

# The New York Times

Sunday, January 20, 2002

Section **14**

**ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT**

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Abstract stained glass windows designed by the artist Ellen Mandelbaum are an unlikely miracle for nuns from five orders in a Hartsdale retirement center.



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times



Photographs by Suzanne Doehlin/The New York Times

# Spiritual Reflections in Bits of Glass

Abstract Window Designs Are an Unlikely Miracle to Nuns in a Retirement Center

By CLAUDIA ROWE

**T**HARTSDALE HE nuns who sit here in quiet contemplation are elderly, the youngest in her 70's. They have spent a lifetime praying in dim chambers where only pale bits of light sneak through densely figured stained glass. But they have discovered that a chapel built to honor the shifting light and changing seasons of nature can be even more meaningful.

A visitor to the Marian Woods retirement center might expect to see sisters worshipping in darkened pews, pondering familiar Biblical scenes. But these nuns, who came together from five orders to create a new kind of adult home, had something very different in mind — an airy, octagonal room with glass windows so colorful and free they bring to mind abstract watercolor paintings, rather than rigid doctrine.

"It's totally breathtaking," Sister Dorothy Wieting, 84, said. "It's awesome. And the

simplicity is beautiful. It's not baroque in any way."

Sister Dorothy was sitting across from the chapel's largest window, an arresting collage of red-and-blue diagonal plates struck through with black and gold to symbolize the resurrection of Christ. It made a powerful image, even if one was unaware of its exact meaning.

"I like to put my own meaning on it so I liked the abstraction," said Sister Dorothy, pointing out how the smoky but uplifting design in another window reminded her of all the good that was elicited from people after the attack on the World Trade Center.

The \$11.5 million retirement complex is home to 50 elderly nuns from Westchester and Rockland Counties, most of whom are members of the Sisters of Mercy, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, the Sisters of Saint Dominic of Blauvelt, the Franciscan Sisters of Peace and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. Their collaborative fund-raising efforts and the modern design of the center make the project unusual in the metropolitan region. Typically, retired

members of religious orders spend their waning years in spartan convents built before Vatican II when nuns had only two habits to store.

Marian Woods, by contrast, is bright, up-to-date and carefully designed with the needs of older residents in mind. This includes private baths and full closets, amenities few of the residents had ever enjoyed. The new chapel, with its 28 abstract glass windows, follows this forward-looking approach to 21st century Roman Catholicism. The windows depict no Mary bending over Jesus, no God in Heaven proclaiming, "Let there be light," just a circular window near the ceiling streaked with gold.

The design was suggested by the Rev. Richard S. Vosko, an architect and priest, of Clifton Park, N.Y., who advised the sisters on building the center. Retirement homes are largely the same wherever one goes, "pretty much plain vanilla," he said, urging the nuns at Marian Woods to think more deeply about their place of worship.

"I attempted to introduce the sisters to the language of metaphor and I'm sure



Nuns, from left are, Sister Christian Jones, Sister Mary Alfred Temple and Sister Dorothy Wiething. Stained glass in the chapel, below.

some critics will say, 'What do those windows mean?' and 'Why isn't it stained glass with literal narrative in there?' Well, to the credit of these sisters — who are all septuagenarians, at least — they wanted to move forward. They wanted to see things in new ways. And when you go to that chapel, you say, 'Whoa, this is not plain vanilla.'"

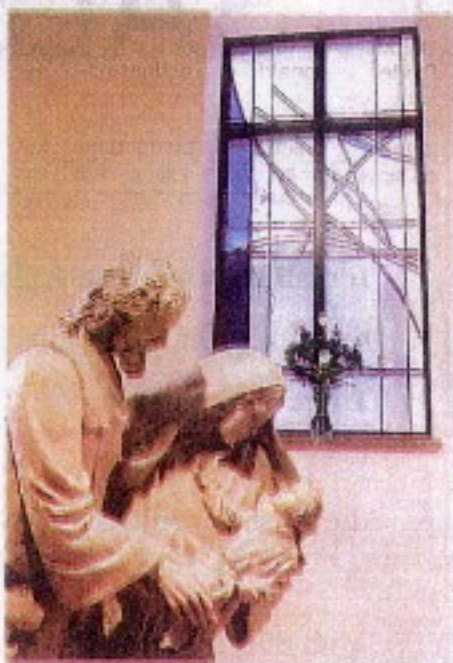
Sister Mary Paschal Hill, director of the project, was not immediately taken with Father Vosko's approach. But she eventually agreed that abstract images "could lead you to meditate, to think and to feel," she said, in profound new ways. With that aesthetic decided, the choice of an artist became particularly important because there could be no firm guidelines for an abstract work. The nuns had to find someone they believed could intuitively translate spiritual matters into color and light.

Ellen Mandelbaum, a 63-year-old painter and stained glass worker from Sunnyside, Queens — who has done stained glass work in houses of worship in Hawaii, Minneapolis, New York City and elsewhere — won the \$250,000 project in 1999. Before completing the chapel last August, she visited the Cloisters at Fort Tryon Park in the Bronx and spent mornings reading Scriptures in her studio "to really get into the mind-set of the people who were going to be using the chapel," she said.

Rohlf's glass studio in Mount Vernon specially ordered hand-blown panes from Europe. Ms. Mandelbaum carefully selected each for its texture and color — some have delicate bubble patterns, others feature a more watery cast — then set them on easels for painting. The brushwork is sweeping and light, almost Japanese in style. When the paint dripped, Ms. Mandelbaum let it. Throughout, Sister Paschal and the chapel committee held onto their faith that the revolutionary design would maintain a religious connection.

"They knew what they were getting right from the start — more modern, expressive work — and they were approving stuff that was pretty bold," Ms. Mandelbaum said.

Sister Mary Alfred Temple, 70, watched it happening. One of the first residents at Marian Woods, she would stand in the field of mud and stones, wondering what it would all look like in the end, as the workers at the chapel tramped by. At the unveiling, she



was stunned.

"At first it upset me very much," Sister Mary admitted. "It was beautiful but it didn't mean anything. The abstraction was very difficult for me."

But Ms. Mandelbaum provided a booklet describing her work. She explained how the different panes of colored glass worked with the light at different times of day and what that meant to her. She told the sisters that she had read Scriptures for inspiration and in a very short time the depth of the work became clear. Now Sister Mary is one of the chapel's most vocal supporters.

"I marvel at Ellen's vision," she said. "She saw in a very profound way what could be done."

Lay people can visit the chapel, and some do, particularly if they are seeing some of the resident nuns. A resident, Sister Rose Brenca, 84, said, "You can come in here any time of the day and find brightness."

Sister Paschal said later, "We knew it was a risk, but life is a risk."

Sitting by the "Wind of the Spirit" window, the nuns nodded their heads in agreement. Out of the mud, they said, had come a miracle.