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Mainie Jellet
Two Compositions, ca. 1922

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MAINIE JELLET

(Dublin, 1897 – Dublin, 1944)

TWO COMPOSITIONS, ca. 1922

i. *Composition*

Gouache on paper

23 x 18 cm;
9 x 7 1/8 in.

ii. *Composition*

Sepia (ink) wash on paper

23 x 18 cm;
9 x 7 1/8 in.

Provenance

European Modern Art, Dublin, 1991;

Sotheby's, London, 23 November 2006, lots 217 (gouache) and 216 (sepia);

Private collection, London

Literature

National Gallery of Dublin, Mainie Jellett and Evie Hone. *The Art of Friendship*, 10 April - 10 August 2025, exhibition catalogue, cat 3. Illustrated in colour p. 39 (for a comparable version of the present pair).

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These two small compositions, comprising a colour gouache and its counterpart in sepia wash, belong together as a closely related pair. Each is built from the same repertoire of flat, overlapping planes, arched and rectilinear forms interlocking around a spiralling central motif and set within a rounded, arch-topped field that lends the abstraction a curiously iconic, almost devotional character. In the gouache, the planes are realised in deep, resonant colour, ranging from blues and browns to ochre and cream, cool greens, and a glowing heart of orange and yellow, while in the sepia wash, the same architecture is stated in monochrome, the forms held in fine outline and modelled in graded shades of brown, so that the work reads as the tonal and linear armature of the coloured version. Seen together, they disclose, in two registers, the disciplined geometric method that underlies Jellett's earliest abstract art and, as a rare matched pair, preserve both the structural thinking and its chromatic realisation. A close comparable, also dated c. 1922, was exhibited in 2025 at the National Gallery of Dublin, in occasion of the exhibition *Mainie Jellett and Evie Hone. The Art of Friendship* (fig. 1)

Jellett carried back that method from Paris, where in 1921 she travelled with her lifelong friend Evie Hone (1894–1955) to study first with André Lhote (1885–1962) and then, decisively, with the Cubist Albert Gleizes (1881–1953). From Gleizes, she took the principles of the translation and rotation of forms and the systematic shifting of shapes across a single plane, which he was then formulating in his treatise *La Peinture et ses lois* (1923), and to which the two Irish women themselves contributed. The present compositions, datable to about 1922, belong precisely to this threshold moment, when Jellett was working her new, wholly non-representational language into being.

How radical a threshold it was can be gauged against another work of the very same year, Jellett's *Seated Female Nude* (1922; fig. 2), a Cubist figure study still tethered, in Lhote's moderated manner, to the visible world. Set beside it, the present sheets show the artist stepping clean out of representation into the subjectless abstraction of Gleizes, taking the leap that would make her a pioneer in the field. That step is measured in full by her own *Decoration* (1923; fig. 3), the tempera panel remembered as among the very first abstract paintings exhibited in Ireland, and greeted at the Society of Dublin Painters that year with the bewilderment of a press that called it an "insoluble puzzle." *Decoration* shares with our two gouaches the upright arched format, the gold-lit centre enshrined within framing bands and the frontal balance, but on the scale and in the permanence of a public manifesto. The compositions catalogued here are its cabinet-scale kin and, as a colour-and-monochrome pair, a uniquely legible record of the thinking behind such a painting.

Their debt to Gleizes can be seen in his *Femme au gant noir* (*Woman with Black Glove*) of 1920, now in the National Gallery of Australia, painted in the very years Jellett sat in his studio (fig. 4). There, the method she absorbed is laid out in full, evinced in the large, overlapping geometric planes, the dynamic intersections of vertical, diagonal and circular movement, the flat, forthright surface. Yet the comparison tells as much by its differences. Gleizes, even at his most abstract, kept one foot in the visible world, preserving a residue of the real in the fragmentation. Jellett cut that last tether, carrying his translation and rotation over into a composition with no subject at all or, at most, with only the ghost of one, the icon glimpsed behind the geometry. Where his touch is austere, almost diagrammatic, hers is warm, the

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colour asserted as pigment and the whole suffused with a devotional feeling entirely her own. It is worth recalling, too, that Jellett and Hone were not passive pupils but that Gleizes himself acknowledged how much the two Irish artists, working at his side, shaped the very theory they had come to learn.

