

ART

Jennifer Bartlett's stained glass door, 1998, Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church, Houston.



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Photo courtesy Huxtor Christie

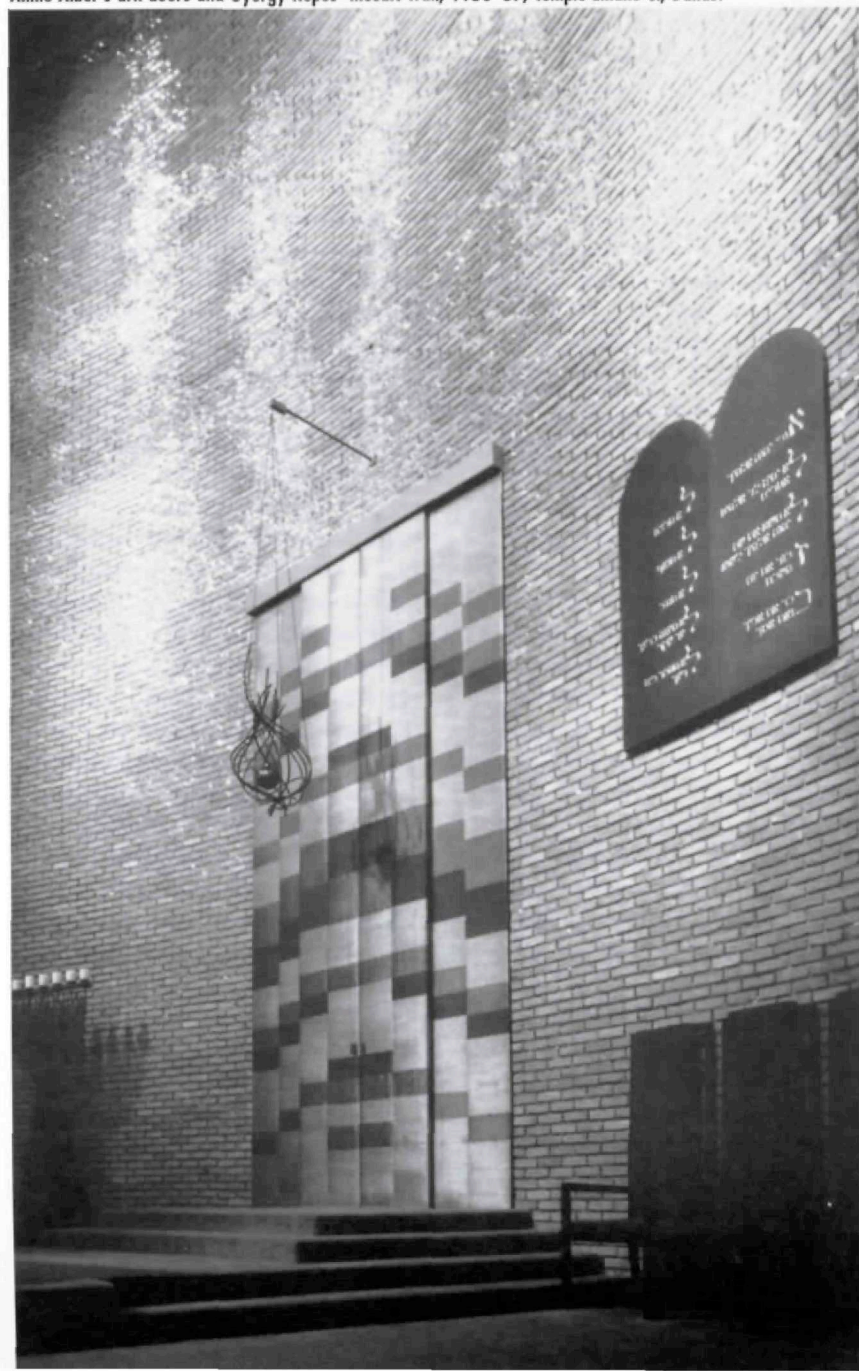
Annabel Livermore's Meditation Chapel, 1977, R.E. Thompson General Hospital, El Paso.

AND THE

BY LYNN M. HERBERT

SACRED

Annie Alber's ark doors and Gyorgy Kepes' mosaic wall, 1956–57, Temple Emanu-el, Dallas.



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There was a time when religion and art were inextricably linked. Artists were invaluable to the development of religion, bringing sacred stories and visions to life, and religion was invaluable to artists, providing them with patronage on a grand scale. Through the centuries, the relationship grew into a thriving partnership. One has only to look at Italy during the Renaissance to see the impact: young hopefuls such as Michelangelo, Bernini, Raphael, and Giotto were transformed into cultural forces thanks to their church commissions.

