



Saints Cyril and Methodius Church, one of the “painted churches of Texas,” is a remarkable contribution by immigrants to church architecture in America.

Immigrant Churches

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

One of the most abiding contributions by Christian immigrants to the vitality of the church in North America over the centuries has been the varied forms of church architecture they bring from their countries of origin. The “painted churches of Texas” are a remarkable example.¹ Their sanctuaries adorned with a surprising profusion of color, these houses of worship are part of the valued and continuing legacy of the Czech and German immigrants—mainly Catholic, but also Brethren and Lutheran—who settled frontier towns like Ammansville and Dubina, High Hill and Praha, Schulenberg and Shiner, West and Fredericksburg, stretching from the Gulf Coast inland to the Hill Country of central Texas.

Today more than forty-five million, or one in six, Americans claim German or Czech ancestry. Over 2.3 million Texans descend from German or Czech immigrants, in this state where one of the flagship universities offers Czech language and culture instruction. Their forebears ranged from professors to farmers, but most were farmers who immigrated to Texas beginning in the 1850s to find abundant, fertile land. Their cash products were cotton, corn, cattle, and feed. They left an “old country” of economic injustice, overpopulation, and food and housing shortages for the promise of freedom and economic prosperity in America. Some even came alone, without family members.²

Recently I visited one of the most beautiful painted churches, Saints Cyril and Methodius Church in Shiner, Texas.³ A color photograph of the sanctuary apse (an extension of the building for the placement of the altar)—captured by Houston photographer Jim Whitcomb—is on the cover of this issue.⁴ Shiner was founded by German and Czech immigrants in November 1887 when the settlers of Half Moon, a small village three and a half miles northwest of the railroad tracks, decided to move their families closer to where the San Antonio and Aransas Pass Railway (SA&AP) trains coming south from Waco stopped. Saints Cyril and Methodius were chosen as the patron saints of the church because these brothers were honored missionaries to the Slavic peoples during the ninth century. Cyril was a monk and probably a priest. Methodius was governor of a Slav colony for a time before he became a monk, abbot, and later bishop. The brothers were accused of heresy, largely because they employed the vernacular language



SAINTS CYRIL AND METHODIUS (1920-1921). Exterior view. Shiner, Texas. Photo: © Jim Whitcomb, Studio Houston, 2008. Used by permission.

in the liturgy. They strove to enrich the spiritual and liturgical lives of the people of Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Bohemia, Southern Poland, and Yugoslavia) in a way that was not officially sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church until Vatican II in the 1960s.

The first church building in Shiner was built on two acres of land just east of the railroad and construction began January 2, 1891, for a structure 85 feet x 40 feet with a steeple 112 feet high. It was dedicated on May 7, 1891, under the name of Saints Cyril and Methodius. In 1920, due to the rapid growth of the parish, Father Francis Xavier Wolf hired the architect E. Wahrenbeger and contracted a San Antonio firm to build the current structure that was blessed by Bishop Drossaerts on July 7, 1921 (see above). Its Romanesque Revival style, which was adopted widely for churches and public buildings in America during the late nineteenth century, is meant to echo the imposing structures of late Medieval Europe.

This photograph is available
in the print version of
Christian Reflection.

SAN APOLLINARE (533-549). Exterior view. Classe, Italy. Photo: © Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

It is illuminating to compare Saints Cyril and Methodius to the Church of San Apollinare (533-549) in Classe, Italy (see above). This important sixth-century church also bears an architectural imprint of immigrants, for it combines the Early Christian style of architecture and painting in Italy with the Eastern style brought there by Emperor Justinian (ruling dates 527-565). Standing in Classe, a small town established just four miles south of Ravenna as that city's seaport on the Adriatic, San Apollinare is modeled on another church in Ravenna, San Vitale (526-547), which contains famous mosaics of Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora. We can trace elements of the Byzantine style from San Vitale to San Apollinare and on through the ninth century when it becomes the Romanesque style that would be "revived" in the church of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Shiner, Texas, a thousand years later.

