

Sean Keating was born in Limerick. He completed some drawing studies in his home county, before moving to Dublin in 1911 to study at the Metropolitan School of Art under William Orpen. He was to become Orpen's most important pupil and his academic painting style owes a great debt to his teacher. He worked as an assistant to Orpen in England, and tried to convince Orpen to return to Ireland to lead the revival in visual art. Keating himself returned to Ireland; he felt that his mission was to help to define Irish nationhood through his painting. He was a realist painter, and although abstract art thrived at the time he lived and taught in Ireland, he remained a staunchly traditional painter.

He travelled to the Aran Islands in 1914 with his friend and fellow student Harry Clarke. This trip had a profound effect on him. He believed that the hardworking rugged men and women of the West were the true heroes of Ireland. Keating portrayed scenes from the Aran Islands many times; he returned there again and again, with Charles Lamb, Harry Clarke, Paul and Grace Henry, all of whom had a great attachment to this corner of the world. Paul Henry was completely enamoured with the landscape of the West, for Keating it was the people who inhabited this land that inspired him. The cult of the proud Irish peasant was popular in the writings of W.B. Yeats and others, and was represented by Keating in paintings such as *Aran Man*, *Seascape with Figures* and *Men of the West*. Keating was an idealist with a strong, social conscience; themes of immigration and the loss of the values of the past, as represented by the islanders, were explored in his paintings.

Nationalism was to become the driving force behind Keating's work. One of his early important works, *Men of The West*, depicts three determined looking patriots. These men, armed only with hunting rifles and dressed in shabby clothes carry all the courage of their conviction, yet are slightly larger than life. This painting was exhibited at the Royal Hibernian Academy in 1917. In 1918, Keating was appointed teacher at the Metropolitan School of Art, Dublin. He later became Professor of Painting and was elected a member of the R.H.A. in 1923.

Much of his work was to document the Irish War of Independence and the Civil War which followed. These paintings were populated with proud and defiant men and women. A heroic and sometimes idealized view of Ireland was evident in his work. In 1922, *An Allegory* depicted the various facets of life in the New Irish Free State. The painting shows a group of regular and irregular soldiers in the foreground digging a grave; the coffin lies nearby draped in the Tri-colour. A destroyed mansion house, a symbol of British repression now in ruins, lurks in the background. A priest and businessman, the two people who seem to be prospering from the new situation, talk in confidence beside a concerned mother and her baby. The baby is wrapped in white for innocence and purity, the white hope of the future. In the painting Keating portrays himself as a weary artist, disillusioned with the war and destruction following the struggle for independence.

In 1924, Keating received the gold medal at the Dublin Exhibition of Irish Art for his painting *Homage to Hugh Lane*, a group portrait of Dublin intelligentsia surrounding the image of Hugh Lane. He was commissioned in 1926 by the State to portray the development of modern Ireland through a series of murals. Keating created a powerful record in a heroic-realist style of the workers and of industrialisation. His popularity as an artist grew and he received further state commissions and exhibited internationally. In 1934, he was appointed Professor of the National College of Art in Dublin and held the position of President of the Royal Hibernian Academy from 1948 until 1962. President De Valera opened a major retrospective exhibition of his work in 1963. Always proud of his political and cultural heritage, one of his last exhibits was a series of six portraits of patriots for the 1966 Golden Jubilee of the Easter Rising.