

# *INTERCOM*

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## HARRY CLARKE: POET IN STAINED GLASS





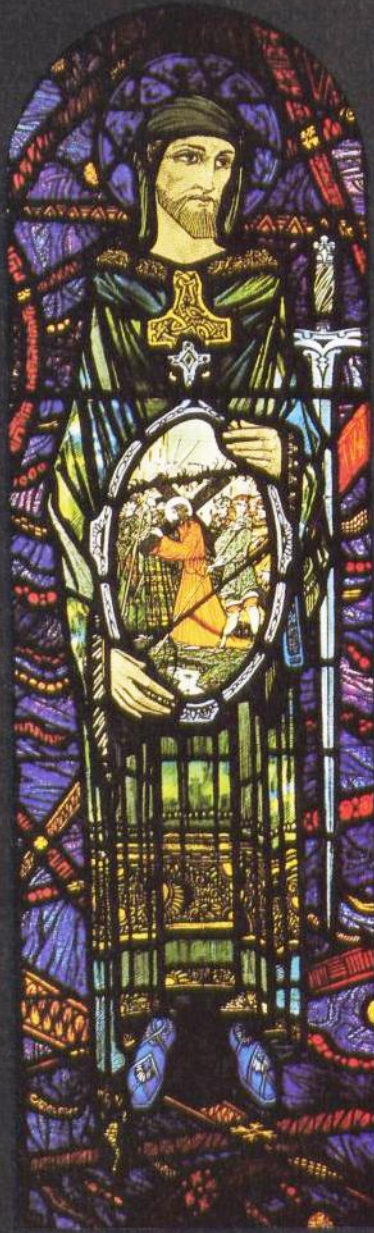
# HARRY CLARKE: POET IN STAINED GLASS

*Dr Nicola Gordon Bowe writes an appreciation of Harry Clarke, the renowned Irish stained glass artist*

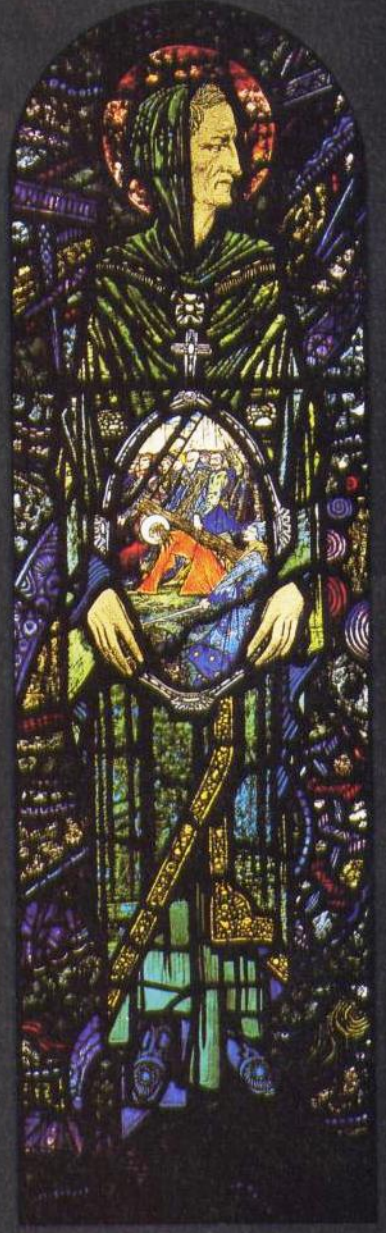
Photographs in this feature  
are of the Harry Clarke  
stained glass windows  
on Lough Derg



The Apostle Peter and Jesus  
is condemned to death



St. Paul with Jesus  
takes up his cross



Andrew, the Apostle and  
Jesus falls the first time



**W**hen Harry Clarke died at the unjustly early age of 42, Lennox Robinson, the Abbey playwright, wrote 'Ireland has lost her greatest designer in stained glass and her greatest black and white artist'. At that time, when his glass was still not widely appreciated, George Russell (AE) rightly prophesied that 'in another generation or two' his work would be eagerly sought for by collectors. He felt, as many do, that Clarke's genius is shown at its highest in his exquisitely creative, imaginative and skilled stained glass work.

