

White, (Patrick) James

by Lawrence William White

White, (Patrick) James (1913–2003), arts administrator, art critic and art historian, was born 16 September 1913 in Holles St. maternity hospital, Dublin, son of Thomas John White, a bank clerk, of Grove Cottage, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, and (Mary) Florence White (née Coffey). His father, a native of Tulla, Co. Clare, was an avid devotee of the racetrack, who wrote a column in the *Irish Field* under the pseudonym 'Danny Boy'. Educated at Belvedere College, White left school at age 16 after passing the intermediate certificate examinations, and took a clerkship in the John Player tobacco factory, South Circular Road, to contribute to the family finances, which were straitened by his father's sporting interests. Remaining with the company for over three decades (1929–60), he rose to become an assistant departmental manager.

Throughout these years he assiduously cultivated his deep interest in art, which dated from his schooldays. Introduced by his friend and former Belvedere classmate, the artist and catholic priest Jack Hanlon (qv), to the latter's art teacher, Mainie Jellett (qv), White took several lessons with Jellett, who soon advised him to pursue his interest in art by becoming a critic; his inability to paint was implicit. Through Jellett he also met Evie Hone (qv), and moved in Dublin's artistic, literary, and theatrical circles of the day. Lacking formal education in art, he taught himself by diligent reading, discussions with working artists, and close study of works in studios, exhibitions, galleries, and churches, in Ireland and on holidays to London and continental Europe. Another keen interest was ballet; a founding member (1937) and honorary secretary of the Irish Ballet Club, he recognised the importance of set design in ballet productions, and thus came to see the meaning of painting as a background to movement and music, an insight that greatly influenced his approach to art.

Having lectured occasionally on art, and published some reviews of art and ballet, he became art critic with the *Standard* (c.1940–1950), a catholic publication for which he chiefly reviewed exhibitions of religious art by Jellett, Hone, Seamus Murphy (qv), and others. He utilised the name James White for such art-related activities, while remaining Paddy White in his business position and among intimates. He later became art critic with the *Irish Press* (1950–59) and then with the *Irish Times* (1959–62), appointments that allowed him review secular art as well. His criticism championed the small number of Irish artists working in modernist styles, including Jellett, Hone, Patrick Collins (qv), Nano Reid (qv), Gerard Dillon (qv), Oisín Kelly (qv), and Louis Le Brocqy. In the early years of the annual Irish Exhibition of Living Art (initiated in 1943), White would lead groups of visitors through the gallery, talking about the pictures; the practice eventually evolved into formal lectures. He gave similar tours and lectures in the National Gallery of Ireland (NGI), and other galleries

and exhibitions. In the 1950s he lectured on art to small groups throughout Ireland, driving to venues after his daily work, under a scheme financed by the bequest of Mrs George Bernard Shaw for the betterment of Irish girls; he also lectured with touring exhibitions of prints organised by the Arts Council. He presented a music programme on Radio Éireann on the lives of the composers, and contributed to arts programmes on the BBC Northern Ireland Home Service.

White collaborated with Thomas MacGreevy (qv) to establish an Irish branch of the International Association of Art Critics, and to bring the body's 1953 congress to Dublin, an event that exposed the work of Irish artists to an influential international audience. Throughout the 1950s he organised exhibitions and wrote exhibition catalogues; these included the Tostal exhibitions, and overseas exhibitions sponsored by the cultural relations committee of the Department of External Affairs. He wrote the catalogue for Le Brocquy's prize-winning show at the 1956 Venice Biennale. He organised the major 'Paintings from Irish collections' exhibition (1957) at Dublin's Municipal Gallery of Modern Art (MGMA), which comprised some 170 canvases loaned by private collectors, businesses, and religious houses, and revealed a surprisingly wide range of work. Notwithstanding his lack of academic qualifications, he was external lecturer in the history of art at UCD (1955–77), external lecturer at TCD (1958–62), and professor of the history of painting at the RHA.

