

**Client:** James Adam & Sons  
**Source:** Irish Independent  
**Date:** 01/04/2022  
**Page:** 10  
**Reach:** 90107  
**Value:** 9217.6800

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## A maverick sculptor whose work remains undervalued



### Treasures

**Eleanor Flegg**

*Ireland's fine arts,  
antiques and  
collectables column*

**I**t's an interesting anomaly that, while some artists gain traction after their death, others just don't. Case in point, Oisín Kelly (1915–1981). He was one of the leading Irish sculptors of his generation and tremendously influential in establishing an Irish identity in art. His public art includes *The Children of Lir*, commissioned for the Garden of Remembrance on Dublin's Parnell Square and unveiled by President Eamon de Valera in 1966, and *Two Working Men* (1969) outside Cork County Hall.

His work is widely appealing and much loved. And yet, his smaller pieces are regularly sold at auction for less than €500. Fonsie Mealy's Irish and International Art auction, which took place on March 23, included three pieces by Oisín Kelly. *Celtic Dancers*, a sculpture in earthenware (32 cm high) fetched €500. *Madonna and Child*, an earthenware relief wall-plaque (32 x 24 cm) sold for €480. It was number 17 of a limited edition of 100, signed with the artist's initials. Both these sold within their estimates. Finally, *Viking Ship*, a copper plaque of a ship with figures on the sea

(36 x 34 cm) slightly exceeded its upper estimate and sold for €520. These prices are by no means untypical.

Some of Kelly's smaller unsigned pieces can still be picked up in charity shops around Kilkenny City, where he worked as artist in residence at the Kilkenny Design Workshops (KDW) from 1964 until his death. Maybe it's because he didn't buy into the Great Artist thing.

Being a great artist usually involves a certain amount of ego and Oisín Kelly didn't play the game.

"He didn't have a sense of his own reputation. He came and went and did his work," says Jack Doherty, a ceramic artist who worked with Kelly at the Kilkenny Design Workshops. "He was making statues for churches at the time, but some of the churches didn't have the money to pay for bronze, so I made the statues for him in ceramic, and he would paint them. It was like a moonlighting ceramic business."

Despite his Protestant roots, Kelly did a brisk business in providing statues, crucifixes and relief carvings for Catholic Churches all over Ireland. The high point of his career as an ecclesiastical sculptor

came in 1979 when a silver copy of his statue, *Saint Patrick's Breastplate*, was presented to Pope John Paul II. The art critic Dorothy Walker wrote in 1978 that his work had "the freshness, clear forms and unsentimental affectionate devotion of early Irish sacred art."

Kelly preferred working to commission to what he termed "free work", because he considered the job of an artist was to accept the role that society asked him to play and that an object should be made because someone needs it rather than in the hope that someone may need it.

Walker quoted him as saying that, if one did "free work", it "seems to me inevitable that one is drawn in and enslaves in the whole insane world of advertising and public relations and sales promotions and the cult of personality. We are all condemned to self-expression, and it is foolish to make a virtue of it."

Among Kelly's most iconic pieces for the Kilkenny Design Workshop, a pair of male and female candleholders, 18 cm high, were cast by Waterford Iron Founders in 1966. A pair of these sold for €1,100 at Adam's on February 8, which is closer to an accurate reflection of Kelly's influence and stature. His hand-painted



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ceramic birds, also made for the Kilkenny Design Workshop, are still going for a song.

Last July, a puffin sold for €240 at Adam's. In 2020, a quail and a duck, sold as a single lot, fetched €320. While every statue that Kelly made, big or small, started with a clay model, it's possible that making multiple small sculptures for sale in a shop didn't do his reputation any favours. The art market tends to look down on multiples in clay.

And, if that wasn't sufficiently low-brow, Kelly also designed tea towels on Irish linen screen printed with depictions of seanfhocail (Irish proverbs) and was once quoted as saying that he had found the medium which suited his genius as a painter – the dishcloth. Given his sense of humour, it's quite possible that Kelly wouldn't have minded that, forty years after his death, his prices at auction don't reflect his status as an iconic Irish artist. Maybe he would have liked it that his work is still relatively affordable.

See [fonsiemealy.ie](http://fonsiemealy.ie) and [adams.ie](http://adams.ie)



**Clockwise from left:** A selection of Oisín Kelly's work: an earthenware relief entitled Madonna and Child; iron candleholders; Viking Ship



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## In the Salerooms

### O'REILLY'S AUCTION ROOMS

Betty Ann Norton, who died in 2020, was well known in the world of Irish theatre, especially for her drama school where generations of Irish actors were introduced to the stage. She was also very stylish. A selection of her belongings will go under the hammer at O'Reilly's Auction Rooms from April 6-8. The sale includes glamorous outfits, dramatic jewellery, furniture and decorative interiors pieces.

The estimates are not astronomical. The jewellery in the sale ranges from an emerald and diamond cluster ring (Lot 48: est. €6,000 to €8,000) to a pair of gold cufflinks modelled as Thalia and Melpomene masks with garnet eyes (Lot 42: est. €100 to €200). Clothing is old-school glamorous: tailored with beading and brocade.

There are garments by some of the household names of Irish fashion design — like Ib Jorgensen and John Rocha — but also some that made a splash in their heyday but are less well known now, Louise Raymond, Thomas Wolfangel and Mary Gregory among them. The furniture is also selected with a keen eye to style and includes a Victorian walnut inlaid veneer credenza cabinet (Lot 151: est. €1,200 to €1,400) as well as Irish furniture designs by Al Frank. See [info@oreillysfineart.com](mailto:info@oreillysfineart.com).



**Under the hammer:** A bronze duck by Irish-Ukrainian artist Vadim Tuzov is part of the Adams auction (April 7) of artworks in aid of the Irish Red Cross

### SOTHEBY'S

"...I am to be tried for my life [...] because transportation would be speedy death to me, & worse than death till death comes. But then British dominion in Ireland is also to stand trial, on the same day, for its life. A deep stake on both sides, but the adversary has all the cards in his hand, and cheats like a blackleg..." wrote John Mitchel to Thomas Carlyle.

It was 1848, at the height of the Great Famine, and Mitchel was the editor of the *United Irishman*, which called for Irish independence. He was tried for seditious libel and sentenced to 14 years' transportation. The letter is coming up for sale at Sotheby's, London on April 4 (Lot 99: est. € 2,383 to €3,574).

The auction also includes a letter from William Huskisson, minister of war, regarding the French invasion of Ireland in 1798 (Lot 76: est. €596 to €834) pleading for reinforcements. Huskisson later became the first passenger to die in a railway accident when he accidentally swung out on a door of a stationary train, in front of Stephenson's Rocket approaching alongside. It happened at the opening of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway. See [Sothebys.com](http://Sothebys.com)

### ADAMS

An auction of artworks to aid the Irish Red Cross's humanitarian work in Ukraine will close for bidding online on Thursday, April 7 at 2 pm.

The sale is conducted by Adams, in conjunction with Suzanne MacDougald, and consists of works donated by art collectors and artists.

One of the star turns in the sale is a bronze sculpture of a duck by Irish-Ukrainian artist Vadim Tuzov (est. €2,000 to €3,000), but the sale also includes works by Irish sculptors John Behan, Rowan Gillespie, and Orla de Bri as well as a range of paintings and prints. See [adams.ie](http://adams.ie).