

Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Name
ARHA	Associate of the Royal Hibernian Academy
CAS	Contemporary Art Society [London]
CIAS	Contemporary Irish Art Society [Dublin]
CRC	Cultural Relations Committee of the Department of Foreign Affairs
CTT	Coras Trachtála Teoranta
DMSA	Dublin Metropolitan School of Art
IELA	Irish Exhibition of Living Art
IME	Irish Malt Exports Limited
IMMA	Irish Museum of Modern Art
IT	<i>The Irish Times</i>
KDW	Kilkenny Design Workshops
MAMAC	Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Nice, France
MOMA	Museum of Modern Art [New York]
NCA	National College of Art
NCAD	National College of Art and Design
NCEA	National Council for Educational Awards
OPW	Office of Public Works
PPRHA	Past President of the Royal Hibernian Academy
PRHA	President of the Royal Hibernian Academy
RA	Royal Academy [London]
RDS	Royal Dublin Society
RHA	Royal Hibernian Academy
RHA	Member of the Royal Hibernian Academy
RHK	Royal Hospital, Kilmainham
ROSC	The International Exhibition of Contemporary and Mediaeval Art, 1967-1988
RUA	Royal Ulster Academy [Belfast]
SJ	Society of Jesus
SRC	Students Representative Council
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
TD	Teachta Dála
UCD	University College Dublin
YKB	Yves Klein Blue

Outsiders: The Birth of a Dublin School of Artists

CHAPTER 1

Ireland has enjoyed an international reputation for its rich culture since the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1921. In particular, its poets, dramatists and novelists have found world audiences since the closing decades of the 19th century while the country was still pressing for independence from Great Britain. For example, the great poet W.B. Yeats (1865–1939) came to be regarded in his lifetime as one of the foremost writers in the English language, and rightly so. What may not be widely known is that he set out to begin with to train as a painter and to follow in the footsteps of his distinguished father, the portrait painter John Butler Yeats (1839–1922). The fledgling poet first enrolled at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art (DMSA) circa 1903 as an art student. He soon found that he did not have a particular talent for painting however, as the few watercolours of his that survive from his brief student days clearly demonstrate. But, before leaving that art school to embark on his true vocation as a great lyric poet, he took time to strongly criticise the curriculum and teaching methods there. He said the college was out-of-date and its teaching was stultifying to truly creative artists. He felt it was only fit for producing academic teachers of painting and sculpture rather than innovative artists.

Despite this criticism which was indeed perceptive, the DMSA had actually produced a number of distinguished visual artists in the years leading up to the Easter Rising of 1916. Perhaps, foremost was the portrait and genre painter of genius, William Orpen (1878–1931), from the Dublin middle class Protestant community, who made a big reputation for himself in London after graduation. He would go on to be knighted and become an official British war

artist during the 1914–1918 conflict. However, he never forgot his origins and was grateful to the DMSA for the training he had received there. In consequence, he returned annually for brief periods to teach his successors at the College and to impart to them his exceptional skills. His pupils included Patrick Tuohy (1894–1930), Harry Clarke (1889–1931) and Seán Keating (1889–1977), all three of whom subsequently became distinguished members of the Royal Hibernian Academy, and Keating its President.

These ardent young artists were passionately interested in Ireland achieving Home Rule and set out to initiate what they regarded as formulating a distinctively Irish way of making paintings, sculpture and stained glass. For a time, Keating followed his master, Orpen, to London where he knew greater opportunities existed for selling his works and earning a reputation. He soon returned, however, more than ever convinced of his nationalist beliefs, and with a passionate wish to establish a unique Irish style of painting. To do so, he repaired to the West of Ireland where he would find his deepest inspiration among the seafaring, ordinary citizens of Connemara.

His contemporary, the enigmatic Patrick Tuohy, was such a rabid nationalist that he could not contemplate taking Orpen's advice to seek his fortune in London. Instead, he took himself off to America in 1927 which he regarded as the land of the free. He succeeded in securing a number of portrait commissions there among the Irish diaspora before the onset of the severe financial crash in 1929 made life very precarious for all artists. Sadly, he died of gas inhalation in 1930 in New York, a tragic end to a brilliant early career.

The third member of that highly talented triumvirate was the stained glass artist Harry Clarke. He had an exceptional colour sense and was a consummate draughtsman in Beardsleyesque fashion. He succeeded in making ravishingly beautiful stained glass windows for both Catholic and Protestant Churches in Ireland and overseas, and was in competition with *An Túr Gloine*, the stained glass enterprise set up by the painter Sarah Purser (1848–1943), who was assisted by the artists Michael Healy (1873–1941) and Evie Hone (1894–1955). Harry Clarke had a vivid imagination and his wonderful complex compositions often included nude figures and scenes from Irish literature, which sometimes got him into trouble with the clergy and the art establishment. His vision

differed from that of Evie Hone whose stained glass windows were inspired by her deep religious beliefs and which radiated her warm emotional responses to her subject-matter. Both artists achieved worldwide reputations for their stained glass windows in their lifetimes. Sadly, Harry Clarke's career was tragically cut short by his death from the dreaded tuberculosis, for which there was no cure in 1931.

