

Colour and Light

The Stained-Glass Windows of Harry Clarke

Lucy Costigan

Harry Clarke was Ireland's finest stained-glass artist. Born on St. Patrick's Day in 1889 he grew up with a stained glass studio at the back of his home, at 33 North Frederick Street, Dublin. His father, Joshua, had emigrated from Leeds to Dublin and had set up a church decorating business in 1892, known as Joshua Clarke & Sons. Harry's mother, Brigid (nee McGonigal) suffered from poor health for most of her life. Brigid died in 1903 at the age of 43, when Harry was just 14 years old. This greatly affected Harry as he had been very close to his mother. Both Harry and his brother, Walter, inherited the tendency towards ill health, particularly chest complaints.

Even as a young child, Harry showed an aptitude for drawing and design. He studied at Belvedere College but left after his mother's death. He briefly became apprenticed at an architectural firm before joining his father in his stained-glass business. Clarke was tutored there by William Nagle, a brilliant artist and craftsman from Dublin. Clarke also attended night classes at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art. His brilliance as an artist and colourist was recognised when he was awarded three consecutive gold medals from 1911 to 1913, for stained-glass work at the Board of Education's National Competition at South Kensington, London.

When Clarke graduated he was awarded a scholarship to visit French medieval cathedrals. At Chartres Cathedral, Clarke was transfixed by the spectacular reds and blues that flowed from the medieval windows. When he returned to Dublin he began to create stained-glass panels that were noted for their spectacular colours and the brilliance of the characters created through the medium of glass.

The hallmark of his work became his use of deep blues, ruby reds and spectacular shades of magenta, emerald, burnt orange and gold. Clarke achieved his shimmering colours by applying acid to flashed glass.

In October 1914, Clarke married Margaret Crilly, a fellow artist and teacher at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art. In 1915, Clarke won his first major commission to create nine windows designed in the Celtic Revival style for the Honan Chapel of St. Finbarr, at University College Cork. This enormous commission took three years to complete and included a spectacular three-light window,



The Annunciation (1922) and The Coronation of the Virgin in Glory (1923) - Coronation light showing detail of Mary surrounded by women from the old testament.

Photo: Michael Cullen



The Crucifixion and the Adoration of the Cross by Irish Saints (1920) - full window positioned high above the altar in St. Joseph's Church, Terenure, Dublin.

Photo: Michael Cullen

depicting St. Patrick, St. Brigid and St. Columille. When the windows were unveiled Clarke received rave reviews for the delicacy and brilliance of his creations. Clarke's genius as a colourist was matched by his extraordinary artistic ability. He was also an illustrator of books for the London publishers, Harrap & Co., including *The Fairy Tales of Hans Christian Andersen* (1916) and *Poe's Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (1919).

blue, green and maroon is highly decorated with floral motifs and geometric shapes. Beside Mary, Saint John is attired in magnificent robes of blue and gold. Mary Magdalene is depicted in the foreground in sumptuous blue and scarlet robes, her long red hair falling around her shoulders.

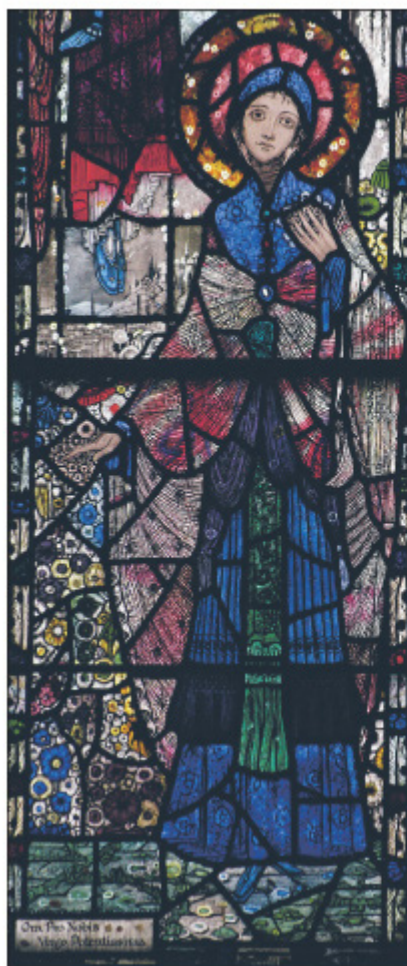
The right light depicts ten Irish saints kneeling in adoration. Among the saints identifiable are Saint Attracta, in a red and white headdress and crimson robes; Saint Columba,

When Joshua Clarke died in September 1921, Clarke began managing the stained glass division of the Studios, while his brother, Walter, took over the church decorating business. Commissions for stained-glass windows flowed in from all over Ireland, the United Kingdom, the U.S.A and Australia.

