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2020

## Prep Dorm Mystery on the Forest Floor: Bak

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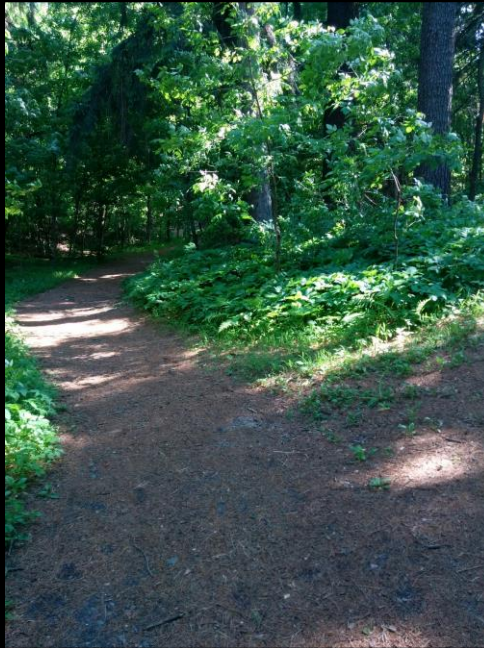
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SJP's  
Mystery  
on the  
Forest  
Floor



2019 06 12 photo by the archivist

Let's take a  
virtual tour in  
the nearby  
woods:



2019 06 12 photo by the archivist



2019 06 12 photo by the archivist



2019 06 12 photo by the archivist



2019 06 12 photo by the archivist



2019 06 12 photo by the archivist



2019 06 12 photo by the archivist





2019 06 12 photo by the archivist IMG\_20190612\_165008





2019 06 12 photo by the archivist



IMG\_0404 from Bob Ellenbecker 2019

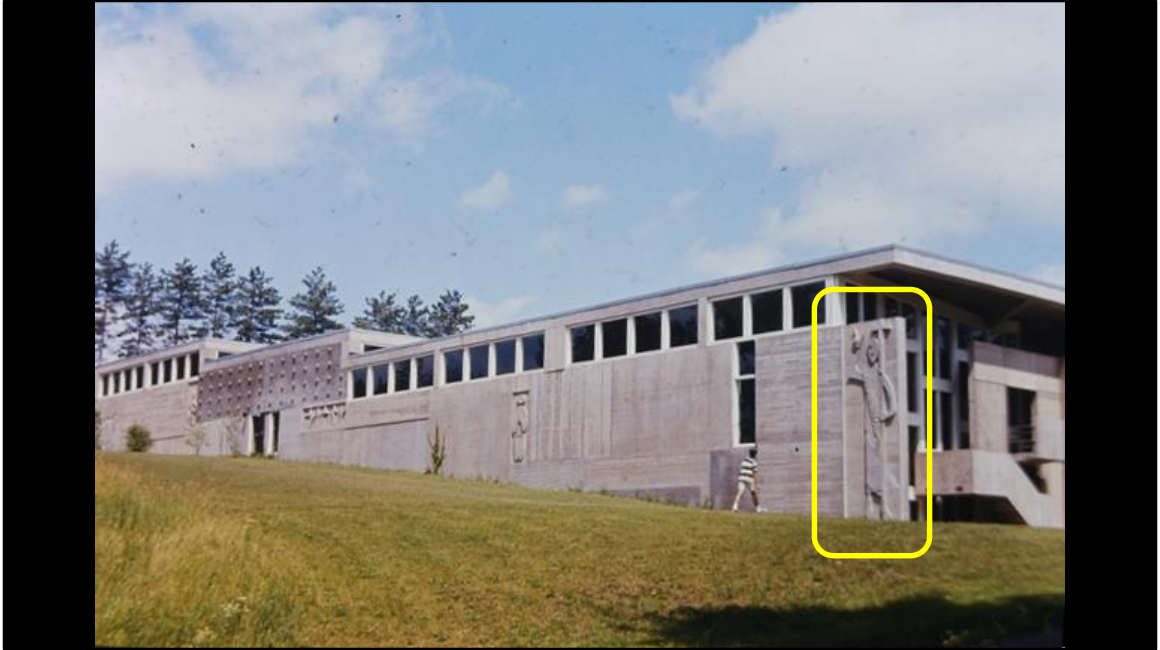


2019 06 12 photo by the archivist

Now let's  
take  
another  
quick  
tour:



Prep School Construction- Walls Almost Done 1962 April 1962 from SJAA

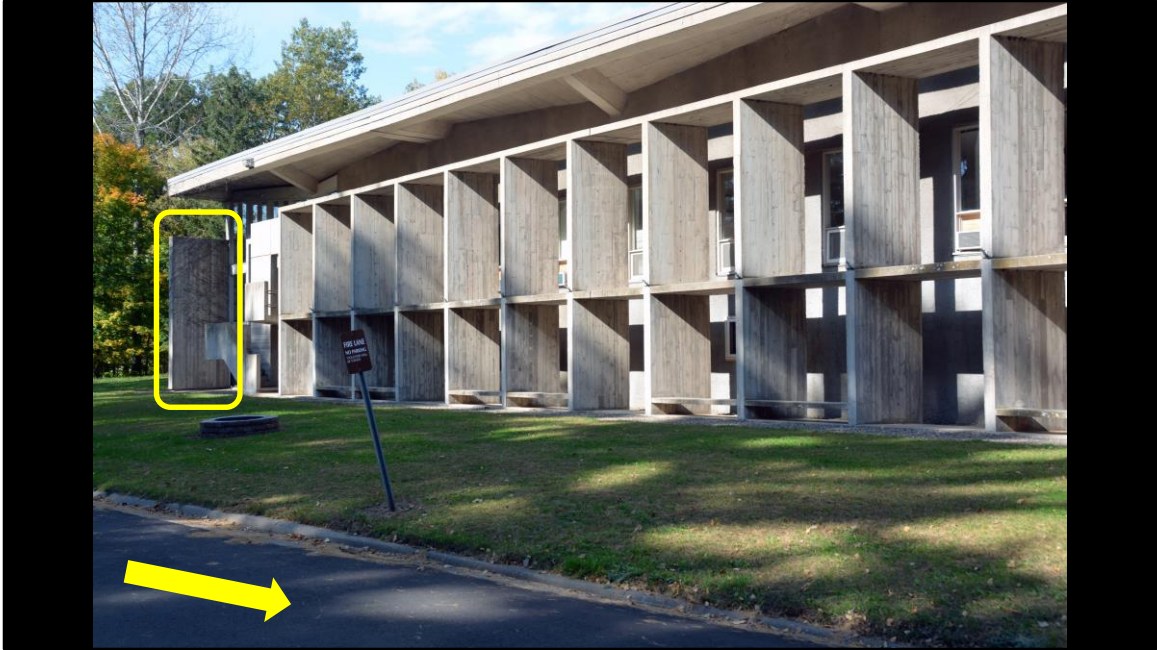


2016 Dell Upton UCLA photo, Dormitory



2016 Dell Upton UCLA photo, Dormitory  
Inset: 2016 Dell Upton UCLA photo, Dormitory\_3867





2016 Dell Upton UCLA photo, Dormitory\_3870



2016 Dell Upton UCLA photo, Dormitory\_3872

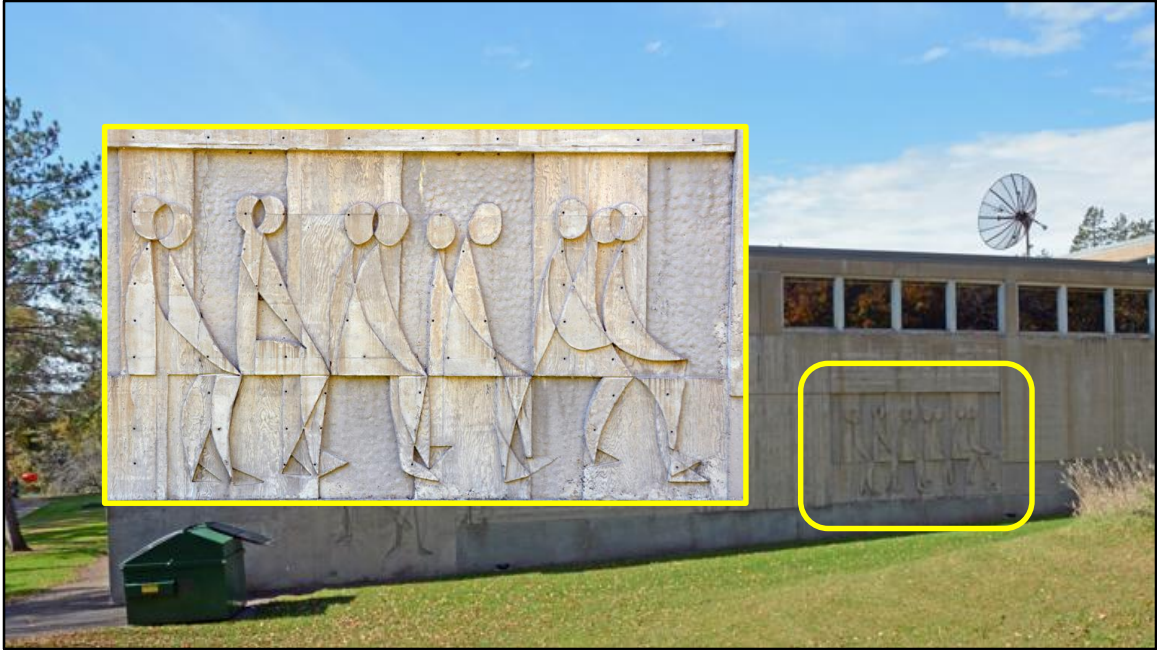


2016 Dell Upton UCLA photo, Dormitory\_3876



2016 Dell Upton UCLA photo, Dormitory\_3876

Inset: 2019 06 12 photo by the archivist IMG\_20190612\_164425



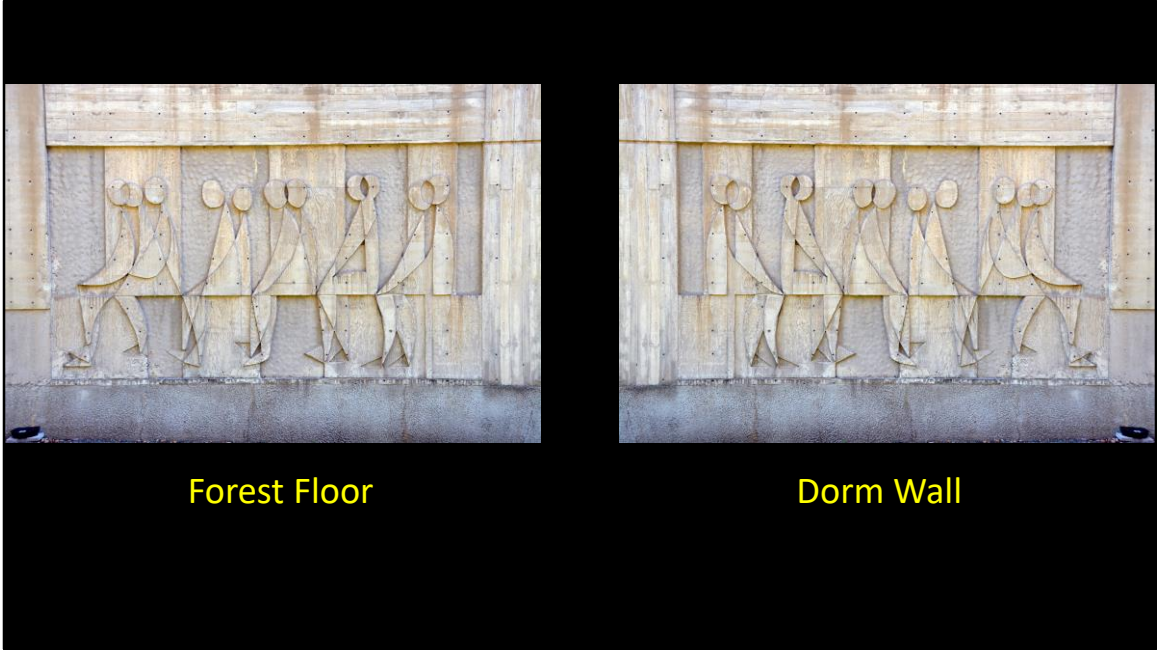
2016 Dell Upton UCLA photo, Dormitory\_3876  
Inset: 2016 Dell Upton UCLA photo, Dormitory\_3879



2016 Dell Upton UCLA photo, Dormitory\_3879



2019 06 12 photo by the archivist



2016 Dell Upton UCLA photo, Dormitory\_3879a FLIPPED



One other  
bit of  
evidence,  
from the  
Abbey  
Archives:  
an old photo

*...but was  
the photo  
inverted??*



Prep School Exterior- Art Piece Outside April 1962 from Abbey Archives - FLIPPED;  
***not sure of original orientation.***

Here's where our Executive Director of Public Relations Michael Hemmesch comes into the story...



