

# HARRY CLARKE'S SACRED STAINED GLASS



(right) Detail of Mary from *The Ascension* (1923)  
at St Stephen's Cathedral, Brisbane, Australia.

(opposite) Detail of main panels from *The Widow's Son* (1924),  
at St Peter and Paul Church, Balbriggan, Co. Dublin

During his short life, Harry Clarke (1889 - 1931) created over 160 windows for churches and private patrons throughout Ireland and the United Kingdom, and as far a field as the USA and Australia. Harry's father, Joshua, emigrated from Leeds to Dublin in 1877, where he established a church decorating business and stained-glass studio at 33 North Frederick Street. Harry grew up with the stained-glass studios, J. Clarke & Sons, at the back of his home. Even as a young child, Harry showed an aptitude for drawing and design and he later studied stained glass 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.

After graduation, Clarke was awarded a scholarship to visit French medieval cathedrals. At Chartres Cathedral, he was transfixed by the spectacular reds and blues that flowed from the medieval windows. When he returned to Dublin developed techniques using flashed glass, aciding and plating to achieve rich, jewel-like colours. His use of deep ruby and blue became the hallmark of his work. He also developed his talents as a graphic artist, illustrating several books for the London publishers, Harrap & Co. Clarke began experimenting with small, exquisite stained-glass panels that were inspired by literary themes. The beauty and mastery of his unique illustrative style is evident in all of Clarke's stained-glass work: exquisite angels and saints gaze out at the viewer, with large, luminous eyes and long, tapering fingers.

In October 1914, Clarke married Margaret Crilly, a fellow artist and teacher at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art. In 1915, he 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, depicting St Patrick, St Brigid and St Columcille. When the windows

were unveiled, Clarke received rave reviews for the delicacy and brilliance of his creations. When Joshua Clarke died in September 1921, Harry began managing the stained glass division of the Studios, while his brother, Walter, took over the church decorating business. Commissions flowed in from all over Ireland, the United Kingdom, the USA and Australia.

In August 1922, Clarke received a commission for *The Ascension* window, for St Stephen's Cathedral, in Brisbane, Australia. Archbishop Duhig visited the studios to commission the window in memory of Isaac and William Mayne, brothers of the donors, Dr. and Miss Mayne. The window contains three lancets that comprise 32 panels (*The Catholic Leader*, Brisbane, 3rd May 2009).

A quatrefoil and two small tracery lights are positioned above each of the three tall, narrow lancets. In the top panels, angels are portrayed carrying shields which represent the instruments of Christ's passion. The main lancet depicts the Risen Lord, attired in white robes and a crimson cloak, ascending into Heaven. He stands above a spectacular sunset and tall evergreen trees. The wounds from the Crucifixion are visible in his hands and feet. His mother, Mary, stands below dressed in a blue cloak and glorious robes of blue, white and magenta. Her robe is tied with a long golden girdle; a dazzling crimson halo surrounds her. Apostles gaze up in wonder at Christ from the lower panels of the three lancets.

The window was completed and installed for the consecration of the cathedral on the 10th June 1923. When the window was unveiled, the archbishop hailed it as "an artistic triumph" (Bowe: 1994, p. 149). The window was restored in the spring of 2009 by the Eumundi Studios. It is considered to be one of the finest stained-glass windows in Australia (*The Cathedral of St Stephen*, Brisbane: 2002).

During the 1920s, Clarke continued to create windows for Irish churches. The two windows he created for Sts Peter and Paul Catholic Church in Balbriggan, Co. Dublin, in 1924, show Clarke's uncanny ability to



breathe emotion and spirit into the characters he created within the medium of glass. *The Visitation* is a two-light window depicting Mary's visit to her cousin, Elizabeth. Mary is portrayed in the left panel, radiant in the full bloom of youth, a beautiful, slender figure attired in robes of deep blue, turquoise and emerald. A diaphanous veil decorated with flowers covers her hair. Mary's long delicate hands emerge from gold-brocaded sleeves and she holds tiny blossoms in her right hand. The right light depicts Elizabeth, who is visibly pregnant with John the Baptist. Elizabeth wears a blue gown, a purple robe decorated with golden flowers and a golden headdress. Elizabeth is depicted standing a step higher than Mary, her hands held in a prayerful pose. Her husband, Zacharias, is depicted behind Elizabeth's right shoulder, attired in an amber headdress. He gazes directly at the viewer.

