

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

Saint Joseph Abbey Refectory, St. Tammany Parish, LA

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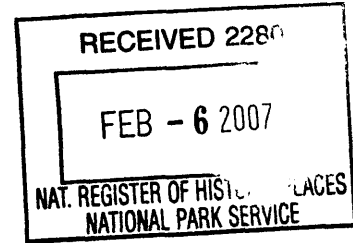
United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Saint Joseph Abbey Refectory

Other Name/Site Number:



2. LOCATION

Street & Number 75376 River Road

Not for publication: NA

City/Town Saint Benedict

Vicinity: NA

State: Louisiana Code: LA County: St. Tammany Code: 103 Zip Code: 70457

3. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: Statewide: X Locally:

Jon Fricker
Signature of Certifying Official/Title Jonathan Fricker,
Deputy SHPO, Dept of Culture, Recreation and Tourism

2/5/07
Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official/Title

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

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4. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ☐ Entered in the National Register
- ☐ Determined eligible for the National Register
- ☐ Determined not eligible for the National Register
- ☐ Removed from the National Register
- ☐ Other (explain): _____

for Edson H. Beall
Signature of Keeper

3.21.07
Date of Action

5. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X
Public-Local: _____
Public-State: _____
Public-Federal: _____

Category of Property

Building(s): X
District: _____
Site: _____
Structure: _____
Object: _____

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

1

Non contributing

____ buildings
____ sites
____ structures
____ objects
0 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 0

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: NA

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: religion Sub: other: dining hall
Current: religion Sub: other: dining hall

7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification: no style

Materials:

Foundation: brick
Walls: brick
Roof: asphalt
Other:

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

The refectory at the Benedictine abbey of Saint Joseph is a long one story brick building with a two story rear wing. Architectural styling is limited to Italianate segmental head windows. For the purposes of the data retrieval section of this document the refectory will be termed "no style." Dating from c.1910, the refectory is located immediately behind the 1908 main building of the monastery (where the monks reside). The refectory's significance rests upon its extensive murals, painted between 1945 and 1949 by Benedictine monk-artist Dom Gregory de Wit. There are no integrity issues. The murals are well preserved (with the exception of minor damage from Hurricane Katrina, August 29, 2005).

The quite long building has a gable at each end and an off-center gabled wing extending toward the rear. Extending from the one story rear wing is a two story hipped roof wing. Windows are four over four. The monks' dining room, where de Wit's murals are located, occupies roughly a third of the building's length. There is also a small dining room for guests, and occupying the other end of the building, a large student dining room. (The abbey has a college for men studying for the priesthood.) The student dining area is functional.

The refectory was the first of two buildings at Saint Joseph enhanced greatly by the talents of de Wit. (See below for biographical sketch.) Between 1951 and 1955 he worked in the abbey church. The church is being nominated separately because it is not immediately adjacent to the refectory.

It is not within the scope of this document to discuss the religious meaning of the numerous paintings. Rather this document will focus on the murals as works of art. (For information on the religious meaning of de Wit's murals, the reader is referred to *Living in Salvation: The Murals of Gregory de Wit at Saint Joseph Abbey*, written by Adam Begnaud, OSB and published by Saint Joseph Abbey, 2005.)

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Virtually every surface of the dining hall, including the ceiling, is treated with artwork. The large undivided room has a double frame exposed truss ceiling. Occupying one gable end is a magnificent painting of the Last Supper of heroic proportions. At the other gable end is an expansive scene of Christ the Good Shepherd. The ceiling's fifty-six panels, divided by wooden members, depict various aspects of creation (fish, animals, etc). Biblical scenes from the Old Testament are found between the windows on the side elevations (for a total of nine murals). Finally, de Wit painted Saint Benedict prominently above the heavy ancient-looking double entrance doors.

De Wit's murals are particularly known for their vibrant colors. The monk-artist made his own colors from powdered pigments mixed with potassium silicate. The overall effect, according to one authority on the artist, is a mural with a fresco-like appearance and durability. The paint penetrates the plaster rather than merely being a surface coating. De Wit also used a slightly textured wall surface when using potassium silicate paint.

The murals were traced onto the dining room walls and then filled in. They began as miniature full-color models, then were resketched on graph paper to the proper scale. Then a serrated roulette was run over every line. The drawing was then held in place on the wall and patted with a bag of blue powdered chalk.

De Wit's signature is his handling of cloth. The murals are replete with voluminous drapes and folds in clothing, often to an exaggerated, or overstated, effect.

The monk-artist's first work at the refectory was the 732 square foot Last Supper on the west wall. Over forty feet wide and extending from a low wainscot to the peak of the gable, this exceptional work is believed to be the largest depiction of its subject. The figures are 1.7 life size. Gregory himself boasted that it was wider than Leonardo da Vinci's famous fresco. Taking nine months to complete, it was blessed by Abbot Columban on Christmas Eve, 1946.

According to de Wit authorities associated with the abbey, some elements in the mural are taken from one of the earliest paintings of the Last Supper, found in the Greek Chapel of the Catacombs of Priscilla in Rome. Christ and the twelve apostles are gathered around a horseshoe-shaped table. In the Roman dining fashion, they seem to be sitting on cushions. Matthew and Judas, at each end, are most definitely lounging at the table. Above the seated Christ is a large and powerfully rendered Crucifixion. Depicted to one side of the table (separate and apart from the scene) is a large image of King David; on the other side, a large image of Saint Paul. De Wit humorously included everyday modern items such as salt and pepper shakers on the table.

True to form, the Last Supper is distinguished by brilliant colors and the artist's signature treatment of fabric. The garments are boldly formed with an exaggerated effect. And they have a vigorous angularity completely in line with the contemporary feel of the mural. As is the case with some of the murals in the abbey church, de Wit's disciples would be quite at home, at least artistically, in a New Deal-commissioned mural. Muscles are depicted prominently and in a certain stylized manner, and hands and heads are treated in a strongly angular manner. One authority has noted how the posture of the bodies lends a strong sense of movement to the composition.

On the other side of the room from the Last Supper, encompassing a large portion of the wall, is a serene scene of Christ as the ever-youthful shepherd. Although accomplished, it seems conventional in comparison to the powerful Last Supper. Here, too, de Wit depicts the human body with the muscular

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system quite prominent, and the shepherd's garment is overstated. Water cascades to either side of the shepherd in a stylized fashion.

The Old Testament vignette murals on the north and south walls are small only in comparison to the Last Supper and Christ the Shepherd. All nine have undefined borders, which, in Begnaud's view, "allows the composition to expand beyond its physical boundaries." Latin texts define the vignettes (sometimes only at the top, sometimes on two and three sides). Particularly interesting is "Go to Joseph," with its stylized Egyptian motifs. Perhaps the most emphatic lines in the painting are in the garments of Joseph's brothers as they kneel before the pharaoh. The overdone, stylized clothing, with its repeating lines, is strongly Modernistic in character. More obviously so is the angel in "Get Up and Eat."

There are no integrity issues with the refectory artwork. The murals remain as brilliant as when painted over fifty years ago. They have never been restored or even cleaned.

Photos:

Supplemental color images are being included in addition to the required black and white photos.

Information common to all photos:

Photographer: Donna Fricker

Date Taken: October 2006

Location of negatives: Louisiana SHPO

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Applicable National
Register Criteria:

A__ B__ C X D__

Criteria Considerations
(Exceptions):

A X B__ C__ D__ E__ F__ G__

Areas of Significance: art

Period(s) of Significance: 1945-49

Significant Dates: same

Significant Person(s): NA

Cultural Affiliation: NA

Architect/Builder: Dom Gregory de Wit (artist)

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

The Saint Joseph Abbey refectory is of statewide significance because its murals are a *tour de force* of mid-twentieth century art. While Louisiana has some notable work from this period (1930s-'50s), most examples are relatively small in size and of moderate artistic quality (some poor). With its multitude of murals, at the hand of a talented artist, the refectory has very few peers within Louisiana. (This context is limited to artwork that is an integral part of buildings, per National Register guidelines.)