Most people were still unaware then that the Director of the National Gallery of Ireland and poet Thomas McGreevy (1893–1967) had just written a short monograph on the painter Jack B. Yeats and proclaimed him a genius. My teacher in school in New Ross had an honours degree from University College Dublin and was quite expert and enthusiastic about Irish literature in the English language, but had probably not come across the visual arts at all in the course of his studies. He was full of praise for the works of John Millington Synge (1871–1909), Seán O'Casey (1880–1964) and Padraic Colum (1881–1972) but was contemptuous of the blasphemous writer James Joyce (1882–1941) who he felt was over-rated and whose writings did not reflect well on Ireland. He made no mention at all of that other great literary émigré, Samuel Beckett (1906–1989), who was probably outside of his experience.

The Irish Christian Brothers have often been derided in recent years, but they performed an essential educational service for the vast majority of the Irish populace in the decades preceding and succeeding the establishment of the Irish Free State. Without them, many citizens would continue to work in lowly occupations. A number of the foremost painters and sculptors of modern Ireland owed their initial education to the inspirational Irish Christian Brothers. The visual arts did not form part of the curriculum at their schools. Instead only Mechanical Drawing was taught as a subject, mostly up to Intermediate Certificate level. The thinking was that it would prepare pupils to enter into apprenticeship training when they left school at the age of fourteen years, and they would be the lucky ones, as the country in the 1950s was enduring high unemployment and mass emigration. If they did not succeed in training as electricians, fitters or plumbers, many would have no other option but to emigrate to England to seek manual work. Only the brightest and luckier students would go on to sit the Leaving

Certificate examination, after which they might find employment in the Civil Service, the Electricity Supply Board or be called for teacher training.

The artists dealt with in this survey mostly grew up in a relatively poor Ireland prior to the outbreak of World War II when the country remained neutral, due to the statesmanship of Éamon de Valera (1882–1975) who was Taoiseach at that time. His successor, John A. Costello (1891–1976), took many people by surprise when he declared the Irish Free State a Republic in 1948. It delighted the majority on the island of Ireland, but dismayed and angered a minority, particularly the Unionist citizens of Northern Ireland, most of whom wish to remain part of the United Kingdom. They still felt loyal to the king of England. The altered situation would give rise to bigotry and divisive conflicts between the nationalist and loyalist communities there in the decades to follow.

Despite the relative lack of art training at Catholic schools in the Republic of Ireland in the post World War II years, artistic talent manifested itself at various locations like mushrooms springing up after a summer shower of rain. A group of young men and a few women with special talents for drawing and painting suddenly appeared on the Dublin scene in the 1950s. Some were born in the provinces, but they soon converged on the capital where the DMSA, now renamed the National College of Art (NCA), could provide them with further specialised education to enable them to become professional artists.

The first of them was a driven young orphan named James McKenna (1933–2000) from Bray, County Wicklow. From his childhood days in foster care, he drew images of animals and humans on scraps of paper, and grew up with a burning wish to become a professional sculptor. He never met his biological parents but was fortunate to be educated at the Bush National School, Killincarrig, Kilcoole, Co Wicklow, and subsequently at the Technical School in Bray where the teachers inculcated in him a love of learning and a lifelong yearning for a United Ireland. A passionate nationalist to his dying days he was a dreamer about Ireland's mythical past and the many stories he had heard at school about Cuchulainn and the Fianna. These early influences would have a strong bearing on his artistic output in the years to follow.

James McKenna was a complete self-starter. He prepared a portfolio of figurative drawings and mixed media paintings as a teenager, without knowing any other artist, and journeyed into Dublin in 1950 to present it to the teachers at NCA. It was then located beside Leinster House and adjacent to the National Library of Ireland. He met there the Professor of Painting at the College, Seán Keating, PPRHA, accompanied by his assistant Maurice MacGonigal, RHA (1900–1979), both of them painters. They examined his portfolio and were so impressed with the intense young man's artistic efforts that they immediately admitted him as a full-time student of art at the College. In addition, because he was so keen and showed such artistic promise, they took the unusual step of awarding him a modest scholarship. It would help to defray the costs involved, since it was obvious that he was almost bereft of means.

McKenna worked with demonic energy at the College for the next five years until he graduated with a Diploma and a first class reputation as a sculptor of formidable potential. He determined to travel to London thereafter, to earn some money to enable himself to purchase the tools of his trade. Dublin was at that time experiencing high unemployment particularly for young people. To finance the trip, he first held an exhibition of his sculptures at the College. Part-time students, including the young architects Sam Stephenson (1933–2006) and Arthur Gibney, PPRHA, (1931–2006), attended the exhibition and were so impressed by his prowess that they both scraped together a few pounds to purchase small works in plaster and bronze. In those days there was no bronze casting foundry in Ireland, so plaster casts had to be sent to England or France to be cast in bronze. McKenna could ill afford to do that, as he often went without meals to buy materials for making sculpture. His contemporaries at the College as full-time students included the painters Pauline Bewick (1935–2022), Patrick Pye (1929–2018) and Carey Clarke (b. 1936) with whom he became acquainted, but not particularly friendly, though Clarke helped him on occasion.

