An up-close, personal look at the 12th Golden Dome regilding
The heart of Notre Dame: The history of the Main Building tells the story of the University

By Brendan D’Oliveira, Special Contributor

Note from the Editor: Jane Libert, Director of External Communications

The collection of breathtaking photos captured during the 125th anniversary of the most recognizable structure on campus, Notre Dame’s Main Building, is one that unexpectedly touched my heart. You’d see it in this issue, and it shows the dedicated application of gold to the building’s facade. The main building is the heart of the campus, the hub of university life. This story— one you can hold in your hand— helps you understand the story of the University.

The heart of Notre Dame is the Main Building.

The history of the Main Building tells the story of the University.
**By Jessica Sieff, Notre Dame**

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A woman clothed with the sun

By Carrie Gates, Museum Curator

Looking up at the newly regilded statue of Mary atop the Main Building, gazing gold in the afternoon light, it is not difficult to imagine her as the woman who appears in Revelation, “clothed with the sun’s” might.

And that is the worshipper Geovanni. Melti intended, according toRobin Jensen, the Patrick O’Brian Professor of Theology and an expert in early Christian art and depictions of Mary.

In the Book of Revelation, chap- ter 12, the prophet John the Evan- gelist describes a vision of a woman clothed with the sun and alarmed with stars—a woman soon to give birth to a son who is destined to rule all nations and who will be caught up to God and his throne.

In the Christian tradition, she is identified as Mary, the mother of Jesus. John goes on in chapter 12 to describe how the woman accompa- nies a great dragon—or an ancient serpent—representing Satan, who seeks to destroy her son and wage war against all who keep God’s commands.

“You can see that our statue of Mary is standing on a half globe, with a crescent moon and a serpent under her foot,” Jensen said. “This is a very traditional iconography of Mary as the woman in Rev- elation, where having the serpent under her feet symbolizes victory over evil.”

The chapter provides an inter- esting counterbalance to the story of Jesus.

“Here you have this figure of Eve”—a tradition that began in Christianity as early as the second century A.D.

“It’s kind of wonderful because these two stories really bookend Christianity as early as the second century A.D.,” Jensen said, referring to Genesis 3. “In the Old Testament, after sin is committed, Eve is the one who brings the son to God. When we see the pattern of Eve in the Gospels, we see the pattern of Mary. So, you can connect all these dots.”

While artists often depict Mary as a mother with the infant Jesus in her arms, Jensen noted that this iconographic similarity is the same to the statue of Mary in the Greco, when she appears under her title, the Immac- ulate Conception.

Revolution 12:1

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.

For Jensen, who studies the importance of context in viewing sacred art, it is also interesting to see such a statue atop an administrative building rather than a church.

“I love the feeling that making the people stumbled. Notre Dame who sees the streets of Mary on the Golden Dome was just a decoration within the campus,” Jensen said. “And it is a tradition that it is not on the Basilica, but on the Main Building. It is really very important. It means it moves away from just being a simple church statue onto something that has become our emblem. In a way, she has become the guard- ian of our entire campus. She’s the one who looks over us and prays for us—and I think that feeling."

GOLD: a cosmic collision between neutron stars

According to the statement of the American Chemical Society, “The nuclear reactions, forming neutron-heavy metals in the core of a supernova, set off a chain of events that have created gold, even in our solar system.”

The major deposits of gold are formed in the Earth’s crust, especially in geothermal areas, where high temperatures and pressures create conditions that favor the formation of gold. Additional gold is also found in secondary deposits, such as placer deposits, where gold is concentrated in alluvial sediments.

Gold is a highly reactive element that can form multiple compounds, including gold compounds such as gold(I) chloride, gold(III) chloride, and gold(I) nitrate.

Gold is a dense, malleable, and ductile metal that is highly valued for its lustrous appearance and its inertness to many chemical agents. It is widely used in jewelry, coinage, and other applications where its unique properties are desired.

Gold is also used in the production of electronic devices, including microprocessors andsemiconductors, because its high melting point and thermal stability make it suitable for high-temperature applications.

Gold's unique properties make it an ideal material for a variety of applications, including electronics, jewelry, and medicine. Its rarity and high value make it a valuable resource for the world’s economies, and efforts to conserve and manage gold resources are ongoing.
As good as gold: Tony Polotto—the man in charge of the regilding

By Natalie Davis Miller, in charge of the regilding

It was hard to miss the big to-do around the Main Dome and statue of Mary signalled a regilding—the act of bringing back the luster and beauty of the iconic architecture known the world over. For many on campus, witnessing this process for the first time was a truly memorable experience. And for Tony Polotto, the senior director for Public Affairs, it was an opportunity to make that happen.

