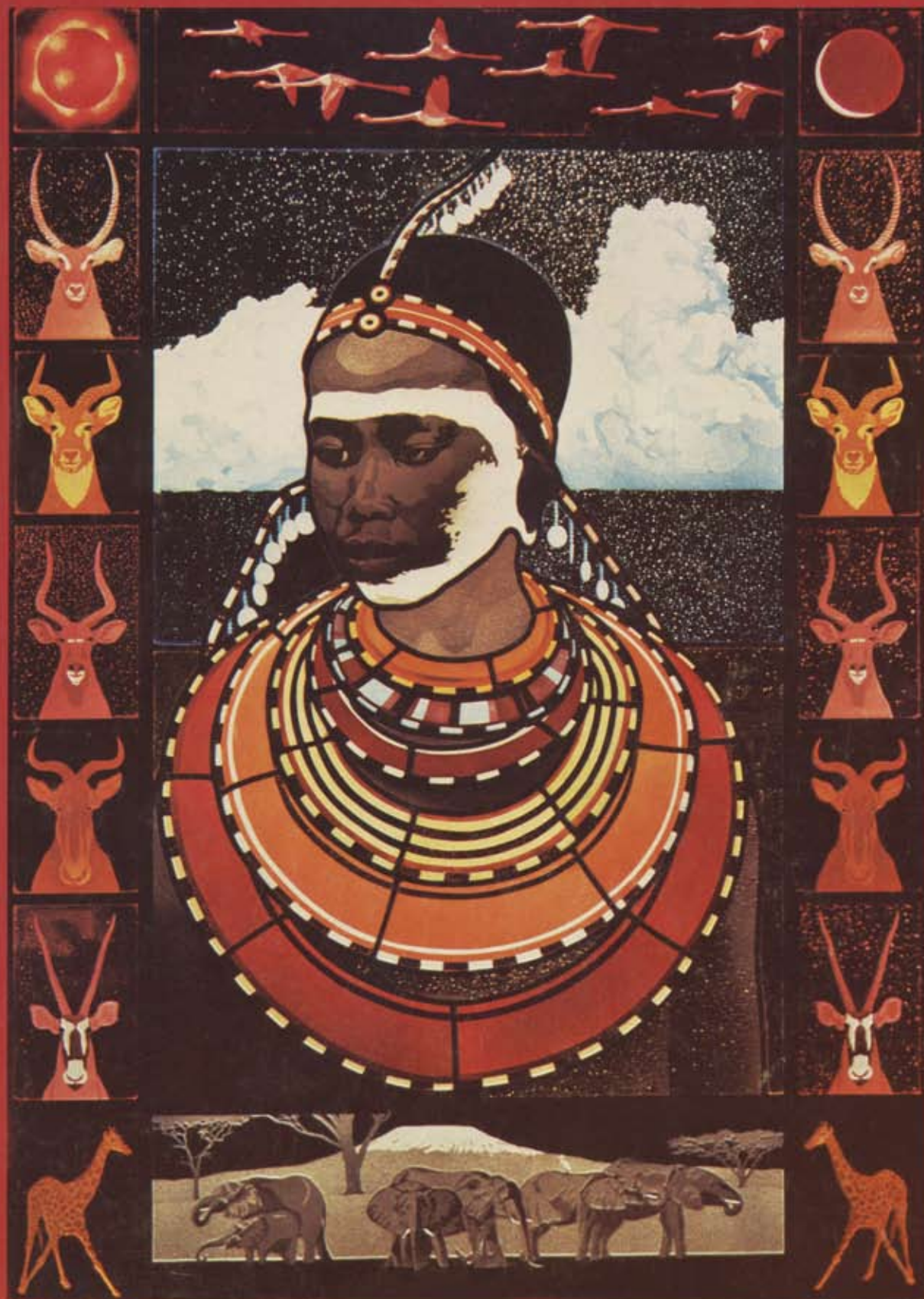


# STAINED GLASS

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# The Seasons at New Dorp High School

by Harriet Hyams



"Fall"

The pigeon swooped from a space within the ceiling and smacked head first into the Lexan protecting the "Winter" window. Frightened by the collision, it zoomed back to its nesting place. An hour later, it careened around the corner and stormed the "Summer" window. It disappeared. But there are others still lodged there. While watching the installation, I was witness to the first assault on my windows.

