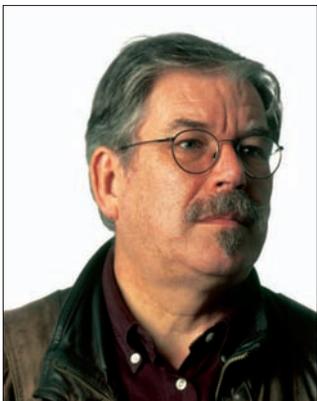


Favourite Plant



Robert
Ballagh

“A flower that I think is very elegant and that I know from art history and from Irish political history is the arum lily. It’s a beautiful plant, a plant that artists have always been attracted to. You see a lot of arum lilies in Mexican art. The arum lily is known in Ireland as the Easter lily and it has an interesting historical connection with Ireland — it has a very strong connection with Irish republicanism. The women of Cumann na mBan introduced the lily as a symbol — I think it was to counteract the poppy in the English tradition.

The Art Nouveau artists in Europe used it a lot as well because it’s very sinuous and reflected the design of the Art Nouveau movement. It’s a flower that has always attracted artists. It does have a funereal connection, which sometimes puts some people off. I think it’s an interesting flower because it’s particularly beautiful. I have a few of them growing in pots and they come up every year. They require no care or attention, which suits me fine.

I am not a plantsman. I grew up in a flat in Ballsbridge and I have lived now for thirty odd years in the inner city in a terraced house, so apart from a few potted plants, I’ve never had a garden or anything. But a couple of years ago I built a studio and that created a courtyard, so I now have a splendid courtyard with some plants in it.

I can name very few of them as I got a gardener in to do it for me. Recognising my history in this area, I said to him, “I want a strictly low maintenance garden.” I remember the first summer, I noticed some of the plants were going a bit droopy, and I said to him, “I thought you said it was low maintenance.” He said, “Well, have you been watering them?” and I said “No”, and he said, “Low maintenance doesn’t mean no maintenance.” I learnt that lesson and I’ve watered them ever since and they’re coming along fine. There are no flowers as such, it’s all grasses and cordylines and things like that. I’m very happy with that.

About three or four years ago I decided to try and do something about the landscape and I had an exhibition of paintings that you could call landscape paintings. One of the things I included in them was natural materials — beach pebbles and leaves and things like that. That’s the nearest I’ve got to the treatment of nature in my work.

I did a portrait quite recently of the writer J.P. Donleavy and he’s sitting beside a window, and out of the window is

montbretia, it’s a plant that I think was brought in here at some stage or other. It’s escaped from the gardens and now it grows in hedgerows and all over the place. It’s a green-leaved plant with an orangey red flower, quite a small little flower, I think it’s kind of an attractive one. I painted that in the background.

I’m very much a studio artist — it all takes place in the studio. Some artists go out and you see them with easels up in the country and they’ve got their canvas up. That’s not the way I work. I work very much in the studio, very much like anyone else who has a job — I go in at nine in the morning and finish at 5.30 or six in the evening. I did a self-portrait of me looking out of our place in Cork down towards the sea, but I actually painted that in Dublin and I had taken photos of the views and done a few sketches there. But the painting of it, even though it’s set there, took place in the studio in Dublin. That’s the way I work.



I have some potted plants sitting in my studio and occasionally I forget to water them and they go downhill a bit, but they’re still with us. Plants are funny things. Even though I’ve no involvement with them at all, I couldn’t throw out a plant. They’re a bit like a dog or cat — even if they’re looking a bit droopy, you try and keep them going.

We’re all the result of our experience; my experiences are essentially urban. I was born in Dublin, I have lived all my life in Dublin. I appreciate nature — I love to go for walks — but essentially my experiences are urban. I think if I’d been born in Connemara, I’d probably be quite a different artist.

— in conversation with Yvonne Gordon.

Robert Ballagh was born in Dublin and is one of Ireland’s most distinguished painters and designers. His paintings are held in collections including the National Gallery of Ireland, the Ulster Museum, the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery, and the Albrecht Dürer House, Nuremberg. He has designed over seventy Irish postage stamps, he designed the last series of Irish banknotes before the introduction of the Euro and he has also designed many theatre sets, including that of Riverdance, and the staging for the opening ceremony of the Special Olympics in Dublin in 2003.