Times have obviously changed. As theology professor Langdon B. Gilkey has noted, “the day of organized religion being at the center of things has long since passed.”¹ Church and state have separated, and religious institutions seem to have lost the cultural confidence that once emboldened popes to trust artists to create monumental works. That, as Gilkey points out, is a shame, not just for the artists who have lost a source of funding, but for religious institutions, which have lost an important ally in dealing with the transcendent. In our technological age of “virtual experience,” Gilkey reminds us that one of art’s greatest gifts is to enhance direct, immediate experience: “The event of our encounter is for itself, a significant enjoyment, an experience of seeing, here, at this moment. And we are deepened, refreshed, challenged to reorder ourselves to see in a new way our world and ourselves — we are re-created.”²

Art *does* afford opportunities for powerful, even spiritual, experiences. Unfortunately, there are many who see that very power as threatening, and so resist having it in their place of worship. In some circles, namely among Protestants, history makes the situation even worse. As a colleague of Gilkey’s has pointed out, “Protestantism has lived so long without the visual that the loss of that human and spiritual resource is not even recognized as an issue.”³

The history of art in the last century hasn’t done much to bring the two sides together either. As the succession of artistic movements indicates, over time artists’ interests have ventured further and further away from those of the church.⁴ The prospects for a link between religion and art were made even less promising by the conflicts in recent years between those on the religious right and the supporters of the National Endowment for the Arts over such works as Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (1987).

The surprise, however, is that despite all the apparent obstacles there have been instances in recent decades where contemporary artists have found a home for their work in spiritual settings. In Texas that has ranged from the works of James

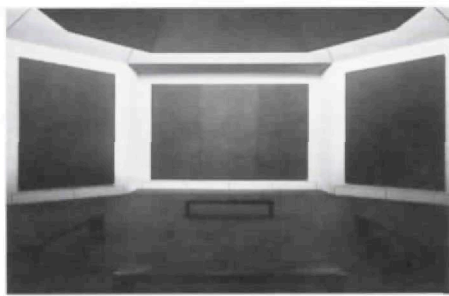
Magee in El Paso to that of Michael Tracy in Corpus Christi and James Turrell in Houston. The instances have been far too few to even come close to constituting a movement, but they make clear that if art and religion aren’t always compatible, then neither are they always combative.

Not surprisingly, the union of art and religion has tended to occur when a dynamic individual emerged to serve as a driving force. In France in the 1950s, Father Marie-Alain Couturier was just such an instigator. He wrote critically of the decline of culture within ecclesiastical circles, vilifying their ready acceptance of academic art. Bringing the work of important contemporary artists back into the church became something of a crusade for him.⁵ His indefatigable efforts led to such treasures as Henri Matisse’s Chapel of the Rosary (1951) in Vence. For this project, Matisse planned everything from the stained-glass windows to the vestments, liturgical accoutrements, ceramic murals, spire, and even a pattern for the roof. The commission came to Matisse late in his life, and he spoke of it as the culmination of his life’s work.⁶ He dropped everything he was doing to focus on the project, which he saw as renewing the forms of sacred art. Of the chapel, Matisse said, “I want those who come here to feel purified and relieved of their burdens.”⁷

For Notre Dame de Toute Grâce in Assy, a city sanatorium in the Alps, Father Couturier commissioned works by Pierre Bonnard, Georges Braque, Marc Chagall, Fernand Léger, Jacques Lipchitz, Jean Lurçat, Henri Matisse, Germaine Richier, and Georges Roualt. He was also the driving force behind Le Corbusier’s Notre-Dame-du-Haut at Ronchamp and the commission of Léger’s stained-glass windows and Jean Bazaine’s mosaic for Audincourt, a small parish church built for Peugeot workers. Couturier later remembered the day he received approval for those two projects as a “red letter day in the history of the renewal of Christian art.... When such projects, representing what is purest and strongest in living art, can be accepted by high ecclesiastical authority, we can be sure that something has changed in the Church of France.”⁸

At about the same time that all this was happening in France, in America painter/sculptor/architect Tony Smith was working on a speculative design for a Catholic church in collaboration with artists Jackson Pollock and Alfonso Ossorio.⁹ With such a threesome in place the potential was enormous. Unfortunately, they lacked a champion such as Father Couturier, and their plans were never realized.

Art historian Miriam Freund, on the



The Rothko Chapel, 1971, The Menil Collection, Houston.

