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Made in England

The Critical Reception of Louis le Brocquy's *A Family*

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Louis le Brocquy's painting, *A Family*, has been described by one contemporary Irish critic 'as a zeitgeist and as a portrait of people struggling to survive'. In particular it has 'resonances for Irish viewers which take them into the heart of the young State's ambitions'.[1] The writer is referring to the notorious scandal surrounding the Mother and Child Scheme that dominated public debate in Ireland in 1951, the year in which *A Family* was painted.[2] Viewed within this context, le Brocquy's painting can be seen to refer to the vulnerability of the impoverished family in 1950s Ireland.[3] The stark treatment of its subject also has relevance for contemporary Irish society, which is undergoing a similar and more fundamental adjustment in its attitudes towards the family and the Catholic Church. However, when he painted the work, le Brocquy was based in London and clearly intended it to refer to an aspect of modern experience that would be readily understood by the London public, rather than a specifically Irish audience. Le Brocquy has stated that *A Family*:

> … was conceived … in the face of atomic threat, social upheaval and refugees of World War II and its aftermath … it was painted while contemplating a human condition stripped back to Paleolithic circumstance under the electric light bulbs.[4]

John Russell wrote that the work 'spoke for a period in which people were glad to have survived, but did not ask too much of life, or of themselves'.[5] The need to situate the painting within a cosmopolitan milieu is affirmed by the obvious references in the work to the canon of modernism, in particular to Manet's *Olympia*.[6]

The juxtaposing of the subject of family life with that of *Olympia*, an iconic painting associated with erotic display, highlights some of the unsettling aspects of le Brocquy's image. Both works focus on a commanding female nude. Like the modern Venus of Manet's work, who defies conventional images of sexual love, the matriarch of *A*

1. Medb Ruane, 'Le Brocquy The Family', *Irish Arts Review*, Summer 2002, p 23.
2. The Minister of Health, Noel Browne, had proposed the introduction of free medical care for pregnant women and their children. The Catholic hierarchy came out publicly against the proposal and the Minister was forced to resign.
3. Le Brocquy was conscious of the dominant role of the Catholic hierarchy in providing charitable services to the poor in these years. Sybil le Brocquy, the artist's mother, was forced to close down a soup kitchen after complaints by Archbishop McQuaid. M Ruane, 2002, p 23.
4. Louis le Brocquy quoted in Sighle Bhreathnach Lynch, 'Louis le Brocquy's A Family: An Unwholseome and Satanic Distortion of Natural Beauty', Recirca.com, September 2002.
5. John Russell, in Dorothy Walker, *Louis le Brocquy*, Ward River Press, Dublin, 1981, p 9.
6. Le Brocquy saw Manet's painting in Paris in 1938.

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Louis Le Brocquy, *A Family*, Oil on canvas, 147 × 185 cm, 1951, collection National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin

Family refutes many of the familiar attributes found in traditional depictions of motherhood. Reminiscent of the work of Picasso and Moore, the angularity of her body with its breastless torso and assertive pose is in marked contrast to the relatively curvaceous forms of her faceless husband. A number of elements such as the pose of the two adult figures and the bed-like form on which they are situated are suggestive of a post-coital tension. This emphasis on the corporeality of family life is reiterated in the splayed legs of the female figure, and the tabletop bed which, illuminated by a naked light bulb, takes on the appearance of an operating theatre. The presence of the child completes this post-partum scenario. In addition to the physical representation of family life, le Brocquy's painting more obviously addresses the psychological reality. The spartan setting emphasises the claustrophobic nature of domesticity. Severe reduction in the colour range adds to the austerity of this painting and the series to which it belongs, referred to as the 'Grey' paintings.

