



Philip Taaffe – Anima Mundi

23 March - 12 June 2011

Exhibition Notes for Primary School Teachers

General Information

The Irish Museum of Modern Art is delighted to present a survey exhibition that focuses exclusively on paintings of the Irish-American artist Philip Taaffe (b. 1955) of the last ten years. The show consists of 39 paintings that demonstrate the highly developed style he has honed over a career spanning 30 years. Taaffe is one of the most significant painters to have emerged in America in the 1980s when he, along with many of his contemporaries, reinvigorated the interest in abstract art after the 'assassination of painting' perpetrated over previous decades.

Taaffe acknowledged that the world is full of representation: every culture, tribe or society has its symbols, references and signifiers. He set himself the task of reinvesting painting with symbol, metaphor and other traditional elements of picture-making while taking into consideration the theoretical basis of Minimalism and Conceptualism. Taaffe likewise treated Abstract Expressionism as a repository of images to be reworked, juxtaposed and manipulated, beginning a new dialogue in the process.

Artists who were of particular interest to Taaffe were Bridget Riley and Barnett Newman, and in his paintings some core elements of their works remain visible. Taaffe began to travel extensively in the 1990s collecting symbols from different historical cultures, and he regularly visited the Middle East, North Africa and India.

It is the combination of the recent history of painting, images from ancient and modern books, cultural histories read or overheard, shamanic traditions and religious rituals and ornamentation that creates Taaffe's multi-layered, trans-historical paintings that somehow sit well with modern-day society.

Key to Taaffe's practice is his interest in symbols, traditions and rituals, especially their transferability over time and space. He leads us from European Bronze Age artefacts to the earliest manifestations of Japanese Buddhist culture to petroglyphs that appear in prehistoric cultures worldwide, and we become aware of a continuous, unconscious, human translation of the world around us.

Another major theme and source of imagery for Taaffe is botany. Taking as material the old natural-history illustrations of early explorers and naturalists, he interweaves them with architectural and other decorative elements.

Yet his works are not merely a compendium of historical styles; they are indisputably postmodern creations, paintings that speak of the most challenging artistic and cultural issues of our time and which, in their complex visual and conceptual layerings, continue in the tradition of artists such as Andy Warhol or Sigmar Polke.

The title of the exhibition, *Anima Mundi* (Lat. 'soul of the world') points to Taaffe's notion of co-existing worlds and beliefs. The *Anima Mundi* is believed to permeate and interconnect everything in the world. Taaffe's artistic universe maps the ebb and flow of knowledge over vast areas of space and time.

Philip Taaffe's work is collected by some of the most prestigious museums in the world including The Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art; and the Reina Sofia, Madrid.

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully-illustrated catalogue with texts by Enrique Juncosa, Colm Tóibín and an interview with the artist by David Brophy.

Philip Taaffe – Anima Mundi is open to the public from 23 March until 12 June 2011 (First Floor, East Wing Galleries).

The IMMA Primary School Programme will focus on the *Philip Taaffe – Anima Mundi* exhibition from mid-April until 12 June 2011 (along with *Old Master Prints: The Madden/Arnholz Collection* exhibition and the Romuald Hazoumè exhibition till 22 May).

Exhibition Information for Primary School Teachers

Philip Taaffe's work is well known for its distinctive patterns and marks employing use of line and colour. The many layers in his paintings combine symbols from different historical cultures and religions as well as themes and images from natural history and architecture. As the title of the exhibition suggests, Taaffe imagines a soul (*anima mundi*) interconnecting worlds and beliefs which simply co-exist.

Taaffe frequently superimposes geometric structures over multicoloured backgrounds, exemplifying the contrast between Classical and Romantic. The ordered geometry of the surface and the luminous chaos of the background suggest a tension that cannot be resolved.

Taaffe culls his images from many sources including dream shapes from natural history and art history. He works with many different techniques to create a place rather than an object.

The exhibition offers much inspiration for the children's learning back in the classroom: in art for looking closely, drawing and painting, printing, paper folding, dyeing or marbling; as well as for discussions in history, religion, geography, SPHE and environmental studies. Suggested practical uses in the classroom can be found at the end of these notes.

You can find a biography of Philip Taaffe as well as his paintings, exhibitions, interviews etc. on his website: www.philiptaaffe.info

There is also a video of the artist talking about his work entitled "Ekctasis" on youtube which was uploaded on 20 June 2010.

List of Artworks

Please note that a substantial number of the following artworks will be visited during a guided tour of the *Philip Taaffe – Anima Mundi* exhibition. However, the number visited will vary according to circumstance on the day, and additional artworks which are not covered here may be included. The list below contains both background information for teachers and viewing suggestions for children.

Porte Amur (2001)

Background Information for Teachers

The painting transports us to another era and place. The viewer's own associations, memories and historical knowledge are activated.

