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Irish self-portraits: the artist in curved mirrors

A Scot in Ireland: Erskine Nicol's Mid-19th Century Self-Portraits

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Erskine Nicol, *Two Figures in an Interio*



Bodycolour and graphite on paperboard, 16 x 11 cm, 1863, private collection.

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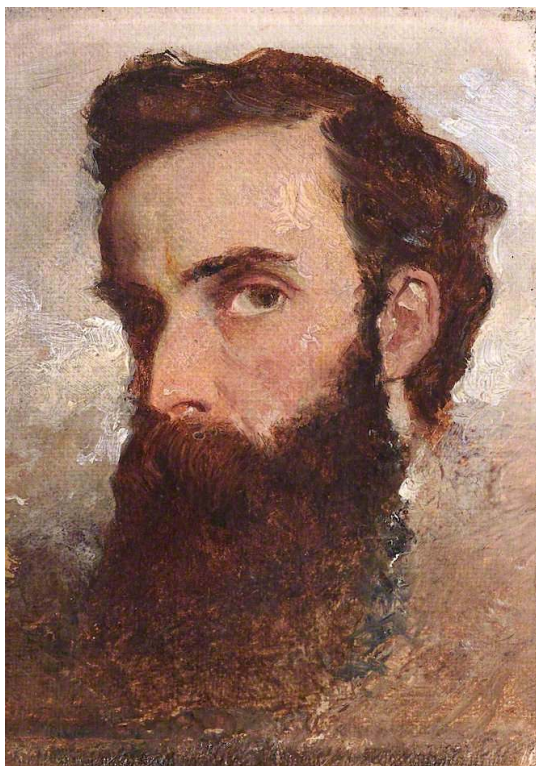
- 1 Many young men challenge the view of their parents when they become teenagers, and this was the case of the Scottish artist Erskine Nicol. Born in Leith in 1825, he was the son

of a cooper¹ who dreamed of a commercial career for his eldest child². However, at the early age of 12, Erskine Nicol entered the Trustees' Academy in Edinburgh to receive an artistic education, and he was soon followed by his cousin, Peter Cleland (1818-1902) in the 1840s³. Together, they decided to leave Scotland in order to set up a school in Dublin so that in 1846, Erskine Nicol resigned from his job as a drawing teacher at Leith High School⁴. The cousins arrived in the Irish capital the same year, but their plan failed and Peter went back to Scotland while Erskine decided to settle on Fleet Street (n°49) and to work in Ireland.

- 2 Nicol roamed the countryside drawing and painting the landscape or the peasantry in watercolour. He travelled the region of Dublin as well as the area of the Claddagh around Galway and in 1847, he exhibited five works at the Royal Hibernian Academy in the Irish capital: the first was entitled *Highland Boys*, *Bird Nesting*, the second, *A Rustic Angler*, the third, *Flowers from Nature* whilst the other two were portraits⁵. Nicol continued to live and work in Ireland until 1850, but even when he settled back in Scotland and later on in London, he continued to visit the country at least once a year, as long as his health allowed. These stays inspired many other paintings devoted to Ireland, in which he sometimes represented himself.
- 3 But why should a Scottish artist choose to paint self-portraits in Ireland rather than in his home country? Can these unusual examples of self-representation be considered the heirs to a long tradition of self-portraits? A self-portrait can be defined as a work of art in which the artist represents himself or consigns his image to posterity, so it supposedly mirrors the identity of an artist. One of the key elements of identity is nationality. So it may be surprising that the Scottish aspect of his identity should be erased by the Irish settings or landscapes that are recognisable in his paintings. To further explore these questions, this article analyses three works. The first, *Self-Portrait with a Rustic Companion*⁶ (1855), was painted in the mid- 1850s, when Nicol's career started to take off. The second, *Donnybrook Fair*⁷, was painted four years later, in 1859, whereas the third reflects a much later phase of the painter's production as it is a watercolour done in 1863 and called *Two Figures in an Interior*⁸. I will first examine how the three pictures may be regarded as typical examples of the genre, before highlighting the unexpected features which differentiate them from the long tradition of self-portraits derived from Rembrandt's work in the seventeenth century (1606-1669). Finally, these self-portraits are key works to the understanding of Erskine Nicol's artistic relationship with Ireland.
- 4 A self-portrait is generally considered to represent an artist's identity, which is best reflected by the act of painting itself. The genre is an assertion of a human being who is willing to insist on his artistic skills⁹. This is the reason why it is very frequent to see an artist portrayed with brushes, palette and paint, as in Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* (1665-1669)¹⁰. Two centuries later, Nicol used the same objects to epitomise his identity as an artist, both in *Two Figures in an Interior* and in *Self-Portrait with a Rustic Companion*. Whereas the latter title clearly indicates that the picture is indeed a self-portrait, the former is not so explicit. In fact, the original title of *Two Figures in an Interior* has probably been lost and this was the name given to the work by the auction house which offered it for sale in 2010¹¹. It was only when I examined the painting that I realised it was a self-portrait.
- 5 First, the painter's face can be identified, which is of course at the heart of the self-portrait. This identification is possible thanks to a portrait of Erskine Nicol painted by

