

# Origins of the Clonmel Municipal Art Gallery

*Peter Jordan*

*Founded in 1948, and now comprising ninety-seven works of art, the Clonmel Municipal Art Gallery is a small but interesting public art collection. According to a 1983 inventory, over fifty pieces date from around the time of the Galleries founding,<sup>1</sup> and another thirty-six were acquired through the William English Bequest, in 1986. The Collection was originally housed in the Municipal Library along with the Clonmel Museum, and as such formed part of a combined cultural facility according with nineteenth-century European precedents.<sup>2</sup> Some years earlier, in 1939, another Irish provincial city, Waterford, had aspirations to create just such a 'cultural complex', but in the event, only the combined library and art gallery transpired, and the early Clonmel arrangement was unique in Ireland.<sup>3</sup> The Art Collection itself originated during the early nineteen-forties, and sprang from the activities of the South Tipperary Fine Arts Society (STFAS).<sup>4</sup> According to the ex-curator, Patrick Holland, few records survive relating to its origin, but an advertisement for the Fifth Annual Exhibition of STFAS, which appeared in the Clonmel Nationalist early in 1946, suggests that the Society was probably founded in 1941.<sup>5</sup>*

The earliest recorded reference to an art gallery in Clonmel occurs in the course of an article in the same newspaper, dated 15th. May, 1946. After welcoming a suggestion that part of the new Clonmel Public Library premises should be set aside as a museum, the article continued, 'already we have through the efforts of the South Tipperary Fine Art Society, the nucleus of a local art gallery.'<sup>6</sup> This was followed up in February the following year by another article which referred to the proposed 'remodelling of the old Munster & Leinster Bank as a combined public library/art gallery.' Noting his approval, the writer commented that:

Clonmel can claim a number of artists whose work has been highly praised and secured awards at many shows and exhibitions throughout the country, and it is only right that a place should be found in the town where the best of their work, with that of distinguished artists from Dublin and elsewhere in the country can be seen by the townspeople and visitors.<sup>7</sup>

His sentiments are typical of those of other regional commentators on art at this time, who as part of their case to justify the establishment of an art gallery, point to the amount of meritorious local art activity.<sup>8</sup> And again as elsewhere, there is an unspoken need expressed to demonstrate that Clonmel artists can compete on the same terms as their more famous Dublin counterparts.

Evidence of the growing interest in visual art in Clonmel, is provided by another article in the same edition of the *Nationalist*. This referred to the impending visit of a noted Dublin art critic, Mr. David Sears, to the town. Sears, then art critic of the *Irish Independent*, was due to give a talk described as, 'of importance to all interested in art and cultural activities in Clonmel.' A portion of the talk, would, the article suggested, appeal to budding connoisseurs, and was to be devoted to 'the means of acquiring the power to judge the fine qualities of composition, colour etc. of a picture.' The lecture was to be sponsored by a group calling themselves the Trustees of the Clonmel Permanent Art Gallery, who were anxious by so-doing to stimulate public interest and support.<sup>9</sup>

A subsequent review deemed the talk to have been very successful, 'attracting a large audience - considering the appalling weather! - and gaining "wholehearted applause at close."<sup>10</sup> 'Lectures have a forbidding ring....something austere erudite', it noted, however this one proved to be something of an exception, and the writer mused, as 'popular lectures of this sort can serve a valuable purpose in extending knowledge of music, art etc. it was hoped to continue them on a increasing scale.'<sup>11</sup> The citizens of Clonmel as in other Irish towns at this time, were hungry for education in the arts, particularly if it was effectively provided in an approachable way.

Towards the end of the year, a report on progress of the new library, noted, 'we had almost forgotten to mention the upstairs room, which had been set aside as a local art gallery...a very fine and spacious room admirably adapted for its purpose. Besides it is a room which will be used for local antiquities....Clonmel is at last to have a real centre of culture.'<sup>12</sup> The next reference to the Art Gallery occurred in the course of a self-congratulatory article, entitled, 'Something to be proud of', which appeared in the *Clonmel Nationalist* early in 1948. It read as follows:

Clonmel has progressed in many ways in recent years...no sphere more remarkable than in that of art and culture. To those who doubt this, we recommend a visit to the exhibition of paintings by members of the South Tipperary Fine Art Club, which opened in the new Clonmel Public Library last week. There they will find a collection of pictures, some 70 in number, and all the work of local artists, which reach a high all-round standard....particularly attractive are the well-known Clonmel scenes... It is good to know that Clonmel possesses such a wealth of artistic talent as this exhibition has disclosed.