As the New Dorp High School in Staten Island, New York became a reality, the pigeons ensconced themselves in the building—they had found warm nesting places. However, the sad outcome was that the school became their prison. It was even more unsettling to see the cyclone fence type of wired mesh ready to be installed over the exterior of the clear windows. Thousands of dollars spent to protect windows from young adults—thousands of dollars for stained glass windows!

The workmen watching at the installation were zany with wonder and laughter—taking bets—on how long they'd last. After school started in September, would it be a minute, an hour? They were treating the whole thing as a laughing matter, and I wasn't sure if I was suppressing anger or dismay that they might be right.

My mind sees the windows as an integral part of this building throughout its life. My romantic self pictures an archaeological dig 10,000 years from now, with shards and fragments of colored glass found at the four corners of a field and not far away will be remains of what once was a Hess oil station, an A & P, a Burger King, a Pizza Hut, an Arthur Treacher's and a Roy Rogers. The foundation stones of the building will cover many acres. A small piece of glass in an undecipherable script will say (after much study) "Harriet Hyams, 1982."

1982—The Present. Eight years ago,

the discussions about stained glass for New Dorp were started. A flash of lightning in the grand scheme, but in my life, a hunk of time. And why stained glass in a high school? There is a federal government recommendation (and many states have specified) that 1 percent of the cost of a public building be spent on art. In New York City, the Mayor issued an executive order in 1965 to this effect. Approximately 80 percent of the new buildings since then have incorporated art.

The year 1965 was not the beginning of artistic awareness in governmental policy. Before the depression many schools had entablatures, cartouches, friezes, murals, painted canvas glued to walls, and frescoes. Then during the depression the W.P.A. installed art works in many schools.

Stained glass is rare in high schools, but it does exist. Barringer School in Newark, New Jersey has stained glass



"Winter"

dating from the year 1906. This glass was a memorial to a group of students killed in an accident. The theme of the windows had to do with the American Indians (!) inasmuch as religious symbolism wasn't permitted.

Then there was a commission that I completed in 1979 (also through the 1 percent for art program) for the Bronx Occupational Training Center—a vocational high school for the handicapped. It was a stained glass panel installed in a light box. This was situated next to the jewelry workshop and the subject I chose was the tools used by jewelry makers, depicted in a simple, straight-forward design.

Of course, I had heard countless times, "How can the city spend so much money on stained glass in a high school?" My response was, "What a place for stained glass!" A high school is full of people during daylight hours in a building that is in use most of the year.

An institutional type of building with tiled walls has no place for paintings and the stained glass adds color, life, and some spirit and energy to usually bland surroundings.

To my mind, the decision for stained glass at New Dorp was a courageous one on the part of the architect, the Eggers Group, and The Board of Education. Fear, and good sense, was at the core of the decision to sandwich the glass between 1/4" Lexan on the exterior and 3/16" tempered glass on the interior. I was adamant that there be no wire mesh beyond the Lexan.

I went to the site to get a feel for the area, but with only the foundation to see, I knew I would have to do my designs from blueprints and intuition. There are four windows, each 6' x 8', all separate and apart from each other, each filling the space at the end of a long corridor. Each has a different background and light. The placement, that is the suitability

of each design to its site, would be questionable until the building was nearing completion.

The decision of the architect and Board of Education to place the stained glass where they did delighted me. The lobby had been the second choice. The first choice, and the approved one, was to select places within the school where the glass would be an encounter, a surprise, for the students and faculty when they came upon it unexpectedly. The corridors are about 100 feet long and the windows are at eye level, so turning a corner could be serendipitous.

The subject matter was left entirely to me. I went back to my own feelings from high school days. They had mostly to do with the passing of time. Beginnings and endings, holidays, vacations, time standing still, boredom, daydreaming, time accelerating and slipping away. The subject was right there—Time represented by The Seasons.



"Spring"

I got to work and the designs were completed and approved by The Board of Education and the architect.

