



BUTLER GALLERY

History of the Butler Gallery Collection 1940s – 2020s

1940s

The gallery was established in the 1940s by local voluntary effort, acting through an association called the Society for the Encouragement of Art in Kilkenny (SEAK). A group of interested people offered pictures, and the Vocational Education Committee provided a large room in the Technical School which was used as a gallery. This was during World War II, when provincial cities were isolated from big cities by fuel shortages, and nobody could travel to cosmopolitan cultural institutions.

The watercolourist George Pennefather and the potter Peter Brennan organised an exhibition of their own work and that of their friends. This generated a desire, locally, to be able to see more contemporary art. It was then decided to inaugurate a permanent collection of art, and SEAK was renamed as the Kilkenny Art Gallery Society, with George Pennefather recorded as its founder in 1943. The Society was formed with forty-nine members who each subscribed ten shillings. One of the declared intentions was to establish a permanent home for the Collection, which 77 years later, and with a collection much enlarged, was finally achieved in 2020.

1950s

In the 1950s the Kilkenny Art Gallery Society went through a trying time with a lack of interest from the public and a decline in membership. At one time there were only seven subscribers. In 1951, the Arts Council of Ireland was established, with an annual budget of £10,000, which even then was not a small fortune. Up to this time galleries such as the Kilkenny Art Gallery Society were expected to fund themselves.

The focus of the Arts Council at its inception was very much on audiences, not artists – promoting the arts, not supporting the artist – a policy that lasted until the 1970s. In the frugal years after World War II, it might be speculated that little funding was available for the arts in Kilkenny, which will account for such a quiet decade in terms of the collection. Circumstances greatly improved by the 1960s.

1960s

In order to rescue the Kilkenny Art Gallery Society from its difficulties, a committee was formed in 1963, with Susan (Peggy) Butler as Secretary. At that time the Arts Council offered £150 towards refurbishing the society's pictures to be hung in due course in Kilkenny Castle. This was the beginning of a fruitful relationship with the Arts Council which from then on provided the crucial financial and moral support that the gallery had been so sadly lacking in its earlier years.

The Arts Council's 'Joint-Purchase Scheme' in particular enabled the gallery to build up a representative cross-section of the best in contemporary Irish painting and sculpture. A tradition of gifting works to the Collection was welcomed and over the decades the Collection grew from donations by artists, private collectors and organisations such as the Contemporary Irish Arts Society, Friends of the National Collections of Ireland, the Black Church Print Studio and the Graphic Print Studio.

1970s

There was a protracted delay before the Kilkenny Art Gallery Society could move into its new premises in Kilkenny Castle. Negotiations first had to take place with the Office of Public Works (OPW), the government body with responsibility for the Castle, which was in the process of restoring Kilkenny Castle. For eight years, between 1968 and 1976, the Pennefather Collection had to be stored in the Kilkenny Design Workshops. In 1976, the new premises were ready and a move was made into the refurbished former kitchens of Kilkenny Castle.

'The first exhibition in the castle was of modern Irish paintings from the Bank of Ireland Collection. In the early years of the gallery, there were no employed staff, so the committee did the hanging and, if necessary, invigilated the shows themselves. The gallery was subsequently named the Butler Gallery after Susan (Peggy) Butler, who, with her husband Hubert, had done so much for the Kilkenny Art Gallery Society. It was at their house, Maidenhall, that the committee usually met to arrange the business of the gallery over tea and cake.'

- Extract from the essay 'An Historical Note', in the Butler Gallery Collection Catalogue by Melosina Lenox-Conyngham, Former Board Member, May 1999.

1980s

Barrie Cooke (1931-2014) was a board member of the Butler Gallery for over twenty years and lived in Kilkenny from 1965-1990. Here he painted, loved to fish, and mentored a generation of younger artists, such as Bernadette Kiely and Paul Mosse. Born in England and raised in Jamaica he was educated at Harvard and the Skowhegan School of art in Maine. Cooke brought Kilkenny and the gallery into contact with artists from all over the world and was prominently involved in advising the emerging Kilkenny Arts Festival to bring artists he knew from abroad to exhibit in Kilkenny.

1990s

The Basil Goulding Collection was donated to Kilkenny Design in the 1970s. Renowned for his artistic instinct, Sir Basil Goulding created an important collection of Irish artists works, many of whom were unknown in the 1960s and 1970s, but who subsequently went on to achieve national and international acclaim. The collection is owned by the Kilkenny Civic Trust who entrusted the safe-guarding, storage and exhibiting of the collection to the Butler Gallery in 1991, where it is administered on their behalf.

Many of these works can be seen on display in Butler House on Patrick Street, Kilkenny.

In the 1990s the gallery hosted exhibitions by renowned international artists such as Antoni Tapies, James Turrell, Sean Scully, Bill Woodrow and Petah Coyne.

2000s

The Butler Gallery has continually sought to be a platform for presenting the best of Irish art today, along with demonstrating a strong commitment to presenting work by artists of international repute.

Our collection illustrates the development of the Kilkenny Art Gallery Society and contemporary art in Ireland. We are committed to the preservation and safeguarding of this collection into the future. Our policy supports acquisitions through gift, loan, and when possible, purchase.

2010s

The Butler Gallery collection strives not only to reflect the changing nature of art since its inception, but also to reflect the changing nature of visual art practice. This includes the range of media used in the making of contemporary art. We continue to nurture this multi-media collection through the work of Irish artists, artist estates, and visiting international artists, and endeavour to keep it current and engaging.

2020s

Butler Gallery made the significant move into the Evans' Home in the summer of 2020. Our Collection continues to grow and flourish due to the generosity of highly significant donations.

The O'Malley Collection — Most notably, the gallery has been entrusted to caretake the artworks of the late Irish artist Tony O'Malley, donated to us by his wife Jane O'Malley upon our move to Evans' Home.

Seán and Rosemarie Mulcahy Bequest — In addition, the gallery was privileged to have been donated a group of works by Irish artists to the Collection under a cultural bequest from the estate of Seán and Rosemarie Mulcahy.