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## Piety, Patronage and *Peinture à Vitrail* Milda B. Richardson



Photo courtesy of SSJE.org

St. John the Evangelist Monastery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is the first monastery and Mother House of the American Congregation of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, the first religious order to be founded in the United States by clergy and laymen of the Episcopal Church.<sup>1</sup> Isabella Stewart Gardner's (1840-1927) relationship with the Cowley Fathers is a storied one. Half of the initial parcel of land on Memorial Drive in Cambridge for the monastery of St. John the Evangelist had been funded by Rev. Spence Burton's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Caspar Henry Burton of Cincinnati, Ohio, with a gift of \$25,000 and the option to buy additional land. In 1919 Mrs. Gardner donated another \$25,000, thus enabling the Cowley Fathers to buy the second parcel. The Romanesque Revival monastery with its cloister and granite chapel, designed by Ralph Adams Cram (1863-1942), was built between 1924 and completion in 1938.<sup>2</sup>

In a letter of gratitude to Mrs. Gardner, Rev. Burton wrote, "We pray that many generations of devoted Religious will venerate your memory as a foundress of their monastery...."<sup>3</sup> Rev. Burton soon visited a Boston lawyer to discuss the purchase of additional land on the Charles River and wrote to Mrs. Gardner, "a fitting occupation for your birthday."<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Gardner's generosity to the Society never diminished, and appreciation for "priceless golden stuff for vestments" is typical of the warm relations between the Fathers and Mrs. Gardner, "A good Samaritan you are who finding me robbed of my dreams by the roadside of life and desolate—such is your skill and wealth of goodness of heart that you not only heal my wounds but restore my dreams."<sup>5</sup> Six months before her death in 1924, Mrs. Gardner sent Rev. Burton a check for \$250,000, which enabled the Society to build the first of its buildings, St. Francis House. Unfortunately, Mrs. Gardner did not live to see the architecture her significant gifts made possible.<sup>6</sup>

Ralph Adams Cram, whose "ambition was to revive monastic architecture as a means of resuscitating the moral foundations of society,"<sup>7</sup> shared Mrs. Gardner's deep spirituality and sincere desire, as cultural leaders, to leave a legacy: "At ten-thirty A.M. on October 11, 1935, I [Cram] began work on the final plans for the chapel of St. Mary and St. John for the Society of St. John the Evangelist."<sup>8</sup> The monastery chapel was Cram's last medieval commission and was executed with Chester Brown.<sup>9</sup> The proposal from the Turner Construction Company of Boston was accepted in May 29, 1936, with Cram soon after confirming a verbal agreement for complete architectural services including the high altar of Belgian Black marble.<sup>10</sup> Cram commissioned various Arts & Crafts firms to provide interior liturgical arts: Hutton Marble Co., wrought iron by F. Krasser & Co. in Roxbury, interior decorations by Irving & Casson—A.H. Davenport, Vermont Marble Co., silver work by Gorham Co., and embroideries by Sisters of Bethany, School of Embroidery, in London.<sup>11</sup> The chapel received the 1936 Harleston Parker Award from the Boston Society of Architects as the most beautiful building of the year.

The chapel's interior walls are light gray Massachusetts granite dressed with a natural split face. "Its most awe-inspiring touch may be the cool blue light from clerestory windows that falls gently on the rough granite of the walls and the polished marble of the pavement."<sup>12</sup> Cram specified clear and two shades of Cathedral glass in the crypt areas of the church, and Syenite and Cathedral glass for the monastery.<sup>13</sup> Later Cram called for permanent stained glass in the rose and west lancets and the remainder of the windows to be filled with plain Cathedral glass in light tints for the Conventual Church, and the first contract with Connick was signed in 1938.<sup>14</sup> At first there was disagreement about figures in the clerestory windows, and Connick invited Rev. Burton to examine the windows at the University of Pittsburgh.<sup>15</sup> Connick was somehow under the impression that Rev. Burton desired figures, and in a rather cross letter to Connick, Cram wrote, "Either I didn't clearly explain to you what we wanted in a way of glass, or you forgot...we are very much in hopes that...there will be no full figure work anywhere. Instead we hope for grisaille with small figures...inserted."<sup>16</sup> Connick responded, "You may be right in assuming that I have confused some of your ideas with Father Burton's."<sup>17</sup> By 1940 the decision to show the male founders of religious orders (continues on reverse)

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*Continued*

in the sixteen clerestory windows was agreed upon.<sup>18</sup> Connick indicated the following in his notes: “Chapel interior is very cool...rather large scale—granite—with a very generous use of warm mortar.



Gouache study for Fr. Benson  
clerestory window in Chapel of  
St Mary and St John, SSJE.

It gives a very gracious effect that ought to be kept—even emphasized—by the windows. This means that Mr. Cram was right in the first place when he spoke of having quite large areas of silvery white glass and tints...and the present ideas, as Father Burton and I discussed it,...to have the lower windows largely in full color...and the clerestory windows with a rather plain background....”<sup>19</sup> Rev. Oliver B. Dale wanted to be sure that the windows would be light and brilliant and provided a notebook of illustrations.<sup>20</sup> A shop label indicates that all color schemes should be studied with the present light which is “kind to the beautiful (sapphire) walls.”<sup>21</sup> Throughout the design process Connick received invaluable advice from the Society. Rev. Williams was pleased with St. John of the Cross and St. Vincent de Paul, but objected to the faces since both men were known through portraits and requested Connick to correct St. John’s beard and fringe of hair, and to make St. Vincent’s beard fuller.<sup>22</sup> Cram also was critical of some design aspects. He insisted, for example, that Mary’s fingers be shortened and eyebrows made more straight, complained about the heavy leading around her face, and wanted more light glass introduced to the foliated pattern.<sup>23</sup> Cram and Rev. Dale were both interested in contemporary European art and shared their conviction that the art of stained glass had reached its heights in the medieval period.<sup>24</sup> When Connick discussed the rose window with Rev. Burton, he noted that more sapphire blue was needed to deepen and compliment the color of the walls, and cool greens and sapphire greens should be substituted for the harsh