Much more important for his future career was his befriending of the small group of night students at the College. They were studying to become painters. They had first spent some time copying the antique Greek and Roman plaster casts before being admitted to the Life Class, where they were allowed to sketch from

the nude male and female models. In those days the models were required to wear a skimpy loin cloth for modesty reasons. The group included a number of people who were most interesting for McKenna.

Among them was the medical student from University College Dublin named Joseph O'Connor (b. 1936), and a professional tailor from Marino on the north side of the Liffey who was a keen painter in oils in his spare time named Michael Lydon (b. 1935). Another member was a dapper little man from Mountjoy Square named John Kelly (1932-2006) who had to leave school early because of the death of his father from tuberculosis. Kelly had joined the local boxing club and early on showed such exceptional proficiency that he might have had a lucrative career as a flyweight professional boxer, if he had not had an even greater urge to become a professional artist. Then there was the sign painter from Blessington Street on the northside named Edward Mooney HRHA (b. 1937) who decided to train to become an artist after seeing paintings in a window by the Northern artist, Paul Henry RHA, (1877-1968). They were joined by a somewhat older artist, also from the inner city, named Michael Byrne (1923-1989).

Another member of the night class was the shipping clerk from Synnott Place near the Mater Hospital, Seán McSweeney (1935-2018), whose father had died in an accident and left his son his palette and brushes. Seán was determined to pursue the career his father was denied, through lack of opportunity. They were all joined by a very vibrant personality named Brian Bourke (b. 1936) who would initially join the College as a full-time student of painting soon after the arrival of James McKenna. Bourke also hailed from an inner city working class family where music and banter were much enjoyed. He showed unusual proficiency at drawing from early childhood and persuaded his mother to allow him to enrol in NCA, even though she was concerned that it was not a suitable career for a working class boy.

However, he was no sooner in the College than he was dissatisfied with the conservative teachers there, and after a year or two decided that really they could teach him nothing useful. He accordingly resigned, or was dismissed for unruly behaviour, probably for not toeing the official line. In the interval he became close

friends with the night students and in particular with James McKenna. In due course McKenna and Bourke would take the mailboat to England to further their art education, and to earn some money. The final member of that group of would-be artists who became so influential, was the industrial printer, Paul Belton (1921-2008) from the Howth Road, who had a long-held wish to be a professional painter. Alas, he was married with young children and had a full-time job managing the family business which employed a number of people. His hopes would not be fulfilled.

The night students at the College of Art used sometimes congregate in Grafton Street at the El Habano tea and coffee café, when studies allowed. They could not afford to drink alcoholic beverages in those days, so they made do with glasses of milk and slices of apple tart. The café was fashionable in the 1950s, and was a place where they could enjoy good conversation. There was always the chance that they would also encounter some interesting and attractive young women there. Besides, it was also the meeting place of budding musicians, poets and intellectuals.

On one occasion the whole group was joined by the celebrity writer, poet and playwright, Brendan Behan (1923-1964), who was then at the height of his powers. Behan had married Beatrice Salkeld, the daughter of Dublin painter Cecil Salkeld (1904-1969) and was full of talk about art and artists. He became a friend and admirer of the earnest group of young painters and dubbed them the 'Brothers of the Brush'. It was a name that they would subsequently become very proud of. It would be some years later before the group would be joined by Anita Shelbourne (b. 1938) and Alice Hanratty (b. 1939) leading to the obvious conclusion that the group should be renamed 'The Brothers and Sisters of the Brush'. However, with the further addition of budding artists John Behan (b. 1938) and Michael Kane the loose affiliation of artists continued to expand until they decided to become known as 'The Independent Artists'. They would have a major influence on the subsequent development of the visual arts in Ireland.

The *Brothers of the Brush* were not the only group of artists on the scene in Ireland at that time. The Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) was flourishing, as were the modernists of the Irish Exhibition of Living Art, influenced by the White Stag Group of

UK pacifists during World War II. Of course, there was also the Water Colour Society of Ireland and some other affiliations.

McKenna and Bourke worked hard in London at a variety of manual tasks, managing also to enhance their initial art education in Dublin with visits to commercial art galleries and museums. They still managed to make art in whatever small amount of spare time they could squeeze out of the twenty-four hour day. Bourke drew the denizens of a pub in which he got work, before moving on to become a hospital attendant where he persuaded attractive young nurses to sit for him. He even managed to enrol for some lectures at Saint Martin's School of Art, and sometimes moonlighted at lectures at Goldsmiths College before the authorities cottoned onto him and persuaded him to leave. He finessed his London experience by travelling to Paris for a month or so but found the going there harder than in London, and was sometimes forced to sleep out rough. He returned to London and frequented the British Museum where he experienced the joys of being allowed to handle and examine Old Master drawings. It was a very enriching time for a young draughtsman with a love of strong colours.

