

President's Message:

It Was the Best of Times; It Was the Worst of Times

Having recently experienced the difficulty of sustaining a stained glass business during an economic recession (some people call it the "Great Depression of 2009") it was very interesting to read about the effects of the Great Depression of 1929 on stained glass studios of the time and on the Stained Glass Association of America.

Fred Oppliger's son, William H. said:

"The Depression times were tough, and I really don't know how Dad survived and kept the business going. One large project of \$10,000 which started in 1929 only paid ten cents on the dollar in 1930 after the crash." (The Stained Glass Quarterly, Winter 1981-82)



When asked what he remembered about past presidents, Harold Rambusch recalled:

"Sometime in the 1930s, the SGAA found itself in serious financial straits. I was called to a meeting with two of the stained glass men who had contributed so much to the dignity that the craft enjoyed at that time. They were Charles Connick and Nicola D'Ascenzo. The luncheon meeting was held at the Building Trade Employers Association in New York City. The result was that each of us wrote personal checks — I do not remember for exactly how much, but the amounts were considerable — to bail the Association out of its immediate difficulties. Within a reasonably short time, our loans were repaid in full, and I had had the privilege of becoming better acquainted with two great leaders of our craft." (The Stained Glass Quarterly, Winter 1978-79)

In an online article dated January 16, 2013, it was mentioned that:

"D'Ascenzo Studios thrived even during the Great Depression — a tribute to the reputation and skill of this master craftsman whose Philadelphia studios were not so much a factory as an artisans' guild."

On March 20, 2007, Bob Jones, author of the "Biographical Index of Historic American Stained Glass Makers," posted the following commentary on the H-Net Stained Glass Discussion Network :

"I gained a little perspective on the Depression years while I was working on the [Biographical Index]. I've attached a list of Association members in 1935. That number was about a third of the membership in the late 1920s. If I recall correctly, federal statistics indicated about four out of five studios closed in the early '30s. Studios did all sorts of retail and service activities as well as glass projects to stay afloat. In New York City, the Federal Arts Project set up a stained glass studio that operated from probably 1936 until 1942. An Episcopal church in Florida had windows by Willet delayed by three years due to restrictions on metals. They were fabricated during the war years."

From 1931 to 1941, there were only two Presidents of the Stained Glass Association of America. Charles Connick and Wilbur Burnham rose to the occasion during the difficult years of the Great Depression, leading up to 1941 — the year the United States was attacked at Pearl Harbor. During these difficult years, not only did stained glass studios of the time have to deal with the fallout of the Great Depression, they also relied heavily on the Stained Glass Association of America to "see what could be done about releasing the scarce materials to our stained glass craft," as World War II was starting in Europe.

In 1944, Henry Lee Willet wrote:

My Entry into the SGAA

... "When I started my own studio in 1930, one of the earliest things I did was to join the SGAA. I found the members to be more interesting and that my competitors, whom I had been led to believe were so terrible, formed a very fine group of people with the same interests and problems as mine. We had much happy fellowship together."

...It Was a Time of Survival; It Was a Time of Revival

My Negotiations with the Government

“At this time, World War II was starting in Europe, and the stained glass craft was confronted not only with scarcity of materials but finally with prohibiting the use of lead and other materials altogether. Karl Lamb and I were delegated to see what could be done about releasing the scarce materials to our stained glass craft. After a number of false starts and trips, I finally got to the head man. He was very unbending and difficult and could see no need in releasing scarce materials to anything as useless in fighting a war as stained glass. We ought to close down and do things for the war effort. I tried to explain to him that the majority of the workers were then too old for the war and temperamentally unsuited, but all to no avail. In my frustration, I burst out that I failed to see how it was fair for the United States to have to ship these same scarce materials to Great Britain while the stained glass studios in England were not only being allowed to continue to make stained glass, but were making windows in competition with us which were being shipped to the United States. At that he went into a rage and ended up by saying if what I told him was true either the English studios would be closed or we would get our scarce materials. We got them.

