

New Glass



Otto B. Rigan • PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLES FRIZZELL

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Introduction

Stained glass strikes a responsive chord in each of us. No one knows exactly where or when stained glass was first used, but we all know we like it. The play of light through glass, transforming interiors with a shower of colors, has always been an aesthetic and emotional delight.

For most people a general impression of the stained-glass craft ranges from Chartres 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' "canvasses" 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 perceived 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.

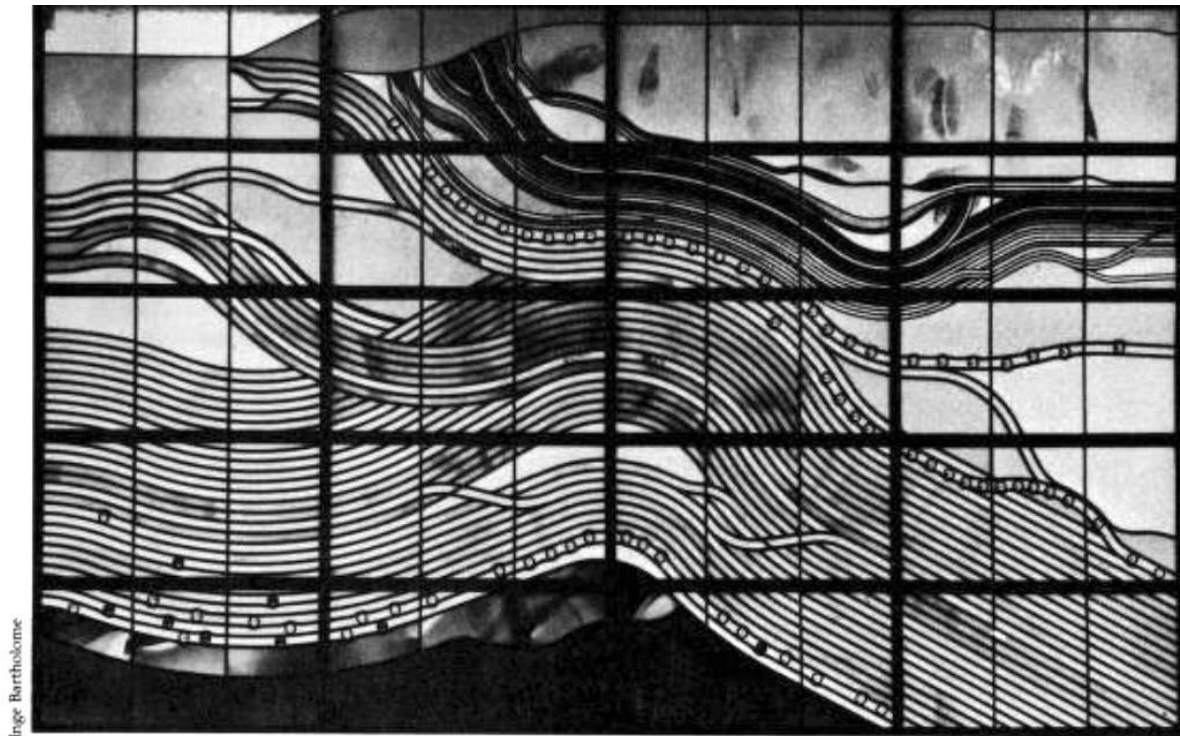
Post-World War II Germans were the first to challenge tradition and to signal a transition from glass craft to glass art. The Germans had nothing to lose. They had lost a war and a great many of their churches and public buildings. They were not interested in rebuilding the past. New, emotionally clean, 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 funk houses and 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 lifestyles 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 book 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.

As a painter, I recognize in the new glass a vital alternative to the more confounding, cerebral world of contemporary art. There is plenty of good



Entrance hall window, Ubach-Palenberg Public Baths. Ludwig Schaffrath, 1974.

art being shown in galleries, but most people won't see it. Somehow the gallery experience is unessential in everyday life. The new glass artists are bridging the distance between the community and the formal art world.

This new glass surely deserves documentation, which is one purpose of this book, but the diversified group of artists represented here did not lend themselves to being gathered up and placed neatly beneath the banner of something so categorical and defined as an "art movement" or "school." Still, since the human mind always tries to organize, sort, and individuate, I groped toward a definition. When I stumbled upon the phrase "omni-movement" I was delighted. As "omni" implies "all things combined," so my tag "omni-movement" expresses an art movement that is without a declared manifesto, statement of purpose, or any restriction whatever.

Personal. Individual. Alive. Fresh. These simple adjectives apply to the new glass. Just as each artist included here is a growing, breathing statement of humanity, so is the art that reflects him or her. The subject matter and approaches are as diversified as the artists themselves, and as long as the artists continue to evolve and change in the dramatic ways shown in this book they will produce a glass art that is neither static nor stale.

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. But to speak of such polar extremes is simplistic. Of twenty-four artists documented in these pages there are twenty-four distinctly different aesthetic orientations. Imagine a football field with its end-zone goals. One goal is the purest interpretation of the autonomous philosophy, the other of the architectural philosophy. On the 50-yard line we release twenty-four jack rabbits. . . .

