

**CHRISTIAN IMAGES AND HERITAGE:  
THE SANCTUARY WINDOWS OF THE  
CONGREGATIONAL UNITARIAN CHURCH  
WOODSTOCK, ILLINOIS**

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When the sun streams through the magnificent stained glass windows in the sanctuary of the Congregational Unitarian Church in Woodstock, we cannot help but notice their beauty. But we seldom listen to the stories that they tell us. And they tell us many stories—of Jesus and Mary and of the BIBLE tales they illustrate, of course. But also the story of a shifting understanding of just who this Jesus was, about art, technology, identity and maybe most of all, the story of the congregation that installed those windows a hundred years ago.

Central to it all is the story of the evolving understanding Jesus. Who was he? Man or God or Spirit or all at the same time? Sage and teacher or Savior? Do we remember him for his sacrificial suffering or the promise of his Resurrection? The story of art in Western Civilization was for millennia largely the story of finding ways of representing answers to these questions. Of one thing we can be sure—these windows represent the answers to these questions as understood by the members of the First Congregational Church in Woodstock, Illinois a hundred years ago.

Of course no one knows what Jesus actually looked like. We can be sure, however, that as Jew, the son of a carpenter and thus a humble man in Roman occupied Palestine, he surely looked nothing like the fellow in these windows. His earliest followers left no representations of him at all. It was not until three hundred years later that the first images of him are found in floor mosaics in the ruins of Greek churches. Perhaps un-surprisingly he was pictured as a curly headed, beardless Greek with a marked resemblance to the Emperor Constantine.

Medieval Italian masters would show him as a slender, delicate man with long dark hair and a wispy forked beard, recognizably Mediterranean but so ethereal he hardly seemed human. Later, Flemish, Dutch and German Renaissance painters represented a much more robust, human Jesus, a strong man and leader, halo reduced to a faint glow, handsome features set off by cascading brown or nearly blond hair and pointed beard. This is the Protestant Jesus that echoed in these windows.

But these images nearly vanished for some Protestants. Calvinists and other Reformers, in their eagerness to be divested all of the pomp and luxury of the Roman Church, cast iconography aside with the Mass. Theirs was to be a religion of the Word. Art itself was seen a distraction from contemplation of God's power and a sinful, sensuous luxury. In England Oliver Cromwell and his Puritans smashed the church windows, painted over the murals, tore down the ornate altars, burned the Crucifixes. Our own Pilgrim and Puritan forbearers, common to us as Congregationalists, Unitarians, and Universalists alike, brought that austere esthetic with them to these shores. Thus the simple, unadorned New England Meeting house style churches that they and their descendents built, including the first building of this Congregation, erected on this site in 1865.

In the second half of the 19th Century, however, a technological breakthrough changed all of that. In Germany new high speed color lithography techniques were developed capable of producing thousands of high quality images at low cost. Suddenly art could come to the humblest cottage—or

church. Catholics were the first to embrace this as a method of teaching and spreading their iconography. German Lutherans, who had never abandoned representational religious art, followed suite. In America immigrant populations spread these images into every village. Not surprisingly, many Protestants also found the images attractive at virtually the same time the rigidity of old Calvinism was being abandoned either explicitly or implicitly by most American Protestants. They were ready to bring the image of Jesus back into their churches.

They were also abandoning the old New England Meeting House style of church building. Reflected in Henry Adams's paean to the Mont Saint Michel and Chartres in France, American Protestants started erecting Gothic and Romanesque Cathedral like buildings, rich in decoration. Inside pipe organs like our own replaced wheezing lap organs or simple spinet pianos and organized choirs began singing instead of just the Congregation. And those pointed arch windows need to be filled as well.

Enter another German technological innovation. Traditional leaded glass windows were enormously expensive, far beyond the reach of most small town congregations. The Germans developed new techniques for painting on glass, which deeply cut the cost. The pictorial images you see in our windows were created by this paint on glass process.

The framing ornamental flourishes were done with another breakthrough technology. Translucent glass with the color infused into it in the manufacturing process now known as stained glass was developed in America by Louis Comfort Tiffany (more on him later.) Prior to this color was applied to glass by process of painting in still hot glass (as opposed to the cold glass method used in our windows) or by applying translucent enamel over clear glass. The sparkling purity of stained glass in the decorative patterns of the windows gave them the richness to the quality of light that pours through them.



Most of the images found in our windows were popular and can be found in Protestant churches of similar age across the country. They were based on some of the very same popular German lithographs by artists like Heinrich Hofmann, Bernhard Plochorst and Carl Heinrich Bloch that the folks in the pews could find in their new family bibles or hang in frames over the mantle.

