

Stained glass tells the tale of Christmas

UKRAINIAN CATHEDRAL TO HOST THOUSANDS OVER HOLIDAYS

By: Melissa Martin

Posted: 12/24/2018 3:00 AM

As she steps into the sanctuary at Sts. Vladimir and Olga Cathedral, Anna Katchanovski pauses to give a visitor a moment to take it all in.

The space is a revelation of light and colour, streaming through tall stained-glass windows.

After 30 years worshipping here, including more than a decade serving as the church secretary, Katchanovski is used to the cathedral's beauty. Sometimes, she says, parishioners even take it for granted; it feels so much like their home.

But she can tell when someone is walking into the cathedral for the first time. The first-timers are the ones with their necks craned back, eyes wide, drinking in the soaring ceiling that's painted light blue like the sky — and also, a rarer prize.

There, topping the long rows of brilliant stained-glass windows that line the walls of the McGregor Street cathedral, are 14 which are the most priceless of all: these were created by iconic Winnipeg artist and former parishioner, Leo Mol.

Even Manitoba Hydro workers who come to read the meters sometimes pause to marvel at the sight.

"This is a unique house of worship in Winnipeg," says the cathedral's priest, Msgr. Michael Buyachok.

Those windows are a big part of that legacy. They are a stunning collection: the Mol windows, which crown a lower set made by a Toronto company, are resplendent with motifs drawn from the long history of Ukrainian Christian life.

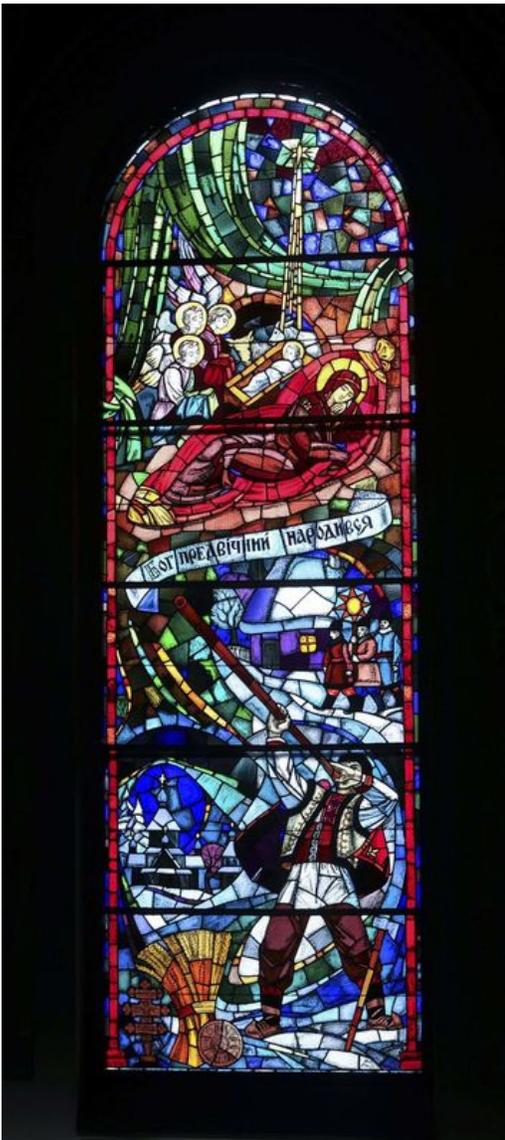
Mol spared no detail. In the windows, Ukrainian martyrs and saints are surrounded by intricate patterns of colour. There are scenes showing the baptisms of the cathedral's namesakes: Vladimir the Great and Princess Olga.

A panel marking the birth of Jesus is embellished with Ukrainian motifs, including a sheaf of wheat, and a messenger blowing a trembita, a type of long horn, to announce the words, inscribed in Ukrainian, that "God Eternal is Born."

"Everything means something to us as a Ukrainian," Katchanovski says. "Leo Mol understood that."

It is the Saturday before Dec. 25, although, at Sts. Vladimir and Olga, there are still a little over two weeks until Christmas; the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church celebrates the holiday on Jan. 7, following the Julian calendar.

The night before that celebration, the cathedral will be full, Katchanovski says. She wishes everyone in Winnipeg could see it. Nearly 1,000 people, the room bathed in the golden glow of the chandelier and voices of the people.



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The beautiful Nativity scene, created by local artist Leo Mol, is one of 36 created for the large Ukrainian cathedral on McGregor Street.

Above all, there are the stained-glass windows. They are a treasure to the cathedral, not only as a rare collection of work by a pre-eminent artist, but also as a loving record of one of its own parishioners, who many here once knew.

In early 2009, the last year of Mol's life, his niece came from Siberia to see him. Mol and his wife, Margarethe, had little family in Winnipeg, and no children; so the visit, Katchanovski says, was long-awaited and precious.

By then, the artist was 94 years old; his mind sharper than his legs. He was a familiar face at the church, where — as he aged — members made sure to invite him to participate in church activities.

That day, Katchanovski let them into the cathedral. She watched as Mol's niece wandered around the sanctuary, while her uncle sat in one of the long pews and described the intent of each of the windows he'd created.

