



Whatever Happened to Stained Glass?

by Geoffrey Wichert

Opposite:
Peter Mollica,
Untitled, 2000. St.
Catherine Chapel of
St. Rose Hospital,
Henderson, NV

Right:
Peter Mollica, *Self-
Portrait #3*, 1984.
Stained glass.
37 x 31 in.

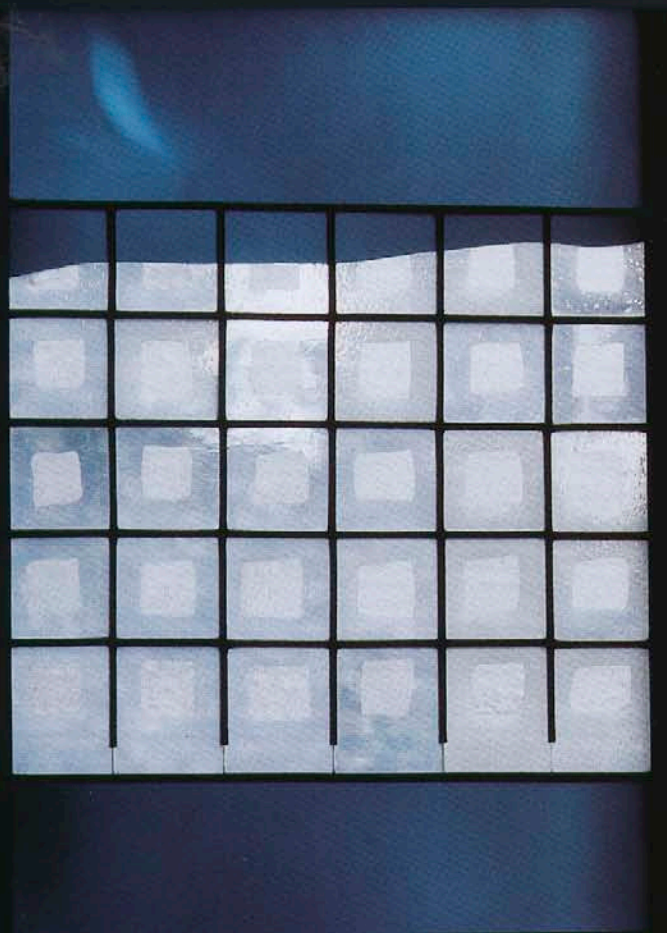
Below:
Peter Mollica,
Untitled, 1977.
Stained glass.
32 x 32 in. Corning
Museum of Glass



No other art can hold more than a candle to the brilliant daylight of stained glass. What are chiaroscuro or even chandeliers against the radiance of Chartres? In its early years, the pictorial window, the queen of the arts, and had enough power to raise another of the Middle Age's glories, the Gothic cathedral, to the sky. Yet in America today, painted windows bound in lead seem as dead as dinosaurs, and those

who know point to the revival of window making in the 1970s as proof. In that decade, domestic applications exploded to a new level among decorators, hobbyists, and practitioners of something they proclaimed a new art, only to collapse in an equally precipitous decline. Compared to the steady growth of other glass mediums—blown, cast, torched, electrified—stained glass seems extinct. Indeed, finding the legacy of what was often called the New Glass is a challenge. Yet the estate exists, heirlooms scattered among surviving members of the glass art family.

The search for the legacy of the '70s begins in understanding what actually happened a quarter-century ago. Artists like to believe they can spontaneously bring forth culture, but a more realistic ambition would be to capture the pre-existing spirit of the time. Epochs like the Renaissance and the post-world-war United States are probably affected more by sudden prosperity than spiritual advancement, and what propels their art is its reappraisal of the material world. Brief, exceptional interludes occur when wealth seems like a reward for previous spiritual achievement; medieval art wore the piety of the Dark Ages over a far more sensuous incarnation. Something similar may have happened in the late '60s, as decades of discipline and self-denial gave way to what would become indulgence on an end-of-the-millennium scale. Political excesses and artistic ideologies set the stage for popular rejection of the mechanical and the manufactured. The artistic renewal of stained glass



in the '70s would have gone nowhere without a sudden demand for recycled and retrofit antique glass that was part of a widespread consumer passion for things handmade. To that extent it was a market phenomenon, and if the collapse of that market and not artistic exhaustion killed stained glass, all the more reason to ask what kind of art has come from those who kept the faith. There may have been many reasons for stained glass, but in retrospect two strong impulses propel the important work. Many took stained glass as they found it, but rejected the social and commercial apparatus that came with it. They wanted to make their own statements—personal versions of what most people would recognize as stained glass—but beyond the accepted boundaries of subject matter and presentation. Accepting historical examples but not traditional roles, these outsiders chose to bypass professional training, credentials, and commercial practices. They used as much of the conventional technique as they could acquire, mostly accepting and even celebrating the limited representational skills of the medium while reveling in its genius for narration. Others seemed to question the entire history of stained glass, taking only its essential substance and technique for the pursuit of very different ends. Haphazardly Modern, they were interested in the material reality and presence of glass, making primarily abstract and geometric compositions that called on the eye to acknowledge that instead of paint scraped on canvas, what it sees are pieces of man-made, translucent stone: a mosaic curtain spread across a view through space. Like David Smith in his late work, they challenge the distinction between painting and sculpture, but from another direction; instead of elaborating the surface of objects, they give the spatial illusions of painting an authentic, indeed architectonic role. If the many were content to be outsiders, these—far fewer in number—were the insiders, for

