



“A poem  
in glass”

A brief history of stained glass of the 13th century, with detailed instructions by Theophilus the monk, contemporary of the period

by Clinton W. Sweet, © 1893

Not until the 13th and 14th centuries did we begin to see the full unfolding beauties of color glass. This was the period when the face of Europe was covered with buildings of great magnitude and magnificence, the monumental expressions of the faith, the devotion of the people, the munificence of the kings and nobles.

What were the windows of these times like? Fortunately, despite the ravages of time, the fanatical devastations of the 16th century and the destruction wrought by the revolutionists of the last, there are still remaining in France a number of windows containing glass made during these two centuries.

Among the most beautiful ones are the exquisite, jewel-like windows of the cathedral of Chartres, one hundred forty-three in number, containing no less than three hundred fifty subjects, with more than three thousand figures.

The first thing the student remarks in studying the windows of the 13th century is that the colors are more brilliant, more artistically combined and skillfully blended than in those of the preceding century, and that the artist, the *master glazier*, never lost sight of the two fundamental principles that should always govern the use of colored glass in windows: first, that it should transmit light; second, that it is only

an auxiliary of architecture, a decorative adjunct.

### Of people, draperies and more

The figures, although generally lacking in expression, are better in drawing than those of the preceding century, such as those in the Abby of St. Denis; the faces are oval in form and more delicately treated, often refined and vigorous, the eyes having a somewhat natural expression, the hair and beard produced by varying the thickness of the lines. The draperies are broader in treatment, lighter and more natural in their folds; the compositions are simple and not overcrowded; the animals, trees and architectural details are still conventional, although the ornaments, taking their motives from the oak, ivy and other leaves, are more natural and show great precision.

The windows as a whole exhibit in every detail great advance in the art of representing natural objects, a more exact imitation of nature, and a great appreciation of the harmony of color.

### Yes, religion was period

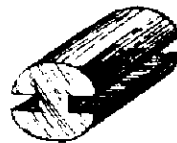
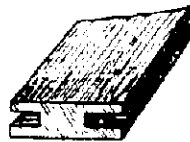
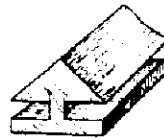
In the choice of subjects, the glass printer of the 13th century was guided – or more truly limited – by the paramount object of all ecclesiastical decoration of the Middle Ages: the instruction of the illiterate and the promotion of piety among the people. Therefore, the windows were filled with representations of scenes from biblical history, the lives of saints and symbolic portrayals of the dogmas of the church.

The windows were a poem in glass, “the first canto reflecting the image of God, as the creator, the father, and the giver of all good gifts; the second, nature, organic and inorganic; the third, science; the

fourth, the moral sense; the fifth, the history of man; lastly, the entire world. Where there were not enough windows in a church to carry out the complete scheme, some one portion was selected.

### A monkish master

Happily, we have an authority on how stained glass was created. Theophilus the monk, most trustworthy in every respect, as he was a contemporary, described the process in his *Diversarum Artium Schedula*, which is epitomized for you at right. The method of making a window, as described by our monk, was the one employed by glaziers all through the Middle Ages. XXX



## The making of stained glass

by  
Theophilus the Monk



When you first desire to construct a glass window, first make a smooth wooden board twice the size of the design. Cover the same with a coating of white chalk, and draw thereon with lead or tin, using a rule and compass, a full outline. This done, draw within the outline such figures and ornaments as you like, first with lead or tin, then in the same manner with red or black pigments, making all the strokes carefully. . . . Then arrange the various draperies and mark down the colors of each in its place, and whatever else you wish to paint. Mark the color by a letter. After this, make yourself some hair pencils, of the tail of a martin, or ermine, or squirrel, or cat, or ermine (*skip a bit, brother—ed*), or of an ass's mane.

Take a piece of glass larger than the place it is to occupy and lay it flat on the plan, tracing with chalk ground in water the outer strokes only of the pattern on the board as seen through the glass.

Take the color which you are to use and paint the glass with the utmost care, putting the color on very thin where the lights are to be, and let the stroke be dark where the shades are to be, varying the stroke for different degrees of darkness. . . . When you have made the first shadows in the draperies, etc., and they are dry, cover the rest of the glass with a light color, which should not be so deep as the middle tint in the shadows, nor so light as the lightest, but between the two. This being dry, make, with the handle of the brush, near the shadows which you first made, firm strokes in every part, so as to leave between those strokes and the first shadows firm strokes of that light color.

Figures on a white ground clothe with sapphire green, purple and red, while those on the red ground not painted make the drapery white. Paint the borders, leaves, flowers, faces, hands and feet in the same way as the drapery.

#### Source

Sweet, Clinton W. "A Sea of Glass," in: *The Architectural Record*, Vol. II, No. 3, January-March 1893