

MEN OF THE SOUTH Sean Keating (1889-1977)

Sean Keating studied art in Limerick before winning a scholarship to study at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin. He studied painting under the artist William Orpen and Orpen found him an excellent pupil. He painted in a similar realist fashion to Orpen and developed his skills in this area, even at a time when abstract painting was becoming popular in Ireland. A traditionalist, he believed in strong drawing skills and an academic approach to painting. Keating went to London as Orpen's assistant and sometimes model but, as a nationalist, he felt his mission was to help define what nationhood meant through his painting. A trip to the Aran Islands in 1914 greatly inspired him; here was the noble islander who represented the ideal, strong, independent type of man needed for the new nation. For Keating he became the image of national identity.



Men of the South shows a group of IRA men. They are waiting for a British military group to pass. An ambush is imminent but as we see from their staunch profiles these men are not concerned for their own safety, but for the principles they hold. Keating portrays these six men as a coherent group. Strong drawing underlies the figures and the neutral tones create an earthy wholesome attachment of the men to the landscape. Keating has made heroes of these men; this painting is not about the grime and pain of war, but about the

idealism and patriotism behind it.

DISCUSSION

- What do you think is going on in this painting?
- Who do you think these men of the South are?
- Keating has painted the portraits of these six men but this painting is more than a group portrait, what else has the artist captured in this work?
- The artist has composed the group of men so that we see them in profile, looking forward into the distance, why do you think he chose this composition?
- There is strong use of line in this painting, the faces and figures of the men are very strongly defined, and every aspect of the painting seems full of conviction. Do you think Keating is trying to influence our opinion of these men by painting them in this way?
- Do you think the sympathies of the artist lie with these men or with the men they are about to encounter? What makes you think this?
- How might the painting look if the opposite answer was true?
- Do you think it is the job of the artist to show political preference in his/her work?

- Look at the overall colour scheme of the painting, it is very harmonious and uses neutral and natural tones. Does the colour have a calming effect or does it add to the tension of the situation.
- Do you get a sense of the time of day from the light and colour of the painting?
- Could there be symbolic reasons for the choice of colour? What might these be?



In the gallery can you find this painting called *Economic Pressure*, also by Sean Keating? This painting deals with the issues of poverty and immigration in the West of Ireland.

Are there similarities in the style of painting in these two works? Can you see this in the brush strokes and colour use? Where else are there similarities?

Keating had a great love for the people and the landscape of the West of Ireland. How is this evident in this painting?

There is a narrative running through both of these paintings. Keating was interested in getting a story and message across to his audience through his realist painting, what message do you get?

HANDS ON

In the classroom have one of the pupils model for the group in the pose of one of the *Men of the South*. If possible find some oversize clothes and some props that could be used to make the scene more authentic.

Look at how Keating has used line to create such a strong sense of form, in your first drawing use only line.

Do a series of five-minute sketches, just using the lines and contours on the clothes to show the form of the figure.

In a longer study use charcoal and chalk on tan sugar paper, again use line to express form and let the colour of the paper represent the broad areas of colour. Using a viewfinder, find a section of this painting that is interesting in terms of pattern and colour. Trace or draw this patterned area onto a larger sheet of paper and using magazines or fabric or mixed media, interpret the design in collage.