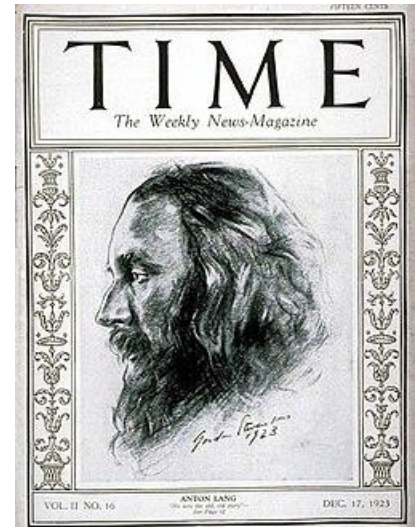


People & Places

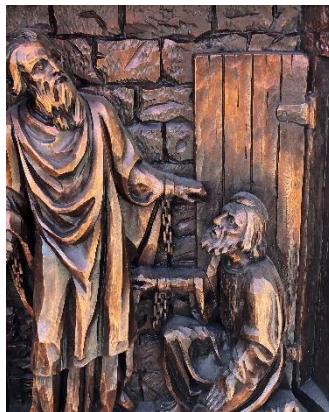
Shaping the Art & Architecture of St. John's Episcopal Cathedral, Los Angeles

By Bob Williams

Master woodcarver Anton Lang – who in 1900, 1910, and 1922 portrayed Jesus in Germany's every-decade Oberammergau Passion Play – is among the intriguing people and places key in shaping the storied art and architecture of St. John's Cathedral, which serves the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles as the landmark “see” (in Latin “*sedes*,” or chair) church of its bishop and people.

