

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

WHAT IS THE FUTURE FOR ART AND CULTURE IN IRELAND?

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Introduction

In Ireland today we are experiencing a deep and growing economic and political crisis. In the Southern state one third of the people are dependent on welfare and in the North of the country there is an ongoing armed struggle being waged which is also accompanied by severe economic conditions and poverty. Linked with this economic and political crisis there is also a cultural and artistic crisis in Ireland. The recent publication Crisis in the Arts is an obvious testament to this situation and is an expression of the growing conflicts and contradictions between the artists and the state.

The significance of a cultural crisis can only be understood fully when we have a grasp of what the true role of culture and art is in society.

As a social phenomenon, culture constitutes one of the more distinguishing features of human society since it is connected with the entire material and spiritual activity, and all social activities of man. The products of art and culture as opposed to other products such as those which are for the satisfaction of determinate material needs, are for the satisfaction of the spiritual needs of people. As such culture has a strong influence on the values and social mores of society. Art, music and literature function in an extremely important way; as objectified expressions of our human existence. They are the humanization of our life experience. Functioning in this way we need and use culture as a

means of identification and understanding of ourselves and our society. Thus the value of culture and art extends far beyond a simple form of "entertainment" or a "means of escape" but rather it is an active force in shaping society. So culture as an ideological form holds implications as much for our future as it affects our present life.

Thus the crisis in culture is not something which is simply affecting artists, our general society is characterised by a marked cultural deprivation: any artistic unity in the buildings and streets of our villages, towns and cities is fast being destroyed along with the unity and identity of the people as a whole. The implications of this situation are disastrous and it has become an issue of grave concern for all progressive and thinking people. In the field of the arts, particular problems arise and questions about the social relationship and relevance of art to society and the role and function of the artist are being brought to the fore by students and people concerned about the present situation.

In this thesis I aim to deal with these questions and problems raised in the area of culture as questions inextricably linked with the social and economic conditions of the day, and also as a product of the historical development of our country. Since in order to deal with these issues with a view to overcoming and bettering the situation we must view culture not as simply an entity in itself but in its whole context as a major force in society dialectically linked

with the economic base and all other major forces in society. Thus in the first phase of the thesis I have given an account of the historical role of culture in Ireland, both as a reflection of and an active form in the changes that have occurred throughout our history as a nation, in order that we may see and understand the relevance of culture in the dynamics of change and progress and by implication the importance and role of culture today. In this way it is then possible for us to see the role that artists and those involved in culture can take up in order to deal with their own predicament, and also, in order to become a vital force in the progress and development of the Irish people towards a new and better future free of colonial and neo-colonial domination and oppression.

Chapter I - The Historical Role and Significance of Culture in Ireland

The active influence and role of culture in the life of the Irish people can be seen clearly in the history of the nation. Viewed in this way, the role of culture becomes not a purely ideological or idealistic question but a very practical issue.

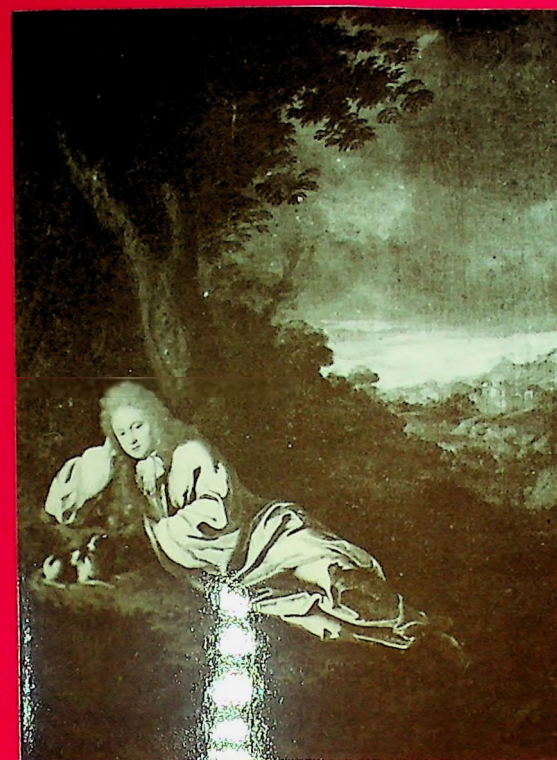
The significance of culture during colonization

Having escaped the colonization of the Roman empire, in the pre-historic era, the Irish culture developed with unrivaled strength, which enabled us as a people to develop the first vernacular literature in western Europe. In fact the Irish became european leaders in the area of culture and learning, reaching a degree of excellence in the areas of stonecarving, metalwork and illumination of which we have many fine examples. This creative strength, strong cultural identity and the long established system of the Brehon laws enabled the Irish to maintain autonomy even under the Norman and Anglo-Norman invasions. Rather than being crushed by the invaders, the Irish assimilated them, with the result that the Irish language had become the vernacular of the colonizers with Norman-French having almost completely died away by the 14th century. But the onset of the Norman invasions heralded in what would be close to six centuries of invasion and this situation of unremitting violence and destruction gradually eroded the strength of the culture and identity of the people. Since unlike the internecine warfare between the various clans who upheld the same indigenous culture these invasions were

perpetrated by a foreign occupier upholding a different culture. Thus the art forms became simpler in form and more disjointed in style throughout the country, with many foreign influences poorly assimilated. This situation increased the vulnerability of the Irish people with the result that the later British invasions were far more devastating. After the reformation in the 15th century when King Henry VIII assumed the title of supreme head on earth of the Church of Ireland a major attack on the centres of learning and culture was made with the attacks on the abbeys and the destruction of church property.

In this weakened state and with the development of a strong centralised state in Britain in the 16th century, the Irish were unable to pool their resources to resist the increased attacks of the colonizers and the 17th century saw the final overthrow of the old Gaelic system. It was during this time of plantation under Cromwell and later William of Orange that the most pointed attacks were made on the native culture. The penal laws were introduced which were aimed at crushing the religious and social values of the native Irish. What remained of the old Irish aristocracy had changed to the feudal system of private ownership and inheritance and were by this time aping their British overlords - rearing their children in English and sending them to British schools.

In the area of culture a new guild system was developed for the crafts and in the relatively new art of painting, private patronage was established. While these areas developed, with



1. JOHN, FIRST LORD BELLEW, Garret Morphy.



2. SILVER DISHRING, Dublin 1765 William Townsend (1745-75)

high levels of craftsmanship in silver and goldsmithing, glass cutting and furniture, and with the emergence of some fine painters such as Garret Morphy (Fig. 1), it was the result of an imposed order rather than an indigenous development and thus it was an art alienated from the people. This can be seen clearly in the forms that emerged, painting was largely portraiture for the aggrandisement of the aristocracy, with the painters being largely trained abroad and considering themselves of a European tradition. And in craft, design was not very innovative being more influenced by foreign trends (Fig. 2). Culture among the ordinary people was maintained in the music song dance poetry in literature, in other words in all forms independent of material wealth.

The conditions of the 18th century saw the people in grave state of wretchedness of both mind and body. Absentee landlords and the resulting rack renting system made any effort of improvement by the peasants of their holdings completely futile. Four separate famines also aggravated the situation. Cultural life was low among the people but the bards who had lost their patrons and who were now reduced to the status of labourer began to write in the common spoken Irish, poetry for the ordinary people, giving rise to much satirical work and the famous aisling poems - a form of poetry lamenting the loss of the old Celtic ways. Many ballads were written about the buachaillí bana (the White Boys), which reflected the aspirations to freedom of the people:

Success to the white boys. We've a few of them here,
We'll toast their good health in both whiskey and beer,

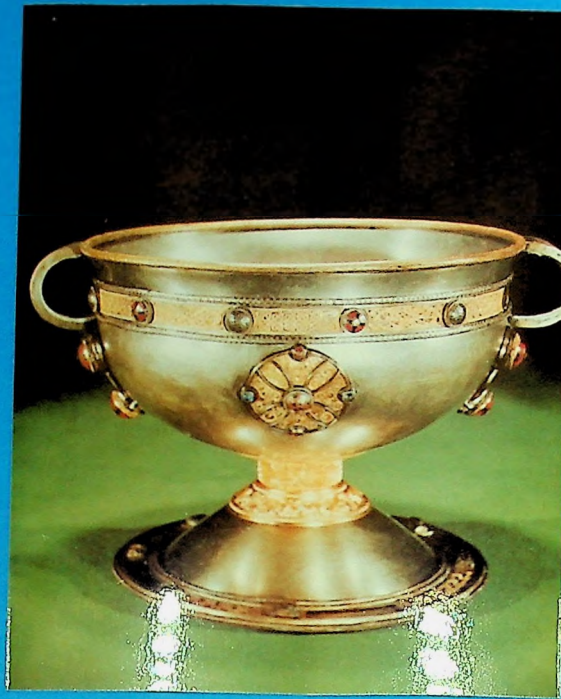
and long may they reign over country and town,
for they are the boys that keep land jobbers down.

The strength of the desire for learning among the oppressed people gave rise to the illegal education system known as the hedge schools. Through these schools the Irish people managed to keep alive some fragments of the language and poetry in spite of the increased cultural imperialism. But because of the lack of any status for the Irish language due to the economic conditions, the majority of the schools taught English. The Irish language became associated with poverty and ignorance and thus the seeds of an Irish cultural inferiority complex were being sewn.

