

Restoration Preparations

“Send me workers skilled in gold and silver, bronze and iron, and in purple, crimson and blue yarn, and experienced in the art of engraving...”

— 2 Chronicles 2:7



Restoration crews check in on-site with Restoring Beauty, Inspiring Hope stickers on their hard hats.

Teams of experts have been gathered to create plans for an incredible undertaking—restoring the interior of The Basilica of Saint Mary. These many talented people have traveled, some from across the country, to start this work on our sacred Basilica. They completed a test mock-up section in early September, that will help us to prepare and plan for the larger restoration, currently planned to begin in spring of 2025.

The Basilica’s interior finishes and stained-glass windows, installed in the mid-1920s, have begun to show signs of distress. For several years, increasing amounts of loose plaster were noticed on

pews and flooring below clerestory walls in the nave. In response to accelerating plaster decay, contractor Mortenson installed protective netting to shield visitors from falling debris. The design team, led by HGA architects, subsequently engaged several specialty consultants to look more closely at The Basilica’s decorative features and finishes.

Conservators from EverGreene Architectural Arts and Liberty Stained Glass Conservation began limited scope investigations in August 2023. The assessment was organized around four categories—interior ceiling plaster assessment, paint analysis, stone masonry

test cleaning, and stained-glass assessment.

The larger scale trials currently underway are informed by analysis of current condition findings. Results of these trials, in concert with the Basilica’s Preservation Plan, will establish the foundational framework to guide decision making for comprehensive interior restoration.

The Basilica of Saint Mary is the first Catholic church in the United States to be raised to the rank of a minor basilica in 1926 by Pope Pius XI. The restoration work, which will be phased over several years, is planned to be completed in time to celebrate the centennial anniversary of that distinction in 2026.



RESTORING BEAUTY, INSPIRING HOPE



STONE CLEANING

The Basilica interior is clad with 4-inch-thick Mankato limestone. Italian marble is used for sculptural elements, chapels, and architectural accents. Stone color, texture, and condition varies by area, depending on stone type, exposure to water, and proximity to daily use.

Cleaning tests were performed in select areas to determine the best restoration approach for interior stonework. Test results demonstrated that mild cleaning agents safely and effectively removed decades of surface soiling, revealing the natural color and pattern variations of the stone.



Explaining the cleaning process and the cleaning material being applied.





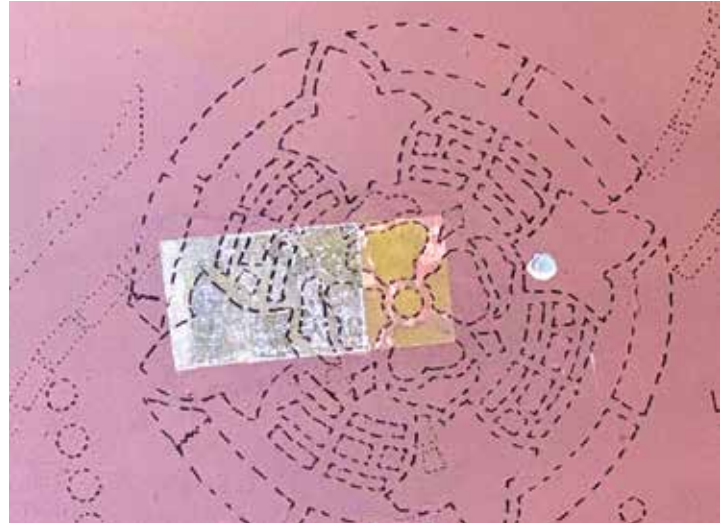
PAINT INVESTIGATION

The decorative finishes we see today are not what they once were. Although previous restorations were sensitive to the original decorating scheme, each iteration deviated further from historic precedent. Glimpses of stencil patterns and various artistic effects captured in early photographs are vividly described by Monsignor James Reardon in his 1932 *Historical and*

Descriptive Sketch of The Basilica—from colors harmonizing with the hue of the stone and color of the windows, to stippling effects, and metallic touches.

The historic artwork, described by Monsignor Reardon, was recently analyzed by EverGreene’s conservators. Traces of original artwork were revealed through test openings created in over-painted

areas and with bright or raking lighting. Where accessible, the historic color palette and visual evidence of stenciling has been documented. Current trials will help determine conservation feasibility and will also provide an opportunity to consider the impact of lighting and cleaning on overall appearance and aesthetics.



Historic stenciling revealed



A painter working on AM ceiling medallion, *Auspice Maria*, which means “under the protection of Mary.”

There are 10 medallions around the perimeter of The Basilica ceiling.



The Basilica Landmark’s mission is to preserve, restore, and advance the historic Basilica of Saint Mary for all generations. The Basilica Landmark was organized in 1993 to preserve and restore The Basilica of Saint Mary and its campus. The Basilica Landmark is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization separate from The Basilica of Saint Mary. Support critical projects to care for The Basilica with a donation at: thebasicalandmark.org



More information on the restoration efforts can be found at: restoreourbasilica.org

PLASTER CONDITIONS

EverGreene’s conservators assessed damaged plaster, from both sides of the ceiling, to evaluate the extent of previous water damage. Prolonged water infiltration from roof leaks and unsound masonry joints have caused significant damage—including efflorescence (a deposit of salts on the surface of a porous material caused by water migration), cracking, and finish failures across The Basilica ceilings.



