



SÉAMUS MURPHY

1907-1975

SCULPTOR





Dreamline 1934, Portland stone, 74 cm h (Fitzgerald Park, Cork)

'til the dust reclaimed him...

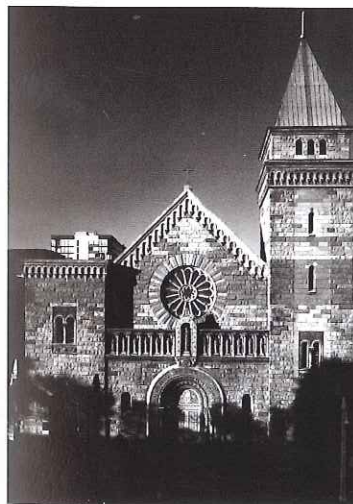
PETER MURRAY

FROM THE MID-1940S UNTIL HIS DEATH IN 1975, THE STONECARVER, letterer and sculpture portraitist Séamus Murphy (1907-1975) held a unique position in the Irish art world. Apart from just one year's study in Paris, in 1932, Murphy, who began his career as an apprentice stonecarver, spent his entire life in Cork, but over four decades he transformed himself effectively into an artist of state. His portraits of political leaders include all five presidents who held office during his lifetime – Douglas Hyde, Eamon de Valera, Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh, Seán T O'Kelly and Erskine Childers – as well as portraits of heroes of the struggle for independence such as Constance Markievicz, Michael Collins and Tom Barry. Among the more recent political leaders he sculpted were Jack Lynch, Seán Lemass and Peter Barry. He also sculpted religious and cultural figures as diverse as Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, John Montague, Seán Ó Faoláin and Frank O'Connor. Yet, while his portraits are an iconic, and occasionally ironic, record of the people who shaped modern Ireland, this artist is held by many to have excelled not as a portraitist, but as letterer, stonecarver and designer of monuments, whose gravestones and inscriptions can be found at many locations in Ireland. He was also an outstanding creator of religious sculptures, with his major work being perhaps his least known – a set of twelve life-sized apostles carved in 1948



Frank O'Connor, 1957, bronze, 49 cm

Twelve Apostles, St Brigid's Church, San Francisco, 1948



for the exterior façade of the Church of St Brigid at Van Ness Avenue in San Francisco (currently facing threat of demolition). The Apostles' faces, according to legend, were based on leaders of the 1916 Rising, although, in truth, it seems many were based on friends of the artist, such as 'The Tailor'. With typical Murphy humour, the face of Eamon de Valera was used to represent Doubting Thomas.

Murphy's personality and philosophy played an important role in his career. In 1944 he married Maighréad, an art teacher and daughter of the sculptor Joseph Higgins. They had three children, Bébhinn, Orla and Colm. Although they struggled financially, their house on Wellesley Terrace became a gathering place for artists, writers and musicians, and for visitors to the city. Murphy's personality and humorous self-deprecating style endeared him to all, but he was also clearly an artist of drive and ambition, who, through many years of economic depression, succeeding in producing important works of art, both in public monuments and also private commissions. He attracted the patronage of academics at UCC and of a number of Cork's leading families, notably the Barrys,



St Finbarr
1933, limestone,
213 cm h
(University College
Cork)



St Finbarr
1934, limestone,
244 cm h
(St Finbarr's Church,
Bantry, Co Cork)



St Ita
1934, limestone,
229 cm h
(St Finbarr's Church,
Bantry, Co Cork)

Murphy returned to Cork in 1933 'full of ambition and ideas'.³⁰ People remember him as 'eager and enthusiastic' after his experience in France.³¹ The Cork sculptor Domhnall Ó Murchadha recalled him as

...all agog with excitement about the unity he had found in French art and life. He had become aware of a sculpture that had evolved within an integrated culture. He had come upon that sculpture at a moment of intense inventiveness and he shared his enthusiasms with us.³²

In 1933, however, 'Cork was very slack' and work was scarce.³³ His first major commissions were for carved statues: *St Finbarr* (1933) for the top of the Aula Maxima building at University College Cork, and a pair, each eight-foot high, *St Finbarr* and *St Ita* (1934), for Bantry church. He originally worked from a small shed at Watercourse Road in Cork, where he later built a studio. Cork was a difficult place to establish a profitable sculptor's studio. The writer Seán Ó Faoláin remarked of it in his biography, *Vive Moi!*.

Cork ... is a charming place in several ways, but it ... had decided limitations. Those of size and variety might be indicated simply by our common use of the definite, defining and confining singular article: the fountain, the Lough, the library, the college, the baths, the cricket field, the lower road, the top field, the regatta, the paper, the park, the statue.³⁴

Séamus Murphy, therefore, was *the* sculptor, since he was the only one of his generation who attempted to pursue a living as an artist/sculptor in Cork. He adapted to this by developing a diversity of skills and producing a range of objects and, notably, by cultivating a market for his well-designed and beautifully lettered tombstones. His experience in France, as Ó Murchadha commented, left him enthusiastic and optimistic about his future as a sculptor. It affected his work stylistically, and sharpened and focussed his entire approach to art, sculpture, and the role of the sculptor in society.

There is a certain heterogeneity to Murphy's sculptural style from the start of his career. This is partly related to his use of different methods; his work in carved stone displays different characteristics and preoccupations to work modelled first in clay and then cast. In France he would have been exposed to the Modernist trend towards simplification and geometricisation of form. Cubist formal reduction had been assimilated into the common aesthetic vocabulary by the 1930s, and this is evident in Murphy's work in, for instance, the UCC *St Finbarr* of 1933, whose body is an essay in rectilinear reduction; the face and hands have enough naturalism to convey expression and individuality, although they still retain a stylised formality. *St*

Finbarr can be usefully compared to a small Madonna and Child executed in 1931, before he left for France. The latter shows a sensitivity to underlying forms and volumes, but is softly rounded and not nearly as daringly reductive as the UCC piece. Murphy, in fact, did very few pieces with the level of geometric stylisation of *St Finbarr*; the eight-foot-high *St Brigid*, commissioned along with twelve statues of the apostles for the façade of St Brigid's Church in San Francisco, shows a similar approach as late as 1948, although the features appear more generalised and idealised. He normally used a less abstract style for his portrait heads, although the smooth symmetry of *Ruth Ripley*, which he brought back from France to Ireland in plaster form, has an elegant formality about it that is reminiscent of portrait heads from ancient Egypt.

Although geometric stylisation only really appears in Murphy's own figurative work after his stay in Paris, he had been exposed to it in Cork in the monumental *Christ the King* (1931) on the façade of the Church of Christ the King at Turner's Cross. John Storrs, a Chicago sculptor, designed this work, which was executed by Cork carver John Maguire from plaster models shipped from America. Storrs' sculpture can be described as Art Deco in style, as can some of Murphy's post-France work. The Art Deco style in sculpture is characterised by the use of the geometry and reductive forms of Modernism, but tempered by a degree of naturalistic representation. The style became widely popular in all forms of art and design after the 1925 Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, and remained so until the outbreak of the Second World War. Eric Gill's work has also been placed within this category, and indeed Art Deco was an attractive style for any artist who was aiming at communicating to a wider public: clear communication and accessibility were maintained, but Cubist-derived geometry conferred formal clarity and conveyed a sense of order and modernity.

Cubist-inspired Modernism was not the only reason that Murphy's post-France figures often looked formally simplified, however. It is clear from his interviews and writings that the Chartres statuary also exerted a powerful influence on him, and the ethnographic collections in the Louvre allowed him to examine carved work from a broad range of historical and geographic sources. Ó Murchadha recognised the emergence in Murphy's work after Paris of 'elements that are the basis of the sculptor's language: the unity of structure that gives universal significance to the particular and that controlled expressiveness that was known in the era of carved crosses and sculptured metal forms.'³⁵

Without exception, Modernist artists in the early twenti-

St Brigid
1948, limestone,
259 cm h
(St Brigid's Church,
San Francisco)



Madonna and Child
1931, polished
limestone, 140 cm h
(private collection)



Ruth Ripley
1934, white marble,
50 cm h
(Crawford Gallery)





Madonna of the Globe
1949, limestone,
259 cm h
(St Vincent's Church,
Sunday's Well, Cork)



Virgin of the Twilight
1941, polished
Kilkenny limestone,
198 cm h
(on long-term loan
to Crawford Gallery)

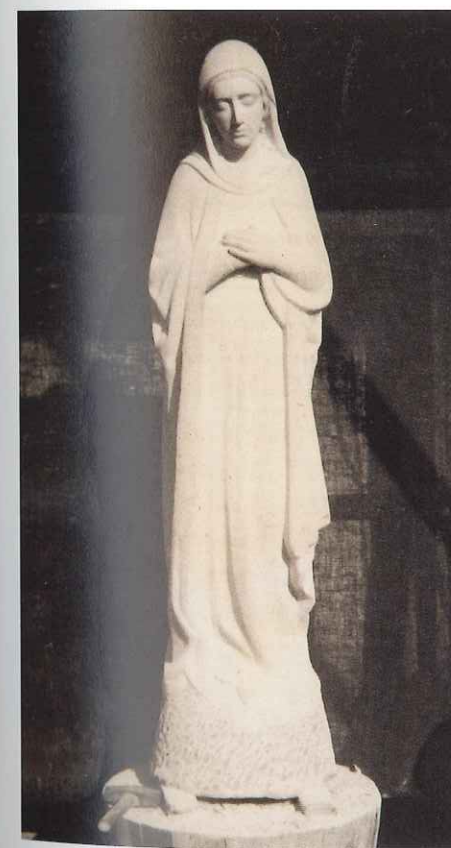
as the door is opened. The whole complex chemistry of *cire perdu* and the processes by which different colours are created fascinated him, and when he no longer had to send his work to Fiorini and Kearney and other great English foundries because casting was being done in Ireland, he enjoyed many visits. 'Visits' hardly describes those voyages; perhaps pilgrimages bearing precious offerings to the den of Vulcan would better describe that elemental completion of the making of a work of art in bronze. Sculptors Edward Delaney and Werner Schürmann (who was also a composer and a professional singer with a beautiful bass voice), cast the Finbarr statuettes which Séamus made for the Cork Film Festivals awards, but in latter years the Dublin Art Foundry was the principal agent of rendering into bronze, and its originator John Behan and his successor Leo Higgins cast the majority of Séamus's works, and also those portrait heads and smaller pieces made by Séamus's father-in-law which he had cast to ensure the survival of the work of Joseph Higgins who had died many years earlier at the age of forty.

