



Peter Coffman

Journeying to the Light: Sarah Hall's Windows at St. Marguerite d'Youville

Peter Coffman

COLD SHOWERS, ROOMS FULL of bunk beds, lights out at 11:00 p.m. Once you get accustomed to the smell of weary sweating pilgrims past and present you must choose to ignore the chorus of snores, each with its own unique tone and tempo, if you hope to rest.

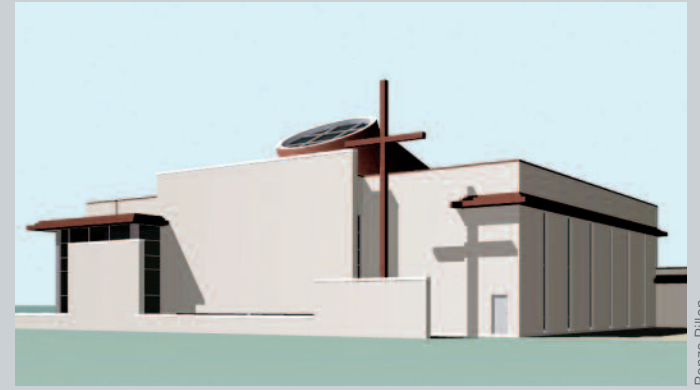
Father Wayne Manne's pilgrimage journal,
11–12 September 2002

For a thousand years, pilgrims have been travelling the *camino*, or road, to Santiago de Compostela in north-western Spain, the site traditionally regarded as the tomb of St. James the Apostle. Some have done it to save their souls, others to expiate a sin; some to celebrate and others to grieve; some for adventure and others simply because they needed time to think. But Father Wayne Manne may be the first person ever to do it for the sake of a stained glass window.

Father Wayne, pastor at St. Marguerite d'Youville in Brampton, Ontario, had a problem. The interior of his stunning new church was dominated by a huge clear glass oculus, twenty-two feet in diameter, suspended above the altar and angled subtly toward the congregation. Stained glass was an absolute necessity, but the building fund could not absorb the cost. Raising the necessary funds would require commitment, sacrifice, possibly even

Right: Exterior twilight view and architectural rendering of St. Marguerite d'Youville Church, Brampton, ON

Overleaf: Detail, *Oculus*, St. Marguerite d'Youville Church, Brampton, ON
◆ 2002b



Renzo Pilon

hardship for a community that had been hit hard by the 1990s recession. Father Wayne decided to lead by example. In an act of faith and commitment that was also a perfect metaphor for the challenging process of building the church and windows, he gathered pledges, hopped on his bicycle and rode the centuries-old *Camino Santiago* from León to Santiago. After ten days of wind, rain, sun, mountains, cobblestone roads and dirt paths, he arrived in Santiago exhausted, exhilarated — and with \$115,000 in his window fund.

Architect Renzo Pilon began the design of the building by asking himself what the concept of a church was all about, and determining that it had nothing to do with the building, as such. A church, he concluded, was about light, about material, about sound; it was about creating an appropriate environment for liturgy. The oculus provided light, a visual focal point, and an element of aspiration that fit his needs perfectly: “we felt we needed to turn people’s heads upward.” Even before discussing it with the client, he had picked his stained glass artist: Sarah Hall, whose award-winning work has been illuminating churches, synagogues and secular spaces across North America for over twenty years.

Father Wayne needed little persuasion. He had been given a compelling lesson on the power of stained glass in the Church of All Nations in Jerusalem, on the traditional site of the garden of Gethsemane. The rich, deep purple glass there gives a powerful, overwhelming sense of sadness — appropriate for that place, but not what one would want for weekly worship. With 380 square feet of glass looming over his altar, Father Wayne knew he had to get it right. “One of the things that attracted me to Sarah’s work was her ability to play with light, and to create an environment with glass that is absolutely magical. It’s not about figures, it’s painting with light. That’s what her windows are — a celebration of light.”

Sarah began consulting with the architect, the client, and the congregation. Father Wayne bought cycling shorts. And so began two journeys, one on cobblestone roads and one in the design studio; both aiming for the same destination.

The most difficult ride thus far from Villafranca del Bierzo to O Cebreiro at 1300 M elevation. Left at 08:30 a.m., arrived at 06:30 p.m. Mountain scenery was breathtaking, figuratively and literally. The last 5 Km were the most difficult of all. We had to get off our bikes every .5 Km and sometimes less. We consume over 3 litres of water per day.

15 September 2002

Technically, the oculus is extremely complex. Each panel is composed of a double or triple layer of laminated glass which is airbrushed, silver stained and hand painted with glass enamels. The background enamel paints were laid down with heavy rollers to give a rich texture and then fired. The leaf pattern and birds are hand painted with enamels and fired onto a separate piece of glass. The exterior layer of glass was lightly sandblasted, to create an even, translucent colouration. The window was fabricated (and, amazingly, installed in a single day) by Glasmalerei Peters, of Paderborn, Germany. Although nearly 100 years old, the Peters firm is at the cutting edge of innovation in stained glass technique.

