Glasgow Museums’ Spanish Civil War Banner

Introduction

The banner of the Scottish Contingent of the British Battalion of the International Brigade was given to Glasgow Museums in 1986. It complements the Spanish Civil War Roll of Honour (PP.1982.110) also held by Glasgow Museums. In the accession register the banner is described as a replica but, it is more generally referred to as the Spanish Civil War banner. These two appellations show two views of the banner: the first its awareness that it is not the original artifact, the second its importance as a physical symbol of people and events. In recent years the banner has had several roles:

Cultural Significance

A banner such as that of the Scottish Contingent of the British Battalion of the International Brigade tells of identity, ideals and events. That so many of the volunteers were members of the Communist Party is shown by the use of that imagery; the use of English and the identification of a Scottish contingent are about identity; and the battle honours tell of where the battalion fought. All these highly emotional concepts are bound into the banner, as much as the events of the war. Support for the Spanish Republican Government was an act of solidarity with the working class in the brutal conflict of the Spanish Civil War. The radical political (socialist) sentiment and the background of industrial unrest and social struggle in Glasgow and Scotland, perhaps explains the strength of support for the International Brigade and its lasting resonance, as much as the events of the war.

Description

The banner is double sided and was designed to be carried. The two sides are the same and are composed of a red silk like synthetic ground fabric with a length of silver grey fringing on the top, bottom and fly edges. A vertical blue oval appliquéd in the middle is bisected horizontally by a yellow and brown appliquéd banner/ribbon. On the yellow side ‘International Brigade’ is painted in red, on the brown side and ‘Spain 1936–38’ is painted in pale yellow. ‘British Battalion’ is painted on the upper part of the oval, with a five pointed yellow star appliquéd at the end. On the lower half is painted ‘Scottish Contingent’, the communal symbol of the clenched fist in front of a globe with the words ‘Freedom – Democracy – Peace’. Painted in red around the toffalls inside the upper part of the oval. The globe is appliquéd in blue and the fist in white with grey for shading. The defainting is embroidered in white thread. In the lower part of the oval a five pointed star is outlined in yellow thread. In the upper half of the banner are two scrolls outlined in yellow braided with four battle honours on each side; on the left one Cordoba, Jarama, Brunete and Belchite, and on the right are Sagarrassa, Teruel, Gandesa Road and The Ebro. Along the top of one edge one five small pole loops of red ribbon, their positioning showing that the flag would be carried with the pole edge on the left hand side.

Comparative Banners

Images on the website of Associació Catalana de Vexillologia show two British batallon banners. One, that appears to be older, has a simpler design on a dark red ground with yellow fringing and no battle honours. This is shown with the pole edge on the right hand side as a banner being carried in a black and white image. The second banner is very like Glasgow Museums banner but it has ‘Volunteers’ painted on the lower half of the oval and a second yellow star below ‘British’. It is shown with the pole edge on the left hand side.

Museum Object

The banner has had a continuing role, with Glasgow Museums facilitating its presence at the 65th anniversary of the formation of the International Brigade in 2001. It was taken to Spain by Stephen Fullerton, one of the last survivors of the Brigade. In 2003 it was taken to the rededication ceremony of La Passionaria, on Custom House Quay, Glasgow for the 65th Anniversary of the withdrawal of the Brigade from Spain. In 2007 it was taken to the funeral of James Maley and in 2008 at the funeral of Stephen Fullerton, the last two Scottish Brigadiers. In 2009 it was borrowed for a memorial service to Blantyre’s Spanish Civil War heroes.

Proposals are being made to display the banner in the People’s Palace in 2013 to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the withdrawal of the International Brigade. With new generations coming to see the banner its role is changing, and it will not only be these as a symbol of the volunteers who went to Spain, but as a gateway for new generations to learn about the Spanish Civil War, those who fought there and its supporters and events in Glasgow.

As the banner’s role changes it raises questions such as: where and when was it made, just how much it replicates the original, who were the Scottish contingent and what happened to them in Spain; what happened to those who returned and how have they and their experiences affected our current society.

Surviving Brigaders outside the People’s Palace in 1986 for the 25th anniversary of the formation of the International Brigade. In the foreground, the banner and the Roll of Honour PP.1982.110

Photograph by Anne O’Hara of the International Brigade Association taken at the funeral of Stephen Fullerton

In memory of Stephen Fullerton, Brigadier

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