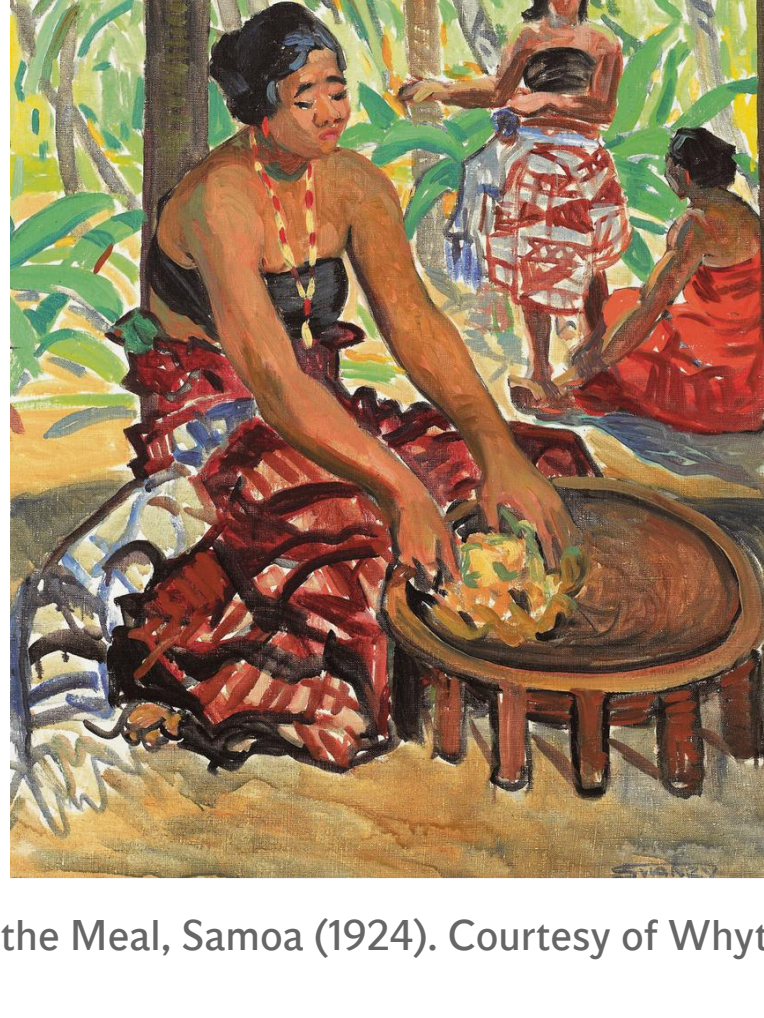




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Mary Swanzy - The unsung hero of Irish modernism

Modesty and timing conspired to keep Dublin-born artist Mary Swanzy's reputation in check, but a new exhibition is set to showcase her body of work



Unique style: Preparing the Meal, Samoa (1924). Courtesy of Whyte's

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The Dublin-born painter Mary Swanzy is one of Ireland's unsung artistic heroes. That's a sweeping claim, I know, but not one I'm prepared to shy away from. Born in 1882, Swanzy pursued "her hobby" until 1978.

Discovering the breadth of her work over the past 10 years has been like uncovering an unknown or reluctant Picasso, over and over, and over. How she managed to live her long, modest and extraordinarily productive life without exploding with frustration at the lack of recognition for her work is a mystery.

Swanzy's dedication to painting was unstinting, her talent unquestionable, however, hers is not a familiar name outside the connoisseurship of Irish collectors and historians. She has never reached the status of her contemporaries - Jack Yeats, William Orpen or Paul Henry - or for that matter her fellow, more familiar female artists, such as Mainie Jellett or Evie Hone. Swanzy doesn't have the same level of public recognition and the reasons are complex.

This is an artist who had 15 one-person exhibitions in her lifetime while also participating in the established Irish exhibitions at the RHA, the Society of Dublin Painters and the inaugural Irish Exhibition of Living Art. Swanzy also had solo exhibitions in America, London and Paris, was a member of the Beaux-Arts after 1919 and served on the Paris Salon des Indépendants organising committee in 1920. She exhibited with her European contemporaries Pablo Picasso, George Braque, Marc Chagall and Raoul Dufy in London's St George's gallery in 1946. Few, if any, Irish artists have ever achieved so much. So why is her work not held in greater public knowledge, either in Ireland, London or indeed Europe?