The inspiration for the theme of the window came directly from the life of the church’s titular saint, St. Marguerite d’Youville. Born in Varennes, Québec, in 1701, she died in 1771 after a lifetime of ministering to the sick, poor and outcast. Sarah learned that Marguerite had once planted an orchard on an island in the St. Lawrence river in order to help feed the poor: “I was absolutely captivated by the idea of what it’s like to lie down in an orchard and look up through the branches to the sky.” She went out to Toronto’s High Park and photographed apple trees. Abstracted to fit Renzo Pilon’s circle and grid, the image of the orchard became the central theme of the oculus. In acknowledgement of Father Wayne’s inspired fundraiser, the theme of pilgrimage, or journey, is also present in the spiral leading inward and the three soaring birds (the latter is also suggestive of the Trinity). The golden light beyond the trees is a reference to St. Marguerite’s devotion to God the Father. The result is a canopy of light above what is liturgically the most important part of the building. The effect has proved mesmerizing on visitors of all ages.



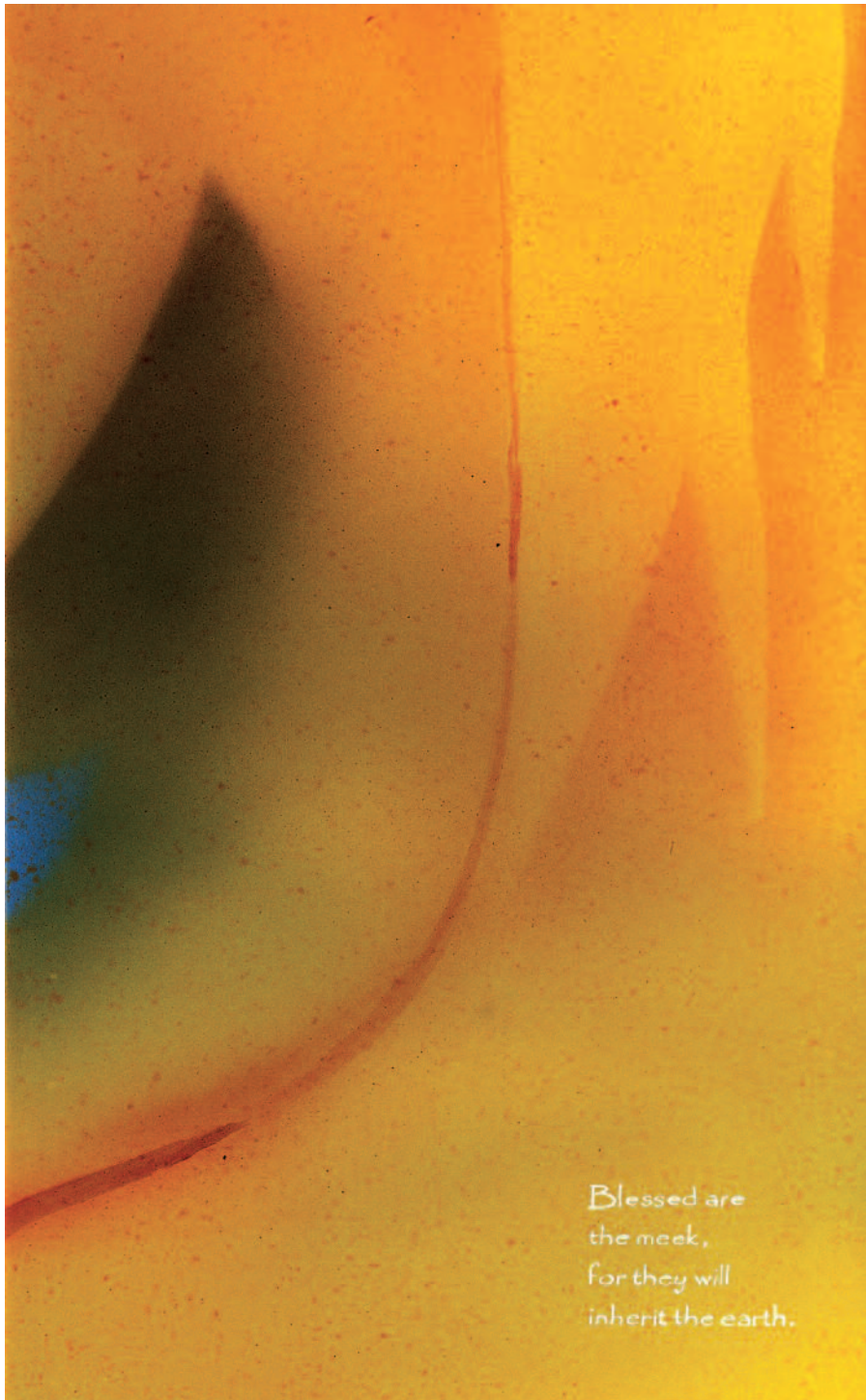
Wayne Manne

Left to right: *Oculus* framework; Sarah and Melanie working at Peters Studios in Paderborn; Installation of 89 triple layer painted glass panels

Bottom: Full view of *Oculus*, St. Marguerite d'Youville Church, Brampton, ON ✦ 2002b



Peter Coffman



Detail, *Pillars of Fire & Light*, the engraved biblical text reads
 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth"
 St. Marguerite d'Youville Church, Brampton, ON ✦ 2002b

Peter Coffman

But the journey wasn't over. So successful was the oculus and so enthusiastic the response, the decision was immediately made to proceed with the nave windows. Challenging as the oculus was, the nave windows would be even tougher.