A restricted palette marked a dramatic change in le Brocquy's post-war work. A strong expressionist use of colour was a feature of his 'Tinker' series (1946–49). Le Brocquy, who rarely visited Ireland in this period, may have felt that his continued reliance on the Irish tinker as a subject was increasingly irrelevant within the context of his development

Correspondence between Louis le Brocquy and the author, 31 March 2003. Le Brocquy has referred to the ways in which the elements of *A Family* correspond directly to that of Manet's painting; see Bhreathnach Lynch, op cit.

as a British painter.[7] A further impetus for changing his approach was the invitation to produce a work for the prestigious Arts Council Festival of Britain exhibition, *Sixty Paintings for 1951*.[8] That *A Family* was originally intended for such a show explains its monumental scale and considered treatment of subject matter. However, another work was submitted in its place, and *A Family* became the key work in a one-man show at Gimpel Fils in June 1951.

Le Brocquy had moved to London in 1946, and within two years critics were referring to the 'meteoric' rise of his reputation there.[9] As a founding member of the Irish Exhibition of Living Art in 1943, an alternative and more diverse exhibition forum to that of the RHA in Dublin, le Brocquy had already made contact with the London art world. He had met influential London critics such as Maurice Collis and Herbert Read in Dublin. Cecil Philips of the Leicester Galleries and Charles Gimpel both visited the IELA in 1945, looking for potential gallery artists. Le Brocquy subsequently exhibited with both galleries as well as participating in a number of exhibitions organised by the British Council as part of its postwar promotion of British art.

On his arrival in London critics were already familiar with le Brocquy's work. In an article in *Horizon* Earnan O'Malley indicated how the artist's discovery of the uniqueness of his native landscape and a native subject, the Irish tinker, had been prompted by the isolation of Ireland during the war. A familiar analogy was made between the travelling figure of the tinker and 'the artist who deals in the unexpected and the unrecognised'.[10] But the tinker was for le Brocquy a symbol of the 'individual as opposed to organised settled society', and of the dispossessed of postwar Europe. Le Brocquy's concern with making reference to wider political and social issues in his painting was thus highlighted. Such an introduction to the work of le Brocquy appealed to English critics who were familiar with some of these issues from the work of the English neo-romanticists.[11] Coming at a time of when there was a dearth of new art from the continent, le Brocquy's paintings provided an exotic and novel version of an already familiar genre. In the catalogue of his first exhibition at Gimpel Fils in 1947, Denys Sutton stated that the artist 'has been stirred by the passion and the originality of his native Ireland', and reminded visitors that the artist's 'reward is to keep alive the legends, the myths and the mysteries that tend to grow cold and become forgotten when their explanation is too constantly sought'.[12] An Irish artist able to treat a theme already familiar from the writings of Synge and Yeats in a modern post-cubist style was a tremendous novelty to the London critics.

The 1951 Gimpel Fils exhibition of the 'Grey' paintings confirmed le Brocquy's reputation in London. His Irish nationality was notably absent from the reviews. John Berger described him as 'one of the most interesting British painters of his generation'. Comparing *A Family* with the earlier 'Tinker' paintings, Berger identified a new exactness of drawing and design which had 'enabled [le Brocquy] to introduce a quite unsentimental tenderness into his work'.[13] Berger noted that le Brocquy was using formal, rather than literary, means to express a spatial tension analogous to that of the painting's subject. He clearly viewed the painting as a serious attempt to engage in the kind of transformative art that Berger so admired. In contrast, Eric Newton presented le Brocquy as an

7. Le Brocquy may have wanted to distance himself from the work of artists like Jankel Adler, who died in 1949, and Robert Colquhoun whose reputation was declining but with whom le Brocquy's 'Tinker' paintings were frequently compared. Le Brocquy relegated the colour and the mythology of these paintings to his tapestries, which he began designing in the late 1940s.

8. *Celtic Splendour – Exhibition of Irish Paintings and Drawings*, Pyms Gallery, London, 1985, p 108.

9. Maurice Collis, 'Natural Drawing versus Pattern', *Time and Tide*, 19 June 1948, p 638.

10. Earnan O'Malley, 'Louis le Brocquy', *Horizon* , July 1946, pp 32–7.

11. Le Brocquy had become familiar with the work of the British neo-romanticists such as David Piper, Graham Sutherland and Robert Colquhoun at exhibitions and through English journals in Dublin during the war. Neo-romanticism had a particular resonance for le Brocquy, not only because it represented the most avant-garde art to be seen or read about during the mid-1940s, but because its protagonists were concerned with defining the historical origins of a national style. The Scottish artists Colquhuon and Robert MacBryde also provided le Brocquy with the precedent of artists moving with relative ease from the periphery to the centre of the cosmopolitan art world.