A beautiful example of Clarke's work can be seen at St. Joseph's Catholic Church, in Terenure, Dublin, where two of his windows are located: *The Crucifixion* (1920), and *The Annunciation* (1922) and *The Coronation of the Virgin in Glory* (1923). Clarke's theme for the Crucifixion window was the adoration of the cross by Irish saints.

The Crucifixion is positioned high above the altar in St. Joseph's. The background for each of the lights is a spectacular red and gold sunset, offset with tall evergreen trees. The top panels of the first light depict six golden-haired angels praying in profile. The middle and lower panels depict ten Irish saints, some of whom can be identified. Saint Braocan is depicted in a bronze hooded cloak. Saint Conlaith, hermit and bishop of Kildare, wears red robes and holds a staff. Saint Ita wears her traditional blue robe, while beside her, St. Kevin holds a golden staff. Saint Sedulus, or Sedna, is attired in an ornate maroon cloak. Beside him St. Fintan wears a bronze cloak that is beautifully decorated with Celtic spirals. St. Patrick is depicted at the front of the saints, attired in traditional green robes.

In the main panels of the central light, Jesus is depicted on the cross. The brilliant crimson and gold sunset adds a dramatic contrast to Jesus' pale, emaciated body. The black lines of lead that cut across Jesus' body resemble scars. The face of Jesus emits enormous power. The lower panels depict Mary, Saint John and Mary Magdalene at the foot of the cross. Mary's robe of



The Annunciation (1922) and The Coronation of the Virgin in Glory (1923) – The Annunciation light showing Mary and ballet slippers of the Angel Gabriel.
Photo: Michael Cullen



The Annunciation (1922) and The Coronation of the Virgin in Glory (1923) - full window.
Photo: Michael Cullen

wearing white robes and a mitre; and Saint Finbarr of Cork, in crimson and gold robes. Saint Brigid of Kildare kneels in the foreground in blue robes.

The *Annunciation and The Coronation* window is located in St. Joseph's Lady Chapel. The *Annunciation* light won Clarke first prize at the Aonach Tailteann Art Exhibition and the Gaelic Revival festival. The delicacy and beauty of *The Annunciation* is breathtaking. The window's colours are pale and shimmering. Clarke's unique brilliance and creativity are etched on every inch of this window, from the Angel Gabriel's frilly petticoat and ballet slippers to Mary's blue silk shoes. Mary is depicted below the Angel Gabriel, gazing out at the viewer with an innocent expression. She is robed in a beautiful gown of deep blue, purple, and green, and she wears a small blue headress. A magnificent halo of many layers and colours surrounds her. A beautiful cloak of pastel colours is wrapped around her. Her tiny blue shoes are placed on a carpet of flowers.

The right-hand light depicts *The Coronation of the Virgin in Glory*. The main panels depict Mary, the crowned virgin, resplendent in a dark blue cloak and an emerald and turquoise robe. She wears an elaborate crown that seems to emit flames of fire. Mary gazes directly at the viewer. Her dainty blue shoes hover above the snake that tempted Adam and Eve. Mary is surrounded by several female figures from the Old Testament including Ruth, Rachel, Esther, Deborah, Rebecca and Judith.

The exquisite figures depicted in the Terenure windows seem to exude poise and grace, as though they possess a rich inner-life that is unique in the medium of stained glass. Clarke's saints and angels were dressed in sumptuous robes of satin and silk, each more elaborately decorated than the next. Clarke's characters are noted for their lustrous eyes, tumbling locks and long tapering fingers.

Clarke was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1929 and was advised to recuperate at a sanatorium in Davos, Switzerland. Although his health continued to deteriorate he managed to return to Ireland to set up his own stained-glass studio, The Harry Clarke Studios in July 1930. He returned to Davos in October 1930. He died in his sleep in Coire, Switzerland, on January 6th 1931. He was just 41 years old. The Harry Clarke Studios continued to create stained glass windows until 1973. However, the delicacy and brilliance of Clarke's unique creations could never be equalled.

During his short life, Harry created over 160 windows for churches and private establishments in Ireland, England, the United States and Australia. Some of his most brilliant work includes the nine windows at the Honan Chapel in Cork (1916 to 1918), *The Ascension* window at St. Stephen's Cathedral, Brisbane, Australia, the magnificent windows at Terenure, the Life of Christ windows at Disert Institute of Education and Celtic Culture, Dingle, Co. Kerry, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, at the Hugh Lane, Dublin City Gallery, and *The Geneva Window*, now at the Wolfsonian in Miami, Florida, USA.

Read more about the Stained Glass of Harry Clarke – *'Strangest Genius'* by Lucy Costigan and Michael Cullen. Published by the History Press, May 2010.

Available in November 2010 – *'A Revel in Blue'* – Film documentary on the Stained Glass of Harry Clarke.

For more information see www.harryclarke.net



The Crucifixion and the Adoration of the Cross by Irish Saints (1920) - full window.
Photo: Michael Cullen



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