Modesty and timing seem to have been the major forces that held Swanzy's reputation in check, also her work was largely undated until the 1930s, making it awkward for art historians to appreciate her progression in the more recent discussions of Irish women painters. Stylistically, she is a chameleon and while her shifts make sense in the broader canvas of social, political and artistic changes, they don't always make it easy to recognise her work.

Swanzy was in the extraordinary position of being in Paris before World War I when modern art was born. She witnessed the first exhibitions of the Fauves, the Cubists, the Futurists, then later on Dada and Surrealism. Some of these major trends she ignored, others she assimilated, digesting and creating her own unique interpretations.

Like many artists, she distrusted galleries, they belonged to the world of commerce and publicity, not the proper home of the true artist. She chose to sell her work privately from the mid 1920s until the 1970s and to compound matters, she was incredibly shy. Swanzy believed the artist's job was to make art and follow one's vision; her family background taught her modesty and to hide her light under the proverbial bushel.

The lack of strong commercial backing is certainly one of the reasons Swanzy is not better known. The contingent lack of investment in her career meant that no illustrated catalogues were produced and her record suffered as a result. She was in fact a victim of her own independence. In her nineties, she stated that had she been a Henry and not a Mary, her life would have been very different.

She was right; her being female is a significant, contributory factor in her limited reputation. In the received view of history, women's participation in the events of the day is sporadically and somewhat generically reported, at least that was the case until 'The Waking the Feminist' debate prompted a more cohesive approach to the version of Irish history around the commemoration of 1916. In order to understand Swanzy's limited public profile, I decided to follow the money as a route through the weight of received opinion. I began this search in 2007 when Swanzy works were achieving good prices.

Yet in broad public knowledge, she remained largely unknown. My research also started before the digital project had taken hold in our museums or galleries. Swanzy might not even have been hung when I was looking for further examples of her work and she was most visible online, through the art market in Ireland and London. It seemed odd that her paintings were fetching good prices and yet the breadth of her output was unavailable across the national collections. Her cubist paintings were the most well known with the landscapes from Samoa and Europe coming a close second.

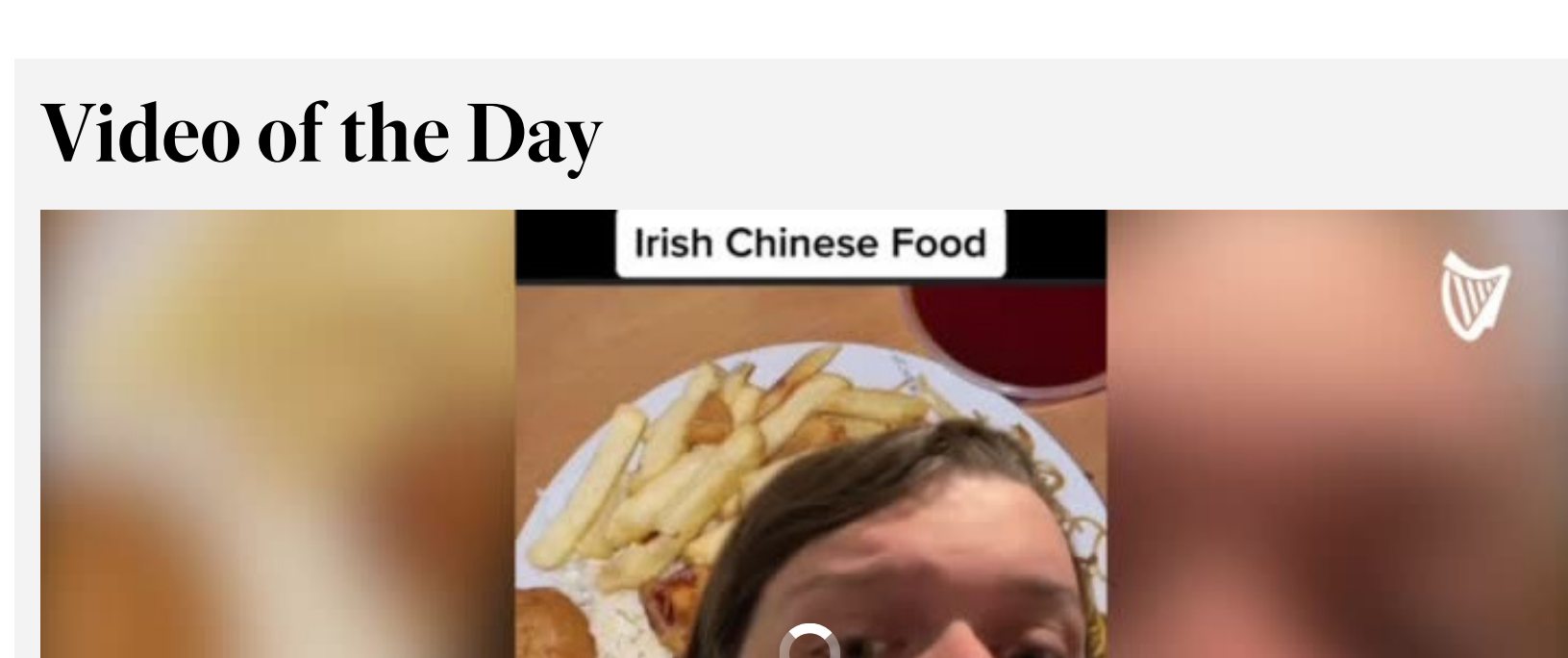
Significant sums of money were changing hands at auction, although this did not seem to have been the case during her lifetime. Swanzy, who was responsible for this extensive outpouring of knowledge, humanity and vision had lived frugally on her limited inheritance while being documented as a wealthy Anglo-Irish female painter. A big disconnect was going on between fact and received history it seemed.

