RICHD WRIGHT is best known for the fact that he paints on walls rather than on canvases and that, despite their beauty and complexity and all the extreme effort that goes into their creation, his works are usually painted over at the end of an exhibition. The Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art decided several years ago that they would like to commission Wright to make a major wall-painting in one of the public (rather than exhibiting) areas of the Dean Gallery and to make it permanent rather than temporary. This dream has now become reality thanks to money from the Scottish Government’s Expo Fund and the Edinburgh Art Festival.

The painting in the west stairwell of the Dean Gallery is the largest and most complex permanent work by Wright so far and the only one in Scotland. Wright won the Turner Prize in 2009 with a gold-leaf painting whose stunning beauty captivated the public imagination and gained great critical acclaim. This work was always destined to disappear after the Turner Prize exhibition finished. The fact that Scotland, where Wright trained and where he lives, now has a permanent example of his work is fitting.

Nowadays we have become used to considering paintings as objects, both moveable and sellable, that we tend to forget that in the early days of western art, in classical antiquity, during the medieval period, even in the early Renaissance, a lot of painting was done on walls and ceilings, often in the form of frescoes, to decorate and give meaning to architectural spaces. The use of moveable supports such as manuscripts, altars and various types of decorative art gradually evolved and at first this sort of painting had utilitarian ends. The idea of painting having a completely non-utilitarian, purely aesthetic raison d’être came later, beginning in the Renaissance and was linked to the rise of private, non-religious patronage—at first by kings and queens and by the aristocracy and later by the wealthy middle-classes. This led to the rise of the individual and named painter and to a growing tension between the power (and money) of the patrons and buyers of art (the collectors) and felt need for autonomy of artists, painting what and how they wanted.

This tension was on the whole fruitful for the development of art and of painting in particular, but, since painters were usually dependent on the money that patrons
and collectors paid for their works, it was the market that had a decisive say in what painters produced. In the 1980s this power of the marketplace became very obvious. There was almost a feeding frenzy for expressive, largely figurative painting that many artists in Europe and America were eager to produce for. Wright was painting on canvas at this time but increasingly he felt alienated by the climate of greed and by the control of the marketplace. He gave up painting for a time and then decided to go back to art school (in Glasgow) to study for a master’s degree. It was at this time that he began to revise his view of art and painting. He turned away from considering painting solely as discrete objects and investigated ways of concentrating on painting as ideas. In an interview in 2000 he said: “About ten years ago I began working in what for me was a new way. This seemed to have something to do with the action of painting and turned out to mean working directly on the wall, which in turn implied thinking about context and architecture as part of the content of the work.”

The reaction against easel painting was partly due to its being traded so nakedly as a commodity. Painting on walls could not be traded and had no commodity value, especially if it was painted out after being shown. Another reason for the move to wall painting was the perceived arbitrary nature of easel painting. There is no objective reason why a canvas should be any size or shape; why any particular subject matter should be treated; and why any particular style or way of painting should be preferred. When real walls were used in a real building with its own function and history, there was at least something to base one’s decisions on. Wright drew particular inspiration from the modernist, utopian tradition of abstract painting. Artists such as Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) and El Lissitzky (1890-1941) believed that ultimately individual paintings were not needed in a properly conceived and constructed architectural environment. Indeed, Wright has often referred to his works as “constructions”. It is no surprise then that Wright often uses abstract shapes and lines to articulate the spaces he paints. But these are not the sole part of his formal vocabulary. He has also used the gothic motifs (especially skulls) of club fliers and record/CD covers and the emblematic, even heraldic forms of medieval manuscripts and room decorations. Indeed, this is what Wright has chosen as the repeated shape in The Stairwell Project in the Dean Gallery. It is organic and recalls a bud or flower, like the fleur-de-lys patterning on medieval buildings. However, by painting them black, Wright has made these delicate shapes take on a new “gothic”, even menacing aspect. The choice of the flower-like motif is inspired by the honeysuckle design of
the original, circular decoration on the ceiling of the stairwell, but, in addition, the rows and rows of delicate organic shapes make one mindful of the generations and generations of orphans who climbed and descended the stairs of the building when it used to be an orphanage. the Dean

not being simply a physical building, but its history, its present function, the life within. in this light the black buds/flowers take on more ominous connotations of disease, sickness and death. child mortality in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was much higher than it is today.