*The Widow's Son* is also a two-light window, created by Clarke in 1924. The left light depicts the widow from Nain and her son. The whole dramatic scene conveys a range of emotions. Two men stand above the widow, staring in amazement at the miracle that has just taken place. Their faces are ashen and their eyes are wide with wonder. The widow stands over her son who has been

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raised from the dead by Jesus. She places a hand on her son's shoulder as he kneels in prayer. The cloths that were used to bind him in death are still visible. The tall, elongated figure of Jesus is depicted in the right light. He is attired in dark ruby robes and his right hand is raised, commanding the widow's son to rise up from the dead. His expression radiates power and strength. Three disciples stand behind Jesus in robes of blue and ruby. The windows at Balbriggan are magnificent in terms of technical execution, emotional intensity, and the sheer beauty and elegance of the characters portrayed.

Clarke's reputation for quality craftsmanship and for creating brilliant, original windows won him his first American commission in 1929. Fr. Dolan of the Basilica of St Vincent de Paul, Catholic Church, at Bayonne, New Jersey commissioned Clarke to create 40 windows, including nine chancel windows depicting angels bearing symbols of the Mass. Clarke was diagnosed with tuberculosis and in March 1929 he travelled to a sanatorium in Davos, Switzerland. He managed to design the angel windows while the Harry Clarke Studios, founded by him in the last year of his life, completed the remaining windows.

The angel windows were sent to New Jersey on the 3rd October 1929, along with 14 plain two-light clerestory windows. When the church was dedicated in November 1930 the windows received rapturous praise (Bowe: 1994, p. 219). The nine angels are positioned in a semicircle high above the altar. Each angel is exquisitely depicted in colourful robes and magnificent wings. Each holds a symbol of the Mass, including a stole, a cross, a thurible, wine and water, a chasuble, a maniple, a candle, a ciborium, and a book.

In 1930, Clarke was commissioned by Fr. O'Meara of the Basilica of St Oswald to create all of the windows for the church at Aston-in-Makerfield, Lancaster, England. Harry worked on seven lancets: St John the Evangelist, St Clare, St Ita, St Juliana Falconieri, St Paschal Baylon, St Catherine of Siena, and St Tarcisus.

The saints are beautifully depicted, each carrying a symbol of devotion to the Eucharist. St John the Evangelist was the only one of the 12 apostles to live to old age. He is depicted wearing emerald and purple robes, embroidered with abstract designs in blue and purple. The chalice is embroidered on St John's robe as a symbol of his devotion to the Eucharist. St Ita was born in County Waterford and was

known as the *Brigid of Munster*. She became a nun and later became the head of the community. She is noted for her gift of prophecy. St Ita is depicted in spectacular robes of blue, turquoise, green, orange and purple. A silver cross is embroidered on her robes. Three jewels that represent the Holy Trinity are depicted beside her.

Clarke's health continued to deteriorate and he died in his sleep in Coire, Switzerland, on the 6th January 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. Clarke's friend, the Abbey playwright, Lennox Robinson (1886-1958), wrote in his obituary (*The Irish Times*, 7th January, 1931):

*...they are there, for our generation, and for generations to come; those windows in the Honan Chapel in Cork, that marvellous east window in Terenure, those little windows in Monaghan, a glorious Last Judgement which is on its way to Mayo, Stations of the Cross in Lough Derg, and here and there in Ireland, England and America, glories from his imagination. They will shine and glow; those blues and reds—how he loved blue!—an inspiration to the faithful.*

(left) Detail of Mary from *The Visitation* (1924), at Ss Peter and Paul Church, Balbriggan, Co. Dublin.  
(below) Basilica of St Oswald, Ashton-in-Makerfield, Lancaster, England – detail of St John (1930).

