

Connick Windows

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THE PASSIONIST: CHARLES CONNICK IN NEW JERSEY

Editor's note: This is the third article in an exclusive series for *Connick Windows* entitled *The Passionist: Charles Connick in New Jersey*, written by architectural historian John Gomez, M.S. Historic Preservation, Columbia University. Parts one and two are available for download in the Charles Connick Stained Glass Foundation's online archives. We extend our gratitude to John for these articles, and for the outstanding Orin E Skinner lecture given at Boston University in October.

Part III: The Medieval Shadows of Montclair

I.

In Upper Montclair - a pastoral suburb in Essex County famously lined with multi-million dollar estates, most erected in the late-19th century in picturesque Victorian strokes - autumn arrives early. The September sun is cooled by the town's dense canopy of trees; leaves are already hardening, turning, flaming. Valley Road - a wide artery I used to walk as a student at Montclair State University in the late 1980s, having worked up the nerve to escape the industrial grip of Jersey City - is a transformative thoroughfare that branches off from Route 3 West, slowly revealing, mile by mile, Upper Montclair as a medieval hamlet: the Victorian manses start to fade out and give way to early-20th century Arts & Crafts storefronts and apartment complexes, their rich brick veneers, multi-hued sloping slate roofs, and stuccoed sides all still extant, preserved, in use in this very era. (Even the mountain-topped Montclair State University campus reveals the area's strong Arts & Crafts lexicon, with original campus buildings coated in stucco and roofed with bright terra cotta tiles.)

A few minutes' worth of driving down Valley Road - and then, following my iPhone's precarious GPS system, I take a quick left and slowly drive down a silent street until a dramatically placed tower belonging to Union Congregational Church shoots across my windshield: I have reached yet another Connick destination. I have no idea what I will confront inside - will Connick let me down? Will his windows here be visually thunderous, as at Princeton Chapel? Or will they, being crafted at the end of his career, be significantly subdued, small in scope, mere shadows of his former self?

To enter Union - an awesome horizontal skeleton of heavily rusticated stone designed by J. Cleveland Cady - one must walk through the building's famous tower entrance. The exterior, one learns, is a visual deceit - for upon entering the narthex a stifling softness is emitted from the inner sanctum. I sense at once that I have entered a great parlor, a domestic space with a plentitude of timber beams, hanging lamps, carpeting, and wood paneling walls along the aisles. Stone has no place inside; only sheer softness and windows illuminated under low ceilings. Right away I witness a glass conflagration in the chancel. Of course, it is a Tiffany Studios-rendered scene, dedicated to the war dead. This Tiffany, however, is small in scale, and while burning bushes and inflamed angels predominate, the entire impact of the composition lacks the usual overwhelmingness of opalescent stained glass windows. (Tiffany's painters must have been instructed by the clergy to keep the temperature down a bit, at least enough to prevent fainting spells among the congregation.)

And there, on cue, is Connick, that brilliant filmmaker, that consummate cinematographer, that detail-obsessed decipherer and measurer of light, his windows spread out along the north and south aisles - almost invisible, framed by polished wood. In five rectangular fields, and in a single rounded window centered in the north aisle, the master does not disappoint, nor fade out; light comes through, but not to

electrify and animate as his gigantic monuments in the 1910s through the 1930s once did. Instead the light is captured and held there, like a stilled candle flame, with a faint warmth and hushed silence. A 360-degree spin triggers the turning of a darkly-painted stained glass scroll illumined with floating figures, visceral vignettes, liturgical wording. The whole glass field at Union, created in one stroke in 1944, even when Connick was ill, is an ecclesiastical etude, a music-infused parlor series dedicated to former preachers and community builders of the church and town. In glowing medallions, Connick playfully and respectfully depicts these legends in action, lecturing to Sunday school students, caring for the destitute, playing instruments at church concerts and recitals, or holding forth an architectural model of the actual church edifice.



Walking across the panels, and coming to their conclusion near the south altar, is a surprise for me because I do not expect to sense, under

(continues on reverse)

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my skin, the same rushing blood I have felt surging in Proctor Hall at Princeton (where “The Holy Grail” still manages to pulse with lightning-lit life) or in the exact center of Heinz Chapel, that virtual stained glass cosmos that makes Pittsburgh an everlasting art pilgrimage site. Connick’s glass here is as mighty as Cady’s imposing tower outside, with similar sweep and spirit. Leaving the building, I come to the conclusion that Union’s Connick windows are supreme nonetheless and should be seen - and heard - as haunting chamber music.

Climbing back into the car, the journey into Connick’s sphere in this entrancing part of the state is, I know, not over just yet: for more color-stained shades and shadows call me forth to the neighboring hamlet of Montclair.

II.

Outside, warm early autumn air currents are controlled by the dense tree covers of ancient town trees; soft breezes sound; the light is thick and magnetic atop the magenta slate roof tiles of stately homes. A few miles away, in the central core of Montclair, just past the book stores, cafés, clothing venues, and small movie houses of Bloomfield Avenue, I turn right onto South Fullerton Avenue and continue until another heavy-stoned church building emerges.

St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, erected in 1889, is populated this same morning by singing parishioners. St. Luke’s, I have heard, is a Tiffany Studios paradise, a virtual museum for the famous firm, with oversized examples of their work. Sure enough, inside, from the shallow narthex through the deep transepts, Tiffany abounds, dominates, and floods the floors in pools of pastel pigments. A magnificent Tiffany war monument at the front is surmounted with sculptured figures and bottomed by a huge inscribed bronze plaque - perhaps the most moving Tiffany canvas I have ever encountered.

But Connick’s colored shadows are here as well. And though eclipsed by Tiffany, they emerge softly, in quick visual bursts, as if a reprise from the thick Tiffany waves. Crafted after Connick’s death in 1945 by his successor firm, Connick Associates - helmed by Orin Skinner and his wife, Frances - St. Luke’s nave aisle windows consist of paired sweet saintly figures and seminal New Testament scenes. All glow modestly in their fixed fenestrations, and though none are as mind-blowingly memorable as the Tiffany glass, the Skinner team pulls off a last-second feat in the chancel, with a three-lancet rose window installed in the 1950s that speaks to Connick’s early days in glassmaking, when densely drawn grisaille patterns gave him his first artistic voice. Woven leaves and branches snake through the Connick lancets; liturgical vignettes are suspended in their web-like vices.

Traversing Valley Road again, working my way east, I am blinded by all the Tiffany I have seen today - but it is the Connick canon that comes forward the most, that penetrates my senses in this magical medieval region.

This is the final printed issue of Connick Windows. To receive electronically, please send your email address to: info@cjconnick.org. Thank you.