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...story it traces back elsewhere, and pushes on to explore later developments. The first painting we see is "The Storm" by William McTaggart, painted in 1890. The tumultuous, deliberately unpolished use of paint in McTaggart's late coastal landscapes led to him being called a Scottish Impressionist. But conceptually he is far from Monet, because his work encodes social and moral references, not least to the Highland clearances, and consequent mass emigration, that McTaggart had seen in his youth. That kind of moral vision is precisely what French Impressionism rejected.

...stable's outdoor oil sketches and, more directly, the work of contemporary artists from the Hague who were championed in Scotland, especially by the Aberdonian tycoon John Forbes White.

...One protégé of White, the painter George Reid, was sent to Holland to train with the outdoor painters of the Hague School. Returning home, Reid shed all narrative content in favour of the study of light and natural colour effects. His view of Montrose (1888) with its Constable-like cloudscape, is not quite Impressionism, but one of the outstanding Scottish paintings in the

...that is all his own.
...This is a broad exhibition in which, as well as painters already mentioned, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Cézanne and Matisse have a place. Taken as a whole, it magnificently justifies the view that Scottish collectors and artists from the 1890s to the 1920s were far in advance of the English in their appreciation of the new French aesthetic.

'Impressionism and Scotland': Royal Scottish Academy Building, National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh, until October 12, tel: +44 (0)131 624 6200

Prize and prejudice

...on of award and auction is ruffling the art world's feathers, says Emily Stokes

...jury (this year Tim Marlow of the White Cube, Philly Adams of the Hatchi Gallery, Rachel Campbell-Johnson of The Times and Jarvis Cocker of Pulp) from a long-list nominated by "art world insiders". The winner is chosen by marking each work out of five – easier than having the jury in a room together, according to Bilton (although, when I call the Sovereign office just before the shortlist is announced, they seem to have lost Cocker up a mountain). Half the proceeds of each sale will this year be given to Kids Company, a charity founded by Pamela Batmanghelidj to provide support to inner-city young people; the rest goes to the artist.

...When I ask Bilton whether he has received any objections from galleries about a system that does away with their fee, he assures me that "they're usually happy to

...participate because that 50 per cent goes to charity. Plus their artist gets to be on a prestigious shortlist".

...But can such a young prize really have the prestige and effect that Bilton claims? His prize is distinctive, he says, because its focus is European and because its aims are philanthropic. Credibility is not an issue, he explains; each painting has been nominated by an expert.

...Yet some art world insiders suggest that, notwithstanding their philanthropic aims, new art prizes can be riddled with problems.

...Sceptics might wonder whether, by keeping the winning piece, Sovereign has found an inexpensive way of building a collection. There are precedents for prize-winning

...works forming collections – the John Moores prize-winners, for instance, go to the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool – but here, the money is given to the artist in addition to the cost of acquiring the work. And, although entering a public collection can increase the value of an artist's work, the Sovereign Foundation's collection does not yet have the same kudos as other prizes.

...Graham Crowley, former professor of painting at the Royal College of Art and winner of the John Moores Prize in 2006, has been on the jury for the Moores prize and several others. He suggests that the principle of combining art award and art auction is "bonkers" and constitutes "a patchwork quilt" of different aims. Crowley advocates the John Moores Prize because it is founded on a commitment to painting and because its judges are a "savvy bunch", favouring practitioners over critics and – his pet hate – celebrity judges. He argues that art prizes gain authority only by building a reputation for picking artists who subsequently win wider recognition. Not all juries are capable of identifying talent in this way. "I've been on a jury where one celebrity couldn't be bothered to come so his wife came instead," he confides.

...Crowley is also keen to challenge the assumption that winning an arts prize will increase the value of an artist's work. He admits that the value of paintings by Peter Doig and Michael Raedecker rose by as much as 200 per cent soon after they won the John Moores Prize but says that the statistic should be treated with caution; such increases mark the juries' ability to choose artists whose "stock was already rising".

...Despite such reservations, it seems likely that art prizes with a philanthropic twist will become more common. As well as understanding businessmen's desire to give to charity, Bilton has clearly spotted the craze for auctions as a form of entertainment. At a time when more and more people are looking to invest in contemporary art as a part of their lifestyle, art prizes offer an attractive entry point at the lower end of the market. And there is always that dream, however unlikely, that a work acquired on a whim will increase in value to Hirstian heights.

The shortlist of the Sovereign European Art Prize is announced next week www.sovereignartfoundation.com



Nominee
"Last Riot 2, Tondo #23" by Tatiana Arzamasova (AES+FGROUP)

Sale of the week

Finery and festivity

Fair: Salzburg World Fine Art Fair

Location: The Residenz, Salzburg, Austria. www.saltzberg-faf.com

Date: Saturday August 9 to Sunday August 17; 11am-7pm daily (until 9pm Thursday); admission €10

Need to know: Coinciding with the Salzburg music festival, the second edition of the Salzburg World Fine Art Fair has attracted 28 leading European dealers who will offer furniture, paintings, tapestry and photographs.

Highlights: This fair promises to showcase pieces of exceptional quality. Old Master specialist Bernheim will offer two 17th-century Flemish flower paintings, one by Jan Brueghel the Younger, the other by Jacob van Walscapelle – estimated at €850,000 each. Robbig will display a superb pair of mid-18th-century Meissen spaniels priced at €75,000. From Christopher Sheppard, there's a rare Islamic mould-blown blue glass bowl that has survived intact for more than 700 years, priced at €30,000.

Compiled by Simon de Burton