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A Living Legacy

ONE OF THE GREATEST COLLECTIONS OF IRISH ART IN PRIVATE HANDS

Irish Art from the Collection of Brian P. Burns To be Offered at Sotheby's London on 21 November 2018

HIGHLIGHTS TO BE UNVEILED IN CHICAGO AND BOSTON THIS JUNE



"I made a bet almost 40 years ago, that a people who could speak and write so brilliantly and compose music so lyrically, surely must also have painted. I have made it a personal mission to inform the American Irish diaspora about the beauty and the visual tapestry that Irish art has bequeathed the world."

Brian P. Burns

London, 13 June 2018 – More than forty years ago, Brian P. Burns made a bet with himself: *"Isn't it possible that the Irish could be just as brilliant in the visual arts as they have been in music and literature?"* The Brian P. Burns Collection of Irish Art, spanning artists from the 18th century to the present day and reaching nearly 200 works at its peak, is the remarkable personal response to that challenge, constituting one of the greatest collections of Irish art in private hands. Through Mr Burns' generous loan of the collection to exhibitions in America and Ireland, the artworks have been enjoyed by visitors in their thousands, creating and inspiring new audiences for Irish art.

Now, on 21 November in London, Sotheby's will offer 100 works from the collection, estimated to realise £3-4.5 million (\$4-6 million / €3.4-5.1 million), with estimates ranging from £1,000 to £300,000. A preview exhibition of highlights will be unveiled to the public in Chicago on 13 June, followed by a showing in Boston from 19-20 June, ahead of an exhibition in Dublin in late summer.¹

¹ Sotheby's Chicago, 13-15 June; Boston College Conference Center, 19-20 June (full details at end of release)

Brian P. Burns, commented: *“Some have asked why Eileen and I have chosen this time to return a large group of paintings from our Irish art collection to the market. Many years ago, when I started collecting, I was advised by Desmond Fitzgerald, the 29th Knight of Glin; Desmond Guinness, and other art advisors in Ireland to remember that no matter how many paintings I might acquire, I was only a custodian of them during my lifetime. Now at 80-plus years old, and with a collection of more than 200 works, it seemed an appropriate time. We have ensured that a number of paintings will be displayed in Chicago, New York and Boston before they “go across the pond” to be exhibited in Dublin and London before their sale this November.*

Eileen and I share a sense of modest pride as custodians that we have made every effort to display Irish art to as many people as possible in the Irish diaspora. We were the only American collectors who had the quiet confidence to bring Irish art back to Ireland for a major exhibition in 1986, to a record audience at The Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery in Dublin. Other major exhibition sites have included the Paul Mellon Museum at Yale Center for British Art, The John F. Kennedy Center of the Performing Arts in Washington DC, the Phoenix Art Museum in Arizona, and most recently, in 2017, an exhibition in New York City to generate funds to complete the reconstruction of St. Patrick’s Cathedral.”

Charlie Minter, Head of Irish Art, Sotheby’s, said: *“The Brian P. Burns collection is a formidable lifetime achievement and more than exceeds Brian’s aims at the outset to pay tribute to his Irish heritage, celebrate the achievements of Ireland’s artists and bring their attention to a wider audience. Acquired with reverence and deliberation, each and every picture was accorded careful consideration before becoming part of the collection. Throughout the process, Brian has shown extraordinary vision, passion and generosity of spirit. Presenting the collection at auction will bring the rich legacy of Ireland’s artists under the spotlight once again and offer collectors an opportunity to write a new chapter for these special pictures.”*

Arabella Bishop, Head of Sotheby’s Ireland, said: *“To bring to a close our 40th anniversary year in Dublin with this once-in-a-lifetime sale feels truly remarkable. Encapsulating our history, our people and our artists, Brian’s collection tells the story of a nation. That story is both personal and universal, and we expect the collection will touch the hearts and minds of all those who see it.”*

BRIAN P. BURNS: AN AMERICAN-IRISH COLLECTOR



Brian and Eileen Burns
Photograph credit: Carrie Bradburn

The story of Brian P. Burns’ family epitomises the American dream. Emigrating from Sneem in Co. Kerry, Brian’s grandfather arrived in Boston in 1892. He secured a job as an \$18 a week motorman until an accident with a trolley car left him crippled. Of his nine children he still had to support, John, Brian’s father, was offered a scholarship from the Jesuits; a life-transforming event which put him through Boston School and College. He went on to become the youngest-ever professor of law at Harvard, propelling him to a distinguished legal career, both within government and for prominent public figures, including William Randolph Hearst. Brian followed in his footsteps, graduating in law from Harvard. Brian recalls

that his father was ‘very proud of being Irish. He never forgot his roots, and inspired us never to do so either.’ It was in honour of his father that Brian founded the John J. Burns Library at Boston College in 1986, today a repository of over 250,000 books and a significant holding of Irish cultural material, including the largest collection of W.B. Yeats papers outside of Ireland. It is also endowed with the annual Burns Scholarship in Irish studies, past luminaries including author Colm Tóibín and former Irish President Mary McAleese.

A graduate of Harvard Law School, Brian P. Burns is a prominent business attorney, entrepreneur and philanthropist. In 2000 he was recognised as one of the top 100 Irish Americans in the book, *Greatest Irish Americans of the 20th Century*. Serving and promoting Irish culture has been at the forefront of many of his life's achievements. In 1986, he was instrumental in merging the American Irish Foundation with the Ireland Fund to create the American Ireland Fund, which has raised over \$500 million in support of Irish charities that promote art, culture, peace and community development in Ireland. He has served on various boards, including the Irish American Fulbright Commission in Dublin, the Ireland-American Economic Advisory Board to the Prime Minister of Ireland and Trinity College Foundation, Dublin. In 1996 he received the Eire Society of Boston's Gold Medal Award. In 2013 he was inducted into The Irish America Hall of Fame in the same class as US Vice President Joe Biden, and in 2017 was nominated to be the 32nd United States Ambassador to Ireland but had to withdraw his candidacy for health reasons.

THE COLLECTION

The original focus of the collection was on narrative works which highlighted the struggles of Ireland's poor during the course of the 19th century. Unlike some collectors, Mr Burns was not put off by such imagery: *"I wasn't afraid of it. It was part of my family story...I've always been aware that we were one generation away from an \$18 a week, crippled Boston motorman. I have a lot of lest-we-forget pictures."*

Many of the pictures were inward looking, depicting the landscape and rural genre scenes which became part of Ireland's national identity. However, with the invaluable encouragement of his wife Eileen, Mr Burns' collection took on a more modern, outward looking perspective with the introduction of works by Roderic O'Connor, Walter Osborne, John Lavery, William Orpen and John Leech. In selecting such artists who trained or worked abroad, often in Paris or London, Mr Burns not only enhanced the collection but prompted a reconsideration of what constituted Irish art, an important development given the dispersal of the Irish people around the world. Of equal significance is the presence of not just Ireland's most celebrated artists, but those often overlooked figures, such as William Sadler, Maria Spilsbury and James Hore. In so doing, a fully rounded picture of Irish art emerged. Mr Burns has been an equally strong supporter of Ireland's contemporary artists, and the collection includes several examples by one of Ireland's best known living sculptors, Rowan Gillespie.

At the outset of his journey, Mr Burns professed placing himself in a world of which he knew little about. Not only that, but Irish art was largely in the shadows with few serious collectors; it was thus a brave decision, emblematic of his pioneering spirit, to immerse himself in such a world. *"The great Willie Dillon"*, as Mr Burns recalled, took him around the galleries and introduced him to Irish artists. *"When he did, it was like a door opening up; I found a treasure."* He became a regular visitor to the galleries on Molesworth Street in Dublin, and made lasting relationships with the likes of Desmond FitzGerald and James Gorry. Such friendships became an integral and enriching part of his art collecting. The collection came to represent not only a journey of self-discovery, but also of the invaluable friendships and stories made through the process. In turn, his enthusiastic engagement with Irish art played a significant role in stimulating the wider appeal of the Irish art market.

