



Rambusch at 125: Objects, Environments, and Light

By Charles D. Linn

As of 2023, the Rambusch Decorating Company has thrived for 125 years. It is not just the creator of bespoke liturgical furnishings, architectural lighting, restoration, and conservation work, but has done thousands of stained glass and mosaics projects, ranging from a few square feet up to the monumental. It is also still a privately-held business, passed down from fathers to sons for four generations.

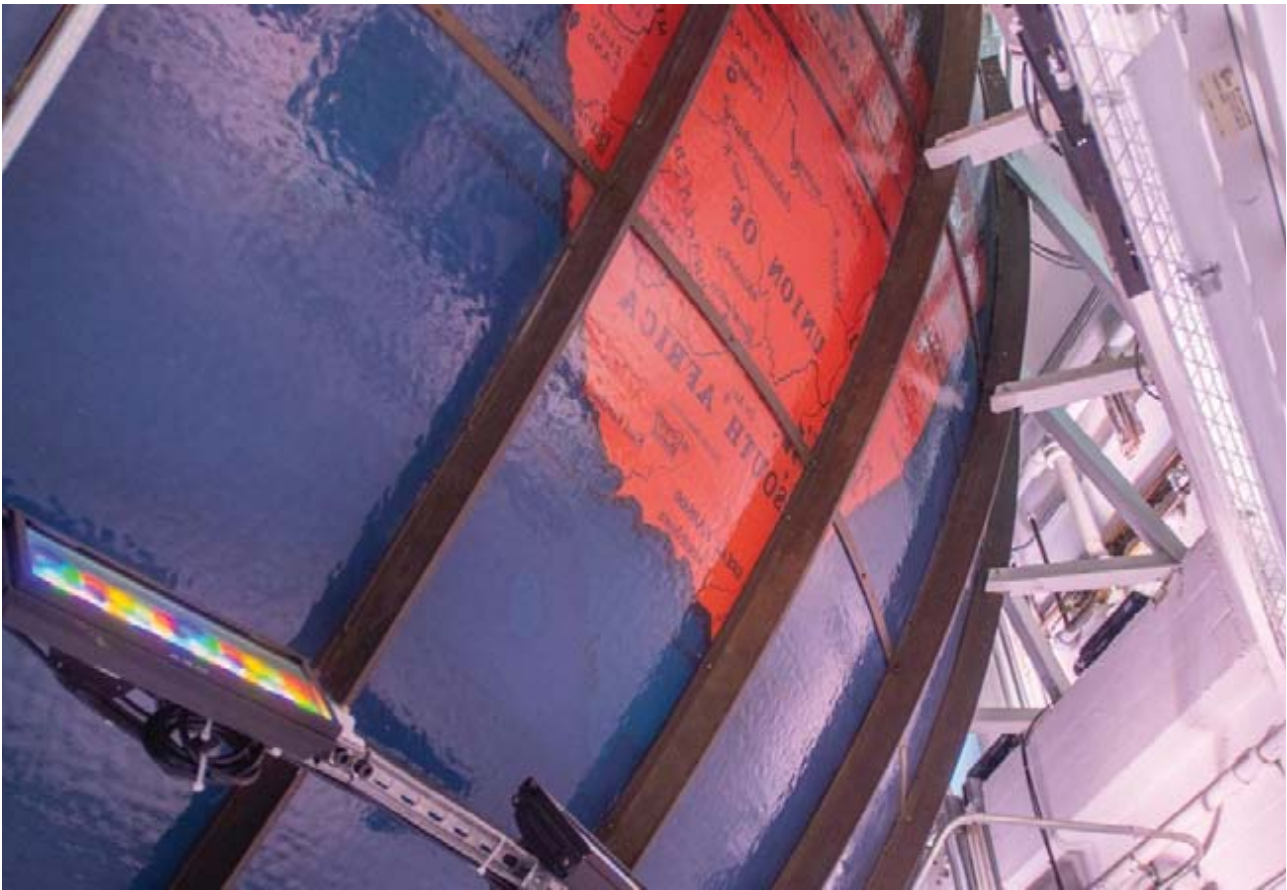
Rambusch's *raison d'être* is to make beautiful objects and architectural lighting that transform architectural spaces. Art, such as stained glass and mosaics is intended for specific places and created based upon the needs and desires of its clients, and clients' communities. This remains as it was when Frode Rambusch, a Danish immigrant, and his partner William Hencken wrote the company's 1898 charter. It said that Rambusch would pursue: "...the manufacture and sale of stained glass, the execution, manufacture, and sale of ecclesiastical and domestic decoration for churches, houses, and other buildings and of sculpture and relief work." The company is now operated by Frode's great grandsons, twin brothers Edwin and Martin Rambusch. Their father, Viggo Bech Rambusch, who at 93 still works as a project manager, purchased the company from his father, Viggo F.E. Rambusch, and uncle Harold Rambusch.

