

6. PAINTED CEILINGS: THEIR SIGNIFICANCE ON THE ROYAL MILE AND WITHIN THE WIDER CONTEXT

Karen Dundas

In the late 16th century Riddle's Court was embellished with highly decorated interiors including painted timber ceilings when the property was built by John McMorran, a wealthy merchant and baillie of Edinburgh, who commissioned the decoration. This type of decoration belongs to a period of artistic activity in Scotland spanning from approximately the mid-1500s to the mid-1600s, and is often referred to as the Scottish Renaissance (Bath 2010). During this period, ceiling and wall painting flourished in domestic settings (Macmillan 1996: 56). A particularly unexpected feature of this decorative style is its popularity over a wide range of society: surviving decoration adorns more obvious interiors such as Falkland Palace and Edinburgh Castle, but it is also commonly found in homes of fashion-conscious wealthy merchants. It is important to note that this type of decoration seems to be quite specific to Scotland, forming a distinctive national style rather than being a British phenomenon (Macmillan 1996: 56). Scotland's connections with continental Europe and Scandinavia were much stronger than with England throughout the 16th century, and the painted decoration was an entirely independent tradition with its own connections (Crone et al 2017). Dendrochronology carried out recently on a number of Scottish Renaissance painted timbers, contemporary with those at Riddle's Court, has confirmed that the majority of pine used in Scottish construction during the 16th and 17th centuries was imported from southern Norway and the Baltic States (Bath 2003: 1).

6.1 Scottish Renaissance painted decoration

During the Scottish Renaissance, painted decoration was usually applied to timber boards and support beams that formed the ceilings of more significant spaces within a building; generally the reverse of the painted boards served as floorboards in rooms above. It is believed that these decorative schemes would have included a 'frieze', painted onto the upper walls between beam ends. Some examples of frieze remains include those discovered in Room F02 at

Riddle's Court; Crathes Castle (Aberdeenshire); and fragmentary evidence found at Moubray House (Royal Mile, Edinburgh). However, wall plaster is easily damaged and often replaced, therefore examples of original frieze decoration are rare. Occasionally paintings extended down the entire wall and examples include Gladstone's Land (Royal Mile, Edinburgh), Culross Palace (Fife), and Crathes Castle (Aberdeenshire); however, this would have been less common in sleeping spaces, where textiles would have been hung below frieze level for insulation.

While decoration was usually executed in tempera (powder pigments in a medium of animal size), work carried out by Scottish Wall Paintings Conservators (SWPC) at Riddle's Court and elsewhere has shown that techniques were often slightly more involved. Until fairly recently, the received view was that Scottish Renaissance tempera ceilings were never varnished; however, it was interesting to note a varnish coating on certain elements of the F02 ceiling at Riddle's Court (eg foliage). A similar coating has been found by SWPC on contemporary painted ceilings along the Royal Mile (Moubray House; 302–304 Lawnmarket). Indeed, it was the discovery of coatings on two surviving ceilings at 302–304 Lawnmarket, and subsequent involvement by Historic Environment Scotland (HES) in this aspect of the project, that resulted in a reappraisal of the original theory. It is now understood that a varnish consisting of pine resin mixed with walnut oil was used to highlight elements of painted ceilings in Scotland from 1580 to 1630.³⁴ It is also possible that an oil/resin-based paint may have been used to achieve a specific colour or desired effect for some decoration (although no research has been carried out to test this theory). Either way, whether executed in tempera or oil paint, it would not have been unrealistic for the budget of a wealthy merchant to stretch to the decoration of a couple of rooms in this fashion, the cost depending upon intricacy of the design commissioned and the expense of pigments chosen.

Academic study of Scottish Renaissance decorative schemes in terms of subject matter, inspiration or technique has been limited. Initial publications describing this style of decoration were published (Apted 1966a; 1966b) over 50 years ago, and it was not until 2003 that a comprehensive

study was published (Bath 2003), which identified sources and listed known schemes (including those lost). Since 2003 there have been a handful of new discoveries;³⁵ nevertheless Bath's book remains the definitive study to date, and his research identifies sources of many of the iconographical features deriving from the engravings and emblem books which were circulating around Europe during that period. These images often entered Scotland via trading connections (Bath 2003: 231; Howard 1995: 7–8), and Bath states that '... much of this painting assumes a certain level of literacy, both verbal and visual, in its viewer, which undoubtedly reflects not only the humanism of the court of James VI but also the level of general education that was available to virtually all social classes who had access to the Scottish universities' (Bath 2003: 2).

