

## **Out of the Blue: Historic Paintings Return to St. Mary's in Astonishing Homecoming**

We read in Sacred Scripture, "Eye has not seen, nor has ear heard, nor has it even entered into the heart of man what things God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2: 9).

Although we are not capable of imagining the joys of heaven, God, in his infinite wisdom, has gifted and revealed to us the pathways that lead to seeing Him face to face; His only begotten son, Jesus Christ our Lord, and Mary, the Mother of God.

Artists through the centuries have sought to inspire in humankind the hope inherent in the images of the Risen Lord and our Blessed Mother ascending bodily into heaven. One such artist was Joseph Walter of Dubuque, Iowa. From 1905 to 1936, Walter established himself as one of the most successful and best known proponents of ecclesiastical art in the mid-West. He spent winters crafting original religious paintings at his studio, and in summers was out "in the field" decorating church interiors with new paint and his masterpieces on canvas.

In 1936 Fr. Herman Schleier, the pastor in Remsen, commissioned Walter to provide several paintings for St. Mary's Church. The centerpieces of the collection were two 16-foot-tall depictions of Jesus and Mary, and they were placed on the right and left of the high altar.

When facing the altar, to the left the viewer's eyes were graced by a stunning image of the Risen Christ holding in his left hand the banner with cross, proclaiming his victory over sin and death. Next to Christ an angel held the martyr's palm leaf, signifying Christ's life given up for all people.

On the right of the altar the viewer beheld our Blessed Mother, aloft in the clouds, carried up to heaven by delightful angels, their youthful faces magnificently adorned with happiness.



Joseph Walter's paintings are visible in this 1939 photo taken during Mass.

Thirty-one years later, in 1967, the parish undertook another complete re-painting of the church interior and the paintings were taken down. The parish committee for the redecoration decided not to re-hang the paintings, which were probably in need of restoration work. The artwork faded into obscurity until no one was really sure where the paintings were, or whether they even survived.

However, on Monday, November 9, Pete and Kathleen Scharff dropped off two rolled canvases, held together with plastic sealing wrap, at St. Mary's rectory. Later in the day, Deacon Rick Roder, who had heard that something was coming in, spotted the canvases. Unable to contain his curiosity and his suspicions as to what the canvases were, he took them into the rectory basement. Slowly and carefully unrolling them, he immediately recognized the Walter paintings from historical photographs! Ironically, one of the first people he found to share the news was Mary Riedemann, whose May 8, 1965, wedding had yielded one of the finest photos of the paintings.

Father Bill McCarthy immediately called for expert advice on the heirlooms and Deacon Roder contacted Penny Christensen, who restored four dilapidated paintings taken from

the old St. Joseph's Church in Le Mars and subsequently placed in the new church. Mrs. Christensen visited St. Mary's on November 23 and inspected the paintings. They are in restorable condition; however, each painting is missing about three feet on top and bottom. Mrs. Christensen can replicate these areas and bring the paintings back as close as possible to their original appearance. She took the paintings with her to her studio in Neola, Iowa, for proper storage and in case funds can be secured to contract her services. The project will be added to the parish "wish list" alongside the other needs and wishes of the parish.

Mr. and Mrs. Scharff happened to show up at the rectory on November 23 within minutes of Mrs. Christensen's arrival and related that the paintings had been given to Adel Stoffel, Pete Scharff's mother, by Father Richard Birdsall some 11 years or more after the paintings had been removed. The paintings remained in the family until Adel passed away recently and Mr. and Mrs. Scharff decided to return them to the parish.

Two very interesting historical ironies surfaced after the discovery of the paintings.

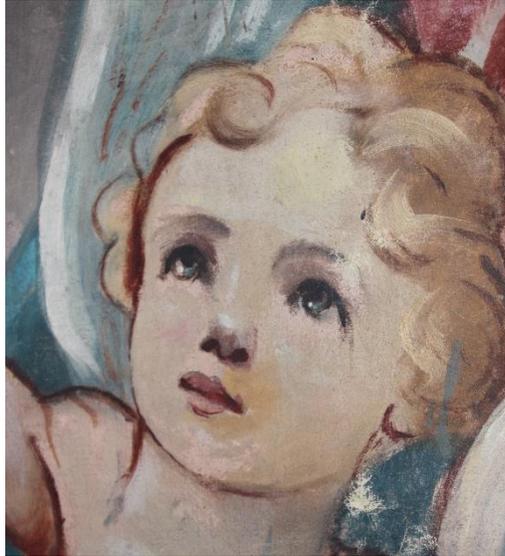
First, Joseph Walter was born in the Tyrolian district of Austria in 1865, which is precisely the area where St. Mary's Stations of the Cross were carved in the early 1900s. This provides a beautiful strand of continuity between the two collections of art; the Stations in wood and the paintings on canvas.

Second, Jerry Riehle was recently at St. Mary's as the parish discusses the possibility of another interior re-decoration of the church. Mr. Riehle's company is a renowned church decorator out of Cresco in Northeast Iowa. As he viewed the paintings, Mr. Riehle related that his grandfather worked for Joseph Walter for many years and learned the craft of church decoration from him.

Walter retired sometime during 1936, so St. Mary's paintings are treasured examples of his work late in his career, and the St. Mary's redecoration that year may likely have been his last large church redecoration project. The job was completed September 2, 1936.

Deacon Roder has attempted to contact the Friends of Joseph Walter historical group, which may or may not still exist. The Dubuque Museum Art is attempting to locate the group and will report its findings. The Museum was very interested to hear that the paintings were found.

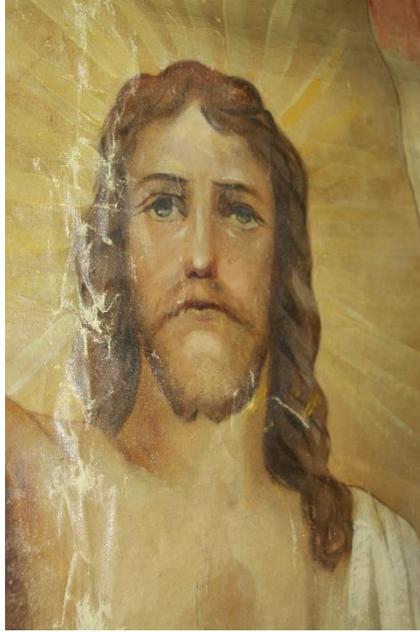
Below are some photos of the paintings, compliments of Krista Harpenau.



*Face of an Angel from the Ascension of Mary painting (photo by Krista Harpenau)*



*Ascension of Mary Painting by Joseph Walter (photo by Krista Harpenau)*



*Face of Jesus from Ascension of Christ painting (photo by Krista Harpenau)*



*Figure 1 Ascension of Christ by Joseph Walter (photo by Krista Harpenau)*