SALE HIGHLIGHTS

'...Ireland not as she is displayed in guide books or history, but Ireland seen because of the magnificent vitality of her painters, in the glory of her passions.'

W.B. Yeats, speech at the Banquet of the Irish Academy of Letters, 17 August 1937

Jack B. Yeats (1871-1957)

'Yeats is with the greats of our time... because he brings light, as only the great dare to bring light, to the issueless predicament of existence...'

Samuel Beckett

Considered Ireland's greatest 20th century painter, the *oeuvre* of Jack B. Yeats holds a special place within the Irish cultural imagination. In his lifetime Yeats exhibited in Ireland, the UK, Paris and the US, in New York, Chicago, Boston, Pittsburgh, Washington, Philadelphia, Massachusetts, Baltimore, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. The collection features five oil paintings, four watercolours, an illustrated letter and a pencil sketch, each work poetically drawing upon Irish subject matter.

A Misty Morning, 1942, oil on panel, Estimate £120,000-180,000 / \$168,000-251,000 / €135,000-200,000

*'The sea for Yeats was life with its mysterious sensuality.'*²



A monumental, solitary figure – typically Yeatsian, lean but strong and square-shouldered – looks over the water's edge as a boat emerges from the fog. The figure can be seen as a symbol of the artist who, now an older man, is looking back on his memories. The sea was an endless source of fascination for Yeats – he loved its mystery, its grandeur and the sea-faring tales that belonged to it.

**The Sea Captain, 1906, watercolour,
Estimate £25,000-35,000 / \$35,200-49,300 / €28,600-40,000**

Before turning to oil, Yeats began his career as an illustrator. His early work consists of lively, figurative animations and his watercolours form a significant part of his body of work. Yeats frequently portrayed local Irish characters in a heroic manner, as seen in *The Sea Captain*.



Roderic O'Connor (1860-1940)

**Romeo and Juliet, c.1910, oil on canvas,
Estimate £300,000-500,000 / \$419,000-700,000 / €340,000-570,000**

Roderic O'Connor was Ireland's leading avant-garde painter at the turn of the 20th century, basing himself in France permanently and befriending the likes of Paul Gauguin and the pioneering painters of the period. Holding a unique spot within the artist's career, *Romeo and Juliet* is a highly charged, passionate painting drawn from O'Connor's imagination rather than directly from the subject, as was his usual practice. The rich and sensual reds, pinks, oranges and yellows emphasise the couple's passion, and with the faces merging into one, the painting recalls Edward Munch's 'The Kiss' (1897, Munch Museum, Oslo), with which O'Connor would have been familiar through printed reproductions.



² Hilary Pyle, 'Jack B. Yeats – A Complete Individualist' in *Irish Arts Review*, 1993

Seascape, Orange and Red Rocks, 1898, oil on canvas,
Estimate £40,000-60,000 / \$56,500-84,500 / €45,000-69,000

Seascape, Orange and Red Rocks, one of two seascapes by O'Connor in the collection, belongs to the artist's critical twelve-year sojourn in Brittany. The wild coastline was the source of a bold series of paintings which the artist depicted using broad expanses of pure colour, unconventional compositional viewpoints and energetic, heavy brushwork. The works he produced are comparable with Gauguin's output at the time, with which he would have been acquainted through his friendship with the artist.



Sir John Lavery (1856-1941)

Armistice Day, November 11th 1918, Grosvenor Place, London, 1918, oil on canvas,
Estimate £200,000-300,000 / \$282,000-423,000 / €230,000-340,000



In this work, Lavery depicts the jubilant scenes in London at the announcement of the cessation of hostilities between the Allies and Germany on 11th November 1918. Around Wellington Arch at Hyde Park Corner, which appropriately depicts Nike, the winged goddess of victory descending on the chariot of war, crowds can be seen gathering in the street while buses and cars, adorned with British flags, race about. Lavery had long trained as an 'artist-reporter' (having first painted Queen Victoria's visit to the International Exhibition in Glasgow in 1885) and was used to working on the spot. With swift brushwork and flashes of colour, he masterfully evokes the atmosphere of the day.