The 18th century was a time of prosperity for the bourgeoisie in Ireland, but the prosperity also brought this class into contradiction with the colonial parliament whose trade restrictions were holding them back. Thus the influence of the French revolution became very strong in Ireland towards the end of the century with the formation of the Irish Republican Brotherhood under the leadership of Wolfe Tone. These new ideas were first reflected in the culture of the ordinary people; the song 'talamh gan chios' (land free of rent) was a popular song of the day.

Culture as an integral part of the struggle for independence

With the Act of Union in 1801, which removed the parliament from Dublin to London, most of the class of people which patronised the arts left the country. This change in the



3. The Qadagh Chalice 8th century



4. 'The Limerick Piper', Joseph P. Haverty
(1774 - 1854)

social structure, while removing the patronage, brought about a new lease of activity in politics and culture which gave rise to the many cultural and political events that have led us to the partial independence we have today.

The Young Irelanders rising of 1848 and the Fenian rising of 1867 were the major military events of the 19th century but these were also accompanied by many ideological and cultural events which were an active force in the consciousness raising of the people in the fight for independence. Development in interest in Irish antiquities accompanied by increased scientific approach to archaeological enquiry by people like George Petrie, led to the discoveries of the Ardagh Chalice (Fig. 3), the Cross of Cong and the Tara Brooch. This along with the publication of finely illustrated books such as George Petrie's Irish ecclesiastical architecture anterior to the Anglo-Norman invasion in 1854, and Henry O'Neill's Fine arts of ancient Ireland in 1863, were significant factors in contributing to a sincere unashamed pride in Irish cultural heritage. During this time there was also a revival in illuminated books, and pottery, silverware and woodcarvings were being decorated with the original interlace and curvilinear forms of Ireland's 'golden age'.

In the field of painting, historical, genre and landscape were the most important styles of the time. Under the new patronage the art began to reflect the aspirations of the native bourgeoisie, and like the bards, the artists began to express the nostalgia for the vanished Ireland. John George

Mulvany's 'A country inn kitchen', and Joseph Patrick Hovarty's 'The Limerick Piper' (Fig. 4) and to a greater extent Maclise's 'Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife' are exemplary of this new content in painting.

Even though it was a lean time for artists, with many still going abroad to train, foundations were being laid for a national art, with the opening of the 'National Gallery' and the founding of the 'Royal Hibernian Academy' and also with the short lived '82 club' which was founded to encourage a national spirit in art and literature.

All these events were powerful forces in the progressive strengthening of the struggle for national independence, and combating the everdeepening cultural degeneration which resulted from the economic and political forces oppressing the people. At the beginning of the 19th century the Irish language was used by the majority of the people; by the end of the century it had shrunk back to the mountainous regions of the western seaboard. It was at this point that the Gaelic League was founded in 1893 as the result of the realization that if the Irish language and literature died, the English culture would become the dominant shaping force of the society. The Gaelic Athletic Association was also formed to revive the cultural identity of the people through their national sports.

Many of the people of the cultural revival also became involved in the Sinn Fein movement since the root causes of the cultural degeneration pointed to the political and economic



5. 'MEN OF THE SOUTH', SEÁN KEATING, (1887-1976) .



6. 'LAUNCHING THE CURRACH', PAUL HENRY,
(1876 - 1958)

situation. Vice versa, those involved primarily in the military movements became aware of the necessity and enabling force of national identity in culture also taking part in these associations. The slogan 'Tir gan teanga, tir gan anam' had been a long held banner of Irish patriots affirming the dialectical unity between cultural identity and independence.

As the struggle progressed the links between it and high culture developed and brought forward many great artists to the people. Artists had still left the country for training but many returned such as Walter Osbourne and Nathaniel Hone, but a new generation of artists trained in the country. The Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin became a hive of the revival especially under the influence of Henry Albert Willis - many of the students were learning Irish and holding ceilís, and under his influence the activity of creating an Irish art became an act of finding out: a learning participation in Irish culture itself. But when Willis died, after only a year as headmaster, this air of enthusiasm left the college, but it still remained among many of the individuals and it is known that two staff and fourteen students were to later join the Irish Citizen Army in 1914.

For the first time in Irish history Ireland and more importantly the Irish people became the subject and content of Irish art in a real and vital sense in the work of artists such as Estella Solomons, Paul Henry, Charles Lamb, Jack B. Yeats and later in the work of Sean Keating (Fig. 5) and others. Some of these artists became very popular among the people.



7. 'THE FUNERAL OF HARRY BOLAND', JACK B. YEATS, 1922
SLIGO COUNTY LIBRARY MUSEUM.



8. 'COMMUNICATING WITH PRISONERS' JACK B. YEATS
1924, SLIGO COUNTY LIBRARY MUSEUM.

Paul Henry gave life in Irish painting to the Irish landscape, occasionally introducing the people into it (Fig. 6). He portrayed their lives with dignity and strength, showing their skill in their work and their oneness with their environment. He brought the influences of the post-impressionists to Ireland but never became obsessed with style. He painted in order "to capture the very soul of Ireland".¹

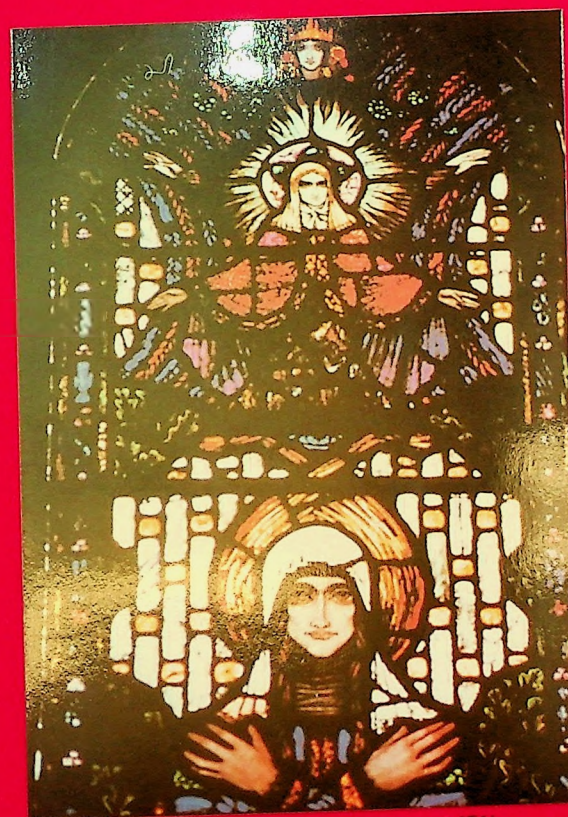
Jack B. Yeats was the most important artist of this period and the people recognised that they had a great artist among them. As a person and an artist Yeats understood the importance of his national identity and birth place, for him Sligo was his school. He said "those painters who have the greatest affection for their country and their own people, will paint them best."²

His love for his own people and his exuberance for life and deep perception gave him the spirit he needed to transform into aesthetic form his experience of the life around him. Painting always from memory and imagination, never using a live model, but using as his reference the vast numbers of sketch books that he had worked on, his work is a distillation of the important moments and events.

During the period of the revolution and the civil war, content was paramount to Yeats, and often the political events became the subject matter of his work. 'The funeral of Harry Boland' (Fig. 7) and 'Communicating with prisoners' (Fig. 8) are such examples. Yeats painted these events not as an outsider with a 'sympathetic eye' but as one involved. It is



9. THE LIFFEY SWIM, JACK B. YEATS, 1924, NATIONAL GALLERY OF IRELAND.



10. DETAIL OF ST ITA MONKS' HOSTEL CHAPEL, HARRY CLARKE 1916.

known that he attended the meetings of Sinn Fein, went to the Gaelic games in Croke Park, and also learned the Irish language. As Hilary Pyle points out in the biography "The insurrection was not a triumph for Jack Yeats as it was for his brother, for him it was the still birth of all that was real... Nothing would make the artist yield from his vision of a politically free Ireland!"³

Yeats' grasp on the reality of the political events reflected his attitude to and close links with the ordinary people, and it is this attitude which makes his representations of the people so vital. His portrayal of the people was not the product of some idealistic Celticism but he depicted the contemporary spirit of the Irish people (Fig. 9). He never concerned himself with pure style as did many of his contemporaries; his purpose in painting was too strong for this. Similarly his concept of humanity was too high to devote himself to caricature. His patriotism and strong sense of identity is the key to his individuality and innovativeness as an artist. His achievement was to bring forth "a new chapter in the history of art"⁴:- he elevated the oppressed and downtrodden Irish people, expressing their character and way of life for the first time in the modern art of painting. There is optimism in his art, upholding the aspirations of the people, and as such it is an enabling force for both the Irish people and the people of all nations.

Chauvinistic Nationalism, Xenophobia and Celtic Mysticism

Unlike Yeats not all of the people of the cultural revival

were progressive, it also gave rise to a cultural chauvinism and dogmatism. We can see this in the literary revival of W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory and also in some aspects of the crafts revival. Upholding idealistic views many of these people promoted that all that was necessary for the Irish people was a cultural revival, obscuring the true cause of the oppression of the people - British colonialism. They saw the conflict in Ireland as being one between the utilitarians and the romantics, the idea being encapsulated in W.B. Yeats' phrase "the greasy till", and that a revival of the great Celtic past would assert the glory and strength of the Irish people, and that this spiritual uplifting would be enough.

