Sir Hugh Lane's Pictures

The Observer, 7 January 1917, page 10, 1,493 words

Mr. George Moore's Story of Their Origin.

Heresy and Art.

"Are They Suitable for Dublin?"

"By this time it must be quite clear to everyone," Mr. George Moore said, in an interview with a representative of THE OBSERVER, on the subject of Sr. Hugh Lane's pictures, "that the duty of the Trustees of the National Gallery is to keep pictures in the gallery, and not to get them out. We will let the question bide, for your readers, I think, will be more interested to hear how the pictures came to be collected by Sir Hugh Lane, and when the story has been told we shall be able to consider whether they should be sent to Ireland or kept back till Ireland is prepared to receive them.

"Some years ago – shall we say ten or twelve? – a gentleman called upon me and having introduced himself as Lady Gregory's nephew began to tell me that he wanted to do something for Ireland. He wanted to 'strike a blow for Ireland,' but the blow that he wanted to strike was the very oddest. He wanted to present Ireland with a picture gallery, and such a blow as this had never been heard before; and his proposal was that he should search all the country houses in Ireland for Romneys, Reynoldses, Gainsboroughs, and Hogarths. The scheme seemed to me to be extravagant, extraordinary, and somewhat meaningless, for anybody who cared for pictures at all could see Romneys, Reynoldses, Gainsboroughs, and Hogarths in the National Gallery. But Sire Hugh Lane was very intent on furthering the aesthetic advancement of Ireland and apparently thought his way was the only way, and, despite much discouragement from everyone to whom he addressed himself, he started forth on his travels, and returned in about two or three months with a large and handsome array of Romneys, Reynoldses, Gainsboroughs, Hogarths, and so forth.

"Saved from Boredom"

"The exhibition of these pictures was very successful, for Sire Hugh Lane provided a hand, tea and cake, and, by his constant presence and urbanity, saved his collection from the usual boredom that attends exhibitions of pictures. He borrowed two pictures from me – a Constable and a Couture. They were chosen from my collection by Sir Hugh Lane, and it was then I began to perceive that, although he had a good deal of knowledge of ancient pictures, he knew little of nothing about modern pictures, especially the great modern pictures of the French school.

"He saw his first Manet in my house, his first Morland, his first Degas, his first Monet; his first Pissaro. He was but little inclined to admire these pictures, but little by little he behand to

Source: Curated by George Moore Interactive LLC (georgemooreinteractive.org) — Shared for research, educational, and personal use.

understand that to found an exhibition of modern French art, consisting principally of the Impressionist school, was a far more taking and original thing to do than to endow a gallery with the usual Romneys and Reynoldses, Gainsboroughs and Hogarths.

“Sir Hugh Lane knew how to combine different ideas, and an opportunity offered itself to found a gallery of modern French pictures in Dublin; for he had obtained from a gentleman in the King’s County the loan of a large picture by Lancret, and at the close of the exhibition he purchased it for £700 or £800; and this picture was sold in Paris for some thousands. He had, therefore, a fund; and at my suggestion he purchased, from Durand-Ruel, two pictures by Manet, the “Mlle. Gonzales” and the “Tuileries Gardens.” These purchases were followed by others, and he obtained on loan from Durand-Ruel many pictures by Degas, by Morisot, by Pissaro; in fact, he obtained examples of the works of all the great French Impressionist painters.

“A Marvellous Dealer.”

“But he did not like these pictures, as he confessed to me. He said, ‘I deal in ancient pictures, and not in modern pictures.’ ‘But don’t you like any modern pictures?’ I asked. The only painter among the Impressionists who seems to me to stand shoulder to shoulder with the ancient painters is Manet,’ he replied; ‘the others are only of casual interest.” Sir Hugh Lane was a moderate aesthetician and a marvellous dealer. His preparation for a picture deal was as extraordinary as Napoleon preparing a plan of campaign. But to return to Dublin and to the exhibition of the pictures that he brought back from Paris – my taste, not his taste, remember that.