The Beach, Evening, Tangier, 1912, oil on canvas,
Estimate £100,000-150,000 / \$141,000-212,000 / €115,000-170,000

Lavery first arrived on the beach of Tangier in 1891, and it was the start of a lifelong attachment to the city. He established a winter studio, visiting annually until 1914, and inspired by the golden sunlight and mesmerising waters, painted Tangier's beaches on numerous occasions.



Sir William Orpen (1878-1931)



Portrait of Miss Annie Harmsworth, 1907, oil on canvas
Estimate £80,000-120,000 / \$113,000-169,000 / €92,000-135,000

Orpen painted both Annie and her sister Violette, probably at the family's home in Kensington, London. *Portrait of Miss Annie Harmsworth* has echoes of Velasquez, an early influence, and John Singer Sargent, while the reflection in a convex globe was a favourite device of the artist.

Walter Osborne (1859-1903)



At the Breakfast Table, 1894, oil on canvas,

Estimate £100,000-150,000 / \$141,000-212,000 / €115,000-170,000

In this intimate portrayal of the artist's parents and his niece Violet, Osborne's attention to light and brushwork, beautifully effective in the window and tablecloth, is typical of his finest work.

Study from Nature, 1884, oil on panel,

Estimate £60,000-80,000 / \$84,500-113,000 / €69,000-92,000

This study was painted in the mid-1880s, a key period in the development of British and Irish post-Impressionism when artists such as Orpen, Lavery, George Clausen and Philip Wilson Steer were learning directly the naturalistic *plein-air* methods of France's painters, especially Jules Bastien-Lepage and that artist's soft tones and square-brush technique. Osborne's body of work includes many scenes of rural life and farmers working the land; this particular study is more domestic, depicting a lady working in her cottage garden, freshly-dug potatoes by her side.



William Leech (1881-1968)



The Tea Trolley, oil on canvas,

Estimate £50,000-70,000 / \$70,500-98,500 / €57,000-80,000

Throughout his career, Leech painted table-top views, both inside and outside, in which he explored the treatment of light. Set in the artist's garden, Candy Cottage in Surrey, this painting is a wonderful evocation of a summer's day. Under the shade of a tree, the light bursting through in the upper corners, stands a trolley with a china cup and saucer and patterned tea-cosy, a book underneath and an inviting deck chair in the corner.

Nathaniel Hone (1831-1917)

Gathering Seaweed on the Strand, Malahide, c.1890, oil on canvas,

Estimate £40,000-60,000 / \$56,500-84,500 / €45,000-69,000



The expansive landscape, soft, tonal colour and brushwork seen in this work are typical of the Barbizon school technique which influenced Hone. The painting – a highly atmospheric rendering of the Irish landscape and weather conditions, responded to with a reverence typical of the artist – originally belonged to John Quinn, a first generation Irish-American and New York lawyer who was a leading patron of Irish artists. He was especially close to the Yeats family, supporting John Butler Yeats, W.B. Yeats and Jack

B. Yeats and was the family's chief contact in America. In 1901 Hone had shared an exhibition with John Butler Yeats in Dublin, an exhibition which brought both artists to national acclaim and convinced Hugh Lane that Dublin should have a modern gallery of art. Seaweed gathering would become a popular subject for Irish artists of the future, including Osborne, Paul Henry, Sean Keating and Lilian Davidson.

