



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Teaching Fine Arts in a Benedictine Setting *by Brother Symeon Gillette, OSB*

[When you enter the High School there are on your right two stained glass windows, one completed and the other in progress. The completed window is the work of a guild of Priory students under the guidance of Brother Symeon. In this article Brother Symeon writes of his own progress as an artist here, and of the growth of the Guild. Ed.]

Saint Benedict in his wisdom provides a description of an ideal monastic arrangement:

The monastery should, if possible, be so constructed that within it all necessities, such as water, mill and garden are contained, and the various crafts are practiced. Then there will be no need for the monks to roam outside, for this is not at all good for their souls. *Rule*, ch.66

The monks of Saint Louis Abbey are fortunate to have on the monastic grounds the physical facilities for its two main works, the Priory School and the Parish of Saint Anselm. As a monk who works as an artist I am fortunate to have studio space in our monastic school where I work so I do not have to roam too much to accomplish my assigned duties.

I began teaching Mechanical Drawing in the 1977-78 school year under the watchful eye of Mr. Reynolds Medart. However, I worked on my own as an amateur icon painter in my room in the monastery. Years later when I moved to the little “weather vane” building (now the Xanadu cottage) and began teaching calligraphy and manuscript arts there, I began using my teaching studio for my own work. This provided my students with a chance to see the sort of work I enjoyed doing. Before long students wanted to work with me on more significant projects and thus began the “banner period” in my teaching years. I have long been fascinated by Celtic manuscripts and especially by the intricate “carpet pages” characteristic of these early Medieval treasures. As I observed students huddled around one such illustration, it occurred to me that more people could enjoy these designs if they were replicated on a large scale. Therefore we used several of the carpet pages from *the Book of Kells*, *the Lindesfarne Gospels*, and other Medieval manuscripts as models for a series of painted works on large pieces of broadcloth or mural canvas. Over the years five of these works were produced as combined student-teacher projects and are in the collection of the Abbey, three were produced as “senior exhibitions” (projects required of seniors for graduation) and one was produced for the monks of Conception Abbey.

These large works often took more than a term or two to complete. One, in fact, took three full years to complete. The sophomores who began the project finished it as seniors, just days before their graduation. The fact that a handful of teenage boys stayed enthusiastic and engaged with this project for three years made an enormous impression on me. This gave me the confidence and enthusiasm to enter into the next phase of my teaching years with my students at Priory.



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In the early 90's I was introduced to the craft of stained glass by serving as a senior exhibition advisor to a student who wanted to produce his exhibition in stained glass. At that time we were in the early stages of planning an extension to the high school building. I proposed to the Abbot and to the school community the construction of a major piece of stained glass for the new building to commemorate the coming second millennium of the Lord's Incarnation. Specifically I proposed the *Jesse Tree* window from Chartres which shows the genealogy of the Lord and the prophets who foretold his coming. I was confident that I could form a team of dedicated students who would build this window with me over a period of five years. My faith in these students was well founded for in fact they completed the project in less than five years and we were able to unveil the completed window on New Year's Day, 2000 A.D.

Over the years I have noticed that contemporary young people often will not take the time to look carefully at an article of high craftsmanship, especially when touring a museum or looking at photographs in books. I found that by encouraging them to use the work of the masters as models for their own work they began to see and to value more and more the artistic heritage of the past ages. This observation led me to propose to my students the setting up of a student Guild where the pursuit of high craftsmanship would be the goal of each member. The first group of apprentices began their pursuit of craftsmanship as calligraphers in September 1989. We chose St. Columkille (St. Columba), the father of Celtic monasticism, to be the patron of Priory's Guild. Years later I knew that the purpose for founding the Guild was achieved when a group of student Guild Masters, sitting at my computer composing a new charter for the Guild, wrote the following for its preamble:

Let it be known that the Guild is a Brotherhood of Artists. We, the Masters of the Guild, find our inspiration in the artistic traditions of Medieval Europe. It is our aim to mirror the ways of the scribes, painters and craftsmen of the Middle Ages in all the work we do. It is also our aim to challenge and guide those who may seek to join this Brotherhood to the full extent of their artistic capabilities. In so doing we strive to grow together and to develop our full potential as men of skill, men of honor and men of God. We, the Masters of the Guild, look to Saint Columkille, the founder of the ancient Celtic scriptorium on the Isle of Iona, for inspiration and help in our quest for excellence.