

Artists in Northern Ireland in post war Britain and Ireland

By Hannah Williamson

This tour will explore artists in Northern Ireland in post war Britain and Ireland and artists who influenced Gerard Dillon in his art practice.

Gerard Dillon was an artist born in Belfast in 1916, who focused on landscape and figures within his work. He worked as a painter and decorator in London for much of his life, alongside his passion for creating paintings. He often travelled back to Belfast and western Ireland to gain inspiration for his work. Dillon was a self-taught painter and has a very distinct style with interesting figures and common themes of conflict and religion throughout his landscape and home interior settings. Noticeable in some of his works, Dillon was influenced by artists such as Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin and Pablo Picasso.

The painting we are exploring for Art Unwrapped is called 'Innishlacken Couple', which is an oil on canvas painting. It involves a couple sitting in their living room in western Ireland, with their dog. The painting in real life has very muted tones, with the figures having a greyish skin colour which could suggest how the people who inspired Dillon in this painting were so unlike him. The painting is simple, with not a huge amount of detail and the obscure perspective and angle seems to be a running theme in Dillon's work. There is a religious element with the cross on the wall and an underlying possible conflict between the couple, which is noticeable through their body language, which could point to possible conflict with religion in Dillon's personal life, with him being homosexual. His paintings are very intriguing and can be interpreted in many different ways.

One of Gerard Dillon's influences was Van Gogh, who was a Dutch post-impressionist painter born in 1853 and is one of the most influential artists in western art history. He is most well-known for his bold and dramatic brush strokes which express movement and emotions within his work. Some of his most famous paintings are a 'Starry night' and 'Sunflowers'.

Gerard Dillon was clearly influenced by Van Gogh, which you can see through Dillon's 'yellow bungalow' 1954, which references the yellow interior of Van Gogh's painting 'Bedroom in Arles' 1888.

Another inspiration for Dillon was Paul Gauguin, a French post-impressionist artist born in 1848. Gauguin is known for his experimental paintings which have a strong use of colour and synthesist style that were at the time very unlike impressionism. His work was not appreciated nor recognized whilst he was a living artist. His work influenced the French Avant Garde movement and many modern artists such as Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. He spent around 10 years in Polynesia where he lived and worked as an artist, creating landscape and figurative paintings inspired by the area he lived in.

In Gauguin's art there is a strong theme of sexuality with paintings of the female nude. You can see similarities within Dillon's artwork as he has elements of sexuality and mainly the male nude within his works.

Following on, I am going to discuss a few artists who created most of their work after World War two and who crossed paths with Dillon through their art practices.

One of those is Daniel O'Neill, a romantic painter who was born in Belfast in 1920. His paintings were known as expressionist and romantic with themes of life, death and love. O'Neill was mainly self-taught, however he worked with and learnt from another Belfast artist Sidney Smith. When he began painting World War two broke out and he actually used some salvaged wood in his artworks after the Belfast Blitz. O'Neill had a difficult time trying to become a well-known artist and was often misunderstood, but his friend Gerard Dillon gave him a well needed push. Dillon encouraged O'Neill to become a painter and look for new opportunities elsewhere. In the 1950s, O'Neill joined an artist's colony in County Down alongside Gerard Dillon and George Campbell, where they created interesting artworks. Then O'Neill and Dillon moved to London to work. O'Neill is mostly known for his paintings 'The Blue Skirt' and 'Place du Tertre' both created in 1949.

Another artist is Mary Harriet "Mainie" Jellet, who was an Irish painter, stage designer, writer and lecturer born in 1897 in Dublin. She was mainly an abstract painter, and her painting 'Decoration' was one of the first abstract paintings shown in Ireland. It was displayed at the society of Dublin painters group exhibition in 1923. Jellet was a 'strong promoter and defender of modern art' and was one of the most important pioneers for modern art in Ireland. Her art is displayed across many museums in Ireland and her work was also shown in the painting event in the 1928 Olympics.

She began painting in an impressionist style but in 1921 she moved to Paris and began creating more abstract style paintings influenced by Cubism. Her new style of work focused on colour and rhythm and they were very subjective, however they did include some religious elements which linked to her personal Christian faith. She then moved home and began exhibiting her recent abstract artworks in Dublin, which came with some harsh reviews as some described them as appearing like puzzles. Jellet was a supporter of Gerard Dillon and she opened and staged his first solo exhibition at the Country shop, St Stephens Green.