

# Marking Ireland's Tragedy through Art

BY CARYN B. DAVIS



On the liveliest commercial thoroughfare of Hamden, Connecticut — a few miles north of New Haven and the Gothic spires of Yale University — stands one of America's most unusual, and moving, visual art institutions, Ireland's Great Hunger Museum. The story it relates, and the story of how it came to be, are well worth conveying.

Ireland's Great Hunger (in Gaelic, *An Gorta Mór*) is one of the darkest passages in human history, yet today it is not as widely known as the Holocaust, apartheid, or the Armenian genocide. Between 1845 and 1852, 1.5 million Irish people died from starvation and disease, while another 2 million had no choice but to leave their homeland. Though this famine was attributed to the blight that decimated the potato crops in 1845 and 1846, it was actually completely avoidable.

In the early 1840s, the potato was the main diet for two-thirds of Ireland's population, most of whom were tenant farmers working for British landowners. They were permitted to build small homes on the land, and to grow potatoes to sustain their families. They paid their rent in the form of exportable crops such as grain, which actually remained plentiful throughout the famine. Instead of being used to feed the hungry, however, the grain continued being exported to profit the landlords. And since the Irish economy pri-



An adjacent window plays a role in *Black '47*, painted in acrylic on canvas in 1997-98 by Micheal Farrell (1940-2000). It measures 118 x 177 in.

oritized bartering over coinage, most people had no currency to purchase grain. Even those who did have some money could not afford it.

"During previous crises, the British government had closed the ports in order to keep food in Ireland for domestic consumption. But the government did not do so in this case," explains Prof. David Valcone, chairman of the history department at Quinnipiac University in Hamden. "Some landlords tried to help their tenants. Others saw this situation as an economic opportunity to break away from the tenant style of agriculture and to move toward larger farms and pasturage. They did not care what happened to the peasants."

In 1845, Sir Charles Trevelyan, assistant secretary of Queen Victoria's Treasury, was in charge of administering relief to Ireland. But he believed that the blight had been sent by God "to teach the Irish a lesson." Moreover, the government perceived farmers' inability to grow crops as a private matter — not something it should address — and thus aid was limited intentionally.

Without crops to pay their rent, thousands of tenant farmers were evicted during one of the coldest winters on

One area of the museum's upper floor is illuminated by *An Gorta Mór*, a stained glass window made in 2012 by Robert Ballagh (b. 1943). It measures 58 1/2 x 58 1/2 in.





Lilian Lucy Davidson (1893-1954)  
**Gorta** (formerly *Burying the Child*)  
 1946, Oil on canvas, 27 1/2 x 35 1/2 in.

record. Many died from exposure and starvation. Those who didn't either perished aboard the cramped, disease-ridden "coffin ships" conveying them to North America, or made it alive to such ports as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Montreal, where they faced discrimination and realized they would never see their families and homeland again. (By 1855, the population of New York was 37 percent foreign-born Irish.) It was not until 1997 that British prime minister Tony Blair offered an official statement of regret for his country's policy during the famine.

#### TELLING THE STORY

Murray Lender (1930-2012) is best remembered as the businessman who expanded his father's Connecticut bakery, Lender's Bagels, into a nationwide brand. His parents were Jewish immigrants from Poland, and although he had grown up in a mixed Jewish-Irish community, he knew nothing of the Great Hunger until he heard an impassioned speech by Quinnipiac University president John L. Lahey.

"In 1997," Lahey recalls, "I had the honor of serving as grand marshal of New York City's St. Patrick's Day Parade. I made Ireland's Great Hunger the theme of the parade in order to commemorate the 150th anni-

versary of Black '47, its worst year. Murray Lender [Quinnipiac class of 1950] grasped the compelling nature of the Great Hunger story and the importance of educating people about its true causes and consequences." This new awareness inspired a donation from Lender and his brother Marvin to establish the Lender Family Special Collection Room at Quinnipiac's Arnold Bernhard Library. Its purpose was, and remains, to house artworks, artifacts, and papers that document the Great Hunger. Over the next 10 years, Lahey travelled to Ireland often to gather materials. The collection he amassed is now the largest Great Hunger resource in the world.