James Brenan (1837-1907)



The School Room (Empty Pockets), 1887, oil on canvas,
Estimate £40,000-60,000 / \$56,500-84,500 / €45,000-69,000

The Brian P. Burns Collection tells the story of Ireland with a candid eye. James Brenan was a popular and highly regarded genre painter in 19th-century Ireland who also had a strong influence on the country's art education. He was head of Cork School of Art, promoting art and design, where he encouraged the development of the lace industry, bringing employment to impoverished areas; later he became head of Dublin's Metropolitan School of Art. This painting, executed in a realist manner and depicting a narrative scene of daily life, is typical of Brenan's work which was often informed by his awareness of social and economic issues. In its depiction of ragged and bare-footed children in a sparse schoolroom, the two central characters confront each other, probably over marbles; a third boy between them pauses from his game of 'jacks' to watch the event. The empty desk of the schoolmaster, stool leaning askew, and the open door highlight the absence of the educator. Brenan's painting is a critical reflection on state education where little in the form of learning is in process, only one young boy at his desk appears absorbed in his work.

F. J. Davis (active c.1845)



The State Ballroom (St. Patrick's Hall), Dublin Castle, c.1845, oil on wood,
Estimate £200,000-300,000 / \$282,000-423,000 / €230,000-340,000

The scene of glamorous men and women preparing to dance in the grand state ballroom in Dublin Castle provides a rare glimpse of Dublin high society, shortly before the room was renovated for the visit of Queen Victoria in 1849. At the end of the room can be seen Lord Lieutenant and Lady Clarendon, serving as Queen Victoria's representative and above them in the balconies, the peers, privy councillors and lord justices. The painting highlights the marked contrasts in the fortunes of Irish society in the 19th century – while the wealthy enjoy a lavish social event, the majority of Ireland's people were suffering greatly as the Irish famine played out. Little is known of the artist himself, though there is a suggestion he was one of the Castle's decorators which may explain the painting's naïve but charming style. It is a unique and significant historical memoir.

Rowan Gillespie (b.1953)

Rowan Gillespie is one of Ireland's most renowned sculptors, with public commissions including 'Famine', along Custom House Quay in Dublin and its counterpart, 'Migrants' in Ireland Park, Toronto commemorating the arrival of Irish migrants. In 2012 Mr Burns commissioned Gillespie to sculpt busts of the four Irish Nobel Prize Winners for Literature: W.B. Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, Samuel Beckett and Seamus Heaney, which stand in front of the John J. Burns Library in Boston. The collection includes six bronzes by the artist.



The Yearning (Misty Morning), bronze,
Estimate £8,000-12,000 / \$11,300-16,900 / €9,100-13,700

This piece was commissioned by Brian and Eileen Burns and modelled on the figure in the Yeats painting, *Misty Morning*. One of their favourite paintings, the Burns missed the

oil when it went on exhibition and so the bronze was created to allow them to continue enjoying the presence of Yeats' strong, broad-shouldered seaman. Bringing the two-dimensional figure to three-dimensional form was a novel and inspired choice: Gillespie more than does justice to Yeats' character and the heavily worked surface echoes Yeats' expressive painting technique.

***The Settlers*, bronze, Estimate £15,000-20,000 / \$21,200-28,200 / €17,000-23,000**

The Settlers was the first work of art to be encountered upon entering the Burns family home. The sculpture immediately gives a sense of the collection to come, hinting at Mr Burn's passion for Irish history and the immigrant story. A humble 19th-century couple, cap in hand and a small bag by their feet, have made their journey to America.



Dates for your diary

Pre-sale Exhibitions:

Highlights exhibition in Chicago: 13-15 June

Sotheby's Chicago, 980 N Michigan Ave, Suite 1815, Chicago, IL 60611

Highlights exhibition in Boston: 19-20 June

Boston College Conference Center, 2101 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02135

Highlights exhibition in Dublin: 30 August-1 September

Royal Hibernian Academy, 15 Ely Place, Dublin 2, DO2 A213

Highlights exhibition in New York: 28 September-1 October

Sotheby's, 1334 York Avenue, NY 10021

Full Pre-Auction Exhibition in London: 16-20 November

Sotheby's, 34-35 New Bond Street, W1A 2AA

Auction:

London: 21 November 2018

34-35 New Bond Street

The sale catalogue will be available in October.

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