



Well-known for his use of allegory as a method by which to reflect on political issues in Irish society, and evident in images such as *An Allegory* (1924) and *Night's Candles are Burnt Out* (1929), Seán Keating was equally well-capable of utilising those skills to focus attention on the greater significance of the simple things in life.

The older woman in *Past Definite, Future Perfect* is reading the cards. She holds the five of hearts and points to another card from the same suit lying on the table. Her young companion watches attentively, her hands clasped to one side so that she can see everything of the procedure. Both women are focused on the cards, but entirely absorbed in their own thoughts. At first glance, the picture presents a quiet moment between, perhaps, a mother and daughter. The only movement is in the old woman's gnarled hands and in the swirl of light and dark tones in the background. Yet the imagery and the artist's title suggest that this is more than a simple depiction of a fortune-telling session. The painting abounds with symbolism: old age presented as the past, beside youth as representative of the future. The manner in which the old woman concentrates on the suit of hearts suggests that she is thinking about her own past loves. The young woman, perhaps unaware that nothing is perfect, may be hoping for a definite answer about love in the future. The overarching message is that the gaiety and hope of youth leads inexorably towards the wisdom and experience of old age.

The theme of old age appears to have been very much on his mind in 1928, a year in which he painted *The Turf Buyer*, *Old Kitty* and *Good Old Stuff*. Added to this, his mother Annie (née Hannan), had been suffering from an unspecified illness for a long number of years; she was nearing the end of her life in 1928. While this is not a portrait of Annie, it is a homage painting made in deference to women and to the wisdom of old age.

The lettering to the bottom left of the image 'AMDG' appears to represent the Jesuit motto 'for the greater glory of God.' In other words, no matter what the cards supposedly say, life will be as it will be.

Past Definite, Future Perfect was shown in the Royal Academy in London in 1928. A reviewer on the 'marvellous' portrait of the old woman commented on how it had the 'conviction of a great old age.' It was purchased from the exhibition for a private collection at the time and has not been publicly exhibited since.

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(An extended note is on www.whytes.com)