Bishop Maximilian consecrated the Church of San Apollinare in 549 in memory of Saint Apollinaris, the first bishop of Ravenna. As is typical in Early Christian architecture, there is no transept in San Apollinare. The rounded bell tower was added later in the Medieval period. The exterior is simple brick with no ornament. The treasure of such a church was on the interior rather than the exterior. The adornments and color are reflected in the mosaics above the altar in the apse. This external shell was deliberately a change in style from the Classical temple that was heavily ornamented and sculpted on the exterior.

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SAN APOLLINARE (533-549). Nave view towards apse. Classe, Italy. Photo: © Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

San Apollinare in Classe is a longitudinal basilica form with a central nave and single side aisles (see above). The two-story elevation provides a clerestory for natural light above the side arcades, where the successive arches are supported by circular columns with foliated capitals. The ceiling, originally made of wood, is now encased in brick. The walls and vaults seem almost weightless, which further draws the eye to the wall mosaics whose rich, glistening colors evoke the richness and beauty of the Kingdom of God.

Earlier Christians had painted murals on the walls of catacombs, but on a much smaller scale than required to decorate large church structures after the rapid growth of Christianity in the fourth through sixth centuries. In San Apollinare the new art form of wall mosaic replaced the older and less expensive medium of mural painting. Mosaics are made of tesserae, small pieces of colored stone, tile, or glass set into plaster. It is believed that the artists who decorated these church walls with beautiful mosaics were imported from throughout the Empire.

The first mosaic workers had been the Sumerians in 3000 B.C., who used small pebbles and tiles. Later the Greeks and Romans created a way to copy paintings using marble tesserae. Their mosaics lacked brilliance, because while their color palette was broad, it was limited to those colors found in nature. Mostly these classical mosaics were placed on floors, although the

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SAN APOLLINARE (533-549). Apse mosaic above altar. Classe, Italy. Photo: © Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

Romans did produce some rare wall mosaics for very special purposes. The early Christians were the first to make tesserae of colored glass, which created a world of color hues (including gold) and intensities that had never been seen before. Because glass tesserae could be made shiny and in irregular shapes, they reflected light in glimmering, colorful tones that furthered the mystery of the interior of the sanctuary. The figures devised from these irregularly shaped pieces of painted and cut glass were held together by a black silhouette that created the illusion of a solid object, making it into a recognizable form when viewed by the congregation below.

At San Apollinare, the apse has a polygonal exterior (probably of Eastern origin), but a semicircular interior. The mosaic that fills this space is in the mature Byzantine style (see above). Like the earliest Christian imagery, it is a pictorial cycle that is interdependent with the architecture. Most of its iconography developed during the previous, fifth century. The mosaic is composed of a large blue medallion with a jeweled cross, a symbol of the transfigured Jesus. The hand of God the Father is visible at the top of the apse. Moses and Elijah, the prophets present at the Transfiguration of Jesus, sit in the clouds. Three sheep represent the three disciples who accompanied Christ to the foot of the Mount of the Transfiguration. Apollinaris, the patron saint of the church, stands in the lower center of the mosaic surrounded by twelve sheep



SAINTS CYRIL AND METHODIUS (1920-1921). Apse mosaic above altar. Shiner, Texas. Photo: © Jim Whitcomb, Studio Houston, 2008. Used by permission.

representing the congregation and the Apostles. Above the triumphal arch, the Apostles are symbolized again as twelve sheep and Christ appears in a medallion surrounded by symbols of the four Evangelists – the bird symbolizes John; the angel, Matthew; the lion, Mark; and the ox, Luke. The background of rich greens, blues, and gold accentuates the white used for the main figures of the patron saint, the prophets, and the sheep.