Last summer Michael copied me on a reply to an email from '59 alum Joe Casey about a possible donation to the Archives. In it, Joe mentioned he "had been a long-time friend of Bruno Bak...I still keep in touch with his son, Clemens...I have forwarded some [things] to him... especially related to the church window and exterior reliefs at the Prep School, which Bruno designed."



Hemmesch photo from online campus directory. Bak photo from O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Images\People

So I asked Joe for Clemens Bak's contact information, which he sent, and we emailed:

**From:** Roske, Peggy  
**Sent:** Monday, June 10, 2019 12:55 PM  
**To:** 'info@bakart-museum.org' <info@bakart-museum.org>  
**Subject:** To solve a mystery at St. John's Prep in Collegeville, MN

Dear Mr. Bak,

I am the archivist for St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota, and took note when Mr. Joseph Casey for mentioned you in an email (below). I am hoping that you may be able to solve something that has been a mystery (at least to me) on the St. John's campus – something to which I have been unable to find an answer in the Archives nor in conversations with those who were around back when the Prep School dorm was constructed. Several people have asked me about this, and I have not been able to give them what I would consider a satisfactory answer.

**From:** Clemens Bak <crbakdesign@yahoo.com>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, June 11, 2019 7:22 PM  
**To:** Roske, Peggy <PROSKE@CSBSJU.EDU>  
**Cc:** Joseph Casey <jlcasey@frii.com>  
**Subject:** Re: To solve a mystery at St. John's Prep in Collegeville, MN

Hello Peggy,

I got your email over the weekend, this is the first opportunity I've had to respond. I do not have first hand knowledge of the panel you asked about, since I was quite young in those days. Much of my information for the book came from a series of interviews and recordings I did with my mother a number of years ago. She has since passed away. I do know that my father worked with Mr. Ted Hofmeyer, who was the concrete expert on both the church and the prep school project. Perhaps you might find some first source material in his files? I couldn't tell from your photo of the image in the woods, but it would be interesting to see if it differed in anyway from the similar panel on the wall. If so that might indicate a design change. Also consider if it may have been flawed or damaged.

“I couldn't tell from your photo of the image in the woods, but it would be interesting to see if it differed in anyway from the similar panel on the wall. If so, that might indicate a design change. Also consider if it may have been flawed or damaged.”

**From:** Roske, Peggy  
**Sent:** Friday, June 14, 2019 2:12 PM  
**To:** 'Clemens Bak' <crbakdesign@yahoo.com>  
**Subject:** RE: To solve a mystery at St. John's Prep in Collegeville, MN

Hi, Clemens.

I ventured into the woods near SJP Wednesday afternoon to get some photos of the "mystery" sculpture in situ. My photos didn't turn out very well, because the mottled sunshine coming through the trees make it difficult to see the sculpture. It is more clear in the photo I sent earlier.

To facilitate comparisons, I have attached both the previous one and one I took, plus one on file here showing the actual sculpture as it looks on the wall of the dorm – except that I have "flipped" the latter. I did that because the major difference between the discarded and installed versions are that the figures in the final version are facing to the right, while the figures on the forest floor version are facing to the left.

I don't know enough about the construction/casting of the relief to know if producing a "mirror image" would have been part of the process? Or did someone decide that it was better, artistically, for the figures to face right (up the hill) rather than left?

Thus it continues to be a mystery, but if seeing these images – and knowing what you know about the process – gives you any insight, I'd be happy to hear of it.

Thanks!


Peggy

"I don't know enough about the construction/casting of the relief to know if producing a 'mirror image' would have been part of the process?"


“This would have to be the first experimental panel that for whatever reason was also an exception to the design plan for the building...”

That was not an error that would have been repeated. It could very likely have been a miscommunication between the design team and the carpentry crew...”

Re: To solve a mystery at St. John's Prep in Collegeville, MN

 Clemens Bak <crbakdesign@yahoo.com>  
To: Roske, Peggy

Retention Policy: Never Delete (Never) Expires: Never

 You forwarded this message on 6/18/2019 12:47 PM.

Reply Reply All Forward

Fri 6/14/2019 9:54 PM

Hi Peggy,

Congratulations! It appears you solved the mystery. This would have to be the first experimental panel that for whatever reason was also an exception to the design plan for the building. That was not an error that would have been repeated. It could very likely have been a miscommunication between the design team and the carpentry crew. It is easy to confuse the orientation of a relief object where the final product is the actual impression. I see that frequently in printmaking classes I teach. In fact the entire concept of these relief sculptures came from the woodcut graphics my father carved, in particular his illustrations of the Pardoner's tale from the Canterbury Tales. Of course the error if it was, also provided for an opportunity to test the concept in real life, which was unique for its day.

