

The Soul in Stained Glass: Nick Parrendo

Dennis Wodzinski

Upon entering Hunt Stained Glass Studio on Pittsburgh's West Carson Street, it soon becomes apparent that there's a Parrendo around every corner. From David Parrendo, Hunt's Business Manager, to Celeste Parrendo, the Master Painter of the studio, it is quite clear that the business owned by their father and artist Nick Parrendo maintains a true familial bond.

The same can be said of the Pittsburgh area as a whole – there always seems to be a Parrendo work around every corner. From Aliquippa (St. Titus Church) to Zelienople (Calvary United Presbyterian Church) and St. Agnes Parish (Richeyville, PA) to Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church (Irwin, PA), Nick Parrendo's touch has illuminated sacred spaces of all faiths, most prominently within the Catholic churches of the Diocese of Pittsburgh.

As you continue through the workrooms and offices of Hunt Studio (and as you do, Nick will gladly show you everything), the workplace of Parrendo since 1950, time often seems to slow down, if not stop completely. The one hundred and nine year-old business has seen many churches come and regrettably go. New pieces of stained glass are sometimes flanked by since-returned pieces, the only vestiges of a number of now-shuttered churches and worship spaces.

But if stained glass is to impart a sense of peace and solace upon the worshiper, Hunt Studio is as good a place for such creation and arrangement to begin. Parrendo's peaceful nature is the perfect complement to the workplace which is a stone's throw away from the West End Bridge on Pittsburgh's South Side.

But Nick Parrendo will be the first to tell you that "Hunt" has been here much longer than he. His humble demeanor will tell of other skilled designers and workers who preceded and inspired him. His admiration for former Hunt Studio designers Helen Carew Hickman and Charles Morris, whom he apprenticed under, is evident in the reverential tone of his voice when he recounts their influence on him.

But to his family, his coworkers, and to his clients, Nick Parrendo is Hunt Studio. His hand, his touch, and his artistic eye are the soul of "Hunt." Sitting in the Mary Immaculate Chapel of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God's Motherhouse recently, I couldn't help but see Parrendo's jovial face as I contemplated his depiction of the life of St. Francis of Assisi. Where the Seraphic Father's face showed compassion, it also showed vitality and a divine love. This illuminated life of St. Francis in twelve panels is among Parrendo's earlier works — a task he finished as a twenty-six year old in 1955, over sixty years ago. You can argue that the depictions of St. Francis's vitality, compassion, and divine love are also reflective of the artist.

At age 87 Nick Parrendo, now sole manager of Hunt Studio, has been at this trade for 65 years.

However, the master was not always the skilled and calculating craftsman that he is today. After recalling his early days and years with "Hunt" he laughingly will recount a myriad of stories detailing his maturation in the centuries-old-craft of stained glass design,

creation, and installation. An often told story is one about when he was an apprentice making seventy-five cents an hour and in charge of overseeing a piece by designer Charles Morris. The only problem was that Parrendo was also painting glass at the same time and forgot about the piece in the kiln.

"I was painting glass and I looked up from the painting and saw Mr. (James) Hunt, George's brother — he was the foreman — and he said 'Look at the kiln' and I said 'Oh my gosh'. All the forms melted out of shape, there were holes burned in them and I went to Mr. Morris and he said 'Well that's okay, I've done the same thing.' So they didn't fire me."

Offhandedly with a familiar laugh he added, 'It's good I'm the owner now.'

Parrendo's vocation has unfolded on Pittsburgh's South Side, but he clearly is a North Side man. Named for his maternal grandfather, 'Nicolò', Parrendo grew up in an Italian family in the Woods Run neighborhood of the city. His father, an immigrant who was unable to read or write English, never rose above the position of "helper" for the Pennsylvania Railroad. Parrendo's mother, who was



Window in chapel of Motherhouse of Sisters of St. Francis of Providence of God (Whitehall, PA) by artist Nicholas Parrendo.

Source: Archives of the Sisters of St. Francis

The Soul in Stained Glass: Nick Parrendo (continued)

twenty-five years younger than his father, maintained the house and oversaw the faith development of the family at nearby Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church. The church was another formative locus for Parrendo as it was where he befriended his spiritual advisor, Fr. Eddie Farina, received the sacraments, met and married his wife, and was eventually the location of Parrendo's first commissioned work.

