

Waddington, Victor

by Terry Clavin

Waddington, Victor (1907–81), art dealer and gallery owner, was born on 9 January 1907 in Stepney, London, the second son of five sons and two daughters of William George Waddington, a schoolteacher and convert to Judaism, originally from a presbyterian family in rural Aberdeenshire, Scotland, and his wife Betta, who was born into a Jewish family in Ostralsberg, Germany. A keen schoolboy boxer, Victor grew up in Scotland, England and Bermuda, as his father moved between jobs before quitting teaching to establish a furniture store at 87 Marlborough Street, Dublin, in autumn 1921. Victor appears to have remained in Britain in a boarding school and then to have worked in London, later telling friends that he made a living from engaging in bare-knuckled prize fights. In the mid to late 1920s he returned to his family in Dublin. His father was declared bankrupt in 1926, though the household furnishings business continued into the early 1930s.

In early 1928, with the help of his future father-in-law, the Dublin furniture maker Nathan Levine, Victor leased an upstairs room at 28 South Anne Street for a picture selling and framing business, later also taking over the ground floor. Grandly titled the Victor Waddington Galleries, it stocked cheap, low grade paintings with most of the profits coming from framing paintings and photographs, and from restoring paintings. He targeted customers normally priced out of art by selling drawings by well-known artists and prints of famous works. Similarly, he allowed free admission and provided free programmes for the regular ten-day exhibitions of Irish and foreign artists staged in his gallery from 1929. In January 1931 he married Zelda Levine. They had three sons and settled in Victoria Road, Rathgar, in 1935.

By then he was moving into better quality paintings as well as sculpture and ceramics. He opened a second branch in Nassau Street in 1937 and established a pottery studio in Kilkenny with Peter Brennan around 1940. Having little appreciation for the avant-garde art emanating from Paris, he dealt mainly in conventional paintings of rural Irish folk scenes and landscapes by established academic artists like Seán Keating (qv), Douglas Alexander and Seán O'Sullivan (qv). He sought to develop the small Irish art market by taking a stall at the RDS during the annual Spring Show and by organising exhibitions in the provinces, including annual exhibitions in Limerick from 1935 and in Cork from 1940. He also exhibited young unknowns in his gallery. In early 1939 he went to New York where he arranged the showing in the Hotel Astor of 270 works by twenty Irish artists, mostly appealing to American views of Ireland as a rural idyll.

He prospered during the period of the second world war, as strict economic controls left the wealthy with little except art to spend on or invest in. In September 1941 he opened a proper gallery on larger premises at 8 South Anne Street, which

was praised for its widening vista effect and its natural and artificial lighting. The attractiveness of the venue was enhanced by subsequent renovations. Later he closed his Nassau Street branch and used 28 South Anne Street for framing and print selling, leaving 8 South Anne Street as his gallery.

In 1943 he finally heeded the promptings of his assistant Leo Smith by agreeing to become sole dealer and business manager for Jack B. Yeats (qv), then Ireland's most noted yet most unappreciated resident artist. Behind the formality of their interactions, Waddington came to revere Yeats, who filled in the significant gaps in his knowledge of modern art. Yeats in turn valued Waddington's energy and promotional flair. In 1944 he sketched Waddington as he dozed in an armchair, later presenting him with the completed painting 'Sleep'. Waddington's features are indiscernible in this characteristically blurred rendering. Yeats also acknowledged their mutual love of horseracing by decorating his letters to Waddington with doodles of horses and riders.

Waddington used his good relations with the newspapers to turn the opening nights of his one-man Yeats exhibitions into prestigious social events where Dublin's professional and business classes could vaunt their wealth, taste and acumen by buying into what they were led to believe was an artist of international stature. Competitive bidding was encouraged by arranging group viewings for select patrons in advance of the general public who came in unprecedented numbers to the eight such exhibitions held during 1943–1955. In 1945 he also arranged a Yeats retrospective in the National College of Art and published an extended essay on Yeats by Thomas MacGreevy (qv), hailing him as Ireland's national artist. Whereas Yeats paintings had been priced for as little as £30 in the early 1940s, by the mid-1950s most new Yeats paintings were going for at least several hundred pounds with the best ones fetching several thousand. Yeats became far more prolific as a consequence.

Following the effective launch of the Irish modern art movement in 1943 with the first annual Irish Exhibition of Living Art (IELA) show, his gallery emerged as Ireland's most important modern art venue, though he continued also to sell and exhibit academic art. From 1945 he kept previously isolated Irish art lovers abreast of the latest international developments by holding regular exhibitions for foreign artists, some of world repute including Jacob Epstein and Oscar Kokoschka. His 1947 exhibitions on contemporary British and French art aroused intense interest and debate. Through such initiatives and by cultivating a small circle of collectors, he enabled a tentative form of modern art to survive in Ireland, despite the hostility of the general public and a conservative art establishment.

