

Important painting rediscovered by Clara art dealer and journalist

AN important picture which was rediscovered by Irish fine art dealer and journalist, James Gibbons, from Clara, has been purchased by the State.

The picture is Sarah Purser's portrait of the mother of Sir Arthur Vicars which once formed part of the collection of Sir Arthur and hung in Kilmorna House in Kerry.

Sir Arthur instructed his valet to save the family portraits by throwing them out of the window just before the old IRA shot him dead and burned down Kilmorna.

"This picture has been hovering under the radar for years and is of museum quality," explains James Gibbons who recognised the work at first sight.

"Dr John O'Grady compiled the catalogue raisonné on Purser and was invited to attend a meeting in a private gallery in Dublin where I had sent the picture for some initial restoration. I was thrilled when he confirmed that not only was it by Purser, but it was the artist at her best. The renowned art historian Dr O'Grady wrote a biography of the artist *The Life and Work of Sarah Purser*. He's a former lecturer in the art history department of UCD and worked alongside Dr Nicola Figgis, an associate professor emerita of that department and wife of the late Fergus Goodbody of Ashmount in Clara," says James Gibbons.

"I've always had a keen interest in Kerry ever since Bernard McNamara asked me to research the history of the Parknasilla Hotel," he says. "I enjoyed helping to promote the hotel with Jasmine Guinness who was brand ambassador for the Parknasilla Hotel Goffs Millions."

Purser was a painter, portraitist - often commissioned to paint posthumous portraits - art activist and stained glass artist. The picture hung in Clara for a period before contracts were signed between the State and Mr Gibbons, who originally trained with the prestigious fine art auction house, Adams on Stephen's Green. "The late Maurice Greene from Corkhill in Clara also trained in Adams many years ago," Gibbons confirms.

"The late Knight of Glin was Christie's representative in Ireland and he introduced me to the director of the Hunt Museum, Ciaran MacGonigal, who

recommended to Brian Coyle, the chairman of Adams that I be taken on and trained. I'd been to universities and had some of the theory which is all well and good but I needed to handle blue chip pictures and furniture and soon I was handling extremely important works of art and cataloguing marvellous Irish furniture."

Sir Arthur Vicars held the ceremonial role of keeper of the Irish crown jewels in Dublin Castle which were stolen on the eve of the visit to Ireland by King Edward VII in 1907. Sir Arthur also kept his

mother's jewels in Dublin Castle for safe keeping and they were also stolen in the jewellery heist. Posters were distributed by the Dublin Metropolitan Police offering a reward of £1,000 for information leading to the recovery of the jewels and a full description of Mrs Vicars' jewellery appeared on the posters beside a detailed description of the crown jewels. After his dismissal Sir Arthur eventually settled in Kilmorna House in Kerry. His mother had been married previously to Pierce Mahony of Kilmorna House and one of Sir Arthur's half-brother's who styled himself as 'The O'Mahony of Kerry' was also painted by Purser. During the War of Independence Sir Arthur was accused of being too friendly with the British troops and was shot dead following a raid on his house by the IRA.

Mr Gibbons went on to work as assistant curator with Ib Jorgensen in his art gallery on Molesworth St and then assisted the late Matty Ryan, Bonhams Fine Art Auctioneers' representative in Ireland.

"One never knew who was on the other end of the telephone in Matty's since he knew lots of royals on a couple of continents. The Queen Mother and Princess Margaret were friends of his, but had passed away by the time I started to assist him sourcing pictures and furniture in Ireland for Bonhams, however Princess

Michael of Kent was still a great friend of his," Gibbons says. "Matty was also an ami de la maison of the top racehorse owners and trainers in Ireland and the UK and he knew instinctively that everyone was the same and never kept people in compartments, introducing one layer

of his friends with another and expected his old friends - royalty included - to budge up and make room at his famous dinner parties in Thurles. At heart, Matty was a diamond expert and often mentioned Sir Arthur and the disappearance of the crown jewels and we often wondered what happened to them. In this particular portrait Mrs Vicars is wearing a ring, presumably one of the pieces of jewellery that was stolen."

Gibbons recalls another of Purser's famous historical works, a double portrait of Constance and Eva Gore Booth purchased by the Naughtons at the Lisadell Sale in 2003 conducted by Christie's.

He added that "Mr and Mrs Naughton ensured that after the picture was restored it went on public view in the Merrion Hotel and it has hung in the hotel for the past number of years and I have no doubt that the State will restore this picture to an equally high standard."

Exactly a hundred years ago this week a major exhibition of Irish art was held in Paris.

Last Friday (January 28th) a new online exhibition 'Seeing Ireland' was launched in Trinity College which explores one of the most important events in Irish art history: Exposition D'Art Irlandais, held at Galerie Barbazanges in Paris in Jan - February 1922. Among the works on display was Sarah Purser's 'Le Petit Déjeuner' which has been in the National Gallery of Ireland's collection since 1959.

Client: James Adam & Sons
Source: Tullamore Tribune
Date: 03/02/2022
Page: 19
Reach: 9914
Value: 1229.0200

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Sarah Purser's portrait of the mother of Sir Arthur Vicars



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Page: 13
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In the Salerooms

ADAM'S

February is a good time for buying art, especially when the larger auction houses go online with selections which, in many cases, are on their second round at auction. John Redmond, for example, is an artist whose work is currently popular with interior designers. His Abstract Composition (Lot 181: est. €500 to €700) is going under the hammer at Adam's Timed Online Art Auction, which closes on Tuesday (February 8). At 100 x 100cm, it's a big whack of a painting. The highlight of the sale is a collection of 100 paintings by Fergus O'Ryan, which are being sold to benefit Our Lady's Hospice in Harold's Cross in Dublin. This follows a stand-alone sale of O'Ryan's work in 2020 and includes landscapes of Spain, France, Italy and Greece, as well as Wicklow and Connemara. Estimates range from €100 to €500

with no reserves. Prints in the sale include Will St Leger's screenprints of Michael Collins (Lots 258-260: est. €400 to €600 each). The one of him wearing a neon pink uniform while carrying a Dior shopping bag is pure class. There are also prints by Gerard Dillon, Jack Yeats, Robert Ballagh and Harry Kernoff.

See adams.ie

MULLEN'S

Kathleen Lynn's 1916 Rising Service Medal sold in Mullen's Collector's Cabinet auction on January 29 for €58,000. The medal was bought by an Irish institution and will remain in the country. Lynn was a medical doctor and a suffragette who joined the Irish Citizen Army as chief medical officer. During the Rising she was part of the City Hall garrison,

assuming a leadership role following the death of Sean Connolly. She was deported and imprisoned in a British jail; after her release she became vice-president of Sinn Féin and was on the run for much of the War of Independence. Lynn was the driving force behind the establishment of Saint Ultan's Children's Hospital, in 1919. Her work with Dublin's inner-city poor had convinced her of the need for a hospital to provide medical and educational facilities for impoverished mothers and infants. Saint Ultan's was the only hospital in Ireland entirely managed by women. It closed in 1983. In the same sale, a rosewood writing slope once owned by Countess Markievicz sold for €2,800. The sloping lid was inlaid with a brass plate engraved "CGB" for Constance Gore-Booth).

See mullenslaurelpark.com



Art's delight: John Redmond's Abstract Composition and Fergus O'Ryan's Innislacken are for sale at Adam's Timed Online Art Auction

