

Kernoff, Harry

by Diarmaid Ferriter

Kernoff, Harry (1900–74), painter, was born 9 January 1900 in London, son of Isaac Kernoff, furniture-maker, of Russian-Jewish extraction, and Katherine Kernoff (née Bardanelle), a member of an old Spanish-Jewish family. Kernoff was apprenticed to his father as a cabinet-maker and attended an elementary school in London, but showed more interest in art, and when the family moved to Dublin (May 1914), he began attending the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art at night. After winning the Taylor scholarship in 1923 he became a full-time day student, encouraged by established painters such as Seán Keating (qv) and Patrick Tuohy (qv). Kernoff showed a particular interest in drawing Dublin, and was one of the few artists at work in the city whose work demonstrated a social conscience and awareness of the plight of the unemployed, as revealed in such paintings as 'Dublin kitchen' (1923). Clarity of vision, careful craftsmanship, and a refusal to romanticise characterised his work, and in 1926 he began an exhibiting association with the RHA that was to last for the rest of his life; he was elected to membership in 1936. Actively involved with literary and theatre figures, he was a member of the Radical Club and the Studio Art Club, and at his studio (in Stamer St., Dublin) painted a remarkable range of portraits of leading Dublin figures including W. B. Yeats (qv), Flann O'Brien (qv), Sean O'Casey (qv), Hilton Edwards (qv), F. R. Higgins (qv), Brendan Behan (qv), and James Joyce (qv). A strong independence of style marked his work, reflected in his one-man exhibitions held in Dublin yearly between 1926 and 1958. When portrait painting, he preferred to paint his subject in one sitting to retain a freshness of vision and avoid a laboured work.

Exceptionally prolific, he was a portrait, landscape, and decorative painter. As well as being responsible for the decorative scheme at the Little Theatre in South William St., Dublin, he designed the settings for Dublin productions of Sean O'Casey's 'The shadow of a gunman' and Lord Dunsany's (qv) 'The glittering gate'. Politically left-wing, he was a member of the Friends of Soviet Russia and his woodcuts were often used in republican and labour newspapers in the 1930s and 1940s; he designed the masthead of the communist weekly the *Irish Workers' Voice*, as well as being part of a delegation to visit Leningrad and Moscow (1930), and was involved in assisting anti-fascist campaigns in Dublin. In 1931 he visited Paris and exhibited 'Metro', 'Paris', and 'Place de Tertre', and in the same year had a sole show in Gieve's Gallery, London, where he displayed 'Ukraine peasant'. In the 1920s Kernoff had developed an interest in the avant-garde and modern movements, but seemed more comfortable with realism and became one of the main artistic chroniclers of social life in urban and rural Ireland, as demonstrated in his exhibitions of paintings at St Stephen's Green and the Victor Waddington gallery, Dublin, with paintings of Dublin landmarks, pubs, shops, and houses, as well as paintings of the Dún Chaoin district in Kerry and the Blasket Islands.

A popular, humorous, and sociable character, with a fondness for swimming and satiric verse, he could often be seen at the Palace bar in Fleet St. and scouring other Dublin pubs for suitable portrait subjects. He exhibited at world fairs in Glasgow (1938) and New York (1939). In the 1940s he began painting on a smaller scale on canvases and produced hundreds of miniature oil paintings. The first of his three publications of woodcuts appeared in 1942, followed by *A storyteller's childhood* in 1946. In 1953 he was represented at the contemporary Irish art exhibition at Aberystwyth in Wales, in 1957 spent a year painting at Nova Scotia, and in 1964 and 1965 exhibited small water-colours in Lugano, Italy, and in Toronto, Canada. In 1965 he was represented by portraits at the W. B. Yeats centenary exhibition in the NGL. For many years he was a member of the arts advisory committee of the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, and in 1974 was made a life member of the United Arts Club, Dublin. Unmarried, he died in Dublin 25 December 1974. His papers are deposited in the NLI.

WWW; Bruce Arnold, *A concise history of Irish art* (1977); Brian Kennedy, *The state and the arts in independent Ireland* (1990); Brian Kennedy, *Irish art and modernism 1880–1950* (1991); Boylan; Snoddy; Dermot Keogh, *Jews in twentieth-century Ireland* (1998)