

Podcast Transcript:

Imagining France. The time, the place, the principles, with Paul McLauchlan and Andrea Horan

Introduction

Welcome to *Imagining France*, a series of podcasts bringing you into the world of the National Gallery's summer exhibition *Roderic O'Connor and the Moderns: Between Paris and Pont-Aven* [18 July – 29 October 2018].

For this episode, Andrea Horan, co-founder of the Tropical Popical nail salon, and fashion writer and critic Paul McLauchlan, discuss their personal responses to the exhibition from their unique perspectives within the contemporary world of fashion and media.

Paul McLauchlan

Hi, my name is Paul and I'm a fashion critic and freelance writer contributing to publications such as the New York Times, *fashions.com* and *Twin*.

Today, I'm with Andrea Horan discussing *Roderic O'Connor and the Moderns* – the latest exhibition at the National Gallery of Ireland.

Hi, Andrea.

Andrea Horan

Hiya!

I'm Andrea. I am the owner of Tropical Popical the nail bar, which I think is gas that we're sitting here – fashion critic and nail-bar owner – but we do bits with the National Gallery, doing artistic interpretations and reactions to the exhibitions as they open, so that's kind of the reason why we're here.

Paul McLauchlan

What was your initial reaction to the exhibition?

I was joyous that it was full of colour, because I find a lot of the time classical art is very subdued and dark, and I think that there's statements made with the darkness rather than the light. I found that this was very pattern-heavy, light, a lot of colour.

Andrea Horan

It was blasts of colours. And even the interpretation – and I suppose it's probably from – because of where they painted a lot of the work, it was in the countryside, so it doesn't have this kind of city darkness on it so lends itself to being more colourful, to having more natural colours is coming through. Especially all the landscapes and all that; they really went for it.

And especially in the later work – as you kind of went through – when they started not taking this for what they were and to maybe challenge that it didn't have to be an exact replication – it was their interpretation of it so that the colours are not what they look like in real life. You've got pink mountains or whatever. And there are some pink mountains, but not very often [laughs].

Paul McLauchlan

I think a lot of the inspiration behind what they painted was inspired by this really intense colours that Paul Gauguin would have. I suppose he started the movement.

Andrea Horan

Would you say he's the leader?

Paul McLauchlan

[laughs] I think he's the leader, but you can see even that his work is inspired by other people, so he is, I suppose, leading from what he knows as opposed to starting something that's incredibly new. And although it was a development, I don't think he necessarily was a revolutionary in terms of his leadership.

Andrea Horan

Well, you also have Cézanne as well, who was very influential in that. But I suppose all of the work is so similar and, like, I'll put my hands up and say I'd never heard of Roderic O'Connor. Gasps! Sharp intake of breath! But I had heard of obviously Van Gogh.

So, when you then look at the work that they were doing, which was really similar, the kind of linear soft brush strokes and everything that was coming through on it, you can see them learning from each other and the Pont-Aven gang.

We were talking about this earlier, how you could tell that they were friendly with each other and they weren't competitive whereas when you look back at Vermeer stuff, the exhibition that was on, there was similarities between each piece of work but you could tell that they were taking a piece, copying it and trying to better it. Whereas I think with this exhibition, there's a friendliness almost. Well, I'm projecting friendliness. I sense that they're pals. And that they're taking the learnings from each other and the techniques are very similar.

And, I suppose, if it was a modern-day world now, you would have Diet Prada jumping in going 'Oh my God they're all copying each other!' or whatever. Whereas it seems to be that's how the art progressed and they learned, or whatever.

Paul McLauchlan

I definitely think that was something that I also found really interesting, like the cross-pollination of ideas between O'Connor and Cuno Amiet and Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin. But, I think, like you said, Diet Prada would not appreciate the exhibition! They would go to town on all of the different references and who was copying who.

When I came to the exhibition, Rosary Cox gave a great tour and she said that there is only one original – whoever created the world – and the rest are just copyists, and I think that's really true.

But, as she pointed out, what is unique to O'Connor is his animated handling, his heightened colour and his simplified form. Which I think, if you look at the other artists in the exhibition, you can see that he still has his own style even if he is inspired by the others. You can go through the exhibition, and even if you aren't familiar with O'Connor, and I wasn't familiar with him either.