The process was as following. The casting form was built according to the architectural sketch and from thence full size paper patterns similar to the cartoons used to build the stained glass panels in the window were cut out. Then using layers of plywood and sheets of styrofoam insulation the patterns were sawed into the layered sections reflected in the casting relief. The more layers the deeper the impression. The styrofoam was then textured, using a bunsen burner torch, probably by my father. The sides, back and bottom were nailed to the form creating a large box. When the structure was complete and stabilized, fresh liquid concrete was poured from the top and allowed to dry. Once it is dry, the casting form and box were carefully removed unveiling the work of art under the form.

The possibility that the layers of plywood casting form would have survived and then removed and reassembled in reverse is highly unlikely. It is certainly the case that the styrofoam with it's surface texture would have to be redone since the texture would all be on the wrong side. To make a second casting in reverse, the entire process would have to have been repeated. It is possible that the back side of some of the wood forms for the figures in the original form may have been in good enough shape to be used in the second casting, but for a casting that large, it would have been just as easy to use new material from the original drawing cutouts. If you look at the images of the Chicago Fire Station wall my father designed, you can see what the relief casting looks like in this process.

btw. the photo of the Collegeville Depot was a much smaller building than the old collier station/artist studio. I will go through my slides and photos to find a good photo and send it to you.

Thank you for your interest!

Clemens

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“...Of course the error, if it was, also provided for an opportunity to test the concept in real life, which was unique for its day...”

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Expires: Never

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“The process was as following:

1. The casting form was built according to the architectural sketch and from thence full-size paper patterns similar to the cartoons used to build the stained glass panels in the window were cut out.
2. Then, using layers of plywood and sheets of styrofoam insulation, the patterns were sawed into the layered sections reflected in the casting relief. The more layers, the deeper the impression.
3. The styrofoam was then textured, using a bunsen burner torch, probably by my father.
4. The sides, back and bottom were nailed to the form creating a large box.
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I sought the opinion of the printmaking professor in the Art Department, who agreed:

**From:** Melis, Rachel <RMELIS@CSBSJU.EDU>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, June 19, 2019 10:33 AM  
**To:** Roske, Peggy <PRoske@CSBSJU.EDU>  
**Subject:** Re: To solve a mystery at St. John's Prep in Collegeville, MN

I think he's just saying that the first experimental panel (presumably the one on the ground) must have come out facing the wrong direction, so they redid it the right way, using the original drawings but constructing new molds. He's right that it's very easy for there to be miscommunication about what direction a final product, in casting or in printmaking, needs to face. And that it's easy to remake a mold using the original drawings, which would just have to be flipped. I don't know that you can use this as certain evidence, but the fact that an experimental panel is mentioned, and that this panel is around and identical except for direction makes the idea that the one on the ground is that experimental panel make a lot of sense...


Clemens' Bak's email let to the website he created as a tribute to his parents' artistic legacy

← → ↻ 🏠 bakart-museum.org/page4.html

A virtual guide to an art legacy

### Bronislaw - Biographical notes


He was a favorite to many students at Georgia Southern during his years in Statesboro (1973-1981). An engaging professor, he was as much a philosopher as an artist. He approached teaching as he approached his work - in pursuit of truth. As an artist his explorations took many paths, testing ideas and applying his design theories in both the realm of abstract and figurative art. Bronislaw Bak was a thinking man's artist whose considerable legacy continues to engage people long after his passing.



