

Margaret Irwin West: art and integrity

During the month of April 2015 the Leinster Gallery in Dublin hosted a curated retrospective exhibition of the work of Connemara-based artist printmaker, Margaret Irwin West (b. 1926). Entitled 'Mining the Image', there were over fifty works on show covering a range of themes from Cubism to social consciousness, and a short film featuring the artist at work, purpose-made for the occasion. Well-known and respected among her contemporaries, it was Irwin West's first full-scale exhibition in Dublin.

An only child, Irwin West led an idyllic childhood, initially in India, and then, from the age of eight onwards, among the forests and hills of County Wicklow. She has retained a fascination with light and shade, and visual contrasts, which began during those formative years. As a young teenager, Irwin West attended art lessons with Lilian Davidson ARHA (1893-1954). It was through those classes that she learned the important elements of academic art: perspective; compositional balance; volume and the subtle use of colour. Davidson encouraged her students to take part in competitions, and Irwin West won several art prizes before leaving secondary school.

Always interested in colour, shape, and composition, and continually, as she recalls, "looking with intent", Irwin West assumed that she would train to become a professional artist. But her ambition was vetoed, and with a natural aptitude for languages, she was sent instead to Trinity College Dublin where she successfully completed a degree in French and Spanish literature. College years were interspersed with long exchange visits to Ghent, Antwerp and Madrid where she absorbed the lessons offered by major works in the city galleries.

Keen to continue her art, it was a family friend, the artist, Father Jack Hanlon (1913-1968), who persuaded Irwin West's parents of the advantages of a Parisian training. So it was that in the early 1950s the young artist attended the painting academy run by the Cubist-inspired artist, André Lhote (1885-1962) in Paris where her Irish student colleagues included Brigid Ganly RHA (1909-2002) and Barbara Warren RHA (b. 1925). Time spent with Lhote over three years changed Irwin West's vision, and her artistic engagement with form, volume, and space. She recalls that Lhote was interested in analysis of composition as treated by artists over the ages. He encouraged group discussion on the topic using hundreds of facsimiles of "Old Master" works, so that his students discovered the periods of compositional development in western art, and at the same time, they naturally absorbed the art history.

Irwin West began to show in the annual Oireachtas Art Exhibition in 1951 with a painting titled *Loach na nGael* and continued to exhibit there throughout the 1950s. In 1952 she showed *The Village Meet*, *Isle St Louis*, and *Solitude* in the Irish Exhibition of Living Art (IELA) and continued to exhibit with the group until 1957. An example of work from that time is a Cubist-inspired painting entitled *The Women* shown in the IELA in 1953. Exhibited in 'Mining the Image', on loan from a private collection, the painting well illustrates Irwin West's Parisian training, and her innate colour sensibility. She continued to exhibit with the IELA until 1957 and with the Dublin Painters from 1955 until 1957. Having married and moved to Scotland in 1957, Irwin West returned to Ireland and began to exhibit with the United Arts Club in 1967. Although not a member of the RHA, she made her debut at the annual exhibition in Dublin with a watercolour, entitled *Man with a Spear*, in 1970, and her work has been selected for exhibition more-or-less continually ever since.

While her children were young, Irwin West completed a training certificate to teach art. Five years were spent teaching in Dunlaoghaire, followed by nine years in NCAD, Dublin, and all the while Irwin West continued painting, printmaking, and exhibiting in group exhibitions. Connemara was always a place of calm for the artist, and when the time came she eventually settled in Claddaghduff, overlooking Omey Island to the west. Rising early, she works, walks and reads every day. She is inspired by language, literature, history, conversation, and those ancient places where people have left their mark over generations, evident in *Excavation*, *Omey Island* and *Talismans at a Holy Well* (Omey Island). Intellectually enlightened, socially engaged, agile, hard-working, and full of integrity to her work, Irwin West is an inspiration to her students, past and present, to artists, and to the public at large. Her retrospective exhibition, 'Mining the Image', was an outstanding success; testament to a life dedicated to art.

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