

'[In]Visible: Irish Women Artists from the Archives': An Interview with Emma O'Toole

Susanna Avery-Quash and Emma O'Toole

The National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin recently mounted an exhibition entitled '[In]Visible: Irish Women Artists from the Archives' (19 July 2018–3 March 2019).¹ It showed material from two little-known but highly important repositories: the ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art, and the Yeats Archive, both of which relate to Irish women artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From these archives, letters, scrapbooks, and photographs, as well as some works of art, including embroideries, were put on show, all made by women artists including Mary Swanzy, Sarah Purser, Mainie Jellett, Susan Yeats, and Evie Hone. The aim was to shed light on their education and artistic practice and to think further about the contribution they made both to major exhibitions and longer lasting artistic initiatives and movements. This interest in their lives and legacy is new; despite being some of the most progressive people in Ireland before and after independence – the suffragette movement and Revolutionary period were contemporaneous – they were overlooked by the Irish arts institutions of the day which were male dominated.

To learn more, Susanna Avery-Quash (Senior Research Curator in the History of Collecting) from the National Gallery in London got in touch with colleagues in Dublin who had conceived of and curated the exhibition: Emma O'Toole (ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art Fellow at the National Gallery of Ireland), Tanya Keyes (H. W. Wilson Foundation Fellow at the National Gallery of Ireland), and Leah Benson (Archivist, National Gallery of Ireland).

The following question and answer session came about from an interview Susanna (SAQ) conducted with Emma O'Toole (EOT). In the first section they discuss what training and life as a woman artist would have been like in the second half of the nineteenth century; they then go on to discuss networks of influence, and finally, posthumous reputations. At the end Emma draws particular attention to two of the most active women artists, Sarah Purser and Mainie Jellett, whose legacy also included putting

¹ For the press release of the exhibition, see <<https://www.nationalgallery.ie/press-release-25072018>>. See also <<https://www.nationalgallery.ie/art-and-artists/exhibitions/invisible-irish-women-artists-archives>> [both accessed 4 March 2019].

on exhibitions and promoting the flourishing of certain public art galleries in Ireland.

Training and life as a woman artist

SAQ: Thinking first about the training and life as a woman artist, what restrictions, if any, were imposed on women during their artistic training?
EOT: Until the latter half of the nineteenth century women in Ireland lacked the opportunities for formal art education. The Royal Dublin Society, a precursor to the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art, first admitted women from 1849 (*Fig. 1*). In 1893 women were permitted to attend the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) schools. Enrolment figures for the period from 1895 to 1905 highlight the number of students who attended the RHA schools with an average of six men and seventeen women during each academic year. The increasing importance placed on women's education from the middle of the nineteenth century, alongside women's interest in practising art and the demand for training in life drawing, contributed to this female influx. Throughout this period, the RHA life class was the only



Fig. 1: Students of the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art, c. 1910, photograph, National Gallery of Ireland, ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art, Margaret Clarke Archive.

place in Ireland for advanced fine art study. Most of the students came initially through the Dublin Metropolitan School, which taught a preliminary basic drawing class.

SAQ: Were women artists from a particular social background?

EOT: In the early twentieth century, the majority of women studying or practising art in Ireland shared similar social backgrounds. They came from a relatively privileged sector of Irish society, predominantly upper-middle-class professional or mercantile families, where artistic pursuits formed part of their education. Despite their similar backgrounds, individuality ran deep as you would expect from a broad group of artists during the time period covered in the exhibition. Aside from practising as artists, many of the women profiled in the exhibition were writers, teachers, political activists, designers, and publishers.

SAQ: Did women travel to further their art education?

EOT: Women artists with the financial means often travelled abroad in order to continue their artistic training. The galleries, salons, and art academies, particularly in Paris, held considerable attraction for artists. While abroad, several Irish women artists embraced new modernist trends in art and brought back new artistic approaches to Ireland. Two of the exhibition's featured artists, Mainie Jellett and Evie Hone, studied in Paris in 1920 and later trained under André Lhote, an advocate of Cézanne's analytical approach to painting, and Albert Gleizes, an established cubist artist. These French painters' non-representational, highly geometrical paintings proved a strong influence on both Jellett and Hone. In 1923 Jellett brought back her first cubist works to Dublin and she is recognized as one of the first artists to introduce abstract painting to Ireland.

SAQ: Did women pursue similar artistic practices to men?

