



Mother and Child

Date

c. 1894

Primary Maker

Sarah Henrietta Purser

Medium

Oil on canvas

Dimensions

47 x 38 cm

Description

Following the failure of her father's business in the early 1870s, it became necessary for Sarah Purser to earn her own income. As she disliked teaching she felt the best option would be to become a portrait painter. Her chief

source of subject matter was the British aristocracy. However, she also painted a number of more informal figure studies, of which this is a fine example. This intimate image is reminiscent of some of the other women artists associated with the Impressionist movement, such as Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot, and it is likely that Purser would have become familiar with their work in Paris. In contrast to the wealth of many of her portrait sitters, this image suggests a level of social deprivation. The mother gazes at the sleeping infant in her arms while another female figure in the background looks out at the viewer. The main focus of attention is the child, placed in the most brightly illuminated area of the canvas. The infant's features are also treated with rather more detail than the somewhat sketchy style with which the two women have been studied. Painting in the late 19th century, Sarah Purser avoided the sentimentality, which pervaded the work of many artists at the time. The direct sketchy approach to the subject reveals Purser's skill in depicting the human figure. (Catalogue Entry [8]: A Century of Irish Painting - Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin, 1997, pp. 143-144) Sarah Purser (1848 - 1943) studied at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin and went to Paris to study portraiture. Influenced by modern French painting, she adopted the style of the Impressionists and Realists. Following her return to Ireland, she established a career as a successful portraitist, working in oils and pastels. Purser was a major figure in the development of the arts in Ireland: her exhibition of the work of John Butler Yeats and Nathaniel Hone inspired Hugh Lane to establish a gallery of modern art in Dublin. It also resulted in Lane commissioning John B. Yeats to paint a series of portraits of distinguished Irishmen and women. She was also instrumental in finding a permanent home for the gallery by persuading the then Taoiseach W.T. Cosgrave to allow Charlemont House become the new home of the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, where it opened in 1933. One of her most important achievements was the setting up of the Friends of the National Collections of

Ireland (FNCI) in 1924. *Mother and Child*, painted using loose impressionistic brushstrokes, is an intimate and sympathetic portrayal of a sleeping child in his mother's arms. The infant mortality rate in Dublin was higher than any other city in the United Kingdom. (JO'D)