James McKenna of the multiple talents worked on the London Underground and used most of his earnings to purchase the tools of his future trade as a professional sculptor. He also managed to carve and model small pieces of figurative sculpture. Often, this meant using clay from the underground excavations, or like Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920), transforming throw away blocks of sandstone and granite into seductive small works of art. He even found time to write a fascinating musical play, titled *The Scatterin'*, which afterwards became a sensational success when it was produced at the 1960 Theatre Festival in Dublin. It was all about youth unemployment in Dublin and the scourge of emigration with which McKenna and his friends were all too familiar. The play then moved back to London and had a successful run there at the Stratford East Theatre. For the first time in his life James McKenna was in the money. The royalties from the play enabled him to move back to Dublin and buy an artisan cottage in Saint Teresa's Gardens in the Liberties. He would share it with fellow artists who could not afford to rent accommodation elsewhere. The house had a small front garden, and it became his outdoor sculpture studio. It was in that

garden that he commenced to carve and assemble a larger than life-size sculpture of a sturdy horse from multiple blocks of timber. He named it the *Red Horse for the People*.

Before McKenna and Bourke finally returned to live in Dublin they were visited in London by Edward Mooney and John Behan, both of whom were also seeking to enlarge their artistic experience, as well as to earn some money. Behan was an industrial worker who was inspired by the great Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) to change the direction of his life, and to enrol also as a night student at NCA. He set out to become a painter but it soon dawned on him that he was destined to become a sculptor.

This book is really the story of the subsequent careers of these young artists, and some others who joined them, when they eventually came home to Dublin to pursue their professional careers. They somehow survived despite a lack of patronage and respect for what they set out to do. The middle class art establishment of the day was initially hostile to them, and unappreciative of what they were trying to do. They received little encouragement. Their working-class approach to making strong figurative art was at odds with what was being shown at the conservative RHA. So the academicians did not want to hear about them, or to have them exhibit at their annual exhibitions. On the other hand, the middle-class artist Louis le Brocq (1916-2012) and his more adventurous modern artist friends Evie Hone, (1894-1955), Mainie Jellett (1897-1944) and some others, had set up a rival annual exhibition to that of the RHA. It was known as the Irish Exhibition of Living Art (IELA), and its first president was the landscape painter Norah McGuinness (1901-1980) who hailed from Northern Ireland.

The IELA favoured more modern ways of making art, including pure abstraction, and was anathema both to the members of the RHA, and to the Brothers of the Brush. The IELA encouraged prominent artists from abroad to participate in their exhibitions, with the aim of improving the standards of art in Ireland and in that they were prescient and successful. The great British sculptor Henry Moore (1898-1986) and the renowned French modernist painter, Henri Matisse (1889-1954) were thus enabled to be seen for the first time in Dublin through these exhibitions. So also was the distinguished Cornish painter Peter Lanyon (1918-1964) whose

work would prove such an inspiration to the Irish painter, then out of the mainstream and working in the provinces, named Tony O'Malley (1913–2003). Remarkably, his individual landscape paintings were accepted for inclusion in the IELA exhibitions, at a time when works by the young Dublin artists were being rejected. But IELA exhibitions found favour with the increasing numbers of the educated Irish middle classes who could now afford to travel abroad and experience foreign cultures.

The Brothers of the Brush decided to do their own thing. They decided to start their own exhibition space. Thus came into being the Cavendish Gallery in 1956. It was the brainchild of Paul Belton, the printer who wished to be a professional painter. He persuaded his family that the basement of their printing works and art supplies shop on Cavendish Row opposite to the Gate Theatre would make a suitable exhibition space. There was enthusiastic agreement to the proposal and the refurbishment quickly went ahead. The Brothers held their first exhibition there that year. It comprised paintings, drawings and sculpture, and the Brothers invited some other like-minded artists to participate also. The private view was adjudged to be a considerable social success and it received some press coverage, even though only a single work of art found a buyer on that occasion. Paul Belton said he did not care. The primary purpose of the gallery was to provide an exhibition space for the emerging band of Brothers. Present also that evening were young John Behan from Sheriff Street and the literary-minded Michael Kane from Ashford in County Wicklow. Both joined the Brotherhood and would become prominent members of the Independent Artists in the years to follow when membership of the group continued to expand. Also present on opening night were some budding musicians and writers, including Ronnie Drew (1934–2008), Dominic Behan (1928–1989) and Ulick O'Connor (1928–2019). Joseph O'Connor was at this stage a postman in London, delivering the mail in the early morning before going on to paint in his studio and attending further art classes at various London institutions. He travelled over on the mailboat that weekend to attend the exhibition opening in which he had eagerly participated. A strong, enduring friendship developed between Joseph O'Connor, Paul Belton, John Behan, Brian Bourke, Michael Kane and James McKenna. They inspired each other to persevere as artists.