12. Denys Sutton, *Louis le Brocquy – Watercolours*, Gimpel Fils, London, 20 May–14 June 1947.

13. John Berger, 'Two British Painters', *New Statesman and Nation*, 16 June 1951, p 680.

Louis Le Brocquy, *Tinkers Resting*, 50.8 × 35.6 cm, 1946, Tate Gallery

intuitive artist whose 'lyrical exquisiteness' was 'as natural as breathing'. Newton, like Berger, had some reservations about le Brocquy's painting because of its reliance on what he termed 'a suspiciously up-to-date' vocabulary,[14] but he asserted that in le Brocquy's work 'the familiar tricks become vehicles of a powerful vision'.[15]

In December 1951, *A Family* and some of the other 'Grey' paintings were exhibited at the Waddington Galleries, le Brocquy's first one-man show in Dublin since the war. The exhibition was well attended and considered to be 'one of the most interesting and important of the

14. Eric Newton, 'Two Contemporary Painters', *Time and Tide*, 16 June 1951, p 566.

15. Eric Newton, 'Round the London Galleries', *The Listener*, 14 June 1951, p 966. Newton's review was referred to in the *Irish Times*, 29 February 1952, p 1.

season'. Local reviewers noted the depth and seriousness of purpose in le Brocquy's work and a new technical assurance. The Dublin art press was struck by the artist's familiarity with an avant-garde vocabulary of form and his ability to use it in developing a central theme. Le Brocquy's awareness of international contemporary art was viewed as a sign of his sophistication, and reference to more prominent European artists was a feature of most of the reviews. One critic noted that le Brocquy's 'Grey' paintings shared the same 'spiritual attitude' to be found in the work of some of his London contemporaries such as Francis Bacon, who it was noted was also born in Dublin, and Graham Sutherland. In particular there was the same 'kind of suppressed terror' to be seen in their works.[16] But at the same time le Brocquy's unique interpretation of these sources was emphasised. Thus the writer maintained that le Brocquy seemed 'to have escaped any serious sort of influence', and that stylistically his work was very individual. Another review noted that the artist had 'borrowed' the means of his expression from Picasso and Jankel Adler but had 'absorbed these influences and emerged with a most frightening power'.[17] The *Irish Independent* noted the contrived nature of the work. The 'Grey' paintings, it wrote:

> … are a little too sophisticate, too self consciously in the mode, and too determinedly clever to be altogether satisfying. Through them we seem to be seeing the artist at second hand rather than meeting him face to face.[18]

Dublin critics who recognised references to contemporary philosophical uncertainty in the work read the subject matter of the 'Grey' paintings in universal terms. Opinion generally favoured a positive reading of le Brocquy's depiction of his figures in which it was felt that basic human values prevailed over any sense of isolation or despair. One writer went as far as describing *A Family* as:

> … a synthesis of shapes embodying the most characteristic family attitudes, the overwhelming maternal grandeur of woman, the strong activity of man, and the graceful unconcern of the child….[19]

One reviewer described le Brocquy as 'the most accomplished painter that his generation in Ireland has produced', and primarily because he has rejected 'threadbare artistic standards'. He noted that the generally positive response to le Brocquy's show indicated the development in Ireland of a more independent and sophisticated interest in avant-garde culture.[20]

In February 1952, *A Family* was offered as an anonymous donation to the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin. However, at a special meeting of the Dublin Corporation Art Advisory Committee, whose endorsement was needed for any acquisition by the Gallery, it was decided to refuse the offer.[21] No reason for the rejection is recorded, but it is likely that a lack of traditional technical accomplishment and the distorted representation of the human body were key issues. These were again a bone of contention when a *Reclining Figure* by Henry Moore was similarly rejected in 1954. References to the ugliness of le Brocquy's figures were a feature of the letters and articles supporting the Art Advisory Committee's decision, which appeared in the newspapers following the announcement of the gallery's refusal.[22]

16. J Ryan, 'The Louis le Brocquy Exhibition', *Our Nation*, January 1952, pp 12–13.

17. 'Le Brocquy's art is varied', *Irish Press*, 8 December 1951, p 4.

