

Connick Windows

Thoughts, news and comments concerning the art and craft of Connick stained glass, published periodically by....

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A Sorry Tale of How Not to Look at Stained Glass

Anne Dort Moffett

In February of 1927 Charles Connick was asked if he wished to enter a competition for stained glass windows in the medieval tradition for the new Riverside Church in New York City. "It will please me greatly to enter this competition," was Connick's reply. Ultimately the studio submitted a design and sample for a clerestory window. The first window presented to the Building Committee was not acceptable. On June 9th, Mr. Connick wrote: "I agree to make another piece of glass the same size as the present one" and stated that he was "highly of the opinion that glass for clerestory windows should be seen at a height approximating at least half the height of the actual window in place." But soon after on June 14th Connick learned from the Committee and the architects that they were "disappointed in your sample." Two days later Connick replied saying "of course I realize my blunder in making this sample (all in good faith) for its actual position in a window seventy-five feet above the eye." On July 5 Mr. Connick wrote to the architects for the church, Henry C. Pelton and Allen and Collens of 75 Newbury Street, Boston: "My sample was made and submitted..., not as a selling piece, but as a finished section of a clerestory window for a lofty interior. Of course, it could only be disappointing when exhibited in a low room eighty feet long. The laws of scale....are more swift and ruthless in stained glass than in any other medium. Windows become transformed at great height; blacks are devoured, colors are clarified and even appear to change...". In the most simplistic terms, a window designed to be viewed from sixty feet away will look distorted, even amateurish, at ground level.

In addition to this viewing perspective, the artist must understand how light controls the success or failure of stained glass windows.

In his epic tome, *Adventures in Light and Color*, Mr. Connick says: "Ancient windows taught me that light changes constantly", and that "there is not only the direct light to consider in the day's changes from sunrise to sunset and in the season's changes....but reflections and refractions from inside and outside." It is generally agreed that stained glass "functions [best] in light and distance together." It is further agreed that "many architects and clients have not learned how to look" in this way.

This, unfortunately, proved to be the case with the Building Committee and the architects for the Riverside Church. Mr. Connick, in his letter of July 5, 1927 to Mr. Collens wrote: "Please know that I am writing this as a devoted craftsman and not as a salesman, for while I would eagerly consider any comments or suggestions made by you or the Committee,...I realize that those made to me....were the result of a misunderstanding of its 'scale-technique.' The truth is that I would not have sent it [the window] at all if I had known your plans for its exhibition [to the Committee]. Suffice it to say that I would cheerfully agree to take out a whole window that did not function beautifully...I will not agree to make a selling piece that will serve to please in an exhibition room twelve feet high....I wish to keep the sample and the design, and will accept one thousand dollars (\$1,000.00) which is one half the amount I have expended, for my time in studying the problem, to mark the incident closed."

On July 20 Mr. Connick acknowledged receipt of the \$1,000 check from the architects saying: "This is in full payment of all obligations incurred by me in relation to my study of the stained glass for the Riverside Church." Herein is a lesson for all of us looking at stained glass or any other form of art - remember to consider your distance and angle from it, i.e. your perspective, and the play of various lights and shadows upon it. If we do this, we will avoid the scorn of the Charles Connicks of today's world.

Note: Source materials for this article were found in the Connick Archives, Boston Public Library Fine Arts Department and in *Adventures in Light and Color* by C. J. Connick (Random House, New York, 1937.) Readers may obtain an e-mail copy of this article, including full bibliographic citations, on request to info@cjconnick.org.

Anne Moffett is a former staff member of the Department of American Decorative Arts and Sculpture, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA. She contributed "Stained Glass from the Studio of Charles J. Connick in the Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston" for our February 1999 newsletter.



Detail from East Window in the Church of Saint Vincent Ferrer, New York -- Study in varying lights and distances.

- A special exhibition (until December 31, 2003) on glass jewelry designs of Arts and Crafts designer, Hazel Blake French, at the Sandwich Glass Museum (Sandwich, Cape Cod) includes a panel of Sandwich Glass fragments by the Connick Studio, 1983-1984, as well as three Sandwich Glass medallions made by students in the Connick Studio.
- The Connick Foundation has created a new service that now is available. You can receive newsletters in electronic form by going to our web site www.cjconnick.org and following the directions given. By sending e-mail rather than paper newsletters we help save the environment's natural resources and also The Foundation saves the costs of printing and mailing.
- Connick Windows newsletters may be viewed on The Connick Foundation web site. And beginning with this issue any photograph that is available in color (as are the two in this issue) will be shown in color on the web site.



Detail from "Christ and the Woman of Samaria" window. Channing Memorial Church, Newton, MA (now Newton Presbyterian Church). Donald MacDonald, Stained Glass Artist, 1882

The Stained Glass Work of Donald MacDonald (1841-1916) and His Times.

An illustrated lecture by Lance Kasparian

The Orin E. Skinner annual lecture on stained glass will be given at 6:30 p.m. on Thursday November 13th in the Rabb Lecture Hall, Boston Public Library, Copley Square. This lecture, co-sponsored by the Boston Public Library and The Connick Foundation, is free and open to the public.

Donald MacDonald was born in Glasgow and trained as a glass painter in London during the 1860's. He settled in Boston in 1868, where skill and dedication to his craft made him sought after by progressive architects. During the 1870's, he was a leading exponent of the British Design Reform Movement, creating alternatives to the conventional Gothic revival stained glass of the day. In this illustrated lecture, Mr. Kasparian will examine the work of Donald MacDonald in relation to efforts in 19th century Boston to master the craft and fulfill the promise of stained glass as a vital expression in conjunction with contemporary architecture.

Mr. Kasparian is an historical architect who has researched and photographed 19th and early 20th century American stained glass for over 20 years. With the assistance of Sarah B. McKeige, great granddaughter of the artist, he has documented the life and work of Donald MacDonald (1841-1916) and his relationship to the 19th century architecture and decorative arts of Boston.