When asked about how his artistic journey began, Parrendo is fast to state that he was not always so sure of his abilities. It perhaps was the most unlikely of places where his vocation seemed to bloom. It was on a hospital bed in Children's Hospital.

His first audience was an anonymous nurse whom Parrendo met while in the hospital with a severe case of bleeding ulcers. She gave him a pad of paper and a pencil to draw while he was recovering in his bed. Upon seeing her patient's progress, Parrendo fondly recalled "She said, 'Wow, that's good'. You know, I didn't think I could do anything good. I didn't think I could do anything really to begin with. So I kept drawing. She thought that was good, so I figured I'd keep drawing." The art world is extremely glad that he did.

The next memory Parrendo has of his artistic development is at North Catholic High School, where he was urged to attend by his parish priest, Fr. Eddie Farina.

"I was in high school and my literature class was reading Gulliver's Travels and there was this picture of Gulliver going through the woods, with his hand around the big pine trees, and again I started drawing. The teacher said, 'Are you finished with that,' and I said 'Oh yeah,' and he said 'Can I have it?' And to this day I'm not sure if he liked it, if it was a reprimand or a compliment," Parrendo joked. Either way, a definite talent was found and encouraged in the young artist.

High school graduation for Parrendo presented a crossroads for the budding artist. Encouraged by his grandfather, he enlisted in the post-World War II army, served for a year and a half and returned to Pittsburgh with a taste of the outside world and the G.I. Bill to support his educational development.

The next problem Parrendo faced was discerning what his next step would be. When he left the service, he returned to his high school guidance counselor for advice. Noting that Parrendo did not take any college prep classes, the advisor recommended applying to art

school. Parrendo remembers "College was out of the question." So he began studies at the Ad-Art Studio School in Pittsburgh (later combined with the Art Institute of Pittsburgh) and supported himself with part-time janitorial work at Our Lady of Perpetual Help. When he finished his classes, as with many things in the young Parrendo's life, it was the suggestion of his parish priest, Fr. Eddie Farina, to "go and see Mr. Hunt. He wants to get young blood in the business."

But "stained glass...hmm," Parrendo still says with a smile.

"So I went to see Mr. Hunt. I wanted to get married, so... (laugh). Mr. Hunt said 'I'm going to hire you as an apprentice. You'll make seventy-five cents an hour.' So I began. They asked me if I would do some cartooning (sketching the planned window out to full size). I vowed to myself, that if they asked me to do anything, I would do it. So I jumped right in."

It was Parrendo's skill with "cartooning" that made him a valuable asset on the Hunt team. His ability to render the finished product without having to send the cartoon to an outside enlarger saved Hunt Studio both considerable amounts of time and money. During the 1950s, when the country was experiencing a boom in the construction of religious buildings, any saved time and effort was critical.

Recalling his early years as an apprentice, Parrendo often mentions the influence that designer Helen Carew Hickman had on him. Hickman (her married name after her time with Hunt) was a 1947 graduate of Carnegie Tech and worked for Hunt from her graduation until 1953. Compared with Hunt's other designer, Charles Morris, Hickman's work was a bit more contemporary in nature. "It turned out that Helen was geared into very contemporary things, but I also saw her do some very traditional pieces," Parrendo recalled. "She told me, 'You have to make yourself change so that your work will be fresher.' I tried to follow her lead. She was a great teacher for me and led me on to all of this."

Initially, Parrendo was paired with Hickman and would transfer her smaller designs into the larger, often ten-foot charcoal "cartoons." "They were coming out great and Helen would point out the details that I might have missed. She would do the research and I thought 'Boy, what a nice education I'm getting. At one point she came back to me to say 'It's a shame that you don't get to do your own work.' So they eventually gave me the chance to do my own designs too."

Fittingly, Parrendo's first independent work was for his parish, Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Woods Run. "Mr. Hunt gave me that job. I think there were fourteen windows and he wanted a ventilator in there. They were double-hung windows so we took out the wooden sash, put in new frames and a new ventilator and windows for \$100," Parrendo laughed.

"So I designed a very simple pattern. The background was rectangular tinted glass and there was a medallion in the middle. The medallions all had an image of Our Lady with a Latin text. And do you know when we got that job, people came into our church and said 'Where are the figures – there's only symbols.' I said 'You have new windows, a new ventilator, all for \$100!'"



Artist Nick Parrendo in his studio.

