

Peter Coffman

Making Space Sacred: A Stunning Set of Windows

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"A CHURCH," ACCORDING TO builder Jack Ruscilli, "is more than just a building." Ruscilli should know. His firm, Ruscilli Construction, recently finished building his own parish church — St. Andrew Catholic Church in Columbus, Ohio. As well as being a wonderful piece of architecture, St. Andrew boasts one of the largest ensembles of stained glass in recent North American memory, with windows filling virtually the whole eastern side of the church. Selected for this challenging and exciting commission was stained glass artist Sarah Hall, whose award-winning work has been illuminating a wide variety of sacred and secular spaces across North America since she opened her studio in 1980.

For Hall, the scale and architectural importance of the windows made this commission, at first, "both exciting and rather terrifying." The vision that guided this project was as uncompromising as it was uplifting: this church had to be extraordinary. This was a space that would have to pick parishioners up and transport them to a higher place. Here, people would expect to have a visceral experience of the sacred. Since before recorded history, this challenge has raised artists to breathtaking heights. Judging from the work at St. Andrew, it still does.

Hall was selected for this commission by a committee overseen by Monsignor Frank Lane and Father Tom Buffer.



Rob Allen

Top: Sarah Hall working in the studio on *The Spiritual Canticle* windows

Overleaf: *Mystery of the Rosary* window, St. Andrew Catholic Church, Columbus, OH, Fr. Thomas Buffer and Sarah Hall in silhouette at the base of the window ✦ 1997c

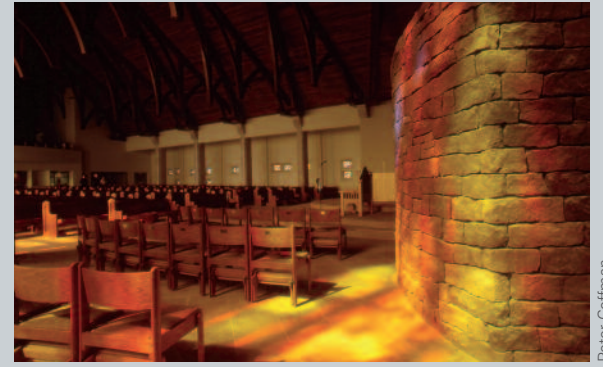
Bottom: *Baptistery* (left) and five *Mystery of the Rosary* windows, St. Andrew Catholic Church, Columbus, OH ✦ 1997c

One of their priorities was to find “people who just make good art, rather than people who think of themselves as ‘liturgical artists.’” Father Buffer’s search for a stained glass artist led him to the Marian Library in Dayton, Ohio, where he saw reproductions of Hall’s work. While numerous American and European studios were also considered, Hall’s track record and design philosophy gave her the edge. According to Father Buffer, Hall’s sensitivity to the architecture was one of the key reasons for awarding her the job: “Sarah Hall’s designs acknowledge the architecture. They are sensitive to the lines and volumes of the building; they respond to and reinforce the existing rhythms. That’s what set her work apart.” Hall explains: “I don’t see my work as a gallery piece that happens to be in a church. It’s there to support the functions of the building. Studying how the light will work in the building is how I generate my ideas for the glass. It gives me a feeling for what the building can say.”

From the beginning, the clergy at St. Andrew made it clear that they wanted a house of God, not just a shell in which to hold services. “Even when no human being is doing anything in here — even when we’re not prancing about and shouting and singing and ringing bells — God lives here,” explains Father Buffer. That’s not



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Exterior view, installation and coloured light at St. Andrew Catholic Church

an easy idea to wrap your mind around, and it's an even harder one to try to build. It's an old problem. "Who is able to build God a house," asked Solomon, "since heaven, even the highest heaven, cannot contain Him?" This was not a rhetorical question, and St. Andrew's designer, Peter Krajnak of the firm Feinknopf, Macioce, and Schappa, is one of the latest in a very long line of architects who have had to come up with an answer. "This place will affect people's souls," muses Krajnak. "We wanted to create a space which would be capable of bearing the weight of mystery."

