

Dana Boussard's Wind and Wheat Uniting Holy Spirit Catholic Parish

by Shawn Waggoner

In June 2016, the final pieces of Dana Boussard's *And You Are the Branches* were installed in Holy Spirit Catholic Parish in Great Falls, Montana. A decade of her work with project fabricator Dennis Lippert resulted in 40 panels of stained glass comprised of more than 16,000 pieces. Boussard's modern interpretation of wind and wheat imagery unifies the space it adorns with the parishioners of Holy Spirit.

The windows were produced in three phases as funding was secured via parishioner donation. Phase 1, completed between 2008 and 2011, culminated in four separate stained glass components, including a large rose window 8 feet in diameter, that is installed high above the entryway in the church's vestibule. Double, four-section area windows flank the altar. And the pièce de resistance, a prow-shaped, four-story-high window, allows Boussard's designs to rise up between them as it reaches for the heavens.

Initially, the church wanted only the rose window and the windows behind the altar. Upon seeing their worship space alive with the light and color that only stained glass can provide, Holy Spirit Catholic Parish began a capitol campaign for Phase 2 of the project. From 2012 to 2014, Boussard designed and Lippert fabricated two corner windows on the back wall behind the altar and chevrons at the tops of the side windows. The lower portions of those panels were produced in Phase 3 of the project from 2014 to 2016.

Boussard and Lippert were fortunate to maintain consistent personnel throughout all three phases of *And You Are the Branches*. As a designer, Boussard remained dedicated to continuing the same flow of design in all phases of the project in spite of the fact that a decade passed between start and finish.

Boussard's Wind and Wheat Design

Some of the best works of art meld together the artist's history and aesthetic with like-minded goals for the project. When project and creator are inseparable, one cannot imagine the artwork being created successfully by any other artist. This is the case with Boussard and her windows for Holy Spirit Catholic Parish.

"The building was not only contemporary, but wide open. It was a large, empty, very simple canvas on which I was elaborating and embellishing. I wanted to bring in the spiritual, but also romance in a sense, by avoiding sharp, angular, geometric lines. That treatment or approach fits the kind of work with which I am associated. The space was given a warm and inviting feeling through the glory and color of the stained glass. I added movement to the space through my windows by using wind and wheat imagery to soften the clean, hard, static qualities of the architectural environment."

Best known for her work in textiles, Boussard's first foray into stained glass came in 1986 when she produced 14 memorial windows typifying the Creation for St. Joseph Catholic Church in



Dana Boussard, one of two side wall windows, each 10'5" x 18'.
Photo courtesy of Roberta Grobel Intrater.

Choteau, Montana. The windows were created in memory of her father, Charles Boussard, a revered Choteau dentist, and were later dedicated to the memory of her mother Dorathy.

Ten years ago, when three Great Falls parishes in Montana were combined into a single, new church called Holy Spirit Catholic Parish, Father Dick Schlosser requested Boussard for the church's windows. Not only did he remember and admire her work at St. Joseph's, but he also wanted a regional artist to design his parish's new windows.

The church requested that Boussard's windows reflect both wind and wheat. These two elements were not only familiar to the artist but had been indelibly ingrained on her psyche. Born and raised in Choteau on the east side of the Continental Divide where the Rocky Mountain Front meets the Great Plains, the West of Boussard's imagination lives and breathes in her artwork.

Dark purple vines begin in the earth then wind their way up through the design, which starts at the bottom with grasses and stalks of windblown wheat. Leaves, branches, flowers, flames of light, and red doves eventually lead the eye to angels' wings that surround and support the Blessed Virgin Mary, her head framed by stars in the night sky.

"I wanted the eye to see the bottom windows first, then look upward toward the sky. That inspired my use of grasses, wheat, and twisting vines in the lower panels, with the chosen verse from John 15:5 becoming an underlying and unifying element for the parishioners: *"I am the vine; you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."*

The vines typify wind and movement as the eye moves upward to the top of the windows. Surrounded by images of doves and wheat, the deep purple vines branch into the form of a chalice, with the host, bathed in radiant light, rising above.



Dana Boussard, Rose Window, installed on the opposite wall from the altar windows, 8' x 8'. Photo courtesy of the artist.

The three center windows behind the altar, side windows 22' x 6' and center window 42' x 8'. Photo courtesy of Roberta Grobel Intrater.



Painted with Glass

Working closely with the SLATERPAULL firm of Denver, Colorado, Boussard was able to design windows that have become an integral part of the architectural concept. Her primary concern was not imagery but rather style. She opted to move away from painted or figurative work and adorn Holy Spirit with windows that would reflect the contemporary design of the church.

In search of the right type, color, and texture of glass for this project, glass selection was a major undertaking, requiring that Boussard travel to Denver; Seattle, Washington; and Atlanta, Georgia. Her main goal was to have a big enough selection to use the glass in a painterly way. She worked mostly with Armstrong, Uroboros, Bullseye, Youghiogeny, and Spectrum glasses to bring her aesthetic to life.

"Essentially I painted these windows with glass," says Boussard. "There are thousands of cuts, and multitudes of small pieces achieve color and nuance. On the small bird shapes, for example, there are probably 10 or 15 cuts. On the larger red birds, there are six different types of red glass, and the feathers on the wings are each individually fabricated."

