

Connick Windows

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On historically significant Bowdoin Street, Beacon Hill, behind the gold-domed State House Boston, the Church of St. John the Evangelist will soon become a private residence excluding the public from studying its prominent artistic contents. Saint John's contains the work of some of the most remarkable figures in the history of American ecclesiastical art: Ralph Adams Cram, arguably America's greatest ecclesiastical architect (who was a parishioner at St. John's); John Kirchmayer, the wood-carver and sculptor; Pierre de Chaignon La Rose, one of America's most eminent heraldic designers; and Charles J. Connick, the foremost American stained glass artist of the twentieth century. These men often worked in collaboration, and the decoration of St John's is a notable example of their harmonious endeavors. In this article St. John's parishioner and former warden, David J. Russo, J.D., explores its history, stained glass evolution and architectural changes. David is also the Chairperson of the Watertown Historical Commission.

The Church of St. John the Evangelist on Bowdoin Street in Beacon Hill is a study in the retrofitting and renovation of a worship space that began life as the Bowdoin Street Congregational Society in 1831. The sanctuary was a spare and austere Calvinist space under the leadership of the Rev. Lyman Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe's father.

In 1863, Church of the Advent, of Brimmer Street fame, purchased the property, and the building began its metamorphosis into an Episcopal space of a particular brand: the Oxford movement. This ideology encourages implementing Catholic thought and practice into the Anglican tradition. Accordingly, the Church of the Advent hired Richard Upjohn to renovate the sanctuary for their more ritualized liturgy.

In 1883, the Church of the Advent sold the property to the Society of St. John the Evangelist, an Anglican order of monks commonly known as the Cowley Fathers. They were also proponents of the Oxford movement and therefore the church was liturgically a good fit for them. Nonetheless, over the next 50 years, they undertook almost constant renovations, including adding a rood screen designed by Henry Vaughan, a reredos by Henry Mower and a renovation and reorganization of the sanctuary in 1930 by Ralph Adams Cram. Indeed a whole book could be written about the comprehensive nature and degree of the changes made at St. John's in this period.

The original Bowdoin Street Congregational Society church windows were in the form of tall Gothic style lancets, four on each side of the nave. Within each lancet is Y-shaped tracery which divides the larger window into pairs of lower rectangular sashes, pairs of middle rectangular sashes and the Gothic arch atop. The Gothic arch itself is a three-light structure with a small Gothic arch on each side and a kite-shaped window standing between and above. The windows originally contained rectangular-shaped

clear paned glass with Adam style panes in the Gothic arch. These original style windows remain in the Bowdoin Street façade.

In 1906ⁱ, the rectangular-paned clear glass windows in the nave were changed. The simple and clear rectangular panes were replaced by cathedral glass: elongated diamond leaded glass windows in rolled rippled yellow color with a lighter yellow trim. This was intended to brighten the sanctuary, as the church was almost fully hemmed-in on each side by buildings. The rippled yellow glass acted to eliminate the appearance of those buildings and capture the limited light, even appearing to light up the glass itself and transmit that light into the sanctuary. The original sashes and tracery in these windows were used. The replacement leading and glass were simply retrofitted into the original sashes.

By 1917, Fr. Cecil Powell, the superior of the Cowley community, found the yellow leaded glass to be drab and thought that adding heraldic shields would give color and texture to the fabric of the windows. Also, as World War I was ending, he thought that the shields would be a good way for families to memorialize their dead or as thanksgivings for those who returned safely. The windows of St John's are therefore rich in meaningful symbolism. They tell a story beyond simply the traditional imagery of the Church and its Saints.ⁱⁱ



St Peter, design by la Rose

To begin the project, Fr. Powell spoke with Pierre de Chaignon la Rose, an ecclesiologist and expert in the field of heraldry, to produce a series of shields and medallions containing the emblems of saints. La Rose was so taken with this project and the Cowley Fathers that he offered to donate his designs. Connick was to be the stained glass artist in charge of creating the windows. However, comparison of the completed windows with la Rose drawings clearly shows that Connick and his Studio team regarded the latter primarily as conveying heraldic data, which they then freely adapted and developed for execution in stained glass. December 19, 1917, Connick wrote La Rose “My foreman and I went to the Church of St. John the Evangelist yesterday, and we determined that my price should be sixty

dollars (\$60.00) each for the coats-of-arms, made and set in place complete.””In view of your many kindnesses to me I shall wish to make a special price of the one which you are to give.”ⁱⁱⁱ

On December 21, 1917 La Rose wrote back: “I would like you to begin as soon as you can on the two lowest of the first window at St. John's (the one nearest the organ) with the arms of St. Peter in the right lower.” La Rose gave St. John's the St. Peter emblem and was charged \$30.00 by Connick Studio.^{iv}



St Peter, window by Connick Studio.
Photo: Ian Justice

As an Anglo-Catholic parish, the priests predictably drew on the heritage of two traditions: the pre-Henry VIII Catholic Church and the religious history of the British Isles. A variety of elaborate jeweled crowns imaginatively devised from English historical precedent or more fancifully invented, surmounted the shields symbolizing Christ, Mary, the Saints and characters from the Old Testament.