A large part of Krajnak's answer was entrusted to the stained glass artist. "This space is all about light," he observes. It sure is. The east wall, with its five windows each measuring 16 x 32 feet, is virtually all glass. In addition, a colossal window measuring 10 x 36 feet fills the baptistry with light, and above the choir loft sits a rose window 7 feet in diameter. In all, Hall's "canvas" consisted of over 3000 square feet of window, which would eventually be filled by 12,945 pieces of leaded, painted, silver-stained and sandblasted glass. With such vast expanses of glass, the architects were like composers who had written a score which left huge, open spaces for the soloist to fill. You want to choose your soloist — in this case the stained glass artist — carefully. Or, as Father Tom Buffer put it, "the wrong windows would have killed this space dead."

Hall's first design challenge was purely practical, and absolutely crucial to the building's success. Somehow, she had to make sure that the huge eastern expanse of glass didn't result in a congregation that was blinded, cooked, overwhelmed, or all of the above. "I knew I couldn't flood the space with light," she explains. "It would have been brutal. This meant not using transparent glass." She also decided not to use primary colours in the windows. "Primary colour in glass is hard on the eye. It's hard on the spirit. In small amounts it's exciting and beautiful, but in a vast field of glass, it's insensitive."

While such fundamental decisions are crucial, transforming a room into a sacred space requires that the light be modulated in a way that strikes just the right emotional and contemplative note. This involves walking a delicate design tightrope. "There had to be enough joy, and enough solemnity," explains Hall. "You

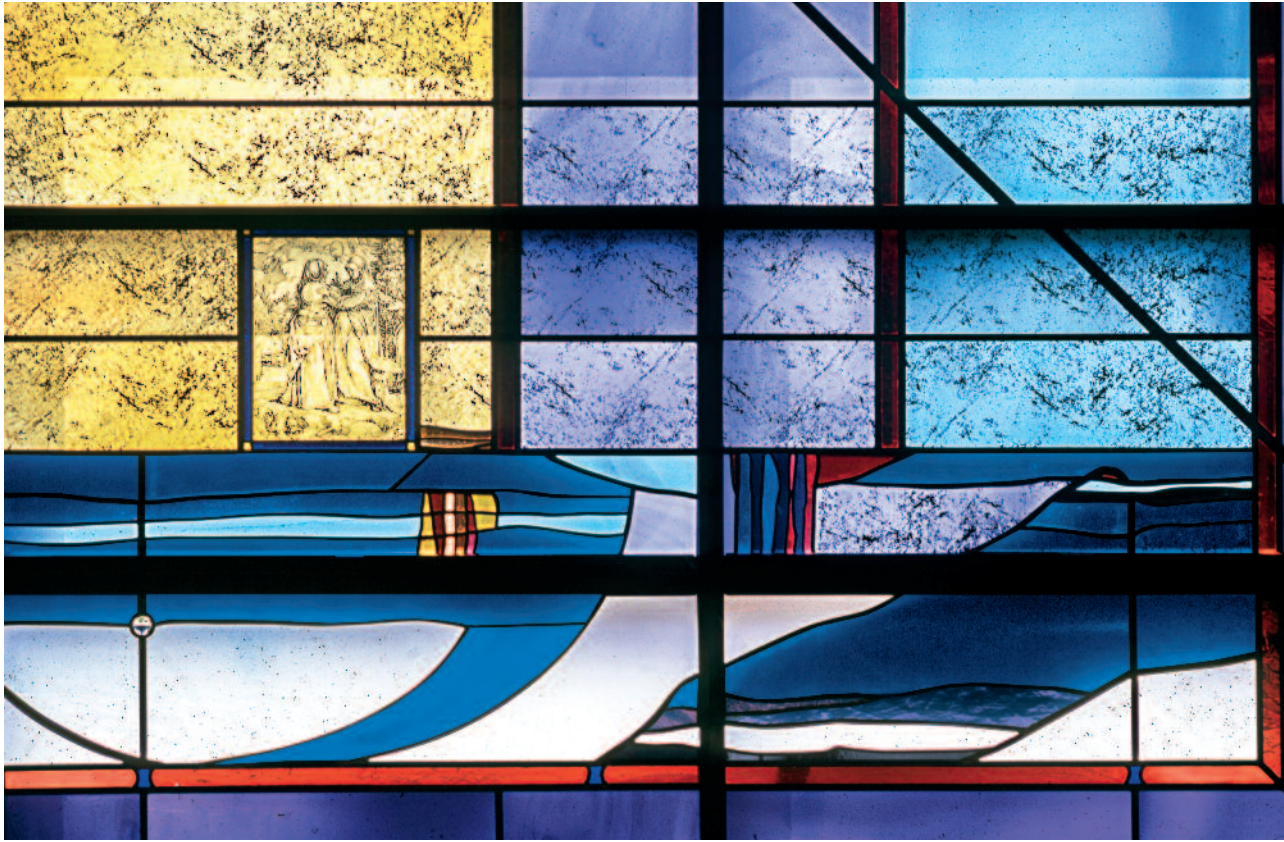
could make it so quiet that the liturgy died. If you make it too strong and primitive, the liturgy won't survive that either. I wanted to make space for worship by finding a balance between solemnity and joy." Architect Peter Krajnak concurs: "This space needed windows which were powerful, yet quiet." In Krajnak's view, that's just what it got: "These windows have an energy to them that is right at the appropriate level for what this space needed."