Underpinning the comprehensive nature of the charter's ambitious list was the desire that every aspect of a job be viewed holistically and sensitively integrated with all of its other parts, and its ambition that the firm should control them all. "We always take the position that every element of an environment should harmonize with every other, including its lighting," says Martin Rambusch, who is chairman of the board of Rambusch, and controls the day-to-day operations which include stained glass and mosaics, interiors, and furnishings such as altars and tabernacles. His brother Edwin, who is president, runs Rambusch's architectural lighting operation.

That stained glass was the first in the list of items in the charter indicates that Frode must have hoped it would become a major part of his business. However,

The Mapparium™ globe was designed by architect Chester Lindsay Churchill, and the Rambusch Decorating Company was commissioned to make the stained glass panels.

Photo: © The Christian Science Board of Directors.
Used by permission.



The Mapparium™ globe was designed by architect Chester Lindsay Churchill, and the Rambusch Decorating Company was commissioned to make the stained glass panels. Photo: © The Christian Science Board of Directors. Used by permission.

economic conditions dictated that the firm couldn't open its own studio for more than three decades. Most of the stained glass for American windows at that time was imported from England or Germany because of the low cost of labor there. The large German studios in particular were capable of producing excellent work and had streamlined their processes. Some studios even subcontracted out individual elements such as hands and faces.

In the 1920s nationalistic pride and isolationism following World War I brought with it the idea that American buildings should also have glass made in the States. And, despite the Depression, in 1930 Rambusch was finally able to open its studio. It already had talented designers, such as Gustave Bernhardt, whose designs had previously been fabricated in Germany, and soon hired William Haley, who had trained in Boston and Buffalo. Artisans with the skills necessary for stained-glass fabrication were eager for work. The studio soon won several large commissions.

Among the first was one of the most complex that the firm would ever undertake: *The Mapparium*, a five-year commission at the Christian Science Publishing Society in Boston, completed in 1935. This three-story spherical room envelopes visitors standing on a 30-foot bridge. From this vantage point they take in a globe turned inside-out based on Rand-McNally's 1934 map of the world. The countries were recreated in stained glass by the artisans of Rambusch. Its 608 tempered, molded-glass panels are backlit to create a luminous environment. Each straight line represents 10 degrees of latitude and longitude, and the map's scale is 22 miles per inch.

The Mapparium's concept was conceived by architect Chester Lindsay Churchill. Per Bergothen, who started at Rambusch as an office boy, then led the Rambusch design and fabrication team. He and his team solved the technical problems of figuring out how to permanently fire the color into the glass and crafting the outlines of the countries along with their labels. They designed the bronze supporting frames, calculated how the tremendous weight of the glass and bronze would be supported, as well as designed the lighting.

EMBRACING TRADITION AND THE NEW

When imagining the Renaissance workshops of Ghiberti, Michelangelo, Da Vinci and others, what comes to mind are cavernous, rough-hewn spaces crowded with artwork and drawings, paint pots and scale models, and apprentices and assistants bringing to life paintings, stained glass, mosaics, tapestries and carvings. It is not unreasonable to suggest that if these artisans were teleported to the Rambusch's Jersey City stained glass and mosaic studios today they could pick up glass and come from the work tables and continue working without even noticing they had traveled ahead in time by centuries. In many cases the ecclesiastical art done by the firm is hardly distinguishable from that which artists have produced across the ages.

