

# THE CANINE GAZE: DOGS IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF IRELAND

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Canophilists who visit the National Gallery of Ireland may be interested to find its inconspicuous, yet intriguing collection of dogs. Depictions of dogs are dispersed throughout the museum, making it one of the most commonly represented animals in the National Gallery. There is a small section devoted purely to dogs, where viewers can notably find Stephen McKenna's illustration captioned by poet Maria Vela 'Dogs dream about dogs.'<sup>1</sup> However, a majority of the gallery's dogs are tucked into corners of paintings, blending into the shadows of these artworks' edges. This essay aims to explore these representations of dogs, particularly in the gallery's Irish art, to answer the question of how and why Irish artists include dogs in their paintings. This essay will survey various works displayed in the National Gallery, focusing on art from the period between the 18th century and the 20th century, to explain how dogs are portrayed in Irish paintings not merely as companions, but as reflections of their owners' identities.

Before looking at the paintings themselves, it is essential to understand the scope of art being examined. This essay focuses on art made by Irish painters (and painters strongly associated with Ireland), and when selecting pieces displayed in the National Gallery which fit into this category, the options are almost exclusively limited to works produced by male artists. Therefore, it is important to stress that this investigation may not be representative of all Irish art. Additionally, this essay only includes paintings from the specified time period because a majority of the artworks in the National Gallery which include dogs are from this time.

While the question to be answered is how dogs are depicted specifically in Irish art from a particular time period, it provides helpful context to inspect how dogs are generally represented in paintings at the National Gallery. The characterization of dogs as light, lively subjects is a recurring idea throughout the gallery. The strokes painters use for dogs appear

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen McKenna, *Dogs dream about dogs*, 2005, illustration, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, IE NGI/IA/MCK1/1/1/2/1.

light and quick, while the strokes constructing humans are, in comparison, precise and defined. Even when the dogs are seated, their wispy fur makes them appear less stationary than their human counterparts. For example, in Jan Baptist Weenix's *The Sleeping Shepherdess* (c.1658), the dog has a lively, lighthearted essence in comparison to the human in the painting.<sup>2</sup> Its whiskers and fur are made of light, wispy strokes, which contrast with the heaviness of the sleeping shepherdess and classical ruins in the background. Similarly, the dog is the liveliest figure in Aelbert Cup Dordrecht's *Landscape with a Youth and His Tutor on Horseback* (c.1650-1652).<sup>3</sup> The shapes of the dogs in Dordrecht's painting are particularly elongated, illuminating their non-human sense of movement. Just as these painters visually place dogs between light and shadow, they symbolically convey the idea that dogs serve as light, moving subjects inhabiting the heavy, somber world of humans.

The peripheral placement of dogs and the quick, less-detailed (relatively to humans) strokes used to add dogs to these paintings suggests that they are not the primary concern of painters. Perhaps just as dogs are deemed pets to humans, they are made as companions to paintings. Artists also often position dogs at the bottom edges of their paintings, which places them in supporting, rather than leading, roles in the stories of each painting. This tendency is exemplified in Lavinia Fontana's *The Visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon* (1599), where the dog and its bearer are not only placed in the bottom corner, but also characterized as entertaining subordinates through their inferiority to the other figures.<sup>4</sup> In Fontana's painting, a short man holds the dog's chain in the bottom corner as he looks up to the other figures, who are depicted as sophisticated and condescending. The dog's red and gold collar

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<sup>2</sup> Jan Baptist Weenix, *The Sleeping Shepherdess*, c.1658, oil on canvas, 72.5 x 61.1 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, object no. NGI.511.

<sup>3</sup> Aelbert Cuyt, *Landscape with a Youth and His Tutor on Horseback*, c.1650-1652, oil on canvas, 109.2 x 149.8 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, object no. NGI.4758.

<sup>4</sup> Lavinia Fontana, *The Visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon*, 1599, oil on canvas, 256 x 325 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, object no. NGI.76.

matches the colours of the jester's clothing, which ties the dog's identity to its keeper in a symbolic way.

