

# Art and Architecture of the Church of The Messiah

*Sally Loessel*

The story of the Church of The Messiah, located on Church Street in Woods Hole, begins almost 150 years ago. Two names stand out in the early history of the church: Mr. Josiah Hopkins and Mr. Joseph Story Fay.

Mr. Hopkins was an Episcopalian who had moved from the parish of Church of The Messiah in Boston to become an innkeeper in Woods Hole. (His small inn was later known as Naushon House.) Mr. Fay was an Episcopalian businessman from Boston who became the first wealthy summer resident of Woods Hole. Reverend Babcock, a minister visiting from Salem in 1852, excited interest in establishing an Episcopal church in Woods Hole, but it was through the efforts of Mr. Hopkins, and especially those of Mr. Fay, that this interest came to fruition.

By September of 1852 a committee established to report on a possible location for a church building had voted to accept a location on Juniper Point. Then Mr. Fay offered to donate a site on the east side of Little Harbor next to the Woods Hole village cemetery. Mr. Fay also proposed to finance the construction of the church. The first vote was rescinded and Mr. Fay's offer was accepted. The church was begun in 1852 and consecrated in 1854.

In 1887 the parish accepted Mr. Fay's offer to finance a second church on the same site, this one to be built of stone. The first church was moved north to an adjoining area and the new stone church was completed in 1888.

The architecture of the 1888 Church of The Messiah is a nineteenth century adaptation of the Gothic style,

built on an intimate scale. The essential characteristics of a church: the narthex, the nave and the sanctuary, had been developed by early Christian architects who were inspired by pre-Christian temples in Rome and who adapted that style to Christian usage. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries these basic ecclesiastical elements evolved into the high Gothic style exemplified by the great cathedrals of England, France, Germany, Italy and Spain. Had any one of these cathedrals been fully completed in the ideal Gothic style, it would have been a cross-shaped building three stories high surmounted by seven spires located at the terminals and at the transept. There would have been seven portals filled with sculpture. Ribbed vaulting would have soared over five aisles and there would have been a chevet with radiating chapels. The building would have been oriented with its apse toward Jerusalem, in the east. The whole interior would have been lit by a multitude of glorious stained glass windows and the morning sun would have especially highlighted the altar area. This is the ideal the nineteenth century architect had in mind when he built the small stone Church of The Messiah in Woods Hole.

The first Church of The Messiah still exists, in a greatly altered form, to the north of the stone church. It is difficult to recognize the original church in the building as it now stands because it has been adapted to different uses in the years since it was moved. For decades it served as the parish house. In 1957 it became the Church Exchange where for 36 years a dedicated group of church women, led by Alice Veeder, worked to raise funds for the church by selling used clothing and a variety of mostly household

objects donated to the Exchange. Today this building is again in use as an extension of the parish house that was built in 1964 for the increasing Sunday School enrollment.

The first Church of The Messiah in Woods Hole was a single story gray clapboard building. The existing remnants of this structure plus two early photographs, a water color painting and numerous drawings, all dating before 1888, tell us much about the original building. The western facade was surmounted by a tower with a bell, which is fortunately preserved in the bell tower of the second church. Steep gables framed the church on the west and on the east (the apse or sanctuary area.) The building was painted red at one time. It had two entrance doors leading into a narrow hallway extending across the width of the building and giving access to the main section of the church: the nave, the sanctuary, and what would appear to be the sacristy.

Three small lancet windows separated the two entrances on the west and were surmounted by three larger lancet windows located between the sloping gables of the roof. Two other trios of large lancet windows were located on the north and south walls of the nave. Although there is no detailed record of these west, north and south windows, we do know from a photograph, the drawings and one painting that their decoration was limited to diamond-shaped panes of glass. These windows were removed when the church was moved north to its present location in 1888 and we have not been able to trace them. We do know from a photograph that three windows which were above the altar in the sanctuary wall on the east did survive and were relocated in the new stone Church of The Messiah. They are now in a small projecting chapel on the southwest corner of the stone church.

The artist or the atelier which created these three surviving panels from the first church is unknown, but



First Church of The Messiah, ca. 1882. Rectory on the left, 1877; stone wall on right, 1882. Photographer unknown. Courtesy, WHHC.

they could have been imported from England. Their style and iconography place them in the mid-nineteenth century. It is not surprising to find these three panels in the apse of a small mid-nineteenth century church, for it was at this time that the Gothic Revival in stained glass subject matter was strongest both in Europe and in America. The color selection and the architectural framing as well as the subject matter could have been inspired by medieval models such as the thirteenth century windows in the cathedrals of Bourges and Chartres. For the medieval Christians who entered a church, the stained glass windows were their Bible. Through the repetition of Bible stories and the presentation of Miracle Plays illiterate people learned to identify the subject matter of windows and sculpture. It was thus important to establish a standard code of iconography for each figure and scene.

The figure in the central panel of this trio is somewhat larger than those in the two side panels, and is immediately identifiable as Christ through centuries-old iconographic conventions. His nimbus is crossed, He is bearded, His long garments are red and blue, and He carries a chalice and small loaf of bread, symbols of the Eucharist. He is placed within a tri-lobed



Manuscript: The Vivian Bible in Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, 9th century, *Christ with Four Evangelists*. Photo by Paul Ferris Smith.

gothic arch surmounted by a pinnacle of curved foliage and another arch. The use of colors other than the traditional red and blue is a nineteenth century addition.

Included in the other two panels are the half figures of the four Evangelists. The young and beardless one



Window from Bourges Cathedral: France, 13th century, *Old Testament Scene*. Photo by Paul Ferris Smith.



Sculpture: 11th-12th century. Main W. Portal of Chartres Cathedral, France, *Christ with Four Evangelists Symbols*. Photo by Paul Ferris Smith.

must be St. John, according to tradition. The tradition of placing Christ among the four Evangelists dates back at least to 845 where it was seen in the manuscript illustrations of the *Vivian Bible* of Charlemagne's period. It is also seen in the thirteenth century in the central portal on the eastern facade of Chartres Cathedral. Each Evangelist has his own symbol: an angel for Matthew, a lion for Mark, a bull for Luke, and an eagle for John. These symbols have their literary origin in Revelations. Artists began to use them at least as early as the fourth century at Santa Prudeniana.

A cartouche in the center of each side panel of the windows from the original church contains a passage from the gospels alluding to the Eucharist. A sheaf of wheat placed above the left cartouche illustrates the passage from Luke 22:19; in the right hand panel the grape vine illustrates Mark 4:24. As in the central panel, the artist used details of form, color and foliage borrowed from medieval antecedents such as at Chartres or the Baroncelli Chapel in Florence, but gave them an unquestionably mid-nineteenth century interpretation.

Although nineteenth century artisans could not fully recapture the quality and inspiration of their medieval predecessors, the trio of windows from the first Church of The Messiah would have been more brilliant in their original setting over the altar.



Window from first Church of The Messiah: 1854–1888, Christ. Photo by Paul Ferris Smith.

In the stone Church of The Messiah, the window over the altar is the most prominent window, especially when its array of colors is illumined by a morning sun. A majority of other nineteenth century windows created for the area over the altar followed the tradition of a Gothic Revival pointed arch. But here we see a transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century.



Window from first Church of The Messiah: 1854–1888, Evangelists. Photo by Paul Ferris Smith.

The *Meeting of Christ and the Samaritan Woman* is set within a square frame surmounted by an abundance of flower-like shapes held within the confines of an elaborate gothic trefoil arch. The traditional colors of Christ's garments form a contrast to the clear blue of the Samaritan Woman's dress and the multitude of blue, pink and yellow shapes in the frame. A landscape behind the two figures introduces a new naturalism to stained glass window design. It suggests a scene from nature painted with pieces of glass. Both the existence and the design of this landscape represent a break with nineteenth century conservatism.

