

Hand in Hand: The artistic and spiritual life of Dame Werburg Welch (1894-1990)

Reviewed by Dr Liam Peter Temple

Enclosed within the beautiful and idyllic buildings that make up Ushaw College is an exhibition of interest to scholars of women religious, the Catholic religious orders, material culture, and religious history more generally. 'Hand in Hand' focuses on the life and works of Dame Werburg Welch and displays a vast range of examples of her work, including paintings, sketches, engravings, carvings and vestment designs. All of these items have been loaned from the Conventus of Our Lady of Consolation, Stanbrook Abbey.



Hand in Hand
The artistic and spiritual life of Dame Werburg Welch

EXTENDED UNTIL SEPTEMBER
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This well-curated exhibition is brimming with information about the life and activities of Dame Werburg. Information panels around the room give useful contextual information not only about the nun herself, but about the history of vestment production at Stanbrook Abbey, the Benedictine monastic life, the variety of different vestment types, and the modernist strand of the Arts and Crafts movement in the early twentieth century. From these we gain a full and insightful knowledge of Dame Werburg's personality and background. We learn, for example, that after attending art school she travelled with her family to Venice, Florence, Milan and Rome. There she spent hours in art galleries, absorbing Italy's artistic styles. After entering the novitiate at Stanbrook in 1915, her artistic talents were recognised by Eric Gill, the founder of the Ditchling Community of Catholic artists and craftsmen. Gill furnished her with woodcarving tools and continued to write to her after his visit to Stanbrook. Later she developed her own variation of the Art Deco style, with examples in the exhibition showcasing her sketches of archaeological finds in Egypt that were greatly inspired by Art Deco forms. We also learn that, as well as serving as sub-prioress from 1956 to 1968, she also managed the community's orchard and could still be found climbing ladders to harvest fruit well into her 80s!



Early sketches and documents relating to Dame Werburg c. 1912 – 1917

The most striking part of the exhibition is undoubtedly the range of vestments which command most of the space, and thus attention, in the room. Here we gain a fascinating insight not only into Dame Werburg's designs, but also the wider efforts of the Stanbrook community. While Dame Werburg produced all the designs used on the vestments, she was not herself an embroiderer. The vestments were produced by other nuns who were skilled weavers and embroiderers, including one Dame Mary Moriarty who was renowned for her skill in weaving orphreys (the ornamental stripes or borders on the vestments).



The exhibition's collection of vestments

One of the best examples of this collaborative effort can be seen in a beautiful black cope with applique embroidered hood, produced in the 1930s by the community. The hood depicts Christ enthroned in heaven and surrounded by angels. The orphreys are embroidered with images of angels trumpeting and cradling the souls of Christians. This stunning design was based on an original watercolour by Dame Werburg, which is also featured in the exhibition. The vestment is a joy to behold, from the gilt brass morse (clasp) featuring glass amethysts, emeralds and seed pearls, to the intricate use of silk and gold thread. Studying these items up close reminds visitors of why Stanbrook was renowned for the quality of its textiles, and why they could often fetch well over £25 when sold externally in the 1930s and 1940s.



Black cope with embroidered orphreys



Embroidered hood based on Dame Werburg's design



Watercolour painting by Dame Werburg

Dame Werburg's work has been exhibited before, although in a very different context. From the 1930s to 1950s her work appeared at the Guild of Catholic Artists and Craftsmen under the anonymous authorship of 'A Benedictine at Stanbrook'. Modesty and anonymity are traits found amongst most women religious, and scholars have often had trouble tracing the lives and outputs of individual nuns throughout history because of this. There is thus a potential conflict here between the need to uncover and celebrate the life of a nun labelled as 'a profoundly talented but largely unknown artist' with the subject's own preference towards anonymity. Any tension is largely overcome by the sensitive interpretation given throughout the exhibition; Dame Werburg is situated as part of a much larger movement at Stanbrook concerning the production of textiles, vestments and material goods, while her community in turn encouraged her to 'embrace her artistic talent as an expression of her faith'. The thoughtful balance struck throughout the exhibition between the need to showcase the extraordinary nature of Dame Werburg's life and works, and the underlying emphasis that her work was undertaken largely at the behest and encouragement of her community, is admirable.

Overall this is a thoughtful, informative and vital exhibition. It does much to shed light on the extraordinary life of Dame Werburg, as well as reveal the little-known activities of the Benedictines at Stanbrook in the production of textiles and vestments. The popularity and success of the exhibition can be seen in the extension of its closing date from 29th June to 3rd September. It is hoped that the exhibition brings a renewed appreciation for women religious and their outputs amongst the general public, while also reminding scholars of the continuing need to sensitively highlight the importance of such women to our understanding of religious history more generally.

The exhibition has been curated by Claire Marsland, Curator at Ushaw. Research for the interpretation was undertaken by Dr Mary Brooks, Durham University Archaeology Department, Andrew Heard, Collections Management Officer at Ushaw College and Brian Lau, a Durham university placement student.