

Ninna Pulli

Reflections on an Internship at Lord Elgin's Broomhall House

One could not possibly imagine a more impressive setting for their very first internship than Lord Elgin's private residence, Broomhall House, in Inverkeithing, Scotland. Whilst studying at Master's level at the University of Edinburgh I and a fellow-student, Brenna Barks, had the unique opportunity to catalogue 18th and 19th-century architectural drawings of the stately country house. Although today a great number of historical estates belong to the National Trust, Broomhall House remains the private residence of the current Earl and Countess of Elgin. Four years after the internship, memories of the project remain fresh as if it were yesterday.

The cataloging of the collection of architectural drawings was a collaborative project between the University of Edinburgh and the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) [\[1\]](#). The aim was to catalogue 18 folders of 18th- and 19th-century architectural drawings pertaining to Broomhall House: plans, sections and elevations, perspective sketches and detailed designs of friezes, mouldings and capitals. The plans were never executed, however, and the drawings are now archived within Perplex sleeves in folios kept at the house. This fascinating collection of architectural proposals were drafted by a number of prolific architects of the Georgian and Victorian eras, architects such as Thomas Harrison, John Adam, Robert Smirke and Charles Robert Cockerell.



South front of Broomhall House as depicted in a print by Joseph Swan and James Stewart ca. 1840. Caption on image: "Broomhall, The Seat of the Right Honourable Earl of Elgin. Fife-Shire. (c) RCAHMS

Dr. John Lowrey, senior lecturer in Architectural History at the University of Edinburgh, supervised the internship and prepared us for the task at hand. We had the opportunity to receive training from RCAHMS on how to catalogue and handle items of this particular nature, and we were acquainted with Canmore, the RCAHMS's public online search engine for the organisation's database [2]. Prior to collecting the data at Broomhall, we were to create a comprehensive catalogue system to enable further research in the future. Our notes on the drawings were to be uploaded onto Canmore later on, and therefore our working methods needed to be in accordance with RCAHMS's standards.

History of Broomhall House dates back to at least the year 1702 when the original house was built at the commission of the 3rd Earl of Elgin. Later in 1766, the 5th Earl hired architect John Adam to refashion the mansion. However, the renovations remained uncompleted by the time of his death in 1771. The 7th Earl of Elgin, largely known for the famous "Elgin marbles" [3] sought to complete his father's work, commissioning Thomas Harrison as the architect to continue the remodelling of Broomhall House. John Adam's plans made room for the vision of Thomas Harrison, whose modern, Neo-Classical style was to reshape the face of the country house. The Earl must not have been entirely pleased with the improvements on Broomhall as he commissioned designs from a number of other renowned architects of the time, both in Britain and beyond. As mentioned before, none of these plans were executed, quite possibly due to the Earl's financial troubles stemming from the substantial costs incurred in a divorce from his wife and the shipment of the Parthenon marbles to Britain.

The drawings link back to a tumultuous time when the fate of the Parthenon marbles was still unclear: some drawings suggest incorporation of Classic sculptures or their casts into the architecture of the house, though most do not. The wings of the house designed by Harrison were demolished at the wish of the 7th Earl, and no record remains of who designed the ones that were built in 1874. Made of Coade stone, on the exterior the estate is of 18th and 19th century design. On the inside the house is equally true to the era, with fantastic furniture and works of art that lend the impression of a place where time has stood still for a good century or two. My, did that give the proverbial kicks to someone who loves art and history and religiously watches BBC's period dramas... Keeping up an air of cool professionalism proved challenging at times when the surroundings were so enchanting.

Over the course of four or five months, my internship partner and I made our way from Edinburgh to Inverkeithing each Wednesday morning. Inverkeithing is approximately 20 minutes north of Edinburgh by train, though Broomhall House is still quite a distance from the centre of the town. Each time Lady Elgin herself gave us a lift to the house and back to the train station – a very kind thing to do as the walk from the public road through the estate's grounds to the house itself would have been enough to wind one. On the way to the house, passing through the grounds of rather pastoral scenery, we saw sheep grazing on the fields and in the midst of morning mist great numbers of pheasants strutted around everywhere we looked (at least before the start of the hunting season).

Prior to the internship, Brenna and I, an American and a Finn, had never met a Lord or Lady before nor had we been to a private country house of this calibre. In my excitement I even googled how to properly address someone with the title "Lord" or "Lady", a memory that now evokes a smile. Lady Elgin was always very approachable and considerate toward us, and in the end perhaps it was slightly unnecessary to put so much energy into worrying about the formalities. The downstairs kitchen had at some stage been labelled "Mum's kitchen", a detail that in my mind speaks volumes of the general warm atmosphere of the historical yet modern house.

