

The Great West Rose Window Cathedral of St. John the Divine

By CHARLES J. CONNICK

THE ROSE WINDOW has long been revered as one of the most beautiful symbols in Christian art. It has been immortalized in poetry by Dante, whose Mystic Rose of Paradise may be called the spiritual image of the rose window. His vision suggested the splendor of design in lyrical color and light that should characterize the lacy stonework and jeweled glass of that architectural unit. Dante probably saw the three great rose windows of Notre-Dame when he visited Paris shortly after they were placed. So the glass craftsman of today may well glory in the work of those early masters and in the potential power of a great symbol in stained glass to touch the springs of poetry—now as then.

The lofty western rose of the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York City offers the symbolist an opportunity to announce in pure light and color the spiritual beauty and power of a heavenly vision, expressed in symbols like those which Dante made immortal in his medieval miracle of song. This great composition marks the effort of the architect, through eloquent spaces patterned in stone, and of the craftsman, in his colored spots of glass defined by paint, lead and iron, to symbolize the Christian ministry as a revelation of Heavenly Love, Wisdom and Power.

The dominating central figure of Christ in Glory is enriched by the symbols of the Seven Gifts of the Spirit and by a choir of angels that radiates from the center and announces the central theme of Praise and Prayer. Eight related pieces are developed as symbols of the Beatitudes that unite conceptions of Heavenly Love and Wisdom with Virtue among men. The four distinctive "petal" units near the outer rim are enriched with

figures of the Four Evangelists. Seraphim, symbols of Divine Love, surround them in the tracery and so announce the New Dispensation. These contrast with four secondary groups, enriched by the Four Major Prophets, surrounded by cherubim, symbols of Divine Wisdom, announcing the Old Dispensation that was prophetic of the New.

The entire conception is based upon a belief in the spontaneous emotional appeal of pure color alive in light. It belongs to the region of poetry and should enrich that great stone fabric from sunrise to sunset with implications of spiritual beauty beyond the reach of mere words. A great window against the sky is like an orchestra of bells and harps in the wind. It is of the color of the weather and its symphonic splendors vary with the passing hours.

We learn to know great windows much as we learn to know Nature's symphonies and the work of the masters of music—by living with them and harmonizing all their elements within ourselves. To those who are alive to gentle influence of landscape and sky, the old traditions of Christian art may still be fresh and vital, for they are touched with Nature's common ways, with sunrise and bursting flowers, birds and stars and rolling seas.

Possibly no tradition of the Middle Ages is more enduring than the symbolism related to color. That tradition is remarkably true to our own emotional responses to direct appeals of pure colors. Our workaday expression "true blue" recalls blue as the ancient symbol of loyalty and divine wisdom. "To see red" is to realize the warmth and power of that color, but its purest rays recall the celestial radiance of divine love, passionate devotion, courage,

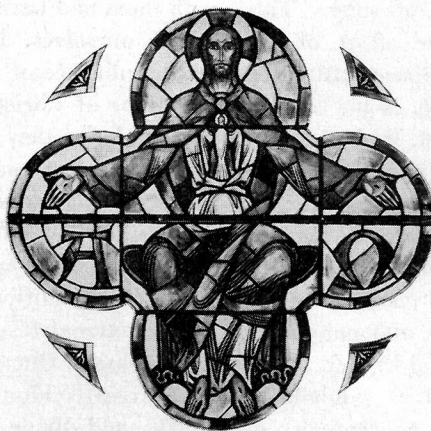
martyrdom. True yellow, the color of gold, still signifies treasure, the gold of spiritual achievement and of heavenly riches, although we recognize a murky yellow as of sinister import, just as the ancients did. White, in its purity and cool restfulness, still speaks to us of serenity and faith, while green, as the color of springtime and youth, needs no label as a symbol of hope and victory.

Musicians have traditions relating color to sound, and lovers of music often think of instruments in terms of color. It is in this region that the artist in glass feels very much at home. The color in light of a great stained-glass window vibrates with a vitality like nothing else in visual art. The relation and interrelation of active colors is like the fascinating bewilderment of myriad sounds "jostling each other in joyful rout." The artist in glass shares with Browning's Abt Vogler a medium for the expression of a beauty become magical. Light and distance may transform the work of a devoted glass man into visions of undiscovered loveliness. The magic he knows is like that of the old musician

*That out of three sounds he frame,
Not a fourth sound—but a star.*

So any description or reproduction of a great window is incomplete unless it provides for that touch of magic. One can say of this design for the western rose of Saint John the Divine that it should sing to the glory of God in a warm center of reds and golds, rayed forth by brilliant angels of Praise and Prayer into a vast quatrefoil of reds, golds and blues, to symbolize the New Dispensation against the cooling triangles of blues and deeper reds that typify the Old Dispensation to complete the circle—the symbol of the Infinite Perfection of the Almighty.

This assumes a visualization of the window itself in light and an attempt to write a program for its mysterious music to the eye. When the window is set in place this fall, it will mark a unique adventure in active prismatic color and our brilliant American light. How fascinating it will be to watch its balancing of light and shadow in dissolving color as it functions in changing lights! Through hours, days and seasons, it will be an architectural unit, a jeweled Phoenix of the sun, a burst of symphonic music that may aspire to César Franck's "Tents of the pavilioned spirit."



Christ in Glory

*Cartoon for the Central Figure of
the Great Western Rose Window*