In the crafts revival a dogmatic approach was taken, not approving of the use of machinery or inventions, they prevented the movement from being a strong vehicle for the development of a modern Irish design. Stylistically their adherence to old dogmas, in keeping with their purist revival, stifled all innovation and ended up with a sentimental and nostalgic art which is possibly responsible for the pure kitch Celtic souvenir business today. Nevertheless, some fine work was produced from the crafts revival such as Evie Hone and Harry Clark's stained glass (Fig. 10) and Art O'Murnihan's illuminations which are undoubted masterpieces in their fields.

W.B. Yeats' Abbey Theatre which was financially backed by the unionist pound having such patrons as Count Florimond de Basterot, Lord Dufferin and Miss Anne E.F. Horniman, specifically promoted this mythological glorification of the racial



11. CARTOON FROM THE PERIOD OF THE TREATY.

concept of Celticism. Yeats opposed realism and naturalism; preferring spiritual identity to political independence. Using the techniques of symbolist theatre with the racialism of Celtic mythology, Yeats hoped to replace the class consciousness of the Irish with a racially determined consciousness. The truth of this was exposed in the hasty exodus of all the nationalists as soon as the theatre was established, to form their own theatre.

These opposing features within the cultural revival were a reflection of the broader contradictions in the political arena, between the socialist direction being taken by the broad masses of the people, who were seizing the lands and had formed various Soviets throughout the country, and the interests of the bourgeois leadership. It was this contradiction which brought about the betrayal of the struggle in 1921 with the signing of the Treaty. Collins' 'stepping stone to freedom' gained the support of the small business men and farmers and the remnants of Anglo-Ireland who had previously backed the parliamentary tradition (Fig. 11). All in all the Free State had left much unchanged and was, in reality, a swapping of one master for another. Economically the country was stagnant and the benefits of independence were not being felt by the ordinary people since the wealth was still being pocketed by the few. High emigration, poor housing, and low marriage rates were still the prevailing social conditions of the Free State. And the backward characteristics of a people oppressed under an imperial power had not changed.

All that was progressive in the struggle for independence was aborted and also the cultural revival to which the state owed its existence to a large degree began to turn sour. It became hijacked by the chauvinistic tendencies in the church and the bourgeoisie. The new state maintained the revolutionary programme of the cultural and the language revival in order to retain some legitimacy as a nationalist state in the face of a sizable republican opposition. But because of the unchanged economic conditions the revival of the culture and particularly the language could not progress despite the enthusiasm of the people. The revival of the language became bureaucratized and was transformed into a mechanical activity confined to the classroom. For while in 1922 the Land League was still a living force among the people with 816 branches throughout the country, by 1924 there were only 139 branches. The numbers of Irish speaking people in the rural areas fell drastically, and people were still rearing their children through English, since the economic conditions had not been created under which the people could continue to use their native tongue. Even though the enthusiasm for the culture and language was strong its destruction was continued since the privileges of one language over the other had not been removed.

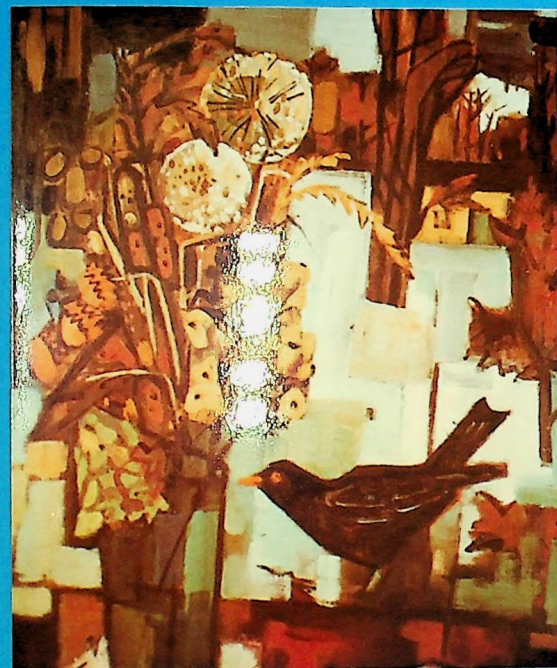
More and more the images of Ireland in the culture promoted by the state were of a mythological character harking back to the great Celtic past. While these images had been a driving force for the people prior to the establishment of the Free State, they now became a falsehood and a deception, since they flew in the face of the harsh realities of the daily

life of the people. This culture of the glorification of the Celtic past served the interests of the ruling class, in that it gave Ireland's technological and economic backwardness a spiritual glamour. It was an image of Ireland geared to putting the people into a deep imperialist sleep. Thus the genuinely progressive nature of the cultural revival was stripped of its class consciousness and turned into a racist culture, not serving the interests of the people at all.

With this cultural chauvinism devoid of class consciousness to cover up relativity, anti-protestantism thrived and a fascization of the state began to develop. It was out of this that the censorship laws of 1929 emerged, backed strongly by various religious organisations. Aside from banning obscene literature, this act also served to prevent any modern literature or progressive ideas from entering the country. What was allowed in was a sea of sloppy romances, and westerns, which, along with the Hollywood films and music halls formed the precursor of the Anglo-American culture we have today.

Censorship lasted for almost four decades of the Free State and under these conditions of reactionary chauvinism and growing poverty and emigration people became cynical of the 'independent' Ireland and its cultural revival. In the same way that the Irish language had become a symbol of poverty and ignorance in colonial times, the cultural revival became wrongly associated with the xenophobic backwardness of the new Free State. The progressive aim of nurturing a strong national identity and unity among all Irish people regardless

of creed had become obscured by the chauvinism that had taken control. Never having become fully politically aware, throughout their struggles, the Irish people merely reacted to their situation emotively with disillusionment.



12. 'A HARD WINTER' NORAH MCQUINNESS,
ONE OF THE EARLY IRISH MODERNIST ARTISTS,

Chapter II - Internationalism, Xenomania and Neo-Colonization

This disillusionment generated by the first decades of the Free State is crucial to our understanding of our attitudes today, since it lay the ideological foundation for the events which initiated the present epoch in Irish history. The poverty and oppressive censorship brought about a reaction in people and artists which associated the Celtic revival and everything Irish with everything backward. Patrick Kavanagh's The Great Hunger was a direct and uncompromising social criticism which exposed the desolation of Irish rural life, and Flann O'Brien's (Brian O Nolan) An Bael Bocht, even though written in a humorous way, arose from a bitter and cynical sentiment towards the revivalists.

Artists, writers, and ideologues, began to look to Europe for new ideas; the literary magazine The Bell became one of the main exponents of this new Europeanism. As early as the 30s and 40s artists were again leaving the country, among them Joyce and Beckett. There they became involved with the modernist movement and formalism. This was the stock reaction of the artists to the chauvinism of the Irish bourgeoisie. They disengaged themselves from the dynamics of change within the society no longer taking up the cause of the ordinary people as the previous generation of artists had done, instead they now took up the reactionary cause of 'art for art's sake' (Fig. 12).

This europeanism filtering down to the general public and accompanied by the diet of light entertainment culture, ideologically prepared them for the 'opening up' of the country under the Lemass government to foreign investment. By hiding the true nature of the poverty, which was the result of the system of capitalism itself whereby the resources of the country were being exploited for the benefit of the few - Lemass convinced the people that the true nationalist goal was to establish a strong economic climate in as short a period as possible through foreign investment.

This period definitely marked a period of economic boom with the creation of jobs etc. and new goods flooding the market with everyone high on the new luxuries. The new liberalism and pluralism generated an air of activity and diversity, socially and culturally. But today, the superficiality of such a boom is obvious with one third of our people dependent on welfare, and emigration returning as a daily phenomenon. What in fact was initiated by Lemass was the neo-colonization of Ireland by foreign monopoly.

'High culture' today in the visual arts

As I have said the stock reaction of the artists was to become involved with the modernist movement which can be linked with the ideological reaction to xenophobia. It is also tied up economically with the development of capitalism as a reaction to the increasing alienation of the artist in society. This alienation of the artist in capitalist society arises from the basic misdirection of all labour under capitalism. Where

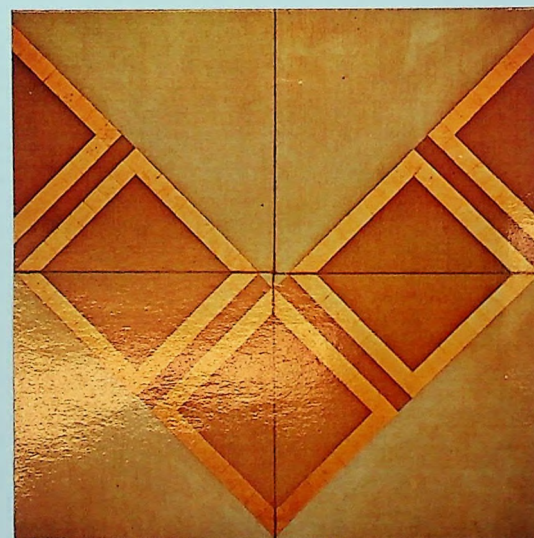
labour is the conscious activity of man and is therefore the basis for all progress. Under capitalism, this labour which is life creating life, becomes labour in order to subsist, and the value of that labour becomes its exchange value - money. Likewise the artist must produce in order to live and his art becomes a commodity which attains a dual value: its spiritual value, and its exchange value. Art as a commodity contradicts art, and under these pressures the function of art becomes fundamentally misdirected.

The achievement of the great bourgeois artists was to liberate the artist from the feudal patronage. But now selling the art product like any other producer he had to compete for custom with other artists. The art had to be marked with a strong individual style in order to sell, and the artist began to wear his individuality and eccentricities like a businessman wears his suit. This individualism and alienation explains the trend of 'serious art' towards abstraction, since all form is only ever the form of its content, this ideological and material abstraction of the artist from society produces an equally abstract art form.

