

New Directions

Volume 14 | Issue 3

Article 8

7-1-1987

Skylight of Pride

Harriet Jackson Scarupa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections>

Recommended Citation

Scarupa, Harriet Jackson (1987) "Skylight of Pride," *New Directions*: Vol. 14: Iss. 3, Article 8.
Available at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol14/iss3/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Directions by an authorized editor of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact digitalservices@howard.edu.

Skylight of Pride

By Harriet Jackson Scarupa

Eight years ago a fire raged through John Wesley A.M.E. Zion Church at 14th and Corcoran Streets, N.W., in the District of Columbia. The fire damaged the sanctuary of the historic building (erected in 1881), destroyed the chancel, almost all of the capitals (tops) of the interior columns and two round stained glass windows, one at the side of the church, the other above the sanctuary.

Destroyed, as well, was a massive stained glass skylight beneath the church's tower which depicted a large angel with extended wings and four dancing cherubs. All five figures were blond, rosy-cheeked, unmistakably white.

Today, the church's 2,128-member congregation looks up at a new stained glass skylight created by Akili Ron Anderson, an alumnus of Howard University's College of Fine Arts who holds an unabashedly Afrocentric view of the world. This new mosaic of colored light is officially called "The Victory Skylight" because its installation marked the completion of the restoration of the fire-damaged building. But it also could be called a skylight of pride, of heritage, of unity.

For the 30-square-foot work—fabricated of some 15,000 pieces of 15 different types of colored glass—is one which dazzlingly proclaims the African heritage.

The work's central diamond-shaped section depicts four Black angels, two male, two female, whose brown profiles are highlighted with gold as if basking in Divine Light. These faces, with their high cheekbones, jutting jaws, broad noses, full lips and sculptural hairstyles are each set within a

bright blue circle which, in turn, is set within a circular golden halo, which is set within another blue circle . . . The angels' brown arms and hands extend into gold-tipped fingers which reach toward a central circle outlined in brown. So, too, do the arms of four more subdued angels set within triangles at the center of each of the four borders.

"The circle is the perfect shape or the spiritual shape of the piece," explains Anderson as he sits on a pew in the church, his eyes directed upward, and discusses his creation. "It represents the God force. The angels are reaching toward it, of course, but they are also reaching toward each other and that's essential to the piece because that symbolizes the unity of Black people."



An artistic jack-of-all-trades, Anderson also restored the capitals of the church's damaged columns, replaced the two round windows destroyed by the fire with those of his own design and did all the intricately carved woodwork surrounding the two windows and skylight. The window above the sanctuary, which is nine feet in diameter, depicts four stylized doves, representing the descending of the spirit of God. The smaller window (six feet in diameter) features a cross formed by and seen through multiple, overlapping geometric patterns.

But it is that monumental skylight crowning the interior of the church that seems closest to Anderson's heart—and his Afrocentric artistic intention.

At the skylight's four corners, for instance, are abstract renderings of angels' wingspans. Ending in a perpendicular point, each is formed by pattern within pattern in lush greens, browns, reds, yellows, bringing to mind African textiles and basketwork and patterns inherent in nature. By intention.

Explains Anderson, "There is a pattern that flows through Africa, which has variations, but essentially what it does is to set up a continuous sort of road. And that road loops in and out of itself, but it never really begins or ends. This speaks to the idea of the African diaspora or the African continuum that we experience here in America or Central America or South America or wherever. Wherever Black people are, there is an African continuum that reflects our culture, our identity, our spirit and our whole reason for being which is our heritage. So that's what that continuous pattern in the wingspans represents."

"The entire piece is very rhythmic," he adds, "which means, essentially, that there is repetition. You see it in the striped areas which repeat each other, in the repetition of the three leaves in yellow, green and red, but also, less obviously, in dark blue and light blue. All this speaks to the rhythm of African culture."

Anderson also makes use of what he calls the "full field," which, he says, "is indicative of African art quite a bit too. What that means is the use of negative shapes as important elements in the piece. A figure [one of the angels for example] would be considered the positive shape and the area around it, the negative shape. What I'm trying to do is make all the areas important." (The use of the "full field" is also a hallmark of the works produced by members of Africobra, a 19-year-old collective of artists with an Afrocentric vision to which Anderson belongs.)

As for the skylight's colors, he says they were chosen to harmonize with those in stained glass panels in existing windows of the side of the church. But they also were chosen for their symbolism. He gives some examples: "I use green, as I do the leaf shape, to give a feeling of growth and vibrancy. Blue represents the mysteries of eternity, time and space without limit. Red often symbolizes for me the bloodlines and cultural lines of Black people and also the scourge of the Middle Passage and the slave trade and how our emancipation here had to do with a lot of bloodshed and pain and suffering and sometimes death."

But yellow, an opalescent amber-tinged yellow that reflects as well as transmits light, seems to be predominate. Why? "People often say yellow is the intellectual color or the color of thought," he answers. And he hopes those who look up at the skylight will be spurred to think about their heritage. "It's also the



Skylight (below) and one of its four wingspans (top), which represent abstract renderings of angels' wingspans.



felt color of the sun," he adds, "and, inasmuch as we are people of the sun, it speaks to that idea. Not just in the sense that what the sun does affects our pigmentation, but in the sense that what the sun does to one's spirit and mind is very profound. So that's a very important color symbol."