“Again the Royal Academy in Abbey-street was hired for the purpose of the exhibition. Sir High Lane’s genius for advertising had developed and the conquest of Dublin began in good earnest. There were teas, there were orchestras, there were paragraphs, there were subscriptions. He asked me to give a lecture, and, as I had known all the painters, Manet, Degas, Pissaro, Monet, in Paris in the ‘eighties, I consented.

“In the lecture it was pointed out that the moral principle that all these pictures exhaled was ‘To be ashamed of nothing but to be ashamed.’ Degas and Monet were exemplars of this morality, Even Berthe Morisot subscribed to it. But Manet, of course, declared it from the housetops with a silver trumpet, and I told the audience how his paintings were a reflection of himself. The stories he told of himself, his admissions concerning himself, which were frequent in his conversation, all revealed the fact that his art rose out of the principle that the artist should be ashamed of nothing but to be ashamed.’

“A Detestable Phrase.”

“Now, this principle shocked Dublin profoundly. Mr. Edward Martyn, who represents the frozen orthodoxy of Ireland, perhaps, more perfectly than anybody else, told me that although there were some parts of my lecture that interested him, he was positively pained at times. ‘Every now and then,’ he said, ‘you said something that hurt me as if someone had shoved a pin into the

Source: Curated by George Moore Interactive LLC (georgemooreinteractive.org) — Shared for research, educational, and personal use.

very quickest part of my body. That detestable phrase, “To be ashamed of nothing but to be ashamed” is the most anti-Catholic that has ever been uttered, and although I am unwilling to believe that the pictures proclaim this morality, still the fact of having heard it prevents me from giving them any due appreciation.

“You,” Mr. Moore continued, “who have not lived in Ireland as long as I have cannot appreciate the thickness of the ice of orthodoxy that covers the Irish intellect, and orthodoxy and intellect are incompatible and mutually destructive. Be this as it may, it is certain that only the orthodox is acceptable in Ireland. Heresy is dreaded in Ireland as it was in ancient Spain, and this is a matter which you English will never quite realise the importance of. Heresy crops up at every moment in Ireland. Father Ford advocated the revival of the Irish language because, he said, it contained no heresy; and another priest denounced Villiers Stanford’s setting of ‘The Voyage of Maeldune.’ The translation of the poem into Irish did not satisfy him: he pointed out that Tennyson’s poem had infected the music. Nobody before had detected heresy in Tennyson’s poem, but the Irish priest is as quick to detect heresy as Torquemada; and I would ask the member of Parliament who has promised to introduce an Act making legal the codicil of Lane’s will to pause. Why inflict heretical pictures upon a Catholic nation? To do so will only set the priests against the Home Rule Bill. They will view it with more hostility than ever. I put it to you: would it not be an unwise and foolish thing from a political point of view to let Lane’s pictures go to Ireland?

“Moreover, Sir Hugh Lane’s collection is doubly tainted with heresy, for it would not have come into existence if he hadn’t met me in Ireland. Remember it was I who instigated it; I was the counsellor in the choice of the pictures that were purchased. These truths cannot be denied, and as the original source of the collection should I not be consulted as to its destination; should not my voice be heard as well as Lady Gregory’s and Mr. Yeats’s. But to return to the main point – the heresy inherent in these pictures. We are anxious to conciliate Ireland. Everyone knows that any attack of the Catholic religion will be deeply resented. No phrase more anti-Catholic was ever uttered, as Mr. Edward Martyn said, than ‘To be ashamed of nothing but to be ashamed.’

It would be well, then, for the National Gallery to hold these Impressionist pictures in trust for Ireland, awaiting the time, which must come sooner or later, when the country will come to terms with the Reformation. People so entirely orthodox as the Irish have no need for pictures. A certain amount of Agnosticism is necessary. Let us have patience with Ireland. Give her a chance. Perhaps some centuries hence she may be ready to receive Sir Hugh Lane’s pictures.”

Source: Curated by George Moore Interactive LLC (georgemooreinteractive.org) — Shared for research, educational, and personal use.