Instead of solving the problem of alienation the bourgeois artist caught up in the promotion of the self and individualism, produces an art evermore alienated and more elitist, all the time destroying any relevance he had to society or social progress. He solves the problems of becoming a prominent artist through superficially changing the form. This can be seen especially in the development of Performance Art



13. 'ORANGE PRESSÉ' MICHAEL FARREL, 1972.
COLLECTION OF THE BANK OF IRELAND.



14. 'GOLD PAINTING' PATRICK SCOTT, 1965
COLLECTION OF THE BANK OF IRELAND.

where the artists in trying to deal with the problem of art as a commodity instead of attacking the system of capitalism rejected the forms of art itself, the forms of sculpture and painting etc., producing in its stead the most elitist if all arts whose attendance rarely spreads beyond the particular 'arty' friends of the artist himself. Not only that but it is also one of the most self indulgent, and exhibitionist art forms that has ever come about in the history of art. This constant search for the new regardless of content is the equivalent in art of consumerism. Thus we have all the 'avants-guards', all the 'isms' which have never fundamentally changed anything, but have simply managed to keep everyone preoccupied avoiding the central issue of the relationship of art to society.

The full impact of American art styles did not reach Ireland until the late fifties and early sixties and with the development of a new corporate patronage of the banks and large companies such as P.J. Carrolls and Co, the new abstract art became prevalent. Artists such as Michael Scott, Cecil King, and later Michael Ashur, Gerda Fromel, Brian King came to the fore, the art became synonymous with the modern architecture and corporate building, lending it a 'cultural' image. In this way the new art became used as part of the ideological weaponry of the image makers of the monopoly class (Fig. 13).

In the debate being held about Irish art and national identity, such artists as Patrick Scott (Fig. 14) -for his use of geometric abstract designs, and gold leaf, Louis le Broquy for



15. 'PONIES RUNNING WILD ON ERRISBEG', PATRICK COLLINS, 1970. COLLECTION OF PAT AND ANTOINETTE MURPHY.

his use of the Celtic cult of the head, Anne Madden for her reference to megalithic standing stones, are being claimed as producing a truly national art. But the absorption of Celticisms into the new modernism, in most cases, by decontextualization, removing all inherent meaning and rendering them as part of a purely aesthetic object, does not, to my mind, create a meaningful Irish art.

Critics such as Dorothy Walker who uphold this view while realizing the importance of indigenous culture - "There does need to be an awareness of just how good the visual art tradition was in Ireland... all the children... should be aware of their cultural background"... "You aren't going to get an audience for Irish art" unless they are "convinced first of all that there is something there to be proud of"⁵ - she then turns the question of national art into a question of form and style.

Others maintain that the true national 'style' lies in the landscape painting which has remained above the superficial influences of Anglo-American culture. The work of artists such as Barry Cooke, Camille Souter, Patrick Collins (Fig. 15) and Colin Middleton, to name a few, come under this analysis. These artists come generally from an older generation of artist than the modernists and have developed their own style to a greater degree. They have drawn on the Irish landscape as the source of their inspiration, but I feel in general that the contemporary relevance of their art is destroyed by their individualism and subjectivism. Much of this work is a very



16. "YOU FORGOT YOUR PRESENT MARY"
MICK. MULCAHY. 1983.



Fergus Delargy, Realisation of a suspicion, 1983. Oil Pastels, 36" x 24"



Fergus Delargy, The continuing saga, 1983. Oil Pastels, 36" x 24"

romantic view of the landscape, full of dark mist and heavy moistness. But who is this art made for? Generally it finds itself in the Dublin Galleries being sold to a rich urban society satisfying the romantic notions and nostalgia they might have for the countryside. Under different social conditions this type of landscape art might truly reflect the feelings people have for the land but at present it is more like the earlier brand of Celtic mysticism, since it does not reflect the reality of the day. I can appreciate the artistic qualities of this art, but as part of the national culture it is an introverted self possessed art, more of a 'murmur' than an 'outward communication', and as such it has very little impact on the Irish imagination. Here the question of a passive or active art emerges and I hope to deal with the issues relating to this at a later stage.

Current trends in the visual arts

One of the current trends in art in Ireland today is the art of neo-expressionist painting. This type of art reflects the ever increasing alienation of art from society and also reflects the alienation of the individual from society. Paddy Graham, Brian McGuire, Eithne Jordan, Fergus Delargy, Mick Mulcahy (Fig. 16), Michael Cullen and others, all mostly men for some reason, are currently working in this way. This trend has also swept the college of art over the last four years, but in this context it is more of a passing trend with many people currently rejecting the style. The reason for this trendist approach to art in the college today is largely due to the staple diet of international art journals for ideas

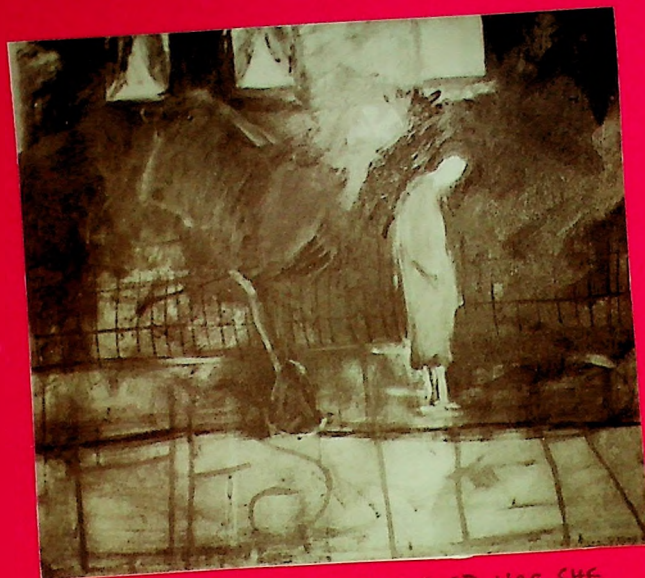
coupled with the effect of the mass culture on the collective consciousness producing an even more xenomaniac breed of artists than any other previous generation.

Many of these expressionists come from the tradition of the 'independents' which had the aim of rejecting the formalism and modernism of the 'living art exhibition'; introducing figuration as a basis for a more socially related art. Looking at the work of these artists it obviously does reflect the growing decay of the social and political structures as well as the crisis of the individual. But 'reflect' is the operative word here, the paintings are an externalization of the inner confusion: there is an angst ridden and hysterical quality to the paint work with every brush stroke communicating fear and angst on the one hand or excited hysterical energy and anarchy on the other.

The two works by Fergus Delargy, 'Realization of a suspicion' and 'The continuing saga' (Fig. 17 and 18) centre around acts of violence with the implication of drowning by force in one and shooting in the other. The people in the images are caricatured becoming personifications of the emotions of fear, aggression and angst. They are deliberately badly drawn in classical terms but not only that, the effect produced is highly unaesthetic: the figures are ugly and repulsive more than anything. There seems to be no other intention in the drawings than to convey or simply express this anxiety and emotion with no effort to overcome it: or make sense of it. Perhaps for the artist the act of drawing is a therapeutic

exorcising of this angst, but what about the spectators? He simply projects it onto them. In a conversation with Jill Nun and Michael Cullen, Delargy says "I did 100 drawings inside six months and if you asked me, why, I wouldn't know why I did them... I felt that I had to do them... But you can't justify everything you do".⁷ The artist obviously does not feel any compulsion to consciously understand what he is doing himself using the difficulty to justify everything you do as an excuse to justify nothing he does. He becomes a victim of his emotions and circumstance placing the emotions above all else. His approach to work is positively anti-conscious, denying his own ability to control his situation. But this is no longer his personal problem when he shows his work publicly projecting his angst onto society he provides no means with which to deal with this emotion. Thus this kind of work is an indulgence in the personal angst and can only encourage the audience to participate in this melancholic outlook.

The work of Brian McGuire also shows this subjective response to crisis but with an even greater sense of loss and angst. His genuine concern for the problems facing people in Ireland today can be seen in his choice of subject matter; centring around the themes of religion, politics, sexuality and the investigation of the self. Because of this it is hard not to react strongly to the content of the work, but his method of dealing with the themes is always to emphasise victimization. In a sense his work shows the outlook of a victim. His colours are often dull and merky with streaks of red and yellow appearing here and there, his images ill defined and merging,



19. 'HESTER GOT SACKED AND DIED, WAS SHE MURDERED?' BRIAN MCQUIRE, 1982.



20. 'GIFT' PATRICK GRAHAM.

combining to convey an overall gloom and melancholy. The representations of people in his paintings often show them as faceless or featureless shapes encapsulated and oppressed within their environment. For example in his painting 'Hester got sacked and died, was she murdered?' (Fig. 19). This is indicative of the artist's own conception of humanity as a mass of faceless passive victims in the world in which we live. This is common to many of his works where the themes are often of death and decay ie. 'Roadside assassination, Provo I.R.A. victim' and 'young man with a submachine gun' where he even projects a melancholic passivity onto an active volunteer of the IRA...

It is ironic that McGuire considers himself a committed socialist while having this pathetic view of suffering humanity. His art simply puts forward a future of apocalyptic doom and destruction; which is no future at all. Any desire for socialism in McGuire is certainly contradictory to his art since the future of socialism depends wholly on the vitality and courage of the people. What McGuire's art does reflect is the bourgeois outlook: self obsessed, guilt ridden, and subjective, exerting its own sense of decay on the whole of humanity, offering no solution or no future simply because within its own frame work and ideology which asserts selfishness and greed as characteristics of humanity over unity and comradeship, it does not perceive a future!

