Newcomb Chapel and Woldenburg Hall

Tulane University

When Newcomb College relocated from the Garden District to the Uptown campus in 1918, its chapel was dismantled and carefully stored, with the expectation of reassembling it on the new campus. This never occurred, and for more than fifty years, priceless windows were left to molder in a variety of sites, including beneath the old Sugar Bowl Stadium.

By the mid-1970s, public and private pressure precipitated the construction of the new chapel. John Desmond, of the Baton Rouge firm Desmond, Miremont and Burks, was the architect.

The letters HSN in the rose window (commissioned in 1894) in the chapel honor Harriott Sophie Newcomb, only daughter of benefactress Josephine Louise Newcomb. Sophie died at age 15 of diphtheria. As early as 1893 Mrs. Newcomb contracted with Louis Comfort Tiffany for this window and the Resurrection triptych (now outside the Newcomb Art Museum) for the chapel on Washington Avenue.

Mrs. Newcomb purchased other windows later, as did graduating classes. The narthex of the chapel includes three Tiffany windows—King David with a harp, the Prodigal Son being comforted by his father (dressed in an elegant robe of drapery glass), and St. Cecilia playing an organ. Note the wide range of colors, the jewels of round or faceted glass, the mold-made flowers, the abundance of opalescent and mottled glass, and the wire strings on King Davids harp. Mrs. Newcomb ordered the King David and St. Cecilia windows in 1894 to honor her mother, Mary Sophie LeMonnier, and the Prodigal Son window dates to 1895.

Early art notes from the Stained Glass Art in Sacred Places tour hypothesized that the 1911 window depicting the landmark fountain on the old Newcomb College campus was of local manufacture. According to Tom Friel of the Newcomb Art Museum, however, Tiffany created it, even though it looks plainer than most windows from that studio. Tiffany work of that era suffered in quality because stained glass was going out of style, and the studio needed to produce glass economically, to compete with commercial work. Gone are the trademark Tiffany drapery glass and molded or faceted beads. Earlier Tiffany windows used multiple layers of glass, often almost paper thin, to create complex colors and depth. According to Friel, this window contains no layered, or flash, glass. Rather than wrapping the edges of the glass pieces in copper foil, the studio used heavier leading, Friel adds.

Woldenburg Hall houses two spectacular triptychs: the Resurrection (1893), with an astonished Mary Magdelene at the right, and the supper at Emmaus (1896), where the recently resurrected Christ joins two disciples for a meal. Both windows make generous use of drapery glass and opalescent glass. (The Tiffany studios skill at painting hands and feet was sometimes limited.) The angel wings in the Resurrection window incorporate the iridescent colors that characterize Tiffany’s favrile glass even though he didn’t patent the formula for this glass until 1894.

The Emmaus window, based on a Rembrandt painting, was ordered by Frank Walter Callender, Mrs. Newcombs best friend for many years. To depict the texture of the sky without painting clouds, Tiffany used striated glass, with several layers of molten glass rolled together.

Tulanes Tilton Hall houses two other Tiffany windows, gifts of Mrs. Frederick W. Tilton (see separate write-up). These eight are the only known windows by the Tiffany Company in New Orleans, though Temple Sinai has chandeliers by Tiffany.

*Excellent information on these windows is available at the Newcomb Art Gallery website: http://newcombartmuseumcollection.tulane.edu/.*

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