



Portrait of Ms. Russell, 1918, oil on canvas board, 65 x 58.5cm, LCGA Permanent Collection

## MARY SWANZY VOYAGES

Mary Swanzy (1882-1978) was a pioneering figure in Irish art. Born in Dublin's Merrion Square she was educated in Dublin, Freiburg and Paris at the turn of the last century. There she mixed in the circles around Gertrude Stein and witnessed the birth of Modern Art. After 1914 she exhibited at the Paris Salons alongside those modern artists who are now household names. She mastered the academic style of painting at a young age and her work rapidly evolved through different styles: Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Symbolism and Surrealism; each of these interpreted and transformed by her in a highly personal way.

She held strident views on the position of female artists, relative to males, making off the cuff remarks such as 'if I had been born Henry instead of Mary my life would have been very different' revealing that she was conscious of the ways in which her gender impacted on her career.

Her record of achievement is unsurpassed by her better-known contemporaries yet there has not been a substantial exhibition of Swanzy's work in Dublin for 50 years since 1968. This exhibition aims to reintroduce our audiences to this artist's extraordinary achievements and reinstate her as a Modern Irish Master.

Following its presentation at IMMA and Crawford Art Gallery, LCGA is delighted to present a selection from the Voyages retrospective exhibition.

**Begin on the right hand wall as you enter the gallery and follow an anti clockwise direction.**

Carnegie Building, Pery Square, Limerick, Ireland.

**FREE ADMISSION**

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## 1. Early work

The first work in the exhibition was made in 1905. It is a portrait of Swanzy's father *Sir Henry R. Swanzy* and the style is formal and academic. The painting demonstrates how Swanzy had mastered the academic style at a young age. At the time, the artist Nathaniel Hone declared it 'the finest painting done in Dublin in the past 30 years'. She was just 23 years old. Dublin had no more to teach the young artist so she left for Paris where she studied under two different masters: Lucien Simon and Antonio de la Gándara. She also studied drawing extensively. While there she completed many figure studies some of which can be seen in the IMMA exhibition catalogue. Unusually we can see her drawing both from the female and male nude. This was very progressive as studying the male nude was prohibited to women at many academies.

On her return from Paris, Swanzy exhibited in a dramatically new style seen in *Portrait of Miss Russell*. In this work we can see the startling changes that occurred in her style and technique while there. Unlike the naturalism of the previous painting we now see that her concern is with breaking up colour into its constituent elements. This was typical of the Post-Impressionists at the time. She developed a distinctive 'hatching' style that is shared with other artists like Roderic O'Connor, and looking closely we can see that she applies pure colour to the canvas creating a dynamic optical effect. Swanzy produced numerous portraits in this style. She attempted to make a career as a portrait painter but claimed that 'men wanted to be painted by men and women were expected to paint pussie-wussies and doggie woggies', a startling criticism of the patrons of the time.

On the next wall hangs *Tulips*. This was exhibited at the Paris Beaux-Arts in 1919 and shows the pinnacle of her Post-Impressionist style. Swanzy was unusual among Irish artists in having shown both at the Salon des Indépendants and the Beaux-Arts. In 1920 against the backdrop of violence during the War of Independence in which her cousin Oswald was assassinated by the IRA, Swanzy decided to leave Ireland for an extended period. She first travelled to Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Czechoslovakia where she focused particularly on the lives of the ordinary people she met there. An example of work from this time is the busy *Market Scene*. Unusually the *Market Scene* is shown from an elevated view, the style is also distinctive as she loads a brush with ink and uses it to draw like a modern felt-tip pen.

### *Hawaii 1923, Samoa 1924*

The early 1920s were a very busy time for Swanzy professionally. Despite her extensive travels she continued to send paintings to major exhibitions. She regularly exhibited in Dublin, London and Paris. In Dublin she was involved with the setting up of the Dublin Painters Society in 1920, this was Ireland's first gallery of Modern art, which she co-founded with Grace and Paul Henry. She was also elected to the selection committee of the Salon des Indépendants in Paris, a fantastic achievement for a foreign woman at the time. It is important to note her involvement in these organisations as later in life she was often described as 'reclusive', but clearly in the 1920's she gave a lot of energy to cultural networks.

