Harry Clarke (1889-1931)

The artist that we chose in St. Angela’s as our National artist was Harry Clarke. The reason for this choice was that there are many works by him in the churches around Co. Mayo. We had planned on visiting these churches for school tours both last year and when that was not allowed, this year but unfortunately due to the pandemic that proved impossible. Please find a little bit about our National Artist below.

Henry Patrick (Harry) Clarke, Ireland's most renowned stained-glass artist, was born in Dublin on March 17th, 1889.

By his late teens Harry was studying stained glass at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art. In 1911 he won a gold medal from the Board of Education National Competition at South Kensington, London, for his window the Consecration of St. Mel, Bishop of Longford, by St. Patrick (The Irish Times: August 19 1911). This was the first of three consecutive gold medals that Harry won at the National Competitions for his stained glass panels.

At the Dublin Metropolitan school of art Harry met Margaret Crilly, a fellow artist and teacher originally from Newry, Co. Down. To the surprise of many the pair married on October 31st 1914 and moved into a flat at 33 North Frederick Street. They subsequently had three children, Michael, David and Ann.

Harry set about getting commissions in stained glass. Laurence, know as ‘Larky’, Waldron, a Nationalist MP and Governor of Belvedere College, became an influential friend and patron of Harry's from the summer of 1912. In 1913 Harry went to London to secure a publisher for his book illustrations. By Christmas of 1913 Harry had secured his first commission from Harrap & Co., to illustrate the Fairy Tales of Hans Christian Andersen. It was published in 1916.

When Harry’s father, Joshua, died on September 13th 1921. Harry moved into the Studios at numbers six and seven North Frederick Street. Harry managed the stained glass business of Joshua Clarke & Sons, while his brother, Walter, managed the decorating side of the business. Harry continued to obtain his own commissions and the name of Harry Clarke soon became synonymous with original stained glass work of the highest quality and craftsmanship. Commissions continued to roll in from churches and patrons all over Ireland and England. Harry was particularly delighted to receive a commission for a three-light window for St. Stephen’s cathedral in Brisbane, Australia. The Ascension window was installed in Brisbane in 1923 and received wide acclaim.

In 1929 Harry was diagnosed as suffering from tuberculosis. Harry had suffered from poor physical health most of his life and this may have been exacerbated by the use of chemicals and lead in his stained-glass work. Harry was particularly delighted to receive his first American commission in 1929 for nine windows for the Basilica of St. Vincent de Paul in Bayonne, New Jersey. However, Harry became under increased stress to complete commissions around this time and he was forced by his continuing ill health to travel to Switzerland for rest and recuperation.

In early 1930 Harry's representatives established the Harry Clarke Studios on Harry's behalf. Harry had returned to Dublin in May 1930 and immediately struggled to catch up with a huge backlog of work. His main project was to complete the Geneva window despite his failing health. He finally completed the Geneva window in October 1930 and it was exhibited in the Studios. In October Harry returned to Davos, Switzerland, in an attempt to bolster his seriously deteriorating health.

In Davos Harry’s health showed no improvement. Fearing he might die in a foreign country, he left Davos in a plan to travel home to Dublin. Having been plagued by poor health for most of his life Harry died in his sleep on January 6th 1931 in Coire, Switzerland, at the age of 41.

Despite being beset by poor health throughout his short life, Harry Clarke still managed to create some of the finest work produced in the medium of stained glass in the twentieth century. Harry created stained glass windows for church and commercial commissions, as well as numerous panels for private patrons. Some of Harry's most celebrated work includes the nine windows he created for the Honan Chapel at Cork University; the Eve of St. Agnes at the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art in Dublin; the Life of Christ windows at Díseart in Dingle; the set of decorative windows at Bewley's cafe, Dublin; and the Geneva window, now at the Wolfsonian in Miama, Florida. Harry’s book illustrations continue to fascinate and delight readers worldwide as his illustrations are highly sought after.