yellow greens. “Red wings of the archangel are too strongly magenta. Possibly all they need is two little slivers of white, one on the outside of each wing. The idea being to preserve the orange color.”<sup>25</sup> The Connick Studio contacted the John Evans Company to locate a stone cutter to cut the limestone for the sixteen openings. Finding an available stone cutter was difficult because they were almost all working at defense plants.<sup>26</sup> The work was nevertheless completed, and most of the windows were dedicated October 23, 1949.<sup>27</sup> Both the Connick and Cram firms donated the Workmen’s Windows “because the workmen who built the chapel gave them to show how privileged they felt to do this work for the glory of Almighty God.”<sup>28</sup>

Cram, Connick and Gardner were devoted to the creation of sacred space. With this commission, made financially possible by dedicated patrons, Cram and Connick collaborated to create a monastery and church which communicate to all who view it a feeling of the sacred. Their efforts arouse in us sensations of liminality—two precincts simultaneously, the physical and the transcendental— best described by the meditation written by Curtis G. Almquist, SSJE.<sup>29</sup> (Found on the Order’s website: <http://ssje.org/ssje/2011/11/>)

## FOOTNOTES

BPL = Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library, Fine Arts Department

Connick = Charles J. Connick Studio

Cram = Cram & Ferguson

ISGM = Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum Archives, Subject Files: Cowley Fathers, Church History

Society = Society of St. John the Evangelist

1. ISGM: Cowley Fathers.
2. ISGM: Letter to Miss Dezel from Rev. Spence Burton, Aug. 31, 1936. St. Francis guest house began in 1924 as a memorial to Mrs. Gardner and served as a residence for Society members and guests until further construction could begin. In 1928 the second unit of St. Francis house was built by Caspar Henry Burton as a memorial to his son, Caspar Henry Burton, Jr., who died as a result of wounds received in the World War. The cornerstone for the Conventual Church of Saints Mary and John was laid August 15, 1936, with funds left by the late Caspar Henry Burton as a memorial to his wife, Byrd Waithman Spence Burton. The main unit of the monastery was built as a memorial to the late Caspar Henry Burton. Keith N. Morgan, *Buildings of Massachusetts. Metropolitan Boston* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2009) dates the monastery 1926, church 1936; the cloister remains unfinished, 338.
3. ISGM: Letter to Mrs. Gardner from Rev. Spence Burton, April 10, 1919.
4. ISGM: Letter to Mrs. Gardner from Rev. Spence Burton, April 14, 1919. According to Mrs. Gardner's wishes, the Cowley fathers perform a service each year on her birthday, April 14, in a private chapel at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.
5. ISGM: Letter to Mrs. Gardner from Rev. F.C. Powell, July 1, 1921.
6. ISGM: Polly Chatfield, "The Cowley Fathers and Mrs. Jack," unpublished lecture, Oct. 1, 2012.
7. Ethan Anthony, *The Architecture of Ralph Adams Cram and His Office* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 25.
8. BPL: Letter from Cram to Rev Spence Burton, Oct. 11, 1935.
9. Anthony, *op. cit.*, 25.
10. BPL: Letter from Cram & Ferguson to Rev. Spence Burton, June 22, 1936.
11. BP: Orders and invoices.

12. Anthony, *op. cit.*, 38.
13. BPL: Letter from Cram & Ferguson to Rev. Spence Burton, Oct. 1, 1936.
14. BPL: Contract between Connick and the Society, May 6, 1938, accompanied by a note from Orin E. Skinner, May 24, 1938.
15. BPL: Invitation from Connick to Rev. Spence Burton, Nov. 21, 1936. Connick commissions are described by Albert M. Tannler in *Charles J. Connick: His Education and His Windows in and near Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation, 2008).
16. BPL: Letter to from Cram to Connick, Nov. 23, 1936.
17. BPL: Letter from Connick to Cram, Nov. 27, 1936.
18. BPL: Statement by Cram & Ferguson, Nov. 7, 1940. Connick received payment for the first eleven of the sixteen clerestory windows (8 north and 8 south) Oct. 17, 1945.
19. BPL: Connick proposal to Rev. Granville Williams, Feb. 14, 1943.
20. BPL: Undated note on photograph.
21. BPL: Connick Shop label, 1943.
22. BPL: Telephone message from Rev. Granville Williams, Oct. 2, 1945.
23. BPL: Notes from July 15, 1938, meeting with Cram, Skinner and Revs. Burton and Dale.
24. BPL: Letter from Cram to Rev. Dale, June 5, 1938. While traveling Rev. Dale wrote to Connick, expressing his admiration for *L'artisan Liturgique*, published at the Benedictine Abbey of Saint-Andre, Bruges, Belgium. May 31, 1938.
25. BPL: Notes from meeting between Connick and Rev. Spence Burton, May 12, 1938.
26. BPL: Letter from Skinner to John Evans, May 4, 1944; letter from Arthur A. Evans to Connick, May 15, 1944.
27. BPL: photo file.
28. Brochure *The Monastery Chapel of Saint Mary and Saint John*
29. Curtis G. Almquist, SSJE, "Poetic Splendor in Color and Light," Orin E. Skinner Annual Lecture, Nov. 13, 2011.