“That was the first lucky break that made me look smarter than I was. The second was a government directive that was issued that covered stained glass contracts. It required that when we got a contract we had to get it approved by the local War Production Board. The headquarters were in New York City in the Empire State Building. When studios were turned down on their applications, I was delegated to go to New York City to Headquarters. I went over cold to find Headquarters consisted of a whole floor of desks, one after another, certainly over 200 of them, with the visitor’s chair beside each. There were about four receptionists. You waited for what seemed an interminable time. I was just



Henry Lee Willet as President of the Stained Glass Association of America, 1942-44

about decided this was going to be a waste of effort when a young lady called, “Mr. Willet, follow me.” I was plunked down beside a short athletic looking gentleman who proved to be a genial Irishman. I noticed on his desk a picture of four boys (his) with boxing gloves. We started talking. He

had a varied career starting in vaudeville and ending in the construction business. Between times he taught boxing at West Point Military Academy. When he found out we were the ones who did the windows in the Cadet Chapel, we became fast friends. Lady Luck smiled again. Out of that sea of desks he ended up as the top man. Some of you may remember that I got him to speak at our convention in 1944 – Cornelius J. Tuomey of the War Production Board. To quote editor Orin E. Skinner’s report of his speech, “He spoke unofficially and pleasantly of the clear and concise presentation of our case, Mr. Willet’s modest and reasonable requests, and the desire to help rather than to hinder our small craft at a time when it was threatened with annihilation.

My Term as President of the SGAA

“...One of the most moving occasions in my life was when, upon the termination of my presidency, Harold Rambusch rose to present me with a watch although our rules direct that no gifts are to be given to retiring presidents. Upon it are inscribed the words “The Stained Glass Association of America presents to Henry Lee Willet, President 1942-1944, this token of the gratitude of the members for his untiring efforts, counsel and guidance, which has made possible the survival of our craft during these trying years of war.” (The Stained Glass Quarterly, Autumn 1944)

It has been a humbling experience to read about this issue’s Past Presidents in more ways than one. They were not only great artists and upstanding businessmen, they belonged to and supported their trade association untiringly and inspiringly, giving their time and their money, while running their own businesses, to keep our craft alive.

It was a Period of Benevolence that Supported an Achievement of Excellence

Lastly, and very importantly, in my opinion, is the following quote by Charles Connick that appeared in *The Stained Glass Quarterly*, Spring 1987, in an article by Noreen O’Gara:

“The artist must always strive to do his best work in spite of the constraints of the marketplace, the whims of fashion, and the well intentioned but uninformed opinions of church committees.”

As many of us have seen over the years, a well-intentioned but uninformed (or misinformed) client may make decisions that can negatively impact the quality and life of their stained glass windows. As members of the Stained Glass Association of America, we must always strive to educate our clients, with the help of our peers and the SGAA in order to create and preserve stained glass works of art employing the highest quality methods — “in spite of the constraints of the marketplace.”



Susan Shea



Charles J. Connick 1875 - 1945

Do you know who said...?

1. "The bitterness of poor quality is remembered long after the sweetness of low price has faded from memory."
2. "Be a yardstick of quality. Some people aren't used to an environment where excellence is expected."
3. "The quality of a person's life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence, regardless of their chosen field or endeavor."
4. "True art is characterized by an irresistible urge in the creative artist."
5. "The supreme achievement in this world is not a painting nor a poem -- great as they are -- the supreme achievement is a life. And the art of living is the supreme art."

Answers:

1. Benjamin Franklin
2. Steve Jobs
3. Vince Lombardi
4. Albert Einstein
5. Charles Connick

List of Works Cited

<http://www.askart.com/AskART/artists/biography.aspx?artist=101269>

<http://www.cjconnick.org/publications/>

http://urban.csuohio.edu/sacredlandmarks/monograph_series/trinity/how4.html

<http://www.willethauser.com/aboutwh/ourstory/willet.asp>

<http://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/05/realestate/streetscapes-217-82d-street-bay-ridge-brooklyn-1892-shingle-style-house-with.html>

<http://www.media-generation.net/DVD%20PAGES/TLW/TLW.htm>

<http://holycrossrumson.typepad.com/pastor/2013/01/nicola-dascenzo-stained-glass-master-craftsman.html>



The President's Page Honoring the Past

"To be President one should be qualified, have leadership ability and love the Association not for what he can get out of it, but for what he can do to make stained glass more wonderful and to help his fellow man." -- Dr. Henry Lee Willet, Winter 1978-79

