

Event review: Autumn lecture, 9 October: 'Behind the mask: stained glass in the art and life of Wilhelmina Geddes (1887–1955)' by Dr Nicola Gordon Bowe

The speaker was introduced by Peter Cormack, who described her as 'the premier Irish scholar on Arts & Crafts stained glass'.

She began by describing how Geddes first came to public attention when, in 1919, a war memorial window commissioned by the Duke of Connaught and destined for Ottawa was shown briefly in London en route from her studio in Dublin, causing a stir. In particular, it drew the attention of the eminent American artist Charles J Connick, who commented that he felt gratitude 'for the spiritual beauty, the poetry and youthful audacity'.

The speaker then took us back to the early 1890s, and Geddes' early promise as a portrait artist. At the time, the Celtic Revival style had become popular in glass, with the result that leading studios (e.g. Heaton, Butler & Bayne) simply added a border of 'green tagliatelle' to a window to make it 'Celtic'. However, the Revival was also, in Ireland, a cultural search for a new national identity and independence amongst the new generation of artists and writers. Consequently Sarah Purser, a leading painter, the poet WB Yeats, the art collector and writer Edward Martyn, and Christopher Whall collaborated to bring AE Child to Dublin as Instructor in Stained Glass at Dublin Metropolitan School of Art. Under Whall's influence, in 1903 Purser founded the Tower of Glass (An Túr Gloine) as a cooperative stained glass workshop in the mould of Lowndes & Drury's London workshop, and Child then became its first manager.

Returning to Geddes' early life, Dr Bowe related how she had been born in a country farmhouse in Leitrim, Co. Antrim, though the family moved a couple of years later into Belfast; she was the first of several children in a staunchly Methodist family. Her father was autocratic, and became increasingly unstable and dependent on drink, which probably had a profound effect on the sensitive girl. A marvellous illustrator from an early age, in 1903 Geddes enrolled at Belfast Technical Institute, encouraged by her early teacher Rosamond Praeger, who had noted the 'strong sense of line and movement' in her drawings. She also revealed a marvellous sense of colour and draughtsmanship, and at first desired to train as a book illustrator, producing exceptional drawings of *The Vicar of Wakefield* (she loved 18th C caricatures), as well as woodblock prints – notably one of Dr Johnson, with 'velvet blacks'. Another passion was for the Classics and she often drew from early Classical sculptures at Belfast Museum, and produced illustrations of *The Iliad*.

Although she regularly won the art prizes at Belfast, Geddes was becoming increasingly unhappy there; the relationship with her life-drawing teacher Mr Hodge became tense owing to her rude remarks and wilfulness. Then, in 1910, came a turning point: her Cinderella drawing shown at the 4th A&C Society of Ireland exhibition in Dublin caught the attention of Sarah Purser, who described it as 'finished with a menacing sense of irony', and invited her there. However, she had another year to spend at Belfast, during which she made her first attempt at stained glass: a panel of Sir Walter Raleigh. That year she also won a travelling scholarship enabling her to go first to Dublin and then to London, where she made drawings in the British Museum, as well as of stained glass at the V&A and of Titian, Uccello and Fra Angelico paintings in the National Gallery, and moved on to York where she was much excited by its glass.

Back in Dublin, Geddes attended the classes of William Orpen, alongside Harry Clarke and others, studying the 'Whall method' as outlined in his *Stained Glass Work* and taught by Child. She also worked for Purser, where she produced her first windows for Ulster, Dublin and Lancashire. Her first big window, *The Angel of Resurrection*, was at St Ninnidh, Inishmacsaint, Co. Fermanagh, a memorial to Rev George Tottenham. In this, Whall's influence is evident in her use of whites set amongst a patchwork of small pieces of rich, jewel-like glass, while her use of ancient Ogham script and symbolic details such as a barren tree make reference to Fermanagh's historic landscape.