From the mid-1940s he assembled a stable of young modernists, most notably Colin Middleton (qv), Daniel O'Neill (qv), Nevill Johnson (qv), Gerard Dillon (qv) and George Campbell (qv). These five could commit themselves full-time to painting because he paid them a salary and covered all promotional and painting materials

costs in return for control of their output and a 50 per cent sales commission. All exhibited regularly in his gallery, achieving career heights of commercial and critical success under his patronage. Louis Le Brocqy (qv), Thurloe Conolly (1918–2016) and Patrick Swift (qv) completed Waddington's monopoly of Ireland's best young progressive talent, permitting him to be dismissive towards those he considered second rate. His modernists dominated the IELA shows from the late 1940s to the late 1950s.

Yet Yeats remained easily his most important and cherished client. He arranged one-man Yeats shows in galleries in London (1946, 1948 and 1953), Leeds (1948), New York (1953), Paris (1954) and Belfast (1956), and spent a year during 1951–2 touring North American galleries with forty Yeats paintings. Hampered by Yeats's refusal to reveal personal details, to comment on his works and to permit reproductions, Waddington's attempts to promote him outside Ireland were unsuccessful. He also secured his younger artists' inclusion in various group and one-man shows held in Britain, continental Europe and North America, and sent an exhibition of his Irish modernists on a tour of thirteen US cities in 1950. His unstinting efforts at developing foreign markets for Irish art came expensively to naught.

Considered to have developed Ireland's first strictly commercially and professionally run gallery, he brought a greater ambition to bear on Irish art promotion, recalling 'I always felt I could make Dublin a little Paris' (*Ir. Times*, 22 Apr. 1980, 10). He perfected the role of the suave impresario and was discerning about those collectors he took under his wing, projecting an air of courtly aloofness that could never quite contain his underlying zeal, both for art and money. On quiet days, he would discuss art at length with gallery patrons, irrespective of their wealth. He supported struggling artists and sold paintings on easy hire purchase terms to aficionados of limited means. A bon viveur, he dined regularly at Dublin's most exclusive restaurant, Jammet's, taking his artists there for culinary and psychological succour. His glamorous social set included Louis Jammet (qv), the owner of Jammet's; the art collector Serge Phillipson; and Howard Robinson (qv), an eminent accountant and banker.

Outside of art, he was involved in the Irish Amateur Boxing Association, was a member of the Terenure LDF during the Emergency and was prominent within Dublin's Jewish community. In 1945 he was vice-chairman of the Jewish Children's Rescue Fund, which raised £20,000 to help orphaned and homeless Jewish children across Europe. Ever conscious of his outsider status in Irish society, he contemplated emigrating to Palestine in 1945 and was regarded by some as oversensitive to perceived racial slights. He had reason, most obviously in 1944 when he faced down catholic moralists threatening to damage his premises unless he removed a nude print from the front window.

In decline after Emergency-era controls lapsed in 1946, the Irish art market collapsed along with the national economy in the early to mid-1950s. His health

suffered while relations with his artists deteriorated, as financial pressures obliged him to reduce their allowances. There were profits from various side lines, including a shop on O'Connell Street selling junk art. Mostly, though, his losses, which he put at £36,000 for 1946–55, were being met by his partner Mabel Spiro (née Fridberg), a wealthy Jewish widow, originally from Cork. (He separated from his wife in 1946, eventually divorcing her in order to marry Mabel). In June 1955 he announced his intention to leave for England but procrastinated, not wanting to abandon Yeats who he was visiting daily in a nursing home. The gallery finally closed in late February 1957, a few weeks before Yeats's death. Many of his Irish artists sank into penury with some becoming embittered towards Waddington.

Living in London at Strathearn Place, Bayswater, he opened his new gallery at 2 Cork Street, Mayfair, with an exhibition of Yeats's last paintings in March 1958. He would host another eight Yeats exhibitions in Cork Street to 1978. In partnership with his son Leslie (1934–2015), Waddington represented English artists with an emphasis on the abstract landscapes of the St Ives school. In 1965 he opened a second gallery at 25 Cork Street, which became his sole gallery a year later when his partnership with Leslie ended acrimoniously. While Leslie established himself as a leading figure in the London art world by selling American pop art, Victor stuck with an older generation of European artists, playing a significant role from the early 1960s in developing the reputation of Henri Hayden. He also kept supporting Zionist causes, being heavily involved in the British Central Fund for Jewish refugees.

