

The Lost Art

The art and craft of stained glass has something in common with Mark Twain: the rumors of its death have been greatly exaggerated. If you believe the rumors, then you might think that stained glass cannot today achieve the same high quality as seen in the European cathedrals built hundreds of years ago. You might have heard another rumor that real stained glass has been replaced with plastic. You may have even heard that no one really “does” stained glass anymore and that all stained glass comes from one or two suppliers.

These rumors — like most rumors that are untrue — are based on misunderstanding, assumption and misinformation. Stained glass is alive and well; the studios that are good enough to call themselves Accredited Members of the Stained Glass Association of America are today producing windows in America that are every bit as good as those seen in the European cathedrals. There are poor imitators of stained glass out there, yet no other material is as durable, beautiful and — in the long run — as affordable as glass. Finally, as a quick glance at the membership lists of the SGAA will show, there are a great many people who are today creating beautiful stained glass windows, custom tailored to the needs of their clients.

At first glance, these rumors can be frightening when one is preparing to commission stained glass. When these rumors — and the rumors that derive from these rumors — are examined, however, they quickly become more humorous than frightening... humorous, that is, until one realizes that it is exactly this sort of misinformation that keeps the beauty of stained glass from being enjoyed on a much more widespread basis.

Stained glass is both an ancient fine art and a craft. Stained glass can bring beauty, joy and inspi-

ration into one’s life. It is truly a shame that more people do not benefit on a daily basis from all that stained glass has to offer.

The first great stained glass falsehood is the belief that stained glass today is not of the quality seen in the cathedrals built in times past. This unfortunate misunderstanding no doubt stems from what people often encounter that masquerades as stained glass. While it is possible to see quality stained glass at the myriad craft shows and fairs across the country, one will just as often see some scrap of colored glass with a pewter figurine in the shape of one or another mythological creature glued to it and passed off as stained glass. It is unfortunate that these poor cousins to art glass are so often what one encounters as stained glass. Today — just as it has always been — work of varying quality is being produced, from the sublime to the trinket.

What is even more unfortunate is that these scraps and bits are compared to the stained glass windows in a gothic cathedral. Just as a craft fair is not a cathedral, so too is a glass jewelry box not a cathedral window. To see quality stained glass, one should go not to the fair, but to the buildings in which stained glass is a part. To quickly find locations where quality stained glass can be seen, contact several of the Stained Glass Association of America Accredited Members listed in this *Sourcebook*, and ask them where they have installed stained glass in your area. They will be proud to tell you where you can see their work. You won’t be disappointed by the visit.

The second great falsehood is that stained glass has been replaced by simulations that can achieve the same result as actual glass. This unfortunate misunderstanding stems from the simple fact that people want to save money and that unscrupulous

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salespeople have duped them into believing that the imitator is cheaper and better. People want to trust other people, and this is a very good thing. Unfortunately, as is well known, this desire to trust can often cloud someone's judgement.

For a stained glass window to be considered old, it must have been in place for at least a hundred years. There are stained glass windows still in their original settings that were old when Galileo first pointed a telescope at the sky. For something made of plastic, old is somewhere around five years. Ten is venerable.

While the initial outlay for an imitation window is less, it will have to be replaced much, much sooner. Whereas the color in glass will not fade in sunlight, colored plastic will fade rapidly. Also, plastic cannot withstand the normal abrasion that a window must face every day from sand and grit that is blown against it by wind. Real stained glass windows are impervious to all but the most damaging high winds.

Finally, there is the belief that real stained glass is created by so few people that one will have to wait a very long time from when the glass is commissioned to when it is created. This idea stems from a misinterpretation of one of the very factors that makes stained glass an art. The best stained glass is not created in a mass-production assembly line. Stained glass is created by hand by talented artists and craftspersons who design the window to suit both its architectural surroundings and the needs and desires of the client.

The role that stained glass plays in a building is prominent. It can be put in place to decorate, instruct, inspire, allow in light, block out light, commemorate, hide an unwanted exterior view, memorialize or any of literally hundreds of goals. Its role

can be one of these; more often it is many of these. Always — like anything else called art — it is put in place to show the owner's good taste. These are not goals that can be met through cookie-cutter mass production.

The production of stained glass does indeed take planning, skill and time. While the creation of quality stained glass is a labor-intensive undertaking, it takes far more skill and planning to create a window than it does time. The artists and craftspersons of the Stained Glass Association of America are accustomed to working to meet building schedules. They are professionals who understand the many aspects of building construction and the need to maintain an established timetable. As you review this *Sourcebook*, you will see that there are many artists and craftspersons who are making high-quality stained glass windows. These are professionals who want to make their living in the field of stained glass. They understand that to do so, they must meet the needs — and the schedule — of the client.

When you are ready to commission stained glass, be sure the studio you contact is an Accredited Member of the Stained Glass Association of America. Our membership aspires to maintain the fine tradition of stained glass. Their accreditation is your assurance that you are working with an established studio run by professionals who are capable of delivering high-quality stained glass that meets the needs of your building.

