

Pat Benincasa's glass and steel Redemption Window lets the viewer see the reflection of three crosses from any direction. The effect is achieved with glass overlays.



# Windows of opportunity

**Pat Benincasa showcases the beauty of stained glass – inside and out**

*By Terry Kosdrosky*

**F**ortunate is the artist who can make a good living from her craft. Even more so for Pat Benincasa, M.F.A. '76, who has taken a couple of left turns on her artistic journey since earning a degree in life drawing from Wayne State.

Today, the 54-year-old Minnesota artist is breaking new ground in glass and wood sculpture with three-dimensional stained-glass church windows, the largest of which was installed last September. Benincasa recently devoted her construction work and paintings exclusively to sacred art.

"Had someone told me when I left Wayne State that I'd be building and working with glass I would have laughed at them,"

Benincasa says. "When I left Wayne and moved out here, all of my degrees were in life drawing. But that is a great foundation for anything. Drawing is attitude. If you can see it and draw it, you can do anything."

One thing about Benincasa: When she decides to move into a new area of art, she throws herself into it. Soon after moving to the Twin Cities, she threw out all of her drawing material and became a painter. Her paintings sold at the Thomas Berry Fine Arts gallery in Minneapolis.

That lasted several years until she decided to build a studio in her back yard in St. Paul. She handled all the work herself – blueprints, permits, building code study and the construction – and she was done painting.

"After that I thought, 'I don't want to paint. I want to build things,'" she says. "I called the gallery to tell them I wasn't painting anymore, which wasn't good because they were starting to sell. But once I feel the need for a change, I do it. If your heart isn't in something, you just can't do it."

Her first big chance in her new medium came in 1989. The state judicial center on the Capitol Grounds in St. Paul was looking for a glass skylight sculpture for the ceiling of its grand staircase. A national competition was held and one of the artists who submitted a design was Robert Stackhouse, an internationally known name.

But "Falling Water Skylight" by a local and relatively unknown artist – Benincasa – wowed the judges, says Harriet Bart, a sculptor who was on the selection jury.

"Commissions at that time went to big names," Bart says. "This was very competitive with nationally known glass artists. But she came in with this incredible model made out of wood and glass. She seemed to have the spirit of the building and its uses in mind. When people are called to the judicial building, it's usually not a pleasant experience for them. Her work was filled with joy and a certain harmony. It really added to the architecture."

Bart says Benincasa was new to the glass medium and brought some new and innovative designs. Her design created a waterfall of light over a staircase that snaked like a river.

Though Bart became familiar with Benincasa and her work over the years, she didn't know her in 1989.



**Pat Benincasa, M.F.A. '76:** "A lot of people think sacred art has to be something timid or stylistic or formulaic. I see it as busting wide open."

"I don't think anyone on the panel knew of her," Bart says. "I think probably there was a preference not to use a local artist. She won in spite of the fact that she was local."

The commission, which was more than \$100,000, was installed in 1995.

Benincasa later created a glass sculpture for the General Services Agency building in Kansas City. She also became an artist-in-residence at Hill-Murray Catholic School in Maplewood, Minn. There, she teaches high school students art.

Benincasa next tackled a pet peeve: stained-glass church windows. She never liked how they looked beautiful inside but were black to the outside viewer. She wanted to turn that around and make church windows as beautiful on the outside as they were on the inside.

But it wasn't easy.

"I started working on it in 1996 and after two years, I thought I bit off more than I could chew," she says. "I started to think maybe God doesn't want me to be an artist. Maybe he wants me to be a high-school teacher full time.

Then I stopped looking at the history of looking at stained-glass windows and started looking at them as sculpture. I had to approach it as a sculpture. Stained glass has flat planes of color. I thought I would build the object in the window and the window around it."

She had to work with window specialists and scientists because the window still had to be functional and couldn't shatter if it were 15 degrees outside and 70 inside.

The result was the Redemption Window for the Hill-Murray chapel. A 10-foot high, three-dimensional cross sits atop real limestone boulders. Blue-hued panes of glass, also three-dimensional, form a sky.

The window was installed in September 2004 to rave reviews from faculty and students.

The work also pushed Benincasa away from secular art. She now only creates sacred art – paintings and glass sculpture.

"The world has come full circle for me now," she says. "A lot of people think sacred art has to be something timid or stylistic or formulaic. I see it as busting wide open."@

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