

The Model



EPISODE 4 – THE VISITOR

[Music played from the soundtrack to the podcast]

Isabel Claffey: Hello and welcome back to The Model, and the home of the Niland Collection in Sligo and this... the fourth episode of 'Encounters with Jack B. Yeats. On a rainy summer's day in 1938, Shotaro Oshima, Japanese student of poetry, visited Yeats at his house on Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin. Jack was in his sixth-seventh year at the time of the visit and Shotaro asked the artist if he could see his work. They climbed the stairs to the studio, and as the rain rattled against the windowpanes and the kettle boiled over on the fireplace, Shotaro asked Jack about the subject and style of his work.



JACK B. YEATS IN HIS DEVON HOME, c.1900, WITH HIS DOG, HOOLIGAN. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF IRELAND ©YEATS ARCHIVE.

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[A RADIO PLAY – ‘THE VISITOR’]

[The sound of rain falling]

Narrator’s voice: You may judge from our conversation, that Jack was a very eloquent person, but the impression he made on me, was that there could be few people so modest, so shy and so amiable. He’s a typical Irishman and seemed even more careless about his appearance than his brother. Seeing his necktie loose and crooked, I was even more charmed by him. I found in this quiet-mannered gentleman - a true artist - faithful to his imagination... I feel he’ll never stop painting until his last day.

[The sound of a pen scratching against paper as the narrator writes down his account of the visit to the artist’s studio]

[SCENE: An Artist’s Studio - Top storey of a house on Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin. A medium sized room with bare floorboards. An easel is positioned between two north-facing windows, and two chairs are placed near the fireplace. The room is neat but bare, except for several canvasses on stretchers and boards of assorted sizes, stacked neatly against the wall. A kettle hangs over the fireplace]

[The sound of rain falling on the street pavement outside the house and against the windowpanes and on the roof tiles]

Visitor: I have just been to Scotland and seen the desolate landscapes of mountains there. And it’s a great pleasure for me now to see pictures

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of Irish people and Irish landscapes. And you have often chosen typically Irish scenes to paint?

[As the visitor speaks to the artist, the sound of rain can be heard in the background - falling on the roof of the studio and with the light sound of rain falling against the windowpanes]

Artist: Yes, this is true. When I was young, I painted a number of pictures representing typically Irish scenes and the people living in those scenes.

[The sound of footsteps on floorboards]

This picture represents the gloomy houses of the poor in Dublin. That is a public house where the tenants of tenement houses gather. In that picture I tried to paint a port in Kerry full of cargo boats. This is a scene in the countryside of Galway. My brother William once lived there with his family. This is a shore landscape in the south-east part of Ireland. That picture in the corner represents O'Connell Bridge. You must have crossed it several times?

Visitor: These pictures, I feel your style of painting is realistic when you choose natural scenes, while in the scenes of a port town and labourers in the street and the lives of Dubliners - you become rather an Impressionist.

Artist: My style has changed recently. You've been to Rosses Point? The picture entitled 'Memory Harbour'... my brother used it as a frontispiece to his book, 'Reveries over Childhood and Youth.' The

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work represents the harbour in that village.¹ At that time, I intended to be a realist.

Visitor: Do you mean that you are no longer a realist? I found so much poetic vision in that picture.

Artist: Art flows on incessantly and changes all the time. Things in the external world may seem always the same to some people, but an artist finds them different when a change is brought about in him. He must not try to go against this inner change. Let me show you a recent painting of mine?

[The sound of footsteps on floorboards]

Visitor: These two men... one appears to be hovering between life and death. This dying man's body seems to be a lump of clay rather than a human body. Does the glimmer of his body express the intense agony with which he is struggling? And the other man standing by his side. He looks like a ghost or a shrivelled tree looming in the dark.

Artist: Yes, the skin of the dying man has become inflamed, and he appears to be in his last agony.²

¹ Jack B. Yeats, 'Memory Harbour,' watercolour and crayon on card, 31 x47cm, 1900.

² This appears to be the oil painting, 'Death for Only One,' (1937) by Jack B. Yeats. In 1939, the writer and combatant on the anti-treaty side of the Civil War, Earnán O'Malley bought the painting, as he instantly fell in love with the work on a visit to Jack's studio (Letter of Ernie O'Malley to Thomas MacGreevy, 1 May 1939, TCD MS. 8117/3.) He acquired the work immediately from Yeats, as his first Yeats painting. The painting was exhibited at the National Gallery, London in 1942 and in the Jack B. Yeats National Loan Exhibition in 1945. Hilary Pyle wrote that the composition of the work suggests the Civil War period in Ireland (Hilary Pyle, 'Jack B. Yeats. A Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings,' Andre Deutsch, 1992, I, p.451).

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[The sound of rain becomes heavier against the windowpanes]

This is another one I painted recently, 'Helen of Troy.'³

[The sound of the two men pulling something heavy across the floorboards]

Visitor: It's a big painting... Let me help you...

Artist: It's based on the legend that Helen's beauty launched a thousand ships.

Visitor: And what a tremendous picture it is! It has that supernatural beauty that reminds me of Blake.

Artist: You see Helen dancing in a boat in the middle of the picture. Her golden hair is flowing like a flame to suggest her burning passion. See... here, at her feet crouches a figure - half brute and half human – with fixed eyes. This beast is recording the names of all the ships that have sunk to the bottom of the ocean.

Visitor: Those ships are doomed to sink in that mixture of light and shade. Aren't they?

³ Shotaro Oshima described this as a large painting in his essay - 'It was five feet wide and four feet tall and was titled 'Helen of Troy.' (Oshima, S., 'An Interview with Jack Butler Yeats,' 1965, p.53). The oil painting 'Helen' (1937) was part of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art Collection.

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[The sound of a kettle whistling]

Artist: I tried to express a truth deeper than a mere fact. I have little knowledge of Greek, but this monster is meant to be writing down the names of the ships in Greek.

[The sound of a kettle whistling, followed by footsteps across the wooden floorboards, as the visitor lifts the boiling kettle from the fireplace]

Ah! the water is boiling over? Thank you.

Visitor: I think there is so much difference between your earlier realistic works and your recent ones, especially experimental pieces such as this.

[The constant sound of rain falling against the rooftiles and windows of the studio]

Artist: Well, every artist if he deserves that name, must necessarily change. Perhaps you know James Joyce's style. It's natural that an artist should change incessantly in his style, like Joyce. It is an inevitable process. Compare, for example Joyce's 'Anna Livia Plurabelle' with his earlier works.⁴ You'll see how great the difference is. You should go and see Joyce. He lives in France now and he would be glad to see

⁴ James Joyce, 'Anna Livia Plurabelle,' London, 1930. This was an extract from James Joyce's great experimental novel, 'Finnegan's Wake,' published in its entirety in London in 1939. Extracts from 'Finnegan's Wake' appeared as 'Work in Progress' from 1928 to 1937. Joyce also made a remark about the similarities to

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you. He writes tremendously big letters because he cannot see well now. Yes, and he has to dictate his works to a copyist that he has employed. There was an interesting episode about that. One day he was dictating to the copyist as usual when there was a knock at the door and Joyce said, “come in” and the copyist wrote down these words. The next day when Joyce was listening to the copyist reading the manuscript back, he was surprised to hear the words “come in” in an unexpected place. He said to the copyist that he couldn't have dictated such words and the copyist answered, that he had certainly heard them. Joyce laughed and said, “ah... I remember please leave the words as they are, as I said those words to the knocking at the door. Don't cross them out, as there is some meaning - even in words uttered casually” [*laughs heartily*]. Yes, there may be some people who will laugh at such a piece as mine as the product of mere fantasy, but even in mere fantasy there often things inseparable from truth or things more real than reality itself. It's the very world a true artist lives in.

[The sound of footsteps across the studio floor, followed by the sound of a drawer being pulled open]

I want to give you this. It's my book of plays, 'Apparitions.' There are two other plays in it, 'The Old Sea Road' and 'Rattle.' I meant for the play, 'Apparitions' to be performed on a stage surrounded by the audience. In the middle of the stage was to be an oval table on which sat an inkstand. Seven chairs were to be placed around the table...it was to be a coffee room in a hotel. I wanted to make it an experiment when I attached such stage directions to the play, but there is no one

the changes in his work and the changes in Jack's work. Joyce owned two paintings of the Liffey by Jack B. Yeats.

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who will put such an experimental piece on the stage? [*chuckles*]

Such a play is not fit for the stage in Ireland, to say nothing of England. And by the way, have you been to the Abbey Theatre to see Shaw's play?

Visitor: Yes, I saw his 'Millionairess' last night. It was too verbose for me to enjoy.

[The sound of the rain against the windowpanes becomes heavier]

Artist: I saw the play with my wife. Mr. Shaw takes every opportunity to advertise his works, but then he does have constant readers among ladies [*laughs softly*].

Visitor: Besides Shaw, who are the popular playwrights in Ireland? Do your dramas sell well?

Artist: [*Sighs*] Even my pictures have almost no demand, still less my dramas. In America there are many social organisations created by plutocrats such as Carnegie or the Rockefeller Foundation, and artists receive considerable benefit, but in Dublin we can find few people who will buy our pictures. Almost all the great works in the Municipal Gallery of Dublin were donated by the painters themselves and there are many pictures of mine there.

[The artist's voice fades away... against the sound of the rain outside]

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I exhort you to visit the gallery by all means for you....

Visitor: Tomorrow morning, I'm going to visit your sister, Miss Corbett Yeats. I'm very glad to have seen you and I have enjoyed the afternoon very much.

Artist: Then I will phone my sister and inform her of your visit. Shall I call you a taxi?

[The sound of footsteps walking across floorboards]

Visitor: Oh no... no! Thank you!

[The sound of rain falling on the street pavement]

Narrator's Voice: The rain was still falling when I said goodbye to the painter. The little square where we stood presented a lonely and deserted appearance. He shook my hand warmly, asking me to revisit Dublin and to see him again. After he had turned back into the doorway and the door closed behind him, I stood alone on the pavement of the square and looked up at the lighted window of his studio. It was the only light in Fitzwilliam Square. In the steady fall of rain, I left the place, picturing the figure of the artist sitting alone among the images of his own creation.

[END OF RADIO PLAY]

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Isabel Claffey: How wonderful to visit Jack's studio and witness the artist's passion for his work. Join us next week for Jack. B. Yeats's one act play 'The Green Wave,' where two elderly gentlemen discuss the meaning of a mysterious painting. This series is kindly funded by the Decade of Centenaries Programme. So, from us in The Model, home of the Niland Collection in Sligo, take care and thank you again for listening. For credits, bios, and further information, please see our website www.themodel.ie

[Music played from the soundtrack to podcast]

