Temple Sinai

6227 St. Charles Avenue

Temple Sinai was organized in 1870 and is the oldest Reform congregation and the largest Jewish congregation overall in Louisiana. The first temple was erected on Carondelet Street near Lee Circle, but shortly thereafter, congregation members began moving uptown, in response to the opening of the area near the Cotton Exposition of 1884. Around 1922, temple members succeeded in galvanizing plans for a new, Uptown temple, pointing out that the existing one was too small and in poor repair. In addition to being too far from members homes, its exterior flight of steps was difficult for the elderly to manage. The Carondelet Street building no longer exists.

The architects for the magnificent Beaux Arts structure that was created on St. Charles Avenue in 1928 were Emile Weil and Moise Goldstein, in collaboration with the Weiss, Dreyfus and Seiferth firm. Every detail of the design was created to convey symmetry, elegance, and a focus on the Torah, ark, and reading table at the east end of the building. Even the balcony, with elaborate plaster grillwork over the colorful windows, is a treat.

The windows are all large. Blue is the dominant color, and symbols of faith abound. Christians may not know what most of the symbols represent, but the menorah, the Star of David, a lion, a crown, a temple, and Hebrew letters are recognizable. The round window over the main entrance has the symbols of each of the twelve tribes of Israel.

High on the wall, near the Calhoun Street corner, a small clear space in the glass bears the name of the stained glass studio: Emil Frei A[rt] Gl[ass]. Documents from the planning stage indicate that congregational leaders wanted German stained glass. The second line of the signature says Munich⋅Bav[aria]⋅St Louis, so we dont know which Frei studio actually created the windows, as both were active at that point. Mr. Goldsteins comments in the architectural renderings, stored in the Southeast Architectural Archive at Tulane, say nothing on this matter.

The ceiling is unusual for two reasons: the decorative squares that cover the ceiling are made of horse hair, and the breathtaking chandeliers were designed and produced by the Tiffany studios. The fixtures can be cranked down individually for cleaning and light bulb replacement. To protect the chandeliers, however, scaffolding is installed periodically so the staff can climb up and maintain the lights.

Temple Sinais organ, by the Aeolian-Skinner Organ Company, is featured occasionally in recitals. Installed at the time of construction, it underwent renovations around 2010, when a 49-pipe shofar was added.

An important tenet of Reform Judaism is ecumenism. While the temple was under construction, its members worshiped at the St. Charles Avenue Christian Church, across the avenue. Since Hurricane Katrina, the temple has opened its doors to the congregations of St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church and of Greater St. Stephen Baptist Church when their sanctuaries were undergoing repairs.

*Visited*

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