Harry Clarke was born in Dublin on St. Patrick's Day, 1889 at a time when much of the stained glass being erected in churches in Ireland reminded one writer of a plate of stirrabout being thrown in one's face, or worse. Windows were usually ordered from set pattern books, made up in Munich, Birmingham or London, if you were lucky, and assembled here. This led to dull, repetitive, stereotyped glass, often of bad quality, or, at best, 'demoralised Gothick'. In 1902 Edward Martyn, the great reviver of theatre and music in Ireland, wanted some decent glass for his family church at Ardrahan, Co. Galway. He could find no adequate native craftsmen, so he summoned the skilled stained glass firm of Whall's in London, not only to make his own windows, but to teach the craft to young Irish artists. This led him and Sarah Purser, the painter, to set up An Tur Gloine, a stained glass co-operative in Dublin and their appointed manager (from Whall's), A. E. Child, began teaching the craft to students at the (then) Metropolitan School of Art in Kildare Street, Dublin.

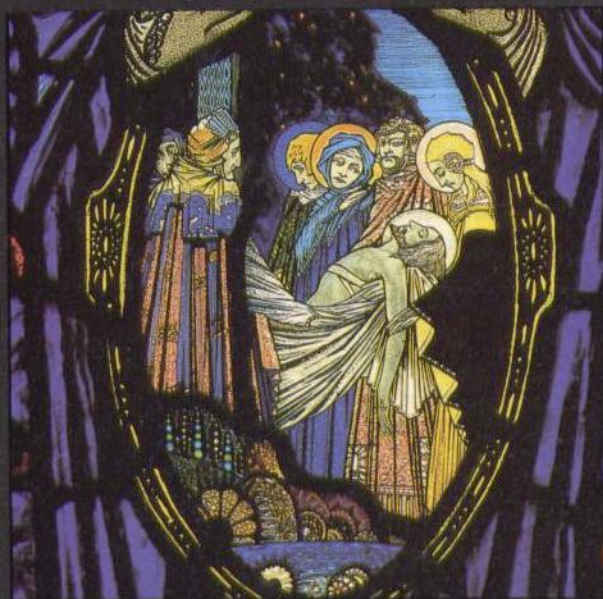
Three years later, the young Clarke began attending night classes with Child, while working by day in his father's decorating and stained glass business at 33, North Frederick Street. Joshua Clarke had established his business, one of the best and most successful in the country, in 1886. He was obliged by popular (bad) taste to work mainly in a 'Munichized' style and commissioned designs from England, as he could find no-one in Ireland to produce what he felt was wanted. However, he soon realised that his son's work was out of the ordinary. By the age of 21, he was exhibiting, was awarded the first ever scholarship in stained glass, so enabling him to become a day student at the School of Art; he won the Gold Medal for his glass 3 years running in the National Competition open to students in all the British Isles and was beginning to receive commissions from eminent collectors in Ireland.

A travelling scholarship gave him the opportunity of going to some of the French cathedrals so that he could experi-



Thomas bears The women of Jerusalem weeping for Jesus

*One of the joys of travelling around the country is to come upon an unexpected gem in an empty church with a microscopic signature, luxuriating in its floral ornament (known as FO's) and to feel that Harry Clarke's genius lives on, despite the tragedy of his being felled at the peak of his career by tuberculosis.*





ence the mysterious beauty of their great medieval stained glass. He closely studied the craftsmanship of the jewel-like glass and intricate leaded patterns of these anonymous masters and, it is said, he vowed to destroy all his previous work and thereafter only aspire to the revelation of such unsurpassable creations. This visit was to be a turning point in his artistic career.

Indeed, there is an enormous development from his early panels to the superb series of windows he was commissioned to do for Cork University's Honan Hostel Chapel, then being built, in 1915. Originally Sarah Purser's studios were supposed to undertake all 19 windows but, when Clarke's first window arrived, the reaction was such that he was allotted 11: the 3 Wonder-Working Saints of Ireland, Patrick, Brigid and Columcille (over the fine neo-Hiberno-Romanesque entrance porch), the 2 smaller chancel windows of St. Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary and, in the nave, 6 of the patron saints of the dioceses in the province of Munster, St. Albert, St. Declan, St. Finbarr, St. Brendan, St. Gobnait and St. Ita. Words can ill describe the sparkling bejewelled richness and hypnotic power of these windows. Their effect was unprecedented – 'No one has ever before shown the great beauty that can be obtained by the leads alone'... 'Their sustained magnificence of colour, their beautiful and most intricate drawing, their lavish and mysterious symbolism combine to produce an effect which is overpowering' – so wrote the critics, and Clarke's reputation was firmly established. Technically superb, each window abounds in copious details (the fruits of extensive research) woven skillfully into the overall design, so that the focal point is always the hieratic beauty of the face of each saint.