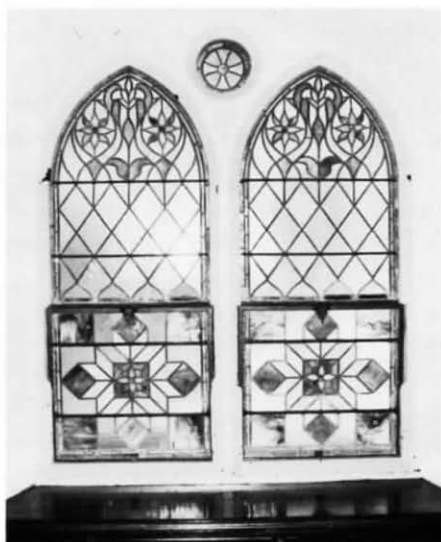
There is, again, no record of the artist who created the

Rose window and the four small lancet windows high on the east and west walls. The Rose window was created specifically for the stone church and dates from the time of its consecration in 1888. There is a clear iconographic relationship between this window and the sanctuary window which has identical shades of blue, red and yellow and which was also made in 1888.

The artist of the Rose window has turned to the Middle Ages for inspiration as did the creator of the three windows made for the first church in 1855, thirty years earlier. The window could have been based on Rose windows designed in the twelfth century for such churches as San Zeno in Verona or the much larger roses at the cathedrals of Notre Dame in Paris and at Chartres. In each of those windows, as in this one, it is the areas of glass divided by sections of stone that create a jewel of varied colors.

The Lamb of God is placed in the center of the Rose window, as it is in the sixth century octagonal Baptistery dome mosaic in San Vitale in Ravenna. For fifteen hundred years the iconography of this symbol has remained essentially the same. The Lamb, identified as Christ by a cross-nimbus, is also the lamb of the book of Exodus. This is an interesting illustration of the medieval insistence on correlating events of the Old Testament with those of the New in order to show that the Old Testament prefigured the New. The story of the Jews in Egypt marking their house doors with the blood of a lamb to save their first-born children from the Angel of Death became a corollary to the Christians' salvation by the blood of Christ, the New Testament Lamb. In a group of ninth century manuscripts influenced by the artistic revival at Charlemagne's Court, the Lamb of God is represented either receiving Christ's blood in a chalice or accompanied by the symbols of the four Evangelists. In a fourteenth century stained glass window in Germany, the Lamb is represented carrying a cross with a banner. The Lamb is usually enclosed in a circle as it is here.

The north and south naves, the choir and the sacristy windows were likely to have been created in a common workshop, late in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the style and color of these windows are quite different from those we have just examined dating from the same period. Indeed, it is only because of the gothic arch shape of these windows that we would rec-



Window in stone Church of The Messiah nave, late 19th century. Photo by Paul Ferris Smith.

ognize them as belonging specifically to a church. There is a suggestion of symbolism in the cross-shaped designs made of assembled diamond sections of glass, but the abstract flowers at the summit of each nave window do not suggest any symbolic interpretation. Only the small crosses between the twin arches of the windows echo the Christian symbolism that fills every other window in the church. The muted colors of these windows do create an atmosphere of peace that is most appropriate to a house of worship.

More recently created windows in the church are those in the "Remembrance Shrine" in the tower which date from 1955. The symbolism of the Lamb of God has been repeated here in the north lancet. The passages from Revelations 21:27 "they which are written in the Lamb's book of life" and from The Book of Common Prayer "The Communion of Saints and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit" refer to the iconography of the earlier windows. The design of the windows is more modern: clear, strong colors are bound together by an interlacing white band to create an abstract twentieth century design.



Another twentieth century window, this one made in 1994, has been added to the west entrance wall of the church. It was donated in memory of Dr. John Brackett Hersey, a member of the vestry and a scientist at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. It illustrates the inscription incorporated into the design, "Behold the Wondrous Works of the Lord in the Deep." The strong colors drawing our attention to the

deep ocean inhabitants become lighter as our eyes follow the design and the animals rising gradually to the light of the sun and to the cross-surmounted ship which is symbolic of the Church of The Messiah in Woods Hole.

