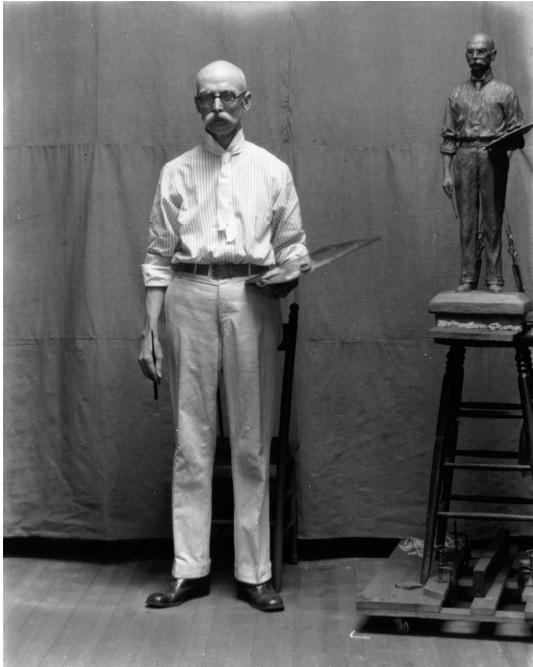


# Roderick D. MacKenzie



Born in London, England, artist and muralist John Roderick Dempster MacKenzie (1865-1941) spent part of his youth in a Mobile, Alabama, orphanage, and went on to train at some of the finest schools in the United States and France. He later spent much time in India. He returned to Mobile, where he executed a widely acclaimed series of pastel drawings of steel mills. During his lifetime, he was considered one of Alabama's most important artists.

The MacKenzie family immigrated to Mobile in 1872. Upon the death of Roderick's mother in 1880, MacKenzie's father split up the family. One sibling was adopted, two others were sent to live with relatives in Scotland, and he and another sibling were sent to live at Mobile's Episcopal Church Home (Wilmer Hall), founded by Bishop Richard Hooker Wilmer. This community and its members recognized and encouraged his passion for

art, providing scholarship funds for his professional training at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts, from 1884 to 1886.

Returning to Mobile, MacKenzie executed portraits, landscapes, and scenes of Mardi Gras activities and was soon recognized as a rising young artist of Mobile, even taking on pupils. As with many American artists of the period, Paris beckoned, and by the fall of 1889, he was studying painting and sculpture at *L'Académie Julian* and exhibiting at the *Salon*. MacKenzie did not find the academy challenging enough for his talent and took and passed the entrance exam for the more competitive *l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts* and attended classes. He married Charlotte Elizabeth Barnes of Boston, 20 years his senior, in 1891 in France. At the request of art dealers in Calcutta, India, who wished MacKenzie to produce paintings of tigers and jungles that were popular at the time, the couple set out by ship for India the following year on an adventure that lasted 14 years.

A British citizen, MacKenzie was well-connected in official circles. In 1902, he was commissioned by the English Viceroy and the Indian government to paint the official picture of the *Durbar, the State Entry into Delhi*, on the occasion of the proclamation of Edward VII as Emperor of India. The success of the monumental painting (now in the Victoria Memorial Hall, Calcutta), prompted the editors of the October 1905 issue of *Men and Women in India* to label him as the best artist in Asia. Invitations to join hunts with the Maharajah of Cooch Behar and the Nawab of Bahawalpur provided him with the necessary experiences to paint a series of commissioned compositions of jungles and tigers. Journeys to the Khyber Pass region and long residencies on the Afghanistan and

Baluchistan (now the Balochistan province of Pakistan) borders helped produce two of his most impressive large-scale works: *Baluchis* and *Our Restless Neighbors—the Afghans*, which were exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1901. Both were translated into photogravures (a type of photographic etching) in London in 1905.

Despite significant public acclaim, financial security eluded MacKenzie throughout his life. Residing in Paris from 1906-1907 and in London from 1908-1913, he sought to capitalize on the public's fascination with exotic places and customs of Asia. Photos of his Paris studio document the recreation of a Southeast Asian setting, filled with souvenirs and works he had created in India. Declining commissions, nostalgia for the Deep South, and the political unrest that eventually resulted in World War I motivated MacKenzie to depart for New York City in 1913 and eventually return to Alabama

When MacKenzie returned to Mobile in 1914 after a 25-year absence at age 49, he was undoubtedly the most well-trained and well-traveled painter, sculptor, and printmaker in Alabama. Long-time friends worked to re-establish his career by commissioning portraits and sculptures of themselves. Other Alabama artists, including Doris Alexander, Hannah Elliot, Carrie Hill, Genevieve Southerland, and Eugene Walter, eventually studied with him either at his A School of Art at 200½ Dauphin Street, which he established in 1917, or privately in Birmingham. During World War I, he executed some propaganda projects for the United States government, but his work provided for only a modest existence, and he and his wife continued to live in his studio.

Charlotte's death in January 1920 closed a chapter in MacKenzie's life and opened

another. That year, he became a member of the American Federation of the Arts, was appointed to the art commission of the state of Alabama, and began to envision what would become the signature project that occupied his life for the next five years, 43 pastels of the Alabama steel industry. Created on site and mainly at night at the Tennessee Coal Iron & Railroad (TCI) plant in Ensley in 1921 and 1922, TCI President Gordon Crawford thought the pictures the best such work he had ever seen. Exhibited first at the Little Gallery Annex in Birmingham in 1922, they were instantly recognized as an inspired series brilliantly exploiting the vivid colors of pastel set on sheets of black paper. Beginning in May 1923, the pastels were shown for more than three years at various locations in New York City: the spring meeting of the Steel Institute at the Hotel Commodore; 1924 at the Anderson Galleries, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Grand Central Galleries; and in 1925 at the Alabama section of the Southern States Exposition in the Grand Palace. During "Alabama Day" at the exposition on May 20 at the Hotel Astor, MacKenzie, along with Helen Keller and others, was officially inducted into the Alabama Hall of Fame. Despite the best efforts of Marie Bankhead Owen, director of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, and others, MacKenzie was never able to find a buyer for the series, to which he had added four panels of the Westfield Blast Furnace in 1931. Although he kept them throughout his life, they were dispersed to family and friends at his death, their importance long-forgotten. Those that have survived make clear that they merit being considered among the true masterworks of American pastel.

A December 1925 fire destroyed his Dauphin Street studio, but 1926 began with news that MacKenzie had been chosen by

the State Capitol Commission to execute eight murals for the rotunda of the State Capitol in Montgomery. The series, depicting episodes from Alabama history, demonstrates MacKenzie's proven abilities with large-scale painting. In addition to the eight canvases, which are still on display, he designed all the decorative plasterwork. The entire project was finished in early 1931 and brought him additional recognition and a reliable income. Building upon the imagery in his steel industry pastels, in 1932 MacKenzie created and exhibited a corresponding series of large lithographs, including a fiery scene of an electric furnace in Anniston.

Financial hardships brought on by the Great Depression led MacKenzie to participate in the Public Works of Art Project, for which he created several pastels of Mobile scenes. He was denied further work, however, when his lack of U.S. citizenship was discovered. Ever the optimist, in 1939 he completed one final project, pastels chronicling the construction in Mobile of the Bankhead Tunnel, the first underwater tunnel built in the South. Trained in the academic tradition of the nineteenth-century, Roderick MacKenzie, especially in his pastels, succeeded in uniting those skills with a modernists' enthusiasm for depicting the events of his own time. Mackenzie died on January 27, 1941, and was buried in Mobile's Magnolia Cemetery.



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