1903-1906	Joseph E. Flanagan
1907-1908	Karl Steward
1909	E. W. Smith
1910	W. G. Speier
1911-1912	H. H. Jacoby
1913	Karl Steward
1914-1915	Charles Donaldson
1916	Frederick Lamb
1917-1918	Henry Hunt
1919	A. H. Rossbach
1920	A. J. Schuler
1921	D. H. Swinton
1922	W. E. Ford
1923	A. W. Klemme
1924-1925	George Mueller
1926	Henry Hunt
1927-1928	Fred Oppliger
1929-1930	Nicola D'Ascenzo
1931-1937	Charles Connick
1938-1941	Wilbur H. Burnham
1942-1943	Henry Lee Willet
1944-1945	Harold W. Cummings
1946-1947	Harold Rambusch
1948-1949	Orin Skinner
1950-1951	Rupert Schmitt
1952-1953	George Hunt
1954-1955	Karl B. Lamb
1956-1957	Wilbur H. Burnham, Jr.
1958-1959	John D. Weaver, Sr.
1960-1961	George D. Spiers
1962-1963	John A. Riordan
1964-1965	E. Crosby Willet
1966-1967	Otto C. Winterich
1968-1969	Stephen Bridges
1970-1971	Harold L. Hollman
1972-1973	A. W. Klemme, Jr.
1974-1975	James Helf
1976-1977	Patrick White
1978-1979	Helen Hickman
1980-1981	John Kebrle
1982-1983	Bill Laws
1984-1985	Gerhard Hiemer
1986-1987	Elizabeth Perry
1988-1989	Walter Judson
1990	Florence Welborn
1991-1992	Paul Pickel
1993-1994	Truett George
1995-1996	Gary Helf
1997-1998	Kirk Weaver
1999-2000	James Whitney
2001-2002	Dennis Harmon
2003-2004	Karen Hendrix
2005-2006	Andrew Young
2007-2008	B. Gunar Gruenke
2009-2010	Jack Whitworth
2011-2012	Jerome R. Durr
2013-	Susan Shea

Fred Oppliger learned glass painting, worked as a Shop Superintendent, Salesman, and General Manager; then in 1928 he became President of Jacoby Art Glass. He attended his first SGAA convention in 1922, and never missed a meeting from 1922 to 1959. He served as President from 1927 to 1928 and was elected General Secretary in 1930, a position he continued to hold until 1959.

Nicola D'Ascenzo was President of the SGAA from 1929 to 1930. Stained glass artist, muralist, painter, and founder of D'Ascenzo Studios in Philadelphia, he was one of America's foremost designers and manufacturers of stained glass windows. Nicola D'Ascenzo was often credited with helping to revive what was then thought to be a dying craft.

Charles Connick led the rescue of the SGAA magazine (Stained Glass) when the SGAA was teetering on the brink of economic oblivion in the midst of the depression. He appointed a team of part time editors and his own chief associate, Orin E. Skinner, who became sole editor with Volume 28, #4. Connick served as President of the SGAA for seven consecutive years from 1931 to 1937.

Wilbur H. Burnham was elected President of the SGAA for the years 1939, 1940, and 1941. During World War II, he lobbied in Washington to obtain supplies of lead and tin for stained glass artists instead of the cigarette industry, where considerable supplies were directed. Today, the Wilbur H. Burnham Studio's records are in the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art.

Henry Lee Willet was active in the SGAA for more than 50 years, holding practically every office of the organization during that time. He served as President from 1942 to 1943, during World War II. Henry Lee took over Willet Studios after his father's death. Under his guidance, the company expanded into a national studio with completed projects in all 50 states and 14 foreign countries.

Harold W. Cummings of San Francisco, California, was owner of the first American studio to design, fabricate, and install dalle de verre in the year 1954. He was President of the SGAA from 1944 to 1945. Working with Harold Rambusch and Henry Lee Willet, he helped to deal with the Union and the National Bureau of Apprenticeship Standards to achieve one of the finest training programs ever.

Harold W. Rambusch was the son of Danish-born Frode Rambusch, who founded the family's famous decorating company in 1898. When Harold was head of the company, it expanded broadly into theater design, and, in 1926, because of his love for stained glass, he added the stained glass department to the company. As President of the SGAA (1946-1947), he was "loaded with excellent ideas and the ability and will to carry them through."

Orin Skinner, along with Wilbur H. Burnham, Sr. and Harold Rambusch, was elected as one of the first three Fellows of the Stained Glass Association of America. He served as its President from 1948 to 1949. When Charles Connick died in 1945, Orin Skinner continued the traditions of the Connick Studio and went on to lead it for 41 more years.