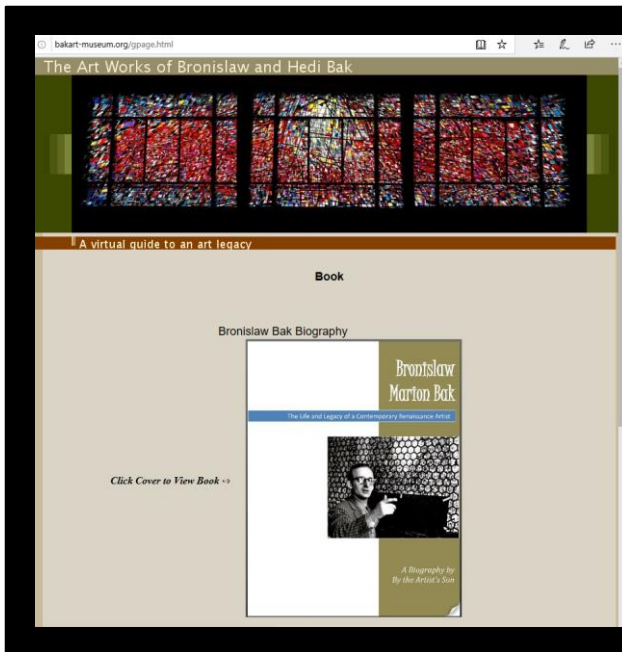
He was born in 1922 in Leszno, a small town in Poland, where his mother was the librarian. At the age of 17 he became a cadet in the Polish army, on the eve of World War II. He fought against the German invasion of Poland in 1939 and was captured and forced into slave labor in German fields and factories until 1943. Escaping to Poland, he was recaptured by the SS, beaten and thrown into the Shirmeck concentration camp in Vichy France where he remained until he was freed by American troops in 1945. The Shirmeck concentration camp was a "reeducation camp" for resisters from occupied lands throughout Europe, a number of whom ended up in the Natzweiler-Struthof death camp 10 kilometers away.

After the war he studied art in Mannheim, where he met his wife, Hedi. Hedi and Bronislaw were part of the first generation of art students in Germany after the war. Up until the Nazi took power in 1933, Europe was the cultural center of the world and art flourished in Germany. Artists were banned, driven in exile and many killed during the Hitler era. The small community of artists, teachers and students who came together amid the rubble of post-war Germany were inspired and grounded in the methods and ideas of an earlier epoch. Bronislaw and Hedi brought this lifelong passion for the pursuit of art to their adopted homeland in 1952. Bronislaw left a 30 year legacy of architectural commissions, paintings, sculpture and fine prints.

His signature work was completed in 1961. The massive stained glass window wall, embedded in the concrete hexagons of St. John's Abbey Church in Collegeville Minnesota remains one of the most significant works of it's kind in the world. The window was designed and executed by the artist in the space of less than 3 years. Working with a few monks and students in a drafty old dairy barn on campus, the project was both a triumph and a disappointment to the artist. The window and artist became the focus of a struggle of wills between factions within the local church hierarchy, that eventually even drew in the world famous architect, Marcel Breuer. The protagonists of that generation have nearly all passed on, and the window still stands in all it's glory. An article in Stained Glass Magazine in 1994 strongly urged the art world to acknowledge the importance of this massive work of art.



[Welcome](#) | [About](#) | [Bronislaw Bak 1922-1981](#) | [A Biography](#) | [Fragments' Film](#) | [Architectural Commissions](#) | [Paintings - Bronislaw](#) | [Works on Paper - Bronislaw](#) | [Illustration Series - Bronislaw](#) | [Hedi Bak 1927-2010](#) | [Works by Hedi](#) | [Endangered Works](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Email](#)

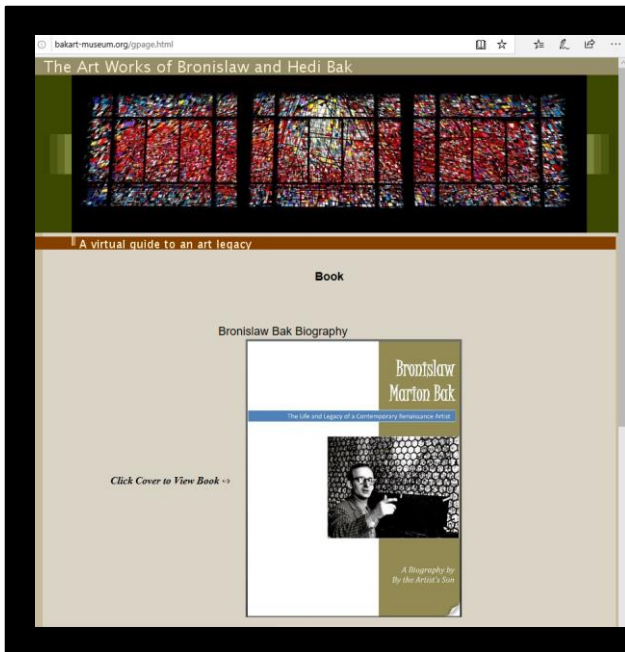


...and an online book he has published

The sheer volume of his three decades of work in this county underlines the passion and drive which characterized his work. Bronislaw Bak, up until his death in 1981, produced hundreds of paintings, thousands of limited edition graphics and designed a number of major architectural commissions in stained glass, concrete relief sculpture and mosaic.

p.8

[content.yudu.com/Library/A2x2z0/BronislawBakBiograph/resources/index.htm?referrerUrl=http%3A%2F%2Ffree.yudu.com%2Fitem%2Fdetails%2F1997805%2FBronislaw-Bak-Biography&skipFlashCheck=true](http://content.yudu.com/Library/A2x2z0/BronislawBakBiograph/resources/index.htm?referrerUrl=http%3A%2F%2Ffree.yudu.com%2Fitem%2Fdetails%2F1997805%2FBronislaw-Bak-Biography&skipFlashCheck=true)



## Chapter 3

ST JOHN'S

### ST JOHN'S

The size of a work of art has never been a primary consideration in judging a work of art. There have never been any important exhibits of "big paintings" or "medium sized sculpture." Size is simply a historical fact in the commission of a work that may tell something of the artist's task - the scope of his or her achievement. One would think that the difference between large or small is that one is more likely to overlook the latter.



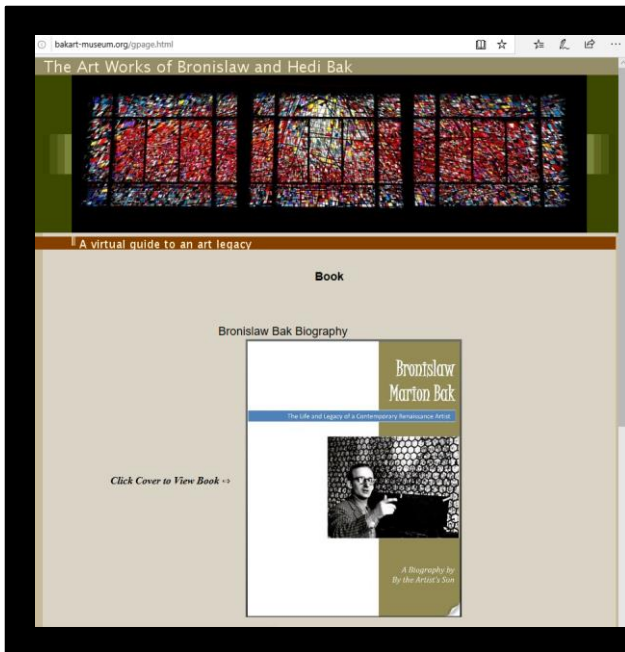
Once in a while there are exceptions to that rule; one of these overlooked exceptions, a particularly large one, was a work designed and built by Bronislaw Bak in Central Minnesota in 1961 - a wall of stained glass, over 10,000 square feet

in surface area. The window, 60 feet high by 168 feet long is a single abstract composition made up of 430 individual panels ensconced in a honeycomb-like grid of poured concrete hexagons. It is one of the largest works of art of any medium executed personally by an artist in this country.



Artists have throughout time been commissioned to design work that has been integrated into the architecture of new buildings, town squares and even parks. Churches in particular have been adorned with works of art that warm the otherwise cold stone and brick. One could not imagine the Cathedral of Notre Dame without its glorious windows or for that matter any other church. And throughout time some artists, like architects, have been credited for their frescoes, nave designs, sculptures and windows that have contributed to the

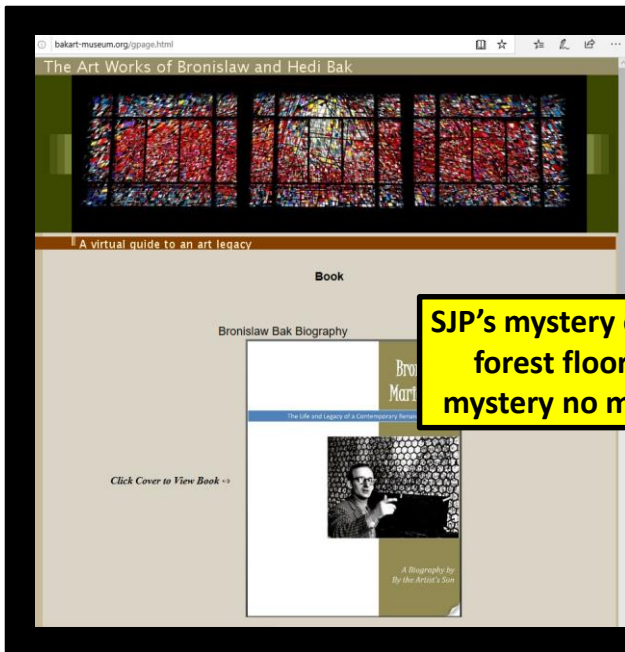
[content.yudu.com/Library/A2x2z0/BronislawBakBiograph/resources/index.htm?referrerUrl=http%3A%2F%2Ffree.yudu.com%2Fitem%2Fdetails%2F1997805%2FBronislaw-Bak-Biography&skipFlashCheck=true](http://content.yudu.com/Library/A2x2z0/BronislawBakBiograph/resources/index.htm?referrerUrl=http%3A%2F%2Ffree.yudu.com%2Fitem%2Fdetails%2F1997805%2FBronislaw-Bak-Biography&skipFlashCheck=true)



In 1961, Val Michelson approached Bronislaw about a project. Michelson who had been field architect for Breuer on the St. John's Church construction project had become close friends with my father. Michelson had been commissioned to design the new prep school and dormitory on the campus. He designed the buildings so that they fit the contour of the hillside. Unhappy with the long stretch of blank walls on the outside of the dormitory, he discussed it with Ted Hoffmeyer, also a friend of my father's and the concrete engineer for the Abby Church project. They came up with the idea of asking Bronislaw to design some wall relief sculpture, much like his woodcuts. Working first on an experimental panel, with the help and advice of Hoffmeyer, he selected the various materials to achieve the most desirable surface texture. Wood, burnt Styrofoam, and metal were all incorporated into the molds. Nearly a dozen panels depict different aspects of the school's activities. At the entrance of the school stands the tall form of St. John the Baptist holding a cross. The depth of the relief forms were limited by the thickness of the walls. Hedi, who applied her youthful schooling as a draftsman to the project, drew the layout of the sketches in three dimensions.

p.48

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p.48

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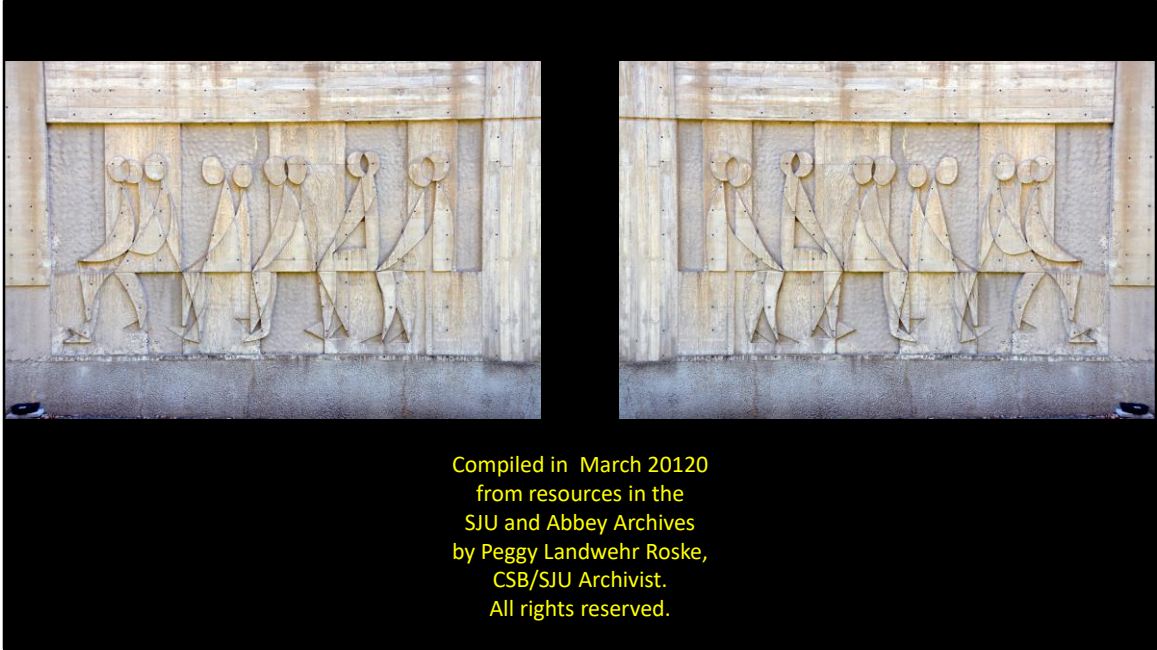






Mathew Ahmann '52 spurred Catholics to help make the dream a reality.

Photo with MLK 2013 Fall Alum Mag p24-25; Mathew Athmann circled  
<https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/24640/rec/174>



2016 Dell Upton UCLA photo, Dormitory\_3879a FLIPPED