

Old City church frescoes win historic designation

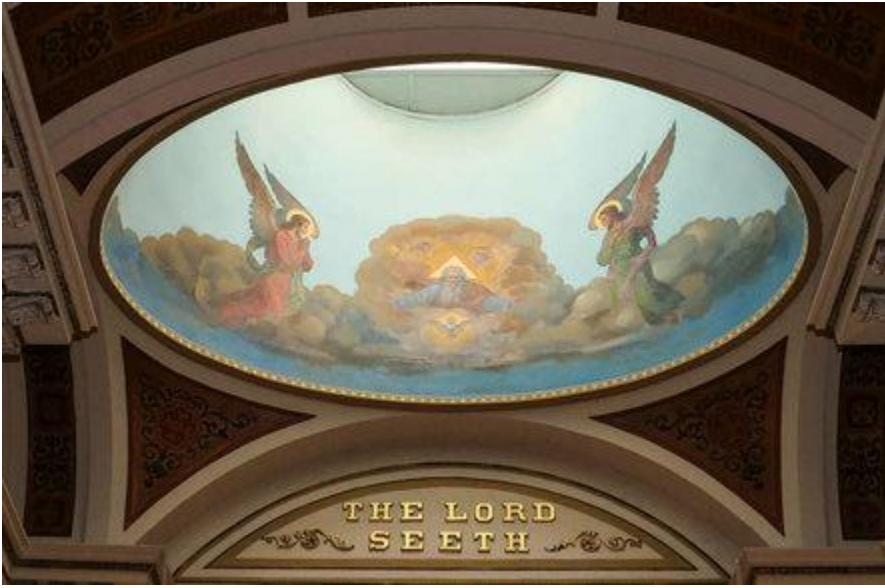
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The Rev. Bill Waters at St. Augustine Roman Catholic Church, whose frescoes are the oldest of their kind in this country, dating to the 1840s. The Philadelphia Historical Commission has unanimously designated the works as historic. (STEVEN M. FALK / Staff Photographer)

by **Erin Edinger-Turoff**, Inquirer Staff Writer

The Philadelphia Historical Commission has unanimously designated as historic the frescoes of St. Augustine Roman Catholic Church, the oldest of their kind in this country.



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They were painted in 1848, one year after the church, at 243 N. Lawrence St., alongside the Ben Franklin Bridge, was rebuilt. It was burned down during anti-Catholic riots in 1844, a time when Irish immigrants largely made up its thousands of parishioners.

It's remarkable, historians say, that the frescoes have survived to the present day.

"The Lord Seeth," inscribed above a massive fresco depicting the Crucifixion, appears at the front altar of the Old City church, built in a style reminiscent of Roman cathedrals. The frescoes are still vibrant, surrounding worshipers from wall to ceiling.

They depict scenes like St. Augustine entering Heaven, delicately and meticulously painted.

"They're in a category all their own," said Celeste Morello, the historian who nominated the frescoes for designation.

The artist, Italian painter Nicola Monachesi, "did them in the same process that Raphael had used in the 1500s in the Vatican," Morello said. The technique, true fresco, calls for the artist to paint directly onto wet plaster, requiring a quick and skillful hand. It was used by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel.

Monachesi used a distinctive balance of the "curling and swirling figures," Morello said, and created arabesque borders, also inspired by Raphael. Morello made sure those borders were protected in the designation.

Aside from St. Augustine's, only the Richard Alsop IV House in Middletown, Conn., boasts frescoes by Monachesi in America, Morello said. St. Augustine's frescoes are some of the oldest known religious artwork in the country.

"To be honest, we didn't know they were so historic until now," said the Rev. Bill Waters, a priest at St. Augustine for nearly a year.

St. Augustine's frescoes are older than those in the Capitol, painted by the Greek Italian artist Constantino Brumidi beginning in 1855.

Barbara Wolanin, author of *Constantino Brumidi: Artist of the Capitol*, said it is not known whether Brumidi and Monachesi were acquainted, but they trained at the same academy in Rome and were experts in the same fresco technique. Considering that much of Brumidi's fresco work in Philadelphia - like a crucifixion scene at the Cathedral Basilica of SS. Peter and Paul - has been destroyed, she thinks it's lucky that Monachesi's frescoes at St. Augustine have survived.

Wolanin said the fresco presentation is "really integral to the experience of the architecture."

Bob Jaeger, president of Partners for Sacred Places in Philadelphia, said his organization advocates for the preservation of historic parishes and synagogues like St. Augustine's. Churches are often "repositories of fine art," he said.

"Because Philadelphia was always welcoming to people of all faiths, Philadelphia has more mother churches than anywhere else in the country," Jaeger said.

The building is a designated historic site. Now the worship site for a large Filipino community and young adults, it was the first Augustinian parish established in America. It is also the birthplace of Villanova University.

"I asked somebody, 'What's the significance that they're doing this?' " Waters said of historical designation. "They said, 'Bragging rights.' That's how I plan to use it."

The property owner - in this case, the parish - is responsible for the cost of upkeep of historically designated sites. The 500 families that make up the parish, Waters said, are dedicated but cannot cover all costs.

"We have the money to pay our bills, thank God," Waters said. St. Augustine's, which is staffed by Augustinian friars, has never been merged with another parish.

Waters hopes to establish a perpetual care fund for the frescoes financed by foundations and individuals with a special interest in historic art. Many parishes have created historic preservation funds and corporations for similar purposes, Morello said.

"At least now, St. Augustine can be known as the church with the frescoes, which no other church in Pennsylvania can claim," Morello said.