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# A Brooklyn Church Uncovers a Long-Hidden Celestial Scene

Building Blocks

By DAVID W. DUNLAP DEC. 25, 2013



Eight-pointed stars in gold, yellow and red have been revealed during the renovation of the 165-year-old Episcopal church.  
Credit Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

At Christmas, thoughts at many churches turn to a certain star. At Grace Church in Brooklyn Heights, thoughts are of a thousand stars or more.

That's how many long-hidden stars have been uncovered in the ceiling of the building, a 165-year-old Episcopal church at Hicks Street and Grace Court, under a \$5 million renovation that includes a new copper roof, new insulation, new lighting, new wiring and a much-needed cleaning of many of the 3,200 organ pipes.

What had looked until a few months ago like a dull ceiling of plain wood planks turned out to be a dazzling celestial extravaganza of eight-pointed stars in gold, yellow and red — so lacy they might be taken for snowflakes — set in an expansive vault of royal blue.

A professional cleaning with sponges, rags, a little water and a gentle detergent brought the stars back to light. Now, the ceiling seems less a solid plane than an opening to the sky. Its crisscross diagonal braces form a delicate trellis through

which the heavens can be glimpsed, as if one were standing in some great Gothic Revival arbor on a cloudless night.



The church opened in 1848, and the ceiling was painted over in the early 20th century with a pattern of false wood, or faux bois. Credit David W. Dunlap/The New York Times

“We were surprised to discover this long hidden splendor that had been waiting to be revealed,” said the Rev. Stephen D. Muncie, the rector of Grace Church. “The restored decorative ceiling and new lighting will lift our eyes — and souls.”

Grace Church was designed by the master architect Richard Upjohn, the confident hand behind Trinity Church on Wall Street. The first service was held at Grace in 1848.

In 1866, the ceiling and walls were painted in a brilliant array of colors and patterns, with a ribbon of biblical verses around the nave and chancel, such as this from Psalms: “Thy testimonies are very sure, Holiness becometh thine house O Lord, forever.”

This work was painted over in the early 20th century with a pattern of false wood, or faux bois, perhaps because the exuberant décor had come to be seen as a bit too riotous. The walls were turned government-office beige; the ceiling, lumberyard brown.

However, sharp-eyed parishioners like Margaret Ann Monsor sensed that something fabulous was lurking below the wood grain. The original decoration could still be faintly discerned. “Sometimes, if the sermon wasn’t gripping, I’d look up and see all this detail,” said Ms. Monsor, a leader of the renovation project.



A professional cleaning with sponges, rags, water and a gentle detergent brought the brightly colored pattern back to light. Credit Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

EverGreene Architectural Arts, the conservation, plaster and decorative painting subcontractor to Grace, made a happy discovery: The faux bois was in distemper paint, a water-soluble combination of pigment, chalk, water and an organic binding agent.

Crews from EverGreene began removing the distemper paint in September, working atop a platform of dense scaffolding. They were largely finished this month.

Thomas Pace, a retired engineer, is the chairman of the church's restoration and repair construction committee. He expressed pleasure with the results as he surveyed the ceiling at close range the other day. "We didn't realize how easily the faux wood would come off or the wonderful condition of the original painting," he said. Mr. Pace said the general contractor, ICS Builders, had done a good job of keeping on time and on budget. The whole renovation should be finished in time for Easter, appropriately enough.

Grace Church was lucky, said Kim Lovejoy, a vice president of EverGreene and the restoration project director, not only because the over-painting could be washed away but also because of what its removal disclosed.

"It's so rare to find a Gothic Revival painting scheme that can be unearthed," she said. "We came to understand that the decoration was creating a heavenly garden in that space."

"The colors and pattern motifs of the painted wall and ceiling decoration, stained glass, wood and stone carvings, furnishings and floor mosaic, were designed to work together as a coherent ensemble," Ms. Lovejoy added.





The 165-year-old Episcopal church is undergoing a \$5 million renovation.

Thomas Chittenden, the senior warden at Grace, cast the renovation as part of the church's mission of pastoral, charitable, social and religious outreach. "We're not just antiquarians and historic preservationists, though we are that," he said. "Having a beautiful, valuable edifice at the center of the parish is a real plus. It visibly enhances the experience."

Mr. Muncie recalled a memorial service for the poet Joseph Brodsky at Grace Church in 1996 and the subsequent tradition of printing "24-Dec-71," one of Brodsky's Nativity Poems, in the church's Christmas Eve bulletin. It concludes:

But the draft through the doorway will part  
the thick mist of the hours of darkness  
and a shape in a shawl stand revealed,  
and the Christ-child and Spirit that's Holy  
will be sensed in the soul without shame;  
a glance skyward will show it — the star.

"I have to admit," Mr. Muncie said, "that when I stand in the church amid the scaffolding and 'glance skyward,' I now see stars."

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