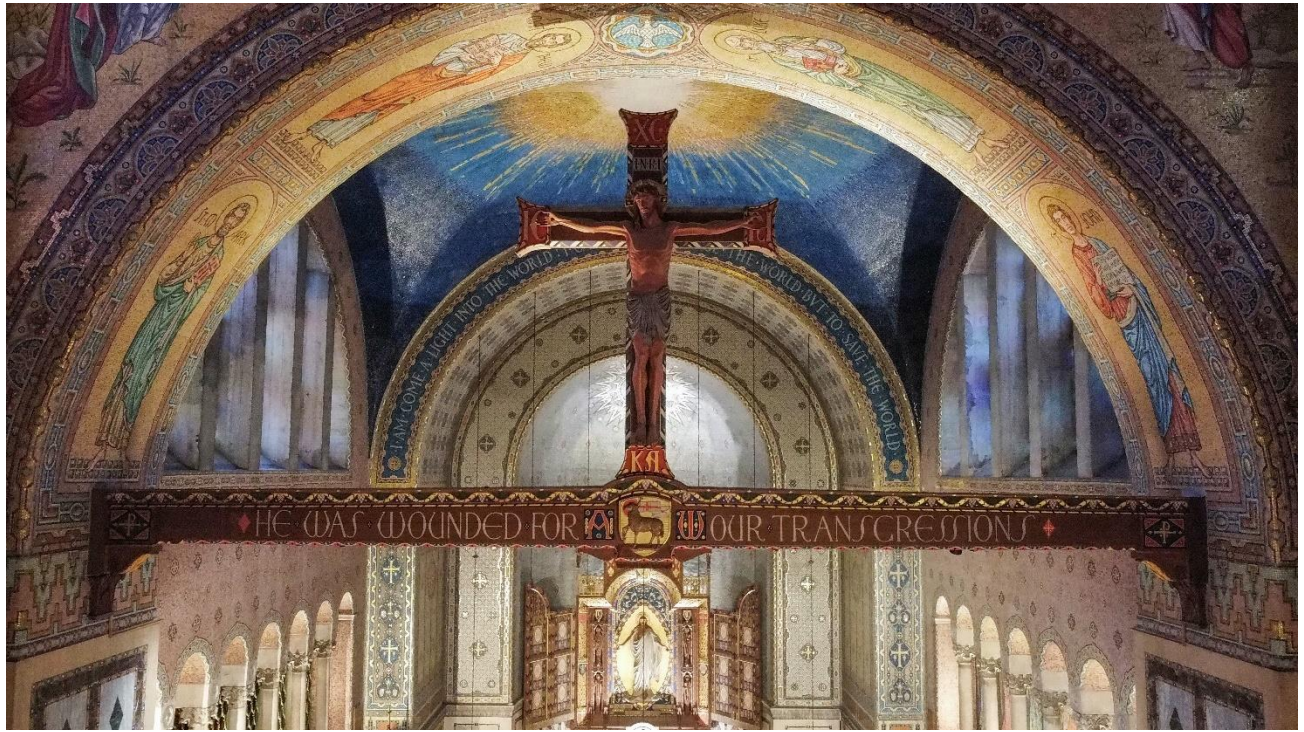


Born into a Bavarian family of artisans, Lang, a potter by trade, is said to have helped carve scenes from the Acts of the Apostles which are featured in eight panels atop the cathedra, the bishop's official chair, positioned near the high altar. Consonant with L.A.'s seismic volatility, one of the eight panels depicts Paul and Silas being freed from prison chains by an earthquake.



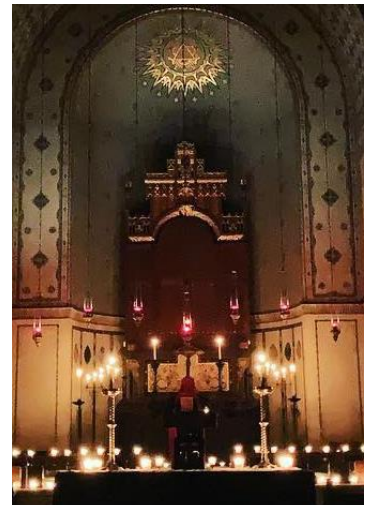
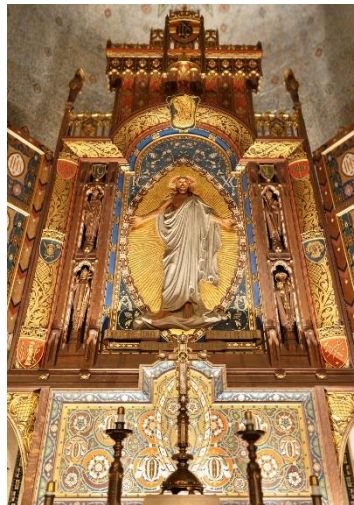
Along with these reminders of the historic apostolic succession and ministries of bishops, the cathedra is inlaid with centuries-old wood from England's Winchester Cathedral. Inset in the prayer desk is oak believed to date from 1079, the oldest artifact present in St. John's.





Lang's pupil Adelbert Zwink carved from oak the life-size crucifix on the rood beam spanning the chancel's central arch, as well as the welcoming figure of Jesus with outstretched arms at the heart of cathedral's altar triptych, the doors of which are closed during Lent and ceremonially re-opened with fanfare during the Easter Vigil.

Italy brings significant influence to St. John's, its façade patterned after the 11th-century Church of San Pietro in Tuscania (about 75 miles northwest of Rome and pictured below at near right). Meanwhile, the ceiling of St. John's replicates that of San Miniato al Monte Basilica (at far right) in Florence, built, starting in 1013, on a hillside overlooking the Duomo.



