



The Reading Figure in Irish Art in the Long Nineteenth Century

By *Tricia Cusack*

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Examines Irish portraits during the long nineteenth century in which figures read or hold a book

The reading figure has been a recurrent theme in Western art but especially from the nineteenth century. This book examines Irish portraits during the long nineteenth century in which people are shown reading or holding a book. It explores different values ascribed to reading and contemporary constructions of the reader. The selected pictures are by artists born, trained, or practising in Ireland. 'Irish art' is, therefore, used broadly to include work framed in some way by experience of Ireland and its history, culture, and politics. This was a time of large social and cultural shifts for Ireland, and a period when books and other reading, including Irish novels, were often published in London. Many of the artists and sitters discussed were Anglo-Irish Protestants. Both Imperial and nationalist ideologues tended to devalue reading, especially fiction, as an unmanly occupation. Nonetheless, some men are depicted reading and failing to embody a manly attitude. The spread of the novel, and the introduction of 'silent reading' allowed women of the middle and upper classes, often Anglo-Irish, to engage with a range of imaginative reading materials, secure from patriarchal surveillance. Visual images of women as serious readers drew on and contributed to the emergence of the 'New Woman' in Ireland.

Readership

Scholars, students, and the general public interested in art history and cultural history in the long nineteenth century.

About the Author(s) / Editor(s)

Tricia Cusack taught at the University of Birmingham, Cardiff Metropolitan University, and the Open University. Her research focuses on how visual art embodies ideas about social, cultural, and national identities.

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