

Landscape painting in Ireland 1600 – 2100

The history of Landscape painting in Ireland is inextricably linked to ownership of land, the rise of patronage and the art market, the mobility of artists and the foundation of artist's societies, schools and galleries.

Its humble origins began with 16th century vignettes in the Elizabethan plantation maps of Ulster; 17th century topographical views by engravers, map-makers and visitors, and early 18th century naïve views of demesnes. However, by the 1720s this rapidly developed into accomplished works by both Irish and foreign artists living in Ireland. Wealthy landowners began to commission aerial perspectives of their houses and lands, some accurate, others more *capriccio* in style. To further adorn their homes, they also purchased paintings of popular local beauty spots, historical ruins and hunting scenes, all with landscape backgrounds. In addition they commissioned family portraits in landscape settings. At Irish auctions they bought mostly Dutch and Flemish works and occasionally French, English and Spanish works. Grand tourists returned with similar collections from their European travels. Not surprisingly, Irish landscape painters who studied these art collections were enormously influenced, particularly by the Dutch and Flemish landscape style. Other artists were consequently prompted to venture abroad, many to London and Rome, where they were further influenced by the English, Italian and French style, returning to Ireland to paint in these styles.

The 18th century was also a period of considerable change in the arts in Ireland with the opening of schools and societies. In 1731 the Dublin Society was founded around the ideas of the European Enlightenment and its first drawing and painting school opened in 1746, with numerous others following. Also in 1757 the Irish philosopher, Edmund Burke, published his famous treatise on aesthetics *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* which had an enormous impact on European landscape painting.

However, during the 19th century the patronage of landscape painting in Ireland significantly stalled due to the impact of both international and national events such as the Act of Union in 1801; the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 and the devastating mid-nineteenth century famine years. Many artists were forced to travel abroad, particularly to London, while others ventured further afield, to Canada and Australia. In Ireland small-scale landscapes that included figures started to make an appearance as well as history and antiquarian scenes using landscapes as a backdrop. An increased interest in portraying Irish society encouraged the production of scenes of everyday life often produced in a picturesque style, some by female artists. The Romantic style inspired by poets such as William Wordsworth and apparent in Claudian and Arcadian landscapes can also be detected and watercolour painting began to increase in popularity.

The second half of the 19th century saw two very distinct groups of landscape artists emerge. The first were academic painters who travelled abroad to study mainly in London, Antwerp and Paris. They painted a diverse array of landscapes and in varying styles, with techniques from tight to broad brushstrokes, and styles ranging from German Romanticism to French Impressionism. The second group remained in Ireland and although they continued to mirror the artistic changes of continental Europe they began to search for a distinctly Irish style of art, producing landscapes of anecdotal, sentimental scenes, mixed with nationalistic undertones.

The foundation of the New Irish State in 1922 fermented the idea of a new Irish identity that could be expressed in landscape painting. Artists looked to the Irish countryside especially the west of Ireland to provide inspiration for their works. Idealised views competed with realism and almost all depicted with iconic simplicity.

By the 1940s this Irish home-grown style of landscape painting gave way once again to works reflecting the artistic concerns of the continent. Responding to the Modern movement, Irish artists depicted landscapes in a myriad of styles from cubism to expressionism and from surrealism to abstractionism.

The closing decades of the 20th Century saw the re-defining of landscape painting once more. Artists north and south placed less emphasis on capturing the natural beauty of the Irish landscape and used it more as a means to a political end.

Today landscape painters working in Ireland continue to assert a sense of distinct identity in their works regardless of style or medium. Indeed it is the rich history of Ireland and its outstanding beauty that allows them to do this.