



BEHIND THE SCENES

HUGH LANE

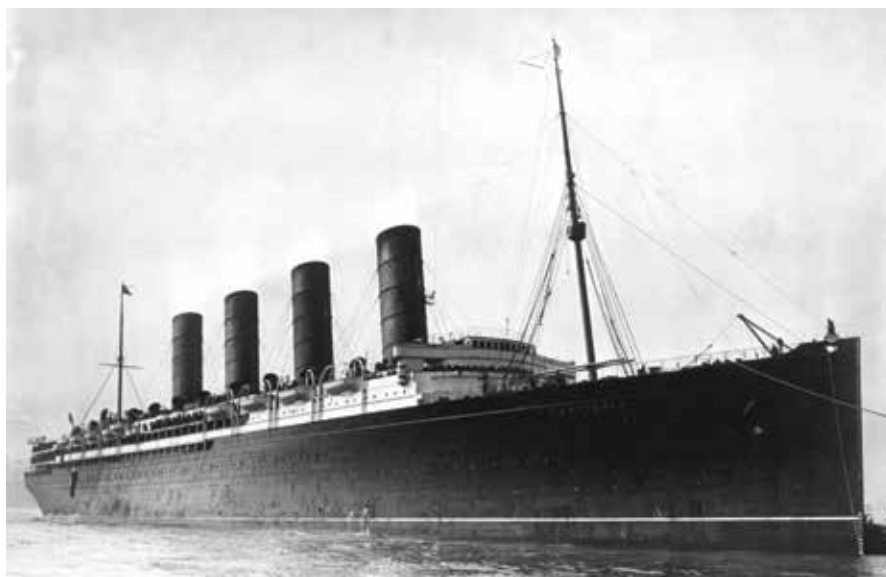
IRELAND'S ART MODERNIZER



On May 1, 1915, a 39-year-old Old Masters dealer, “of slight build, with a high forehead” and “wearing a pearl tie pin,” boarded a steamship in New York Harbor bound for England, where he lived. Along with the personal belongings of Hugh Lane, the ship’s manifest listed “one case of paintings.”¹ Sadly, Lane and 1,958 other passengers and crew would never disembark in Liverpool. On May 7, the RMS *Lusitania* was struck by a German torpedo, sinking in sight of Ireland’s southwestern coast, near Cork, the county where Lane was born.

While the primary objective of Lane’s trip to America — the sale to Henry Clay Frick of Titian’s *Portrait of a Man in a Red Cap* and Holbein’s *Thomas Cromwell* — had been successful, the young dealer’s efforts to court American collectors never gained traction,

(LEFT) ANTONIO MANCINI (1852–1930), *Portrait of Hugh Lane*, 1904, oil on canvas, 89 x 46 in., Dublin City Gallery: The Hugh Lane ■ (BELOW) GEORGE GRANTHAM BAIN (1865–1944), *RMS Lusitania*, c. 1907–13, photograph, George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.





one reason his name barely resonates in the U.S. today. Yet Sir Hugh Lane (1875–1915) remains a complicated and fascinating figure who thoroughly rewards our attention.

One compelling clue to the man is the mysterious crate of paintings aboard the *Lusitania*, which was valued for insurance purposes at 4 million British pounds. Ongoing rumors that it contained museum-quality masterpieces by the likes of Rubens and Rembrandt raises the larger question: why would a dealer bring such pictures from art-hungry New York back to art-rich Europe?

One theory is that Lane was escorting paintings owned by the dealer Joseph Duveen for their temporary loan to the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin. Those who knew Lane well would not have found this type of “errand” out of character. After all, he was serving as that museum’s director during the 14 months before his death. If the idea of an art dealer running a major museum strikes us as problematic today, it only underscores the complexity of this man, whom many considered a chameleon of the art world.

In the superb, full-length portrait of Lane painted by Antonio Mancini, he stares directly at the viewer, his face rendered with quick, agitated brushstrokes that convey his restless personality. In only 39 years, Lane played a multiplicity of roles — dealer, collector, benefactor, and museum director. While maintaining a respectable business handling the Old Masters, he championed, above all else, the public display of modern art. Paradoxically, it was Lane’s involvement in the non-commercial side of art — as

(LEFT) TITIAN (c. 1488–1576), *Portrait of a Man in a Red Cap*, c. 1510, oil on canvas, 32 3/8 x 28 in., Frick Collection, New York ■ (BELOW) BERTHE MORISOT (1841–1895), *Summer’s Day*, c. 1879, oil on canvas, 18 x 29 1/2 in., National Gallery, London (Sir Hugh Lane Bequest)



PIERRE-AUGUSTE RENOIR (1841–1919), *The Umbrellas*, c. 1881–86, oil on canvas, 71 x 45 1/4 in., National Gallery, London (Sir Hugh Lane Bequest)

a driving force behind the establishment of public collections — that has defined his legacy and put Ireland firmly on the map of global culture.

