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The Stained Glass Conservation of Trinity Church, Wall Street

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When one thinks of Trinity Church in New York, its sandstone façade seen from Wall Street or the iconic graveyard come to mind. Inside, the Church holds over one hundred stained and leaded glass windows from the original 1840s building construction through the time of the rear addition added in the 1960s. This paper explores the identity of the stained glass in the main part of Trinity Church, Wall Street and how that identity was maintained during the conservation program.

The identity of the windows is made of a web of strands woven from the window's design, construction and condition. The jewel of Trinity – the chancel window – sits on the west end making it the first thing one sees upon entering the building. It is the oldest figural window in Manhattan (c. 1845) and the sole figural window in Trinity's main church. The aisle and clerestory stained glass windows are of the same date and are typical of the design and jewel-tone color palette of the mid-19th century: a consistent field of printed quarries accented by vertical painted borders.

Trinity's architect, Richard Upjohn, was responsible for the building design as well as a significant part of the stained glass design. The involvement of the architect in the design of the stained glass is somewhat unusual. Upjohn was a talented designer, though not a glazier. The enigmatic Abner Stephenson appeared as if from nowhere to fabricate the windows and may have had some hand in designing the aisle and clerestory. Glaziers were a rarity in NY in 1844, but Stephenson was still an unusual choice. Abner was a capable glass painter - his work has a specific style and shows a clear understanding of materials and technique. However, aspects of the construction of the windows in Trinity suggest that he may have been an inexperienced glazier.

In addition to the design and construction of the windows, outside influences further contributed to their identity– an elevated train line added in 1878 and later a subway run under the Church in 1904 seem to have caused the significant movement of stone and of the windows themselves. Primary sources revealed breakage of the glass from stone movement, acts of vandalism and maintenance campaigns have contributed to a multitude of interventions within the stained glass over the last 175 years.

Condition surveys showed physical evidence of the considerable intervention: heavy repairs with cumbersome mending and strap leads, copper foil repairs, poorly painted restoration infills, wholesale replacement of panels, indiscriminate cold paint applied across entire windows, borders made of glass not available at the time of the original fabrication, back spray from interior painting and various types of unventilated protective glazing. Typical degradation such as untreated breaks, paint loss, missing or broken saddle bars and deflection were also seen throughout the windows. The surveys also revealed four bays of entirely original clerestory tracery. The inaccessibility of these bays from the exterior secured their originality and provided a glimpse into the past.

A conservation approach was constructed to preserve existing conditions wherever possible and improve upon the elements that were not functioning properly without diminishing the inherent identity of the

stained glass. Several campaigns of asbestos-ridden sealant were applied on both the exterior and interior of the windows. This created a uniquely problematic aspect to their removal as New York State law requires ACM material to be abated by qualified professionals. After removal, each window was carefully conserved. Any restoration pieces that were aesthetically similar to the original artwork and functioning properly were maintained. The small amount of existing “poor repairs” were replaced with painted infills matching the original in design, style and glass type. Existing or original pieces that were severely broken were repaired as often as possible. New additions to the stained glass include environmental glazing for specific windows, custom support methods, a protective glazing system designed to be aesthetically consistent across the entire building and bespoke internal ventilation for each window type.

Consideration was given throughout all aspects of this project to ongoing maintenance and future conservators. Extensive documentation was required to paint a very clear picture of exactly what was conserved, using which specific materials. The conservation campaign has ensured a long future for the stained glass at Trinity Church with minimal impact to its long-established identity.