White resigned his position at Player's on becoming curator of the MGMA (1960–64), moving with his family into an apartment above the gallery in Charlemont House, Parnell Square. Transforming the character of the historically sedate and dowdy institution, he attracted a much larger and more diverse public by organising temporary exhibitions (some eight to ten each year), making the premises available for meetings and conferences, and inviting special groups for exclusive lectures and tours (for example, Sunday morning visits by the staff of one or several business firms). A particular success was the 'Art: USA: now' exhibition of contemporary works from the Johnson Wax Company collection (1964). He updated the museum's collection of twentieth-century paintings, to which he introduced works by Irish modernists. Shocked to learn that gallery attendants had been refusing admittance to children, he immediately reversed the policy, and took initiatives to encourage visits by children and school groups. The annual 'children's art holiday', featuring lessons for children in painting and drawing from practising artists, was introduced at Christmas 1962, and attracted considerable publicity in the mass media.

As director of the NGI (1964–80), White pursued similarly dynamic and imaginative policies of outreach. He expanded staff, improved facilities, augmented the collection, and increased the number and variety of gallery activities. The early years of his tenure saw the construction and opening (September 1968) of a gallery extension, which housed ten new exhibition rooms, conservation laboratories, a reference library, and restaurant. A permanent restoration department was established following the work of a team of visiting Italian restorers, who

accomplished a long overdue cleaning and restoration of a portion of the gallery's collection (revealing thereby the quality of many works whose importance had been regarded theretofore as primarily archival, especially of the Italian seicento).

White's pursuit of acquisitions to the national collection was boosted by the colossal increase in value of the Shaw bequest (amounting to one-third of the royalties accruing to the published works of the playwright George Bernard Shaw (qv)), owing to the international box-office success of the film *My fair lady* (1964), based on Shaw's play *Pygmalion*. White employed Shaw funds to purchase many major works, thereby filling gaps in the collection. A particularly fortuitous purchase was 'The funeral of Patroclus' (1781), a canvas only recently discovered and identified as the long-lost work exhibited by Jacques-Louis David at his first Paris salon. Other masterpieces acquired through the Shaw fund included two Romanesque apse frescoes from the church of St Pierre de Camppublic in southern France; a collection of twenty-four Greek and Russian icons; the 'Annunciation' altarpiece by Jacques Yverni (*fl.* 1410–38), a rare example of the international gothic style in the school of Avignon; a 'Crucifixion' by the Sienese master Giovanni di Paolo (1403–82); 'The image of St Alexis' by Étienne de la Tour (1621–92); 'Venus and Cupid' (1756), a rococo overdoor painted by Fragonard for Mme du Barry; and Goya's 'El sueño' (c.1800).

White deliberately enhanced the NGI's representation of Irish artists, not only by purchase, but also by fostering a receptive attitude toward gifts and bequests. He acquired many eighteenth-century portraits and landscapes (including two views of Dublin (from Clontarf and from Chapelizod) by William Ashford (qv), first president of the RHA), and the important subject painting 'The conjuror' (1755), a satire on the compositional methods of Joshua Reynolds by Nathaniel Hone (qv) the elder. He greatly increased the gallery's holdings of Jack B. Yeats (qv) (a personal friend, whom White considered the greatest modern Irish painter), acquiring works that spanned the artist's career, including such familiar pieces of the collection as 'About to write a letter' (1935), 'The last dawn but one' (1948), 'Grief' (1951), and 'For the road' (1951), and a group of watercolours including 'The man from Aranmore' (1905); 'In memory of Boucicault and Bianconi' (1937) was a gift from film director John Huston (qv). Other modern Irish painters whose representations were strengthened were Roderic O'Connor (qv), Paul Henry (qv) (including the iconic 'Launching the currach' (1911)), William Orpen (qv) ('The holy well' (1915)), and William Leech (qv). 'The goose girl' (c.1921), purchased as a Leech in 1970, became one of the gallery's best-selling works in reproduction, but was subsequently reattributed to English artist Stanley Royle. Among the Jelletts acquired by White was the cubist 'Decoration', which had caused a sensation in 1923 as the first abstract painting ever exhibited in Dublin.

Under White's direction the NGI hosted both home-generated and international touring exhibitions, sent exhibitions abroad, and became a thriving venue for lectures, seminars, concerts, and receptions. Gallery attendance increased ninefold

by 1978 (to 506,000). The NGI loaned works extensively to the Irish provinces and overseas (empowered by the National Gallery of Ireland Act (1963), rescinding a restriction that had allowed loans to public exhibitions only), becoming known as one of the world's most generous lending galleries. Pictures from the reserve collection were loaned to government offices and Irish embassies abroad.

