the french connection

The first half of the 20th century saw some Irish artists look to Europe for a new means of expression, while others favoured a heroic traditionalism rooted in home ground. *ROBERT O'BYRNE* explores how these two movements made way for a new kind of Irish art

During the opening decades of the last century, the influence of France on the development of Irish art was considerable. Irish artists who had learned of advances in their area and who wished to see these at first-hand naturally gravitated towards republican France which, as well as being the acknowledged hub of the Modernist movement, had the additional allure for those of a nationalist disposition of not being monarchist England. Nevertheless, the opportunity to benefit from such an experience was not open to everyone and tended to be the prerogative artists with independent means. This was especially true of young women travelling to Paris, their role model being Sarah Purser, who spent time there in the late 1870s. For more than half a century thereafter, a succession of Irishwomen – predominantly Protestant and possessed of both a private income and a spirit of self-reliance – took themselves to Paris in order to study art. Only when the outbreak of the Second World War rendered such travel impossible was this cultural exchange between Ireland and France broken.

Two such women were Evie Hone and Mainie Jellett. Life-long friends, they are invariably mentioned together, even though they held only one joint exhibition, in Dublin in 1924. In the years prior to this event, Hone and Jellett had been working in Paris, first at the studio of André Lhote and then that of Albert Gleizes. Although neither can be deemed a major artist, both men were influential teachers and theoreticians. This meant that when Hone and Jellett returned home, they could argue their practice of Cubism on aesthetic principles, an immense advantage at a time when opponents to international modernism within Ireland were gaining ground.

Those opponents, including such notable figures as Seán Keating, promoted the notion of a national school of art based on the depiction of rural western Ireland and its people as representing an heroic ideal; the concept had first been advanced by Paul Henry following his discovery of Achill Island, Co Mayo, in 1910. Works by Henry from this early period represent the visual equivalent of Synge's contemporaneous plays, but both his own work and that of other painters in post-independent Ireland was inclined to lapse into a distorted sentimentality. While Henry had trained in France, the same was not true of Keating or other traditionalists like Maurice MacGonigal, who had instead studied in Ireland. It is also worth noting that whereas the majority of Modernists during this period were Protestant women, their opponents were male and Catholic; gender and faith were also elements in the debate.

In conservative, newly independent Ireland the anti-Modernist, pro-nationalist school of art enjoyed widespread popularity and led some practitioners, such as Mary Swanzy, to spend large amounts of time out of the country. Even before achieving independence, Ireland had lost a number of key figures to France, such as painter Roderic O'Conor and designer/architect Eileen Gray. The development of Modernism in Ireland was hindered by the voluntary exile of these figures, just as it was in literature by the departure of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett.

While it is possible to discern during these years the emergence of two opposing camps in Irish art, which might be summarised as the international Modernists versus the nationalist traditionalists, neither side ever issued an official manifesto or established a formal organisation to promote its own interests. The nearest the Modernists came to this was the founding in 1920 of the Dublin Society of Painters, which provided an opportunity to exhibit and a supportive environment for Jellett, Hone et al. As for the traditionalists, they could already find these advantages within the Royal Hibernian Academy, renowned in some circles and reviled in others for its conservatism. While post-Cubist movements like Dadaism and Surrealism seem to have passed almost unnoticed in Ireland, the two camps of Modernism and traditionalism became stuck in a stalemate that persisted until the outbreak of the Second World War. This event not only forced the return home of a number of artists until then working elsewhere in Europe, like Louis le Brocquy, but also brought to these shores a group of English artists including Basil Rákóczi and Kenneth Hall, who some years earlier had set up a body they called the White Stag Group. This organisation quickly attracted support within Ireland and throughout the war years it energetically organised exhibitions and other events in Dublin. The abilities and styles of the group's members varied but they had in common an indifference to both the battles of earlier decades and the opinions of the old guard.

OPPOSITE: Kenneth Hall, *Red Man Yellow Moon*, 1936. Oil on canvas. ABOVE: Basil Ráckózi, *The Prisoner*, 1944. Oil on canvas. Collection Irish Museum of Modern Art. Both loan, the Cundill Foundation, 2004.

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For many artists, this outlook was a revelation and provided an example for the formation of the annual Irish Exhibition of Living Art which, following the rejection by the RHA of two pictures by le Brocquy, made its debut in 1943. The IELA drew its inspiration neither from existing institutions within Ireland nor from France but from a wide variety of sources at home and abroad. A new era so started for Irish art, one not only more open to the possibility of outside influences than had previously been the case, but also prepared to advocate the merits of moving forward and not becoming stuck in the myth of a national school. ■