

Connick Windows

Thoughts, news and comments concerning the art and craft of Connick stained glass, published periodically by...
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Thoughts on the Problem of 'Redundant' Windows

Peter Cormack M.B.E., F.S.A.

Charles Connick once lamented that stained glass is 'the Cinderella of the arts', for although it is one of the most expressive of all artistic media, it all too often faces indifference, ignorance and neglect. This is especially a concern when stained glass windows are located in 'redundant' buildings, those which have been vacated, for whatever reason, by their faith communities (or by educational or civic institutions), sometimes leaving behind significant parts of their tangible heritage.

When one considers that stained glass windows and other ecclesiastical arts embody - sometimes very movingly - the devotion and sensibilities of previous generations, and that they frequently commemorate specific individuals and groups, it is all the more regrettable when a congregation is obliged to turn its back on its own heritage. Unfortunately, this is becoming an increasingly common phenomenon on both sides of the Atlantic. In Britain the problem of disused religious buildings and their contents has been an ever-growing challenge for the last thirty or forty years, so a British perspective on the problem of 'orphaned' stained glass windows may offer some topics of discussion, even if it does not present any easy solutions.

Not long ago, a conference about Scotland's heritage of historic stained glass was aptly entitled 'Who Cares?'. It highlighted among other things the challenge of recording and preserving windows of artistic and/or historical interest, a problem which increasingly vexes a number of organisations and individuals in all parts of Britain.

The first serious attempt to address the issue was in England over thirty years ago, when the Stained Glass Museum was established at Ely Cathedral in Ely, Cambridgeshire. Under the pioneering curatorship of Martin Harrison (author of the definitive 1980 monograph *Victorian Stained Glass*), the nucleus of a national collection of 'rescued' windows was assembled. Almost all the glass was sourced from churches and chapels which had been closed for worship. For the first time, the existence of the new Museum offered the relevant authorities the option of offering significant but now 'redundant' glass to an organisation which would not only preserve it but also display it for public appreciation. This was a real step forward, but the Museum's limited storage and exhibition space has always severely limited the quantity of glass that it can re-house.

Fortunately, another positive development came in 1982, when the Worshipful Company of Glaziers (one of London's ancient craft guilds) set up the London Stained Glass Repository with the specific purpose of re-cycling windows of quality. Again, the Repository was supported by the various faith bodies, each of which has complex administrative procedures involved in closing their buildings. The process does at least now incorporate the option of offering glass to the Repository for re-use. At the same time, the Repository has encouraged architects and others to consider installing 'second-hand' windows, a process that has resulted in some very successful re-installations of important 19th- and 20th-century glass not only in U.K. buildings but as far afield as South America and the Far East. However, with around a thousand churches in England having closed during the 1970-1985 period alone, most of them containing quantities of stained glass, the need for a systematic approach has remained urgent.

Similar initiatives have been taken in Scotland, so that at least there is now the possibility of saving some of the many interesting windows throughout Britain which would otherwise have been vulnerable to loss or damage. However, a crucial question arises. Who is to decide what is worth saving? Despite the ever-growing interest among historians, curators, dealers and collectors in the decorative/applied arts of the last 150 years or so, post-medieval stained glass still retains the marginalised 'Cinderella' status bemoaned by Connick seventy years ago.

In Britain there is only a handful of scholars who truly specialise in 19th- and 20th-century stained glass. They have, with few exceptions, had to accumulate their expertise outside the usual academic and heritage institutions - institutions which might otherwise have provided a base from which to influence a wider appreciation of the field. There is, for example, no post-medieval equivalent of the very successful *Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi*, which has done so much to promote the international study of medieval glass. So although we in Britain have an extraordinarily rich heritage of windows from the 1800s onwards, there is as yet no comprehensive inventory from which to compile lists of outstanding and 'at risk' examples.

