



## The Widow

### Date

1882

### Primary Maker

Frank Joseph O'Meara

### Medium

Oil on canvas

### Dimensions

152.4 x 101.6 cm

### Description

'The Widow' is considered an important transitional picture in O'Meara's development in that the somewhat heavy tones and attention to detail of earlier canvases give way here to a more sparse and sensitive style of painting. The figure of a young widow dressed in contemporary mourning costume is silhouetted against a barren, cold and misty background. The forlorn and mystical mood of the painting is enhanced by the widow's

flowing veil and her averted gaze. The whole scene exudes a sense of deep introspection and loss, which is symbolic both of widowhood and of death in nature as represented by autumn and the approach of winter. This painting is probably the first in O'Meara's series of single figures of women set near water which he did in the 1880s and it is one which illustrates the artist's role in disseminating the late 19th century French style of Bastien Lepage, Cazin and Puvis de Chavannes to a younger generation of British and Scandinavian artists. Like the other paintings in this series the setting is Grez-sur-Loing, which was aptly described by the writer Robert Louis Stevenson as 'a pretty and very melancholy village'. The model for 'the Widow' has since been identified as Mary Isabelle Bowes. The two met on one of Bowes' visits to Grez in 1880 and one of the first paintings for which Bowes modelled is this painting, begun in 1881. Bowes, or 'Belle' as she was known, modelled for other works in this collection including 'Towards Night and Winter' and she was also painted by other visiting artists including Sir John Lavery. While 'Belle' patiently posed for extended periods of time, thus enabling O'Meara to realise his artistic pursuits, O'Meara in turn encouraged 'Belle' to pursue her interest in photography. The two lovers were engaged for many years, and, while both of their families approved of the relationship, the couple were urged to delay the marriage until the artists' financial circumstances improved. The discovery of the model's identity imbues this work with a deep sense of tragic irony as, several years after the artist painted his muse and lover in the role of a young widow, O'Meara contracted malaria and died in his hometown of Co. Carlow, thus leaving 'Belle'

behind to take on the role of widow, once more. The backdrop for this study is the artist's colony of Grez sur Loing. Several artists including John Lavery and William Stott of Oldham spent time at Grez but O'Meara spent by far the longest amount of time in the area- from c. 1875- 1888- only returning to his native co. Carlow at the end of his young life. The landscapes and atmosphere clearly made a lasting impression on the Irish artist, who displayed a predilection for rural landscapes from an early age, as documented in his early sketchbooks of the landscapes in and around co. Carlow. Source: Stratton Ryan, Mary. Irish Arts Review, 'Frank O'Meara's Muse', 2011, pp. 92-97. vol. 28, no.1 Kenndy, B.P. 'Irish Painting'. Town House and Country House. Dublin, 1993. (Catalogue Entry [9]: A Century of Irish Painting - Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin, 1997, p. 144)