All the large statues and many of the smaller ones were carved direct in stone, but when he made a portrait head in stone the plaster cast acted as a template and its contours were transposed by a three-dimensional mapping process followed by fine detailing and finishing to bring the likeness and spirit of the sitter to its final form. The carving, of course, was not a mechanised process: it was done entirely by hand, and variations from the plaster cast could be made at every stage. His portraits in marble, sandstone, Portland stone and limestone have a matte finish, unlike the highly glazed appearance of some of the statues. Even the 'heroic' size (heroic indicates that a work is larger than life, in this case 104 cm high) of the Michael Collins, now in Dublin City Gallery – the Hugh Lane, has its plaster cast 'template', which was also used for the bronze now in FitzGerald Park. The original commission for a religious work had been cancelled when the block of Carrara marble was en route from Italy, and Séamus took the opportunity to make a head of Collins, who he admired for his looks and for his energy, though he accepted commissions from almost any source, and made two heads of de Valera. In 1956, eight years after its completion, the Collins was bought for the nation by public subscription, initiated by President Seán T O'Kelly, as a gesture of reconciliation when the memory of the civil war was still potent. This symbolism pleased the many friends and supporters who had contributed to the purchase. It was also a relief to at last be paid for this very large work whose material costs he had borne for so long.

At a time when the Catholic Church was still an impor-



An Spéir-Bhean
(Kerry Poets
Memorial)
n.d., limestone,
183 cm h
(Killarney, Co Kerry)



Mother of Sorrows
[or *Virgin of the Sorrows*]
1938, limestone,
163 cm h
(Ursuline Convent,
Ballytruckle Road,
Waterford)

tant patron, it is remarkable that Séamus, when he had the choice, looked outside of the religious art with which, inevitably, his work is linked. Once, when asked which of his statues was his favourite, he chose the *spéirbhean*, the mythological Muse of poets, whose limestone figure celebrates the Kerry Poets in Killarney. And even if the Bishop of Cork was unable to see any merit in the work of Irish artists when he built a 'rosary' of churches in the 1950s (*The Virgin of the Twilight* remained a darkly gleaming fixture in the studio for over twenty years until it was bought by subscription, organised in 1960 by the Sculpture Park Committee, for the people of Cork, stipulating that it never be placed in any church), others were more enlightened: twelve apostles and *St Brigid* found their way to San Francisco in the late 1940s, *St Patrick* to Minnesota in 1952, and closer to home and to official censure, the Drishane nuns commissioned a limestone statue of the Virgin for their convent at Millstreet, Co Cork (1954); a Madonna and Child in Portland stone was erected at the Bons Secours Hospital in Cork (1958); and the Ursuline nuns in Waterford still treasure their *Virgin of the Sorrows*, which was completed in 1938. It is impossible not to guess that its extreme simplicity of line and discreet grace were expressive of his own sorrow at the death of his mother the year before. A polished limestone, *Madonna and Child* (1939) eventually found a place in the Church of the Holy Family, Military Hill, Cork, bought by the parish priest at the instigation of a parishioner, Frances O'Higgins. The courage of all these people must be admired: they too had to live in a city where the poverty of spirit of a powerful bishop had practical consequences. Séamus's letter to the bishop enquiring if he should emigrate with his wife and family went unanswered, and thus he was one of the few artists and the only sculptor who stayed in Cork and made a living solely through his work. He never taught, or engaged in work unrelated to sculpture or architecture, and though he welcomed students at the yard, his appointment as professor of sculpture at the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) was titular.

Another life was possible. He was offered a job working in York on the 'unfinished Cathedral', as it is sometimes unkindly called. Had his local attachment been less profound, he might have spent the rest of his life high above the Foss and the Ouse doing battle with York stone, coaxing it, learning its nuances and flaws. It is pleasant to speculate who might now thrust a gargoyle face from the tower of York Minster if he had accepted the rejection of *The Virgin of the Twilight*, which had been, on its first appearance in 1942 at the RHA, acclaimed both by his fellow artists (among them Patrick Hennessy, Mainie Jellett, Seán Ó Faoláin, Francis McManus) and by the critics,