Because Great Falls benefits from many sunny days, Boussard's original windows behind the altar incorporated opaque glasses and semi-opaque glass to help block the sun from worshipping parishioners. When the corner windows were being designed, the church expressed a desire for more transparent glass and a feeling of "bringing the outside in." The upper portions of the corner windows behind the altar start out opaque but move into an increased use of clear glass. These transitions allowed the artist to maintain a consistent style throughout the entire project while meeting the clients' requests. The corner window combination of opaque and clear glass was continued in the final side windows so that the total effect in the church is both rhythmic and cohesive.

A Team Effort

Boussard stresses the importance of her team in the process of fabricating and installing Phase 1 of the windows. The glass was all copper foiled with hidden rebar reinforcement, a must in all of her windows. Master glass cutter Roy Carpenter, fabricators from Lippert Studio, and Lippert himself, with whom Boussard had worked on previous projects, were key members of her team.

A Missoula, Montana, architect who's worked in stained glass for 40 years, Lippert previously built a 21-foot stained glass dome for George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch. His projects with Boussard include her windows for St. Joseph Parrish and public pieces for Big Bend College in Moses Lake, Washington; Rocky Mountain College in Billings, Montana; and The Anchorage Health Science Center in Anchorage, Alaska. Pushing the limits of stained glass is always likely when combining Boussard's ideas with Lippert's technical prowess. The two of them completed Phase 2 and 3 of the Holy Spirit project alone.

Boussard's husband Stan Reifel contributed his construction skills to the project by building expert shipping cases and light tables. In the early 1970s, Boussard moved to New York where she met Reifel, an exhibition designer and gallery director as well as furniture and house designer. Their romance began when he exhibited her paintings at his Fairtree Gallery. They lived in San Francisco, California, for a short time, then moved back to Montana and married. Together they have a daughter Ariana, also an artist.

Boussard and Reifel say the Holy Spirit project was the most challenging glass installation they've worked on to date, as well as the largest. Boussard spent considerable time consulting with the architects on issues regarding light and dimension. Working from the inception of the architectural specs, the complicated angles

were constantly being modified as construction for the glass space commenced. That process created delays, since shifting angles and changing window sizes slowed what she could do.

Installation

TC Glass Company, located in Great Falls, spent days installing the windows. Professional movers brought the windows to Great Falls in crates built by Reifel, and not one piece of glass broke. The massive circular rose window, designed to reflect a marriage of the other three, took a full day to install and was carried to its permanent location on a scissor lift inside the church. The pieces on either side of the altar were also installed from the inside using scaffolding.

The four-story centerpiece had to be installed from the outside with a man lift. Though she had seen the piece in working drawings enlarged to scale, she didn't see this window in its entirety until installation day. The installers had to remove 10 thermopane glass panels, each approximately 8 feet by 4 feet, while sometimes encountering near gale-force winds.

"It was a little nerve-wracking, because the wind was blowing like crazy," says Boussard. "There were days when we had to stop, take a break, and wait for the winds to die down. When you're manipulating such large windows, there's always a fear of breakage and the possibility of the panels bending. The wind exacerbated that immensely."

Artistic Growth Through Public Art

As Boussard works on smaller drawing and painting projects, she awaits with anticipation her next large stained glass commission. The artist has lived for years near Arlee, Montana, on the Flathead Reservation in their hand-built wooden house on a meadow surrounded by woods. Her studio is located in a refurbished 1916 barn with two separate floors and plenty of room to work. Large skylights provide the perfect light for all of her media, and there is plenty of wall and floor space.

"I couldn't have made the Holy Spirit windows without this much room. It is this space that allows my mind to be able to envision and complete large public artworks. I live on 60 acres outside of Missoula, where I see mountains, wheat fields, and cows running by. There's a peace that comes from being surrounded by the natural world, and that's reflected in all of my work."

Her other public art commissions consist of mostly textiles and can be seen at the Anchorage International Airport, Anchorage, Alaska; the Federal Reserve Bank, Minneapolis, Minnesota; AARP Headquarters, Washington, D.C.; and Montana State Library, Helena, Montana. In 1999, Boussard was awarded a distinguished Fine Arts Alumni Award from the University of Montana and was chosen to represent her state with a textile piece in an exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, in Washington. She is also a past recipient of both a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and a Western States Arts Federation (WESTAF) Fellowship.



*Dana Boussard with Rev. Richard Schlosser
at the halfway point in the commission.
Photo courtesy of the artist.*

*Using lifts to install windows on the outside of
the church. Photo courtesy of the artist.*

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*Dana Boussard, Starry Top, the top two panels of the center window behind the altar, 8' x 8'.
Photo courtesy of Ariana Boussard-Reifel.*

"I have been very fortunate throughout my career in public art that I've been allowed and encouraged to explore artistically and develop designs based on my strengths and interests. Overall, I've had very few constraints. With the Holy Spirit windows, they were open to my creativity, and I was very grateful for that. The wind and the wheat have now become the home of the congregation, and that symbolism will unite them as parishioners for years to come."

GA



*Dana Boussard, Detail of the Red Bird in the center window behind the altar.
Photo courtesy of the artist.*

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