There are important differences, however, between the culture of the company started in 1898 and traditional ateliers. "There is no Rambusch 'style'" says Martin Rambusch. "Our glass designs can be influenced by anything that works: Gothic, Romanesque, Byzantine, Classical Colonial, International Style, abstract, geometric." It was never run according to the whims of a single studio master. The family has always considered itself the stewards of the traditions of the great artistic workshops and has restored Tiffany and La Farge windows as well as numerous other windows and domes from various firms. Few studios that based their success on a single star designer and employed a distinctive vocabulary survived beyond a single generation. When the style they were known for went out of favor or the designer was no longer active, their studios disappeared.

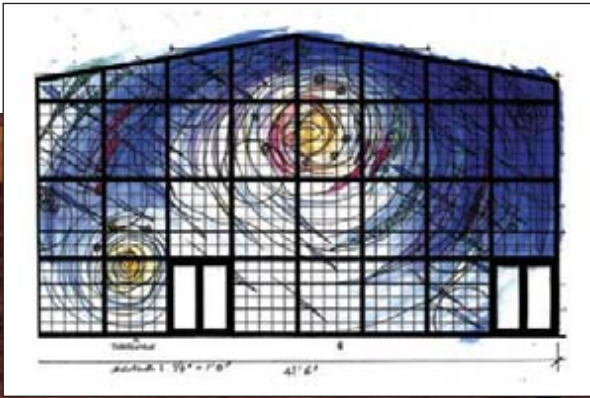
Work in the early years of the studio was in these traditional Revival styles, and thousands of these windows exist. Since its beginning, the firm has done windows for all religious denominations in domestic and commercial settings. When International-Style architecture stripped buildings of their traditional elements in the 1950s, the firm was quick to produce glass designs that were abstract rather than figurative, sometimes geometric and at other times free-flowing, even as it continued to produce windows in Revivalist styles. Colombian artist Leandro Velasco's "The Life of Christ" window, a 25-foot-tall, 80-foot-wide tryptic for Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church in Durham, North Carolina from 1979 is much later, but mixes the figurative and the abstract in an illustration of 12 scenes from Christ's life. Freeform and rectangular geometric shapes interposed with scenes that are



Leandro Velasco's 1979 "The Life of Christ" window. 25-foot-tall, 80-foot-wide tryptic for Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church in Durham, NC. Photo: Rambusch Decorating Company

clearly of Jesus and people from the Scriptures are mixed to create drama and movement.