The designs on surviving paintings range from popular fruit and flower motifs,³⁶ representing 'plenty' but with no definite symbolism (eg Gladstone's Land, Royal Mile; Culross Palace, Fife) to paintings with highly symbolic or moralistic references (eg Crathes Castle, Aberdeenshire; the 'Painted Chamber' at Culross Palace, Fife). Other motifs such as arabesques seem simply decorative (Culross Townhouse, Fife). Regardless of the designs commissioned, their classical origins evidently reflect the cultural and intellectual aspirations of the owners.

While many more decorative interiors would have been painted than survive, Bath (2003) identifies over a hundred buildings in Scotland where Renaissance painted ceilings still survive in situ, 16 of which are located in Edinburgh; this number has increased to 21 since 2003, three of which are the recent discoveries at Riddle's Court.

By the mid-17th century, Scottish Renaissance painted decoration was beginning to fall out of fashion in Edinburgh, and then gradually throughout the rest of the country. Many ceilings had already been damaged or destroyed by fire, which was a constant threat for overcrowded timber buildings. Uneven beams were shaved back to apply lath, and boldly coloured decoration was concealed behind the monochrome ornamental plaster ceilings and wall panelling that became the predominant taste in a city that now viewed itself as a centre of Enlightenment thinking. Such was the fate of Riddle's Court; the Scottish Renaissance ceilings,

hidden for centuries behind false plaster ceilings, were finally uncovered during refurbishment of the property over 400 years later.

6.2 Scottish Renaissance paintings at Riddle's Court

6.2.1 Room F02 ceiling (King's Chamber, first floor)

Ceiling description

Densely patterned paintings on the board and beam ceiling in Room F02 (Illus 39) were first discovered in the early 1960s. The decoration is believed to date to 1598, to commemorate a visit to Scotland by Ulric Duke of Holstein, representative of the Holy Roman Empire. Pearce (2012) notes that the chief motif is a repeated 'crowned double eagle, the arms of the Holy Roman Empire, cradled by a spray of thistles, and another motif with a cherub's head. The eagle and thistle motif seems unambiguously to declare alliance between Scotland and the empire' and goes on to describe the importance of this ceiling as a rare example of '... ephemeral festive architecture' rather than simply domestic decoration (ibid).

The ceiling consists of 13 beams and 12 bays (compartments) running north/south across the room. As is typical with these ceilings, the widths of the bays and dimensions of the beams vary. The condition of the decoration is very good, and although the paintwork now appears a little worn and faded, it would have been more strongly coloured originally. Decoration on the boards is painted in blue, green earth, red earth, yellow ochre and white with designs outlined in black. The colour of decoration on the beams alternates: red earth, blue, raw umber(?), blue, red earth, blue, raw umber(?), blue, etc. Some of the motifs have a varnish coating which, while clearly visible in raking light, has oxidised and darkened over the centuries. When first applied this coating would have saturated the paint colours beneath, giving them even more impact.

Frieze description

Two surviving frieze fragments from wall plaster between the painted beam ends were removed from the building upon discovery in the 1960s. A black and white photograph from HES conservation files, dating to the discovery of the decoration, shows five surviving frieze fragments on wall plaster between



Illus 39 Part of the painted ceiling in the so-called King's Chamber (F02) showing ornate detail. (© Andrew Wright)

beam ends at the north side of the room; it seems that the fragments were removed from the building upon discovery. The fluid, irregular painting style of the foliate design on these fragments demonstrates that the frieze was painted freehand, unlike the repeating ceiling board emblems which are uniform in size and shape and were probably 'pounced'. A

section of bright yellow line has survived beneath one fragment, indicating that there would have been a line running horizontally along the bottom of the frieze. This line would have marked a distinct separation between the ceiling/frieze and wall paintings or hanging textiles, giving a sense of completion to the scheme.

To the naked eye the bright yellow pigment underlining the frieze has a crystalline appearance and thus sparkles as it catches the light. It is almost certainly orpiment (arsenic sulphide), possibly cut with the more economical yellow ochre to make it go further. Interestingly SWPC found the same colour on a similar line below decorative frieze remains during conservation treatment at Moubray House, further down the Royal Mile. Pigment sellers on the Royal Mile were recorded during the 16th/17th centuries, whose estates on death list ‘orpiment in large quantities’ (Pearce 2015).