Many of these artists feel skittish about their work. On the one hand they are the budding roses, the creative thinkers, the revolutionaries in a field dominated by traditionalists and hobbyists, on the other they must make a living. Clients (commissions) often want what they are sure of (history, tradition) and are afraid of what an artist may produce. It is still an expensive medium, and it can be frustrating for the artist with little money and too few "right" commissions.

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.

Because of their diversity of personal approaches to glass art, I chose to let each artist speak directly to the reader in his or her own words. As with any visual art the visual object is the artist's primary statement, but this sharing of stories, philosophies, and goals behind each artist's particular works seemed too exciting to miss and a valuable means of insight into the human beings who create the art. Each artist was encouraged to say whatever he or she felt would be most representative. Some of their communications to me were fluid and personal; others, structured and formal. Many statements were received as lengthy essays, others as scribbled notes. Some of the statements are philosophical; others are analytic discussions of the techniques of particular windows. I hope this book will be as interesting to you for what it says by and about the people who make the art as it is for what it shows of the new glass art.

Otto B. Rigan

Atwater, California
June 1976

Fred Abrams

Fred apparently has a love-hate relationship with his city and the way it relates to him and his stained-glass panels. At one moment he speaks with anticipatory conviction of the time he will leave the Los Angeles basin and in the same breath expresses his marriage to the phenomenon of that city.

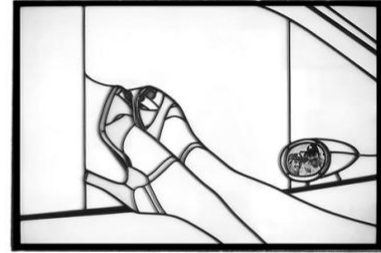
One thing is sure, his tongue-in-cheek humor as realized in his glass work is directly dependent on southern California style and culture. The subject matter of his windows expresses his total familiarity with the Los Angeles aesthetic. Fred's windows are not unique in structure or physical technique, but rather in choice of subject and purpose. They are a contradiction to the romanticized "beautiful window" concept that we have been conditioned by tradition to expect.

L.A., the town where people come to "make it." L.A., the media capital, where ads are made to sell us images of the "good life." L.A., where buildings are torn down as fast as they are built. L.A., a town full of illusions and unrealistic dreams. L.A., where beauty is in the eye of the ad man. L.A., where being on top is the name of the game. L.A., where if you're not on top, you're nowhere.

I worked for over a year in a small cottage in Santa Monica Canyon (probably the most exclusive, rustic environment in the city), with springs and creeks surrounding me. My place was one of the first to be built in the area, a "long twenty-five years ago." Slowly, trees were cut and large homes took their place. The owner died, and his wife sold the house. In desperation, all I could find was a studio with no windows and four white walls in an industrial area. My work became almost colorless. Albino-stained glass. I found myself fascinated with the internal structures of undersea creatures.

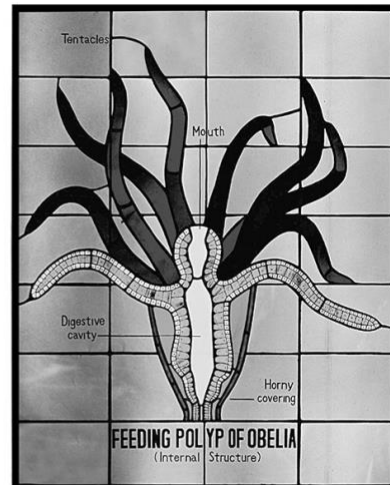
Like a mad scientist working in his basement, I experimented with glass. I tried to put the brain of a chicken in one window. I tried to find the cure for cancer. Some people thought I was creating a monster. But, as I saw it, I had realized that beauty was something that originated from within and that the most beautiful window I could create would not stop smog.

With WHO'S ON THIRD?, I questioned one's perception of beauty. It took a subject that most anyone could relate to: a woman's legs and her stylish shoes. But the significance lies within what is not visible in the picture. The clear glass that makes up most of the piece represents the idea that what is visible is not even what is important. One might imagine that the legs of the woman (assuming there is a woman) are propped on a car door and she is seeing a reflection of Ron Cey and Ken McMullen through her rear-view mirror. The two third basemen of the then National League champs are obviously in good spirits. But in the right corner of the "mirror," one barely sees the tip of the cap of Jerry Royster, the third third baseman of the team, a rookie, fighting for a job.

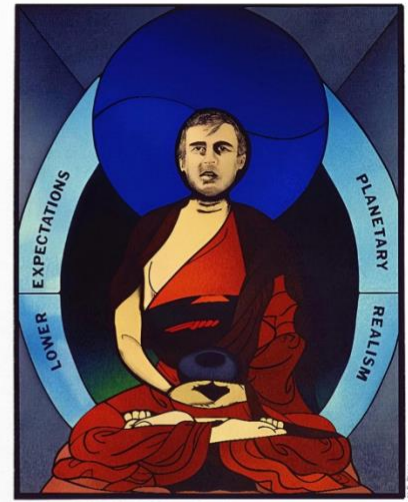


Who's on Third? 1975. Collection of the artist.

Feeding Polyp of Obelia (Internal Structure). 1974. Collection of the artist.



FRED ABRAMS *The Nervous
System of a Chambered Nautilus*
Collection of the artist.



FRED ABRAMS *Untitled*. Collection of the artist.