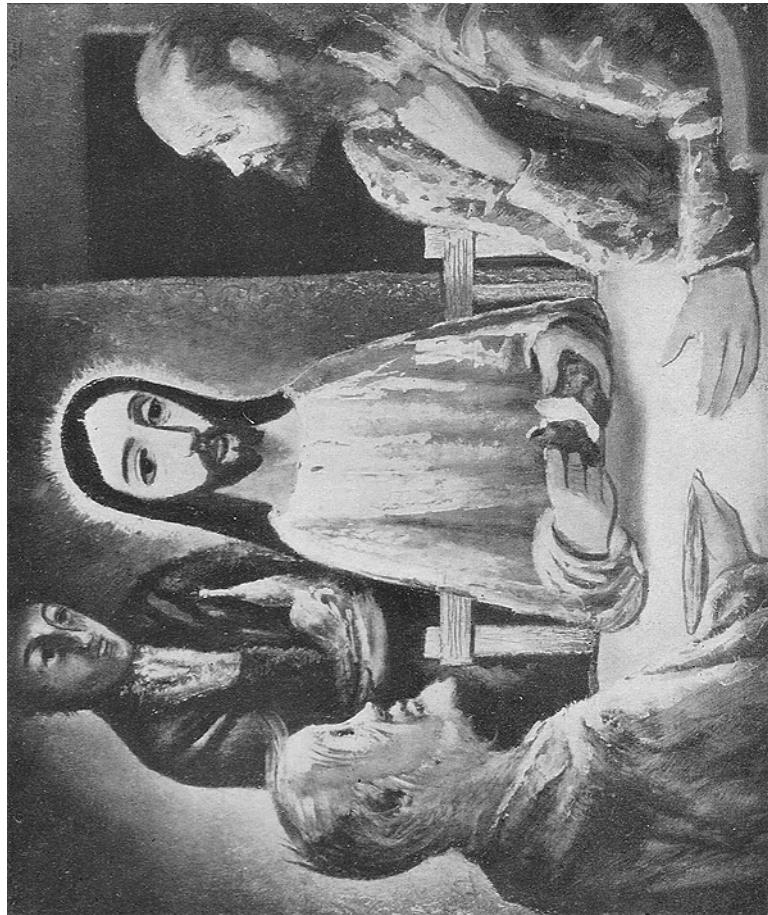


THE VISUAL ARTS IN IRELAND

JAMES WHITE

MICHAIL MacLiammoir has recently referred to the lack of visual sensitivity in the Irish people 'whose ears had always been its strongest point of aesthetic perception'. Naturally, the storyteller's art had been the only one to survive the long enslavement. Only the 'Ascendancy' had time or money to dabble in the fine arts, and the very nature of the 'Ascendancy' clan (those who collaborated with the ruling civil service appointed by England) led them to seek the most superficial portraits or stereotyped landscapes. Nevertheless, way back in our past we had a flourishing school of illuminators and sculptors, and it could not be held with much confidence that we are inherently colour-blind or immune to the suggestivity of lines or forms.

It is a fact worthy of reflection that Catholic clergy and people instinctively reacted against the lovely Georgian styles of architecture in which many of the towns and cities of Ireland were built during the past two centuries. For instance, the Hiberno-Romanesque style owes its popularity in no small degree to the fact that it resembles so little the Georgian manner and, of course, also because it revives the ancient pattern of Cormac's chapel and other remains of the early Celtic era. It is also felt that the Royal Hibernian Academy carried with it into the 1920's not only the taint of its origin as a facet of the life which revolved around the society of the Ascendancy, but possessed too, the air of decadence natural to an Irish society which by every artistic standard could only be judged as if it was situated in a suburb of London. Its most shining individualist, Sir William Orpen, lived in London, though he often visited Dublin where he taught and inspired a group of young painters which included Patrick Tuohy, John Keating and Margaret and Harry Clarke. Keating commemorated the deeds of those who fought in the Rising and in the Civil War, and then turned for subjects to the men of the West, seeking inspiration from a source which had served Yeats and Synge in the Drama. Today he is President of the Royal Hibernian Academy, and he is surrounded by a group of artists who have retained their interest in natural representation. It is hard to see,



THE DISCIPLES AT EMMAUS
by Daniel O'Neill

[By courtesy of
Ashley Galleries



MADONNA IN RED (1942)
by Colin Middleton

[By courtesy of
Astley Galleries

however, that there is any inherent difference between the style of their portraits or landscapes and that of the annual display in Burlington House.

