

# Here to Stay



ISOBEL HARBISON on  
the history of Dublin's  
Hugh Lane Gallery, which  
has seen a century of  
cultural diplomacy and  
great political change



Dublin's Charlemont House – designed by William Chambers and built in 1763 for the first Earl of Charlemont, James Caulfield – is a uniquely beautiful example of a Georgian mansion. Facing onto Parnell Square, this three-storey building sits on an elevated site just north of O'Connell Street, the bustling thoroughfare that meets the River Liffey at the city's centre. The building has witnessed many changes in Irish society over the past 250 years. It saw Ireland's return to self-governance after three centuries of British rule – a campaign intensified by the 1916 Easter Rising, where O'Connell Street's General Post Office became the leaders' headquarters. This period further coincided with suburbanization and the spread of tenement housing in the area. Economic fluctuations have continued since, from the EU investments of the 1980s to the rise (and fall) of the 'Celtic Tiger' boom in the 1990s and 2000s to Dublin's current place as a stronghold for global technology, housing leading corporations' European headquarters. Charlemont House has overlooked the city through the best and worst of times and, in 1933, opened its doors to Dubliners as the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art.

Known today as Hugh Lane Gallery, the museum first opened on Harcourt Street in 1908 and is believed to be the oldest public gallery of modern and contemporary art in the world. Its founder, Hugh Lane, was an Irish art dealer, collector and museum director. Born into a modest Protestant clerical family in County Cork in 1875 and raised in Cornwall, he began his career as an apprentice painting restorer with Martin Henry Colnaghi before working at London's Marlborough Gallery. During this time, Lane maintained links with his maternal aunt in Ireland, the dramatist Lady Augusta Gregory, who was deeply involved in the Irish Literary Revival movement alongside Alice Milligan, AE Russell and William Butler Yeats. Inspired by exchanges among artists, writers, directors and cultural organizers based between Dublin and London, Lane resolved to contribute to this hive of cultural activity himself. In 1904, he organized an exhibition of works by Irish artists at London's Guildhall, while continuing to solicit support from leading Irish artists by requesting that they donate pieces to his collection. Lane was also travelling to Europe at the time and began collecting impressionist

works in France, including *Beach Scene* (1877) by Edgar Degas, *Music in the Tuileries* (1862) and *Eva Gonzalès* (1870) by Édouard Manet, *The Umbrellas* (1886) by Pierre-Auguste Renoir and *The Mantelpiece* (1905) by Édouard Vuillard. Alongside the Irish works, these were to be foundational to the collection of what he wished to be Dublin's Municipal Gallery of Modern Art.

Several years after opening the museum on Harcourt Street, Lane wanted to relocate it to a purpose-built property on a more prominent site. He had invited Edwin Lutyens – an English architect renowned for combining vernacular styles with contemporary techniques – to consider the brief. A commission of this pedigree would acknowledge the Irish Revival while also mapping the gallery internationally. However, two distinctive proposals by Lutyens – one on St Stephen's Green, the other bridging the River Liffey – were vetoed by Dublin Corporation (later Dublin City Council), set to be the gallery's longer-term custodian. Infuriated, Lane changed his will in 1913, bequeathing his collection of 39 impressionist paintings to the National Gallery in London.

Opening page  
Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin,  
2011. Unless otherwise  
stated, all images courtesy:  
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Previous page  
Antonio Mancini,  
*Portrait of Hugh Lane*,  
1904, oil on canvas,  
2.3 × 1.2 m

## Charlemont House has overlooked Dublin through the best and worst of times.



Édouard Manet, *Music in the Tuileries*, 1862, oil on canvas, 76 × 118 cm. Courtesy: © Sir Hugh Lane Bequest, 1917, National Gallery, London. In partnership with Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin



Frances Stark, *The Unspeakable Compromise of the Portable Work of Art: #11/16, in lieu of my couch*, 2001, installation view, 'The Studio', 2006–07, Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin. Photograph: Oliver Godow

Two years later, Lane was dead. Aged 39, he drowned on the RMS Lusitania off the coast of West Cork while returning from the US, where he had sold two paintings to Henry Clay Frick. Shortly before his death, then working as director of the National Gallery of Ireland, Lane had reversed his will, leaving all 39 paintings to the Municipal Gallery on the condition that a suitable building would be provided by the Corporation. This codicil was authored and signed, but never legally witnessed.

What ensued has been a century of international cultural diplomacy, against the backdrop of great political change, with generations of Irish politicians, lawyers and cultural envoys requesting that Lane's final codicil be recognized. In 1938, an arrangement was reached to alternate the collection between Dublin and London at agreed intervals. Various interim revisions have included, in 1993, the rehoming of 31 of the paintings to Hugh Lane Gallery with the remaining eight (of the greatest monetary value) divided into two groups, lent to Dublin every six years in alternation. This year, yet another agreement was reached, with two works to remain permanently in London and ten others rotating between the institutions. Significantly, under this new arrangement, the paintings displayed in London will now be labelled 'Sir Hugh Lane Bequest, 1917, National Gallery, London. In partnership with Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin'. Barbara Dawson, director of Hugh Lane Gallery since 1991, said in a press release that this agreement 'underpins the collegial relationship that has developed between the two institutions. Importantly, it acknowledges the history and the role of Hugh Lane Gallery in the provenance of these paintings and means that people in both countries can continue to enjoy Sir Hugh's celebrated bequest.'



Eithne Jordan, *Tableau*, 2017–18, exhibition view, Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin



Francis Bacon Studio, Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin, 1998. Photograph: Perry Ogden

Dawson's capable negotiations are among her numerous successes during her tenure as director. Here, she has built upon the existing collections and innovated new collection strands, developed conservation infrastructures, advanced and digitized the archive, adapted display architectures (including a bespoke space for the historic stained-glass collection), introduced a strong publishing strand, enhanced the education and public programmes, installed a cafe and a bookshop, and continuously energized both the temporary and contemporary exhibition programmes.

