



Trees (1920s) (Detail), Oil on canvas, 52.2 x 45 cm, Private Collection

PUBLIC TALKS

Thursday 18 April, 6 – 7pm
Mary Swanzy's Voyages

Curator of the exhibition **Seán Kissane**, IMMA, will discuss the retrospective *Mary Swanzy, Voyages* and the artist's position as a Modern Irish Master.

Thursday 16 May, 6 – 7pm
A journey through modernism in the age of war

Drawing on over a decade of biographical research artist **Liz Cullinane** will provide a valuable picture of the times in which many of Swanzy's paintings were created, as well as the rich social history behind some of the artist's less familiar styles and developments.

Organised in association with Age & Opportunity as part of the nationwide Bealtaine festival – celebrating the arts and creativity as we age.

CREATIVE WRITING

**Sundays 28 April, 5 May, 19 May
and 26 May 2019, 2 – 4pm**

Mary Swanzy inspired writing workshops led by **Laura Mc Kenna**.

Using a combination of guided exercises and in-gallery observation, participants will have an opportunity to bring their own interpretation to Swanzy's artworks through poetry, prose or creative non-fiction. Suitable for beginners or more experienced writers.

Price: €10 for 4 sessions, booking through Eventbrite

BOOK A TOUR

We welcome opportunities to collaborate with schools, community groups and educational partners.

For more info on Learn & Explore:
www.crawfordartgallery.ie

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Crawford Art Gallery

Mary Swanzy Voyages

15 March – 3 June 2019

Mary Swanzy (1882-1978) was a pioneering figure in Irish art. Born in Dublin's Merrion Square she was educated in Dublin, Freiburg and Paris at the turn of the last century. There she mixed in the circles around Gertrude Stein and witnessed the birth of Modern Art. After 1914 she exhibited at the Paris Salons alongside those modern artists who are now household names. She mastered the academic style of painting at a young age and her work rapidly evolved through different styles: Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Symbolism and Surrealism, each of these interpreted and transformed by her in a highly personal way.

She held strident views on the position of female artists, relative to males, making off the cuff remarks such as 'if I had been born Henry instead of Mary my life would have been very different' revealing that she was conscious of the ways in which her gender impacted on her career.

Her record of achievement is unsurpassed by her better-known contemporaries yet

there has not been a substantial exhibition of Swanzy's work in Ireland for 50 years since 1968. This exhibition aims to reintroduce our audiences to this artist's extraordinary achievements and reinstates her as a Modern Irish Master.

Early Work (1)

The first work in the exhibition was made in 1905. It is a portrait of Swanzy's father **Sir Henry R. Swanzy** and the style is formal and academic. The painting demonstrates how Swanzy had mastered the academic style at a young age. She was just 23 years old. At the time, the artist Nathaniel Hone declared it 'the finest painting done in Dublin in the past 30 years'. Dublin had no more to teach the young artist so she left for Paris where she studied under two different masters: Lucien Simon and Antonio de la Gándara. She also studied drawing extensively including figure studies. Unusually she drew both from the female and male nude which was very progressive as studying the male nude was prohibited to women at many academies.

due to serious injury. The war is also referenced in the portrait of Swanzy's sister **Muriel** done in 1942. She is looking out the window, strained with worry as she waits for her son to return from the war.

In her 1977 interview (which can be heard in the final room) when asked on how society had changed since her youth, Swanzy condemned the decline in manners since she was a girl. She was particularly surprised that Irish people had, to her mind, lost their natural courtesy. Social critique emerges as a theme in her late work, and a typical example of this is **Figures Drinking**. Three figures whose faces are sharply lit are shown focussed on a bottle of wine. The male figure to the right is about to pour some wine into a glass. He is wearing a green suit and tie as befitting a respectable gentleman. However, his mouth is open wide in a vulgar and degrading manner or he may be shouting. It is a grotesque scene worthy of Goya, and as with his work could suggest a biblical reference. The open shouting mouth is repeated in **Taxi, The Opera Singer** and

Revolution all of which share a cast of characters. Economic difference is seen from the excessive wealth shown in **The Wedding** in which a pregnant bride's train flows all the way down the aisle of the church. This contrasts with **Beggar Man** who sits shivering by the side of the road as a finely dressed lady throws coins in his cap.

The sound piece plays an important interview between Mary Swanzy and RTÉ Radio aired in 1977. She was 95 years old and would die in the following year. Literally a voice from another century, she recalls her childhood in Dublin in the 1890s, Paris in the early 20th century, the artists she met and her thoughts on life and culture.

The exhibition is curated by Seán Kissane, Curator: Exhibitions, Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) as part of the IMMA Modern Masters Series.

IMMA ÁRAS NUIA-EALAÍNE
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THE GROUND FLOOR OF LUNDEN
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by what appear to be demonic armies and choirs of angels. Adjacent to this is Horus the Egyptian falcon-headed god, set in an ancient classical landscape – note how the spear forms from the previous painting are repeated and a small airplane flies up from the right – a funny anachronism. Beside that is **Allegory** which shows half of a giant Buddha figure sitting on a lotus flower. Above him another angel figure descends with a reaper's sickle in his hand, intent on the many people below.

Potato Famine, This is our Gift our Portion Apart and **The Blessing** were created during the period of the Second World War and show how women are particularly affected at times of war and crisis. Swanzy moved back to Ireland in 1941 due to the bombing raids during the Blitz in which her sister's house in London was destroyed. In Dublin she participated in numerous exhibitions including the first Irish Exhibition of Living Art.