Only one painter emerged from the stirring years of the resurgence, vigorous, different, and proclaiming a world which had nothing to do with the nineteenth century drawing-room: Jack B. Yeats, akin to Munch, the Norwegian in the manner of his drawing, but much purer in the classical nobility with which he set down his figures, essentially Irish characters with the dignity of gipsies who are beholden to no man for the means of their livelihood. The remarkable facility of this artist to depict the men of the fairground or circus as belonging to their setting (a setting which is frequently a lonely wild patch of foreshore made magic by an early sunrise or an evening glow) accounts, perhaps, for the sense of poetry and mystery so often associated with his work. The inexact delineation, coupled with the surfaces of mingled colours laid on in thick swirls of paint, completes the general impression of passionate absorption in his art. Words of course are mere echoes of the feelings which an artist arouses in those who write of his work; but the importance of Jack B. Yeats, as far as Irish art is concerned, is not simply the influence which he has had on his contemporaries, but is even more due to the inspiration he has given to a generation to turn from the subject of a picture and to marvel at the emotive power which colour and form can exercise on the mind when these two aspects are sensitively employed to suggest the poetic quality of life and nature.

In the Municipal Gallery in Dublin there hangs a large brilliant painting, 'Deposition', by Mainie Jellet. This artist was a teacher as well as a painter, and she was directly inspired by the Fauves. Together with Evie Hone, she worked in the studios of André L'Hôte and Albert Gleizes. The cold intellectual exploration of form which Gleizes has always undertaken in his canvases impressed these two women and they worked on abstract themes for a considerable time. Mainie Jellet, always the more scientific in approach, developed her style on that of Gleizes. However, during the closing years of her comparatively short life, she began to interpret religious themes or western landscapes, which usually contained horses or ponies, but without ever losing her interest in the relationship of forms as the essence of her picture. Consequently the public found a certain difficulty in accepting her

figures which accentuated the planes and neglected the data of facial expression and the rest. But the artists found in her a rallying point, especially those younger ones who sought to express their feelings in terms other than those acceptable to the academies. By the early thirties many young artists were managing to spend a season or two in such Paris studios as that of André L'Hôte where they found the ideas which were circulating closely in accord with the familiar atmosphere of Mainie Jellet. By this time, too, the pictures of Jack B. Yeats began to have their effect on the general public, and it was gradually becoming clear that there was more to painting than the mere implication of its recognisable figures. Interest in modernist tendencies quickly spread and the disciples of Mainie Jellet and Evie Hone soon came to dominate the scene and to form the nucleus of a school.

It is not yet possible to claim for Ireland an individual school of painting akin to that associated with the dramatic movement of which the Abbey Theatre was the centre, but it is evident that the painters now occupy the most dominant place in the artistic life of the country. The main groups are all placed in 'the middle of the road', for the extreme points of invention find little sympathy in a land which specialises in moderation and fears its satirists. By far the greater number of the painters, and practically all the sculptors, stand foursquare with nature, and it is by selection and omission that they achieve a degree of originality, rather than by the distortion of the images which inspire them. Most of them have made their pictorial language distinctive by the development of a colour range which is challenging because its source is the gaiety of France although it is used to symbolise the Irish scene. Nora McGuinness, Frances Kelly, George Campbell and Fergus O'Ryan come to mind as four artists who could be considered as realists with little in common except the fact that each pursues an individual line.

