

IMMA
COURTYARD GALLERIES
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Championing Irish Art: The Mary and Alan Hobart Collection



Introduction

IMMA is pleased to present *Championing Irish Art: The Mary and Alan Hobart Collection*, an exhibition of Irish works, first presented at different times by Pym's Gallery London. Established in 1974 by Mary Hobart from Co. Monaghan and her Devon-born husband, the late Alan Hobart, Pym's Gallery, from premises in Belgravia and Mayfair in London, mounted a series of pioneering exhibitions that promoted Irish art internationally for the first time since Sir Hugh Lane, when it was little regarded at home and virtually unknown abroad.

The exhibition begins during the First World War, with images that record wartime experiences as well as portraits of the 'everyman soldier', alongside moments of rebellion and resistance. It places Mary Swanzy in dialogue with Jack B. Yeats, considering the ways in which their individual and idiosyncratic interpretations of modernism pose productive questions. The exhibition moves through the hard-edged abstractions of the 1960s and '70s in the work of Micheal Farrell, Cecil King, and Charles Tyrrell, before ending with works made in response to the conflict in Northern Ireland by William Crozier, Rita Duffy, and F.E. McWilliam.

Against the background of the conflict in Northern Ireland, London in the early 1980s was a hostile environment to fly the flag for Irish culture, but the Hobarts succeeded in dramatically raising the reputation – and value – of Irish art. In line with current scholarly interest in the role of dealers and galleries in how art is created, curated and collected, this exhibition and publication explores Pym's Gallery's crucial role in the development of a market for Irish art. This important collection offers a snapshot of nearly a century of Irish visual art and offers our audiences the chance to see some true icons of Irish art by renowned artists.

Room 1: *The War Years*

This group of artworks presents numerous perspectives on the tumultuous first two decades of the twentieth century. William Orpen was one of the first British official war artists along with John Lavery. His war works seen here record moments that vary from terror to contemplation; for example, *The Thinker* recalls the sculpture by Rodin.

Orpen also depicted the Republican elite like Grace Gifford Plunkett (1888 – 1955) seen in *Young Ireland* (1907). An artist and student of William Orpen's, who regarded her as one of his most talented and rebellious pupils. Although from an Anglo-Irish background, she became a member of the Provisional Republican Government in their fight against British occupation. Gifford married Joseph Plunkett, leader of the 1916 Easter Rising, seven hours prior to his execution in Kilmainham Gaol. She devoted her art to the cause of Irish nationalism, and during the Civil War she sided with the Anti-Treaty republicans - this led to her being jailed in Kilmainham for three months and later being socially ostracised. The works by John Lavery and Grace Henry contrast in their engagement with Irish political and cultural life, seen from the perspectives of Westminster in London and Connemara. Lavery's sketch presents the House of Lords debate in Westminster to

negotiate the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty following the War of Independence. It sought to establish Ireland as a self-governing dominion of the British Commonwealth. On the 16th of December the Lords voted in favour of The Treaty. Back in Ireland, the Treaty which included the partition of Ireland, spurred a division which led to the outbreak of the Civil War in 1922. The completed painting was acquired by the National Gallery of Ireland.

Notably, Henry's work was shown as part of The Irish Race Conference in Paris in 1922. The conference was intended to provide a platform for Ireland to represent itself as an independent nation through culture. It highlighted Ireland's sovereignty enabling opportunities between Ireland and the rest of the world.

Alcove: *William Orpen Drawings*

These drawings portray Sir Hugh Lane in the early 1900s when he was actively engaged with building a personal art collection, which would go on to form the core of the Hugh Lane Municipal Art Gallery in Dublin – the first known gallery of modern art in the world. Like the Hobarts, Lane was an art dealer who purchased works by French Impressionists, among others, while extolling the merits of Irish art abroad. This small group of works depicts different moments in his life with humour and energy.