Paddy Graham an older artist working in this vein, produces many images of a sado-masochistic nature. Take for example

'Gift' (Fig. 20) a cynical name for such an image which depicts the nude figure of a woman with what seems like a rope tied around her neck and her arms either missing or tied around her back. Again the figure is repulsively distorted. She is presented lying sacrificially beneath a pair of feet, which seem to be symbolic of the feet of Christ on the cross, since they look like they have been nailed to something. At the same time she is being offered a flower by a man depicted in the right hand corner. This image shows a completely cynical and dark view to humanity especially of woman here being portrayed as a masochistic victim and object. (In fact the image of women generally in this expressionist painting is highly insulting and reactionary; where they do occur it is usually in connection with orgies.) Also in dealing with these semi-religious themes Graham totally disregards the ordinary decent sentiments of most religious people, and taking an iconoclastic attitude, only emphasises the sado-masochistic aspects, and the sexual moralisms of religion. In this way any critique of religion is lost to people since he can only alienate the religious viewer and encourage an emotive hatred of religion and religious people in others.

The work of these 'expressionist' or 'neo-expressionist' painters in general shows a morbid obsession with death and decay, reflecting the general decay and degeneracy of society within the capitalist system of exploitation of man by man. In their refusal to come to terms objectively with this crisis, by abstracting their own predicament from its class content, they absorb the crisis into a crisis of the self. As a result

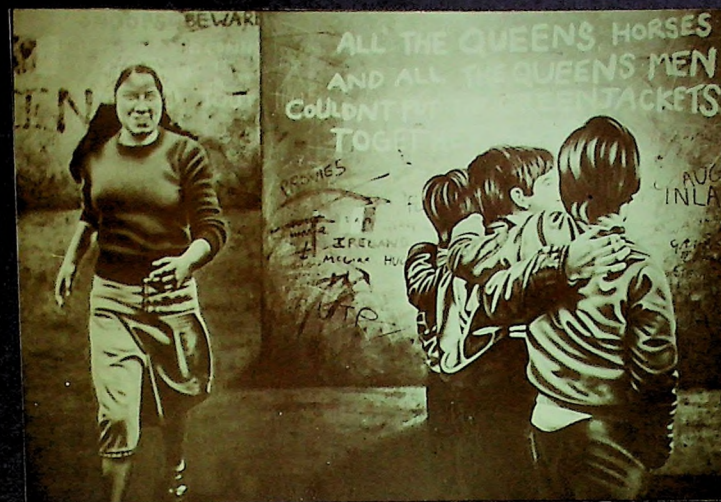
of this anti-conscious emotionalism they can only project onto society a nihilistic apocalyptic vision through its images of obscenity and barbarity. As an art form it is therefore not in any way enabling to its audience and in fact becomes another element in the oppressive forces which are trying to make people passive objects and a pliable work force.

But these movements in art which draw art away from its true function and relevance to society do not go unchallenged by both society and art students. New 'isms' have had to be generated to maintain any credibility for art at all, but many of them simply carry on the anti-realism of modernism. New dogmas and theories about representation are used to evade the truth. Today in Ireland, particularly in the North where the anti-imperialist struggle has taken a new and increased upswing, which despite all the efforts of Stormont, internment, the Duplock courts, plastic bullets, the H-blocks and the present Anglo-Irish agreement, has continued to develop and grow, artists are beginning to respond to the conflicts and struggles around them, making it part of the content of their work. At the same time there has been very little response by artists in Ireland to the northern question, excuses such as close proximity precluding the artist from making an 'objective' comment, fear of partisanship etc. have been made to justify the lack of commitment of Irish artists to the Irish people, and also their lack of commitment to the pursuit of truth.

But there is also a fear on the part of the establishment of

the potential of artists and art to show the truth. In the mid seventies it was an English artist Conrad Atkinson, who was invited by the Arts Council and the Congress of Trade Unions to give an exhibition on 'an Irish theme'. Censorship of the art for society exhibition in the Ulster Museum and the regular interventions into art criticism by local government officials all attest to the potential power of art and culture.

An artist who deals with the northern issue is Dermot Seymore; an artist born and bred in Belfast. His images achieve a surrealist effect combining naturalistic representation with superimposed images. There is obvious intent in these paintings with the careful construction of the images and the careful and painstaking brushwork. But exactly what his intent is, is more difficult to analyse. In his statement entitled 'On the bewilderment and absurdity of things' he seems quite a conscious, as opposed to anti-conscious, person, yet there are contradictions in what he says. For instance he named the exhibition in the project 'Two Tribes' and says that it was a mistake to name it that and also says he does not like to be referred to as a protestant artist and yet he continually refers to himself as such. At once he says that he wants to understand the northern conflict and at the same time wants to find the "bewilderment and absurdity of things". He denies the existence of cultural imperialism: "cultural imperialism is just a slogan" and then infers that in the end "it's a problem of the imagination".⁷



This is a difficult statement to analyse since there is an obvious lack of consistency in his thinking but in the end it is to the paintings we must look to understand his intent.

Most of the paintings such as 'All the Queens Horses' (Fig. 21) which depicts a republican scene, either show one section of the divide or the other. While Seymore is critical of the divide he does not want to actually overcome it remaining within its confines simply representing us with it. This is significant in Seymore's work in that it does not challenge the stock analysis of the ruling class and their media, that the problem and cause of the conflict in the North is two tribes, two traditions, two communities, two religions, two races, loyalist and nationalist, etc. etc. which completely obscures the role of British imperialism in the conflict. It seems to me that in presenting the people in this way Seymore is also laying the blame on the ordinary people for the conflict. His use of the symbol of the salmon of knowledge spiked on a stick or stuck headfirst into the ground, implies the death of reason but he implies that this loss of reason emanates from the people. In other paintings he deliberately confuses symbols. For instance he paints Arabic symbols and writing on helicopters in the North - perhaps implying that the Arabs are fighting holy wars instead of anti-imperialist struggles. In another painting a girl's legs in short focus set against a long range view from a helicopter implies a barbarity but not overtly criticises it. It can also encourage sadistic voyeurism.

In all his images there is a disturbing juxtaposition and barbarity represented. Naturally when dealing with such a situation as the North these issues are going to be part of the work. Seymore shows a hatred for the situation in the North but it seems this hatred is leveled at the people themselves and is extended also to those Arabic peoples who are waging struggle as well. Sometimes he is denying or concealing the British presence by using false symbols on the helicopters. This cannot have an enabling effect on the people in the North because it simply continues the criticisms and blame leveled at them by the British and Irish government. It emphasises the divide instead of showing the common plight of all the people in the North. Seymore is obsessed with sectarianism; he hates it and sees it as fascist but does not attempt to overcome it, he simply represents it.

Another artist, Willie Doherty, has been dealing with the question of the North. His recent exhibition was made up of work which was done while the artist was living in his native Derry. He uses photographs and text to convey his content which is done in a far more minimalist and abstract way than Seymore's work, using images such as a closeup of leaves, a road side, an advertisement hoarding and all the other normal places in Derry. He has tried to avoid the sensationalist type image of the press, combining these images with text from various sources, slogans, books, etc. Doherty hopes to set up a conflict of image and text which he hopes will make us more aware of the manipulations of our perceptions of the North by the media. Again the artist is not concerned to make

a statement or give a response on his own behalf. Using statements and quotes from graffiti he is simply lifting meanings from other sources, at least, unlike other post-modernist photographers, he takes his own photographs.

In a talk the artist gave on his work recently, he made little reference to the situation in the North and emphasised more the reasoning behind the formal considerations in his work which lay in post-modernist theories about the media. His main aim being to attack the distortions of reality in the media by drawing out attention to its forms through art. But he does this by simply mimicking the media itself. The role of the media in relation to the North is extremely sinister and is an important theme to be taken up in art, but as in everything else it should be done in order to show the truth. Doherty's attitude seems to be that the truth is so distorted that there is no truth in the end. This is not a serious commitment to a theme which is, in reality, a question of life or death to the people living in the North.

In the final analysis this effort to address the questions and issues facing the people by these two artists, has been taken up in a manner which simply reiterates the myths and the obstacles facing the people. A reiteration of the catholic versus protestant etc. without comment is a symptom of the artists not seeing this issue as one which faces themselves as Irish people, a problem which has to be overcome in order for us to progress as a people. Picasso's 'Guernica' is a direct statement against war, but both Seymore and Doherty have

abstracted themselves from the situation and have failed to make any clear comment, good or bad. So in the end the interpretations of the Irish struggle remains in the hands of the bourgeois press who continue to propagate the lies and distortions and continue the censorship of information.

Dermot Seymore's paintings which shout out the loyalist slogans of 'Taigs out', 'Fenian Bastards', etc. etc. could be taken up as support for the colonial fascist ideology of unionism: adequately exposed recently by the pogroms which are taking place and the 'Ulster says no' campaign. Equally Willie Doherty's photographs with the text 'We will not forsake the blue skies of Ulster for the grey mists of an Irish republic' could find itself quite comfortably hanging over the mantelpiece of an Orange Lodge. Since no amount of irony could possibly combat the fascist and mythical logic which gives rise to such idiotic slogans. This is because the artists are not taking full responsibility for the content of their work. If through their individualism artists remain aloof from the people, no amount of 'reflecting' reality is going to bring them any closer to people or make their art more relevant to people.

