

## The Trinity College Dublin Art Collections

**Artist:** Camille Souter  
**Title:** *On Their Way*  
**Medium:** oil on Paper  
**Dimensions:** 79cm x 57cm

b. 1929, Northamptonshire, England

Born Betty Pamela Holmes, her first husband Gordon Souter allegedly nicknamed her 'Camille' after the consumptive heroine of Alexandre Dumas' novel 'La Dame aux Camélias'. She was raised in Ireland, and studied nursing at Guy's Hospital in London. She began painting in the 1950s when recovering from tuberculosis on the Isle of Wight and is mostly self-taught. She took brief classes in clay over wire sculpture, which she continued to practice, destroying all but one work as they failed to meet her standards. She began painting in earnest on the spur of the moment in 1953, and almost despite herself, she realised her deep desire to paint and declared 'I shall have to spend the rest of my life fighting for it'.

She maintained her strict standards and destroyed all her work of this period, though she cites the Abstract Expressionists (such as Jackson Pollock) as influences at this time. After travelling and working in Italy (where she sold her first work) and France, she returned to Ireland and began to exhibit. Her first solo-exhibition was in 1956 in the El Habano Restaurant, Dublin. In 1957 she first exhibited in the Irish Exhibition of Living Art where she received critical acclaim and sold all works submitted. She won an Italian Cultural Institute scholarship to Italy for a year in 1958.

When living on Achill Island she began wearing her signature black woollen beret of the local fishermen, to keep her hair out of the way when working. It has been said that her poverty is evident in her materials; the bicycle aluminium paint, enamel and newspaper, which luckily corresponded to Achill's hues. Though her work of this period was compared negatively with American Abstract Expressionism, she queried what such artists were 'actually going to do' with their free style, making clear her tie to subject matter.

In 1960 she exhibited in the first Independent Artists' Group show and her work was prominently displayed and married sculptor Frank Morris that year. They moved to the gate lodge at the back of Charleville House, outside Enniskerry, where they met Sir Basil Goulding who 'bought quite a bit and wrote a cheque', although she remembers having to ask 'Basil, you wouldn't happen to have ten shillings?' Goulding was a most important collector, and his patronage sustained them at this time when Souter had three children on her bike each morning to be dropped to school.

In 1961 one of Souter's works represented Ireland in the Paris Biennale, and she received her greatest critical acclaim at the Irish Exhibition of Living Art that year, when painter Patrick Hickey dubbed Irish painting 'to be standing still', citing Souter as the only exception. By this time the Dawson Gallery is said to have a waiting list of those wishing to buy her work, the Arts Council supported the acquisition of her work by public and private bodies, and Professor George Dawson created the College Gallery in Trinity College, Dublin. From the early 1960's on the College bought six works of Souter. Souter and Morris settled at Calary Bog, Co. Wicklow in 1962 and worked

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there over the next decade. In 1965 she and Barrie Cooke were exhibited in 'Two Painters from the Collection of Sir Basil Gouling' exhibition in the Ulster Museum, and in 1966 her work was exhibited in the Royal Hibernian Academy for the first time.

Souter continued to work, her subject matter always changing, moving first to a series of canal paintings, to slaughterhouses, dead fish, to industrial scenes, Shannon Airport, to works based on the Gulf War and still lives. She continues to return to Achill Island to paint, and lives between there, Dublin, Wicklow, and Italy. Her painting is small in scale and intimate, unlike the monumental, impersonal work of the Abstract Expressionists. It is almost always representational, quietly observing, usually empty, spaces in a way that is accepting of varied and sometimes ugly subject matter. This emptiness, that of something no longer there, some have taken as an expression of loss, and one's thoughts turn to those the artist has lost; a husband after attaining success, 'one of her true, true collectors' after being made a member of the Aosdána and more recently her mother.

Her work has been called poetic, sensitive without being sentimental or one-sided, almost shy, it is without 'hidden depths or indecipherable meanings, rather it is about taking pleasure in the ordinariness of the imagery'. Souter says that it is herself that she paints for, and her self-demanding nature have led her to buy back work to destroy it, and on another count replace the destroyed, borrowed painting.

Souter refuses to promote herself internationally, and is said to have operated an 'embargo' on the sale of her works to Americans, simply because they already 'have so much good stuff'. Furthermore, she lives in the hope of one day seeing her 'offspring' again, and fears that if they were sold abroad they may never return to Ireland. She also believes that 'many works (particularly landscapes) are best seen under the natural and changing daylight of the place the subject matter originated.'

Other works by the artist can be found in: The Irish Museum of Modern Art; The Dublin City Gallery, the Hugh Lane; The Ulster Museum, Belfast; The Crawford Municipal Art Gallery, Cork and the Limerick Municipal Art Gallery.

The information in this article was taken from <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/irish-artists/camille-souter.htm> and <http://aosdana.artscouncil.ie/Members/Visual-Arts/Souter.aspx>

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