one of his friends, William Fettes Douglas, a Scottish artist who lived between 1822 and 1891.

William Fettes Douglas, *Portrait of Erskine Nicol*



Oil on canvas laid on panel, 14.5 x 10.2 cm, Royal Scottish Academy.

Public domain (<<http://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/detail.php?ID=191594>>).

- 6 This oil on canvas entitled *Portrait of Erskine Nicol*¹² was exhibited in Edinburgh at the Royal Scottish Academy in 1862, a year before Nicol painted the so-called *Two Figures in an Interior*, so that the painter was the same age in both pictures and can easily be recognised. Thus, the fact that Nicol painted a self-portrait in *Two Figures* became obvious and it shows that he represented himself with enough verisimilitude to be identified by a person who had already seen him or a representation of him, even in the twenty-first century.
- 7 This is relevant to another dimension of self-portraits: in such pictures, artists construct an image of themselves which will survive them; and this is how they will be remembered by the public, art lovers and even by their own family. So self-portraiture has a memorial function. Artists create images of themselves that they are willing to transmit; they emphasise the aspects of their personality that they deem worthy of remembrance. In *Two Figures*, Nicol illustrates specifically the performance of painting. The artist has carefully represented his pen and the wood panel on which he is drawing. Furthermore, the background recalls the structure of many other pictures, noticeably of *Interior with Stairs*¹³, a watercolour which must have been painted the same year. The reappearance of such a setting evokes the reality of the studio where paintings are carefully constructed, so that, following the tradition of self-portraits, the artist turns the self into a spectacle of artistic creation.

Erskine Nicol, *Donnybrook Fair*

Oil on canvas, 107 x 211 cm, 1859, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

Public domain (<<https://theartstack.com/artist/erskine-nicol/donnybrook-fair>>)

- 8 This “self-as-spectacle”¹⁴ is also visible in *Donnybrook Fair*, an oil on canvas in which Erskine Nicol depicts himself and his wife amidst a hundred visitors walking from one stall to another. To the right of the middle ground, Nicol and his wife are lost in the crowd and yet, their posture among a group of middle-class characters gives them a social standing. In particular, one may note the dress of Nicol’s wife, which reflects the contemporary fashion for crinoline. For Rachel Weathers, in the 1850s, the crinoline was “the costume of the angel in the house”¹⁵. Weathers claims that this dress was perfect for middle-class women as it allowed them to feel protected and to convey an image of “passivity” — one could hardly move in such dresses —, “fragility” or “chastity”¹⁶.

Erskine Nicol, *Donnybrook Fair*, detail

- 9 Despite its popularity, the crinoline was criticised in newspapers like *Punch* for its frivolity: it was said to be inspired by French fashion — Empress Eugénie was particularly fond of crinolines — and was considered by some as a waste of money. Being made of several layers of cloth and implying the use of a corset, a crinoline cage as well as a petticoat, it was an expensive outfit. By painting his wife wearing such a costume, Nicol implies that in spite of the extravagant cost of crinoline he could afford it, and it is therefore a proclamation of his success. It is true that by the end of the 1850s, Nicol had become famous and he regularly exhibited his paintings in the most important galleries of the UK such as the Royal Academy in London or the Royal Scottish Academy in Edinburgh. His own costume is also that of a middle-class gentleman, complete with white shirt, creamy beige waistcoat and raincoat, dark necktie and top hat. The painter looks ahead, gives his arm to his wife while a friend of his or a relative is pointing at something in the distance. It is the perfect image of a middle-class family on a day off, and their social status is made even more conspicuous thanks to the contrast offered by the characters in the foreground, who mainly belong to the working class or the peasantry.
- 10 In *Donnybrook Fair*, the painter's self-portrait corresponds to a "celebration of self", to repeat the words of David C. Ward¹⁷, who identifies this feature as a characteristic of the genre. This is also true of the earlier watercolour entitled *Self-Portrait with a Rustic Companion* (1855), in which the painter's social status is enhanced by the contrast produced by the peasant sitting behind him. This character is painted in a particularly derogatory manner: not only his clothes and his worn-out hat, but his unkempt hair, his wrinkled face, his attitude bending forwards and especially his protruding teeth give him an air of silliness, as opposed to the painter who looks neat, with clean clothes, sleek hair and a well-groomed beard.