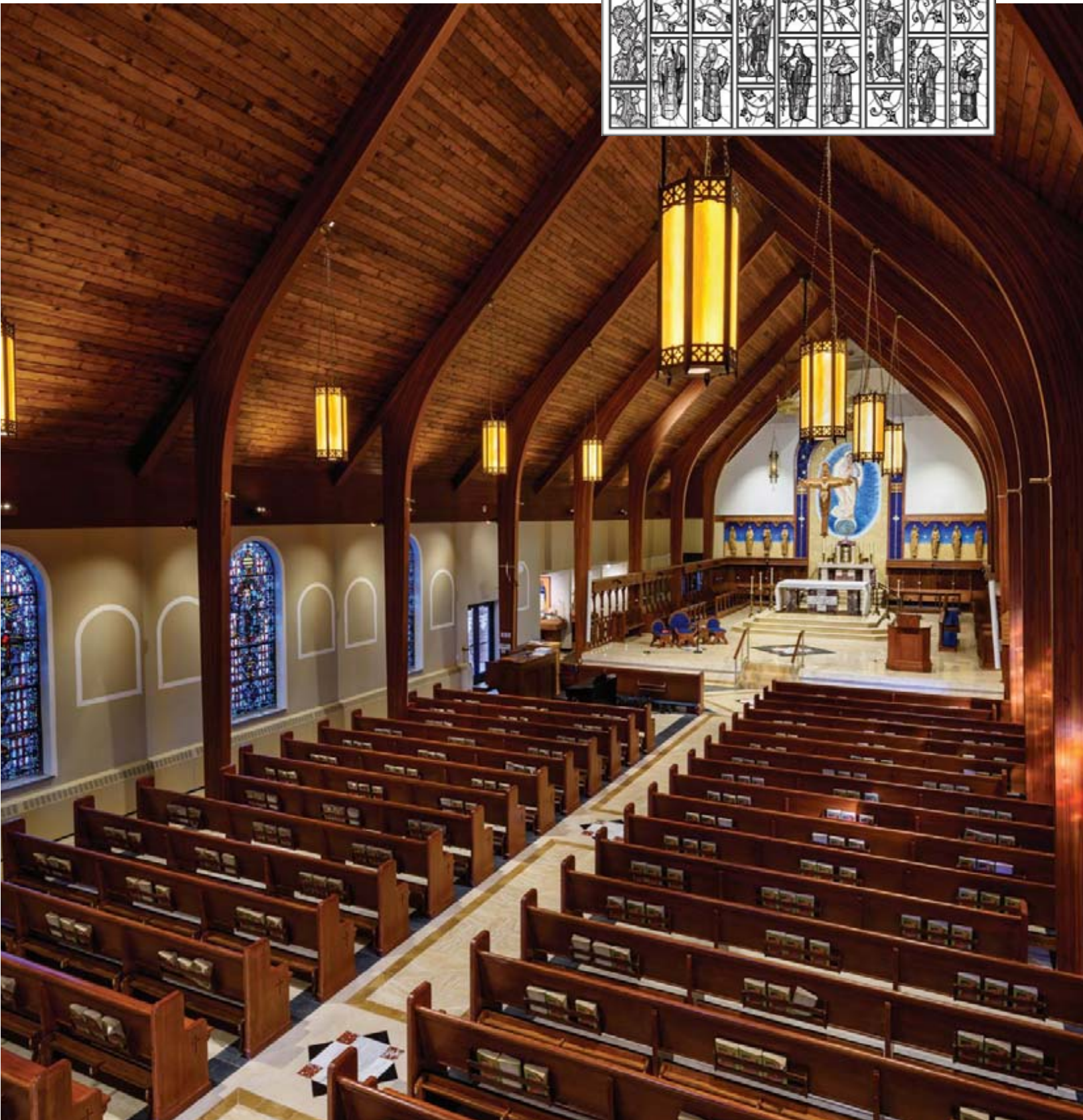
In recent years, the firm's work is still nimble stylistically, executed in whatever style is most appropriate. At the Church of Saint Gregory, the Great, Hamilton Square, New Jersey, artist Nikki Vogt designed two abstract windows that depict the colors of the liturgical calendar whirling at the center of creation. These 2002 "Creation" windows are perfectly suited for the building's clean, contemplative spaces. At the University of St. Francis's Immaculate Conception Chapel, in Loretto, Pennsylvania, narthex windows by Leandro Velasco depict Saints who are important to the Third Order of St. Francis in the Garden of Eden. Its windows are in a traditional style that is more appropriate for the Chapel's moody, exposed-wood interior. These were done in 2023.



Inset sketch: Nikki Vogt

Creation windows at the Church of Saint Gregory, the Great, Hamilton Square, NJ, 2002.