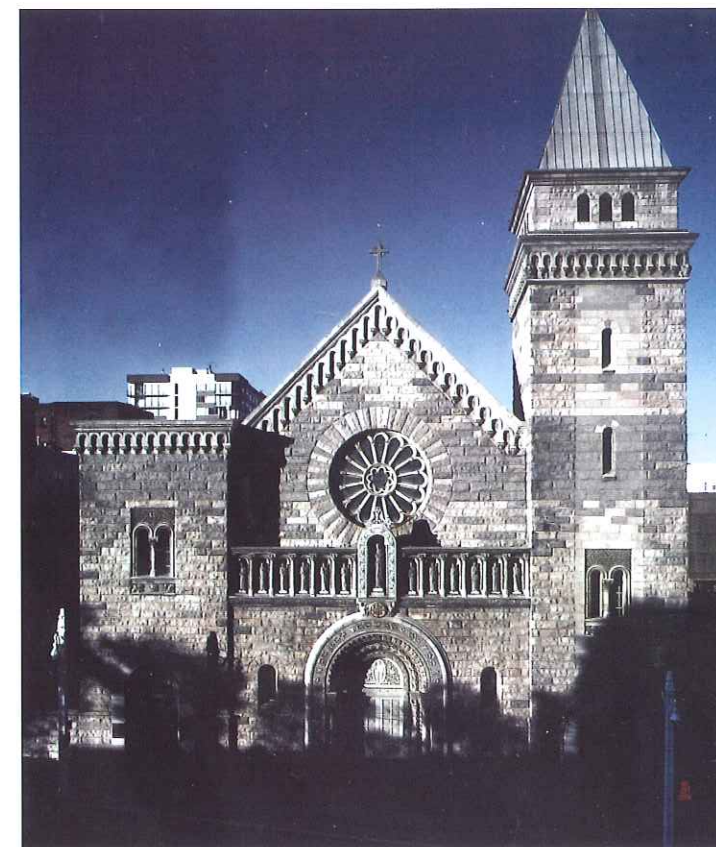
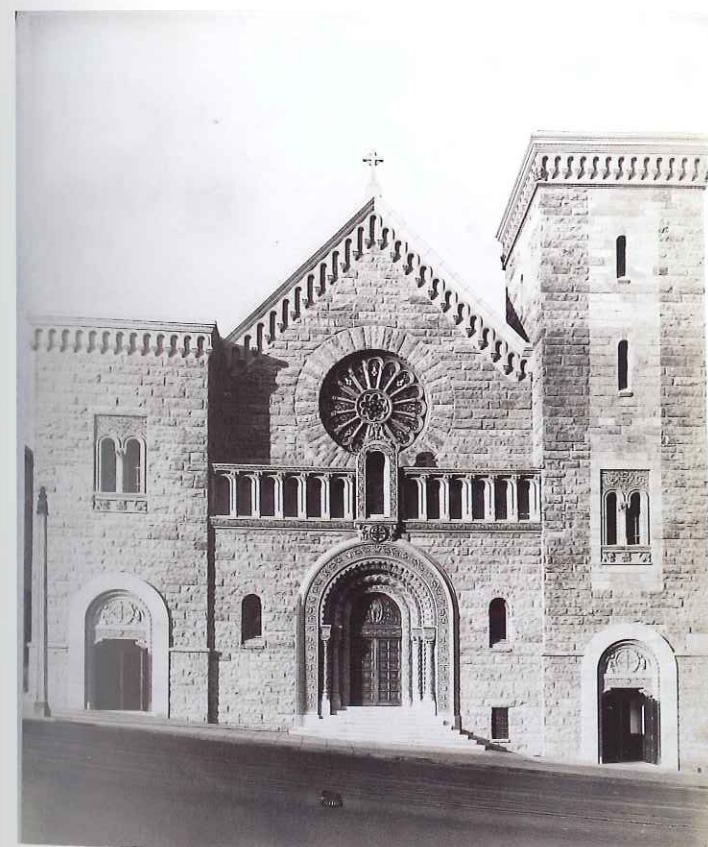
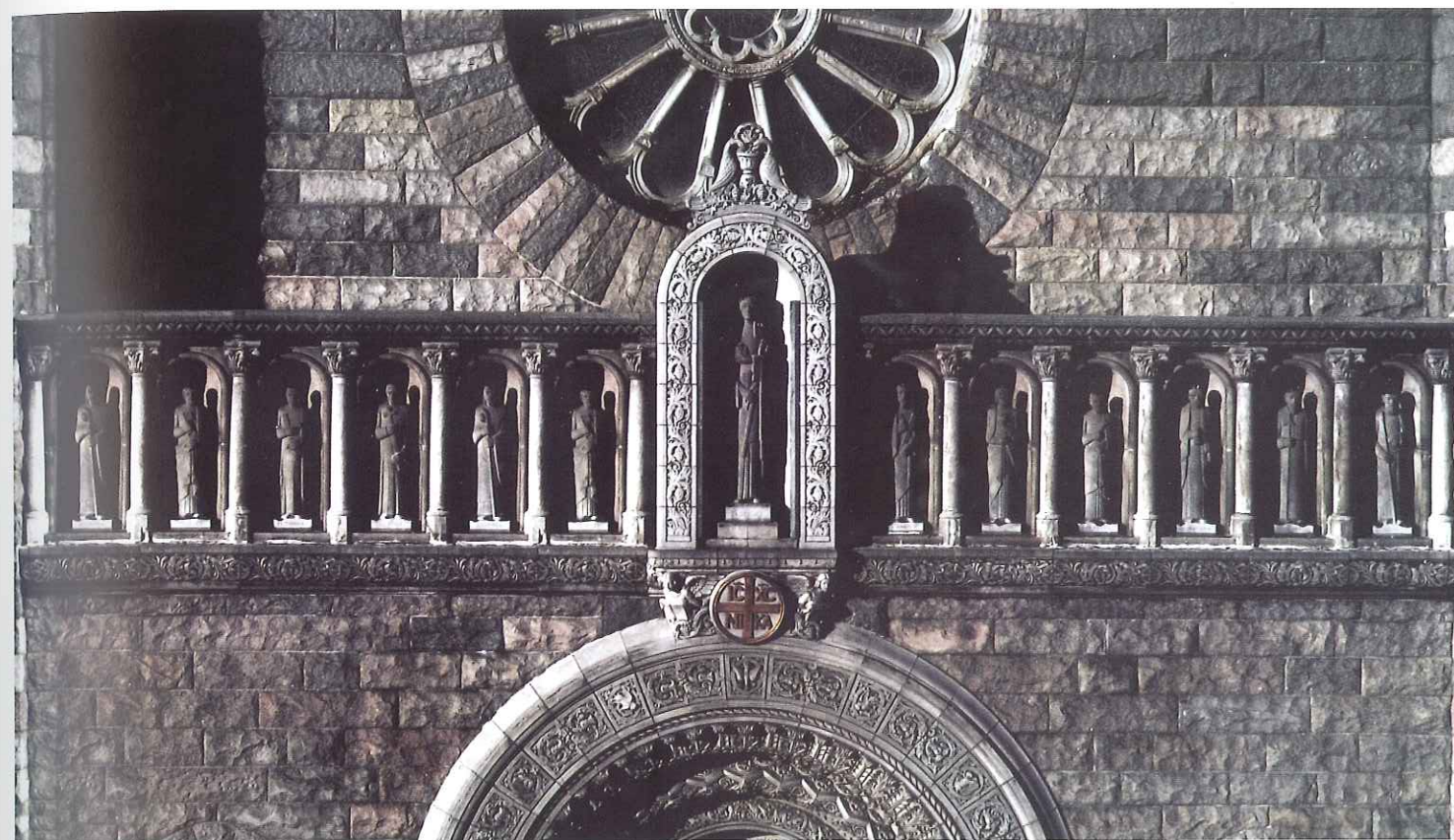


