

# The Chatham Historical Journal

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From Pittsboro to Paris, 1876 - 1945

## Frank Marsden London, Artist

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### The Early Years: Pittsboro, 1876 - 1895

Frank Marsden London was born in Pittsboro, North Carolina, on May 9, 1876. He was one of the seven children of William Lord London and Caroline Haughton. At that time Pittsboro was a community of about 400 people who were recovering

from the devastation of the Civil War. Frank's grandmother, Mrs. Henry Adolphus London, described the late 1870's as the "hardest years in this state for everybody for reconstruction takes time."<sup>1</sup> Although some families were comfortable, bitter poverty existed, and everyone had to bear the emotional toll of war.

Frank London showed an early interest in art and design. One of the ways this interest was manifested was in a desire to make doll clothes, a hobby that probably made him seem strange and separate from his peers. His artistic inclination may have been encouraged by his mother, who had shown promise as a painter in her earlier years. While a student at St. Mary's College in Raleigh, she painted several canvasses which are still in the possession of the London family. Her choice of subject matter is unusual and her style of painting is untutored, but her talent is evident. It is possible that Caroline Haughton London's unfulfilled artistic ambition revealed itself in encouraging her son to pursue his interest in art and design.

While a youngster in Pittsboro, Frank attended St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church and served as an altar boy. His early education took place at church, at home, and at the Pittsboro Scientific Academy. In 1893 he entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he remained until 1895. While at the university, Frank grew flowers in a dormitory window box, for which he was chided by the school newspaper. This anecdote reveals the artistic and independent nature that was the core of Frank London. It also reveals, perhaps, an inheritance received from his grandfather, Henry Adolphus London. H. A. London was remembered as a "lover of nature," responsible for "ever keeping flowers on the altar" of St. Bartholomew's while he "beautified the churchyard with trees, shrubs, and many box bushes."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the flowers Frank



*Frank Marsden London and Augusta Johnson London, Woodstock, N.Y., c. 1940 (Photo courtesy of Dr. Lawrence London)*

grew under a dorm window were a link to his past, as well as an effort to surround himself with beauty and color. The love of the beautiful and unusual and a strong sense of color would later become Frank London hallmarks.

In this age of supersonic jets, it is difficult to imagine the trip between Chapel Hill and Pittsboro as demanding. Yet in 1893 London traveled three hours to cover this 18-mile distance by horseback or carriage. Frank London did not go home often, and after he left for New York in 1895, he never lived in the South again. He left Chapel Hill in the fall to study at the Pratt Institute of Art in Brooklyn, New York. He was nineteen years old and had never ventured farther than Wilmington, North Carolina. He boarded a train for Norfolk, then took a boat to New York. Because outlets for art had not been developed in the South at this time, this journey northward must have proven a liberating experience for a young man who lived and breathed art.

### **Artistry and Versatility New York, 1895 - 1923**

Frank was fortunate to have art studies financed by his family. The London men were prominent Southerners, Confederate veterans, and businessmen, and it was remarkable that his family supported both Frank's artistic pursuits and his choice of further schooling in the North. That he was able to get this support was due to his obvious and considerable talent, his ambition to explore this talent, his father's good-natured temperament, and, most likely, his mother's determination to nurture her son's artistic growth. Letters home during this period tell of his excitement "living the life art offers" as, for example, frequenting the theater. He took a room in Brooklyn, purchased a bicycle, and wrote his family, "I don't have to go far to be in the country." Brother Arthur visited Frank in New York during this time, reporting back to his family,

"Frank is doing well and knows just about everybody."<sup>3</sup> Apparently Frank's sense of humor, great sense of fun, and his "Southern way" of easily establishing friendly relationships must have eased the transition from home and things familiar.

After studies at the Pratt Institute, Frank became a student at the William Merritt Chase School of Art (later named the New York School of Art). William Chase (1849-1916) was a rare example of a great artist who was also a great teacher. "His [Chase's] fame and influence as both an artist and teacher were internationally acknowledged. He was a master technician but more important, he was a brilliant artist who set out to establish a distinctive American art statement."<sup>4</sup> Chase's repertoire included landscapes, still lifes, portraits, figure studies, and interiors, subjects that Frank later developed in his own work.

During the period from 1904 to 1923, Frank London became an artistic and business success, and he married and fathered two children. He was a partner in the firm Montague Castle-London Company. While associated with this firm, he designed textiles, stained glass windows, and ecclesiastical objects. His versatility as a designer extended to interior design for clients like the Vanderbilts. He also produced the annual Skinner Satin Company's display at Grand Central Palace in New York City. Frank London inherited business acumen from his father and was successful in real estate investments as well as in design work. He bought several brownstone houses on New York City's East Side, renovated them, and turned them into rental properties. The rentals provided income so that he could later devote full-time attention to painting.

