

Muriel Gahan



Muriel Gahan was a lone ranger on the Arts Council in its early days. Màire de Paor was the only other member until the 70s. She was active in rural development and an advocate for traditional crafts and the cooperative movement.

She grew up in Mayo where her father worked for the Congested Districts Board. She travelled with him and gained insights into the extent of post-independence, rural poverty.

Gahan was educated at a girls' boarding school in Wales and at Alexandra College where she met her lifelong friend and collaborator Olivia Cruikshank Hughes.

She worked as a painter and decorator with an all-female firm, the Modern Decorator, and through this work first came into contact with the United Irishwomen, a group founded in 1910 and which became, in 1935, the Irish Countrywomen's Association.

Gahan along with other United Irishwomen opened a sales depot in Dublin - called the Country Shop - to sell the work of isolated rural craft workers who were unable to get fairly paid for their work. She is credited with launching the Aran Jumper as we know it today as it was she who commissioned the first commercial Aran in 1932.

In 1935 she launched the Irish Homespun Society in an effort to preserve countryside craft traditions through, for example, exhibitions held at the annual Dublin Spring Show. She was also a driving force behind Irish Country Markets Ltd of which she was chairwoman until 1975.

She was a member of the RDS from 1946, and served on its industries, art, and general purposes committee in 1948. She was on the first Arts Council (1951), and in 1956 was appointed to the council of the Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland.

Gahan was instrumental in the ICA's securing funds from the Kellogg Foundation of America for An Grianán, their residential training college at Termonfeckin, Co. Louth, which opened in 1954. In 1976 she became the first female vice-president of the RDS.

The Arts Council provided funding to An Grianan in the early days as Muriel was instrumental in setting it up. The focus was very much on the vocational and income generating possibilities of home crafts at the time. She also mixed in contemporary art circles, was 'well got' and was friendly with, amongst others, Mainie Jellett.