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Imogen Stuart, sculptor whose work mixed Expressionist and early Irish Christian styles – obituary

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Imogen Stuart in the studio at her home in Sandycove, Dublin; on her right is a small sculpture of Pope John Paul II embracing two children which was later cast as a over-life-size monument at Maynooth University Credit: Nick Bradshaw

Imogen Stuart, who has died aged 96, was a German-born sculptor of part-Jewish background who spent most of her life working in Ireland, where she enjoyed the patronage of the Catholic Church.

The sense of displacement and loss she felt in her early life contributed significantly to her individual style, which blended the interwar Expressionism of her homeland with the primitive beauty of ancient Irish religious iconography.

She was born Imogen Werner in Berlin on May 25 1927. Her father, Bruno Werner, a decorated veteran of the Great War, was one of the Weimar Republic's leading art critics and was influential in the Bauhaus movement and friends with such figures as Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Bertolt Brecht and Hermann Hesse. Her mother Katharina was also an art historian.

Adolf Hitler came to power in January 1933, and in October that year Bruno Werner signed the so-called "Most Solemn Vow" of loyalty to the Führer, a controversial pledge of allegiance by 88 of Germany's most influential writers and poets. Goebbels used it as a stick with which to beat those who refused to toe the party line on cultural policy.



St Brendan the Navigator, by Ian and Imogen Stuart, in Bantry town centre, Co Cork Credit: George Munday/Alamy

It did Bruno Werner little good, however. Though his father was a German Lutheran, his mother was Jewish and in 1935 he was classified under the Nuremberg Race Laws as a “Half-Jew”. In 1938 he was forced to resign as theatre critic and arts editor at the *Deutsche Allgemeine*; the Nazis confiscated the family home in Berlin, and Werner went into hiding to evade the Gestapo.

He made good his escape from the capital in 1944 through the help of friends, and spent some time in hiding in Dresden, where he had gone to school, luckily arriving after the Allied bombing of the city.

Meanwhile, after the bombing of Berlin began in 1941, Imogen and Sibylle had been evacuated to Bavaria and then, after a brief return to Berlin, moved with their mother to a distant relative near Vienna.

Late one night in the spring of 1945 Bruno reappeared at their lodgings and, learning that Imogen had been drafted to help dig tank traps against the advancing Red Army, took her with him to a friend’s house in Bavaria, where they were liberated by the Americans.

Katharina and Sibylle remained in Austria, where they were “liberated” by the Red Army, but they managed to escape to Bavaria, evading the attentions of Soviet soldiers, where the family was reunited.



Imogen Stuart at work

By the end of the war Imogen Werner had decided to become a sculptor, and in the aftermath of the conflict her father, who went on to serve as a cultural attaché in Washington, approached Otto Hitzberger, a sculptor and art professor living in Garmisch-Partenkirchen whose work had been declared “degenerate” by the Nazis and banned from public exhibition.

Hitzberger took charge of Imogen’s formal training for nearly five years; food shortages in the post-war period obliged the pair to carve gravestones in return for food parcels.

Imogen, however, remembered it as one of the happiest periods of her life, her happiness heightened in 1948 by the arrival of a handsome Irishman, Ian Stuart, who had gone to Munich to study under Hitzberger.

They married in 1951 and Imogen converted from Lutheranism to Roman Catholicism – though she admitted that she could never bring herself to go to confession, asking her husband: “What am I supposed to be sorry for?”

They moved to live in Laragh Castle, Co Wicklow, home of Ian Stuart’s mother, Iseult Gonne Stuart, whose mother, Maud Gonne, had been the inspiration for some of WB Yeats’s greatest love poems. “It was an old barracks which was full of damp,” Imogen recalled. “On certain days there was water running down the walls and the books became so wet that there was mildew.”

In 1940 Iseult Stuart had hidden the German spy Hermann Görtz, who had been parachuted into neutral Ireland on a mission to convince the IRA to expand their wartime bombing campaign in Belfast. Iseult spent some weeks in jail but was acquitted for lack of evidence; it was her estranged husband, Francis Stuart, a novelist and poet living in Berlin, who had given his wife’s address as a safe refuge.



Methos, the Angel of Peace, by Imogen Stuart on the tower of St Teresa's Church, Clarendon Street, Dublin

The Allies arrested him after the war for making pro-Nazi propaganda broadcasts to Ireland and for writing broadcasts for Lord Haw-Haw, William Joyce, the last man to be hanged for treason in Britain.

Imogen and Ian Stuart then moved to a Dublin suburb, where they set up a studio and began working together. Their first significant commission was a 21ft-high copper figure of St Brendan the Navigator in Wolfe Tone Square in Bantry, supporting the Irish claim that the saint known as “the navigator” beat Christopher Columbus to the New World by several centuries. Imogen’s work was gaining international recognition and was exhibited at the Salzburg Biennale in 1962.

Imogen and Ian Stuart had three daughters but separated in 1972, Imogen feeling that her husband was abandoning his art and her for “the hedonistic road to exotic places like Afghanistan, India and Morocco”.

She continued her work as a sculptor, creating significant pieces for churches and public spaces all over Ireland. Her best-known sculptures include the monumental sculpture of Pope John Paul II in St Patrick’s college, Maynooth, and a carved altar and baptismal font at the Honan Chapel in Cork City. Examples of her work are held in private and public collections around the world.

Imogen Stuart was a fellow of the Royal Hibernian Academy, Commander of the Germany Order of Merit and a recipient of the Golden Torc of Aosdána, Ireland’s highest artistic honour.

She is survived by two daughters. One daughter predeceased her.

Imogen Stuart, born May 25 1927, died March 25 2024