Erskine Nicol, *Self-Portrait with a Rustic Companion*

Watercolour heightened with white, 23 x 21 cm, 1855, private collection.

Image courtesy of whytes.com¹⁸.

- 11 In this painting, Nicol fashions his identity in opposition to that of his Irish sitter. The painting is an invitation to follow the painter's gaze and to observe the sitter with attention; in other words it entices us to discover his artistic production which, as the ugly peasant indicates, is no mere reflection of reality but a reconstruction to the Irish peasant's detriment. Indeed, as noted by Pascal Bonafoux, a self-portrait can also be a fable: "Face, features, portrait... [...], 'Let's sketch it out'... Invitation to dream, to tell a tale, to embroider a story [...] the self-portrait is not only a face, an image or a portrait"¹⁹.
- 12 It is in that sense that Nicol's self-portrait is original: because of the caricature of the Irish peasant that is offered to the viewer, it is not a conventional representation of a painter in his studio. The painting invites the viewer to share a deprecating vision of the Irish peasant, based on a series of British clichés which, until the 1860s, had constructed the stereotype of Paddy as an idiotic but happy and harmless peasant who tended to be dirty, awkward and alcoholic²⁰. A nineteenth-century spectator could immediately discern the sitter's Irish identity thanks to the clay pipe that would symbolize his status²¹. Such a depiction of Irish identity was likely to please Nicol's customers in Great Britain, and in particular in Scotland, where anti-Irish prejudices were virulent, as was noted by Perry Curtis:
- 13 The [Scottish] Lowlands in general and Edinburgh in particular proved a fertile breeding ground for various shades of Hibernophobia and anti-Celtic sentiment. Although born in London, James Gillray was the son of a Lanark man [...]. Similarly, George Cruikshank was the son of the Scottish illustrator and cartoonist, Isaac, who had emigrated to London in the 1780s²².

- 14 Some famous caricaturists such as James Gillray (1756-1815) or George Cruikshank (1792-1878) had participated in the cultural construction of the Irish “other”, marked with negative traits in, for instance, *United Irishmen upon Duty* (Gillray, 1798), depicting Irish Republicans as criminals²³, or the pair of lithographs by Cruikshank called *Irish Decency!!! N°1* and *Irish Decency!!! N°2* (1819), showing ragged or almost naked Irishmen in the office of a clerk. Anti-Irish prejudice was deeply ingrained in Scottish mentalities as such stereotypes dated back to the eighteenth century and were developed by other nineteenth-century artists of Scottish origin like John Proctor (1836-1914) or Harry Furniss (1854-1925) who both drew anti-Irish caricatures for the widely-circulated magazine *Punch*²⁴. In addition, it was in Edinburgh that several theories in phrenology were developed to prove that ‘Celts’ were inferior to ‘Anglo-Saxons’²⁵.
- 15 Curtis’s analysis is confirmed by the historian Martin J. Mitchell who writes:
- 16 In nineteenth-century Scotland [...] the Catholic Irish were despised by the bulk of the native population on account of their race and religion, and because they were employed mainly as strike-breakers or as low-wage labour²⁶.
- 17 It is true that Irish workers were used to break the strikes which occurred between the 1820s and the 1850s in the Scottish coal and iron industries²⁷ and as a result, they were hated by the local labour force and despised by the middle classes. Erskine Nicol’s caricature strengthens the prejudices of the time, and flatters viewers by assuring them of their own superiority compared with the ridiculous Irishman. As a Scotsman, Nicol claims a dominant position in relation to the Irishman. Consequently, this self-portrait corresponds to the definition of caricatures, which are “texts laden with clues to the social and political dynamics of any given time and culture”²⁸. In *Self-Portrait with a Rustic Companion*, the Irish background seems to emphasise the distance that the painter puts between himself and his subject.
- 18 Yet, in *Donnybrook Fair*, Nicol, his wife and their two companions are not major elements in the composition which is dominated by the setting. Because of the profusion of characters, the central feature of the painting is clearly the Irish event, the fair at Donnybrook. The painter being depicted as a minor character, other elements compete for the viewer’s attention²⁹. Moreover, such a posture deprives the painted artist of the “gaze out of the picture” which, according to Galligan, gives the impression that the painter is looking at himself in a mirror³⁰. The absence of this “reflexive” gaze, to use Galligan’s words, shows that the painting is not a conventional portrait.
- 19 On the contrary, in terms of genre, *Donnybrook Fair* is better qualified as a narrative painting, in the tradition established in Scotland by the artist David Wilkie (1785–1841) with his picture called *Pitlessie Fair*³¹ (1804). Wilkie and Nicol had much in common: both were Scottish, interested in Ireland and specialists in narrative painting. Wilkie’s tour of Ireland in 1835 had inspired him to paint *The Peep-O-Day Boys’ Cabin* (1835-6) and *The Irish Whiskey Still* (1840), two canvasses telling stories of families involved in illegal activities. As noted by James Caw, Wilkie had a considerable influence on the next generation of Scottish painters:
- 20 [Wilkie’s] example was so potent, not only as regards choice and treatment of subject, but technically, that there were comparatively few Scottish genre-painters of his or the immediately succeeding generation who did not work in a more or less Wilkie-like manner³².