#### Time Consuming

Over the next few years, Clarke's love of detail led him to execute several miniature panels, illustrating poems by Synge, Heine, Walter de la Mare, Shakespeare and stories by Flaubert and others in an intricate technique he evolved, whereby thick pieces of flashed ruby, sapphire or gold-pink glass were plated together, acid-etched, stained, etched and painted upon to achieve a myriad of colours and tiny forms. Mounted and lit from behind, they have a great jewelled depth and allow his extraordinarily fertile imagination and draughtsmanship a dimension and richness unattainable in his watercolour or black and white illustrations.

However, these were time-consuming and hazardous to make, and he was more and more occupied with commissions for

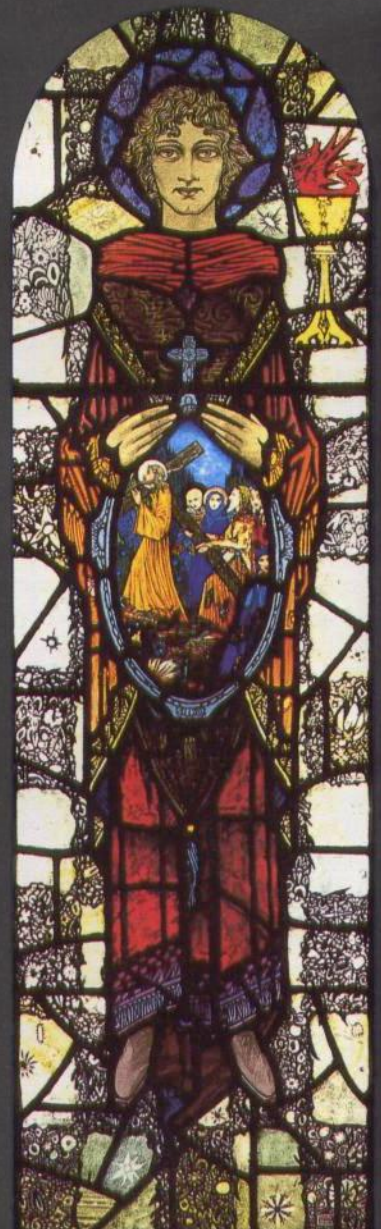
church windows, apart from exhibitions, his book illustrating and designing commissions and pioneering activities in the Arts and Crafts Society and Guild of Irish Art Workers. In 1918, he made a lovely Nativity for the east end of the Somerville family church at Castletownshend, West Cork, for which he later did 2 more windows – one of S. Luke, containing a little portrait of Edith Somerville (of Somerville and Ross fame), dressed as S. Cecilia, playing the organ. Sadly, the beautiful 3 light Sacred Heart windows of St. Peter's, Phibsborough and the huge Adoration of the Cross of St. Joseph's, Terenure (both in Dublin) are not in their original positions and can not be seen to their best advantage. However, the 2 radiant little side windows in Terenure are easily viewed. The enlightened parish priest, Dr. John Healy, who commissioned them, spoke of 'the profound thrill on first coming into the presence of Mr. Clarke's great works' and, in these, the studded, gem-like Coronation of the Virgin, set among the naughty Queens, contrasts most strikingly with the waif-like Virgin, amazed at being visited by an elegantly smiling angel, hovering above her on a crazy-paving rockery.

Commissions followed to design and make some of his finest windows in England (Dorset and Cheshire), Wexford and Killiney, Co. Dublin. Some of these commemorate those killed in the War and the Killiney window depicts an exquisitely graceful red-headed angel of peace, holding a dove.

In 1921, on their father's death, Harry and his brother, Walter, took over the management of the thriving business. The two brothers had married the Crilly sisters of Newry. Harry's wife, Margaret was a highly gifted painter, whom he had met at the School of Art where she was one of Sr. William Orpen's star pupils. Despite increasingly administrative responsibilities, a growing family, the political unrest in Dublin and continual deadlines, Clarke never ceased to be as inventive and original as ever, while maintaining a consistently high level of craftsmanship in the studios.

