

Montgomery County artist has a heart of glass!



Randall Claggett works on the painted pieces of the stained glass ceiling for the Elkins estate. (CLEM MURRAY / Staff Photographer)

By Jessica Parks, Inquirer Staff Writer

POSTED: OCTOBER 01, 2013

Twenty-eight years ago, Randall Claggett moved from Florida to Montgomery County, PA and was blown away by what he saw - stained glass was everywhere. Not just in churches, but also in homes, businesses, museums, and estates. For Claggett, the brilliantly hued panes combined the best of both worlds: Art and income.

"Growing up in Florida, opportunities in stained glass as a medium were just unheard of," Claggett, said. "After seeing all of the beautiful stained glass in the area, I knew right away that it would be my passion in art. I decided to jump in with both feet, and Castle Studio was born."

Over the last 25 years, Castle Studio, located in North Wales, PA, has weathered the ups and downs of the economy to become one of the state's premier stained glass studios, specializing in the restoration of historic hand-painted stained glass windows.

This year has been particularly fruitful for Claggett, who is finishing a complete restoration of the 10-foot by 20-foot oval stained glass ceiling at the Elkins Estate in Elkins Park, as well as other projects in Philadelphia and York, Pa.

Claggett was also able to restore a privately owned, badly damaged, late 19th century stained glass window featuring an ethereal songbird, but had to recreate the central element - a hand-painted Renaissance style portrait of a woman in ornate robes, with flowing hair and delicate facial features.

But the hardest thing, he said, is weathering the slow years. "Some studios always seem to have work. For me, it's been feast or famine."

Joe Beyer, who runs a larger Philadelphia studio where Claggett once worked, said the stained glass industry is hard to crack. "Many have tried and most have failed," Beyer said.

In his studio last week, Claggett painted the final pieces of the gilded-vine ring that surrounds the perimeter of the oval stained glass ceiling at the Elkins Estate.

At this point, he is painting from memory, dabbing and swiping the brush to create highlights and depth. Unlike traditional works on canvas, where the artist builds the image up with paint, stained glass painting is done by taking paint away to let light pass through.

Claggett was also commissioned to clean and secure the fleur-de-lis etched ceiling in the room that used to be Mr. Elkins' art gallery. "In recent years, it was rented for parties, and some panels had dislodged and were dangerously close to falling," Claggett said.

Sister Anne Lythgoe, whose Catholic order owns the Elkins Estate and is preparing to sell it, said the minute details were taking longer than expected, but they "make a world of difference."

"He's a craftsman of the highest caliber," she said. "I didn't want to rush him."

jparks@philly.com

610-313-8117 @JS_Parks

www.inquirer.com/MontcoMemo