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Corot and Collectors

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RTÉ

SUNDAY MISCELLANY

a selection from 2004 – 2006

edited by CLÍODHNA NÍ ANLUAIN

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RTÉ

COROT AND COLLECTORS

N i a m h A n n K e l l y

On Parnell Square, in the Dublin City Gallery the Hugh Lane, there is a small painting by the French artist Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot called *Woman Meditating*. The seated young woman is painted in muted tones, the whole canvas made up of olive greens and earthy browns. She gazes just past where I stand looking at her, with her hands clasped lightly around her knee, as though she may be rocking her body slightly. Her gaze has the intensity of someone utterly lost in thought, or meditation, as the title suggests. Her eyebrows are slightly raised, her lips barely pursed, her facial expression serious. The tonal quality of the painting conveys the contemplative mood of the work as much as her posture.

It is an unusually stark portrait – there are no clues to its context, though it seems logical to assume that these are not the woman's usual clothes. Perhaps she is dressed in this medieval-style costume for a play or a ceremony of some sort. Her hair is tied up in a deep red band to complete the period look, with small drop earrings, only one of which I can see.

There is a sister painting to this one in America's Cleveland Museum of Art – a more staged and larger work, depicting a woman in a similar costume resting her head on her hand as she sits in a clearing in a forested area. It shares a sense of contemplation with this painting in Dublin as the woman gazes downcast, past her feet. But somehow, while the *Woman Meditating* at the Hugh Lane may have been more of a study than a finished allegory of some sort, it seems to me more immediate and more

revealing of Corot's sensitivity to exploring human emotion through portraiture – a subject he is not usually associated with. Without any specific context provided, the *Woman Meditating* in Dublin appears quite solitary, so I am left to focus on her, without distraction, as an individual, and to share with her a quiet moment of thoughtfulness.

So how did this painting come to be in Dublin? It was not part of Hugh Lane's own collection, but was presented to the city's gallery when it first opened to the public in 1907 by a group called the 'Ladies of Ireland'. Harcourt Street was the first location of the gallery and I found a reference to these women in a review text written that year, in which the group are referred to as the 'Irishwomen's Picture League', and the unusual qualities of the painting are noted. At that time the painting was known as *Woman Resting*.

Who were these women who had the foresight to acquire an atypical work by Corot, and further, had the spirit to present it to the city of Dublin on the occasion of the first exhibition of what was to grow and expand into one of Europe's finest municipal collections of modern art?

I am perpetually in awe of the philanthropic aspect of art collecting when the imperative of individuals transfers into the public arena for the benefit of so many. Some years ago, I had the pleasure of meeting the late Gordon Lambert on a few occasions in relation to research I was doing on his pivotal contribution to the development of the collection at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. Like talking or listening to Patrick J. Murphy, or reading about Chester Beatty, Hugh Lane, Sir and Lady Beit or John Hunt, to name a few, Gordon Lambert took my breath away with the sincerity of his passion for art. Without the intervention of such individuals, the public and municipal art collections of Ireland today would be sorry exhibitions indeed.

Women in this area are somewhat less recognised than their male counterparts, but at the Dublin City Gallery the Hugh Lane, this exquisite Corot painting is on display because of just such a group of women. Even earlier, in 1905, another key painting in the gallery's collection, *Blush Roses* by Henri Fantin-Latour, was presented by Lady Ardilaun. Born Olivia Herbert, she was a keen art, design and garden enthusiast and her more famous husband was Sir Arthur Edward Guinness. The rose, *Souvenir de St Anne*, was named after the couple's garden in Clontarf in Dublin. So I imagine that this luscious Fantin-Latour painting, with its delicately described pink rose petals, meant a lot to Lady Ardilaun.

And it was another woman, the artist Sarah Purser, who we can thank for the current location of the gallery in Charlemont House at the north end of Parnell Square. Purser was also responsible for founding the Society of the Friends of the National Collections of Ireland, an organisation that continues to contribute hugely to our public collections today. The behind-the-scenes role of collectors is, unfortunately, often underestimated in the histories of art – the most evident clue to their activity is to be found on the provenance of works as it usually appears on the labels beside their display.

As I return to gaze at Corot's *Woman Meditating*, I can't help but wonder about the journey of this small painting from Corot's studio to inner city Dublin; how it came to be, finally, in my line of vision.



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Clíodhna Ní Anluain is a producer with RTÉ and is the editor of *Reading the Future: Mike Murphy in Conversation with Irish Writers* (2000).

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Elizabeth Magill, *Like a Bird* (4) 2006, oil on canvas.
Courtesy of the artist and the Kerlin Gallery, Dublin