

BELFAST'S HIDDEN TREASURE

Wilhelmina Geddes (1887-1955)



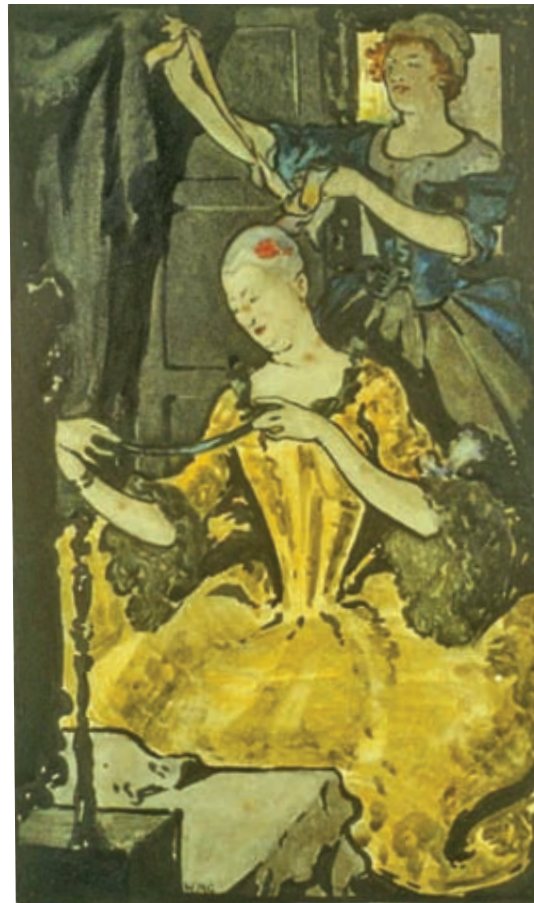
Above / Wilhelmina Geddes, Self-portrait, linocut print, c. 1924, private collection (photo: author)

This year a plaque will mark the house in Marlborough Park South, Belfast where the artist, Wilhelmina Geddes, lived when she was attending the Belfast School of Art between 1903 – 1911. (1) Although, when she died in London in 1955, she was described as “the greatest stained glass artist



of our time”, her striking graphics, embroidered designs and windows are still little known in the city in which she grew up.

This may be partly because, as the Irish Times had earlier observed, “In Miss Geddes' drawing there is great emotion. One can feel the tragedy in some of her figures... Her glass is quite unlike that of most other stained glass workers; the religion which it reflects is the religion of power and fighting, not the religion of peace and restfulness”. Furthermore, two of her four fine windows in Rosemary Street Presbyterian Church were destroyed during WW2, the two that survived have been mounted back-to-front, artificially lit, in Church House, and her haunting Children of Lir window (1929) commissioned for Belfast's new Municipal Museum on Stranmillis Road in 1929 (2) languishes in storage along with her dramatic little Picasso-esque Rhoda panel. Before she left Ireland permanently for London in 1925, Geddes was cited with Jack Yeats as one of the two great, “truly religious” modern Irish artists, and one of Ireland's “women artists ▶



Left / Wilhelmina Geddes, 'The specious stepmother is presented by Lir to his children', first panel of The Fate of the Children of Lir window, painted stained glass, 1930, Ulster Museum, Belfast (photo: author)

Above / Wilhelmina Geddes, Cinderella dressing the Ugly Sister, watercolour and ink, 1910, courtesy of the Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin



Above / Wilhelmina Geddes, Scenes from the Life of Colman MacDuagh, painted stained glass triptych, 1911, courtesy of the Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin

► of account... who is producing the finest, the most sincerely, passionately religious stained glass of our time”.

Although her life drawings, graphics and book illustrations were particularly admired when she was growing up in a



Above / Wilhelmina Geddes, detail of the figure of Hope, Faith, Hope and Charity window, painted stained glass, 1913, Townsend Street Presbyterian Church, Belfast (photo: Jozef Voda)

succession of houses constructed by her builder father in Belfast, she only designed and made her first prize-winning stained glass panel (depicting Sir Walter Raleigh) just before she left the School of Art. What persuaded her to investigate a medium she had not otherwise studied was the enthusiastic response of the eminent Dublin painter, Sarah Purser, to the richly coloured illustration, Cinderella dressing the Ugly Sister (3), she submitted to the 1910 Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland exhibition. Purser was on the look-out for exciting young talent who might join An Túr Gloine (The Tower of Glass), her stained glass cooperative. This she had established in Dublin in 1903 to encourage native artists to find expression in a medium too often inferior, and imported, which had gained popularity in Ireland during the ► nineteenth century. (4) Geddes accepted her invitation to join the small group of former art students working in the romantically named workshop in Upper Pembroke Street, behind Dublin’s Fitzwilliam Square. Supervised by the well-connected Purser, they were taught by A.E. Child, manager and instructor at the Dublin School of Art, trained in the London studio of Christopher Whall, the eminent English Arts and Crafts stained glass artist.