Fortunately, there have been indefatigable voluntary efforts, notably by the Church Recorders of the National Association of Decorative & Fine Art Societies, to create such an inventory in Britain. Other bodies, such as the Victorian Society and the Ancient Monuments Society, have taken a serious and consistent interest in the plight of vulnerable stained glass. But, so far, no effective overall body exists which can link up the scholarly expertise and recording/cataloguing with the faith organisations who ultimately decide the fate of windows in their care. And with almost all the impetus for this work coming from volunteers, there is a discernible tendency for church and state authorities to take the matter less seriously than they should. It is a regrettable fact that attitudes are too often moulded by financial considerations: if something has not been paid for, there is an insidious assumption that it cannot therefore be worth bothering about! By contrast to the generally unsatisfactory British situation, the Church of Ireland (the Anglican/Episcopalian denomination in the Irish Republic) has set a commendable example of responsible stewardship by commissioning professional reports, carried out by Dr David Lawrence, on the stained glass in all its churches.

If a solution to the problem of 'redundant' stained glass is to be found, it will undoubtedly be energised by raising public awareness of stained glass as a major art form during the last two centuries. Museums and exhibitions can play a vital role in this educational process, but curators first need to broaden their knowledge of the decorative arts to embrace fully the historic significance of the medium. To take one example, the study of the Arts & Crafts Movement (in Britain and the U.S.A.) has been distorted by an astonishing neglect of the huge corpus of glazing designed and made by many of the Movement's leading exponents. It is surely no exaggeration to state that Charles Connick was America's greatest 20th-century artist in stained glass, yet there is no specimen of his work displayed (or even owned) by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, nor does Boston's Museum of Fine Art feature Connick in its displays of modern decorative art.

If omissions like this could be redressed, the gradual process of rescuing what W. R. Lethaby called 'the most perfect art-form known' from unjust neglect might begin. Then, when a church or other building with significant stained glass faced closure, the question of finding an appropriate new home for the windows might perhaps be given the serious consideration it truly merits.

PETER CORMACK M.B.E., F.S.A. has curated numerous exhibitions on Morris and the Arts & Crafts Movement at the William Morris Gallery, London. He has written and lectured extensively on 19th and 20th-century stained glass and was for 10 years the Co-Editor of The Journal of Stained Glass. Mr. Cormack is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London; Honorary Fellow of the British Society of Master Glass Painters and Honorary Director on the Board of the Charles J. Connick Stained Glass Foundation.

■ **Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation** announces a series of public lectures and tours entitled *Charles J. Connick: World Class Stained Glass in Pittsburgh*, May through October 2009. For details, see <http://www.phlf.org/phlf-tours-events/> or contact Mary Lu Denny at 412-471-5808. The first event is:

Sunday, May 24: Keynote address by Peter Cormack at Calvary Episcopal Church: "Stained Glass of the Arts & Crafts Movement in Britain and America." A tour of the church will follow.

■ *Singing Windows Tour*, Columbus and Gambier, Ohio on Thursday May 21, 2009. Come explore the artistry and intent behind some of the area's best stained glass windows, focusing on American master Charles J. Connick and led by Peter Cormack. The tour will take in exceptional Connick windows at the First Congregational Church in Columbus and Kenyon College's Peirce Hall in Gambier.

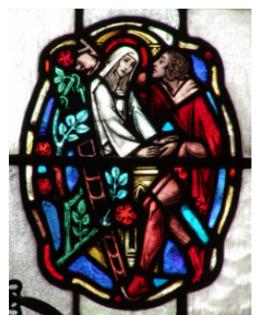
The tour schedule is

9:30 am Lecture & stained glass window tour First Congregational Church, Columbus

11:30 am - 1:00 pm Drive to Kenyon College in Gambier

12:45 - 1:45 pm Lunch at Kenyon College Inn

2:00 - 3:30 pm Stained Glass window tour, Peirce Hall, Kenyon College



Medallion representing Romeo and Juliet. Shakespeare window, Peirce Hall.

Photo by C. Donnelly.

Registration for the May 21 events may be done online at www.cjconnick.org through PayPal, or by sending a check payable to the Connick Foundation, 37 Walden Street, Newtonville, Mass. 02460. Cost for both lectures and tours and lunch is \$28. Cost is \$15 for the Columbus event only. Columbus Museum of Art members are entitled to a 10% discount. Registration deadline is May 10 and will be limited.

■ **A reminder: Receiving the newsletter by email would not only benefit the environment (using less trees) but also save money for the Foundation. Please sign up for email delivery on www.cjconnick.org under the menu item 'Stay in Touch.'**