EOT: More so than their male counterparts, women artists embraced the Arts and Crafts Movement in Ireland, which underwent a revival in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in line with other countries in Europe and America. Many Irish women artists practised in an array of media encompassing engraving, lithography, poster design, metalwork, stained glass, textiles, and bookbinding. By the late nineteenth century, it had become more acceptable for women to practise these crafts in guilds, mainly working and exhibiting anonymously, and contributing to the surge of nationalism based on the cultural revival in Ireland. While many female crafters worked anonymously, Susan (Lily) Yeats was an exception. She became known for her embroideries, which she exhibited in the Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland (est. 1894) (*Fig. 2*). Lily Yeats was trained and employed by William Morris's workshops from 1888 to 1894. With her sister Elizabeth (Lolly) Yeats and Evelyn Gleeson, she set up the Dun Emer Guild in 1902.



Fig. 2: Lily Yeats, embroidered rose and olive cushion cover, designed by William Morris, c. 1902, silk thread and wool embroidery on blue poplin, National Gallery of Ireland, Yeats Archive, NGI 12246.

In 1908, following a split with Evelyn Gleeson, the Yeats sisters left Dun Emer Industries and continued their work at Cuala Industries. Along with hand-coloured prints, greeting cards, pamphlets, and small monthly magazines known as broadsides were also printed at the Cuala Press.

Networks of influence

SAQ: Emma, thinking now about our second major theme — networks of influence — I'd like to ask you about how women artists shared their artistic ideas and practices.

EOT: Cooperatives and art guilds provided an important avenue through which women artists shared ideas and learned new artistic skills. Dun Emer Guild, for instance, helped young women to earn a living through embroidery, rug-making, printing, and bookbinding. Established in Dundrum, Co. Dublin, the aim of the guild was to employ Irish women in the making of beautiful things, and it contributed to the training and education of working-class girls. Susan Yeats taught local girls in a wide range of

embroidery techniques; some of their works were framed, or incorporated into cushions, table or bed linen, or furnishings. Similarly, in 1903 Sarah Purser established An Túr Gloine (The Glass Tower), a cooperative glass studio located at Pembroke Street, Dublin. The studio provided an alternative to the commercial stained glass imported from England and Germany for Irish churches and other architectural projects. The cooperative employed several female artists including Evie Hone, Wilhelmina Geddes, Beatrice Elvery, Ethel Rhind, and Catherine O'Brien (*Fig. 3*). At the studios, artists were trained and instructed in every detail connected with the design and production of the glass, from the enamelling to cutting, leading, and kiln firing.

SAQ: What role did women artists play in the development of art exhibitions and in the establishment of art collections?

EOT: Women artists were active in the establishment of art societies and exhibitions that enabled them and their peers to showcase their artwork. One of the most influential of these was the Society of Dublin Painters, founded in 1920. The society aimed to provide an alternative public exhibition space to the RHA due to the academy's continual resistance towards the display of modern Irish art. The society was successful in providing a venue for young artists such as Mainie Jellett and Mary Swanzy to show their work regularly in solo and group exhibitions, and became synonymous with the



Fig. 3: An Túr Gloine stained glass studio, c. 1904, photograph, National Gallery of Ireland, ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art, An Túr Gloine Archive.

best of Irish avant-garde painting in Ireland until the early 1940s, when it was succeeded by the Irish Exhibition of Living Art (IELA) in 1943. Once more, women such as Mainie Jellett, Norah McGuinness, and Evie Hone played a key role in the foundation and administration of this organization.

The exhibition also celebrates women who were pioneering in establishing and promoting art collections in Ireland. Sarah Purser was the second female to sit on the Board of Governors and Guardians, National Gallery of Ireland, from 1914 to 1943. In 1924 Purser founded the Friends of the National Collections of Ireland. The purpose of this organization was to bring about the return of Sir Hugh Lane's collection of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings from London to Dublin, as there had been a dispute after his death as to where he wanted his art collection to be housed. Purser was instrumental in securing Charlemont House as premises for what is now Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane.

Posthumous reputations

SAQ: And finally, Emma, thinking about women's reputations during their lifetimes and posthumously, could you tell me how a woman who worked as a professional artist would have been regarded in Ireland in the later decades of the nineteenth century?

EOT: Regardless of the fact that by the late nineteenth century women formed the majority of students enrolled in the RHA school in Dublin and regularly exhibited at the RHA annual exhibition, professional women artists weren't generally recognized or viewed in the same light as male artists. In 1922 Thomas MacGreevy (director of the National Gallery of Ireland from 1950 to 1963, and who served on the first Irish Arts Council) asserted that there were 'several women artists of account' who deserved proper recognition from the RHA, yet highlighted a chauvinist minority among the RHA academicians who 'apparently only titter at the idea of a woman artist'.² In 1924, over one hundred years after its establishment, the RHA elected Sarah Purser as its first female member. She was followed three years later by Margaret Clarke. Despite such challenges and low visibility, women played a key role in the development of modern art and the decorative arts in Ireland.

