Trinity Cathedral: The Burnham Stained Glass Windows
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As a large and familiar landmark (at least from the outside), it is possible not to appreciate the
traditions as well as complex associations that makeup the interior art of Trinity Cathedral. To better
appreciate this interior, its components may be studied separately in order to understand them fully
before trying to comprehend the entire interior decoration of the Cathedral as a whole. A separate
study of Trinity’s Burnham Studio stained glass windows is a case in point.

Trinity Cathedral contains over forty stained glass windows that span the 15th through the 20th
centuries. Its medieval windows come from the hands of artists working long ago in England and
Germany while the more recent windows are the work of such noted studios as Willet, Connick,
Tiffany, Heaton, Young, and Burnham. Employing traditional orientation and iconography, these
windows tell particular stories to those in attendance at Cathedral functions. How does their
orientation and iconography achieve this story telling and what stories are told?

Looking closely at the Burnham Studio windows (the most accessible in the Cathedral) provides
answers to these questions. Positioned just above eye level, these windows are easy to see. Located
along the aisles below the large windows of the east and west transepts and along the east and west
aisles of the nave, they are in high usage areas of the Cathedral. They tell a thematically unified
story based on legendary and biblical information about the life of Jesus.

The Burnham Studio produced fifteen windows for Trinity Cathedral. Three are located along the
aisle below the large Nativity window in the west transept; three more are located in the corre-
sponding position in the east transept below the large window depicting the Resurrection. Five
more windows are located along the east nave aisle, while four are placed along the west nave aisle. Here the four Burnham windows share space with a middle window produced by the Gorham Studio.

The Burnham Studio commission for Trinity windows resulted from the opinion of the Cathedral dean that this was the most competent studio in the design and installation of stained glass memorial windows. The dean was also responsible for the subject matter of the windows which were installed during the latter part of 1939.

Burnham used pot-metal glass in the Trinity windows. This common glass coloring technique uses metal oxides to achieve color and takes its name from the ceramic pots in which the metal and molten glass are heated. This glass was then made into sheets using the antique or muff method. The molten glass was hand blown into an elongated jar from which the top and bottom have been removed. The remaining cylinder was cut down the side, reheated and flattened into a sheet. This glass has a variety of imperfections which result in a superior quality glass for stained glass windows. Variations in thickness result in color shading. Bubbles and surface striations caused by the spinning of the molten glass during the blowing process causes the light rays passing through the glass to scatter creating a sparkling effect.

The design for the windows began with small colored drawings. These are turned into cartoons, finished black and white renderings made to full window size. From the cartoon the cutline and pattern drawings are made. The cutline is an exact tracing of the leadlines that will serve as a guide in leading the glass together (glazing). The pattern drawing is used to make templates for the cutting of each piece of glass in the window.

Before glazing, the glass may be painted with special vitrifiable paints that are fused to the glass by heating it in a kiln. The glass painter traces the details directly from the cartoon on to the glass. Using a variety of paints, stains, and enamels, the painter can create the images and decorations that insure that the windows tell their story.

The Gothic architecture style of Trinity Cathedral is a deliberate attempt to remind about the English/Anglican roots of the American Episcopal faith. Henry the VIII’s reformed English Church continued with its Catholic forms of worship in churches designed and built during the long period of Gothic architecture predominance in Europe. Trinity Cathedral's clerical and lay leadership hoped that the structure's interior decoration would also be reminiscent of Episcopalian origins. The Burnham windows are part of this atavism.

By the 1930s, the Burnham Studio was nationally prominent and noted for the excellence of its medieval-revival windows. Wilber H. Burnham, Sr. noted his purpose “to give glory to God through a material which is the crowning accent of architecture.” His son carried on the Burnham interest the medieval stained glass tradition. Although the senior Burnham was still an active artist at the time of the Trinity window commission, it is possible that these windows are the work of the son who had recently graduated from Yale with a BFA. Regardless of artist, the Trinity windows exemplify a concept that Burnham, Sr. agreed with: Unity in multiple windows is most easily created when there is an early, consistent policy from church leaders working closely with the designer.

In telling Jesus’ biography, the windows use repetitive iconographical features including nimbus (halo), fleur-de-lis, grapes, vines, grain, leaves, stars, and wings. The symbolical body language of the figures shows hands raised in blessing, as well as standing, sitting, and kneeling postures. In some respects the elongate figures and unfocused gazes remind of the appearance of painted icons.

At their dedication, the Trinity Burnham windows were the subject of local media attention. They remain in the Cathedral, using color, light, and design to tell their stories to the interested and informed visitor.

(The authors acknowledge the collaboration of The Rev. David Novak and Thomas Lewis in this ongoing research.)