In 1923 she set off on her most ambitious voyage. Travelling through Canada and North America she made her way to Hawaii. She chose to go there as her uncle had moved there in the 1880s. He was a successful sugar merchant and his home and garden can be seen in *Honolulu Garden*. The following year in 1924 Swanzy sailed 2,500 miles to Samoa. There she made one of the most iconic bodies of work ever painted

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by an Irish artist. She depicted the incredible richness of the forests she found with banana trees and other tropical plants. Importantly she also depicted the lives of the native peoples there. Unlike her predecessor, the French painter Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), who often sexualised the women of the islands showing them naked and indolent Swazy always depicts the people of the islands, both male and female, busily occupied with their daily tasks. We see figures carrying heavy loads and leading animals. We see women preparing food for their families or washing their children in the stream. This shows Swazy taking a feminist and liberal view of the lives of these people at a time whereas they were described by people like Gauguin as 'noble savages'.

### *Cubism, Futurism & Surrealism*

It is now necessary to turn back in time by nearly ten years to see the first works that Swazy made in a Cubist style. She first exhibited in Paris in 1914 and around this time started to make her first Cubist works. Unlike her earlier work in a 'hatching' style in which she is breaking up colour into its constituent parts, she is now breaking up the picture plane into forms which was a central Cubist concern; instead of depicting objects from one viewpoint, artists observed and depicted the subject from different points in time and space simultaneously. Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) is credited with 'inventing' Cubism in around 1909 and he and Swazy are almost exact contemporaries. The two artists knew each other but Swazy claimed that at the time he was 'just a little person like myself' and that they were both pursuing a singular vision. However by 1914, Cubism had evolved into many different iterations and dominated artistic discourse. As such it is not surprising that Swazy adopted it and she is certainly the first Irish artist to do so. Her peculiarity is that she continually adds narrative to her compositions unlike many of her contemporaries who aimed for pure abstraction. *Composition*, dated to 1927, continues the use of Cubist form and Surrealist content. Here we see a figure of God the Father, derived from Christian tradition, surrounded by what appear to be demonic armies and choirs of angels.

By the late 1920s when some of these works were made, Swazy was exhibiting in Paris alongside artists like Paul Signac (1863-1935) and Gino Severini (1883-1966) and the prices of their paintings were similar. This is an interesting point as while the work of these male artists now commands tens of millions of Euro on the art market, the work of female artists like Swazy has been overlooked.

### *Symbolism and Surrealism & Voyages in the Imagination*

Here, Swazy's complex personal narratives are seen combined with an interest in world religions, Renaissance arts and ancient ritual. *This is our Gift our Portion Apart* show how women are particularly affected at times of war and crisis. Swazy moved back to Ireland in 1941 due to the bombing raids during the Blitz in which her sister's house in London was destroyed. In Dublin she participated in numerous exhibitions including the first Irish Exhibition of Living Art. This space also demonstrates some of the variety of styles that Swazy was utilising from the late 1920s through to the 1940s from Realism and Symbolism through to Cubism.

After the Second World War, Swazy returned to her home in London. Her work often took on a darker and more sinister mood. In the 1960s, some of the strangest of Swazy's works appear. The fantastical worlds seen in *Roundabout*, *Strange World*, and *Winning the Race*, all have the quality of an interrupted

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narrative. The scenes are populated by recognisably human figures in everyday dress who are accompanied by other people who have been reduced to satirical caricatures. There are human/animal hybrids, many types of animals like horses, pigs, bulls, cats and especially birds. This strange assembly of characters make the images appear like scenes from the world of science fiction rather than deriving from an art historical lineage.