The matching of colours between a dog and its owner is similar in Irish depictions of the animal. However, instead of tying a human's identity to a dog in a condescending way as Fontana does, the Irish painters seem to use dogs as symbolically positive figures. Walter Osbourne's *Portrait of J.B.S. Macllwaine Artist and Inventor* (1892) features Osbourne's close friend sitting with his dog in the garden at Macllwaine's home in Dublin.<sup>5</sup> Osbourne uses the same colours to create the dog as he uses to construct the chair which Macllwaine sits on. Though not many colours are used in the painting as a whole, the exactly identical colouring of Macllwaine's dog and his chair suggests a connection between the two beings, tying the dog's identity to its owner. The gentle placement of Macllwaine's hand on his dog, along with Osbourne's use of pleinairism, create a representation of the relationship between a dog and its owner which is more nature-focused and affectionate than Fontana's representation. Osbourne's dog may symbolically represent loyalty, since dogs (and horses) are considered the 'animal most faithful to man' as James Hall attributes to Pliny the Elder in his *Dictionary of Subjects & Symbols in Art*.<sup>6</sup> This notion of the dog's symbolism is further supported by the context the National Gallery provides in the description to the right of the painting, which notes that Osbourne and Macllwaine were old friends.

In a similar way to Fontana and Osbourne, Robert Hunter ties together the identities of a dog and its owner through matching colours. In Hunter's *Portrait of Peter La Touche of Bellevue* (1775), the dog's colours match Peter La Touche's clothes and gun.<sup>7</sup> Hunter's use of colour in this instance not only connects the dog to its owner, but it also highlights the dog's role in hunting. This, and the likeliness of the background landscape being the grounds of

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Osbourne, *Portrait of J.B.S. Macllwaine Artist and Inventor*, 1892, oil on canvas, 61 x 51 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, object no. NGI.882.

<sup>6</sup> James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects & Symbols in Art* (New York, 1974), p. 105.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Hunter, *Portrait of Peter La Touche of Bellevue*, 1775, oil on canvas, 152 x 198 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, object no. NGI.4034.

Peter La Touche's hunting lodge (according to the National Gallery's description to the right of the painting), stress La Touche's identity as a hunter, which the National Gallery describes as a 'higher pursuit.'

John Lavery's *The Artist's Studio* (1910-1913) also follows the pattern of using matching colours with dogs and their owners.<sup>8</sup> Lavery's painting, which the National Gallery notes is based on Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, features Lady Hazel Lavery, along with her daughter, stepdaughter, and family greyhound. Lavery places the greyhound in the same spot that Velázquez places his dog: the bottom right corner of the painting. The colour of the greyhound's fur matches the colour of the family's skin, especially Lady Lavery's. The greyhound sits at the feet of Hazel's stepdaughter, whose dress is close in colour to the greyhound. According to Hall, dogs at the feet of women symbolize marital fidelity.<sup>9</sup> Lavery's dog is not directly at the feet of Hazel, but the combination of its close proximity to her and their shared colouring creates a strong association between the two figures.

An additional example of matching colours between humans and dogs is in Frederic William Burton's *Faust's First Sight of Marguerite* (1857).<sup>10</sup> In Burton's watercolour, Marguerite's hair matches her dog's fur. While matching colours is one way painters closely tie the identities of dogs with their owners, another method is the use of physical connection. As referenced before, the physical connection between Macllwaine and his dog in Osbourne's painting is gentle and affectionate. In the same way, La Touche gently wraps his hand around his dog in Hunter's painting. Additionally, Nathaniel Hone the Elder's depiction of the relationship between a dog and its owner is just as affectionate; in his *Self-Portrait* (c.1780), Hone's dog rests in the crook of his elbow, which sits on a plinth decorated with what the

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<sup>8</sup> John Lavery, *The Artist's Studio*, 1910-1913, oil on canvas, 344 x 274 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, object no. NGI.1644.

<sup>9</sup> Hall, *Dictionary*, p. 105.

<sup>10</sup> William Burton, *Faust's First Sight of Marguerite*, 1857, watercolour with white highlights on paper, 71 x 62.5 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, object no. NGI.19602.

National Gallery describes as an ‘immortalised’ representation of his wife.<sup>11</sup> In Hone’s painting, the dog may symbolically represent his faithfulness to the memory of his wife, as Hall notes that dogs indicate faithfulness to a dead spouse’s memory.<sup>12</sup> Finally, in Strickland Lowry’s *An Interior with Members of a Family*, one of the dogs in the painting sits in the lap of and is held by one of the children.<sup>13</sup> The other dog, however, is not physically connected to the family, nor does its colour match the family’s colours in any clear way.

