

The McBey Studentship in Art History: James McBey: Art and Autobiography

University of Aberdeen, Oct 01, 2025

Application deadline: Jul 31, 2025

www.abdn.ac.uk/study/funding/655#:~:text=This%20PhD%20studentship%20focuses%20on,the%20art%20world%20of%20Aberdeen.

Hans Hones, University of Aberdeen

Applications are invited for The McBey Studentship in Art History, for a project titled James McBey: Art and Autobiography. The three-year studentship consists of a fee waiver at home (UK) rates and a maintenance grant of c. £20,000 p.a. The successful candidate will also have access to a modest research budget, including resources to organise an academic conference.

James McBey (1883-1959) was a celebrated Aberdeenshire-born artist and traveller, and a key protagonist in the 20th-century revival of etching in Britain. He is best-known today for his work as official war artist to the Egyptian Expeditionary Force and for his considerable commercial success in the 1920s, both as an etcher and a society portraitist. More recently, interest in McBey's work was revived by the 2023 exhibition *Shadows and Light* at Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums.

This PhD studentship focuses on McBey's early career. In particular, the project will examine McBey's autobiographical self-fashioning, using this approach as a springboard to reconsider his early training and career within the art world of Aberdeen.

Key research questions may include:

How did McBey's own writings, especially his autobiography *The Early Life of James McBey* (published posthumously in 1978), shape perceptions of the artist's life? How does this text sit within a longer tradition of artist biographies and anecdotes?

McBey was no tormented genius but a highly organized professional with a strong work ethic. To what extent was this attitude rooted in a specific Protestant ethic, shaped by his upbringing in North-East Scotland? What role do narratives of chance and destiny play in McBey's autobiographical writings?

In retrospect, McBey described his formative years in Aberdeen as an obstacle that the dormant genius had to overcome. To what extent did the artworld of Aberdeen provide educational and commercial opportunities for an aspiring artist that might complicate or challenge the artist's autobiographical assessment?

McBey's career coincided with a period of critical and commercial re-evaluation of works on paper

in Britain. How was the artist's work situated by the historiography of the etching revival? What role did friends and collaborators, such as Martin Hardie, play in promoting McBey's career?

A key resource for the project is the James McBey Print Room and Library at Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums, founded by his wife Marguerite in 1961. It comprises his personal collection of artworks, sketchbooks, scrapbooks, diaries, photographs and letters. Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums holds the world's largest archive of artworks by James McBey.

The project will be supervised by Dr Hans C. Hönes, Senior Lecturer in the Art History Department, University of Aberdeen. The project is generously funded by The Marguerite McBey Trust.

Criteria

Applicants must be of outstanding academic merit and potential for independent research, as evidenced by the candidate's academic record, prior qualifications, proposal and references. Selection will be based on this evidence and upon the strength of the proposed engagement with the advertised research project.

The successful applicant must have at least a 2:1, or international equivalent, degree, in Art History or in a cognate discipline. A demonstrable interest in Scottish art and/or art historiography is of advantage, but no requirement. It is preferable but not a requirement that you hold a Masters relevant to your chosen area of study. Other factors such as financial status and nationality are not taken into account.

This competitive scholarship is open to applicants of all nationalities. If the recipient is a home (UK) student for fee purposes their fees will be waived. If the recipient is an international student for fee purposes, they will be responsible for paying the difference between home and international fees.

Funding for international students does not cover visa costs (either for yourself or for accompanying family members), immigration health surcharge or any other additional costs associated with relocation to the UK. The start date for the studentship is either 1 October 2025 or 1 January 2026.

Application Procedure

For informal enquiries, you are encouraged to contact the supervisor, Dr Hans Hönes, by email (hans.c.hones@abdn.ac.uk) to discuss your potential fit with the project, how your own research interests will benefit the project, and how you intend to frame your research proposal.

Application will be via the PhD application portal:

<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/pgap/login.php>

Further information on the process may be found at this site:

<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/study/postgraduate-research/apply/>

You should apply for Art History (PhD).

Your application must include: A personal statement, an up-to-date copy of your academic CV, and clear copies of your educational certificates and transcripts.

Please provide two academic references with your application.

Please note: you DO NOT need to provide a research proposal with this application.

If you require any additional assistance in submitting your application or have any queries about the application process, please don't hesitate to contact us at dhpa-pg-admissions@abdn.ac.uk. You should mark your application "The McBey Studentship" in the Intended Source of Funding field on your online application.

The deadline for applications is 31st of July 2025

Reference:

STIP: The McBey Studentship in Art History: James McBey: Art and Autobiography. In: ArtHist.net, Jun 8, 2025 (accessed Mar 5, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/49462>>.