



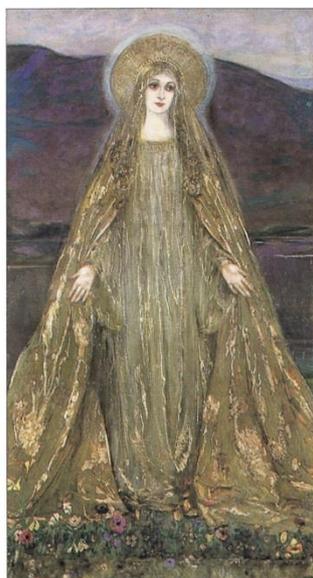
St Patrick's Belfast

FOUNDED 1815

Notes on

The Madonna of the Lakes – Triptych Altarpiece

by Sir John Lavery



Taken from an original text by Fr Michael Sheehan to whom we give our thanks for his permission to use his research

On Sunday, 20th of April, 1919, Dr MacRory, Bishop of Down and Connor, unveiled in St. Patrick's Church, the triptych altarpiece 'The Madonna of the Lakes', painted by a native of the parish, celebrated artist, Sir John Lavery.

Nearly two years previously, Fr John O'Neill, Administrator of St. Patrick's, was asked to go to the presbytery's reception room. There he met a small, rather stout and immaculately dressed man who gave his name as John Lavery.

Modestly and quietly, Sir John Lavery expressed his desire to present to the church of his Baptism, the first religious picture he had painted. It had been exhibited at the Royal Academy earlier that year. Before going to the presbytery, John had visited the church to select a suitably lit location for the painting. This, he suggested, would be the apse to the left of the church.

As Sir John rushed towards his taxi, waiting to take him to catch the boat-train to Stranraer, he promised to send a photograph of the painting, for those concerned, to study. Fr O'Neill walked with him to the taxi, where Lavery opened the door and introduced him to Hazel who had been waiting for him in the car. True to his word, John sent an enlarged photo but it would be a year and a half from that first visit to the unveiling of the triptych.

The initial place suggested for the triptych could not be made available because the donors of the original altar in that apse would not consent to its removal or relocation. Later it was placed in the apse on the left side of the church after a major fire gutted the church in 1995.

A total of ten handwritten letters from Sir John Lavery remain in the possession of the parish. There is also a typed letter from his secretary as well as one in Lady Lavery's handwriting. These tell us much of the previously hidden detail of the painting's story. The letters contain minutiae, giving his thoughts behind his religious painting as well as the arrangements for its placement in the church.

In Lavery's letter of the 30th of December, 1917, he makes note of the involvement of Sir Edwin Lutyens in the design of the altar on which the triptych was to be placed. It is believed that Lutyens also designed the frame for the painting. After exhibition at other centres, the triptych was sent to Belfast. Unfortunately after it was dispatched, a railway strike took place and it was detained in England for several weeks. This was the cause of great anxiety on both sides of the Irish Sea and for some time the painting's location could not be determined. Eventually it arrived with the altar and its decorations and was installed for the unveiling on Easter Sunday, 1919.

One of the surviving artefacts which accompanied the triptych at that time was a letter from the art dealer valuing the painting for insurance purposes at £3,000.

The models for the triptych were the three women in John Lavery's life, his wife Hazel, his daughter, Eileen and his step-daughter Alice. St. Brigid, modelled on Eileen, later Lady Semphill, is surrounded by sheep, tradition believing Brigid to have been a shepherdess. St. Patrick, modelled on Alice, is depicted with pigs in the background recalling Patrick's enslavement as a swineherd in County Antrim. Hazel was the model for the Madonna. She is depicted against an imagined backdrop of lakes and mountains.

In front of the triptych the visitor will notice a carved oak crucifix. This cross is modelled on the Celtic High Cross. The figure of Christ on the cross is unusual. He is wearing a crown and a kilt but the overall feeling portrayed is one of strength and courage. This cross was made for Lavery by Mr R May of Hopefield Avenue, near the Antrim Road. The wood used in the cross was a piece of oak salvaged from an old church in Ballinderry which was built from the remnants of an even older church which stood there in the late 1400s.

For further information on the life and works of Sir John Lavery, please refer to a short publication written and produced by Fr Michael Sheehan, available from the parish office.