

“The Cult of the West of Ireland”

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The west of Ireland makes up twenty percent of the state, and is rich with hundreds of years of history, literacy and art. Gerard Dillon spent much of his time around the west of Ireland visiting the uncolonized and authentic Irish soil, the idea of this was something that fascinated Dillon.

Dillon himself was born in and raised in 1916 to a working-class family in West Belfast, but left to travel to London at age 14 to become an apprentice house decorator and painter.

The West was a mystical place to Dillon, who was brought up in a prominently urban environment during the world war, the west was his escapism. His attraction to the west was colonialism, an Ireland not ruled by British rule.

From 1936 he began to paint and visit Connemara frequently. He travelled between London and the West a lot of the time, selling his work in London and Dublin to make money to travel back to the west. As a gay, working-class artist Dillon had an obvious sense of belonging there.

From as early as the 15th century, landscape and portraiture had been a standard commission for Irish artists. Many artists such as Daniel Maclise (1806-70) relocated to London after the Famine had occurred in Ireland, which predominantly affected many people in the West of Ireland.

The development of Irish Fine Art has not been a smooth one. After the 1940's followed post war and political turmoil throughout the country.

It wasn't until the 1960's that Ireland began to regain confidence as a nation regaining its own identity, artist then sought to develop a uniquely Irish style of painting and thus the push towards modernism occurred.

A new alignment of experiences with modern life, various social and political agendas acted as a starting point for many artists across Ireland. New themes and ways of creating art produced the rejection of history and conservative values. Something that Dillon defiantly gained inspiration from, clearly shown in his work which uses variety of techniques and themes inspired from his time in the west of Ireland.

Mainie Jellett is noted as one woman who was the driving force behind modernism in Ireland. Her strong energetic paintings reflect herself as a character. Jellett was quite good friends with Dillon, and helped him open his first shown in Dublin.

Modernism is seen not only in Dillon's work but in the works by artist Sean Keating. His painting “Men of the West” (1915) reflects the westernised west Ireland and was promoted by De Vela within the Irish republic, as the painting ties in with the Easter Rising and was painted pre-partition.

The painting illustrates three men holding guns, dressed in Aran clothing, yet bare a resemblance to the cowboy of Americans Wild West. Keating depicts himself on the far-left, pictured standing beside the Irish tri-colour, portraying himself in the role of the idealist.

Clearly reflecting his own nationalist standpoint through his art and the activism within it, reflecting the artist pride but also perceived need for revolution through violence. He was one of the few artists who dealt with the complex social and political upheavals of the early years of the Irish new state.

Keating who was greatly inspired by his trip to the Aran Islands in 1913-14, while visiting his friend Harry Clarke. The painting 'Slan Leat a Athair / Goodbye, Father' (1935) depicts a scene of a priest leaving the island of Inisheer, the smallest of The Aran Islands.

A contrast between the beauty of the landscape and the primitive lives of the islanders fascinated Keating, unaffected by such political turmoil going on within the mainland of Ireland. Similar to Dillon he was greatly inspired by the people and their simplistic way of life.

In 1927 Keating illustrated Synge's "Playboy of the Western World" (1907), he identified with the realism and poetry he found within the work. Likewise, this legacy of the west was what interested Dillon.

"The Playboy of the West" was set on the west coast of Ireland in James Flathery's public house in Co. Mayo during the early 1900's. The play was performed in Dublin in 1907 a few years before Dillon was born. The play follows the story of a young man Christy Mahon, running away from his farm believing to have killed his father.

I believe that the setting of the Irish landscape and the idea that Christy was treated so kindly by people of the West may have been something that Dillon possibly related to. As Christy had come from a distant land, like Dillon, he too was welcomed within the community, so much so he made it his second home.

Many of Dillon's pieces are inspired by the artists around him and primitive ways of the west of Ireland, including the painting before you. Dillon spent an entire year of his life on the island of Innishlacken off the coast of Connemara in the west of Ireland, relating to Keating's own ventures to the Aran Island and sharing similar interest in their subject of work.

One of Dillon's interest was the Irish landscape, the idea of the West of Ireland was always quite prominent in Irish art. Artists such as Paul Henry an earlier artist than Dillon, was extremely well known for his depictions of the West of Ireland in his post-impressionist style, but was also a great influence on Dillon.

The painting "Dawn, Killary Harbour" created in 1921 in oil on canvas, depicts landscape overlooking the dawning of the day though the head of the valley, reflecting upon the

natural and pure Irish landscape. Henry mainly painted the landscape and what the west of Ireland looked like but communalised, mainly taking people out of the landscape.

Where-as the people of the west were Dillon's main subject interest. "Island People" shows their difference in their work, with Dillon's inclusion of figures within his landscape pieces.

Evidentially, Dillon's main focus was portraiture and the people of the west ways of living.

Looking at the painting displayed... alongside the traditional Irish symbolism displayed upon the mantle reflecting Dillon's Catholic upbringing. You see through the depiction of the couple in the painting they are presented thorough their closed off body language, hindering towards that of his parents.

Following a used technique of Dillon's, many of his characters have green toned skin, presenting them quite alien like with uncommon colour choices for their skin tones. This technique was often used within Dillon's work and the simplicity of the painting itself reflects the primitive culture of the west at the time.

But also Reinforcing the segregation of the Island of Innishlacken, which resulted in the more primitive livelihoods these people had in comparison to those in more urbanised areas where Dillon was from, something quite obscene to Dillon.

Undoubtedly Dillon was an astonishing painter, taking inspiration from his companions and painters before him. His art often used a tilted perspective with a surreal imaginative force taking inspiration from his muse, the West of Ireland.