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After Art: Thoughts on Looking at Art

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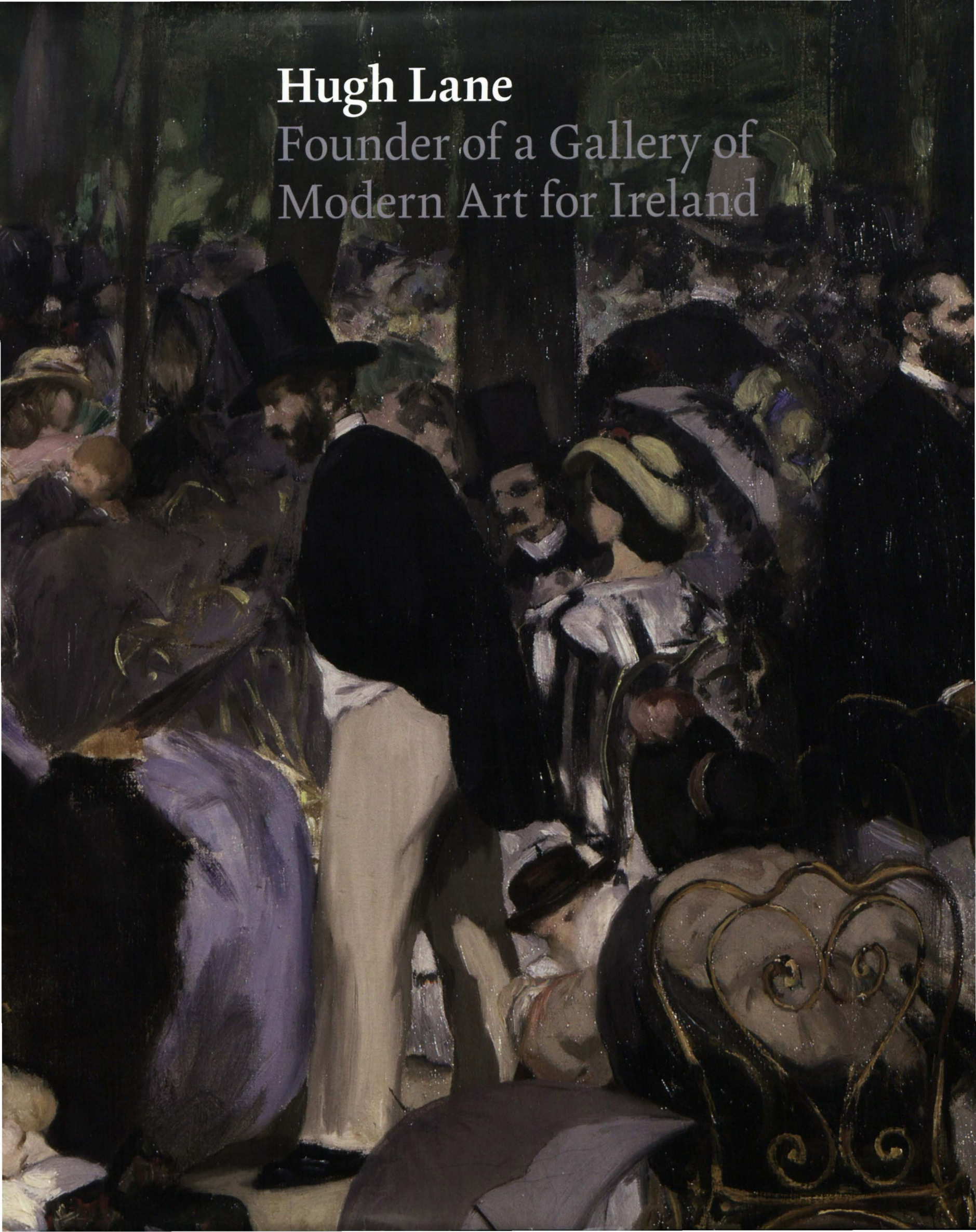
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Hugh Lane

