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*LES IMAGES ET LES FORMES. FRANÇOISE HENRY (1902-1982),
LES HÉRITAGES D'UNE ŒUVRE PIONNIÈRE*

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**'THE MIRACULOUS SPRINGING TO LIFE OF AN ART THAT HAS BEEN
DEAD FOR CENTURIES'**

SCHOLARLY INVESTIGATION AND ARTISTIC PRACTICE IN EARLY 20TH-CENTURY
IRELAND

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'The miraculous springing to life of an art that has been dead for centuries'¹

Scholarly investigation and artistic practice in early 20th-century Ireland

Sandra Heise



Fig. 1 : Art Ó Murnaghan, « Sixteen Men » page, c. 1925 © National Museum of Ireland

When Françoise Henry's book, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*², was first published in 1940, it was reviewed in *The Dublin Magazine*³ in the same year. The reviewer, Arthur Kells, was an established contributor to the magazine, which would eventually publish over sixty of his reviews. He was a natural choice for the publisher, Seumas O'Sullivan, who had previously entrusted him with Robert Alexander Stewart MacAlister's *Ancient Ireland*⁴ and would later ask him to review Paul Jacobsthal's *Imagery in Early Celtic Art*⁵.

1 « The Irish Republican memorial », *Sinn Féin*, 19 April 1924, p. 3.

2 Françoise Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, London, Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1940.

3 Arthur Kells, « Review of *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, by Françoise Henry », *The Dublin Magazine*, XV, n° 4, 1940, p. 68-70.

4 *Id.*, « What of archaeology in Ireland? Being a review of *Ancient Ireland*, by R. A. S. Macalister », *The Dublin Magazine*, XI, n° 1, 1936, p. 61-65.

5 *Id.*, « Review of *Imagery in Early Celtic Art*, by Paul Jacobsthal », *The Dublin Magazine*, XVIII, n° 2, 1943, p. 75-76.

The review concentrates mainly on Henry's chapters 4, 'Lindisfarne', and 7, 'Illumination; Eighth and Early Ninth Century', describing them as 'delightfully written, and full of excellently clear descriptions and comparisons'⁶. The writer points out Henry's ability to describe a page of ornament in a way that was intelligible to the general reader, without a flood of 'cold technical details'⁷; he was grateful that his imagination had not been paralysed, but rather that here was 'the best description and analysis'⁸ he had ever read of the Kells Gospels. He praises especially Henry's ability to intuit some of the 'characteristics of the human being in his work'⁹, and therefore somehow conjure up the painters and scribes of the *Book of Kells*.

Kells did not agree completely with Henry's interpretation of Irish art, taking issue with her statement in Chapter 2, 'Early Monasteries', that '(a)s for the cross itself, it takes all sorts of shapes, all borrowed from Continental and Eastern Christian monuments of the early period, and no doubt introduced into Ireland in the fifth century'¹⁰. It would later emerge that he held a personal belief that pre-Christian cross-shapes may have been in use in some monuments rather than Christian ones. This view remained unshaken even by Henry's encyclopedic knowledge and feeling for the time periods of particular stone monuments. So upset was Kells by the perceived insult to pre-Christian art that he would revisit the issue as long as eight years later, in a note submitted to the *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological Society*. In it he writes that the issue is 'a definite obstacle, tending to mislead and obstruct Irish students of Archaeology in their study of a very obscure phase of our pre-history'¹¹. His unease with Henry's hypothesis about cross symbolism being added alongside pagan designs stemmed from his belief that pre-Christian Ireland was, in general, portrayed as barbarous and benighted.

Apart from this idiosyncrasy, however, Kells openly appreciated Henry's scholarship as a clear vision of the work of his kindred artists. In the course of the review, Kells reveals that he is quite familiar with the *Book*, remarking that Henry's identification of the principal artist as the 'Goldsmith' agrees with his own perception of the same person as the 'Big Man'¹². He emphasises Henry's gift for 'sensing the magic of movement in line, ... divining, in the artist, his independence of conventions in correctly filling space, in other words the possession of an inner sureness of real knowledge, which she finds in its greatest moments of accomplishment'¹³, and concludes that Henry has 'an intuitive grasp of her subject'¹⁴. This interesting phrase, 'an inner sureness of real knowledge' may have more to do with the reviewer's sense of his own artistic mission than the subject of Henry's book, however.

