

CALIFORNIA CONTEMPORARY STAINED GLASS

DECEMBER 14, 1976 through JANUARY 16, 1977

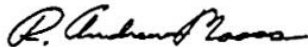
an exhibition organized by the **FRESNO ARTS CENTER**

A Note From the Director

The Center presents an unusual and extremely exciting exhibition — works by eighteen talented artists working in stained glass. This exhibition presents stained glass not as a retrospective of styles and trends of the past — *vis a vis*, secular windows and glass lamp shades. Rather, the exhibition attempts to present a state of the art today, not just architectural or design adjuncts.

Uniquely installed, it is perhaps the largest single exhibition of contemporary, and experimental, stained glass ever presented by a museum. Each work is exhibited as an artistic statement of its own and shown in an atmosphere which offers an environmental effect not experienced before. Not simply hung or suspended, all pieces are individually mounted and lighted in walls specially constructed for the exhibition.

We are grateful to Dan Fenton of Oakland who served as our guest curator. Not only is he represented here as an artist but he was an editor of *Glass Art Magazine*. As a writer and artist he was able to draw on his knowledge of the medium to research and contact the artists included here. We also owe thanks to Otto Rigan, author of the recently published book *New Glass*, for his informational introduction. In addition, the following have offered their services and expertise in the preparation and installation: James Russell, Anthony Ochinerio, Ross Eppler (of San Francisco), Fred Biglione, Jr., Consolidated Electrical Distributors, and the entire staff of the Arts Center who behind the scenes make it all happen.



R. Andrew Maass
Executive Director

INTRODUCTION

by Otto B. Rigan

For most people a general impression of the stained-glass craft ranges from Chartes Cathedral to Tiffany lamps to decorative windows in Victorian houses. There is a new expression of this old medium, however, and it is not Gothic, Victorian, or Art Nouveau, nor is it hanging over your dining room table. The new glass, though having its roots in the traditional craft, has shattered the boundaries of convention and style to evolve into an independent art. The new glass shows the spirit of the individual artists in styles that reflect humankind's changing, eclectic consciousness. The only thing the new glass has in common with its predecessors is the medium itself.

The stained-glass craft has traditionally been impervious to radical change. Until this century there was no pressure for the glass field to revolutionize itself. The medieval windows of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries were a perfect complement to Gothic architecture. Like tapestries in color and design, their appeal was primarily as pattern, and personal iconography, if any, was decidedly secondary. Such windows were made by craftsmen and artisans working within narrow limits.

The coming of the Renaissance to Northern Europe slightly changed this architectural concept as Gothic windows slowly evolved into glass paintings through which light could filter. They were non-architectural in the sense that the buildings were to the windows no more than frames for the artists' "canvases" executed in glass. But, though freed somewhat from its strong architectural dependence, the glass medium in the post-Renaissance period was far too costly for development by individuals in the secular world, and, as individual expression, glass art remained secondary to the art of studio painting. Glass art has had little identity as a personal medium up to present times, but has consistently reflected the interchange among art, architecture, and wealthy institutional patrons.

Another inhibitor of change in the evolution of the craft was its preceived purpose. Stained-glass windows from the Middle Ages to the present were mainly ecclesiastical or monumental statements. And usually only the Church could afford such extravagance. With the development and growing affluence of the middle class after the Industrial Revolution, glass occasionally turned up in the secular world, but mostly as decorative coats of arms or the standard diamond-shaped "Dutch windows." It was not until the late nineteenth century and the glass of Louis Comfort Tiffany and his peers and imitators that glass made any real penetration into secular life. Victorian and Tiffany styled windows could be found in homes, but they still had not broken the aesthetic links with the traditions of the craft. Victorian windows were merely decorative and Tiffany was attempting to emulate the concepts of the medievalists in a contemporary fashion.

Despite the realities of space travel, world wars, the effects of mass media, and the bomb, most glass artisans of this century have continued to work within the traditional standards of stained glass. Those standards, hold-overs of an aesthetic mentality from previous centuries, have frequently been translated into bad reproductions of styles that are not relevant to our times.

Post-World War II Germans were the first to challenge tradition and to signal a transition from glass craft to glass art. The Germans had nothing to lose. They had lost a war and a great many of their churches and public buildings. They were not interested in rebuilding the past. New, emotionally clean, graphic windows were therapy for the subdued human spirit and ideal for the simple, modern parish churches and public buildings that were being built to replace the old. German artists purified the glass field by incorporating unpainted glass in their designs, thereby returning to the natural integrity of their materials, lead and glass. But even this contemporary German art has developed within the shadow of architectural limitation.

In the late 1970s, especially on the West Coast of North America, suddenly there don't seem to be any limits. This may be a function of a place and a time where popular culture continuously breaks its limits and where popular architecture is a composite of all styles from brown-shingled fund houses to geodesic domes to 1970s "moderne" and the golden arches. More likely, the pioneering, limit-shattering art of the new glass is not a purely western phenomenon or movement at all but springs up at a time when the American middle class has more leisure, is better educated and more diversified in interests than ever before, and when the search for expansive ideals and life-styles is at an all-time high. In any case, the new glass shows a new spirit in an ancient medium: contemporary culture is increasingly eclectic and so are the varied styles of the new glass artists.

