

Seán O'Sullivan RHA (1906-1964): An Extraordinary Talent

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'Seán O'Sullivan,' Adams Art Auctions, 2 May 2012. Reproduced with kind permission from Adams Art Auctions – see www.adams.ie

When Irish artist Seán O'Sullivan died, at the early age of fifty eight, his funeral was attended by a stellar array of people from across all walks of Irish life; the President, Eamon DeValera and his wife Sineád, John A. Costello, James White of the Municipal Gallery, Patrick Brennan, secretary of Aer Lingus, Professor Delargy of the Irish Folklore Commission, publisher Colm O'Loughlin, and architect Michael Scott, to name but a few. The turnout suggests something of O'Sullivan's artistic life; he was well-respected as a gifted artist among his peers, his clients and his viewing audience. But over the ensuing years O'Sullivan's contribution to the Irish art scene during his short but highly productive life has been somewhat sidelined. This may be partially explained by the fact that he was a shy man that did not engage with the press to any great extent, and by the post-1950s art-historical approach that privileged modernist art in Ireland to such an extent that those of an academic persuasion were overshadowed, if not entirely ignored. Yet, O'Sullivan was a man of immense talent; a prolific artist who exhibited over two hundred works at the Royal Hibernian Academy between 1926 and 1964, while also showing at the annual Oireachtas exhibitions from 1942 onwards, and at several other venues in Ireland and abroad including the Victor Waddington Gallery in Dublin, and the Helen Hackett Gallery in New York.

O'Sullivan was born in 44 St Joseph's Terrace, South Circular Road, and later raised in 126 St Stephen's Green in Dublin, where his father, John, ran a business as a carpenter and joiner. The house was in a row that contained the now-forgotten Green Cinema, which was demolished and later replaced by a modern shopping centre. According to contemporary accounts, his ancestors were sailors from West Cork. O'Sullivan was educated with the Christian Brothers' at Synge Street. Measuring over six feet, he was a good boxer, a fencer and a squash player. He also enjoyed sailing, a hobby that one contemporary reviewer saw a throwback to his maritime ancestry. He was an avid reader in English, French and Irish, and he loved the theatre. While records of his life are scant, it is clear that he showed signs of talent as an artist at an early age. In 1951 he gave an interview to a writer from *The Irish Times* in which he said that he first visited the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art at the age of twelve or thirteen. But this initial visit was, evidently, a mistake; like many a young boy, he wanted to see guns, but he went down the wrong corridor in the wrong building and found himself confronted with artists and paintings instead. The explanation for this was that the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art was situated beside the National Library, in the general area that now houses the Joyce Exhibition and the department of prints and drawings, and in the vicinity of the National Museum. According to O'Sullivan, he was impressed by the paintings, but felt that he could do as well himself, and he decided that on leaving school he would become a student at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art.

Student records for the School of Art show that he first registered there, on a scholarship, in 1926. One of his teachers was Seán Keating (1889-1977), who was to become a life-long friend and mentor. Keating's *Portrait of Seán O'Sullivan* (1929), gifted to the sitter in 1929, well-illustrates O'Sullivan's strong features and quiet, but determined nature. Hilda Van Stockum, who was a contemporary of O'Sullivan's at the school, described him as handsome, with lovely hazel eyes and a grin like a Cheshire cat. However, when Van Stockum told O'Sullivan that he looked like her then idol, Michael Collins, he was not pleased because he did not admire her hero's features. There was, of course, a very active social life among the students at the school of art. Van Stockum reveals that many of the students could not dance properly, so her mother organised lessons in the living room of their house. The classes were given by Michael Scott, then head of the student's union and an Abbey player, and they were attended by, among others, O'Sullivan, Maurice MacGonigal, Harry Kernoff, F.R. Higgins, and Nano Reid.

O'Sullivan's student days at the school appear to have been intermittent. According to Van Stockum, it was George Atkinson (1880-1941), the then Headmaster at the school of art, who organised for O'Sullivan to undertake a three month training course in lithography at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London under Archibald Standish Hartrick (1864-1950). In 1926, and as a result of that training in London, O'Sullivan showed three wonderfully evocative lithographs at the RHA, all of which are represented in this collection of his work: *Snow*; *Wapping*, *Old Stairs* and *A Topper*. While in London, O'Sullivan met and later married a young Anglo-Dutch art student, Rene Mouw, and the pair spent their early married years studying in Paris. O'Sullivan studied at La Grande Chaumière and at Colarossi's, and he worked in a studio in Montparnasse over that of Antoine Bourdelle (1861-1929). Contemporary newspaper accounts of his life reveal that while in Paris O'Sullivan became fluent in French, and was on friendly terms with painters George Rouault and Raoul Dufy, and with expatriate writers James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. Indeed, O'Sullivan became something of an amateur Joyce scholar, and could, apparently, expound for hours on end about his work. The couple went on to have two daughters and evidence of their family life is to be found, gently portrayed, among the many paintings, studies, prints and sketches that form this collection of work. While O'Sullivan remained an academic painter, it is clear that he absorbed and retained something of the atmospheric use of colour evident in the Parisian arts scene of the time.