Photo: Rambusch Decorating Company



St. Francis's Immaculate Conception Chapel, in Loretto, PA., narthex windows by Leandro Velasco, 2023. Photo: Kevin Simonson of Rambusch Decorating Company



Left: *Bloc Dècor*, hand-painted grisaille Morning Glory on glass block by Rambusch designer Margarete Overbeck. Photo: Fay S. Lincoln Photograph Collection, O1628, Eberly Family Special Collections Library, Pennsylvania State University



Right: Stained glass window for Queen of Peace Church, North Arlington, NJ by Bud Haley Griassle. Painted in grisaille, wood mullion, and muntin framing. Photo: Rambusch Decorating Company

INNOVATIONS IN MATERIALS

In another departure from studios that refused to stray from tradition, Rambusch has always embraced new materials and invented ways of working with them. For example, when glass block became popular in the 1930s, Rambusch experimented to find a way to use it as the foundation for hand-painted grisaille, such as a Morning Glory design, by Rambusch designer Margarete Overbeck. Extensive experimentation was required to overcome the problem of the blocks imploding during firing. Christened *Bloc Dècor* by Rambusch, the process was quite popular in the 1940s and '50s.

In the 1950s, Colonial Revival architecture became popular in the wake of World War II. The richly-colored stained glass with lead lines of earlier styles were unsuitable for the light, classically-inspired interiors of these buildings. Rambusch was challenged to design and make something more fitting. Blenko Glass,

working under Harold Rambusch's direction, developed a hand blown glass, cut and rolled hot onto itself to trap large and small air bubbles, resulting in a subtle, but sparkling, translucent material that could be tinted in delicate hues. The familiar wood mullion and muntin framing of colonial architecture held the glass rather than came, and the subject matter for the windows was painted in grisaille, such as this window by Bud Haley Griassle for Queen of Peace Church, North Arlington, New Jersey.

Over the years Rambusch also has made windows with sandblasted glass, carved with electric copper wheels; glass designs in multiple layers adhered with epoxy; acid-etched flashed glass, and embedded colored and chipped *dalle de verre* in cement mortar, later on using matrices of epoxy instead.



Dancer, an 80-square-foot stained glass window for the Buckingham Hotel in NYC. Designed by José Ortega. Fabricated and installed by Rambusch in the late 1990s. Photo: Rambusch Decorating Company

HELPING HANDS

Often artists who are not experienced in stained glass need a guiding hand, such as the graphic artist José Ortega. He had not worked in the medium before being selected by the owners of a New York City hotel in the late 1990s to create a stained glass design for its entrance. Collaborating with Mr. Ortega, full-size cartoons of his design were created at Rambusch. Simply entitled “Dancer” it depicts a whimsical figure dancing over a starry New York City skyline. The firm did the cutting, leading, and installation for the 80-square-foot window. Opal glass was chosen because the piece would serve as a welcome to guests of the hotel day and night and had to be translucent, reflective, and strikingly visible at all times.

In a similar situation, in 1993 Ida Kohlmeyer, an artist and congregation member of Touro Synagogue in New Orleans, was asked to produce a stained glass window for a new wing of its building. Having never done stained glass, she approached Eugene Koss, a professor at Tulane’s Newcomb College of Art who engaged Martin Rambusch, who was once his student. Their design won a competition and together they designed a series of six-foot wide windows reminiscent of the forms and colors of Marc Chagall. Among the challenges was the production of several two-inch-thick glass disks, created by pouring molten glass into metal molds and mixing in glass canes. The two-inch thick disks were annealed for two weeks to prevent cracking.

Top: Details of a collaborative 6-foot window with Ida Kohlmeyer for Touro Synagogue in New Orleans, 1993.

Bottom: Martin Rambusch pouring molten glass into metal molds and mixing in glass canes for the Touro Synagogue window.

Photos: Rambusch Decorating Company





A project with Marble Collegiate Church, New York City, is an example of Rambusch helping a client select artists for windows that it did not produce. With the exception of two Tiffany windows installed around 1900, the church sanctuary had been enclosed by stained glass in a generic diamond pattern since it opened in 1854. Church officials approached Martin to help its community refine their goals and create a fair process to identify and commission artists. Eventually this led to the stories and parables chosen for six 18-foot-high windows in the north and south facades. These were produced over a decade.

At the end of the project, Nikki Vogt was selected to design the final window over the Fifth Avenue entrance, and the firm fabricated the window with her. Titled “Welcoming Christ,” in the 25-foot tall window, Jesus’ gesture beckons all people into the Church against a silhouette of the New York City skyline. Dedicated in 2008, the magnificent window creates a powerful experience, particularly when lit at night.

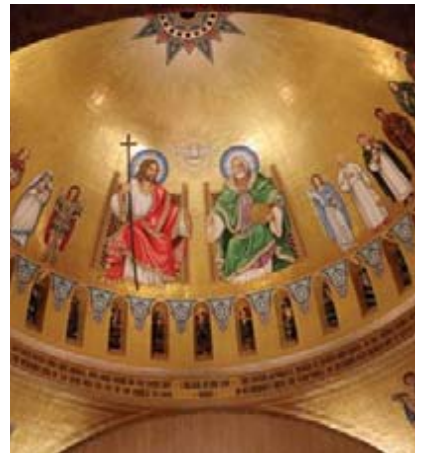
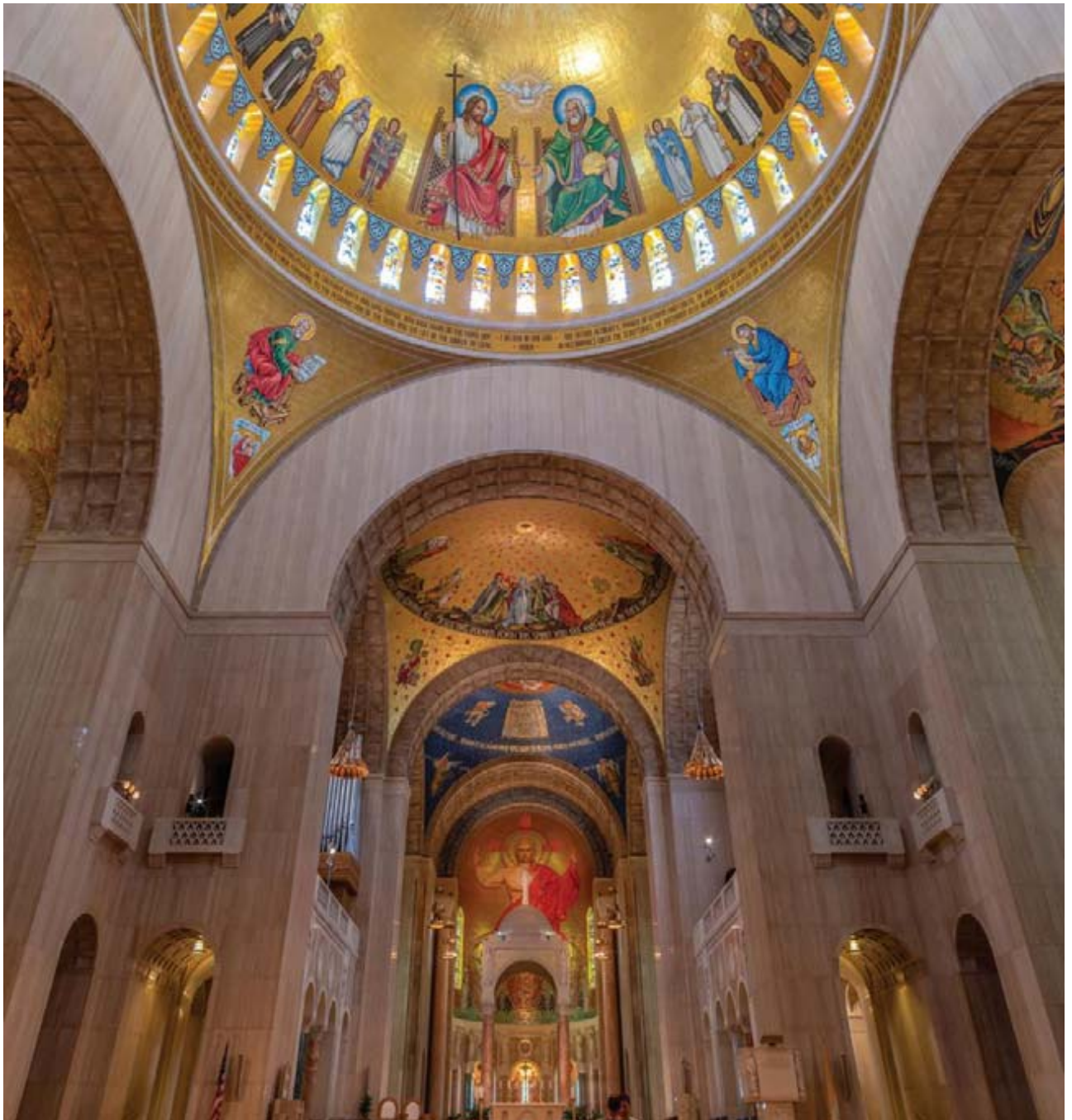
NO JOB TOO LARGE OR SMALL

Three generations of Rambuschs have done projects at The National Shrine of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, including three rose windows, small chapels, assorted liturgical furnishings and art, and architectural lighting. But, Rambusch’s most important and memorable work was the design and management of a series of three of its massive mosaic domes over the central aisle of the nave. All three were designed by Leandro Valesco.

The first was the Redemption Dome. It is essentially a gold tesserae sky-dome, with the image of Christ Redeemer in a modern Byzantine style. Next came the Incarnation Dome. Divided into four quadrants, it depicts the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Wedding Feast at Cana, and the Transfiguration. In contrast, the Redemption dome has a blue sky that is being overtaken by a bursting star. Edwin and Viggo Bech and the Rambusch team were responsible from design to fabrication, and for managing its design, cartoons, and artistic supervision. It was dedicated in 2008. The mosaics cover almost 4,000 square feet, including pendentives.

Left: *Welcoming Christ* for Marble Collegiate Church, New York City. The 25-foot tall window was built in collaboration with Nikki Vogt, 2008.

Right: The National Shrine of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, all three mosaic domes cover almost 4,000 square feet. Photos: Kevin Simonson of Rambusch Decorating Company



Its most remarkable mosaic dome was yet to come. In 2013 the Shrine commissioned Rambusch to do the interior of the great 88-foot diameter Trinity Dome. Located over the sanctuary and clergy celebrating the liturgy, this final dome had been unadorned since the Basilica's completion in the 1930s and now is considered one of its crown jewels. For a year studies for the dome evolved as they were presented to the Basilica's Iconography Committee. Through dialogue and sketches a multitude of questions were addressed for the committee, which determined that Our Lady would be shown as The Immaculate Conception facing the Trinity. The final design had room for 22 figures, including two archangels, who flank the Trinity, and two choir angels flanking Our Lady. The dome covers an astonishing 12,164 square feet, not including the pendentives.

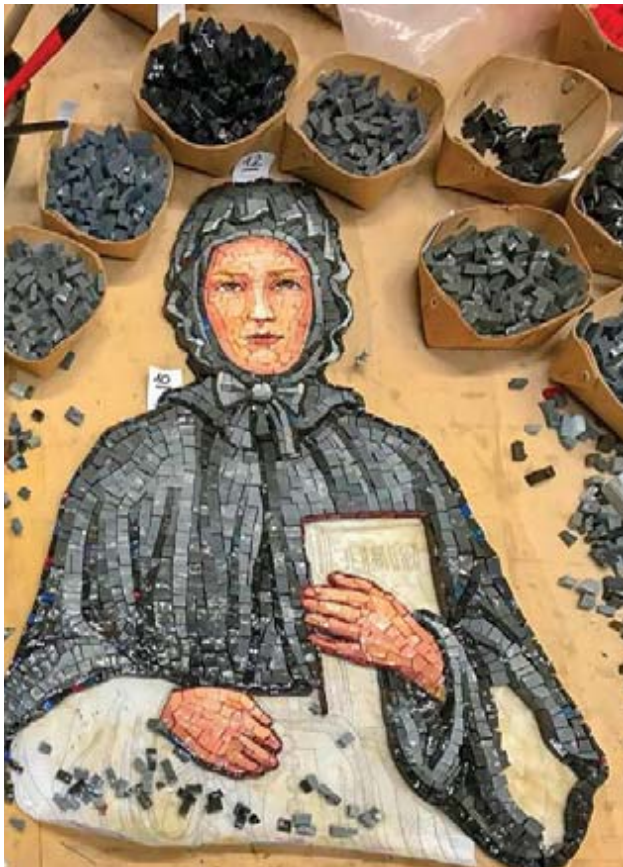
The domes were a monumental effort, and credit is due to the Trivisanutto Giovanni Mosaics from Spilimbergo, Italy, which created the mosaics for all three domes. They were expertly installed by Stephen Miatto of Miatto Mosaic Art Studios,

