

PALISADES FREE LIBRARY

Exploring Glass as a Metaphor

by Harriet Hyams



This installation by Harriet Hyams is in the Palisades Free Library, Palisades, New York; Hyams calls Palisades home and considers it a “small, intelligent, artistic and progressive community.”

Think George Washington, Revolutionary War, Benedict Arnold, Hudson River, Tappan Indians; add the mighty cliffs of the Palisades as background, and you’ve tumbled backward in history. The Hudson River flows nearby, and the ageless cliffs exist as they did hundreds of years ago, but Palisades, New York, has changed significantly.

It is changed, yes, but there are many reminders of the past dating from colonial

times. The names of families, buildings and streets are continual reminders of history to those of us who moved here. Even though I came here more than 25 years ago, I am still thought of as a new arrival.

As a small, intelligent, artistic and progressive community, Palisades has gathered steam. The initial idea for a library came from Lydia Lawrence in 1891, and the location was a home she donated. A larger home was the next step, then the old schoolhouse (now our

Community Center) and finally the present library building, acquired in 1953. There have been changes since that year, and the building is in good repair, but the community is still looking to expand the library facilities and functions.

Good fortune came to this small community in the person of Beatrice Agnew, who became our librarian about 40 years ago. She worked her magic within the stacks, at the front desk and behind the scenes selecting and enriching, inter-

acting and participating and eventually expanding with foresight into the digital age. From 1981 till her death in December 2007, I was a beneficiary of Beatrice's interest in her library's readers and researchers. She'd follow me to the shelves and help answer my research queries with a selection of books from history to iconography. She wanted to understand what I was learning and what I didn't know.

At her Memorial in January of 2008, I suggested doing stained glass in her honor, and the idea was immediately given a positive nod by the library board and her family. An art committee of three was selected to follow and approve my design ideas when they were complete. I decided which windows would be appropriate and gave the committee three designs to choose from. I had a particular preference, and that is the one they selected.

The windows are at the front of the building and are on the first level, in a bay area at the entrance. They can be seen coming and going. There is flow on the street level. Flowers, lawns, trees, the homes across the street, cars, pedestrians are a part of the flow and the little foyer where the windows are located needed to feel expanded, not enclosed, so I decided to invite the outside in and use glass that was interesting but did not block the view.

I needed to keep the architectural integrity of the building while adding an element totally different from what was there before. I chose a subtle palette, knowing that the textures would distort and enchant at the same time. My theme was books, and I used semi opaks to give some weight to the design. The glass is Lamberts and Fremont antique. The windows can also be seen at night, as the foyer light is on a timer, and they have become an attractive addition to the corner landscape in the evening.

I checked a few stained glass studios to see where I would be comfortable: their space, glass supply, craftspeople, prices and timetable. Rohlf's Stained Glass



The use of clear textures in this installation allows the surrounding beauty of the landscape to be abstracted in the window.



Installation of the Palisades Free Library window went smoothly.

Studios was my preference, and they were complete professionals from the beginning, showing me glass from the racks that I knew would be sensational. I had brought along samples of what I had in mind. I have a vast supply accumulated over these many years. I gave myself the privilege of not indicating every color, so that when selecting the glass, I could translate my design in the moment with ease and spontaneity. Rohlf's was amenable to that, and the glass selection went quickly and smoothly, waxing up before natural light.

I was sent the perimeter measurements of the two windows (the work of Donald Rosefort) on heavy white paper. They each measure approximately 32" x 66". Then I worked out the full-scale

designs, indicating the size of the leads and indicating reinforcing bars. When completed, I brought the finished work back to the studio, and the designs were traced, patterns cut, and everything readied for my glass selection. Rohlf's hung the cartoons, and I started selecting pattern by pattern. I had not worked with the superb Amy Hinkelman before, and she and I worked in tandem. Our minds seemed to have met at some earlier time. I learned afterwards her father had just died and—professional that she was—she never mentioned it; not knowing about her loss felt strange. Besides Amy there were excellent glaziers, like Miguel Reyes, and installers Rubin Reyes and crew.

These easterly stained glass bay windows were to replace two windows that had a series of horizontal and vertical mullions similar to the north window and south door. There is a small space with a window seat below the bay and a flow of readers of all ages, coming and going, so the installation became a point of discussion. It was decided that, instead of triple glazing with the stained glass sandwiched in the middle, we insulate each stained glass panel between clear, tempered laminate glass, creating a one-inch thick panel with an insulation system. Then at the installation, the existing casements would be removed, and each stained glass panel would be installed against a double-faced vinyl tape, set on blocks with a 3/16" tolerance all around. It would then be secured with a wood molding and sealed with a silicone sealant. The result is amazing. Unless one is told about the protection, the look is flawless.

The installation went without a hitch. We started early on a lovely September morning, and, by the time the library opened at 1:00 P.M. the space was closed in.

On December 28, the windows were dedicated. I gave some remarks, which included the following:

Before closing my remarks, I'm going to take a risk and ramble for a few

minutes about the nature of glass as a metaphor. It is unique in that it is a semi-cooled liquid. It has no regular structure or order. It is chaotic and made from ordinary ingredients. However, when it is in a molten state and becomes a beautiful vessel or a sheet of glass, then it moves to another realm, and then yet another as it is incorporated into a living design for a living building. Thus, we have harnessed all these chaotic molecules into a meaningful expression of memory and pleasure. So the metaphor that takes hold for us is a diverse group of citizens: men, women, children, of different races and religions — a variety of very strong personalities here. If the molecules of disorder that make up glass (without brains) can eventually become unified (and still retain their individuality), certainly we humans should be able to forgive and forget and forge a community where we work together in kindness and do what it takes without hindering good progress.

I'm drawn to circles and understand Beatrice Agnew was also. These windows have a circular feeling, but they are obviously incomplete circles. It makes little difference, though, because our brain can complete what we visually don't see, and our imagination completes the mystery. Books take us into ourselves and beyond ourselves. Stained glass does, also.

About Harriet Hyams:

Harriet Hyams has been designing stained glass for more than 40 years. The 32-foot-high west windows in the sanctuary of the Jewish Chapel at West Point; the prize-winning Dominican chapel; Our Lady of The Rosary, Sparkill, New York; and a stained glass wall for Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., Orlando, Florida, exhibit her unique style. In addition to liturgical projects, she has done work for government buildings, corporations, public buildings, schools, residences and autonomous panels.

Working as a sculptor in wood, stone and steel in her early career, Hyams' love for form and



Photos this page: The use of highly transparent glasses (detail, right) means that the look of the window changes dramatically throughout the day as lighting conditions vary. In the photo, above, artist Harriet Hyams seated in front of the installation.

space adds other dimensions to her work, incorporating light and color. Her 14 solo exhibitions have all included sculpture. Since 1987, she has produced and exhibited life drawings in ink, charcoal and gouache. Her works are included in public and private collections throughout the country.

A stained glass design for Temple Beth Shalom in Cayman Brac, Cayman Islands, has recently been approved and will be fabricated at the Rohlf Studios.

Hyams has traveled extensively to see and learn about old and new stained glass throughout the world. This has brought scholarly knowledge and a unique perception to her work.

More of her work can be seen online at www.harriethyams.com.