18. PHG, 'Varied Works in Art Exhibition', *Irish Independent*, 8 December 1951, p 4.

19. See note 17.

20. J Ryan, op cit.

21. Press reports revealed that, somewhat unusually, the corporation officials had approved the offer, while it was the artists on the Advisory Committee who had voted against the acceptance of the painting. E Sheehy, 'Art Notes', *Dublin Magazine*, 27:2, 1952, pp 36–7.

22. Letter from 'Verdad' to Editor, *Irish Times*, 6 March 1952, p 5.

The subject matter alone could have made it unsuitable in some minds for exhibition in the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, which, as the country's only museum of modern art, was a showcase for contemporary Irish culture.[23] The position of the family as central to Irish life had been enshrined in the 1937 constitution.[24] Le Brocquy's painting seems to represent a modern nuclear family living in an urban setting without any indication of its social or national roots. His representation of the principal figure of the mother as independent and disconnected from her family was at odds with post-independent Ireland's relegation of the female to a subservient role as nurturer of a primarily masculine Irish race.[25] One can contrast le Brocquy's treatment of the subject with Sean Keating's 1936 painting, *Economic Pressure*, in which the emotional security of family life is depicted as solid even in the face of economic and social turmoil, and in which the family members follow well-defined gender roles.

The treatment of the subject of *A Family* was not, however, a feature of the controversy in 1952. The ultimate reason for the rejection of le Brocquy's painting lies in the growing struggle for control of the art establishment in Ireland in the 1950s. Those associated with an 'Irish Ireland' ideology, such as Sean Keating, still held powerful positions in the RHA, the National College of Art and the Advisory Committee of Dublin Corporation. From their nationalist perspective, Ireland was distinguished from the rest of the world by a distinctive religion, language and social order. Therefore *A Family* was not only incompetent in terms of academic criteria, and possibly offensive in its subject matter, but was largely irrelevant to an Irish audience. In a much later statement le Brocquy wrote that he regarded:

> … self-conscious nationalism … including picturesque images perhaps of Irish country folk dressed in the clothes of a preceding generation … [as] images no more respectable in themselves than the sterile Nazi kultur, or indeed the ordained Marxist aesthetic of 'social' irreality with its own insistence on compulsively happy peasants.[26]

It was, le Brocquy asserted, his experience of the 'transcendent universality' of European art that had offered him an alternative ideology. His belief in the necessity of experimenting with wider styles and modes of art was shared by other artists who participated in the IELA. This group's reverence for British and French culture was anathema to the 'Irish Irelander'. Not only was work by foreign artists an established feature of the IELA from 1944 onwards, but leading British critics were regularly invited to lecture or even select the exhibitions.[27] Le Brocquy revealed a similar deferential attitude towards British culture when he stated in 1950 that he had left Ireland 'to earn … a living in a country where taste was more advanced'.[28] Defenders of le Brocquy's reputation referred to the critical success of his work in London as a means of refuting local antagonistic opinion.[29] In reporting the rejection of *A Family*, the *Irish Times*, in an effort to illustrate how extraordinary the decision to refuse it had been, noted that the work had been reproduced in *The Listener* and featured in a talk on the BBC Third Programme.[30] The interest in le Brocquy's work in the British media was thus presented as confirmation of its value as art.

23. Unlike the cosmopolitan nature of London society in which a wide range of art could be absorbed, Ireland was concerned with controlling the content of its cultural material, as is most obviously demonstrated by the Censorship of Publications Act of 1929 which was still widely enforced. The fact that this aspect of *A Family* was either ignored or missed by both sides in the dispute is indicative of the narrow ways in which contemporary art was viewed in this period.