Most of the country's Black churches, particularly those housed in buildings that were originally owned by white congregations (as was John Wesley A.M.E. Zion Church) display few Black artistic images of any kind, and even fewer in stained glass, that medium most popularly associated with the towering Gothic churches of Western Europe during medieval times. The absence of such images in houses of worship which serve Black families disturbs Anderson.

For one, in his view, "Christianity is an African religion. It was born, as was Jesus, in Africa; it might not be considered Africa proper in terms of the way the map is divided now, but in ancient times all of that area was part of the continent of Africa. And people in that part of the world were not white, but ranged in skin color from tan to black. So, it's not just *better* for Black people to have Black images in their churches, but it's the truth. It's more historically accurate. Those people [the founders of Christianity] were, in fact, people of color."

Others may well disagree, wondering if Anderson's Afrocentric lens hasn't led him to misread history. But they may be far less likely to fault the other reason he advances for having Black images in Black churches. "It's important for us to have Black images wherever we go," he says, "but particularly in spiritual institutions because if the spirit is broken then the mind and body do not work. The spirit is essential for inspiration, for steadfastness, for the ability to continue against the odds. So, particularly in a spiritual or a moral institution such as a church, Black images are very important. Another way of looking at it is that those other images of other people are very detrimental."

The fact is that some twenty years after "Black is beautiful" rang out with such force, churches with Black imagery are *still* unusual. Which may be one of the reasons Anderson's skylight has attracted so much attention. (Another, quite simply, is that it is an aesthetic triumph.) The work and its creator have been highlighted in articles in *The Washington Post* and a magazine

published by the National Conference of Artists and on two Washington television programs, "Capital Edition" on Channel 9 and "Just for You" on Howard's Channel 32. And the skylight has drawn a goodly number of people who visit the church solely to gaze upon it.

Reflecting on the importance of the work, Jeff Donaldson, a painter who is an associate dean of Howard's College of Fine Arts and was one of the founders of Africobra, observes: "In a period when the artist has become more and more estranged from the general public, it's very heartening to see a young artist [Anderson is 42] who has an Afrocentric vision and is able to use that vision in the art for a Christian church. For the church to select someone like that took courage and, I think, a certain kind of 'African world view,' if you will. And for him to be able to overcome whatever artistic ego he had and harness his talents in the service of that congregation is an outstanding achievement.

"It's not just an outstanding individual achievement. It is a significant reunification of art and religious practice and teaching."

How *does* the congregation feel about the skylight? "The congregation is adjusting to it," says the church's pastor, the Rev. Dr. G. Ray Coleman, who earned his doctorate from Howard's School of Divinity in 1983. "You've got to be mindful of the fact that it totally reverses the kind of imagery that was up there before. The reaction of people hasn't been 'My that's so marvelous' or 'It's great,' but has been one of a great deal of contemplation and study."

That's just the type of reaction Coleman hoped the skylight would cause. "As Ron and I talked about constructing it, I told him I wanted something that people couldn't just look at and say, 'Oh yes, that's this or that's that,' but something that would draw them into it and keep them there for a while," the minister recalls. "It does. It involves them. And it suggests a lot of different things to people depending on their own perspective."

As for *his* perspective, Coleman acknowledges that the skylight — with its heavenly version of Black people reaching toward the God force and each other — reinforces the message he delivers from the pulpit below its glow. "The theme of my preaching is about the practicality of life and life as it relates to a kind of surrendering to a higher purpose," he says. "And it's also about the fact that Black folk are a family. I don't care where they are, whether they are

here or in South Africa or West Africa or wherever, Black people in this world are a family. We have basic values that are *ours*."

The Artist

As a child growing up in Washington, D.C., Ron Anderson often assisted his carpenter father on various projects, learning how to use a variety of tools and to understand the characteristics of different types of wood.

Later he added to his carpentry and woodworking skills those of painting, printmaking, sculpture, tilework, photography, filmmaking, illustration, set, lighting and store window design and, of course, stained glass. "I'm not a slave to a style or medium," he says, as he leafs through a portfolio showing some of the works he's done over the years. Two of his most recent: a concrete sculpture depicting the warm relationship between a Black policeman and a Black child which he did for the City of Baltimore and a plaster relief illustrating the Last Supper for New Home Baptist Church in Washington.

Through the years, his works have been exhibited at Howard University, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the Art Barn, the Franz Bader Gallery, the Miya Gallery, the Department of Agriculture and in a variety of settings outside Washington, among them, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Duke University, the New Muse Gallery in Brooklyn, N.Y. and the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1976.

It was at FESTAC that he adopted the name given to him by Nigerian artists with whom he lived in a special artists' village. Akili Askia Amabenema (which he shortened for simplicity) means "wise or courageous warrior gathers with all the tribes in the nation," he says.