although equally estranged from authority, they remade stained glass from the inside out. The aesthetic impulses behind insider and outsider approaches were not consciously ideological then, however apparent these proclivities may seem now. Few acted purely on one or the other, and some well known and widely admired artists, such as Kathie Bunnell and Paul Marioni, balanced both. In Bunnell's crystalline depictions of the natural world, water, trees, and stones appear transfigured by psychological and spiritual insights equal to those found in 13th century portraits, but with Buddhist composure in place of Christian moral teaching. There is no reason to believe she could have found freedom and opportunity to explore such a personal dimension outside of a studio in her home, nor is it likely that commercial experience would have encouraged her to develop the optical effects she achieved with raw glass and a copper foil line. Marioni, who was Bunnell's Mill Valley neighbor in the early years, also made innovative use of copper foil, but exploited a far wider palette of glass. In a quintessential Modern gesture, he punningly used actual objects, such as headlight lenses and hood ornaments, to represent themselves. In shattering the barrier between what was in the window and what was not, designing windows to be as interesting at night as by daylight, and inventing ways to eliminate the lead-line, Marioni became the only artist in history to rival Tiffany's influence on stained glass. Yet he never put technique before content: all he wanted was to have the viewer see what was on his mind. Unmixed insider impulses propelled Dick Weiss and Peter Mollica, who both sought to make glass speak with its own, hitherto quiet voice. Tellingly, both became notorious for disparaging work they felt passively accepted debased, popular standards. Weiss wanted to infuse his glass with the vitality of contemporary painting and produced work that, like Picasso's, was not popular until after he stopped making it. Meanwhile, he does what young artists think they will do, but almost none does: going into his studio every day and made art regardless the scorn or attention directed his way. In closely observed portraits painted in the round, and non-objective screens made of highly refractive roundels, he contin-

ues to make sense of the look of glass. Peter Mollica took the deceptive pictorial simplicity and sophisticated space of medieval glass as early models. In his justly celebrated "Ruby Puck" series, a leaded grid flatly represents the three-dimensional goal net and strains to do the impossible: to capture the optically advancing red disk within the plane of the panel. Gestalt psychologists and realist painters share a vocabulary of perspective cues that includes relative size, overlap, and convergence. In *Berkeley Glass* (1974), Mollica added texture to the list. Three years later, in the Corning Museum of Glass, relative transparency emerged as the key determinant of how windows read. Throughout the '80s, Mollica manipulated transparency in panels that interact ever more fluently with their visual surroundings. Nothing quite like them had been seen before. If Mollica is the exemplary insider, Cappy Thompson is the ultimate outsider. Thompson's intricately composed and richly painted fables seemed to emerge historically from hallowed precedent, yet in them she burrows back into the intertwined history of narrative and illustration. Like the visual equivalent of World





Opposite:
Catherine
Thompson, *Modern
Beauty with Image
in Sake Cup*, 1977.
Painted Stained
Glass

Left:
Catherine
Thompson, *Year of
the Monkey*, 1986.
Painted Stained
Glass

Below:
Catherine
Thompson, *Dogs
and Rabbits*, 1983.
Painted Stained
Glass

Music, she opens the universe of acceptable reference beyond the western canon, filling old bottles with even older wine and reinvigorating both. Church windows strike poses to teach morality, but Thompson uses morals to set stories in motion. A narrative needs a point, but all a story needs is action, and everything in her windows moves: trees writhe, birds fight battles, devils ride bicycles, and angels walk tightropes, while dogs and rabbits draw the patterns of their lives. The depicted moment is not privileged, only illustrative; ever present is the immanence of other moments, other events. In an extensive series of episodes painted on blown vessels, Thompson took the next step, placing successive scenes on opposite sides so they could be animated by rotation, or by looking through. As the paired scenes grew from transparent overlays to three-dimensional, global theaters, the anecdotal merged with the autobiographical. Mythological actors became identifiably her family and friends. Like one who dove deep in her art and came up in a different pool, she depicts the universal not just in the par-

ticular, but the particularly personal. *I Was Dreaming of Spirit Animals . . .*, commissioned for the Sea-Tac Airport, depicts her creative process as the sun and moon pouring visions into her mind while she sleeps in her husband's arms. So long as stained glass requires architectural settings and expensive materials, its vitality will seem to wax and wane with its popularity. Yet while these artists may not have had the careers they envisioned decades ago, they all continue to make credible, significant work in glass. Meanwhile, recent commissions argue that opposite impulses may be converging. Peter Mollica's use of clear glass in the Knight Law Center is the same as Cappy Thompson's at Sea-Tac. The German technology that makes Thompson's glass wall possible was almost certainly provoked by Paul Marioni's campaign to eliminate lead lines. Cappy Thompson and Dick Weiss have stimulated worldwide interest in painting on glass. There is one other important, continuing influence of the stained glass of the '70s. After decades of pondering the disappearance of



dinosaurs, science admitted that some survived by evolving into birds. Any sensitive witness to the transformation of blown and cast glass—from industrial and craft processes that produced utilitarian and decorative objects into artistic mediums of eloquence and impact—will also have seen how the aspirations and gravity of stained glass became part of a much larger art.

Geoffrey Wichert is a regular contributor to GLASS Quarterly.