

Crossing Borders of Style: The Migration of Italian Renaissance Ideals into Irish Art and Cultural Identity, 1840–1940

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Art has always travelled further than its makers. Across centuries, images, ideals, and styles have crossed borders as persistently as people themselves. In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland, these migrations of form were not mere echoes of European taste but powerful vehicles of self-definition. This essay explores how Italian Renaissance ideals of beauty, harmony, and sacred composition moved across space and time to shape Irish art between 1840 and 1940. It argues that this migration of style, carried through church patronage, art education, and cultural revival, became a subtle act of translation: Ireland transforming the language of the Renaissance into its own expression of faith and nationhood. Far from imitation, this exchange reveals how the circulation of art can forge identity in motion.

The Renaissance was not only an epoch in time but an enduring vocabulary of form and meaning. Its ideals - balance, naturalism, ideal proportion, and divine beauty - became universal markers of artistic excellence. The “migration” of these ideals into nineteenth-century Ireland must be read within the intertwined frameworks of religion, education, and empire. The Royal Hibernian Academy, founded in 1823, modelled itself on continental prototypes, its curriculum rooted in the study of classical casts and Italian masters.¹ Reproductions of Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo circulated widely through print and plaster, creating what Ernst Gombrich later called “a heritage of Apelles”: the diffusion of canonical ideals as cultural currency.² This migration was not a simple importation of aesthetics; it was also a movement of people and institutions. Italian craftsmen and painters were commissioned for Irish churches during the Catholic revival, bringing with them the iconographic conventions of Renaissance piety.³ The Jesuit and Presentation orders encouraged art education based on Italian devotional models, intertwining Catholic reform with visual culture. Through these channels, the Renaissance became a living presence in nineteenth-century Ireland translated, adapted, and sanctified in new contexts.

One of the clearest mediators of this aesthetic migration was Frederick William Burton, whose celebrated *The Meeting on the Turret Stairs* (1864) blends the emotional intensity of early Italian art with the moral idealism of Victorian Britain. Burton’s composition, inspired by quattrocento frescoes, translates Renaissance tenderness into a national idiom of romantic restraint.⁴ Though painted while Burton served as Director of the National Gallery, London, its reception in Ireland was immediate; the work became a symbol of Irish sensibility elevated through continental form. In Burton’s art, Italian grace became a means of articulating Irish emotion. Women artists such as Sarah Purser further redefined these imported ideals in early twentieth-century Ireland. Her stained-glass studio *An Túr Gloine* (The Tower of Glass), founded in 1903, drew on Renaissance workshop structures and Marian iconography while serving the cultural aims of the Gaelic Revival.⁵ Purser’s practice, informed by Florentine compositional balance and medieval craftsmanship, embodied what Fintan Cullen terms the “visual politics” of Irish identity: an art both cosmopolitan and nationalist.⁶ The migration of Italian ideals thus reached into craft, ecclesiastical art, and pedagogy, reconfiguring the sacred image as an emblem of Irish self-definition.

¹ Michael Ann Holly, *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 42.

² Ernst Gombrich, *The Heritage of Apelles* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1976), p. 9.

³ Fintan Cullen, *Visual Politics: The Representation of Ireland 1750–1930* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), p. 118.

⁴ Nicola Figgis and Brendan Rooney, *Irish Paintings in the National Gallery of Ireland* (Dublin: NGI, 2001), p. 204.

⁵ Charles Ford, *Art and Nationalism in Ireland: The Visual Dimension of Irish Identity, 1920–1940* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), p. 37.

⁶ Cullen, *Visual Politics*, p. 130.

The transmission of Renaissance ideals was sustained through Ireland's developing art-school network. In Dublin, the Metropolitan School of Art (later NCAD) followed the South Kensington system, itself derived from continental models that privileged linear drawing and anatomy.⁷ In Cork and Belfast, smaller schools echoed this method, ensuring that the Renaissance remained the silent foundation of artistic training. By the early twentieth century, reproductions of Raphael's *School of Athens* and Leonardo's anatomical studies adorned classroom walls across Ireland.⁸ These images served as both pedagogical tools and cultural mirrors, reflecting a tension between inherited authority and emerging independence. At University College Cork, the teaching of art history in the 1910s and 1920s drew heavily on continental scholarship, positioning Renaissance art as the wellspring of civilisation.⁹ Yet Irish scholars increasingly questioned the colonial implications of this hierarchy. To embrace the Renaissance was to claim participation in European culture; to adapt it was to assert autonomy within that culture. The classroom thus became another site of migration—where visual knowledge crossed borders, and Irish students learned to see themselves as both heirs to and interpreters of continental tradition.

By the time of the Irish Free State, the language of Renaissance form had been thoroughly naturalised in Irish art, but its meanings had shifted. Artists of the interwar period such as Seán Keating and Leo Whelan employed Renaissance compositional clarity to depict Irish modernity and labour.¹⁰ Their monumental figure's muscular, dignified, idealised recall Michelangelo's prophets and Raphael's saints, yet stand firmly on Irish soil. The aesthetic of ideal proportion became a metaphor for moral order and national strength. This process exemplifies what Benedict Anderson calls an *imagined community*: a shared sense of belonging constructed through symbolic forms that cross space and time.¹¹ Just as Renaissance humanism travelled northward centuries earlier, its Irish reception represents a re-imagining of community through visual language. In appropriating these ideals, Irish artists engaged in what postcolonial theorists later termed *transculturation* - a negotiation of power through cultural exchange.¹² The migration of style thus mirrored the migration of political consciousness.

