

From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

The Stained Glass Art of the Fourteenth Century

by W. St. C. Baddeley
1903, Vol. 26, 150-161

© The Society and the Author(s)

THE STAINED GLASS ART OF THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY.

By ST. CLAIR BADDELEY.

I VENTURE to preface my remarks on the fourteenth century and its glass by lamenting the exceedingly uneven and unfair distribution of our information regarding fourteenth-century things and people. It is true we have the names of the successive abbots of Tewkesbury; we know particulars about most of the members of the De Clare and Le Despenser families, and some others whose monuments and mortal remains lie in the solemn twilight of this beautiful choir. We are told that Abbot Gerald did this and Prior Henry de Banbury built that; but we are not vouchsafed one word as to the name or personality of the architect who designed this vault, or the painter-glazier who, with all his skill, fashioned these glorious windows, in which we witness so truly grandiose an expression of man's delight in beauty, and which have, I think, afforded us all so interesting a gaze into the life of the mighty past. We are not told, except by the work itself, how this artist carefully developed a clear, intelligible scheme for the entire choir, windows, clerestory, as well as east window, in accordance with the desires of his patron, the reigning Le Despenser, or the abbot, or of both; not observe (as we moderns do), patch by patch, one not related to the other, but in one sensible general plan, which with its system of subjects, sacred and secular, could be distributed in an artistic proportion of colour in due and proper harmony with its architectural accessories. A mere yellow, dusty little scrap of fourteenth-century parchment,

had it survived, might have told us in which of these old streets he may have had kiln, furnace, and casting-tables, and how much he was paid for the work, what directions were given him for representing these different Earls of Gloucester, and also what other individuals he may have presented in other windows of this abbey, now long since vanished. For look, in that far-back fourteenth century, with its papal schisms, murdered kings, its Black Death, and wars with France, men knew how to solve the problems of art with what we should consider very imperfect apparatus, in a manner which still defies us in the twentieth century with all our scientific analyses and appliances. In fact, the only blots (glaring ones, I may call them) upon these windows are the well-meant interpolations made by an enthusiastic London glazier at his own cost, effected in 1829.

Let us think for one moment of the differences of their respective advantages, and then contrast in our minds the difference in the results of their labours. This Mr. Collins, of the Strand, came armed like a giant with the experience of the centuries—at least in improved chemistry with refined oxides, and (as he doubtless believed) finer glass. Further, he had the diamond to cut up his sheets with, instead of having to score them out with a hot iron, and then break and grind them; and yet, with all these apparent advantages, all these commanding means, beauty has listened to the poorer, earlier artist-glazier, and has positively mocked the richer and later one. She has, I fear, laughed at his effort and left it to work out its own ridicule, which it has too surely done. But for all this, I would rather a thousand times over have the work of a man of that stamp utilised in such windows as these than the work of the autocratic restorer of modern days, who is far more the vital enemy of antiquaries and lovers of art; instead of inserting a fragment here and there, the latter would not stop short of wholesale re-reading and blundering rearrangement. You may see what has been done in the Lady Chapel at Gloucester, and also at Winchester, by this class of operator. And yet the original

maker of these windows was not necessarily a genius—it does not appear to me, at least, that he was such. What was he? What makes his work so endlessly interesting and impressive to us? Truly, he was nothing more than a strong and honest link in the great chain of artistic traditions. For three centuries directly behind him had the tide, not of science, but of art development, been continuously rising throughout Europe, and, what is more (as we now know it), was still for two more centuries to continue rising before its ebb. Practically (in our modern phrase) it is “blood that tells,” and it was “blood” that the earlier artist had, and Mr. Collins, of the Strand, from no fault of his own, had *not!* Æsthetic blood of the bluest! It is clear, therefore, from this that the tide of art had far-fallen when the later man vainly attempted the impossible—namely, to think he was swimming in the great sea when he was paddling rather well, but in a mere puddle on the nearly-dried sands. And yet, let us not for a moment be harsh to him for his well-meant attempt. Under the sadly misused name of Art, and under the patronage of educated and learned officials, have we not over and over again witnessed the putting forth as works of high art the most affected crudities in the shape of stained windows?—windows that would not in the older days have been even allowed to go to the kiln, but which now are passed into the choirs and lady chapels of our most venerated churches and cathedrals, and honoured there with pompous unveilings and possibly episcopal tea-parties.

Things, however, are vastly improving, it must be confessed; and it is now understood that ordinary thin window-glass with no variety of surface, such as Mr. Collins used eighty years ago (like all his contemporaries) is absolutely unfitted for stained glass windows, and the so-called cathedral glass is the very worst possible material for painted windows: that no matter how fine may be the colours used in adorning them, their effects will be either miserably weak or else vulgarly glaring, unless the glass used be both very thick and naturally varied in surface. Every departure from the

mediæval method of making such glass only leads us astray. But there is, in fact, no reason whatever why we should not (providing there is no shortcoming in artistic power) produce as noble stained and painted glass as did our forefathers.

But, to avoid going here into too technical details, let me pass to consider a little the wide differences of our attitudes regarding the work of the past in this branch of art. For, in so wide a field as that included between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, there is room for a wholesome variety of tastes. Usually, I find them dividing into three well-marked categories. The first includes most of those of us who prefer colour to drawing. These are consequently best pleased with glass of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and to them the flat-treatment (so seen in Tewkesbury choir windows), wanting in pictorial perspective, and conspicuous in certain rather primitive formalisms, far from seeming a cause of shortcoming, seem by their simplicity (or rather by the reduction of all complexities) more attractive and appropriate for the purposes of decoration. The second category includes both the numerous lovers of the silvery perpendicular glass (designed for loftier and wider spaces abounding with rich yellow stain and pale greyish blues, and a far broader and also more detailed style of colouring, together with superior drawing of the forms and faces), and those who prefer the still more perfected pictorial portrait-and-landscape glass of the Renaissance, which bravely and with exquisite finish often attempts impossible rivalry with the painter in oils. The third and last category, comprises all those who have never seriously studied the art at all or thought of its value, and for that reason are the readiest to offer opinion. It also includes those who patronisingly tell you that after all coloured glass is only a sort of pleasant-toned antimacassar or, as they are sometimes pleased facetiously to term it, a jumble of jewels. It is only, I need say, in relation to the attitudes of the former of these admirers that I desire to offer the few

remarks I have to make, and in some sort they may be considered a plea (sometimes necessary to urge), for those who prefer the earlier glass to the later. One of the points which, at all periods of art has been proved impossible to settle definitely (and doubtless it will continue to be so) is where the artist in this or that medium (marble, mosaic, or glass) ought to be short with himself, and to recognise the inherent limitations of that medium. It must be confessed that the nature of the average artist tends to brush aside these limitations, or to regard them as non-existent. The discipline of a fine period in Art is always short-lived. We are all of us aware that the schools of Pheidias, Pasiteles, and Glycon would have scorned the dramatic and realistic sculpture of succeeding Greek schools, just as the admirers of Sophocles and Æschylus regarded even the masterpieces of Euripides as a falling away; just as the builders of the Parthenon would have considered the Coliseum and St. Peter's equally monstrosities!—and artistically we cannot doubt that judgment would be on the side of the plaintiffs. Leaving aside Literature, in Sculpture we value suggestiveness more than realism. In Painting, where the medium is so tractable, we exact far more of realism; indeed, we instinctively claim it. Yet painting has limits in the direction of realism also, which cannot be transgressed without giving dissatisfaction. It is, therefore, far from difficult to understand that representations in the coloured transparent medium (such as is painted glass), must inevitably demand severer restrictions than does fresco or canvas; more especially when further it is recollected that glass-paintings were designed to produce their effects from a height or a distance, beyond and above the spectator. The earlier masters of it, such as him who made these Tewkesbury windows, were fully aware of the relations of his art to that of mosaic as well as to painted picture. It was, in some not very distant degree, akin in its self-dictated formalism to Heraldry itself. But was it this which prevented him going further in the direction of realism?—for

he is certainly not a good draughtsman! My answer is in the negative. Had he been able to draw better, and had he acquired greater command of shading and perspective, I cannot doubt he would have used them here. He did not use conventional treatment, because it made for simplicity, or for fear of confusion, so as to please and instruct the beholder. He merely worked within the known zone of his art and could not go beyond, just as his thirteenth-century predecessors had worked in the confined and narrow Byzantine and Romanesque traditions of their day, and stopped short with them.

The delicate question that arises, then, for us of a later day is this. As we view the medium of presentation of picture in stained and painted glass, which is that fine historic moment in the development of this great art, the moment when we should put down our artistic finger to the artist and say, "Thus far, and no farther!" in which we are to say practically to ourselves, "I know that you can overcome still greater difficulties, that you can technically realise still more, by shading and stipple-shading, and more yellow stain, etc., but I would rather you did not go beyond your present attainment, which agreeably leaves something for my imagination"? The sheer fact of this complicated problem is this. We are not mediæval or Renaissance people; neither the one nor the other, but an eclectic product of a mass of periods, ingenious hybrids that sometimes, but not often, outshine the pure-breds; but certainly not belonging to an original great Decorative Art Period at all. To us it is no longer an intimate matter of feeling the exact amount of light we shall permit in our church or cathedral. To us it is no particular care how the rest of the church windows are filled so long as our own particular window commemorates, in some thoughtful manner, the individual to whose memory we desire to do honour. Hence one part of a modern church is sometimes dark and mysterious; another, light and shivering cold, with not even a shadow to clothe

its nakedness. Hence, also one window in an aisle will be found filled with glass imitating fourteenth-century style, while the traceries are clearly perpendicular, and in the next you will see Early English trefoils and Munich "transparencies."

But look back for a moment into the middle of our glass period, to the thirteenth century, when they could not command even fair figure-drawing nor refined execution, but had too often to fall back upon the geometrical method and represent networks of interlacing patterns, often no more profoundly fascinating to the beholders than handsome puzzles having their unerring solutions! The glory of these windows is in their unapproachable tints, the depth and richness of which our finest modern enamels cannot quite rival. To the mediæval mind these dark windows poetised the direct light of ordinary day, and subdued the aggressive efficiency thereof to a severe dimness, consonant with the mysterious gloom of its own imagination, which only "saw through a glass darkly." But to the student of old glass painting it cannot but appear (as to the student of architecture) that, even in those strange days of wars of the barons, of fanatical crusades, of the rise of the mendicant orders, and of the creation of Parliament, I mean the period included within the lives of the three Gilberts De Clare, there was faintly but clearly heard the same cry all over Europe that Goethe gave with his last mortal words—"More Light, more Light!" And like a slow sunrise from the sea Art in her most manifold splendour rearose, and immediately the windows of church and castle began to widen, and the thin splayed apertures became windows adorned with mullion and tracery, and the light, as it were of freedom, began somewhat solemnly (as was becoming) to stream in through them upon their congregations. Indeed; though I have introduced the word freedom figuratively, it may also be understood and applied with actuality. For nothing is more happily more beautifully true than that with man the life of physical light has increased in proportion with his inward illumination.

From being gloomy, fortress-like buildings, his mediæval churches became perfect palaces of coloured light and music, and coterminously with this movement, with this lifting of the funereal curtain of mediæval darkness, occurs an immediate strengthening of the powers of artistic observation. Objects in nature which hitherto had been regarded by the artist as meriting conventional treatment only, were now discovered to possess unconsidered beauties of detail fully worthy of realistic rendering, while preserving a symbolical adaptation. Henceforward we begin to find the oak-leaf and acorn, the ivy-leaf and its berries, roses and trefoil, and, above all, the vine-scroll, appearing to advantage in the neatest possible undercut stone-foliage of cap and corbel—or painted in the borders of stained windows—or above them in their tracery lights; all depicted with the enlightened power of visible affection. The same movement is also noticed influencing the human figure and its ever-varying drapery, and archaism in its rendering manifests signs of coming departure. In fact, the characteristics of beauty hitherto either drily descried or totally unobserved, now discover themselves intimately in every section of the world of Art. And so ardent we know is the recognition of nature on the part of the Gothic fourteenth-century artist that his arches and doorways and windows, quite apart from their details, develop into elaborated leaf designs, trefoil quatrefoil, cinquefoil, etc. He is found paying the highest possible homage to the vegetable kingdom, to the flower world; and with this advance so powerfully marked towards the birth of the fourteenth century in architecture, sculpture, and painting, the painter-glazier endeavours to keep step with his far less tractable materials, carefully watching, however, as to what may be selected and adapted, and what may not, for his translucent pictures.

About the year 1310 was observed the important fact that white glass treated to a solution of silver and placed in the kiln would (according to the temperature to which it was subjected) take a transparent and indelible stain varying from

palest lemon to tawny orange. By means of this additional enrichment of his means windows were now produced with extraordinary effects of beauty in gold and silver. The delicate crockets and finials of white canopies would be touched with it into lines of light: the hair of angels, the crowns of monarchs, the mitres and staffs of prelates, the borders of robes, and the aureoles of the beatified, would be stained with it as with a celestial sunrise. Moreover, the heads of his figures could now be rendered in the same piece of glass with the nimbus or crown. It is not difficult to discern what a change, what a revolution, this portended in glass. So far the windows had been dark, and if grand and mysterious, totally wanting in what might be termed spiritual gaiety. Hitherto also the treatment of subject had been crude and flat, and confined to medallions and patterns of a graceful geometrical character. Now this treatment with stain added fresh possibilities. Borders with bright natural flowers began to appear, and rich diaper designs, borrowed from Oriental brocades, and the canopy and figure and niche, with elaborate decorative detail, developed apace; and by means of architectural foreshortening, perspective in glass-painting began to feel its way forward. Later followed the stipple-shading in the face and figure and other elaborations of which we have seen examples. But it need not be doubted that our artist was quite aware of the inequalities of his work. He knew well enough where his strength lay, and he envied the advances made in figure-rendering by the fresco painter who decorated the neighbouring walls. But, like the latter, he now found himself no longer confined to single circumscribed positions and very limited areas. The enlarging tracery windows invited him to carry his canopies in sequences across their "lights," thus forming positive bands of richly-coloured figures as we see in butterflies' wings, and giving those broad symphonious effects so familiar to us at York, at Gloucester, and here at Tewkesbury.

And it is at this stage of fascinating evolution of the art that we find our artist the author of these choir windows.

He works effectively at his figure and canopy, setting his carefully-armoured but rather monotonous knights in niches having backgrounds richly diapered alternately in green and ruby, while below each occurs his individual heraldic achievement. Above, however, rises magnificent tabernacle work, finial and flying buttress spiring delicately in silvery glass, and having in the centre of each tympanum a golden fleur-de-lis. It is only when we scrutinise the face-painting and figure-drawing that the craftsman fails, that his ambition seems mocked. At the same time his art has made very real advance in this direction also when compared with the awkward and archaic figures of fifty years before. His lines are more informed, and his action has far more suggestion of free movement. While he has improved notions of flesh tint, he has as yet acquired no modelling of facial muscle. In fact, he cannot pretend to much individualisation or finish. He is still ages behind the beatified bishop in the Deerhurst window or the work at Malvern, and but little in advance of the beautiful and slightly earlier St. Catherine, also at Deerhurst. The current of realism in portraiture which had set in among Tuscan painters has not yet touched the Tewkesbury artist. He is held suspended, as it were, between the archaism of the thirteenth century and the ambitious Naturalism of the coming Perpendicular period; but it is nevertheless easy to see that his tendency is forward, and not a stagnating one.

But there is yet more to be said in our artist's favour. For, might he not perhaps turn upon us and say: "It is all very well for you twentieth-century folk to come into this choir and scrutinise my clerestory windows by the aid of that exceedingly clever but very ugly instrument you appear to have invented, and then to criticise adversely my treatment of the human face divine, but my effect, such as it is, was calculated for a distance. You are expecting delicate effects which I might certainly have striven to render, had my windows been intended for positions nearer to the unassisted eye!" He might even be imagined to become still more

petulant with us, and say: "Really there is no being even with your want of consistency. There are beautiful, highly-finished, naturalistic figures and faces of real people as well as of saints and apostles, which noble masters who came at a later and more learned period than mine, painted for the aisle windows of Malvern Priory, at merely ten feet from the pavement, and you people have taken them and tossed them with their explanatory scrolls, etc., up among the lofty traceries of the west and east windows there, at altitudes where your telescopes and binoculars alone can make discoveries of their worth and meaning, and then you come here and blame me for not having put more detailed treatment into the faces of my clerestory Le Despencers and Zouches! But, when I think of these five De Clares and Fitz Hamon, having to face the dreadful arrangements of colour and heraldry you have inserted opposite them in the south clerestory window here, truly perhaps my astonishment at your other proceedings becomes lessened." Indeed, I would willingly detain this probably modest, but clear-sighted and grave craftsman, a little longer, and ask him to tell us many delightful things of Tewkesbury in his own day, and who were the architects who worked there then, and painted the wall-spaces, now bare, and how often Eleanor Despenser and her son Hugo III. came in and viewed his progress on the new windows, and perhaps kneeled there in prayer touched with bitter memories; and what also were the names of the sculptors who made some of these splendid effigies! But I must not take up more than the good share of time you have so kindly permitted me to appropriate. Still, I would not willingly quit my subject without just one word about that other magnificent spread of stained and painted glass at Great Malvern. For the contrast between these two is a most fortunate one, and it well illustrates the gap of 120 years of time which intervened between their makings, and if by its simple nobleness and by its depth, as well as splendour, of colour, the Tewkesbury glass proclaims its rougher virility of character,

most assuredly the windows at Malvern Priory with their spacious seas of silver washed with blue and gold, their delicate finish and sometimes even rather timid effect reveal a more perfect but far more feminine tendency in the art. We may prefer which we like, but we are not likely, once having had a thorough look at both, to ever forget their relative dignities, and to heartily admire them and to especially express our thanks to the citizens of venerable Tewkesbury for having preserved them.