- 21 Unsurprisingly, Nicol's manner was Wilkie-like, but his vision of Ireland was less picturesque than that of Wilkie, who tended to paint romanticised Irish peasants, especially in *The Peep-O-Day Boys' Cabin*, in which the female protagonist looks like a Madonna while her husband is pictured as an exhausted hero³³. Nicol chose to develop a less idealised iconography of Ireland, closer to the way in which Wilkie represented Scotland with *Pitlessie Fair*. This work of art was meant to be "a portrait of a village with its people", including elements of the artist's own biography, given that Wilkie's father is represented in the painting³⁴.
- 22 Narrative paintings based on the portraits of real individuals encompassing all layers of Victorian society were also made highly fashionable in the mid-century by other artists such as the English painter William Powell Frith (1819-1909), whose picture entitled *The Derby Day*³⁵ — exhibited in London at the Royal Academy in 1858 — required a guard rail to protect it from the enthusiastic public³⁶. As remarked by Brendan Rooney, Nicol may have heard about the success of this painting in the capital³⁷ because two years later, he offered the visitors of the Royal Scottish Academy his own depiction of a popular fair: *Donnybrook Fair*, exhibited as number 325³⁸. This large canvas, more than a meter high and two meters long, shares numerous characteristics with *A Derby Day*. Both are vast pictures with a "panoramic³⁹" quality examining a famous event: the former illustrates the carnival taking place every year at the end of August in a suburb of Dublin⁴⁰, while the latter represents the horse race at Epsom in England, which gathered members from all social classes.
- 23 *Donnybrook Fair* is not so much a portrait of the painter as a sample of Irish society in Nicol's days. For Thomas, this is characteristic of narrative paintings like the one by Frith, which "glorifies" Victorian society and British values⁴¹. In *Donnybrook Fair*, Nicol's contemporary society is also commemorated, as many distinctive social groups can be observed. As Thomas writes, such pictures aim at "show[ing] contemporary subjects" and offering "a truthful view of the world based on a scrupulous representation of modern-day life"⁴². Actually, Nicol has included peasants dressed up to the nines and having lunch in the foreground, but also middle-class visitors in the middle background, where acrobats and musicians such as a drummer can also be seen. On the right, soldiers can be recognised by their bright red jackets, just as four police officers standing in front of the queue below the swingboat can be identified by their dark blue flat caps tied under the chin.

Erskine Nicol, *Donnybrook Fair*, detail

- 24 It is true that both *Derby Day* and *Donnybrook Fair* show carefully painted characters who are involved in different actions or scenes: “narrative pictures are primarily stories [...] and they aim for dramatic effect”⁴³. To better understand the little dramas unfolding under their eyes, viewers need to examine the tiniest details. As noted by the owner of *The Derby Day* in 1858, “the nature of the picture requires a close inspection to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it”⁴⁴. This leads us to another characteristic of the genre: the viewer has an “active role”, which turns him into a “detective, whose job is to interpret the symbols, expressions and actions, in order to reconstruct the story”⁴⁵.