In the early seventies, schools in New York were being built readily and money was not a major issue. By 1975 the money crunch played havoc with construction in New York City and New Dorp was one of the many projects put aside. The foundation for the building was in, but all further construction was temporarily laid to rest. My completed approved designs had the same fate—they were also laid to rest.

In the spring of 1980, the architect called to say that New Dorp was being reactivated. I dusted off my designs and made an appointment for a meeting. It was a combination of exciting and terrible. Exciting for the obvious reasons and terrible because, as I looked at the blueprints of the window details, I noticed there was no provision for either the Lexan or the tempered glass. Those

details were victim to the long five-year lapse in time.

The bureaucracy of a change order to correct the omission was hair-raising and frustrating. After many months, many meetings, and numerous telephone conversations, it was accomplished.

The frame fabricators presented another problem. They insisted that the mullions had to be wider than I had planned in order to strengthen the windows. I disagreed; a structural engineer friend was consulted to justify the thinner mullions and he did just that. After a United Nations type of negotiation, we compromised, with the mullions about 50 percent wider than I thought necessary or desirable.

And then there were the designs themselves. As is the case with many artists, my work had changed. I would be working in 1981 on designs finished and approved in 1975. There was no room for major changes. The best I could do to

adjust to my 1981 self was in refining the imagery during the cartoon stage and in my selection of colors. Those were the only possibilities.

This was January, 1981 and I still didn't have a signed contract for the work.

Sometime during 1980 the New York City Art Commission had given me its stamp of approval and, finally, by February of 1981 I had my contract with the City. With the help of a good friend, I was able to find the specified insurance and would have coverage for a year. My contract with the city had a completion date of February 25, 1982.

I was eager to get started. There had been so many delays. The price of glass had escalated. The studio was waiting for me. I wanted to select my palette and get going. Impossible! It wouldn't be until August of 1981 that the frames would be installed. I had waited a long time, but decided not to do my cartoons until I



"Summer"

could take final field measurements.

It was at this juncture that I made my decisions as to the final locations of the "Spring," "Summer," "Winter" and "Fall" windows. I had made preliminary studies of my glass and brought samples of colors to the school. My decisions were based on the suitability of the light and background to the glass and colors. I knew I also had to deal with an overhang and a brick wall either to the right or left depending on the window. Neither posed a serious problem except eventually in taking photographs of the windows in place.

One of my major concerns was the very heavy width of the interior mullions that the frame fabricators had insisted be 2 5/16" wide. At the studio, a wood frame that simulated the permanent metal one had been constructed so I could foresee what the problems were. I used a variety of leads, the heaviest being one inch. At close range, in the studio, one-inch lead looked outrageous as did much of my glass selection. In-

stalled, the heavy leads and the bold large areas of color were very successful and important to the windows. Remember, they could be seen from 100 feet away.

What would happen to the stained glass when it was sandwiched between the Lexan and the tempered glass? The possibilities of woe are long and sad. Somehow it worked! There is a minimum of reflection and, in some instances, the unique imperfections in the glass are enhanced. Perhaps they're magnified.

Beside the task of obtaining the glass, the job proceeded uneventfully. It was completed and installed before the contract deadline.

All the fabrication and installation of these windows was done by Jack Cushen of New York City at his studio on 17th Street. Jack Cushen has done much of my fabrication over the past several years and nothing I can say or write about him will do him or his studio justice. Not only is his workmanship superb, but his disposition and character

are equally fine. Working with him isn't working. He has the soul of a poet. Our contract was a handshake!

As I write this article, I'm waiting for the school to open in the fall of 1982. So far I've just seen the windows at the installation or over weekends when we were photographing in the presence of a security guard and her watchdog. The finishing touches on the building have been progressing slowly, but my mind races ahead to the first day of school and the reaction of students and teachers. I'd like to think that the windows will be noticed with interest and curiosity and that they will stimulate questions and wonder. Also that by the year's end, they will be familiar, but that their continual change with the seasons will still bring moments of delight.

Harriet Hyams lives and works in Palisades, New York. She is an artist deeply involved in architectural stained glass. Her commissioned works are in various parts of the United States and include both the religious and the secular.

Photographs by Leland A. Cook.