

IRISH ART AND POLITICS IN PARIS 1922 BILLY SHORTALL

SUMMARY

This essay examines a major exhibition of Irish Art staged in Paris in 1922 by the nascent Irish Free State. In a bold statement of cultural policy, a nation unsure if it had a viable future, announced itself on the international stage through its visual and material culture.

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Art without politics is superhuman. Politics without art is subhuman. Either without the other is inhuman.¹

Irish art historians have tended to look at art history through artists' eyes rather than those of the State. 'The historiography of Irish art to date has been overwhelmingly directed towards the lives and work of individual artists, with little emphasis on the cultural and political environments in which they worked.'² Anthropologist Clifford Geertz argues that while art may appeal to some universal sense of beauty (if it exists), to fully understand the art work requires 'a knowledge of what those arts are about or an understanding of the culture out of which they come'.³ This essay views Irish art through the lens of political history and vice versa. Some hold that the engagement between art and politics is an 'unhealthy intersection'; others such as Richard Kearney argue that 'art must be prepared to abdicate its throne of proud and unprincipled autonomy and to become conversant with the everyday affairs of man—the political'.⁴

The current Irish Government initiative, 'Global Ireland 2025', with its plan to use Irish culture to increase Ireland's

international footprint, has a historical parallel in the use, by the Irish Free State, of visual art in the first decade after independence.⁵ A political soft-power approach to winning international business, tourism, and friends is as old as the Irish state itself. This paper considers an international engagement that the new State had with visual art after independence; it was one of many.

The Anglo-Irish treaty of December 1921 was one of the defining events which led to the modern Irish State. It ended the War of Independence with the British but not on the terms that Irish nationalists desired or expected. It partitioned the country and left the twenty-six-county Irish Free State as a Dominion of the British Empire. Fervent disagreement between pro- and anti-treatyites resulted in the Civil War that began in June 1922 and lasted for eleven months. It left the nascent State unsure if it had a viable future. During this period of uncertainty the Irish Free State sought to assert its independence and unique identity and to confirm its sovereignty nationally and internationally.

The political movement for independence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is inextricably linked to the rise of cultural nationalism, exemplified in the Literary Revival, and the establishment of organisations such as the Gaelic Athletic Association and Gaelic League. Three of the seven signatures on the 1916 Proclamation of Independence were published poets and it is difficult to identify a politician of the period who was not culturally engaged.⁶

In an effort to affirm Irish sovereignty and announce its arrival to the world, the Irish Minister of Fine Arts in the revolutionary Dáil, George Noble Count Plunkett, father of J.M. Plunkett, an executed 1916 signatory, funded a major Irish art exhibition held in Paris in January 1922.⁷ The government sought a 'propaganda value' from the exhibition of three hundred Irish art works.⁸ The works

for the French capital exhibition were selected by Plunkett, with assistance from the exhibition organisers in Paris and artist John Lavery.⁹

WORLD CONGRESS OF THE IRISH RACE

The World Congress of the Irish Race, also known by its Gaelic title—*Aonach na nGaedeal*—was opened in the Salle des Fêtes of the Hotel Continental, Paris, by the Irish envoy to Paris, Seán T. O’Kelly, on 21 January 1922.¹⁰ This Paris conference was planned during the Civil War and took place just two weeks after the Anglo-Irish treaty was approved by the Dáil.

Paris was chosen as the venue because the Dáil wanted to place Ireland in an international arena, and Paris was then the art capital of the world. This exhibition was the first time the country, as the independent state was emerging, used art to position itself internationally. It was a bold statement by a new State on the range, scale, and quality of contemporary visual art and art industries in Ireland; they presented a public display of artistic independence to support their claims of political independence.

The Irish Race Congress (IRC) sought to establish a central body to coordinate the worldwide Irish diaspora and showcase Irish sovereignty and cultural uniqueness on an international stage. It was an early deployment of cultural diplomacy by the Free State in an effort to win international recognition for the new Irish state. Politically the Treaty had divided the Dáil, previously united with common national and international political objectives. Art and culture was something both sides of the divide could embrace. Pro-treaty George Gavan Duffy, as Minister for Foreign Affairs, wrote to anti-treaty Éamon de Valera on 12 January, explaining that the IRC was ‘mainly of a cultural and artistic character’ and he thought that it was wise ‘to send a delegation

representing Ireland [that would] avoid party politics’ and would ‘represent fairly the two parties [sides] in An Dáil’.¹¹ However the acrimony of the treaty debate was continued in Paris and, despite it being primarily a cultural event, politics dominated the contemporary and historical reports of the event.¹² About 250 people attended,¹³ including 100 official delegates, representing their national organisations, from various parts of the world including Spain, Scotland, Argentina, Australia, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, England, Italy, Java, Newfoundland, New Zealand, South Africa, and the United States.¹⁴ Many prominent Irish politicians including three future Irish presidents were in attendance.¹⁵ (Fig. 1)

ART EXHIBITION AND CULTURAL PROGRAM

The cultural programme of the Congress was under the remit of Plunkett as Minister of Fine Arts. It included concerts of Irish music, performances of Irish plays, and a series of ten lectures by experts on various aspects of Irish cultural life—including Jack B. Yeats speaking on Modern Irish Art, his brother William on Irish literature, Douglas Hyde on the Gaelic League, Arthur Darley on Irish music, and Evelyn Gleeson on Irish Arts and Crafts.¹⁶ In keeping with the theme of the Congress, all deliveries were nationalist in tone and content.

The Congress used large and luxurious venues as a visible statement of prosperity, pride, and ambition.¹⁷ It projected a confident new state and self-determining nation on a world stage—bringing independent Ireland, unshackled from Britain, back into Europe and further legitimising the internationalism of the Irish independence movement. The art exhibition was held in the Galeries Barbazanges, on Rue Du Faubourg Saint Honoré, a large modern gallery noted for its contemporary art shows.¹⁸

The 1922 Irish art exhibition in Paris reflected the single-



↑ Fig. 1: [23/1/22]
congrès irlandais à Paris :
[photographie de presse]
/ [Agence Rol]. Source:
Bibliothèque nationale de
France. Group includes Seán
T. O' Kelly, Eoin MacNeill,
Éamon de Valera, Countess
Markievicz, Mary MacSwiney,
Harry Boland, Douglas Hyde,
Jack B. Yeats.

→ Fig. 2: John Lavery,
RHA, RA, RSA (1856–1941),
George Gavan Duffy, 1921,
oil on canvas, 76.9 × 63.9 cm.
Collection: Hugh Lane
Gallery.



minded political approach of the pre-Treaty government and was devised as the central part of a cohesive cultural undertaking, presenting the official grand narrative of Irish cultural history.¹⁹ Organised at just under half the cost of the entire spectacle, the exhibition of Irish art and arts and crafts was its centrepiece.

The exhibition was opened by Léonce Bénédict, curator of the Musée du Luxembourg, on behalf of the French Minister for Fine Art and it ran for a month. Ninety-four mostly contemporary Irish artists, craftspeople, and societies from all four provinces were represented—showing two hundred and eighty-one exhibits in various media.²⁰ Also included was the work of the internationally renowned Irish-born English-based painter John Lavery. Of particular significance were his ‘pictures of modern Irish history’ including political portraits of Arthur Griffith, Michael Collins, George Gavan Duffy, and others.²¹ Painted at a time when the Dáil was declared illegal by the British administration; here they were presented as legitimate statesmen of a functioning government. (Fig. 2)

