

The Lane Legacy

Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin

European collectors and champions of modern art in the late 19th and early 20th century shared a determination and passion in bringing new artistic ideas into the public domain. Their efforts were successful to varying degrees in cities across Europe as they attempted to overcome resistance from conservative official establishments and popular opinion. Some of these endeavours were temporarily successful, only to be dismissed from their official posts or have their collections dispersed after their death. Today, given the level of acclaim and value of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings, it is difficult to believe that a hundred years ago these pioneering artists and their work were viewed by many with suspicion and antagonism and relied on enlightened groups for support.

Sir Hugh Lane (1875 – 1915) was one such champion who was successful in his ambitions. Inspired by the revolutionary talent of early 20th-century Irish poets and writers, including his aunt Augusta, Lady Gregory, and W.B. Yeats, who were part of Irish Literary Revival, Sir Hugh set about supporting contemporary Irish artists and establishing a gallery of modern art for Ireland.

It was a time of flux, of advances in industry, technology and the arts. World Fairs showcased inventions and innovation; Gustave Eiffel's tower was the signature work at the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1889, while at the Chicago World Fair in 1893 George Ferris Jr's invention of the Ferris wheel was the talking point. Modernisation in industry and art was accompanied by transformation in political thinking which resulted in upheavals throughout Europe, including Ireland.

It was against this fluctuating landscape of radical thinking and innovation that Hugh Lane achieved an extraordinary feat. Together with his supporters and the financial backing of Dublin Corporation, he established the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art in Dublin, which first opened to the public on the 20th of January 1908 in temporary premises, Clonmell House in Harcourt Street. A handsome catalogue accompanied

the collection featuring *The Age of Bronze* by Rodin on the front cover and, with Lane's customary attention to detail, the cover text was printed in both Irish and English.

With his passion and enthusiasm, he persuaded his supporters in Ireland and abroad to purchase and donate works for the Gallery. Sir Hugh's contribution to Irish cultural life was exceptional and the establishment of the Gallery was the most important cultural event in the birth of modern Ireland

The Lane Legacy celebrates Sir Hugh Lane's astounding legacy and reveals the depth and wealth of the artworks that he and his supporters brought together and gave outright to Dublin. It also includes works donated in his memory. He died aboard the *Lusitania* in 1915 on his return journey from New York; he was just thirty-nine. This exhibition includes many of the works in the original Municipal Gallery of Modern Art collection which, through a remarkable spirit of philanthropy, was generously assembled for the people of Ireland.

Gallery 6 – Bridge Gallery Controversy

The controversy over finding a suitable site for a building to house the collection of modern art that Hugh Lane and his supporters had brought together for Dublin erupted between 1908 and 1913. While a budget was in place to build a new gallery, a suitable site proved impossible to identify. Against a backdrop of growing political unrest in Ireland and throughout Europe, opinion was sharply divided over building a new gallery for this collection. Support came from many quarters. Socialist and Nationalist leaders such as James Larkin and James Connolly supported Lane, as did the Lord Mayor and many of the city councillors, including the famous Sinn Féin councillor Alderman Thomas Kelly.

However, the business community, including the famous press baron William Martin Murphy, were vehemently opposed to Lane's plan. Lane invited the English architect Sir Edwin Lutyens to Dublin to see if he could identify a site. After several of his suggestions were rejected, Lutyens came up with the idea of a gallery spanning the River Liffey, replacing the cast iron bridge known as the Ha'penny Bridge. Lane loved the plan and set about getting it agreed by Dublin Corporation. Controversy raged over the design, including concerns over the suitability of a river site; that Lutyens was not a local architect; that the gallery would be a monument to Lane; and such a building was not in the interest of those subject to deplorable housing conditions. The plan was narrowly rejected by Dublin Corporation. Later Alderman Kelly remarked to Lady Gregory, "If Lane had stayed in the country it would have been all right".

The result was that Lane, in 1913, decided to lend his 'conditional gift of continental pictures', thirty-nine in total, to the National Gallery, London, and then made a will leaving them to London. Yeats's fiercely polemic poem *September 1913* was inspired by these calamitous events. In 1915, Lane relented and wrote a codicil to his will, leaving the pictures to Dublin. Although signed, it wasn't witnessed, thus depriving it of legal status. The paintings remain in London's ownership as Lane died aboard the *Lusitania* in May 1915. Since 1959, agreements have been in place to share these paintings with Dublin.

