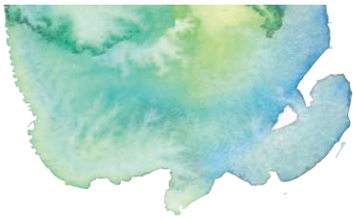

a failed experiment?

Did Modernism succeed in Ireland? Not quite, argues *BRUCE ARNOLD* – although the achievements of a few individuals in the face of opposition from a rigid society paved the way for a new generation of artists

Modernism in Ireland largely failed, playing virtually no part in the evolutionary sequence of international Modernism through the 20th century. This was contained within a succession of movements, and of painters, sculptors and writers who influenced events. Collectively, these architects of international Modernism sought to put form and the exploration of technique above content and narrative, thus breaking with the main traditions of the 19th century. Those involved went in different ways, creating a diverse patchwork about which no generalisations are possible. What we call Modernism did conform to broad generalisations about a conscious attempt, in Ezra Pound's war-cry, to "Make it New!".

No Irish artist made any appreciable impact on this, though many were influenced by it. There are reasons for this and there were just a few artists who transcended the limitations of their Irish roots, either by leaving the country or simply by grit, determination or originality. However, it was a largely threadbare representation of the true reality of international Modernism. There were exceptions, notably Mainie Jellett, a significant figure in Abstract Cubism.

Ireland even had a Fauve, Phelan Gibb. He later exhibited with the White Stag Group. After early study at the Académie Julien, he was inspired by the paintings of Cézanne and Van Gogh, seen in the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery which later exhibited Gibb's paintings. He became a friend of Matisse and Braque, sharing a studio with them and attracting the attention of Gertrude Stein, who remained a lifelong supporter of his work. He held an exhibition with Bernheim-Jeune in 1913. Through the intervention of Oliver St. John Gogarty and Countess Markievicz, the show transferred to Dublin where it was due to open on October 27, 1913 in the Mill's Hall in Merrion Row. It never opened; there was opposition from the Church on grounds of obscenity. The police impounded all the paintings. Gibb did not get them back until the early 1930s.

The details of his experience are given here for a number of reasons. Firstly, this was one of the earliest confrontations between the Church and the new liberal approach in art to subject matter and its treatment. Secondly, it was an early, if not the first, brush with effective censorship confronting the work of a serious and admired painter whose working colleagues, only a few years earlier, had included the ground-breaking French Fauves, Braque, Matisse and Derain. Thirdly, it demonstrated a form of collusion between Irish authority and the Church; this was to become a major anti-Modernist force, affecting James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and others. Fourthly, it demonstrated the way of escape for Modernist Irish artists, by way of England to the continent and notably to France.

They fled a rigid morality induced, protected and supported by Church and State. This made sterile the pursuit of the

RIGHT: Phelan Gibb, *Paysage*, 1906. Oil on board. Private Collection. OPPOSITE, TOP: Jack Butler Yeats, *A Race in Hy Brazil*, 1937. Oil on canvas. AIB Art Collection, 2010 © Estate of Jack Yeats, DACS, London 2010. BELOW: Oskar Kokoschka, *Pigeons*, 1941. Watercolour. Collection Irish Museum of Modern Art © Estate of Oskar Kokoschka, DACS, London 2010.

fundamental break in the arts with tradition, in favour of new ways of thinking. This largely misguided morality, obsessed with sexual behaviour, nudity, eroticism and the intrusion of the Church into the privacy of married life, prevailed throughout and beyond the period covered by this exhibition.

It is part of the miraculous spirit of creativity that so much was achieved in spite of the oppressive forces.

Irish influences against Modernism were not the only problem. A much more complicated set of handicaps derived from the Irish cultural movements that developed towards the end of the 19th century and into the early 20th century.

The Irish Literary Renaissance, the Celtic Revival, the Irish Language, or Gaelic Movement, crowded the creative stage and made it difficult for the good art and literature that had been there before to prosper. Much of it was in painting and this was conservative and conventional. It was also very good, however, and had a following. The work of John Lavery, William Orpen, Walter Osborne and Nathaniel Hone, accomplished and now highly valued, did not offer a seedbed for Modernism, nor did the writings of George Moore and Somerville and Ross.

The same was true of the influence of John Butler Yeats and his two sons, William and Jack. The poet emerged as the leader of Ireland's rather quaint form of Modernism. At his side – though not a particularly close ally – was his younger brother, Jack, a talented

painter whose modest professional roots lay in visual journalism. He never studied painting in oils within an art school; he never worked with another painter, more sophisticated, more experienced or more accomplished technically, such as Oskar Kokoschka. Yeats learned with his eyes and his quick hand and good judgment. In oil painting he made a slow uncertain start. His contribution to Irish Modernism was modest. He found a new and rather different voice in his later paintings. Yet they stand alone. He established no 'school' – he would have rejected the idea. And he had no followers. It is also worth pointing out how late his development was and how slow was Ireland's recognition of his real worth. He is often compared with Oskar Kokoschka and the two men were friends, Kokoschka an admirer of the older artist. Yet the comparison is misleading. Kokoschka, in contrast with Yeats, had a European reputation and was a well-known figure in German Expressionism in his early 1920s, a fact that not only demonstrates his impact but also demonstrates the receptive climate in Germany to new artistic ideas.

There was one significant exception to the uncertain, piecemeal development of Irish art and culture during the 20th century and it adds appeal to the contribution of Mainie Jellett, both within World Modernism and in Irish art, where her certainty and confidence, against much opposition and mockery, demonstrated noble- and single-mindedness. After the Cubist Epoch in which Picasso, Braque, Metzinger, Gris and others shaped a new painting, there was uncertainty about the way forward. Picasso and Braque reverted to classical forms and diverged; the intense, authoritative spirit of Cubism was dissipated. Abstraction was the inescapable way forward. Mainie Jellett spent ten years visiting and painting in France and developing works in pure abstraction. She exhibited and taught the technique in Dublin, her conviction powerfully sustained during a largely sterile period.

In the closing years of the Second World War, when Ireland added, to her self-appointed isolation, the involuntary ostracism deriving from neutrality and Church obduracy about the nature of Irish society, Mainie Jellett was the moving spirit in the creation of the Irish Exhibition of Living Art, the future annual focus for Modernist work. ■