

Treasures of the National Gallery of Ireland Library & Archives

Instagram Live Tour: Culture Night 2020

Transcript

Speaker 1: Mary Clare O'Brien (H.W. Wilson Fellow)

Opening lines

Hello and welcome to this live online event at the National Gallery of Ireland. This is an event especially for Culture Night. Keep an eye out for Culture Night activities both online and onsite by checking out the National Gallery website and social media.

My name is Mary Clare O'Brien and work in the Library in Archives here in the Gallery. Today my colleagues, Donna Rose and Grace O'Boyle, and I will be talking to you about our Library and Archive collections at the Gallery, selecting some highlights from these collections that we want to share with you. We're filming from the Sir Denis Mahon Reading Room which is one of the several reading rooms available for our staff and the public to research in. While there are some onsite access restrictions in the Library and Archives at the moment due to COVID-19, our staff are available to assist with your research needs. We are offering lots of digital services and trying to share our collections as much as we can online, like this event today.

Introduction to the Library and Archives

Before I show you some treasures from our collections, I want to introduce you to the five collections within the National Gallery Library and Archive.

1. The ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art holds a library and archive that focuses solely on Irish art.
2. The Art Library is an extensive collection of art research resources that covers the rest of Europe and many other regions worldwide. It holds over 100,000 volumes on art dating from the 15th century to present day as well as many other materials such as auction catalogues, journals, online resources and more.
3. Our Institutional Archive holds documentation and various other object types relating to the gallery such as minute books, old attendance records, correspondence, photographs and much more. It's very useful for understanding the history of the gallery as well as the collection it holds.
4. One of most popular collections is the Yeats archive that holds material that belonged to the very creative Yeats family including, of course, Jack Butler Yeats, but also his sisters Elisabeth and Susan Yeats, his father John Butler Yeats and his niece Anne Yeats.
5. Finally, we have the Sir Denis Mahon Library and Archives. Sir Denis Mahon was born in 1910 and was one of the one of the foremost scholars and collectors of his generation, specialising in Italian baroque art. Along with donating his own

research papers and personal and family belongings, he donated his library that would have assisted his own art research.

Giorgio Vasari's 'Vite'

So that leads me to show you our first treasure, which is from Sir Denis Mahon's library. It's a beautiful rare book by Giorgio Vasari. The book is written in Italian but the title in English roughly translates to "The Lives of the most excellent Italian architects, painters, and sculptors" or "The Lives" for short ("Vite" for short in Italian). It was first published in 1550. The book we have laid out today is second, definitive edition written shortly after in 1568. Why this book is so special—outside of the sheer age of it—is because it is considered the foundation of art-historical writing. So, in other words, the first art history book. Vasari's Vite tells us about the lives of Renaissance artists including Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael. On this page open here, we see an illustration of Giorgio Vasari himself. There are many other illustrations throughout the book.

Now I'll pass you to Donna Rose who'll be showing you some her favourite treasures from the Library and Archives.

Speaker 2: Donna Rose (ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art Fellow)

Thank you Mary Clare!

Lady Mahon's Hat & Photograph

And now moving on to this fabulous ostrich feather hat which once belonged to Lady Alice Evelyn Mahon. Lady Alice was born in 1877 to a wealthy family and grew up at Westport House in Co. Mayo. She married John Fitzgerald Mahon in 1898, and in 1910, the couple had their only child, who they called Denis, and he went on to become one of the leading art historians and collectors of his generation.

Lady Alice spent some years living in London where she bought this beautiful hat from the luxury department store Harvey Nichols. Her taste in hats was true to the fashion of the period, when hats were very large. Hatpins were used to secure the hat to the wearer's head, which were sometimes over a foot long!

These hats became less fashionable during the First World War when smaller and plainer hats were popular. They appear to have made a bit of a comeback in the 1920s though, as we can see in this photograph here next to the hat.

This photo is of Lady Alice Mahon pictured with members of an interesting organisation called the 'Universal Aunts'. The Universal Aunts were set up in London following the First World War, during which aunts around the UK stepped in to provide childcare, elder care, and home care while parents were off at war or working outside the home. The organization continues to provide voluntary care for families in need to this very day.

Lady Alice Mahon is the person in the centre of the photograph. She was a philanthropist and volunteered her time to several organisations. It's great that we can see her work and her interests reflected in the Mahon Archive.

[Bea Orpen Sketchbooks](#)

The next objects on the table are a selection of sketchbooks which once belonged to the Irish artist and educator Bea Orpen.

Bea Orpen was born in Dublin in 1913. She was born into a very arty family and was the niece of the architect and painter Richard Orpen and the prominent painter William Orpen. Bea enjoyed art from a young age, receiving private art classes from the Irish artist Lilian Davidson.

She went on to train in drawing, painting, textiles and commercial design in London before returning to Ireland when she was 26 years old, settling down in Drogheda. In 1946, Bea founded the Drogheda municipal art collection alongside her husband Chalmers Edward FitzJohn ('Terry') Trench and played an important role in establishing Drogheda Municipal Gallery of Art.