Madonna
1945, Portland stone, 167 cm h, signed & dated
(Church of the Annunciation, Blackpool, Cork)

opposite

Twelve Apostles
1948, limestone, each 153 cm h
(St Brigid's Church, San Francisco)

St Brigid's Church, San Francisco
before and after installation of statues

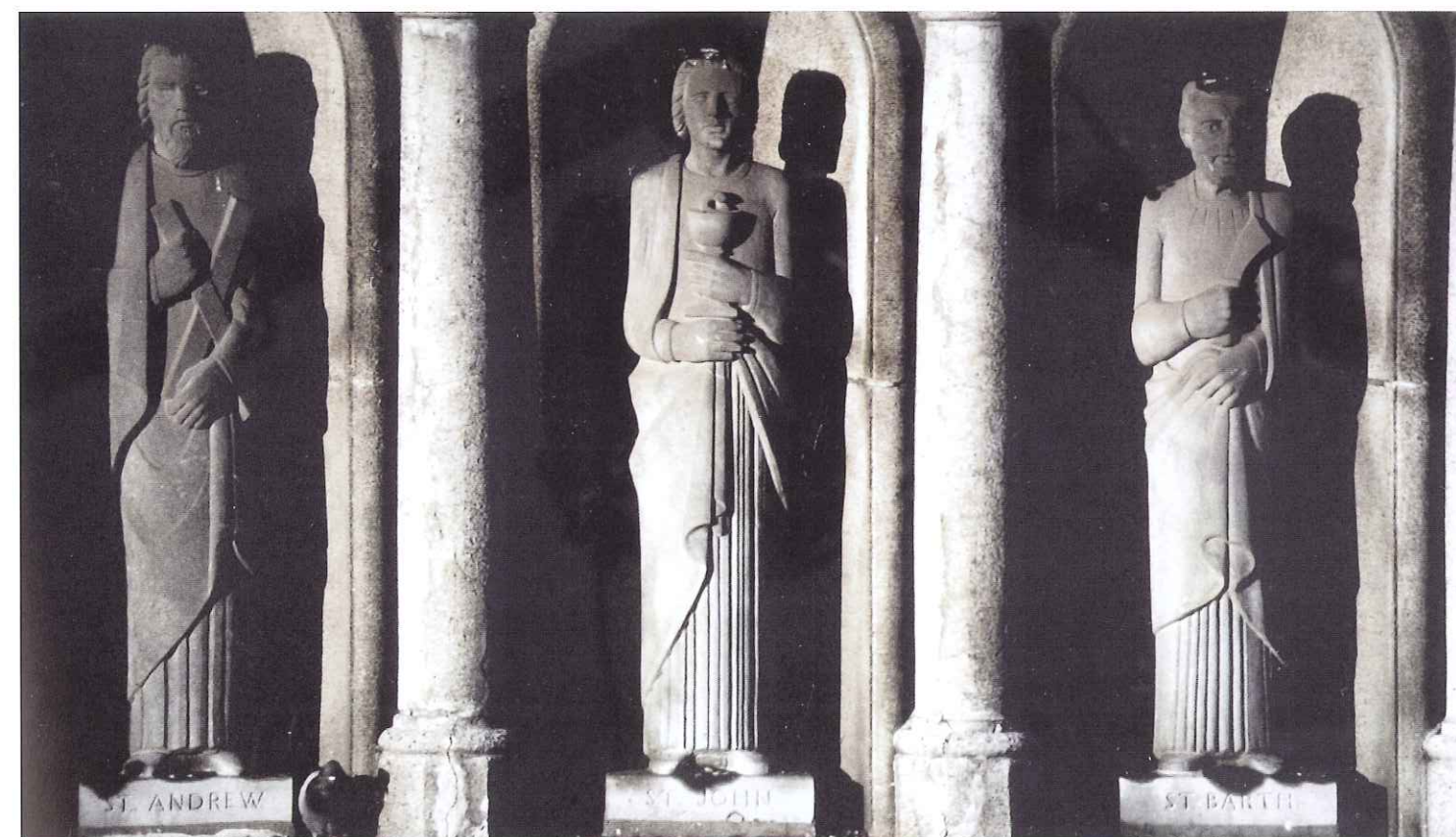
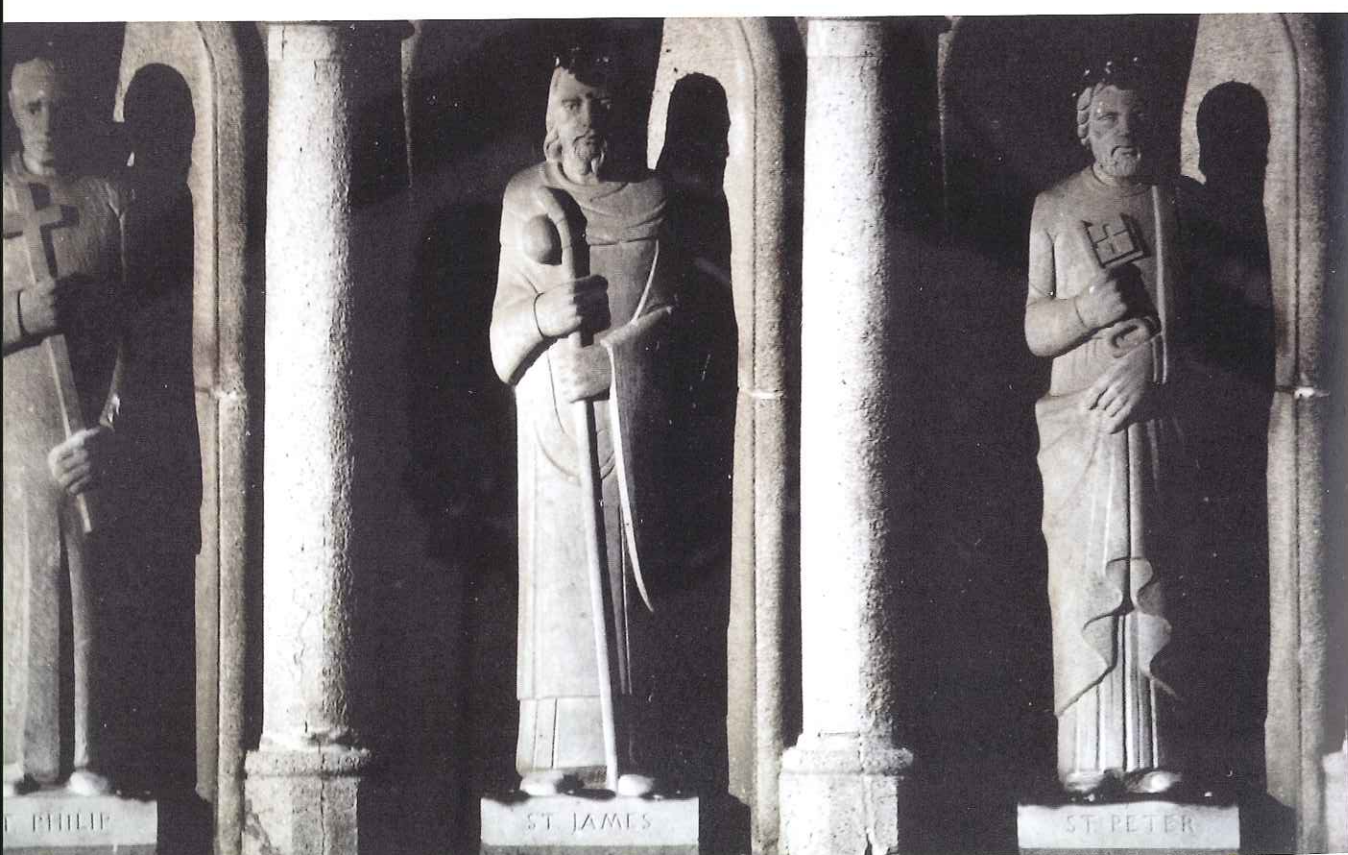