Joseph O'Connor's case is a slightly sad one. His parents from Cork and Kerry had scrimped and saved to be able to afford to send their clever son to the prestigious Belvedere College in Denmark Street. It was an expensive fee-charging college run by the Jesuit Order with high standards of academic achievement. The friends he grew up with on the street near the Phoenix Park all went to the nearby Irish Christian Brothers school where the education was free, but less liberal. O'Connor's parents hoped he would become a doctor or a priest. He secretly wanted to become an artist. The best compromise he could come up with, was to enrol at University College Dublin by day as a medical student, and at NCA by night as a student painter. After three years of both, he finally decided that art was to be his life, so he forsook medicine and fled to London when his irate parents decided he was *persona non grata* at home. His Garda Síochána sergeant father was furious, telling him that an Irish painter could never earn a satisfactory living. Salt was rubbed into the wounds of the old couple when their only daughter Siún O'Connor (c. 1938–1985) also elected to become an artist. She duly attended NCA for five years, but did not have the exceptional painting talent of her brother. She ended up teaching art at a Saint Louis Convent, until she died middle-aged of a sudden heart attack, having recently inherited the family home. It now passed to her absentee brother, who prior to that, had to stay at the home of his friend Paul Belton on his visits to Dublin.

It was at this stage in 1985 that this writer came to know about Joe O'Connor and his unique paintings for the first time. It followed on from a visit to our home by a Dominican priest from Tallaght who said he was a friend of the artists Patrick Pye and Joseph O'Connor. His name was Paul Murray (b. 1947) and he was a practising poet in his spare time. He told me his close friend Siún O'Connor had died suddenly and his brother in London was somewhat short of money to pay for the funeral expenses. Would I consider buying a Joseph O'Connor painting to help out in the circumstances? I provisionally agreed, and accompanied the priest to the O'Connor home. I was astonished to encounter the hundreds of paintings there, stacked about the walls. A few were framed and hanging on the walls of what had become Joseph's Dublin studio. Almost all were unframed, and painted in acrylic on a variety of

materials, including canvas, cardboard and even sheets of newspaper. It immediately struck me that O'Connor's style was very much his own, and in fact, quite unique. I was instantly taken by a high-toned Expressionist portrait of an Afro-American woman which hung in pride of place. On examining the reverse of the canvas, I discovered that it was a portrait of the eminent operatic soprano, Jessye Norman (1945- 2019) whom the artist had seen on television singing on the occasion of the commemoration of the French Revolution. It was undoubtedly a masterwork by the artist. Fr Murray said it was for sale at a price of £800 and I pounced upon it there and then and wrote out a cheque for that amount, happy to acquire something special, but also glad to be of some assistance to the artist.

It occurred to me then that Joseph O'Connor was one of Ireland's forgotten artists. I was keen to be of further assistance, so next day I called in to John Taylor of the Taylor Galleries, the successor to the Dawson Gallery in Dublin, and urged him to give Joseph O'Connor a solo exhibition. He readily agreed and the show followed soon afterwards. The artist travelled over from London for the event, and it was the first occasion on which I made his personal acquaintance. He turned out to be a tall, dark-haired, self-effacing erudite and very likeable man. I had the honour of saying a few words, in the course of which I urged the gathering present to support the deserving artist by buying one or more of his works. In the event, it sold only reasonably well, as he was something of an unknown personality on the Dublin social scene, which counted for a lot. However, I gave further help by purchasing two additional works painted on sheets of newspaper, one of which was of a Welsh footballer about to strike for goal, and the other was of a group of race horses surging towards the finishing line, with their jockeys high up out of the saddles and brandishing their whips frantically. Joe O'Connor and I became friends from then on, and have kept in touch ever since.

O'Connor writes many letters in a characteristic spidery scrawl, often enclosing cultural cuttings from English newspapers, and sometimes enclosing vivid ink or biro sketches of footballer's profiles or Premier League soccer players in action. These sketches are often reminiscent of the sketches of the Swiss painter and

sculptor, Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966). Sadly, as this book goes to print, Joseph O'Connor has now retired to UK sheltered accommodation as his family feared for his safety alone in Dublin during the COVID-19 restrictions.

From childhood, I was very interested in many things, including gardening, classical music and poetry. A love of the visual arts only surfaced in earnest when I came to live in Dublin in 1956. The massive painting, *The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife*, at the National Gallery of Ireland by Cork-born artist Daniel Maclise (1806-1870) left me full of wonder and admiration for what gifted artists could achieve. I was hungry to learn much more about art. While working in the Central Bank of Ireland, then in Foster Place. I was enabled to study Public Administration, Arts and Commerce by night at nearby Trinity College Dublin over a four year period, which coincided with the night students of painting and sculpture at NCA. It would be a few years later before the pursuit of art would become for me an overriding passion.

My marriage to Antoinette in 1964 meant the purchase by mortgage of a small bungalow and then we wished to purchase a few watercolours to hang on the walls of our new home. We began to attend house contents auctions. We were soon side-tracked when we came across an experimental abstract oil painting on a wooden panel, signed John Kelly which we liked and bought for the derisory price of £5. It turned out to have been painted by Little John Kelly from Mountjoy Square and not by the older academic artist John F. Kelly, RHA, who was his teacher at NCA during the younger man's years as a night student at the College.