The abstraction of modern glass tends to draw attention to the glass itself. Whereas figural glass provides a diverting narrative, Hall's designs leave her nowhere to hide if the quality of the material isn't up to standard. For this reason, all of the glass at St. Andrew was hand-made at Glashütte Lamberts in Waldsassen, Germany, and personally selected by Hall. While the design is distinctly contemporary, the techniques of leading, silver staining, and painting are completely traditional. In fact, the only technique used that had no parallel in the twelfth century was the painting, which was screened rather than done by hand. "Screening has a different look from hand-painted glass," explains Hall. "It's an absolutely contemporary, two-dimensional look."

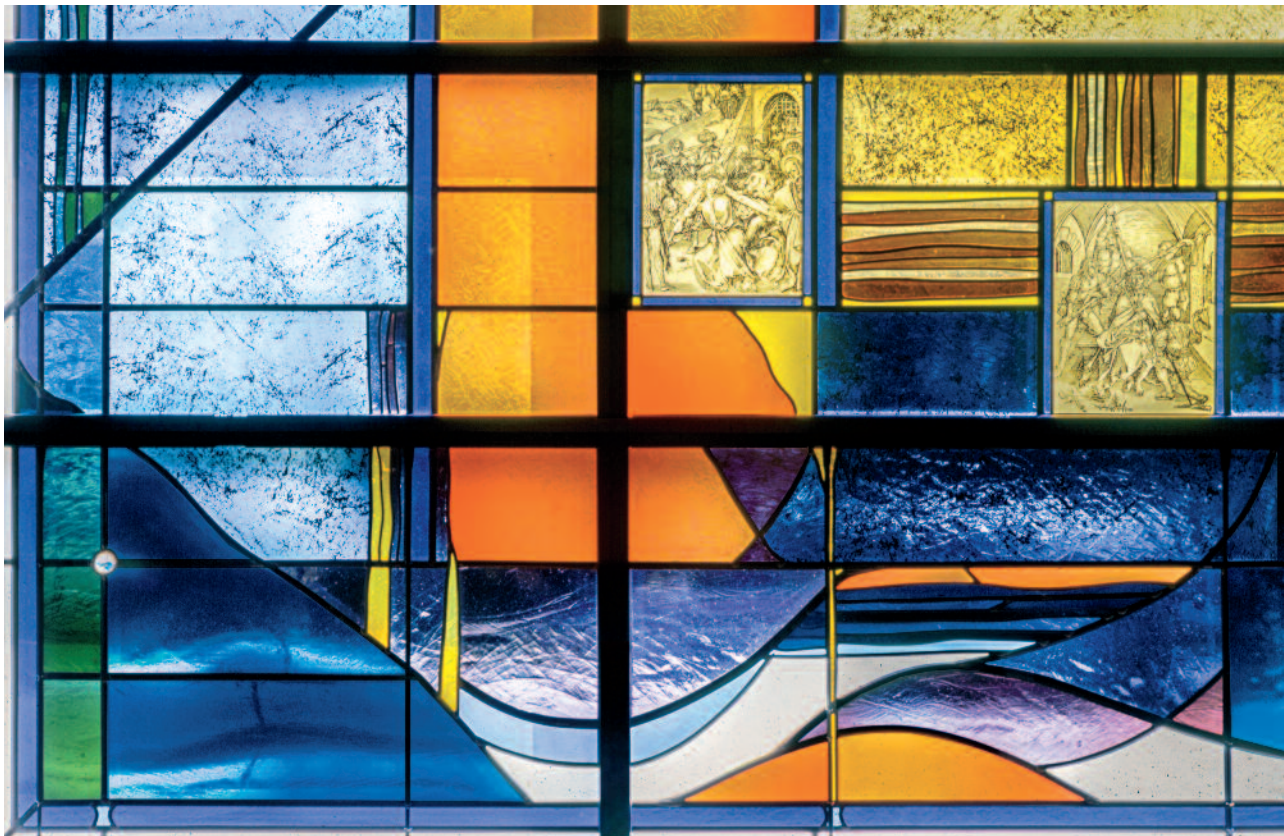
Once the design work was complete, the assembly of the windows took place at Sattler Studio in Nova Scotia. Hall and the Sattlers worked closely together throughout the project, from the selection of the glass at Lamberts to the final installation in Columbus.

For Hall, the construction of the windows in Sattler Studio was actually the most challenging aspect of the entire project. The sheer scale of the project meant that large sections of the windows were already packed in trays while other pieces of glass were still being chosen. "I had to keep in my mind 13,000 pieces of glass and their colours," Hall recounts. "It's very hard work to remember everything you've already done, and how your next choice is going to affect this whole, vast composition. And you have to get it right. It was a huge stretch, mentally."

The interior of the church is dominated by the five triangular-headed east windows, each measuring 16 x 32 feet. The theme depicted is the Mysteries of the Rosary, which consists of fifteen scenes from the life of the Virgin. The first five are the Joyful Mysteries (for example, the Annunciation), the second five the