On behalf of the Irish state, White negotiated a revision of the 1959 agreement regarding disposition of the pictures bequeathed by Hugh Lane (qv). Under the old agreement, the thirty-nine paintings were divided into two lots that alternated every five years between Dublin's MGMA and the National Gallery in London; among other factors, the frequent transport posed risks to the works. Under the new agreement (1979), for the following fourteen years thirty of the paintings were loaned to the MGMA, eight remained in London, and one (Renoir's 'Les parapluies') spent seven years in Dublin and seven in London. Though some commentators protested that White had secured quantity at the expense of quality, the agreement (which was subsequently further revised) was generally welcomed in Ireland as a qualified triumph.

A member of the Arts Council (1967–84), White was the body's chairman (1978–84). The priorities of his chairmanship were to secure capital funding; seek a government policy on the arts in the education system; develop community arts; and increase support for the individual artist. A facet of the latter objective was the launch of Aosdána (1981), an organisation of 150 established creative artists, each in receipt of an annual state grant. Less publicised was the extension of the existing Ciste Cholmcille fund, for the support of individual artists and their dependants in poor financial circumstances, by the council's being authorised not only to administer but partly to finance the fund. Adjusting to a substantial cut in its 1982 budget, the council controversially curtailed its support for some established (and high-profile) institutions, ostensibly to allow funding for smaller organisations and new initiatives. The decisions provoked a highly publicised clash with the taoiseach, Charles Haughey (1925–2006), during which White and his colleagues withstood pressure to sack the council's director, Colm Ó Briain. White's diplomacy helped assuage the situation, resulting in reaffirmation of the council's independence, and increased funding for 1983.

Honorary secretary of the RDS (1986–90), White catalogued the society's collection, in collaboration with Kevin Bright (1998). He was awarded an honorary LLD by the NUI (1970), and was decorated by the governments of France, Italy, and West Germany. A trustee of the Chester Beatty Library of Oriental Art, he belonged to numerous art associations in Ireland and internationally. He served as honorary secretary and president of the Society of the Friends of the National Collections of Ireland. His publications include: *Irish stained glass* (1963), a catalogue of twentieth-century work written with Michael Wynne (1937–2003); *National Gallery of Ireland* (1968); *Jack B. Yeats* (1971; NGI exhibition catalogue); *John Butler Yeats and the Irish renaissance* (1972; NGI exhibition catalogue); the biographies *Pauline*

*Bewick: painting a life* (1985) and *Gerard Dillon* (1994); and many other catalogues, prefaces, and articles.

With a self-professed mission 'to bring art to the people' (Kennedy (1991), ix), White both stimulated and informed the awakening of interest in the visual arts in Ireland associated with the increased prosperity of the 1960s. Regarding himself in his various roles as primarily an educator, he was a stimulating lecturer and enlightening author, who discussed art in lucid, accessible terms, avoiding overly scholarly or esoteric language or tone. His taste embraced the entire history of humanity's artistic creation, encompassing every epoch, school, and style. Small and suave, he was unashamedly passionate about art, capable of a physical response to the beauty of a painting. His recreations were golf, gardening, and bridge. He married (1941) Agnes ('Aggie') Bowe; they had three sons and two daughters (one of whom predeceased him), and resided at 15 Herbert Park and later at 66 Cedars, Herbert Park Lane, Dublin. He died 2 June 2003 in the Ailesbury nursing home, Sandymount, Dublin. A portrait by Edward McGuire (qv) is in the NGI.

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GRO (birth, death certs.); *Ir. Times*, 22 May, 23 Aug. 1957; *ITWW*; *Ir. Times*, 24 Jan. 1976 (profile); 20 Oct. 1979; 8 Dec. 1979 (profile); Brian Fallon, 'The municipal gallery and modern art', *Ir. Times*, 13 Feb. 1980; *Ir. Times*, 12 Mar. 1980; Homan Potterton, introduction to National Gallery of Ireland, *Illustrated summary catalogue of paintings* (1981), xi–xlii: xxxviii–xli; Brian Kennedy, *Dreams and responsibilities: the state and the arts in independent Ireland* (c.1990); id. (ed.), *Art is my life: a tribute to James White* (1991); Dorothy Walker, *Modern art in Ireland* (1997); *Ir. Times*, 7 June 2003; *Sunday Independent*, 15 June 2003; *Times*, 18 June 2003; *WWW*, xi