

The Journal-News

TONIGHT: Mixed precipitation, lows near 30
TOMORROW: Rain likely, highs in low 40s

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RICHARD GUTWILLIG

ROCKLAND'S COLUMNIST

Stained glass art that sings like an opera

"Each commission has its own story. Each work is a saga."

— Harriet Hyams

After 20 years, working in and with stained glass is still a learning experience for Harriet Hyams.

The Snedens Landing artist began her career in stone and wood and then went on to welded steel sculptures. From there, she moved off into stained glass and has become one of the country's most renowned craftspersons in that medium.

Beginning Sunday, the Thomsen Gallery in Tappan will present a Hyams exhibition — Perspectives — reflecting the artist's work in steel sculpture, stained glass and drawings. The show will continue through March 2, with viewing hours from 1 to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays.

Hyams' stained glass work ranges from a series of four windows for New Dorp High School on Staten Island, to skylights for private residences and a stained glass wall for the office of the chairman of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Other commissions include 24 windows for the Maple Knoll Chapel in Springdale, Ohio, the Sts. Vartanantz Armenian Apostolic Church in Ridgefield, N.J., and a special illuminated wall for the Hallmark Building in Houston.

In a recently completed article for a stained glass magazine, Hyams wrote:

"A commission is much like an opera. When it works, it sings and is part of the whole. With the commission, there's the story, music, lighting, the stage and costumes. So with the challenge of an architectural commission. There is the client, budget, the architect, lighting, colors and textures. It's a team project with all of the limitations and compromises along with the benefits of many creative minds and hearts."

Born in Jersey City, Hyams graduated from Rutgers University in 1950, majoring in English. In 1972, she received her master's in art and education from Columbia.



Harriet Hyams, a Snedens Landing artist, calls working with stained glass, 'painting with light.'

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The Journal-News/Colette Fournier

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"I love to draw, I'm addicted to drawing," she says of her sketching and painting.

Part of it is a love of the medium, part is the necessity of making a drawing as the first step in creating a new stained glass masterpiece.

Much of Hyams' preliminary work is done in the downstairs studio of the contemporary home she shares with her husband, Charles Shimel, a civil engineer. They have been married for 11 years and moved to Sneden's Landing 7½ years ago.

Working in stained glass, Hyams said, "is like painting with light. You use a palette of colored glass and create pieces according to the type of light shining through. It is an art with modern-day challenges never envisioned by medieval artists.

"What they saw through their church windows was only sky, clouds and kinds of light. They didn't have to worry that in two years there'd be a new building going up next door."

Oftentimes, there can be a long period between initial concept and final realization.

The windows at New Dorp High, depicting the four seasons, were first designed in 1975. The plan was then shelved and reactivated when budget monies became available. Original architectural plans were lost, new plans designed, changes made in window size and what was envisioned in 1975 was not what became reality in 1982.

One of Hyams' current challenges is a stained glass commission for a 190-foot boat being built in Australia for a New Jersey client.

"This one is causing all kinds of problems never envisioned before," she said. "There is a transparent skylight 7 feet above the glass walkway. There's a bar above, steel framework, lighting with the skylight above a spiral lucite staircase. This is one instance where it feels like I'm chasing my own tail. You think of stained glass as stationary, but on a boat that's not true."

Unlike most parents who refuse to single out one child as a favorite, Hyams has certain stained glass pieces that she favors over others.

"Starting in the mid-70s, I worked on six windows I called my 'Glas Architectur' series, abstract expressionist pieces. I have one hanging here at home. I'm working now to get figures into my glass and I recently sold one called 'Goddess I' at a show at the Rockland Center for the Arts. 'Goddess II' will be on exhibit in Tappan."

Size hasn't been a problem for Hyams who has created works large and small. The artificially lit stained glass wall in Houston measures 22 feet by 7½ feet. Her spider web glass is 14 inches big.

The process begins with a Hyams design. It can be her own concept, a sketch, an idea. The client may have some concepts in mind as well. Usually, Hyams will present two or more proposals to the client.

Once a final design is selected, Hyams makes a "cartoon," a full scale representation. Then comes the process of selecting glass, tracing and cutting the pattern. Using New York City glass houses, Hyams supervises the final cutting, installing and glazing (leading).

Most of the glass is imported from West Germany, France and England, with some coming from suppliers in the United States. Hyams prefers "antique" hand blown glass, with each piece having specific characteristics of lines, indentations, bubbling, speckles and other distinguishing traits.

Does Hyams visit her creations?

"I usually don't have that chance. New commissions keep me busy and I'm really getting back into drawing and painting as an expressive art form and not just as a step in the stained glass process."

The boat project takes up a lot of time these days and Hyams is looking forward to finishing a stalled commission at West Point.

"I have a model for a granite sculpture and stained glass open sanctuary for the Jewish Chapel at West Point. I'm just waiting for the donor to say, 'Go ahead.' It's really very exciting and, I think, very lovely and meaningful."

As for the future, Hyams said, "I would like more time to paint — figurative work that could also be incorporated into stained glass. I'm not particularly interested in doing saints but I would like to have some humanity in the glass."

Asked how she would like to be remembered, Hyams said:

"That's awfully hard to answer, I guess as someone who didn't want to repeat herself and when she felt she had gone as far as she could in a medium wasn't afraid to branch off into another. As an artist trying to evolve, not being on hold because it was safe. Taking risks, looking for adventure."

Richard Gutwillig's column appears Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday.