Trinity Church, Boston, as a Monument of American Art: : : : : Irene Sargent

As the irony of Fate, the Puritan city of America possesses what must always rank as the most important monument of ecclesiastical art in our country; since the edifice in question marks a new era in our national development of architecture and of the use of colored glass as a decorative agent. As is not infrequently the case with epoch-making works of art, Trinity Church, Boston, owes its being to a great, temporary misfortune, and a large share of its beauty to an accidental discovery. This statement, seemingly careless, can be justified by explanation. The great Boston fire of 1872 placed an extensive and valuable area of the city under an absolute disability of long duration. Old barriers between the commercial and the residential districts fell, and the compressed business life burst forth at unexpected points. A new quarter developed on the made lands to the southwest, which had indeed existed before the fire, but whose final character was assured by public needs and demands arising out of the appalling municipal disaster. Opportunity which had been denied to architects by the tortuous street lines, the steep ascents and the narrow limits of the old city, were now abundantly offered to the artist who should arise competent to employ the means at hand. The man did not fail the occasion, when Richardson, the architect of thorough training, great strength, originality and adaptability, gave the plans for the church which was to renew and modify the building art throughout the United States. He was a genius who accepted the legacy of a long past age, understood the modern uses to which it might be put, successfully allied the principles which he had adopted, to the features borrowed from other periods of art, took into grave consideration conditions of climate, local atmosphere and site: thus producing an unique structure, showing indeed a continuity of tradition and acknowledging its source,—just as a highly developed language keeps in memory the people who first spoke it—but, at the same time, displaying creative force sufficient to provide it with a long existence. The Gallo-Romanesque style, as treated in Trinity Church, was seen to fit the surroundings into which it had
been introduced. The bold, simple outlines of the Richardson structure accentuated the flat site out of which it rose. Its masses, disposed in great blocks harmoniously united, must, it was evident, preserve their striking individuality, even when a thickly populated area should crowd public buildings and dwellings closely upon it. Its structural material, rich in color, rough in texture, and made further susceptible by the character of cutting to accidents of light and shade, the area and shape of the roofs which offered occasion for the use of a covering which should tell against the clear blue of the sea-atmosphere: all these features justified their existence and made a strong appeal to the artist and to the layman alike. So, within the decade following the building of Trinity Church, Boston, the round low arch, the heavy column, the rough stone fabric of the Romanesque rose East, mid-way and West in the United States, marking its character upon church, town-hall, corporation-building and home. An architectural era, known as the "Richardsonian," began, which, although sometimes expressing itself awkwardly and inopportune, was yet a period of great artistic progress: sweeping away like a flood, the trivial, inorganic, badly coördinated style which had preceded it, and everywhere rearing the simple, strong and striking structure. As is the way of life and of art, the parent of the "Richardsonian Romanesque" is forgotten by the many, and its degenerate descendants,—for such there are—are often criticised for defects absent in the great original, which is an imposing pile, satisfying the form-sense by its treatment of line and mass, and making a strong appeal to the color-sense, as is required from every successful modern work of art. The beginning of an era is indeed marked in the coördinated stones of this church, and wherever in our country we find traces of the crude, bold Romanesque giving a touch of strength and character to our buildings, whether ecclesiastical, secular or domestic, whether located on sea-board marsh or Mississippi bluff, we recognize the influence of Richardson. Indirectly to him, also, we must attribute that adventurous spirit in architecture, which, as one of its happiest efforts, produced the house of Louis Tiffany, at Madison Avenue and Seventy-Second Street, New York: a building which combines and
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harmonizes in a remarkable way architectural elements chosen from widely different styles and countries; making them serve the double end of use and beauty, and perfectly adapting them to modern and new-world conditions; binding together into one organic structure the French tourelle, the Italian loggia and the Hanseatic League Town roof. Endlessly extended and multiplied, these elements have provided popular enjoyment throughout the country: the tourelle being a real "coign of vantage" over the crowded street, since it joins picturesqueness with economy of ground space; the roof pierced with numerous windows serving the same purpose as the tourelle, although under different conditions; and the loggia increasing the comfort and pleasure of the city residence, while offering possibilities for decorative effects obtainable from no other treatment. Between the house thus skilfully produced and the Romanesque church consecrated by the memory of the great bishop Brooks, there is no apparent connection; yet save for the existence of the church, the house judged by Edmund Gosse to be the finest domestic structure in America would never have been built, and our cities and towns would lack much of that picturesqueness which is dependent upon the variety of sky-line, and upon architecture showing alternate solid and pierced spaces: as, for instance, towers with open arcades, cloisters and porches with heavy semi-circular or depressed arches, and structural material not too highly wrought and polished to resist the beautifying influences of sunlight and shadow, weather and time. The Romanesque movement, begun at the opening of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, is now a subject of historical interest. It may be considered by some superficial observers as a lost artistic cause. But the architect of Trinity built for future generations by creating a structure imposing and individual enough to rise above considerations of style and to become a type in itself. He gave a rightly directed impetus to the building art in America: lifting it and sending it out into untried possibilites. He initiated a movement, containing, as we now see, a valuable and permanent element. He brought into prominence a type of architecture which offered the largest opportunities to decorative artists in glass, in mosaic work
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and in mural painting: three superb mediums of expression, in two of which American artists now bear comparison with the highest of their brothers in the Old World.

In Trinity Church the sister and subsidiary arts found their promoter in John La Farge, whose mural paintings and decorative windows, like the structure itself, mark the beginning of an artistic epoch: in mural painting for America, in decorative glass for the world. Through the agency and influence of this single man this modern place of worship has come to fulfil certain of the secondary functions which were performed by the great cathedrals of the Middle Ages, when they were the permanent repositories of the most exquisite productions of all the arts and crafts, when they were open schools, educators of the popular taste, sources from which the imaginative might draw lessons, the inventive genius might receive aid to guide him in his experiments, and the mature artist could gain a knowledge of principles by which to judge his own and his rivals' work.

With the first decorations placed by LaFarge upon the walls of Trinity, began an epoch of mural painting, which, although not yet terminated, has already clearly demonstrated the originality of American art and commanded for our artists world-wide respect and admiration. The work of LaFarge, confided to the care of the sanctuary, has suffered no injury during the quarter century since it was executed, while the nearly contemporaneous work of Hunt upon the walls of the Capitol at Albany, has, long since, ceased to exist; leaving behind no record save such as exists in the aquarelles of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Within the comparatively short time which has elapsed since the building of Trinity, other structures have arisen, such as the great libraries in Boston and Washington, and the Appellate Court in New York, which are even better adapted than the church for the display of mural decorations, and in these Sargent and Abbey, Vedder, Blashfield, Simmons and Low, have shown qualities which, in all cases, mark them as careful students of the old and supreme masters, and, in some instances, have met the artistic requirements of their times as fully as did the great Italians, who unfolded the history of man
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from his creation to his redemption, or who recorded municipal triumphs upon the walls of chapel or palace. Nor would it seem that the American genius for mural painting had, as yet, arrived at maturity. It is, rather, in its youth, daring and tentative, reaching out for remote possibilities, too confident of its power to heed conservative criticism, or to fear a fall into grave error. At all events, it understands the world to which it addresses itself, for it accepts color as one of the most imperative needs and one of the most spontaneous expressions of modern life. The “Abbey red,” the Sargent maze of color stand for something beyond parts of carefully planned artistic schemes. They are vibrant with life, feeling and passion. They speak in a language stronger than any that can be composed of words to those who live “the strenuous life.” But however far this American development of an important branch of art may go, its beginnings in Trinity Church, Boston, can not be ignored. The prophets, “the woman of Samaria,” the “Nicodemus” of LaFarge will always be recognized as the first members of a great series. They are at once intrinsically excellent and historically significant. They are among the treasures of Trinity whose value can not be appraised.