6 *Id.*, « Review of *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period* », art. cit., p. 69.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

10 Françoise Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, op. cit., p. 32.

11 Art O'Murnaghan, « A note on the cross in Irish archaeology », *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological Society*, 11, n° 1, 1945, p. 61.

12 Arthur Kells, « Review of *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, by Françoise Henry », art. cit., p. 70.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*

'Arthur Kells' was, in fact, a pseudonym of Art O'Murnaghan (1872–1954) (fig. 2), and his choice of *nom de plume* gives a substantial clue as to his interests. Describing himself as a 'scribe-artist'¹⁵, he had by 1940 completed a third of his magnum opus, *Leabhar na hAiséirghe* or *The Book of the Resurrection*¹⁶. By its completion, this would comprise a twenty-six-page ornamented and inscribed vellum manuscript commissioned to commemorate the dead of Ireland's independence struggle. The book would be a testament to his mission of reviving Insular manuscript techniques as studied with scholarly rigour and empathy by Henry, while blending them with his own artistic and philosophical viewpoint. In essence, Henry and O'Murnaghan personify the idea of scholarly excellence and its application and interpretation in contemporary artistic practice. In this way, the artist is a lens through which interpretation and understanding of scholarly advances such as those made by Henry can be viewed.



Fig. 2 : Art O'Murnaghan, 1937. Image courtesy of Peter Figgis

A self-taught antiquarian and artist, O'Murnaghan had conducted his own research into Insular design, inspired by the Celtic and cultural revival to which he was exposed by membership of the Gaelic League. His membership of the League inspired him to change his name from Arthur Murnaghan to Art O'Murnaghan. Born in Southampton in 1872, his early training as chemist's apprentice gave way to work as a wallpaper designer in the Morris tradition, with his floral designs being sold through both Liberty and Waring and Gillow. While he resumed his wallpaper work following a permanent move to Dublin in 1898, the decline in demand for floral papers soon led him to lose this job and take up a succession of diverse careers, for example stage manager, actor and set designer for the Gate Theatre, and teacher of Celtic design at the National College of Art.

15 Art O'Murnaghan, « *Leabhar na hAiséirghe: plan for binding and notes on the pages* », ms., 1951, front cover. Easter Week collection of the National Museum of Ireland.

16 The series of artworks is part of the Easter Week collection of the National Museum of Ireland, with the following registration numbers: HE:EWL.76; HE:EWL.78-83; HE:EWL.382-383; HE:EW.1424-1428; HE:EW.1437; HE:EW.1491; HE:EW.1552-1553; HE:EW.1598; HE:EW.1600; HE:EW.1626; HE:EW.1708; HE:EW.2013-2014; HE:EW.2303.

During his parallel careers, however, he continued to draw and paint. He came to the attention of Irish republicans wishing to commemorate the dead of the independence period due to an artwork on which he had worked in his spare time from 1917 to 1922. This was the 'Éire' page¹⁷ (fig. 3), done by pencil and brush on a sheet of Bristol board, its design displaying the artist's method of merging antiquarian and contemporary political themes. He achieves this through the association of pre-Christian and early Christian symbolism with political activists of his own time. With these dominant themes he also combines a fascination with and respect for nature, references to which are found in all his artworks. The page, in his own words, was the product of his being isolated, due to 'his hours of work, from association with others in the national movement'¹⁸, and of being 'thrown back on himself to express his share in the awakening, by designing a kind of monument to the name of Eireann (sic). The name "Eire" (sic), and some of the beauties it told of, were the inspiration'¹⁹. The page is a monochrome premonition of his greatest achievement, the *Leabhar*.

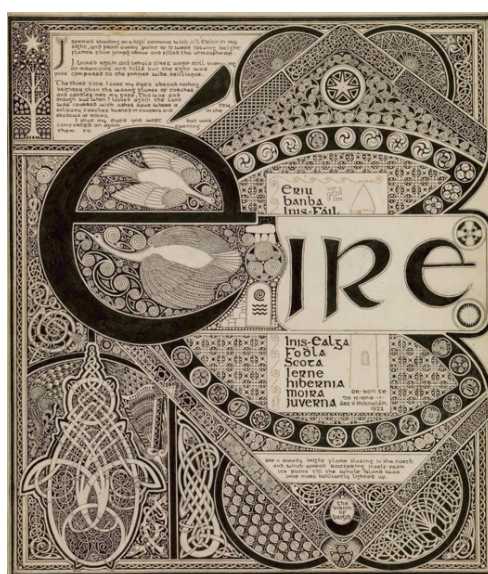


Fig. 3 : Art O'Murnaghan, the «Éire» page, 1917-1922 © National Museum of Ireland