The truest companion to these works, however, is the work of Evie Hone, who sat at the next easel through the same Paris years and made abstractions of the same lineage, as in her own *Composition*, constructed from similar interlocking, rotated planes (fig. 5). The two artists are inseparable in the story of Irish modernism and were reunited in the above-mentioned National Gallery 2025 exhibition. Yet their contemporaries were quick to tell them apart, and the distinction bears directly on the value of the present pair. Critics of their first joint exhibition in 1924 judged Hone to be ‘the purer artist’ and Jellett ‘the cleverer,’ that is to say, Hone the more instinctive and expressive colourist, Jellett the more rigorous and exacting builder of form. Where Hone, bruised by the hostility that met their work, soon withdrew, first for a time to a convent in Cornwall, then to the stained glass for which she is now chiefly remembered, Jellett remained, through the 1920s and beyond, the single most committed and sustained champion of pure abstraction in Ireland, ‘the only serious exponent,’ as the *Irish Times* conceded by 1927, ‘of the ultra-modernist school of painting’ in the country. These compositions belong to that rarer, more radical achievement.

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Fig. 1. Mainie Jellet, *Composition*, 1922, oil on canvas, 64 x 48 cm.
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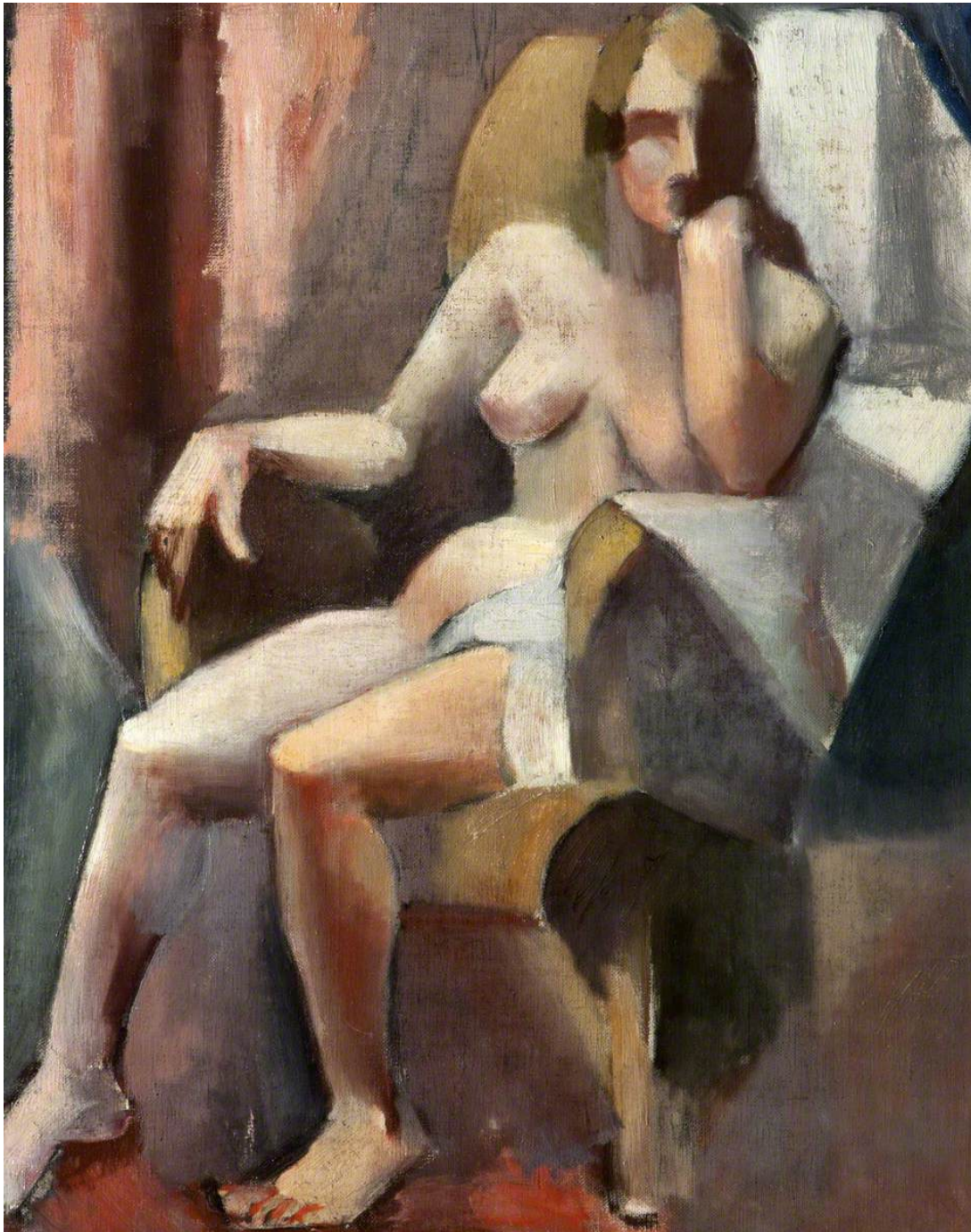


