



NORMAN GARSTIN: A LIMERICK ARTIST IN FRANCE 1882-86

Norman Garstin was born in Caherconlish, Co. Limerick, in 1847. He studied engineering for a while at Queen's College, Cork, after which he spent a period in a London architect's office. This was followed by a spell in the diamond fields of Kimberley in South Africa. After a successful stint as a journalist on the *Cape Times*, he returned to Ireland where, following the loss of an eye in a hunting accident, he decided to study art. At the Antwerp Academy, he studied under Charles Verlat and later in Paris under Carolus Duran, interspersed with periods of painting in France, Italy, Spain and Morocco. In the latter half of the 1880s, he began to send pictures to exhibitions at the Royal Academy and the Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts. By then, he had married and taken up residence at Newlyn in Cornwall, where he became a leading member of that group of thirty or so artists collectively known as the Newlyn School. He died at Penzance in 1926.

Norman Garstin was born in Co. Limerick, and, as a young man, studied engineering and architecture. During the 1870s, he was involved in the diamond rush in South Africa, then became a successful journalist. He returned to Ireland in 1877. Curiously, after an accident in which he lost the sight of one eye, he became a painter.⁽¹⁾

Garstin gives a brief summary of his career (quoted in *Artists of the Newlyn School*, 1880-1900):

I met a painter sportsman who seriously advised me to take up Art as a profession. After a lot of thought I was determined to have a good try and so started for Antwerp, in which Academy I studied for a couple of years under Charles Verlat, at the same time as Bramley, Logsdail, Fred Hall and some other Englishmen. The last six months of my stay in Belgium I painted in the country with Theodore Verstraete.⁽²⁾

Garstin went to Antwerp in 1880, lodging at Wit Kwiswerf and enrolling at the Academy in the summer course in the antique class.⁽³⁾ At thirty-two, Garstin was older than Walter Osborne, Joseph Malachy Kavanagh and other Irish artists there, but it is likely that he would have met them. While in Belgium, Garstin painted a number of attractive small panels of interiors and outdoor scenes. In the former the dark tonality is contrasted by reflections or spare points of light. In *Interior with Figure*,⁽⁴⁾ for instance, there is a corridor leading into a room in which a lady is scrubbing the floor, revealing Garstin's interest in space. He effectively suggests the reflection of the window in wet floor and walls, with green colouring, and these areas of light in the

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Norman Garstin (1847-1926): self-portrait, from the University of Limerick Self-Portrait Collection.

dark picture recall Leech's Breton Interiors.

Outdoor studies show a similar freshness and simplicity. *The Roundabout Diest, Belgium*, shows a gaslit evening scene, with people on the merry-go-round and couples promenading. *Beguinaige Church*, a sympathetic scene of an old woman in black and a child in a side street between the church and a red brick house, is more sketchily painted than the Flemish scenes of Osborne and Kavanagh. The influence of Verstraete might be important here.

Garstin followed the contemporary pattern of moving from Antwerp south to France.

I went to Paris and studied under

Carolus-Duran for three years. I was one of a group of young painters who made their headquarters at the Hotel St. Malo and there we always dined. We were an enthusiastic crew, and used to have eternal discussions about art over little restaurant tables.⁽⁵⁾

Garstin could have been at Duran's at the same time as Helen Trevor and Gernon. Apparently he met Degas in Paris. He wrote about Manet as early as 1884, admiring

a delicious brightness and happiness ... He lets in light and air. Pictures like his later ones amongst the brown bitumen canvases of the average exhibition seem like patches of sunlight on a prison wall.⁽⁶⁾

From the Hotel St. Malo (off the Boulevard Montparnesse), he sent his first picture to the R.A. in 1883. In the same year he sent a picture to the R.H.A. from Hotel Beranger, Rue Flavin, Boulevard Montparnass.⁽⁷⁾ He visited Brittany, and could easily have bumped into Osborne and others there. A series of fresh and deftly painted little panels (well represented at the 1978 Garstin exhibition *Two Impressionists - Father and Daughter*), may belong to this period, although often he did not date his work. *The Pardon of St. Barbe, Brittany*,⁽⁸⁾ is an attractive scene of Breton women on steps, with sunshine falling on their white traditional hats and on the trees. The flecks of blue and red alleviate the sombre black dresses. *Church and Square, Brittany*, c. 1882, (cat. no. 52) also depicts sunlight and shadow in a village square. But light, shadow of church and clouds in the sky are not unified. *The Little Lane, Brittany*, a study of sunlight and shadow in a clearing in a wood, with the shadow of the artist cast in the foreground, is quite 'impressionistic' for the period. The



'Among the Pots', Brittany, by Norman Garstin.

sense of movement and shadow give a certain mystery to the picture.