Source: Dennis Wodzinski

The Soul in Stained Glass: Nick Parrendo (continued)

Parrendo laughed. Regrettably, Parrendo's first stained glass design has been lost to history. "That building is now I believe an apartment building. All the windows were taken out and sold. So I don't know who has the windows to this day." Gradually, work picked up and he soon was receiving ample design and installation work of his own.

To give one a sense of the size and scope of the workload at Hunt Stained Glass Studio in Parrendo's first decade of work at Hunt, there are 1,065 unique work orders listed for the 1950s alone. Of that number, the 1950s saw significant new stained glass arrangements for St. Henry Church (Pittsburgh - closed 2005), St. Ignatius Church (Carnegie, PA), St. Elizabeth of Hungary Church (Pleasant Hills, PA), Divine Providence Prep School (Allison Park, PA), and Speers United Methodist Church (Charleroi, PA) among several others. In total, from 1950 until 2014, Hunt Studio was responsible for 6616 unique jobs including design, fabrication, installation, and repair of stained glass arrangements. Averaged out, that is roughly 103 unique jobs per year. This is an extremely significant number when one realizes that Hunt Stained Glass Studio employed four designers in the 1950s (Hickman, Morris, Roy Calligan and eventually Parrendo himself); by the end of the 1960s, Parrendo was the sole designer.

The Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God, located in Whitehall, PA, gave Parrendo his first commissioned work regarding the life of St. Francis. In response, with some suggestion from Mother M. Loyola Sebelskas, OSF, he delved into Franciscan spirituality and symbolism. Likewise, when St. Bonaventure Parish needed a new stained glass arrangement, Parrendo began researching the life of the Seraphic Doctor, and tapped into a new realm of spirituality heretofore unknown to him. As you listen to Parrendo humbly discuss some of his past projects, you realize that each new commission, though often tiresome in regards to research, has always been a period of spiritual growth and development for the soft-spoken artist. After sitting with him for a while, one gets the sense that he considers his career to be his vocation — a true gift and a long journey of faith and spiritual and educational growth. With every prospective window or piece, Parrendo had to delve into the critical elements of scripture, Christology, lives of the saints, and even the images and traditions of other faith communities.

Categorically, Parrendo's work is hard to classify as a whole. Initial works showed a more traditional design. Recent decades have shown a more fluid composition style, reflective of a spirit that often feels borne out of the sacred space itself, and not simply anchored by colored glass and lead. Parrendo's artistic strength lies in his flowing style and ability to adapt the window to the space that it illuminates. He quipped while discussing the benefits of bendable lead framing on his works that "If you want longer-lasting windows use flexible lead. If you want a long life, be flexible." Overall, his work shows a flexibility that Helen Carew Hickman, his mentor of years past, would approve of.

Asked if he had a particularly favorite saint or religious scene to depict, Parrendo paused before he answered. "You have to like it all, that's what I say. You have to like all the scriptures, Old

Testament, New Testament, all the letters and everything else." Pausing another moment, he added "However, Revelation is so visually impactful that it gives you so many subjects to work with. That's what I've noticed when doing images regarding Revelation. The Apocolypse makes you think 'Wow'. It allows you to go on forever with such vivid imagery."

With the advent of the 1960s, a shift was becoming evident in the greater Roman Catholic Church; 1962 marked the opening of the Second Vatican Council.

When considering the changes of the "Vatican II" Church, Parrendo noted a shift in perception of the church, from within and without. For a while, he said, Protestant

"ministers would almost always come down on the Church and point out all of the bad things. Since Pope John XXIII, all that changed. He brought fresh air into the Church and now we are one, common in Christ, and now we're not picking at each other. I noticed the difference quite a bit actually. I remember one Presbyterian minister who came in. He wanted a lot of detail in his work. He brought a stack of papers, three quarters of an inch thick, and he said 'Here's the first window.' I said, 'All that for one window?' But I learned so much in regard to scripture from him. Another lesson I learned from a Lutheran minister, he said 'You Catholics make Christ so judgmental, so severe, put a smile on his face and make him happy.' Ever since then I've tried to make our Lord pleasant,"

Parrendo laughed. "It has been a true learning experience."

