

ACQUISITION POLICY

Introduction

The National Gallery collection comprises paintings, sculpture, works on paper, miniatures, books, archives, and applied art, chiefly silverware, stained glass and furniture.

The collection consists principally of European art from about 1300 to 1930. The Gallery also holds the national collection of Irish art, from the late 17th century until about 1970, and the national collection of portraiture which extends to the present day. There is a significant library collection, including rare books, and several important archival collections connected with Irish art and other areas of specialism in the collections, including pre-eminently the Centre for Studies in Irish Art, the Yeats Archive and Sir Denis Mahon's papers.

Since the founding of the Gallery in 1854 and its opening a decade later, there have been major purchases as well as significant gifts, including the Milltown gift and further works presented by, among others, Hugh Lane, Chester Beatty and, more recently, Alfred and Clementine Beit.

The Gallery has a strong international reputation. Part of its richness lies in housing several distinct, as well as distinctive, groups of holdings. Paintings far outnumber sculptures: these are mainly portrait busts. Our holding of Irish works from 1700 onwards is particularly strong, but fades by the mid-twentieth century.

A small group of old master drawings was acquired mainly in the late nineteenth century. The strength of the works on paper collection lies in its Irish holdings particularly of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The archival holdings have been growing in recent years. The Library houses a reference collection built up by exchange and purchase, but also holds some significant, rare volumes.

Principles of Collecting

Section VIII of the 1854 Act establishing the National Gallery of Ireland states: 'it shall be lawful for the said last-mentioned Body Corporate to receive Devises, Bequests, Donations, and Subscriptions (annual or otherwise) of Land, Buildings, Money, and Works of Art, and to hold the same, and, and to lay out such sums of Money as they shall so receive for the purposes of the National Gallery of Ireland, in the Improvement and enlargement of the Collection of Works of Art presented to or purchased for the said Gallery, or deposited therein...'

The National Gallery continues to collect and considers works in any media. It does not view its collections as final or complete. The Gallery is prevented by statute from de-accessioning.

The Gallery acquires works by purchase, using its Government grant and/or own funds. It also makes acquisitions by other means, principally gift or bequest, and including by tax-related allocation.

The criteria for works entering the collection require high quality of their artistic ambition and achievement.

The Gallery will make specific efforts to address the gender imbalance present in this – as in all other – historic collections.

Criteria for portraiture rest upon a combination of eminence of the sitter and importance of the artist. The Gallery is looking to diversify the range of sitters, to reflect a more inclusive and diverse view of Irish society and accomplishment.

Library and archive collections should meaningfully relate to, and extend, collections already housed at the Gallery. The Gallery actively pursues archives related to the history of Irish art.

New acquisitions extend our knowledge and understanding of works and traditions already represented. However, acquisitions can also have the role of extending the collection, expanding existing contexts, bringing representation of certain artists, styles or traditions up to date, and introducing new media, hitherto outside the scope of previous acquisitions practices.

The ambition for most new acquisitions should be to include them in the on-going displays of the collection. However, some parts of the collection, for example, archival works and works on paper, can be only intermittently displayed due to their material condition. They have an equally important role as study collections.

Method of Acquisition

Acquisition proposals are processed, in-house, by specialist curators working through the Director. Art historical merit and relevance, price, availability, provenance, condition and good title all need to be satisfactorily ascertained before a work is put to the Board for final approval. These details should be included in the note written for inclusion in the Board papers. The same process applies to gifts and purchases.

The supporting note should include an illustration of the work, details about the artist, the work itself set in context, discussion of its relevance to the collection, discussion of price or market value. In general, acquisitions should be present for consultation during the Board meeting.

Priorities for Acquisition

Priorities for acquisition change over time and according to the changing needs of the collection. The Gallery should not prioritise lesser works at the expense of targeting parts of the collection that will benefit from a more concentrated strategy of acquisition. When assessing possible additions to the collection, the NGI is not only acquiring for the present but shaping the context for Irish and international art for the decades to come.

Currently the highest priority for acquisition is in art made after 1900, including a continuing commitment to Irish art, archives, sculpture and portraiture.