Commissioned by the Irish Republican Memorial Society in 1924, he would create *Leabhar na hAiséirghe* in three phases up to 1951, the work being interrupted twice due to the lapse of the first governing committee and a later disagreement between artist and reformed committee. The aim of the Society was to produce 'a national memorial to the memory of the heroes who have given their lives for the attainment of the absolute independence of Ireland since Easter Week 1916'²⁰, and their vision was for the lists of names of all those killed to be accompanied by extracts from the writings of nationalist leaders and emblems associated with particular regions and events,

17 The page is part of the collection of the National Museum of Ireland, with the registration number HE:EWL.412.

18 « Celtic Design », *Shama'a: a magazine of art, literature and philosophy*, 6, n° 1 & 2, 1925-1926, n.p.

19 *Ibid.*

20 « Constitution of the Irish National Memorial Society », NLI MSS, Ms. 1737, ms. minute book of the society's governing committee, p. 3.

interwoven with specifically Irish symbolism. Vellum sheets for the project were sourced from the firm of H. Band & Co., based in Brentford, West London, the same company that had supplied vellum to William Morris's Kelmscott Press²¹.

The influence of Insular manuscripts was felt from the outset, with the original newspaper advertisement for the *Leabhar* project celebrating 'the miraculous springing to life of an art that has been dead for centuries... It is the art of the Irish monks who wrought the Book of Kells, the Book of Armagh, the Book of Durrow, and many another jewel of penwork, that lives anew²²'. O'Murnaghan's work was seen as simultaneously innovative and derivative in the best sense, composed of 'joyous intricate pattern, an arrangement of lines that is living because it is being used for the first time and used to express an idea (and)... yet they are so intimately connected with the old Celtic tradition and with the works of the master-scribes of Ireland that they take us back at once to an archaic, intricate, fantastic world where Archangels and Dragons and Stars live happily with the Four Elements and the Garden of Eden trees²³'.



Fig. 4 : Art Ó Murnaghan, *Title page*, c. 1925 © National Museum of Ireland

Going back to the notion of the academic in relation to the artistic, one area in which O'Murnaghan, an English-born Irish nationalist and self-taught artist, and Henry, a French-born classically trained archaeologist and historian of Irish art, would undoubtedly agree was in their admiration for Insular manuscripts in general and for the *Book of Kells* in particular, described as it was by Henry as 'a volume of technical perfection²⁴'. Henry's ability to detect and conjure the scribes and artists of the eighth and ninth centuries was mirrored in O'Murnaghan's conviction that he himself channelled the spirit of the scriptoria into his own work. In a letter to his benefactor, Joe McGarrity, he revealed that in the early years of the *Leabhar* project he would draw the initial

21 Ms. cit. minute book, p. 16.

22 « The Irish Republican memorial », art. cit., p. 3.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Françoise Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period (to 800 A.D.)*, London, Methuen, 1965, p. 202.

design onto paper, then trace onto the vellum before over-lining the design with a fine brush and permanent Chinese ink. However, by the time of writing, he was drawing directly onto the vellum, 'as the old Book artists did'²⁵.



Fig. 5 : *Book of Kells*, folio 129v ©The Board of Trinity College Dublin

Henry was interested also in divining the painting techniques of the old scribes. In her study of the *Book* in 1974, she traces the implements used by the painters, detecting a quill used to draw lines in the illuminations; 'a less flexible instrument, perhaps of wood'²⁶, and a very fine brush, 'coming neatly to a point'²⁷. Henry suggests that this was probably made of marten fur. O'Murnaghan noted with regard to his work that 'all the ornament on the vellum pages was done with pencil and brush—no pen-work'²⁸. His rejection of quill pens was explained by his inability to find anything other than steel nibs, which he found unsatisfactory for use on vellum.

²⁵ National Library of Ireland MSS Department, Ms 17,475/3, p. 1.

²⁶ Françoise Henry, « The Book and its decoration », in *The Book of Kells: reproductions from the manuscript in Trinity College Dublin*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1974, p. 157.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Art O'Murnaghan, « Leabhar na hAiséirghe: plan for binding and notes on the pages », ms. cit., p. 11a.