Of particular interest are the delicately wistful Balbriggan (Co. Dublin) windows of the Visitation and the Raising of Lazarus; the windows depicting the 5 Orders of Architecture in Bewley's Oriental Cafe, Grafton Street, Dublin, complete with exotic flowery swags and dreamlike fauna; the single light St. Hubert in Carnalway, Co. Kildare, commissioned by the local rector, Canon Hannay (alias George Bermingham, the writer) with its lower panel containing a single piece of blue glass, only 18" square,

*In many cases these artistic stained glass windows are now commercially valuable and these values should be nominated specifically in insurance documents*



John the Evangelist and Simon helping Jesus to carry his cross



acided twelve times to produce a moonlit miniature; the much larger 3 light Coronation of the Virgin, sent to Glasgow, and the great east end Ascension window sent over to Brisbane Catholic Cathedral, Australia.

In 1923, the year of the Glasgow and Brisbane windows, an ideal chance to express the sheer poetry of his imagination came in the form of a private commission to make a window of his own choice for the owner of a private house in Dublin. A sequence of small panels illustrates Keats' poem, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, in moonlit shades of magical sapphire glass, touched with golds, rubies and emeralds. Tiny figures swirl past the captivated spectator, transported into the hidden world of their creator's imagination. This window, now in the collection of the Hugh Lane Gallery of Modern Art in Dublin, where it is admirably installed, won Clark the Gold Trophy at the huge Aonach Tailteann exhibition of 1924. Indeed, his stained glass work was usually exhibited at the studios before being sent to its destination, and cartoons and sketches for windows were often to be bought, too.

Appropriately enough, Clarke's last completed work began 4 years later, is another composition of small figures, illustrating scenes from the works of his favourite contemporary Irish writers. Commissioned to represent Ireland in the League of Nations International Labour Building at Geneva, this window is now on display in Miami in the Wolfsonian Foundation's collection, after being on long-term loan display in the Hugh Lane Gallery. Here, O'Casey's Joxer (in the form of the great actor F. J. McCormick), O'Flaherty's leering Mr. Gilhooley, AE's Priestess of Tears, Deirdre, Years' beautiful Countess Kathleen, Synge's Playboy, Lennox Robinson's Robert Emmet, Shaw's St. Joan and Lady Gregory's Brigid mingle in richly glowing colours and pay tribute to Ireland's creative spirit, expressed quite uniquely by Clarke.

There are untold treats to be discovered in churches in Carrickmacross, (Co. Monaghan), Raheny, (Co. Dublin), Ballinrobe and Newport, (Co. Mayo), Dingle (Co. Kerry), Kilbride, (Co. Wicklow), Gorey, (Co. Wexford), Cloughjordan, (Co. Tipperary), Renvyle, (Connemara), Castleknock (Co. Dublin), Belfast, on Lough Derg in St. Patrick's Purgatory, in Wales and in the South of England, to name but a few. One of the joys of travelling around the country is to come upon an unexpected gem in an empty church with a microscopic signature, luxuriating in its floral ornament (known as FO's) and to feel that Harry

Clarke's genius lives on, despite the tragedy of his being felled at the peak of his career by tuberculosis.

Clarke's artistic output was quite extraordinary in such a short working life. In 16 odd years he displayed a mastery of the technique of stained glass, used in a totally original and yet traditional way.

He evolved an extremely individual style but, as a born illustrator, could adapt his mood and mannerisms to evoke what he was depicting in the most imaginative way. He liked using thick pieces of irregular glass (especially blues) – even using the bottoms of bottles in some windows. He could coax the most mysterious quality out of a simple piece of glass. The inventiveness and the sheer fluency of his brush and pen work on the surface of the glass is worth close study, never detracting from the overall design of the composition. Kaleidoscopes of rich colours greet you as you first behold a window and only as you

## THE RESTORATION OF STAINED GLASS

*In recent years a large amount of restoration work has been carried out on stained glass windows throughout Ireland. The company most responsible for the work of restoration is The Abbey Stained Glass Studios of Kilmainham, Dublin. Company Director, Ken Ryan writes about the meticulous work of restoration.*