Another Lavery painting, *The Blessing of the Flag* (1921), depicted the archbishop of Dublin, blessing the flag and baptising the new State, visualising the alliance of Church and State. Kneeling before the unofficial flag, a national propaganda symbol, is a soldier in the uniform of the Irish Free State. The moment of consecrating the flag symbolises the birth of a nation with a Catholic identity. Separately, de Valera and his supporters hired cars during the congress and mounted them with Irish flags. Followed by the French gendarmerie, they toured places of Irish interest and religious sites in the city.²²

Terence MacSwiney, republican and Lord Mayor of Cork, whose death from hunger strike in a British jail in 1921 had previously highlighted the Irish quest

for independence by its widespread international newspaper coverage, was celebrated in music and art in Paris. Lavery's painting of his requiem Mass in London, titled in the exhibition, *Funérailles du Lord-Maire de Cork*, depicted his cortege with sunlight illuminating the Irish flag on the coffin. Previously this painting, shown in the Glasgow Arts Club, was entitled *Southwark Cathedral, London 1920*, a vague title that led to the painting being described simply as 'a detailed study of St George's Cathedral, Southwark'.²³ Re-titled and in the politically charged atmosphere of the Paris Congress, it, like many of the other works on view, was an index to the atrocities perpetrated on Ireland. One of Jack Yeats's exhibits, *Bachelor's Walk, In Memory* (1915), recalls an event witnessed by the artist—a woman leaving flowers at the spot where English soldiers had shot dead four unarmed Dubliners and wounded more than thirty others in 1914. (Fig. 3)

The central Cathleen Ní Houlihan-type figure is accompanied by a boy, a metaphor for the new State looking to the future. Although painted seven years earlier, Yeats decided to show this work for the first time at the Congress in Paris, presumably because its messages of sacrificial death, rebirth, and hope for the future resonated with Ireland's situation. The display of these scenes was designed to garner international support in ongoing negotiations with the British and to assert Irish independence.²⁴

Countess Markievicz, Irish politician and artist, attended the Congress and was represented in the show with six works. (Fig. 4) She called for a response to the racism Irish people had been subjected to under British rule, and its inferred colonial superiority. She was referring to cartoons relating to Irish political and social life as presented in English newspapers and magazines from the 1800s.²⁵ These presented Irish people as simian, drunken, aggressive, and



↑ Fig. 3: Jack B Yeats, RHA (1871–1957). *Bachelor's Walk, In Memory*, 1915, oil on canvas, 45.7 × 61cm, private collection. On loan to the National Gallery of Ireland.

↓ Fig. 4: Countess Markievicz (1868–1927), *Young Irish Amazonians*, watercolour on paper, 17.8 × 25.4cm. Collection: Hugh Lane Gallery.



racially inferior to the English coloniser, asserting that Ireland was violent, incapable of self-government, and reliant on a benevolent England to rule and protect the country. This negative image of Irishness propagated in British media was counteracted in the exhibition. For instance, Patrick Tuohy's subtle painting, *Young Mayo Peasant* (1912), blurred distinctions between political portraits, images of the political struggle for independence, and romantic depictions of those that occupy the Irish rural landscape. The subject is a poor but confident youth, with his and his country's future laid out before him. This piece, with its rich use of colour and direct composition, presented a sensitive representation of a poor Irish youth and provided a riposte to earlier Irish peasant constructs.²⁶ Genre scenes and iconic, affirming images of Irish life ranged from Seán Keating's painting of Irish revolutionaries willing to take on the might of the British Empire to Leo Whelan's *Kerry Cobbler*. Elizabeth Yeats' Cuala Press prints of Irish life were populated with distinctive Irish types wearing wide brimmed hats and shawls, unique Irish landscapes, and traditional Irish events such as horse racing on the strand in Sligo. These implied that Ireland was an ancient state with a distinctive culture—an actual functioning entity.

