

## EARLY CHRISTIAN ART IN IRELAND.\*

IT is a relief to have something pleasant to read about Ireland; in the midst of boycotting and plans of campaign to learn that there is art in Ireland, and to know that along with much that is harsh, cruel, and vindictive, there are some things Christian. So vivid and urgent is Ireland's present that we are in danger of forgetting the picturesqueness and dignity of Ireland's past. Miss Stokes's book turns back the pages of history a thousand years, to times when the Emerald Isle was prosperous and peaceful, when monks in monasteries were busy illuminating their MSS. or embroidering the precious metals with filagree and fretwork, or piling great stones into rough masonry and laying the foundations of architecture.

Early Christian art in Ireland—that is from about the middle of the 6th century to the middle of the 13th—had in the main these three forms of development: embellished manuscripts, fine metal work, and architecture, with a little rude sculpture thrown in. Miss Stokes takes up these three lines in their order, and presents an interesting panoramic view of their historic evolution. Manuscript illumination was carried to an extreme of perfection in the Irish monastery. One of the most famous of Irish MSS. is the "Book of Kells," which is an example of workmanship of the first class. The Irish scribes employed a character resembling that of the Latin Romance MSS. of the 5th and 6th centuries. More than sixty of these scribes attained fame before A. D. 900. Tradition has it that St. Columba wrote no fewer than 300 books with his own hand. Certain portions of the celebrated Stowe missal are of Irish origin. Other Irish MSS. of note are the "Book of Dimma," a copy of the Gospels which was found in its "shrine" by boys hunting rabbits in 1789; the "Book of St. Moling," containing the four Gospels in Latin, with a formulary for the visitation of the sick; the "Garland of Howth," another copy of the Gospels; the "Psalter of Ricemarch," a MS. of the 11th century, which belonged at one time to Archbishop Ussher; and an Irish "Antiphonary," or book of hymns, belonging to the 9th or 10th century. Besides these Irish relics, strictly such, there are scattered through the libraries of England

and the Continent a large number of ornamented MSS. produced by scribes who were of Irish birth or training, all of which have a style peculiarly their own. Spirals, zigzags, lozenges, circles, and dots are favorite forms of decoration in all of these; while the drawings of the human face and figure are generally barbarous and often hideous. The traveling Irish monks who wrought these beautiful works in these lands of their pilgrimage were men of rough exterior, but often of manifold accomplishments. These relics of their handiwork are to be found today at Schaffhausen, Basel, Coire, Eichstadt, Würzburg, Tegernsee, Ratisbon, Fulda, Trier, Gheel, Cambridge, and Leyden.

Passing to metal-work the Irish artificers made a variety of ornaments in gold, silver, and bronze; bells, chalices, crosiers, brooches, and shrines or cases for sacred books and consecrated bells. These shrines were sometimes as valuable as the objects they contained, often beautifully enameled and chased and studded with precious gems. One of the most remarkable of the chalices is that found at Ardagh. It is of a two-handled urn-like pattern, classic in its outlines and exquisitely ornamented, about 7 inches high and 9 1-2 inches wide at the top, with a base 6 1-2 inches broad and a bowl 4 inches deep. Gold, silver, bronze, brass, copper, and lead enter into its composition. The chasing seems to have been done with a chisel and a hammer, and glass and amber are joined with the enamel.

In ancient sculpture Ireland shows a large number of monumental stones, some of them burial stones, others altar stones and crosses. Forty-five "High Crosses" still remain standing on Irish soil, thirty-two of them richly ornamental, and eight of them bearing inscriptions. Many of these stone crosses are striking and beautiful. Their embellishment consists of historical and descriptive panels, depicting scenes from Scripture or the lives of the Saints, and the work in them is fine and choice considering its age, which is at the least six hundred years.

Miss Stokes's concluding chapter is devoted to architecture, the first forms of which of course were rude and rough, consisting simply of unshapen stones in a state of nature laid loosely together with only a faint semblance of order. Dressed stone and cemented joints began to appear in the 6th century, and some of the early doorways to the churches, for example, are remarkable for their massive character. Great blocks of limestone, 10 or 15 feet in length by 6 and 8 in width, are found dovetailed into each other with a truly artistic skill. The round tower is a peculiar feature of archaic Irish architecture. More than a hundred examples of it were in existence at the beginning of this century. Sometimes the round tower was an appurtenance of a

church, sometimes it stood independently. It generally carried a bell. Its walls always tapered toward the top.

An extremely useful appendix to Miss Stokes's book is a folded sheet at the end containing a chronological table of all the classes of Irish art-work mentioned in the foregoing pages, enabling the reader to trace their development at a glance, and to see how manuscript writing was followed by metal work, and metal work by sculpture, and sculpture by architecture. The names of scribes, artisans, and builders are given in connection with their chief works and the dates of the same. An index completes the book.

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