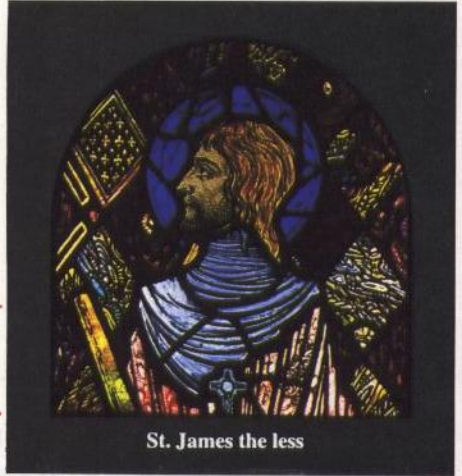
In Ireland we are most fortunate to house a wealth of stained glass by artists of the highest calibre. These stained glass artists are: Harry Clarke, Michael Healy, Michael O'Connor, A.E. Child, Wilhelmina Geddes, Catherine O'Brien, Hubert McGoldrick, Evie Hone, Ethel Rhind, Sarah Purser, Beatrice Elvery, Richard King and many others.

Most of these stained glass windows of quality are catalogued in *The Gazeteer of Stained Glass* by Nicola Gordon Bowe, David Caron and Dr. Michael Wynne published by the Irish Academic Press. They are throughout Ireland but surprisingly enough there is a large concentration of these quality stained glass windows in the West of Ireland.

To combine a holiday in the West with a cultural tour of stained glass would be a most pleasant experience. The stained glass tour would start at St. Brendan's Cathedral, Loughrea, where exquisite stained glass by Michael Healy may be seen. His first commission there was in 1904 and he continued working there until 1940. In St. Brendan's Cathedral, there are also works by Evie Hone, Hubert McGoldrick, A. E. Child, Sarah Purser and Ethel Rhind. This Cathedral houses

approach closer do the wonders unfold. Of course, he worked incredibly hard. A race against time and long, late nights sitting up into the early hours in his studio.

The Harry Clarke Stained Glass Studios were established at 6/7 North Frederick Street in July, 1930, on Walter's death, at a time when Harry Clarke himself was having to spend more and more time in a Swiss sanatorium. The Studios carried on a high standard of stained glass craftsmanship and design throughout the world, until they closed down in 1973.



St. James the less

the greatest cross section of Irish artistic talent in the country.

The most outstanding stained glass in the country is by Harry Clarke and his studio artists. Continuing on the West of Ireland tour the works of Harry Clarke may be seen in Ballinrobe, Cong, Kilmaine, Tuam Cathedral, Ballindine, Knock, Glenamaddy, Claremorris, Newport, Roundfort, Innismaan, Tooreen, Friary, Ballyhaunis, Tullycross, Cashel and Westport.

For a more spiritually rewarding experience one could have a three day penitential visit to St. Patrick's Purgatory in Lough Derg. The Stations of the Cross in the Basilica are by Harry Clarke in stained glass and the detail in the medallion panels is jewel like.

The Abbey Stained Glass Studios put these fourteen Harry Clarke windows on exhibition after they were restored some years ago in The Royal Hospital, Kilmainham. The attendance at this Exhibition far exceeded expectations when over fifteen thousand people came to see these beautiful works of art.

It saddens me to see so many convents in recent years being put up for sale. Often the stained glass windows are included in the sale and their inclusion makes absolutely no difference to the price achieved for the property. Once the sale of the property is complete the stained glass could be overlooking a new billiard hall or even a disco. Before any such sales take place advice should be sought on the qual-



ity of the stained glass windows in these buildings.

The windows can be removed at minimal cost and stored until a suitable new home is found for them. Some of them are of a very fine quality and if they were offered to the Irish missionaries abroad they could be incorporated as focal points in new churches. Often medallion panels may be removed from larger windows and used in the smaller new convent buildings. They could also be fitted into illuminated cabinets when window sizes do not suit.

There are of course traders who buy such items of religious art in order to turn over a quick profit. This practice must not be encouraged and the suitable re-housing of quality stained glass windows must take precedence over all other financial considerations.

### Reawakening of awareness

It is fortunate that men of vision such as Most Rev. Joseph Cassidy, Archbishop of Tuam, Very Rev. Thomas Shannon P.P.

from Ballinrobe and the then Prior of Lough Derg, Mgr. Gerard McSorley have taken such a close interest in their treasures in stained glass. They have been largely responsible for the re-awakening of awareness of the high quality artistic work around them. When they became aware of distortions and cracking in the stained glass windows they sought expert opinion on the deterioration that they had detected.

