

Hugh Lane and his Artists

19th May to
7th August 2011

Hugh Lane's 1904 exhibitions were critical in the history of the establishment of Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane (originally known as The Municipal Gallery of Modern Art). They were born out of Lane's earlier successes, particularly that in 1902 when he organised an exhibition of Old Master paintings in the Royal Hibernian Academy (R. H. A.) drawn from private collections from all over Ireland. In his letter to *The Irish Times* Lane explained that the aim of the exhibition was to rekindle an interest in art in Ireland and in particular to nurture an appreciation of modern Irish art.

Lane's plans for another exhibition the following year, this time of modern Irish art, were thwarted due to the premature death from pneumonia of the artist Walter Osborne. The R. H. A. galleries were unavailable as they scheduled a retrospective exhibition in honour of Osborne in the winter of 1903. Lane bought two works from the exhibition for The Gallery of Modern Art, *Mother and Child*, which is in this exhibition, and *Tea in the Garden*, which can be seen in Gallery 2 on the ground floor.

Undeterred, Lane looked for alternative venues for his exhibition. The perfect opportunity presented itself in the form of the World Fair in St. Louis, U. S. A. in 1904. Built on over 1200 acres in the heart of St. Louis, in a time of world peace and technological promise, it was by all accounts the most beautiful and successful educational exhibition of international culture ever to be presented. Although not an independent country at the time, Ireland was represented by an 'Irish Village' which was underwritten financially by Thomas F. Hanley, an Irish American from St. Louis, and his supporters. They worked closely with the newly founded Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction in Dublin where the Secretary of the Department, T. P. Gill along with the vice president Horace Plunkett were central to the brilliant success of Ireland's contribution. Lane proposed to organise an exhibition of Irish art, comprising paintings and miniatures from the 18th century to the contemporary. One of the sections was planned to be of 'Irish Beauties' installed in a custom-made panelled octagonal room. However, by March 1904, alarmed at the costs of the exhibition especially the insurance premiums, T. P. Gill wrote to the nationalist M. P. John Redmond cautioning him about Hugh Lane.

My dear John,

Hugh Lane, the art gallery man may come to you or other members of the party... with some ideas about the Irish exhibition at St. Louis, and I warn you to be particularly careful about him. The Irish Americans, who are underwriting the Irish Section (and with whom we are cooperating) have declined to go on with this particular part of the feature of it in which Lane is interested, the pictures, owing to the excessive rates which the insurance companies have put up... The pictures in any case are a minor feature, although in Lane's language of course it was to be the greatest thing in all St. Louis... and they have further been rather alarmed at Lane's methods who is rather a wild man about money...

The artists selected, among them Jack B. Yeats, were bitterly disappointed. However the indefatigable 'art gallery man' turned to London and organised his exhibition of modern Irish art to tremendous success in the Guildhall, where over eighty thousand people paid admission to visit it. Several of the artists represented either presented works for the new gallery or had their supporters gift them, including John Lavery, Walter Osborne, William Orpen, Jack B. Yeats, Dermot O'Brien, Roderic O'Connor and Frank O'Meara. In all over one hundred works were pledged and Lane organised an exhibition of these in Dublin's R. H. A, alongside other works which would be desirable for a gallery of modern art.

The 1904–05 exhibition was a phenomenon. For the first time ever modern Irish artists exhibited side by side with the Impressionist painters, Monet, Degas, Pissarro, Renoir and Sisley. Manet was also represented as too were Corot, Courbet, Constable and Segantini among others. The Impressionist paintings were lent by Durand-Ruel, the famous Parisian art dealers. One of the works they lent was the magnificent *Waterloo Bridge* by Monet. It was bought for the gallery by Mrs. Ella Fry for 15,000 French francs. Landscape painting, particularly by French and English artists, was very well represented in the works Lane borrowed from the estate of James Staats Forbes, a Scottish industry tycoon who had died earlier that year. The little early Degas, *A Peasant Woman*, was purchased for this collection for £70, with subscriptions raised by Mrs. C. J. MacCarthy and *Woman Meditating* by Corot was acquired for £600 by what was known as the Ladies of Ireland fund. The Prince of Wales (later George V), on his visit to Dublin in 1905, purchased four paintings, *The Elder Tree* and *Weymouth Bay* by Constable, *A Village Road* by Harpignies and *The Fisherman* by Corot, and The Princess of Wales presented *A Seaport* by Constable.

In his Prefatory Notice to the exhibition, Hugh Lane writes: “There is something of the common race instinct in the work of all original Irish writers of to-day, and it can hardly be absent in the sister art...”. From the outset Lane made it clear that his vision was outward looking and not confirmed to an art which would solely draw on Celtic themes for its inspiration. The gallery would be a place where people could see and appreciate not only the modern movements of the day, but also understand the concerns of the contemporary artist. Lane goes on to say “A gallery of Irish and modern art in Dublin would create a standard of taste, and a feeling of the relative importance of painters. This would encourage the purchase of pictures, for people will not purchase where they do not know.”

He saw the Gallery playing a significant role in promoting a distinct school of Irish painting, “Such a gallery would be necessary to the student if we are to have a distinct school of painting in Ireland, for it is one’s contemporaries that teach one the most. They are busy with the same problems of expression as oneself, for almost every artist expresses the soul of his own age.”

Of the three hundred and six works exhibited at the R. H. A., over one hundred and twenty works were presented to The Municipal Gallery of Modern Art. When it opened to the public in January 1908, the collection comprised three hundred works which were acquired without any public financial support. The French national newspaper, *Le Figaro*, wrote of the event emphasising not only the calibre of the collection but also the philanthropy of its founder, “...to create, without any money, without any support whatsoever and armed solely with a tenacious will and a passionate love of the beautiful, an entire museum rich in beautiful works... gathered with so much effort and care, to a town that one loves – that is the ultimate gesture of this ingenious man.”

Hugh Lane and his Artists presents our audiences with an impressive exhibition of what was considered modern in 1904–05. It is also a testament to a commendable culture of philanthropy that existed at the turn of the 20th century and reveals a singular understanding and appreciation of the pivotal position the visual arts were to play in the birth of modern Ireland.

Barbara Dawson **Director**

With special thanks to Logan Sisley, Exhibitions Curator, who curated the manuscripts and archive section of the exhibition; also also to Colette O’Daly, The National Library of Ireland, Dr. Eimear O’Connor, and The Royal Hibernian Academy.

Hugh Lane and his Artists is on the first floor of Charlemont House. The Gallery’s collection of Corot paintings is on display in Gallery 6 on the ground floor.

For further reading please see: *Hugh Lane* by Lady Gregory; *Hugh Lane and his Pictures* by Thomas Bodkin; *Hugh Lane* by Robert O’Byrne; “Letters from St. Louis” by Homan Potterton, *Irish Arts Review*, 1994; “Hugh Lane and the Origins of the Collection” by Barbara Dawson, *Images and Insights*, Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, 1993; *Hugh Lane A Founder of A Gallery of Modern Art for Ireland*, 2008; Sir Hugh Lane Papers at the National Library of Ireland.