Comparison with contemporary ceilings in Scotland

Although the ceiling colours in Room F02 are entirely typical of their era, and the decoration seems simpler than on the more recently discovered

ceilings at Riddle’s Court, there is no doubt that the F02 ceiling is exceptional and unique in its subject matter, and its importance cannot be overestimated, due to the unique commemorative nature of its composition, marking a historically important event in Scotland. There are no other known painted ceilings in Scotland which provide suitable content for comparison in this regard.

6.2.2 Room F03 ceiling (first floor)

Ceiling description

The ceiling of Room F03 (adjacent to the F02 King’s Chamber ceiling) had been significantly affected by fire at some point in its past, and dousing of flames with water has irreversibly damaged the paintings; consequently all of the original decorated boards in this room are missing (Illus 40).



Illus 40 A colour orthophotograph of the painted beam and board ceiling in Room F03, North Block. Inset: the only surviving painted board on the ceiling of Room F03. (© CFA Archaeology Ltd)

The ceiling consists of 26 beams and 25 bays running north/south across the room; however, following structural alterations, beams 22–26 are currently hidden behind the east wall of the room. Also, the northernmost ends of beams 8–18 continue outwith the confines of the room and into the stairwell; a solitary painted ceiling board, spanning six bays, survives in this space. Room F03 was originally two distinct spaces; the area east of ceiling beam 20 originally belonged outside of the painted room. Evidence of this is indicated by notches in the beam for a timber room divider; also there are no decorative remains on timbers from the east side of beam 19.

Conservation treatment stabilised the paint remains and improved legibility of the design, but it has not been possible to revive the original pigment colours. Although there appears to be little remaining colour, at close range tiny fragments are still visible in places where the paint surface is broken or the charred surface layer has delaminated.

Decorative design

Three distinct, elaborate designs were discovered on the ceiling beams in Room F03 and, like the decoration in the adjacent King's Chamber, the pattern wraps around all three sides on each beam.

- *Beam design 'A'* – strapwork/ribbon bands outlined with a contrasting colour, with *trompe l'oeil* (an artistic technique that produces an optical illusion of three dimensions) highlights and shadows. A loose, rinceaux vine (decorative bands depicting leaves and often fruit or flowers extending from a central undulating stem) runs in the background, heightening the *trompe l'oeil* effect. On the beam soffit strapwork is punctuated by simple, generic flowers at approximately 60cm intervals. 'Leaf' shapes on either side of the flowers form part of the rinceaux vine decoration.
- *Beam design 'B'* – strapwork/ribbon bands with large fleur-de-lis and other shapes at intervals along beam sides. The ribbons appear to consist of either a wide band with a thin central line of contrasting colour, or a wide band outlined with a contrasting colour. A loose, rinceaux vine runs in the

background. The soffit depicts 'oak leaf' shapes with 3-D 'shadowing', alternating with octagonal shapes formed by strapwork.

- *Beam design 'C'* – strapwork/ribbon band, which appears to consist of either a wide band with a thin line of contrasting colour, or a wide band outlined with a contrasting colour. A rinceaux vine runs in background, periodically forming 'trident' and foliate shapes on beam sides. The rinceaux vine appears as the most dominant feature for design 'C'. In addition to strapwork/ribbons, the beam soffit is punctuated with large, 'flouncy' flowers with four tripartite-edged petals. These flowers alternate with smaller, monochromatic 'spiked' floral designs that form part of the rinceaux vine.

Colour scheme

Colours found on ceiling F03 are white; pale yellow ochre; red earth; blue (azurite or smalt, which have been identified on contemporary ceilings such as those at Gladstone's Land; azurite is not particularly stable and converts to black copper oxide when heated – since the blue painted elements were in particularly poor condition this may indicate use of azurite); a fiery orange-red (likely vermilion containing impurities such as iron oxide and lead oxide; while vermilion is quite stable, impurities are not, causing the paint surface to darken over time to a purplish-brown); a bright yellow (the same as found on the F02 King's Chamber frieze fragment – likely orpiment); a bright green (possibly 'vergaut', a mixture of orpiment and indigo) (Siddall 2018) – all on a black ground.