Photo courtesy The Menil Collection

other hand, proved to be a champion on the order of Father Couturier. During the time she served as head of the Jewish women's organization Hadassah, it commissioned Marc Chagall to create a series of windows for the synagogue at Hebrew University Medical Center in Jerusalem. As was the case with Matisse, Chagall's 1959 commission came late in his life (he was 72). But many felt the windows to be

Philip Johnson's work on the campus. Rothko was to be an equal collaborator with Johnson, but both men had strong ideas and couldn't find a common ground. So after much arguing, Johnson bowed out. The university eventually bowed out as well.

Rothko's chapel then almost found a home in the Houston Medical Center before finally landing on Menil property

near the University of Saint Thomas as an ecumenical structure, with the Houston firm of Barnstone and Aubrey called in to complete the architectural work. Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk* (1963-67), eventually installed outside the chapel, had meanwhile jumped through a few hurdles of its own. The de Menils had tried to give it to the city of Houston as a memorial to Martin Luther King Jr., but the city refused it for political reasons.¹² So the obelisk wound up in front of the chapel in a reflecting pool designed by Johnson.

The chapel was finally dedicated in 1971, a year after Rothko's death. Though he never saw his paintings installed, the commission was a formative one for the artist. As he wrote to the de Menils, "The magnitude, on every level of experience and meaning, of the task in which you have involved me, exceeds all my preconceptions. And it is teaching me to extend myself beyond what I thought possible for me."¹³

Years earlier in Dallas, Temple Emanuel had demonstrated a similar commitment to the importance of contemporary art within its walls. As the synagogue embarked on a building project in 1951, Rabbi Levi Arthur Olan told his board that the new temple "must express, in art forms and in symbols, the religious ideas of our faith ... a religious service must be a moving emotional experience ... encompassing art, music, and liturgical expression ... which will send the worshipper out exalted, courageous, and confident."¹⁴ An unusually open-minded art



Jean Lacy's stained glass windows, 1996, Trinity United Methodist Church, Houston.

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committee and architectural team enthusiastically involved artist Gyorgy Kepes in the design of the sanctuary and chapel. Kepes ultimately designed an ingenious mosaic wall, as well as furniture for the pulpit. He also involved other artists, Annie Albers among them, in the design and execution of other aspects of the chapel. Temple Emanuel was dedicated in 1957.

Dallas is also home to another innovative sanctuary. In 1992, the Reverend Zan W. Holmes Jr. of Saint Luke Community United Methodist Church approached artist Jean Lacy about creating a series of 53 stained-glass windows. Holmes had taught theology with Lacy's former husband and had been impressed by the biblical images she had created for educational packets used in Sunday school. Lacy, who had never worked with stained glass or on such a monumental scale, admits to having been a bit frightened at the outset. Holmes was interested in an Afrocentric look at the Christian story, and Lacy answered the call by creating a series of windows that breathe new life into the stories of the Bible by incorporating elements from African and African-American experience and history.

So successful were Lacy's windows that in 1994 the Reverend Robert McGee of Trinity United Methodist Church, Houston's oldest African-American church, commissioned the artist to do 12 windows for Trinity's sanctuary. Those windows were dedicated in 1996. Both churches were unusually progressive in their desire to connect the past with the present, to make the Bible more relevant to their congregations' experience. Inevitably, certain elements of the imagery proved to be inflammatory to some members of the church, but Lacy credits the commitment of the two pastors in helping to overcome such obstacles.

While the spark for these projects came from within the religious community, two recent projects in Houston have resulted instead from the commitment of someone in the art world. In 1992, while marching in a gay rights demonstration at the Republican National Convention in Houston, art dealer Hiram Butler had an epiphany of sorts. The hatred and lack of acceptance he saw emanating from the convention was, he felt, in contravention not just of certain fundamental tenets of Western civilization, but also of religion as he knew it. Butler set out to bring art and religion together in an effort to make enduringly manifest religion's accepting and inclusive nature.



Michael Tracy's Emmanuel Chapel, 1985, Corpus Christi Cathedral.

Photo: Courtesy James C. Reams, FAIA

his greatest work, so much so that before they were installed in Jerusalem they were exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and, in a pavilion specially built for them by the French government, at the Louvre in Paris.¹⁰

Father Couturier's spirit has also been felt in Texas. In the early 1930s Couturier took John and Dominique de Menil under his wing in France, sharing with them his passion for the arts. When they moved to Houston, the de Menils brought with them Couturier's lasting influence, and in 1964 they commissioned Mark Rothko to create a series of paintings for a chapel.