In many cases these artistic stained glass windows are now commercially valuable and these values should be nominated specifically in insurance documents. Otherwise in the event of say destruction by fire, the insurance company only obliged to pay the cost of replacement windows which could fall far short of the actual valuation.

The Abbey Stained Glass Studios responded to an enquiry on the condition of stained glass in the following way completely without obligation. We will inspect the windows, photograph them and then

## HOW DETERIORATION HAPPENS



Over the years the lead in the stained glass windows perishes and its life is approximately fifty years. The glass will last indefinitely provided that it is properly maintained. In the major cathedrals in Europe there are craftsmen permanently employed removing stained glass, re-leading it, and re-installing it. By the time the work is finished it is time to start the whole operation again.

In our experience we have found that stained glass windows have always been too tightly fitted, both at the sides and top and bottom. Also each panel is fitted immediately on top of the panel below which does not allow for upward expansion and it also has to take the weight of the panels above. This method of fixing is incorrect and we will describe the correct method hereunder.

Most of the stained glass windows are exposed to the rays of the sun and are very heavily painted and the dark colours attract the heat. If you felt the stained glass on a sunny winter's day the glass would be quite warm and of course on a sunny summer's day the glass becomes very hot. This build-up of heat makes the lead pliable and the lead then sags and makes the window lose its shape. When the lead cools it does not revert to its original shape and so the window becomes distorted. This process is repeated every day that heat is generated and eventually the window becomes completely buckled.

As the shapes of the windows change extreme pressure is exerted on the sections of glass and these eventually break. This also causes the edges of the broken glasses to chip and as the paintwork is on

the surface of the glass it falls away and begins to look unsightly. The sections of glass also become darker over the years as the dust and grime of generations adheres to them.

Usually these windows are fitted tightly into the openings with a hard putty and the panels are fitted one immediately on top of the other. There should have been room for expansion at the sides of the panels and at the top. This can be done easily by enlarging the side grooves in the stonework and by replacing the panels using T-bars. By using a T-bar section horizontally the next panel on top is held independently and allows room for the lower panel to expand upwards as necessary. The sealant to be used should be a mastic compound which does not solidify and whilst it seals the windows it allows for movement.

Usually stormglazing is in roughest glass which holds grime and this should be removed and replaced with clear glass. This would have a double effect in that it would keep the temperature down and also not obscure the stained glass by allowing as much light as possible through. The cavity between the stained glass and stormglass must be properly ventilated to prevent a build-up of heat and to prevent condensation and consequent vegetation in the cavity.

As time goes on, because of the pressure the windows are already under the rate of deterioration accelerates and if the windows were not maintained they would self-destruct and fall out.

*Harry Clarke could coax the most mysterious quality out of a simple piece of glass*



The Apostle Simon



## RESTORATION OF STAINED GLASS

Remove the roughcast stormglazing and replace it with new clear stormglazing. Use 6m.m. clear float glass to reduce the build-up of heat and allow for adequate ventilation at the base of the stormglazing.

Take out the stained glass windows. Take them to the studios and completely restore them. Whilst they are being restored each section of glass would be cleaned individually and when the windows are replaced they will sparkle as the artists had originally intended.

The windows should be dismantled and set in new lead and cement, made up in sections. Any glass which has cracked due to being strained should be treated by either of the following methods:

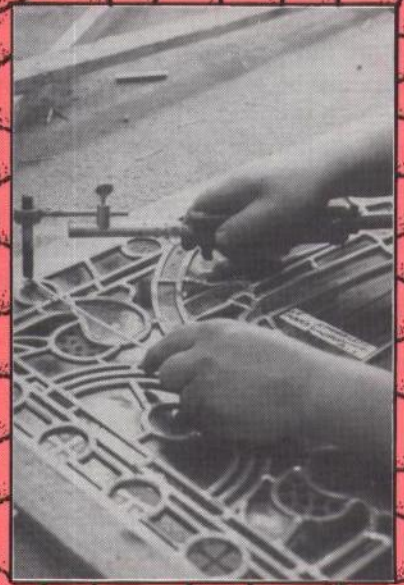
A clear piece of glass should be fixed behind the cracked section and glued to it with clear adhesive and then the cracked portion should be replaced. This method should be used particularly in the case of damage to glass depicting faces, hands or parts of the body. In less important sections the method used should be by adding a new piece of lead where the cracks occurred. The emphasis is on the fact that the existing stained glass should be re-used so as not to devalue the work of the artist.

compile a written report on their current state and suggest the proper remedy to restore them to their original glory. Often we will be able to supply copies of the original order for these windows from our records.