The distinctiveness, vibrancy, and value of contemporary Irish culture was ably displayed in Paris in theatre and music concerts, and by portraits of Ireland's literati in paint and bronze. Albert Power displayed sculpture busts of writers W.B. Yeats, Lord Dunsany, and James Stephens. Derrmod O'Brien's portrait of playwright Lennox Robinson was entitled *Robinson Lennox (auteur de 'Patriotes et le Chef Perdu')*. Including the name of these patriotic plays in the painting's title outlined Robinson's nationalist credentials and marked the portrait with the exhibition's political leitmotif.

The Arts and Crafts exhibits—included stained glass



↑ Fig. 5: Susan Mary ('Lily') Yeats (1866–1949), *The Moon*, silk embroidery on blue poplin ground, 24 × 36cm. Private collection.

↓ Fig. 6: Paul Henry (1877–1958), *A West of Ireland village (Un village de l'ouest de l'Irlande)*, 1921, oil on canvas, 65 × 81cm. Collection: Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.



by Harry Clarke and Wilhelmina Geddes, and embroidery by Lily Yeats (Fig. 5)—were originally intended to be displayed with Pre- and Early Christian objects from the National Museum in a continuum of high-art objects from medieval times.²⁷ Designed to present the Irish nation as having an ancient heritage and not merely being born out of the recent revolutionary period. These were all presented as examples of what de Valera termed ‘the genius in the race’ and the ‘magnificent culture, the grand things the nation could give to the world’.²⁸

That the interests of Irish artists and craftspeople dovetailed with the political aspirations of the Congress organisers is exemplified by their unanimous eschewing of their RHA and RA member designations. The Royal title would have been at odds with the theme of the Congress and the exhibition’s aim to create a political and cultural distance from the United Kingdom and anything Royal.

A testament to the quality of the art on show is how many works, in private ownership at the time, are now in national collections.²⁹ The French government purchased one of Paul Henry’s now trademark, then radical, Irish landscapes for its national collection.³⁰ (Fig. 6) A painting of a uniquely Irish scene entering an important French collection authenticated Irish art, and its recognition helped to achieve the political and ‘propaganda value’ so keenly sought by de Valera and the other organisers, in the first Irish Free State government sponsored and organised art exhibition.

CONCLUSION

This spectacle in Paris was the start of an emergent internationalist approach to cultural policy. Although the Irish Free State government funded major exhibitions on home soil, they took a more hands-on approach to exhibitions abroad. The Executive Council met annually

to discuss participation in a series of international shows in London between 1927 and 1931.³¹ State officials managed Irish artists’ participation in the Empire Marketing Board 1926–33, and they were regarded as ‘leading the way’ when the Department of Industry and Commerce organised an exhibition of contemporary Irish art as part of the Irish exhibit at the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair.³² The political agenda behind these art engagements changed over the course of the decade from asserting sovereignty to promoting trade and defining a nation taking its place in the world.

The internationalist approach to cultural policy in the early years of the Irish Free State was formalised with the establishment of the Cultural Relations Committee in 1949.³³ Seán MacBride as Minister for External Affairs, saw the promotion of Irish culture abroad as important to ‘the material and economic development’ and a help ‘in the economic and political tasks which we have to face’ in Ireland.³⁴ He added that

whether it be in the field of international politics, foreign trade or tourism, one of the first tasks that has to be achieved is to make the people of other countries interested in our island and to make them feel kindly towards us... the best way to attract tourists from other countries is to interest them in our culture, in our history and in our scenery... show them what we make, how we live and what we have to sell.³⁵

Global Ireland 2025 seeks to use art and culture as an instrument ‘to enhance our international reputation and increase our influence in the world’—an ongoing process that started almost one hundred years ago in Paris, 1922, with the Exposition D’Art Irlandais.³⁶