Rothko, who more than once had described his work as religious, had longed for years to find a chapel-like space for his works.¹¹ The hurdles associated with the completion of the Rothko Chapel, however, make one marvel that it ever materialized. At first, the chapel was to be a Catholic one at the University of Saint Thomas, the culmination of archi-

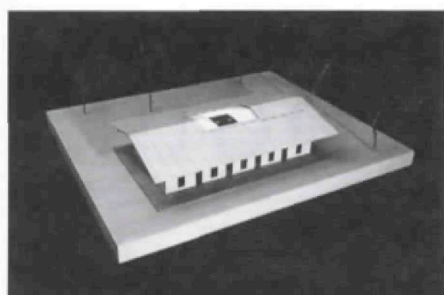


Photo by Ben Thomas

Model of Live Oak Friends Meeting House, Houston. Leslie K. Elkins, architect, with James Turrell's skyspace, 1998.

Butler was invited to serve on the art and architecture committee of Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church, which is located only a few blocks from the Rothko Chapel. He took committee members out to see the work of various artists, and when they decided to look for someone who had worked with stained glass, Butler introduced them to New York artist Jennifer Bartlett. Bartlett found she had much in common with both Saint Stephen's rector, Helen Havens, and her congregation, and together they discussed everything from a master plan for the church to more specific items such as tile work for the nave, a font, and a lectern. In 1996, Bartlett started a series of eight stained-glass panels for the doors leading to Saint Stephen's new columbarium, collaborating with Leslie Elkins, a Houston architect known for her ability to work with artists. At the time of the doors' dedication in 1998, Rector Havens noted that, "The doors ... symbolize entrance into the nearer presence of God, as well as opening our parish life into the neighborhood in which we live."¹⁵

In 1998, Butler was also on hand for a groundbreaking ceremony for the Live Oak Friends Meeting House of Houston. Some years before, Butler had introduced the Live Oak Friends to James Turrell, an artist known for his work with light who, like the Friends, is a Quaker. Light is integral to the Quaker faith, and Turrell had long dreamed of having one of his pieces in a meeting house. The Live Oak Friends were moved by Turrell's ideas, and commissioned him to create something for their new meeting house before most of them had even had an opportunity to see his work. Butler then introduced Turrell and the Live Oak Friends to Leslie Elkins, who was subsequently hired as the project's architect. When it opens in 1999, the Live Oak Friends Meeting House will, like the Rothko Chapel only a few miles away, undoubtedly become a pilgrimage site.

Farther south, along Texas's border with Mexico, two very different artists have created spiritual spaces without the aid of champions such as Father Couturier, the de Menils, the Reverend Zan W. Holmes Jr., or Hiram Butler. One of them is Michael Tracy, an artist of international renown who settled in San Ignacio, a small town along the Rio Grande. For Tracy, there has always been a connection between art and religion. In 1966, as a

young man, he sought out and interviewed Rothko, who was then working on his chapel paintings, and years later, for a 1981 exhibition, Tracy created his own chapel-like environment.¹⁶ A get-together with a friend in 1984 led Tracy to design a chapel for the Chemical Dependency Unit of South Texas, a medical facility in Corpus Christi.

Tracy's design for the unit's interdenominational chapel included an altarpiece and furniture that he collaborated on with Mexican craftsmen. Unfortunately, the chapel no longer exists, having been in place only from 1984 to 1987. In 1985, though, Bishop Rene Gracida of the Corpus Christi Catholic Diocese commissioned Tracy to collaborate with architect James Rome on the Emmanuel Chapel in the Crypt of the Bishops at the Corpus Christi Cathedral. For this subterranean chapel, Tracy created a moving environment with architectural arches, furniture design, a spare but intense use of color, and a monumental 18-foot gold triptych in the form of an altarpiece. Friar James Harris of Alice, Texas, became familiar with Tracy's Emmanuel Chapel, and years later invited the artist to create a chapel in a two-car garage on his church grounds. The work, Saint Michael's Chapel of Perpetual Adoration at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, was dedicated in 1992. The Emmanuel and Saint Michael's chapels still exist, but they're no longer products of just Tracy's imagination. Their original austere beauty has been altered by the addition of devotional and decorative objects by those who worship there.