From 1913 she was paid the rate of £1/week at An Túr Gloine. One of her first windows, *Innocence in the Fields of Experience*, in memory of a 19-year-old girl makes much use of white glass and has a great sense of light. Her *Hope, Faith and Charity*, for a Belfast Presbyterian church, uses her sister Florence as a model and is very different, in strong primary colours (which no one else was using at that time). The windows here and elsewhere (e.g. St Ann's Dublin) have Hellenistic/Byzantine-like figures, recalling her studies of Classical Greek sculpture. Small details also make reference to medieval manuscripts. Her first Dublin window, the Dooner memorial window at St Ann's, is both Byzantine and also directly relates to Burne-Jones' *St Frideswide* in Oxford.

Another influence was Scottish Border ballads. Her pen-and-ink drawings for *The Wife of Usher's Well* related by Sir Walter Scott depict the dead figures enveloped in an efflorescent glow.

Under Sarah Purser's direction, a trip to France followed, to visit the cathedrals at Chartres, Rouen and Paris. The fine stone Romanesque and Gothic sculptural figures with their drapery in the porches had a massive impact on her subsequent style, giving her new inspiration. Back in Dublin, Geddes worked on two small windows *Faith* and *Hope* for Wellington, New Zealand. The figures show an influence of the Chartres porch sculptures, as well as a stone relief from the British Museum, *The Apotheosis of Homer*.

After finishing these, Geddes returned to see her family in Belfast, where she worked on a series of drawings entitled *Nekyia*, from the 11th book of *The Odyssey*, where Odysseus visits the Land of the Dead. Back in Dublin, she began work on a large window for Rathgar, Co. Dublin, *St Peter Preaching to the Jews*. The setting is Jerusalem's Temple Mount, yet its figures are arranged almost as in a Classical setting, as in Raphael's fresco *The School of Athens* in the Vatican. Six small panels above and below this depict the disciples, whose modelling and actions recall a Donatello frieze in the V&A, whilst the grisaille-like borders of sprouting leaves and flowers resemble the early Gothic scrollwork at Canterbury. A dog in bloody red appears influenced by Franz Marc.

At this time, in 1915, Geddes became ill with pleurisy so that the window's central section was painted largely by Catherine O'Brien. She spent her time whilst convalescing in designing and making soft toys. Though she designed more windows, *St Christopher* for St Ann's, Dublin and the Cuthbert memorial window of *The Wise and Foolish Virgins* for the Presbyterian Church, Belfast, they were cartooned by Ethel Rhind, whose coloration and glass painting were less subtle. Then, in 1916, her father died.

Towards the end of WWI, Purser's studio began to receive a number of war memorial commissions. One was from HRH Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught, in memory of Canadian staff. This was allotted to Geddes, though it caused her much trouble, with continuing alterations needed to her sketches before she had approval from Clarence House for the design, *The Welcoming of a Slain Warrior by Soldier Saints*. In this the warrior, in deep blue, ivory and saffron, is draped in the crimson *chlamys* (cloak worn by Ancient Greek warriors) as he is welcomed to the Elysian Fields.

During this period Geddes also worked on other designs for St Ann's, Dublin (the *Julian* and *Culinan* windows) and All Saints in Blackrock, as well as *The Leaves of the Tree for the Healing of Nations* in Belfast, and the *Joseph's Dream* panel at Ely. Then in 1922 was another turning point: with the founding of the Irish Free State there was much civil unrest in Belfast, and many people were suffering. Geddes received a commission at St Luke's, Wallsend upon Tyne near Newcastle, for a *Crucifixion* window. Her design of Christ on the Cross was stark in its depth of anatomical detail, its flesh almost stripped to the bone, and the blank look in his mother's crying eyes – comparable to Picasso's *Crying Woman*. In this year also, Geddes was preparing to move to London.

Many more commissions followed her move. She moved into a studio at Lowndes & Drury's Glass House in London, where she was working beside eminent stained glass artists. Her biggest window, in 1935–8, was the *Te Deum* rose window commemorating HRH Albert, King of the Belgians, at the Cathedral of St Martin in Ypres. Though plagued by ill health beginning during the War, she continued to work, but her later windows reveal her steadily worsening vision, until finally her death in 1955. *Chris Wyard*