

## The Four Murals in the Chancel

By Carolyn M. Chilton

*[It would be great to have a photo of the murals but I don't find a good one on the Y drive. The one of the home page of the website is good, but again, I don't find the master of it.]*

For more than eighty years, the walls at the back of our chancel (behind the altar) have been graced with four murals. Painted in Gothic Revival style, they depict (from left to right) the Annunciation to Mary, the Nativity, the women at Jesus' tomb, and the Ascension.

The murals are unsigned and little was known about them or the artist until our Art Committee, in the early part of this century, undertook research on the many decorative objects at Grace & Holy Trinity Church. With special thanks to Dr. Lewis Wright and Mr. Donald Traser we now know more about these murals.

The artist was Frederick Auguste Benzenberg who was born in 1873 in Eberfeld, Germany. He studied art in Dusseldorf and came to New York City in the 1890s. Although he worked initially in decorating theater walls and ceilings, he soon developed a strong interest in religious art. For many years he was an Ecclesiastical Designer for the Gorham Company. Mr. Benzenberg's wife, Dora, was an American. They purchased a house in Brooklyn in 1902, in which a granddaughter still lives. Among his other works are the ornate ceiling in the Chapel of the Holy Family at the Church of the Transfiguration in New York City, and works in churches in San Antonio and Los Angeles. He died in 1961.

Our murals are done on canvas, and were applied to our walls by the Gorham Company in 1929. They are a memorial gift honoring Col. John W. Gordon from his children. Col. Gordon also gave two of our stained glass windows (on the south wall), he helped raise the money for the new stone church in the 1880's, and the Ascension stained glass window over the altar.

In 1947 a leak developed in the roof over the Ascension panel and badly damaged that mural. Vestry minutes from December 1948 reveal that after much searching, Benzenberg was located and he was hired to paint a replacement panel which was installed in 1949. Prior to the installation of air conditioning some of the sanctuary windows and panels in the ceiling were opened to provide air circulation. This, of course, also allowed in dirt and soot, and the murals became darkened and dirty over the course of the years. In 2002 art cleaners were hired to clean and restore them. They tried using various chemicals all to no avail. Then one of them took a Q-tip, swabbed it around in her mouth, and tried cleaning a corner of one of the murals. The dirt and soot came right off! The murals were then cleaned with synthetic saliva!

As we move into the Advent, Christmas and Epiphany seasons, find a moment to look at these beautiful paintings up close, especially the Annunciation and Nativity ones. What symbol of the Holy Spirit can you see in the Annunciation window? Look at Mary in both the Annunciation and Nativity windows...does she look the same? How is she dressed in both of them? What background of the murals do you see that makes them in the Gothic Revival style? What is the source of light in the paintings and what might this tell us about the artist's intention? What do you notice about the angels in the two paintings?

Enjoy!