Comparison with contemporary ceilings in Scotland

The large scale of this space suggests that Room F03 may have been a 'Great Hall', presumably forming a suite of rooms with Room F02.

Designs 'B' and 'C' alternate on beams of the F02 King's Chamber ceiling (albeit in a less detailed manner); however, there is no evidence of beam design 'A'. Large 'flouncy' flowers similar to those of beam design 'C' are also present on the S02 ceiling (described below); very similar painted flowers have been seen on timber wall panels in the 'Painted Chamber' at Culross Palace (Fife).

Designs on the ceiling beams in Room F03 are elegant and elaborate in their composition, and while there are obvious similarities to the beam pattern in adjacent Room F02 (King's Chamber), designs on the F03 ceiling beams appear more complex and finely executed. Examples of this are highlighting and shading on the strapwork, creating a three-dimensional, *trompe l'oeil* effect; the use of a more varied colour palette; and the subtle and intriguing rinceaux vine weaving through the background (the combination of vine overlaid with strapwork on the F03 ceiling is unique to Riddle's Court). Overall the F02 King's Chamber ceiling has the same basic design, but lacks the dramatic effect.

One can only speculate about the decoration on the lost ceiling boards; paint remains on a single surviving panel in the stairwell are of similar proportions to those on the F02 ceiling, and offer a few tantalising clues. However, there are clear differences in the patterns used: the F03 board depicts a bird in a 'walking' pose painted in one of the bays, and folds of hanging draperies. Similar birds can be found on ceiling boards at nearby Gladstone's Land,

and also at Nunraw Tower (Garvald). The source of the bird image is likely to be a 16th-century book illustration. Folds of hanging draperies feature on other painted ceilings such as those at Prestongrange (Prestonpans) and Moubray House (Royal Mile, Edinburgh), and are likely to have been inspired by Hans Vredeman de Vries engravings.³⁷ Curiously, the direction of decoration on the solitary board suggests that the ceiling should be viewed from the north facing southwards (the bird and draperies are upside down), but the most likely explanation is that the board has been taken down at some point and then put back facing the wrong direction.

6.2.3 Room S02 ceiling (second floor)

Ceiling description

The remains of a third Scottish Renaissance painted board and beam ceiling was discovered hidden behind a false ceiling in Room S02 (Illus 41). Like the F03 ceiling, the ceiling in Room S02 had been badly affected by fire at some point in its history and damage to the paintwork had been exacerbated by water. The S02 ceiling has 12 beams and 11 bays



Illus 41 A colour orthophotograph of the painted beam and board ceiling in Room S02. (© CFA Archaeology Ltd)

running north/south across the room; approximately one quarter of the original boards are replacements, and many of these are badly charred.

Decorative design

There are two distinct board designs, which alternate with each bay:

- The first design consists of repetitive strapwork cartouches with stylised foliate motifs, all framed by border lines running along either side of the bay.
- The second design is identical, except that floral motifs replace the foliate motifs.

Similarly, there are two alternating beam designs (same pattern on soffits and sides):

- The first design is a running scroll of coloured bands (a form of strapwork) interlacing at approximately five points along the beam, dividing all three beam faces into rectangular lozenges containing arabesque or 'squiggle and dot' motifs.
- The second, simpler design consists of a series of rectangular, framed lozenges containing arabesque or 'squiggle and dot' motifs. Note: beam side lozenges contain arabesques; beam soffits randomly contain either an arabesque or 'squiggle and dot'.

Colour scheme

Historic fire and water damage have irreversibly altered the colours and the resulting appearance is entirely misleading: for instance, areas looking somewhat blue from floor level are in fact where the paint surface has completely turned to ash. Despite this, it has been possible to identify and record the majority of designs and colours.

While much of the paint surface is now covered with a hard, charred coating, SWPC discovered an intricate, bold and brightly coloured scheme, which stresses the insatiable passion for colour evident in Scottish Renaissance interior decoration. The colour pattern is often unpredictable, a typical feature of this type of decoration which tends to be free-flowing and spontaneous. Colours found in cracks, scratches or small losses include white chalk ground; black outlining motifs (lamp or bone black); yellow ochre; blue (azurite or smalt); fiery orange-red (vermilion);

vibrant yellow-green (probably a mix of orpiment and indigo); and bright yellow (orpiment) found on some beam elements but, interestingly, not on the boards.