The advance of these trends in art of modernism, post-modernism, neo-expressionism, are, as I have said, a product of the alienation of art from society. The modernist notion of 'art above class', 'the apoliticism of art' and of art that 'can only be judged in terms of art' have only served to draw art even further away from society. But these theories have been met

with opposition by art students genuinely concerned to produce a progressive art and by society who show their disregard by staying away from art events. This reaction has been met with new theories of 'post-modernist' culture with its 'new realism' in an effort to present a new, seemingly progressive, art. But these theories of 'de-construction', 'cosmopolitan collective consciousness', 'media consciousness' etc. etc. when analysed, show themselves to be simply a new kind of formalism and yet another effort on the part of the experts to camouflage the crisis of their artistic culture. The constant metamorphosis from one 'ism' to the next is not an expression of 'vitality' or 'progress' but a product of the ever deepening decay and all out struggle against realism and revolutionary art. In fact many of the new anti-aesthetic theories promote that all innovation is the negation of art and as such are attacking aesthetic development itself.

But common to all these trends is this egocentrism and it is this which is destroying all power of artists and people to unite, and thus for artists to create meaning for all people. It is this egocentrism which renders art powerless for people and produces the art of isolation and decay: an art of nihilism and despair and the art of superficial reflections.

Mass culture today

As art producers it is important for artists, writers and musicians to understand the present cultural situation of Ireland, in order to become clear on what must be done in the area of culture so as to provide a good and decent culture



22. PHOTOGRAPH FROM 'THE FACE' MAGAZINE SHOWING
YOUNG CHINESE PEOPLE DANCING TO A WESTERN
ROCK GROUP.

for our people. With the advent of this neo-colonization of Ireland came a new kind of cultural aggression which is far more sophisticated than any other previous attack on our culture in history. I am referring to the mass culture which has swept the entire world especially since the 50s and constitutes the most powerful ideological weapon of imperialism to shape the tastes and values of the people of all nations and make them subserviant and passive to domination and neo-colonization. There is a tendency not to consider this culture a culture at all especially among intellectuals, but it would be foolish to overlook this because of its obvious influence on all of us. The strength of its influence can be seen most readily among the youth who strongly identify with the various trends offered to them of punk, heavy metal, hippy, new romantic. The list goes on right through to sports culture where we have people dividing into various support groups, for international leagues etc.

The source and consequently, its whole form and content almost exclusively comes from the United States of America and Britain, and what this culture represents is the predominance on the world scale of capitalism and especially the predominance of US imperialism as the most powerful monopoly state. The advance of this culture on a world scale has the effect of sweeping away the indigenous cultures of smaller nations, replacing them with a bland international culture (Fig.22). Thus when we go to European countries who speak their own language, we can find young people singing songs through English. While most of these are American in origin some are also

the produce of their own country, nevertheless they are almost all sung through English because their own language does not fit in with the form or the content of the pop idiom. If one goes to the annual slogadh competitions held in Ireland which are aimed at promoting Irish culture among the youth, there are many examples of young people singing their own pop songs through Irish. It is almost embarrassing to listen to these songs because the Irish language sounds strange used in this way; I feel this is mainly due to the contradictions between the mass culture and popular indigenous culture. But the effect of this is that young people who are encouraged to identify with the dynamism of the mass culture begin to consider their own culture as unhip or irrelevant. This is but one of the ways in which the mass culture evokes a cultural inferiority complex, primarily among the people of smaller nations whilst at the same time promoting a cultural superiority among the people of Britain and America. We often see Americans travelling right across the world in order to go to McDonalds restaurants and go to nightclubs that pump out the same disco music all over the world, where instead of hundreds of songs we have only approximately, twenty different songs to do the whole world! In this they experience a false type of patriotism and pride since this culture is no more their own indigenous culture than anyone else's.

This aspect of mass culture serves the interests of the ruling class and superpowers as an integral element in their efforts to absorb the entire world as the market for this world monopolist. Wiping away all indigenous culture, it destroys the

national identity of people and helps to create the type of transient almost nomadic labour force that imperialism requires, obscuring the source of emigration by weakening the links people have with their own country. So not only is this mass culture a huge money making industry but it is also a great propaganda weapon in the hands of imperialism. Conditioning the people to become passive consumers, especially since the only real participation this culture involves us in, is in the act of buying the records, clothes, etc.

But this culture is often very deceptive in the ways in which it actually maintains the social order of capitalism, posing as a culture of rebellion it serves to usurp the energies of people and their aspirations to change, offering false directions and solutions to the problems facing them.

We can see this in the many forms of so called 'counter culture' which was especially developed in the sixties when the young people were taking up a stand against the political events of the time such as the Vietnam war. At this time the whole hippy culture was developed and wheeld in like a Trojan horse among the people, directly aimed at smashing this growing political awareness among young people. This culture of 'love and peace' disorientated the genuine democratic desire for peace, promoting an imperialist pacifism ie complete passivity in the face of outright aggression and war, thus attempting to neutralise the opposition to war among the people. In this hippy culture growing your hair long and smoking marijuana was promoted as the truely revolutionary thing to do: symbolic gestures rather than political actions!



23. GIBUSCOUS WEARING 'DESTROY' T-SHIRT



Many examples of this direct attack on revolutionary action can be seen in the songs of the time, for instance The Beatles - 'So you think you want a revolution' or another song of theirs - 'Revolution no solution'. 'All you need is love' is another imperialist dream to send the 'young ones' off into a deep sleep, while the superpowers get on with their business of waging more wars for the domination of more world markets. It is difficult for people to accept that this culture is ideologically controlled and determined but again there are many examples of censorship that show this up. John Lennon's song 'Give Ireland back to the Irish' was all set to make big profits until the BBC decided to put a ban on it, and so the capitalists took their cue and the song became hard to find. If this is the fate of a sentimental pop song now could anything really revolutionary come from this culture?

The hippy cult also promoted the notion of sexual liberation as the crucial issue for young people just as the cult of James Dean 'the rebel without a cause' called out the deception of 'liberation from the older generation' citing the problem as originating in one's own parents as if they were the true authors of a system which obviously does oppress young people.

Today there are new trends and fashions to appeal to those young people who feel themselves in contradiction with the system. The emergence of 'punk' in the seventies glorified the life of poverty and crime. A 'true punk' wants nothing to do with society, sleeps rough, begs on the streets etc. Cid Viscous' famous Tee-shirt 'DESTROY' (Fig. 23 and 24) obviously

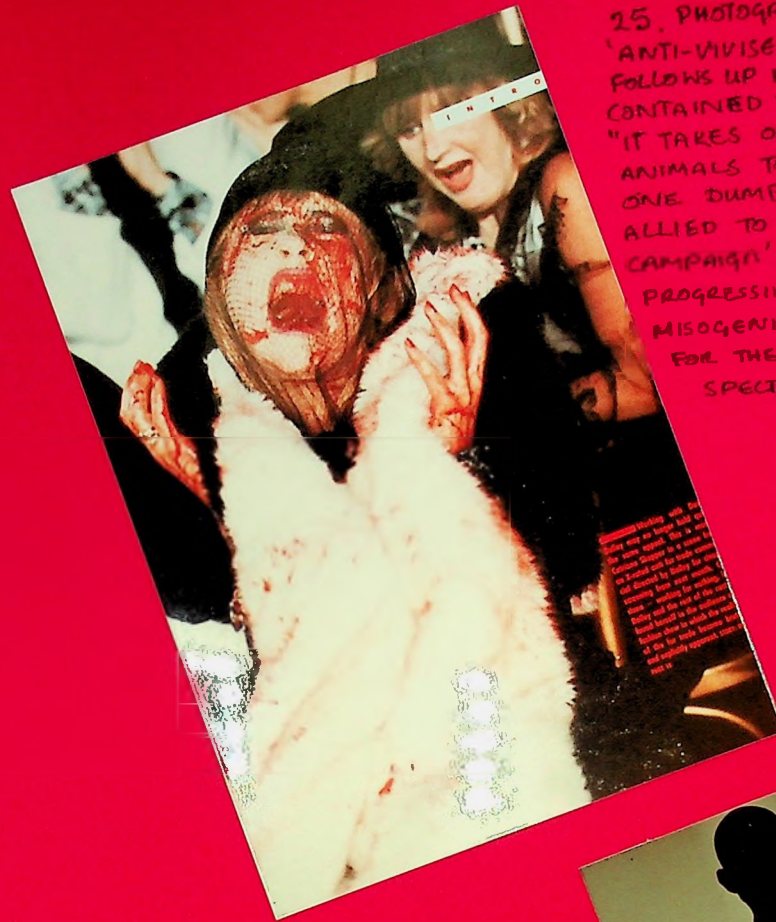
promoted the complete nihilism of the punk ideology. The words "God save the queen she ain't no human being" while appealing to the class antagonism to the ruling class, obscures the true conscious nature of this class. The famous punk classic 'The great Rock and Roll Swindle' is the story of a band who rise to stardom and fame through infamy and deceit. While it exposes the utter corruption of the music industry it also promotes the ethic of exploitation based on deception and lies. In general the film also promotes a fascist attitude towards people which can be seen when Cid Viscous is approached by a prostitute he sticks a cream bun in her face and in the end part of the film he shoots at his audience. At another stage in the film the band go to visit the famous bank robber Ronald Biggs who is pictured walking along the beach with a man in a German SAS uniform. Thus outwardly the film promotes fascism and criminality. The film appeals to young people because it is aggressive towards the system, but this aggression is misdirected into a fascist aggression. The black humour in the film is finally directed at the youth themselves who flock to see the film which is by now a 'cult movie'. In taking up the ideas promoted in the film they are really taking up the ideas of the exploiters themselves.