Plaster worker on scaffolding

STAINED GLASS

Liberty Stained Glass Conservation concluded, through visual observation, that stained glass is generally in stable condition, at least for the immediate future. Many of the windows have been previously restored in place with varying degrees of success. Regardless of previous restoration efforts, there is some untreated breakage and evidence of continued water infiltration. Another concern is the condition of the glass support system.

Properly installed and spaced support bars contribute to the integrity and long-term durability of the window. It is hard to assess the strength of lead or its remaining lifespan while a window is in situ (in place). The intent of the trial is to assess the condition of the lead strips, called “comes,” that hold the glass together, and feasibility of future repair.



Brianne Van Vorst, Principal and Conservator of Liberty Stained Glass Conservation, working on a window.

Partners in Restoration





STRUCTURAL STUDY

During the site investigation for the Building Envelope Study, HGA and their consultant, WJE, observed cracks throughout areas of the attic, primarily in and above the large arches at the base of the dome and the arch over the south balcony, but also at other, sometimes adjacent walls. Some of these cracks have been previously repaired, but the cracking extends beyond the repairs.

HGA structural engineers are currently investigating historic masonry and conditions that may be contributing to the observed cracking. The goal is to verify whether the cracks remain active and to determine if repairs or strengthening is necessary. Appropriate repairs will be designed as needed to effectively address the root causes of observed distress.



Monitoring cracks at masonry



Exterior stone cracks



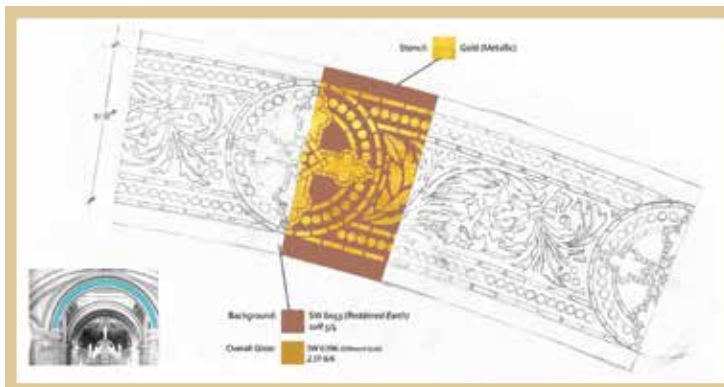
This project has been financed in part with funds provided by the State of Minnesota from the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund through the Minnesota Historical Society.



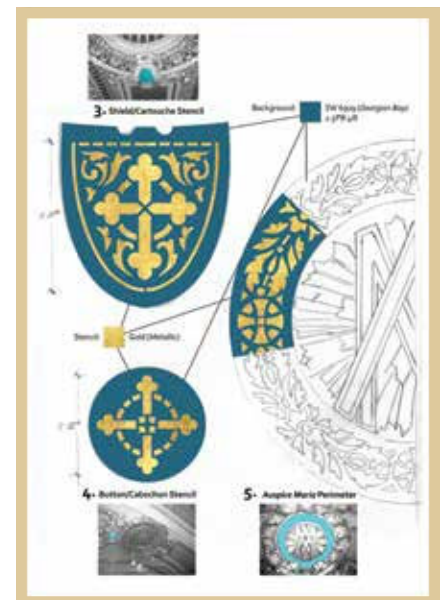
NEXT STEPS

The team will use the trial phase to evaluate the constructibility, effectiveness, and visual appearance of proposed options for stained glass conservation and the process of interior finish restoration. The scope of this phase of work has been carefully thought out to test the full range of repairs anticipated for the project—from design, through

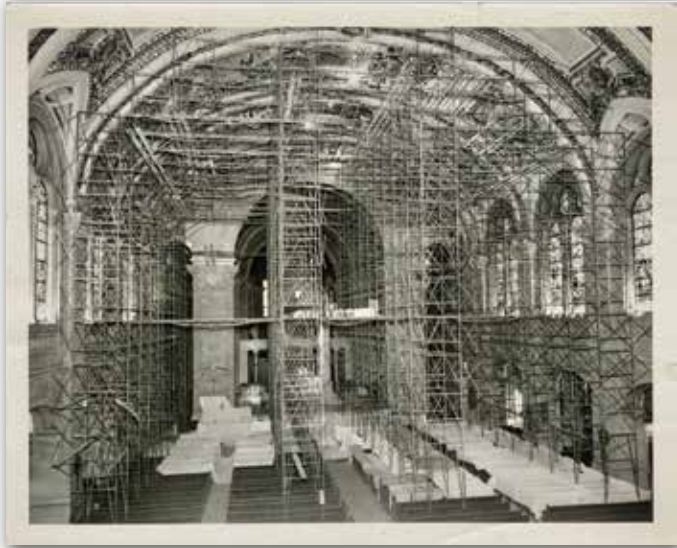
procurement, to final installation. Guided by ethical conservation practices, the focus will be on recreating historic stencil work and developing appropriate treatment strategies that align with both budget and preservation goals. ✚



Recreated historical stencil work and historic paint palette



Historical Design and Restoration



Nave and Sanctuary filled with Scaffolding, Minneapolis, Minnesota. December 20, 1951. collection.mndigital.org



Slifer and Abrahamson. 1920–1927. “Grapevine and Grape Cluster Pattern for Plaster Ornamentation, Basilica of Saint Mary, Minneapolis, Minnesota.” (Basilica of Saint Mary Archives)