Having returned to London in the late 1920s or early 1930s to work as a lithographer with Frank Brangwyn, O'Sullivan said that he was called to Ireland on a commission, and he never got away again. It is not clear when he returned to Dublin; however, in the early 1930s he re-registered as a non-fee-paying student at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art so that he could attend classes in etching given by George Atkinson, while also doing some teaching. In the summer of 1933 O'Sullivan showed an exemplar of his training with Atkinson at the Victor Waddington Gallery in Dublin. The etching, which can be seen in this collection, was titled *Head of a Girl*, and it was described by one writer at the time as 'an excellent essay in a difficult art.' In 1936 O'Sullivan took a studio at Molesworth Street, which he maintained until 1939, when he moved to 6 St Stephen's Green where he remained until his death in 1964.

By 1928 O'Sullivan's main occupation was portraiture. He painted several of Ireland's best-known actors, revolutionaries, artists and writers, many of which were shown in the RHA, including Joseph Holloway (1930), Maud Gonne McBride (1930) and Jack B. Yeats (1930). Perhaps his most famous portrait was of Eamon DeValera (1933), which was shown to great acclaim in the RHA that year. The commission was encouraged by O'Sullivan's major patron at that time, Dublin solicitor John L. Burke, who had been in school with DeValera. Apparently, Burke made a habit of offering advice to his artist friend in a manner that included driving his point home by taking a firm hold of O'Sullivan's elbow. This was illustrated with great humour one day when O'Sullivan rolled up his shirt sleeve for the benefit of his friend and collector, Tomas O'Muircheartaigh, a past President of the Gaelic League. 'Look', O'Sullivan said, 'see my Burke-marks!'

Like Orpen and Keating before him, O'Sullivan had strong views on what a portrait actually was. He said that he could see the finished work before he began, and that a portrait was a statement of the character of the sitter according to what the artist could truly see. He believed that painterly flattery was fatal, and that portraits were not about beauty, but about showing the sitter's intellect. There are many portraits in this collection of work that exemplify the artist's attitude to the craft. One of the finest examples is O'Sullivan's simple, yet highly evocative *Study of Brian Ó Nualláin* (aka Myles Na gCopaleen and Flann O'Brien) (1940), drawn in charcoal highlighted with white chalk on buff paper. The writer is illustrated in a relaxed pose, seated on a high stool with a cigarette in hand, while the other hand rests nonchalantly inside his overcoat pocket. It would not be Ó Nualláin without a certain sartorial indicator, and so he is shown wearing his trademark hat. The artist and writer were well acquainted; they were close neighbours in the Dublin suburb of Blackrock and as such, O'Sullivan's depiction of his friend offers an exciting glimpse into the social life of an artist who enjoyed the company of some of Dublin's best-known public figures who gathered in popular hostelrys in the city centre, and in the suburbs.

O'Sullivan's ability to really see his model is obvious in *Study of Douglas Hyde*, for example, which is an engaging watercolour sketch that well-illustrates the sitter's lively intellect and sense of humour; indeed, Hyde is so well portrayed that his personality literally jumps out from the page. Observe too, the strange, otherworldly and spiritual face illustrated in *Study of a Monk*. Drawn with charcoal and coloured pastel on grey paper, the artist merely hints at the monk's robes, but it is his concentration on the half-shadowed features - the red beard, slightly crooked nose and sideways glance of the blue eyes - that really brings this extraordinary study to life.

While portraiture was of central importance to the artist's career, this is a vitally important collection of his work because it offers a view of the artist in a more relaxed mode, away from the rigours of official portraiture and all of its associated expectations. Several of the people portrayed are shown reclining, resting, or at ease, as if unaware that they are subject to the artist's gaze; studio interiors are fleetingly sketched; landscapes are marked out with broad sweeps of watercolour infused with sunlight and a sense of relaxation; scenes portrayed in the cityscapes could be Russia or Paris; atmospheric, and sometimes personal moments in the artist's life, are permanently fixed to paper or canvas, and all the while, his stylish use of a variety of media; oil, watercolour, charcoal, pencil, chalk pastel and lithography, seems effortless. It is as if we are looking at the artist's studio, with incomplete sketches and ideas laid out beside fully completed works. His working methods become apparent, not least in the oil studies of landscapes which are painted on small pieces of wooden board cut to a similar size so that O'Sullivan could fit his wet paintings into a slatted box specially designed for the purpose. A small sketch of Peig Sayers belies the fact that O'Sullivan knew her well, and indicates his love of the Gaeltacht regions, and of the Irish language. Without the benefit of private papers or diaries, each and every piece of work in this collection offers evidence or information about the artist and his working life and context.

In 1955 O'Sullivan went to Philadelphia for a six-month painting tour. He undertook several portrait commissions while there, including Dr Perry Pepper, President of the College of Physicians, and William Walker, President of the Bank of Pennsylvania, and he held an exhibition of work in the Art Alliance, which was, according to contemporary accounts, a huge success. He returned to Dublin and spent the last years of his life working mainly on portrait commissions. Indeed, O'Sullivan was working on a religious portrait commission when he died in 1964.

On hearing of his untimely death in May 1964, the then President of the RHA, Maurice MacGonigal commented to a writer from *The Irish Times* that 'one of the defects of mankind is its failure to recognise genius until it has been removed.' Seán O'Sullivan could turn his hand to any form of visual art production: from book covers, to advertisements; from lithographs to large-scale commissioned portraits; from caricatures to religious commissions and personal reflections. He possessed an extraordinary talent, one that should be fully and properly evaluated in the context of the history of twentieth-century Irish art. That this collection has now been documented is a crucial step towards that re-evaluation.

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