In view of the value of the windows and their artistic content this work must be carried out by experienced craftsmen and it cannot be entrusted to anyone without proven ability. Our company has been working in this medium since 1944 and most of our craftsmen have been with us for over thirty years.

One of the oldest windows which the Abbey Stained Glass Studios have restored is the East window in the Cathedral of the Assumption, Tuam, depicting the Virgin Mary and the Four Evangelists by Michael O'Connor, which was first installed in 1832. Another earlier window which we restored is in the Synod Hall of St. Mary's Cathedral, Tuam, by George Mc Allister and is dated 1812.

We are proud to have been entrusted with the priceless treasures in stained glass throughout Ireland and the craftsmen of our studios derive great satisfaction from being associated with the works of such great artists.



Meticulous work of stained glass restoration

Dr. Nicola Gordon Bowe lectures in the National College of Art and Design.

She is author of the acclaimed study *The Life and Work of Harry Clarke*

Irish Academic Press

soon to be re-issued as a paperback. She is also author of

*The Gazetteer of Irish Stained Glass*  
Irish Academic Press

Intercom wishes to thank Ireland of the Welcomes and photographer Brian Lynch for the use of photographs in this feature on stained glass



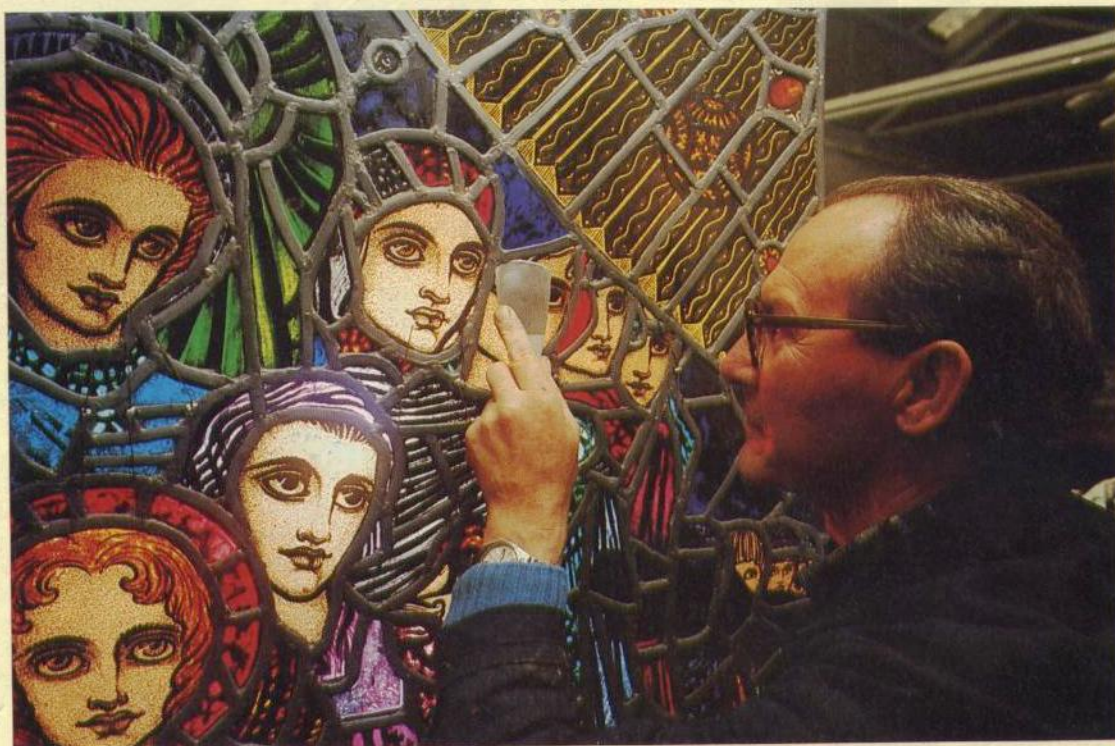




FOUNDED IN 1944

# The Abbey Stained Glass Studios

SPECIALISTS IN ECCLESIASTICAL WORK



*Designers and Manufacturers  
of Stained Glass*

*Restoration of Old and Damaged  
Stained Glass*

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