

Connick Windows

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THE PASSIONIST: CHARLES CONNICK IN NEW JERSEY

Editor's note: This is the second 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. Part one, *The Newark Codex*, appeared in the winter edition and is available for download in the Charles Connick Stained Glass Foundation's online archives.

PART TWO: ENLIGHTENMENT IN ENGLEWOOD

From the rear parking lot of First Presbyterian Church, in Englewood, New Jersey - a wooded Palisades bluff township delineated by dense districts of old growth trees and long steep stretches of lawn-lined mansions and low-rise garden apartment complexes - the pull of the great George Washington Bridge is intensely felt. Above Englewood's ancient foliage, past the soaring Corbusian residential towers of nearby Fort Lee - a municipality known as the mecca of silent film manufacturing a century ago - the Manhattan metropolis, ever frozen yet ever evolving, rises.

Against this striking apparitional backdrop, First Presbyterian, a High Victorian Gothic Revival church designed and erected 1870-1878 by George Fletcher Babb, Potter & Robertson, and J. Cleveland Cady, with later additions and alterations by the prominent Boston architectural firm of Allen & Collens, stands in silent polychromatic stateliness, its connecting chapels, octagonal transepts, soaring bell towers, stepped foyer entrances, hedge-hemmed drives, and hidden ivy-shaded walkways revealed resplendently across a long horizontal campus at the wide summit of East Palisade Avenue. Recent heavy rains have inundated this ecclesiastical enclave's richly rusticated envelope of sandstone blocks and metamorphic roof tiles, giving it an ethereal slate-gray glow, a grainy illuminance indicative of the glorious glass fields awaiting within.



The low-lit interior sanctuary - a simple yet riveting cruciform spatiality shaped by stretched-to-the-limits timber arches and pulled purlins, all meeting at metal-plated points and crisscrossing into parabolic vaultings - is an archeological bounty of stained glass art. Major memorial windows executed by the New York and Boston studios of some of the early-20th century's finest fabricators - Henry Wynd Young, Louis Comfort Tiffany, John La Farge - unfold along central column-obstructed aisles; surface at transept turns; appear half-seen through deep doors, altar alcoves, curving corridors.

Every single and multi-lanceted opening is occupied by a light of the highest order. In the north transept, set in the north wall fenestration, three majestic thick-plated prisms dominate: *King David* (1882) and *John the Beloved Disciple* (1895), attributed to La Farge and Tiffany, and *John the Baptist* (1897-1906), a serene, glass-nugget encrusted scene designed by the forgotten master - and Englewood resident - Chester Loomis (1852-1924). Opposite these radiating images, in the rounded recess of the south transept, three more windows in similar style loom: *Risen Christ* (1885) and *Mary Magdalene* (1889), by La Farge, and *Resurrection Angel* (1914), by Tiffany, topping off one of the region's most prized (and, according to parish officials, priceless and uninsurable) collections of Tiffany and La Farge windows.

As visceral and famous as these opalescent-heavy transept windows are, First Presbyterian's stained glass canvas is balanced - certainly surpassed - by the Henry Wynd Young windows. The chancel rose window, dating to 1917, is supremely transcendent alone. Cadmium-infused at every inch - from the three robed figures of *Faith*, *Hope* and *Charity* to the intricate grisaille patternings - the triptych tableau levitates over the altar like a Golden Fleece, sumptuous in its fixed illuminated book sphere. The Young Studio, based in Brooklyn, also designed windows between 1918-1924 for First Presbyterian's west choir balcony wall and the side walls of the north and south transepts, as well as all

the memorials in the north aisle. These in particular are most pivotal, having been designed by the studio's reigning genius: J. Gordon Guthrie (1874-1961). At First Presbyterian, his trademark medieval style - forlorn cherubic faces with glowing photo-real hair, musical instrument-wielding saints, statuary canopy surrounds, all clenched into the tight confines of the narrow panel - is on fire, especially in the north aisle WWI memorial window *Galahad and the Quest of the Holy Grail*. Filled with deep sadness - a sadness that becomes, in light, its central beauty - the window might be the church's greatest glass possession.

Except there is a Charles Connick window tucked away in a small pointed aperture in the west wall of the south transept, so as to purposefully surprise and eclipse, in one viewing, everything else.

In 1929, Connick was commissioned by First Presbyterian donor Frederick S. Duncan to craft a *Consecration* window in memory of the Cory and Lyman families. Connick, who designed his own King Arthur window at Princeton University over a decade before, at the same time as Guthrie's version - a towering work that defined his artistic course over the next decade - was well aware that his *Consecration* window in Englewood had to be better than all the Tiffany, La Farge, Young and Guthrie windows if his presence was to have substantial meaning - certainly no easy task among such gifted contemporaries. Connick, through correspondence, listened intently to Duncan, who asked that the window conform visually to the church's surrounding Young windows, particularly the stone canopy borders. Surely a small commission in Englewood could be quickly rendered, without much effort?

For Connick, every window, be it monumental or minute, counted toward his overall canon; nothing was to be taken for granted; the small sonnet was to be even greater than the sweeping epic. Burning creativity at this precise time was on Connick's side: career wise, he had reached a new pinnacle, designing his monumental chancel windows for Ralph Adams Cram's Princeton Chapel. His powers as an illustrator, painter, and glazier were extraordinary, Shakespearean in scope; his ability to find inspiration within his own grasp and depths. Emboldened, Connick added statues of saints stacking upward, reredos-like, to the Englewood light, but his pale statues seem to be living, filled with breath, their eyes peering toward the subjects. He divided the window into three scenes: at the base, Hannah presenting the boy Samuel to Eli the High Priest; in the middle, Mary and Joseph bringing the Christ child to Simeon in the Temple; at the top, St. Augustine and his son Aeodatus being baptized by the Bishop of Milan with St. Monica watching.

The window, which took three years to conceive, render, fabricate, and set, was a triumph for Connick - though today it is virtually forgotten - and led to the commission of four Gospel medallion windows across First Presbyterian's south aisle between the years 1933-1944, including depictions of St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke, and St. John. These later windows, though far from monumental, were taken seriously by Connick as well, who even visited the site from Boston to manage their installation.



But it is his *Consecration* window, as small as it is, that remains as his Englewood testament. Aglow in setting sunlight, it is voluminous to the viewer's eyes, filled with haunting effigies and a searing saintly innocence that verges on the immaculate. It is a work that can bring viewers to their knees, if not tears. Hidden, perhaps - yet keenly kinetic, lasting, for all time.

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News and Notes

The Foundation's Annual Tour took place in Pittsburgh over the Memorial Day weekend and was a great success. Many thanks to Peter Cormack and Al Tannler for their insights, and to our host churches for their hospitality.

The Orin E Skinner Annual Lecture will be given in October by architectural historian John Gomez, author of the 2014 newsletter features. Details to be announced.

The exhibit "Charles Connick, Adventurer in Light and Color" continues until the end of July at the Jackson Homestead in Newton MA.