A DISCERNING EYE

As a dealer, Lane had a penchant for spotting gems beneath dusty surfaces. After a stint in a Bond Street gallery, he “differentiated himself from the trade by assuming the guise of the connoisseurial gentleman dealer.”² Lane’s London residence, Lindsey House, functioned as a gallery where he could live among the artworks like collectors do. The American writer Theodore Dreiser called it “a delightful palace of art” where clients were welcomed into elegantly appointed interiors with a rotating selection of British, Italian, and Dutch paintings set among fine furniture and artifacts.

Lane’s dealing in Old Masters ran parallel to his ostensibly peculiar desire to purchase modern European art. At the urging of his friend the Dublin-born, London-based painter William Orpen, he enthusiastically bought French Impressionist works for himself.

During multiple visits to the respected Paris dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, Lane acquired significant paintings that made him one of Britain’s earliest collectors of Impressionism: Morisot’s *Summer’s Day*, Degas’s *On the Beach*, Renoir’s *The Umbrellas*, and Manet’s *Music in the Tuileries Gardens* and *Eva Gonzalès* would rate as outstanding acquisitions in any era. A marker of this esteem for modern French art is Orpen’s large painting of 1909, *Homage to Manet*, which shows a group of men in Lane’s home. Reading aloud from a newspaper at left is the critic George Moore; Lane appears at far right with his hand to his face. (The other men are, left to right, the artist Philip Wilson Steer, the critic D.S. MacColl, and the artists Walter Sickert and Henry Tonks.) Hanging above them on the wall is Manet’s large 1870 portrait of the artist Eva Gonzalès.

Lane’s personal interest in French art was tied to an agenda he surely considered the most important of his career: establishing (and donating to) the first public gallery of modern art in Dublin. But what motivated him to make French Impressionism the centerpiece of this effort? Lane remained resolute in his support of such daring modern art at a time when few people in Britain took notice of it. His initiative was informed by the unique insights he had developed while wearing so many different “hats.”

First, from his vantage point as a dealer, Lane observed that the art market was increasingly woven into the tapestry of global trade, ever more defined by the widening reach of the British Empire and its newly minted millionaires, who should and would become patrons of the arts. Modernity, and modern art, were themselves woven into the fabric of such commerce. Sec-



ond, the French works anchored a philanthropic initiative through which Lane sought to encourage donations by Irish artists and others to a new Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, and thus to deepen the civic pride of Dubliners and all Irish people.

Curatorially, Lane believed that contemporary art best reflected the restlessness of modern Western society and saw it as a wellspring to tap. On an ideological level, he thought that the freshness of modern art would not only educate the general public, but also nurture a distinctive

new school of painting in Ireland. His thinking had been profoundly shaped by his famous aunt, the dramatist Augusta, Lady Gregory, a key figure in the Celtic Revival. Around this time, the most interesting Irish artists went abroad to seek training, rather than entering traditional academies at home. For example, Nathaniel Hone the Younger studied in France with Thomas Couture; infused with light, his landscapes incorporate techniques he had gleaned from the Barbizon painters. Walter Osborne also honed his craft on the Continent.



WILLIAM ORPEN (1878–1931), *Homage to Manet*, 1909, oil on canvas, 64 1/8 x 51 1/8 in., Manchester Art Gallery, England

Alert to the influences Irishmen were absorbing in France, Lane was convinced that French art could infuse his country with sophistication while also connecting Dublin to the rest of Europe, from which it had long been shielded by London's imperialist interventions. As early as 1904, he organized exhibitions representing a range of artists, including Irish and French ones, in both London and Dublin. Lane also supported living Irish artists such as John Butler Yeats, recognizing their talent and the need to display their works long-term. He hoped these activities would coalesce as essential ingredients baked into a plan to shape a collection that would mobilize a sense of national identity.³