Fig. 2: Mainie Jellet, *Seated Female Nude*, 1921-1922, oil on canvas, 56.3 x 46.2 cm (22 1/8 x 18 1/4 in.), Ulster Museum, Belfast, inv. BELUM.U2293

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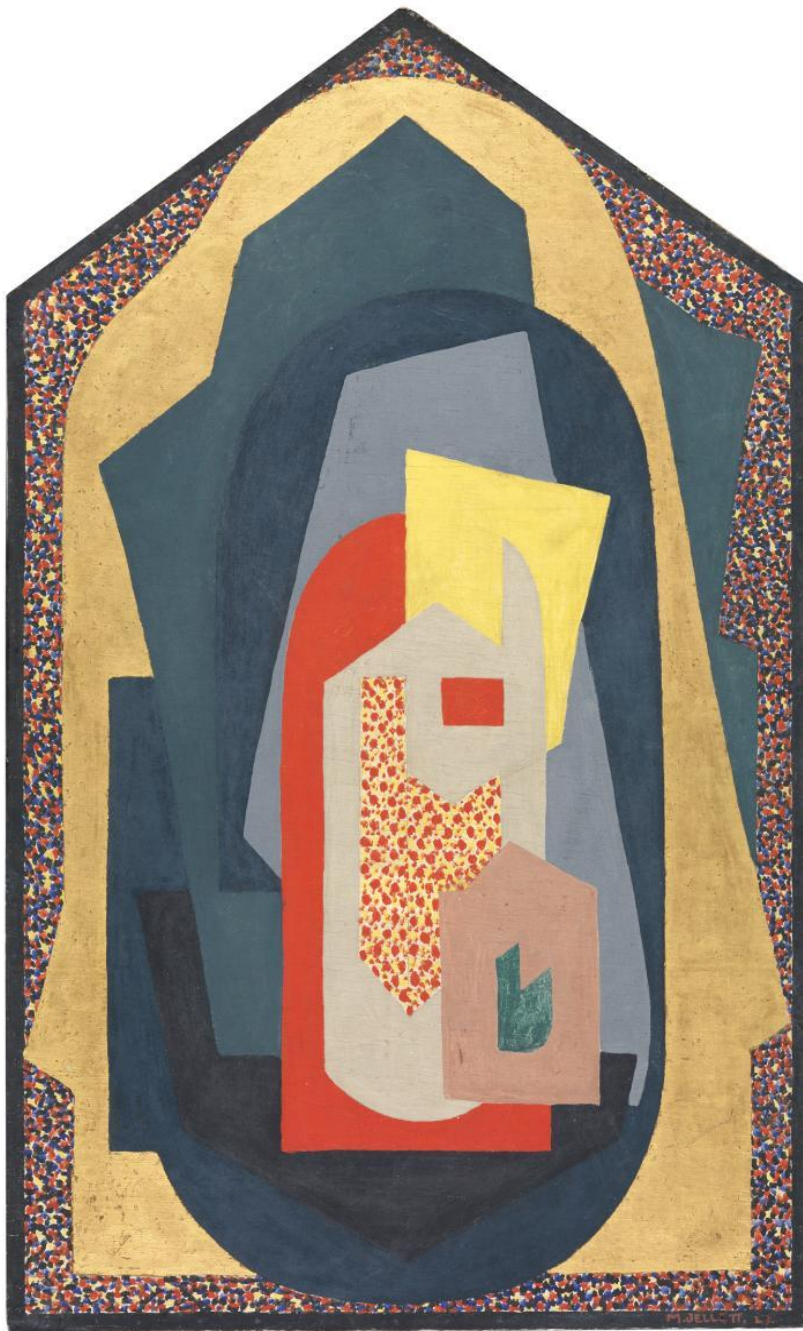


Fig. 3: Mainie Jellet, *Decoration*, 1923, tempera on wood panel, 89 x 53 cm (35 x 20 7/8 in.), National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, inv. NGL.1326

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Fig. 4: Albert Gleizes, *Femme au gant noir* (Woman with Black Glove), 1920, oil on canvas, 126 x 100 cm (49 5/8 x 39 3/8 in.), National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

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Fig. 5: Evie Hone, *Composition*, ca. 1924, gouache on card, National Gallery of Ireland, Belfast

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COLNAGHI *London*

26 BURY STREET, LONDON SW1Y 6AL
UNITED KINGDOM

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+44 (0)20 7491 7408

contact@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Madrid*

CALLE GENERAL CASTAÑOS 9
PLANTA BAJA, DCHA.
28004 MADRID

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
BY APPOINTMENT

spain@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *New York*

23 EAST 67TH STREET, FOURTH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10065
USA

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+1 (917) 388-3825

newyork@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Brussels*

RUE JACQUES JORDAENS 30
1000 BRUXELLES
BELGIUM

BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

brussels@colnaghi.com