the way wright orders his motifs over the walls in his different projects varies greatly. occasionally he will isolate a motif (or a pair of them) and make a focused composition. sometimes he will work with symmetries or rorschach-like doublings (although this is more common in his independent drawings). but, most commonly, he has recourse to the multiple repetition of forms. the forms can be purely geometrical, such as lines, but they can also be complex, organic shapes, as he has used in the stairwell project.

repetition is a favourite practice in architecture. it introduces order and structure. but it can be monotonous and, when carried out on a large scale, even overwhelming. that is why variations and subtle alterations are so important in architecture—and in painting. in the stairwell project wright repeats the flower-like motif, but changes its orientation, its size and alignment according to where it is placed on the complex three-dimensional structure of the stairwell. the stairwells of the Dean Gallery are the building’s most notable architectural feature, both from the outside and within. indeed, they are quite overwhelming. coming from the narrow and relatively dark main corridor of the ground floor, one is struck by how light-filled and monumental they are. they have a clairestory just below the ceiling that lets in huge amounts of light. at the

that the stairwell towers are about to collapse—under the impact of the light, wind and outside world in general. The stairwells provide a constant reminder of

the natural world beyond the confines of the building. Hence the brilliant choice of the flower motif by wright.

the complex architecture of the clairestory, with its square ceiling and round decorative (floral) feature, its window surrounds the corners of the walls and the large cornice beneath: these are all covered with rows and rows of buds/flowers, but by no means in a uniform manner. in the four corners of the walls wright has created nodal points from which curved lines-waves-of black shapes radiate outwards. It is in this area that the shapes
are smallest and closest together. Like iron filings reacting to a magnetic force, the shapes create patterns that point to the natural forces that underlie all reality. Indeed, as modern physics has shown, matter is made up solely of energy (just as light is). Substance is, if not an illusion, then simply the way that we and other sentient beings perceive the world. Wright’s wall-painting tackles the most fundamental of all issues: light and dark, energy and substance, life and death, the very subject of Genesis in the Bible. “And God said, let there be light; and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the Darkness.”

Although Wright would probably hate to be mentioned in this connection—he is very modest—this is also one of the subjects tackled by Michelangelo in his paintings on than ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Likewise the choice of flower shapes to symbolize nature and matter has a long and illustrious pedigree: not only the flowers in the margins of medieval manuscripts and in the mille-fleur tapestries of medieval courts, but the wind-blown roses that surround Venus in Botticelli’s The Birth of Venus.

The power of Wright’s wall-paintings lies in their fusion of formal directness (which does not mean that they are not complex and subtle) and depth and range of association. He responds to the spaces in which he paints with extraordinary acuity, homing in on its very essence, and then turns this into works of rare beauty. Thomas Hamilton’s Dean Orphan Hospital is one of Edinburgh’s finest buildings with a long history of different uses. Wright has now produced a fitting work of art to commemorate that history and to point it forward into the future.

Richard Wright
Born in 1960 in London, Richard Wright trained at Edinburgh College of Art, graduating with a BA (Hons) in painting in 1982. He then completed his Masters at Glasgow School of Art between 1993-95 and is still based within that city. He is famous for his intricate and usually ephemeral wall-based works, referencing imagery from both high and low culture. Wright has been in several high profile solo shows including, Gagosian Gallery, London BQ, Berlin 2009, ‘Richard Wright’, MCASD Downtown, San Diego 2007, DCA Dundee 2004 and Tate Liverpool and Kunsthalle Bern in 2001.

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