In her 1977 interview when asked on how society had changed since her youth, Swanzy condemned the decline in manners since she was a girl. She was particularly surprised that Irish people had, to her mind, lost their natural courtesy. Social critique emerges as a theme in her late work, and a typical example of this is *Figures Drinking*. Three figures whose faces are sharply lit are shown focussed on a bottle of wine. The male figure to the right is about to pour some wine into a glass. He is wearing a green suit and tie as befitting a respectable gentleman. However his mouth is open wide in a vulgar and degrading manner or he may be shouting. It is a grotesque scene worthy of Goya, and as with his work could suggest a biblical reference. The open shouting mouth is repeated in *Taxi*, *The Opera Singer*, and *Revolution* all of which share a cast of characters. Economic difference is seen from the excessive wealth shown in *The Wedding* in which a pregnant bride's train flows all the way down the aisle of the church. This contrasts with *Beggarman* who sits shivering by the side of the road as a finely dressed lady throws coins in his cap.

In the Hub to the rear of the galleries plays an important interview between Swanzy and RTE aired in the mid 1970's. She was 95 years old and would die in the following year. Literally a voice from another century, she recalls her childhood in Dublin in the 1890s, Paris in the early 20th century, the artists she met and her thoughts on life and culture.

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Exhibition curated by Seán Kissane, Curator: *Exhibitions*, Irish Museum of Modern Art as part of the *IMMA Modern Masters Series*.

A fully illustrated monograph, *Mary Swanzy: Voyages*, including a thematic essay by IMMA curator Seán Kissane and an extensive biography by Liz Cullinane accompanies the exhibition.

**IMMA** ÁRAS NUA-EALAÍNE  
NA hÉIREANN  
IRISH MUSEUM OF  
MODERN ART

**Crawford  
Art  
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An Roinn  
Cultúir, Oidhreachta agus Gaeltachta  
Department of  
Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht



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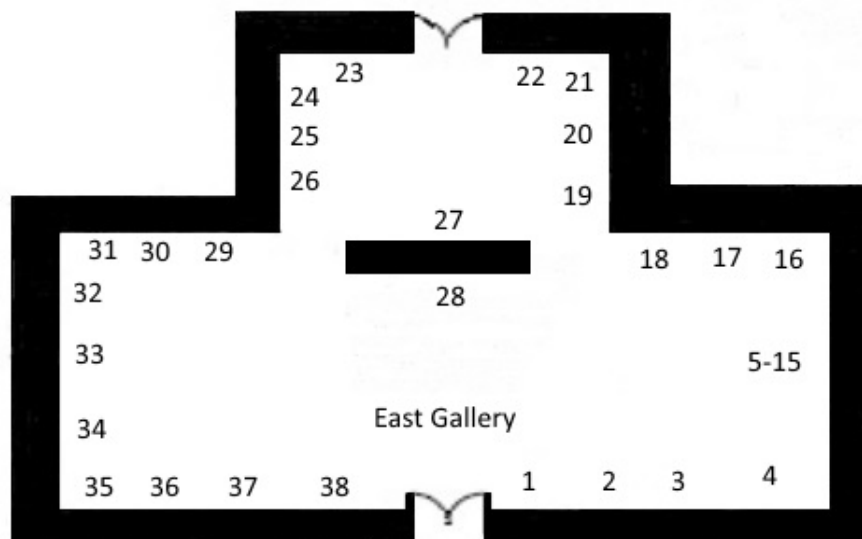
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Comhairle Cathrach  
& Contae **Luimnigh**  
Limerick City  
& County Council