Initiated at the beginning of the seventies, the punk ideology and culture prepares a section of the youth to accept the poverty and unemployment and a life without future which is offered to them in this system.

Within this imperialist culture there are any number of apparently different forms and onsessions, any number of fads and fashions for people to latch onto. But they all in one way or another encourage us to aspire to the values and life style of the ruling class - from soap operas and police dramas to punk and heavy metal. Giving us the illusion that we can live fulfilling lives if we can simply ape the aimless and degenerate lives of the exploiters. As if we were the parasites and not the real wealth creators who are being robbed by these parasites. Through the violence of the music videos and TV-serials we are conditioned either to accept passively or participate mindlessly in the colonial and neo-colonial aggression waged against the oppressed peoples; and eventually for the possibility of the world war which is in constant preparation between the two superpowers. This is particularly relevant to Irish people with our own country partitioned and dominated by a colonial power.

This culture, including high culture, encourages us to take an egocentric world outlook, dividing us into various interest groups opposed to one another. This is the most destructive aspect of this culture since this egotism is the world outlook of the exploiter and when spread among ordinary people this outlook is the outlook of the slave. This illusory individualism, - illusory since as wage slaves in the capitalist system under the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, people are not actually 'free living' individuals, but only believe themselves to be 'free' by donning the various superficial 'individual identities' and separatist interests' provided by this

25. PHOTOGRAPHER DAVID BAILEY'S 'ANTI-VIVISECTION' PHOTOGRAPH FOLLOWS UP HIS BILLBOARD PIECE WHICH CONTAINED THE SLOGAN: "IT TAKES ONE HUNDRED DUMB ANIMALS TO MAKE IT (FUR COAT) AND ONE DUMB ANIMAL TO WEAR IT". ALLIED TO 'THE ANIMAL LIBERATION CAMPAIGN' THE WORK IS NOT INFECT PROGRESSIVE BUT SHOWS BOTH MISOGENISM AND A FASCINATION FOR THE OBSCENE AND THE SPECTACLE.



26. 'MADMAN OR PRIEST' ALISTER MACLENNOW, 1981. THIS WORK SHOWS THE CROSS INFLUENCES BETWEEN 'HIGH' AND 'MASS' CULTURE, WHERE BOTH SHOW THE SAME FIXATION WITH VIOLENCE AND SPECTACLE, OFTEN USING THE SAME AESTHETIC DEVICES.



culture - destroys the unity among people whose only future lies in uniting with one another to collectively oppose this system of exploitation. This identification through culture with the oppressor offers absolutely nothing to people and it actually comes between us and the development of any true consciousness or identity. It is escapist and anti-conscious and is usurping the power of people preventing them from taking up any true road to fulfil their aspirations for a better future and true individual freedom.

But the whole backward and anti-conscious aspects of this culture which has become a kind of sacred cow is protected by the whole liberalist notion of 'freedom of thought' whereby it is argued that people should be allowed to have any opinion they like regardless of the truth, regardless of whether you can substantiate your ideas or not. It is said that since people read Harold Robbins' books and watch the soap operas, and since young people buy the records and attend the concerts etc., it must be their culture, the culture that maintains and holds their true interests. Various examples of how it draws from national cultures are brought forward for its defence. Examples of rock against racism, Band Aid, etc. are also used to prove that it is a progressive culture and really anti-imperialist (Fig. 25 and 26).

But whatever the defense made of this mass culture we can only look to the facts; to the widespread apathy and despair, to the high rate of suicide, to the life of self abandon in the drug culture, to the criminal and anti-social behaviour and

fascist faction fighting and to the false enemy of the generation gap.

But the greatest lie about this mass culture is that it is the culture of the people and the youth themselves. These so called success stories are the creation of the multimillion dollar entertainment industry which is controlled by a handful of monopolies who create the tastes, the fashions and the images of the 'stars' using their vast promotional and advertising resources.

This culture is a severe threat to the national culture of our people and is fast becoming the dominant form of culture in Ireland. It is continuing and compounding the liquidation of the national language by British imperialism since national culture and identity is in direct opposition to the interests of imperialism and the neo-colonization of Ireland. By giving people false aspirations it obscures the true aspiration of the people to a decent future. It is not an innocent culture or 'just for entertainment' but is part of the exploitation and growing impoverishment of the Irish people. In the light of this it is therefore crucial that all the artists, writers and musicians and people involved in culture in Ireland take this question of culture seriously and set about forming a culture that is in the interests of people.

Chapter III - The future for art and culture

The status and the role of the artist today is a product of both our history and our present, social, political and cultural situation. Art and artists are fast coming into contradiction with the present situation, the recent publication Crisis in the Arts brought out by the Artists Association of Ireland is a testament to this reality. The document highlights the plight of artists under present economic conditions, showing the indifference of the government to the arts and culture treating them as a marginal entity. Expenditure on the arts in Ireland is the lowest in Europe, and the position of artists as regards social welfare is extremely unclear and vulnerable. Arguments for better funding and investment in the arts and many criticisms are made in the document, all of which are well founded and it is important for artists to demand the economic aid and respect that they need.

The government is criticized for having no official policy on the arts but their attitude to art and culture is no different from their attitude to all areas that are not considered profitable - witness the cuts in education etc. While having no official policy for the arts a broader examination of what successive governments have actually done shows the true policy of the ruling class for culture.

In the same way that they have encouraged foreign monopoly industry to the detriment of our own indigenous industry, they have encouraged the importation of foreign mass culture while

economically strangling our own, for example film studios such as the Ardmore Studios simply serve as empty factories for foreign companies to come and make films here. Foreign pop music is imported while only 2% of the arts budget (which is only .01% of the total government expenditure) is given to the area of traditional Irish music which happens to be the most popular and well attended art form in the country. An appetite for culture does not develop out of thin air and this active promotion of one culture over another is molding the tastes of the people.

The Irish people are reportedly the least cultured and the least concerned with culture in Europe - it is not coincidental that we are also the cheapest labour force and have the highest unemployment in Europe. Thus the contradictions between art and the capitalist and neo-colonial system is the root cause of the crisis in the arts and while greater economic aid is an immediate demand of artists; it would not solve the underlying problems.

In taking up the issues facing themselves, artists come up against the results of their alienation; they find little support among the people for artists. Like students, artists cannot withdraw their labour since art and culture are for the satisfaction of the spiritual needs of the people. Thus the basis for their support lies in artists fulfilling these spiritual needs. If art becomes an elitist product attached to a decaying system of capitalism their art will decay with it.

"The object of art as well as any other product produces an artistic public appreciative of beauty. Production thus not only produces an object for the subject but a subject for the object."⁸ Art and artists that make themselves completely subordinate to the capitalist system are killing art since all art and culture is necessarily a product of creative consciousness. The art of the neo-expressionist and the various other art trends I have talked about, are producing an anti-conscious suicidal art, in some cases actually bringing about the suicide of the artist eg. the high suicide rate among the American abstract expressionists. In fact this expressionist tendency to self destruction can be seen from Van Gogh on.

The real crisis in art is a crisis of form and content. The ideologies of modernism and the mass culture which promote egocentrism and division are the ideology and culture of the slave as Patrick Colling says: "What's lacking in Irish art now is in my opinion, everybody wants to look out instead of looking in and looking out is making a colony of us."⁹

But the relationship between art and culture and the economic base does not have to be a passive one as we can see in our own history, during the period of the Celtic revival where art and culture reflected the aspirations of the people for independence and freedom. Culture as an ideological superstructure can either take up the new ideas of its time in the service of the people or it can be used to help maintain the status quo. As I have shown, the ideas being promoted in the mass culture and also in the 'high culture' today by the

bourgeoisie, form an ideological weapon with which to maintain the subjugation of the Irish people and the peoples of the world.

For artists in Ireland the necessity of taking up the new ideas of socialism and creating an art reflective of the aspirations of the people is obvious. Since even as a capitalist country Ireland cannot afford to lavish on its people whatever benefits there are in this so called 'internationalist' cosmopolitan culture, simply because capitalism is now at the stage of imperialism ie where the majority of countries and peoples are dominated and exploited by a handful of superpowers - and in this situation Ireland is not a capitalist power but a neo-colonized country. The native bourgeois class is therefore not a class of indigenous power but a collaborative bourgeoisie who are simply the watchdogs of imperialism in Ireland. In Ireland we do not have many of the corporate type buildings which decorate their walls with 'high culture', or the huge modern art museums, sponsored and supported by capital. Our artists are not internationally famous, even though the geometric shapes of Brian King and Michael Warren etc. are every bit as geometric as any Nreman etc. and the 'Bad Painting' of Graham and McGuire is every bit as 'bad' as Schnabel and Baselits - as Roderick Knowles points out in his book Contemporary Irish Artists, although he seemed to think it was because there is not enough exposure of literature on the subject. But who knows the important artists of countries such as Mexico or Brazil, it is surely no coincidence that Ireland is among these countries ignored by 'international' bourgeois culture,

So the notion of striving toward international acclaim in the world sphere is practically a dead letter for Irish artists. In general it often means the denial of one's own identity as in the case of Bob Geldoff and many other Irish artists. It means, like an orphan to be adopted by some greater power than Ireland. But does this not then have a knock on effect on the integrity of the artist and by implication the integrity of his production? To sacrifice his national identity which is part of one's individuality on a world scale, surely then questions the 'individuality' of the artist which all artists proclaim ad nauseam.