Lane played his hand aggressively with the city government — formally known as the Dublin Corporation — to establish a permanent home for the collection, pushing for specific provisions on its location and selection of architect. He even made the promised gift of 39 French paintings contingent on his satisfaction with the future deal. Lane encountered headwinds of various types but managed to secure enough government support to display his pictures in a temporary location on Harcourt Street. In 1908, the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art opened its doors there, free to all visitors and featuring 285 works, many donated by Lane and various contemporary artists. When it came time to hang them, Lane used techniques that had succeeded at Lindsey House, displaying them alongside three-dimensional objects of all kinds. This tactic

EDOUARD MANET (1832–1883), *Music in the Tuileries Garden*, 1862, oil on canvas, 30 x 46 1/2 in., National Gallery, London (Sir Hugh Lane Bequest)





WILLIAM ORPEN (1878–1931), *Self-Portrait*, 1913, oil on canvas, 48 3/8 x 35 3/8 in., Saint Louis Art Museum

centered on the idea that careful staging was at the heart of successful public engagement. For his services to art, Lane was knighted by King Edward VII in 1909.

ENDURING CHALLENGES

Despite strong lobbying by Lane's supporters in artistic and literary circles, the search for a permanent home collapsed in 1913. Lane had overplayed his hand by relying on the Impressionists for leverage. He saw his gift as transformational, but the civic authorities — dominated by conservative Catholic factions — did not share his enthusiasm. Disappointingly, the wider public remained ambivalent about the French pictures, sensing that they somehow conflicted with Ireland's uniqueness, despite Lane's argument that a national identity could be constructed from both native origins and a pan-European viewpoint.⁴

In 1913, feeling rebuffed, Lane bequeathed all 39 French paintings to the National Gallery in London. In May 1915, news of Lane's tragic death reverberated around the world, but the most jarring aftershock was the discovery of his recent "codicil of forgiveness" that reversed the earlier bequest by redirecting it to Dublin. Alas, this signed document had no legal standing because it had never been witnessed.

Since 1915, often against the backdrop of tense Anglo-Irish relations, this legal limbo has produced various negotiated agreements that split the collection into groups rotated between London and Dublin, though official ownership remains with the former. The bequest has stirred an ongoing debate on ownership and a long-running campaign by Dublin to recover the paintings that, once spurned, have now accrued significant commercial value and become powerful symbols of Irish national pride.



Dublin City Gallery: The Hugh Lane is located in the 18th-century Charlemont House on Parnell Square.

The latest sharing agreement officially expired in 2019, so naturally the Lane Bequest was on the agenda of a September 2019 meeting of the trustees of London's National Gallery.⁵ (No resolution has been announced since then, and the situation has only grown more complicated in light of Brexit: the Republic of Ireland remains in the European Union while Britain has left it.)

Whatever the outcome, the Dublin City Gallery: The Hugh Lane has since 1933 stood proudly in its permanent home on Parnell Square, filled with the many non-French artworks that Lane acquired or attracted, plus others collected since his death. It is a testament to its idiosyncratic founder, who has been aptly described as "an art dealer who never wanted to sell a painting, a collector who immediately gave his art away, a donor who capriciously changed his will and instigated a legal dispute between two museums."⁶

Lane's capacity to triangulate the roles of dealer, donor, and director — to play the art-world equivalent of hopscotch — proved instrumental in developing a modern framework for public collections. His fingerprints can even be found in South Africa, where he helped establish the first public art museums in Cape Town and Johannesburg. Today art professionals often employ similar forms of shape-shifting amid ever-blurring lines.

Though Lane did not live to see his dream completely fulfilled, his spirit of inclusion and generosity lives on. Today "The Hugh Lane" is free to visit and features a dynamic program of exhibitions and events, a perpetual reminder of his role in the formation of modern Ireland. ●

Information: When in Dublin, visit hughlane.ie. For more, read Morna O'Neill's book *Hugh Lane: The Art Market and the Art Museum, 1893–1915* (2018, Yale University Press) or watch Thaddeus O'Sullivan's drama-documentary film *Citizen Lane* (2018).

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NOTES

- 1 Robert O'Byrne, *Hugh Lane, 1875–1915* (2000, Lilliput Press), 243.
- 2 Morna O'Neill, *Hugh Lane: The Art Market and the Art Museum, 1893–1915* (2018, Yale University Press), 164.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 70–75.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 72–81.
- 5 National Gallery, London, Minutes of the Board Meeting, Thursday, 19 September 2019, Item 12.1.
- 6 O'Neill, 8.