After Brittany, Garstin appears to have travelled to the South of France, to Italy in 1884, and to Morocco. He painted attractive outdoor sketches, such as *Artichokes* in the South of France in 1883, a *plein-air* scene of Tangier in 1885 (whose subdued tone reminds us of the admiration for Velásquez by Duran, Garstin's teacher in Paris), *On the Sands, Tangier*, 1885, and *Haystacks and Sun* with fresh sunny feel. In 1886, Garstin went to Spain, then England. He began sending work to the R.H.A. and R.A. in the 1880s and nineties, from the Irish midlands, then from Newlyn in Cornwall, where he settled in 1886. He became a member of the N.E.A.C. in 1887, exhibiting there until 1889. Among the artists of the Newlyn School who were introducing *plein-air* subjects and French methods into England was Stanhope Forbes, born in Ireland, who had also painted in Brittany. Several important canvases, for example *The Rain it Raineth every Day* of 1889 and *The Stranger* (1890), date from Norman Garstin's years at Newlyn, and show various French influences. In the former, the figures with dark umbrellas reflected in the wet roadway and silhouetted against the open composition, with buildings in the distance, is remarkably close to Caillebotte's *Rue de Paris: Temps de Pluie* (1877). Garstin could have seen paintings by Caillebotte at the seventh Impressionist Exhibition in 1882. The latter has a dark bitumastic tonality, but the detailed figures of the boy and girl in school clothes probably derive from Bastien-Lepage. Garstin sent two French pictures to the Guildhall

exhibition in 1904, and to the 'Irish International Exhibition' in 1907.⁽⁹⁾

In common with other artists at the time, Norman Garstin's pictures seem to fall into two groups: large, official exhibition pieces, (often with 'poetic' titles), and small landscape studies from nature. The final word should come from the writer to the Newlyn School catalogue:

Garstin's own work reflects this conflict of attitude: superlative small landscapes,

rather strained exhibition pieces, the single impressive compromise, 'The Rain it Raineth every Day', the element of humour and, in his later work, an indecisiveness of direction ...

NOTES

1. *Two Impressionists - Father and Daughter*, catalogue of exhibition of Norman and Alethea Garstin, St. Ives, Bristol, Dublin and London, 1978. Biography by Michael Canney. Also, notes for lecture by Thomas Bodkin, *Bodkin Papers*. Trinity College Dublin.
2. *Artists of the Newlyn School* (1880-1900), exhibited, Newlyn, Penzance, Bristol, (1979), catalogue by Caroline Fox and Francis Greenacre, p. 210.
3. *Registers of Académie Royale*, Antwerp.
4. These Belgian scenes, nos. 51, 53 and 55 in *Two Impressionists - Father and Daughter*, exhibition op. cit.
5. *Artists of the Newlyn School. op. cit.*, p. 210.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 209, quoting Norman Garstin, 'Edouard Manet'. *Art Journal*, 1884, p. 110.
7. Graves, *Dictionary of R.A. Exhibitions; Exhibition catalogues of R.H.A.*
8. The following paintings are respectively nos. 52, 1, 54, 2, 7, 3, 12, in *Two Impressionists*, exhibition, op. cit.
9. Catalogues of N.E.A.C. To the Guildhall exhibition of Irish Art, 1904, Garstin lent *The Cape Rose* (sic), and *Moulin de la Ville*, and to the Irish International Exhibition, 1907, *Le Café Rose* (presumably same picture as above) and *La Bouille on the Seine* (watercolour).

(Reprinted from *The Irish Impressionists in France and Belgium, 1850-1914*, The National Gallery of Ireland, 1984).



'Breton Village', c. 1882, by Norman Garstin.