

# Meeting God in Hammer and Chisel

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Fiddler of Dooney by Imogen Stuart, Photo: William Murphy

Imogen Stuart, sculptor, died in Dublin in March 2024 aged ninety-six. You can find her work in many places across the country. They're hidden treasures, worth searching out and spending time with, because much loving labour has gone into the creation of each one: they are gifts to be treasured. A recent documentary on her was well titled *Imogen from the Heart*. Her pieces are not just shapes in wood, metal or stone: they draw us into living mystery.

Born into an artistic Lutheran family in Berlin in 1927, she studied sculpting in Bavaria, where she met Ian Stu-

art. They married and came to live in Ireland in 1951 and had three daughters. Siobhan was killed in a car crash in 1988. You'll find her gravestone, sculpted by her mother, in Glendalough, where the family had lived.

I had the privilege of meeting her regularly in recent years. I'd be invited to make tea in the kitchen and bring in some cake, most of which I ate myself. Occasionally we enjoyed a drop of liqueur, then had a brief resumé of public affairs and finally got down to whatever business she wished to discuss.

She had a natural gift of hospitality:

meetings were not casual but important encounters. She gave herself over to each guest. Conversation was luminous, respectful, enriching. She would ask questions and take responses seriously. She would debate artistic details with her gifted stone-carver and life-long collaborator, Phil O'Neill, and always respected his expertise.

She had an endearing simplicity: you knew exactly what she had on her mind, whether a sensitive design for the Church in Letterfrack, on behalf of the Benedictine Sisters in nearby Kylemore, or the renovation of the Holy Water fonts in Knock, or her dream of a museum of Irish religious art, the absence of which was, in her view, a tragedy, which would lead to the disappearance of the workplace, library and tools that are intrinsic to the artist's life. She wanted her studio to be a place of inspiration for budding artists.

She was herself generous to a fault: her joy lay not in monetary gain but in her work being appreciated. At the 2018 World Meeting of Families in Dublin, splendidly dressed, she took great delight in watching children excitedly entering her Beehive Meditation Cell, closing the door on the outside world for three minutes (judged by an egg timer!) and then emerging to tell their parents what the experience was like. She wanted her work to be 'used'; she called art 'an essential public good', which would be accessible not only to the eye but to the touch.

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When I interviewed her during an Art Weekend in Knock, she acknowledged the source of her inspiration: 'The Holy Spirit is most definitely in my work.' I thought of her style as akin to that of the Zen masters: a long period of thought and waiting would lead to an awareness of what to do, followed by clarity as she expressed herself in the chosen medium. 'There comes a point at which I know what to do. Then I just do it!'

Her endless working hours were for her a mode of contemplative prayer. Her subject matter resonated with the same sense of the divine as captivated the early Irish artists.

We talked occasionally about what might lie ahead. She was surprisingly cautious about life after death but was glad to ponder over the encounters of the risen Jesus with his friends, such as hearing her name lovingly called, enjoying a leisurely lakeside breakfast with the Lord and reviewing with him her long and rich life, reunion with family, friends and the vast community of fellow-artists; most of all being welcomed by the Author of all Beauty and hearing the words, 'Well done, good and faithful servant!' All would then be pure joy, which, in C. S. Lewis' view, is 'the serious business of heaven'.