Though the matching colours and physical connections are recurring ideas in the depictions of dogs at the National Gallery, not all examples fit into these patterns. When looking at the examples from the National Gallery which do not follow these ‘rules,’ a new commonality between the artworks emerges. Within the remaining examples, all of the dogs seem to mimic their human counterparts. In James Barry’s *The Death of Adonis* (c.1775), the dogs appear to share the concern that Venus shows towards Adonis, the hunter who lies wounded after being bitten by a wild boar.<sup>14</sup> In Robert Fagan’s *Portrait of Sir George Wright, 2nd Baronet* (c.1791-1792), Wright’s dog struts along the path in the same direction as his owner.<sup>15</sup> These dogs still serve as reflections of their owners’ identities by underscoring the actions and emotions of their owners.

It is clear that Irish artists whose paintings are in the National Gallery use dogs as reflections of their owners’ identities, but why include them at all? Interpreting the dogs as symbols of loyalty and fidelity, as applied to the paintings of Osbourne, Lavery, and Hone, provides one explanation for why artists include dogs in their paintings. Similarly, it makes sense to include dogs when they are used to create the understanding that their owners are

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<sup>11</sup> Nathaniel Hone the Elder, *Self-Portrait*, c.1780, oil on canvas, 75.6 x 121.3 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, object no. NGI.886.

<sup>12</sup> Hall, *Dictionary*, p. 105.

<sup>13</sup> Attributed to Strickland Lowry, *An Interior with Members of a Family*, 1770s, oil on canvas, 63.4 x 75.8 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, object no. NGI.4304.

<sup>14</sup> James Barry, *The Death of Adonis*, c.1775, oil on canvas, 100 x 126 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, object no. NGI.1393.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Fagan, *Portrait of Sir George Wright, 2nd Baronet*, c.1791-1792, oil on canvas, 213 x 145 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, object no. NGI.4061.

involved in the 'higher pursuit' of hunting, as can be seen in Hunter's *Portrait of Peter La Touche of Bellevue*, as well as in James Barry's *The Death of Adonis*. For the other paintings, such as Frederic William Burton's *Faust's First Sight of Marguerite*, the answer is less apparent.

Burton created over 80 preparatory studies before painting the final version of *Faust's First Sight of Marguerite*, and in the preparatory study displayed to the right of the final version in the National Gallery, there is no dog present. Perhaps Burton decided to add the dog because it underscores the emotions and traits of the humans in the painting. According to the National Gallery, Burton's painting depicts the movement when Faust, whose 'soul is the subject of a bargain between God and the evil spirit Mephistopheles,' meets 'the innocent Marguerite' and is 'mesmerized by her beauty.' Burton may have included the dog to emphasize Marguerite's beauty, and the colour of the dog's fur matches her hair. The dog's small size underscores Marguerite's innocence, and its gaze upon the humans stresses the importance of their interaction. The dog serves as both a manifestation of Marguerite's inner workings and an additional witness to the scene.

When interpreting paintings in the National Gallery, the canine gaze emerges as an important element. If viewers spot a dog, then follow its gaze, they are often redirected to the human subjects of the painting. This is exemplified in Fagan's *Portrait of Sir George Wright, 2nd Baronet*, as well as in Hilda Geralda van Stockum's *Evie Hone at Work in her Studio* (1952).<sup>16</sup> According to the National Gallery, Geralda, a Dutch born painter who moved to Ireland and enrolled at the Dublin Metropolitan School of art, created this painting during a 'demanding time' for Hone. Geralda's inclusion of a dog, in the same way as Burton's, directs the viewer's attention to the human, encouraging viewers to sympathize with their experiences and emotions. The canine gaze reinforces the idea that artists use dogs as

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<sup>16</sup> Hilda Geralda van Stockum, *Evie Hone at Work in her Studio*, 1952, oil on canvas, 51 x 41 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, object no. NGI.4205.

manifestations of humans' inner lives, and that they are imitations or reflections of their owners' identities.

In the National Gallery of Ireland, dogs act as quiet but impactful additions to various artworks. In some Irish paintings, they serve as symbols of loyalty, fidelity, and higher pursuits. Through this symbolism, physical connection they share with humans, identical colouring with their owners, and their attentive gaze, they reflect and underscore aspects of human identity, experience, and emotion. Though they are not the main subject of most paintings, they have subtly powerful impacts on the scenes they inhabit, making them a beloved companion to the subject of any painting.



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