6.2.4 'Hidden' ceiling (Room S03, second floor)

A fourth Scottish Renaissance painted board and beam ceiling was discovered while lifting the floorboards in the room above Room S03, revealing Renaissance paintings on the reverse of the boards. This ceiling is hidden behind a significant 17th-century ornamental plaster ceiling in Room S03 (which remained unaffected by the refurbishment works), and therefore could not be exposed for viewing. The upturned boards were recorded by CFA and a photographic montage gives an idea of the ceiling designs (Illus 42, 43 & 44).

This ceiling also appears to have been affected by fire, albeit to a lesser extent than the adjacent S02 ceiling. Some lovely decorative details such as highlights and shadows on the strapwork create a three-dimensional, *trompe l'oeil* effect.

The relationship between Rooms S02 and S03 is unclear but it seems fair to say that they would have formed a suite of rooms, given the similarity of the decoration. The board designs (Illus 44) are virtually identical on these ceilings, apart from the colour scheme which may differ, as dark/light colours do not seem to coincide on the various elements. Room S03 ceiling photographs show what looks like a red ochre, white and black scheme; however, as already noted, caution must be observed when making assumptions about colours, as the paint layer consists of poorly bound pigment particles affected by smoke or fire.

Crucially, the beam designs differ completely: the S03 ceiling has strapwork decoration wrapping around from the beam soffits, having more in common with decoration on the F02 King's Chamber and F03 ceilings. Particularly interesting are the sides of the S03 ceiling beams, which depict hanging bunches of grapes.

Comparison with contemporary ceilings in Scotland

The bunches of grapes painted on the Room S03 beams are the only known example of this motif on Scottish Renaissance ceiling beams. In contrast, bunches of grapes are a common motif on ceiling



Illus 42 The floorboards found below the North Block roof prior to uplifting. (© CFA Archaeology Ltd)



Illus 43 Tempera artwork underneath one of the floorboards. (© CFA Archaeology Ltd)



Illus 44 A colour orthophotograph of the painted ceiling boards below the North Block roof. (© CFA Archaeology Ltd)

boards (eg Gladstone's Land, Royal Mile; 302–304 Lawnmarket, Edinburgh; Culross Palace, Fife), and they are also often found on plaster wall friezes forming part of a Scottish Renaissance scheme (eg Huntingtower, Perthshire; and Crathes Castle, Aberdeenshire). It is noted that the elaborate coloured-banding design on alternate beams of the S02 ceiling is similar to the design on a contemporary ceiling at Nunraw Tower (Garvald).

In addition to the usual earth pigments, SWPC once again discovered bright yellow orpiment and vibrant green on many elements of the S02 ceiling beams. This same green was also found on the F03 ceiling at Riddle's Court, and the colour appears to be 'vergaut'. During conservation treatment in 2010, SWPC observed this vibrant green on a beam lozenge at Moubray House (Royal Mile, Edinburgh).

6.3 Discussion

Unquestionably, the Scottish Renaissance paintings at Riddle's Court are some of the most intriguing survivals of their genre. The elaborate decorative designs on ceilings F03, S02 and S03 have few comparisons either on the Royal Mile or further afield. The range of pigments used, some more valuable than the usual earth pigments (for example, vermilion: although this is the synthetic form of costly cinnabar, it is equally expensive due to its mercury content, since mercury is also rare and valuable), is more extensive than found on the majority of contemporary schemes, and, unquestionably, the F02 King's Chamber ceiling design is entirely unique not only with regards to its application method and uniformity, but also due to its status as an emblem of Scottish diplomacy

towards the close of the 16th century.

The badly charred F03 and S02 ceilings at Riddle's Court have offered a rare and unexpected glimpse of these lively schemes as they would have looked when first painted. Most surviving ceilings from this period have lost their vibrancy due to a variety of factors, among them centuries-long exposure to open fireplaces, UV light degradation, and well-meaning but detrimental

restoration practices; yet brightly coloured remains beneath these damaged paint surfaces have given us a more accurate indication of their intended appearance. Investigation of the Scottish Renaissance painted ceilings at Riddle's Court has provided a treasure trove of new insights into decoration from this period, adding both to the historical archive of the building and the wider oeuvre.