END OF PODCAST

RUNNING TIME: 10:46 minutes

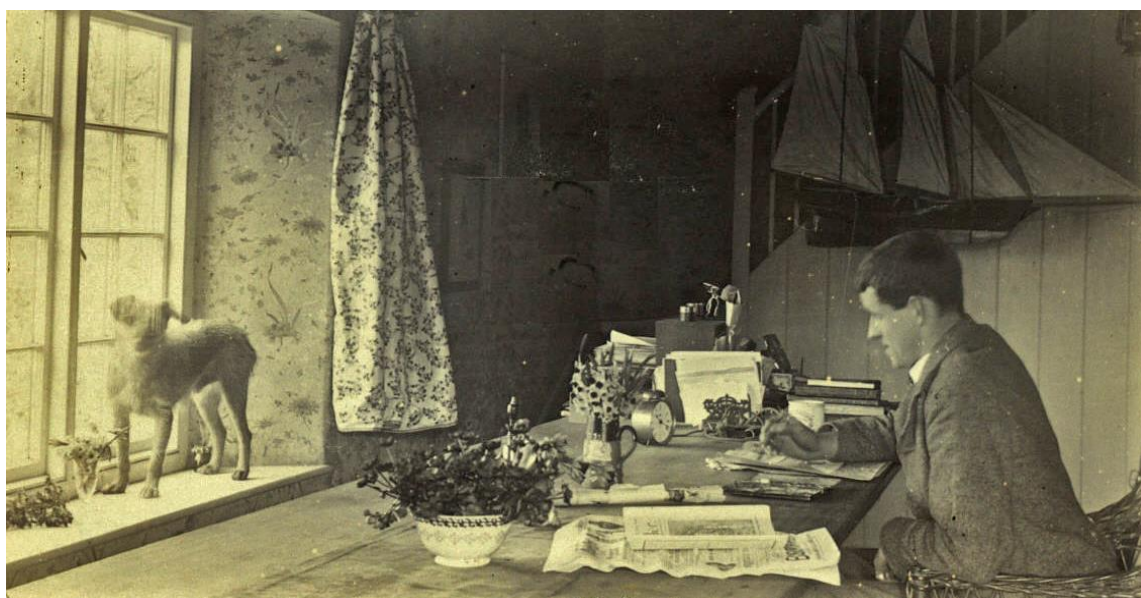
The Model, home of The Niland Collection
The Mall
Sligo
+353 (0)71 914 1405
www.themodel.ie

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SHOW NOTES: EPISODE 4 - The Visitor

For the fourth episode of 'Encounters with Jack B. Yeats,' The Model, home of the Niland Collection presents 'The Visitor.' A radio play directed by Isabel Claffey, with the roles of the visitor and the artist, played respectively by Yuji Shimobayashi and Ultan Burke. This short radio play was adapted from an essay by Shotaro Oshima (1899-1980),⁵ a Japanese scholar-poet and later professor of English Literature in Waseda University, Tokyo. In this essay, Shotaro described a visit to Jack B. Yeats's studio in Fitzwilliam Square on a rainy summer's day in 1938.



JACK B. YEATS IN HIS DEVON HOME, c.1900, WITH HIS DOG, HOOLIGAN. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF IRELAND, ©YEATS ARCHIVE.

From the late 1920s, Jack's artistic style was to change radically, and Jack compares these changes to the similar wayward revolution in the use of language by James Joyce. During the inter-war years, the artist's line becomes subsumed within a torrent of rich impastoed

⁵Shotaro Oshima, 'An Interview with Jack Butler Yeats,' in 'Jack B. Yeats. A Centenary Gathering,' (ed.) Roger McHugh, The Dolmen Press, 1971, pp.51-56. Shotaro was visiting Ireland during a three-year stay at Oxford University. His book, 'W.B. Yeats and Japan,' published by The Hokuseido Press, Tokyo in 1965, popularised the poetry of William Butler Yeats in Japan and his interview with Jack B. Yeats was initially published in this book. Shotaro also published poetry in English - many with Irish themes.



paint. He was drawing in colour, even though he had begun his artistic career as a draughtsman, earning his living as a comic artist and illustrator from the 1880s, where he used the pseudonym, W. Bird for the cartoons he drew for the satirical magazine ‘Punch.’

Two years before the interview with Shotaro, Jack painted a series of visionary works underpinned by mythological themes: ‘California,’ ‘A Race in Hy Brazil’ and ‘Helen.’ This latter work is discussed in the interview with Shotaro, as is another important painting by the artist, ‘Death for Only One,’ which the writer, revolutionary fighter and close friend to the artist, Ernie O’Malley purchased after seeing the work in the artist’s studio. The composition of ‘Death for Only One’ suggests the civil war period in Ireland,⁶ and was possibly one of the reasons, why Ernie O’Malley was initially drawn to this darkly painted and emotive work.