Coming of age at the turn of the century, Swanzy lived through extremely challenging times, being on the wrong side of history in Ireland during the shift from British rule to independence.

Hers was a Protestant, professional family, originating in Monaghan; her father was knighted in 1907 for his work in ophthalmology in the Dublin hospitals and her mother was a direct descendant of John Knox. Swanzy and her two sisters grew up in a rented property amongst the medical fraternity in Merriem Square. Mary Swanzy set up home in Florence to "settle her life" after the death of her father in 1913 but was forced to return to Dublin with the outbreak of World War I.

The struggle for independence came to their door with the death of her second cousin, RIC District Inspector Oswald Swanzy. He was held accountable at the coroner's inquest, along with the British prime minister, Lloyd George, for the willful murder of Cork's first Sinn Féin Lord Mayor Tomás Mac Curtain in 1920. Oswald subsequently met his end in Lisburn, Co Antrim in August 1921 in a reprisal attack that led to three days of rioting that spread to Belfast; 22 deaths were recorded.

Video of the Day



At this point Swanzy began visiting Czechoslovakia with Lady Muriel Paget's Mission, assisting with post-war work and documenting what she saw. Her paintings from these regular visits provide an engaging and fascinating history of the shifting displaced populations in Eastern Europe during often freezing winters.

As a single, unmarried woman, she was without a permanent family home following her father's death so she travelled a lot, visiting her extended family. In 1923, she went to stay with her widowed aunt in Honolulu from where she visited Samoa. Here she produced many extraordinary paintings, unlike any work produced by an Irish artist before or since.

Swanzy relocated to London in the mid-1920s, like many Modernist Irish artists and writers who chose to explore their work abroad at this time. Here she pursued her craft without disruption until World War II when she truly found her own voice. Taking refuge with her younger sister in Dublin during the London blitz, she responded with some of her most emotional paintings. She returned to the austerity of Britain after the war and there she remained until 1978, painting right up until her death.

The retrospective exhibition curated by Seán Kissane that opens at IMMA next Friday may be the first time that even those who collect Swanzy's work will experience the full scale of her significant back catalogue. How wonderful that IMMA has seen fit to champion her in their Modern Masters series for all who appreciate painting to admire her vision.

Artist Liz Cullinane is currently researching a biography of Mary Swanzy

Mary Swanzy, Voyages, runs at Dublin's IMMA from October 26 - February 17

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