Ultimately, the collection outgrew its space. Lahey soon discerned the value of establishing an off-campus museum that would showcase Ireland's talented artists while telling the Great Hunger story through their artworks. He enlisted the help of Niamh O'Sullivan, professor emerita of visual culture at Dublin's National College of Art and Design. In her role as consultant curator, she not only proceeded to curate the exhibition that opened the museum in 2012, but also introduced Lahey to Ireland's pre-eminent artists. Before doing so, O'Sullivan explains, "Quinnipiac asked me to review the existing collection to assess its strengths and weaknesses."

She sought to tell the famine's story through six major themes (Disease, Death, Poverty, Eviction, Resistance, and Emigration), and to find artworks to represent them if they did not already exist in the collection. O'Sullivan also wanted to ensure that Ireland's leading artists — both historical and contemporary — had works displayed here, even if these did not directly address the tragedy. "I was trying to get those two things to work together because, first and foremost, this is an art museum and not a history museum," she says.

For example, the collection contains an oil painting, *Derryanne*, painted in 1927 by Jack B. Yeats (1871-1957). Acquired from a private owner, it depicts the harbor of Derryanne, where the politician Daniel



Margaret Lyster Chamberlain (b. 1954)  
**The Leave-Taking**  
 2000, Bronze (16 figures), 25 x 36 x 12 in. (overall)

A detail of *The Leave-Taking*

John Behan (b. 1938)  
*Famine Ship*  
2000, Bronze, 27 x 30 x 7 in.

appeared and the plants are rotting. On the right is the eviction scene with the collapsing house. People are forced to leave their homes; we see them on the road. The ship in the distance speaks of the emigration.”

Other subtleties in the building’s design lend themselves to the collection and its overriding narrative. The space where visitors enter has an intentionally low ceiling and is not well lit, conveying a sense of confinement and somberness. This helps us imagine what living in a tiny cottage would have been like — or being below deck on a coffin ship. Also on this level are 19th- and 20th-century paintings, though there is only one piece that was actually painted at the time of the famine, Daniel MacDonal’s *Irish Peasant Children* of 1847.

Brady points to “other early pieces such as James Brenan’s *The Finishing Touch*, about a daughter leaving for the New World.” She says, “We have Henry Allan’s *The Ragpickers*, which shows women collecting cloth, cardboard, and paper in order to make money after the famine. *The Irish Piper* by William Oliver is also post-famine and illustrates the musical side of Irish culture.” O’Sullivan adds, “The 19th-century paintings address the issues of poverty, dispossession, immigration, mourning, loss of the culture, and scarring of the landscape, as well as other social and cultural aspects.”



O’Connell (1775-1847) lived. O’Sullivan explains, “O’Connell led the fight for Catholic Emancipation — the right of Catholics to vote and sit in Parliament again — and he also initiated the attempt to sever the Union of Great Britain and Ireland by constitutional means. Repeal had been a goal before the famine and became more urgent because of it, yet the will and means to pursue it were hugely weakened. If we can’t acquire literal paintings, we tell the Great Hunger story by association or allusion. The Yeats scene allows us to convey its political dimensions.”

#### ENABLING ART TO SPEAK

The design of the 4,750-square-foot museum helps convey the story. Even while it was being constructed, the building was adapted to suit the placement of several artworks. Based in nearby Chester, Leonard Wyeth of Wyeth Architects LLC designed a high-tech, energy-efficient structure with a stucco-and-stone exterior that resembles an Irish cottage, and an interior that harmonizes with the art. “You don’t create a room and then decide where the art will be placed in it,” Wyeth says. “You start with the art and then create the room. There are a number of museums that, by their very nature, are in competition with their contents, but this building is about the artworks.”

