

Connick Windows

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

Milda B. Richardson

The following is excerpted from the complete scholarly article on St. Gabriel's Church, Washington, DC. This article will appear on the Connick Foundation web site, www.cjconnick.org.

In a letter of gratitude to the supporters of the preservation and restoration efforts at St. Gabriel Church designed by Boston architect Charles D. Maginnis, founder of the Maginnis & Walsh studio, Revs. Thomas Gude and Roberto Cortes-Campos wrote: "The vision of Gabriel's Hope is one that will call upon the best that can be given..."

With the St. Gabriel complex—school (1923-4), rectory (1925), convent (1925) and, finally, parish church (1929-30)—Maginnis achieved his goal of the ideal Catholic complex, coordinated both in style and materials. The interior of St. Gabriel is an example of the optimal ambiance Maginnis required for true Catholic worship, "only with shadow can art give expression to the mystery of religion...the tempered light, the atmosphere of mystery into which men come from the glare of the street and feel at once there is none of life's fever in it."

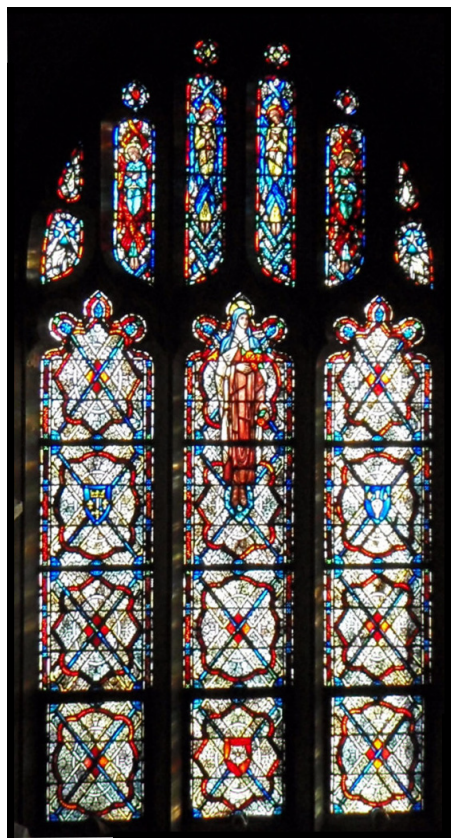
Consistent with Maginnis' practice, he engaged the finest craftsmen for the St. Gabriel commission. Bishop McNamara had an abiding interest in and rather specific instructions for the treatment of the stained glass windows, as is evident from his voluminous correspondence with Orin E. Skinner of Charles J. Connick Associates. The overall effect was to be one of lightness, because the Bishop had a prejudice against a dark church ambiance. The Bishop understood that light colors, such as the bubbly white and light greenish and bluish tones within small patterns, would increase the worshippers' perception of volume and their beloved parish church would appear larger than it is. The eight nave windows were to depict singular standing figures, for which church leaders provided illustrations in order to avoid "archaic drawing" in the faces. The richest, deepest blues and reds were reserved for the rose window above the altar, as well as the transept and east window, and the nave windows, tinted with greens and gold, were made plainer than the Connick studio would ordinarily create in order to give prominence to the central figure of God the Son. The overarching iconographic program is revealed by the sequence of the windows from the Annunciation in the East, past the stately figures in the nave, culminating at the Rose window with the Infant Christ in the center. Bishop McNamara requested that the center of the rose open out so that God the Son could appear there. In discussing church interiors, Maginnis wrote: "The lines of the interior must contrive to secure a befitting aspect of solemnity—an atmosphere which shall stimulate religious emotion." Christ the Consoler is depicted in the north transept with the pelican feeding its young below, symbol of Divine Sacrifice and Protection. The south transept window is devoted to Christ the King crowned with the triple crown and flanked by King David with his harp and St. Peter with his bishop's keys of silver and gold. Charles Connick wrote that, "It would...be entirely feasible to make a greater distinction...between the wheel window...and the other windows if your client should so desire, while retaining the present total cost price." The studio responded to the Bishop's wishes for the windows to admit plenty of illumination by using grisaille in the nave and transepts, at the same time enriching the fields with foliated patterns of silvery tones and interlacing strapwork of brilliant pure color. This technique leads naturally through symbols and medallions to the principal figures in rich pure color. In the end, the Bishop was pleased and wrote to Connick: "When it is a question of architecture or of window glass, I take it for granted that anything that is done by Mr. Maginnis or you is worth while;...I may find myself wishing that the windows would appear to me at all times as they did today at the twilight hour when the rose window especially was more than beautiful. At other times I see mostly gold, but an hour ago every color, to use your expression, was singing and the harmony was complete." Maginnis himself fully appreciated Connick's artistry when he noted: "Almost everyone is sensitive to the emotional stimulus of the colored window as it enters into the ecclesiastical scene, but few know how to penetrate to its artistic rationality."