A second group, which seems to bear some relation to the advanced painters in Scotland, endeavours to create forms which evoke the atmosphere and emotion which they seek. They still maintain a close connection with reality, because they never leave one in doubt as to their subject matter. Father Hanlon, for instance, draws on a series of facets in nature which seem to him to evoke the flowerlike delicacy or childlike purity of the Virgin and rearranges his symbols to make a Madonna which conforms

more to the painter's artistic sense than to the illustrative tradition. Daniel O'Neill or Colin Middleton, both influenced by Yeats, provoke a splendid surface quality and a distinguished colour harmony to illuminate the imaginative figures drawn direct from the Ulster region of biblical Protestantism (Middleton) or from fantasy (O'Neill). One could make a long list of such derivations, but for reasons of space one is forced just to mention Nano Reid, Anne Yeats, Gerard Dillon, Eugene Judge, Doreen Vanston, Elizabeth Rivers and Cecil Salkeld.

Finally there are the artists who violently rearrange or distort the recognisable data or ignore as far as possible the symbols which can be related to things known. . . . Louis Le Brocquoy is the most skilful craftsman we possess, and his Adler-like compositions are exquisitely smooth canvases which seem far too often to be perversely obscure. Thurloe Connolly persuades us to accept his pure abstractions by the power of his colours and the integrated complexity of his cubes and triangles which often contain a clue to his vague sources.

In the sphere of stained glass we claim a school of our own which appears to emerge superior to, and independent of, any other working in this medium. About the time of the first world war Harry Clarke and Michael Healy began a tradition of design based on line as it is used in fine lithography, but supported by a quality of colour so rich and clear that their windows bear a startling air of enchanted brilliance. Both of them employed the convention of letting into their planes of colour a series of minute lights which gave sparkle and life to the whole conception. Their many imitators have tended to match their technical effects without possessing the genius necessary to provide the work with an original design and conception.

It was not until Evie Hone's work became well-known that the more calm and devout quality of the masters of the Gothic windows was remembered in Ireland. She does not sacrifice any of the warmth and brilliance of colour of the Clarke school, but she has altogether ignored the device of breaking up surfaces with pinholes of light made by aciding on the glass. Her designs are simpler and her leadlines cut across the design so ruthlessly that once again the viewer recaptures the delightful pleasure of looking through an abstract pattern at a glorious symphony of colour expressive of a simple pictorial subject clearly depicted.

It is not difficult to account for this fluency of invention and craftsmanship when one remembers the marvellous wealth of illuminated manuscripts which has been left us by our ancient scholars. It would not be surprising if we could claim in the same way an original group of sculptors. The fact remains, however, that although we supplied England with many of her most popular Victorian carvers (witness the Albert Memorial in Hyde Park) this is not possible. Indeed, many a claim is made for the classical purity of some of our monuments, but surely there is a creak in the boards of every structure which does not express its own period in a contemporary idiom.

Albert Power was an artist of great personal individuality, and time and again he succeeded in making a straightforward project with the inexplicable quality of originality. Never, one feels, did he suggest a distinctive style or attempt to make his forms in themselves expressions of the ideas underlying their obvious external implication. Today a few young artists like Seamus Murphy, Lawrence Campbell and Peter Grant have felt their way into the current European tradition without losing personal expression, and two others, Hilary Heron and Oisín O'Kelly have broken new ground. Hilary Heron goes boldly for the expressive harmony of forms. Oisín O'Kelly on the other hand borrows the somewhat primitive styles of the early Celtic stonecarvers.

It is not yet possible to point directly to the qualities and distinctive features which make for a national school in Ireland. It is at least easy to see that the imagination of a people stimulated by a very active practice of the Catholic faith, and their traditional love of fantasy and mystery, together with a reaction against the greyness of the land consequent on climatic conditions, are factors which make for the easy absorption of the styles current in France in the first quarter of this century. These borrowings of styles are a direct consequence of the political conditions which delayed the natural reaction against the *trompe l'œil* school. The important factor, however, is that a natural, one might almost call it a defensive, nationalist consciousness of an ancient tradition is enabling the more inventive artists to absorb without imitating, to be influenced without sacrificing individuality, and above all to retain that sense of proportion which never overlooks the object of art, which is to produce a work impressed with the thoughts, ideas and emotions of the maker.