ENDNOTES

1. Richard Kearney, 'Beyond Art and Politics', *The Crane Bag*, 1:1 (Spring, 1977): 8–16.
2. Catherine Marshall, 'Introduction' in Catherine Marshall and Peter Murray (eds.), *Art and Architecture of Ireland, Volume 5, Twentieth Century* (Dublin: Yale, 2014), 2.
3. Clifford Geertz, 'Art as a Cultural System', *MLN*, 91:6 (1976): 1499.
4. Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'Politics and the Poet', *Irish Times*, 21 August 1975, 10. Kearney, 'Beyond Art and Politics', 11.
5. 'Global Ireland Ireland's Global Footprint to 2025'; <https://www.ireland.ie/media/ireland/stories/globaldiaspora/Global-Ireland-in-English.pdf>
6. These were Patrick Pearse, Joseph Plunkett, and Thomas MacDonagh.
7. At the time of the exhibition no foreign State had recognised Irish sovereignty.
8. Count Plunkett Papers, 1648–1940, NLI. Draft letter from Plunkett to de Valera, 26 Nov 1921.
9. The organisers in Paris were Irish-Canadian Katherine Hughes, National Organiser for the Irish Self-Determination League in Canada, and Thomas Hughes Kelly, a wealthy Irish American member of Friend of Irish Freedom, an American-Irish republican support organisation.
10. The date was specifically chosen to commemorate the third anniversary of the Republican Dáil.
11. Letter dated 12 January 1922 from George Gavan Duffy, Minister for Foreign Affairs, to de Valera inviting him to nominate four Congress delegates. Papers of Desmond and Mabel FitzGerald, UCD Archives, P80/704.
12. Available texts on the World Congress of the Irish Race: Dermot Keogh, 'The Treaty Split and the Paris Irish Race

- Convention', *Études Irlandaises*, 2:12 (1987): 165–70; Gerard Keown, 'The Irish Race Conference, 1922, Reconsidered', *Irish Historical Studies*, 32:127 (May 2001): 365–76; K. Daniel, 'The scholars and the saboteurs: the wrecking of a South African Irish scheme, Paris 1922', *South African-Irish Studies*, 1 (1991): 162–75; Paul Murray, 'The Irish Race Congress 21–28 January 1922', *History Ireland*, 4:9 (Winter 2001); Richard Davis, *The Self-Determination of Ireland Leagues and the Irish Race Convention in Paris, 1921–1922* (Tasmanian Historical Association Papers, 24, 1977); and John Brannigan, *Race in Modern Irish Literature and Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 35–48.
13. The most accurate figures are in the papers of the diplomatic archives in Nantes. Estimates for attendances at each session, ranges from 150 to 250. Fine Ghaedheal, *Imteačta Aonaíge na n-Gaedeal ib-Páris, Eanáir, 1922, Proceedings of the Irish Race Congress in Paris, January, 1922* (Dublin: Cahill & Company, 1922) lists 98 official delegates. A diary was also signed by 98 people on the Monday—in the NLI Brennan papers, others joined later that day and during the week.
 14. 'Minutes of the World Congress of the Irish Race held at Paris during the week ending January 28th 1922' (20pp), [January 1922]. Diarmid Coffey, Coffey & Chenevix Trench Papers, National Library of Ireland. MS 46,312 /2. See also Fine Ghaedheal, *Imteačta Aonaíge na n-Gaedeal ib-Páris, eanáir, 1922, Proceedings of the Irish Race Congress in Paris, January, 1922* (Dublin: Cahill & Company, 1922), 19–22. Delegates had voting rights.
 15. Douglas Hyde, Seán T. O'Kelly, and Éamon de Valera.
 16. There were lectures on economics, Irish agriculture, athletics, Irish history, Irish music, the Gaelic League, lyrics and plays of modern Ireland, Irish arts and crafts, and modern Irish art.