It was followed by an intriguingly interesting pastel of a religious subject, titled Easter Triptych by an artist named Patrick Pye which we also liked, and hoped to obtain for a similar modest sum. Unfortunately, there was another spirited bidder in the salesroom for that painting and we ended up having to pay £26 to secure it. For us it was almost beyond our resources in 1965, but it was our first introduction to the group of young Irish artists who started out as the Brothers of the Brush and went on to be better known as the Independent Artists. Over the years to follow, we bought works by Michael Kane, Brian Bourke, Barrie Cooke (1931-2014), James McKenna, Seán McSweeney, Charles Cullen (b. 1939), Edward

Mooney, Camille Souter (1929-2023), Joseph O'Connor and others, and additional works by Patrick Pye as well as selected artefacts. They greatly enriched our lives, and we became friends with many of them.

After three and a half years in the Central Bank, I succeeded in moving to the staff of Arthur Guinness, Son and Co. (Dublin) Limited, where the pay was much better. Some years later, my wife and I and our young family spent some time in London still working for Guinness, before moving on to Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia and then on to Kumasi in Ghana on the West Coast of Africa. We returned home to Dublin in 1973 for me to take up a new exporting career. During the five and a half years we lived abroad, the art scene in Dublin was changing dramatically. The Independent Artists had taken the Arts Council to task for alleged biased distribution of public funds, and had established the Project Arts Centre and the Dublin Art Foundry, with minimal or no support from the Arts Council. Michael Scott (1905-1989) and James Johnson Sweeney (1900-1986) had shaken up traditional art by holding two international exhibitions of modern art in Dublin in 1967 and 1971 under the banner of ROSC, described as the poetry of vision.

We came home with a small collection of contemporary Malaysian paintings, some Chinese ceramics, and a collection of Ashanti small bronze sculptures, known as goldweights. We immediately purchased a larger home and re-commenced buying contemporary Irish paintings and sculpture that we particularly liked. After a few years back on the home scene, it would appear that word got around, rightly or wrongly, that I had 'a good eye'. Soon, invitations followed to join various arts organisations. It was never then my ambition to become a member of 'the Irish art bandwagon' as Leo Smith, the proprietor of the Dawson Gallery, then described it. As I gained more knowledge about art through constant looking and voracious reading, my friend the late Michael Wynne (1937-2003) persuaded me to become a life member of the Friends of the National Collections of Ireland, and architect Peter Doyle (1937-1995) followed with an invitation to become a member of Basil Goulding's Contemporary Irish Art Society. Membership of the Cultural Relations Committee of the Department of Foreign Affairs soon followed, as well as membership of The Arts Council. James White (1913-2003)

then inveigled me into becoming a member of the Royal Dublin Society, and his immediate successor as chairman of its Visual Arts Committee, as well as persuading me to join him on the Advisory Committee for the National Self-Portrait Collection at the University of Limerick. I was now a fully-fledged member of the Irish art establishment, much loathed by many members of the Independent Artists, though some of them had become my friends. I was happy to take on those various pro bono commitments believing it to be both a privilege and a duty to contribute towards the development of the arts in Ireland.

In 1981 I was offered the Chairmanship of the ROSC Executive Committee by its founder Michael Scott. It came out of the blue, and was totally unexpected. I accepted it, even though David Hendriks of The Hendriks Gallery warned me I would be 'eaten alive by the begrudgers'. It did put me on an immediate collision course with some of the most vociferous members of The Independent Artists, all of whom I respected and admired. Those artists were justifiably riled because Irish artists had been specifically excluded from the first two ROSC exhibitions. The thinking of the international jurors for those exhibitions was that Ireland did not then possess any artists of international calibre with cutting-edge innovative styles. Louis le Brocquy, then living in France, was so irate at his perceived exclusion that he wrote a strong letter of objection to his old friend, Michael Scott, which hurt Michael to the bone.

Gordon Lambert and myself were then co-opted to membership of the ROSC Committee in 1975 and we succeeded in changing that restrictive policy. As a result, the international jurors for ROSC '77, chose two Irish artists for inclusion, Brian O'Doherty (1928-2022) and James Coleman (b. 1941), both of whom lived abroad and were well known to international museum curators. The position further improved, from an Irish art point of view, for ROSC '80. The jury on this occasion was all Irish under the Chairmanship of art critic Dorothy Walker (1929-2002). I was a member of that jury and I successfully campaigned for the inclusion of Robert Ballagh (b. 1943) and William Scott (1913-1989). I was also successful in having two leading Japanese painters selected. I had come across their paintings on business trips to Japan.

In preparation for ROSC '84 at the Guinness hop store I decided to freshen up the ROSC Executive Committee with Michael Scott's approval. Brian Ferran (b. 1940) from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and Ted Hickey (1940-2007) from the Ulster Museum brought younger perspectives to the forum. So did my choice of two Independent Artists Michael Kane and Noel Sheridan (1936-2006), in an attempt to make ROSC more inclusive. Unfortunately, the experiment backfired. I had underestimated the strong loyalty of Michael Kane to his comrades. He submitted a list of 22 Irish artists to the Committee for inclusion in ROSC '84 and it was more than the rest of us were prepared to entertain, so he resigned and wrote adversely about it to the Irish newspapers next day. Naturally, he received loyal vocal support from the other members of the Dublin group of artists. The unwelcome publicity was somewhat off putting for the ROSC financial sponsors. In the end, we invited the prominent Irish architect Dr Ronnie Tallon (1927-2014) to select 10 Irish artists that he considered to be most suitable for inclusion in ROSC '84, and he did so, after our first choice of juror, Declan McGonigle (b. 1953) of the Orchard Gallery in Derry had turned down what he must have regarded as 'a poisoned chalice'. The exhibition duly went ahead and was widely praised.

