

RIVER TO THE SEA Norah McGuinness (1901-1980)

Norah McGuinness was born in Derry but worked for much of her career in Dublin; she represented Ireland in the Venice Biennale of 1950. McGuinness was a versatile artist who worked in costume and theatre design, window design for major shops in Ireland and the America, as well as book illustration. But, her main love remained painting. She painted landscape and figurative work that developed in style from representational and naturalistic to cubist and semi-abstract. She was influenced in France by the cubist style of Andre L'Hote and by the strong colours of the Fauves. She developed her own very personal style of semi-abstract painting through her still life studies, and her studies over many years around the docklands of Dublin.



River to the Sea from 1959 has all the vibrancy and colour of McGuinness's mature work: the strong diagonal in blue and green dissects the painting and the use of outline further fragments the image. Strong contrasts of orange and blue, purple and yellow sing out to us from this magical setting. The familiar landscape with its traditional thatched cottage becomes a new world under the inquiring eye of the artist.

DISCUSSION

- What is the first thing that strikes you about this painting?
- What do you think the figure in the painting is doing?
- Do you think the artist is painting the scene exactly as she sees it or has she changed it? Why do you think this?
- Can you follow the river through the painting? Can you tell where it goes?
- If Norah McGuinness is not interested in showing things exactly as she sees them, what is she interested in showing?
- Can you tell a lot about the place from this painting? Do you get a good feeling of what this place is about?
- If you look first at the orange area on the right side of the painting, where does your eye go to next? How do the colours carry you around the painting?
- Why do you think the artist outlines different areas?

- In some of the painting, the background is pale blue; in the rest it is dark blue, which part looks further away?
- Orange and yellow are warm colours used in the painting, green and blue are cool, does the painting seem warm or cool to you?
- Orange and blue are called opposite or ‘contrasting’ colours, so are purple and yellow, red and blue. Can you see in this painting what happens when any of these opposites meet?
- Cubist painting wants to show more information about the subject than showing how it looks just from one spot. It wants to show the structure of objects from different points of view. Often cubist paintings are like jigsaws with each piece giving us some new piece of information on the subject. Do you think this is a cubist painting?



COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Look at *The Ripe Field* by William Crozier.

See how bright the field is, and how dark everything around it has been painted, why do you think the artist did this?

The artist is really looking at one place here, the field, so the field is big and the edges are really clear. In *River to the Sea*, the artist also outlined her shapes and made them very clear, is this how you draw or paint? Do you think doing this helps make a painting? How?

HANDS ON

Try this cubist exercise, find a bottle or cup and place it on the table in front of you. Look carefully at the object and draw the curves and lines that make up the structure. (Don't bother with any patterns or labels.) Now turn your object so that you are looking directly into it. Draw these shapes in a different coloured pencil on top of your first drawing. Next turn the object so you are looking at the base and change colour again. Build up your drawing like this, this style of drawing can look very interesting and it can show lots of information.

Paint a scene from somewhere you know in the country, use the strongest colours you can for everything in your painting to get across the feeling of the place.