Andrea Horan

Do you feel bad saying that? I always feel bad. I'm like 'oh god!'

Paul McLauchlan

I mean, I think it's good, because there will be a lot of people who won't know Roderic O'Connor and they'll come to the exhibition and be enlightened as to who he is. And, I think that's really important that exhibitions and galleries can introduce the public to new artists, even if he is from the 1800s and they haven't heard of him. I think it's a good form of education.

With O'Connor, I was really interested in what was unique to him and I think even through the first room and the second room if you see the works that he's made and then you go to the third and the fourth and the fifth, you can start to recognise which ones belong to him based on animated handling.

Andrea Horan

When you say animated handling, what do you mean by that?

Paul McLauchlan

What I mean by that is the way he used stripes, and there's not really many lines in his work. And it's very, I suppose, he paints really kind of intensely from memory and it's not academic, I guess.

Andrea Horan

This is how art is made; it was more a feeling.

Paul McLauchlan

Yeah, what he was feeling that it was almost like his feelings and emotions were just exploding onto the canvas.

Andrea Horan

And we were saying they were all quite hippies, really, weren't they? The group of them in the countryside.

Paul McLauchlan

Yeah, I mean Pont-Aven – they would have been quite spiritual and the paintings style synthesis and symbolism would have been very much inspired by the kind of, I suppose, outward appearance of natural forms as opposed to looking at something sitting there with their canvas and easel and painting from what they can see. It is more inspired by memory, and I think that's really interesting, because then you get, I suppose, a looser painting. But you also see something that is very personal to them then as opposed to – we can all look at the window and decide what we see, and we all see the same thing.

Andrea Horan

Do we though? [laughs]

Paul McLauchlan

But, we all remember it differently.

Andrea Horan

And that's what makes the richness of it.

Paul McLauchlan

I think that's what makes it so rich, and that's really interesting. And I think it was Paul Gauguin who said a canvas was a flat surface onto which colour was applied, and I think that's informed a lot of the colour in the exhibition. You can see that it is so vibrant. Like you were saying about the pink mountains – mountains aren't pink.

Andrea Horan

Apart from that one in Bolivia, or somewhere.

Paul McLauchlan

Apart from that one [laughs].

But, yeah. I thought that was really interesting, like. Painting from memory, and we all remember things very differently.

Andrea Horan

Yeah! And what I loved is when you can see that there was, like, at the start, the colours were again very like, this is a peasant and this is what they look like. But then as it goes on then this peasant has blue and orange stripes on her face, and you're like, that's a very interesting way of shading and bringing the light to her face, and it is bringing the light to her face but it is in a way that's completely unnatural almost but yet it's still possible.

We were also talking about the way that those stripes are working. There is a street artist called Aches, who does a lot with RGB, and it's almost like it brings it alive and pops it. And you can see the reference there. He didn't get the reference from there, but you can see that it's been used for a long time and when you see the modern take on it, of how it doesn't have to be the real life real spice look.

Paul McLauchlan

Yeah it was definitely, I suppose, a revolt against Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, because they got quite fed up with that I think, and that's why they went to Pont-Aven. Because Paris at the time, there was a lot of scandal and political instability at the time so they all went to Pont-Aven to have a great time I suppose [laughs].

Andrea Horan

Drinking their cider in the fields [laughs].

Paul McLauchlan

But yes, it was different. They moved to Pont-Aven.

Andrea Horan

I read something about them – and this is why I love them as well and why we are deciding they are hippies – because they were sick of the commercialisation and all that kind of jazz. And moving back to a more simple life of joy and nature and painting and cider.

Paul McLauchlan

The most important part of their life [laughs].

But yeah, I think it was really interesting that they chose Pont-Aven because it was much cheaper than Paris, which was where the centre of the international art scene would have been.

Andrea Horan

I think it's also random that an Irish guy from Roscommon is ending up bopping around Pont-Aven.

Paul McLauchlan

Yeah, it's strange to think that he made it that far, and he was one of the only Irish artists to stay in France. He really detached from Ireland.