A similar outcome took place for ROSC '88. A number of Irish artists were chosen by the jury which comprised two eminent foreign museum curators as well as Michael Scott and myself. Brian Bourke and Tony O'Malley were among them, and deservedly so. The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) curator, Kynaston McShine, who had been born in Trinidad and was familiar with the large colony of flamingos in the great swamp there, was greatly taken by O'Malley's exotic Bird Lake paintings from the Bahamas and insisted that he should be included. The only regret I had from ROSC '88 was that it did not include examples of his finest poetic paintings by the Irish master, Patrick Collins (1911-1994). He was by then past his prime and the foreign jurors did not regard him as avant-garde enough. I think his most ambitious works would have held up well to the international exhibits.

In the end, the selection of art has all to do with taste or the lack of it. The judgement of art is surely a very subjective process. No two people will always agree on what is important art or the

converse. Even the great French innovator, Paul Cezanne (1839-1906) was very dismissive of the art of many of his great French contemporaries. Likewise in English art, two of its greatest exponents John Constable (1776-1837) and J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) were constantly at loggerheads, criticising each other's paintings, and jealously vying for prime hanging positions at the annual exhibitions of the Royal Academy.

Thomas Ryan (1929-2021) HRHA was a full-time attendee at NCA in the '60s. He had no time for abstract art, nor for the modernism being talked about by the night students. He had a strong personality and mingled socially with many of the other full-time students. Ryan looked back to the examples of the Old Masters and established a reputation after graduation as a gifted portrait painter. His ideal teacher was the fellow Limerick man Seán Keating PRHA who shared his conservative views. Ryan subsequently succeeded to the Presidency of the Royal Hibernian Academy, and held the position for many years, and was succeeded by Carey Clarke. Ryan was very trenchant in his views, once describing himself on radio as a first class draughtsman, unlike the much talked about innovative landscape painter in France, Paul Cezanne who he opined was only a third rate draughtsman.

The RHA modelled itself on the Royal Academy in London from its foundation in the 19th century, and had not changed very much by the middle of the 20th century when the Dublin school of artists appeared on the scene. It was elitist and favoured by the professional classes and was not welcoming to 'young Turks'. Happily, it has altered for the better since then and now welcomes exciting new talent to join its ranks. The IELA had, in the meantime, gone into abeyance and the RHA has now taken over most of its worthwhile functions.

It became increasingly evident to this writer during the organisation of the ROSC exhibitions that foreign museum curators honestly believed that Ireland did not have a long and distinguished history of great painting and sculpture, as did rich European countries such as France, Italy, the Netherlands and Germany, and to a lesser extent, England. Sure enough they knew about our writers but were unaware of our painters. The continental countries had a long start on Ireland. The noble men of Florence and Rome had

fine castles and great houses built for them in which they could display masterpieces of painting and sculpture. The Papacy in Rome was also an ongoing patron of the Fine Arts and its Italian churches became treasure houses of the finest human creations. No such opportunities of wealthy patronage existed in Ireland.

Despite this, many home-grown talents followed in the 18th and 19th centuries. Numbered amongst them were the portrait painter Garret Morphey (1650–1716), the landscapist George Barret (1730–1784), the great history painter, the Corkman James Barry (1741–1806), the portraitist of genius, Nathaniel Hone the Elder, (1718–1784), *genré* painter Hugh Douglas Hamilton (1740–1808), the exceptional landscape painter from Waterford, Thomas Roberts (1748–1778), and the gifted painter from the provinces, Thomas Frye (c 1710–1762) who felt it necessary to emigrate to London where he managed the Bow porcelain factory. The 19th century in turn produced such excellent painters as James Arthur O'Connor (1792–1841), a painter renowned for his moonlights, his friend the Wexford painter Francis Danby (1793–1867) who specialised in dramatic biblical scenes as well as landscapes, the landscape painter Nathaniel Hone the Younger (1831–1917) from Malahide, a prosperous grain merchant who could afford to spend years in France, painting in the Forest of Fontainebleau with the Barbizon School, and finally, the richly talented Walter Osborne, RHA, (1859–1903) who could turn his hand to any subject. There were other lesser talents in those days, many of whom gravitated towards England to find patronage. It was no wonder, then, that Irish artists were, until comparatively recently, regarded as British artists. It would take the 20th century scholarship of Professor Anne Crookshank (1927–2016) and Desmond Fitzgerald the Knight of Glin (1937–2011) to correct that misconception, when they published their pioneering volumes on Ireland's early artists.