Room 2: *Mary Swanzy and Jack B. Yeats: A Conversation*

Swanzy and Yeats were close contemporaries, born in 1882 and 1871 respectively. This space allows the viewer to compare their idiosyncratic styles side by side. Yeats's subjects included Celtic myth and everyday Irish life, conveyed through a personal Expressionistic style, seen in his very loose brushwork and use of vivid colours. In 1945 Yeats achieved significant recognition when the biggest showing of his work was presented in Dublin. He was celebrated as a 'national painter' that is, an artist who expressed an Irish identity. *The Sun* (1947) shows an idealised figure set against an immense sky that evokes his memories of visits to Sligo as a child. Comparing this work to *O'Connell Bridge* (1925) [opposite] a clear development can be seen from the recognisable figures and location of O'Connell Bridge, through to the looser abstraction of the figure and imaginary location seen here.

Swanzy's painterly styles varied from Expressionism to Symbolism and Futurism. Her subjects were also extremely varied; for example, there is an artwork relating to her travels to Samoa and the South Seas in the early '20s, which contrasts with one of her works made during the Second World War. After 1914 Swanzy exhibited at the Paris Salons alongside those modern artists who are now household names, and the prices of their paintings were similar. This is an interesting point to consider, as in the later years, the prices of her work, compared to her male contemporaries, diverged significantly. The work undertaken by Pym's Gallery, among others, to present the work of women artists has gone a long way to address this disparity.

Room 3: A New Abstract Tradition

The acceptance of abstract art in Ireland was a slow process, with Mainie Jellett's 1920s works being met with derision in the popular press. By the '60s the situation had shifted with numerous artists employing the style, but it remained difficult to make a living as there were few buyers for this type of work. Organisations like the Contemporary Irish Art Society sought to make modern work available to museum collections, and the annual Irish Exhibition of Living Art gave a platform to modern forms. By the '70s artists like Charles Tyrrell benefitted from a more discriminating audience who were better informed by the Rosc exhibitions.

Cecil King was an important figure in the development of modern art in Ireland. Beginning as a collector of modern art, he went on to help organise the "Rosc" exhibitions which after 1967 brought the best of international modernism to Ireland. He was influenced by the many artists he met through Rosc. The two works here show the shift in his style from a loose European abstraction to the hard-edged American abstraction seen opposite.

A defining feature of William Scott's work is its combination of figuration and abstraction. After a period of purely abstract painting, he began to reintroduce form into his work. This work depicts a reclining nude, her form flattened on the same plane as the orange couch and silver wall. The erotic, magical side of his paintings became increasingly apparent in 1950s, especially in certain nude paintings. By the beginning of 1956, however, this overt sensuality had been largely absorbed into the very texture of the paintings, their colour and paint quality.

Room 4: The Return to Conflict

The emergence of a civil rights movement on the island of Ireland had a profound effect on the development and politicisation of many artists' work. The escalation of violence in the wake of the Bogside Massacre in 1972 saw artists like William Crozier, Michael Farrell and F.E. McWilliam, who had experimented with abstraction in the previous decade, return to a figurative style that communicated their anger and frustration.

Living in France in the 1970s, as the conflict in Ireland worsened, Michael Farrell felt removed from and frustrated by events such as the 1974 Dublin-Monaghan bombings. In an attempt to visually communicate his reaction to this political strife, Farrell moved away from his earlier hard-edged style toward figuration. This work depicts the bust of a painter on a seashore, looking out on a horizon; a type of self portrait of the artist attempting to depict a world from the other side of the sea.

McWilliam, Rita Duffy and William Scott were all Northern Irish and they responded to the social and political context in very different artistic media and styles. Each artist grapples with the subject of Irish identity in this period presenting identity as a complex and varied concept.

Working in surrealist idiom, Rita Duffy's painting depicts a variety of cultural activities associated with Irish identity. 'Crossroads dancing' was a popular social event that was frowned on by the Clergy. Here, four large expressionless figures dance in a circle under the backdrop of Ireland's flag. The largest figure on the left recalls an iconic portrait of Padraig Pearse, one of the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising. Tiny accordion and fiddle players play at the dancers' feet, alongside other characters sunbathing, posing for portraits and a nun disciplining a young girl.

Acknowledgements

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Exhibition curated by Seán Kissane.

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A fully illustrated catalogue, designed by Peter Maybury with an essay by William Laffan and an afterword by Kenneth McConkey is available in the IMMA bookshop for €15.00.

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Front Cover:
William Orpen
Young Ireland (1907)
Oil on canvas
89 x 63.5 cm
The Mary and Alan Hobart Collection