
Stained glass restoration keeps 150-year-old studio humming

By JEFFREY GOLD
AP Business Writer

March 25, 2007, 9:58 AM EDT

CLIFTON, N.J. -- For more than a century, stained glass in churches and synagogues throughout the eastern United States drew gazes from worshippers. But time, weather and shifting foundations have caused many of the intricate designs to buckle and crack.

That means a lot of business for J&R Lamb Studios, which began operating in 1857 and is the oldest stained glass maker in the United States, according to industry experts. Stained glass restoration represents a growing part of the business.

"I believe we are just looking at the tip of the iceberg of the restoration business," said owner Donald Sammick, who bought the prominent shop from the Lamb family in 1970.

The company started in Manhattan's Greenwich Village and was at other New Jersey locations before moving to Clifton in 2001.

More than half of the shop's 30-plus current jobs are restorations, Sammick said, who estimated that Lamb's revenues last year were about \$1 million.

Because they have been operating continuously for 150 years, some of their renovations involve repeat business _ of a sort.

The stained glass windows at Zion Episcopal Church in Rome, N.Y., were made by Lamb Studios in 1903. Recently, they got an overhaul at Lamb Studios: All the old lead was removed, the glass was cleaned, several painted areas received touchups, and then the pieces were reassembled with fresh lead.

The surge in renovation work does not surprise Jane Shadel Spillman, curator of American glass at the Corning Museum of Glass in Corning, N.Y.

"After 100 years, they need work," Spillman said.

Spillman said Lamb is among the top stained glass studios in the nation, although not a household name like the windows and lamps made by Louis Comfort Tiffany.

"And that's not because of a lack of quality, it's just that Tiffany is very fashionable," she said.

Another reason is that Tiffany signed his works, while Lamb Studios did not. She said

that while Tiffany stopped glass production in the 1920s, Lamb Studios has continued, producing some of the nation's most notable large works.

These include the stained glass windows at Stanford University's chapel in California, which inspired a woman who saw them as a child to choose Lamb Studios to construct three giant windows at the Christ United Methodist Church in Sugar Land, Texas.

"Art is a medium that God frequently works through, and has through the ages," said Claudia Yeakel, chairperson of Stained Glass Committee at Christ United Methodist Church, Sugar Land, Texas. "The Lamb windows spoke to me more than other windows."

Each window costs \$180,000. They depict biblical scenes and measure 20 feet wide by 35 feet high, she said.

Her church, built in the 1980s, originally had clear glass, but began efforts to replace them with the stained glass about eight years ago, Yeakel said. The money has come from a few large donors and the congregation. The last window is to be installed in the fall.

"It's a great blessing," Yeakel said. "Our windows are so powerful that I have people tell me how the window spoke to them, how God spoke to them through the window."

The windows that create such devotion are born in a modest workshop in which the power of the colored glass is muted as panes lay on long tables. Classical music plays on a radio as three craftsmen bend over their labors, cutting lead strips with knives in homage to techniques spawned centuries ago in Europe.

One of the artisans, Dominique Raeuber, was reassembling a Tiffany-stained glass window from St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Lewes, Del. Each segment contained two pieces of glass, and over the decades, grime had wriggled past the lead, necessitating that the interior spaces be cleaned, as well as the exteriors.

"When Tiffany built his windows, he never thought anyone would have to restore it," said Raeuber, 54, a Swiss native who now lives in Jersey City.

To prevent the interior from again being soiled, Raeuber has edged each two-pane piece with copper foil. The copper will be hidden once the segments are again secured in lead framing.

The steep cost of stained glass is among the reasons that new windows are no longer the mainstay of Lamb Studios, Sammick said.

In addition, tastes have changed. "A lot of your new-age religions, especially in the South and Southwest, deal with a more austere interior," Sammick said.

On the Net:

Lamb Studios: <http://www.lambstudios.com/>

This article originally appeared at:

<http://www.newsday.com/news/local/wire/newjersey/ny-bc-nj--oldstainedglassst0325mar25,0,257731.story?coll=ny-region-apnewjersey>