The article concludes with a reference to a 'well lit room in the new library which should serve as an ideal home for the permanent Art Gallery, which it is hoped to establish in the town.'<sup>13</sup>

Less than two months later, the Art Gallery must have been at least notionally established, as there are minutes dated 11th May, 1948, which refer to a meeting of the Art Room Committee.<sup>14</sup> The attendance list names seventeen people, including five representatives from the Corporation, a priest, a doctor, a national teacher, and two women artists. In the course of this, possibly first, meeting, a local art teacher, Richard J. Long, informed the Committee that pictures were available free, both from the Haverty Trust and the Friends of the National Collections, to art galleries controlled by municipal authorities.<sup>15</sup> He also suggested that additional support for the Gallery should be sought from the local authority.

The Corporation however appears to have seen responsibility for the Gallery as lying jointly with the County Library authority, and the Gallery Archives contain a number of

letters requesting funding from the County Librarian. One such, dated 9th June 1948, is from the Town Clerk, and is addressed to J. Brennan, Librarian, County Library, Thurles. In it he states that, 'Clonmel Corporation are about to establish an art gallery in the new public library, Parnell St. This has arisen through representation being made in recent years from the South Tipperary Fine Arts Society, who have been carrying on as an independent body for some years past. When their art gallery comes under municipal control it will be entitled to certain benefits from the Haverty Trust in the matter of obtaining certain paintings free, but as you are aware there will be other expenses involved, and of course these will have to be borne by the Corporation. The present Art Gallery as the name implies has provided for the entire South Tipperary area, and it is not the intention of the Corporation to confine it to the Borough. They accordingly feel that your committee may be willing to contribute towards the annual running costs.<sup>16</sup> Another further letter to Brennan, dated 13th October 1948, estimates the annual running cost of the Museum as £400, and repeats that it might also be possible to obtain paintings from the Haverty Trust and the Friends of Irish Art (FNCI). It also states that the hours of opening had not yet been decided.<sup>17</sup>

Much of the newspaper record referring to the gallery at this time is concerned with the problem of ownership and the rights and responsibilities accruing. Later that year it was decided to transfer ownership of the paintings in the permanent collection to the Corporation. The *Clonmel Nationalist* reported under the heading, 'Clonmel Art Gallery - Pictures on permanent loan', that 'The Clonmel permanent Art Gallery trustees wrote to the Corporation regarding the handing over of paintings to the latter body, and suggesting that there were two ways of taking over these paintings, namely (1) under the scheme for the acceptance of gifts, and (2) by sale for a nominal consideration. It was further suggested by Mr. P.J. O'Reilly, that at a meeting of the trustees it was the unanimous opinion of all present that the easiest way to manage the transfer of the pictures would be to offer them to the Gallery on permanent loan. This was a technique he had frequently adopted under similar circumstances. The trustees didn't care for the suggestion regarding payment...and their suggestion would it was believed get over the difficulty... consideration of the matter was adjourned.<sup>18</sup>

Brief notes relating to the transfer were taken by Patrick Holland at an interview with Liam Murphy, a retired artist, and founder member of STFAS. Murphy related that, 'Myself and Dickie Long used to mount the whole of the exhibition. Ernest Hayes and Charlie Lamb were living at the time - their pictures were acquired by the Fine Art Club. I remember the Letitia Hamilton, but I don't remember the Leech ones. We used to have exhibitions in the Town Hall. We gave the paintings to the Corporation.<sup>19</sup>

At a meeting on the 5th May 1949, it was proposed that the Museum and Art Room Committee should comprise of all members of Corporation, plus five members of the Permanent Art Gallery Trustees, and five members of the Historical and Archeological Society.<sup>20</sup> The existing members (Trustees) of the Permanent Art Gallery are given as: Mr. P. O'Reilly, Mr. R.J. Long, Mr. E. O'Connor N.T., Miss Mary Morris, Dr. P. O'Connell M.Sc.<sup>21</sup> Edward O'Connor was also a member of STFAS, and in June of that year he is recorded as writing to the Librarian, seeking permission for the Society to hold its 8th Annual Art Exhibition in the Gallery.<sup>22</sup> As the Gallery itself consisted only of one room, this must have involved considerable disruption to the permanent display. There is no record of whether or not permission was given.

