

Jon Erickson

Lending a Contemporary Aesthetic to Ecclesiastical Work

by Shawn Waggoner

Perfectly capable of producing a compassionate Christ or beloved saint, Jon Erickson lends a personal and modern touch to his ecclesiastical work. Through his studio Aurora Stained Glass, Savannah, Georgia, he has been exposed to some of the brightest talents of the 20th century and has had the opportunity to learn many skills as a painter from one of the last classically trained glass painters, Dick Millard. "One of the truths in life taught by Dick and others is that true learning begins when one admits the vastness of their ignorance."

Born in Rhode Island in 1966, Erickson was raised in a family whose members nurtured his artistic development. He was enrolled in various youth programs and figure drawing classes at the Rhode Island School of Design, and his grandparents inspired his interest in painting, sculpture, and music. He graduated in 1988 from Savannah College of Art and Design where he earned his BFA in illustration and a minor in art history. In 1990 he began working for Aurora Stained Glass, which he now owns. Much of the studio's work has been produced for churches and religious institutions.

"My art history background aids in determining and utilizing appropriate liturgical iconography. Visiting the space and researching any illustrative subject matter on the Internet are also vital parts of my design process."

Erickson's Mighty Eighth Air Force Windows

The National Museum of the Mighty Eighth Air Force, Pooler, Georgia, honors the Mighty Eighth's proud legacy by preserving the stories of courage, character, and patriotism displayed by the men and women from World War II to present. Erickson designed and fabricated 13 windows and two door panels with transoms for the Chapel of the Fallen Eagles.

The Eighth Bomber Command (Re-designated 8th AF in February 1944) was activated as part of the United States Army Air Forces January 28, 1942, at Hunter Field in Savannah, Georgia. Brigadier General Ira C. Eaker took the headquarters to England the next month to prepare for its mission of conducting aerial bombardment missions against Nazi-occupied Europe. During World War II, under the leadership of such Generals as Eaker and Jimmy Doolittle, the 8th AF became the greatest air armada in history. At its peak, the 8th AF could dispatch more than 2,000 four-engine bombers and 1,000 fighters on a single mission. For these reasons, the 8th AF became known as the "Mighty Eighth."

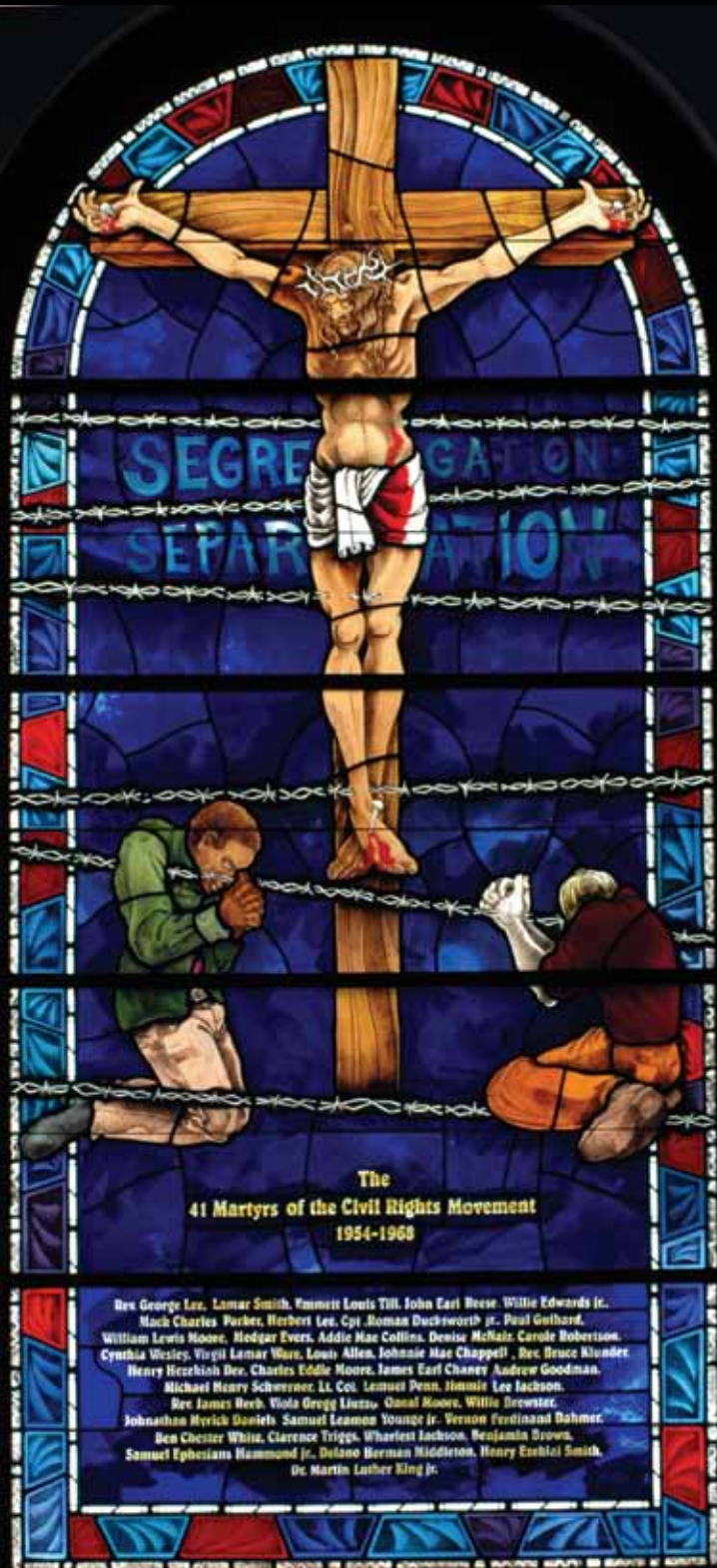
The Chapel of the Fallen Eagles was built to resemble an English chapel and is meant to give visitors a place of quiet reflection. Individuals and 8th Air Force member associations donated the stained glass windows. The themes depict both Biblical and aviation references. Each window donor was allowed to develop a design and met with Erickson to work out the details. One donor, Abraham "Hap" Galfun, died before his window depicting Moses coming down from the mountain clutching the Ten Commandment stones was finished.

