

# Modern Stained Glass

Craft of the Middle Ages Meeting the Challenge of our Modern Idiom

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Stained Glass is traditionally considered a craft of the Middle Ages. The origins and techniques of the craft are medieval. The most vital extant examples of stained glass are found in European early Gothic churches. The stained glass craft has never suffered from the subversive activity of revolutionaries. It has not revolted against the medieval form, which was valid for its time. This retention of the medieval form has proved commercially advantageous. Thus does the craft seem to discourage revolution and necessary evolution.

The craftsman too often petrified his concept of the craft in a Gothic mould and in so doing limited the potential of glass both in technique and expression. The designer faced with a craft challenge relied on the safe "medieval formula" to create a rival Chartres. Would a competent painter today limit himself in technique and expression to a poor copy of Leonardo da Vinci? Painting has evolved since da Vinci. The other arts and crafts have had their 'liberators.'<sup>v</sup> Stained glass after the medieval period "perished," according to Herbert Read "because it stepped outside the bounds of its aesthetics and tried to imitate the effects of another art, the art of panel painting." The function of stained glass is to achieve translucency not obscurity. Renaissance easel painting delighted in shadowing and three dimensional realism. Renaissance ideals have had lasting influence in the Western world and still serve as criteria for conservative churchmen. The Renaissance ideals have suffocated the potential vitality of stained glass, seeking rather to make a realistic picture transparent than a section of the wall translucent. The Renaissance induced a greater interest in realistic pictorial decoration than in colorful fenestration.

Stained glass was soon numbered among the "lost arts" and eventually reached its lowest ebb during the Victorian era. With the advent of photography pictorial representation achieved its logical conclusion. It is no wonder that the temper of the modern art world looks down on pictorial art as no better than mid-Victorian illustration. The abstract, then, is championed as the sole expression of the serious creative contemporary artist.

Much stained glass is commissioned for religious edifices, symbolism (which may be abstract) forms a part of the traditional denominational iconography. There is also a demand for depiction of holy personages and biblical incidents. Can this pictorial challenge be met without resorting to a safe medieval carbon-copy or a sweet Victorian chrome?

The direction of painting since Cezanne away from classical realism has had the salutary effect of preparing an audience for a return to emphasis on fundamentals in stained glass. These fundamentals include: pure color used for its own sake, a more brilliant and extended color palette, two-dimensional stylization in drawing as opposed to three-dimensional realism, and experimental juxtaposition of differing textures.

The belated but providential moment of liberation has arrived. The stained glass craftsman has a choice today. He can revolt against the pseudo-medievalism and Victorian chromorealism, he can explore the potentialities of the craft and meet with inventiveness the challenge of our modern idiom.

Pseudo-medieval architecture, long the American front running favorite, is increasingly challenged by the contemporary. Contemporary architecture makes lavish use of glass as an integral structural component. Significantly, this glass is unadorned. Many architects fear that the vitality of contemporary interiors will be embalmed by the introduction of lifeless re-creations of an archeological fenestration. May one conclude that contemporary American architecture will develop without the help of stained glass? However, the heartening example of vital European contemporary glass has prompted an increasing American architectural interest irrespective of economic consideration. At the present moment there is little American glass comparable in contemporaneity to the best of European craftsmen's glass. Can we do less than share the architect's growing interest in contemporary glass?

Herbert Read in the introduction to Robert Sower's book on "The Lost Art" points out that—"The modern architect is usually afraid of colour, especially of intense colour, and rather than use it would condemn people to worship God in a white glare of antiseptic austerity. As for any use of stained glass in other than ecclesiastical buildings, the thought rarely occurs to him. Yet in every modern building there are windows through which we would rather not see—windows giving on to glazed courts full of soil-pipes and fire-escapes, or with larger views of gasworks and chimney-stacks. Most inhabitants of such buildings would prefer to look *at* a window by Matisse, rather than through plain glass.....I do not wish to suggest that the only purpose of a stained glass window is to act as a screen for the more hideous aspects of our modern civilization. As that civilization is cleaned up and we enter into a new era of architectural beauty, stained glass will naturally take its place among the component elements of an architectural style. In the end it will be found, not that the stained-glass artist needs the support of the architect, but that the architect needs the stained-glass artist for the colour and the richness and the glory that belong to a great architecture."

There are encouraging indications of the dramatic integration of stained glass in contemporary architecture. Emil Frei and his St. Louis community of artists are incontrovertably the visionaries of contemporary American stained glass. Many studios in the Stained Glass Association of America are experimenting in the field of glass block, carved and sand-

Presented before the Design Division of The American Ceramic Society at its 58th Annual Meeting in New York City, April 25, 1956.