Archangel Uriel window.
Photo: Ian Justice

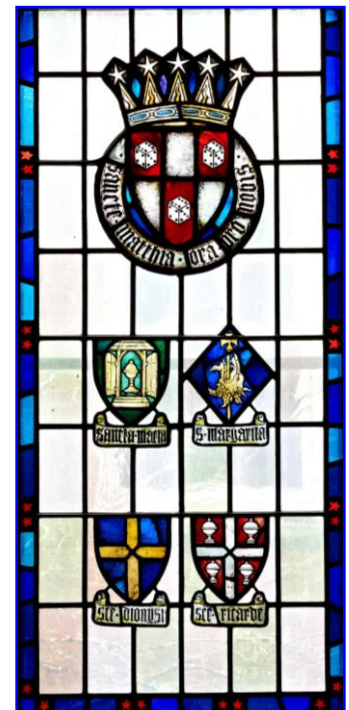
Above the gallery and in the Gothic arches, the windows are devoted to angels and the 12 tribes of Israel. The angels are represented in the kite of the window and the tribes in the side arches. Because the angels are represented in the summit of each window, the angles are not simply heraldic shields but rather medallions: shields enwreathed by fretwork and topped with a prince's crown. The angels featured are Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, Uriel and Zadkiel.

The tribes of Israel, on the other hand, are smaller and represented with shields and banners below with their respective names in Latin. The tribes featured are Asher, Benjamin, Dan, Gad, Issachar, Joseph, Judah, Levi, Reuben, Simeon and Zebulun.

“The artist in glass is often puzzled by light conditions in city churches. A window is at the mercy of the light it receives, and when the path of light is disturbed by all sorts of obstructions it is difficult to make it function beautifully. This problem is emphasized in the Seven Sacraments window, for such a subject suggests pure color and pure light.”^v

Connick wrote that the Seven Sacraments medallion window in the Cram Chapel is “to be in pure color, and drawn with special feeling for silhouette. The medallion backgrounds are to be of seedy white, or of the corrugated glass we are now using. The figures should be clearly traced, and probably matted in a single tone. It is a question as to whether or not the figures should be slightly stippled... The window gets direct sunlight in the morning, and I would like to have Troto, [Trovatore Mainini, Connick designer] Svendsen [Knut Svendsen, Connick designer] and Cartwright [Leo Cartwright, Connick cartoon artist] see the place where the window is to go on a sunny morning, and carry the whole thing through. The background of the window to be of tinted slabs, and I am not sure whether or not it should have any texture of paint, although the window gets direct light in the morning. As a rule, all the windows at the Church are shaded, and they say there is no danger of having it too light.”^{vi} “Mr. Cram is delighted with the design for the Seven Sacraments window for Mr. Cram’s Chapel. (We are giving this window).”^{vii}

Outside of the chancel and under the galleries are the remaining six pairs of sashes. Each sash contains a medallion of one of the Apostles consisting of his coat-of-arms enwreathed by a white field inscribed with his name and “ora pro nobis,” [pray for us] and surmounted by an earl’s coronet. Below each Apostle’s medallion are two pairs of coats of arms of particular saints, each set placed one above the other with banners below with their respective names in Latin. Male saints are represented with a traditional escutcheon (shield) shaped coat-of-arms while the female saints feature a lozenge (diamond) shaped form, which add importantly to the visual interest of the composition. The only exception in this portion of the series is the shield of St Mary of Jerusalem, who in her sovereign role as Queen of Heaven would be shown with a proper shield rather than a lozenge used for female.



St Matthias window.
Photo: Ian Justice

The lead work of the windows and some of the background glass under the gallery also deserves some mention because, as we've learned about all things at St. John's, there's a general scheme and some exceptions. Once the shields and medallions began to be added, more liberty was taken to change the windows to introduce even more light to the dim sanctuary. When the two chancel windows adjacent to the chancel were added in 1930, the lead work was changed to a rectangular pattern from the elongated diamond pattern. The rectangular lights are composed of very light and translucent blue, green and clear panes on the north and south sides. These lighter colors acted to brighten the chancel and give prominence to the sacred activities conducted there.