Donated by the 379th Bomber Group, the glass doors and transoms depict a flight crew, a chapel, and a bomber known as Ol' Gappy, the first bomber to make 157 missions. The 93rd Bomber Group's window depicts a B24, a stylized view of a cemetery, and a Purple Heart. The 96th Bomber Group donated a Gothic window behind the altar—a reproduction of a window from an English chapel depicting Christ on the left and an airman in flight suit on the right.

Erickson's favorite windows include a floral panel and a piece that depicts a World War I vintage airplane, an experimental bomber that never saw combat, flying over the American countryside at different angles. "I have a lot of respect for these guys. They flew through hell for us, and it felt good to make stained glass for them. This was a dream job to have all of your work in one place, in such a beautiful chapel and impressive museum."

Jon Erickson, 41 Martyrs,
144" x 48", St. Athanasius Episcopal,
Brunswick, Georgia.

Jon Erickson, William's Window, 72" x 24",
Chapel of the Fallen Eagles, National Museum of
the Mighty Eighth Air Force, Pooler, Georgia.





Jon Erickson, (left to right) Caroline's Window, 72" x 24"; Jewish Veterans Memorial, 96" x 48"; 448th BG Memorial, 72" x 24". Chapel of the Fallen Eagles, National Museum of the Mighty Eighth Air Force, Pooler, Georgia.

Montgomery Presbyterian Church Calvary

For Montgomery Presbyterian Church in Savannah, Erickson was given a photo of a Patrick Reyntiens/John Piper window and asked to create something similar. Though he examined the image, he closed the book and approached his design from an original perspective.

Erickson did not visit the space prior to designing the window and was glad for that. "This was a very small, traditional building built with materials donated by Henry Ford. I don't think I would have come up with this particular design had I seen the space. But the clients wanted something abstract and modern." The windows were given in memory of Roger Famous Ross, Bonnie Gertler Ross, and Russell "Rusty" Edward Ross on October 24, 2004.

Historically a stained glass window was a tool for teaching or visual narration. Although the Montgomery piece is contemporary and primarily abstract, Erickson still wanted it to teach. Dominating the work are the three crosses—the one on the right representing Christ and the left crosses representing the two thieves crucified on Calvary with the Lord. The purple in the center of the large cross represents the royalty and sacred nature of Christ. A small amount of purple is present at the heart of the cross on the left to represent the thief who asks of Christ, "Remember me when you enter upon your reign" (Luke 23:42), to which Christ replies, "I assure you, this day you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). "To me this is a symbol of hope for us all," says Erickson.



Jon Erickson, Calvary, 96" x 60", Montgomery Presbyterian, Savannah, Georgia.

Within the arms of the large cross are 12 small shapes representing the 12 disciples, five on one side and seven on the other. Four are of a more saturated hue representing apostles, the brightest representing John, Jesus' most beloved apostle. The disciple of the darkest hue represents Judas. The five red/yellow elements represent the blood Christ shed for us. A white dove rises from the arm of the large cross, symbolizing Christ's spirit and love winging toward the heavens. The dove on the left is in descent following the third across the composition as if spreading the message of the Gospel to us all. The background is mostly calming colors to symbolize peace that Christianity brings to the believer.

Athanasius and Other Martyrs

Applying pigment in a loose and painterly style lends to the contemporary aesthetic seen in Erickson's liturgical work. "Iconography is not always noticed or understood in modern times, so I try to approach the work with the goal of creating a *feeling* that uplifts the spirit."

The emotions of his modern aesthetic are particularly evident in two windows made for St. Athanasius Episcopal Church in Brunswick, Georgia. Erickson was able to portray the iron resolution that made Athanasius of Alexandria an enduring model for lone crusades against entrenched authority. A detail of the windows was published in Chapter One, beginning on page 12, of Volume Four, "Darkness Descends," of the 12-volume historical series, *The Christians: Their First Two Thousand Years*.

A second window for St. Athanasius, *41 Martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement*, uses barbed wire, blood, and the pain of prejudice to pay homage to those who contributed with flesh and philosophy to the equal treatment of African Americans. "You shouldn't be afraid to put an idea or image out there that's going to raise eyebrows."

His abilities as designer, painter, and fabricator allow Erickson to approach each project with a comprehensive and specific goal. Successfully incorporating his modern eye to the ancient craft requires his knowledge and experience in these areas of the stained glass craft.

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See the May/June 2014 issue of *Glass Art* for more information about Jon Erickson's process and autonomous stained glass panels.

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Jon Erickson, (left to right), *Helping Hands*, 84" x 24", *St. Timothy's Episcopal, Signal Mountain, Tennessee*;
St. Athanasius, 84" x 48", *St. Athanasius Episcopal, Brunswick, Georgia*;
Woman at the Well, 84" x 24". *St. Timothy's Episcopal, Signal Mountain, Tennessee*.

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