

# Trinity's 'College Gallery': The Swing of the Sixties

Curated by Richard Wood

4<sup>th</sup> July – 27<sup>th</sup> September 2015

**The Glebe Gallery** is delighted to present a special selection of 20<sup>th</sup> century works from The Trinity College Dublin Art Collections. Originally conceived by Lismore Castle Arts with invited curator and Trinity alumnus Richard Wood, the exhibition features key Irish and international pieces by Josef Albers, Karel Appel, Carlos Cruz-Diez, Patrick Collins, Barrie Cooke, Micheal Farrell, Robert Indiana, Cecil King, Roy Lichtenstein, Nano Reid, Patrick Scott, William Scott, Peter Sedgley, and Victor Vasarely, accompanied by a portrait of George Dawson by Mick O'Dea.

For over 55 years, generations of students, staff and visitors at Trinity College Dublin have been introduced to the excitements and challenges of the contemporary visual arts - at the moment of their emergence - through the activities and display of modern art collected for a picture hire scheme, known on Trinity's campus as 'The College Gallery', organised by George Dawson (1927-2004), founder of the Genetics Department and the picture hire scheme, along with a team of volunteers. In the late 1960s Richard Wood was one of the student volunteers; he recalls that:

*"Students gloried in possessing, at least for a term, an original work by Yeats, le Brocqy, or William Scott, or a signed lithograph or silkscreen print by Picasso, Braque, Henry Moore or Vasarely."*



Peter Humfrey's student rooms 1967-68 showing his room-mate and sister. On display are a silkscreen print by Victor Vasarely and a Pieter Brueghel reproduction hired from the College Gallery

The initial purpose of 'The College Gallery' was to loan to students in halls of residence pictures for their rooms and this was later extended to staff and departments. Organised and run by undergraduates, a growing collection was exhibited over two days in the university's Public Theatre where residents could view and then ballot for their choices. As time progressed, students became increasingly involved in the process of collecting contemporary art at Trinity. Impassioned by George's enthusiasm for the emerging artistic trends of the time, students were encouraged to discover their own critical eye and aesthetic inclinations.

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*"I don't remember how I got involved in the College Gallery committee but I guess it would have been around 1966. At the start of each term we exhibited the pictures in the Examination Hall, pricing them differentially according to our notions of quality. And, of course, anyone on the committee who had rooms in College got the pick. One term, I had a small William Scott blue and white oil, a Braque dove (I think orange on a white background with a black surround) and a sumptuous glowing gold Vasarely. The Scott was actually lent to the collection by Anne Crookshank, as were the Braque and Vasarely by George Dawson."*

George Wynne Wilson, 'College Gallery' student committee member in the 1960s, p95\*

This exhibition introduces the sense of wonder and excitement experienced by these students in the Sixties. Together with George and other key staff members like Professor Anne Crookshank and Adrian Phillips, they travelled the length and breadth of Ireland and often further afield, feasting on 'the swing' taking place in the visual arts. Urban and abstract subjects began to dominate, resulting in bold styles and techniques such as hard-edge minimalism and silkscreen printing, plus Op, Pop and Kinetic art, reflecting wider, pervasive social changes. Student imaginations were captured and the College's Modern Art collection was firmly established. Though these new trends caused a



Barrie Cooke, Bennett's Bridge, 1965, oil on canvas, 133.4 x 104.3 cm. Courtesy of The Trinity College Dublin Art Collections; © The Artist's Estate

sensation amongst the students, they never completely eclipsed their interest in the work of artists who pursued a more painterly route, either traditional or abstract in approach, some experimenting simultaneously with the new international influences. A selection of these works from the College Collections introduce the exhibition, aiming to provide a contemporary 1960s visual arts context within which the 'new', crisp-formed minimalist styles were received in Ireland.

The influence of Trinity's 'College Gallery' was far-reaching, having played a significant role in the establishment of the Department of the History of Art and Architecture at Trinity by 1966 as well as the development of The Trinity Exhibition Hall in 1967, a collaboration with the Arts Council, and the first

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university art gallery in Ireland. This new 'kunsthalle' was instrumental in showcasing international and national artists to Irish audiences, its ten-year run culminating in the establishment of the permanent university gallery in the guise of The Douglas Hyde.