Wood is a strong design element in the interior of the church. The arched wooden ceiling and the support

### **Stained Glass Techniques in Brief**

*We know that colored glass was inserted into window openings as long as two thousand years ago. The Romans framed glass with wood; Arabs set pieces of glass into plaster frames or in stucco in the eighth century; and as early as the ninth century figures and designs of colored glass were inserted into medieval buildings in the West.*

*The procedure involved laying a pattern on the work table and arranging the colored mouth-blown sections of glass to form a design or figure. Expression on the faces or details of design were painted onto the heated glass by dipping the brush in metallic oxides mixed with glass powder. As these colors dried, they integrated with the glass pieces which were then fastened to the frames with strips of lead.*

*The techniques of creating stained glass windows have evolved somewhat over the last thousand years. The windows in the Church of The Messiah illustrate some of the changes. The earliest windows, the ones from the first church, were created at a time and in a studio when most stained glass was still mouth-blown and the staining and painting followed traditional procedures inherited from medieval times. We have no record of this studio or of the exact date of the windows, but they probably belong to the mid-nineteenth century. The red framing consists of hand-blown clear glass to which a second red layer has been added. The lead design in the flowers and the gothic arches are hand-cut and applied to both sides of the glass.*

*The large window in the choir over the altar, the Rose window over the church entrance and the small lancet windows high on the east and west walls all appear to be contemporaneous and in a style that is*

*sometimes called "Tiffany." The beautiful altar window was created at the end of the nineteenth century using domestic glass. The faces and hands of Christ and of the Samaritan Woman are made with a complicated technique using plated or layered glass which is then painted. The opalescent colors of Christ's halo and that of the background and borders involve a careful selection of the sheets of glass. The flowers with their centers of "chunk" glass are especially difficult to make.*

*The two lancet windows of the "Remembrance Shrine" were made in 1955, but were hand or mouth-blown and created according to early methods. Every piece was painted and then fired. The use of many different colors gives these windows a delightful variety.*

*The majority of the church windows, those created for the nave and the sacristy at the time of construction in 1888, have subdued colors and repetitive designs that give repose without distraction from the service. It is possible that they were selected by the congregation from patterns available for embellishing many types of buildings.*

*The most recent addition to the group of stained glass windows in the church was created in 1994 to replace a leaded window made about 1880. The artist used both old and new techniques. Much of the detailing was done by fusing layers of glass. Heat-compatible glasses were cut, stacked and then melted together in a carefully controlled environment. The process produces great depth of color, an interesting texture, and an almost painted effect. The Biblical verse included in the window was etched onto the reverse side of the window by sandcarving into the colored glass. The letters seem to float in the darker toned background.*

ing buttresses appropriately recall a ship's hull and knees. Photographs taken before 1908 show there were thirty pews, fifteen on each side of the nave, very close in style to those we now have. These pews may have been made soon after 1888. We do not have the same assurance in dating other church furniture such as the reredos or altar frontal, the lectern, the pulpit, the font, and the prie-dieu. We have no record of the artist or of the studio which created them and the unusually fine carvings of the altar frontal. Some of them are visible in a 1908 photograph, but not in a photograph of the first church. It would be difficult to date them by style, especially the wood carving, which is conservative.

The iconography on the frontal is interesting because it repeats themes already present in other parts of the church. The Lamb of God holding a staff with a banner surmounted by a cross is prominent in the middle of the reredos behind the altar. The Arma Christi, the traditional symbols of Christ's passion are carved in low relief on the front of the altar. There are a whip with nails, a crown of thorns, a scepter, a hammer, three nails, a ladder, a sponge, a spear and pincers. There is also a veil with the imprint of Christ's head with a crown of thorns referring to the legend of Veronica. The Arma Christi are well-known symbols which were often present in Byzantine frescoes and manuscripts where they were placed around the throne of Christ in the Last Judgment.

There is fine oak carving on the wainscoting of three of the walls of the "Remembrance Shrine." It is the recent work of Alan Buck, a Woods Hole artist who used a simplified style appropriate to this intimate gothic interior.