17. The main congress venue was the Hotel Continental. Other venues included the Grand Hotel (secretariat and accommodation), Palais d'Orsay hotel (opening reception), and Salle Hoche (theatre and grand ball).
18. The gallery showed the work of avant-garde artists such as Picasso, Modigliani, Gauguin, Matisse, Chagall, and Dufy. The gallery closed in 1928.
19. In addition to the art exhibitions and cultural lectures there were two concerts of Irish music and performances of J. M. Synge's 'The Riders to the Sea' and Lady Gregory's 'The Rising of the Moon' in the Salle Hoche by the Dramatic Section of the Irish Club of Paris.
- 20 *Exposition D'art Irlandais [exhibition Catalogue]: Ouverte Du 28 Janvier Au 25 Février 1922*. Paris: Galeries Barbazanges, 1922.
21. Letter from O'Brien to Lavery, 10 December 1921. Art O'Brien was Dáil Éireann's first envoy to London, where he played a major role in the Irish Self-Determination League of Great Britain and patronised many London-Irish cultural events. Art Ó Briain papers, c.1900–c.1945, National Library of Ireland. MS 8461 34. There was extensive correspondence between Kelly and O'Brien with Lavery concerning exhibiting at the IRC. Both were particularly anxious to secure the loan of his 'Pictures of modern Irish history'. O'Brien along with Erskine Childers was Lavery's contact when he painted the portraits of the treaty delegates in 1921. O'Brien and Kelly considered Lavery similarly painting the Race Congress delegates and although the artist attended the exhibition in Paris the portraits never materialised.
22. The Irish tri-colour was flown over the GPO in 1916, used by the Free State in 1921 but only formally confirmed as Ireland's national flag in Bunreacht na hÉireann (Constitution of Ireland) in 1937.

23. *Aberdeen Journal* (19 March 1921), cited by Claire Crowley in the National Gallery of Ireland, Blogpost 3, October 27, A Dark Episode from Irish History; http://www.nationalgallery.ie/en/Exhibitions/Creating_History/Blogposts/October27.aspx.
24. Aspects of Independence were subject to ongoing negotiation at this stage and there were many unresolved issues, for example, British troops were still present in the State, Britain retained control of certain ports, negotiating the border was an issue and there was a narrative in some newspapers of Britain retaking control.
25. Perry L. Curtis, *Apes and angels: the Irishman in Victorian caricature*, revised edition (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).
26. This work is now in the Hugh Lane Gallery. That Tuohy saw this painting as more than a portrait is evidenced by his entering this in the Genre class in the 1922 Aonach Tailteann art exhibition rather than as a portrait.
27. Letter Thomas Hughes Kelly to Plunkett, 23 November 1921. Count Plunkett Papers, 1648–1940, National Library of Ireland.
28. Anon, 'Congress Banquet. Mr. De Valera's address.' *Cork Examiner*, 25 January 1922, 5.
29. Art works exhibited by William Conor, Grace Henry, Paul Henry, Nathaniel Hone, Sean Keating, John Lavery, William Leech, Countess Markievicz, Dermot O'Brien, Sarah Purser, Patrick Tuohy, Charles Shannon, Estella Solomons, Leo Whelan, Jack Yeats, John Hughes, Albert Power, and Oliver Sheppard are now in important public collections.
30. *Village dans l'ouest de l'Irlande (A West of Ireland Village)*, oil on canvas, 66 × 82cm and painted over 1920/21 (catalogue number 29) was a typical west of Ireland scene. It is now in the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

31. Executive Council consisted of the President (Prime Minister) and members of his cabinet of ministers.
32. Eleanor Jewett, 'Many interesting paintings now to be found in buildings on the grounds of A Century—Irish Free State started trend; Followed by local Association artists', *Chicago Tribune*, undated news clipping, June 1933.
33. The Cultural Relations Committee was established in 1949 to promote Irish art and culture internationally. It was superseded by Culture Ireland in 2005. The Arts Council which promotes art and cultural nationally was established two years later in 1951.
34. Anon, 'Ireland Photographed for Exhibition Tour' in *Irish Times*, 29 December 1950, 7.
35. Ibid.
36. 'Expanding our Global Footprint: A Thematic Perspective, Bringing our Culture and Heritage to the Wider World' in *Global Ireland 2025*, 41.

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