

## Irish Art and Modernism

During the late 1890s to mid-1900s modernism influenced Irish art tremendously, so what is modernism, and how did it change Irish art?

Modernism is a philosophical term and an art movement. Modernism was defined by the rejection of traditional art and other core themes such as politics, shapes, form, religious beliefs, and the idea of a utopian world. The start of the modernist art movement can be linked to the artist Edouard Manet, whose paintings not only depicted scenes of modern life but made no attempt to accurately portray the real world.

So how did modernism change Irish art?

Modernism changed Irish art as it allowed a freedom in painters that did not exist before. Modernism had influenced Irish art between 1920-1960 during which time, Ireland was dealing with the Easter rising of 1916 and the civil war of 1922. The modernist period allowed the Irish people to express their thoughts and feelings about these historical events which they were not able to do before.

Roderic O'Connor was considered the first true Irish impressionist to arrive in Paris in 1886. O'Connor was fascinated by the average Breton peasant and landscapes. O'Connor became close friends with Paul Gauguin, notably one of the most influential painters during the modernist movement. While O'Connor was not interested in religion, Gauguin was engrossed by the Catholic Church and, through his painted scenes of landscapes and portraits in bold colours, Gauguin had hoped to find answers for his religious beliefs. This modern style of painting, by breaking the traditional art practices and introducing religion into art, influenced multiple Irish artists such as Gerard Dillon.

Gerard Dillon was born in 1916, Belfast. He was a landscape and portrait artist that studied at Raglan Street Public elementary school and the Christian Brothers' School. Dillon left school at the age of 14 to become a housepainter and decorator. Over the course of his life, Dillon had several creative and peculiar jobs so that he could save up for paints to further explore his art practise. Dillon was self-taught

aside from spending four months at Belfast School of Art which he left due to his need to preserve his art style. Dillon was particularly fond of the west of Ireland and treated the west like a fantasy land, a beautiful utopian place so different from the place he called home which was Belfast. Dillon referred to the west as a “magnificent wonder” for anyone who visited and looking at Dillon's paintings we notice his attention was always on the people from the west, rather than the place itself. This is interesting because, while Dillon says he was fascinated by the landscapes, we could also say his fascination was not with the scenery but instead the people of the west and how different and foreign they were to him.

This is particularly evident in Dillon's painting titled the ‘Innishlacken Couple’ where the dog is looking at the couple while the couple are looking past the dog, looking into the abyss. The dog is the spectator, the viewer. Dillon embodies the dog, he is astonished by what he sees, entranced and he cannot look away.

When looking at the Innishlacken couple, there are clear references to other artists who were leading figures during the modernist period.

The first reference that we see is Vincent Van Gogh’s ‘Bedroom in Arles’. The pale muted blues can be seen in both paintings, the brushstrokes are thick, showing the artists hand, a history that cannot be erased. Dillon and Van Gogh both paint objects that are not in proper proportion, this would become a reoccurring theme in modernist art. Van Gogh’s paintings on the wall lean forward and are tilted rather than straight on the wall whereas Dillon paints the fireplace lopsided.

Dillon also hides hidden gems in his paintings, secrets waiting to be uncovered. In the Innishlacken Couple we see a letter on the fireplace which is signed by Dillon himself. This emphasizes Dillon’s belief that the west was whimsical and magical and that the people of the west were different to him. What further solidifies this idea is the way Dillon paints the couple. Dillon paints the couple with sickly greens and muted purples instead of fleshy pinks and peaches. This could be because Dillon sees the pair as aliens, people from another world which would also tie in with the notion that the west was an otherworldly entity.

Another object we can see in Dillon’s painting is a cross. The cross denotes Dillon’s religious beliefs and how he was trying to find his identity within the west and with the people.

Another painter who influenced Dillon was Paul Gauguin. As stated earlier, Gauguin was extremely religious and would try to find answers for his religion through painting. Similarly, Dillon would depict religious symbols in his work such as the cross and paintings of mother Mary lurking in the background. Religion was important to Dillon not because he was searching for answers, but because he was trying to find his identity. Dillon was homosexual but he was raised in an extremely religious household so he felt he needed to reject his religion or reject his sexuality as they clashed with each other and could not co-exist. This could also be why Dillon felt the west was a lot freer than the rest of Ireland. Dillon saw the west as an escape from his sexuality and religion, a place where he could mould his identity into whatever he wanted - which is evident in his self-portraits where he would dress up as people of the west. The green, olive tones we see in the Innishlacken couple are also present in Paul Gauguin's 'The Green Christ' of 1889. Gauguin and Dillon used colour to express emotion throughout their paintings. Green could represent nature, which Gauguin loved but green could also represent feelings of boredom which we can see in Dillon's painting.

In conclusion, modernism changed Irish art as it allowed artists freedom that had been locked away for years. Leading artists of the movement such as Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin inspired many Irish artists such as Roderic O'Connor and especially Gerard Dillon. Through modernism, Dillon was able to come to terms with his religion and identity. It is through modernism that as artists and art enthusiasts we were able to find emotion within a painting, we were able to look deeper into a painting and explore our own identities. While the modernist period was brief in Ireland, it was essential to Irish art and blessed us with paintings we will remember for years to come.