Before the end of 1911, Geddes had shown her skill and extraordinary aptitude for the difficult medium of stained glass by making a small triptych illustrating Scenes from the Life of St. Colman MacDuagh for Purser (5), now in the Hugh Lane Gallery. This was to be exhibited to acclaim in Dublin, ►



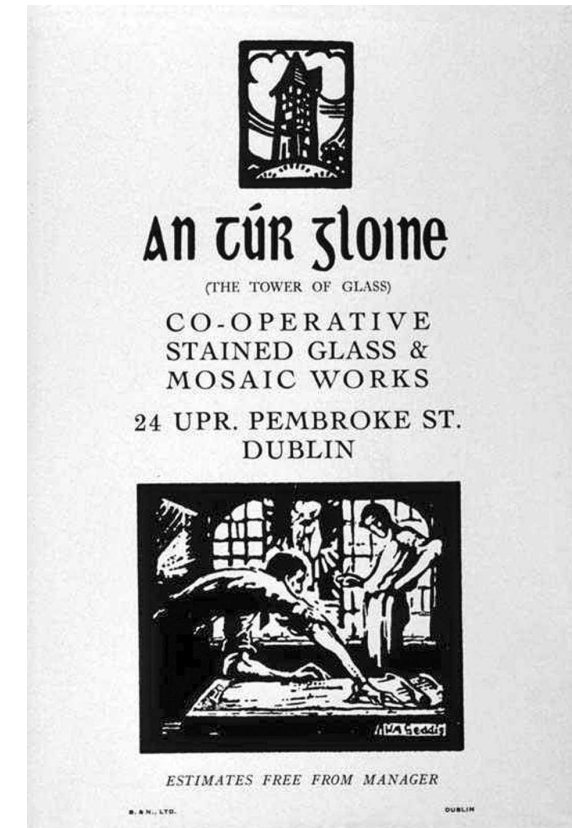
Above / Wilhelmina Geddes, detail of Martha and Mary, Christ with Martha and Mary, and the Raising of Lazarus window, painted stained glass, 1927, St. Cedma’s Church, Inver, Larne, Co. Antrim (photo: author)

► London, Ghent and Paris (and, more recently, in Edinburgh and Los Angeles) as she explored formal ways of expressing the literary, classical and biblical sources she knew so well, through painted glass and lead. At the same time she continued to draw black and white illustrations, which she later translated into strongly graphic linocuts and woodblock prints. (6) Her visual sources included Archaic and Classical Greek sculpture, Romanesque sculpture and mediaeval and Pre-Raphaelite stained glass.

Her first tentative commissions with An Túr were two single-light memorial windows in Co. Monaghan – for Benmore Church at Inishmacsaint, near Derrygonnelly (not far from her birthplace in Co. Leitrim), and for the Church of St. Molaise at Monea, Levalley, beyond Enniskillen. In 1913, her sister Florence (a music student at Queen’s University, Belfast) was among the models she used for her first Belfast window, a 2-light Faith, Hope and Charity for Townsend Street Presbyterian Church, which is full of inventive, richly coloured details, sensitively painted. (7) Evocative mediaevalized narrative scenes can be seen compressed into her Parables window (1916), re-erected since the Troubles in the Presbyterian Assembly Hall in Belfast, and in the series of poignant War Memorial windows that she made between 1918-1920 for churches in Dublin, Belfast and Ottawa. Despite the jewelled patchwork of tiny angelic figures meandering through the Elysian fields in St. John’s, Malone Road, Belfast, (8) and her stoic soldier saints in Dublin, (9) it was the magnificent Canadian window that established her reputation internationally. An American critic declared that “Nowhere in modern glass is there a more striking example of a courageous adventure in the medium”.

Increasingly monumental masterpieces followed at Wallsend-on-Tyne and at Larne, Co. Antrim (10) before she left Ireland

Below / Wilhelmina Geddes, cover design for 25th anniversary An Túr Gloine booklet, 1928, private collection (photo: author)



to rent a studio at the London Glass House. There she remained, working independently, making unsurpassed windows in England, Belgium and Wales - right up to her death. Always financially pressed yet uncompromising, she continues to be revered by her fellow artists for her vision, drawing and craftsmanship. ●



Nicola Gordon Bowe
Craft NI



Above / Wilhelmina Geddes, detail of the Archangel Michael, The Archangel Michael with Soldier Saints window, painted stained glass, 1918, St. Ann’s Church, Dawson Street, Dublin (photo: Jozef Voda)