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Restoring a Cultural Treasure on Chapel Street

Think “cultural treasure” and “Chapel Street” and a few obvious associations come to mind: each season’s galaxy of offerings at the Yale Rep; paintings by Hogarth, Gainsborough, Constable, and other English contemporaries at the Yale Center for British Art; the extensive collection of American art at the Yale University Art Gallery.

Three blocks east on the Green, at the corner of Chapel and Temple Streets, sits another example, less well-known to many, but also one of New Haven’s significant cultural treasures.

Trinity parish was founded in 1752. The main part of the Trinity Church building—one of America’s earliest examples of Gothic Revival architecture—was completed in 1815. Trinity’s distinctive exterior—brown rough-hewn sandstone quarried in Hamden—houses a remarkable collection of stained glass windows.

The windows—originally clear panes set in movable sashes—began transformation to stained glass in 1871. The most recent installation on the main floor occurred in 1968. Above the entrance on Temple Street, another window, commissioned to celebrate the church’s 250th anniversary, was installed in 2002. Backlit, it shines out nightly over the Green, a beacon to all who pass by.

Renowned American artists crafted windows for the church, including works by the studios of Nicola D’Ascenzo, Charles Connick and Louis Comfort Tiffany.

Over decades, the relentless forces of New England weather, vehicular exhaust and industrial pollution took their toll on the original stained glass collection. Cracks appeared, as windows weakened and buckled under their own weight. Accumulation of grime and moisture discolored many sections. Many windows suffered significant damage. Some were irreplaceable originals.

In the mid-90s, Trinity undertook a long-term project to restore damaged windows and provide for ongoing maintenance. The church started its annual Holiday Bazaar to provide a primary and continuing source of project funds. In April this year, the initial phase of restoration ended. Henceforth, ongoing maintenance and repair will ensure future preservation.

Trinity's architectural and cultural treasure is open to the public at no charge. All are welcome to visit weekdays from 10 to 4 and Saturdays from 9 to 12. Inside the main entrance, visitors may pick up a leaflet—A Walk Through Trinity—that describes the windows and other notable features of the interior.

Entering the sanctuary, visitors will find it filled with soft light—a place of tranquility offering a restorative break from New Haven's bustling streets. A self-guided tour provides ample time for full appreciation of the beauty and uniqueness of each window.

On Sunday, June 5th [2011], at its 10 AM service, Trinity will recognize completion of the initial phase of the project by rededicating the stained glass windows. The congregation warmly invites visitors to join the celebration and the festive coffee hour that will follow.

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