



October

Date

1887

Primary Maker

Frank Joseph O'Meara

Medium

Oil on canvas

Dimensions

99.1 x 49.5 cm

Description

Autumn and winter subjects provided evocative themes for the 'plein-air' artists, as for Millais and the Pre-Raphaelites. Millet had painted a series on the seasons, and Bastien-Lepage's 'Saison d'Octobre' (1879) (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne) was one of his first 'Peasant' paintings. At Grez, Carl Larsson had painted atmospheric watercolours of villagers in garden settings; for example an old woman in 'October (1882-1883)', and an old man in 'November' (1882), (both in the Art Museum, Goteborg). Robert Vonnoh represented an old woman raking leaves in his 'November' (1890) (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts). O'Meara was inspired to paint his own series on autumnal themes: as in 'Towards Night and Winter' (see Object Number 26) where

a young girl is burning leaves. The old woman here is engaged in the same autumnal activity, probably at the edge of the village, where a number of O'Meara's pictures are set. This setting conjures up feelings of the isolation in which a number of O'Meara's Grez paintings are set. Unusually for O'Meara, however, she does not turn aside, but appears to confront us directly. A disturbing atmosphere is evoked by her dark shawled shape against the pond, her haggard face and gnarled hands. A similar old woman appears in Lavery's 'Return from Market (1884) (Private Collection) and old women were often represented by Irish artists in Brittany (for example by Walter Osborne, Nathaniel Hill and Helen Trevor). But there is a particularly sombre mood to O'Meara's 'October', showing the hardship of country people's lives. The setting is both literally and metaphorically evocative of that time of the year which represents a turning point between fruitful summer and its harsh winter counterpart, which always lies just beyond the horizon, posing as a constant threat to the livelihood of the country people. It is perhaps expressive too of the

artist's own ill-health or troubled state of mind, a year before his death. The blurred, but crisp forms, have a contemporary 'photographic' feel and, indeed, O'Meara pursued an interest in photography with his lover and muse Mary Isabelle Bowes. The careful drawing of the face and hands may show O'Meara's admiration for Dürer (for example Dürer's drawing of his aged mother). The backdrop for this painting 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. O'Meara exhibited 'October' at the Royal Glasgow Institute and at the Grosvenor Gallery, London, in 1887. It was also exhibited, posthumously in Dublin in 1889. (Catalogue Entry [9]: Julian Campbell, 'Frank O'Meara 1853 - 1888' - Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin, 1989, p. 48) Kenndy, B.P. 'Irish Painting'. Town House and Country House. Dublin, 1993.