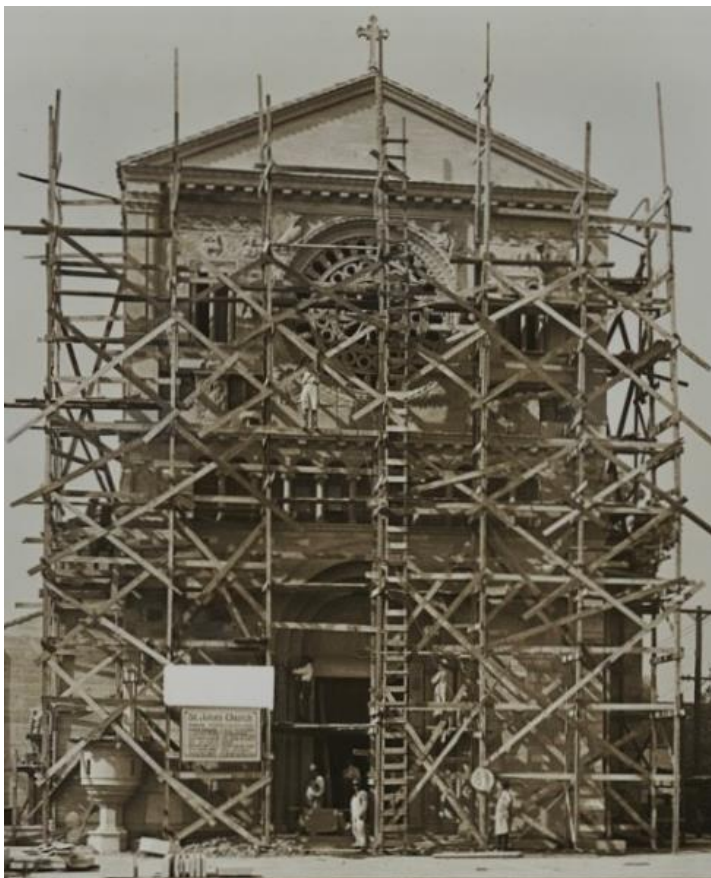


The architectural choice of Romanesque Revival style for St. John's reflects a trend toward Italian-inspired designs, and echoes the Franciscans' naming of El Pueblo de Los Angeles after Assisi's St. Mary of the Angels Basilica, the interior of which shelters St. Francis's 13th-century "Little Portion" chapel, birthplace of the Franciscan order.