Carmel, New York, and Rugo Stone, Lorton, Virginia., under the supervision of Rambusch.

But not all of the firm's mosaics have been monumental. At Seton Hall Preparatory School, in North Orange, New Jersey, a five-foot tall mosaic of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton was installed near the main entrance, set within an old water fountain niche at the juncture of hallways. Designed by Edwin Rambusch and Rambusch artist David Gavasheli, it helps remind students on their way to class of the values on which the school was founded.

THE "THREAD OF DESIGN"

Another difference with the workshops of old is that rather than a master dictating his work to clients, often Rambusch's projects do not begin with a clear, fully-defined solution. Rambusch aids its clients, be they a community, clergy, or committee through a process it calls the "Thread of Design." This reflects the firm's philosophy that the design of architecture and its elements should be approached holistically, but also with a commitment to engaging its users.



Crafting the St. Elizabeth Ann Seton mosaic.
Photo: Rambusch Decorating Company



Five-foot tall mosaic of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton installed at Seton Hall Preparatory School, in North Orange, NJ. Designed by Edwin Rambusch and Rambusch artist David Gavasheli.
Photo: Rambusch Decorating Company



Our Lady of Guadalupe window for St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church in Gaithersburg, Maryland, 2019. Design by Rambusch artist David Gavashli. Photo: Rambusch Decorating Company

“Lots of times our projects don’t begin with a clear, fully-defined solution,” Martin said. “We try to help our clients—communities, or clergy, or committees move through a process it calls the “Thread of Design.” By creating a preliminary verbal solution that is refined as the project moves through design development supported through sketches, goals gradually come into focus and clarity through the refinement of form, details, materials, and finally values. The Thread of Design allows for a dialog between the designer and the client that ensures that all considerations are integrated into the final design solution.

In 2019, at the St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church in Gaithersburg, Maryland, a Thread of Design helped the parish design a window of Our Lady of Guadalupe to connect her ornate, traditional image to a new transitional background, all within a modern church. A flowing screen of transparent, overlapping color was chosen. Rambusch artist David Gavasheli’s design weaves warm golden threads subtly into several shades of cool silver to lead the eye inward toward Our Lady’s radiating mandorla.

A WORD TO THE WISE

What makes it possible for a firm to survive 125 years? It is not just due to the ability of its employees and artisans to design and make beautiful objects. “We amass tremendous amounts of information for these projects,” Martin said. “Establishing a scope and budget for a restoration means condition reports, size and weight of the glass, crews, hotels and meals for them, transportation, and what it will take to close the holes if glass is removed for repair, it is truly a shame how many gorgeous, irreplaceable windows we can’t restore because of cost. But we have to protect our business too.”

As a part of the celebration of its 125th anniversary, all are invited to “Rambusch: A Century and a Quarter of Objects, Environments, and Light, an exhibition of the work of the Rambusch Decorating Company,” at the National Arts Club in New York City. The show opens on November 30 and runs through January 2, 2024.

Charles D. Linn, FAIA, has written about architecture and design for more than 40 years. He was editor of Architectural Record and Architectural Lighting magazines. ■