The late 1960s also harkened in a new era for Hunt Stained Glass Studio itself. In 1966, with the retirement of George Hunt from the family business, Hunt Stained Glass Studio was sold to John and Margaret Lally. Noted for their business and philanthropic acumen, the Lallys enlarged the scope of Hunt's business model by expanding into faceted glass design and dealing more with repair and conservation work. A prime example of faceted glass design that Hunt and Parrendo undertook were the massive wall-sized stained glass pieces designed for St. Thomas More Church in Bethel Park, PA. Other significant Hunt Studio works from this decade include St. Patrick Church (Canonsburg, PA), St. Norbert Church (Overbrook - Pittsburgh, PA), Beth Israel Synagogue (Washington, PA), and St. Valentine Church (Bethel Park, PA) among many others.

Asked if he ever had any regrets over certain designs, Parrendo laughed "Oh yeah. I wish I could do several over again. For the first couple of years, every time I did something I would later say 'Ah, I could have done this, I could have done that.' Once you commit to a design, it is hard to change, especially in stained glass. Once you put something down, you have something to go by. But then you say 'Wow, I don't have time to do it over. Boy, it would be nice to do it over the way I see it now.' But yeah, hindsight is amazing," he joked.

Such hindsight and vision is emblematic of Parrendo's unique ability to change perspective and keep his approach to work "fresh" and invigorating.

The Soul in Stained Glass: Nick Parrendo (continued)

One example of his fresh approach to work has been his time as an instructor of stained glass design: “I was here about twenty-five years and they needed a teacher of stained glass in Pittsburgh.” At first hesitant, the humble Parrendo was worried “if they’d ask questions that I don’t know the answers to – what would I do? But I remembered St. Francis de Sales said, ‘If you want to learn, teach.’ Then I thought, that’s what I should do.” In response to his initial “yes” to becoming a teacher of stained glass, he still offers classes and workshops on the craft that he picked up as an apprentice. Currently Parrendo also leads a yearly stained glass class for St. Edmund’s Retreat on Enders Island, CT.

Another example of Parrendo’s versatility and ability to adapt is his foray into 3-D art — sculpture. The impetus for working on sculpture came when he was approached by St. Gabriel of the Sorrowful Virgin Mary Parish (Whitehall, PA) after he had completed their stained glass arrangement. “So I said, ‘Okay, I’ll try to do that.’ Since he was an employee of Hunt Stained Glass Studio, Parrendo had to look elsewhere for viable creative space for this new venture. “So I sketched it and did it in my basement at home. I had an old couch there so I made a clay model, created a mold, and put it on the couch and then put the resin in it.” Pausing, he added “I didn’t realize it, but it got so hot that I thought I might burn my house down. So I maintained a vigil all night, wondering when it would cool down because my wife and family were upstairs. I sweated that one out,” he laughed.

As his ability in sculpture also became known, he had to improve his work area to compensate for incoming commissions. “Soon one thing lead to another. We needed more space, so my brother in law, the kids, all pitched in and built this garage in my backyard. Now I could work on the weekends.” However, “Then I bought a new car. I put that car in the new garage and the next day it wouldn’t start. So I said I’m never going to put a car in that garage again. But then I got the studio, and now I do them here.”

Speaking of “getting the studio,” with the departure of the Lally family from Hunt Stained Glass ownership in 1987, a unique opportunity was presented to Parrendo.

“I’ll tell you, going from an employee to an owner. I was scared, I’d say to myself ‘What do I know about running a business?’ I just wanted to do the artwork. A guy advised me, ‘You have to buy this studio.’ I said ‘I know nothing about running a studio.’ He said ‘Anyone who buys this studio will bring their own artists – where do you think you’ll be?’ So I said ‘If I’m going to keep my job, I have to buy the studio.’ So I took a mortgage out on my house and started all over. It worked out terrifically. I couldn’t ask for anything better – I’ve always had a key to this place. I would always come in on Saturdays. I thought, just to be able to come here...it’s a second home. If you’re saying that you’d rather be at the studio than on the golf course, well that’s saying something about what you’ve been able to accomplish. I’m so grateful. It’s amazing how things worked out. Just the idea that God has a plan for you, and you say ‘Yes’ – it’s going to click.”

But such a long career has also had a few bumps along the way. One of his fellow artist-friends won’t let him drive the golf cart after an accident during a national stained glass convention. To mark his now humorous accident, they placed a marble plaque, “a memento to Nick cascading over the hill into the creek,” he laughingly recalled.

On a more serious note, Parrendo recalled a scary situation that developed at a conference in Kansas in 1994.