Details from two *Mystery of the Rosary* windows, St. Andrew Catholic Church, Columbus, OH ♦ 1997c



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Sorrowful Mysteries (such as the crucifixion), and the last five the Glorious Mysteries (culminating in the Coronation of the Virgin). The windows progress from the Joyful to the Glorious Mysteries as one moves from the main entrance toward the altar. While the traditional images associated with the Mysteries of the Rosary are present in screened panels based on a set of sixteenth-century woodcuts by Albrecht Dürer, the more compelling enactment of the theme occurs in the abstracted landscape that fills the lower register of each of the five windows. This landscape parallels the Mystery stories symbolically, changing in colour, design and emotional tone to reflect the narrative events of the Mysteries. As Hall explains: "The story begins in winter, with a landscape that's quite dormant. There's only a suggestion of movement and growth. As you progress through the windows, the landscape becomes more and more alive, as does the story. It ends with the Glorious Mysteries, in which the landscape leaps out of its framework and transcends its boundaries."

As the Mysteries of the Rosary unfold horizontally, each of the five windows also contains a vertical progression from bottom to top. Above the bottom layer depicting the Mysteries is a layer which Hall characterizes as "essentially an architectural extension, into colour and light, of a wall." The triangular head of each window is dominated by a huge, complex circle of light and colour, symbolic of the Rosary bead, which consummates the geometry of the architecture and the symbolism of the windows.