The bust of Christ was drawn from the depiction of Jesus in Hoffmans's popular "Christ and the Rich Young Ruler" and Jesus as the Good Shepherd was influenced by Plochorst.

The windows were generally ordered from a catalogue. The providers would work with each individual congregation on special touches, such as dedications, and on decorative framing material. They might even adjust elements of the pictures themselves at the request of the congregation.



One of our windows is very unusual for a Protestant church of the early Twentieth Century when hostility of Catholicism still remained high. Very few Congregational churches would have included a Marian window, let alone one depicting her in classic blue robes so similar to Catholic images. In the window Mary holds lilies, a symbol of the Resurrection. These lilies are importantly repeated in other windows.

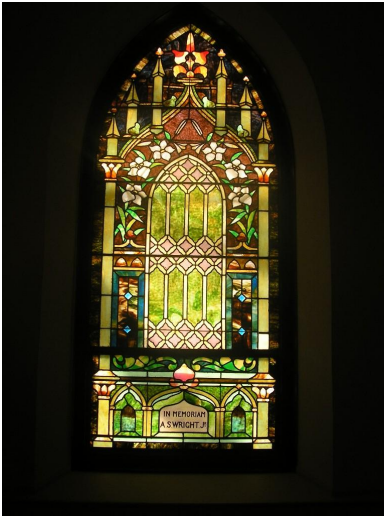
That window is balanced on the other side of the triptych by an angel also holding lilies. Perhaps it is the angel who rolled the stone away from Jesus's tomb and was waiting to announce the Resurrection to the three Marys.

These windows flank a window illustrating John 10:11, "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for his sheep." Jesus is very human, his halo reduced to the faintest glow. He is carrying a lamb and opening the door for his flock, literally leading them to heaven. Over his head hang bunches of grapes and sheaves of wheat—the ingredients for the wine and bread of communion. The dove when pictured with wings spread traditionally symbolized the Holy Spirit and in Catholic traditions, the infusion of the Body and Blood of Christ into the wine a host of Communion. Sitting with folded wings, these doves are undoubtedly a rejection of the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist.



The picture of Jesus at the Door was among the most popular of the era. It illustrates Revelations 3:20-23. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come into him, and will sup with him, and he with me..."

The image was said to have been inspired by the painting "The Light of the World" by British artist William Holman Hunt. The first version was completed in 1851. Another version, destined to hang in St. Paul's Cathedral in London, toured the US to wide acclaim in 1904. But there are significant differences between the inspiration and most of the American church windows. In the original Jesus is depicted as Christ the King cloaked in a rich robe, crowned with thorns, bathed in a significant halo, and carrying a lantern. This perhaps is in keeping with the vision of St. John the Divine in Revelations. The American versions highlight Jesus the man, the humble Shepherd of Men. His raiment is simple. He is shod in sandals, a traditional symbolism for Jesus before the Crucifixion. The Crown of Thorns is missing. The halo has been reduced to a faint glow. Instead of carrying a lantern ("I am a lamp unto the World"), our Jesus carries the shepherds crook, the humble symbol of pastoral leadership. In the original, it is night and the foliage is dead indicating a "last chance" for salvation. Our window features a sunny day amid a riot of spring flowers. The botanical decoration at the apex of the pointed arch above him is yet another representation of the lily, this time a stylized fleur-de-lis.



The lily motif is echoed yet again in the single window dedicated to the memory of long time congregational leaders A. S. Wright both in the representational flowers wreathing the inner arch and the abstracted ones at the apex. This fleur-de-lis design also shows up in the ornamentation to window featuring the head of Jesus.

The botanical ornamentation, which lends so much to the beauty of our windows, is in the decorative Art Nouveau style of the era, popularized by the work of Lois Comfort Tiffany. Tiffany's windows and mosaic installations decorated many upscale churches of the period, notably including the stunning windows of Unitarian Arlington Street Church in Boston, and a behind the altar mosaic at Fourth Universalist Society in New York.

So what do our windows tell us about the folks who first sat in these pews? That they were breaking free from all of the old constraints of Calvinism. That they were people of their times, as modern as the motor cars that were beginning to chug along on the streets of Woodstock. Spiritually, that they connected with the teachings of Jesus and identified with him more as a man than as a Deity. Yet the promise of the Resurrection was very important to them, central in their faith lives. But this Resurrection promised eternal salvation not to just the elect of God as in old Calvinism, but to any "That believeth in Me." Not yet Universalists, they believed, at least, that salvation was universally available through the agency of this Jesus.

What do we feel when we look upon these windows? Can we see them through those long ago eyes, or only through eyes hooded by our own religious wounds, by our resolute rationalism, by our yearning to break free from old restraints? The story of these windows is still being written on our hearts today.