At some points we wondered if we could continue on.

17 September 2002

"I knew the nave windows were going to be more difficult than anything I had ever done," remembers Sarah. "There wasn't any precedence in my work for something so soft and painterly." Soft and painterly indeed, but also measuring twenty-two feet by twenty inches — so long that, in the studio, the whole window could not be seen at once. Traditional leaded glass gives the artist some design parameters — there is a discipline imposed by the structure of the window itself. Not so with these elegant, elongated rectangles. The huge size, unusual shape and the technical virtuosity of Glasmalerei Peters meant that anything was possible. But when absolutely anything is possible, where do you start?

Sarah began by returning to the first principle of the design, which was to create a space that would convey warmth, hope and love — without distracting from the liturgy. To architect Renzo Pilon it was very important that the windows not be pictorial. Father Wayne agreed: "Some maintain that the purpose of liturgical art is didactic. What we're trying to do is lift people's spirits."

Twelve in number, the windows resonate with the twelve apostles, the signs of the zodiac, the tribes of Israel and the gates of Jerusalem. Very painterly in style, they consist of airbrushed silver stain and enamels that underwent several firings. Some areas were lightly sandblasted to create variations in depth. The text on each window was hand-etched. The ensemble spreads across both sides of the nave wall like twelve glowing columns of fire, full of movement and energy, but never overpowering. With their undulating colours and flowing rhythms, the windows gently but compellingly affirm the place of light and colour in the life of the spirit. They are a tour-de-force of brilliant design and execution.

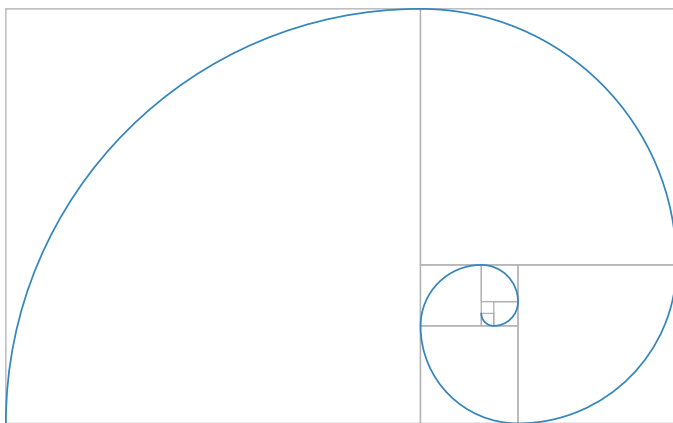
Windows like these require risk, faith and surrender from the artist. Like Father Wayne on the *camino*, Sarah had to leave comfort and familiarity behind; she had to trust that the strength and beauty of the initial vision would lead her to the destination. And she had to take others with her on this journey of faith. Like Chaucer's pilgrims, Father Wayne travelled in a company of companions, some planned, others accidental. The hospitality of strangers, the sharing of stories, the give and take of compassion and help, are all part of the pilgrimage experience. Sarah's creative voyage was much the same: "The journey also included the community at St. Marguerite d'Youville. And it included the community of people I worked with at Glasmalerei Peters."



The first phase of the journey is nearly complete. The oculus and the nave windows envelop the space in light from above and along the sides. Sheer white curtains cover four of the nave windows, their unveiling awaiting a bit more inspired fundraising. But before the pilgrims reached this point, they came to the realization that the journey itself was the destination. As Father Wayne discovered, "The *camino* confirmed what I had already sensed ... It isn't about getting there. The *camino* itself is the pilgrimage, the transformative experience." That is the gift offered to everyone who designs a stained glass window, travels a *camino*, or enters the warm, ethereal glow of St. Marguerite d'Youville.

Top: Sarah's watercolour sketch for 6 of the 12 *Pillars of Fire & Light* nave windows

Right: 1 of 12 *Pillars of Fire & Light* windows, St. Marguerite d'Youville Church, Brampton, ON
 ✦ 2002b



Peter Coffman is an Associate Professor at Carleton University's History and Theory of Architecture program, and Past President of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada.

Journeying to the Light: Sarah Hall's Windows at St. Marguerite d'Youville, by Peter Coffman, reprinted with permission from *The Journal of Stained Glass*, Issue Volume XXVIII, 2004.



Peter Coffman