The abstraction of this presentation of the Mysteries of the Rosary, while supremely evocative, also posed a challenge to Hall and the congregation. The Catholic church and its parishioners have a reputation for being somewhat conservative in their artistic tastes. This should hardly be surprising, since they are the inheritors of an unbroken tradition of religious art which stretches back nearly 1,700 years. It is an incredibly rich legacy from which to draw inspiration, but the down side is that it often results in a profound mistrust of modern art and modern artists. For Hall, this presented a challenge: how can she, a contemporary artist working in a contemporary style, remain true to her own time and sensibilities while satisfying a community saturated in the conventions of the last seventeen centuries? "Traditional" windows, in a country whose Catholic roots barely stretch back over the last two of those seventeen centuries, usually means pious, painterly figures of saints, apostles, and the Virgin. Such windows are of their time, but they are emphatically not of our time, and no artist worthy of the name will try to fool herself, or her client, into believing that they could be. For Hall, the abstraction of modernism is essential to spirituality at the end of the twentieth century. "I want it to be a place where they are capable of meeting God," she says. "For me that means that there's room for their imaginations, and for all



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kinds of dimensions that I'm not going to define." The process of reconciling conservative and contemporary visions was a delicate one, and there were some initial doubters. "When it comes to a church, I think very conservatively," explains Ruscilli. "When we started looking at contemporary window designs they seemed very foreign to me; they just didn't feel right."

For Ruscilli, the initial point of access proved to be the Dürer panels of the fifteen Mysteries. The inclusion of these narrative panels, with a content familiar to all Catholics, provided a level of comfort for the parishioners and acted as an invitation to contemplate the more abstract, symbolic aspects of the windows. As Father Buffer explains, "Having the Mysteries of the Rosary in the windows gives them some specificity. It says that they are part of a Christian environment. You could have left them out entirely, but having them there is a gain." For Ruscilli, their presence helped him warm to the contemporary windows.

"They lock the windows back into something that many of us are used to in our older churches," he says. Ruscilli is now a convert, describing himself as "delightfully surprised at the outcome." Parishioner and donor Ellyn Dekker was also initially uncertain. "I was originally surprised that the windows were so contemporary. But the quality of the glass is so exceptional, and Sarah has used geometry in a way that creates such a symbolic feeling in the windows. She did an outstanding job."

Taken together, this ensemble of immense windows creates a dazzling landscape of light, epic in scope and symphonic in structure. This visceral impact is crucial, not as something that competes with the narrative meaning of the Mysteries of the Rosary, but as the appropriate expression of it. A "mystery," in this sense, is a religious truth that is beyond the powers of human understanding. As such, they are presented here not as a series of stories to be understood, but as a series of devotions to be

Glorious Mystery (Pentecost) detail, Mystery of the Rosary window, St. Andrew Catholic Church, Columbus, OH
 ✦ 1997c

enacted and experienced. This was precisely Hall's intention: "It will be an experience for the congregation at a visceral level, not a narrative one. It reaches their hearts when they look at it." Father Buffer concurs: "You do have a transforming experience when you cross the threshold into the church, and a great deal of that comes from those windows."

The baptistery window provides not just a backdrop for the act of baptism, but an experiential manifestation of its meaning. Measuring a staggering 36 x 10 feet, it is anchored by a blue pool of water at the bottom. Above the pool is a column of light, flanked by green columns which symbolize re-birth and renewal. At the top is an image of the Holy Spirit. The intention, according to Hall, was to create a dynamic, resonant experience of baptism. "Hopefully the experience of baptism is one which moves through our lives; it doesn't stop," she explains. "That's what the ripples in the pool of water are meant to suggest. Baptism isn't an end in itself. It's the beginning of something."

