STAINED GLASS
BY JOHN LA FARGE

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The third quarter of the nineteenth century stands out as a dark era in our national history, overshadowed by the gathering clouds of the Civil War, the devastation of the war itself, and the bitterness that followed it. The taste of the time added its own peculiar gloom in that heyday of the brownstone front and the untouchable parlor dressed in black walnut and haircloth, cast-iron gaselier, and wax fruit. And it was not only creative but destructive. As if to balance the dubious contributions of those years many famous early build-

ings were pulled down needlessly, among them Thomas Hancock’s house in Boston, the State Capitol in New Haven, Mount Pleasant (James Beekman’s house) in New York, and William Penn’s Slate Roof House in Philadelphia.

With this background John La Farge, painter, illustrator, designer, and writer began a long career that became a strong influence in the revival of sound craftsmanship in the decorative arts. His contemporaries Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins, Albert Ryder, and Ralph Blakelock perhaps now enjoy greater esteem as painters, but no one approaches La Farge as a master in stained glass. Hundreds of his windows in churches, public buildings, and private houses are easily recognized by their extraordinarily vibrant color and powerful design as well as their original method of fabrication. His travels in the Orient and the South Seas, his early studies of the windows in Gothic cathedrals in France, and the work of the Pre-Raphaelite group in England made a lasting impression upon him and fixed his determination to express his own ideas.

Impatient with the materials then available, La Farge became a pioneer in new ways and means, inventing his characteristic opaline glass, introducing molded glass for varied textures, plating several layers of glass for more subtle tones, and fusing small pieces of varied colors to secure sparkling surfaces without leads. He used cabochons as jewel-like accents and sometimes smuggled in amethyst and other semi-precious stones for extra brilliance, as in his Battle Window in Memorial Hall at Harvard University.

La Farge often repeated certain subjects with minor variations, such as the Peacock, and the Peonies in the Wind. A large window given anonymously to the Museum last year

Drawing for the figure of Welcome, by John La Farge. Anonymous Gift, 1945
Peacock window by John La Farge. In the Worcester Art Museum

is unique. As it is not mentioned in the numerous publications about La Farge, it is worth having the artist's own opinion of it from a letter written in 1909:

"Tuesday aft

"Dear Mrs.---

"Your letter is a great pleasure. I ought to tell you that I saw the window without telling any one and that I think it the finest piece of glass ever made. It is as fine as the Peacock one on another key. I am proud of it beyond what I can express. And you have been very kind.

"I shall invite people as may best turn out. Next week Mr. Wright places the window and you will kindly let him and me know you are back as convenient to you or one of us. I suppose however that Mr. Wright will be on the watch.

"Sincerely yours,

John LaFarge"

The central theme of the window takes its name of "Welcome" from a woman's figure standing between parted draperies of oriental design, a figure "well formed, calm, stately," often used in his paintings and murals. Her easy grace, like that of other figures by La Farge, shows the influence of Dr. William Rimmer, the sculptor anatomist who was his friend and guide. The arabesque panels that form the borders are executed in paler tones with an opalescent background to accent the rich red, blue, and green of the central theme.

The work of John La Farge is out of fashion now, but because of his unique contribution in stained glass, he will maintain his place in the history of American art. He created an American style with his new technique and his knowledge of the science of color. A photograph in black and white can indicate only faintly the artist's accomplishment in this medium.

The window is 13 feet high and 8 feet wide; it has been installed in Gallery L 3 at the entrance to the American Wing. This is an appropriate beginning to the collection of other kinds of American glass now in the adjoining galleries. Two cases of favrile glass by Louis Comfort Tiffany and contemporary glass by Steuben and other companies have also been put on display to supplement the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century blown and molded glass and pressed glass from Sandwich and Pittsburgh.