SAQ: As far as you've been able to discover, Emma, did critics and journalists ever review the work of these women artists?

EOT: The exhibition touches on the fact that some of the most prominent art critics and commentators did not always give women artists the critical recognition that they deserved. Margaret Clarke, for instance, exhibited

² Thomas MacGreevy, 'The Position of Women Artists in Ireland', *Irish Independent*, 4 December 1922.

regularly at the Royal Hibernian Academy from 1913 and quickly established a reputation as a much sought-after portrait painter. However, her reputation was often overshadowed by her husband, renowned stained glass artist Harry Clarke. In reviews of her work, Margaret was often referred to as ‘Mrs Harry Clarke’. On the other hand, An Túr Gloine met with wide critical acclaim. This is particularly evidenced in a scrapbook of newspaper articles created by Catherine O’Brien referencing the exhibitions and commissions of An Túr Gloine. *The Studio*, a magazine of fine and applied art, for instance, described the glass company as ‘perhaps the most noteworthy example of the newly-awakened desire to foster Irish genius’.³

SAQ: And how would you say that their work is viewed today?

EOT: The current lack of exhibitions and published material that acknowledge the contribution that women artists from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries made to the development of art in Ireland needs to be addressed and further equality needs to be established. In fact, the current exhibition on ‘[In]Visible: Irish Women Artists from the Archives’ attempts to fill, in some small way, what is a gaping void with regards to exhibitions on Irish women artists.

SAQ: Can we expect to see more women artists spotlighted in the National Gallery of Ireland’s future exhibitions? Are you and your colleagues planning on taking your research into ‘[In]Visible Women’ any further?

EOT: Yes. In addition to our archive exhibition on Irish women artists we also have a display of portraits of Countess Constance Markievicz. While best known as a leading figure of the Irish Revolutionary period, Markievicz was also a trained artist and the exhibition showcases a number of the artworks she produced while incarcerated in Holloway prison in 1918. Over the last number of years, the gallery has also displayed and acquired the work of a number of contemporary women artists. In 2017 the gallery commissioned Vera Klute to sculpt a portrait bust of Garry Hynes, director and co-founder of the Druid Theatre. This work now forms part of the National Portrait Collection at the National Gallery of Ireland, as does Geraldine O’Neill’s oil painting of the designer John Rocha, which the gallery commissioned in 2015. Coinciding with the current Markievicz exhibition, the gallery has commissioned its first performance art piece from acclaimed artist Amanda Coogan.

Artists in focus: Sarah Purser and Mainie Jellett

Emma O’Toole discusses below what she considers to be the legacy of these Irish women artists.

³ ‘Studio Talk’, *Studio*, 33 (1905), 250–68 (p. 260).

Sarah Purser (1848–1943): As a successful portrait painter and advocate for the arts, Sarah Purser was a key figure in the development of the visual arts in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland. In 1891 she was elected an honorary academician by the RHA, and later became the first female member. During her seventy-year career she played an instrumental role in Irish cultural life, and her studio at Mespil House in Dublin became a salon frequented by writers, politicians, artists, and revolutionaries. She was an important leader in Ireland's stained glass movement, having created *An Túr Gloine* in 1903. She was later responsible for establishing the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery and played a fundamental role in persuading the Irish government to provide Charlemont House as its residence.

Mainie Jellett (1897–1944): While studying art at the Westminster School of Art in London, Jellett began a long-standing friendship with fellow woman artist Evie Hone. Both travelled on to Paris, studying together under the tutelage of André Lhote and Albert Gleizes, before making their return to Ireland in 1923. At this time, Jellett's abstract work took on the suggestion of religious representation and she contended that spirituality could be best expressed in abstract, or non-figurative art. In 1923 Jellett exhibited *Decoration*, one of her earliest cubist works, at a Society of Dublin Painters' exhibition. The painting was greeted with general antagonism by the art establishment, the influential critic George Russell describing it as 'a late victim to Cubism in some subsection of this artistic malaria'.⁴

Jellett's contribution to artistic life in Ireland was not solely based on her works of art. She championed modernism in Irish art through her writing and lectures on the subject in Dublin from 1926 onwards, and introduced an awareness of modern developments and a European sensibility to the art establishment in Ireland. Most notably in 1943 she co-founded the Irish Exhibition of Living Art, one of the most significant annual exhibitions of contemporary Irish art until the 1970s.

About the ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art

The ESB CSIA reading room is open to all members of the public by appointment. Monday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. T: +353 1 6325517 E: csia@ngi.ie.

About the Yeats Archive

The Yeats Archive is available to all members of the public by appointment. Monday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. T: +353 1 6633454 E: yeats@ngi.ie.

⁴ *Irish Statesman*, 27 October 1923, pp. 207–08.