24. Article 41 privileged the position of women within the home, and Article 44 banned divorce.

25. For discussion of this idea see C Nash, 'Gender and Landscape in Ireland', in *Sources in Irish Art: A Reader*, by Fintan Cullen, Cork University Press, 2000, pp 302–8.

26. Louis le Brocquy, 'A Painter's Notes on His Irishness', in *American Irish Historical Society Recorder*, 1981, p 25.

27. In 1947 Herbert Read was invited to address the IELA, and in 1952, Eric Newton was asked to select the exhibition.

28. W J White, 'Contemporary Irish Artists IV – Louis le Brocquy', *Envoy*, 2:6, May 1950, p 56.

29. J Ryan, 'The Louis le Brocquy Exhibition', *Our Nation*, January 1952, p 12.

30. *Irish Times*, 29 February 1952.

Sean Keating, *Economic Pressure*, 122 × 122 cm, 1936, Crawford Municipal Art Gallery, Cork

Despite the fact that the IELA had been a major feature in the Irish art calendar for almost a decade, none of its committee members had been appointed to the Art Advisory Committee of Dublin Corporation.[31] Members of the IELA and their associates were nevertheless being given increasingly important roles in the developing art establishment in Ireland. Keating had acknowledged these changes in 1950 when he declared that:

> … the emergence of a new class of leisured people, not poor enough to work, not rich enough to be idle, [has] opened up a new period of activity hinging on Art. The younger generation of this class … will provide the personnel of the new Arts Council and Cultural Bodies…. In Art, as in other things, movements are inspired by saints and missionaries, and stifled by theologians and functionaries.[32]

31. Letter from IELA Committee to Editor, *Irish Times*, 8 March 1952, p 7.

32. Sean Keating, 'Painting in Ireland Today', *The Bell*, 16, December 1950, p 18.

In this statement, Keating makes a conspicuous reference to the social class of the new art establishment whose promotion of Irish art was to become increasingly elitist. The committee of the IELA had a distinct upper-middle-class and Anglo-Irish flavour.[33] Le Brocquy himself came from a privileged background, which along with his prominence in the London art world gave him the credentials needed to become one of the key Irish artists of the coming decades.

The modernist architect Michael Scott epitomised the cliquish nature of the new art establishment to which Keating referred. A prominent member of the new Cultural Relations Committee and the Arts Council of Ireland which was founded in 1951, Scott was also a committee member of the IELA and a close friend of le Brocquy. The Cultural Relations Committee, set up to advise the Minister of External Affairs on the promotion of Irish culture abroad, became a matter of increasing importance after Ireland declared itself a republic in 1949. It advised on Ireland's participation in the Venice Biennale the following year. This event offered the opportunity of showing modernist Irish art abroad and demonstrating to a sophisticated international audience that Irish culture was more than a 'bog-oak and shillelagh tradition', as one newspaper put it at the time.[34] In 1956, Louis le Brocquy and the sculptor Hilary Heron were selected. The commissioner and critic James White noted that le Brocquy, as a figurative artist with an original modernist style, would attract the attention of the jury. Furthermore, from a nationalist perspective le Brocquy, who was still living in London, needed to be proclaimed as an Irish artist. It would be wise to establish le Brocquy's nationality, wrote White, as 'the English are eager to claim le Brocquy for themselves and have already presented [F E] McWilliam and Francis Bacon, two Irish born artists…'.[35]

Le Brocquy's exhibit in the Biennale consisted of two tapestries and 21 oil paintings. *A Family* was among a number of 'Grey' paintings submitted. A common theme was that of children, and 'men playing at being children', as White put it. Le Brocquy's pictures, according to the Venice Biennale catalogue, are 'a clear assertion of man's dignity'. *A Family* was described as a 'cry of anguish and pain relieved by the tenderness of childhood.'[36] As well as alleviating the austerity of the 'Grey' paintings, the inclusion of the tapestry *Garlanded Goat* in the exhibition allowed for a more appropriate presentation of le Brocquy as a modern Celtic artist in whose work romantic symbolism is evident. The tapestry has a specific Irish subject, the crowning of a goat at the Puck Fair in Kerry, a medieval tradition partly Celtic in its origin. On seeing it at an exhibition in London the previous year, one critic referred to it as 'a superb example of the Celtic art of surface decoration'.[37] Its showing in Venice, along with the more universal subjects of le Brocquy's paintings, promoted the idea that Ireland had a distinctive culture but one which related to the wider European context.

