St. Katharine Drexel Chapel

Xavier University

This powerful chapel is a dream come true for Xavier Universitythe culmination of plans first voiced long ago. With the canonization of St. Katharine in 2000, efforts to honor her with a chapel took wing. Opening ceremonies for the building took place in October 2012.

César Pelli, a native of Argentina and recipient of the America Institute of Architects Gold Medal, served as architect. The idea of constructing a building with spiritual purposes was extremely attractive to me, he wrote. This building embodies Drexels traits of modesty, simplicity and spirituality. He worked with the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, the order of nuns organized by St. Katharine, to ensure that the building would reflect the simplicity and purity that she sought.

One of the first things to catch the eye of worshipers is the floating corpus of the Risen Christ, his wounds clearly visible and his arms uplifted. The sculpture was carved of linden wood in Italy and incorporates the grain of the wood in some of the folds of the garment.

The creation of the windows is a result of teamwork among Cuban artist José Bedia, New Orleans artist Laurel Porcari and her studio staff, and the Franz Mayer Studio of Munich.

Ms. Porcaris Tapestry Art Glass Windows were inspired by the kente cloth made by the Akan people, among others, in West Africa. Originally created by the Ashanti Kingdom, kente cloth is characterized by multicolored design with strong geometric patterns. Here it honors St. Katharines life work to improve the lives of the underprivileged, especially African Americans.

To recreate this fabric in glass, the artist relied on detailed computer plans. The 31 windows are three layers thick, each layer being made of hundreds of small strips of glass, carefully arranged by hand according to the computer instructions. Once pieced together, the glass is fused into a single piece. Designing the windows was complicated, especially since each has different pattern.

The architectural team approached Mrs. Porcari to ask if she would also undertake the challenge of turning artist Bedias black-and-white pencil sketches into colorful windows. To do this, she turned to the studio of Franz Mayer, a firm established in 1847 and traditionally associated with the elaborate, carefully painted Munich-style glass seen in numerous classic New Orleans churches. As part of its rebuilding after World War II, the Mayer family and its employees have created an enormous studio with complex equipment to produce a large variety of contemporary types of glass artincluding even a tent for the Diplomatic Club in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Mrs. Porcari worked for three weeks at the Mayer Studio, collaborating with their artists to create several samples of colors and glass types. Once Mr. Bedia selected his favorite, the fourteen Stations of the Cross were produced at the Mayer Studio, using a float glass technique of triple-laminated units of tempered glass.

The Stations of the Cross use only the primary colors: yellow, red, and blue, yet they complement the more subtle variations of color in the tapestry windows. The simplicity of the silk-screened drawings and the careful use of colors yield powerful images of the Passion of Christ.

The chapel, and its art glass, convey St. Katharines strength as well has her chosen characteristics of modesty, simplicity and spirituality.

*Visited April 21, 1913*

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