Later that year another rather more prestigious exhibition was staged in Clonmel. This was a touring exhibition of Irish Art which had been organised by the Department of Education. Under the heading, 'Art on Tour', the *Clonmel Nationalist* reported that, 'Far too few of our people know the splendid work that is being done by Irish artists, and have little opportunity to see it.'

As a result, the Department of Education decided to have an exhibition comprising forty-five representative paintings by leading Irish artists sent on tour throughout the country, such that 'our people can see the fine creative ability which native artists display.'<sup>23</sup> There is no record of the public response to the exhibition in Clonmel.

Few records also survive in the Gallery Archive relating to the purchase of art works. One letter dated, 26th September 1949, refers to the purchase of a reproduction copy of the Book of Kells. Another letter to members of the Museum and Art Gallery Committee, dated 14th December 1949, and signed P. Macaoidh, requests them to attend meeting at which the purchase of paintings would be on the agenda. Another note refers to the expenditure of £100 per annum on new pictures during the early nineteen-fifties. A letter dated 14th January 1950 approves the purchase for £8 of Anne O. Yeats' *The Gillies Boat - River Shannon*, which had been exhibited at a recent STFAS exhibition. A letter from the Town Clerk, addressed to M. Flannagan, Librarian, and dated 5th July 1950 states, 'Herewith pictures of Fr. Sheehy and John O'Leary, presented by Dan Breen - please arrange to have placed in Museum. Another letter dated, 6th July 1951, refers to an enquiry from the Haverty Trust about the space available in the Gallery, in response to a request for works. Finally a letter dated 15th May 1953, acknowledges the receipt of two brass (name) plates from the Haverty Trust.<sup>24</sup> Taken as a whole it is possible to infer that the modes of acquisition in Clonmel were much the same as in other Irish municipal galleries, comprising gifts from both individuals and organizations, and purchases by the Gallery Committee itself.

Under a file entitled, 'Museum Grants from Carnegie Trust' (300/3), there are some interesting details of an 'Expert Report on the Clonmel Museum & Art Gallery.' The museum was visited on 25th July 1951, by one J.A.S. Stendall, and the Report is dated 14th August 1951. It includes a description of 'The Building', as follows:

Clonmel Museum & Art Gallery consists of one room situated over the public library; 'its furnishings' comprise thirty-five pictures, mostly by Irish artists, several being local. These works which in the main are oils, clearly indicate that discrimination has been exercised in choice and acceptance. An important work recently acquired by gift is an oil by (Phillip) Wilson Steer entitled, 'Country Scene with Pond'.

The report made 'recommendations', that 'on the art side there need be no restrictions subject to space available, provided only pictures of merit be accepted...picture battens on south wall...here some of the pictures can be hung...not nearly so many as at present. Titles should be printed in an unobtrusive manner - the large white cards now in use are very disturbing. The remainder of the pictures can be exhibited on the landing, where they will form a cheerful lead into the museum itself; and regarding 'staffing', the local Council should formulate policy, guided by the Society's (STFAS) representative, the librarian/curator being the permanent official whose duty it would be to carry this out.



Charles Lamb, *A Galway Harbour*, oil on canvas, 68.5 x 91cm (© The Artist's Estate).



Italian Mannerist School (late 16th.C), *The Death of Adonis*, oil on canvas, 122 x 101cm (Image courtesy of South Tipperary County Museum).



John B. Yeats, *Portrait of John O'Leary*, oil on canvas (by kind permission of the National Gallery of Ireland).

On the whole, the Report appears positive and realistic in its recommendations. There is no record of the Museum Committee's response however, but the Museum and Art Gallery remained without a curator until the appointment of Richard Long some three years later in 1954.<sup>25</sup> Because no record of acquisition dates and sources was kept, the extent of the permanent art collection at this time is a matter of speculation. Around 1960, the gallery consisted of approximately forty-eight works of art, a high proportion of which were landscapes, including a fine harbour scene by Charles Lamb. Portraits made up about a fifth of the Collection, with notable examples by William Conor, Harry Kernoff and Jack B. Yeats.

There is also a strong representation of work by local artists, and in particular, Lilla Perry. The most unusual painting in the Gallery is an Italian Mannerist composition, entitled *The Death of Adonis*, a rare example of history painting in Irish municipal art collections. Unfortunately there are no details of its provenance, but it probably came from one of the large houses in the area.