The white shapes in the foreground were inspired by the ornamental bark stencilling of the people of the Amur River in Mongolia.

The superimposition of colours and forms makes the canvas seem to vibrate. The work is symmetrical and has an architectural quality.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

Do the white shapes remind you of anything? Can you see that some of them are inverted? Where would you find patterns of vine leaves? What happens in the top part of the canvas?

The artist has put one decorative pattern on another decorative pattern. What effect does he achieve?

Sanctuary (2002)

Background Information for Teachers

Petroglyphs are found across the globe, and they have profound cultural and religious significance. The petroglyphs Taaffe used in this painting are from Peru.

The dark brown/green/blue background evokes a sense of moisture and mystery. It makes for a marked contrast with the brightly-coloured petroglyphs which seem to radiate.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

Have you ever seen such images and if so, where were they from? What were they of? What are the shapes of in Taaffe's painting? Such images are called petroglyphs or rock engravings (*petros* means 'stone' in Greek and *glyphein* 'to carve'). Petroglyphs are found world-wide, and they are often associated with prehistoric peoples.

Petroglyphs are different from pictographs. Pictographs are images drawn or painted on a rock face. Both types of images belong to the category of rock art.

How does the artist give you sense of this being rock art? Is it the stylised images? Or the colours of the background? Or is it the plant life that's suggested in the mosses and ferns? Do you think there is an air of mystery about this artwork? Why would a cave have a special atmosphere?

Composition with Shells and Algae (2005)

Background Information for Teachers

Superimposed shells and seaweed celebrate the possibilities of abundance. Taaffe once remarked that repetition also helps him to reach a trance-like state.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

The artist has said that he likes repeating motifs and patterns because it gives him the possibility of using tempo and rhythm like a musician. Can you see how these ideas might apply to this painting, or to any other painting in this exhibition?

Do you think there is movement in this underwater world? Is it possible to look at the whole painting at once or do you have to examine it bit by bit?

Devonian Leaves (2004)

Background Information for Teachers

A large body of Taaffe's work contains botanical references. This painting is a floating arrangement of images of fossilized leaves from extinct plants. The marbled background gives the work a magma-like quality. The irregular band of white in the upper part of the painting suggests a glacier and the climatic conditions that brought about the extinction of these plants.

Taaffe is interested both in the idea and the shapes of fossils, and he made prints with them. He likes the liquidity of paint, the pouring of colours. When he marbels his own paper, he works on the floor, large-scale.

Paper marbling is a method using patterns of colours floated on either plain water or some solution that are then transferred to an absorbent surface, such as paper or fabric.

For wonderful examples of marbled paper as well as an actual demonstration of how it is made, see:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=vk-Ta7ichz4

Viewing Suggestions for Children

Taaffe likes to work with fossils. The word fossil comes from Latin *fossus* meaning 'having been dug up' and refers to the remains of animals and plants from thousands of years ago. The Devonian period occurred more than 300 million years ago.

For the background of the painting, Taaffe used marbled paper which he made by floating colours on water. He then put the paper onto the canvas. This is called a collage. Do the shapes and colours remind you of anything?

A collage (from French *coller*, 'to glue') is a work of art assembled from different forms, for example papers, photographs, newspapers) so as to create a new whole. Taaffe considers collage one of the major art forms of the 20th century.

Dryadic Figures (2006)

Background Information for Teachers

Trees in many cultures are symbolic of life and growth. The bark is that of giant Douglas fir trees, and the decorations on the bark columns are from a cabinet-making manual. The sky employs star shapes from Egyptian funerary paintings on tomb ceilings.

The West Coast Indians in Washington State carve emblematic figures out of the Douglas fir trees that are almost anthropomorphic.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

As in the painting *Devonian Leaves*, there are references to plants in *Dryadic Figures*. Can you find them?

The tall vertical shapes are made of bark patterns from the giant Douglas fir. The shapes are meant to suggest the dryads who are tree nymphs said to live in trees.

The West Coast Indians of the USA carve images into the giant Douglas firs that resemble human beings.

Cape Siren (2008)

Background Information for Teachers

The title is fictitious. The decorative patterns come from western Canada which is an area full of capes. He mixes designs from the natives of western Canada with Chinese heads and the heads of mermaids and sirens of Greco-Roman origin (Sirens: seductive bird-women in Greek mythology).

Viewing Suggestions for Children

Taaffe took ideas from the native people of the North-West Coast of America who live in an area surrounded by water. Do you think the motifs look liquid, and if so, why? The title *Cape Siren* is an imaginary place. Sirens are bird-women in Greek legends who lure sailors to shipwreck with their enchanting music and voices. Can you think of a different title that would be suitable?