Bea was also a popular art teacher and worked in several schools and colleges in Drogheda. As well as being an educator, Bea was an accomplished painter. She enjoyed painting landscapes and travelled around Ireland and Europe painting the natural world, exhibiting her work frequently.

We are lucky to have a selection of Bea's sketchbooks in the gallery's ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art archive. The sketchbooks are an invaluable tool for understanding her versatility as an artist. We can see that she enjoyed drawing from life, drawing people and animals, and that she used her sketchbooks to explore proportions.

We can also see some of her background in commercial design through the various poster designs which she created in her sketchbooks.

When considered alongside her paintings, the sketchbooks can help to give us a more rounded understanding of Bea's creative process, her interests, and her skill as an artist.

[Suffragette letter](#)

There are lots of interesting letters in the gallery's archives, belonging to artists such as Frederick William Burton, William Orpen, and Jack Yeats. This letter here is from the Institutional Archive.

It's a letter written in 1914 from the Commissioner of Police of the Dublin to the National Gallery of Ireland, and it's a letter of warning. It tells gallery staff to be on the lookout for "special activities" of the "militant suffragettes and their supporters".

The Suffragettes were an early 20th century movement who campaigned for voting rights for women. Suffragettes sometimes used acts of civil disobedience to draw attention to the social and political inequality experienced by women at the time. This letter is most likely inspired by an action carried out by suffragette Mary Richardson, who earlier in 1914, used a meat cleaver to slash a Velázquez painting called Rokeby Venus at the National Gallery in London.

So this letter is a snapshot of a really interesting time in Irish history. The suffragettes were eventually successful, and a few years after this letter was sent voting rights for all women were passed in Ireland with the formation of the Free State in 1922.

[Jack Butler Yeats' Painting Smock, Hat and Glove](#)

Finally I'll move on to this artist smock. Artists' smocks like these were often used to protect an artist's clothes from paint. This one belonged to the Irish artist Jack Butler Yeats. He was a really influential illustrator and painter, and you can see a number of his works hanging on the gallery walls in the Irish rooms.

What interests me most about this outfit though is the sign of wear that you can see on it. You can see the brown paint stains all over the smock itself. And if you take a look at the yellow cotton gloves which he would have worn to protect his hands, you can see that the tip of the index finger is worn from use. If you think about the way that you'd hold a pencil or a paintbrush, you can see how that would happen. It's really amazing to see these elements of the artists practice captured in these objects. Now I'm going to pass you on to Grace, who's going to talk about a few of her favourite objects from the Yeats Archive.

Speaker 3: Grace O'Boyle (ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art Fellow)

[Jack Butler Yeats Olympic medal](#)

Hi all, following on from Donna's discussion on Jack Butler Yeats, I am going to take a closer look at Jack's Olympic silver medal which he won at the Paris Olympics in 1924.

A lot of people may not be aware that Jack Yeats was in fact an Olympic medallist. Between the years 1912 and 1948 there was a section of the Olympic Games dedicated to artistic and cultural pursuits. For the Paris games Jack submitted his painting 'The Liffey Swim' (1923) which hangs in the Irish rooms of the National Gallery. He titled the painting 'Swimming' for his submission as one of the requirements for submitting was that the painting be directly inspired by sport.

The Liffey Swim has an enduring presence and is one of Jack's most famous works. It documents an annual event that still happens to this day and is unique in Europe.

[Mary Swanzy's painting palette](#)

Here we have Mary Swanzy's painting palette, last used in her studio in Blackheath, London.

It was donated to the CSIA collection in 2012 by Patrick Murphy.

Swanzy was a landscape artist and one of Ireland's first abstract painters; she painted in many styles reflecting her interests in cubism, fauvism, and Orphism.

She studied at May Manning's studio, the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art, as well as in Paris. Independent wealth allowed her to travel extensively to develop her practice and, in 1949, she was made an Honorary Member of the RHA.

This is an extremely interesting object from a material culture point of view, although it does not serve its intended function anymore, the palette functions as a very helpful tool for learning more about Swanzy's style and use of colour. From a conservation point of view, the palette could be very useful for revealing properties about the paints and pigments she used.

[Elizabeth Corbett Yeats Embroidery](#)

Moving on to this beautiful cushion cover which was embroidered by Susan or 'Lily' Yeats from 1902.

She was a designer in her own right and an embroiderer associated with the Celtic Revival, Lily studied and taught embroidery in the style propounded by William Morris, working under his daughter May in London. In 1902, she moved to Dublin to co-found the Dun Emer Guild and, in 1908, established the embroidery department of Cuala Industries.

The piece is vibrant in colour and the materials have sustained themselves brilliantly over the years. All materials are of high quality, including the blue base, which is made from poplin. Poplin was a mix of silk and linen that was extremely durable and long lasting. The subject matter of the cushion truly echoes the premise of the arts and crafts movement and its profound connection to nature.

[Closing lines](#)

Thank you for your time and for tuning in! Please check out some of our other Culture Night events which are happening around the gallery this evening.

Goodbye!