I only met Lord Elgin, the 11th Earl, very briefly [4]. He is of a respectable age and together with the rest of the family he mostly stayed in the parts of the house that we rarely used. Brenna and I were stationed at the opposite end of the house most of the time, deeply focused on the drawings, cataloguing all 131 of them.

Most of the work was conducted in the dining room where the 18 folios containing the drawings covered the entire, long dining table. One of the many awe-inspiring items in the same room was an impressive, sculptural dark-wood fireplace from Princess Anne of Denmark. It turned out that it had originally served as a bed headboard, interestingly enough. Among other distractingly fascinating items throughout the house were naturally the Parthenon marbles, Robert the Bruce's sword, beautiful jade artwork from China and portraits of the family's ancestors from centuries gone by. Enormous oriental-style carpets covered the floors, and large oil paintings depicting 19th century landscapes and game hunts hung on the walls. As we took reference photographs of the architectural drawings in the better-lit music room, or dance hall as I call it in my mind, we also came across a fantastic Chinese closet containing a miniature theatre, which captured my attention. Even though Lady Elgin provided us with an extra heater, during winter months the dining room grew fairly cold and to warm up a bit we ventured into other parts of the first floor just for the exercise, mindful of the family's privacy, of course.

Each Wednesday, before we arrived, a kettle and a tray bearing two cups and a plateful of biscuits awaited us in the dining room. Small kindnesses such as this definitely made the already interesting and one-of-a-kind project even more unforgettable as a work experience. To study a fairly unknown collection of fascinating architectural drawings at Lord Elgin's estate felt like a privilege in itself. On the first day of the internship we had not thought of bringing lunch with us, and Lady Elgin kindly brought us pots of delicious soup that she had made. I distinctly remember thinking how absurd the situation was: there we were, in the historical Broomhall House, eating pea soup and biscuits that a Lady had prepared for us, and sitting in front of an oil painting by Esteban Murillo.

A great thank you to my friend Brenna for all the help and for the reminiscing of the experience. Brenna Ariel Barks, MSc, is a dress, social, and art historian, specialising in the eighteenth through early twentieth centuries examining cultural exchange and the "exotic other" in dress and art. She has just finished a temporary position at the FIDM Museum in Los Angeles and is the Managing Editor at the international academic fashion blog, Worn Through, in addition to running her own blog, Of Ravens and Writing Desks.

Ninna Pulli, MScs, has studied fine art and art history in Cardiff and Edinburgh and worked as a researcher in the Museum Centre of Turku.

LINKS:

• [Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, profile of Broomhall House on Canmore](#)

• [The British Museum, on the ElginMarbles](#)

• [Worn Through](#)

[Of Ravens and Writing Desks](#)

[The University of Edinburgh](#)

1. Royal Commission on ancient and historical monuments of Scotland Independent non-departmental government body financed by Parliament, responsible for recording, interpreting and promoting the historical environment of Scotland.[↑](#)
2. Canmore contains information on over 300,000 archaeological, architectural, maritime and industrial sites in Scotland[↑](#)
3. For those interested in history and art, the name Elgin quite likely brings to mind the famous “Elgin marbles” – the classical Greek reliefs and sculptures that Thomas Bruce, the 7th Earl of Elgin, recovered from Parthenon in 1801–1805 and brought to Britain. At the time the 7th Earl of Elgin was Britain’s ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, a realm that ruled Greece until 1921. In 1816 the marbles were sold to the British Parliament at a price lower than what the shipping of the marbles had totaled. Some of the marbles that the British Museum could not house are currently kept in Broomhall House. The subject of the marbles’ ownership has been questioned ever since their removal and the subject remain controversial to this day. Over time, both before and after the marbles were removed, nature and man have left their mark on these unique, irreplaceable works of art. Legalities aside, having admired the collection kept in the British Museum as well as the one in Broomhall House, I am simply glad a great number of the marbles have survived.[↑](#)
4. Lord Elgin holds the titles of Earl of Elgin, Earl of Kincardine, Baron Elgin, Lord Bruce of Kinloss and Lord Bruce of Torry. He is the clan chief of the Scottish Clan Bruce, a royal house in the 14th century that produced two kings of Scotland.[↑](#)