The stylistic changes that took place within Jack’s work during these years were out of step with French and English trends, and as the art historian, E.M. Gombrich wrote, they were ‘...irrigated neither by the Seine nor by the Thames.’⁷ Jack was going his own way – carving out his own path, as his work became increasingly experimental and expressionist in the application of paint and in his way of capturing light, but he never goes towards complete abstraction, as the figure always remained ‘somewhere’ within the perspectival plane, whether ephemeral, temporal or rooted in the landscape – these figures of blasted humanity were subsumed within flares of quavering electrified colour, where the artist carried out the high-risk balancing act between representation and materiality, as he described himself, in what sounds very close to a personal manifesto – or a ‘way of being’ - in his radio interview with the young broadcaster Eamonn Andrews in October 1947:

⁶ Hilary Pyle, ‘Jack B. Yeats. A Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings,’ Andre Deutsch, 1992, I, p.451.

⁷ E.M. Gombrich, ‘Forty Years of Modern Art’ *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 90, No. 540, March 1948, pp.82-83)

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*'There is only one art and that is the art of living. Painting is an occupation within that art, and that occupation is the freest of all the occupations of living. There is no alphabets. No grammar, no rules whatever. Many hopeful sportsman have tried to invent rules and have always failed. Any person or group of persons who tried to legalise such rules do a disservice to this occupation of living. They forget that... that painting is tactics and not strategy. It is carried out in the face of the enemy.'*⁸

In the 1938 interview with Shotaro, Jack talks about his work not selling well in Ireland, as it wasn't until 1942, that his career had a firm foothold within the English art scene, and this was with the joint exhibition between the artist and William Nicholson at the National Gallery in London. By 1945, his reputation as Ireland's leading modern artist was fully confirmed with The Yeats National Loan Exhibition in the National College of Art in Dublin. By this time, Jack was 74 years old.

⁸ Jack B. Yeats radio interview with the young broadcaster Eamonn Andrews in October 1947, RTE Archives.

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EPISODE CREDITS:

‘The Visitor’ - a radio play, adapted from an essay written by Shotaro Oshima (1899-1980), originally published, ‘W.B. Yeats and Japan,’ by Shotaro Oshima, published by The Hokuseido Press, Tokyo, 1965, and re-published as the essay, ‘An Interview with Jack Butler Yeats,’ in ‘Jack B. Yeats. A Centenary Gathering,’ (ed.) Roger McHugh, The Dolmen Press, 1971, pp.51-56. Copyright sought but not found.

The Visitor: Yuji Shimobayashi

The Artist: Ultan Burke

Script Adaptation: Lara Byrne

Sound Effects: Isabel Claffey

Director: Isabel Claffey

ARTIST BIOS:

Operating out of Sligo town, Ultan Burke brings theatre to his audience in spaces they feel comfort in and ownership of. His shows ‘An unrhyming life’ (2019) and ‘Self’ were based on mental well-being.

Lara Byrne is an arts researcher based in the northwest of Ireland.

Isabel Claffey is a founding member of Shared Light Theatre Company, and has worked in the industry since the 2000s as a performer and director. Recent recorded work includes radio plays for The Dock with Old Time Radio and the part of Mag in “Murmur” for Magpie Productions at the Camden and Edinburgh Fringe Festivals.

www.sharedlighttheatrecompany.com

Yuji Shimobayashi is a student of SRUC. He works on farms in the northwest of Ireland, exploring sustainable ways of living.

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SERIES CREDITS:

This series is kindly funded by the Decades of Centenaries Programme (2013-2023)

Episodes introduced by Isabel Claffey

Sound Engineer: Daniel Bannon

Sound Editor: Colm Condon

Soundtrack to Podcast series, 'no man's land,' (2020) composed by Karen Power

Producer & researcher-writer: Lara Byrne

Curated by the Artistic Director of The Model - Emer McGarry