We return now to the Independent Artists group in the middle of the 20th century. They were angry young men and women from humble backgrounds who kicked against the artistic styles of the past, as artists do everywhere. They recognised that the visionary Dublin Society founded by the philanthropic gentleman Thomas Prior (1681–1751) and his friends in a room in Trinity College Dublin in the 18th century, was a spectacular breakthrough for artists in

Ireland. It became the Royal Dublin Society when it secured some funding from London in those colonial days. Its aim was to foster agriculture, science and the arts, and it gave a great impetus to the latter, by taking over and developing the Robert West (died 1770) Drawing School for Young Artists. It was also responsible for setting up the National Library of Ireland, the National Museum of Ireland, the National Botanic Gardens and some other important cultural institutions in the 19th century, which continue to enrich contemporary Irish society. Many young artists benefited from the teachings and scholarship of the RDS, but it took a while after the foundation of the Irish Free State before Catholic art students felt they were welcome to benefit from the RDS which had traditionally been an Anglo-Irish preserve. The major events of the year were the Spring Agricultural Show and the Summer Dublin Horse Show at the RDS. Religion soon ceased to be a dividing factor, as artist Alice Hanratty (b. 1939) pointed out in an interview, when she stated that religion was no longer an issue amongst the comradeship of young Irish artists in the second-half of the 20th century. Her colleague in the Independent Artists, Charles Cullen, felt confident enough to submit his student paintings to the RDS Annual Taylor Scholarship and was successful in winning a valuable prize.

Yet, Charles Cullen could not earn a living from his art, and he was ultimately forced, like Little John Kelly, to take a teaching job at the National College of Art and Design (NCAD), to feed and educate his family. Like Michael Kane, both Cullen and Kelly drew ongoing inspiration from the novels *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce and the extraordinary books gave them endless material for visual subject matter. Yet, sadly to this day, not a single work of art by Charles Cullen has yet been purchased for the Collection of the Arts Council/An Comhairle Ealaíon, nor has he had much exposure at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Kilmainham. It was left to Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane to mount a late retrospective exhibition of his work in the late 1980s, and it proved to be a revelation. It was because of the relative neglect of the Dublin School of Artists, as I now like to describe them, that I decided to undertake research and write this book about them.

They are still undervalued in the marketplace, and deserving of greater artistic recognition in my opinion. Good friends Sharon

and Liam Belton RHA hold a similar opinion. Liam was one of the long haired idealistic young art students with socialist convictions who attended NCA in the 1960s and campaigned against the authorities for much-needed change at the College. He said the example of his father and fellow Brothers of the Brush in the 1950s had been an inspiration to himself and subsequent Irish art students and he now felt their story should be told. I undertook the task in 2020 when COVID-19 restrictions permitted. It was a special pleasure for me to have the opportunity of interviewing most of the surviving artists from Independent Artists' days to discover just how much they achieved for the better, through their student campaigning against the odds over those critical few decades.

An example of how Irish visual artists of the 20th Century were undervalued, and even often ignored in favour of more high-profile musicians, writers and poets, was exemplified by the excellent book *Ireland and the Irish* written by the cultural historian John Ardagh, and published in 1994. Ardagh was a freelance writer, journalist and broadcaster. He was domiciled in England, but had been born in Malawi, East Africa, and his special interest in Ireland derived from the fact that his landed ancestors had emigrated from the family seat in County Waterford in the 19th century. He spent a few years travelling the length and breadth of the island of Ireland, interviewing prominent people and researching modern Irish history before he published his excellent book which is unusually well balanced and sympathetic. Yet, the one startling absence in his otherwise wonderful book, is any mention whatsoever of Ireland's distinguished painters, sculptors and stained glass artists of the 19th and 20th centuries. It is most surprising. He interviews John Banville, Seamus Heaney and Dermot Bolger for example, but fails to even mention Jack B. Yeats or Paul Henry, let alone interview Louis le Brocquy, Brian Bourke, Michael Kane or other living Brothers or Sisters of the Brush. It is the one lacuna in an otherwise wonderful book, in the opinion of this writer. John Ardagh was obviously unaware of the growing diversity and increasing excellence of the visual arts on this island, which would result in the emergence of world class talents such as William Scott, Francis Bacon and Sean Scully during the period when he was conducting his research. He obviously shared the erroneous opinion of some

other European commentators that Ireland had no modern tradition in painting and sculpture.

I hope this brief survey will encourage future Irish art historians to examine the achievements of these pioneering artists in much greater detail. They deserve it. It should never be forgotten that selling price in the marketplace is not to be confused with excellence in artistic achievement. Thus, it pains me that the works of some of these artists still sell for shamefully low prices at auction, either because the conservative art-buying public do not know enough about them, or worse still, because they do not rate highly enough their artistic achievements. I am confident this will change, with the passing of years, as it did for many great artists of the past such as Vincent van Gogh who could hardly find a sale for a single painting during his frenzied lifetime, despite the constant help from his vitally concerned art-dealing brother, Theo. Irish visual artists of today should no longer be regarded as inferior to their literary contemporaries, but placed on an equal footing with them, when the cultural history of the country is re-evaluated.