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Miracles of Resurrection

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Clifton, N.J. -- When, more than half a century ago, the homily went into serious overtime at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in West New York, N.J., young Donald Samick found a welcome distraction in the rich colors streaming from the stained-glass windows. "I remember looking up at the windows and thinking how pretty they were," said Mr. Samick, 64, now the head of J&R Lamb Studios Inc., the oldest continuously operating ecclesiastical art and stained-glass concern in the U.S.

Lamb, which celebrated its 150th birthday last month, has had commissions from every state in the union. These range from the creation of a double lancet stained-glass window for Manhattan's Marble Collegiate Church and stained-glass windows for various chapels at Camp Lejeune, the North Carolina Marine Corps base, to the restoration of the Robert E. Lee memorial window in Richmond, Va.'s historic St. Paul's Episcopal Church -- made necessary when a sailor on leave and in his cups heaved a rock through it.

In the work room of the studio, a modest two-story structure on a busy suburban street here, an artisan was assembling a stained-glass window for St. Albans Episcopal Church in New Brunswick, N.J., one of a series of four that will replace large sheets of colored glass. At a neighboring work table, an employee examined a window with missing pieces -- a memorial tribute to one Helen C. Dickinson Gesner -- that had been brought in for evaluation from Christ Church in Ridgewood, N.J.

There's a 60/40 split between commissions for new windows and restoration projects. While much of the work is ecclesiastical in nature, Lamb does a few domestic jobs -- diamond shaped leaded glass, say, for the occasional architect building a Tudor home. A current project is the restoration of a skylight for a house in nearby Hoboken. Whatever the scope and nature of the work, it's done exclusively by hand with soldering irons and glass cutters, pattern shears and lead knives.

Rather like a doctor taking a medical history, Mr. Samick and his colleagues attempt to learn as much as possible about a window before beginning treatment. Major artisans, notably the arch rivals John LaFarge and Louis Comfort Tiffany, had their own discrete design techniques and their own methods for cutting glass and putting windows together. "It behooves us to understand those techniques intimately. You can't just take it apart blindly or you're not going to know how to put it back together," said Mr. Samick, whose craftspeople take rubbings of the lead lines of each layer of glass to facilitate reassembly.

Depending on the quality of the lead, a window's structural design and the method of installation, restoration is required every 90 to 100 years; \$30,000 to \$50,000 will refurbish a 5-by-20-foot window. "The glass itself will last forever," said Mr. Samick. "It's made of silica, so it's impervious." Not so the lead, which is gradually weakened by oxidation, moisture and heat.

The biggest challenge of the job is not the restoration work itself, which involves releading the window and perhaps shoring up the window frame, but the removal of the window from its resting place. "When a window is installed, it's strong," said Mr. Samick. "But when you're taking it out, it's because the window is weak and delicate and needs to be restored. In some cases, the leading is so fragile the window could start falling apart under its own weight." Prayer and tape come in particularly handy at such moments.

There are certain fundamental rules when it comes to restoration. Chief among them: Make sure whatever you do is reversible, because there might come a time that better -- permanent -- solutions will be available. And unless it's missing don't replace painted glass, because you're dealing with original artwork.

Lamb Studios was established in 1857 by two brothers who had emigrated from England and settled in New York's Greenwich Village. The original focus of the business was the interior design of churches -- mosaics, woodwork and metal work. But in the 1870s, Lamb extended its reach to include windows, in the process becoming one of the foremost developers of opalescent (semi-opaque) stained glass.

"I can recognize a Lamb window by the style of painting on it. It's different from anyone else's. It's much more refined in terms of brush strokes," said Mr. Samick, a former architecture student who joined the firm in 1964 as a draftsman and salesman and became its owner six years later. He's currently bidding on a project to restore the opalescent stained-glass windows that Lamb Studios made almost a century ago for the First Presbyterian Church in Orange, Texas. It is, he says, a good time to be in the restoration business: "America is getting old. The result of the church building boom of the early 1900s is that a lot of work needs to be done now -- roofing, masonry, stained glass."

When a house of worship approaches Lamb for new stained-glass windows -- the firm has fashioned some 15,000 of them -- generally there's already donor money on the table. "It's usually done to honor or more likely to memorialize someone," said Mr. Samick, who determines a price based on the size of the window and the intricacy of design. Will there be lots of tiny pieces and myriad painted figures -- for instance, the full cast of the Last Supper -- or will there be abstract imagery, which tends to mean little painting applied and only a few small pieces? "I always tell people it's like asking the price of a car. It's a complicated question," he said. For a 2-by-10-foot window, the tariff runs from \$4,000 to \$10,000.

If it's an older church, Mr. Samick can count on a request for traditional scenes from the Bible. "It's generally what the donor wants because the donor tends to be an older person who grew up with sweet images of Jesus. We make a lot of sweet images of Jesus." Conversely, if Lamb is outfitting a new house of worship with contemporary architecture, "they'd probably like to have more stylistic imagery," for instance praying hands, said Mr. Samick.

"We were very appreciative of the direction Don gave to us," said Edwin Mulder, retired associate pastor of the Marble Collegiate Church. "We hadn't put in a new window in 100 years, and he had the patience of Job. He asked what we were trying to say with the window, what was the message. I never got the sense that he was trying to sell us something."

Mr. Samick returns the compliment; he regards himself as blessed in his clientele. "The clergy is easy to communicate with and very respectful of the work we do," he said, adding: "I have no bad debts. I have no accounts receivable over 15 days. That's unheard of."

Whether it's good for business or good for the soul, Mr. Samick spreads his religious trade around. "I worship in a lot of different places at different times." And while he can't help but notice the stained glass on the premises (or the lack thereof), "I wouldn't say to the minister, 'great service, but your windows need help.'"

At home, that diplomacy goes right out the you know what. "I'm a fanatic," he said, "about having clean windows."

Ms. Kaufman writes about culture and the arts for the Journal.