

## Gerard Dillon

### The Artist, Local Hero

The painting “Innishlacken Couple” was painted by the artist Gerard Dillon, who was born within the Lower Clonard Street in the Falls area of Belfast, Northern Ireland. He was born in 1916 and was given his birth name “Francis Gerard Dillon”. Dillon’s father was a postman, British army Veteran and his mother an intense Catholic, nationalist.

Gerard Dillon’s education took place at the Raglan Street Public Elementary School, later he won a scholarship to the Harding Boys’ school that was run by the Christian Brothers in 1927. Dillon ended his education by leaving school at the young age of Fourteen, so he could begin to work as an apprentice to the house painting and decorating firm of Maurice Sullivan.

When he was young Dillon possessed a strong sense of curiosity within both the world of culture and art. Gerard Dillon’s goal was to become a self-taught artist that created and performed his own unique artistic style. As a result, Dillon’s art education was brief, due to the short time period of attending night classes at the Belfast College of Art. Dillon was only there for a few months despite his mother willingly paying for his lessons. Dillon found the thought of being taught by someone else by something he believed he could teach himself to be frustrating.

Dillon’s career as a house painter meant he began to learn and adapt from using paint and brushes. However, after a while, Dillon found himself becoming bored with painting large spaces with the use of only one colour. Whenever he had the opportunity to have a moment to himself, he would use an old piece of cardboard or either a discarded piece of timber so he could create small flourishes and designs with the use of a wide paint brush despite being restricted to only one colour. When Dillon left Belfast to move to London at the age of 18 in the year 1934, he performed many manual jobs in order to support his art. These jobs included him being a painter, decorator, laborer, boilerman, and night porter. With the assistance of his jobs Dillon had used whatever money he earned to buy art materials for himself. Dillon regularly attended art galleries so he could observe and teach himself within the world of art.

Dillon made the choice of not following any other instructor or artistic style other than his own despite the possibility of being poor which outcome he was not troubled by. Dillon’s goal was to become the type of artist who sought to

see the world through a child's sincerity and innocence. At this point in time, he had already begun his artistic pursuit by experimenting with watercolours. He further went on to developing his work by using oil paints.

Within the year of 1939 Dillon took a cycling holiday of Connemara, Ireland with his friend and aspiring artist, Ernie Atkin. This moment of the young artist's life was considered to be a crucial key time within the process and development of his life. The Connemara landscapes acted as a great influence on Dillon, he found himself being captivated and inspired by the rugged but yet beautiful landscapes which contained mountains, seas, lakes, and also Islands like Innishlacken. Inside the Island of Innishlacken Dillon found himself often allowed to be cut off from the world around him and live within a small cottage, where he isolated himself. Dillon would take a boat journey away from pubs, churches, and barracks. This presented him with the feeling of discovery of a land where he was not required to be concerned with suggestions of human interactions. From that day forth Dillon spent most of his time in Connemara in the West of Ireland with George Campbell as he started painting the landscapes.

Dillon went on to regularly paint his landscapes with the idea of envisioning the landscape through a window. The focus on windows was one of the many features contained within his work, due to the fact that he would never go outside to perform his pieces. As an alternative option Dillon instead used the method of placing people inside the landscape similar to the idea of seeing actors on stage, he purposely added people into the landscape because they were performing a task. This caused Dillon to develop a lifelong fascination with the landscape and the world of culture of the West of Ireland and allowed him to produce his artwork pieces "The Yellow Bungalow" and "The Black Lake".

He was stopped from returning to Great Britain due to the outbreak of the second world war which caused him to return to Belfast. Due to the uninviting feeling Dillon found in Belfast he decided to move to Dublin in order to see if he could find again the sense of freedom he felt during his time in London.

For the years of the war Dillon spent his daily life in Dublin, where he would attend art exhibitions that would be held at "The Dublin Painters Gallery" where he would meet and introduce himself to Mainie Jellet. In the year of 1941 whilst he was still in Dublin Dillon joined "The White Stag Group" which was a group that invited young and adventurous Irish artists into their rankings. Within this group of artists Gerard Dillon was able to meet leading

contemporary artists and to begin to work alongside other artists and writers. Dillon had his own solo art exhibition in the Country Shop on St Stephen's Green in Dublin within Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> of February 1942. His exhibition was opened by Mainie Jellet who was a champion of modern art in Ireland.

He was also assisted in setting up the Irish Exhibition of Living Art to where, in 1944, he sold his first oil painting. Dillon was then able to return to London in the year of 1945. During the 1940s and '50s towards the late 1950's he decided to move away from the subject of landscape painting and pursue the focus of abstraction, where he was influenced by Abstract Expressionism art movement. From the years 1953 to 1955 Dillon was forced to take on part-time jobs such as a Night porter in order to support himself financially for his painting, literacy activity, and illustrating work. In 1956 he was officially appointed to the position of Art teacher at Shepherd's Bush and then later on at Gloucester Road, where he held this position for five years.

In 1962 Dillon's brother Joe died. Joe was the one member of his family that he was most attached to. Later, Dillon gave a painting to Madge Connolly, 'And the Time Passes', which contained two masked pierrots. Within this painting one pierrot is holding out a hand of the departing pierrot, this was seen as a form of symbolism towards Dillon's days together with Joe and then the departure of his brothers life.

Towards the final years of his life, Gerard Dillon began to paint images of pierrots with masks. The figure of the pierrot clown acted as a stand in for Dillon. Instead of involving himself inside his work he used the clown as a representation of himself. Within the early stages of Dillon's pierrot paintings Tom McCreanor expressed that he got the sense of sadness coming from Dillon's paintings. Dillon gave the answer that he believed that this was a method of demonstrating that nature is telling that you are on your way out. The painting "The Brothers" was one of the earliest of Dillon's art pieces that included a pierrot crying over three skeleton graves. This painting is a form of symbolism towards Gerard Dillon grieving over the death of his three brothers who all died over the short time period of five years. Joe died in the year of 1962, Patrick died in 1964, and in December 1966 John died.

In 1965 within IELA, Dillon presented four other similar paintings. One of these four paintings was known as "Pierrot and Picture" and contains a pierrot figure being seated on the ground with the left hand over his eyes to give the impression that Dillon's strong grief and sadness felt like a burden to himself. The landscape behind the pierrot was linear with a farm outhouse and machinery.

The artist met an unfortunate ending when he had a stroke then died on 14<sup>th</sup> June 1971, the artist's sudden death prevented a final trip for him to London organized by his nephew Gerard. Gerard Dillon's final requests were for him to be buried 'in a real old untidy Belfast graveyard'. He was then buried in an unmarked grave at the Belfast's Milltown Cemetery.