Voyages in the Imagination (6)

After the Second World War, Swanzy returned to her home in London. Her work often took on a darker and more sinister mood. In the 1960s, some of the strangest of Swanzy's works appear. The fantastical worlds seen in **Roundabout**, **Strange World**, and **The Melée** all have the quality of an interrupted narrative. The scenes are populated by recognisably human figures in everyday dress who are accompanied by other people who have been reduced to satirical caricatures. There are human/animal hybrids, many types of animals like horses, pigs, bulls, cats and especially birds. This strange assembly of characters make the images appear like scenes from the world of science fiction rather than deriving from an art historical lineage. **Scarecrows** shows a kind of garden party where ladies in evening dress dance in a field with a group of scarecrows. The scene of able bodied women dancing with mutilated men calls to mind the aftermath of both World Wars when men returned from the battlefields with missing limbs and many other deformities

On her return from Paris, Swanzy exhibited a portrait of her younger sister **Miss Muriel Swanzy** at the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) in 1907. In this work we can see the startling changes that occurred in her style and technique while there. Unlike the naturalism of the previous painting we now see that her concern is with breaking up colour into its constituent elements. This was typical of the Post-Impressionists at the time. She developed a distinctive 'hatching' style that is shared with other artists like Roderic O'Connor, and looking closely we can see that she applies pure colour to the canvas creating a dynamic optical effect. She attempted to make a career as a portrait painter but claimed that 'men wanted to be painted by men and women were expected to paint pussie-wussies and doggie woggies', a startling criticism of the patrons of the time.

On the same wall hangs **Tulips**. This was exhibited at the Paris Beaux-Arts in 1919 and shows the pinnacle of her Post-Impressionist style. Swanzy was unusual among Irish artists

in having been shown both at the Salon des Indépendants and the Beaux-Arts. In 1920 against the backdrop of violence during the War of Independence in which her cousin Oswald was assassinated by the IRA, Swanzy decided to leave Ireland for an extended period. She first travelled to Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Czechoslovakia where she focused particularly on the lives of the ordinary people she met there. On the left-hand wall, are two examples from this time. The portrait of the baby boy called **Slavco**, and the busy **Market Scene** is shown from an elevated view, the style is also distinctive as she loads a brush with ink and uses it to draw like a modern felt-tip pen.

Hawaii 1923, Samoa 1924 (2)

The early 1920s were a very busy time for Swanzy professionally. Despite her extensive travels she continued to send paintings to major exhibitions. She regularly exhibited in Dublin, London and Paris. In Dublin she was involved with the setting up of the Dublin Painters Society in 1920, this was Ireland's first

gallery of Modern art, which she co-founded with Grace and Paul Henry. She was also elected to the selection committee of the Salon des Indépendants in Paris, a fantastic achievement for a foreign woman. It is important to note her involvement in these organisations as later in life she was often described as 'reclusive' but clearly at the time she gave a lot of energy to cultural networks.

In 1923 she set off on her most ambitious voyage. Travelling through Canada and North America she made her way to Hawaii. She chose to go there as her uncle had moved there in the 1880s. He was a successful sugar merchant and his home and garden can be seen – on the right-hand wall - in the works ***La Maison Blanche*** and ***Honolulu Garden***. These works are interesting for the manner in which they depict colonial lifestyles. Note the figures taking tea on the lawn of the ***Maison Blanche***.

The following year in 1924 Swanzy sailed 2,500 miles to Samoa. There she made one of the most iconic bodies of work

ever painted by an Irish artist. She depicted the incredible richness of the forests and tropical plants. Importantly she also depicted the lives of the native peoples there. Unlike her predecessor, the French painter Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), who often sexualised the women of the islands showing them naked and indolent, Swanzy always depicts the people of the islands, both male and female, busily occupied with their daily tasks. We see women preparing food for their families or washing their children in the stream. This shows Swanzy taking a feminist and liberal view of the lives of these people at a time whereas they were described by people like Gauguin as 'noble savages'.

Cubism (3) and Futurism (4)

It is now necessary to turn back in time by nearly ten years to see the first works that Swanzy made in a Cubist style. She first exhibited in Paris in 1914 and around this time started to make the work entitled ***La Poupée Japonaise***. Unlike her earlier work in a 'hatching' style in which she is breaking up colour into its constituent

parts, she is now breaking up the picture plane into forms which was a central Cubist concern; instead of depicting objects from one viewpoint, artists observed and depicted the subject from different viewpoints in time and space simultaneously. Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) is credited with 'inventing' Cubism in around 1909 and he and Swanzy are almost exact contemporaries. The two artists knew each other but Swanzy claimed at the time he was 'just a little person like myself' and that they were both pursuing a singular vision. However by 1914, Cubism had evolved into many different iterations and dominated artistic discourse. As such it is not surprising that Swanzy adopted it and she is certainly the first Irish artist to do so.

Her peculiarity is that she continually adds narrative to her compositions unlike many of her contemporaries who aimed for pure abstraction. ***Woman in White Bonnet*** (c.1920) with its intense spirals and movement is typically Futurist – a modern movement which emerged in Italy through artists like Giacomo Balla (1871-1958), whose work can

be compared to Swanzy's. Due to the First World War, the Salon exhibitions in Paris were suspended for five years so it is difficult to firmly establish Swanzy's style at this time. Added to this is the fact that she rarely titled or dated her pictures.

By the late 1920s when some of these works were made, Swanzy was exhibiting in Paris alongside artists like Paul Signac (1863-1935) and Gino Severini (1883-1966) and the prices of their paintings were similar. This is an interesting point as while the work of these male artists now commands tens of millions of Euro on the art market, the work of female artists like Swanzy has been overlooked.

Surrealism (5)

Here, Swanzy's complex personal narratives are seen combined with an interest in world religions, Renaissance arts and ancient ritual.

Composition (1927) continues the use of Cubist form and Surrealist content. Here we see a figure of God, derived from Christian tradition, surrounded