Ireland's embrace of Renaissance visuality cannot be divorced from its Catholic identity. The Counter-Reformation had long associated Italian art with orthodoxy, and in post-Emancipation Ireland, this association gained renewed power. Church commissions in Dublin, Cork, and Limerick often favoured Italianate designs, with imported mosaics and frescoes reinforcing a sense of universal Catholic belonging.¹³ Yet within these sacred interiors, Irish artists inserted local saints, landscapes, and features, domesticating the universal. The visual migration of sanctity thus operated in both directions: Italy lent form, Ireland supplied soul. Dorothy Walker has noted that Purser's *An Túr Gloine* windows, though modelled on Florentine balance, reveal "a distinctly Irish melancholy, a spirituality of weather and place."¹⁴ This hybridity encapsulates the impact of migration in its broadest sense, the transformation that occurs when an idea crosses a border and finds new meaning in altered light.

By the 1920s, younger Irish artists began to reassess the authority of the Renaissance tradition itself. The *Exhibition of Living Art* (founded 1943) later positioned modernism as a new migration of ideas, yet its founders - Mainie Jellett and Evie Hone - had both trained in continental studios steeped in sacred geometry and iconographic discipline.¹⁵ Even in abstraction, the ghost of the Renaissance lingered: proportion, rhythm, and the search for spiritual order endured. The migration of form had become cyclical, each generation translating the old into new idioms. For Evie Hone, whose stained-

⁷ Ford, *Art and Nationalism in Ireland*, p. 54.

⁸ Holly, *Past Looking*, p. 57.

⁹ Cullen, *Visual Politics*, p. 146.

¹⁰ Ford, *Art and Nationalism in Ireland*, p. 81.

¹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 6.

¹² Holly, *Past Looking*, p. 63.

¹³ Cullen, *Visual Politics*, p. 162.

¹⁴ Walker, *Modern Art in Ireland* (Dublin: Ward River Press, 1982), p. 27.

¹⁵ Ford, *Art and Nationalism in Ireland*, p. 102.

glass work for Eton College Chapel (1949) fuses Cubist structure with Gothic reverence, the line from Giotto to modernism was unbroken.¹⁶ Her art demonstrates that the Renaissance in Ireland was never static but a continuously evolving conversation. The impact of this centuries-long exchange lies not merely in stylistic borrowing but in the creation of a cultural habit: to look outward and inward at once.

The migration of Renaissance ideals into Irish art did not end with the early twentieth century; it became part of Ireland's broader cultural memory. Exhibitions, publications, and religious commissions continued to position Renaissance art as both a moral model and a measure of civilisation. The National Gallery of Ireland's acquisitions during the 1920s and 1930s—particularly Italian devotional panels and drawings—reflected a curatorial interest in linking Irish audiences to a shared European heritage.¹⁷ This collecting impulse reinforced the idea that Ireland, through art, could claim intellectual kinship with the continent. Public exhibitions also reanimated Renaissance imagery for new political and social purposes. During the 1932 Eucharistic Congress in Dublin, processional art and ecclesiastical design consciously drew on Renaissance spatial harmony and pageantry, transforming civic space into a sacred theatre.¹⁸ These visual spectacles echoed the Renaissance synthesis of faith and display, yet they carried a distinctly Irish inflection: a celebration of national piety and postcolonial independence.

At the same time, modern Irish writers and critics invoked the Renaissance to articulate a vision of renewal. In cultural journals such as *The Bell* and *The Capuchin Annual*, art critics described contemporary Irish creativity as a 'rebirth', consciously echoing the term *rinascita*.¹⁹ The persistence of the Renaissance as metaphor reveals how thoroughly its language of rebirth and enlightenment had entered Irish cultural consciousness. To speak of an "Irish Renaissance" was not merely to reference Yeats or the literary revival but to position Irish art within a transnational lineage of creativity and awakening. This enduring dialogue between past and present demonstrates that artistic migration extends beyond stylistic influence: it shapes how a nation imagines its place in history. The Renaissance in Ireland was not a closed chapter but an ongoing conversation—a lens through which artists and audiences alike interpreted questions of identity, modernity, and belonging.²⁰

The migration of Italian Renaissance ideals into Irish art between 1840 and 1940 was neither imitation nor accident. It was a sustained act of cultural translation, one that shaped how Ireland saw itself and how it wished to be seen. Through the devotional image, the art school, and the national studio, continental aesthetics were re-imagined as expressions of Irish faith, resilience, and modernity. The Renaissance, far from being a foreign inheritance, became a shared language of renewal.

In tracing this journey of ideas, one perceives that migration is not solely the movement of people but of visions, values, and forms. The crossing of aesthetic borders forged a bridge between Ireland's colonial past and its creative future. The impact endures in the stained glass of Purser and Hone, in Burton's tender lovers, and in every Irish artwork that carries the memory of distant light refracted through local colour. Art, like migration itself, reminds us that identity is never fixed but always in motion.

¹⁶ Walker, *Modern Art in Ireland*, p. 88.

¹⁷ Figgis and Rooney, *Irish Paintings in the National Gallery of Ireland*, p. 224.

¹⁸ Ford, *Art and Nationalism in Ireland*, p. 95.

¹⁹ Cullen, *Visual Politics*, p. 172.

²⁰ Holly, *Past Looking*, p. 69.

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