But important as are in this church the mural paintings of LaFarge, his picture windows in the same great edifice rank far beyond them; marking, as they do, what may be termed the opening of the American Revolution in decorative glass. In this art or artistic craft, the first telling success of the master resulted from a discovery made by him in 1870. By this means he learned that the white substance of a certain imitation porcelain, when insufficiently mixed with clay and coloring matter, produced a curious opalescent quality, semi-transparent and of great beauty. Applying this discovery to his work, he composed what artists believe to be the most perfect color-material ever invented. This he did by crushing under heavy rollers sheets of opaline glass containing two or three colors imperfectly mixed: the process being so conducted as to intermingle the separate sheets and colors. This experiment was the inception of the American idea of the decorated window, which later developed into a thing of almost over-
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powering beauty. Owing to this accidental discovery and by means of this simple process, glass was produced in such variety of color and with so many gradations and modulations in shades as to include almost every conceivable combination of tints, either those which melt into one another, or those which form sharp contrasts. This discovery placing at the disposal of the artist so infinite a gamut of color, almost entirely removed him from the necessity of painting. He could reinforce or lighten his tones by "plating" with darker, the same, or lighter colored glass. He used the lead line to emphasize the composition, making it, according to his purpose, the "string" or narrow line, the "flat" or wide band, or, again, the diminishing line, in effect like the strokes of a brush. Even the flesh parts he no longer entirely rendered by the use of opaque pigments. These, too, he "overplated:" placing the more vigorous accents on sheets at the back of the window, and painting the more delicate flesh tones at the front. In this device lay one of the greatest successes of the new system, for, the entire subject, save the flesh parts, being translucent, it was essential to preserve the same quality throughout the scheme, and by such means was the desired result secured.

From the examination of these processes and devices it will be seen that the first American efforts in the making of decorative windows were largely confined to extending the gamut of color and to the production of glass with gem-like qualities. The first requisite was obtained through the aid of chemistry; the second by cutting or chipping the glass in such a way as to give an irregular, faceted surface, catching the wandering rays of light and equaling the iridescence and brilliancy of old Egyptian and Roman glass, which, up to that moment, had found no rival in these qualities. Still another device was employed artificially to give the modern substance that appearance which mediæval glass has naturally acquired through the operation of time and the stress of weather. Upon the latter substance dust, moistened by rain and dampness, has acted along the lead-lines as a corrosive agent, eating the glass thin in furrows, and leaving it midway in the piece of its original thickness. To this chemical action is due a varied intensity which

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makes one of its greatest charms and which, analyzed by the American artist, has been perfectly imitated by him in his effort to leave no instrument or note wanting in his orchestra of color. Having thus provided himself with a color material perfectly subservient to his command, LaFarge gave to Trinity certain masterpieces of art and craftsmanship. His windows placed side by side with others produced in the Old World, and under obedience to tradition and precedent, attract the most careless visitor and lead him to seek the source of their appealing beauty. The more critical observer yields equally to their charm; finding to his satisfaction that they do not appear as results of accident, when compared with the examples here offered of what has been called "deliberate design."