For centuries, church brasses have enhanced the aesthetic appeal of the service. The bell in the Church of The Messiah dates from the original 1854 church and has been in the stone church since its construction in 1888. The other brasses in the church are the lectern,



Pulpit, brass, between 1888 and 1908.  
Photo by Paul Ferris Smith.



Eagle on lectern, early 20th century.  
Photo by Paul Ferris Smith.

the pulpit or ambo, the candelabra, the baptismal font cover, the altar rail and the cross.

The lectern and the pulpit have appealed to the creativity of artists and clergy throughout the centuries because of their importance during the service and their prominent location between the nave and the sanctuary. Traditionally the Bible is supported on a lectern formed by the outspread wings of an eagle during the reading. The eagle symbolizes St. John, iconography that can be traced back at least to the manuscript illuminators of the Drogo Sacramentary in the time of Charlemagne. According to one interpretation, the eagle was thought to fly higher toward the sun than any other creature and John's Revelations carries Christian thought just as high. The eagle in the Church of The Messiah is a fine example of late nineteenth century craftsmanship.

For well over a thousand years it has been traditional for the sermon to be delivered from a pulpit, also called an ambo, placed in an area close to the congregation at a raised level. Pulpits gave another opportunity to

show scenes and symbols from both the Old and New Testaments for the instruction of the congregation.

The octagonal baptismal font is in the southwest corner of the church near the projecting area with the three stained glass windows from the first church, forming a small baptistry. Traditionally fonts were carved from stone and were either octagonal or round with an eight-sided "lip" reminiscent of early octagonal buildings such as the sixth century Byzantine baptistries in Ravenna and the famous fourteenth century masterpiece in Florence. Carved on the sides of the font in the Church of The Messiah are the traditional Alpha and Omega and two crosses, one of which is entwined with a serpent. The brass font cover, surmounted by a cross and foliage, is similar in style to the finely wrought details of the pulpit.

The brass altar rail which separates the choir from the altar itself was probably added to the church furniture at the same time as the rest of the pieces, and it is stylistically in keeping with them. It is possible that they all came from the same workshop. The 1908 photographs of the church's interior show these pieces all in place, and as they do not appear in the photographs of the first church, it is likely that they date from between 1888 and 1908.

The altar cross should be included among the other brasses, but it is difficult to say if it was created during this same period because the style is more conservative. The symbol of Christ as the Lamb of God is in the middle of the cross. The Lamb is again holding a staff with a banner and cross; it is accompanied by the symbols of the four Evangelists on the arms of the cross.

The process of enameling figures like those on the altar cross involves pouring molten glass into separate metal compartments to delineate the shape of each figure. Similar techniques have been known since pre-Christian times, but the enameling of objects is best known through the "champlevé" religious art created in France and Belgium in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.



Baptismal font and cover: brass and marble, between 1888 and 1908. Photo by Paul Ferris Smith.





Altar Cross: stone Church of The Messiah, between 1888 and 1908, enamel on brass, early 20th century. *Lamb of God and Evangelist Symbols*. Photo by Paul Ferris Smith.



Kneeling cushion, designed and created by Jane Foster, ca. 1960. Photo by Paul Ferris Smith.

The embroidery in the church and on the fair linen and the vestments reflects the skill and devotion of the parish members. The kneeler cushions were created by a group of dedicated altar guild members between 1959 and 1961 who embroidered them with a rich variety of symbols adding another layer of meaning to the church service. Most of the kneeler cushions were made for the altar rail area, one was for a Bishop's seat in the sanctuary. One of the two cushions in the baptismal font area was embroidered very appropriately with the Dove of the Holy Spirit.

The kneeler cushions used for communion and for other ceremonies in the altar rail area are embroidered with the symbols of each of the twelve apostles. Most of these symbols have been familiar to communicants since the early years of Christianity. St. Peter is the apostle most frequently represented in Christian art, often in pictures of the Last Judgment standing at the gates of Paradise. His symbol is a key to those gates.