Richard Long died in the early nineteen-sixties, and thereafter the Museum and Art Gallery seems to have stagnated for a number of years, until the appointment of Patrick Holland as Curator in the early nineteen-eighties. There is consequently a dearth of any information until this time, when a letter dated, 10th October 1985, from D. Mackey, Assistant County Manager (Acting) to D. Denny, designated Arts Officer, states that, "...most of our collection is now in storage in the County Museum, simply because we have not got space to display it yet here".<sup>26</sup> By 'here' he was referring to the Town Hall, and at that point it was considered moving the Art Collection there.<sup>27</sup> The move never took place, but according to Patrick Holland, parts of the Collection were displayed there from time to time. In a further letter to Denny dated, 26th September 1986, Mackey indicated the extent and condition of the Collection at that time, as follows: "At present there are sixty pictures in the collection, twelve of poor quality & condition, twenty-one important works by well-known artists, twenty-seven of lesser importance and a further thirty paintings and four sculptures from the William English Bequest." The latter were mostly contemporary works by art students, bought at shows in Limerick and Cork.

Throughout this period, a selection of the most important pieces in the Collection formed a standing exhibition that was displayed in the old museum, between special and visiting exhibitions. Substantial progress was also made in preserving and cataloguing the Art Collection, and some further works were added. This process is continuing still today, and in recent years there has been an upturn in the fortunes of the Art Gallery, in that since 2003, it has been re-housed in the fine new premises of the South Tipperary County Museum in Clonmel. Here amidst more spacious surroundings, it was possible for the first time, in November 2005 to stage a major exhibition of this fascinating art collection, which from now on, should gain the public exposure it has long deserved.

#### References

<sup>1</sup>Gallery Archives.

<sup>2</sup>Giles Waterfield, *Palaces of Art: art galleries in Britain, 1790-1990*, exhibition catalogue (London: Dulwich Picture Gallery, 1991), 22, notes that late nineteenth century art galleries in the U.K. were often conceived as adjuncts to museums and libraries.

<sup>3</sup>See Peter Jordan, 'Sinclair's Dream: The Waterford Municipal Art Collection', *Irish Arts Review Yearbook*, 1994, G.P.A.: Dublin, 121-125.

<sup>4</sup>Interview with Patrick Holland, 8.11.93.

<sup>5</sup>The *Clonmel Nationalist* (CN), 9.1.46, p.2.

<sup>6</sup>'A Museum for Clonmel', CN, 15.5.46, p.2.

<sup>7</sup>CN, 19.2.47, p.2.

<sup>8</sup>See P. Jordan thesis.

<sup>9</sup>CN, 19.2.47, p.4.

<sup>10</sup>CN, 26.2.47, p.2.

<sup>11</sup>Sometime later a very popular lecture on music was given by Alois Fleischman.

<sup>12</sup>CN, 15.10.47, p.2.

<sup>13</sup>CN, 24.3.48, p.2.

<sup>14</sup>Museum file. minutes record as present: Ald. J.J. Morrissey and R. Murphy, Cllrs. D. McCann, J. Taylor and M.F. White, Messrs. E. O'Connor N.T., P.J O'Reilly, D. Quann, Dr. P. O'Connell, J. Tinsley, R.J. Long, P.J. Purcell, T. Meagher and J. Dillon, Misses. Bracken and Caulfield and the Rev. Fr. Lane. Some time later, five trustees of what was referred to as the Permanent Art Gallery were appointed, namely, P. O'Reilly, R. J. Long, E. O'Connor NT, Miss Mary Morris and Dr. P. O'Connell M.Sc. (Minutes, 14.7.48).

<sup>15</sup>Interview with Patrick Holland, 8.11.93. Holland described him as 'the leading light of the South Tipperary Fine Arts Society.'

<sup>16</sup>Letter, Gallery Archives (GA)

<sup>17</sup>Letter, GA.

<sup>18</sup>CN, 15.12.48, p.3.

<sup>19</sup>GA.

<sup>20</sup>Minutes, 5.7.49, GA.

<sup>21</sup>Minutes, 14.7.48, GA.

<sup>22</sup>Letter, 6.6.49, GA.

<sup>23</sup>CN, 16.11.49, p.2.

<sup>24</sup>All in GA.

<sup>25</sup>Patrick Holland in letter to the author, 14th May 1999.

<sup>26</sup>GA.

<sup>27</sup>At this time also, the Clonmel Museum and Art Gallery was renamed the Tipperary South Riding (S.R.) County Museum.