

The Burrell bequest A cast-iron case for change

From Herald Scotland archive

WEDNESDAY 15 OCTOBER 1997

On the one side sits a group of trustees whose members are said to be as negative and obstructive as an old-style Soviet dictator in adhering to the letter of Sir William Burrell's bequest to the city of Glasgow.

On the other sits the indefatigable Julian Spalding, Glasgow's director of museums, who, with the city fathers' backing, is seeking to have the terms of the bequest overturned so that the Burrell collection can be shown abroad. Mr Spalding has made many enemies during his tenure as museums director and, if his future is not exactly riding on the outcome, he has much to gain from the result going his way. Presiding over it all in a grand municipal setting are parliamentary commissioners - a lord, a viscount, and two earls - who must decide whether the city council has made the case for, in effect, a private Act of Parliament nullifying the restriction on overseas exhibitions. Like much else in the arts world, this might seem somewhat esoteric and irrelevant, but in the substance of the case and its implications it is a storm of Warwick vase rather than teacup proportions. Burrell, a shipping magnate and capricious plunderer of worldwide artefacts, was an awkward cuss in his old age when he imposed the ban on his collection going overseas, apparently because of his worries about the efficacy of seaworthy transport. With sophisticated packaging and transportation nowadays that is not a concern, as the commissioners have heard. Of much greater concern, it seems, is the principle of trust on the benefactor's part being breached and if the commissioners support the council in this particular case there will be a genuine fear that bequests will dry up in the future because the wealthy givers of art will conclude that their wishes will eventually be overridden. That is an important point at issue. The National Gallery of London, one of the great galleries in the world, got round it by effectively turning down gifts and bequests which imposed excessive restrictions. That was not an option for Glasgow. It did not even have a gallery to house Burrell's collection. Eventually it did and the Burrell gallery has played a significant part in helping transform Glasgow from a smokestack to a tourism city. Indeed, its early success was phenomenal, but by 1995 it had experienced a 70% drop in visitor numbers. The Charles Rennie Mackintosh "brand" has been hugely successful for Glasgow, thanks in part at least to highly popular overseas exhibitions. In his disinterested but crucial evidence yesterday the National Gallery director, Mr Neil MacGregor, said that no major art collection in the world which could lend and borrow chose not to. There are obvious benefits. Attendance at the borrowing museum is boosted on two fronts, because of interest in the art which it has temporarily on show and through the greater exposure abroad to the work which it has lent. But it has to be reciprocal and, due to Burrell's conditions, Glasgow's hands are tied. Against a trend of falling visitor numbers under the current restrictions these seem to us to be sound enough reasons for overturning the bequest. But, we believe, there are also legal grounds. Under the National Heritage Scotland Act of 1985 the terms of a bequest can be contravened by national galleries after 25 years, a period long since passed in relation to the Burrell collection. It is housed in a public

gallery and it is at the very least of national importance. There is, we conclude, a cast-iron case for change and if it should already have been made on legal grounds we might wonder what all the fuss has been about, particularly in relation to lawyers' fees, which mount by the day.