In his catalogue essay, White was concerned with presenting le Brocquy's work within a specifically Irish framework, rather than referring to the obvious stylistic sources of his work in modernist painting. He argued that the stylised approach to the figures in such works as *A Family* came from the 'Celtic background' of the artist. White's description of Celtic art as one which 'makes mystical abstractions in order to give life to those subtleties of thought dear to the spiritual world of the

33. The members of this included many artists and collectors interested in modernist art, and whose position of power was strengthened in the postwar period when the necessity for establishing Ireland's cultural identity on the world stage was recognised.

34. Candida, 'An Irishwoman's Diary', *Irish Times*, 11 August 1950, p 5.

35. National Archives MS, Department of Foreign Affairs, 415/95, letter from James White to Miss Tunney, CRC, 29 February 1956.

36. National Archives MS, Department of Foreign Affairs. 415/95 III, James White 'Text for Venice Biennale Catalogue, 1956'.

37. Robert Melville, 'Exhibitions', *Architectural Review*, no 117, April 1955, p 271.

Louis Le Brocquy, *Garlanded Goat*, 155 × 130 cm, 1949–1950, wool tapestry, woven by Tabard Frères et Soeurs, Aubusson, edition of 9, private collection, Ireland

early middle ages',[38] limited the potential readings of le Brocquy's work at Venice. This was compounded by White's statement that, in his approach to subject matter, the Celtic artist is more concerned with 'interior reactions' than 'exterior behaviour'. White was aware of his former mentor Mainie Jellett's writings and lectures on art of the 1930s and 1940s, in which the connection between Celtic art and that of modernism was made explicit. In her campaign to establish modernist art in Ireland, Jellett cogently argued that the foundations of Irish art were both abstract in form and part of a European, rather than a national, tradition. White was, however, more concerned with placing le Brocquy's work within a national rather than an international context. His critical approach marginalised the work of le Brocquy by containing it within a specific Celtic realm and connecting it, however subtly, with a particular idea of Ireland – a country that Robert Melville, in a subsequent essay on le Brocquy, and misquoting the artist and writer David Jones, described 'as the surviving westernmost peripheral remnant of the ancient pattern of Celtdom'.[39]

When *A Family* was awarded the Nestle Corporation Prealpina prize at the Biennale, this was seen as an indictment of its earlier treatment by the Dublin Municipal Gallery. But the painting was subsumed into a critical agenda, which presented le Brocquy as a primarily spiritual artist whose work had only an oblique relationship to contemporary life. This interpretation appealed to the new art establishment in Ireland, with which le Brocquy remained closely connected, as it provided an appropriate modernist style with which to enhance the national image. The emphasis on a Celtic origin privileged the idea of the artwork as a reflection of timeless values. Ironically it echoed the Irish Irelander's emphasis on a unique Irish identity, but its replacement of the idea of a Gaelic culture with a Celtic one gave modern Ireland a place within the international cultural arena. The difficulties of projecting such an ethnic reading onto an artist's work are indicated by Robert Melville's 1961 description of le Brocquy's 'Grey' paintings, including *A Family*, as 'a Celtic version of Cubism'. He wrote that the estranged look of the figures, rather than expressing a universal sense of alienation, more specifically mark them out as Irish to an English viewer.[40]

The idea of the Irish artist as intuitive and Celtic had its origins in Matthew Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867). Sentiment was the key attribute of the Celt, according to Arnold, and this made the Celtic artist 'quick to feel impressions, and feeling them very strongly; … [and] keenly sensitive to joy and sorrow'. But at the same time it deprived his poetry of 'balance, measure and patience … the eternal conditions … of high success'.[41] Arnold maintained that the lack of a conceptual basis for Celtic poetry had forced the Celtic artist to be concerned with technique and style rather than substance.

