



Figure 1: *Swan Lake*, designed by John Macfarlane. © Tristram Kenton for the Guardian.

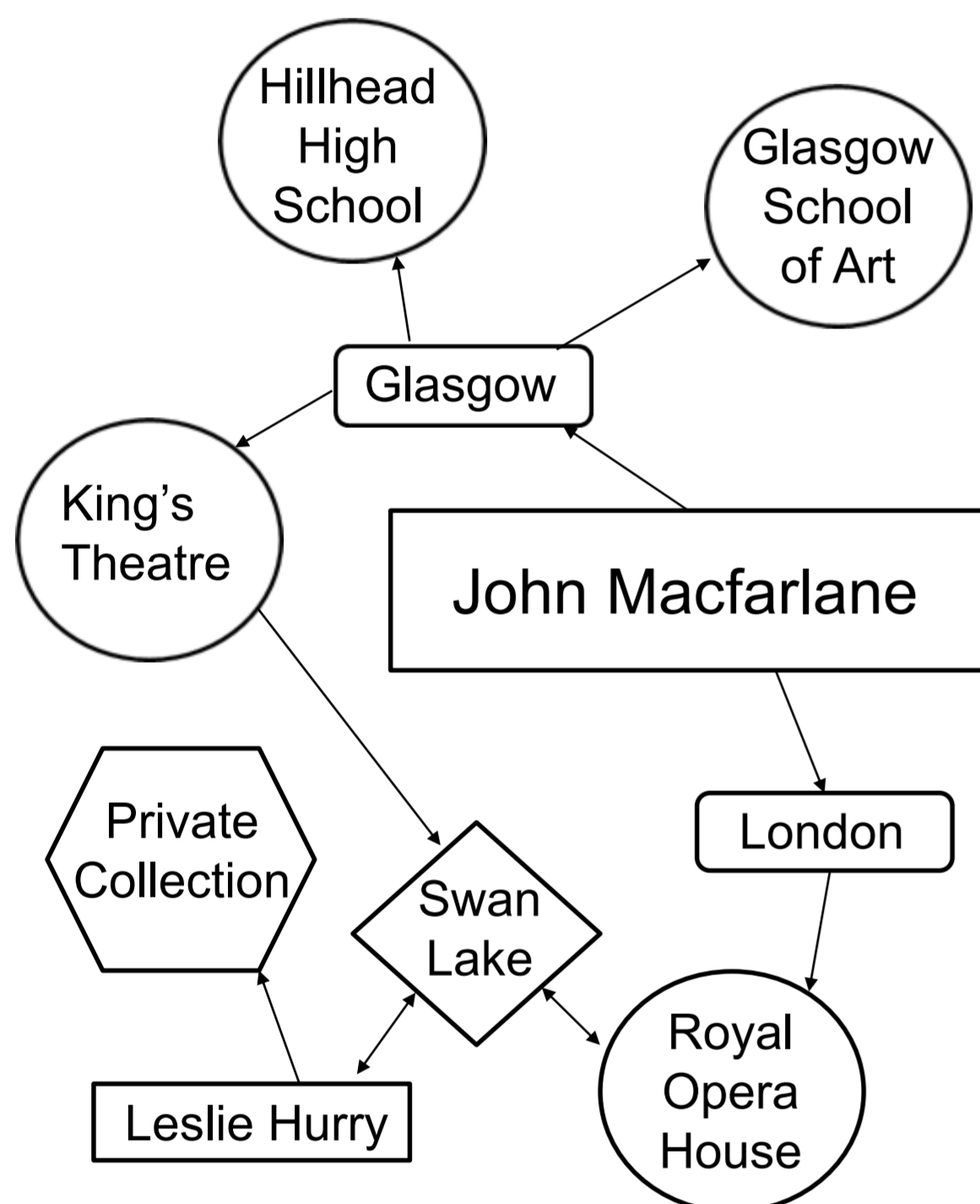


Figure 2: An example of how the Power to Transform database operates.

Introduction

The Power to Transform database shows the advancement of painted stage cloths used in theatrical productions alongside scenic works of art from the mid-seventeenth century to the present day in Britain. As part of developing the Power to Transform database, information from a variety of sources, including archives, The Hunterian collection, as well as contextual material from a private collection was examined.

The Power to Transform

Oral histories of scenic artists and set designers who have a direct connection to painted stage cloths and modern theatrical environments form a key part of the project. Contextual secondary texts are integrated into the database that allows for comparison and to explore the significance of the stage cloth.



Figure 3: John Macfarlane. *Odette*. 2018. From the original costume drawings of *Swan Lake*. 50cm x 40.6cm. © John Macfarlane.



Figure 4: John Macfarlane. *Odille, Act III*. 2017. From the original costume drawings of *Swan Lake*. 50cm x 36.3cm. © John Macfarlane.

Stage Cloths in Context

Backcloths are integral to the narrative and atmosphere of a performance. The handling and the use of the glue-sized bleached linen cloths from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has resulted in the material becoming fragile.¹ Furthermore, there are few stage cloths in collections as they tend to remain in storerooms, and due to their fragility and size they are problematic to display.

Using John Macfarlane as an example, it is possible to see how the database will work (Figure 2). Macfarlane is a Scottish theatrical designer as well as a scenic artist. The artist has been commissioned to design pieces for international contemporary and classical productions. During an interview for this project, Macfarlane revealed he remembered seeing a production of *Swan Lake* featuring designs by Leslie Hurry when he was a child and how the performance affected his career and his recent set designs (Figure 1) and the costume designs for *Swan Lake* for the Royal Opera House, London (Figure 3 and 4).

Conclusion

By analysing the works from artists and designers that have a connection with a theatrical site it is possible to establish a number of relationships through collaborations or inspiration, demonstrated with the example of John Macfarlane and Leslie Hurry. This project will also result in an exhibition at The Hunterian that will explore the different functions, materials, and the creation of these works of art and their significant to our cultural heritage.

References

¹ Christina Young, "The Changing Role and Status of Scenic Artists in England." In *Setting the Scene: European Painted Cloths from the Fourteenth to the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Nicola Costaras and Christina Young. 99-107. London: Archetype Publications Ltd in association with the Courtauld Institute of Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum, 2013.