There are heads of Roman mermaids and Greek sirens in the painting and also Chinese heads. Why do you think did the artist use heads from different times and places? Why did he place the patterns over the heads?

Cairene Window II (2008)

Background Information for Teachers

Islamic decorative elements are superimposed on backgrounds of saturated colours made using orizomegami, a Japanese craft of folding and dyeing paper. Taaffe was fascinated by the fact that both techniques originated in the 11th century, at a time when pre-geometricised Islamic art still retained a closeness to imagery from nature.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

The artist likes to compare what happened in different places at the one time. In this painting he combines an ancient Japanese paper folding and dyeing technique with the geometry of Islamic decoration. Both go back to the 11th century.

Do you like art which uses patterns and colours and why? What does it remind you of? Do you think it is difficult to make such a painting? If you were to make something similar, what materials would you use?

Artificial Paradise (Locus) (2008)

Background Information for Teachers

The title *Artificial Paradise* echoes the title of a work by the French poet Charles Baudelaire on the use of mind-altering substances. There is a strong hypnotic quality to this painting of Taaffe's.

The black colour of the background serves as a firework-like, phantasmic explosion of rhythmic plants and ferns, seeds and spores. Roots pulse their way across the painting, connecting and giving life to what could almost be luminous creatures that inhabit the deepest oceans. The sheer scale and high contrast in this painting physically create another world in which observers can immerse themselves.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

Does the painting remind you of a fireworks display? If so, is this because of the bright colours against a dark background or is it because of the shapes? What do the shapes remind you of? Why do they appear to be floating?

Is it like a dream-world, or is it rather like a world of ferns and strange sea creatures, seeds and corals? Can you see any birds?

Port of Saints (2007)

Background Information for Teachers

The painting is dominated by gold leaf line carvings of curves borrowed from Islamic decoration. The gilded curves shimmer and make the painting dynamic. The decorative work in the lower half is borrowed from the prayer niche of a mosque.

Taaffe often uses imagery that is today associated with Islam but that also exists in other cultures. The eight-pointed star that occupies the expanse of *Port of Saints* marks the early human understanding of the intelligent order that underlies our universe. It was often used in the Middle Ages as a symbol of the prophets of Islamic art. Islam discourages representational art and therefore grew from a study of geometry into ornamentation.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

Where do you discover parallel lines? Can you see any parallel lines running from the upper part of the canvas running into the lower? How do you think did the artist organise this painting?

Count the points of the golden stars. Can you figure out how to make such a star? It is actually easy to construct an eight-pointed star as it is based on two squares.

Can you see how the white stars form circles around the red stars?

What do the golden curves do to the painting? Are they effective? Do they make the canvas look more dynamic?

Painting with Teeth (2002)

Background Information for Teachers

The vertical, decorated columns composed entirely of teeth clearly refer to tribal totem poles. Totem poles are monumental sculptures carved from large trees particularly by cultures of the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast of North America.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

Do you like this work? Can you make out the different kinds of teeth that make up these towers? Do you find it funny or maybe scary, and if so, why?

Does the painting remind you of anything? What might have given the artist the idea to this work?

The columns may remind you of totem poles. Totem poles are big sculptures carved from large trees. Can you see traces of trees in the painting?

Composition with Gemstones

Background Information for Teachers

Taaffe likes to think of how gems result from geological compression and how the structure of minerals is crystalline. He enjoys the imaginary architectural possibilities of minerals.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

Gemstones are also called precious or semi-precious stones. They are pieces of mineral and rock that are cut and polished to make jewellery.

How does the artist suggest that the gemstones are polished and shiny? What kind of precious stones do the colours suggest? Do those who work with precious stones really cut gemstones differently? Why are gemstones also called precious stones?

Minerals form through geological processes. They have a highly ordered structure. Why do you think did Taaffe superimpose gemstones in this painting? Why make the background black?

At the end of the tour:

The Irish writer Colm Tóibín wrote in the exhibition catalogue that Philip Taaffe “has made in his work a new history of the world from the images the world has left to him”. Can you suggest what Tóibín may have meant by this?

How would you know from these paintings that the artist has travelled a lot?

Suggested Practical Uses in the Classroom

The artworks on show encourage a close look at Taaffe’s use of line and various kinds of symmetry and repetition. The effective contrast and shading of colours are of interest as are the workings of layering. The use of marbled paper could encourage trying out that technique in school just as the use of orizomegami (a Japanese craft of folding and dyeing paper) could. Intricate geometric patterns may encourage the design of simpler versions with the help of squared paper and rulers and/or a compass, and the process can be compared to constructing Celtic interlace. The strong patterns in Taaffe and the colours and layering lend themselves to print making. The many religious and cultural motifs can be approached from the angles of history, religion, geography and SPHE, and images from the natural world easily combine with environmental studies.