

Desmond Kinney's Mosaics

Desmond Kinney (1934-2014) was born in Portstewart, Co. Derry in 1934 and studied at the Belfast College of Art where his contemporaries included Basil Blackshaw, T.P. Flanagan and Cherith McKinstry. In the 1960's, Kinney established the innovative graphic design studio Kinney/Dobson, the first of its kind in Ireland to achieve International recognition. Kinney is also well-known for his very large-scale murals, mainly in mosaic.

There are three of Desmond's murals at the University of Limerick -

The Wandering Angus, The Story of Sionna and An Buile Suibhne (Sweeney Astray)

The Venetian glass mosaic mural erected in the Atrium of the Foundation building is based on Buile Suibhne, one of the major achievements in the canon of medieval literature; they are 48 feet long by 7 feet high. The artist has incorporated some of Seamus Heaney's poetry from his translation of "Sweeney Astray". Buile Suibhne is the tale of Suibhne (frequently anglicised as Sweeney or Sweeny), a legendary king of Dál nAraidi in Ulster in Ireland. The king was annoyed by the sound of a bell. When he learned that the sound came from Bishop Ronan Finn as he set up a church, the pagan king stormed naked to the church, pulled the bishop forth, and threw his psalter into a lake. He would have killed the bishop were he not called at that moment to fight in the Battle of Mag Rath (near modern Moira, 637 A.D.). Prior to the battle, Bishop Ronan blessed the troops. Suibhne took the sprinkling of holy water as a taunt and killed one of the bishop's psalmists with a spear and threw another spear at Ronan himself. The spear struck Ronan's bell and broke it. At this, Ronan cursed Suibhne with madness. His curse was: 1) that as the sound of the bell had been broken, so now would any sharp sound send Suibhne into madness, 2) as Suibhne had killed one of Ronan's monks, so would Suibhne die at spear point. When the battle began, Suibhne went insane. His weapons dropped, and he began to levitate like a bird.

From that point on, Suibhne leapt from spot to spot, like a bird. Also like a bird, he could never trust humans. His kinsmen and subjects sent him mad with fear, and he could only flee from place to place, living naked and hungry. After seven years in the wild, Suibhne's reason was briefly restored by his kinsmen, who very gently coaxed him back to earth, but, while recuperating, a mill hag taunted him into a contest of leaping. As Suibhne leapt along after the hag, he again took flight and returned to madness. Eventually, after travels throughout Ireland and Western England, Suibhne was harboured by Bishop Moling. He lived, broken and old, with the bishop, and the bishop entrusted his care to a parish woman. Unfortunately, that woman's husband, a herder, grew jealous and killed Suibhne with a spear. On his death, Suibhne received the sacrament and died in reconciliation.

In 1971 Desmond Kinney designed the The Song of Wandering Aengus mosaic for a bank in Dublin. He was influenced by Seamus Heaney to use the poem by WB Yeats and this interior mosaic symbolises the last lines of the poem:

I will find out where she has gone....

And pluck till time and times are done

The silver apples of the moon

The golden apples of the sun.

The mosaic was removed from Dublin in the 80s and found a home in the Glucksman Library Board Room foyer some time later. The University of Limerick has further links with this poem as the crèche is called Silver Apples after the poem and the last 3 lines of the poem are carved on the foundation stone of the University.