Funding for additions to the university's modern art collection mostly came from the hire of the existing collection and, often, new purchases were chosen by the student committee while vetted by the member of the academic staff in charge. Many artworks were actually acquired from the shows held at The Trinity Exhibition Hall which launched with Ireland's first solo exhibition of Henry Moore's sculptures, just a few months before the first 'Rosc' exhibition in 1967. 'Rosc', an Irish word loosely translated as 'poetry of vision', was a series of major exhibitions staged to revitalise Ireland's connection with international artistic movements. It is noteworthy that, because Trinity students were already quite familiar with modern and contemporary visual art through the auspices of Dawson's 'College Gallery', they were asked to act as mediators at 'Rosc '67'. Featuring recent and contemporary artistic movements such as Op, Pop and Kinetic art, and artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, Karel Appel, Robert Indiana, Victor Pasmore and a retrospective of Ireland's Norah McGuinness, some 40 exhibitions were held at Trinity over a ten year period including, in 1969, the first and only solo show of Pablo Picasso's work in Ireland while the artist was alive, including a work already part of the College Collections, and to which 42,000 people paid entry during a 6-week run.

Among the notable and cutting edge exhibitions shown at Trinity was the 1967 'Banners by American Artists' which was the most extensive display of these works in Europe and their first outing in Ireland and Britain. These artist-designed banners were made originally to publicise exhibitions in New York during a paper workers' strike when printed posters were unavailable. They shouted brashness and excitement aptly evoking the city from which they hailed and inspiring other artists to follow suit long after the strike was over. As Richard Wood explains:

*"The banner was small-town American writ large, superficiality screaming at the viewer, the very antithesis of academic life, and we, the student committee, were smitten."*

Richard Wood, 'College Gallery' student committee member in the 1960s, p 94\*

The Banner exhibition at Trinity included two pieces by Roy Lichtenstein, one of the main protagonists in the Pop Art movement. Architect Ronald Tallon, of the leading Irish Modernist architectural firm Scott Tallon Walker, bought the 'Pistol' banner and the College Gallery student committee managed to purchase the landscape banner, 'Night Seascape', which is on view in this exhibition and is number 8 in a series of 20 produced. In fact, Tallon attributed his long-enduring passion for Pop Art to Dawson having introduced his eye to this art form at Trinity:

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*"George Dawson organised a great showing of these banners in Trinity College before they were ever shown in Europe. Roy Lichtenstein, Jim Dine, Robert Indiana, Jack Youngerman, all the great American hard-edged abstract artists were brought to our awareness. Again, in 1971, he organised an exhibition of Pop Art making us aware of the use by great artists of visual images derived from the advertising world of the time."*

Ronald Tallon, architect, p 103\*

In January 1968, the new Exhibition Hall welcomed the 'Light in Movement' exhibition which had been selected by Cyril Barrett of the University of Warwick, and organised by the Herbert Art Gallery, Coventry, where it was shown first; its subsequent and last port of call was the University of Bristol Union Arts Festival that February. Barrett, author of one of the first major books on 'Op Art', also known as 'Optical Art', brought together works by artists exploring light as content-creator and driver of experience. Kinetic light objects, neon tubes, reflections and the rhythmic movement of light or variations of colour all created an enveloping environment that included works by Julio le Parc, Martha Boto, and Peter Sedgley, all accompanied by contemporary electronic music. As a result of the show, George Dawson purchased Sedgley's 1966 'Looking Glass' suite of screenprints, a selection of which are on show here in the gallery; Dawson later gave the whole suite to the College Collections.



Roy Lichtenstein, Night Seascape, 1966, sewn felt, edition 8/20, 246 x 111 cm. Courtesy of The Trinity College Dublin Art Collections; © The Artist's Estate

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Peter Sedgley, Looking Glass No. 4, 1966, screenprint, edition 73/75, 48.5 x 48.5 cm. Courtesy The Trinity College Dublin Art Collections; © The Artist

*“One of the ... shows that sticks in my mind was the ‘Light in Movement’ exhibition in 1968. I recall Peter Sedgley’s wheels of colour that explored the chromatic scale. I remember seeing the Op artist Bridget Riley on a visit to the exhibition with Sedgley. The show was accompanied by electronic music composed by Terry Riley (no connection to Bridget), both the music and the lights were on a loop system. ... It all felt very avant-garde.”*