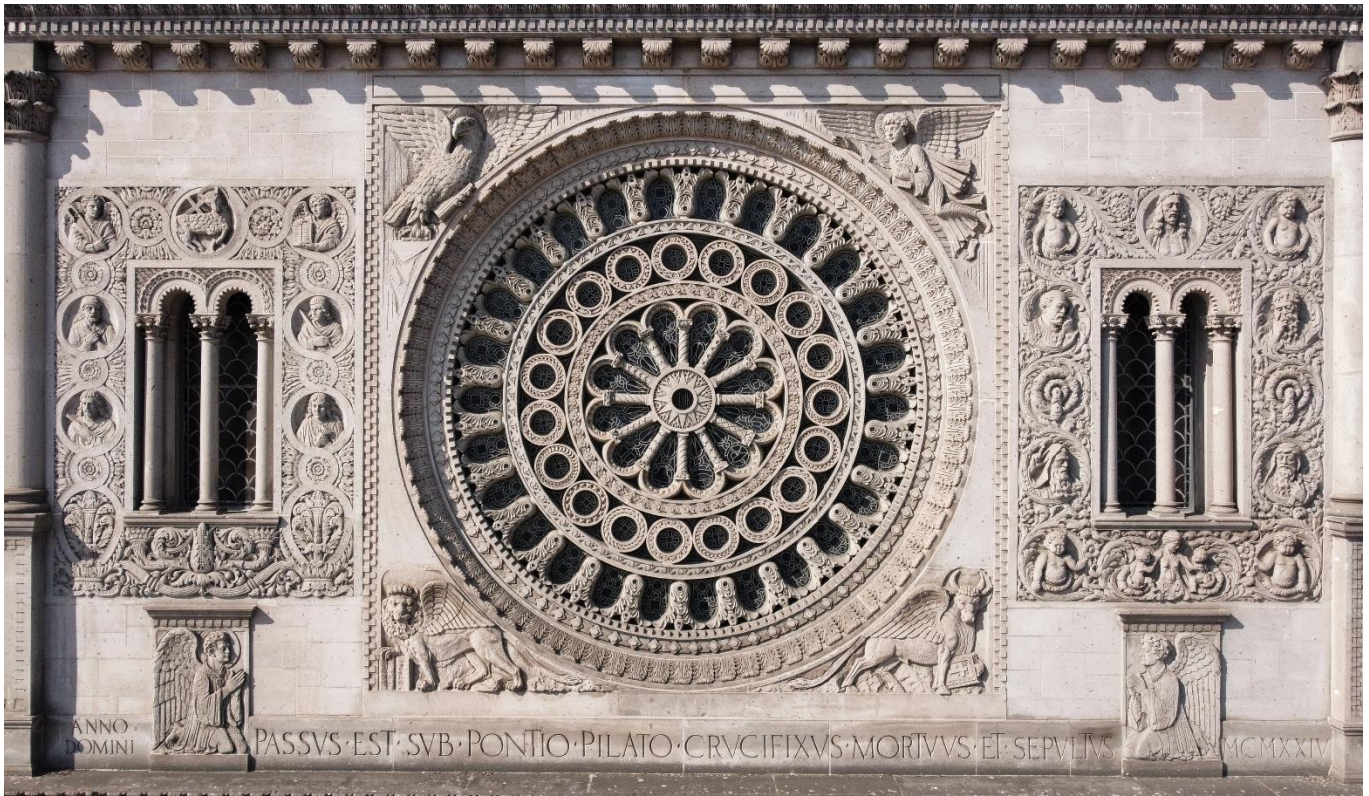
Architects F. Pierpont and Walter S. Davis (standing and seated at center with siblings) were commissioned by the vestry of St. John's to design the church. Ground was broken in 1923, and construction advanced on a "pay-as-you-go" basis, championed by the Rev. George Davidson, rector from 1913 to 1951. St. John's was consecrated February 3, 1925. The congregation grew from 400 to 2,300 members, becoming the Episcopal Church's largest parish west of Chicago.



The sanctuary was built of steel-reinforced concrete – with walls 2-½ feet thick – at a cost of \$650,000 (more than \$9 million today) next to the original wood-shingled St. John's Church erected in an orange grove after the parish was founded in 1890 near fashionable homes of Chester Place. The wooden church was moved by wagon south on Figueroa for use by another Episcopal parish.



The church's façade is tufa, a volcanic stone, carved by a team of artisans led by notable sculptor Salvatore Cartiano Scarpitta (pictured with his bust of La Jolla philanthropist Ellen Browning Scripps; he also carved a likeness of Benito Mussolini). Born in Palermo, Scarpitta immigrated to the United States in 1910. His other major L.A. commissions include sculptures for the original Stock Exchange Building downtown and County Hospital.



To the façade of St. John's Scarpitta added a bit of Hollywood whimsy with cherubs said to be in the likeness of character actor D'Arcy Corrigan's toddler daughter Dolores (pictured at right), herself a child actor.



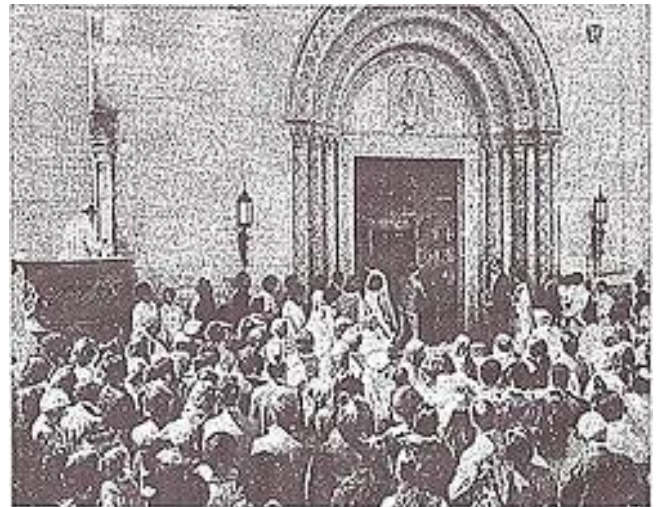
Inside St. John's, the chancel's Carrara marble lectern (pictured below),