> Celtic poetry seems to make up of itself for being unable to master the world and give an adequate interpretation of it, by throwing all its force into style, by bending language at any rate to its will, and expressing the ideas it has with unsurpassable intensity, elevation and effort.[42]

Irish writers of the literary revival used this stereotyping of the Celt to encourage the notion that a distinctive sensibility could be detected in

38. National Archives, MS, Department of Foreign Affairs, 415/95 III, James White, 'Text for Venice Biennale Catalogue, 1956'.

39. Robert Melville, quoting from David Jones's description of Celtic art, in *Louis le Brocquy*, Galerie Charles Lienhard, Zurich, 1961.

40. Ibid.

41. Matthew Arnold, *On The Study of Celtic Literature*, 1910 edition, quoted in J V Kelleher, *Matthew Arnold and the Celtic Revival*, University of Chicago, 1971, p 210.

42. Ibid, p 211.

the work of Irish artists. George Russell noted the ability of the Celtic poet to abstract from the landscape another Ireland 'through which they wandered in dream'. This 'mystical view of nature' is, wrote Russell, a national characteristic.[43] Taking Charles Dickens as an example, he argued that English literature had always been more sympathetic with actual beings than ideal types. In contrast, a Celtic art that focused on heroic models such as Cúchulainn dealt with universal concepts of beauty, heroism and spirituality.

One can find distinct echoes of these characterisations of the Celtic artist in subsequent writings on Irish art. Brian O'Doherty's catalogue essay *The Irish Imagination* (1971) has been singled out as a key example of the tendency of critics to stereotype the work of Irish artists. O'Doherty argued that the paintings of Irish artists of the period 1959 to 1971 shared an 'atmospheric mode' which reflected a national reluctance to engage directly with the concrete reality of modern Irish life and experience. This echoes Arnold's assertion that the Celt had an inherent inability to have 'a firm conception of life'. O'Doherty's observations were rooted in his own experience of postwar Ireland. In particular he identified the close relationship of artists, dealers and collectors in this period as a major factor in the development of the type of ambiguous landscape painting that was so widely produced by Irish artists of the mid-twentieth century. Irish artists, he argued, used international styles and ideas only where they appeared to be relevant to the peculiarities of their Irish experience. He was careful to position modern Irish art between two extremes – a provincialism of the right (nationalism), and a provincialism of the left (modernism).[44] He described the best works in the *Irish Imagination* exhibition as avoiding provincialism and demonstrating the complex position of the local artist who is required to be 'as intelligent as any modernist'.[45] Aware of the decline of modernism internationally, O'Doherty was arguing for a revaluation of Irish art in terms of its relevance to local or regional concerns. However, his essay veered from a consideration of a specific social and historical context to broad generalisations about Irishness. He has been accused of giving priority to romantic concepts of place, impulse and sensibility over materialistic ideas of economy, visual ideology and conspicuous consumption in his discussion.[46] While such an indictment gives a one-sided view of O'Doherty's essay, it was the romantic aspects of his writing that were picked up on and reused by later critics. His references to evasiveness, light, mist and 'timeless compounds of myth' represented familiar and established ways of thinking about Irish art. In 1981, for an exhibition of Irish art in London, Frances Ruane characterised modern Irish art in terms of 'agricultural roots, conservatism, an obsession with the past, and a passion for indirect statement', and presented the Irish artist as 'intuitive rather than intellectual or academic'.[47] The following year Dorothy Walker wrote that Irish artists were less revolutionary and less conscious than Irish writers, and that they used open-ended structures, a feature of Irish art since prehistoric times, intuitively and instinctively, rather than from a developed principle of aesthetics.[48] Such a romantic notion of the Irish artist contributed to the idea widely held in the public consciousness that 'art and artists are products of inarticulate, almost involuntary impulses'.[49]

43. George Russell, 'Nationality or Cosmopolitanism', 1899, in David Pierce, *Irish Writing in the 20th Century – A Reader*, Cork University Press, 2000, p 46.