	<b>Titled</b>	<b>medium</b>	<b>dimensions</b>	<b>Owner/Lender</b>
1	<i>Portrait of Sir Henry Rosborough Swanzy, 1905</i>	oil on canvas	139 x 86.5x 5cm	The National Centre for Arts and Health, (NCAH): Tallagh University Hospital
2	<i>Portrait of Ms. Russell, 1918</i>	oil on canvas board	65 x 58.5cm	LCGA Permanent Collection
3	<i>Portrait of Sarah Purser, c. 1920</i>	oil on canvas	58.5 x 49.5cm	Collection of Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane. Presented by the Friends of the National Collection of Ireland, 1944.
4	<i>Portrait of Mary St. Clair Tullo, 1933</i>	oil on board	53 x 46cm	Private Collection
5	<i>Conflagration</i>	oil on linen	51 x 38cm	LCGA Permanent Collection, bequest of Dr. R. Best, nd.
6	<i>Figures Drinking, c. 1950's</i>	oil on board	36.5 x 25cm	Private Collection
7	<i>The Embrace, c. 1940's</i>	oil on board	40.5 x 31cm	Private Collection
8	<i>Revolution, 1943</i>	oil on canvas	30.48 x 55.88cm	Private Collection
9	<i>The Opera Singer, 1944</i>	oil on canvas	45.7 x 35.6cm	Collection of Irish Museum of Modern Art, Heritage gift from the McClelland Collection
10	<i>This is Our Gift Our Portion Apart, (Group of sorrowing women), 1942</i>	oil on board	43 x 28cm	Private Collection
11	<i>The Wedding, c. 1950's</i>	oil on board	26 x 43cm	Private Collection
12	<i>Taxi, c. 1950's</i>	oil on canvas	23 x 15cm	Private Collection
13	<i>Standing Lady with Two Attendants, c. 1950's</i>	oil on canvas	44 x 29cm	Private Collection
14	<i>Beggarmen, c. 1940's</i>	oil on panel	23 x 30cm	Private Collection

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15	<i>Involvement or Winning the Race, c. 1960's</i>	oil on board	51 x 46cm	Private Collection
16	<i>Roundabout, 1966</i>	oil on board	52.7 x 45.7cm	Private Collection
17	<i>The Melée, 1931</i>	oil on canvas	55.8 x 70.5cm	Private Collection
18	<i>Strange World, c. 1960's</i>	oil on canvas	53.3 x 45.7cm	Private Collection
19	<i>Poetic Figure, c. 1951-1965</i>	oil on panel	60 x 50cm	LCGA Permanent Collection
20	<i>Swans, c. 1930</i>	oil on canvas	50.9 x 60.9cm	Collection of Crawford Art Gallery (Part of AIB Art Collection donated to the State in 2012)
21	<i>From the Sea, c. 1951-1965</i>	oil on canvas	44.5 x 52cm	LCGA Permanent Collection, donated by Friends of the National Collection of Ireland, 1979
22	<i>Sur le bord de la Foret, c. 1950's</i>	oil on board	76.2 x 63.5cm	Private Collection
23	<i>Composition, 1927</i>	oil on canvas	81 x 101.5cm	Private Collection
24	<i>Trees, c.1930's</i>	oil on canvas	52.5 x 45cm	Private Collection
25	<i>Sun on the Sails, c. 1920</i>	oil on canvas	76 x 63.5cm	The O'Brien Collection
26	<i>In the Window, 1920's</i>	oil on canvas	61 x 51cm	Private Collection
27	<i>Untitled Cubist View of Doorway through Foliage (nd)</i>	oil on canvas	42 x 62.5cm	Private Collection
28	<i>Flowers and Lighthouse, c. 1927</i>	oil on canvas	81 x 100cm	Private Collection
29	<i>Honolulu Garden, 1923</i>	oil on canvas	62.9 x 75.4cm	Collection of Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane, purchased 1976
30	<i>Le Village, c. 1925</i>	oil on canvas	60.9 x 76.2cm	Private Collection
31	<i>In Samoa, 1924</i>	oil on linen	76 x 63.5cm	Council of Alexandra College
32	<i>Samoan Scene, 1924</i>	oil on canvas	152 x 92cm	Collection of Crawford Art Gallery (Part of AIB Art Collection donated to the State in 2012)
33	<i>Samoa, 1924</i>	oil on canvas	76 x 63.5cm	Private Collection
34	<i>Preparing the meal, 1924</i>	oil on canvas	61 x 51cm	Private Collection
35	<i>Market Scene, 1920-21</i>	oil on canvas	30.5 x 50.2cm	Private Collection
36	<i>Tulips, c. 1918</i>	oil on board	61 x 51cm	Private Collection
37	<i>Field workers, 1914</i>	oil on board	28 x 33cm	Private Collection
38	<i>Conservatory, Clare Hall, c. 1918</i>	oil on canvas	49.5 x 28cm	Private Collection

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