No public collection in Ireland has a comprehensive holding of international works made between 1900 and the present. In the context of the NGI's Acquisitions Policy, the activities of other Dublin-based institutions, chiefly IMMA and the Hugh Lane Gallery, play a role, but without actively shaping the strategy of the NGI, which is the function of the NGI Board and Executive.

Limited resources for funding acquisitions, either public, charitable or private, remain a key challenge for all public institutions. Nonetheless, the Director proposes that these Dublin institutions discuss and seek to align acquisition strategies on a regular basis.

Introducing a comprehensive overview of international twentieth century art into the NGI collection is an unaffordable and unattainable aim. However, the Gallery should aim to add a selection of important individual works in the collection from key periods and developments. The NGI should actively seek opportunities of artists currently being overlooked.

The American and British Friends of the NGI present the Gallery with an opportunity to cultivate collectors in these countries who see value in presenting their works or having their collections on display in Dublin. Our Irish Friends and Patrons support our ambition to enrich the Gallery's collection of Irish art.

While consolidating and extending our holdings of modern foreign art, the Gallery should seek to extend its collection of Irish art. The Gallery should aim to represent Irish art of more recent periods more programmatically, to consolidate its position as the state collection of Irish art.

The Gallery should commission and / or acquire contemporary portraits as a rule, not as an exception. These might be either portraits commissioned by the NGI or those already in existence.

The Director proposes to seek opportunities for extending Gallery works on paper holdings by consolidating in particular Irish and British areas of strength, as well as selectively expanding into new areas. The NGI should seek to create strong groups within its holdings, as well as seeking significant individual works.

Library and archival collections form significant collections held by the National Gallery. The Library will aim to consolidate its role as a centre of national excellence when rehoused as part of the final phase of the Master Development Plan. The NGI holds several significant

archives, most recently the addition of Sir Denis Mahon's Archive and the illustrated letters of William Orpen.

Cataloguing and digitisation are the bridge between the collection as accumulations of information and material, and its use and availability as a source for research, insight and knowledge.

All works of art should be considered on their artistic merit, and not excluded from consideration because of their medium. Thus photography, among other media such as video, not traditionally acquired, can be acquired because of its artistic excellence or its historical importance, like any other medium historically accepted by the NGI as worthy of consideration.

The Gallery should, moreover, develop an acquisitions strategy for photography, particularly of work with a connection to Ireland. A longer-term aim should be to build an overview of the history of photography, most likely through identifying an existing collection and acquiring it by gift or purchase.

Sources of Acquisitions

The government provides limited funds for acquisition (euro 858,000 in 2018). The Gallery has several funds, some of which support acquisitions. There are no other significant national resources that assist with acquisitions. The exception is the S1003 scheme, which enables donors to gain an 80% tax credit when donating a work of art that fulfils certain criteria, to an accredited institution, such as the NGI.

The Gallery needs to actively encourage gifts, to accept a limited and judicious number of loans-in as a way of building key relationships, and to use existing mechanisms in the tax system, for example the Section 1003 scheme, to encourage philanthropy.

The Gallery should identify and cultivate the owners of key works or collections in Ireland and abroad, to extend the long and fruitful history of enlightened donations to the collections.

A further aim should be to encourage legacies and bequests, of art and/or funds with the aim of building an endowment for acquisitions. As the revenues from the George Bernard Shaw Fund enter their final period, replacement sources of funding have become a greater need.

Conclusion

The National Gallery currently has limited resources to dedicate to acquisitions. Its funds are restricted and diminishing while the overall prices of art in the market increase. However, by encouraging gifts and loans, and by encouraging use of the tax regime and advocating further changes to the tax system to encourage giving still more, there are long-term gains to be found.

Consolidating the twentieth century brings the collections up to date and creates a stronger context for Irish art and portraiture of more recent periods. Different media will be considered on their artistic merit.

The diversity of the collections, embracing fine and decorative art, portraiture, works on paper, archival materials, and both national and international schools, constitutes a great strength and creates a strong sense of identity.

The Director proposes reviewing this policy with staff and the Board at regular intervals, evaluating it against the background of recent acquisitions and in the context of current means available for extending the collection.

A judicious policy of continuing acquisition remains a core objective of the National Gallery.

Approved by the Board 17 May 2018