The English critics and craftsmen can not with justice include La Farge in their strictures regarding American decorative glass, since, equally with Holiday, our own artist, notwithstanding his love for color, strenuous, pure, fresh, rich, insists upon the coordinate importance of form. He does not misapprehend the medium in which he works, after the manner of those painters upon glass whose type is Sir Joshua and for whom the window is but a translucent canvas. Few figures enter into the compositions of La Farge, and they are drawn with sweeping lines, as if quickly conceived, and executed at the moment of inspiration. They are dramatic, yet dignified in action, suggesting the biblical personages of early Italian art, which are themselves reminiscent of classic types. They are Giottesque in spirit, without modern Pre-Raphaelite affectation, and possess the old painter’s rapid power of story telling which invigorates the correct French modeling. The drapery falls in heavy folds, conformably to the treatment of the first Tuscan schools, and serving a double purpose: expressing rest, or slow, easy motion, as demanded by the limitations of the glass picture; also, giving direction to the headlines, and forming a close union between the actual support and the linear composition. The decorative, as distinguished from the pictorial treatment, is carried into the landscape, which is a mere suggestion, and into the accessories which are thoroughly conventionalized. Altogether, it will
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appear upon careful study of the subject, that La Farge, as the exponent of a new departure in art, is sane, if not conservative; a respecter of the best traditions, even though he be an inventor and innovator. Indeed, he would be best described as a developer, since he himself has acknowledged that all elements of the modern decorative treatment of glass are found in the painted windows of the thirteenth century, although they there exist “in archaic form.” La Farge, a fervent admirer and subtle student of both Venetian and Japanese color, an experimenter in chemical compounds and technical devices, successful far beyond the usual, has not allowed himself to be led astray by his qualities as a colorist. He in no wise resembles Hans Makart, the Viennese painter of gorgeous pageants, who, enamored of his own artistic qualities, like Narcissus of his own beauty, wasted away and died, because of “the pigments which besieged his brain.” Contrary to this tendency to exaggerate and degenerate, La Farge has shown the ability to profit by the lessons set by the old artist-craftsmen, and equally to employ the latest advances in science. But always he has controlled his own temperament and qualities, never yielding to the vagaries of passing “fashions in art,” or to the caprices of clients. He is, in his work, “without fear and without reproach.”

His windows in Trinity, compared with those contained in the same edifice which follow tradition and represent certain schools, are most interesting and instructive if considered singly. Like Richardson’s exterior, they form in themselves a study and commentary upon an all-important period of American art. Upon entering the church, one finds himself in an atmosphere of half-gloom, even if the day be clear and bright. The presence of masses of carven walnut darken greatly the interior, which receives its principal illumination from the dome at the intersection of nave and transept, and its secondary light from brilliantly colored windows piercing, at short intervals, the walls tinted in soft Pompeian red. The semi-circular apse glows with glass of gem-like brilliancy, figured with scenes depicting the life of the Christ. These windows, twelve in number, are narrow, and terminate in semi-circles conformably to the round arch of the Romanesque style.
They show only the traditional reds, blues and greens: those sharply defined colors which, taken together, form what has been termed by a recent writer, the Gregorian chant of color, as contrasted with the Wagnerian orchestra of subtle, elusive shades set into vibration and music by La Farge.

To the right of the chancel and beneath a Byzantine gallery, appears the small but famous window by Burne-Jones, having for its subject the collection of treasure for the building of Solomon’s temple, and which is replete with sentimental interest for the members of Trinity parish; since it is a memorial to the devoted vestryman who saved the records of the church from the great fire of 1872. In this work are found the elements of what may be called the glass revival: an event which was due to the same Pre-Raphaelite influence that gave new force to all the arts and crafts during the active period of William Morris and his friends. The work is plainly of a transition period. The gamut of tones is not largely increased from the one which did service in the olden times, but the colors are differently distributed. The composition is a crowded one, details are rendered literally, a sense of proportion is lacking in the scene, and there are many characteristics of the glass picture as distinguished from the glass window. Considered from the point of view of color,—that first requisite of a decorative window,—it is even less enamel-like and translucent in effect than the same artist’s picture in oils of “King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid,” now hung in the Tate Gallery, London.

High in the walls of the right transept of Trinity, the Oudinot windows represent the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the Descent of the Holy Spirit, with the time honored types and symbols of the Roman Church. Their insipid classicism, their white and yellow tones sound a discordant note to the masses of deep emerald green and the ingenuous small-scale figure-drawing of the Pre-Raphaelite windows of the opposite transept, which portray three other great biblical events: the Nativity, the Adoration of the Magi and the Flight into Egypt.