Erskine Nicol, *Donnybrook Fair*, detail

- 25 For example, in *Donnybrook Fair*, a thorough examination of the right foreground allows us to distinguish a group of gamblers, with a man seen from the rear extending both his hands, in which something is hidden, towards a peasant. The latter rummages through his pocket for a coin, while a third character with a white top hat whispers some words of advice. One may guess that the adviser is an accomplice of the old man stretching his arms towards the smiling peasant, for he tightly holds his *shillelagh* (a stick which was used in Ireland for walking and fighting), in case things go wrong⁴⁶. So narrative paintings require “reading”⁴⁷ to highlight their dramatic aspect and provide insight into their “Christian dimension”⁴⁸. Of course, such a scene was perceived by nineteenth century visitors as morally incorrect, given that the peasant will probably be swindled by the persuasive partners⁴⁹.
- 26 Being placed in the foreground, such crafty characters are given more importance than the figures of the painter and his wife who are placed behind them. Such a placement demonstrates that Nicol's self-portrait is only a minor element of this painting whose features correspond to the then-fashionable narrative genre. Obviously Nicol wanted to leave a trace of his identity within the painting without departing from the characteristics of this successful trend. More than the signature, the presence of the couple is an expression of the painter's experiences in Ireland and of his fondness for the country, which had become a part of his identity by the end of the 1850s.
- 27 The presence of the artist is also quite discreet in *Two Figures in an Interior*, in which, although painted in the foreground, Nicol does not seem to be the main figure. The peasant in the middle ground appears to be as important as the painter, so that the artist and his subject are merged in this self-portrait. This suggests that Nicol's identity could not be separated from his Irish representations. Besides, the Irish setting is also illustrated with meticulous details, like the stone floor, the wooden hooks on the left, or the wood beams. To Nicol, the inside of an Irish cottage like this one was interesting in itself, and he spent some time painting studies of such interiors, as confirmed by another of his watercolours, entitled *Interior with Stairs*. It features the same floor and stairs, but the door above the stairs is opened so that one can distinguish a basin and a jug. Both characters have disappeared but some hens are pecking in the foreground, which alludes to the Irish tradition of keeping them inside during the winter, so that they could continue to lay eggs⁵⁰. In *Two Figures in an Interior*, the fowl have been replaced by a broom which seems to be the attribute of the Irishwoman sitting on the left, while the painter has his brushes. However, both of them appear in what looks like their natural environment — the Irish cottage —, depicted so carefully that it is more than a setting: it gives identity to both characters.
- 28 Consequently, *Self-Portrait with a Rustic Companion*, *Donnybrook Fair* and *Two Figures in an Interior* illustrate various aspects of Nicol's identity: in the caricature of the Irish peasant, he appears as a foreigner whose nationality should not be confused with that of his subjects⁵¹. Yet, in the second, the painter and his wife are part of a narrative painting whose goal is to describe the visitors to Donnybrook Fair, so that the couple is associated with the Irish and their customs. Finally, the watercolour underlines the importance of the setting in Nicol's self-representation, as the painter can be observed in an environment which inspired his artistic production throughout his life.
- 29 What these three self-portraits have in common is their illustration of Nicol's production and their hints as to the reasons for his success from the 1850s onwards. *Self-Portrait with a Rustic Companion* and *Donnybrook Fair* show that the Scottish artist excelled at painting

details, and in particular the faces of his characters. This talent allowed him to invent crude caricatures but also to represent various emotions like anger, surprise, disappointment, interest, satisfaction, perplexity or affection. All these feelings are experienced by different characters painted in *Donnybrook Fair*, a picture which is also noteworthy for its scrupulous representation of a multitude of stalls, identified by Brendan Rooney as reliable depictions of the entertainers of the time such as, to the left, “Bells American Circus” or the nearby wagon, identified with a sign reading “Living Wonders & Paddy Maguires Learned Pig Toby who can tell the hours of the day & discourse like a Christian”. Further on the right is a Temperance Society tent with a medallion above its blue sign, probably representing Father Mathew, the founder of this movement. To Rooney, “Nicol’s *Donnybrook Fair* represents the most elaborate and ambitious of many representations of the fair by successive artists from the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century”⁵². The atmosphere of this typically Irish fair is perfectly rendered by the lively visitors painted by Nicol.