Andrea Horan

The cheek of him [laughs].

Paul McLauchlan

But he would have been surrounded by people like Cuno Amiet.

Andrea Horan

Who was my favourite out of the exhibition.

Paul McLauchlan

With the evolution of the Pont-Aven school of art, what did you think about the development of, I suppose, their collaboration and the way that they interpreted each other's work?

Andrea Horan

I think it's cute. Is that an art word? That's not an art word [laughs].

I think it's because you can tell that they were pals and when I then went back and read a bit more about the relationship that Roderic had with my pal. You could see that there was a budding friendship and that they were learning and creating together and moving things forward for each other as opposed to trying to better each other.

And they're obviously trying to get better and to improve and move things along, but I think I enjoy the journey of, I suppose, the more colour that happened, the more they became braver with the colours, was more my buzz. And its nature. Not nature, but I prefer colour, so that's how I'm going to see it.

And we were talking about etches and sketches of the black and white pieces and neither of us were enamoured with those, so I think that's kind of interesting from where we're both coming from in a world of colour. You're in fashion and I'm from nails, that's literally colour-filled. They weren't the pieces that stood out.

Paul McLauchlan

I personally wasn't drawn to them, and I think it's because you were surrounded by the amazing purple walls in the exhibition and then you have all these really vibrant pieces of art, and then you come to these black and white landscapes and it's almost disappointing, I suppose, in the context of the rest of the exhibition.

I suppose it does give something more varied, and it does show the different, like, the scope of the style.

Andrea Horan

We're sweating for colour [laughs].

Paul McLauchlan

Exactly. It fell flat for me. And I think that you felt the same. And I think the ones that had landscape – Pont-Aven by Roderic O'Connor was one of my favourite pieces in the exhibition. It really was an explosion of colour.

Andrea Horan

It was like a kaleidoscope of colour.

Paul McLauchlan

What piece sticks out as your favourite?

Andrea Horan

My favourite was the Amiet bunch of flowers. It is very evident, stunning. I kept going back to it and I've been to the exhibition a couple of times now and I kept ending up back at that.

And even when we were doing the interpretation for nails, we kind of found five themes that came out of the exhibition that would work for nails. Florals was a very good one, and obviously the texture and the lines in that works really well on nails. But we also – because everything is so textured, so one of our themes was texture, florals, apples. Apples – they're everywhere! Literally all I saw for the whole exhibition was apples. Stunning apples, in fairness. And especially with the colours that went in and the lines and especially when I went past the literal interpretation I thought it was stunning.

We did a peasant one as well, a lot of peasant women.

And you were saying that my pal had to go back to Switzerland because he couldn't afford to pay his models.

Paul McLauchlan

Yeah, they paid the models in Pont-Aven which was interesting, I suppose, that they were actually treating them fairly.

Andrea Horan

Because models are not treated fairly [laughs].

Paul McLauchlan

You can see that they really appreciated the subject. I remember if you look at some of O'Connor's work, which was more of my interest as opposed to your pal Cuno Amiet from the 1890s [laughs].

Andrea Horan

I think we would have gotten on; he seems like a sound guy.

Paul McLauchlan

If you take some of O'Connor's work, you can see that he really respects his subjects in that he gives them a clear identity. Even though it is an interesting interpretation the way he uses colour and texture you can see that he does respect them and even though the paintings are called Breton women, or Breton girl. They don't even get a name. But you can see that he does respect his subjects – I think anyway.

Andrea Horan

Why do you think that?

Paul McLauchlan

I think that because, even though it is a loose painting, you can see that there is character there and you can get a sense of the person he is painting. I think that is a form of quiet respect, I guess.

Andrea Horan

Do you think there are a lot of artists who didn't have that respect?

Paul McLauchlan

I don't think that Paul Gauguin did. We discussed him, and he was not the greatest person either from accounts.

Andrea Horan

I didn't know anything about him. I just looked at the piece, the big huge piece where they're at the table, and the thing that jumped out at me first was all the men are dressed and all the women are naked. Like, for me it was just a disparity between the two. And then the hipster guy sitting in the middle; he looks like something out of Vice or something, leading the table.

But then all the women just draped over naked. I instantly was turned off the piece because of that, and maybe that's from where I'm coming from as a woman and work I've done in the past. I just would be like, 'He's a bit of a pig, isn't he?'

And then, you tell me the story.

Paul McLauchlan

He sexualised his subjects, as you've just discussed. But he used to send these really graphic letters to O'Connor which couldn't be published because of the nature of them, no one wanted to be reading those.

Andrea Horan

I'm so intrigued by them now. I'm sweating for them [laughs].

Paul McLauchlan

But they couldn't publish them because they were just too graphic for any audience to come across. So it's clear that his character definitely influenced the way he painted.

Andrea Horan

You can totally feel that off the work.

Paul McLauchlan

I think in a modern context.

Andrea Horan

We're in the MeToo/Harvey Weinstein world.

Paul McLauchlan

And with all of the fashion photographers that were recently – it was uncovered – allegations against them. For me, when I looked at Paul Gauguin's work, it kind of reminded me of the way that Bruce Weber sexualises men in his work. And then when allegations came out against him, it was almost like the work was –

Andrea Horan

It was always telling us but no one was listening, I suppose.

Paul McLauchlan

Terry Richardson is another one. These people's work is definitely giving us clues as to what they like and what kind of person they are.

Andrea Horan

And how they treat people and what their beliefs are and all that kind of jazz. So what we can take from that is, from that big picture, you're not into his personality. However, it is an interesting piece.

Paul McLauchlan

I think the work that O'Connor was doing was much more respectful, and he was, seemingly, a nicer person. Although, some people have said that he was quite a grump.

Andrea Horan

Being grumpy doesn't make you not a nice person. But I think there is kindness in him in – now, it's obviously his self-portrait, so I don't know if he painted himself to be sounder than he is – but he looks like a gentle man who has soft kindness in his eyes.

Do you think you just did that like in a selfie world now where you can control your selfies? Did he control how did he projected himself with his self-portrait?

Paul McLauchlan

I suppose it maybe comes back to how he loved himself. I think that's interesting actually the way the people view themselves, how has that changed.

Andrea Horan

It's like what you see, your profile picture on Facebook versus your 'tagged in' on Facebook. It's like how you think you present yourself and how you're seen is completely different. I think that's really interesting when you look at portraits from historical pieces like that, to try and get a sense of, well, is that the real him or is that who he wants to portray.

Paul McLauchlan

But I think that idea of what are they portraying and in what sense do they want to give comes back to what we talked about at the start with the way that they collaborated. Was it appropriation or appreciation? And that's something that I ask myself a lot, even

with fashion respecting. Are these artists respecting the work of others or are they stealing?

Andrea Horan

I think that brings us into a huge conversation about appropriation in general that I think is happening in society and I think there's a huge conversation and I think every single thing that happens in the world is appropriation. And that's how culture and art evolve, and if we try and control that, and not let ideas spread, then we're living in a world that is very closed off to ideas. And you become very focussed on what's "your" right, rather than what is taking and borrowing from other people to make things grow and to feel more rounded.

I think that goes straight through, from fashion to art to politics. And even if you look at the way politics is going, there is no appropriation happening in left versus right. If there was more appropriation happening, we would have a much rounder political system. So I think there's a role for appropriation in art, fashion politics and life, I believe. Once you're not doing it in a way, like if we take the Indian headdress, and a company is commercializing that to make money and not respecting it, that's a whole different ball game.

Whereas, if you're taking elements of like something to move it on, I think it has to be part of life. That's like saying "you can never use red again, because you're appropriating red". That boils it down to a very simplistic view of things, but that's like saying "Prada did a red shoe before, nobody can ever do a red shoe again", you know that way. Or like a red sole, like Louboutin, you can't have ownership of red. You don't own red.

Paul McLauchlan

I think Christian Louboutin owns red [laughs].

Andrea Horan

He doesn't own red. He did it, but that doesn't mean that someone else can't do a red sole with polka dots on it.

Paul McLauchlan

It definitely leaves you in two minds, and I think that's what I think I liked about the exhibition. It made me really think when I looked at the pieces, were they from inspiration, because there was a lack of ideas? And that was something that I really find interesting.

Andrea Horan

I never even thought about it like that.

Paul McLauchlan

Like you said it would be very limited, to think that you could never do a red shoe again, it's been done. With these guys, you know, can we pick and choose like these people? Okay, they were friends and they collaborated and they were inspired by each other,

but does that mean that people who aren't friends and don't collaborate can't be inspired by each other? Are we just picking these because they are in a major exhibition and we feel like we have to respect them and the way they worked?

Andrea Horan

I respect the way everyone works unless they're dicks like Paul Gauguin [laughs].

So, I think I like the fact that they're friends, but at the same time I don't think that necessarily leads to the fact that if someone's doing it who aren't friends, like the Vermeer pieces and the Dutch artists who were trying to outdo each other, they still created different pieces of work, each added something more and that people are learning from. And that was bringing people forward and challenging people.

So I think there's a role to be played for sure. I think, with this, they're all in a certain area, hanging out with each other, drinking cider - we're projecting that, by the way - but I think it's interesting that, of course there is going to be similarities, because if you hang around the same five people all the time you start to dress like them, you start to talk like them, you start to take on their characteristics. I think the same is for art, personally, as an art expert (laughs) resident art critic [laughs].

Paul McLauchlan

That's interesting what you said about the Vermeer exhibition and how the artists were competitive. I think competition makes work better.

Andrea Horan

I 100% agree. If you're not challenged, you're just going to float along, doing what you do. And until somebody comes in to step things up, that challenges you to set things up. And I think that's why, again, appropriation is a good thing, in my mind, if it's respectful. But it's about growth and moving things forward and challenging things so that they can change, as opposed to leaving it as it is.

Paul McLauchlan

Do you think the artists in this exhibition got too comfortable?

Andrea Horan

Oh god. No, I don't; because I think when they started using the colours that don't represent what is reality, I think that's a big jump. But I think that something that was happening around that time, so I think that something that wasn't accepted maybe in the 1800s. Am I projecting that again?

But I think they were definitely trying to push their boundaries for sure and enjoying themselves and at the end of the day the whole point of art is to create something that people love, that you enjoy making, I think. So if they were enjoying themselves then I don't think they were comfortable. I think they were trucking along with joy.

Paul McLauchlan

Interesting. Because I think with the landscape, if the Dutch artists were more competitive, then maybe the art that's produced is more worthwhile because they were constantly pushing themselves as opposed to looking around them and absorbing.

Andrea Horan

But if you look at the Dutch artists up in a line they're not that different. Obviously, they're different, but they are honing their skills.

Whereas, I think there's a lot of difference in what was created in Pont-Aven for sure. And they had similar styles, yeah, with the soft and linear style but I think there was definitely enough difference for it to challenge - not even challenge - but for me to have a feeling of there being enough.

Paul McLauchlan

Yeah, and I suppose they did all have singular elements, like with O'Connor, who, like we were saying, had animated handling and heightened colour and I think Cuno Amiet, your pal, did some really interesting things with, I can't remember which painting it was, but it was almost like a counterpoint to an O'Connor painting. It was much darker colours he used as opposed to O'Connor's really bright colours. And that was something I quite liked from Cuno Amiet. I just like the contrast between the two.

Andrea Horan

I would describe his stuff as muted, which is probably gas because most people would say it's a colour explosion of kaleidoscopes. But the way he picked his colours was a muted bright tone, I suppose, whereas O'Connor was literally like lashing through the brightness you know, so I think there was definitely a difference between those two in that sense.

Paul McLauchlan

I think there's a painting in there of Giacometti and that painting is muted, like you were saying, and I'm almost certain it's by Cuno Amiet. You can see how when he went to Pont-Aven how much his style changed, but remaining, some of the darker colours did remain. I suppose his aesthetic is more darker and less involved in these bright colours. But, like you said earlier, you know, he had to go back to Switzerland, so perhaps he wasn't in the greatest headspace, and that came through in his colours.

Andrea Horan

I would have supported him as his pal [laughs].

Paul McLauchlan

There was also Van Gogh in this exhibition. How did you feel about the similarities between Van Gogh and O'Connor - something which I personally didn't realise was a thing before I saw the exhibition, which, I suppose, thought was really enlightening.

Andrea Horan

Yeah, for sure. I suppose, familiarity breeds joy almost. Because you can be like “oh, I know that one”, and you know the style of it and whatever. So, to see then how at the same time there was so many other people especially an Irish person and that's the familiarity again doing similar stuff. It's kind of like, Oh wow, he was similar to Van Gogh.

And it's all marketing, I suppose, if you break it down, that we know Van Gogh. Is his work better or worse than the others? From the era, from the area, from the gang?

And that's a bigger question that we were having of, like, who decides what's better? Is it all who gets a bigger platform? Who sells more? And especially with the likes of Damien Hirst, who would be the main example of that. Is it hype and marketing that makes the art good, or is this actually what it is? I think when you boil that down, that's a whole interesting conversation that I love having.

What do you think?

Paul McLauchlan

I think that's interesting because you need hype and marketing as much creativity. And you see that nowadays in fashion - you can have these really great designers, but if there's no hype and marketing, their career won't go anywhere.

Andrea Horan

And then you have absolute shitehawks selling crap because they have the hype.

Paul McLauchlan

But ultimately it does come back to sales, because if they don't make any sales they can't make the next painting.

Andrea Horan

That boils down to a whole discussion of what is success – is it making money or is it making something that you loved and making what people love?

Paul McLauchlan

And Cuno Amiet, he went back to Switzerland, but we still appreciate his work now. And I think that maybe answers your question that even though he didn't – you could say that he failed – he still succeeded in terms of his paintings.

Andrea Horan

So then, is success just notoriety? Where do we draw the line of what success is for art? And who decides that?

So you've got all your different – and then art from a child has a value to parents, when it could be s**t.

Whereas then you've got something that's worth fortunes and – like the diamond skull from Damien Hirst. Is that stunning? Who's willing to pay for it? Who's willing to look at it? Who's willing to be part of it? And who's willing to emotionally connect with it?

Paul McLauchlan

That's why I hope when people look at this exhibition, that they are willing to challenge what they think is good and what is bad.

You and I looked through the exhibition and there is some pieces that we looked at and just thought 'Not that great'. [laughs] To be honest.

Andrea Horan

But that's subjective, and that's what I love about art so much, and that's what makes me passionate about it is because it is subjective and it's not up for anyone to decide what you like or what is good. I think the whole point of it is that we go on our journey of discovery, exploration and love. I am a hippie at heart [laughs].

Paul McLauchlan

I do hope that when people see the exhibition that they are willing to challenge what they think is good and bad, and hopefully they answer their own questions, whether they look at it and think it's all the same. Were these people copying or inspired?

I think it's important for people to decide and to be a critic. I didn't feel afraid to have an opinion. I feel sometimes when I see art exhibitions, that it's almost the opinion is forced on me, that you think it's good because you're told as good as opposed to looking at it and saying no this is actually crap. Not that anything in this exhibition was crap.

Andrea Horan

It's marketing and hype.

Paul McLauchlan

I thought that was really interesting the way that these people were inspired by each other.

Andrea Horan

And it turns out that Roderic O'Connor was Van Gogh's hype girl in the Pont-Aven region, I believe [laughs].

Paul McLauchlan

His gang, I guess, supporting each other.

Andrea Horan

Even after he died, he kept hyping him up, on and on, so I think again it goes back to who is your hype girl?

Paul McLauchlan

For Van Gogh it was his brother. He ran the gallery and pushed Van Gogh's work and it's probably why we still know it today. Which comes back to what we said, how some people to drop off the face of the Earth and we never hear about them again.

Andrea Horan

Which could have happened to O'Connor. Well, maybe the time is now. So listen to this podcast, and Roderic O'Connor is now the most famous artist in Ireland.

Paul McLauchlan

Because we said so. [AH] The end [laughs].

Outro

You've been listening to Imagining France: Roderic O'Connor and the Moderns: Between Paris and Pont-Aven. With audio engineering by Mark Canton, music composition by Michael Fleming and produced by Brina Casey.