



The Paintings in the Immaculata Church Sanctuary

In 1862, Johann Schmitt, a German speaking religious artist who lived in Covington, Kentucky, was commissioned by Fr. Bernard Mary Gels, the third Pastor of Immaculata, to create the seven large oil paintings currently displayed in the sanctuary. Each painting was to portray an event in Mary's life. Only five of the images fulfilled the commission, as Fr Gels left Immaculata before the last two were completed. Frank Duveneck, one of Cincinnati's most influential and well-known artists, was an apprentice to Schmitt during that time and may have had a hand in their creation.

A common practice of religious artists then was honoring prominent parishioners or large donors by using them as models in commissioned paintings. There is no record of that being done in the Immaculata paintings. Schmitt is also said to have used his adopted daughter Mary's face for images of the Blessed Virgin.

Facing the sanctuary, the first painting on the left is the **Annunciation** which portrays the Angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she is to be the Mother of God. Mary is shown kneeling in prayer in her home in Nazareth. The Holy Spirit is represented by a dove at the top of the image.

There is also a subliminal image located between the dove at the top of the painting and the window in the middle. It's a face, but it often takes a while to see it. Did Schmitt intend it to be there or was it just coincidence? We'll never know. Who does it represent? Again, we'll never know. It's one of those mysteries that make history interesting.

The next painting in the left-to-right sequence is the **Presentation of Mary in the Temple**. Mary is seen ascending the steps of the temple and approaching the high priest. She is wearing a red dress covered in blue and a crown of white flowers symbolizing her purity.

Her mother, Ann, and father Joachim, are also present. The city in the background is Jerusalem.

The **Birth of Mary** depicts Mary being held by her mother Ann with Joachim looking on. The identity of the other figures is not known. Note the cherubim at the top of the image holding a banner that reads *Ave Maria*. The vine of morning glories along the left edge of the window symbolizes the birth of our salvation.

The center piece, **The Immaculate Conception**, depicts Mary standing on a cloud wearing a white dress symbolic of her purity and a blue cloak trimmed in red. Blue is a symbol of her divinity and red her humanity and unique position as Mother of God. If you look closely around Mary's head, you will see twelve stars. Also note that she is surrounded by brightness. This is an allusion to Revelation Chapter Twelve, which describes a woman wearing a crown of twelve stars and clothed in the sun. The nun to Mary's left is St. Rose of Lima. She's wearing a crown of thorns and holding a rose.

The identity of the priests to Mary's right is not certain. Some believe the priest to her far right is John Duns Scotus, a Franciscan who vigorously defended the Immaculate Conception in the middle ages. The identity of the second priest is also unknown but an educated guess is St Francis of Assisi who was Schmitt's favorite patron.

The banner at the bottom of the painting is in German. The English translation reads "Oh Mary, conceived without sin, pray for the conversion of this country, America." Below the banner is an angel suspended above the world.

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Next in sequence is the **Sacrifice of Isaac** which is one of the paintings not representing an event in Mary's life. Abraham, the father of Isaac, is clothed in red and his son Isaac is behind him holding a hat and staff. The Angel Gabriel is telling Abraham not to sacrifice Isaac as God had previously asked him to do. Abraham was obeying God by offering Isaac as a sacrifice. When God spared Isaac, Abraham sacrificed a ram, seen in the lower left corner of the painting.

Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is the other painting not representing an event in Mary's life. The Angel in the image is carrying a fiery sword and casting Adam and Eve from the Garden. Behind the angel is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil from which Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. The serpent that tempted them is also present in the painting.

The last painting is **The Assumption**. The angels are lifting Mary to Heaven and scattering pink and white roses and lilies. Mary is looking up to the Most Holy Trinity. God the Father is on the right looking down, Jesus is holding the crown that awaits Mary as the Queen of Heaven and between them is a dove, representing the Holy Spirit.

All seven paintings were cleaned and restored in 1986 by Carolyn von Stein, an artist who lived on Mt. Adams. Johann Schmitt painted in churches throughout the midwest. More of his paintings may be seen in Mother of God Church in Covington.

~ Jim Steiner

German Inscriptions in Cincinnati Churches

The use of German in the inscription "O, Maria, ohne Sünde empfangen bitte für Bekehrung dieses Landes AMERIKA" over the main altar of Holy Cross-Immaculata Church was not atypical in the mid to late 19th century in Cincinnati. The German immigrants to the city not only heard Mass or had services in their native tongue but adorned their churches with German inscriptions.

That was true of both Catholic and Protestant churches, as this sample demonstrates. St. Rose Church was founded in 1867, eight years after HCI, in the East End on what was then called Eastern Avenue. Its German congregation had the words "St. Rosa Kirche Errichtet A.D. 1868" (St. Rose Church erected 1868) chiseled on the church spire over the central doorway. One of its stained-glass windows is engraved "Hl. Rosa bitt für uns" (Holy Rose pray for us).

The Salem United Church of Christ at Liberty and Sycamore Streets in Over the Rhine, founded also in 1867, bears the inscription "Deutsch evangelisch reformierte Salem's Kirche" (the German evangelical reformed Salem's Church).

And, further out at 4311 Eastern Avenue in Columbia-Tusculum, what is now called the True Light Baptist Church bears the inscription "Columbia Deutsche Evangel. Protes. Kirche A.D. 1876" (Columbia German Evangelical Protestant Church 1876).

So predominant was the use of German in many of the churches, especially the Catholic churches, that HCI's patron, Archbishop Purcell, held a separate retreat for 12 of his diocesan priests who could not speak English, to advance their language skills.

~Ed Adams

Source: Fortin, Faith and Action, History of the Catholic Archdiocese of Cincinnati 1821-1996