Twelve Apostles 1948, limestone, each 153 cm h (St Brigid's Church, San Francisco)

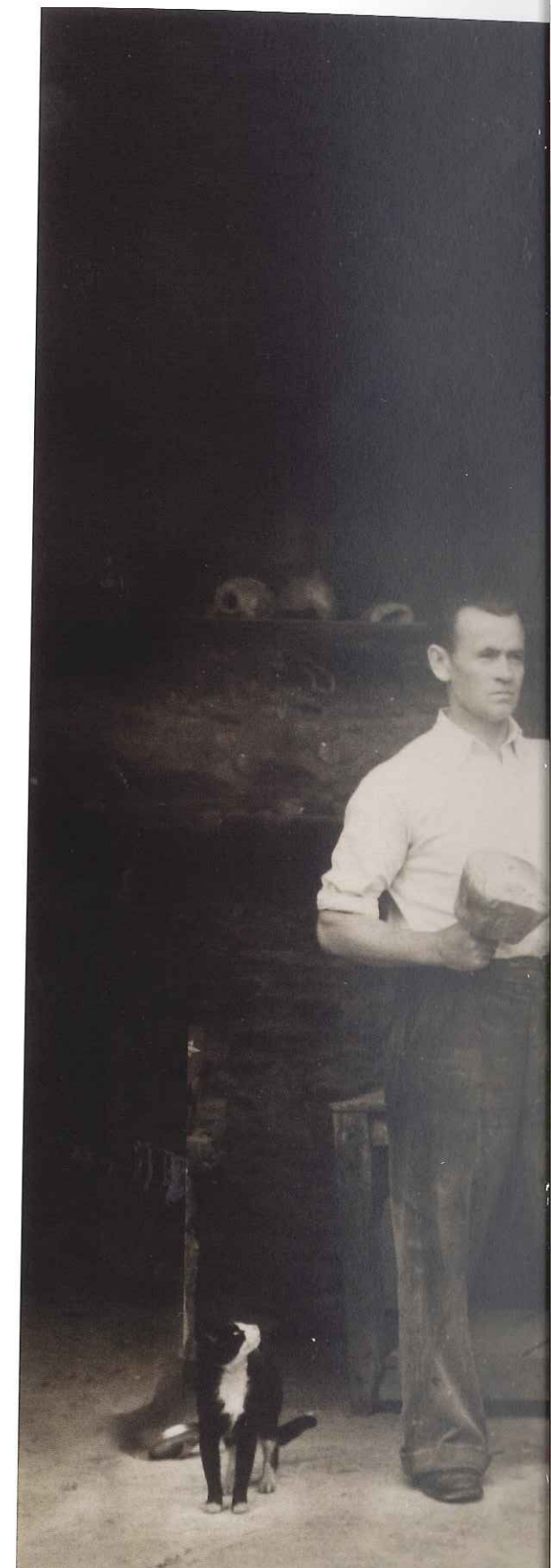


Twelve Apostles 1948, limestone, each 153 cm h (St Brigid's Church, San Francisco)





St Brigid 1948, limestone, 259 cm h, signed & dated (St Brigid's Church, San Francisco)



Madonna of the Globe 1949, limestone, 259 cm h (St Vincent's Church, Sunday's Well, Cork)



21



22



23

note: commissioned by Cardinal T Manning,
San Francisco, USA
(Ballingeary churchyard, Co Cork)
[see page 97]

21 *

Naomh Gobnait

1950, limestone, signed & dated
carving: panel inset in plinth carrying traditional
prayer in Irish; decorative carving on base
(Cúil Aodha, Ballyvourney, Co Cork)
[see pages 90-93]

22 *

Naomh Padraig

1949, polished limestone, 91 cm h, signed
(St Patrick's College, Maynooth)
[see pages 88-89]

23 *

Naomh Padraig

1952, limestone, 180 cm h
inscription: NAOMH PADRAIG
(Church of St Columba, St Paul, Minnesota) **
[see page 96]

24

Our Lady of Fatima

1949, limestone, 175 cm h, signed Séamus
Murphy A.R.H.A
(Holy Cross Cemetery, Charleville, Co Cork) **

25 *

Our Lady of Graces

1953, Portland stone, 168 cm h, signed
(Youghal town centre, Co Cork)
[see page 98]

26 *

Sacred Heart

1945, Portland stone with a marble base,
182 cm h
(Church of the Annunciation, Blackpool, Cork)