Fig. 6. Method of drawing a circle with a pair of compasses. Drawing from International Correspondence Schools, *A textbook on ornamental design*, Scranton, International Textbook Co., 1901, p. 8. Public domain due to age

Henry detected in the *Book of Kells* the use of 'mechanical aids, such as rulers, set squares and compasses'²⁹ (fig. 6)', for example in folio 28r (fig. 7), as well as the possible use of French curve instruments (fig. 8) to 'greatly facilitate the drawing of the irregular curves which seem always to have such perfect balance, as for example in the bodies or wings of animals'³⁰.

O'Murnaghan was almost certainly working with mathematical instruments in the framing of his designs, as is shown, for instance, in the symmetrical appearance of certain designs in the 'Destiny' page (fig. 9).

It remains to be seen, post-Covid, whether compass point marks will be found in the completed *Leabhar* pages. Henry's observation that 'there are many cases when the (compass) centres have left no visible trace'³¹ may be instructive in relation to O'Murnaghan's work. It is very likely that he used French curves as a drawing aid, as can be seen by the contours of his artworks 'Under the Mantle of Brigid' and the 'Title' page of the *Leabhar* (fig. 10–12).

Henry describes the use of very diluted ink to trace the contours of the patterns, for instance in folios 30v and 31r of the *Book of Kells* (fig. 13), retaining the possibility that a stylus or silverpoint may also have been used in some cases³². Colour was then added within these contours, the artists afterwards drawing the containing lines and details in gall ink, as also used in the script. O'Murnaghan's practice corresponds loosely with this technique, as he over-lined his original pencilled design with a fine brush and Chinese ink, with harmonious colours added with a brush³³.

Henry next turns her attention to the pigments used in the *Book*, visualising them being dissolved in water to which a binding medium, probably white of egg or sometimes glue, was added³⁴. Drawing on research in the laboratory of the British Museum, Henry was able to list the pigments used as white and red lead, orpiment, verdigris, ultramarine, and a number of vegetable or animal extracts such as folium and indigo or woad³⁵. O'Murnaghan, a trained pharmacist and master of natural remedies and preparations, created his own paints rather than relying on shop-bought ones, 'mixing the pigment with egg white, parchment glue, fish glue and gum to create a paint that he would use on all of the vellums'³⁶, according to an account by his grandson.

29 Françoise Henry, « The Book and its decoration », *op. cit.*, p. 157.

30 *Ibid.*

31 *Ibid.*

32 *Ibid.*

33 National Library of Ireland MSS Department, ms. cit., p. 1.

34 Françoise Henry, « The Book and its decoration », *op. cit.*, p. 157.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 157-158.

36 Peter Figgis, « Remembering Art O'Murnaghan », *Irish Arts Review*, 2, n° 4, 1985, p. 41.



Fig. 7a : *Book of Kells*, folio 28v
©The Board of Trinity College Du-

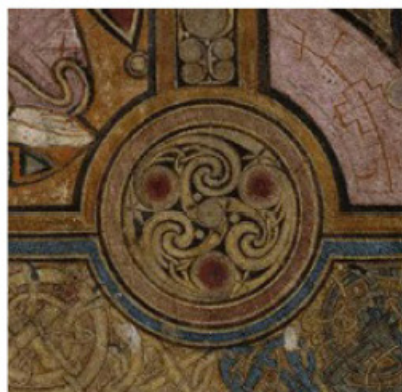


Fig. 7b : *Book of Kells*, folio 28v, detail
©The Board of Trinity College Dublin

Fig. 7c : *Book of Kells*, folio 28r
©The Board of Trinity College



Fig. 7d : *Book of Kells*, folio 28r, detail
©The Board of Trinity College Dublin





Fig. 8 : Otto Lueger, *Lexikon der gesamten Technik*, Stuttgart/Leipzig, Deutsche Verlags/Anstalt, 1904. Public domain due to age

O'Murnaghan had a deep affinity with the individual designs used in the *Book of Kells*, and several comparisons can be made between designs in the original book and in the *Leabhar*. In 1950, he wrote a short piece entitled 'Interlinear Design in the Book of Kells: a supplementary note', published in *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*³⁷. Here, he detects the presence of a badly worn decorative scroll where a previous contributor had wanted to see traces of an inscription in 'some Eastern script'³⁸. In the accompanying images, O'Murnaghan reconstructs the contours of the scroll (fig. 14).

Homage to the *Book* is found in such pages of his *Leabhar* as the 'Title' page (fig. 4, 15), in which he creates a shrine to interlace, some of which might have been influenced directly by designs on folio 27v, for instance, of the *Book* (fig 16).

