

CENTENNIAL GAZETTE

St. James Cathedral, Seattle

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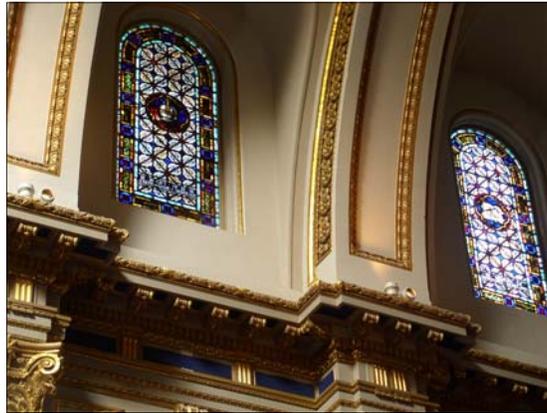
SINGING WINDOWS: CHARLES CONNICK AT ST. JAMES

It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good, as the saying goes, and the collapse of the Cathedral's dome had a few positive consequences. The acoustics of the building were dramatically improved, for one thing, and, beginning in 1918, the clear glass windows were replaced with stained glass by the Boston studio of Charles Connick.

Connick called the making of stained glass windows a "craft," and himself a "master craftsman"; but he was every inch the artist: brilliant, intense, and also a bit temperamental. In 1937, Connick published *Adventures in Light and Color*, a massive and splendidly illustrated account of his love affair with stained glass, and his life-long pursuit of the secrets of the medieval masters.

Connick's book includes many anecdotes that suggest what working with this passionate craftsman must have been like. For example: on seeing one of his windows installed in a new church, Connick realized that "surface light"—that is, light coming from the inside of the building, and shining *on* the glass rather than *through* it—was making the new window look dark and dull—in a sense, "putting it out." He made some suggestions, but the church building committee told him that the new window was good enough the way it was. Connick replied with some heat, "I don't want my window to be 'good enough.' I want it to be glorious!"

For Connick, the art of stained glass wasn't so much about line, draughtsmanship, and subject matter as it was about color and light. He first visited the great Cathedral of Notre Dame in Chartres, France, in August of 1910, and his experience there transformed his understanding of his craft. "All my theories about windows—even my latest ones—had to be revised; so many windows alight, caroling together within sympathetic walls, seemed to combine into something new and strange.... They were like a new wizardry of sound, a strange music that was also familiar." At Chartres, Connick saw windows that were vulnerable to the light, taking on new and shifting moods as morning turned to evening, as summer turned to fall. The windows of Chartres were alive in a way Connick had never imagined windows could be. He wanted his windows to live in the same way, thriving on the light,



"I want people to hear my windows singing," Charles Connick wrote in 1937.

changing with every nuance of sun, cloud, and shadow.

The Cathedral's windows come from an early phase in Connick's career. He had established his Boston studio in 1913. And the commission for St. James Cathedral in 1916 was one of the largest he had yet received, with a complex arrangement of themes and subjects, selected by the Cathedral's pastor, Father William Noonan.

The Cathedral windows tell a story, and as we move

through the Cathedral they lead us from word to sacrament, from earth to heaven. We begin, in the west nave, with the saints and evangelists, on the lower level, and symbols of the ten commandments, on the upper level: the power of God's word, in both the Old and New Testaments. Moving into the transepts, the large green and gold windows take us to moments when earth touches heaven, the Nativity of the Lord on the north side, and the Resurrection on the south. And in the east nave, we move towards heaven, with symbols of heavenly worship in the clerestory. The windows in the Cathedral Chapel are also by Connick, and their wonderful imagery of the Eucharist show the versatility of this dynamic artist. (See if you can find the window Connick himself donated!)

One of Connick's heroes in the world of stained glass was the 19th-century architect and restorer of all things medieval, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc. Connick would often tell the story of Viollet-le-Duc's first visit to Notre Dame in Paris. "The child first saw the great North Rose just as the cathedral organ burst into music. He thought sound, color, and light were one, as he exclaimed, 'Father, the window is singing.'" For Charles Connick, that little story said everything about stained glass. Windows were more than decoration, more than just bright colors and pleasing designs. A beautiful window, Connick felt, could preach the Gospel. "If churches are made radiant and beautiful places of worship," he wrote, "we can have a spiritual regeneration without anyone knowing what is going on. Beauty can preach as very few men with bundles of words can preach. I want to make beautiful interiors for both churches and souls. I want people to hear my windows singing."

—Corinna Laughlin

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