

## **Edward McGuire, 1974, Portrait of Seamus Heaney**

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Edward McGuire's portrait of Seamus Heaney is one of the best-loved paintings in the Ulster Museum collection, and in many ways it is the definitive image of the poet.

Many portraits and photographs followed yet this was the first, commissioned by the Ulster Museum in 1973 when Heaney was just thirty-four.

Born near Bellaghy, in county Londonderry, in 1939, Seamus Heaney is widely recognised as one of the greatest poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

His work is deeply embedded in nature and his early experiences of the Ulster landscape, and the apparent simplicity of his directness of expression and connectedness with his native place resonates deeply with visitors. This sense of immediacy and recognition can be deeply affecting, and McGuire's portrait is a constant powerful and familiar presence in the Ulster Museum galleries.

Edward McGuire was born in Dublin in 1932, studied in London and was a friend of Lucian Freud. There is in his work an intense interest in observational detail and the suggestion that nature is an elemental but controllable force. McGuire often included birds and animals in his paintings, using a meticulous manner reminiscent of Holbein, however these subjects seem not have particular symbolic meanings and Heaney described the birds obscured in deep foliage in the background as McGuire's '*own kind of phantasmagoria*'.

In McGuire's portrait of Heaney the viewer is immediately struck by the poise and seriousness of the poet's expression. There is a sense of the urgency and intent of youthful ambition but also a quieter, newly discovered maturity. Heaney admired the portrait, remarking that McGuire had captured in him '*a keep of tensions*'. I particularly like this reference to the direct, almost confrontational physical presence of Heaney as a fortress or tower-house containing and protecting his as yet unrealised poetic ideas and ambitions.

Although it seems rather obvious to say, Heaney has taken on the mantle of national poet. Although he disliked pretentiousness or overt seriousness of any kind, his poetry has come to define the land and rural experiences of the north of Ireland and, for many of our visitors, his words are always with us.