Ciarán Nicholson, Student employee at The Trinity Exhibition Hall 1960s, p101\*

Only a few months before Trinity showed ‘Light in Movement’, Ireland’s first Op Art show was held in the Ritchie Hendriks Gallery on St Stephen’s Green which the ‘College Gallery’ student committee attended and where a work by Venezuelan artist Carlos Cruz-Diez caught their imagination. They were unanimously determined to purchase it but they did not have the funds. By the time they had raised the money, the pictures had returned to the Parisian gallery but they found that the picture was still available. Yet another obstacle was to pose only a temporary issue for the enthused bunch of students collecting for the university - there were no funds for transport – but they soon sorted this, as Richard Wood reveals:

*“... When the decision to purchase it was made and then approved by Miss Crookshank, the question of the further cost of transport was next to raise its unwelcome head ... The irrepressible William Garner announced that he would go to Paris during the next vacation and collect it. A grateful committee gazed at him in admiration; the problem was solved. Sure enough, at the beginning of the next term, there was one splendid Cruz-Diez and, proudly, we put it on display in the exhibition. We asked William how he had got to Paris, and then back – with the picture: ‘I thumbed, both ways!’ he boomed.”*

Richard Wood, ‘College Gallery’ student committee member in the 1960s, p94\*

The tale of this student hitching his way to Paris, energised by this world of contemporary visual art to which he and his peers had been afforded access, then hitching all the way back again with the considerably weighty picture under his arm is just one of the great trailblazing stories of Trinity’s ‘College Gallery’ and the collections as a whole. One student was so impressed by ‘The College Gallery’ he went on to establish a modern art collection in Athlone Institute of Technology, creating a kind of ripple effect.

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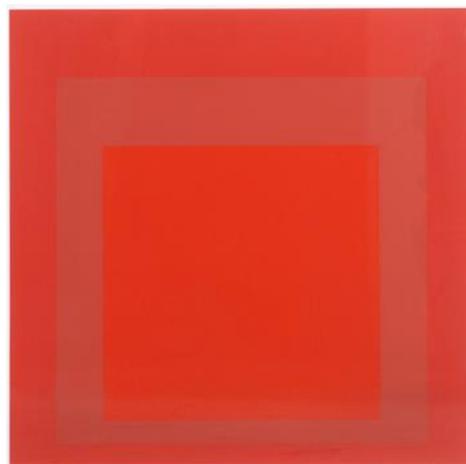
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Another, in later decades, returned the favour by funding the acquisition of one of the university's most important modern sculptures – the 'Cactus Provisoire' by Alexander Calder. The impact on the community working in, and moving through, Trinity continues in tangible and intangible ways, but one thing is certain, that the dynamic was set up during the 'Swing of the Sixties' and could not have happened without the boundless energy and creative vision of the student volunteers, like Richard Wood, and the man who connected a campus and a city directly to visual art - George Dawson. Commenting about the future of his personal collection of art during an RTE *Arts Express* interview on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 1990, 40 years after he commenced work for Trinity, Dawson stated:

*"Oh my will is really quite straight forward. They've been bought for the College, they are used by the College, and they'll go to the College. I don't see there's any point to buying paintings unless one knows what their permanent value is going to be and to whom, and I've lived nearly 40 years at Trinity. If they should be of use to add to the environment of Trinity for future generations of students, okay, I'm very happy about that – that's precisely why I bought them."* p110\*



Micheal Farrell, Study '66, 1966, acrylic on canvas, 91.5 x 80.5 cm. Courtesy The Trinity College Dublin Art Collections; © The Artist's Estate



Josef Albers, Homage to the Square Series SP V, screenprint, edition 14/14, 50 x 50 cm. Courtesy The Trinity College Dublin Art Collections; © The Artist's Estate

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**Written by Catherine Giltrap, Curator of The Trinity College Dublin Art Collections, in conversation with curator of the exhibition and Trinity alumnus Richard Wood, and with the assistance of Carolyn Kelly, Curatorial Assistant, TCD**

\*All quotes marked with an asterisk are extracts from Chapter 4 in the following Trinity College Dublin publication, which is available for purchase at the Gallery during the exhibition:

***George Dawson: An Unbiased Eye. Modern and Contemporary Art at Trinity College Dublin since 1959, edited by Catherine Giltrap (Dublin: Associated Editions, 2010)***

Proceeds from the book will directly support new acquisitions and conservation projects in order to perpetuate opportunities for generations of students, staff and the visiting public to engage with the visual arts at Trinity College Dublin. **Further information at [www.tcd.ie/artcollections](http://www.tcd.ie/artcollections)**