Gallery 1 – Impressionism

In 1904, Hugh Lane was introduced to Impressionism art by his friend, the artist William Orpen who brought him to the gallery of Parisian art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel. Lane bought several paintings by the French Impressionists, including Manet, Renoir, Degas, Monet, Pissarro, Morisot and Vuillard. He was one of the first collectors in either Ireland or the UK to collect Impressionist art.

In November 1904, he organised an exhibition in the Royal Hibernian Academy of works that had been pledged to the Gallery of Modern Art along with Impressionist paintings borrowed from Paul Durand-Ruel, marking the first time Irish audiences had been exposed to Impressionist art. The following year, the Durand-Ruel Gallery organised the first ever Impressionist exhibition in London, in the Grafton Galleries in Mayfair.

Lane bought almost all of the artworks in this room including the magnificent *La Musique aux Tuileries* by Edouard Manet, one of the first great modernist paintings of contemporary life. Monet's *Lavacourt under Snow* had been singled out by English supporters of Impressionism as a work to be purchased by the National Gallery, London. The National Gallery rejected the painting as the artist was still living and Lane acquired it. Ironically it is now one of the works shared with the National Gallery. Although annoyed with Dublin's slow response to create a building for the modern collection, Lane continued to buy for the gallery. In January 1913, W.B. Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory saying that Lane had just bought a Degas (*Beach Scene* or *Bains de Mer: Petite Fille Peignéé par sa Bonne*) for £4,500 which was destined for the Gallery of Modern Art.

The generosity of supporters is demonstrated here by Mrs. Ella Fry who purchased Monet's *Waterloo Bridge* for £600 even though she had never been to Dublin. The bust of George Bernard Shaw by Rodin was donated by the author and playwright, *Portrait of Hugh Lane* by John Singer Sargent was commissioned by his friends and Bonnard's *Boulevard de Clichy* was donated by the Friends of the National Collections of Ireland.

Gallery 2 – Barbizon School and Antonio Mancini

For his 1904 exhibition at the Royal Hibernian Academy, Hugh Lane also borrowed a considerable number of paintings by artists of the Barbizon School from the estate of the Scottish industrialist James Staats Forbes. The Barbizon School was a mid 19th-century French movement in painting that made a considerable contribution towards a greater naturalism in art. This new Realism saw the artists paint nature with great sensitivity and for its own sake, as opposed to being a backdrop for allegory or historical drama. The name is derived from the village of Barbizon on the edge of the forest of Fontainebleau near Paris. Artists such as Theodore Rousseau, Constant Troyon and Charles François Daubigny escaped from Parisian urban life to commune with nature in the magnificent countryside around Fontainebleau. This movement, a precursor to Impressionism, greatly influenced the next generation of artists.

Earlier in 1904, on a visit to Rome, Lane sat for his portrait to the Neapolitan artist Antonio Mancini, whose work he greatly admired. As well as acquiring several of his paintings, Lane invited the artist to Dublin where he commissioned him to paint his sister Ruth Shine and his aunt Lady Gregory.

Mancini was known for his rather unorthodox method of painting. He placed a frame with grids of horizontal and vertical threads in front of his sitter and another in front of his canvas as he parried between the sitter and the painting, sometimes wearing a wreath of laurels on his head. It was rumoured that Lane, alarmed at Mancini's lavish use of paint, used to lift off some of the heavy rich scumblings and put it back on the palette when the artist had left the studio. In his poem *The Municipal Gallery Revisited* W.B. Yeats declared:

“Mancini's portrait of Augusta Gregory,
'Greatest since Rembrandt' according to John Synge.”

While Mancini may not be a rival to Rembrandt, in these portraits he gives us astute and discerning insights into the personalities of these remarkable women who were indefatigable supporters of Hugh Lane and his project.

Gallery 3 - Landscape

In 1901, the activist artist Sarah Purser brought Hugh Lane to an exhibition of paintings by Nathaniel Hone and John Butler Yeats in St Stephen's Green, Dublin. She had organised the exhibition in protest at the conservatism of the Royal Hibernian Academy, who had declined to exhibit works by these leading Irish artists. It was a eureka moment for Lane. He was so impressed by the works he saw he commissioned John Butler Yeats to paint portraits of notable Irish personalities and bought several paintings by Nathaniel Hone.