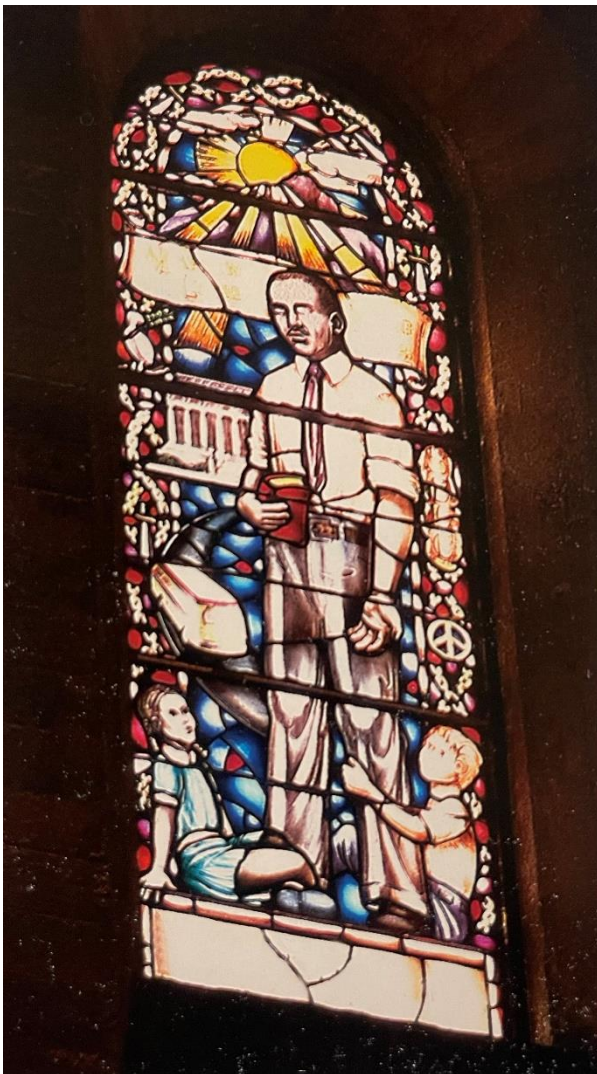
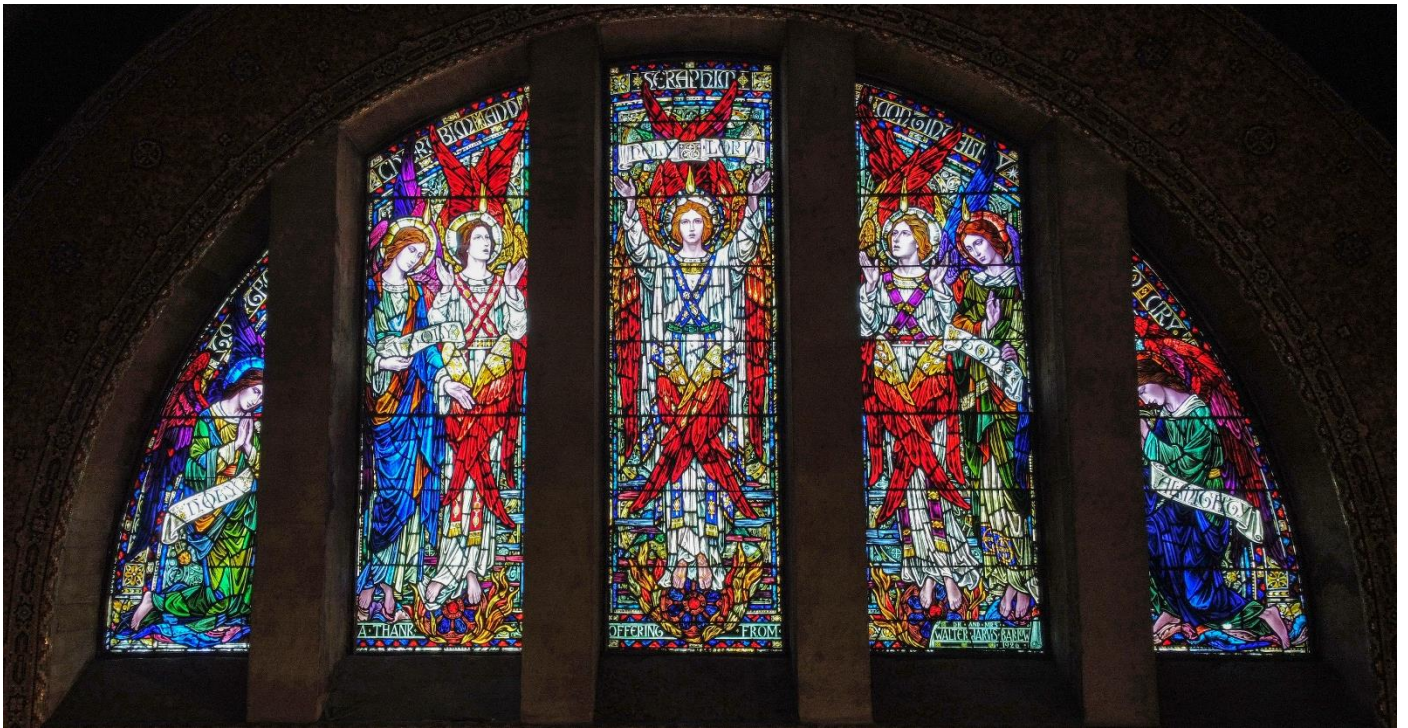