Founder of a Gallery of
Modern Art for Ireland



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Founder of a Gallery of
Modern Art for Ireland

Edited by Barbara Dawson

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Niamh Ann Kelly

'other men's flowers'

The art of the past and the great collections in which it is housed have always been an important resource for artists. Either using it as a source to extract lessons of relevance for their own work or wrestling with the tradition and transforming it into something of their own making, artists consistently acknowledge the value of the work of artists of previous generation in advancing the 'new' and establishing their own position in the long history of art. For some, such as Leon Kossoff and Frank Auerbach, this engagement with the past is based on a close study of the hand of great masters and is a continual process of technical discovery. For others, such as Francis Bacon, Jeff Wall and Martin Kippenberger, the art of the past is a source of ideas to be interpreted and refashioned in works of a very different kind.

Taken from a quote by the French moralist Michel de Montaigne – 'in this book I have only made up a bunch of other men's flowers, providing of my own only the string that ties them together' – this exhibition draws on the collections of the Tate and Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane as well as the private collections of the artists, and attempts to set up a dialectic discord between diverse artistic approaches. In seeking to address the nature and obligations of working within the art of the past and collections, 'other men's flowers' asks what are the responsibilities to context when bringing such a disparate group of works together? What useful histories can unfold? How might we usefully understand the gaps and discrepancies in art production and dissemination?

The exhibition is less concerned with histories of representation and illusion than with the lived experience or intervention offered by the work of art and with how artists deal with this experience as it somehow transforms their own field of vision.

Michael Dempsey, Head of Exhibitions

Installation view of 'other men's flowers', showing *Madonna Irlanda, or The Very First Real Irish Political Picture* (left), by Michael Farrell, and *Das Endes des Alphabets* (right; Estate Martin Kippenberger; Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne), by Martin Kippenberger

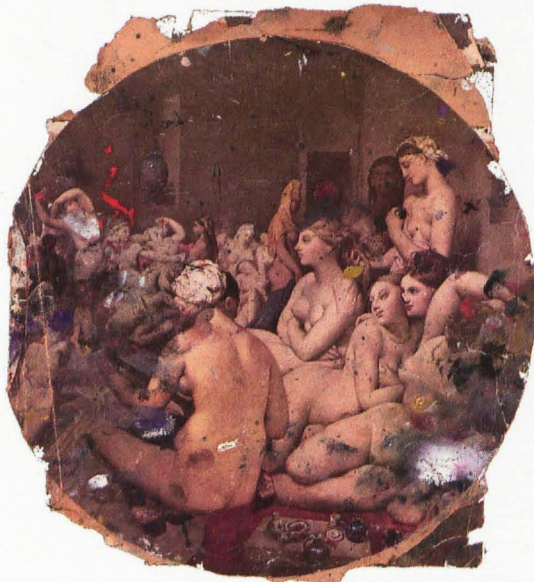
The borrowers

The title of this exhibition, 'other men's flowers', is a term that has been applied to collections of poetry, as well as to a particular writer's disclaimer on originality.¹ In this art exhibition the term implies two types of borrowing: curatorial and artistic. The curator has knowingly borrowed works of art for the temporary purpose of an exhibition. The artists whose works make up the exhibition have looked directly at the art of others who have gone before them. In this way they too have collected art for this display. Many artists pore over the past in order to learn and copy from

Fig. 1
Frank Auerbach
Bacchus and Ariadne, 1971
Oil on board, 122.3 x 153 cm
(Tate: presented by the executors of
the estate of David Wilkie, 1993)



Fig. 2
Francis Bacon
Colour photographic illustration
of Ingres's *Le Bain turc*, 21.9 x 18.3 cm
(Collection Dublin City Gallery
The Hugh Lane, Francis Bacon
Studio Archive)



other eras, cognizant that to enter into the space of art is to engage with a loaded, and at times unpleasant, legacy of power relations. Importantly, spending some time considering how art influences art exposes the self-referential aspects of ongoing cultural practices. As well as functioning as a homage to what has gone before, this assertion of involvement in art made in earlier periods is a welcome release from the illusion of absolute originality. While imitated gestures, reconfigured compositions, familiar lines and borrowed references are regenerated to create something new in these art works, it is the presence of the past that most ardently permeates all their forms.

