

Healy, Michael Joseph

by Diarmaid Ferriter

Healy, Michael Joseph (1873–1941), stained-glass artist, was born 14 November 1873 at 40 Bishop St., Dublin, one of three sons of Andrew Healy, labourer, and Mary Healy (née Farrell), daughter of a cattle dealer from Carlow. Born into a relatively poor household, Healy was drawing incessantly from an early age and went to school in Whitefriars St., Dublin, where he also served as an altar boy in the church. His father died when he was very young and he went to work at the age of 14 in a sugar-boiler's, and subsequently with a spirit-bonder. In 1898 he joined the RHA art school and (although he failed to win the Taylor scholarship) in 1899 he obtained the academy's first prize for real life drawing. In the same year he was employed by Fr H. S. Glendon, editor of the *Irish Rosary*, who appointed him illustrator for the magazine; the issues between September 1898 and December 1899 contain fifty-nine of his drawings. Recognising his talent, Glendon arranged for him to visit Florence for further study, where he stayed from September 1899 to May 1901, working in the studio of the Florentine painter de Bacci-Venuti.

On his return to Dublin he became a teacher at the Dominican College in Newbridge, Co. Kildare. Living in solitary lodgings in Heytesbury St. and Pleasant St. in Dublin city, he worked on a large number of sketches and watercolours of Dublin and its characters, most of which were never seen in public, though some were later to appear in the Limerick City Gallery of Art and the Municipal Art Gallery in Cork. A reclusive, shy, and deeply religious man who remained unmarried, he had presented himself as a postulant lay brother at the Dominican noviciate at Tallaght in Dublin, but did not follow it through. His friend John Hughes (qv) informed Sarah Purser (qv) of his abilities, and he resigned from his teaching position to join An Túr Gloine, a new stained-glass firm established in 1903, where he studied under A. E. Child. His first window was 'St Simeon' (1904), a one-light for Loughrea cathedral, Co. Galway, the future location for many of his other pieces. Under-recognised in his own lifetime, Healy became a stained-glass artist of outstanding ability, producing windows of stark colour, strong composition, and expressive line. He became in effect the pioneer artist of the modern Irish stained-glass movement, demonstrating a wide range of understanding and power of interpretation, and in terms of draughtsmanship was an acute observer of detail, as well as being an innovator in the process of aciding and plating. The influence of religion and Florence was certainly a factor in the development of his craft – he read Italian every morning – and he can be seen as belonging to the wing of the 'Irish Ireland' movement that turned to the restoration of church art, a process initially led by Edward Martyn (qv) and Robert Elliot (qv) and continued by Harry Clarke (qv).

Thorough, patient, yet tenacious and stubborn about his craft, Healy had a profound influence on Evie Hone (qv) as she moved from the abstract domain to

that of stained glass. Healy's work was to appear in many locations, including St Eunan's cathedral in Letterkenny, where his 'St Columcille' appeared in 1910, and Clongowes Wood College, where 'St Joseph' was executed in 1916; the window 'St Patrick at Slane' was shown at the Exposition d'Art Irlandais at Paris in 1922. He also exhibited stained glass at the Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland Exhibition in Belfast, Dublin, and Cork in 1917. His four-light 'St Augustine' window in the Augustinian church, John St., Dublin, was executed in the mid 1930s. Healy also completed commissions for buildings in New York, Chicago, and Wellington, New Zealand, where three windows, 'Charity' (1931), 'Love' (1931), and 'Wisdom' (1937), were installed in the chapel of Karori crematorium. In 1938 he completed 'The annunciation' and 'The visitation', both two-lights, for the Blackrock College chapel in Dublin. In producing work of such a devotional character, religious contemporaries saw him as 'doing all that a great artist could do to give worthy expression to the religious life of the people of Ireland' (MacGreevy, 113). An occasional contributor of cartoons to the *Leader* newspaper, Healy also appealed to traditionalists of the arts revival, and to rural clergy who may have found the work of Clarke too sophisticated and aesthetic. Nevertheless, there were noticeable shifts in Healy's style: his later work in Loughrea cathedral, 'The ascension' (1936) and 'The last judgement' (1940), were less Victorian and more colourful, intricate and almost expressionist. Healy and Evie Hone had intended setting up a workshop together, before Healy's death in Mercer's Hospital in Dublin, 22 September 1941.

---

C. P. Curran, 'Michael Healy: stained glass worker', *Studies*, xxxi (1942), 65–82; Thomas MacGreevy, 'Michael Healy: personal reminiscences', *Capuchin Annual*, 1944, 113–16; Stella Frost, *A tribute to Evie Hone and Mainie Jellett* (1957); James White and Michael Wynne, *Irish stained glass* (1963); Brian Fallon, *Irish art 1830–1990* (1994); John O'Grady, *The life and work of Sarah Purser* (1996); Boylan; Snoddy