Farther west along the Mexican border, artist James Magee has created two very different spiritual spaces. In the late 1980s, Magee's studio assistant was hospitalized for a time at the R.E. Thomason General Hospital, a trauma center in El Paso. Moved by the work being done at the hospital, in 1989 Magee established the Annabel Livermore Floral Fund, which makes sure that once a year each patient in the hospital receives a flower with a note wishing him or her health and happiness. Magee wanted to do more for the hospital and approached the director of the facility, Jim Booher, about another project. With the support of the hospital's board, the two men carved out a small space within the hospital for a meditation chapel. Under the persona of Annabel Livermore, a pseudonym he has used for years, Magee created a series of floral watercolors for the chapel and painted a skyscape filled with birds, clouds, and the

sun, moon, and stars in its barrel-vaulted ceiling. Magee's architectural and furniture designs were executed by the hospital's carpenters, and today his chapel — with the soothing sound of trickling water, its homage to nature, and a small desk where visitors have taken to writing and leaving prayers — is an oasis of calm in an otherwise charged surrounding.

A much more private project is Magee's ongoing work *The Hill*, which he considers the culmination of a lifetime of art and "his final line of defense on this earth." *The Hill* is composed of four monumental chambers aligned on a cross axis, standing alone in a vast, empty prairie 63 miles east of El Paso. Magee began the project in the early 1980s by purchasing 100 acres of land; he has since amassed 2,300 acres in an effort to ensure that views from *The Hill* remain unobstructed. He has completed three of *The Hill*'s four chambers. Behind each one's towering steel doors can be found a chapel-like environment that contains Magee's massive sculptural work in metal and glass. *The Hill* is private and unphotographed, and is an unforgettable experience for those who travel there.

Sadly, it is the exception rather than the rule to find innovative art by important contemporary artists in spiritual settings. Even when an artist is invited to contribute to a religious building, that doesn't guarantee his or her involvement through to the end. Building committees, assorted constituencies, numerous meetings, and the need for consensus can all work against an artist's participation. Most artists are used to working alone, and to operate within such a forum is more than many are willing to take on. And there are risks for the religious institutions as well. Collaboration with a contemporary artist requires a tremendous leap of faith on their part, and as so many have found, it much easier and safer to simply mail-order official or traditional religious art.

So, are we going to have to continue to rely on museums as stand-ins for art-filled chapels? Through the efforts of the individuals listed here as well as others, what Father Couturier called the "tradition of courage and mutual confidence" has been kept alive — but just barely.¹⁷ It is encouraging, therefore, that for the upcoming millennium, the Catholic church has initiated a number of art-related building projects. One of the most notable is Robert Rauschenberg's

commission to create a massive, 36-panel interpretation of the Apocalypse for a cathedral in Foggia, Italy, being designed by Renzo Piano. An undertaking with such tremendous potential, involving two internationally acknowledged masters in their fields, hearkens back to the church's glory days, and leads one to hope that the new century might bring with it a revitalized union of art and religion. That would be for the greater good, because, as Thomas Merton wrote, "In art we find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time."¹⁸ ■

1. Gilkey made his comment as part of his 1981 commencement address at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. A revision of the address, "Can Art Fill the Vacuum?," appears in *Art, Creativity and the Sacred: An Anthology of Religion and Art*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1984), pp. 187-192.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

3. John Dillenberger, "Artists and Church Commissions: Rubin's The Church at Assy Revisited," in *Art, Creativity and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1984), p. 195.

4. Looking down a chronological list (ie: mannerism, neo-classicism, impressionism, surrealism, dada, pop art, conceptual art ...) one might easily conclude that religious concerns are becoming less and less directly relevant to artists' work.

5. Marie-Alain Couturier, "To the Great Men, the Great Works," in *Sacred Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press in association with the Menil Foundation, 1983), p. 34.

6. John Elderfield, *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1992), p. 419.

7. Marie-Alain Couturier, "Vence," in *Sacred Art*, p. 94.

8. Marie-Alain Couturier, "Audincourt," in *Sacred Art*, p. 102.

9. For more, see John Keenen, "Architecture," in *Tony Smith: Architect•Painter•Sculptor* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), pp. 44-45.

10. For more, see *Miriam Freund, Jewels for a Crown: The Story of the Chagall Windows* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963).

11. Sheldon Nodelman, *The Rothko Chapel Paintings: Origins, Structure, Meaning* (Austin: University of Texas Press with the Menil Foundation, Inc., 1997), pp. 39-40.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

13. Mark Rothko to John and Dominique de Menil, January 1, 1966, The Menil Collection Archives, Houston.

14. Levi Arthur Olan quoted in Gerry Cristol's *A Light in the Prairie: Temple Emmanuel of Dallas 1872-1997* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1998), pp. 163-64.

15. Press release, Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church, April 20, 1998.

16. The exhibition, entitled *Off The Wall*, was presented at the San Antonio Museum of Art September 12-November 1, 1981.

17. Couturier, "To the Great Men, the Great Works," in *Sacred Art*, p. 36.

18. Thomas Merton quoted in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Image Books, 1974), p. 387.