“I’m on the van to the hotel, and a fire breaks out in my chest. I had this pain that burned like crazy. I thought ‘I’m not going to tell anyone I have heart problems in my chest. They’ll take me to the hospital – I’m not going to the hospital.’ I thought it must be my gallbladder. I stood on my head. I tried everything to get rid of that pain. It wouldn’t go away. So I called the airport and asked when the next plane went back to Pittsburgh. So I took the flight the next morning, got into my car, and drove to Allegheny General Hospital. They said ‘You’re having a heart attack.’ I said ‘What?’ So I called my daughter, I said ‘I’m not in Kansas anymore,’” he laughed.

Despite these health scares, Parrendo still maintains a very active lifestyle, often playing a round of golf a week or taking a ride on his bicycle on Pittsburgh’s North Shore. In addition to his work at Hunt Studio (a name he never contemplated changing) and his physical activities, he is also very active in the greater stained-glass world. In 1999 Parrendo received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Stained Glass Association of America, the same organization that his mentor and friend Helen Carew Hickman was president of in the 1970s. When contemplating that thought, the humble Parrendo simply smiled and nodded his head.

Today, Hunt Stained Glass Studio, hemmed in by West Carson Street, the Ohio River, and within a stone’s throw of the West End Bridge, is a vibrant workplace and inspiring repository of thousands of completed stained glass works from decades past. It is an appropriate location for some introspection and peace for the 86-year-old Parrendo. Reflecting on his own approach for stained glass, he said

“I was always searching...It’s a relationship with God, and I think the more that you develop such a relationship, the more you’ll encounter the light. Centering Prayer has really helped. I thought, to be able to sit in silence, and music is very nice, but there is a better language with God, and that is through silence. To be able to start the day with twenty minutes of silence, just remembering that you are in God’s presence, is very important to me. I often think of the many things that have happened because of that special relationship, those encounters that impress themselves onto my artwork.”

But as often occurs with Nick Parrendo, the discussion shifted to matters other than art or stained glass. He added “We’re searching for that close bond - it’s a whole never-ending search. And we look forward and think, we’re eventually going to die. We wonder ‘Where are we going?’ Well, if we fall into the arms of God, you know, that’s what it’s all about.”

The Soul in Stained Glass: Nick Parrendo (continued)

After sitting down with Nick Parrendo for an hour or two, it becomes quite clear that a sincere love permeates his entire being. It influences how he approaches work and even how he holds a conversation. As an artist, Parrendo could be justified saying that his work is his true love. But it isn't. Perhaps stained glass is his second love, but his first and enduring love will always be his wife Emmanuella – 'Luella', whom he met in the Our Lady of Perpetual Help bowling league, and his four children John, David, Eddie, and Celeste. Every discussion of stained glass with Parrendo will also be a discussion of family and the ties that bind. Nick and Luella were married thirty years before she succumbed to the effects of leukemia in July 1981.

We as outsiders, as admirers of his skill, are lucky enough to catch the essence of that familial love in his work that we encounter on a weekly and perhaps daily basis. As the sun illuminates each and every pane that Parrendo works on, his drive and love also shine through each and every piece that he has created. In many ways, it is the touch, the arrangement, and the mind of the artist that bring true illumination to our sacred spaces. However, Nick Parrendo would argue otherwise and simply offer that someone greater than he brings true illumination.