The mural painting above the altar of Saints Cyril and Methodius depicts Christ praying in the Garden of Gethsemane (see above).⁵ The presence of the ministering angel signifies that the painting has its biblical source in the Gospel of Luke.⁶ Christ and the angel are in the center of the lower portion of the mural. Christ stands on rocks that cascade below him and to the right. On the left side of the painting, in a greener, oasis-like area of the garden, the apostles Peter, James, and John are sleeping. To the right in the background is the walled city of Jerusalem. Like the mosaic painter of the sixth century whose name does not come down to us, the name of the mural painter is unknown at this time.⁷ The deep ultramarine blue for the heavens behind the angel compliments the gray of the rocks on which Christ kneels. He wears a purple mantle over his white gown, and the angel has white robes. Like the San Apollinare painter, this artist employs



SAINTS CYRIL AND METHODIUS (1920-1921). Nave view towards apse. 1920-1921. Shiner, Texas. Photo: © Jim Whitcomb, Studio Houston, 2008. Used by permission.

a simple, rich palette as the background to the central figures clearly visible by their white draperies. Five semicircular windows separate the apse mural and the dome of heaven painted as a blue sky with clouds. Above the central apse scene are three angels. Above the central angel are four small putti, or baby angels. The original inscription on the arch in front of the apse dome, "Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, Dominus Deus Sabaoth" (Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts), was replaced in the 1954 renovation with the current words, "Ecce Panis Angelorum" (Behold the Bread of Angels).

The beauty of this church, like San Apollinare, is the interior decoration. The exterior of Saints Cyril and Methodius is red brick, simple and unadorned. The church is also a longitudinal basilica with a nave and single side aisles, with a nave arcade supported by four columns (see above). As a Romanesque revival church, it contains the characteristic barrel vaults over the nave and five quadripartite, ribbed groin vaults over the side aisles. The religious iconography and imagery are not limited to the apse mural painting. Twelve stained glass windows, documented as being commissioned by artists in "Munich, Bavaria," for the 1920s structure, feature scenes from the life of Christ. On the left side of the altar, the Annunciation is depicted in the first window, followed by Adoration of the Shepherds, Presentation in

the Temple, Jesus in the Temple with the Elders, Wedding at Cana, and the Beatitudes. Beginning at the right of the altar are the Supper at Emmaus, Resurrection, Christ Giving the Keys to Saint Peter, Jesus in the House of Mary and Martha, Boy Possessed by Demons, and Jesus and the Woman with a Hemorrhage. On each window, key lines from the scriptural narrative are written in Czech.

The Catholic Church of Saints Cyril and Methodius was listed in the National Register of the Texas Historical Commission on June 6, 1983. One can only imagine the pride those original settlers would feel at this recognition of the significance of their immigrant settlement, their faith community, and the glorious church structure they left behind. Like the Christians who built San Apollinare, they managed to create a lasting legacy in architecture and painting—because they were imaginative and bold in appropriating their ethnic heritage while faithfully interpreting the larger Christian tradition.

NOTES

1 For an overview of these church buildings, see the Web site of the PBS documentary “The Painted Churches of Texas” (2001) at www.klru.org/paintedchurches.

2 The University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio offers brief introductions to the heritage of German-Texans (www.texancultures.utsa.edu/publications/texansoneandall/german.htm) and Czech-Texans (www.texancultures.utsa.edu/publications/texansoneandall/czech.htm). The population data is from the 2000 U.S. Census.

3 I greatly appreciate the hospitality shown to me when I visited the church of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Shiner, Texas, on May 28, 2008. In particular, I would like to thank the pastor, Reverend Robert E. (Bob) Knippenberg, and Mr. Joe Machacek, Assistant Business Manager, for assisting me during the visit. All historical information regarding the Church stated in this article was found in the church files and documents that I was allowed to study. For more about this active parish, see www.shineratholicchurch.org.

4 Jim Whitcomb, a commercial and architectural photographer, founded Studio Houston Digital Photography in 1999. His portfolio of images of the painted churches (www.StudioHouston.com) was the inspiration for this article.

5 The original mural contained only the figures of Christ and the angel in the Garden of Gethsemane, before the mural was enlarged to cover the entire dome area during a sanctuary renovation in 1954.

6 Luke 22:43-44 records this detail: “Then an angel from heaven appeared to [Jesus] and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.”

7 Mary Barta, Parish Business Manager at Saints Cyril and Methodius, recalls that the painter’s name was Edmond Fařo, but I could not find any documentation on the artist.



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