

# Analysing Cubism: Mainie Jellett (1897 – 1944)



Mainie Jellett, *Decoration*, 1923, National Gallery Ireland

Mainie Jellett was born in Dublin, and would become one of Ireland's foremost Modern painters. She first trained at the Metropolitan School in Dublin and then at the Westminster School of Art in London. At Westminster she trained with the painter Walter Sickert, and her early works reflect his Impressionist style.

It was also at the Westminster school that Jellett met Evie Hone. The two would become life-long friends, and in 1921 they began studying with the Cubist artist André Lhote. Here they learned about Cubist abstraction, and soon after both Jellett and Hone began training with Albert Gleizes.

## Cubist Training, 1920-1923

When Jellett left for Paris, it was to study with a Cubist artist, André Lhote. Lhote is known for his Cubist paintings, but is perhaps most celebrated as a teacher. Lhote's method started with a representational subject, like a person or a landscape, and then used geometric shapes to re-interpret the work. However, Jellett was unsatisfied with Lhote's teaching. She was searching for "extreme Cubism", and felt Lhote's method was not abstract enough. Comparing Lhote's *Nu Assis* (left) to Jellett's *Decoration* (above), you can clearly see a figure in Lhote's painting, while Jellett's is fully abstract. After only a few months with Lhote, both Jellett and Hone began training with Albert Gleizes.



André Lhote, *Nu Assis* c.1928, Whitford Fine Art, London

Gleizes' method was radically different from Lhote's. Rather than starting with a representational subject, Gleizes taught Jellett and Hone to start with nothing but geometric shapes. Using his method of translation and rotation, Gleizes showed the artists how to use only shapes to bring life and movement to the painting. This satisfied Jellett's need for pure abstraction, and Gleizes' theories on colour revolutionized her painting style.

In Jellett's work, her use of colour reflects what she saw as the inner rhythm of a subject. She believed in the 'spiritual' value of colour, and that colour harmony could be used to create extraordinarily beautiful and forceful works. She studied the Old Masters' techniques from the Renaissance and adopted their symbolic use of colour.

## Rejection in Ireland, 1923-1928

Jellett returned to Ireland in 1923 with the goal of introducing Cubism to an unknowing public. Her style was immediately rejected. At the Dublin Painter's Exhibition she exhibited *Decoration*, 1923 (above), and another work. The *Irish Times* headlined her paintings "Two Freak Pictures," and Jellett was called "a late victim to...this artistic malaria." Writer and artist George Russell even called Jellett's art "sub-human" in a scathing review. Her audience found the painting confusing, and ridiculed her work. Critics argued that pure abstraction removed any potential for subtlety in the works, and that they were just repetitive decoration.

Viewers in Ireland were unfamiliar with purely abstract images, and were unable to see the religious symbols that were so common in Jellett's paintings. In *Decoration*, Jellett abstracted the traditional icons of the Madonna and Child using the gold leaf, blue, and red common in the Old Master's 15th century frescos. For Irish viewers, this symbolic use of colour was not enough for them to connect with the painting.



Mainie Jellett, *Homage to Fra Angelico*, 1928, Private Collection

It was only through significant personal effort, and increasing international praise that Jellett was accepted. *Homage to Fra Angelico* (left) from 1928 was her first Cubist painting to be favourably reviewed in Ireland.

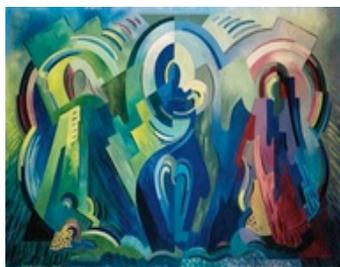
### Acceptance in Ireland, 1928-1944

Jellett was not discouraged by the initial Irish rejection of her paintings. She was determined to show Ireland the significance of Modern Art, and more importantly, how it connected with ancient Celtic art. Through lectures, articles, radio broadcasts, and exhibitions, she gradually broke down the initial barriers against her style.

She was devoted to showing Modern Art to Ireland, because she believed that art was an expression of spirituality. For Jellett, Celtic art was the national "primitive" art form, and by modernizing it with abstraction, she could revive a lost style and return its significance to Ireland. Jellett believed that if she could find a way to communicate with the Irish public she could return spiritual health to a troubled Ireland:

"...if we could only open our eyes to the truth behind Celtic art and the treasure house we have in this country in what it has left us, we might then become conscious of a reality that would give our art a national character."

- Mainie Jellett, *Analysing Cubism*, Crawford Art Gallery, 2013, Séan Kissane, 107.



To do this, Jellett realized she had to communicate in a different way. At this time, 93% of people living in the Irish Free State were Catholic. This resulted in Catholicism being closely linked with Irish Nationalism. Jellett saw this as her way to communicate with the general public, and developed a style that could convey Irish nationalism, without resorting to stereotyped subjects like romantic landscapes and the working class in rural Ireland.

Mainie Jellett, *The Virgin of Eire*, 1943, Private Collection

She continued painting religious themes, but changed her style so a general audience could understand her paintings. First she reduced the level of abstraction so a clear subject could be seen. She also began making direct references to ancient Celtic art, with rounded subjects and fluid lines. Finally, by using titles like *The Virgin of Eire* and *Homage to Fra Angelico* (both above), Jellett helped the public "read" the paintings to more clearly connect with the partially abstracted religious icons.

Her efforts were successful, and Jellett found acceptance for her art in Ireland. From the late 1920s until her death in 1944, Jellett was an international spokesperson for Irish Modernism. She represented Ireland, as an artist, at the 1928 Olympic Games, was commissioned for works for the Glasgow Empire Exhibition in 1938 and for the Irish Pavilion at the New York World Fair in 1939, and was made founding chairman of the Irish Exhibition of Living Art in 1943.