

THE ROSEAU CATHEDRAL and a damaged Stained Glass window from the Sanctuary

by Bernard Lauwyck .

My discovery of two pieces of a badly damaged but beautiful stained glass window, depicting Our Lady of Immaculate Conception, in the attic of the Roseau presbytery prompted this article. This was the second of the four damaged windows that were removed from the Roseau Cathedral sanctuary in 1975 by Rev. Fr. Charles Vermeulen and replaced with the present flamboyant ones. The other two windows are all in small pieces.



ANNUNTATIO BEATAE MARIAE VIRGINIS

Notice the golden crown for the Queen of Heaven. Also notice the two white Lilies, symbolising Mary's purity and virginity. The feast of Our Lady of Fair Haven Cathedral parish is however the feast of the Assumption of Mary.

In the window below notice the 12 stars around Mary, which is based on Revelation 12 . *“A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.”*



Please feast your eyes on the beautiful decorative blue background and the blue mantle with golden order of Mary.

During the cathedral interior renovation in 1994, preceding Bishop Edward Gilbert's ordination, Monsignor William John Lewis, Dean of the Cathedral, changed the then existing colour scheme to blue, white and gold. This choice was an appropriate one as blue and white are the colours associated with the Virgin Mary and the 12 stars around her head are in gold.

More than 15 rolls of 2" wide gold leaf were used on the mouldings and capitals above the columns at the time. All this will be lost soon as the mouldings will be removed with the old timber roof. Also the stone arches, capitals and columns will be demolished to be replaced with reinforced concrete imitations. There is no possibility to salvage this gold leaf thin skin, which at the time was affordable, but now is prohibitively expensive, as gold prices on the world market have risen prohibitively.

It is my firm opinion that we should stick to this colour scheme at the end of the renovation works as white and blue are the colour of the Virgin Mary and gold is the colour for her golden crown and stars as can be seen on these windows. However I want to involve Mrs. Nancy Nassief in the final decision making when the time is upon us. She has helped us a lot with colour schemes in the past.

Blue was not always associated with the Virgin Mary. In medieval and Renaissance times, the colour blue became the established colour for the Virgin Mary. I want to provide you with some background history to appreciate this more:

In the Roman Empire imperial purple or Tyrian purple was the most expensive colour and as the production was tightly controlled. It was used exclusively by the imperial court. This make us understand the meaning in the gospel of Mark :

the passage of **Mark 15:17**

*“They put a **purple** robe on Jesus”*

Mark 15:20

*“When they had finished making fun of him, they took off the **purple** robe and put his own clothes back on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.”*

The dye was discovered much earlier by the Phoenicians and already in use in the time of Moses:

“Exodus 36:8

[*Making the Tent of the Lord's Presence*] *“the most skilled men among those doing the work made the Tent of the Lord's presence. They made it out of ten pieces of fine linen woven with blue, purple, and red wool and embroidered with figures of winged creatures.”*

The dye was produced after a lengthy process from a mucous secretion of sea snails. I could tell you more but this would lead us too far. It suffices to know that colours denoted status and in before modern times.

When Marco Polo (1254-1324), the famous Westerner traveller, returned home to Venice in the winter of 1295, after a journey through Asia which lasted 24 years, the western world became aware of the existence of the mines of Lapis Lazuli in Afghanistan. Lapis lazuli, a semi-precious stone, had been mined in Afghanistan for more than three thousand years, and was exported to all parts of the ancient world. In Egypt, it was used for the eyebrows on the funeral mask of King Tutankhamon (1341-1323 BC).



The cost of importing lapis lazuli by caravan across the desert from Afghanistan to Egypt was extremely high. About 2500 BC, the ancient Egyptians began to produce their own blue pigment known as Egyptian Blue, a colour to LAST FOR ETERNITY. This ancient recipe was lost to the world by AD 700. with many other ancient colour recipes and knowledge.

Piece of
Lapis lazuli.



With the travels of Marco Polo, a new expensive blue called ULTRAMARINE (Latin *ultramarinus*, literally "from beyond the sea") was added to the pallet of the Middle Ages' artists. From the 15th C on the Catholic Church decided as the major patron of the arts, to use it for the images of God's Mother. Blue became associated with her queenship, virtue and holiness. One of the reasons was that Ultramarine is a colour which had very expensive ingredient lapis lazuli and which took a great deal of skill and effort to prepare. Colours could not be bought from the shelves as it is today but had to be made by the artist, following recipes protected by the Guilds. Artists also found out that ultramarine is a far finer, superior and permanent colour with a brilliance no other blue could match. It was also a much darker blue. Artists used the pigment sparingly, reserving their highest quality blues for the robes of Mary.

The alternative later was pigments made from azurite, which were less expensive, but tended to turn dark and green with time. An example is the robe of the Virgin Mary in *The Madonna Enthroned with Saints* by Raphael. The Virgin Mary's azurite blue robe has degraded into a greenish-black

It might be interesting to know that the colour blue played no part in the architecture or decoration of churches in earlier ages. When the Abbé Suger rebuilt the Saint Denis Basilica in Paris between 1130 and 1140, he installed stained glass windows coloured with cobalt blue pigment, which, along with the red glass in the windows, filled the church with a bluish violet light. The church became the marvel of the Christian world, and the colour became known as the "bleu de Saint-Denis".

Later, the coat of arms of the Kings of France became an azure or light blue shield, sprinkled with golden fleur-de-lis or lilies. Blue had come from obscurity to become a royal colour.



Ultramarine is the most difficult pigment to grind by hand. In the beginning artists used egg-tempera as bonding agent but this was superseded by the use of oil later in the 16th Century.

The reader needs to realize, what art scholars have known for years, that nothing appears or is used in a religious painting, of that time, that was not carefully put there, after a lot of thought and study, to convey a deeper religious meaning. The Virgin Mary did not get a blue mantle by accident.