- 30 Interestingly, the 1863 watercolour is not so precise when it comes to both characters, so the viewer understands that the painter’s attention is rather focused on the setting and its perspective. Actually, *Two Figures in an Interior* creates the illusion of several planes: the entrance with its stone floor, the stairs, the upper floor and the room revealed by the open door at the back, which is itself closed by another door. So the setting here plays a game with frames: the first corresponds to the frame of the canvas, the second, to the open door, and the third, at the back, leads the eye of the viewer further inside the house. Another frame is also suggested by the door over the stairs, which hints at Nicol’s capacity to create three-dimensional interiors in the tradition of Dutch painters like Adrian Brouwer (1605/6-1638), who was also famous for his caricatures of smokers inside dark taverns.
- 31 In these self-portraits, Nicol depicts himself as the heir to this tradition that allows painters to poke fun at the rest of the world in order to gain fame. According to Galligan, “the painter ultimately include[s] his own image [...] within the tableau to indicate his status as proprietor, the integral participant in a continuum of visual perception⁵³”. With his caricatures, Nicol participated in the elaboration of the anti-Irish prejudices that had already been developed by other artists who had paved the way for his own iconography of Ireland. But Nicol’s perspective was original because he merged elements of British caricatures with the techniques of narrative painting and the genre of self-portraiture, which made his representations distinct from those of other painters belonging to the Scottish school of art⁵⁴. Although such caricatures can be shocking to today’s viewers, it should be noted that Nicol’s self-portrait with a boorish Irishman was part of a fabricated vision whose goal was to please Nicol’s public and, as a consequence, to make him successful. *Self-Portrait with a Rustic Companion* does not necessarily reflect his own opinion of Irish peasants as, to use Galligan’s words again, a self-portrait “is to be recognised as a fabricated construct, standing not one but two steps away from the ostensible model or object”⁵⁵.
- 32 The verisimilitude of Nicol’s paintings should not lead us to conclude that his art was the perfect mirror of his thoughts or even national identity. In these three pictures, he presents himself as an artist who became famous thanks to his Irish caricatures, who is able to paint large canvasses or expressive characters, and who pays attention to the details of rural life. In *Two Figures in an Interior*, Nicol paints himself as the discreet witness of Irish peasant life, which proves that it is a portrait of himself as an artist but

not as an individual personality and even less as a Scotsman. The three pictures allude to Nicol's production and its characteristics, and they imply that the painter is nothing without his art.

- 33 The paintings by Nicol explored in this article have inherited many features from the genre of the self-portrait. *Self-Portrait with a Rustic Companion* and *Two Figures in an Interior* both illustrate the artist while he is painting or drawing, and this performative dimension is reinforced by the presence of a character that the beholder of the nineteenth century would immediately identify as Irish, whereas the second is conspicuously placed in an Irish interior. Similarly, *Donnybrook Fair* is an invitation to discover a typically Irish celebration, which confirms Nicol's interest in the country and its inhabitants. Even if he was a Scotsman, most of his artistic production was devoted to Ireland so that today, he is considered as an "Irish painter"—in the sense that he was a painter of Ireland. These self-portraits offer a compendium of Nicol's art, illustrating most of its characteristics: they reveal his prodigious capacity to paint pictures in perspective, his sincere passion for Ireland and its rural life, his talent at painting emotions as well as detailed characters, whether in a flattering or derogatory manner, and his careful observation of everyday life. More than a portrait of himself, these three pictures draw a portrait of his art, asserting that the artist's identity cannot be separated from his production.

NOTES

1. Erskine Nicol's father, James Main Nicol, worked for wine merchants called Wanchope, Moodie & Hope.
2. Joyce M. Wallace, "Artists", *Further Traditions of Trinity and Leith*, Edinburgh, John Donald Publishers, 1990, p. 65-78, p. 65. Philip Gilbert Hamerton, *The Portfolio, An Artistic Periodical*, London, Seeley, Jackson & Halliday, 1879, vol. 10, pp. 60-62, p. 60.
3. Anonymous, "The Late Mr. Peter Cleland, artist", *The Scotsman*, Edinburgh, 7 March 1902, p. 4.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Unfortunately, the titles of these portraits were not recorded. Ann M. Stewart, *Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts: Index of Exhibitors 1826-1987*, Dublin, Manton Publishing, 1985-1987, 3 vols, 1987, vol. 3, p. 14.
6. Erskine Nicol, *Self-Portrait with a Rustic Companion*, watercolour heightened with white, 23 x 21 cm, 1855, private collection.
7. Erskine Nicol, *Donnybrook Fair*, oil on canvas, 107 x 211 cm, 1859, Tate Gallery, London.
8. Erskine Nicol, *Two Figures in an Interior*, bodycolour and graphite on paperboard, 16 x 11 cm, 1863, private collection. Note that bodycolour was used to obtain dense colours for highlights. It is a mixture of watercolour pigments with fish or animal gelatine but without white pigment. In Nicol's days, the white tint was obtained thanks to zinc oxide, known as Chinese white. So bodycolour is different from gouache (which consists in mixing watercolours with an opaque white pigment and Arabic gum). See <http://>

www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/g/gouache and <http://goldenagepaintings.blogspot.fr/2008/05/bodycolour.html> [Both accessed January 2018].