Along the right wall, the lower row of windows forms a series of the Parables, executed by Henry Holiday, the modern English
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classicist in the treatment of decorative glass, and an able writer upon his artistic craft. These subjects show a deep understanding of the medium employed: containing few figures in vigorous, restrained action, drawn upon simple backgrounds which recall the rich browns and dull, soothing greens of English landscapes. All these subjects, French and English as well, are, in varying degrees, picture windows. And so considered, they prepare the means for judging La Farge's "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," seen high up in the same wall, but toward the rear of the church. For this window sentiment suggested the subject, since the fair woman to whom it stands as a memorial resembled the Virgin of Titian. It remained for a subtle and exquisite art to translate into glass portions of the Venetian masterpiece and to compensate for the loss of those portions of the picture which were irrelevant to the purpose of both artist and client. The material produced by La Farge duplicated and even surpassed the palette of Titian. The problem was to apprehend and perfectly to restore the original color scheme, without which the modern rendering would be ineffective, lifeless, full of the faults of the ordinary copy. Those canvases of Titian, of which "The Presentation" is a type, contain masses of crimson and of blue which always bear to each other a certain proportion in quantity, a certain relation in place. They are harmonized with each other and formed into a complicated scheme by means of warm whites, creams, soft pinks and browns, the latter ranging from light chocolate to the dark rich tone of weathered oak. In the part of the picture to be retained in its translation into glass, the robe of the Virgin furnished the blue, which, in the translucent medium, seems as if it were mixed with light, and tremulous, and is of that intense hue found in the waves of the Mediterranean. The crimson had to be supplied. It appears in the glass as the drapery of a musician who sits at the base of a sarcophagus, and leans mourning over his lute. Beside giving the necessary color element, this figure has most attractive qualities of design and fitness. It is a bit of Venetian art, recalling the boy musicians of Carpaccio. It does not appear to be a clever, artistic device. It is part and parcel of the work, as if it had been con-
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cieved by the same brain and at the same time as the chief figure ascending the steps of the temple. Furthermore, the work as a whole is satisfying and delightful in that no archaism or mannerism thrusts itself upon the spectator, who, thrilled by the gem-like quality of the glass, yields to the exquisite sensation caused by the intricate harmony of ruby, sapphire, and all their attendant colors and shades, supporting and contrasting. Such effect proves that the window meets the requisites and does not exceed the limitations of the medium in which it is executed: in a word, that it is decorative rather than pictorial. At all events, for one who has drunk in its loveliness, it is a thing too fair to be subjected to artistic dispute, and it remains in the memory like a musical phrase. Nevertheless, this one among the several La Farge windows in Trinity is, perhaps, least characteristic of the inventor and developer, and least appropriate to mark the new departure.
The rôle of an epoch-making work of art is borne equally well by the window in the organ tribune, piercing the west façade, and by another next beyond it in the same wall. The first mentioned is the one so widely noted for its beauty of coloring: containing the figure of the Christ projected against a background of that intense blue which yet has an undertone of green, and was the favorite of Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites. Patient chemical experiments involving a great number of substances (to be accurate: no less than seventeen) produced the material out of which arose a design distinguished for restraint, repose and dignity. And no foreign critic has reason to judge harshly a decorative window so faithful to the best traditions of art and craftsmanship. It is no result of “accident versus deliberate design.”
The other window to which reference has been made, has for its subject the “Revelation.” It, perhaps, affords the widest range for the colorist, of any religious subject that might be chosen, and no possibility has been neglected in the execution. The opaline glass so closely connected with the name of La Farge here appears as his sign manual, pouring its lambent flame through “the gates of pearl” and the wings of “the angel of the Apocalypse.” Great jewels in rich colors burn in the breastplate of “the bride adorned for her
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husband," and the brilliancy of their substance has been further increased by the device of breaking the thick glass irregularly with a hammer, so that their fractured edges may catch and play with the light in its passage. The window, at bright noonday, is too enchanting to permit calm judgment, but when coldly analyzed, it proves that American decorative glass is a direct advance upon previous material and craftsmanship devoted to the same purpose. It plays also no insignificant part in the enrichment of an edifice which deserves to be cherished among the greatest historical monuments of our country. The names of Richardson and La Farge should be honored as those of patriots, since art is an integral part of national life.

ARCHITECTURE IS THE PRINTING PRESS OF ALL AGES, AND GIVES A HISTORY OF THE STATE OF SOCIETY IN WHICH IT WAS ERECTED

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