ceiling decoration. Heraldry, administered in Scotland by the Lord Lyon, King of Arms, records the genealogies, precedence and honours associated with noble

families, and as such, offered a means of expressing a wide range of family attributes which was appropriate to the requirements of both painter and patron. Such heraldic devices frequently accompany images and text in emblematic style. The first emblem book in English was *A Choice of Emblemes* published in 1586 by Geffrey Whitney four years after the date inscribed on the Prestongrange ceiling.

Emblematic images combine a motto, usually in Latin, with a illustrative image derived from a range of sources – classical Greece and Rome, contemporary, biblical or mythological – allied with a short verse relating image to motto.[19] As demonstrated in the work commissioned by Sir George Bruce at Culross, the emblem format readily lent itself to modification to suit individual purposes.[20] The coherence and consistency of both emblematic and heraldic images, together with their clear intention of presenting a statement to the informed observer, is in strong contrast to the fantastical combining and recombining of an enormous variety of forms typical of the grotesque style.

Although it is difficult in many cases to identify reasons for the choice of images, it is nonetheless clear that such interior decoration was a highly individual statement of personal history, aspirations and beliefs by those who commissioned the work. Sir Alexander Seton, for example, when remodelling Pinkie House in 1613, used a number of sources to present an expression of his personal world view to the informed viewer:

> *"The houses Seton built or improve at Fyvie (Aberdeenshire) and at Pinkie (East Lothian) are notable for their use of an extended vocabulary of heraldic and emblematic devices which must be seen as making claims for his own and his family's role in bringing an implicitly neoclassical urbanitas and humanitas to Renaissance Scotland."*[21]

Indeed, uniquely among surviving examples, the source material at Pinkie has even been adapted to include a portrait of Seton himself.

5 THE BARONIAL HALL AT PRESTONGRANGE

Prestongrange House itself probably began life as an agricultural outpost for the Cistercian Abbey of Newbattle,