9. Gregory Galligan, "The Self Pictured: Manet, the Mirror, and the Occupation of Realist Painting", *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 80, n° 1 (March 1998), pp. 138-171, p. 165.

10. Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait with Two Circles*, oil on canvas, 114 x 94 cm, 1665-1669, Kenwood House, London.

11. The watercolour was sold on the first of October 2010 at Skinner's in Boston (lot 400A) under the title *Two Figures in an Interior*.

12. William Fettes Douglas, *Portrait of Erskine Nicol*, oil on canvas laid on panel, 14.5 x 10.2 cm, Royal Scottish Academy (RSA).

13. Erskine Nicol, *Interior with Stairs*, watercolour, size unknown, 1863, private collection.

14. A nice phrase used by Gregory Galligan, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

15. Rachel Weathers, "The Pre-Raphaelite Movement and Nineteenth-Century Ladies' Dress: A Study in Victorian Views of the Female Body", in Margareta Frederick Watson, ed., *Collecting the Pre-Raphaelites*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 1997, pp. 95-108, rephrased by Julia Thomas, *Pictorial Victorians: The Inscription of Values in Word and Image*, Athens (Ohio), Ohio University Press, 2004, p. 80.

16. *Ibid.*

17. David C. Ward, "Celebration of Self: The Portraiture of Charles Wilson Peale & Rembrandt Peale, 1822-7", *American Journal*, vol. 7, n° 1 (winter 1993), pp. 8-27.

18. I would like to thank Ian Whyte who kindly sent me his picture of the painting in November 2016.

19. My translation of Pascal Bonafoux's sentence: "Visage, figure, portrait... [...] 'figurez-vous'... Invitation au songe, à la fable, au conte [...] l'autoportrait n'est pas qu'un visage, une image ou un portrait". Pascal Bonafoux, *Autoportrait, Or tout paraît*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2014, p. 10.

20. The stereotype is analysed in further detail in Edward Hirsch, "The Imaginary Irish Peasant", *PMLA*, vol. 106, n° 5 (October 1991), pp. 1116-1133. To Hirsch, this was mainly a British invention but a different perspective is given by the revisionist historian Sheridan Gilley, in "English Attitudes to the Irish in England, 1780-1900", in Colin Holmes, ed., *Immigrants and Minorities in British Society*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1978, pp. 81-110.

21. Lewis Perry Curtis writes that: "to enhance the recognizability of [...] national types, artists added such appropriate accessories as knee breeches, trousers, pantaloons, shillelaghs, scimitars, clay pipes, hats, caps, and beer mugs". Lewis Perry Curtis, *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, p. XIX. Interestingly, in the case of *Self-Portrait with a Rustic Companion*, Nicol uses symbols of Irish identity to depict his sitter, but the artist himself is not painted with any recognisable Scottish prop.

22. Curtis, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

23. Cruikshank provided a similarly brutal imagery of the 1798 rebellion led by the United Irishmen with his 1845 illustration entitled *Murder of George Crawford and his Granddaughter*, portraying a desperate young woman in white surrounded by cruel rebels who have already slain her grandfather and dog with pikes.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 45, 96.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
26. Martin J. Mitchell, "Irish Catholics in the West of Scotland in the Nineteenth Century: Despised by Scottish workers and controlled by the Church?", in Martin J. Mitchell, ed., *New Perspectives on the Irish in Scotland*, Edinburgh, Birlinn, 2008, pp. 1-19, p. 1.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
28. Curtis, *op. cit.*, p. XI.
29. This recalls the crowd scenes by Brueghel the Elder, such as *Peasant Wedding* (1566–69), in which the artist might have painted himself as the man with a sword sitting on the far right. Alexander Wied, *Brueghel*, transl. F. Moulinat & L. Pericolo, Paris, Gallimard & Electa, 1997, p. 140. Brueghel was said to take part in such peasant festivities, see Desmond Shawe-Taylor & Jennifer Scott, *De Brueghel à Rubens, The British Royal Collection*, transl. Johan-Frederik Hel Guedj, Bruxelles, Actes Sud, 2008, p. 29. Similarly, Hubert and Jan van Eyck could have painted themselves as the third and fourth judges on horseback in *The Mystic Lamb* (1420–1432). Since the Renaissance, artists have included representations of themselves as minor characters in pictures which do not belong to the genre of self-portraits. This practice allowed them to leave a trace of their existence in their masterpieces.
30. Galligan, *op. cit.*, p. 159.
31. Even before Wilkie, another Scottish artist, Alexander Carse (c. 1770–1843), had depicted a village fair in 1796 with *Oldham Stock Fair*. David Wilkie, *Pitlessie Fair*, oil on canvas, 61.5 x 110.5 cm, 1804, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.
32. James L. Caw, *Scottish Painting, Past and Present, 1620-1908*, Bath, Kingsmead, reprint 1975, p. 103.
33. Fintan Cullen, *Visual Politics, The Representation of Ireland, 1750-1930*, Cork, Cork UP, pp. 117-125.
34. Nicholas Tromans believes that it could be one of the characters discussing below the main trees on the right. See Nicholas Tromans, *David Wilkie, Painter of Every Day Life*, Dulwich, Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2002, p. 50.
35. William Powell Frith, *The Derby Day*, oil on canvas, 101.5 x 223.5 cm, 1856-8, Tate Gallery, London.
36. Julia Thomas, *Victorian Narrative Painting*, London, Tate Publishing, 2000, p. 27.
37. Brendan Rooney, "Donnybrook Fair; Erskine Nicol", in Brendan Rooney (ed.), *A Time and a Place, Two Centuries of Irish Social Life*, Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland, 2006, pp. 141-144, p. 143.
38. Royal Scottish Academy (ed.), *Catalogue of the Exhibition of the Royal Scottish Academy*, Edinburgh, Royal Scottish Academy, 1860, p. 20.
39. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
40. Séamas Ó Maitiú, "Donnybrook Fair, Carnival versus Lent", *History Ireland*, vol. 4, n° 1 (Spring 1996), pp. 21-26, p. 22.
41. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
44. Jacob Bell in a letter to Frith, quoted by Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