an image of St. John the Evangelist, also was carved by Scarpitta, who engaged his younger son to serve as the model for the face. The lectern was given to St. John's by Mrs. Spencer H. Smith in 1927 in memory of her husband. In addition, Scarpitta carved from white Carrara marble the pulpit, which, on the base, lists in Latin the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: Wisdom Understanding, Counsel, Spiritual Strength, Knowledge, True Godliness, and Holy Fear.

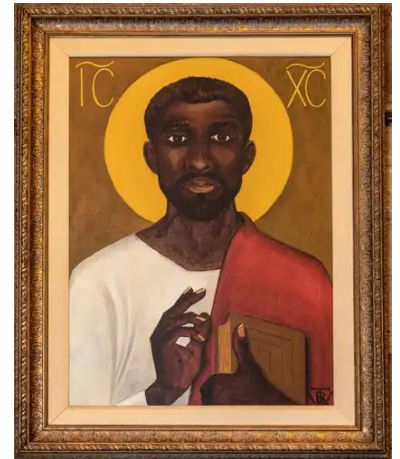


The outdoor pulpit of St. John's – an unusual church feature – was carved by Scarpitta with the words of II Corinthians 4:5: "We preach not ourselves but Christ Jesus the Lord." The outdoor pulpit has featured centrally in parish protest acts, including the 1970 symbolic closing of the bronze doors in opposition to war in Vietnam. The doors were reopened in 1973 when the war ended (L.A. Times photo at right).