At a glance

After art come the conventions of its perception. Every art exhibition is the result of layers of history that lie behind each gallery wall. Imaginary orders are endlessly constructed in exhibitions, later to be reworked in written histories of art.² In one such order artists draw inspiration from literature, and critiques of art are in thrall to literary theories. The tension between stories and



Fig. 3
Jeff Wall
Coastal Motifs, 1989
Transparency in light-box,
119 x 147 cm

pictures is, of course, part of an ongoing struggle to differentiate between word and image in a wide-ranging argument that, hopefully, can never be fully resolved. What is written and spoken about art, along with when it is packed in crates and shipped, who promotes it and where, are the means by which art enters into public memory. The gaze of a passing viewer, however, creates another set of links between art works already connected by a shared exhibition space. A viewer's glance addresses a compilation of individual creative views announced at different times and in different places, before these art works are viewed today in this gallery or this book. This moment of looking is the collusion between class, gender and urbanism in practice: the history of art compounded in a tiny gesture of glancing.

Shadows of women and men

For some the story of art begins with a woman tracing the outline of her lover's shadow on the wall by candlelight. She drew the line of his shape as he slept and created his image so she could keep

him close after he left.³ Given how the direction of the gaze between women and men has changed in such a determined manner, and apparently without end, it is curious that such a story should remain relevant at all. In Modernism's account of itself and of the past, art is a relentlessly male-dominated arena: macho in its forms, masculine in its language, gendered in its point of view. It seems that from Modernism's earliest advocacy most of those who looked were men. Artists looked at women (and fruit and plants, and then at geometric forms); collectors looked at the art of men. In some ways the history of Modernism is an account of these sexually divisive perspectives and the battles they contain. Among a minority of collectors of his day Hugh Lane saw beyond his gender and, arguably, utilized his social advantages well. Now we are all looking at men's art, and women's too, and finally realizing that the story of art was not entirely as it had seemed before. Maybe once again the shadow on the wall can be as much about longing as it is about gender.

Time and traces

Hugh Lane collected his objects of art, and his subjects, with a strong and clear purpose. His desire to build a collection that would bear witness to an emerging European strain of art interests was driven by his philanthropic intention to have this reservoir on tap for the benefit of art in Ireland.⁴ Looking at his original collection, it is hard to imagine how some of his thematic and stylistic choices were deemed controversial in his day, so persuasively has the historic machine of Modernist expectation in the meantime ground down the edginess of what occurred in art a century and more ago. Beyond concerns of historical positioning, to stand in front of any collection of art on display is to witness the scrapes and scratches of life apparent on the surface of a work of art. Cracks in paint, worn weave and splintered frames all tell stories of the object's own history. An art work has been seen, hidden, retouched, conserved, sold, bought and exhibited. This physical presence of art generates the realization that looking at art made in the past does not bring us back to some earlier time. We cannot truly know the radical history of what are looking at. Instead, art works made in days gone by reiterate our present-day reality. The art has travelled, not us.

Queuing

Art produced in the past can function in deeply prescribed ways in today's climate of touring exhibitions. We viewers live in a culture where you may have to book a ticket in advance to see certain large-scale exhibitions. Works by 'masters' are sent travelling, mostly through so-called Western countries. Functioning as cultural emissaries beating home a message of the historically combined powers of finance, ideas of creative rarity and national self-promotion, such framed wonders hold significant sway over Sunday afternoons and holiday times. Standing three people deep from a work by Renoir or Vermeer, for example, in a hot crowded room encourages each of us to feel privileged (in case we did not already). Such a shoulder-rubbing breath-in-the-ear experience can also breed frustration. We have waited, queued and arrived – only to be left gawping from a short, cramped distance at something that often is a lot smaller than predicted by our imagination. And yet we collectively stand still to stare at what, though inanimate and fragile-looking, seems to glow a little and enacts a commanding pull on our communal attention.