Inspired by the involvement of his aunt Lady Gregory and the poet William Butler Yeats in the Irish Literary Revival movement, Lane was determined that the contemporary talent in the 'sister art', the visual arts, would also be acknowledged and play its part in new Ireland. This was to be achieved by the establishment of a Gallery of Modern Art.

The Dublin-born artist Nathaniel Hone lived in France for seventeen years. Greatly influenced by Gustave Courbet and Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, he spent a considerable time in Barbizon where he developed his mature style of landscape painting which he applied to his Irish landscapes with great effect.

As in Gallery 2, many of the paintings in this room were once in the James Staats Forbes collection, including the group of landscapes by Corot. Corot is a sublime painter of landscape, whose harmonious subtle compositions were greatly admired by his peers. During the course of the 1904 exhibition, the authorship of *Peasants by a Lake*, attributed to Corot, was challenged, much to the delight of Lane's detractors. While it did enter the collection as a Corot, the composition, a multitude of people engaged in varied activities, has demanded further research. It is now established as a copy of a work by the Hungarian artist Géza Mészöly.

Gallery 4 – Irish Painting

In May 1904, Hugh Lane organised the first ever exhibition of Irish art in the Guildhall in London. The exhibition was originally intended for the Irish Pavilion at the World Fair in St Louis, USA, organised by the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction for Ireland. There was alarm at Lane's plans for the exhibition, which the Department thought would be financially extravagant, and the exhibition was eventually cancelled due to rising insurance costs. It was, as the young Jack B. Yeats ruefully remarked, a great opportunity missed for contemporary Irish art. Not to be deterred, Lane approached Alfred Temple, the director of the Guildhall, who agreed to the exhibition. It was a tremendous success, with over 80,000 visitors paying admission over its eight-week duration.

In his preface to the catalogue Lane outlined his ambition for the Gallery of Modern Art in Dublin:

“There are so many painters of Irish birth or Irish blood in the first rank at this moment, that extreme interest is being taken in this bringing together of sufficient specimens of their work to enable students of art to discover what common or race quantities appear through it. There is something of common race instinct in the work of all original writers of today, and it can hardly be absent in the sister art...A gallery of Irish and modern art in Dublin would create a standard of taste, and a feeling of the relative importance of painters... I and my friends look forward to having in Dublin, sooner or later, a gallery where such works and, if possible, the works of all great contemporaries, may be hung. We have had promise of a picture from many of the painters exhibiting at the Guildhall. The funding of a site and of a building in Dublin should be the lesser part of our task”.

Hugh Lane died before a permanent building could be achieved.

Gallery 5 – British Painting

Hugh Lane's collection includes excellent examples of the diverse movements in late 19th- and early 20th-century English art. The Pre-Raphaelites, founded in 1848, are represented here by Edward Coley Burne-Jones, Simeon Solomon and John Roddam Stanley Stanhope. The Pre-Raphaelites sought a return to Quattrocento (14th-century) Italian art known for its extremely detailed, complex compositions and intense colouring.

The Sleeping Princess by Burne-Jones is one of a number of paintings inspired by the Legend of the Briar Rose which he painted between c.1871 and 1894. Simeon Solomon was known for his Old Testament and Classical subject matter. His career was tragically cut short when, in 1873, he was arrested for soliciting in a public urinal in London and in the following year he was arrested in Paris. Although he never again publicly exhibited, he was supported by a circle of sympathisers, including Hugh Lane, who continued to buy his work.

Lane also supported artists from the New English Art Club (NEAC), which was founded in 1886 by young artists in opposition to the traditionalists in the Royal Academy. He collected many artists who were members of the NEAC, including William Orpen, John Singer Sargent, James Abbot McNeill Whistler, Philip Wilson Steer and George Clausen.

Augustus John's ménage à trois with his wife Ida and mistress Dorelia, as well as his gypsy lifestyle, was legendary. He was a regular visitor to Dublin and, as well as purchasing works from John, Lane commissioned him to paint a series of murals for his house in Cheyne Walk, London.

Charles Shannon was included in Lane's exhibition of Irish art in the London Guildhall, although his Irish connections are rather tenuous. Influenced by his lifelong companion Charles Ricketts, who was also his artistic collaborator, and by Renaissance Venetian painting, his early style gave way to a lighter palette in later years when he became known for his elegant classical style portraits and allegorical scenes. Ricketts, as well as a painter and illustrator, became a theatre designer around 1906 and worked with, among others, Oscar Wilde, W.B. Yeats and the Abbey Theatre, Dublin.