About six months later, Mol died. Katchanovski has often remembered that contemplative visit.

"What a beautiful moment," she says. "That was his only niece that he had, and she came after all those years she had tried to come. Finally, she came and saw him, and they went over these windows, and his work. It was beautiful."

When the cathedral was consecrated in 1951, the Mol windows were not yet part of its vision; to save funds for construction, and for lack of a qualified artist, most of the original windows were made of simple coloured glass.

But in 1963, eminent Ukrainian artist Swiatoslaw Hordynski finished painting the cathedral interior. The priest, hoping to further beautify the space in the Byzantine tradition, reached out to Mol.

That winter, Mol completed the first two windows. One features Vladimir the Great's sons, saints Borys and Hlib, who were martyrs. The other depicts 11th century saints Anthony and Theodosius, who brought monasticism to Ukraine.

Mol would continue to work on the windows until 1977. Each one was sponsored by a parishioner.

Since then, the windows have watched over the transformation of Ukrainian life in Winnipeg.

In the early days of the cathedral, it served as a hub for Ukrainian Catholics in the city, drawing nearly 1,000 people to its Sunday service.

Back then, Buyachok says, the place was so busy it had three priests, and three morning services. It was a historic place, and famous: in 1984, Pope John Paul II made the cathedral his first stop after arriving at the Winnipeg airport.

Then, as it does now, it served as a beacon to newcomers. Just four days after Katchanovski arrived in Winnipeg in 1989, she went to Sts. Vladimir and Olga. She'd heard about the cathedral when she was living in Europe.

"The church was the first place people are looking for," she says, of the immigrant experience.



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Anna Katchanovski has been worshipping at the cathedral for more than 30 years.

"Where can I go and pray, to meet people, but also to be part of the church that you left behind? When you're a new immigrant, this is a kind of a homeland connection. The church was always the thing that united us."

As with many churches, attendance numbers have dwindled. Yet the parish does have a bright future, renewed again by waves of newcomers from eastern Europe. Today, they make up about 80 per cent of the cathedral's attendees.

This year, it has been busy with weddings and baptisms: they are grateful for that, Katchanovski says.

Meanwhile, some things have not changed. The cathedral still performs all of its services in Ukrainian, and publishes bilingual church bulletins — the only Catholic parish in Manitoba that still does so, Buyachok says.

There are 24 feast days on the Ukrainian Catholic calendar, though only six are designated as obligatory observations. But in Ukraine, it is common to celebrate all of them; so Buyachok opens the cathedral for all.

"I'm the only one that still does it," he says, with a smile.



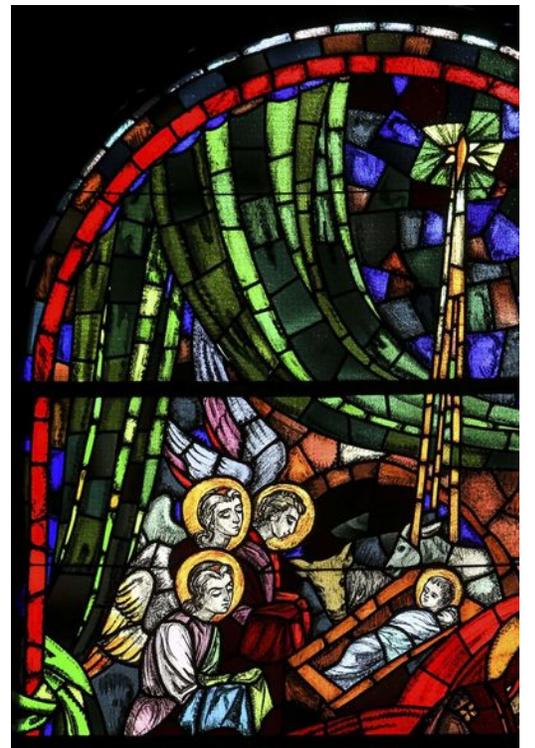
JEFF DE BOOY / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS FILES

The late Leo Mol was the artist behind the cathedral's famous stained-glass windows.



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The parish's secretary, Anna Katchanovski, says newcomers are often taken aback by the beauty of the cathedral's sky-blue ceiling and majestic stained-glass windows.



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PRESS

The Nativity scene portrayed in late artist
Leo Mol's window will be seen by
thousands over the holidays.

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The cathedral is getting older. Years of worship, weddings, baptisms and funerals have etched themselves into the building's fixtures. The floors are showing their age. The plaster on the walls has been gently restored, in places.

Each year, with the support of parishioners, Buyachok tackles another item on a long to-do list of preservation fixes. At age 79, he adds with a laugh, he may not see all of it finished; the work will continue for the life of the cathedral.

Yet here, under the great blue vault of the ceiling, in the light dancing through the stained-glass windows, all of the building's dents and well-worn places seem to fade away. There is only the wonder of the space, vast and enduring.

That beauty is part of the Byzantine tradition, the priest explains, one that, here, an iconic artist helped create.

"The church is not just a building, but a house of worship," Buyachok says. "That's why we try to make it as beautiful as possible... that's the closeness that we want to feel to God. We want to express God as a universal beauty."

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