

MICHELLE YOUNG AND AUGUSTIN PASQUET



# SECRET BROOKLYN



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

## ERASMUS HALL ACADEMY

16

### *Stained glass treasures inside a school*

911 Flatbush Avenue  
 Brooklyn, NY 11226  
 718-564-2551 or contact via website for visits  
<http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/17/K539>  
 Monday–Friday 8am–2:20pm  
 Transport: B/Q to Church Avenue

Nestled in the heart of Brooklyn is Erasmus Hall; one of New York City's most impressive yet little known treasures. This Gothic-style school, reminiscent of the colleges at Oxford and Cambridge, was founded in 1786 in an area settled by the Dutch. It is considered one of the oldest schools in the United States and was the first secondary school chartered by the New York State Regents. Erasmus Hall was funded by some of the country's most famous Founding Fathers, including Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr, and counts among its alumni such figures as Mae West, Barbra Streisand and Neil Diamond. Today, five schools use the complex now known as Erasmus Hall Educational Campus, which is filled with notable art and architecture.

Beyond the exterior architecture, the interior of the school reveals the rich history of the building. The current complex was built around

an original 1786 wooden clapboard school building in 1904 by school superintendent C.B.J. Snyder, who is credited with over 400 of New York City's most architecturally notable schools. Artwork was an important part of school design during Snyder's time, with most schools incorporating site-specific commissioned artworks of various mediums.

But Erasmus Hall is special; it is brimming with stained glass. The most famous piece (along with the sculptures in the garden) can be seen from the outside. However, viewed from within the vaulted two-floor auditorium, designed much like a church, it is a sight to behold. Behind the stage, *The Life of Erasmus* opulently portrays the life of the school's namesake. All through the school, traditional stained glass motifs contrast with modern imagery, including sections depicting American industry and scientific research.

Above the main entrance along Flatbush Avenue, you'll see five panels of stained glass on the second floor behind the turreted façade – a work that was created by Louis Comfort Tiffany, the son of the famous jeweler. This stained glass gem was originally commissioned for the school library in 1919 to honor the first principal of Erasmus Hall, Walter B. Gunnison. The Neoclassical subject matter shows a figure (representing knowledge) amid a Roman scene created using a combination of painted and plated glass techniques. Due to overcrowding, the library has since been converted into two classrooms but the Tiffany piece remains in situ.



Photos by E. Frossard (lft) and Stan Rice (right)