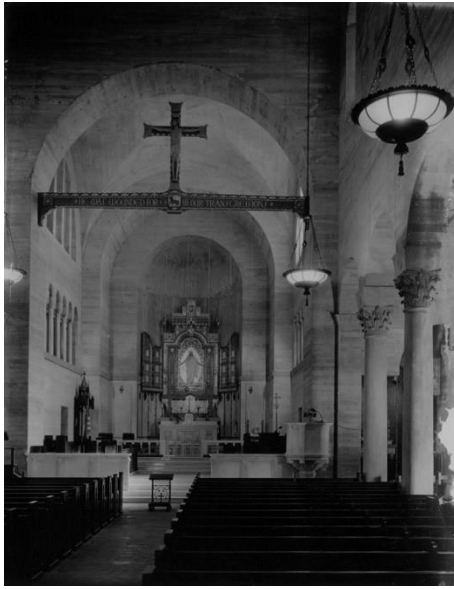




Amid the extensive and exquisite stained glass in St. John's Cathedral, the arch of north choir windows (above) include St. Mary at center with a *Te Deum* motif. The south choir windows portray the defeat of evil, with St. George slaying a dragon, and the Archangel Michael seen as sentry. Clerestory windows, many installed in the 1940s by English craftsmen, feature saints and martyrs. In 1977, the Judson Studios of Los Angeles installed the window it created in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., shown with two children and incorporating views of the Lincoln memorial, a bus from the Montgomery boycott, and a contemporary peace sign, and other symbolism significant in the civil rights' leader's life.



Black American and wider African heritage also is celebrated in the *Icon of the Black Christ*, a print of an oil painting by the Rev. Canon Warner Traynham, rector of St. John's from 1984 to 2001 who welcomed Archbishop Desmond Tutu to St. John's in 1990.



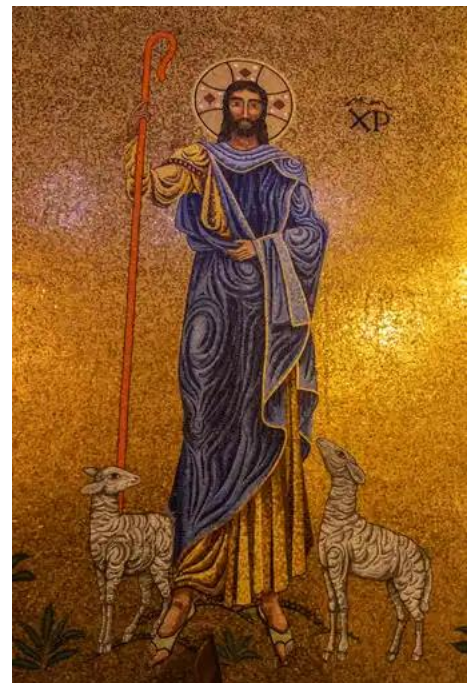
Other notable paintings include a copy of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, seen nearest the Lady Chapel and said to have come to California in a covered wagon.

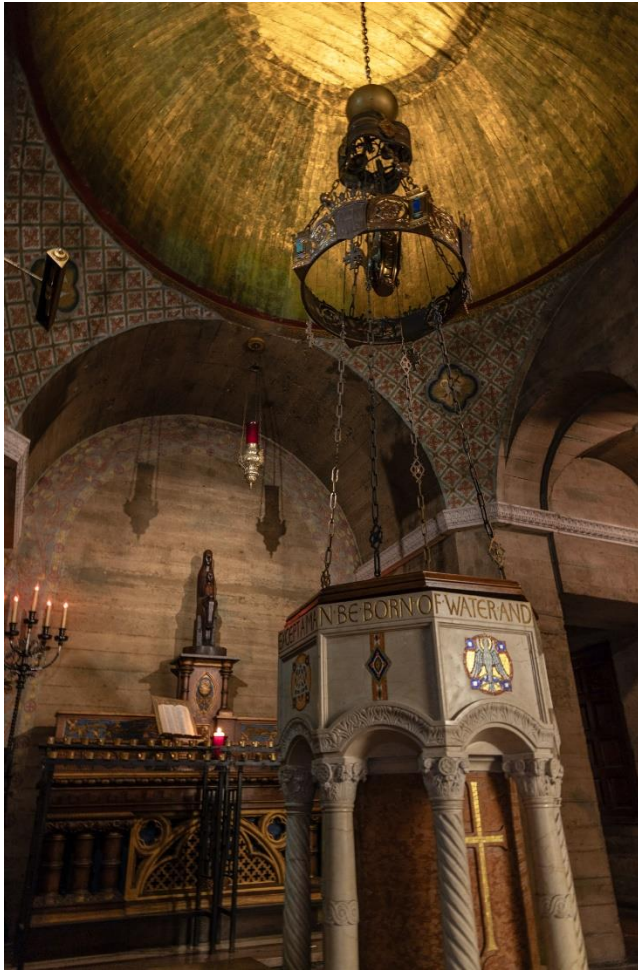
The Lady Chapel was originally called the Liberty Chapel in tribute to the 192 men of St. John's who served in World War I. The high windows honor those who served in World War II. Another window across the nave is inscribed: "In Honor of Women and Girls Who Went From This Parish to Serve Their Country in World War II."



