

Curator's choice

Jessica O'Donnell selects *Self-Portrait* by Frank O'Meara, a new acquisition to the Hugh Lane Collection



SENSITIVE CONSERVATION TREATMENT UNDERTAKEN AT THE HUGH LANE HAS BROUGHT THE SUBTLETY AND SKILL OF O'MEARA'S USE OF COLOUR TO THE FORE

FRANK O'MEARA (1853-1888)
Self-Portrait 1884 oil on canvas
29x22cm. Collection Dublin City
Gallery The Hugh Lane

In 2016 the Hugh Lane Gallery acquired a rare self-portrait by the artist Frank O'Meara (1853-1888). This exquisite painting was purchased with the financial support of Mary Stratton Ryan whose own research has done much to bring O'Meara's oeuvre to a wider audience. Measuring only 29x22cm, this portrait was painted in 1884 when O'Meara was thirty-one. Like so many Irish artists during the 19th century, O'Meara had travelled to France to broaden his artistic practice. There he enjoyed a bohemian lifestyle and embraced *en plein air* painting, albeit in a reflective, poetic way. From 1873-76 he attended the atelier of the successful portrait painter Carolus-Duran in Paris. O'Meara made friends easily among the international brigade of artists there including the American artist John Singer Sargent. Displaying the skill for which he would later become famous, Sargent, in 1875, painted a perceptive and endearing portrait of a twenty-two year old O'Meara, a friend he

described as 'irresistible.' Sargent's portrait, which until recently was the most well-known painted likeness of O'Meara, was presented to The Century Association in New York by Isobel Osbourne, a young American whom O'Meara had met and had a relationship with while both were living in the picturesque village of Grez-sur-Loing. Sketches made by Osbourne around 1876-78 and now in California are charming vignettes of their time together. She fondly remembered O'Meara as a 'handsome youth in his

rough country tweeds, knitted stockings, and stout brogues, with a blue beret on his curly head and a blackthorn shillelagh in his hand,' a description borne out by contemporary photographs and also by John Lavery's portrayal of O'Meara in *On The Bridge at Grez* (1884). Isobel Osbourne's folio also includes a self-portrait pencil sketch by O'Meara in which he is depicted wearing a sad and resigned expression.

In the painting *Self-Portrait*, under discussion here, we see O'Meara's 'helmet of wild curly auburn hair' and ubiquitous pushed back cap. His fellow artists remarked on O'Meara's wit and lightheartedness occasionally clouded by a 'wild Irish temper'. His *Self-Portrait* suggests this moodiness and has a pensive and melancholic quality similar to the figures lost in reverie that predominate his works painted at Grez. His health was failing around the time this portrait was painted and only four years later, debilitated by malaria, he would return from France to his native Carlow to die at the young age of thirty-five. Sensitive conservation treatment undertaken at the Hugh Lane has brought the subtlety and skill of O'Meara's use of colour to the fore. O'Meara had a slow, methodical approach to his painting in general and employed pencil studies and large-scale painted sketches before completing finished works. The application of paint in this portrait reveals it to have been painted relatively quickly and with confidence. O'Meara left only a small number of extant works; the majority of which are privately owned. The acquisition of this exceptional portrait has enriched the Hugh Lane's collection and the Gallery is fortunate to have the largest number of paintings by O'Meara in a public collection. *Self-Portrait* by Frank O'Meara is currently on view as part of *Frank O'Meara and Irish Artists Abroad* at the Hugh Lane Gallery. ■

Jessica O'Donnell is Acting Head of Collections, Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane.