

Bringing Cleve Gray's *Threnody* to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine



Rendering of Cleve Gray's Threnody at St. John the Divine

Cleve Gray's *Threnody* was commissioned for the opening of the Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase in 1973. Amongst the most important mural series in post-war American art, it represented the artist's response to the tragedy of the Vietnam War and the loss of life on both sides of that conflict. As we approach the 50th anniversary of the completion of *Threnody* we reflect on its importance and lasting relevance today.

Remarking on the cavernous space assigned him, Gray stated:

"I thought of the room as a cathedral: the central axis as the nave, the two doors corresponding to transepts, the black wall as the west wall...and the red wall as the apse. From the realization that the depiction of tragedy often requires an element of hope, I have chosen a positive red for the central figure of the "apse" wall. Unexpectedly but inevitably, this figure became the focal point of the room. In the midst of death, it had to offer hope, just as blood is both the palpitating fluid of life and fleeting evidence of death."

Overwhelming in both their scale and emotive power, Gray's accomplishment resulted in one of the most successful unions of art and architecture in the country.

An initiative to bring the *Threnody* murals to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City is underway for 2021. The Cathedral, a sacred architectural landmark, is renowned for presenting significant works at the intersection of art, faith, and the struggle for human rights.

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