For more than 40 years the walls of the chapel were unfinished cement, as the walls of the nave now appear. But in 1968, a major gift made it possible for Derrick John Taylor with artists from Judson Studios to install 24-carat gold and other tiles from Italy. With their golden background symbolizing eternity, the mosaics were given in memory of Blanche Hinman Garland, and her daughter, Gwendolyn Garland Babcock, selected the tiles.

The marble and mosaic decoration of the sanctuary walls (shown unadorned in photo at top left) was executed by the firm Calvert, Herrick & Riedinger in stages spanning two decades. In 1947, *The Seven Angels* mosaics (pictured at top right) were created in Italy and added to the north choir at a cost of \$150,000 (approximately \$1.65 million today). Below the angel choir is the console of the 1925 E. M. Skinner pipe organ custom built for St. John's.





Located to the south of the chancel, the baptistry is another stunning feature of St. John's. Raising the oak canopy over the font releases a brass dove from the overhead crown, and a 300-pound brass ball counterbalances the canopy with pulleys. The font is carved from a 500-pound block of Botticini marble and is supported by an eight-sided block of Verona red marble, the number eight signifying new life. The altar is from the original 1890 wooden St. John's Church.

In 2008, St. John's was designated the diocese's pro-cathedral (an extant parish church so named rather than built as a cathedral) by Bishop J. Jon Bruno. In 2019, Bishop John Harvey Taylor consolidated cathedral ministries and transferred to St. John's the cathedra handcrafted in 1924 for the diocese's former St. Paul's Cathedral, razed in 1980 after Diocesan Convention deemed the considerable cost of earthquake repairs and renovation to be unaffordable.

It is notable that St. Paul's Cathedral, designed by renowned architect Reginald Davis Johnson – son of L.A.'s first diocesan bishop, the Rt. Rev. Joseph Horsfall Johnson – was consecrated in November 1924 on Figueroa Street about 1.8 miles north of St. John's, which opened weeks later in December. St. Paul's was formed out of St. Athanasius Church, Echo Park, which dates from 1864 as Southern California's oldest continuing Protestant house of worship. So far, no documentation has been discovered as to the dynamics of constructing these two large churches simultaneously; research is welcome.

Meanwhile, L.A.'s cathedra carver, actor Anton Lang, is remembered for his Christlike life that included opposing Nazi attempts to add anti-Semitic language to Oberammergau's Passion Play.

“At Oberammergau we have all kinds,” Lang told *Literary Digest* (January 5, 1924). “There is a Catholic church, and a chapel that is used by the Protestants – Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, and all kinds. But that isn't what counts. It is how one lives that makes one good or bad; and Jesus, I believe, will take us all” – including those of other faiths – “to heaven according to our virtues.” ■



Robert Williams serves the Diocese of Los Angeles as historian-archivist and canon for common life. His experience with St. John's spans 40 years. New photos included herein are by Paul Sanchez of Los Angeles.