The Artist:

Dom Gregory de Wit was born in 1892 in Holland. He entered the monastic life in Belgium in 1913, taking the name Gregory. He completed his novitiate in 1915 and was ordained a priest in 1918. He is said to have shown an interest and skill in painting since childhood. At the close of WWI he was sent to study at the Brussels Academy of Art and then to the Munich Academy. He also spent time in Italy. De Wit exhibited his early work at The Hague and in Munich in the 1920s. The only religious murals in Europe verified to be de Wit's work are a series of nine in the refectory of the Abbey of Metten in Bavaria.

De Wit came to the United States in 1938 at the invitation of the abbot of St. Meinrad Abbey in Indiana. The abbot had seen the artist's work in Europe and wished him to paint murals in the abbey church at St. Meinrad. (St. Meinrad is the founding house of St. Joseph.) Among the visitors admiring de Wit's work at St. Meinrad was Abbot Columban Thius of St. Joseph.

De Wit's first commission in Louisiana was at the newly completed Sacred Heart Church in Baton Rouge, where he worked in the early 1940s. He also completed work at St. Meinrad in this period, before taking up residence at St. Joseph Abbey in February 1945. In 1950, after the refectory paintings were completed, de Wit left for a several month sojourn in Europe. Prior to departing, he planned his work for the abbey church and left the designs with the community for approval. In January of 1951 the community voted to have de Wit paint the church. Assisting him was a young artist named Milo Piuz, whom de Wit had met in Europe. By all accounts, the designs were de Wit's, but Piuz "had a hand in the execution" (Adam Begnaud, OSB, *Living in Salvation*). The abbey church murals were complete by April 1955, when de Wit expounded on them from the pulpit. Later that year the artist returned to Europe, making occasional visits to the United States. He died November 22, 1978 in Switzerland.

By all accounts de Wit's most extensive and important work in America is in Louisiana – at Sacred Heart and Saint Joseph Abbey. There is no known inventory of his output. The Sacred Heart murals were (and perhaps still are) controversial. One observer, Aelred Kavanaugh, former dean of the seminary at St. Joseph, considers Sacred Heart to contain de Wit's "most powerful work." The nave is dominated by a huge figure of Christ in the apse's dome. The figure is roughly forty feet high. The deformed-looking right hand, raised in blessing, is six feet long. The depiction is definitely not traditional. As Kavanaugh writes, "it inspires awe, and often dread, in beholders." It is standard to refer to the face as Sicilian or Mediterranean looking. This author saw African features. The flesh is olive (or brown, depending on your interpretation); the eyes are huge; the lips are full; the nose reads almost as a piece of machinery; the neck veins are grossly overstated. The curly hair is stylized, and Christ sports a moustache. Like the work Gregory would do at Saint Joseph, the clothing is full of exaggerated drapes and folds. Originally beneath Christ was a large crucifix painted by de Wit on mahogany. It was so controversial as to be removed in 1948. Other work at Sacred Heart includes a handful of murals and a set of stations of the cross. (The work is not nearly as

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extensive at Sacred Heart as at St. Joseph church and refectory.) De Wit's work was less than popular with Sacred Heart parishioners. Father Blasco dismissed the monk-artist as he worked on one mural (a quite enticing Woman at the Well). De Wit subsequently returned to finish it.

The Context:

The vast majority of mid-twentieth century murals in Louisiana date from the 1930s and were commissioned by New Deal agencies. At the lower end of the spectrum are relatively small post office murals of generally mediocre to poor artistic quality. Louisiana retains about a dozen of these – typically one mural per post office. Particularly accomplished New Deal-era murals are located at Allen Hall, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge; the Louisiana State Capitol; and the State Exhibit Building in Shreveport. Well-known muralist and LSU faculty member Conrad Albrizio was the artist for the Capitol and Exhibit Building. Students under his direction executed the Allen Hall work. Conrad's largest work in Louisiana came in 1954 with four murals at the Union Passenger Terminal in New Orleans. Each measures roughly 8 feet by 60 feet. Looking beyond public buildings, the other notable examples of mid-twentieth century murals known to the Louisiana State Historic Preservation Office are the three buildings painted by Dom Gregory de Wit: Sacred Heart in Baton Rouge and the refectory and church at Saint Joseph.

Among the extant mid-twentieth century murals in Louisiana (some in the Capitol have been painted over), the de Wit murals at St. Joseph are conspicuous because of their quality (for example, the stylized drapery) and the overwhelming extent to which they lend character and emotional force to an entire architectural space (as opposed to a single limited section of wall). The Louisiana State Historic Preservation Office knows of no other buildings in Louisiana as extensively articulated in mid-twentieth century mural art.

St. Joseph Abbey:

In 1889 a small group of Benedictine monks from St. Meinrad Abbey in Indiana established Saint Joseph Priory and Preparatory College at a site near present-day Pontchatoula, Louisiana. They moved to St. Tammany Parish in 1902, and the priory was elevated to abbey status in 1903. On November 30, 1907, a fire destroyed the wood frame campus, and the monks built anew a few acres to the west. The present large brick monastery building dates to 1908. That same year the Postmaster General established a post office at the monastery with the name Saint Benedict.

Saint Joseph Seminary College is an accredited four-year college for men interested in the priesthood. The monks staff the college and also serve in area parishes. One of the high-profile ministries of the abbey is Pennies for Bread, which began in 1990 when the monks decided to extend their in-house bread baking to help the poor. Through corporate and individual sponsors, the monks bake about 1,850 loaves per week for delivery to twenty-five organizations.

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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Begnaud, Adam, OSB. *Living in Salvation: The Murals of Gregory de Wit at Saint Joseph Abbey*. Saint Joseph Abbey, 2005.

Eggart, Mary Lee. *A Guide to the Art and Architecture of Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church, Baton Rouge, Louisiana*, 1998.

Kasteel, Annemarie and Tassin, Anthony. "A Monk's Masterpiece." *Louisiana Cultural Vistas*, Fall 2004.

Kasteel, Annemarie and Tassin, Anthony. "Dom Gregory de Wit: Monk and Artist." Unpublished manuscript draft on file at Saint Joseph Abbey archives.

Kavanagh, Aelred. "The Glory on the Face of Christ: The Vision of Dom Gregory de Wit, O.S.B." *Cross, Crozier and Crucible: A Volume Celebrating the Bicentennial of a Catholic Diocese in Louisiana*. Glenn Conrad, General Editor. Archdiocese of New Orleans in cooperation with the Center for Louisiana Studies, 1993.

Saint Joseph Abbey. *Century of Grace: A Pictorial History of Saint Joseph Abbey and Seminary*. (No publication information)

Previous documentation on file (NPS): NA

- ☐ Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- ☐ Previously Listed in the National Register. (partially)
- ☐ Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- ☐ Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- ☐ Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
- ☐ Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State Agency
- ☐ Federal Agency
- ☐ Local Government
- ☐ University
- ☒ Other (Specify Repository): Saint Joseph Abbey

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10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: less than an acre

UTM References: **Zone Easting Northing**
 15 777020 3380600

Verbal Boundary Description: Boundaries parallel building elevations, each at a distance of 10 feet.

Boundary Justification: As noted in Part 7, the refectory is located in the midst of other campus buildings. Boundaries cut closely around the refectory to exclude these buildings.

11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: National Register Staff, Division of Historic Preservation

Address: P. O. Box 44247, Baton Rouge, LA 70804

Telephone: 225-342-8160

Date: August 2006

PROPERTY OWNERS

Saint Joseph Abbey