The new breed of glass artist presented in this show seems determined to explore the medium for all of its possibilities, to shape it into a true art that is as responsive to the individual as to the current world. The shift from craft to art is complete.

Most of us think of art as something that only happens in museums and galleries. It is exciting to witness an exuberant new art form that relates to homes, everyday public places, and unexpected environmental sites, and, of greater importance, connects directly with people. The new glass, as you will see, has the capacity to evoke a positive response from the community as a whole — art connoisseur and wheat farmer alike.

There are two general directions for the new glass artists. One is the "commission" approach (the tie to the architectural tradition), the other the autonomous approach. The artist on commission designs windows to harmonize with the physical style and function of a structure and to reflect the lives of the people who live in or use the building. Such windows are "walls of glass." This art — as in the days of the artisans — is subservient to architecture, but the sites and patrons of today are infinitely varied. To design and build an autonomous stained-glass work is to create a window panel for no particular structural opening, space or client.

Who is creating the new glass? Some are formally trained artists, painters and sculptors among them, who have served apprenticeships in the medium. But most are from unexpected backgrounds — a railroad switchman, a body-and-fender man, graduates in English literature, physics, and philosophy. All have found in glass a means to express their unique individuality. They are all seers and trend-setters who are putting social and visual conventions into new perspectives.

*Note: This introduction is from New Glass copyright 1976 by Otto B. Rigan
San Francisco Book Co., 1976*

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CONTEMPORARY GLASS

by Dan Fenton

Several years ago, when I began to work with *Glass Art* magazine, I became aware of many new artists with new concepts about stained glass. Many of them began by working with traditional techniques, but their work was distinctly going beyond mere decoration. They were exploring the unique properties of glass. Lead lines took on a graphic presence rather than being only a structural nuisance. The innate ability for glass to modify light also became a major concern. Artists were creating works with a greater regard for the nature of their materials.

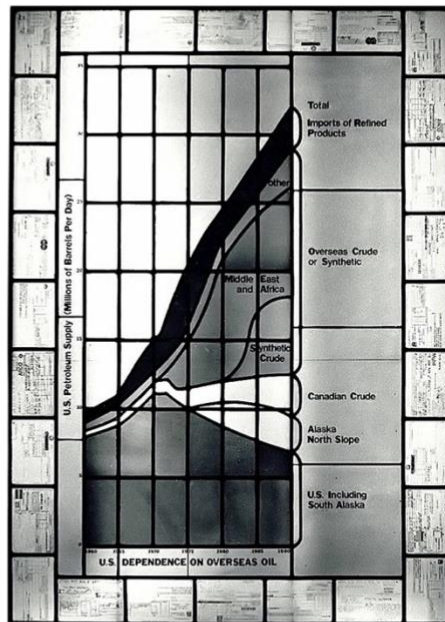
This selection of stained glass compositions is a representative cross section of the innovative glass art now being created in California. Eighteen artists are represented, each with their own unique approach to glass, in an exhibition of over 50 compositions. The works are shown as autonomous visual statements independent of their final environmental context. This is not to deny the architectural application of glass, but rather that the development of these works were conceived as compositions of "light."

Due to the difficulties of installation and illumination of stained glass in a gallery environment, shows are seldom undertaken, and works rarely reach the public view. Therefore, this exhibition becomes important in giving the public an update on stained glass (most people already have some ideas about what stained glass is). The surprise of the show is the discovery of years of previously undocumented innovation and growth in stained glass design.

FRED ABRAMS

I love the beauty of stained glass. When I was a kid I loved fireworks and Christmas lights. July 4th and Christmas were my favorite times of the year. I also loved watching the Los Angeles Dodgers play. But today I see things differently. They're starting to make fireworks out of plastic. Hardly anybody puts up their Christmas lights anymore due to the energy crisis scare. Baseball is politics. I recently did a complete psychological and economic analysis of the Dodgers from the players to the coaches to the owner, as a means of figuring out why they lost the pennant. I enjoy that as much as making windows. So, why not do both at once? Who's going to be interested in seeing a psychological and economic study of the Dodgers in stained glass? The Dodgers did have an attendance total of about 4 million this year. I'm sure it would mean something to a few of those people. What's so interesting about tulips?"

(excerpts from Fred Abrams interviews Fred Abrams)



1. Makin' a Buck. 22 3/8" x 18 1/4"
2. United States Dependence on Foreign Oil 45 3/8" x 32 1/2" (reproduced)
3. Computer Price Codes: Hollywood Payday Nutroll. 11 5/16" x 21 1/4"
4. Computer Price Codes: Knudsen Vitamin D Milk 11 1/6" x 21 1/8"