The other symbol on the St. Peter cushion alludes to his martyrdom on an inverted cross. The chalice and snake on the St. John cushion refers to the attempt to poison him before his eventual execution. Three knives refer to St. Bartholomew's martyrdom by being flayed alive. The scallop shell of St. James would have been recognized for the last thousand years wherever pilgrimages were made. Multitudes traveled to Santiago de Compostela, near the shore where his body was believed to have been washed ashore miraculously. St. Andrew's martyrdom was on an X-shaped cross. St. Mathias, who replaced Judas as one of the twelve apostles, was beheaded with an ax by the people to whom he was preaching the gospel. The martyrdom of St. James (the Lesser) is symbolized by a saw. The boat of St. Jude symbolizes his travels as a missionary. Three money bags symbolize St. Matthew's former position as a collector of taxes. St. Simon, the fisher of men, is symbolized by a fish. Thomas, who built churches and was later martyred, is symbolized by a carpenter's square and a spear.

The two prie-dieus near the church entrance were created by two master artists. On one of these the scallop shell of St. James is embroidered together with the

Dove of the Holy Spirit and a fish which is given its Greek Christian identification, IXYS [ΙΧΥΣ], for IESUS CHRISTOS THEOS GENUS SOTER, "Jesus Christ son of God Savior." The sailboat on the second prie-dieu cushion is the seal of the Church of The Messiah and, in its Latin translation, symbolizes the nave of a church. The PAX symbol on the mast is a major element of Christian iconography, symbolizing the Greek XRISTOS [ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ], "Christos."

The beauty of the organ music is an important accompaniment to the service at the Church of The Messiah. The church is fortunate to have a mechanical-action pipe organ which was rebuilt as Opus 196 by George S. Hitchings in 1889. At that time most of the original stops were discarded and the rest were revoiced with the nickings removed to achieve the sound of traditional North German organs. Mixtures were also added to both keyboards and to the pedal stops. To celebrate the church's centennial in 1989, the church engaged the Andover Organ Company to install a great principal stop.

The aesthetic tastes of a century, of an ongoing community, and of leaders in the community are reflected

in the Church of The Messiah. Bronze plaques and documents affixed to its walls list the names of some of the people who founded it, helped design the building, the windows, and all the various church "furniture." A handsomely bound red volume called the "Book of Remembrance" tells more about the faithful parishioners who have contributed to the life of this village church.

Sally Loessel writes:

During my childhood and teen years in Europe my family's background led to our interest in the art heritage of several European countries, with an emphasis on the culture of the medieval period. It seemed logical to major in Art History at Wellesley, which led to graduate study at New York University, at Paris' Sorbonne and the Musée Royale in Brussels. Princeton University's program, the Index of Christian Art, gave me the opportunity to apply the earlier years of training, followed by further work abroad, and more recently, 10 years of volunteering as a docent at Princeton's museum. An earlier job at New York's Museum of Modern Art (in its infancy), and some years with the Experiment in International Living in Vermont were interspersed along the way. Art History, European residence, together with my husband's years as a concert pianist have passed along a variety of interests and talents to the careers of our daughters and of their families. We will forever thank my father for his decision to join the MBL back in 1928, establishing a foothold here for us all.

### Artist/Creators

Bell	Bell from 1st church	Henry N. Hooper, 1854
Windows	Windows in Bell Tower	William H. Burnham Studios, 1854
Windows	Window in SW Nave	Bonnie Maresh, 1994, Waquoit
Woodwork	Woodwork in Tower	Alan Buck, 1994, Woods Hole
	Wood Crozier	Nicholson, 1944-51
Architect	Architect of 2nd church	William Pitt Wentworth, Boston, 1888
Organ	Organ Maker	Hook and Hastings, Boston, 1885+
	Organ Re-builder	George S. Hitchings, 1889
	Organ Re-builder	Slicker Organ Co., Buffalo, 1964
	Organ Re-builder	Andover Organ Co., 1989
Cushions	Kneeling Cushions	ca. 1960, created and designed by Alice Carson for the altar by Jane Foster, Rector's prie-dieu