The jobs Anderson has held include serving as D.C. Commission on the Arts/National Endowment for the Arts artist-in-residence at McKinley High School, chairman of the visual arts department at Duke Ellington School of the Arts and art and Black studies instructor at Barrie New School, all in Washington.

For the past ten years, though, most of his artistic work has been channeled through his company, Nationworks Art Contracting, Inc. The "company" actually amounts to one Akili Ron Anderson periodically is joined by others when larger projects warrant.

Many of Anderson's artistic skills — as well as his ideas on the role of the Black



artist — were honed at Howard during the tumultuous '60s. He came to the university in September 1965, having spent a year at the Corcoran School of Art. "I left the Corcoran not because the art teaching there was not good, but because I needed to be around Black people," he says. "At another time, I could have stayed at a white school. But at that particular time [the height of the Black consciousness/Black Power movements] it was very important for me to be around Black people."

"I am so happy I did go to Howard," he adds. "I met so many people there who have made a great impact on my life and are still making an impact on my life. And, artistically, Howard exposed me to the whole idea that art can very much have a political and cultural dynamic.

"There's a church today called the Church of What's Happening Now. Well, the art department at Howard when I was there was [fostering] an art of What's Happening Now in terms of being very much attuned to the realities of the day and speaking, really, to the needs of the people. There was a great amount of support for the images we were creating. There were also, on campus, antagonists to those images. Some people said this type of art was a threat to the institution; others said it was a gift to the institution. That tension, too, was important; it helped us define what we were about."

One professor whom he found particularly influential was Ed Lowe "in terms of his

creativity . . . and just being brave." And then there were the two people whom he calls "masters," Lois Mailou Jones Pierre-Noel and James Wells.

From them, he says, "I got a sense of a real history and a real richness of culture — and love. It was like they were my parents artistically and to a great degree otherwise. They gave me — as a youngster just out of high school and as a person who was an activist — a vision of pride, the idea of taking a chance and also a sense of maturity. I felt as if they were saying, 'Hey, if I were your age, I would do the same thing, but watch out for this and watch out for that.' So that kind of knowledge became extremely important."

Anderson had three majors — design, printmaking and painting — but he left the university short of earning his degree. "I didn't have enough credits to graduate — I have a semester or a year, at most, to go — and I was just ready to leave," he says. "I want to go back and finish up."

Meanwhile Akili Ron Anderson continues in his quest "to be an artist who is *necessary* to the whole cultural development of Black people, not just a frill. And not just being an artist myself, but contributing to making art indispensable, something that people really rely on. So that a person coming home tired from work can look at a work, and feel inspiration through it.

"And, larger than that, so that people can come to an institution, be it a school or a church or whatever, and be able to feel included when they look around them and not feel that they're in some place that is culturally alien to them."

The congregation of John Wesley A.M.E. Zion Church, for one, would have no problem understanding what he means.

The Process

The technique used by Akili Ron Anderson and his assistants to fabricate the skylight for John Wesley A.M.E. Zion Church differs little from that utilized in the Middle Ages.

After consulting with the church's pastor he worked up a rough sketch of a proposed design, keeping himself open to any of the pastor's suggestions. Next, he did a more detailed drawing with colors blocked in and then a finely detailed drawing which served as the actual model for the completed work.

From the drawing, he made a cardboard pattern of the design which he and his four assistants used to cut sheets of different-colored glass with glass cutters in much the

same way a seamstress uses a dress pattern and scissors to cut cloth. He and his assistants then assembled the glass pieces on a table as if they were putting a puzzle back together, working section by section. They next filled in the spaces between the individual pieces with lead and zinc. When all the pieces had been joined in this way, they soldered both sides of each section with a soldering iron, cleaned the glass and readied it for installation.

Before that, though, they had to weld together 14 separate steel sections to form a steel frame to support the skylight's 105 separate sections, numbering and coding each section to facilitate assembly. To further support the approximately 6,000-pound skylight, Anderson devised a system to suspend the whole piece on heavy-duty steel chains and aircraft cables which he and his assistants anchored into the rafters of the church.

The actual installation, which took two weeks, was a formidable undertaking. Anderson and eight assistants had to climb along the church's roof, mount a ladder leading to the top of the tower and lower themselves into it, balancing themselves on supporting beams. Sometimes tethered, sometimes not, they crisscrossed the gaping hole like circus aerialists as they laid down the frame and skylight — section by section — and hooked up the chains and cables.

The skylight and two windows Anderson did for the church were the first stained glass projects he had ever undertaken. He learned the historic craft by studying every book on stained glass he could find and by transferring the design skills he had developed in painting, printmaking, sculpture, mosaic tilework, carpentry, filmmaking and other parts of his artistic repertory to the medium of colored glass. "Once you've learned the elements of design — color, shape, line, depth and so forth — they can be applied to any medium," he says.

Not that working in such a fragile and rigid medium didn't present special problems. "I cut my fingers all the time when I first started," he says. "Now I can put my hand in a whole box of glass and not cut it."

Along the way, he's also gained a healthy respect for the special artistic attributes of stained glass. "Any given day or any given hour, the skylight and windows will look different; the light will look intense or diffused, the colors will change. That's one of the things that is very exciting about glasswork. It's very fluid, very alive." □