## Committee on Research

For the past two years the problem of the "Glassy State" has been the major subject of examination, being of interest to most Divisions of The Society, and involving so many areas of ceramics. This choice was not intended to be confining and other items were included in this year's Division reports.

### Basic Science Division

W. G. Lawrence reported that his bibliography on glass structure,\* issued last year, had been extended by an additional 75 references in a first supplement. It was agreed that the bibliography should be kept up to date and the yearly revision continued. Efforts will be made to classify references according to the theoretical approach. This will not necessarily result in a critical review but rather in a clearer delineation of the various schools of thought on the subject.

J. R. Johnson presented a review of radiation effects on ceramics, to be published. With more information on radiation damage soon to be declassified it is expected that much of this will then need to be brought up to date.

### Enamel Division

The research committee of the Enamel Division felt that it might best serve in an advisory capacity and promote discussion of research topics. It was planned to hold a

\* "Bibliography of Glass Structure," compiled by W. G. Lawrence for the Research Committee of the Basic Science Division. 50c. State University of New York College of Ceramics at Alfred University, Alfred, N. Y.

### Design Division.....

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blasted glass, and chipping chunks of rock glass and imbedding these nuggets in concrete. Recently the Stained Glass Association of America and the American Federation of Arts sponsored a project called "New Work in Stained Glass." Here certain glassmen and famed artists such as Rattner, Gottlieb, Moller and Pereira made designs for stained glass panels employing a variety of techniques and individual designs. These panels have toured the museums of the United States and are now on a State Department sponsored tour of the Middle East. This project was a success, not only because of the enthusiasms of the art critics, the press and the general public, but because it indicated the new horizons and potentials inherent in this great living craft.

Stained glass has been and will continue to be the handmaid of architecture. The architecture of their time was living to the craftsmen of the thirteenth century, in retrospect, the greatest epic of the craft. As craftsmen, we must strive to understand those forces which are shaping the art in our times and the contemporary architecture which we are called upon to complement and adorn. This will prepare us to create a vital contemporary stained glass for our idiom which may in time prove to have been another classical period of achievement.

session of invited papers on "The Fundamental Chemistry and Physics of the Corrosion of Vitreous Surfaces." but insufficient acceptances rendered a formal program impossible in 1957. Several papers on the problem were contributed to the Annual Meeting.

### Glass Division

T. Harrison Davies presented a report on access to Soviet ceramic literature, describing the procedures and facilities available in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, for obtaining information on Russian work. Attention was directed to an important recent Russian symposium on the structure of glass, with the opinion that the papers should be translated. Efforts are being made to find means of financing the translation.

### Materials & Equipment Division

Although no report was submitted, it was suggested that the Division make efforts to encourage manufacturers to display laboratory equipment at the Annual Meeting. In particular it was stressed that there is need for better knowledge of sources of large laboratory and pilot plant equipment.

### Refractories Division

The previous year's work indicated, on close analysis, that the glassy phase was of relatively little interest to refractory technologists. A better understanding of the bond between crystals is more relevant to their needs and it is hoped to stimulate research in this field by presenting the problem for discussion at the fall meeting of the Refractories Division.

### White Wares Division

The division's research chairman drew on eight members to represent the varied interests of the White Wares Division. They sought to determine 1) what research is currently being carried out on the glassy phase; 2) critical problems of the industry; and 3) ways in which the research committee can serve the industry.

The committee's report, to be published in a forthcoming issue of the *Ceramic Bulletin*, indicated that both electrical porcelain and semi-vitreous dinnerware industries are studying the glassy phase. It lists opportunities for research, and suggested ideas for improving communications between laboratories, schools, and plants.

### Members of the Research Committee:

	1956-57	1957-58
Basic Science	W. G. Lawrence James R. Johnson	P. D. S. St. Pierre Sam Zerfoss
Enamel	H. B. Kirkpatrick	G. D. Kelly
Glass	Harrison Davies	W. R. Prindle
Materials & Equipment	Frank Day	R. R. Bush
Refractories	R. B. Snow J. F. Wygant	R. B. Snow J. F. Wygant
Structural Clay Products	J. O. Everhart	Elmer R. Ligon
White Wares	E. C. Henry	E. C. Henry
General Chairman	Louis Navias	Louis Navias
		P. D. S. St. Pierre, <i>secretary</i> Louis Navias, <i>chairman</i>