44. Brian O'Doherty, *The Irish Imagination 1959–1971*, 1971, p 20.

45. Ibid.

46. Tom Duddy, 'Irish Art Criticism – A Provincialism of the Right?', *Circa*, 35, July/August 1987, pp 14–18; updated version reprinted in F Cullen, 2000, pp 91–100.

47. Frances Ruane, *The Delighted Eye – Irish Painting of the Seventies*, Arts Council of Ireland, 1980, unpaginated.

48. Dorothy Walker, 'Traditional Structures in Recent Irish Art', *Crane Bag*, no 6, 1982, p 41.

49. Declan MacGonagle, 'Better to Stammer the Truth than to lie in the Tongue of Plato', *Circa*, no 75, Spring 1996, pp 18–19

Tom Duddy has argued that such commentators were largely uncritical and subjective in their appraisal of the work of Irish artists.[50] Rather than balancing their readings with a closer consideration of the socioeconomic context, they were guilty of putting nationalist criteria forward as an explanation of the stylistic and iconographic nature of modernist Irish art. This positioning of Irish art within a peculiar native context meant that universal rules of criticism were not applied to the work of Irish artists. The particular social and political context of the works of art was neglected in favour of generalised discussion, which privileged a positive and coherent national image above any real elucidation of Irish art. The obvious reason for this is that Irish critics were, as Chris Cappock put it, fulfilling an ambassadorial role for Irish culture abroad. The exhibitions on which they were writing were part of the Irish State's drive for recognition as an independent nation with a unique culture.[51] In this context visual art was relegated to providing an image of Irish culture as aware of modernism or postmodernism but ultimately poetic, passive and introspective. The stereotyping of Irish visual art has thus compounded the historically marginal position of art compared with literature and theatre in modern Irish culture.

In recent years postcolonialism has in some ways replaced the Celtic view of Irish art as a means of presenting it as unique and important within an international scenario. While more sophisticated and engaged than its predecessor, much postcolonial criticism has perpetuated the notion that the work of Irish artists is primarily motivated by a strong connection with their country's historical past. The postcolonial agenda has privileged the work of those artists that suits such an interpretation. The contested belief that Ireland is in fact postcolonial is associated with a partisan view of Irish identity which ultimately positions it as Catholic and nationalist.[52] Both postcolonial and earlier presentations of Irish art as Celtic are primarily concerned with presenting Irish visual art in terms of specific political agendas. These agendas leave little room for the idea that Irish art can and does participate in a myriad of discourses. Thomas McEvilley, in an essay that unquestioningly positioned Irish art within a postcolonial context, declared that 'contemporary art exported from within a culture to the outside world is a type of visual diplomacy that introduces the people of the world to another in their living reality'.[53] But the type of contemporary art that a curator or a state chooses to export and the critical context in which it is presented will fundamentally affect how its particular culture is perceived internationally. It is crucial that such 'visual diplomacy' is exposed and that the artwork be presented in terms of the complex political networks which bestow distinct and often conflicting judgements on it. As the critical treatment of le Brocquy's *A Family* demonstrates, the framing of a work of art within national boundaries imposes considerable limitations on the ways in which it is read both art historically and critically.

50. Tom Duddy, 1987, pp 14–18; reprinted in Fintan Cullen (2000), pp 91–100. See also Mary Stinson Cosgrove, 'Irishness and Art Criticism', *Circa*, no 52, July/August 1990, pp 14–19.

51. Chris Cappock, 'Editorial – The Art of Appropriation', *Circa*, no 14, Jan/Feb 1984, p 5.

52. John Wilson Foster, 'Strains in Irish Intellectual Life', in *On Intellectuals and Intellectual Life in Ireland*, ed Liam O'Dowd, Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University Belfast, 1996, pp 87–9.

53. Thomas McEvilley, 'Here Comes Everybody', in *From Beyond the Pale: Artists at the Edge of Consensus*, Irish Museum of Modern Art, 1994, p 21.

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