The perception of the colors comes up again in discussing the four newer medallions depicting Mother Seton, Catherine Tegakwitha, St. Catherine Laboure and Mother Marie Rose, discussed with the Connick Studio in 1949 and completed in 1959. Instructions regarding the Mother Elizabeth Seton medallion from Orin Skinner to James Mullaney, who set the glass, specify: "Cut in a few pieces of the orange vermilion glass...to replace some of the cool reds to bring the background color a little more in line with the earlier medallions. Do a little judicious touching up of the whites so they will not stand out so prominently. This is especially true of the headdress of Saint Catherine Laboure, and the rays of light around the...little figures with Mother Seton..." The small figures with Mother Seton were criticized for "paleness...perhaps something could be done about making them more colorful." The psychology of color was very much on the mind of the correspondents, since the Bishop had always wanted "an 'active' effect that helps [people] reach the state of calmness."

Maginnis felt that Connick's work elevated stained glass from "a vivid but none the less perfunctory element of the ecclesiastical scene." When the details of representing additional saints in the transept windows is discussed among Skinner, Maginnis, McNamara and Walsh whether to place figures on grisaille without a background of pure color or in separate medallions the higher price for medallions with figures disappointed the Bishop. A letter from Maginnis & Walsh to Connick is an example of the gentlemanly style of business practice in that era. "My dear Mr. Connick:...When the designs were perfected and the price quoted larger than this, the client had already received the offer of the windows and is now so embarrassed that he cannot either suffer the elimination of the little figures or to request an enhancement of the gift. In this emergency, of course, he was naturally tempered to consider the placing of these two windows to some other studio, which he naturally regretted, in view of his great enthusiasm for the windows you have already done. It seems to me that if you can possibly manage to do it, I wish you would arrange to carry out the original design." Connick accommodated by changing the design from figures to symbols of the saints, thereby admitting more light. The confluence of superior craftsmanship is evident in the excellent result which enhanced the liturgy of the Mass then and now and inspires all those participating in Gabriel's Hope.

"Send forth thy Spirit, and they shall be created. And thou shalt renew the face of the earth." Psalm 103:30

Milda B. Richardson teaches in the School of Architecture at Northeastern University and in the Fine Arts Department at Emmanuel College, and is currently President of the New England Chapter of the Society of Architectural Historians. She is preparing a monograph on Maginnis & Walsh.



Connick Windows

*"I want to make beautiful interiors for both churches and souls
I want...[all people] to hear my windows singing..."*

Charles J. Connick

Nave window in St. Gabriel's Church, Washington, DC
C. J. Connick 1931
Photograph by Thomas Carr

The Orin E. Skinner annual lecture entitled *Transatlantic Gothic: Aspects of Anglo-American Medievalism* will be given by Peter Cormack on November 17, 2008. Peter Cormack, art historian and writer (and occasional stained glass artist), is an Honorary Director of the Charles J. Connick Stained Glass Foundation. He is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London, and is the Society's Honorary Curator of Kelmescott Manor, William Morris's country home.

Charles J. Connick: His Education and His Windows in and near Pittsburgh by Albert M. Tannler will be published Autumn 2008 by the Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation. The book documents Connick's formative years in Pittsburgh and Boston and his windows in ten architecturally significant buildings in southwestern Pennsylvania.