



MAINIE JELLET (1897-1944)

A SPIRITUAL AND MILITANT MODERNIST

Patrick Claffey

(The second in a series of four on Irish religious artists)

The Irish artists Mainie Jellett and Evie Hone (1894-1955) often come up in the same conversations. This is hardly surprising since they had much in common; they were born within a few years of each other, into the same social class in Protestant Dublin, and went on together to become significant, even revolutionary, figures in the Irish art world, each in their own way

Mainie Jellett was born on 29 April 1897 at 36 Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin, one of four daughters and in a family of strong women who made their mark of achievement in their various fields. Her father William Morgan Jellett was a barrister and later MP. Her mother Janet McKenzie Stokes was an accomplished musician. All her daughter studied music and Mainie had thought of following this path before turning to painting. Her grandfather John Hewitt Jellett, was Provost of Trinity College Dublin. Mainie's sister Dorothea (Bay) was the orchestra conductor at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin. Her aunt was Eva Jellett (1868-1955), the first woman doctor to graduate from Dublin University (TCD). She later became a pioneering doctor in 1906, taking up a position in the Dublin University Mission in Hazaribagh, India, and in 1917 for a year at the British Military Hospital in Mumbai.



Albert Gleize, *Crucifixion* (1935)
National Gallery of Ireland

Mainie's art education began at 11 when she received painting lessons from Elizabeth Yeats, Sarah Cecilia Harrison, and Mary Manning, who had a studio on Merrion Row, and whose influence on Irish Artists of the time was considerable. Along with Evie Hone she went on to study with Walter Sickert (1869-1942) in London, and André Lhote (1855-1962) and the cubist modernist Albert Gleize (1881-1953) in Paris. She later studied at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin where she introduced her modernist ideas and practice. Her teachers included Sir William Orpen (1878-1931), and his influence is apparent in her work at that time. Evie and Mainie were indeed pioneers in the introduction of modernism in Ireland—a move derided by many in its earlier days but which quickly gained considerable influence on younger artists.

While Evie took a religious path based on her personal religious convictions, and veered into stained-glass for which there was a large market both in Ireland and internationally, Mainie, on her return from Paris to Dublin became very much a militant for modernism taking her struggle into the Dublin art scene.

This was not without its trials and tribulations for the 26 year old Mainie. In 1923 she was denounced as a source of dangerous foreign contagion—all the more dangerous, one imagines, as it came from France! In an article in the Irish Time Fintan O'Toole and Riann Coulter write: "In October 1923



Mainie Jellett, *Virgin of Eire*, (1944)
National Gallery of Ireland



the *Irish Times* reviewed an art exhibition mounted by the Society of Dublin Painters. The anonymous critic confessed to being puzzled by two paintings by Miss "Maimie" (sic) Jellett: "They are in squares, cubes, odd shapes and clashing colours . . . to me they presented an insoluble puzzle."

Even the relatively progressive intellectual George Russell described Jellett as the creator of a "subhuman art". Harsh words indeed for what was essentially a very gentle style.

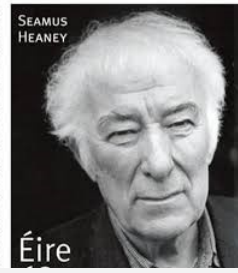
By 1927, however, the *Irish Times* saw in her "the only serious exponent in this country of the ultra-modernist school of painting"

This did not mean, however, that she did not have a strong religious or spiritual vision of her own. It is certainly not without significance that the National Gallery of Ireland has hung two modernist abstract religious works (see above), Glieze's striking *Crucifixion* (1935), and his student Jellett's serene *Virgin of Eire* (1944) side by side in the European room of the gallery where they both surely belong. .



Mainie Jellett, *Homage to Fra Angelico*, c. 1927

On 'the radiance of Catholicism'



It is fair to say that for much of his adult life, Seamus Heaney lived, like many writers, somewhere on the peripheries of faith. However, whatever his practice in terms of 'church-going, he never doubted that Catholicism played an essential part in his imaginary, and the way he viewed the world.

John McGahern held a similar view. This is evoked by the Scottish author and columnist Maggie Ferguson in a recent column on Heaney in *The Tablet* (12/26 August 2023)

"My Catholic upbringing gave the right to joy' he confided to her on their first meeting. In a later conversation, following the publication of *Station Island*, he talked of his sense of 'lightening' and 'his new of readiness to credit marvels.' As he remembered the 'radiance' of his Catholic boyhood, he remarked: "People talk about the effects of Catholic upbringing in sociological terms: repression, guilt, prudery. What isn't sufficiently acknowledged is the radiance of Catholicism. It gave everything in the world a meaning. It brought a tremendous sense of being, of the dimensions of reality, the shimmering edges of things. The older I get, the more I remember the benediction of it all. It was hardly surprising then to find that his last words in a final text to his wife Marie were *noli temere, do not be afraid'*

Maggie Ferguson is the author of a fine biography of the Oradian poet George Mackay Brown, an adult convert to Catholicism. *George Mackay-Brown: A Life*, Murray, Edinburgh, 2006

MASS INTENTIONS

17 October 2023

11am: Michael and Mary Gaffney & Tina

24 September 11am: Special Intention

5pm: Gary Roberts, Anniversary

Masses Times

Sundays: 9.30am, 11am, 5pm

Weekdays: 10am

Rosary following 10am mass

Collections Last Week

N/A