Prior to her appointment, the collection had been boosted in the late 1960s and '70s, intensifying its commitment to modernism as it hosted the third iteration of Rosc in 1977: a series of six international modern art exhibitions held in Dublin between 1967 and 1988. Work collected over this period included pieces by Joseph Beuys, Christo, Cecil King, Agnes Martin, Kenneth Noland, Brian O'Doherty and Günther Uecker. When I asked over the phone what her ambitions for the gallery were when she was initially appointed, Dawson says she was conscious of 'repositioning it', eager to consider how its collections would traverse the 20th century. So, while attending

to works of the early and mid-century that were the collection's base, she also diversified its contemporary holdings to include an expanding range of media adopted by Irish and international artists. Among contemporary works by Tacita Dean, Liam Gillick and Julian Opie, the collection now features some of the most distinguished Irish artists working in film, video and installation, including Gerard Byrne, James Coleman, Willie Doherty, Jaki Irvine and Niamh O'Malley.

In 1998, Dawson acquired Francis Bacon's studio, which she describes as a 'milestone for the gallery'. Originally located in London's Reece Mews, the studio had been left perfectly intact after the artist's death in 1992, with John Edwards and Brian Clarke as its custodians. Dawson recalls how, until the mid-1990s, Bacon's early years had been quite vague. He had refused any authorized biographies during his lifetime but several emerged in the few years after his death, revealing that he had been born in Ireland and spent his childhood and late teens between Ireland and London. Keen to create an exhibition of Bacon's works that might foreground the artist's links to Ireland, Dawson was introduced to Clarke, the estate's executor, by the art dealer James Mayor. Clarke

then introduced Dawson to Edwards and so began a conversation that led to the acquisition of the studio containing an archive of over 7,000 objects, a sizable book collection and six of Bacon's works, five of which are unfinished.

When she was first shown the studio in situ, Dawson was 'totally enamoured by it, the sheer wild chaos of it, the real beauty of that mad chaotic interior', and with Edwards and Clarke she discussed at length how best to preserve it. The process of transferral from London to Dublin was undertaken with forensic attention to detail – including the removal of the ceiling and flooring as well as every trace of dirt and dust – and was realized with the help of conservators, archaeologists and curators. 'My vision', recalls Dawson, 'was that it had to be preserved as it was: a small space, only six by four metres, but so intense. It would lose its context if it were cut in half or only half shown. The whole point was that it was this glorious and gory mess, where marvellous paintings were created, like a phoenix rising out of the ashes.' Hugh Lane Gallery has both the process and product of Bacon's original studio, an asset that is quite distinct from other European studio museums and partial studio reconstructions.

Bacon's studio now sits within the ground-floor galleries, themselves constructed on what were previously the gardens of Charlemont House. The 1930s Wing was designed by Horace T. O'Rourke as a series of interconnected double- and single-height galleries in the Neoclassical style and an axial Beaux-Arts arrangement. These are host to works from the permanent collection as well as various displays, projections and installations by contemporary artists. The reconstructed Bacon Studio sits at the end of this run of galleries in a purpose-built area flanked by a dedicated archival space and picture gallery, designed by David Chipperfield Architects in 2001. Just beyond lies the Sean Scully Room. Another renowned artist of Irish origin, Scully donated eight paintings in 2006 and *Landline Gray* (2015) in 2018. These are all now on permanent display in a part of the 2006 Wing, a multi-storey, multi-gallery annex, designed by Gilroy McMahon Architects.

Upper-storey Georgian reception rooms retain original fine detailing, such as a Pietro Bossi fireplace. These spaces often host contemporary exhibitions. Frances Stark's *The Unspeakable Compromise of the Portable Work of Art: #11/16, in lieu of my couch* (2001), for example, was displayed here as part of the 2006–07 exhibition 'The Studio', curated by Christina Kennedy and Jens Hoffmann. Stark's work is a wooden chair that appears to have been reassembled with tape and plaster from some previous breakage. It stood rickety near the decorative fireplace and in close proximity to Daniel Buren's coloured acrylics, stuck to the Georgian windowpanes. The exhibition alluded to the Bacon Studio downstairs and Buren's seminal 'The Function of the Studio' (1971), an essay about the redundancy of that space in the heyday of conceptualism. Contrasting references were considered playfully from the vantage of 2006, a newly digital age. Here, Stark's chair and Buren's window appeared in conversation with Charlemont's features and were, like the Bacon Studio below, so rich with detail and suggestive of complex histories that they seemed to rebut any claims of a studio's total obsolescence.

Hugh Lane Gallery's current priorities include cultivating a greater social-media presence, the digitization and online documentation of more of the collection's 2,300 works (excluding the Bacon and Harry Clarke archives) and planning for a new development in adjoining buildings on Parnell Square. This will include a centre for art, community engagement and scholarship that will allow for an expanded contemporary exhibition programme as well as new conservation and education projects, and significant on-site engagements with artists in the area and further afield. 'It should be an exciting place to visit,' Dawson muses, before stopping abruptly. 'It is already,' we both continue, in sync FM

Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin, Ireland, is currently showing 'Joseph Beuys: From the Secret Block to Rosc' (until 21 November), 'Cecil King: Present in Time Future' (until 28 November) and 'Hiwa K: Do you remember what you are burning?' (until 13 February 2022).

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## Francis Bacon's studio was this glorious and gory mess, where marvellous paintings were created.

Barbara Dawson

Richard Tuttle, 'Triumphs', 2010–11, exhibition view, Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin

