

The Painted Church

By Arthur Shapiro



On the Big Island of Hawaii, near Kona and above Kealahou Bay, is a church officially called St. Benedict's but known as the "Painted Church." It's one of Hawaii's most unusual and beautiful small churches, modest on the outside yet astonishing inside. It was built around 1900.

This is the story not just of the church but of the missionary priest who transformed and built it.

Father John, formally Father Jean (John) Berchmans Velghe, was one of those remarkable late-19th-century missionary priests who seemed part priest, part carpenter, part artist, and part adventurer. He is remembered today for transforming the tiny rural Hawaiian church into the famous Painted Church. Yet his path to Hawaii was long and unlikely.

Father John was born in Belgium in the mid-1800s and joined the Catholic missionary order called the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary, commonly known as the Picpus Fathers. This was the same missionary order as Father Damien, the famed "leper priest" of Molokai.

His Story

Father John was sent to serve in a Spanish-speaking territory and, in preparation, spent a year or two studying Spanish. When the ship arrived somewhere in South America (historical accounts are vague about the exact location), an outbreak of yellow fever kept him from going ashore. He faced two choices: return to Europe or sail west to Polynesia and Hawaii.

After some time in the Polynesian Islands, he was about 41 years old and already experienced in working with Polynesian cultures when he arrived in Hawaii in 1899.

The church he found there in the bay was not a grand parish but a small coastal chapel called St. Francis Regis. The local Hawaiian community had gradually begun moving uphill from the hot

shoreline to cooler elevations with better farming conditions. Rather than abandon the church, Father John was instrumental in relocating it.

The Church

The original chapel was dismantled piece by piece. Lumber, pews, and other materials were hauled uphill by mule to the present site above the bay, in the hills. There, Father John oversaw the church's reconstruction and its renaming to St. Benedict's Church.

By the time they finished in 1902, Father John apparently believed that the plain wooden interior lacked spiritual power and beauty. So he decided to transform it himself.

He had carpentry skills and was artistic, but had no formal artistic training.

The Transformation

Using ordinary house paint on wood panels, he began painting biblical scenes directly onto the walls and ceiling. (Interestingly, he used lead-based paint, which has preserved the artwork to this day.)

What makes this extraordinary is that he created the illusion of a European Gothic cathedral within a tiny wooden Hawaiian country church. He painted arches, columns, vaulted ceilings, shadows, and depth effects that make the eye perceive grandeur where there was very little actual space.

But the paintings were not merely decorative.

At the time, many native Hawaiians in the region could not read fluently in either Hawaiian or English. Father John used paintings as teaching tools, essentially visual Bible stories. The murals depicted: Cain and Abel; The Temptation of Christ; Saints; heaven and hell imagery; and Biblical scenes.

Essentially, the church became an illustrated religious text.

He worked for roughly four years on the church, often simultaneously serving as pastor, carpenter, designer, and artist.

Then, unexpectedly, he was recalled to Belgium around 1904, before he had fully completed all the paintings. The reasons are not entirely clear in surviving accounts, but were likely a routine reassignment by his religious order. He never returned to Hawaii.





What makes Father John memorable isn't simply that he painted a church. It's that he embodied a certain frontier-missionary spirit of old Hawaii. He came from Europe, lived in remote Polynesia, built a church by hand, taught through art, and adapted European Catholic traditions to Hawaiian and Polynesian culture.

He left behind something unexpectedly intimate and human, not polished cathedral art, but the work of a determined self-taught missionary trying to inspire faith in a small Kona community more than a century ago.