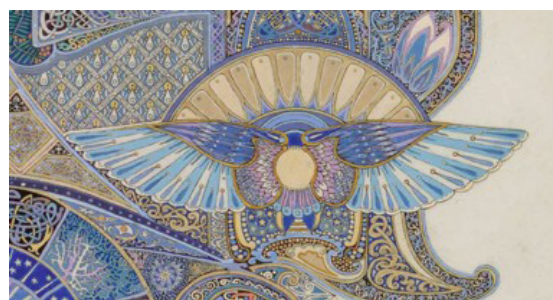


Fig. 9 a-b-c : Art Ó Murnaghan, «Destiny» page, c. 1926, and details © National Museum of Ireland

There are also to be found tributes to iconographic figures from the *Book*, such as the eagle symbol of St. John found on folio 27v (fig. 17) as reimaged by O'Murnaghan in his 'Destiny' page (fig. 18). If not directly influenced by the *Book of Kells* image, the modern figure is at least derived from the pool of scholarship on Insular manuscripts as exemplified by Henry.

It is interesting to note, also, that the artist does not confine himself to the *Book of Kells*, but also finds direct inspiration in other volumes such as the *Book of Durrow*, as is shown by the similarity between the chequered pattern of folio 21v (fig. 19) and O'Murnaghan's repeated pattern on the 'Connacht' page (fig. 20) and other pages of the *Leabhar*.

³⁷ « Interlinear design in the Book of Kells: a supplementary note », *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 80, n° 1, 1950, p. 97.

³⁸ *Ibid.*



Fig. 10 : Art Ó Murnaghan, «Under the Mantle of Brigid»
page, c. 1924 © National Museum of Ireland



Fig. 12 : Art Ó Murnaghan, «Title» page, detail, c. 1925
© National Museum of Ireland

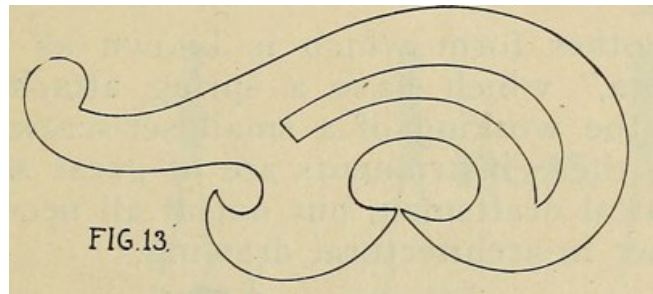


Fig. 11 : Drawing of a French curve from Oscar S. Teale, *Architectural drawing*, New York, UPC Book Company, 1920, p. 19. Public domain due to age

