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Thoughts of an Artist in Stained Glass

Robert Oddy

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Stained glass is a distinctive medium for art. It is different from painting and it is different from sculpture, but it has strong connections to both. Like a painter, I explore light, color and texture. Like a sculptor, I create pieces that are both 3-dimensional in reality and also give the viewer a 3-dimensional illusion; and they are tactile – at a recent show, nearly everyone who stopped to look at my windows also touched them and felt the contours. Most people love glass, and are fascinated by its transparency or translucence, and the way it toys with light. Colors and textures float in it as though in free space, and shift with changes in the light source as though alive.

Many people these days think of stained glass as a decorative craft. We carry mental images of lampshades, pretty sun catchers, terrariums, and so on. Another strong association for many of us is religious art in church windows. These are all appealing and appropriate uses of stained glass, but I should like to see a broadening of our expectations of stained glass art. The potential of this medium for creating significant art is at least the equal of paint, stone and wood, and it can enrich personal and family space as well as work and public spaces.

Stained glass is often called an architectural artform, because it is usually a part of a building. However, the work can serve two distinct functions within the architectural setting. Some work is architectural in design, comprising abstract or geometrical features that are continuous with or reflect lines and shapes in other components of the building, or perhaps modify the
appearance of the environment beyond the window. It is part of the architect’s attempt to create a new space. Other work is purely art – the window in the wall of the building is not regarded as a connection between outside and inside, but as a frame for a work of art and the daylight is used to bring the image to life. These functions are not mutually exclusive, and we can create intriguing work by combining them. Glass of different degrees of transparency can be chosen so objects or landscapes beyond the window may be visible through it. They become part of the work – dynamic because they are at different distances from the viewer and subject to varying lighting conditions.

My conscious goal in building stained glass windows is to create a strong impression of depth – a sculptural dimension – combined with delicate and subtle detail. I find this in LaFarge and Tiffany, but not in most other stained glass work either before or after them, which often seems to me two-dimensional. To this end, when designing I try to disregard the usual constraints of the medium (the existence of lead lines, curves that are convenient for cutting, 2-dimensional format, etc.) and just sketch the picture I want, deciding on form and balance (including color) of the whole, and working out the placing and rough form of individual features. My full-scale working drawings are never complete. I carefully draw major lines and components of the design, but the detail is fleshed out as I go along with the fabrication. For instance, I might build several separate blossoms or leaves and arrange them on the working drawing. Then I will cut intervening pieces of glass, and sometimes reshape the already assembled features to join with each other. So, parts of the window grow – sometimes outward from assembled components, sometimes by filling spaces between features. [Another article expands on this topic.]

My techniques derive primarily from late 19th century art nouveau and naturalistic stained glass artists. I use copper foil instead of the traditional lead “came” for finer detail, and make
extensive use of “plating” (superimposing multiple layers of glass) in order to get subtle variations of color and texture beyond what can be done in a single layer. I have adapted these techniques to my own purposes. I represent details by streaks, mottles, ripples and other textures in carefully chosen pieces of glass, cutting intricate shapes out of glass, attaching copper foil and wire to the front or back of the glass, engraving or etching the reverse side of the glass, using a large “palette” of different glasses. Texture in glass is important and specific features within a sheet can be used to great effect. Also, subtle variations in density and hue can be used to suggest distance or shadow. And if you look closely at one of my windows or touch it, you will find that it is not flat. Plating (multiple layers of glass) and offsetting pieces in the vertical plane can be effective in producing depth effects or more subtle
lines than the usual simple lead line. In some pieces I have also incorporated wood, carved into bas-relief.

Most of my work is commissioned for a specific situation. So, another facet of the art is discovering a theme or subject that is meaningful to the client. Ideas for windows arise in a variety of interesting ways: every window has a story! One, called “Central New York” was for a person who wanted something that would remind her of her present home when she moved away later – the window incorporates a stylized view of her house in its landscape. Another pair of windows called “Spring Unicorn” and “Autumn Dragon” were made for Bruce Coville, the children’s novelist, depicting woodland scenes with hints of mythical creatures from his books – each window has a creature hidden in the lines of the tree branches – the outlines of the creatures come from book illustrations drawn by Kathy, his wife. This is personal art. The interaction between artist and client gives special significance to what is already a rich and satisfying medium of artistic expression.