



The Bird Market

Date

1886

Primary Maker

John Butler Yeats

Medium

Oil on canvas

Dimensions

63.5 x 48.3 cm

Description

'The Bird Market' was well received by the critics when shown at the Royal Hibernian Academy in 1886. The genre scene is dominated by the portrait of the boy in the centre. Yeats was clearly more interested in the child than in the activity of the bird market. He was particularly

intrigued by the character development of children as the references to his own children in his letters indicate. In this painting he has caught perfectly the nervous yet hopeful gaze of the boy as he looks up at a potential buyer. The object of his gaze is being scrutinised with the same solemnity by two other children on the left. A girl on the right with a birdcage in both hands looks around for possible clients. Genre scenes involving children had been popularized in British art earlier in the 19th century by artists like Mulready but Yeats' painting has none of the coy moralizing of the earlier pictures. Walter Osborne painted realistic genre scenes in Dublin in the 1880s but he is more interested in the atmosphere of the setting than in the work depicted. In 'The Bird Market', Yeats focuses closely on the people who carry out the work and the way it shapes their personalities. The dull earth colours of the clothes and background provides a perfect foil for their faces which Yeats does not idealise or romanticise but interprets sympathetically. (Extract from 'Images and Insights', Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin, 1993, p. 62)