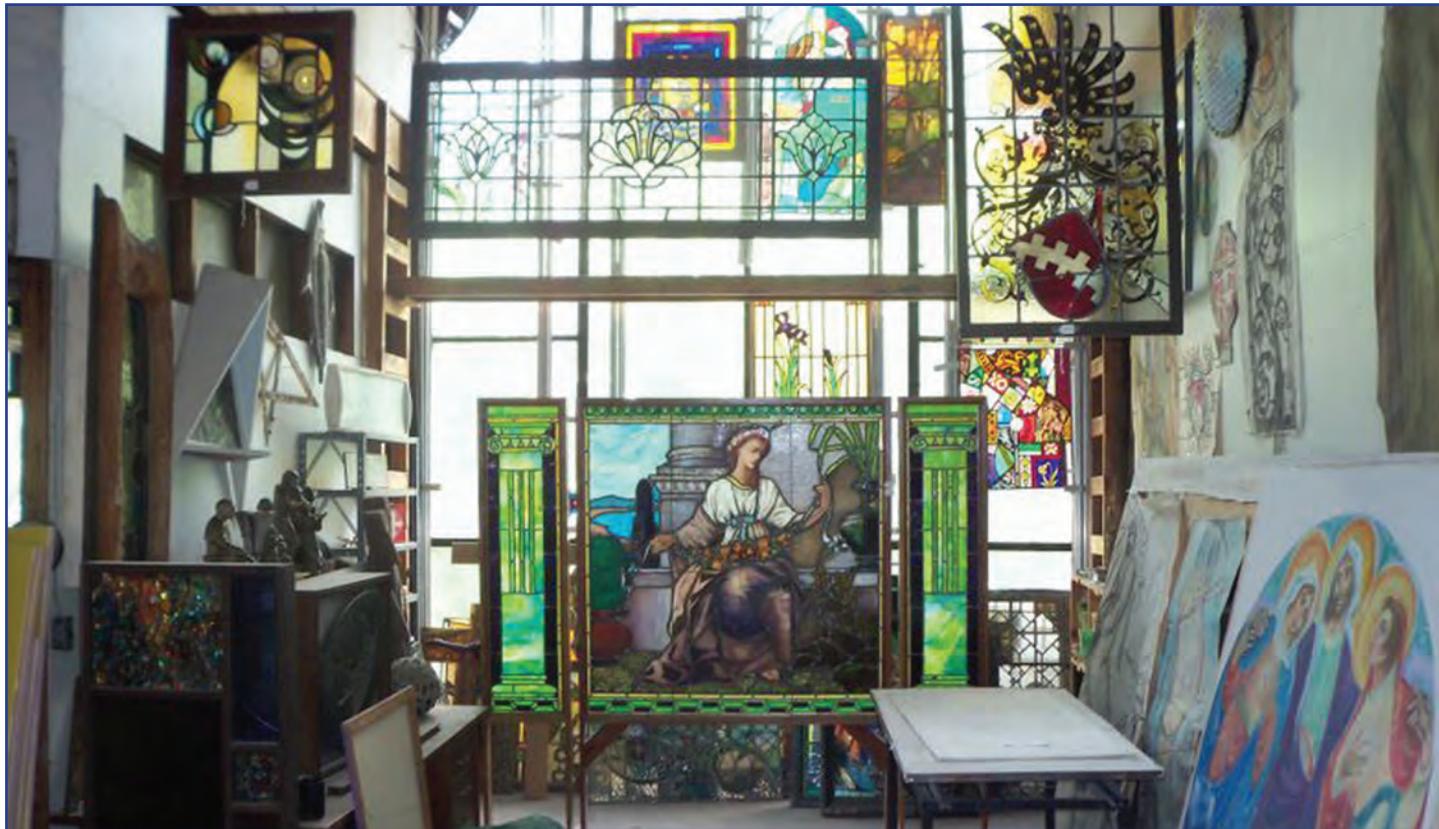
Author's Note

To be honest, this article was to have had a dual purpose: to provide a biography of the artist, and to produce an exhaustive listing and description of each of Nick Parrendo's public stained glass and sculptural arrangements. But, with thousands of works attributed to Hunt Studio in the past 65 years, such a listing is still a "work in progress" for another time.

Initially, I went to Hunt Stained Glass Studio to learn about Nick Parrendo, the artist, the prolific stained glass artisan, and sculptor. But something transpired in my two-hour long tour of Hunt Studios and my interview with the artist.

I came out of Hunt Studio having met Parrendo — the humble and joyful human, the long-time North Side resident, the weekly golfer, the proud family man, and the spiritual guide he undoubtedly is. It truly is hard to divorce Parrendo the family man from Parrendo the artist. Thus the incomplete nature of my intended dual undertaking! However, one does not exist without the other. There cannot be the artist without the North Side family man; they exist together as one. That is truly what makes Nick Parrendo's work so enduring and invigorating. The work reflects the man as a whole, and not simply a school of design or a fleeting artistic genre. It is as if in each and every pane of glass that Parrendo has arranged, he has illuminated the space with a little glimpse into the soul of a man who is wholly a part of the finished product. As Parrendo said to me at the conclusion of our talk, "I think what will happen, when we see God, divine and beautiful, we're going to forget everything else." Often it is that forgetfulness that one feels when stepping into the illuminated space of a Parrendo arrangement for the first time. If that is so, Nick Parrendo will surely feel he has accomplished his stated intent.

Additional information on Nick Parrendo and Hunt Stained Glass Studios is available at the studio website: <http://www.huntstainedglass.com/>.



Interior of Hunt Studios, Pittsburgh.

Source: Dennis Wodzinski