Montague Castle-London Company specialized in 13th-century stained glass. While a partner in this company, Frank London made several trips to Europe to research glass in French, English, and Spanish cathedrals. Numerous sketch books from these trips still exist. During a return trip, Frank met Miss Augusta Johnson, who was also an artist. Her lively and gracious manner must have captivated him, for they married in 1908. She gave up her art career following her marriage to Frank. In 1910 Augusta London gave birth to their daughter, Caroline, named for Frank's mother. In September 1914 Augusta gave birth to their son, Marsden. In the midst of their happiness, tragedy struck when Caroline died of pneumonia in December of 1914. Following Caroline's death, Frank, accompanied by Augusta and Marsden, returned home to family in Pittsboro, calling on an important source of strength to cope with his daughter's death. Another source

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of strength, as well as a vehicle for expression of his deepest pain, was his art. While visiting in Pittsboro, Frank and Augusta together drew a pastel of Caroline, a healing gesture for two artists grieving the loss of their child. This picture remains in the family collection.

### Stained Glass Window Design

Although Frank London was involved in several different areas of design during the years 1904-1923, this period is significant particularly for his stained glass work. His most widely known design is the altar window in St. Savior's (Belmont) Chapel of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. The other known work is the clock face on the south elevation of Grand Central Station. Marsden London recalls a trip with his father to Ossining, New York, to look at a church window his father had designed there. However, this window has not yet been identified and located. In addition to these, London designed windows for three churches in New Jersey: Grace Episcopal (now Church of the Epiphany), Christ Episcopal, and Central Brick Presbyterian. Because business records from Montague Castle-London Company have been lost, locating and documenting Frank London's stained glass works have proven to be difficult tasks.

In North Carolina, four stained glass windows have been attributed to Frank London. Two windows are located in St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, another in the Pittsboro United Methodist Church, and the fourth in the Church of the Good Shepherd in Raleigh.

The two windows designed by Frank London in St. Bartholomew's are known as "St. Cecilia" and "Well Done Good and Faithful Servant." "St. Cecilia" was designed as a memorial to Frank's aunt, Anne Mauger Haughton (July 1835 to February 16, 1916). Mrs. Haughton was an organist at the church for 66 years. Appropriately, St. Cecilia is the patron saint of music and the window overlooks the organist. The St. Cecilia window was made by Hardman Company of Birmingham, England, and is executed in a 13th-century mosaic pattern. It is the most valuable window at Saint Bartholomew's because this mosaic technique is labor-intensive.

"Well Done Good and Faithful Servant" was designed as a memorial to Frank's father, William Lord London (April 3, 1838 to November 30, 1916). The window is located in the center of the east wall and depicts a soldier kneeling to receive Christ's blessing. William Lord London was a captain in the North Carolina Troops of the Confederate States Army. He was wounded three times in battle and, in 1863, was promoted first to Inspector-General,

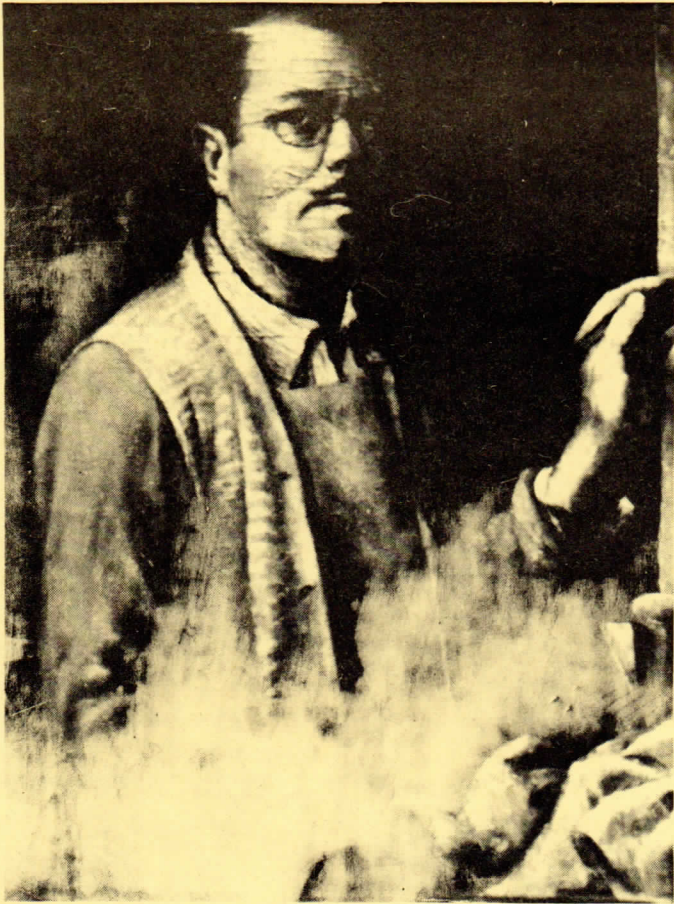
then Adjutant-General of his brigade in recognition of his "skill and gallantry" at Gettysburg.<sup>5</sup> He was a trusted citizen of Pittsboro, a generous benefactor to many causes, a vestryman at St. Bartholomew's Church for 47 years, and senior warden from 1881 until his death in 1916.