Biography

The press and commercial success of big exhibitions, which can at times seem to mill with more tourist cameras than people, are a reflection on the sustained Modernist concern with authors. It is, after all, the list of artists' names that draws visitors there in the first place. Names have always been emphasized in Modernist histories which looked back, to the extent that the history of Western art reads like a set of nationally aligned name tags, complete with dates of births. Biographies were key in accounts of figuring genius through the Modernist era itself: who loved whom, when, and how did they all die? In today's art world, wittily thrashing about in popular culture, cults of individualism are easily promulgated through the means of widely accessible and various mass media. When considered together, these trends suggest the emphases on names may be little more than

ruses to counter the blatant materialism of art practice. This insistence on naming can reasonably be considered as an unnecessary counterpoint to the luxury associated with art today. From another perspective, perhaps a concern with naming is simply an unavoidably human way of understanding our culture.

Art-watching⁵

As an object or condition of encounter, art remains outside us – as artists, collectors, viewers or curators. The moment at which an art work lures us in more closely, to see better (its brightness, its textures, its incomprehensible nature), is the moment we are reminded of our distance from it. Art's physical presence ensures that this is so, despite a temporary invasion of our senses. And so, to watch over art in the ways collectors and curators do, is a practice of vigilance over an external other.⁶ This process echoes how artists, through their art, watch over all of us, their subjects. Artists who, in their work, reconsider art first produced in earlier times are elaborating on constantly reworked relativities simulated between art works in permanent collections and temporary exhibitions. Such art actively links collectors to curators, artists to viewers, and the viewing that started centuries ago begins anew in the gallery and is continuously revitalized in printed accounts of it. Ongoing anthologies of art, like 'other men's flowers', are not confined to the gallery wall or catalogue page because the memory of each work is altered by each momentary glance. After art, there is an ongoing conversation between the past and the future, as we stand somewhere in between, glancing at this moment in time and wondering what it is we cannot fully see.

Notes

1 The French writer Michel de Montaigne is widely credited with coining the phrase 'other men's flowers' in 1580, to stress that he was aware of other writers and their work and to suggest that his work was little more than a combining of influences. Field Marshal Viscount Wavell used the phrase as the title for an anthology of poetry he published in 1944. More recently, the same title was used for a book of text-based artists' prints curated by Joshua Compston, published by the Paragon Press.

2 I am borrowing Donald Preziosi's term, 'imaginary order', which he uses to describe the idea that museum visitors commonly assume that someone comprehends the significance of every exhibition. Paul Duro (ed.), *The Rhetoric of the Frame* (New York, 1996).

3 This refers to a Greek story from the seventh century BC in which a young woman, Dibutades, traced the outline of her lover's shadow on the wall as he slept, because he had to leave her the next day. Her father, a potter, is said to have cast the shape of his silhouette in clay. This story is

often used to explain the 'discovery' of drawing, of painting, of relief sculpture or of representational art in general.

4 An account of Hugh Lane's personal circumstances and reasons for collection, along with some of the more courageous decisions he made runs through Robert O' Byrne, *Hugh Lane, 1875–1915* (Dublin, 2000).

5 My use of the term 'art-watching' is further discussed in Brian Fay, Niamh Ann Kelly, Brenda Dermody, *Art-Watching* (Dublin, 2007), a limited-edition art publication on the collection of Dublin City Gallery The

Hugh Lane and the National Gallery, London.

6 I use the idea of 'vigilance' here following on Emanuel Levinas's thesis on love and vigilance, discussed in Richard Kearney, *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers on the European Mind* (Manchester, 1995). I explore this further in *Art-Watching*.



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