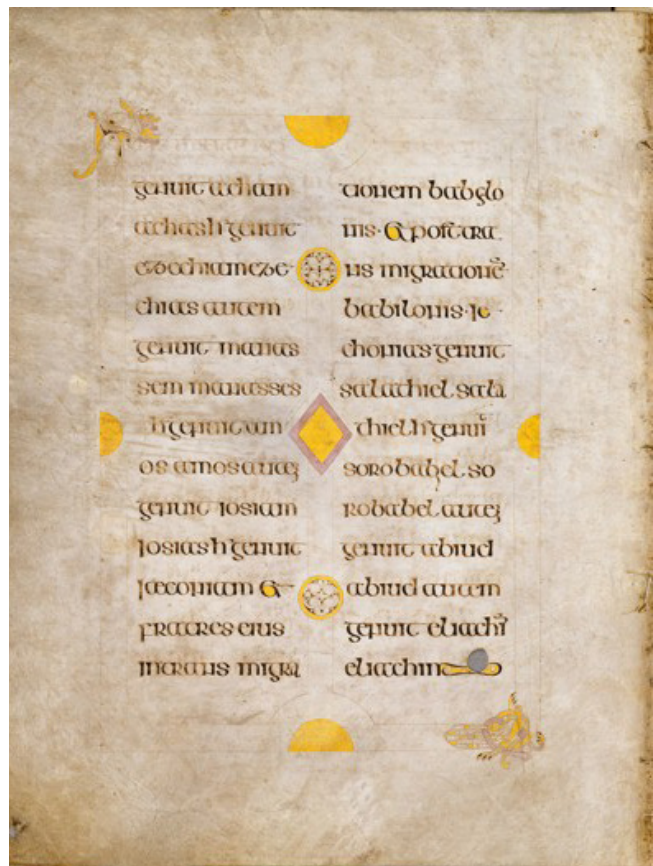


Fig. 13 : *Book of Kells*, folio 30v ©The Board of Trinity College Dublin

The artist also had other academic influences, such as the published version of Eugene O'Curry's mid-19th-century lectures on *The Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History*³⁹ and *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*⁴⁰. Reading the lectures gives an insight into O'Murnaghan's thinking about antiquarian records and monuments, as can a study of his own notes in a journal volume devoted to the binding plan for the *Leabhar*⁴¹. Very frustratingly, eleven manuscript volumes of autobiography by O'Murnaghan, to have been called *Irons in the Fire*, were destroyed shortly after his death in 1954⁴², with the loss, perhaps, of many straightforward explanations of his method.

It remains to be discovered through research in the Françoise Henry archives whether Henry ever reacted to the review of her book, or was even aware of it. It is likely that she knew of O'Murnaghan

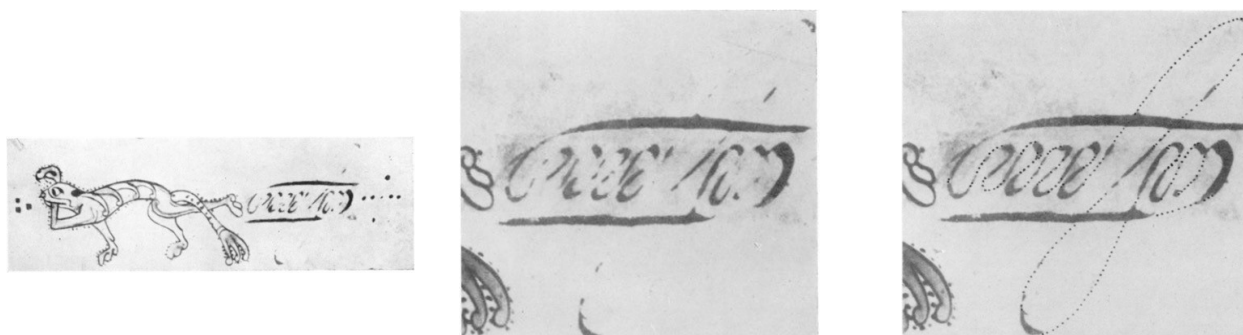


Fig. 14 a-b-c : A decorative scroll as reconstructed by Art O'Murnaghan in «Interlinear design in the Book of Kells: a supplementary note», *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vol. 80, n° 1, 1950, facing p. 97 © The Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland



Fig. 15 : Art Ó Murnaghan, «Title page», detail, c. 1925 © National Museum of Ireland

and his work, due to her wide knowledge of the art of her own time and personal friendships with a number of artists. One of her friends, the sculptor Domhnall Ó Murchadha, studied at the National

39 Eugene O'Curry, *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History*, Dublin, James Duffy, 1861.

40 *Id.*, *On the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*, London/New York, Williams and Norgate/Scribner, 1873.

41 Art O'Murnaghan, « Leabhar na hAiséirghe: plan for binding and notes on the pages », ms. cit.

42 Peter Figgis, « Remembering Art O'Murnaghan », art. cit., p. 44.



Fig. 16 a-b : Book of Kells, folio 27v and detail ©The Board of Trinity College Dublin

College of Art while O'Murnaghan was a teacher there, for example. At a hopefully near point in the future, in a post-Covid world, it would be gratifying to extend this research theme, perhaps leading to a record of Henry's perception of O'Murnaghan's art.



Fig. 17 : *Book of Kells*, folio 27v, detail ©The Board of Trinity College Dublin



Fig. 18. Art Ó Murnaghan, «Destiny» page, detail, c. 1926
© National Museum of Ireland



Fig. 19 : *Book of Durrow*, folio 21v, detail ©The Board of Trinity College Dublin

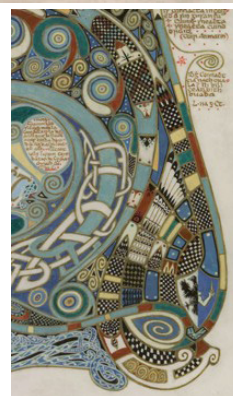


Fig. 20 a-b : Art Ó Murnaghan, « Connacht » page and detail, c. 1945 © National Museum of Ireland