27 *

St Brighid

1948, limestone, 259 cm h, signed & dated
inscribed with saint's name and carving of
traditional symbols
note: Commissioned (together with *The Twelve
Apostles*) by Mgr J Cantwell for 13 niches on the
façade of this Hiberno-Romanesque church
(St Brighid's Church, San Francisco) **
[see page 86]

28 *

St Columba

1935, plaster and varnish, 72 cm h
note: 1 plaster version extant **
[see page 75]



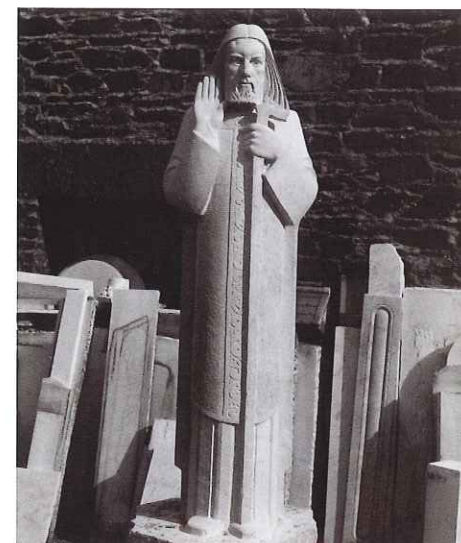
25



27



28



29



30, 33



31

29 *

St Finbarr

1933, limestone, 213 cm h
note: plaster version in Visitor Centre, UCC
(University College Cork)
[see page 70]

30 *

St Finbarr

1934, limestone, 244 cm h
(St Finbarr's Church, Bantry, Co Cork)
[see pages 71, 73]

31 *

St Finbarr

1956, silver and bronze, 30 cm h
note: designed as Cork Film Festival award
(Cork City Hall)
[see page 99]

32

St Francis

1953, Portland stone, 168 cm h
(Church of Adam & Eve, Merchant's Quay,
Dublin)

33 *

St Ita

1934, limestone, 229 cm h
(St Finbarr's Church, Bantry, Co Cork)
[see pages 71, 72]

34 *

St Joseph and the Child

1950, limestone, 178 cm h, signed
(Servite Priory, Benburb, Co Tyrone) **

35 *

Twelve Apostles

1948, limestone, each 153 cm h
(St Brighid's Church, San Francisco)
[see pages 83-85]

36

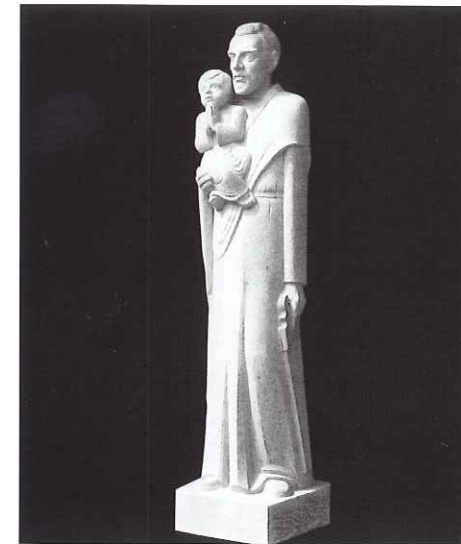
Virgin

1954, limestone, 168 cm h, signed
(Drishane convent, Millstreet, Co Cork)

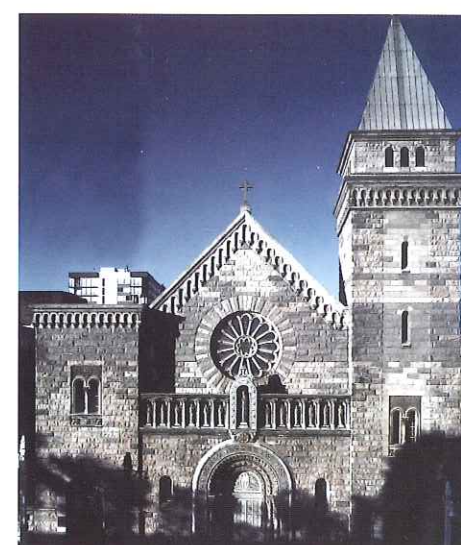
37 *

Virgin of the Twilight

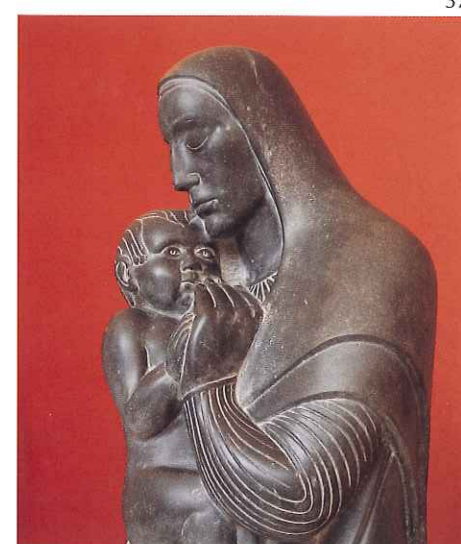
1941, polished Kilkenny limestone, 198 cm h,
signed
(on long-term loan to Crawford Art Gallery)
[see pages 79-81]



34



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