The detail and color in both windows is rich, particularly on the robes. The figures are framed by arches and angels, a Victorian technique used to create the sense of the figures being on an easel. The most striking feature of the William Lord London window is the gesture and expression of the soldier receiving Christ's blessing. The spirit of Christ is embodied in the humble devotion of the kneeling soldier and the outstretched hand of Christ. The ability of Frank London to capture this quality surely must be the outcome of a religious temperament, that is, the capacity to feel deeply the significance of the moment and, by instinct, be able to translate the spiritual into human experience. We sense in his letters a deep devotion to the church, and we see this attachment in his stained glass work.

**Four stained glass windows attributed to Frank London are located in North Carolina, of which three are in Chatham County.**

Of the three windows in Pittsboro designed by Frank London, the window at the Pittsboro United Methodist Church is the most poignant. The window was designed for Octavia Daub Alston (November 15, 1870 to January 18, 1914).<sup>6</sup> Octavia Daub married Captain James F. Alston, who came to Pittsboro from Littleton, North Carolina. He was associated with the railroad when it was an important economic force. The Alstons and Londons were lifelong friends, so when Captain Alston wanted a memorial window for his wife, he contacted Frank London to do the work. The Alstons, like the Londons, had lost a child at an early age, and Frank London designed a window called "Jesus Healing Child." This window was designed and installed sometime between 1914 and 1920.

In this window the mother figure is on bended knee, offering her sick child to Christ. Christ is inclined toward the child, holding a limp, outstretched arm. His other hand rests lightly on the child's head. There are three figures behind the mother; two are looking at Christ and the third gazes, prayerfully, toward heaven. There is a



Self-portrait, 1931. Oil on canvas, 30 1/2" x 45"

(Photo courtesy of Dr. Lawrence London)

member of the Church of the Good Shepherd. The window portrays Christ as the "Good Shepherd" and is a much larger work than his other North Carolina windows. Mrs. Ward's history describes the window:

*Christ stands in the middle of the window in the midst of the power and the glory. The Chi Rho and the Chi Rho Nike in each of the upper corners proclaim Christ is victorious. The roses are a symbol of victory and triumphant love. The window design also contains the Chalice, Crown, tree and water, all meaningful Christian symbols. Nine angels encircle the Crown symbolizing a glory of Angels and at the same time, the personification of intelligence and power.<sup>7</sup>*

This window portrays Christ in Glory. There is no reference to His work in the rough glow of human company or to the pain and degradation at His end. This is a high world, the Heavenly Kingdom in which everything that was promised has come true. Upon closer examination, the face of Christ draws our attention. Christ looks out from the radiant wall with a sensitive Jewish beauty, a fine brow, and a level gaze. This is a face that might have been found in the work of Renaissance painters who derived much of their tradition from early mosaics.

*(This is the first part of a two-part article.)*

#### NOTES

1. Rev. R. B. Shannonhouse, *History of St. Bartholomew's Parish 1833-1933* (June 1, 1933), p. 11.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

3. Personal interview with Dr. Lawrence London, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, October, 1991.

4. Ronald G. Pisano, *William Merritt Chase* (Watson-Guptill Publications, 1979), pp. 13-14.

5. Dr. Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., "London, William Lord," Chatham County Historical Association files, Pittsboro Memorial Library, Pittsboro, North Carolina, [p. 1].

6. Octavia Daub Alston was the granddaughter of Peter Daub, one of the first Methodist circuit riders. He was a professor of Biblical literature at Trinity College (now Duke University) and the founder of Greensboro College. [Personal communication from Mrs. John C. Lemay, Durham, N.C.]

7. Mrs. Clyde Ward, *Therefore with Angels and Archangels: The Church of the Good Shepherd, 1874-1974* (February 1974), pp. 211-212.

*[The authors are deeply indebted to many individuals for help in preparing this article. A full listing of sources will appear at the end of the second part of this article.]*

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solemn, serious naturalism in the grouping of the figures; the gravity of the situation has been comprehended. The pose and gesture of each figure has embodied the role of Christ as a miracle worker. In this window, we feel that Frank London has abandoned theatrical grandeur and rhetoric and brings us to this scene as shaken observers. Here he identifies human life with divine tragedy and raises it to a level of experience we all have shared.

A fourth window attributed to Frank London is above the altar in the Church of the Good Shepherd in Raleigh. Mrs. Willford Claiborne Reed, the former Harriet McGee, gave the window and altar in memory of her husband (1857 to 1907). Harriet McGee was the daughter of a McGee family that lived on Hillsborough Street and attended the church. When she married Willford Claiborne Reed, Harriet left Raleigh and lived abroad with him for many years. She returned after his death and made these gifts to the Church of the Good Shepherd.

According to Mrs. Clyde Ward's history, "no written record can be found concerning the acquisition, design and installation of this window." However, London family history provides that Frank London designed the window. In 1910 Frank was traveling in North Carolina drumming up business and may have made a connection with Mrs. Mrs. Reed through his cousin, H. M. London, a