

Visual Arts

Bits of glass from bombed churches in WWII get new life in "Peace Windows"

By Jack Broom

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As he stooped to the floor of a bombed-out cathedral in Germany, picking up a few bits of colored glass, Army Chaplain Frederick McDonald had no grand plan in mind.

"I guess no one will call this looting," the Seattle-born McDonald told a fellow chaplain.

The year was 1945, and in the last stages of World War II, McDonald was crossing Europe with Allied troops led by Gen. Omar Bradley, seeing villages that had nearly burned to the ground, families mourning their dead, verdant fields torn up by bomb craters.

"Saddening to me were the number of church towers shot down, those upward-pointing symbols of the majesty of God," he wrote in his memoirs.

To remember those shattered sanctuaries, McDonald collected pieces of glass from two dozen churches in England, France, Belgium, Holland and Germany, tucking them in envelopes and mailing them home to his mother on Queen Anne Hill.

Now, more than a half-century later — and nearly four years after McDonald's death — this wreckage of war has been transformed into a prayer for peace, a work of beauty.

A team of artists has created 25 stained-glass windows incorporating the fragments McDonald collected. Early next year, "Remembered Light: The McDonald Memorial Peace Windows Project" will be displayed in a national park in San Francisco, the city where McDonald lived the last two decades of his life.

"He would be thrilled," said his sister, Elizabeth Parsons, 94, of Seattle. Parsons saw the first few windows on a visit to her brother several years ago, but illness will prevent her from traveling to the completed exhibit. "He was just so delighted that something like this could finally happen."

It almost didn't. In the decades after the war, the glass bits remained in a box, still inside their envelopes, while McDonald's work as an Episcopal priest and love of adventure took him to Asia, Africa, Europe, Hawaii, even the North Pole.



MCDONALD MEMORIAL PEACE WINDOWS PROJECT

Eyewitness: A two-foot-wide triangular window including glass from the Church of St. Augustine in Wiesbaden, Germany, touches on emotions from sorrow to humor. Army Chaplain Frederick McDonald's words, painted on the window, note the church was so damaged he held services in a casino, where the eyes of his congregation sometimes strayed to nude figures painted on the ceiling.



Loss and redemption: The 16-inch-diameter round window tells of a woman who had a child blasted from her arms in a bombing raid that leveled a third of Wiesbaden. It includes glass from a damaged Russian chapel.

But in 1999, with McDonald in his 90s, a string of coincidences set the project in motion.

A story in fragments

It started with a dinner conversation in which a recently widowed friend wondered aloud what to do with colored glass left behind by her stained-glass hobbyist husband.

McDonald mentioned his glass fragments, and friends at his retirement community were immediately intrigued. Soon they spread the collection out over a large table, placing the envelopes in a grid marked with yarn.

One friend contacted a Bay Area stained-glass studio, which sent French-born artist Armelle Le Roux to meet McDonald.

"He was amazing," said Le Roux, 36. "He was the kind of person who had an incredibly journalistic memory of detail, but also a very caring, very human approach."

McDonald had thought about combining all the pieces in a single window, or perhaps a triptych. But his rich memory of sites and stories convinced Le Roux each should have its own art piece.

One such story came from Wiesbaden, Germany, where a third of the town had been leveled in a single 20-minute bombing raid. In the ruins of a chapel there, McDonald met a cleaning woman who said when the bombs hit, she had been rushing to a shelter, carrying a child. The blast blew the youngster from her arms and she never saw the child again.

The finished art pieces range from 11 inches to several feet across, with McDonald's shards making up just a small portion of each. In one, the bits he collected are notes on a musical scale, in another, they're headstones on hastily dug graves.

"A man of peace"

Le Roux and McDonald conferred regularly for more than two years as the windows took shape. When he died in 2002 at 93, a dozen were finished and six more had been designed.

Many of McDonald's war experiences are detailed in a 465-page memoir he had published in 1995 as "Remembered Light," a title borrowed for the windows project.

In it, he said his first reaction to seeing damaged churches was anger toward "those barbaric Germans." Then he realized some church towers had been blasted by advancing Allied forces to keep the Germans from using them as observation points.

"Remembering this did not make me feel much better," he wrote.

When the war ended, McDonald was selected to deliver a 15-minute sermon broadcast back to the United States by NBC radio. "Days of



Fallen crucifix: The sight of a crucifix which had crashed to the floor of a church in Trier, Germany, was particularly poignant for McDonald, who said the image, facing heavenward through the destroyed roof, seemed to capture Christ saying, "They know not what they do." The stained-glass window above uses glass fragments from the church in re-creating a photo of McDonald, right, which was published in his memoirs in 1995.



A photo of McDonald before a fallen crucifix. The image was recreated in one of the glass windows.



MCDONALD MEMORIAL PEACE WINDOWS PROJECT

war are hard times and breed many griefs," he said. "They are, too, times of testing and development of character. The reward that remains, however, is the peace."

His book mentions his glass-collecting and offers glimpses of his sense of humor: "My persistent interest caused some of my friends to accuse me of carrying rocks in my Jeep in case I found some church windows unbroken."

The glass making the musical notes in this window came from a Catholic church, a Protestant chapel and a Jewish synagogue, all damaged in Verdun, France. Artist Armelle Le Roux said the arrangement is unplayable, an allusion to the irrationality of war.

A home at the Presidio

Next February or March, the finished windows will be displayed at the Presidio of San Francisco, a military camp dating to the 1700s, which became part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in 1994.

Initially, they'll be shown in a former officers' club, but their permanent home will be the site's Spanish mission-style chapel, undergoing a three-year, \$3.5 million renovation by the nonprofit Interfaith Center at the Presidio.

"We're hoping to make it so you can take a walk through the chapel, downstairs and up, and see the sequence of places Fred went," said Paul Chaffee, executive director of the center.

A short video welcoming visitors will include tape of McDonald shot early in the project. "He was a man of peace and appreciated peace," said Chaffee. "His hope was that light would shine through these again in spite of the bullets."

McDonald's own words have been etched or painted onto the windows, giving the viewer a sense of his thoughts and perspective.

On one, showing a shadowy figure emerging through a door frame, McDonald asks, "Who is he? ... Does he have a message for us? Can he in any way clarify the bafflement we feel for that great irrationality we call 'War'?"

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