46. However, it should be mentioned that “the symbolism used in such images could only be understood by an informed minority”, to repeat the words of Julia Thomas (*Victorian Narrative Paintings*, *op. cit.*, p. 30) who explains that art critics became more important thanks to narrative paintings: “the growth of narrative painting paralleled the growth of art criticism. The critic came to prominence as one who could correctly interpret the image and teach the public how to do so”. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

47. Julia Thomas, *Victorian Narrative Painting*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

49. It should also be said that Thomas identifies a last feature of narrative pictures, their “problematic documentary evidence” as such paintings leave out some aspects of their contemporary society (*ibid.*, p. 33). Nicol’s picture is no exception to the rule as it represents a fair that had been banned four years before the painting’s exhibition, in 1855.

50. Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2006, p. 114.

51. Although he can be considered as the heir of Wilkie given his artistic choices, Nicol does not insist on his Scottish origins in the self-portraits that I have found. Rather than showing his nationality, these pictures are made to demonstrate his skills.

52. Brendan Rooney, ed., *A Time and a Place, Two Centuries of Irish Social Life*, Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland, 2006, p. 142.

53. Galligan, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

54. For more details on Erskine Nicol and the Scottish school of art, see Amélie Dochy, “A Scottish Art and Heart: The Transparent Influence of the Scottish School of Art on Erskine Nicol’s Depictions of Ireland”, *Études écossaises*, Grenoble, ELLUG, 2013, vol. 16, pp. 119-140.

55. Galligan, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

ABSTRACTS

This article explores three self-portraits by Erskine Nicol (1825–1904) entitled *Self-Portrait with a Rustic Companion* (1855), *Donnybrook Fair* (1859) and *Two Figures in an Interior* (1863), in which the artist is, paradoxically for a Scottish painter, represented in an Irish environment. The setting effectively erases his nationality. These paintings question the genre of self-portrait even if they bear some of its typical characteristics, since their elements of caricature or their inclusion of other characters indicate a will to go beyond a self-image. In fact, these paintings are invitations to discover the painter’s talent and his artistic vision of the world.

Cet article étudie trois autoportraits d’Erskine Nicol (1825–1904) intitulés *Self-Portrait with a Rustic Companion* (1855), *Donnybrook Fair* (1859) et *Two Figures in an Interior* (1863), dans lesquels l’artiste s’est représenté dans un environnement irlandais, ce qui est paradoxal pour un peintre d’origine écossaise. En effet, son identité nationale s’efface au profit d’un tel décor.

Marquées par certaines caractéristiques typiques du genre, ces images mettent toutefois en question le genre même de l'autoportrait en incluant des éléments de caricature ou la présence d'autres personnages qui signalent une volonté de dépasser l'image de soi. Ces tableaux constituent en fait une invitation à découvrir le talent du peintre et sa vision artistique du monde.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Erskine Nicol, autoportrait, identité, écossais, Irlande

Keywords: Erskine Nicol, self-portrait, identity, Scottish, Ireland

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