

THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF IRELAND

THE MARRIAGE OF

THE CONSERVATION OF A NATIONAL TREASURE IS NOW COMPLETE



STRONGBOW AND AOIFE



*The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife
after conservation*

The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife (1854) is the largest and one of the most iconic works in the collection of the National Gallery of Ireland. Measuring 315 x 513 cm, the painting is full of symbolism, and is considered one of Daniel Maclise's best works. It has been said that every Irish schoolchild knows of its importance. However, this national Irish treasure was in dire need of care and conservation. Here, the National Gallery of Ireland's Simone Mancini and Muirne Lydon share how The Ireland Funds in partnership with Bank of America enabled a challenging three-year project that has now given a great cultural gift back to Ireland.



Above: Conservator surface cleaning the painting

Conceived originally for the Palace of Westminster *The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife*, instead found its way to the Gallery when it was presented by Sir Richard Wallace in 1879. This dramatic work, one of the earliest paintings by an Irish artist acquired for the national collection, depicts the marriage of Aoife, the daughter of Leinster King, Dermot MacMurrough, to Strongbow, the Norman nobleman and military adventurer.

The painting, a dramatic tour de force, is most-read Irish history painting in the National Gallery of Ireland's collection. Maclise's ability to work on a detailed painting of this scale required great dexterity and technical ingenuity but above all else a strategic vision in which he was able to consider the whole work and its constituent parts simultaneously. Considering this, it should come as no surprise that the demands placed on an artist by such a large-scale creation are similar to the challenges placed on those responsible for the subsequent conservation of these artworks. This was certainly the case when the Gallery's conservators were faced with the conservation of the painting, not only because of its sheer size but also its historical significance and popularity.

The refurbishment of the Gallery's Dargan and Milltown Wings between 2011 and 2017 provided the initial opportunity to conserve the painting. This long-awaited project necessitated the de-installation and storage of the entire collection in order to restore and upgrade this part of the building. Conservation of the painting took place over

a period of three years, finishing with the painting back on display in the Shaw room for the re-opening of the Milltown and Dargan Wings in 2017.

The Ireland Funds have worked in partnership with Bank of America on several leading cultural projects. The Bank supported the extensive period of conservation and research of this beloved masterpiece, through Bank of America's Art Conservation Project. Since 2010, the bank has provided grants to museums in 30 countries for more than 120 conservation projects. In partnership with The Ireland Funds and their focus on preserving Irish culture and heritage, the innovative conservation project commenced in earnest in 2012, when the painting was removed to undergo technical examination, followed by extensive conservation conducted with the most up-to-date non-invasive procedures.

The conservators were confronted with several challenges during the project. Principal among these was the obvious difficulty of moving the painting, which is larger than any of the doors, stairs or lifts to the conservation studios. A whole series of problems regarding its transportation and the different phases of conservation followed as a consequence. Also of concern was the painting's condition, which on first inspection appeared to be quite poor; and required complex treatments. Together these factors informed the strategic approach to the project, which was devised to take into account the wider aspects of the painting's conservation rather than being solely concerned with its restoration. Indeed, this concern for aspects

that could influence the work's condition post-treatment was critical and based on an awareness of the painting's future in terms of centuries, not simply how it would appear on the day of its re-hanging.

Whilst conservation on the painting progressed, Bank of America's generous support ensured the work undertaken was captured in a series of short films, which were shared with the public via an active social media campaign.

This project is indebted to the many people who were called upon to assist throughout. The collective team effort comprised of a collaboration from several international and interdisciplinary teams, including technical research undertaken on the painting by the CHARISMA transnational research team, a unique European research infrastructure for restoration and conservation of Cultural Heritage. The project and the scholarly research related to it is celebrated in a dedicated publication *'The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife—Conserving a National Treasure'*, which includes essays from the National Gallery of Ireland conservation and curatorial staff.

The public has been captivated by The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife for decades, and conservation has ensured the continued safeguarding of this celebrated artwork which can now continue to inspire us from its lofty, well-earned place on the Gallery wall.



Above: The National Gallery of Ireland team de-installing *The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife* to begin conservation



Above: Analysis of MacClise's painting materials and techniques

Below: Ultra violet light detail of the painting during conservation



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—Brian T. Moynihan,
Chief Executive Officer of Bank of America.

THIS HIGH PROFILE PROJECT RECEIVED MUCH PUBLICITY IN THE NATIONAL PRESS AND TELEVISION AND RECEIVED AN ALLIANCE BUSINESS TO ARTS AWARD AND A SPIDER AWARD FOR THE PROJECT'S DIGITAL MEDIA PRESENCE. THE SPIDERS HONOR IRISH INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS FOR THEIR OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENTS ONLINE AND CELEBRATE THE SUCCESS OF THE IRISH INTERNET AND DIGITAL MEDIA.