Above the choir loft floats the 7-foot wide rose window, which was constructed in Hall's Toronto studio. Since the Middle Ages, the rose window has been one of the most powerful symbols of Western spiritual art. Numerous symbolic meanings have been attached to it, but perhaps the rose's tremendous psychological resonance is best summed up by T.S. Eliot's lines: "At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, But

neither arrest nor movement." The rose window is St. Andrew's still point. At its centre sits a rose, the symbol of the Virgin. From that centre springs a spiraling growth of leaves against a rich blue sea of stars and galaxies. The life force seems to emanate from the rose; then to grow, multiply, and ultimately return to the centre. Near the top, just right of centre, is a celestial witness that presided over the completion of the church, comet Hale-Bopp — a tiny marker proclaiming "you are here" in a cosmic landscape of infinite time and space.

More than any other single window, the rose seems to capture the imagination of many members of the St. Andrew community. "Coming from the gable, high above the pews, it has an almost supernatural feeling," observes Ruscilli. "I'm in love with that window," marvels Dekker, adding, "Hale Bopp gives the window a cosmic feeling, as well as dating its construction."

While Hall's windows dominate the church, other notable contributions were also made to the glass at St. Andrew. Near the altar are the four small "angel windows," made in 1911 and rescued from Buffalo's "new cathedral" when that building was demolished in 1977. Opposite the Mysteries of the Rosary, on the west wall, are fourteen small windows depicting the Stations of the Cross, designed and made by Kevin Kelly of Abbey Stained Glass Studios in Dublin, Ireland. The sacristy, where the priest prepares for the mass, is graced by two small but lovely windows designed and painted by Columbus artist Bruce Horner, and constructed at

Mystical Rose
south window
in stone tracery
above the organ
loft, St. Andrew
Catholic Church,
Columbus, OH;
the comet *Hale-
Bopp*, which
passed over the
church during
construction,
can be seen at
the one o'clock
position ↻ 1997c



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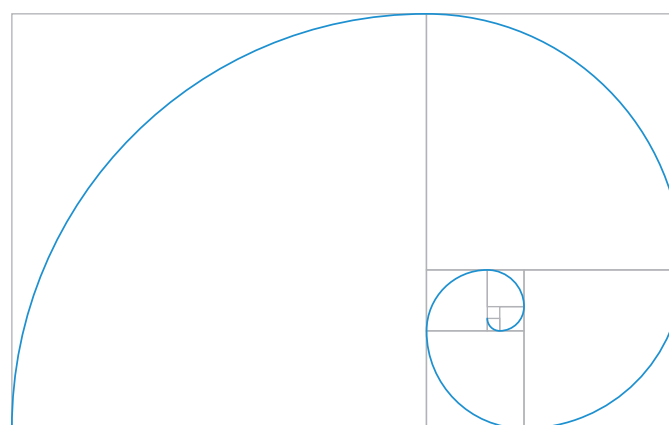
Hall's Toronto studio. Horner's windows elevate the sacristy from its customary utilitarian status: "I wanted to make stained glass that would spark theological meditation," he explains.

St. Andrew Catholic Church was dedicated on June 7, 1998. Engulfed by the stunning light coming from the windows, and the glorious music coming from the choir loft ("they go together like pasta and wine," as Ruscilli observed), the parishioners who filed into their new church that afternoon were treated to an unforgettable experience. "I felt, as I stood in front of the windows, that I was in a waterfall of light," says parishioner Laura Fisher, who was in charge of publicity during the building campaign. "The colour was above me, behind me, in front of me, below me; I was drenched in colour, my mind and my soul."

"The windows have the effect of lifting one up," observes Dekker, adding: "The colours play beautifully on the wall at the back of the sanctuary. They really bring the stones to life." Monsignor Colby Grimes, the new pastor at St. Andrew, is aware that the church he has inherited is something special: "This space provides a lift. It helps the human touch the divine, and that's what religion is all about. People are going to have memories and positive experiences of faith here that they didn't have before." In fact, they already are, judging from Fisher's response to her

new church: "It brings me a spiritual joy, and I find the presence of Christ. There's something sacred about this space, and about those windows. It's a real call to deepen our spirituality."

More than just a building indeed!



Top register of one of the *Mystery of the Rosary* windows, St. Andrew Catholic Church, Columbus, OH
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