In 1921, the yellow rippled glass was removed from a pair of windows and replaced with rippled, bubbled, translucent glass, some with very light blue tones. Nonetheless, the elongated diamond patterned lead work was retained, as was the bright yellow border.

In 1959 two other sashes were altered, with the yellow rippled glass being removed along with the elongated diamond lead work itself. It was all replaced with a rectangular pattern of lead work containing very light and translucent blue, green and clear panes. Outlining these sashes were mid and dark blue borders enlivened by red stars, in harmony with the two chancel windows.

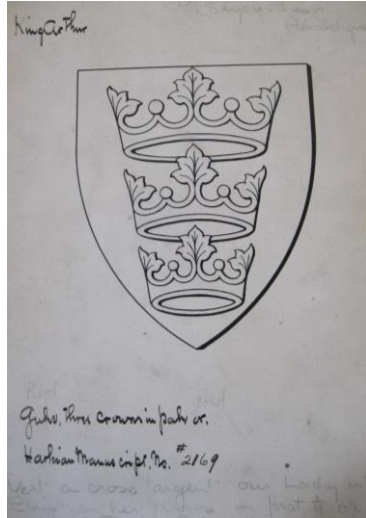
The parish considered changing all of the leaded windows to one of these two patterns, and indeed, Connick Studios corresponded with the church in 1930 and again in 1958 and 1960 about pricing and changing the yellow glass background.^{viii} However, we never did, although it is unclear why. Nonetheless, we are left with a quite varied compilation of interesting and significant stained glass windows.



An entrance dalle de verre screen with St. John's eagle designed by György Kepes, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Center for Advance Visual Studies, was installed in the 1960's. Stained glass artist Joseph Ferguson fabricated the panel for Kepes and St. John's. "I worked from a sketch he gave me and have a painting that was approved by the church and that I worked from. I cut the pattern from expanded metal grill, made two sides connected by sections of the expanded metal grill and then troweled cement on in place. I must have fixed the glass in place and troweled the cement around it. There were lights inside the structure."

It's important to remember that the Connick windows at the Church of St. John the Evangelist are a representation of the values and background of the priests who served the parish community. They are artistic expressions that created an environment in which the members of the parish community experienced the sacred in a very particular way, and aided them in their lifelong journey toward Christian salvation.

What will become of the unique treasures in historic 'Gothic style' Saint John the Evangelist is a question answered only by its life as it continues to unfold. We here at the Connick Foundation, representing Connick and his artistic workers, as well as the other Artists and Craftsmen, are praying that however St. John's evolves, its treasures will continue to exist and inspire those who experience them.



From a letter to Oliver B. Dale, S.S.J.E. November 18, 1927: “King Arthur, regarded as a saint in Brittany, is represented by three golden crowns on a field of ruby in reference to his kingly nature”
Photo on right: Ian Justice

ⁱ *Boston Globe*, "Rood Screen Dedicated," January 15, 1906, p. 9

ⁱⁱ In 1923 Father Powell requested a shield of St. Edwin to be dedicated to a friend's young child. “My dear Mr. Connick: Mrs Ford, a friend of ours lost her little boy Edwin, a month or two ago. He was run over by an automobile and killed instantly.....She and her husband want very much to have an heraldic shield of S. Edwin in one of the windows of St. John's.....Today I have a letter from Mrs. Ford in which she begs me to ask if you will let her have a little sketch with the colours indicated, of the shield.....The window shield might go, I should think, in a window of the Church near the Pont where there is vacant space.” Letter, January 25, 1923, from the Connick Collection, Boston Public Library, Fine Arts Department.

ⁱⁱⁱ CJ Connick, Letter, December 19, 1917.

^{iv} Invoice, April 1, 1918.

^v Studio notes, undated.

^{vi} Connick Studio notes recorded September 8, 1930

^{vii} CJ Connick dictation notes, September 15, 1930.

^{viii} CJ Connick, Letter, to RA Cram, 1921, “I have never liked the yellow glass”. Orin E Skinner, Letter, January 23, 1930, to Fr Burton SSJE, “Mr. Connick is very glad that you are considering changing the background of your windows”.

Sources:

Smith, Robert Cheney, *The Shrine on Bowdoin Street: 1883-1958*, Society of St. John the Evangelist, Boston, Mass., 1958
A Litany of Saints, William J. Coe, pamphlet, undated.
 Connick Collection, Boston Public Library, Fine Arts Department.