

GATES OF HEAVEN

1 in a series of 3

February 17, 2008

This spring, the Seattle Art Museum is privileged to host a once-in-a-lifetime exhibit of three panels of Lorenzo Ghiberti's Renaissance masterpiece, the bronze doors of the baptistry of the Cathedral of Florence. A series of inserts in the bulletin will help us celebrate this event and learn more about "the Gates of Paradise" and our own magnificent bronze doors created by Ulrich Henn. On Monday, March 3, the Seattle Art Museum will host an interfaith panel on Ghiberti's doors. Details coming soon!

In April, 1424, Lorenzo Ghiberti oversaw the installation of his new doors for the baptistry of the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore. These doors, depicting twenty scenes from the New Testament, weighed thirty-four thousand pounds and cost twenty-two thousand florins. Ghiberti, now 44 years old, had labored at them for twenty years—his entire adult life.



Lorenzo Ghiberti tucked a self-portrait into his "Gates of Paradise"

The Merchants' Guild of Florence, who had commissioned the doors so many years before, were delighted with the results. No sooner had they seen the doors in place and heard the raves from every side, than they decided to commission another set of doors from Ghiberti. This time, they told him, he was to pull out all the stops. "He had permission to do anything he wished so that the doors would turn out even more elegant, rich, perfect, and beautiful than he could ever imagine. Nor should he worry about the time or the expenses, so that just as he had surpassed all other statuary up to that time, he could now outdo and surpass all of his own works" (Vasari).

Ghiberti threw himself into this new project with zeal. Finally he had a worthy rival to compete with: himself! For twenty-four years, he labored at this new set of doors, revolutionizing art as he went, making breakthroughs with each panel, in perspective, relief, and in the casting and finishing of bronze. The doors, which were finally installed on the east side of the baptistry in 1448, depicted stories from the Old Testament, from the creation of Adam and Eve to Solomon in his glory. Many years later, another Florentine artist, Michelangelo Buonarroti, was seen pausing to look at them. "When he was asked what he thought of them and whether they were beautiful, he replied: "They are so beautiful that they would do nicely at the entrance to Paradise" (Vasari).

At St. James, we know that the age of great church-doors is not in the past. In the early 1990s, Father Ryan—like the Merchants' Guild in Florence so long ago—was in search

of an artist who could create bronze doors for St. James Cathedral. While the Merchants' Guild had held a contest which drew artists from all over Tuscany, St. James Cathedral cast its net far wider. "After spending considerable time on research and study," Father Ryan has written, "we began an international search for an artist to handle the commission. Artists from across the country and around the world, including some fine ones right here in the Northwest, submitted proposals for consideration. In the end, the decision was made to award the commission to the internationally recognized German sculptor, Ulrich Henn." Well-known in his native Germany, Henn had completed only one commission in the United States—the magnificent gates of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. After receiving the commission, Henn visited Seattle, taking the measure not only of the building but of the community as he commenced work on this new project.

Henn's bronze doors were the work not of days or months, but of years. Fifteen feet high, the great central doors were to depict the journey to the heavenly Jerusalem, beginning with Adam and Eve in the garden, through Noah and Moses, and the story of Christ's ministry from his Baptism in the Jordan to his lonely journey to Calvary. As in Ghiberti's day, sculpting the doors was only the beginning of a long, immensely complex process developed by the Romans before the Christian era—the lost wax process.

—M & C Laughlin

Next week: *The Bible in Bronze.*



Ulrich Henn completed St. James Cathedral's bronze doors in 1999

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Doors have great symbolic significance in our culture. We speak of being "on the threshold" of something, of someone "opening doors" for us, of having the door "slammed in our face." In your life, when have doors opened for you? When have they closed?
- Jesus said, "I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be safe" (John 10: 9). The doors of a church, not unlike the altar and the ambo, are a sign of Christ in the building. Ghiberti's "Gates of Paradise" and our own doors created by Ulrich Henn are unlike ordinary doors in that they have no handles: they can only be opened from within. How did you first enter the Church? Who opened those doors for you?