As co-executor of Yeats's will, he controlled his large volume of unsold works, including the early watercolours and ink drawings, which he exhibited for the first time. Scholars and gallery operators collaborating with Waddington over Yeats found him to be territorial, forceful in advancing his collectors' interests and ill-informed about Yeats's early works. Waddington's devoted management of Yeats's legacy was complicated by British critical disdain and the existence of around 1,200 Yeats paintings, many of indifferent quality. Adopting a crude valuation method, based on the date, size, condition and subject, he fed the unsold works carefully onto the market and propped up faltering prices during the 1960s by buying those becoming available. He did so with the help of a network of gallery owners comprising his brother George in Montreal, his former assistant Leo Smith in Dublin and an associate in New York. By the early 1970s collectors saw Yeats as a safe investment, causing prices to rise steadily before rocketing from the late 1980s. Yeats's dominance of the Irish art market from the late twentieth century was Waddington's most enduring legacy.

In 1978 ill-health forced him to relinquish the running of his gallery to his son Theo (b. 1943) who had earlier taken over George Waddington's gallery in Montreal and later operated several other galleries in North America. He died in London on 13 April 1981. There is a portrait of him by Cecil Galbally.

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GRO (marriage cert.); *Kilsyth Chronicle*, 4 Nov. 1921; *Ir. Times*, *passim*, esp.: 2 Nov. 1926; 5 Oct. 1928; 15 Oct. 1931; 13 Feb. 1939; 8 Mar. 1945; 28 Mar. 1953 (profile); 15 Oct. 1955; 9–10 Feb. 1956; 4, 28 Feb. 1957; 15 May 1973; 26 June 1974 (interview); 1 Aug. 1974; 22 April 1980; 22 Apr. 1981 (appreciation); 22 Aug. 1981; 30 June 1983; 25 June 1986; 11 Jan. 1994; 11 Nov. 2003; NAI, Department of Justice, 2013/50/405 'George Somers Waddington: naturalisation' (1939); *Ir. Independent*, *passim*, esp. 22 Sept. 1941; 28 Feb. 1945; 5 Mar. 1947; 22 Feb. 1993; 11 Jan., 30 Mar. 1994; *Irish Tatler and Sketch*, Dec. 1946; Mar., Oct. 1947; Feb. 1948; Nov. 1951; Mar., Apr. (profile) 1956; *Sunday Independent*, 9 Oct. 1949; 9 Dec. 1990; *Social and personal*, Jan. 1950; *The Times*, 11 Mar. 1958; 10 Oct. 1967; 15, 24 Apr. 1981; 3 Dec. 2015; *Jewish Chronicle*, 1 May 1981; Nevill Johnson, *The other side of six* (1983), 49–50, 52; S. B. Kennedy, *Irish art and modernism, 1880–1950* (1991); *Fortnight*, June 1992; Sean Dorman, *Physicians, priests and physicists* (1993), 93–5; Theo Waddington, *Victor Waddington: a tribute* (1993); *Modern painters* (Spring 1993); T. G. Roenthal, *The art of Jack B. Yeats* (1993); *Irish arts review yearbook*, 1993; James White, *Gerard Dillon: an illustrated biography* (1994); Michael Scott, *architect, in (casual) conversation with Dorothy Walker* (1995); Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: the last modernist* (1996); Dorothy Walker, *Modern art in Ireland* (1997); Bruce Arnold, *Jack Yeats* (1998); Brian Fallon, *Age of innocence: Irish culture 1930–1960* (1998); Nick Harris, *Dublin's little Jerusalem* (2002); Vera Ryan, *Movers and shapers: Irish art since 1960* (2003); *Irish arts review*, Autumn 2003; Spring 2005; Theo Waddington and Vivienne Waddington (eds), *Jack B. Yeats: amongst friends* (2004); Vera Ryan, *Movers and shapers 2: Irish visual art 1940–2006* (2006); Michael Bird, *The St Ives artists: a biography of place and time* (2008); Yvonne Scott, *Jack B. Yeats: old and new departures* (2008); John Burns, *Sold! The inside story of how Ireland got bitten by the art bug* (2008); Leslie Waddington, 'Mr Yeats and Mr Waddington', Declan J. Foley (ed), *The only art of Jack B. Yeats* (2009), 20–1; Adrian Clark, *British and Irish art 1945–51: from war to festival* (2010); Eimear O'Connor, *Seán Keating: art, politics and building the Irish nation* (2013); Stuart Rosenblatt, *'Heritage', the A–Z DNA of Irish Jewry* (2013); Catherine Marshall and Peter Murray (eds), *Art and architecture of Ireland, v, twentieth century* (2014); *Independent* (London), 4 Dec. 2015; Edward McGuire, unpublished memoir; Waddington Custot, 'Sixty years on Cork Street' [www.waddingtoncustot.com/exhibition-archive/](http://www.waddingtoncustot.com/exhibition-archive/); interview with Bruce Arnold (art critic); interview with Theo Waddington (son)