Plootto set the tone for what would be his second successful gilding. But the Main Building, I can say has been my favorite project out of my career. Plootto has 33 years of experience in construction—working with contractors, developing relationships, working with quality assurance and making sure the final product is what it needs to be. But the everyday work and developing relationships on campus that are meaningful for Plootto.

“The people are amazing, I wouldn’t hesitate to pick up the phone and call anybody on this campus at any hour and expect a warm greeting and helpfulness. It makes your job,” Polotto said of the work—ers involved with the process. “We have measures in place to make it a success. Did we meet the budget? Are we on time? Was it done safely? And is the quality of the final product what we were after? Those questions are the barometer for success.

Plootto described the 2005 renovation as a learning process. The questions he had then were equally appropriate now: “Is it an experience of what do we have to be concerned about that nobody’s ever thought about before? The scaffolding in all of its complexity. We have to do a structural analysis on the building. How can we know the building is the building take the load? How is it going to be engineered and built, so we can account all of the tower and the actual Dome and the statue of Mary?”

The scaffolding went up in May, and did the gilding and the repair. Plootto office made a daily inspection of the scaffolding systems,” he explained. "It was an experience of what do we have to be concerned about that nobody’s ever thought about before? The scaffolding in all of its complexity. We have to do a structural analysis on the building. How can we know the building is the building take the load? How is it going to be engineered and built, so we can account all of the tower and the actual Dome and the statue of Mary?”

The scaffolding went up in May, and as soon as the students left cam-pus. Plootto office made a daily inspection of the scaffolding systems, followed up and designed months before it was needed. This was a far cry from how it was done in the past. “What’s been interesting is if you see any historic photos of the Main Building, the people that took care of this building generations ago literally climbed on scaffolding at the base of the statue and the gilding, and the repair work off of steps existing from the inside of the structure. That would never fly today. And that’s why we have the complicated scaffolding systems,” he explained.

"I would say with the painting and the gilding itself, it’s not just the expertise, it’s passion for your job,” Polotto said of the work—ers involved with the process. “We have one shot for doing this right, and if we’re going to take it, it’s going to do right. Those people care about what they’re doing. They’re passionate about their work."

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“Grand Schmitt Studios, the group that did the last regilding, as well as others project on campus, has worked with the father, son, and daughter and granddaughter in the Schmitt family, and in a manner of sorts, other members of the team for this regilding. This includes the foreman from the 2005 regilding, who was the project man—ager for the go-round. The only new player were the painters, work—ing on beautifying the tower below the Dome."

Workers used rolls of gold leaf, thinner than a strand of hair. It was adhered to the statue and Dome using first a primer or size, and then glue. The gold was rolled on and rubbed in with a cotton glove. “It looks like an automobile finish,” Polotto said. “When it’s done, you can’t see any seams or any imper—forations in the gold at all. It almost looks like a typical finish.”

From start to finish, the con—struction took five months, including the five weeks to turn the scaffolding and the four weeks to take it down.

Measuring success

For Plootto, success with just the final project. It’s also the process, including protecting pedestrians, veterans, faculty staff and workers in general.

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Prior to commencing the regilding itself, a team of workers meticulously erected scaffolding from the ground up, spanning a height of about 200 feet. The construction process took approximately six weeks to complete.

While the regilding project was a considerable undertaking, a relatively small team was assembled to complete the intricate work. Fewer than two dozen people were involved in the process, including preparations, repairs, painting, and application of the gold leaf.

From beginning to end

Telling the story of the 2023 regilding was an intra-divisional effort. Teams from the Office of Public Affairs and Communications, including the departments of Brand Content, Internal Communications, Media Relations and ND Creative, each contributed their talents, whether in direction, writing, photography, videography, brainstorming or managing the multifaceted project.

Behind the scenes

Watch videos, browse photo galleries and read more about the regild online.

Brittany Kaufman, editor/proofer
Tony Polotto, senior director of construction; Natalie Davis Miller, managing editor, NDWorks; and Tony Fuller, senior videographer/editor

Kristi Flaherty, associate director, Brand Content

Barbara Johnston, University photographer

Nevin McElwrath, media designer
Zach Dudka, creative director, video content

Matt Cashore, senior University photographer

Elissa Chudzicki, senior graphic designer

Back row, standing, left to right: Andy Fuller, Jennifer Laiber, Brendan O'Shaughnessy, Dennis Brown, Jenna Liberto, Nevin McElwrath, Zach Dudka, Beth Shrewsberry, Carrie Green, Megan Burns-White, Meg Ryan, Erin Spinetta, Michael Rinehart; photo credit: Matt Cashore, June 2023. Tony Fuller, Liv Steele, Kristie Parker, Tony Parke, Jillian Blanchard, Matt Cashore, Michael Rinehart, and Shrewsberry.

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Not pictured: Amy Bladow, Toni Murphy, Shannon Kohle, Jessica Steff and Brandon Wiegels