For example, a very large painting titled *Black '47* by Micheal Farrell (1940-2000) was placed strategically so that the shaft of light depicted in it seems to come from the window to its right. (The scene imagines Sir Charles Trevelyan on trial presenting his case for non-intervention, with skeletons rising up as witnesses.) Similarly, *An Gorta Mór*, a large stained glass window by Robert Ballagh (b. 1943), was hung high in the atrium to give it the same kind of didactic function and visual effect that such a window would have conveyed in medieval times. “This glass piece is a triptych,” explains the museum’s director, Grace Brady. “On the left everything is going well, the house has heat and the potato plant is healthy. In the middle, the blight has

Kieran Tuohy (b. 1953)  
*Thank You to the Choctaw*  
(upper-most detail)  
2005, Bog oak, 52 1/2 x  
12 x 9 1/2 in. (overall)



Rowan Gillespie (b. 1953)  
*Statistic I & Statistic II* (detail)  
2010, Bronze, each 49 x 19 x 19 in.



The museum's upper level contains sculptures and paintings by contemporary artists, and also a video wall with a nine-minute loop depicting newspaper and magazine illustrations that speak to the story's economic and political dimensions. As visitors ascend the staircase, which has a slight ripple effect to evoke a ship's stairs, they notice that the upper level's ceiling is higher and its space brighter. As they move from piece to piece, the story unfolds. *Gorta* by Lilian Lucy Davidson (1893-1954) depicts the anguish of family members as they dig a grave for their dead infant, their tattered clothes and skeletal frames underscoring their desperation. *The Leave-Taking*, a 16-piece bronze sculpture by Margaret Lyster Chamberlain (b. 1954), shows parents and children torn apart as some depart Ireland in search of a better life. Chamberlain writes, "I felt a strong link to the Jewish Holocaust and used photographs of those victims to study the effect of starvation and despair on the human body. I went within myself to integrate this experience into each figure's persona. How would each of them have endured such suffering, privation, humiliation, and loss?"

A sculpture crafted from black bog oak by Kieran Tuohy (b. 1953) called *Thank You to the Choctaw* honors the Native American tribe who, in 1847, sent the considerable sum of \$170 to help the Irish people. The donors understood such a plight well, having suffered from hunger, disease, and exposure while being exiled from their own land.

The sculpture *Famine Ship* by John Behan (b. 1938) portrays a coffin ship, with its masts fashioned into crosses and sails comprised of the skeletons of those who died aboard. The original version is on display in County Mayo, Ireland; it is not only the largest bronze sculpture ever made in that country, but also one of the few public memorials acknowledging the famine at all. In Ireland, "There's still a lot of

shame surrounding the Great Hunger," Grace Brady explains. "Shame for the people who survived it, for those who emigrated, and for those who stayed and may have gotten their neighbor's land, even though that assured their survival."

One of Brady's favorite sculptures is *Statistic I & Statistic II* by Rowan Gillespie (b. 1953). This figure group commemorates the 650 quarantined people buried on Staten Island after dying from diseases contracted during their transatlantic voyage to New York. "Amazingly," the artist notes, "it has been possible to identify the name, age, date, and cause of death of most of those who were so unceremoniously disposed of in this mass grave. I felt the need to offer some small dignity to those forgotten dead by cutting their names into bronze."

Although the museum's central theme is bleak, Grace Brady believes it ultimately restores visitors' hope by creating a platform for education and discussion. "We have contemporary artists getting this story out into the world. You can't move forward until you address it and face it head on. To me, that's hopeful." ■

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**Information:** 3011 Whitney Avenue, Hamden, CT 06518, 203.582.6500, [ighm.org](http://ighm.org). Admission is free. The museum's website is unusually rich and was recently enhanced with a trove of articles about the Great Hunger. Consider visiting lower Manhattan's Irish Hunger Memorial Garden ([bpcparks.org/whats-here/parks/irish-hunger-memorial](http://bpcparks.org/whats-here/parks/irish-hunger-memorial)), which incorporates Irish flora and stones from all of Ireland's counties.

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