When we consider this question of international acclaim of art it is ironical that those artists who assume the international fashions of the day receive far less international acclaim than say the artists who courageously take up the unpopular (in the cosmopolitan sense) national character, and imbue it in their art. Take for example the popularity among the ordinary people of the Nicaraguan artists working today in the revolutionary situation in Nicaragua, which can be seen in the stylistic influences of South American painting or mural painting throughout the world including the Belfast murals; or the potential that people would have in the art of a black South African if we had access to it.

Because this is recognised by people as the art of struggle, it has international relevance as the art of ordinary people in the struggle against crisis and subjugation - the art of freedom.

So the most vital and important path for Irish art and Irish culture to take is to take up the revolutionary task of creating a true national culture and art which springs from the national character and culture of our own nation. We should do this because it is absolutely necessary as part of the struggle against the oppressive forces of imperialism to avert the absolute disaster of world war which is threatened by this system. There is an obvious necessity for a culture of struggle which can ideologically strengthen and support the people, a conscious culture that can combat the detrimental effects of the anti-conscious Anglo-American culture.

This culture is already being born in the struggles of the peoples throughout the world and in our own country in the North where the people are actively engaged in the struggle against imperialism. Since the culture of imperialism, of mass culture and high culture are in direct contradiction to the lives and the interests of the people of the North, they can gain nothing from this culture with its promotion of imperialist pacifism and nihilism. In this situation the people are turning more and more to their own culture for strength and understanding where today the demand for Irish teachers cannot be met. They are also creating a new and contemporary culture based on their tradition, writing new songs about their compatriots in struggle. The work of Christy Moore is a modern contemporary music written in the Irish idiom which takes much of its strength and vitality from this struggle. His work with Moving Hearts producing such pieces as 'Lake of Shadows' is highly innovative using modern instruments like the saxophone

alongside traditional instruments like the tin whistle and the violin to produce very fine instrumental pieces. He has written songs about the hunger strikers and also about the lives and harassments of the people in the North. His song 'No time for love'

No time for love when they come in the morning
no time to show fears or ^{for} tears in the morning
no time for good byes or no time to ask why

and the sound of the sirens: the cry of the morning is a very potent expression of cruelty of the British regime in the North and also the bravery and determination of the people. As a young person brought up in the South in ignorance of the truth and reality of the northern situation, this song has greatly increased my understanding and appreciation of the plight of the northern people. Juxtaposing the private life of people, their relationships with each other, with the brutal harassment by the armed forces. This song in fact does not diverge or exaggerate reality in any way, it is quite an accurate description of how the police saracens come at 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning and barge into peoples houses and bedrooms to take them off for questioning.

The development of the mural art is an example of the people taking the representations of their own lives and struggle into their own hands. These murals began during the H-blocks campaign when political issues came to the forefront of the peoples minds. Clusters of murals began to appear throughout the city of Belfast and spread to towns like Derry. This art of mural painting is a truly social committed art as Noel



27.(a) & (b) TWO EXAMPLES OF NORTHERN IRISH MURAL ART.



McGuigan said in his article 'The Open Art Gallery of Political Art' - "an art which proclaims the aspirations of the society from which it is produced",¹⁰ using the symbols from the history of the Irish struggles such as the Phoenix, the Starry Plough, the tricolour and adding the present day symbols of the H and the lark (the spirit of freedom). It is an ongoing and developing art with contemporary relevance and contemporary form. (Fig. 27)

But in the South also, this renewed cultural activity is taking place, realizing that the culture was in serious threat, the people have given up any blind faith in the state and have yet again taken the cultural struggle in their own hands. Many new organizations have sprung up since the late fifties, Gael Linn, Ceoltas Ceolteori na hEireann, the Pipers Club, Conradh na Gaeilge and many more. Also in more recent years we have seen the establishment of some 'all Irish' schools in particular the two in Dublin in Inchicore and Ballymun which are the direct result of the peoples' own initiative. This interest in Irish culture is growing steadily and is becoming now far more successful in terms of popularity than the earlier revival at the beginning of the century. In a country where the young people are becoming more and more impoverished with unemployment, the 'youth culture' becomes even more alienating and inaccessible, in reaction to this, more traditional and less alienating activities are becoming more popular, a culture where expensive clothes and hairstyles are not the pre-requisite for enjoyment. This can be seen in the high attendance of set dancing classes, all around Dublin, where

the Pipers Club now have two classes every night of the week as opposed to one class one night of the week two years ago. Also a huge interest in learning to play Irish music is developing. It is interesting to note that approximately 20 years ago there were only 4 master ileann pipers whereas now there are 3 - 400 in the country.

In the fine arts there have also been some responses to the issues facing people, particularly the North. Brian King, Brian O Doherty, (Patrick Ireland), Robert Ballagh and others all responded to the civil rights campaign in 68 - 69 producing works in support of the people; while this was shortlived in their careers it still forms a significant phase in Irish art, in fact had this collective response among artists to the North not happened it would leave a great emptiness in Irish art. The significance and importance of this work is reflected in the frequency with which art students refer to this period in Irish art. Seamus McKenna's 'Red horse for the people' and 'Oisin in adhiaich na feile' are good examples of a current art being produced which shows a definite partisanship with the struggles of the people.

But the poet Michael Harnett's response to cultural and political domination is possibly the most prominent of all artists today; publishing his book a fare well to English in 1975, he decided henceforth to only publish in Irish. There is a tinge of the old Gaelic racialism in his attitude and work but the sentiment and import of his work is progressive. In part five of his poem 'A farewell to English' his message is clear to

artists:

Poet with progress

make no peace or pact:

for the act of poetry

is a rebel act.

(By progress he refers to the false cosmopolitan progress in Ireland today.)

The capitalist system, now at the stage of imperialism, its highest and final stage, is now showing more and more the inherent anarchism of this system based on competition and profit with its massive overproduction and diminishing markets. Where the vast majority of the peoples of the world are becoming increasingly pauperised and therefore unable to even buy the goods produced, where people in factories in Thailand and the Philipines are actually being locked into their factories only let out to buy food, where thousands of people are dying as a result of the nuclear industry as we have seen recently in Bopal in India. This is a system in utter crisis, where the 'booms' are becoming shorter and shorter and almost imperceptible. It is a decaying system and with it all its forms including art and culture are reflecting this decay. But the world is in a state of constant movement and development with the old dying away and the new growing up, there are no 'immutable' systems and no 'eternal principles' just as the feudal system gave rise to the capitalist system, the capitalist system is now giving rise to the socialist system and this can be seen throughout the world. In this light we should base our orientation on what is developing and not on what is decaying. This is true especially for artists. Art should not

be involved in covering up or ignoring the contradictions of the capitalist ^{system} or even reflecting its decay but take up the most vital and important role of art, that of exposing society to itself, but also it should hold vibrations from the future showing a way forward.

There is a role for the artists, the mural art and the cultural activities of the people are part of this progress in general culture, but progress must also be made in the fine arts. This progress in the fine arts depends upon the artists basing their orientation on that strata of society which are the most progressive, the working class who will spearhead any change that will occur in society. In order to do this it means that the artists should reject this individualism and isolationism and consider themselves as part of the people. In developing this basic attitude they cannot help but take up the issues facing the people and also reflecting their aspirations for change and for a decent future. Many people are holding up 'community art' as the art of the future, it is important for people to be creative in their lives and these activities can be beneficial if run correctly. There have been problems with wheeling in high-tech equipment such as video and photography which is used for the duration of the project and then taken away again leaving no means for the people to carry on with their newly acquired skills. But it still remains for the artist as a skilled and talented person to produce a culture for the people that is of high professional quality and also aesthetic. We cannot make divisions which say the only culture for the people with 'street credibility'

comes from community arts and leave the fine artist in his ivory tower. It is foolish to praise beyond justification art produced by the community which can often be amateurish and even superficial, simply because of who made it, or on the other hand fall silent in awe of the work of some fine artist simply because he is termed as such. Why should people have to make do with art that is amateurish on the one hand or an elitist and irrelevant art on the other?

A truly progressive and good art both in terms of form and content will depend on the artists rejecting this individualism but also it cannot be produced by relying on borrowed styles but must create its own styles. This creation of new and innovative styles will arise naturally from a close contact and commitment to the people in the same way as Yeats drew his inspiration from the people around him. This approach to art and culture which draws its inspiration from the people and their national character, and art which promotes a national culture and national identity is often accused of being 'isolationist' and 'regressive'. But when we view the whole situation it becomes obvious that this direction is the most truly internationalist and progressive of all. It is a direction which celebrates the indigenous culture and dignity of a nation and therefore also holds respect for the culture of all peoples. This is the direct opposite to the mass culture and the bourgeois high culture which attempts to wipe out all diversity and indigenous culture, replacing it with a bland and second rate culture. As in the early 'golden age' of Irish Celtic culture, having a strong indigenous identity, the

artist and the craftspeople would be better able to assimilate in a more rationally discriminate way the best aspects of all other styles and cultures.

In taking up these new ideas and approach the artist will not only create an art, music or literature more meaningful to people, but also an art more meaningful to himself. In addition to this he will also be confronting the problems of alienation destroying its disabling effect and thereby creating an art that can become a vital and important aspect of progress and movement in society. This establishment of a strong national culture here in Ireland is the most progressive and fruitful path of future culture in Ireland and would therefore be Ireland's contribution to a truly progressive world culture.

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